

Chapter One

About Boyfriends – Amanda

I don't want to talk very much about my boyfriends. It is too personal.

How I could put this? Red was my schoolmate. He has red hair and a mustache. He is a few years older than me. He has Down's Syndrome. He asked Mom's permission to get engaged. He said, 'Elaine, I'd like to marry your daughter.' He followed up in school, in the classroom, when he got down on one knee and proposed. I said 'yes.' But I thought it was all a joke.

Then the whole engagement thing went out of control. I stayed the night at Red's house so we could travel to Special Olympics together. I stayed in his room but we were in bunk beds. He was like a roommate. Red's mother set us up with a special romantic breakfast. Actually I think they both did it. It was set up in their kitchen and we had Wheaties® by candlelight. Toast was included. We went to the Special Olympics after that, but I let the romance fizzle out. He was a great person but he was too old for me and too quiet.

Todd was five years younger than I was. He was a basketball star and more my type. His nickname was, 'Long Shot.' He would pass the ball to me, yelling, 'Here Manda!' and I caught it and shot it in. I couldn't run because of my bad knees, so I would stand under the basket, and Todd would get the ball to me. He moved down to St. Clair when we were still in school. He did come to my graduation, but I haven't seen him in years.

About Amanda - Nancy

"I hope they didn't go through my Drummond Island room," Amanda said. She was sipping her cola, looking up at me over the straw, her navy almond-shaped eyes snapping with intelligence.

"Yes. They did. But I saved all the stuff."

“You did? Like Mom and Dad’s picture?”

“Yes.”

“What about the map?”

“Yep.”

“How about my bed I always sleep in?”

“Yes. Still have it.”

“How about your big jacuzzi?”

“No.”

“Oh.” Her expression did not change. She was mulling it over. She had loved the Jacuzzi tub. She was little enough to actually swim in it, turning somersaults, her tiny feet waving in the air, her fat bottom rolling gracefully, her white bald head popping out of the water with a toothy beluga smile. Dad had taught her to swim in Lake Huron when she was small. She floated effortlessly, her skill extending to the pool at her high school, and from there on to Special Olympics.

Her social life had ended after graduation, when she was 26. With school over, she retreated to her upstairs nook in Mom and Dad’s house with her TV, in the remote little town on the tip of the crooked peninsula. I knew she missed her friends. She’d had a lively love triangle with two suitors, Todd and Red. There was a third boy, Satch, tall and lumpy and perpetually adolescent. He grabbed the breasts and crotches of his female classmates. He was regarded by them with a sort of fascinated, disgusted awe. They loved to hate him.

Sex was a constant topic of discussion in school, but never at home. When Amanda was in her early twenties, Dad decided to have her tubes tied, as a precautionary measure. As far as we knew, she wasn’t sexually active, but he was afraid something might happen. Having Amanda consent to the surgery required going before a judge. She had to assure him that this had been her decision.

“Kids are a pain!” she roared, and the gavel came down while the judge laughed.

She recovered almost effortlessly from the surgery. From time to time, whenever the subject of my own procreation came up, she would nudge me and whisper, “Get your tubes tied.”

I was never sure if this meant I should just follow her example, like the time I drew lines on my knees with a magic marker, to match the scars left by her surgeries. But her intimation about my sterilization made me a little uncomfortable. Finally, I asked her. “Why? Why should I get my tubes tied? Don’t you think I would be a good mother?”

“Yes,” she said. “You’re a great mother! To dogs and horses!”

“Shut up!” I roared.

“You shut up!” she said.

She was sitting now, facing me across the table, trying to read my expression. She watched me constantly. We would be driving and she’d be sitting in the passenger seat, and rather than looking out the window, she would be gazing over at me. It was almost as if she was studying my thoughts, examining each fragmented memory with a gentle sort of fascination. Her eyes were always soft and interested.

“I’m sorry about the jacuzzi tub,” I said. “We will have another one someday. And I am sorry about your Drummond Island Room.”

“Oh, it’s okay.”

It wasn’t okay. She had unquestioning faith in me, and I was not measuring up. For years I had provided Amanda with her summer home away from home, and now it was gone. I’d had to make the same apology to my two horses, who had lost their roomy stalls and grassy, rolling pastures. They were now languishing in a muddy, stump-studded space, overcrowded with ponies in Northern Michigan, taken in by the only friend who could make room for them.

I had handled the move with the same sort of vision I used on the divorce; a blank, flat opacity. I had lived on the farm for fifteen years. My trees were still young, stretching upward, nourished by the bones of various beloved dogs and cats, and a goat named Joe. The wild rose bush, that began as just a half dozen twigs my mother had given me, now flourished by the garage door. It spread there, covered in pink petals and humming bumble bees, perfuming the

light wind. Perhaps in some sort of physical statement, my Achilles tendon had burst just weeks prior to the move. The resulting lameness, the foot flopping uselessly with no lift or power, made it impossible to carry anything heavy. Friends came with pickup trucks, sorting through the boxes, questioning what went where, lifting and stacking and hauling my life away. They joked and laughed, avoiding the inevitable, making light of the enormity of it. There was nothing else to do. I had taken the last load and driven down the hill away from my warm and sprawling home, forcing myself to not look back.

“Are you okay?” Amanda said. She still was sitting there with her bent straw, scrutinizing my expression.

“Yes. Vickie and Janny will be here soon. Let’s get a pizza.”

It was September 24, 2010, Amanda’s fortieth birthday. We were celebrating with dinner and a movie. The closest movie theatre was in “the Soo”, Sault Ste Marie, an hour away from Amanda’s home.

“Tell me something about when I was a baby,” Amanda coaxed.

I smiled. “I will never forget those days.”

I thought of Dad’s announcement to us all, on that day, forty years before. “Your new little sister is a Mongoloid.”

His tone was somber and he watched us carefully for a reaction. He had sat us all down, all seven of us, so that we could understand the depth of this new development. We lined up with our sun-tanned faces serious and all eyes in various shades of blue, widening with the new unknown responsibility. The baby, Dad explained, was going to show up with slanted eyes and a large, protruding, pointed tongue.

Our second oldest brother, Theil, already at 18 an ever-calming presence, nodded his head and said, “Dad, you and Mom will never have to worry about her. I’ll take care of her.”

At eight years old, I took this all very seriously. From Dad’s description, the baby sounded like some sort of freak. But my heart immediately went out to her.

Then she arrived. She didn't look like a freak. She was a pink and golden infant with perfect skin and tiny, plump clenched fists. It had been five years since we'd had a baby in the house, and when this one opened her eyes, I saw they were navy blue, so dark that the pupils were indiscernible. I fell immediately, violently in love. I had never seen a baby more beautiful. I even loved her name: Amanda Christina Bowman Bailey. Maybe it was my age, or perhaps it was the fact that she was different from other babies, but my tender mothering instinct kicked in. This became my baby. I dressed her. I fed her. I changed her. I held and talked to her for hours. I sat by the crib and watched her sleep.

Well into her forties by that time, Mom hadn't wanted another baby. She had actually undergone surgery for a tubal ligation before getting pregnant for Amanda, but the doctor had tied off a blood vessel instead. It was an error that was ripe for a major lawsuit, but my parents never pursued it.

I was too young to understand depression. I just knew that Mom was sleeping an inordinate amount of the time, which gave me the freedom – as well as the responsibility - to mother the baby. Besides Amanda, I had three sisters. All of them had names beginning with the letter, "R". So I called them, "the R's." R1 was Raven, the oldest girl, an industrious sort with a strong mothering drive and a cleaning compulsion. She left for college by the time Amanda was 2 years old. R2 was Rose, a tomboy on the basketball team and always bicycling with her friends, and in general too busy to nurture a baby.

As Amanda grew, and eventually learned to stand, Dad would prop her upright on his legs and rock her, back and forward. The faster he rocked, the more she liked it. The chair creaked loudly in time and he sang to her in his booming voice while they rocked.

"Rock a bye and don't you cry, and we'll go up to Granny's,

Upon the hill, behind the mill, and see the little lambies."

The rocking made the baby strong, and she learned to hold her head up and walk and then run. She loved patty-cake, especially the "pick it" part. She loved the feel of scratching on her palm. When she would sit with one of us and watch TV, she would grab our fingers and force them against her palm. "Pick!" she ordered, and we would sit there scratching absently. Forty

years later my brother Marcus and I both have the impulse to start scratching the palm of her hand if we hold it for any length of time.

In time I learned that Mongoloid was no longer the politically correct term for Amanda's genetic anomaly. It was called, "Down's syndrome," named after Dr. John Langdon Down, who fully described the syndrome in 1866. Later, it became commonly called Down syndrome, dropping the apostrophe and "s". But I always preferred to spell it in the possessive form. To me, calling it "Down" could be misinterpreted as something negative: indicating that people with an extra chromosome were somehow lower or lesser than the rest of us. To say, "Down's" simply meant a syndrome had been discovered. The chromosome could be credited to someone. To me, that sounded much better, more like, "Nim's Island" or, "Hershey's Chocolate."