

## Chapter One

“One million dollars!”

“Yes,” Cassandra smiled. “You know, it’s not really a million dollars. Taxes have to be taken out.”

“I know, but still. One million dollars! Who knew your font of useless information and ability to adapt to your situation would allow you to hit the jackpot one day.”

Cassandra continued to work on editing the footage for tomorrow’s blog post on how to build a rustic king size bed using wood pallets you could find for free. It had been a solid month since she won the money, but her sister, Sydney, couldn’t get over the fact she’d actually won the reality show competition.

“And you were very popular on the show!”

“I guess.”

“You guess? There were literally bags of fan mail delivered to your door last week!”

“They’ll forget about me as soon as the next season starts up.”

“You could be the next Kim Kardashian!”

Cassandra made a face at her sister. “I have zero interest in being the next anything.”

“You should capitalize on your success and fame. A million dollars is nice, but it’s not going to last forever, especially, as you said, the taxes are taken out.”

Cassandra knew where this was heading.

“My blog income is quite healthy, thank you very much.”

“I know, but still ...”

Cassandra knew her sister had been a part of a multilevel marketing company for three years now and couldn't stop talking about it. If it wasn't the chemical free lifestyle, it was the business opportunity.

To her credit, it wasn't in a pushy way. She was just really enthusiastic. Her sister genuinely seemed to love, love, love their products and wanted everyone to have them. Once, Cassandra saw one of Sydney's commission checks and was blown away her sister was able to make that kind of money from just sharing about something she loved.

“Have you opened your kit yet?”

And there it was.

“Hmmm? What?”

“Your Premium Starter Kit. You know, the one you bought after we chatted a couple of weeks ago? You said it arrived. Have you opened it? Have you used it yet?”

Cassandra pretended to intently focus on editing the video footage. She didn't want to confess to her sister that she hadn't even broken the seal on the box after she finally relented and bought one for herself.

“Cassie!” Her sister's exasperation was clear.

“Ok fine,” she confessed, knowing how she would be disappointing her. “No, I've not opened it yet. I've been busy getting this next project done to put up on the blog. I promise. As soon as I've uploaded this video, I'll open it and play with it.”

“It's not a toy, Cassie.”

Cassandra rolled her eyes.

“I'm not a kid, Sydney. No one calls me Cassie anymore.”

“Sisters have privileges and one of them is that I get to call you what I've called you our entire lives, no matter how famous you get or how old we get. After all, it's just me and you now.”

Cassandra gently grabbed her sister's hand and squeezed.

“At least we have each other.”

“Forever,” Sydney answered.

Sydney reached into her massive purse and pulled out a booklet.

“I stopped by, because I wanted you to have this. It just explains more about the oils and all of the great things you can use them for so you can get the gross stuff out of your life. Ditch and switch, Cassie. Ditch and switch.”

Cassandra smiled and flipped through the booklet. She still lived in the small house in Franklin, Tennessee where they grew up, though the town wasn't nearly as small as it used to be. People were moving into the county in droves and the small town atmosphere was changing.

Sydney chose to move closer to downtown Nashville, where she owned a vintage clothing store near Vanderbilt. Her sister was a vegan, a bit of a bohemian and a die-hard nature lover. She loved her essential oils. But, as she often pointed out, only the best essential oils, which for her meant a company that had been in the essential oil business for decades. Sydney had been using their oils and teaching others about them for almost three years. She'd even been to their farms in Utah and Equador, and last year she went on a Mediterranean cruise paid for by the company.

Cassandra was not quite so earthy. She ate a lot of junk food and drank a lot of coffee. Sydney was concerned with eating all organic, non-GMO fruits and vegetables, while Cassandra was happy to eat whatever fast food place happened to be around when hunger struck.

As a matter of fact, she was feeling a few hunger pangs right now and walked over to her pantry to grab a bag of crunchy Cheetos.

Cassandra offered the bag to Sydney. “Would you like some?”

“One of these days all of your bad choices are going to catch up with you, you know,” Sydney admonished, pulling an apple from her bag and taking a bite. “This would be a much better choice.”

“I'm fine,” Cassandra answered, crunching down on the crispy salty goodness. “It's not like I'm fat or anything.”

“No,” Sydney agreed. “You've been blessed with good genetics that allow you to eat that crap and still stay thin. However, it's not just the weight I'm referring to. It's all that processed food and it's not good for you. It's like putting mud in your gas tank. Don't put mud in your gas tank, Cassie.”

Cassandra sighed, closed up the chip bag and put it back in the pantry.

“Fine. Do you have another one?”

“Yes!” her sister’s face lit up. She reached into her oversized vintage bag, pulled out another apple and handed it to her. “I’d like to have my little sister around a long time, you know. I love you. That’s why I nag.”

Cassandra smiled and took a big, crunchy bite of the apple, feeling the juice of the fruit running down her chin.

“This was washed, right?” she asked between bites.

Sydney gave her sister an impatient look, until she realized Cassandra was just joking with her.

“How much do you have to do to get a blog started? Is it hard? I’ve been thinking about starting one for my oil business.”

“It’s taken me about three years to get mine where it’s actually paying my bills. Marketing on YouTube, Facebook, Pinterest and Instagram really helped drum up interest.”

Cassandra was able to quit her day job as a paralegal a year ago when her DIY blog started making her more money than she was getting paid. She was doing well enough, but when she won a spot on a new survivalist/scavenger hunt reality show, her subscribers and followers skyrocketed. Her YouTube channel now had two million subscribers and her Instagram following was almost at one million.

“I noticed your new car parked outside. Turquoise Mini Convertible .... Nice!”

“What can I say? I decided to follow the internet’s advice and treat myself. I picked it up yesterday afternoon. We should go for a ride on the Natchez Trace this weekend with the top down. Maybe picnic at one of the falls.”

“Sounds great!” Sydney caught sight of the clock hanging over Cassandra’s fireplace. “Oh my! I didn’t realize it was so late! I’ve got to get back to the store. Jackie’s going to be ready to go to lunch soon. Did I tell you I’m selling the store to her?”

“No! Really? You love that store.”

“I know, but you know what I love more? Freedom! My essential oil business gives me that.”

Sydney leaned in and gave her sister a quick kiss on the cheek. "I've got to run. Open your kit, read the booklet and call me later! Love you!"

"Love you too!" Cassandra called out as the screened door banged shut.

She turned her attention back to her video upload. It was stalled, which meant she had to start the entire thing all over again.

"Great," she mumbled. When technology worked, it was wonderful. When it didn't she wanted to hurl her laptop through the wall.

Eight hours later, it was dark and she was finally finished with a post that should have only taken her a couple of hours. Instead, it took her all day. She realized she had not eaten dinner, but at least the video was uploaded so she could stay on schedule with her blog post for tomorrow. Some of her fans were as impatient as young children on Christmas morning.

Fans.

Cassandra smiled to herself. She had fans. There were actually people in the world who valued what she knew and liked her for sharing it. Some of them just followed her because they liked what they saw on the show. Regardless, she was doing something she loved and making money at it.

Of course, some of these so-called fans could be a little weird, but she took those with a grain of salt. None of them were dangerous, just maybe a little too enamored with her appearance in a bikini during one of the competitions.

"What to have for dinner?" she wondered aloud, opening her near empty refrigerator. "Hmmm ..."

Feeling uninspired, she walked to her pantry and threw open the doors. Again, nothing really great to choose from.

"Ramen it is!" she said, grabbing the blue oriental flavor and filling a pot with some water. She waited for what felt like forever for the small amount of liquid to start boiling so she could throw in the rectangular dried noodles and finally eat.

She was just about to do that when her sister's ringtone sounded, filling the room with the sound of Amy Winehouse's Back to Black, her sister's favorite song.

"Hey Sydney!" she hit the speaker button. "I was just about to throw

some Ramen on, want some?"

Silence greeted her on the other end.

"Sydney?"

Again, silence.

Cassandra frowned and ended the call. "She butt-dialed me again. So rude."

She walked over to the stove and threw in the noodles, setting the timer for three minutes. She had a little trouble opening the foiled flavor packet, but eventually got it, dumped it in the pot and grabbed a bottle of sriracha.

"Just a little spice to liven things up this evening," she said aloud, trying not think how it sounded that a 30 year old woman considered eating ramen noodles with sriracha all alone on a Thursday night spicing things up.

"I'm talking to myself, eating ramen noodles all alone in my comfy clothes," she said aloud as she picked up the remote. "And I like it."

She had already chowed down half the bowl when her sister's familiar ringtone blared out of her phone again. She paused the tv and answered.

"Sydney? Is that you? Are you there this time or is this another butt call?"

Silence greeted her again.

She sighed deeply and was about to hit the end button again when a soft, yet masculine voice said, "Don't hang up, Cassandra."

Cassandra took her phone off speaker and listened.

"Who is this?" she asked. "How did you get my sister's phone?"

"I have your sister's phone, because I have your sister."

Cassandra's chest tightened with his words, but there was some part of her that wondered if this were some kind of joke Sydney was playing on her. If it was, she wasn't laughing.

"Listen," she started.

“No,” the voice hissed. “YOU listen to ME.”

She swallowed, her throat thick with dread. She knew by the sound of his voice this was no joke.

“What do you want?”

“You’ll find out in good time. You can rest assured your sister is just fine. For now. However, if you call the police, if you call anyone or do anything other than what I tell you to do, she will die.”

“What is it that you want?” she asked again, her hand gripping the phone so tight her knuckles were white. “The money from the show? You can have it all. Every penny. Just please don’t hurt my sister.”

Silence greeted her again.

“What do you want?” she screamed into the phone.

“You, Cassandra. I want you. It’s been a long time since I’ve encountered anyone with street smarts like yours. You see, I’ve been watching you for several months on that show. You’re quite pretty and you’re smart. Resourceful. I’m going to find out how smart and resourceful you really are. If you are as smart as I’m hoping you are, your sister will be returned to you unharmed. If you’re not, you both will die.”

Cassandra sat down on the couch, her legs suddenly as wobbly as the remaining noodles in her bowl.

“In a few minutes, a messenger will bring you an envelope with instructions. Don’t bother questioning him, he’s just an innocent boy hired to make a delivery. And again, don’t contact the authorities. I will know if you do and you will be responsible for your sister’s death. Do you understand?”

“Yes. I understand. What is it I’m supposed to do?”

“Play the game, Cassandra. You’re good at playing games. But then again, so am I.”