

HEROES OFTEN FAIL

A RIVER CITY CRIME NOVEL

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One

Monday, March 13, 1995
Day Shift
0729 hours

It was a secret place and like most secret places, it was forbidden and dangerous.

Kendra discovered it when she took the long way home from school one day, and immediately shared it with Amy. The two girls swore each other to secrecy in hushed tones, their pinkie fingers locked. Amy was the one who named it the Fairy Castle.

She and Amy didn't want Kendra's brothers or other neighborhood boys finding out about Fairy Castle, so they kept their secret as best they could.

Of course, Kendra told her mother everything and so it was only a matter of time before Mrs. Ferguson was down at Fairy Castle to check things out.

"Ugh," she'd said. "Girls, this place is so *dirty*."

"You have to use your imagination, Mom," Kendra had told her. She swept her hand across the small dirt cave. "This is the ballroom, where we have our dances, and—"

"Kendra, honey, this is a dirt cave dug into the side of a pile of dirt and held up by a couple of boards." She pointed to the two pieces of lumber jammed up into the low roof ceiling. "You don't know if animals come in here or other

kids—“

“Mom, it’s a *secret* place,” Kendra told her. “No one knows but us.”

Mrs. Ferguson shook her head. “It’s not safe. I don’t want you playing here anymore. Do you understand?”

“But, Mom—“

“No buts. You are not allowed to play here anymore and that is final.”

After Kendra’s Mom said they couldn’t go there any more, Amy didn’t dare tell her parents about Fairy Castle. School was out for a whole week and the two girls were planning on spending as much time as possible at their secret, forbidden place.

Last night’s rain covered the city streets and left behind small puddles in the cracks and holes in the roadway. Kendra jumped in the air and landed in a small puddle, sending a spray of water in Amy’s direction.

“Knock it off, Kenny,” Amy said, knowing her friend hated being called that.

Kendra frowned for a moment and considered splashing Amy again. She decided not to and quickly caught up to her, skipping her way to Amy’s side.

“I think we should have a wedding today,” Amy said.

Kendra smiled. A wedding. That was perfect.

“You can be the bride,” Amy said, pushing a lock of her dark hair behind her ear. Kendra has seen Mrs. Dugger do that, too. “And I’ll be your maid of honor.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s like the bride’s best friend. She gets to stand next to her while she gets married.”

Kendra beamed. She would get to be the bride and have her best friend next to her. What could be better?

"Who will you marry?" Amy asked her.

That was a serious question and Kendra gave it considerable thought.

"And no one from school," Amy blurted. "You have to marry a movie star or some famous person."

Her first inclination was to choose Prince Charming from the movie *Sleeping Beauty*, but he was only a cartoon. She knew Amy would be quick to point that out and then she would just have to choose again, anyway, so she dropped the whole idea and gave it some more deep thought.

The girls turned onto Stevens and headed for the empty lot on the corner, less than half a block from Fairy Castle now. Kendra felt a small surge of panic. She had to decide who she wanted to marry before they reached the secret place. But who?

"I know who I'd marry," Amy whispered.

The sound of a vehicle turning the corner behind them caused both to move to the sidewalk.

"Who?"

Amy gave her a secretive smile. "You can't tell anyone."

Kendra raised her hand, small finger extended. "Pinkie swear."

Amy reached out and locked fingers. "I'd marry Westley."

"Westley who?" she asked

"You know," Amy said, and Kendra did. Westley was a character from their favorite movie, *The Princess Bride*. He was handsome and nice and more importantly, he was real and not a cartoon. Kendra wished she had thought of that first. Maybe—

"That's who I was going to say," she told Amy.

"Too late," Amy teased. "He's going to be my husband and we're getting married tomorrow at Fairy Castle."

“But I’m getting married today.”

Amy shrugged. “You’ll just have to marry someone else, I guess.”

“But I wanted to marry Westley, too.”

“Why didn’t you say so?”

Kendra bit her lip. “I was...thinking about how my dress should look, that’s all.”

“Liar,” Amy said, shaking her head.

“It’s true!”

“Nuh-uh, Kenny.”

“I’m not lying—”

There came a chirp of tires coming to a sudden stop and both girls turned their heads to the street. A blue van had pulled to a stop next to them. The side door slid open and a tall, thin man stepped out with a black ski mask over his face.

Kendra’s eyes widened and struggled to think of what she was taught to do in these situations.

The man reached for Amy, who stood frozen in place just like her.

She watched the man’s white hands grasp Amy by the upper arms and pull her to his chest.

The man’s eyes flashed to her and she saw something in them she knew instinctively was bad for her. She sprinted away as fast as her legs would carry her.

The sound of the van door slamming shut and the engine gunning spurred her to run even faster. She knew she couldn’t outrun the van and hoped wildly someone would save her before the van screeched to a stop next to her and the man in black gobbled her into his arms, too.

Kendra’s heart pounded in her chest, her neck, her temples. She couldn’t

get enough air into her tiny lungs. But her legs pumped like two pistons, running straight and hard.

The roar of the engine faded and then she found herself alone, too scared even to cry.

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***Heroes Often Fail* by Frank Zafiro**
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