



Reluctant Press presents:

The Mirror of My Love 2



Nick Lorange

A 'HER TV' E-BOOK

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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.

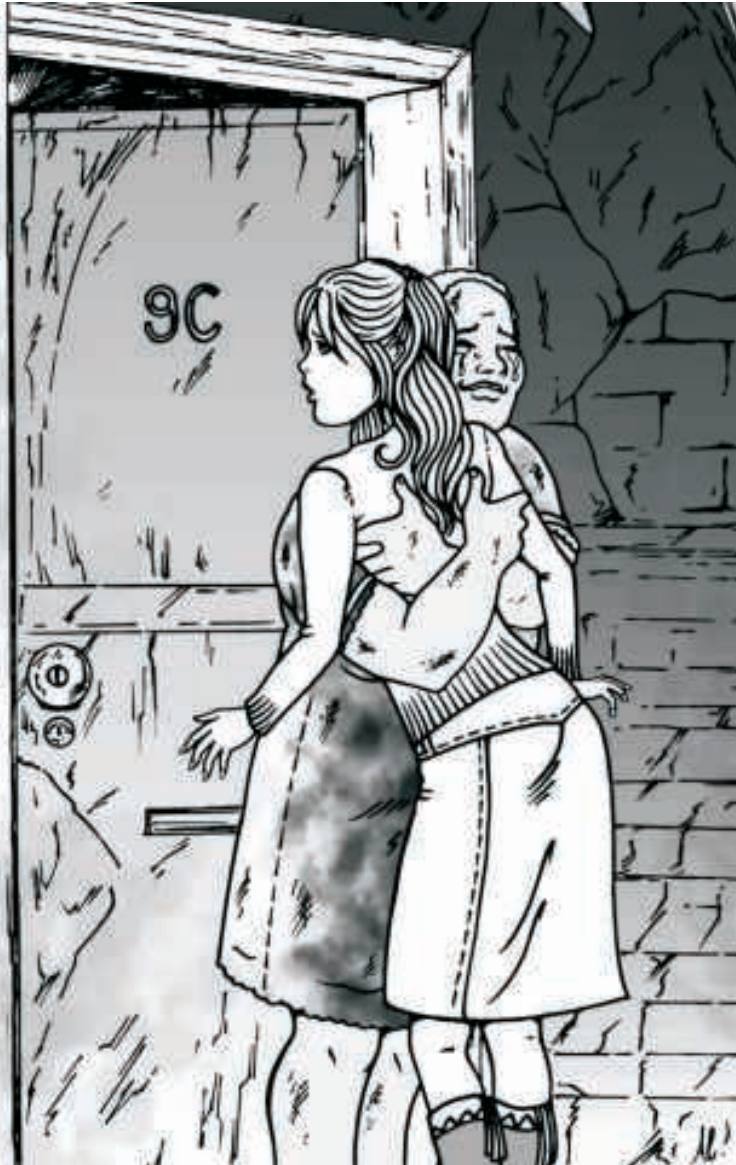
"I know New York is a rough city. But I remember the look in your eyes when you talked about it. You always used to sing that song by Frank Sinatra, *New York, New York*." He sang a bit of it in a passable baritone.

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?"