

Wake Up, Wanda Wiley

Andrew Diamond



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This new character, Hannah thought, was somewhat thickheaded. That didn't surprise her. Wanda had written quite a few like him. Obtuse alpha males with single-minded intent. This one pursued a line of questioning that had nothing to do with anything in her world. He didn't even take the time to notice how out of place he was—a twenty-first-century action hero in a late-nineteenth-century Victorian farmhouse, location Nowhere.

The furniture was worn, the floors creaked underfoot, and the rugs were going bare. There was no country outside the tall, curtained windows, no landscape beyond the few feet of grass and bushes visible through the ever-present fog. The ticking clocks inside the house had no hands. There was no time to tell.

The man asked again about the president, and again he called her Anna.

Now she put it together. He wasn't one of Wanda's characters. He belonged to Ed Parsippany. Wanda was merely ghostwriting. She obviously didn't know what to do with this guy or he wouldn't have wound up here.

“You’re in the wrong book,” Hannah said.

“Come again?”

“This is a romance. You’re an action character.”

“I’m sorry, lady, you’re not making any sense.”

“You’re looking for the president?”

Now he was alert. He fixed her sharply in his sights.

“What do you know about the president?”

“The president has been stolen.”

Trevor grabbed her by the arm and whispered roughly in her ear. “How do you know that? Who briefed you?”

“No one briefed me,” Hannah said, pulling her arm away. “It’s the title of a book. *The President Has Been Stolen*.”

Trevor shook his head gravely. “Fraid not. It’s classified information. How did you come by it?”

Hannah let out a sigh of frustration, then said slowly, as if talking to a child, “It’s a book. Wanda’s ghostwriting it. She got the outline from Ed Parsippany—”

“Parsippany? You know which group he’s affiliated with?”

“Random House. He just makes the outlines and then farms out the writing to other authors.”

Trevor clapped his hand on her shoulder and hissed, “Is this some kind of code you’re talking in? What’s an outline? You mean a plan, right? You’re telling me there was a plan to kidnap the president. Have you seen this plan?”

“Yes. Take your hand off me!” She pushed his hand off her shoulder and rubbed the sore spots where his fingers had dug into her flesh. “God, I never understood why all her men have to be so domineering.”

“Who’s this *she* you’re talking about?”

“Wanda.”

“Wanda,” Trevor repeated thoughtfully. He rubbed his chin as if trying to recall some long-buried bit of

information. “Doesn’t ring a bell. Is it an acronym for some terrorist organization?”

“Wanda is the author,” Hannah said.

“Of the plan to kidnap the president?”

Hannah looked him over quietly for a second. “You’re handsome enough,” she said. “But not my type.”

“Where is the president?”

“Not my type at all. I don’t like tough guys. She knows that.”

“Who? Wanda?”

“Yes.” The green silk of her satin dress rustled as she turned. Trevor couldn’t see the worry in her eyes, the furrowed brow, or the way she wrung her hands. He scanned her top to bottom, looking for the telltale bulge of a holstered pistol beneath the dress. There didn’t seem to be one, at least not from the waist up. Below the waistline, the skirt flared out wide enough to conceal a bazooka, but if she was packing anything down there, she couldn’t get to it without hiking up the dress, and that would be a loud and awkward operation.

So no gun handy, Trevor thought, but she still could have a knife. A flat-handled instrument, like those throwing knives magicians use. If she had the proper training, she could draw it and slash his throat in one smooth motion. And a woman like this, as pretty as she was in that satin dress, would obviously be trained to work at close quarters. To seduce a man, get his guard down, draw him into slashing range.

Where would she keep the knife? Down around her calves or ankles, which were covered by the dress. Of course, Trevor thought. No one wears ankle-length dresses anymore. Unless they’re trying to conceal something.

He stepped forward quickly while her back was turned, and in one smooth motion, he crouched and swept his

hands beneath the dress, sliding them up the outsides of both legs from the ankles to the midthighs.

She spun at once and slapped him, aiming for the face, but in his low crouch, the heel of her hand caught him on the ear and knocked him sideways. “Creep!”

He sprang up immediately and grabbed her wrists. Her nostrils flared and her eyes went wide with terror.

“I don’t have rape fantasies!” she pleaded.

The hard fighting glint in Trevor’s eyes softened to a look of confusion. “What?”

“I’m not Lesley Fairchild.”

Trevor shook his head as if trying to snap out of a bewildering dream. “Who?”

“Lesley,” Hannah sniffed. “From the first series. You know, the *Taken* books. *Taken by Storm*, *Taken by Force*, *Taken in the Night*. That whole erotica series that had the feminists up in arms.”

Trevor’s eyes narrowed as he began to realize he was dealing with a mentally ill person. Maybe if I dip into her delusional language, he thought...

Then, tentatively, he asked, “Was the president also”—he watched her eyes for signs of panic—“taken?”

“Originally, I was the heroine of that series,” Hannah said absently.

“What series?”

“The *Taken* books.”

OK, Trevor thought. She’s stuck in her own train of thought. Try to draw her out. “You said something about feminists?”

Hannah nodded. “They thought the series was regressive. You know, a helpless woman at the whim of a man’s desire. And liking it. That was what sent them over the edge.”

“These feminists...” Trevor cocked his head like a dog when it listens closely. “Were they in on the plan to take the president?”

“Let go of my wrists.”

“Because feminists can be pretty angry, you know.”

“That’s a stereotype. Please let go of me.”

“I need to see what’s between your boobs.”

“Excuse me?”

“You could have a knife in there. That’s some pretty substantial cleavage.”

“It’s just the dress,” Hannah said. “It smooshes my— Wait, who carries knives between their boobs?”

“Terrorists,” Trevor shot back. “Spies. Kidnappers. Feminists.”

“God, what an awful character!”

“Who?”

“You! No wonder Wanda hates the thriller genre.”

“Who’s Wanda?”

“I told you. She’s the author.”

“You’re trying to distract me,” Trevor said. “I need to inspect your cleavage.”

“For knives,” Hannah said in a mocking tone.

“That’s right.”

“And what about my butt crack? How many do you think I could sandwich in there?”

“The butt crack’s not a threat,” Trevor said. “Not in that dress. You’d have to unzip the back to get to it.”

Hannah rolled her eyes and sighed. “Oh God!”

Trevor pushed both her wrists into his left hand to free up his right. “Now listen,” he said, “if we were at base, we’d have a female officer do this.”

“You’d have a woman rough me up?”

“No one is roughing you up. This is a matter of national security. I’m just going to slide one finger down there. One

finger and—” He broke off abruptly and looked so strangely at her chest that Hannah, wondering what he saw, was forced to look down too.

“What?” she asked. “What’s wrong?”

“Your dress,” said Trevor.

“What about my dress?” She saw no stains or tears in the shiny blue fabric.

“It was green a minute ago.”

“You’re right,” Hannah said.

“And now it’s blue. How...” Trevor looked at her suspiciously, and for the first time, she saw a hint of uncertainty in his eyes. “How did you change it? I haven’t taken my eyes off you since we’ve been in this room.”

“She’s revising,” Hannah said.

“Who?”

“Wanda.”

Trevor watched her closely as if to figure out what trick she was trying to play. “What does that mean? Revising?”

“She’s rewriting the scene. Look at the window.”

Trevor glanced quickly toward the window without turning his head. This woman was a clever one, and he didn’t want to take his eyes off her for too long.

“The curtain’s closed,” he said, returning his eyes to her after the quickest of glances. “There’s nothing to see.” He was pleased with himself for having the presence of mind to avoid whatever trick she had attempted.

“The crack between the curtains,” she said. “What do you see in the crack?”

He gave another split-second glance. “Daylight,” he said with proud machismo.

“And what time was it when you came in?” she asked softly.

“I came in ten minutes ago.”

“But the world you came from had clocks and time. What time was it?” She led him gently.

“It was midnight.”

“And now it’s daylight. How does daylight happen ten minutes after midnight?”

With an unshakable confidence, he said, “We’re in Sweden.”

Hannah shook her head. “We’re not anywhere.”

“You’re either psychotic,” Trevor said, “or you’re a witch.”

A witch, Hannah thought. He’s scared of me. He’s starting to crack.

“Do you really think I’m hiding a knife between my breasts?”

Trevor suspected the question was a trick. His eyes narrowed. “I believe you want me to believe that you do not have a knife between your breasts.”

“Go ahead and check,” Hannah said.

Trevor still wasn’t sure what she was trying to pull. “Why do you want me to check?”

“So you’ll let go of my wrists. This is ridiculous.”

He thought back to his criminal psychology courses at the academy. Of course she’d try to sell the idea that checking her cleavage for a knife would benefit *him* when in fact it would benefit her. But how? Trevor began to suspect he was up against an unusually clever criminal possessed of special psychological powers. A Hannibelle Lectress, perhaps.

“Go ahead,” Hannah whispered. “Just one finger though. Slide it right on down.”

Trevor felt his throat going dry. “That’s a”—he looked from her chest to her face and back again—“that’s a lot of cleavage. Might need two fingers.”

“OK,” Hannah said as she pushed her chest out. “Don’t cut yourself.”

Trevor swallowed, a dry convulsion of the throat, then slid his index and middle fingers between her breasts, withdrawing them so quickly his hand almost hit her chin on the way out.

“Satisfied?” she asked.

“Yeah.” He let go of her wrists.

“Well I’m not,” she said as she turned toward the window. “I never am. Not with the stories Wanda writes for me.”

Trevor was more lost than ever.

“I mean, that was the least erotic touch I’ve ever felt from a man.” She opened the thick velvet curtains onto a world of fog. “That was like going to the dentist.”

“What’s out there?” Trevor asked as he approached the window.

“Nothing.”

“There has to be something.”

“A porch out front, and about six feet of walk. There’s a strip of grass on the side of the house, and an old hand-pumped well in back.”

“Where’s the rest of the world?”

“It’s gone missing,” Hannah said. “That’s what happens when you’re depressed.”

“Are you depressed?”

“To the extent that Wanda is, yes.”

“Wanda the writer?” Trevor struggled to put the pieces together, but like a good investigator, he kept his eye on her for clues. “How long have you been in this house?”

“On and off for years,” Hannah said.

“Alone? Always alone?”

She shook her head. “No. I get out now and then. Every time Wanda starts a new romance series.” She stepped

away from the window and the fog, toward the clarity of the lamplight. “She did the *Taken* series first, and I was the heroine of the first draft. But I didn’t like hardcore erotica. I didn’t like being ‘taken.’ I wanted to be seen and heard, so she wrote me out.”

She looked to see if Trevor was still listening. He was, but the attention he gave her was more clinical than personal, like a psychiatrist evaluating a new patient in the asylum, or a cop looking for cracks in the story of an unreliable informer.

“The second series was *The Spanking Billionaire*. I like a good spanking as much as anyone, but it gets old after a while. And the billionaire was crass and obsessed with power. She could tell I didn’t like him, so she wrote me out again. Raven Locksley became the heroine of that series.

“Then there was the *Kilted Brute*. The foul-mouthed Scotsman with his reeking armpits and his red-haired horse dong. The Highlands are romantic in pulp novels, but when you’re there, it’s cold and windy, and maybe I’m old-fashioned, but I don’t like men in skirts.”

She picked at her fingernails for a moment, and when she looked back up, Trevor was making an inventory of the room with his eyes, lingering on the ancient furniture and turn-of-the-century photos.

“Wanda got sick of the criticism, people saying her books were thinly veiled porn, so she cast me in a Regency. You know, early nineteenth century, Jane Austen kind of stuff. I hated it. It was so confining, having to dress like that, not being able to speak your mind. The gender roles were like straitjackets. There was no chemistry between me and Lord Gladwell, so she wrote me out again, and Eunice Birdwhistle became the lucky young miss.

“Every time she writes me out, she sends me back to this house. I sit here all alone while she swears that

someday she'll get back to me. Well I don't know anymore."

Her silk dress rustled as she sat heavily on the couch. A look of weariness and despair came over her.

"The Regencies did well," she said. "The first few, anyway. She's finishing book nine of the series. You know what that means?"

Trevor watched her closely, convinced now she was insane. "What?"

"It means I've been in this house on and off through eighteen books. Three *Takens*, three *Spanking Billionaires*, three *Kilted Brutes* with horrible body odor, and now the marrying off of every eligible lord and lady in the Lake District." She raised her moistening eyes to his. "There is no time in this world, Trevor. But there is a sense of never, a sense I'll never leave here."

If this woman was working with the people who stole the president, Trevor thought, she was performing superbly. They had obviously trained her well, but beyond her training she had some natural talent, a compelling quality that no amount of teaching could impart. Wary of her display of emotion, he kept up his guard against being seduced. It would be better, he thought, to play the part of the psychiatrist. Ask probing questions with feigned empathy to draw her out, and perhaps she'll inadvertently expose a clue that could help him find the president.

"Why do you think you're stuck here?" he asked.

Hannah shook her head and said slowly, "I'm a runaway character."

"What's that?"

"A cardinal no-no in genre fiction." She saw he didn't understand, so she elaborated. "Romance writers have to follow the rules of the genre. The woman gets her man. Or

in your case, in the thriller genre, the hero gets the bad guy.”

Trevor perked up at this. “The bad guy. Do you know who he is?”

“The president is the bad guy,” Hannah said.

“No, the president is the guy I’m trying to find. Do you know who took him?”

“He took himself,” Hannah said. “That’s the big twist in chapter sixteen.”

“That’s impossible,” Trevor scoffed. “The president can’t kidnap himself.”

“That’s why it’s such a good twist,” Hannah said. “No one sees it coming.”

“OK.” Trevor shook his head once more as if trying to shake off the impossible logic of a dream, or the spell of a beguiling witch. She’s doing it again, he told himself. She’s telling you things you want to hear so she can mislead you. Turn the subject back to her. See what she’ll reveal about herself.

“Why do think you’re stuck here?” he asked again.

“I already told you.”

“Why can’t Wanda write you out of this?”

“Because she’s depressed. She just lies around the house all day and smokes pot.”

“How do you know that?”

“Go outside and smell the fog. It reeks of marijuana.” Hannah paused for a moment, deep in thought, then added, “She’s stuck. Poor Wanda is stuck.”

“But you said she just finished the ninth book in the Regency series.”

“It’s horrible,” Hannah said. “The first three were great, then they dried up. She’s still sticking with the formula, but all the life has gone out of them. Only her diehard fans read her now.”

Watching her there beneath the lamplight, detached as she was, unselfconscious and lost in thought, Trevor began to reappraise her, not as an agent or a spy, but as a woman. She has some depth to her, he thought, though God only knows what madness lurks down there. She's pretty enough to manipulate any man, and I can't figure out what cards she's holding. She's like a poker player who might have a royal flush or might just have a handful of nothing. Or maybe she's just jokers all the way down, the kind who draws you so far into their insanity that *you* begin to feel insane.

Will she try to play the seduction angle, he wondered. That's the most obvious option, given her delusions of romance. A gentle probe might shed some light on that question. Make a suggestion and watch her face. Watch her body. Don't listen to the words. Just look at the physical reaction.

"Maybe," Trevor offered in a gentle tone. "Maybe Wanda sent me here to be your lover. Your..." he fumbled through the words. "Your soulmate."

"No," Hannah said, shaking her head numbly. If there was any tell in her body language or facial expression, the weight of her sadness and resignation covered it up. He couldn't read her.

"You're in a different book," she said. "Remember? You don't belong here."

Here we go with the books again, Trevor thought. It's like we're running in circles. How do psychologists have the patience to deal with crazy people?

"And besides," Hannah added glumly, "you don't even have a penis."

Why did those words strike such terror into his heart? What power did she have over him that she could say

something so patently ridiculous and yet make him feel compelled to check? To make sure?

The fog outside was thickening. The wisp that drifted in through the window sash smelled of marijuana, just as Hannah had said it would.

If she's right about that... Trevor thought nervously. He put his right hand on his thigh as nonchalantly as he could, and watched her to see if she noticed.

I don't care if she's in a book, he thought. And I don't care if I'm in a book, or if there is no time or if the whole world is just fog, but I'm not going to check my pecker just because some crazy woman whose dress changes color for no reason at all says I don't have one.

She watched his hand slide toward his crotch, and he watched her, pretending not to move it and seeing whether she was buying his ruse.

So what if one minute it's midnight and the next minute it's daylight, he thought. That doesn't mean I don't have a penis. People in Sweden have penises and it's light at twelve-ten a.m. on the summer solstice.

Hannah now seemed to have caught the contagion of his suspense. She watched his hand slide closer.

"I'm only doing this," said Trevor, who had broken into a sweat, "to prove that you're insane."

Hannah nodded kindly, wide-eyed with anticipation.

Finally, Trevor's hand hit the spot. He closed his eyes and let out a huge sigh of relief. "You're wrong!" he exclaimed with a delighted smile.

"Then you haven't gotten to chapter sixteen yet."

Trevor's eyes shot open. "What?"

"Chapter sixteen of *The President Has Been Stolen*."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Trevor said nervously. "What happens in chapter sixteen?"

"You'll find out."