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HER OWN DAUGHTER

Chapter one

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When she glanced up at him, she thought, now there's a man with the weight of the world on his shoulders. Several young men just like him, dressed in crisp black, flitted about from table to table, like butterflies. A chandelier twinkled overhead. All around her, animated conversation among the other women flowed like the fine wine into the crystal goblets before them. Suella glanced around at the other wives and would wonder how many thousands of dollars went into the upkeep of the hair and manicures, the designer sundresses and the brand new shoes. Yet, if she turned around the corner, she would see the glass partition and the doorway. When she opened the doorway she would find steps, stadium style plush seats and she would hear the crowd noise drift up from below, of a bat hitting a ball or the umpire shrieking a "strike" call.

Suella looked at Julie Veragones, sitting beside her. A former model, Julie stood about six feet tall yet probably weighed less than most Rottweilers. She'd worn her glossy, dark brown hair in an upswept style, curls cascading down her back and lightly framing the sides of her face. To Suella and anyone else within earshot, she said "I dread this time of year. School's out, the kids are home saying "There's nothing to do, mom!"

Trenna Kyle, a much shorter and curvier woman giggled. "So what's it to you? Just put 'em out in the pool and tell the nanny you'll pay her an extra hundred bucks if they don't drown."

They all laughed.

"My brats are gonna be up in Maine until the All-Star break," Kaitlyn Vogel, another tall, coltish looking woman said. Kaitlyn had also modeled, referring to it as "good training" for becoming a trophy wife. "It's Jeff's yearly mother's day present to me. We send them off to be with grandma and grandpa for a month."

"That's so neat," Maribel Aviles said, speaking for the first time since she'd arrived. "I thought I'd be the only one with kids. Cincinnati is such a young team." Her husband Miguel had arrived in a trade during the winter. Maribel turned to Suella. "What about you, Sula? How old are your kids?"

All of the women except Maribel looked down at the drinks they cradled between their fingers. Suella shifted from side to side on her high-heeled sandals. "I don't have any children."

Still smiling, Maribel said "Well, you're young. There's still time."

Suella decided she was going to like the new girl.

Some shouts erupted from around the corner. They all glanced in that direction.

An Asian waiter with a dispassionate expression on his face passed by, carrying a tray of empty glasses and plates. Julie stopped him. “What’s going on?”

The waiter shrugged. “Perez is getting bombed. Someone on the Cardinals just hit one into the River.” Gilberto Perez was a young star pitcher who’d remained a bachelor so far.

“Oh, no,” Maribel said. “We’re going to have to come back.”

“They can do it,” Kaitlyn announced with confidence. “Let’s go check it out for awhile.” The four of them started for the corner and the seats in the press area, but Kaitlyn had set her drink down and started for the rear door.

“What are you doing?” Julie asked, with an incredulous tone.

“Let’s go to our field boxes for once,” Kaitlyn said. “In there, it still feels like you’re watching the game from your living room.”

Their heels click-clacked through the cavernous concourse. When they left the luxury boxes, they approached the regular gates and plazas. The smells of hot dogs, mustard and tap beer drifted around them. Two guys who wore jerseys with ripped jeans and backwards-facing baseball caps approached them. “Wow!” one of them said, looking at Julie. “Supermodels! We must be in Heaven, man!”

Julie strode confidently on, toward the field level corridor. She reached the aisles first and called back to Suella. “Wow, you’re not going to believe this, Susie. They’re bringing your hubby in.”

Suella couldn’t believe it. “What? It’s too early! It’s not even dark yet!”

Their seats were in the noisy scout and VIP area. When Suella settled herself in, she took in the entire field. Her husband, Nathan Worthy, emerged from the bullpen

door. While he walked toward the field, as casually as if he'd been on a beach somewhere, the crowd buzzed expectantly. Yet, Suella knew the trance her husband went into, whenever he took the mound.

A noisy scout wearing a golf hat lifted his arms in exasperation. "Oh great, they're bringing in Worthy." He shook his head. "When the hell are they going to get rid of that old piece of shit?"

Julie, who was sitting directly beside Suella, suddenly stiffened, and swung her neck in the man's direction. "Sir, for your information, that piece of shit's WIFE is sitting right here."

He glanced over at them with glazed eyes to complement his mottled skin. "Well then I guess I should get on my knees and apologize, right?" A few male voices laughed along with the elderly scout.

"You know, you're really rude!" Julie snapped at him.

Suella touched her on her wrist, leaning in to whisper into her ear. "It's okay, Jewel. People have been saying that since he turned thirty-five."

Julie relaxed. "Well it bothers me! It's exactly the reason I like to stay up there."

"Let's have some beers," Kaitlyn said. "I'm buying!" She excused herself for the concession stand and Maribel followed along after her. Suella watched her husband warm up. For the first couple of throws, he lobbed the ball plateward, as if he was throwing to a five-year-old. Some people laughed. Suella shook her head, wondering when they locals would get used to his quirks. He'd been with the team for two whole seasons. Gradually, Nathan whipped his arm forward with more force, causing the ball to zip and snap as it arced toward the catcher. He was throwing at full speed by the time the

umpire called for the game to resume.

The scoreboard read 4-0 and it was only the third inning. Suella remembered something Nathan had told her a couple of weeks before, as they lie awake in bed.

“They’re going to make me fight, start me off in the pen.”

Finally, the crowd quieted down and the next batter appeared at the plate, flexing his muscles as he set himself in the batter’s box to face Nathan. Her husband brought his hands high over his head while still facing the plate. He twisted, shrunk down, brought his left arm back and swung it around like a whip, slinging the ball toward the catcher. His first pitch sailed high, causing Suella to remember another one of their conversations about what he did. “My riser looks just like a fat fastball coming toward the plate. Those greedy assholes usually can’t lay off it. They pop it straight up. And to see that ball going into a pop up, well, it’s a great feeling. Almost as good as you sucking me off.”

The batter fouled off the next pitch, while Suella, Julie, and Trena waited for the other two to get back with the beer. Julie poked Suella in her arm. “You’re so quiet tonight,” she said. “You’re not still bumming over what that new girl said, are you?”

“No, no it doesn’t bother me.” Even as Suella said the words, she knew she’d said them too quickly. And she wasn’t that good of an actress. Yes, Maribel’s words bothered her because it was about the thousandth time in the past fifteen years that someone looked on her childless status with pity.

The batter hit a sharp ground ball to the shortstop, Julie’s husband. She pumped her fist triumphantly as she watched him smoothly field the ball and fire a strike over to first base. “Way to go, Tony baby!”

Maribel and Kaitlyn returned with the beers. Suella sipped and watched, coaxing

her husband on for more and more success. The second batter greedily swung at the riser pitch Nathan threw and it hit his bat with a feeble click, sending the ball straight skyward. She heard a radio announcer's voice as he described the scene unfolding before her: "There's a high, high fly ball toward shallow left. Wow, that thing is a major league pop up. Veragones goes back, Calderon calls him off and catches it like a can of corn. Two down!"

Another rough looking character strutted up to the batter's box. Nathan stared the black man down for a few moments before swirling into his windup and hurling his first pitch to him. It landed in the dirt. So did the next one. The batter hit a foul. The next pitch looped way outside, causing the catcher to scramble for the ball. She suddenly realized what he was doing and rolled her eyes. "Oh, good god."

Julie flashed her a quizzical look. "What's the matter?"

"He's putting the guy on."

They both watched Nathan's next pitch sail way outside of the batter's box. Julie said "Doesn't the catcher have to put his arm out to the side and call an intentional walk?"

"Not the way Nathan does it."

While they both watched the batter trot toward first base, the same loud man from before barked: "See that? Chickenshit. Get him out of there."

Suella could sense Julie tense up beside her and she reached out to still her.

"Don't say anything. You'd only be dignifying him."

Julie snorted in disgust, glaring at the old man with the bulbous nose. "Doesn't it make you mad when idiots say things like that?"

“No, because I know they’re not true.” She watched him go to work on the next batter, imagining that she was seeing him for the first time. Nathan was tall, standing just over six feet tall but quite reedy. He may have weighed a hundred-seventy pounds if he carried two dumbbells in his pockets. He wore his copper colored hair in a short, feathered style and with his smooth skin and delicate features, people were often shocked to discover he was thirty-eight years old. Yet people like this idiot scout still commented about his age.

The crowd around her buzzed expectantly. Nathan had walked a guy who looked ripped and antsy, the kind who liked to steal bases. He juked and jumped around the first base bag, taunting him. Suella watched her husband’s expressions. After a stern scowl, the batter retreated. Nathan whipped around and threw as hard as he could to home plate and the umpire yelled “Strike one!”

After the catcher threw the ball to him, things got more complicated. Nathan would grip the ball with the tips of his fingers and revolve the ball quickly through them, reminding her of a Las Vegas sharpie shuffling cards or a magician playing tricks with a rope. In the middle of this action, he suddenly picked the ball up and threw it hard toward Greg Thierry at first base. Greg caught it with a pop in his mitt and slapped the runner’s shoulder as he dived back toward the bag. A chorus of “oohs” and “aahs” drifted up from the crowd.

“Almost caught him napping,” Julie said.

Nathan went into another quick set, glanced at the runner and arced a pitch toward home plate, the pitch Suella recognized as his rainbow curve. The batter lunged at it and sprayed a foul ball into the seats behind the visiting team’s dugout. Suella and Julie

giggled at watching kids and grown men fighting over the ball as it bounced around through the crowd. The umpire fished a new ball out of the sack dangling from his leg and Nathan went back to work again. He flipped the ball back and forth and in circles between his fingers, while glancing at the plate for the signal and at first base for the runner. He brought his glove up, for the wind up.

The runner put his head down and started to race for second base. Nathan, who looked like he was going to uncork for another pitch home, instead snapped his wrist and flung the ball to Greg, who caught it and side stepped away from first base. Greg fired a strike to Mick Bell at second. Mick crouched down and grinned, waiting for the doomed runner. A cloud rose from his head-first slide. The second base umpire yelled “Yer out!” Mick casually tossed the ball toward the pitcher’s mound and jogged off toward the dugout in one fluid motion, while the crowd roared in approval.

Julie said “Wow, that was cool!” as they both watched Nathan shake Mick’s and Greg’s hand on the way into the dugout.

Suella shrugged. “I’ve seen him do it a million times.”

The ladies watched two more innings from the field level seats as Nathan held the other team from scoring any further runs. The loud, drunk scout kept quiet for the rest of the time they sat there. Suella wondered if the pickoff play had shut him up. When they all arrived at the posh luxury box the waiters had brought out a fresh round of hors d’oeuvres and drinks. Suella suffered through another round of talk about parenting and discussions about children’s grades and futures.

“Hey, your guy did quite a job out there today,” Kaitlyn said at one point, smiling, trying to get Suella involved in the conversation somehow.

“Yes, he did,” Suella replied, smiling, thanking Kaitlyn silently.

After a blur of passing trays and raised glasses, the game soon ended, loyal fans trudging up from the theater seats with disgusted and disappointed looks on their faces.

“They gotta trade for another hitter,” someone said.

The activity after a game was always the same. Suella and the other wives would take the elevator down to the clubhouse where most of them would wait in the lounge just outside of it, what someone called “The Green Room.” Most times the players would have showered and changed by the time they made it down there. Some of them greeted their wives there with hugs and sweet, smooth talk. Suella knew that Nathan took a little bit longer so she waited patiently for him.

Soon, Nathan popped out of the door and looked around for her. He smiled when their eyes met, the kind of smile that made her fall in love again. They hugged and kissed. Suella always let Nathan speak first. He made a mock annoyed face and said “Hey, didn’t I tell you never to come here?”

“But I need a ride, mister. I figured a big strong pitcher like you would be able to help me.”

Nathan nodded, holding an arm around her. “Well, you’re pretty cute. I’ll see what I can do.” He handed her a set of car keys.

Suella groaned inwardly with disappointment. “But we have such a beautiful little condo. Sometimes I don’t think you like to spend much time in it.”

Nathan winked. “It’s even more beautiful when you’re there. I won’t be long. Stay up! Surprise me.” He leaned forward and gave her a long, slow, passionate kiss.

“How are you getting back?”

Nathan shrugged, flashing her a boyish smile. “A big, strong pitcher like me should be able to figure out something.” He gave her a quick hug and disappeared back through the door and into the clubhouse.

The consolation prize was getting to drive the scrumptious, low slung teal Mercedes SL750 sport coupe. Suella found it in the same spot in the players lot located in the concrete bowels beneath the stadium.

The wedge shaped speedster with the sensuous seats of buttery leather spun around the ramp, and in just a few turns and a climb up Adam’s hill, Suella found herself in their neighborhood. Their condo at the top overlooked the whole city.

A clear, June night intensified all the twinkling light and neon from the tops of the buildings. When she looked out the picture window at the twinkling lights and the dazzling cityscape below, she thought that this might be a nice place to start the next chapter in her life. Yet she and Nathan had bought the condo because, as Nathan had said “Hotels get expensive.” Nathan had just been traded to Cincinnati a couple of summers before, and at the drop of the owner’s hat, could find himself pitching in a new city the next day.

Their real home was in Santa Monica.

They’d met seven years ago, at a party.

Chapter Two

Hollywood, 2006

Nathan was pitching for New York then. He always said he liked coming to play the Dodgers, because of all the parties.

She never forgot his opening line: “Hey, you want to meet someone?” He tilted his head endearingly.

“Who, you?”

“Yeah!”

She hadn’t seen him before and assumed he was just one of the hordes of Hollywood hopefuls. He didn’t look nerdy enough to be a screenwriter or a producer. They talked all evening and Suella wondered where all his quiet, cocky confidence came from. At least a couple of times during their conversation, he said “I know people.” She avoided asking him directly what he did, and she liked the air of mystery he gave by refusing to volunteer the information.

At the end of the night he said “I think we should get together sometime.”

“I’d like that.”

“Okay.” He nodded. “Gimme your address.”

“My email address?”

He shook his head. “No, silly, your snail mail. Just give it to me. You won’t be disappointed.”

A couple of days later a package arrived for her. When she opened it, she found a handwritten note and an expensive looking cell phone. The note read “You’ll love this phone! It can do everything except give you a massage (nudge nudge wink wink). My

number's already programmed in there. Call me!"

Whoever this guy was, she thought, he was unbelievable. She called him later.

"Hey!" he said. "Wanna come to New York?"

Nathan arranged a ticket for her on the next flight from LAX to LaGuardia. He was going to be busy that afternoon, he said, so would she mind terribly if he had someone from his organization pick her up and bring her to his workplace? Well, so far the man had dropped a lot of money to her. "Sure," she said. Suella was a freelance systems analyst who could work from anywhere as long as she had one of her MacBook Airs with her. While on the flight she tried to do some code work for a client but she kept stopping and looking up.

What was she doing? She had dropped everything to fly, cross-country to be with a man she'd only met once, at a party. She knew nothing about Nathan, other than that he was gorgeous and charming. Her heart told her it was the right thing to do. A clean-cut, well-groomed gentleman sat beside her on the flight. He looked all around. Rather than do his own work or tap into the plane's electronic entertainment system, he took in all that was around him during the long flight. On the third time that Suella stopped working and glanced upward, he stirred.

"Is everything okay?" he said with a soothing baritone.

She shrugged, closing the Mac, knowing that she was too distracted to get any real work done, anyway. "Yes, fine," she said.

"You're on business, I take it?"

She slid the Mac into her sleek carry-on. "Well, not exactly."

"Going to see friends and family? On vacation?"

She sighed. “Yes, I’m going to see a friend.”

“I’m on the way home,” he went on. “It’ll be great to see my wife and daughter again.”

Suella’s shoulders dropped with relief. When she looked at his hands she saw the thick gold band on his finger. “Actually, I’m flying all across the country to meet up with a guy I met once, at a party.” For the rest of the plane trip they discussed whether she was taking a risk or not.

“You only get to go around once in life,” the man, who had introduced himself as Russell, said. “If you’d stayed back in Santa Monica, you might always wonder if you gave up on something special.”

Their conversation made the rest of the trip fly by for her. They discussed business, the internet, and movies. Before long, the captain announced over the intercom that they would be landing soon, put all tray tables in the locked and upright position. As they landed in LaGuardia, at the dinner hour Suella turned to Russell. She thanked him. Once they both exited from the collapsible corridor, Russell disappeared into the crowd while Suella scanned the sea of faces and signs populating the arrival gate. She saw a jacketed employee holding up a sign reading “Suella Langenfeld.” Happy, she strode up to the gentleman to identify herself. He was a friendly looking guy in his late fifties or early sixties, with a tuft of brown curly hair and big glasses. When she reached him she realized that he was wearing a royal blue satin baseball jacket with the NY insignia in orange on it. His nametag read “Gerald Conway, equipment manager.” They introduced themselves. As Gerald took both of her bags and started walking in the direction of the airport lot, they talked.

“So you work with Nathan?” she asked him.

He chuckled. “Yes, you could say that.”

It suddenly dawned on her. “Nathan is a baseball player?”

Gerald stopped and turned slowly, to regard her. “Yes. He’s a pitcher.”

He put her in one of the official fleet cars of the team and drove her to the ballpark, which turned out to be only a couple of miles from the airport.

When they entered the stadium parking lot, one uniformed guard after another waved Russell through until they reached a ramp that tunneled down into an underground garage. Suella had seen two baseball games in her life, both at Dodger Stadium, and both in the cheap seats, with her friends. When Russell helped her out of the car, she saw the underground beehive of activity for the stadium, with receiving trucks arriving and television vans setting up. People walked briskly back and forth in all directions, most of them squawking into cell phones or two-ways.

Russell brought Suella all the way through the clubhouse and the executive offices and into the field level corridors. “It’s not safe to go on the field now because they’re still taking batting practice,” Russell said. “He told me to take you straight to the bullpen.”

“Surprise!” Nathan said when he saw her. He had been sitting on a bench with a few of the other pitchers, watching one of them throw to a catcher. “Did you have a nice flight?” They hugged, and he rocked her back and forth.

“Yes! Nathan, how come you didn’t tell me?” she asked, pulling away from him. The uniform he wore, with the tight fitting blue nylon underneath, accentuated his lean, v-shaped physique very well. She wondered if she was blushing.

“Well shucks,” he replied. “I wanted you to know I was a regular guy. I just have kind of a strange job. I get to fling baseballs for a living.”

Nathan introduced her to his friends and took her to a quiet room in the clubhouse, where he said they did “after the game” interviews. “I’m so glad to see you!”

They were playing a weekend series against Washington. He was scheduled to pitch on Sunday afternoon, but since Saturday’s game was at night, they would have lots of time in the morning and afternoon to explore and enjoy New York together. While he kept a co-op in Manhattan, she would stay at the Hilton near the airport.

When she thought about their first date years later, she shook her head, grinning. As time wore on, she would learn over and over just how many onion peel style layers of secrecy Nathan would reveal. How late would he stay out that night? While he’d said “just awhile,” she could still be waiting for him at two in the morning. To pass the time she picked up the wand and turned the screen on.

She at first kept in split mode as she both checked her stocks and her mail along with surfing past channels. A rocket kept lifting off at the lower right quadrant of the screen, distracting her like a fly buzzing around her ear. Would it be better to close out the net or the channel grid? Four choices appeared in the upper left corner. The first three looked like the “let’s embarrass a celebrity” fare that oozed out of the digital maze like slime. A straightforward looking program to the left caught her eye. A calm looking auburn-haired man in a white lab coat held up a DNA helix. Many moons ago, when she had been in school, she had actually enjoyed science. All the other windows blinked off at her command until only the scientific guy looked out at her. She turned up the sound.

“Several advances have been made in genetics and yes, cloning over the years,” he said. A picture of Dolly the Sheep flashed onto the screen, and Suella remembered hearing about that in high school, about twenty years ago. Next, they discussed cells. Stem cells from cord blood instead of aborted fetuses had ended the arguments from the religious right, the announcer said. While still in its infancy, cloning could produce a viable duplicate of another human being. Suella wondered, with all the freak shows on television, why she’d never heard of parents coming forward with a cloned child. And even if someone had come forward with a cloned baby, would she have believed it?

A series of animated images showed the cell, the nuclei, and something called “telomeres.” In the past, cloned offspring produced short telomeres, which brought on genetic problems such as premature aging and weakened immune systems. The next segment of the show discussed scientific details of artificially stimulating the telomeres during the birthing process, which theoretically would produce more viable offspring. Her eyes glazed over. She reached for the wand but stopped when the announcer said “This is a breakthrough which will help couples unable to conceive.”

Usually, the news shows approached things from the other angle, about the government’s attempts to curtail the population. In the wrong company, “mandatory sterilization” could still bring about heated, passionate arguments. Yet, in California, with certain ethnic groups multiplying like rabbits it became the only way to balance the state budget. None of it affected her, of course. Suella was thirty-seven and still childless.

Meeting with the other wives always caused her to sigh, however. On dates before she married Nathan, many men had asked her one question. “If you were able to

have a baby, would you want to?"

"Of course," she would say. But she would have to be exactly like her, though. Cloning. There was an idea. That was how she could do it. Her mind ran through a whole series of coming attractions, such as styling the little girl's hair with pretty bows and putting her in adorable baby doll dresses. They would play together, sing together, laugh together, and love together. A daughter would love her unconditionally.

The door swished open, jarring her from her reverie. Nathan stumbled a bit as he entered the room, smirking at her. When he saw the images on the screen, he squinted. "What the hell are you watching? The "boring" channel?" Nathan tossed his jacket onto the couch and shuffled across the condo toward the refrigerator.

"I had to do something while you were gone." She flipped the screen mode back to split, cursing herself for letting him intimidate her.

Nathan picked up his own wand from the slot near the kitchen doorframe and started paging through his stocks and the headlines. He still stood, concentration locked on the flashing numbers and images, causing Suella to feel as if she were invisible.

"Hey babe, let me ask you something."

Still gazing at the screen, Nathan said "Uh huh."

"You know how you're always saying that you 'know people?'"

Still looking. "Yeah."

She shifted around on the couch below him. "Do you know anyone who does cloning?"

"Cloning?" His eyes narrowed, and he glanced down at her for a second. "What, do you want to dig up your dead cat and see if you can make a carbon copy of her or

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