



Reluctant Press presents:

The Mirror Of My Love



Nick Lorance

A 'Young Adult Tv' E-BOOK

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The Mirror Of My Love

**A Romantic Novel
By Nick Lorance**

I Die

There is a song; I don't remember the group, but I remember the lyrics;

Too many broken hearts have fallen in the river

Too many lonely souls have drifted out to sea

You lay your bets and then you pay the price

The things we do for love, the things we do for love

What does that have to do with the events in my life? Nothing and everything. Mankind as a whole has

done things for love that no other species would even contemplate. From removing the head of John the Baptist to satisfy a dancer's whim to giving almost a billion dollars to a woman best known for being a Playboy centerfold because the then 20-year-old woman was willing to pay sexual attention for a year to an 89-year-old oil tycoon.

But none of them gave as much for love as I did.

My name is, or was, Peter Stankowski. I was the son of a well-to-do Catholic family in Virginia Beach, Virginia. I sit now in a room in a lower-middle-class house writing all of my thoughts in one of those cheap ledger books they sell with a Bic. A house with walls that need better insulation and windows most of which leak air and will undoubtedly stick in the summer.

I couldn't be happier in the grandest mansion in the city.

I called my family well-to-do. I make it sound so mundane. Let's be realistic. My father was a tycoon. He had made so much money with real estate that instead of buying and selling real estate, he got into political manipulation, and started buying and selling favors and politicians. Rich men and organizations that didn't want to be known for their contribution would shift the money into my father's coffers, and it would be distributed through a layer of middlemen to politicians across the country. If there is a politician you hate because of his policies in the last decade, my father probably handed him the 'soft' money he spent getting elected. Every time there is a scandal blasted across the papers, the man who shifted the money into that captured politician's accounts probably got it through one of my father's intermediaries.

There's a term for it, *Eminence Gris*. Or Grey eminence. The power behind the throne that always manipulates, but is rarely seen.

Now think of me as a child growing up there. Picture the person who would be formed in such a womb. I would either turn out as a monster equal to my father, or a loner.

I chose loner. Instead of being the glad-handing type like him, I focused on sports, and expended every emotion on that.

I was a freshman at St Bartholomew's, a Catholic high school when the events I will explain occurred. I was the typical jock of my era, good at sports, well loved by the girls, the epitome of American youth. I excelled at soccer and track and wanted to go out for the boxing team, but I was small light and wiry. We didn't have any students small enough for me to box safely. Beyond that I was assured of my place in society because I was the scion of a well-to-do house. But I had few friends and no girl friends. It wasn't that they weren't willing to like me. I could have gone through the girls at St. Bartholomew's like a libertine, untouchable, thanks to my father's connections.

It was just that if I had a friend, that person had to pass father's rigorous test. Very few did, and most were people he had chosen to be my friends and who I couldn't stand. A woman would be scrutinized unto the fourth generation. Wealth, social standing, being photogenic, they were important to my Father with love a distant fifth or sixth. Maybe if Prince Charles had a daughter, she would be in the running, but very few others would have been. A quiet and studious Paris Hilton would have been good enough. Nicky Hilton might if she hadn't decided to become an ac-

tress. Nicole Richie wouldn't have even been in the running because of who her father was. Does that Give you an idea of my father's value system?

So I spent a lot of time alone.

My story actually begins when I was graduating from the lower school, St Michael's Junior High School. I was in the tower to which the younger men aspired, and all below me was mine to command. I had everything, or so you might have thought at that time. But I was lonely, willing to hide from the world like Rapunzel begging to be locked away, cutting my own hair to assure it.

Then she walked into my life.

She was Serena O'Neal. Serena had the type of beauty men yearn for but are never willing to admit they desire. No large breasts or a fine rear. Rather she was a quiet studious girl a year behind me with the face of a Madonna (I mean the Madonna of the Bible, not the singer) and the grace of an angel.

I happened to see her walking with a gaggle of girls my last semester of school in junior high. She was still at the coltish stage girls are in at that age. Small-breasted, long-legged, but that face...

What can I say? I fell in love with who and what she was at that moment. I yearned to be with her so badly that if I had been another boy I would have flung myself at her. But as Shakespeare would say, 'Ah, there's the rub.' Thanks to the crap I went through with Father, I had been a shy boy in grade school; excelling at sports had not changed that frightened little boy I had been. I wanted to meet her, to speak with her. To hold that hand and gaze into those hazel eyes, to tell her how I felt.

All right, I admit it. I was a coward. I couldn't bring myself to reveal to her how I felt. The frightened little boy refused to take the chance that she would throw me aside, would laugh at my foolish statements. Worse, my father would take a look at her social standing and do everything up to and including murder to keep us apart. A friend was able to get me a picture of her when I asked. It is most cherished possession to this day.

Then that chance was gone.

The freshmen class was taking a trip to Washington to see Congress in action. I went out of boredom rather than an interest in democracy. After all, my family owned a couple of Congressmen. Why should I watch the idiots in action? It's like buying a biotech firm and going down to look through the microscope yourself. 'All right guys, this is how the cell is supposed to work.'

I had been resting on the bus as we raced toward Washington. There was a full load, fifty of us. My seat partner was Tom Casey who was also a jock, and he wanted to discuss the last track meet with me.

I had just told him to get out of my face when I heard a blat of the bus's horn. I leaned into the aisle, and in front of us through the swirling fog I saw a jack-knifed tanker. Even I, a rather mediocre student, could tell that we wouldn't be able to stop in time.

The bus was doing thirty-five miles an hour when it hit the tanker. There was a flash as something ignited the fuel, the windshield exploded, glass slashed into my face and a blast of heat light and pain raced down the aisle to my fifth row seat. I closed my eyes, feeling the heat wash over me, felt skin crackling. Then my

head hit the seat in front of me, and that was the last thing I really remembered for almost a year.

I Am Reborn

Some people in comas remember nothing. They see the accident happening, then they wake up and so time has passed. For me, it was a long horrible series of interlocking dreams. I saw the bus screech to a stop. I was miraculously unhurt. I climbed down, and we were back at the school. The accident had happened, but no one had been hurt.

I walked into the school, and there before me was Serena. She looked at me, then her hand came up and did what it never had; it touched my face.

"You're all right, Peter," she whispered. I knew that voice. I had sat close enough to hear her breathless recital of her day to her friends more times than I wanted to admit to. "Oh my love!" She threw her arms around me, and I hugged her.

This is where the dream should get better, but for me it became the nightmare. She moved away, looking at me, then her hand came to her mouth, and she screamed. I would look into the glass of the building and see a horribly burned face staring back. She would run, and a flame-withered hand would come up as I tried to call her back.

Or I would see a graveyard. The people I remembered from school, the students that had not been on that bus standing as fifty holes were filled with boxes; fifty lives ended in a stupid accident going into the soil to become memory. Sometimes Serena would be there,

throwing herself on the coffin, pleading for me to rise and come back to her. Other times she would stand in the distance, watching but not participating, tears pouring down her cheeks. I would try to comfort her but now I was a shade, a ghost. Unable to touch her, unable to comfort her.

In the worst nightmare of them all, I would see her at school. She would be talking with someone about the accident and say, "Peter who?"

Other times I would be standing before a blinding white light, and a voice would say "You were a pretty bad boy. But there is hope for you yet. What will it be, Peter? Will you go on to Purgatory or take a chance and return to fix the mess you made of your life?"

When I was asked that question, I would always be hung up on what to say. Purgatory was where you went if you had unconfessed sins on your soul, if your faith was mediocre or lackluster. I didn't like the idea of going back. Would I be a mummified figure in a burn ward? Would I be blinded, crippled, or worse? Would I be mute and have to win the love of Serena using only my eyes? Would I beg that beauty to tie herself to a mass of burned or crippled flesh? What was more important to me, her happiness or mine?

I was in the middle of that last dream once again when it happened. God or maybe it was St Peter had asked that question.

"As long as Serena is happy, do what you will!" I screamed. As I said it, I felt the world shift. The scene vanished, the Pearly Gates disappeared. I saw something above me. I don't know how long I stared at it. It was the most wonderful sight I had ever seen. For a long moment, I didn't recognize it. Then finally I was able to identify it. It was the ubiquitous white acousti-

cal tile you see in every institutionalized place. School, offices...

Hospitals.

I was lying in a bed, staring at the ceiling.

I lay there, unsure of where I was, or how I had gotten there.

There were monitors around me. It looked like the ICU where my Aunt Glenda died.

Mentally, I began doing a check. Toes, yep. Feet, ditto. Lower legs, upper, fingers, lower arms, upper arms neck. Mouth. Everything seemed to be there. I couldn't see bandages in my view, and didn't feel any cloth pressing on my face. My throat was dry. I took a deep breath, and whispered, "I'm alive."

Why did my voice sound so strange? My hands began feeling around, and I finally found the call button on the pillow. Why do they do that? Both arms are stuck out straight. I have tubes in one, and the damn call button is on the opposite side of the pillow from the free hand. Maybe it's to stop you from calling them. I hit the button.

There was a crashing outside, and I wanted to leap from the bed in surprise. But I felt like I'd gone four rounds with Mike Tyson. I looked at my hand and it appeared odd. Slim, my naturally long fingers looking almost feminine. The very movement tired me out.

The door opened and a young Asian man looked in. His eyes widened in surprise, then he bustled over to me.

"Awake at last, I see," he said in a singsong voice. "How are you feeling?"

“Thirsty,” I whispered. He got a tumbler with a glass straw and let me drink until I had my fill. I felt like I’d been in a desert.

He ran off at the mouth as he was checking me. How I was here because of the coma. I was really a lucky girl because he was able to use the photo to correct the damage.

I let him run on as I zoned out. Then something he had said clicked.

“Girl?” I asked.

“Yes. It was really a shame about the prominent larynx, but when I went in to fix your vocal cords, I corrected it.”

“Corrected it?” I tried to sit up. “I’m not a girl. I’m a guy!” I tried to sit up, but he held me down easily with one hand. I tried to hit him, finally pummeling his arm with my fist. But in my weakened condition, I was doing more damage by screaming at him. He pulled a syringe from his pocket with one hand, pulling the cap off with his teeth as I ranted at him. “I’m Peter Stankowski! Peter Stankowski! My father’s lawyers will sue you blind!”

He stuck the needle in my arm, and shot it into me. I kept screaming until darkness took me.

I awoke to a darkened room. I could see the doctor, or whatever he was, dozing in the chair beside the bed. I started to shift, and he snapped awake. “Are you calm now?” he asked.

“Calm?” I asked. “I wake up to find that my doctor thinks I’m a girl so he chopped up my Adam’s apple and you ask if I’m fine?”

“I did not chop you up. I corrected injuries. Will you allow me to explain?”

“Go ahead. It better be good.”

“You were caught across the throat when the boy beside you tried to pull you back from the flames. He accidentally shattered your larynx, and you were choking when they pulled you from the bus. They intubated you but the injuries caused swelling which were affecting your vocal cords and suffocating you, so I was called in. I am a specialist who has emigrated to this country. I had to remove a portion of your larynx to allow you to breathe properly, then I had to trim the damaged vocal cords.”

“Specialist?”

“Yes. I am Doctor Mokota Zim. I came here from Thailand.”

“So that is why my voice is different, higher. What did you specialize in?”

“I worked in a clinic for sexual reassignments as a plastic surgeon.” He shrugged. “Good work, but so limiting. But my experience helped when I reconstructed your face.” He opened the file on his lap, and handed me a picture. It showed what looked like raw hamburger. I gagged, looking at him in shock.

“I looked like that when I came in?”

“Yes. You slammed into the seat, breaking your nose. Then your savior threw you back out of the flames. Your entire face, from just below the eyes

down, was already ripped by flying glass from when the window exploded.”

He showed me another photo. The face had begun to heal, but the damage was severe.

“When the state declared you indigent, you were given over to my care by the Dresden Foundation. It is a non-profit organization that cares for those who cannot pay for the more expensive and necessary treatments. It was at the behest of Marcus Stankowski for the girl his son wanted to save when he died.”

“Wait a minute! I’m not a girl! And I’m not dead!”

“So sorry, but Peter Stankowski died in the bus accident.” He drew out a death certificate. I looked at it. According to it, I had suffered massive trauma to the head, and severe burns across 90 percent of my body. I had been declared D.O.A. The list of injuries was extensive. Inhaled flames, suffocated from the injuries, a brain so badly damaged I would have been lucky to be alive.

“Tom Casey.” I whispered. “He was in the seat beside me. He saved my life.”

“The mistake about your gender and identity happened there. The secondary explosion blew off your lower clothing except for the underwear. The upper clothing was almost melted, and little remained. A nurse saw only underwear, thought it looked like panties and wrote down ‘female’. Small hospital, a lot of injured. Forty-two people from the wreck came in, that number including those already dead on arrival. Only eight survivors.

Panties? Wait a minute. I was hoping to go swimming after the boring trip. I had worn my Speedos. If

they had been partially burned or melted, they would have looked like panties.

“Your father came and was told about his son. Only identification was from folder the boy clutched in agony. His body was over yours, shielding you from being burned. Everyone assumed you were a girl he had been trying to save.”

“But hadn’t anyone looked at me since? Didn’t anyone notice I had something a girl doesn’t?”

He shrugged. “You don’t know a lot about hospitals, do you? Orderlies do sponge baths, but they don’t look at charts. Patients are just by room. If you are told to give the coma patient in room seven a sponge bath, do you ask them what sex? All of the injuries were up here.” He waved at his face and neck. “The nurse and doctors...” he motioned to himself “look at chart and injury. Not to see how well you hang. The one that catheterized you upon arrival should have noticed, but I think with all of the panic, they didn’t have time to correct the chart. As I said, it occurred near a very small local hospital. No trauma center, seven people on shift including all of the duty doctors and nurses handling almost 50 patients from one accident. Like my home village when Government bombs fell on us accidentally during the Vietnam War; the doctors and nurses were overwhelmed

“I came in the first day to fix your throat. Saved your life. But I didn’t look. I was told it was a girl, thought you were. At that time they were trying to search for your identity, but no one knew who you were. You were the only one not claimed.”

“Wait! What about Casey?”

“An orphan. No family to identify. Everyone assumed you were some young girl that had slipped on the bus, friend of the driver, maybe just a student that came along, but who wasn’t on the register.”

“So I was listed as John Doe?”

“Jane Doe.”

“All right, all right, Jane Doe.”

“Mr. Stankowski paid to have plastic surgery done so when you woke, you would have your face again. Dresden Foundation pays stipend for care here.” He motioned to the clinic around him. “Taking care of you helped me pay for an orderly and a nurse. I needed the money. Once your face healed sufficiently, I used the picture in the wallet with your clothes...”

“Picture? What picture?”

He looked at me curious. Then he got a hand mirror. He cranked up the head of the bed, and held the mirror where I could see.

I stared. Somewhere in that timeless horror, I found myself holding the mirror.

It was a face perfect in every way. A face I had seen in my mind during all of that hell of the coma. But it wasn’t my face.

Serena O’Neal looked back at me.

My Situation Changes

I think I had a perfectly good reason for freaking out at that moment. Here I was, sitting in a hospital bed almost a year after I have been declared legally dead, looking at my face which was now a mirror image of the face of a girl I loved but was never able to

tell. The doctor snuck up on me with another needle and I went to La La Land for a time.

I was still weak. It was another two days before I could move, and a week before I could walk without assistance. I spent some of that time crying, some of it railing at the doctor, at my father, and the damn stupid doctors in the hospital where I had been labeled as a girl, and briefly at God. I made peace with God though because I knew this was a test, a sick, twisted driving-me-crazy-just-considering-it test, but a test I would have to endure.

The doctor kept the nurse away, taking care of all my needs himself. The nurse didn't know I was a boy; she had been in charge of meds and the occasional test to see if I had started to come back, none of which includes groping the patient. The orderly might have, but he was an older black man and didn't appear to be too bright; just big, strong, and as gentle as a lamb.

Doctor Zim brought in my effects as the week ended and I went through them numbly. My student ID had been in my shirt pocket and had been melted into a free-form sculpture. The wallet had survived better, being real calfskin, but there had been nothing in it but a few dollars and that picture. There was nothing else of value in the wallet.

My finger felt stiffness in the hidden bill section. I peeled it open and pulled out the card. The card was a brightly colored chunk of plastic like an ATM or credit card with only the Chase Manhattan bank logo on the front along with a Mastercard logo. There was an account number but no user name. It was wrapped in a piece of scrap paper labeled 'Pete's Mad Money'. I had forgotten I had it.

A few months before my Aunt Glenda's accident, she had taken me for a drive alone away from the house. She had handed me the card. "Your father will control everything you do in life if you let him, Petey. Just consider this your golden parachute if you ever want to bail out."

Glenda and Father had never really gotten along. They had been partners until I was about six, but once she made her first ten million, she sold her part of the business and spent her time traveling. He thought she was a wastrel; she thought he was so strait-laced he'd cut himself in half if he tried to bend over. He had 'given' me four trust funds, but there were so many catches that only a saint or a robot could have passed the strictures.

The first had come into effect when I turned 15, with the stricture that only 10 percent could be touched unless my grade-point average was 3.6 or higher. *You* try getting B-minus in every subject. The others were to come on line when I turned 18 if I had graduated with a high enough standing to be offered a position in the Ivy League, I would pass the second challenge when I married if the girl fit my father's strict standard, the last on the birth of my first male child, provided I named him after my father.

If I failed to succeed in his requirements, each rolled over into the next one, so the amount I could spend would increase even if I were a total boob who ended up in a community college.

But the last two would end if I didn't marry by 26 and have that male child by 30. Glenda had known that. It was her brother after all. So she had taken from her money and given it to me so that I could spit in his eye and walk away.

Then she had been hit by an out of control car. Two weeks later, she had quietly gone.

How much was in it? I didn't have a clue. I had put the card in my wallet and pretty much forgotten about it.

I slowly stood. I had lost a lot of muscle tone; the calluses on my hands and feet had smoothed into normal skin again and I really did look like a girl. I was able to walk if I took it easy but I had to know if I still had money. I had to have my own face back.

The doctor was out, so I found a closet. Unfortunately, he had assumed I was a girl, so every stitch of clothes was for a female. Not only that but he didn't seem to think a girl could wear slacks or jeans. It was all frilly dresses or skirts with pastel blouses and sweaters. There was even what looked like a school-girl's uniform. Obviously the guy had a few fantasies of his own.

Well fine, if I had to dress like a girl, at least I could work on being unattractive. I picked a skirt that came down below my knees, flat shoes, the least objectionable blouse and a sweater that would disguise that I didn't have any tits. I'd be some frumpy flat-chested girl to anyone that saw me. The orderly wasn't in sight; I made my way to the back door, and left unnoticed.

Stepping outside was like walking out of prison. The sky was so blue, the clouds so white. I stood there for several minutes just drinking it in. I didn't even care that it was a filthy alley! Finally I walked to the street and looked around. There was a Washington Mutual Bank across the street and I headed there. The man in front of me finished doing what he was doing, and I walked up and inserts the card. I remembered the

password. I typed in GLENDA. Then I asked for an account balance.

The computer chuckled, spat out the paper, and asked if I wanted another transaction. I asked for 300 dollars as I looked at the balance receipt.

\$1,350,000.

I stared at it, then looked down as the crisp 20s that had stuck out of the machine like a lucrative tongue. I told the machine I didn't want anything else, took the money, and stuck it in the pocket of the skirt.

I walked over to a pay phone and called a cab. I gave my home address and rode silently as it took me there. The house still stood, but it looked as if it hadn't been occupied in a year or more. I didn't touch the gate. Father had electrified fences to keep away the lower classes. I tapped the call button on the annunciator.

"Stankowski residence," a man's voice answered.

"I'm looking for Marcus Stankowski."

"Ma'am, Mr. Stankowski hasn't lived here since his son died."

"Please. It's important."

"If it is important, I suggest you call his business number to make an appointment."

"Please."

"Ma'am, I'm only the security officer assigned to monitor the house. I cannot connect you with him, nor am I allowed to give you his number. Now please go."

I walked glumly away. I could go to my father.

Right. I had been raised with the idea that the 'lower classes' wanted what we had and would do

anything to grab it. If I showed up, he'd demand a DNA test, then call in the guy from the lab. 'I fund your place,' he would say. 'If you want me to continue funding it, you will say the boy is lying. If you don't, I will pull the funding. When your boss asks why, I'll tell him.'

Hell, he spent a million and a half a year, spreading it to every private and commercial lab in this city alone. I would never run that gauntlet.

Besides, I looked like a girl.

I needed my own face back.

I caught a bus back to where I had started. Now that I had money, I could take it, shove it in Doctor Zim's face and say, "Put my face back like it was." I was so busy thinking when I leaped down from the bus that I ran into someone, and both of us ended up on the ground.

The first thing I saw was a pair of panties with little flowers on them. A tartan skirt like the ones the girls at St Bartholomew's wore. My eyes rose. A blazer with St Bart's crest. I leaned back.

And Serena O'Neal was staring at me.

I was stunned. The woman of my dreams right here, close enough to kiss. She looked at me, unbelieving, then her hand came up slowly, touching my cheek with a gentle caress as if afraid I was smoke and mirrors.

God, I had wanted her to look at me for so long, wanted the touch of her fingers, to see the hope that now sprang to her eyes. Then she hugged me,

"Amanda, you've come home!"

Amanda?

The girl was a pint-sized tank engine. I stood up, hoping to break into the crowd and get away, but she caught her arm around me, dragging me in the opposite direction. After a while, when she was sure I wasn't going to bolt, she paused, looked at me, hugged me as if she was terrified I was an illusion, then dragged me further to repeat the process again a block or so farther on. Part of me was ecstatic. To hold her in my arms...

But who the hell was Amanda?

We went into one of the seedier neighborhoods and she came to a house. It had been recently painted, looking as if it had merely declined into seedy neglect. An older car sat in the driveway and she almost leaped for joy when she saw it. "Mom and dad are home!" she squealed with delight.

She dragged me around to the back door, opening it. The kitchen was small. Hell, the pantry in my home was larger! A woman stood facing the stove, stirring a pot as she sprinkled spices into it. A man sat at the table, looking toward her, obviously in conversation. Then he turned. Serena had been in front of me, and as he looked, she stepped aside.

Whatever he was going to say died in his throat as he saw me. He stared at me as if I had to be a ghost. The woman felt the change in the room and turned.

"What ever is..." Her voice slowed as she saw my face. I saw so many things there; pain, happiness, dread, and hope. Then she was lunging forward, sweeping me into a hug as she cried. "Oh my baby!" she wailed, holding me so tight I was afraid I would be

suffocated. She leaned back, hands running over my hair, my face, then she pulled me back into a hug that threatened to break my ribs.

She finally let me go, wiping her eyes as the man stood. He looked at me, and I could see anger there. "So you've finally come home. Two years it's been without knowing where you slept or what you ate! How you were surviving! What did you expect us to do?" Then the anger drained away and he was crying. The woman leaped to his side, hugging him, and they both stared at me.

Serena pulled me forward, then the man wrapped those huge arms around me and bawled like a baby.

Christ above, I didn't know what to do! I looked like someone he knew, obviously. I looked like his daughter who was standing there with tears running down her face and an expression of joy. The woman was looking at me as if I was the second coming. Finally I slowly returned the hug. As I did, the arms tightened. Hell, if he wanted to, he could have broken me in half! But he held me as if I were a piece of fine Dresden china.

"We were so worried, Amanda," he finally said. "Where were you? You ran away and never even bothered to let us know!"

Oh crap. If I told them the truth, it would get really confusing. Wait a minute... ran away? "My memory isn't really clear," I replied.

"Oh God. Maybe she hit her head and lost her memory!" the woman said. "I knew she wouldn't have just left without saying something!"

I found myself at the table, a nice hot cup of tea on the table in front of me, two adults looking at me

adoringly, Serena nowhere in sight. When they decided that I had amnesia, she bolted from the room. If I'd had the chance and my legs felt better, I would have been running already.

Serena came in, dragged a chair over beside me, and set down a photo album. Reverently, she opened it. The two adults in the first picture were younger, in their wedding clothes. Then I saw the same people with a girl on their laps, smiling happily. At the beach, walking in the hills. The love they felt for this girl was obvious.

Then suddenly there were three girls. One older by maybe six years as the two younger girls looked quizzically at the camera. The birthday parties, three kids at the beach instead of one. On and on in a dizzying array of years of pictures until I suddenly saw something I recognized. Two girls in the uniform of St Michael's, one smiling so broadly that you would think her head would detach, the other a little more cynical with a slightly irritated expression.

Both with the same face.

Amanda was Serena's twin sister.

"Better the crust of dry bread where there is love, than the fatted calf in a house of enmity." So says the bible. I had never considered what the psalmist meant until that night. I did everything I could to leave, but they wouldn't let me go. I told them I had to pick up my stuff, and they allowed that it was true. However they wanted to feed me, see me eating their food, ask me so many questions I couldn't answer. I hemmed and hawed and came up with something. What it was, I really don't remember. The food was spiced with three people who had never met the real me loving me unreservedly. It was a heady mix.

I admit, I got them talking about Amanda. She had been the older twin by all of two and a half minutes. The two had been inseparable through their childhood. But Amanda had grown distant two years previously. What had caused it was unclear except that she had wanted to go to the High School of the Performing Arts so she could become an actress, and her parents hadn't been willing to let her go.

Suddenly Amanda had merely gone. No word, no warning, just gone. Serena had been devastated. The parents, as I found most good parents do, blamed themselves. There was something they had done wrong that caused this. But how do you tell a girl at fourteen that her sister left for that reason?

They finished the meal and dragged me upstairs, showed me into Amanda's room, then left me alone. I walked around it, like a kid inside a museum diorama. It was sad. A shrine to someone who perhaps didn't care that someone else had built just for them. It had been cleaned and dusted to within an inch of its life every day, but it was static, frozen in time on the day she had left. 7th grade textbooks in a neat row, a picture of her leaning back into Serena's arms at a beach somewhere. A girl's room where the owner had gone, and the supplicants still did the ritual in hopes that she would return. Like a cargo cult had come to Virginia.

An evil voice whispered in my ear. *They think I'm Amanda... This could be my room... I could stay, be with Serena every minute of every day... I would be close to the woman I loved.* I looked in the mirror and saw myself looking back. After my coma, I was thin as a rail, coltish... I looked like Serena did right now. My hair was a bit lighter brown than hers, but we both had expressive

hazel eyes. I turned toward the bookshelves. Oh yes, I could do it...

And it would be a lie. I would be a poseur, a changeling. A monster in my own eyes from the minute I started, until she eventually discovered the truth.

I couldn't do that to her.

I heard a soft breath then felt a pair of arms encircle me from behind. "My beloved sister... I have dreamed of this day for so very long."

I turned slowly. My worst nightmare and fondest wish were there in her glowing eyes. I couldn't run. I could only hug the girl as she cried against me. "Never leave me again, please!" she pleaded in a whisper. She looked at me, eyes shining with tears. "Promise!"

"Serena..."

"Please, by all that is holy swear it!"

I hugged her. "I need time to think." I saw the hurt in her eyes, but she didn't push it.

I convinced them that I had to go get my gear the next morning. Serena wanted to go with me, Her father, Matt, wanted to drive me. But I finally convinced them it would be easier if I went alone. They let me go only after I promised to not leave without at least some warning this time. It seemed Amanda was a woman of her word, and they trusted that.

A cab whisked me back to the clinic and I told Doctor Zim what had happened. He wasn't sure what help he would be.

First things first.

Question; a girl of about fifteen walks into a bank, writes a counter check or withdrawal slip for say ten thousand dollars, then uses a high tech super ATM card to prove it is her money. What does the bank do? If you answered 'give it to her,' you're dreaming. I don't think Paris Hilton could have done that at fifteen. No, since the person in question was a minor, they'd hold them there while they verified the check. With no parents to point at, no ID worth mentioning, and being unclear of who I was, I'd end up being held while the bank, then local police, then the Feds got into it. I'd be found out eventually.

But I am my father's son. When in doubt, cheat.

Doctor Zim knew a stylist down the street and I asked her to make me look older. Not that much older. Think of the brand new college graduate who lands an executive secretary job. I had bought a nice looking business suit with a briefcase and tied back my hair before I arrived. She shook her head, did some kind of ritual magic, then did some makeup work on me. Then she turned me to look. My hair was now in one of those rolled buns favored by the wealthy and those who work for them; the makeup was understated, definitely not what a teenager would have come up with. When she was done, I looked like an adult. A baby-faced adult, but an adult. A pair of horn-rimmed glasses made me look five years older.

Once that was done, I called a lawyer's office. Dr. Zim talked for me, telling them his secretary would be coming over there to speak with them.

This I could do in my sleep. I had heard my father explain it over and over. You go in acting like you own the place, you hand them cash, tell them what you

want, and if they do it, fine. If not, you go to another lawyer. Once you hand them the cash, they have to keep quiet.

The story was simple. The firm I worked for would be doing business out of Virginia Beach for the next year or so. A lot of it had to be done by bank draft and wire transfers, but some would be conducted locally with an ATM. However it was an attempt at a high-level buyout; if the locals knew we were there, other entrepreneurs might jump in.

All contact would be through me. I would authorize and order all payments. No sir, my instructions are not to identify myself beyond the card I have handed you. Yes, I know I am young, but my firm trusts my integrity. If you wish some verification, please call the number on the back of the card. I blessed Aunt Glenda. The several million my father had set up as trust funds would have already been absorbed, but she had hidden this money so carefully that the only ones who knew it existed were me, the IRS (who were paid the taxes religiously by her old law firm), and the bank. The bank had been warned, I had been told, that no one had a right to know who owned the account unless they had a court order proving malfeasance. The bank was to tell them that the bearer was a trusted employee who had authority to write a check for the lot if needed.

They ate it up. Wave enough money and any lawyer would go along. Give him a chance to skim some of it and he will give you his firstborn. For a retainer of 20,000 dollars a year, hourly costs when necessary, and a power of attorney, they would authorize the transfers of money from the account for me, give orders to the bank to send wire transfers, and the bill from the credit

card part of the ATM would go there and be paid. Any bills I created would also go to the lawyers.

I returned to the clinic, triumphant except for one little thing.

I didn't have access to any of my photos.

"If I only had a picture of you, we could avoid this problem," the doctor opined. "Perhaps the school has one?"

"Of course!" I leaped to my feet. "They have to have a picture of me!"

Guess again.

I showed up at the school still dressed as a secretary and went to the library. The yearbook from the previous year had nothing of me in it. I remembered never liking the camera, of avoiding it all year. Father loved the paparazzi. I avoided them. I never showed up for the class photos, or the standard photo shoots they would do. I had been the same at St. Michaels. If they had me listed in the yearbook, it would have been as 'the boy who wasn't there'.

I walked out of the library, and almost ran into Serena. She was walking with classmates with an expression of such joy on her face. Again it hit me. Could I ruin her life just to save my own?

I took a quick shower, putting my hair back down so I looked like a kid again. The doctor helped me pack all of those clothes he had gathered for me in suitcases I had picked up at a Goodwill store. The suit had to stay here; I couldn't explain something that upscale and brand new. The doctor took me to the O'Neal house. I had brushed out my hair and cleaned off the makeup, so I was back to almost normal. I introduced him as a friend who had helped me when I first got back into

town, and he played the role well. I went up to my room and collapsed.

I wanted to die. I wanted to go back a year and do the entire thing over again. To have a hundred, no, a thousand, pictures taken of me so that I would have been able to pick and choose the best.

There was a hesitant knock on the door. I rolled over, lying on my stomach, my hair down over my eyes. "Come in."

Serena came in, kneeling by the head of the bed within arm's reach. "What did you think of my school?" she asked lightly. Her look wasn't light. I didn't know what she was thinking, but it wasn't happy.

"You saw me?" I said in a dead voice.

"Of course I did. You looked so much... older." She gave a brittle little laugh. Then the somber face was back. "You were looking for something. A picture."

"How do you know that?"

"You remember I always spend more time in the library than any other part of the school," she said. "I asked the librarian what you were looking for." She leaned forward, eyes so close that they were all I could see. "A picture of Peter Stankowski."

"Yeah, what of it?" My voice was harsh, and I immediately regretted it. Her eyes were hurt.

"I just wondered..." she picked at the edge of her skirt. "I wondered if maybe... If maybe you loved him?"

"It doesn't matter." I said, burying my head. "They tell me he's dead."

"I know." Her voice was soft. She reached out and I saw in her hand a picture.

It was me right after school let out at St. Michaels before summer vacation my last year. I was walking with some classmates, my blazer hung across my shoulders. I looked like the cock of the walk. I looked at the picture, then at her. Her eyes were downcast. "Why do you have a picture..."

"I've had it since the first time I saw him at St. Michaels after you left." She whispered. "I held on to it when he died. I... I wanted some memory of the man I hoped to marry."

Marry. The word resonated in my mind, rolling around like a bb in a boxcar. The woman I loved then had loved me as well, but never told me. She loved me still, even after I had been dead a year.

"I think he might have been starting to notice me. I thought I saw him look at me. He was always finding a reason to sit nearby, but he never... never said anything to me."

"But it's the New Millennium!" I laughed. "Why didn't you tell him?"

"Oh I couldn't do that." She looked at me with a mixture of dread and elation. "I was so shy. Not like you." She shrugged. "Besides. I couldn't ask him while my own life was still incomplete." She stood, turning to look away. "I was missing my sister, wanting to know whether she was safe or not. Whether she was alive or dead." She spun around, crying. "I couldn't worry about my happiness until I knew that. I would have been betraying you if I had! Then... he died." She looked out the window, staring into a horrible memory.

"I remember the burial. Everyone else had been buried the week before, but his father wouldn't stand there with the common folk. Peter's buried up at All Saints. I asked to be allowed to come but I was refused. It wasn't even him, it was some secretary!

"So I slipped into the cemetery. There's a tree about fifty or so yards from the grave-site. I watched as the only man I will ever love was interred, and I cried for you and for me and for him. Now..." She looked at me. "He is gone, but you are back. My life is complete." She was happy that 'Amanda' had returned, but part of her wanted to scream at me. She wanted to scream about the love she had never had, that 'I' had denied her by being gone. Then she looked down.

"I am so terrified that you will leave again. When you were here, I was happy. When he was alive I was happy, but not complete. If both of you were gone, I think I would rather die." She wiped the tears fiercely. "But I won't hold you back if you leave! I won't do that! You're here and I have to hold onto all the happiness I can get. Even if you leave me again..."

I found myself kneeling facing her, then I hugged her to me, both of us crying. "I'm not going to disappear again!" I almost screamed. I'll be with you here until the stars themselves grow cold! I swear it on God's name!"

So began my life of lies. I would stay here. I would be her sister; I would be the mirror of the one I loved until the real Amanda returned.

I was able to get back to the Doctor's office. I didn't know what I might need but his specialty back home would help.

I had enough money to buy a full sex change, though he wouldn't have been able to do it overnight. Besides, I intended to still be the man of her dreams when this was done.

He had a friend who worked in New York who specialized in full body prostheses for stage productions and movies. Zim called him, I called the lawyer, bought him a ticket and he was down from the city two hours later. He knew me, having seen me in the coma. He was Vietnamese, didn't speak a lot, had an accent thick enough to need slicing but he did good fast work. Four thousand dollars later, I stood naked, looking at myself in the mirror.

The suit fit from neck to the cleft of my legs, and fit so snugly that it was unnoticeable. I could go to gym class, walk through a room naked and take a shower and no one would know I wasn't a woman. The skin was close enough to real that only a doctor would have been able to tell it wasn't. The only adjustment necessary was for the breasts. I hoped they were close enough to Amanda's.

After the guy left, Dr. Zim allowed me to use his phone. I called a detective agency my father used on occasion. I told them what I knew. I gave them a description of Amanda, and the fact that she had always wanted to be 'a star'. I figured that meant Hollywood. Her family had the High School of the Performing Arts, which suggested to me that she might be in New York instead, and I mentioned that to the detective.

The operative quoted a daily rate worse than any plumber's. I told him to get off his butt; when he found her, he'd get a bonus. I instructed him where to send the bill, and told him to express mail it so the money would be in his account in a few days. When I had a

Post Office box, I would give him the number so I could get weekly reports; if he found her, he should call immediately at a number I would give him.

Zim watched me, waiting until I was done. "So, you have the money you need to have your face restored. Why wait?"

"Because I can't reappear as Peter only to have her sister disappear again," I told him. "So while the detective looks, I am going to be that sister."

I returned to the O'Neal's home; as of then, it was *my* home. I tentatively asked Matt, I mean 'Dad', if I could take a transfer and join Serena at school. I don't know who was happiest, him, Serena, or me.

It was Thursday around noon. Matt was like his daughter, he wouldn't take 'maybe later' as an answer. He tossed us in the car and drove down to the school. He was implacable. He was a cliff laughing at the waves that slam into it. He was a tank smashing through solid concrete walls. He was Juggernaut from the comic books.

The secretary fell before him. The Vice Principal, then the Principal, saw him. I spent hours going through all of the tests to show how far along I was in school. We left an hour after dark, with the Principal promising that he would have the results by Friday afternoon. If my grades were good enough, they would allow me to enter the freshman year on Monday.

Friday, the results were in. I could enter school. Now we descended on the store where the school uniforms were sold. Suddenly I realized what this was costing the O'Neals, not just emotionally, but monetarily. Another full set of uniforms cost almost a thousand dollars, tuition was going to cost them eight

thousand more. Then we went to a small clothing store and began to buy everything in sight.

“Really, I can share Serena’s clothes,” I protested.

“I will not have my child running around in used clothes!” Serena’s mother Marion snapped back. I had forgotten that everything the Doctor had bought was second hand. “The O’Neal’s have never allowed one of theirs to look shabby, and we’re not going to start now!”

Matt laid his hand on my shoulder. “We’ll get by, Amanda. We always do.”

We went back to the house, sat and just talked. They wanted to let me know what had been happening with their lives, even if I couldn’t tell them what had happened in mine. I took it all in. My family had never really talked. My mother died when I was six, and father never remarried. Father would ask about school, but it was all pro forma. He was a father, he was supposed to take an interest in his child’s schooling (or at least go through the motions), so he did. I was almost willing to bet it was in his day timer, ‘7 PM: At dinner, ask your child how he is doing at school. Remonstrate the child when grades are bad, praise when grades are good.’

In the movie *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*, the main character talks about his friend Cameron. He speaks of Cameron’s home, which he describes as a museum, where every thing is ‘look but don’t touch’. I always identified more with Cameron than I ever did with Ferris. When I finally saw my father again, I fully expected him to look a bit confused and correct his day timer to include me, making a note to fire whoever told him I was dead.

But the O'Neal's reminded me of the story of the prodigal son. Here I was, gone for two years, and they rejoiced at my return. We didn't have a fatted calf, but I noticed that Marion served a veal casserole that night with a twinkle in her eyes.

Saturday Serena took me walking. A lot of the city I saw that day was brand new to me. Oh it had been there all along, I knew. But driving by in a chauffeured limousine you never really see it. I discovered more about the city of my birth that day than I had learned in 16 years of living there.

Sunday, Serena woke me up to get ready for Mass. Again this was very different from home. Father was an apostate Catholic. He kept some religious connections, went to Mass on the high holidays, even flew us to Rome to see Pope John Paul II one year. He was like the stereotypical mobster who makes a full confession on his deathbed after a life of murder and mayhem, expecting to skate into Heaven on a loop hole.

I was wearing a nice little number from my new wardrobe that had been chosen and deemed fitting for Mass. It was a pale peach dress that zipped up with bell sleeves, matching two-inch heels and a veiled hat.

Riding in the old car, feeling the press of Serena's leg against mine, I was in for more than one surprise. We went in and I sat through the Mass with them. Near the end, when the priest would make announcements, he ended with, "And it is good to see that Amanda O'Neal has returned to the family fold at last. I ask all of you to give thanks in your prayers for her family's happiness."

After the service, I walked over to the candles before the statue of the Virgin Mary. I felt in my pocket. I

still had almost two hundred dollars remaining from my last withdrawal.

"It is good to see you again, Amanda." I turned to see the priest, Father Monahan. "It's been a long time."

"It's good to be back, Father." I replied. I looked at the statue, deep in thought.

"Something troubles you, my child."

"Father, who would I pray to when I need to find someone desperately?"

"The Infant of Atocha or St. Anthony. St. Anthony is the patron saint of lost articles." He cocked his head. "Why?"

"And if the person I am looking for has been missing for a long time?"

"For desperate or lost causes, you pray to St Jude." He looked at me. "Amanda, who are you trying to find?"

I took the taper, and lit one of the candles. "Blessed Infant of Atocha, guide my prayers." I lit the second. "Blessed St Anthony, help me find the one I seek." I lit the third. "Blessed St Jude, please aid me in my cause."

I waved the taper out, setting it back in the cup.

"Amanda. Don't I deserve an answer to my question?"

"I'm trying to find myself, Father." On the way out, I took the bills, stuffed them into the poor box, and left with my family.

School Days

'Communication is the problem to the answer

*You've got her number and your hand is on the phone
The weather's turned and all the lines are down
The things we do for love, the things we do for love'*

I had expected to go back to school. To meet all those people who remembered me, who wanted to see me again.

But I hadn't expected to be dressed in a girl's school uniform, and for those welcoming people to be calling me Amanda.

Marion had one of those cheap disposable cameras, and ambushed us both at the breakfast table. Serena and I stood there, arms around each other, as shot after shot was taken. "Don't look so grim, Amanda!" Marion cried gaily. Serena tickled me, and that picture I have a copy of. Two beautiful girls, looking at each other laughing.

Then it happened again at school. When we walked in, we literally stopped traffic. Every student within sight of us stopped, staring. I had never considered what it might be like to have a twin. For Serena to have a twin that few had met must have been a serious shock to everyone.

The school had placed us on the same schedule of classes. The secretary that gave me the class list jokingly told me that it was so that we couldn't trade places for tests. Our homeroom was history, and we were immediately inundated in attractive young girls in uniform. Serena had always been popular among the girls; I knew that when I first saw her. But I didn't believe how popular she was.

I was introduced to each with 'You remember...' so that we didn't have to tell anyone about my putative memory loss.

Michelle O'Bannion jumped up on the desk in front of me, flashing her panties at me. "Damn it's still hot!"

I blushed, looking away as Serena scolded her. "Michelle, you're flashing the room!"

The well-built blond looked around, then at Serena. "It's not like I'm flashing some guy!" She looked at me with that roguish twinkle I would come to know so well. "Is it, Amanda?"

I know you've probably been to more than one school, so you know the drill when a new student is brought into the mix. You are introduced. Stand, give your name, say 'I'm happy to be here,' then sit down. We were soon deep into the reconstruction period. The class ended, and Serena took my hand. "Chemistry is next."

We threaded the hall, and I heard a whisper. "Look at them. Can't you just see both of them..."

I spun around. I recognized him. Steve Lomax, a senior, now captain of the football team. "What did you say?" I demanded. I advanced on him, and he just stood there. Of course I wasn't Peter Stankowski any more. I was a cute little girl protecting my sibling.

"Oh, you're cute when you're angry, baby."

I stepped in, poking him in the chest with a steely forefinger. "I am *not* your baby, twerp. Having a size 20 collar and a size three head doesn't impress me. You aren't man enough for anyone with a brain in her head." He grunted as I lowered the finger, this time punching it into his solar plexus. "If you come near my

sister or me, I will teach you a whole new meaning for the word pain. Now get lost!"



He stared at me as if he couldn't believe it, then gave me a smarmy smile and walked away.

"You've changed, sis." Serena said softly when I re-joined her.

"Huh?" I hadn't been a girl more than a week and already I had blown my cover?

"You used to like it when guys paid attention to you."

"Yeah, but he wasn't paying attention to me, it was us." I covered really quickly. "He was imagining both of us with him."

She paused, looking at me. "But how do you know that?"

I couldn't answer that question.

"And sometimes you walk like a guy, or sit with your legs open," she said, going on. "It's like you've forgotten how to be a girl."

I couldn't answer that either. How can you forget something you never knew?

We got to class, and I went through the introductions again. "Amanda, there is a case of retorts in the storeroom," the teacher, Mr. O'Malley, said. He held out a key ring. "Could you get them for me, please?"

"Yes sir." I took the keys, and hurried down the hall. There were a number of boys still out, and I felt every eye on me like an impala on the veldt being eyed by the local pack of hyenas. I reached the storeroom and was coming out with the box when I noticed a half-dozen of them standing there, waiting for me.

"Amanda."

“What do you want?” I snarled. Three of them I remembered. Sammy Wise, Josh Randall, and David Connors. They were an inseparable trio of seniors with more demerits than anyone should have and still be allowed to attend school.

“We were just going to ask you to join the Astronomy club,” Sammy said.

“Yeah, we have an eight-inch reflector we built. There is supposed to be excellent viewing of Saturn tonight,” Dave said.

“What are you dorks doing in the hall?” a raspy voice growled. I looked past them as they turned to face this threat. It was Carl Yablonski, captain of the wrestling team. He was the size of Olympic wrestling gold medalist Kurt Angle with a serious attitude problem. I had been able to back him down as a boy because I never let him push me around. He was the stereotypical bully and only his skills on the mat had stopped him from being kicked out of school more than once.

We fought exactly once. I had been taking lessons from Coach Donahue at St. Matthews and Coach Sebring here with hopes that I would fill out and get a chance on the boxing team. But Yablonski didn't know that. With different martial arts, there are different rules. You can't punch in wrestling, and can't grapple in boxing. All that time, no one knew his secret.

He had a glass jaw.

He tried to grab me and throw me down and I took him down with one right cross. Everyone thought I was Superman. He backed away from fighting me again and if I was nearby, he didn't bother anyone my entire freshman year.

But the dynamics of a school are like a pile of pick-up sticks. Grab the wrong one, the pile falls over, and you've lost. But there's still a pile even then. New situations, the dynamic shifts until it finds equilibrium again. Without someone to stop him, he'd gone right back to his old ways.

Maybe I could get him to act more human by talking to him this time. I knew I'd probably make a real name for myself if I had to beat him up. I was considering the methods available after our last class when Serena came into the classroom. "Sis!" I looked at her, then at her pointed finger. I had been thinking; I always think better when I put my feet up on the desk. However in a skirt...

My feet came down and together so fast you'd have thought they had rocket assist. She chuckled. Leaning over me, she said, "You have to be more careful. From what I've heard, a lot of the boys are already interested in you."

"Interested?" I suddenly pictured the typical school scene. You go to your locker, then a big meaty paw plants itself beside you. It's ol' Jason the Jock who wants to show off his rippling biceps. Do you simper or ignore him? Would I punch his lights out instead?

"Yeah," she laughed. "They like you because you're always so energetic and straight forward."

Oh crap. "Then since we look alike, you must have a lot of admirers too. I hope I'm not cramping your style."

Her humor vanished. "No. I don't have any admirers. I'm too... serious."

No my love, I wanted to scream. You are careful in your speech and don't joke a lot; that is all. There is one man

who has loved you forever, and he's right in front of you! I'd do anything you asked me to do!

Do anything... What would Yablonski do if I were to use feminine wiles on him?

The gym had been partitioned so that all the sports teams could use it, three teams at a time. The girl's gymnastics team was working on the balance beam at one end; the basketball team using one court on the other, and the wrestlers were practicing between them. Yablonski was standing off to the side, shouting at the two on the mat when we approached.

"Excuse me," I said. He spun, and for a moment, he was surprised. I had put on that 'sweet innocent girl' look that had worked so well on me as a guy.

Face it. If I pulled this off, I could become the lead actress of the Drama club. "We haven't met. I am Amanda O'Neal."

He looked me up and down. Or should I say, he started at my feet, looking at the legs, stopped at the skirt as if hoping I'd flash him, then up until he locked eyes on my breasts. Only then did he look at my face. He was a loser in the Game of Love, obviously.

"Carl Yablonski." He stuck out a meaty hand, and I laid mine on his. He closed his fingers tightly to make sure I couldn't get away. "Pleased to meet you."

"I have always liked... strong men," I said in a throaty whisper. "But I feel a strong man can afford to be... gentle."

"I don't know what you mean," he said. Christ above, rutabaga has a higher IQ than this guy.

"You were so mean to those boys in the hall earlier." I gave a light laugh. "I really like strong men, but not violent ones."

"I think I see."

I almost screamed inside. What did this guy need? A hand-drawn map, Post It notes and a flipping native guide? "If you can prove to me that you are the kind of man I admire, I think I might be willing to spend time with you."

That he got. Not the 'prove to me' part but the 'spending time' part triggered all his macho buttons. He pulled me toward him, lifting me from the floor.

All right, this had gone far enough. Behind me I could hear a gasp from the doorway, and someone saying, 'Sis!' But I had gone from sweet to bloody furious in one go. But you would never have told it from my voice or my face. I had my mother's temper and she had terrified full-grown defensive lineman!

"Put me down."

"Nah, I like this."

"I was wrong. You're not a real man if you have to force someone."

"Then maybe you have to convince me to let you go," he laughed.

"If that's the only way." I gave him a feral smile. It was just registering in his pea brain that this was not a good thing when my head came forward and I head butted him right in the nose. He screamed, dropping me, and I wound up an uppercut that started a foot below my knees, and went six inches past his face as I hit

him as hard as I could. He took two steps back, then fell on his back with a crash that should have shaken the foundations, out like a light.

Gotta love that glass jaw.

I glared at him, still riding the adrenaline high when I heard someone coming toward me. Coach Sebring was marching toward us like a ship under full sail. I wished I could sink into the floor. Everyone was staring at me; over by the gym door, Serena had her hand to her mouth, and was giving me a look I didn't want to see ever again. The coach stopped, crossed those huge guns he called arms, and asked mildly, "How's your hand?"

I had forgotten why boxers wear gloves. Whether you're getting hit or doing the hitting, it's still muscle and bone hitting muscle and bone. My knuckles smarted and I gasped as I tried to open my hand. It felt like I'd broken it.

He took it in his, curiously gentle. "That was a pretty good punch. A pity we don't have a girl's boxing team." He manipulated each finger separately, looking at me as I winced and gasped. "Not too bad. I'd suggest you not hit anyone else for a few days." He looked at the silent watchers. "Not that you might have to." He let go. "Pretty badly bruised, but nothing some ice and a hot pack later won't cure." He turned around. "I assume the sports teams intend to compete this year?" He gave a full-throated roar. "The show's over! Henderson, get a bucket of cold water and wake our Mr. Yablonski. Ask him if sweeping and mopping the gym for the next week will teach him to treat a lady like a lady." He looked back at me. "Come to my office."

I followed him, then felt a presence beside me. Serena was walking beside me; the look on her face was indescribable. The coach got out one of those chemical ice packs, broke the vial, manipulated it to get the gel chilled, then laid it on my hand. "Hold that," he said. Then he sat in his chair, looking across at me then at Serena. "Your sister, Amanda?" he asked.

"Yes, coach."

"We frown on people beating on each other here," he said to me sternly. "But as I said, that was a pretty good punch. Did they have a girl's boxing team at your old school?"

How could I explain this? Lie. "No, coach. I learned it from a guy I knew."

"Well, you have the makings of a real boxer if you were a guy."

I know, Coach. You told me that when I was a guy. "But there isn't a girl's boxing team." I said.

"If you want to learn, I know a couple of gyms that will teach you... with your parents permission that is." That was almost word for word what he'd told me before putting gloves on himself to spar with me after my father refused. The only difference between the two coaches that had taught me was that Donahue had wanted me to practice with my father's picture painted on the heavy bag. He took a piece of scratch paper, and wrote. "Tell your parents I think you might be good. But it's their decision."

"Sure, Coach."

"In about an hour, switch that ice pack out with a hot pack. That will help reduce the swelling. Why don't you two run along home?" He gave me that look again.

“Unless there’s someone else you want to beat up today?”

Serena caught my arm before I could answer, dragging me back into the gym. We were halfway to the street before she stopped, and her shoulders started quivering. I thought she was crying or scared but when I turned her around, I could see she was struggling not to break into hysterical laughter. “Oh, you got what you deserved!” she finally gasped out. “I saw that Sharon Stone imitation you were doing!” She clasped her hands, and gave me a puppy dog expression just like the one I must have used. “Oh sir, I know that I would be willing to give my virtue to you. That is if you dyed your hair blue and wore clown makeup.” Then she looked down, then back up, grinning.

We laughed together, and I found myself holding her. She didn’t know the truth; she could never know it.

We walked down the street to the bus stop. There was a hair salon on the corner, and I pulled her toward it. “Where are you going?” she asked alarmed.

“I need the blue hair dye,” I told her straight-faced. “But you’ll have to direct me to the clown store.”

“Oh you!” She pecked me on the cheek, and ran on toward the bus stop. I followed, hand on my cheek. She had kissed me!

My First Date, Sort Of

I was sitting at my desk, working on homework two weeks later. Serena came in, hugging me from behind. “I love you, sister,” she whispered, kissing my neck.

I was wishing Amanda had never left. Not because having the woman I love kiss me every chance she got wasn't a dream, but because her sister had been such a flake. I was getting all of that unrequited affection, and as much as I liked it, I really hated the real Amanda. Serena sat on the bed, looking at me studying. "I'm bored."

"How can you be bored with the homework we have?" I asked. It was rough going for me. Serena was one of those students that just knew the right answer, whereas I succeeded only by plodded my way through it like walking through a swamp. We were almost neck and neck in our class standings, but only because I studied very hard.

"Yeah, but it's Saturday. We should go shopping."

"With what?"

"Well, you know Dad always give us our allowance on Saturday mornings," she told me. That hadn't surprised me so much. A lot of my friends when I was still Peter had to do chores at home, and the O'Neal clan was no exception. What had surprised me was that it was so... satisfying. I washed dishes, did laundry, helped Marion clean, or yard work; there was something to do every day. Asking if there was something to do or just doing it without asking got you brownie points, and I was the star at collecting them. I never knew working with your hands could be so much fun.

But Matt O'Neal was an expansive man. He felt good work ethics deserved an equal compensation. We got a brand new twenty every week, and while I didn't have any money worries, I could see Serena's eyes light up when she got it. We'd gone to the movies the last week, and I had even started to appreciate the effort necessary to make the standard chick flick, at least

when the girl you love cuddles against you to watch it raptly.

She finally wheedled me into going down to where he was working on a new window. No store-bought crap for Matt O'Neal, no sir! He had removed one of the 1950s windows and was using a router to make an exact duplicate of the frame to replace it. Sheets of glass lay to the side along with glazier's points and putty.

"Dad?" Serena called. "It's Saturday."

"Is it?" He stopped, giving us a blank stare, then looked around as if confused. "Is that why I'm home working on the windows?"

"Oh Daddy," she giggled. "We were thinking of going shopping."

"You were? With what? Your good looks?" He gave us that blank look again. But I could see the humor in his eyes.

"We were hoping for money," I said softly.

"Oh. You think I'm the Bank of Scotland or something?"

"Daddy!" Serena looked shocked. "We just wanted to get some things. You know, like underwear?"

I don't know who blushed deeper, Matt O'Neal or myself. He pulled out his wallet and handed us our due. Then he astonished us by handing us another pair of twenties. "If you were boys, it wouldn't cost as much. How something that won't even cover a dollar bill can cost so much, I have no idea. If you were boys, I could tell you to go commando. But the boys at school would get the wrong idea."

I chuckled, though Serena looked a little confused. He gave me an appraising look. "You tell her what it

means out of my delicate hearing. Now shove off, you two."

We hurried upstairs to get changed. "What did he mean?" Serena asked me when she came in wearing a sundress with a shirt below it. I explained the term and she giggled with me as we ran down the stairs and out of the house.

"I think I need a new bras" she said. I resisted the impulse to look at her, but she caught my arm, turned me toward her and cupped the objects of my desire. "Don't you think I've gotten bigger?"

Oh God, I prayed. Please don't do this to me! "I hadn't noticed," I demurred.

She looked down, flipping them up in alternate hands as if they were two of three juggling balls. "One of the boys in the hall yesterday said he thought I might be a C cup already."

Think of sports statistics. American presidents. Being immersed in a mountain lake full of ice water. Don't think of a pair of maybe C-cup breasts right in front of your eyes, attached to the girl of your dreams. "Possibly."

We reached the department store and went upstairs to foundation garments. One of these days I'm going to find out why they call them that.

We went through the racks and Serena kept asking me how I thought this one would look, or that one. Since all of the bras I had seen up close were in the last three weeks, worn by either her or myself, I wasn't sure I should have an opinion.

She stopped, pulling out her cell phone when it rang. She listened, then walked away from me. Intrigued, I followed.

“No, that’s not right, Yasmine,” she said. “She is acting pretty weird. I’ve noticed it too. I don’t know. Maybe she’s not a girl.”

Not a girl... Oh God, she’d found out. I was toast!

I stood there, stunned as she closed the phone, and turned. “Oh sorry, Amanda. That was Yasmine.”

“Oh.” Yasmine was a friendly girl with long black hair, and the tendency to hug anything around her; though because of her strict upbringing, she hugged girls at school rather than guys. But remember, I was one of the ‘girls’ and therefore available as a snuggle bunny. I had been subject to her assault a number of times. She was just so bubbly that if she didn’t have something to hug, you could almost see her hugging herself. She believed in full body hugs, and I pity the guy that finally gains her affections. She would give him that kind of leg-behind-the knees kiss in public that is stock in really bad romance movies. If anyone might have felt something, uplifting as it were, she was the one.

Any good mood I had before vanished. Maybe that was what Yasmine had been talking about to her. ‘Are you sure it’s really Amanda? You know she acts like a guy a lot. Punching out Yablonski in the gym and all’.

Serena had been trying to keep a conversation going, but I was too deep in my own worries to notice. We walked silently in the cloud of my doom, which now had spread to her. She stopped at a street corner waiting for the light to change, and her eyes ran down my body stopping on my legs.

“Wait a minute.” She reached out, and before I could back up, her hand came to rest on my thigh.

I panicked. I wanted to run screaming. A very personal part of me wanted to pop out and say 'hi'. She ran her hand along my thigh, then stood back up. "I thought so."

Oh I am not only toast, I am burned toast!

"Mom put my jeans in your closet!"

"Huh?" Before I could think of something more intelligent to say, I felt something behind me, and turned. Two older boys were standing there, looking us over. The blond was looking at me, while his dark-haired friend was scoping out Serena.

"Twins." The blond said. "That is so... different."

"Hey girls, how about we buy you lunch?" the brunette said.

"Yeah, our car is right over there." The blond motioned toward a late model Lexus. Yeah guys, when in doubt, show them you have cash, right?

"Not interested," I gritted out.

"Aw come on." The brunette caught Serena's wrist, and I saw her wince. "We're not going to hurt you girls."

I was cocked, locked, and ready to kill someone. If Serena thought I was a guy, the next few moments were going to prove it to her. "Guys, I think we need to talk." I reached across, my thumb digging into the hand of the guy that had grabbed Serena. He gasped and let go. "No touchee until after our talk." I turned the same bright smile on Serena. "Sis, could you stand there for just a moment? I need to discuss something with our friends here." I caught each of them by the arm and smiled brightly. "Lead on!"

I saw her standing there, looking confused as I led them into the alley. I stopped them, and stepped back. "Guys, when it comes to picking up girls, your style leaves much to be desired. So Momma Amanda is going to teach you a crash course in what not to do."

I punched Blondie in the stomach. "Fancy cars don't mean squat." I spun, kicking Brownie in the crotch. "Look but don't touch until the girl lets you." Both were on their knees, holding different parts of their body, staring at me in shock. "Last but not least, no means no!" I stepped back. "Here endeth the lesson. Class dismissed. If you follow us, you had better bring some friends. If either one of you ever touches my sister again, you'll wish I had killed you today." I turned to stalk away. Then my heart stopped. Serena was standing at the end of the alley looking at me.

Oh god, she only suspected before and I've just proved it. She knows I'm a guy and all she needs to do now is shout it from the rooftops. Better yet, call CNN and let them broadcast it!

I stopped in front of her, then almost fell backwards as she hugged me tightly. "You scared me!" she wailed. "I knew they would try something. I thought you might need help, and you took a chance on getting hurt to save me!" She wasn't being very coherent as she cried against my shoulder.

I looked back at the guys. "Didn't you see what happened?"

"All I saw was them on the ground and you standing like an avenging angel over them. Then I heard you say 'If either one of you ever touches my sister again, you'll wish I had killed you today'." She hugged me again. "I never thought I meant that much to you still!" She looked up at me. "I thought you loved me before.

But since you've come back, you have been so attentive and caring and honest with me, I didn't know how to handle it! I thought you'd try to keep me at arm's length. But you have been there for me every second, and I have never felt so loved."

She kissed me delicately on the cheek. "If only you were a boy. I'd already be in love with you."

If I were a boy? I made the signal for time out. "Whoa, wait a minute! What was that you and Yasmine were talking about so privately? That I might be..."

"You?" She laughed. "No! She got a guinea pig last month and we all thought it was a girl. But it's been acting weird, and I looked it up online. The two sexes are very different in their personalities if you know what to look for, and I told her that maybe it was a boy, not a girl."

She laughed so hard at the look on my face. I had to join in.

Miscommunication

As the season progressed, I settled in. It isn't hard really. No, not *that*, you pervert, I mean getting used to the idea of which bathroom to use, to check every morning to make sure you don't have a beard, to concentrate on getting dressed in gym and not ogle the eye candy, there or in the shower. A clean mind is a happy mind. Speak politely and not punch people in the arms like a guy; giggle don't laugh like a demented horse, those kinds of thing. Some of that was really hard. Ice cold showers and saying something to make the coach have me run penalty laps helped a lot.

Doctor Zim had put me on a mild hormone regimen the first week; by mid-October he'd decided that it had balanced out my natural hormone production. We had to check every week because if I produced too much testosterone, I'd start growing a beard and if I took too much estrogen, I wouldn't need the top half of the body suit, if you catch my drift. Thanks to this I had fine facial hair that was barely noticeable, just like a girl. He also assured me that when we finally found Amanda, all I needed was a week of shots of testosterone and I'd be back to normal in no time.

That didn't stop the mood swings and lack of erections, though. That worried me but I still had dreams of Serena in my arms when I returned to normal and I was fully functional in them so I didn't worry yet.

The detective had come up empty on the Left coast. I had mentioned the High School for the Performing Arts again and he blindsided me with, "Which one?"

"Huh? I thought there was only the one they mentioned in Fame."

"Guess again, ma'am. One of my men is a whiz with a computer, and he made just a short list for me. Lehigh Valley Charter High School, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania; HSPVA in Houston; L.A. County School of the Performing Arts; CAPA in Philadelphia; Tara in Boulder Colorado; Tuacahn in Ivins Utah; LaGuardia—that's the one you remember from the movie, in New York. The list goes on, three single-spaced typed pages and that isn't all of them. My guy got over ten million hits when he put in the term 'high school for the performing arts'.

I had not thought it would be that hard.

He went on. He'd even checked the porno houses, hoping to find her in a film there, and had guys canvas the dirty bookstores in hopes that they might see her face on a DVD box.

He suggested having someone drive a direct route from L.A. to Virginia Beach, hitting every town on the way for Jane Doe corpses, and I authorized it. In the first month, I'd spent over ten thou on this search and still no results. This would make the bill for October closer to twenty k. But the money didn't matter to me. I would find her if I had to go down the streets of every town between here and L.A., screaming her name until they kicked me out of town!

I hadn't lost hope yet though finding out how many performing arts schools there were shook me to the core. If I reached this time next year without finding her, then I'd be worried.

I was coming to school with Serena early in October when I saw one of the teachers looking at me oddly. I looked back at him. It was Mr. Kaufman, one of the regular substitute teachers. I had heard Mr. Landau was taking a sabbatical, and Kaufman was probably teaching Literature in his place.

It turned out I was right. We were deep in American Lit that semester, and he was expounding on Mark Twain. "Twain is probably the most modern thinker of his time, but like all such people, he misled his readers into thinking the wrong thing."

He faced us, glaring; "Twain was a man who wrote of God; 'A god who could make good children as easily as bad, yet preferred to make bad ones; who could have made every one of them happy, yet never made a single happy one; who made them prize their bitter life, yet stingily cut it short; who gave his angels eternal

happiness unearned, yet required his other children to earn it; who gave his angels painless lives, yet cursed his other children with biting miseries and maladies of mind and body; who mouths justice and invented hell—mouths mercy and invented hell—mouths Golden Rules, and forgiveness multiplied by seventy times seven, and invented hell; who mouths morals to other people and has none himself; who frowns upon crimes, yet commits them all; who created man without invitation, then tries to shuffle the responsibility for man's acts upon man, instead of honorably placing it where it belongs, upon himself; and finally, with altogether divine obtuseness, invites this poor, abused slave to worship him! what kind of man is this to venerate in American Literature?"

I raised my hand slowly. "Yes... Amanda?"

"Sir, I believe Mr. Twain was trying to point out the common fallacy not of God, but how man views him."

"Oh really." He hitched up a pants leg, sitting on his desk. "How so?"

"People lay so much of the blame for what happens in their lives on God rather than on themselves. When you have a flood, it's 'God's will'. The fact that you built your house on a flood plain or below a dam is His fault. How is it God's fault that a company dammed the river above Johnstown, Pennsylvania? People still build houses on the edge of Vesuvius today, even with the evidence of Pompeii before them.

"When a child dies, people say 'God loved him so much he had to call him home,' never thinking about their own negligence or an accident that no one could have foreseen, or drug use, or not taking care of them properly. They act like God is a collector for the Audu-

bon Society. They refuse to accept that you have seen a species defined as extinct unless you bring in a body!"

He cocked his head, arms crossed. What a shrink would call closing out, ending any desire to listen. "Really. Care to expand on that?"

Suddenly I realized why my anger was building. He reminded me of my father in his 'I am so much smarter than you' moods. "Sir, he said 'gives the angels eternal life' but when you think about it, everyone seems to believe that all you do when you go to Heaven is sing hymns, and wait for the music to start again. Like the hymn Amazing Grace, 'When we've been here ten thousand years- there's no less days to sing his praise than when we first begun'. The angels might have an eternal life, but don't you think they would be bored in such a heaven, even with eternal patience?"

"I can't see a God of Creation, the Master Architect as he has been called, a being that has shown that making things different and unique down to the differences in the wing patterns of a butterfly or the unique shape of a snowflake is capable of making such a static and incredibly boring place. He is constantly creating and wants that from us, his last children as well.

"Every time man has done something new and unique in science, it has not been God that tried to slow it down, it has been reactionary men. Is stem cell research a good thing? I don't know. I think of those with diseases it could mitigate and look at the Church condemning it, but if it works, it is because God made it possible. If he does not want to have us do anything, he doesn't have to point a finger..." I pointed, making my voice deep and booming voice "Hey! I told you no!" The class giggled a bit at that. "Why waste His energy

when all He has to do is make the first attempt fail. And the second and every one after that until we give up? A lot of the more hidebound scientists claim that is what happened with cold fusion. They did it that first time but 'God' didn't want man to have such power, so he made sure it wouldn't work again."

"So the church is wrong." he said flatly. I heard a hiss of breath from someone.

"Sir, the Church condemned Galileo for heresy when he claimed Jupiter had four moons. They wanted to burn him at the stake when he said he saw a ring around Saturn. They condemned people for heresy in the 11th century for saying witches had powers, and less than a century later, they condemned those who said witches had no powers.

"They created the inquisition and tortured hundreds of thousands for 'denying' the true faith. They fought a war that lasted for over 30 years against the Protestants because one small group didn't agree wholly with their teachings! They accepted slavery, even going so far as to say that the black man were sons of Ham, who had been condemned after the flood to be slaves of the other races until their last days.

"They stood by mute as the Nazis slaughtered 12 million people whose only crime was their religion, society, or political stance. Even outside the church, it is no better. It was the American Supreme Court who stated in the Dredd Scott decision that a black man had no rights to violate."

"Oh really."

"Sir, The Church in its own histories had admitted its mistakes of the past. A century from now, they

might make the same admission about stem cell research.

“God gives us a life, and it might be short, but we learn from it. The time we have must be long enough to learn and prove our worth, whether it is the premature child who dies in the incubator, or ‘Old Parr’ of England who died at 145. I think we have to learn to be responsible, to own up to our mistakes, to make the world a better place for those that follow us and prove to his satisfaction that we have done so.

“A lot of people don’t learn it, but how is that God’s fault? He gave us a gift more precious than the angels could have dreamed when he made us as he did. He gave us the choice to do what’s right or wrong and leaves us alone to sink or swim without bullying. The angels didn’t get that choice. They have no more free will than the lowest slave. There is a movie named Dogma. Bartelby the angel in that movie said it best. ‘We were the first, but God loved you best’. That is what free will means.

“If anything, mankind is the true sons of God and he expects to see us grow, mature, become, as Shakespeare said in Hamlet, like a god. And on that day those of us that are there will receive an attaboy worthy of the term. It would be a waste of all the time and thought God has spent on us if he were any other way.

“The idea, as Twain said, that we are his slaves is foolish. If we do not grow beyond our limits, we are nothing but a dog that doesn’t understand why his master is upset. An earthworm would be showing more intelligence.”

I suddenly noticed that every eye was on me, some shocked at my challenge of the Church’s ban on stem

cell research, but a lot of them were merely surprised that I knew the subject so well.

"I see." He smiled gently. "Three-page essay on the book the Mysterious Stranger due on Friday." The class groaned at that. "You can all thank our little philosopher for that assignment."

The bell rang, and we started for our next class. "Where did you learn that?" Serena asked.

Dodge and weave! "I read Mark Twain ages ago!"

"I've never seen you with any of his books before," she said. "You always told me he was too smarmy."

Oh great, something else I do that Amanda doesn't! "I wanted to keep him to myself." I gave her a doe-eyed brainless expression, clutching my books to my chest as if they were my lover. "Oh, I so love him! More than you ever loved Peter! When I grow up, I'm going to marry him!" I finished with a faked swoon.

"Oh stop," She blushed, nudging me with her shoulder.

We had Kaufman for the rest of the week. Every time he got onto another author, he would set me off. Honestly, Henry David Thoreau didn't hate governments, he just saw no reason for them to make We The People pay for some politician's bad habits. Hawthorne merely didn't see a reason to treat the Indians as second-class citizens, and Poe was a drug addict like Coleridge, who wrote the unfinished poem 'Kubla Khan' in the midst of a truly memorable high.

I had never realized before how deeply I had delved into my father's library. I still remember the musty smell of the original edition of Uncle Tom's Cabin I had read as a boy.

On Friday we were told that Mr. Landau would be back on Monday. I was sent a memo from the school office to meet Mr. Kaufman that day after school. I had convinced Matt and Marion to let me go to the gym to practice boxing, so I changed into my sweats and headed to the teacher's lounge.

"Ah, my favorite student," he said when I arrived. "Out of uniform so early?"

"I go to the gym to practice boxing," I told him. He looked at me askance.

"That isn't feminine," he commented.

"I hit another student my first day here. The coach told me if I wanted to hit people, I should at least learn how to do it right." I shrugged. "When I want to think, I find that hitting the heavy bag is a great way to let my mind work."

He nodded then took out my copy of the report he had asked for on *The Mysterious Stranger* by Mark Twain (Though just to be difficult I had put down the author as Samuel Langhorne Clemmons, his real name.) It was marked A+, 'Excellent explanations'. I looked up from it, and he was watching me with an appraising eye. "What were your plans after high school?"

It surprised me. "I don't know, sir." Hell, I wasn't sure what I would do at the end of the year if I hadn't found Amanda by then.

"Well, I think you would be an excellent teacher with the proper training."

"A teacher?" Part of me heard my father. He put teachers right up there with plumbers; necessary evils but you never let them in through the front door. Another part was astonished. Here I was supposedly a

sophomore in high school, and he was suggesting a complete career eight years of school away!

At the same time, I realized that my father had tried to form me into a duplicate of him. I had no life he didn't expect to control. Once I had gotten my own face back, I wanted to be as far as I could be from what he wanted. I had enjoyed every one of those arguments with Mr. Kaufman.

He must have taken my silence for disapproval. "No I'm serious. Your grasp of literature, especially American literature, tells me that you would be able to teach it. There you were, not even a third of your life behind you, but you made a reasoned, thought-provoking argument to a man twice your age. I can picture you where I stood; taking the satisfaction that someone you were teaching wasn't just saying 'Yassa boss. Sho 'nuff dat's the troof.' He made me giggle with his Stepin Fetchit accent.

He paced, looking at me as he passed on every circuit. "Do you know how hard it is to find an inquiring mind? The Church of his day tried to get Twain declared a heretic for his 'blatant attack on god'. The State of Mississippi just over ten years ago had the schools clear Uncle Tom's Cabin from every public and school library shelf on the grounds that slavery never happened and it was all a racist attack by the blacks?"

"Of course I know that," I said. "But the Church let it slide because he wasn't a Catholic, and Mississippi finally backed down in 2000."

"There!" He gave me such a satisfied look that I blushed. "Besides, I watched you for the last week. Haven't you noticed how people were asking you questions about your report?"

There had been a lot of questions, bull sessions, and some out and out begging for help from fellow classmates this last week. Everyone had wanted my opinion or suggestions on what to read or how to write a report. Sam Durden, one of the jocks, had offered to take me to dinner and a romantic evening afterward! Serena had commented that if I was going to be a tutor, I should charge for it. But I had never considered that I was doing just that.

“Thank you, sir.”

“You don’t realize how important a mind like yours is to a teacher. You wouldn’t turn in a report on King Arthur Vs the Knights Who Say Ni, or why Jiminy Cricket was so important to Pinocchio.

“I have friends at Villanova, Notre Dame, and Boston University.” He looked at me, staring deep into my eyes. “All three have excellent American Lit departments, and they’d be willing to help with funding.”

I didn’t tell him that funding wasn’t my problem. “Thank you, sir.”

He stood up, and took my hand. “One word of advice though.” He squeezed my hand gently. “There are two varieties of girls that get crushes on their male teachers. There are the flighty ones who will treat every word from his mouth like gospel, then there are the ones that try to prove they are as good as the man they flirt with. Don’t let your emotional attachments get between you and learning.”

“What?” I had spent every minute in class going at it hammer and tongs with him and this idiot thought I was flirting?

“First, I am too old for you.” He held up a hand as if he expected me to protest. “Second, it is unseemly for a

man my age to take advantage of a brilliant young girl in that manner." He grinned, and the grin did make him look kind of cute. "But I will admit, I was flattered." He lifted my hand and kissed it.

"Now go on to your gym. Maybe the next time you see me, you'll be over this tomboy stage and I can visit your family." He picked up his bag, nodded to me again, and left.

Every time I think I have a handle on my present situation, something like this happens.

To Be Myself For A Single Night

The school was talking about having a Halloween party. Serena had a costume but was keeping it a secret. I had one planned too.

I had been living in her house for almost six weeks by then. Every day I saw the woman I loved most in the world. She would hug me, play with my hair, and sit curled up against me.

But it wasn't *me* she was doing this with. It was the person she thought was her sister. I was there, but I was not.

You think that sentence is confusing, think about it from my point of view.

But Halloween is special. You wear a costume, you become something or someone else. I had been struck by a horrible little idea.

What if I took off my costume and became myself again?

For the week before Halloween I obsessed over it. Who would know? For that matter, who would believe

the truth even if they saw it? It wasn't like I had my own face back again. I would be just her older sister dressed like a boy. And no one would believe the truth.

Zim was able to have his special effects makeup friend make me a wig that matched how my hair had looked before the accident. He even offered to make me a full-face mask from my photo, but I refused it. I wanted to be able to back off, to apologize, say it was a bad joke if Serena freaked. With a wig that was easy, but a full lifelike mask would have been impossible to explain.

I left school to go to the gym, telling Serena I would meet her at the party that would be held at the school. Instead I went to Zim's clinic. I had slipped him a few thousand dollars despite his protests, and he was able to advertise and get more patients. He was starting to really make money, enough that he was able to hire two nurses and more orderlies. They waved me through. I visited at least once a week for him to check my hormone levels, and the way he'd greeted me that first time told his employees I was a special patient.

He waved me into his office, and brought out a wig box. "Ready?"

"As I'll ever be, Doc."

He opened the box, and lifted out the mannequin head. It looked like my old hairstyle; the color was spot on, the hair nice and thick.

"I spoke with Janice, the woman that runs the salon down the street. She's expecting you."

"Thanks. Tell your friend he's a lifesaver."

"May be good news for him before he goes."

"Goes? Where?"

“Visa expired. Work kind of slow in New York. Not enough money to relocate to Las Vegas or Hollywood.”

“How much does he need?”

“He can get money. The problem is with immigration.”

“Tell him I’ll loan him what he need to relocate.” I motioned toward his phone and called the local law firm. They referred me to one in New York that specialized in immigration problems. I told them to sic the other firm on the case, and also to wire the money before close of business. I took the box with half of me in it, and ran down to the salon.

Janice, who had helped me before in my rendition of Executive Secretary, was a huge fat black woman my father would have called a mulatto. I called her Janice, and she called everyone ‘Sugar’. I told her my plan, and she clucked at hiding my hair. She got out a handful of bobby pins and began laying my hair flat.

“Pretty girl like you hiding it! Least you ain’t cutting it! The Bible says hair is a woman’s crowning glory. Why you putting that thing on?” She jerked a nod at the wig as if it were an unwanted house-guest.

“Halloween, Janice. I’m going as my sister’s boyfriend.”

“And why ain’t he here to do it for her?” She was the kind of woman the Jews would call a Yenta, the overenthusiastic aunt who just can’t stand seeing you unmarried.

“Because he’s dead,” I said softly.

“Me and my big mouth. I start interfering, you tell me next time!” She pulled my hair savagely, pinning the last of it down. I smiled a bit at that. Asking Janice

not to poke her nose in was like convincing a lion to become a vegetarian with a reasoned argument. But she meant well. Finally she was able to slide the wig on.



“How do I look?” I asked.

“Well Sugar, you still have that makeup on. Let me take care of that.” She pulled out creams and whisked away the eye shadow and lip gloss I wore. After this much time, I had learned how to do my own make up in self-defense because Serena would giggle and make me up if I forgot. It was funny that first week after I joined the family when she insisted I do her face as she did mine. I went to school sweet, sedate, looking like a young Madonna of the New Testament; she came looking like the other Madonna.

Lucile, Janice’s manicurist, came over, cleaned away the light red nail polish, and redid my nails with a clear varnish instead. Then Janice turned me around.

I looked like a boy dressed in his sister’s clothes. Long thin face, girlish figure, with the prosthesis still on.

“I don’t look that much different.”

“It’s the clothes, Sugar. Makes you look like a boy pretending to be a girl. Why don’t you change and take another look?”

I went to the lady’s room and changed. I had chosen a boy’s uniform from St. Bartholomew’s, and I removed the prosthesis and packed it in the bag before I got dressed. It was a little odd to feel cloth directly against my chest again, slacks instead of tight pants, and the shirt with the buttons on the now-wrong side. The shoes felt like clodhoppers. I felt strange. It was like I really was a girl and this was just a costume.

I stepped back out, and Janice guided me to a three-way mirror in the corner. I now looked like Serena’s twin brother.

"I think it will work," Janice said. "But you listen to me, Sugar. Don't leave those wrappings too long. Blood circulates back in afterward, you going to have some very tender puppies there." I was confused, but she touched my chest carefully. She thought I had bound down my breasts! "And when you walk, forget about wiggling it like you do when you walk normally. You a boy now, not looking for them. Get that?"

I had never considered it, but the movement of a girl's rear when she walks is mostly nature, and every one does it. Guys just don't spend a lot of time examining it in other guys. I assayed a walk. I thought of Yablonski, and tried to walk like that oversized gorilla. "No girl, I said less, not more!" She looked confused when the comment made me laugh. I was able to pass inspection after a few minutes.

"Best I can do with what you got, Sugar. Oh." She opened a bottom drawer and came out with a pair of socks and a safety pin, stuffing one inside the other as if I was going to wear them both on the same foot. "Go back in there, pin the top at the waist, and let 'em hang. Give you what a girl don't have." I obediently did as I was told. There was now a very obvious bulge. God, is that what every girl assumes?

She grabbed my shoulders, looked me up and down. "Now don't you get fresh with that girl, now that you have the equipment!" I blushed and she laughed. "You have fun at that party. Tell me all about it next time you come in, you hear me?"

"I hope it works." I hugged her, then attached a name tag to the blazer. It read 'Peter Stankowski'.

I caught a cab back to the school. The gates were open, orange jack-o-lantern shades had been attached

over a string of lights, and there was music coming from the gym.

I walked up to the door. Mr. Laughlin, the creative writing teacher, saw me and did a double take.

“Amanda?”

“Yes, sir. Is Serena here?”

“Yes. She said she was going to wait over by the buffet for you.”

“Thank you, sir.”

He leaned forward, looking at the tag. “That’s a name I haven’t seen in a long time. He was in my class.”

I knew that. “He was?”

“He didn’t have much of an imagination. Never seemed to grasp the idea of fantasy.”

“Oh, from what I heard he had a very active imagination,” I replied.

I went in. Every possible costume was in that room. My favorite was someone wearing a Little League baseball cap over a sheet he’d run over with a car so that a tire track ran across the chest. Josh was dressed in a costume that looked like it came from the original Star Trek television show, and his eyes widened at me.

“Wow. You look... like a hunk!” he said.

“Why thank you, Mr. Spock. Just what every girl wants to hear. Have you seen Serena?”

“Not yet. Want to dance?”

“I promised Serena the first dance,” I told him. I could see the buffet table but a girl in a full wedding dress was between it and me. I walked around him, and as I did, the girl turned around. My heart stopped.

Serena stood there in a dress I recognized from the picture album as the one her mother had been married in. It was satin and lace, floor-length, with the bridal veil pulled down in front. She saw me coming, and her eyes widened in surprise. Then she saw the name tag and looked at me with pain in her eyes.

I caught her hand. "My sister, my love. You never had a chance to speak with Peter, to dance with him, to spend the evening with him." I lifted the hand and kissed it gently. "Please, pretend for an evening that this is the Halloween ball he missed. Let me stand in for him." I pleaded with my eyes. "Dance with me."

She stared at me as the music segued into a slow song I had heard on an oldies station. Chris De Burgh singing 'Lady In Red'. I pulled gently.

She followed me to the dance floor, and I held her in my arms as we danced.

*I've never seen you looking so lovely as you did tonight
I've never seen you shine so bright
I've never seen so many men ask you if you wanted to
dance
They're looking for a little romance, given half a chance
I have never seen that dress you're wearing
Or the highlights in your hair that match your eyes. I
have been blind
The lady in red is dancing with me cheek to cheek
There's nobody here, it's just you and me, It's where I
wanna be
But I hardly know this beauty by my side
I'll never forget the way you look tonight.'*

Looked me in the eyes as we moved. I knew what De Burgh was trying to say. There was no one there but us. It was a timeless moment of love. I saw tears start to flow in her eyes, and I held her face to my chest as she cried. But the dance went on.

*I've never seen you looking so gorgeous as you did to-
night
I've never seen you shine so bright, you were amazing
I've never seen so many people want to be there by your
side
And when you turned to me and smiled, it took my breath
away
I have never had such a feeling
Such a feeling of complete and utter love, as I do tonight
The lady in red is dancing with me cheek to cheek
There's nobody here, it's just you and me, It's where I
wanna be
But I hardly know this beauty by my side
I'll never forget, the way you look tonight'*

She looked back up, and for the moment, I knew she had accepted the fantasy. I was the man she loved, and we were having that first romantic dance we didn't have. *If only she knew...*

*'But I hardly know this beauty by my side
I never will forget, the way you look tonight
Never will forget, the way you look tonight
The lady in red
The lady in red
The lady in red
My lady in red (I love you.)'*

As De Burgh whispered that last line, I echoed it aloud. We stopped moving. I was staring into the eyes of the woman I loved and I didn't know what to do. They should issue manuals to boys on what to do when this happens! 'You are holding the girl after the dance. The music has stopped and the next song hasn't started yet. It is good time for that first romantic kiss but you are unsure how she will react. So you...'

Yeah, they don't sell those manuals. I leaned forward as if to kiss her. She can pull back, she can tell me 'it's all right to pretend but sis, this is as far as it goes.'

Our lips touched. Her eyes widened, then I was kissing her gently on the lips. Her eyes closed, she gave a small whimper. Her body was pressing into me, and I felt her hug me tighter. As a 'romantic' kiss it wasn't even close to the 'shove yourself halfway through your partner' type the movies show all the time.

"No dancing so close!" we leaped apart, staring at Nemesis. It was Miss Harrigan, a woman ten years older than God, music teacher and the arbiter of morals for the school. "How dare you dance so close, young man!"

Serena laughed. Harrigan glared at her. "I want your name!" she demanded of me.

Serena answered around the giggles, "Miss Harrigan, this is my sister Amanda."

She glared at me then leaned closer. "You're Amanda O'Neal?"

"Yes, Miss Harrigan."

She looked me up and down. "You walk almost like a boy, Miss O'Neal. And from the back I was so sure." Then she shrugged. "Try not to dance too close together, all right? We can't have the real boys complaining."

She stormed away and we laughed. I considered that I had been asked to dance, and probably so had Serena. "If there's someone else you'd rather dance with--"

“No.” She kissed me on the cheek. “I will dance with my love. And since he is not here, and you were sweet enough to stand in, I will dance with no other.”

The music segued again. ‘Lady’ by Styx

We danced until the ball ended at ten. Boys tried to cut in but we ignored them. We didn’t want our evening to end. I chose which songs we danced to because I loathed the frenetic jerking of modern dances. If it was a slow song where I could hold her close, I would lead her out. There were times during that night when she cried, when I cried. For the first time since this deception began, I could pretend; pretend that the accident had never happened, that we were having that dance; that we were falling in love like we should have if fate had not dealt us such a wicked hand.

they called last dance, they played another oldie. ‘Lady’ by the Little River Band. I, extending my hand to her. She looked up at with me with so much love in her eyes that I wanted to blurt out the truth. Tell her who I was, what I had done. Not that I had already spent as much as her father had made in the last year to find her sister, not that I would spend all of that plus much more to have them back together again. But that I was the man she still mourned.

Then the moment passed as she held me. I could feel her shudder against me as she cried.

As the second verse began, I realized it might have been written for me alone:

*‘Look around, come to me
I have no answers, but know where I wanna be
I look around, play a part
I was born in the winter and cooled by a warm heart’*

My life before we met had been winter. My father could be nicknamed Jack Frost for all of the emotion he showed. This girl had remade me just by existing, and her warmth had thawed me. As I looked into her eyes, I realized that even when I went back to being Peter Stankowski, I would be forever changed by her gentle presence. That standoffish boy was dead; the new Peter Stankowski was stronger for his absence.

The music ended, the lights came up. I wanted to keep dancing, to never have the night end. I could see the same thing in her eyes. We moved reluctantly apart. We stood there staring at each other. I don't know what she saw in my face, but in hers I saw a wordless yearning. "We had better get home," I finally said

"Yes."

I extended my arm in an old-fashioned courtly gesture, and she took it. I picked up the gym bag from my locker. Then arm in arm, we headed for the bus stop.

We walked in silence. We boarded the bus and went to the back. She looked at the dress, hands plucking at it as if not sure where it had come from.

"Serena..."

At the same instant she said, "Amanda..."

We looked at each other. "You first," she said.

"No. You first."

She stared at the dress for so long I thought she would remain silent. "Mom thought this was just a costume tonight," she whispered. "That I had let Peter go. But you understood, even if you didn't tell me." She looked up with unshed tears in her eyes. "I dreamed of

wearing this dress, swearing my love to him and him alone.

“When he died... When he was taken from me... I wanted to follow him into oblivion. I wanted to die right there. Only the thought of you kept me from ending my own life and being damned for all eternity.”

Serena...”

“Please, let me finish.” She looked away, then held my hand so tightly my fingers hurt. “I couldn’t do to you what you had done to me. I know that sounds harsh and mean, but I knew that wherever you were, you would know I was alive, and part of you would want to come home some day. I didn’t want you to find an empty house... to become what I have without you both in my life... an empty soul. To be devastated as I had been.”

What should Amanda say? “I was stupid,” I whispered. “Knowing you were alive kept me sane. When it became too much for me, I had to come home. I couldn’t stay away, I couldn’t have died without telling you I loved you.” She hugged me, and we cried against each other’s shoulder.

We reached our stop and she stopped me, a wicked gleam in her eyes when we could see the house. “The porch light is still on,” she said.

“That means they’re still up waiting for us.”

“I know that, silly.” She leaned to me, and whispered in my ear. I think I had the same look of evil delight on my face as we walked up to the door and rang the bell. Matt opened it, a bowl of candy in his hands, and we caroled, “Trick or treat!”

More pictures just had to be taken. We did one with me sitting like the Lord of the Manor, Serena’s hand on

my shoulder as she stood behind me. Then we reversed. Then one of me on one knee, holding an open jewelry box, Serena's eyes on it and so happy. Marion then went upstairs. She came down, carrying a garment bag. "Put this on, Amanda."

I went into the downstairs bathroom. It was an old tuxedo, faded with time. I touched it gently. It was the one Matt had been married in. I put the prosthesis back on and put on the tux. It was like an eight-year-old girl playing dress up in her mother's formal gown. I stepped out, and they all laughed at the look. Matt had a 20-inch collar, and was seven inches taller than I was, so the pants dragged.

Marion tucked and pinned until it only looked slightly ridiculous instead of absurd. "All right, final picture. I want you to stand there, looking into each other's eyes, because it's your wedding day."

I turned to Serena, she to me. Wordlessly, I put my arm around her waist, she put hers around my neck. In heels, she was two inches taller than I was; she leaned forward, lips less than an inch from mine, then her eyes closed, and I could feel that trembling again. A tear started down her cheek and I instinctively reached up to brush it away, palm against her cheek, my thumb up. "Hold it! Perfect!" The camera flashed.

I looked at them later. I know they say the camera doesn't lie, but that last picture doesn't tell the truth. It shows two young newlyweds, lost in each other's eyes. The man has put his arm around her waist possessively, instinctively marking his territory. She has put her arms around his neck, also instinctively, giving herself utterly to this man. He has raised his hand to his love's face, cupping and guiding it. He doesn't care

who sees it, he will taste her lips again, right here, right now.

When we had taken that last picture, Matt began to cry. He knew how much Serena had loved that now dead boy. That she had tied her entire emotional life to someone gone forever. Marion had tears in her eyes as well. They probably thought this was as close as Serena would ever let herself get to a real wedding.

“You both look so radiant,” Marion husked, then she turned, wiping her eyes. “I can almost picture you as man and wife.”

Serena and I looked at each other uncomfortably. I ran from the room and when I came back, I was the devoted daughter again. It had been a magical night, but Cinderella- no, I remembered the 50's movie with Jerry Lewis- ‘Cinderfella’ had to return to real life.

I kept copies of all of them for the wall I had started. Not an ‘I love me’ wall but an ‘I love and want to remember every second with these people wall, because Serena was not the only O’Neal displayed.

As I stared at the copy I had tacked on the wall, I realized they were right. It showed a truth that went beyond the joking little scene we had been playing out for the enjoyment of all concerned. Maybe it showed the real truth of my emotions, and the longing of Serena. It hurt even more when I thought about it then. That all of our love was there, but couldn’t be expressed openly.

Everyone had to joke with us the next day at school. The guys were asking me to join the boys’ teams, and

several girls came over, pretending to flutter fans as if they were belles from the War Between the States. 'Oh suh, how rude of you not to dance with me!' Then they would slap me with the fan, and flounce away.

The teachers even got into it. When I went to P.E., the girls' gym teacher looked at me, and shouted 'Young man! How dare you dress out with the girls! Leave or I'll report you!' When we were walking down the hall to a class, Miss Harrigan stopped me. "I'll not have such disgusting behavior in my school again, young man. Is that clear?" Then she winked at me and walked on.

Another Sister?

It was such a pleasant dream. I had finally found Amanda, coached her on what I had done, promised her all of the money left in my bank account if she would just come home and be with her sister. She had done it, and I had gone on. My face had been returned. I had convinced my father of who I was, and had returned to my family's fold.

I'd come back, swept Serena off her feet, we'd had a whirlwind courtship, and now we were living in our home. I rolled over, touching that beloved face as she slept, then threw my arm over her.

Something wasn't right. Mankind has instincts that kept us from being Saber-tooth tiger chow in past millennia, and they were screaming at me!

My eyes snapped open. There was a face right there close enough to kiss. But it wasn't Serena. I didn't recognize this woman.

Her eyes opened, the same hazel shading to green looked at me for a moment as if they didn't recognize me. Then she smiled lazily, and pecked me on the cheek. "Sorry I had to share your bed. Dad has to convert my room back." Then she rolled over, back to me, and was asleep again.

Convert?

I knew Serena and Amanda had an older sister Caitlin. She had gone on to college and that was the last I knew of her. So this was Caitlin.

I slid out of the bed so I wouldn't disturb her, got dressed and headed downstairs. Everyone else was up already and Serena leaped into my arms. "Both my sisters are back!" she enthused.

"When did Caitlin get here?" I asked.

"Last night, late," Marion said. She slid a stack of pancakes out of the oven where they were being kept warm. "I'm sorry we put her in your bed, but if we had put her in with Serena, they would have been up all night. You sleep like a log."

I grumbled a bit, but what could I say? It was true.

They were talking about her as I ate silently, taking in all the information I could. Caitlin had been at Boston University for the past five years and had returned to Virginia Beach to go to work. It would have helped if I knew what she intended to do. From the side commentary, I knew that Caitlin and Amanda had been close because Caitlin was always getting Amanda out of trouble. That meant she would probably assume that role again. She would be watching me like a hawk, and she might notice the differences.

I had finished my pancakes, and was trying to wheedle a cup of coffee out of Matt when Caitlin came down. She was dressed casually, but stylishly.

I was able to get more by listening to her tell them of her college years. She had been studying to become a research chemist and had graduated with a Bachelor's degree in organic chemical engineering. But at the moment jobs were tight in the field, and she'd spent an additional year getting her teaching credentials. There had been a brief stint at a public school in Boston, but then she had suddenly quit that job and moved back here.

She was vague about why she had quit. Both Matt and Marion wanted to know more. They could join the club. After telling Serena lies about anything and everything for the last few months, I could recognize a fast shuffle with the best of them.

"It's good that you're back, Amanda." Caitlin looked at me sidelong. "I knew you were a little impetuous, but I never expected that you'd run away."

"I was stupid, Caitlin." I looked her in the eye. "I'll try to make up for it."

She looked at me again, this time speculatively. Oh god, I thought, she suspects. Maybe not that I'm a guy but that I'm not really Amanda.

We looked at each other, two poker champs appraising the opposition.

"I hope I didn't snore," I said.

"Oh heavens, no!" She chuckled. "But you must have been having a very interesting dream."

"Oh?"

"I went to bed around midnight," she said. "You were on your stomach and I had some trouble finding enough room in that bed with you. But right after I settled in, you curled up against me like a cat, and I swear you purred when you did!"

I blushed. I know what the dream was. It was lying beside Serena, my arm across her, my hands... I blushed even deeper.

"If you had been a man, I would have worried!" she said lightly. I suddenly noticed that Serena and her parents were looking at us like vultures watching a staggering mule. "'Like sleeping with an amorous octopus. You were very... affectionate."

"Probably thinking of some boy I might like." I shrugged.

"Oh really." She leaned forward, her cheek against mine, and whispered. "Then why did you whisper Serena's name?"

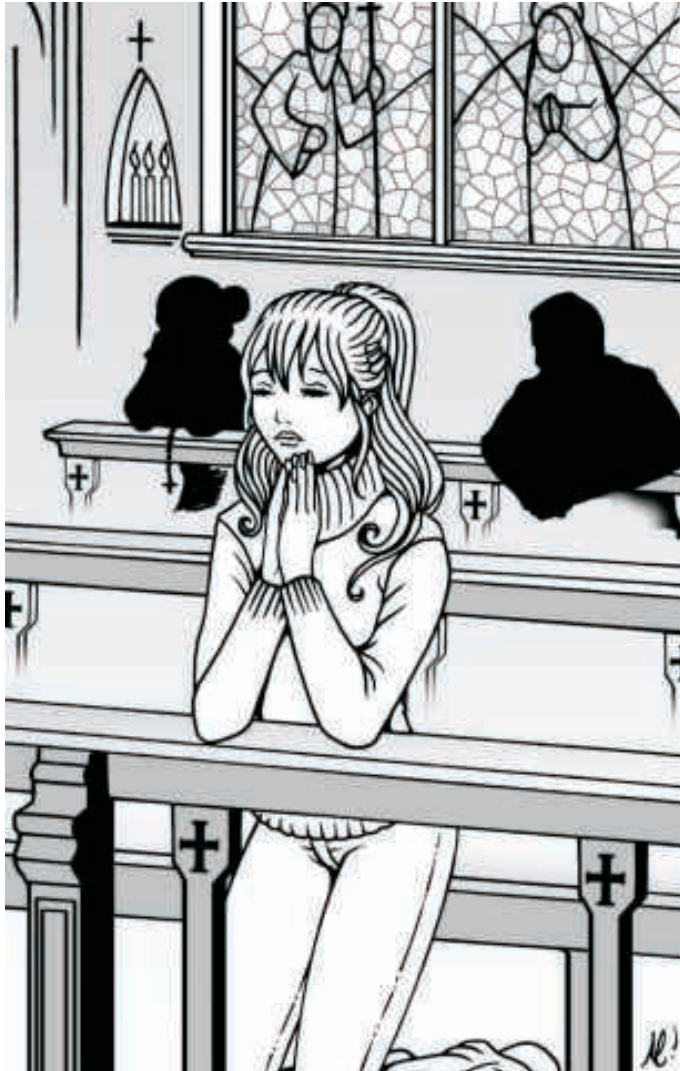
I didn't move. I was caught between what I wanted and the act I was portraying in my little melodrama of a life. She leaned back from me, and the look was feral. I flushed and looked away. Why did Serena give me a hurt look when I did?

First round to her on points. But the fight wasn't over yet.

When we got our allowances, Caitlin took us in hand and we did the town. We went to a winter carnival and wandered the stalls, looking at handcrafts, eating whatever caught our fancy. I bought a little fairy on a chain for Serena, and she put it on immediately. A few moments later, she gave me a pendant with two intertwined hearts and our names etched on it that I immediately put on.

I tried to keep up my normal routine with Serena but always there on the periphery was the silent regard of my new nemesis.

Sunday we went to Mass and as I had every week since I joined the O'Neal household, I lit three candles to the saints I was asking for help. Every week I would



get to an ATM and take out a couple of hundred, which I stuffed in the poor box. Some of you might think this was 'greasing the skids' but I was asking God and the Saints for help, and I couldn't ask for help in good conscience unless I was willing to help someone not named O'Neal.

My father had always had Ebenezer Scrooge's attitude about the poor but living among people he'd have defined as too stupid to get real jobs, I had a new appreciation for their hardships. Some of my classmates were poor and their families were paying extra by keeping them in a parochial school because the only way to break free from being trapped on the lower end of the social ladder is not to whine but to climb. Every bit of extra education gave you an extra rung to grasp, and the fierce 'no bell curve' competition in a strict school taught you how to fight your way out of the pit. When you got out of college after that, you were ready to wrestle the grizzly bears of adult life, and woe betide the guy who tried to stop you because of something as inconsequential as your race or sex!

I turned from the votives and noticed that Caitlin was in a deep conversation with Father Monahan. They kept glancing at me, and my heart chilled even deeper. I hadn't been willing to go to confession during the last few months, and he had refused me Holy Communion because of it. It wasn't that I didn't have sins piling up like cord wood; it was because if I didn't make a clean breast of it, *all* of it, I would never have my chance of absolution. If I was lucky, I'd only end up in Purgatory, but at the rate I was going, I fully expected to end up in Hell. My Hell would be looking at Serena sitting in heaven, wishing I could be there with her as she sat in misery, wondering where I was.

I was almost happy to go back to school on Monday. I would be out of the house, away from Caitlin's constant scrutiny. I could try to be happy.

We went to our second class, which was chemistry. Mr. O'Malley looked across the classroom, and waited for us to settle down. "I will be leaving the school today," he said. "My family has had a crisis and I must relocate to California."

We murmured at that. O'Malley was well liked. He mixed humor and chemistry, sometimes freaking us out by pretending to get ready to blow us all up. We learned because we could tell he enjoyed teaching us as much as we liked learning from him. He motioned for silence. "I could not in good conscience just leave the school and you in the lurch. I waited until they could find an excellent replacement for me." As he said this, I could hear someone walking down the hall outside. The door opened.

Caitlin walked in.

O'Malley waved toward her. "This is a graduate of our establishment, and of Boston University as well. May I introduce Caitlin O'Neal?"

Gone was the soft woman I had seen at the house. This was Caitlin O'Neal, teacher, and I knew without thinking about it that we'd get no slack from her just because we shared her name.

Mr. O'Malley left, and Caitlin made a note on the attendance records. "I haven't had a chance to go over your work yet, so we'll spend today going over things you should have learned. Who can tell me what DNA is?"

Casey Solomon raised his hand. "It's the primary building block of all life on Earth."

She made a note. "And what does DNA determine, Serena?"

"It determines everything about a human being. Hair color, eye color, skin, everything."

"And why is DNA used in criminal investigations... Amanda?"

My heart was in my throat. "Because no two people's DNA is alike. A sample of DNA is supposed to be accurate to within 4 trillion people."

She looked up at me, appraisingly. "And why is that considered more accurate than fingerprints, Amanda?"

She had it in for me; I knew it. "Because while the odds say there are three of four people in the world right now with the same fingerprints as mine, there is no one with the exact same DNA pattern."

"Ah but you're wrong!" She looked around the class. "Can anyone tell her why she is wrong when only one in four trillion should match her DNA?"

There was a resounding silence then I saw a hand come up tentatively beside me. It was Serena.

"Yes, Serena?"

"Identical twins have DNA that is exactly the same?"

"Correct." Caitlin questioned everyone there, and I wasn't the only student who got something wrong, but why had she asked me those questions?

Because she suspected me.

That day was hell for me. Everyone wanted the inside scoop on my sister the teacher, and I couldn't tell them. Everyone thought I was just hiding the truth, so they'd ask Serena instead. I was glad I spent so much time around her because I learned more about Caitlin.

Caitlin had the kind of clean-cut beauty you get from a good beginning, healthy food, and exercise. She was 23, looked eighteen, and had every boy in the school fantasizing about her.

But she had a sharp tongue. When some boys stopped to watch her walk by right after the end of school that first day, she spun on a heel, hands on her hips, glaring at them.

"All right, look all you want, you little cretins!" she snarled. They flinched at her tone. "If all you can think about is that, I'll turn your names over to the coaches. I know the football team could have used some help this year, but did I see you out there?" She pointed at a guy who was more muscles than brains. Then she spun, poking one older boy in his expanding gut. "Girls might like brains, bucko, but they also like some muscles on a guy. I saw you at lunch. It's a good thing you brown bag it because an Ethiopian family could have lived for a week on what you stuffed down!"

She glared at them and they wilted like cut flowers left sitting on an August day. "You want to impress me, be more than just someone with raging hormones! You!" She pointed at a third boy who tried to disappear but hadn't gotten the knack down yet. "I've talked with the other teachers here. You could be the valedictorian if you'd stop bringing magazines to read instead

of your textbooks. Your chemistry work isn't good enough to get you more than a D. I think Mr. O'Malley must have liked you, because I would have failed you."

She stood, spearing them one by one with that minatory gaze. She was a brand new lion tamer and with one snap of her whip, she had them jumping through hoops. "I am sure you all have something you should be doing right now. Am I right?"

I stood there with Serena, and watched the boys slink away. One of them noticed me. "I can tell she's your sister, Amanda. She's got your tongue."

Caitlin noticed us and smiled. "Girls, I have some stuff to pick up. If you'd like a ride, I'll give you a lift home."

Tuesday dawned and we got a ride to school with her.

If anything, that public diatribe actually made the boys at school like her more. But now they were trying to impress her by being good students. I still didn't know enough about her to talk beyond inconsequential small talk. The advantage of being a student is that you can claim to have schoolwork to do.

I was getting ready to go to the gym, pulling my bag out of the locker, when suddenly a pair of firm breasts hit my back at the same time a pair of hands covered my eyes. "Guess who," a voice whispered.

I knew it wasn't Serena. She was already in a student council meeting. None of the other girls had played this game with me, and it definitely wasn't a guy. "Miss O'Neal?"

She let me go. "It's after school, Amanda. You don't have to call me that when we're alone."

"I just thought that at school I should treat you like a teacher rather than a sister," I dissembled. "That way, any good grades I get from you are seen as honest work rather than favoritism."

"Yes, I wanted to talk with you about your grades... among other things." She motioned. "Come with me."

She led me into her classroom. "Your grades this last semester or so have been... interesting."

"Oh?"

"Yes." She leaned against the desk, motioning for me to sit on one of the stools. "Before you ran away, you were a lot like Serena. You could pass any class you wanted, but you rarely did because you wouldn't apply yourself."

"Well, I had things on my mind."

"I know. Acting always entranced you. You wanted to be a star! You thought that by becoming an actress you could sidestep the entire education issue." She looked down thoughtfully, then transferred the gaze back to my face. "Since you have come back, you have applied yourself diligently, but it's almost like you're a different person."

My heart was hammering. She surely must hear it. "What do you mean?"

"You learn, but you're more methodical than you used to be. Before, you could soak it up as if it were water to a plant, just like Serena can. The only difference between you two was you didn't want to drink. Now I see you buried in the books all the time. Serena

can finish her homework in a third of the time you take, yet your grades have improved remarkably compared to just two years ago."

She sighed, wiping her face. "What I wanted was a sister-to-sister talk, and I sound like a teacher!" She chuckled. "But I am one now, aren't I?" She became serious. "I spoke with Father Monahan last Sunday and he is worried about you. Mother and father are as well. You haven't been to confession since you returned, and all of them say you're distant."

"Well, it was a hard two years."

"I understand that." She cut me off. "But you won't tell any of us what happened. You have two years that are empty pages in our lives. We know it must have been rough. We're lucky that you're still alive. But we can't get past the fact that those two years are a mystery you won't talk about."

"I don't remember much of them."

She sighed. "Are you still a virgin?"

"Sis!" I blushed furiously. "I'll have you know I am still exactly like God made me. Nothing has been changed." *Sure*, a little part of me whispered. *You were born with a latex torso instead of skin, right? You were born with this face?*

She sighed again. The put-upon sigh that adults always use with children who for some reason will not comply. "We don't mean to pry." She grinned sadly, "No, actually we *do* mean to pry. But it's not because we are morbidly curious. It's because something made you run away, and until we know what caused you to do it, we aren't sure it won't happen again.

“Serena worries about it all the time. That one day she will turn around, and you will have vanished again, and this time it might be for good.”

She had wanted to be a star. What I worried about was that she was starring in porno movies. Or maybe even a snuff film. That she had trusted one driver too many when hitchhiking and was now buried in a ditch. The attempt to run down a trail from here to Hollywood had turned up empty. Oh, there were girls missing in the states between Virginia and California, but all of the ones that matched the basic description didn't have this face or Serena's DNA. Don't even ask what I went through to get that sample. But what would Amanda say if she sat where I did now with two years of disappearance to her credit?

I looked down. “I missed Serena. I didn't mean to hurt her, but I realized that I had. I felt that by coming home, I could at least try to make it up to her.”

She looked at me for a long time. “So you will tell me nothing of what happened.”

“It isn't that. I just don't remember a lot of it.”

She gave me that 'I don't believe a word of it' look. “All right. But you should at least go to confession.”

“But...” I looked at her. “God remembers every sin. If I died next Monday after confessing every sin I remembered, wouldn't I still be condemned for the ones I forgot?”

She chuckled. “I heard about your discussion with Mr. Kaufman. Think of your rebuttal of his characterization of Twain. Do you think God would condemn you for all eternity because you lost your memory and forgot something?”

I looked away. “I didn't want to take the chance.”

“Enough of that. Tell Father Monahan the truth, then go to confession. Get yourself right with God, and all else will fall into place.” She hugged me, then stepped back, her light mood returned. “So what are you getting for my birthday in two days?”

Oh crap. I hadn’t known it was her birthday! “I don’t know yet, but I’ll have something for you. I was thinking of a music CD, but I didn’t know if your taste in music had changed...”

“Oh I still love the classics. Berlioz is my favorite right now.”

“So on the nineteenth I’ll have my party hat on, and something by Berlioz in hand.” Went from loving sister to suspicious woman again. *All right? I wanted to wail, what did I do this time?*

I found out by looking in the family Bible. I had slipped a look when I first moved in, because I should remember everyone’s birthday, right? My own was July 25th, and therefore incidental. Serena and Amanda’s was December 2nd, Matt’s was July 6th, and Marion’s was May 15th.

Caitlin’s was November 22nd.

Not two days away. Was *five* away. I was so toast.

She spent the next few days watching me like a hawk. I would go down to get a cup of tea and she would hold out the sugar and cream, almost daring me to choose wrong. She would ask me little questions, as if daring me to answer so she could cry, “Wrong! The real Amanda would want the grape jelly, not the marmalade!”

I was being worn to a frazzle by the constant attention, and I couldn't just run away again. Serena would be devastated. But if I stayed and the truth came out...

Between Scylla and Charybdis. Ruin my life, ruin Serena's, or ruin both. Which could I choose?

By Friday I was almost ready to confess. Admit what I had done, let them rip me to shreds, tie me to the stone and send the vulture to rip out my liver. I left very early around sunrise. If they asked, I'd just say I was in the mood for a walk. But I had to think of a way to either get by this or I really would have to confess.

I found myself near the school and decided to go on in and wait in the cafeteria. It was cold and I could use a cup of tea right about then. Not to drink, but to swim in so I could warm up.

"Hey, kid." I looked up from my misery. There were a half-dozen older boys, seniors or maybe junior college guys. They were scattered as if at random, but it looked to me like they had placed themselves to watch the front gate.

"Yes?"

"Do you go to school there?" The spokesman asked, waving toward the school.

"Yes, I do."

"Did you just get a new teacher? A Miss O'Neal?"

"Yes, Miss O'Neal started just last week."

"Great," one of the guys said. "Finally."

I felt alarmed. Why would a bunch of guys who didn't go to this school be looking for Caitlin? "Is there something I can help you with? Tell her you called maybe?"

“No!” the spokesman almost shouted. Then he toned down, made a dismissive gesture. “No. We’ll talk with her when she comes in.”

The alarms were blasting now. These guys were up to no good. Something must have shown on my face because the spokesman smiled at me as if it would calm me down. “You look cold, kid. Can we buy you a coffee or something?”

“I think not,” I said calmly. “Excuse me, I am meeting someone.”

“Yeah sure.” One of the guys stood up and moved in behind me to block my escape. “I think you are just a little afraid of us.”

“Why? Should I be?” I asked. My hand dipped into the bag and I felt what I needed.

“Nah, we aren’t dangerous. You might find us to be... really friendly.”

“That may be the case. However I do not have time right now to make new friends. So if you’d step aside please?”

The guy behind caught my arm and I dropped the bag. I had been getting my practice glove on. It wasn’t on right, but it was enough padding to protect my hand as I spun and planted a right cross in the guy’s stomach. He started to go down. I thought to hell with the Marquis of Queensbury as I kicked him in the teeth. I bent, grabbed the other glove, and snugged them down as I spun to face the others.

I snarled at the shocked man in front of me. “Remember the Incredible Hulk TV show? You don’t want to make me angry. You wouldn’t like me when I’m angry!” I took a boxing stance. “Out of my way, scumbag, or you’ll be eating dinner through a straw!”

He took in my stance and backed away. I grabbed my bag and stormed past them into the school.

All right, I fumed, what was that about? Who were these guys and why did they want to find Caitlin?

As the students trickled in, I heard more. I hadn't been the only one asked about Caitlin or the only one alarmed by it. By now they knew everything about her schedule, family, and car. When Caitlin arrived, I avoided her. She was still giving me that look, and I didn't want to have her start questioning me at school.

She got a cup of tea in the cafeteria, and was leaving with it when Mr. Johansson the Principal walked in. "Miss O'Neal?"

"Yes?"

"There were reports that some older boys were looking for you this morning."

Her face clamped down into a bland mask so tight I winced in sympathy. "Older boys?"

"Yes. They were asking students about you. I called the police because some of the students thought they might be a danger, but they didn't find anything." Caitlin looked silently at him for a long moment. "Do you have any idea why they might be looking for you?"

"No idea at all, sir. If you will excuse me?"

As I said, lie enough, and you get good at spotting them. She knew them from somewhere.

The day went by slowly. Between whatever was going on with Caitlin and my own worries, it seemed to never end. I went to my locker and got out my gym bag. I had just closed it when Caitlin came up.

“Amanda! Have you seen Serena?”

I looked at her. “No, Caitlin. She should be in the student council meeting.”

“I looked there already. They asked her to run to the store to get some notebooks, and she hasn’t come back yet.”

I looked at her and could see the worry. I suddenly pictured Serena being asked and replying, ‘*Yes, she’s my sister.*’ “This might have something to do with those guys who were looking for you, right?”

“I don’t know.”

“Spare me,” I snapped. “I took an early morning walk and they not only asked about you, but they got pushy when I got suspicious of them.”

“Oh God.” She whispered.

I caught her by the shoulder. “Damn it, Caitlin, spill it!”

“I taught a semester in the Boston public school system,” She said. “I found out that a group of boys were dealing drugs and I turned them in. Their fathers were rich, and they got off with expulsion rather than jail. But I started receiving death threats.” She looked at me. “I don’t know how they found out where I went, but I think it might be them.”

“And if they know your name, they might know you have a younger sister going here, right?” She nodded numbly.

“Come on.” I spun on my heel. “We have to go home, warn dad and mom, then wait for them to come out of the woodwork.”

She followed me and we froze on the steps of the school. Someone was leaning over her car, sticking something under the windshield wiper. I handed her the bag and took off like a coursing hound. The guy started to turn. It was the bullyboy with the broken teeth from that morning, and he started to run. I tackled him and rolled over, ending up with me on top, his hair in my hands. I slammed his head down on the pavement.

He struggled but Caitlin was there a moment later. She stepped on his hand and I heard bones snap. Then she kicked the knife he had drawn up by his head. She had saved my life! She held a badly written note where I could read it:

‘IF YOU WANT HER BACK IN ONE PIECE, YOU COME ALONE WHEN WE CALL’.

I saw red. I turned back to him, pulling his head up as I leaned forward so that I was less than an inch from his face and I screamed at him. “Where’s Serena? If you’ve hurt her, you’ll wish you were never born! Talk!”

“We couldn’t hang here waiting for O’Neal!” he gasped. “We grabbed her to bring her out of hiding!”

“Why, damn you?”

“Our parents cut us off and wouldn’t pay! She ruined our chances at college!” he screamed back at me.

“Who gives a damn if a bunch of losers get drugs? We needed the tuition money!”

“Where is she?” I wanted to pound his head through the tarmac, but all I’d get out of that was the satisfaction and blood on my hands. I reached over, grabbed the knife, and was waving the blade in his face. “Tell me or I’ll make sure you never have kids!”

“Amanda...”

“Shut up!” I screamed at Caitlin. Looking back at my victim. “Talk!”

He bit his lip and for a moment I knew he was going to try to tough it out. I smiled, then leaned back, blade behind me as I started to look. He paled. “An old store about two blocks away-”

“Address!”

He rattled it off. The school security guard had come running when he heard me screaming, and he took the guy into custody. But the instant he arrived, I was running. I heard Caitlin calling me, but all I could see was Serena tied up, being beaten, being raped... reached the address, and one of them was outside. I had dropped the knife somewhere but I didn’t care. Serena was in there, in danger.

I was charging at him and as he turned, I screamed a wordless battle cry of rage and lowered my head as I picked up speed. I hit him with my shoulder and my fury carried both of us through the soaped-up window. I heard the glass shatter, felt it falling around me, but if it cut me, I wouldn’t know until later. I was in *berserkerang*; that battle fury everyone thinks is only Nordic but other peoples have histories of it too, including the Celts and Poles.

I didn't feel anything but my fury. *They. Would. Not. Hurt. Serena!*

I leaped up and met the first with a left hook that Tyson would have applauded. The second was backing away; trying to calm me down but nothing short of a tactical nuclear warhead was going to stop me. I kicked him in the crotch, caught his head as he went down, and slammed his face into my knee as it came up, breaking his nose. The other two started to move forward, and I squared off.

"You may know the stance but that doesn't mean..." the spokesman from this morning started to say, but I moved into him, blocked his roundhouse punch and gave him a four-punch combination; three hard jabs to the stomach followed by an uppercut that laid him on his back.

The last guy had a knife. I was going to charge him anyway when I heard, "Freeze!"

A cop was standing at the broken window, his gun out. "Drop it!"

The thug looked at him, and I saw a cold light in the cop's eyes. "Put it down or I will kill you."

He opened his hand and the knife fell to the ground. I snatched it up and the thug screamed in terror, backing up until he fell over some debris.

"Ease down, girl!" the cop snapped.

"I may need this to free my sister," I snapped at him. I could hear muffled screaming coming from a closet and I almost ripped the door down. They had torn her blazer up to tie her and her blouse had been ripped open. They had used duct tape to gag and blindfold her. I growled, wanting to give that guy his

knife back as a suppository. Only her nose was uncovered.

The cop saw it and gave a growl of his own as he turned to the thug. "On your knees!"

I touched her arm and she stiffened, then began flailing in an attempt to flee. "It's Amanda," I whispered. She stiffened again, then relaxed. "I have to cut this damn tape off in a moment. I'll be careful but lie still." I turned around, glaring at the thug. "Give me your coat," I snapped.

"I'm not..."

I must have teleported because the next thing I saw was his face an inch from mine, my hand squeezing his neck as if I would rip it out barehanded. My spittle splashed in his eyes. "Give me your coat or I'll take it off your dead body!"

The cop stripped it off him and I took it. I gently cut the tape over her mouth by prying the adhesive up with my fingers an inch at a time, gently sliding the blade under it and cutting out. It took some time, but I wasn't going to rush and cut her accidentally. Some of her hair caught in it and it tore out as I lifted it. I soothed her with my voice as I worked. They had stuffed her panties in her mouth and I pulled them free. I swore by God that if they had raped her, I would geld all of them with this very knife. I took a deep shuddering breath to calm down. Then I started on the other loop of tape.

She finally saw me and tears of shame and relief welled in her eyes. "Just a minute, love, let me cut this last bit free," I said as I cut the bound strips from her arms and legs. The instant they were free, she flung

herself into my arms. I dropped the knife hastily to keep from impaling her.

I hugged her but I kept one arm free long enough to wrap the coat around her. "You're all right, Serena. I'm here."

"I was so... so scared!" she wailed.

"You should have known I wouldn't let anything happen to you," I whispered. "No one hurts the girl I love so much." I was crying against her neck as I held her, intending to never let go. I sobbed. "No one will hurt you as long as I live. No one!"

A hand touched my arm, and I looked up. Caitlin was kneeling beside us. Looking at me with wordless love. She hugged us both, then took us home.

From that moment, she didn't think to question if I was or was not Amanda. She must have assumed that anyone willing to fight and die for her sister couldn't be all bad.

When her birthday came, I was ready. I had heard part of Berlioz before. In a movie called *Sleeping With the Enemy*. So I got her his *Symphonie Fantastique*.

End Part One

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