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Title: Through A Glass, Darkly
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Synopsis: As Lee and Amanda’s first wedding anniversary approaches, they struggle to come to terms with the past as sinister forces in the present threaten to destroy what they have built. Third segment to story that began in “With Or Without You” and continued in “If Looks Could Kill”

Scarecrow and Mrs. King

Through A Glass, Darkly

*“When I was a child, I spake as a child,
I understood as a child, I thought as a child:
but when I became a man, I put away childish things.
Now, we see through a glass, darkly;
but then, face to face: now I know in part,
but then I shall know even as I am known.*

I Corinthians, 13,11-12

CHAPTER ONE

“...and that sums up our latest intelligence reports on conditions in the Middle East.” Lee Stetson glanced quickly at his watch before continuing. Almost 9:45, he thought ruefully. His meeting was already running behind schedule. That seemed to be par for the course around here lately. He didn’t know why he’d expected today to be any different.

“That brings us to the main item on the agenda...Desmond and King are going to bring us up to date on the security for the upcoming anti-terrorism conference.” He nodded to Francine, who quickly took his place at the podium.

“As you know,” Francine began professionally, “Mrs. King and I are coordinating security for next week’s conference, which is scheduled to begin on Monday afternoon and conclude at noon on Wednesday. In addition to the standard precautions, we’ve initiated the following security measures...”

Lee leaned comfortably against the wall as he absently listened to Francine run down the extra precautions they’d discussed yesterday. He tried to focus on the meeting, but his thoughts kept drifting to his wife sitting attentively at the polished conference table. Their hectic schedules had seemed even busier than usual these past few weeks due to this upcoming conference. He silently cursed whoever it was who had scheduled the symposium for the week before their anniversary. It was definitely one more case of bad timing. As if they didn’t already have enough to do getting ready for their second wedding ceremony on February 13th.

He turned his attention back to Amanda. It seemed like an eternity since they’d been able to be alone together, he thought wistfully. But he had to admit she’d done a wonderful job with this project. She’d thrown herself into it with her usual enthusiasm and, if there had been little time left over for him these past few weeks, he could at least understand. He knew how important this assignment was to her.

Sometimes he was amazed at how she managed to juggle everything, her career, her kids, not to mention their private time together. Although, the latter seemed to have fallen by the wayside lately. Actually, he sometimes thought they’d had more time for each other before they’d gone public with their marriage. All those special weekends, just the two of them...he sighed, remembering. At least they had their second honeymoon to look forward to next week. Seven days to lie around in the sun, with no work or family problems to get in their way.

He looked over at Amanda again. Even though they had both had a grueling week, she was still able to sit in this meeting looking calm and collected. No, it was more than that...she looked positively beautiful in that gray silk suit, her dark hair pulled back off her face with a clip. He caught her eye and smiled, a world of longing conveyed in his look.

She met his gaze, then quickly looked down, pretending to check something in the paperwork spread out before her on the table. She could feel herself blushing in response to his look. Her head buried in the reports, she sneaked a quick peek at her co-workers. The other agents assembled in the conference room seemed oblivious to the exchange, she noted with relief. They

all appeared to be absorbed in whatever it was Francine was saying at the moment.

Amanda found it difficult to concentrate this morning with her special plans for the evening running rampant in her head. Work and wedding preparations may have left them without any quality time together these last few weeks, but she definitely intended to remedy that tonight. She and Lee both needed to relax after the frenetic schedule they'd been forced to work since mid-January.

Despite the added burden, she was secretly pleased that she and Francine had been entrusted with the security detail for the anti-terrorism conference. She knew it was a fairly routine assignment for a field agent, but to her it represented an important milestone in her business relationship with Lee. When he had accepted the new position of Chief of Field Operations last November, the stress of their new work dynamic had caused quite a few problems at home and at the Agency. But since they had reached their new understanding on Christmas Eve, Lee had been true to his word about no longer keeping her tied to a desk. The whole incident with the Chameleon, while hitting frighteningly close to home, had at least produced this one positive effect. It had been a long time in coming, but Lee finally appeared to be working through his obsessive concern for her.

Smiling to herself as she flipped through the file, she risked one more brief look at her husband. He was still leaning nonchalantly against the wall, trying to hide his smile, apparently lost in some pleasant thoughts of his own. He certainly looked great in his new jacket, she thought with a grin, suddenly wishing that the day was ending instead of just beginning.

She forced her attention back to Francine, who appeared to be calling her name. Looking up, she saw that her partner had finished her report and was staring at her with a raised eyebrow. "Do you have anything you want to add?"

"No," Amanda replied, quickly covering her inattention by shuffling the papers in front of her. "Ms. Desmond I and will be in attendance at the convention center and hotel for the length of the conference to troubleshoot any problems might arise. And that pretty much covers it."

"Okay, that's it for this week," Lee said, officially closing the meeting. He tried unsuccessfully to stifle the smirk that appeared in response to Amanda's flustered expression. She was normally the picture of professionalism in staff conferences and it took a lot to ruffle her equanimity. Her thoughts must be as happily distracted this morning as his own, he thought, his grin widening. "We'll meet on Monday morning to finalize the assignments."

He called to her as she left the room. “Mrs. King, could I see you for a minute?”

“Yes?” she responded, smiling slightly at the form of address Lee had chosen. Although she had decided to retain the name ‘King’ for professional use, it seemed funny to hear her husband refer to her that way.

He waited until the rest of the staff had filed out of the room before speaking. “You seem to be having a little trouble concentrating this morning,” he teased. “Anything I can help you with?”

“I think you’ve already done enough, thank you. If I couldn’t pay attention, it was your fault,” she laughed good-naturedly. “Do you think in the future you could keep your eyes to yourself while we’re in a staff meeting?”

“I don’t know, that’s asking a lot when you sit there looking like that.”

“Like what? You’re in pretty bad shape, Stetson, it you think this suit is provocative.”

“The way I’m feeling this morning, you’d look provocative wearing a sack,” he said with a grin. He quickly glanced around and lowered his voice. “How long has it been, anyway? I’m starting to feel like our sex life is just a figment of my imagination.”

“It hasn’t been that long,” Amanda answered softly, gathering her papers hurriedly. “Just...”

“Two weeks...”

“One day...”

“Eleven hours...”

“And about ten minutes,” she added with a smile. “But then, who’s counting?”

“Not me,” Lee replied, taking the file and walking with her to the door.

“Me, neither,” she intoned with an emphatic shake of her head.

Holding the door open with a flourish, he quickly followed her into the bullpen. “Come on, I’ll walk you back to the Q-Bureau. I’m on my way out anyway.”

They quickly fell into step together as they headed to the elevator that led to the outside world. “What’s on your agenda for today?” Amanda asked as they began their ascent.

“Not too much. I’ve got a meeting with Billy and Holstein at the White House this morning,” he added casually.

“And here I was thinking you’d worn the new jacket for my benefit.” Amanda smiled, pausing to straighten his tie. “How long will your meeting take?”

“It should be finished by early afternoon. Why?”

“I was thinking that if I can get my paperwork out of the way, maybe we could get out of here a little early today?”

The elevator doors opened and they both acknowledged Mrs. Marston with a nod as they climbed the circular staircase that led to the upstairs offices. “If you can pry yourself away from your desk, I thought we might get a head start on our weekend,” she continued with a grin.

“I think that might be arranged,” he answered happily. They entered the Q-Bureau, pleased to find that Francine had not yet returned to the office. Quickly checking the vault to ensure that it, too, was empty, Lee wasted no time closing his arms around his wife and kissing her.

“Now this is just like old times,” she said with a sigh, returning his kiss.

“I know. Just one of the things I miss about this office. Besides the view.”

“It is nice to be able to look outside.”

“I wasn’t referring to the window,” he said, kissing her again. “I missed you this morning.”

“Me, too. I hate those early meetings...then we can’t say good morning properly.”

“Yeah,” he grinned, kissing her again. “So tell me, Mrs. Stetson, what exactly did you have in mind for tonight?”

“Well, Mother is leaving this afternoon for her ‘Weekend Aviator’ Convention,” she began with a smile. “And Philip is spending the weekend with his friend Tommy. In fact, he’s going to his house directly from school.”

“That leaves Jamie...”

“Who’s going on that Father/Son thing with the Junior Trailblazers. You remember, where they spend the weekend living off the land, eating roots and berries, and negotiating the survival course - just the guys. I think it’s the Junior Trailblazer’s version of male bonding. It’s the last level they have to pass before they make it to raccoon.”

“Sounds exciting.” Lee rolled his eyes.

“Well, it is to Jamie. He’s been talking about nothing else for weeks. Where have you been?”

“Ever since I passed my survival skills certification as a freshman agent, I try to tune out anything that has the word wilderness in it,” he said with a shudder. “It’s got something to do with rain, a swamp filled with leeches, and a nasty case of poison ivy.” Lee shook his head, closing his eyes to blot out the image.

“...I don’t want to talk about it...I don’t want to hear about it,” they both said in unison.

Amanda laughed. “Well, Jamie’s thrilled about the trip. There’s a trophy for the Father/Son team that acquires the most points for the weekend. Philip finished in third place the year he took the course.”

“I’m impressed.”

“I can tell,” she said, playfully slapping him on the arm. “Anyway, we should be grateful. Joe’s picking him up at four this afternoon and we’ll have the entire house to ourselves for the weekend.”

“God bless the Junior Trailblazers,” Lee intoned fervently. Kissing her one more time, he headed for the door. “Got to go. I’ll be back here by 3:30 and then we can get leave.”

“It’s a date.”

He walked briskly through the door with a spring in his step, barely avoiding a collision with Francine. “Hello, Francine and goodbye, Francine,” he smiled, winking at Amanda as he left.

“There goes a man in a good mood,” Francine smirked as she sat down at her desk. “Special plans for the weekend?”

Amanda shrugged noncommittally, barely able to contain her own grin as she, too, headed for her desk. “Could be. What about you? You and Jonathan up to anything special?”

“He’s taking me to L’Ornate tonight.”

“Not bad...he must have something special on his mind.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” Francine said with a sigh, switching on her computer to signal that the conversation was at a close.

Amanda looked over at her partner. She could tell that something was bothering her. During the past six weeks, she and Francine had developed an easy-going working relationship. Learning to work with a new partner hadn’t been easy, for either one of them. But Amanda felt the tension that had marred the first few months of their partnership gradually being replaced by a budding friendship based on trust and mutual respect. Of course, Lee hadn’t made the adjustment any easier by handing them the ‘soft’ assignments. But since she and Lee had come to an understanding about that at Christmas, working with Francine had been a lot easier. They had even seen Francine and Jonathan socially on a few occasions.

From the few times they’d been out in a group, Amanda could tell that Jonathan was serious about his relationship with Francine. But it was equally obvious that Francine was still wrestling with her deep-seated fear of being hurt. Amanda wished that she could say something to help her, but she knew that Francine was in no mood to pay attention to anything she might have to say. Or anyone else, for that matter. She had a suspicion that Francine wasn’t ready to accept yet just how serious Jonathan really was about her.

She smiled, remembering Lee’s struggle with his feelings. She knew from experience that she couldn’t really help her partner with her inner battle. All she could do was be ready to listen when and if Francine wanted to talk. Amanda hoped for her partner’s sake that she would manage to come to terms with this

issue sooner rather than later. Life was too short to let fear deter you from really living.

She was thankful that she and Lee had finally reached that conclusion. Almost one year ago, they were busy preparing for their 'mystery ceremony' as Lee jokingly referred to their elopement. Looking back, they both should have realized how impossible it would be to make that work. Lee had once compared their marriage to a fireman's schedule, 'two days on and four days off'. He was only kidding at the time, but that description had really been pretty close to the truth. Their relationship had been more like a clandestine love affair than a real marriage.

Amanda couldn't help but smile at the memory. At first it had been exciting, sneaking around, plotting to find ways to be alone. And when they were together, it had been incredibly intense, as if they were adrift in a private world that only the two of them shared. It was so easy to shut out everything else. There were no responsibilities, no children or mortgage payments to worry about, and they were never too tired or too stressed to make love.

But despite the perks, all the secrecy had a down side, too. At the end of their weekends, Amanda always found herself missing Lee more than ever as she struggled to adjust to their separation all over again. Time and time again, she would reach out for him at night only to feel the coldness of the empty space in her in bed. It wasn't only their physical relationship that she missed, but the simple intimacy of being together, of sharing her day-to-day problems with the man she loved. She knew that Lee had felt the same way, too.

And the situation at the Agency hadn't helped things, either. Even though she had been prepared to have a part-time husband, she had believed she would still have a full-time partner at work. But after the shooting on their honeymoon in California, Lee had been coddling her professionally, reluctant to expose her to anything even remotely dangerous. It was as if their whole relationship had suddenly turned inside-out.

Now that they had put an end to all the half-truths and evasions, though, she felt closer to her husband than ever. The open acknowledgement of their relationship had forged a new bond between them. Of course, it had been won at the expense of those erotic clandestine weekends, Amanda thought with a sigh. But with any luck, the next two days should prove to be just as wonderful as she remembered.

She turned her attention to the mountain of work piled in front of her. Thoughts like these wouldn't make the papers disappear. She only had a few

hours to wade through this mess before Lee returned from his meeting. Smiling, she reached for the first file.

* * * * *

“It sounds like everything is in place for the conference,” Billy Melrose said as he and Lee waited for their order at the hot dog stand.

Lee nodded in agreement. “Amanda and Francine have done a pretty thorough job with security.” As the boy brought their order, he reached into his pocket for some cash.

Billy caught his arm. “No, this one’s on me. After all, you’re the one with the new house and the big mortgage.” He grinned as he handed over a five dollar bill.

“Gee, thanks Billy. That’s a big help.”

Billy laughed again as they sat down. “This is what I miss when I’m in New York. There’s nothing better than a chili dog from Mickey’s.”

“Does Jeannie know you’re eating that?” Lee asked with a laugh.

“No. And remember Scarecrow, on a need to know basis, this is something she doesn’t need to know.”

“Oh, you can trust me, Billy. I carry an Alpha green 14 security clearance these days.”

Billy chuckled as they sat down on one of the outdoor tables. He quickly scanned the area, suddenly turning serious. “So, Scarecrow, what was so important that we had to meet here in the freezing cold?”

“The final autopsy report on the Chameleon’s partner finally came through.”

“It’s about time. What does it say?”

“No foul play - suicide. There’s the usual medical mumbo-jumbo, but the short version is that it’s some kind of fast-acting poison. Consistent with methods the Chameleon had used in previous hits. It was concealed in a hollowed out tube of her drop earring.”

“Then the evidence backs up what Holstein said in his statement.”

Lee looked away. “Maybe. I admit, on the surface, everything appears legitimate.”

“But?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s nothing.”

Billy smiled. “I’ve seen that look before, Scarecrow. What’s really bothering you about all this?”

“The convenience of it all. There’s the timing, for one - there wasn’t one senior agent in the building. Rookies were covering every shift.”

“It was right before the holiday. And our teams were covering other events in D.C. that night.”

“With you in New York, the debriefing was my responsibility.”

“Your superior ordered you to go home,” Billy countered. “You’d broken up the hit and taken out the assassin. Not to mention that you’d almost been killed yourself earlier that night.”

Lee shrugged, as Billy continued. “Holstein was the target – he had a vested interest in the debriefing.”

“Yeah, maybe. And maybe he had as much interest in seeing that she wasn’t debriefed.”

Billy looked at him closely. “Do you have evidence to back that statement up?”

Lee shook his head. “Nothing but a gut feeling.”

“Unfortunately, gut feelings don’t hold much water with internal affairs.”

“I know. But everything that happened...Billy, a contract is supposed to be just that – a contract. It’s business. This whole thing seemed very personal. I mean he dragged my private life into the middle of a hit. It bothers me.”

“You know the autopsy findings will officially close this Agency’s investigation.”

“I know,” Lee nodded in agreement. “But still...Billy, I want to look into this...unofficially for now.”

Billy looked at him thoughtfully. “You want to assign a covert team? As head of Field Ops that’s your prerogative.”

“No...at least not yet. There isn’t enough to go on. I want to poke around myself first. Don’t worry,” he added as he caught Billy’s expression. “I have no intention of charging off on my own again. That’s one lesson I’ve finally learned. You see, I’m even discussing this with you,” he grinned.

“I don’t want you in over your head, Scarecrow,” Billy said, his look stating in no uncertain terms that he was not amused.

“Believe me, after what happened with Dr. Smyth’s little party, I have no intention of making this a one-man operation,” he rejoined with a laugh. “Besides, Amanda would kill me. And believe me, I’m not looking for that kind of trouble.”

Billy smiled, shaking his head. “I have a feeling I’m going to regret this, but all right, you have my okay to look into it... quietly. But we keep this between the two of us for now.”

“Agreed.” Lee smiled again as he took a bite of his food. “You’re right, Billy. This is the best chilidog in D. C.”

“I think I’ve just lost my appetite,” Billy groaned, pushing his plate away.

CHAPTER TWO

“...so I think Francine and I have everything under control,” Amanda announced over her shoulder as she walked through the back door of their Rockville, Maryland home.

“I’m sure you do,” Lee stated confidently, kicking the door closed with his foot. His arms were laden with groceries, which he quickly deposited on the kitchen counter.

“What have you got in here?” he complained in mock annoyance. “I thought you said you just wanted to pick up a few things.”

“No one can just ‘pick up a few things’ at the supermarket,” she smiled, kissing him lightly. “Besides, I have a very special dinner in mind.” She pulled something out of the bag, peeling off the wrapper to reveal a bottle of Lee’s favorite Beaujolais.

Lee eyed the bottle appreciatively. “I definitely approve. But I can’t believe you found that at the grocery store.”

“No, they don’t carry it,” Amanda laughed. “I just happened to pick this up a few days ago. I was saving it for a surprise.”

“It’s starting to look like you’ve been planning this dinner for a while, Mrs. Stetson.”

“Try all week.”

He smiled and pulled her closer. “I’ve got a few plans of my own, too. Would you like a preview?”

She returned his look, running her hands up the front of his coat. “Depends on what you had in mind.”

He raised his eyebrows, leaning in to kiss her.

“I’m sorry,” Dotty said as she unexpectedly entered the room. “I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“Mother,” Amanda said in surprise, patting Lee on the chest as she untangled herself from his embrace. “I didn’t realize you were still home. I thought you had your Weekend Aviator thing.”

“Oh, I do,” she assured her quickly. “In fact, I think Captain Curt just pulled into the driveway. But I didn’t want to leave until you got home.” She paused for a minute. “Jamie’s upstairs.”

Amanda glanced at her watch. “It’s almost 4:30. Joe’s running late?”

“No,” Dotty sighed. “Joe called a little while ago. He canceled on Jamie. He has to be in court first thing Monday morning and he said he needs the weekend to prepare.”

Amanda glanced over at Lee. “Was Jamie very upset?”

“He was devastated. That nice Mr. Sanders...that’s his friend John’s father...”

“I know who Mr. Sanders is, Mother.”

“Well, Mr. Sanders said he could go with them, but Jamie didn’t want to. He didn’t want to be the only one there without his dad. Something about a trophy and Joe taking Philip a few years ago...”

“He was really looking forward to this,” Amanda said sadly. “That’s all he’s been talking about all week.”

“I know.” Dotty glanced at the wine and groceries spread out on the kitchen counter. “Amanda, I don’t have to go to this conference this weekend. I can tell Captain Curt that we’ll do it another time. I’ll do something special with Jamie.”

“No, Mother, you’ve been looking forward to this and Captain Curt’s waiting in the car. Go on. We’ll deal with this.”

“You’re sure? Because it’s no trouble...”

Lee nodded. “Go on, Dotty, have a good time.”

Dotty looked from one to the other. “Okay. I left my number by the phone if you need me.”

“Just enjoy yourself, Mother,” Amanda called to Dotty’s retreating form. She turned to Lee with a sigh. “I’d better go up and see if Jamie’s okay.”

Lee nodded. “Go ahead. I’ll put this stuff away.”

“Okay.” Amanda hesitated, turning to give him a hug. “I’m sorry about...”

“It’s all right. Go on and talk to Jamie,” Lee reassured her.

* * * * *

Amanda stopped outside Jamie’s door, pausing to knock. There was a time when she would walk in and out of the boys’ rooms freely, she thought wistfully, but not any more. One of the many things that had changed as they grew older. It seemed like only yesterday that they were small and she was

trying to find the words to explain to them why their father was away from home so much. How did that old saying go? 'The more things change, the more they stay the same'. Even after all this time, here she was, still making excuses for Joe. She suddenly felt very tired as she knocked again, this time entering the room without waiting for a reply.

Jamie was lying on the bed, his face buried in a book. Amanda hesitated for a fraction of a second before sitting down beside him and patting him on the arm. "I'm sorry about your weekend. Your grandmother told me what happened."

Jamie shrugged, seemingly absorbed in his reading.

Amanda took a deep breath and tried again. "I'm sure your Dad's just as disappointed as you are."

"I guess."

Amanda was a little startled by the hostility in his voice. He must be even more upset than she'd first imagined. "I know John and his dad would be glad to have you go with them," she said hopefully, trying to find a way to salvage the weekend for her son.

"It doesn't really matter." Jamie stared pointedly at his book, refusing to meet Amanda's eye.

Amanda sighed at his response. "Jamie, I know how much you've been looking forward to this."

"It's just a stupid campout."

She reached out to take his hand. "If you went with John and his dad, you might have a good time. You've done stuff with them before."

"I don't want to go with them," Jamie said, glaring back at his mother as he pulled his hand away. "Anyway, you just want me out of the house this weekend so I won't be in the way."

Amanda looked at him suspiciously. "That's not true. Why on earth would you think that?"

He shrugged noncommittally. "I just do. I won't bother you. I'll stay in my room."

“Jamie, you’re my son and I love you. You’re never in my way. I only suggested that you go with the Sanders’ because I knew how much you were counting on this weekend. “Amanda shook her head sadly. “No one’s forcing you to go if you don’t want to.”

“It’s too late - they left already. I’ve got to read my this for school, anyway.” He turned his face away, burying it again in his book.

Amanda looked at Jamie’s sullen expression, deciding to let the matter drop for now. “Okay, if that’s how you feel. But if you change your mind, I’ll be happy to drive you up there.”

Amanda watched the stubborn figure of her son as he continued to read his book, a small frown painted on his face. She wished she could find the words that would make this better. Maybe he just needed a little time alone. She left the room with a sigh, closing the door behind her. She was surprised to see Lee standing in the hall.

“Struck out, huh?” he asked, tilting his head in the direction of Jamie’s door.

“You heard? I feel so bad. After everything Jamie’s been through this year, I’d like to…” Amanda looked away with a sad shake of her head. ‘I’d like to throttle Joe right now’, she added to herself. She took a deep breath, turning back to face her husband. “I can’t get through to Jamie at all. It used to be so easy when he was little.”

Lee gave her a quick hug. Stepping back, he held her at arm’s length, looking into her brown eyes with a smile. “Why don’t you let me give it a try?”

“I don’t know, Lee, he’s pretty upset.” She hesitated a minute before continuing. “For some reason, he seems to feel like he’s in the way.”

Lee nodded. “I caught that part of the conversation. That’s why I’m the one who needs to talk to him.”

She raised her eyebrow. “Okay, if you think so. Good luck.”

“Thanks,” he said wryly. “Why do I suddenly have the feeling I’d rather be disarming a terrorist?”

“I’ll be in our bedroom, so yell if you need back-up,” she grinned.

Rolling his eyes, he hesitated briefly before knocking on Jamie's door. "Hey, Jamie, it's Lee. May I come in for a minute?" Lee walked boldly into the room before Jamie had a chance to say no. His stepson refused to look up, instead feigning a keen interest in his book.

Lee took a deep breath, trying to remember what it was like to be twelve. He smiled as he glanced at the comfortable clutter of 'stuff' scattered haphazardly around the room. These quarters would certainly never have passed one of his uncle's surprise inspections, Lee thought ruefully. And he had absolutely never been allowed to relax on his bed with a book. It violated his uncle's sense of order. In Colonel Robert Clayton's world, there was a proper time and a proper place for everything.

Sitting down on the edge of the bed, he tried think of a good way to break the ice. Jamie certainly showed no signs of making his task an easy one. He took a deep breath and plunged ahead.

"That must really be a good book," he began, looking at Jamie a little more carefully. "But I bet you'd have an easier time reading if it wasn't upside down." He paused for a minute before continuing. "You can tell me to leave if you want to, Jamie. But I thought maybe you might like someone to talk to."

Jamie reluctantly put his book down on his chest, turning towards Lee with a hostile glare. "There isn't anything to talk about. My dad can't go on the campout and I've ruined your plans for the weekend." He picked up his book again, turning it over with an exaggerated motion.

"You haven't ruined my plans for the weekend at all. But I would guess that you're kind of mad that your dad ruined yours."

Jamie shrugged his shoulders. "He had to work. You and Mom have to work a lot, so why shouldn't he?"

"Exactly," Lee countered, ignoring his stepson's antagonism. "So you shouldn't be mad at him for having to do his job. But that doesn't solve your problem about this weekend, does it?"

Jamie shook his head.

"I have an idea, if you're interested," Lee continued casually. "If you still want to go..."

“Mom already said I should go with John and his dad,” Jamie said sullenly.

“What I was going to say is that I’d be happy to go with you if you’d like.”

Jamie eyed Lee suspiciously. “Really?”

“Yes, really.”

“Why?”

“Because I know how much you wanted to go. And because I remember what it’s like to be your age and wish your father was around to do that kind of stuff with you.” He took a deep breath. “I know it’s not the same as going with your dad, but I’m game if you are.”

Jamie started to speak and then hesitated, looking down at the floor.

“Come on, Jamie, it’ll be fun. Besides,” Lee added with a grin, “I hear there’s a trophy involved and my survival skills are top-notch. The federal government guarantees it.”

Jamie smiled at his last remark. Looking up, he let out a deep breath and quietly said, “Okay.”

“Okay.” Lee looked at the camping gear thrown in the corner of the room. “Why don’t you finish packing and give me a few minutes to make a couple of phone calls, and we’ll get going.”

Jamie nodded in silent agreement. Wondering what he’d gotten himself into, Lee left to tell his wife.

* * * * *

“Amanda, where’s my...” Lee stopped mid-sentence as he heard her voice rise in anger. She was sitting on the edge of the bed with her back to him, speaking into the telephone through clenched teeth. He paused, listening to the one-sided conversation.

“I don’t care, Joe, you promised him...No...No, I don’t...Well, you’re wrong. Jamie doesn’t understand and neither do I...No, you’re just leaving me to pick up the pieces again. You’d think I’d be an expert after all this time...Well, you can try, but I’m not sure if he’ll be interested...No, I have never done that. As I recall, you were the one filling his head with impossibilities last summer...I

don't want to rehash that either. Don't worry, I'll take care of it... Yeah, you're welcome. Goodbye." She slammed the phone down into its base and exhaled loudly, rubbing her forehead with her hand.

"Whew," Lee whistled softly, happy he wasn't on the receiving end of that conversation. "So how's Joe?"

Amanda turned around at the sound of his voice. "Evidently too busy to spend the weekend with his son," she replied sarcastically, anger still seething through her words. "And don't say it – I know I should have waited until I cooled down to call him."

Lee sat down beside her, putting his arm around her shoulder. "I wasn't planning on saying anything of the kind. You can fight with Joe all you want."

Amanda smiled at him ruefully. "Gee, thanks, that's so generous of you."

"Just be sure you know what it is you're really fighting about."

"Believe me, I know exactly what I'm angry about. I hate to see him disappoint Jamie, that's all."

"Uh-huh."

"And just what is that 'uh-huh' supposed to mean?"

Lee raised his hands in mock defense. "Absolutely nothing at all. Don't drag me into the middle of this. I'm an innocent bystander here." He backed away, getting up and heading into his walk-in closet.

She sighed sadly, rising to follow him. "I'm sorry. It's Joe I'm aggravated with, not you. I think I'm as disappointed as Jamie is," she confessed with a sad smile. "I've been looking forward to being alone with you all week."

She followed him into the closet, coming up behind him and putting her arms around his waist. "But I shouldn't complain. It's not like it was before we 'went public'. We do still have the weekend together."

"Uh, Amanda," Lee began, slowly turning to face her. "About this weekend..."

Amanda looked up at him, unable to read the expression in his eyes. “What? You’re not going to tell me you just remembered something you have to do at work, are you?”

“Not exactly. I told Jamie I’d take him on the campout.”

“He agreed?” she asked incredulously.

Lee nodded. “He seemed a little hesitant at first, but he’s packing right now. Which reminds me, I need to find my long underwear.”

Amanda shook her head skeptically. “You, on a wilderness weekend with the Junior Trailblazers?”

Lee returned her look with a grin. “What’s the matter? You think the Junior Trailblazers won’t survive the encounter?”

“Oh, they’ll be just fine. It’s you I’m worried about.”

“Amanda, I’m a spy. How hard can it be to infiltrate a group of suburban fathers on a campout?”

She laughed in response. “You have no idea. Believe me, breaking up Peter Sacker’s New Utopia group was a picnic in comparison.” She leaned in closer and whispered in his ear. “And you won’t have me to keep you warm this time.”

“No?” He looked into her eyes and smiled, slowly shaking his head as he leaned in to brush her lips with his. “Then maybe you can loan me your waterproof match.”

“Sure, Stetson, I think you’ll probably need it.” She smiled as she leaned in to kiss him again. “Thank you.”

He stepped back to look at her. “For what?”

“For doing this for Jamie. I know exactly how you really feel about spending the weekend in the wilderness.”

“I’ve been on assignments in worse places than a cold tent. As long as I don’t let myself picture you here cuddled up in our nice, warm bed, I should be okay.”

“Then I guess I shouldn’t tell you what I won’t be wearing,” she teased.

“Probably not.”

She leaned in closer to whisper in his ear. “Then just keep a mental image of that tropical island we’re headed to next week. That’s what I plan to do.”

“Hmmm, that might just get me through the weekend,” he grinned. “But I’ve got to get moving. I need to talk to Billy before I go.”

She nodded absently. “I guess I can use this weekend to catch up on my paperwork. And all those final details for our anniversary ceremony next Saturday.”

“Hey, I’ll miss you, Mrs. Stetson, ” he whispered regretfully.

“I’ll miss you, too. But I’m happy Jamie agreed to go. This is a big step for him.” She paused for a minute, looking Lee in the eye. “For both of you.”

“I know.”

“And I promise you a terrific homecoming on Sunday.”

He smiled as he raised his eyebrows. “I’m going to hold you to that.”

CHAPTER THREE

The sunlight was beginning to get weaker as the two figures rounded the top of the small hill. Lee smiled as he watched Jamie struggling to hide his yawn as he dropped his backpack on the ground.

“Tired?”

Jamie shook his head. “No, I’m okay. Lee...” He took a deep breath, glancing at his stepfather out of the corner of his eye. “Do you have any idea where we are?”

“Sure. Believe me, this is a piece of cake. ” He gave Jamie his most reassuring smile, trying to hide the fact that he suspected they’d actually been traveling in circles for the past hour. In the winter, all the markings seemed to look alike.

Lee glanced over at Jamie, smiling as he recognized the expression on his face. He wore the same eager look that Amanda had when they first started working together, an endearing mixture of excitement and concern.

Squatting on the ground beside Jamie, Lee spread the Junior Trailblazer map out in front of them. "Okay, the last checkpoint was here." He frowned slightly as he studied the markings.

"Yeah," Jamie nodded. "Then we were supposed to follow this trail here." He pointed to the route outlined in red, looking at Lee questioningly. "Maybe we shouldn't have taken that shortcut?"

Lee shook his head. "Nah, the shortcut should cut at least a couple of hours off our time." He looked at the map thoughtfully and back again at the trees. "We're okay. If we keep heading due north, we should come out right over here." He pointed to the map once more. "Then it's only a short hike to the finish line. We shouldn't have too far to go tomorrow at all."

"Okay."

"Don't worry, Jamie, I've done this kind of thing a million times." He smiled again in encouragement.

"Really?"

"Yup. So, do you want to stop now and camp or go a little further?"

"We can go a little further," Jamie said with a smile.

"Okay. Then let's head north. You can tell the direction by how the moss grows on the trees," Lee added.

"Did you learn that in spy class?" Jamie asked.

"Ah, no," Lee replied with a grin. "Actually, your mother taught me that. Let's go."

Jamie grinned, too, as he picked up his gear and followed Lee down the trail.

* * * * *

Amanda shivered as she pulled the small blanket closer around her, the warmth from the fireplace doing little to dispel the chill she felt. Curled up comfortably in a corner of the couch, she had been trying to read the updated report on counter-espionage tactics for the last thirty minutes, but to no avail. No matter how hard she concentrated, she kept reading the same sentence over and over again. Giving up, she tossed the papers on the coffee table with a sigh and quietly sipped her wine. Gazing into the flames of the fire, she wondered how Lee and Jamie had fared last night in the woods. The local station had reported record low temperatures in the outlying areas.

She took another sip of Lee's favorite Beaujolais, savoring the flavor on her taste buds. By all rights, she should have been enjoying this wine and this fire with Lee, instead of a report on anti-terrorism measures. Damn Joe anyway...his plans were always more important than hers. Thanks to him, she was sitting alone on the couch while her husband and son were off together in the woods.

Amanda shook her head sadly. What was the matter with her tonight? Here she was feeling jealous that Lee was spending the weekend with Jamie instead of at home with her. It was certainly absurd to be jealous of her own son. She knew it was selfish, but the truth of the matter was that sometimes she missed the way things used to be, missed having Lee all to herself. Before, when their marriage was a secret shared only by the two of them, it was as if he belonged to her alone.

This was really silly, she thought, silently chastising herself for her self-centered thoughts. She was happy that Jamie was finally starting to look at Lee as part of their family. She knew what an important step this was for both of them. She said a silent prayer that things were going well. Jamie had still appeared to be in a surly mood when they left yesterday.

She wondered for a moment if these irrational feelings about their lost privacy might be part of the problem between Lee and Jamie. Something had given Jamie the idea that he was in the way. Her youngest son had always been very tuned in to her feelings. Perhaps she had inadvertently been sending him the wrong message. Jamie had been especially sensitive since the episode last fall with agent Mason.

It had always been so easy for Lee with Philip. It was obvious from the start that they had both made an immediate connection. They seemed to have so much in common. It had been a very different story with Jamie. The more Philip opened up to his stepfather, the more Jamie seemed to pull back.

Amanda heaved an angry sigh. She still laid most of the blame for this at Joe's door. He certainly had been less than helpful in encouraging Jamie to accept Lee's place in her life. Of course, to be fair, Joe hadn't known she and Lee were married at the time. He had viewed their relationship as a casual flirtation and had inadvertently passed that point of view along to his son. In a way, Joe, too, had been an unwitting casualty of the veil of secrecy that had surrounded her life since her marriage to Lee. Maybe that explained the hint of resentment she sometimes felt from him when they were together.

But that still didn't let him off the hook for this weekend. If Lee hadn't stepped in...lost in thought, she didn't hear the doorbell until the second ring. Looking through the peephole, she was a little dismayed to see Joe standing on her front porch, impatiently shuffling from one foot to the other. He was the last person she wanted to talk to right now. She reluctantly opened the door.

It was obvious from the look on his face that he was still upset from their phone conversation yesterday. She took a deep breath, greeting him coolly. "Hi, Joe."

"Amanda. Can I come in?"

"Sure." She opened the door and stepped aside, allowing him to enter. "I didn't expect to see you tonight."

"I stopped by to see how Jamie was. I thought I might take him out to dinner."

"I thought you had to work all weekend?"

"Well, I have to eat."

Amanda sighed. "I suppose so. But you're out of luck - you missed him by about twenty-four hours."

"What are you talking about?" he asked, his annoyance apparent in his tone.

“Lee took him on the camping trip. They’ll be home tomorrow night if you want to call Jamie then.”

“I see.” Joe stared uncomfortably at his ex-wife’s unbending form. “Okay, tell him I stopped by.”

Amanda hesitated a minute, then turned to Joe. “As long as you’re here, do you want to sit down? I think we probably need to talk about Jamie.”

Torn between his need to leave and his desire to talk about his son, he finally nodded in agreement. “I suppose I could stay for a few minutes.”

“You know, Joe, you can’t work night and day,” Amanda said, trying to hide her irritation as she invited him into the family room.

Closing the front door, Joe reluctantly followed her retreating form. “Amanda, I couldn’t help it if I had to work this weekend. I only found out yesterday that the trial date was moved up. I have to be in court Monday morning. It’s an important case.”

“It always is.”

“My client is counting on me. I owe it to him to be prepared.”

“Your son was counting on you, too. Or did you overlook that fact?”

“No, I didn’t. I happen to love Jamie very much.”

“Then you should have known how much this weekend meant to him,” Amanda added, sitting down on the couch. “Jamie’s been talking about nothing else for two weeks. And to break it to him over the phone...at the very least, you owed it to him to tell him to his face.” She shook her head sadly. “But I guess face to face conversations were never your strong suit. As I recall, we decided to end our marriage over the phone, too.”

“That was a cheap shot,” Joe said, struggling to keep his temper in check. “No matter what happened between us, you know how important Philip and Jamie are to me.”

“But never important enough to put them first. They’ve always come second to your career. Just how many of their birthdays did you miss, Joe, while you were running all over the world on behalf of your clients?”

“That’s not fair, and you know it. I never abandoned my family...you’re the one who made it look like that by staying in Arlington with my sons when I wanted you to join me.”

“Your sons weren’t much more than babies when you made the choice to pursue your career in a third world country.”

“The Emergency Aid Organization did a lot of good. What’s wrong with wanting to give something back to people less fortunate?”

“I guess it’s all a matter of priorities,” Amanda muttered, turning her gaze to the window.

“What does that mean?” Joe demanded, taking his coat off and throwing it across the chair.

Amanda sighed, facing him once again. “I was the one who put my plans on hold and supported you all through law school. Or have you conveniently forgotten that fact?” She took another deep breath. “We had two little children. It was time you put them first and settled down to be a family.”

“We could have done that anywhere, Amanda. But you stubbornly refused to even consider moving. You never tried to see my side of things.”

“You were talking about moving to another country, where the living conditions were pretty primitive. You can’t drag two little babies all over the world like that,” she snapped in annoyance. “Children need a home, some stability.”

“I see, like the stability you’re giving them now?” He picked up the report Amanda had left on the coffee table. “‘State Department Update on Anti-Terrorist Measures and Counter-Measures’ – I’m sure this makes for great reading before bed.”

“In case you failed to notice, Philip and Jamie outgrew bedtime stories a long time ago,” she retorted sarcastically. “The same way I’ve outgrown making excuses for you.”

“I’ve never asked you to do that.”

“I know...you never asked me about anything, period.” Amanda stood up, pacing restlessly back and forth as she turned a wrathful eye on Joe. “Making unilateral decisions was more your style.”

“Well, I don’t recall being consulted when you decided to pursue a career that turned my children into targets,” Joe rejoined angrily.

“Oh, I was waiting for you to drag that up again,” she retorted, her voice becoming louder. “But you know, Philip and Jamie were never in any danger at all until you landed it all in our laps. I believe your enemies were the ones who dragged our children into the middle of that mess with the EAO.”

“And what do you call what went on with Jamie last fall? Held hostage by a deranged federal agent who almost kills him and blows up his house right before his eyes. It wasn’t my career that sent him into therapy.”

“Yeah, where he’s working out trying to deal with his absentee father.”

“And what about his absentee mother?” Joe intoned, his voice rising in anger. “Or haven’t you listened when your son complains that you’re never around?”

She whirled around to face him. “Damn it, Joe...it’s not the same thing and you know it. When Jamie was little, I was the one who was always there for him.”

“I know...I was the one who was working to support our family so you could always be there for him.”

“And it was your decision to do that half-way around the world. I had no choice but to be both mother and father to our sons when they were small. But guess what? The boys are both teenagers now. And it’s a healthy thing for their mother to have some outside interests, including a career of her own.”

“One where being shot at is just a routine day on the job?” he sneered.

“What I choose to do with my life is none of your business,” she retorted through clenched teeth. “You gave up the right to comment on it a long time ago.”

“Maybe so.” Joe paused, turning on her with a furious eye. “But don’t stand there and tell me you were thinking of Philip and Jamie when you took up this line of work.”

“What are you implying?”

“I’m not implying anything,” Joe answered hotly. “I’m saying that you were more interested in pursuing one particular federal agent than a career at the Agency.”

“Oohhhh...just what is that remark supposed to mean?”

“You figure it out.” Grabbing his coat, he headed for the door.

“That’s right, Joe, walk away, just like you always do,” Amanda sputtered heatedly as she followed him. “But leave my relationship with Lee out of this – it has nothing to do with what we’re talking about.”

Joe took a deep breath and paused, his hand on the doorknob. “You’re wrong, Amanda. It has everything to do with Jamie’s problems. But, as usual, you refuse to see any point of view but your own.”

“If that is the case, it’s your fault,” Amanda stated, angrily meeting his eye. “You were the one who led him to believe that his parents would get back together last fall.”

“Don’t lay all that at my door. I wasn’t the one leading a secret life. You and Lee and your ‘need to know’ bullshit.” He looked at her in frustration. “Don’t you think maybe your children needed to know you’d remarried?”

Wincing at his last words, Amanda turned away, her arms folded across her chest defensively. Blinking back the tears that welled up unbidden in her eyes, she vaguely wondered why she and Joe were doing this to each other. It had been years since they’d torn into each other like this. In fact, since his return to Washington two years ago, their relationship had been remarkably cordial.

His hand on the door, Joe hesitated for a moment, resting his head against the smooth grain of the wood. He glanced at Amanda out of the corner of his eye, watching her rigid figure with a remorseful eye. Taking a deep breath, he walked over to her, laying a cautious hand on her shoulder.

“I’m sorry, Amanda. You’re right, your relationship with Lee is none of my business.”

She sighed sadly. “I’m sorry, too. Gosh, Joe, what just happened here?”

“I think our past reared its ugly head and took a bite,” he answered wisely. “Maybe it’s time we really talked and put a few of these issues to rest once and for all?”

“Maybe so.” Amanda let out the breath she’d been holding, turning towards Joe with a cheerless smile. “Are you hungry? I’ve got a refrigerator full of food and no one here to eat it.”

He nodded, returning her look. “Okay, thanks. I think I’d like that.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Lee broke up another branch and added it to the fire. The flames rose higher, sending little sparks flying up into the night. Gathering some extra branches, he stockpiled them on one side of the campsite. Since sunset, the air had taken on a bitter chill. Lee had a feeling they might need the extra wood later.

He glanced over at Jamie. He was sitting cross-legged on the ground silently watching the flames, his back resting against a fallen tree trunk. The small figure by the fire hadn’t moved once while Lee had been busy gathering the wood. He wished he knew what Jamie was thinking. He was such a quiet kid - it was difficult sometimes to even guess at what was going through his mind. Time and time again he had tried to find some frame of reference that would help him understand his stepson, but so far he had been unsuccessful.

He moved closer to the fire, sitting down next to Jamie. The stillness closed in around them, the comfortingly familiar sounds of the woods conspicuously absent in the wintertime. It was definitely turning into a cold night, even for February.

Lee cleared his throat, searching for something to say, finally settling on a universal topic. “So, Jamie, how’s school going?”

Jamie shrugged noncommittally. “Okay.”

“Okay,” Lee echoed, picking up a branch and absently stirring the fire. “You’re not cold, are you?”

Jamie shook his head. “No.”

“Hungry?” Lee tried again. “I think there are some beans left.”

“No, thank you.”

Lee took a deep breath, throwing the branch he'd been playing with into the fire. “The Super Bowl was pretty good last week, huh?” he prompted, giving it another shot. He could see Jamie wasn't going to make this easy. “How about those Redskins...beating the Broncos 42 to 10?”

“I don't know. You and Philip watched that.”

“Oh, yeah, that's right.” He racked his brain, desperately seeking another topic. Getting this twelve-year old to open up to him tonight was like pulling teeth. He'd had better luck extracting information from hostile witnesses during an interrogation.

He took a deep breath and tried again. “John and his dad seemed pretty nice,” he began.

“They're okay, I guess,” Jamie stated vaguely.

“Oh? I thought you two were good friends.”

“We used to be.” The boy sighed, reaching for a stick and imitating Lee's earlier gesture. “John thinks he's so cool. All he talks about is how he's gonna win the trophy this weekend.”

“What about the rest of the guys?” Lee asked, looking at Jamie with concern.

“I don't hang out with them much anymore. They all play basketball and I don't.”

Lee looked at him quizzically. “Your mom told me you didn't want to try out for the basketball team this year.”

Jamie stared at the fire, avoiding Lee's gaze. “I couldn't.”

“Try out?”

Jamie nodded. “Their tryouts were at the end of October, right before we moved. It was too late for this year.”

Lee looked at Jamie, reading his disappointment even in the darkness. “That’s too bad. But you can always try next year.”

Jamie shook his head. “It’s harder to make the team if you weren’t on it the year before.”

“You could practice. I’m sure Philip would be glad to help you.” Lee glanced at him out of the corner of his eye. “For that matter, so would I.”

“It wouldn’t make any difference,” Jamie said unhappily. “They always take the same guys back again.”

“I guess this move has been kind of tough on you, huh?” Lee asked sympathetically. He debated for a minute whether or not he should venture into this area. He didn’t feel qualified to give an opinion – this ‘parenting’ stuff had always been Amanda’s territory. Maybe Amanda had already given Jamie some advice on this subject.

“Have you talked to your mom about this?” Lee inquired hopefully.

Jamie shook his head. “I didn’t want to bother her. “

“She wouldn’t think it was a bother.”

“But she’d just worry about it. And then maybe...”

Lee’s eyebrows narrowed as he watched Jamie closely. “Maybe what, Jamie?”

“I don’t know.” He hesitated for a minute before continuing. “Lee...can I ask you something?”

“Sure. What is it?”

“Are you ever scared?”

He looked at Jamie with a puzzled expression, wondering exactly what he was trying to say. “Sure. Everyone gets scared.”

“No, I mean...” Jamie paused, then blurted out, “Are you ever scared that something might happen to my mom?”

Lee looked at Jamie closely, suddenly understanding what was really bothering the boy. He kicked himself for not realizing it earlier. After all, hadn't he been struggling with the same issues himself not too long ago? It was no wonder Jamie had been so quiet and moody lately.

Lee looked at Jamie again and nodded solemnly. "Yeah, sometimes."

Lost in thought, he tried to think of some words that would reassure Jamie. This was a lot for a twelve-year old to deal with. Lee remembered the lengths his fears had forced him to go to only one short month ago. He certainly hadn't done a very good job dealing with his own worry over Amanda. And he was a grown man. More than that, he was a trained professional. He ran his hand nervously through his hair, searching for some words that might make this better.

"When you love someone, it's natural to worry about them. And I'm sure everybody worries that something will happen to their parents."

"Yeah, but it's not the same. Other people's mothers don't have dangerous jobs."

Lee reached out and picked up another branch, tossing it into the fire. The crackle of the burning twigs echoed loudly in the stillness. He took a deep breath and tried again.

"You know, Jamie, a lot of what we do is really routine. Reports, paperwork...organizing little details – it's not like what you see on T.V. or in the movies."

"I get scared when she goes to work that she might not come home," Jamie said in a small voice.

He glanced again at his stepson. "What makes you believe your mother won't come home at night?"

Jamie turned to face him, tilting his head to one side. "You didn't."

"Your mother knows how to take care of herself," Lee said, neatly sidestepping Jamie's remark and repeating Amanda's own words of reassurance. "Believe me, she's very good at her job."

"But something still could happen to her. You're good at your job, aren't you?" Jamie asked pointedly. "And something happened to you. "

Lee exhaled loudly, not knowing quite how to reply to Jamie's statement. This was a tough one. He leaned back against the log, searching for the right words to describe to Jamie what had happened to him. How could he even begin to explain an inexplicable business to someone his age? At times he found his job impossible to understand himself.

Even after all these months, he was still trying to come to terms with what had happened at the Agency last summer, still struggling to grasp the motives behind Dr. Smyth's Phoenix Group. Adversaries like Alexi Makarov or Addi Birol – those he could recognize and fight. The reasons for their actions were clear-cut. But enemies that hid behind the faces of friends...that was a different story altogether. He found their motivation much more difficult to comprehend.

Lee took a deep breath, glancing over at Jamie again. He was evidently more troubled by this than he and Amanda had realized. "Have you tried telling your mom how you feel?"

Jamie shook his head. "No."

"Jamie, I know this is hard for you to understand at your age...or really at any age," Lee mumbled to himself. He sighed and tried again. "Lot's of people have jobs that have some element of risk. Ours just seem to be a little more dramatic. But they're really not."

"I don't know," Jamie continued, turning to Lee with a serious expression. "Last summer, when mom thought you were dead - I've never seen her so upset. And after the house blew up..."

"Go on," Lee encouraged him gently.

"I started to worry..."

"That you wouldn't be safe anymore," Lee finished quietly. "What happened with Mason was pretty scary, I know."

"But, see, it was my fault all that happened. If it wasn't for me, mom wouldn't have been in the house that night. And you wouldn't have gotten shot. You guys came in to get me out."

"Jamie, none of what happened was your fault." Lee tried to reassure him. "You were just in the wrong place at the wrong time. And I swear, your mother

and I will do everything we can to make sure nothing like that happens to you or to Philip again.”

Jamie toyed with a small stick, absently pulling the dried leaves off and throwing them into the fire. “After all that happened, I started wondering what I’d do if something happened to mom, like if she’d been killed in the explosion. I’d have to live with Dad and Carrie. I wouldn’t see Grandma as much. Everything would be so different.”

Lee solemnly nodded in understanding, looking up at the night sky searching for the constellations the way he used to do when he was a boy. He could relate only too well to what Jamie was saying. How do you begin to explain death to a child? It was a difficult enough concept for an adult to understand and accept.

His thoughts drifted back sadly across the years. He suddenly felt five years old again, listening to a stranger telling him that his parents had gone away. The path of his life had been forever altered on the night his uncle had appeared at his door to take him to his new home. To a place that wasn’t really a home at all. Even after all these years, the pain of that loss was still there, like a wound that never quite healed. He saw himself sitting on the bed in his new room, on that first air base in California, wondering why everything in his life was suddenly so different and asking his uncle again when his mommy and daddy were coming home.

The home that he and Amanda had finally made together was a sharp contrast from those impersonal Air Force bases where he had grown up. In that world, childhood was practically nonexistent. ‘Doing your duty’ was the order of the day, and your duty meant that you always did as you were told, no questions asked. In that world, your quarters passed a bi-weekly inspection. Personal belongings were never left strewn about your room, but must always be placed in the appropriate place. Clothes were always pressed and shoes were never without polish. These were the rules that formed the boundaries of his life when he was Jamie’s age. Looking back through adult eyes, he now recognized just how formal and structured his upbringing had been.

Lee shook his head sadly, remembering. “It wouldn’t be easy, but you’d adjust,” he said quietly, wondering for a moment if he was referring to Jamie or himself. “I know how you feel about losing your mom, Jamie, because my parents both died when I was five. I had to go live with my uncle.”

Jamie looked at him shyly. “Yeah, mom mentioned something about that.”

“She did?”

Jamie nodded. “She told us not to ask you about it.”

“Well, I guess she knows it’s not something I like to talk about too much,” Lee said softly. It was so like Amanda to try to spare his feelings. He looked at Jamie, who had suddenly grown very quiet. “My uncle was in the Air Force and I hadn’t seen very much of him,” Lee continued, offering up some information. “I grew up all over the world in a lot of different places, wherever he happened to be stationed.”

“You must have missed your parents,” Jamie added knowingly, trying to think about how he would have felt if that had happened to him.

“I still miss them, Jamie,” Lee stated simply. “But life goes on. You’re right about everything changing, but you adapt to the changes. So you see, I understand what you’re worried about.”

“Yeah.”

“I wish I could promise you that nothing would ever happen to your mother, but you’d know I’d be lying,” Lee continued soberly. “What I can tell you is that your mom and I are both very careful not to take any unnecessary chances.”

He took a deep breath before going on. “Jamie, I love your mom very much. I can promise that I will always do my best to make sure nothing happens to her. I give you my word on that.”

Jamie nodded again, smiling bashfully at Lee.

“You’ve had to grow up in a hurry this past year,” Lee added, returning Jamie’s look. “I guess it was easier for you when you thought your mother worked for a film company, huh?”

“Kind of.”

“That’s one of the reasons why what we do is so secret. We didn’t mean to lie to you. But there are some things we really couldn’t tell you. You and Philip probably know more than you should about our jobs.”

“Yeah,” he agreed with a sigh.

“But you can’t go on worrying about this. It doesn’t do any good. Maybe you should talk about some of this stuff with Dr. Barr. Have you discussed it with him at all?”

“I haven’t told anyone about it.”

Lee considered the implication of Jamie’s words. Finally speaking his fears aloud was an enormous step for the boy. He felt touched that Jamie had chosen to confide in him. He turned to him once again.

“It doesn’t do any good to keep this stuff to yourself,” Lee continued somberly. “I do that too, sometimes, so I know what I’m talking about here. It always feels better when you get what’s bothering you off your chest. If you ever want to talk about any of this, I’ll be happy to listen.”

Jamie shook his head, trying to hide his yawn.

Lee looked at him kindly. “Tell you what, we should get some rest. After all, we have a trophy to win tomorrow, don’t we?”

“Yeah, we do,” Jamie agreed happily.

“Okay. Let’s hit the sack.”

“Lee,” Jamie began as he slowly stood up. He looked down at his stepfather with a timid grin. “You’re right, it does feel better to talk about it. Thanks.”

* * * * *

“Amanda, this was really nice – much better than a restaurant.” Joe smiled as he rose from the table, clearing away the last of the dinner dishes.

“Thanks, Joe. It was nice to have some company.”

“Would you like some help with those?” Joe offered, joining her at the sink.

“No, I’m just going to let them soak. Why don’t you go on into the family room and sit down? I’ll be right there.”

Turning off the faucet, Amanda grabbed their wine glasses and the half-empty bottle of the Beaujolais as she followed Joe into the other room. “It looks like we did a pretty good job on this stuff,” she grinned as she set the glasses down on the coffee table.

Joe smiled, too, nodding his head in agreement. “It was excellent. And so was dinner.”

“It’s Lee’s favorite,” Amanda said, sinking down into the sofa with a yawn. “The wine, not the dinner. Would you like to help me finish this off?” She held the bottle up invitingly.

“I’d better not if I’m going to drive home tonight. I know we all have a pretty civilized relationship, but I’m not sure your husband would appreciate me spending the night.”

“Probably not,” Amanda said wryly. She refilled her own glass, taking a swallow as she glanced out the window. “It looks cold out there. I hope Lee and Jamie are warm enough.”

“I’m sure they’ll be okay. Don’t they have some sort of Agency training for this sort of thing?” he asked jokingly.

“Yeah, they pretty much cover all contingencies,” Amanda smiled in reply. “It’s funny, you know...”

“What is?”

Amanda sipped again from her glass, feeling the warmth of the wine flow through her system. “All those years ago, when we first met, I had so many dreams about what my life would be like in the next ten or twenty years – but I never in my wildest dreams pictured myself...”

“As a spy?”

“We don’t say ‘spy’,” she laughed. “But yes...life is strange sometimes, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is,” He nodded sadly. “I certainly never thought then that we’d end up divorced.” He paused for a minute, deep in thought. “What happened to us, Amanda?”

She sighed as she took another drink. “We just grew apart, I guess. When I think about how young we were...we jumped into everything so quickly. I don’t think we ever stopped to talk about what we really wanted out of life. And when you were traveling so much, away for months at a time...it’s just hard to make a long distance marriage like that work.”

“You’re right.” He, too, relaxed against the sofa cushions, turning to Amanda with a funny half-smile. “You know, it’s strange...when I came back to D. C. a few years ago, I was finally ready to give you everything you’d wanted when we were married...stability, a home, real family life. But it was too late. That’s not what you wanted any more. It took me a little while to realize that.”

“It’s not that I didn’t want those things anymore, it’s just...”

“That you didn’t want them with me,” he finished wisely.

She smiled, shrugging slightly as she reached to pull the afghan around her shoulders.

Joe looked at her with a grin. “You don’t have to feel uncomfortable, Amanda. Despite my earlier comment, I’ve really come to terms with you and Lee. I know how you both feel about each other. I saw that first-hand last fall.”

“I’m sorry that I didn’t tell you about us from the beginning, that you had to find out the way that you did. Maybe if I’d been honest with you, with all of you, Jamie might have had a little easier time of it.”

“What’s done is done, Amanda. You can’t change it now.”

“I know,” she said in a small voice. “I really had every intention of telling you. Do you remember last year, when we had that lunch and you told me about you and Carrie?”

“Yes?”

“I had something to tell you that day myself.”

Joe shook his head sadly. “That’s what you wanted to say?”

“Yeah. But you were so excited about your news that I thought I’d wait a little while longer, for just the right time. It just never seemed to present itself. Then when you and Carrie broke up, I didn’t know how to.”

“I understand. I didn’t make it easy for you, either. I practically told you that I couldn’t deal with the news.”

“It’s difficult news to deal with. I don’t know how well I did. It’s not easy to hear that someone you’ve shared a significant part of your life with has moved on.” She chuckled softly. “I guess it’s kind of an ego thing.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean. Jealousy is such a complex emotion. There are times I am a little jealous of Lee...but not the way you think,” he added quickly. “I’m jealous that he gets to live with the boys and I don’t.”

“Oh, Joe...”

“That’s why tonight, when you told me Lee had taken Jamie on the camping trip, I kind of lost it. I was feeling guilty enough that I’d let Jamie down in the first place. But I shouldn’t have made that crack about you and Lee.”

She sighed softly. “I said some things I shouldn’t have tonight, too.”

“No, Amanda, maybe it was time that it was said, time we cleared the air. Obviously I wasn’t able to give you what you needed when we were married. I understand you well enough to know that if I had been able to, we would still be together.”

“That goes both ways, sweetheart. I don’t think I gave you what you needed, either. I know I was pretty stubborn. I guess learning to compromise is something that comes with age.” She sighed as she took another sip of wine. “Who can say what went wrong or why. It’s nobody’s fault. Sometimes things work out for the best, even though it doesn’t seem like it at the time.”

“You’re right about that.” Joe rubbed his hand along his forehead, his thoughts turning to his fiancée. She really was a wonderful person, bright, sweet-natured and easy to be with. Since Thanksgiving when they had put their relationship back on track, Carrie had made every effort to really get to know Amanda. Now they had forged the beginnings of a lasting friendship. He was glad that the two most important women in his life had found a way to get along.

Unfortunately, his relationship with Lee Stetson continued to be a little more complicated. He knew this was something he needed to come to terms with, for his sons’ sake if not for his own. Some things were much easier said than done. But maybe it was time that he tried.

“You know,” Joe began hesitantly, “according to Philip, Lee is the next best thing to superman. He talks about him non-stop. Sometimes I don’t know how to compete with all that.”

“Oh, Joe, it’s not a competition. The boys both love you very much, sweetheart. You don’t have to do anything but be their father.”

“I know,” Joe said stiffly. “But I feel like I’ve missed so much of their growing up...like you said before, all the birthdays, school plays, and holidays.”

Amanda smiled. “I’ve missed my share of school plays, too. And you’ve been a big part of their lives since you came back to D. C. That’s all that matters now.” She gave his arm a tender squeeze. “What we both need to do is to make sure what happened in our past stays in the past. The only thing that matters now is that we both try to be the best parents we can to our sons.”

“You’re right, the boys need to come first.”

“If you had some wine, we could drink to that,” she chuckled, picking up her own glass.

“Why don’t we shake on it instead?” Joe offered, extending his hand. “To making Philip and Jamie our first priority.”

“And to only looking forward, not backward,” she added, closing her hand around his affectionately.

They sat quietly together as the flames of the fire died down slowly in the grate. Amanda sipped her wine, glancing at Joe out the corner of her eye. She laughed softly to herself as she watched Joe’s profile in the dwindling firelight.

“What’s so funny?” Joe asked, leaning back on the sofa.

“This is not exactly how I pictured spending my weekend,” Amanda said in amusement. “Sitting here on the couch, drinking this wine with you.”

“You had other plans in mind, huh?”

“Yeah, kind of,” she replied, blushing slightly.

“Do you remember that time when Jamie was about a year old...”

“And he’d been teething for weeks.”

Joe nodded, the years falling away at the recollection. “When we finally got him to sleep, we were so relieved by the peace and quiet that we finished that whole bottle of burgundy wine.”

“The ‘red stuff’,” she added with a smile. “Yeah, I remember. That was right before you took the job with the EAO.”

“Yeah,” he said, shaking his head sadly. Joe looked away for a minute, then turned back towards Amanda, gently taking her hand again in his. “You’re really happy now, aren’t you Amanda?”

“Yes, Joe. I love Lee very much. We’ve found something really special together.”

“I can tell. There’s something in your eyes now...that I never saw when we were together. I just want you to know how glad I am for you...for both of you. All I’ve ever really wanted was for you to be happy.”

“That’s all I want for you, too, Joe. You really are a great guy. Carrie is very lucky to have found you.”

“I feel lucky to have her, too.” He squeezed her hand and rose from the couch, stretching his stiff muscles. “And on that note, it’s time I hit the road.”

Amanda picked up his coat and slowly walked him to the door. She held his coat open for him, helping him put it on, patting him on the shoulders. “I’ll tell Jamie you were here.”

He turned to face her, nodding slowly. “Tell Lee thank you for filling in for me.”

Amanda smiled silently in reply, understanding how much that had cost him. “Give Carrie my love. And tell her we’re looking forward to the wedding in March. If there’s anything I can do to help her, you know I’d be happy to.”

“I’ll tell her.” He kissed her on the cheek as he started out the door. “And we’ll both see you next Saturday, at the ceremony.” He paused for a minute before leaving. “Bye, Amanda.”

“Goodbye, Joe.” She waited by the door, waving one more time as Joe slid behind the wheel of his car. She watched as he pulled away, his tail-lights fading into the distance. Sighing, she quietly closed the door and locked it.

CHAPTER FIVE

“That’s the last of the them,” Dotty said as she finished loading the dishwasher.

Amanda nodded distractedly, glancing at the clock on the stove. “I don’t know what’s keeping Lee and Jamie. I expected them back long before this. It’s after eight o’clock.”

“I’m sure they’re fine, Amanda. Probably trying to thaw out from their weekend in the woods. Why they have these things in the middle of winter, I’ll never know.”

“It’s supposed to be a test of survival skills, Mother. But it isn’t usually this cold, even in February.”

“Survival is one thing, turning people into Popsicles is another,” Dotty said heatedly. “After all, they’re just little boys...”

“Oh, it’s fun, Grandma,” Philip added as he headed into the kitchen. “Mom, can I watch some T.V.? The ‘Charlie’s Angels’ marathon is on.”

“Have you done your homework?” his mother asked, looking at him questioningly.

“No, but...”

“Then don’t you think you’d better get it finished, Philip?”

“Okay,” he mumbled in disappointment, reluctantly heading for his room.

“Can you believe the stuff he wants to watch on television?” Dotty began, shaking her head. “Really, Amanda...”

“Hey, Lee and Jamie are home,” Philip called out from the other room. “I think they...”

The rest of his sentence was drowned out by the exuberant sounds of Lee and Jamie’s entrance. Philip turned around, heading back into the kitchen with them.

“How was the trip?” Amanda asked brightly as she turned in the general direction of the noise.

“Hey, look Mom, they won!” Philip said with a grin, helping Jamie with the trophy he was struggling to carry. “That’s so cool.”

They put the trophy on the kitchen table and Philip stood back to admire it. “That’s much bigger than my third place trophy,” he said kindly, as Jamie nodded his agreement.

“First place, Jamie, that’s terrific. I knew you could do it,” Dotty said in admiration.

“That’s wonderful, sweetheart,” Amanda said, giving him a hug. “You must have worked really hard to win first place.”

“Nah, it was a piece of cake, right Lee?” Jamie said, staring admiringly at his trophy.

“Right,” Lee replied with a grin. “All we had to do was read the map.”

At the sound of his voice, Amanda turned around with a warm smile, walking over to kiss him hello. “Are you guys hungry? We saved you some dinner.”

“No, we stopped at Marvelous Marvin’s,” he said, returning her kiss.

“Yeah,” Jamie put in. “We had Colossus burgers and fries.”

“Minus the secret sauce.” Lee laughed, rolling his eyes as he noticed Amanda’s expression.

“It was great,” Jamie beamed.

“You’re lucky, we had green beans,” Philip muttered under his breath.

“It must have been some weekend,” Dotty said, looking at them in amusement. “You two look like you brought home half the woods with you.”

“And the other half is in the garage, with our camping gear,” Lee chuckled in response.

“Yeah, we got kind of dirty when we took that short cut,” Jamie agreed.

“Short cut?” Amanda said, looking at Lee quizzically.

“Ah, it wasn’t really a short cut,” Lee said quickly.

“Yeah,” Jamie answered. “We thought it would take a couple of hours off our time, but after we kept going around in circles...”

“Circles?” his mother repeated.

Jamie nodded. “And then when we had to take that detour because of the lake that wasn’t on the map...”

“And you still won?” Philip asked in surprise.

“Yeah, we already had so many points, it didn’t matter that we finished late,” Jamie said happily.

Amanda raised her eyebrow as she looked at her husband. “Finished late?”

“Uh, just a little,” he replied with his most engaging smile.

“Yeah, Mom, but it was okay, we made it in before they called the rescue squad.”

“C’mon, Jamie, why don’t you hit the showers?” Dotty said, trying not to snicker at the expression on her daughter’s face. “They way you look, it may take the rescue squad to get you cleaned up.”

“Oh, Grandma...” he began.

“Your grandmother’s right, Jamie, you go ahead,” Lee said with a smile. “Just don’t use all the hot water.”

“Okay,” Jamie agreed pleasantly.

Amanda listened in surprise to the exchange, noting with satisfaction that this was the first time Lee had sounded like a parent where Jamie was concerned. She shook her head in wonder as she saw Jamie head off to the bathroom without an argument. “I’m glad you won, sweetheart,” she called out as he turned to leave. “I’m proud of you.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

As Jamie went to grab his trophy, Philip picked it up for him. “That’s okay, I’ve got it,” he said, helpfully carrying it towards the stairs.

Jamie turned to look at Lee as he headed out of the room. “Thanks, Lee. I had fun.”

“Me, too, Jamie.”

“I’ll get you some extra towels – you’re going to need them,” Dotty said, smiling to herself as she followed the boys out of the room.

Lee turned towards Amanda with a tired smile. “So, are you proud of me, too?”

Amanda quickly closed the distance between them, putting her hands lightly on his shoulders. “I don’t know, Stetson. Short cut? Circles? Rescue squad?”

“Yeah, I think those Junior Trailblazer maps are written in some kind of code,” he laughed. “We still won.”

“Tell me the truth – did you cheat?”

“Cheat, me? Amanda, how can you even ask that,” he answered with a grin. “Don’t worry, we won fair and square.”

“Uh-huh.” She shook her head in mock dismay. “You look beat.”

“I am,” he yawned. “You were right about those fathers...they’re a pretty tough group to break into.”

“The film company was a hard sell, huh?”

“One of them actually wanted to discuss the camera angles he’d used in his latest home movie,” he grinned. “But I knew I was in big trouble when he told me he’d actually seen IFF’s latest documentary.”

“‘The Life Cycle of the Boll Weevil’?”

“Yeah - you can see now why we won.”

“I guess you really did deserve that trophy.”

“Jamie can keep the trophy,” Lee smiled as he pulled her against him. “I kinda had another reward in mind.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah.” As he leaned in to kiss her, she pulled back slightly.

“That isn’t exactly the reaction I was going for,” he teased.

“Lee, you’re a mess,” she complained, wrinkling her nose in distaste.

He ran his hand over his face. “Don’t like the new look?”

“No, mountain men don’t appeal to me,” she laughed, keeping him at arm's length.

“And this is the homecoming I get after a rigorous weekend in the woods, sleeping on the cold ground, eating roots, drinking from streams...I knew it would happen sooner or later. The honeymoon is really over.”

“No, it’s not over – let’s just say it’s on hold until you shave and shower.”

Lee yawned sleepily. “I guess I’ll go hit the showers then.”

“And I’ll think about what I can do to reward you for your bravery this weekend...after I see what kind of mess you left in the garage.”

Amanda smiled as she watched him head upstairs. She couldn’t remember when she’d ever seen Jamie and Lee so relaxed around each other. Things must have gone really well this weekend, she thought with a relieved sigh. She couldn’t wait to hear the details. Joe’s big case may have turned out to be a blessing in disguise.

She quickly sorted through their camping gear, smiling to herself as her thoughts drifted back over her own weekend. It felt really good to finally talk things through with Joe, yet at the same time, she was filled with an inexplicable sadness. But she knew their talk should have happened a long time ago - it was a sort of closure for their marriage that was long overdue. She still felt a twinge of guilt for leading him on last summer, however unintentionally. She tried not to dwell on how much easier things might have been on everyone if she had kept to

her original plan last January and told him the truth about her upcoming elopement. Maybe he and Carrie would be married by now. Joe was a wonderful man – he deserved everything good that life had to offer. She just couldn't be the instrument of his happiness anymore. She fervently hoped he'd finally find what he needed with Carrie.

She glanced at the clock on the stove as she came back into the kitchen. She didn't realize it had gotten so late – she hadn't intended to spend that much time in the garage. Switching off the lights, she headed up the stairs, thankful for her peaceful household. Her mother was already in bed, the muted sounds from the television drifting out from beneath her closed door. She knocked on Philip's room, quickly checking to see that he'd done his homework. Securing his promise that he would indeed finish his algebra papers neatly this time, she said goodnight, stopping in the next room to look in briefly on Jamie. He was already in bed, sound asleep, his glasses flung carelessly on his bedside table and his dirty clothes thrown in a pile in the corner of his room. She pulled the covers up around him, slowly running her hand across his hair. Her baby was certainly growing up, she sighed, her thoughts tinged with sadness. Turning out his light, she headed for her own room.

She opened her bedroom door, her mind turning to the pleasant prospect of Lee's homecoming. She couldn't wait to show him exactly how much she'd missed him this weekend. She closed the door quietly behind her, noting with a smile of anticipation that Lee was already in bed waiting for her.

"You must have really worn Jamie out," she said as she walked toward him with a laugh. "He's in bed, sound asleep, dead to the ..." Reaching the bed, she took a closer look at her husband. He, too, was sleeping, snoring lightly, the covers pulled up around his head. And he wasn't much neater than Jamie, she laughed ruefully, as she bent to pick up the clothes he'd dropped in an ignominious heap by the bed.

She bent to kiss him softly on the forehead. "Sweet dreams," she murmured indistinctly against his now smooth cheek. His hair was still damp and he smelled of soap and shampoo. And he was absolutely sound asleep. Sighing softly, she quickly changed her clothes and crawled into bed beside him, snuggling against his warmth and, closing her eyes, drifted pleasantly off to sleep.

* * * * *

Lee opened his eyes, looking at the clock with a start. It read 5:45 a.m., he noticed with bewilderment, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. He had been asleep

over eight hours? He had just meant to lie down for a minute while he waited for Amanda to join him. Amanda...he quickly rolled over on his back, smiling at his wife who was sleeping soundly next to him, curled up on her left side.

He propped himself up on his elbow to look at her more closely, watching the even rise and fall of her breathing. He marveled at how wonderful it still felt to wake up beside her every morning. After everything they had been through in the past year, he didn't think he'd ever take this simple pleasure for granted. She even looked beautiful in the morning, he thought as he watched her slumber. He carefully placed a small kiss on her shoulder, then pulled back, observing her closely to see if she would stir. She murmured softly, burrowing down deeper under the covers.

He could see that it was going to take some more extensive maneuvering to wake her up. He carefully bent over her, blowing softly in her ear. She mumbled something indistinctly, brushing her hand against her ear as if batting at a fly. He gently pulled back the hair that had fallen in her face as she slept, leaning over her to place a butterfly kiss on her cheek. She sighed contentedly as if enjoying a pleasant dream, hugging her pillow closer to her. Lee leaned back, frowning slightly, contemplating his next move with care.

Amanda buried her face in her pillow, trying to hide her smile. She had been enjoying the last few seconds of deep sleep before Lee's overtures had slowly roused her to consciousness. She lay still, waiting for his next step with eager anticipation.

She didn't have to wait long. His breath warm on her back, he gently pulled back the covers, trailing tiny kisses down her neck and shoulder. Summoning all her willpower, she remained motionless, barely suppressing her grin as she listened to his frustrated sigh. She knew it wouldn't be long until he resorted to more drastic measures.

He didn't disappoint her. It only took a few seconds before he executed a new plan of attack. Beginning at her ankles, he began to trace a path up underneath her nightgown, along the outside of her leg. His hand moved slowly and skillfully, his fingers lingering playfully at the curve of her hip before sliding up to gently cup her breast. Unable to lie still any longer, Amanda moaned slightly, grasping his hand through the fabric of her nightgown.

"Okay, you win, I give up," she teased, snuggling against him.

"That's what you get for playing possum," he laughed, burying his head in her neck.

“I was just giving you a taste of your own medicine. You couldn’t even stay awake for a few measly minutes last night. I come upstairs and what do I find...”

“I’m awake now,” he whispered as he pulled her closer. He brushed his lips lightly against her, murmuring a quiet “good morning”.

“Good morning to you, too.” Amanda answered in a soft voice. “Sleep well?”

“Like a rock.”

“What time is it?” she asked sleepily as he rolled on his back, taking her with him. She rested her head on his shoulder, her left arm and leg draped over his body as she pulled herself in closer.

“It’s early,” he replied, holding her tighter in his arms and kissing the top of her head. “Not quite six o’clock.”

“Good.”

“Miss me this weekend?”

“Every minute. How did things go with Jamie? I still can’t believe you won that trophy.”

“Actually, aside from missing you, it was a pretty good weekend.”

“I could tell. You two seem much closer. What happened in those woods, anyway?”

“Nothing much,” he laughed, gently stroking her arm. “We hiked, we camped, we talked...”

“About?”

“You know, ‘guy’ stuff.” He leaned over and silenced her with a kiss. “I’ll tell you later.”

“Lee...”

“Let’s just say we understand each other a little better now. It’s given me a whole new perspective on the wilderness,” he said, his hands beginning to gently explore her body.

“Lee, stop teasing and tell me what you talked about,” she said, stopping his hand just short of its goal.

“How to build a fire, the best way to stay warm in the wilderness, that kind of stuff, “ he grinned.

“You’re not going to tell me, are you?”

“Nope. Of course, you could try to torture me,” he whispered in a low voice. “I might break under intensive interrogation.”

“Oh, yeah? What if I take you camping next week instead of to the island? How’s that for torture?”

“Not exactly what I had in mind,” he grinned, rolling them both over on their sides so they were facing each other. “Besides, freezing in our long underwear was not exactly how I pictured us spending our second honeymoon.”

“Why don’t you enlighten me,” she suggested, giving up her questioning and finally allowing him to change the subject.

Eyes twinkling, he pulled her closer and whispered lowly in her ear.

“I definitely like the way you think, Stetson,” she returned, running her hand slowly up and down his arm.

“I’m glad. Speaking of which, I am sorry about last night. I just meant to lie down for a minute and wait for you, but the next thing I knew, it was morning,” he laughed apologetically.

“You’re forgiven this time. Of course, you could find a way to make it up to me.”

“I thought that’s what I’ve been trying to do. If you’d just stop interrupting me...”

“I’m sorry. I’ll give you my undivided attention now, I promise. “ She reached beneath the waistband of his boxers, running her hands over his buttocks and pressing him towards her. “How’s this?”

“Hmm, I like it,” he murmured as he closed his mouth on hers, parting her lips with his tongue and kissing her deeply. His hands continued the exploration he’d begun a few minutes earlier, losing himself in the soft contours of her flesh. Somewhere in the distance, he heard the discordant sound of a telephone, but he pushed it from his mind. He vaguely heard Amanda calling his name.

“Lee,” Amanda said a second time, pushing him away. “The phone.”

“Don’t answer it,” he panted, urgently kissing her again.

“It’s the business line,” she said, breaking the kiss. “We have to answer it.”

Lee sighed and rolled on his back, the persistent ring of the phone becoming an annoying wail. He grabbed for it, tersely answering, “Scarecrow.”

“Hi, it’s me.”

“Do you have any idea what time it is, Francine?” Lee demanded, still somewhat breathless from his activities.

“I’m sorry, did I, ah, interrupt something?” Francine asked innocently, laughter bubbling behind her words.

“What is it, Francine?” he growled irritably.

“I’ve got a few things I have to go over for the conference this morning.”

“We went over everything on Friday,” he said crossly.

“You’re not the one I need to talk to, Scarecrow. Could I please speak to my partner?” she asked demurely. “That is, if you’re not too busy,”

“Hold on,” he replied through gritted teeth, handing the phone to Amanda. “Your partner would like to speak with you.”

Amanda took the phone, sitting up and pushing the strap of her nightgown back into place. “Francine? Is there a problem?”

“I’m sorry to intrude on you guys, but I needed to tell you that our meeting at the Regency has been moved up this morning. It’s at eight o’clock now, not nine-thirty.”

“And you waited until now to tell me?”

“I meant to call you last night,” Francine answered apologetically.

Amanda gripped the phone tightly in exasperation. Lee’s hand had begun its exploration anew and she shut her eyes, trying to concentrate on what Francine was saying.

“Jonathan dropped by,” her partner prattled on. “And...Amanda, he asked me to marry him.”

“What did you say?” Amanda asked with a smile, hearing the answer already in her voice.

“I told him yes. That’s why I didn’t call. I’m really sorry.”

“No, it’s okay.” She rolled over, trying to evade her husband’s persistent attentions. At least Francine seemed to have had a good night.

“Do me a favor, will you? Don’t tell Lee. I want to tell him myself, in person. I want to see the look on his face.”

“Okay. You know how I feel about it,” she said vaguely, trying not to spoil Francine’s surprise. “I’ve got to get moving. I’ll see you at eight.” Leaning over Lee, she hung up the phone.

He put his arms around her, holding her tightly in his embrace. “What was that all about?”

“Oh, nothing, just business,” she teased, smiling softly, planting a small kiss on his lips. “I’ve got to go.”

“Just business and you’ve got to go?” he said skeptically as he held her tighter in his arms. “That’s supposed to be my line.”

She pulled herself away from him, struggling to get up. “C’mon, Lee, I’m not kidding. I have to shower and pack for this conference and meet Francine at eight at the conference center.”

“Amanda...”

“It’s work, you know that.”

“Yeah, I know that. And I know that you’ll be spending the next two nights with Francine at the Regency,” he moaned, pulling the pillow over his head. “I’m beginning to think there’s some kind of conspiracy to keep us apart.”

“Just keep your mind focused on next week like I plan to do,” she said as she bent to kiss him lightly. “I’ve got to jump into the shower.”

“I could scrub your back,” he offered with a seductive smile.

“You know full well if you get in that shower with me I’ll never get out on time.”

“There’s nothing I can do for you?” he tried one more time.

“Actually...”

“Yes?” he said expectantly.

“You could drop the boys at school for me this morning,” she smiled archly. “It’ll give you and Jamie a chance to talk about more ‘guy’ stuff.”

“Not exactly what I had in mind,” he grinned. “But okay - my meeting isn’t until nine.”

“I’m sorry about this morning,” she said, leaning against the bathroom door. “In five days we’ll have a whole week all to ourselves.”

“Hold that thought,” he rejoined, smiling at her from across the room. “Hurry up, get your shower before I lose control and you miss your meeting.” Sighing, he pulled the covers up over his head.

With a wistful look at Lee, Amanda headed into the bathroom.

CHAPTER SIX

“You guys really didn’t have to buy me dinner,” Francine said as she emerged from the crowded dining room at the Hotel Regency with Lee and

Amanda. "In fact, I probably should have treated you to make up for my unfortunate timing this morning."

"Don't be ridiculous, Francine," Amanda stated with a smile. "This was a celebration."

"Amanda's right, we couldn't be happier for you and Jonathan," Lee reiterated. "Only next time, just remember to call the night before."

"Ignore him," Amanda replied as she knocked Lee in the mid-section with her arm. "He's still recovering from his weekend in the wilderness."

"Scarecrow in the middle of a group of Junior Trailblazers," Francine snickered. "What I wouldn't give to have seen that."

"Can I escort you ladies to your room?" Lee inquired, ignoring her remark.

"No, thanks," Francine said. "I'm going to make one final check on tomorrow's security arrangements."

"Do you want me to go with you?" Amanda asked.

Francine looked over Amanda's head at Lee, who was shaking his head adamantly.

"Not necessary," Francine replied, noting the look on Lee's face with a smile. "This shouldn't take long. You can do the morning check. I'll see you in about ten minutes?" She glanced quickly at Lee who was pulling his hands apart, indicating that she should stretch out the time. "On second thought, you'd better make that twenty minutes," she amended, making a point of checking her gold Italian wristwatch.

"Okay." Oblivious to Lee's machinations, she headed purposely towards the elevator.

"Thank you," Lee mouthed over his shoulder, as he turned to follow her. He reached for Amanda's hand, quickly enclosing it in his. It felt good to steal a few moments with her. Their schedules today had been extremely hectic and he had been unable to carve out the time for even a few private words. He had anticipated they'd at least have a quiet dinner alone tonight, but when he'd arrived at the hotel, he discovered to his chagrin that she'd invited Francine to join them. Of course, once he'd discovered the reason, he couldn't have been

happier for Francine. She and Jonathan had been dancing around the marriage issue for the better part of a year, ever since his unexpected return to D.C. last spring. It seemed that she'd finally been able to put her fears to rest and move forward with the man she loved.

The elevator stopped on the eighth floor and they quickly departed, stopping to show their I.D. to the agents stationed at the concierge's desk. With the conference delegates all staying on this floor, security up here was tight. And after the incident with the Chameleon, absolutely no one received a free pass, Amanda noted with a smile. She was relieved that everything appeared to be going according to plan. She knew it was irrational, but she felt as if she had something to prove with this assignment. This was the first major project Lee had entrusted to her since his promotion and she was more anxious than usual that nothing go wrong.

With a sigh, she realized they had reached her door. She turned and looked up at Lee. "Goodnight," she said, a touch of regret creeping into her voice.

"Not quite yet," he grinned, reaching for her key.

"Lee, I'm working tonight."

"I'm perfectly aware of that. But I'd prefer not to say goodnight to you in front of an audience." He nodded his head, indicating the two agents watching them from down the hall. "Unless you insist..."

"Get inside," she said, rolling her eyes and hurrying into the room.

Lee closed the door and immediately took her in his arms. "I've been thinking about this all day," he said as he quickly kissed her.

"I missed you, too."

They stood together for a few moments, holding each other tightly. Lee kissed her neck softly before pulling back to look at her. "It's been a long time since you and I were alone together in a hotel room," he murmured, his eyes twinkling.

"Lee, we're not really alone," Amanda reminded him, starting to pull away.

“I don’t see anyone else in here, Amanda,” he laughed as he leaned in to kiss her again.

“Lee...” She sighed deeply, putting her hands on his chest in a half-hearted attempt to stop him.

“What?” he breathed, nibbling teasingly at her earlobe.

“Those two agents are right down the hall...”

“I saw them,” he whispered, drinking in the scent of her perfume as he kissed his way down her neck.

“And they saw you come in here,” she objected weakly, struggling not to respond to the feel of his fingers moving sensuously across her back.

“I know, I thought they looked very efficient,” he joked as he pulled her blouse out from beneath her skirt. His hands traveled up underneath her shirt, lightly caressing the bare skin on her back.

“Lee,” she began, attempting another feeble protest.

Ignoring her, he pulled her in closer, kissing her deeply. He felt her breathing quicken as her resolve momentarily weakened and she returned his kiss.

She exhaled softly as the kiss ended, leaning against him and allowing herself a minute to enjoy their closeness. His hands roamed across her skin and before she knew what was happening, her mouth somehow found his again. Coming up for air, she broke their contact with an effort.

“You know Francine will be up here any minute,” she said, speaking softly, her lips still on his.

“Not a problem,” he said, his fingers starting to undo the buttons on her blouse, his intention obvious. He bent to quickly kiss the area he exposed.

“Wait just a minute, Stetson,” she stated firmly, quickly pushing him away. “What is this - ‘how to make love in five minutes or less’?”

“Right now, five minutes are about all I need,” he mumbled breathlessly, his mouth again seeking hers.

“All I need?” she intoned mockingly. “When did this activity get reclassified as an individual sport?”

“I was only saying that sometimes quick can be good,” he sighed in exasperation, his breath hot on her neck. “Besides, you heard Francine agree to give us twenty minutes.” He flashed her his most seductive smile as he moved to capture her mouth once again.

She shook her head again, more seriously this time, as she turned and walked away with a frown. “Agreed? Is that what you said?”

“I told her that she should take her time checking on security,” Lee explained, coming up behind her, and enclosing her in his arms. He kissed her lightly on the neck. “I thought you’d be pleased.”

She pulled out of his embrace, quickly putting some distance between them. She turned to look at him from across the room, her anger simmering just below the surface. “You thought I’d be pleased that you turned our intimate relationship into a group negotiation?”

“I’m sorry,” he complained sarcastically, “but I wanted to spend just a few minutes alone with you. I didn’t realize you were going to make this a federal case.”

“You’re the one who seems to be doing that,” she shot back.

“Amanda, it’s been almost three weeks. I’m going through serious withdrawal here...”

“And I’m not?” she rejoined hotly. “I happen to miss our sex life, too, you know.”

“Then what are we arguing about?” he said, moving to close the distance between them.

“Lee, I told you already, I’m definitely not in the mood right now for a quickie.”

“Fine,” he said, stopping dead in his tracks. “You’ve made that abundantly clear. Excuse me for wanting to make love to my wife.”

“And excuse me if I can’t get psyched about five minutes of groping each other before Francine walks in.” She carefully tucked her blouse back inside her skirt.

Lee watched her, sighing in frustration. “Amanda, the last time we made love is starting to be a hazy memory.”

“And this would certainly be memorable, wouldn’t it?” she snapped. “After all this time, I’m sure you can hang on forty-eight more hours until this conference is over.”

“That seems like all I’m doing these days,” he returned in annoyance. “I thought things were supposed to be easier once we were actually living together.”

“I wasn’t aware that you had any complaints.”

“I don’t normally. It’s just lately, there are a few things...”

“‘A few things?’” she interrupted. “Exactly what is that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing. Let’s drop it.”

“No, you started this, I think you should finish it.”

“We don’t have time to talk about this now.”

“You seemed to think we had time enough for some non-verbal communication a few minutes ago,” she hissed. “Or do I have so many shortcomings that five minutes isn’t enough time to cover that?”

“That’s not what I meant and you know it.”

“Tell you what,” she continued hotly, ignoring the pained expression on his face, “since you don’t have time to discuss this, why don’t you just make another list? I’m sure I’ll have time to read it when hell freezes over.”

“Oh, forget it,” he returned, his own anger mounting. “I’m sorry I even mentioned it. Goodnight.”

He yanked the door open forcefully, barely avoiding a collision with an embarrassed Francine. Standing beside the doorway, she quickly pretended to

search through her handbag. “I was just...ah...looking for my key,” she mumbled lamely, holding open her jumbled purse by way of explanation. Rolling his eyes, Lee walked past her, slamming the door behind him.

“Goodnight to you, too,” Amanda muttered under her breath, turning away to hastily button up her blouse. She sank down on the bed in exasperation.

“I’m sorry about that,” Francine apologized. “I was just waiting out there to give you guys a little privacy. I seem to have the worst possible timing these days.”

“Don’t worry about it, Francine,” Amanda responded, her irritation at Lee still apparent. “You aren’t the one responsible for Lee’s mood.”

“It’s kind of comforting to know that marriage doesn’t really change things between two people,” Francine chuckled, disregarding Amanda’s disheveled state. “The two of you still manage to fight as much as you always did.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Amanda sighed, abruptly the subject. “Everything set for tomorrow?”

Francine nodded. “Everything’s running smoothly. You know, Amanda, you really should relax about this assignment. It’s routine.” She stifled a yawn. “It’s been a long day. If you don’t mind, I think I’m going to take a nice hot bath. I brought these along.” She held up an elegant bottle of bath salts, wrapped in gold foil with embossed French lettering. “They’re wonderfully relaxing. You ought to try some – from the looks of things, you could use them.” She headed for the bathroom with a smirk.

“Should have sent some home with Lee,” Amanda muttered under her breath.

“Did you say something, Amanda?” Francine called from behind the bathroom door.

“No, I didn’t, Francine,” Amanda lied, rubbing her hand across her forehead. Lying down on the bed, she tried to block out the pain that was beginning to throb across her temples. Sometimes she’d like to strangle Lee, she thought heatedly. As if she was looking forward to spending the next two nights in this hotel room with Francine. Even though over time they had developed a workable partnership and even the beginnings of a personal friendship, Francine was still Francine. Best when swallowed in small doses.

She closed her eyes, her thoughts turning once more to her husband. Small pangs of guilt began to tug at her conscience. She shouldn't have been so abrupt with him earlier. What was the matter with her these days? First she bit off Joe's head this weekend, then Lee tonight. After all, he only wanted the same thing she did, a few private moments together. Of course, he might have phrased his invitation a little more appealingly, she thought wryly. The strain of work combined with pulling off this wedding ceremony must be taking its toll on both of them. Four more days to go until their anniversary, she thought mournfully. She hoped they could survive that long.

She took a deep breath, enjoying the peace and quiet while she waited for Francine to finish in the bathroom. Glancing at her watch, she realized that she'd been in there close to thirty minutes. Francine had a lot to learn about not hogging the bathroom, she thought dryly, wondering if Jonathan had any idea of what he'd gotten himself into. Of course, after the little show she'd witnessed tonight, Francine was probably in there harboring the same speculation about Lee.

With only a second's hesitation, she reached for the phone, quickly dialing their home phone number. She was rewarded with a busy signal. Philip must be talking to his new girlfriend, she thought with a groan. She wouldn't get through for hours. She tried again, this time calling their private business line. She listened in frustration as the phone rang the prerequisite six times before the answering service picked up. She decided against leaving a message, afraid that Lee was in no mood to return her call tonight. She vaguely wondered where he could be. It was only a short trip from the hotel to Rockville. He should have had more than enough time to get home by now.

Maybe he was taking a cold shower, she thought with a wry grin. She'd give it some more time, then try again. One way or another, she'd say goodnight properly tonight.

* * * * *

Lee rolled over, punching the pillow with his hand. He was still too keyed up to sleep, he thought with a frown. He glanced at the clock, noting that it was a little past midnight. It was probably too late to call Amanda tonight, he sighed. He should have called her as soon as he got home, instead of going out for a run. Dotty had looked at him as if he was crazy, but he had work off this excess energy somehow. The boys had instantly volunteered to go with him, but he'd quickly vetoed that suggestion. It was bitterly cold outside and with Amanda out of the house, he didn't want to take the chance of one of them getting sick on his watch. As it was, Jamie was sniffing a little from their weekend in the woods.

Dotty had laughed at his concern about that, assuring him that Jamie only had a little cold. Still, he couldn't help worrying about him. 'Was this what it was like to be a parent?' he thought suddenly. If so, he wasn't sure how Amanda survived it all these years alone. Even with Dotty's reassuring presence, he still felt the responsibility keenly. He fervently wished Amanda was here to shoulder it with him.

Everything was better when he shared it with her, he thought sadly. He'd behaved like a selfish boor earlier tonight, implying that their sex life was the most important thing about their relationship. No wonder she'd reacted the way she did. The hell with the time, he thought quickly, he really owed her an apology tonight.

As he reached for the phone, he heard the distinctive ring of their private business line. Sighing, he quickly grabbed for it, hoping this wasn't an urgent problem.

"Lee?" Amanda's voice called tentatively through the wires.

"Amanda? Is something wrong?" He asked quickly, responding to the note of tension in her voice.

"No, I've just been trying to get a hold of you all night," she replied in a low voice, glancing quickly at Francine who was sleeping peacefully under the covers in the bed across from hers. "I keep getting a busy signal on our home phone."

He reached over and quickly checked the other line. "I think Philip left it off the hook again," Lee sighed. "He was talking to 'whatsurname' for hours tonight."

"Julie."

"That's the one. I finally told him to say goodnight at 10:30. "

Amanda laughed softly at this picture of domesticity. "Is everything else okay?"

"I think Jamie's getting a cold, but your mother said not to worry about it."

"Did he have a fever?"

“A fever?” Lee replied in alarm. “I don’t think so.”

“Then don’t worry, he’s probably fine,” she whispered.

“Okay. Amanda...”

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry about what happened tonight,” he said, hesitating while he searched for the right words. “I didn’t mean to behave like an oversexed teenager.”

“It’s okay.”

“And I also didn’t mean to imply that I wasn’t happy with our physical relationship. It’s always been...”

“Yeah, for me, too,” she smiled, pausing briefly before continuing. “I’m sorry about earlier. You know how much I...”

“I know, I do, too.” He paused, listening to the stillness of their sleeping household. “I wish you were here right now.”

“I wish I was, too.” Stealing a quick look at her partner’s motionless body, she whispered quietly into the phone. “Francine hogs the bathroom.”

“What, you didn’t have your little talk with her?”

“Which talk is that?”

“The one where you lay out the ground rules for bathroom usage,” Lee laughed. “You know, ask her about her habits, work out a schedule...”

“I don’t know what...”

“Too bad you couldn’t get those ‘brother/sister’ accommodations with Francine,” Lee continued, gently jogging her memory.

“Oh, that little talk,” she laughed, remembering her diatribe about their sleeping arrangements in the hotel parking lot during the ‘Marvelous Marvin’ case. “I guess I’ll have to remember to do that next time.” She took a deep breath, sighing softly. “We should try to get some sleep.”

“Yeah, we’re probably going to need it,” he yawned sleepily. “Just a few more days until the relatives arrive.”

“We at least have Wednesday night together. Aunt Lillian is due on Thursday and your uncle on Friday morning.”

“I know,” he said apprehensively, the thought of spending even twenty-four hours with the Colonel already putting him on edge. “You know, Amanda, I suddenly remember what was so appealing about eloping.”

“Well, we did it once for ourselves, I suppose we can do this one for our family. Just remember what comes after the ceremony.”

“The honeymoon,” he grinned. “Trust me, I haven’t forgotten.”

She smiled on her end of the phone. “Try to get some sleep.”

“I will...I love you.”

“Me too.”

“‘Me too’ what?” he teased.

“You know,” she whispered, looking over at Francine.

“Yeah, I know, but I want to hear you say it.”

“Lee...”

“Amanda...”

“Oh for Pete’s sake,” Francine chimed in loudly. “Just tell him you love him so we can all get some sleep.”

“Okay, okay.” She could hear Lee trying to suppress his amusement at Francine’s remark. “I love you, too. Satisfied?”

“Not really, but I think that’s as close as I’m gonna get tonight,” he laughed.

“Goodnight, Lee,” she said, replacing the phone on its cradle. She rolled over, closing her eyes with a sigh. She couldn’t wait until this weekend when she

could finally spend some quality time with her husband. She counted the remaining days until their anniversary. Saturday couldn't come soon enough to suit her.

"Amanda," Francine's irritated voice drifted across to her out of the darkness. "For the record...I do not hog the bathroom."

"You were in there over an hour, Francine. I was beginning to think you'd drowned."

"I was applying my moisturizing base from Monsieur Henri. There are six separate steps. You can't rush these things, Amanda."

"I should have realized," she groaned. "Tell me, does Jonathan know about this little ritual?"

"Take my word for it – Jonathan is more than satisfied with the results of Monsieur Henri's beauty process," she answered knowingly. "Besides, speaking of annoying habits, how does Lee deal with your obsessive need to always have the window open?"

"I like fresh air," Amanda replied through gritted teeth.

"In case this little fact has escaped you, it's February."

"Francine, it's only open a crack," she sighed, mentally counting to ten. It was going to be a long couple of days.

"Well, I'm freezing to death," she grumbled. "The man must deserve a medal."

"Goodnight, Francine," Amanda sighed, rolling over and pulling the covers up. 'Besides,' she added to herself, 'I make sure he's never cold.' Her mind quickly filled with the pleasant thoughts that image engendered and she closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"I feel guilty eating in front of you," Billy stated as he dug into his breakfast.

“No, go ahead,” Lee said with an easy smile. “I’m going to wait for Amanda.” He signaled the waitress to refill their cups. She acknowledged him with a harried smile, rushing to take another order. The coffee shop at the Hotel Regency was crowded with delegates from the conference and Lee and Billy both nodded to several familiar faces as they passed by. It was the perfect place for a casual, “off the record” meeting.

“So, what did you make of all that?”

“I don’t know, Scarecrow. At best, it could be a dead end and at worst, a red herring.”

“A cover-up? For what?”

Billy shrugged. “The real buyer?”

“You could be right,” Lee agreed with a frown. “But I definitely think it’s worth checking out. Right now it’s the only lead we have. And you know Merchisson’s the top man Paris. His information should be pretty solid.”

“That’s true. But considering the circumstances, I hate to throw this in your lap.”

Lee sighed. “But it’s the perfect cover. The bank those checks were drawn on is located on the same island we’re headed to – we can just pop over and check it out. Who would suspect a honeymoon couple?”

Billy nodded soberly. “You plan to use Amanda for this then?”

“I need backup. Besides,” he grinned, “If I do this on my own, I can guarantee you my first stop when we get home will be in divorce court.”

“I hear you,” Billy laughed, taking another sip of coffee. “Okay, bring her on board.”

“I’ll fill her in as soon as she has a need to know,” he assured his boss. “But at the moment, the fewer people who are aware of what we’re up to, the better.”

“If we can find a name to link to the Chameleon’s hit...” Billy began.

“...then we may be able to use him to link Holstein to all this,” Lee finished.

“Or at the very least, get some answers as to why Holstein was the target,” Billy amended carefully. “Remember, we have no solid evidence to suggest that he was anything more than an innocent victim in all this.”

“I know, I know - but I can’t shake this feeling....” He broke off suddenly as he saw Amanda and Francine enter the coffee shop.

Billy turned and followed his gaze, noting the wistful expression that came over Lee’s face as he caught a glimpse of his wife. Billy couldn’t suppress his smile at that sight. The friend sitting next to him today was a sharp contrast to the brash young man who’d joined his team so many years ago. That other Lee Stetson had performed his job coldly and efficiently, devoid of any emotions – the consummate agent. Then Amanda came into his life and Billy had observed his metamorphosis with increasing pleasure. As he had told Lee before that business with Addi Birol, keeping his feelings tightly in check for so long exacted a heavy personal toll.

He watched his friend rise and quickly negotiate the crowded dining room to reach Amanda. Yes, those ‘lone wolf’ days were certainly history now, he grinned. But his relationship with Amanda King, while so good for him emotionally, was a detriment when working in the field. His thoughts drifted back again to October of ’86. It had been impossible to reign Scarecrow in when Amanda had been held hostage by the terrorist Birol. They were lucky that situation had ended well, Billy thought soberly. Scarecrow’s feelings for Amanda rendered him vulnerable back then. It was next to impossible for an agent to perform efficiently when he had so much to lose.

And that incident was before their marriage, before their relationship became public domain. Billy shook his head, thoughtfully finishing the last bites of his breakfast. Theirs was a dirty business at times, anyone and anything fair game when the stakes were high. And for a field agent, they almost always were. Billy was relieved that Lee’s promotion had coincided with the announcement of his marriage, since had Scarecrow remained an active field agent, he would have had no choice but to rethink his partnership with Amanda.

Billy sipped his coffee, watching Lee and Amanda talking quietly together across the room, the picture of happiness. He sighed audibly at the thought of having to throw them yet another curve ball after everything that had gone down in the past six months. It was regretful, he reflected sadly, but Scarecrow and Mrs. King’s marriage had altered the rules of the game.

He needed to talk to Lee about Amanda's status. It was a discussion he had been putting off. Teaming her with Francine seemed to be working well so far. Who would ever have thought that, Billy chuckled to himself. He was painfully aware of how hard Amanda had worked to get this far. But with her relationship with Lee Stetson now common knowledge, she was just as vulnerable in the field as Lee would have been. Their marriage was a liability for active field status. This was something that needed to be addressed, and soon.

"Good morning, sir." Amanda's greeting startled him, rousing him from his reverie.

"Good morning, Amanda," he smiled. "Things at the conference have gone very well. You and Francine should both be commended."

"Thank you, sir," she said, returning his look and sitting down in the extra seat beside Lee.

"Francine isn't joining us?" Billy inquired.

"No, she said she wasn't hungry."

"I don't think the coffee shop's cuisine is up to her usual standards," Lee teased.

"Well, she doesn't know what she's missing," Billy laughed. "It was excellent. I highly recommend the pecan French toast." He pulled back his chair and stood up.

"You don't have to run off, Billy," Lee said with a smile.

"I've got a few things to take care of before the final conference session this morning," he winked. "You two enjoy your breakfast."

Amanda turned to her husband with a grin as their boss departed. "All right, Stetson, 'fess up – what did you say to Billy to negotiate this half-hour of privacy? I mean, first you bargain with Francine, now our boss..."

"I didn't say a thing, I swear. Billy's been working in intelligence for a lot of years – he has keenly honed instincts."

"If you say so," she laughed. "The bit about asking him to stay was a nice touch."

“Glad you liked it,” he said wryly. “I wanted to make it up to you for not being able to have dinner with you last night.”

“That’s okay, I understood. Did the boys enjoy their pizza?”

“Yeah, we had a good time.”

“You know, my being away for a couple of days has certainly brought out a new domestic side to you,” she teased, her face lighting up in a sultry smile. “I think I find it extremely sexy.”

“Oh, yeah? If I’d only known, I would have developed this interest years ago,” he grinned, accentuating the remark by moving his eyebrows. “Actually, I did kind of enjoy it. Well, the part with the boys, anyway,” he qualified, reaching for her hand under the table. “You I’ve missed.”

She squeezed his hand. “Me, too.”

“You know,” he began, lightly stroking her fingers, “Joe is taking the boys out tonight.”

“Really? When did all this happen?” She caught his fingers in hers, entwining them together.

“He called last night. He won his big case.”

“That’s good,” she smiled. “And what is Mother up to?”

“She has tickets to that new play at the theatre on M street.”

“The one that’s been sold out for six months?”

“Yup.”

“How ever did she manage that? Those tickets are like gold.”

“I don’t know,” Lee smiled innocently. “She must have friends in high places.”

“Oh my gosh,” Amanda sighed in amusement, “whatever will we do with the house all to ourselves?”

“I can think of a thing or two,” he grinned wickedly.

“I’m sure you can,” she agreed, returning his look. “Tell you what, how about I make you a special dinner, just the two of us, to reward you for your extra duty on the home front these past few days?”

“Tell you what,” he countered, retrieving his hand and offering her a menu. “How about we eat a big breakfast and skip the dinner part?”

“I like the way you think,” she smiled, quickly perusing the restaurant’s offerings. “Oh, I meant to ask you...how’s Jamie’s cold?”

“He’s fine. Your mother was right, it wasn’t serious.”

She nodded, barely suppressing her smile. “You know, you never did tell me what you two talked about last weekend. The ‘guy stuff’.”

“I didn’t?”

“No, you didn’t.”

“It...” Lee opened his mouth to speak as the waitress arrived at their table. Quickly giving her their order, he turned his attention back to Amanda with a serious expression, carefully choosing his words. “It was very enlightening. Jamie’s really quite a sensitive kid, you know.”

“Really?” Amanda smiled at Lee’s attempt to explain her son to her. “I hadn’t noticed.” She gave his hand a playful squeeze.

“Okay, okay. It’s just that this is a lot to get into over breakfast. Let’s just say I finally figured out what we have in common.”

“What?” she asked, momentarily intrigued.

“We both worry about you.”

Amanda sighed. “Lee...”

“I told you, this is complicated.” He removed his hand from hers, running it nervously through his hair as he tried to explain his conversation with Jamie. “I don’t think you have any idea just how hard Jamie’s world is for him to deal with right now. He’s worried that he’s going to lose you. He’s had to grow up pretty quickly these past few months. He’s suddenly come face to face with the

fact that the world isn't always a safe or friendly place. That's not easy for a child."

"Are we talking about Jamie now or you?" Amanda inquired quietly, putting a comforting hand on his arm.

"I don't know," Lee replied. "Both of us, maybe." He took a deep breath, looking into her dark eyes with a sorrowful expression. "I'm afraid I understand how he feels all too well." He paused for a minute, searching for the right words. "You know, Amanda, the whole loss of innocence issue is a difficult one to deal with, whether you're five years old or twelve."

"I know that," she said in a small voice, squeezing his arm. "We'll both be there to help him through this."

Lee nodded sadly. "I just think that maybe there are some tough choices ahead."

Amanda sighed and looked away, unable to meet his eye. "I know that, too."

"Hey," he whispered softly. "I didn't mean to get so serious. We don't have to make any irrevocable decisions right this minute. I just meant that we need to think about things."

"Yes," she agreed, meeting his gaze and nodding slightly.

"Here comes our order," Lee said, inclining his head at the waitress who was carrying a heavily laden tray. "Let's enjoy breakfast. Remember, you're going to need all your strength later."

"Is that a promise?" she asked, the sparkle returning to her eyes.

"Most definitely," he beamed in response.

* * * * *

"I thought this day would never end," Lee sighed as they walked into the house hand in hand.

"Me, too," Amanda reiterated, tossing her coat casually over a kitchen chair. "I expected to be done with the reports from the conference much earlier. Sorry you had to wait for me."

He shook his head. "I could have probably stayed later than 7:00 o'clock. Take my word for it - I have enough to keep me busy for the next six months and then some. Billy keeps promising me a staff."

"I thought he told you to take anyone you wanted from the New York office or D.C.?"

"He did," Lee reluctantly admitted. "I shouldn't blame Billy. I've been procrastinating. But I need to make a decision soon, before the work load buries me alive." He sighed as he piled his coat on top of hers, moving to close his arms around her waist.

"Enough of this nonsense." He closed his arms around her, pulling her body in close to his. "I'm sure there are more interesting things we could be doing than discussing business."

Amanda leaned in against him with a sigh, running her hands up his chest and tangling her fingers in his hair. "What exactly do you have in mind, Mr. Stetson?"

"I was thinking of a little quality time together, just the two of us," he said, lowering his head to nibble on her neck, his hands moving gently across her back.

"We could play Philip's new video game," she teased, tilting her head to one side to allow him better access. "He says it's a lot of fun."

"Not the kind of game I had in mind," he murmured against her ear, his hands traveling lightly down her back and over her hips. "I was thinking of something a little more interactive...and adult," he added, his voice a low growl.

"We could always pick up where you left off on Monday night," she teased. "I think I can spare five minutes now."

"What I have in mind will take a lot longer than five minutes," he asserted, pulling her to him and kissing her deeply. "Then again...."

She met his look with a throaty laugh. "You're absolutely sure you don't want me to make some dinner?"

"I'm not hungry," he whispered, moving his hands back up underneath her suit jacket. "I didn't eat that big breakfast for nothing."

“That was a long time ago. We wouldn’t want to run out of energy, you know.”

“We could always order a pizza later if our stamina waivers,” he grinned, slipping the jacket off her shoulders.

“And eat it in bed?”

He nodded, his mouth curving up in a smile. “Now,” he continued in a teasing voice, “if you’re talking about cooking the way we did on Christmas Eve?” He raised his eyebrow speculatively, tossing her jacket on top of their coats.

“Too much clean-up,” she laughed, slowly loosening his tie. “Besides, I think we’re out of whipped cream.”

“Too bad,” he grinned, opening the top button on her blouse and planting a tiny kiss in the hollow of her throat. “Any strawberries?”

“Out of season.” She pulled off his tie, pitching it carelessly over her shoulder.

“I know – that old standby, chocolate.” He undid another button, his fingers lingering tenderly on her chest.

“Sorry, used the last of it while you were off in the woods,” she breathed as she reached under his suit coat to trail her own fingertips along the thin fabric of his shirt. “Unless you’ve been to the store?”

“Nope,” he said, sighing softly at the feather-light touch of her fingers. “I guess we’ll just have to manage without it.”

“I think we’ll survive,” she said in a low voice, peeling off his coat at last and throwing it on the counter. “Unless it’s been so long you’ve forgotten what to do?”

“I don’t know, you might have to jog my memory.”

“Don’t worry. I can take you through it step-by-step if need be.”

They both smiled as she reached behind his neck, slowly pulling him towards her. Amanda closed her eyes, anticipating the gentle pressure of his lips on hers, when their forward motion was suddenly halted by the sound of a loud,

thumping noise above their heads. She hesitated, placing a restrictive hand on Lee's chest as they both turned in the direction of the sound.

"Are the boys home?" she asked, her brow knitting together in a scowl.

"I don't think so. Joe told me he would pick them up from school."

"If he canceled on them again..."

Lee shook his head, tiny worry lines beginning to form around his eyes. "I don't think so. Joe was very definite."

"Well, it sure sounds like there's someone in Jamie's room."

Lee headed cautiously towards the stairs, his left hand reaching reflexively for his gun.

"Lee," Amanda hissed. "What if it's one of the boys?"

"What if it isn't?" He frowned, seeing the look on her face. "Okay, okay," he said, leaving his gun safely in its holster. "Stay here."

"Not on your life," she insisted firmly, unconsciously re-buttoning her blouse as she fell in step behind him.

He pursed his lips closely together, shooting her a look as he cautiously mounted the stairs. Amanda followed him, one hand on his shoulder, closely hugging the wall. They stealthily made their way to the top of the staircase and down the hall, halting just outside Jamie's room.

Lee signaled for her to stay flat against the wall. Gripping the knob tightly, he quickly thrust open the door. The 'intruder' stood calmly by the far wall, neatly unpacking the contents of his suitcase into the top two drawers of the dresser.

"Now I'm certain you've been playing 'secret agent' too long," the man stated gruffly. "Or is that just the way you enter a room these days?"

"Sir?" Lee answered in shock, unconsciously snapping to attention.

"You were expecting someone else?"

"No, sir," Lee replied stiffly. "We weren't expecting anyone."

Hearing the tone in Lee's voice, Amanda hurriedly stepped into the room, a smile instantly diffusing across her face. "Colonel Clayton, what a wonderful surprise." She gave him a quick hug in welcome, while Lee stood uncomfortably to one side, watching in stunned silence as his uncle returned Amanda's greeting in kind.

"Why didn't you tell us you were coming early?" she continued, linking her arm with his. "We thought you were arriving on Friday."

"I had some extra leave coming and my squadron finished their training session early, so I hitched a ride on a B-52 that was heading east."

"We're so glad you did, aren't we, Lee?" she prompted, giving her husband a threatening look.

"Uh, yes, sir."

"How did you get in?" Amanda inquired, ignoring the tension in Lee's voice.

"Your very charming mother let me in earlier. She was just leaving for the theatre. She offered to change her plans, but I wouldn't hear of that. I told her I was very capable of unpacking and entertaining myself for a few hours."

"Have you eaten yet?"

"Oh, don't go to any trouble on my account."

"It's no trouble at all," Amanda smiled kindly. "Lee and I were just starting to cook."

"Yeah, we were," Lee put in sourly.

Amanda shot him another warning glance, then turned a friendly eye to Colonel Clayton. "Colonel?"

"Then I would be delighted to join you," the Colonel put in kindly, linking his arm with Amanda's as they headed through the door. "But only on the condition that you drop this formality and call me Uncle Bob." He looked over his shoulder, speaking gruffly to his nephew, who appeared riveted to the floor. "Coming, Skip?"

“Yes, sir,” he responded instinctively, his uncle’s use of that childhood name grating in his nerves as he followed them down the stairs.

* * * * *

“That was a good dinner,” Amanda said, as she emerged from the bathroom, drying her damp hair with a towel.

“I guess it depends on your definition of ‘good’,” Lee returned dourly. “The food was excellent, but I think the company gave me indigestion.”

“Lee, you shouldn’t be so hard on the Colonel. After all, he’s family.”

“I don’t think our idea of ‘family’ is the same, either.”

“Your uncle came all this way for our ceremony,” Amanda reminded him gently. “And two days early, at that. I think he was anxious to see you.”

“Well, he has a funny way of showing it. He didn’t say two words to me all night that weren’t part of his standard interrogation.”

“He seemed genuinely interested in meeting the boys when Joe brought them home,” Amanda pointed out as she ran her comb lightly through her hair. “And the boys seemed to take to him right away.”

“I know. It was very peculiar.” Lee sighed, stretching out on his back and looking up at the ceiling. “He’s normally not very good with children. Trust me, I speak from experience.”

“I think he really wants to be a part of the family.”

“Take my word for it, Amanda, if he was polite to the boys, it’s because his overblown sense of duty dictated that he should be.”

“Lee...”

“What are we going to do with him tomorrow?” Lee sighed, continuing to stare blankly at the ceiling.

“That’s all taken care of,” Amanda grinned, lying down on her stomach next to him. “He’s taking mother to the airport to pick up Aunt Lillian, then he’s taking them both to lunch at his club.”

“Ughh,” Lee groaned in exasperation, rolling his eyes at the ceiling. “That’s great. I can just imagine the conversation now.”

“You need to relax,” she whispered, running her finger tantalizingly up and down his chest. “Your uncle isn’t the monster you make him out to be.”

“You can say that because you didn’t have to grow up with his rules,” he frowned, rolling away from her. “I fully expect the man to knock on that door any minute for one of his unscheduled room-checks.”

“Lee, you’re blowing things way out of proportion,” she chided, moving closer to him and beginning to knead the muscles of his upper arms. “Why don’t you roll over and see if my ‘magic fingers’ are as good as yours?”

“I’m not in the mood, Amanda,” he complained, gingerly shaking off her hands.

“Since when?”

“Since your new ‘Uncle Bob’ landed unceremoniously on our doorstep.”

“I promise in a few minutes, you won’t be giving him a second thought.” She reached out to him, sliding her hand around to work the buckle on his belt.

He caught her fingers in his, bringing them to his lips and kissing them lightly. “I’m sorry, I just can’t.”

“Lee…”

“The Colonel always puts me on edge,” he tried to explain. He rolled off the bed, abruptly heading for his closet.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m going running.”

“In the middle of February?” she asked, tilting her head in amazement. “It’s cold out. In case you haven’t noticed, we live in Maryland, not California.”

“I’m perfectly aware of that,” Lee replied, unable to curb the sarcasm in his voice. “But I’ve got to get rid of this nervous energy somehow.”

“I just offered you the perfect way to do that very thing,” Amanda retorted, patting the space on the bed next to her invitingly.

“Amanda, I can’t make love to you when I feel like I’m ten years old again and about to fail inspection.” He paused at the door, looking over at her in discomfort. “I’ll be back when I’m exhausted. Don’t wait up.”

“Great, and what about me?” Amanda muttered as she watched him retreat through the door. She rolled over, heaving a heavy sigh as she beat her head against the pillow in frustration.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Amanda yawned as she slowly opened her eyes, blinking a few times to adjust to the darkness. It must still be early, she thought sleepily, since the first hints of morning light were just beginning to play beneath the edges of the window blinds. She’d had a hard time falling asleep last night, tossing and turning for almost an hour before finally falling into a restless slumber. That pattern had continued for most of the night. Her sleep was anything but relaxing. She felt even more worn out this morning than when she went to bed last night, if that was possible.

She rolled over, instinctively reaching out for Lee, to snuggle for a few minutes against the warmth of his body. This had become their morning ritual - whoever woke first automatically seeking the reassuring comfort of the other’s presence. It was the thing she missed most on those few nights lately when they had been forced to sleep apart.

Her arm systematically patted his side of the bed, encountering nothing but empty space. She sat up abruptly, snapping fully awake. Not only was her husband not in his usual spot this morning, but from the looks of things, he hadn’t been all night. A feeling of uneasiness flooded through her as she crawled out of bed. Throwing on her robe, she headed downstairs, the feeling rapidly escalating to full-blown panic. The part of her mind in charge of rational thought told her that she was overreacting. But in light of everything that had happened to them in the past few months with the Phoenix Group and the Chameleon, Amanda was beyond looking for simple explanations to normal deviations from their routine.

“Lee,” she called apprehensively, heading through the hall to the kitchen.

“In here.”

Amanda veered quickly toward the sound of his voice, noting with relief that he was indeed still in one piece, stretched out comfortably on the family room sofa.

“Are you okay?” she demanded, trying to control her labored breathing.

Lee looked up at her strangely. “Yeah, I’m fine, but you don’t seem to be.”

She turned away to hide her face, walking over to look out the window. “I’ll be okay. I just got scared for a minute. I woke up and you weren’t there.”

“I’m sorry,” Lee sighed, reacting to the note of concern in her voice.

“I thought something might have happened to you.”

“I knew I’d have a hard time sleeping last night and I crashed here on the couch so I wouldn’t disturb you.” He came up behind her and pulled her to him, holding her reassuringly in his arms. “It’s nothing more sinister than that, I promise you.”

She exhaled softly as she relaxed against him. “With your track record lately, I guess I kind of jumped to the wrong conclusion. I thought maybe something happened to you on your run.”

“Well, there was this one point while I was running...”

“What?” she demanded apprehensively, her voice wavering slightly.

“It was really dark, the road was pretty deserted and I was heading around the corner blindly,” he began as her face filled with concern. “And...”

“And?”

“And I almost pulled a hamstring,” he laughed. “I was so keyed up last night I didn’t take the time to stretch out properly.”

“Not funny,” she said, pushing him away and flinging herself down on the sofa. “I was really worried about you, and you make jokes.”

“Believe me, a pulled hamstring is no joking matter.”

Noting the look on her face, he sat down beside her on the sofa, leaning back with a sigh and reaching for her hand. "I'm sorry, I was just trying to lighten the mood." He brought her fingers to his lips and tenderly kissed them.

She rolled her eyes in his direction, pulling her hand out of his and absently rubbing her forehead.

"I didn't mean to worry you," he whispered, sincerely this time. "I was just lying here doing a little thinking."

She looked at him closely, suddenly recognizing the expression that clouded his features. She had seen it thousands of times when they were working together. Lee always wore that look when he was grappling with a particularly stressful case or, more recently, a problem that he had difficulty sharing.

She reached out to him, taking his face in her hands. "You know you don't have to think all alone here in the dark," she whispered tenderly. "I'm right upstairs."

"I wasn't alone," Lee answered sadly, removing her hands and leaning over to plant a kiss on her forehead. "I had a few ghosts to keep me company."

She sighed audibly, settling back on the sofa and laying her head on his shoulder. "Seeing the Colonel brings everything back, doesn't it?"

He nodded, still lost in his private world, frowning slightly as he tried to collect his thoughts. The Colonel's unexpected arrival last night had stirred up a number of feelings that he had been trying to ignore ever since their marriage last February. He hesitated for a minute, debating whether or not to broach this subject with her. He wasn't in the mood for another fight, not this close to their anniversary ceremony. On the other hand...making up his mind, he plunged ahead before he lost his nerve.

"It's more than that, Amanda. Since we got married, I've been thinking a lot about my parents. But more so since we started living together. I guess it brought back a lot of memories I thought I'd forgotten."

"Good memories or bad?"

"A little of both, I think. Especially since..." He looked away, his words trailing off in a sigh.

“Since....” She prodded gently, reaching for his hand, realizing just how difficult a subject this was for him.

He squeezed her hand, slowly entwining his fingers with hers. “Since my weekend with Jamie.”

“What exactly did you and Jamie talk about that has you so tied up in knots?” Amanda asked in a voice filled with concern.

“His fears about losing his mother.” Lee took a deep breath, letting go of her hand. “I guess some of the things he said really hit a nerve.” He stood up and walked over to the window, watching the first streaks of red move across the horizon with vacant eyes.

Amanda tucked her legs up under her on the couch, silently observing her husband’s rigid silhouette against the window. She fought the urge to go over to him and hold him, remaining instead on the couch, clutching his pillow tightly. She hated sitting there and doing nothing when he was in pain, but this was something she couldn’t fix with a hug. She knew from past experience that more than the comfort of her arms, what he needed right now was a little space.

He continued to stare at the horizon, watching the sky gradually lighten. “You really need to talk to Jamie, you know. I think he wants to tell you what he’s feeling, but he doesn’t know how.”

“I’m not sure I know what to say to him, either,” she added sadly. “It’s like you said yesterday...the incident with Mason took away his childhood. I don’t know how to give that back.”

“You can’t,” Lee said knowingly, in a voice filled with pain. “We can’t change the past. All we can do now is find a way to help him live with it.”

“Any ideas on how we do that?” she inquired. Lee’s use of the word ‘we’ was not lost on her. Lee was beginning to see himself as part of the solution to Jamie’s problems, not just the cause.

“Not really. I don’t have all the answers here. Believe me, I wish I did.”

“But you think my job is the issue,” Amanda stated, a slight edge creeping into her voice.

“I never said that.”

“No, you didn’t. But I’ve become an expert at hearing what you’re not saying.” She sighed audibly this time, resting her head on her hands. “I don’t want to quit my job. I know this may sound selfish, but I’ve already made that sacrifice once.”

Lee turned around, casually leaning against the window as he tried to read the expression on her face. “Amanda, don’t look at me as if I was Joe. I’m not forcing you to give up your career or even to put it on hold. I’m merely suggesting that you give some serious thought to what that career should be. There are options here. Leaving the field doesn’t necessarily mean leaving the Agency.”

Amanda sighed, looking over at him through tear-filled eyes. “I thought we settled all this at Christmas.”

“No, the only thing we settled was that I would stop babying you and find a way to deal with your active field status. I think I’ve managed to do that. But I never promised to like it.”

“Are we talking about what you want now or what’s best for Jamie?”

“Maybe a little of both. In some ways, I think they’re the same thing.” Lee turned once more to stare out the window, the room shrouded suddenly in an uncomfortable silence. He wished he could give Amanda an easy solution to this problem, but Jamie’s wasn’t the kind of wound that could be healed with the a band-aid. He had the feeling that’s what they’d been trying to do so far.

He watched the early morning wind catch a stray twig and send it tumbling across the yard. It looked like the beginning of another bitter cold February morning, he thought with a sigh. Even without snow, the ground looked bleak and hard this time of year, covered in a dismal winter brown. He suddenly couldn’t wait to get out of here on Sunday. A little warm sunshine would be a welcome change of pace.

He pulled his gaze from the window with an effort, coming over to sit on the arm of the large, overstuffed chair by the sofa. He had been putting off this conversation for some time now, waiting for the ‘perfect’ moment that never seemed to arrive. Even after all this time, his childhood was difficult to talk about, even with Amanda. The reality of his parents’ death was still a very private pain. But for Jamie’s sake and his own, he knew he owed it to her to at least try to make her understand.

“Amanda, when my parents died, I was forced to deal with a lot of stuff Jamie’s struggling with now. Grasping the concept of death isn’t an easy thing for a five year old.” His eyes were fixed on the floor, studying the tight weave of the carpet. “All I knew was that my mother wasn’t there anymore to tuck me in at night.” He looked up to meet Amanda’s eye with a sad smile. “The Colonel wasn’t very big on bedtime stories.”

“I can imagine,” she smiled wryly.

“And when I was finally old enough to understand what had happened, it still didn’t help me to deal with the anger.”

“Anger? In what way?”

“It’s hard to explain.”

“Try,” she coaxed.

“Part of me was proud of them,” he began. “They served their country and ‘did their duty’. That concept was very big with the Colonel.”

“You have every reason to be proud of your parents, Lee. “

“I know that.” He took a deep breath, forcing himself to continue, to explain the feelings that he had only recently become aware of himself. “But underneath that pride, there’s still a part of me that resents it, resents that they put their duty to their country before their duty to their son. I missed a lot growing up without them. I never knew how much until recently.”

His expression softened as he allowed himself to meet her eyes, their look drawing him over to the sofa to sit beside her. “I think Jamie might be feeling some of the same anger.”

Amanda leaned back, carefully considering his words. Jamie’s behavior had certainly been confusing lately. It alternated between overwhelming concern when she came home late and studied indifference when she was around. Lee’s insight certainly cast Jamie’s recent actions in a new light.

“Maybe I should talk to Jamie’s therapist about this,” Amanda sighed. “Dr. Barr might have some ideas about how to deal with his problem.”

“It couldn’t hurt, I guess. But I think he needs some reassurance from his mother more than another therapy session.” Lee gently took her hand in his.

“You said it yourself – family life and the Agency really don’t mix. Taking the risks we take every day in the field – I’m not sure it’s fair to do that to a child.”

“I know that Lee, maybe better than you do. I’m the one who’s been dealing with that reality for the past five years.”

“And you’ve dealt with it very well, too. But that was before Philip and Jamie knew about your job. That knowledge puts a different spin on things. Jamie has to cope on a day-to-day basis with very real fear that something might happen to you. In some ways, that anxiety is harder to live with than the pain of the actual loss. The fear is always there, just under the surface. It never really goes away.”

“I never thought about it that way,” she sighed. “And I guess I never really considered the danger when I was just civilian auxiliary.” She looked away, unable to meet his gaze.

“But now you’re a full time, fully qualified field agent. You can’t ignore the danger any more than I could. And knowing our little secret...”

“...Makes the boys vulnerable, right?” she finished. “You told me that once a long time ago.”

“In a different lifetime,” he smiled, squeezing her hand.

“Yeah,” she agreed, her mind traveling back to her conversation with Lee at that crazy party when he had admitted his real profession. At that point, she’d thought he was a gangster.

She turned back to him with a tender smile. “You might as well tell me the rest of this, Scarecrow. I get the feeling you have more than Philip’s and Jamie’s sense of security on your mind.”

He leaned back on the sofa, staring up at the uneven patterns on the textured ceiling. “Amanda, I’ve spent the better part of my adult life out on the streets, trying to make a difference. I’ve put my life on the line more times than I can count. And I was good at my job.”

“The best,” she whispered, giving his arm an affectionate squeeze.

“But I can’t do that anymore. I don’t want to. Like I told you that day in the hospital, after everything that happened with Mason and Dr. Smyth, I was more than ready to give up the field. If Billy hadn’t offered me that promotion, I

think would have walked away. At this point, I feel I've earned the right to a little security and happiness, without worrying about being shot at on a daily basis."

He took her hand again, bringing it carefully to his lips. "Remember how you felt a little while ago when you came downstairs in a panic?" he continued. "That worry goes both ways. I know you don't want to hear this, but I don't want to worry about you being shot at, either. "

"Lee..."

"Amanda, it took me a long time to find you and even longer to admit to myself what I'd found." He tilted her chin up, forcing her to look him in the eye. "I love you, more than I ever thought possible. And I want all those things I put off for so long, things I never dreamed I'd get the chance to have. Do you understand what I'm trying to say?"

"That you want a home and a family."

"Yes."

"And everything that goes with it, right? You really do want us to have a child of our own, don't you?"

"Yes," he said again, emphasizing his admission with a nod of his head.

"When you brought the subject up last Christmas, part of me thought it was just a reaction to everything we'd been through last fall."

"I've thought about it a lot since Christmas, Amanda. It is what I want."

"I never thought I'd hear those words coming out of your mouth, Scarecrow."

"I know, scary, isn't it? Look what you've done to me."

Amanda sighed, staring at his profile in the dim morning light. "Yeah, well, I feel that way, too. There was a time in my life when that was all I wanted, to be a mother and a housewife. Then I met this guy in a waiter's outfit and suddenly I wanted so much more than that."

"I always knew it was love at first sight," he teased.

“Don’t flatter yourself, Stetson, I’m talking about my career here, not your dubious charms.”

He shrugged his shoulders, barely concealing his grin as she continued. “You know, those years you spent on the streets, I spent raising a family - practically by myself. Jamie will be thirteen soon. And you want me to start all over again.”

“Yeah,” he admitted sheepishly. “I guess I do.”

She shook her head, trying to process this information. “Do you have any idea how much a baby will change our lives? My life?”

“I know it’s a big decision. I just never knew until recently how much I really wanted it. And you wouldn’t have to do it alone this time.”

“I never should have let you go into the woods with those Junior Trailblazers,” she groaned. “I knew no good would come of it.” She lay back against the sofa cushions, sighing softly.

“So, what do you really think?” Lee probed. “It’s not like you to dance around the issue like this.”

“I guess I don’t know how to answer your question. Part of me wants to say yes, I’ll give you everything you want here. The other part feels like I’m giving up everything I’ve struggled to become. Does this make any sense?”

“Yes. I’m the one who’s watched you throw yourself into your agent candidate classes, remember? You’ve got to know how proud I am of everything you’ve accomplished.”

“But that doesn’t stop you from worrying.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“If I decided to come out of the field, would there be room for me on your administrative team? Could we still work together or would that look too much like nepotism?”

“I can broach the subject with Billy. But I think he’d agree.” In point of fact, Lee knew Billy would be relieved. He didn’t want to tell Amanda, but lately their boss had been dropping discreet hints about Amanda’s field status. From some of his more pointed remarks, Lee knew that sooner or later Billy would

force the issue. He looked at his wife's thoughtful profile. He'd prefer that this decision be Amanda's choice, not Billy's.

"Okay," she nodded. "I'll think about it seriously, I promise." Seeing the look in his eyes, she reached out to take his hand, offering what reassurance she could. "I'm not saying no. But like you said, this is a life-altering decision, Lee. I just need a little more time."

"I understand. You can take all the time you need. I won't pressure you. Just promise me you'll think about what I said – about Jamie."

"I will," she nodded, sighing thoughtfully. "You know, I'm not in my twenties anymore. It may not be as easy as you think to have a baby at my age – it could take awhile. And there are no guarantees."

"Don't worry, I'm fully prepared to give the project my best effort," he grinned. "I hear trying is half the fun."

"Yeah, you get the easy part. I'm the one that has to deal with morning sickness, swollen ankles and childbirth."

"You know I'd do it for you if I could."

"That's a pretty safe offer, and you know it, Stetson."

"True," he laughed. "I love you, you know. No matter what we decide."

"Yeah? You'd better, 'cause I love you, too."

He smiled as he leaned forward again to kiss her, the first sounds of the stirring household beginning to be heard overhead. "I guess the troops are up," he joked, stretching to work out the kinks in his neck and glancing at the clock on the mantel. "The Colonel will be down here any minute. I'm surprised we haven't seen him before this. Punctuality is the hallmark of a well-ordered life, you know."

"I didn't know that," Amanda grinned as she slowly got to her feet. "And what about breakfast? As long as you're up, can I tempt you with some food this morning?"

"Why not," he returned, putting his arm around her. "As long as you're considering changing your lifestyle so drastically, the least I could do is work on changing mine."

“Good answer,” she laughed as he led him into the kitchen.

CHAPTER NINE

“We’re running low on dip again, Amanda,” Dotty informed her daughter as she brought the two nearly empty bowls into the kitchen.

“I know, we’re totally out of shrimp, too,” Amanda frowned as she looked in the refrigerator, wondering whatever possessed them to have this family gathering on the eve of their anniversary. Her mother, Aunt Lillian, the Colonel, not to mention Joe and Carrie – it certainly made for a volatile mixture. Amanda sighed, mentally cringing at the thought. They must have both been out of their minds.

She pulled her mind back to the task at hand – finding something to feed her guests, the quicker the better. As long as they were all eating, she wouldn’t have to worry about the conversation. “I found a couple of jars of salsa,” Amanda said as she rummaged through the back of the refrigerator. “And I think there are some bags of chips the boys haven’t found yet hidden somewhere in the cupboard.”

“I know, I was saving them for Captain Curt. You know how he loves my special salsa,” Dotty smiled, lost for a moment in a private memory. “But you’re right, they’ll do just fine.” She put a comforting arm around her daughter’s shoulder. “You look frazzled, darling. Don’t worry, everything is going to be wonderful tomorrow.”

“I know,” Amanda said, rubbing her forehead. “It’s just been a very long week.” She grabbed some bowls from the cupboard, absently filling them with salsa. “How’s it going in there, anyway?”

“Just fine. Bob is telling another one of those wonderful stories of his. He’s such a charming man.”

Amanda rolled her eyes as she searched the cupboard for the hidden bags of chips. Unfortunately, Lee didn’t find the Colonel’s military stories charming at all, she thought with a sigh. And he was already wound up enough from his uncle’s visit. She could almost feel the tension building in her husband from here and she absently rubbed her fingers in small circles around her aching temples. Three days of family togetherness had given her a monumental headache. Colonel Clayton’s unexpected arrival on Wednesday night had cast her in the

part of peacemaker, a role that had become increasingly more uncomfortable as time wore on. They had to be two of the most frustrating men she'd ever encountered. Amanda could plainly see that underneath their affected formality and stilted conversations lay a real affection for each other. But since their dealings with each other in the present seemed hopelessly programmed by their past, she doubted that either one of them would ever discover it on their own.

They were both so stubborn, both refusing to see what was right in front of them. This reluctance to express their feelings must be a family trait. Of course, having spent some time with the man who raised him, Amanda now had a much clearer understanding of her husband's behavior. But despite this insight, her patience with the whole situation had worn incredibly thin. She grabbed the two bags, ripping them open with a vengeance.

"Is Lee holding up okay?" she asked her mother, her eyebrows knit together in a frown.

"He seems a little on edge, but for that matter, dear, so do you. I suppose that's not unusual for the bride and groom on the night before their wedding."

"Mother, I wouldn't exactly call us the 'bride and groom'. Don't forget we've been married for a year." Amanda unceremoniously dumped the contents of the bags into a bowl, the tension in her voice spilling over into her actions.

"Yes, but since I didn't get an invitation to your first ceremony, Missy, you'll excuse me if I sometimes forget it took place," Dotty said testily.

"Mother," Amanda moaned, regretting that she'd ever opened her mouth. From the remarks Dotty had made in passing over the past few months, Amanda had realized that her mother was still very upset over the veil of secrecy that had shrouded the last four years of her life. She had hoped that time would help make it all right, but she should have known better. When her mother was this upset, she was like a dog with a bone...she never let go.

She sighed, feeling a little guilty for that thought. Her mother had a right to be angry. Amanda had a good reason for the half-truths and evasions, but that didn't make it any easier for Dotty to accept.

Her mother turned away, placing the two small bowls filled with salsa on a tray. "I realize I'm not supposed to mind that you lied to me about your marriage for the better part of six months, Amanda. Of course, why would you feel the need to tell me? After all, I am only your mother. I guess I didn't have a 'need to know'. Isn't that how you like to phrase it?"

“I didn’t mean...” Amanda began, suddenly wishing that her mother suffered from that famous Stetson reticence. Regretfully, she knew she wouldn’t be spared from hearing exactly how her mother was feeling.

“I guess I can understand that,” Dotty continued hotly. “And I guess I can understand why you would choose not to confide in me. I suppose you didn’t think I could be trusted. Of course, when you needed me to take care of your children, now that I could be trusted with. Of course, what does motherhood count for in the larger scheme of things? I mean, I know it doesn’t compare to issues of national security.”

“Mother, I’m really, really sorry that I kept things from you,” Amanda began, playing the peacemaker once again. “I hated lying to you. But I was only trying to protect you and the boys.”

“I’m sure you were, dear,” her mother muttered coolly. “I’m sure you only had my welfare in mind all those times you told me you were ‘working late in the editing room’. Just like I’m sure you had the best of intentions when you decided that you simply wouldn’t tell me that you’d eloped. After all, why would I want to attend my only daughter’s wedding?”

“Mother, I didn’t mean to hurt you, it’s just...there are things I couldn’t tell you about my job...things I still can’t tell you.”

“Excuse me, but I don’t see what one has to do with the other, Missy.”

Amanda let out the breath she was holding, rubbing her aching head again. She knew her mother had a valid point – her job wasn’t really the whole problem here. Her mother could accept and even understand the ‘need to know’ issues. But what she couldn’t deal with was the reality that her only child had chosen not to confide in her about her personal life. Amanda knew that she could have introduced Lee as her boyfriend much earlier than she had done. Actually, when she stopped to think about it, Lee was the one who had really forced the issue by stopping by to see her mother during the episode with Birol.

If Lee hadn’t made that introduction, Amanda wondered when she would have decided to come clean. Lately she’d realized there was a small part of her that enjoyed the excitement of their secret relationship. The same part of her that liked the thrill of working in the field...the part of her that was just like Lee. He’d seen that in her from the beginning, remembering the way he used to tease her about getting a real kick out of the danger and excitement of field work. And

he was right, of course – she did find it exhilarating. Part of her would really miss that feeling when she left the field, she thought with a pang of regret.

She glanced nervously over at her mother who was busily scrubbing the already clean counter, her lips tightly pursed together. Amanda took a deep breath, trying one more time to explain her actions.

“Mother, I know it’s hard to understand, but there were issues with our job that...well, it was just difficult. It just seemed less complicated to elope. I don’t know, maybe I wasn’t thinking very clearly at the time. We both really wanted to get married.”

“I can understand that, I guess,” Dotty said at last, abandoning her cleaning and turning around to look at her daughter. “But when you were shot out in California, and I didn’t know if you were going to live or die...you still felt the need to hide your relationship with Lee. But then I suppose a life and death situation isn’t a good enough opportunity for you to be honest with me.”

“I’ve tried to explain...and you knew Lee and I were seeing each other then.”

“‘Seeing each other’ is the way people refer to marriage these days?”

Amanda squirmed under her mother’s gaze and took a step back, accidentally knocking the container of chips to the floor. The bowl shattered into a million pieces, sending the corn chips flying across the room.

“I’m sorry,” Amanda said, blinking back the hot tears that threatened to spill out all over the kitchen floor just like the chips. Her hand trembled almost imperceptibly as she bent to pick them up.

“What crashed?” Jamie asked as he poked his head into the kitchen. “Are you okay, Mom?”

“Everything’s fine, Jamie,” Dotty replied, seeing Amanda’s inability to respond. “We just had a little accident. Go on in the other room while we clean it up.”

“Okay. Mom, is it okay if I take Dad upstairs and show him our new video game? He said he wants to play.”

“Sure, Jamie,” Amanda replied, turning her head away to hide her tears. She waited until the sound of his footsteps faded away, then sat down on the floor, hugging her legs as she rested her chin on her knees.

Dotty took a deep breath, squatting down beside her and beginning to pick up the fractured pieces of the ceramic bowl. “I’m sorry, too, darling. I didn’t mean to drag all that up. This is supposed to be a happy time. I guess Lillian has me a little crazy. I love my sister to death, but we get along better at a distance.”

“It must still be bothering you, though, or you wouldn’t keep bringing it up.”

“I do that?” she asked in a small voice.

“Constantly,” Amanda nodded, holding her head in her hands.

“I’m sorry, Amanda. But put yourself in my shoes. Think about how you’d feel if you found out Philip or Jamie had been keeping something that important from you.”

Amanda nodded, understanding what her mother was trying to say. She would feel awful if either of her sons hid such an important part of their lives from her. She was even a little hurt that Jamie felt he couldn’t confide in her about his fears.

“You’re right, Mother,” she said at last. “I’m sorry for not telling you about our elopement last year. Lee and I honestly thought we were doing what was best for everyone. Maybe we rushed into it without totally thinking things through, but we didn’t want to wait any longer to get married. And maybe it was selfish, but we just wanted to be together. We didn’t mean to hurt anyone.”

Dotty put her arm around her daughter’s shoulder. “Was that so hard to say, Amanda? I’m not so old that I can’t remember what it feels like to want to be with the person you love. And you know how I feel about Lee. All I want for you, all any mother wants for her daughter, is for you to be happy. Maybe you’ll find that out someday,” Dotty finished, smiling as she gave her a final hug.

“I am happy,” Amanda said through her tears. “We both are. It’s just this crazy ceremony has us both on edge.”

“I’ve noticed,” Dotty returned with a laugh. “I didn’t think it was a sudden desire for physical fitness that has Lee out running at all hours of the night.”

“It’s been a rough week.” Amanda looked at her mother, a smile beginning to form at the corners of her mouth. “I’ll be glad when tomorrow is over.”

“What you both need is a little time alone together,” Dotty said knowingly. “And when you get back from your honeymoon, I think it’s time I started looking for a place of my own. I’ve intruded long enough.”

“Mother, having you here is not an intrusion. Neither of us feels that way.”

“I know, but you know how that old saying goes, ‘houseguests and fish begin to stink after three days’. I hate to think about how they smell after three months.”

“You’re not a houseguest,” Amanda said emphatically, putting her arms around her mother and returning her hug. “I honestly don’t know what I would have done without you after Joe and I divorced. I’m not sure if I ever said thank you.”

“You didn’t have to, darling. I was glad to help. You and the boys filled a void in my life, too, after your Daddy died. You helped me as much as I helped you. But now that you’re married, I think it’s time I found a place of my own. I never intended to move in here with you.”

“Why don’t we wait to talk about you moving until we get back? I don’t think I’m in any shape to handle any big decisions right now. I just want to get through tomorrow without any major mishaps.”

“All right, darling, if that’s what you want.” Dotty smiled thoughtfully at her daughter. “But you shouldn’t worry about tomorrow. It’s going to be a beautiful ceremony. And I promise, not another word about missing the first one. We’ll make this a fresh start, shall we?” Dotty rose slowly, extending an arm to help her daughter up off the floor. “Now why don’t we see if we can salvage something to tide our guests over until dinner is ready? Before they start eating the furniture.”

“Or each other,” Amanda muttered quietly to herself as she allowed her mother to pull her to feet.

* * * * *

“Everything okay?” Lee asked quietly as Amanda came out of the kitchen, perching unceremoniously on the arm of his chair. “It kind of sounded like you were using the plates for target practice.”

“Just a little cooking mishap,” she replied softly, rubbing her fingers gingerly over her forehead. “At least dinner’s almost ready. Maybe some food will help me get rid of this headache.”

“You skipped lunch again today, didn’t you?” Lee asked in a worried tone.

“Well, I had to get some last minute paperwork taken care of, so I worked straight through.”

“It’s no wonder you have a headache. It’s almost eight o’clock. Francine evidently doesn’t know it’s one of her duties as your partner to remind you to eat.”

“That’s because Francine doesn’t need to eat. She sneaks chocolates all day long when she thinks I’m not looking.”

“I think you’re getting out of there in the nick of time,” Lee said, trying not to laugh at the image of Francine secretly popping Godiva chocolates into her mouth. “Any longer and Francine might turn you into a chocoholic, too.” His eyes narrowed as he looked at her more closely. “Are you sure you don’t want to lie down?”

“No, I’ll be okay,” Amanda lied, blinking her eyes a few times to distract herself from the persistent throbbing in her head. In reality, she longed for the comfort of a few minutes in a darkened room, but leaving them all without a referee, even for a few minutes, was definitely out of the question. She could hang on a little while longer. “I think I will pop upstairs and get an aspirin, though.”

“I’ll go,” Lee offered solicitously. “You just sit here and rest for a few minutes. You haven’t stopped running since you got home. Besides,” he whispered, “if I listen to one more of the Colonel’s stories about the ‘good old days’ I’ll go out of my mind.”

“Lee, he’s not that bad,” she muttered in a low voice. “If you’d only relax a little you’d find that out.”

“Not in a million years,” he stated emphatically, heading for the stairs with a grimace. He’d had just about enough of the Colonel’s trip down memory lane. In theory, living in so many different places sounded exciting and glamorous, and maybe it was to an adult. But certainly not to a little boy who’d desperately needed some sense of stability in his life. Six months in one place, three months in another...constantly moving, constantly changing...it was no life for a child, especially one whose whole world had just been turned upside down.

Lee pushed these thoughts from his mind with an effort. If he didn’t stop brooding about all this, pretty soon he’d need some aspirin, too. Seeing the Colonel again just stirred up the old resentments. Maybe that was one of the reasons he had studiously avoided prolonged visits with his uncle in the past. A lunch here, a dinner there, every three years or so...those were the parameters that defined their relationship. It had worked very well for them for more years than he cared to remember.

Lee vaguely wondered why his uncle had chosen to deviate from that pattern now. A few years ago, after he and Amanda had helped the Colonel with that mess about his squadron, they had both vowed to try and see each other more often. His uncle had even promised to spend the holidays with him. But when they rolled around, instead of a visit, the Colonel just had another excuse for why he couldn’t get away. Lee had finally accepted that the Air Force was the only family Colonel Robert Clayton ever really wanted or needed. He hadn’t really expected him to accept his wedding invitation, let alone show up a day before he was expected. It was totally out of character.

Closing their bedroom door, Lee pocketed Amanda’s aspirin and headed back down the stairs, steeling himself to face the party once again. This time tomorrow, all this family nonsense should be over with and he and Amanda would finally be alone together. Now that was definitely an idea whose time had come, he thought with a grin. He remembered feeling the same way on this night one short year ago, although for different reasons. Last year had been about the eager anticipation of unexplored pleasures, while this year he looked forward to the familiar assurance that their twelve months of marriage had created. He smiled to himself, his mind happily engaged in pleasant memories. When he’d told Amanda last year that good relationships, like wine, only improved with age, he hadn’t known then how true that statement could be.

His foot was on the top stair when Jamie’s voice drifted to him faintly from down the hall. Turning, he headed towards the sound, intending to corral him for dinner. As he reached Jamie’s door, his words became clearer and he overheard his stepson recounting their weekend in the woods, proudly showing

off his trophy to his dad. Lee hesitated briefly, debating whether or not to knock, before deciding that he was through walking on eggshells in his own house. Amanda usually served as a buffer in his dealings with Joe, but maybe it was time that they found a way to relate to each other without her.

Rapping loudly on the door to announce his entrance, he quickly stuck his head in the room, informing them both that dinner was almost ready.

“Good, I’m hungry.” Jamie said as he put his treasure back in its special spot. “I was just showing Dad our trophy.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty cool,” Joe added, brushing his hand affectionately through Jamie’s hair. “Much bigger than your brother’s.” Joe smiled at Lee as they followed Jamie through the door. “I remember that’s all I cared about when I was his age – outdoing my older brother.”

Joe paused as they reached the top of the stairs. “Jamie, why don’t you go on ahead?” I need to talk to Lee for a minute.”

“Okay,” Jamie agreed pleasantly, heading down the stairs.

“Jamie,” Lee called him back reaching into his pocket for the aspirin. “Take these to your mom and tell her we’ll be down in a few minutes.” He turned to Joe. “Major headache,” he explained with a smile.

“A few pre-wedding jitters?” Joe grinned.

“I think it’s more like ‘family’ overload - too many relatives. You know, the more I think about it, eloping had its advantages. You sure you don’t want to reconsider the big wedding next month?”

“Actually, I wouldn’t mind running off, but Carrie has her heart set on all the trimmings. Women.”

“Yeah, I know,” Lee sighed, rolling his eyes in agreement.

They both stood at the top of the stairs, both of them studying the floor as an awkward pause ensued. Lee cast a sideways glance at Joe. The man seemed as uncomfortable as he did, he thought with an ironic grin.

“So, Joe, I’m sure you had more on your mind than wedding plans when you sent Jamie downstairs.”

“Yeah, I did,” Joe stammered, trying to think of a way to begin. He took a deep breath and forged ahead. “I just wanted to say thank you for taking Jamie camping last week. He obviously had a really good time.”

“I was glad to do it. Actually, I had a good time, too.”

“Well, I appreciate it. I hated to disappoint him like that. I know I haven’t always been there for him in the past, but I’m working on changing that.”

Lee nodded, uncertain just how to reply to Joe’s comment. Amanda had told him that she and Joe had spoken about Jamie, but hadn’t gone into the specifics of the conversation. It must have been some ‘little talk’. Evidently her opinion still mattered to Joe a great deal. But for the first time, Lee suddenly found that fact didn’t really bother him any more. He only felt glad that, for Jamie’s sake, she’d apparently gotten through to Joe.

“Jamie seems less anxious this week,” Joe continued thoughtfully.

“I know, I saw that, too.”

“Whatever you said to him last weekend seemed to have helped.”

“I didn’t really do that much.”

“Well, he’s certainly proud of his trophy,” Joe laughed. “Maybe it’s a good thing I got tied up in court. I doubt if we’d have won if I’d been with him.”

“I don’t know if it was entirely fair to the other kids. I just happen to crawl through the underbrush for a living.”

“I’m glad it helped you both win,” Joe began. “But I have to be honest with you. I’m still not entirely comfortable with what you and Amanda do for a living. And I know enough about the Agency to know that I have reason to be concerned.”

“I can understand that, Joe, especially in light of what happened last fall. Believe me, Amanda and I are both painfully aware of the danger and we’re taking steps to make sure nothing like that ever happens again. But it was time to end the secrecy – for all our sakes. We just didn’t expect to do it quite so explosively.”

“I’m sure you didn’t,” Joe said grimly. “But you have to understand how hard this is for me. I’m trusting both of you with two of the most important things in my life – my sons.”

“We both know that. I promise you that we will always put the boys’ welfare first.”

“Fair enough, “ Joe returned, holding out his hand. “I guess I can’t ask for more than that.”

Lee nodded, accepting Joe’s offered hand with a smile, relieved that they had finally reached a tentative understanding. As long as they all continued to put Philip and Jamie first, they couldn’t go wrong.

“I think dinner should be...” Lee started, but was interrupted by Jamie running up the stairs.

“Dad, Lee...” he yelled.

“We’re right here, Jamie, you don’t have to shout,” his father grinned.

“Mom says you’d better get downstairs before her head explodes,” Jamie said simply. “Everyone wants to eat.”

“Then we’d better get going if we know what’s good for us,” Lee laughed.

“You’re right about that,” Joe seconded.

They both shared a knowing smile as they followed Jamie downstairs to dinner.

CHAPTER TEN

Amanda retreated to the safety of the kitchen, sighing as she loaded the last of the dinner plates into the dishwasher. This had turned out to be a really bizarre evening. First her mother chooses tonight to unload four years of repressed aggravation, then Lee and Joe come downstairs acting like long lost buddies. Amanda felt as if she had entered 'The Twilight Zone'.

It was somehow oddly reassuring to see Lee and the Colonel still reverting to type during dinner. Reassuring, but infuriating. They had kept up their usual game of verbal volleyball through the entire meal, tossing remarks

across the table as if it was a net. If they didn't stop sniping at each other soon, Amanda thought she was literally going to scream.

At least it had caused the party to break up relatively early. Joe and Carrie had left shortly after dinner and the boys had disappeared upstairs to play their new video game. Her mother and Aunt Lillian pleaded fatigue and quickly followed them. Lee had immediately volunteered for kitchen duty, but Amanda had seen that offer for exactly what it was – a convenient way to escape from the Colonel. She had told him in no uncertain terms that she didn't really need his help in the kitchen. She suggested that he spend a few minutes alone with his uncle instead, a feat he had somehow avoided for the last three days. He'd opened his mouth to protest, but the look on her face had evidently convinced him to think better of it. Grumbling under his breath, he'd reluctantly headed into the other room.

They had been in there together for over a quarter of an hour while Amanda listened to their standard gruff question and answer session from her vantage point in the kitchen. The pain in her head, which earlier had subsided to a dull ache, had once again blossomed into a throbbing roar. She leaned against the counter and closed her eyes, trying to block out the hammer in her skull. But the sound of raised voices spurred her to action and she shut the dishwasher with a bang, rubbing her temples as she headed into the other room to join them.

"That's what you get for chasing shadows," the Colonel was saying with authority. "Agency, CIA – it's all the same. Shrouded in so much secrecy it's impossible to tell bogus covert operations from the legitimate ones."

Amanda groaned inwardly as she caught the gist of the conversation. The Colonel was evidently commenting on the fallout from the scandal that had rocked the intelligence community last fall. There went her last hope of ending the evening on a friendly note. Dr. Smyth's Phoenix operation was definitely an episode she'd prefer to forget, as would Lee. It was still a sore spot with him. It was only recently that he had started to come to terms with what had happened last fall, the nightmares resulting from his ordeal only now beginning to subside. Amanda knew her husband well enough to realize that he would probably never tell her everything that had gone on while he'd been a prisoner of the Phoenix Group. He had a hard time admitting it even to himself, euphemistically referring to it as his 'debriefing session' – a deceptively innocuous term for his kidnapping and brutal questioning at the hands of men he'd worked side by side with, men he should have been able to trust.

"Excuse me, sir," Lee continued in a low growl, "but that type of thing isn't exactly confined to the intelligence community. I believe it was Air Force

personnel who were responsible for the death of your own squadron a few years ago.”

“Yes, and we cleaned house ourselves,” the Colonel reiterated, staring at his nephew belligerently from across the room.

“Really? As I recall, you had a little outside help with that,” Lee added hotly.

“No one asked you to butt into my business back then,” the Colonel snapped back. “I can handle myself just fine and I have been for quite some time now. You ‘suits’ think you have the answer to everything. You always conveniently forget it’s the military who teaches you all those little tricks in the first place.”

“That’s right, you can handle yourself just fine, sir. If memory serves you were tied to a chair when I arrived at that house.”

“Yes, but I could have gotten myself out of it...”

“Yeah, right,” Lee muttered under his breath.

“When I got there, you were both tied to a chair,” Amanda interjected, her voice rising heatedly. “And I think you’re conveniently forgetting who untied you. You know, I have just about had it with both of you. You two make quite a pair. Look at yourselves, all this silly quarreling, this is no way for family to behave.”

“Amanda...” Lee began.

“I’m not finished yet. I don’t know why it’s so hard for both of you to just come out and admit you care about each other. You’re driving me crazy and I’ve run out of patience.”

Her hands were on her hips as she turned to her husband. “Lee, you’re not a child any more, so you can just stop acting like one and talk to your uncle like an adult. He didn’t have to raise you when your parents died, no one held a gun to his head. And he couldn’t have done that bad a job or you wouldn’t be the kind of person you are.”

Without missing a beat, she faced down Lee’s uncle. “And Colonel, would it kill you to tell your nephew how you feel about him, that you were worried about him after what happened last fall? You could have called and talked to

him directly, instead of going behind his back and calling me. I'm tired of playing intermediary in your ridiculous little war, so I'm going to stop right now. Thanks to all this nonsense, I have a horrible headache. In fact, I've had a really rough night all around, so I'm going to bed now. And don't even think of following me," she grumbled at Lee as she saw him start to stand up.

"I expect the two of you to stay right here and talk things through," Amanda stated bluntly. "And after that, if you two still want to go at each other, fine, go ahead, just don't do it in my presence. Good night, Colonel. Good night, Lee - I'll see you tomorrow. If I ever get rid of this headache," she added breathlessly. Without further ceremony, she turned abruptly and headed for the stairs, leaving uncle and nephew staring at each other open-mouthed in the family room.

"She has quite a temper, doesn't she?" Colonel Clayton said as he nervously cleared his throat. "And amazing stamina - she said all that without taking a breath." He shook his head in silent admiration.

"Yeah, I know," Lee nodded, finally finding himself and the Colonel on common ground. He paused a moment, running his hand anxiously through his hair as he watched his uncle silently out of the corner of his eye. "Do you want a nightcap? Brandy?"

"Thank you, that would be good."

Lee wordlessly retrieved two snifters from the bar and generously filled them. Perhaps a little alcoholic haze might help the situation, he thought with a grim smile. Since Amanda had left him with few options here, he could definitely use a little Dutch courage if he was going to say what was on his mind. His uncle mumbled his thanks as he handed him the glass, quickly taking a generous gulp. Lee laughed silently to himself - the Colonel must feel exactly the same way.

Lee settled back in his chair, sipping his own brandy. The liquid burned as he swallowed it and he felt his tension begin to slowly drain away. He turned to his uncle with a questioning look. "You called Amanda after that business last fall?"

The Colonel cleared his throat again, drinking from his glass as he studiously avoided his nephew's gaze. "Well, I was concerned," he said finally, his eyes following the liquid as he swirled it around in the brandy snifter. "I've had some experience with POW situations and...well, I know it's not exactly the same thing, but I wanted to make sure you were okay."

“It wasn’t so different,” Lee smiled grimly, clutching his glass tightly. He brought it to his lips, quickly draining it. “But I am okay. Thanks for asking.”

Colonel Clayton took a deep breath. “Your wife is right, I should have called you. It’s just...hard...to know what to say.” He, too, quickly consumed the rest of his brandy.

Lee nodded silently, reaching for the bottle and quickly emptying the remainder into both their glasses. He sat back in his chair, looking at the Colonel from across the room. His uncle looked older, he noticed suddenly. And very much alone. Lee knew from experience just how uncomfortable that could feel. Maybe Amanda had a point, he reluctantly admitted. Maybe he had been behaving like a sullen child ever since his uncle had arrived. Just like Jamie had acted last year with him, he thought with chagrin. Except that he wasn’t twelve years old anymore; he was supposed to be old enough to know better. He let that idea play in his mind as he pensively sipped his brandy.

The Colonel coughed slightly, breaking the silence between them, speaking in a low voice. “I know I was a poor replacement for your parents. I always looked up to your father – but he was the older brother I admired but never knew very well.”

Lee nodded in understanding, turning his head to stare out the window. “I wish I’d had the chance to know him.”

“I wish so, too. It’s amazing how much you look like him. Sometimes when I look at you, I think...” The Colonel’s words trailed off into his drink.

“I know the last thing you wanted was to be saddled with a kid,” Lee stated neutrally, the brandy giving him the courage to finally say what was on his mind.

“That’s not entirely true,” his uncle said awkwardly. “But children were like a foreign country to me. Trust me, I had no idea at all what to do with a five year old.” He raised his glass to his lips, gulping down the last of his drink. “So I did the best I could. I brought you up in the best tradition of the military. Maybe it was no real life for a child, but it was all I knew.”

Lee nodded briefly, considering his uncle’s words. They took on a whole new meaning in light of his newfound experience in step parenting. He hadn’t really known how to deal with Philip and Jamie at first, either. At least he’d had Amanda to help him. Who had his uncle had? Lee couldn’t recall the Colonel

ever having a serious, lasting relationship. He'd been as much of a loner as Lee had ever been.

"I guess it couldn't have been easy for you," Lee admitted with a sigh. "Why did you take me in?"

"You were family," the Colonel replied simply. "Family sticks together."

"You've been hanging around my wife too long," Lee laughed nervously. "You're starting to sound just like her."

"She's a very smart women. A class above all those bubbleheads you used to hang around with. Of course, I knew you were never serious about any of them."

"Thanks, I think," Lee smiled.

Colonel Clayton looked up, bashfully meeting Lee's gaze. "You know, you're a lucky man, Skip – you've finally got that family you always wanted."

Lee nodded thoughtfully, acknowledging the truth of his uncle's statement. He had been incredibly lucky that Amanda had crossed his path. Fate was truly a fickle playmate. But for an excess of men in red hats one memorable day in the train station, he could have easily ended up as alone as the Colonel. He didn't want to think what his life would have been like without Amanda in it. He thought he'd had it all figured out back then, but he didn't have a clue. Amanda had taught him a lot – about life, about people, about things they didn't cover in the Agency procedural manuals.

He smiled to himself as he remembered saying those very words to her once. Back then he had never dreamed that one day she would teach him an even more important lesson – how to be part of a family. That was something he didn't dare allow himself to think about in those days. He and Amanda had come a long way since the dark, cold night they'd spent hiding out from Peter Sacker's fanatical followers in that swamp. Bound to each other by handcuffs and the numbing cold, he had allowed himself the luxury of holding her close that night. But it had still taken a foot of steel and the threat of death to keep him from running away from the emotions she'd awakened in him.

That night belonged to a different lifetime now. He'd finally stopped hiding from his feelings. He looked down at the band of gold on the third finger of his left hand. A year ago he'd stood beside Amanda as they'd had pledged their lives and their love to each other. Tomorrow they would renew those vows

in front of their family and friends. They would be joined together once more, this time not by steel handcuffs but by invisible ties that were even more binding. Maybe it was time now to let go of the past and move forward. Maybe now he was finally ready.

“You know, sir, it’s your family, too,” Lee stated simply. “We’d like you to be part of it.” He stole a glance at his uncle and, reading the surprise and gratitude on his face, he amended quickly, “I’d like you to be part of it.”

“I’d like that, too,” the Colonel replied haltingly, shifting his gaze to the window to hide his awkwardness.

“Then maybe you shouldn’t let so much time go by between visits,” his nephew added.

“We’ll see,” the Colonel said gruffly, continuing to study the view.

Lee didn’t allow those words to chill him this time. He recognized embarrassed avoidance when he saw it. He’d been guilty of it himself on too many occasions. His uncle must have wanted to be a part of their lives or he wouldn’t have made the effort to come to the ceremony tomorrow. If the Colonel could take the first step, then he could take the next one, Lee thought, vowing this time that things really would be different. He’d make sure his uncle didn’t remain a stranger, especially if he and Amanda had a family of their own.

“So,” the Colonel continued, “what do you think of your new boss?”

“Colonel Holstein?” Lee answered vaguely, allowing his uncle the welcome relief of a more neutral topic. “The jury’s still out. Although I suppose you’d approve of the choice...after all, I believe he is a product of military intelligence.”

“Not one I’d want to brag about,” the Colonel snorted derisively. “We have a few skeletons in our closet, too.”

“How so?”

The Colonel hesitated a minute, considering his words carefully. “Jack Holstein and I go way back. I’ve known him for a long time and known ‘of him’ for even longer. I don’t like what I know.”

Lee looked at him suspiciously. “You referred to ‘skeletons in the closet’...?”

“There was an incident a long time ago that was conveniently covered up. A very suspicious arms deal with a foreign government that shall remain nameless...military supplies being directed to mercenaries in an attempt to overthrow the existing regime. It was a direct violation of U.S. policy.”

“And Holstein was involved?”

“Up to his eyeballs.

“Were charges ever filed?”

“No,” the Colonel replied flatly. “The proof conveniently disappeared when the only witness committed suicide. Poison.”

“And of course the investigation was closed,” Lee murmured, Billy’s words about the Agency’s investigation into the death of the Chameleon’s partner echoing in his mind.

“Closed and swept under the rug. Cleaner than a whistle. But he was involved – they both were.”

“Who was?”

“He and that cousin of his,” the Colonel snorted derisively.

“You’re not referring to Senator Holstein?” Lee asked dubiously.

“Yes, I am.”

“I don’t know about that,” Lee began. “If you’re right, and that’s a big ‘if’, he must have had a change of heart. He was my informant on Dr. Smyth’s operation. Without his help, I’d never have broken the case. And he took two bullets in the head for his trouble.”

“Maybe he’d changed, but I doubt it,” his uncle scoffed. “That whole family was nothing but trouble.”

Lee considered this information for a moment, then dismissed it. His uncle must be off base about the Senator. If Senator Holstein had been involved, he’d paid the ultimate price. He shivered involuntarily as his mind traveled back to the night last August when the Senator and his friend Tom Fellows had been executed. The Colonel hadn’t been in the basement of that house in Georgetown

that night, hadn't had to listen to the sound of those bullets echoing in his brain for the last six months or try to block out the memory of Senator Holstein pleading for his life.

Shaking himself out of his reverie, he turned once again to his uncle with a thoughtful look. "I appreciate the information about Colonel Holstein. It might shed some light on something I'm working on."

"Glad if I've helped," his uncle stated gruffly.

Lee acknowledged the Colonel's thanks with a nod. This information, sketchy though it was, could turn out to be the first evidence they'd had that Colonel Holstein was not who he appeared to be. An unfortunate pattern was emerging here. He suddenly had another reason to look forward to their little trip to the islands. His gut told him now more than ever that Jack Holstein was somehow hopelessly embroiled in this whole mess with the Chameleon. Hopefully their honeymoon would prove productive in more ways than one, he thought with a smile.

"I think I'm going to call it a night," the Colonel said, rising slowly and beginning to head for the stairs. "Maybe you should, too – you have a big day tomorrow."

"You're right," Lee agreed, slowly following his uncle's lead.

"You know, if you need a place to sleep tonight, you're welcome to bunk with me in Jamie's room. Amanda seemed pretty mad."

"Thanks," Lee laughed. "I may take you up on that."

"As long as I get the top bunk," his uncle rejoined, slapping him playfully on the back.

"I guess you do have seniority here," his nephew responded with a grin.

"And Skip – watch yourself with Holstein," the Colonel reiterated, his brow knit together in concern. "I don't trust him."

"Neither do I. Thanks again for the warning." Lee turned off the lights and followed his uncle upstairs.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Lee tiptoed noiselessly into the bathroom, trying not to disturb Amanda as he rummaged through the medicine cabinet. Where had he put that aspirin earlier? He could have sworn he'd left it right on the first shelf. He cringed as he knocked over a bottle of vitamins in his search, sending the minuscule pills skittering across the floor.

"Damn," he cursed under his breath, stopping to retrieve the tiny tablets.

"What are you looking for?" Amanda's voice drifted to him from the other room, her earlier annoyance still apparent in her tone.

"Aspirin," Lee replied in a subdued voice, tentatively poking his head out through the bathroom door.

"Right here by the bed."

"Thanks." He moved over to the nightstand, eyeing the medication with relief.

"How did you get in here?" Amanda asked irritably. "I thought I locked the door."

"You did," Lee grinned guiltily. "Lock pick, standard issue." He held up the slender tool up for her to see.

"You can't take a hint, can you?" she said, rolling her eyes, as she turned away from him. "I thought I told you I'd see you tomorrow. I've had about all I can take tonight."

"I just needed an aspirin. There weren't any in the boys' bathroom," Lee explained. "I'll get out of your hair."

"My headache contagious?" she inquired, rolling over to look at him more closely.

The dim light from the bathroom cast a pale glow on the room and Lee shifted uncomfortably under her gaze. "Not yet, but if I don't take some aspirin, I'll wake up with a whopper. The Colonel and I killed a bottled of brandy after you left us."

“As long as you didn’t kill each other, I guess that’s an improvement.”

Lee looked at his wife’s still figure lying beneath the covers. “Amanda,” he began, kneeling down on the floor beside the bed. “I just wanted you to know...” He sighed, unable to find the words to tell her how he felt.

“What?” she demanded accusingly, propping her head up on her elbow. “Did you and your uncle...?”

“No, we talked,” he said, looking up to meet her eyes. “Finally. It was different...good.”

“I’ve been trying to tell you that your uncle’s not such a bad guy,” she said, a tentative smile beginning to form. She was relieved to see that he seemed strangely at peace somehow.

“I know you did. But sometimes it’s hard for me to talk to him without the past getting in the way.”

“The past has a way of doing that to everybody sometimes,” she agreed, remembering her conversation in the kitchen earlier tonight with her mother and last weekend with Joe. “The trick is to not to let it pull you backwards, but to learn from it and move forward.”

“Easier said than done sometimes.”

“I know.” Amanda ran her hand over the bed. “Come on over here.”

Lee slowly pulled himself up off the floor, climbing up on the bed next to her. He sank down on the mattress, the scent of her perfume calming his raw nerves. “You know, Amanda, it’s funny,” he said in a low voice, reaching for her hand as he laid his head close to hers on the pillow. “When I thought about my uncle, even long after I’d grown up, I still saw him through the eyes of a five year old. He seemed larger than life to me back then. And he scared the hell out of me.”

“That’s not surprising. Lee, when you met him, you were only a little boy. A little boy who’d just lost his parents. It’s only natural for a child to be afraid when his whole world has been turned inside out.”

“Not according to the Colonel,” Lee laughed bitterly. “You know, I still remember...”

“What?” Amanda prodded gently, running her hand soothingly along his arm.

“That first night I spent with him. It was on the base in California. I was in a strange bed in an even stranger place. The Colonel made one of his ‘surprise’ inspection visits.”

“And?” Amanda asked quietly.

“He caught me crying,” Lee admitted, turning to study the ceiling.

“What did he say?”

“He informed me in no uncertain terms that tears were a waste of time. That they wouldn’t change anything. He told me that he would leave me alone and I had ‘permission to cry’ for the next hour. But that was it. When he came back, he didn’t ever want to see or hear any more tears on the subject.”

“What did you do?” she asked in a small voice.

“What he told me to do - I cried for the next hour. And never again. Not once, Amanda,” he murmured sorrowfully, rolling over to face her again. “Not even when I watched Dorothy die in my arms.”

“Oh, Lee,” she sighed, reaching out to pull him against her.

“Not until that business with Blackthorne...until you made me see it was okay.”

His voice trailed off and she felt his arms tighten around her. She moved her hands soothingly through his hair, remembering the night she’d taken him in her arms while he’d shed those long overdue tears for his parents. That night he’d finally come to understand that it wasn’t weakness to grieve for the people he’d lost.

“I’ve never told that to anyone before,” Lee continued in an intimate whisper, drawing a shaky breath as he held her close. He pushed the memory aside as he felt her tears wet against his neck. He pulled back, his fingers gently brushing her tears away as he gazed into her eyes. “Hey, I didn’t mean to make you cry. I was just trying to explain why it’s been hard for me this week. I know I haven’t been acting like myself. More like that scared five year old.”

“It’s okay,” she whispered tenderly. “I understand.”

“But tonight, for the first time, I looked at him like an adult. I finally saw Colonel Robert Clayton the way he really is – and he didn’t make me feel angry or afraid any more. He’s really very much alone. It was like looking in a distorted mirror and seeing not the Colonel, but myself – the way I might have ended up if it hadn’t been for you. Thank you for not giving up on me all those times I pushed you away.”

“I would never have let that happen.” She reached out to touch him, affectionately running her fingers along the side of his face. “You were worth waiting for.”

“So were you.” He returned her smile, seeing in her eyes a reflection of the love that was mirrored in his own. His hand closed around hers, bringing it to his lips for a tender kiss.

“Lee,” she whispered softly, “I’ve been doing a lot of thinking...about what we talked about the other morning.”

“Your job?”

“Yes, partially. But mostly about having another baby. I was really confused the other day. I didn’t mean to sound like I didn’t want to have your child.”

“I know it’s not an easy decision.”

“Yes and no. I’m beginning to see how important this is to you. Lee, I want us to do this.”

“Do you mean that?” he said hesitantly. “Amanda, I don’t want to force you into anything.”

“You’re not,” she whispered. “I do want it, with all my heart.”

“Even if it means coming out of the field? You said...”

“I know what I said. But I think you’re right, coming out of the field is the right decision. Not just for the sake of a baby, but for Jamie as well.”

She brushed her hand tenderly across his cheek. “And I think it’s what’s best for us,” she continued in a soft voice. “If it comes down to a choice between

working in the field and our life together, you know there's no contest. And besides, I hear there are very strict rules about pregnant field agents."

"Thank you," he breathed, happiness at her decision flooding through him. "You have no idea what this means to me."

"I think I do... 'cause I know what it means to me. If it seemed like I was being stubborn about my job, it's only that I kind of felt like I had something to prove at the Agency, to Francine, to the other agents, maybe even to myself. That I could be more than just your protégé."

"You're much more than that, Amanda. I've always known you were a good agent."

"Always?" she teased. "Come on Stetson, we're supposed to be telling the truth here. I can remember more than a few times when you didn't even consider me a gifted amateur."

"That was a long time ago - part of another lifetime. And the guy who thought that was an idiot."

"I can't argue with that," she laughed. "I guess we'll have to hope our child is lucky enough to take after its mother."

"Well, if it has you for a mother, it will already be lucky." He leaned forward and kissed her tenderly. "Amanda, you're sure you're not just doing this for me...because of what I said tonight?"

"No," she replied, cupping his face in her hands. "I made this decision last night while you were tossing and turning again downstairs on the couch. I've had a lot of time to think lying here all alone the past few nights. I was planning to tell you this tomorrow - kind of my anniversary present." She tilted her head slowly towards him, brushing his lips with hers. "If you want to know the truth," she whispered, "I tossed out my diaphragm this morning - so if you wanted to start trying right now, it's all right with me."

"That's the best offer I've had all week," he grinned. "But I thought you had a headache?"

"Not anymore...that aspirin is amazing." She slid up next to him and began to unbutton his shirt.

He caught her hand on the first button, gently pushing it away. “Amanda, don’t take this the wrong way, but not tonight.” He sighed deeply, reaching out to brush a strand of hair out of her eyes before continuing. “I want tomorrow to be a special day.”

“It will be special. Making love tonight won’t change that.”

“Probably not. But with all the stuff that’s been going on these past few weeks, with Jamie, with work, with my uncle, the wedding plans...I kind of lost sight of the real reason why I started all this, why I wanted to renew our vows tomorrow.”

“The real reason?”

“That I love you,” he said simply. “And I want to say that again, this time in front of all our family and friends so that everyone understands that.” Leaning his weight on his right arm, he looked plaintively into her eyes. “Does that make sense?”

“Yes,” she nodded, imitating his posture as she turned to look into his hazel eyes with a sigh.

“We’ve already waited this long...I figure, what’s one more night? Maybe all those near misses have been trying to tell us something.”

“That abstinence builds character?” she teased, a slow grin building around the corners of her mouth.

“Nah, I’ve got plenty of character,” he laughed. “But it would make our second wedding night even better. I know it sounds silly...”

“No, it doesn’t,” Amanda said quickly. “I think it’s the most romantic thing you’ve said to me in a long time.”

“Really?”

“Really. Especially when you remember that ‘five minutes is all I need’ line you tried the other night,” she added mockingly.

“Well, I aim to please.”

“Yeah, Scarecrow, that’s what they all say,” she grinned, giving him an affectionate shove. “I guess I have to admire your self-control. Okay, we’ll do this the old-fashioned way. But that means you can’t sleep in here tonight.”

“I wasn’t planning on it. That much self-control I don’t have,” he laughed. “The Colonel said I could sack out with him.” He stood up to leave, pausing briefly at the door to look longingly at his wife one more time. “I guess I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“I guess you will.” As he started through the door, her voice called him back. “Lee...”

“Yes?” He turned and looked at her expectantly.

“I’m sorry if I’ve been acting crazy myself this week. I kind of feel like I’m on an emotional roller coaster ride these days.”

“That’s okay. I haven’t exactly been easy to live with. Although all that running...it could have some unexpected benefits. They say it helps improve your stamina,” he smirked, raising his eyebrows suggestively.

“Get out of here,” she laughed, her hand closing around the small bottle of pills on the nightstand and tossing it in his direction. “And don’t forget your aspirin.”

“Goodnight,” he returned, carelessly pocketing the bottle of pills.

“Lee?” She called again, raising herself up slightly on one elbow.

“Yes?” he answered, sticking his head back in the door.

“I love you, too.”

“See you tomorrow,” he grinned, winking at her as he closed the door.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The almost full moon shone down on the deserted road, illuminating the area like a spotlight. Lee Stetson smiled to himself as he pressed his foot down on the accelerator, expertly guiding the silver corvette through the familiar terrain. Glancing at Amanda out of the corner of his eye, he noticed with relief that she seemed pleasantly relaxed as she leaned back against the car’s headrest. After the

frenetic pace of the past week, culminating earlier tonight as they renewed their vows, it was wonderful to just sit beside his wife in companionable silence.

He smiled again as his thoughts drifted back over the evening's events. Standing by the fireplace in their living room, Lee had nervously shifted his feet as he waited for his 'bride' to appear. Time stood still for him as she walked towards him on Billy's arm and he remembered thinking that she'd never looked more beautiful, not even a year ago at their secret ceremony. He knew in that moment exactly how much he loved her and how grateful he was that she had come into his life almost five short years ago.

The scenery sped by in a blur as Amanda felt Lee give the car a little more gas. She sighed contentedly, watching her husband's profile in the darkness. It had been such a lovely day, she thought tenderly as she allowed the happy memories to wash over her. The congratulatory smiles of their family and friends, her mother's joyful tears and the look of pride on her sons' faces warmed her heart. But they didn't compare to the expression in Lee's eyes as they repeated their vows again, openly and in plain sight, this time with nothing to hide. That look was something she'd treasure for as long as she lived.

Their wedding last year had been very special, but it was a private moment belonging to the two of them. Having their friends and family present this time to witness their commitment lent a different feeling to the ceremony. The emotion of it all caught Amanda a little by surprise. She didn't realize until she stood next to Lee today just how much they'd missed by eloping. The happy wishes of their loved ones made the day even more special.

Jamie had seemed especially comfortable with the festivities, Amanda thought with relief. Her son appeared to have finally accepted Lee's place in their family. The ceremony today had cemented the bond they'd forged on the camping trip. As she watched Jamie offer Lee his sincere congratulations, her mother's words to her last night suddenly took on a whole new meaning. Secrecy and lies had created more problems than they had solved. Amanda was glad they'd decided to publicly renew their vows.

She glanced over at Lee, watching the look of lazy concentration that he always wore when he was driving the corvette. He seemed more at ease than he had in a long time, his hands playing over the wheel as the car glided effortlessly towards their destination.

"Hey," she said softly, breaking the silence between them at last. "Penny for your thoughts."

“You’ll have to come up with more than that. The going rate these days must be at least a dime.”

“You drive a pretty hard bargain, pal. The least you could do is give me a discount now that we’ve been officially married twice.”

“Okay, you win. Actually, I was thinking about that very thing.”

“A discount?”

“No, the ceremony,” he laughed.

“Me, too,” she sighed. “It was so beautiful. You couldn’t have given me a better anniversary present.” She smiled at him warmly, her hand reaching out to rub his leg affectionately. “Did I remember to thank you?”

“Not yet,” he grinned. “But the night is young.”

“I would be more than happy to do that provided we ever get to our destination. Am I crazy or have we been taking the scenic route?”

“I had a little time to kill, I wanted to make sure everything was ready and waiting for us. But we’re almost there.”

“Good,” she whispered, her hand absently stroking up and down as she spoke.

“Uh, Amanda,” Lee replied uncomfortably. “Do you think you could stop that?”

“Stop what?”

“That,” he answered with a smile, his eyes glancing down at her hand resting tantalizingly on his upper thigh. “Unless you want me to pull over to the side of the road and show you just how much I’ve missed you.”

“Oh,” she grinned, her eyes following his gaze. “Sorry - I’ll try to stay over here, light years away on my side of the car.” She removed her hand, placing it in her lap with an exaggerated motion.

“Good,” he responded with a laugh. “I’m getting too old to worry about that gear shift.”

She laughed readily at the image his words engendered, leaning her head against the window with a sigh. "So, are you going to tell me where we're spending tonight? You've been guarding the information like it was some kind of state secret."

"You haven't guessed yet?" He slowed the car, making a right turn onto a familiar street.

"No, I..." Her words trailed off as she turned to look at her surroundings. Her mind had been too occupied with Lee and the wedding to pay much attention to where they were driving. A slow smile spread across her face as the car pulled to a stop in front of the Crystal Springs Inn.

"Oh, Lee, you didn't."

"Yes, I did," he smiled, reaching into his pocket for a key. "Room number two." He dangled the key out in front of her.

"That's so sweet," she whispered, her eyes misting with happy tears. "You really are a hopeless romantic."

"I have my moments."

"You think the room's ready?" she joked, glancing at her watch as he left the car and came around to open her door.

"Absolutely guaranteed," he said, flashing her a smile as he helped her out of the car. He grabbed their luggage and they headed in the direction of the Inn. "This time I've taken precautions. I checked in this afternoon and left a healthy tip just to make sure."

Amanda nodded her approval at his forethought, remembering their wedding night one year ago with a smile. When they'd arrived at the Inn last year, they found to their chagrin that housekeeping was still in the process of readying their room. Lee had persuaded the desk clerk to check them in anyway and they stood anxiously side-by-side, watching the cleaning lady go through her evening checklist.

Thinking back now, Amanda laughed at the picture the two of them must have made, impatiently waiting for the maid to finish her duties. The woman was absolutely unbelievable. If meticulous attention to detail had been an Olympic sport, then that maid was the gold medallist. Amanda didn't think she'd ever seen a room prepared so thoroughly or with such painstaking

slowness. After waiting for so long to consummate their relationship, they should have been experts at holding their feelings in check, Amanda thought dryly. But the few minutes they stood in that room waiting for the maid to exit were some of the longest of her life. She'd known from Lee's expression that he felt the same way.

Lee closed the door of their room with a bang, shaking Amanda out of her nostalgic reverie. She smiled as he deposited their bags in an unceremonious heap on the floor.

"I'm sure the bellboy would have brought those in for you," she teased, watching him rub the kinks out of his shoulder.

"I'm not taking any chances this year," Lee stated emphatically, remembering last year's tortuous maid. "He might decide it was his duty to explain how the heating system works or something. Of course, I didn't realize you'd packed all the clothes you owned in that suitcase." He grinned as he stretched his neck. "You know you aren't going to need them."

"Is that a promise?" She looked longingly at him from across the room. Finally finding herself alone with Lee after this past week was an incredible feeling. She glanced nervously at the phone on the table, half expecting it to ring.

Lee smiled as his eyes followed her gaze. "Not this time," he insisted, taking the phone off the hook. "The world can get along without us for a little while."

"Definitely," Amanda agreed. She quickly crossed the room to where he was standing by the fire. "Let me take a look at your neck. Maybe I can help." She felt him begin to relax as her hands moved over his sore muscles.

"Oww," he grimaced, reflexively pulling away as her fingers hit a particularly tender spot.

"Honestly, you're as bad as Philip and Jamie," she said in a teasing whisper. "Hold still and I promise it will feel better." She came up behind him again, working her fingers expertly over his neck and down his shoulder.

"You're right, it feels better already." He caught hold of her hand as he pivoted to face her. "You don't need to..." He paused for a minute, exhaling softly as his eyes locked on her in silent admiration.

“I don’t need to what?” she whispered in a low voice, feeling his hand close tightly around hers as his breathing quickened.

He shrugged his shoulders, his sore neck forgotten as he looked into her eyes with a smile. He suddenly found himself beyond the power of speech, his gaze intensifying as their eyes met in a moment of perfect understanding.

Without another thought and only a second’s hesitation, they each took a step forward, simultaneously reaching for each other. Their mouths met in a heated kiss, their passion igniting like dried brush exposed to a single match.

Moaning slightly, she opened her mouth, her tongue feverishly seeking his as she sought to prolong the kiss. “Oh, Lee, I’ve missed this,” she whispered, putting her arms around his neck and pulling him closer.

He groaned in return, crushing her tightly in his arms, gasping her name as her lips trailed down his neck. He sighed deeply as he closed his eyes, breathing heavily as she ran her hands tantalizingly over his hips.

“Amanda,” Lee murmured again, his mouth inches from hers as his hands searched feverishly for the zipper of her dress.

“Don’t talk,” she admonished breathlessly, quickly covering his lips again with hers. She parted her mouth as their kiss intensified, her fingers nimbly undoing his tie before moving swiftly to the buttons on his shirt. Breaking their embrace, she pushed him back slightly, deftly stripping away his jacket and shirt and casting them carelessly on the floor. She drew a ragged breath as his eyes silently urged her to hurry.

He brought his mouth back down demandingly on hers, shuddering slightly as she dragged her fingernails across his back. His own hands sought and finally found the elusive zipper clasp on the back of her dress, closing his fingers over it clumsily. He fumbled with it for a few seconds in an awkward attempt to unzip it.

“Damn,” he muttered under his breath, cursing his own ineptitude.

Smiling slightly at his urgency, Amanda quickly reached behind her back to deftly work the zipper, the dress effortlessly falling to the floor.

Lee shook his head as he watched her step out of it and quickly kick off her shoes. His arms closed around her and he kissed her again, moving his fingers up her back to tangle in the softness of her hair. He felt Amanda step

backwards, directing them to the bed, but Lee shook his head, instead gently guiding her down to the floor. As they lay together on the rug in front of the fire, they finished undressing each other in eager anticipation. Their mouths met again and again, tongues exploring as their hands traveled the length of the other's body, sliding hungrily over hard sinew and soft curves.

Slipping out from under him, Amanda pushed Lee onto his back, positioning herself to lie lightly on his chest. She gently traced his lips with her fingers before moving them slowly downward. Eyes twinkling, her mouth quickly followed the path they had taken over his lips and throat, her tongue swirling around his nipples as she completed her journey down his body. She ran her hands sensuously over his thighs, feeling his muscles contract as her mouth progressed from his waist to the smooth flesh of his stomach.

She paused for a second, looking up to catch his expression before continuing. He seemed to be enjoying her handiwork immensely, she thought with a sly grin. Smiling, she began again, licking her way up and down the length of his shaft before enclosing him in her mouth. She heard a low moan escape from his throat and she reveled in the pleasure she knew she was giving him.

As her ministrations continued, Lee felt himself nearing the edge and abruptly pulled away, reaching down to draw her up across his chest.

"Lee," she whispered softly, resting her lips against the hollow of his throat. "I..."

"Shhh," he said, cutting her off as he rolled her onto her back. "I thought you said not to talk." His fingers sensuously traced her inner thighs and he listened to her groan of pleasure as he deftly slipped two fingers inside. The past year had taught him exactly how she liked to be touched and it wasn't long before he heard her breathing quicken and felt her body tense in response. His lips parted in a smile as he raised his eyebrows questioningly.

She nodded almost imperceptibly and he slid his hands underneath her hips. Turning her slightly so that he barely had to move to enter her, their bodies glided effortlessly together as they began to move to a familiar rhythm.

They lay together, one body, not two. Half-spoken murmurs of pleasure were the only sounds that penetrated the cocoon of silence that enveloped them.

Amanda felt Lee tense almost immediately, too quickly, their foreplay combined with the weeks of abstinence leaving him little room for control. She

held him close as he shuddered in pleasure. Exhaling softly, she felt him relax against her and she ran her hands affectionately through his hair.

He groaned slightly, rolling over on his back, and stared up at the ceiling with an embarrassed grin.

“Amanda, I’m...uh...sorry about that.”

She turned to him with a teasing smile, the laughter bubbling up in her throat. “You really weren’t kidding about the five minute thing, were you?”

“I guess I’ve really missed you,” he replied, meeting her eye with a sheepish look.

“I guess so,” she returned. “But this kind of shoots a hole in your ‘running builds stamina’ theory. And here I was expecting such great things from your new fitness program.”

“Well, it’s partially your fault, you know. I had this whole romantic thing planned, then you had to stand there looking like that. I was momentarily overcome.”

“Evidently.” She scooted over and rested her chin on his chest. “The question is, what are you going to do to make this up to me?”

He looked at her sparkling eyes and flashed her a smile. “I’m sure I can come up with something appropriate.”

“I’m sure you can,” she smiled, moving to kiss him lightly on the lips. “You could start by ordering me a pizza.”

“A pizza?” he asked incredulously. “I had something a little different in mind.”

“I’ve been hungry for pizza ever since you suggested it the other night. I didn’t eat anything tonight at the reception and I’m starved.”

“Okay,” he laughed, “one pizza coming up. Anything else I can do for you?” He looked at her significantly.

“We can talk about that while we’re waiting for the delivery boy.”

“At your service,” he grinned, sitting up and reaching for the phone.

“That’s the general idea,” she said, a slow smile beginning to form as she watched him dial.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Could you hand me another piece of the pepperoni?” Amanda asked, leaning back against the pillow with a smile.

“I’ve never seen you eat so much,” Lee replied incredulously as he handed her a generous slice.

“I guess I didn’t have much of an appetite this week,” she answered with a grin, popping a generous portion into her mouth. “By the way, did I say thank you for your efforts on my behalf while we were waiting for the pizza?”

“Not in so many words, but I got the general idea,” he teased, reaching for the bottle of champagne resting in a bucket of ice on the bedside table.

“I can’t remember when I’ve had so much of your undivided attention,” she grinned, taking another bite of pizza. She sighed as she rested against the pillows. “Do you think the delivery boy thought it was odd that we slipped a twenty under the door and asked him to leave the box outside?”

“Amanda, he probably thought the whole thing was odd,” Lee laughed as he leaned over to refill her champagne glass. “I don’t think they get too many deliveries for the Crystal Springs Inn.”

“You’re probably right,” she laughed, the bubbles tickling her nose as she sipped her champagne. “I guess most of the people staying here have other things on their mind.”

“They don’t know what they’re missing,” he whispered lovingly, replacing the bottle in ice and planting a kiss on her bare shoulder. “We can eat pizza naked in bed any time you say.”

“Thanks, Stetson, I appreciate the offer.” She relaxed against the pillow, looking around the room and taking in the general disarray with a sweep of her eyes. “We sure made a mess of this place. We were much neater last year.”

“No, just more unsure of each other. At least this year we didn’t have to look over our shoulder for Nick Grant.”

“That’s true.” She surveyed the room again, turning to Lee with a sigh. “It did look beautiful when we arrived tonight. The fire, the champagne, the flowers...everything. It was really nice.”

“I had a lot of time to think about it while I was out running,” he laughed. “But I had no idea what you really wanted was a pepperoni pizza.”

“With mushrooms,” she grinned, taking another bite.

“With mushrooms,” he repeated, lifting his glass in a mock toast. “Pizza and champagne - what a combination.”

“Kind of like us,” she said as she snuggled down beside him.

“Yeah,” he whispered, kissing the top of her head with a smile.

“It really was a beautiful ceremony.” Amanda felt all the tension of the past week disappear as she settled in contentedly against Lee’s side. “I think everyone enjoyed themselves.”

“Beeman certainly seemed to,” Lee observed wryly.

“I know. One glass of champagne and he was following Francine around like a puppy again.”

“Yeah, I thought Jonathan was going to hit him.”

“I think Jonathan was too busy worrying about what his own wedding was going to cost him to notice,” Amanda laughed. “Didn’t you hear Francine commenting on everything?”

“No, but I tend to tune out conversations about floral arrangements.”

“It’s all going to be ‘terribly chic’. She’s hired the most fashionable and expensive wedding coordinator in D.C.,” she grinned. “One more remark and my mother was going to kill her.”

“Poor Jonathan – I hope he knows what he’s in for,” Lee responded with a hearty laugh. “Speaking of your mother – did you see her dancing with Billy?”

“I did. I guess it’s safe to say she’s finally decided to declare a truce.”

“I’m glad,” he said, smothering his yawn. “Billy’s a good friend.”

“Tired?” she asked with concern.

“A little. I haven’t had a lot of sleep this week. Too many nights of insomnia on the couch.”

“I didn’t sleep that well, either, all alone in our room.”

“We’ll have to make a pact not to let that happen again then.” He lifted his glass in her direction with a flourish. “To no more sleeping apart?”

“To no more sleeping apart,” she repeated, clinking her glass against his.

They both drained their glasses, looking at each other with a smile. Setting her champagne down carefully on the nightstand, Amanda stretched out comfortably on her right side, propping herself up on her elbow as she studied Lee’s expression. He did look a little tired, she thought with a flash of regret. Last week must have been as rough on him as it was on her. Still, after almost a month of untimely interruptions, she wasn’t ready for tonight to end quite so soon. Reaching out a tentative hand, she began to tenderly caress him, her left hand moving seductively down his chest.

“Sweetheart,” Lee stated sleepily as he tried to stifle another yawn, “I can’t keep my eyes open.”

“That’s okay,” she persevered, “I hear you don’t need your eyes open to do this.”

“But you do need to be conscious,” he said apologetically. “Would you mind if…”

“Gosh, Lee” she teased. “You’re starting to sound like an old married man.”

“Oh, you think so, huh?” His laugh began deep in his throat and his eyes sparkled as he watched her slim form illuminated in the pale glow from the lamp. She looked especially beautiful tonight, he thought fondly, looking into her brown eyes. Suddenly, sleep was the furthest thing from his mind.

“Is that some kind of a challenge, Mrs. Stetson?” he questioned in a teasing voice.

“You can take it any way you want, Mr. Stetson,” she answered, pressing against him as she ran a leisurely hand up and down his spine.

“Hmm...I think I’m starting to feel up to it.”

He turned to her with renewed energy as his body awakened to her touch. Their eyes met, holding each other in their gaze for a few moments before reaching for each other in unspoken agreement. They touched their lips together, lightly at first, then with a growing intensity that caught them both by surprise.

Lee pulled back, kissing the top of her head. “Let’s take this a little slower this time.”

She nodded and smiled, leaning back and allowing him to set the pace. He ran his fingers lightly through her hair, then moved them down her cheeks, holding her face in his hands. He lifted her head, bringing her mouth again to his. As he kissed her slowly, their tongues met and entwined, unhurriedly embracing each other. Amanda sighed against his lips, concentrating on the feelings evoked by his kiss.

Closing her eyes, she felt his fingers run tantalizingly down her neck, tracing the curve of her shoulders, the smooth lines of her arms. His breath warmed her chest as his mouth moved across her breasts, first one and then the other, drawing her nipples up with his tongue.

“Amanda,” she heard him whisper sensuously as his lips traveled down her body. A small sob caught in her throat at the way he spoke her name, as if it was as essential to him as the air he breathed, and it touched her very core. Unable to lie still any longer, she caught his face in her hands, drawing him back towards her in a passionate kiss.

She pressed her body closer to his and together they discovered each other again with hands and mouths, every touch and feeling as exciting and new as it had been on this night one year ago. She found herself suddenly overwhelmed by the emotion of it all, the journey they had traveled together in the past twelve months. Momentarily unnerved by the intensity of the experience, her hands stilled and she looked at Lee through half-closed eyes.

His lips on her forehead broke through her silent reverie. “Hey, no thinking allowed,” he breathed, his voice barely audible against her ear. “There’s plenty of time for that later.”

She nodded, the sound of his voice bringing her back to the present. “You’re right,” she whispered in a low voice, “now it’s time for this.” She kissed him deeply, a long, slow kiss, her tongue again doing a lazy dance with his. “And this.” She moved her lips down his neck, pressing her tongue in a circular motion in the hollow of his throat.

Lee moaned softly as she moved lower, her breasts brushing against him as her tongue continued to make small circles across his chest. The feeling was incredible. His hands moved to touch her, his fingers on her back imitating the movement of her tongue. He loved the feel of her, her skin against his, smooth and soft. He sighed as she moved her mouth lower, closing his eyes and drinking in the exquisite pleasure her lips and tongue brought him. He briefly thought how well she knew him after this past year, how quickly her caresses could bring him to the edge. He reached down, lifting her and laying her gently beside him on the bed.

He held her firmly, his lips progressing down her body the way hers had done on his a few minutes ago, his tongue moving in quick probing strokes. He heard her moan as her body tensed and he quickly covered her, resting his weight on his elbows as his lower body moved to enter her.

Joined together, they lay still for a minute, letting the passion build. Slowly, simultaneously, they both began to move against each other, losing themselves in the perfection of the moment, each effortlessly matching the rhythm of the other’s body. The room was filled with a rushing sound, like waves beating on the shore, and they rode the crest of their passion together, everything spinning dizzily out of control. At last they lay still, the wild beating of their hearts slowing to a more normal rhythm.

Kissing Amanda one more time, Lee reluctantly rolled away, settling down beside her and pulling her tightly into his arms. As he held her close, he knew with a certainty that the rejoining of their lives today had meant as much to her as it had to him.

Amanda rested contentedly beside her husband with a happy sigh. “Wow,” she murmured, still trying to catch her breath. “I take back everything I said earlier. I’ll never make fun of all that running again.”

“See that you don’t,” he laughed.

“I promise,” she said with a grin, shivering slightly as she snuggled next to him.

“Cold?”

“A little.”

“Is that better?” he asked, pulling the quilt up around them.

“Much,” she answered, burrowing down under the covers beside him. They lay together in comfortable silence, Amanda’s head pillowed on Lee’s chest, listening to the comforting beat of his heart. She relaxed against his body, luxuriating in the feel of his arms holding her close. Her fingers traced tiny circles on his chest as her thoughts drifted back over the last hour. “Lee...”

“Hmm,” he murmured contentedly.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“You can ask me anything you want, you know that.” He rolled over on his side to look her in the eye.

“I was just wondering...our second wedding night...if it was different for you?”

“Is that where you drifted off to?” he asked, looking at her closely.

She nodded briefly, her eyes avoiding his. That was the simple explanation for what had happened to her. In truth it was much more than that. The events of the last year had suddenly washed over her in a tidal wave of emotion.

“There was one thing,” Lee continued, pausing for a minute as he considered his answer. He opted for the light approach while he tried to figure out what she needed to hear. “Housekeeping was much more efficient this time,” he joked. “I don’t think I’ll ever forget that maid. If the woman had taken any longer in here last year, I was considering using force to remove her.”

“I’m not talking about that and you know it.”

“I know you’re not,” he said, leaning over to place a kiss on her forehead. “Yes, it was different. For one thing, I wasn’t as nervous this time.”

“Nervous? You?” she asked incredulously.

“Yes, hard to believe I know...”

She punched him playfully in the arm. "Could you please be serious?"

"Okay, okay," he answered with a nervous laugh. Even after all this time, he still found it hard to talk about his feelings. "I guess I felt a lot of pressure last year."

"You did?"

"Uh-huh," he nodded. "Considering all the press my 'reputation' had gotten, I was afraid I wouldn't live up to your expectations."

"That's so funny – I never dreamed you felt that way." She planted a tiny kiss on his chest, leaning in closer to whisper in his ear. "You know you didn't have anything to worry about, don't you? You surpassed every one of my expectations. Last year and this year."

"Glad you approved," he teased, grinning as he looked into her brown eyes. Something in their expression grabbed his heart and he forced himself to level with her. "Honestly speaking, it was more than that. The way I felt about you...us...it scared me a little bit." He hesitated, at a loss as to how to describe his feelings. "I'd never had such an emotional...I mean, we were friends long before we ever..." He sighed again, looking her in the eye. "Do you know what I'm trying to say?"

"Yes," she said simply, smiling as he stumbled over his words. She understood him perfectly. Her heart had always been able to read his, even in the days when his fears had forced him to wear a mask of studied indifference. He had brought so much to her life, the bond between them deeper than anything she had ever felt before, even with Joe.

"I wish I'd known you felt that way last year," she continued in a whisper. "Maybe then I might not have felt so much pressure myself."

"Not from me?" he asked, his eyes narrowing in concern. "It really was okay with me that we waited."

"Not that kind of pressure. It was a little more indirect. I'm referring to your colorful history."

"My history?"

“This might sound silly, but it was kind of intimidating,” she added, taking a deep breath before continuing. “That was quite a parade you had marching through your apartment, pal. I mean – you actually owned a bathrobe with ‘She’ embroidered on it. I know we’d decided to wait until our wedding night to make love, but the longer we waited, the more I thought about all those beautiful, exotic women in your past. I worried that maybe you’d be disappointed. I was afraid I wouldn’t measure up.”

“You’re right, it does sound silly,” he said, kissing her lips softly. “There wasn’t even any basis for comparison. I love you.”

“I know that now,” she nodded. “Actually, I knew that the first time we made love. You’ve always made me feel like that – that you loved me.” She leaned towards him to briefly return his kiss.

“Don’t you know that goes both ways?” he added, brushing his lips against hers again. “The first time we made love I felt like I’d finally found what I’d been looking for in all those other beds. Kind of like coming home.” He turned to look at her with a serious expression. “It was different with you, Amanda. We have the whole package - love, respect and friendship. That’s why for me it’s always been so intense.”

“For me, too,” she whispered. “I’ve never felt anything like it before. Not ever,” she reiterated, looking at him significantly.

Lee smiled, understanding the full implications of that admission. Reaching out, he lovingly traced the curve of her cheek with his hand. This was as close as Amanda had ever come to talking about her physical relationship with Joe. She was a very private person, extremely close-mouthed about the time she’d spent as Joe’s wife. From a few of the off-hand remarks she’d made this past year, Lee had felt fairly certain that Amanda had discovered in her second marriage all the things that were missing in her first. Not just physically, but emotionally as well. But it was comforting to finally get that reassurance from her.

“Amanda,” he asked, tilting his head to regard her curiously, his question hesitating on his lips. “Why didn’t you ask me about this before? If it’s been bothering you...”

“I don’t know,” she answered, slipping her hand into his. “I meant to. With everything that’s happened, I’d kind of pushed it to the back of my mind. I guess I’m feeling a little nostalgic tonight.” Amanda snuggled against him, smiling as she felt his free arm come around to pull her closer. “The time never

seemed right to talk about it. I mean, after waiting so long to finally make love, we only had that one night together before..." She breathed deeply, closing her fingers firmly around his. "I hadn't planned on spending our honeymoon alone in the hospital."

"I hadn't planned on that, either." He tightened his arms around her protectively. "I can't begin to tell you how I felt when I looked into that car," he stammered, holding her as if he feared she would slip away. "When I saw you'd been hit...it was like someone knocked the wind out of me. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't catch my breath...not until you woke up," he finished, gently touching his lips to her forehead.

"That must have been awful." She trembled slightly, her eyes filling with unshed tears. She buried her face against his chest so he wouldn't see them, murmuring softly, "Kind of like how I felt when they told me you were dead."

"Yeah," he said sadly. "I know how hard that was on you, believe me."

"That whole time was just so...I don't know how to describe it." She closed her eyes, suddenly lost in the memory. "Sometimes it still plays over again in my head. I can see everything so clearly – Billy standing in the family room of the old house, telling me that you'd been killed in that explosion."

She pulled back a little to look at him, as if to reassure herself that he was really there. She lightly traced the outline of his face with her fingers, her voice a low monotone as she remembered.

"You'd cheated death so many times...I guess we both had. It didn't seem real at first. Then just when I'd begun to accept the truth of what Billy had told me, I received your surprise package. Do you have any idea how I felt when my mother told me it was from the man in the red hat?"

"I can imagine. If I had known they told you I'd been killed...but I had no idea what happened that night after I was hit from behind. I didn't even know that the house had blown up. When I woke up in that basement with Mason..." He shuddered at the memory, crushing her tightly in the protective circle of his arms, drawing as much comfort from holding her as he was giving.

"I wish I could change things, Amanda." He spoke the words in a voice charged with emotion. "I wish you'd never had to go through that. But I can't. I can only promise you to never let it happen again. That's the biggest reason why I wanted us both to come in from the field. Sometimes the price you pay is just too high."

“I know,” she returned, her own voice echoing his feelings. “And it’s really what I want to do. I wish I could change things, too.” She hesitated slightly, pausing to choose her words carefully. “I wish I could erase what happened to you,” she said, adding under her breath, “when you were a guest of Dr. Smyth.”

“We can’t erase what happened,” he sighed, his face clouding over darkly for a moment. “For either of us. All we can do is find a way to try to live with it.” He gave her a comforting squeeze, moving slightly to whisper quietly in her ear. “You do help. Every day that we’re together, it gets easier to forget.”

She sighed deeply, breathing in the comfortable scent that was Lee. “It’s been a pretty emotional year all around.”

He nodded in agreement. “We’ve both had a lot of adjustments to make.”

“Not just us, Lee, but our whole family, too. All that hiding and sneaking, keeping everything from mother and the boys. Things just turned out to be so much more complicated than we thought.”

“I know. I guess our whole ‘mystery marriage’ was a pretty lame idea. It was stupid to think it could really work.”

“Yeah. I just didn’t realize we’d all have to go through what we did to find that out.” She closed her eyes, the fateful night when her house had exploded fast forwarding through her mind. “When I woke up in the emergency room and you’d been shot and they wouldn’t let me see you because I wasn’t ‘family’...I just couldn’t do it anymore. I had to tell everyone that we were married.”

“I know. You don’t have to feel guilty about that - I’d reached the breaking point, too. If you hadn’t said it, then I would have.”

She exhaled softly as the memories of that time quietly subsided. “There’ve been so many changes for the boys this year. The trauma of losing everything in the explosion, our marriage, their father’s engagement...and now we’re thinking of adding to that with a new baby.” She rubbed her hand distractingly up and down his arm.

“Are you having second thoughts?” he asked in a halting voice, pulling away slightly to look her in the eye.

“No, I’m not – I just want you to be prepared in case it’s not an easy transition for Philip and Jamie, that’s all.” She reached out to trace his lips with her fingers, a faint smile crossing her face. “Anyway, after the way we’ve spent our evening, it could be a little too late for second thoughts.”

“That would be really nice,” he said with a silly grin.

“Yeah, it would,” she agreed with a smile. “I feel like tonight is a turning point, kind of like a fresh start for us. No more secrets, no more hiding. It’s nice to be able to look forward to a normal honeymoon this time, no guns, no bad guys...just the two of us, getting to know each other again, and working on our new ‘project’ together.”

“Yeah,” Lee said somberly, quickly banishing his guilty thoughts about their honeymoon’s added agenda. Maybe he shouldn’t have told Billy he’d check out that tip about Holstein. Well, it was too late now – there was too much at stake to change the plan at this point. They would both have to make the best of it. After all, it should only be an afternoon’s work. They would have the rest of the week to be newlyweds.

“Are you okay?” Amanda asked quietly, sensing his change of mood. She mentally kicked herself for bringing up the business with Mason and Dr. Smyth. She should have known better than to mention it tonight.

“I’m fine.” He brought her hand to his lips in a tender kiss.

She nodded, her fears assuaged by the tone of his voice. He seemed to have pushed whatever was bothering him to the back of his mind. Amanda let it pass for now. Lee would eventually talk about that night, when he was ready. She knew he just needed a little more time to give him some perspective.

She, too, pushed the past aside, turning to him with a happy smile. “Today was the best anniversary present you could have given me. Thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank me. You know how much I...” his voice faded as he looked at her with an embarrassed grin.

“Yeah,” Amanda nodded, “me, too.” She walked her fingers lightly up and down his back. “Tonight was pretty terrific, too. Everything seemed new but wonderfully familiar. Perfect.”

“Perfect, huh?” he inquired with a doubtful lift of his eyebrows. “Are you including our memorable five minutes on the rug?”

“Even that,” she replied, kissing the tip of his nose. “Stop apologizing. You more than made up for it while we were waiting for the pizza guy.”

They were stretched out comfortably side-by-side, arms around each other, their bodies meeting in a loving embrace. They kissed again, but with only a hint of their earlier passion, the tiny spark that threatened to ignite between them momentarily quelled by mounting fatigue.

“We should get some rest,” Lee stated sleepily as he tried to stifle a yawn. “It’s been a long day.”

“You’re right, it has,” she agreed, reaching across him to switch out the light. “Besides, if we get some sleep, we can pick up where we left off in the morning.”

“I can see it’s going to be an exhausting week,” he laughed.

“You’d better believe it, Scarecrow.”

“Goodnight, Mrs. Stetson,” he whispered groggily as he gave into his exhaustion. “Happy anniversary.”

“Happy anniversary to you, too,” she said, echoing his sentiments as her eyelids fluttered shut, resting safely in the curve of his arm.

THE END