



Reluctant Press presents:

The Mirror of My Love 2



Nick Lorange

A 'HER TV' E-BOOK

Copyright © 2012, Reluctant Press

Mags, Inc/Reluctant Press TG Publishers

This story is a work of fiction. Any similarity to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental. All situations and events herein presented are fictional, and intended only for the enjoyment of the reader. Neither the author nor the publisher advocate engaging in or attempting to imitate any of the activities or behaviors portrayed.

Persons seeking gender reassignment surgery, hormone therapy or any other medical and/or body-altering process should seek the counsel of a qualified therapist who follows the Benjamin Standards of Care for Gender Identity Disorder.

Protect Professional Fiction on the Internet

We need *your* help! We spend several hundred dollars to edit, illustrate and typeset *each story*. It is important, therefore, that everyone works to help keep professional fiction alive on the Net.

The civil penalties for copyright infringement can be severe, including substantial monetary damages, injunctive relief, and liability for attorneys' fees incurred in prosecuting a case. In addition, criminal penalties may be imposed if someone willfully infringes a copyrighted work for commercial advantage or private financial gain.

Mostly, though, we just want to be able to keep offering this service to our authors and our readers.

Report stolen books by using the contact form at reluctantpress.com or call us at 800-359-2116

Thank you.

The Mirror of My Love Part 2

By Nick Lorance

Maybe we've found her!

It was just after that incident when I got a call on the cell phone I had bought. The O'Neal parents had bought me one of the prepaid minute types, but this one was a fancy anytime-minute job. I kept it hidden with the ringer set to pulsate because I couldn't explain to Serena's parents where I got the money to pay for it. Not that I was worried that someone who knew us would call me on it. The only ones with this number

were the lawyers, Doctor Zim, and the detective agency.

“We think we might have found her,” the detective in California told me.

“Where!”

“A town named Yellow Tavern. It’s...”

“I know where it is. Just north of Richmond.”

“One of my men has been surfing the Internet and found a mention of her name as an actress working at a supper club there. The site hasn’t been updated in over a year. It’s not much but it’s better than we’ve had so far.”

I worked it out. Richmond was about 80 miles away and Yellow Tavern about two more, almost along the route you would take to get from Virginia Beach to New York if you didn’t take the Bay Bridge. “I’ll go and check it Saturday. If I find anything, I’ll let you know.”

Yeah, like it would really be that simple. Dream on.

I told Matt and Marion that I had remembered leaving some things in a storage locker in Yellow Tavern. Could I please take a run up there to see what I had left? That went over like a girl my age asking if she could go to the Newport News Naval Base enlisted man’s club to ‘meet some cute guys’.

They shared a look. Matt came down with both feet before I could say another word. “We were planning a trip up there during winter vacation. You can wait until then.”

“But Dad...”

“No.”

“Please, just a day trip.”

“There will be no further discussion.”

I fumed. Damn it, if they knew why I wanted to go there... *Yeah, right. But if they knew why, they would also have to know who I was, or rather who I wasn't. I would be on the street with a restraining order that wouldn't let me near Serena again in this lifetime so fast I'd get whiplash.*

Damn it, Amanda might have run away, and I might even have an inkling of why. But I had to get to Yellow Tavern to pick up the trail! I kept remembering Tommy Lee Jones in *The Fugitive* pedantically going over how fast his quarry could run in the time since he escaped. How far had she run in two years? If she was there this very minute, how far could she run in the next six weeks?

Maybe I wouldn't have to go. I got on the phone to Doctor Zim. He called the supper club, but their phone number must have been changed.

All right, I'd do it the hard way. I knew I'd make the folks mad, but I had to go, permission or not.

I went to bed, but I set my mental alarm for 5 AM. The next day was Saturday; if I left then, I'd be gone for almost four hours before anyone else got up. Amtrak ran a commuter train twice a day with a transfer in Newport News. The first left at 7 AM. Plenty of time to get to the station on foot, though a cab would be faster. I had already packed my backpack with a change of clothes if I needed it.

I woke up in darkness and quietly dressed. I slid the cell phone into my pocket and left the house. It wasn't far to the nearest ATM and I stopped there to pick up some cash. I had just put it away when a noise made me spin around.

Serena stood there, looking woebegone. She had her own backpack with her.

"Serena..." I whispered.

"You were leaving me again," she said softly. "You were going to run away, leave without saying goodbye again. I don't know where you were planning to go. You were probably lying about Yellow Tavern."

"Serena..."

You are not just going to disappear again!" she screamed at me. Then she leaped into my arms, hugging me fiercely. "We go together or not at all!"

"Serena, I have to go!"

"Together," she snarled at me. "Or I pick up the phone, call the police, call home, call the church, then pray to God for a bolt of lightning to knock some sense into you! You. Are. Not. Leaving. Me. Alone. Again!"

I sighed. If she was with me and we found Amanda, I'd have one hell of a lot to explain, and it would ruin our lives in the process. But her will was cobalt/nickel steel. "All right. Come on."

We reached the station, picked up our tickets and got on the train with seconds to spare. As the train left the station, I thought of what to say. There had to be a reason I could give her, but I didn't have a storage locker in Yellow Tavern and I didn't know anyone there I could claim I was visiting.

I decided it was time to tell at least part of the truth. "Serena, there's a lot I haven't told you." I said. "The most important thing is... I'm not really Amanda."

I waited for her to say something. I looked up, fearful, expecting to see a ravaging beast looking back at me.

She was asleep. Damn it, I had finally gotten up the nerve to say it, and she fell asleep!

Then I softened. She must have heard the doctor and me talking yesterday. She had sat up all night, already dressed, and when I slipped out so quietly, followed me even more quietly. She was so terrified of losing her sister that she wouldn't have gotten any sleep at all.

I kissed her cheek and threw my arm around her, pulling her against me. She grumbled a little in her sleep, turning, then her arm fell across my chest and she sighed, settling into slumber.

By train it's a little less than four hours to Richmond's Staples Mill Road Station. I had awakened a very groggy Serena in Newport News and guided her to the track for the next train, then woke her up to get her on that train.

I know I could have left her on the first one, or at the station, but damn it, the instant we got on the first train together, I was responsible for her. I wasn't going to leave her to get raped murdered, or sold into white slavery! She was my sister, damn it!

No, she *wasn't* my sister. She was the woman I loved, and I wasn't going to leave her to be... You know what I was going to say. I was starting to have severe multiple personality issues as I'm sure you can tell.

We arrived in Richmond just before 11. Serena had gotten almost four hours of sleep; she was coherent,

but still tired. We caught a bus to Yellow Tavern, and arrived there right before noon.

“Well, where next?” she asked.

I had to find a way to ditch her for maybe two or three hours. I had to be able to search without having her following me. “First, we think about the fact that this might take until dark. If we miss the train, we’ll have to wait until morning for another one. So we find a room for the night just in case. Besides, I juggled my pack up and down. “I only packed one change of clothes, and you seem to have packed like you were going to march to Gettysburg with General Lee.

She chuckled. Her backpack weighed four times what mine did because she had packed everything she thought she might need on the road for a week or more.

We were walking to the phone when I saw a dress in the window of a small store. It was *so* perfect for her. She complained when I dragged her inside, but her eyes went soft when I showed her the dress. It was a light brown that matched her eyes, with a sweetheart waist, and two scarlet hearts with intertwining roses on the breast. She fell in love the minute she saw it. It cost sixty dollars; I told her I’d borrowed Doctor Zim’s ATM card and had already promised to pay him back by helping out at the clinic.

We found a small bed and breakfast, and I started to get two rooms, but from the look in her eyes, she was sure I would ditch her here. I sighed, and we ended up with a room with a single queen-sized bed.

“I’m going to take a quick shower,” she said. I nodded, sitting on the bed, watching the door to the bathroom, and fell into a deep depression. If I was lucky, I

would find Amanda, tell her what happened, and convince her to go home. Once she left, this deception could end. I couldn't say it hadn't been my dream come true in a way. How often do you get unreserved love from four people who really don't know you?

But if I was unlucky, Amanda would be gone, and the hunt would have to continue. So I'd go home, get grounded for all of eternity by very angry parents, and still have her with me.

Face it; if I was unluckier, Serena would see us together. Then I'd have to do a quick song and dance, run like hell, or tell her the truth, fall on my knees and beg for her forgiveness for deceiving her. If that was forgiven, only then could I tell her I loved her. Maybe after all of that, I could admit what I had spent and would continue spending until Amanda was home.

I was feeling grungy from the trip and when she opened the door, I started to say I was going to take a shower as well. But the words died in my throat. She stood there, hair tousled, wearing nothing but a robe the Inn supplied that hit her at mid-thigh, looking like a wet dream come true.

"Uh..." I motioned toward the bathroom. She stepped aside so I could run in. I set the shower for water so cold I might have been running in the snow like a Swede. Damn, she was *so* beautiful! Here I was, in the middle of some boy's idea of the perfect situation for romance, and I'm freezing my bejesus off in a cold shower!

I stepped out, shivering, and wiped down. Now, what could I suggest to keep her here while I went there? I finally came up with it. I'd tell her I needed a map, since I didn't remember how to get to the storage

locker from here. I'd suggest she wait for me to get back. There, all rikki-tik.

I stepped out and started to speak, but she was curled up on the bed. Four hours had helped, but she needed at least eight to feel human. Her body had decided to cash that check.

I picked her up, then slid her under the covers, careful not to look. God would give me points for my restraint, even as part of my mind was gibbering, *'Hey you really want to look so come on.'* I wrote a note: WENT TO GET THE STUFF; BACK IN ABOUT TWO HOURS. I PROMISE! I stuck it on the pillow beside her. Then I left.

I asked at the front desk, and finally caught a break. The Regimental Supper club was only a mile or so away, and I was able to get the address. I caught a city bus and rode there. I was nervous, and I'll admit, a little terrified. What if I met her? I could claim to be Serena, but the same things that would trip me up in the O'Neal house would bite me on the butt here.

How would I explain how I had found her? What would happen when she returned home and the real Serena looked blank when Amanda asked about it? A man could go nuts thinking about all of the possible permutations.

I got off the bus, and looked first at the street signs, then at the address. It was three blocks away...

Or rather, it had been. It looked like it had been abandoned since the War Between the States. The once fine Victorian mansion it had been in didn't have a

window left. The door was sagging, and a chain link fence surrounded the entire lot with nice big NO TRESPASSING signs. The sign hung by one strap, creaking in the wind.

I almost collapsed to my knees then. All my hopes of the past day or so had been dashed in one instant. But I felt my lips draw back in a feral snarl. Like hell!

went over the fence and looked inside. The upper floor had been converted into a series of neat apartments and a section overlooking what had been the ballroom with connections for fixtures. The lower part had been converted into a major kitchen, and an area that would seat about sixty diners before the stage. The decorations in the entry hall made it look like a late 19th Men's club with Confederate regalia now tattered and faded.

Professionally done photos of the type you get where you dress up in antique clothes at a studio covered the walls of the entry hall, and one of them caught my eye.

It was definitely Amanda. She was dressed in a formal gown right out of *Gone with the Wind*, bowing to a tall handsome older man, who held her hand. Both looked at each other with such love. The caption read: THE COLONEL'S CHILD BRIDE. The date was a little over nineteen months ago.

All my hope was not completely gone then; I knew where she had been. Maybe she still lived here in town somewhere! I stuffed the picture in my pocket.

I started talking to all the neighbors. The club had closed almost exactly a year ago when the son of the owner had been arrested for attempted murder. The court costs had driven the restaurant under; while they

had succeeded in keeping him from going to jail, they didn't bring in the money that they needed to keep it open. While everything else was going wrong, one young actress wasn't really worth remembering.

But everyone talked about Yancey Stokes! He was the son that had been accused. He had run with a local White supremacist gang for years; in fact he had been rumored to be their leader. Then he'd supposedly knifed a black man and they had arrested him. The family had gone into bankruptcy trying to keep him out of jail, and succeeded. I had a mental picture of this Yancey Stokes. Built like Yablonski without the mental capability to tie his own shoes without assistance. The kind of guy who would keep alive a century and a half of hate without even breaking a sweat.

This was going to take a little longer than I had anticipated.

I arrived at the Inn, and they stunned me when they told me Serena had come down an hour after I left, had gotten the same directions I did, and had come after me!

I had put our home number and Serena's cell number in my phone and I punched the speed dial frantically.

The phone rang and rang. I wanted to scream at it. My mind threw up terrible pictures. Her phone was lying on the street as two thugs ravaged her. It lay beside her still, dead hand as a thug went through her purse. It lay on a shelf at the bus system office because it had fallen out of her...

"Hello?"

"Serena?" I almost screamed it.

"Amanda! Where are you?"

I wanted to rip out my hair. She sounded so... normal! "Where am I? Where the hell are you? I got back to the Inn and they told me you left!"

"I met a friend of yours by the campus while I was waiting for the bus. I'm at his house having a cup of cocoa right now."

Great. Not dead or in trouble. She's enjoying a cup of cocoa while I'm having heart attacks! "Where. Are. You?" I gritted out

"Over here with the Stokes family. Yancey was just..."

"Yancey! Give me directions, now!"

I found out where the family lived and stormed over there. I was going to rescue my sister, ask the family what had happened. If I ran into this Yancey Stokes and he'd laid a hand on her, I'd kick him in the crotch so hard his grandchildren would wince!

They lived only a few blocks away and I could see they had fallen farther into poverty. The sign outside of the ramshackle apartment was renting at about half the going rate for the area. It looked like the kind of place whores use as a hotbed hotel, I thought sourly. No, I was being vindictive. It was more likely an apartment that rented to students.

I found the name on a mailbox. 9C. I stalked over, ringing the bell harshly. The door opened and before I could say anything, a huge woman wrapped her arms around me, crying. "Amanda, we were so worried about you!" she wailed.

What was it Yogi Berra said? 'Like Déjà vu all over again.' Hadn't I just gone through something like this in September? The woman had bright red hair, and an expression of such joy that I allowed her to drag me

into the apartment. I looked past her at Serena perched primly on the couch, cup in hand, smiling at me. "You remember Yancey." the woman said, motioning at the man beside her.

Remember the picture I had of this guy? Strong like ox, smart like tractor? Well, forget it. He was tall, thin, about nineteen with sandy blond hair, wire rimmed glasses, and looked like he should have been working in a library.

He walked over, his long slim hands gentle as he took mine. Then he raised my hands to his lips, and bestowed a kiss on each palm. "We wondered what happened to you. You left before the trial was over. Right after the supper club closed." He motioned to the couch. The woman who turned out to be his mother, Renee, hurried into the kitchen to return with another cup of cocoa.

"Your sister told me you returned home." He sounded almost sad. "You couldn't make it?"

"Uh, no," I said.

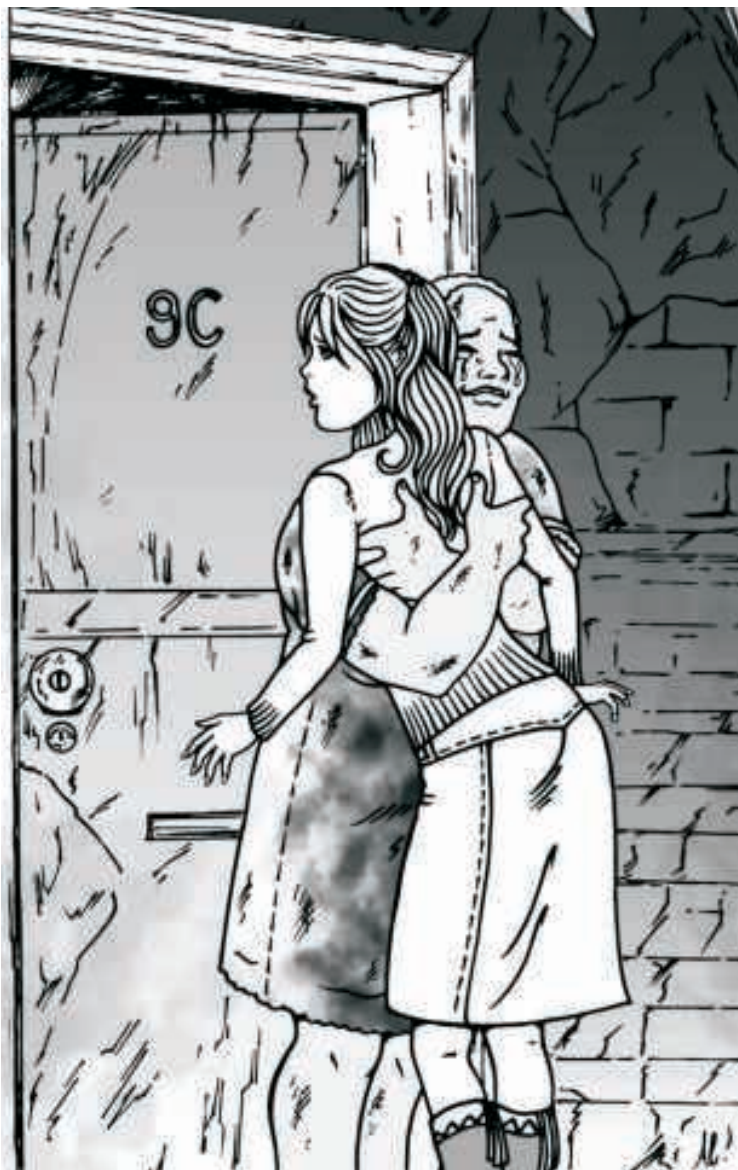
"I know New York is a rough city. But I remember the look in your eyes when you talked about it. You always used to sing that song by Frank Sinatra, *New York, New York*." He sang a bit of it in a passable baritone.

I sipped the cocoa. "What happened with the trial?"

"You remember that I was accused of knifing that guy, right?" I nodded. "It turned out that the information the police were using to accuse me came from the gang I used to run with before I met you." He shook his head. "To think I let them try to run my life! If you hadn't asked me to do the lighting for The Colonel's

Child Bride, I would have never guessed I could do it so well.”

“What was that?” Serena asked. I took the picture out, and handed it to her. She looked at it in wonder.



"Every minute she would be talking about her sister," Mrs. Stokes said. "She's younger than I am by a couple of minutes, but she got all the looks in the family, she would say. She didn't tell us where you were though."

"Why not?"

"She left because of that argument you had with her when you were both thirteen, and she wanted to prove herself before she came back. She said that if your father knew where she was, he'd come up here like Sherman marching to the sea again. If we tried to find them, she'd leave." She looked at me with sadness. "I couldn't bear the idea that she would run away again, perhaps this time end up dead or worse. So I stayed quiet and let her stay with us."

"Argument?" Serena said, puzzled. Then she looked at me in horror. "I was joking!"

"What?" I asked. I was being whipsawed like the last kid in a game of Crack The Whip.

"I remember their club now! Dad came to see his Uncle Fred before he died, and we stopped at the club for dinner. They did small theatrical productions of local scripts, and they were doing something, I can't remember what. We were watching and you said 'I could do better than that' when some girl left the stage.

"We were both tired and cranky, and I said, 'Not on your best day'.

"You looked at me, got that look in your eyes and said, 'I'll prove it to you, and one day you'll admit I was right'. Then you wouldn't even talk to me for the rest of the evening." She started to sob. "It wasn't Mom or Dad that drove you away, it was me!"

I fell to my knees hugging her. "I'm sorry. If I hadn't gotten mad, maybe I wouldn't have left. But that's the past. Let's forget it ever happened, please? I'm home now, and I'm not leaving again."

Mrs. Stokes suddenly sat bolt upright. "Wait a minute!" She scurried from the room and brought back a photo album. "We were in such a hurry to get everything of value out of the supper club when they foreclosed, and we found out that Amanda had left this. She had already left, and we didn't know where to find her, or where to send it."

She opened the album and held out a program. On the front was the same picture I had picked up. The title emblazoned in flowery script was: THE COLONEL'S CHILD BRIDE. I took it and looked at it. So she had really been here.

"It's inside," she said softly. I opened it, and a picture fell out. Serena snatched it up, staring at it with wide eyes, then leaped into my arms, hugging me. The picture fell on the floor again, and I could see Amanda and Serena dressed as little Victorian era bawdyhouse girls. They were smiling wide, both looking into the camera and definitely enjoying themselves.

"The picture," she whispered in my ear. "The one we took that night. That's why you came here. To start proving me wrong."

We spent the night at their house and I caught up on the first year of Amanda's Hegira. She had arrived footsore at the theater when they were auditioning for The Colonel's Child Bride. They had run through all of the local talent and were hoping to find someone in another city when she arrived and blew their doors off with her portrayal.

The plot was that it was right after the shelling of Fort Sumter; the Colonel, played by Yancey's late father, promised one of his dying men that he would marry the boy's sweetheart and love her as she deserved.

What he didn't know was the girl was only fourteen. With the start of the war, her father and brother had already joined up, and would have left her with a wicked aunt (Played by Mrs. Stokes). In an act of desperation, the forty-year-old man married the fourteen-year-old girl, ensconced her on his plantation, and left to go to war. It showed snippets of the girl growing older and more tired as her husband popped in to shower her with affection as the war ground on, ending when he came home in a casket.

They had discovered that Amanda was really fourteen by accident. Yancey had tried to follow her home one evening to give her parents crap about not feeding her right when he discovered she had spent the first weeks after she got the part sleeping in an abandoned building. They had tried to get her to go home or at least contact her parents. Only her adamant will had stopped them from letting the parents know where she was. By then, she was a star; people would line up if they knew she was on stage. They finally convinced her to move in to their home over the theater.

I got to see it all. Yancey had taken over the lighting and stage direction less than a week after the show opened. It had been so popular that it was slated to run for its second year when disaster struck. There were pictures taken of every scene including a poster run six weeks into the production when the local paper commented. The poster had Amanda, draped over his arm, hand on his chest, looking at him adoringly with the

headline: AMANDA O'NEAL IS SARAH FONTAINE
IN THE COLONEL'S CHILD BRIDE.

It was like seeing any such production from the eyes of one amateur photographer. All of the photos had been taken with a 35mm camera on a tripod from the loft where Yancey did the lighting. The pair were sitting primly apart as if they weren't sure if they should even be in the same room the day he told her of her lover's death. There was also the closeness of later years, where she flung herself into her husband's arms whenever he returned home; the poignant sadness when she nursed a slave woman and the photo that followed it as she cried when the girl died from cholera. Then I saw her standing beside the draped coffin, the proud young woman in widow's weeds holding the medal her husband had won in that last desperate battle at Appomattox station.

They even had a video of one show, shot from a tripod in the corner by a student from U.V. Richmond. The entire room, dining tables and all, was part of the stage, so in one scene when Sarah (Amanda's Character) was berating a hooligan that had decided to move into her home, she literally moved tables between them as he stalked her, trying to convince her that any man was enough if there was no man in her life. Then he threatened to take what she would not give.

The audience screamed, then applauded wildly when she hefted a .36 caliber Navy revolver that had been hidden under one of the centerpieces, fired a warning shot, and demanded that he leave. She staggered to the stage, collapsed into a chair, then, as the man ran at her, stood and calmly fired five times, causing his body to jerk with every shot. Then, with him

dead, she collapsed, howling in reaction. Man, that girl could act!

Then the black man, a local activist, had been stabbed. The local gang fingered Yancey, and it was only the brilliant work of his lawyer that had kept him from being railroaded into twenty years in jail. But it had cost them the club, the husband's health and eventually his life; another family had been struck down by fate.

But some good came out of it. Yancey stood in the courtroom after he had been exonerated, and asked to be sworn in. Then he made an emotional diatribe against the gang. He named names, times and places where he had been asked to act as an alibi. While he had never harmed or killed anyone, that evidence re-opened so many cases that the local police were able to clear a five-year backlog.

No one had expected it; he didn't even ask for immunity from prosecution. He had freely admitted when and where the members had talked about people that were later murdered or beaten. What he said in less than two hours was enough to start an investigation that was still ongoing. His statements in the courtroom had removed any reason for him to go before a grand jury.

Ten men had been arrested already; in four of the cases, the prosecutors were seeking death penalties. Yancy then asked the judge to charge him for his own crimes in connection with their actions. That trial took less than an hour, most of it reading a list of the charges because he pled guilty when the Judge agreed to allow it. He received ten years unsupervised probation. He went on to be a student at the University of Virginia Richmond, and paid his way by helping small

theaters in the area with their lighting and stage direction.

We got up the next morning to find Caitlin sitting at the table, glaring at both of us. I just stood there with my mouth hanging open. Was she a bloodhound in a past life?

"I called Dad yesterday," Serena admitted shame-faced. "When I couldn't find you, I got so scared that I couldn't think of anything else to do. But then I met Yancey, and he told me about the club. I called the folks back to tell them where I was, that I was safe. We knew you'd find me or call me, so I wasn't worried. But I... forgot to tell you.

"The only reason I wasn't here last night was because my water pump blew before I even got out of Virginia Beach!"

Caitlin took up the story at a roar. "Do you realize how worried your father is? That your mother is having hysterics? If you're lucky, you'll only be grounded until sometime in your twenties!"

She spun around, focusing on Serena. "It's bad enough that they spent two years worrying about Amanda, you had to run off too!" Then she spun and poked me in the chest. "And this isn't the first time for you! Were they just supposed to say 'Oh well, she's gone again? Any bets on how long this time?'" She glared at us, arms crossed, toe tapping impatiently as the silence lengthened. "Well? Do you have anything to say for yourselves?"

"I thought I remembered something, and I had to find out if it was true," I whispered. "It was driving me mad!"

"And I was safe because Amanda was with me!" Serena cried. "I wasn't going to lose her again!"

I waved a hand helplessly. "When she wouldn't go home, I couldn't have left even if I wanted to! If my last two years were so bad that I don't want to remember them, would I have dragged her along?"

Caitlin looked at the open album before her. Amanda in her courtly gown, fan waving as she hosted a ball for a group of Confederate army officers. "You did look stunning, kid."

"Stunning!" Yancey cried out. "Do you know she got two marriage proposals that night? No one believed she was only fourteen!"

"Oh she did?" Caitlin looked at me, then hugged me. "You know if you had waited a few hours, I would have been driving you here?"

"Huh?"

"Our parents talked with me after you went to bed. You had started building a head of steam when they said no and we all expected you to do another runner if we didn't help you this time." She shook me like a terrier holding onto a rat, but gently. "I was going to tell you at 7 but you'd already gone. After all, what is family for?" She hugged me again, then motioned. "Let's go."

I turned to Mrs. Stokes. "Thank you for your hospitality. Both then and now." I touched the photo album and tape longingly. She saw my hand, and laughed.

“Well go on, take them! That was the set Yancey made just for you.”

I mumbled a thank you as we left. I wrote down the address. When I got home, an anonymous patron would ‘discover’ their plight, and fifty thousand dollars would be delivered so that their dream would be returned.

Thanks should be given in the best way possible. They had helped Amanda and, by extension, Serena. I had to repay that kindness.

We returned home and I got the tongue-lashing I deserved, but the pictures and that video tape we brought gave them back a year of Amanda’s life. I felt that it was worth the screaming I endured. They looked at me now as if I’d had my dream in hand, but given it up to return home.

Whether they knew it or not, I had given up a dream, just not the one they thought.

I went to my room to begin my week of being grounded. Before I went to sleep, I slipped outside, made sure no one was nearby, and called the detective agency in L.A. I asked them for a reference to an agency in New York. Once I got it, I put it in the phone memory and called. It was almost eight in the evening, and I was dog tired, so I wasn’t really bothered by getting an answering machine. “I am calling after being referred by the Hoyt Agency in California. You can call them and verify. Reference case number 1440-775.

“I am looking for a missing girl named Amanda O’Neal. Hoyt has all the specification on the girl; height, weight, age DNA sample, et cetera. It is believed that she was in the New York area as of a year ago. She had expressed an interest in the High School

for the Performing Arts. Any necessary checks of the DNA of Jane Does in the area are authorized.

"If she is found, do not call the police or pick her up. Observe, protect, and notify me at this number immediately. I expect you to go to work immediately, and that someone will call me tomorrow morning with a quote of your rates and a bank account where the money can be wire transferred."

Now that I was done, I went to my bed.

The Christmas Gift

I didn't mean to listen, but I heard part of the conversation as I came downstairs one evening to get some warm milk.

"It's going to be... rough," I heard Matt say with a sigh.

"I know that." Marion replied softly. "But she's our daughter. We failed somehow the first time. We can't let it happen again!"

"I wasn't saying we would." I heard the chair squeak. "But the cost of everything has gone up this last year." He sighed again, and I could almost see him holding his head in his hands. "We'll find the money somewhere, Marion."

"But where, honey?" There was a long pause. "I could get a job. It would help."

"Yes, you could. But what kind of man does that make me?"

“A man who will keep his family together. Who considers his wife a helpmate rather than a trophy.” I could almost see her face softening as she said it. “The man I married.”

“I love you, honey.”

I walked silently up the last few steps then came down a little louder.

“Amanda?”

“Yes, Dad?”

“Could you try to keep it down to a dull roar? There are people sharing a romantic moment in here.”

I stuck my head around the corner. They were hugging, and started to pull apart. “Don’t stop on my account,” I told them. “I know where babies come from.”

“Amanda!”

“Young lady, why are you still up?”

“I was just getting some warm milk to help me sleep.”

“I’ll get it.” Marion started to stand.

“Hey, I can operate a stove. Just kiss the man and let me do my thing.”

They didn’t talk about it while I was still downstairs, but I know they probably did when I was back upstairs.

I set the milk down, turned on the light on the desk, pulled out a piece of scratch paper and began figuring. Uniforms, clothes, doubling the allowance, more groceries, the cost of the school itself; Christ almighty they had more than doubled what they had to pay for even one daughter when I walked in the door! I knew Caitlin was paying them rent (at her own request, mind

you. Dad had wanted to refuse) but that only put a little sand in the greased slide downhill. Matt had said he'd let me go to the gym and that was another 30 dollars a month. When I had suggested I pay for it from my allowance, he merely handed me the allowance money as usual, daring me with his eyes to protest.

I had been raised with the idea that people sink or rise to their natural level; my father had always used their bank account as an indication of how valuable they were. He could wax lyrical about it. There is a parable in the bible about Lazarus and the rich man. He always compared the poor to that rich man begging Lazarus to give him water. Give, give, and give. According to him, that was all the poor ever said.

But looking at the O'Neal family, at all those 'poor' I went to school with, I knew he couldn't have been more wrong. I realized that sometimes God doesn't give you a choice in the matter. It didn't matter where you start, but He does judge how you deal with it. I had seen their house. It was shabby, but it was from use, not neglect. Matt worked at the post office during the week and spent weekends repairing the house with his own two hands. He'd paint the house every four years and touch it up when necessary because he wanted to show the world that he hadn't given up.

They were the kind of family that would spend money on soap because only the truly destitute won't wash, that put money away for their kid's college rather than going on vacations; the kind of people who scrimped and saved to buy groceries and would eat their pride without salt rather than asking anyone for a handout. People who would go to their graves driven to distraction if someone did them a favor, and wasn't there to repay.

The O'Neals were the type of people that sent their daughters to a parochial school because you got a better education than public schools even if it cost you 8000 dollars more every year. And the state didn't give a damn because they still took it out of you in taxes to pay for the school building your children never saw the inside of.

They would never end up on welfare or on a police blotter regardless of my father's dire predictions. Matt would sell blood and let his wife get a job rather than admit defeat. He'd sell his own organs to feed us. Robert Heinlein said it best. Matt would have stood up to his hips in human waste shoveling it away rather than see his children starve. He was a man worth admiring, and I hoped I would be half the man he was when the real me returned.

About that allowance money... Consider; twenty bucks is enough for a pair of girls to have a day out sightseeing, buying the little things girls like to have. Not much really. The average plumber make two or three times that an hour.

But it's eighty dollars a month, 1040 dollars a year. Enough for a mortgage payment and utilities for a month and it wasn't just Serena, it was both Serena and me now. I was dragging them down like a drowning man clutching to a rescuer.

While they smiled, fed me, gave me money, put clothes on my back, worried about me they were doing it by robbing Peter to pay Paul, hoping Paul would forget to call. All because of me.

I really felt like crap. I couldn't even hand them the money from the bank because A: They'd want to know where it came from and B: they would make assumptions about question A, all of them linked to organized

crime, drugs or maybe the porn industry and C: they would see it as a handout even from me, and would reject it. Hell, there had been three days of arguments before Matt accepted Caitlin's money, and he knew where it came from!

I had to do something!

As the holiday season closed in on us, the weather went from balmy to brisk, then frigid. Going to school was terrible because of the weather, but enjoyable because the woman I loved was there with me. But for how long?

She and I still had different lives in a lot of ways. I went to the gym three times a week, and took out my frustrations on the punching bag or whatever person wanted to spar with me. There were women out there who wanted to box; the gym I had chosen had not only other women to spar with but even a woman strength training-cum boxing coach. Thanks to the hormonal regimen I was on, I couldn't bulk up like a normal guy, but I soon had long sleek muscles. Serena had been asked to assist the student council so she spent after school hours there helping out.

When we sat down to Thanksgiving dinner, we had both given a hearty Amen when Caitlin said grace and included both myself and the Stokes family in it. The O'Neal family had taken that family to our bosom for the same reason that 'unnamed benefactor' had slipped them cash. Matt felt he owed them a debt he could never repay.

Both Serena and I spent hours groaning from being over-full after T-day dinner.

Again, I was struck by the differences between the life I had led and the one I led now. My father would

have had a Thanksgiving party. You had to be a friend, a vanishingly small list, to attend, a business associate he liked working with, a list even smaller than the friends list or a social climber who sucking up to him to get an invitation or a little campaign funding for a political campaign that was 'priming the pump' as he called it for later political favors.

Which group do you think made up the bulk of his party list?

There would be enough food to feed an Ethiopian village for three months, even leaving out food the Koran forbids.

My father would have considered that grand feast of the O'Neal's as what he bought for the serving staff.

Was there enough? Yes of course there was. More than a family of five could eat in one sitting. There would be turkey sandwiches casseroles and finally stew. The O'Neals wasted nothing.

Take a wild guess as to which Thanksgiving dinner made me feel happiest.

It was the week after Thanksgiving; I was gone to the gym to work off the enormous meal Matt and Marion had served. I remembered I had promised that I would get a book for Serena from the public library, but for the life of me, I couldn't remember the title. I was at the door of the Student Council chambers when I heard two voices. I stopped.

"Serena, I was wondering," Student Council President Tyler Keely was saying. "I need an assistant to be monitor for the girls on the skiing trip next month. I wanted to ask you if you'd accept the position."

"Amanda is so much better at handling rambunctious people." she demurred.

He gave a gentle laugh. "If I needed an assistant to deal with the boys or to take charge in an emergency, I'd pick her in a minute. Anyone who can cow Yablonski with one punch would be able to ride roughshod over them all." His voice grew serious. "But I wanted someone I like to work with. Amanda makes me nervous."

There was a long pause. "All right if you need help, I'm your girl."

"I wish you were."

There was another long pause, and I could feel my heart pounding. Oh God, he loved her. I wanted to go in and throw him out of the window, but I couldn't do that. I coughed, then stomped as if walking heavily, and entered the room.

They were standing a few feet apart, and Tyler leaped to his feet when I entered.

"Sorry to bother you, but I forgot something." I smiled at him, and looked at Serena. "You wanted a book, but I couldn't remember the title."

"Soldiers of Color. It's a book about black Confederate army units. Written by Niko Machiavelli."

I wrote it down. "See you at home later?"

"Of course." She gave me that smile I loved, and I left in a deepening gloom.

As I walked, I considered my relationship with Serena. I was pretending to be her sister, living in her house, having her tell me every secret, hold me when she was sad. She had fought to protect her.

But what did we have really? She was in love with the real me, but the real me was supposedly in a cemetery. I had finally seen the monolithic stone Father had

erected. It had taken a month before Serena was willing to take me there though she went every week. She didn't notice that when I claimed to be tired, I had sat beside the tomb, resting my hand on the grave, looking at it for a long time. I knew who was really there. Tom Casey had taken my place one last time, and no one else even mourned him.

It wasn't like this guy was a monster or out for only one thing either. I could see why girls would be attracted to Tyler. He was tall, well-muscled, intelligent and thoughtful; Captain of the swim team, he was everything our Wrestling captain and Football captain were not. As Peter Stankowski, I had known him in a peripheral sort of way. He was a class ahead of me, a good student. I recognized him, and he always treated others with respect. I think we might have become friends. Suspicious parents would relax and say, 'Oh him. He's safe.'

I couldn't complain if Serena had finally gotten over me. I was dead and buried, and the thought of her going through her life alone pining for what she thought was a moldering corpse appalled me.

I hoped against hope that we would find the real Amanda, but I had sunk over a hundred thousand into the search so far, with no return except for the photo album from Yellow Tavern and the fact that she had been in New York a year ago.

Big deal. If I just wanted to spend the cash, do you know how many times I could go completely around the world in a year? I could have visited every American state capital, every national capital in the world and had time to stop for tea in London, Pernod in Paris, Ouzo in Rome, and Sake in Tokyo. Assuming a walking distance of 20 miles a day, and if she didn't stop for

Sundays to go to Mass, she could have *walked* halfway around the world at the equator in that time!

So, I had to ask myself... What is more important? My love for Serena? I couldn't even admit it to her until we found the real Amanda! I was lying to her by not telling her I was alive . Or was her emotional happiness now and in the near future more important?

Would I stand between her and every male above the age of fourteen until then? I could see us as Patty and Selma from the Simpsons, with me keeping her from marital bliss and the idea made me feel worse. Would I sit there for thirty-odd years, still her 'sister' because Amanda never returned, both of us growing older, me using the memory of a man she thought dead as a shield between her and any suitors?

Damn it, I couldn't do that! I couldn't keep her from her happiness, and if she didn't know I was alive, what excuse could I use? I had considered sending her a birthday card, signed from the real me, but then she would be devastated that I hadn't seen her in over a year. Would she still feel an unrequited love for such an unmitigated bastard?

I picked up her book, arrived at the gym, and proceeded to beat up on the heavy bag, on the speed bag, then when he opened his mouth, a lightweight that gave me lip. I was in the mood to hurt someone. I was smaller, but I was taking out all my anger on him.

After three rounds, Sandy Wright, the weight training coach who had been acting as referee, called the fight. I was way ahead on points, and only his heavier weight and greater stamina had kept him going this long. All things being equal, he would have been on his back unconscious or TKO'd by now.

“All right, O’Neal, what’s your problem?” she snarled after following me into the locker room.

“I’m...” I didn’t know how to say it. I collapsed on the bench in the locker room, holding my head in my hands, and bawled. I told her everything that was wrong between Serena and myself except for who I really was and what I was doing for her. When the water works finally shut down, I found her rocking me in her arms.

“You have to let her make that decision, Amanda,” she whispered. “Shall I tell you a story?”

“Oh Puh-leeze!” I wailed.

“I am a lesbian.” She said. I wanted to recoil but whatever her orientation, she had never been less than professional around any of the women that trained here. “I fell in love with my roommate in college. Head over heels, tongue hanging out, had-to-have-her in love.

“But she was straight. She loved me as a friend and would never have considered any other relationship with me. I knew that. I had been her best friend for two years and she didn’t know I was a lesbian.

“So I gave up what I wanted. I remained that friend. I held her when she came home from dates where the guy thought with the little head instead of the big one. I nursed her when she was sick, protected her from the guys she dumped because they were abusive. When she met the man of her dreams, I was her maid of honor.” She hugged me, and I could see tears in her eyes. “He turned out worse than any of the guys she had dumped. Two years into the marriage, he got mad because she had gotten pregnant. He got drunk, then

went home and beat her to death. He's doing life at Joliet."

She was silent for a long time. "When you love someone, you have to let them make their own mistakes. Parents learn that. You have to let them skin their knees, make stupid remarks to the wrong people, marry monsters. It isn't a matter of just beating on anything you think might harm them, because unless you lock your sister in a room and never let her out, she will make those mistakes. Some in work, some in relationships. Whether you like it or not, being overprotective will harm her far more than life will because if you shield her from everything, what happens to her if you die and leave her without your protection?"

"All you can do is hope to be there to pick up the pieces." She stood, tousling my hair. "Go home, give her a chance at a real life. Like the old Chinese saying goes, hold the one you love with open hands."

Even knowing what she said, it didn't help. My mood was noticeable to the family and there were looks of worry passed between the adults. I was juggling my love for Serena, her love for Tyler, and money problems for the O'Neal family simultaneously. I had to find a way to help them.

It was the week before Christmas break when I got my answer. Everyone had taken to saying Merry Christmas, and our History teacher, Mr. Connors snorted. "Christmas, Santa Claus. Do any of you even know where it started?"

"The birth of Jesus," someone answered.

“Oh, really? According to Roman records, and with the aid of Luke, we can figure out exactly when he died. All of the Apostles agree that it was Passover. Now, when is Passover?”

There was silence. “Come on, where do you think the holiday of Easter came from? And that is when?”

“It was the 8th of April. But the date changes every year,” Serena said.

“Why is that?”

“Because it’s the third Sunday after the Vernal Equinox.”

“Correct. Now we know that Our Lord and Savior was 33 and a half when he died, but if you take a calendar and count back six months, you will find that it was not Christmas day that he was born. December and early January in Israel is as cold as it is here. In that kind of weather, the shepherds would have died of hypothermia sleeping outside.”

“As for the date, the Church took over the celebration of a Roman holiday called Saturnalia, but it wasn’t until 98 AD that it was labeled as the celebration of his birth and not until the 4th century AD that it became a time of gift giving. But that had nothing to do with Jesus until the latter date. The original church reserved that holiday, as the Jews did with Passover, for quiet contemplation of all He had done for us.

“It was linked instead to St Nicholas, later called Santa Claus, but there really was such a man.”

“The true story of Santa Claus begins with a man named Nicholas, who was born during the third century in the village of Patara. At the time the area was Greek but is now on the southern coast of Turkey. His wealthy parents, who raised him to be a devout Chris-

tian, died in an epidemic while Nicholas was still young. Obeying Jesus' words to "sell what you own and give the money to the poor," Nicholas used his whole inheritance to assist the needy, the sick, and the suffering. He dedicated his life to serving God and was made Bishop of Myra while still a young man. Nicholas was known throughout the land he administered for his generosity to those in need, his love for children, and his concern for sailors and ships.

"Under the Roman Emperor Diocletian who persecuted the Christians, Bishop Nicholas suffered for his faith, was exiled and imprisoned. At that time the prisons were so full of church officials that there was no room for the real criminals. After his release, Nicholas attended the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD. He died on December 6th, 343 AD in Myra and was buried in his church. Within a century of his death, he was beatified and the anniversary of his death became a day of celebration, called St Nicholas' day.

"There were stories told about this simple man. They show us what kind of man worked within the early church. One tells of how he discovered that a poor man with three daughters despaired of having a dowry for them. Think about your father having to give the groom's family a brand new car to convince him to marry you. In those days, a young woman's father had to offer prospective husbands something of value called a dowry. Without one, your father would have to allow whoever wanted you to take your hand.

"The larger the dowry, the better the chance that a young woman would find a good husband. This poor man's daughters without dowries were therefore destined to be sold into slavery and it would have been called a marriage. Mysteriously, on three different oc-

casions, a bag of gold appeared in their home, providing the needed dowries.

“The bags of gold, tossed through an open window, are said to have landed in stockings or shoes left before the fire to dry. One version of the story says he actually climbed on their roof and threw the bags down the chimney to bounce into the shoes. This led to the custom of children hanging stockings or putting out shoes, eagerly awaiting gifts from Saint Nicholas and having him coming down the chimney. And so, St. Nicholas was linked to unexpected but needed gifts.

“The season of gift giving usually started around the 6th of December, but in the Fourth Century it was moved to Christmas which ran from Christmas Day to the Feast of Stephen on the 7th of January.

“That is the true meaning of Christmas, giving gifts when you expect nothing in return. Giving those in need what they really do need. Not this ‘what am I getting?’ craze we have in America.” He then went on with his history lesson, but I now had a plan for getting the money to the O’Neals. All I had to do once it arrived was convince them to keep it.

They had a school Christmas party that Friday, and we had fun saying our goodbyes for the holiday. There was that skiing trip planned for the first of the year, and even as I smiled and chatted, I felt the depression building. Every time I thought Serena and I would have some time alone, Tyler would come and drag her away for yet another meeting about the organization. I was sure he was going to ask her out on a date. If he did, what would I do?

Serena came back to the classroom and I took her arm, getting ready to leave. We had just reached the door when Tyler suddenly appeared again.

“Serena, call me tomorrow and we’ll go over the lists for who rides in what car on the train.”

“Of course, Tyler.”

He looked up, then grinned, pointing. “Mistletoe!”

We looked up and sure enough, some joker had put a sprig over the entryway. Before Serena could react, I did. “But if it’s over both of us, you have to kiss both of us.” He looked alarmed. “What’s wrong, Tyler? I look like her but you don’t like me?”

He sighed. Then he moved forward. He gave each of us a kiss on the lips that was as sexy as one from your father, then walked away. Serena gave me a dig in the ribs. “That was mean.”

He’s monopolizing all of your time. If he wants to date you, he should just come out and say it. I can take a hint.”

“If it’s attached to the two-by-four he hits you with,” she said. Then she gave me a cute little grin. “If you’re going to be jealous, why don’t you date him?”

“Me!” I blushed. “Until I find a guy I like as much as you, I’m just going to have to settle for being a spinster.”

She chuckled, then looked up again, considering. “We’re still under the mistletoe,” she whispered.

“What do you mean?”

“This.” She leaned forward, took my face in her cupped hands, and gave me a soft gentle kiss. “Thank you for being my sister. And for loving me so much.”

We weren't getting a lift that day because I had given the parents a song and dance about wanting to be able to buy everyone presents without anyone looking over my shoulder. Serena of course wanted to be with me, and that I agreed to because it was all part of my cunning little plan.

We got off the bus, and were trudging across the parking lot when I said casually, "What is that?"

I walked over to a light standard, bent down, palmed a packet from my inner pocket, and stood with the envelope in my hand. I came back over and handed it to her. "What could it be?"

She looked curious then checked the flap, which was open, a very important detail. If it had been sealed, she wouldn't do what she did, which was open it. She gasped and dropped it. I snatched it up like any curious girl would and looked inside. Then I pulled out one of the wrapped bundles of hundreds. I gave her the same look.

"What do we do?" I gasped.

"We'll turn it in to the mall security guards."

I had considered this possibility. I remembered my father reminiscing one evening about when he worked at a concert hall in college. Every day he would go into the security office, and take a quick look in the lost and found box. If he saw something he liked, he'd make a note of its description. Half an hour later, one of his school friends would come in and say,

"I don't know if it's been turned in, but I lost.."

He gained a rather large collection of valuable things that way during his time in college. He always figured if you lost it, you were too stupid to deserve it in the first place.

“Yeah,” I said dismissively. “And an hour after they go off-shift, one of their friends will come in and say, ‘I lost a blank envelope with a lot of money in it. Did some Good Samaritan turn it in?’ and they’ll hand it to him and the thieves will split the money.”

“You’re a cynic.”

“It only takes one person betraying your trust to make you cynical, Sis. We’ll go home and talk to Dad. If we put ads in the local papers, we can try to find the owner, and if they don’t show up in a month, we can keep it honestly. It’s not like we don’t need the money.”

She liked the idea.

It wasn’t as easy as that. With 20,000 dollars in brand new bills still in the bank wrappers and no way to discover to whom it belonged, Matt wanted to turn it in to the police. I gave him the same analogy I had used on Serena. He wanted to do it anyway, but then Caitlin came out of nowhere and told him about something like it happening when she was at Boston U. with a 30,000 dollar necklace a Professor’s wife had lost. No one had expected a crooked policeman until someone saw his wife wearing it.

Matt didn’t like the idea of having to pay for the ads but I laid my allowance cash down and said I’d pay for it. Serena added hers a moment later.

As luck would have it, it didn’t cost us a dime. We all went to the local paper, and were soon talking to a guy in the advertising department.

Have you ever paid for such a serious advertising campaign? They were quoting \$150 a day! Oh we’d get a discount; they quoted a little over four thousand if

we paid for the month in advance. It looked like my plan was a flop.

While we were there, a mousy little guy walked in, heard us, made a call, and asked us to come upstairs with him. The mousy guy took us into a corner office. I almost panicked when I saw the title on the door. The Managing Editor?

By that time I was in despair. To be honest, we'd have to place ads in the front section, the classifieds, on the sports page, even, I joked, on the Comics page so we could be sure everyone saw it. But the cost would have eaten that forty bucks Serena and I had offered without even chewing for just one day.

The Editor listened to the reporter giving a succinct account of what Matt had told the guy in advertising. The manager picked up the phone and called down there. He told them to double the sizes of the ads we were placing; he'd take the difference out of petty cash. When Matt protested, the guy merely said, "Think of it as an early Christmas present to an honest man."

The mousy guy walked us out, asking a few questions. What our home life was like, that kind of thing, while we waited for a cab. We didn't see any reason not to tell him.

Imagine my shock when I went out Sunday morning before Mass and found the paper.

HONESTY IS NOT DEAD; IT LIVES IN THE CHRISTIAN HEART read the headline.

"Matt O'Neal, father of three daughters, Caitlin, 23, and twins Amanda and Serena, 16, knows the woes of anyone living in our modern economy. A postal worker, his bills went skyrocketing when his daughter

Amanda, who had been missing for almost two years, returned in September of this year.

“The devout Catholic suddenly had to spend twice as much on the school uniforms and additional tuition a Parochial school charges. With the modern economy, that put the lower middle class family in a spiral toward bankruptcy. Trusting in their faith, The O’Neals had buckled down, and were trying to make it work.

“But this quiet desperation does not mean that honesty is not paramount in the O’Neal household.

“En route to a local mall to buy Christmas presents, the two younger girls found an envelope with a large sum of money in it. The amount will not be disclosed in this article. The elder of the two, Amanda, worried that one bad apple in mall security or the local police would see the money and find a way to steal it. Instead, that daughter suggested that they place ads in every section of this paper and bravely offered the money she would have spent on her own family’s Christmas to save that holiday for someone she didn’t know and might never know. Her younger sister, spurred by the same inherent goodness, offered her own money.

“The family was in the advertising department here when this reporter overheard their story. It was brought it to the attention of the Managing Editor who in the spirit of the season, undertook to pay the over four thousand dollars it will cost to run ads in every section of this paper for one full month, the legally required period, and to do so out of his own pocket.

“Showing where his children had learned it, Matt O’Neal, 51, protested this act of kindness. A proud man, he didn’t want to have someone else pay for a good deed his religion taught he must do. Only by con-

sidering it a Christmas present would he finally accept that generous act.

“Such a family deserves our praise and our prayers this Christmas season. They shame those of us that pick up valuables in the street and call it ‘finder’s keepers’.”

Oh God. All they needed was pictures!

I went into the house and Caitlin waved me over to the television. Oh, they’d gotten the pictures. Someone from the local ABC Affiliate had contacted the school and gotten the pictures that would end up in the year-book we hadn’t received yet. Serena seated, smiling for the camera, my dour expression in the photo right beside it. Pictures of me playing soccer with the scene of Serena in the background enhanced so we were both in focus. Serena looking so mature taking notes at a student council meeting. A shot of the Astronomy club with both Serena and ME as she looked through the eyepiece of the telescope, even a video clip of us walking into the school together.

I was shocked. We’d been blasted across the entire front page and the national news! If Amanda saw this...

Wait. If Amanda saw this, she would learn that I was here. She’d come down ready to do battle, and I’d run away. Then I’d get my face back, reappear after suffering a horrible case of amnesia and be able to love the woman I loved in my own persona.

How could I lose?

The Terrible Frost

Things quieted down before Christmas. That morning I was shaken from a sound sleep by Serena who

dragged me downstairs like a tugboat wrestling a cruise ship. My father would have snorted at the tree. It was barely my height. But we'd decorated it with all the care and love that people should bestow on one. My father would have blown a thousand on getting me anything I wanted. I jokingly said one year I wanted a pony, and what did I get? Try a thoroughbred race-horse colt that cost more than a new car, and that I could never ride because it was too damn valuable to take a chance on possible accidents.

The Stokes had come down to share our Christmas. Dad had gotten us matching ski outfits for the school-sponsored trip. Caitlin had paid for ski rental and lift tickets. Marion had bought us a brand new digital camera so we could bring back tons of pictures. Yancey had brought a copy of the script of the Colonel's Child Bride. Renee, his mother, had brought matching necklaces, a heart broken in half with my name on one and Serena's on the other. We immediately traded so that I wore her name around my neck.

Serena shoved a package in my hands, and I opened it with trembling hand. It was a hand-knitted scarf. Her name was on one end, Amanda's on the other. The names were separated by a series of hearts getting larger and larger as they progressed to the middle of the six-foot long woolen garment until there were two intertwined hearts at the center.

I didn't know how my gift would go over. I had gotten a small locket with our pictures in it and I hesitantly handed it to her. She looked at it for a long time, then threw herself into my arms.

I didn't want to be completely serious so I gave the other gifts I had gotten out, promising that I would buy them something for real when we got back after the

trip. I got Matt a small box marked 'Teenage Restraint Device' which had a miniature straitjacket in it with 'Amanda' over the left breast. Marion got a recipe book that was marked 'When Amanda is not home, remember to reduce all measurements by one quarter.' For Caitlin I got a small model of a bullwhip with the note 'For the next discussion with you male students.' For Serena I had gotten a soft plushy doll 'For when I'm not around to hug.' They laughed when I showed them that the miniature straitjacket would fit the doll.

I gave Yancey a rubber knife, telling him "That way you won't hurt anyone next time" and Renee got an address book with my name in it with the words, "What do you mean, where am I from?"

Then I brought out the real presents. A laser level for Matt, a photo of Serena and I seated together, looking at each other, so we looked like mirror images for Marion, and for Caitlin, a day timer with notes on all the students we could both remember neatly labeled on their birthdays to warn her about them. On our birthday I had written 'Amanda and Serena; your sisters, remember? The elder is a flake but willing. The younger is a precious gem worth every effort.' The Stokes got an H.O. scale diorama of the Regimental Club with carriages and miniature figures from the War Between the States and a little standing marquee of the Colonel's Child Bride that a boy at school had made for me. The card said, 'One day soon...'

Since Serena's birthday was three days before Christmas, we had presents for that as well under the tree. Serena had gotten me a ring with intertwined hearts with our names engraved inside. I had gotten her a picture frame. In it was the photo that had started Amanda's journey, tattered and folded, with the note,

“My most precious possession, for my most precious love’.

The Archdiocese had an agreement with the Richmond Ski club so we got a discount for skiing trips. We all arrived the 27th of December, packed and ready to go. There were almost a hundred students going this year; I could see not only why Tyler had begged for help but also why Serena was chosen to be that help. Where anyone else would have been reduced to a gibbering mass on the floor or I might have hit someone, Serena threaded her way through the people on the platform, indicating seats for them, explaining how to get to the dining car when we transferred at Richmond Main Station to the express, dealing with a bunch of girls that you would never believe were teenagers, because they acted like pouting nine-year-olds. I think the worst was Tyler, running back to make sure she was handling it every five seconds or so, on the platform and on the train.

It took almost a full day to get to the resort, and again Serena was the rock that the chaotic world had to deal with. We were in our rooms, ready for the next day of skiing and already drinking cocoa by dark.

Serena and I had just settled in the lounge sharing a love seat, cuddled together like puppies when Tyler arrived with yet another emergency. I sighed as she went off with him. Michelle nudged me. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know.” I had found that if I didn’t think of Michelle’s attributes, she was a great friend. “I feel like I’m losing a sister.”

"I don't know why. Tyler is a great catch."

"But we get along like a house on fire." At her quirked eyebrow, I added, "You know, screaming, confusion horrible injuries and total devastation."

"He does like you," she protested.

"Really." My tone was flat.

"It's just he doesn't like you in that way. Whereas Tommy Bevins adores you."

I choked on the cocoa. "Tommy Bevins? Only about this tall..." I made a motion about even with my nipples. "A senior who seems to think Star Trek is the be-all and end-all of the Universe?"

"He was joking with my boyfriend Conrad about dreaming of seeing you in the green makeup of the Orion slave women."

I suddenly pictured myself dressed in next to nothing, green complexion, dancing with wild abandon as Tommy watched. She waited until I had the picture, and we both laughed.

She touched my shoulder gently. "So she found a guy first. It's not the end of the world."

If only you knew...

The next morning, we split up. Some were going to the bunny slopes, others to the adult course above it for experienced skiers. The last group went to the Expert course above the other two. The mountain slope ran for almost a mile from the top of the 'widow maker' which was a separate course only a real expert or a suicidal jerk would take, ending at the lodge. At the bottom of each course there were warming sheds and links to the ski lifts so an expert could ride up and spend all day at the widow maker without seeing a single newbie.

I could have taken the expert course easily. I had skied about three weeks of every year before my 'death'. Serena didn't have that experience so she took the group that went to the adult courses, and I went to be with her.

Of course Tyler just had to go there as well. I was wondering if I could entice him up to the widow maker...

I finally went up to the expert slope alone to take out my frustrations. Racing down a hill at almost fifty miles an hour is exhilarating. The good thing about it is you can't think, you have to just let your body react. I didn't have to consider him leaning close to whisper in her ear, smell her hair.

I hit a stretch of moguls and bounded like a beach ball. *Thank you, God...*

There was the blat of the alarm horn as I reached the bottom of that slope. An attendant told me that a blizzard was expected within an hour or so and everyone was being asked to go to the lodge. Instead of taking the lift, I ran the adult slope to the bottom to meet up with Serena.

She wasn't there. I found out that she had gone up to the expert slope with Tyler not long after I had left. I collared an attendant. No, I could not go back up. They had already cleared the widow maker and the expert slope. No, he didn't care that she was my sister and might have gotten separated. He didn't care if I had gotten a message from God that I had to go up. If he had to, he would have me dragged to the lodge bound and gagged.

I stood in the lobby fuming, watching as the skiers were chivvied into the building. Every minute I ex-

pected to see the jaunty little cap Serena had been wearing. But she didn't come in. I dragooned a couple of the older students into starting a list. They came back to me as darkness fell. Serena had not come in. Tyler was still missing too.

As the emergency teams saddled up to go out and find them I paced in the dining room, glaring at the mountain. I was not just going to stand there! They were thinking like a bunch of guys looking for someone who had gotten lost and would eventually find their way to the warming sheds; I was thinking like a guy that wanted to get the girl alone away from her domineering sister. I knew that slope well. We came here every year way back when. There were a dozen little places on the slopes on either side where you could get a girl alone, trails that were too narrow to ski safely, but quite wide enough to walk. Going back less than ten feet, you were invisible. If they ignored the warning, they could be caught in one of them. The blizzard had lowered visibility to less than fifty feet; it was farther than that from the edge of the slope to the flats where they had the warming sheds. At times the flurries reduced visibility to the length of your arm. Moving through this in a blizzard was like driving in pea soup fog. You could get lost within a few feet.

I left the dining room. The door to the emergency storage area was open. I slipped in. I grabbed a coil of rope, a bunch of hand flares, an emergency pack, a small fuel stove and a flare pencil with screw-in flares. Then I slipped back into the dining room and grabbed three jackets of different sizes. One was large enough to fit over what I was wearing; another fit over the first, and the last one made me feel like a human Hindenberg. I took them not because I thought it would be that cold, but because when I found them,

they'd be wearing just the regular ski clothes. In this weather, that would be as much help as drinking milk to fight the freezing wind.

I didn't tell anyone where I was going. They would have tried to stop me. A hand line had been strung to the bottom of the lifts, but the damn things had been shut down. I found the main breakers, flipped them, then jumped on the first lift bench I could catch. The lights on the towers came on when I did. I knew they would realize that some idiot was obviously trying to ski in this weather.

I changed lifts, got to the top of the expert slope before anyone could get out, shut the lifts down and reversed them. I turned left, making sure it was as close to 90 degrees as I could, and started cross-country style across the flat. I reached the tree line after about ten minutes, then began slowly going down the slope. I checked at each alcove I remembered. By the time I reached the bottom of the side, I was despairing. There were as many on the other side, so I skied across to that side and began to herringbone my way up. I was almost to the top when I stumbled; there in front of me was a ski lying all by itself.

Serena and I had rented skis, and this one looked like the ones they issued. To avoid having someone 'forget' that they'd rented them, the resort painted them in neon colors. This looked red, like the ones Serena had chosen.

It had caught in a hummock but in the windblown snow I could see nothing. I lit a flare and I could see the track, running straight up and toward an upper alcove. I kept up the herringbone climb, my legs screaming from the exercise, the wind cutting through me even in the extra jackets. If they were out here, they would be

chilled, frozen. They might even already be dead. If she died because of that two-bit Romeo...

No! If she was dead I didn't want to live.

I reached the alcove and found the ski and poles from both of them beside a tree, ten feet from the course, already half-buried. In the light of the dying flare I could see a line of footprints but they didn't go out onto the slope, they went deeper into the forest. I bound the skis and poles to my back and followed, snow blowing in my eyes, my arms getting heavier. The skis were ton weights attached to my legs as I cross-country skied into the woods.

There was a whimpering sound. I threw aside the dead flare, striking another. Tyler was laying there, his shattered leg dragging, his hands still trying to draw him forward. I flipped him over, and he screamed in agony.

"Tyler! Where is Serena?"

He looked up at me. "A... Amanda... We got lost. Turned around." He waved toward the path behind him. She's in a cave back there. She's so cold... Tried to get help. Fell... My leg..." He fell unconscious.

I made a splint out of the poles and tied him to the skis he had worn with Serena's in the center. I used the trail of blood he had left to find the cave. It was more of a hollow, barely enough to cover one person. Serena sat there, head on her chest.

"Oh God, don't fall asleep, you'll die if you sleep!" I screamed at her. I dragged Tyler into the hole beside her, then frantically stripped off the extra jackets I had on. The middle one, I put on him. The inner one which was warm from me wearing, I finally got her into. I slid the outer one back on, the chill from just that brief ex-

posure ripping into me. I took out the stove, and lit it. The emergency kit had soup, cider, coffee, and cocoa in packets. I scooped snow into the folding pan, then used my skis to frantically to pile snow to both sides, then in front as a windbreak. I sat beside Tyler, slapping his face until he came back, handed him a cup of cocoa, then told him to wake Serena up as I finished the windbreak. Only then did I take out the flare pencil. I aimed it upward and the red light lofted above the trees.

I crawled back inside, and seeing that she was awake, I made her some soup.

“You... came,” she whispered.

“I would have died if something happened to you. Of course I came.” I looked at my watch. If someone had been able to see it, they would need less than 20 minutes to get close. I took off her gloves, chafing her hands and holding them over the burning stove. Once I had, I did the same for Tyler. By the time I was done, it was time to crawl back out there and fire the second flare. I only had one left.

I crawled back in and checked his leg. It was a bad break. He was awake but his eyes were unfocused. I checked his temperature and it was down. The stove wasn't enough to warm them.

I crawled back out and began finding firewood. I came back in, dug down until I hit soil, and dumped fuel on the branches I had found until we had a blaze. I took the skis I had used for his travois and the oversized coat I was wearing, and jammed them into an impromptu igloo. I found more wood but I couldn't go much farther away and be sure of finding my way back. After dumping this last precious hoard of wood on the fire, I pulled them both over to it, then curled up against Serena's back, trying to give her my own

warmth. I was feeling icy cold myself. I knew that if I fell asleep, I would die and so would they.

I finally fired off the last flare but no one had come. They had to be en route! Hell, they should have seen the light from it down by the damn lodge! But it had been over an hour. They weren't coming.

I crawled back inside. The wood was burning merrily but I knew it would only last a few more minutes, an hour at most. Then the temperature would plummet and they would go to sleep and never wake up. Tyler had lapsed into unconsciousness again and Serena was fading in and out. I didn't know how long I would have before I began to freeze to death too. They might last an hour, they might live until morning. But I had to get help now. I took my skis and raced back down the alcove. I only hoped I wouldn't be...

A branch came out of nowhere, striking my forehead. I was flipped arse over apex by the impact, my skis flying. I hit the ground with bruising force and lay there, looking up into the blasting snow. I fell into unconsciousness, knowing I had failed.

I came awake as two rescue workers tried to strap me down. "My sister," I whispered.

"What?" One of the men leaned down, trying to cut the wind that had carried my question away.

"My...sister." I pointed toward the alcove. They tried to shush me but I fought them, pointing and repeating myself. They skied back into the alcove just to humor me, dragging me in a ski litter, and found the others. I was coherent by the time they found them. I

demanded that Tyler who was obviously hurt worse than I was should get one litter, and Serena the other.

I walked down the slope out of the alcove as they went ahead, except for the one guy who stayed with me. A few minutes later, another team arrived. I rode down the hill, bundled in enough thermal blankets to warm up an elephant.

I refused treatment at the lodge. Except for a bruised forehead, I was fine. Serena and Tyler were taken to the hospital. Since they had already left, I pitched a screaming fit until the lodge supplied a truck to take me down there. The hospital was so slow at the moment that they were the only patients; until one of them woke up, they had put them both in the same room. I grabbed a chair, sat between them, and stared gloomily at the wall.

All right, let's face it. He's a flake, probably a horn dog, but he had a mile of guts and a will that wouldn't quit. Anyone else would have stayed and frozen with her like a sheep in a drift. He'd tried to walk down a ski slope in a blizzard. When he broke his leg, he could have crawled back to her or just given up and died there in the snow but he kept going forward. While I slapped him silly to wake him up, he gently shook Serena and called her name, then gave her half the cocoa I had prepared for him before she'd gotten that soup.

He was a better man that I could ever be.

I listened as the doctors came and went fluttering around them. Tyler had compound fractures of both bones in that left leg plus damage to veins and artery. Only the tight tourniquet-like upper end of my hasty splint had stopped his bleeding to death. They weren't

sure he'd ever walk again. If they had gotten that helicopter they wanted, there might have been a chance...

I pulled out my cell while I was alone and speed dialed Dr. Zim. "Can you find out who the best guy for broken bones is in this area?" I asked. "And get me his number? Great." Ten minutes later, he called back and told me that he had checked. The doctor was scheduled to go on vacation, but hadn't left yet. I called him.

"Doctor, there's a kid up here at the resort who just shattered the bones in his lower leg. They aren't sure if he'll ever walk again and I won't accept that. Could you please come up here to consult? I know you're planning on going to the Bahamas. Tell you what. You give me the name of your hotel there. I'll pay for the vacation on top of your fees. No, I am not joking. In fact, call them in four hours, I guarantee that your costs will have already been refunded. If they haven't, I'll talk to the Bahamian government." I never worked so fast in my life. I called my lawyer's toll-free number and browbeat the phone service into connecting me directly to the partner that handled my accounts. I told him to find out what the doctor had paid for his vacation. Call his hotel, send them a wire transfer for that amount, tell them to refund the doctor's money, and tell them that the Bureau of Tourism and the Prime Minister would get a very nasty call from my law firm if they delayed for even a minute. Then I instructed him to have a vehicle capable of dealing with the snow at the doctor's house and waiting within the hour.

Three and a half hours later, the senior orthopedic surgeon from the University of Virginia arrived, took one look at the X-rays, and had them call Tyler's parents. The doctor at the clinic told them that someone had paid to have the top surgeon in the state to be on

hand. He had promised that while Tyler might not be able to swim like he did before, he damn sure would walk again. I fell asleep as they rolled him out for emergency surgery.

I snapped awake. I was in the room and it was morning. Serena was sleeping peacefully. Tyler wasn't anywhere nearby. I stood, stretching the kinks out. I walked down to the doctor's lounge, no one complained when I poured hot water and made some tea. I went back to the room. As I lifted the Styrofoam cup, I saw Serena looking at me through half-lidded eyes.

"Hey you," I said softly. I leaned over, brushing her forelock off her face and she gave me a lazy smile.

"You came for me."

"I told you I wouldn't let anything happen to you," I said. Then it hit me. Tyler had done everything but die for her. "I don't mind."

"Mind what?"

"If you and Tyler... I don't know, date."

She looked at me curiously. "What are you talking about?"

"I know you guys have been spending a lot of time together. He probably professed his love for you before the blizzard hit. I found him with a broken leg, crawling toward the course, still trying to get help. He was willing to die trying to get help for you." I looked away. What I had to say was just so damn painful. "I can't stand against someone like that. I won't complain, whatever happens. I'll baby-sit the kids, remember the

anniversary and be the best aunt they can ever have." I wanted to die and I was starting to cry. "Even if..."

She caught the front of my shirt, dragging me down to hug. "Amanda, that is noble and brave and I love for you saying it. But you are really stupid." She shook me. "He wanted me to *pretend* I was his girl friend until Valentine's Day." She whispered into my ear. "His family is relocating to Boston. I said if I had your permission, I would but I couldn't really be his girlfriend. I have given my heart to another."

"Yeah. The late great Peter Stankowski," I blurted out.

"In part. But I love my sister too much to wander away from her so quickly." She pecked me on the cheek. "Where is he?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "Someone called in the top surgeon in the state to work on his case. He's probably still in the operating room. What time is it?" I looked at the clock. "Oh God, I slept for almost seven hours!"

"You had a busy day. Tell him... Tell him thank you for me."

I ran to the nurse's desk. "Tyler Keely. They operated on him. Where is he?"

"Family member?" a man asked. I turned to look at him.

It was Korbett, the man I had roused and brow-beaten into being here. "I don't recognize you, sir. Are you the doctor that came to help in the middle of the night?"

He gave a tired chuckle. "You make me sound like the Lone Ranger," he said disparagingly. "Yes, that's me."

"Tyler, is he going to be all right?"

"It would be polite to answer my question," he chided me gently.

"I'm sorry, sir. No, I am Amanda O'Neal. He and my sister got caught in the blizzard yesterday. I went up to find them. Tyler had broken his leg so I did what I could before going for help."

"So you are who I have to thank."

"Sir?" I felt like running. Did he recognize my voice?

"You're the one who splinted his leg."

"Yes, sir."

"You cut off the blood flow."

"Oh, I almost hurt him worse?"

"Well, yes and no. When you immobilized it, you stopped him from bleeding to death because the upper tie was very tight." He sighed. "That meant he was still alive when he got to the clinic here. It also meant we were able to find the arterial and venous damage more readily. He has you to thank for that." He sighed again. "I saved his leg. It had to be pinned, and will probably give him problems for a long time but he still has it, thanks to you."

"No, sir. He has you to thank." I took his hand. "If you hadn't come..."

°You can thank some bossy woman who did everything but beg me on hands and knees,± he snorted.

Then he looked at me speculatively. "Did you see anyone else here?"

"Any one else?" I pretended to consider. "There were two doctors on call and three nurses, and I think they had a couple that were doing floors. Oh, and the lady in the lunch room..."

"Never mind." He laughed. □Lone Ranger indeed!□

□Sir?□

"I got a frantic call from someone asking me to come here. They paid my usual operating fees and for my vacation, which I hope I will still get to take. But whoever it is didn't bother to stay around for this boy to thank."

"Like the Good Samaritan."

"What? Oh, you mean the Bible story."

"It's a parable, sir, not a story," I said. "Besides, if they'd had the helicopter they wanted to buy, whoever called would not have bothered, probably." I clutched his hand. "Sir, if my family had the money, any of us would have paid to have you here in thanks. Tyler is a special boy. Anyone who would risk his life for my sister is part of my family as far as I am concerned."

"I stand corrected. He's in there. If he asks, tell him not to worry."

Tyler laid there, his broken leg in a cast and traction. I walked over, and he opened his eyes. "Serena?"

"She's fine." I grabbed a chair, pulling it over. "You know, if I didn't consider it incredibly brave, I'd say

you were out of your mind to try to go down that hill after you broke your leg.”

“She was in danger. I had to.” As it was for me, it was as simple as that. She was in danger...

“Yes, I understand that.” I sipped the tea. “She told me.”

“About?”

“Pretending to be her boyfriend until your family moves.”

“Oh.” He looked at the leg. “We may have to go sooner than I thought. This must have cost Dad a pretty penny.”

“Yeah, well, I’ll make a deal with you. If you get back to school before you leave, I’ll tell everyone you’re the sweetest thing since clover honey.” I leaned up, brushing his forehead with my lips. “You deserve it.”

The next day, right before the trip was supposed to be over, Serena and I made the trek from the lodge to the hospital. Tyler’s condition had been upgraded from serious to guarded. The doctor had told him that his leg would heal and there would be less than 10 percent mobility loss. Tyler looked at me curiously, then at her as I looked at my watch. I flipped on the TV to Dick Clark’s New Year’s Rocking Eve, turning the sound down so it didn’t bother the other patients. Serena pulled out a bottle of sparkling cider; I poured three or those little throwaway plastic tumblers hospitals use and we drank it as the countdown began. When they got to zero, Serena and I leaned forward and kissed him on each cheek. I took out the camera Matt and Marion had bought for us and took a series of photos of her hugging him, kissing his cheek, leaning against him with a wide smile on each face.

"That was very kind of you," she told me as we left afterward.

"told you. He's too good a man for me to stand in the way of your happiness."

"No. I mean the other thing."

"What?"

She sighed, stopped me, and turned me to face her. "Count with me. Ten, nine, eight, seven..." I looked at her, still confused. We reached zero, and she said, "Happy new year!" Then she leaned over, and gave me a soft kiss.

She leaned away, and I whispered, "Happy New Year!" and gave her one back.

I went to the Valentine's Day dance and watched Tyler dance Serena around the floor. Damn, the kid had guts. He had not only gotten full mobility back in the last month, he now intended to join the swim team at Loyola. I had kept my promise and when he left the next day, Serena and I were there to wave as he boarded the plane.

It was the Monday after Valentine's Day that I noticed that someone was following me to school. There was a figure in a sheepskin coat balaclava and sunglasses on the corner. It watched us drive in when Caitlin drove us to school, then as we drove out. When I went to the gym that week, the silent figure followed me. I wondered who it might be.

The holidays and all of the time since September had eaten up all but a million bucks and had started making inroads into that as well. Still no joy.

I beat up on the heavy bag, and as I did, I saw the silent figure enter the gym. I looked at whoever it was, then shrugged, going back to what I had been doing. I was gasping when I finished. I went to the locker room, took a shower, and had just stepped out wrapped in a towel when I saw the person standing at the end of the lockers.

“Can I help you?” I asked.

Slim hands came up and pulled off the hat and glasses simultaneously. “Yes you can. You can tell me who you really are.” Amanda O’Neal was staring furiously at me.

“Oh God...” I said.

“You have been living in my parent’s house, pretending to be me, going to school in my name, for all I know seducing my sister and I want to know who you are.”

I collapsed on the bench. “It’s a long story.”

“I have all day,” she said implacably.

I told her the truth. Not all of it. I didn’t mention spending over 300 thousand dollars trying to find her. But I told her who I really was, that the face was not my choice, it had happened because of a well-meaning doctor, and that when I had run into Serena, she assumed I was Amanda.

“So you pretended to be me,” she repeated. “You lied to my family, lied to the school, lied to God for all I know. That ends this very minute.” She stalked forward, standing within striking distance, fists clenched.

Then her hand lashed out, my head rocking from the slap. "I don't care what sick purpose caused you to do that. I don't care who your father is or who you think your father is. You *will* stay away from my sister, stay away from my family. If you come within a mile of them, so help me God, I will tell the police you're some sick perverted stalker and have you arrested!"



I nodded. "I'll stay away." She nodded sharply, then left.

I didn't know what to do. I packed my gear numbly, and left the gym for the last time. I found my feet leading me home...

No, to Serena's home, where even now Amanda was telling them all what a monster had been doing for the last six months.

I didn't have a home any more.

I went to the clinic and sat in a chair numbly. I know the secretary talked to me, I know the nurse and an orderly did as well, but I was numb. My entire life had come crashing down, and I couldn't find it in me to care about anything else.

Zim had Muzak in the waiting rooms; suddenly the song that was playing came through clear as a bell.

Remembering times gone by

Promises we once made

What are the reasons why

Nothing stays the same

That's all I had now, wasn't it? Memories that would have to sustain me through the rest of my dreary life.

'There were the nights, holding you close

Someday I'll try to forget you

As soon as my heart stops breaking

Anticipating

As soon as forever is through,

I'll be over you.'

Damn it, that wasn't true! I would never get over her. I would just go on with what was left of my pathetic life.

I heard the bell on the door and looked up. Doctor Zim was locking the door, and had turned the sign. Somehow it had gone from an early spring day to pitch black outside. I didn't know how much time had passed. He knelt in front of me. "Amanda? What's wrong?"

"The real Amanda is back, Doctor. She's back, thinks I'm some kind of pervert and told me to stay away from Serena forever."

"So what are you going to do?"

"I don't know." I started to sob. "I don't know!" I threw myself at him, and cried.

Banishment

It was like being in a fever dream. I know I ate and slept, but every other waking minute for three days was spent staring at the ceiling. I could tell you that each tile had exactly 164 holes, but beyond that my mind was blank of everything but despair.

I could never see her again. I couldn't speak to her, touch her hold her ever again.

On the third day, something broke through at last. I was lying there, staring at the ceiling when I heard the sound of an action movie in the next room. Doctor Zim liked the American action movie genre a lot. Then I heard someone singing. Part of me didn't give a damn. The other part listened.

It must have been the movie *Against All Odds*, because that was the song. Then as if God had wanted me to hear, the words reached down and ripped into me.

'I wish I could just make you turn around,

turn around and see me cry

There's so much I need to say to you,

so many reasons why

You're the only one who really knew me at all'

No one in this world knew me as well as Serena did. I would live. I could live without her. But it would be an empty shell of a life. I would be a walking, talking robot with no more heart than the Tin Man from the *Wizard of Oz*

'So take a look at me now, well there's just an empty space

And there's nothing left here to remind me, just the memory of your face

Now take a look at me now, cause there's just an empty space

But to wait for you is all I can do and that's what I've got to face'

But I didn't even have that, did I? Like the character in the movies, I was under sentence of death. It had been commuted, but only as long as I stayed away from Serena.

I got mad. I rolled to my feet, looking at that face. Fine. All my good works, all I had done to make her happy, was trash to throw away.

Fine! I could change back to who I really was. Become Peter Stankowski again. But I liked the new me inside that Serena by her very existence had brought

out. The old Peter Stankowski was dead, but this Peter Stankowski would be a monument to her. But like any suicide, I could always leave with a grand gesture, flipping the bird at the world.

I would find my father and beat him over the head with his own twisted sense of honor by suggesting he have his own clinics do the DNA testing to prove who I was on the condition that he promise not to mess with the tests or their findings. He'd do it because he's the kind who bets, knowing he can't lose.

Well, this time he *would* lose because I had all the genetic aces.

I'd get enough out of him that I could move away, I could go to Europe, become a remittance man, spend my life in wine, women, and song, and I'd never have to see this face again. This face...

...This face that my hands were clutching, tears pouring out of my eyes like a flood. This face that I loved so well when it was attached to a woman named Serena. The only woman I would ever love, and now could never have.

I wanted to fulfill my promise to Amanda, but I had to see her, to speak to her. Damn it, after all I had given, I hadn't even had the chance to tell her I loved her. Not me, the person that had lived a lie for her for six months. 'Amanda' had said it hundreds of times, but 'Peter' had never been there to do the same. Me, the person formed by that love that now was cast adrift never to return. It wasn't that I wanted to, It was that if I didn't, I would be as dead as that old Peter Stankowski. But I couldn't go with this face, admit the truth, wearing this mask. I had worked for six months to make Serena happy, and I wasn't going to poison her sister's relationship just out of spite.

I went to see the doctor. He was happy to see me up and called his friend who now lived in LA. The guy promised to send something to me by Fed-Ex. Then I called the lawyers and went to the bank.

On the way back from the bank, the church stood there before me and I walked into the Rectory. Father Monahan was on a ladder. I came up behind him and cleared my throat. "Father?"

"He looked down. "Amanda? What are you doing back so soon?"

"It wasn't me, father. It was... Father I beg you, will you hear my confession?"

"Amanda..."

"Father!" I wailed. "Please! Only God can help me now!"

He climbed down and led me into the nave to the confessional. I knelt down as the screen opened. "Bless me Father, for I have sinned. It had been almost nineteen months since my last confession. I swear before our Savior that it will be full and complete. Nothing shall be hidden from you.

"I am not Amanda O'Neal. My name is really Peter Stankowski. I was injured in a bus accident on October 17th of the year before last. Until the second week of August last year, I was in a coma. During that time, I was declared dead because Tom Casey, an orphan from St. Anthony's Boys Home was beside me, and they assumed his body was mine.

"When I awoke, I had Serena O'Neal's face. My doctor told me that I had been declared dead. I was now a Jane Doe because the hospital had made a mistake and marked my file as female. I discovered among my effects a bank card given to me by my late Aunt

Glenda which has given me money to do what I must. I tried to contact my father, but he has not been back to Virginia Beach since my reported death.

“I was getting off a bus when I met Serena, and she automatically assumed that I was her sister Amanda...”



Phase One was complete. My penance was lighter than I could imagine. He felt that God had punished me enough. Before I left the church for the last time, I gave him fifty thousand dollars. I would have given him more, but I had a use for it still. There was one last thing I had to do before this incarnation of Amanda O'Neal disappeared. I might up end up in jail. I knew that. I also knew that I would end up dead within a month; without Serena, I had no reason to live.

The church condemns suicides to hell for eternity, but there are two forms of suicide the church will accept, covered under the blanket of deprivation. If I starved myself, or refused liquids, I would die. It takes three weeks on average without food, three days without water. If I went off somewhere and used either method, it would be considered an extreme act of faith. I put myself completely in God's hands, and what happened from that point was His will.

I picked up the dice, rolled them in my hand. I asked all of the female saints to blow on them, then threw them for the last time...

The next morning I went to the doctor's office and looked at what I had asked for. The makeup man hadn't sent it; he had delivered it. It would require more skill than I had to attach it to my face.

I went to the salon and had Janice pin my hair down again. I didn't tell her anything. She kept asking me what was wrong, but I knew that if I started talking, I would start crying, then screaming. When she was done, I handed her every cent I had. I didn't look

at her face when I blithely gave her over a thousand dollars.

I went back to the clinic, changed my clothes, removed that damn prosthesis for the last time, slid on the wig, then sat in the chair as the makeup man did his own brand of magic.

It was a long way to the school; I had hired a limo. It arrived as school was ending for the day, and I climbed out. My legs felt weak, I could barely stand because of all the emotional pain I was suffering but the doctor had loaned me a cane. The students stared at the car and a lot of people gasped when they saw me. I walked slowly forward, and like a school of fish before a Great White, they separated until I was staring at Serena and Amanda. Serena looked as if she had been gut shot, Amanda was noncommittal.

I walked up until I stood less than five feet from them and looked into my true love's eyes for the last time.

"Serena," I whispered.

She moved toward me, and Amanda's hand caught her. "Oh God, it can't be... Peter?"

"Do you know how long I have hoped to hear you say my name?" I asked her gently. "To see you again?" I looked past her at Amanda's furious face. "I've been in a coma and in and out of the hospital ever since the accident. I wasn't cleared by my doctor to be here before now."

"But Peter, what hospital, where?"

"That doesn't matter. I've been forbidden to see you ever again," I said. "I was told to never come close to you as the price of my being made well again, and I

will honor my promise. But I have to say this to your face regardless of what happens to me afterward.

"I love you. I have loved you since St Michael's School. I have always loved you and always *will* love you.

"If fate had not intervened, perhaps I could have proven this to you. One day I would have asked you to marry me and prayed that you said yes. But that is not to be. I must give you up and I ask, no I beg you, to forget me. If I can't be with you, I will die inside every minute, knowing you are waiting for me to return.

"I heard your sister finally came home, and I rejoice that she is with you again. May you live long and happy lives together. May you find a better man than me to marry, and I swear by all the saints that I will dance in honor of your wedding wherever I am, and I will drink to the health of every child you have, and if possible, help them in their lives as if they were my own." I looked at her one last time, my heart a shattered lump on the ground. "Goodbye."

I turned and walked back to the car. "Peter?" I heard her whisper.

"Peter?" I heard her cry, but I couldn't see. I fumbled for the handle, finally caught it and clambered into the car.

"Peter!" She was running toward me. I couldn't take it. If she reached the car, touched me, I'd hold onto her even as the police dragged me away.

"Drive." The driver looked confused. "Damn you, drive!" The tires spun, smoking, and I ran away. I saw her stop in the street, staring after me. Then she fell to her knees.

Then she was gone.

I ripped the mask from my face. I flung it onto the floor, and began kicking at it, screaming my rage at what I had done. When it was nothing more than a misshapen lump of plastic, I finally stopped.

'Don't hang on, nothing lasts forever but the earth and sky

It slips away, and all your money won't another minute buy.'

I pulled out the card, staring at it hatefully. The song was right. Almost a million dollars, and it was worthless to me. I would not even bother my father.

My life was over.

'Dust in the wind, all we are is dust in the wind

Dust in the wind, everything is dust in the wind.'

'A compromise would surely help the situation

Agree to disagree but disagree to part

When after all it's just a compromise

Of the things we do for love, the things we do for love

The things we do for love'

Reborn

I handed the card to the doctor when I got back to the office. "Doc, there's just under a million left. Play St Nick for me and give it away."

"But your face."

"Yeah. Give me my own face back first. When can we do it?"

"I can have a full team here by tomorrow evening."

The next evening I lay on the table, the prosthesis finally gone for good, looking up as the mask was lowered over my face. "Count backward from 100," the anesthesiologist said.

"100, 99, 98..."

The room was dark when I awoke but I knew that ceiling. Unlike the last time, I felt bandages. A figure sat in the chair beside me. I licked my lips. It hurt. "Doc?" I whispered.

"You lied," The visitor said. A hand came forward and the table lamp came on. Amanda looked at me coldly. "I told you to stay away from her and you said you would. You lied to me!"

I was having trouble tracking. I lied? Oh. "Had to see her one last time. Tell her how I feel..."

"You implied to her that I had forbidden it!"

"No... Ask anyone at school... Everyone knew what my... my father is like... Would have cut me off without a cent for even looking at her... Hurt her if I refused... She would assume it was him, not you..."

"So now she knows you're alive. What makes you think she won't look for you?"

"My father again. He would hire detectives, body guards... Better protection than the Pope... Even if she tried, she wouldn't get near me."

“So what now?”

“Won’t get near him except to get money so I can go away... never come back...” I was drifting in and out but I could see and think more clearly now. “Won’t want to be happy without... her.” I couldn’t tell her what I had decided. She would have considered it a ploy. Better to merely die unremembered.

“You love her that much.”

“Yes.”

“And the money you already had?”

I looked at her. Had I told her about the money? I must have. Forgot. “Gave it away... Not... Not important...”

“Oh really. And where did you give this money away?”

“Not your concern... All gone...”

She glared at me hissing. “You are the most disgusting, irritating, man I have ever met. And working in New York, that’s saying something.”

“You... were there?” I shook my head, confused. “Detectives... looked for you.”

“When they checked the records, they would have found an Adorato O’Neal at the school. Adorato is the Italian word for Beloved, as Amanda is the Spanish word. I knew Dad would check, hoping against hope.

“I already know from talking to Serena that you tracked me as far as Yellow Tavern, and they told you about New York. What she didn’t know was why you went there. Any answers?”

I merely looked at her. “You knew I wanted to go to the High School for the Performing Arts?” I nodded.

"I'm in the junior class there. I'm supposed to become a senior in June."

"But Serena's only a freshman."

"No one told you about us, did they?" I looked confused. "Serena is a wunderkind. So am I when I exert myself. She could have been a freshman, jumped two whole grades the year I left. But she wouldn't do it because of me."

"Because of... you?"

"Yeah." She shook her head. "Didn't want to leave me high and dry by moving on to a new school before I got there. When I left, I finally found a reason to bust my hump."

"Acting."

"Yep. I played Sarah Fontaine in the Colonel's Child Bride and liked it. I had the audience in my hand, and had men who thought I was lying about my age trying to marry me, to just touch me!" She looked ecstatic. "In fact, right now I am supposed to be in rehearsals for an Off-Broadway production of *Lolita*. At least I was until someone found an old paper and asked me if I was related to the O'Neal's of Virginia Beach.

"It took me over a month to track down a video tape of the story. I saw my sister walking into school. Imagine my surprise when I noticed that *I* was with her.

"I took time off from school. Sucked up to the director, no, not in that way, to get two weeks off from rehearsals. Something weird was happening to my family and I wanted to know what the hell you were doing there.

“Serena acted like I hadn’t left when I finally came home. She’s so much more affectionate now. Your doing, no doubt.”

“Most important person in the world.” I was starting to come out from under. I looked at my hands. “I gave up half a year of my life to be her sister when I could have just gotten my face fixed.” I looked at her. “She wouldn’t even have come near me after you left. She felt she would be betraying you if she was happy while you were still missing. I couldn’t stand by and see her in such agony if I could help. I did what had to be done to keep her happy.”

“Let’s see... It’s taken me almost a week to discover all ‘I’ had been doing. I had to talk to a lot of people and be very subtle about it.” She leaned back, fingers steepled in front of her.

“First, Serena runs into me purely by chance. She immediately knows it is me, and drags me home. I spend that evening not really talking to Dad and Mom but listening like a spy, learning a lot about what has happened since I had left. They are under the impression, you see, that I have lost my memory.

“Then I show up at school in disguise looking for the picture of one Peter Stankowski. Yes I heard all about Stankowski from the students there. That he was a standoffish little prig who wouldn’t give you the time of day. Killed in a tragic bus accident October before last. When Serena discovers my interest, she shows me a photograph, because she foolishly loved this little monster and thought I felt the same. When she cries because he is gone, and I have returned, I promise to never leave ever again. I take the tests necessary, and get into school so I can be with her all the time.

“I go to Mass, and Father Monahan, who is a very good friend of the family, is surprised. I don’t greet him, I don’t go to confession or Holy Communion. Instead I ask him some silly question about which saint to pray for in helping to find someone. He gives me the names of three saints. As he stands there, I say a prayer to each and light candles to them. Alarmed, he asks me who I am looking for and I say, ‘myself’.”

“Then I defeat the biggest bully in the school with two blows. I met him last week in the hall and he actually went around me with his head down, hoping I wouldn’t look at him

“Then surprise surprise, I become an expert on American Literature. Imagine Mr. Kaufman’s surprise when I had trouble explaining how much the later working conditions on merchant vessels were affected by the novel *Two Years before the Mast*. He asked me if I was mad at him because he had ‘spurned my affections’ the last time he was here. I told him I had a lot on my mind, and I would do better.

“Then I show up at the Halloween party dressed in a boy’s uniform with a name tag marked Peter Stankowski and proceed to monopolize my sister’s entire evening.

“My older sister Caitlin returns to go to work at the school. She teases me that I whisper my sister’s name in a dream, and I don’t react right. What I should have done is profess undying love and try to nibble on my little sister while she giggles. But she really gets suspicious when I can’t even remember her birthday. Imagine that!

“But Caitlin forgets her suspicions when someone kidnaps my sister. I go berserk. I almost kill three men; verbally threaten to kill one and to neuter another.

Why would someone who was part of some criminal conspiracy risk their life for some girl they had only met a month before? Just in case you were curious, you broke one man's jaw, ruptured three discs in another, and if you had kicked him a little harder, you would have gelded the other. Neither your coach at school nor the woman who is your weight trainer was surprised that you could be so lethal when told the circumstances. I am sure Yablonski would agree.

"Then suddenly I just have to go Yellow Tavern. Serena refuses to let me go alone. When I get there, I do what? I leave her sleeping where she is safe and make a beeline for the Regimental Club. Serena wakes up, follows, and runs into an old friend named Yancey Stokes. I come in ready to commit murder but calm down as soon as I know Serena is safe. I get my photo album and a brief synopsis of what I had been doing a year earlier and the problems the family had suffered. Suddenly out of nowhere, someone donated 50,000 dollars anonymously to rebuild their little theater. Would you know anything about that?"

I bit my lip.

"Then when we are going to buy Christmas presents, I find an envelope. In it is 20,000 dollars in two 10,000 dollar bricks, fresh from the bank. I use logic and 'remember' a similar incident to convince my dad to post advertisements rather than handing it to the police.

"A local newspaper and a local TV station pick up the story. A month later, the money is handed to Dad in a very touching, televised ceremony. Who is standing behind him with Serena? Why, me! Let me guess. You were the one who conveniently 'lost' twenty thousand dollars so it could be 'found'. That is why no one

came forward to successfully claim it, right?" I kept my mouth shut.

"I thought so. Then I go on a skiing trip with the school. Serena gets lost on the slopes. Do I sit in the lodge and wait? Do I have hysterics? No.

"I break into the emergency locker, steal a bunch of gear, disobey every safety instruction, risk my life by going up the mountain alone in the worst blizzard of the season, find my sister and her companion, build them a shelter, bind their wounds, then I try to go back down the mountain in that blizzard trying to get help. Somehow I am knocked unconscious.

"The rescue workers arrive. When they find me, I immediately tell them that the others are there and refuse to go down the mountain without them. I fight like a lioness against them until they finally go looking where I tell them to look. When they find them, I demand that the others who were more seriously injured be sent down in litters.

"The boy with Serena was very badly injured. He had stepped in a hole and his leg was very badly broken. The local doctors are sure he is going to lose his leg." I snapped up right at that. "You didn't know," she said. "It is probably no surprise to you that less than an hour after they say they might not be able to help, a very efficient doctor got a rather odd phone call. Someone told him that he was needed desperately. When the doctor told this unknown person that he was about to go on vacation, the person told him they would not only pay for that vacation, but all of his usual fees. He thinks they are joking but less than twenty minutes later, a very reputable lawyer calls him, tells him his client has already authorized the funds transfer, and the lawyer is arranging a vehicle to

get him there. You probably don't know anything about that either, right?" I looked at her. This wasn't as hard as dealing with Caitlin, but Amanda already knew too much.

"The doctor checked on the request. When he heard what had occurred, he immediately had the doctors clamping off ruptured arteries, and pumping blood through the lower leg. He said to the papers that if they had waited until morning, Tyler would have lost his leg. The damage was severe and only the best man for the job could have worked that miracle." She cocked her head. "Do you know what he did with the fees he was paid for that job? And the money that he didn't have to spend on the trip?" I just stared at her.

"He spoke to some girl at the clinic who compared his actions, and the actions of the one who paid that money, to the Good Samaritan. He gave it all to that Podunk little hospital to help them to buy a Life Flight helicopter they have been trying to fund for three years now. If you ever go skiing there again, you will see it. Those forty-odd thousand dollars he donated finally got them the helicopter. When they wanted to dedicate it to him, the doctor refused.

"He asked instead that it be dedicated to, and I quote, 'the unknown person that saved a young boy's future life and leg at my hands. The person who, like the Good Samaritan, helped someone he didn't even know, and left without saying a word or expecting thanks'. That is why the helicopter is now named 'Good Samaritan'.

"Then we come to the week after Valentine's Day. I go to the gym as I always do three times a week. Did you know that while I can fight to protect myself, I prefer stiletto heels and nails? But suddenly I am enam-

ored of boxing. I meet some lunatic who claims to be me. I tell her some cock and bull story that I am really a dead man who by pure accident has my sister's face and when I am challenged, I don't fight her, I walk away. Whether I know it or not, I am an extremely deadly person in such a tiny package. I have proven that violence is not beyond me. But. I. Walk. Away." She looked at me for a long time.

"Now think of my last week from my point of view. I face this impostor and hear this story. I think whoever this person is, they are lying. The man she claims to be is dead. I don't know what she is thinking or plotting or planning, but I tell her to go away and never return. I return to my home, where my sister acts like I never left. To ease her suspicions and to prove my own, I decide to spend what time I have left of this vacation I have arranged pretending to be the impostor. I go to school where I begin to find out all of what I was supposed to have done.

"I went to church, where I hear all about the interesting things I had done. Did you know I have always gone to confession, pardon the pun, religiously? But for six months, I didn't go. Father Monahan was sure I had become apostate. He felt much better when I did go to confession that Sunday. He thanked me for returning the trust he had always had in me.

I asked him if anything unusual had happened during that last six months. He said that I suddenly started lighting candles and then he mentioned something really odd.

"You know what that parish is like after being there for six months. Most of the people are poor. Yet suddenly right after I came home, someone began stuffing money by the bagful into the poor boxes. Two or three

hundred dollars a week; over six thousand dollars to date.

“He knew it was all from the same person who wasn’t a local, because the average family that lives there could never afford something like that. I was the only new face in the congregation but where would I have gotten that kind of money?”

“Then that very night I get an interesting call. He calls my house, asks for me. Once he is sure he was talking to me, he said, ‘It may surprise you, but ‘you’ came by totally despondent, positively frantic and gave me an interesting confession’. He wouldn’t tell me what ‘I’ said of course, but he ended with an odd comment. He said, ‘I think you have misjudged yourself’.

“Then I’m at school when this limo shows up. Out of it steps the supposedly late Peter Stankowski. I assume that this must be Plan B. Sweep the poor girl off her feet this time as a man, get back into her good graces, and ignore me. Instead he professes undying love for my sister, tells her he is forbidden to see her ever again, begs her to forget him and marry another, then escapes, leaving my sister a heartbroken wreck.

“So I tell myself, there is evidence of what kind of monster he is if I only look for it. I looked the first day I was home and what did I find?” She opened her bag, and pulled out the ledgers. My heart stopped. I had recorded every emotion, every minute of my life with Serena in those damned books.

“I read them, all of them. You even kept an accounting of what it cost in your attempts to find me. I had all the proof I needed to show my sister that you were a lying bastard. But I hadn’t told the family anything yet.

"I mention to her that night that maybe 'Peter' really didn't care. That he had said that only to hurt her. She defended you with such ferocity I would have thought you were the sister, not me. She said to me that Peter's father was a demon from hell, and that the only good thing the evil man had done in his life was father the boy. She said she would not let him stand between her and happiness.

"She would storm the gates of Heaven and Hell to get him back and until she did, she would never rest. He was the only man she would ever love; she would take Holy Orders if she could not be your wife because the only other beings in the universe beyond reproach were God himself and me."

"That shook me. How could I leave her deluded about you and go back to what I am trying to do? I mentioned that I might have to leave again. If the first reaction was surprising, this one was nothing short of alarming. She began wailing and it took several hours and a promise that I would never leave ever again to get her out of her room. She said it was bad enough that you were gone from her life forever, but if I went as well, she would have nothing to live for.

"I noticed comments about Doctor Zim. You respect him a lot. But do you realize you never wrote his address down? If you had, we could have had this discussion before your operation."

"So you see my position. I cannot just give up my dream; it is close enough for me to taste it. I have to go back to my life, if only for a time. I have to finish school so I can use my acting credits and the fact that I have graduated to build a career on. But I can't do that here. And I can't go without destroying my sister like I almost did two years ago.

“I see these-” She handed me the journals which I took with a trembling hand, “and as much as I want to believe it, I don’t see a monster. I see a man that has given up his own future to protect the woman he loves. A man who spent in excess of four hundred thousand dollars not only to look for one foolish woman, but to help everyone he met that needed help because in some small way they helped either Serena or me or, like the doctor, could help one of those people.”

She cocked her head again. “A man who gave so freely with no thought of return that others were inspired to do the same. Doctor Zim intends to add a free clinic for the working class poor here. Your Vietnamese friend almost lost his job because you needed him here, and was able to convince his boss it was a debt of honor. Father Monahan knows where the money came from now. You’ve helped four Catholic families get children into school anonymously. The Stokes are rebuilding, but they also intend to associate with a school of performing arts in Richmond by allowing them to stage their own productions.

“You have in the last six months done enough good to cancel any debt you might owe to your father. I don’t mean it as an insult, but you really do take after your father. He uses money as bait in a trap to force men of honor to forswear their honor. You use it to gently convince others to do what is right. If it had been you instead of your father in charge of his money, you would be right up there with Ernst Schindler as a humanitarian. But your portrayal as my sister still disturbs me.

“I have only one question of you. How far were you willing to go?”

"If I had found out you were dead, I would have remained as Amanda to my dying day," I answered softly. "Doctor Zim could have done the operation. I would have been her sister and her protector, stood between her and the world, and gone to my grave with no one ever knowing my secret, except for God."

"What do you intend to do now? I can't plan for my future with you as a human sword of Damocles."

"What more do you want? I had to see her, but I hoped that by begging her to find another, I could set her free. I've cut myself out of her life forever," I said dully. "I burned the bridge, salted the earth. Once I have the money, I won't even live in the same country as her." I looked at her and almost screamed, "What more do you want from me? My death? Hand me the knife!"

She looked at me for a long moment. Then, softly, she said, "I want you to pretend to be me again. Just until I get out of school in New York."

I looked at her in shock. "Did you just say what I think you said?" She nodded.

I fumbled for the call button and buzzed. Then I touched my face under the bandages. "I don't know how fast the doctor can fix this. I'll have weeks of swelling."

"That quickly?"

"You don't get it," I sighed. "Heaven is beside Serena. Even if you told me to leave and never come back when you return for all time, I would give my soul for the days you grant me."

Doctor Zim came in. "So you are awake. The operation went well, and you can be out of the bandages in a week."

“Doc, put my face back. Give me Amanda’s face again.”

He stared at me, then looked at Amanda, who nodded. “Human skin is not like plastic or rubber, young man. I can’t guarantee that you will ever get your real face back if I do this. I can’t guarantee that I will even be able to return your face to what she looked like. If we wait a couple of weeks...”

“No, doctor. I can’t wait that long.” I touched my face. It hurt a little. Probably the painkillers were taking off the edge. “Do it.”

“So bossy, all the time you are bossy.” He waved a finger at me. “Did you even look at yourself? You don’t care that you may be a circus freak if I operate again in so short a time?”

“Doctor, I don’t care if I end up looking like the Elephant Man when you’re done. I have to take the chance. Please, just do it.”

“No. You look at what I do. You see real you again. Be happy with your face.” He grabbed a pair of scissors, slashing through the bandages. “You look at all of my work you want to waste. Then you tell me again to ruin it!”

I closed my eyes and felt the bandages being ripped away. He thrust a mirror in my hands. “Look.”

“Doctor,” I said patiently. “I don’t think I’ll have the courage to go through with this if you force me to look. I know what I looked like. I will treasure that memory but the only face I can love is Serena’s. If I cannot be there with her, and Amanda cannot, then you leave me no choice but suicide. I have already destroyed her love. At least my death as Peter would give her some closure.”

I heard a step and a gentle hand touched mine, pushing the mirror up. "Look, Peter," Amanda said.

"No, Amanda. I won't look at what I might have had."

"Open your eyes!" They snapped open at the command and she pointed. "Look!"

I looked hesitantly down. The hair had fallen over my face and I couldn't see it. I carefully pulled it back.

Serena's face looked back at me.

I stared at it, then at her, then at him.

"She arrived just as you were going under. Didn't even get a chance to start. I think you are bossy. Oh boy! Stay around her; get lessons from a master! She chased everyone out and spoke to me, told me what she needed to know. I promised to help. Put the bandages on you, let you wake up."

"But my face hurts..."

"Small sterile needle. Poked you along lines where I would have worked right before you woke up. Not even blood." He shrugged. "Pain for a few more minutes, then nothing. Not even scars."

"I had to know." Amanda said softly. "I know what your ledgers said. Fifty thousand to the Stokes, over two hundred thousand to different detective agencies, one hundred thirty thousand to one doctor." She waved at Zim. "And forty seven to another. Dumping 20,000 dollars on the off chance that you could convince Dad to keep it; giving the good doctor here almost a million dollars and saying; 'Play Saint nick for me'.

"What kind of man throws money away like that? A con man? You couldn't have gotten a tenth of what

you have already spent out of them. Someone who was trying to rip off Marcus Stankowski? The man would laugh at the attempt."

She sat on the bed, and touched my face gently. "No. The only kind of man that would do all of that is a hopelessly romantic fool doing everything he can to make the woman he loves happy. That has given up half a year to be there for her every minute." She leaned forward and kissed my cheek. "A man I will be proud to call brother-in-law when I return. I told Serena that I intended to speak to you tonight. That between the two of us we would somehow make your father see sense. You two would be together if we had to move Heaven and Earth. If she challenges Heaven and Hell, I will be on one side of her, you on the other.

"That is if you can do this for me, starting tonight."

I stared at her in amazement. I could step right back in, become Amanda again until she returned. Then I could come back as myself, sweep Serena off her feet, live happily ever after.

"That is if you want to. Far be it from me to force you into..."

"Yes!" I cried. Then I whispered, "I'll do it! I'll do anything for the woman I love."

"Then you had best get dressed. Mom and Dad will already be upset that you were out late. I had a talk with dad you'll need to deal with but I am sure you can walk widdershins around that. You've done it before."

"But you still have a week of your vacation."

"Peter, remember what you said a moment ago? That you didn't think you had the guts to ask him to change your face again if you saw it in the mirror? My lovely brother-to-be, I knew exactly how you feel. If I

don't go now, I don't think I will have the guts to go back to cold and friendless New York." She raised an admonishing finger. "But that doesn't mean I won't ask for two weeks during summer vacation."

"I'll pay your way round-trip."

"You'll do nothing of the sort. I expect you to squirrel away whatever you have left and spend it on my sister. Now get dressed."

I leaped from the bed, putting the prosthesis back on. I slipped into the clothes she handed to me, then looked at her hesitantly. "How do I look?"

"Like you belong." She kissed me on the cheek. "Someday we will, all three of us, look back on this and regale your children with what you have done for love. No man has ever done more." She kissed me on the lips. "Take care of her. Protect her, be with her, love her for both of us."

"I swear I will."

"I was thinking of asking you to play..."

"Sebastian in Twelfth Night," I interrupted.

She grinned, kissing me on the cheek. "Go on. She's waiting."

Doctor Zim gave me a lift to the house. He handed me the card. "You might need this." I climbed out of the car, staring at the house. I wanted to run away, I wanted to run in. I couldn't think of what to do.

I walked forward,

I had barely walked in when Serena tackled me. "Where did you go? Did you see him? I was worried!"

"I'm sorry, my love." I hugged her, kissing her on the cheek. "I just needed some time to myself tonight."

“So? Tell me!”

“He said he would come back by this time next year if he has to come as a beggar.”

“A beggar? I wouldn’t care if he were in a wheelchair, burned beyond recognition and we could never touch each other!” She looked at me and I saw such serenity and strength in her face. “I love him. It is as simple as that.”

“You almost ended up with the police asking you politely to head back home after they cuffed you and threw you in the car this time,” Caitlin commented, coming from the kitchen. “Dad and Mom are driving around trying to find you.”

“All right!” I laughed. “I promise, and will repeat the promise when they get home. I will let them know where I am. I’ll even call them if I am going to be late from the Gym. I will try to never worry them again.” I looked into Serena’s eyes. “I have far to go and promises to keep.” I kissed her cheek, and hugged her to me. “But I will go with you every step of that way and I will always be there for you, no matter what happens. I promise.”

The door opened and Matt and Marion came in. I leaped into his arms before he could speak. “I’m sorry, Dad. I hurt you, but I had to talk to this guy Serena loves. I wasn’t going to deal with a basket case because his father is a monster.”

“After what we talked about, I was hoping you would act more responsibly.”

“What?”

Serena caught my arm. “You didn’t change your mind?” She shook me. “Dad talks to the school so after

summer we go back to school as seniors and you forget?"

Seniors. Of course, they're genius children. Wunderkind. "I wasn't sure I'd pass. I have improved..."

"Nonsense," Matt snorted. "Every teacher in the school thinks you are both intelligent enough to handle it. Your grades have shown it. Mr. Kaufman said he'd beat any English department that refused you to death with a club!" He shook his head. "The Principal thinks you'll graduate with honors even if you are two years younger than the rest of the kids."

"And you're rid of me two years early."

"Amanda, if you weren't my daughter, I'd spank you."

"You mean if I wasn't, you would, Dad?"

He growled. "You know what I mean."

"Yes, Dad. Thank you." I hugged him. "I love you, Dad."

"Well, tell us about this Peter Stankowski."

This was not going to be fun. I looked at Serena. "I think he's a bit idealistic, running away like that at school, but he and Serena are a good match in my opinion."

"Better than you and her?" Caitlin asked sarcastically.

I remembered what Amanda had told me. "Nay, I shall not share her with such a beast!" I leaped, pinning her down, pulled up her blouse, then blew belly farts on her stomach as she writhed and giggled helplessly.

"I shall hold her and play with her until he leaves in disgust!"

Everyone was laughing.

Serena giggled, hugging me tightly, then she pushed me away, looking serious. "But I have to talk to you about Peter, Amanda. I can't have you alone while I am so happy."

"Hey." I suddenly got embarrassed. "It's not like I haven't been alone before."

"No I have decided." She stood, looking at her parents, then at me. "I will not marry Peter."

"What?" all of us said it at the same time. I was stunned.

"If he really loves me, he will accept my terms." She looked at me imperiously. "He must marry us both or not at all."

"Us?" I squeaked.

"Both?" Matt roared.

"Marry?" Marion gasped.

Serena glared at all of us for a frozen second, then turned to go upstairs. She stopped at the bottom step, looked back at us coolly, then winked.

"Gotcha."

I leaped up and she fled, laughing, up the stairs. I followed in hot pursuit. I was going to spank her. I was going to tickle her until she wet herself. I was going to...

I felt the laughter bubble up. I was going to love her. In her own words, it was as simple as that.

'Ooh you made me love you

Ooh you've got a way

Ooh you had me crawling on the floor'

THE END