

SAY UNCLE

Chapter One

You wouldn't think oatmeal could kill a gal, but - thanks to a fast thinking, large-breasted waitress by the name of Polly - I'm here to tell you anything is possible.

It was like this; I was sitting at a booth for two, in a recently renovated local coffee shop, reading the morning paper, minding my own business. I was vaguely aware that someone had walked toward my table, but I didn't look up, because I assumed that they were being seated at the booth across the aisle. I had just put a spoonful of oatmeal, with strawberry and maple syrup into my mouth when I heard my name, looked up, and saw my cousins, Elly and Mark, cousins I hadn't seen in, literally, years. I was stunned. And that's when it happened. I opened my mouth to voice my surprise, and the strawberry slid into my throat and jammed.

What would have been, in the best of situations an uncomfortable reunion, was rapidly turning into dangerous farce, and, bizarrely, I was the only one conscious of that fact. It felt as if I had suddenly sprouted an Adams apple and that the strawberry was literally expanding in my throat. Clearly, my cousins didn't know what was going on. Elly, always the peacekeeper, smiled tensely at me and nodded, while her older brother, Mark grimaced what he might have thought was a smile, but fell way short. He moved a half-step away from the table. No doubt I looked agog, stunned by their sudden appearance - which, indeed I was - but in fact, I knew if I didn't get help, these two people would be my last vision of the world. This alone was enough to make me pound on my chest to dislodge the damned berry. I watched in a panic as Elly's smile slowly faded and her top lip inched up, exposing her gums. She squinted uncomprehendingly at me. Mark just looked embarrassed.

Fortunately, at that very moment, dear, sweet, maternal Polly came rushing past my cousins and screamed into my face, "Can you talk?"

I threw my head from side to side, grabbing out to her for help. Everything was a blur around me. The people at the counter turned from their coffee to watch, little old ladies looked up from their poached eggs (half of which they wear home on their chins), the entire establishment was in a suspended moment of disbelief as

the very exciting prospect of watching a patron die at booth twelve loomed before them.

Polly seized me by the waist and spun me around. She braced my torso against her left arm and smacked my back with her right arm. Nothing. I was feeling light-headed, ready to give in to the stupid piece of fruit. Again, she smacked my back, her arm feeling more like a two by four than an appendage of a sixty-odd year-old woman. Nothing happened. Unable to inhale or exhale, it felt as if it was about to burst. She wrapped her arms around me from behind, pressed her massive breasts against my back, uttered some words of reassurance and then, as hard as she could, she jabbed her fists just under my sternum and practically pulled me up off the ground.

It was a glorious moment. I watched the oatmeal covered strawberry sail in slow motion, a perfect arch, glistening in the overhead light as it landed smack dab in the middle of Mark's forehead.

My body went limp in Polly's embrace, and she lowered me back onto the red vinyl booth. I took several, deep gulps of air before I finally was able to clear my now raw throat and thank her. Polly, also shaken from the event, squeezed my shoulder and said, "I couldn't lose you, kid, you tip too well."

She looked up at the useless gaping duo and handed Mark a napkin.

Without a note of thanks, he took it from her, dipped it in a glass of water and wiped his brow.

"Bulls eye." She muttered as she straightened up and gently patted my back. "You okay, now?"

"I'm fine, thanks to you."

"Remember, kid, chew." Polly sauntered over to another table and loudly warned the elderly, stooped woman, "Careful now, Annie, that's what happens when you don't gum things enough."

In less than five minutes life was back to normal. The busboy had cleared away my breakfast dishes as well as the offending strawberry, and Elly and Mark were sitting across from me with water and coffee. Aside from one last remaining piece of oatmeal plastered to Mark's forehead, you never would have known that I had almost died just moments earlier. Mark lowered his penetrating eyes, green like his father's, or mine for that matter, and lifted his coffee cup.

"Wow," Elly opened two packets of artificial sweetener and poured them into her coffee. "That was pretty intense." My younger cousin is a pretty woman whose round face and straight, straight brown hair make it clear that she is her father's daughter. In the yellowish coffee shop light, I could see that hairline wrinkles had only recently started to grace her eyes. "I knew you'd get choked up when you saw us, but I never expected *that*." Elly looked up at me from her coffee and smiled with her eyes, picking up where we had left off, years earlier. The drift with Elly had been something I never really understood, since my 'falling out', if you could call it that, had been with her father. Seeing her made me realize how much I had missed her.

I reached beyond the divide. "Didn't think I'd be so *berry* surprised, eh?"

Mark, who is three years my junior and three years older than Elly (placing him somewhere near forty), let out an exasperated sigh and glared at his sister. "You want to entertain each other or get to the point?"

I hadn't remembered Mark as being such an ass, but a lot can happen in four years. The last time I saw anyone from my mom's side of the family was when my brother, David, died four years earlier. Mark had showed up at David's funeral, and even went to the cemetery, but he hadn't bothered to come back to the apartment afterwards. He had told my sister, Nora, that he was sorry, but he had a very important business meeting. He never even said good-bye to me that day -- not that I dwell on that sort of thing.

I stared at my good-looking, self-important cousin. Family dynamics have always baffled me. I mean, really, what is family? Should DNA be the guideline by which this is determined, or should it be a matter of love, respect, and trust? There is no question that Mark and I share some similar genetic coding, but we are as different as cantaloupes and scissors.

No longer the nice little girl in need of my family's approval, and not about to put up with his attitude, I cut to the chase. "Obviously, you need or want something, Mark, so what is it?" He squinted but didn't say anything. "I'm sorry, maybe I don't understand. I can only presume that this meeting - which is neither at my home or my office, but in the coffee shop where I *was* having a nice, leisurely breakfast - I can only assume that this meeting was not happenstance and you have gone to some trouble to track me down on this cold, gray day." Through the picture window behind him, pedestrians with umbrellas struggled against a February rainstorm. "Why don't you get right to the point, Mark?"

Elly added half the pitcher of milk to her coffee and Mark contemplated his hands. Good looking hands, actually; large, strong, with dark hair and a gold and sapphire

pinkie ring on his left hand. Still no wedding band. The only imperfection was a cut between his thumb and index finger on his right hand.

I stirred sugar into my coffee and felt hungry, despite my brush with death. I waited for Mark to pick up the slack.

Finally, Elly turned her dark brown eyes to me and said, "We went to your office and your secretary told us where we could find you. We have a problem, Sydney." She paused. "It's Daddy. He's been arrested for - "

"Arrested?" I echoed softly.

Before she could complete her sentence, Mark interrupted. "*Was* arrested. He's not *in* jail now."

I looked blankly at Mark, turned back to Elly, and muttered, "Go on."

Her whole body seemed to inflate when she took a deep breath. "Two months ago, Dad was arrested for arson and murder - "

"What?" It felt as if I had been hit in the head with a sledgehammer. Uncle Mitch? Arrested for murder? It was impossible. A thousand thoughts crammed into my head at the same time. Who would he have murdered, and why? "Arson? Murder?" I felt my face tighten into a deep scowl.

Elly nodded. "His ex-partner's factory was torched and a woman died in the fire."

"Ex-partner?" I interrupted again, feeling more and more like a stranger to these two people with whom I'd shared a childhood full of sleepovers, baths and secrets. As far back as I could remember, Uncle Mitch and Jake Merrick had been bickering partners in Harriman's, a dress manufacturing business. It seemed impossible that something as monumental as the dissolution of their partnership would have happened without someone having told me.

"Oh yeah. Daddy bought Jake out a couple of years ago. You didn't know that?" She too seemed surprised by my ignorance.

"A couple of *years*?" My hands were resting on the tabletop, palms up as if pleading. I curled my fingers in and shook my head.

"Oh Sydney, I'm sorry." Elly said as if she meant it. "Anyway, Jake may be Daddy's cousin through mom, but they've always hated each other. Do you still know

anything about the shmatte business, because it's nothing like it used to be when we were kids."

When I was four, Uncle Mitch started bringing me to work with him at least once a month, a routine that lasted for about three years. He'd show me off to his employees, set me up at a desk in his office where I would do very important business, and then he would buy me a hot dog, a Cel-Ray, and an ice cream sandwich. I had every intention of growing up to be Joan Crawford, taking over the family business and turning it into a zillion dollar enterprise. I had it all figured out; I'd smoke cigarettes and click around on high heels, snap orders at people who respected me because I was tough, but I wouldn't be too tough.

"Ninety-nine percent of the manufacturing is done overseas now. Cheap labor. It makes sense." Elly shrugged. "Anyway, after thirty years of being in business together and hating each other, Dad and Jake finally decided to call it quits. Jake's crazy son, Danny - remember him? - well he went after Dad with a box-knife ... that's when Dad decided *genug is genug*.

"They were very smart about how they handled their arrangement. They agreed that they had to dissolve the partnership, but they didn't decide who would take the business until *after* they drew up an agreement. Get it?"

"Sure. But why?"

"This way no one would think they were getting screwed. See, they negotiated an agreement not knowing who was going to retire or who was going to take the business. That way, they both felt confident that whichever side they were on, they were getting a fair deal. After all the papers were drawn up and everything was agreed upon, they went to their lawyers office and flipped a coin.

"Depending on how you look at it, Dad won the coin toss, which he should have because he genuinely loves the business and Jake's always complained about it. Anyway, Jake was free to retire or do whatever he wanted. He had said he planned to retire." Elly picked up her coffee and looked at me over the rim of the cup.

"I take it he didn't." I said.

Elly blinked. "Nope. Instead, the gonif opened a new shop within a year and a half." She brought the cup to her lips.

"The son of a bitch had signed a non-compete clause, it was part of the agreement." Mark added. "But then, to make matters *worse*, the schmuck tried to steal Dad's clients by offering them a 40% discount."

"Obviously Jake was doing something dirty because the cost of manufacturing in the States now is prohibitive." Elly said when Mark took a breath. "I mean, he made excellent money when he and Dad ended their partnership, but not enough to bankroll a whole new operation, especially in the States."

If it hadn't been for the surrealistic fact that we were discussing Uncle Mitch's future, it might have felt like old times, the three of us huddled over afternoon coffee. The only things missing were a haze of cigarette smoke and the kind of connection that comes with intimacy. At that moment, I don't know what I missed more, the cigarettes or the connection to my family.

"Jesus, how's your mom taking all this?" I asked, knowing that Jake was Aunt Maddy's cousin, which probably put her right smack dab in the middle of everything.

Elly's shoulders fell. "It's been hard on her, but we all know what the truth is."

"Right. So, Jake's business was torched, and Uncle Mitch was blamed." They had already painted the crux of the scenario when they said he had been arrested, but I needed details. "What evidence did they have?"

Elly and Mark looked askance at one another before Mark took a deep breath and told the palms of his hands, "On the surface it really doesn't look good. I mean, already a grand jury has ruled against him." He looked up at me and clamped his hands shut. "Apart from the fact that Dad threatened Jake in front of about a hundred and fifty people, the investigators found something in Jake's garage that they say was used to set the fire."

"What?" I asked.

He shrugged and studied the restaurant behind me. Then, very softly he said, "I don't know, a crowbar." He clicked his tongue against his teeth and looked almost angry, but I knew it was pain he was feeling, not rage. "His fingerprints were on it." His voice cracked, but he quickly continued, "But only because someone planted it in his garage. It was on his car, he picked it up and tossed it off to the side." He rested his chin in his hand, hiding his mouth behind his fingers.

"Okay. Tell me about the fire." As much as it disturbed me that this was the first I was hearing about all this, I had to take a deep breath and remind myself that this wasn't about me. It was about Mitch. My uncle. A man who used to be my friend. A second father who had loved me unconditionally ... until he learned I was gay. And then he didn't know me anymore.

Elly clutched her coffee cup and asked, "Will you help us?"

That she would even think to ask the question hurt me, after all, we're family. Then again, I was looking across the table at two virtual strangers. I knew less about them than I did Mrs. Jensen, a little old crackpot in my building, who has actually won a soft spot in my heart after all these years.

"Of course, I will." My words came out in a husky, almost gruff manner, which masked what I was really feeling; apprehension bordering on fear. This wasn't an unknown client coming in and hiring me to pick through their dirty laundry ... this was my family, and whether I wanted to admit it or not, it made a difference. A good investigator needs to rely on their objectivity, which is something I usually pride myself on, but this was a different kettle of fish altogether. How could I be objective with my family, especially since there had been years of silence weighing us down? It was a challenge I wasn't certain we could all rise to.

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