

Secret Storms

A Mother and Daughter, Lost then Found

by

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SAMPLE CHAPTERS

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JULIE

Chapter Three

STATE MENTAL HOSPITAL

The first few days I was at EPPI, the institute for the mentally challenged and the criminally insane, all that any of us patients on women's ward 'C' did was sit and watch the reports of Kennedy's assassination on television. We all gathered around the small set in what was inaptly referred to as the sunroom. In the Philadelphia Institute, the private hospital where I was kept before being transferred, there had been a real sunroom that had actual sun flowing brightly into it. In this sunroom at the state hospital, you could barely see your hand outstretched in front of you, what with the tight dark heavy mesh that covered the few windows. The sunlight coming into that room could be contained in a small thimble.

Everyone sat on the gray washable vinyl couches and chairs, packed in like sardines, smack in front of the television, watching the scramble of reporters trying to cover this story. By late afternoon, we were told by Walter Cronkite that Lee Harvey Oswald was being held for the assassination of President Kennedy and for the fatal shooting of Patrolman J.D. Tippit.

I didn't sit with the others. I stood behind the couch and chairs to watch the television; it seemed the safest place. In front of me, two-dozen or so unfamiliar people, most of them in shock and suspending their illnesses for the moment, shook their heads, cried and grieved for the loss of a great man.

On my third day at EPPI, Sunday morning, November 24th, Oswald was scheduled to be transferred from police headquarters to the county jail. Everyone was watching the live TV coverage when suddenly we all saw a man aim a pistol and fire at point-blank range. The assailant was identified as Jack Ruby. A stunned silence filled the room. Not even the doctors and nurses who had been sitting with us uttered a sound. Oswald died two hours later at Parkland Hospital. I continued to stand behind the couch and near the nurses' desk, listening, watching and waiting.

On Monday, November 25th, President Kennedy was laid to rest in Arlington National Cemetery. Like the simple turning of a page, when Kennedy's funeral was over and the television networks returned to their normal scheduling, the patients on my ward no longer needed to suspend their illnesses. It began slowly, hardly noticeable at all, quite naturally. A woman with extra-red rouged cheeks began to twirl on tiptoe, humming the music she was dancing to. Some women began to rock up and down, up and down, some rocked fast and some rocked slow. One sat and rocked, another rocked and walked, and others rocked in place and hummed discordantly. A group of four, as though previously arranged, began to follow one-after-the-other-after-the-other, seemingly attached by a single piece of invisible string, around and around the no-sun-room. These were the Zombies—no one and nothing blocked their way, because if anything did it was shoved aside roughly and shouted at. Then, a giant dark-haired woman began to shake the ward with her deep-throated profanities. Stomping the man-sized shoes she wore without socks, her trunk-like legs covered with thick black hair, she roared blasphemies and gnashed her corroded teeth.

I hid in a corner, flattened myself against the wall, and if someone bumped into me there, I stood by the nurses' desk. I didn't cry. I did not want to attract any attention. I just stood and trembled and prayed

for the day to pass and for God to keep me safe.

These were the same patients who had been sitting on the couch and chairs in front of the television. These were the very same patients who had been crying for the last week. Tears had rolled down the cheeks of these people as they wept for Jackie, Caroline and John, Jr.

In some cases it was obvious why a person was there. But with me, there was nothing you could put your finger on exactly, except, of course, that I had a slight bulge in my stomach. I stood back and watched my fellow patients begin to storm and break out into further uproar. I listened to the echo of their newly retrieved voices bounce hard, back and forth, against one wall and then onto another. My throat tightened. *Oh God*, I thought. My body went rigid. *Please help me*, I prayed. My heartbeat thundered. And then I tasted a sharp acid rising from my stomach. It is an acquired taste, the essence of fear.

The next day, I was taken off the ward for the first time, down in an elevator, along dark, winding hallways and through a door—one of many, each indistinguishable from the others. Inside the room was a desk with a man behind it. The nurse who had escorted me there placed me in a chair in front of the desk and left. The man behind the desk smiled at me for a split second and introduced himself. He was a doctor of psychology, he told me.

I didn't like the way he looked—all one color, with his beige teeth, lips, face, hair, shirt and tie, blending into the bare beige wall behind him, creating the impression that maybe he wasn't there at all. I had to blink twice to focus in on him and when I caught his blank stare it made me so uncomfortable that I quickly looked down at the green linoleum floor. My hands were in a tight fist in my lap. My body was trembling—in fact, I hadn't stopped trembling since the day before. I hadn't slept, either. New noises—night noises—groaning, moaning, screaming, yelling noises filled the ward for the first time since I'd been there. They had kept me awake all night. I lay quaking, curled up in a ball, my back to the wall, my eyes wide open and facing the door so I could see anything that might come through it. I listened intently, concentrating on every little sound, every creak, wondering if it was staying in one place, moving away, or coming closer. I waited for something to happen. I waited for someone to explode. I waited for my door to fly open. I waited for someone to grab me, drag me out of bed and shake me like a rag doll and beat me against the wall. I waited all night, quivering, listening and watching, until the sun came up and the room filled with light and one of the nurses came in for her regular morning bed check.

"I want to talk to someone," I told her. "I need to talk to someone right away."

"I'm told you would like to speak to someone," the beige man, now holding a pencil poised to write, said.

I looked down at my hands in my lap. I took a breath. I willed my trembling to stop.

"There is nothing wrong with me," I whispered. "I shouldn't be here."

"I can't hear you," he said. "Can you look at me?"

"I don't belong here," I whispered a little louder as I forced myself to look up.

He blinked his eyes. He shifted in his chair. He waited.

"I'm not mentally challenged or criminally insane."

He began to scribble.

"I shouldn't be here. I should be someplace else."

"Where *should* you be?" he asked.

"I don't know. Home, maybe." I looked down and hunched over. "Or *a* home. A home for unwed mothers, maybe," I whispered, feeling great shame. A tear splashed onto the green linoleum below and I covered it up with my foot.

"I can't hear you," he said. "Please speak up."

I looked up. "I shouldn't be here," I said louder. "I'm not crazy. I'm pregnant. All I am is pregnant with a child."

He scribbled some more.

"I think I am being punished," I said even louder, wanting him to hear me, needing him to hear me, desperate for him to hear me. "I think they must have put me here to punish me. Because I am not insane." I spoke slowly and clearly, so each word I said was separate and individual and could not be misunderstood.

He kept scribbling.

"I am frightened. I am scared out of my mind here. I am afraid that one of the patients is going to hurt me. Do you understand? I am very fearful for my life here."

He gave no response.

"Please help me," I called out to him. "Please, can't you help me?" I begged.

He blinked his eyes. He shifted in his chair. He waited.

I felt my mouth stretch open wider than my head and my entire body began to quake again. I stood up, put both hands on his desk and leaned in toward him. "Help me. Please, help me," I pleaded, tears of rage flowing from my eyes. "I am scared to death and I need you to help me get out of here."

"Can you hear me?" I began to roar at the beige man behind the desk. "Can you hear anything I am saying?"

After that, I refused to utter a single word. I silently retreated inside myself—a condition that is, I would later find out, called *elective mutism*. If no one was going to listen to me, I resolved, then what was the point of saying anything? I went where they told me, did what they said. But I was stiff and still and silent. Inside, though, I was hot with fury. Enraged. Outraged. Infuriated by what was being done to me.

In the beginning of the fourth month your baby's ear bones begin to harden and he or she may begin to hear sounds. His or her face will be well developed. Eyebrows and scalp hair are beginning to appear. Your baby is now big enough that his or her heartbeat can be heard with a regular stethoscope. At the end of the sixteenth week your baby will be around 5.5 inches and weigh 6 ounces.

KATHY

Chapter Forty-One

JUST A TRIM, PLEASE

It was 1975; I was twelve years old. My brothers and I had just come back from a restful summer in Philly, which felt like one long rejuvenating exhalation. I returned refreshed, filled with love—the kind of love that I could only get from time spent with my family, the type of love that fertilized my soul and allowed for full and long-lasting blooms. And blossom I did.

My legs seemed to grow several inches that summer; the baby fat cradling my face melted away, revealing contours of high, feminine cheekbones. Inside, I was still the same softball-playing tomboy, but my exterior was doing all it could to deny it. “She’s lovely,” strangers commented. “Kathleen is coming into her own,” buzzed a circle of women at church. It was becoming apparent there was a female buried beneath the layers of tangled hair and sweaty smudges—and she was coming out, ready or not.

My coming out was not, however, welcomed by everyone. Gloria was less than pleased with the recent developments. I could tell by the impatient tone, which would strangle any conversation that gave birth to a compliment toward me. “Yeah, well, she’s growing up,” she’d say with a matter-of-fact lift of her eyebrows.

By the middle of my seventh grade year, Gloria had had enough. She and I were in the local grocery store one day, rounding the cereal aisle making our way to the condiments; I was relegated to the task of pushing the cart.

“My, aren’t you a beautiful young lady,” a frail woman with a hunched back and kind smile commented.

“Thank you,” I whispered as I lowered my head and pushed forward.

A compliment within Gloria’s earshot usually meant trouble for me.

I glanced over at Gloria scanning the shelf a few steps ahead of me. There was nothing about her stance that looked irritated; she hadn’t heard the comment. But before I could digest the feeling of relief, the old woman walked over to Gloria, pointed at me, and asked, “Is that your daughter?”

My heart stopped. I squeezed the handle of the cart and winced my shoulders forward.

“Well,” she paused, “...yes.” Her hesitation spoke volumes.

“She’s a rose,” the old woman cooed. “And look at that beautiful head of hair.” The well-meaning stranger could not have known of the thorns that would grow out of that comment.

I kept my head tucked, but in my mind’s eye I could see the controlled chagrin on Gloria’s face.

After the groceries were put away, Gloria called the twins and me into the kitchen. “Take a seat,” she ordered.

“What’s going on?” we asked.

She appeared with a stack of white bath towels and a black, oblong zipper bag. She set everything down on the kitchen table and unzipped the bag to reveal an assortment of scissors in ascending sizes,

each with their own private pocket, and a long, narrow black comb.

"Haircuts," Gloria announced. "You're first, Tracey."

"I want bangs," Tracey said.

Melissa was next. "Bangs, please," she begged. "Just like Tracey." Tracey was the older twin—by six minutes—and Melissa, like most younger siblings, seemed to feel comfortable following Tracey's lead.

I was last. I sat on the barstool and draped the bath towel over my shoulders. Gloria stepped back and quietly examined me like I was a painting at an art gallery, tilting her head slightly to the left and then to the right.

"Just a trim, please," I said. I was particular about my hair—it was the one thing of which I had control.

"No bangs," I said. "They'll get in my eyes." I pinched my thumb and index finger together. "Just a half-inch, please."

"Uh huh," she mumbled. "Don't worry. I'll make you look nice."

She began to cut. I could hear the slow-motion snip of the shears close to my head. Too close. I watched a twelve-inch section of brown hair fall to the ground. Startled, I grabbed the side of my head to feel the effects.

"Not that much," I yelled.

"Relax," she smiled. "I know what I'm doing."

I pulled away and looked back at her.

"Just a trim!" I said, tears welling up in my eyes.

"Calm down," she ordered, as she squared my shoulders forward again. "I said I know what I'm doing."

Do I get up and run?

My hesitation cost me another section of hair. *Snip*. A cool presence now occupied the left side of my neck and felt like a window had been opened. *Snip*. My head felt lopsided now; weightless on one side, full on the other. *Snip*. The point of no return. I gave in to the moment. I had no choice but to give in.

"All done!" she said, as she stepped away with a pleased look on her face. I jumped up and ran to the bathroom mirror. Upon hearing my gasp, Gloria called out from the family room. "It's called a pixie."

I didn't recognize the girl in the mirror staring back at me. Gloria came into the bathroom and stood behind me, smiling, running her fingers through the short half-inch patches of hair.

"I wanted a trim," I whimpered.

"Oh, stop being so ungrateful," she barked, as she pulled her hands back. "You look fine, now go out and play."

I entered school the next day with my shoulders hunched and my head down, wishing I could disappear.

"What happened, Kathleen?" my teacher asked.

"My mom cut my hair."

"Well, dear," she said, "that's the good thing about hair. It always grows back."