

Me & My Ollie McKee

BY LAURA LALLONE

CHAPTER ONE

Some cosmic force has it out for me. Despite careful planning, every haircut is more of a disaster than the last. I don't blame Silver; she's apparently a fabulous stylist. It's just the story of my life.

"Unlock the door, Mel," my sister Elle says sweetly from the other side of our bathroom door. I know she is totally amused. "Just let me see it. Maybe I can snip..."

"You're not touching my hair. You can see it on your wedding day." Part of me means it. Of all the haircuts to botch, the timing of this one was the worst. Elle will walk down the aisle, the perfectly perfect bride that she was born to be, and I will be at her side as usual with a sheepish look on my face. I hate that I'm so shallow.

“Yeah, right. In a month? Get off the floor,” Elle shouts like a drill sergeant.
“You’ll catch a cold. That’s the last thing I need.”

“Elle, I’m a 29-year-old woman...almost 30, and I’ll sit where I want in our apartment. And thanks for your concern about my health.” I feel the floor beneath me. The tile is surprisingly cold for July. Why does Elle always have to be right? With a sigh, I pull myself off the floor and survey the damage again in the mirror. I do believe this is what they call a mullet.

The sad irony is that my grandfather, fondly known as Big Frank, owned a barbershop with his five brothers for 36 years. His father before him kept the fine gentlemen in his Italian seaside hometown exquisitely groomed for decades. And I can’t get a decent haircut to save my life.

Through the bathroom door Elle’s voice trills. “Mom’s on the phone. She has some news.”

“Can she wait until I get dressed?” I grunt impatiently under my breath, wrapping a towel around my body and pulling hard on my hair. Elle cracks the door open and sticks her hand in with her cell phone pointing in my direction. “Take it,” she orders.

“Hi, Mom,” I say as I grab the phone. I shoo Elle out and brace myself against the bathroom door.

“Hello, Mel, it’s your mother.”

“Yes, Mom, what’s up? Elle says that you have some news.”

“I do.”

“OK...”

“Do you remember Ollie? He lived down the street from us when you kids were growing up.”

Ollie McKee. We haven't talk about Ollie in years. “Yes, Mom, I remember Ollie. How could I not remember Ollie?”

“Do you remember his father, John?”

“Yes, Mom, I remember John. What about John and Ollie? Are they OK? Was there an accident?”

“Well, do you like them?”

A tingle runs up my middle. “Do I like them?”

“Yes, do you like John and Ollie?”

“What are you asking me?”

“Just answer the question. Do you like John and Ollie?”

“What do you mean ‘like’?”

“Ahhh...do you think that they are nice people? You know. If you were picking people to come to a dinner party, would you pick them?”

“Ma, you're being very strange. Fine. Yes, I like John and Ollie very much.”

“I'm being strange? You're being strange. Well, anyway, you know that John's wife – Ollie's mom – died a few years ago...”

“Yes, Mom. Mrs. McKee died when we were in high school.” My voice pitches in an odd way. I look down. My hand is clenched around the edge of my towel. “Mom, just tell me. Are John and Ollie OK?”

“Yes, they're fine. They're fine. Well, you know I've been a little lonely...”

“I know, I know it's been rough since Dad died.”

“Well, actually even before that. Your Dad...well...I loved him...I really did...but it was just...good...then hard and confusing...and...I don’t ever want to feel that way again... and well...John and I...”

There’s a John and I?

“Ma, are you trying to tell me that you and John are dating?” A cocktail of emotions stirs inside of me. “It’s OK. I’d be OK with that.”

She doesn’t answer.

“Mom, are you alright? Did something happen? You’re starting to worry me.”

“No, no, no. Everything is fine. It’s actually...really great.”

“Then why do you sound so odd? Why aren’t you answering me?”

“John and I got married.”

Her words defy gravity. My mother isn’t a woman to act in haste. She’ll investigate five different stores over three weekends to find the best deal on a \$45 toaster. But somehow, just one year and four months after my father’s death, she marries John – the man who lived down the street. Not just any man, but Ollie’s father. I don’t know this woman.

My mother keeps talking. But I’m not listening. I’m somewhere else. I’m five years old and extracting baby ornamental strawberries from the ground. It’s that day, that legendary day, when Elle kissed Ollie up the oak tree and propelled him into years of love struck misery. Mom and John are there too, standing next to each other right behind me. Their arms are folded and their bare feet nestled in the dewy sliver of grass in front of our house, keeping watch, having their adult conversation.

Through a haze I decipher words strung together in my mom's voice. She and John married last weekend, an elopement at City Hall in downtown Philadelphia that was "no big deal." It wasn't exactly what she would have wanted, but it was fine. She didn't want to bother us about it, so she didn't call sooner.

"Mel, are you there? Say something. You haven't said anything." I hear her edgy tone more than her words. "You're mad. You're hurt. You hate me."

I lift out of my fog.

"I don't hate you. I think that it's great. John is a really great guy. Wow. I'm just a little surprised."

My parents had a rocky relationship at best. A low level of misery that robbed the house of oxygen. Fighting or really not fighting, which was worse. So much being said but really not being said. Up until his last breath, stopped short by a brain aneurism, my father wielded his signature weapon, what became known as "stiff lip." Not saying a word. Holding it all in. Still, even with stiff lips and oxygen depletion, I never imagined my mother with anyone besides my dad. Never.

"Mel, you'll get used to it. I know that it's a shock..."

"No, no. I'm OK. I'm just really surprised. Wow."

"Oh, Mel, listen...Ollie just walked in. He and John went out to dinner so John could tell him the news. Can you hold on a minute? I'll put Ollie on."

"No, no, no, no, no. Can I call you ba-"

It's too late. A muffled exchange flows from the other end of the connection.

Yanking at my towel, I dash toward my bedroom. Elle is lying on my bed fanning through old pictures. I cover the mouthpiece of the phone. “Can you believe this?” I whisper.

With a grin as broad as her face, Elle proudly declares, “I knew it. I always knew it. I am so happy for them.”

A voice comes through the phone.

“Hey, Mel, it’s Ollie. Long time, no see.”

The floor beneath me softens. “Ah, hi?”

“Hey, uh, listen, I’m going to be in Manhattan on Friday. Can you guys get freed up for the day?”

I blink. I blink again. I can’t stop blinking. It’s Ollie McKee. It really is and he sounds exactly the same.