

## **Smoke And Mirrors**

### **Chrissie Anderson Peters**

Patty wasn't popular by a long shot. But she wanted to be. What high school sophomore didn't want to fit in, be liked, and invited to go places by people they thought were cool, people they desperately wanted to be their friends? She found herself rather plain looking, her short, dark red hair, curling lazily at the nape of her neck, her dark green eyes always looking down out of her 5'6" frame, afraid to look other people in the eye, afraid that they would laugh at her, because she was just the slightest bit noticeably cross-eyed. To her, it seemed like an unbearable handicap. It might as well be a missing or grossly distorted limb, the way people in Dover treated her and teased her – both behind her back, but even more painfully, to her face – in the halls at school and on the bus, which her parents forced her to ride every morning and every afternoon. She had learned the hard way to try to sit close to the bus driver, Annie, who tried to fend off the bullies and creeps who taunted Patty, calling her names, crossing their eyes mockingly, and laughing at her, in general.

Patty had only one friend in the whole world. That was her older cousin, Vinnie. Neither of them could explain why he let her hang around with him sometimes, why he didn't make fun of her like all his friends did. It wasn't because she was family. Vinnie was too cool and aloof to hold something as flimsy as family ties that high in regard at the age of seventeen. It wasn't because he was physically deformed himself. Rather, Vinnie was an attractive dark-haired, blue-eyed boy, about 6'2", who ran track and should have played football, but he thought the football players were all assholes. But he found Patty to be one of the few *genuine* people he'd ever come across. Sure, she wanted to be popular and run with the cool kids, but he chalked most of that up to her being a sophomore; he was pretty sure that she'd grow out of that in a year or two. She was smart – not just book smart, but people smart.

Despite the fact that most people were cruel to her, Patty could read people. She knew who the really dangerous ones were and stayed away from them. Until the day the new girl, Rosa-Maria, showed up at a party he had taken Patty to. And Patty seemed drawn to Rosa-Maria like a magnet, seduced by the older girl's beauty, charm, and friendliness.

Vinnie had met Rosa-Maria a few weeks before. She couldn't have been any older than he was, but her parents chose to homeschool her. In this town, that was weird. Only religious

freaks homeschooled their kids. And Vinnie was pretty sure that Rosa-Maria's family didn't qualify as religious freaks, seeing as how they dressed like hippies, didn't go to church, and Rosa-Maria didn't bat an eye when other kids lit up joints around her at parties. Not your typical evangelical behavior, Vinnie noted mentally. He had, of course, introduced himself to her at the first party. Who wouldn't? She was a knockout! Raven-black hair, dark brown eyes, perfect lips, satiny white skin. He wasn't sure where she'd come from, but she definitely didn't fake-bake during the winter months and pre-prom like so many of the girls in Dover, he observed approvingly.

She had been polite to Vinnie, but almost seemed to mock his attempts of befriending her. Like she was not in need of his friendship. A bit wounded, he had walked away, finding some other girls to talk to. At a party the next weekend, he had decided to try again, with much the same thing happening. He couldn't help but get a little snarky with her. After all, he was only trying to be friendly. She smiled coyly. "Only trying to be friendly?" Then she nodded. "Well, Vinnie, if you can look me straight in the eye and convince me that there was absolutely no other thought in your mind at either party when you approached me to talk to me, then I'll apologize, and we'll start from the beginning."

Now Vinnie was getting pissed. "Wow, someone sure is stuck on herself!" And he wheeled on his heels to walk away.

But he suddenly heard Rosa-Maria's voice whispering inside his head, repeating his self-thought description of her from the first night back to him, "What a knockout! Raven-black hair, dark brown eyes, perfect lips, satiny white skin. I don't know where she came from, but she definitely doesn't fake-bake..."

He turned back around to see her smiling at him impishly, him blushing, confused by how she had just accomplished whatever she had just done. "Smoke and mirrors," she said with a wink, then went to get a drink from the kitchen.

From then on, Vinnie steered clear of Rosa-Maria. If they ended up in the same room, he gave her a wide berth. She always smiled, or laughed nonchalantly, throwing her head back, her beautiful hair cascading down over her shoulders. It was maddening to Vinnie. Actually, it frustrated and embarrassed him beyond words. So, every time it happened, he made an excuse to leave the room as quickly as possible. There was something about her that didn't ring true.

Something that gave him pause. Sent off alarm bells. He couldn't place his finger on it, but it was there. Smoke and mirrors!

"Smoke and mirrors, my ass!" he said as he saw her from across a crowded field where about three dozen teenagers partied and moved to the beat of an old-school boom box one cloudy Friday night, when he had brought Patty to hang out with him after the football game ended in a lopsided score, the home team winning by a landslide.

"What did you say?" Patty asked, having trouble hearing over all the people and the music echoing off the rock quarry on one side of the field.

"Never mind," Vinnie muttered. "Listen. You see that girl over there? The one with the dark black hair and really red lips?"

"You mean the gorgeous one that looks like Snow White or something?"

Vinnie rolled his eyes. "Yeah, Snow White, whatever. Her name is Rosa-Maria. She's new. She and her folks moved here about a month ago —"

"Why doesn't she go to school with us?"

"They homeschool her. Look, Patty. It really doesn't matter. I just want you to promise me that you'll stay away from her. She does weird Jedi Mind-Trick stuff. I just don't wanna see you get taken in by her, okay?"

Patty looked up at her cousin, more than a little wounded that his words indicated that he felt like he had to look out after her. She always felt like she was his friend when they were together. Now, suddenly, he'd gone and screwed up the dynamics of the foundation of their relationship by indicating that he felt responsible for her somehow. "Yeah, Vinnie. I'll do that."

Vinnie realized how what he had said had sounded. He hadn't meant it that way at all. He reached out to touch Patty's shoulder, to try to explain, but she pulled away icily and walked away to stand by the boom box by herself. For a while, he stood watching her. No one else tried to talk to her. For good or for bad. So, he finally got tired of standing guard from a distance and went to talk to Vanessa Radford, who he really wanted to ask to Winter Formal.

Rosa-Maria watched keenly as Vinnie finally let his hawk's-eye gaze leave his younger cousin Patty and curled her lips into a pretty smile. She was glad to see Patty. Finally. After all these weeks. It seemed like she had been waiting to meet this girl her whole life. Maybe she had, in a sense. After all, this was her reason for being here. She had heard Vinnie warn Patty all

about her. She had to figure out a way to introduce herself to Patty and to gain her trust, despite the “big brother” advice from Vinnie. Maybe that was the best way to play it, Rosa-Maria finally decided. Let Vinnie be the bad guy; she could tell that Patty was angry about being talked to that way. Rosa-Maria would just introduce herself and see how things played out, she finally decided.

She didn't want to call unnecessary attention to herself. That wouldn't help anyone in this scenario tonight. So, she strode up silently and stopped just short of Patty's side and took a deep breath. The music was so loud, here beside that ancient boom-box. So, she leaned closer and threw her voice, trying to make it sound as though she were speaking to Patty from beside her, but actually getting inside her head, much the same way she had with Vinnie the night he freaked out. “Hey,” she smiled at mouthed the word to Patty, who turned suddenly to see Rosa-Maria standing right beside her.

At first, Patty looked terrified. She looked around, panic-stricken. She was looking for Vinnie, Rosa-Maria was certain. Rosa-Maria breathed calmly, almost hummed in her ear. “It's so loud over here, isn't it?”

Patty nodded. “Yeah, it really is!” she called back, trying hard not to look into Rosa-Maria's face, not wanting the new girl to see her crossed eyes right off the bat and quit talking to her. Rosa-Maria started walking a little further away from the music, closer to the quarry. Patty blindly followed her, although she did look over her shoulders a few times for Vinnie.

“What are you looking for?” Rosa-Maria had stopped, and Patty walked right into her, looking behind her instead of paying attention to where she was going. “Will you get in trouble with Vinnie if he sees you with me?” There. She said it straight-up. No dancing around it. She wouldn't pretend not to know that Vinnie didn't want Patty around her. Best to be straight-forward, she decided on the spur of the moment.

Patty looked at the spot where Rosa-Maria was standing, then back where most of the rest of the crowd of teenagers stood, then repeated the process two or three more times. Then Patty finally said, “Oh, it doesn't matter what Vinnie thinks! I'm old enough to make my own decisions.”

Rosa-Maria smiled at Patty and lifted her face so that their eyes met. “I'm glad you think so. Really, I am.” She took her by the hand, then led her to a secluded spot near a stream.

Though the night was cloudy and a bit chilly, the moon had begun plying peek-a-boo from behind the clouds.

Patty wasn't sure what to say. Or how to feel. No one – ever, not even her parents – had ever intentionally looked into her eyes like that. And Rosa-Maria's eyes held such kindness, such warmth. It was like Patty had needed to see that look her whole life. "Where did you live before?" Patty asked, trying to think of something to ask, not sure what she should try to talk about with a perfect stranger who felt so immediately like an old friend.

Rosa-Maria chuckled softly. "Do you really want to know the answer to that? Or would you rather know why I came here?"

Patty blushed. It's what she had been thinking. "How did you –"

"I told Vinnie that it's smoke and mirrors," Rosa-Maria began. But it's a sort of family gift. I can read people's thoughts. I know that you want a friend more than anything. Someone other than just Vinnie."

"Vinnie's good to me!" Patty defended the same person she had been angry with just a few minutes before.

"Of course, he is. And it's genuine. Vinnie isn't nice to you because he feels sorry for you or anything like that. It's because he sees what a good person you are. You could so easily be a bitter, ugly person, but you're not. Sometimes you want to be. You put up walls to defend yourself – even with Vinnie when he told you to stay away from me tonight."

Patty laughed a little. "Did you shoot him down? You must have shot him down for him to say that he didn't want to see me get taken in by you and that you do weird Jedi Mind-Trick stuff!"

"Well, to be fair to Vinnie, he was coming on a little bit and instead of just playing nice, I actually *did* get in his head and read his mind and talked to him in there instead of with my outside voice. Guys like *to play*, not *be played*," she winked at Patty, who laughed out loud.

The two of them talked for what seemed like hours. Maybe it was hours. Time lost meaning for Patty. It was the first time in her life that she felt like she could open up to another girl, like she had met someone who truly understood her. Which seemed completely illogical. Because Rosa-Maria was perfect in every way. Physically attractive. Intellectually stimulating. Conversationally stimulating. Delightfully witty. Not plain or average or defected in any way.

Around midnight, the moon came out big and bright. The two girls sat back and admired it on the rocky banks of the creek that flowed through the quarry. “Patty, if you had one wish, what would it be?”

Patty, without hesitation, blurted out, “Oh, Rosa-Maria, I’d give anything to be perfect, to be beautiful and enchanting, just like you!”

Rosa-Maria took Patty by the hand and smiled the most perfect smile through those heart-shaped blood-red lips. “Do you mean that, Patty? Do you swear that you want that?”

“Yes! It’s so horrible being cross-eyed, Rosa-Maria!”

“It could be so much worse, Patty. Your being cross-eyed isn’t so horrible. Even though you see things differently, you still see things as they are. You’re lucky in that regard.”

“Oh, I’m not lucky at all,” Patty reassured her.

“I can make your wish come true,” Rosa-Maria whispered in Patty’s ear. “If you’re sure it’s what you want.”

“Yes, please! If you have some way that you can make me like you, please, yes, do it!”

Rosa-Maria told Patty to close her eyes. She led her carefully to the creek. The moon poked through the clouds again, so brightly that Patty could tell it had come back out even though her eyes were closed. Rosa-Maria put one arm around Patty’s waist and whispered, “Keep your eyes closed, Patty, no matter what now.” Patty nodded her head. “Kiss me,” Rosa-Maria almost begged Patty.

Patty hesitated. Here she stood, eyes closed on a creek bank in a quarry on a late fall night at midnight, a strange girl’s arm around her, about to kiss a girl, something that she had never done in her life, not even with a boy. And something about it all felt so scary. But something about it all felt so thrilling. She had no idea which part she should listen to. Just as she opened her lips and moved them to kiss Rosa-Maria as the beautiful girl had requested, Vinnie’s voice broke through the night, “Patty, stop! Oh my God, Patty! Look what you’re doing!”

It was the sheer terror in her cousin’s voice that made her open her eyes and look out across the creek, to where he stood calling out to her. And that is when she saw her reflection in the water. And the reflection of what had its arm around her. An amphibious-reptilian creature standing on two legs with a misshapen head and long tongue lashing out of its mouth looked

back at her through the reflection in the creek. She quickly turned her head to see the beautiful Rosa-Maria in human form still standing in front of her. “What –” Patty stammered.

“It nearly worked!” Rosa-Maria screamed at her. Then pushed her backward and clenched her fists at Vinnie as he made his way across the creek and grabbed Patty away from Rosa-Maria. “You! You messed up everything! I’ve waited for this for years! I’ve sought out the perfect candidate who was so miserable with their life that they would do anything to trade places with me. And I found her! I found Patty!”

“But your promises weren’t what you said they were,” Vinnie pointed out. “You made the mistake of giving your game away to me at that party. It just really hit me tonight. And when I came over that hill looking for Patty and the moon came out and I looked down and saw your true reflection in the water, it all made sense. Smoke and mirrors. No more, Rosa-Maria! You’ll have to find somewhere else to play your games now.”