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## Chapter 1

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Sage Worthington stood stock-still, glad for the relief of the large sunglasses she'd worn as the sun beat down, burning her skin through the fine material of her black formal dress. Her heart ached and her eyes were burning despite the fact that they were shaded. She was so grateful for the two small hands that clung tightly to each of hers. Her siblings were the anchor that was forcing her to stand there, rooted to the ground, when all she wanted to do was fall into a heap and cry.

Six days ago, with one phone call, the young woman's life and those of her little brother and sister, had changed forever. The news of their mom and dad's deaths had devastated all of them. Thank God, the kids hadn't been in the car! The loss was so large to bear, she wouldn't have wanted to live if she'd lost all of them.

Up until this point in her life, Sage had been totally self-centred. Her life had been about school, her job and her friends. She'd been an only child until she was fifteen. Now though, things would be about Netty and Bailey and figuring out where the three of them went from here. It was time for her to be a grown up and she didn't mind at all. The trouble was, she had no

idea where she was going to start. There was so much to think and worry about.

The sweet sound of ‘Amazing Grace’ was drawing to a close and she knew that the time had come. It was time to place their roses and leave, to get the children away from there before the coffins were lowered. Her parents would understand. Netty and Bailey had seen and heard enough and so had she. Still clinging to the small, now sobbing, figures she turned and walked away, towing what was left of her family behind her. This was the best thing to do, for now at least, they could get their breath before everyone turned up at the house.

God knew Sage wasn’t ready to make all of their life decisions yet; all she could do was take it a day at a time, or maybe an hour at a time. She reached for the door handle of the family truck, but a large hand was already there. She turned to find their next-door neighbour standing right behind her.

“Hi, Sage,” he said sadly.

“Cliff, I’m sorry, I didn’t see you there.”

“Hey, kids,” he said, touching each small head gently.

“Hey, Cliff,” Bailey answered. “I brushed the horses this morning like you showed me.”

“Good boy,” Cliff answered.

Netty said nothing.

“Are you okay, Sage?” he asked, concern written all over his face.

Sage nodded. “I’m okay. At least I think I am.”

“I want to go home,” Netty said.

“Yeah, me too,” said Bailey. “You comin’? We’re having company.”

“I’ll come back for a while.” He helped buckle the kids in their seats and then closed the door.

“I’m so sorry for your loss, Sage,” Cliff said, “I’m still finding it hard to believe that they’re gone.”

“We all are.” Sage wanted to make conversation, to be more

friendly but she was numb and was finding it hard to find words. She and their neighbour Cliff had had an awkward frienemy background when they were younger, though that was a few years ago.

“I’ll see you back at your place,” he said. “We’ll talk more then.”

Cliff tipped his hat and walked back to where his grandparents were waiting along with the rest of the mourners.

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Sage waved away what must have been the sixth plate of food that someone had tried to make her eat. She just didn’t think she could swallow. “I’m sorry, I can’t. Maybe later.” She hadn’t looked up, so didn’t notice the owner of the offering.

“Maybe just try a little now,” Cliff said. “You have to eat.”

“I don’t have to do anything.” Sage didn’t mean to get a tone in her voice but seriously, if one more person told her that she needed to eat, she’d scream. He probably meant well, but he was the last of a very long line of food pushers and she couldn’t take it any more.

Cliff pulled up a seat next to Sage. “Bailey tells me you never sit and eat with them. You cook food but then you just sit and watch them eat it and stare at the wall.”

“Bailey is nine,” she said.

“He’s a nine-year-old who has lost his parents and is now worried that you’ll get sick because you’re not eating,” Cliff said gently.

“I-I don’t,” Sage started to answer but really didn’t know what to say. What did she say to that? That she didn’t want to worry him, that she didn’t know that he noticed? Did she notice herself that she hadn’t been eating? All were true. “I’ll talk to Bailey. I don’t want him to be upset over me, and tomorrow, I’ll eat with them.”

“Good idea. An even better idea would be if you ate the sandwich and drank the tea before you go talk to him.” His tone was gentle but firm.

“Thanks for your advice, Cliff, but I think I can decide when I need to eat. I’m an adult now.” Sage tried not to jut her chin out like a smart-alec teenager.

“And yet you sound very much like the eighteen-year-old I once knew,” he said, unable to hold back a grin. “I think I remember being able to make you do as you were told back then.”

“You’re never going to let me live that down are you?”

“Probably not. I hope I made enough of an impression on you that *you* never forget.”

Sage blushed. How *could* she forget? The fun night when she was home alone nearly six years ago had started as a fun, care-free time with her best friend and had ended up being one of the most embarrassing moments of her life. She glanced at the big man next to her...

*“Party at my house!” Skyler said. “We could go to yours but mine is in town, so easier for everyone to get to.”*

*“I don’t know. My parents made me promise that I would stay home while they’re away.”*

Her parents had gone to stay the night in the next town where they had an obstetrician’s appointment the next day. They’d taken her little brother too. She had to stay because of her last final.

*“They won’t even know.”*

*“What if they phone and I’m not there?”*

*“Phone them first and tell them you’re exhausted and having an early night.”*

*“That might work.”*

*“Your mom and dad are away, my mum and stepdad are away. How often do we get the chance to party with no parents around?”*

*“Not often.”*

## An Unexpected Wife

“See? We have to and guess what? Sienna’s brother Jonathan is going to get us a keg of beer.”

“Jonathan isn’t old enough to get a keg of beer.”

“No, but Jonathan’s friend is. Well, he’s not really a friend but he will get it, we just have to pay him.”

“Now that is a problem. All I have is my emergency money and I can’t spend that without explaining what the emergency was. Obviously my folks aren’t going to think a keg is an emergency.”

“That’s why we’re going to charge ten dollars a head.”

“Okay then, that just might work. You know what? Let’s do it.”

“You’re remembering that night,” Cliff said with a grin.

“The night you found Skyler and I a little worse for wear, wandering the street, looking for pizza.”

“The night you lied to your parents and when they couldn’t get a hold of you, they phoned me and had me go look for you.”

“Same night.” She was mortified that she could feel herself blushing and knew that it had to be showing. It was a curse, blood rushing to her face at every opportunity, giving away her embarrassment immediately.

“I guess you remember that night didn’t end well.”

“I remember that you manhandled me.”

“Manhandled,” Cliff scoffed. “I lifted you into the truck because you were drunk and belligerent and then when we got home, I lifted you *out* because you were still giving me trouble.”

“You ruined my fun and embarrassed me in front of my friend.”

“I might have saved you from something a lot worse.”

“Nothing happens in a small town like this.”

“Tell that to ‘Nightline’.” Cliff smirked. “You were a brat and I had to spank your sassy behind because you bit me.”

“You didn’t *have* to, besides, I was defending myself.” She could feel a smile starting to twist the corners of her mouth and she felt a pang of guilt, amongst other things. Guilt because she shouldn’t have butterflies in her tummy remembering being manhandled over

Clifford Welsh's knees. This was the gathering after her parents' funeral and she shouldn't be feeling—that. A memory flashed through her mind of his hand actually connecting with the back of her jeans and she gasped, out loud. Colour once again filled her face and she tried to stand up, to get away. Trouble was, there was a large man right in front of her and he wasn't going to allow her to escape.

“Better eat this sandwich. I haven't lost my touch; I can still make you do as your told.” He smiled at her, wiggling his eyebrows. He took a corner of a sandwich from the plate and held it to her lips.

She took a bite, and had to admit that the food tasted good. She also found that she was actually hungry.

It was finally over. Sage stood at the door with Netty on her hip, saying goodbye to the last of the mourners. At least, almost the last. Cliff had taken Bailey to feed the animals.

“You going to be all right, honey?” Aunt Jen asked, “Because I can take the little ones home with me if you want.”

“No, I'd rather have them here, Aunt Jen, really.” Her aunt was hovering and had been since she got home. Sage knew she wanted to help but she was smothering her.

“Or we could stay.”

“No, you don't have to do that.” Oh please don't do that, Sage thought.

“Okay then, if you're sure.”

“I am.” Sage loved her aunt and her uncle, but she felt drained. She just wanted to be alone to gather her thoughts but she wanted to do it where she could hear Netty and Bailey breathing peacefully in their sleep.

“Fine then, honey, we'll give you a couple of days and then we'll see you back here Friday for the reading of the will.”

“Thank you.”

Sage closed the door and breathed a sigh of relief. “Alone at last, Netty. Are you tired? How about I put a movie on in my room. You can lay on my bed just for a little while huh?”

“I want to lay in Momma and Daddy’s bed.”

Sage’s voice caught in her throat. “Sure, baby doll. You can do that.”

When she came back down the stairs, Cliff was waiting. “So the animals are fed and we bedded down the horses. I strained the milk and put it in the fridge. Is there anything else you need help with?”

“Thank you no, I’ll be okay.”

“If there’s anything else you need, you just have to let me know.”

Sage smiled. “We’ll be okay, won’t we, Bailey?” Her brother nodded but she could see the worry in his eyes. He had to be petrified. She was the occasional weekend sister that brought home three weeks’ worth of laundry and then mostly slept. How was he supposed to have faith that she could look after him? She would though; she’d figure this all out.

“I’ll leave you to it then,” Cliff said, lingering longer than he meant to.

He leaned against the doorway, staring into her eyes until she shivered and grinned, a slight pink tinge creeping onto her cheeks. “Yeah, I better see to the children.”

“I’ll be around. You know, just to make sure you don’t need anything to be done.”

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The sun was gone and the house was quiet. The kids hadn’t wanted supper but they’d been grazing most of the afternoon so she wasn’t going to force them. Time for bed at last.

“Can we have our story in Momma and Daddy’s bed?” Netty asked.

“Yeah, can we, Sage, please?” Bailey begged.

“I guess so. Have you chosen a book?”

“I don’t want to hear one of Netty’s baby books tonight, Sage,” Bailey said. “Can you tell us a story like Dad used to?”

“He used to say, ‘when I was a boy’ but you can say, ‘when I was a girl’,” Netty agreed.

Sage sighed. This was the last thing she felt like doing but she was grateful that Bailey and Netty were starting to ask for what they needed, so for the moment, she would just go with the flow. “Okay, I guess we can do that.”

“Hop in,” she said, lifting back the familiar covers, finding a little comfort herself in the familiar ritual of a story in her parents’ bed. When everyone was cosy and settled, she started. “When I was a young girl, I was an only child. I used to say my prayers every night, right in that room over there. Mom or Daddy used to sit on the edge of the bed and listen. Every night after saying my usual thanks, I would ask God if he would send me a brother or a sister. Mom said that God would do his best but he couldn’t grant every prayer or wish, he wasn’t a fairy godmother.” The kids giggled and she couldn’t help but smile. “It took a long time, but guess what? He did answer my prayers. I waited patiently and eventually Mom found out she was having a baby.”

“That was me,” Bailey said.

“Yep, that was you. We were all so happy that I kept on praying for another brother or a sister and then guess what? “

“You gotten me!” Netty said.

“That’s right, we got you. It was so fun to have a brother and a sister but, by then, I was already eighteen years old. I got to play with you for just a while and I had to go off to college. I missed you so much that I came home every chance I could. Trouble was, I was staying in a big city and big cities are expen-



sive and I had to get a job so I couldn't always come home as much as I wanted. I missed you guys."

"We missed you too," Bailey said.

"Well, I'm home now."

"What if you go back to the city again? Who will take care of us?"

"Listen, *I* am going to take care of you, I promise."

"You really promise?" Bailey asked, his eyes full of hope.

"I really promise. Now you need to get some sleep."

"Can we all stay here?" Netty asked.

"Sure. We'll all stay here together tonight."

"I miss my momma and daddy," the little girl said, crying softly. She curled into Sage's side and hung on tight.

"I know you do, honey, we all do." Sage clung to both of her little people, feeling her brother's body lightly shaking as well. She looked to the ceiling and hoped the fairy godfather was still listening as she whispered a prayer. "Please, God, make sure I'm not giving these kids false hope. Help me to find a way to keep everyone safe and happy."

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The next morning, Sage woke to the six o'clock alarm. This was something she hadn't really had to do since she'd gone off to college, although she liked to help her dad out when she was home, sometimes. Buck, the hand, though had retired and her dad hadn't hired a new hand yet so she and the kids were it for now.

"Wakey, wakey rise and shine," she chanted sleepily.

"I'm already awake," Bailey said with a grin. He was standing fully dressed in the doorway like he'd been waiting for them for a while.

"Good boy, you really are an old hand at this, aren't you, Bails?"

“Yes, ma’am. We got to do the animals, Netty,” Bailey said, giving his little sister a shake. Netty blinked her eyes open. “You can feed the chickens and collect the eggs.”

“Okay,” Netty agreed sleepily.

“Can you remember how to milk the cow?”

“Me?” Sage asked. “I think I can manage that.” She had to suppress a grin. Here she was thinking that Bailey was a little boy, which he was a lot of the time, but at the moment, he was all business. The man of the house. “Will I help you get dressed, Netty?”

“I’m not a baby. I can dress myself,” Netty said with a giggle.

Bailey rolled his eyes. “I’ll move some feed and then we can turn out the horses and muck the stables.”

“Sounds like a plan.” In a perfect world, the plan would involve some coffee and a short lie in but she was well aware that this was how things were done in the country.

While she waited for Netty to get dressed, Sage put on some coffee and got a loaf of bread out of the freezer. Thank goodness she didn’t have to bake it. When she came home for visits, her mom had always made her own bread. *She* though, was no superwoman like her mom had been. Her mom had helped her dad out and still held down a job in town in the bakery. Her dad ran this place, boarding other people’s horses and growing what they needed. It was never a big concern, but they got by. Finally, Netty emerged after dressing herself. “Well, that *is* an interesting outfit for a ranch hand girl,” Sage said with a grin.

“I’m not a ranch hand girl, I’m a ranch hand princess.” Netty stood proudly, ready for work. She had donned a pale blue, lace and satin princess dress with jeans underneath and a crown on her head.

“I guess that’ll work,” Sage said with a smile. Hey, if a kid was happy to work and they needed to be a princess to do it, she could go with that. There were so many other things to worry about. Money was a bit of an issue. While she had helped out a

bit and she sort of knew the running of the place, she didn't have a clue how they actually made money. She had noticed that there weren't any other horses in the barn but their own so the boarding business seemed to be not happening. Oh well, there was a roof over their heads and they wouldn't starve; there were vegetables in the garden and eggs in the coop. Omelettes anyone? She certainly wasn't going to be the one to end the life of a chicken. She rubbed her hands over her face, trying to erase fearful thoughts from her mind. At least she had what was in her account. Maybe the lawyer could shed some light on the money issues at the will reading. Why hadn't she ever had this discussion with her parents? Sage knew why; her parents had been supposed to live forever.

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By the time they were finished with morning chores, Sage felt like she was ready to go back to bed but there was a list a mile long of stuff she still had to do. "Right, breakfast," she said with a smile. "Go wash your hands."

"Can we have pancakes?" Bailey asked.

"Sure." Sage opened the pantry hoping to find one of those little jugs that you add water to. Nope, not at this place. Her mom always made everything from scratch. That was something else she would have to learn. Her repertoire was omelettes, sandwiches and cold cereal. Not that she wasn't big on microwaved ready meals, but kids needed more than that. They needed food that had been prepared with love. How hard could that be?

"Hi."

Sage jumped. "Cliff, you scared the life out of me."

"Sorry. I did knock but no one heard me."

"That's okay, you just startled me. Is there, I mean, what can I do for you?"

“Nothing. I came to see if I could do anything for you. I see you seem to have things mostly under control here.”

“Yeah, I do.” Kind of, she thought.

“Sage, are we having pancakes?” Bailey asked. “I’m hungry.”

“Yeah, Bails, about that... there’s no mix left.”

“What’s a mix?” Bailey asked.

“Exactly!” Cliff grinned. “What self respecting country girl uses a *mix*?”

“One who is a little kitchen phobic.” She found herself smiling as he gathered ingredients, obviously intent on preparing their meal.

“Did you find any eggs this morning, Netty?”

“I found all the eggs!” Netty said proudly.

“Excellent. Milk?”

“I got the milk!” Sage giggled.

“Okay, then. Everyone pay attention to your first lesson in pancakes. You especially,” he whispered into Sage’s ear.

Cliff’s breathy voice against her ear sent a frizzle of pleasure spinning through her body like an out of control fuse. It was all she could do to catch her breath, let alone think straight.

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“Those pancakes were yummy,” Netty said.

“They sure were,” Bailey said, picking up his plate and getting it awfully close to his face.

“Don’t you dare even think about licking that plate, mister.” Sage tried to frown but her eyes were laughing. “There’s no way you’ve ever been allowed to do that. Rinse your plate and put it in the dishwasher, Bails, you too, Netty.”

“Okay.” Netty stopped and gave Cliff a hug. “Thank you for the yummy breakfast.”

“Yeah, thanks, Cliff. Can I go play now?” he asked his sister.

“Of course you can,” Sage said. “Stay in the yard though

where you can hear me if I come out to the porch.”

“Thanks for showing me how to fix pancakes.”

“You’re welcome. If you need any other pointers with cooking, I’d be happy to show you.”

“Have you seen our fridge and freezer? We have enough leftovers to last us a month.” She wished they didn’t. She wished she had an excuse to get Cliff to come and cook for them more often. He made all of them smile.

“Well, when they run out, you know where to come.” He smiled widely.

“I do. You’ll be the first person I call.” Sage grinned, wishing she could think of something to say but the air was thick with an awkward silence.

“Well, much as I’d like to stay, I have to work.” He jotted his number on a post it pad on the fridge and ripped it off, and stuck it back down directly onto the fridge. “I’m leaving you my number so you know how to reach me.”

“Thanks. Hopefully we won’t have to bother you.”

“It won’t be a bother. Besides, I had fun this morning.”

“I did too.”

“He could come and eat leftovers with us, Sage, couldn’t he?” Bailey asked, appearing from nowhere.

“I’m sure Cliff is very busy.”

“I have to eat,” he said with a broad smile.

“Then pop in anytime, we’ll be here.” Sage pushed the hair from her eyes, wishing she’d actually spent some time making herself presentable. It hadn’t occurred to her at the crack of dawn that the animals would mind how scruffy she was. Now she was stuck. If she suddenly did herself up around dinnertime, it would be obvious that she was trying to make a good impression and she couldn’t care less. Could she? Was she trying to make a good impression?

Sage lifted the lid on the large washer and started to pull the clothes out.

“Someone’s coming,” Bailey yelled out from the fence where he was giving his pony an apple.

Sage dropped the wet t-shirts into the basket and stepped out onto the porch to see who it was. “Aunt Jen, Uncle Harry. What brings you out here again so soon?”

“Well, we wanted to talk to you, honey.”

Aunt Jen looked serious and Uncle Harry wasn’t looking at her at all. “Is something wrong?”

“No, not exactly. There’s something we would have normally spoken to you about as soon as you got home but well, the timing is just terrible.”

Sage glanced at Bailey who was listening intently. “Bails go and check on Netty will you, honey? She went up to her room.”

“You just don’t want me to listen,” Bailey said.

“I just need you to check on your sister,” Sage said. It was the first time her brother had challenged her since she came back and it wasn’t like him.

“Okay,” he agreed. “I’m not a baby though you know.”

“I know, Bails.” She waited for her brother to go inside before walking with the others to the outdoor sofa.

“Please tell me what’s wrong; you’re scaring me.”

“Sage, honey, I don’t know how to tell you this. We’re moving. It’s not something we would have planned if we had known what was to happen but we didn’t know and now it’s all done. Our house was sold weeks ago and we have already made our plans to move on over to Florida where your cousin Leah has settled with her family. We wanted to be closer to her and, of course, the baby. I’m so sorry, honey, I swear, if I’d known...” Aunt Jen’s eyes filled with tears and Uncle Harry put his arms about her.

Sage was shocked, and she felt like crying, not just for herself or the kids either. Aunt Jen had lost her only sister and Uncle

Harry had lost his best friend. The two couples had been close as long as she could remember. “It’s okay. I’m the one who’s sorry. Here I’ve been thinking just about our loss and I hadn’t really given a thought to yours.”

“It’s as it should be. They were your parents.”

“I don’t know what to say except, we’ll miss you. But don’t worry; we’ll be okay.” She hugged her aunt and tried as hard as she could to keep the tears that had welled from falling. She didn’t want to make this harder for them than it already was. “When do you leave?”

“We’ve managed to get an extension on the time we have to move but we have to be out eight weeks after the will reading on Friday.”

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Sage was nervous as she dressed for the meeting. It was finally Friday and she didn’t know why, but she had a bad feeling. The children were already dressed in their Sunday best and were sitting on the sofa waiting for her to be finished. She didn’t know why she’d had them dress up, but it just seemed the thing to do.

“Why do *we* have to dress up?” Bailey said from the doorway. “No one’s coming to see me.”

“It’s the right thing to do, Bails.” Was that the right response? She was the adult now; she should know these things shouldn’t she?

“Why, what are they even coming for, to talk?”

“Talk about important things; adult things, stuff about our future.” Yeah, she had no idea really. She hoped it was just a formality but, nevertheless, she was nervous.

“Exactly. Don’t know what there is to talk about anyways. We’re all right here aren’t we?”

“Of course we are and you don’t have to listen.”

“Then why did I have to put on nice clothes?”

“Bailey!” Sage felt like a heel as soon as she raised her voice. “Bails, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to yell. I’m just nervous that’s all.”

“It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not. You’ve been a really big grown up helping this week and I couldn’t have done it without you. This stuff is a pain but it’s the law. They have to talk to me and I have to listen.”

“Okay.”

“Tell you what though, you can go and play in your room and I’ll call you if I need you.”

“Thanks.”

“And you can take off that tie.”

“Thanks, Sage.” Bailey grinned and ran off happily.

Sage brushed her hair one more time and went to offer Netty the same deal.

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The atmosphere was formal as Sage, Aunt Jen and Uncle Harry sat around the table; the family attorney perched formally at the head.

“Thank you all for coming,” he said. “While wills are not usually read like this anymore, when your parents signed these papers, they specifically asked that you could all be here to support each other and so that they had one more chance to speak to you, to explain, if, in fact, they passed suddenly and together, as is the case.”

Sage nodded but was a little confused. Explain what?

“So first for the financials.” He straightened the papers in front of him and tapped them on the table. “You may or may not know, but this property has a fairly hefty mortgage.”

Sage blinked and tried to breathe; it wasn’t easy. The bad feeling she had was growing by the second. How heavy? That meant payments. How was she supposed to make enough money to make payments and look after the kids and this place?



“While the house is an asset, all debts have to be paid to the bank before the amount that is left can be determined.”

“I have to sell the house?” Sage’s eyes bulged. It hadn’t occurred to her that she would have to sell the house, to sell their home? Where was she supposed to live with two children? What was she going to tell them? “Isn’t there life insurance?”

“Yes, there is life insurance, and I’m getting to that. The life insurance will be divided into thirds with the children’s inheritance being placed into a trust for the minors.”

“The minors are Netty and Bailey. They have names, they are little people and they need to have a roof over their heads.”

“He’s trying to explain, dear,” Uncle Harry said.

Sage tried sit quiet and listen, hoping someone was going to make sense of all this.

“The horses are not part of the estate and, as such, do not have to be sold. The guardians though will have to make arrangements for their wellbeing. That will include Jack Worthington’s horse Jett.”

“Great. That’ll be a comfort. We’ll have to live in a box, kids, but you can bring your ponies. They will, of course, be sharing our accommodations and food with Jett, the big cranky stallion.”

“Sage, just let the man read so we can figure this all out,” Aunt Jen said, putting her arm around the young woman.

“Thank you,” the attorney said. “The distribution of assets is as follows: There is life insurance that is in trust for the minors; Bailey John Worthington and Annette Rose Worthington until the time that they each turn twenty-five-years-old. In the meantime, their guardian/guardians will be able to access the money for their benefit; school, day-to-day requirements, medical, etc.

“See, honey, no one is living in a box,” Aunt Jen said helpfully. “Not that we would have let that happen anyway.”

“Of course we wouldn’t,” Uncle Harry chipped in.

“Your inheritance will also be paid to you when you turn twenty-five.”

“Are you serious? How am I supposed to feed the kids and the animals?” Sage was beyond frustrated. “Make the mortgage payments?”

“I’m sure that your parents had their reasons, but my job is just to carry out their wishes. Now, if you’d let me, I’ll finish.”

“Go ahead.” Sage felt sick. How much worse could it possibly get?

“The next part has a letter I have to read out loud. It’s with regards to the guardianship of the children.” He took a handwritten letter out of the envelope and read...

*Our darling, Sage. If you are reading this, we have passed together and as sad as I know you must be, we need you to pay attention and hear everything that we have to say. All of it. It’s important.*

*You came into our lives while we were still so very young ourselves and we enjoyed every minute with you. We made the choice to get married and be parents and that is a decision that we never regretted. That being said, there were two of us and we always parented together. We hope that you can one day find someone that you can enjoy the kind of relationship with that we have shared.*

*This is the hard part. We both know how much you adore your brother and sister, that you will want to be their guardian. Sometimes, as a parent, you have to look at the bigger picture and that is exactly what we are trying to do. At this time of your life, you should be free to make your own best life choices.*

“What are they saying?” Sage felt like she was going to throw up.

*If you are under thirty, for the time being, Netty and Bailey will be with Aunt Jen and Uncle Harry. They will be their legal guardians.*

“We didn’t know, honey, I swear,” Jen said, gasping.

Sage glared.

*Sage, when you turn thirty or before then if you marry, you may apply for legal guardianship and the children can be in your full time care.*

“So I have to get married to keep my brother and sister?” Sage asked incredulously.

“That’s about the strength of it, or wait another six years. Which would be the wisest course for action,” the attorney answered. “There’s more.”

*Please, Sage, please understand that we have only made this decision in all of your best interests. We want you all to have lives. Happy lives.*

*We love you all and only want what’s best for you.*

*Love Mom and Dad xoxoxo*

*PS: Jen you are my only sister and I know this is the biggest favour anyone could ever ask, but please take care of my babies and do what’s best for all three of them.*

*Love*

*Meri xoxoxo*

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“Sage, you have to believe I didn’t know anything about this.”

“I do,” Sage said. “It doesn’t change anything though. I have lost everything, my home, Bails and Netty and my parents. The thing that hurts the most is them. They’re gone and they died thinking that I wasn’t someone they could trust.”

“It wasn’t that at all.”

“Yes, it was, Aunt Jen. They dressed it up, but that was basically what they meant.”

“I think you need to read the letter a few more times when you aren’t so upset.” Jen wrapped her arms around her niece.

Sage nodded. “What am I going to tell the kids, Auntie?”

“I don’t know. We can leave it for a week but then it might be a good idea if we take them with us so they aren’t here when people come to look at the place. That’ll still give us a few weeks before we have to move to break the news to them and give them time to adjust, seven weeks until we have to leave.”

“Oh, God, I forgot—you’re moving and they’ll be even further away.”