

Title: Amandacadabra

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Timeline: First season - winter

Summary: Very dark comedy - while on assignment at the '84 Winter Olympics, Amanda gets an unexpected visitor.

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Thanks: First and foremost to Merel who, looking up from the half-pipe, said, "Someone ought to write an Olympics story; you ought to write an Olympics story," and then, after I relented and told her how I was going to go about it, suggested I include the line from Little Feat. Second to BP&A - remind me not ever to ask you to motivate me again. Third, to my betas - Merel, Pam, and TK. Finally, to all those who answered my 'medical' questions offline.

Feedback: I welcome all praise, but prefer comments to be in-depth and constructive. You may contact me on or off-list, but please keep in mind that on-list comments are often good sparks for discussion.

Notes: The East German skater in the '84 Olympics was Katarina Witt. She won the gold and had men watching figure skating. However, I was unwilling to use any non-fictional characters in my story. Any resemblance b/t my East German skater and Miss Witt is purely coincidental - really.

Rating: PG

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The door was open. It was the first thing she noticed upon arriving back at her hotel room. Pushing cautiously through, she immediately took stock of the situation and was relieved to see that everything was in place.

As her heart slowed, she suddenly became aware of the sound of water running in the bathroom. "Hello?!" She crept toward it. "Who's there?" She knocked sharply. "Hey, what's goin' on in there?"

Receiving no answer, she backed away, never taking her eyes off the door until she reached the bed and sank onto it, overwhelmed. The splashing continued, and she stood again, trying to find a solution to her quandary.

"Okay, Amanda, relax." She began to pace as she talked to herself. "Relax? Right! There's someone in my bathroom. How am I supposed to relax? This is ridiculous; now I'm talking to myself!"

As she continued to pace, she noticed the running flow had changed to a persistent gurgle, and she stilled to listen more closely. Looking around the room for something, anything she could use as a weapon, she finally settled on a large, glass paperweight bearing the Olympic insignia.

Grasping it firmly in her right hand, she again edged her way back to the door. "Okay! I don't care who you are or what you're doing; I'm comin' in!" she shouted. As she touched the doorknob, she spotted water beginning to seep into the carpet. "And I'm not paying for the water damage," she added more quietly.

Throwing the door open, she was met by the sight of a very wet, very naked, and very dead man lying in her bathtub. She lurched backward, recoiling from the sight, and then braced herself to look again. "Why do these things always happen to me?" She shook her head and set the paperweight down on the counter by the sink before tentatively reaching past the corpse to turn off the faucet.

"Don't go anywhere." Amanda held a finger out in warning to her unexpected guest and then realized the ludicrousness of talking to a dead man. She shook her head again and shut the door behind her.

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"5583," the monotone voice of the Agency operator greeted her.

"Mr. Stetson please," Amanda whispered into the phone, though it was unlikely anyone would overhear her.

"Lee Stetson here," the familiar voice met her ears after only a moment.

"Lee!" she hissed. "I've got a problem."

"Amanda? What's going on; are you still in Sarajevo; what's wrong?" His questions came rapid-fire.

"Look, I know I said I could handle this on my own, and normally I could, and things have been going really well, but . . ." She paused to inhale and collect her thoughts. "Lee, there's a naked dead man in my bathtub."

"What!?" He had been reclining in his chair and this news caused him to bolt upright - uncertain if the point she was most upset about was that the man was naked, that the man was dead, or that the man was in her bathtub. At a loss for words, he asked, "Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure, Lee! I know a naked dead man when I see one."

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry." He stifled a sigh, realizing how patronizing the question must have sounded. "Just . . . don't touch anything. Call the police; I'll catch a plane as soon as I can."

He hung up the phone slowly, shaking his head in disbelief. He should've known better - should've been able to see that nothing could ever be simple or straightforward where Amanda was concerned.

Francine glanced in his direction, raising an eyebrow archly at his obvious frustration. "Things not going well for our little international traveler?"

"You could say that." He shook his head morosely.

"What's wrong? Unable to find a good burger place? Passport photo make her look constipated? Having trouble calculating the exchange rate? Tell me if I'm getting close." She drummed her long fingernails against the laminate desktop as she waited for the answer.

He looked up at her, his lips thin in obvious frustration. "Apparently, there's a dead man in her bathtub."

"Hmm . . ." Francine seemed utterly unaffected by the news. "Gives a whole new meaning to 'fat man in the bathtub with the blues'."

Lee rolled his eyes and exited the bullpen, trying to think of a way to break the news to his section chief.

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"Mrs. King, you are in serious trouble." The Sarajevo police officer looked her up and down again, his eyebrows knit tightly together. "Tell me again how the man came to be in your hotel room."

"I don't know!" she repeated for what seemed like the fiftieth time. "I came back from the giant slalom, and there he was. I've never seen him before; I don't know who he is; I don't know where his clothes went; and I don't know why he was in my bathtub." Her volume escalated with each assertion.

"He was Russian; you know that, at least." The captain tried a different tack. "Coach for the Soviet ice hockey team."

Amanda dropped her head in defeat and shook it in slow disbelief. "No. I didn't know that."

"There are those on the police force who think that you probably had something to do with this man's death. After all, the Americans have not been performing well in these Olympics. It might be to your advantage to see the competition . . . eliminated." He pronounced the last word with an affected precision and then formed a steeple with his fingers under his chin to watch her.

"You don't really mean to say that. . ." she began and then stopped, realizing that it was exactly what he meant to say. "Oh . . . my . . . gosh . . ."

"Your finger prints were all over the crime scene." The captain began to tick off the evidence they had accumulated against her. "You had motive, you had opportunity, and though we are

not quite sure about the cause of death, something tells me that because you managed to get press credentials on such short notice, you probably had means."

Looking around the spartan police headquarters, her eyes settled on the jail cell. "Oh, my gosh," she repeated, feeling the blood drain from her face.

"We are not going to arrest you . . . yet," he volunteered, though it did little to soothe her. "But I would be careful if I were you, Mrs. King - very careful." His eyes met hers, as though to drum home the seriousness of his words. "If it was not you who killed him, then you are much too close to the person who did."

She didn't say a word, finding her throat suddenly constricted, but nodded emphatically, signaling her understanding.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. King - and remember, be careful." He called after her as she stood and walked from the police station.

The Olympics. They were about ice dancing, figure skating, downhill skiing -- not a dead man in her bathtub. Amanda walked down the street in the direction of the ice arena. There was no reason to neglect her assignment - dead Russian ice hockey coach or no dead Russian ice hockey coach.

She stopped at a flower vendor a block from the ice rink. Watching as the monkey on the vendor's shoulder pirouetted, pranced, and pounced from shoulder to shoulder, she waited for the vendor to take her order. "White roses, please," she asked, smiling gently in the monkey's direction.

"How are the hippopotami?" he asked in response to her request.

It took her a moment to react to the question, and then, it was with confusion. "Hippopotami?"

"Oh, sorry my mistake," he quickly covered, lifting the monkey from his arm. The tiny animal quickly leapt to the edge of a small fire and made a production of warming his hands. His master, meanwhile, retrieved the bouquet and handed it to Amanda. She paid him and nodded an abrupt farewell to the monkey.

At the arena, she handed her press credentials to the man at the door, and he pointed in the direction of her seat. This afternoon was the short program. She'd sat through the school figures the day before yesterday, casually watching the young, East German phenom trace the required patterns on the rink with almost effortless grace. At the end, she tossed her bouquet of roses from the stands with the other fans, and exhaled slowly when she saw the young skater retrieve it.

She was to repeat the practice today. She looked down at the flowers in her hand - white roses. It felt odd, tossing flowers to the East German rather than the American skater, but those were her orders. Buy a bouquet from the vendor with the monkey, wait for the East German to skate, and toss it to her after each of her programs. For this, she would get a free trip to the Winter Olympics.

She knew there were messages in the bouquet. Plucking dead leaves from the rose stems, she'd seen the card tucked deep within. For a moment, sitting in the stands, she struggled with the urge to sneak a peek. Looking at how securely the envelope had been sealed, however, she thought better of it. Any tampering would surely be noticed, and she was unwilling to face the ire of either the Sarajevans or her fellow agents.

She sat, listening to strains of various classical composers piped into the arena. As each new skater took the ice, Amanda was drawn deeper and deeper into the magic of the event. Finally, the East German glided on and took her spot.

She took a deep breath. The air in the stadium was thick with a damp chill. The odors of sugary snacks, sweat, and coffee mingled and went to her head. She stood to shrug out of her jacket and then retook her seat.

As the woman skated around the rink, Amanda was drawn even closer to the edge of her seat. The young skater was mesmerizing, moving with the precision of a well-trained athlete and the effortless grace of a born performer. Amanda found herself rooting for the young woman, and at the end of the performance, stood with the rest of the crowd to cheer.

It was only then that Amanda remembered the flowers. Kneeling, she twisted to retrieve the bouquet from under her seat. She tossed it with a light underhand pitch to the rink, and then breathed a silent sigh of relief when she saw the skater glide over to retrieve it.

The French voice of the announcer came over the loudspeaker naming the next group of skaters, and she settled back in her chair – pleased to be able to relax and enjoy the rest of the show.

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By the time the lights dimmed and the last skater exited the ice, Amanda looked at her watch, surprised to see that it was already well-past dinner time. She gathered her purse and coat, smoothing the wrinkles out of her pants as she walked toward the exit. "Just keep walking." She recognized the voice, but jumped nevertheless, not expecting to run into him here.

"Lee?"

He steered her away from the crowds, asking, "Well, who else would it be? Let's get out of here."

She struggled to keep up with his pace, at the same time searching her mind for conversation. "Is Billy angry?" she finally asked.

"Is Billy angry?" Lee echoed. "Is Billy angry?!" You call me from a simple assignment in Sarajevo after having somehow come up with a dead man in the bathtub of your hotel room; how do you think Billy feels?"

She turned to face him as they were entering the hotel. "He's angry," she assessed.

"Actually he's concerned; *I'm* angry," Lee corrected. "How could you let this happen?" He turned on her as they entered the elevator.

"Let this happen'?" Now she echoed him. "Lee, I didn't *let* anything happen. I came back from the rink and he was there. It's not as though I hung a sign on my door saying, 'Please Murder Russian Hockey Coaches Here'."

"You may as well have," he argued, stepping off the elevator and following her down the hall to the room. "This would never have happened to an experienced agent. They'd know how to take . . . precautions – to always be on the lookout."

"Well, I'm sorry I'm not an experienced agent," she uttered the mock apology on her way into the bedroom. Glancing across the hall at the tape that sealed her former hotel room, she shuddered slightly. "But Mr. Melrose didn't seem to have any concern about my qualifications when he sent me on this assignment. So, maybe you should stop and try to figure out who did this rather than blaming me for 'letting it happen.'" She had been pacing as she ranted, and with the last statement threw herself backward onto the bed.

"Okay . . ." Lee said, looking at her with a degree of caution.

"And another thing . . ." she sat back up, and took a deep breath. "I know that I've been passing messages to the skater." Seeing his incredulous reaction, she added, "Don't try to tell me I haven't; I saw the card. I figure the flower vendor has probably been sticking them in there, because he would have to know in order to not give me the wrong flowers. And I don't know what this is really all about, and I guess I don't need to know, but what I do want to know, and I since he asked me I probably really have a need to know, because it was really such a strange question, is what does this all have to do with hippopotami?"

He shook his head a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Hippopotami?"

"Yes." Unable to sit still, Amanda began to pace again, drumming the side of her hand into her palm for emphasis as she spoke. "When I was picking up the bouquet this afternoon the flower vendor asked me about the hippopotami. Lee, I think I should've been prepared for that question." She stopped pacing and turned to face him, hands on her hips. "I was pretty embarrassed."

"Amanda . . ." he sighed, "I really don't have a clue what you're talking about." She looked as though she didn't believe him, and he nodded, reaffirming what he'd said, and then added, "Which makes me wonder just what it is you've gotten yourself tangled up in."

With a brief glance into the hall, he made his way to her former hotel room. She watched, with an overwhelming feeling of apprehension as he picked the lock, and entered. Then, he walked over to her bathroom, and slid a penknife under the seal. With his head he gestured in the direction of the door. "Keep a lookout, wouldja?"

She sighed, but stood sentry nevertheless. He could hear disgruntled whispering as he began to inspect the bathroom, and fought back a chuckle. He poked around the tub, studying the drain, the faucet, the spigot, and the tiles. As he was about to give up, the glint of something caught his eye. He pulled out the penknife again, and lifted the hair trap from the drain.

"Amanda!"

She dashed into the bathroom at his cry. "What?"

"Could you get me a Kleenex? I think I've got somethin' here." Using his makeshift tool, he began to dig around inside the drain.

"Lee?" Amanda questioned, holding out the tissue cautiously. "Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"Of course it's a good idea," she answered her own question as he fished a syringe from her drain and wrapped it carefully in the tissue she'd handed him. "I mean, you're a spy; you get paid to know a good idea from a bad idea. Certainly, you know what risks you're taking by handling a dirty needle, and you've probably been vaccinated against whatever diseases you might catch, and OH MY GOSH I'm not touching that thing," she finished when he held the wrapped up syringe for her to take.

At Lee's glare, she changed her mind and plucked the bundle cautiously from his hand. "What do you want me to do with it?"

"Put it on the desk, the dresser, the bed, I don't care! Just let me get cleaned up, and then we'll send it back to the Agency for analysis." He replaced the hair trap and then wiped his hands on his slacks. Holding the tissue and syringe out in front of her as though they might bite, she edged back into her own hotel room, and dropped them on the dresser.

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"What does it say?" The skater's coach leaned over the young woman's shoulder as she retrieved the card from the bundle of white roses and scanned its contents.

"Just another fan," she answered, sliding the card into the pocket of her sweatpants. "Tells me I'm beautiful, and the best."

Her coach looked at her skeptically. "You know that already - what makes this card special enough to keep?"

"I saw the man in the stands." She gave her coach a knowing glance. "He's very handsome."

Changing the subject, her coach stood. "Come. You have to get back to the village before curfew."

With a sigh, the young skater picked up her pack of gear and headed out of the arena. "Octavia," she asked her coach, "what do you know about hippopotami?"

"Really, Kleinchen," the coach responded, "where do these questions come from? You should be thinking about your skating."

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"The League of the Hippopotamus, Billy? Why haven't I heard of them before? Uh, huh . . . ahhh . . . uh, huh." Amanda sat on the bed, listening to the one-sided conversation. "Okay . . . alright, Billy. I'll tell her."

"Billy says, 'good luck'," Lee relayed as he hung up the phone.

"Oh, that was nice of him." Amanda nodded, and then asked, "What about the League of the Hippopotamus?"

"Apparently they're an Eastern European dissident group working to sever ties with the Soviet Union. There are branches in Sarajevo, East Berlin, Prague - all over. According to Billy, it's highly covert, but we've been helping them when we can. It's possible they're behind the murder of the Russian hockey coach, and I'm beginning to suspect the East German figure skater might just be a member, too." Lee picked up the pad of paper next to the phone and absently began to write on it. Looking up, he saw Amanda's brows knit together in confusion. "What?"

She pursed her lips in thought and then spoke. "Well, it's just . . . I saw a documentary on hippos once, and I just don't understand it - they're big, ugly, plodding animals - not at all cunning. Why would they name their organization after something like that?"

"Think about it," Lee answered. "Who would suspect? Besides, if you ever run up against one in the wild, you'll discover that they're more 'cunning' than you could even imagine."

"Look," he continued, "I pulled a few strings and got a room at the hotel next door. I'm gonna try to get some sleep. I'll see you tomorrow; I want to get to the rink to watch the East German skater practice." He walked paused at the door before he left the room. "Try not to get into anymore trouble, okay?"

As he shut the door behind him, she threw herself face down onto the bed and let out a growl. "That man drives me CRAZY!"

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"She's beautiful," Lee commented sitting closer to the edge of his seat as the young skater jumped and twirled, her skirt flowing around her. "Look at her . . . figures."

"School figures were three days ago, Stetson," Amanda deadpanned. "Come on, she's almost done - we have to go meet her."

"Fraülein Eiskönigin, dürfen wir ein Moment bitte?" Lee apprehended the young woman as she stepped off the ice.

"It would be better if you use English. I can speak it but my coach cannot," she responded.

"Walk with me to the dressing room. I will tell her you are reporters for an American newspaper."

"You sound almost like you were expecting us," Amanda assessed, which drew a nod of surprised approval from Lee.

"I knew it was only a matter of time. You're the woman who's been throwing the flowers." Amanda nodded and the skater began to unlace her skates. "But I don't know who you are." She looked pointedly at Lee as she pulled off one skate.

"He works with me," Amanda explained. "We're . . ."

Lee elbowed Amanda sharply in the ribs before she could explain any further and interrupted. "We're very interested in what you might know about hippopotami."

"Octavia," the skater called out to her coach. "Ich hab' Hunger. Kannst du mir bitte ein Schnitzel und vielleicht auch eine große Salat nehmen, als ich mit diesen Leute vertig machen." Once the older woman had left the room, she continued. "The Hippopotamus League contacted me once I'd made the Olympic team. I'm not political, but I do love my country. If they can help make it a better place to live, then I want to help them." She ran her finger over the edge of her skate blade as she spoke. "I'm sorry. I did not know about the man in your hotel room until yesterday."

"But why?" Lee asked. "What have you possibly got to gain from killing him and pinning it on Amanda?"

"I didn't kill him," she answered with an abrupt defensiveness. "I didn't even find out about it until afterward." She shrugged and ran a long, manicured fingernail over the grain of the bench. "He was in her room already," the skater explained. "They told me they killed him to demoralize the Russian team -- so they would lose. They did not mean to make it look like she did it - it was supposed to look like he had died of natural causes."

Amanda paled. "Lee . . . I . . ."

"I know," Lee said with a gentle squeeze to her forearm. "Look, we should let Miss Eiskönigin finish getting changed before her coach comes back with the schnitzel and salad."

"Danke," the skater smiled with a cautious warmth as the two agents exited.

"Lee," Amanda asked as the door swung shut. "What was the coach doing my hotel room?"

"That's what we're going to find out." He paused for a moment, and looked back in the direction of the locker room, an oddly pensive expression on his face. Then, shaking it off, he again began to briskly lead the way from the arena.

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"No, nothing, Billy." Lee sighed into the phone. "And the skater's not talking. Let me know what the lab boys dig up on the syringe, okay?"

"Of course," Billy responded.

Lee smiled and gave Amanda the thumbs up before continuing. "One more thing - the victim, Mikhail Vek, see if you can find any background on him. Apparently, the reason he was murdered in Amanda's bathroom is that he was there already."

"You think he's an operative?" Billy asked.

"I think it's a possibility," Lee responded with another glance in Amanda's direction. "I'm gonna do a thorough sweep of his room this afternoon and see what else I can find out. Something just doesn't add up here."

Amanda grimaced as Lee said that, and began to pluck small pieces of fuzz from her pants.

"Okay, Billy . . . I'll let you know." Lee hung up the phone. Then, turning to Amanda, he said, "We should probably get to the Olympic village and poke around his room."

"That won't be necessary . . ." Amanda began to walk in the other direction.

Lee groaned and turned on his heel, glaring at her. "Amanda . . ."

"He wasn't staying at the village," she informed him, a trace of a knowing smirk pulling at the corners of her mouth. "He was staying here."

"How do you know that?" Lee asked, not quite sure he wanted to hear her reasoning.

"Well, we rode together on the elevator sometimes," Amanda said. "They told me at the front desk that he wanted something nicer than the Spartan quarters in the Olympic village."

Lee let his breath out in a long hiss. "I don't suppose they told you what floor he was staying on."

"Nope," Amanda shook her head, but continued to smile glibly, "but I know. He was on the fifth floor. We were on the elevator together sometimes, and he always kept riding after I got off. Since I'm on the fourth floor, and there are only five floors in the hotel, his room has to be on the fifth floor." She paused a moment, and then added, "logic."

Lee rolled his eyes, but ultimately agreed. "Okay, let's go."

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"You met with the Americans today," the voice on the other end of the phone informed her. Digitally altered it was absent of both gender and accent. The lack of any reference point, left her not only disoriented, but also irritated.

"Yes," she answered, feeling the hair on the back of her neck stand up. "They wanted to know about Mikhail - what he was doing in the woman's room."

"What did you tell them?" As the question was asked, she gripped the receiver more tightly.

"What could I tell them?" she asked in response. "It's not as though you've told me anything. I'm nothing but a pack mule to you hippopotami."

There was silence on the other end, and she grabbed her toes to stretch her legs in front of her as she waited. "You understand the importance of our mission; it would mean a better life for you and all other East Germans. Don't blow it."

"I have no intention of blowing this or anything else," she answered, sighing deeply into the phone as she leaned over to stretch her back and arms. "Is that all?"

"Keep an eye on them," the voice told her. "I don't trust them."

"You may rest assured that the feeling is mutual." She hung up the phone, then turned in the direction of her room.

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"So we have a Russian hockey coach with an interest in," he paused looking down at the glossy magazine with the bold Cyrillic title, *"healthy women."*

Amanda caught a glimpse of the cellulite and babushkas that seemed to be liberally splashed on every page. Wrinkling her nose, she picked up another magazine. "Lee," she flipped through the pages, "Is this . . . what I think it is?"

"Prekrasnaya Vanna" he answered, taking the magazine from her, "Beautiful Baths. Yeah, it's exactly what you think it is."

Amanda looked around. "You know, Lee, for a man who liked bathtubs as much as he apparently did, I'm surprised he doesn't have one in his room."

"Might explain why he was in yours," Lee mused aloud.

"Maybe. . ." Amanda pushed at the edge of the bedspread with the toe of her shoe. Striking something solid, she knelt and pushed the bedspread aside. "Or maybe it's something else."

She pulled out a large metal lockbox.

"How could the police have missed this?" Amanda asked as Lee lifted the box and struck a quick blow with the heel of his hand to break the lock.

"Easy," Lee answered, "they were looking into the supposed killer, not the victim." Ignoring her, he went back to rifling through the box' contents. "Thank Gaod for shoddy Soviet construction," he murmured. "That couldn't have been easier to break into."

He finally lay the last sheaf of paper aside. "Well, hell."

"What?" Amanda asked.

Lee shook his head and thumbed through the papers again before answering her. "He was doping the players - and getting money from the Soviet government for doing so. The whole team was like a mass science experiment - what steroid can be combined with which pain inhibitors? What can be ingested to keep steroids from showing up in a urinalysis?"

Amanda wrinkled her nose. "He sounds like a very dishonest man."

Lee snorted. "That's putting it mildly." He rolled the papers into a tight cylinder and slid them into his inside breast pocket. "Come on; let's get out of here."

"Right!" Amanda agreed, nodding in a caricature of abrupt professionalism.

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"Hello, again, Mrs. King; I don't believe I've met your companion." A Sarajevan policeman met them outside the room.

"Darling," Lee responded, his voice dripping with condescension, "I *told* you our room was on the other floor."

"Fine!" She turned on him, falling automatically into the role of the put-upon spouse. "You were right! You're always right! I should just listen to you."

The Sarajevan officer shifted his attention back and forth as he tried to follow the verbal volley. Finally, interrupting them, he pointed to Lee and then Amanda. "This man . . . your husband?"

Just as Amanda opened her mouth to protest, Lee smiled and held out his hand, "Lee King, at your service."

"Leaking?" The officer knitted his eyebrows together.

"Lee . . . King," Lee tried again pausing between the first and last moniker.

"Ah, well . . ." the policeman nodded, slowly comprehending. "You are going to have to come with your wife and me, Mr. Lee King."

As they were ushered away, Lee glared at her, exhaling forcefully through tightly pursed lips.

Amanda shrugged, indicating her blamelessness.

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"Now, Mr. Lee King . . . what was it you said you did again?" The policeman who had met them in the hotel had been joined by another officer - this one in an ill-fitting business suit. The second officer sat back in the chair and puffed deeply on a thin, pungent cigarette as he waited for Lee to answer the question.

"I'm a plumber," he answered without hesitation. "I fix leaks."

Amanda pressed her fingertips to her temples and shook her head slowly, as Lee's interrogation continued.

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"Mrs. King. Mr. King." The policeman looked at them each in turn as he addressed them. "Somehow I do not trust you. No one can be as inept as you."

"Oh, believe me." Lee nodded with certainty. "We are."

The policeman grunted and continued. "However, we have no proof. Much as I might like to, I cannot hold you. You're free to go, but . . ." He narrowed his eyes into slits. "Do not leave Sarajevo, and stay out of hotel rooms that are not yours."

"Yes, sir!" Amanda pushed back from the table and stood quickly, and Lee rushed to keep up with her.

"Come on." He grabbed her arm and attempted to turn her to walk in the other direction.

"Lee, the hotel's that way," she argued, shaking her arm free.

"And the U.S. Consulate's this way." He pointed. "I don't know about you, but I'd rather not have an extra pair of ears when we call Billy."

She glowered at him, but followed in the direction of the Consulate.

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"That's right, Lee - nothing," Billy repeated his earlier statement for Lee's benefit. "No solvent, no cleanser, nothing. It's as though that syringe hadn't been used."

"What if we're not looking for the right thing?" Lee asked. "What if the syringe wasn't used to administer the means of death, but was the means of death itself?"

Billy was silent, and Lee waited as he tried to connect the pieces. "A Bolshevik Bubble?"

"It makes sense," Lee opined.

"I'll see if I can get our guys to suggest the coroner out there look for a puncture wound. Good work." Lee hung up with a smug look on his face.

"What's a Bolshevik bubble?" Amanda asked.

"It's a Soviet dirty trick - a way to eliminate the enemy with almost no detection. The murderer injects an air bubble into the victim's blood stream. It throws blocks the flow of blood out of the heart and the victim dies of cardiac arrest.

Amanda's eyes widened. "That's the reason there wasn't any trace of poison on the syringe."

"Right," Lee confirmed. "They didn't use any."

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She set down her cup of thick, Turkish coffee and took another bite of her pastry. "The ice skating finals are tomorrow."

"Hmm." Lee didn't appear to be interested in the conversation; his attention remained trained on the window of the café, watching the passersby.

"Am I supposed to pick up another bouquet for the East German?" she asked.

"Hmm?" He looked up at her, his attention still incomplete.

"Lee . . ." She waved her hand in front of his face. "Flowers. East German skater. Tomorrow."

His face registered gradual comprehension. "Right, yeah, sure."

"What's going on out there?" She turned to look over her shoulder and see what he found so fascinating, but save a sculpture garden, the landscape seemed unremarkable.

"The hippopotamus," he finally told her, pointing to a bronze statue near the edge of the garden. "I saw someone stuff a note in its mouth a few minutes ago. I'm waiting to see who picks it up."

Her eyes widened, and she sat up straighter in her chair. "Oh . . ."

"Don't look so obvious!" he scolded her. "Just act normal."

She nodded sharply. "Normal! Right!" She kept her spine ramrod straight and took another sip of her coffee. "See anything yet?"

"NO!" he answered sharply, and felt a pang of guilt when he saw her blanch. More softly, he continued, "Not yet; I'll let you know."

She nodded her understanding and sat further back in her chair. "Would it be normal enough to order another Dobos Torta? These are *really good*." She took another bite of her cake to emphasize her point.

He exhaled deeply through his nose. "Yes . . . Amanda, that would be fine."

As she signaled to the waitress, Lee let out a deep breath. "Ah-HA, gotcha!!" Without warning, he dashed out the door to the coffee shop.

"That man is so RUDE!" Amanda exclaimed under her breath and then took a bite of her pastry while waiting for him to return.

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"Entschuldigung Sie!" Lee called after the retreating figure. "Sagen Sie mir, bitte - was wissen Sie über Flußpferd?"

The pace of the retreat increased, and Lee matched step until they were both in a dead sprint. Growing winded, he finally tackled the other operative in a flying leap. "I asked," he repeated to the figure, now prone on the ground, "what do you know about hippopotamus?"

"Nichts," she answered spitting in his face. "Ich weiß nichts!"

"Sehr gut, Octavia," he responded. "You can tell that to the authorities later."

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"It was her coach?" Amanda was seated on a bench in the locker room of the ice arena, listening to Lee debrief the young East German.

"I cannot believe Octavia would do such a thing - she always struck me as disinterested in politics." The skater appeared visibly shaken. Pale, she gripped the strap of her equipment bag tightly. "What am I supposed to do without my coach?"

"Skate your heart out," Amanda answered and then added, "This isn't your fault, you know. You couldn't've known this would happen."

"I know," she replied glumly, "but I still feel responsible."

"You had no choice," Lee answered. "You've been told since you were a little girl that you were going to skate. Everything was decided for you -- where to live, where to train, what to drive. I'm amazed that you were even able to contact me. "

"It's funny," Amanda observed, before the skater could answer. "The Hippopotamus League . . . their mission was a good one - to free the Soviet Bloc countries - it's only how they went about it that was a problem. If they'd worked with us rather than on their own, things might have been different." As she finished, Amanda noticed that Lee's expression had softened. She saw the pair trade a meaningful look, and the room felt suddenly too small.

She coughed uncomfortably, and they both turned back to face her. "Are you sure you're going to be okay?" Amanda asked, and the skater nodded.

"Yes," she said. I have practiced hard. My body will perform even if my mind is elsewhere. And," she added after a beat. "I have the support of good friends." She gave Lee's hand a squeeze as she said it.

"You know each other?" Amanda asked though she already knew the answer to the question. "You know each other." She confirmed. "You might have bothered to tell me." She told Lee, her ire growing.

He shifted his weight from foot to foot, a blush creeping from his neck to his face. "Uh, Amanda . . . things sometimes get . . . complicated."

"Yesss . . ." she hissed. "Very complicated, indeed." She turned on her heel, heading out of the room. "I'll just be going now. "

With a brief apologetic glance to the ice skater, he dashed out of the locker room after her. "Amanda, wait!"

She turned, fixing him with an icy glare. "What?"

"It's not what you think," he offered lamely.

She looked him up and down, her expression inscrutable. "Oh?" she finally asked. "So, you're telling me, that I wasn't sent here to play cupid for you and the little strudel in there?"

"Me and . . ." he couldn't finish the sentence. "You think we . . ." He threw his head back and laughed. "Oh, *no!*"

Confused, she waited for him to explain. "No - she and I never . . . Her older sister and I . . . were close . . . once. I met her on one of my early assignments. I found her to be very . . . flexible." His face softened with the memory. "But she and I . . . no, she'll always be a knock-kneed kid with a pair of ice skates around her shoulders."

"Get on with it, Stetson," Amanda snapped.

"Wait a minute . . ." he paused and watched her carefully. "You're not *jealous*, are you?" A grin spread slowly across his face at the thought. "You *are!*" Just as quickly, he turned serious. "Amanda, we're not . . ."

"Oh, for crying out loud! No, I'm not *jealous*. I know there's nothing between us, and there never will be. We're business associates. Would you get on with it please?" She rolled her eyes.

"She's family," Lee explained as though he were admitting that he had a fear of heights.

Amanda's swallowed hard and rocked back on her heels. "Family? But you said . . ." She struggled to keep her voice light.

"Not *family*," Lee laughed again. "Family - one of my external contacts. She keeps me up-to-speed on everything that's going on in the East German sports world, and I do a favor for her now and then."

"Oh," she responded, realization dawning on her face. "So what favor were you doing for her this time?"

"I was setting up contacts for western endorsements. She's a beautiful woman, and she's probably going to win. If she can get a few commercials under her belt, she might get enough money to eventually emigrate to the west.

"Ahhh," she nodded. "And it wouldn't look good if you were to be the one passing her the information."

"Right," he confirmed.

The duo stood there for a moment, watching one another awkwardly. "Well," Amanda finally broke the silence. "The Sarajevan Police have apologized for the misunderstanding, so I guess I get to go home now . . ."

"Yeah . . ." Lee's voice seemed tight, and he jammed his hands in his pockets while he thought over what he was going to say. "You know," he finally began, "the free skate's tonight. You could stay and watch the last of the competition. You probably won't be able to get a flight home until tomorrow anyway."

A smile slowly spread across her face. "Okay!" Then, after a beat, she added, "But you're throwing the flowers this time."

END