

EXCERPT SEE SADIE
JANE RUN
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One

SADIE JANE KLEIN

recently

I CURSED WHEN MY head snapped back—the ridiculous veil caught in the door I’d just slammed closed. Not one of the more genteel profanities my long-ago college boyfriend’s mother informed me was appropriate for a *lady* to let slip from her lips, mind you. Polite society *might* abide the occasional “damn” or even “shit,” but beyond that, no one would approve of such a mouth. Naturally, I made it worse when, with a wink, I informed her that her son liked my mouth just fine.

I didn’t even want to wear a veil—certainly not anything that long. Hell, I didn’t want to wear a dress. *Shoot*, I didn’t even want to get *married*. Then again, neither did Tristan. Right? So, we didn’t. But there I stood, in a pitch-black room I didn’t know, on *The Sapphire Selkie*, a riverboat casino I *never* would have chosen, with my *chapel-length* veil stuck in the door I just banged shut, trying to escape a banquet hall and the shocked faces of hundreds of wedding guests left in my wake. Wait, what was that look on Tristan’s face? And where the heck was he? He should have been here by now.

Nope. I dropped a full-on *F-bomb* and ripped the veil’s hair comb free from my tight curls.

Out of the dark, a chuckling snort startled me. My eyes adjusted to the lack of light with the help of the dim glow that snuck through a round side scuttle on the boat’s starboard.

Forgetting the headdress left dangling in the door jamb, I hoisted my organza gown to my knees, ready to make another run for it.

“Is that an invitation?” By the sounds of it, my hideaway pal had enjoyed the open bar before the ceremony. Tristan, playing the role of “groom,” called it pre-gaming, and since it was a midnight ceremony on a gambling vessel, somehow that tracked.

“Excuse me?” The southern drawl I tend to keep buttoned up doubles when I get frazzled or happy or drunk or... “Is that any way to talk to a bride on her would-be wedding day?”

“Shit.” Chair legs screeched across the floor when the silhouette of a tall man pushed to his feet. “Sadie? Sadie Klein?” A faceless twang met mine.

I stepped deeper into the dark.

“Apologies. I didn’t mean to—”

“Do I know you? Hard to imagine since I know all of ten people on the pages-long guest list—and I only like two of them.”

The stranger laughed again. “It’s Ellis, Ellis Holland.”

I didn’t speak, stunned to learn he was, in fact, *not* a stranger, but relieved the nighttime light helped hide my shock.

“We went to high school together,” he continued.

Still, no words came from my side of the cabin.

“I was a couple years ahead of you in your brother’s class. Leo?”

“I know my brother’s name, Ellis.” Reining in my bark, I played dense while desperate to keep calm. “Your name’s—Ellis?”

“You tutored me. In Calculus. How do you not remember? People call me Dutch because my last name’s Holland—”

“Yes,” I interrupted. “How clever.” Having little interest in any sort of small world reunion, I pushed ahead, knowing I needed help, seeing as my rogue bridegroom appeared to be a no-show. And I had no plans to stick around. But of all the people... “Two questions.” I zeroed in on a Plan B.

“Ask away, Sadie,” he sighed, but I ignored the dismay.

“How drunk are you?”

He didn’t slur his speech, but what self-respecting southern boy did, no matter how inebriated he got? “Just drunk enough, I s’pose.”

“Great. One floor down, at the aft of this too tall river barge, there are three twelve-foot, inflatable pontoon rescue dinghies equipped with 10.0 short shaft outboard electrical motors.” I met silence. “They’re red,” I offered when I realized my error. I have a tendency to focus on details few others find interesting or important or at all necessary.

He cocked his head in the shadows. “Again, apologies. Imma little drunk. Was the second question hidden in all of that?”

With my eyes adjusting to the environment, I’d swear I could see enough to register the handsome man’s quirked lip. “Oh. No. Right. Think you could help me get off this hell-boat and pilot one of those puppies the two miles back to dry land, Mr. Holland?”

“Captain.”

“O-kay. I’ll call you whatever you’d like.”

“No, it’s *captain* one of those puppies, not pilot. You captain a boat, pilot a plane.”

I waited a beat. “Ellis? Dutch? Oh, Captain, my Captain? Could you help out a runaway bride?”

“It’d be my privilege, Sadie Jane Klein.” If he’d worn a hat, he’d have tipped it. Memories of small-town-living where everyone knew everything about you, including your middle name, washed over me and struck me dumb. A rare condition. Neither of us moved for a full three seconds.

“*Ahem*, I’m assuming you mean *now*, darlin’?”

“Yes, Ellis. Now’d be good, but *never* call me that again.”

Dutch rushed past me, opening the door a crack to see if the corridor was clear. Hall sconces highlighted his sea green eyes and

days-old beard. Sandy-brown curls, I recalled from our younger days, were gone, and now he wore his hair quite short, if not an all-out buzz cut. Unfastening his top button, he loosened his necktie while I stared at his chiseled profile. The man had aged well.

“Sadie?” It might have been the *second* time he beckoned me from the door.

“Yes?” I jolted out of the chaos ruling my brain but couldn’t pull my gaze from his lips. The new light also revealed a faint scar, almost silver, at one corner of his mouth. I winced with the sudden memory of how it bled all those years ago. And why.

“Isn’t this boat gonna move again soon?”

“Yes, out twelve nautical miles for the gambling to begin.” Another unnecessary detail.

“So, we should probably hurry.”

“Yes.” My feet wouldn’t move. Tristan should have been here by now. Hell, Tristan and I shouldn’t have ever been here at all. *Son-of-a-*

“You sure, Sadie Jane?”

That name, said just that way, was all the encouragement I needed. I met Dutch’s bloodshot eyes. “Let’s do this,” I spat, and hitched up my skirt again, grabbed the crook of his arm, and we bolted for the nearest stairwell, leaving behind the ludicrous veil.



I knew better. *Everybody* knows better. But as we fled the party at sea, buzzing through the humid night air, I couldn’t help myself. “That was easier than I thought it’d be.” I didn’t say it to anyone. The high-pitch whine of the electric motor, splashing surf,

and blustery wind demanded a near-yelled conversation, and that wasn't happening.

Nevertheless—I said it, even though I knew better.

Under the perceived circumstances, one might think our great escape should have included more than the uneventful run-in with an on-a-break busboy, a ladder that was a bit too narrow and a bit too steep for my bridal get-up, and a couple of troublesome sailor knots that slowed our freeing the dinghy. I'd never admit it aloud, but I couldn't have made it without help. It seemed my debt to Ellis "Dutch" Holland continued to grow.

Of course, the old chestnut about perception versus reality—well, it played a regular theme in my life. It wasn't a surprise no one had launched an all-hands-on-deck search for me. Dollars to dumplings, Tristan created some distraction to give me a head start, and as soon as I figured out how it all went so wrong, how I allowed that dumbass to get me into this mess—wait. Who was the dumbass?

My fellow fugitive and I sped toward socket string lights that seemed to twinkle along the faraway dock landing. They didn't, really. The sea breeze made them oscillate, and the undulating tide beat out a rhythmic *clank* as moor chains assailed the buoyed channel markers. For people who grew up in a coastal town, those markers, the lights, those sounds make finding your way, even at night, something like automatic. And I had no doubt Dutch would get me to shore. What would happen then? I hadn't a clue.

Halfway between the anchored riverboat and the berth, we found ourselves in the darkest part of the journey. Lights glimmered ahead and behind us, but out in the waterway, I could barely see my hand in front of my face. Barely.

Looking back at the *Sapphire Selkie* and the near-mistake I'd dodged didn't seem prudent, nor did staring at the man who looked like a mistake I might *enjoy* making. While I chastised

myself for that impudent notion, the engine's whine, the wind, the splash of the surf—*everything* went quiet. Yep, I knew better.

My head hung low. "Ellis?"

The glow from the distant casino-at-sea outlined the movement of the figure at the rear of the rescue craft. That figure didn't reply. I repeated his name, but my question was obvious.

"Can't say for sure, Sadie, because it's darker than the Devil's—I can't read the digital display, but I imagine the battery died."

"Yeah. I figured," I sighed. "Two things."

"You're big on that."

"On what?"

"Twos."

"What?"

"*Two* questions, *two* things."

You'd think my distress in the thorniest of run-ins at the most untimely moment might encourage a milder manner—a less knee-jerk reaction toward the man who'd volunteered to be my liberator, but no. "Stick around, Ellis. Sometimes there's *three*."

"Careful. I just might," he mumbled, but I caught it.

"Might what?"

"Stick around."

I faced the shore, hiding my smile. Not that it mattered on a moonless night. The choppy water lapped on the boat's bow, and I kept my eyes on the far-off marina. A chill racked my frame, and my grin nearly morphed into a laugh. I stifled it.

Finally, he spoke again. "You were saying. Two things?"

I paused to be sure I wouldn't let slip the unhinged howl building in me, brought on by the absurd circumstance: dressed in a \$15,000 gown, stranded on an out-of-battery rescue dinghy in the middle of Booby Creek at o' dark thirty with the wrong man, a man I hadn't seen in fifteen years. A booby is a sea bird, by the

way, and don't let the term "creek" fool you. It was big. I shivered again. "Please tell me this thing came equipped with paddles, and, more importantly, that you are carrying—a flask."

The raft jostled, and I grabbed the nylon rope laced around the boat's hull. Dutch removed his dark suit coat and leaned to hand it to me. "Here. Put it on."

"That's not necessary but thank you." Hard-headed, I refused his kind gesture, already too indebted to the man.

"The flask is in the inside pocket."

"Oh." That changed things. I reached for the jacket, honestly eager for some warmth. "Aren't you the gentleman?"

"We'll see," came his quick reply.

I stopped short while slipping into the refined fresco blazer. Someone had expensive taste, and not just me. The sterling silver flask full of top-shelf Scotch further proved the point. I took my second healthy swig.

"And yes, we have paddles. Your favorite number. Two."

I stowed the booze in the breast pocket and extended my hand. "Well, hand me one, and let's get to shore."

"I will not. You're wearing a wedding gown, an expensive one, I'd guess. Not that I've taken much notice in our rush, but if I know Tristan Pembroke—and I do—it's pricey. No, you will not be rowing ashore, Miss Klein."

I opened my mouth to correct him. I was *Dr.* Klein, a Ph.D. in geotechnical engineering, but Dutch interjected before I could get the words out.

"Let me guess. Two things."

Damn, I wish he didn't make me smile like that. More stubbornness bloomed. "Three things, actually. I couldn't give a flying ferret about the dress, and how do you know Tristan?"

"That's only two things."

"Don't be an ass."

“But you said *three*—”

“No, that’s the third thing, Ellis. Don’t be an ass. Now how do you know my fiancé?”

“*Oof*. Hate to be the one to tell you this, but I’m pretty sure he’s your *ex*-fiancé now. And I work with his father. That’s why I was on the boat tonight. Work.”

“Work? What kind of work?”

“Uh, I’m—kind of a—problem solver. I mean, security, sort of. I work—security.” His reply lacked conviction as he stumbled over his words. Maybe he was drunker than I thought.

I laughed—couldn’t help myself, but I kept it in check. “Hate to be the one to tell you this,” I mimicked, “but after this show of disloyalty, I’m pretty sure you *worked* security for Tristan’s father. Past tense.” I might feel guilty about that dig when all was said and done.

“*Nah*, Mr. P. and I are good. But I appreciate your concern for my employment welfare.”

I disregarded his scored point. “Guess that explains why your name wasn’t on the guest list. Since you were there for *work*.”

“I dunno, Sadie. It was a big list. Long. You remember every *total* stranger’s name on that very lengthy list?”

Dutch might have caught me in my earlier lie. Not so much a lie as an omission, a feigned non-recollection. Of course I’d remembered Ellis Holland. How could I forget? No matter how hard I tried.

As if he read my mind, he continued, “How is ol’ Leo these days?” The metal-on-metal clang got louder as Dutch made slow rowing progress toward land.

Opting to neither confirm nor deny his suspicions, I ignored his implication. “My brother’s great. Really good. Lives in New York City. Queens, actually. Finished grad school at St. John’s. He’s a physician’s assistant now. Works too hard and too much to

make time to meet the man of his dreams, but he's happy." I hoped that last part was true. It had been a while since we talked and who the hell was I to judge him on work/life balance?

"So busy he couldn't make it to his kid sister's wedding? The kid sister he adores more than life—"

I pulled out the flask again and busied my mouth with it.

"It's nice he's keeping the Klein family's medical tradition alive." Dutch softened his tone. "I was mighty sorry to hear about your grandparents' passing."

My heart had barely stitched itself back together over the last year and a half, but I didn't show my pain. I wasn't a big sharer. My grandparents, Drs. Avigdor and Talia Klein were the only parents I've ever known, and I suppose I should count myself lucky to have had them as long as I did. Still, the ache ran deep. Worse, if I allowed myself to dwell on the loss, both of my grandparents and the mother and father I never knew. So, I didn't. I took in a big helping of sea air.

"Yes, well, Mee-maw and Granddaddy raised us right, but it was too soon. I'm grateful they went together. It's the only way they would have had it. One wasn't long for this world without the other. Besides, physics says when the eighteen-wheeler hit them, they never felt a thing. I think it bodes well, to be honest. Our parents went down together in an ocean storm, 'course, I was too young to remember, and our grandparents, in a car wreck. When my time comes, I hope it's like that. With the one I love." Welp, so much for not dwelling. Why would I ever share that? Least of all with Dutch Holland.

More *splash* and *clang* filled the void before Dutch spoke again. "Some might call it a curse, but you always did look at life a little differently." He took two more long, slow strokes before he sputtered, "W—was the one you love supposed to be Tristan?"

"No." My adamant reply came fast. "Never."

“Good.” Dutch’s reply flew from his lips just as quickly.

“Why good? What makes that good?”

“If he was the one, and you still ran away, you’d probably be sad right now. And I don’t want you to be sad. Not over the likes of Tristan Pembroke, anyway.”

It had been a long time since Dutch and I’d known one another, and in the night’s mayhem, wondering what memories of me he might have carried with him made my brain hurt. But I’d always been a runner. I ran *into* situations with little thought and often ran *away* if things got messy, then criticized every figurative misstep, coming or going. Now, there he sat, all these years later, acting like maybe he did recollect a thing or two, and being sweet about it to boot.

“*Hm.* Like I said, aren’t you the gentleman?”

Dutch simply sniffed and kept rowing.