

Claiming Her Inheritance

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Chapter 1

Chase

My child, listen to what I say, and treasure
my commands. Proverbs 2:1

This is outrageous! Who in all creation is Sally Clark?” said my eldest child, Leslie, as she pounded a fist on the long oak table in the conference room of our lawyer’s office. “Daddy, I don’t understand. A complete stranger gets one-third ownership in the ranch and 10 percent of the magazine? That 10 percent should have been mine.”

The room echoed with “Sally Clark?” as my six children looked at one another for some recognition of who knew her.

“Leslie’s worked at the magazine since she was sixteen and has been managing editor for three years now. She’s right. It doesn’t make sense to give each of us other kids 10 percent but to cut Leslie out,” Emily, my youngest, said. “For me the magazine is a job. It’s not my heart’s desire. But it’s Leslie’s dream.”

We all had just come from Pop’s funeral reception at my ranch outside Great Falls, Montana. Emotions ran high as the hot July sun that beat down on us for the hour the reverend had preached at the

graveside. I allowed the general outrage among my progeny to continue for a moment, then put up a hand to silence them.

“Enough!” I turned to Karl Kandell, the family lawyer. Karl and his father and his father before him had served the many generations of Chase Reynolds for nearly as long as our family had been in Montana. “There must be some mistake, Karl. No one here even knows who this woman is.”

“There’s no mistake, Chase. That’s why I’ve gathered you all here. Better to explain it once and have done,” Karl said. “And he didn’t cut Leslie out. She gets \$200,000.”

“That’s nothing—a pittance!—compared to a share in the magazine. Why did Poppie do this to me?” Leslie griped.

“It’s far from a pittance, young lady,” I reprimanded her. I turned to Karl. “Pop told me several months ago he was thinking about making changes in his will, but this? It’s not what I’d call a few changes. This is major. Pop never indicated to me the magazine would go to anyone other than Abby, and he *never* mentioned a three-way split of the ranch.”

“Your father had me make all these changes six months ago along with adding Ms. Clark.”

“What!” Leslie screamed, bolting out of her chair. “Didn’t you advise him against it? What kind of lawyer are you, anyway?”

“Sit down. It’s not like Poppie was senile,” said Emily, the peacemaker of the family. She tugged at her sister’s arm, but Leslie shook her off.

“Leslie, sit down, calm down, and stop interrupting,” I told her, directing a stern gaze at her until she sat down. “Karl, he didn’t say a word to me about all this, and I’m his executor.” Why did Pop do this? I ran my fingers through my hair as though it would bring sense to Pop’s actions. “Abby, did he say anything to you?”

“No, he didn’t. Karl, why don’t you start with what you can tell us about Sally Clark?” said my sister, Abby. She reached over and gave my forearm a squeeze of encouragement.

“Your father met her back in 1985 when he and your mother were vacationing in Paris.”

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“That’s all we need, some senile old foreign broad!”

“Leslie!” I rose from my chair, hoping the bulk of my broad shoulders and chest would convey my parental authority. “Control that tongue of yours or leave the room, now!”

She matched my gaze, anger flashing from her eyes. She turned away, and for a moment I thought she was going to leave. Instead, she let out a humph and stomped to the window, her back straight and stiff. I sat back down. Her behavior reminded me of the temper tantrums she threw as a child. I thought she’d outgrown those, but it would seem not.

“Ms. Clark is fifty-eight, far from being old or senile. And she’s from Nebraska, not France. She is currently living in Kansas City.” Karl took a long drink from his glass of iced tea. A bead of sweat trickled from his forehead down his pudgy cheek despite the coolness of the air-conditioned room.

“She’s my age,” Abby said excitedly. “Single? Married? Employed?”

“Single, works as an editor in a small publishing firm. She saved your parents from being mugged while they were in Paris.”

“Terrific,” Leslie groaned.

I ignored her. “Go on, Karl. How did she save them?”

“A case of right place, right time. Ms. Clark was a Marine Corps MP serving at the American Embassy at the time. She spotted the mugging in progress one evening and intervened.”

“And so Poppie decides she deserves to own my magazine,” Leslie spouted from her perch by the window.

“Leslie, Ms. Clark has been given only a 10 percent share in the profits. She won’t own the magazine,” Karl said. “Rest assured, the inheritance has conditions.”

“Conditions?” Leslie spun away from the window to face the group again. I noted her wrinkled brow and clenched jaw. A favorite expression of hers that never bode well for anyone but her. I watched as a degree of relief washed over her face. “What are they?”

“She has to spend four weeks at the ranch.”

“So what?” Leslie said.

“She has to complete the full four weeks or no inheritance,” Karl explained.

“I don’t see that as particularly reassuring. Anyone can stick it out for four weeks when the reward is big enough.” Leslie grunted, moved to the table, and glared at me. “Poppie gives his own grandchild \$200K and a perfect stranger gets 10 percent of *Cattle and Cowboy* magazine and a third of the ranch. Daddy, it’s just not right. Do something.” The whine in her voice grated my nerves, and at that moment I saw her for the spoiled woman she had become.

“I will *not* do something. This is what Pop decided and we won’t stand in the way of that. Now sit down, and, Leslie, one more outburst and you will leave this room.” I held her gaze as she took her seat, then I glanced over at her husband, Jake. His silence at her behavior surprised me. Why wasn’t he doing anything to calm her down?

“Mr. Kandell, you said conditions, plural. That’s only one,” Leslie said. “What are the other conditions?”

“Not really a condition, but Ms. Clark must actively participate in the daily ranch activities,” Karl clarified.

That seemed to mollify Leslie, for the moment. She grinned.

“Why four weeks?” my sister, Abby, asked.

“As your father explained it to me, he didn’t want it to be ‘here you go, it’s all yours, goodbye.’ He wanted her to get acquainted with all of you and for you to get to know her.”

“I’m sorry, but none of that explains why Poppie singled me out,” Leslie said.

“No, it doesn’t. He did leave this envelope for you.” Karl leaned forward, reaching his arm across the table, a business-size white envelope in his hand.

I and my children and their spouses all watched as Leslie took the envelope from Karl, stared at it for a long moment, then shoved it into her purse.

“I’m sure all this will make more sense as you get acquainted with Ms. Clark,” Karl said.

“All that aside,” Leslie interjected, “she’ll never last four weeks,

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especially if she spends any time in the saddle with Four and Michael.”

“What’s being a rancher got to do with the magazine?” Chase IV asked.

“Identifying with the heart of the rancher and the realities of the job,” Karl said.

“Duh, Four,” Gabe said, a big smile erupting.

Karl sat back in his chair, his red eyebrows raised, arms crossed and resting on his rotund belly. The prolonged silence became uncomfortable.

Everyone trained their eyes on Leslie.

“Stop staring at me,” she said as she stomped her foot like a bratty teenage pop star. “I still don’t like it.”

“I know this has been a shock, but if Ms. Clark doesn’t stay the full four weeks at the ranch, her share of the ranch is split between Chase and Abby, and her 10 percent of *Cattle and Cowboy* goes to Leslie. Which means, Leslie, that the \$200,000 stipulated in the will for you cannot be distributed until after Ms. Clark has completed her four weeks. And when she dies, it all comes back to the the family.”

“Holy buffalo chips, Karl, why didn’t you say that twenty minutes ago?” I said.

“Because I kept getting interrupted.”

I could see the frustration on Karl’s face. For him, reading Pop’s will must have seemed like dumping a truck load of cow manure on Central Avenue in downtown Great Falls.

“Right now I have a more difficult issue to deal with. Ms. Clark hasn’t responded to any of the letters I’ve sent her. We can move forward with distributing the bulk of your father’s estate, Chase, but as for Ms. Clark, the law requires me to do several things in attempting to locate an heir and a waiting period after all efforts have been exhausted.”

“How is that going to effect the daily workings of *Cowboy*? We can’t just stop everything we’re doing,” Leslie protested.

“None of this affects the daily routine for anyone, Leslie. All can continue as is. We’re talking about the distribution of profits, not management of the magazine, or the ranch, for that matter.” Karl

scanned the grieving faces of my children and their spouses. “There are a lot of scenarios to this situation. While you are all deep in grief at this unexpected passing of your grandfather is not the time to discuss them. Let’s get through the weekend first. Bottom line: Ms. Clark inherits 33 percent of the ranch and 10 percent of *Cowboy* magazine and all the profits that come with them.”

“Can we contest this?” Leslie said.

“We will not contest this, Leslie. I told you that already,” I said.

“Legally, anyone in the family can contest the will, but let’s cross that bridge if we get to it,” Karl said.

That seemed to settle Leslie’s dissatisfaction for now. I gazed at each of my six children, attempting to read their emotions. Four, Michael, Peter, and Gabriel seemed calm, and why not? They had never been involved in the magazine and had now gained 10 percent of it. In addition, they knew that once I was gone, the ranch would be theirs. Emily appeared overwhelmed with grief. Of all the kids, she was most like my father and had had a special connection with him. I made a mental note to keep an eye on how well she was processing her grief, then I turned to observe Leslie.

She sat directly across from me, head down, her face in her hands. Her silky brunette locks fell forward, brushing the table. I could see the slow rise and fall of her shoulders and hear the deep breaths she took in, held, and then released. I recognized the body language; she was working to calm herself. Unlike my other children, she acted as though her world had fallen apart. But was her grief for Pop or about 10 percent of magazine going to a total stranger? At the cemetery, she hadn’t shed a tear. Her reaction to all this alarmed me.

“Well, kids, your grandfather’s will dealt us a big surprise, but I, for one, am looking forward to meeting Sally Clark. Let’s go home. We have a ranch to run.” I stood and watched them all file out the office, conversing softly among themselves. Karl stopped Abby and me as we reached the door.

“We need to talk more about this. There are details about Ms. Clark I can tell only you and Abby.”