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Aunt,
Daisy's Secret

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Chapter One

Melanie climbed the long flight of stairs finally reaching the stuffy attic. She was thinking that it was foolish to retreat to the sweltering hot room on a day like this; but it was her place of solace, and the only place that could soothe her at the moment. She immediately went to the half moon window, undid the latch and pushed her shoulder against it. The creaking old frame, with its uniquely cut pieces of glass finally gave way, even though at first it seemed determined to remain shut tight, as it had for so many years.

The attic had been used as attics are, for storage, and little more. It consisted of one large unfinished room, with exposed beams, creaky floors and dust everywhere. There were dozens of packing boxes from several generations of her family, several pieces of old furniture, a smattering of useless knickknacks and two old trunks that held Melanie's greatest interest, because they belonged to her Aunt Daisy, whose house this was.

When Melanie first started retreating to this haven so hidden away from everything else, she'd brought the vacuum up the narrow stairs and cleaned every nook and cranny. Though now it seemed her efforts were wasted, the dust too thick and old and defiant to be so easily swept away. So, Melanie made due wearing her oldest clothes to her favorite place, deciding to enjoy the dusty smells of her family's history.

The first waft of outdoor air that greeted her nostrils was thick with summer heat and moisture, quite unlike the refreshing breezes she remembered from the early spring. Plugging in the antique fan, its noisy rotor jerked to a start and began to move the hot air around the room enough to make it bearable. Collapsing into the over-stuffed chair like a weary rag doll, Melanie let the lumpy old chair and its musty perfume ease the tension that had been brewing in her all day.

The oppressive day had been made all the worse by her argument with her husband, Tony; one of many they'd had in recent weeks. It seemed she was always interrupting him in the middle of his work; and anymore, he was furious with her, even when her interruptions were about things she considered important. Of course that was the problem, they didn't see eye to eye about what *was really* important.

Melanie closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the soft cushion, replaying the most recent altercation in her head, looking for some hint of how it might have gone differently. It was a simple power struggle over nothing, she decided. If he'd just answer her questions, he'd save a whole lot of time and anguish. She couldn't understand why he was so fanatical about his work. After all, when they took over the house, he decided to work at home, just so he could be there. If he wasn't going to help her out, why then did he bother to stay at home?

The dilemma was perfectly simple to Melanie. But try as she would, Tony just didn't see things her way.

Melanie pulled at a tuft of stuffing coming out of a faded red flower in the chair fabric. She wondered about Aunt Daisy, who had once lovingly picked out this pattern of roses on the dark green background. Melanie loved living in her Aunt's grand home, even though it was tattered around the edges, and the renovations had put such a strain on her relationship with her husband.

The only thing Melanie could do was to put the disagreement out of her mind, and think of other things . . .

She had such delicious fantasies that were much more appealing to her now; thinking of the fine parties she'd have in her newly decorated home, thinking of a dashing Tony—out of the memories of their courtship—standing with her on those great front porch steps greeting their guests. She smiled to herself as the pleasant pictures of marital bliss filled her. She even imagined Tony carrying her away in his

arms, and making love to her in the gazebo that was in the backyard.

Looking out of the attic window, Melanie could see the grim trellised structure. Time worn, like everything else, the floor now sloped so badly that Tony demanded she quit using it for fear that she'd run a foot through a rotting board. That was so silly, Melanie thought; she'd danced her way about that gazebo hundreds of times in her growing up years, playing "princess in her castle". The gazebo seemed no different now, just in need of a good coat of paint and a few well placed nails.

Melanie remembered her Aunt Daisy serving tea to her garden club, in the once elegant backyard. In her memories, she remembered her Aunt as an older woman, well past the youthful romantic she liked to imagine—the young woman that used to wear the flowing flowered dresses that were packed in her trunks.

Leaning forward in the chair, Melanie pulled her favorite trunk closer to her, and jiggled the familiar latch until it at last gave way. Opening the creaky lid, she gazed admiringly at the dresses inside. Melanie was about to pull out her favorite, when she noticed that the inner lid looked strangely cockeyed. Tapping on the upholstered piece of wood with her hand, she tried to push it back into place; but instead, it suddenly gave way, spilling the contents of a secret compartment onto the dresses below. Melanie's eyes widened as she discovered a packet of letters and a book. They appeared to her like buried treasure, suddenly unearthed from a different time. The letters had been written on some fine tissue paper stationery, and now tied with a faded blue ribbon, she thought them too fragile to touch, let alone open. The book, on the other hand, was bound with a leather cover, and appeared in good condition. While the inside had yellowed some at the edges, and the paper crackled softly when she turned the pages; it seemed resilient enough to withstand some inspection.

Opening to the first page Melanie read:

Daisy Markham—1939

The words were neatly printed with a fountain pen. A quick look revealed that this was a diary filled beginning to end with Aunt Daisy's flowing penmanship. From the center of the book dropped a photograph, a black and white on hard cardboard backing, with two young faces staring back at Melanie like ghosts. Melanie recognized Aunt Daisy's soft blonde curls, neatly tied back with a ribbon. Behind her was a young dashing man with dark eyes and curly black hair, his arms wrapped around her then svelte female frame.

Aunt Daisy's sailor, Melanie immediately thought, seeing the neat uniform the young man wore. Melanie had heard of her Aunt's beau, only in whispers and half phrases, the man who'd claimed her heart, and whose mysterious disappearance had haunted her family history for years thereafter. Melanie had only known that her Aunt's beau had been a sailor; and though she'd gone on to marry another man, she'd secretly pined for the sailor until the day of her death. Melanie often imagined Aunt Daisy thinking of him, when in later years, she found her Aunt gazing off into nowhere with a winsome smile on her face.

Cautiously turning back to the front page of the diary, Melanie's hands were actually trembling, thinking of what Aunt Daisy might reveal about her life before Uncle John. Perhaps this book would explain what was behind the hushed gossip about her scandalous past. Melanie felt a little guilty reading the personal words, but then who could it possibly hurt with Aunt Daisy, Uncle John and no doubt the young sailor, long dead.

Excited about what she might discover, Melanie began to read.

I hesitate to even write these things, but I am compelled to do something with the private thoughts I have, especially those I hold of my dear Joseph.

"Ah yes!" Melanie exclaimed aloud. The sailor's name was Joseph!

How strangely different our friendship is from anything I've ever known, or even heard of. Even the magazines I get from the East Coast do not tell of such things, but when I think of the bliss I have with Joey, I cannot imagine life to be any other way. He's able to make claims on me in ways I never believed possible. Not that I'm such an experienced woman, I am older than so many friends who rushed off to marry after high school. Those high school boys were so silly, with their anxious eyes and easy grins. Oh yes! Some made me blush, especially Victor Hodges, but he'll never be anything but a farm-boy. I can't imagine dusting off farm dirt from my shoes all my life!

Joseph is different than all of them, so calm and reasoned. He makes me feel like a woman, like a real woman, not a giddy school girl from a small town—which I fear is exactly what I am. He makes me shiver so when I'm with him.

That first dance, he was the only man I could even look at. He stared at me from across the room. I was laughing so hard at Gracie's joke, when his eyes caught mine. He made me stop laughing with just that once glance. His broad shoulders, that curly dark hair and his olive skin. It's because he's Italian. I've never known an Italian man before. He says his parents were born in Italy, that's so romantic in itself. He'll take me there some day to ride on the gondolas in Venice. I think of him like a movie star, that's how different he is from the other boys I know. He's so worldly, coming from New York; to me that's like coming from a foreign country.

I felt so foolish when I fell down in my fit of laughter. I really just stumbled over Gracie; but then Joseph was there offering me his hand, as I looked up at him through my giggles. He was so serious, almost like I was a naughty girl having done something terribly wrong.

But then he smiled at me, and I thought the whole wide world was opening. Joseph is always like that, one moment almost threatening, the next surrounding me in his broad arms and smiles. It makes me blush to say how I feel when he holds me. There's a knot in my stomach, and a sensation that seems very carnal.

But I'm digressing to avoid why I'm really writing. I know I have to tell someone and these blank pages are the only listener I have. It's such a strange story, I still don't know what to make of it. I thought that writing it down this way would help me make sense out of this tale.

I suppose this came about with Joseph, because I'm so often stubborn and pigheaded. And of course, I have such a temper, it's often gotten me in trouble. Daddy's always said, I would be one miserable handful to any man that would have me.

Anyway, it all started yesterday when Joseph picked me up at the dress shop at 5:00, as he always does. My day had been a hectic one, and I was already out of sorts; though I didn't realize how much so, until Joseph told me that we were going to his Uncle Zito's house before we had dinner.

"Oh, please, no," I whined at him. I couldn't bear the thought of an evening in that smelly old apartment, with Uncle Zito and his pipe, and his loud voice blaring some stupid thing in my ear.

"Daisy?" Joseph looked at me surprised. I'd never countered him on anything, I've never had reason to.

"I don't want to see your Uncle Zito," I said, trying not to sound too angry with him.

"Oh? Why not?" he asked.

"I'm just so tired, couldn't we just have dinner?"

"It won't take but a minute," Joseph said, and taking me by the hand we walked in silence the three blocks to his uncle's apartment.

By the time the "minute" turned into an hour I was fuming. As we were out the door and on the way to the

restaurant, I heard Joseph whisper something about not being such a whining brat.

"I am not!" I said, indignantly.

"Oh?" he said, looking at me with one fixed eye.

Sometimes Daisy Markham, you act more like a twelve year old than a grown woman."

Melanie shivered reading those words, as they reminded her of Tony's accusations about her.

Joseph led me to a small diner just down the street, while I smoldered in my incensed state the whole way. In the restaurant I refused to talk to him, and that only made him look at me all the more irritated.

"Would you settle down, so we can enjoy our dinner," Joseph said.

"What do you mean settle down, I'm just fine." There was a very deliberate snarl in my voice. Sometimes I'm so foolish, the little things that bother me end up being so small.

Joseph looked at me as if he didn't know what to say, he was appalled that I was acting this way with him. Usually my childish moods vanish in a few minutes, but this one was lingering on dangerously.

"Would you please talk to me?" he finally said, when my bristling silence had bothered him enough.

"If you don't like the way I am," I said, "then I'll leave." I grabbed my purse and started toward the door.

"Oh no you don't!" Joseph said, pulling me back. "We just ordered dinner. You're not going anywhere."

"You think you can treat me like a child," I said. I was very angry, and my raised voice was beginning to draw attention to our argument.

Joseph flashed those dark eyes at me, and I should have realized how upset he was then, but I HAD to stamp my foot, and pull away from him. I walked out leaving him with two uneaten dinners to pay for. I can see now why he was

so upset. Then, I thought I was perfectly justified in my attitude.

When Joseph caught up with me, he grabbed my hand and held it tightly, so there was no way I would get away. He didn't say a single word, all the way home, but when we got to my bungalow his next measures stopped me cold.

Following me into the house, he stood for some seconds in the midst of the living room.

"Do you have a hairbrush, Daisy?" he asked. His question took me completely by surprise.

I told him yes. Of course I have a hairbrush.

"Go get it," he said. The tone of voice was so demanding, but I was still too naive to realize what he planned to do with it. I ran off to my room and retrieved my hairbrush, thinking that Joseph simply wanted to brush his hair. But when I handed the black lacquer brush to him, he took it in his hand and walked toward the dining room where he pulled out one of the dining room chairs.

"Come here," he ordered me.

I was flustered, as it dawned on me what he had in mind. I felt just like a little kid again, as well I should, the way I was acting.

Joseph didn't wait for me to respond, but closed the several steps between us and pulled me by the arm toward the dining room chair. I'm sure I shrieked out loud, but I remember now so little of what happened. I do remember that Joseph was more serious than I'd ever seen him.

"You behave like a brat with me, I'll treat you like one," he said.

I was trembling all over; but it was so strange, I didn't have the courage to offer a protest. I was simply stunned. No one, not even my father has ever stood up to me this way. I still don't know what to make of it.

"What are you going to do," I asked, as if I didn't know.

"Spank you," he said quite calmly. His cold strength was so compelling I couldn't do anything but submit, as he sat

down and pulled me over his lap. He immediately administered several hearty smacks across my rear end, the hairbrush giving quite a good sharp smack.

I was so shocked, I didn't utter a word until the second half dozen smacks. Then with my wits about me, I began to wail like the dickens, kicking and screaming with all my might.

"Joseph, you have to stop this!" I cried.

"I certainly do not!" he insisted. He let that brush land harder still.

"Stop it now!" I tried again.

"Hush!" he blared at me, as he continued to lay the horrible thing on my bottom.

I quieted at least for a moment, though I continued to try wiggling away from him. That only made Joseph spank me harder. And with his free arm clamping itself about my waist, my furious struggles were all the more pointless.

The brush came down with such fury that I thought he'd never stop. Before long, my bottom seemed to burn, each new smack just adding to the ever growing warmth in my rear. I was so humiliated, I was no doubt blushing, though neither of us would know that right then, since my face was nearly on the floor.

I couldn't believe how much this hurt. I imagined my poor bottom glowing rosy red under my skirt.

"Joseph, please," I wailed, very loudly.

"If you don't be quiet my love, I'll pull up your skirt and get a little closer to your bare skin!" he informed me.

That quieted me altogether, I couldn't imagine anything more horrible, or more improper; though I have to admit that there was a certain fascination with the possibility.

The hairbrush continued with an amazing steadiness, until I thought I could stand no more. And just as I was about to squeal loudly again, Joseph stopped.

"Now," he said, as he pushed me back to my feet. I was about to run bawling to my bedroom, but his voice leapt out

at me and hauled me back.

"Don't you go anywhere," he said, very sternly.

I shrank back, embarrassed to let him see my tears and my red nose, rubbing my poor wounded rear. It still felt mighty sore, though the burn was beginning to subside, leaving me with the most lovely warm feeling on my punished rear cheeks.

"Don't you ever pull a silly stunt like that again. Do you understand?"

"Stunt?" I questioned him foolishly.

"Making a scene in the restaurant, and walking out on dinner," he reminded me. "You're much too old to act like that."

He was completely right, I know, but there was just enough defiance left in me to scowl at him nastily.

"I'd better get an apology Daisy, or I'll start again." He waved the hairbrush in his hand. I knew he wasn't kidding.

"I'm sorry," I said at last. "You were right." I believed every word I said, and I hoped he heard the sincerity in my voice. I guess I was still so stunned by the whole thing, that I couldn't believe it had happened. Even today, I still don't know exactly what to make of the amazing incident, or my dear Joseph, but strange as it seems, it's only made me love him all the more.

After my apology, Joseph came to me and put his arms about me and held me. I didn't say a word, and neither did he. Explanations were unnecessary, as if the treatment was normal and perfectly appropriate for a courtship like ours.

When he finally spoke, he was as loving and tender as he'd always been. All the horrible irritation and anger had vanished, and I could only remember the sweet things about our time together.

I cooked him scrambled eggs and potatoes, and he said it was the best meal he'd ever had. I don't know if he was telling the truth or not, but it didn't seem like honesty was quite as important right then, as the quality of affection we

had for each other. And mine, as bizarre as it may seem, has risen by leaps and bounds, in this short time.

"Melanie!"

The young woman jerked, awakened from Aunt Daisy's world into her own. The harsh sounding tone in Tony's voice concerned her.

"Melanie, where are you?"

Melanie snapped the book closed and pushed it back into its hiding place, along with the packet of letters. She could hear Tony's step on the stairs, and didn't want to be caught with the dairy in hand. It was a foolish worry, since Tony couldn't care less what she was doing, but Melanie felt she should guard her Aunt's privacy as if the woman was still living.

"Melanie," Tony said, stepping up into the attic. Seeing him there in the shadowy light of the entry, she was instantly reminded of Aunt Daisy's description of her Joseph. They would be about the same height, with the same muscular Italian build, dark curly hair and gleaming black eyes. Melanie closed the lid of the trunk slowly as Tony peered at her from the gloomy stairwell. She hadn't realized until that moment how much the light of day had dwindled away. Long shadows would suggest a summer evening about 8:00 p.m., though nothing had happened to change the stifling heat. The fan still hummed along noisily; though suddenly its sound grated at her ears like nails on a blackboard.

"Haven't I told you about that old thing," Tony said, as his eyes followed hers to the squealing metal appliance.

Melanie was feeling such blissful thoughts, that the reality of Tony's irritation surprised her. Then she remembered that this was how things often were between them anymore.

"It works just fine," Melanie said, "I haven't had a problem with it."