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Susan grew up in California and now lives in Seattle with her husband. She's passionate about animal welfare, especially that of the ragdoll cat and adorable poodle who think of her as mum.

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# **The Sister Effect**

**Susan Mallery**

MILLS & BOON

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Text to speech



To Sarah...for Ellis

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About the Publisher

# One

Finley McGowan loved her niece, Aubrey, with all her heart, but there was no avoiding the truth—Aubrey had not been born with tap dance talent. While the other eight-year-olds moved in perfect rhythm, Aubrey was just a half beat behind. Every time. Like a sharp, staccato echo as the song “Counting Stars” by OneRepublic played over the dance studio’s sound system.

Finley felt a few of the moms glance at her, as if gauging her reaction to Aubrey’s performance, but Finley only smiled and nodded along, filled with a fierce pride that Aubrey danced with enthusiasm and joy. If tap was going to be her life, then the rhythm thing would matter more, but Aubrey was still a kid and trying new things. So she wasn’t great at dance, or archery, or swimming—she was a sweet girl who had a big heart and a positive outlook on life. That was enough of a win for Finley. She could survive the jarring half-beat echo until her niece moved on to another activity.

The song ended and the adults gathered for the monthly update performance clapped. Aubrey rushed toward her aunt, arms outstretched for a big hug. Finley caught her and pulled her close.

“Excellent performance,” she said, smoothing the top of her head. “You weren’t nervous.”

“I know. I don’t get scared anymore. I really liked the song and the routine was fun to learn. Thank you for helping me practice.”

“Anytime.”

When Aubrey had first wanted to study tap, Finley had gone online to find instructions to build a small, homemade tap floor. They’d put it out in the garage and hooked up a Bluetooth speaker. Every afternoon, before dinner, Finley had played “Counting Stars” and called out the steps so Aubrey could memorize her routine. Next week the dance students would get a new routine and new song, and the process would start all over again. Finley really hoped the new music wouldn’t be annoying—given that she was going to have to listen to it three or four hundred times over the next few weeks.

They walked to the cubbies, where Aubrey pulled a sweatshirt over her leotard, then traded tap shoes for rain boots. April in the Pacific Northwest meant gray, wet skies and cool temperatures. Finley made sure her niece had her backpack from school, then waved goodbye to the instructor before ushering Aubrey to her Subaru.

While her niece settled in the passenger-side back seat, Finley put the backpack within arm's reach. Inevitably, despite the short drive home, Aubrey would remember something she had to share and would go scrambling for it. Finley didn't want a repeat of the time her niece had unfastened her seat belt and gone shimmying into the cargo area to dig out her perfect spelling test. Going sixty miles an hour down the freeway with an eight-year-old as a potential projectile had aged Finley twenty years.

"We got our history project," Aubrey announced as Finley started the car. "We're going to be working in teams to make a diorama of a local Native American tribe. There's four of us in our group." She paused dramatically. "Including Zoe!"

"Zoe red hair or Zoe black hair?"

Aubrey laughed. "Zoe black hair. If it had been Zoe red hair, my life would have been ruined forever."

"Over a diorama? Shouldn't your life be ruined over running out of ice cream or a rip in your favorite jacket?"

"Dioramas are important." She paused. "And hard to spell. We're going to pick our tribe tomorrow, then research them and decide on the diorama. I want to do totem poles. The different animals tell a story and I think that would be nice. Oliver wants a bear attacking a village, but Zoe is vegetarian and doesn't want to see any blood." Aubrey wrinkled her nose. "I eat meat and I wouldn't want to see blood either. Harry agrees with me on the totems, but Zoe isn't sure."

"So much going on," Finley said, not sure she could keep up with the third-grade diorama drama.

"I know. Could we stop at the cake store on the way home? For Grandma? She's been sad." Aubrey leaned forward as far as her seat belt would let her. "I don't understand, though. I thought being on Broadway was a good thing."

"It is."

"So Grandma was a good teacher for her student. Why isn't she happy?"

Finley wondered how to distill the emotional complexity that was her mother in a few easy-to-understand concepts. No way she was getting into the fact that her mother had once wanted to be on Broadway herself, only to end up broke and the mother of two little girls. The best Molly had managed for her theater career was a few minor roles in traveling companies. Eventually motherhood and the need to be practical had whittled away her dream until it was only a distant memory. These days she taught theater at the local community college and gave intensive acting classes in her basement. It was the latter that had been the cause of her current depression.

“Her student wasn’t grateful for all Grandma did for her. When she got the big role, she didn’t call or text and she didn’t say thank you for all of Grandma’s hard work.”

Molly had not only found her student a place to stay, she’d worked her contacts to get the audition in the first place. Finley might not understand the drive to stand in front of an audience, pretending to be someone else, but if it was your thing, then at least act human when someone gave you a break.

Finley glanced in the rearview mirror and saw Aubrey’s eyes widen.

“You’re always supposed to say thank you.”

“I know.”

“Poor Grandma. We have to buy her cake. The little one with the sprinkles she likes.”

Finley held in a grin. “And maybe a chocolate one for you and me to share?”

“Oh, that would be very nice, but we could just get one for Grandma if you think that’s better.”

Finley was sure that Aubrey almost meant those last words. At least in the moment. Should she follow through and not buy a second small cake, her niece would be crushed. Brave, but crushed.

Nothing Bundt Cakes wasn’t on the way home, but it wasn’t that far out of the way. Finley headed along Bothell-Everett Highway until she reached Central Market, across from the library. She turned left and parked in front of the bakery. She and Aubrey walked inside.

Her niece rushed to the display. “Look, they have the confetti ones Grandma likes. They’re so pretty.”

The clerk smiled. “Can I help you?”

“A couple of the little cakes,” Finley told her. “A confetti and a chocolate, please.”

Aubrey shot her a grateful look, then tapped on the case. “Could we get a vanilla one? I see Mom on Saturday afternoon. I could take her a cake.”

The unpleasant reminder of Aubrey’s upcoming visitation had Finley clenching her jaw. She consciously relaxed as she said, “It’s only Wednesday. I don’t know if the cake will still be fresh.”

“Just keep it in the refrigerator,” the clerk told her. “They’re good for five days after purchase.”

Aubrey jumped in place, her enthusiasm making her clap loudly. “That’s enough time.” She counted off the days. “Thursday, Friday, Saturday. That’s only three days. Mom will love her little cake so much.” She pressed her hands together. “Vanilla is her favorite.”

Finley told herself that of course Aubrey cared about her mother. Most kids loved their parents, regardless of how irresponsible those parents might be. It was a biological thing. Sloane *was* doing better these days. Maybe this time she would stay sober and out of prison. Something Finley could wish for, but didn’t actual believe.

Finley nodded at the clerk. “We’ll take all three, please.”

Aubrey rushed toward her and wrapped her arms around her waist. “Thank you, Finley. For the cake and coming to my performance and helping me practice.”

“I seem to be stuck loving you, kid. I try not to, but you’re just so adorable. I can’t help myself.”

Aubrey laughed, looking up at her. Finley ignored how much her niece looked like Sloane—they had the same big blue eyes and full mouth, the same long curly hair. Aubrey was a pretty girl but like her mother, she would mature into a stunning woman one day, as had her grandmother Molly before her. Only Finley was ordinary—a simple seagull in a flock of exotic parrots.

Probably for the best, she told herself as she paid for the cakes. In her experience, beautiful women were easily distracted by the attention they received. Little mattered more than adulation. Relationships were ignored or lost or damaged, a casualty of the greatness that was the beautiful woman. Finley, on the other hand, could totally focus on what was important—like raising her niece and making sure no one threatened her safety. Not even her own mother.

\* \* \*

“What is it?” Jericho Ford stared at the picture on the tablet screen. The swirling tubes of metal twisted together in some kind of shape, but he had no idea what it was.

“The artist describes this creation as the manifestation of his idea of happiness,” Antonio offered helpfully.

“It looks like a warthog.”

“It’s art.”

“So a fancy warthog.”

“It’s on sale.”

“I don’t care if it’s left on the side of the road with a sign reading ‘free.’ It’s ugly and no.” Jericho looked at his friend. “Why would you show that to me?”

“You said you needed some pieces for your family room.”

“I meant a sofa and maybe a bigger television.”

“You could put this on the coffee table.”

“That’s where I put my beer and popcorn.” Jericho pointed to the tablet. “If you like it so much, you get it.”

Antonio’s brows rose. “Absolutely not. My house is all about midcentury modern these days.”

“The warthog isn’t midcentury enough?”

“No.” Antonio slapped the tablet closed and put it in his backpack before removing two gray subway tiles and setting them on Jericho’s desk. “I want to make a change in the kitchen backsplash for number eleven.”

Antonio pointed to the tile on the right. “This was the original choice. I like the shine and the texture, but I’ve been thinking it’s too blue.” He tapped the tile on the right. “This has more green and goes better with the darker cabinets in the island.”

Jericho loved his job. He built houses in the Seattle area, good-quality houses with high-end finishes and smart designs. They sourced local when possible, had a great reputation and frequently a waiting list for their new-construction builds. Castwell Park—the five-plus acres he’d bought in Kirkland, Washington—had been subdivided into twenty oversized lots where Ford Construction was in the process of building luxury houses.

Jericho enjoyed the entire building process—from clearing the land to handing over the keys to the new owners. While he’d rather be doing



something physical with his days, he was the site manager and owner, and all decisions flowed through him. Including tile changes suggested by his best friend and the project's interior designer.

"Those tiles are the same color," Jericho said flatly.

Antonio grimaced. "They're not. This one—"

"Has more blue. Yes, you said."

He grabbed the tiles and walked out of the large construction trailer set up across the street from the entrance to Castwell Park. He'd made a deal with the owners of the empty lot to rent the space while construction was underway. When his crew finished the twentieth home, he was going to build one for the lot's owner. Jericho didn't, as a rule, build one-offs, but it had been the price of getting a perfect location for the construction trailer, so he'd made an exception.

Once out in the natural light, he rocked the two tiles back and forth, looking for a color difference. Okay, sure, one was a *little* bluer, but he doubted five people in a hundred would notice. Still, Antonio's design ideas were a big reason for the company's success. He had a way of taking a hot trend and making it timeless.

"Email me the change authorization and I'll okay it," Jericho said, handing back the tiles.

"I knew you'd agree. These will make all the difference."

"No more changes on house eleven or twelve," he said, leading the way back inside the trailer. "The designs are locked in and we've placed all our orders."

"I know. This is the last one." Antonio smiled. "Besides, I've already checked with the distributor and she said it was no problem to substitute one for the other." He settled in the chair by Jericho's desk. "Dennis and I were talking about you last night."

"That never means good things for me."

Antonio dismissed the comment with a wave. "We're inviting a woman to our next party."

Jericho knew exactly what his friend meant but decided to pretend he didn't. "You usually have women at your parties."

"A woman for you."

"No."

Antonio leaned toward him. "It's time. You and Lauren split up nearly seven months ago. I know you're still pissed at your brother, but that's

separate from getting over your ex-wife. They cheated, they're hideous people and we hate them, but it's time for you to move on."

Antonio had always had a gift for the quick recap, Jericho thought, appreciating his ability to distill the shock of finding out his wife and his younger brother were having an affair and the subsequent divorce into a single sentence.

"I've moved on," Jericho told him.

"You're not dating. Worse, you're not picking up women in bars and sleeping with them."

Jericho grinned. "When have I ever done that?"

"You're a straight guy. Isn't it a thing?"

"I hate it when you generalize about me because I'm straight."

Antonio grinned. "Poor you." His humor faded. "It's time to stop pouting and move on with your life."

"Hey, I don't pout."

"Fine, call it whatever you want. Lauren was a total bitch and I honestly don't have words to describe what a shit Gil is for doing what he did. But you're divorced, you claim to have moved on, so let's see a little proof." His mouth turned down. "I worry about you."

"Thanks. I'm okay."

Mostly. He hadn't seen his brother in six months, which had made the holidays awkward. His family was small—just his mom, him and his brother, with Antonio as an adopted member. Gil's affair with Lauren had rocked their family dynamics nearly as much as his father's death eight years ago, shattering their small world. Their mother had taken Jericho's side—at least at first. Lately, she'd been making noises about a reconciliation. As Gil and Lauren were still a thing, he wasn't ready to pull that particular trigger just yet.

"Dennis is a really good matchmaker," Antonio murmured.

"Did I say no? I'm kind of sure I said no. I can get my own women."

"Yes, but you won't."

"Now who's pouting?"

The first five notes of "La Cucaracha" played outside, announcing the arrival of the food truck. Antonio's face brightened.

"Lunchtime. You're buying."

"Somehow I'm always buying."

"You're the rich developer. I'm a struggling artist. It's only fair."

“You have a successful design business. And if that wasn’t enough, your husband is a partner at a fancy, high-priced law firm. You married money.”

Antonio laughed. “Wasn’t that smart of me?”

Jericho followed him out of the trailer. “You would have married him if he was broke and homeless. You love him.”

“I do and now we need to find someone for you to love. Not another redhead. That last one was a total disaster.”

“I’m not sure the failure of our marriage had anything to do with the color of her hair.”

“Maybe not, but why take the chance?”

\* \* \*

After dinner, Aubrey helped Finley clean the kitchen. In truth the eight-year-old spent more time talking than putting things away, but Finley was fine with that—she enjoyed the company. Besides, she wanted Aubrey to know she was interested in her day, her school, her friends, that every detail mattered. The first five years of her niece’s life had been tumultuous. As long as Finley was Aubrey’s guardian, she was going to make sure the little girl felt safe and loved.

“Harry said his family is going to Disneyland this summer,” Aubrey announced in a reverent tone. “For a whole week!”

“Doesn’t Harry have a lot of brothers?”

“Four. He’s the second youngest. But Disneyland! Have you ever been?”

“I haven’t,” she admitted, trying to ignore the inevitable destination of the conversation. “Are they flying to Los Angeles or driving?”

Aubrey carried a plate from the kitchen table to the counter. “I don’t know. Is it far?”

“Over a thousand miles.”

Aubrey’s blue eyes widened. “The drive would take forever.”

“A couple of days.” Maybe more with five kids requiring bathroom breaks at different times. Not that flying would be all that much easier, although the getting-there part would go faster.

“We should go,” Aubrey told her. “We’d have the best time.”

Finley continued to load the dishwasher. “We would, but that’s a big trip.” It would also be expensive and Finley didn’t think she could swing it.

“It could be you and me and Grandma and Mommy.”

Travel with Sloane—that was so not happening.

“Did you finish your reading?” she asked, hoping to distract her niece.

“Uh-huh. And I did my math sheet. We get our new spelling list tomorrow. I wonder what the words will be.”

“I don’t know, but they’ve been getting bigger every time.”

Aubrey spun in a circle. “I saw that, too! Last week we had *evidence* and *conclusion*. Those were hard.”

“But you learned them.” Finley smiled. “I’m proud of you, baby girl.”

Aubrey rushed toward her and flung her arms around Finley’s waist. Finley wiped her wet hands on her jeans, then held on tight.

“I love you, Finley.”

“I love you, too. You’re my best girl.”

As quickly as the emotional encounter had begun, it was over, with Aubrey dancing away, singing the words to the song “Physical” because she and her grandma were all about the eighties.

Once the dishwasher was on and the counters wiped down, Aubrey raced upstairs to pick out her coloring project for the evening. Book and crayons in hand, she settled on the floor in front of the big coffee table. She and Finley discussed viewing options, finally settling on *The Brady Bunch* reruns for an hour before she read until bedtime. Finley debated joining her, but there was laundry to do and she should probably scrub the bathroom she and Aubrey shared—normally a Saturday chore, but she’d been working extra hours the past couple of weeks.

She’d made it halfway up the stairs when she heard her mom call her.

“Finley, I need to talk to you.”

An innocuous statement, she told herself, even as her shoulders tensed.

She followed her mother into the fourth bedroom-slash-home office at the back of the house. Bins filled with summer clothes were stacked next to boxes of Christmas decorations. Finley sat on the double bed while her mom took the desk chair.

Molly McGowan might only be a few months from her fifty-fifth birthday, but she could still pass for a woman in her midforties, although time and disappointment had blurred her once beautiful features until now she was merely attractive. Finley told herself that one of the advantages of being average was there was no great beauty to fade, which was a plus for her. She wasn’t looking for one more problem to solve.

Her mother pressed her lips together, then exhaled sharply. Finley's shoulders tightened even more and she started to regret the second helping of enchiladas at dinner as her stomach shifted uneasily. Whatever Sloane had done now was going to be Finley's problem to solve, she thought grimly. It always was.

"I heard from your grandfather."

Finley registered the words, but had trouble processing their exact meaning. She only had one grandfather, her mother's father. He had been a central figure in her and Sloane's lives until he sued Molly for custody of her children. At thirteen and fifteen, the sisters had been old enough to be asked where they wanted to live. Molly had warned them if they didn't choose her, they would never see her again—a terrifying prospect. What no one had predicted was when they said they wanted to stay with their mom that their maternal grandfather would turn his back on them, figuratively and literally, and disappear from their lives forever.

"I don't understand," Finley said. "He called you? It's been twenty years and he called now?"

Her mother nodded. "He's older and not doing well. Apparently he's been ill for a while, in and out of nursing homes."

She sat perfectly still, except for her fingers as she spun the ring on her right index finger. A sure sign she had something to say that Finley didn't want to hear.

"Is he dying?" she asked. "Do you need to go see him?" She paused. "Where does he even live?"

"Phoenix. He moved to Arizona. You know, after."

"After? Mom, he tried to take away your kids. He dragged us all to court, then when he didn't get his way, he deserted us. He said no matter what he would be there for us and take care of us and then he was gone. Just gone."

Molly spun the ring faster. "It was a long time ago." She looked away, then back at Finley. "He's going to be moving in with us. I've invited your grandfather to stay."

"You what?"

Finley found herself standing with no memory of having moved. She stared at her mother, raised both arms, then dropped them to her sides.

"He's coming *here*? To this house?" Remembering Aubrey on the other side of the wall, she lowered her voice. "You said we could never forgive

him for what he did. You said we'd hate him forever. He left us, Mom. All of us."

"He did, you're right. But that was a long time ago and things change."

Finley sank back on the bed. "We haven't heard from him. He never reached out, not once."

"He has now. He called me. He's old and alone and he's my father."

Which was very compassionate, Finley thought, and probably the right moral position, but she simply wasn't that forgiving. Because when her grandfather had lost the case and gotten so cold and angry, she'd been the one to run to him, grab his hand and beg him to understand why she'd had to pick her mother. She'd been the one to tell him she loved him. She'd pleaded with him to not be mad. But instead of seeing things through the eyes of his thirteen-year-old granddaughter, he'd pulled free of her grip and walked away.

Finley remembered collapsing onto the hard floor of the courthouse and sobbing as if her heart were breaking. Because it was.

She waited for weeks to hear from him. She'd called, but his phone was disconnected. The letters she'd written him had been returned. Six months after that horrible day, her mother had informed her that Lester had left the state without a word to any of them.

"He's moving in next week," her mother told her, pulling her back to the present. "This will be his room, so it needs to be cleaned out."

Her mom kept talking, but Finley wasn't listening. *Next week?* How could it happen so fast?

She wanted to say no, that she didn't approve, but this wasn't her house and therefore it wasn't her decision.

"I know you're upset," her mother said. "But I have to do this. For my future."

"I don't understand."

Her mother looked away. "He'll put us back in the will if he can live here. It's not a fortune, but it will mean a little financial security for me. I'm not getting any younger."

Finley forced herself to stay seated and keep her mouth shut. Screaming wouldn't help the situation. In her head, she understood that all her mom had was this house. She didn't make much at the college and her students paid practically nothing for their acting classes.

But to have Lester come and live here? There had to be another way.

“Do this for me,” her mother said, meeting her eyes, her gaze intense. “I gave up everything for you and your sister. Do this for me.”

“You can just ask,” Finley told her, tasting bitterness on her tongue. “You don’t have to use guilt.”

“You’re not always reasonable. Besides, guilt works on you.”

Finley ignored that. “What about Aubrey? I don’t want him hurting her.”

“Dad will be great with her. Look how much he loved you and Sloane.”

“Until he didn’t.”

Her mother rose. “Your life would be much easier if you learned how to forgive.”

“I’m very forgiving. I just expect people to earn it a little.”

Molly started to say something, then shook her head. “You’ll clean out the room?”

Finley stood and looked around. “Do you want to keep the desk in here?”

“No. It takes up too much room. There’s that dresser in the basement.

Let’s put that in here instead and put the desk downstairs.”

“I’ll take care of that and the boxes.”

Her mother touched her arm. “I need this, Finley. Not just for the money, but because he’s my father and I miss him.”

“I miss him, too, but we weren’t the ones to walk away. That’s on him.”

“It’s been twenty years. Try to let it go.”