

CHAPTER ONE

“Uncle Jack died?” I switched the receiver to my left ear as I tried to sign the papers Jody placed before me on the desk.

“Yes, a massive heart attack.”

Jack was my father’s half-brother but I hadn’t seen him since I was a little girl and couldn’t remember what he looked like. I assumed my father and he had a falling out of some sort.

“He liked to travel but when he bought that winery and vineyard out in California he was always too busy to visit.” She sighed. “We didn’t see him after your father died. I sent a Christmas card or two, but he never responded.”

I’d heard it all before, but Mother needed to say it so I continued to listen while deleting Spam from my email inbox. She told me she was going to California for the funeral.

“Why do you feel obligated to fly out there? Doesn’t he have a family to take care of things?” I asked. Fridays were always busy and I had another appointment in ten minutes. Mother often called when I was the busiest, informing me that her ESP clicked on and gave her no choice. I’m sure she really meant she felt lonely and assumed I must be too.

“That’s the problem. He never married and we are the only family. Your father would never forgive me if I abandoned Jack in his time of need.”

Mother's sense of drama was always rich. "They're both dead. Neither will know if you choose not to go."

"You can't be serious! Your father would turn over in his grave."

I rolled my eyes and reached in the desk drawer for the small mirror I kept there. "How's that possible? I thought he was in heaven."

"Of course, honey. It was just a figure of speech."

"Which? Heaven or turning in his grave? Because if it's the latter, he probably needs to turn over. He's been in the same position for thirteen years."

"Wilhelmina Fredrickson! That is disrespectful."

"Sorry, Mother." I lowered the volume on my headset and tried to touch up my lipstick. "I've really got to go. I have an appointment."

"I understand, but I haven't told you the real news yet."

"Can I call you back when I get home?" I asked. "I've really got to go." I clicked off before she could respond. I'd probably pay for my rudeness later, but right now it was worth it. I put my head down on the desk and closed my eyes, a feeble attempt to ward off the headache I felt building.

I sent Jody home half an hour early, but continued to work on a brief I wanted to finish before I left for the night. After printing a copy, I leaned back with my hands above my head to stretch out the kinks. I needed to go to the gym and spend time on the machines. But I had an appointment with Kent to meet at the Bullpen for dinner.

"Appointment," I said aloud. "Why do I call...?"

Probably because Kent always called during business hours and set our dates up with Jody as though we were meeting to discuss a civil suit rather than to spend intimate time together.

The Bullpen was a raucous sports bar, where food and fun meant greasy and loud. I preferred the dimly lit, quiet ambiance of an Italian restaurant after a day at the office, but Kent couldn't be more than twenty feet from a television screen.

I finished, slipped the papers into a folder, and stood up. Maybe I would call Kent and cancel our evening. I was tired and still had to return Mother's call. If I didn't, she would be sure to call me. I flipped the lights off and had my key out to lock the door when the telephone rang. Hopeful that Kent was on the other end of the line and I could back out of our date gracefully, I set my briefcase beside the door and picked up the phone on Jody's desk.

"This is Handel Parker. Jack Fredrickson's attorney."

I picked up a pen and scrawled the unfamiliar name across the top sheet of Jody's notepad. "What can I do for you, Mr. Parker?"

"Not a thing. It's what your uncle did for you. He named you sole heir of his estate."

"Is this some kind of joke?" I asked. My brother Adam and his college buddies had pulled senseless pranks on me before but this didn't have the same immature flavor.

"I can assure you this is no joke.

Why would a man I'd met only once leave everything he owned to me? It made no sense. Nearly everyone had friends or a lover -- someone. "Mr. Parker, why --?"

"Could we arrange a time to discuss the details after the funeral?" he asked.

“Yes, of course, but could you tell me something about this winery? After all --”

“I’d be happy to answer all your questions when you get here, but right now I’m running late for an appointment.” He left me his office phone number and asked that I call his secretary to let her know when I would be arriving so that someone could meet me at the airport.

Moments later I hung up, and stared down at the meager notes I’d scribbled. The thought of owning and operating a winery brought up a dozen questions. What kind of wine did they bottle? Was the business solvent or were there debts to pay? How many employees were involved? Was there a manager in place or had my uncle run things alone? But the question uppermost in my mind was -- what am I supposed to do with it?

It might seem romantic to own a California winery, but as a Minnesota divorce lawyer my life was quite the opposite. I couldn’t imagine depending on such an iffy thing as weather conditions to make a living. Gardening had never appealed to me for that very reason. I liked knowing what to expect, and getting what I expected or a close proximity. When you file a divorce you get what you ask for.

At home the winery situation continued to occupy my mind as I changed into jeans and a sweater. When I returned Mother’s call it was to inform her that I was going with her to California. She was ecstatic. She kept me on the line for twenty minutes before it suddenly occurred to me that I had never called Kent to cancel our date. It was too late now. He would already be at the Bullpen, watching the ever-present television screens while he waited for me to show up.

“Mother, I have to go. I forgot about Kent.”

“How could you possibly forget that man? He’s adorable. Even if he does like to talk about sports all the time.”

“Yes, well, learning I’m the owner of a winery might have something to do with it.”

I grabbed my jacket and keys and flew out the door. A light rain fell, slowing traffic already thick with the Friday night crowd. I pulled into the Bullpen parking lot twenty minutes later, glanced in the rearview mirror to reassure myself I didn’t look as tired and drawn as I felt, and hurried inside.

The Bullpen was revved up. Most of the tables were full, and the bar was swamped. Sport spectators knocked back beers and argued at the top of their voices about the latest game. I spotted Kent sitting at our usual table, his purple Vikings cap on backward and his arm around a woman I didn’t recognize.

He did expect me to meet him tonight, right?

His preoccupation with the woman nearly gave me the seconds I needed to sum up what was going on. As I hesitated, she ran her hand along his cheek and pulled him in for a kiss. I stared a moment, then spun on my heel, and hurried for the door, nearly colliding with a waiter carrying a tray of drinks.

CHAPTER TWO

Mother and I flew out to California on Monday morning. She sat puffed up with importance as though I were receiving a title along with my inheritance. She touched up her makeup before disembarking from the plane, no doubt afraid that some reporter would seek us out and take our picture for the National Enquirer.

“I always knew there was something special about Jack,” she said as she powdered her cheeks. “He and your father were opposites. Jack was an adventurer, while James was down-to-earth responsible.”

“Does that mean Dad wasn’t special?” I asked as I glanced out the window at the runway. The plane turned slowly and headed toward the buildings in the distance.

“Billie, why do you always turn everything around that I say?”

I patted her arm and grinned. “Because it’s fun.”

She lined her lips with a darker shade of mauve. “I just meant that he was different. Exciting in a romantic way. He traveled to places most folks would be afraid to set foot in. He tried new things, wasn’t afraid of taking a chance.” Her voice dwindled and she sat back against the seat, releasing a quiet sigh. “James once asked me if I was in love with Jack,” she confessed.

Now it was my turn to be aghast. “Mother!”

She shrugged her shoulders and laughed lightly. “I guess maybe I was once.” She met my horrified gaze and patted my cheek. “A long time ago. But only for a minute. I fell too much in love with your father for it to last.”

As she stuffed her cosmetics back into her carry on bag, I watched her, and realized how little I really knew about my own parents. She could be loving, sometimes to the point of suffocating, but other than as my mother I didn't really know much about her. Did she kiss on the first date when she was a girl, smoke cigarettes in the woods, or run on the track team at school? Was she popular? Would she rather run in the rain or build a snowman? And did she and my father have the kind of love that would last, or was his death a blessing in disguise?

A man in a chauffeur cap met us at the gate. He held a sign with *Fredrickson* in big black letters. "I'm Wilhelmina Fredrickson," I said.

After collecting our luggage, he led us to a limousine and opened the door. "Here we are, ladies."

I let my mother climb in first and then followed. A man waited inside, his dark suit blending into the shadows. He smiled, his teeth white against tanned skin. "Hello. I'm Handel Parker," he said.

I don't know if it was the surprise of the man being the exact opposite of what I'd expected, (old, stout, balding, and short), or the instant attraction I felt when he took my hand, but I nearly fell into his lap as the limo edged into traffic.

"Sorry," I breathed as I caught my balance and sat firmly next to my mother, opposite Handel Parker.

"It's quite all right," he murmured, turning to answer the phone that blinked beside him. "Excuse me."

His quiet conversation went on for five minutes or more while we watched San Francisco roll past our window. We were headed toward the Napa Valley, wine country.

“Sorry about that.” He replaced the phone and sat back, his attention complete on his guests now. I thought I detected a thread of mistrust laced with curiosity in his gaze. “When’s the last time you visited this part of the country?” he asked.

I hadn’t been out of Minneapolis except to attend law school in Chicago, never taking the time for a real vacation. “I’ve never been to California.”

A slight look of surprise crossed his face before he resumed the bland lawyer persona. “Really?”

“Sure you have, honey. You just don’t remember,” my mother interjected. She patted my knee as though I were still a small child. “We came here to visit Jack when you were six or seven. No -- actually, you were closer to eight. I was full-blown pregnant with Adam on that trip. I’m surprised they allowed me on the plane.”

Handel Parker didn’t ask any questions, but apparently he showed a glimmer of interest that only my mother picked up on. She continued with her story, reminiscing about the past with so much vibrancy I began to suspect she really did have feelings for my father’s older brother.

“My children are nine years apart,” she explained. “Just when you get used to the idea that your child is in school and growing up, along come diapers and late-night feedings. Jack never met my son Adam, but he bonded with Billie instantaneously on that trip. Obviously, more than anyone knew,” she said with a slight shake of her head. Her salon perfect hair never moved. “Jack and Billie were both early risers and each morning they went out to the winery where he let her explore, and explained the wine making process to her.”

I felt uncomfortable under the spotlight so I chewed at my bottom lip, and stared out the window, distancing myself from the conversation with inattention. I had no memory of that time or Uncle Jack, and yet I had been eight years old. How was that possible?

The countryside rushed past without me really seeing it, my thoughts turned inward, struggling to dredge up something from that time to call my own. Mother's memories were foreign to me, a life apart from who I now was.

Handel Parker unbuttoned his suit coat and clasped his hands loosely in his lap. My gaze strayed from the window to his face. He had a firm chin, full lips, and deep set eyes. His blonde hair grew thick and curled up along the collar of his dress shirt, a good month past due for a trim. Definitely not as conservative as most lawyers I knew.

“So how long were you here for that specific visit?” he asked my mother. His voice was modulated, trained to sooth clients and convince juries of his version of the truth, no doubt.

I glanced her way, curious myself since I had no memory of the events. She smoothed one eyebrow as she had a habit of doing when thinking. “Just under three weeks. As I recollect, James planned for a month, but he suddenly got a call from the office and we had to leave that very day. There was an emergency of some kind.” She reached out and patted my arm. “Funny thing though. Billie didn't even throw a fit like I thought she would. After all the fun she'd been having, working with her Uncle Jack, and learning new things, she was thoroughly ready to go home.”

“I suppose Jack was disappointed,” Handel said, ever the perfect host, keeping the conversation from lagging. He held my gaze as my mother opened her purse to search for a mint. “He must have felt lonely after having a family around.”

Mother looked up, her brow wrinkled in thought. “I don’t really know. Jack was off somewhere when James got the call and we had to leave before he returned.”

“How strange.” If I hadn’t been looking directly at him I wouldn’t have caught the flash of cynicism that crossed Handel’s face, immediately replaced with a polite smile as he shook his head. “But it sounds like Jack. Always the perfect host. He might have forty people scheduled for a wine tasting and he’d just disappear. If it weren’t for the terrific staff, the place would be bankrupt by now.”

I watched his eyes light up when he spoke of Jack and the winery, and wondered what their relationship entailed other than attorney/client. Were they friends, or just acquaintances? “How long did you know Jack?” I asked.

He pushed the hair back from his forehead. “As long as I can remember. He and my father were friends since high school. My folks worked for the previous owner of the winery and then my father continued to work for Jack when he purchased it. I must have been about ten when I started doing odd jobs around the place. As a teenager I helped harvest the grapes. After I graduated from law school Jack insisted that I be his personal attorney, although I specialize in criminal law.”

“You worked only for Jack?”

He raised one brow, a look that would be considered condescending without the smile that accompanied it. “Of course not. Jack wasn’t that well off. He couldn’t afford

to hire me full-time. I agreed to take care of any legal matters for him when and if they came up. After all, he helped pay my way through college.”

“Well, wasn’t that nice,” Mother said. “I knew Jack was a philanthropist at heart.”

Handel Parker nodded slowly, his expression indecipherable. “Yes, he was.”

Rows of vines in neat symmetrical lines stretched as far as the eye could see, rolling with the hills and dells, parting smoothly to encircle a cluster of olive trees left standing guard like gnarled, elderly, gentlemen keeping watch over the tender grapes. A neighbor’s vineyards butted up to Jack’s, the lines running in the opposite direction, and according to Handel, Fredrickson’s biggest competitor.

“New winery’s are spreading all over the country,” Handel informed us as we slowed to turn into the long gravel driveway.

“I read something about that,” I said. “Didn’t the number of registered winery’s double in the past couple of years? Last year over 600 permits were issued. Wine is becoming the fastest growing agriculture in America. I have a friend from college who lives in Washington State. She said wineries are popping up all over there too.”

Handel’s look of surprise at my knowledge warmed my heart. For some reason he didn’t seem to like me very much and I enjoyed the thought of besting him at something. We were both attorneys, and maybe that accounted for the competitive streak in me. But the man was obviously jealous I’d inherited Uncle Jack’s holdings. Had he expected them for himself?

“Yes,” he said, buttoning his jacket in anticipation of our arrival. “They’ve spread along the entire West coast, as well as Virginia, the Carolinas, and any other state conducive to growing grapes. In fact, I believe Minnesota has a few vineyards as well.”

I opened my mouth to expound once more from my well of winemaking knowledge, but my mother laid a hand lightly on my arm and squeezed, a warning to *save it*. She knew from experience between my brother and myself that I wouldn’t quit until I had the last word, something I’d failed to grow out of. I expelled a frustrated breath and watched as the buildings came into view.

According to Handel, the house had been rebuilt in the fifties after the original was destroyed by fire. The owners at that time decided to go with brick to save themselves another heartache. Spreading out like a child’s Lego creation with one addition after another, it appeared a living, growing, entity. The brick was the palest pink, shimmering in the sun like a watercolor painting. The outlying buildings, storage sheds, barn, and winery were painted white with black trim, in sharp contrast to the deep cerulean California sky, and rather modern when compared to the neighboring wineries with their monastic style buildings.

The limo pulled up to the house and stopped behind a red Porsche. The chauffeur opened the back door for us before emptying the trunk of our luggage. I climbed out first and stood looking around, my gaze resting briefly on each building as though memories would suddenly start flooding back and I would remember that summer with the clarity Mother seemed to have. But nothing looked remotely familiar.

Handel took Mother’s arm and walked with her up to the house, not even waiting to see if I would follow. I glanced back at the limo, but the driver had already climbed in

and was pulling away. There were two pickups parked across the yard in the shade of a huge, oak tree and I caught a glimpse of someone watching from the shadowed doorway of the winery. I shivered in spite of the warm rays of the afternoon sun, and turned toward the house.

Handel held the door for me and I stepped into the coolness of the darkened entryway. Bells of recognition still had not started ringing inside my head and I wondered if they ever would. Obviously, those weeks of my childhood had not been as remarkable as Mother made them out to be.

Handel led us down a hallway to a large room, cavernous in its simplicity. A single chair sat close to the brick fireplace, a piece of stray furniture lost and alone. An old, brown, leather couch and end table were pushed close against a far wall, as though someone had cleared the floor for a dance. However, the walls were not empty; paintings filled with bright splashes of color adorned them like jewelry on a naked woman.

Mother stopped in the middle of the room and gazed around, her eyes wide with something akin to shock. “What in the world happened to Jack’s beautiful furniture?” she asked. “I remember he had wonderful pieces that he picked up all over the world.”

Handel paused in his guided tour, his eyes narrowing as he looked around, as though just noticing the bareness of the room. “Oh -- well, Jack gave it away,” he said with a slight shrug. He met my look of incredulity and I swear there was resentment in his gaze. My initial attraction to the man was quickly fading. “I was surprised when he willed everything to you. I thought he’d have the place sold and give the money to those in need or designate shares to all of the employees. He had a heart as big as anyone I’ve ever known.”

Something about that statement made my stomach turn, but I didn't know if it was Handel's attitude toward me or my own sense of justice. I knew that inheritance didn't necessarily have anything to do with deserving. Lazy, worthless, children inherited their hard-working parents' fortunes everyday just because they had matching DNA. I certainly didn't feel that I deserved my uncle's money, but he had made the decision to leave it to me of his own free will.

I tore my gaze from Handel's accusing one and fixed my eyes on the huge painting above the fireplace mantel. Streaks and wild dabs of paint adorned the canvas like a food fight gone creatively abstract. I imagined anger rather than fun emanated from the framed art. For some reason it frightened me, and I no longer wanted to be in the same room.

"I would like to take a tour of the winery if you have time to show us around before we settle in a hotel for the night," I said. My voice seemed over loud in the hollow space and I felt another headache coming on.

"I'm sure that can be arranged, but aren't you planning on staying in the house while you're here? I had rooms prepared for you." He spread his hands as though in supplication. "It is your property now."

I was not seduced by his placating words. I knew he resented me for being Jack's niece. I cleared my throat and looked at mother. "Well, of course we'll stay if it's all prepared. I just didn't want to presume."

Mother laughed lightly, her eyes crinkling at the corners the way I liked to see. A person that laughed without laugh lines was not truly happy or amused. She seemed to sense my mood and wanted to lighten it. "You aren't worried about Jack's ghost, are you

honey? Because if he's hanging out around here, I'm sure he's a friendly ghost. After all, he gave the place to you."

I released a breath and hoped the tension I felt would expel from me as well.

"Please show us to our rooms then," I said, looking at Handel silently waiting.

"Right this way, ladies."

My earlier notion of touring the winery was forgotten as quickly as Handel Parker left the house, speeding away to town in his red Porsche. He needed to attend to some things, he said, but then he would be back to take us to dinner. The thought of spending more time with the man made my heart thud in my chest, anxiety filling me like a teenage girl on her first date, except it wasn't anxious excitement over the prospect, but an incomprehensible foreboding that I couldn't quite put my finger on. I knew he questioned the validity of my receiving my uncle's holdings, as though I'd conspired to put a voodoo curse on Jack before he died, which was preposterous since I was raised Lutheran.

The bed in the room prepared for me was one of those monstrous, four-postered things that take up nearly the entire room. Three steps were built into the side so that anyone other than Paul Bunyan could get in without a catapult. I spread out and closed my eyes, relaxing into the soft comforter, imagining myself the Raggedy Ann doll that I once owned. The cloth doll was literally torn to shreds when my father ran over it with our riding lawnmower one summer, leaving me heartbroken and him guilt-ridden. He replaced it with another doll, similar in looks and clothing, but I knew it wasn't mine and

refused to play with it. Mother placed it on my bookshelf. Limp and bent over at the waist, it continued to grin down at me, an evil doppelganger.

The house seemed hushed as though even the walls knew there had been a death in the family. I could hear faint sounds from outside my window, birds chirping happily, a motor of some kind humming, but in this room only my quiet breathing broke the silence. I turned over, curled up into a fetal position and slept.