

Waltz in Syncopated Time

Part 3

August 13, 1987
Dulles Airport

Lee found Billy waiting by the Austrian Airlines check-in counter. Looking at the ticket his boss handed him, he raised his eyebrows. "First class?"

"It was all we could get on short notice," Billy explained. "Come on." He lifted Lee's bag. "Let's get your luggage checked."

At the departure gate, Lee sat in the stiff vinyl chair and then stood, walking around the tiny space and staring absently at the jets on the tarmac before retaking his seat. He repeated the process three times before Billy caught his arm. "Sit down, please."

Lee turned, narrowing his eyes. "Billy . . ."

Before he could respond further, an artificially cheerful voice came over the intercom. The same words being repeated a few seconds later, in German, over another speaker, created an eerie echo effect. "Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen . . . Guten Tag, meine Damen und Herren . . . Austrian Airlines flight . . ." He felt his head begin to pound and closed his eyes in an attempt to drown out both voices.

Seeing Billy walk toward the gate and then turn back toward him impatiently, Lee reached under his seat for his carryon bag and joined him. Distractedly, he handed his ticket to the gate agent and was greeted with a bright smile and a, "Gute Reise, Herr Stetson."

"Danke schön." He nodded curtly and shuffled down the jetway behind Billy.

As the stewardess took his jacket and offered him a drink, Lee thought back to the last time he had flown first class.

Then, he had been with Amanda, not Billy. They had been on their way to California. He took a sip of his whiskey and swallowed a rueful laugh with the bitter liquid. Six months ago, this luxury would've made a difference. But nearly losing Amanda once, and now possibly again, had taught him that there were more important things in life.

Draining the last of his drink, he put the empty glass on the edge of his tray and nodded to the flight attendant for another.

Billy raised his eyebrows but said nothing. Lee emptied his second glass as the plane pulled away from the gate and began its way down the runway.

Unable to move about the cabin, he pulled a magazine from the seat pocket and thumbed through it absently - perusing advertisements for travel alarm clocks and motion sickness wrist bands, but unwilling to complete the half-finished crossword puzzle in the back. It would have required too much concentration.

He next reached for the headphones, pulling them from their plastic bag and plugging them into the socket in his armrest. He flipped channels randomly, mixing strains of Falco with those of Strauss.

As he moved to flip the channel again, Billy reached over and pulled the earphones free. "Lee, enough."

"I shouldn't have let her go," he said by way of a response and looked out of the windows at the miniaturized landscape. "I should've made her stay."

"Made her stay?" Come on, man. You know as well as I do that no one, not even you, *makes* Amanda do

anything."

"Yeah . . ." he sighed and reached into his pocket, running his fingers over the smooth edges of the gold band he now kept with his loose change - always within easy reach. "But . . ."

"Lee," Billy interrupted, "this was a simple assignment. I would never have approved it if I'd thought . . ." Billy paused, squeezing the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger before finishing his sentence, "If I'd thought anything would've happened to her." He waited a moment and then added. "I'm sorry; I know you two were close."

"Yeah," Lee agreed, returning his hand to his pocket. "Very close."

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August 14, 1987

Morning came too quickly. The sun streamed through the cabin as the plane soared above the western edge of the Alps. The flight attendant passed around hot towels and hotter coffee, and Lee was thankful for both.

He watched Billy with interest as he sipped his coffee. "You're quiet this morning."

"I've been looking over the report again," Billy admitted. "The second page is a list of all the personal effects that were found on the body -- jewelry and such."

Billy passed the file folder to Lee, and he began to read aloud. "One pair diamond stud earrings; one ring, gold, letter 'A'; one ring, gold, opal stone; one bracelet, gold; one ladies' watch; one . . ." Lee swallowed hard. "One diamond heart on a platinum chain." He turned the page, looking for more, and then skimmed the list again.

"There was nothing else?" he finally asked his boss.

"No, that was the complete list."

"Hmmm. . ." Lee scanned it again, running his hand through his hair.

"What is it?" Billy asked, clearly confused by Lee's reaction.

"Nothing . . . nothing . . ." He stood and crawled awkwardly over his boss, only excusing himself after the fact. "I'm gonna go freshen up."

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A nondescript black sedan escorted them from the airport to the morgue in the heart of Vienna's central district. A young blond woman introduced herself as Martina, the coroner's assistant, and prattled nervously in awkward English as she showed them to the back room.

"When I had heard that the lady was American, I could not believe my ears. And then, to see that she . . . how bad it was, I was just wanting to go away and never to come back."

She unlocked a silver door and rolled out a long metal tray. On it, lay a sheet-covered body. Lee fought back the lurch in his stomach when the young woman slid the sheet back and exposed what remained of the victim's 'face'.

Though he had seen the photos, they had done little to prepare him for the gruesome reality in front of him. Her features had been shot away. Broken pieces of flesh, cartilage, and bone were all that remained. Her hair, her long chestnut curls, seemed curiously left alone, tainted only by dried blood and pieces of debris from the river.

He bit his lips from the inside and swallowed hard before asking, "Fingerprints?"

"Her hands were destroyed, too." Martina shook her head, conveying her dismay. "She must have put them up to try to protect herself from the first blast."

"She was shot twice?" Lee's voice broke as he asked the question. The woman's death had over-scored the other details in the report.

"Yes. It was the second blast that killed her." Martina fumbled with the sleeve of her jacket as she spoke.

"Can you move the sheet down?" Lee asked. The assistant complied, pushing it down past the corpse's shoulders.

He grunted, "Lower," and she again pushed it down until the entire upper torso was exposed.

"All the way," he finally ordered, and the blond pulled the sheet completely off, folding it precisely as though needing to keep her hands occupied.

With a clinical detachment he didn't know he possessed, Lee studied the dead woman's naked body as Billy looked away, coughing slightly.

He knew Amanda's body as well as he knew his own - every dimple, every freckle, every curve, and as he ran his eyes over the dead woman, he knew with growing certainty that although there was an uncanny resemblance, she was **not** Amanda.

"It's not her," he finally announced, his voice breathy with relief. Tempering it somewhat with somber respect for the woman who had died in his wife's place, he repeated, "Billy, it's not her."

"How can you be sure?" Billy's eyes ran the length of the young woman's frame.

"It's not her," Lee repeated with growing conviction. "Amanda has a scar, here . . ." Lee pointed to a spot left of center on his chest. "From where she was shot in California. And she has a mole . . ." he paused. "She has a mole under her right breast."

Billy did not react to the tacit acknowledgment of their intimate relationship. Instead, he asked again, "Are you absolutely sure? She was a floater - her skin's a mess. Don't let your personal feelings cloud your judgment, man."

"I **know** Amanda . . ." Lee turned his back on the corpse, and jammed a hand in his pocket.

"Lee," Billy tried again, but was cut off.

"It's not her. Our . . . Amanda's . . . wedding rings are missing, too." Not waiting for his boss' response, Lee walked out the door.

END PART III