

Four Months Ago

She sat at the kitchen counter staring at the headline on the day's front-page story on her iPhone: "Dixon Withdraws." Below, in smaller print she read more:

WASHINGTON: In a statement today to the media and supporters, Senator Allen Dixon, the front-runner for the Republican Party nomination, announced his withdrawal from the presidential election. According to sources at campaign headquarters, his wife has fewer than two months to live. Dixon, who was believed to have the best chance to become the second black president of the United States, will remain at his wife's side. The withdrawal has turned the campaign upside down.

She wiped a tear from her eye before looking back at her iPhone.

"No!" she whispered. "I must not do this."

She put the iPhone down, buried her head in her hands, and began to sob. It was so unfair. The world was unfair. She had sacrificed so much. Now this. Again she looked at the phone. Just sixty seconds. That's all. She picked up the phone again.

Taking a deep breath, she punched in a familiar number and held the phone firmly against her ear. It rang once, twice, and then on the third ring, a woman answered.

"Dixon residence."

"Hello?" she said. "My name is Angelia Swenson, and I'm a sorority sister of Mrs. Dixon. We were very close in college, and I was one of her bridesmaids. Is she well enough to talk to me?"

"She may be asleep. One moment, please," said the woman.

If she were asleep, she would hang up, and there would never be any attempt to call again.

After what seemed like minutes, but most likely was only a few seconds, a different woman's voice came on the line. It was barely a whisper.

"Angelia, I'm glad you called."

"I'm not Angelia," she said. There was a pause.

"You—it can't be. You died sixteen years ago."

"It's me, Mom," she said.

"Oh, God, that can't be possible. Where are you? What happened?"

"Mom, tell no one that we have spoken. I love you, Mom."

Before there was an answer, she hung up.

She stood up, wiped the tears from her eyes, and deleted the news story. She could do no more.

They say that to live you must almost die. If that's true, then during the last six years I have truly lived. It seems hard to believe that not only my life but also the fate of the entire human race changed on that fateful day. Let me take you back to that morning six years ago.

My name is Amy Brown. I'm seventeen. Well, actually, I will be seventeen in four months, so I guess I'm really sixteen. Even though I'm sixteen, I'm a senior at Freeman High School in Spokane, Washington, and I've been accepted to Gonzaga University in the fall.

I guess you could call me the typical teenager. If you asked me what I look like, I'd say I have green eyes and ash-blond hair, and I'm tall. To be exact, I'm six feet one. Which means that although some of my girlfriends claim I'm attractive, I feel gawky. My breasts are too small and my hips too narrow. One of my boyfriends said I have a cute butt. But to me, personally, it's smaller than it should be. Honestly, I wish I weighed twenty more pounds. I'm the runt of my family. Both Mom and Dad are taller than I am. Imagine being the runt, and you're still taller than 60 percent of the boys.

I guess I'm popular. I play volleyball, and I'm on the varsity cheerleading team. Even though I'm taller than two of the boy cheerleaders, I do a pretty good job.

Oh, I almost forgot. I also have a black belt in karate. No, I am not a female Bruce Lee. It was my dad's idea. He enrolled me in the martial arts when I was six. In grade school and junior high, I loved it. But in high school, I was more interested in other things. Besides, a boy doesn't want to date a girl who can kick his butt. No, I have never used my martial arts training to protect myself. As a matter of fact, most of my friends don't know I have a black belt.

When you're as tall as I am, you feel weird in a dress. At least I do, and I am much happier in jeans than in a dress. Of course, I only like designer jeans, not some pair of Walmart specials. My taste in clothes comes from Mom.

We live near Hangman Hills. It's a development south of Spokane next to Hangman Valley Golf Course. My dad and I play golf sometimes, but it bores me. I love to talk, and some people don't like talkers on the course. I think they take golf too seriously.

We have lived in our house since I was four months old. It's big for just the three of us, but most of the homes out here are. We have ten acres and could have horses, but the only pet we own is Mr. P. He is a big gray tomcat. He's my cat. I found him when I was in fifth grade.

Dad sells stocks and bonds and works for ER Rogers Investments. I guess he does pretty well. He bought me a new Mustang when I started my senior year.

On Friday, my life changed. It started out like any other school day. In the morning, I grabbed a Pop-Tart for breakfast and headed for the garage. Mom has always lectured me on my eating habits and that morning was no different. I of course mumbled one of the normal remarks that we teenagers are so good at.

I pushed the garage opener and climbed into my Mustang. It's only three months old and still has that cool, new car smell. It is bright red and has white racing stripes. It has a turbocharged engine and is fast. Dad and I both like fast cars. No, I don't drive recklessly. Hey, I'm a girl—no testosterone. I backed out of the garage, turned around, and headed down the long driveway to the main road.

Freeman High School is eleven miles from the house. I programmed in my favorite tunes and sang along as I drove. When I got to school, I parked in the student lot.

It was starting to rain. When my hair gets wet, it curls. I wear it long, and I hate it when that happens. But that's what your hair does when you are part black. Oh, I forgot to mention that. The truth is, I can pass for white, which is all right considering that there are only four African Americans in our school.

Mom's darker—well, sort of brown. One of her parents must have been black. She was a foster home child and knows nothing about her parents. I don't hide the fact that I am part black, and none of my friends seem to care. All my boyfriends have been white. Mom's real active in the PTA and church, and everyone seems to like her even if she is part black.

I ran for the front door as the raindrops began to fall. As the door closed behind me, I entered to the noise of 316 students all talking at once as they waited for the first bell to ring. Talk about the Tower of Babel. This was it.

"Amy!" Riana Morrison shouted over the din. "Are we doing pizza after the game?"

"Sure," I answered.

We had a basketball game at five o'clock. After the game we would all gather at the Pizza Hut on Sprague Avenue. Mom and Dad knew that I wouldn't be home until around ten.

I know—most teenagers do what they want and stay out late, but not me. My folks trust me to do the right thing, and I want that trust. Besides, I had a major term paper due on Monday, and this weekend I was committed to that term paper.

Craig Henderson ran up.

"Hi, Craig," I said.

"Hi, Amy. What are you doing after the game?"

Craig had a big-time crush on me, but he just wasn't my type. Right now, I wasn't interested in any major commitment. Now, don't get me wrong, I like boys, but I am not gaga over them, and I'm one of those 20 percent who really is a virgin. Enough said about that subject.

"We're all going to Pizza Hut."

He smiled and said, "Maybe I'll see you there."

"Sure," I said, returning his smile.

I headed for my first class. English Literature. I actually like going to school and do very well. I especially like to write. I finished all of my required courses for graduation last year, and this year I'm taking college prep courses.

Freeman's senior class is only seventy-three students. Because we are a small high school, I take college prep courses on Tuesdays and Thursdays at West Valley High School. To me, the classes are interesting.

At lunch, we all gathered at our regular table in the cafeteria. My three closest friends are Riana, Justine Adams, and Marylyn Yurich. We all live in the Hangman Valley and attended grade school and junior high together. Riana's parents go to the same Methodist church we do.

"This food sucks," grumbled Justine.

"It looks like the school's on another health-food kick," I replied.

"Well, you're lucky, Amy. You could eat pizza all the time and not gain a pound. Unfortunately I need the health food," said Justine, who has always been overweight.

As was the case with our friendship, we always enjoyed our lunches together even though we traveled in different social groups. Personally, I think this social stuff is a bunch of bull. I like people in all groups. Maybe being from a different ethnic background than 90 percent of my classmates makes you look at life a little differently.

After school, I spent some time in the library, and then at four o'clock, I went down to the girls' locker room and got dressed in my cheerleader's uniform. A half

hour later, we were in the gym warming up before the basketball game. Students began filing into the gym, and soon it was packed. It was the first game of the season. We were playing Ritzville, and both teams were considered first-place contenders in our division. It was going to be a good game.

No matter how the game ends, the cheerleaders must continue to keep the students supporting the team. With a close game, that can be tense. This was a close game. We didn't get a breather until halftime, and it was so hot, I was sweating like a pig. Funny, we say that. In biology we learned that pigs don't sweat. Anyway, I think my deodorant was failing.

We stood around waiting for the second half. I looked up in the stands. Craig Henderson waved at me. I waved back. Craig plays football and had on his letterman's sweater. Several other football players were with Craig. These guys usually spend the basketball season walking around the stands, scoping out girls. Right now, they were all staring at me. I glanced down at my sweater. Oh great, I had sweated enough that the sweater was sticking to my chest and my nipples could be seen through my sport's bra. Now, three horny ballplayers were busy undressing me with their eyes. Jeez, boys are stupid. Do they think we don't know what they're doing? I felt like walking into the stands and kicking all three in the nuts. Instead, I smiled and turned my back to them.

The buzzer blared for the second half. For the next thirty minutes, the lead alternated back and forth. By the last two minutes, we were no longer cheering. We were all watching the game, each person holding our breath. With the score tied at sixty-nine each, there were only three seconds left on the clock. Ritzville got the ball. The player took a shot at half court. It sailed through the air toward the net. I willed the ball to miss the net, believing I had the power to move objects. With a whoosh, the basketball slid through the net, and the final buzzer went off. Ritzville had just won the game, seventy-two to sixty-nine.

A cheer rose from the other side of the gym. Defeated, we filed out of the gym. We were so close, but they always say that close only counts in horseshoes, whatever that means. In the locker room, we were all quiet. I showered, dressed, and headed out to my car. It was time for us to get over the game. It was time to gather at the Pizza Hut on Sprague.

I walked out to the student parking lot. Most of the cars had already left. My Mustang was sitting by itself. I pulled out my key and pushed the unlock button. The horn beeped, and the lights went on.

As I approached the car, I heard a cat mew. Great, just what I needed was a stray cat looking for a home. Well, I already had a cat, and it would just have to find someone else. The cat jumped on the hood of my car. I was about to shoo it off when I looked again. It was Mr. P.

“Mr. P, what are you doing here?”

Maybe it just looked like my cat. The cat jumped off of the hood and ran over to me. Mr. P had a limp. When I first found him, the vet said that some time before we got him his back leg had been broken and had healed wrong, giving him a slight limp. But the injury didn’t slow him down. It was definitely Mr. P.

He ran up to me, looking up with his big yellow eyes. Then he went back to the car and stood by the door. I opened the door, and he jumped in. As I slid into the driver’s side, he butted his head against my arm. God, I loved this cat.

I was only eleven when he came into my life.

It was summer, and I had wandered down by the golf course. I was looking for golf balls in the woods. Mom had told me not to go into the woods, but you know how preteens are. We do our own thing. I was searching for balls when I saw the skeleton of a cat lying in the grass. It was lying on its side, like it was asleep. There was no meat or hair on the bones; it must have been there for years. I wondered what had killed the poor thing. Then, typical for an eleven-year-old, I pretended that I was a good witch with the power to bring the poor cat back to life. I picked up a stick, pretending it was my magic wand, touched the skeleton with the stick, and whispered, “Hocus pocus, I order you to live.” Of course, nothing happened, and after a few moments, I wandered off searching for more balls.

“Hello, little girl. What are you doing here?”

I turned around. Standing in the shadow of a pine tree was a man. I couldn’t explain it, but something told me that this was a bad man.

“Just looking for golf balls,” I answered.

“Would you like to go for a ride with me?” asked the man.

“No!” I said, remembering my mother’s warning never to talk to strangers. I turned and ran as fast as I could. I was tall for my age, and I could run fast. I could hear the man behind me, but I was pulling away.

Then I tripped on a root and fell flat on my stomach.

“I got you now, you little brat,” he growled.

I felt his hand grab my shoulder. Then the man screamed.

“No, get away from me!” He screamed again. I rolled over and saw him running through the trees.

I sat up shaking and then started running for home. I didn’t want to look for golf balls any more, and I would never go back there again. As I ran out of the woods, I saw something gray running beside me. It was a large gray cat. He looked up and kept pace with me. When I turned into our driveway, he followed.

When Mom saw the cat, she freaked at first. She had gone in and called my dad who came home early. When Dad saw the cat, he said, "Hello, Mr. P."

The cat answered as if he knew him. Dad explained that when he was a boy he had had a gray cat named Mr. P.

So we kept him, and that's how he got the name Mr. P. From that day on, he has slept on my bed every night.