

Chapter Two

Playground

Amanda “woke”, if waking it could be called, early and placed her feet on the ground from where she had been floating.

“Wish I could have a bed. Or some clothes.” she muttered.

Never in her life did she imagine herself as a nudist, but it looked like her afterlife was going to be one long, embarrassing display of flesh. Tortured flesh, but good stuff still, she mused looking down at her assets.

Walking outside the cottage she looked up and saw Mark still asleep. Outside his window the full moon shone onto the necklace, charging the crystals. The pale white light glittered like ice crystals in their depths.

Well, at least all my power doesn't have to come from him.

Relieved she stared at the moon before her, welcoming its cold light as she waited for the sun.

Mark got up just as the sun's rays painted the sky red and gold. He trundled down the stairs heading for the breakfast table but stopped just before he got to the kitchen. Amanda could hear someone speaking nearby and strained to listen.

“I've got a court date for next month to testify.” their father was saying. “And they want to ask Mark some questions too.”

Amanda's heart beat faster. They wanted Mark to testify? That would mean...

“Is that wise? He's just a baby, I don't want to upset him.” their mother said worriedly.

“I'm afraid so.” her father said heavily. “They want to know what happened when that fu... bastard stepped through that door.”

“What if it hurts him?”

“He'll have to face it sooner or later. This stuff doesn't go away. Ever.”

“But he's just a boy!” she heard their mother sniff.

“I know. But he's seen more than any boy his age should have to see. Thank God he screamed so loud, or he would've disappeared too.”

Amanda didn't contradict him, though Markie had never screamed once.

“Don't, Dan! Don't even say it! I don't want to think of it!” his mother snapped, suddenly angry. “It's bad enough that son of a bitch got his hands on Mandy. God! What he did to her...I want to rip his balls off!”

“Me too, sweetie. Me too. But keep your voice down. We don't want Mark overhearing this.”

“Sorry. It just...I felt so helpless and awful looking at what he did to her, her lying on that metal table under that...sheet. Oh God!” she broke off sobbing.

“Me too. Me too.”

After a while his mother stopped crying and sniffed.

“God, I must look such a mess right now.”

“It's okay. Everyone will understand. I have to get to work but I'll have to talk to Mark tonight when I get home. Get him ready for court.”

“Will...will he have to face...him?! I don't want him near my baby!”

“I don't know. I don't think so. He's just a kid after all.”

God! Don't let him face that monster! He'll take his opportunity, I just know he will! Amanda listened intently, hardly daring to move lest she miss something.

The clock chimed on the wall.

“Shit! Gotta go. You going to be all right?”

“Someday, maybe. But go. Get your butt to work. I'll watch over Mark. Me and Amanda.”

Amanda heard her father's heavy tread falter.

"What was that?"

"Sorry dear. But Mark thinks he's seeing his sister, says she told him she'd always watch out for him. I think he was dreaming about her, that's all. They were always close, after all. I don't see any harm in letting him think his big sister's still watching out for him."

I am mom. I promise.

"Hmmp. Well, maybe not. I don't know. Let me know if it becomes a problem and I'll talk with the boy."

"Sure. I will, hon. Take care."

"I will. Bye."

Mark waited until after his father had left before padding into the kitchen. His eyes were troubled and his head was bowed, Amanda noticed in alarm.

"Morning, hun." their mother said, looking over at him as she stood by the stove.

"Feeling hungry? How'd you like some scrambled eggs for breakfast?"

"It sounds good, mom." Mark said, scrambling into his chair.

"Perfect. It won't take me long. I'll just start the stove."

She bustled about for a while, asking what he was planning to do for the day and if he wanted to go outside.

"I...don't want to." Mark confessed. He glanced at the front door and shivered.

His mother noticed and pursed her lips. "Nonsense!" she forced out cheerily. "It's a sunny day! You'll have a lot of fun at the playground. We'll go together, all right?"

Good. That will give me time I need to figure out a plan for this court date thing. Hopefully, I can husband some power so I can stop the bastard cold when the time comes.

They walked to the playground after breakfast. While his mother sat on the benches with some of the other mothers Mark wandered past the swing sets and the monkey bars and the see-saw. Kids he knew shouted at him to join them, but he waved his hand and pretended not to hear them.

Instead he went to the big pirate ship in the middle of the playground. Kids were around it playing near the slide and swinging on the attached rope. Mark went to the front end where a ship's wheel had been attached. A single ledge ran across the width of the space, used as a step for scrambling up to the top or just for sitting.

He sat down quietly and pulled his knees to his chest. Amanda pursed her lips. Watching him closely, she knew it was time to go outside. Mark always wanted to play, to have chosen this spot with only the ship's wheel here, which didn't attract the kids as much as the rear of the ship with its slide and attached swing rope, meant that he didn't want to and that was bad.

She stepped out and sat beside him on the bench, wondering how best to handle the situation. Before she could open her mouth, however, a shout interrupted her.

"By yourself again, eh sharpie?"

He looked up into the grinning face of a little girl Amanda recognized as Jackie, his best friend since last year. She remembered when Mark had come to her asking how she knew whether or not she liked a boy. When she asked him why he told her there was a girl in his kindergarten class that made him feel strange. Amanda had met her and noticed right away the connection they shared with each other and Lucy, Jackie's twin sister.

Gladdened to see Jackie, Amanda scooted over to make room just in case she wanted to sit. A friend might help snap Mark out of his funk.

"Hey Jack." He said dully. Amanda could tell he didn't really want to talk right now, but his friend plopped herself down next to him.

"Sorry about Amanda." She said slowly, as if unsure what to really say.

"Thanks." Mark said automatically.

She punched his arm.

Amanda froze, she couldn't believe it! Perhaps they weren't friends at all! She readied to defend him.

"Owww! What was that for?"

"To wake you up, you big dummy." She grinned again. "C'mon, you gotta snap out of it! You're no fun sulking."

"Well go find Jimmy or Lucy to play with then." He growled. "I don't want to play."

"I don't want to play with them, I want to play with you! C'mon, it'll be good for you!"

"Go away." He groaned.

"No!"

Suddenly she reached out and snagged his hat. Giggling she ran off leaving Mark scrambling to chase her around the playground, yelling at her to give him back his hat.

"Nyah! Nyah! Can't catch me!" she shouted.

Mark tried, but her long legs had about two inches on him and he just couldn't keep up. She began to outpace him.

"C'mon Jackie! Give me back my hat!"

"You have to catch me first!" she shouted.

Amanda, running alongside the two laughed. It had just been her way of showing off and getting Mark to play with her. The change seemed to have done him good, at least.

Her foot caught in one of the many holes left by the imprints of running shoes. Bits of bark went flying and she tumbled to the ground with a shriek.

"Jackie!" Mark cried, hurrying up to her.

"Jackie, are you okay?!"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine." She said.

"Jackie, are you sure you're okay?" he asked worriedly, looking over his stubborn friend.

"Dude, chill. I'm totally fine." She whined. "See, not even a scratch." She rotated her arms to show him. "Just a little dirty is all. It'll wash off in the shower at home. Here's your hat back."

She plopped it on his head at the same moment she kissed him on the cheek.

"Jackie!"

"Gotcha!" she grinned and took off.

Mark was so flat-footed that he froze for half a second. Amanda grinned hugely as an "Awww!" escaped her. Then he jolted and ran after Jackie as hard as he could, laughing. She'd gotten him! But he'd show her who was king of playground tag!

By the time they got home Amanda was feeling a lot better about her brother. Jimmy and Lucy had joined in for four way tag and they'd played for hours until Jackie's mom had to get her and Lucy for dinner. Then Jimmy said he'd have to get home too. Amanda followed Mark back to their mom and found her amongst a circle of mothers she recognized who seemed to be hugging her or something. They'd let go as they approached and asked how he was feeling. He'd mumbled stuff and their mom had gathered her things and taken him home.

During the walk back to the house Mark was unusually quiet. Amanda glanced at his face and noticed his intense thoughts. But she couldn't do anything and decided to rest in the necklace.

Popping back she situated herself comfortably in her bauble and began to rest.

"Amanda?"

She started. She hadn't realized how quickly she'd fallen "asleep". Reorienting herself, she realized that they were back in Mark's room, and he was fingering his necklace.

Alarmed, she quickly jumped out of the stone just in time to hear him say, "Amanda, can you come out and play?"

She laughed to herself. He was trying to prove to himself that she was real. Mischievously she stuck her mouth behind his ear.

"I'd love to come out and play, but I don't think that's a good idea right now."

Mark jumped almost clean off the bed. He spun around towards her and she was proud to note how he looked right at her. She was visible now, and intended to be so throughout.

"Amanda! Am I glad to see you! Why can't you come out to play, sis?" he asked, hugging her. His arms passed through her misty body and he bit back a startled cry.

"C-c-cold!"

"Sorry! Sorry! Remember, bro, I'm not alive anymore. I'm a ghost, and spirits are cold." Amanda said.

"It's okay." Mark said, trying to hug her again. This time his hands stopped at her skin and she thought she could just feel them, like phantom pin and needles when she was alive. But how she couldn't say. "I love you anyway." he laid his head to rest on her breast, then leaned back, startled.

"Mandy! You're not dressed!" he said in surprise. He closed his eyes.

Amanda phased out her body, focusing on keeping her head visible.

"Better?" she asked.

"Uh...you're a head." he pointed out stupidly when he uncovered his eyes.

"Guess I'm doing good then." Amanda cracked a smile.

"Why are you naked?" he asked plaintively.

Amanda's smile faltered.

"I think because I was murdered naked." she told him. "I can't form clothes, I've tried. I can't get rid of the wounds either. I don't know why."

"You...look like you did when you died?" Mark asked quietly, his eyes flicking down to where her body had been. Then they flicked back to her face. Amanda realized that his gaze rested on her slashed throat. She must look like a horror show, and she opened her mouth to apologize, but Mark looked earnestly into her eyes and said, "It doesn't matter. I don't see them, I just see you."

Amanda swallowed against the solid lump in her throat. For the moment she didn't wonder why she felt her old physical responses as if she were alive. Now she sobbed on her brother's shoulder, deliriously happy.

How long they remained like that, Amanda didn't know. They were brought apart by a knock on the door. Amanda fuzzed out into invisibility, waiting to see what would happen.

Mark looked at her and started. She almost laughed at his expression. A second knock and the sound of her father's voice made Mark shake free of her spell.

"Come in." he called out.

Their father stepped through the door. He was a tall man, about six foot two, with heavy muscles on his arms from obsessive time at the gym and still in his business suit from work.

"Hey dad." Mark said.

"Son. We need to talk."

He walked to the bed and sat down next to Mark. His face seemed drawn and dark circles were under his eyes. He looked *old*, older than Amanda ever remembered seeing him, and his hair! It was silver now! Well, half silver at least. She could see a few brown hairs clinging on together.

"Son, do you remember when the policeman spoke to you about...about Steven and what he said that night?"

Mark nodded.

"Well, we're going to have to go to a place where other people, similar people, are going to want to ask you the same questions." His father said seriously.

"But, why daddy? I've already told the policeman everything." Mark asked plaintively.

"I know. But they are going to want you to go over it again. Steven is on trial for what he did to Amanda and what he tried to do to you. Your testimony...er, what you say about what happened, will help them condemn him."

"What if he...comes after me." Mark asked in a tiny voice, suddenly terrified.

Amanda held him close, letting him know she was there with him. She felt his tiny body shaking. She couldn't blame him. Just the thought of him being in the same room with that monster made *her* shake.

"He won't be able to, son. You're not going to even see him when you give your test...uh, tell what happened. You'll just go in, tell the man in the black robes what happened, and leave."

Mark wrinkled his forehead

"Robes? Wouldn't he want to be dressed before I talk to him?"

His father snorted, chuckling under his breath. Amanda grinned. Oh, Short Stuff!

"No, Mark. Robes are what judges wear. It's ancient tradition that's followed even today. When you are older you will understand."

"I'm old enough." Mark protested. "What's trah-dition?"

"It means it has been done in the past and will continue to do so in the future."

"Oh. So somebody did something once, now everybody does it?"

"Kind of. Don't worry about it. And we'll be with you when it's time, all right?"

"Okay dad."

"All right. But," he added, looking right into Mark's eyes. "If he *is* there son, you are not to speak to him, you aren't to listen to him. You are just going to tell the judge what you saw and then leave, okay? If he tries something, there'll be plenty of folk to stop."

Books flew off the shelves. Mark's cabinets and toys began to shake wildly. Her father gasped and grabbed Mark, pulling him from Amanda's frightened grasp. She stared wildly around and realized...

She struggled to master her fear. Bit by bit the shaking stopped, the books and toys settled. Her father stared around.

"Must'a been an earthquake." he muttered.

"You gonna be okay, son?" he asked, looking at Mark. "You can sleep with your mom and me if you want tonight."

"No, poppa. I'll be fine." Mark said. "I'm a big kid now."

Their father smiled and ruffled his hair.

"That you are, son. That you are. Well, good-night son. Pleasant dreams."

He left leaving Mark alone again. Or not.

Amanda reappeared beside his bed, her form flickered as it hovered above the floor.

"Amanda?"

"Mark...I'm worried. I...don't want you to be anywhere close to that monster."

Mark took her hand.

"I'll be fine, sis. Dad's going to be there and I just tell a man in a bathroom robe what dumbshit said."

"Mark! Watch your language!" Amanda scolded. "Where did you ever hear such words?"

"From school. The janitor knocked over a gallon of paint on the teacher's desk and she called him a dumbshit and to get out of the classroom."

She laughed.

"Okay, so I get why she used the word, though she shouldn't have in front of young kids! You are way too young to know that word, okay?"

"But sis," Mark protested.

"No buts, short stuff." Amanda said sternly.

"Even for *him*?"

Amanda hesitated.

"Even for him. You're better than that, Markie. I know it."

Mark sighed. Why did sisters have to make things so complicated?

"All right, sis. I promise."

"That's my short stuff."