



The
DARK
LADY

QUICKREADS

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Andrew hurried down the narrow aisle of the crowded plane. “How are we doing, Jenny?”

His pretty assistant bent over her clipboard. “All the musicians are on board,” she reported.

“Even the viola players?” Andrew interrupted her nervously.

“Yes, even the viola players,” she assured him. “They caught that last taxi, remember?”

“And the crew?” Andrew went on.

Jenny nodded. “The crew’s on board. All the husbands and wives and kids are here. The whole symphony orchestra’s here—all 152 of us! So sit down and relax.”

Andrew sank back in his seat and snapped on his seatbelt. “This tour’s a disaster already,” he muttered.

“This tour is *not* a disaster,” Jenny said consolingly.

“We barely made it out of San Francisco on time,” he groaned. “We have to be in Jerusalem in just 20 hours. I have no idea how we’re going to manage nine cities.”

“Don’t be such a worrywart. You’ve got me, remember?” Jenny chirped.

Andrew managed a little smile. “I know. But for some reason I just have a bad feeling about this tour.”

“You *always* have bad feelings,” Jenny reminded him. “And right now you’re wound up tighter than a yo-yo. Want a neck rub?”

“Please,” Andrew sighed. He leaned forward and moaned as he felt Jenny’s small, strong fingers on his neck.

Then his cell phone rang.

“*Arrrgh!*” he cried out as he pulled the phone from his pocket.

“Andrew? It’s Ken,” a voice said.

It was Andrew's roommate.

"Hey, someone left a weird phone message for you," Ken went on.

"What? What did the message say?" Andrew asked.

"The guy said that The Dark Lady belongs to him," Ken said.

"You're kidding!" Andrew wailed.

Just then a small, plump man clutching a violin case appeared in front of Andrew. Next to him stood an exasperated flight attendant.

Andrew looked up and gritted his teeth. "Phillip," he said. "I'm on the phone. Jenny can help you."

"I don't want your *assistant*. I want you," Phillip insisted.

"Can't it wait?" Andrew asked.

"No, it cannot," Phillip snapped.

"Ken," Andrew said into the phone, "I'll call you back in five minutes." Then he turned to Phillip.

"This *woman*," Phillip sputtered, "says I can't hold my violin in my lap." He glared at the flight attendant.

“If he won’t use the overhead bin,” she explained, “he can just slip it under the seat in front of him.”

“Listen to her!” Phillip hissed. “She wants me to put my violin on the *floor*. She obviously doesn’t know that this violin is The Dark Lady.”

The flight attendant looked blank.

Phillip shook his head in disgust. “It’s only one of the most famous violins in the world!” He glowered at the attendant until she shrugged and walked away.

“Can you *believe* this?” Phillip cried.

“Phillip, it’s for your own safety,” Andrew said. “If the plane crashed, it could fly out of your hands.”

“Nonsense,” Phillip said. “I’d *never* let go of The Dark Lady.”

“Then put your coat over your lap and hide it,” Andrew whispered.

“That awful woman’s going to be very suspicious,” Phillip whined.

“No. That woman is *tired* of you, Phillip. She’ll leave you alone—trust me,” Andrew

said as Phillip huffed off.

Andrew punched in Ken's number. "Can you remember *exactly* what the message was?" he asked.

Ken paused a moment. "He said, 'The Dark Lady is mine.' That's it. Then he hung up," he said. "You're taking The Dark Lady on the tour, right?"

"Unfortunately, yes," Andrew said. "Phillip insisted."

"You better keep an eye on it," Ken suggested before he hung up.

Jenny was curious. "What was that all about?" she asked.

Andrew glanced around the crowded airplane. "I don't want to talk here," he whispered.

Suddenly two slim fingers tapped Andrew on the shoulder. He looked up impatiently, but smiled when he saw Nineve, Phillip's wife.

Andrew took her hand. "You look wonderful, as always," he said, admiring her elegant dress.

“Thank you, dear,” Nineve said. “I hope Phillip wasn’t too difficult. He gets so anxious, you know.”

“No problem,” Andrew shrugged.

Nineve shook her head, smiling. “He won’t set that violin down for an instant,” she said. “If he gets up for anything, *I* have to hold it. Traveling with a baby would be easier.”

“I could hold it,” Andrew offered.

Nineve smiled warmly. “Thank you, dear. Isaac volunteered, too. But for some reason it has to be me.”

All passengers must take their seats as we prepare for takeoff, a voice announced over the P.A. system .

Nineve waved a graceful goodbye. “I’d better go,” she said.

Jenny looked at Andrew. “You have a crush on her, don’t you?”

Andrew smiled. “We’re all in love with Nineve—every guy in the whole symphony. How on earth does Phillip deserve her?”

“No justice?” Jenny suggested.

Andrew nodded. “If there was any justice,

Isaac would be the star, and Phillip would be number two.”

“In your dreams,” Jenny laughed. “Dealing with Phillip is half your job. Want a pillow? You should sleep. In a few hours we arrive in Jerusalem.”

“I *am* wiped out,” Andrew admitted as he took a pillow from Jenny.

Andrew was just drifting off when he remembered the e-mail he had downloaded just before getting on the plane. He got out his laptop and found a few messages from friends, and a lot of spam. Then he noticed one subject line: *Dark Lady*. The sender was *SmarterThanU*. He opened the message and read:

*Before you leave Jerusalem,
The Dark Lady will be mine.*



Andrew was anxious to talk to Jenny, but she was sleeping. More than an assistant, she was a friend. And he needed a friend right now. He didn't really trust anyone but Jenny.

For the next several hours, Andrew stared into space. *Who had sent him the message? What in the world was he going to do about it?*

His mind went around in circles. Finally, his eyelids drooped, and he sank into the pillow. Then he heard the announcement: the airplane would be landing in 15 minutes.

“Wake up, Jenny. We’re in Paris,” Andrew said.

“How long before we catch the next plane?” she yawned. “I want to hear about that phone call.”

“We’ll have an hour there,” he said. “Let’s take a walk in the airport and I’ll tell you about it.”

But just as the plane landed, a worried-looking trombone player hurried over. He’d left some music at home. Could he have the fax number of the hotel, so his daughter could fax him the music? Then Phillip and Nineve appeared. Phillip couldn’t bear airplane food. Could Andrew help them find something decent to eat in the airport? His talk with

Jenny would have to wait.

They looked at seven restaurants. Phillip rejected every one. Finally, Jenny grumbled, “We better find our gate or we’ll miss our connection.”

To get to their gate, they had to pass through security once more. There they joined a long, slow-moving line of people waiting to be checked.

“All this security is *insane!*” Phillip complained angrily.

People in uniform were now checking purses and jackets and bags. “Open, please,” a man said, pointing to Phillip’s violin case.

Keeping the case very close to him, Phillip slowly opened it.

People around him went silent as they saw the violin. Its finish was unusual—a brown so dark that it was nearly black. It reminded Andrew of a deep pool, so deep it went on forever.

“*Tres belle,*” murmured the man in uniform. *Very beautiful.*

Phillip snapped the case shut and