

# Second Chances

Sequel to *Echoes*, winner of a 2004  
Florida Writers Assoc. literary award

A novel by Sunny Serafino

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Also by Sunny Serafino

A Grandma for Christmas

Never Look Back

Beyond Innocence

Secrets \*

Echoes \*\*

Nobody's Child

Following Daddy  
(a humorous memoir)

\* Winner of a National League of American Pen Women  
literary award (2005)

\*\* Winner of a Florida Writers' Association literary award  
(2004)

## *CHAPTER ONE*

My daughter was born two days before my mother died. If I close my eyes I can easily return to those days although most of the time I try not to. Could it possibly be almost five years ago? But I know my count is correct. Those two happenings will always be joined in my heart—the loss and the gift—the hurt and the joy, tied together like a precious package.

My mother was a truly special person but I didn't realize that until it was almost too late. When we learned Mom was terminally ill it was a shock, a wake-up call, a stunning blow to our complacency. This couldn't be happening...not to us. Three to six months was what the doctors gave her. "That isn't enough time," we cried, our world falling apart. But Mom was the one with the strength. She had one goal to fulfill in what little time was left to her...to reunite our family. Not that there were any great rifts, just differences that made me and my brother and sister choose lives that were separate...diverse.

Michael, the family math brain, became a stockbroker in New York; Debbie, head of her class when she graduated, went on to college and then joined a firm of architects in Chicago. As

for me...well I was the one who always marched to a different drummer. School didn't mean much to me; sports were my big interest and after graduation there wasn't any team to belong to so I just took off. I guess I was looking for myself or at least somewhere where I thought I was meant to be. But in reality I flitted from place to place, job to job. My brother and sister and me... we just did our own thing.

I always knew Mom was determined when it came to her family and she proved her strength went beyond belief when she made her last wish a reality. We came home, Michael from New York, Debbie from Chicago and me from Florida.

I'm Patty Hoffmann, her youngest daughter and now I live in the house where I was born, Mom's house. It's just me, my dad and my little girl. And try as I might, there is never a time when I can completely shut out that time five years ago when Lili-Kay was born and Mom died.

I remember...

~ ~ ~

Mom's funeral was held on a hot day in July. I didn't notice the sky was clear and blue; the hole in my heart and the chill I felt as we stood around the grave was all I was aware of.

We didn't wear black because that's what Mom requested before she took her last ride in the ambulance to Eagleton General. "We've known this day was coming for months," she'd told us. "Black clothes are too hot for this time of year and besides, I want you to celebrate my life."

There were hundreds of people at the funeral in St. Catherine's, or that's what it seemed like, but Mom had asked for no graveside services. That's why it was Dad, Michael, Debbie and I, with Mom's lifelong friend, Kate, who stood for a

few minutes around the untidy gravesite after the priest left. Heat rose from the plastic tarpaulin covering a pile of dirt that earlier had been torn from the earth to create the gaping hole in front of us. The dirt we had just thrown on the casket seemed too ugly, too bare and so sad I couldn't keep tears from pouring down my cheeks. It was hard to breathe and difficult to swallow but it didn't seem to matter...we didn't have anything to say.

The world sounded too quiet as I cradled my sleeping child in the soft, thin blanket. I felt her stretch, squirm then settle back into the crook of my arm. I held her closer to me so that my body shielded her face from the hot sun. Dad took his suit jacket off and tossed it across his arm; Debbie shifted uncomfortably in her high heels. I guess no one wanted to turn away but I knew we had to eventually. It was as if time had ceased to exist.

Michael stood a half pace behind us. I saw him reach for Debbie's hand, his other arm circling me, drawing the baby and me closer. Dad's hand rested on Debbie's shoulder and he slipped his other arm around Kate's waist, drawing her into our sad circle. There were only five of us now, six with the baby.

~ ~ ~

I was tired tonight and after a long day at work it was easy for me to push back on the arms of my chair in the living room so that the footrest poked forward. Especially since Dad and Lili-Kay were at Aunt Kate's for a visit and the house was quiet.

I love my job as dental assistant. I love the busy day at work and then the fun of making dinner for my dad and daughter. I take pride in my abilities to manage a career and the house, not alone by any means. Dad and Aunt Kate are always

ready to give me a hand and constantly urge me to make room for some fun outside of work and home but I'm content with my life. Sometimes at quiet times like this the memories of the intense loneliness that had engulfed me during the time when Mom was sick and then when my baby was born, slip back.

I settled back and closed my eyes. Maybe it was because I was tired. I recalled how scared I was, not only being there during the last months of Mom's life, seeing her slip away; but also facing my own shaky future. Not only was I losing my mother but I had a new baby to take care of...and I was a single parent. At first it was overwhelming and a hollow emptiness chilled me until my very bones hurt and the hole in my heart seemed ready to open at any time...but Dad and Aunt Kate kept assuring me they'd be there for me...and they were...and still are. My life is full. I have them, Lili-Kay and my career. I love taking care of the house for us, doing the things that Mom had always done, keeping things just like she did.

I slid my hands down the worn armrests, noting the pulled threads where Mom had stuck needles when she worked on her embroidery. I smiled as my fingers ran over the rough places on the chair, Mom's chair. I guess in my mind it will always be Mom's chair.

It was more than a year after my mother's death before I could bring myself to sit in the chair and then it was only when Dad had said, 'Sit there, Patty. The light is better. Your mother always did her needlework in that chair.' It was an invitation; a strange crossing over a stumbling block of time. I was almost afraid to slide onto the cushions, fearing they would repel me; but they welcomed my body when I tentatively sat on the chair where I had watched my mother sit, her fingers flicking stitch after stitch from one knitting needle to the other.

The past continued to push itself into my head. *Funny how I couldn't wait to leave after high school; couldn't wait to get away from this house and Eagleton. Back then I thought nothing here ever changed, nothing was interesting. But, the monotony I'd rebelled against was now my comfort zone.*

I was about to drift off to sleep when I heard Dad and Lili-Kay come in the back door. Lili-Kay, the baby named after her grandmother, my mother Lily Hoffmann and the woman who played such a huge part in my early life...and still did...Aunt Kate, my mother's best friend.

"Hi," Dad called. "Wait 'til you see what Lili-Kay has. What a little con artist she is."

Lili-Kay shrugged out of her coat and piled it on one of the kitchen chairs. "Mommy, Mommy, look what Aunt Kate gave me," she said, her feet thundering across the hardwood floor in the dining room.

"Hah. Gave you? You probably wheedled it out of her. Let me see," I said sitting upright. My heart swelled as my daughter collapsed against my knees. Would I ever get accustomed to my little miracle? "What is it?" I asked, taking the box she pushed into my hands.

"Books." Lili-Kay's honey-brown eyes glowed with enthusiasm.

"Kate had them in a box in the attic. Guess from way back," Dad said, sliding into the matching chair next to me.

"This is great, honey. Did you thank Aunt Kate?" I asked as I peeked into the box, seeing the worn books that Kate had once read to me. I pulled my daughter onto my lap and smiled as she snuggled into my arms. My eyes met my father's. It was good to see him return my grin. "We'll read them together, one at a time. You'll love them. I did," I said,

smoothing my daughter's hair back from her face. "I'll bet you had chocolate cake, too,"

Lili-Kay nodded vigorously. "Yeah, Aunt Kate said it was Grandma's recipe."

"Well," I said, standing. "It's time for your bath and then bed."

"And a story," Lili-Kay said, starting up the carpeted stairs. "A new story from my new books."

"It's my turn to read tonight." Dad called as he watched us disappear up the stairs.

"Okay," I said, following Lili-Kay as she hopped up the steps, one foot at a time, holding onto the railing, "but only one story. Don't let her talk you into more."

In the bathroom, I adjusted the water pouring into the tub as Lili-Kay sprinkled in the bath salts Santa had tucked into her Christmas stocking. "I like to smell good. Aunt Kate smells good. Her kitchen smelled like chocolate cake tonight. Grandpa and her were talking a lot. Quiet so I couldn't hear. They do that sometimes."

I smiled at the chatter. Lili-Kay was prone to babble on and often I didn't really listen, but tonight something in her tone caused me to frown. "What were they talking about?"

Lili-Kay shrugged and slid into the foamy water. "Don't know. They were too quiet. Like it was secrets," she said, taking the washcloth from my hand and scrubbing her neck.

*Secrets? Well, she's probably exaggerating and besides, I don't really care what secrets Dad and Aunt Kate have.* But as I bathed Lili-Kay I knew I was not being honest. I was curious. Secrets between Dad and Aunt Kate probably meant a family matter and if it was worth keeping quiet maybe it was trouble. Was there a problem with Debbie? Michael? Not me; I had no

problems. I wrapped a towel around my little girl's damp body and, cradling her in my arms, bundled her off to her bedroom. Maybe after Dad read to his granddaughter I'd broach the subject. *But then again, maybe it's better to let sleeping dogs lie.*

~ ~ ~

"Want a cup of tea?" I asked my father after he came downstairs.

"Good idea. I'll put the kettle on. She's fast asleep. We didn't even get through the first story," he chuckled, standing at the bottom of the stairs

I followed him into the kitchen. "Anything new?"

"New?" he asked, filling the kettle.

"New with Kate. You were gone a long time."

"She can't get enough of the kid."

I slipped into my usual seat at the kitchen table; the same table where as a little girl I colored while Michael built a model airplane. I spun the lazy Susan in the middle. "Lili-Kay said you were whispering." I watched my father's face.

"That little monkey," he said, putting the mugs on the counter next to the stove. "We weren't whispering, but you know how big little ears can be."

"Well, what were you talking about? Has she heard from Deb or Michael?"

"Not that I know of. Want cookies?"

"No thanks. You can if you want some; they're in the cupboard over the stove."

"Had cake." He patted his waistline. "Have to watch it now that I'm retired."

“You’re avoiding my question. Anything wrong? With Kate? Or her family?”

“Nothing is wrong. I swear you’re as curious as your daughter. We were just talkin’.”

*Strange. Oh well, I’ll find out eventually.* I watched my father stir sugar and milk into his tea. “You take your tea just like Mom did. Seems to me I remember you took it black a long time ago.”

“Did. Things change. I like it like this now.” He stirred the milky liquid and stared out the night-darkened window. When he turned back he caught me looking at him. “What? How I take my tea is a big deal now?”

“No,” I said lowering my eyes. “You still miss her don’t you.” It wasn’t a question. “So do I.”

“I’ll always miss your mother.” He sighed, then said, “Life goes on Patty. For me, for you. How are *you* doin’?”

“Me? I love it here. Funny how once I wasn’t at all interested in Eagleton or this house and now it’s the center of my life and I’m content. No, not content—happy. Thanks, Dad.”

He slid his fingers over mine for a moment. “It was your mother’s doin’—bringin’ you kids back home. Now Michael has Celia and Deb’s married to Charles ...I’m glad you’re happy. But, honey, you’re still alone. That ain’t right, Patty. You should be with young folks. You should be datin’.”

I leaned back in my chair and grinned. “Oh, so that’s what you and Kate were talking about. You two are back at trying to get me married, aren’t you.”

“No such thing,” Dad said, his denial a weak attempt at hiding his embarrassment at being caught so easily.

“Dad,” I said, standing. “I’m happy here—with my job—with my family. I haven’t closed that door completely but

no one I've dated over the past four years is right. If Mr. Right happens to come along, you'll be the first to know, okay?"

"We only want what's best for you. Kate and me. We want to see you happy."

I leaned down and put my arms around my father's shoulders. "I am happy, Dad." I brushed my lips across his cheek, feeling the late-night stubble.

He patted my arm. "Keep it that way and we'll all be happy." He stood and pushed his chair in.

I noticed him smiling to himself as I turned the light out over the stove. Then I heard him mutter something under his breath. "You say something, Dad?"

"No, just mumblin'. It comes with age. I'm going up to bed. Good night."

"Night, Dad. See you in the morning. Think I'll read for a while." I hooked my arm through his as we left the darkened kitchen and walked through the dimly lit dining room. The light next to Mom's chair beckoned, a library book on the table. I settled into the comfortable creases in the cushion but as I reached for the book a strange feeling swept over me. Just what were Dad and Aunt Kate whispering about? Sighing, I opened the book and slid the bookmark out. "Me, probably," I muttered. "Trying to get me married. Well, I'm not ready—not interested. I like things just as they are—living here with Dad and Lili-Kay." I raised the footrest on the recliner and leaned back. "I've had all the changes in my life I need." I paused and looked around the familiar room. "No more changes. They should know that."

Still, nagging thoughts bothered me. What did Dad say in the kitchen he didn't want me to hear? What were he and Kate keeping secret? I shrugged. *Don't make something out of nothing. Everything is fine.*

## *CHAPTER TWO*

Walking through the city he'd left ten years earlier, Parker Allen Wells grimaced as remnants of his bitter past burned darkly in his mind. It was a past that had made him choose to roam from place to place rather than come home. After his third year in college, when he fell in love against his parents' wishes, and after the failing grades because parties and sports seemed much more important at the time; after the 'final incident' there was no reason to come back. No reason to look up old friends. He had burned his bridges—or so he thought.

Eagleton was his hometown, a hometown that held no sense of home anymore. But, he puzzled, what had compelled him to come back now? He hadn't called anywhere home for ten years. Why now? Who cared where he was? Surely not anyone in Eagleton.

Main Street looked the same. The cobbled street, a result of the Eagleton Historic Society's two hundredth anniversary restorations, was rough under his shoes. On one corner stood the department store that boasted 'serving Eagleton more than one hundred years'. Some of the smaller shops looked familiar and others were obviously part of the modernization that the older

residents always fought. Parker smiled when he saw a window display of skin-tight, hip-hugging jeans and tops that displayed a generous amount of midriff. “Mother would have had a fit,” he mumbled into the collar of his coat, pulled up around his neck. ‘Disgusting hippy trash,’ she would have said. She would have said that if she still lived here.”

He hunched his shoulders as if the breeze coming off the river was colder than it really was. April was a fooler—warm for an hour then gray and damp. But what really chilled him came from the uncertainty he carried within him.

His stride was steady but his steps were cautious, as if unsure of where he was going and yet he knew where he was going—to the Regency Hotel. It wasn’t the grand building it once was, the bed was lumpy and the halls dingy, but the room was cleaner than some he’d occupied and no one raised an eyebrow when he booked the room for an undetermined length of time.

No, his destination wasn’t what he was uncertain about. It was why he was here at all that puzzled him. He stood on the sidewalk with his hands on his hips. Something caught his attention—a car with a noisy muffler—full of teenagers waving banners from the windows. Eagleton High. He’d been a hero back then; the kid who never missed a ground ball, who made the game-ending touchdown and sank the final rim shot. Back then he was someone.

“Well, you aren’t a hero now and those are just distant memories,” he muttered into the cold night. Still, as he walked through the lonely lobby and punched the button for the elevator, he wondered where those old friends were. Was anyone he knew left in Eagleton?

## CHAPTER THREE

Kate and George sat next to each other in a booth at the Eagleton Diner just outside the new Mall complex. Every Thursday they went to the movies and then stopped at the diner for coffee and pie.

“I can’t believe these past six months.” Kate’s smile deepened the laugh lines around her eyes.

“You’re blushing,” George said, and reached for her hand. “Blushing makes you look young and happy.”

“Well, the happy part is right.” She sighed and leaned against the red leatherette backrest. “Remember that time we took Lili-Kay to Eagle Lake Park?”

“What time? Like we don’t take her there every week?”

“You know the time I mean.”

George laughed. “You mean the time I *surprised* you?”

She grinned and nodded, her mind drifting back through time, back to their real beginning...

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On a crisp fall day late in October, George and Kate picked Lili-Kay up at her daycare center and, as they so often did, went to the park. The brilliance of the fallen red and gold autumn leaves had faded into heaps of brown scrap beneath the bare trees. The nip in the air warned them that perhaps this

would be the last time this year Lili-Kay could romp on the grass. There was a hint of snow in the air.

They walked behind Lili-Kay who scuffed through the dead leaves and looked over her shoulder. “Okay if I roll down that hill?” she asked, gesturing.

But before they could respond, she darted across the path and scampered up a small mound. They laughed as the little girl threw herself to the ground and rolled over and over, landing at their feet.

“You’re covered with leaves and twigs, you naughty girl.” Kate smiled, pulling her to her feet.

“Oh, but it’s such fun. Did you and Grandpa ever do that?” Lili-Kay’s eyes sparkled in the late afternoon sunshine—her hands picked debris from her sweater.

Kate and George looked at each other and laughed. “I did, when I was a very little girl,” Kate said. “I don’t know about your grandpa.”

“I didn’t have time for such foolishness,” he answered, then added, “but I wish I had. It looks like fun.”

Lili-Kay walked between them holding their hands and occasionally swinging her feet several inches above the ground. She didn’t notice the glances they exchanged over her head.

Later that night, Kate was surprised by a knock on her door. Taking a quick glance at the clock as she hurried through the kitchen she noted the time. “Nine-thirty. Who can this be?” she muttered, snapping on the back porch light.

George grinned sheepishly when he saw her startled expression.

“George,” she stammered. “Is everything okay at the house?”

“Sure.”

“Lili-Kay’s all right?”

“Yep.”

“Patty?”

“Yep.”

They faced each other—he still grinning—she with a puzzled expression.

“Well.” Kate took a small step back. “Oh—come in—come in. Why are you standing out there in the cold?” She clutched her sweater across her chest and ushered him into the warm, bright kitchen.

~ ~ ~

“That was our beginning,” George said, draining the last of his coffee.

“Not really. Now that I look back we were spending more and more time together, finding more and more excuses to pick up Lili-Kay, run errands...” Kate watched the waitress leave the check and remove the plates.

“You *found* stuck windows and broken steps for me to fix,” he said, a wide grin spreading across his face.

“I did not. They *were* stuck and broken.”

George slid two one-dollar bills from his wallet and tucked them under his saucer. “I never complained, did I?”

“No.” She closed her eyes, remembering. “We must have talked for two hours that night but I can’t remember what we talked about, can you?”

“Nope. I just remember leavin’.”

Again Kate blushed. “I remember you leaving, too. We stood in the kitchen for such a long time, as if we had more to say but neither of us could think of anything.”

“You sure looked pretty, Katie.”

“Pretty! I had on old slacks and that terrible gray sweater.”

“I don’t remember that. But,” he paused, “I do remember leavin’.”

“So do I. I think my knees turned to water when you leaned forward and kissed me. Then you jerked the door open, rushed outside and disappeared in a blast of cold air.”

“I wanted to get out before I changed my mind.”

“Changed your mind about what?”

“I just needed to get away before I did somethin’ foolish.”

“Like escape?”

“Didn’t dare stay,” George said with a sly grin. “But the kiss was right, scary as hell, but right.”

They laughed softly.

“Not so scary now though,” she teased.

“I’d kiss you here if I wasn’t so shy.”

“Shy!”

They sat quietly, remembering what followed that first kiss—the late night suppers, movie dates and walks that promoted handholding and....

Kate looked at George trying to read his expression.

“What are you thinking about?”

“You’ll blush if I tell you.” He paused then shrugged. “I was remembering the first time. The first time we made love.”

“I was so nervous,” Kate said, color flooding her cheeks.

“So was I,” he said, bringing her fingers to his lips. “You’re so...”

“So what? Gosh, I’m almost afraid to ask what I’m ‘so’. Especially here.”

“I was gonna say special, but that didn’t seem like a good enough word—good enough to say what I really feel.”

Kate leaned her head on his shoulder for a moment, then said, “I think special is a nice word.”

“You are special, Katie.” He rested his hand on her thigh. “And for the rest of your life I want to be the one who makes you feel special.”

He picked up the bill and helped Kate slide across the bench. “Let’s get outta here. Wanna take a walk around the lake?”

She nodded and they left the diner. As they crossed the parking lot she looked up at the sky—a sliver of moon in a starlit night offered little light. Before he opened the car door for her he pulled her to his chest, his lips touched hers, gently at first then lingered with increasing passion. They didn’t speak as they pulled out onto the main street and, minutes later she smiled as he pulled into the deserted lot of the familiar city park.

“Guess it’s too early in the year for most people to stroll around the lake at this time of night,” she said, taking his hand in hers.

“Just nuts like you and me,” he said. Hand in hand they started down the macadam pathway that circled the large lake.

“We’ve been here a time or two,” she said, lengthening her stride to match his. He seemed to be in a hurry.

They stopped near a bench next to some willows and watched as the still leafless branches disappeared into the water rippled by the cool late April breeze. Again he pulled her into his arms and for several moments they stood, arms encircling each other, her head nestled against his scratchy woolen jacket. When they separated he led her to a bench and, sitting side by side, slid his arm around her shoulders.

“I love bein’ with you, Katie. All the movies and walks and stuff—not much excitement I guess but I...”

“Exciting enough for me. I love being with you, too.”

They sat quietly, watching the movement of the trees in the breeze. Along the path to their right a lamp glowed casting a muted reflection in the water.

“Warm enough?”

“Yes,” she said, snuggling closer.” You’re right though, that little kiss way back then was the beginning. I remember when I realized I wasn’t thinking of you as just a friend anymore, when I stopped thinking of you as Lily’s husband, as a widower, but a man—a man I was interested in, a man I had feelings for. Do you remember when I went to visit my sister Ellen last November?”

“Yeah. I thought she was sick or somethin’.”

“She wasn’t sick. I was. Sick at heart because I thought I was having sinful thoughts about you.”

George laughed. “Sinful? You, Katie?”

Kate nudged him with her elbow. “I felt guilty at first and then when I talked to Ellen, she said, ‘Jesus, Kate, *liking* a man isn’t sinful. Take it one day at a time. Maybe this is *the one*.’”

“And I was?”

“You are.”

“I was scared too when I started to think of you like—like a woman and not just a friend. I love you, Katie. You know that don’t you?”

“Yes. And I love you.”

“So...?”

She slipped her fingers into his hand. Her chest tightened and she felt as if she was holding her breath. “So...?”