

THE WOMAN OF A THOUSAND FACES

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There it was again, that annoying buzzing sound, pulling Katelyn out of the best sleep she'd had in a month. She twisted and turned in the pale satin sheets, trying to avoid waking up, but the sound of her phone vibrating against the dresser began again. Reluctantly she threw the top sheet to the side and sat up in bed. She snatched the offending phone off the dresser and answered it.

"Speak," she demanded.

A light, young, male voice on the other end said, "Hi Katie. It's Max."

"I thought I told you and the agency that I was on vacation for the rest of the month. I also told you never to call me before 9 A.M."

"I'm sorry if I woke you, but it would help if you told me which time zone you were in."

"Cut the baloney. We both know you've tracked this phone and know I'm staying at a resort in Saint Lucia. Now I am going back to bed and after that, I'm going to continue my vacation."

"Well, I hope you already took time to see the Pitons, because I need you, Katie; I need the woman of a thousand faces."

She looked out the open window of her bungalow framed by the pale, gossamer curtains stirring in the warm early morning breeze. "I told you to stop calling me that, and I'm not taking another job right now."

"I'll make you a deal. Double your usual fee, and I promise to stop calling you the woman of a thousand faces."

Max might be the closest thing she had to a friend. Being a private intelligence contractor was a lonely business, never knowing who to trust. The roaming lifestyle provided an ever changing array of scenery, but companionship, even having a pet, was an unaffordable luxury. "Don't make promises you can't keep. I'll do it."

He chuckled and said, "Thanks, Tiger. I owe you one. The mission pack with pocket cash, details, and plane tickets will be delivered to your bungalow within the hour."

She shrugged, hung up the phone, and headed for the shower. Twenty minutes later, while sitting in front of the mirror in her blue bath robe brushing her long, straight, naturally black hair, a manila envelope was shoved under the bungalow door. She walked over

and picked it up. Inside were all the usual little bits. She opened the passport to the photo page. "Predictable," she said to herself. Max liked blondes and had put her picture on the passport with long blonde hair and generous candy apple red lipstick. Then she saw the name on the passport, Woatf, Willow E., and choked back a laugh. She shook her head and said to herself, "Woatf, woman of a thousand faces, that joker."

She pulled her two bags from the closet, and threw them open on the bed. The slightly smaller bag was filled with her wigs, makeup, latex facial appliances, and the other tools of her trade. She pulled on her red and orange sundress decorated with tropical flowers, blonde wig, and then packed the remaining contents of the closet into the larger suitcase. Two hours later she took the resort bus to the airport and boarded the first of two flights that would take her to London via Miami. The ticket, security, and border agents spent more time looking at her dress than at her passport. In the back corner seat of the first class cabin, she pulled the mission brief from the envelope and began looking over the details while the jet took to the air.

It was a two part mission, surveillance and infiltration. The target was just your usual scumbag arms merchant, code named Scorpio, originally from some corner of Russia, and graduating to dealing in nuclear materials. The agency wanted her to watch his movements, listen in on his conversations, and get close enough to intercept his phone communications. Ultimately, she would break into his office and use the included USB drive to search his computer. She shuffled the contents back into the manila envelope as the stewardess arrived.

"Can I get you anything, ma'am?" she asked.

"Just a glass of chardonnay, please."

When Katelyn landed at Heathrow airport, she took a taxi to Piccadilly Circus. The plethora of shops, cafes, and neon signs around this traffic circle reminded her of New York's Times Square. She stopped the taxi and walked the remaining few blocks along Coventry Street, rolling her suitcases behind her until she reached the hotel Thistle Piccadilly, where her contact had reserved a room for her. The room was beautiful, more luxurious than she needed for this short-term assignment, with a separate seating area, and, as an added touch, Max had ordered up fruit and flowers whose beautiful fragrance greeted her when she opened the door. The bellman set down her suitcases on the stand near the closet and after she tipped him quietly exited. She unpacked a few dresses and hung them up in the closet, but left everything else in her bags. She was only scheduled to be here for five days, and preferred to remain prepared to leave in a hurry.

"First things first," she said to herself. She walked into the bedroom, slipped off the long blonde wig, and pulled the sundress over her head. She quickly changed into a pair of jeans, a gray t-shirt, and tucked her hair up under a black baseball cap. "Time to survey the territory," she said out loud. Before leaving the room she grabbed her bailout packet from the hidden pouch in the lining of the smaller suitcase. It contained another passport in a fake name, two

thousand Euros, and a lock box key. If the job went sideways and she couldn't get back to the hotel, she would have an escape plan.

First, she walked casually around the area at least a block from her hotel. When she found a suitable place on a barely used side street and no one was watching, she slid the bail-out packet into a small space at the meeting of two walls. Comfortable that no casual passer-by would accidentally discover it, she turned her attention to the job. Her target had rented an office right on Piccadilly Circus, and she scoped out the entrance, taking careful note of all the restaurants and cafes she could use for cover before returning to her hotel.

The next day she tied her hair up at the back of her neck and wore a gray running suit. She spent most of the day bored, sitting in a coffee shop, staking-out the front of his building, trying to deduce the habits of her quarry. He typically wore dress shirts with black or gray slacks, and a medium length black leather coat. Usually, he left for lunch around noon, dinner around six, and returned after dinner. The surprisingly short Russian man with dark hair and several days of beard growth seemed to be staying in his office overnight, and always traveled with at least one oversized bodyguard.

On the second day, Katelyn wore a simple black dress and conservative black heels. She had on a blonde bob wig and full makeup. It took at least an hour in front of the mirror each day for her to apply the makeup, along with any additional latex appliances. In her experience, minor facial changes were the key to a good disguise. It wasn't like being in the movies; no amount of foundation could cover excessive use of latex. A small modification to the bridge of her nose or airbrushed shadows to accentuate her cheek bones usually did the trick. Anyone could stakeout a target with a huge telephoto lens and a parabolic microphone. Working a target this closely required subtle and believable changes in appearance.

She trailed Scorpio more closely, following him to one of his usual lunch spots. She looked so different each day that neither he nor his bodyguard gave her a second glance. Sitting at a nearby table, she watched him in her peripheral vision as he ordered a steak for lunch and drank a carafe of vodka. She nibbled at her plate of grilled chicken breast with buttered peas, ginger carrots, and steamed broccoli, while pulling out her tablet computer and inserting the special USB dongle which allowed her to intercept cellular phone communication. The target's phone, even though it was sitting silently in his pocket, updated itself on the network every ten minutes, and while he sat eating, he received several text messages.

Once she had captured the unique identifier of his mobile device, she uploaded all the information she had gathered to the agency. They operated a sophisticated network of electronic listening stations, and with his mobile device I.D. would be able to record and decipher all his communications. When Scorpio got up to leave the restaurant from his table in the back, she made her way to the bathroom and, passing by him, took the opportunity to slip an audio bug, disguised as a one Pound coin, into the pocket of his coat.

Day three, she opted for her silver business suit, white shell, square rimless glasses, and a medium length red haired wig. When she looked in the mirror, she didn't even recognize herself. She spent the day listening to the audio from the bug, and following him to lunch and dinner. He took several meetings with a variety of men and one woman, and as Katelyn watched them, she diligently but discreetly took pictures of everyone using cameras hidden in her ink pen, watch, and makeup compact. As usual, she uploaded everything to Max. Scorpio took the last gulp of his after dinner aperitif, wiped his mouth with his napkin, and headed for door. Walking past Katelyn, he took a second glance at the redhead in the business suit. Silently, she cursed herself. She had gotten sloppy, wearing the same disguise for lunch and dinner. If he had recognized her, she might have blown the whole operation.

On the fourth day, she took more care. For the lunch game, she wore her jeans and gray t-shirt with the black baseball cap, but for dinner, she contacted an old resource to pose as her male companion. He had a narrow face, a pointy jaw, and looked good in his black jacket and tie. Hiding in plain sight while being the center of attention was one of her specialties. She looked stunning in a red oriental style satin dress with her long blonde wig. She and her tall dark-haired friend laughed and pretended to be on a date to deflect any suspicion. She dutifully took over fifty pictures and sent them all back to headquarters where teams of analysts would identify all of Scorpio's contacts.

Finally, the last day of her mission dawned. Dressed in a simple white shirt and black slacks paired with a shiny purple collarless jacket, she followed him at lunch. When he went to dinner, it was time to infiltrate the man's office. She was waiting, leaning against a wall half a block away, dressed in her jeans, a black t-shirt, and her long black parka. As soon as he was out of sight, she approached the door to the office.

The door had a high quality electronic keypad lock, difficult to defeat directly, but the metal and glass door was too well used. There was a very slight gap between the door and the frame, into which she slipped a flat flexible piece of metal. In a second, the door unlatched, and she entered the building. Up two flights of narrow stairs and she was standing at the door to his office. She deftly picked the deadbolt lock and stepped inside checking the corners for video cameras.

There was no desk in the office, which looked more like a lounge. White fabric overstuffed chairs and couches, along with numerous coffee and end tables, ringed the room. On the coffee table farthest from the door next to the large bay windows she spotted his laptop computer. She strode confidently across the room, opened the laptop, and inserted the USB drive, which broke past his password and began decoding his files.

The infiltration program took a couple of minutes to run, and she used the time to poke through the target's email. She sat in stunned silence when she noticed a third of the man's communications were to or from the internet domain woodandtrail.com. She knew from experience

that it was a cover for homeland security contacts, and opened a few of the recent emails. One in particular included photos of her walking in Piccadilly Circus wearing her blonde wig with the text “Thanks for sending your agent. She’s been very helpful and agreed to work for us.”

The infiltration program had finished its work and shutdown the computer. “They were running counter intelligence surveillance on me the whole time. Did someone at the agency tip them off?” Katelyn asked herself in wonder. “I need to get out of here, now!” She pulled the USB drive and shut the lid on the laptop before running for the door. She leapt down the stairs two at a time, making a mad dash for the exit. Just when she reached the front door of the building, she met the target and his bodyguard coming back in.

The bodyguard lunged at her and tried to get his massive arms around her. She ducked under his grasp and kicked him in the back of the knee while grabbing and pulling his shoulders from behind. His leg collapsed and he fell backward hitting his head hard on the unforgiving tile floor. When she turned to face Scorpio, he had a six inch flip-out locking knife in his hand and made a wild swipe at her with it. She felt the hot burning sensation as it cut her left arm from shoulder to elbow.

She grabbed his knife hand and twisted it in a wrist lock, which forced him to drop the weapon. He went berserk, lifted her injured left arm, and began punching her over and over in her left side. What his attack lacked in finesse, it made up for in sheer ferocity. She jabbed the thumb of her right fist into the side of his neck, which stunned him long enough for her to get free, swivel around behind him, and put him in a choke hold.

He finally went limp and dropped to the floor, just as his bodyguard was staggering to his feet. She didn’t hesitate. There was no one now between her and the exit, and she made a run for it. She flew out the door and dashed down the street, away from the circus, in search of a secluded area to hide. After taking several turns, she found a deserted alley and dove into an open dumpster, pulling the lid closed over herself. She lay there in silence, leaning against the bags of smelly refuse, waiting. After a few moments, she heard the heavy, hurried footfalls of her pursuers run past.

Katelyn stayed there for ten minutes to make sure they didn’t double back before she pushed the lid open with her one good arm and dragged herself out of the dumpster. She flopped onto the ground like a fish, gasping for breath, and clutching her broken ribs with her injured left arm. The pain caused her to take halting breaths, but it was bearable. She lay there looking up at the clear starry night sky and took a moment to thank those stars she was still alive. She had evaded capture, but laying there she couldn’t ignore the facts of her situation. The mark had escaped, and due to the information he had sent them, the agency now believed she was a turncoat. She sat up and climbed the side of the dumpster to help her stand, shakily. She searched around until she found some fairly clean napkins and used them to wipe the blood and grime from her face, arms, and legs. Then she straightened her hair and pulled her coat tightly around her slender frame.

Exiting the alley, she walked a block and a half on the dark and deserted street before she spotted an open coffee shop. She slipped through the door and picked her way around the dozen patrons some standing and some sitting in booths with red velvet benches, making her way straight to the ladies toilet. Once inside, she locked the door behind herself and pulled her coat off to take stock of her situation.

Her left arm had stopped bleeding from the long gash and didn't appear to be broken. She touched her left side and winced at her painful ribs, but they would heal. From the looks of her injuries she could avoid going to the hospital, although tomorrow she would be covered with dark bruises, impossible to ignore. From the pocket of her coat, she retrieved her compact and began applying her makeup again. She tied her hair up in a bun at the back of her head just as someone began knocking on the bathroom door. "Just a minute," she replied.

She braced herself for anything as she opened the door, but it was only another woman, waiting to use the facilities. Katelyn checked the dining area and the street outside for any signs of her enemies and, when she was sure it was safe, slipped out into the moonless night. She thought it doubtful they had traced her back to the hotel, so she retrieved her bailout packet from its hiding place and decided to carefully work her way back to her room.

She was able to get through the lobby without anyone noticing her wounded condition. Once in her room she took a few minutes to scrub out the gash in her arm, apply alcohol, and bandage it with gauze and medical tape. Then she switched into a clean pair of jeans and a long sleeved black shirt, that would hide the bandage on her arm, and was ready to leave the room in less than fifteen minutes. On her way out, she stopped at the front desk, just long enough to drop off the key and told the stunned clerk, "I'm sorry. I'm in a hurry, just bill the card on file."

She stepped into the waiting cab, and then noticed a man emerge from the dark alley across the street. He was smoking a cigarette, watching her. Max didn't smoke, but this guy seemed familiar. Then she recognized him; his name was Martin. He was a washed up field agent, assigned to a desk after a series of dubious failures. Her phone beeped. Martin disappeared, walking along the street as she looked down to check her phone. The message from Max read, "Major blowback from operation. Ghost until I contact you by alternate method." She flipped the phone over, popped off the back, pulled out the SIM card, and snapped it in half. She wanted to ensure she wasn't followed, so she asked the driver, "I'm leaving London tonight, would you mind driving me past a few sites?" He was only too happy to run up the fare. She directed him to drive by Trafalgar Square and the Millennium Wheel before finally going to St. Pancras station. She arrived only moments before the last departure and boarded the high speed train heading through the Chunnel to Brussels.

She kept a small crappy apartment there, stocked with an assortment of non-perishable food and a shelf full of books, on the third floor above a little pastry shop. The tiny flat barely accommodated a bed, mini-fridge, microwave, and a bathroom. The walls and door were painted with an ancient black lacquer, which looked strange in the modern compact florescent lighting.

On her way from the rail station she stopped in a grocery and, while ensuring her trail was still clean, grabbed the essentials.

When she arrived, she plugged the mini-fridge into the electrical socket, and stored the groceries inside. She would need to stay here and keep out of sight for a couple of weeks until Max posted the prearranged phrase on the internet forum. The agency might not trust her right now, but she knew she could count on Max. He would signal her when the coast was clear and she could resume her normal routine.

She pulled her copy of Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* from the shelf and eased her aching body down on the bed. She couldn't relax as she continued to seethe over the betrayal. Martin had, almost certainly, sold her out. Her next task would be to track him down, beat some answers out of him, and settle the score with Scorpio. Wistfully she looked around the tiny cell and lamented, "What a way to spend the rest of my vacation. This time last week I was enjoying a beautiful bungalow in paradise, and now look at me..."