

Amelia's Story

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Miss Ealand was not there. Miss Holland was not there. There was a total stranger sitting behind the desk of the outer office when Ed Straker came up from SHADO's underground HQ. Momentarily he froze. "Who are you?"

"Miss Rodgers, sir." The accent was American, further west than his own.

"And what are you doing here?"

She smiled at him, a big, beaming smile. "I'm standing in for Miss Ealand while she's on holiday. Miss Holland has flu. It's all been cleared with Mr Freeman."

"Has it indeed?"

Typical of Alec not to tell him. But he had no reason to doubt that she was competent. He took a closer look at her. Her age was not obvious, thirties, maybe forties. She had long dark hair, was a little on the plump side but pretty enough. Pretty enough for Alec. He wondered if there was anything going on there.

He also wondered if she knew about SHADO. He could not exactly ask her.

He nodded abruptly. "You're here for two weeks?"

"Yes, sir."

"Fair enough." He walked out onto the lots. He hated to admit it but he did feel slightly lost without Miss Ealand. She knew him, she knew what he wanted before he did most of the time and she had been there since the beginning.

He shook his head. He was probably being unfair. Miss Rodgers would be fine.

* * *

"And on top of that we have three films which need -"

For the second time in twenty four hours, Ed Straker pulled up short as he entered the outer office. This time he was coming from outside, had Alec Freeman with him and was expecting Miss Rodgers. What he was not expecting were the flowers.

They were everywhere. He counted half a dozen vases in a single glance. They were, he had to admit, tastefully done. Multiple shades of blue were highlighted by splashes of yellow. He had no objection to them in principle, they were just... everywhere.

When he recovered his voice he asked: "Is it your birthday, Miss Rodgers?"

"No sir. But thank you for asking."

"Do you have a particularly attentive admirer?"

"No sir, I don't think so."

"They can you explain the flowers?"

"I just thought they'd cheer the place up."

Half-a-dozen responses went through his mind - including the fact that this was inappropriate for a military organisation, though he could hardly use that one - but she was only here for a fortnight. He gritted his teeth and went through to his office, followed by

Colonel Freeman.

"Stop grinning, Alec."

"You're not looking at me."

"I don't need to. Is she your latest?"

"Girlfriend? I haven't even asked her. Yet."

Straker pulled a face. "Then how did I end up with her?"

"She's the senior available secretary. Like the studio and everyone else, half of them have gone down with the flu."

Straker glared at him. "She'd better workout. Or I'll be stealing yours"

Alec glared back. "You wouldn't... Yes you would."

* * *

The next day it was a chocolate on his blotting pad when he came in. The day after, it was a rose for his buttonhole.

"I don't even have a buttonhole." He sighed. "I appreciate she means well but it's not the way I do things. Talk to her, Alec."

"Why can't you talk to her?"

"You're the head of personnel. Do it."

* * *

The next day there were no flowers, no little gifts and no smile on Miss Rodgers' face. Momentarily he regretted his actions but Straker hardened his heart. The place had to be run efficiently.

* * *

The first sign of disaster was when Alec failed to turn up for work. For a moment Straker felt real fear - which turned to exasperation when his second in command phoned in with the flu. He already had a headache to cope with himself.

And then he sneezed.

By the end of the day he was running a temperature, had a handkerchief pressed permanently to his nose and was wishing he was dead.

"Oh sir, you can't drive home in that state!" It was Miss Rodgers.

"I am perfectly capable -"

"But you can hardly see."

It was difficult to argue on that one and in the end it was easier to give in. She took him home - "Always wanted to drive one of the executive cars." - and while he changed, she insisted on getting him something to eat. He was in no state to argue and before he knew it he was tucked up in bed and fast asleep.

She was still there when he woke up.

"You spent the night?" he asked with a mixture of annoyance and gratitude.

"I didn't think it was safe to leave you on your own." she said, handing him a cup of coffee.

"Mr. Freeman would probably agree with you. Although what he's going to say if he finds out..."

Over the next few days he relaxed enough to allow her to nurse him. She was better company than he had expected, introducing him - among other things - to the esoteric world of role-playing games.

"You can be anyone you like."

"I can see the appeal of that."

And by the end of the week he had created a character for himself, a tailor stitching favours for the ladies to give to their champions as they rode off into battle. "Let them get on with the fighting."

He was reluctant to go back to work but the day came too soon when the doctors declared him fit. SHADO needed him, so he went.

Alec, fully recovered, grinned his most lascivious grin when he saw him. "Is it true your new secretary's been spending the night?"

Straker stared him down. "She's been teaching me petit point."

Which, as he intended, left Alec entirely speechless.

At the end of the next week Miss Ealand returned and he was glad to see her. Now he knew everything in the outer office would proceed smoothly.

"So Miss Rodgers is off back to the typing pool?" Alec wondered.

"Not at all." Straker told him. "I've made her a script developer. She has some very interesting ideas."

He turned away, then turned back with a smile. "Say, Alec, could you cover for me this evening? I'm kind of busy."