

SHE WITNESSED HER MOTHER'S MURDER.
NOW THE ONLY WAY TO KEEP HER SAFE IS TO
TUCK HER AWAY ON AN AMISH FARM.

*Face
in the
Mirror*

Paula Mowery

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1

Sydney Russell strolled out onto the tarmac of the private airplane terminal in Knoxville, Tennessee. Mitch zipped by on the refueling truck and waved in her direction. She returned the greeting and continued to make her way toward her mother. Raised voices stopped her. Her mother wasn't alone.

The dark-haired and equally as dark-skinned man peeked from the other side of her mother and glared at her. Despite the comfortable sunny April day, she shivered.

Mom glimpsed over her shoulder and her eyes bulged at connecting with her gaze. She flipped back toward the man and shoved some kind of package back into his hands. Though the man called after her, she practically sprinted to Sydney. Not stopping, she grabbed her daughter's arm and pulled her into the airport terminal lobby. She let out a deep breath and flashed a weak smile at Sydney. "Hi, honey. Sorry I wasn't quite ready. Now we can go for that lunch."

Sydney massaged her arm. Her mother's rough grasp seemed to almost bruise. "Mom, what's wrong? You're trembling."

Her mother scanned the lobby. "Let's go. I'll tell you during lunch. Not here."

Sydney followed her mom to the car and sat in silence during the short drive across the street to the

restaurant. They settled into a booth and gave their drink order. Sydney crossed her arms on the table and stared across at her mother. "OK, spill it. What's up with that creepy dude? You about took my arm off, dragging me away." She massaged her arm for emphasis.

Mom rubbed her temples with her fingertips then bowed her head and feigned interest in her silverware. "I've carried two packages for him, but I told him today that I didn't want to do it anymore."

"Obviously, he wasn't too happy about that. What kind of packages were they?"

Her mother's gaze shot up. "Drugs."

Sydney's chest tightened.

"It scares me that he saw you. But I'm hopeful that he got the message. I want nothing to do with that scene." She waved her arms in front of her.

"Mom. Drugs? You actually transported drugs?"

Mom glanced around. "Shhh. I'm not proud of it, but the money was too large a temptation. We've had two of you in college, you know."

The waitress brought their drinks and took their food order. She scurried off to her tasks.

"But how could you do that? Support something like that just for money?"

"It was a couple of small packages. Probably didn't amount to much in the scheme of things." She shrugged.

Sydney's mouth dropped open. "I can't believe you can be so flippant about something like this. It's wrong in any amount."

Mom put up her hand. "It's done, and I'm through."

"You're sure?"

“Look, let’s not talk about this anymore. I want to hear about school. You’re almost done.” Her mom leaned on her elbows.

Sydney was hesitant to change the subject. How could her mother carry drugs? But the two of them had so little time together, just mother and daughter. And she did want to share about upcoming graduation, so she let the subject drop for now. “Can you believe that this is it? I’ll graduate from Maryville College in May. Then come fall, I’ll be interpreting in the school system here in Knoxville.” She chuckled and sipped her drink. “I shouldn’t say that. God had this plan for me all along.”

Her mother patted her hand. “I’m so excited for you. You’ve done so well.”

They continued to talk about graduation and her new job all through lunch. Soon they were back to the airport, walking through the lobby.

A lump rose in Sydney’s throat. “Mom, I’m still concerned about this man and the packages...”

Her mother cut her off. “That’s done, remember? Like it never happened.”

Sydney nodded reluctantly and followed her mom to the other side of the lobby.

Mom turned to Sydney. “This is merely a short flight. I have to pick up Mr. Mullins, the lumber guy. I should be home by supper.” She looked up at the sky. “The weather is good.” She embraced Sydney. “You all packed and ready to go home for the weekend?”

“Yep. Got all my dirty laundry.” She chuckled. “But only a few more weekends and I’ll be home to bother you.”

Her mother smiled. “I’m actually glad you’ll be back for a while. I’ll get to hear all of your interpreting

stories and all about your students.”

“I’ll remind Dad that you’ll be home by supper.”

Her mother nodded and stepped through the big glass doors and walked across the tarmac to the plane. As she hopped into the side drop-down door, she waved and flashed the sign for I love you. Sydney returned the sign.

She stayed by the large windows. Mom’s plane taxied to the other end, out of sight momentarily. Then the airplane zoomed in front of her and lifted off. Sydney shielded her eyes from the sun’s rays. The plane rose steadily.

Suddenly, the radio burst into life behind the counter. Sydney faced that direction, struggling to make out what was being said. Her mother’s frantic voice crackled. “Some kind of explosion.”

Sydney whirled back toward the window and strained her gaze at the end of the runway. She could barely make out smoke puffing from one wing. The plane bounced violently and dropped to the small grassy area at the end of the runway. She pushed open the door and ran onto the tarmac for a better view. Surely, her eyes were mistaken. Flames shot up from the mangled heap of metal.

Sirens blared and trucks tore down the taxiway toward the wreckage. Sydney stood frozen to the spot on the black asphalt tarmac. Her pulse pounded in her head, and she grabbed her right arm with her left to still the violent trembling.

An arm slipped around her waist. She jumped. Finally, she ripped her gaze from the commotion and focused on Amy, the receptionist from the lobby.

“Honey, come on inside with me. Let’s sit down.”

Sydney resisted with a shake of her head at first

but finally relented. If she continued to view the carnage, she might be sick. She stumbled into the lobby and plunked into a chair. Her stomach churned and her throat burned. She shot up like a rocket and raced to the restroom. After losing the contents of her stomach, tears began to flow. Leaning on the sink, she swished out her mouth and jerked a towel from the dispenser. With the towel still over her mouth, she straightened and looked at her reflection in the mirror. "Oh, dear God, please," she whispered.

She slowly shuffled back to the lobby and ambled to the window. Flames and smoke still rose from the other end of the airstrip. Tears slid down her cheeks.

~*~

Nathan Greene checked his police uniform again in the restroom mirror at the station. He breathed in deep and let it out slowly. This meeting with the captain must be what he had been waiting for. Would he be assigned to the special drug unit like he hoped? He had worked hard for this moment. His physical rehabilitation was over and he was ready for this. With his shoulders squared, he walked to the conference room.

"Early for the meeting. I like that." Captain Parrott slapped Nathan on the back and entered the room.

Nathan followed. He sat in the offered chair. Officer Jordan Wynn breezed into the room. Nathan jumped up and shook his hand.

Captain Parrott cleared his throat and took a seat. After Nathan and Jordan sat, the captain looked directly at Nathan. "Officer Greene, we wanted to

inform you that you will be added to the special drug unit. When Officer Thomas returns from her vacation, you'll be briefed a bit more. I want to assign you as a trainee to her and Officer Wynn here."

"Thank you, sir." Nathan could hardly contain his excitement. "I look forward to working with you, Officer Wynn. And with Officer Thomas."

"You'll be working quite closely with Officer Thomas. Wynn here has other duties connected with Homeland, but the two team up when called for." The captain glanced at Jordan and winked like they shared some inside joke. The captain stood. "Until then, let's get back to our normal duties."

Nathan walked a little more lightly, with a kind of bounce in his step. Just a bit longer on regular patrol and then he'd prove he could come back and be somebody. Impatience and eagerness would eat at him until Office Thomas returned from her leave.

2

Sydney slumped onto the stool the funeral director had just provided. A nice gesture but it would take more than sitting down for a moment to alleviate the weariness pulling on her body. She'd never been one who attended many of these visitations before funerals. In fact, she'd not been to many funerals at all.

How much longer did she have to put on her brave face and greet people? How she tired of people's words. They were well-meaning, she was sure, but they had no idea. A person who lost her mother in such a violent way could never be easily comforted.

Her gaze was suddenly drawn to a man entering the back door. He didn't join the line. He stood to the side. Dark hair. Dark skin. His eyes covered with dark sunglasses. Her breath caught in her throat. The man from the airport. He smirked and barely nodded. Was that for her? She shifted on the stool. A chill ran down her arms and back, and she shivered.

Some people exited in front of the man, and then he was gone. Sydney swallowed hard. He had done this. Why hadn't she thought of that before? She shook her head to clear it. Had she read too many suspense stories? Why would he come here?

She hadn't shared with her father anything about the man or what her mother had told her. Maybe she

should.

Someone patted her arm, and she jumped.

"Are you OK, sis?" Her brother, Bobby, peered down at her.

She struggled to smile and added a nod, not trusting her voice at the moment. This wasn't the place or the time. She'd tell them tonight after this was all over.

~*~

Sydney plopped down on the couch in the den followed by her brother and father. She let a deep sigh whoosh from her lungs. "I'm glad that's over with, and we didn't string this out over another day. I just don't think I could have taken another moment of people telling me how sorry they are and reminding me that Mom is in a better place."

"They mean well," Dad said.

"I know. I don't mean to sound so harsh." Sydney studied her dad. "Why don't I warm up some of the food from the church for you?"

Her father scrubbed his hand down his face. "No, thanks, hon."

Her brother sat forward. "I really don't get it. I'm still in complete shock with all of this. And that police officer said they were actually going to investigate further because they feared foul play. What did that mean?"

Sydney's stomach wrenched. She cleared her throat. "There's something I need to tell you two."

Dad's brow crinkled. "What is it?"

"There's more to the story than the fact that I just

happened to be there after Mom and I had lunch that day."

Dad's crinkled brow turned to deep worry lines. That was exactly why she hadn't already shared this information with him and her brother. She sucked in a deep breath and let it out before telling them about the packages her mother had couriered and the argument between Mom and the strange man who'd made the arrangements for her to do so.

Bobby leaned forward. "Packages? What kind of packages?"

Sydney bit her bottom lip. "It was drugs."

Her father's face scrunched into a harsh expression. "Drugs. Your mother transported drugs?"

"I'm afraid so. She told me that the money was so good she couldn't resist. But then she came to her senses and told the man she didn't want to do it anymore." Tears welled in Sydney's eyes. "I'm afraid he might have something to do with the plane crash."

"No wonder the police said they would be investigating further," Bobby said.

"There's more. I saw the man Mom argued with that day."

Her father jumped to his feet. "What?"

"The same dark man with the dark hair and dark sunglasses. He was at the funeral home today."

Bobby swiveled toward Sydney on the couch. "Where did he go? Did anyone else see him?"

Sydney shrugged. "I don't know. I just looked up and there he stood at the back. When I looked again, he was gone."

"Did he recognize you?" Dad plunked back into the chair.

"I don't know, Dad. I thought he kinda smiled at

me, but I can't be sure."

"We have to get you away from here. If you can identify this drug trafficker, you're in danger." Dad stood and rushed from the room.

"But what are we going to do? Should we go to the police?"

Dad peeked around the corner from the hallway. "Pack a few outfits. I want you safe first. Then your brother and I will let the police in on this."

"Where will you take me?" Sydney's voice squeaked.

"I've got the perfect place. Now gather a few things. We'll leave as soon as you pack a small bag." Dad turned toward Bobby. "Son, throw in one change of clothes. We'll leave through the garage so no one spots the luggage."

"Where are we going?" Sydney interjected as her dad and brother sprinted away.

"The safest place I know," her father called.

~*~

Charlie hopped up into the trolley and slid into a seat with her husband, Colton, following close behind. Their vacation had been just an hour from home in Pigeon Forge but it had afforded them much needed time to relax as newlyweds. Two men, with matching baseball caps scooted in across from them, one sporting a cold scowl.

As their gazes met, Charlie's southern upbringing prompted a greeting. "Hey. How are y'all?"

The older man's eyes narrowed. "Why do you care?"

"Just being nice. Sheesh." She shrugged.

"Really?" He snarled.

"Excuse me. You don't need to treat me like that."

The man diverted his eyes to the passing scenery.

"I think you need prayer." Charlie folded her arms and set her jaw.

Colton elbowed her side, but she brushed his warning off.

"Well, go ahead." The man eyed her with a challenging expression.

"All right. I will." She bowed her head and closed her eyes. "Lord, I pray Your protection on this man. I pray for Your presence to be near and real to him. Please bless him that he might find joy. In Jesus' name, amen." Charlie opened her eyes and lifted her head.

The man's rock-hard face softened. He pushed a bag into her lap. "Here, you must be the one."

The trolley jolted to a stop, and the two men jumped to their feet, yanking their hats further over their eyes. Charlie tried to grab the man's arm. "Sir, what do you mean?"

But the two men disappeared into the sea of milling tourists.

"What was that all about?" Colton grasped her arm.

Charlie turned back. "I don't know. That was strange."

Both their gazes tracked to the backpack on her lap.

"I'd say you'll get a clue from whatever's in that bag. But do you think it's safe?" Colton lowered his voice and leaned in closer.

The trolley jerked again. Colton patted her arm and nudged her shoulder. "This is our stop."

She nodded, shuffled to the edge, and stepped down onto the sidewalk. They started toward their vehicle, but a hand on Charlie's shoulder stopped her. Instinct spun her around in a stance of defense.

A tall man with a bald head pulled off his sunglasses and glared at Charlie. Then his expression relaxed. "Officer Jarvis? I didn't realize you were on this case. I thought I was taking this hand-off." He gestured toward the backpack.

"Stevens, right?"

Officer Stevens nodded.

Charlie scanned the gathering group of people, waiting for the next trolley. "Maybe we should step over near our vehicle and out of this crowd."

"Right." Stevens pushed his glasses back onto his face.

Colton eyed her with a wrinkled brow. Charlie's mind spun with the possibilities of the bag's contents and what kind of case Stevens was involved in.

In front of their SUV, Charlie whirled around. "OK, Stevens. It's Officer Thomas now. What's this all about?"

He snatched off his sunglasses. "You're not on this case, are you? So, why did you get the bag?"

"My guess is those two men mistook me for the hand-off person for some reason. Someone is in danger. From my experience, I'd say this involves drugs. Am I getting close?" Since she worked in the drug unit at the police station, and had met her now-husband, a corporate pilot, on the last sting, she figured it was a pretty good guess.

Officer Stevens' eyes widened. He rubbed a hand over his head and shifted his feet. "I don't think I'm at liberty to say." He reached for the bag. "I'll take this

back to Captain Parrott."

"Not so fast." Charlie pulled out her phone. "I'll check with the captain." She punched the number and waited.

"Charlie, we're still on vacation for two more days." Colton crossed his arms over his chest and glared at her, jaw muscles twitching.

"Babe, I just want to check on this. Then we'll be right back to our second honeymoon."

Colton mashed his lips together and nodded. "Uh, hm."

"Officer Thomas?" Captain Parrott's voice boomed through her cellphone.

"Yes, sir."

"Why am I hearing from you on your vacation?"

"My vacation was interrupted by a little incident."

"I'm listening."

Charlie explained about the backpack exchange and Officer Steven's approaching her. "Smells like a drug case. What's up?"

The captain sighed. "It seems that Rusty Smith and his cohort we nabbed weren't the end to that drug trafficking operation. Which is no surprise. Enjoy your last couple of days, and you'll be briefed as soon as you return."

"And the backpack?"

"Info on an eyewitness. Let Stevens bring it back."

"OK. I'll see you first thing Monday morning."

She reluctantly turned the bag over to Officer Stevens. The curiosity was eating her. But she knew better than to cross the line with Captain Parrott. She'd know the details soon enough.

~*~

Colton studied Charlie across the restaurant table. Her blank expression and lack of focus proved her distraction with this case. He leaned in and grabbed her hand. "Penny for your thoughts. Isn't that the way the saying goes?" Their gazes connected. "But I don't have to fork out any money to guess what you're thinking about."

She squeezed his hand. "I'm sorry. I've just been thinking about all the implications of this." Her lips pursed. "You need to be careful."

"What does this have to do with me?"

She stared right into his eyes. "These guys might still hold a grudge. You did play a part in bringing one of their guys down."

Colton stroked his chin, considering her warning. "I'll be alert, but I worry about you."

She pushed a rogue lock of her dark hair behind her ear. "No need to worry about me."

"Oh, yeah? Coming from the one who has a scar from a bullet on her shoulder."

"I'll be careful, too." She squeezed his hand again.

3

Charlie trailed Jordan and the captain into the small conference room at the police department early Monday morning. Officer Greene already perched on a chair and jumped to his feet as they entered. Why was the young officer here?

Captain Parrott motioned for them to sit. He planted his palms on the table and leaned forward, looking Charlie in the eyes. "Charlie, you'll be training Nathan. I've brought him up to speed."

Charlie wasn't thrilled with a tag-along on this case, but she'd squelch her protest. Captain Parrott's tone communicated his lack of tolerance for argument.

The captain straightened. "We already knew that someone was obviously taking over the drug trafficking vacated by Rusty and his cohort. The newest transporter at the airport had a mysterious engine malfunction and crashed, killing the pilot."

Charlie winced. She glimpsed Jordan. He ran his hand down his face.

The captain eased into a chair across from them and opened a file. "The pilot's name was Pamela Russell."

Charlie gasped and turned toward Jordan. "Is that the same Pamela Russell we know from church? I'd heard about the crash...just hadn't put the pieces

together. So why the weird hand-off?" She turned her attention back to Captain Parrott.

"That was Mrs. Russell's husband and son. Mr. Russell immediately sent his daughter away, hiding her. It seems she can identify the contact person, and they feared for her life. When the daughter, Sydney, confronted her mother, Mrs. Russell broke down. She'd carried only two parcels but wanted out. Somehow, those druggies retaliated and took her out." The captain pounded his fist on the table. "Mr. Russell and his son insisted on this kind of transaction as a way to protect Sydney. They are understandably paranoid right now."

Charlie gritted her teeth. She understood the frustration. "So, now what?"

"The information from that backpack you intercepted gave us a physical description of the man Sydney saw hand off stuff to her mother. We got some other details from the father and son. But we don't have a name. Just not enough to find this guy. We've got to catch him in the act. Then we can let Sydney Russell ID him positively."

Jordan stroked his chin. "Where do we start? Stake out the airport?"

The captain shrugged. "That's one thing I think we should do. Station plain clothes at the Knoxville Airport and a small airport in Morristown that the Russell's mentioned. From what we know, Mrs. Russell picked up a package there."

"Anybody visited Rusty?"

Captain Parrott considered her with a nod. "Might be worth a try. If we could just get a name. Otherwise, we're searching for a needle in a haystack. You and Nathan pay Rusty a visit."

~*~

Sydney smoothed the apron over her black dress and tried to concentrate on rolling the dough in front of her. It had been a few months since she'd been in her friend's Amish home and she never found the "simple" life easy, but there was a rhythm to the day's work that helped to keep her from obsessing over all that had happened. Only three weeks remained in her last semester at Maryville College. Would she have to repeat the courses? Would they even allow her to repeat them?

A hand on her arm jolted her from her thoughts. She looked into the caring eyes of her friend, Rebecca.

Rebecca signed, "What's wrong?"

Sydney signed back, "Just thinking."

Rebecca patted her arm. "I'm afraid for you. Your mother ..." She paused and shook her head.

"I know. But school."

"Sorry. So sorry." Rebecca's facial expression was fully animated, proving her true remorse for Sydney.

"I hope the school will allow me to complete my degree without much trouble."

Rebecca squared her shoulders. "They must." She stomped her foot for emphasis. "If not, school crazy." She morphed into her native American Sign Language, expressing her support for Sydney, even if she had to go to that school and tell them a thing or two.

Sydney chuckled. "My good friend, I love you."

Rebecca smiled and her expression calmed. She squeezed Sydney in a side hug, and they dove back into their task. Rebecca's mother would soon be ready