

SON OF A GUN

Chapter One

"I don't know why you couldn't call a handy man," I grumbled to my elderly Aunt Minnie as I replaced the washer on her kitchen tap.

"It's too simple for them. I'd look like an idiot," she said puffing on a cigarette by the window in her Park Avenue kitchen and indulging my dog Auggie in treats of last night's porterhouse.

"Notice how I don't comment on the fact that you *are* an idiot."

"That was nice, thanks."

"In the future if you would kindly remember that I am a private detective and not a handy gal – we will live out the rest of your life in relative peace."

"Yes but it was my handy gal who fixed the faucet," she said slyly.

"Shut up."

"Besides, we'll all get enough peace when I die. Might as well stir things up now. And what are you complaining about? A washer is nothing. In return you get homemade popovers. I slave for you, and this is the thanks I get."

"Thank you Aunt Minnie," I said as I tossed out the old washer and nuzzled Auggie who was pushing her 70-pound bundle of soft fur and love at me. Half Samoyed and half golden retriever, she sighed with an almost contagious contentment.

"Why are you so grumpy? It's a beautiful morning. Don't tell me you miss your girlfriend already." She was referring to my partner, Leslie, who was at that very moment en route to Kennedy Airport for a flight to California where she was to meet with Christa Maiwald, a renowned artist looking for a new interior decorator.

“No,” I said too quickly.

“Okay, what’s up?” she asked as she pulled the popovers from the warming oven. “And don’t say *nothing* because I’m too old to play emotional hide and seek. Remember, we’re playing Beat The Clock with my lifeline.”

“Oh shush, you’re going to outlive all of us,” I said pouring another cup of coffee.

“Enough with my longevity. Could we please talk about your relationship?”

I didn’t say a word. It had been a difficult morning.

“What?” She asked, pausing as she placed the warm muffins into a lined basket.

“Nothing.”

“Bullshit.” She set out strawberry, almond, and plain butter along with a plate of soft cheese and a smaller basket of baguettes. “You might as well tell me now and get it over with because you know I’ll make your life a misery until you do.”

“We didn’t part on the best of terms and that always bothers me, especially when one of us is flying.”

“Why? What happened?”

I shook my head and tightened my jaw.

“Just spit it out.”

“I learned last night that she tried to hire Miguel without my knowing it,” I explained referring to one of the operatives at Cabe Sloane Investigations, the business I own with my long-term friend and associate, Max Cabe.

“To do what?” She lifted a brow as she motioned for me to sit.

“She wanted him to get background information on Harold.” After nearly a dozen years of widowhood and two months in a whirlwind romance, Leslie’s mother, Dorothy, was going to tie the knot with her seventy-four-year-old Romeo, a man her children barely knew. This disturbed them enough to want to look into his background.

“Dot’s beau?” Minnie asked.

“Yup.” I slathered strawberry butter onto a steaming hot popover.

“What’s that about? The wedding is in a few weeks.”

“I know. This is a potential nightmare. I mean personally I like Harold. He’s a little too country club and John Waynish for me, but hey, I’m not about to marry him.” As far as I was concerned Dorothy was happy for the first time since I had met her years earlier when I learned things about her that I knew no one else in her family knew. I have respected that confidence for all these years, but that information only made this situation harder for me. Dorothy and her husband, Jesse (Leslie’s father), had not been intimate with one another for many years before his passing. Now, in her 70s, Dorothy had rediscovered herself as a sexual being. Who the hell was I to aid and abet in taking that away from her?

“Is it just Leslie or her siblings, too? Minnie asked.

“Everybody. Actually, more Marcia and Paul than Leslie, but she’s the one who tried to hire Miguel.”

“I don’t get it. Why didn’t she just ask you?”

“She didn’t think I would want to get involved because of Lloyd,” I said referring to the past with her brother.

“Well, she’s got a point there,” Minnie said handing off a piece of baguette to Auggie.

“Don’t feed her from the table, Min.”

“Technically this isn’t a table,” she said because we were in fact sitting at a counter. “Why did she wait until now?”

“She actually talked to Miguel a few days ago, but naturally he wouldn’t take it on unless it was sanctioned by Max and me. And Leslie was reticent to tell me because from the beginning when everyone got up in arms about Dorothy getting married I suggested that they all seemed more concerned about their own interests than their mother’s happiness. I had assumed that what they all feared, while not voicing it, was what would happen to their inheritance if this *interloper*, as Marcia constantly

refers to him, married mom and got his mitts on her bank account, which is, as you know, flush.”

“You have such a winning way with people, don’t you dear?”

“People don’t like it when you speak your mind.” I polished off a popover and tried not to look at her gaze, which I knew was leveled directly at me. I continued in my own defense. “The thing is Leslie *assumed* how I would respond and chose not to tell me because of that.”

“But she did tell you.”

“Relationships are about communication and if you don’t communicate, then you have no relationship.” I mumbled.

“Oh my God, could you be any more judgmental? Of course, you two have a relationship and a damned good one, you idiot. She was afraid to talk to you, she finally did and when she did you responded in the very way she thought you would which is what kept her quiet in the first place. What’s wrong with you?”

“There is nothing wrong with me and why are you rushing in to defend Leslie when I ...”

“When you’re acting holier than thou? I don’t know.”

I grabbed a piece of baguette and slathered on some cheese, neither of which I wanted but brought to my mouth as a means of keeping quiet. It was a delicious distraction.

“All I’m saying sweetheart is that while I understand how hurt you were by her not talking to you first, you still have to acknowledge that she *did* open up and that is communication.”

I shifted uneasily in my seat. I knew that Minnie was right, just as Leslie had been right to assume that I wouldn’t have wanted my office involved in anything related to the Washburns if only because of the history and the fact that her siblings have always seemed uncomfortable with me. Being that both her sister Marcia and her brother Paul are passive aggressive, it’s always been something unspoken, but just because something is ignored doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist.

“Okay,” I finally said.

“Okay what?”

“Okay I’ll call and apologize.”

“Don’t do it for me,” she feigned innocence. “Do it for Auggie,” she sounded like she was talking to a baby as she rubbed the expectant furry face between her veined hands.

At that moment my cell phone rang. I was certain it was Leslie calling to tell me how much she loves me.

I wish it had been.

“Hey,” I said as I moved out of the kitchen for privacy.

It took a second before I understood that the voice on the other end of the line wasn’t Leslie but rather my good friend, Peggy Dexter-Cannady. I waited as she tried to stop crying long enough to tell me her husband, John, a police officer, had been shot and which hospital he had been taken to. It was surreal; watching Auggie lazily eat breakfast in the security of Minnie’s cozy home while on the other end of the phone my old friend’s world was unraveling.

It’s amazing how much information a person can process in a nanosecond. As soon as I recognized Peggy’s voice I knew something hideous had happened, I understood her panic, and I realized that despite my own fear I had to keep a level head. I stood there white knuckling the telephone receiver and promised I would meet her at the hospital.

Dogs, though the most perfect creatures on the planet, require attention and I knew that without Leslie I would be in a bind because Auggie was just at the point of having to cross her hind legs.

“Min, I have to go. Can you take care of Auggie for a little while?”

“Sure, what’s up?”

“John Cannady was shot. I have to go to the hospital.”

“Oh my God. Is it bad?”

“I don’t know but it can’t be good. I’ll have Kerry pick up Auggie later, okay?” My secretary, Kerry Norman, is always happy to have Auggie to play with.

“Call me. Let me know what happens.”

“I will.” I left without kissing her goodbye, without reminding her that I loved her, without thanking her for the popovers or the dog sitting.

In the back of the taxi, I tried to call Leslie, but her phone was already off. I simply left a message that I loved her.

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By the time I arrived at the hospital the media was already gathering. This was only to be expected since John is a cop, and a captain, at that. There was also a group of officers gathering outside to lend Peggy whatever support she might need.

I found her in a room that had probably been an office before because it was small and two walls were wire mesh windows that looked out into the hallway, but now it was modestly furnished with orange plastic chairs and a framed print of a forest in the snow. With her was a uniformed officer, a good friend of theirs named Hank Yarberg who has known John since high school. Black mascara had streaked down and dried on Peggy’s gaunt cheeks. Her eyes were swollen and bloodshot and her hair, which was now short and red with dark roots, seemed to have been charged with static electricity and made her look like a long, slender chipmunk on speed. She wore a gray Donna Karan suit with a white silk blouse, both of which were stained with blood. She had been staring blindly at the floor chewing on a nail before she saw me. As soon as I entered the room she stopped. Her lower lip quivered as she reached out for me. Hank looked relieved when he saw me.

In another lifetime I was a cop and though I’ve been a private investigator for a long time, I still have a lot of friends who are with the force, friends like John. Fortunately, I have had very little experience with these situations.

Hank stood awkwardly to the side as Peggy and I embraced. He kept his big hands thrust deep into his pockets while his sad brown eyes stayed glued to a spot just beyond us.

I acknowledged him with a look as I rocked Peggy in my arms.

The sergeant nodded and squeezed his lips together.

The muffled sounds of the hospital ER filtered past the closed door and the thick glass. I knew that outside on the street news crews were converging, ready to record “the events as they unfold”.

When Peggy showed signs of loosening her grasp on me, I asked Hank if he would hunt down a bottle of water for Peggy. I know how hard it is to sit in a room with someone while waiting for life and death news. Asking Hank to find bottled water gave Peggy and me privacy while at the same time giving him something to do.

“What happened?” I asked once she let go and started pacing the small room. I sat on an orange plastic chair with my back to the windows. As I waited for her to find the words I studied the poster on the wall. In the foreground a branch of a tree was covered with ice and beneath the photograph was the word CHANGE. Just under that was written: *there is nothing permanent except change*. I wondered who had picked out this particular artwork for the hospital and if they purchased it with hopes that the sentiment would be somehow comforting or inspirational. You figure if you’re in an emergency room waiting area you are in the midst of change and hardly need a reminder.

Finally, she said, “I don’t know what happened.” She brought her thumb to her mouth and started scraping her teeth against the nail. “It was like every other morning. I got Lucy ready for camp and John walked her there. When he was downstairs I made our breakfast protein shakes and put the toast in the toaster. I was excited because I had found this health bread that he likes, and I was going to surprise him with it. Silly, isn’t it, the things we can get jazzed up about?” She stopped and pressed her palm against her mouth. When she could catch her breath she whispered, “It’s so easy to take everyday things for granted. And then you don’t even know what happened but suddenly everything is wrong. I was listening to NPR but since I had it on in the living room I had turned up the volume for Morning Edition. He took a long time getting back, and I was getting peeved because he knew I had an important meeting this morning,” her voice inched up a register as she fought tears. “I thought if he got stuck talking to our neighbor Mrs. Murphy he’d need help getting free because she’s lonely and, well, as nice as she is it can sometimes be hard to disengage with her. Anyway, about halfway down the hallway I saw that the elevator door was open. Then I noticed what I thought was a foot and a leg, but it didn’t make sense because the toe was pointing to the ceiling, like

whoever was attached to it was lying down.” Peggy sank onto a chair at the far end of the room, as if she needed to keep her distance.

“I realized that it was John’s shoe. I remember screaming his name. He was laying on the floor, his palms up, his eyes closed, his head propped against the baseboard, and the newspaper was opened at his side.” She stopped and clutched her stomach. “Oh God, Sydney.” When I got up and touched her shoulder her arms flayed as if fending me off, and I knew that in a way she was fending me off because the last thing she wanted at that very second was comfort. I understood that, as faulty as her reasoning might be, Peggy felt responsible for not having been able to help John. It is that basic element of love, the instinct to protect, which can either produce miracles or make us crazy.

My heart was breaking for my friend but there was nothing I could do other than keep my distance and wait for her to find her own way.

“When I knelt down beside him I saw the hole in his shirt and the blood. I mean I knew he had been shot, but I hadn’t heard anything.” She spoke softly to her hands. “I hadn’t seen anyone.” She brought her fingertips to her forehead and started rubbing. “I must have started screaming, but I don’t remember. The next thing I knew John was on a gurney and they were telling me I couldn’t ride with him in the ambulance. By this point there were police everywhere. Hank was there and he drove me over here. God, the whole thing is just making me sick.”

I knelt in front of her and asked, “Where’s Lucy?”

“At camp. But I called Marcy and asked if she’d pick her up and take care of her until I knew what was happening. I have to call the camp and let them know that it’s okay for Marcy to pick her up.” Marcy is not only a close friend and a police officer, but she is my business partner, Max Cabe’s wife. Peggy suddenly grasped my hand. “Oh my God. Do you think Lucy’s in danger?” She squeezed my fingers until they started to feel numb.

“No. Absolutely not. And you know she’s safe with Marcy, she’s a cop, so don’t even worry about that.”

Just then the door opened behind me. I twisted around and saw Hank filling the doorway. He cradled a large brown bag in his arms and said, “Peg. I just heard that the mayor’s on his way over.”



“I don’t want to see anyone,” she whimpered.

Hank and I shared a helpless glance. Finally, I said, “He wants to offer his support, Peg, whether you voted for him or not.” I waited to see if this would bring about even the hint of a smile. It didn’t, so I added, “Look, I believe in the ripple effect of love. Maybe it can’t move mountains, but the collective consciousness can make a difference and let’s face it, we could use all the help we can get right now.”