

Excerpt

According to Patrick Killion's favorite data analyst at the Agency, he was a half-inch short of being the perfect romance hero. As long as the inch she was talking about was his height and not his dick, he didn't give a rat's ass.

Today, at a measly five foot eleven and a half inches, he towered above the locals. His height, combined with his sun-bleached blond hair, meant he definitely did not blend in with the Colombian population. He didn't bother to try.

The CIA dealt in threat assessment and probability levels, manipulation and human intel. Lockhart's appearance, expertise, hidden Cayman Island bank account, and the fact she was in the right place at the right time for Vice President Ted Burger's murder, made her his number one suspect. So, despite FBI ASAC Lincoln Frazer telling him to back off yesterday, he was still following her. He couldn't walk away.

Last night he'd shaken the tree to see what fell out.

He ignored the twinge to his conscience. He'd been a little rough. He hadn't wanted to risk her getting the drop on him. He had given her a get-out-of-jail-free pass and probably saved her life—that should count for something.

Except she hadn't behaved as she should have. She hadn't called her employer. She hadn't grabbed a bag and run. Instead she'd reported the assault to the local cops and had gone in to work today. Maybe she'd been busy destroying evidence or delaying until the last possible moment before she made a mad dash for some small private airfield. Maybe she was overconfident about her abilities. Or maybe she was innocent.

It was the last "maybe" that bothered him.

As he stood in line for a ticket to the ecological park, a pretty redhead in a strappy top and high-heels eyed his neon orange T-shirt and red plaid shorts with a distasteful grimace. He'd committed a class-A felony and the fashion police were about to convict.

"Airline lost my luggage." Killion raised his palms in a pitiful shrug, putting enough misery into his travel-worn appearance that the woman's expression immediately shifted from disgust to empathy.

"That blows. How long ago?"

"Two days now. They swear they'll get it to me sometime today—"

She gave a disbelieving snort. "Yeah, they once lost my luggage on a trip to Mexico and by the time it arrived I was getting on the plane home. Worse, they refused to reimburse all the clothes I needed to buy..."

Off she went, and he was in. Phase one of this mission accomplished. He walked into the conservatory as part of a group of American tourists, rather than as a single white guy traveling alone. They milled loosely about, looking at Lepidoptera specimens that fluttered about like giant-sized pieces of confetti.

A family of seven—five women who all looked like they'd rather be at the mall, an older man, and a teen who read every piece of information like he was cramming for a test. Killion stayed close to the stacked redhead because he looked like the kind of guy who'd stay close to a stacked redhead, but he also chatted to the others in the group, gleaning information. They were down from Florida, visiting family over Christmas. The Americans had arrived in a large minivan with an armed driver, but the driver stayed with the vehicle so they weren't too worried about security. In this country, staying in one spot for any length of time meant you attracted attention—and not the, "Oh my, don't you have pretty eyes" kind of attention.

It wasn't a good thing.

Hot sun bore down on the forest canopy that shaded the ecological park. The small interpretive center affiliated with the Amazon Research Institute attracted local schools as well as the occasional tourist, but it was Monday, January 5 and schools were closed until after Epiphany. The place was deserted except for this little band of intrepid explorers. The ground steamed and sweat beaded on his skin as his adopted people wandered slowly from enclosure to enclosure. A rivulet of perspiration soaked into his shirt.

A huge yellow butterfly drifted over his head and landed on a piece of cut fruit on the feeder tray. The redhead barely contained her squeal of excitement and took twenty pictures with her little point-and-shoot. Killion's point-and-shoot dug into his spine and held fourteen rounds. Their group finally headed into the amphibian enclosure where decaying damp earth mixed with traces of ammonia, and the musk of rotten leaves.

Welcome to the jungle.

His new friend grabbed his arm, pointed. "Aren't they cute!" A minuscule, neon-yellow frog was stuck on the side of a glass tank.

"They may look cute"—said a familiar voice with just the barest hint of a Kentucky twang—"but one golden poison dart frog contains enough toxin to kill ten-to-twenty grown men." Dr. Lockhart wore spectacles on a string around her neck and reminded him of the class nerd—the one all the guys had secretly lusted after but had been too intimidated to ask out on a date. The professor had unusual violet-blue eyes that showed clear signs of a sleepless night. He would have felt guilty, but more than one person had told him he was a heartless bastard who didn't have a conscience. A sociopath by any other name.

He didn't give a shit, so they were probably right. Hell, she should be thanking him. Being tied up and threatened sure beat the hell out of a trip to a Black Camp or a lifetime in prison—and those were the more civilized options.

Audrey Lockhart wore ubiquitous jeans over Birkenstocks and a tight white tank top that molded her breasts in a way that left little to Killion's undeniably vivid imagination, all topped off with a thin purple shirt that she left open. She wasn't carrying a weapon—unless she had a frog in her pocket. "I'm Dr. Lockhart, I study anurans and my specialty is the family Dendrobatidae—poison dart frogs."

For all intents and purposes she appeared to be exactly what she said. A scientist, dedicated to her research. He rarely trusted appearances. That's what data analysts, surveillance, and background checks were for—not to mention interrogation.

"I thought captive ones weren't poisonous?" Killion pointed to a little guy about an inch long that was sitting at a precarious angle on a large green leaf. The creatures didn't look real—they looked like miniature plastic toys. They certainly didn't look like the deadliest creatures on the planet. He placed his hand lightly on the redhead's back, and she sank against him, proving her taste in men was as terrible as his taste in clothes.

The professor's eyes ran over him and his new squeeze, then away, dismissing him as just another tourist.

She didn't recognize him from last night. There was no obvious guile in her gaze. No deception.

"You're right in that individuals bred in captivity have no toxicity, but these specimens were pulled straight from the nearby rainforest where they are endemic and, trust me, you wouldn't survive a close encounter." Her voice was husky, sexy enough to raise his awareness of her as a female rather than a target.

He'd always had a thing for voices. And nerds.

She continued, growing more serious, "It takes years for them to lose their toxicity, and even touching a paper-towel that has been in contact with the skin of these particular individuals can kill you. They are extremely dangerous."

"Death by frog." His smirk didn't reach his eyes. "Bet that ain't pretty."

The redhead laughed. The professor did not.

"We're very careful how we handle them." She looked stern now, like she was the teacher and he was the naughty schoolboy. And there was his vivid imagination going nuts again.

"Have you ever seen someone die after touching one?" asked his new friend.

"Thankfully, no." The professor's gaze was open and sincere.

What did he expect? Skull and crossbones instead of pupils? He'd been with the Company long enough to spot an operative with one quick glance, but this woman was an enigma. Either she was an incredible actress, or he was way off base in his assessment of the facts. Hell, maybe she was just another enviro-nut trying to save the planet—or, in this case, frogs.

"Do they taste like chicken?" he joked.

Those violet-blue eyes flashed. "I don't know," she bit out. "Would you like to try one?"

Ouch.

Her fiery response was hot as hell, but obviously she didn't appreciate his sense of humor—he'd been told it was an acquired taste. He didn't look away, instead used the opportunity to study her carefully. Her gaze was determined, but he could see fear at the edges—from the scare he gave her last night? Or did she live in constant fear, waiting for her time between the crosshairs? He didn't figure being an assassin was particularly good for your long-term health. Someone, somewhere was always trying to tie up loose ends.

The information he had on Lockhart was solid, but facts didn't necessarily add up to truth—something he'd learned during his time in Iraq. He needed to dig deeper, get closer. But didn't dare tip her off. Hence his little tourist trip today. Like Lockhart with her frogs, he wanted to study her in her natural environment.

"Aren't you scared, working with them?" His new friend asked in a voice that was as thin and high as her heels. "I mean, what if one hopped on you?"

"I'm more scared of people than I am of frogs." Sadness touched one side of the biologist's stern mouth.

Join the club, sister.

"I'd be terrified." The woman shuddered beneath his palm and relaxed back into him. He removed his hand. God, he hated using people, and yet he was so fucking good at it.

"What d'you feed 'em?" He searched for questions a normal tourist would ask, rather than "do you stay and watch your targets die, or do you take off early to avoid traffic?"

"Ants, beetles, some plant material. We go out and forage in the jungle for fresh food every few days," the professor told him.

"You go into the rainforest alone? Aren't you scared of being kidnapped?" he asked.

K&R was a lucrative business throughout South and Central America, as well as many Middle-Eastern countries. One of his best friends was a former SAS soldier who worked full-time as a negotiator for the families of kidnap victims. This was prime territory for those who liked to extort a little extra pocket money with relatively low investment, so why was Dr. Lockhart immune? Were the local bad guys more scared of her than she was of them? Was she connected in some way? None of his sources had any information on the professor that he hadn't already gleaned for himself.

"I don't go into the jungle alone." Lockhart's gaze skewered him, seriously questioning his intellect—he got that a lot. "I'm extremely careful, obviously, but it's no more dangerous here than in some parts of the States. I've never had any trouble in the rainforest."

She'd experienced trouble somewhere though and not just his visit last night—he could see the echo of experience in her eyes. Men like him exploited weakness like that.

"You studied these things for long?" He sought to distract her from her memories.

She made direct eye contact this time in a way that told him she didn't like him very much. Ignoring his question, she checked her watch and called out to the others to begin her demonstration. Four o'clock on the dot.

Killion moved closer, close enough to catch the scent of lavender on her skin and to see her gaze flick warily over him. Her complexion was pale, skin fine-grained. Lips soft and deliciously pink.

She was delicately-boned, petite, but not skinny. Even so, he'd had a hell of a time holding onto her last night and had almost got his balls twisted off. He wouldn't underestimate her again.

He brought his attention back to the talk.

The teen asked a lot of questions. Maybe the kid was a wannabe frog geek. Or maybe he liked listening to the doc's voice as much as Killion did. She had a wicked chuckle that seemed to affect a certain part of his anatomy that should know better. He shifted uncomfortably. If her career in science fell through, she'd make a fortune doing phone sex.

The fact he was thinking about phone sex when she was talking earnestly about chytrid fungus and climate change being the biggest global threat to frog populations, combined with habitat loss and over-harvesting by the pet trade, suggested he was long overdue in the getting laid department. He now knew far more than he'd ever wanted about frogs and the effect of Audrey Lockhart's voice on his libido.

Talk about torture.

She knew her stuff, but then this was her field. His was finding people who didn't want to be found and extracting information they didn't want to reveal. His expertise usually garnered those he captured some quality time in a US institution. The really lucky ones got to travel the world, although it was hard to be a tourist with a bag over your head.

Audrey Lockhart, Ph.D., looked squeaky clean, but she'd been in Kentucky the day Ted Burger had been murdered with batrachotoxin—a deadly alkaloid secreted in the skin of *Phyllobates terribilis*, the golden poison dart frog. Murdered by a woman pretending to be the maid, of the same general height and weight as the good professor. Eye and hair color were easily altered, but how many women knew how to handle these suckers without dropping dead on the spot? Not many.

Coincidence?

Not likely.

Problem was Audrey Lockhart wasn't throwing off operator vibes, and that bothered him. It bothered him a lot. Whoever killed the VP had waltzed past security into his fancy house, served high tea, and then walked calmly away as the guy lay frothing at the mouth on his study floor. It took either balls or a sociopathic coolness under pressure. And he wasn't seeing it. Not last night, not today.

Lockhart looked innocent. Actually she looked almost too innocent, all perky frog geek, which automatically raised red flags for him. How could anyone be that innocent after the last fourteen years? Or maybe he was getting soft. The current shit-storm in the Middle East had him questioning what all those years in the sandbox had been for. Bin Laden was dead, but the situation was more fucked up than ever with extremists trying to initiate Armageddon—and not figuratively. They were literally trying to instigate the end of times, as if the world wasn't fucked up enough.

What was wrong with these assholes?

People in the US had no idea how lucky they were, and it was his job to make sure they continued to thrive in blessed ignorance. He should be out there, figuring out a way to help moderate people regain control of their countries and reduce the threat to his homeland. That's what he should be doing.

Instead he eased to the back of the crowd, pulled out his cell phone and snapped a photo of the group. He'd seen enough, but he waited until the professor finished her spiel and he drifted away with the others. No drawing attention to himself. No standing out. He even bought a frog T-shirt from the gift store, and said a warm goodbye to his new friend from Miami and her family.

It was late afternoon and the sun went down fast in this part of the world. It was already getting dark. He started the engine of his rental, but hesitated as a small sedan pulled up in front of the ecological center. Killion took a photograph of a man getting out of the car before he headed quickly through the entrance—a definite player judging from the bulge near his left shoulder. The guy left the engine running, and if that didn't scream "quick getaway" Killion didn't know what did. Was this Audrey Lockhart's ride? Maybe the guy had her new identity tucked into the pockets of his bad boy leather jacket.

Killion dialed a number he knew by heart.

Copyright Toni Anderson. All Rights Reserved.