

**AMaNdA NOBLE,  
ZooKeeper EXtraordinaire**

by  
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Boot in the Door Publications

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Print Book Format: ISBN 978-0-9788183-0-2

First Printing April, 2007

Published in the United States of America  
Boot in the Door Publications

This book is dedicated to Kyler Poor King.

If a single word could be used to describe his smile it would have to be, *outstanding*. His smile was his face; it radiated from who he was. There simply was no separating the two.

I wish to say thank you to my friends and family, my personal cheerleading squad, especially my husband, David, for not laughing at me when I told him I wanted to write books.

To all the kids at Anahuac Middle School, thank you for the inspiration and ideas that you have given me. They will continue to fuel my fervor for years to come. And yes, you have to read the Epilogue.

For Bernice Jackson, thank you for taking on a second career as book editor. Without you this would have been a cake sans icing, dry and hard to swallow.

Kudos goes to Ron and Shawn Landry, father and son photog team, for going out of their way to get the fabulous photos of “*Amanda*” gator wrestlin’.

Thanks to Gary Saurage and Lance Herring at *Gator Country*, in Fannett, Texas, for their generosity in allowing us the use of their awesome alligator theme park.

Last but not least, thanks to my nail-tech, Heather Lotz. I advise anyone with writer’s block to sit at her workstation for an hour, a better muse can’t be found.

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## A Friend and a Ferret

“Manda! Hey man, you up yet?”

It was Kyler, and his voice was distant and muffled. I forced open my sleep-crusted eyes to look at the phone in my hand. It was upside down. Hoisting myself up in bed and flipping the phone to its proper position, I croaked, “What’d you say?”

“Get up and come over here, so we can watch your dad. I’ve got it on, and it looks like his first day to do live TV is gonna be total.”

“No, thank you,” I grumbled, my throat pasty in an Elmer’s glue sort of way. “I’ve been trying to forget about that. In fact, I had intended to sleep through it. What time is it anyway?” I groped for the clock on my bedside table. “Are you crazy! It’s not even seven o’clock yet.”

“C’mon Manda,” Kyler cajoled. “The commercial said your dad is bringing a special animal, an audience favorite. Are you coming over to watch his first day as a regular on the show or not?”

“Not. I can’t bear to watch when they tape the segments he does from here at the zoo. Why would I watch now that he’s going to be a full-time doofus?”

“Then I’m coming over there,” he declared, and the line went dead.

I fumbled the phone back into its cradle, slid my feet

into my fuzzy slippers, and staggered to the closet. I caught my reflection in the full length mirror hanging on the closet door. Ick! My green pajamas made me look like Gumby's kid sister.

I dressed in my favorite *thank God there's no school* clothes, denim cutoffs, Care Bear T-shirt, and flip-flops. I headed for the bathroom and my toothbrush. I could not believe I was up before seven AM. I was sure sleep deprivation must be against the law—somewhere.

With my mouth minty fresh, I headed to the kitchen, poured myself a glass of juice, grabbed a box of Pop Tarts, and decided to sit at the breakfast bar that separates the living room from the kitchen. It gives easy access to the toaster. The back door opened and Kyler strolled in as I was pushing the toaster handle down.

"Good, you're making breakfast," he said, passing through the kitchen and into the living room.

"How can you be so chipper this early in the morning?" I groused.

Ignoring my wisecrack, Kyler plopped onto the sofa and snatched the remote from the coffee table before kicking his feet up on it. "This is better anyway," he remarked. "It'll be cool to watch on the big screen."

"Cool!" I said, astounded. "You think it would be cool to have your father parading across the television dressed like he had just come from the back side of the Serengeti? Do you know what he actually told Marta last night?"

Kyler gave me a clueless shrug.

"He's thinking of calling himself: *Gage Noble, Zookeeper Extraordinaire*. Can you believe it?"

Kyler bobbed his head slowly, as though seriously thinking it over. "That'd work," he surmised.

"Please, isn't it enough that he's named the *Morning Show* spots, *Getting Up With the Chickens*, but to give himself some geeky superheroish nickname; let's face it,

he's more *Ace Ventura* than Zookeeper Extraordinaire.

"You never know, Manda. With a live broadcast anything could happen."

"That's precisely what I'm worried about," I moaned.

Kyler, shoving a pillow behind his back and adjusting his comfort level commanded, "Get me a glass of juice, Panda Bear."

"I told you not to call me that anymore, and get your own juice, ya lazy bum."

"The show's starting," he whined, reluctantly leaving his seat to hurry to the kitchen. "I don't wanna miss any of it."

The familiar theme song floated across the airwaves. "*Good morning, I'm Monica Taylor. It's seven a.m. and you're watching the Orlando Morning Show. In this morning's news...*"

My breakfast formed an intrusive knot in my stomach. The *Morning Show* had been taping segments with Dad for several months, and I was only now getting used to it. People at school would say things like, "Saw your dad this morning. Did he know he had dried bird poop on his shoulder?" or "Caught your dad's show. What's with all the Band-Aids?"

Those pieces were pre-taped and edited by people who knew what they were doing. Now, with Dad going live from the studio, all of Orlando would know what a bumbling boob he was.

Don't get me wrong. Dad has always loved the animals. The feeling simply was not mutual. If it has a beak, Dad is going to get pecked. If it has fangs, he will get bitten, a claw, you can bet Dad will be scratched.

So, I sat there watching the gargantuan TV Dad bought to view himself, with my breakfast doing a circus act in my stomach, and all I could think was *God, please don't let him do anything stupid.*

“What kind of juice you got?” Kyler asked, swinging the refrigerator door open.

“Orange,” I replied, as he ducked and bobbed his head to snoop into the back shelves.

“Doesn’t Monica Taylor’s voice get on your nerves?” I observed. “Sort of like a paper cut to the eardrum. I don’t think she likes Dad,” I added.

“She’s hot,” Kyler said from the back of the fridge.

“Please. She’s so fake. Fake hair, fake smile, fake boo...”

With one quick move Kyler jerked out of the refrigerator to stand and gawk at me, a cocky brow arched.

“Yeah, those are fake too,” I quipped.

Opting for a Yoo-hoo, Kyler helped himself to one of my pastries on his way back to the sofa. “Fake or no,” he said, “she looks good. Besides, I wanna watch your dad. I’ve had to leave before six-thirty every morning for weeks, and I haven’t been able to catch the show.”

Kyler King had been my best friend since before T-Rex met with the meteorite, and the dirty rat got his driver’s license before me. After taking the classroom portion of the course, he had spent the last couple of months doing his time behind the wheel early every morning.

“Plus,” he continued. “This live thing is gonna be total. I’m not missing it.”

“*Thanks for that report, Jim.*” The perky anchor-woman’s voice grew louder as Kyler tapped the volume button on the remote.

“Here it comes,” he said. “Gage should be next.”

“*In our second half hour, Chris Atkins will be here with the weekend box office review.*”

“Who’d your dad take with him?” Kyler asked.

“How should I know? I was dead to the world when he left this morning.” I shot Kyler a meaningful glare.

“*And now it’s time for the Morning Show’s wildlife*”

*segment, Getting Up With the Chickens.*”

“Watch her,” I said, pointing to the television. “She can’t stand Dad.”

“Shh!” Kyler hissed, slinging a corner piece of Pop Tart at me, narrowly missing my glass of juice.

*“This morning’s presentation will be a special treat. Getting Up With the Chickens, the Morning Show’s wildlife segment, has been added to our daily lineup. Starting today, it will be coming to you live from the studio. So please, put your hands together and join me in welcoming Gage Noble, from the Noble’s Ark Zoo in Kissimmee. Come on out, Gage. What do you have for us this morning?”*

“Watch her. She’s going to get as much distance as she can between her and....” Before I could complete my sentence Monica Taylor stood and sidled around the back of her chair.

“Hey, it’s Frenchy. Your Dad’s holding Frenchy!” Kyler pointed out.

“Oh no,” I groaned.

“I thought you said Frenchy didn’t like the cameras,” Kyler remarked, puzzled.

“I did. And he doesn’t.”

“Frenchy looks—sort of scared.”

I watched as Dad lowered himself into one of the leather chairs on the show’s set; Frenchy crouched nervously on his shoulder. “Come, sit,” he said, to an equally nervous Monica.

“Gage,” Monica murmured, cupping her hand protectively around her throat. “You brought the... the ferret.” She was struggling to maintain her saccharin sweet, TV-show-host demeanor. “It seems a-agitated this morning,” she said.

“Nonsense,” Dad replied, patting the seat of her empty chair. “Frenchy loves you. Come sit down, you’ll see.”

“Yeah, right,” I scoffed. Kyler turned, pointed the remote at me, and clicked the on-off button to shut me up.

Dad peeled Frenchy away from his collarbone, placed the ferret in his lap, and began stroking his back. The enormous television screen made it easy to see Frenchy’s shiny whiskers twitching frantically.

“Poor Frenchy,” I sighed. “Dad knows how he hates those bright lights; it would serve him right if Frenchy sank his teeth into Dad’s neck like he did last time. This whole TV thing is stupid anyway.”

“Lighten up, Manda,” Kyler said. “What’ve you got against your dad’s show anyhow? A lot of people like *Getting Up With the Chickens*.”

“What have I got against it? Well, let me see,” I said, leaving my stool and moving over to hang across the back of the sofa. “There are the aforementioned wardrobe choices; he looks like some mutated crossbreed that’s escaped *Animal Planet*, and that truck, don’t even get me started on that truck.”

Kyler looked up at me, his forehead scrunched. “Don’t diss the truck,” he said. “That truck is sweet. How many people do you know get around town in a ride like that?”

“Ah... none,” I scoffed. “I believe that’s my point. No self-respecting teen wants a parent taking her to school. But try riding to school in a white, zebra striped, Ford pick-up truck with a horn that blasts a Tarzan yell.”

“Hey, man, you’re the only one bugged by this. People love your dad; they think he’s cool. He is cool!”

With a grunt, I shoved off the sofa back and returned to the bar, leaning heavily against it. “It’s easy for you to sit there and say he’s cool,” I sighed. “You’re not the one living with him. I may have to live in a zoo, but does my life have to be one, too?”

“Whatever,” Kyler replied, with a tone intended to let me know I was being dramatic. “I don’t get what the big

deal is. You don't see me all bent out of shape about living in a hotel, do you?"

Annoyed, I gathered my dirty dishes and walked into the kitchen to place them in the sink. Sounds of the zoo awakening drew me to the bay window at the back of the kitchen. Across the patio and back yard I could see Joey, the head zookeeper, hosing out the chimp cages and filling their bowls with fresh fruit. The lioness, Hasina, let off a soft roar that echoed across the park, letting the other animals know it was time to wake up.

No matter how many times I experienced it, the first stirring of the animals in the morning was amazing. Exhaling deeply, I walked back into the living room to sit on the sofa beside Kyler. On the TV, Dad had coaxed Monica into joining him; she even managed to look interested as he rambled on, spitting out ferret facts.

"Would you like to hold him, Monica?" Dad said, dangling the squirming ball of fur in Monica's direction.

Monica recoiled. "No!" she snapped, and then softened a bit. "Uh...no Gage I don't think so. You're doing a fine job."

"Are you sure? Frenchy really likes your perfume."

"Uh-oh," Kyler grunted, sitting up suddenly. "Look how Frenchy's starting to fidget. I think your dad's losing control of him."

"What do you mean—losing control?" I said, pulling up to the sofa edge beside him.

Before there was time for either of us to say any more, Frenchy burst free of Dad's grasp and skittered around the stage.

"Oh, jeeze, this can't be good," I mumbled. "He's looking for a place to hide."

Kyler pitched to one side and back again, loony laughter erupting from his throat. "Looks like he found one," he chuckled.

“Ohmigosh!” I jumped to my feet, slapping my hand to my forehead. “Ohmigosh!”

Usually admired for my debating skills, and an ability to wield a clever vocabulary, I’ve led the debate team in countless wins; however, upon seeing Frenchy the ferret scurry up egotistical, self-promoting, silicone-enhanced Monica Taylor’s skirt, all I could come up with was—Ohmigosh!

Crazy mortified, I looked to Kyler for sympathy. He was no help. His head thrown back in an all out belly laugh, he clapped his hands theatrically. “This is not funny,” I gasped, smacking him in the head. “This is exactly what I was afraid of. Animals are unpredictable. What was Dad thinking, taking Frenchy on live TV!”

I collapsed back onto the sofa and glared at the television. Dad was up and bustling around the stage obviously at a loss how he should retrieve Frenchy. A squealing and frantic Monica had jumped to her feet and grabbed her leg, just above the knee, halting any further advance on Frenchy’s part.

“*GET HIM OUT!*” she demanded. “*GET HIM OUT! THIS INSTANT, GAGE NOBLE.*”

“What do you think she means—get him out?” I stammered.

Kyler threw his head back and howled.

I vaulted to my feet—again. “Oh, no! No, he wouldn’t...he’s not going to...”

Shocked, I stared at the TV. “I can’t believe he did that. *Gage Noble, Zookeeper Extraordinaire* reached up Monica Taylor’s skirt and pulled out a ferret.”

Kyler’s lip twisted into a satisfied grin. “Now, that was total.”