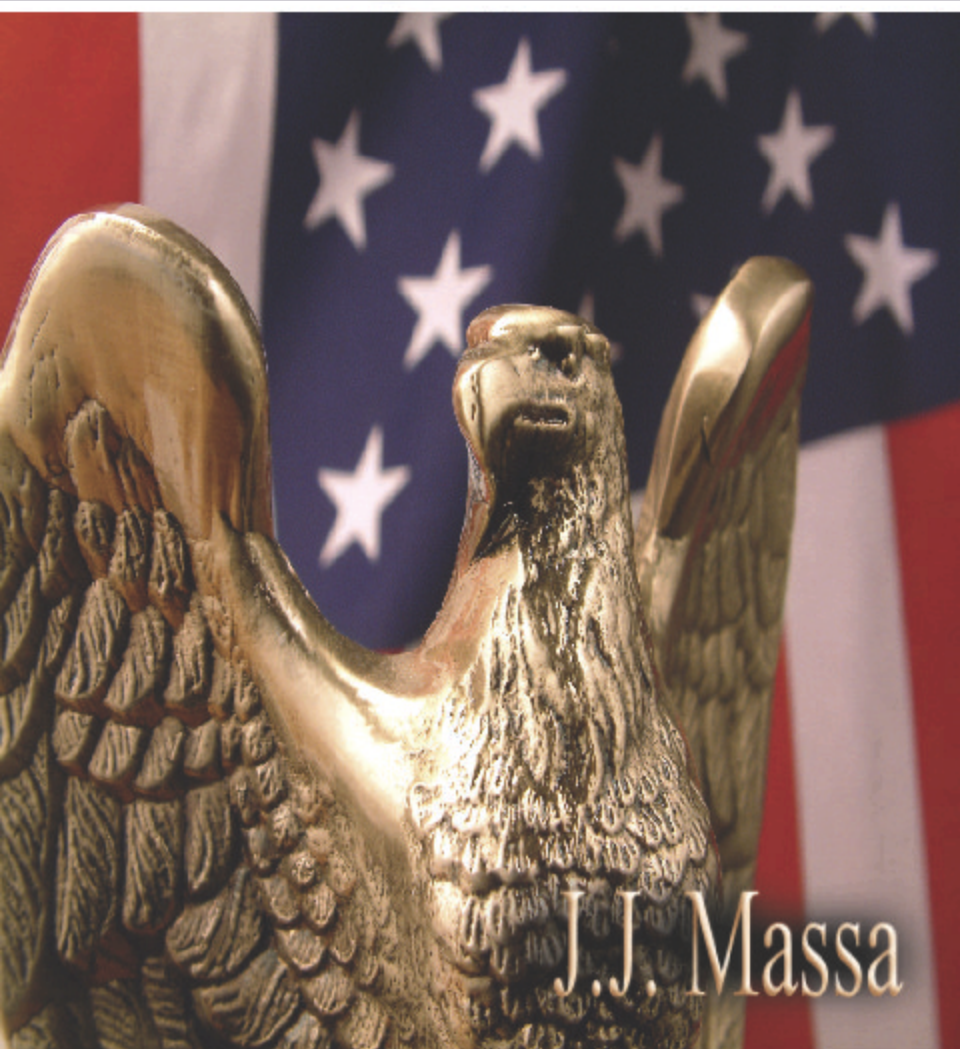


*loveyouandivine*



J.J. Massa

*Daddy's Girl*





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**Daddy's Girl**

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*Dedicated to:*

*Tracey, Claudia,*

*Sasha, and Rita.*

*Thank you all—*

*for everything.*



# *Daddy's Girl*

*by*

*J. J. Massa*





## Chapter One

Tabitha Baker walked into the bar shivering and seated herself near the end. It was a relaxed kind of place.

"Double Bourbon," she ordered when the bartender stopped in front of her.

"You got a preference?" he asked her, bored.

"What can I say?" she smiled, "Jim Beam Black or it doesn't really matter."

The bartender grinned. "I think we're gonna be friends, honey."

*Jimmy's* was a comfortable neighborhood bar that reminded Tabby of the establishment from the TV show, Cheers. She sipped her drink and relaxed, grateful for the laid-back atmosphere. Tabby wasn't looking for companionship. She just needed a drink and a moment around people. It was nice to hear voices yet not be expected to interact.

Tired of unpacking and organizing her things, she'd decided to explore her new surroundings. Her new townhouse was in a nice neighborhood and she had walked for a few blocks. It was cooler here than it had been in her South Carolina home. She had found the bar at the perfect time; the bourbon would warm her for the chilly walk home.

"The minute you put that glass down, you're my *best* friend," Tabby grinned back at the man.

## *Daddy's Girl*

Laughing, the bartender set the drink on the highly polished bar and took the money for it, moving away.

As she sipped her bourbon, Tabitha reflected on her move to Maryland. The main reason she had relocated to the Washington, DC area was to be closer to her father.

She shuddered, fighting back the cold chills that took over every time she thought about the assassination attempt just months ago, his first year in office. It had been so scary and upsetting. The shock and fear was still so great that she couldn't stand the idea of missing one more minute with him. It was her deepest fear that he'd be killed that way, even though he hadn't been injured in the shooting.

Tabby had known that she wouldn't see much of him in person when she moved to Washington, but she *would* see more of him. Tabitha Baker was the best-kept secret in Washington—maybe the entire country. Her father was President of the United States. It was at his request that she'd moved north.

She had been so young when her mother died. Serena Baker's much older husband had only recently died when Tabitha had been conceived. Later, she had made it clear to her daughter and close friends that she loved Langley Dalton, Tabitha's biological father. Serena had the ability to see the future and didn't want anything to stand in the way of the good her lover would do for the country and its people.

"Need anything else?" the bartender was back, pushing a bowl of pretzels in front of her.

"I'm all set," she smiled, lifting a pretzel to her lips. She really didn't feel like talking, just thinking.

The bartender nodded brusquely, a smile in his navy blue eyes. "I'm Dave. Let me know when you're ready for another one." He winked and moved away.

She smiled, feeling comfortable. He seemed a non-threatening sort of guy. When her hand wrapped around the

shot glass, though, she felt a little jolt. Although indistinct, her inner vision told her that Dave wasn't as mild-mannered as he seemed.

Tabby had the ability to tell things that had happened by touching objects. It was both a blessing and a curse and she was very careful about what she touched.

She didn't have the ability to see the impending events like her mother had—not in the same way. . . When she began researching something, she would automatically know what information would be needed in the future and how best to find it.

Looking into the clear, copper colored liquid, Tabitha thought about her home. She'd lived in South Carolina most of her life. Although she'd traveled to spend time with her father sometimes, she was used to South Carolina. She loved it there.

She'd attended an all girls' school in South Carolina after her father was elected the neighboring state's senator and had been required to move to Washington, DC. Tabitha's legal guardians, Elaine Taggart and Clive O'Brien had gone with him, as part of his staff.

Although the University of South Carolina had supplied some of her college education, Tabby had transferred to Meredith College, a woman's university, after achieving her associate's degree. Late in her second year at college, she began having trouble with a male student.

At the time, Tabby hadn't wanted to tell her father about it, so she'd moved to Raleigh, not too far from home, although it was not on the coast and she didn't like it as much. After working hard, she'd gotten her degree there and had tried to start a life. Things hadn't gone too smoothly and she missed her father. She'd be happy in Washington, of course she would.

Without speaking to anyone, Tabitha finished her drink

## *Daddy's Girl*

and prepared to go home. As she headed for the door, she ran into another patron, literally. The man was completely nondescript, though for some reason, he made her uneasy. She didn't see him follow her as she slipped out the door.

Swallowing the last of his beer, further down the bar, Garth had noticed the young lady leaving. He'd spotted her entering, too. She was a very attractive young thing. He also noticed the loser following her. That was never a good sign. He murmured to Dave, the bartender and his close friend, to have a cruiser drive by while he took off after her.

Garth saw the man grab her purse and backhand her when he was still a few feet away and too far to stop him. She was a crumpled heap on the pavement, but he managed to recover her property and restrain the fool who hit her.

Unfortunately, her cell phone was a total loss. That had gone flying when the dirt-bag had tugged on her purse.

The police arrived almost right away. Since it was an upscale Maryland suburb, Garth wasn't surprised. As a concerned citizen, he stayed with the young lady while the paramedics checked her over. Her sweet face had *nothing* to do with it.

A petite five feet, two inches in her white sports shoes, she was pretty as hell. Her long, dark brown hair was slightly wavy. It framed a lovely oval face with beautifully arched brows and delicate cheekbones. Almond shaped eyes the color of copper pennies had captured his attention right away. Garth knew he could stare at this woman for hours and be completely happy.

At some point during the proceedings, a reporter appeared on the scene asking her if she worked at the White House. The rattled young woman admitted that she had a minor position in the research department. Before she even knew what was happening, a photographer snapped a picture of her attempting to block her face with small hands that

were completely inadequate to the task.

The little lady seemed very upset about the entire incident and Garth thought she was showing signs of shock. When her teeth began to chatter he gave her his denim jacket. It was so large on her that she was lost in it.

"Can they do that?" she asked Garth. "Can they just take your picture and put it in the paper?"

*Poor thing.*

"I'm sorry, honey," he told her, "It's the Freedom of Information Act. You *are* a White House employee."

"Can I borrow your cell phone?" she asked him, brow furrowed.

He winked at her. "Anything for a damsel in distress." He wanted to get to know her better and this could be the edge he'd been looking for. "Need to call your husband? Boyfriend?" he asked her, artlessly.

Her mouth curved into a little smile—he already loved that beautiful dimple.

"Daddy," she answered.

Garth handed her the phone, smiling back at her. He saw her start when her hand wrapped around the phone. She smiled weakly and turned away from him as she began to push buttons. That didn't keep him from listening in shamelessly.

When someone answered, she said, "Kill Devil Hills, mile marker seven, twelve-twenty-seven A.M.," and then waited for a minute.

His brow was furrowed now. That was an odd way to say hello. He turned a little away so she wouldn't notice him listening.

"Hi, it's Tabby. Could I speak to him please?" she murmured. "It's important," she managed, her voice wobbling. Another long pause...

After a minute, she asked, "Daddy?" and he saw her

## *Daddy's Girl*

fighting to keep her chin from crumpling—obviously distressed.

"Someone tried to steal my..." her eyes were misty and apparently, "Daddy" didn't make it past the word "steal" before he had something to say.

"I'm okay, Daddy, really. It's just that they took my picture for the paper and I have a bruise and..." Evidently *Daddy* didn't like some part of that sentence. Garth bet the word "bruise" had gotten his attention this time.

"Daddy, you can't do that! I'm just a researcher; you can't assign me a detail." Her breath caught on a deep inhalation and stopped, clearly she was listening again.

Both she and Daddy certainly had his attention now. There weren't that many people in Washington who could assign *anyone* a "detail." He knew that because he *was* a "detail."

Garth Cavanaugh was a Secret Service operative assigned to the Presidential Protection detail. This was his afternoon off.

"Daddy," she tried again after a minute. "The man who helped me is still here. He's some kind of police guy."

He hadn't told her that, but he supposed it was close enough. His gun must have tipped her off. He watched carefully as she considered what her father was saying.

"What if he told you that I'm okay?" she asked him, waiting for an answer again. Finally, she covered the mouthpiece on the phone and turned to him.

"Sir?" she asked. Garth turned.

"Garth," he corrected her.

"Garth, would you do me a favor?" She was listening again. She rolled her eyes and looked at Garth. "Would you please just tell my father that I'm okay? He probably won't say anything. Just would you?" she entreated him.

He would have anyway but now he really wanted to know more about both her and her daddy.

"Be glad to," he assured her, holding his hand out for the phone. "Sir?" he said.

"Yeah?" he heard. Something stirred in his memory. He wasn't sure how, but he knew that voice.

"Your daughter was knocked to the ground but..." he started—and then "Daddy" cut loose with some very ugly words.

He saw that she was shaking her head frantically.

"Sir, she's fine. She has a few bruises, but that's all. She has her property back. Her cell phone was broken but everything else is fine," he told her father.

"If you'll see that she gets home safely, son, it'd mean a lot," the speaker told him.

"Of course, sir." Garth responded, brow furrowed. If anyone else had called him "son" Garth would have probably been insulted. It seemed like a compliment from this man—he seemed so familiar somehow. *Why do I know that voice?*

"Can I speak to Tabby again, please?" her father asked.

"Yes, sir," he responded, handing the young lady his phone.

"Daddy, it's me," she began speaking right away.

Garth walked away to give her some privacy. Something about the man's voice seemed really distinctive to him, normal—a voice he heard every day.

He heard her telling her father that she'd be in the building the next day and that she'd see him then.

When the police had finished with her, Tabitha turned to Garth and told him that she'd like to go home. He guided her back toward the bar, thinking furiously.

"My truck is over here. I'll drive you." He wanted to keep her with him a little bit longer. "Why did your father's voice sound familiar to me?" he asked, trying to get a conversation going.



## *Daddy's Girl*

Nonchalantly, she answered, "He's a politician, so you probably hear his sound-bites all the time." She smiled at him again, flashing that sexy little dimple.

"You want to tell me his name?" Garth inquired, arching a brow at her, grinning. "Is it a state secret?" he winked.

Her face turned a little pink. "I'm not trying to be, um, mysterious, but I'm not going to say his name." She looked at him as he helped her into his truck. This woman took his breath away with just one look. "My parents weren't married to each other and my father is a prominent politician. Most people believe my father is dead." A look of surprise dawned on her face. "You already know more about me than people who've known me all my life."

He stared at her and felt a grin start. *All right!*

"In that case, I know you well enough to ask you out. I have two tickets to see my cousin's stand up comedy act. Join me?" he waited, holding his breath. He couldn't believe how badly he hoped she'd say yes.

## *Chapter Two*

Tabitha was stunned. She had just wanted to check out her new neighborhood and had impulsively stopped at an inviting neighborhood bar for a drink. Now look—she'd been attacked and almost robbed and had managed to upset the leader of the free world in the process.

The man she'd bumped into...she'd gotten a flash of triumph from him. Could he have been more than a mugger? No, she wouldn't consider that possibility now.

Studying her knight in skintight denim, one word came to mind as she glanced over his torso—sculpted. He had short, dark brown hair. It was almost black. His eyes were almost black, too. What a hunk! Anyway, didn't she deserve a reward?

"I'd love to go—if you're sure your cousin is funny?" she smiled coaxing a chuckle from him.

"I guess we could both use a good laugh, huh?" he agreed, a trace of a southern accent tickling her sense.

"Are you from Mississippi?" she asked. He grinned.

"Can't hide it completely, I guess," he confessed.

"I'm from South Carolina," she confided. "Would you mind stopping at my house so I can clean up?" she asked, giving him the address. They were both surprised to learn they were neighbors since he lived across the street and two townhouses over.

When they got to her home, Tabby went straight to her

## *Daddy's Girl*

room to change. She didn't care if he poked through her things. The boxes in the living room didn't contain anything that would expose family secrets.

A low whistle coming from that room reminded her that there *were* some really interesting pictures. He was holding one of them when she entered the room.

"You're connected to some pretty heavy hitters, aren't you?" he observed, surprised.

She moved next to him and looked over the picture, hiding a smile when she realized her father wasn't even in that one.

"I guess," she shrugged. "I'm ready," she told him, hoping to distract.

\* \* \* \* \*

Garth's cousin really *was* funny. Most of his routine was about his family of cops and their experiences. Tabitha hadn't laughed that much in a very long time. On the way home, she told Garth as much.

"After the day you've had," he smiled at her, "I'm really glad I could help you laugh."

Tabitha smiled back at him and then shivered. It was much colder here than in South Carolina. She commented on that as he pulled into her driveway.

"That's why you have that fireplace in your living room," he winked, hopping out of the truck to open her door.

"Do I have to hook it up? There's fake wood in there but..." She'd never had to deal with such a thing before.

"Want me to come take a look at it?" Garth offered.

Tilting her head, she looked at him for a minute. "I'd appreciate that," she said, finally, sliding out, brushing up

against him.

She hoped she wasn't getting in over her head here, but he seemed like a nice enough guy. Besides, she'd been with him for hours and he had saved her from that awful mugger.

*There was the part where he was dead sexy, too. She shouldn't forget that.*

Once inside, she poured them both a glass of red wine and sat down to watch him fix the fireplace. In no time, he was seated next to her enjoying his wine while they looked at the fire.

Tabitha moved closer to the open fireplace so she could get a better idea about how it worked. Leaning up on her knees, she tried to look in it while at the same time turning her head to ask him a question. Before she could rock forward into the fireplace, Garth snatched her back and fell on top of her.

He opened his mouth to speak sharply to her, but instead, his eyes locked on hers. Slowly, dipping his head, his lips lingered just above her mouth, so close she could feel his breath.

His lips brushed hers in a kiss as soft as a butterfly wing. Lightly, his mouth settled over hers as his tongue dipped in, so easy, so gentle.

One kiss led to another until finally he pulled back, staring at her, neither able to look away. He traced her lower lip with the tip of his tongue and pulled back again, gazes locked.

Groaning, he lowered his mouth onto hers again and sunk his tongue between her teeth, deepening his possession of her mouth. His hands slid down to her hips and he pulled her against his pelvis his erection prodding her abdomen. Tabby didn't know if she'd ever wanted to make love with a man this badly before.

Garth stared intently into her eyes as deliberately, she

## *Daddy's Girl*

tugged the shirt from his waistband and slid a hand under it. He groaned and lowered his mouth to her neck. With every lick and nip, she became more and more aroused.

Rising from the waist, he pulled his shirt over his head and looked down at her. Licking her dry lips, Tabby slid her hands up over his abdomen through the dark hair there, easing both hands up across his ribcage and over his hard, flat nipples.

His hands slid under her cropped t-shirt and eased it up over her head revealing a sheer, antique white, lacy bra that clearly showed her pink nipples. Leaning down, he nipped at first one then the other hard peak through the lace. Finally, he slid his hands behind her and unhooked her bra, slowly drawing it off of her, baring her breasts to him.

"You are so beautiful," he groaned as he covered one breast with his hand.

When he took her other pink tip into his mouth, she thought she'd shatter into a million pieces. She couldn't help it, she wanted to feel him, taste him. Leaning into him, she pressed her mouth to his chest, kissing and licking. Her teeth scraped his nipple and he moaned.

His hands wrapped around her waist just as she skimmed her hands to tease at his button and zipper. He was the beautiful one and all she wanted was to see the rest of him, feel all of him. Tabby pushed against him with both palms and then slid down his body. Using her arms and her head, she butted, pushed, and nudged until she had him on his back.

He chuckled at her antics until she slipped her tongue into his bellybutton and then he groaned as she unsnapped and unzipped his jeans. The tip of his erection was poking out the top of his briefs. She bathed it with her tongue and then slid down to help him with his shoes.

Quickly, she worked her way up again and began tug-

ging his jeans and underwear down. He tugged at the waistband of her jeans, making his own needs clear. Leaving her lacy off-white panties on, she wriggled out of the denim pants.

Tabitha eased up and bent to the proof of his manhood—so hard and soft at the same time. Opening her mouth wide, sucked up and down its silky steel length, wetting the rounded tip before gliding to the base.

“Tabitha, I’m going to come if you do that any more,” he groaned, pushing against her shoulders and trying to pull her up. Tabby was determined that she wanted to do this. She’d never made love to a man using her mouth before, had never wanted to until now.

“I want you to come, Garth. I’ve never done this before. I want to taste you,” she told him, causing him to groan loudly.

She bent and slid his heavy length into her mouth again. This time, she moved faster, sucked harder, until he cupped her head in his hands and thrust urgently into her mouth.

Tabby didn’t stop, though. With her hands, she stroked and squeezed. He thrust upward and she took him as far as she could to the back of her throat. He began to flex and jerk in her mouth, moaning and calling her name. Warm, salty semen filled her mouth and she swallowed and swallowed as he came. She continued to lick and massage him until he tugged her to his chest falling backward again.

“Tastes like the ocean,” she whispered. “I love the ocean,” she told him with a weary sigh.

“Good Gawd Almighty!” he groaned, cuddling her. She lay atop his body while he rested. She reached over and took a sip of wine.

With her mostly naked body resting atop his, it wasn’t long before he became aroused once again. Gently, he rolled until she was under him. He rose over her, planting a hand on either side of her head. Slowly, he lowered his mouth to

## *Daddy's Girl*

hers. Ever so lightly, he nibbled her bottom lip and then traced the upper lip with the tip of his tongue. When she opened her mouth on a sigh, he slipped his tongue inside, mating with hers until she moaned softly.

He nipped at her throat and mouthed his way down across her shoulder blade to her breast. He was making her feel things she'd never felt before—her tight nipples were so puckered and hard.

Moving his mouth to her right breast, he pounced on it, licking, then kissing, and then sucking. Her head spun as he applied the same treatment to her other breast until she thought she would fly apart.

He slowly made his way down her body, scrupulously kissing and tasting any part of her that could lead to arousal. Arriving at her hips, he guided her lacy panties down her legs and off, kissing and licking as he went. When Garth nibbled on her ankle she didn't think she could take any more, and that was before he made his way up the other leg.

Placing a palm on each thigh, Garth gently but firmly spread them, settling in between. Resting on his elbows, he parted her delicate labial lips with both hands and began licking her little nub. She couldn't stay still; she felt her body creaming when he lowered his tongue to her and licked her juices.

Placing a palm on her abdomen, he massaged her clit with his thumb. Using his other hand, he inserted first one finger and then two into her sheath, causing her to cry out. Those magic fingers slid in and out in perfect counterpoint to his moving tongue. As she moaned and writhed, he curved his fingers inside her and found the spot just behind her pelvic bone. Her G-spot. She'd always thought it was a myth—now she was a believer.

Her body clenched and she tightened around his fingers moaning and mewling as orgasm overwhelmed her. After

catching the last few drops of her cream with his hot mouth, he slid up her body. Neither of them had been expecting intimacy tonight so neither was prepared.

He pulled her against him and they cuddled for long minutes, smiling when Tabitha released a soft feminine sigh. He'd never had such an intense bout of lovemaking before. *And they hadn't even had intercourse.* No woman had ever made him feel this way.

"Assuming I ever move from this carpet," he groaned, causing her to giggle. "I'd like to see you again."

Tabitha looked at him and tilted her head. She was so cute! And so hot! He cupped her head and tugged her down to him, pulling her beneath him once more. She couldn't miss his renewed erection pressing into her hip.

"You keep looking at me that way and we'll be right back where we were a little while ago," he growled at her.

She snickered and batted at him with her hand. He loved all that sass and passion wrapped up in such a tiny little package. At five feet ten inches, Garth wasn't all that tall, but she made him feel like a giant.

"Will you have dinner with me tomorrow?" he asked her. "I go in early so I'll be done early. Just come on over when you're ready." He waited for her answer—and waited, sure it was too long in coming.

"Okay," she said finally. "I'll leave a message about what I'm hungry for and let you know when I'm leaving work."

He gave her a big grin. "Good, I'm gonna go before you change your mind," he teased her.

"Don't worry, what woman could turn down a free meal with a hot hunk?" she laughed.

Garth planted a hard kiss on her swollen lips and began pulling his clothes on. He was walking out the door when the phone rang.



## *Daddy's Girl*

He should have kept walking, but it was after midnight and he wondered who would be calling her so late at night. She'd turned back to answer the phone and didn't realize that he hadn't gotten in his truck. He pulled her door shut behind himself, though it wasn't closed.

"Hello--oh hi, Daddy," he heard her say. He was still pretty curious about ol' Daddy.

"No, I really am fine, Daddy. I'm up because I just got home. I went out with the guy you talked to earlier."

Long pause...

"We went to a comedy show and then he came in to fix my electric fireplace."

Giggly pause..."No, Daddy, that is *not* a euphemism for "Light my fire"—although..."

She was snickering at Daddy now.

"What did you say to Mother? Come in and see how many pork-barrel amendments I've had eliminated?"

Garth knew he really should be moving on but he thought he'd listen just a minute longer. Maybe he'd figure out who Daddy was.

"Okay, if you want, maybe I'll ask him if he wants to come. It's not really a fun, date-type event. Let's see if he can stand my company for the next few weeks or so."

He was *really* curious about that... but it sounded like she'd get around to it if he hung in there. He heard her yawn, though she was trying to stifle it.

"Okay, Daddy, I love you, too. See you tomorrow? G'night."

He eased the door shut and made his way to his truck, sliding behind the wheel, rolling out of her driveway. He didn't think she'd notice that he hadn't left yet but he didn't see any need to take chances.

\* \* \* \* \*

Hidden in the shadows, he watched the man in the truck leave his beloved's home, far too late at night. Sneaking away like a thief. The watcher snarled, lip curling in the darkness.

The truck pulled into a house across the street and a few doors south. That was fine. That intruder wouldn't be able to see him from down the street. Besides, Tabitha didn't belong to that other man.

She'd been testing him. Testing his love. Soon she would be reminded that she was his.

## *Chapter Three*

"Sugarplum, at least tell me his name?" Agitation in every stride, President Dalton paced the living room of his personal quarters, stopping to offer his daughter a cup of coffee.

"No, thank you, Daddy, I'm going to breakfast in the cafeteria with Aunt Elaine in a little while." She moved to stand in front of her father, taking both of his hands in hers. Looking up at him she said calmly, "I'll tell you his name if it seems like we're dating more than casually. Otherwise, you'll have him investigated, tailed, and every other thing you can think of."

"Exiled, beheaded..." President Dalton added, wrapping both arms around his daughter. "Punkin', it's so good to have you here. I just wish I didn't have to get shot at to make it happen." Tabby opened her mouth to speak and her father stopped her. "I'm sorry, baby, that was mean."

"It's okay," she laid her cheek against his shoulder, hugging him back. "I'm glad to be living closer to you, too. I don't even mind getting up before the roosters crow to come see you." She cast a meaningful glance out of a nearby window where the sky was still as dark as it had been at midnight.

"Getting up that early wouldn't be a problem if you went to bed at a decent hour like a good little girl," he grumbled.

She pulled back and looked up at him, narrowing her eyes. "You are *not* going to start *that* again, Daddy!" she growled. "I'm a grown woman, I'm responsible, and I have every right to go out on dates."

"That doesn't mean your poor old Daddy has to like it," he mumbled, squeezing her tight again.

"No, I know, Daddy," her voice was muffled against his chest. "But it *does* mean you have to suck it up."

"Language, young lady!" her father snapped and Tabby rolled her eyes. "Don't you roll your eyes..." He was obviously trying to be stern, or at least pretending seriously. Either way, Tabby couldn't help it and began to giggle. Before long her father was chuckling along with her.

An arm around her shoulders, they moved slowly toward the door. Tabby reached for the high back of an upholstered wing chair, getting a little jolt. An image of an older woman, heavysset with white hair, flashed through her mind's eye.

"What happened to the chair that was here before?" she asked, looking up at him.

"The National Park Service took the old one and brought this one," he told her, nonchalantly. "I wasn't especially attached to it, so I didn't say anything."

Tabby chuckled lightly. Leave it to her father...The old one had been a favorite of Dolly Madison, this one—a favorite of Barbara Bush. It *did* appear to be more comfortable, at least.

"I doubt we'll see each other today, Daddy, so I'll look for a call from you later," she told him, planting a light kiss on his cheek.

"Try to stay out of trouble, if you don't mind, sweetheart," he grumbled. "I got a country to run, you know."

"I know," she laughed. "I'll just keep it down over here in my little corner," she promised, laughing as she took her leave of him.

## *Daddy's Girl*

\* \* \* \* \*

Garth got to work the next morning before the president was even awake. Or at least, that's what he thought. He really didn't know what time the president got up.

He was a little surprised to see Tabitha having breakfast in the White House dining room with Elaine Taggart, the president's secretary. He knew she wouldn't see him, but he hung back and watched her anyway.

As he looked on from another area of the room, he saw Elaine peer into Tabitha's face and cup her cheek. Both women stood and hugged and then turned and went their separate ways. He'd known she was "well connected", but the president's secretary? That was pretty high up.

Telling himself that he simply wanted to keep his work life and private life separate, Garth refused to examine his reasons for hiding his job from Tabitha. His cell phone rang and he focused on that instead.

After chatting with his brother Eamon, a Washington, DC police officer, for a few minutes, Garth hung up. Suddenly it occurred to him that Tabitha had used his phone the day before to call her father. He flipped it open and looked at the number. Without thinking he hit the send button. An operator answered.

"White House, West Wing, code please?"

"Wrong number, I was calling Secret Service," he mumbled.

More and more, the puzzle of her Daddy was tickling his brain.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Tabitha got home that afternoon, she realized that she didn't have Garth's phone number. She changed quickly, planning to hurry across the street.

Before she reached the door, her telephone rang. She answered it but heard nothing. Halfway to hanging up, she heard the caller speak.

"It's me you want, Tabitha," said the rough whisper.

"Excuse me?" she said courteously, ignoring the freefall her stomach was doing. The words sounded ominous, even though the man had said very little.

"You're always so polite, aren't you?" the voice said.

"Who are you?" she squeaked.

"You know who I am," came the gritty-voiced reply. "You'll give yourself to me soon."

The line went dead.

The phone call really spooked her, so Tabitha scurried across the street to Garth's house. She had every intention of telling Garth about her phone call.

The caller had been right. She had a pretty good idea who he was. She'd know for sure in a few days, probably. She suspected it was the man who'd driven her out of South Carolina when she was in college. He was the same person who'd figured highly in her decision to give in to her father's pleas to move to Washington and come to work in the White House.

In her haste to get over there and get Garth's attention, Tabitha didn't notice that his door wasn't closed all the way. Stumbling up the stairs, Tabitha tripped, and falling forward,

## *Daddy's Girl*

she rolled right through his front door.

When she recovered enough to look up, she found herself staring into the barrel of a very large handgun. On the heels of her father's shooting, the phone call and the worry she had about the man bothering her, it was too much.

Most of Tabitha's worst fears had to do with a gun aimed at her father. She had no way of knowing that this man was one of his protectors. She looked at the gun pointed in her face and began to shake. Falling backward to her hands, she tried to scoot away.

Garth realized what had happened a minute or two after instinct had had its way with him. She looked at him with her big, round, penny colored eyes and he felt like a baby-seal killer.

Dropping to his knees, Garth placed the gun on the floor and slid it away from him. He began moving toward her.

Backing up until she was wedged into the corner behind the door, Tabitha wrapped her arms around her knees and tried to make herself as small as she could. Apparently, instinct had taken over for her, too.

"Baby? Tabitha?" he kept talking to her as he neared.

When he reached her, she tried to flatten herself against the wall still more. He sat down on his rear end and reached out for her. Wedging his hands between her and the wall, Garth scooped her into his arms. She was still shaking like crazy.

Mumbling apologies the whole time, Garth pulled her onto his lap and began rocking with her. He kissed her face and her hair as he rocked.

After a while she seemed to calm down a little.

"You were going to shoot me!" she accused in a whisper, her voice cracking.

"No, Honey, I wasn't going to shoot you, I swear," he countered.

"You had a gun and it was aimed at me. You were going to shoot me." She was shaking again. "Something stopped you, but you were going to shoot me." She began to struggle.

He didn't know what would happen if he let her leave. He had no intention of letting her out of his sight, so it didn't matter. Garth did the only thing he could think of.

He kissed her—her eyes, her cheeks, her ears and her mouth. Anytime she tried to speak, he kissed her.

Finally she collapsed against him. Never releasing her, he rocked forward and stood.

He carried his precious cargo into the bedroom and laid her gently on his bed. He removed her clothes with delicate care, as if she was a wrapped piece of priceless art. He savored each moment.

As he feathered kisses on her neck, her head rolled back, allowing him access to her collarbone. It was obvious that arousal had replaced fear for her, as well. He tried to be tender, in spite of how badly he wanted her. He eased her silky top off of her shoulders.

With each brush of his lips, each lap of his tongue, he hoped to keep her aching for more. And where his lips weren't, his hands were.

When he ended each kiss she seemed to want more, and he didn't let her down. He kissed his way back down to the zipper on her slacks and slowly began inching it downward as his mouth followed.

"You're so beautiful," he groaned, telling her with his eyes, as well as his words. He wanted to make sure she knew how beautiful he really thought she was.

Kissing her stomach, he teased her with his tongue, dipping it into her navel and then pulling her pants and panties all the way down to expose the top of her dark brown curls.

He unhooked her bra, and she shrugged out of it, tossing



## *Daddy's Girl*

it to the floor. His eyes were hungry as he explored her body.

When his gaze lingered on her nipples, he saw them pucker before his eyes. Bracing his arms on either side of her, he lowered his torso and rubbed his hair-covered chest against her satin soft mounds. The hair on his chest teased her sensitive nipples. Moaning, she arched her back, dragging her breasts across his fur covered chest.

Rising to him, her hands explored the rippling muscles of his back. Garth gently lowered her to the bed once again, following her down, spreading her legs wide. While he kissed her long and passionately, his hands roamed over every part of her body.

He cupped her breasts and teased her nipples, pinching them and plucking at them.

He slid his hand between her legs and stroked her wetness, "I'm going to put my mouth here." He promised to her.

She could only moan because his fingers were taking her higher and higher.

"I'm going to put my tongue here," he whispered, plunging a finger inside of her.

He continued to stroke her receptive flesh, trailing kisses down her neck. Covering her breast with his mouth he began suckling her nipple. When he nipped her with his teeth, she gasped. He wanted her out of her mind with passion for him.

He slid a second finger inside her body, making her cry out with pleasure. "It makes me wild that you're so wet for me. I need to taste you, baby."

Slowly, he slid down her body, moving to the end of the bed. Finally, he was lying between her legs. Shifting his hands to the inside of her thighs, he pulled them open.

Garth's mouth gently closed over Tabitha's center, suckling her. She could feel his shaft against her leg becoming even harder. It must excite him to arouse her this way.

She couldn't control her arching back as the sensations

overwhelmed her. Sliding his finger inside her while still teasing her with his tongue, Tabby didn't think she could hang on much longer.

When she felt him slipping a second finger inside her, she gripped his hair. She was fighting the orgasm, but she knew he could tell that she was almost there.

She tried not to come. She fought it, but he found that amazing, elusive spot inside her and stroked it until she came unglued. He didn't stop, though. His tongue lapped at her, feasting on her with hungry urgency.

It was too much. She needed to feel him moving inside of her. She couldn't even think or breathe. He must have felt the same way. He reached to a drawer nearby and pulled out a condom before quickly disposing of his remaining clothing.

Propping herself up on her elbows, she watched him climb back onto the bed; his enormous erection was bouncing out in front of him. All she could think of was exploring him. She ran her thumb along the bottom side of his erection, a spot that turned out to be very sensitive. Taking the condom from him, she rolled it over him, watching it jump in reaction. Her fingers circled his width as she enjoyed how large and heavy he was in her hand.

When he was sheathed, he urged her once again onto her back. Opening her legs, he moved between them, and she felt the clench of excitement low in her belly. Using one of his hands, he guided himself inside her. Lowering his mouth to hers, he swallowed her moans.

Tabitha thought she'd shatter when he finally sunk deep into her hungry depths. Gradually, he began to move up and then back down inside her body. After a few thrusts, she whimpered, arching into him.

She wanted more. She needed more.

Understanding her ache, Garth pulled all the way out and plunged into her, hard. Right away, he pulled back

## *Daddy's Girl*

again, plunging in just as forcefully as before. Again and again, he pumped in and out of her body. Her legs wrapped around his calves as her body rocked up to meet his.

She couldn't hold back her little mewls of pleasure, couldn't help the way she called his name as he drove into her urgently. He moved faster, harder, seeming to respond to her demands until she was unable to hold back any longer.

"More, Garth," she begged, "Don't stop," she moaned. Suddenly, she tensed, clutching at his shoulders, burying her nails in his flesh.

Her body tightened around his, sucking him deeper into her. Her tight sheath milked him with spasms of ecstasy and he plunged over the edge after her.

Tabitha heard him moan as his body convulsed, exploding with pleasure. When the very last drop was drawn from him, he collapsed.

## Chapter Four

Rolling over, Tabitha tried to identify her strange surroundings. Most immediately, she needed to figure out what or who was in her bed.

"Okay, Baby?" Garth mumbled.

*Well that takes care of that. It's Garth and I'm in his bed. Wonder if he knows that it's me?*

"Bathroom," she mumbled in return and slid off the bed.

She made her way across the room trailing her hand over the wall and a dresser. Suddenly she caught her breath. Pictures of guns and shooting flashed through her head. Clearly, she saw her father's face as he was pushed to the ground.

Tabitha didn't know what she'd touched. All she knew was that she had to call her father right away. She stumbled out into the hallway looking for a phone. There! She found one on a table bathed in moonlight.

Quickly she dialed the number.

"Lo?" she heard her father's voice mumble.

"Daddy?" she choked.

"Tabby Cat? Whassamatter Punkin?" she could hear him rolling around, trying to sit up.

"Daddy, I touched something and I saw you get shot." She could hear the tremor in her own voice.

"You're not at home?" His sleepy gruff voice asked.

"No, Daddy. I'm--I'm at uh...someone's house." She

## *Daddy's Girl*

was no different than any daughter telling her father she was sleeping at the home—and in the bed—of a man to whom she wasn't married.

"Land sakes, Tabby Cat! You know what time it is? It's four in the mornin'!" her father pointed out needlessly. His southern accent was very pronounced right now.

"Daddy, *please*," she sighed.

"Tell me what it looked like, Punkin," he said in a resigned voice.

She knew he cared about her fears. The resigned part probably came from realizing that "Daddy's Little Girl" had stumbled out of a man's bed to call him.

"Lots of guns and lots of men, Daddy. Somebody pushed you down and got shot. He stumbled backward and tripped over you. I didn't see his face." That's all she could remember.

"That sounds an awful lot like what happened before, sugar. The assassination attempt. Maybe you touched an old newspaper," he reassured her. She released a sigh of relief. "Tabby Cat, it would make your old daddy feel better knowin' you were passin' the rest o' the night in your own bed."

"You want me to walk home in the middle of the night, Daddy?" she asked him.

He didn't need to know that Garth lived practically across the street.

"How 'bout the couch then, Punkin? Doan know what good it does to close the barn door after the horse is out but I'd be much obliged if you'd humor me a little."

"All right, I'll do that. It's okay. G'night, Daddy. I love you. Thanks for making me feel better." He'd never know either way, of course, but it just happened that she *wanted* to stay on the couch right then. She was too rattled to go back in that room with whatever she'd touched.

He chuckled. "G'night, Tabby Cat. I love you, too.

Thanks for givin' me nightmares."

She laughed and hung up the phone.

Garth heard Tabitha head down the hall to the bathroom and then he hung up the phone. He didn't feel the least little bit guilty about listening in on her conversation. Security was his business. Besides, who called their father at four in the morning from her lover's house?

Tabitha Baker did. Garth had come fully awake when she had stopped and sucked in her breath near his armoire. His personal bulletproof vest was hanging on the door, he remembered. She'd jerked and then stumbled forward to the door as if something were snapping at her heels.

When the light indicator on the phone had shown an extension in use, he picked up the handset on his side of the bed. The conversation he'd overheard still confused him a little.

What did she mean by saying that she'd touched something and saw her father being shot? He agreed with the man, it did sound a lot like the incident that took place several months ago when some fool had tried to assassinate the president. But touching something? Too confusing for the middle of the night.

There were five or six men who'd been in the middle of that melee with the president, now that he thought about it. In addition to the Commander In Chief, maybe four of them were from southern states. In fact, Garth had shoved three men down to the pavement himself, right before his vest had caught one of the flying bullets. He'd have to give it some thought later.

Right now it looked like Tabby Baker was a woman of her word. He'd heard her finish in the bathroom and now he heard the springs squeak on the couch. He stood and grabbed a blanket from a trunk at the end of the bed and headed out there. She had to be as naked as he was.

## *Daddy's Girl*

"Did my snoring keep you awake?" he asked her sitting down on the couch.

"Um, no," she said shyly. "Something scared me. I--I just thought I'd sit out here in the moonlight."

"Is it okay if I sit with you?" Garth asked. "I have a blanket..." he wheedled.

She giggled a little. "In that case, I'd love your company, sir."

With a harrumph, he pulled her up against him, his front to her back, and pulled the blanket over them. They laid there in silence for a few minutes.

"Garth?" she said after a little while.

"Yes?" he answered, kissing her neck.

"Is this a very old couch?" she asked.

"No," he answered, confused. "I bought it about six months ago. Why?"

"I think there's a spring sticking out. It's poking me in the back." She sounded serious.

After a few seconds, he began to chuckle. "I've got something I'm gonna poke you with, woman!" he growled.

He took her hand and wrapped it around his engorged staff. "Is this the spring in question, ma'am?" he whispered gruffly.

She squeezed him as he lowered his head to hers in a passionate kiss.

\* \* \* \* \*

Where was she? He paced back and forth, not caring if someone spotted him in this upper-crust neighborhood. Should the police question him, he'd say he was lost.

But where was she? He'd called her from the deli where

*J. J. Massa*

he'd had supper earlier. She knew she'd been naughty. She should have told him where she was going, what she was doing. And now where was she?

His Tabitha was teasing him—that was all. Well, a little of that was tolerable. Too much of it and he'd have to punish her. Soon it would be time to call a halt to her foolishness. Very soon.



## *Chapter Five*

Over the next few weeks, Garth and Tabitha were nearly inseparable. They went to ball games together and out to eat. Sometimes she cooked, and once in a while he did.

Tabitha enjoyed talking about his childhood. With twelve brothers and sisters, it must have been such fun. As an only child, she'd lived in an adult world so much of the time.

She tried to tell him a little about her life in the boarding school. She'd loved parts of it and she'd loved the camaraderie with the other girls. Between the friends she'd made at school and the time she spent with her father and her guardians, Tabitha had never felt unloved. Still, she would have liked brothers and sisters. Garth had mentioned he had a brother here in Washington. Maybe he'd introduce her sometime.

Walking down the hall at work one morning, Tabitha was mulling over the possibilities of meeting his family and introducing him to her own patchwork family. Not watching where she was going, she walked right into someone in the hall.

She'd come to work early thinking she'd talk to Secret Service about the phone calls she was getting and the weird, unpleasant things happening around her house.

She knew that the man who'd harassed her in South Carolina had somehow found her again. She didn't want to overreact, but maybe it was time to talk to someone about

this. When she'd touched her door the evening before, she'd "seen" him, his anger, his determination.

Tabby didn't really think he'd do anything more than bother her, but it was unnerving that he'd come all the way to Washington to harass her. Surely that wasn't why he'd come. He must've gotten a job in the area and...

"Hey there, Tabby Cat!" It was her Uncle Clive.

She looked up at him and smiled, "Good morning, Uncle Clive. You're here pretty early, aren't you?" she asked him.

"Nope, Sweetheart, I'm right on time," he smiled down at her. "You coming to dinner tonight?"

"Wild horses wouldn't keep me away," she verified.

"How about a young man? Would that keep you away?" He was laughing at her now.

"Shows what you know. He's working tonight," she wrinkled her nose at him and walked away.

After talking to Uncle Clive, Tabitha decided she'd think a little more before she talked to anyone about the things happening around her house.

Sure, she was getting a little spooked, but she didn't need to bring this to her father's attention just yet. She knew if she mentioned it at work, he'd find out. If he didn't find out, her Uncle Clive would. Tabby couldn't take a chance on that right now.

She'd found an eerie drawing on the inside of the kitchen cabinet. The pictures she'd seen when she touched it were of the awful man who'd been following her.

The White House was preparing for the next election and she didn't want to stir things up.

In truth, she knew she could find any number of reasons why she shouldn't tell about the man harassing her. So far, the ostrich method of problem solving was working for her. She was ignoring the man and hoping he'd go away.

Garth backed into a doorway when he saw Tabitha

## *Daddy's Girl*

coming. He hadn't expected to see her at work so early. She'd almost seemed to have a purpose this morning. She'd been walking right toward his office.

Watching from the recessed doorway, Garth had been surprised at her collision with the president's Chief of Staff, Clive O'Brien. It was interesting because there'd been nobody else in the hall and he'd stepped right in front of her, causing her to plow straight into him.

As he'd looked on, Tabitha had smiled up at O'Brien and they'd had a short conversation. It looked for very much as if the two were well acquainted. She'd wrinkled her nose at him before she'd turned and walked away.

Garth wondered if he'd been the man she'd called Daddy. They didn't look alike in any way. Clive O'Brien was, however, one of the men in the president's party whom he'd knocked to the ground to save from the assassin's bullet six months prior. In addition, he was from the south. He'd have to think on that one for a while.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tabitha always enjoyed having dinner with Uncle Clive and Aunt Delores. She wasn't as close to Clive's wife as she was to him, though they were affectionate friends. Aunt Elaine came for dessert and that was fun, too. She'd missed them all.

They'd really put her on the spot about Garth. Uncle Clive had teased her and both Aunt Elaine and Aunt Delores wanted details, details, and more details.

Finally, Tabitha had given in.

"I like him a lot," she told them. "We've been dating since that guy tried to take my purse. He seems to like me a lot, too."

Aunt Delores and Aunt Elaine both wanted to know

what Garth looked like. Tabby was only too happy to describe him.

"Let's see," she grinned at them. "He's taller than me but everyone is..." they were teasing her now. "He's got short, dark hair that he combs back." She gave this some thought, "His eyes are a very dark, dark brown," she paused, dragging out the description, "He's got full lips and a prominent chin," she closed her eyes, picturing Garth. The ladies were egging her on now "He has a wide forehead and a straight, medium sized nose," she grinned broadly now.

Both older women leaned forward eagerly. Uncle Clive was laughing outright.

"The best part is..." Tabby grinned devilishly "he has a really hard..." The older women were fanning themselves, "...torso," she said. Laughter burst forth. Everyone was having a great time. Finally she said, "He *does* work out..."

She went home smiling, hoping she could introduce Garth to the people she loved one day soon.

## *Chapter Six*

Garth wasn't ready for Tabitha to find out that he was Secret Service. He couldn't say why, exactly, but it didn't matter, he just wasn't.

She'd asked him a week ago if he was busy tonight. He'd told her that he'd have to work. He didn't say he was working this party. When he saw her moving through the crowd, he edged part way behind a plant.

Between monitoring his men and scanning the crowd, Garth managed to keep an eye on her. She danced with two ranking senators, a congressman, two men on the speech writing team and the Deputy Chief of Staff. Now she was moving his way with the president's Chief of Staff.

They stopped less than a foot from the curtain he was using as a blind.

"He hates your dress," Clive O'Brien said, smiling at her.

Garth thought she looked very sexy in the long, low cut, body hugging, seashell pink gown. He wished nobody else had the opportunity to make that judgment, though.

"I hate his tie," she told Clive, smiling.

"Well, I guess you two are even, then, aren't you?" Clive put his arm to her back, guiding her to a low bench nearby. It was still within eavesdropping distance.

"I wish I could dance with him. We haven't spoken in a while. I miss him," she sighed.

Garth felt the stirrings of jealousy. Who did she miss?

She wanted to dance with some guy? He knew she didn't mean him at all; she didn't even know he was there at the party.

"I know, Sweetheart. Look over at him and smile," Clive directed.

Tabitha turned her head toward a group of men and smiled. About four men smiled back at her including the president and the young Deputy Chief of Staff she'd danced with earlier. As she smiled, Clive began speaking again.

"He's going to be by later tonight. It'll be *very* late. He'll call when he's on the way."

As Garth watched, Tabitha's smile blossomed. He looked over at the group of men. The president still appeared to be looking her way and so did his advisor. The young man closed one eye in a wink.

Garth thought he'd be sick.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Daddy!" Tabby threw her arms around her father, thrilled to see him. Wrapping both arms around her, he spun her in a circle and then leaned down for a kiss. "It's been so long! And I was so afraid I wouldn't get to really see you before you left!"

"I'll only be gone a week, Puddin'," The president murmured, an arm around his daughter as they moved inside.

"Are you sure it's safe for you to be driving around like that, Daddy?" Tabby asked, pouring her father a cup of coffee. It was late, but she knew he'd be up awhile. How he managed to do so much on so little sleep was beyond her.

"I'll have you know, young lady, that I've been driving around all my life, and a good twenty years before you were

## *Daddy's Girl*

born!" he mock-growled, sipping the coffee gratefully.

"That's not what I mean and you know it," she countered, sipping her own coffee.

"A more interesting question, Tabby Cat is—where was your young man tonight?" President Dalton asked, arching a brow at her.

"Uh, he said he had to work..." she took a healthy swallow of her coffee, thinking it over. "Really, Daddy, he's not *my* young man. I mean...we've been dating..."

"Pretty exclusively, from what I hear," Dalton finished for her, both eyebrows raised this time.

"Well, yeah, that's true," she stood, placing her cup on a coffee table as she paced to the window and back. "But neither of us has made any declaration or commitment-type statements."

"So?" Dalton moved up behind his daughter. "You feel pretty strongly about him, it seems." He turned her to face him.

"Maybe I do, but I can't just go and say, *"Hey, how's your security clearance? Can you keep a secret? I want you to meet my Daddy..."* I have to be just a little more... *sure* of him first, you know?"

Her father sighed heavily, pulling her into his arms. "I'm sorry, baby." He hugged her, laying his cheek on the top of her head. "Do you ever wish...?"

"No!" she said vehemently, pulling back to look at him. "No, I don't ever wish anything!" She paused and then grinned sheepishly, "Well, I wouldn't mind a baby brother." Her father snorted. "Aside from that," she went on in a more serious, firm tone, "I'm proud of you, I'm proud of the job you do and I know there would be a lot of stumbling blocks in your way if the world knew that I was your daughter. Mom was right; there were too many things that could have stopped a good man from doing a good job. That's just the

way it is."

He sighed again, almost a growl. "She might have been right, dad-damn it! But I don't have to like it."

Tabby laughed. "We don't make public opinion, we just use it."

"Now you sound like your Uncle Clive," he grumped.

"Speaking of Uncle Clive, how long did he say you could be out to play tonight?" Tabby asked, teasing.

Her father glanced at his watch. "I think I've used up my time. Those Secret Service guys are generally pretty on the ball. My usual team got off after the party or I couldn't do this."

"Thank Heaven for labor laws," Tabby teased, stepping up on her tiptoes to kiss his jaw.

"Thank the U.S. Department of Labor," President Dalton grumbled. "Heaven doesn't have a thing to do with it." He gave her another tight squeeze and a kiss. "Take care while I'm gone, Sweet pea."

"I will, Daddy. You be careful."

Tabby closed the door behind him with a sigh. She'd miss him while he was gone, but these foreign policy trips were generally pretty safe. Maybe she'd get a chance to talk to Garth about their relationship before her father got back.

\* \* \* \* \*

As Garth watched from his front window, the Deputy Chief of Staff's car turned into Tabitha's driveway. A man got out. It was difficult to see details about him but Garth didn't need them.

He watched as a physically fit man, wearing jeans and a sport coat, got out of the car and ran a hand through his dark



## *Daddy's Girl*

brown hair. His face was still impossible to see. The man walked to Tabby's front door and began to insert a key in the lock and then stopped.

Riveted, Garth saw Tabitha fling open the door. She was wearing a pink bathrobe and fuzzy slippers. The man wrapped his arms around her and she wrapped hers around him. Garth couldn't look away. That other man twirled her around and lowered his head toward her for a kiss as he ushered her through the front door and closed it.

Garth felt like his heart had slammed shut. Thank God he was off work the next day. He drove to the liquor store and bought enough alcohol to incapacitate himself for at least twenty-four hours. He never noticed that the man who'd come to visit Tabby didn't stay very long.

\* \* \* \* \*

When she tried to call the next day, Garth had her number blocked. He hung a sign on his front door that said "Do Not Disturb". It was helpful that the president went to Geneva for Peace Talks the day after that. He went with him and they were gone for a week.

The only time he saw Tabby the week following his return, she had been walking toward the Secret Service office again. Once again, Clive O'Brien seemed to be heading for her.

To Garth's surprise, she spotted O'Brien and seemed to duck down a staircase. The man put his hands on his hips and stared speculatively after her.

A day later, the Deputy Chief of Staff sought Garth out. He seemed thoroughly uncomfortable. When the two men were alone, the younger man finally said what was on his mind.

"Mr. Cavanaugh, I have to ask you something rather

personal," he fidgeted.

Garth looked at him unblinking for a minute.

"Shoot," he said, finally, wishing he could shoot the man in front of him. This, no doubt, was the man Tabby had chosen over him.

"You seeing anybody?" the man asked.

"What do you care?" Garth growled. The Deputy Chief of Staff flinched.

"I was told to find out. Are you seeing Tabitha Baker? Just answer." It would have sounded more commanding if the man's voice hadn't cracked.

After a long minute, Garth told him, "No, I'm not seeing her. I'm not seeing her at all. We dated but it didn't work out and we broke up. Anything else?"

"Shit," was all he said before he turned and left.

## *Chapter Seven*

Garth had stationed himself outside the West Wing on the veranda one morning a week after his conversation with the Deputy Chief of Staff. He liked to take regular assignments sometimes. It helped him know what his men were experiencing. Besides that, he needed a low key assignment. The president was staying in and Garth needed fresh air and a break.

He was more than a little surprised to see Clive O'Brien walk out with his arm around Tabby. Researchers really didn't have any business in this area.

"Honey," he heard Clive address Tabitha. "We need to talk about something, okay?"

Keeping his face expressionless, he glanced quickly over at them. Garth could see she looked pale. He stared straight ahead and tried not to notice. He had no idea if she'd seen him. He also knew that, with his nondescript suit and standard issue sunglasses, he looked very much like many of the other men stationed around the White House.

"Tabby, you know that police type guy you've been seeing? Garth Cavanaugh?" That got Garth's attention.

Tabitha nodded.

"I know I'm not your father, but I *am* your guardian."

That was news to Garth.

"I had someone speak to the man recently." Tabitha's eyes were round in her face. Garth couldn't have looked

away for any amount of money.

"Tabby, did he ever tell you that he's Secret Service?" she shook her head. He wished he could see her eyes more clearly.

"He's been assigned to Presidential Protection, but I don't know which detail he's with right now or where in the building he is, okay?" he said. She nodded again.

"Honey, I know you said you really liked him and you were sure he liked you, too," he said gently.

Garth's chest began to hurt. He was having trouble breathing.

Clive had stopped walking now and turned Tabitha to face him a little bit. Garth was fifteen feet in front of them but neither had looked up. He was closest to them. He could see their faces. The next man stationed out there was nearly forty-five feet away and wouldn't hear this conversation.

"Tabitha, Mr. Cavanaugh said that he wasn't seeing you anymore. He said you two were not seeing each other at all. Said you'd broken up."

She made a sound like someone had punched her in the stomach and stumbled as if her knees wouldn't hold her. Clive held her tight and eased her down on a nearby bench.

Tabitha wiped at the corner of one eye with the butt of her hand. Her chin was trembling. Clive pulled out a handkerchief and began dabbing at her face. Besides that first gut-punch sound, she hadn't made a single noise. Garth watched, stunned, as she pulled herself together.

She cleared her throat. "Uncle Clive, please don't tell Daddy," she said quietly. She turned to look at his face. "Please?"

"You really care about this asshole, Tabby?" Clive asked her, looking intently into her eyes.

Right now, Garth *did* feel like an asshole.

"Uncle Clive, a man has the right to date, or not date,

## *Daddy's Girl*

whomever he wants. I guess he can't help that he doesn't feel the same way about me as I feel about him." Garth could see her struggling for composure again. "He doesn't deserve to have his life destroyed just because he didn't fall in love with "Daddy's little girl"," she told him, choking up again.

She turned her face into Clive's shoulder while he rubbed her back. Finally, she pulled back and pressed both hands to her face. Clive stood and offered a hand to her.

"Come on, Tabby Cat," Clive O'Brien told Tabitha. "Let's go have a drink or three. Mr. Cavanaugh will never know how much he has to thank you for." Pulling her to her feet, Clive leaned down and kissed her hair.

Tabby sniffed and gave a weak laugh. "Let's go toast Garth Cavanaugh's long and happy life," she said with a watery smile. Hand in hand, the two left.

Garth was stunned and upset. He felt like he'd just been hit by a truck. She had seemed so very hurt. Actually, she'd seemed devastated. Just watching her suffering that way had been painful.

All this time, he'd been sure that he was the injured party. He'd seen that man arrive at her house. Was it possible that she wasn't sleeping with some other guy? Maybe he'd blown the whole thing. For all he knew, the president's Deputy Chief of Staff was her brother or something.

Once again, Garth found himself wondering who the hell Daddy was. Daddy must be powerful indeed if the president's Chief of Staff was her guardian and still not as influential as him.

Garth mulled this over for a while as he stood at his post. Over and over again the words she'd said and the way she'd looked played through his mind. He *had* to see her.

As soon as his shift ended, Garth wasted no time getting to Tabitha's townhouse. He was determined to get to the bottom of things.

*J. J. Massa*

Nobody was home at Tabitha's house when Garth got there. Nobody came home that day or the next.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tabitha stayed with her Uncle Clive that night and went home the next day. She wasn't eager to go home anymore. She didn't want to see Garth's house across the street and know that he didn't want to be with her.

She'd probably fallen in love with him that first day when she'd borrowed his cell phone. He'd so obviously wanted to find out if she was married or had a boyfriend. It had been so endearing. She didn't know if she would have done anything different even if she'd seen this coming.

Her daddy did know something was wrong, but she'd told him she had to handle it herself. She didn't want him going after Garth.

She wished she could tell somebody about the guy that was bothering her. It was downright scary, the things he was doing. She knew beyond any doubt that it was that guy from her old college. He obviously had a screw loose. She decided that she would tell, first thing tomorrow. This guy had sent her dead flowers, ugly notes, he kept calling; and that was the easy part.

She'd found things wrong in her house. Doors were off of hinges. Notes were written in marker on the insides of her dish cabinets.

When she went into her kitchen today, there was a dead tarantula on the marble counter. It had had a hatpin stuck in its middle section. This was worse than when she'd left school or before she'd moved here. It was awful. She felt terrorized.

Only minutes after arriving home and discovering the

## *Daddy's Girl*

latest offering from her stalker, someone began pounding at Tabitha's door, surprising her. She couldn't imagine who it was but she was at a low ebb. Without thinking, Tabby flung open the front door. She didn't even try to protect herself.

She felt a sting and that's all she knew for a while.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Tabitha, you should have told me that you wanted to move away from home. We could have planned."

"Look, Shelby..." she began, her voice weak and uncertain. He knew it was the sedative, but that was no excuse for her oversight.

"Steve!" he screeched, slapping her hard. Her head snapped back and hit the wall. "I prefer to be called Steve, and you *know* that!"

Tears sprung to her eyes, but she shook them away. Such a strong woman. And she was his! But so stubborn. Why wouldn't she admit that they belonged together?

She cleared her throat. "Uh, Steve...I forgot, really. Since, um, before...you know, everyone else used to call you Shelby..."

He raised a hand, drawing it back in warning. But she was right. Everyone *had* always called him Shelby. It wasn't her fault. After all, they'd been apart for awhile.

He worked to keep his voice calm. "I like Steve better," he explained patiently. "It stands for Shelby and Tabitha, forever. Get it? S.T. ever—Steve."

Her smile was a little weak, no doubt from the sedative. "Of course. That really does make sense."

She didn't say she liked it, though. Well, he'd give her a chance to settle in.

## Chapter Eight

Garth stood in the Oval Office while the president and his Chief of Staff talked. It had been a busy day and people had been in and out constantly. If they'd wanted the room for privacy, they'd tell him. He stayed at his post behind the president's desk to the right of his chair.

After a minute, President Dalton slammed his fist against the wood of his desk.

"God damn it, Clive!" he thundered. "Where the fuck is she?"

"Sir..." began Clive.

"This has NEVER happened before," he roared. "I can't do this if I have to worry about her. Something's wrong, I know it!"

"Mr. President, you have to focus, you *have* to, sir," O'Brien tried to placate his friend and boss. "Langley..."

"What if something's happened to her? What about that guy she was seeing?" Garth wondered whom the "she" was that had the president so stirred up. He was having a real déjà vu moment and didn't know why.

"I've known where that man is every minute since last week. If something's happened to her, he didn't do it." The Chief of Staff tried again to placate the president.

O'Brien seemed to be staring at him now. It took everything Garth had not to squirm.

"He might have broken her heart but he hasn't put a



## *Daddy's Girl*

hand on her since the last time I saw her, Lang."

Was O'Brien still looking at him? Garth refused to look, decidedly uncomfortable with the older man's angry attention.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tabitha was dying, she knew it. She could actually feel herself bleeding inside. But she'd be damned if she'd die in some whacked-out lunatic's basement. She didn't know what he'd been shooting her up with, but she knew she wouldn't survive another one of his temper tantrums.

The last one had rendered her unconscious and it looked like he might have even scared himself with his violence. He'd been so angry that she wouldn't "give" herself to him that he'd kicked her over and over until she passed out.

Maybe she should have done what he wanted. She wanted to live, so she had tried to bargain.

"I'll do whatever you want, Steve, honestly." She'd nearly called him Shelby again. That *always* set him off.

It didn't seem to matter this time, though. "I don't want your pity!" he'd shrieked. "You'll admit that you want me. One of these days..."

She hadn't heard the rest. After he'd knocked her to the ground, he just wouldn't stop kicking her. All she could do was try to cover her head and pray for it to be over.

Now, she staggered to the door, seeing two or three of them. When she pushed at it, it swung outward, into a stairwell. Painstakingly, she pulled her battered body up the dank stairs, vaguely grateful that she was covered, though her clothes were smelly and dirty.

He'd allowed her to use the bathroom in the corner of the basement, hosing her and the designated area down

afterward. She'd been fully dressed in her thin silk shirt and polyester blend skirt. So she'd been covered, though not warmly. When she was wet, there was some consolation in that the clothes she wore weren't heavy wools and denims. That hadn't been as comforting when she was dry, on the other hand.

Her captor had fed her thin soup, something fishy, but it had been warm. Still, there hadn't been nearly enough of it. She didn't feel hungry as she had before, so she figured she'd been away from her home for days.

Her father must be frantic, she thought, pulling herself up the cement stairs. Garth might have missed her, if they had still been together. She pushed that away.

There was a house here, empty and dark. Tabby stumbled over the top step, pitching painfully to the ground. In the distance, she heard barking dogs and she staggered toward them. The ground was cold and uneven and a misty rain was falling.

She had no idea where she was, how long she'd been stumbling and lurching along, or how long she could keep going. One foot in front of the other, she forced herself. Just keep going.

"Hey! Lady! Get outta my yard!"

Tabby jerked toward the voice. In that instant, everything went black.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was past midnight, almost a week after that day on the verandah, and still Tabitha hadn't come home. Garth was in the Secret Service office at the White House when word came down that Eagle and Hawk were about to roll. That meant

## *Daddy's Girl*

that the president and the Chief of Staff were going somewhere in a hurry. Garth rushed to the president's transport vehicle.

As he slid into the president's SUV next to the driver, he was informed that they were heading to George Washington University Hospital. He was a little confused. Who had been injured? Didn't the president usually go to Walter Reed?

As they poured out of the SUV at the hospital, Clive O'Brien stopped him and told him which floor and which room to go to. Garth gave instructions to his men and headed up. At one point the president actually seemed to try to push him out of his way.

"Sir, I have to go in first," he told him.

"Then get your ass moving, son," President Dalton ground out.

There was something about the way he sounded when he'd called him "son" that rang a bell with Garth.

When he reached the room Clive had sent him to, he saw the president's secretary sitting in a chair beside the bed. There appeared to be a sleeping figure in it with all manner of wires and tubes running in and out. He declared the room "clean" and the president rushed in.

Garth stationed himself beside the window. Clive O'Brien entered the room and closed the door. Garth spoke into his radio ordering men at the door, the elevators and all entrances and exits.

As he watched, the president moved to the bed and sat down beside the apparently sleeping figure. Elaine Taggart moved from the chair where she'd been sitting. Garth observed, fascinated, as Langley Dalton ran his hand over the figure's hair and spoke. His boss' next words shocked him.

"Daddy's here, Punkin'," he said. "Tabby Cat, Daddy's here"

"Daddy?" he heard Tabitha's choked voice. "Daddy!" she

cried. "Daddy, Daddy, Daddy," she was in his arms now. "Daddy, he hit me and kicked me. Oh, Daddy," she sobbed.

The president raised his legs to the bed and slid under the sobbing young woman. Monitors were flashing and all kinds of mechanical noises could be heard. A nurse and a doctor rushed to the door and Garth looked at Clive O'Brien. He nodded. Garth murmured into his radio and the pair entered and began readjusting the equipment.

Garth stepped forward to more closely monitor what they did and how close they got to the president. He was on autopilot.

*Tabby was injured? Tabby was the president's daughter?*

President Dalton continued to caress Tabitha's hair as he kissed her and spoke softly to her. He cuddled her against him and rubbed her back. Finally, the doctor approached him.

"Sir, I have to inject her again. Her body's been traumatized. Her heart rate is too high and she has to calm down. If I don't put her out..." the doctor trailed off. Reluctantly, the president nodded.

He continued to speak softly to her as she succumbed to the drug and fell asleep. President Dalton turned to the doctor.

"Sit down, man, you're not going anywhere for a little while!" he ordered. He looked at the nurse. "You might as well sit down, too. Somebody had better tell me what happened to my little girl," the president growled. He continued to run his hand over her hair and her uninjured shoulder.

Garth was as anxious as his boss to find out what had happened. He really wished he were sitting where the president sat, for that matter. He'd give anything to be holding Tabitha on his lap and cuddling her right now.

"Sir, I'm Dr. Velasquez," said the doctor, "I'll tell you about her injuries and do the best I can," he told him.

"That's a good start," said Dalton.

## *Daddy's Girl*

"She's malnourished, a bit hypothermic, has a dislocated shoulder, a broken rib and one of her kidneys is badly bruised." He sighed. "It's probably ruptured. I'll talk about that in a minute. She's got deep muscle bruises on her thighs and a hairline fracture on her shin and another on her radius, and probably a concussion."

The Commander in Chief swallowed convulsively and kissed his daughter's head. "How did this happen?" he asked in a low voice.

The doctor turned to his nurse who was a relatively young woman.

"Stand up, Jennifer," he told her. He took her arm and jerked it a little. "Now drop to the floor and cover your head with your arms—fetal position," he instructed.

The doctor held her arm while the nurse dropped to the floor and curled herself into a little ball. She covered her head with her free arm. The doctor mimed kicking her as she turned in circles trying to avoid his damaging foot. He kicked at her head, torso, legs and back. "Dislocated shoulder, concussion, radius, rib, kidney, thigh, shin," he said while he mock-kicked.

"Thank you, Jen," he finally said.

The president's arms tightened around his daughter. Garth could feel his own blood boiling. His eyes locked with Clive O'Brien's.

"Apparently, she's being stalked," Dr. Velasquez told them.

"Clive, I thought she was dating some kind of cop? How could this happen?" her father asked.

Looking at Garth, Clive answered, "Mr. President, they had some kind of misunderstanding. They broke up." The president had his face buried in his daughter's hair. He didn't see his Chief of Staff staring at his detail. "She never told anybody that someone was bothering her. The cop was actu-

ally an agent—one of ours.” Clive explained.

Dalton’s head shot up. For a minute he just stared straight ahead. Then, he slowly turned to look fixedly Garth. “Tell me she’s fine, son,” he said in a low voice. “Tell me it’s just a few bruises.” His eyes were wet with unshed tears.

“Sir,” Garth began.

He, too, was swallowing convulsively now. He moved forward and reached for Tabitha. Her father caught his hand in a viselike grip.

“Mr. President,” Garth choked out, “It *was* a misunderstanding. Please, let me look after her now.”

President Dalton glared at the head of his security detail.

“You hurt my baby once; don’t think I don’t know you did. I tried to leave it alone because that’s what she wanted.” He cuddled her closer. “I’ll get the man who hurt her and I don’t know why I shouldn’t kill you right where you stand. You probably hurt her just as bad—worse. The doctor can’t help her with what *you* did to her.”

“The doctor can’t help her with that but I can. I can and nobody else.” Garth had forgotten he was talking to his President. He was trying to get through to an angry father.

“Sir, I love her and she loves me. If she didn’t, I couldn’t hurt her like that. It was my own foolishness and hurt that made me jump to the wrong conclusions.” Garth realized that it had been her youthful-looking father that had come to see her that night.

“I know I can convince her that I love her and make her trust me again. While I’m doing that, I can protect her and keep her safe until the asshole that did this to her can be arrested or annihilated.”

He turned to look at Clive. “Mr. O’Brien, you know she loves me. You *know* it.” Garth turned back to the president.

Langley Dalton looked at him, the doctor, the nurse, and finally, his Chief of Staff.

## *Daddy's Girl*

"Clive, I want to declare her publicly as my daughter and assign a detail to her right now. Tell me why I shouldn't. Don't give me any shit about polls or standing!" he demanded.

"Sir, it could be because she works at the White House that this happened to her," he started. "Public opinion will be hard on her, harder than on you. She knows you're proud of her. I think you'll do her more harm than good if you do that." Clive went on.

Garth could tell that Clive was getting through to the man.

*Don't stop yet—you're almost there, he thought.*

"Mr. President, if you let the world know that you have a daughter, they'll stop at the part where you've never been married." Clive looked over at Elaine Taggart, President Dalton's longtime secretary and Tabitha's other guardian.

"Sir," she said. "They'll think little Tabby wants recognition. They won't care that you loved her mother or that it was Serena who didn't want to get married. They won't even care how much you love that little girl," she went on.

The "little girl" shifted in her father's arms. "Daddy?" she mumbled. "*Daddy*," she sighed.

Dalton leaned back against the elevated mattress taking Tabitha with him. He continued to stroke her. "Tabby Cat," he whispered. "My little Tabby Cat," he said, wiping the tears out of her eyes as she cried in her sleep.

He turned to the doctor. "What happens next here?" he said.

The doctor had been engrossed in the drama happening around him and was taken by surprise.

"Um, we may end up doing a surgery on her shoulder if it turns out her rotator cuff is torn. The kidney's the only other serious concern so far. We have to watch it. If it's ruptured, we still may be able to avoid surgery by keeping it from

getting infected. We'll transfuse her so we could use some of your blood, sir." He said the last after the nurse had whispered to him. "Sir, Mr. President we..." he stammered.

"What, man!" Dalton was losing his much vaunted patience now. He'd been up for twenty hours and the person he loved most in the world was beaten and unconscious in his arms.

"Sir, it's possible that we'll have to remove part or all of her kidney," he stammered. He hadn't thought he'd ever have to face the president at all, much less with news like this. "It's more than likely that it's ruptured. If we can't keep infection away and the damage is too bad or there's swelling, we could have to take it," he explained.

The other man was silent for a minute. Finally he turned to the nurse.

"Do what you need to do to get enough blood for my daughter. Keep your mouth shut about her." She hustled out of the room.

He turned to his Chief of Staff. "You think we need this man?" he asked him, nodding toward Garth.

Without uttering a word, Clive dipped his head in a nod.

"Go get changed. Be back here before I have to go. You're on official leave. Decide whom you need for help. Tell O'Brien," the president ordered.

Garth turned, closed the curtains at the window and turned to leave the room. Clive clamped a hand on his arm as he reached the door. The president was having his blood drawn and wasn't paying attention.

"You better take good care, son," he told Garth.

"I'll earn this second chance, Mr. O'Brien. I love that woman," Garth told him quietly.

"Go!" Clive ordered.



## *Chapter Nine*

Garth didn't even bother going home. He went to his second in command.

"Dave, get someone to bring me some civilian clothes. I'm gonna tell you something and if I ever hear it again, I'll kill you. You believe me?" he stared at the man until Agent Vosper, Dave, dropped his eyes.

"You been straight with me since the service, G-man of course I believe you. If you say it, you'll do it," he affirmed seriously.

"That woman in there is the president's daughter. I just found that part out. I've been in love with her for a while now. I'm taking leave to protect her until her stalker is caught. I may need help," he finished, holding Dave's shoulder.

His friend emitted a low whistle. "You ever do anything by half, buddy?"

Garth shook his head from side to side "No," he said simply.

He found a call room, showered quickly, and changed into scrub pants and a spare t-shirt one of the residents offered him. Someone found him a clean pair of socks and a doctor's smock. He furnished a key so Dave could get him some shoes and clean clothes for later.

"I'll be glad to be your connection," Dave told him, "but

I think you'll need some back up for a while." Garth knew the other man was right. He knew he'd have need of some help.

Tabitha's doctor had been sworn to secrecy upon threat of who-knew-what and was released to check on his other patients. He let Garth know that the president would be in Tabby's room for another twenty minutes or so.

Garth used those twenty minutes to call his brothers and sisters and let them know that he needed their help. His first call was to his brother Eamon, asking him to take over Tabitha's case.

He returned to Tabitha's room after forty minutes. He found the president rolling down his sleeve and kissing his daughter.

"Tabby, can you hear me?" he said. She'd been doped up so he knew she might not be able to talk to him.

"I love you, Daddy," she whispered. "I'm sorry I let someone hurt me," she told him. At his indrawn breath she said, "Mama said you had too much to give to the world for us to be selfish. She was right, Daddy. You're a great father and you're a great President. I love you so much. Please be okay."

"Shh, Honey. You're the best daughter and you make it so much easier to do what I need to do," he told her. "If I didn't have you, I don't know if I'd care as much about making the world a better place. I love you, Tabby Cat. I need you to be okay, too." He kissed his daughter and held her until Clive O'Brien and Elaine Taggart guided him to the door.

"Damn it, Cavanaugh, you better take care of my baby," he growled at Garth.

"Sir," Garth took a chance. He had his President's attention. "If you want to sneak out, take Agent Vosper with you. Don't come alone. We need you, Sir. All of us do, especially Tabitha."

The Commander in Chief looked at him for a long minute. He nodded and left.

## *Daddy's Girl*

"Sir," Garth said to Clive O'Brien. The Chief of Staff looked at him. "I need my brothers and sisters, sir." O'Brien nodded. Then they were gone.

Finally Garth was alone with Tabitha. He knew she'd used up what lucidity she had to talk to her father that last time. He stretched out in the chair and waited for the next thing to happen.

He was dozing when he heard her begin to cry.

"Please, make it stop. Please help me," she sobbed.

"Tabby, it's me, it's Garth." He tried to get her attention.

"No, not you! You don't care about me," she cried.

"I do, I really do care, Tabby, I'm so sorry. What can I do for you now?" Garth asked, somewhere between angry and miserable.

"Please don't let him hurt me anymore, Garth. I just can't take anymore," she hiccupped.

Garth felt so bad. He moved to her and gathered her into his arms.

"What can I do, baby?" he slid under her as her father had. "I promise I won't hurt you. I was wrong, honey. I'm gonna keep you safe now, I swear it." She continued to sob but she allowed him to gather her close. The nurse came in and reset her monitors giving her another shot. She stayed while Tabitha calmed and fell asleep again.

"Mr. Cavanaugh, what do I tell the next shift?" she finally asked.

"Jennifer?" the young lady nodded. "Tell them that she's connected to the White House and some very influential people are incredibly worried about this young lady. Do me another favor," Garth had had a flash of inspiration. "Call this number," he gave her the number for the Senator from South Carolina. "Leave the message that Tabitha Baker is here. You're gonna be shocked at who shows up..." When he looked at her face and thought about who already had shown

*J. J. Massa*

up, he was a little embarrassed. "Well, maybe not," he corrected himself. "But everyone else will be."

\* \* \* \* \*

The next day, Tabitha was moved down the hall to a larger room. She had very few lucid moments. There were times she'd mumbled or cried in her sleep. At some point, though, Garth began to take notes.

By the time his brothers and sisters began trickling in—one here, two there, and one large group, he had some idea about what had happened to Tabitha.

Around midday, he was surprised by a call on his cell phone.

"Hell of a world," he heard, "when a man can't even visit his daughter in the hospital in broad daylight but I can call an asshole like you."

"Mr. President," Garth answered, "I'm delighted to be speaking to you, too, sir."

"You better have a damn good reason for levity, Cavanaugh," his boss barked at him.

"Matter of fact, I don't sir. She's had a bad day and she'll need more blood. Sir?" he said.

"What is it, son?" President Dalton said gruffly.

"Sir, I think I know something about what happened but she's—the kidney, sir." Garth turned to stare out the window. He was trying to hold on to his own composure.

"I'll be there later. Probably around one in the morning. Make sure they're ready for me," he sounded angry as hell, Garth thought. God help anyone who crossed the president today.

"You got a team yet?" the president asked Garth.

## *Daddy's Girl*

"Coming together, sir." He took a deep breath, "Sir?" Garth ventured.

"Yeah, son?" President Dalton asked.

"Don't nuke anybody today," Garth told him. He heard a bark of laughter and the line went dead.

Over and over, Garth told his siblings—"The woman I love was hurt badly by a stalker. We need to catch him or kill him. Her father's pretty high up so we need to make sure that's not part of the equation. I want you here around twelve-thirty in the morning."

The best and the worst part of Garth's day was early afternoon.

Settled in the new, larger room, Tabitha woke up. She was out of her head with pain. She began calling for her Daddy, Uncle Clive, even Aunt Elaine but mostly, her Daddy and Garth. As much as he had hurt her, she somehow knew Garth would try to help her now.

Garth held her and cuddled her as best as he could without jostling her. He promised to keep anyone from hurting her anymore.

"Garth," she whispered, "you're going to hurt me again. I never knew you would hurt me," she told him, mumbling. "I thought maybe you loved me a little."

There just wasn't a word bad enough to describe himself, Garth knew. He whispered comforting words of love to Tabitha, but he knew she didn't really understand. He hoped beyond reason that some part of what he was saying was sinking in. He would continue to touch her, love her, and comfort her.

Hopefully, her subconscious would remember that she was safe with him.

## *Chapter Ten*

*A* little after midnight, the Cavanaugh siblings began to assemble. Garth let them talk and carry on for ten minutes or so and then he settled them down. He expected Tabby's father in about fifteen minutes and he told them that.

He quashed their proclamations of "greasing the skids" and using favors to get them all here. He encouraged them to sit and relax on the couch and chairs he'd had brought into this larger room. Someone had brought coffee and for that he was damned grateful.

"Listen, this is fucking important so shut the fuck up!" Garth barked, finally. He never spoke like that. In fact he didn't talk much at all. He had their attention.

"Tabby's Dad will be here soon. When he gets here, keep your mouths shut until I introduce you. When I say your name, shake his hand and the other guy's and get out of the way."

The older siblings realized something important was going on. The younger ones wanted to run their mouths. It was close to one in the morning when he got everyone's attention again.

"The first person you're gonna see will have a weapon drawn. Just sit tight and don't move and this won't be a bad day." He looked around at them. "Keep your hands visible."

Garth stood up and moved to the bed. Tabby was moving fretfully again. Jennifer and Dr. Velasquez had tried to put off her injection until her father got to see her. He rubbed

## *Daddy's Girl*

her back and whispered to her.

"Garth?" she sobbed. "Daddy?" she whispered.

He heard his brothers and sisters mumbling about melodrama and stress and then the door came open. Dave had his gun drawn, as expected. Garth held his hands up, his own gun still holstered.

"It's clean, man," Garth told him. "They're all carrying but nobody's drawn," he said. "Hands!" he barked at his siblings.

Every one of them held their empty hands out. Dave moved to the door and opened it, nodding.

The President of the United States, followed by his Chief of Staff, entered the room.

Orrin Cavanaugh, a Military Policeman, shot to his feet and stood at attention. President Dalton slapped Garth's shoulder on the way to the bed. Clive O'Brien gave him a half hug and moved to recline near the window and the bed with Garth.

As the president placed his hand on her head, Tabitha squeaked out, "Garth?"

"It's me, baby," her father said.

"Daddy!" she cried out. A collective gasp could be heard from the other end of the room. He slid onto the bed and leaned down to kiss her. "I'm glad you came, Daddy," she whispered.

"Of course I came, Tabby Cat," he said.

"Daddy..." she croaked. "Daddy, you have to listen," she said.

Her father carefully lifted her onto his lap and cuddled her close to him. "I'm here, Punkin', I'm listening," he said.

"Daddy, I think ..." she took a deep breath. "Daddy, I think I'm going to die."

Garth surged forward and grabbed the president's shoulder. O'Brien grabbed both of them.

"Tabitha," her father said sternly, "I'm sorry, but I can't allow that!" He sounded like he was grounding her, Garth thought.

"Daddy," she opened her eyes and looked at him. Garth could see she was fighting the pain. "I don't know if I can help it, Daddy."

O'Brien pulled Garth back to the window and held him back with both arms. Neither man cared how they appeared to the onlookers.

"My baby Tabby," Dalton crooned, holding her close. "You have to stay alive. I need you. I can't do this without you." Tears were running down the president's face now.

"Daddy, I'm trying my best," she told him. She reached up to touch his face.

"Your best is better than anyone else I know, Tabby Cat," he told her. "I'll help you and so will Uncle Clive and even Garth. We'll all help you live."

"Daddy, it hurts so bad. I can feel my insides bleeding. That man, he's going to do it again," she whispered.

Her father wrapped both arms around her as best as he could without jostling her too much. He buried his face in her hair and rubbed it back and forth.

"Honey, Uncle Clive helped Garth and all his brothers and sisters to come here and catch that man. He'll never hurt you again." He took another deep breath. "The doctor will make you feel better in a few minutes. He'll stop the bleeding and the pain. Please try to get by till we can get you better. I need you or I'll be all by myself. I can't do this President thing without you, Tabby Cat. This is the hardest thing I will ever ask you to do, Baby girl. Just keep living."

Clive released Garth so he could press the call button for the doctor. Jennifer had been waiting and she sprinted in.

As she injected Tabitha, the girl turned to her father. "Okay, Daddy, I'll try harder. I love you. I don't want you to



## *Daddy's Girl*

be alone. Will you let Uncle Clive and Garth help you, too?" she asked as she faded away under the medication.

Garth and Clive both moved to him and placed a hand on Tabitha. "I will," choked Langley Dalton as Clive gripped his shoulder with one hand and Garth's with the other.

All three men took a deep breath and Clive and Garth turned away for a minute. Dr. Velasquez entered the room. Jennifer began preparing paraphernalia for the president's blood donation.

"Tell me what's going on, Doctor!" the president demanded. "Why does my little girl think she's dying?"

"Technically, she is, Mr. President," said Dr. Velasquez. "I think we can stop it, though," he said. The president glared at him. Their audience of twelve held their breaths.

"Think?" President Dalton's voice was low and dangerous.

"We need to remove that kidney, sir," he began. "I'd like to get someone at the University of Maryland Medical Center over here. It's a highly challenging and difficult procedure and they are the pioneers."

"I'll take care of it," said Clive. "We'll get someone over here tomorrow. That soon enough? You need someone now? We can do now..."

"Yes, sir. I mean, no, tomorrow is soon enough," said Dr. Velasquez. "Also, I'm afraid there could be some cranial bruising. Simply put, she probably has a concussion. She'll need to remain reasonably stationary for the better part of three months. The longer she does well, the less likely ..."

He didn't really need to finish his statement. They all understood that he meant the longer she did well, the less chance of her dying as a result of the head injury.

"You got anything else right now?" the president asked the doctor.

"I'll keep Mr. Cavanaugh apprised of what's going on,

sir," the doctor promised. He would be only too glad to get away from there as soon as possible, Garth could tell.

"Go!" the president told him. He went.

"All right, son," Dalton said to Garth, "What's next?"

"I think Tabby's stalker has been in the picture since college," he began. "I need to check further," he said. "We'll be on that right away." He paused. "Mr. President? Mr. O'Brien?" Garth started.

"You might as well call me Uncle Clive, boy," the man said with a faint curve of his lips.

President Dalton was not as magnanimous. "Stick with 'Sir', son, I'm not sure we're going to keep you yet." They were all smiling just a little.

"Maybe he should have ducked a few months ago instead of catching that bullet for you, Mr. President," Clive winked at Garth. "Course it would have been more impressive without the vest."

"What can I say?" Garth laughed. "Didn't want a hole in the 'Babe Magnet'."

"My ass!" the president growled. "The country does owe you a little something, however, for telling me not to nuke anything today." Both men smiled tightly at each other. Garth's brothers and sisters wondered if they'd undervalued him all these years.

"I'd like to introduce you to my brothers and sisters, Mr. President. Every one of them has dropped what they were doing because I asked them to."

Garth extended an arm to indicate his family.

"In order of age and alphabet, sir." He turned and nodded to them.

"Abe, the oldest, FBI, he's Cord's twin," he paused. Each Cavanaugh sibling shook the president's hand followed by the Chief of Staff. "Cord, sir, is also FBI."

"My brother Eamon works for DCPD," he introduced.

## *Daddy's Girl*

Eamon shook hands and moved away.

"I come after him, sir, the only Secret Service operative," Garth continued and then indicated his next brother with a wave, "Isidore is the only Postal Inspector. He works for Mississippi," His brother moved on and his first sister stepped up.

"Katherine, our own little Kat, is Biloxi PD, Undercover," her mirror image moved forward.

"Margaret is called Maggie. She and Kat are twins and she's Biloxi PD, Bomb Team. They'll stay at Tabby's to see if the guy shows up..." They stepped out of the way and a rigid young man stepped forward and saluted.

"Captain Orrin Cavanaugh is an Army MP stationed at Fort Ord," Garth explained.

"At ease, son," the president told him. Orrin assumed the parade rest position off to the side.

"Quin is Biloxi PD," Garth introduced as another young man moved forward. "He's a K-9 officer and he works Public Relations, also. I don't know if he brought his dog..." Garth looked over at his younger brother. Quin blushed and shrugged, with an embarrassed nod. "Uh, maybe you can meet her later..." President Dalton raised a brow and Quin moved aside.

"Siobhan is Biloxi PD, part of the Accident Reconstruction Team," Garth went on as a very young woman reached out to shake hands.

"Ulick is Biloxi PD, from the Dive Team Division," another young brother reached out to be introduced.

"Willow and Yorrick are Biloxi ATF. They're twins," he indicated his last two siblings, "That's the lot of 'em, sir," he said when they had shaken hands and stepped away.

"Good Lord, son!" The president looked over the group. "Sure I don't need to activate the Mississippi National Guard just to keep Biloxi safe till you all get home?"

"No damn wonder they gave me trouble at Biloxi PD," laughed Clive.

"Folks, I just want to say something here," President Dalton began.

Everyone stared at him. Jennifer and Doctor Velasquez had returned and were listening as well.

"The fact that you all dropped what you were doing to come when your brother called you—that says a lot for you and for him. You might have actually redeemed him a little in my estimation. Anyway, pay attention," he barked, as if anyone would have done otherwise while being addressed personally by the president of the United States.

"This little girl is my only living relative and I'm hers." He gave his daughter another kiss. "Her mother was the only woman I ever loved and our daughter is my heart and soul. I love her with everything that I am. If Tabitha doesn't make it, I'm resigning. Anything you can do to keep her safe, you do for your country. Never doubt it. Thank you for stepping up to the plate."

A stunned silence greeted his speech. Orrin had come to attention again.

"Be seated!" the president ordered. Everyone moved back to the couch and chairs. Orrin remained standing.

"Come," he gestured the doctor forward.

"Sir," said Dr. Velasquez, "The surgery will end up taking about six or so hours, possibly longer. I'll make sure Mr. Cavanaugh is updated often."

President Dalton nodded. He knew what the doctor wasn't saying. Tabby was pretty beat up and had a head injury. If this surgery weren't absolutely necessary, they would have tried to put it off.

"Tabby? Can you hear me?" her father asked her. He kissed her face.

"Daddy? I'll do my best," she murmured.

## *Daddy's Girl*

"I love you, Punkin'," he said.

"I love you, too, Daddy," she sighed, falling asleep on the last word.

"Clive, have Agent Vosper go out with you. Garth, walk me out. Vosper, order the car," the president issued orders while he headed out the door. "Glad to know you, Cavanaughs," he nodded.

Orrin held a salute.

Garth slipped on his jacket and patted his chest to verify that his gun was holstered in its usual place under his left arm. The four men left the room together and the Cavanaugh siblings assembled around the large window near the foot of Tabitha's bed.

## *Chapter Eleven*

In a short time, they could see the president and Garth exit the building. As they watched, a car approached. At the same time, a man walked up from the other direction. When the man got within a few feet, they saw Garth draw his gun and step in front of the president.

The driver of the car pulled to the curb and jumped out, standing beside it with his gun drawn. The president said something and the man scurried away.

As his brothers and sisters watched, Garth opened the car door for the president and the two men faced each other, talking. The Commander in Chief was an inch taller than Garth. After a minute, they shook hands. The Cavanaugh family watched as the president hugged their brother briefly and then slid into the backseat of the car.

Clive O'Brien walked up then and repeated the process, first shaking Garth's hand then pulling him into a quick hug. The last man, Dave Vosper walked up and stopped in front of Garth. He put his gun away and saluted Garth. After a minute, Garth saluted back. Vosper slid into the front passenger seat and the car drove away.

Waiting for their brother's return, the Cavanaughs assembled began chattering quietly. Orrin didn't say a thing. Garth had always been his inspiration. They even favored each other. He knew the others didn't realize the strengths of

## *Daddy's Girl*

the fourth Cavanaugh but Orrin did. He thought about all that he'd seen and heard so far this night.

"Who knew?" Abe shook his head.

"How about our own little Alligator Gar?" Izzy piped up, his serious face softened in a smile.

"If he isn't just a snake in the grass!" Maggie chimed in.

Orrin stepped in front of them and stared until he had their attention, dark eyes snapping.

"Less than six months ago, your brother took a bullet meant to kill the president of the United States. He knowingly put himself in the path of a bullet to prevent injury to our Commander in Chief." He glared at them for a minute. "That's his job and The president knows that. How many of you have ever seen any President touch a Secret Service agent, or anyone else? Garth has a friendly relationship with President Dalton. It's not only because he does his job, but as long as the president's not bleeding, you know our brother's doing a damned good job."

"At ease, Captain!" Garth barked at his little brother. Orrin assumed parade rest again.

"I said *at ease*, soldier," Garth growled. Orrin dropped silently into a chair, his face blank.

Garth looked around at the assembly. Usually, his blond, blue eyed oldest brothers took charge when they were present. Garth always let them unless he disagreed with something. Today, he was unquestionably in charge. He sat down.

"Orrin, Tabby's greatest fear is what happened a few months ago. I don't know what she's hearing right now but I don't want to remind her about it." He released a deep sigh. Orrin nodded.

"She didn't know I was her father's detail until last week. Course, I didn't know she was his daughter until the night I called you guys." Garth flopped back in his chair

massaging his forehead.

The room was silent for a minute.

Finally, Eamon spoke, burnished red hair catching the low light as he looked around. "Okay, Garth, I've officially taken over her case and I'm getting all kinds of support. What you want to do?"

"I think the guy after her has been targeting her for three years. That's why it escalated this way."

"How come she never told anyone?" Maggie asked.

"Best I can figure, she thought it was just a crush," Garth explained. "When she couldn't handle it, she left. She transferred from USC to Meredith and thought that took care of it."

"That's not unusual for victims of stalkers," Siobhan murmured, her dark brow furrowed.

"They're implementing all kinds of stalker awareness programs at Mississippi college campuses," Willow added.

"A lot of people don't know about the state programs for address confidentiality," Isidore put in. "Reverse directories are no help, either," he said with disgust.

"It's usually women," Siobhan told them, looking at Maggie. "They feel sorry, like they're being mean when they turn a guy down. Sometimes they think they're overreacting." She paused, thinking about it. "What we really need to do is find out what kind of stalker this guy is. I mean, did she go out with him? Is he delusional?"

Several heads nodded before Cord spoke up. "Abe and I will see what we can find out from USC then."

"When did she move here?" asked Abe.

"About two months ago," Garth told him.

He didn't like considering that Tabby might have had some kind of relationship with the person who'd hurt her so badly. Still, people dated and broke it off all the time. There was no crime in that. She didn't deserve what had happened to her. Nobody did.



## *Daddy's Girl*

"Wonder if he pestered her after college?" Abe and Cord said together.

Maggie looked over at them and rolled her eyes. "I meant, *right* after college," Cord huffed.

"What about letters and such?" Izzy asked. Garth had expected that. Isidore had always had a mail fixation. He collected stamps, still wrote to pen pals...the man was something else. Garth grinned, comforted by the predictable for a change. His Black Irish brother, blue eyes sparking with purpose, never let him down.

"Exactly, Iz," he turned to smile at Isadore. "See what you can find. Just settle in tonight and see what you find tomorrow. Which one of you three—or four—wants to get her mail?" Garth looked at Abe, Cord, Eamon, and Izzy.

"We'll all look at whatever it is—give it to me," Isidore piped up. "The Postal Service frequently turns to the FBI when mail is involved in violent crimes," he explained. "After all, it's usually a crime that has crossed state lines..."

"Fine," Abe agreed. "Cord, you want to take one of the youngsters there and go check out USC, Columbia? Columbia, right, Garth?"

Garth shook his head. "No, Beaufort. She likes the coast."

"Okay, Beaufort," Cord agreed. "I think I'll take Willow and Yorick...they know enough to ask the right questions, but they're young enough to fit in. I'm old enough to look like a grownup," he laughed.

At thirty-six years old, Cord, and consequently his twin Abe, had a handsome, ageless quality about them. Still, there was no doubt that both men were above the legal age. Yorick and his twin Willow, both with green eyes and dark red hair, were only barely old enough to consent by America's laws, just having past their twenty-second birthdays. They were sweet, attractive young people. They'd fit in well in a college environment.

"Eamon," Garth turned to his next oldest brother. "Nobody has been in her place in a week—only her or her attacker."

"A clean field then...We'll bring in a forensics team tonight and see what we can get—before the girls get in there," Eamon mused aloud, stepping away from his brother to pull out a cell phone.

"I'll get us a room here," Kat began, only to be cut off.

"Cord and I can stay at Quantico," Abe interrupted, "I think Izzy can, too...he's cleared." Izzy nodded.

"Quin and I are staying with Eamon. Orrin..." Siobhan began planning.

But Garth had plans for Orrin, so he interrupted this time. "Orrin is going to stay with my buddy, Dave. Ulick, Maggie, and Kat can stay over at my house. Willow and Yor can stay there, too, just for the night. I have a spare room and a couch and they're leaving in the morning. I'm staying right here. We'll figure out who goes where and what comes next after Eamon's crew gets a good look at whatever was left behind at Tabby's place."

"Okay, the team is on its way," Eamon announced. "Who's coming with me?" He looked around.

"Hell, it's right across the street from your place isn't it?" Maggie asked, inclining her head toward Garth, hands on hips.

Garth shrugged. "As a matter of fact, it is."

"We might as well most of us go...We'll go to your place so we don't all scare the locals," Kat snickered, catching Maggie's eye with a wink. Kat had wavy, wine red hair, Maggie's hair was a ginger red, as wavy as her sister's, though both had the same laughing blue green eyes. Sobering, she looked at her older brothers, "This is going to get some attention. Press, you know?"

"She's a White House employee," Quin reminded them.

## *Daddy's Girl*

"We'll spin it that way, if we have to. For now, we'll try to low key it as much as we can."

"Sounds good," Garth agreed. "I'll run it all by the boss...Get back to me with whatever you find, huh?"

"You got it, Gar," Abe promised, moving to his feet.

"It's damn-near three in the morning," Eamon stood.

A general shuffling and watch-checking ensued as the Cavanaugh siblings made their way out the door. After a protracted series of goodbyes and hugs, Garth finally found himself alone with his brother, Orrin.

## *Chapter Twelve*

Orrin watched silently as his favorite brother went to check on his ladylove. He wondered what she looked like. She had to be special to appeal to Garth.

He wasn't afraid to say that Garth was his favorite. He loved his family, every one of them. For some reason, though, he'd idolized Garth since he was old enough to think. The silent young man, five years his senior, had always made time for him, understood him, valued him.

When Garth had joined the Army after graduating High School, Orrin had been at first devastated, and then determined to follow him. Garth had never let him down, writing to him every week, calling on special occasions, coming to events. They had a connection and he was incredibly proud of his older brother.

"So why did you want me to stay with Dave?" Orrin asked when the other man joined him. He thought he remembered Dave from one of his rare visits when Garth was still in the service, aside from what he'd seen of him this night.

"Dave's a bartender now...I thought you'd need a drink," Garth nudged him, teasing, sitting down next to him on the couch at the back of the room.

"I sure as hell could use a drink," came a voice from the opening door.

"Hey, man," Garth jumped to his feet, greeting Dave,

## *Daddy's Girl*

reaching out for a handshake. "Did you get Eagle all tucked in and locked down?"

Dave opened his mouth to speak when an ironic voice behind him observed, "Well, he tried. I just happen to outrank him. Good damned thing I brought the booze, since we all need a drink."

Orrin shot up, automatically coming to rigid attention.

"Holy Shit, sir!" Garth swore, face mottling. "How the fuck are we supposed to keep you alive if you..." Orrin blanched, sure his brother was about to be drawn, quartered, boiled in oil, or at least incarcerated.

"Sit down and shut up, son, and remember who you're talking to!" President Dalton snapped.

"Sorry, sir," Garth combed a shaking hand through his short hair.

Turning to Orrin, The president rapped out, "You soldier—go liberate some small, synthetic, open containers capable of holding fluid, at least seven ounces." To Dave and Garth, he said, "You know you've got to be detailed and specific with these guys..."

Orrin saw him hand the bottle to Garth and head toward his daughter's bed.

"Better get five of 'em, young man," The president's Chief of Staff said from behind him. Locking eyes with The president, the newcomer said, "Think of me as her mother. I made Elaine stay with Delores."

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"I hope one of you turned the light out when you left," Garth growled, flopping down on the couch. He snatched a plastic cup from Orrin, ignoring his wide eyes.

"Ah, someone will wake up the Vice President if anything happens," Clive said flippantly, reaching for a plastic cup.

"At least they aren't urine sample cups," President Dalton took the bottle from Garth and turned to Orrin.

The look of horror on the young captain's face at the very idea of handing his Commander in Chief a specimen cup to drink from had both Dave and Garth, and after a moment, even Clive and President Dalton, laughing out loud.

President Dalton took the bottle of what turned out to be exceptional bourbon and poured all five men a healthy shot.

"Don't say your President doesn't care about the needs of his soldiers, Cavanaugh," Clive laughed.

Orrin sat holding his cup, looking at the other men, trying to decide, apparently, what to do. "Sip it, don't knock it back," Dave cautioned, leading by example. "This is the *good* stuff. You have to run a country to get your hands on it."

Orrin nodded stiffly, lifting it carefully to his lips. Dave chuckled, turning away. Garth sent his second a glare, promising him retribution later for letting the Eagle fly tonight.

"Aw, don't be too hard on him, son," The president intercepted his threat. "I couldn't stay in. I had to come back. Tell me what's going on?"

Garth pushed his splayed fingers through his hair again, marshalling his thoughts. "Uh, let me see. Eamon has a forensics team going through Tabby's place, seeing if we can pick up anything that way. Cord, Yorick, and Willow are headed down to USC tomorrow to see what they can find out about this character. I'm sure I'll get a call in about an hour..."

"Shit." President Dalton took a healthy swallow of the dark amber liquid. "I just wanted to spend more time with my baby girl. Damned Serena...Fuck!" he spat, drinking a little more.

"Come on, Lang, Serena knew what was best. She had

## *Daddy's Girl*

that...*shine*. I doubt she knew this was coming." The Chief of Staff studied his own cup of alcohol for a long pause.

"Uh..." Garth cleared his throat. He looked over at Dave and then Orrin. Dave was as curious as he was. Orrin appeared nervous as hell. The handsome, young-looking President had an eyebrow arched, waiting for him to continue. "How did you get to be President of the United States without anyone finding out about Tabby, or Serena, come to that?"

Clive O' Brian swirled his drink in the plastic cup, looking deep into it and then up into the eyes of his best friend and boss. "It was the most sophisticated, well-planned evasive intelligence maneuver of your career," he told Dalton.

"Bullshit," The president responded. "I think Serena had it all planned out the night we met."

"Tell me about it?" Garth asked, leaning forward. Orrin and Dave had edged away a little bit, Garth noticed. He knew they were interested, but suspected they didn't want to be noticed, just in case.

"We met on the beach," President Dalton murmured, sipping at his bourbon.

"Kill Devil Hills," Garth questioned, "Mile marker seven?"

Dalton threw him a hard look and then shrugged. "Yeah, the OBX. Things were different then, twenty-six years ago. It was a lot quieter, not as built up, you know?"

Dave and Garth both murmured agreement, more to keep the conversation going than to suggest that either really had any idea about how developed the Outer Banks of North Carolina were.

"Emmet Baker had just dropped dead," Clive picked up the story again. "...crusty old bastard," he mumbled. He laughed at the surprise etched on the younger men's faces. "Lang here had the hots for his wife, badly."

"I *also* had a lot of respect for The Governor," Dalton

growled. "I avoided her like the plague." He turned to Garth and Dave—Orrin was attempting to make himself small in a corner of the sofa. "It was hard as hell standing next to her all day, getting her through the funeral. I had planned to run for Governor the next term; I ended up inheriting the office to start with."

"How'd he die?" Dave asked, too interested to keep out of the conversation.

"Congestive heart failure," O'Brien spoke up. "He wasn't a young man."

"Serena loved him," Dalton cut in, "They just weren't *in* love...he was over thirty years older than her. She did a lot for the state, though...a whole lot."

"So, did you *plan* to meet in Kill Devil Hills?" Garth wanted to know.

"Naw," Dalton answered, topping off everyone's drink. "She'd gone a few days before, staying with an aunt or something. I didn't try to find out who or where. I just needed to clear my head, and yeah, maybe find some sweet young thing and get lucky...shit, I don't know."

Orrin looked nonplussed, trying to consider the implications of his Commander In Chief getting lucky. Garth nudged him with a quiet snicker and turned back to The president.

"It was late at night...I was just wandering the beach, and there she was. I walked up to her and looked down. She looked up and just said "Oh!" that's it. We talked all night, met there again and did it the next night. After that, well..."

"The rest is history," O'Brien looked from one man to the next.

"Pretty much," The president sighed. "Tabby was born premature and Serena insisted that we let the world think she was Emmett's. She had a way of knowing things...she knew I'd be president...she knew she'd die when Tabby was seven. Tabby has it, only backward..."



## *Daddy's Girl*

Garth leaned forward. "Excuse me, sir?" he asked carefully. "Has what?"

"She can tell the past, the same way her mother can tell the future. Serena could touch things, or people, and know what they were going to do later, or what was going to happen down the line." He shrugged. She'd proven herself to him very well. "Tabby can touch something and see what it was involved in, or if you've touched it, she can see what you've done. It's not foolproof, but it's accurate enough."

"So when she grabbed my vest that night..." He let that thought trail off. The president was glaring at him in a way he didn't want to encourage.

"No wonder she looked at me funny at the bar that first day," Dave piped up. When all heads turned his way, he went on, "I gave her a drink and she picked it up, and then turned around to stare at me like I'd said something...off color..."

"Yeah, she can tell things about people just by handling something they have..." O'Brien nodded.

"Well, why didn't she realize this nut job meant trouble for her then?" Garth gritted. "Especially since he'd already been after her..."

"She can see what folks have done, *sometimes*." Dalton reached over and squeezed Garth's shoulder. "Besides, she probably never thought the guy would hurt her. She's like that. Too trusting."

## Chapter Thirteen

“*W*hat good is a piece of chewed gum if we don’t even have any suspects?” Garth growled, raking his hand through his short hair in agitation. Tabby was in surgery and he hadn’t heard anything for an hour.

“Gum and *hair*. Almost two thirds of all stalkers are non-Hispanic whites. A DNA test will at least help us narrow that down. And we’re talking more than a piece, we’re talking twenty or thirty chewed pieces of gum around the side of the house near the garage—along with many strands of fine, short, brownish hair. Like you’d find if he was running his hands through his hair compulsively. Has to be from our boy,” Abe filled him in. He spoke calmly, as an FBI agent, he was naturally used to dealing with agitated people.

“All right. Okay...” Garth sighed, trying to focus only on what Abe was saying and forget his fears for Tabby. “So, of course we know it’s a guy, huh? Anything else?”

“Around ninety percent of all stalkers are male, over half of them educated but working in blue collar jobs—we know our guy went to college. He fits the profile so far. And most have some kind of other criminal record—prior acts, assaults, substance abuse. That narrows it down even more,” Abe went on calmly. He hesitated though, as if there was some-

## *Daddy's Girl*

thing else he meant to say.

Garth stilled. If Abe was tiptoeing around him, it couldn't be good news. "What?" he demanded. Taking a deep breath, he asked again in a quieter tone. "What, Abe?"

"Some—a fair amount of stalkers suffer from a mental disorder, aside from substance abuse. They might have mood disorders which could be treatable, but some aren't. A whole lot of 'em are obsessed with death, suicide, common destiny..." he trailed off.

"Yeah, I get it," Garth growled into his flip phone, pacing toward the door and away from it. He'd left Orrin inside, more or less guarding the operating room. Cell phones were discouraged inside and Garth didn't want to run afoul of the hospital administration if he could help it. "You're saying that he doesn't care if he lives or dies, as long as Tabby goes with him..."

"Yeah," Abe agreed. "That's about the size of it. And if she was nice to him, and he chose her, whether she went out with him or not, he'll feel like he owns her." Abe paused and then went on. "Either way, the good news is, with what we *do* have on this guy...we could narrow it down or even pinpoint him with the gum and the hair. Not all agencies will have the DNA, but if we can prove ethnic background, then Cord will have something more specific to look for."

"All right, yeah," Garth agreed, trying to be upbeat also. "Then Yor and Willow will know who to talk to...somewhat. Okay, this is good. Thanks, Abe."

"How's she doing?" Abe asked, his voice softening in concern.

"I don't fuckin' know," Garth snapped. "Shit, I'm sorry. I mean, I haven't heard and she's been in there for a few hours now. I'm a wreck."

"Hang tight, bro," Abe soothed, accepting Garth's ill temper. "We'll do everything we can out here. She's in good

hands. Just..."

"Just what?" Garth jumped at the change in Abe's tone.

"Remember that she's safe in the O.R."

"Yeah," Garth agreed, anxious now to get back inside. "I'll check in later, huh? If anything comes up, send someone over or just page me and I'll come out and call you back."

"Will do," Abe agreed. The line went dead and Garth stuffed his phone back into his pocket.

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"Shelby, Mr. Johnson wants to see you in his office!" a snide voice announced loudly.

Mr. Johnson was the manager of the grocery store that currently provided his paycheck. It was a temporary job. They all were. When he and Tabby settled down, he'd have to get something a little more permanent, something more stable. For now, the hours were flexible.

"Steve," he snapped. "I told you that I prefer to be called Steve," he grated. The idiot should be able to handle something *that* simple.

"Doesn't matter," the other man mumbled, turning his back and kneeling down beside a box of creamed corn.

He had a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach, but then, that feeling had been his constant companion for days. He'd hurt her, he knew it. But she wasn't dead. He knew that, too, because when he'd mustered up the courage to go back to the half-finished basement he rented, she'd been gone.

He'd hurriedly stuffed what he could of his meager belongings into his car and got away from there. He needed to get his head together before he saw her again.

Of course he was angry. She had to know that. She should

## *Daddy's Girl*

have waited for him to return. It was his right to take care of her, even if he had hurt her. She should have let him apologize. She owed him that much.

Resentfully, he lifted a hand to knock at the store manager's door.

"That you, Mohotten?" he heard from within.

"Yes, sir," he mumbled.

He wasn't that good at respectful, but a job was a job and a boss was a boss. He was smarter than all of them, of course. His focus had to be on Tabby now, so he couldn't look for work in his field. As soon as she accepted their destiny, he would take more interest in employment. With his intelligence and talent, he wasn't worried about getting hired. He was a good catch, after all.

"Come on in here," the deep voice beckoned. "Close the door."

That couldn't be good. He closed the door.

"Something on your mind, Mr. Johnson?" he asked, fighting not to sneer. This wouldn't be the first time he'd been fired, or the last. He wouldn't go out sniveling.

"You've been late every day this week, you look like shit...I gotta let you go, Mohotten," Mr. Johnson said bluntly.

"Whatever happened to reprimands and second chances?" Shelby *did* sneer this time. He couldn't help himself.

"You haven't been here ninety days," Johnson returned evenly. "I don't have to give you any reason. I was just being helpful. You'll never get on anywhere else if you don't clean up and work on that attitude."

"Helpful," he spat. "You're not going to give me a good reference."

Johnson shrugged. "By law, I can't really give you a bad one. Your appearance will do you more harm than I ever could. Take your check up to the cashier and sign it. No fee." There was usually a dollar fee to cash checks for employees.

*J. J. Massa*

Even though he didn't feel all that well-done-by, he didn't want to make things any worse. Besides, it was plenty hard to cash a paycheck when you didn't have a bank account.

"Thank you," he grumbled, snatching the white envelope with his check inside.

Nobody spoke to him on the way to the cash register area. The cashier was coldly polite. He didn't care, though. He had more important things on his mind.

He had to find Tabby before he could get another job. It would probably be a good idea if he cleaned himself up first, Johnson was right about that. Or...maybe a day laborer or something. He wasn't afraid of a little hard work. That would afford him the flexibility he needed, as well.

Decision made, he cashed his check, bought a pack of chewing gum, and headed for his car.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Whatcha got, Eamon?" Garth was looking for anything he could find to take his mind off of Tabby, who was currently in the recovery room. Her father had called twice over the last few hours, the president's Chief of Staff, three times.

"Hey, there's Dave," Orrin observed, watching a press conference silently airing on a large television in the corner of the room.

Garth and Eamon looked over. Garth was silent for a second and then turned away.

"He's talking about that Foreign Aid Bill that congress is trying to push through," Garth explained. "What's going on, Eamon?"

"How'd you know that?" Orrin demanded. "The sound's turned down and the captioning isn't turned on ei-

## *Daddy's Girl*

ther."

Garth looked at him blankly for a minute. "Oh. I read lips. It's a useful skill."

Eamon looked from one to the other. Orrin was fixed on the television, apparently trying to read the president's lips. Dave stood behind him, still as a statue. Garth waited for his older brother's eyes to land on him again and made a *come on* gesture with his fingertips.

"Yeah," Eamon chuckled with a little start. "Okay, we couldn't get a full match on his prints, but the hair and the gum came back with a few things."

Eamon hesitated as if gathering his thoughts. "Well?" Garth asked impatiently.

Shooting an irritated look at his younger brother, Eamon flipped out a small tablet, turning pages until he found what he was looking for.

"Okay," he huffed, "I don't understand all of this, but here it is." He glanced up at Garth, who nodded. "Some antipsychotic drugs can cause the level of insulin in the blood to go up or down...you can tell that from saliva samples sometimes. Abe had the gum analyzed and our guy is taking some kind of drug that reduces the insulin level in his blood and something else to correct that. The head of the lab over there ran his results through a friend at the UVA Medical School's Research Department."

"You can tell all that from a wad of gum?" Garth shook his head in disbelief.

"It's the saliva—and the hair," Eamon nodded, respect apparent. "Apparently the saliva has a lot of the same proteins that our blood does. And the hair shows us what meds he was taking months ago and what he's taken recently. It's a piece of the puzzle."

"How come we can't just ask her?" Orrin spoke up, moving forward and joining the conversation.

*J. J. Massa*

Garth shot him a glare. "She's a bit indisposed at the moment," he growled.

Orrin looked at him for a long minute. "Well...she *will* wake up. I mean, she knows this guy, right?"

"It's not that we can't wait for her to tell us his name, Or'," Eamon stepped in. "It's just that every bit of information we can gather about this loser and his habits will help."

\* \* \* \* \*

The low murmur of purposeful voices buzzed around her, punctuated by the steady *beep, beep, beep* of medical equipment. She felt a distant soreness, nothing too taxing, but she knew it would be worse when the anesthesia wore off.

Surgery. She knew that she'd been in surgery. Garth had told her, the doctor had told her. Kidney...that's right, there was something wrong with her kidney.

Tabby struggled to open her eyes, to speak. The best she could do was a low groan. That apparently was enough, bringing a concerned nurse to her side.

When the nurse moved away, Garth was there, taking her hand, kissing her forehead. "Tabby? Baby? I'm here," he murmured, stroking her face.

"Garth..." her throat was dry, she felt restless, like she wanted to be in someone else's skin. If only he could make it all better. Maybe a distraction would help. "What's going on? Talk to me," she husked.

"I'm not completely sure what you mean, baby," he hedged, spooning one single chip of ice onto her lips.

She opened her mouth graciously, ravenously sucking on the ice. Nothing had ever tasted so good in her entire life!

"More!" she demanded.



## *Daddy's Girl*

With a warm chuckle, Garth dropped another chip of icy heaven into her mouth, no doubt thinking he'd distracted her.

The ice had revived her, made her feel a little more human. She let him spoon another chip into her mouth, opening up like a baby bird for him. It was manna to her, and it made him feel good to do something so easy but so appreciated, she could tell.

Finally, she decided she needed information more than ice chips. "Garth," she murmured. "Tell me what's going on...I have vague notions but I really don't know what's been real and what isn't."

"Basically, we—my brothers and sisters mostly, are trying to track down the guy who did this to you. Think you can tell me his name?" Garth asked hopefully.

"Your brothers and sisters?" Tabby was stunned. "How come...why not use the local guys?" she asked. She was winding down again, but she didn't want to go back to sleep. There was something... "Shelby...uh, Shelby Mohotten...that's, um, his name," she sighed, swallowing a yawn. "He's creepy...disturbed." She could hear her voice drifting off, powerless to stop it. "Steve, um, likes to be... uh..." she struggled, forcing the words out through uncooperative lips. "Call him *Steve*..." she managed on a last puff of sleepy breath.

"Steve, huh?" Garth muttered to himself. "How odd," he thought as he stroked Tabby's hair back from her face. He had nothing against the name *Steve*, and nothing against the name *Shelby*, either. Until now...

Well, that didn't matter too much, beyond the fact that Garth now had a name for his brothers and sisters to work with. Hopefully, they could track him down. He liked to think he could protect Tabby for the rest of her life and maybe he could. More likely, she wouldn't allow that. She'd get over this terrible experience, as she should, with love, support, and

counseling and she'd demand her independence again.

At the nurses' urging, Garth stepped out of the recovery room so that they could take Tabitha's vital signs and various other medically necessary chores. He looked around and spotted his brothers right where he left them. Orrin was still squinting at the television screen, trying to read the president's lips. Eamon had been joined by Abe, and as Garth made his way over, Kat and Maggie entered through another door.

\* \* \* \* \*

Shelby slammed down the telephone handset, jerked at the cord, and tried his best to part it from the metal boxed body of the payphone. The fact that he couldn't just enrage him further. He hadn't wanted to believe the little paragraph in the two-day old paper. If he hadn't been looking for it, he might not have found it.

Tabitha Baker, only child of the late Grand Old Man of South Carolina, Governor Baker, had been injured in an accident. She was a patient in George Washington Hospital and was currently not seeing visitors. Flowers and donations were welcomed to be given to the hospital.

How dare she? He moved away from the bank of payphones, moving with the crowd milling through Union Station. He needed to calm down, to think. Why had she kept the most important information about herself from him? He thought he knew everything about her.

He stopped short. She wanted him to work for it. That was it. She wanted him to find out about her, unwrapping the layers that made up who she was, like fine tissue paper covering a porcelain vase. Well, he could do that, was doing

## *Daddy's Girl*

that. Now that he knew his Tabitha was *somebody*, related to the late Governor Baker of South Carolina, some things made sense that hadn't before.

He had to prove himself—show her that he was worthy of her. Show her that he was man enough for her. She was testing him. That was fine—everyone knew how smart he was. He was up to this task.

With purposeful strides, Shelby made his way across the marble floors of the bustling train station that was also home to more than one hundred stores and restaurants. At street level, he found the ticket booth for the Virginia Railway Express, watching for the METRO Red Line train. It would transport him to Metro Center where he could either take the Blue Line or the Orange Line and get off at the Foggy Bottom station. From there, he'd be right at the main entrance of George Washington University Hospital, where he'd discovered that Tabitha had been taken.

Once he got there, he'd find out where she was and how best to get to her. As important as she was, she would certainly have a guard of some kind. It was no wonder that she needed him. He understood that she needed to be away from the cloying restrictions of public life. She needed him, to care for her. He wouldn't let her down.

## *Chapter Fourteen*

Shelby wasn't sure if his luck was good or bad. He'd gotten off the bus and waited, checking the situation out. There didn't seem to be any increased security present, but he watched, just to be sure.

Seeing nothing out of the ordinary, or what he assumed was ordinary anyway, he casually made his way up to the information desk. He forwent asking anything of the youngish Hispanic man wearing the jacket and badge of security. Instead, he turned toward a matronly older woman whose nametag identified her as Marge and proclaimed her a volunteer.

"Hi," he smiled as pleasantly as he could manage. "I'm looking for a patient's room number. I heard she was here." He slid the paper in front of her. "Tabitha Baker, my very good friend, is hurt." He bowed his head, regret and worry overwhelming him.

The sweet old thing smiled at him, practically simpering. It was no more than Shelby...Steve deserved, anyway.

"I'm sorry, young man; we can't give out that room number. She isn't seeing visitors yet. If you'd like to send up a note, why I'm sure I can guarantee that she'll get it as soon as she's able."

Shelby fought the urge to pound the desk, inhaling a deep breath and allowing his disappointment to show. The

## *Daddy's Girl*

guard was paying attention now, so he shook his head in negation, murmuring his thanks and left the area as soon as he could.

He needed another plan. The love of his life, his woman, was up there, being held against her will and he needed to save her, to claim her.

There were a lot of ways to blend into the furniture in a hospital. He'd think of something. The best place to start was the place Tabby had started. The Emergency Room.

It didn't bother him that the guard began talking to the old woman as he moved away. After all, he hadn't done anything wrong. Tabby was very special. Lots of people liked her. Not to mention how many people would be after her since she was so important.

He smiled grimly. She'd been telling him in so many ways that she loved him—she needed him. That first day, she'd sat in front of him in English Language level two oh one and he'd known. She was calling out to him. She always sat within five seats of him after that. Always.

If that wasn't enough to tell him she needed him, that she loved him, twice, she'd stepped on him in the hall. She'd been quick to apologize both times and recognized how grievous an injury she'd done him. She knew he was more than he seemed, and she let him know that.

It had taken a lot for him to ask her to coffee early in their second year. He could easily see how disappointed she was to have to turn him down, but obviously, she couldn't draw attention to him or to herself. That made so much more sense now, as did the fact that she so sweetly told him she couldn't date him. He'd been so angry with her when she didn't return for her third year.

But, they were both destined for big things. She couldn't take a chance on not finishing her degree, or risk him not realizing how important she was. And he had...finally.

*J. J. Massa*

"Help you, mister?" he jerked around, surprised at the abrasive voice behind him.

"Oh, yeah, thanks. I'm lost," he improvised quickly. The dark skinned man arched a questioning brow at him. "Uh, I start work in housekeeping, today," he smiled weakly.

"That so?" his questioner asked, pursing full lips and staring at him with narrowed eyes. "Why don't you head over to personnel? They'll put you where you belong. You know where that is?"

What could he say? If he didn't know, he'd give away the fact that he'd never been before. With a tight nod, he turned on his heel and headed in the other direction.

"Hey," a furtive voice joined him. He looked over at the blue-jacketed young man falling into step beside him. "Come on with me. We'll get you fixed up. Everybody gets lost. Guy's a jerk."

"Thanks," he smiled, relieved. "Call me Steve."

"Good to meet you, Steve," his savior grinned. "Damn good. I sure didn't want to have to mop four floors tonight. I'm Pat."

Destiny. It was destiny and this proved it.

\* \* \* \* \*

"How's she doing, son?" The president asked the second Garth opened his phone.

"She's doing much better, sir," Garth was pleased to tell him. "I spoke to her for several minutes in recovery. She was alert and talking clearly before she dropped off to sleep again."

"I can't get over there right now. You'll tell her I called." It wasn't a request, and Garth didn't treat it like one.

"The second she opens her eyes again, sir," he promised.

## *Daddy's Girl*

"Good man."

The line went dead and Garth stuffed the small phone back into his pocket. He knew there were rules against cell phones in hospitals, but this was the president. If he didn't qualify as an exception, nobody did. Besides, Garth reassured himself, he was well away from any medical equipment, heading for the large waiting room off to the side where he'd left his brothers and sisters.

"Okay, boys and girls," he began, including Maggie, Siobhan, and Kat in his greeting. "We now have a name. Shelby Mohatten."

"That's going to be *very* helpful," Isidore said as he stood to shake Garth's hand. "Cord has a stack of questionable letters that someone sent to Tabby a few years ago, and to a couple of the professors at the college. Because they were in house, they didn't have postage, but still needed it. Seems they never got around to reporting the issue, but never got around to investigating it, either."

"Well, that's a piece of luck," Eamon murmured, making a note on his pad.

"I'm hoping we can find a residence for this guy," Siobhan spoke up. "I'd really like to see what I can find there. It could help."

"And maybe a means of employment," Abe chimed in. "I sincerely doubt our boy is independently wealthy."

"You know..." Quin had been mostly quiet, seated on the floor next to his large shepherd, Eurydice. "Speaking of money, let's assume he doesn't have much. We already know that he fixated on Tabitha without any real encouragement, right?"

"What are you getting at?" Garth asked, intent on his brother. Quin's social nature tended to disguise his intelligence and thoughtfulness. He didn't miss a thing, usually, and had taken a second minor in psychology in college.

Whatever he had to say would be worth hearing, Garth knew.

"Erotomania," he stated, his gaze taking in everyone assembled. Eurydice thumped her tail. "It's kind of rare. It's also called also called de Clerambault's syndrome—it's the delusional belief that another person, usually of a higher social status, is in love with them. From the sound of things, Shelby has been diagnosed with something. He's on antipsychotics, Abe said, right?"

Abe leaned forward. "Yeah, but it's possible that he might have gone from regular medication to nothing. The hair tests—DNA tests, will show it. Doc said that if he just quit taking his stuff, it could cause his symptoms to come back with a vengeance."

"Just looking back," Maggie entered the conversation, "it seems like this is a pattern of sorts for him."

"Yeah, didn't he go after her a couple of other times? Once in college, once after?" That was Kat, always on the same wavelength as her twin.

"Actually, from what she told me when she was out of it," Garth broke off his thought and began to pace. The topic was important, inevitable even, but the very idea disturbed him to no end. He cleared his throat. "It sounds like he fixed on her at least twice in college and then again before she moved here."

"Y'know," Quin mused, stroking his gleeful dog as he thought aloud. "I bet he's been pretty sporadic about taking his meds all along. Folks with delusions and delusional disorder tend to be pretty suspicious of drugs. He'd take 'em till he felt okay, or just till he decided not to. Simple as that..."

"Sir? Mr. Cavanaugh?" Five heads turned toward the door. The woman framed in the doorway was a hospital volunteer and appeared to be looking at Garth.

"Yes, ma'am?" he smiled, stepping away from the group.

"We're ready to transfer Miss Baker back to her room now, if you'd like to accompany her," the diffident young



## *Daddy's Girl*

woman informed him.

Garth supposed that between himself and his brothers, as well as his sisters, Dave, and the dog, they were a pretty intimidating group.

"Thanks," he smiled. "I'd like that. Orrin? Dave?" he angled his head toward the two men.

"I think we'll take this info and spread out, Gar," Eamon locked eyes with Abe, who nodded.

"Izzy, you wanna come with me? We can track down Cord and do the mail thing," he suggested.

"Sounds good. What about you guys?" Garth glanced over at his remaining siblings, conscious of the volunteer waiting patiently for him.

Eamon answered him as their sisters, Quin, and his dog, all stood, putting themselves to rights. "We're heading back to the precinct. I want to run this name, see what we can come up with. Maybe we'll track down something—an address, something."

"Let me know then," Garth nodded sharply, turning back to the young volunteer. "Lead on, Miss," he smiled.

## *Chapter Fifteen*

He was working pretty hard, but didn't feel like he was succeeding. Tabby was somewhere in this huge hospital and so far, he wasn't having a lot of luck finding her.

"Whatcha doin', Steve?" Pat, the guy who'd put him to work had apparently come looking for him.

He'd let the other man fill out a time card for him and had even clocked in. What difference did it make, after all? None. Therefore, he'd gone along, as amenable as you please, and followed all the instructions.

"Uh..." he had to think fast. "Well, I wanted to make sure I didn't try to go into a room that had someone in it," he improvised. "I figured the best way was to look it up on the computer. Nobody was in here, so I thought it'd be okay."

He waited with baited breath. Hopefully this simpleton would buy his explanation.

"Wow," Pat looked at him with admiration. "You can do that? How'd you know what to do?"

He grinned. This was going to be easier than he thought.

"Well, first thing I did was look the hospital up online. It says there are three hundred and seventy-one beds. So that means there can't be more than that many rooms. By trial and error, I found out that there are only five private rooms on any floor. The rest are doubles, right?" His eager audience

## *Daddy's Girl*

was riveted, nodding eagerly.

"Next break, you'll show me how to do all that, right?" Pat asked breathlessly. "That's pretty cool, Steve."

"Sure thing, Pat. Uh, here, check this out." Swiftly seizing his moment, he typed Baker, Tabitha into the search field. Up popped the patient information screen, including her room number. "I saw her name in the paper the other morning," he grinned smugly.

"That is SO cool!" Pat crowed. "Hey, I think she's on the other side of this floor. Wanna go walk by? See if we can get a look at her? If she's in the paper, she's famous, right?"

"Hmm," he mused. "Well, if she wasn't famous before, I guess she is now, huh?"

He didn't really want Pat with him when he saw Tabby again, though maybe he'd be less obvious with someone else. Not that anyone was looking for him. How could they know who he was? Soon they would. But not now. "Yeah, let's go by there. Look," he pointed on the screen to a multi-colored drawing depicting the hospital's various levels. "This tells you where every single room and everything is. Did you know there were rooms down there?" Shelby asked of a strip of numbered purple blocks, two levels below the basement.

"Yeah, we're supposed to go and clean those sometimes," Pat winked. "And we do...*sometimes*."

"Bad," Shelby chuckled. "Just bad," he shook his head in mock reproof. This was perfect. He'd keep Tabby there until he was sure it was safe. What better place for her?

"We can go grab a snack," Pat was sayng, already heading for the door of the office they were in, stopping to look back over his shoulder. "You know, after we check her out."

"Sounds good to me." He'd still have to do whatever work this guy wanted him to do...sort of, anyway. "Then it's back to the salt mines, huh?"

"Salt mines?" Pat was apparently a little simpler than he

seemed.

"Back to work?"

"Yeah," Pat snickered, one arm landing on his shoulder briefly as the two men fell into step. "You know, we get a discount in the cafeteria. I'll introduce you so they'll know you work here. Since nobody gave you an ID badge yet...Wow!"

They had entered through the heavy double doors at the end of the ward. Right next to the door bearing the number he was looking for sat a giant German Shephard. Directly in front of the door stood three muscular men, heads together and talking low.

Through the curtains on the window facing the ward, two nurses could be seen moving back and forth in the room. It was impossible to tell as they walked by whether or not the figure on the bed was Tabitha.

\*\*\*\*

Garth looked down at Quin's dog and then over at his brother. Both man and dog were following the progress of two hospital employees as they made their way down the hall.

The two men seemed innocuous enough, chatting amiably as they made their way up the hallway. Neither of them looked more than briefly at the group collected outside of the door.

Watching Quin, Garth had to wonder. He didn't look away from the two as they exited the hallway, out into the main corridor again. The dog didn't look away, either.

"What's up?" he finally asked his brother when the hallway was clear.

Quin continued to murmur softly to his dog for a few moments before rising to his feet. "Something about one of those guys set her off. She targets on people who act unnaturally either voluntarily or involuntarily."

## *Daddy's Girl*

"I don't get it?" Orrin asked, confused. Garth was a bit confused as well, and nodded.

"One of those guys might have been nervous, sweating, something that told her that being in front of this door or us made him especially fearful. It could have been the dog, or they could have been doing something wrong otherwise...or maybe one of 'em is our guy." He stroked his dog lovingly. "Eurydice won't forget."

Garth arched a brow. "Well, okay," he mumbled, not sure what to say. "Tell you what—you, Or' and Eurydice go patrol a bit. Dave's going to pick up Ulick in awhile. Siobhan, Maggie, and Kat are with Eamon and Izzy running down leads."

"All right, so Dave and Ulick will come along and give us the night off, huh? What're you gonna do?" Quin asked, no doubt realizing that he was being dismissed.

"I'm going in to check on Tabitha," Garth murmured, giving his brother a half-smile and a wink before opening the door.

The two nurses who had been busy settling Tabby in and checking her vitals were now finished, stopping on the way out to assure Garth that everything was fine. He didn't miss the way their eyes lingered on his younger brothers as they passed.

Maybe there would be time for socializing when everything was straightened out with Tabby. One thing at a time, Garth decided, heading over to the bed.

She looked so beautiful to him, her color much improved now than it had been when he'd first seen her after the attack a few days ago. Garth stared down at her for long moments before he realized that her eyes were open and fixed on him.

"Hi there," he murmured, easing carefully down to the bed next to her.

"Um, hi." She sounded shy, nervous.

J. J. Massa

"How're you feeling, sugar?" Garth asked, taking her hand in his, gently avoiding jostling the IV lines in her arm.

"I guess I'm about as well as can be expected," she observed, trying for a wry tone, but falling short. "So they took one of my kidneys out, huh?"

"Yeah, they did. The prognosis is pretty good, though." Garth sounded uncomfortable to her, almost guilty.

There would be no better time to address their situation, as far as Tabby was concerned. True, this was the first time she'd felt anything approaching human in awhile. But putting things off hadn't done her any favors of late.

"Garth, are you feeling bad because you didn't know this was happening to me? Like maybe you should have known?" She decided to plunge right in. She'd straighten this out and a few other things besides.

Garth started visibly. "What, you're reading my mind now?" he asked, almost defensively. "Your dad said you know things but..."

"That has nothing to do with this, Garth. We'll talk about that later. Right now, I just want you to stop taking this on as if it were your fault..." She looked at him hard, considering. "If I know Daddy, he's probably acting like it *is* your fault, like you should have known, huh?"

"Well, he's right, baby," Garth insisted, his voice breaking slightly. "I mean, I *should* have known..."

"How?" she demanded, shifting and reaching for the button to elevate her head a little. "Are you psychic now?"

Garth *harrumphed*, pressing the button firmly, stopping when he apparently felt she was raised enough. Tabby decided that it would do. She'd take back her own care from him slowly. Everything about this situation would need to be handled just so.

"I'm a Secret Service agent, honey; I should at least be alert to..."

## *Daddy's Girl*

"To what?" she cut him off. "To the woman you were seeing dealing with harassment? When I didn't even tell you? When I didn't have you over or anything?"

"I saw you in the hallway at the White House. There were times you were heading right for my office. I should have asked." He was maligning himself and to some extent, Tabby agreed.

Time to get that part of the program out of the way, she decided. "Yeah, well, to do that, Garth, you would have had to tell me you were a Secret Service agent, huh?" She didn't voice any inflection either way. Tabby was certain he knew where she was going with that. No need to add on.

Not letting her down, Garth hung his head like a guilty schoolboy. "I really don't know why I didn't, sweetheart. Except..." he looked into her eyes, his hand coming up to cup her face.

"Except?" she asked, arching a brow. *This oughta be good.*

"Except, I was falling in love with you and it scared the shit out of me," he confessed, his voice deep and sincere.

*Yeah, that's pretty good.* "Oh, Garth," she sighed. "I was falling in love with you, too. I should have tried to tell you more about Daddy...I *really* should have tried to talk to you about..." she hated to say it, "...about Shelby—Steve."

Garth leaned down to kiss her and Tabby jerked her head away. "Bad breath," she explained breathlessly, hoping he'd understand.

He pulled back, gracing her with a devastating wink before reaching over to a bedside table. Twisting the lid off of what had to be a travel sized bottle of mouthwash, he handed it to her, holding a rinse basin under her chin so that she could swish out her mouth.

"Garth," she growled testily, "I don't want to spit in front of you."

"Sugar," he countered, leaning down to kiss her nose. "After everything that's gone on up till now, a little spit is nothing." When she didn't respond, he added, "Besides, I want to kiss you real bad."

That was incentive enough, Tabby decided, covering her mouth with one hand as she swished and spit in as ladylike manner as she could manage.

"Thata way," Garth declared, placing the small plastic basin aside.

She opened her mouth to speak, not sure what she might say, when his lips settled over hers softly, like a caressing breeze. He paid homage to her mouth, his lips soft, seductive, sensuous. He nibbled her bottom lip, moving to trace the upper lip slowly, luxuriously. After long moments of tasting her, knowing her this way, he slipped his gentle tongue inside, deepening the kiss.

Tabby clung to him with one hand, the other limited by the tubes that kept fluids flowing into her. She was completely lost in his arms and sure that it was worth any amount of suffering just to be there.

Finally, after a timeless interval, Garth pulled back, brushing her hair back from her face. "I love you, Tabby, I should have said it before. I shouldn't have been such a coward."

"I love you, too, Garth. And I guess I was a coward in a lot of ways, wasn't I?" she sighed.

"Let's just call it a draw for now, okay?" he insisted, leaning down to lay a sweet kiss on her lips. "Your father wanted me to make sure you knew he called, by the way. He won't be able to get here tonight. Maybe tomorrow, I think."

"Poor Daddy," she yawned. Suddenly, she was exhausted. That was probably not an unusual thing for all the surgery and the drugs they had her on, but still. She'd been so out of it for the last few days. She didn't want to miss anything more. "I think I'm gonna fall asleep again, Garth."



## *Daddy's Girl*

He smiled. "You need your sleep, sugar. You'll have some X-rays and therapy tomorrow, in preparation for going home. The better you do, the sooner you can get home."

There was a lot Tabby wanted to say to that—not the least of which was that she wasn't sure she *wanted* to go home. But fatigue was taking over and all she could do was reach for him.

Her hand dropped before she touched him, but he lifted it and folded her fingers over his, pressing a soft kiss to her knuckle.

"Sleep now, baby," he murmured. Good advice, she decided, since she had no other choice but to take it.

## Chapter Sixteen

Who were all those men? And the dog...what was *that* all about? He was *Steve*—Shelby and Tabitha *forever*! He belonged there, she loved him. They were keeping him out.

Well, they were supposed to be keeping him out. They wouldn't be able to, of course. Sure, they were big, beefy men. But his Tabby didn't like that kind of guy. She liked him. He knew she did. They had a long, intricate relationship. It was more than a body type. They were connected.

He pulled the trash bag out of the short can and replaced it with a fresh one, not really paying attention to what he was doing. Pat had told him to go ahead and finish out the floor he'd been working on.

After all, his girlfriend was there. Just the thought made his heart leap, even though he knew that Pat had just been teasing. He thought of telling Pat the truth—Tabby *was* his girlfriend. But he didn't. She'd kept their relationship close to her heart, private, all this time. He owed her nothing less...at least for now. The time would come soon when he could tell the world.

The next room was hers. He wheeled his housekeeping cart up next to the door, assembling his supplies. Glancing at the window, he could see the room was dark. He tapped lightly on the metal frame, his heart in his throat.

## *Daddy's Girl*

Not waiting for an answer, he pushed the door open, poised to step in. "Could you come back a little later, buddy?"

Stunned, he stopped, frozen in place. He couldn't move. That was Tabby all right. *His* Tabby. His Tabby with some Nearerthal sitting on her bed, leaning over her, pawing at her.

"Uh, sure," he mumbled, not moving. The other man leaned down, kissed Tabby.

"Izzit, Garth?" Tabby murmured from the bed, her voice sleepy and vague.

"It's nobody, honey," the big man answered. "Just get some sleep. Mornin's gonna come early. You'll have a lot to do tomorrow with going here and there for treatments."

"ove you," she sighed, sinking further into sleep.

"I love you, too, baby," the man's deep voice vibrated through the room. He kissed her again, and moved to rise.

Backing out of the door, Steve—or was he Shelby—he didn't know. His world was rocked on its foundations. Who was that man? Why did he think he had the right to touch Tabby that way?

That was the man she'd teased him with, wasn't he? And now, poor Tabby was in over her head. The man had her in his clutches, drugged and at his bidding. It was up to Steve to rescue her.

He pulled his cart back from the door angrily, wheeling it toward the double doors at the end of the ward.

"Hey, Steve? Wassamatter?" Pat held the ward doors open for him, helping him manhandle the heavy cart through them.

Steve looked hard at him. "I just found out I have to work tomorrow," he growled finally.

"Oh, yeah? How come?" Pat unlocked the housekeeping store room and helped Steve push the cart inside, along with the other two lined up and waiting for service.

"Apparently they're short in another department," he tried, waiting to see how that would be met. "Orderly..."

*J. J. Massa*

"Oh, man, I *hate* working orderly. Some of those sick people are gross," Pat commiserated. "Wonder why they didn't call me in? I usually get extra hours."

This was working just the way he needed, and certainly better than he thought it would. "I'm sure it's because you're senior," Steve placated. "How long before we're done tonight? I gotta find a place to sleep."

"I got an efficiency on D Street," Pat offered. "It ain't much, but you can flop there. It's a couple of bus and train changes, but not so bad."

"Hey, thanks," Steve said, sincerity oozing forth.

No doubt Pat was sent to this place and this time to aid him. He'd have to give some serious thought about what to do with the other man when he'd gotten Tabby and took her away.

It was obvious that everything Pat had was at his disposal. While he was sure that Pat had been chosen somehow to do his bidding, he deserved a reward of some kind. How fair would it be for Pat to get in trouble for helping him? Not fair at all, really. He'd spend the evening with Pat and decide what his fate should be.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Abandoned?" Garth was a little confused. Siobhan tapped her foot, apparently waiting for him to understand what she was telling him.

"It looks like he just never came back," she explained patiently. "It seems like our boy Shelby—Steve, kept her in an oversized closet of the one-room basement that he rented."

"Don't stop on my account," another voice entered the conversation with the careful opening and closing of the door.

## *Daddy's Girl*

Clive O'Brien joined the small group. "Hey, son, how is she?" True to form, he pulled Garth into a partial hug before extending his hand to Siobhan.

Behind him, Eamon slid through the barely opened door, pulling it closed quickly.

"She's fine...better, anyhow. We had a good talk earlier. She was pretty lucid," Garth explained.

Clive looked intently into his eyes, searching for something. It seemed he found it, clapping Garth on the shoulder and squeezing.

"Good, glad to hear it," he smiled. "Now, tell us, young lady, what you found out about this guy and Tabby. You're an accident reconstruction specialist, right?"

Siobhan smiled. "Yes, sir," she replied, pleasure in her voice. Who wouldn't be thrilled if the president's Chief of Staff knew exactly what you did for a living? "Uh, she, uh..." Siobhan took a deep breath, trying again. "She was restrained in this closet, apparently bound and her mouth covered when he wasn't there. Nobody complained of unusual noises during his absence. And he *was* absent often enough."

"He had a job at a local grocery store," Eamon added, consulting his notes. "He was fired just two days ago."

"So he hasn't been back to his apartment and he no longer has any means of support?" Garth asked, making eye contact with both his brother and his sister.

"That's the facts so far," Eamon nodded, strain showing around his eyes.

"We also found a prescription for antipsychotics," Siobhan told them. "One that is specific for delusional disorder, from what we can tell—just like Quin said. Thing is, it was refilled over a month ago, but only a week's worth have been used."

"That bears out what Abe was telling us, I think," Eamon murmured. Met with several blank stares, he finished his thought.

"Abe said that, if he stopped taking his drugs, his symptoms could come back worse. This seems like this is a clear case of him getting worse."

"Well, we can't say what he thinks, necessarily," Garth tried to be fair.

"No, but it does seem like he's getting worse," Cord eased into the room, bringing Willow and Yorrick with him.

"Why do you say that, son?" Clive had been edging away from the group, intent on seeing Tabby, but Cord's two cents gained his attention once again.

"Back in college," he began, shaking hands all around but focusing on Clive. "She had a few problems with him, but nothing too terrible."

"That's a matter of opinion," Willow groused, glaring at her brother.

Cord slipped an arm across her shoulders. "I mean, nothing too dangerous. Unsettling, sure."

"Yeah, unsettling...creepy if you ask me," Willow groused, laying her dark head on her big brother's shoulder. "How would you feel if some guy pulled what he did on me?" she mumbled resentfully.

"I'd rip his balls off," Yorrick answered for him forcefully. "And that's *before* he got any further than just leaving notes at your dorm and stuff."

Siobhan moved in next to her youngest brother, creating a circle of brothers, sisters, and Clive O'Brien.

"Willow and I are pretty lucky to have all you big, strong studs to look after us," she soothed. "Tabby doesn't have any brothers or sisters. She was on her own."

Before Clive could address that statement, Cord picked up the thread.

"I wouldn't be surprised if the facts that she didn't have a lot of friends around and no obvious family were part of her appeal." Garth shook his head one time, signaling that he

## *Daddy's Girl*

hadn't gotten Cord's point. "See," Cord went on. "She's pretty, sweet, and unattended. Our boy is something of a predator, but he knows his weaknesses. He needed someone to fixate on—someone who couldn't really cause him much trouble."

"So how come he continued to harass her after she told him no? For that matter, how come he didn't leave her alone after she left?" Clive asked, his anger in check, though obvious.

Siobhan began to speak, interrupting Eamon before he could say what was on his mind. "This is where the meds come in. It's not unusual for folks with delusional problems to..." she searched for the best way to say what she was thinking.

"They get paranoid sometimes, or just think they're better because they feel better," Eamon filled in the gap. "So it's really possible that the times that he looked for and went after Tabby were times that he went off his meds."

Siobhan nodded enthusiastically. "Or maybe he just cut back, thinking he didn't need as much..."

"Is it normal for folks with that type of disorder to fixate on just one person?" Clive asked, his brow furrowed, trying to understand.

"It is if they suffer from psychosis or Erotomania," Cord answered, his demeanor serious.

"Hmmm," Clive mumbled. "So it doesn't have anything to do with who she's related to or anything, huh?"

"Well," Cord answered, "It sort of does. I mean, it's obvious from his records that Tabby was always in a higher social standing than he was. She just kept herself better...everything about her grades—just overall, we know that about her."

"He comes from a working class home. His mother left the family when he was pretty young. His father worked two jobs and didn't stay around the house much." Abe had joined the crowd gathered at one end of Tabby's room, easily sharing the benefit of his investigations with everyone collected.

"I know it's sad that he had a tough life," Willow sighed. "It's not that I don't appreciate that. I know the things he did aren't his fault...sorta. I really don't get it, I guess. He's sick, I get that. I just..."

"Honey, stop," Garth slid an arm around her. "You can't worry about all that."

"That's right," Eamon leaned over and pressed a kiss to her forehead. She would always be the baby girl in their family. Yorrick would likewise be the baby boy forever. "Our job as law enforcement is to find him and stop him before he does anything else."

"It's up to the doctors to figure out what caused his problems and fix them," Clive nodded. "Law enforcement is supposed to try and protect him and everyone else while those of us in a position to do so try to put things in place so he can get the help he needs. Let me go see her and then you can tell me what's next, hmm?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Tabby protested weakly as the nurse helped her out of the bed. They wanted to remove her catheter and she knew she'd need to get up every so often before that could happen. Right now, she sat in the chair next to the bed while the medical assistant and nurse worked together to change the bed and see to her needs at the same time.

"I'll be taking all that stuff off of you tonight or tomorrow," the nurse explained as she helped Tabby to her feet again. "Don't forget you can push on this any time the pain gets to be too much, okay? There's no need for you to suffer."

"This" was a button on the end of a thin cord. Back in the recovery room, the anesthesiologist had explained, and the



## *Daddy's Girl*

nurse had explained a second time, that the button would release a pain reliever directly into her IV each time she pushed it. She'd need that for the first day or two, they'd told her, and she certainly had. Of course, it was only the first day still, but she had every intention of pushing that button as soon as the nurse handed it back to her.

She'd already had what the nurse called an SCD, or a Sequential Compression Device, hooked to her legs to simulate the blood flow caused by walking. It had felt odd, but not so odd that it kept her awake for very long.

"Okay," Tabby mumbled, one second away from begging for her magic button so that she could go back to sleep and feel better. The washcloth bath the other woman had helped her with had been wonderful, but now even that clean feeling of wellness was fading fast.

"I have one more thing to torture you with before you can get back into the sack," the unrepentant nurse announced. "Now, you'll want to sit up straight for this. You feel up to it?"

"No," Tabby answered instantly. It didn't matter what "it" was. She didn't feel up to it. And torture? "Um, no torture, thank you." She might as well be polite, as long as the woman still had that all-important button in her hands. Tabby was fast gaining a small understanding of what an addiction felt like. She was sure she'd do just about anything to get her hands on the pain medication gained by pushing that button.

With a delighted chortle, the far-too-chipper nurse squatted down next to Tabby, making sure she was sitting up right. "This is called an incentive spirometer. You use it after surgery to help you keep your lungs clear. We'll just do a couple of minutes with it this time. Not even two whole minutes. Think you can do that?"

She held up a blue, plastic gizmo for Tabby to look at. It had a red ball sort of embedded in it, a flexible tube with a mouth piece on the end, and a column with numbers and a

yellow arrow that moved up and down when the nurse blew into it to show Tabby how it worked.

"First, you take the mouthpiece in your mouth and seal your lips tightly around it." she instructed, handing the thing to Tabby. "**Breathe in slowly** and as deeply as possible, raising the yellow arrow here toward the top of the columnn."

Tabby tried and the little arrow moved just a tiny bit.

"Now, hold your breath as long as you can, try for at least five seconds. And then you let out your breath and let the little arrow fall to the bottom."

Tabby did as she was told, sighing in relief when her little chore was finished.

"You think you can do that about ten times?" the nurse asked hopefully.

"Huh-uh," Tabby denied readily, certain that, indeed, she could *not* do any such thing ten times.

The cheerful nurse giggled at her, apparently unflappable in her good humor. "The quicker we get you doing this, the quicker you can be kissing on that hunk of yours," she wheedled, cutting her eyes toward the door mischievously.

Tabby snorted, but she couldn't deny the appeal of that mental image, so she took the mouthpiece between her lips and breathed in slowly a second time. After holding her breath for the requisite five seconds, she let it out, gasping for air.

"Okay, okay, honey," the nurse cooed. "That was a worthy try. Why don't you get a little rest and we'll do ten the next time around?"

Tabby had the vague idea she'd been played. Before she could sort that out, her very own Nurse Ratchet with the annoying good humor was helping her into bed and handing her the button she longed for.

Just holding it in her hand made her feel better. She bestowed a benevolent smile on her aggravating savoir and

## *Daddy's Girl*

pressed the button. As the cool feeling stole into her veins, pushing away the debilitating pain, Tabby groaned.

"Thanks. More later, promise," she mumbled, drifting away on a tide of pain-killer and good will.

"Sure thing, sweetie," the nurse chuckled. "Just as soon as you get back from LaLa Land."

## *Chapter Seventeen*

Shelby had napped, slept for four hours. Rested and refreshed, he looked down at the other man, at Pat, for a long time before making up his mind. It was a shame really. Pat had been nice to him. But no sacrifice held value if one didn't suffer for it. He would miss Pat—the first person who'd treated him like a friend in far longer than he could remember.

Pat never stirred, not even when Shelby left the bedroom to look for a weapon. He'd considered smothering Pat with a pillow, but it seemed unlikely to work. Pat could wake before his air was depleted. And beside, he was a little bigger than Shelby. No, he needed to hit him with something.

A cursory search of the living area, where he'd been told he was welcome to sleep, offered only the thin-cushioned sofa and a sleek bookshelf. The bookshelf was sturdy, the books on it almost exclusively paperback. None of them would serve as a weapon. There were no bookends, bulky knickknacks, convenient, hand-sized lamps, nothing.

The apartment itself was tastefully appointed, and looking around it, Shelby wondered if Pat had feminine leanings. There were candles aplenty and tasteful prints on the walls, though the frames were too thin to be of use for anything but their intended purpose.

## *Daddy's Girl*

The chair and the sofa boasted throw pillows everywhere and there were plants. Silk plants. Silk plants in aluminum containers... not heavy at all.

He didn't want to use a knife—that would be terribly messy. But perhaps he'd find something else in the kitchen. Every kitchen was a potential killing field—almost anything in it could be used as a destructive device, capable of causing deadly injury.

As Shelby poked through the cabinets, he became ever more certain that Pat was hiding his true nature. Perhaps he didn't trust Shelby...or maybe he didn't find him attractive. It was clear that Pat was attracted to men.

Even without the evidence of his neatly and tastefully decorated apartment, there were pictures. Throughout the kitchen, he found sweet little framed pictures of Pat with his arm around a man, the same man, including one that showed the other man nestled in Pat's lap.

In the windowsill above the kitchen sink, he found a photo of Pat and the man kissing. On the corner of the heavy block frame, two dates and a man's name were inscribed:

Daniel Vidou 1975 – 2006 the etching proclaimed. So he'd died recently then, leaving Pat alone. Pat, who was as friendly as a puppy, and so incautious in his loneliness to befriend someone without even learning their name.

Well, Shelby would do right by this man. More than a sacrifice, Pat's death would be a gift. A gift to both Pat and to the deceased Daniel.

Shelby hefted the picture in his hand. It was heavy for a five by seven inch rectangle. The wood itself was solid mahogany with a sheet of thick Plexiglas fitting neatly into a carved off center recess where the picture of the two men sat. A wide border on one side made room for the carving and still looked artsy and modern. It was quite stylish, indeed.

Yes, this tribute to Pat's lamented lover would do nicely for Shelby's purposes. He needed a place to bring Tabby to, and this was a nice enough place. He needed to show her that she was important. She was more important to him than anyone. She'd learn that when he showed her Pat, his only friend.

Shelby stripped off his shirt, and down to his dingy boxer shorts. He didn't plan to get dirty—that's why he didn't want to stab Pat. But he might. You never knew.

Holding the heavy, smooth rectangle of wood behind him, he entered the room. Pat shifted in his sleep, turning toward the door, toward Shelby.

"Hmm...whatcho doin', man?" Pat mumbled, blinking owlishly.

"The couch was hard. Can I lay down here?" Shelby asked, his voice low, soothing.

"Yeah, s'fine," Pat sighed, rolling over again to face away from the Shelby.

In three long strides, he was there, a knee on the bed. Not wanting to lose momentum, to chicken out, Shelby swung his arm around, a roundhouse blow, hitting Pat on the side of the head as hard as he could with the picture.

It was a stunning strike, but clearly not as debilitating as it was meant to be. Before Shelby could get his arm back again for another hit, Pat rolled, his own fist coming up and connecting with the side of Shelby's face.

Instinct and self-preservation ruled as he repeatedly rained whack after jolting bash, bludgeoning Pat with the heavy wood. Fingers tightened around his throat and blood poured freely from his nose as Pat defended himself vigorously.

All would be lost if Shelby ended up on the bed and Pat managed to break free, if he somehow gained his feet, or even sat up.

For such an intense fight, it was quiet and over quickly, though it seemed to rage for eons. Breathing heavily, the air

## *Daddy's Girl*

burning in his lungs, Shelby looked down at the battered face of his friend. Blood oozed from his nose, dripped from a broken lip.

In fact, Shelby's nose was bleeding, too, and his face hurt. He wouldn't be angry at Pat though. He died like a man, fighting all the way.

Now, should Shelby do something about him? Leave him where he was? The first weak rays of dawn were reaching out, peeking into the window of Pat's second floor walk up.

He needed to clean himself quickly, get dressed, and go get Tabby. There was no time to lose. Pat could stay where he was for now.

\* \* \* \* \*

The rustle of a cart outside the door jerked Garth awake, sweating and swearing to himself. He'd been in such a deep sleep. The door to the room opened smoothly, soft-soled shoes moving firmly across the floor.

"Good morning," a soft voice murmured.

"Hey," Tabby mumbled back sleepily.

"How're you feeling this morning? Any pain?" They were talking quietly, no doubt being considerate of him sleeping on the sofa so close by.

Garth appreciated that, but he was more interested in what Tabby's answer would be. Was she feeling pain? He hadn't heard her stir much throughout the night, and she'd been fast asleep when he finally laid himself down.

"I'm fine. Better than I've been in awhile," she answered, drawing a sigh of relief from Garth, and a pleased hum from the nurse.

"I'm glad to hear it, honey," the pleasant voiced woman sounded satisfied, truly pleased. "You've been through enough. It's high time you were on the mend."

Beeps, clicks and hissing were heard as she took Tabby's temperature, measured her blood pressure, and checked the state of her surgical site.

"What time is it?" Tabby asked, her question muffled at the end and Garth looked up to see her taking something.

"It's only about four-thirty," the nurse was distracted, her pen scratching noisily across Tabby's chart. "You go back to sleep, hon, I'm just getting an early start."

"Uh, m'kay," Tabby agreed readily, scooting down in the bed again.

With a rattle and clack, the nurse turned and began rolling her blood pressure machine out of the room, pausing at the door. When she moved through it, Garth closed his eyes.

The door didn't slip shut as expected, though. Concerned, Garth struggled to rise when a hand settled on his head.

"Don't get up, son," a deep, southern voice rumbled.

"Holy fuck, Mr. President! Where's your detail?" Garth choked, his voice trying to rise.

"I'm pretty sure it's treasonous to use such language when you talk to me, boy," President Dalton paused in front of him, leaning down to plant both hands on Garth's shoulders. Rendering him completely speechless, The Commander in Chief deposited an affectionate kiss on his forehead before turning away. "I won't see you hanged for it this time, son, but you can expect dark meat and cheap liquor at the next family holiday gathering," he warned, striding quickly across the room.

"Daddy!" Tabby squealed, struggling to pull herself upright.

"Hey, sugar britches!" Garth could hear the smile in Langley Dalton's voice as he lowered the rail on the side of the bed, sliding in next to his daughter.



## *Daddy's Girl*

He wanted to rant, rave, carry on about the president wandering around with no protection whatsoever, but he bit it back. No good would come of him having a tirade. He *would*, however, have a nice, long talk with the men assigned to the White house security detail.

"Daddy, it's so good to see you!" Tabby gushed. Garth saw one arm go around her father as he took her gently into both of his.

"I've missed you, kitten. I've been so worried about you." His voice was husky with emotion. Garth felt moisture gather in his eyes listening to father and daughter reunite. "I just can't tell you how good it is to see you doing so much better. It breaks my heart that anyone would ever..."

"Hush, Daddy," Tabby stopped him, her voice cracking, thick with feeling. "I'm gonna be okay. It's all gonna be okay."

Garth could hear the president swallowing down his response, instead just holding her close and reveling in her improved wellbeing.

"I think I'm supposed to say those things to you, Tabby Cat," he murmured, stroking a loving hand down her back.

Garth didn't hear anything more, instead stepping out into the hall and pulling out his cell phone. He quickly dialed a number and waited.

He was more than a little surprised when his brother answered the phone. "Quin? Is that you?" he asked, pulling the phone away from his ear and checking the display. He felt certain he'd dialed Dave's number.

"Yeah, it's me," Quin grumbled his answer. "Dave and Orrin got held up at the bar, I guess. You know, Dave's *other* job."

"Yeah, I *know* Dave's other job," Garth growled coming to a quick decision. "Okay, pack up your little doggie and get here as quick as you can. The Eagle is out without a handler and I need you to stick with him till he gets home."

There was silence for a long minute, and then Quin guessed, "Can I take that to mean President Dalton has come calling without a guard? And you want me...*me*? You want me to protect him?"

"You and Euridyce, yeah. I'd consider it a great favor, Quin," Garth answered solemnly.

"Wow...okay, but...wow," Quin breathed, "Kay, I'll be right there. I was coming anyhow, but...wow." He hung up the phone before Garth could say another word.

Garth shook his head in amusement, turning to head back into the room. "Excuse me," a firm feminine voice stopped him with his hand on the door handle.

"Yes?" he answered, waiting.

"It's a little early for visitors. You'll have to tell that man to leave," the nurse said resolutely.

"Not likely," Garth mumbled, turning to face the woman. "He won't be here long. He can't visit any other time," he explained patiently.

"I'm sorry, but we just can't get our jobs done with people coming in and out at random times," she began. Garth was sure she was really getting wound up.

Before he could respond, Jennifer, the nurse who'd been there since the beginning, came to intervene. "Cecily, it's fine, he has my permission to be here." She looked apologetically at Garth, perhaps embarrassed to be giving The President of the United States permission for anything.

The nurse called Cecily was apparently not too thrilled to be overruled and flounced away with a huff.

"Thanks," Garth smiled at Jennifer. "I really didn't want to argue with her."

"She means well," Jennifer smiled back, glancing over her shoulder to the window. "They seem to be having a good visit," she nodded toward Tabby and her father. "That's so good to see."

## *Daddy's Girl*

"It really is," Garth agreed. "I'm so glad she's finally on the mend."

"We're going to start therapy; right after X-ray's this morning. Well, really, it's a sonogram. Someone will probably be along to get her within the hour. She can't eat until afterward, so she'll eat in between," the young nurse explained, answering the questions Garth had intended on asking.

## *Chapter Eighteen*

Shelby searched until he found a washcloth, neatly folded on a multi-colored stack in the bathroom. He carefully mopped the blood dripping from his nose and lip, wishing he had time for a shower. He grabbed another washcloth and soaped it, washing his armpits quickly.

He wished he could be as neat and well-appointed as he should be—as any courtier fit for the queen that Tabitha was. Failing that, he went to look in Pat's closet. Pat was taller than he was, more muscular. But Daniel, Pat's deceased boyfriend—they were together now at least—he was more of a size with Shelby. And there were clothes here that had obviously belonged to him.

"I'm sorry, Pat," Shelby faced his victim lying on the bed. "You were nice to me. But Tabby needs me and she needs a place to be. She isn't well... You are a worthy sacrifice for her, and now you're with your Daniel." He reached out and stroked the cool and battered face. With a sigh, he turned to leave, stopping only to grab Pat's keys from the dresser.

Had he looked back, he might have seen Pat blink.

Instead, he concentrated on ignoring his aches and pains, single-mindedly making his way out the door. His thoughts were jostling back and forth. Should he bring Tabby here first? Or should he wait? Would she be well enough to leave the hospital?

## *Daddy's Girl*

Finally, he settled on a plan as he made his way out of Pat's apartment building. He would secret Tabby in one of the derelict rooms in the subbasement of the hospital. They were for emergencies only and never used. That way, he could sneak around, make sure he had whatever medicine Tabby needed, and then get her out of there.

He remembered the bus and train that he'd taken from the hospital the night before. It wasn't as easy as just going backward, but he could read a schedule. He'd be back at the hospital before the sun rose fully.

In fact, traffic and buses and trains were all going in his favor this morning. He made such good time getting to the hospital that he was far earlier than he needed to be. It was no problem, though.

His early arrival afforded him the opportunity to get in, find an empty computer terminal, and see what the hospital had planned for Tabitha this morning. After that, he would go to her floor and watch her room. That would be the best way to figure out how to get her alone.

The ever-useful Pat had afforded him another work smock. Nobody even questioned him as he made his way through the halls and in and out of offices. Shelby had also found a master key on Pat's key ring. Conveniently enough, it was labeled 'hospital room-master' in tiny letters.

After learning that Tabby would be having a sonogram first thing, Shelby headed for her floor. He could empty a few garbage cans, maybe get his wheeled housekeeping cart out. Nobody looked too closely at hospital maintenance staff. When she was ready, he'd simply walk up and say he'd been sent for her. No problem.

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"Sugar plum, I've got to go in a minute," Langley Dalton murmured to his daughter, giving her another tight hug.

"I'm so glad you came this morning, Daddy," Tabby gushed, so relieved to see her father, so pleased to be able to reassure him. "I was so worried about you. Garth told me you sent me your love yesterday."

"I was pretty mad at that boy at first, you know, honey," Dalton confessed. "I knew he was the one you'd given your heart to, and I knew he'd broken it."

There wasn't much Tabby could say to that. She'd been devastated by Garth's unexplained withdrawal.

"But you trusted him anyway, Daddy?" she asked. She wouldn't deny it. She wondered what Garth could have done while she was laying in that hospital bed to inspire her father's confidence.

Her father, a man who had fought in a war, ordered men and women into battle, and faced down foreign leaders and party opponents every single day, began to blush.

"Well, sugar," he smiled sheepishly. "I was pretty mean to him—I wanted to beat the tar out of him, to tell you the truth. And I let him know it." He leaned over and kissed her cheek. "In the end, I went with my gut. He didn't run away, he didn't back down. He treated me like a father, not a president. That made me trust him." He lowered his voice to a whisper. "Don't tell him though. I'm not done making him feel bad."

"Daddy!" she giggled. "I didn't know you had such a mean streak."

"I have to, pun'kin," he laughed. "After all, I'm the leader of the free world. I can't let anybody think I'm a pushover."

## *Daddy's Girl*

Serious again, Tabby took a deep breath. "I'm glad you decided to trust him, Daddy. I think I might end up married to this one." She waited to see what he'd say

"I guess I figured that one out, honey. Maybe I saw that in him when he was begging me to let him take care of you. I just wanted someone who cared as much as I did...or as near to that as I could get, anyhow," Dalton told her, his voice heavy and serious.

"I'm glad," she said simply, kissing him on the cheek. "There were issues between us, I guess you saw that. But I think we've got them mostly worked out. I still haven't really met his brothers and sisters yet."

"I hoped you would talk about that stuff, sweetheart. You can't have a true relationship without facing the hard stuff and getting through it. Your mama and I...well, it wasn't always smooth sailing between us."

"I know, Daddy. I do know. Thanks for being the best. I love you, you know."

Tabby really didn't know what else to say. She hoped she was being clear. It was so important to her that the men who meant the most in her life got along with each other. Her Uncle Clive treated Garth with affection. She'd seen that the night before. Her father had been her biggest concern. He'd let Garth stew a little, but he'd accepted the younger man, she had his word.

"I love you, too, Tabby Cat," her father smiled down at her. "I just want you to be happy. If this young man can accomplish that, then I'm glad." He gave her a mischievous grin. "But that doesn't mean I'm not gonna make him work for it."

"I wouldn't have it any other way, Daddy," she grinned back at him.

The president moved to his feet and Tabby reached up to hug him. "I'll call you later, if I can, honey," he murmured in her ear.

"Sir, do you mind if I walk down with you?" Garth

requested, making his presence known. "My brother Quin and his dog are downstairs, ready to head back with you."

Dalton looked beadily at Garth for a couple of minutes. Finally, he grudgingly growled, "It's only because I like the dog that I'm letting you send a sitter home with me, boy."

"Mr. President," Garth stepped closer to him. "You said you wouldn't leave without a detail, sir. It's..."

Dalton held up a hand, palm out. "I don't want to talk about it, son," he interrupted roughly. "I know what I said. I just wanted to see my little girl. You got an issue with that?"

"You know I don't, sir," Garth began again. "But your safety is important—not just to me and her, either."

"Daddy..." Tabby's voice had a warning edge.

The president relaxed into a smile, winking at Garth. "I know, son, I know. I appreciate it. It just happens that there wasn't anyone available when I found the chance to get out. Next time, I'll call—how's that?"

"That would be outstanding, sir," Garth sighed in relief. He turned to Tabby. "Jennifer—you remember her?" as if on cue, the door opened and the nurse in question entered the room. "This is Jennifer and she's going to help you get ready for your sonogram and stuff. I'll be back quick like a bunny."

"Like a bunny, huh?" Tabby laughed. "Well, it should be fine. Hi, Jennifer. You're going to stick with me till Sir Cavanaugh returns, right?"

"Hello, sir," Jennifer quickly greeted the president, turning back to smile at Tabitha. "If I have to step out—I have a difficult patient right down the hall—Cecily will be with you. She's on her way in now..."

Jennifer looked at the president, Garth, and then the door; her meaning clear. Nobody knew the actual President of the United States was on the premises. If they wanted to keep it that way, they should really get moving.

Reluctantly, Garth kissed Tabby goodbye, pulling a jacket



## *Daddy's Girl*

on over his jeans, to hide his gun, and walked out with her father. They took the back stairs to avoid unnecessary attention.

"She's doing a lot better, isn't she, sir?" Garth risked a conversational gambit, looking over at Dalton.

The president shot him a glare, saying nothing for a moment, and then stopped on a landing between floors. Garth stopped too, hands in his pockets nervously, rocking back on the balls of his feet.

"I know she loves you, son," the older man said softly, "and that matters. You love her, too, and *that* matters."

Garth nodded, not wanting to look too eager and hopeful. "I do, sir. Very much."

"Because of that, because you can be good for her, because I like you—you're welcome with me." He stared hard at Garth, unwavering, causing him to fidget. "You hurt her again, I'll kill you. Make no mistake about it. I'll see you dead."

Garth looked into the bourbon brown eyes of his future father-in-law and shivered at the implacable gaze that looked back at him. "Yes, sir."

Satisfied, Tabby's father finished what he had to say. "Welcome to the family, son. You can call me "sir" most of the time. After you're married, you can call me Lang when you have to call me something in private...Mr. President will do the rest of the time."

Garth couldn't keep his lips from twitching, and finally broke into a grin. "Good thing I voted for ya, huh, Mr. President?"

Langley Dalton snorted without answering, stepping back against Garth as he opened the door, letting Garth shield him from the door to greet Quin where he and Eurydice waited on the sidewalk.

"Hey, Quin," Garth murmured, reaching out for a handshake.

The president threw him a grateful smile, extending his

own hand for a shake. "It's good to see you again, Quin," he smiled shaking his hand. "Hey, pretty girl," he crooned to Eurydice, rubbing her ears.

Garth breathed a sigh of relief at that. It would never do to have his brother's dog growl at, or worse yet, bite the President of the United States.

Quin looked on in awe, while Eurydice wagged like a happy puppy, licking at Dalton's hands and moaning with pleasure.

"Sir, where's the car you drove so you guys can head back?" Garth interrupted, glancing around for the Deputy Chief of Staff's small car.

"Oh," the president stood. "I caught a cab," he grinned nonchalantly.

"Ho—ley...spit on a stick," Garth growled, squeezing his eyes shut tight.

Dalton nodded in approval. "Much better, son," he patted Garth's shoulder. "I really don't want my daughter marrying a man who can't control his foul mouth."

Garth forced himself to breathe slowly, swallowing convulsively. Finally, he said, "Sir," his voice was husky, with a little squeak. "If you keep this up, it won't matter, cuz you'll be deceased..."

"Hush, son, what's done is done," the president cut him off. Turning to Quin, he asked, "You got your gun?"

Quin cleared his throat. "Yes, sir. Uh, we'll just take Garth's truck, why don't we?"

"Excellent," Dalton smiled, reaching out for Garth's keys.

Rolling his eyes, Garth exhaled heavily and dropped the keys into his hand. Together, the three men and the dog made their way across the parking lot to Garth's SUV. He waited while the other two climbed in and stood back, watching until the large vehicle drove out of sight.

## *Chapter Nineteen*

"This is all highly irregular, you know," the nurse, Cecily, groused. "Jennifer isn't the *only* one who has patients, you know. Just because she's sleeping with Dr. Velasquez..." she trailed off, belatedly realizing she was speaking out of turn.

"I certainly appreciate you helping me out, nurse," Tabby said respectfully, fighting the urge to groan out loud. *Really, how childish.* "If you wouldn't mind just helping me get ready for my sonogram, I'm sure I'll be fine on my own."

Cecily graced her with a forced smile, perhaps a little embarrassed. "I'll just help you into the wheelchair and then you can come out in the hall and just wait there where we can keep an eye on you. I'm sure the orderly will be here for you in just a minute or two."

"That'll be just fine," Tabby assured her warmly, though she felt completely impatient with the entire thing.

While she did still feel very uneasy knowing that her stalker was roaming free, she certainly didn't want to be a burden to anyone—especially not this self-righteous medical assistant with delusions of grandeur. In fact, she sighed to herself, there were a lot of those delusions going around these days.

"Okay, now," Cecily patronized, parking Tabby outside her hospital room's door. "Someone will be along to get you

any second now. And I can see you just fine from over there."

She didn't miss the fact that the young woman, after aiming a caricature smile at her over her shoulder, walked straight into an inner office and pulled the door closed. Craning her head did no good. Tabby couldn't see another soul up or down the long hall. With a sigh, she reached out to angle herself a little in the chair, hoping she could see to the end of the hall where the orderly would be coming from.

Palm flat, she stretched one arm out to make contact, get a little purchase so that she could turn the wheelchair around. Tabby recoiled in alarm when she laid her hand on the wall.

Shelby! His image flashed across her mind. He was here! Posing as a hospital employee, Shelby was nearby, looking for her, watching her. Where was Garth? Where was everyone?

Before she could so much as open her mouth to speak, her wheelchair began to move. Dread seeped through her bones. She didn't need to look around. Chances were good that any normal orderly would have spoken to her.

"Sh...Steve?" she asked, hating how weak her voice sounded, hating how it cracked.

A sharp turn and they were in an empty room. "I'm so proud of you, Tabitha."

She squeezed her eyes tight, nearly devastated to realize she was right. "Wh...uh, what..." she couldn't focus, couldn't make anything sensible come out of her mouth. She was trapped. Again. Stuck, taken, hijacked. She sighed, trying to get her thoughts together.

"You knew I'd be back for you. I could never let you go. We were meant to be together. And now, I've passed all the tests, proven to you that I'm worthy. We *will* be together, my love."

The chair turned easily and she swung around to face the opposite direction. To face her captor. "Oh, God...Shelby," she

## *Daddy's Girl*

choked. "Uh, I mean, *Steve*." What had happened to him? He was a mess—a frightening mess.

On close inspection, Tabby could see a suppurating, bloody gash on his neck. It had to be from someone's fingernails. The side of his face was a muted violet. There were faint trails under his nose, which was reddened and angry, no doubt it was broken.

"I have a place for us, all ready for you. There's food and it's nice, comfortable." No need for him to tell her about Pat just yet. "It belonged to a friend of mine," he murmured.

Belonged...It belonged to a friend of his? Did he mean *had belonged* or what? If Shelby looked this bad, what must the other man look like? It was all Tabby could do not to choke on her fear.

"Sh...Steve," She *really* needed to keep his name straight. He obviously was hanging by a very thin thread. "Steve, I just had a kidney removed, a day or so ago. I've hardly done any walking at all."

Taking her completely by surprise, he dropped to his knees in front of her, threading his arms around her and laying his head on her lap.

"I'm so sorry I hurt you," he whispered, his voice husky, choked with tears. Tabby was taken aback. "I just...I get so mad sometimes. It's hard to control. You were always there for me. So good to me. So special. I have to take care of you. Everyone should know how wonderful you are and how you're meant for me."

Tabby swallowed heavily, frightened but her heart breaking for this shattered young man. "Steve," she choked, her hand carefully coming to rest on his dark, tangled hair. "You've been hurt. You need to be seen." She doubted he would let anyone treat his injuries, but it was worth a shot.

He lifted his head, his shaking hand reaching toward her face. Resting his fingertips on her cheek, he used his other hand

to lever himself against the arm of the wheelchair and rise to his feet.

"No matter what, you always put me first, don't you? I'm the luckiest man in the world," he sniffed, a watery smile coming and going on his face. "I'm going to take such good care of you. You're worth everything."

What should she do? Was there a way to rein him in without anymore injury? She was so scared. Garth could handle him easily, she knew. And all of his brothers and sisters were around. She hadn't met them yet, she'd been so out of it.

"Steve," she said gently. "I don't want you to get in trouble. There are—there are people watching after me. They sort of dropped the ball this morning, but they'll look for me."

He walked to the door, looked out, and then turned back to her. "It's okay," he beamed. "I'll keep you here in the hospital for awhile, at least a few hours. They'll think you're long gone before I take you out of here. And I'll have all the medicine and everything you'll need before we go."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Where is she?" Garth demanded loudly, fighting to keep from shouting.

"What's up?" Abe joined his brother, placing a calming hand on his shoulder and squeezing.

"You were supposed to stay with her, Cecily," growled Jennifer, her demeanor somewhere between irate and frantic. "Did you even see...?" She took a deep breath. "Get out. Just go. You're relieved."

Cecily burst into tears, hands over her face, she made to walk around the nurses' desk and out into the hall when

## *Daddy's Girl*

Eamon intercepted her. "We've just gotten an emergency call from a man who'd been severely injured. A hospital employee. Our stalker is here at this hospital posing as one of the housekeeping staff."

"You really have to be paying attention to tell the difference between housekeeping-maintenance and orderlies," Jennifer observed, adding, "I guess we know that Cecily wasn't paying attention."

"Did you notice the man at all, Cecily?" Eamon asked. Garth could tell he was trying to be gentle, but he could clearly hear his brother's anger. Eamon Cavanaugh didn't suffer fools gladly. That was fine with him—he wanted to tear her limb from limb.

Cecily sniffed, her sobbing lessening somewhat. "I-I..." her chin crumpled. "I didn't even see who it was," she admitted, breaking down again.

This time Eamon let her go, turning toward Jennifer. "I need you to get security up here," he began, shifting to face his brothers. "I've got some men downstairs, around the emergency room, waiting for my word. Cord, Maggie, and Ulick are down there. Siobhan is interviewing the vic, and the others are working on the paper side of things."

Garth was glad to know what everyone was up to, reassured that so many were involved in finding and helping Tabby, but the simple fact was—Tabby was missing, at the hands of the man who'd been terrorizing her for years.

He wanted to be everywhere at once—he wanted to shoot someone, call the president and order in a strike force—something.

## Chapter Twenty

Garth didn't want to call Tabby's father. The man was busy and it wouldn't do any good. That's what he tried to tell himself.

It didn't matter what lies he tried to believe, he had to tell. Her father had a right to know she was missing. However, he didn't need to call the president, exactly. The Chief of Staff would do nicely.

"Uncle Clive," he said when O'Brien answered the phone.

He figured the less formal mode of address would alert the other man to the personal nature of the call. It might even remind him that he felt something like affection for Garth—so the president didn't have him shot before he could find Tabby.

"Whatsamatter?" O'Brien growled, audibly covering the phone. Garth could hear him ordering people through the muffling hand. *Out, Out...not you—stay.*

"Tabby...Uh, when I was down with the president, something happened." He took a deep breath and let it out. "She's missing," Garth blurted.

"Missing?" Clive echoed, sounding distant—as if he'd never heard the word.

"The nurse...I was too long in getting back upstairs," Garth admitted, fighting the urge to lay the blame at someone else's feet. "Eamon came in with a report from an injured hospital employee. He'd befriended and been attacked by a



## *Daddy's Girl*

man who was interested in Tabby and who is masquerading as a hospital employee."

He'd tried to keep his tone even, to spout the facts as he knew them and not break down. Tabby was here, somewhere, and they had to find her. How hard could it be? She was in the hospital somewhere; he was pretty sure about that.

"Do you believe he's left the premises with her?" the older man asked, his voice calm.

"Uh, actually, no we really don't. We can't be sure, of course, but the hospital, as you know, is four hundred thousand square feet, from stem to stern." He sighed gustily. "The search is taking awhile."

There was a lengthy pause on the other end of the phone. Finally, Clive spoke, bit obviously not to him. "Can that dog track people?" he asked of whoever was in his office.

"Shoot! It's Quin. Eurydice." Garth slapped his open palm against his forehead. How could he have overlooked something so obvious?

"Don't blame yourself about it, son," O'Brien's tone was soothing, though Garth could clearly hear the worry behind his words. "Lang needed a sitter. It's your job. I know you love our Tabby Cat. If this dog hadn't been drooling on my rug, I might not have thought about using her either. Just find our girl, huh?"

"Yes, sir, of course," Garth croaked. He wasn't sure if he felt any worse or any better. Probably not better. Unfortunately, he wasn't really numb, either.

\* \* \* \* \*

The room was a bit dusty, which was odd for a sterile hospital room underground. It had been left abandoned for

some time. Apparently the cleaning crew didn't get down to this level all that often. The automatic lights glowed eerily from the baseboards. They never went off—she'd grown used to that during her stay. She didn't know what time of day it was, but at least she wasn't left in the dark.

Shelby had gone away, locking the door behind him. Not before he'd settled Tabby into a hastily made up bed in a cold, windowless room.

Tabby shivered, aching, worried, fighting the need for sleep. She knew she'd probably missed some medicines she was supposed to have. Her body was screaming for painkillers. She'd definitely missed a dose or two there.

What should she do? What could she do? She couldn't get out; the door was well and truly locked from the outside. She'd tried it desperately, finally collapsing in a nearby chair while she recovered from the exertion.

Now, she lay in the bed, dozing on and off, praying for Garth to find her before something more happened to her. And Shelby. He wasn't in good shape. What if he became incapacitated and left her here? He could be picked up...anything could happen.

After an interminable amount of time, the door rattled and opened. Tabby had been dozing, in too much pain to really sleep. She startled, desperately watching to see who entered, hoping against hope that it would be Garth, security, someone.

It was Shelby. "Hello, Tabitha," he smiled, his swollen lip casing him to lisp somewhat. "I brought you some food. I wasn't able to get the medicine you need." His mouth drooped for a moment. "They maintain the pharmacies on the floors very carefully."

He looked awful. Even in the dim light, she could see that the bruise on his right cheek was swollen and a dark purple now, colorful with a hint of blue at the edges. How

## *Daddy's Girl*

was it that nobody saw him and wondered?

"S'okay, Steve," she mumbled, trying to pull herself up to sitting. She was *so* tired and sore. "I wouldn't mind a little drink of water."

"Did you get out of the bed after I left?" he asked, his voice even. It was impossible to tell if he was angry or not.

"Yes," she said simply, deciding it didn't really matter.

To her surprise, he smiled again. "Good. You're supposed to walk a bit, but only a bit, after a kidney surgery. So at least you've done that. I'll go out in just a little bit and try to get some medicine for you."

He was quiet for a second, and even in her pain, Tabby realized he was uneasy, nervous in a way that he hadn't been before. Almost giddy.

"Steve?" It was getting easier to call him that. "What is it?"

He flashed a guilty smile. Pulling back his light blue hospital smock, he showed her the butt of a tiny silver gun tucked into the waistband of his pants.

"I thought I should get us some protection," he explained, his eyes dropping.

"Is it real?" she asked, amazed. "Can I hold it?"

"Oh no, you could drop it, or hurt yourself!" He sounded scandalized.

Well, it had been worth a try, anyway. Tabby let out a quiet sigh, closing her eyes and laying back. She was tired.

"Okay," she mumbled.

"Rest now," he murmured to her. "I'm going to get your medicine somehow. I'll be back soon."

Tabby tried to relax as Shelby bent over her, carefully kissing her cheek. She didn't move when he turned, quietly slipping through the heavy door. She heard his key snick in the lock, the bolt slid into place and he was gone.

She'd had an idea. A wonderful, simple, obvious idea.

Every patient room, in fact, every bathroom contained a little metal plate with a thin cord dangling from it. Each and every plate had the words: *In Case of Emergency, Pull Cord*, emblazoned on it in great, bold letters.

After seeing the dangling lines everywhere she looked for so long, she supposed that she'd become used to seeing them and hadn't given a thought to what the words and the cord meant. She waited a few minutes, excited, wanting to be sure that Shelby didn't come in and catch her.

The cord was within easy reach of the bed, and that was a blessing. The way she was feeling right then, Tabby knew she couldn't have even managed getting out of bed without falling flat on her fanny.

Minutes had passed and her nerves were frayed. If she waited too long, he'd be back again. Finally, with difficulty, she reached around, feeling her way, until she found it. The cord. The beautiful, blessed cord. Excited, nearly frantic, she tugged...and tugged.

Had anything happened? How would she know? This part of the hospital was running on auxiliary power, Shelby had said. The electricity to the rooms down here might or might not be active. It was certainly cold. The lights seemed like back ups that always stayed on at night.

## *Chapter Twenty-One*

Along with a team of men, Quin, Eurydice, Cord, and Garth, were working their way down from the top floor, searching every possible room in the hospital. Some were, of course, off limits, but in every instance there was an accounting of whom, or what, was in the room.

There were units circling the block and stationed at all the exits. Even the route to Pat's apartment was being carefully watched. Siobhan and Ulick waited in the apartment itself, just in case Shelby came back there, with or without Tabby.

For those same reasons, Maggie and Izzy remained at Tabby's townhouse. Nobody was positive where Shelby would take her, and it was imperative that they intercept him wherever he chose to go.

"Mr. Cavanaugh!" Garth was following Quin and Eurydice into the bright stairwell when the hospital's chief of security caught his attention.

He stopped, turned, waiting frozen for the burly older man to rush up to him. "There's been some odd activity in an isolated, generally unused subbasement. Someone has activated an emergency call switch down there. The team is headed that way."

"You've alerted them to the potential danger, right? And of course they..."

"Sir, we can't do anything less than answer that call as if it were a code-blue. In fact, that's what you're hearing right now." He swept a hand toward the ceiling, indicating the pleasantly modulated woman's voice repeating "*Code-blue, subbasement three, unit zero three zero one-one.*"

Garth had begun to jog, his brother falling in behind him. They had all turned from the stairwell and headed to the nearest elevator, eager to get to Tabby—or solve the mystery in the lower level.

In his gut, Garth was certain that it was Tabby down there. He wanted to issue orders, ask questions, direct. But he knew his role was to be different this time. He'd been searching frantically for her only to be stuck seven or eight floors above her when she needed him the most.

"Cord's down there!" Eamon greeted them when the elevator doors opened. "He and one of the security teams took a medic and went down to the fourth subbasement, to work their way up. Figured it couldn't hurt."

Eamon would be getting constant input from every police source as the detective in charge of Tabby's case. Abe, in his guise as a representative for the FBI, would grudgingly get any information that Eamon wasn't privy to.

\* \* \* \* \*

Shelby rounded the last corner, proud and pleased. He was triumphantly returning to Tabitha with the antibiotics she needed. He was sure she didn't expect it, but he had pain pills, too.

He'd never mean to hurt her before. She'd just...well she knew. They'd talked about it and she understood. What a wonderful woman.

## *Daddy's Girl*

Suddenly, he heard it. "*Code-blue, subbasement three, unit zero three zero one-one.*"

What was happening? His hands shook impossibly as he tried to stuff the pills into a pocket in his smock, struggling to find the key.

"Damn! Damn it!" he swore to himself, to the door, to the world and to the key that somehow slipped out of his hand and clattered onto the hard floor of the hallway. "Not now! She needs me! I have to help her!" His voice was rising in pitch, cracking, frantic. Tabitha was in there. She was having a code-blue and locked in, alone!

Finally, his trembling fingers manipulated the key into its impossibly small slot. *Shlink*. It slid home and he turned it hard, pushing the door inward at the same time.

"Tabitha? Oh my god! Tabitha! Talk to me," he begged, not even noticing when a pill bottle bounced out of his pocket, skittering across the polished linoleum tile when he kicked it in his haste to reach her.

"S-Steve!" she could barely talk. She could be having a seizure or something.

He took her by the shoulders and squeezed, trying to draw a coherent response from her. "Please be all right, please!" he chanted, his voice high pitched and wheezing.

"Stop!" her strangled cry barely penetrated the fog in his brain.

But it did get through. He stilled, hearing the sound of running feet and voices coming nearer. "What did you do?" he groaned, confusion and betrayal carved in the frown on his face, the harsh whisper of his voice.

He stepped back, releasing her, spinning to face the door as a handful of people burst through it. Everyone froze in place, looking at him in expectation.

The gun was in his hand. He hadn't realized that he'd even drawn it.

But he had to do something. Even though Tabby had called these people here, she just didn't understand. He couldn't let them take her away. It was his job to care for her, to protect her, even from herself.

"Shelby..." The big man approached slowly, he had a gun, too. "Put the gun down. Nobody has to get hurt here."

"Steve!" Shelby screeched, his arm shaking badly. "I'm Steve, and you need to get out, *go!*" He backed up to Tabby's hip, blocking her as much as he could from the large man, all the men, that were gathered in the doorway, threatening her. "Get out! You're scaring her, just get out."

He raised the gun, holding it with both hands, trying as hard as he could not to close his eyes. He wouldn't be a big chicken this time. She needed him.

Tabby couldn't believe what was happening. "Steve!" her voice cracked in a dry whisper. "Don't shoot, *please.*"

The big man took a step toward them—it had to be one of Garth's brothers with his brown hair and dark eyes.

"Shelby and Tabitha forever!" Shelby yelled.

It sounded like fireworks, poppers, that she'd thrown at the sidewalk and clapped when it exploded. One weak one, one loud one, and then a dud. Men dived for the floor and Shelby staggered backward, turned, and stumbled across Tabby.

"You were nice to me," he whispered, clutching at her shoulder. "You were nice and I knew you were special. "So good, so important—you needed me to take care of you..."

He coughed and blood dribbled down from the corner of his mouth.

The room burst into chaos, men everywhere. Shelby was spread out on the floor, emergency workers cutting his clothes off. Tabby saw the man who was probably Garth's brother talking into a phone or radio of some kind.

Medics were all around her, lifting her, easing her onto



## *Daddy's Girl*

a gurney. And then, Garth was there, holding her hand, kissing her, running to keep up with the gurney.

"Sugar, I'm so sorry we left you alone. I'm so sorry this happened. It's gonna be okay." He kept up a stream of comfort words nonstop, all the way up to her hospital room.

Tabby clung to him gratefully. She was in such pain, worn out from holding herself together, from trying to be strong and resourceful. She couldn't even think about what had happened there in that cold little room.

Had Shelby died? He had been shot, but he might have lived. What would happen to him?

"Daddy...you gotta tell daddy that I'm okay, Garth. He'll be worried," she managed, fighting the effects of the cold pain killers sliding into her vein. She needed it, was glad to have it, but she wanted to tell him things, ask him things. "I love you, Garth. Who was that other man? Your brother? Will Shelby live?" She felt the world fading away, his voice echoing from a distance.

The only thing she understood him to say was that he loved her, too.

\* \* \* \* \*

"How's my little girl, son?" Langley Dalton's voice was low and urgent over the cell phone.

Garth glanced at the television screen mounted in the corner of the high wall. C-Span was broadcasting a high-powered question and answer session with the president and a host of foreign dignitaries. As he watched, he could see his august employer standing in a corner, angled away from the intrusive cameras as he talked on a cell phone. Dave stood to the right of him, impassive.

"She's resting now, sir. She wanted you to know that she's okay." He took a deep breath. The president had turned and was looking directly at the camera now, directly at him it seemed, one dark eyebrow arched in question. It was eerie. Garth knew his boss couldn't see him, but he looked into those eyes as best he could when he answered. "Dr. Velasquez says that she's tired and a little in shock but okay. There'll be no lasting damage."

"How's your brother? It was Cord wasn't it—who fired the shot?" The other man's voice was low and warm, vibrating with understanding and concern.

"Yes, sir, it was Cord. The bullet winged him pretty good. It wasn't as bad as it could have been, though." Garth took a deep, calming breath. He didn't know how much the president knew about events of the day. "I think, sir, that he's most affected by—that he's most upset—about killing that little guy."

On screen, the president's mouth thinned as he nodded his head one time. A light flashed and Dave moved a little closer to his commander. People could be seen filing into the picture from the right frame.

"Gotta go," Dalton's voice was clipped now. "Watch over my baby girl and thank everybody for me. I'll be in touch with each and every one of 'em soon as I can be."

"Yes, sir," Garth answered, but knew his words fell on empty air. The president was already striding up to the podium, a sincere smile on his face as he apologized for his distraction.

Eamon had stayed behind and was even now waiting patiently for Garth to hang up the phone. "You okay?" he asked when Garth turned to sit next to him.

A curtain had been drawn around Tabby's bed, and Garth let it be. She had been dosed heavily with painkillers and wouldn't be missing him for quite some time. Still, he

## *Daddy's Girl*

didn't want to get all that far from her just now.

"I'm all right," Garth nodded, fighting a yawn. Too much adrenaline always left him feeling drained when the high was over. "Tabby's pretty messed up about what happened with Shelby. Her doctor is recommending counseling. At some point, maybe we'll do it together, just to talk the whole thing through."

Eamon looked startled, one cinnamon-ginger brow arching over his light blue eyes. "That's really proactive of you, Gar," he observed. "Hell, I'm proud of you."

"What?" Garth glared at his brother. "I'm not a caveman. If one of us getting counseling is good, both of us getting counseling is twice as good. I'm in this for the long haul, buddy."

Eamon shifted sideways to look hard at him. "So...did you ask her yet?" he queried.

Garth smiled and shook his head. "No, I thought I'd wait till she was conscious. Call me an old romantic..."

Rolling his eyes, Eamon whacked him solidly on the shoulder before pulling Garth to his feet. "Siobahn ought to be here any time now. She was over with that guy Pat that Shelby attacked. Everybody else is down in the cafeteria, getting ready to head back. Let's go say goodbye. I'll leave a couple guys on the door here."

Reluctantly, Garth nodded. His brothers and sisters would be heading back to their daily lives post-haste. He owed them all a great deal, in some cases, just for support, but that was enough. He'd needed them here this week and he hated to see them go, although he was more than grateful that Tabby was no longer in danger.

He shook his head to clear the sad thoughts. They'd all find ways to get together; they were a family. Soon, Tabby would join their family. It was time for relief, not sorrow. Eamon held the elevator patiently, waiting for him to catch up.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

"*I* thought they'd never leave," Tabby sighed, stretching out on the bed, throwing Garth her best "come hither" look.

Chuckling, Garth rested a knee on the edge of the mattress, arching a brow at her. Her wicked grin, combined with what she hoped was a sexy shrug, had the desired effect.

One knee became two and then he was advancing, prowling toward her on his hands and knees, dangerous and sexy, and all hers. She shivered, reaching for him as he stopped above her, trapping her in the cage of his arms and legs.

"It *was* a party, sugar," he purred, leaning down to nip at her chin. "And it was good to see Ulick, Eamon, Abe, and Siobhan, wasn't it?"

"Well, yes, of course, but isn't it standard procedure that engagement parties end early so the engaged couple can celebrate *properly*? I didn't think Daddy would stay that long. I'm glad Dave and Uncle Clive finally dragged him away." She rolled her eyes and wrinkling her nose at him.

Garth laughed, lifting one hand to trace the neckline of her thin top, helping it along as he flicked one button and another. It fell open a little and then a little more.

"Your father has his own ideas about what is and is not proper, baby. And I don't think he's all that excited about us

## *Daddy's Girl*

celebrating. In fact," he leaned down and nipped at her lower lip, pulling away before she could engage his mouth. "I don't think a wedding ring is going to change things all that much."

Tabby lifted a finger to his lips. "Hush, Garth. Nobody's father wants to think of such things. He'll get over it as soon as he gets a grandchild."

The tilting of those firm, sensual lips had to be the most beautiful thing Tabby had ever seen. If she hadn't already known that he loved her, it would be crystal clear now.

"Hmm," Garth purred, pushing her blouse off her shoulders and down. She helpfully assisted him by shrugging it off the rest of the way. "Something to consider..."

His hands didn't stop; caressing over her shoulders, down her arms and back up her waist, tracing every rib. She loved being tenderly touched, especially when the person touching her was this man. His big hands were surprisingly gentle as they stroked her. They seemed to know where to touch to make Tabby's body tremble with need.

"Something to practice for..." Tabby agreed, trying not to moan as Garth's nimble fingers found the fastener on her skirt and slid it open.

One tug and the satiny skirt skated over her hips and down, leaving her exposed in her sheer thigh highs and lacey panties and bra. Teasing with one finger, Garth began to trace the lace around the cup of her bra, tickling her and making her ache.

When she arched toward him, he pulled back with a wicked grin. "Uh, uh, uh," he admonished her, tapping her nose with his taunting fingertip.

"Please," she moaned, squirming closer, trying to force him to touch her. "Don't tease me, Garth," she pouted, her own nimble fingers starting to work on the buttons of his shirt.

Leaning back, he made short work of his shirt, and then, with a sexy wink, rapidly unbuttoned and unsnapped until

he wore no more than the devilish smile she had fallen in love with. Nipping and kissing down her legs, he quickly divested her of her filmy

They kissed and caressed, reveling in each other's body. At first, Garth's slow pace was making her crazy. She soon decided that she liked the slower pace—it was much more sensual.

Garth kissed down the length of Tabby's body, caressing her ultra sensitive skin with his fingers and mouth. Absorbed in his delicious journey, he licked down her slender neck to her flushed breast, not stopping until he reached a pink, pebbled nipple.

He paused there, laving it with his tongue and nipping it with his teeth, while his hand continued to travel down Tabby's heated, body. She writhed and moaned in pleasure when Garth's fingers paused at her navel, circling it with light touches, teasing and touching. Pulling his mouth away from her rosy nipple, Garth licked his way down Tabby's stomach until his hands and mouth met as he traced the crease of her thigh.

The scent of her excitement was a heady musk. She was so wet, so hot, just for him. Sliding down between her legs, he bent her knees up, pulling her labial lips apart with his thumbs.

Gently, carefully, he traced her delicate folds with the tip of his tongue. Tabby began to pant, shifting against his mouth, needy for more. Garth's mouth covered her, his tongue sinking into her sheath, out and around, eating her, devouring her, sucking her juices and nipping at her swollen nub until her breathless gasps turned into strangled moans and he tasted her cream thick on his tongue.

Her channel still clenching, Garth moved up her body, sliding his hungry cock deep inside and claiming her mouth with his at the same time. They groaned in unison as Tabby's

## *Daddy's Girl*

legs wrapped around his waist, letting him slide that much deeper into her wet heat.

"Love you," he murmured against her mouth, "Love you." He can't stop saying it, over and over, as he plunged into her, taking open-mouthed kisses with every word. "Love you, love you, love you."

"Garth!" Her cry was almost panicked as she clung to him, eyes wide, her tight sheath contracting around him.

"That's it, baby, that's it," he groaned, "Come on," he urged her, the tingling deep in his balls urgent and tight.

His body shuddered, jerking almost of its own accord as orgasm ripped through him, causing him nearly to black out.

A tidal wave of pleasure and emotion overwhelmed him and he collapsed, falling to the side so that he wouldn't crush her.

They lay there panting side by side for long minutes.

"Not a bad start to our engagement," Tabby sighed.

Garth rolled toward her. "It's important to start as you mean to go on," he murmured earnestly, reaching out to stroke her face. "Loving you every day of your life, that's how I mean to go on, just so you know."

"That works for me," Tabby grinned, fighting a yawn. "Put me down for that."

"Done," he smiled, chuckling warmly as she drifted off.

They'd come a long way from a mugging outside of a bar to engaged. Easing his palm over her flat tummy, he wrapped himself around her, wondering if, even now, his child was coming together inside of her. What if his own little girl was getting herself together in there?

With a rough shake of his head, he gathered her into his arms. He just wasn't ready to think about that yet. Nope, not yet.























