

## Chapter Two

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*Liesl*

*November 7*

**M**r. Van de Berg's paralegal led Liesl down a narrow hallway, then turned into the spacious office that smelled of leather and men's cologne. Bookcases filled with legal reference books lined two walls from floor to ceiling. A massive mahogany desk served as the room's centerpiece. Two chairs faced the desk, and the paralegal seated her at the one not stacked with files.

Liesl nervously fingered the stitched seams and brass studs on the chair's arms. Fifteen minutes later, Mr. Van de Berg burst into the room.

"Thank you for coming," he said. "Someone should horsewhip me for my delay." His neatly groomed white hair showed his advanced age. He was short and wide and wore a double-breasted blue suit that lent him a dignified air.

Liesl stood, towering six inches over him as he clasped her hand in his enormous paw. "Not a problem, Mr. Van de Berg."

“A client cornered me at Diner 54. It was hard getting away. I’m inclined to send him a bill.” He gestured for her to sit.

He snaked past the stacks of files teetering on the floor near his desk and claimed his chair. “It was not appropriate to tell you at the funeral, but I have to say, you’ve grown into an admirable woman. Suzanne’s pride in you was not misplaced.”

His compliment caused her cheeks to flush. “Thank you.”

“Now, we have business to do.” He frowned. “I’m so sorry we’ve lost her. She was one of my dearest friends.”

“Did she seem ill the last time you saw her?”

“No. She was her usual chipper self.” He grabbed a thin file that sat to his right and pulled out a legal-sized document. “We had lunch together before the Butterfly House board meeting last Monday. She looked great.”

He fished reading glasses out of his jacket pocket and placed them on his nose. He silently studied the page in his hand and then looked up. “Your aunt made several bequests.”

“I’m not surprised. Did she donate the house to her brother, Myron, or one of her favorite charities?”

“No. Myron and his family have established themselves in California. They don’t want that house. She’s left it to someone who loves it.” He peered over the top of the glasses. “You. She also left quite a bit of money for charities.”

Liesl hesitated, contemplating what little money she’d tucked into a savings account. “If there isn’t enough money in her estate to clear her bequests and pay her funeral expenses, I have some put away.”

“What?” His face bloomed as red as a tomato in Aunt Suzanne’s summer garden. “You mean your aunt never enlightened you with the details of her financial situation?”

Liesl shrugged. “She never talked money.”

“Your aunt should have gone over her finances with you a long time ago.” He glared at her as if this was her fault. “Some things should be family matters, not left for her attorney to explain, even if Suzanne knew me since I wore diapers.”

He took off his glasses, pulled out a hankie, and rubbed them clean. After an inspection, he replaced them on his nose. “I repeatedly told her to educate you about her affairs. Obviously, she ignored me.”

“Please don’t be angry.”

He mumbled a bit about Suzanne’s “charm,” lightening Liesl’s heavy heart.

“Other than some sizeable bequests, your aunt left her estate to you. Any idea how much that might be?”

“Not a clue.”

“Liesl, in addition to her house and her car, after her donations, you will inherit approximately thirty million dollars.”

Liesl blinked. Was he kidding? She studied him to see if this was a joke, but his face bore no sign of humor.

Her mind raced to make sense of this news. “Did she win the lottery and not tell me?”

“Oh, that’s a good one.” His lips trembled. Then he threw his head back and laughed. “Win the lottery? Can you imagine her buying a ticket from Mrs. Kavetti at the liquor store?”

They shared a chuckle until Liesl asked, “Where did all the money come from?”

“Originally? Your aunt’s father. He was quite a fine accountant and learned to invest money.”

She nodded. “I knew he made a lot of money, but I thought Uncle Myron had some type of business failure after their father died.”

“That, my dear, is exactly what Ms. Suzanne wanted the

town to believe. When her brother Myron needed money for his business, she bought out his half of their parents' house. Then, she did nothing to stop the gossip that the money was gone. She probably even encouraged it. No, no. A brokerage firm in St. Louis has handled her investments for decades. The local townspeople know nothing about it."

"But Uncle Max must have known." Surely Aunt Suzanne wouldn't have kept something that huge from her husband.

"He did, but it all belonged to her, not him. Not that he cared about money. He was more interested in talking about golf."

"Why would both of them have kept it a secret?"

"Perhaps this will help you understand." He pulled a lumpy, legal-sized envelope from the file and handed it to her.

Tears burned her eyes as she read her name, written in Aunt Suzanne's exacting penmanship. They'd been so close. Why hadn't she told her about the money? Was it a matter of trust?

"Mind if I read this now?"

"Be my guest."

She hesitated before opening the envelope and shook it upside down. Three keys fell onto her lap. They were long, thin brass keys with tags attached.

Liesl flipped through the manila file folders inside and found copies of some of Aunt Suzanne's trusts and her will. There was a smaller envelope, still sealed, addressed to her. She ran her thumb under the sealed edge and removed its contents. The date was three years past.

*My dearest Liesl,*

*I've not been able to tell you about the money. It is both a*

*blessing and a burden. You will understand when it belongs to you.*

*There's fun in the control of a secret stash of money. Sometimes Santa Claus wears high heels. Whenever there's a need for money to improve someone's life, I step in and anonymously make the change. An example of the fun of giving involves Dr. Johnson. I noticed his intelligence when he was just a boy. Both of his parents worked two jobs just to raise him, leaving no question that scholarships had to fund his higher education. I secretly created a scholarship fund that only one smart young man applied for and received. It awarded tuition, books, and a small living expense for his college career, as well as his medical school. I've enjoyed that gift the most because I've reaped the benefits as his patient. He's the best physician this town's ever had, and I'm proud to have had a hand in it.*

*It's your decision whether people know about the money. Secrecy has allowed me to escape pressure from those who crave money. You may decide otherwise. Do what's right for you.*

*My dearest Max never cared a whit about my money. He simply loved me for me. I wish the same for you one day. Too bad things didn't work out between you and Kurt. He really loved you.*

Of course, she'd mention Kurt, but a woman can't forgive certain things. His betrayal, for one, could not be forgotten.

*Every day, I thank the Lord and your parents for giving you to me. I love you to the moon and back.*

When she finished, Mr. Van de Berg nodded at the keys. “Those are safe deposit box keys, all for Mexico Bank.” He pushed up his glasses. “We’ll have to open them together. Part of the estate, you see. I’ll file her will in probate court now, and in a week or two, we’ll meet again and go through her investments.”

“Won’t people discover her sizeable estate when you file?”

“No. Long ago, we designed her estate so the financial information is in trust. No financial details will go in the public records. No one will know unless you tell them.”

“I’m at a loss about my apartment in Houston. I have two months remaining on my lease and a part-time job there.”

“You have options.” He waved his arms in the air like a magician. “You don’t need a part-time job with this inheritance. You’ve written some books, but you don’t have to continue unless you choose.”

Could she possibly stop writing? Writing was like breathing.

“Liesl, you’re a very wealthy woman. Don’t do anything hasty until you’ve digested this news. Take some time to decide how you will live your life.”

She reached for her purse and stood. “Mr. Van de Berg, Aunt Suzanne didn’t want people to know about the money. I’ll respect her wishes in that regard. I just don’t understand why she didn’t tell me.”

He rose and moved toward her. “When you’ve figured her out, let me in on the secret. I knew her more than sixty years, as her friend and as her attorney, yet she remained an enigma. Only your Uncle Max seemed to understand her.”

He glanced down at the carpet. “I’ll miss her, Liesl. She was ... a delight. I’ll miss her for the rest of my days.”

Her eyes burned. “Don’t you find it odd that she was perfectly well on Monday, then ...” she stammered, unable to say the words.

“I do, Liesl. That I do.”

She gave him a quick hug and longed to use her money to bring Aunt Suzanne back.

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Afternoon sunlight filtered through the picture window and shone on lacquered wood floors. Brass chandeliers hung from the high ceilings. Glass transoms topped the openings to the various downstairs rooms. Carved wooden rosettes dotted the upper doorway trim. Wainscoting on the walls gave the entry warmth, even though it was a large space.

Aunt Suzanne’s—no, Liesl’s house.

It would take some getting used to before she could consider this beautiful house her own. There was a small fireplace in the corner, where photographs of Uncle Max, Aunt Suzanne, and Liesl dotted the mantel. On the right, a hallway led to the formal dining room, butler’s pantry, and kitchen. To the right of the hallway entrance was a massive, hand-carved mahogany staircase. To her left, a hallway of pocket doors led to several rooms. The first space was the music room. It opened into the library, used as a study or den, and finally, the screened sun porch.

She shrugged free of her wrap and hung it on the antique oak and brass coat rack behind the door, next to Aunt Suzanne’s coat. Without hesitation, she pulled the camel hair material to her face and inhaled. The reward was the faint scent of Aunt Suzanne’s perfume. Fighting back tears, she fingered its soft texture. This needed to go to charity. Aunt

Ellen E. Withers

Suzanne would kill her if she didn't donate all her clothes to worthy causes.

But she wasn't capable of removing her aunt's things from the house today. One day soon, but not yet.