

RED HAIR

By Donna Casella

It happened every spring when the warm Chinook winds swept down over the prairie and broke the spell of the long, hard Montana winter. The first warm day. I would play outside all day, and that night at dinner my parents could hardly keep from laughing when they looked at me because the spring sun had made my face blossom into a million ugly freckles. I wanted to die. I was ashamed because I was so ugly. I kept my hands over my face all through dinner. I thought of running away so no one could ever laugh at me again.

It was all because of the red hair. Red hair in Great Falls Montana was not a wonderful thing to have. When my Aunt Winifred was pregnant, Aunt Hazel, who was always very jealous of her, is rumored to have said *I hope she has a redhead. Would serve her right.*

My parents didn't seem to be thrilled with my red hair either. Oh, they pretended otherwise but I could tell. My mother told me there were two kinds of redheads: the ones with the carrot red hair and white skin, and the other with Titian hair such as mine. You know *Titian*, the painter who painted the fat, sprawling women with light red hair. If I were going to be called *Titian* I wished those women were not so fat.

When I was five, mother cut my hair and then left to answer the phone. While she was gone, I flushed all the hair down the toilet and broke her heart.

When I was seven and had to go to a new school after my parents' divorce, a boy called me *red* and I fled home to my grandparents' house in terror and refused to go back to school for two days. Hadn't he seen that I had Titian hair?

When I was eight or nine I wore thick braids and my head ached sometimes from the weight of all that Titian hair. Mother washed it with P & G laundry soap because it made my hair shine. I hated hair washing days as it was extremely painful to have the snarls combed out of my thick, long, wet hair. Those were the days before conditioners.

I used to make up stories. My heroine was always the same: a raven-haired beauty with blue eyes and very white skin. Men were crazy about her.

My conception of red hair began to change when I talked my mother into subscribing to *Photoplay*—that glossy, wonderful, glamorous magazine. As I poured over the pages I began to realize that some of the movie stars had red hair and it was sexy, a good thing to have: Maureen O'Hara, Rita Hayworth, Susan Hayward, Lucille Ball. And then the movie *Gilda* came to the Liberty Theater in Great Falls, Montana, and it changed my life.

I must have seen that movie ten times. I never tired of watching Rita Hayworth sing, strut, writhe, flip that beautiful hair to the floor, peel off those long black gloves and twirl them around her head. Who else but a redhead could have pulled that off? Who else but a redhead could sing "Put the blame on Mame, boys. Put the blame on Mame. One night she started to shim and shake and that brought on the Frisco quake. So you can put the blame on Mame boys, **Put the blame on Mame.**"

After the show was over, I would walk up the carpeted stairs to the ladies room at the Liberty Theater. I walked like Rita, my hips undulating slightly. My mouth was pouty and kissable, my voice husky and sexy. It was only when I looked at myself in the mirror and saw the freckles and pigtailed that I realized all redheads were not the same.