

"Has it ever occurred to Scott to get a serious job?" Adele asked. "I mean, forgive me, since I haven't had a serious job in my life."

Justine smiled patiently. "Your jobs have all been serious, and without you we'd have been lost. If you hadn't dedicated yourself to Mom's care, it would have cost our whole family a fortune. We're indebted to you. And I agree it would help if Scott worked more than part-time, but I think that ship sailed years ago. He's only worked part-time since Amber and Olivia came along."

Adele adored her nieces, ages sixteen and seventeen. She was much closer to them than she was to Justine.

"I'm sorry you're going through this," Adele said. "I wish there was something I could do."

"Well, the thing is, the future is looking very uncertain. I might need your help," Justine said.

"What could I do?" she asked.

"Adele, I don't like to push you, but you have to get it together. We have to make some decisions about what you're going to do, what we'll do with the house. I realize what I've given you for your hard work hasn't been much, but I don't know how long I can keep it up—paying for the maintenance on this house, the taxes, a modest income for you... I don't want to panic prematurely," Justine said. "Maybe I'll be able to work everything out without too much hassle, but if I run into trouble... Money could get very tight, Addie. All those promises I made—that I'd help financially while you fix up the house, that I'd give you my half of the proceeds when and if you sold it... I might not be able to come through. I know, I know, I promised you it would be yours after all of your sacrifice, but you wouldn't want me to ignore the girls' tuition or not be able to make the mortgage..."

"But Justine!" Adele said. "That's all I have! And I was considering finishing school myself!" Though if she was honest, she had no plans of any kind.

Justine reached out to her, squeezing her hand. "We're a long way from me needing money. I just felt it was only fair to tell you what's going on. If we're in this together, we can both make it. I swear, I will make this all work out. I'll make it right."

But as Adele knew, they had never really been "in it together" in the past, and they wouldn't be for very long in the future. Addie's dedication to their parents allowed Justine to devote herself to her career. For that matter, it should be Justine and Scott shoring each other up. At least until Justine had a better idea. But where was Scott today? Golfing? Biking? Bowling?

Adele realized she had some difficult realities to face. When she dropped out of school to help her mother care for her father, she wasn't being completely altruistic. She'd needed a place to run away to, hiding an unplanned pregnancy and covering her tattered heart. She'd never told her family that her married lover—her psychology professor—had broken down in tears when he explained he couldn't leave his wife to marry Adele, that the college would probably fire him for having an affair with a student. For her, going home was the only option.

At the time Justine and Scott had been riding the big wave and didn't lust after the small, old house in Half Moon Bay. That house was chump change to them. So, they worked out a deal. Adele had become her mother's guardian with a power of attorney. But the will had never been adjusted to reflect just one beneficiary rather than two. In the case of the death of both parents, Adele and Justine would inherit equal equity in the eighty-year-old house and anything left of the life insurance. At the time, of course, neither Adele nor Justine had ever considered the idea that Adele would be needed for very long. But before Adele knew it, eight years had been gobbled up. She was thirty-two and had been caring for her parents since she was twenty-four.

Adele, as guardian, could have escaped by turning over the house, pension, social security to a care facility for her mother and gone out on her own, finding herself a better job and her own place to live. She wasn't sure if it was her conscience or just inertia that held her in place for so long.

"I just wanted to make sure you understood the circumstances before anything more happens," Justine said. "And since you don't have any immediate plans, please don't list the house for sale or anything. Give me a chance to figure out what's next. I have children. I'll do whatever I can to protect them and you. They're your nieces! They love you so much. I'm sure you want them to get a good education as much as I do."

*Does anyone want me to have a real chance to start over?* Adele asked herself. This conversation sounded like Justine was pulling out of their deal.

"I'll think about this, but Scott has responsibilities, too," she pointed out.

"He's been out of the full-time workforce for so long..." Justine said.

"Just the same, we all have to live up to our adult commitments and responsibilities. And you've had a highfalutin job for a long time. You've made a lot of money. You can recover. I haven't even begun."

"I need your help, Addie," Justine said. "You need to come up with a plan, something we can put in motion. Make plans for your next step, put a little energy into this old house, make suggestions of what we should do with it, everything. Let's figure out what to do before I find myself short and unable to help. I'm sorry, but we have to move forward."

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