

Amy Dawson Robertson



A Rennie Vogel Intrigue

# SCAPEGOAT

# SCAPEGOAT

Amy Dawson Robertson



Copyright © 2011 by Amy Dawson Robertson

Bella Books, Inc.  
P.O. Box 10543  
Tallahassee, FL 32302

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper  
First published 2011

Editor: Katherine V. Forrest  
Cover Designer: Linda Callaghan

ISBN 13: 978-1-59493-262-5

**Other Bella Books by Amy Dawson Robertson**

*Miles to Go*

## Acknowledgments

Towers of cupcakes and endless gratitude first and foremost to Alexandra Ogilvie who has been instrumental in the creation of this book. Her patience and kindness got me over many rough spots. I could only thank her adequately if I could confer upon her an uncle who was a jazzhead.

To S-H, who always has good ideas when I'm stuck and who reminds me that I can take things too seriously. Her help in entering edits into the manuscript was invaluable though it made me realize how slow a worker I really am.

Thanks to Mary Buonanno and Ella Schiralli for their support and always useful feedback. I'm so glad to have such good friends.

Thanks to Robin Eastman Caldwell for her unflagging support, friendship, feedback and for always being willing and wanting to read for me. And for all the nights chatting in the gazebo.

Thanks to Rana Choi for her Korean language help which as she knows was awesome, behind-saving, life-transforming and did wonders for my hair.

Thanks to Amanda Kyle Williams for always giving me a boost when I felt unable to meet my deadline. I wouldn't have made it through without the Bustelo.

Thanks to Katherine V. Forrest, a great lady, a great writer and editor and a pleasure to work with.

Thanks to my Dad, my siblings and my great sprawling family of aunts and uncles and cousins – your support means the world to me.

I feel fortunate to have so much interaction with so many of my readers on Facebook, in forums, and through email. It gives me a constant sense of purpose and inspiration. I thank you all.

And thank you, finally, to my mother, Sally Loy Woodward, who couldn't be more supportive and encouraging. She makes me believe, even when I am exhausted and feeling overwhelmed, that I can do it. She's also a darn good editor. Thanks, Mom, you truly are the best.

*Once again and always for Mom,  
And for Alexandra*

## **About The Author**

Amy Dawson Robertson lives and writes in the Washington, D.C. area. Connect with her on Facebook or check out her blog and website at [amydawsonrobertson.com](http://amydawsonrobertson.com).

## PROLOGUE

*Saint Mary's Correctional Center  
St. Mary's, West Virginia*

The rain had been coming down hard for days all over the West Virginia Panhandle. Road conditions, with the flash floods and the poor visibility, had kept most people home, ordering in takeout and turning to their televisions for solace. Finally, the storm—a nor'easter, the weathermen said—had moved on, slipping over the mountain to torment the good people of Virginia, leaving only a fine drizzle behind.

West Virginians count themselves a hardy lot—especially the hunters. And a little bit of rain wasn't going to keep them from their quarry. The roads were already filling with trucks driven by men in camouflage and blaze orange. Neither was it going to keep the men of the Saint Mary's Correctional Center from their daily breath of fresh air and the great outdoors of the prison yard. They filed outside one by one in their thick hooded

gray prison-issue plastic raincoats—useless against the cold but serviceable for a bit of water falling from the sky. Once in the yard the men assembled along the usual racial and gang lines. But basketball was colorblind and anyone who had decent moves could play alongside a man who might otherwise spit in his face. Or worse.

Those who weren't playing were either waiting to join the game or watching. And the rest milled about smoking cigarettes, talking trash and making deals.

Two white inmates stood about twenty paces from the action going on around them—close enough to the play on the court that they wouldn't draw the attention of the guards but secluded enough that they could talk without being overheard.

The two men were about the same height and build except that one was slimmer than the other. And they had such similar features that the other convicts called them The Twins. To many of the black and Latino inmates, the two white boys might as well have been identical, except that one was blond and one was dark. They were an unlikely pair. But prison can make for strange bedfellows and the two men—a skinhead and a rich boy who'd gotten himself into trouble—had struck up a kind of friendship.

They were together so much—and on their own—that some thought a prison romance had developed between them. Sex, of course, occurred between men in prison. But it was a kind of sex that almost never entered the realm of emotion and was required to fit neatly into the established prison hierarchy. Those who had power could demand it. And those who had none found it necessary to offer themselves up. Or suffer the consequences. Any liaison entered into on the basis of equality—and that happened only very rarely—was met with derision and violence. The man who had first uttered the suggestion that the skinhead and the rich boy were more than just friends was beaten so badly by the skinhead's crew that no one ever mentioned it aloud again.

It wasn't true anyway. The skinhead simply liked to talk to the rich boy. The rich boy listened to him, to his theories about the Zionist conspiracy and the coming New World Order. How the government of the United States had become a failed experiment. The skinhead thought he was getting through to

him, converting him as he'd done with so many young men back home in Blanding, Utah.

He had big plans for when he got out of prison. And it turned out the rich boy had a few of his own and would be released just a week before him. The rich boy also said he had a car waiting for him on the outside. That would work out just fine.

“Yo! C.K., heads up!”

The skinhead and the rich boy both turned their heads at the same time to see a football spiraling toward them. The rich boy jumped and snagged the ball, tossing it back to Cruz, a short pockmarked El Salvadoran who'd slit the throat of a convenience store clerk during a botched robbery.

*C.K.*

Cainkiller.

Though the name had only belonged to one of the two white inmates when they entered the prison system, they had both come to identify with it.

The skinhead shoved his hands deeper into his pockets. It was damn cold and he'd have been just as happy to give up his rec time to stay warm and dry in his cell. But the delivery was today. He and the rich boy pretended to watch the game—the Kings were stomping the Gaylords—but the muscles along his back twitched like a horse at the gate, waiting.

The prison, past the checkpoints and the parking lots, was surrounded by miles and miles of woods—some parkland, some private. Hunters with a valid license were active this time of year. With overpopulation, they were allowed two bucks and a doe per season.

One hunter, hunkered down on his belly in the woods, crawled inch by inch over the wet ground till he reached a spot fifteen paces from the perimeter of the woods, the closest point he could get to the prison without drawing the notice of the guards and still have a clear shot. But today he wasn't carrying his .30-06. Feeling the damp through his thick camo raincoat, he held in his hands a potato rifle. And it was that potato gun

that would fire the package over the concertina wire and into the yard. At the exact time.

The skinhead looked at his watch.

“Okay. Now.”

The rich boy nodded once and strolled over to the basketball court, lighting a cigarette as he went. He walked without a care into the midst of the game. Chaos quickly erupted with ricocheting bodies and shouts of, “What the fuck you doing? Get off the fucking court!” He didn’t hear the thunk of the package landing in the mud—and neither did the guards. He fell, took a few sharp kicks to the ribs and one bastard’s boot caught the corner of his ear. He felt his body being lifted and tossed and then he landed with a wet *thwack* in the mud far enough off the court for the game to continue. He wiped the mud from his eyes and turned his gaze to the skinhead.

The skinhead was smiling and in the pocket of his raincoat was a bulge just larger than a pack of cigarettes.

## CHAPTER ONE

*Istanbul, Turkey*

Rennie Vogel stepped into the courtyard closing the door behind her. She checked her watch before pausing to take in the moon, low and perfectly full, silhouetting the dramatic spire of the former Beyoglu hospital against the sky, clear tonight. The courtyard had come with the apartment and was double its size. The same pattern of green, white and coral red tiled her living space and extended into the courtyard and up six steps to a narrow rise lined with lush potted plants. A high stuccoed wall enclosed the courtyard and tonight, like most nights, a black cat sat on the wall eerily outlined against the backdrop of the city. She turned away from the flash of the cat's eyes to fit her key into the iron gate that led up a short flight of steps where she threw the bolt on the heavy door to the street.

It was just a few minutes to midnight and though the little

store just paces around the corner of her cobbled street was usually open till then, her American habits, accustomed to opening and closing times written in stone, nagged at her. She ran through logical scenarios in her mind in the thirty seconds it took her to round the corner. They should be open till midnight, she told herself. They usually are. But sometimes they close up early. She had been unable to discern any predictable pattern. The store's hours didn't seem to be aligned with the weather or the tourists carousing more than usual. Sometimes she thought she liked living in a world where the clocks ran more naturally, more in tune with human whim rather than a constantly thrumming capitalist machine. But not when she was thirsty.

A beam of light breaking the shadow of the Galata Tower told her she'd gotten lucky tonight and she hurried down the steps. Shops so tiny didn't exist at home and she found the intimacy of being with not one, but usually two, clerks in a store no larger than a walk-in closet disconcerting.

"Marlboro Light and an Efes," she said, holding up a finger.

American cigarettes were everywhere in Istanbul. American beer was not. But Rennie wasn't choosy and had grown to like the one lager to be had all over Turkey.

Back in the courtyard, Rennie sat with her feet up on the low brick wall, sipping her beer and taking in the skyline. When she could rouse herself to it, she was still awed by living in a foreign city. And Istanbul seemed to embody the foreign with its minarets and the keening call to prayer waking her every morning. She'd balked at the Istanbul assignment at first, suspecting it was the opening chime to the death knell of her time with the FBI. But then she found the foreignness suited her. She *wanted* to feel alienated.

Rennie stifled a yawn and watched as the ever-present courtyard cat slinked away as he always eventually did when she invaded his territory. She heard a window open above her and saw a man lean out, take a final drag on a cigarette and drop it to the courtyard below. She'd almost taken the sixth floor flat for its balcony and the sight of the Golden Horn in the distance. But the courtyard sold her, hemmed in on three sides by tall buildings where Turks hung out their hand-woven rugs to air on

their windowsills. Rennie didn't like feeling enclosed, without an escape route, but she'd developed a habit of not shunning things she found unpleasant. Punishing herself seemed logical somehow.

*And deserved.*

Indeed, her guilt felt like an entity that had taken up residence in her body. An unexcisable and malevolent twin. She shook her head, wishing she could just stop thinking. She drained her beer and went into the studio to try, once again, to sleep.

Twenty hours later, Rennie sat at her desk in the FBI Legal Attaché Office in Istinye, tapping her heel against the cheap industrial carpet, staring, her eyes unfocused, at the cryptic Turkish document before her. It was eight o'clock and she would leave soon, walking slowly down the street to a pub frequented by Eastern Europeans. She wouldn't see anyone she knew there and would sit in a quiet corner drinking a much needed beer and pretending to read.

Her body had gone soft. She hadn't felt strong for a long time. Every morning she'd wake, thinking, *This is a new day*. But by evening she'd be filled with longing for the moment when the seal of the fridge door pulled away from the chill metal and she'd reach for the cool neck of the bottle, the opener at the ready. It was as if the woman she had been, the woman who felt she only had to reach out and could firmly grasp whatever she wanted, was always just ahead of her, out of sight, slipping around the corner into the shadows. She'd intend to get some exercise but the desire to calm her mind as she'd done since Tajikistan would be too strong. She'd done nothing more in the past six months than occasionally walk up the steep hill to her Beyoglu apartment after a stroll across the Galata Bridge to the Asia side of the city. Sometimes, she went to the baths. Stared at the copper ceiling, feeling her shoulder bones, her hips against the octagonal marble slab as she waited to be called and scrubbed perfunctorily by a robust Turkish woman. Afterward, she'd eat too many mezes and a fish and go home. It was strangely comforting somehow, cloaking herself in a layer of fat.

After Tajikistan, CT3—the special forces team she'd worked so hard to get onto—had been dissolved, supposedly temporarily, while the investigation took place. She was placed on leave with pay, enduring round after round of humiliation, failing to adequately respond to questions that were unanswerable unless the government admitted its role. And they were never going to do that.

In the midst of it all were the funerals.

*Baldwin. Goode. Levin. Smythe.*

Awkward conversations. Family members broken by grief.

The funerals had done nothing to heal the wounds from the death of her team. At each ceremony, family members had eyed her with confusion or sympathy or outright hostility. Only Smythe's wife—Smythe, whom she'd clashed with time and again—had approached her, irony of ironies, gripping her hand and saying the expected, "Thank you for coming. I know this is hard for you, too, and I want you to know I don't blame you at all."

And it was there that she finally cried. Not at Baldwin's funeral, her friend, whom she ached for, but at Smythe's. Rennie had gripped Fiona Smythe's hand so tightly. And then the woman had guided Rennie's head to her shoulder where she heaved once, and cried as silently as she could. For everything that had happened. And for Fiona Smythe too, who stroked her back and cooed in her ear, so kind and never to know what a bastard her husband was. When Rennie had finally lifted her face, she stared at the woman, certain an expression approximate to madness had twisted her features. She wanted to say, *Why don't you blame me too?*

*Baldwin. Goode. Levin. Smythe.*

Every day she recited their names like an incantation, only her lips moving. But on the bad days she could hear the words like a banshee scream in her head.

Where had her strength gone? Rennie had retreated into herself further than she ever imagined she could. Accepted whatever accusations were made in the interrogations. Fully expecting to be fired, she waited for it, patiently, longing to hear the words and go home and sleep. But they never came. She was

to attend language classes, pack her bags and settle into a desk job—research and analysis—in the Istanbul office. Safely away from all that had taken place in those dark woods, sentenced to smother under reams of paper.

Rennie forced her leg to stop its incessant jumping. She shut down her computer. Locked her files in the drawer. She spoke to no one on her way out. The other agents and the foreign service staff had learned to keep their distance. They knew she was tainted and didn't want to be infected by whatever had tanked her career.

Outside the day was still hot and the city was busy and cosmopolitan. It almost buoyed her mood. This March was unseasonably warm in Istanbul and it only made her feel disjointed, the seasons all askew. She longed for the normalcy of a rainy spring in Washington—the coming of the cherry blossoms and the tourists. She stopped at a street vendor and bought a wrap—spiced meat and roasted eggplant—before she headed to the bar. She didn't want to get too drunk. Just a little.

Thoughts of Hannah Marcus crept into her brain. She couldn't go there. To the place where she imagined what might have been possible. it was too much. Too much.

Reaching her bar, she thought, I'll just walk by, go home, read a book, get a good night's rest. She stood before the door, a woman in a daze.

*You should go for a run.*

Every day she told herself she would run. Every day. But the lure of the bar and its easy comfort was too strong.

*Or at least just go home.*

But her apartment was too empty. And if she was there and coherent, she would think. And she must not think.

Rennie tried to remember who she was before the FBI, before she began running around that old track in college. But her mind wouldn't stretch back that far. She only remembered that first moment of clarity as she tore up her favorite trail on Old Rag Mountain, when she realized she could become whoever she wanted to be. And it had seemed like everything that came after that—getting into the FBI, being chosen for CT3—had only reinforced her unflinching sense that she could achieve whatever

she set her mind to.

A finger of pain trailed along her throat.

*You need a drink.*

Rennie pushed through the heavy door, trading the thrum of the hot, muggy street for the clamor of the airless bar. The tension in her throat was almost unbearable. But release was close.

The light in the bar was entirely artificial. She could be anywhere except for the incomprehensible chatter in the background. Mainly Bulgarians, with a sprinkling of Czechs and Romanians, maybe even a Pole or two. It didn't matter. She couldn't understand them and they had no interest in her and that was what she wanted. She moved to her table in the back, waving to the bartender as she passed. She sat and found she was in a curious mood. Something new had crawled into her brain. Something that felt like action. She set her jaw against it, didn't have the energy for it. What was the point anyway?

There was a pay phone at the back of the bar. Her eyes kept returning to it. Before she could change her mind, she moved toward it pulling the calling card from her pocket—the one with no connection to her government. Several weeks before she left for Turkey she had stopped by a colleague's office, finding him absent and the database she needed open on his desktop. She quick-searched Hannah's name, memorized her number and performed her colleague's original search. Sometimes at night, when she tossed and turned in bed, she would visualize punching those numbers into a dial pad. It never once helped her to sleep. The numbers on the pay phone were sticky and Rennie had to try twice before reaching a dial tone. The 202 exchange—the D.C. area code—seemed a million miles away.

*What if she answers? What could you possibly say? Without ruining your career?*

But her career had felt over for a long time. If it wasn't, she wouldn't be where she was. She couldn't think. Was it a crime? Calling Hannah Marcus. When she'd been explicitly instructed to have no contact with her. She was about to hang up when Hannah's machine picked up.

*Good. Yes. Just listen to the message and hang up. Just hear her*

*voice.*

The message was brief and to the point and Rennie could hardly take it in.

*Oh, Hannah.*

Just as the beep sounded, she heard Andrei calling to her from the bar.

“Vogel, you’re up.” Her beer sat frothing on the bar, scarred from years of abuse.

“I’ll be right there.”

Rennie replaced the receiver. It felt like the end, a conclusion to something she shouldn’t have been thinking about anyway.

The walk from the phone to the bar seemed interminable. She heard Hannah’s voice in her mind and the memory of their one night together rushed back, achingly vivid. She thought, What could it possibly matter? But somehow it did.

The bar was busy. It was Friday night. She drank half the pint in the first gulp, easing the tension in her throat.

Andrei, unshaven and handsome and always good-natured, stood smiling at her. Rennie was an unusual presence in the bar.

“Our friendly American,” he said.

Rennie smiled back and lifted her glass.

“Cheers to that.”