



*Saturday, September 1*

*11:45 p.m.*

Wind whips my face as I race across the pasture on Chieftain. As if Cole would ever let me ride the stallion, but hey, this is a dream. In the next minute, I'm trying to identify the noise that woke me. Lying still for a moment, I pray it's just a cat outside or maybe a thunderstorm. There it is again. I throw back the covers and fly down the hall, where I plow into Sly.

Her short, spiky hair pokes out in all directions, and at any other moment, I might tease her. She seems exhausted, and I hate to think of her losing another night's sleep.

"I'll go." I can barely hear Sly's quiet whisper above the increased sounds of our little sister's sobs.

"We'll both go." I lay my hand on Sly's arm and give it a slight squeeze.

We hurry to Maggie's room and open the door to discover her curled into a tiny ball in the middle of the bed.

"Magpie." Sly softly uses our father's pet name as Maggie launches into her arms, nearly knocking Sly to the floor.

"I want Mamma and Daddy!" Maggie wails.

I wish I could wail right along with her. Settling beside her, I stroke circles on Maggie's back as Sly soothes her with sounds more than words.

"Sweetheart, I know. We all do," Sly says.

Hot tears sting my eyes, and I flick them aside. I have to be strong. There will be time for crying later.

Within a few moments, Maggie's sobs dissolve into tiny hiccups. I snag a tissue from the bedside table, then offer it to her. The tension in the room lifts, and I sense rather than hear Sly's deep sigh. We've weathered another storm. Together.

"Sly?" Maggie's voice sounds strong, considering how hard she'd been sobbing earlier.

"Hmm?" Sly brushes back a damp strand of hair from Maggie's face.

"Why did God kill Mamma and Daddy?"

For a flash, I can't breathe, and I meet Sly's startled gaze over Maggie's tousled head.

"Do you mean, why did they die?" Sly asks gently.

"No!" Maggie sits up abruptly and focuses on Sly and then me. "Why did God kill them?"

"Magpie," Sly closes her eyes.

But Maggie shakes her head. "No, don't call me that. I want to know why God killed our parents. Pastor Jeff always tells us how much God loves us, but I don't believe that anymore. He can't love us if He did such a bad thing."

I study Sly, guilty that Maggie is the one to voice the question that's been tormenting me. I desperately hope Sly offers an answer—for both of us. But it's a lot to ask of a young woman who is barely twenty-two-years-old.

"Maggie, I can't answer all your questions, and we may never learn the answers until we get to heaven someday. Sometimes bad things happen, even to Christians. But I can tell you, God does love us. He wants you to tell Him how you feel—it won't make Him angry or hurt His feelings."

I'm surprised by the wisdom in Sly's words.

"Psalm 147:3 has become my favorite Bible verse in this past year. It says, 'He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds' (NIV). You, and I, and Jess—we're brokenhearted. We continue with our lives, but in our own way, we're still broken. But God cares for us so much, He put that scripture in the Bible, so we'll have hope that He is healing us. Mamma and Daddy raised us to trust that God keeps His promises. He will keep this one, too."

Maggie is silent for a minute, then reaches up to touch Sly's cheek, which is wet with tears. "Okay," Maggie whispers. "I'll talk to Him about it. And I'll try to believe."

Moments later, I follow Sly out of Maggie's room, and without speaking, we both head down the stairs. The Hello Kitty nightlight glows in the kitchen and allows Sly just enough light to see as she pulls out a tin of chamomile tea. She glances at me, and I nod.

She fills two mugs with water and places them in the microwave. I move to the pantry and return with a package of peanut butter cookies, which earns a nod from Sly. She's shivering a little, so I grab a lightweight sweater and hand it to her. As Sly cocoons herself in the gray knit, I'm struck by how thin she's become.

At five foot seven, Sly has always been 'willowy,' as Mamma called her. But Sly has lost many of her curves in recent months. I wish I could share some of mine with her. I'm barely five-three, and, in my opinion, I have plenty of curves to spare.

When our snack is ready, we sit and sip our drinks, neither willing to break the silence. The kitchen is my favorite area in our home. The cheerful yellow curtains and Mamma's brightly colored woven rugs make it welcoming and cozy.

In the evenings, Daddy often worked at the kitchen table, keeping Mamma company as she graded papers for her third-grade class. Over the past months, Sly has taken their place at

the table, working into the night to pay bills and manage our small household.

Ten months ago, we sat at this kitchen table, absorbing the news that our parents were dead. How was it possible? They'd been laughing when they climbed into Daddy's car that afternoon. A few hours later, they died when their car skidded on standing water and plummeted into a ravine.

"Do you ever get mad at God because of what happened?" I blurt. "I mean, I know we get angry that Mamma and Daddy died. But it affected your entire life. You quit college and changed your plans so you could become our guardian. It isn't fair to you." My voice trails off as I speak the words I've been holding in for ten long months.

Sly sips her tea. "It isn't fair to any of us."

"But you were only twenty-one years old," I say. "You should be in Missoula, at college, studying photojournalism and engaged to Brad Jenkins. Instead, you moved home to take a job at Sinclair Construction. You gave up your dreams." I contemplate my cooling tea and wonder if reminding Sly of everything she's lost is the right way to repay my sister for her sacrifice.

"Who says I gave up my dreams? I will be a photojournalist, but it may take a little longer to earn my degree. I'm learning interesting techniques through the online courses I'm taking. And I liked my job most of the time." She flashes a sad smile.

"Trust me, Brad is no great loss. He started hanging out with some real partiers, and it affected our relationship. I was already considering breaking off my engagement with him. Please don't worry about me, Jess." Sly puts her hand on mine. "God's got a plan for each of us. It will be okay. And I'll find another job."

I wish I can feel as confident as Sly. Our parent's death has shaken my faith more than I prefer to admit. And while I don't believe God killed them, I can't seem to find a solid footing with my faith these days.

It reminds me of the song I used to sing in Sunday School about the man who built his house on the sand. When the storm

came, his house fell down. These days, I have an uneasy feeling that the ground beneath my faith is as shaky. I just hope there are no more storms.

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*Sunday, September 2*

*8:00 a.m.*

I OPEN MY EYES, and for a moment, everything seems the same. My Tweety alarm clock reads eight o'clock, and the sun is peeking in my bedroom window. But gradually, the events of last night force their way into my consciousness.

What if I can't prove Sly's innocence, and she goes to jail? Our only relatives are Grandma and Grandpa Thomas, and they live in a nursing home in Florida. Sly tried to reassure us last night, but the reality is, Maggie and I might have to go into foster care. We could even be placed in different homes. My heart pounds as I consider that possibility.

I brush aside the negative thoughts as they race through my mind. Sly is innocent. That's all there is to it.

Before we returned to our beds last night, Sly and I agreed to keep today as normal as possible for Maggie's sake.

Sliding out of bed, I pull on a black skirt with a baby pink T-shirt that shows off my fading summer tan. I gather up my long hair in a loose ponytail and hurry down the stairs, pulling on my pink Vans as I go.

Sly is sitting at the kitchen table, still wearing the black yoga pants and old sweatshirt she changed into last night. Did she even go to bed?

She glances up as I enter the room. "There's fresh coffee if you want some."

I nod and pour myself a cup. I prefer Pepsi to wake me up, but today, coffee suits my mood. I sit next to my sister and give her arm a squeeze.

“It will be okay,” I reassure her. “I talked to Cole last night, and he says Nick will do everything possible to get to the bottom of this.” Because Justice is such a small town, law enforcement consists of Sheriff Harvey Richards and Deputy Sheriff Nick McBride.

Sly gives a tiny smile. “Yes. Nick called last night when you were sleeping. He convinced Robert not to press charges yet. At least he saved me from the humiliation of being taken to the police station. He plans to stop by later this afternoon to ask me a few questions.”

She blows into her coffee, then whispers, “Jess, I don’t know what I’ll do if I lose you and Maggie, too. I promised Mamma and Daddy I’d take care of you two girls if anything ever happened to them. I can’t let them down.” Tears glimmer on her lashes, and she swipes them aside.

“You listen to me, Sylvia Rae Thomas,” I say fiercely. “You haven’t let anyone down, not Mamma and Daddy, and certainly not Maggie and me. You gave up so much to live here in Justice with us. When this mess gets straightened out, the Sinclairs will owe you a sincere apology. As a matter of fact, I think I’ll insist they rent the billboard on Interstate 15 and post it there!”

Sly smiles at my vehemence. “You’re probably right. It’s a horrible misunderstanding. Besides, Nick is a good investigator. Remember last summer when the Benson brothers broke into homes while the owners were on vacation? Nick was determined to catch them in the act, and he did.”

“That’s right. Cole says he’s never met anyone as stubborn as his brother.” Then I remember the rest of his statement. “Well,” I add self-consciously, “he did say except for me.”

She looks into my eyes. “Jess, I love your loyalty to me, but you’ll need to keep your temper in check. Please let Nick do his job, and you stay far away from the Sinclairs until this is resolved, okay?”

I give a non-committal grunt as I pour a bowl of cereal for myself and Maggie, who can be heard thumping down the stairs.

As she enters the room, I'm relieved to see her usual infectious grin, and my tension eases a bit more.

"You're right on time," Sly says as Maggie joins us at the table. "You can say grace."

"Grace."

Maggie and I speak at the same time, and Sly tries to give us a stern look but fails.

"Pray, please," she says, twitching a smile.

"Father, thank you for this beautiful day. Please bless this calorie-free food. Amen." I pick up my spoon and focus on my Sugar Smacks.

"Calorie-free?"

I shrug. "Hey, last week, Pastor Jeff read that scripture, 'You have not because you ask not.' I thought it was worth a try."

Sly opens her mouth to say something, then appears to reconsider. She shrugs and spoons up some oatmeal.

"Hey, Jess, could you curl my hair this morning for church?" Maggie asks around a mouthful of cereal.

Sly and I both stop eating, with our spoons half-way to our mouths.

Reaching over, Sly touches Maggie's forehead. "No fever."

I look into Maggie's dark brown eyes. "For real, Maggie?"

She nods with enthusiasm, and her long russet braid swings forward toward her bowl. I rescue it in the nick of time. I definitely don't want to curl sticky hair.

"What's the occasion?" Sly says.

Maggie stares at Sly as if she is from outer space.

"This is the day," Maggie says. At our puzzled stares, she sighs and mutters something that sounds like *clueless*.

"The day?" I tease.

Maggie gives me a patient look and speaks as if she's talking to a toddler. "Today, I will join the junior high Sunday School class."

The light dawns, and I give Sly a guilty glance. We forgot Maggie's special day. Today, our Sunday School is starting a new

series for the year. Maggie will turn twelve at the end of the month, but the leaders have invited her to be part of the class from the beginning so she won't miss any lessons. Maggie has looked forward to this day all summer, but we were so overwhelmed with Sly's news, we completely forgot.

"I'll be happy to curl your hair, Magpie," I say, honestly.

She grins and returns to her cereal. Maggie is small and compact, which helps her excel in her gymnastics class. Her long brown hair has natural highlights of red and gold, and she has a scattering of freckles across her nose. She's adorable.

Sly's gaze mirrors the same love and concern for our little sister. Tears sting my eyes. We're Maggie's only family now. It isn't right. Mamma and Daddy should be here, at this very minute, sharing our breakfast. They should be hugging Maggie and telling her how proud they are of her. Now that responsibility—and honor—belong to Sly and me.

"Please, God," I whisper in my heart. "Please help us."

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*Sunday, September 2*

*12:00 p.m.*

AFTER CHURCH, I meet up with Grace and Cole. Grace spent the morning working in the nursery, and she looks like she needs a nice, long nap.

"What's cooking?" I ask my typical after-church question and receive the typical responses.

"Taco Bell," says Cole.

"Wendy's salad," says Grace.

"McDonald's." Maggie appears next to me, jumping up and down in excitement.

"Um, Magpie," I say, considering a diplomatic way to uninvite my little sister to lunch.



"The junior high class is driving to McDonald's in Dillon, and Sly says we're going, too." Maggie dances away on happy feet.

"Let's skip McDonald's," suggests Cole.

"No doubt," Grace agrees.

We decide on the Dairy Barn, at my suggestion.

"Hey, they'll close next month, so we need to get our fill of chili-cheese fries while we can."

We scrunch into Cole's truck and head to the edge of town.

Grace keeps glancing at me, silently asking if I want to discuss Sly, but I shake my head, my throat tight. Cole's mouth looks grim, but he stays silent.

Last night, I'd called first Grace, then Cole to explain Sly's problem. Shocked and angry, they promised to pray for the truth to come out. I appreciate their support, but I need to forget—even for a few minutes.

When we arrive, we discover that others from our high school BoB—Bunch of Believers—group decided to eat here, too.

Todd Sanderson stands up and waves at us. "Hey, guys, over here."

We order our food and soon join Todd, his sister, Terri, and a girl I've never met before. However, I noticed her sitting with the Sanderson family at church that morning. We settle onto the vinyl benches.

"This is our cousin, Macy, from Tennessee," Todd says. "She's staying with us for a while."

Macy has tawny brown hair and blue eyes that remind me of robin's eggs. She resembles her cousins, which means she is beautiful. Not that Todd is beautiful. Well, maybe a little. Macy is unlike them in one way, though.

Todd and Terri, seventeen and fifteen, are both very outgoing. Macy seems to be the opposite of outgoing. Is there such a thing as ingoing?

We introduce ourselves to Macy, and she gives us a timid

smile but doesn't say a word. In fact, we're half-way through lunch before Macy proves she can actually speak.

"Could you show me the bathroom?" she whispers to Terri.

Terri nods, and I see Todd watching them with concern.

"Everything okay?" Cole asks.

Todd appears startled we're still there. "Um, sure. I mean, of course." His grin seems genuine.

By the time we leave, the weirdness evaporates. But I have an odd sense that Macy could use a friend.