

Dodging a Bullet

Author: BohemianFling

Timeline: between "The Wrong Way Home" and "Fast Food for Thought"

Type: Alternate Universe, but not Alternate Characterization

Disclaimer: The Scarecrow and Mrs. King characters belong to Warner Brothers and Shoot the Moon. The story, however, is all mine. Please don't post or redistribute this without my consent.

Notes: For a while, I've wondered where Amanda learned the almost expert gun-handling technique she displayed in "Stemwinder." We never saw her get any training after her dismal score in the virtual firing range during "Over the Limit." She had to have received some during the course of the series, but we didn't get to see it, so I have set out to remedy that.

Thanks: One night I had a dream. I told the dream to Dotty and Pam, and they insisted the dream be made into a story. Without their friendly nagging and loads of encouragement, there would be no story at all, so I owe them a huge debt of gratitude. Another huge thanks to my "Dream Team" of betas. They keep me from making stupid mistakes, reel me in when I'm off track, and make amazing suggestions for improvement. Dix and Becky get gold stars for being patient with me while I agonized over one particular line. Last, but not least, Merel deserves 'special' thanks for planting a seed in my head about something that resulted in a scene I never expected to write. She has a knack for pushing me, and I do mean pushing, farther than I think I can go. The NC -17 rating is a result of her conviction that I can write smut.

Special Note: For a great part of this story, please keep in mind that Amanda is an observer, as well as a participant. It's as if she is a member of the audience watching a play that she wrote, directed and stars in as well.

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Dodging a Bullet

As Lee approached their destination, he glanced at his passenger. Despite Amanda's constant chatter during the drive about how much she was looking forward to this, he knew her nerves were on edge. The entire time she talked, she fidgeted with the buttons on her flannel shirt, the seat belt buckle, the ring on her right hand . . . just about anything within her reach.

"Here we are," Lee announced, bringing the car to a stop in front of the old building.

Amanda turned to him, apprehension written all over her face. "Do you really think this is a good idea?" Her left palm was nervously rubbing her thigh, wearing an almost visible track in her jeans.

Smiling, Lee covered her left hand with his right to still the motion. He had asked Billy that exact question the previous afternoon. Hoping his own misgivings weren't evident on his face, Lee met Amanda's eyes. Billy's response came immediately to his lips. "Leatherneck says you're ready. It's his job to know that, and I trust his judgment."

Taking a deep breath, Amanda nodded. "If Leatherneck, Mr. Melrose and you all think I'm ready for this, then I guess I'm ready for this."

"We do." Lee gave Amanda's hand an encouraging squeeze. "You'll be fine. C'mon, let's get this show on the road."

Almost as soon as they left the car, Lee reached for Amanda's hand. Although he couldn't explain why, the contact had a calming effect on him. Despite his positive words, Lee was almost as nervous as Amanda, maybe more so. He knew she could do just about anything she put her mind to, but she was still very hesitant around guns. No matter how much she hated the idea of actually pulling a trigger, he knew that she understood it was part of her job to be proficient with firearms. Leatherneck had approached Billy a few days ago, insisting that Amanda move on for more aggressive training in this area. He had assured the section chief that her progress in both the virtual and real firing ranges had been significant. She needed to go to the next level.

Lee grimaced at the memory of Billy explaining that 'Assassins' Alley' was the perfect challenge for Amanda. The moment the words 'simple training exercise' were out of Billy's mouth, a knot had formed in the pit of Lee's stomach. Experience had taught him that nothing was ever 'simple' where Amanda was concerned. A 'simple' courier assignment had landed her in jail in Germany, for crying out loud. He had tried to convince Billy to change his mind, arguing that she was **not** ready, but it was no use. One of Billy's most defining -- and often most aggravating -- qualities was his ability to make decisions and stick to them, and he was determined to stick to this one. That knot had grown considerably more tangled since yesterday. Lee couldn't shake the feeling that something was going to go wrong.

Lost in his thoughts, Lee had to stop quickly to keep from walking into Amanda when she halted next to the guard's station at the entrance to Dodge City. Across the top of the small building was a sign with the warning 'Abandon Hope All Ye Who Enter Here.' Pointing to the sign, Amanda commented dryly, "Nice confidence booster."

Lee chuckled. "That's just to add a bit of realism to the Dodge City theme. Let me just get us signed in, and we can get started." He spoke to the guard, who handed him a clipboard and pen. Quickly, Lee scribbled his name and Amanda's on the sign-in sheet and returned the objects. "There. All official." Turning to Amanda, he reclaimed her hand and guided her past the entrance. "Remember, there are only wooden targets here. They'll be triggered at various intervals as you make your way through town. Your objective is to shoot the bad guys without shooting innocent bystanders or hostages. You'll be using a modified gun that shoots paint pellets instead of bullets. There are thirty pellets in the gun. It's all very simple."

"Simple, right," Amanda said sarcastically. "The last time I was here, I wound up in hand-to-hand combat with a Russian agent."

"I seem to remember you took out that Russian agent without a weapon, so a few wooden cutouts shouldn't be a problem, especially when you have this," Lee handed her a gun, "on your side."

Amanda gripped the gun in her right hand and looked at it with disdain. "I still don't like to shoot."

"I know, but you have to know how, just in case . . ." Lee trailed off, cursing himself for bringing up what had become a rather sore subject between them. After the incident with O'Keefe, he had been very vocal about how Amanda's 'dumb luck' with a gun would not always suffice. He had explained time and time again that shooting a person was something an agent was forced to do on occasion. Nobody enjoyed that part of the job, but it was often a necessity. Lee's need to make Amanda understand that fact clashed severely with her desire to never, ever, not in a thousand years, fire a gun at another living soul.

". . . my partner is in danger, and I have to protect him," Amanda finished for him, her eyes downcast.

"Or her." Lee ducked his head to look Amanda in the eye. "I'm sure glad I learned how to shoot," he said with a small smile. "Aren't **you**?"

Amanda smiled in return. "Well, when you put it **that** way . . . I guess I can take on a few wooden cutouts in the name of my partner's safety."

"I appreciate that," Lee chuckled. "Are you ready to begin?"

"Ready."

Lee nodded. "OK. I'm going ahead to watch your progress. Count to ten, then start the course." He called over his shoulder as he ran to position himself out of sight, "Remember, you have to check out every building!"

"Right. Every building." Amanda rubbed the gun handle as she counted. By the count of four, she could no longer see Lee. It made her nervous to attempt this without him by her side, but Mr. Melrose had insisted she run the course alone. 'At least Francine isn't here to laugh at me if something goes wrong,' Amanda reasoned. At ten, Amanda immediately ran to the sidewalk on her left. She knew it wasn't smart to be where there was no protection, even if there were no KGB agents lurking in the shadows of Dodge City. Slowly, she made her way toward the first doorway.

Taking a deep breath, Amanda held her gun in front of her and slipped into the building labeled 'General Store.' Carefully, she walked up and down each aisle. As she rounded the last corner, she stepped on a loose floorboard and a menacing looking gangster cutout popped up a few feet in front of her. "Oh my gosh!" Amanda exclaimed as she ducked behind a large barrel. Willing her heartbeat to return to normal, she took aim and shot at the wooden figure. "I'm sorry," she said to the 'dead' gangster as she walked past him. One last look around the store satisfied her that there were no more cutouts to fight in there. She continued down the street.

After 'killing' four dangerous-looking bad guys and one unfortunate dance hall girl who happened to startle her, Amanda prepared to enter the telegraph office. 'How can anything be in here?' she wondered as she stepped into the room. The office was very tiny, most of the space taken up by a desk, telegraph equipment and a large wooden structure. 'I guess this place doubles as the Post Office,' Amanda noted as she pulled a dusty letter out of a slot in the wooden unit. She ran her hand over the equipment and smiled. The telegraph machine had always fascinated her as a child when she watched Westerns with her parents. They couldn't explain how it worked, which was probably what made it seem so mysterious. After a few taps on the machine and a quick look around the room to assure herself there were no villains crouching around or under the desk, Amanda returned to the sidewalk.

One hour and twenty-eight 'bullets' after she started the course, Amanda left the bank and stood on the sidewalk to think. The bank had been her last building to check. All that remained was to cross the street and return to the starting point. 'Twenty-eight shots fired in all,' she mused, 'two hit good guys, and it took three to kill the bad guy who was swinging from the chandelier in the saloon. I was given thirty pellets.' Knowing the Agency was likely to test her resourcefulness by giving her **fewer** pellets than she needed to hit all the intended targets, Amanda suspected she had missed quite a few. 'Go back through all the buildings again, or call it a day?' she debated. With only two pellets left, there wasn't much she could do even if she took the time to search all the buildings one more time. 'The Agency training manual -- chapter six, section four, paragraph nine -- states this is when an agent should call for backup, but what would Lee do in this situation?' Amanda immediately answered that question. 'He'd do the exact opposite of what the manual says.' After a moment's hesitation, her 'by the book' nature took over, and she purposefully began to make her way back to the guard's station to wait for Lee.

As Amanda stepped into the street, she tripped on the uneven wood of the sidewalk. The familiar noise of a target being 'launched' surprised her. Slowly turning in a circle, she looked for the source, but saw nothing. 'Maybe there

used to be one here somewhere,' she thought, shrugging. From above the sidewalk, a wooden cutout swung toward Amanda, catching her completely off guard. The target hit her in the back of the head, sending her sprawling into the street, unconscious.

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"Are you all right? Can you hear me?"

Amanda's eyelids fluttered. She opened them to find a pair of concerned hazel eyes staring at her. Blinking a few times, she tried to focus.

"Can you tell me your name?" a deep, baritone voice asked.

"Amanda King." She tried to sit up, then slumped back onto the ground when the throbbing in the back of her head caused the world to spin crazily around her. Groaning, she gingerly rubbed her head with her right hand. "Ooh, that hurts."

The man slid his left arm under her back and, taking her left hand in his right, gently pulled her into a sitting position. "Easy does it. You took quite a spill."

"It sounds like rolling thunder in my head, and I'm shaking like a leaf." Amanda looked up at the man who was propping her up in the street. "What happened?"

The man smiled. "You tripped when you stepped off the sidewalk and -- " Suddenly the man stopped and looked at something over Amanda's shoulder. His eyes took on a near-panicked look. "Oh no."

"What is it?" Amanda swiveled her head to see what was causing such consternation. Her eyes widened when she saw what was headed their way. "Oh my gosh!"

"We have to get out of here. It's a stampede!" The man slid his right arm under Amanda's legs and scooped her up against his chest. Amanda clung to the lapels of his coat while he ran for the side of the street as fast as his legs could carry them. When he reached the relative safety of the sidewalk, the man turned his back to the street, positioning Amanda between his body and the side of the saloon. He pushed her head against his chest and bent his head over hers to shield them both from the clouds of dirt and dust being kicked up by the herd.

When the stampeding cattle had finally made their way past them, Amanda lifted her head and smiled at her rescuer. "You saved my life, Mr. . . ?" Amanda paused for the man to supply his name.

"St . . ." The man cleared his throat and looked her in the eyes. "Stand, uh, do you think you can stand?"

Amanda nodded, suddenly becoming very conscious of the fact that she was cradled in the arms of a perfect stranger. He secured his grip on her waist and removed his right arm from under her legs. As her legs swung toward the ground, Amanda tightened her grip on the man's jacket for support. When her feet met the sidewalk, she took a small step backward in an attempt to place some distance between herself and the stranger. The weight shift, and the fact that Amanda's hands still clutched his jacket, pulled him closer to her. He smiled slowly, keeping his eyes locked on hers.

Amanda nervously ran her tongue along her lower lip. "Thank you for saving my life," she said in a voice not much louder than a whisper. The man nodded his acceptance of her thanks and continued to stare at her. His silence,

the intensity of his gaze, and his close proximity unnerved her considerably. Desperately, she tried to think of something to say. "In some cultures, that would mean I'm now responsible for your life."

The man chuckled. "I don't think that will be necessary, but," the brim of his hat brushed the top of Amanda's head as he leaned forward and whispered, "I do think a reward is in order."

A chill ran up Amanda's spine, and her heart began to beat as fast as the pounding hoofbeats she could still hear in the distance. As he lowered his head, Amanda instinctively closed her eyes. 'He's going to kiss me! I can't let him kiss me! It wouldn't be proper. I need to . . . Oh, what's taking him so long?'

A fraction of an inch before their lips met, Amanda felt his body tense. From somewhere behind him a man was calling a name. Amanda opened her eyes, catching a flash of anger in his eyes before he turned his head to his right to focus on the source of the very loud shouting.

"Walker!! Brad Walker!! Answer your ol' pal Zeke!" A very thin, very dirty cowboy jumped onto the sidewalk and slapped her savior on the back.

In one fluid motion, Brad's right arm shot out, gathered a fistful of Zeke's shirt and slammed the man against a nearby post. "What do you think you're doing, shouting my name like that?" he hissed.

Amanda was grateful Brad's attention was completely focused on Zeke, so he didn't hear her gasp of surprise upon hearing his name.

"Hey, Brad, I-I-I'm s-s-sorry," Zeke stammered. "I didn't mean no harm, honest! I jes' been yellin' at ya since I seen ya almos' git run over by them cattle. When ya didn't answer, I thought ya mighta been hurt." Zeke's eyes wandered toward Amanda. Grinning lasciviously, he looked her over from head to toe. "Guess ya just had other things on yer mind. When yer through . . ."

Amanda shrank back against the wall. She didn't like the looks of Zeke, and she definitely didn't like the way he was leering at her.

A yank on Zeke's shirt brought his attention back to Brad. "Stay away from the lady," Brad warned through clenched teeth, "or you'll be answering to me. You got that?"

"Yeah, yeah, Brad, I got it." Zeke's eyes darted nervously around and he lowered his voice. "I got a message fer ya."

Brad glanced at Amanda then back to Zeke. Keeping his hold on Zeke's shirt, Brad maneuvered the cowboy a few feet away from Amanda, and they conversed in hushed tones.

'**He's** Brad Walker?!?!' Amanda watched the men while they held their whispered conversation. Could the man who had heroically rescued her from a stampede really be one of the most wanted gunslingers in the country? Eyeing him carefully, she mentally reviewed everything she knew about Brad Walker. Always wears a brown hat and calf-length brown duster: check. Wears a faded navy bandana around his neck: check. Tall, slightly over six feet: check. Handsome: check, check, check. 'Well, Amanda, he matches the description.' Noticing that Brad and Zeke were ending their conversation, Amanda carefully composed her features, hoping the shock of hearing Brad's name was no longer evident on her face.

"Good. Get outta here. I'll see you back at camp." Brad released his hold on Zeke's shirt and gave him a shove toward the street.

Zeke cast one last look at Brad and Amanda before running across the street. He jumped on his horse and headed out of town to the west in a cloud of dust.

Turning to Amanda, Brad apologized. "Sorry about that. Some people have no manners."

"Thank you for your concern, Mr. Walker," Amanda smiled. She took a step backward as Brad advanced toward her. "Thank you again for saving me from the stampede. I really should get back to work now."

Brad continued to move closer. "Allow me to escort you, ma'am."

"Oh, you really don't have to do that."

"I insist." Brad's tone brooked no argument. "Where to, the schoolhouse?"

"The **schoolhouse**?" Amanda raised her eyebrows. "Why the schoolhouse?"

Inclining his head toward the swinging doors of the saloon, he reasoned, "You don't expect me to think you work in there, do you?"

"And why not?"

Amanda fumed as Brad casually took in her appearance. The gingham dress she wore covered every square inch of her body from just under her chin to the tips of her boots. She could almost hear him thinking the word 'demure.'

His assessment complete, Brad scoffed, "Dressed like that?"

"Ooh!" Irritated, Amanda turned on her heel and took a few steps away from Brad. The sudden motion and pounding in her head caused her to lose her equilibrium. She placed her hand on the wall of the saloon to steady herself.

"Hold on." In one long stride Brad reached Amanda's side. He cupped her left elbow in his right hand. "Just tell me where to take you."

Amanda pointed to a small office a hundred yards or so ahead of them. "There. The telegraph office."

The two walked in silence to the telegraph office. Before entering the small room, Amanda lifted her chin to look at Brad. Extending her hand to shake his, she said, "Thank you again, Mr. Walker, for saving my life. I am in your debt."

Brad took her hand and gently rubbed her knuckles with his thumb. Slowly he moved her hand upward, turning it slightly. "It was my pleasure, Amanda King," he breathed as he brushed the back of her hand with his lips. "I'm looking forward to collecting my 'reward.' "

Leaving Amanda standing at the door of her office, Brad turned and retraced the route they had just taken.

While she watched him walk away from her, Amanda absently massaged her hand where Brad had kissed it. She allowed her thoughts to drift to the events of two weeks ago.

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Amanda entered the dimly lit office and stood just inside the door. She was somewhat surprised to see her immediate supervisor, William "Billy" Melrose, standing in front of the desk. The President of the United States was standing with his back to them, hands clasped behind his back, staring out his office window. Amanda threw a questioning look at Mr. Melrose and, at his encouraging nod, cleared her throat and asked, "You sent for me, Mr. President?"

"Come in, Mrs. King. Please, close the door and have a seat."

She pushed the door shut behind her and quickly sat in one of the two chairs in front of his desk. After Amanda was seated, Billy settled into the other chair.

Without turning, the President spoke. "As I'm sure you know, Mrs. King, a man in my position is accustomed to being threatened. Threats come with the job. Each one is investigated to determine its validity and seriousness, and appropriate action is taken to eliminate it. Usually, these are nuisances, with no weight behind them. A recent threat, however, is extremely serious. The most powerful business consortium in the country has, with good reason, taken an extreme disliking to my announcement that the government will now regulate transportation costs for all staple goods. These men have been getting rich by charging exorbitant fees for shipping these items, not caring that most people in the middle states can no longer afford the basic necessities. Two weeks ago, we received word that the consortium hired a professional gunslinger, Brad Walker, to assassinate me. The first agent assigned to this case was able to learn that they also contacted the Jenkins gang to plan and assist in carrying out the attack. For the past week, the gang has been camped just outside of Dodge City, Virginia, where they immediately 'bought' what little law exists there."

The President finally turned to face Amanda and Billy. Slowly, he walked to his desk. Worry was etched into his features. "Four of our best agents have been sent to infiltrate the Jenkins gang. All four -- Mark Phillips, Jason Marshall, Adam Carson and Lee Stetson -- have been fished out of the Potomac. The last two, we could only identify by their clothing and personal effects." He closed his eyes for a moment and shook his head sadly. "It disturbs me greatly to have lost these fine men."

Amanda's eyes widened when she heard the names. The skills of the deceased were legendary. It was unthinkable that anything could happen to any of them, let alone **all** of them, in the space of two weeks. "How, sir? How could the Jenkins gang have known about every one of them?" She searched the faces of the President and Billy for answers. "Those men are," she swallowed hard and corrected herself, "**were** experts."

Billy nodded in agreement. "They were the best. The only reasonable explanation is that there is an informant in our midst. Someone inside the department is feeding information to a member of the gang."

"Which is why we have decided to take a different tack. Instead of sending someone to **infiltrate** the gang, we're going to send someone to **observe** them. A reporter, if you will." The President fixed his gaze on Amanda. "Only Billy and I will be in contact with the agent to prevent a leak on this end."

"Then why are you telling me . . ." Amanda paused as she realized what the President was trying to tell her. "You want **me**," she raised her eyebrows and pointed her right index finger at her chest, "to be your reporter?" Stunned, she looked at Billy. "I'm not even an agent yet. I can barely shoot a gun and have never been alone on an assignment."

"Melrose says you have good instincts, Mrs. King." The President stepped around the desk and stood in front of Amanda. "From what he tells me, you are perfect for this assignment."

"Amanda," Billy hastened to reassure her, "the skills you **do** possess are more important to us right now than whether or not you can fire a gun. We need someone who can get information without being obvious, separate fact

from gossip, and get close to someone in the gang without raising suspicion." He leaned forward in his chair. "You can cozy up to a gang member, let him think you're sweet on him, and gather more information than any male agent could."

"I'd be all alone?" Amanda asked. "No backup?"

Billy smiled. "I will be your backup. You will report everything you learn directly to me via telegraph. The minute I think things are getting too dangerous for you alone, I will step in with a team of agents."

Amanda weighed that information carefully. "How can we be certain the telegraph operator won't tell someone I work for the government?"

"Oh, that won't be a problem," Billy grinned, "because **you** are the new Dodge City telegraph operator." He chuckled at the look on Amanda's face and her predictable response:

"Oh my gosh."

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Amanda shook herself out of her reverie and saw that Brad had mounted his horse and was now heading out of town in the same direction Zeke had taken earlier. Pushing open the door to her office, she decided there was no time like the present to contact Billy.

"Well," Amanda mumbled to herself as she settled into her chair next to the telegraph machine, "Mr. Melrose will be very pleased that I can 'cozy up' to Brad Walker himself." A flush crept into her cheeks when she imagined what that might entail. "Stop it, Amanda. This is business, and he is a murderer!" Concentrating on the task at hand, Amanda quickly tapped out a coded message to her supervisor.

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Sleep was elusive. Brad shifted uncomfortably on the hard ground. Every time he closed his eyes, Amanda King invaded his mind. He remembered how she'd felt in his arms when he'd whisked her away from the stampeding cattle. His heartbeat quickened when he thought of how close he had come to kissing her. Seemingly burned into his brain was the image of her face when he'd kissed her hand and made it clear he would collect his 'reward.'

"Why won't she leave me alone?" he groaned and rolled onto his back. For a few moments he lay still, listening to the sounds of the members of the Jenkins gang as they boasted to each other about their latest exploits. They had tried to draw Brad into the one-upmanship competition, but he had begged off, citing the need to be alone to prepare for the job he had been hired to do. He had made his bed some distance away from the campfire and spent the evening watching the people entrusted with the plans for getting him close to the President. Right now, he was glad the gang members were not near enough to notice his preoccupation with something other than the assassination.

Giving up on sleep, Brad sat up and raked his fingers through his hair. "I need a drink." After carefully checking his boots to make sure no unwanted guests had decided to sleep in them, he roughly yanked them over his feet. Gathering up his hat and jacket from the ground next to his makeshift bed, Brad stood and made his way to his horse.

Fifteen minutes later, Brad looped the reins over the hitching post outside the saloon. He pushed through the swinging doors and walked directly to the bar. "Whiskey," he said to the bartender and tossed a few coins onto the counter. The bartender placed a glass in front of Brad and deftly scooped up the money with one hand while pouring amber liquid into a glass with the other. Nodding his thanks, Brad raised the glass to his lips.

As he sipped his drink, Brad surveyed the room. A lively discussion at the other end of the bar about the 'new talent' at the dance hall was barely audible over the unrecognizable tune the piano player was pounding out and the laughter of a drunken man who was whirling a shrieking saloon girl around the floor. A few men were playing cards at a table in the center of the room, with a very blonde saloon girl standing behind one of them.

When Brad's gaze swept over the brightly dressed woman, she caught his eye and smiled. Engrossed in their game, the card players were not paying her much attention. She sashayed across the room, her too-tight dress displaying all her assets to their greatest advantage. Sidling next to Brad at the bar, she batted her eyes at him and asked, "Buy a gal a drink, Mister?"

"Yeah, sure." Brad nodded to the bartender, who quickly poured a pale brown liquid into a glass. The woman downed the drink in one gulp and raised a questioning eyebrow at Brad. Shrugging, he indicated to the bartender that he should pour her another. Brad knew that her job was to get him to buy her as many drinks as she could. Most men figured they'd only have to buy a few before the woman would have had enough, but Brad knew better. Although he paid full price for her drinks, he knew she was really drinking water with just a touch of alcohol. Usually, he avoided the game. He preferred to drink alone, and he certainly didn't need to pay for female companionship. Tonight, however, the distraction was welcome, and well worth a few dollars.

The woman ran her right hand along Brad's left forearm. "What's your name, cowboy?"

"Brad."

"Pleased to meetcha, Brad. My name's Randi. That's with an 'i,' not a 'y.' " The buxom blonde looped her arm around Brad's and tugged. "How 'bout we have us a seat?" Randi led him to the nearest table and pushed him into a chair. Plopping herself onto his lap, she draped her right arm around his shoulders. "Now, isn't this cozy?" Randi asked. Not waiting for an answer, she pressed her lips to his.

When Randi released his mouth to trail kisses along his jaw, Brad sighed, "Amanda."

"Sure, darlin', I'll be Amanda, if that's who you want me to be," Randi whispered into Brad's ear.

Abruptly, Brad's eyes flew open. The vision of soft chestnut hair and deep brown eyes morphed into the reality of blonde hair and dark blue eyes. 'Damn! Why is that woman on my mind?' Determined to erase Amanda's image, Brad placed his left hand on the back of Randi's neck. He roughly pulled her to him and kissed her forcefully while his right hand caressed her left thigh.

Randi, true to her occupation, immediately responded in kind. Slightly shifting her position on Brad's lap, she gave herself enough room to slide her left hand under his jacket. Slowly, she ran her palm from the center of his chest upward, lightly rubbing her thumb along his collarbone and neck. The fingers of her right hand tangled in Brad's hair.

Shrill laughter from the other saloon girl reminded Brad of where he was, and he jerked his head away from Randi's insistent mouth. 'Who am I kidding?' He grasped Randi's wandering hand by the wrist. "I gotta go." Ignoring her protests, Brad stood, forcing Randi to either stand or fall. Wisely, she chose the former option.

"One more drink, cowboy?" she suggested, not wanting Brad to slip out of her clutches quite so easily.

'Another drink,' Brad pondered for a second. 'Maybe that **would** do the trick. Maybe one wasn't enough.' Having convinced himself that alcohol would drive Amanda out of his mind, he turned away from Randi and walked back to the bar. "Whiskey --- a bottle," he demanded.

With a raised eyebrow and a knowing look, the bartender reached under the counter for a full, unopened bottle of the liquor. He placed it in front of Brad without saying a word.

Reaching into the inside pocket of his jacket, Brad retrieved a few bills and tossed them on the counter. "That should cover the drinks . . . mine and the lady's." He clutched the bottle by its neck and headed for the exit. Before leaving, he looked back at Randi and tipped his hat. "Maybe some other time," he said, then pushed his way through the swinging doors.

Brad pulled the cork out of the whiskey bottle with his teeth and spit it onto the ground. Tipping his head back, he took a large swig, allowing the liquid to course down his throat. Wiping his mouth with his sleeve, he walked to the hitching post and untied his horse. In one fluid motion, Brad slipped his foot into the left stirrup and swung himself onto the animal's back. "Come on, Diablo, back to camp. I have some serious drinking to do." After another gulp of whiskey, he nudged the jet-black horse with his heels and they headed out of town in a cloud of dust.

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Amanda tossed and turned on her narrow bed. The sheet and blanket were tangled around her legs. Wearily, she extricated herself from the bedcovers, sat up and drew her knees to her chest. She sat with her arms wrapped around her legs and her chin resting on her knees. Thoughts of Brad Walker had permeated her mind, refusing to go away and let her rest.

Realizing that sleep was not going to come any time soon, Amanda sighed, got out of bed and walked to the small writing table on the other side of the room. It was the only piece of furniture she had brought with her, provided by Mr. Melrose. After lighting the room's only oil lamp, she ran her fingers along the underside of the table drawer and quickly located the secret panel. Gently, she pushed the panel upward until she met resistance then slid it toward the front of the desk. An opening just wide enough for her hand was revealed. From the secret compartment, Amanda removed a bulky envelope and settled into a chair next to the table.

"Maybe there's something in here I missed," Amanda muttered to herself as she opened the envelope and withdrew its contents. For the hundredth time since receiving her assignment, she perused the sheaf of papers detailing the exploits of Brad Walker. Much of the information was shocking; there was no disputing the fact that the man was a cold-blooded killer.

Amanda set the papers in her lap and ran both hands through her hair. She couldn't reconcile the ruthless gunman in the bulletins with the man who had saved her life that afternoon. Closing her eyes, she pictured Brad as he leaned over her in the street, concern evident in his hazel eyes. She saw the shocked look on his face when he realized they were about to be trampled by the stampeding cattle. Remembering how he had lifted her and carried her to safety, she could almost feel his arms around her. As she thought about how close he had come to kissing her, her lips parted slightly and her heartbeat quickened. A 'reward' he had called it. "Oh, how I wanted him to kiss me!" she whispered to the shadows in the room. "How could I have been so taken in by a murderer? Are my instincts that bad?"

Willing her mind to go in a different direction, Amanda focused her thoughts on Brad's reaction to Zeke shouting his name. His anger fit with the profile of the killer documented in the papers on her lap. Other than that, there had been no reason for her to suspect he was a dangerous man. Except for the attempted kiss, Brad had been a perfect gentleman.

"I'm looking forward to collecting my 'reward.'" The sound of Brad's husky voice echoed in Amanda's mind and sent shivers up her spine. She felt the heat rise up her neck and into her cheeks. There was no use denying that she wanted to bestow that reward as much as he seemed to want to receive it.

"Well, Amanda, this isn't getting you anywhere," she announced. Folding the papers, she slipped them back into the envelope and returned the information to its hiding place. After ensuring that the panel was firmly back in place, Amanda stretched and decided she should attempt to get some rest. She blew out the flame on the oil lamp and walked to the bed.

A cold breeze from the open window stopped Amanda before she reached the comfort of her bed. Although she liked to sleep with the window open a crack for fresh air, the night's chill was more than she had expected. Crossing the small space to the window, she moved the curtains aside and pushed down on the window to close it all the way.

A sudden burst of light from the saloon across the street caught her attention. As Brad shouldered his way through the swinging doors, stopping only to open a bottle and take a deep drink of whatever it contained, she watched. Her eyes followed him as he untied and mounted his horse, took another drink and rode out of town as if the hounds from Hell were chasing him.

Thoughtfully, Amanda turned away from the window and settled into bed. 'I guess I'm not the only one who isn't sleeping tonight.'

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Amanda placed her hand over her mouth to stifle a yawn. The office had been busy enough to keep her from feeling the effects of her sleepless night -- and from thinking about Brad -- until an hour before closing. Since then, all she'd had to keep her occupied was the less than exciting task of sorting the mail. As she handled the letters, she tried to figure out how she could re-initiate contact with the gunman, contact that would make him feel comfortable enough with her to discuss his plans. Bumping into him on the street wasn't going to give her enough time for that. Every idea she had was quickly discarded as unworkable. "How am I supposed to gain his confidence?" Amanda grumbled, growing increasingly frustrated.

Suddenly realizing she only had a few moments to close the office before Mr. Melrose's daily message was due, Amanda placed the last letter into its slot, locked the office door and drew the shade. Just as she tucked the 'Closed' sign between the shade and window, the telegraph machine began to hum, signaling an incoming message. A glance at the clock confirmed that it was exactly one minute past five o'clock. Even though his penchant for timing perfection was well known among his staff, it never ceased to amaze Amanda that Mr. Melrose managed to contact her at the exact same time every day, no matter where he was.

Hurriedly, Amanda slid into her chair and leaned over the machine. Her lead pencil flew over parchment as she transcribed the rhythmic clicking. After the sign-off, she set the pencil aside to give her full attention to the message. Mr. Melrose and the President agreed that Amanda's 'good fortune' at establishing contact with none other than the hired gun himself was the break they had been hoping for. They expected her to have details about the assassination plans immediately -- if not sooner. The code phrase for 'whatever it takes' jumped off the page at her.

Amanda leaned an elbow on the desk and cupped her chin in her palm. "Whatever it takes?" she murmured to the empty room. "What have I gotten myself into?" She tapped her index finger against her cheek, wondering again how she could make contact with Brad.

A tap at the side window made Amanda jump. Her eyes widened when she saw the object of her musings staring at her through the glass. While keeping her eyes trained on Brad, Amanda folded the coded message and rested her hands on top of it.

Smiling, Brad pointed at his chest then the door, indicating he wanted Amanda to let him into the office.

She nodded her assent and waited for him to walk away from the window. As soon as he was out of sight, Amanda slid the folded paper under a stack of mail that was on the corner of the desk. Making a mental note to burn the message as soon as possible, Amanda stood and walked to the door, unconsciously smoothing her dress as she crossed the room. After taking a deep breath, she unlocked and opened the door to find Brad standing directly in front of her, nervously turning his hat in his hands. "Hello, Mr. Walker."

"Good evening, Amanda," Brad answered with a bob of his head.

"Is there something I can do for you?"

"Uh, well, I was wondering . . ." He shuffled his feet and cleared his throat. "I was wondering if you'd like to join me for supper?"

Unprepared for such an invitation, Amanda only managed a surprised "Oh!"

Taking her reaction as a 'no,' Brad shrugged. "If you have other plans, that's all right. Maybe another night." He turned to leave.

"No, wait!" Amanda stopped him by placing a hand on his arm. "I'd enjoy having dinner with you this evening, Mr. Walker." She smiled up at him, pleasure and excitement evident on her face. "Thank you for asking."

Smiling in return, his eyes crinkled at the corners. "Please, call me Brad."

"Thank you . . . Brad," Amanda said shyly. "I need to lock up first."

"I'll give you a hand," Brad offered and moved toward the office.

"No!" She blocked his forward motion by stepping between him and the door. Her mind whirled as she rushed to come up with a plausible explanation for **why** she couldn't let him help. "I'm sorry, but only employees are allowed in the office after closing."

Although he didn't look convinced, Brad took a step backward and nodded. "All right. I'll wait."

"I'll just be a minute." Amanda slipped back into the office and closed the door, leaning her back against it for a moment. She breathed a sigh of relief and silently thanked Brad for solving her problem. 'This is perfect! I should be able to get some information for Mr. Melrose tonight!'

As she made her way across the room, her eyes wandered to the stack of mail on her desk. 'Should I burn the message now?' Looking from the pile to the door, Amanda decided it would be more sensible to take care of it when Brad wasn't nearby. Keeping him waiting and starting a fire in her office were bound to make him suspicious, which was something she could not afford to do at this stage of the game.

Although she couldn't take the time to completely destroy the information, she knew she should do something with the message to prevent someone from seeing it. Yanking the paper out from under the stack, Amanda quickly tore it into small pieces, dropped the fragments into a box on the floor and pushed the box as far under the desk as it would go. Satisfied that it couldn't be seen from the door or window, Amanda collected her purse from a drawer and left the office, pulling the door closed behind her and locking it.

When she turned, Amanda was surprised that Brad was not standing where she had left him. Instead, he was pacing between the end of the building and a spot a few feet from the door, slapping his hat against his thigh as he walked. Watching him, Amanda had the distinct impression that he was agitated.

On his third pass, Brad stopped short when he noticed Amanda watching him. "Oh. You're done?"

Dropping the office key into her drawstring purse as she walked toward him, Amanda nodded. "All finished."

"Good, because I'm as hungry as a bear."

Amanda laughed. "Now that you mention it, I'm rather hungry, too."

Brad linked her arm with his and steered her toward the only 'proper' eating establishment in town -- the restaurant at the boarding house.

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During their short walk, Brad was able to observe Amanda as she interacted with other Dodge City citizens. To everyone they passed, she smiled, nodded and said 'Hello,' receiving warm greetings in return. Three times, she stopped their progress completely -- once to discuss a young man's recent illness, another to coo over a young woman's newborn baby, and a third to offer condolences to an elderly woman on the loss of her husband. She was either oblivious to the curious looks aimed in his direction, or she was pointedly ignoring them. Having never been much of a people person, Brad found the experience interesting, amusing and, to some extent, charming.

When a local emerging from the restaurant engaged Amanda in some friendly conversation, Brad leaned against the establishment wall and pondered on exactly who she was. To the population of Dodge, she seemed to be a friendly telegraph operator. What he'd seen through her office window made him wonder if that's all she was, though. He was fairly sure Amanda hadn't noticed that **he** had noticed her hiding something from him when he first tapped on her window. He was positive she didn't know he had been watching her for a few moments before getting her attention. There was no way she could have realized he had seen her receive and transcribe the telegraph message. Her reaction when reading it had made Brad suspicious. The fact that she had hidden it from him made him even more so. Amanda's very lame reason for not allowing him into the office had made the hairs on the back of his neck stand at attention. The second the door had closed behind her, he had dashed to the window. Her actions -- tearing up the message that had caused her earlier consternation and hiding the pieces -- convinced him that Amanda was up to something. He didn't know what, but his gut told him it couldn't be good for him. His gut was rarely wrong.

When she had glanced at the window after hiding the box of scraps, Brad had nearly been caught, but managed to duck out of sight before she saw him. He had quickly raced to the front of the office and began pacing to provide a reason for his slightly elevated breathing. Fortunately, Amanda hadn't appeared to think anything out of the ordinary had occurred.

Picturing the ripped paper in his mind, Brad narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. 'I have to find out what was in that message. Tonight, after dinner, I'll go back and get those scraps,' Brad nodded. "Yeah, that's what I'll do."

"You'll do what?" Amanda's question snapped Brad's attention back to the present.

"Um, I was thinking that I'd just go ahead and eat dinner by myself, since you seem determined to talk to everyone in town, and I think you missed a few people over there by the general store."

She gasped and placed her hand over her mouth in mock surprise. "You wouldn't!"

"I might." He flashed his most winning smile at her and winked. "I'm hungry, remember?" Offering her his arm, he inclined his head toward the restaurant door. "Shall we?"

Amanda slipped her arm through his and nodded. The pair entered the noisy restaurant and searched for an open table. Brad spotted a location near the back of the room and quickly maneuvered them toward it. A hand-written menu nailed to the wall next to the table proclaimed that the special for the evening was rabbit stew.

"Mmm, rabbit stew and plenty of biscuits," Brad licked his lips. "That sure does sound good. What'll you have?"

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"Stetson," Amanda said thoughtfully.

Brad's biscuit caught in his throat, and he began to cough. Between gasps for air, he managed to croak out a strangled "Wha-at?"

"Are you all right?" Concerned, she stood and patted him on the back. "Are you choking?"

"I'm fine." Brad took a few sips of his drink and motioned for Amanda to return to her seat. "Um, what was that you were saying?"

Amanda watched him carefully as she lowered herself back into her chair, the motherly look in her eye indicating she was doubtful that his coughing fit was finished. "I was just wondering about this." She fingered the well-worn brim of his hat, which was lying on the corner of the table. "Don't cowboys usually wear Stetsons?"

'My hat?!' Brad breathed a sigh of relief and shrugged. "I guess. I never gave it much thought."

"Why don't **you** wear one?"

"Maybe because I'm not a cowboy."

"No?" Amanda picked up her fork and began pushing food around her plate. "Then what are you?"

Brad tensed. He detected more than casual interest on Amanda's part. In his line of work, the ability to pick up on even the smallest change in someone's demeanor could mean the difference between life and death. It was almost imperceptible, but her tone now had a slight edge, as if she already knew the answer and was just waiting to see what Brad would say. All through dinner, she had been asking personal questions, his suspicions about her growing with each one. Deciding it was time to tell her what she wanted to know, he leaned forward and spoke in a low

voice. "I'm a gunslinger." Suppressing a grin when Amanda dropped her fork, he pointed to his hat and added, "I took this off a guy I shot."

Amanda's eyes grew as large as her dinner plate, and her mouth dropped open so fast that Brad thought her jaw might come unhinged. "You killed a man for his hat?!" When the elderly couple at a nearby table stared at them with shocked expressions, Amanda threw a nervous smile their way and waited for them to return to their meals before turning her attention back to Brad. Leaning across the table and lowering her voice to a whisper, she asked again, "Did you really kill a man to get his hat?"

"Of course not," Brad scoffed. "I killed him for an entirely different reason. I just happened to like the hat. Since he wasn't gonna be needing it . . ." He stared at the hat for a moment then winked at Amanda. "You can sure pick up some good stuff off a dead body."

Brad watched with amusement as Amanda's eyebrows disappeared under the wisps of hair on her forehead. He settled back in his chair, folded his arms across his chest and launched into a series of tales of his exploits. "There was this guy in Denver who stole a whole lotta goods from the biggest mercantile in town, so I was sent to teach him a little lesson. He thought he could get away with everything by shooting me, but I was just a bit faster. Got a nice set of chaps from that fella, plus some new saddlebags and the undying appreciation of the storekeeper's daughter." He closed his eyes, smiling as he remembered the 'appreciation' he had received from Miss Phyllis Carter. "Yep, that was a good job.

"The one in 'Frisco was really good, too. Tracked a couple of guys for one of the local big shots and got a small pouch of gold nuggets for my trouble. They weren't all that interested in parting with it, but I, ah, 'convinced' them it would be in their best interests to hand it over to me. You ever been to San Francisco?" Not waiting for Amanda's response, he continued, "It's a helluva place, San Francisco. Always someone ready and willing to pay for my services. Those Nob Hill folks don't want to get their own hands dirty, you know. After I handled those miners for Mr. Moneybags, he gave my name to some friends of his. I had lots of work in 'Frisco. My last job there was a wild one, let me tell ya." He rolled up his sleeve and pointed at a scar just above his elbow. "See this? I got this when some smart guy took a shot at me. Grazed me, but didn't stop me from dropping him with one shot."

Taking in Amanda's stunned expression, Brad suppressed a grin. 'Hang onto your hat. I'm just getting warmed up.' His eyes took on a faraway look. "But the one in Mexico, now **that** was something . . ."

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A multitude of stories and a pot of coffee later, Amanda finally found her voice. "Don't you ever think that it's a horrible way to make a living, killing people for money?"

"A man's gotta make a dollar the best way he knows how, and I'm damn good at what I do." Satisfied that he had given Amanda a thorough account of his work, shocking her as much as possible, Brad ended the discussion by perusing the menu. "Dessert?"

"No, thank you. It's late, and I'm tired." She stifled a yawn. "You must be, too, after your late night."

"Late night?"

"Well, it was awfully late when you left the saloon last night, or maybe it was early this morning."

Wondering if Amanda was fishing for something, Brad chose his words carefully to draw her out, forcing his tone to remain light. "Keeping an eye on me, were you?" he questioned with a quirked eyebrow and half smile.

Flustered, Amanda explained in a rush. "No, no, I . . . well, I couldn't sleep. I was restless, and it was cool in my room, because I had left the window open a little. I mean, I like to sleep with the window open a bit, but it got colder last night than I expected, so I was too cold and had to get up to close the window, and that's when I saw you leave the saloon." She slumped back in her chair and added, in a thoughtful tone, "You were drinking straight from a bottle. That's hardly the thing a man does when sleep comes easily."

Brad shifted uncomfortably in his chair, remembering exactly what had driven him to drink. She didn't seem to be digging for information, but she had managed to touch a nerve. Searching Amanda's eyes for any hint that she knew what had caused his discomfort, he responded, "I guess I was restless, too. Whiskey helps me sleep." Abruptly, he stood, tossed some bills on the table, and reached for her hand. "You're right. It's late. I'll walk you to your room."

Taking his outstretched hand, Amanda rose. "Men aren't allowed upstairs."

"Then I'll walk you to the stairs." Releasing her hand, he cupped her elbow and led them to the back of the restaurant, where a narrow hallway led to the boarding house stairway.

At the base of the stairs, Amanda paused and turned to face Brad. "I guess this is good night." She idly ran her right hand up and down the banister as she spoke. "Thank you for dinner."

"Amanda," Brad covered her right hand with his left and lightly brushed his fingertips along her knuckles. Placing his right hand under her chin, he tipped her face toward him. In a low voice, he suggested, "There's still time for dessert." He leaned in to kiss her, finding himself strangely nervous about the prospect.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Mrs. King. I didn't mean to . . . I was just . . ." The young girl suddenly found her feet extremely interesting. "Ma told me to take clean towels upstairs. I didn't mean to interrupt."

Startled, Amanda and Brad quickly stepped away from each other. "It's all right, Ruth. Mr. Walker was just saying good night."

Surprised by Ruth's salutation, Brad barely registered Amanda's assurances to the girl that everything was fine. 'Mrs.? **Mrs.** King? She's married?' A glance at her left hand confirmed that there was no wedding band there. There wasn't even a tan line, so any ring she may have once worn had long been discarded. 'Is she really married, or is that some story she's telling people?'

"I'll take these towels up, Mrs. King," Ruth nodded her head shyly at Brad and quickly made her way up the stairs.

Amanda watched Ruth until she disappeared into the upper hallway then turned to Brad. "Well, that wasn't **too** embarrassing, was it?"

"Ruth called you **Mrs.** King," Brad flatly stated.

"That's right. That's because I'm . . ."

"You're married," he accused. "Why didn't you tell me? You didn't think the fact that you're married was important enough to mention? That seems like a **very** important fact to leave out, don't you think? Were you even going to tell me you're married, or --"

Two words, spoken quietly and with a slight quiver in Amanda's voice stopped his diatribe. "I'm widowed." A shadow passed over her face. After what seemed like an eternity of silence to Brad, she softly added, "It's been three years now."

Mentally kicking himself for being so insensitive, Brad murmured, "I'm sorry. I had no idea."

Shaking her head as if to erase bad memories, Amanda smiled ruefully and deftly changed the subject. "It's late, and I'm tired. I think I'll go up now. Will I see you tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow?" Suspicious about her motives for wanting to see him, he decided to lie. "No, I, uh, I . . . I have business out of town all day."

"Another time, then. Thank you for dinner." She turned and headed up the stairs, calling "Good night" over her shoulder.

"Good night, Amanda."

Brad stared after her, watching the sway of her hips as she climbed. Briefly, he entertained the notion of following her to her room for a more stimulating activity than searching her office, but he stifled the feeling. Although he would have preferred to spend the night upstairs, he knew he had to find out what she was hiding.

As soon as Amanda was out of sight, Brad quickly exited the building and strode across the nearly empty street. He glanced over his shoulder at the windows above the restaurant, wondering exactly which room was hers. Based on their earlier conversation, all he knew was that her room faced the saloon and that she liked to leave her window open a crack at night. Four rooms were on that side of the building, all of which looked identical from the outside, and every window was closed. Slipping into the shadows in the alley next to the saloon, he positioned himself to watch the rooms, hoping for some sign of Amanda's presence in one of them.

While he watched, Brad reviewed what little he knew about Amanda. She knew almost everyone in town, as their trip from her office to the restaurant had proved, but she was living in a boarding house, something that typically meant 'temporary resident.' He made a mental note to find out how long she'd been in Dodge City and when she'd become the telegraph operator. During dinner, she had managed to ask him a million questions, but answered very few of his. Other than the surprising fact that she had been widowed three years ago, he realized he knew next to nothing about Amanda. That was something he meant to remedy as soon as possible.

A flicker of light from one of the boarding house windows, followed by the appearance of an undeniably female silhouette, captured Brad's attention. Even through the curtains, he immediately recognized the slim figure as Amanda's.

Watching her move about the room for quite some time, he wondered what was taking her so long to extinguish the lamp. She moved away from the window, vanishing from Brad's view, causing him to groan in frustration. 'Hurry up, Amanda. I need to get into that office as soon as possible.'

A few moments later, Amanda again appeared in front of the window, this time pulling her dress over her head. Suddenly, Brad was frozen in place and all the air rushed from his lungs. Vaguely, it occurred to him that some of his normal bodily functions had reversed, because his mouth was as dry as sand, and his palms were drenched with sweat.

He tried to tear his eyes from the window, but he was fixated on Amanda as she prepared for bed. It was as if everything was in slow motion, the dress taking hours instead of seconds to float up and over her head. After carefully folding the dress, Amanda bent at the waist to set it down on something out of Brad's view. 'Probably the

bed,' he reasoned, then immediately regretted the thought. Visions of a half-dressed Amanda and a big, comfortable bed sent his pulse racing.

Brad closed his eyes and leaned his head against the wall, willing his ragged breathing to return to normal. 'Now is not the time to be thinking about **that**. You have work to do.' He kept his eyes tightly shut and forced himself to concentrate on the task ahead of him instead of on the half-dressed woman across the street.

Minutes later, he took a deep breath, steeled himself for what he might see, and cautiously opened his eyes. His breath came out in a relieved rush when he saw that the room was dark. 'All right, let's get on with it.'

Stepping out of the alley, Brad noticed that the darkened street was devoid of all life. With the shops closed, the stage not running at night, and the dinner hour over, the only evening activity was at the saloon. From personal experience, he knew that it would be at least an hour before men started drifting into the bar, making it the perfect time to break into the telegraph office.

Within minutes, he was standing at the door of the small building. After carefully checking to his left and right for anyone in the area, Brad expertly jimmied the lock and slid inside the office, closing the door softly behind him.

He thanked his lucky stars for the moonlight streaming through the side window as he quickly made his way across the room and located the box Amanda had hidden under the desk earlier that evening. Dumping the contents onto the desk, Brad sighed heavily at the size of the pile that formed, dreading the task of trying to fit all the pieces back together. He scooped up a handful of scraps and slowly let them slip through his fingers to drift back onto the desk. 'How can one sheet of paper produce all this?' he wondered. Clearing a small work area on the desk, he considered the best way to go about the tedious process of reconnecting them. The pieces were so small, there didn't seem to be a single one that had more than two letters on it. That meant it could take hours to mix and match all the possible word combinations to rebuild the message. Separating two scraps from the pile, Brad slid them to the cleared space and tried to join them like jigsaw puzzle pieces. When the edges didn't match, he pulled a third piece, then a fourth, fifth and sixth from the pile, none of which fit together in any combination. Glaring at the half dozen pieces in front of him, he muttered, "This is going to be tougher than I thought."

After a frustrating few minutes, Brad had managed to put together a single line: FLUGH YUWLR XOD PAENGV. "Code. I **knew** she was up to something!"

The rattling of the door handle caught Brad off guard. He brushed the scraps into the box and shoved it back under the desk while his eyes darted frantically around the room to search for a place to hide. Just as the door swung open, he ducked behind the cabinet supporting the rack of mail pigeonholes in the back of the office. Peeking through one of the openings, he saw a shadowy figure approach the desk.

When the figure stepped into the shaft of moonlight, Brad clearly saw her face. 'Amanda? What the hell is she doing here now?' Curious, he squinted his eyes and leaned closer to the pigeonhole for a better view.

He observed her as she withdrew a small metal tin from a desk drawer, set the lid aside and emptied its contents into the drawer. After retrieving the box of scraps, she overturned it and guided the paper into the tin. When she reached across the desk, he assumed it was to collect the lid. Instead, he was surprised to hear the distinctive sound of a match being struck. Brad watched, dumbstruck, as she held the match to the papers and set them ablaze.

Amanda stood over the fire until it petered out, then she gently stirred the ashes with a pencil. Placing the lid on the tin, she nodded, seemingly satisfied that the message was completely destroyed. With a sigh -- one of relief, it seemed to Brad -- she pulled a handkerchief from her skirt pocket, wrapped the tin in it and left the office, locking the door behind her.

Brad remained behind the cabinet until Amanda's footsteps faded from earshot. Cautiously, he crept out of his hiding place, half-standing when he reached the window to peer out and see if she was still nearby. Not seeing her anywhere close to the office, he returned to the desk. Although he'd seen Amanda burn the message, Brad couldn't allow himself to leave the office without verifying it had been completely demolished. A quick search of the desk and box revealed nothing.

"Damn, damn, damn!" Brad pounded his fist on the desk, causing a stack of mail on the corner to tip dangerously. He put out his hand to stop it from toppling over and noticed a slip of parchment paper sticking out from behind it. "Well, well, well. What's this?" Carefully, he reached behind the mail and found two small pieces from the message. "X-O-D, again," he said after fitting the scraps together.

Rubbing his chin thoughtfully, Brad pondered about what to do next. "Maybe there are a few more pieces she missed around here somewhere." A quick search of the rest of the office revealed none, and absolutely nothing out of the ordinary. Realizing there was nothing more to be gleaned there, Brad stealthily made his way out of the office.

Minutes later, Brad sat astride his horse, staring at Amanda's window. "Tomorrow, Diablo, I'm going to turn that room inside out and find out exactly what she's doing in Dodge City." The horse nickered softly, as if giving his approval. "X-O-D," Brad muttered as he kicked his heels into Diablo and they rode out of town.

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Brad glared at the "Closed" sign in the telegraph office window. When he had ridden through town that morning with the Jenkins Gang, he was certain the door to the telegraph office had been open. He would have remembered if there had been a sign in the window, he was sure of that.

The day was getting worse and worse. His plans to search Amanda's room as soon as she left for work this morning had been disrupted by Harlan Jenkins and his sudden itch to rob the stage. Brad had tried to get out of being a part of it, arguing that he wasn't being paid for anything other than the assassination, but Harlan would have none of that. The head of the gang had been adamant that Walker participate in the robbery to feel like 'one of them' before what he referred to as "the big doin's." Brad had had the distinct impression that it was some kind of a test, designed to find out if he was as good as they'd heard he was. Whatever Jenkins' reasons were, he and his band of misfits had seen first-hand Brad's capabilities in the heat of battle.

He hadn't even intended to fire his gun, knowing the gang members were more than happy to shoot at anything in sight, but the stagecoach driver had had Brad dead in his sights. If Brad hadn't shot the man, he would now be lying lifeless in the countryside. Brad shook his head to rid himself of memories of the driver's look of surprise as the bullet hit him and he fell from the wagon seat onto the dirt road.

The robbery, and subsequent 'celebration' that Jenkins insisted Walker attend, had taken up the entire morning and a good part of the afternoon. Brad had finally managed to slip away unnoticed, leaving the rest of the gang drinking, drunk or passed out in a field near where they had attacked the stage. He had wasted no time in returning to Dodge City.

Now, Brad was pacing in front of Amanda's office, wondering where she was. Deciding to take a chance that she had just left the office briefly to go to the general store, Brad headed to the boarding house. Hoping to find an obscure entrance, he went directly to the back of the building. He smiled when he located a door that opened into

a hallway behind the kitchen. After scanning the area to ensure he was not being watched, Brad slipped inside the building.

As he approached the stairway, he narrowly missed being seen by Ruth when she clattered down the stairs. Ducking back into the hallway, he flattened himself against a wall and held his breath until she disappeared into the kitchen. "That girl should wear a bell," he muttered under his breath as he hurried up the stairs, wanting to be well out of sight before Ruth re-emerged.

Brad made short work of breaking into Amanda's room and quickly began a systematic search. In the closet, he found a few well-worn dresses and a small, empty valise. Opening the bureau drawer, he found neatly folded undergarments. One by one, he lifted each item to see if anything was hidden inside or beneath it. He paused in his search when he picked up the last camisole. Unlike every other garment he had found, it was a cool, smooth silk, not cotton. Rubbing the material between his thumb and index finger, Brad imagined how it would feel against Amanda's skin. With difficulty, he suppressed the image and dropped the camisole back into the drawer. He slammed the drawer shut and moved on to the rest of the room.

Twenty minutes later, having found nothing to tell him who Amanda was or why she was in Dodge City, Brad sank wearily onto the edge of the bed. Thoroughly discouraged, he rested his elbows on his knees, closed his eyes and massaged his temples. "There has to be something here, I'm just missing it." He moved one hand to the back of his neck and rubbed muscles that were fast becoming knotted with tension.

When he opened his eyes, his gaze fell upon the writing table across from him. He already knew there was only writing paper in the drawer, but something about the table was bothering him. Tipping his head to one side, Brad noticed that the drawer didn't fit quite right into the frame. He walked across the room and pulled it out to inspect it from all angles. His heart began to beat faster when he discovered hairline cracks, which formed a small square in the underside of the surface. Applying light pressure in the center of the square caused the panel to move a fraction then stop. With a smile, Brad slid the panel forward to reveal the envelope Amanda had concealed there.

He quickly perused the contents of the envelope, a feeling of unease in the pit of his stomach growing as he read the personal history of Brad Walker. When he turned the last page, his eyes widened in surprise. Incredulous, Brad stared at the Presidential seal at the top of the page.

"She's an agent?!"

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Amanda rummaged through yet another tangle of a gang member's belongings. She had already searched more than half of the Jenkins Gang's things, hoping to find something Mr. Melrose could use to prevent the assassination. When the gang, along with Brad, had thundered through town earlier, she remembered that Brad had said he'd be out of town all day. Amanda immediately closed the office, borrowed a horse and rode out to the gang's camp as fast as she could. Knowing this might be the only time all of them would be away to give her time to search, she was anxious to find something as fast as possible. She was beginning to think she would never find any useful information about the gang's plans when an envelope fell to the ground at her feet.

"What's this?" She picked up the envelope and pulled out two sheets of paper. Unfolding the top sheet, she gasped. "Oh my gosh, this is it!"

"What's 'it,' little lady?"

Trying to stay calm, Amanda slid the papers back into the envelope. She pasted a bright smile on her face and answered, "I'm sorry, were you talking to me?" as she turned. The smile faded when she found herself face to face with Zeke.

"Hey, yer Walker's lady friend, ain'tcha? Do you remember ole Zeke, huh?" Zeke hooked his thumbs into his belt loops and rocked on the balls of his feet. "I've heerd tell I'm purty dern hard t'fergit."

"Yes, well, I'm sure that's true, Mr., um, Mr. Zeke." Nervously, she backed away from the dirty cowboy. "If you'll excuse me, I need to be going now."

With surprising speed, Zeke's right hand clamped onto her upper arm. "Not so fast, honey. Whatcha doin' here?"

"I, um, I . . . I was looking for Brad. Mr. Walker."

Zeke pulled Amanda close, his acrid breath making her eyes water when he asked, "An' what's this?" He reached behind her back and grabbed the envelope she was clutching.

"Give that back," she demanded, staring directly into Zeke's beady eyes. "That's for Brad."

"Well, now, little lady, Brad ain't here right now, is he?" He pressed his body closer to hers. "How's about ole Zeke keeps you company while you wait?"

"Take. Your. Filthy. Hands. Off. Her." The steel in Brad's voice was colder than the steel of the revolver he held against the base of Zeke's neck.

Zeke froze and his eyes widened in fear. "C'mon, Brad, we's jes' playin'. No need to git jumpy."

The click of Brad's gun being cocked sounded incredibly loud in the silence of the camp. "If I have to repeat myself, your brain, what little of it there is, is gonna be splattered all over your boots."

Zeke swallowed the huge lump in his throat with difficulty and slowly released his hold on Amanda's arm. "I'm lettin' her go, Brad." His arms shook as he raised them into the air. "Ain't no reason to shoot."

Looking at Brad over Zeke's shoulder, Amanda saw the deadly intensity in his gaze. At that moment, the fact that he was a cold-blooded killer finally registered in her brain. Even so, she had never been more relieved to see anyone in her life.

Brad eased his thumb off the hammer and holstered his gun. He grabbed Zeke by his collar, bunching the material in his fist. "If you ever come near Amanda again, I'll kill you. You got that?"

"Yeah, yeah, I got it." The cowboy's head bobbed nervously in understanding. "Don't go near the lady."

"Yeah. Don't go near the lady." Brad sent Zeke sprawling with a flick of his wrist. "Now, get the hell away from me before I change my mind and put you out of my misery right now."

Zeke scrambled to his feet. "Okay, okay, I'm goin'," he grumbled. While dusting himself off, he spotted the envelope lying on the ground where it had flown out of his hand when he hit the dirt.

Amanda and Zeke reached for the envelope at the same time. Zeke was a hair faster, whisking the object away from Amanda's grasp. He tossed it to Brad. "Here's the love letter the lady brung ya." He smirked at Amanda as he turned and walked toward the other end of the camp.

"Oh, Brad, that's not a love . . . I mean . . ." Amanda took a deep breath and collected her thoughts. She held out her hand and asked, "Could I have that back, please?"

Brad's only response was to stare coldly at her. A muscle in his jaw twitched.

Amanda nervously chewed on her lower lip under his scrutiny. She knew he was angry, but she also knew she had to do something to get the envelope away from him. Looking him directly in the eyes, she softly said, "I'm so glad you're here. I don't like that Zeke character. I don't know what he would have done if you hadn't shown up when you did."

Her thanks were met with stony silence.

Pointing at the envelope, she again asked, "Brad, could I have that, please?" When he still didn't respond, she tried to take it out of his hand.

Brad jerked the envelope away from her and shoved it into his coat pocket. "Just what the hell are you doing here?" he demanded.

"I came to see you," Amanda lied, hoping she sounded convincing.

His quirked eyebrow told her she didn't. "Last night, I distinctly told you I would be out of town today, didn't I?"

"I forgot."

"You forgot."

"Yes. I forgot. I forgot," Amanda replied indignantly. "Is that so hard to believe?"

Brad made a sound similar to a bear's growl. "All right, let's say I believe you. What did you want?"

Amanda was saved from answering the question when the entire Jenkins gang loudly burst through a stand of trees at the edge of the camp. She whirled around to watch them approach. Dealing with Zeke was bad enough, but she really didn't think she was ready to face a whole group of criminals. 'This is just great, Amanda. What does the Agency manual say about two against twenty?' It occurred to her that she thought of Brad as being on her side and wondered why. Pushing that thought to the back of her mind, she concentrated on the current situation. 'I had better get out of here -- fast.' Taking a step backward, her escape was thwarted when she backed right into Brad's chest.

Before she could react, he snaked his arms around Amanda's waist, leaned forward and whispered into her left ear, "Play along."

The low timbre of his voice caused a shiver of something other than fear to run through Amanda. She had no idea if her murmur of "Mmm-hmm" was in response to his order or the feel of his lips against her ear. Involuntarily, she closed her eyes and tipped her head to the right, allowing him easy access to her neck, which he readily accepted. As he trailed feather-light kisses from her ear to her collarbone, his right thumb rubbed lazy circles just below her ribcage. Amanda's knees suddenly felt too weak to support her. Brad instinctively tightened his grip on her waist when she melted into him.

Sounds of stomping hooves, snorting horses and drunken laughter suddenly permeated Amanda's brain. Her eyes flew open to see Harlan Jenkins bring his horse up short in front of them. He slid off his mount and dropped the reins to the ground. "Well, lookee here! Mighty pretty filly ya got there, Walker. Ya been holdin' out on us? That jes' ain't neighborly."

Brad slanted his eyes toward Harlan. "Get lost, Jenkins. Can't you see we wanna be alone?"

When Harlan took a few unsteady steps toward Amanda, Brad positioned himself between her and the gang leader. "That's close enough, Jenkins," he warned.

"Share and share alike, ain't that right, boys?" Harlan grinned at the rest of the gang, who murmured in agreement. "See, Walker. Them's the rules."

Brad took a menacing step toward Harlan. Through a clenched jaw, he threatened, "You'll have to go through me to get to the lady." He eased his left hand toward his gun, his fingertips hovering menacingly above the holster.

Harlan grinned. "Calm down, Walker. I'm jes' givin' ya a hard time. Why don't you and yer lady join us for a few drinks? There's plenty to go around."

"No, thanks." Brad reached behind him and wrapped his arm around Amanda, pulling her close to his side. "We want to be alone . . . if you get my meaning."

"Ya don't have to paint us a picture, Walker." Harlan turned to his men and added, "Unless ya wanna, that is!" He slapped his thigh with his hat, and he and the gang began to laugh uproariously. "Come on, boys. Let's leave the lovebirds alone and get on with the party!"

As the gang members dismounted their horses and followed Harlan toward the main campsite, each one winked at or nudged Brad. Some made comments like "Got yerself a real looker there, Walker" and "Never knew a **lady** would be interested in a gunslinger" as they passed and were rewarded with a glare from Brad.

Amanda edged closer to Brad as each man walked by, silently praying that none of them would challenge him. He looked angry enough to spit fire, and she definitely didn't want to be the cause of a massacre. When the last man finally passed by, she breathed a huge sigh of relief. Moving away from Brad, she said, "Well, I guess I should be going. If you'll just let me have that envelope . . ."

Brad whirled around and grabbed Amanda's arm. "You aren't going anywhere. You're staying here with me tonight."

Indignant, Amanda twisted out of his grasp. "What makes you think a ridiculous thing like that? I am absolutely **not** staying here with you!"

Pointing at the gang of drunken men, quite a few of whom were openly ogling Amanda as they passed a bottle around the roaring campfire, he asked, "Do you want to chance riding out of here with that crowd knowing you're out in the woods all alone?"

Amanda looked at the gang and grimaced when one of the men waved at her and grinned suggestively. "No, but you could do the gentlemanly thing and escort me back to town." She watched with interest as a series of emotions flitted across Brad's face -- surprise, disbelief, annoyance, then, finally, anger.

"No!" he vehemently exclaimed. "I am not going all the way to and from town just because you got us into this . . . this . . . this **situation**. You have two choices. You can stay here with me, or ride back to Dodge City." He then

added pointedly, "Alone." When Amanda didn't make a move toward her horse, Brad grunted. "All right, then. Come with me. My camp's up there." He nodded his head toward a small hillock a few hundred feet away from where they stood. "Let's go eat."

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After an uncomfortably silent dinner of beans and bread, Brad suggested they turn in for the night.

Amanda watched nervously as Brad unfurled his bedroll. "It's not very big."

"It's big enough."

"Not for two people."

Impatiently, Brad tugged at one end of the bedding to straighten it. "It wasn't meant for two people, but it'll do, unless . . ."

"Unless what?"

"Unless," Brad stood and jerked his thumb toward the main camp, "you want to take your chances with Harlan, Matt, Pete and the rest of the boys. I'm sure one -- or more -- of them would be glad to offer you a place to stay for the night." Biting back a smile when Amanda shivered with revulsion, he added, "I didn't think so." He tugged his shirt from his blue jeans and began to unbutton it.

"What are you doing?" she asked, her eyes widening with surprise and her voice cracking slightly as she realized Brad was preparing to remove his shirt.

"Getting ready for bed. You should, too."

Nervously, Amanda plucked at the folds of her skirt. "I am ready."

"No, you're not. You can't sleep in your dress."

"I can, too."

"No, you can't."

"Yes, I can."

"No, you **can't!**" Brad inclined his head toward the camp. "Do you see everyone down there watching us? They think you are with me -- **with** me, you get that? If you get into my bedroll wearing all your clothes, they're gonna know you aren't, and they'll think that means you're fair game." He grabbed her arms and turned her to face him. "Do you understand what that means?"

Amanda gulped once and nodded. "I'd better get ready for bed."

Brad blew out a breath, relieved she had gotten the message. "Good idea."

"Turn around."

"Turn around?"

"Turn around!"

"You've got to be kidding. I'm gonna see you out of that dress, anyhow. We're gonna be sharing rather tight quarters for the next few hours, in case you hadn't noticed."

Amanda folded her arms across her chest in a defensive stance. "I'm not taking off anything until you turn around."

Shaking his head, Brad slowly turned away from her and grumbled under his breath as he continued to unbutton his shirt, "And you wondered why I mistook you for a schoolmarm the day we met."

"What?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all."

She knew she should avert her eyes and start undressing, but the idea of seeing what lay beneath Brad's flannel shirt held her attention. Amanda watched silently as he discarded the shirt in a heap on the ground. His boots and socks followed. A flush crept up her neck and into her cheeks when she realized that he was unbuckling his belt, preparing to remove his pants. "What are you doing?" she asked in a strangled whisper.

Brad paused for a second, his hands on the top button of his jeans. With a smile, he deliberately unhooked each button along the fly. "Getting ready for bed."

"Aren't you going to keep those on?"

"No."

A slight note of panic crept into her voice. "But, you can't, I mean, I can't, I mean, we . . . you have to wear something!"

"No, I don't." Brad glanced over his shoulder and winked. "What would the guys say about that?" He hooked his thumbs into the waistband of his jeans and quickly pushed them to his ankles.

Amanda's gasp of surprise was immediately followed by a sigh of relief at the sight of his long underwear.

Laughing, Brad said, "Since you insist, I guess I'll sleep in these."

"You enjoyed that, didn't you?" Amanda accused.

"A little," he admitted as he stepped the rest of the way out of his jeans. Tossing the garment on top of his shirt, he said, "I'll tend to the fire while you finish getting ready."

Amanda waited until Brad was busy with the fire, then she pulled off her boots and stockings, stuffing the hosiery into the toes of the boots. She unbuttoned her dress, drew it over her head, folded it neatly, and set it on top of the boots. Casting a wary eye in Brad's direction to make sure he wasn't watching, she tightened the ribbons of her camisole. Although it was sleeveless, and the square neck was rather low, it provided adequate cover for her upper body. Her knee-length bloomers and calf-length, cotton petticoat were enough to maintain her decency, she supposed.

Frowning at the bedroll, Amanda debated what to do. She preferred to be near the open side, in case she had to get out in a hurry, but, under the circumstances, it seemed wiser to use Brad as a buffer between her and whatever -- or whomever -- might come along during the night. Glancing at him, she took in his broad back, muscles rippling as he stoked the fire, and the shape of his bottom, his crouched position molding his long underwear to it. Feeling her heartbeat quicken at the sight, she wondered if she should be more worried about him than anyone else. With a resigned sigh, Amanda slipped into the bedroll, slid all the way to the closed side and turned her back to Brad. "You can turn around now."

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Brad lay with his hands linked behind his head, listening to Amanda's even breathing and wishing he could fall asleep as easily as she had. His uneasiness about her being an agent was making him edgy, as were recurring thoughts of how it had felt to hold her in his arms and nibble her neck. The memory of watching her undress earlier was only adding to his tension. While tending to the fire, he had realized her motions were reflected in the coffee pot. Her movements, distorted by firelight and the shape of the container, had been strangely erotic. It had taken most of his willpower to stay crouched by the fire until well after Amanda had crept into the bedroll.

Her proximity wasn't helping the situation, either. When they had first gone to bed, her back was to him, and her posture was rigid and on guard, as if she was afraid he might attack her. He had stayed near the bedroll opening, unmoving, trying his level best to minimize contact. In sleep, however, she had relaxed considerably. Occasionally, she would roll onto her back, and her hand would brush against some part of his body. Each touch set off tiny sparks, reminding Brad that he was more than a little attracted to her.

As if Amanda somehow had read his thoughts, she suddenly rolled onto her right side, flung her left arm across his chest and rested her head on his shoulder. Her right arm was wedged between their bodies, the back of her hand resting against his thigh. At Brad's sharp intake of breath, she mumbled something incoherent, dropped her arm from his chest to his waist, and snuggled closer to him.

After waiting a few moments to make sure she was still asleep, Brad slowly exhaled. He said a silent prayer that she wouldn't move her arm any lower or she might realize the effect she was having on him.

Deciding it would be a good idea to put some distance between them, he clasped his hand around her wrist, lifted her arm off his waist, and eased out from under it. He gently rolled her onto her back as he shifted his weight to prop himself up on his elbow. Looking down at her, thoughts of leaving her side fled from his mind. He carefully brushed loose curls away from her face with his right hand, marveling at how beautiful she was. Her skin, pale in bright daylight, was like fine bone china in the moonlight. The moon's rays discovered shimmering highlights in her chestnut-colored hair. He wound a curl around his index finger and slowly drew his hand away, relishing the feel of the silky lock against his skin.

Placing his palm against her cheek, he lightly traced her lips with his thumb. He sucked in a breath when her tongue darted out to moisten her lips, catching the tip of his thumb in passing and making his hand tremble.

'Kiss her,' a voice in his head urged.

A second voice chimed in with, 'She's asleep. She'll never know.'

'She owes you,' a third added. 'You saved her life.'

Finding no reason to argue with his inner voices, Brad bent his head toward Amanda, intending to steal the kiss he'd been twice denied by untimely interruptions. A subtle change in her breathing stopped him, alerting him to the possibility that she was awake. He slowly lifted his head and found her dark eyes trained on him.

"Amanda," he whispered huskily, her name a plea on his lips, an unspoken question in his eyes as he gazed into hers. He saw suspicion, confusion, and maybe even a small amount of fear mixed with desire in her eyes. Or was he seeing a reflection of his emotions? Either way, it was enough to make him hesitate. Pulling back slightly, he could almost feel her uncertainty filling the small space between them.

'It's just a simple kiss. Why does it have to be so damned complicated?' As he softly stroked her cheek, he heard the small catch in her breathing and watched her nervously lick her lips. 'She wants me to kiss her, whether she'll admit it or not,' he realized. Even if her mind wasn't completely sure, her body certainly was, and that was all Brad needed as encouragement. "Consider this payment for services rendered," he whispered as he leaned forward and captured her lips with his.

The kiss was tentative at first, their lips barely touching. It was soft and sweet, everything -- and nothing like -- Brad expected. He deepened the kiss -- or she did, Brad wasn't quite sure. Her lips softened under his, then parted, inviting. His tongue slipped inside her mouth and moved slowly along the underside of her lip. It swept the ridge of her teeth before connecting intimately with her tongue. The kiss became hungry, as if both had been starved for contact and were finally being allowed to have as much as they wanted.

His senses reeling, Brad tore his mouth from Amanda's and touched his lips to her throat. He ran his right hand down her body, placing it over her left breast. The nipple hardened at the contact and grew more rigid as he made lazy circles over it with his open palm.

Amanda gasped and jerked beneath him. Her eyes were wide with surprise. The reaction startled Brad into remembering that she wasn't a dance hall floozy or a loose woman. Amanda was . . . wholesome. That was it, wholesome. The thought brought him to his senses, and he, reluctantly, pulled his hand away from her breast.

She changed his mind for him. "Please, don't stop," she implored. At his hesitation, she added, "It's been a long time."

A flicker of shock shot through him before he remembered that Amanda was a widow. No floozy, to be sure, but she certainly wasn't completely inexperienced, either. With a smile, Brad once again claimed Amanda's mouth with his. Covering both her breasts with his hands, he teased both nipples into stiff peaks using a slow, open-palm circular motion.

Her hands skimmed along his back, sending liquid fire from his neck to his waist. The sensation fueled his desire to elicit the same reaction from her, to send molten lava coursing through her veins at his touch.

Brad fumbled with the camisole ribbons, grunting in frustration when they refused to untie. Determined to remove the barrier and continue his exploration of her body, flesh against flesh, he impatiently slid his hands under the camisole and pushed it upward, forcing Amanda's arms over her head as he tore the garment from her body.

Amanda's gasp when her upper body was exposed to the cool night air quickly changed to a moan of pleasure when Brad gently rolled her left nipple between his thumb and index finger. He lowered his head to her breast and replaced his fingers with his mouth, slowly circling and flicking the nipple. Taking advantage when she arched her back, he slid his right arm under her body. Linking her fingers behind his head, she pulled him closer to her breast. Brad responded eagerly, alternating between nipping and sucking the hardened nub, reveling in her whimpers of satisfaction.

His left hand glided down her body, resting at the curve of her waist, his thumb brushing her skin in a pendulum motion. Heat from her body seemed to flow into him as he caressed her skin, warming him from head to toe.

Sliding his right hand behind her neck, he softly stroked her delicate skin as he kissed a trail to the valley between her breasts. He pressed his mouth against her pounding heartbeat, feeling it quicken beneath his lips. With the tip of his tongue, he drew a path to the hollow of her neck. Nuzzling the spot, he smiled as her vocal cords vibrated from her moans, causing his lips to tingle. Slowly, he planted soft kisses up the column of her neck, on her chin, and along her jaw.

Amanda ran her fingers through Brad's hair and along the outer edges of his ear then placed her palms on his cheeks. She applied pressure, urging him to turn his head toward her. With their lips a fraction of an inch apart, their ragged breaths mingled as they struggled to get their breathing under control.

He watched, unable to take his eyes from her lips as she slowly wet them with her tongue. Swallowing around a sudden lump in his throat, Brad leaned toward her just as she lifted her head, their lips meeting as if in a mutual agreement.

Shifting his weight, Brad rolled onto his right side, flattening his right hand against her back to keep her close against him. As he moved, he slid his left leg between hers. His left hand roamed over her hip, down her right thigh and came to a stop just above her knee. Bunching her petticoat under his fingers, he inched the material upward until the hem of the garment was in his grasp.

Easing his hand under the petticoat, he stroked her inner thigh. The soft cotton of her bloomers felt more sensual than the finest silk against his fingers. Little by little, he moved higher, subtly encouraging her to open her legs to him. When he finally reached his goal at the apex of her thighs, he pressed the heel of his hand into her most sensitive spot and lightly traced the area between her legs with his fingers.

Amanda pulled her mouth from his, her eyes wide with surprise. As he began to apply more pressure, her eyes closed and she responded by lifting her hips to grind her pelvis against his hand. She quivered beneath his fingers, the sensation causing his blood to pound furiously in his ears. It took him a moment to realize that Amanda was whispering "More" into his ear.

The single word, spoken in a voice thick with passion, began to unravel the thin thread of control Brad was trying desperately to maintain. Grabbing the waistbands of her undergarments, he dragged them off her and tossed them out of the bedroll. Without hesitation, he thrust the index finger of his left hand into her slick entrance and began to stroke her. Adding his middle finger, he continued to slide slowly in and out while rubbing her clitoris with his thumb.

As she gyrated against him, Brad plundered her mouth, his tongue keeping perfect time with the rhythm of his fingers. Fleeting, as her touch threatened to send him spinning completely out of control, he wondered how she had suddenly managed to grow ten more hands. Without warning, she pulled her mouth from his and began to buck furiously against his fingers, her breath coming in short gasps.

With a groan, he realized neither of them were going to last much longer, and he desperately wanted to be fully inside her when she climaxed. Breathing heavily, he withdrew his fingers and moved far enough from her to push his long underwear off his body. After shoving the underwear out of the bedroll, he positioned himself between her legs. He inserted just the tip of his penis into her and waited for her to relax around him. Slowly, he pulled out and re-entered her another inch. He repeated the process twice more, each time waiting for her to get used to the feeling before retracting.

Wrapping her legs around his waist, Amanda pressed her heels against his bottom and arched upward. "Why are you torturing me?" she moaned and wriggled her hips, encouraging him to enter her further.

She was right. It was torture -- exquisite torture. With superhuman effort, Brad resisted her urgings and stilled his own motions, leaning forward to kiss her instead. As he pulled away, he whispered, "Trust me."

He swore his heart stopped beating when she looked up at him and gasped, "I do trust you." The simplicity and honesty of the words struck a chord deep within him that he had long since buried, if it had ever been there at all. At that moment, nothing existed for him but Amanda.

Trembling with his own need, Brad took a few deep breaths and concentrated on meeting hers first. Deliberately, he began to inch in and out of her again, her whimpers and moans nearly driving him mad. Finally plunging entirely into her, he stopped for a moment to savor the feel of them being locked together.

Breathing heavily, Brad placed his palms on the ground on either side of Amanda's head. Thickly, he commanded, "Look at me." Amanda's eyes fluttered open, and she gazed up at him, her eyes vaguely unfocused and as black as night with desire. Staring into the unfathomable depths, he began to move slowly, gaining speed as Amanda matched his rhythm.

He heard Amanda's strangled cry of "Oh, Brad!" as he felt her go over the edge. Continuing to thrust into her, he prolonged her pleasure until his body demanded its release, and he collapsed on top of her. When his breathing finally returned to some semblance of normalcy, he lifted his head and smiled at her.

She cupped his face in her hands and drew him into a deep kiss. Breathlessly, she pulled away and returned the smile. "Brad, that was. . ."

"Incredible," he interrupted.

"Incredible," she agreed.

He rolled onto his side, propping himself up on his elbow and placing his right hand on her stomach. Caressing her abdomen, he commented, "You really are something, Amanda King." He closed his hand over her waist and pulled her to him as he rolled onto his back. As she moved, he slid his left arm under her shoulders, letting her head settle against his neck.

She let out a contented sigh and draped her arm across his chest. When his chest expanded from a large yawn, she groggily asked, "Sleepy?"

"Mmm-hmm. You?"

"Mmm-hmm." Heavy-lidded, Amanda tipped her head toward Brad. "Good night, Brad."

He placed a light kiss on her lips and responded, "Good night, Amanda. Sleep well." He snuggled her closer to him and smiled as her head nestled back against his neck. As he drifted into an exhausted sleep, his last thought was, 'The next time, I want to hear her call out **my** name.'

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Amanda fought against waking. She'd been having an incredible dream about Brad and didn't want it to end. Gradually, she became aware of her surroundings -- her head nestled in the crook of Brad's neck, his arms around her, the feel of his heartbeat under the palm of her hand, their legs entwined, nothing between them but bare skin -- and her eyes flew open with realization. It hadn't been a dream.

'It hadn't been a dream?' Her mind couldn't quite grasp the situation. 'What was I thinking? He's a criminal, a gunslinger -- a murderer, for heaven's sake! I'm supposed to be keeping him from assassinating the President, not . . .' Amanda shook her head to derail that thought. 'Oh, what possessed me to . . . to . . . what possessed me?'

Brad moaned softly in his sleep and tilted his head as Amanda moved, his lips brushing her forehead as he shifted position. His right hand caressed her back in what she assumed was meant to be a soothing motion, but it was producing the exact opposite reaction, effectively reminding her of **precisely** what had possessed her. Amanda's pulse was racing, and she was sure her heart was pounding loudly enough to wake the dead.

She sighed and silently berated herself. 'I wasn't thinking. I was feeling and reacting, not thinking. Some agent I am. What would Mr. Melrose think?' Suddenly, his words to her when she had been given the assignment echoed in her brain: "You can cozy up to a gang member, let him think you're sweet on him, and gather more information than any male agent could." The last telegram she had received from him had instructed her to do 'whatever it takes' to gain Brad's trust. 'Well, I only did what Mr. Melrose told me to do,' Amanda rationalized. 'I cozied up to Brad pretty darn well last night, and he either thinks I'm sweet on him or . . .' She grimaced slightly, momentarily concerned about what Brad might think of her now. With another sigh, she thought, 'It doesn't matter. National security is at risk, and that's what's important. I have to do whatever it takes to save the President.' Sighing contentedly and snuggling deeper into Brad's arms, Amanda decided that she sounded almost convincing.

"Good morning, Amanda."

His breath tickled her ear, and the throatiness of his voice sent delightful tremors through her. Turning her head to look at him, Amanda's heart leapt into her throat upon seeing the raw desire in his eyes. 'In for a penny, in for a pound,' she thought as she pulled him into a passionate kiss. Thoughts of national security evaporated, and she lost herself in what she had both feared and anticipated -- an encore of the previous night's performance.

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"Amanda, there's something I need to tell you."

"Mmm," she murmured against his neck, where she was placing light kisses.

Momentarily, he gave in to the sensations she was creating, enjoying the feel of her lips against his skin as she traveled across his collarbone toward his shoulder. When her hand brushed across his waist and began to move lower, he realized he had to stop her before things went any further. He grabbed her wrist, preventing further motion. "Amanda, stop."

She lifted her head, her expression one of confusion. "Is something wrong? Did I do something wrong?"

"No, no," Brad shook his head. "I just have to tell you something, something important." He took a deep breath then released it. 'Here goes nothing.' "Amanda, I'm not . . ."

"Walker!"

The shout startled them. Looking over her shoulder, Brad saw Pete Jenkins approaching. "Damn!" He pulled Amanda tight against him and murmured, "Stay still," as he drew the blanket over her shoulders.

Amanda nodded and buried her face in the crook of his neck, keeping her arms wrapped around him.

"Walker!" Pete shouted again as he walked closer to the bedroll.

"That's far enough, Pete," Brad warned.

Pete stopped at the sound of Brad's voice. "Still sleepin', Walker? Gettin' soft, ain't ya?" When his only response was a glare from Brad, Pete took a step forward and nudged Brad's long underwear with the tip of his boot. With a grin, he said, "Guess I know why ya ain't jumpin' outta bed this mornin'."

"My sleeping habits are none of your business," Brad said through gritted teeth. "What are you doing here?"

"Harlan's havin' a meetin' right now. Said to come fetch ya, 'cause he's gonna go over the plans fer, um, well, ya know, the **plans**."

Brad felt Amanda tense slightly in his arms, and he gently stroked her back to relax her. "I'll be there in a minute."

"Harlan said I was to wait fer ya."

'Damn that Jenkins!' Again, Brad glared at the man, and the muscle in his jaw began to work. He didn't want to just go off and leave Amanda, but he had to find out about Harlan's plans. Glancing down into her eyes, he tried to wordlessly convey that he had to go. When she gave a slight nod of understanding, Brad looked at Pete. "All right."

He picked up Brad's long underwear. "You'll be needin' these," he grinned as he tossed them at Brad.

Brad deftly caught the garment in one hand and scowled at Pete. "Wait for me down the hill. I'll just be a minute."

Pete gave a little salute then turned around, whistling cheerfully as he walked down the hill and out of sight.

With a sigh, Brad gave Amanda a small smile. "I'm sorry, but I really have to go."

"I know," she answered, pulling the edge of the bedroll up to cover his arms.

"I'd much rather stay here with you and . . ." He stopped mid-sentence when she tugged the underwear out of his hands and tunneled into the bedroll. Before he could ask what she was doing, he felt her slip the long underwear over his feet.

Slowly, she pulled the garment up his calves and thighs, sending shockwaves through his body. Upon reaching his hips, Amanda paused and slid her hands under his backside, applying pressure to indicate she needed room to continue. Obediently, Brad raised his hips from the ground, allowing her to slip the underwear over his hips and up to his waist.

With a final tug to ensure they were properly fitted, Amanda kissed her way up Brad's chest and neck. She lifted her head and smiled wickedly. "And what?"

Brad spoke with effort, his breathing somewhat labored. "And enjoy more of this." He rolled her onto her back and kissed her soundly. Reluctantly breaking away, he sighed. "I really have to go."

Before Amanda could stop him again, Brad rolled out of the bedroll. He quickly shimmied into his jeans, stuffed his feet into socks and boots, then shoved his arms into his shirtsleeves. Turning to face Amanda while buttoning his shirt, Brad said, "Stay here, Amanda. I won't be gone long, and then we can, um," he found himself stumbling over his words when she stared up at him, her expressive eyes mirroring his longing, "ah, we can pick up where we left off."

Her approving and seductive smile added pinpoint lights to her dark eyes. "Good idea."

Brad leaned down to give her a quick kiss then headed to meet Pete. "I'll be back **soon**," he promised over his shoulder.

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As soon as Brad was out of sight, Amanda collected and pulled on her undergarments, fastening the camisole as quickly as possible. She listened as Pete's tuneless whistling faded in the distance. Once she felt he and Brad were a good distance from the campsite, she crawled out of the bedroll and dressed.

Looking toward the main camp, she could see the gang members in a circle around Harlan Jenkins, who was waving his arms wildly as he spoke. She could not make out his words, but the sound of his voice carried to where she stood, and Amanda could tell he was excited.

"The plan," she said to the wind. "The plan!" she repeated, suddenly remembering the envelope that was tucked away in Brad's coat. Swiveling her head, she saw that it was still slung over a log next to Brad's horse.

Amanda picked up the duster and fished the envelope out of the pocket. She folded it and tucked it into her boot, the only place it would be completely concealed if someone spotted her.

With a glance toward the men in the campsite below to make sure nobody was watching, she hurriedly made her way down the other side of the small hill. Circling behind the meeting, Amanda retrieved her borrowed horse and quietly slipped out of the camp.

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Amanda rushed into the telegraph office and skidded on a piece of paper on the floor just inside the door. She recognized Mr. Melrose's bold scrawl and quickly read the message telling her to meet him at the blacksmith's as soon as she returned.

In a matter of minutes, she entered the blacksmith's barn and approached the lone person in the building. His face was covered by a welding mask, and he was hunched over two twisted pieces of white-hot iron, forging them together.

She tapped the man on the shoulder. "Excuse me, I'm looking for someone."

The man dropped the iron onto his workbench and turned. Lifting his mask, he said, "It's about time you showed up, Mrs. King." The annoyance in his tone was tempered by his obvious relief at seeing her alive and in one piece.

"Mr. Melrose! I'm so glad to see you, sir. I went to the gang's camp yesterday to search it, and I found the plans, but I was caught by that nasty man, Zeke, then Brad, uh, Mr. Walker rescued me, but he took the envelope and wouldn't give it back, and he got angry with me for being there and wouldn't let me leave, so I had to stay with him last night." A flush worked its way into her cheeks when she realized what she had said. "I mean, he made me stay with him so none of the gang would bother me. He didn't hurt me or anything. Actually, he's a very nice man, not like a criminal at all. If it weren't for all the reports about him, and the stories he told me at dinner, you wouldn't think he's a bad man. You know, the stories he told me weren't in the reports. Why is that, I wonder? Anyway . . ."

Billy held up his hand to stem the flood of Amanda's words. "Amanda, please. Somewhere in there, I think I heard you say that you have the plans for the assassination attempt?"

"Yes, sir! They're right here." Amanda retrieved the envelope from her boot and handed it to Billy. Reading over his shoulder, she gasped in surprise at the location for the attack that was written on the second page. "Dodge City? How is that possible? The President isn't coming to Dodge City this afternoon."

Smiling with satisfaction at the contents, Billy exclaimed, "Perfect! They took the bait!"

Amanda furrowed her brow in confusion. "The bait, sir?"

"Yes, Amanda, the bait. We had finally pinned down a prime suspect as the leak at the office and needed to find out if our suspicions were correct. Knowing we couldn't wait forever for Jenkins to make a move, the President and I decided to force his hand. Two days ago, I told our leak, and only her, about the President's plans for today." Billy's smile widened into a huge, self-satisfied grin. "He's arriving by train in Dodge City at two this afternoon on an unscheduled and unannounced trip."

"Oh! That's very clever, sir."

"Thank you, Amanda." Billy folded the plans and slipped the pages back into the envelope. "You did good work getting the plans. Now, you can leave the rest to me. I'll have a group of fully trained agents here within the hour. We'll make sure Jenkins' men and Walker don't get anywhere near the President."

At the mention of Brad's name, Amanda became apprehensive. "Mr. Melrose, sir, what will happen to Br . . . Mr. Walker?"

"He is a hardened criminal, one we've been trying to catch for years. You've read the reports, so you know. We'll do our best to capture him, Amanda, but the safety of the President comes first."

Amanda nodded, surprised at the sudden pressure in her chest at the thought of Brad being gunned down by her fellow agents. "I understand, sir. It's just that, well, I've gotten to know him, and I don't think he's really as bad as the reports make him out to be. Oh, I know all about him taking chaps and saddlebags off a dead man in Denver, recovering gold nuggets in San Francisco, chasing cattle thieves in Mexico and all sorts of other things, but I think there's a lot of good in him. He just needs help finding it."

Billy frowned. "Did you say Denver, San Francisco and Mexico? Where did you hear about those?"

"Yes, sir. At dinner. Mr. Walker told me all about his, uh, jobs in those places."

"Well, I'll be damned," Billy murmured under his breath. "I wonder how he pulled that off?"

"What's that, sir?"

"Nothing, Amanda. You were saying?"

"Those stories weren't in the reports you gave me. I guess we didn't know everything about Mr. Walker after all."

A small smile formed on Billy's face. "I guess you're right about that, Amanda." He took her by the arm and led her to the door of the barn. "Now, you go on back to the telegraph office and go about your normal routine. I'll take care of Walker."

"But, sir!" Amanda protested.

"But nothing, Amanda. I'll handle things from here on out. You just go to work and go about your normal routine." Cutting off any further argument, Billy added sternly, "That's an order."

Resigned, she answered, "Yes, sir."

As Amanda left the barn, Billy shook his head and muttered, "This sure is one for the record books."

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Brad crouched behind a pile of crates on the train platform, cursing the fact that he hadn't been able to see Amanda before all hell broke loose. After Harlan had informed the gang that they would attack the President this very afternoon in Dodge City, he had taken Brad aside to discuss the assassination details. When Harlan had reached into one of his bags and realized the plans were missing, Brad had known exactly what was in the envelope Amanda had been so intent on keeping from him. Upon returning to his campsite and, to his dismay, finding both Amanda and the envelope gone, he had intended to head right into town and have it out with her. Harlan's decision to go over every last detail about a thousand times had prevented the trip.

Jenkins wanted to make sure everyone was in place early, in case the President arrived ahead of schedule. Brad had objected, noting that trains were notoriously late, rarely early, but the gang leader had insisted they err on the side of caution. So, for a full hour before the train was to arrive, Brad had been stuck right where Harlan wanted him, with no way to contact Amanda. He prayed that she hadn't managed to get word of the plans to Washington before the President boarded the train. If his schedule was suddenly altered, and Harlan found out that Amanda had stolen the plans, Brad knew Harlan would shoot first and ask questions later -- if he bothered to ask questions at all.

A chill ran up Brad's spine when he thought about the possibility of Amanda being caught. He stretched his shoulders to relieve the tension that had been building, wanting nothing more than to warn her to get out of Dodge as fast as possible. For a moment, he entertained the notion of slipping away undetected long enough to find her, but a glance to his left told him it would be impossible. Two of Jenkins' men were standing less than ten feet from him. Jake was intently watching the horizon, and Simon's gaze was fixed on Brad.

Brad nodded in Simon's direction then noticed Jake's sudden alertness. Looking into the distance, he saw what had captured the man's attention. Plumes of smoke were barely visible, signaling the imminent arrival of the President's train.

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As ordered, Amanda had gone straight to her office when she left Mr. Melrose. Even with the normal day-to-day activity with the mail and telegraphs to be sent and received, she had been unable to put thoughts of Brad out of her mind. Every few moments, she had found herself looking at the clock, alternating between wishing the hands to move slower to prolong the inevitable and faster to get it over with as soon as possible.

She had been in constant turmoil over Brad, professional and personal feelings clashing. Logically, she knew he was a hired gun and expert marksman, a cold-blooded killer paid to assassinate the President, and she had to do everything she could to prevent him from succeeding. Emotionally, however, she had seen something in him, something good and heroic, which made her think he wouldn't be able to pull the trigger. The question was, which side of Brad would take over at the train station?

Amanda started at the faint sound of the train whistle. Swiveling her head to look at the clock, she was surprised to see that it was one-thirty. "I just know I can convince Brad not to shoot the President if I can get to him in time, but Mr. Melrose told me to stay out of it." Standing, she began to pace in front of her desk, her heartbeat quickening as she debated what to do. "I can't disobey a direct order, but . . ." she stopped short and a smile crept across her face. "Mr. Melrose said to go about my normal routine, and I do usually go to the train station every day to check for the mail." With one more look at the clock, she made her decision, quickly leaving the office.

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Brad felt his muscles tense as the train chugged into sight. In a matter of minutes, it would pull into the station and Jenkins would signal his men to launch the attack on the President's car. He took a deep breath to calm his nerves and scanned the train platform, easily picking out the locations of all of Jenkins' men. His eyes narrowed when he spotted a familiar face peering around the side of the station house.

'Amanda? What the hell?' He made a move toward her before the train whistle blew again, and he looked toward the tracks to see the locomotive quickly approaching the station. There was no way he could risk leaving his position now. Frustrated, he pounded his fist against a crate. 'Damn! She's going to be right in the middle of this mess, and I can't do anything about it!' Thinking he could somehow catch her eye and tell her to go away, he looked at the spot where he had seen her, but she was no longer there. Brad closed his eyes and breathed a sigh of relief. 'Good. She's gone.'

Brad almost jumped out of his skin when he felt a light tap on his shoulder. He whirled around as best as he could in the small hiding place. "Amanda! What are you doing here?"

"Shh!" she whispered, placing her index finger against her lips. "Someone will hear you." Her eyes darted around nervously, and he had the distinct impression that she, too, had located every gang member who was at the station.

Lowering his voice, he repeated, "What are you doing here?" He grabbed her by the arm and pulled her down next to him so she was hidden from view. Anxiously, he checked the area again, relieved that none of Jenkins' men appeared to have seen her. "Do you have any idea what's going to happen in a few minutes? You need to get out of here."

Amanda shook her head vehemently. "I'm not going anywhere until I talk to you." She placed her hand on his arm and her eyes bore into his. "You can't do this."

"Do what?"

"Shoot him. You can't shoot him. I won't let you shoot the President. Your President. Our President. The President of the United States of America. The most important man in the country."

"What? Amanda, you don't know what you're talking about. I'm not going to --"

"I know you're here to kill him," she interrupted. Her grip on his arm tightened, and she implored, "Please, Brad. Don't do it."

He shook loose from her grasp and clamped his hands on her upper arms. "Amanda, listen to me. I'm not going to kill the President."

"You're not? You're really not?"

"No, I'm not." Her relieved, yet still skeptical, look made him smile. "I'm really not. But Jenkins will, if . . ." The smile disappeared when he heard three short blasts of the train's whistle, the indicator from the engineer that he would soon be bringing the massive vehicle into the station. "Amanda, you have to get out of here. **Now.**"

"No."

"Yes."

"No!"

"Yes! Amanda, you don't belong here. You'll just be in the way."

Amanda pulled away from Brad and leaned against the station wall. Crossing her arms in front of her, she stared defiantly at him. "I'm not going anywhere until I know the President is safe."

"A-man-da," Brad groaned. "You have no idea how dangerous it's going to be. You could get hurt."

"You could get hurt, too, and I don't see you going anywhere," she countered.

Brad threw up his hands in exasperation. "I can't go anywhere. It's my job to . . ." The rest of his sentence was drowned out by the ear-splitting sound of squealing brakes. They both watched sparks fly from the rails as the train ground to a halt. The deafening silence that descended upon the platform once the train stopped was broken by a blood-curdling yell from somewhere above the station house.

"What was that?" Amanda asked and stood up, moving into the open to look at the roof. Her eyes widened when she saw Harlan Jenkins take aim at the railroad car and squeeze the trigger of his rifle. She froze when she realized that she was directly in the path of the bullet.

"Get down!" Brad shouted. He yanked her arm, successfully dragging her to relative safety behind the crates just as the bullet whizzed past her head. Pulling her into a bear hug, he held her tight for a moment, never more thankful for his lightning quick reflexes than he was at that moment. When he released her, he watched, concerned, as she looked from him to the roof and back to him again, clearly dazed. To try and snap her out of her shock, he joked, "How did you keep from getting yourself killed before you met me?"

Open-mouthed, Amanda glared at Brad. Indignantly, she said, "Before I met you, I never needed anyone to save me from almost getting myself killed." When he grinned and raised an eyebrow, she sighed and smiled. "Thank you for saving my life. Again."

Shrugging off her thanks, he casually noted, "Yeah, well, I have some experience with dodging bullets." He peeked over the top of the crates to watch the battle that had started on the platform. Smoke from the train mingled with gunpowder, making it difficult for Brad to see what was happening. His cue would come any minute, and he had to be in position. Turning to look at Amanda, he felt a knot form in his stomach. Leaving her here -- alone, unarmed, and unprotected -- was going to be next to impossible, but it was his only choice.

"Amanda, I have to go."

"I'll go with you." She struggled to rise, but her knees were still wobbly after the near-miss shot.

Suddenly frightened that she would follow him into what would surely be Dodge City's version of Hell, he put his hands on her shoulders to keep her from standing. "No! It's too dangerous." Looking into her frightened eyes, his tone softened. "I don't want to have to worry about you while I'm out there."

"But, Brad --" Amanda abruptly stopped, startled when firecrackers exploded all around them.

"Stay here! I mean it!" Brad shouted over his shoulder at her as he ran onto the platform and into the fray.

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Amanda reached for Brad, but he was already out of sight, immediately swallowed up by the smoke. She gripped the edge of a crate and pulled herself to her feet. Coughing as the acrid gunpowder invaded her lungs, she covered her mouth with one hand and waved the air with the other to improve visibility. Determined to locate Brad, she squinted against the sting of gun smoke and tried to pick him out of the crowd of men who were wrestling with and shooting at each other in front of her.

A sudden gust of wind helped clear the air enough for Amanda to get a glimpse of Mr. Melrose at the far end of the platform shouting orders to what she hoped was an army of agents and gesturing toward one of the train's cars. She turned her gaze to where he was pointing and her eyes widened. The President's car was being surrounded by a group of armed men, creating a human barricade against Jenkins and his gang.

Relieved to see that Mr. Melrose had arrived in time and the President was well protected, she continued her search for Brad. Scanning the crowd, she finally spotted him, his height and signature brown duster, brown hat and blue bandana distinctive among the sea of black hats worn by the gang members. He was less than twenty feet from her, using a few dozen neatly stacked feed sacks to protect himself from the gunfight in front of him.

As she watched, he popped up from behind the sacks to fire off three successive shots in the direction of the President's car. She flinched, even though she couldn't hear the noise above all the other noise surrounding her. Closing her eyes, she leaned her head back against the station wall. 'How could he be doing that? He said he wasn't going to shoot the President. Why did I believe him?'

Bracing herself for whatever she might see, she slowly opened her eyes and turned her head toward the train. Seeing that the President's guards all seemed fine, she looked lower and noticed three of Jenkins' men slumped on the platform in front of the train. Puzzled, she swiveled her head back to watch Brad.

When he rose to squeeze off a few more rounds, Amanda realized that there was no way he could be shooting at the President. His arm was held parallel to the ground, just inches above the height of the sacks, which was a good foot below Brad's full height of just over six feet. At that height and angle, he could only be targeting something lower than the train's windows.

She saw Brad reload and watched as he peered over the sacks then stood to fire. Noting where he was aiming, she slanted her eyes in that direction, trying to keep Brad at the edge of her peripheral vision to know when he squeezed the trigger. When the shot came, it was almost as if Amanda followed the bullet from Brad's gun into Pete's back as he tried to climb onto the train. 'Ohmygosh! He's shooting at Jenkins' men, not agents!'

A shout from above drew her attention, and she looked up to see Harlan turned away from the train, hollering at someone out of her line of sight. As he turned back toward the melee, she heard him yell, "Kill him!" Pointing at Brad, he repeated the order, "Kill him now!"

Disregarding her own safety, she left her hiding place and broke into a run. "Brad! Look out!" she warned, hoping he would hear her above the din of the fight. Looking over her shoulder, Amanda saw Harlan raise his rifle and aim it directly at Brad. "NO!" she shouted as she dove toward Brad, hitting him hard enough to knock him off balance, slamming her head against the platform as they fell and the bullet harmlessly thudded into one of the sacks.

Instinctively, Brad wrapped his arms around Amanda and rolled them against the station wall, out of Harlan's sight. Keeping her between himself and the wall, he raised himself into a sitting position and pulled her into his lap.

Cupping her head in his hand, he worriedly felt the lump that was already beginning to form on the back of her head. "Amanda, can you hear me? Are you all right?"

With a groan, she opened her eyes. "How did you keep from getting yourself killed before you met me?" Amanda asked with a weak smile.

Brad smiled tenderly and bent his head to brush his lips against her forehead. "Dumb luck, I guess."

She tipped her head back to look into his eyes. "Mmm-hmm. Thank goodness you're not the only one who can dodge a bullet." Slowly, her eyes closed, her last conscious image being Brad's concern-filled hazel eyes.

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"Amanda, it's Lee. Are you all right? Can you hear me?"

Amanda's eyelids fluttered. She opened them to find a pair of concerned hazel eyes staring at her. Blinking a few times, she tried to focus.

"Can you tell me your name?" a deep, baritone voice asked.

"Amanda King." Groggily, she took in her surroundings and struggled to sit, suddenly anxious. "The President, is he all right?"

Lee wrapped his arms around her comfortingly to keep her from rising. Puzzled as to what that question might mean, he smiled and assured her, "He's just fine, Amanda. And you will be, too." He leaned down and gently brushed the hair from her face. "That's more than I can say for the 'criminal' who collided with your head."

She smiled at the contact. Her eyes drooping, Amanda nodded. "I knew you'd save him, Brad."

Staring at Amanda quizzically, Lee's brows furrowed. "Brad?"

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At the sound of a familiar tap on her back door, Amanda looked up from her newspaper. When her partner crooked his finger at her, she smiled, set down the paper, and quickly made her way across the kitchen. As she opened the door, she glanced toward the stairs. Satisfied that her mother and sons were not going to suddenly materialize, she slipped outside and softly closed the door behind her.

"Hi," she greeted Lee.

"Hi. How are you feeling?"

Amanda rubbed the sore spot at the back of her skull. "I still have a bit of a headache, but I'm all right."

"Good, good." Lee bobbed his head. "I have some news for you. Billy told me to tell you that you passed Dodge City."

"Really?"

Lee grinned and assured her, "Yes, really. You scored 80% -- not exactly what we'd call 'flying colors,' but a very acceptable score."

"80%? Me? 80%?"

"Mmm-hmm."

"Oh, I'm so relieved. I wasn't looking forward to doing the course again."

"Neither was I. You and Dodge City don't seem to get along very well."

Amanda shrugged. "It always works out all right in the end." She tipped her head back and stared at the heavens.

Lee followed her lead, joining her in a few moments of silent star-gazing before asking, "Amanda, are you **sure** you're recovered?"

"Yeah." She slanted her eyes toward him. "Why?"

He stuffed his hands in his pockets and stared at the tips of his shoes. "Well, uh, you did take a good hit, and you were a little, um, confused when you first came to."

Amanda turned toward Lee and furrowed her brows. "Confused how?"

"You called me Brad." Raising his head, Lee fixed his gaze on Amanda. "Who's Brad?"

At the mention of the name, Amanda vividly recalled the dream that had been hovering around the edges of her memory since Dodge City. Brad. Closing her eyes, she let the images rush through her mind like a movie. It seemed so real. She could almost feel his arms around her, hear his low voice as he asked for a 'reward,' his lips brushing against her ear, feel him next to her in his bedroll, see his hazel eyes darken as he leaned in to kiss her . . . Hazel eyes. Her eyes widened with recognition as she met Lee's questioning eyes. 'Brad is Lee. Brad is Lee! I dreamt of Lee and me and we . . . It was Lee with me in that bedroll, and . . . Oh!' She was immediately grateful for the dark patio, so Lee couldn't see the flush of pink tinting her cheeks.

"Who's Brad?" Lee asked again, jealousy obvious in his tone.

"Brad is . . ." she paused, her eyes sparkling mischievously.

"Is who?" he prompted.

"Oh," she sighed, "he's just someone I dream about." She suppressed a grin at the sudden shock in Lee's eyes.

"You, uh, dream about someone named Brad?" He lowered his eyes and began to fidget with his tie. "Is he someone important to you?"

"Yeah," Amanda looked dreamily at the stars. "If only he didn't live in the nineteenth century . . ."

"The nineteenth cen . . ." Lee raised his head and he narrowed his eyes at Amanda, suddenly aware that she was teasing him. "So, this guy -- Brad -- is from a past life?"

"A **distant** past life," she assured him.

"Good." He puffed out a breath, relief smoothing his features into a smile. "Well, that's all cleared up, and I'm glad you're all right." Inclining his head toward the street, he said, "I'd better get going."

"Yeah," Amanda agreed. "Early day tomorrow."

"Yeah. Good night," Lee said and turned to leave.

Before he could slip out of the back yard, Amanda called, "Lee?" As he glanced back at her, she asked, "Do you own a cowboy hat?"

The End