

SECOND DAUGHTER

by

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Prologue

Baltimore, Maryland

The sound of thunder shook the house as staccato flashes of lightening illuminated the child's bedroom. Katie Curtis sat straight up in her princess canopy bed.

On any other night, she would have run to her parents' room and jumped into bed with her mommy. But, she knew her mommy was out of town for the weekend.

She could hear her papa's voice booming from downstairs. He sounded so happy.

Katie got out of bed and tiptoed to the top of the staircase. Then she heard another voice. A woman's tinkling laugh. But it wasn't just any woman. It was, Maria, her nanny.

When she reached the bottom stair, she could see the two of them in the hallway. They were facing each other and standing very close together. Then, Maria lifted her face and her papa leaned down and kissed her.

Katie covered her mouth with her small hands to hide the gasp of surprise, and then quietly made her way back to her room. Even at the tender age of five, she knew what she had seen would change her world forever.

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The next morning after breakfast, Maria dressed her in her warm, yellow and white sweater. Even though Katie begged her father to let her stay home with him, he wouldn't budge.

"Don't be silly, honey. Run along to the park and have fun with Maria. I have work to do."

Katie didn't want to be anywhere near Maria. She wasn't sure if she could ever really like Maria again. She had awakened with the horrible thought that her mother would be coming home and find out that Papa had been kissing her nanny. Should she tell her?

On the way to the park she refused to hold Maria's hand and ran as far ahead of her on the sidewalk as possible. Katie hid behind the slide until Maria got busy talking in Spanish with a few of the other nannies in the park, then Katie took off running for home.

She had so many questions to ask her papa. Why had he kissed Maria? Did he still love mommy? She felt sick about it.

When she reached the house, she ran through the living room and into her father's study. Surprised to find the door open, she peered inside. Her father was slumped at his desk. At first she thought he was sleeping, but as

she moved closer she could see a bright red river of blood running down the side of his face and onto the desk.

Katie screamed, but she was frozen in place. Suddenly she saw movement near the sliding glass doors to the left of her father's desk. A tall, shadowy figure in a red, baseball cap lurched as if coming for her. Katie lost her balance and fell to the floor, and at the last moment the figure turned and vanished through the doorway.

Chapter 1

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania - Nineteen Years Later

JW Kelley stumbled down the park trail. Pain shot through his knee with each step as he sloshed through muddy puddles. The rain fell in sheets making visibility poor, but he could still make out the blasted red coat running ahead.

“Traitorous bitch,” he mumbled through clenched teeth. I should just let her go. It would serve her right, he thought. I take her in and give her a home, and the first time we go out she runs away. Gratitude, yeah, sure.

“Okay, so just go,” he yelled as he leaned up against the nearest tree for support. His lungs pleaded for air and his sides heaved. With a last effort he put his finger between his teeth and blew.

The whistle stopped her dead in her tracks. To his astonishment, she began to run straight for him. Her tongue lolled from side to side.

He crouched on his knees just as she pounced upon him. Her momentum almost knocked him over. He couldn't help it. He grinned and stroked her wet, smelly coat while she licked his face.

"You stupid dog," he said as he clipped the leash to her collar. "I guess I'm always gonna be a sucker for the ladies."

Home was looking pretty good right now. He was tired and wet. Everything ached, and he was feeling all of his thirty-four years. Who was he kidding? With his body aches, he felt more like eighty. He had the average set of old injuries from high school and college football, but the ones that nearly killed him were the bullet wounds from an assassin's gun. He didn't like to think about it. To do so was to admit his failure. He had only failed at one thing in his life, and the cost had been devastating. It had cost him his career and his reputation, not to mention the huge dent it put in his self-image.

By the time he reached his street, the downpour had slowed to a drizzle. His dog, Jezebel, appropriately named, he thought, walked steadily ahead pulling on the leash. She stopped every few feet and looked back at him with her big, puppy-dog eyes. He was also a sucker for big brown eyes and strays.

JW had been the bane of his mother's existence bringing home every lost or injured mongrel in the county. She felt sure he would become a vet, but to her dismay he'd set his sights on what he imagined were bigger things. He'd given up on bringing home strays until recently. He couldn't very well have kept a menagerie while he guarded the Vice President.

He'd been on top of the world doing what he'd dreamed of all through college. After the customary grunge years in the Secret Service, he had been given the plum assignment of guarding the Vice President's family. It

wasn't the top job, but, at the time, he was still young and had his whole career ahead of him. Or so he thought.

He shook his head to clear his thoughts. Dwelling on the past would do no good. All the what-ifs and if-onlys would not and could not change one day in history, nor change what had happened seven years earlier.

Jezebel jerked bringing his thoughts back to the present. He could use a hot shower and a cold beer, but not necessarily in that order.

JW walked up the gravel driveway to his home. The modest house was set back from the road and hidden by a thick growth of trees. On the large wrap-around porch was a swing and two rocking chairs. It was, he thought, the kind of place you could imagine two old people enjoying their twilight years.

At one time, the place had been a refuge from prying eyes and hungry journalists. Thankfully, all those cameras and microphones were gone.

He was a loner now, and he liked it that way. Even his friends and family didn't come around too often. He wasn't the best of company. He just wanted to be left alone to run his business and cry in his beer. He was very good at feeling sorry for himself.

He opened the front door and stepped into the darkened room. He'd been sure he left the curtains open and the desk light on. The hair on the back of his neck bristled. He instinctively reached to his side for the gun that in times past had always been there, but now he felt wet denim instead.

His eyes swept the room and rested on a small girl sitting on the couch. Her legs were tucked up under her dress. He couldn't see her face, and he breathed a sigh of relief when she made no threatening moves.

He crouched down to unleash Jezebel, and the dog ran to the girl and nuzzled her hand.

“Hey, kid,” he said, as he flipped on the ceiling light. “This is private property. What are you doing in my house? Are you lost or what?”

“I guess you could say that, JW. I’ve been lost for a long time now.” Her eyes scanned his body. “You look like hell,” she said.

“Geezus!” he hissed through clenched teeth. He had not recognized her, but he would always remember that husky, breathy voice. He took a close look and said, “If it isn’t the Second Daughter.”

“I hate that name. I always hated it when you called me that. Please call me by my name.”

“Of course, little Katie. Besides your title has changed now hasn’t it? You are the First Daughter now.”

“I am not anyone’s daughter. My parents are dead and Bradley Manning is not my father. Never has been and never will be.”

JW began to pull off his wet Nikes and his socks. “What are you doing in my house? The last gossip rag said you were in some funny farm all coked up on drugs. I’m wet, I’m tired and I’m in a really bad mood, so I suggest you take your skinny butt right out of here before I call the police. I’m going to get out of these clothes, and you better not be here when I get back.”

JW slammed his bedroom door, the noise echoing in his ears. His angry thoughts raced. Damn, damn, damn it to hell! Katie Curtis. The President’s stepdaughter. I could barely tolerate the brat while I was guarding her family, and now here she is in my home. In my space! Who does she think she is? She has always blamed me for her mother’s death, and now she has the gall to come here!

He pulled on a dry, but not too clean pair of gray sweats and a T-shirt. He towed off his wet, light brown hair, but didn’t bother to comb it. He really needed that beer.

He walked quickly through the living room and into the kitchen. He was relieved to see that Katie was gone and there was no sign of his dog. He reached into the refrigerator and grabbed a six-pack of Miller Lite and heard Jezebel bark from the front porch. After polishing off half a bottle, he opened the front screen door.

Katie was sitting on his front steps looking out toward the trees. She was stroking the dog's silky ears.

"I thought I told you to leave," he said.

"You did and I complied," she said not bothering to turn around. "I got out of your house."

"I meant off of my property."

"You didn't specify. You just said don't be here when I get back." She turned and looked at him. Her long, red hair hung limply on her shoulders, and her once beautiful, brown eyes were dull. She couldn't have weighed more than a hundred pounds soaking wet. She said he looked like hell, but obviously she hadn't looked in a mirror lately.

"You really hate me don't you? I know I was a spoiled little kid when...well back then, but I never did anything malicious to you. I know you think I blamed you for my mother's death. But I don't. I was heartbroken and confused, but I know it wasn't your fault. I'm here because I need help. I know you own a company that protects people."

"I don't do drugs," he said. "So you won't find any in my house. And, if it's money you want, I've got everything tied up in the business. I don't have two nickels to rub together. Sorry, sweetheart, you'll have to get your fix somewhere else. You came to the wrong chump. And by the way, I don't hate you, I just never had much use for you."

She flinched as if his words had actually struck her. “That’s the second time you’ve referred to me as an addict. Why?”

“Oh come on, missy. The whole world knows what you are. It’s all over the tabloids. Even the reputable news sources have reported it. It appears your stepfather is quite embarrassed about your addiction. He’s started a whole new war on drugs campaign because of you.”

“I can’t deny I’ve been in a hospital, but I have never done cocaine or any other type of recreational drugs. I have never taken any kind of meds voluntarily. They were always prescribed and shoved down my throat.” She sounded exasperated.

She stood up, and JW got a good look at her. Her face was still strikingly lovely, although somewhat thin and drawn. She looked tired and defeated as she walked across the porch and settled into the big swing.

She wore a faded, cotton dress with tiny blue flowers that was at least three sizes too big. It hung off her shoulders and past her knees. She wasn’t wearing any shoes.

JW began to pace back and forth. Jezebel’s tail thumped on the wooden planks as he passed. “Okay, you don’t do drugs, and you’re the perfect symbol of innocence. I get it. But what I don’t get is what you could possibly want from me?” he said.

Katie pushed her feet against the deck, and the swing began to move slowly back and forth. “You know my papa used to take me to the park and we’d swing for what seemed like hours. I’m not talking about my stepfather, Bradley Manning,” she frowned. “I mean my real father. He loved me very much. He died when I was five years old. They said he killed himself, but I know he didn’t. He wouldn’t have done that to me.”

He stopped pacing and leaned against the railing. He ran his fingers through his hair and stared at Katie. What was this woman doing to him? Was she a complete loony?

Katie looked up at him as she stopped the swing.

“What? What are you looking at?” he said. “Don’t you dare feel sorry for me, little girl. I’m nobody’s charity case.”

“I don’t have the slightest idea what you’re talking about. I was thinking how I used to think you hung the moon. You were so tall and good looking. You always kept the boogie men away.”

Yeah, he thought, and you used to look at me like I was a piece of dessert.

“So what will it take to get you off my front porch? I don’t want you here. We really have nothing to say to each other.”

Katie pushed herself up from the swing and walked over next to him. “You own a protection company that keeps high-profile clients safe. I want to hire you to keep me safe.”

“Sorry, honey, but Madonna you’re not. I don’t think you have to worry about any half-crazed fan trying to get to you. Besides, you have Secret Service protection.”

“Not anymore, I don’t. Bradley ended it after I graduated from high school and left for college.”

He moved away from her to the other side of the porch. He was, after all, a red-blooded man. She made him uncomfortable. She had become a beautiful woman, and he hadn’t been with a woman in a while. Not since the last one had complained that he drank too much and spent all of his time at work. He walked back into the house and grabbed two bottles of

Miller Lite. When he returned, she had sat down again on the steps with her legs drawn up under her chin.

“What’s the matter? Has your trust fund dried up? Can’t you afford to buy yourself a dress that fits? You look like Little Orphan Annie.” Too late, he realized his slip. She may not be poor, but she was an orphan. “Hey, I’m sorry. That was cruel.”

“I’m sure there was no harm intended,” she said, “after all it is the truth.” She looked down at her dress and then up at JW. Her smile was weak and thin.

“So what is it you need from me? A boyfriend being a little too friendly? Did you lead him on and then he didn’t like it when you refused him?”

Katie smiled sadly. “When did you become such a cruel bastard? No, it’s nothing as simple as that. I know things I shouldn’t know, and people want to keep me silenced.”

JW wiggled his fingers and made a spooky sound. “My oh my! It sounds dangerous. Maybe you should call in the feds, or at the very least tell your father. Oh, yeah! I remember. Bradley Manning is not your father.” He remembered her relentless infantile tirades that someone had murdered her real father. He didn’t believe her now anymore than he had then. At the time, her stepfather had assured him Katie acted out because she needed extra attention.

He could tell she was fighting back tears, and he grudgingly respected her for not falling apart.

“Okay, you win. I’ll leave.” She wiped her knuckles across her eyes and turned to walk down the steps.

Deciding against his better judgment to humor her, he reached out and caught her by the arm. “Look, I’m sorry. I can be a mean son of a bitch. My

mother raised me better than this. I can't help you, but maybe I can find someone who can. What is it? Who are you afraid of?"

"I doubt if you'll believe me. You'll think I'm missing a few brain cells."

"Maybe, but try me anyway," JW said as he finished off the second beer and opened the third. "Come inside. Sit down and tell me why you're here. Why you came to me?"

He pushed the screen door open and held it as she slipped into the room. "Look, can I get you something to drink? I've got beer and water. Sorry no soft drinks."

"No, I don't want anything. I'm afraid if I took one swallow of beer, I'd be out like a light. I haven't slept in a while. I came to you because I don't have anywhere else to go." She pulled her hair back from her face and shifted uncomfortably in the chair. "I trusted you when I was a kid. I guess I still trust you."

"You've got family. Can't they help?"

"No, there's no one anymore. My grandparents are dead and both of my parents had no siblings."

Pity pinched his heart. "I know you never liked President Manning much, but he is family, sort of." JW squatted down in front of her and took her slender fingers in his.

She turned his hands over and rubbed the scar tissue that ran across his palm to his missing ring finger and pinky. "I heard you'd been shot three times and one of the bullets ruined your gun hand. I didn't realize how devastating the injuries were until now." Her voice was sad.

He pulled his hands back and abruptly stood. "Not a pretty sight is it, princess?"

“I’m so sorry, JW. I’m sorry you were hurt, and I’m sorry that you hate me. I never wanted anything bad to happen to you. I shouldn’t have come. I wasn’t thinking straight. I’ll put you in danger too, and I don’t want that.”

She stood on shaky legs, as the tears flowed down her cheeks. Her brown eyes glistened.

Why couldn’t she be one of those women that got all blotchy and red when they cried? he thought. He moved closer to her and brushed away her tears with his thumb.

“Ah, hell,” he swore as he gently pulled her into a brotherly hug.

He was a sucker for a stray with big brown eyes.

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