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# A FEAR NOT PRODUCTION

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SOUL LOVE LIVE PRESENTS

HATE THE GIRL



Written by Denise A. Davis

\* Contains characters from [Mobile Suit Gundam Wing](#).

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# episode two \_ a rock star's work is never done

## *Part One – Good Morning, Amanda*

**THE WAKE UP CALL** came just as Amanda had decided that there was no use in staying in bed. Even without looking at the caller ID, she knew that it was Aidan calling to shake her from her slumber.

“Hello, Aidan,” she mumbled, taking the cell under the covers with her.

“Good morning, Amanda,” he responded. Amanda groaned. He was a morning person. She tried not to let that fact grate on her nerves at the moment. “How are you?”

“Well, I haven’t been awake long enough to know. Call me back so I can find out.”

Aidan chuckled. She heard sizzling in the background as if he were cooking bacon. Breakfast sounded good right now. “I wish I could, but one of my most annoying traits is that I am extremely consistent so I have to pester you until you decide to get up.”

Amanda sighed. He was right in a way. She had to get up and meet with her manager at ten, and it would be nice to be more alert than usual. She had a full day of appearances and promotions and it would be nice to have a moment of serenity outside of the glamorous life.

“Alright, I’m up,” she muttered. “What’s our agenda for today?”

There was a pause. Then Midori, wearing a blue collared blouse and black slacks (with pearls no doubt!), burst into the room, looking harried.

“Manda,” she began, “what the hell is with the strange guy in our kitchen cooking our food?”

*No way!* Amanda leapt out of bed and followed behind the stalking Midori. They clamored to the kitchen where a tallish guy was singing Aerosmith and Run DMC. Aidan, no doubt.

“*And she told me to walk this way...don’t delay...*” Aidan was singing as he tossed frozen raspberries and strawberries into a blender. He pushed liquefy and jumped as he saw their bemused faces.

“Well,” he murmured. “Good morning, ladies.”

Midori crossed her arms over her chest. “Good morning to you, Aidan. Do I have to ask what you’re doing?”

“No. I can just show you.” With a flourish, he presented two plates and two reddish concoctions in tall glasses. “Turkey bacon, eggs, and toasted wheat bread with raspberry-strawberry-citrus punch smoothies.”

Midori goggled. “Wow...” She grabbed her plate and glass and walked to the table to sit down. Amanda smiled appreciatively at Aidan and picked up her own plate and glass. She sat across from Midori, who, being the busy person she happened to be, savored this chance to have breakfast and ate with gusto. She seemed to be happy with Aidan now.

Aidan washed the dishes while the girls ate. Midori raised an eyebrow and shared a look with Amanda. Amanda rolled her eyes.

Midori picked her glass and took a sip. “Thank you, Aidan, for making this lovely breakfast for us. I’ve been telling Amanda we should get a man around here more often.”

Amanda glowered at her, indicating that they’d never had such a conversation. Aidan didn’t see this, however, because he was drying the dishes.

“Well, I figured that you two needed a morning like this.” Aidan turned to them with the dishtowel in his hands. “Besides, I couldn’t avoid an opportunity to make breakfast for a woman, let alone two.”

Midori chuckled and shared another look with Amanda. Amanda raised her eyebrows. “I think I speak for us both when I say we are enjoying it.”

“Some more than others,” Amanda muttered as Aidan finished putting away the dishes.

Aidan crossed the room and stood at the table. “If you’d like me to do it again—”

“I’m sure you’ll be back again,” Midori drawled, crunching on bacon. “Absolutely sure of it.” She turned to Amanda. “Maybe the two of you should go out sometime! I would go with you but I’ve got art galleries to embellish with my work.”

Amanda stared at her, openmouthed and speechless.

“The Fray is playing at Soul Love Live in a couple of days,” Aidan suggested. “I saw that you expressed interest in hearing more of their music.” He paused at Amanda’s expression. “I wouldn’t call it a date, though...I mean...”

“Thanks Aidan. I get the point.” Amanda sighed and pushed the chair back. “I have some appointments I have to keep.”

“Yeah, it’s getting kinda late,” Midori echoed. She stood and pinched Aidan’s cheek. “Thanks for breakfast. Take care of Manda.” With that, she whirled and sashayed out, knowing that Amanda’s gaze was burning holes in her back.

Meanwhile, Aidan turned to Amanda. “Amanda, look, I...” He pushed a hand through his hair. “If you want to come to Soul Love Live tomorrow night, I’m not going to take that as a sign that we’re going steady or something.”

Feeling a bit less ill at ease, Amanda laughed. “Thanks for the clarification. For a second there, I...” She stared into his eyes. “I thought—”

“Thought what? That I was madly in love with you?”

A moment passed. They both laughed and each tried to deny that the laughter was somewhat forced. A short silence ensued afterward, then Aidan glanced at his watch.

“Well, I promised to meet Danie in a few minutes, so I have to go.” He grabbed his keys. “See ya later.”

“Later.”

Aidan left, leaving Amanda in silence. She stood there for a moment, then ventured upstairs.

# The Gracia Journal

## Breaking Out and Making Pandamonium


By Claudia Miercoles

In music news, it looks like Amanda Latona has finally reached the place she had been working for since childhood. And has an appearance on Total Request Live to show for it.

Her debut album, *Pandamonium*, was released yesterday with much speculation and excitement. Latona’s longtime fans were delighted as much as Latona herself at the release of a studio album. Some wonder if Latona’s ex-boyfriend AJ McLean from the Backstreet Boys has had the chance to hear the album. At the release of “Can’t Take it Back” a few weeks earlier, many of Latona’s online fans had acquired the album’s track listing and a few album snippets, including Latona’s next single, “Do You Still?” The speculation comes from this very song, and some even postulate that Miss Latona might want to recreate her relationship with the dysfunctional McLean. Others just say that it’s just a song and it should be regarded as nothing more. And her fans gobble it up faithfully.

She celebrated her album release at a party in Los Angeles hosted by her record company. Latona partied, but not till dawn, with friends and family. Record company executives toasted the young Latona with kudos and wishes for prosperity.

*Part Two – Jumping into...The Fray*

 **THE ATMOSPHERE IN SOUL LOVE LIVE** was quite different than the album launch party had been the night before. These people were trying to groove to a nice beat. There was no networking, no cash-fueled toasts, no weighty predictions of grandeur. Amanda sighed into a Pepsi and turned to Aidan across from her.

“So how does it feel?” he asked. He gestured to a known tabloid photographer who was being escorted out by an SLL bouncer.

“Well,” Amanda began. “I’ll say that it’s still a shock after all this time. But I can’t deny that it feels good—a teensy bit.”

Aidan understood. He sipped mineral water. Amanda noticed that the few times that she had been out with him that she had never seen him drink liquor. “You plan on being the designated driver tonight?”

A bit startled, Aidan glanced down at his drink, then back to her. “Oh...I...” He recovered with a smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “I don’t drink very often.”

“Are you a violent drunk?”

Aidan shook his head. “Hardly. A dumb drunk, really. I...did something really idiotic once, when I was younger.”

“You? Did something stupid?” Amanda chuckled and nearly choked on her drink. “Alright, Aidan Bloom. What was it? Did you go streaking across the street or something?”

Aidan traced the rim of the glass with his finger. “No. I lost my virginity to a former female friend of mine and got her pregnant.”

*Pause.*

Amanda blinked, eyes a little wide. “Are you kidding me?”

Aidan stared her in the eye. “No.”

*Pause.*

“Do you have to pay child support?”

Aidan shook his head. “The baby never made it to term.”

Wow. This was *monumental*. Her first impression of Aidan was of a guy with...scruples. It was shocking to think of him in a torrid affair. He was English for godsakes! He hailed from a London prep school (as his bio from fireinbloom.org had told her). He had breeding. What was wrong with the world?

Spying the look on Aidan's face, Amanda decided to change the subject.

"So, do you know the band very well?" Amanda was referring to the Fray, who was performing in a few minutes.

"Somewhat. I met Chris one night while I was accompanying Danie here, and we started hanging out. I, uh, ran into Gretchen and Samantha, literally. It was the day you were on the radio. I, uh, sort of spilled water all over her skirt. It's a wonder she still talks to me."

Amanda laughed. "Aidan, I'm sure it wasn't that bad."

"I'm not that bad with women, really. I usually have more finesse, to be honest, but..."

Amanda shifted, getting the look in his eyes. "She looked just like Danie."

Aidan's gaze focused on Amanda, then he smiled. "Well, that was part of it. I haven't had good first meetings with Danie's sisters." He picked up his glass and took a sip. "So let's change the subject, shall we?"

"Let's." Amanda tilted her head. "What time is it?"

Aidan glanced at his watch. "It's almost time for the Fray to go on."

As soon as Aidan finished his sentence, a spiky-haired guy came bounding onto the stage amid applause and cheers. He grabbed a microphone and spoke into it. Aidan told Amanda in an undertone that the guy was Max Harris, the new owner of the club.

"All right, I think I get the point." Max flashed them an impish grin. "I know you all love me and all, but I have to give the stage over to three very talented friends of mine. Introducing, from the very streets we all came in, Samantha Dunne, Gretchen Thomas, and Chris Parker—the Fray!"

The crowd clapped wildly as a blonde in jeans tucked into black combat boots and a black wifebeater with silver lettering, a dark-haired girl wearing a leather skirt and a lavender screen tee that proclaimed, *Look Who's Here!*, and a guy in jeans and an A&F T-shirt came onto the stage. The two girls took guitars, and the guy sat behind the keyboards. Amanda figured that the dark-haired one was Gretchen.

Behind them, the drummer counted out the beat and the music began. Gretchen stepped up to the mike with her guitar strapped on and belted out the first verse in her deceptively sweet voice with vigor and attitude. Amanda had to admit that she was hooked.

*I live in a blond star nation  
Brunettes get no participation  
But I won't bleach my hair  
I am a botched creation  
Adding to your agitation  
I won't buckle under your glare*

Samantha joined her to make the harmony for the bridge.

*It doesn't matter what you do to me  
Compared to you I'm invincible*

Chris on the keyboards leaned into his own mike and joined his female bandmates for the chorus.

*Wake up  
You wish  
You don't want any of this  
Go hide yourself  
And not get it  
Take out  
Your time  
Get it thru your mind  
and stop sleeping  
Wake up*

Gretchen grinned at her cousin with a Bangles-type eyeroll, and Samantha stepped up to center stage to drawl the second verse in her lower-pitched voice.

*I live in a high beeled world  
I can't wear these boots I'm told  
But I won't buy new shoes  
But I'm of a punk-girl mold  
Trying to make you fold  
I have already paid my dues*

Clapping her hands to the beat, Amanda turned to Aidan, who suddenly turned to her. There was something in his eyes that Amanda understood but really didn't want to understand. Time stood still for a moment. The song continued on, unheeded by the two of them.

The song ended and broke them from their reverie.

“Um, excuse me,” he murmured despite the applause, and got up from the table.

Amanda watched him leave with a growing sense of disquiet. She didn't have time to pursue it because a familiar face came into her line of vision and overshadowed everything else.

### Part Three – Introducing Gina Delaney...

**OH! ALEX**,” Amanda said, mouth frozen into a smile.

Alexander James McLean wasn't the type to walk away from an old friend, even if the old friend was an ex-girlfriend. Lord knew how many he actually had. He paused at Amanda's table ready for another rousing game of Catch-Up. She wasn't quite sure if she wanted to play, though, but she was sure that she couldn't avoid him this time.

“Amanda!” he exclaimed, brown eyes alight with excitement. “Long time no see. How are you?”

“I'm fine,” she admitted. “Living the life, working myself to death. But I love it.”

Alex nodded and then took Aidan's chair. “I heard your album yesterday. You...” He shook his head as if he couldn't find the words. “You amaze me. I know you've probably heard too many versions of that during the past few days.”

“You can never hear it too much,” Amanda joked.

Alex opened his mouth to say something, but his focus changed for a split second; the change was discernible enough for Amanda to notice that Alex was staring off into another direction. Amanda shifted and followed his gaze.

She was a bit petite with blond hair that was perfectly styled with every strand. Something about her manner dimly reminded Amanda of Britney Spears and she couldn't pinpoint why. Her blue jeans hugged her figure perfectly while her pink screen tee warned the members of the male species, *You'd Better Make More Than I Can Spend*. Amanda raised an eyebrow and tried to smile when she looked in their direction.

The girl waved, at Alex, her face lighting up. She nearly planted herself in Alex's lap, and Amanda's other eyebrow arched. When she noticed Amanda, the smile dropped a touch, but it never disappeared.

“Um hello,” said the girl. Her tone indicated that she was a little wary.

“This is Amanda, sweetheart,” Alex told her. “The friend I was telling you about.”

The girl's face lit up in comprehension. “Oh yeah! Now I remember. Silly me.” She looked to Amanda. “I'm Gina.”

“Nice to meet you, Gina,” Amanda responded. In an effort to be conversational, she asked, “Been in Gracia long?”

“No actually,” Gina answered. She flipped her long tawny hair over a shoulder. “I prefer Hollywood. It has much more glitter

and”—she looked at the Fray on stage with a look of barely veiled disdain—“glamour. Like just the other day I saw—”

“Excuse me, are you Amanda Latona?”

The male voice came from behind her, so Amanda had to shift in her chair again to face him. When she did, she saw a tall, dark-haired young man with an inquiring look in his iridescent eyes. He was accompanied by a bald guy with dark skin. Out of the corner of her eye, Amanda saw Gina raise an eyebrow, and Gina’s expression indicated that she didn’t take too kindly to being interrupted.

“Yes, I am,” Amanda affirmed, a little bemused.

The guy nudged his hairless friend. “See? I told you it was her.” He turned to Amanda. “My name’s Isidore Corcoran, and this is James Sharp.”

Amanda tilted her head, wondering where she had heard those names before. They sounded familiar but she could not place them in her wildly swirling brain. Meanwhile, Gina’s eyes went huge.

“Ohmigod!” Gina leaped out of Alex’s lap and attached herself to Isidore’s arm. James’s eyebrows arched. “I know you! You are, like, the hottest duo in music producing right now.” She held out a hand. “My name is Gina Delaney—”

“Nice to meet you,” James broke in, tone achingly polite, “but we’re here to speak with Ms. Latona.” He gently but none-too-subtly nudged her aside and smiled warmly down at Amanda. Amanda swore there was a little bit of exasperation in his brown eyes.

“We’ve heard your album,” James told Amanda.

“And we love it,” Isidore added. “I know this is kinda spur-of-the-moment and unprofessional, but we would like to work with you.” He produced a business card from his pocket. “Perhaps we can arrange a meeting or something.”

Amanda looked down at the card. *Fear Not Productions*. Hmm. Something to consider. She nodded and gave them a genuine smile. “I will definitely be calling you.”

“We’ll be looking forward to it,” James said. He gave a nod to Alex. “Hey, McLean. You and the other boys in the studio yet?”

“Maybe,” Alex replied. “We’ve been writing some stuff and talking to some other producers.”

“Iz and I have been thinking about a song for you guys,” James explained. “Maybe we can talk about it.”

Alex agreed. He took his pouting girlfriend by the waist and told Amanda goodbye, squeezing her hand warmly before walking off with James and Isidore. Amanda returned the warm goodbye and promised to call him sometime. Gina just gave her a look

that cemented her role as the territorial female and followed. Amanda just stared back and didn't take much offense to it.

As they walked away, Amanda looked at the card again. She glanced up and spied Gina hanging on Isidore's arm again as James chatted with Alex; she was little a frenetic bumblebee trying in vain to find her way into a honeycomb. As Amanda peered at her from afar, she wondered to herself how much things had actually changed. *It's like that old saying, right? Things change and stay the same.*

She turned to the stage as the Fray started another song. She felt a little ache and sighed at it, wondering where it came from. Nostalgia. There was one time when she was the girl on Alex's arm—but she knew she wouldn't have been playing the batting-eyed opportunist. She got where she was on her own will, with her own hard work.

*Had Danie done the same?* she found herself asking silently. No, she realized, because Danie was too fierce for that. And she had deftly covered the associating between her and Alex for years as she pursued her modeling career then one in music. *No, Amanda thought, Danie wouldn't have used him. But Gina might be.*

*He said I was a little pretty  
Wanted to know if I had someone  
And if I didn't, could I have some fun  
Well, I told him the bonest truth  
That he wasn't my type  
And I was trying to be nice...*

Amanda turned away from the stage and glanced around the club. The audience was in a mellow mood, listening to the Fray's smooth song. She exhaled and tried to expel the feelings brought on by Alex's appearance. She didn't notice Aidan was back at the table until he waved a hand in front of her face.

"Is everything alright?" Aidan asked.

Amanda blinked. As she had noticed with Alex, Aidan could see the change in focus. She forced a smile that didn't quite meet her eyes.

"Just saw an old friend," Amanda told him. She then changed the subject because she didn't want to talk about Alex. It didn't need anymore of her time. "So when do I get to meet the Fray?"

*Part Four - Come Together*

**THE NEXT DAY**, Amanda got a call from Mark Timberlake.

Mark had been thinking about her for a while. It was true but he didn't tell her this. He knew that might just freak her out. Especially if she didn't know why he had been thinking about her.

No, he wasn't planning on kidnapping her and engaging in perverse sexual acts that included bondage and leather whips. The twice-divorced Timberlake had work on the brain, and he knew that he was probably thinking a little too much about it given the complaints from his ex-wives. But that was what he did for a living. He wanted to live well.

He also wanted Amanda Latona to live well. And if his plan went right, it could help things considerably.

"You want me to participate in a baseball game?" Amanda asked. She sounded incredulous. Mark couldn't blame her. It did seem like a strange idea. Not unheard of, but strange.

"It's a charity thing," Mark told her. "We're raising money for the local women and children's shelter. I was going to make it a local thing, and I'd be remiss if I didn't ask you to participate. Actually, I'd be honored if you did."

He could hear Amanda's dubious smile spread. "If you're trying to flatter me, it's working," she admitted.

Mark couldn't help but laugh. "Good. I hoped it would."

"When is it?"

"Three weeks from Saturday. It's going to be at on Esperanza Field at Gracia Park. If you don't know where that is, you can have someone drive you. Oh, and I'd go out and buy a good pair of running shoes. You're going to need them."

After he ended his conversation with Amanda, Mark realized that the hardest part of this was going to be telling Danie about it. She was not going to like what he had in mind for this little venture. So he took the easy way out and called Aidan.

After he told Aidan what he had in mind, Aidan sighed. "You are testing me, Mark. You know I'm not going to get Danie to agree to this with Amanda participating. Not after that other little idea of yours."

Mark shrugged as if Aidan could see him. "Is it wrong of me to want to smooth things over between the two of them?"

"And this is your way of doing that?" Aidan demanded. "You are certainly one glutton for punishment."

"I'm an optimist," Mark amended.

"Or bloody thick-headed."

Mark exhaled. If it had to be done, it would. And Aidan would do it better than he could. "Aidan," he began, "just do it. It won't kill you."

“But it just might,” Aidan pointed out. “It very well might.”

## THE LINE UP

### the pandas

Amanda Latona  
Gretchen Thomas  
Aidan Bloom  
Megami Takumi Hill  
Jennifer Dunne  
Danny Holmes  
Eric Thomas  
Nicole Smith  
Moiria-Selene Thomas  
Magdalena Mallone

### the panthers

Danie Thomas  
Samantha Dunne  
Heath Mallone  
Max Harris  
Miyori Arashi  
Jessica Thomas  
Cassandra Stratford  
Rachel Smith  
Christopher Parker  
Melanie Smith

*Part Five – Forget Wrigley Field—We’re Going to Gracia Park!*

**IN THE DUGOUT AT ESPERANZA FIELD**, Amanda stood at the entrance and watched Danny Holmes at the plate. Samantha Dunne was pitching, looking forbidding in her black and red Panthers jersey and hat. She crossed her fingers and hoped for a homerun.

The day was beautiful, perfect for a baseball game. It was warm, but not hot. The sun would cause havoc later, but now it cast its mid-morning light upon them from the clear blue sky. In the stands, spectators watched in rapt attention, cheering when their team scored a point or struck someone from the opposite team out. Advertisements had trumped up the game, and somehow the angle of Danie and Amanda being rivals found itself being exploited to bring viewers and donations. It seemed to have worked. Photographers and reporters stood by, recording the event onto film and paper. So far, Amanda’s team was only two points ahead—and there was no telling how long that would last.

The Pandas were on the offense with two players on first and second base. Underneath a black cap, Pandas pitcher Moira-Selene Thomas crouched expectantly at second while Pandas first basewoman Jennifer Dunne waited at her favorite position. Amanda narrowed her eyes at Danie, who was playing shortstop. It would be interesting to see if Danie would count her own sister out on her way to third base if the opportunity arose.

Inside, Gretchen Thomas peered at Amanda curiously. So far, everyone had kept a polite distance from her because of Danie. No one wanted to see her wrath...but suddenly Gretchen’s interest overrode her fear.

She strode up to Amanda and nodded at her cousin on the pitcher’s mound.

“Sam’s a damn good pitcher,” Gretchen remarked, hoping to start a conversation. “She used to strike the boys out all the time in high school.” When Amanda turned to look at her, she added, “But then again, Moira-Selene kicks major ass, too.” She held out a hand. “Gretchen Thomas, by the way. You’re Amanda, right?”

Amanda shook her hand. “Right. Nice to finally meet you.”

“Likewise.” At the plate, Danny swung and catapulted the ball to the outfield. People in the crowd cheered as Moira-Selene made it home. In the outfield, Jessica Thomas recovered the ball quickly and threw it to Danie. Jennifer danced over second with Danie looking at her threateningly. Jennifer finally settled and Danie threw the ball back to Samantha.

Gretchen leaned down and picked up a helmet. “I think I’m up,” she told Amanda. “Wish me luck.”

Amanda wished her luck and Gretchen sauntered off. Chris Parker, her bandmate, was behind the catcher’s mask and taunted her as she steadied herself over the plate. Inside the dugout, her teammates laughed and joked around. Amanda turned and looked at the roster again as Gretchen hit a single. Bases were loaded.

And she was next.

“Who’s up next, cap’n?” Nicole Smith, clad in her jersey and matching sweatbands, asked.

Amanda picked up a bat and tested its weight. “I’m up, actually.”

Moira-Selene gave a grim smile. She could already see the scene before it happened. She figured she could at least bring out good sportsmanship in her team despite the loyalty to Danie that some had. “Well, you know what that means.” She turned to her teammates. “Alright, guys, enough playing around. We gotta give our team captain some moral support.”

Amazed at the unexpected sentiment, Amanda blushed. “You don’t have to do that—”

“Of course we do.” To the others, Moira-Selene said loudly, “Off your asses, Pandas. Come on. Outside. Follow my lead.”

Amanda placed her helmet on her head and strode to homebase with her team behind her. The chant started in a stage whisper. *A-man-da. A-man-da.* Then got louder. And louder. *A-man-da. A-man-da.* The Panthers looked a little shocked, and Danie appeared irritated. It seemed no one feared her wrath any longer.

Samantha put her hands together in the shape of a T, and the worst possible thing happened.

She and Danie switched places, making Danie the new pitcher. The Pandas stopped chanting.

“Oh shit,” murmured Aidan.

“Holy Buddha,” breathed Megami Takumi Hill, who was last (to her great relief) on the roster.

In the stands with his beer, Mark muttered, “This could get ugly.”

At first base, Gretchen gave her a furtive, smirk-laden thumbs-up. The photographers and reporters remained poised for a great dramatic scene. Everyone held their breaths for the same. And it was only the second inning.

Danie stood on the mound, staring at Amanda. Amanda stared back, knowing that looking away would only serve to make Danie feel like she had won something. And the game was not over yet.

Then she released the ball.

“*Stee-riiike* one!” the umpire announced.

The satisfaction was apparent on Danie’s face, but Amanda schooled her face to less revealing lines. Outside the Pandas’ dugout, Magdalena Mallone reached into her sock and produced a cigarette. Aidan glanced over in shock.

“What the hell are you doing?” he demanded

“This is far too bloody stressful,” Magdalena replied. “I need a smoke before the suspense kills me.”

Aidan reached over and took the cigarette from her mouth. “And I’m telling you not to smoke right now.”

“Bloody hell, Aidan,” Magdalena snapped. “Make me chew it why don’t you?”

At the plate, Amanda tried to relax her fingers and focus. She heard Gretchen yell some words of encouragement. Danie prepared for another launch.

It went sailing past Amanda’s middle.

“*Stee-riiike* two!” the umpire announced.

“Well shit,” Nicole swore. Louder, she yelled, “Girl, you better hit that ball! Make that thing scared of you! Make it wanna go home crying to its mama for some milk and Yoo-Hoo!”

Moira-Selene could barely contain her snort of laughter. “I’m sure that’ll help Amanda hit the ball, Nicole.”

The black girl shrugged. “Hey. Whatever works.”

Amanda exhaled and tried to relax again, feeling slightly amused by Nicole. *Whatever happens, I will not be disappointed if I don’t hit this ball. It’s just a game.*

“Just hit the ball, love,” mumbled Chris from behind the mask. Amanda raised an eyebrow but didn’t say anything.

Danie, obviously triumphant, threw what she hoped would be the ball that would get Amanda Latona out.

Unfortunately for Danie, Amanda hit it.

As if someone had flicked a switch, the Pandas became animated—cheering, clapping, yelling. The crowd reacted in kind; reporters scribbled, photographers snapped pictures. Amanda tossed the bat aside and dashed to first base. Jennifer made it home in a white, and black, blond blur. Danny followed close behind, leaving Amanda on second and Gretchen on third.

Mark exhaled in relief and downed the rest of his Bud Light. Crisis averted.

Danie hid her disappointment well, but the people who knew her best could see it in the raising of her chin. Her older brother went up to bat, challenging her to strike him out. That got a feral smile out of her. As Danie adjusted her hat, Eric Thomas looked at Amanda standing on second base. And grinned. Amanda grinned back.

The game only intensified from that point. Mark had long given up his beer and lively, jocular conversation with surrounding spectators and was nearly reduced to biting his nails.

The Panthers and Pandas were tied in the ninth inning. The Panthers gained three points before they switched to the outfield. It was now the bottom of the ninth, bases were loaded. The Pandas were up to bat, with two outs and two strikes. There was the hum of anticipation in the air. Pens were poised to write, cameras were poised to snap. Magdalena had all but shredded her cigarettes to chew on them to quell the anxiety. Nicole had latched herself onto Aidan, muttering, *Hit the ball, hit the ball dammit* like a mantra. Aidan was tense enough not to care.

Jennifer was on third, Gretchen on second, and Amanda on first. Eric again stood on home plate, facing his impenetrable younger sister with determination and a false sense of older-brotherly bravado. He didn't want Danie to see his fear so he put on his best poker face.

"I can't let you strike me out, *bermana*," Eric said. "It'll look bad."

Danie narrowed her violet eyes. "Oh—watch me."

"And what do I get if you don't?" Eric pretended to think. "Oh, I got it. You get to wear a nun's wimple to your next public appearance."

Faced with greater incentive to strike him out, Danie grinned. "You're on."

Danie went into position on the plate and prepared to launch the ball. Jennifer, Gretchen, and Amanda all tensed, poised to run. Not able to watch, Amanda closed her eyes for a moment and said a short prayer to whatever heavenly deity was listening.

The *ping!* of the ball against metal was like music to Amanda's ears.

The ball flew upward and out; Eric dropped the bat and hesitated as it fell in far left field. No one caught it, so the Pandas on bases went into quick and instantaneous motion.

"Hell yeah!" exclaimed Nicole.

Eric rushed to first. Jessica grabbed the ball as Gretchen reached home and Amanda passed Samantha. Eric ran harder, rounding second and coming to third as the ball made its way back into the infield.

"Shit, shit, shit!" swore Magdalena. "Run faster, damn you!"

Samantha, who got the ball from Jessica, threw the ball to Danie. Eric was a few yards away from Amanda, who was almost home. Danie ran toward homebase with the ball in her glove. Eric yelled something but it was unintelligible. Amanda glanced back and found that Eric was closer than she expected. She sped up but Eric was too fast. There was only one thing to do.

She dove for home and could sense that Eric had done the same thing. What she didn't realize until they hit the ground together was how heavy he was. But his arm had softened her fall, so she wasn't too angry. A split second after they hit the ground, Amanda felt Danie's glove in her side.

With wide eyes, Chris leapt up from his vantage point to get a good look and threw off his mask. The umpire peered at the scene as the dust settled.

Amanda and Eric were lying on home plate and it was clear that they both were touching the base. The Pandas won—*by one point*.

“They're safe!” he announced.

The Pandas collapsed into screaming and ecstatic relief. Shutters opened and closed and cheers erupted from the stands. Amanda opened her eyes and found that her team swarmed around her like a group of hyperactive hummingbirds. Someone helped her to her feet. Before she could catch her breath, Danny and Eric had her up on their shoulders.

“Now *that's* what I'm talkin' 'bout!” Nicole declared.

The Panthers lined up to shake hands with their opponents and wished them a good game. When it was time for the two team captains to face each other, everyone held their breaths.

A tall redhead—Jessica Thomas, as Amanda later learned—gave Danie a nudge. Danie said evenly—and this required much effort on her part, “Good game. Congratulations.”

“Thank you,” Amanda responded. “You played a damn good game, too.”

Happy that was out of the way, Gretchen wrapped an arm around Amanda's shoulders. She didn't seem to care that Danie would maim her later. “I say, since we played such a damn good game, we should go to the Moon Spot for some nourishment.”

“I second that motion,” Megami agreed.

As everyone chattered about food and the reporters swooped down like a pack of hungry wolves, Amanda found herself face-to-face with Eric Thomas. She got the same jolt that his first furtive smile had given her. His bluish-green eyes were alight with mirth and his short chestnut hair glinted in the sunlight.

“I guess I should thank you,” Amanda said. “For getting me home.”

Eric smiled again. "There's no need to thank me. After all, we're on the same team, right?"

"Right." She looked across the field where a reporter was talking to Danie. "So you're not afraid of her?"

"Of who?" Amanda just stared at him meaningfully. "Oh, you mean Danie?" He chuckled. "My sister can be a fearful woman sometimes, but I'm not afraid of her."

"No?"

Eric shook his head. "No. I've got too many embarrassing things on her anyway. Besides, Jess's even scarier anyway. But if you ever need some ammunition," he added, making Amanda smile, "let me know."

Amanda met his smile, and then found herself looking away shyly. What was it about this guy that was making her feel fresh out of high school? After a moment, Amanda tilted her face up to him again. "So what is it that we get anyway for winning?"

"Mark didn't tell you?" Amanda shook her head. "We get a spread in the city's magazine as the winners," Eric told her. "It's one of those special editions that sells magazines. Soon the city will know about the infamous Pendas and their team captain. Of course, they won't call us the Pendas. They'll think of something more chic."

Amanda nodded, taking it in, and then she heard someone yelling her name. The sound had Eric glancing up, too, and they found Alex trudging through the crowd in their direction. And sure enough, Gina was attached to Alex's arm like a blond tumor. She found herself asking, *Malignant or benign?*

"Great game, Amanda!" Alex called.

She gave him a spunky wave and an exaggerated bow. "Thank you very much. I'm surprised to see you on this side of the Southern California."

"Well, when I heard that you were playing, I couldn't stay away."

"It was a good game," Gina said primly. She flicked invisible dirt from her white shirt. "Though, I don't know how you dive in the grass and slide in the dirt like that."

"Some girls," Eric began in an emotionless tone, "are meant to be more versatile than others. Variety is the spice of life, isn't it?" As Gina glared at him, Eric turned to Amanda. "I'll see you at the Spot, Amanda. Good game."

"Thanks," Amanda said, waving. "See you then."

She watched Eric walk away, not realizing that she had gotten off-track. Alex opened his mouth to say something, but a black and navy blur passed before their eyes and nearly tackled Amanda. After having the wind knocked out of her for the second

time that day, Amanda recovered and found that her roommate had found her.

Midori hugged her tightly again, and Amanda silently thanked her for rescuing her from a potentially uncomfortable situation. Midori turned and quickly greeted Alex and Gina but shifted her attention back to Amanda. Not forgetting her manners, she hastily excused herself and Amanda and led Amanda away.

“Okay, I’ll admit,” Midori began, “when you told me about this, I wasn’t sure how it was going to turn out. But it was pretty exciting. You look good in those little baseball shorts with the tall socks.”

“Really?” Amanda pretended to preen at herself. “Well damn. What do you know? I look sexy.”

“I’m sure that was why Eric Thomas was checking you out...”

Amanda couldn’t quite stop the pinkening of her cheeks. “He’s a guy. What more can you expect from a hot-blooded American male?”

Midori looked at her significantly. “Uh huh. You and I both know that he’ll have you sitting across from him at some posh restaurant by the end of the week.”

“Are you kidding?” Amanda cried. “The last thing I need right now is a boyfriend. And I plan to stick to that sentiment, my friend.”

Midori snorted—or produced a sound that was close enough. “That’s what you say now. But you’re going to come home one of these days with hearts in your eyes and prove yourself wrong...”

to be continued...

## SONGS IN THIS EPISODE 🎵

1 “Wake Up”

Performed by **The Fray**

**(Gretchen Thomas/Samantha Dunne)\***

2 “Walk on By”

Performed by **The Fray**

**(Daniella Thomas/Gretchen Thomas/Samantha Dunne/Nicole Smith/Melanie Smith/Miranda Willard)\***

\*Fictionalized for the purposes of the series/site. Written by D. Davis.