

Esmerelda Sleuth

“THE OTHER SIDE OF THE MIRROR”
Book One

By
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Notice** Portions of this story may prove too graphic, sexually explicit, or violent for sensitive readers. It is intended for mature readers.

A Special Note from the Author:

Although this story sends Esmerelda back in time, please be aware that I did not do a detailed historical research. I simply let my imagination run loose and wrote a story as it came to me. That is the beauty of fiction which is described as: a writing of imaginary people, places, and events. So, I apologize in advance to those sticklers who seek historical accuracy in fiction should you find an inaccuracy in these pages. Please keep in mind that my goal is to entertain, not to educate.

Happy Reading!

“A mirror reflects the illusion of our life while hiding the reality of darkness.”

Esmerelda Sleuth

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I leaned back in my well-worn executive office chair and stretched the kinks from my body. I'd finally solved the case that had plagued me for weeks. It was a call for celebration!

Eleanor Waterford's husband was a sly player. He'd managed to disguise his activities to the point that I simply couldn't uncover the name of the female who he was keeping company with. I was just about to give up and confess to my boss that I'd failed when it struck me. What if the woman he was seeing wasn't a woman at all?

Bingo!

Why hadn't that come to me before?

Maybe because the photos that my assistant presented to me had Bill Waterford in what looked like a lover's embrace with a person who wasn't his wife and was dressed like a woman with a body frame to match?

It was a classic lesson for me in stereotyping.

I'd come across the name, Frankie Stapleton, on several occasions during my research, but I simply considered him a business associate. Since I was looking for a woman and not a man, I didn't take the time to dig around until the fact that Frankie, a.k.a. Francis was a cross-dresser who was in the process of becoming a transsexual who would eventually change the spelling of his name from the masculine Francis to the feminine Frances surfaced. Not at first, anyway.

Frankie was also Bill's distant cousin. Because of Eleanor's over-the-top prejudices and his fear of her doing something as drastic as

divorcing him for his association with a man who was working on becoming a woman, or, at the very least, subject him to criticism and ridicule that he wasn't up to, Bill was supporting his cousin in his transitional journey - both emotionally and financially- in secret. Hence, the reason that I thought Frankie was a business associate.

What my assistant and I had immediately labeled as a lover's embrace was merely a hug of support from one human to another.

Unlike Eleanor, I try to be an open-minded, live-and-let-live kind of person. Therefore, when I discovered the truth, I simply smiled with satisfaction over solving the mystery of the alleged other woman with no judgement of Frankie in any way.

After clasping my hands behind my head and propping my feet on the top of my desk while gloating over my success to myself, the realization came to me that I now had to write a report of my findings for Mrs. Eleanor Waterford. Memories of Bill's pleading for me to keep it from her battled with my sense of duty to my client.

It turned out that my client was the money person in the marriage. Bill was afraid that Eleanor would leave him if she found out that he was emotionally and financially supporting his cousin. I would have questioned this fear had I not met with his wife on several occasions and raised a brow or two at some of the comments that were made by her in simple conversation. Bill was right to fear the worst would happen if I told her the truth about her husband's support of his transsexual cousin.

So, now I was faced with a choice. Should I surrender a complete and factual report? Or, should I doctor it a bit, as Bill requested, to save a

very kind, understanding, and generous man from the wrath of his not so kind, not so understanding, and definitely not so generous wife who was in control of the family money?

I looked at the clock. It was six o'clock on a Friday. Quitting time. Eleanor Waterford's report could wait until Monday. It would give me time to sleep on what to do.

Nora cracked my office door open far enough to pop her head through. "I need a drink. How about you?"

I smiled as I closed the folder on my desk. Grabbing my handbag and sweater jacket from the nearby clothes tree, I nodded. "More than one, I think."

We giggled our way out of the building as we compared our day's events and the people who we'd been forced to deal with. It wasn't an ideal practice to share things that went on in an investigation office, but we needed an outlet for our frustrations or we would be sure to go mad. Besides, we were best friends since middle school and would never betray our friendship by repeating what was said in confidence.

Nora and I worked for the same company, but in different departments. I was a junior investigator and she worked as a supervisor in the general secretary pool that serviced me and a few other investigators. It was expected that she would know the results of a case since it was she or one of the secretaries that she supervised who tended to the files and typed up the report before sending it to the client, but the details of how it was solved remained a mystery to her, unless they were shared by me.

In most cases, they were. Not only did it bring a bit of excitement into her normally mundane existence, but she also often brainstormed with me. More than once, a case was solved with the aid of her input.

It was a crisp early evening in late fall. My sweater jacket was meant more for spring or a cool summer night. Nora and I were originally from New York, but we decided to stay in the south after college. Even though we were in Virginia, it still snowed and could still get bitter cold in the winter months. Since I wasn't a fan of winter, I'd procrastinated on dragging out my cold weather wear as long as I could. My covering barely protected me from the air that almost stung my flesh. It was a stark reminder that I'd waited as long as I could to shift wardrobes.

Fortunately, the bar that was our after-work-hangout was only a block away. In no time at all, we were settled at a table with a dirty vodka martini with extra olives in front of me and a Tom Collins in front of Nora. Between the body heat of the crowded room and the forced hot air that was pumped from the vents in the ceiling, I was warm as toast within minutes.

My friend looked at the multiple toothpicks with olives stuck on them that graced my martini and wrinkled her nose. "I don't know how you can stand all of those nasty little green things mucking up your drink."

I chuckled. "They stave off the hunger so that I don't binge when I finally find food."

She pulled the cherry from her drink and used her perfectly straight teeth to separate it from its stem. "I should do that with these cherries. They're a damn sight better tasting."

I shrugged as I watched her deposit the cherry stem onto her cocktail napkin. “And, super sweet.”

Nora’s eyes lit up when she spotted a very attractive man who looked to be in his late twenties entering the bar. “Speaking of super sweet. That’s Lance Northrup. Just looking at him gives me chills.”

My blue-grey eyes followed the stare of her rich brown ones to the opposite side of the room. I had to agree with her. The tall, dark haired male moving with regal grace toward the bar to order a drink was one of the best looking guys I’d laid eyes on. Ever.

I furrowed my brows in thought. There was something about this man that felt familiar. Although, I couldn’t explain why since this was the first I’d seen him. I disliked it when I couldn’t put a reason behind a feeling or emotion.

Annoyed with myself, I heaved a sigh.

Mistaking my sigh of annoyance for one of desire, my friend wistfully said, “My sentiments exactly. He’s new to the neighborhood. He works in the real estate office around the block with Melanie Gaines. Remember her? She was one of the secretaries, but left last year for bigger and better. Now, she’s his secretary. She’s kept in touch with a few of us. We had lunch last week and she told us all about him. Lucky woman. Of course, guys like that would never go for a girl like her or me.”

I had a feeling that she was right. Men who looked like Lance Northrup were famous for having slender, willowy eye-candy on their arms. Nora couldn’t be more opposite. Her pointed nose was too large for her rounded face. More than once a cruel whisper declaring that she

looked like a penguin could be heard in the office by one of her jealous underlings. She had a shape that could only be described as fluffy and if she reached a height of five-feet-one inch it would be a surprise to me. I didn't remember Melanie Gaines well, but if my recollection was correct, she was no prize either.

I was a few inches taller than Nora with a slender, hour-glass shape. My nose was straight and just the right size for my face. It was also in alignment with a mouth that friends and family felt would be perfect for a lipstick commercial. In short, my facial features were in sync to the point that most people thought me pretty.

I would have been satisfied with my looks if it wasn't for the fact that my hair was a wild mass of rusty curls. It was so unruly that I'd given up on taming it years earlier.

It didn't matter that others found it beautiful. I'd considered it hideous for the greater part of my formative years. It took maturity, along with continual listening to other's open admiration of the mane on my head, to convince me to stop lamenting over my misfortune of genetics and find a bit of complaisant peace about my hair.

My saving grace for my self-esteem was my flawless porcelain skin and kissable lips; neither of which were enough to outshine the model types that clung to the arms of men like Lance.

"Me neither," I said as I nodded my head. "He's wearing designer from head to toe."

"He not only makes good money, he comes from money," Nora said with open envy.

After taking a good long drink of my martini, I burped, giggled, and added, "He's probably a jerk, anyway. The cute, rich ones usually are."

Nora pumped her drink with her straw. "Yeah. You're right." The sip of her drink that she took through her straw was in stark contrast to the gulp I'd just had. "What do you have planned for the weekend?"

"Rest," I said. "I need to unwind after the Waterford ordeal."

"It must feel good to have solved it, right?" Nora asked. "I can't believe the twist in the story. The guy is not having an affair with a woman. He's supporting a man who is becoming a woman. Who would have guessed it?"

I shook my head. "Now I have to figure out how to write a report that will state that he's not having an affair like his wife thinks without harming Bill Waterford's marriage or financial security. It's a sad thing to say, but I prefer him over my client."

Nora shook her head. "I don't envy you."

"Do you mind if I join you?" asked an irritating feminine voice that sounded familiar, but I just couldn't place.

"Melanie Gaines," Nora said with emphatic teasing. "Are you stalking your handsome sales rep?"

Giving Nora a look of mock offense while giggling, Melanie denied knowledge that Lance had entered the bar only seconds before her. Looking around, she said, "The place is packed tonight. I guess I am not the only one who had a long week."

Nora removed her handbag from the chair next to her to indicate that Melanie was welcome at our table. “Melanie, do you remember Esmerelda? She’s one of our top investigators.”

I nodded my greeting to my former secretary as I shifted beneath the steely study of her piercing green eyes. Her inspection reminded me of my grade school principal who was forever complaining to my parents about my wild and untamed coif being a distraction to the other students. Of course, my parents simply smiled and said that they’d contain it in a braid or bun while calling the principal inappropriate names beneath their breath. -My parents were of the people who found my hair to be my best asset. Not my worst.

Being this close to Melanie gave me the opportunity to compare my recollection of her looks with what was actually before me. I’d gotten the general scope of her appearance correct. Unlike my dear friend, Nora, with the beak nose, or me, with my wild mane, Melanie was normal to the point of being unmemorable. Her facial features were nondistinctive. Her hair color was a mousy brown that she’d tried to spruce up with a bit of highlighting. It didn’t help that she had it pulled back into a ponytail that rested high on the back of her head in fifties style. Her height was average for a woman. The only thing that would have ever made me remember her after a meeting was those eyes. The eyes themselves were a normal green, but she’d learned to use them to look at people in a memorable way. As she’d done with me.

Clever woman.

Leaning into the table to get her attention, Melanie addressed Nora in such a low voice that I could hardly make out the words. “It’s a

holiday weekend so the office is closed on Monday. A few of the people from work are going to spend the extended weekend at Lance's country estate. It's been in his family for centuries and is established with some phenomenal amenities. Or, so I am told. I'll bet he'd let you come along."

Nora's eyes lit up; as did my attention. Was she simply inviting Nora? Or, was I included in on this invite?

It wasn't because the house belonged to a rich and handsome guy that I wanted to go. Not only did I believe that I'd be of no interest to him, but I was too focused on making senior investigator to spare the time and energy needed for dating. It was just that I loved old things; especially old houses. If this house had been in his family for generations, it had experienced a good deal of history. I longed for the opportunity to sit in a room with my eyes closed and feel the energy of days gone by. It was something that I often did whenever I came across an antique shop. As crazy as it sounds, it was as if the contents of the shop spoke to me. Images and thoughts would fly into my head. I often left the shop knowing the history of a piece of furniture or a nic nac without having to consult the shopkeeper.

My mind had wandered off their conversation to the point that I missed Melanie summoning Lance to our table. You can imagine my surprise when I found him asking to sit in the chair next to me.

I quickly fumbled with removing my handbag from his targeted seat. At first, I thought that my clumsiness was a result of being startled back to reality, but I soon determined that it was more the fact that the energy this man exuded was both overwhelming and familiar.

Why did he feel so familiar?

“Ladies, I’d like you to meet the newest member of the Zuckerman Real Estate sales team, Lance Northrup,” Melanie said with a syrupy voice that grated on me like nails dragging across a chalkboard.

“Lance, this is my good friend Nora Oosterhout and her boss, Esmerelda Sleuth.”

“Friend,” Nora said as she nodded and smiled her greeting to Lance. “Esmerelda is my friend.”

Melanie’s brows raised. “Oh? I didn’t realize. I thought she was just your boss.”

“We’re careful not to show too much partiality in the office,” I explained. “You know how catty some people can be.”

I knew that I’d hit a nerve with Melanie and I hoped that she was astute enough to read between the lines and realize that I was aware of and remembered her poor behavior while she worked for my company. It had struck my memory during the introductions what it was about her that I’d found unsettling. She’d been one of the catty secretaries who’d compared Nora to a penguin behind her back.

I had a hard time keeping the steam from pouring out of my ears at her superlative behavior toward my friend who I was certain was unaware of her backstabbing side. I couldn’t help wondering what motive was behind it.

The words coming out of Lance’s perfectly shaped mouth had a rich, lusty undertone. “Esmerelda, what a beautiful name for a beautiful woman.”

I don't know who was more shocked by the words that poured forth from that handsome mouth with eye catching straight and -dentist whitened- teeth. From the look of shock on Melanie and Nora's face, it was clear that they hadn't expected such a comment any more than I had.

"Esmerelda Sleuth is her full name," Melanie giggled, with emphasis on my last name of Sleuth. "Here's the best of it. She's an investigator! Get it? Esmerelda Sleuth is a sleuth!"

Although Lance politely smiled, he made no attempt to join Melanie in her laughter over her clever play on words. In fact, I got the impression that he was annoyed with it. As was I.

Since I'd joined the office of Snyder and Jason Investigations, I'd been teased more times than I could count over the fact that my last name was Sleuth. It usually came from clients who spoke before they thought, so I excused them their social ignorance. Melanie's behavior, however, was purposeful. Unfortunately for her, it backfired. Not only had she irritated me and Lance, but Nora was clearly unimpressed.

In fact, she was so annoyed with Melanie's childish behavior that I was barely able to prevent her from declining the weekend invitation. Fortunately, she caught my look before she finished her sentence and added to it that she didn't feel that it was right to accept a weekend invitation in front of me if I wasn't included.

Picking up on the gist of what was occurring, Lance quickly rectified the situation by extending an invitation for the extended holiday weekend at his country estate to all at the table. I would be lying if I didn't admit that I was inwardly gloating over Melanie's obvious

disapproval as she looked from me to Lance with those piercing green eyes.

The trip to Lance's estate house was fairly uneventful. Even with the occasional wrong turn that was prompted by Nora's outdated and inefficient GPS system, we made good time. This was because Nora had what was referred to as a lead foot. Speed was the name of the game for that woman no matter what she was doing. Be it driving a car or walking down the sidewalk, Nora didn't know the meaning of the word slow.

I, on the other hand, have always been prone to take my time. I believe that personality trait has been a considerable aide in my career. One of the vital aspects of my job is to be able to take in and remember as much about a person, place, or thing as possible. It's difficult to do that when you're rushing about.

When Nora first got her license, it took a good deal of effort for me to remain calm while a passenger in her car, but, over the years, I eventually settled down and stopped fearing for my life. In fact, I actually catnapped between wrong turns during our drive.

We'd heard that the estate was old and established, but no one mentioned that it resembled a resort hotel. To add to the illusion, we were greeted by a valet who assured Nora that he would be extra careful parking her recently restored nineteen sixty-six Ford Mustang convertible.

We'd arrived late morning, which was fairly early in accordance to social etiquette, so I was surprised to discover that the other guests were already gathered near the pool behind the house. Some were actually using it.

A man, who introduced himself as Radcliff, greeted us at the door and escorted us to our rooms. By his accent and skin color, I guessed him to be from Jamaica, but the formality of his dress and behavior intimidated me into not questioning him about it. I marveled at the breathtaking décor as he guided us through the grand house that still contained much of its original furnishings. It was just my taste. It made me think of one of my favorite period television mini-series, “Downton Abby.” It so reminded me of that show that, if it wasn’t for the fact that Downton Abby was filmed in another country, I would have questioned if this house was used to film it.

I would have been happy to simply sit in the ambiance of my room that was the size of half of my apartment, but Nora was hot to mingle with the other guests. After standing at the door and taking a long, longing look at the room that I’d been assigned, I closed it and reluctantly followed my friend down the richly carpeted hall to the winding staircase that led to the French doors that opened to the oversized flagstone patio where the rest of the guests were laughing and drinking.

When I saw no sign of Lance, I jokingly whispered that he was probably going to make a grand entrance like the Great Gatsby. Nora laughingly agreed.

Including Lance, we totaled eight in residence for the long weekend. Nora and I were the only guests who were not associated with Zuckerman Realty in some way.

Since our host was nowhere to be found, and Melanie Gaines was the only one that Nora and I knew, it was necessary to make the rounds

with introductions. Needless to say, Melanie jumped at the opportunity to introduce me to each and every guest by my full name. With every introduction, she insisted on pointing out that Ms. Sleuth was a sleuth. To my disappointment, unlike Lance, each and every person who I suffered an introduction to had a little witty comment about it. A few of the guests had already started drinking, so their wit was emphasized by the abundance of alcohol that was freely flowing. As a result, laughter at my expense abounded for an easy hour.

When Radcliff mercifully announced that lunch was ready, I practically ran toward the dining room to get away from them all. In doing so, I barreled straight into Lance. To my humiliation, we both went down. Fortunately, he was walking by a settee near the grand staircase and it cushioned our tumble.

I was acutely aware of the solid embrace of his surprisingly muscled arms when he instinctively caught my fall. It gave me no choice other than to rest my cheek against his rock hard chest. In doing so, I could hear his powerful heart beating at a pace that seemed just a bit faster than normal.

Although it was only a few seconds in length, our stunned silence felt excruciatingly long. He finally broke it by jokingly saying, "If you wanted me to hold you, I can think of better approaches."

Red faced and far too mortified to appreciate his wit, I struggled to free myself from his embrace and stand up. In doing so, my hand accidentally rested on his stiffened manhood.

"Okay, then," he chuckled. "There is a time and a place for everything, dear woman. Lunch first, if you please."

I yanked my hand away from his bulging crotch as if I'd touched a hot iron and stood upright. I was certain that my cheeks were so flushed that they matched my red hair as I pulled it away from my face while doing my best to regain my balance and composure with as much dignity as I could muster. "I'm so sorry... I..."

"Esmerelda. Is it not?" he said with a slight smirk on his face and a glint of amusement in his eyes as he stood and straightened his clothing. I didn't miss the fact that he was eyeing my torso with great interest.

Realizing that I was probably a tussled mess as well, I quickly smoothed and realigned my top. It was a fairly form fitting tee shirt that had shrunk just a little in the wash. I knew this when I'd grabbed it to wear that morning, but, since my pile of dirty laundry far exceeded what I had left that was clean to wear on this unexpected weekend excursion, I put it on without much thought. What I hadn't realized until that moment was that it was now tight enough to accentuate the size and shape of my breasts in a way that could be misconstrued as an invitation under circumstances such as this.

After what just happened, I could only imagine what he thought of me in my sexy shirt. I resigned myself to changing my shirt as soon as possible while I added the fact that I'd worn it in the first place to my list of humiliating events.

I would have smoothed my hair, but there was no help for it under normal circumstances, so I didn't bother.

Tears of humiliation threatened to pour fourth as I choked out validation that I was indeed Esmerelda. It was followed by more apologies for my clumsy behavior.

His dark eyes danced in the afternoon light that poured through the opened French doors and oversized windows. It was clear that he wasn't in the least bit bothered by the fact that I'd just had my hand on his crotch and knew that he'd been aroused by our little tumble.

Men!

Extending his arm, he teased, "I believe the safest place to be is by your side, Esmerelda. Shall we?"

Frustrated, at a loss for words, and too choked up to be able to enunciate them if I was able to find them, I slid my hand through the crook of his arm and allowed him to escort me into the oversized dining room.

The guest list consisted of three men -with Lance making four- and four women -myself included. By the looks of pure jealous hate as we entered the room, I gathered that the women were all unattached - or, at the very least, had designs on Lance for the weekend. I also got the impression that one of the men did as well. This was a time when I regretted being so astute about my surroundings.

He boldly asked a man, named Peter, to move out of the chair next to him so that he could seat me where we could comfortably converse. Fortunately, Peter was one of the few guests who showed no animosity toward me. His jovial compliance with Lance's request was a welcome respite from the otherwise tense atmosphere.

It took a while before the guest's attention left me and Lance and turned toward good conversation and even better food. I'm fairly content with my station in life and never really coveted that of the rich and famous, but, if I had to covet one thing, it would be the fact that they always have a fantastic cook at the ready.

Since Lance made no mention of our little hallway fiasco during our luncheon conversation, but favored me with topics that were both intelligent and interesting, I soon relaxed and forgot about my humiliation. I was so engrossed in his stories about his family history that I robotically ate every bit of food that he felt the need to pile onto my plate. By the time I'd realized what I'd done, my stomach suffered extreme discomfort and I was in the need of some rest and an antacid.

Disappointed at the turn of events, Lance escorted me back to my room. He disappeared briefly, only to reappear with a bottle of antacids. I thanked him profusely while my shaky hands fumbled with the bottlecap. Something about this man's nearness just sent my body into a jitter fest. Yet, I couldn't imagine being in a room without being close to him.

He reached forward and placed his hand over mine. It felt soothing and warm. I could feel my jitters easing up.

"Here. Let me help you," he said in a soft coo-like tone.

Chills that bordered on erotic traveled up and down my spine as I reveled in his touch. For a brief moment, my abdomen contracted with desire. With the cap removed, he had no reason to continue keeping his hand over mine. Even so, it took a moment for him to pull it away. When he did, I felt an immediate sense of disappointment and loss.

Our eyes locked for an intense moment as his face drew closer to mine. For a second, I thought that he might kiss me. My entire body stood at attention in anticipation of what I was sure would be a fantastic and memorable experience before my tortured stomach ruined the mood with a great big hiccup.

“Take your antacid and get some rest,” he said as he stood to make a reluctant exit. “I’ll check on you in a few hours.”

“I’m sorry,” I whispered as I watched him close the door behind him.

Furious over the missed opportunity, I popped the antacids into my pouting mouth before yanking my overly seductive tee shirt off. My breasts were strong and firm, so I hadn’t bothered to wear a bra. Looking down at my hardened nipples, I groaned at the realization that they must have been poking at the fabric of my tee during our almost kiss.

With the desire to escape what was turning out to be a day of embarrassment, I curled up on the bed and willed myself to sleep.