

THE OTHER DAUGHTER

CHAPTER ONE

Twenty years later

She was late, she was late, oh, God, she was so late!

Melanie Stokes came bounding up the stairs, then made the hard left turn down the hall, her long blond hair whipping around her face. Twenty minutes and counting. She hadn't even thought about what she was going to wear. Damn.

She tore into her room with her sweatshirt half pulled over her head. A strategic kick sent the heavy mahogany door slamming shut behind her as she shed the first layer of clothes. She toed off her tennis shoes and sent them sailing beneath the pine bureau that swallowed nearly a quarter of her bedroom. A lot of things came to rest beneath the battered dresser. One of these days she meant to clean it out. But not tonight.

Melanie hastily shimmied out of her ripped-up jeans, tossed her T-shirt onto the sleigh bed, and hurried to the closet. The wide plank floorboards felt cool against her toes, making her do a little cha-cha-cha along the way.

"Come on," she muttered, ripping back the silk curtain. "Ten years of compulsive shopping crammed into one five-by-five space. How hard can it be to locate a cocktail dress?"

To judge by the mess, pretty hard. Melanie grimaced, then waded in fatalistically. Somewhere in there were a few decent dresses.

At the age of twenty-nine, Melanie Stokes was petite, capable, and a born diplomat. She'd been abandoned as a child at City General Hospital with no memory of where she came from, but that had been a long time ago and she didn't think of those days much. She had an adoptive father whom she respected, an adoptive mother whom she loved, an older brother whom she worshiped, and an indulgent godfather whom she adored.

Until recently she had considered her family to be very close. They were not just another rich family, they were a tight-knit family. She kept telling herself they would be like that again soon.

Melanie had graduated from Wellesley six years earlier with her family serving as an enthusiastic cheering section. She'd returned home right afterward to help her mother through one of her "spells," and somehow it had seemed easiest for everyone if she stayed. Now she was a professional event organizer. Mostly she did charity functions. Huge black-tie affairs that made the social elite feel social and elite while simultaneously milking them for significant sums of money. Lots of details, lots of planning, lots of work. Melanie always pulled them off. Seamless, social columnists liked to rave about the events, relaxed yet elegant. Not to mention profitable.

Then there were the nights like tonight. Tonight was the seventh annual Donate-A-Classic for Literacy reception, held right there in her parents' house, and, apparently, cursed.

The caterer hadn't been able to get enough ice. The parking valets had called in sick, the Boston Globe had printed the wrong time, and Senator Kennedy was home with a stomach virus, taking with him half the press corps. Thirty minutes ago Melanie had gotten so frustrated, tears had stung her eyes. Completely unlike her.

But then, she was agitated tonight for reasons that had nothing to do with the reception. She was agitated, and being Melanie, she was dealing with it by keeping busy.

Melanie was very good at keeping busy. Almost as good as her father.

Fifteen minutes and counting. Damn. Melanie found her favorite gold-fringed flapper's dress. Encouraged, she began digging for gold pumps.

During the first few months of Melanie's adoption, the Stokeses had been so excited about their new daughter, they'd lavished her with every gift they could imagine. The second floor master bedroom suite, complete with rose silk wall hangings and a gold-trimmed bathroom, where she needed a stool just to catch her reflection in the genuine

Louis IV mirror, was hers. The closet was the size of a small apartment, and it had been filled with every dress, hat, and, yes, gloves ever made by Laura Ashley. All that in addition to two parents, one brother, and one godfather who were shadowing every move she made, handing her food before she could think to hunger, bringing her games before she could think to be bored, and offering her blankets before she could think to shiver.

It had been a little weird.

Melanie had gone along at first. She'd been eager to please, wanting to be happy as badly as they wanted to make her happy. It seemed to her that if people as golden and beautiful and rich as the Stokeses were willing to give her a home and have her as a daughter, she could darn well learn to be their daughter. So she'd dressed each morning in flounces of lace and patiently let her new mom cajole her straight hair into sausage curls. She'd listened gravely to her new father's dramatic stories of snatching cardiac patients from the clutches of death and her godfather's tales of faraway places where men wore skirts and women grew hair in their armpits. She spent long afternoons sitting quietly with her new brother, memorizing his tight features and troubled eyes while he swore to her again and again that he would be the perfect older brother for her, he would.

Everything was perfect. Too perfect. Melanie stopped being able to sleep at night. Instead, she would find herself tiptoeing downstairs at two a.m. to stand in front of a painting of another golden little girl. Four-year-old Meagan Stokes, who wore flounces of lace and sausage-curled hair. Four-year-old Meagan Stokes, who'd been the Stokeses' first daughter before some monster had kidnapped her and cut off her head. Four-year-old Meagan Stokes, the real daughter the Stokeses had loved and adored long before Melanie arrived.

Harper would come home from emergency surgeries and carry her back to bed. Brian grew adept at hearing the sound of her footsteps and would patiently lead her back to her bedroom. But still she'd come back down, obsessed by the painting of that gorgeous little girl whom even a nine-year-old girl could realize she was meant to replace.

Jamie O'Donnell finally intervened. Oh, for God's sake, he declared. Melanie was Melanie. A flesh-and-blood girl, not a porcelain doll to be used for dress-up games. Let her pick her own clothes and her own room and her own style before the therapy bills grew out of control.

That piece of advice probably saved them all. Melanie left the master bedroom suite for a sunny third-story bedroom across from Brian's room. Melanie liked the bay windows and low, slanted ceilings, and the fact that the room could never be mistaken for, say, a hospital room.

And she discovered, during a clothing drive at school, that she liked hand-me-downs best. They were so soft and comfortable, and if you did spill or rip something, no one would notice. She became Goodwill's best customer for years. Then came the trips to garage sales for furniture. She liked things banged up, scarred. Things that came with a past, she realized when she was older. Things that came with the history she didn't have.

Her godfather was amused by her taste, her father aghast, but her new family remained supportive. They kept loving her. They grew whole. She was late, she was late, oh, God, she was so late!

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