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Scarecrow and Mrs. King

IF LOOKS COULD KILL

CHAPTER ONE

The man and woman pushed their way through the throng of busy travelers. The frenzied scene at Dulles International Airport was not unusual for the week before Christmas - the volume of traffic was increased nearly tenfold by the nearness of the holiday. They both smiled pleasantly to the harried customs official.

“Anything to declare?” the official inquired routinely, already thinking ahead to the next person in line.

“No.” The man replied in a meek voice, extending their passports with a tentative hand.

The official quickly glanced at the documents. Pausing for only a fraction of a second, he passed them through the checkpoint, pleasantly telling them to have a nice stay.

The man and woman cast a sideways glance at the official before moving ahead in silent acquiescence. Pulling a single teacup rose from his pocket, the man fastidiously fastened it in his lapel as arm-in-arm they made their way through the busy terminal.

Tiny flakes of snow began to fall as Amanda Stetson pulled into the driveway of her new Rockville home. She quickly slid out from behind the wheel of her Jeep Wagoneer, pausing for a moment to bask in the welcoming glow of the light streaming from the windows. The snow, combined with the twinkling red and green lights covering the bushes, lent a decidedly festive air to the late December evening. Filling her lungs with the brisk winter air, she sighed deeply as she took in the peaceful scene. The feeling of tranquility that permeated the atmosphere tonight contrasted sharply with the turmoil of her life only a few short months ago.

Last August, her happy vision of a future with her new husband and her children had splintered into a million pieces when Billy Melrose knocked on her door to tell her Lee was dead. Suddenly, the coming months loomed darkly before her, bereft of hope or happiness. Without Lee, the days ahead filled her with an ever-mounting feeling of dread. But the grim, forbidding future she'd envisioned dissolved instantly on that September morning at the train station when she felt Lee's familiar touch once again. Now, settled comfortably in her new home with Lee, her sons and her mother, she eagerly anticipated their first Christmas together as a family.

She leaned up against the car for a few minutes, her thoughts dwelling on the conspiracy at the Agency that was behind Lee's apparent "death" last fall. They were still feeling the aftershocks both at work and at home. She shuddered as she recalled Dr. Smyth's suicide and Jamie's kidnapping by agent Mason. The latter had resulted in the explosion that had destroyed her house on Maplewood Drive. Despite the horror of those bleak days, together she and Lee had put their life back on track. The joy of their reunion overshadowed the events that had darkened their days last fall. It was as if they had been given a precious gift - a second chance at a life together. This time, they would do it right. This time, there would be no more secrets and no more lies. It seemed that everything had worked out at last.

A small, involuntary shudder suddenly passed through her and she fought the uneasy feeling that accompanied it. Sometimes, despite everything, Amanda felt irrationally frightened, as if the pieces of her life had fallen too neatly into place. Now, standing here alone in her driveway, she fought the sensation once again. As long as she and Lee were together, they could face

whatever curves life managed to throw them. With only the barest hint of a frown on her face, she shook off her gloomy reverie and entered the house.

“Mother, boys, I’m home.” Amanda entered the kitchen where Dotty and the boys were just sitting down to dinner.

“You’re just in time, dear.” With a cheerful smile, Dotty ushered her to the kitchen table. “Did you have a good day?”

“A long day.” Amanda looked at the table that was set for four. “Did Lee call?”

“Yes. I’m supposed to tell you that he won’t be home until late. He has a dinner meeting with Colonel ...Hefer?”

“Holstein.”

“Oh. I knew it was some kind of cow.”

Amanda smiled as she sat down at the table. “How about you guys? Good day?”

“I made the junior varsity basketball team,” Philip volunteered.

“Philip, that’s wonderful. See, you didn’t have anything to worry about.”

Philip shrugged his shoulders. “It was just luck. Tim Michaels broke his ankle in Saturday’s game.”

“That doesn’t seem too lucky for poor Tim,” Dotty chimed in.

“Yeah, well, there was an opening on the team. The coach moved me up. He said I would have been on the JV team all along if I’d tried out with everyone else.”

Amanda smiled at her eldest son. “I know it’s been hard for you to change schools, Philip. I’m really proud of the way you’ve handled everything. Both of you.” Amanda glanced over at Jamie, who seemed uncharacteristically quiet tonight. “Everything okay, sweetheart?”

Jamie stared at his plate, methodically rearranging his food with his fork.

“Jamie?”

“You were late for dinner. I was worried about you, that’s all.” He shrugged his shoulders as he stared down at his plate.

Amanda sighed. Ever since Jamie had been held hostage by Mason and discovered what his mother and stepfather really did for a living, he worried about her excessively. The psychologist assured her this was a normal reaction to the trauma he’d experienced and would lessen with time. The doctor suggested she encourage Jamie to express his feelings. Unfortunately, this was not as easy as it seemed. The problem was compounded by the very nature of Amanda’s job. The secrecy that was part and parcel of working for the Agency precluded Jamie confiding in any of his old friends. And that didn’t even take into account the normal stress of adjusting his mother’s ‘new’ marriage, the upheaval of their recent relocation to Rockville, and the strain of a new school and new friends. The combination had made for a difficult few months for her youngest son.

“I’m sorry, Jamie, I was held up at work.”

“Were you catching a double agent?” Philip asked hopefully.

Amanda smiled at Philip’s overdeveloped sense of drama. “Nothing that thrilling - just a mountain of files. When you get older, Philip, you’ll discover it’s really paperwork that keeps our government going.”

“May I be excused?” Jamie asked.

“Is that all you’re going to eat, Jamie?” Dotty inquired.

“I’m not that hungry.”

Amanda sighed. “Sure, if you’ve had enough.” She watched him clear his plate and head slowly up to his room.

“Mom, can I go out and shoot a few baskets?”

“It’s snowing, Philip.”

“I know. That’s half the fun.”

“Okay, but just for a little while,” Amanda called to the retreating figure of her son. She turned to her mother. “I wish I had his energy.”

Dotty looked at her daughter closely. “You seem tired, Amanda. Are you sure you’re not doing too much? I mean between your job and this house...”

“I’m fine, Mother. Things are just a little stressful at work. It takes a while to adjust to working with someone new.” She smiled sadly to herself. “I miss my old partner.”

“We’ve all had a lot of things to adjust to lately.”

Amanda chose to ignore the slight edge to Dotty’s voice. She knew her mother was still working through some issues raised by the revelation of her ‘secret life’, as her mother fondly referred to her job these days.

“Mother, I’m worried about Jamie. He seems so sad lately. I was hoping the holidays might lift his spirits.”

“He’s going through a rough period right now, darling. It’s going to take some time, but he’ll be all right.”

“I wish I could be as sure of that as you seem to be.” Amanda shook her head sadly. “Have I told you how much Lee and I both appreciate your staying here for awhile?”

Dotty smiled at her daughter. “You know I’m happy to help you, dear. But when Jamie’s feeling more secure about things, I’m going to get out of your hair. The last thing newlyweds need is a mother and a mother-in-law under foot.”

“You’re not under foot. And you’ve lived with the boys since they were both small. Jamie doesn’t need any more changes in his life right now. It’s gonna take his whole family right now to help him get over the trauma he went through last fall.”

“He’ll be fine. I’m a grandmother and a grandmother knows these things. And I also know what you need right now.”

Amanda tilted her head questioningly.

“You need to take a long, hot bath and then crawl into bed and relax a little. I’ll hold down the fort here.”

“You make everything sound so easy.”

“Amanda, I’m a mother and a mother…”

“...knows these things,” they finished in unison. Smiling, Amanda headed up the stairs.

* * * * *

Amanda slowly closed the pages of her book and glanced one more time at the clock by the bed. It was after eleven. Suppressing a yawn, she pushed her book aside and leaned back against the pillows. The logs in the fireplace had burned down, leaving only a few red-hot embers, a silent testimony to how late Lee was again tonight. She left the warmth of her bed and walked over to the window. Outside, the snow was still falling steadily, a few inches already accumulating on the grass and in the driveway. There was nothing she’d like better than to be snowed in here in her new home with her husband until after the holidays, Amanda thought with a smile. She leaned her forehead against the window, closing her eyes and silently willing the snow to continue.

“What on earth are you doing?” Lee’s voice called from the doorway.

Startled, Amanda spun around to face him, a guilty look on her face. “Gosh, Lee, you scared me. I didn’t hear you come in. You shouldn’t sneak up on me like that.”

“I’m a spy – it’s what I do.” He sighed mournfully. “Or at least what I used to do. Glad to know my ‘sneaking’ skills haven’t gotten too rusty sitting behind my new desk.” He smiled sadly as he took off his jacket and tossed it haphazardly across the chair.

“Bad day?”

“Typical day. Meetings, meetings and more meetings.” He flung himself down on the bed in exasperation. “There are days when I wonder why I’m doing what I’m doing, sitting there in another meeting, out of the action, trying to sort through the mess left by Dr. Smyth.”

“You’ve got to give it some time. It’s only been a few months – you can’t expect to put things back together over night.” She sat down beside him on the bed. “How was your meeting with Colonel Holstein?”

Lee shrugged. “Okay.”

“Just okay? That doesn’t sound very promising.”

“I don’t know, maybe I’m just tired. But there’s something about him...I can’t put my finger on it.” His words hung in mid-air. “I miss Billy.”

Amanda smiled wryly. “I’m sure Jeannie feels the same way. How much longer will he be in New York?”

“At least until after the first of the year. With all of Smyth’s phoenix operatives dead or in jail, we’re really short handed. That’s one of the things we discussed tonight – speeding up the recruitment process to replace the people we lost. As it is now, I’m constantly juggling our people here in D.C. to fill in until we’re up to full strength.”

Amanda looked at him pointedly. “If you’re so short on agents in the field, then why am I...”

Sensing that the conversation was heading into dangerous ground, Lee quickly interrupted her. “We said we weren’t going to bring the Agency home with us, remember?” He reached out to tenderly stroke her cheek with his hand.

Amanda hesitated for a minute, torn between her desire to clear the air and the warm sensations created by the touch of his fingers on her skin. She knew exactly what he was up to - trying to distract her from continuing their earlier conversation about his overprotective tendencies. It had become an ongoing battle recently. When Lee assumed his new position as Chief of Field Operations a little over a month ago, Amanda suddenly found herself buried under a mountain of paperwork, “spring cleaning” file after file of insignificant cases. He seemed reluctant to assign her to a permanent partner, instead pairing her temporarily with Francine. She realized his actions stemmed from his irrational anxiety about losing her the way he’d lost his parents as a small boy.

Even though she understood it intellectually, it still drove her crazy. She had hoped that with a little time Lee would work through this fear on his own, but he seemed to be getting worse instead of better. With every day that passed, Amanda grew more and more tired of being kept “out of the line of fire”. Like it or not, she knew they were heading for a confrontation on this issue. She turned to face her husband, sighing deeply. But not tonight. Looking into his eyes, she saw only his love for her and a reflection of her own mounting desire. She slowly let out the breath she’d been holding and settled back comfortably into his arms.

He held her tightly, brushing the top of her head with his lips. “How was Jamie tonight?”

“I was held up in traffic and a little late for dinner. He was worried again.”

Lee held her closer, whispering in her ear. “Give him some time. That’s what we all need, you know. Just a little time to adjust to all the changes.”

Amanda turned to look at him closely, reading between the lines, her heart hearing what he was struggling to put into words. She could give him the time he needed to make his own adjustment. She ran her fingers slowly and sensuously over his lips. “Did I mention today how much I love you?”

Lee smiled as he opened his mouth and sucked her finger inside. “Not that I recall. How about if I throw another log on that fire you started and you can show me, Mrs. Stetson?”

“Now that’s the best idea you’ve had all day.”

Smiling, Lee brushed her lips with his. “Keep my spot warm. I’ll be right back.”

Amanda watched him quickly place two small logs in the grate and expertly fan the flames. She closed her eyes and relaxed into the softness of the pillows, waiting expectantly for Lee to join her. Even though they had been together constantly since Lee’s miraculous return from the ‘dead’ in September, Amanda still marveled at how wonderful it felt to live openly as husband and wife. If it was possible, she loved Lee even more at this moment than she had when they were married last February. Now there were no more secrets to keep them apart. She heard him switch off the lamp by the bed and felt him silently slide in beside her. Instinctively, she turned towards him. He pulled her close, holding her tightly in his arms, his lips brushing against her forehead. Amanda rested against him, feeling his heartbeat through the thin fabric of his shirt.

The corners of her mouth turned up in a smile. “Aren’t you a little over dressed?”

He smiled sheepishly. “I guess I was in a hurry.” With an economy of movement, he quickly shed the unwanted garment. “Better?”

Amanda slid her hand over his smooth chest. “Uh-huh.” She raised her eyes to meet his, seeing in them all the feelings Lee still sometimes had a hard

time putting into words. He looked at her with the barest hint of a smile. "Amanda..." He whispered her name almost like a prayer and his mouth captured hers with an easy naturalness that still took her by surprise even after all this time. She parted her lips and felt his tongue slowly explore her mouth, joining her to him, an echo of what was to come. She strained against him, wanting, needing to feel his body next to hers. His touch flowed through her and electrified her even as his voice still murmured her name. His hands moved up her arms to the straps of her nightgown. She felt the warmth of his palms against her skin as he slid the silky fabric down her arms and over her waist and hips. The firelight filled the room with a romantic glow and she let go of all the tensions of the day, concentrating instead on the touch of his hand on her skin. Amanda shut her eyes as his mouth closed on hers once again and she felt him slip off her silk panties. She instinctively reached out to him, her hands echoing his movements as she quickly pushed his boxers out of the way.

An almost overpowering sensation of love washed over her and for a moment she felt the tears spring to her eyes. This same thing had happened the first time they made love after their ordeal last fall. Everything they'd both been through seemed to heighten every sensation and she'd shyly touched him as if she'd never felt skin before. It was as if their bodies had suddenly come back to life in a world where everything was fresh and new. She was certain Lee had felt it, too.

The room had suddenly grown very warm and she saw Lee kick the sheets out of the way. Her breathing quickened as his lips moved slowly down her throat to her breast, taking her nipple into his mouth and lightly teasing it with his tongue. His hands moved sensuously down her body and she reached out to him. She sensed his desire as his mouth closed once again on hers in a demanding kiss. Her body moved to the rhythm of his hands as they stroked across her. For a time, they both lost themselves in each other as their hands explored familiar flesh, teasing, touching, coming almost to the edge, then turning back. Closing her eyes, Amanda ran her hand up the taut line of his thigh and across his chest. Lee grasped her hands in his and rolled her onto her back. She felt his weight covering her as he lay on top of her. In a rush of exhilaration, she raised her hips and parted her legs, opening herself to embrace him. He entered her slowly and she lifted her hips once again to meet him, joyfully joining her body to his. In a fluid motion, she wrapped her legs around him, pulling him in even more deeply. They moved together in a practiced rhythm, slowly at first, then more quickly, until they both cried out together. As small shudders rippled through her, she managed to whisper softly, "I love you."

They lay contentedly in each other's arms, spent and happy, and Lee leaned in to kiss her once more. Smiling, Amanda ran her fingers slowly over his face, lightly tracing his eyebrows, down the straight line of his nose to his lips. He lightly kissed her fingers as they moved over his mouth, then reached out to take hold of her hand. Entwining his fingers with hers, he faintly replied, "I love you, too." With a happy smile, Amanda snuggled against him and closed her eyes.

CHAPTER TWO

The man emerged from the lobby of the Potomac Plaza Hotel and moved purposefully to the car. The snow that had been falling steadily for most of the night had tapered off to a few scattered flurries. They clung tenaciously to the petals of the sweetheart rose attached to the lapel of his overcoat. The woman waited impatiently in the front seat, oblivious to the beauty of the world of white surrounding her.

"What took you so long?" she snapped as the man slid into the driver's seat beside her.

"It took a few minutes to secure the correct accommodation," he answered in a faintly accented voice.

"You were successful?"

"Yes. The suite should suit our purpose." With a barely concealed smile, he handed her the key to room. He pointed to the rear of the hotel. "We can go in through the back."

The woman frowned slightly. "Good. Let's get going. This weather has put us behind schedule."

Without a word, the man started the engine and pulled slowly around to the back of the hotel.

The persistent ringing of the telephone intruded jarringly on the peace and quiet of the early morning. Somewhere on the edges of consciousness, Amanda's sleep fogged mind heard Lee answer and ask for a status report. Reluctantly opening her eyes, she saw that it was not quite six o'clock. Groaning, she snuggled down deeper into the pillows, pulling the covers over

her head. Normally a morning person, Amanda seemed to be finding it increasingly difficult to get out of bed lately. She dimly heard Lee end the conversation and rolled over to look at him.

“Problems?”

He frowned slightly, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. “Possibly. That was Johnson. Intelligence reports the Chameleon may have entered the U.S. last night through Dulles.”

“The Chameleon? The international hit-man?”

“That’s the one. I’ve got to get to the Agency.” Lee reluctantly pushed the covers aside and started to rise.

“Hang on a few minutes and I’ll go with you.”

Lee stopped and turned towards her. “There’s no need, Amanda. It’s early. Why don’t you get a little more sleep?”

She hesitated for a fraction of a second before replying. “You’re sure?”

“Believe me, I wouldn’t be leaving this early unless I had to.” He leaned over and kissed her. “I’d much rather stay here with you.”

“Me, too,” she murmured against his lips.

“I’ll see you later at the staff meeting.”

“Okay.” She watched Lee head for the shower with a sigh. It was definitely too early in the morning to jump back into their running argument about work. She lay back, snuggling down under the covers. That nagging feeling of worry began to gnaw in the pit of her stomach again and she rolled over, hugging his pillow tightly against her body. She wished that she could put her finger on what was really bothering her. Maybe she just missed her husband. They seemed to have so little time together since Lee started this new job. The break-up of Dr. Smyth’s organization had created a gaping hole in the very fabric of the Agency that they were now all struggling to close.

But sometimes Amanda felt that there might be more to it than this. Since his promotion, Lee seemed different somehow in a way that was difficult to define. That almost imperceptible change had begun to spill over into their intimate relationship as well. That’s not to say that it wasn’t good. Their sex life was still

incredible, she thought with a smile, her mind dwelling pleasantly on the events of the previous evening. It was just different, in a way that was almost impossible to describe. Maybe she just needed to give things a little time. Lee had implied as much last night. She was worrying needlessly - everything would be fine. She closed her eyes and drifted back to sleep.

* * * * *

“Good morning, boss.” Francine Desmond fell into step with Lee as he made his way through the bullpen to his office. “You’re here bright and early. And I thought newlyweds were chronically late for work. Of course, you’re not really newlyweds, are you? We all just think you are.”

“Don’t start, Francine.”

“Hmm, crabby, too. Trouble in paradise?”

Lee ignored her, opening the door to his office and sitting down behind his desk.

“I didn’t get enough sleep last night.”

Francine smirked at him from behind her pile of files.

“Don’t say it, Francine.”

Francine faced him with an expression of innocence. “I wasn’t going to say a word.”

“I had a late meeting with Colonel H and an early call this morning,” Lee stated irritably. He groaned as he indicated the stack of paperwork she was carrying. “Don’t tell me those files are all for me.”

“I’m afraid so.”

“What happened to the administrative support Billy promised me?”

“You’re looking at it.”

Lee sighed in resignation. “Not really. We’re too short handed. I’m going to need you in the field.”

Francine looked at him pointedly. “Speaking of the field, there’s a

problem with my new partner.”

Lee raised his eyebrows.

“Or should I say your old partner? Should I call her that? I guess it’s all a matter of semantics.”

“What problem?” Lee was beginning to be irritated by Francine’s teasing banter.

“Dr. Kelford’s department called. Amanda has canceled her agency physical twice this month. And you know, regulation twelve, subsection two clearly states, ‘all field agents are required to submit to a yearly physical to be considered on active field duty. Failure to comply will result in suspension until...’”

“You don’t have to quote the rules to me, Francine. I’ve read them.”

“Sorry. I was just trying to...”

“I’ll take care if it. Any other pressing business?”

Francine flipped through the stack of files, handing him a thick report. “The latest status reports on the Chameleon.”

Lee reached for the file. “Thanks. I’ll see you at the staff meeting at ten o’clock.”

“I’ll be in the Q-Bureau if you need me.”

With a backwards glance at Lee who was already absorbed in the file, Francine headed out the door.

* * * * *

Amanda entered the room and took her place at the mahogany conference table. With a pleasant nod to the other agents already seated around the table, she leafed absently through the papers at her place. Francine came through the door in a rush, walking over to Amanda and sitting down beside her.

Amanda groaned inwardly as she saw her approach. Even though she had been partnered with Francine more and more lately, she feared they would never have the same easy working relationship she’d shared with Lee. With

Francine, Amanda felt like she was back at square one, having to prove herself as an agent all over again. She sometimes thought Francine would never see her as anything more than the simple housewife from Arlington whom Lee had indulgently worked with from time to time. In reality, her life was far from simple. Amanda knew she had already proved herself in the field on more than one occasion and so did Francine.

That's what made this entire work situation so frustrating. They had forged the beginnings of a good working relationship when they were investigating the circumstances surrounding Lee's 'death'. Then, when she and Lee returned to work after their leave of absence, Francine had done an abrupt about face. Since then she had become more and more puzzled by Francine's reaction to her. She wondered briefly if something else was going on in Francine's life to cause this sudden animosity.

Her thoughts were interrupted by Lee's sudden entrance. She caught his eye as he took his place at the head of the table. Amanda thought he looked tired. He smiled over at her in brief acknowledgement before addressing the group.

"We have a top priority problem this morning so I'll get right to the point. We have reason to believe the international gun-for-hire known as the Chameleon came through Dulles International sometime last night. Our intelligence is good – it comes from a former associate who saw our target recently in Europe. I don't have to tell you what this means – he's presently number three on the Agency's most wanted list, with a bullet. Until he's apprehended or we have confirmation that he's left our area, I'm afraid all vacations and days off are canceled until further notice."

A murmur of disgruntled voices greeted this statement.

"I know - I am aware that the holidays are almost here, but that gives us all an added incentive to wrap this up as quickly as possible." Lee consulted his notes. "The problem is, there could be any number of targets right now in D. C. We need to figure out his game plan, get some idea of who he could be after – ASAP. All we really know right now is how much we don't know. The man is a master of disguise, able to assume many different identities to accomplish his job - hence the name 'Chameleon'. And once he's assumed a disguise, we might as well throw our description of him out the window. This man could literally be anyone. That's why he's proved so elusive to any number of international agencies, including this one."

Lee paused and looked out on the solemn faces of his agents. He really hated to have to do this just a few days before Christmas. He glanced briefly at his wife sitting next to Francine, her hands folded quietly in her lap. She'd been looking forward so much to their first holiday together. He had even promised to take a few days off to enjoy the season this year. And, for the first time, he'd really been looking forward to Christmas, too. He knew it wasn't fair to her, but then again, when had this business ever been fair? He reluctantly turned his attention back to his report.

"The man has a monumental ego. He marks his kills by leaving a sweetheart rose at the scene – that's his trademark. And we have reason to believe that the Rose Tuxedo Shop on M Street is one of the Chameleon's known drops here in D.C. We will have round the clock surveillance beginning now. Johnson, you'll coordinate the teams. Use everyone but Francine and Amanda." Francine began to protest, but Lee cut her off. "I need you both to run down a list of possible targets. Our first priority is to get an idea of who the Chameleon could be after." He turned back to Johnson. "You can use them as back-up, but only in an emergency. Okay, status reports as soon as you have them. That's all."

The other agents filed out, while Francine and Amanda lingered.

"Scarecrow, I thought you said you needed me in the field?" Francine demanded crossly.

"Right now, I need you to take care of this, Francine."

Francine looked over at Amanda. "Uh-uh," she said knowingly. "We'll be in the Q-Bureau if you need us for anything more than busy-work."

Francine left in a huff and Amanda wordlessly began to follow.

Lee's voice called her back. "Amanda, I need to see you for a minute."

She reluctantly turned to face him. Her latest assignment had left her in no mood to talk to him right now. After witnessing the exchange with Francine, she was beginning to suspect that the cause of her new partner's animosity was standing right in front of her.

"Yes?"

Lee waited until the room emptied before he spoke. He felt the anger simmering behinds her polite facade. “Don’t start, Amanda. It’s been a brutal morning.”

She pursed her lips, struggling to keep her temper in check. “Maybe it wouldn’t be quite so brutal if you would let me out from behind my computer screen.”

Lee looked at her sharply. “Well, you’re not really giving me much choice in the matter.”

“Me?”

He ran his hand nervously through his hair. “Doc Kelford’s department officially informed me that you’ve missed your last two appointments.”

“Gosh, Lee, I’ve been so busy filing lately that I just haven’t had a chance to get there.”

Lee ignored the sarcasm in her voice. “You are now officially overdue for your agency physical. I have no choice except to suspend you if you miss the next one.”

“Isn’t that a little extreme? Or maybe that would solve all your problems – you wouldn’t have to invent reasons to keep me at my desk.”

“That’s not what I’m trying to do.”

“Really? You could have fooled me.”

“Amanda, as agents we live with certain rules and regulations. And, unfortunately, as your chief, I’m now in the unenviable position of making sure they’re followed.”

“This from the man who taught me that rules were made to be broken.”

“Yeah, well, the view seems a lot different from behind this desk.”

“Lee...” She started to speak, then thought better of it. Looking away, she merely added, “Don’t worry. This won’t be a problem. I’ll take care of it.”

Lee glanced at her uncomfortably. “I know you will. I made an appointment for you at three o’clock this afternoon. You need to keep it or I’ll be forced to ground you.”

“Great,” she replied stiffly. “Anything else, sir?”

“Amanda, honey...”

She rolled her eyes at his use of the endearment and walked quickly away. Lee started to follow her, then reconsidered. Instead, he remained by the podium and followed Amanda with his eyes, watching her unbending form move determinedly thought the bullpen and disappear down the hall. Abruptly, he sat down at the conference table and glared at the mountain of files piled in front of him. Sighing, he admitted that maybe Amanda had a point – he had always balked at regulations himself. Unfortunately, in his new position he seemed buried under a mountain of nit-picking little rules. ‘Administration One’, he thought in frustration. He’d always sworn it would never happen to him. After almost two months of being forced to walk in Billy’s shoes, he had to admit that they were beginning to feel a little tight. Maybe he hadn’t been entirely fair to Amanda. He’d give her a little time to cool off, then stop by the Q-Bureau and try to mend his fences. He quickly gathered his files and headed back to his office.

* * * * *

Amanda entered the Q-Bureau and sat down behind her desk with a sigh. She was still seething from her conversation with Lee. She glanced quickly over at Francine, who now occupied Lee’s old desk by the window. Her new partner appeared to be having problems of her own. Her face to the wall, Francine was speaking heatedly into the telephone. Feeling the awkwardness of the situation, Amanda tactfully moved into the vault, pretending to pull some files. It didn’t help, though, as Francine raised her voice, forcing her to be an unwilling witness to this latest fight with Jonathan.

She sighed involuntarily. This was just another example of the subtle little differences in her working environment these days. Lack of privacy had never been an issue when she and Lee had shared the Q-Bureau. The only thing they had to worry about were people walking in on them at an inopportune moment. Amanda smiled softly, remembering the day Lee had locked the Q-Bureau door and kissed her. This office had played a major role in furthering their relationship. It seemed strange now to see Francine’s face whenever she looked up from her work. She missed Lee’s presence in the office, missed the easy give-and-take of their partnership.

The sound of the receiver being slammed into its base broke into her reverie. She self-consciously emerged from the vault, settling herself behind her desk without a word. Francine turned her face away, staring aimlessly out of the window. Amanda nervously cleared her throat before speaking. "Everything all right, Francine?"

She took a few minutes before she answered. "Yes, I'm fine."

Amanda regarded her sympathetically. She knew first-hand what it felt like to be at odds with the special person in her life. She turned a friendly eye on Francine.

"I know we've never been the best of friends, but if you need to someone to talk to, I'll be happy to listen."

"Not really. Everything's great."

Amanda turned away, busying herself with the new computer sitting on her desk. She felt rather than saw Francine pacing up and down across the room.

"Jonathan's angry because I told him I may have to cancel our holiday plans," Francine blurted out suddenly. "He just doesn't make any effort to understand my work."

Amanda smiled at her kindly. "All relationships are complicated, Francine."

"At least Lee understands your job."

Amanda rested her chin on her hands. "Oh, yeah, he understands all right. He understands so well that he won't give me an assignment that requires anything more dangerous than typing."

Francine returned her smile. "I've noticed. As your new partner, I'm being tarred with the same brush. The only thing getting any exercise around here is our fingers on the keyboard." Francine looked at Amanda searchingly. "What are you planning to do about it? That is, if you still plan on having a career as a field agent and not a glorified secretary?"

"Don't worry, Francine, I intend to take care of it. In my own way."

“Well, I hope it’s soon. My personal life may be on the rocks, but I’ve worked too long and too hard to let my career end up there, too.”

“And I have no intention of either of them ending up there,” Amanda muttered under her breath. With a final look at Francine that stated in no uncertain terms that the subject was closed, she turned her attention once again to her computer screen.

CHAPTER THREE

The clerk looked up from his book as the ringing bells signaled the arrival of new customers at the Rose Tuxedo Shop. He smiled congenially at the man and woman who entered the shop, acknowledging them with a nod. The man ignored him, glancing casually around the room, fingering the small flower in his lapel, while the woman began to flip through the racks of dress shirts.

Leaving a bookmark to note his place, the clerk closed the novel and politely addressed his new customers. “May I help you?”

“I’m looking for something in a burgundy silk,” the woman replied, her voice rising as she spoke.

“Burgundy silk? I’m not sure if we have anything in that shade. If you could give me a minute....”

“I’ll take care of this,” his boss interjected, appearing suddenly at his side. With a solicitous smile at the couple, he motioned to the dressing rooms in the back. “If you’ll step this way, I think I have exactly what you’re looking for.”

The man and woman followed the owner to the rear of the shop. The clerk started to return to his book, then suddenly snapped his fingers as he headed to a rack in the corner of the store. Retrieving a few samples, he followed the trio to the dressing rooms.

“Mr. Rose, you forgot these new...” The clerk stopped, puzzled. “What are you...?”

His words hung in midair as he stared wide-eyed at the body of his employer lying in a heap in the corner of the shop. He wore the same expression seconds later as the bullets caught him in the chest and the head.

The man looked at the woman with an air of detachment. “We won’t be using this drop again,” he said, his faint accent becoming slightly more pronounced. “Pity.”

The woman smiled as she adroitly removed the silencer from the gun. “They were on to it anyway. Time to move on.” Retrieving a packet of documents from beneath a bench in the dressing room, she expertly concealed it among her purchases and proceeded to deftly remove the small flower from her companion’s lapel. She stepped over the clerk’s body, dropping the flower, and headed nonchalantly out the front door.

Amanda absently rubbed her eyes as she stared at the computer screen. Sighing loudly, she glanced over at Francine.

“Any luck?”

“You know, Amanda, I never realized how many state functions, receptions and parties there were on the week before Christmas. Although I guess I should have remembered, since I’ve certainly attended a number of them in the past.”

“Well, ‘tis the season...”

“Yes, to be working overtime.” Francine let out an exasperated sigh. “I’m getting nowhere with this. It’s going to be next to impossible to cover every event – there are just too many of them.”

“Let me take a look. Maybe we can narrow the list a little bit.” Amanda walked over to her desk and peered over her shoulder. “Look at this, Francine – the reception for Colonel Holstein tomorrow night. There are any number of possible targets there.”

“And that’s only one of about ten parties and receptions in the next few days. I told you this is an impossible task.”

Francine and Amanda both looked up from the screen as the door to the Q-Bureau opened. “What’s impossible?” the familiar voice intoned from the door.

Amanda took one look at Lee leaning comfortably against the wall and then quickly turned away. Seeing him standing casually in the doorway filled her with mellow feelings and she wasn’t ready to let go of her anger yet. She willed herself to focus her attention on the computer screen.

“Well, well,” Francine smirked, casually glancing from one to the other. “A visit from our new Chief. And to what do we owe this pleasure?”

“I thought I’d see if your partner was free for lunch.”

Amanda said nothing, her attention focused on the screen ahead of her. The air of tension reverberating in the room was too much even for Francine and she abruptly rose and headed for the door.

“That’s my cue to check in with agent Johnson. I’ll just use the phone at Mrs. Marsten’s desk.” Francine closed the door to the office with a bang.

Lee crossed the room and perched on the edge of his old desk. He stole a nervous glance at the tense figure of his wife bent stiffly over Francine’s computer. He reached out and put a tentative hand on her arm. “So, what do you say, do you have time for lunch?”

Ignoring his touch, Amanda tenaciously continued to stare at the screen. “I’ve got a lot of work to do here.”

“We need to talk.”

“Is that an order from my boss?”

“No, it’s an invitation from your husband.”

She reluctantly looked up and caught his eye. As he shyly smiled at her, she began to relax, slowly letting go of her earlier animosity. She unconsciously released the breath she’d been holding. “Do we have time to go to Emelio’s?”

“Anywhere you want.”

“Okay, you’ve got yourself a date.”

Relieved, Lee flashed her his most apologetic smile, catching her hand in his as they made their way to the door. Before he could open it, Francine burst in.

“We’ve got to hit the road,” she said quickly to Amanda. “Johnson needs a relief at the tuxedo shop.”

Lee immediately dropped her hand. “They had instructions not to use you except in an emergency,” he stated irritably, his annoyance clearly apparent. “What’s their status?”

“Priority One – Johnson needs to take Lemont to the hospital.”

“The hospital? He’s been injured?”

Francine smiled ironically. “Nothing that dramatic. A simple case of food poisoning. I gather something he ate for lunch didn’t agree with him. Lucky for us, wasn’t it, partner?”

The ringing of the telephone cut off Amanda’s reply. She turned automatically to answer it as she grabbed her purse.

“Q-Bureau. Yes, he’s right here.”

She handed the phone to Lee. “For you. It’s Billy, from New York. They’re patching him through here. I’ll take a rain check on that lunch.” Purse in hand, she started after Francine.

“Amanda...”

“Got to go.” She quickly followed Francine out the door, effectively cutting off Lee’s protest. He started to follow when he realized he was still holding on to the receiver. Tempted to hang-up, he heard Billy’s voice calling to him. With a worried frown, he reluctantly sat down at his old desk and took the call.

* * * * *

Amanda aimed her binoculars at the window of the Rose Tuxedo Shop on M Street. Adjusting the view piece, she methodically scanned the area from left to right. The street seemed unusually quiet for this time of day. Placing the binoculars to her lap, she absently rubbed the crick in her neck with her right hand. Twisting her head for a minute to work out the knots, she caught sight of Francine, who was staring at the rear view mirror.

“Got something?”

“I’m not sure,” Francine answered, her eyes trained on a man making his way slowly towards the door of the shop. They watched in silence as the man bypassed the shop and continued down the street. Francine let out the breath

she'd been holding. "Nothing. Let's give it a few more minutes, then do a routine check."

Amanda nodded, sweeping the area one more time with the binoculars. Placing them back in their case, she looked out the window, staring at nothing in particular. The store windows were liberally decorated with the signs of the season and Amanda suddenly found herself thinking about the approaching holiday. Lee had been so busy lately, he hadn't even found a spare fifteen minutes to do his usual one-stop Christmas shopping, she thought with a smile. After her experience last year, she'd given up trying to help him shop. But she had been hoping to steal him away for a few hours today or tomorrow to help her pick out some last minute items for the boys.

Now the Chameleon had interfered with all their plans. There were only a few days left until Christmas, she thought with a sigh. Strictly speaking they weren't working tomorrow night, but they still had to make an appearance at Colonel Holstein's reception. Amanda was not looking forward to it. There would be a number of important Washington figures there, another of the stuffy government events that Lee's new position required them to attend. They might be going to this party as invited guests and as not agents but to Amanda, it still felt like work.

Their new working relationship was fast becoming a point of contention in their marriage. She bristled as her thoughts drifted to the appointment Lee had arbitrarily made for her this afternoon with Dr. Kelford's office. This was yet one more example of his changing attitude. It was almost as if he didn't know exactly how to deal with her now that he was no longer her partner. Amanda knew that Lee had come to trust her instincts over the years that they had worked together. She had to find a way to make him realize that those instincts didn't just disappear because they were no longer working together.

She briefly wondered if part of the change she'd seen in Lee stemmed from going public with their personal relationship. They had both looked forward to the day when they could end their charade and live openly as husband and wife. But announcing their marriage brought with it a whole different set of problems. Amanda recognized that being Mrs. Stetson complicated things, which was one of the reasons she'd chosen to retain the name 'King' at work. But she hadn't expected it to be this difficult to strike a comfortable balance between their personal and professional relationship.

Amanda looked over at Francine, who seemed distracted herself. It was still a little disconcerting to see Francine sitting beside her in the car instead of Lee. Given the choice, she much preferred Lee's profile to Francine's, she

thought wryly. She heard Francine sigh softly. Clearing her throat, she broke the uneasy silence that had sprung up between them.

“Everything okay, Francine?”

“Give it a few more minutes, and we’ll go in.” Francine caught Amanda’s bemused expression. “Oh, I take it you weren’t referring to the stakeout.”

Amanda smiled. “You look like you need someone to talk to. Still thinking about your argument with Jonathan?”

Francine remained silent for a minute, then blurted out, “How do you do it, Amanda?”

“Do what?”

“Juggle your personal and professional relationship. I’ve tried, and it just doesn’t seem to work.”

Amanda looked away, trying to put her feelings into words. “It’s not as easy as it seems. We seem to be having a little trouble adjusting to all the changes in both relationships at the moment.”

Amanda hesitated for a minute before going on. Under normal circumstances, she would never have dreamed of talking to Francine about her personal life, but the cozy confines of the car seemed to encourage her to open up. “Lee and I had developed such a close working relationship in the past four years.”

“Evidently.”

Amanda overlooked this remark and forged ahead. “I know I haven’t been the easiest person to work with lately and I’m sorry. It’s hard to adjust to someone new now. It’s like Lee and I have been forced to go through a professional divorce of sorts – I know he feels it, too. Plus the unresolved issues he seems to have about my new ‘single’ career appear to be spilling over onto you.”

Francine smiled to herself. “He does seem to have lost sight of the fact that I’ve been a fully qualified agent for a number of years.”

“And then there’s our personal relationship. It’s funny – we’ve been married for almost a year, but for most of that time it was a secret, something

only Lee and I shared. Suddenly, everything is out in the open and we have to deal with all the ramifications of that.” Amanda laughed bitterly. “You’d think it would be a relief, wouldn’t you? But we’d gotten really good at hiding our relationship. We knew the rules, knew how that worked. This is unfamiliar territory.”

Francine shook her head. “Lee Stetson, a married man. I still can’t get over it.” She glanced quickly at Amanda. “No offense.”

She sighed in response. “None taken.”

“Amanda, I’m sure his recent behavior is only a temporary aberration. Lee will come to his senses about all this sooner or later. I just hope for both our sakes it’s sooner.”

“That makes two of us.”

Francine smiled at her partner. “It’s been awfully quiet in there... What do you say we have a look-see?”

“Okay.”

“You take the front, I’ll go around back. Remember – you’re just shopping.”

“I know what to do, Francine.”

“Then let’s go.”

They emerged from the car, looking over their shoulders before cautiously approaching the store. Francine motioned for Amanda to enter as she slowly worked her way around to the rear. Amanda nodded her assent and made her way into the shop. Silence greeted her as she glanced nervously around the room.

“Hello? Anyone here? Can somebody help me?”

“Back here, Amanda.” Francine’s voice called to her from one of the dressing rooms in back. She quickly headed toward the sound of her voice.

“I don’t think they’ll be waiting on anyone else today.” Francine pointed to the bodies of the two men resting haphazardly on the floor. “I’ll call it in.”

With a grim face, Amanda nodded in silent reply, her eyes glued to the sweetheart rose lying on top of the bodies.

* * * * *

Amanda watched in silence as they wheeled the bodies out. She shivered unconsciously. This was a part of her job she would never get used to, no matter how hard she tried. She could never deal with death as if it were an everyday occurrence. So far, she'd never killed anyone in the line of duty. She knew that when push came to shove, she would do what she had to do to protect herself or her partner. She shook her head, forcing those thoughts out of her mind. She took solace from the realization that she would cross that bridge when and if she came to it.

Francine joined her at the counter, shaking her head sadly. "They've been doing a sweep, but so far, nothing. Except, of course, his fragrant calling card."

"I didn't expect to find anything, really," Amanda answered. "I don't think the Chameleon plans to use this drop again."

"You're probably right. Maybe, if we're lucky, we'll turn something up."

The sound of a car caught their attention and they both turned in time to see a familiar silver corvette come to a screeching halt outside the Tuxedo shop.

"Well, well – it looks like someone's in a hurry." Francine stifled her laugh as she caught sight of Amanda's face. Her new partner was definitely not amused.

Lee entered the shop in a rush, his eyes quickly searching the room. Seeing Amanda and Francine standing by the counter, he visibly relaxed and made his way quickly over to them.

Francine's attempt to control her smile was unsuccessful. "So, what brings our boss all the way across town to check out a routine crime scene? Let me guess – you just couldn't wait for our reports," she added with a sideways glance at Amanda, who was struggling to keep her anger in check. "I'll let Amanda fill you in."

Shooting Francine a scathing look, he turned his attention to his wife. "What have you got? Amanda?" he prodded.

She turned away, taking a deep breath and pretending to ignore his question.

“Amanda...”

“Lee, what are you doing here? Are you checking up on me? Because if you are, I really don’t appreciate it.”

“I’m not checking up on you,” he replied with a look of chagrin. “Occasionally, they do let me out of my office.”

“You certainly got here quickly. You must have set a new land speed record from the Agency to this shop.” Amanda paused for a minute, the pieces of the puzzle suddenly falling into place. “You weren’t following us, were you?”

Lee looked away, a guilty expression on his face.

“You were. I can’t believe it. You don’t even trust me to do a routine surveillance without looking over my shoulder.”

As her voice began to rise, Lee cast a nervous eye on the other agents who were finishing up their routine sweep of the shop. “Let’s take this outside.” He abruptly turned on his heel and headed for the door. Wordlessly, Amanda followed him.

As the door clanged shut, she wheeled to confront him. “You going to beat me up, Scarecrow? Now that we’ve ‘taken it outside’?”

“That is entirely inappropriate, Mrs. King. Believe me, the Chameleon is no joking matter.”

“Believe me, I’m not laughing. I certainly see nothing funny in this situation.”

“Would you please lower your voice? This is neither the time nor the place for this discussion.”

“And what would be the right time and place?” she demanded, disregarding his plea for quiet. “At home, where you don’t seem to want to discuss our jobs? Or at the Agency, where you’re always too busy? Maybe I should make an appointment.” Her voice dripped with sarcasm as she turned an angry eye on him.

“Believe it or not, I’m just doing my job. And at this moment I need you to do yours. For the last time – what’s the status on the scene?”

“There’s nothing to report. Francine and I were suspicious at the lack of activity and did a routine check. We found the bodies, complete with a sweetheart rose on top. But I’m not telling you anything you didn’t already know, now am I? I mean, I’m sure you saw it all from your vantage point around the corner.”

She turned abruptly and headed for the car. Lee caught her arm in an attempt to detain her. “This isn’t a game, Amanda. You can at least behave like a professional. You are talking to your Operations Chief. Your personal observations have no place in your status report.”

Amanda glanced down at the hand that was still clutching her arm. Looking up, she coldly met his eye. “Would you mind taking your hand off me, Chief? That’s certainly not very professional of you.”

Lee abruptly released his hold on her. “I’ll expect your full report on my desk within the hour. And you have an appointment with Dr. Kelford at three o’clock that you need to keep or you will find yourself sitting permanently behind a desk.” Without another word, he headed purposefully towards his car.

CHAPTER FOUR

The man and woman relaxed in the sitting room of their suite at the Potomac Plaza Hotel. Sitting comfortably on the striped couch, he casually inventoried the tools of his trade. An assortment of rifles, silencers and telescopic lenses were scattered innocuously on the small coffee table in front of him. A black bag filled with theatrical make-up lay at his feet.

“Have you made up your mind yet?” the woman asked absently, idly thumbing through the pages of a fashion magazine.

“Almost,” he answered, his slightly accented tones falling melodically on her ears. “Don’t worry - we should be on target for tomorrow.”

“Good. I’d like to get home before Christmas.”

He smiled smugly. "You will be. I've definitely decided who will make this hit. I just have a few details to work out and we're set to go." He indicated the make-up bag at his feet. "And this is for you." He casually tossed the black wig in her direction. "Now, let's get moving. We have a little more research to do tonight."

Abandoning her magazine, she picked up the wig and headed for the mirror. "What do you think?" she asked, making a few adjustments to her appearance.

His lips turned up in the faintest imitation of a smile. "It will do. Let's go."

Lee sat at his desk, absently flipping through the report that lay in front of him, his stomach loudly reminding him that it was long past dinnertime. Glancing at his watch, he saw that it was almost eight o'clock. No wonder Billy had always put in such long hours – in the bowels of the Agency, there was no way to tell if it was day or night. Another thing he missed about being in the Q-Bureau – the ability to look out the window. A simple pleasure he had taken for granted in the last two years.

He pitched the report carelessly onto the desk, rubbing his fingers over his eyes. The view, or lack of one, wasn't really what was bothering him and he knew it. It was Amanda. He missed working with her, missed looking up and seeing her face, her lips tightly compressed as she concentrated on her task. After their earlier confrontation at the Rose Tuxedo Shop, she'd stopped by his office and efficiently placed her status report on his desk. She hadn't said a word, merely looked at him once before returning to her own office. The look on her face told him in no uncertain terms that she'd had her fill of his nonsense.

Lee hadn't been able to get that look out of his head all afternoon. He shouldn't have tailed her on her assignment this morning. He'd spent more than enough time as her partner to know that she could handle herself. He'd witnessed her metamorphosis from an untrained yet talented civilian into a first-rate agent. Knowing it intellectually was one thing – accepting it emotionally was turning out to be quite another. While he wouldn't hesitate for a minute to put his life in her hands and hold her life in his, it was difficult to relinquish that responsibility and trust to someone else. It was turning out to be much harder to let go of their professional partnership than he had ever imagined it would be when he'd accepted this job. In the final analysis, it all boiled down to one simple fact – fear. He was afraid of losing her the same way he'd lost everyone he'd ever really cared about.

He watched the night cleaning crew slowly move through the bullpen. It was more than time to call it a day. Instead of sitting alone in his office

apologizing to the wall, he should be at home where he belonged, sharing these feelings with his wife. After what he'd pulled today, though, it would probably be easier to confront the Chameleon tonight than Amanda. Safer, too. He couldn't put it off any longer. He slowly and deliberately rose from his chair, closed his office door and headed for the elevator.

* * * * *

Dotty and the boys were just finishing dinner when Amanda entered the kitchen. Jamie's face was suffused with a smile, his relief evident as he watched his mother walk through the door. Catching his look, she returned his smile.

"I'm sorry I'm late, fellas." Amanda sat down in exhaustion at the table. "I meant to get home for dinner before you went to your Dad's."

"That's okay, Mom," Philip answered congenially. "Did you catch any bad guys today?"

"Not today," Amanda replied sadly.

Dotty observed her sharply, taking particular note of the haunted look in her eyes. "Boys, your Dad will be here any minute. Why don't you head upstairs and finish your packing."

"We're only going to be gone for two nights," Jamie whined. "There's not that much to pack."

"Go on, listen to your grandmother," Amanda answered, shooing them from the room.

The boys noisily cleared their plates, Jamie hanging back slightly to watch his mother before following Philip up the stairs.

Dotty waited until they'd left before speaking. "Is everything all right?"

"Of course. What could possibly be wrong?" Amanda answered sarcastically.

Dotty ignored her tone and continued. "Let's see, Lee's missed dinner again and you look like you've lost your best friend. These late night meetings are really become a habit."

Amanda turned away and looked out the window. Her eye fell on the small stable at the back of their property. They hadn't quite decided yet exactly what to do with that. She'd just have to add it to the growing list of things she needed to discuss with her husband. Her mother's voice cut into her reverie.

"Amanda?" Dotty repeated, unwilling to let her daughter skirt the issue as she'd done so many times in the past.

"Yes, Mother?"

"I asked if everything was okay."

She turned and smiled at her sadly. "I heard you. It's just kind of difficult to answer now that I can't tell you Lee's in the editing room."

"I would never try to pry into your job, Amanda. I do understand that there are things you can't tell me."

The hurt in her voice was easily apparent to Amanda, who walked over to Dotty and put her arm around her. "I know. I'm sorry. It's just been a long day."

Dotty eyed her daughter with concern. "Amanda, are you feeling all right, aren't you? You've been so tired lately, and I'm not sure you've really recovered from everything you went through last fall. I worry about you."

Amanda sighed. "I'm fine. Actually, I had a physical this afternoon and you'll be happy to know that the Doctor said I was in perfect health. Just suffering from a little stress. I guess it goes with the job."

Dotty looked at her wisely. "That's not the news you were expecting to hear?"

Amanda brushed the tears from her eyes and shook head. "It's not that. I didn't really think I was pregnant. It's just..."

Dotty's put a comforting arm around her daughter's shoulder. "It's all right, darling. You still have of time to have a baby if that's what you and Lee want."

"That's just the problem. I don't know what I want. I mean, should I feel sad or relieved? We haven't had the time to discuss it." She blinked through her tears. "And this is just kind of a wake-up call that the biological clock is ticking..." The discordant chime of the doorbell interrupted their conversation.

Dotty sighed. “That must be Joe - right on time. I’ll get it.”

Amanda sighed, wiping the remaining tears from her eyes. She heard her mother greet Joe from the foyer and run upstairs to get the boys. She plastered a smile on her face as he headed into the kitchen.

“Hi, Joe. The boys are almost ready.”

“Thanks. Carrie and I have been looking forward to spending some time with them – starting our own Christmas traditions.”

“How are the wedding plans coming?”

“I think she has things under control. I’m trying to stay out of it as much as possible.” He smiled over at her. “It’s been hectic, though, and Carrie’s been pretty stressed about the guest list. I never realized how many things could pop up at the last minute to derail the festivities.”

Amanda smiled in spite of herself. At least Joe and Carrie didn’t have to deal with theft, murder, and works of art valued in the millions. They only had to concern themselves with ‘normal’ problems, like seating arrangements and how many people to invite to the wedding. At this moment, Amanda had to admit that ‘normal’ problems had a certain appeal. She vaguely wondered if the veil of secrecy that had surrounded her marriage to Lee was partially responsible for some of their current difficulties.

Joe looked at her closely. “Is everything okay, Amanda? You seem a little...I don’t know.” He fumbled for the right words, coming up behind her as she quickly turned to face the window.

“Everything’s great.”

Joe smiled sadly. “You always were a terrible liar, Amanda King.” He looked at her sheepishly. “I’m sorry, I mean Amanda Stetson. I guess old habits die hard.” He looked tenderly at her for a moment. “I hope Lee’s smarter than I was and realizes what he has,” he whispered softly.

Amanda blinked back the tears that were beginning to form again in her eyes. “Don’t say anything nice to me right now, Joe, or I’m going to start crying.” Her voice trembled slightly as she spoke.

Joe reached out to touch her with a tentative hand. “Amanda, you know I’ll always be here for you. As a friend. You can always come to me if you need someone to talk to.”

Amanda turned to Joe. “Thank you, sweetheart. I think I could use a friend right now.” The tears she had been unsuccessfully trying to control momentarily overwhelmed her as she moved into Joe’s embrace. They stood together in the bright kitchen, Joe holding her in his arms as her sobs subsided. Breaking the embrace, Amanda wiped the tears from her eyes.

“Thanks, Joe. I needed that. I...” Her words caught in her throat as she looked up to see Lee watching them from across the room.

Joe self-consciously stepped away from Amanda, nervously extending his hand. “Lee...it’s good to see you.”

With an almost imperceptible hesitation, Lee shook Joe’s hand, coolly replying, “Joe...” The sound of their silence reverberated throughout the room as they each retreated to neutral corners.

“Philip and Jamie are all set,” Dotty began as she entered the kitchen. She nervously glanced from one to the other, the tension in the air unmistakable. The boys followed closely upon her heels, the normal noise of their entrance magnified by the unnatural silence.

Joe moved quickly to his sons. “Let’s go, fellas. Say goodbye to your mother and grandmother. And Lee.”

Amanda kissed them each goodbye, giving Jamie an extra hug. “I’ll see you on Christmas Eve. Don’t give your Dad or Carrie any trouble.”

“We won’t, Mom,” Philip answered.

The usual goodbyes filled the air as the boys left quickly with their father. The door closed with a bang and Lee, Amanda and Dotty were left standing alone in the kitchen. Dotty cleared her throat as she nervously studied the patterned texture of the ceiling. “Well, I think it’s time to head upstairs and finish my novel. It’s been a long day.” She made a quick exit, heading for the safety of her room.

Amanda continued to watch Lee from across from the kitchen. “Do you want some dinner?” she asked quietly.

“I’m not hungry,” he answered at last. “I’m going out for a drive.”

“Lee...”

“I’ll be back.” Without another word, he turned and left the room.

* * * * *

Amanda looked up from her book as she heard Lee finally make his way up the stairs. The hands on the antique clock perched on the mantel of the fireplace told her it was well past midnight. Feigning an interest she really didn’t feel in the latest Robert Ludlum novel, she pretended to study the page as Lee walked through the door. She surreptitiously watched him take off his suit coat and place it carefully over the arm of the chair. With a sigh, she closed the cover of her book and turned to face him.

“So, how’s the car running?”

“Excuse me?”

“You were gone so long I thought you must have had car trouble.”

Lee looked away, unwilling to meet her eye. “Let’s drop it for tonight. I’m tired.”

“I don’t doubt it,” she muttered under her breath. “It’s after midnight.”

Lee said nothing as he removed his tie and laid it methodically on top of his jacket.

“Would you care to tell me where you were all evening?”

“I went for a drive. Can’t we just leave it at that?” He turned and looked towards the window.

She took a deep breath. “No, I can’t. I really needed to talk to you tonight.”

He religiously studied the view from the window. “I could tell.”

The hint of sarcasm in his tone chilled her and she unconsciously rubbed her hands up and down her arms. “Yes - as you would have found out if you had bothered to stick around for a few minutes.”

He pulled his gaze from the window and continued to get ready for bed. “You already had one husband to talk to,” he rejoined testily.

Hot tears pricked her eyelids. “Just what is that supposed to mean?”

He shrugged in response.

“Lee, I’m tired of these games. They’re exhausting me. After playing all day at work I can’t do it at home, too. Would you just tell me what’s going on?”

“That’s what I was intending to do earlier tonight. I came home to try and talk to you, but you were otherwise occupied.”

“Joe saw that I was upset and he was concerned. You know we’re just friends.”

“And you know that isn’t always easy for me.” Lee sighed as he turned once more to face the window.

“I can’t change the fact that Joe and I have a history.”

“It’s not your past with him that bothers me. It’s your present. It really hurts that you feel more comfortable confiding in him than you do in me.”

“That’s not true. I didn’t go looking for Joe tonight - he just happened to be there when I needed a friend. Besides, Joe isn’t the issue, and you know it.” She paused momentarily before continuing. “Our problem is that you don’t seem to trust me.”

“That’s ridiculous. You don’t really believe I think you and Joe...”

“Of course not. You know, Lee, you stand there telling me that I don’t seem able to confide in you. That goes both ways.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I’m talking about our working relationship – or lack of one.”

“Amanda, we’re not partners anymore. There are things that...”

“That on a need to know basis, I don’t need to know?” she intoned sarcastically.

“More than that – things you can’t know.”

“I’m not talking about national security, Scarecrow. I’m talking about the simple fact that you no longer trust me to do my job.”

He swung around to face her. “It’s not a matter of trust…”

“It most certainly is,” she interrupted hotly, “even if you won’t admit it. Every time you assign me to administrative duties, you tell me you don’t trust me. Every time you hand me another Mickey-Mouse assignment, you tell me you don’t trust me. And when you refused to confide in me about what you were really up to a few months ago - that really told me you didn’t trust me.”

Lee sighed in exasperation. “I explained why I didn’t tell you the truth about the Phoenix investigation – it was too dangerous. I didn’t want you to get hurt.”

“There’s more than one way to be hurt, Lee. How do you think it felt when Billy appeared on my doorstep and told me you were dead? Do you have any idea at all what that did to me?” The tears fell unbidden from her eyes. Lee moved towards her, but her hand warned him to keep his distance. “That won’t solve anything. We both know you don’t have any problems communicating your feelings like that. Talk to me.”

Lee ran his hand nervously through his hair. “I don’t know what you want me to say. I know you blame me for what happened last fall with Mason. Hell, Amanda, I blame myself. But you know what? I can’t change the past, either.”

“I never blamed you for what happened – I know circumstances spun out of control. Lee, that’s not the issue. The problem is this crazy need you have to protect me. I don’t know how much more of this I can take.”

“I know better than anyone the dangers that go hand in hand with this job. I just don’t want anything to happen to you. Is that so bad?”

“Yes – when it crosses the line and becomes obsessive. How can I make you understand that I don’t need you to baby me anymore?”

“I’m not doing that...”

“That’s right, you tail every agent team that goes out on a routine surveillance. No wonder you’re working such late hours.”

“Amanda...”

“And while we’re on the subject,” she continued, her anger rising once again, “you schedule all their medical appointments, too, I guess?”

“The regulations state...”

“Don’t quote regulations to me. You’re starting to sound like Dr. Smyth.”

“Damn it, I’m trying not to let our personal relationship hamper my ability to do this job,” Lee answered irritably. “You’re the one who kept telling me I should have followed procedure in my investigation last fall. I’m just trying to do that now.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Look – I’m treading a fine line here. I can’t let it look like the rules apply to everyone but you. Do you want your co-workers to think I’m giving you preferential treatment because you’re sleeping with the boss?”

“I’ve never asked for preferential treatment and you know it, Stetson. And as for sleeping with the boss...” She picked up his pillow and threw it at him in a fit of anger. “Well, that’s one less thing you have to worry about tonight.”

“Fine.” Retrieving his pillow from the floor, Lee turned and walked away, angrily slamming the door behind him.

“Fine,” Amanda echoed, picking up her book and heaving it at the door. It connected with a thud and fell to the floor.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Is everything set for tonight?” the woman inquired as she handed a cup of steaming coffee to her compatriot. Gingerly sipping the scalding liquid, he nodded his head in affirmation.

“Good. I’ll be glad when it’s finished. This scenario makes me very nervous.”

The man took her hand in reassurance. “We’ve done our research. Trust me - everything will go off without a hitch. By this time tomorrow we’ll be enjoying breakfast on the terrace without a care in the world.”

“And a million dollars richer.”

“Exactly. That should make a lovely Christmas present.” He inhaled the fragrant scent of the little flower fastened to the lapel of his coat. “Just a few more details and it’s time to put the plan in motion.”

Amanda stifled a yawn as she struggled to make the morning coffee. The clock by her bed read 4:27 a.m. when she’d finally closed her eyes. Sleep had proved almost impossible and the words she and Lee had exchanged echoed through her mind all night. She suspected that he hadn’t fared much better, since she heard him pacing around downstairs until the wee hours of the morning. She debated going downstairs to talk to him, but her anger refused to let her capitulate. Besides, she thought stubbornly, the next move was up to him.

As she leaned sleepily on the breakfast bar, she caught sight of Lee’s pillow and blanket in a heap on the family room sofa. She didn’t feel up to facing her mother’s inquisition this morning. The last thing she needed was to try and explain their fight to Dotty when she couldn’t even explain it to herself. Sighing, she walked over to the sofa and methodically folded the blanket. As she finished, she looked up and saw Lee enter the kitchen.

He poured himself a cup of coffee without a word and sat at the kitchen table, retreating to the safety of the morning paper. He was obviously avoiding her, as it was apparent that he’d used the boys’ bathroom to shave and shower. Amanda procured her own cup of coffee and silently joined him. Taking a sip, she wrinkled her nose in disgust. She eyed Lee warily from her side of the table. “Could you pass me some sugar?”

Avoiding her gaze, he handed her the bowl.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He slid once more behind his paper, trying unsuccessfully to concentrate on the words in front of him. After reading the

same sentence three times, he tossed the newspaper disconsolately on the table. He looked up and met his wife's brown eyes. "Sleep well?"

"Not particularly. You?"

He stretched, trying to work out the painful kinks in his back. "I've slept better on stakeout."

Amanda fought the smile that played around the corners of her mouth. "Then maybe you should have come upstairs and talked to me."

"I didn't think you were in the mood to talk. I wasn't the one throwing pillows, you know."

Amanda sighed. "Well, we're both sitting here now."

Lee shook his head. "Amanda, I'm tired. My head hurts, my back hurts...I don't want to fight anymore."

"I don't want to fight, either." Amanda reached over and put a tentative hand on his arm. "But we have to try and work through this or it's going to tear us apart."

"I'm not sure I know how to do that."

"You could start by telling me what you're feeling."

Lee pushed back his chair and paced the room nervously. "This isn't easy for me, Amanda. I can't help worrying about you when I'm not there to keep an eye on things."

"'Keep an eye on things'? There you go again implying that I can't do my job without you."

"And there you go again flying off the handle. You tell me to explain my feelings, but you don't really want to hear it."

"That's not true. But when you keep saying you don't think I'm capable of doing my job without you there to protect me...Lee, I think on some level you still see me as the untrained civilian you handed that package to four years ago. I've come a long way since then."

“I’m aware of that. This is a dangerous business we’re in and I’ve been doing it a lot longer than you. And I’m just not comfortable with you being in the line of fire.”

“Lee, I’m aware of the dangers of the job, too. I had to deal with it first-hand when you went off on you on your own last fall.”

“How many times can I say I’m sorry about that? I’m getting sick of apologizing for simply trying to protect you.”

She looked him straight in the eye. “You’re determined to keep me out of the field, aren’t you?”

“I never said that. I just...” The ringing of the telephone cut him off mid-sentence. They both stood motionless in the kitchen, transfixed by the sound of the phone. On the fourth ring, Lee picked it up, speaking tersely into the receiver. “Yes?”

Amanda stared at him lost in thought, half-listening to the one-sided conversation. “Who is this...no...no...okay.” She could tell by his body language the call was work related and she watched him scribble something on the pad by the phone. As he hung up, he folded the paper and put it in his pocket, momentarily lost in thought.

“Who was on the phone?”

Lee had a faraway look in his eyes. “No one important. I’ve got to go.”

“Give me a minute and I’ll go with you.”

“No, Amanda, I’ll take care of it.”

“Damn it, Scarecrow, there you go again, flexing your overprotective muscles. Stop trying to shield me.”

“That’s not what I’m doing. Stop putting words in my mouth.”

“You don’t have to say it. I know what you’re thinking.”

“Then you’re a step ahead of me, because I don’t know what I’m thinking right now.”

“You can’t deny it. It’s coming through loud and clear in everything you’re not saying.”

“Deny what? That doesn’t make any sense.” He paused for a minute before continuing. “Amanda, I’m exhausted. I don’t even know what I said anymore. I’ve got to get going.”

“Great. Just go off again on your little secret mission. Who said history doesn’t repeat itself?”

“I need to take care of this alone. Just leave it at that.” He paused for a moment. “I’ll be in and out this morning, then tied up in meetings until late. I’ll have to meet you tonight at Holstein’s reception.”

“I don’t think so.”

Halfway to the front door, Lee turned once more to face her. “I’m not going to have time to come home first.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m not going to the reception.”

“What?”

“I’m afraid it might be too dangerous for me to attend.”

“Amanda, I need you there. This is a social obligation.”

“That’s all I’m good for these days? To fulfill my ‘social obligations’?”

“I didn’t mean...”

“Because you obviously think I’m incapable of fulfilling my work obligations...”

“Amanda...”

“...and if all you need is for someone to stand adoringly at your side, I’m sure that could be arranged. In fact, now that I think about it, why don’t you give Leslie a call? She was always a pretty good substitute. If you hang on a minute and I’ll even go get you my dress.”

The silence in the room was almost palpable. Lee took a deep breath, turning to look out the kitchen window. “You never let anything go, do you? I

don't have time to deal with this right now." He hesitated once more, running his left hand absently through his hair, then turned to leave. "Thanks for your understanding," he called over his shoulder. "Do whatever you want about tonight."

"Lee...wait," Amanda whispered softly as she looked up and watched him walk out the door.

* * * * *

Francine looked up from her desk as her partner walked into the Q-Bureau. She grinned as she watched Amanda flop down in exhaustion behind her desk. "Not very energetic this morning, are we? Busy night?"

Amanda frowned. "Please, Francine, I'm not in the mood."

The tone of her voice put Francine on notice and she quietly mumbled an apology of sorts. "Sorry. I didn't realize you were so touchy this morning." She turned her attention to the report on her desk.

Amanda walked over to the coffee pot on the small table in the corner of the office. Fixing herself a mug, she sat down again behind her desk. The warm liquid soothed her jagged nerves and she could feel herself slowly begin to relax. She looked over at Francine who was sipping from her own mug. "I'm sorry, too. I shouldn't take my bad mood out on you."

"Must have been some fight," Francine muttered, her eyes glued to the papers in front of her.

"We were discussing my job." Amanda slowly sipped her coffee, debating whether to continue. "I guess you have a right to know this because it affects you, too. I think Lee's on the verge of asking me to give up working in the field. He doesn't seem to think much of my skills as an agent."

Francine looked up at her in astonishment, the report momentarily forgotten. "Really?"

"An opinion I'm sure you share."

Francine shook her head in denial. "That's not true. Although you have to admit that your introduction to this business was a bit unorthodox. I mean, how many of us were actually recruited in their nightgown in a train station?"

Amanda shot her a withering look.

“And I’ll own that in the beginning I did think you were more suited to clean up after children than the KGB, but that was a long time ago. As much as it pains me to say it, you’ve become a first-rate agent.”

“Thanks, I think. I only wish our new boss shared your opinion.”

“He does. He’s never given me reason to believe he’s anything but proud of all you’ve accomplished.”

Now it was Amanda’s turn to be surprised.

“Do you remember when your little class ‘C’ interrogation turned into a full scale scramble last year?” Francine continued. “Billy told me how Lee defended you to Beeman, told him that you shouldn’t be treated like one of his rookies. That you had ‘more experience in the field than half the operatives at the Agency’ I believe was the way he put it. And when we were involved in that ‘Trojan Horse’ mess last spring, Lee told me you were one in a million.” Francine smiled. “Although, I did think he might be a little prejudiced. I recall at the time I thought he was probably suffering from a love-induced form of temporary insanity.”

Amanda didn’t answer, but merely shrugged her shoulders.

Francine cleared her throat and continued. “Okay, as long as we’re being honest here and I’ve actually complimented your work, I have something else to confess.” She paused as she caught Amanda’s eye. “I’ve been really jealous of your relationship.”

“Jealous?” she said, her curiosity piqued.

“I don’t mean jealous in the sense that I’m interested in Lee myself,” she added quickly. “What I’m trying to say is that you two have the kind of relationship I’ve been looking for all my life.”

Amanda looked across the room in amazement, not quite trusting what she was hearing. She vaguely wondered if the Agency’s latest truth serum had somehow found its way into the coffee pot. It was absolutely out of character for Francine to be talking to her like this. Amanda could only watch in wonder as she continued to pour her heart out.

“Amanda, Lee and I have both been in this business a long time and our outlooks...on life...and love...are not...too dissimilar. We’ve both had major commitment issues to deal with. That’s one of the reasons our relationship was just what it was...a brief distraction. But that’s not what I’m talking about.” She took a deep breath and forged ahead. “I think the main reason I didn’t want to think Lee could be serious about you was because if I admitted that he could come to terms with his fear of commitment, I’d have to acknowledge that maybe I could, too. And that scares the hell out of me.”

“Why? Francine, I think Jonathan really cares about you.”

“You seem to overlook the little fact that he left me standing at the altar.”

Amanda paused for a moment, nodding in silent agreement. “I’m sure that must have been very painful. But if you love him, don’t let the past stop you from trying again.”

“That’s easy for you to say.”

Amanda shook her head. “No, it’s not. I understand all about failure. After Joe and I divorced, it took me a long time to get to the point where I was ready to seriously try again. But believe me, it’s worth it. Even on those mornings when you’d like to hit your husband over the head with a blunt object.”

Francine smiled over at her. “I understand what he’s going through. You see, when you decide to commit to someone the way Lee’s finally allowed himself to, you have to relinquish your control over the relationship. And that opens the door to being hurt. And believe me, for people like us, that’s the most frightening part of all.”

Amanda seemed lost in thought. “So you’re saying the job isn’t the real issue with him at all.”

Francine nodded. “I think he’s using it as an excuse so he doesn’t have to admit what really scares him - losing what he’s found with you. It’s what I’d do.”

“Then why can’t he just tell me that? I’d understand.”

“I think we both know that verbal communication is not Lee’s strong suit,” Francine replied with a smile. “Amanda, he’s afraid. And when people are afraid, they sometimes do really stupid things.”

“And say really stupid things,” Amanda muttered to herself. She glanced at Francine whose eyebrows were raised in a question mark. “I said something to him this morning that I shouldn’t have. It was really low. I don’t even know why I said it...I opened my mouth and it just came out. It was like I was standing there watching myself say this really hurtful thing...and after what you just said, I feel even worse.” She hesitated for a fraction of a second, then stood up. “I’ll be right back. I need to run downstairs for a few minutes.”

“Amanda, Lee’s not there – when I spoke to him earlier he was on his way to a meeting with Colonel Holstein. He didn’t expect to be back until after lunch.”

“I know. I’m just going to leave him a note.” She paused, her hand on the doorknob. “And Francine...thank you.”

“Don’t mention it. That’s what partners are for,” she answered, her mouth turned up in a smile.

* * * * *

Amanda yawned tiredly as she walked into the house, glad the day was finally over. The silence that greeted her was a little disconcerting for a minute until she remembered that the boys were still with their father. Joe and Carrie were scheduled to bring them home late tomorrow afternoon and they were supposed to all celebrate Christmas Eve together. She hoped that was still the plan. Lee’s erratic behavior had finally gotten to her.

They had been unable to touch base all day, a fact that left Amanda feeling vaguely uncomfortable. He had just left his office this morning when she’d dropped in to try to apologize. She really didn’t want to leave matters between them the way they had ended up this morning. Unable to talk to him in person, she’d left a brief note on his desk where he’d be sure to see it. As things stood, she’d found it difficult to concentrate on work with her scathing remark about calling Leslie still hanging between them. She thought he must probably still be pretty upset if he hadn’t been able to find thirty seconds to pick up the phone, meetings or no meetings. In a last-ditch attempt to put things right, she’d stopped by his office later that afternoon, only to discover he’d just left the building for a late appointment. That had finally been the last straw. He evidently didn’t want to talk to her. Guilt over their earlier conversation started to be replaced by anger. She may have crossed the line in their discussion that morning, but Lee could at least have the good grace to let her tell him that. Earlier in the day she had decided to go to Holstein’s reception tonight, but now she was wavering once again.

Lost in thought, she didn't hear her mother enter the room. "Amanda, darling," Dotty repeated, trying one more time to get her attention.

"I'm sorry, Mother, I didn't hear you.'

"You seemed a million miles away."

Amanda smiled sadly. "Not really. What are you up to with those?" She pointed to the armload of videocassettes Dotty was carrying.

"Oh, these? Nothing..."

"Mother..."

"You'll think it's silly."

"Try me."

"They're Cary Grant movies. I was planning on having a marathon tonight." She sighed. "I've got all the really good ones. 'Bringing Up Baby', 'My Favorite Wife', 'An Affair to Remember' ..."

Amanda smiled. "I never realized you were a closet Cary Grant fan."

"I guess you're not the only one who's kept a few secrets." Dotty sighed as she continued. "When you were little, your Daddy and I always went to a Cary Grant movie over the holidays. So every year I always watch a little Cary Grant – it's become a little ritual. I thought I'd do it tonight before your Aunt arrives tomorrow."

Amanda looked at her in wonder. "I had no idea you did this."

"There's no reason why you should. It was kind of a personal thing...between your Daddy and me. And you have been pretty wrapped up in your work the last few years."

Amanda smiled bitterly. While her mother was busy spending the holidays watching Cary Grant movies, she was otherwise occupied with the KGB or the current facsimile. Sighing, she put her arm around her mother. "You miss Daddy."

Dotty nodded sadly. "I know it's been a long time, but I just can't help it. The holidays make me think of him." She turned an inquisitive eye on her daughter. "Aren't you and Lee supposed to be going to a party tonight? You know, for that man who's named after a cow?"

"That was the plan."

"Then shouldn't you be getting dressed?"

Amanda said nothing, but turned her gaze to the window. She could see the holiday lights twinkling in the distance. The snowfall two nights ago clung to the ground, the blanket of white one more reminder of the season. She sighed softly.

This time Dotty put her arm around Amanda's shoulders. "Don't take what you have for granted, darling. Or before you know it, it can slip right through your fingers."

Amanda placed her hand on Dotty's, squeezing it tightly. "I know."

"Now, the way I see it, you have two choices. You can stay here with me and enjoy Cary's witty repartee all evening or you can change your clothes, go to that party and dance with your handsome husband."

Hesitating only for a second, Amanda turned to head upstairs. Dotty grinned appreciatively. "Tough choice, I see."

Amanda stopped and smiled at her mother. "Thank you."

"Get going. I have a date with Cary Grant."

* * * * *

Francine checked the time as the party guests continued to file into the ballroom. The hands of her watch read eight fifteen – a little over two hours until Colonel Holstein was scheduled to make his speech. The tiny white lights lent the room a decidedly festive air and the guests seemed to be enjoying themselves, some more than others, she thought wryly. The crowded room was a veritable 'Who's Who' of important dignitaries in D.C. – she could even count a few of the guests as her past boyfriends. What had she ever seen in them? Now, all she wanted was for this night to end so she could relax in front of the fire with Jonathan and enjoy a nice Yule log.

Times had certainly changed. At least, they had for her. It appeared that some people found it harder to turn over a new leaf after all. She shook her head in silent disapproval. Lee was certainly enjoying himself tonight, flirting with every beautiful woman in the room. She should have known that his new role of devoted husband would be short lived. They say predators always revert to type. If that was the case, then the real Lee Stetson was back with a vengeance.

Francine sighed audibly as she surveyed the scene. She'd tried to talk to him all evening about his callous behavior, but she hadn't been able to get close enough. Instead, she was forced to witness the spectacle he was making of himself from a distance. There he was now, in a quiet tête-à-tête with a stunning dark haired woman. Well, at least Amanda should thank heaven for small favors, she thought with a rueful grin. Her husband still seemed to be attracted to brunettes. His beautiful companion apparently found his attentions very entertaining, because she laughingly stole a flower from one of the table arrangements and fastened it to his tux with a coquettish smile. Lee certainly seemed intrigued. Francine was disgusted.

And here she was this very morning envying Amanda and Lee's relationship. She should have realized that two such different people never really stood a chance of making it work. At least Amanda wasn't here to witness this debacle. Although, all things considered, she did think Lee would be more discreet than to cheat on Amanda in front of half the Agency. Well, okay, perhaps that was a slight exaggeration. He wasn't really cheating on her, not in the strictest sense of the word. And there were only a few well-placed security teams covering this party. There were a number of different events tonight in D. C. that were also being covered. For a minute she questioned why this event was so short-staffed. Scarecrow must have figured he'd be on hand tonight to add to their numbers.

Although at present his mind didn't appear to be on business. What could Amanda have said to him this morning to produce such a drastic reaction? Their fight must have been one for the record books. But whatever she'd done, it certainly didn't merit this kind of treatment. Amanda should have taken her advice a year ago and broken up with Lee for good. Oh, she wanted to go over there and shake him. Did he have any idea what he was throwing away? Or were all relationships this fragile, unable to withstand the wear and tear of everyday problems? Sighing, Francine wondered if she'd ever be able to work up the courage to make the commitment she knew Jonathan wanted. From what she'd seen tonight, she didn't think it was worth it.

Sighing once more, Francine swept the room with her eyes one more time before heading to the door. As she turned to leave, Amanda suddenly appeared before her out of nowhere.

“Hi, Francine. Have you seen Lee?”

Startled, Francine was for the moment absolutely incapable of any attempt at clever parrying.

“What are you doing here?” Her voice rose as she struggled to hide her discomfort.

“I was invited.” Amanda looked at Francine in bewilderment. “What’s the matter? You look like you want to frisk me.”

“Amanda, let’s go outside. I need to talk to you.”

“Later, Francine. I need to find my husband.”

“Believe me, this can’t wait. Let’s go outside.”

“Francine, I’m not working tonight, so, yes, it can wait.” Amanda turned and headed into the party.

Francine followed close on her heels, trying desperately to detain her. “Amanda, please, don’t go in there.”

“Francine, what are you...” Her words caught in her throat as she caught sight of Lee arm-in arm with the striking brunette.

Francine followed her gaze. “That’s what I didn’t want you to see.”

Amanda stood frozen in place, her eyes glued to Lee and his lady friend. She watched them disappear into a small, sheltered balcony.

Francine tried to pull her away. “Come on, Amanda. Let it go for now. It won’t help to make a scene.”

Amanda pushed off her partner’s arm and made her way as if in a trance through the milling crowd. Her every instinct told her to follow Francine’s advice, but instead she moved purposely towards the balcony. She rounded the corner in time to witness Lee’s lips close on the woman’s in an intimate kiss. Stifling a sob, she turned and quickly fled.

CHAPTER SIX

The man and woman stood silently together, calmly surveying the scene. She turned to her companion with a sigh, her brow knit together in a frown. "I'm beginning to regret accepting this commission."

The man regarded her with disdain. "Why? Everything is right on schedule."

She shivered unconsciously. "Something about this bothers me. I have a bad taste in my mouth."

"That's from the caviar you ate. I simply detest domestic brands."

She turned up her nose in distaste. "At least it should all be over shortly. And perhaps, if we're lucky, they will serve something better on the flight home?"

His smile echoed her sentiments as he extended his arm with a flourish. "Shall we join the others?"

The woman silently acquiesced, accepting his arm with a gracious nod. Together they turned and walked away.

Amanda drove mindlessly through the streets of Washington, her hands clutching the steering wheel until her knuckles were white. She felt as if someone had knocked the wind out of her as she struggled for air in great gasping breaths. Traffic was light for a Wednesday night in D.C., a circumstance for which she was profoundly grateful. In her current state of mind, it would be all too easy to have an accident.

Heedless of the direction, she simply drove, her mind a jumbled swirl. In a few short seconds, her entire world had turned upside down. She tried to concentrate on the road ahead of her, but all she could focus on was the image of her husband with his arms around that mindless debutante at the party, his lips closing on hers. Oh, she was just the type of girl that always decorated Lee's arm in the past, young, beautiful and, most likely, without a thought in her head. Yes, the type he'd always preferred - an ornament, not a partner. The kind of girl who demanded nothing but a charming dinner companion and an energetic lover, the kind who obligingly disappeared into the woodwork when it was over.

How many times had those girls looked down their nose at her in the past? Her mind drifted back to that first party when she had glanced up to see him smiling down on her from the circular staircase. There he stood, the sophisticated man-of-the-world clad in a custom-made tuxedo, a direct contrast to her suburban blouse and slacks. The differences between them had been glaringly apparent at that first meeting. And in the months and years that followed, at every embassy function or party they attended, Lee was always bombarded by an endless parade of women, a steady stream of 'Randy Babies' as she'd jokingly come to refer to them. The names changed, but the type was always the same. And they all regarded her as some interloper barely worth their notice.

Maybe they were right after all. Sometimes she did feel like an outsider, as if she was just trespassing in a world where Lee felt completely at home. He'd traveled everywhere, spent summers in castles in Germany and vacationed in Monte Carlo, while she was the type of person who visited Europe without bringing a gown.

She took a deep breath, her sobs slowly subsiding. Maybe it was a mistake to think that two people who came from such different worlds could make a go of it. After all, Lee was champagne and she was warm milk. Although recently she had let herself believe that maybe he secretly preferred warm milk.

Yes, perhaps she had been naive to think that Lee really wanted to settle down. What was it Francine had said about him last year? Oh, yes – that he couldn't be satisfied with just one h'ors d'oeuvre; he had to have 'the whole tray'. And she had smugly believed that the man Francine described didn't exist anymore. The man she thought she knew so well. The man who huddled next to her in the swamp for warmth and looked at her with eyes of love; the man who pulled her into his arms as she slipped out the back door of the old house on Maplewood Drive, tenderly touching his lips to hers; the man who held onto her tightly as he finally shed long overdue tears for his parents. That was the Lee Stetson she loved. That Lee had risked everything during Stemminder to creep into her bedroom to tell her that he loved her. That Lee had been willing to trade his life to rescue her from Addi Birol, had held her in his arms as she trembled with fear and calmly asked her to marry him. That Lee had stood beside her in front of the Justice of the Peace in Marion and slipped a gold ring on her finger with a nervous smile, solemnly promising a lifetime of love and fidelity. That Lee had held her body next to his the first time they'd made love and whispered that he'd always love her.

And she'd believed him. She still believed him now. Or believed in him. Was there a difference? She didn't know anymore. Looking up, Amanda

suddenly realized she was approaching the Agency. She had mindlessly navigated the streets in her pain-induced trance and this is where she had ended up. What was her subconscious trying to tell her? Her over-worked mind could no longer grasp the nuances. Her perception of everything was skewed by what she'd witnessed tonight. Almost as if it was meant to deliberately confuse her.

She pulled to a stop in front of the Georgetown building that served as a front for the Agency. She paused for a moment, lost once more in thought. Something just didn't add up. She desperately tried to reconcile the playboy Lee Stetson she'd observed at the party tonight with the Lee Stetson who was her husband, the man who she knew in her soul would never betray her, no matter how angry he felt. The dichotomy between the two was just too great. She took a slow, deep breath. She was missing a vital piece of the puzzle. That special intuition of hers was sending off loud alarm bells in her brain now that her mind had calmed down enough to hear it.

Her eyes drifted over to the IFF sign blowing ever so slightly in the wind. It was turning into a bitter night in more ways than one. She made up her mind. She would discover the truth one-way or the other. Maybe something on Lee's desk could offer some clue to his behavior. Her features set in a look of grim determination, she headed into the Agency to find out.

* * * * *

Amanda leaned back in Lee's chair, absently rubbing her aching forehead with the palm of her hand. So far her quest for the truth was proving to be nothing more than an exercise in frustration. If there was something to find here, her tired brain was incapable of seeing it. Or maybe it was just wishful thinking. Maybe she was merely grasping at straws, looking for some logical way to explain the illogical. Perhaps she should just acknowledge that, angered by her words this morning, Lee had lashed out at her where he knew she was most vulnerable.

No, she couldn't believe he would behave like that. Even at the beginning of their relationship, when they were nothing more than friends, Lee had never deliberately tried to hurt her. Why on earth would he suddenly start now? Even if her words had wounded him this morning, in her heart she knew he would never betray the trust between them. She was still missing something, some nagging little detail that she ought to recall. It hovered tantalizingly before her eyes only to evaporate as her mind began to close around it.

She silently surveyed the mess in front of her. Lee's desk should be classified as a federal disaster area. She wondered how he could find anything in

all this chaos. Evidently he couldn't, she thought wryly, as she picked up the unopened note she'd left him earlier in the day. It was almost completely buried beneath a stack of reports. Someone must have piled the papers on top of the envelope. At least that explained why he hadn't called her back. Sighing, she perused his appointment book and messages for the day. The only thing that struck her as out of place was a phone message from Marguerite Bowman, the clerk of the Justice of the Peace who had married them. What on earth would Lee need to talk to her about? That phone call was odd, but definitely not sinister. The rest of his day was spent in meetings, one this morning with Colonel Holstein, a phone conference with Billy, and...her eye was caught by a the last appointment, evidently scribbled in haste. Lee's writing was almost illegible when he was in a hurry and she strained to decipher it. 'Potomac Plaza, suite 553, 6:00 p.m.'...what was he doing there?

Her mind quickly jumped to the most obvious conclusion. Tears in her eyes, she willed herself not to think in those terms. The nagging voice in her head alleged that there was only one way to construe the meaning of that appointment. While her agent's mind doubted that Lee had gone to a hotel to catch up on his paperwork, her heart steadfastly refused to believe he was there for any darker purpose

She sat very still behind the mahogany desk, trying desperately to turn off her thoughts. If she closed her eyes, she could almost imagine that she was sitting behind his desk in Q-Bureau the way she had done so many times in the past. Her lips formed a tentative smile as happier memories flooded her mind. She could picture them both so clearly, like a video tape playing over and over in her head. She saw Lee surreptitiously watching her as she worked, trying vainly to hide his smile. She saw him lean over to kiss her as she sat at her desk, then quickly reach for a file as Billy's unexpected knock interrupted them. She saw him silently catch her eye as he left the room, expressing more with that one look than he could with a thousand words. And she remembered the love in his eyes the day he'd slipped the diamond engagement ring on her finger.

How had they come to this point? Was their love such a fragile flame that the first strong gust of wind could blow it out? She couldn't accept that. She absently twisted the circlets of gold she now wore on the third finger of her left hand for everyone to see. Lee had been so happy when they no longer had to hide their marriage. They'd had it all – love, respect, friendship and laughter.

She smiled as she recalled that night about six weeks ago, right before Lee started his new job. On their way out to dinner, they had stopped by the Agency to clean out Lee's desk and move his things into this new office. The switch took longer than either of them had anticipated and before they knew it, they'd

missed their dinner reservation. Finally finished, they stood side by side in the Q-Bureau one last time, looking at the now-empty desk. They were reluctant to leave, both of them silently acknowledging how different things would be when they came to work the next day. Lee took her hand in his, gently running his thumb over her wedding ring. Looking into her eyes, he brought her fingers to his lips and kissed them tenderly. A slow, sensual smile spread across his face. With a wicked gleam in his eye, he closed the office door and quickly turned the lock, saying that the two of them really ought to share this office one more time before he officially turned it over to Francine. Amanda chuckled softly at the recollection. Two hours later, when they finally left the building, he told her he'd never be able to think of the vault in the same way again.

Amanda sighed, fingering her rings once more. The commitment they represented meant as much to him as it did to her – she would stake her life on it. They had both traveled a long way since that fateful day at the train station four and a half years ago. Lee had worked hard to overturn the roadblocks his past had erected on the way to this ultimate partnership of theirs. The feeling of abandonment he'd experienced when his parents passed away, the guilt and responsibility he felt over the death of his first partner and, of course Dorothy, had all contributed to the difficulties he had in expressing his deepest feelings. But slowly he had begun to overcome these obstacles.

She closed her eyes and saw Lee sitting at his desk in the Q-Bureau, reaching down and tentatively handing her a small bouquet of roses. She knew back then exactly how much that gesture had cost him and...wait a minute. That was it! The thing she'd been struggling to remember all night. It had been right in front of her all along. At the party, when she had walked in on Lee with that woman, he'd been wearing a rose in his lapel. Not once, in all the years she had known Lee Stetson, had she ever seen him sporting any kind of flower on his tux. Let alone a rose. Despite his gift that afternoon in the Q-Bureau and the occasional token offering to mark a really special occasion, he hated roses, their sweet smell to this day an unwelcome reminder of Dorothy's untimely death.

But if that wasn't Lee, then who was it? And where was her husband? Amanda paced nervously back and forth in the close confines of the office. Stopping suddenly, she took a deep breath. Something else was going on here, some scenario as yet unknown to any of them. And just maybe the key was in room 553 of the Potomac Plaza Hotel. Without hesitation, Amanda turned and headed purposefully out the door.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The music from the party drifted slowly upstairs where the man and woman stood arm in arm surveying the scene below. The man tilted his head slightly, inhaling the pungent odor of the rose.

“It’s almost time.”

His lovely companion looked at her watch, as if to confirm his statement. “Yes.”

“Should we have one more dance before the speeches begin?”

“I think we should stay right here, out of sight.”

“You don’t approve?” He smiled as he paraded himself slowly in front of her.

“Yes, you’ve done a wonderful job, as always. The effect is quite remarkable.”

“Then shall we?” He extended his arm in a flourish.

“I’m staying right here. Unlike you, I have no desire to tempt fate.”

“You have that feeling again.” It was more a statement than a question. “Believe me, everything is taken care of. Including our little problem at the hotel. And in an hour, we’ll be safely on our way. Have I ever let you down?”

She shook her head in reply.

“Then don’t worry. Nothing can go wrong.”

The woman smiled sadly. “And that’s usually when it does.”

Amanda tried to quell the nervous feeling in the pit of her stomach as the elevator began its ascent. On the way to the Potomac Plaza she had almost convinced herself that she was on a fool’s errand. But the little voice in her head insisted that she keep on driving. As long as she was here she might as well see this through. She took a deep breath as the elevator slowed and the doors opened. She didn’t know exactly what she expected to find in the hotel suite, but she’d come too far to turn back now.

Checking the numbers, she noted that suite 553 was at the far end of the hall on the left. She paused in front of the door and knocked softly. Receiving no reply, she cautiously tried the door handle. She sighed – of course she hadn’t really expected it to be open. She needed something to pick the lock. She

quickly removed a long, thin ornament from her hair. This would have to do, she thought ruefully. She paused for a moment, her hand on the knob. She still felt guilty about this aspect of her work. The odious act of violating a person's privacy would always be distasteful to her. She smiled to herself. If Lee could see her standing here like this, he would laugh and tease her about her reluctance to go through someone's 'personal, private things'. Lee would have been in the room ten minutes ago, not standing in the doorway engaged in a debate with his conscience. Checking the hall one more time, she knelt down and inserted the hairpin into the lock. She squinted slightly, trying to see the opening in the dimly lit hall. The soft lighting at the Potomac Plaza Hotel might be romantic, but it was definitely a disadvantage when breaking and entering. She fiddled with the hairpin, trying to line up the gates the way she had been taught. Why did they always make this look so easy on television? She wished in vain for a standard issue lock pick. Just a few more seconds...the bolt suddenly gave way and Amanda almost fell into the room.

She stood up slowly, momentarily disoriented as her eyes adjusted to the blackness. It was almost impossible to see anything in the pitch-dark room. The pale streak of light coming in from the hallway did little to alleviate the problem and Amanda threw the door open wide in a futile attempt to make out her surroundings. The suite looked empty enough. Deciding to take the chance, she flipped the light switch on.

The room was immediately flooded with a soft light and she blinked her eyes as she made a quick survey of the area. At first glance, nothing here seemed out of the ordinary. The sitting area was furnished with a small striped sofa, two chairs and a coffee table. A desk stood adjacent to the wall in the far corner of the room. Everything was tidy and in place, with no evidence here of a hasty departure. Amanda went over to the desk and hurriedly searched the drawers. Nothing in there, either, except some stationary and the King James version of the Bible, standard hotel issue. She noted that the wastebaskets were empty and the ashtrays spotless. In fact, this sitting room looked like it had never been used.

She walked over to the sofa and sat down. This entire idea was beginning to seem absurd. She didn't know what revelations she had expected to find here. So far the only thing she'd discovered was that the Potomac Plaza Hotel was tastefully furnished and had a very thorough cleaning service.

Amanda looked at the bedroom door with a sigh. As long as she was here, she might as well check out the décor in that room, too. Leaving the sofa, she approached the door and slowly turned the knob. The lamps from the sitting room gradually illuminated the bedroom and she was immediately

struck by the contrast. Things were definitely not as neat in here. The closet doors stood open and the drawers in the dresser were askew, as if someone had rifled through them searching for something. The bed was a mess, the covers heaped in an untidy pile, with rose petals strewn on top. Not unlike the scene at the Rose Tuxedo Shop, Amanda thought with a mounting feeling of dread. She warily approached the mound of blankets and gingerly pulled back them back with one finger. She heard a muffled noise coming from the bed. With a fluid motion, she stripped the covers off and jumped back.

“Oh my gosh, Lee.” She gasped as she saw what had been concealed beneath the blanket. He lay immobile on the bed, his arms fastened to his body by a straitjacket. He was vainly attempting to speak through the adhesive tape that covered his mouth. She stood rooted to the spot, her hand covering her mouth, stifling her cry. His muffled cries galvanized her into action. Her momentary shock quickly dispelled, she moved to sit beside him on the bed, but his eyes silently implored her to stop. He carefully moved his head toward her, indicating that she should remove the tape.

She tried to take it off carefully but it was firmly adhered to his skin. His eyes looked at her imploringly. “I’m going to have to pull,” she said, her own eyes mirroring the pain she knew this would inflict. “I’m sorry.”

His eyes silently told her to proceed. She ripped off the tape in one swift motion.

“Ahhhh...” He made a circular motion with his mouth in an attempt to block out the stinging sensation on his lower jaw.

Amanda’s gaze fell on him in sympathy. “Are you all right?”

Lee rolled his eyes. “Do I look all right?”

She instinctively leaned forward to caress him, but his words stopped her short. “Amanda, don’t touch me. And whatever you do, don’t jiggle this bed.” His eyes indicated a small, oblong box resting next to him on the bed. “I’m hooked up to a bomb.”

“A bomb?”

“Yeah, it’s somehow tied into the back of the straitjacket. Too much motion and the device will activate. At least that’s what he said.”

“That’s what who said?”

“The Chameleon. I had an unexpected rendezvous with him earlier tonight. He’s not much of a host.”

“I can see that.” Amanda walked around to the other side of the bed, looking at the device from another angle. Lee was right – he was literally unable to move. It was impossible to remove the straightjacket without triggering the bomb. Likewise, the victim couldn’t get up and walk away. It was an ingenious setup conceived by a truly diabolical mind. It rendered the intended victim entirely helpless.

Lee’s voice interrupted her train of thought. “Amanda, what time is it?”

“You’re lying there attached to a bomb and all you can ask is what time it is?” Amanda stated incredulously. “I think it’s time to phone the bomb squad and get you out of this.”

She quickly crossed the room and accessed the Agency’s priority one emergency number. Lee could hear her murmured tones from his ignominious position on the bed. He closed his eyes, drawing in a deep, shuddering breath, steeling himself to face what he knew he had to do. The sound of her footsteps heralded her return and he felt the gentle touch of her hand on his cheek softly caressing the place where the tape had covered his mouth. The hotel’s alarm system wailed plaintively in the background. He opened his eyes and looked deeply into hers.

The look in his eyes caused her earlier annoyance to evaporate. She smiled down at him. “Hang on, sweetheart, help will be here soon. They’re evacuating the hotel now.” Mindful of his precarious situation, she carefully leaned forward and tenderly brushed her lips to his.

Her lips were soft and warm. Lee wished for nothing more at this moment than to get lost in the feeling of love that washed over him at their touch. “Amanda,” he whispered with emotion, “what time is it?”

She glanced quickly at her watch. “About a quarter to ten.”

“That’s what I was afraid of,” he said, trying to keep his voice even. “The bomb is on some kind of timer. We’ve got about fifteen minutes, more or less, before it goes off. Assuming your watch is accurate.”

Amanda paused, her hand resting on his cheek. “The bomb squad will never get here in time.”

“I know. You’ve got to get out of here.”

She looked him straight in the eye. “Not on your life, Stetson. I’ve already been a widow once this year. Let’s get you out of this thing.”

Lee took a deep breath. “He said you can’t untie the back without moving the box.”

Amanda moved to take another look at the back of the Chameleon’s deadly contraption. Lying on his right side, Lee couldn’t turn over on his back or stomach without triggering the motion sensor. “He’s right, there’s no access to the straps without setting the thing off.” She returned to the opposite side of the bed to face him. “Can we cut this off from the front?”

“With what? You wouldn’t happen to have a handy little Junior Trailblazer knife on you?”

“No, all I have in my purse is a nail clipper.” She thought for a minute. “Let me see what’s in the bathroom.”

Lee took another deep breath, willing himself not to move. His muscles felt cramped from lying in one position for so long and he longed to give into the luxury of rolling over. He could hear her rummaging through the bathroom drawers. “Amanda?”

She quickly returned to the bedroom, her frustration evident in her voice. “There’s nothing in there that we can use. Maybe I could try the rooms down the hall...”

“There’s no time. Besides I’m not even sure we can cut this off. I don’t think this is a regular straitjacket. There’s some kind of wire mesh around the front – it feels like I’m lying on metal.”

Amanda carefully touched the front of the jacket. “You’re right, I can feel something through the material.”

Lee looked deeply into her eyes. “Please, Amanda. Get out of here. I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“And I feel the same way about you.” Her voice shook slightly as she spoke, revealing the depth of her concern at their dilemma. Amanda sighed deeply. After everything they’d been through this past year, she had no

intention of losing Lee now. “If we can’t cut this thing off you or untie it, then we only have one option.”

“No, that’s too dangerous. Just get out of here while you still can.”

“Shut up, Stetson, the clock is ticking here. You’re wasting time we don’t have. Can you tell me how to disarm this thing?”

He hesitated. “If I could see it, maybe. But I can’t turn around.”

“Then I’ll tell you what I see and you can tell me what to do.”

“Amanda, it won’t work.”

“Do you have a better idea? I’m not leaving you here without trying to do something.”

Lee closed his eyes in silent resignation. If the situation was reversed, he knew he wouldn’t leave either. “Okay, okay, you win. We’ll give it a shot. But Amanda, you’ve got to promise me something...if I tell you to leave, you will. No questions asked, no arguments.” He could see the hesitation in her eyes. “I mean it. Promise me. If this doesn’t work, then that will be the only thing you can do for me.”

Amanda nodded at last in silent agreement, her heart reading his beneath the calm façade of his words. She understood how he felt. Almost everything she cared about in this world was tied up on that bed. But if and when it came to that, if Lee needed her to leave, she would.

He looked at her with a bittersweet smile. “Okay. Now you’re going to have to describe everything you see as accurately as possible.”

She nodded once again, suddenly finding herself at a loss for words. With a final caress of his cheek, Amanda circled the bed and knelt on the other side. She could no longer see Lee’s face and she took a deep breath, willing herself to find the courage to do what needed to be done. “Okay. It’s just an oblong box, some kind of metal, I think.”

“That’s good. Do you see any screws or bolts?”

Amanda looked carefully at the seemingly innocuous little box. “Yeah, on each corner. Four screws. The twisty kind.”

Lee groaned at her description. “The ‘twisty kind’? Oh, Amanda...”

“Do I take them off?”

“Very carefully loosen the screws. Just loosen them, but don’t take off the cover.”

Trembling slightly, she slowly complied. “They’re off.”

Lee exhaled loudly. “All right. You’ve got to do exactly what I say. Do you think you can do that?”

“Very funny.”

“Carefully move the plate off at the top, just the top. Do you see any springs?”

Amanda leaned forward almost in slow motion. “No, nothing.”

“Okay, that’s good. Then take off the plate. Be careful - don’t jiggle it. And let’s hope it’s not light activated,” Lee mumbled under his breath.

“Light activated? Now he tells me.” She carefully eased the cover off the box. She stared at the inside in confusion. “Lee, how can you tell if it’s light activated?”

“It’s not.”

“How do you know that?”

“We’re both still here.”

Amanda smiled. “I see your point.”

Lee’s voice was calm and reassuring. “Amanda, you’re doing fine. Now tell me what the insides look like.”

She studied the device for a moment. “There’s some kind of tape running.”

“Don’t touch that,” he warned. “It’s probably connected to the timer. And booby trapped.”

“It looks like there’s a panel in the back.” She strained to get a closer look at the device without actually touching it. “And there are tiny fuses, you know, the same kind Jamie used for his science project last year? He worked so hard on that project and those little tiny fuses were always blowing out. They kept blowing out, I kept replacing them...”

“Amanda, I know what kind you mean. The bomb?”

She raised her eyebrows. “Sorry. It’s just that they look just like those little fuses...Lee, there’s a cylinder on the right with two wires attached.”

“Does it look like you can lift it up?”

“Yes.”

“That’s it...that’s what we’re looking for. Okay, very, very carefully lift the body of the cylinder. What do you see?”

She quickly complied, carefully lifting it off its base. “There’s some kind of little stick. It looks like a tiny cross.”

“Damn, that’s the trembler switch. He really did it...it is motion activated. Whatever you do, don’t shake it. Close the cylinder fast...but carefully.”

“Fast and careful, he says.” She slowly let out her breath. “Okay, done. Now what?”

“You said there were wires?”

“Yes, two.”

“All right. One will deactivate the device.”

“And the other?”

“You don’t want to know.”

She smiled ruefully. “That’s what I was afraid of.”

“You can use your nail clipper to cut the wire.”

She retrieved the clipper from her purse. “I knew this would come in handy.” Taking up her position again, she studied the wires, a worried frown forming on her forehead. “Lee, we have one little problem.”

“Just one?”

“I don’t know which wire to cut. I mean there’s no blue wire.” She paused, staring at the device. “It’s always the blue wire, right?”

“Yeah, I remember.” He could hear the fear reverberating in her voice. “What are the choices?”

“Red with a white stripe or green with a yellow stripe.”

“Red and green? You’ve got to be kidding.”

“Yeah, with a stripe.”

Lee thought for a minute. “Okay, green.”

Amanda silently held her breath, placing the clipper next to the green wire. She braced her wrist with her left hand to still her trembling fingers.

“Amanda?”

“Just a minute. My hand’s shaking.”

Lee took a deep breath, his voice barely audible. “Amanda, you don’t have to do this. Just get out of here.”

“Sorry, can’t do that.” She looked at him strung up helplessly on the bed. Tears began to form in her eyes, but she forced them back. There was no way on earth that she could walk away and leave him like this. Their jobs demanded a lot from both of them, but losing her husband to this cold-blooded killer’s idea of a practical joke was a sacrifice she was not equipped to make. She turned back to the box, determination resounding in her words. “The green wire. You’re sure?”

“I’m sure. Just cut the green wire.”

She gingerly shook her hand, clenching her fingers and willing the tremors to stop. “Lee...”

“What?”

“I love you.”

“I love you, too. Cut the green wire.”

She hesitated for a second and snipped. The mechanism in the box ground to a halt. Her heart still hammering in her chest, she collapsed in exhaustion on the bed.

“Amanda?”

She slowly raised her head at the sound of his voice. “Yeah?”

“You did it. Good job.”

“Thanks, Scarecrow.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

With a nod at the faces smiling out from the crowd, the man escorted the woman to the door. Glancing at his watch, he raised her hand to his lips, kissing the back of it. Then, with a wink, he released her.

“It’s time for you to get going. I’ll finish things here.”

“I think I should stay. I can’t shake the feeling that something’s about to go wrong.”

“No. Right about now this town should be rocking from our explosive interview earlier.”

She shook her head, her eyes narrowing in a frown. “You’re getting careless on this assignment. You should have taken care of business instead of indulging your sense of the dramatic.”

“I suppose so. But what fun is it to win so easily? The element of danger adds something to the game. The idea that he could still outwit me makes it so much more exciting.”

“That’s what worries me. I’m afraid you’ve underestimated your opponent.”

“You saw what happened earlier. Everything’s worked out just as we anticipated.” He smiled as he looked into her eyes. “Don’t worry. I’ll meet you as planned.”

She nodded, looking over her shoulder at him as she silently left the room.

Lee sighed as he rolled over to look at Amanda. She had collapsed on the side of the bed, her head buried in the covers. She looked emotionally spent and on the verge of exhaustion. He smiled at her uncertainly. “Are you okay?”

Amanda looked up slowly. “I think so. You?”

“Yeah. Do you think you can get me out of this?”

She looked at him closely, the beginnings of a smile playing around her lips. “Sure it’s not too dangerous? I was thinking maybe I should wait in the car.”

“Amanda, come on, before the other agents get here. I’ll never live this down.”

“Yeah, I see your point. Kind of an embarrassing position for our Operations Chief to be caught in, isn’t it?”

“This is not the time for this discussion. Get this damn thing off me.”

“I don’t know...seems to me like the perfect time to finish this once and for all. At least you can’t get up and walk away.”

“Amanda...”

“Oh, okay, if you insist. Turn over so I can see what I’m doing.” He rolled on his side while she knelt beside him on the bed, gingerly pushing the metal box out of the way. “How do you get yourself in these situations?”

“This really hasn’t been my day.”

“And you worry about me,” she muttered under her breath. He could hear her soft laughter as she worked away on the knotted lacings of the straightjacket.

“Amanda, I don’t see anything funny about this.”

“I was just thinking - we’re ahead of schedule this year.”

“Ahead of schedule?”

“You know – tomorrow night is Christmas Eve. That’s the night we traditionally do this kind of thing.”

“I was hoping to start a new tradition this year. No life and death situations – just our family. Are you almost done?”

“It’s caught. I never would have been able to get this off without setting off the bomb. This is worse than the ‘kellick hitch’,” she muttered as she impatiently worked at the tiny knots. “Lee, there’s one thing I don’t understand about this.”

“Then you’re doing better than I am. I’m not sure I understand any of it.”

“Why this elaborate set-up with the bomb? If he wanted you out of the way, why not just shoot you?”

“I can’t explain it. He seemed very amused by the whole thing. Maybe he’s Russian and as T.P. would say, he needs the poetry of it all. I’ll be sure to ask him when I catch up with him.” He let out a sign of exasperation. “Are you almost finished?”

“I’m trying. This would be a lot easier if I had a knife.” She pulled one more time and the bindings at last gave way. She quickly undid the jacket’s fastenings and helped Lee extricate himself from the trap. The inside of the straitjacket appeared to be lined with a fine wire mesh. Amanda had never seen anything like it.

Lee stood up stiffly, stretching and rubbing his arms to get some feeling back into them. “It feels good to be able to move.” He glanced down at the remains of the Chameleon’s deathtrap piled in a heap on the bed. Shaking his head, he turned to Amanda who was standing on the other side of the room silently watching him. They faced each other awkwardly, not quite certain how to behave now that the immediate danger was past. Silence hung in the air between them like a heavy curtain hiding them from each other. For a minute Amanda felt as if she had suddenly taken a giant step into the past, back to that

time when they were unsure of each other and too many words were always left unspoken.

As Lee smiled shyly, tentatively holding out his arms, Amanda just as suddenly saw the face of her husband snap securely back into focus and she moved to quickly close the distance between them. Sliding into the familiar safety of Lee's embrace, she clung to him, feeling his breath on her ear, hearing his tenderly whispered words of apology.

"I'm sorry, too," she murmured, looking up and gently brushing his hair off his forehead. "I've felt awful all day, thinking about what I said to you this morning."

"Me, too. I wanted to call you but every time I reached for the phone, someone else needed something." He took a step back, really looking at his wife for the first time. His lips turned up in a smile. "You went to the party tonight?"

Amanda smiled, too. "Yeah. It was an eye-opening experience. Lee, how did you end up at this hotel? And why didn't you at least bring back-up?"

"I got a message to meet you here at six o'clock. And I don't usually bring back-up to hotel rooms with my wife." He began to pace at the recollection. "When I walked in, everything was dark. I went into the bedroom and he must have jumped me from behind. He hit me with something." Lee unconsciously rubbed the tender spot on the back of his head. "When I came to, I was in that damned contraption. I never saw his face - he always stayed behind me. I have no idea where he was headed, only that he's making the hit tonight."

Amanda smiled sadly. "Don't worry. I have a pretty good idea where he is right now and what he looks like. Lee," she paused, considering her next words carefully, "he's at Holstein's party. And he looks exactly like you."

"What are you talking about?"

"When I got to the party tonight, 'you' were already there. You were with..."

"With who?"

"You were with a woman. I caught you together and I saw you kiss her."

Lee walked over and put his arms around her. “Amanda, I wasn’t at that party. I was tied up in this hotel room. Literally.”

Amanda sighed. “I know that. But at the time it looked like...”

“You really think that I would do that to you?” He stepped back from her and his voice took on a slight edge. “You have that little faith in me? In us?”

She looked away, unable to meet his gaze. “At first I thought...but then when I calmed down, I knew something was wrong. That’s how I ended up here. I went to your office and saw this appointment on your calendar. Something seemed wrong, so I came over here to find out for myself.”

“What did you expect to find here?”

Amanda hesitated, seeing the pain of her unspoken accusation in Lee’s eyes. “I don’t know. I was hurt. I...” They both turned their heads at the sound of approaching footsteps in the hall.

“That should be the Agency’s emergency response group,” Lee muttered. “It’s about time.” He took a deep breath. “Amanda, we’ll have to finish this later. I’ve got to get to Holstein’s party and stop the Chameleon. Once and for all.”

“I’m going with you.” She looked him boldly in the eye. “And don’t even think of telling me to go home and wait for you.”

Lee sighed. “I wouldn’t dream of it. Let’s go.”

* * * * *

Amanda followed Lee down the walkway that led to the patio adjacent to the ballroom. The sounds of the party softly filtered out from the windows on the far side of the building. From their vantage point, it appeared that Colonel Holstein was about to begin his speech.

Lee carefully checked the windows on the east side of the room and motioned for her to do the same on the north end. Amanda couldn’t help smiling at the ease with which they fell back into their old partnership. When they were working together, instinct took over, each inexplicably able to predict the other’s next move. Despite the issues that were momentarily clouding their personal relationship, professionally, they were still a formidable team.

Lee nodded in her direction, indicating that the back-up team had taken position. Gun drawn, he came up to stand beside her. “He’s on the other side of the room, near the Colonel. You’re right – he does look like me. It’s creepy – almost like looking in a distorted mirror.”

“Lee, there’s no sign of the woman he was with earlier tonight.”

Lee paused, considering her words. “You think they’re working together?”

“Yes. I mean – it all fits. I think their little performance was staged for my benefit – to throw me off balance.”

“Neutralize the opposition – me at the hotel, you here?”

Amanda nodded. “The way this has been planned, it wouldn’t make sense that he would risk locating some random woman at the party. He’d need to be certain the woman would execute his little scenario at just the right moment.”

“You’re probably right. Could you identify her again if you saw her?”

“I don’t know, I think so. I wasn’t thinking too clearly at the time. Francine may have gotten a better look at her. She’d been at the party all evening. I didn’t arrive until after eight.”

“Okay. Keep your eyes open. I’m going in through those French doors over there. Stay here and...”

“Watch your back,” she finished for him.

“Right.” He paused, looking deeply into her eyes for a moment. “My back couldn’t be in better hands.”

She took a deep breath, returning his look. “Get going, Scarecrow. Let’s catch this guy and go home.”

Amanda watched as Lee made his way around to the doors on the far side of the room. From her position at the window she couldn’t hear what Colonel Holstein was saying, but she could see by his animated gestures that he seemed pleased with his reception. As her eyes quickly scanned the room, she noted that the back-up teams were slowly moving in, drawing the net tighter around their quarry. The Chameleon must have sensed them, too, because he backed

away from Colonel Holstein and melted into the crowd. She saw Lee enter unobtrusively through the back doors and signal to the other teams who began to make their way through the throng of people. But it was nearly impossible to track the Chameleon's progress through the crowd of innocent bystanders and Amanda stood helplessly on the sidelines as the situation rapidly deteriorated.

From her position by the window, Amanda could easily observe the entire room. She shook her head at Lee, who had paused behind Holstein under the staircase that led to the upper level of the multi-tiered room. Amanda swept the perimeter one more time. Suddenly, her eye was caught by a flash of light from the stairway behind Holstein's head. She realized the danger almost before her brain could process the information. The gleam came from the reflection of light on the polished steel of the Chameleon's gun – a gun that was aimed directly at Colonel Holstein's head. She called out to Lee and he caught her eye, instantly recognizing the threat. Without a second's hesitation, he somersaulted forward, rolling onto his back and firing up at the stairs. The Chameleon fell, gun in hand, before he had time to fire a shot. As he rose from the floor, Lee turned and caught her eye, his silent thank you conveyed by his smile.

* * * * *

Amanda stood by the staircase silently observing the team of agents sweeping the area. The party guests had departed hastily when the evening's festivities were brought to an unceremonious conclusion, leaving the room with a dismal morning-after feel to it. She was thankful that Lee hadn't been added to the list of casualties tonight. She shuddered to think what might have happened if she hadn't gone to the Agency and discovered the scribbled note that had led her to suite 553. Forcing herself to dispel these gloomy thoughts, Amanda looked up and saw Lee coming towards her. With a fleeting glance at the Chameleon's body lying on the floor, she quickly moved to meet her husband and together they headed out into the lobby. Francine was standing off to one side engaged in a heated conversation with a representative of the hotel.

The disgruntled gentlemen marched away and Francine shook her head as she greeted Lee and Amanda. "Well, they can't wait for us to get out of here. Tonight's activities certainly won't do anything to increase their bookings. I have a feeling Colonel Holstein's going to have to find a new spot for his next party." She glanced at Lee with a careless smile. "You look like hell, Scarecrow. Are you okay?"

He shrugged. "I've been better. It's not every day that you get to take yourself out like that." He nodded in the general direction of the ballroom.

“It’s amazing the effect he created with a latex mask and make-up. No wonder he’s eluded the authorities for so long.”

Amanda placed a comforting hand on Lee’s arm, recalling the incident a few years ago with woman who’d been surgically altered to resemble her. It was an unnerving experience to see yourself being readied for a body bag. She knew exactly what Lee was going through.

Lee absently patted her hand as he turned to Francine. “There’s no sign of the woman he was with tonight. Did you get a good enough look at her to do a composite?”

Francine shook her head. “No. I was so disgusted with your behavior that I tried not to look at her.”

Amanda sighed. “I’m sure that was the whole idea.” She caught Lee’s eye. “I’ll go check and see if they’ve finished going over the body.”

Lee continued to watch her as she headed over to talk to the team of agents still hard at work in the ballroom. Francine looked at him closely. “Everything okay?”

“I told you, Francine, I’m fine.”

“That’s not what I was asking. I was referring to you and Amanda.”

“That’s fine, too.”

Francine heard the underlying tension in his voice at the mention of Amanda’s name. “You know, Stetson, I’m sure you never thought you’d live to hear me say this, but you’ve got a good thing going with Amanda. Don’t blow it.”

“Why does everybody think I’m going to blow it?” he demanded, his annoyance now clearly apparent. “It was the same thing last year with that whole Elisa Danton business. My friends always seem more than willing to jump to the wrong conclusions.”

“I was referring to the way you’ve been treating her lately at work. But since you mention it, let me point out that you weren’t at the party earlier. You didn’t get treated to the same performance the rest of us did. And with your track record, you can’t blame us for thinking...”

“That’s all in the past. I’ve never given Amanda or anyone else a reason to think otherwise. I happen to love my wife very much.”

Francine could hear the anger and frustration creep into his voice and she felt as if she had placed a somewhat clumsy finger on an open wound. “Hey, I’m sorry, okay? I, for one, can’t tell you how glad I am that I was so far off base tonight. Actually, it’s kind of reassuring.” She hesitated a moment before continuing. “If you can finally feel that way about someone then there might be some hope for me, too.”

Lee nervously ran his hand through his hair and let out a deep breath. Francine could see him visibly relax and he addressed her with the beginnings of a smile. “I’m sure there is, Francine. Just give Jonathan a second chance. Believe me, it’s worth it.”

Francine laughed. “That’s funny - that’s exactly what my new partner said to me just this morning.” Francine nodded in Amanda’s general direction. “It looks like they’re finished with your double in there.”

They both watched as Amanda moved towards them totally absorbed by the contents of the manila envelope she carried. She looked up as she approached the decorative column her husband and her partner were both leaning against. “He didn’t have much on him. No I.D. - just thirty dollars in cash and your car keys.” She grinned as she held up the keys to his precious silver corvette. “Oh, and this.”

He took the envelope from her and opened it. “It’s an airline ticket,” he stated with a smile.

“Exactly. Are you thinking what I am?”

Lee nodded. “We may have just gotten lucky. Let’s see if we can meet up with his lady friend at Dulles.”

* * * * *

The wind chill had dropped to an uncomfortable 10 degrees at Dulles International Airport as light snow began to fall once again. The inclement weather in conjunction with the approaching holiday was wreaking havoc in the terminal. The normally thin crowds had reached an unprecedented level for a Wednesday evening. Lee, Amanda and Francine pushed through the mass of people waiting for their flights as they slowly headed to gate 17C.

“It’s a zoo here tonight,” Francine muttered as a woman came perilously close to stepping on her foot. “Will you look at that?” She angrily thrust her foot forward. “Does she have any idea how much these shoes cost? That woman has no appreciation at all for designer originals.”

Lee and Amanda exchanged a smile as they came to a halt in front of the entrance to a small airport shop. Lee turned to Francine with a grin. “Why don’t you take your designer originals for a walk by the gate and see if you can spot our mystery woman. Just a quick walk through, then come right back here.”

“Okay, boss.”

As Francine disappeared into the crowd, he quickly perused the area, turning to Amanda with a sigh. “This is like looking for a needle in a haystack. She’ll be hard to find in all these people.”

“It looks like there are a bunch of angry travelers over there.” She tilted her head towards the growing group of passengers milling around the ticket counter.

“Well, we did hold up their flight. Everyone’s anxious to get out of here before the holidays. I don’t envy those poor ticket agents.”

Amanda glanced at her watch with a sigh. “It’s after midnight. I guess it’s officially Christmas Eve.”

Lee caught her hand in his. “Then it’s time to wrap this up, go home and get a head start on our brand new holiday tradition.”

“A quiet Christmas Eve with our family? No bullets or bad guys?” Amanda raised her eyebrows in disbelief. “Sounds too good to be true.”

Lee squeezed her hand. “Every year from now on – I promise.”

“I’m gonna hold you to that.” Amanda looked up at him, her eyebrows coming together in a slight frown. “But before we get to it, we do have some unfinished business between us. We need to talk.”

Lee sighed. “I know. Tonight, when we get home. I promise you that, too.” For one brief moment he violated all of his carefully constructed rules as he blocked out the rest of the world and looked deeply into his wife’s eyes. It was a luxury he seldom allowed himself when in the middle of a case. The love that flowed between them was like an electric current, a link so strong it was

almost tangible, and Lee broke the connection with an effort. They had a job to finish, a job in which emotions could play no part and might all too easily get you killed. He used to be able to effectively turn off all his feelings while he was on a case but, since Amanda, that was no longer possible. Now the best he could manage was to keep them at a distance, a beautifully blurred background to the harsh reality of his working world. He looked up as Francine approached and unconsciously dropped Amanda's hand.

"See anything?"

Francine shook her head. "No. Our other agents are in place, though. Maybe she's not here."

"They had to be leaving together," Amanda stated emphatically. "I have a feeling she's here somewhere. The Chameleon didn't have a passport on him and only thirty dollars in cash. If he wasn't meeting her, then how did he plan on getting out of the country?"

"I agree," Lee said, scanning the area one more time. "And I have an idea. If we can't find her, why not let her find us?"

"What do you mean?" Francine asked.

"Earlier tonight they wanted everyone to believe her partner was me," Lee continued. "I think it's time the tables were turned."

Amanda looked at him sharply. "You're going to use yourself as bait?"

"It's the only way to draw her out. Let her think I'm the Chameleon."

Francine nodded thoughtfully. "It could work."

Lee looked at Amanda as he spoke. "It will work."

Amanda turned away, looking over at the shop. Her eyes fell on the flower cart tucked unobtrusively in the corner. "Stay here a minute. If you're going to do this, you might as well do it right."

Lee and Francine watched quizzically as she approached the cart and spoke with the merchant. The man smiled as he handed her a small red rose. Returning with her purchase, she broke off the stem and pinned it on the lapel of Lee's jacket. Smiling, she looked up into his eyes. "All set."

Lee returned her smile, his emotions flickering briefly in his eyes. He felt under his suit coat for his gun, patting it reassuringly as he turned to leave. “Give me a minute to get in place, then blend into the crowd and keep your eyes open.” He turned towards the gate when the sound of Amanda’s voice brought him back.

“Your wedding ring,” she said, indicating the plain gold band on his ring finger. “I just remembered. The Chameleon wasn’t wearing one.”

Lee quickly removed the ring. “Take care of this for me,” he whispered as he placed it in her hand.

“I will.”

Amanda closed her fingers tightly around the ring as she watched Lee head purposefully to a spot just to the left of the ticket counter. His eyes roamed over the crowd as he paced back and forth in a small circle, as if impatiently waiting for someone. Two other agents stood nearby posing as passengers, while another stood behind the counter disguised as a ticket agent. She glanced at Francine who appeared to be observing her with a wistful expression.

“Francine? You okay?”

Francine nodded. “I was just thinking what a good team you and Lee make. Professionally and personally.”

Amanda smiled as she watched Lee move into position. “Francine, you’re full of surprises. Two compliments in one day – what’s gotten into you?”

“I guess it’s the season for miracles,” she quipped. “Let’s wrap this up and get out of here, partner.” They joined the others, disappearing into the crowd, Francine moving to the right while Amanda veered to the left. She skirted the throng of waiting passengers keeping one eye on Lee as she moved slowly through the mass of bodies. She saw him nod almost imperceptibly to the agent behind the counter and then heard the agent announce that the flight was ready for boarding. As the passengers began to queue by the door to the long tunnel that led to the aircraft, Amanda saw a woman with shoulder length blonde hair approach Lee from behind. The woman smiled at him as she leaned forward to inhale the scent of the rose he wore nonchalantly on his lapel.

Amanda was too far away to hear what was being said, but she recognized the now blonde woman as the mysterious dark haired beauty from the party. She searched the crowd for a sign of Francine but she was nowhere to

be seen. She tried unsuccessfully to shoulder her way through the mass of people in an effort to reach Lee. Something in the woman's eyes told Amanda that she was beginning to sense the trap. As Amanda came up on the left, she saw the woman begin to slowly take a step backwards while withdrawing what appeared to be a small hypodermic needle from her purse. Before she could reach the scene, Francine appeared out of nowhere, 'accidentally' bumping the woman from behind. Before the blonde could react, Francine raised her foot and brought the heel of her shoe forcefully down on the suspect's instep, effectively neutralizing her escape. A quick karate chop to her arm caused her to drop the hypo as two other agents moved in, flanking her on either side. It was over almost before it began.

"Good work, Francine," Lee said, as Amanda finally reached them.

Francine smiled at them both and proudly held out her foot. "You see, designer originals, yet functional, too. Never underestimate the power of a really good pair of shoes." She nodded her head at the blonde woman now securely in custody. "Shall we show her to her new accommodations? I'm very late for my date with Jonathan."

CHAPTER NINE

The blonde woman sat despondently in the small cell in the bowels of the Agency. Since her capture at the airport earlier in the evening, she had refused to answer any questions, using her silence as a makeshift shield in a now untenable situation.

She'd had a premonition that something would go wrong all evening. She should have listened to her feelings instead of her partner – her feelings never let her down. She knew they should have eliminated Scarecrow in that hotel room immediately instead of indulging in that ridiculous diversion with the bomb. Now here she was, left alone to pick up the pieces of a treacherous game gone dangerously awry.

The cell door slid open and, startled by the sound, she lifted her eyes. Confronted by the face of the last person she needed or wanted to see, she looked away with a frown. There was nowhere to run, no recourse left her. She knew what had to be done. She turned back to stare at Jack Holstein with a grim smile.

Amanda stifled a yawn as she walked into the family room of her new home. The festively decorated Christmas tree dominating the corner by the fireplace welcomed her in a twinkle of red and green. But the brightly colored

lights did little to lift her spirits and she collapsed on the sofa with a sigh, fighting the feeling of melancholy that suddenly washed over her. She knew it was only a delayed reaction to everything that had happened in the last twenty-four hours, but understanding that didn't make the feelings any less real. She needed a distraction to take her mind off things until she had a chance to talk to Lee.

Her eyes glanced at the stack of videos still sitting on the coffee table. Cary Grant might do it for her mother, she thought with a smile, but he didn't appeal to her tonight in her present frame of mind. Switching on the television, she idly flipped through the channels in search of some suitable holiday fare. But the only thing on appeared to be some movie about prehistoric animals. She absently watched the two dinosaurs fighting for a few minutes, then turned off the set with a grimace. She'd seen that old movie a hundred times. Sighing, she leaned her head back on the couch and closed her eyes.

The silence closed around her, covering her like a comforting blanket. Her busy household was seldom this quiet. With the chaos of the boys' activities, her mother's comings and goings and their hectic work schedules, it seemed that she and Lee never had any time alone anymore. Sometimes she felt like they'd spent more time together, just the two of them, before their relationship became public knowledge. No wonder things had been a little tense lately between them. It was difficult enough adjusting to living together when there were only two people to consider, but add to that the boys, her mother, an ex-husband and the pressures of a new job and the situation became much more complicated.

She hoped that's all that was going on with him. Their new job situation had definitely added to the stress lately. She missed the comfortable intimacy of working with Lee in the Q-Bureau. Ever since this promotion, something had felt a little off-kilter in their relationship. Or maybe she was using his new job as a convenient excuse. Now that she thought about it, maybe the change really dated all the way back to his return from the 'dead'. She'd had a vague impression that something was not quite right ever since their reunion. Perhaps that's why she'd let her insecurities overwhelm her tonight when she'd seen 'Lee' at the party with another woman. Under normal circumstances, she would never entertain the thought that he was cheating on her. She would have chalked up what she'd seen to some kind of peacock dance scenario and waited for an explanation.

She couldn't forget the wounded look in his eyes tonight in the hotel room when he accused her of not trusting him. And she still felt guilty about throwing Leslie in his face this morning. She wished she could take back those

sarcastic words spoken in anger, but she knew it was too late to undo the hurt they'd inflicted. She sighed again. More than anything right now she wished she could take him in her arms and show him how much she loved him.

The clock on the mantle informed her that it was almost 1:30 in the morning. Lee should be home soon. They had both gone their separate ways after the airport, he to the Agency with the Chameleon's accomplice and she to the hotel to retrieve his car. He shouldn't be too much longer, she thought with a smile. Maybe she'd have a nice welcome waiting for him when he came in. She turned off the tree lights and headed upstairs.

* * * * *

Lee mounted the stairs to the bedroom with a weary tread, fighting the overpowering feeling of fatigue that threatened to overtake him. Every muscle in his body ached from his unnerving encounter with the Chameleon earlier tonight and he longed for the pleasant relief of a steaming hot shower. A quick glance at his watch told him it was practically two thirty. No wonder he was so tired. On top of everything that had happened tonight, he hadn't had any real sleep for almost twenty-four hours. Unless you counted the few restless hours snatched last night on the couch. He paused outside the bedroom, his hand on the doorknob. He had promised Amanda that they would talk tonight, but suddenly he couldn't summon the energy. He half hoped that she would already be asleep.

At least his business tonight at the Agency had been concluded much more quickly than he'd anticipated. After seeing the blonde woman safely secured in a holding cell, he'd been surprised to find Colonel Holstein waiting to meet with him. Their conference was as perplexing as it was unexpected. After thanking him profusely for saving his life, Holstein told him he should go on home, that he would personally take charge of the suspect's debriefing. As chief of field operations, Lee knew that responsibility would normally fall to him. He found Holstein's special attention to this case somewhat disconcerting. He had never shown any particular interest before in routine Agency matters. Despite the fact that for all intents and purposes Holstein appeared to be the Chameleon's target, this debriefing was still considered routine. The entire situation seemed a little odd. Maybe his exhaustion was clouding his judgment. Perhaps he should just take Holstein at face value and be thankful he hadn't been tied up at the Agency for hours. God knows he'd been tied up enough for one night.

He opened the bedroom door quietly in an effort not to disturb Amanda. The room was dark, the only light coming from the flickering flames of the

candles burning on either side of the bed. His eyes fell on the sleeping figure of his wife, her face peaceful and calm, seemingly without a worry in the world. Unfortunately, that was far from the truth. More than anything, Lee longed to put an end to the tension that had recently sprung up between them, but he didn't know where to begin. At this moment he couldn't even say where it had come from, only that it seemed to be growing stronger every day.

Evidently she had intended to wait up for him tonight but had been unable to stay awake. Lee's features unconsciously softened as he looked at her and his face was diffused with a warm smile. He couldn't remember when he had seen anything quite as beautiful as Amanda's face illuminated by the soft candlelight. Her slim hands were folded gracefully on top of the covers and his eyes lingered for a moment on the band of gold that gleamed on the third finger of her left hand. He shook his head sadly. He couldn't believe that she would actually think he'd betray the vows he'd made when he placed that ring on her finger.

He stood by the door for a moment, trying vainly to shut off his thoughts. The whole turn of events tonight had left him with a plethora of unanswered questions, both at home and at work. Perhaps things would at least improve at the Agency when Billy returned from New York after the first of the year. He could really use a sounding board for his troubles. Once, he would have turned to Amanda with these problems, but now he was afraid to take the chance. There was no way in hell he would risk putting her harm's way. These days he seemed to find himself involved in more than his fair share of life and death situations. Sometimes it felt like the more he had to lose, the less he was able to control the element of danger inherent in their work.

With a sigh, he looked at Amanda one more time. He couldn't solve these problems tonight. What he needed a shower and some sleep, in that order. Things would be clearer in the morning. He quietly headed into the bathroom.

* * * * *

Amanda was awakened by the sound of water falling somewhere on the fringes of her consciousness. Fighting her way through the layers of sleep, she surfaced slowly, her mind searching for the meaning of the sound. Sitting up, she saw Lee's jacket strewn haphazardly over the arm of the chair. The noise suddenly stopped and Amanda realized with a start that he must have turned off the shower. She softly called to him from the bed.

He stuck his head into the room. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to wake you."

“That’s okay. I didn’t mean to fall asleep.” Amanda smiled at him, trying to shake the cobwebs from her sleep-fogged mind as he came into the bedroom still damp from the shower. She woke up in a hurry as she ran her eyes over him hungrily. She’d never known anyone who could wear a bath towel quite so well. The sound of his voice interrupted her thoughts.

“Amanda?”

“I’m sorry. What?”

“I asked if you had any problems picking up the car?”

She shook her head. “Uh, no, everything was fine.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

She smiled at him and patted the space on the bed next to her.

“I’m still wet,” he mumbled, shaking the moisture from his hair.

Amanda watched in silence as he disappeared into the bathroom again, lying back on the pillows with a puzzled frown. She was still trying to make sense of his bewildering behavior when Lee reappeared a few minutes later, dressed in his pajamas, the top casually unbuttoned. He crossed the room and sat down on his side of the bed with his back to her. She rolled onto her side and scooted over next to him, reaching under his shirt and slowly trailing her hand up and down his spine.

“Lee...”

“Forgot the light.” He stood up abruptly and headed for the bathroom, flipping off the switch with his left hand, his right moving nervously through his slightly damp hair. Crossing the room, he blew out the candle still burning on his nightstand and slowly crawled into bed.

She rolled on her side, leaning on her elbow, her hand supporting her head. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“No problems with our lady friend after the airport?”

“Just the opposite. She’s safely tucked away in a holding cell at the Agency.” The flickering light from the candle still burning on Amanda’s side of the bed cast giant shadows across the ceiling and he rolled onto his back, staring up at the patterns of light and dark. “Holstein wants to supervise this personally. It looks like I won’t even need to go in tomorrow.”

“Really?”

Lee shrugged. “Yeah, and neither do you. He said everyone involved with tonight’s incident should enjoy a long holiday weekend. I guess he’s grateful to be alive.”

Amanda rolled onto her back with a sigh. “If it’s not work then you must still be angry with me.”

An uncomfortable silence sprang up like a translucent barrier between them. Lying side by side in the semi-darkness, Lee was the first to cross it, closing his hand around Amanda’s. “I’m not mad anymore. I guess I’m just a little hurt that you think I would be fooling around with another woman. I can understand it coming from Francine or anyone else. But you...Amanda, I thought we had more trust between us than that.”

She winced at his words as she searched for a way to make him understand. “You have to admit the illusion was remarkable.”

Lee let go of her hand with a sigh. “I don’t care what it looked like. Even if I saw you standing in the middle of DuPont Circle with another man, I still wouldn’t believe it.”

“The way you didn’t believe what you saw in our kitchen the other night?”

“That’s different,” he replied defensively. “And I told you I didn’t think there was anything going on between you and Joe. It’s just that you have this whole history with him...and it makes me crazy when you seem able to confide in him and not me.”

“Lee, I told you a long time ago that I’ll always love Joe. He’s the father of my children and I wouldn’t want to change that even if I could. But our marriage didn’t work for a lot of reasons. You’re my husband and I’m ‘in love’ with you. Believe me, there’s a difference.” She turned over to face him, running her hand tenderly across his cheek. “And your history isn’t easy for me, either.

Remember, for almost three years I was a daily spectator to the steady stream of women parading in and out of your life.”

“You know that’s all in the past.”

“Exactly. But it doesn’t change the fact that sometimes it makes me feel a little insecure. I guess the same way you feel sometimes about Joe, huh?”

He rolled over to look at her, a small smile playing at the corners of his mouth. “Okay, maybe you have a point.”

“I’m sorry about last night and this morning,” she whispered, moving to close the distance between them. “I don’t want to fight anymore. I’d much rather make up.” She reached out to touch him, brushing her fingers across his chest in the way he loved.

He caught her hand in his and brought it to his lips, tenderly kissing her fingers. “It’s not that I don’t appreciate the thought, but I’m really tired. It’s been one hell of a day.”

She pulled her hand away, slightly taken aback by his words. “You’re sure you’re okay?”

He smiled sadly. “Yes. I’ve just got a lot on my mind, that’s all.”

“But nothing that you’d care to share?” she inquired, a slight edge to her voice.

“Not tonight. Please, Amanda, I’m exhausted. I need to get some sleep.” He leaned in and kissed her on the forehead. “Goodnight. I love you,” he murmured before rolling away from her, pulling the covers up around him.

Amanda quickly put out the remaining candle sitting on her nightstand. She closed her eyes and settled back against the pillows with a sigh, the rise and fall of Lee’s breathing lulling her to sleep in the cloying darkness.

CHAPTER TEN

The woman paced nervously in the small confines of the holding cell. Time was running out. He would be back very soon and she needed to make a decision. She really had no options left - she’d known that as soon as she’d seen his face last night in her cell.

As soon as she'd realized whose hands held the strings, she knew the dance would be a short one.

She'd understood from the start that it could always come to this. It was part and parcel of the world she chose to work in. Her partner always enjoyed living on the edge and she'd come to appreciate it with him over the years. The thrill of the chase became the driving force in their lives.

But someone always paid the price. This time it just happened to be her turn. She heard the noise at the far end of the hall, footsteps heralding his return. No time left at all. She reached for the small capsule he'd left for her on the table, swallowing it with a bitter smile.

Amanda woke to the sounds of Lee's nightmare. Covered in a cold sweat and moaning incoherently, he was engaged in a battle with some invisible force that only he could see. From the looks of things, he had been dreaming for some time, the covers twisted into a tight ball at his feet. Amanda wondered why his thrashing hadn't disturbed her earlier. She must have been in a deep sleep.

She softly called out, trying not to startle him. "Lee, wake up. You're having a bad dream." When he didn't respond, she leaned over and gently shook him. Without warning, he rolled over, pinning her to the bed in one quick move. He was breathing heavily and for a moment his eyes had a faraway look in them. Suddenly, she saw recognition creep back into his face and he whispered her name almost like a prayer.

Just as quickly, he released her and rolled away, his breath coming in great heaving gasps. Amanda put her hand on his back, rubbing gently back and forth while she waited for his breathing to return to normal. As she felt him relax, she rolled closer to him, putting her arms around him and fitting herself tightly against his back. He reached for her hand, slowly entwining her fingers with his.

She pressed herself closer to him. "That must have been some nightmare," she murmured tenderly, her body seeking the familiar comfort of his flesh. She felt him tense in response and begin to pull away. She held on tighter, refusing to allow him to put any more distance between them. "Lee, please talk to me."

He rolled toward her with a sigh and she scooted over to give him some room. "I just need a minute and I'll be okay." He suddenly noticed the pained expression on her face. "I didn't hurt you, did I?"

She quickly shook her head. “No. I’m just worried about you, that’s all.” As she continued to rub his arm comfortingly, she was struck by a sudden thought. “This isn’t the first time this has happened, is it?”

“No,” he admitted reluctantly.

“Just how long has this been going on?”

He sighed deeply, knowing it was futile to try to deny the truth. “Ever since my ‘debriefing’ by the Phoenix Group.”

She raised herself up on her arm and looked him straight in the eye. “And why haven’t you told me about it?”

He studiously avoided her gaze, looking like a small boy who’d been caught with his hand in the cookie jar. “I knew you’d worry. I thought you’d been through enough.”

“Damn it, Lee. How can I make you understand that you don’t need to protect me? Especially where you’re concerned?”

The look on her face made him squirm and he turned away, unable to meet her eye. “I thought I could handle it on my own.”

She sank back down on the bed, her eye glancing at the clock on the nightstand, its bold numerals reading 8:25 a.m. It was still early, Amanda thought with a sigh. She turned to face Lee once more. “Can you tell me what your nightmare’s about?”

“It’s always the same thing. I’m back in that damned hellhole of a cellar being questioned by Mason. Except this time I can’t get away. This time I can’t stop him and I end up betraying you, too.”

“And then?”

“Nothing much. At that point I usually manage to wake myself up in a cold sweat and lie around waiting for morning.”

She shook her head in disbelief. “I can’t believe I’ve never heard you before.”

Lee smiled. "Amanda, since everything that happened last fall, you've been an unusually sound sleeper. It takes a lot to wake you up. And the nightmares haven't all been this bad. This just happened to be a pretty violent one. Probably everything that happened last night with the Chameleon brought it all back again."

She looked at him with concern, still not convinced. "Maybe you should talk to Dr. Pfaff about this."

"No way. I prefer to shrink my own head, thank you."

"But you need to talk to someone about what's bothering you. It's not healthy to keep all this bottled up inside."

"I thought that's what I was doing right now."

"So this is what you've been keeping from me all this time?"

He nodded guiltily. "I hoped I could deal with it and you wouldn't have to know. I thought we deserved the chance to be happy without all this baggage getting in the way."

"But Lee, don't you see, it has gotten in the way. All these tense, stupid little arguments we've been having lately...I've known for a while that something was not quite right between us. I just couldn't figure out what it was." She moved closer, forcing him to look at her. "You can't tell me that you haven't felt it, too."

He sighed in resignation. "I have. But I just didn't know how to make it okay again without burdening you with this."

"Marriage is supposed to be about sharing things, Lee - the good and the bad. I don't remember any part of the wedding vows that talk about shielding your partner from the bad stuff. It's been more of a burden trying to figure out what was wrong." She paused for a minute before continuing. "I guess that's part of the reason I was so quick to jump to the wrong conclusion last night."

"It's okay. I guess I haven't exactly been thinking too clearly myself lately." He paused for a minute searching for the right words. "I'm sorry for the way things have been at work. I know I haven't been exactly fair to you."

She raised her eyebrows. "'Exactly fair'?"

“Okay, I admit I have been assigning you to the ‘soft’ cases on purpose. You were right about that, but only partially. I know how hard you’ve worked and how far you’ve come.”

“Then why don’t you think I can handle myself?”

“I do think you can handle yourself. You’ve always had great instincts. After all, they brought you to that hotel last night. It’s just that I knew how to deal with you as your partner...I’m having a harder time doing it as your chief.”

“But Lee...what’s really changed? You’ve always been the senior agent, so technically you were always the boss.”

“Yes, but we still worked as a team. When I was with you, I could always watch your back just like you watched mine. It’s so much more complicated now.”

“Because you’re not there.”

“Yes. But it’s still my responsibility. I feel accountable for all the agents in the field, but more so with you. If anything happened to you on an assignment I sent you out on, I’d never be able to forgive myself.”

“But field agents choose to accept that risk. You’re not forcing any of us to do the job. You never felt that way about Billy when you were in the field.”

“I know, but I’m beginning to wonder how he dealt with the stress.” He grinned, remembering. “I must have given him quite a few migraines.”

She smiled. “I guess what goes around comes around. But to be fair, Billy never had to deal with his wife at work. I do realize it complicates things. At least now I understand why you were tailing me on a routine surveillance the other day.”

“I’m sorry about that. I couldn’t stop myself. I know it drives you crazy, but I can’t help worrying about you. After it took us so long to get to this point, I don’t think I could stand it if anything happened to you now.”

“I’m not in any danger, I’m right here. And I have no intention of taking any unnecessary risks. I don’t want to lose what we have, either. We’ve got to find a way to deal with this situation.”

He rolled over on his side and reached out to tenderly caress her face. “So much can go wrong in this line of work. I’ve experienced that up close and personal these past few months. And if I can’t even keep myself out of danger, then how can I protect you?”

“You’ve got to stop obsessing about this and trust that I can take care of myself. I understand that you worry about me. I feel the same way about you. But it’s not your job to protect me. Just like it wasn’t your job to protect your partner from taking that bullet for you. Or your father’s job to protect your mother from Thomas Blackthorne.”

She reached out to gently rub his arm. “Lee, you’re not omnipotent. You can’t control everything. You forget that people have a free will. Sometimes, no matter what, bad things just happen and it’s nobody’s fault. But you can’t stop living. That way, you miss all the good things, too.”

“I know. I just didn’t realize it would be so hard.”

“Anything worthwhile is rarely easy.”

“I know. I used to think that if I had never given you that package and dragged you into this crazy business...

“What, that I’d be unhappily married to Dean and dying of boredom in the suburbs?”

They both looked at each other for a moment, then laughed softly in unison. The tension suddenly broken, Amanda reached out to place a tentative hand on his chest. “I know what you’re trying to say. But it all boils down to free will again. Don’t forget, I had a choice in the matter, too.”

She leaned over to kiss him, tenderly looking in his eyes. “If I hadn’t taken that package from you, just look what we would have missed. I mean, Christmas Eve in a cabin surrounded by Russians, spending the night tied to that chair together in Germany, almost kissing in a swamp...not to mention all those shared dinners at Emelio’s and working side by side with you for almost five years.”

Her hand moved sensuously over his chest as she spoke, her fingers sending shivers up his spine. This time he didn’t push her away as he had last night. “I wouldn’t trade it for anything in the world,” she whispered with a smile.

“I guess you’re right,” he answered, his voice low and inviting, the sparkle gradually returning to his eyes. “I certainly wouldn’t have wanted to miss this.” He pulled her closer, his lips closing on hers again, returning her earlier kiss with a little more passion. “Or this.” He kissed his way from her mouth to her ear, nibbling lightly on the lobe. “And certainly not this.” His hand moved to the thin strap of her nightgown, pulling it slowly down her shoulder, his lips following the path his hand had gently traced. He paused in his journey to look searchingly into her eyes, finding there the reassurance he needed.

She met his gaze with equal candor. Mouthing the words “I love you,” she slowly reached out to him, her hand sliding up his chest in a tender caress. Grasping him behind the neck, she pulled him to her, her lips parting as she kissed him possessively. As she felt his tongue against hers, she knew that he had forgiven her for doubting him last night.

She pushed him over on his back, her mouth still locked on his. Her hands trailed down his chest underneath his unbuttoned pajama top, pushing it quickly out of the way. She needed to feel him and touch him the way she’d wanted to last night, to let him know how much she loved him and how much a part of her he’d become in the ten short months that they’d been married. It was as if expressing her love for him physically at this moment completed their emotional reconnection.

“Roll over,” she whispered, turning him so that he lay on his stomach, pulling his pajama top off and carelessly tossing it to one side. She quickly straddled him, sitting lightly on his hips as she began to knead his muscles. She started at the neck and moved sensuously lower, down his back and then along each arm, feeling the remaining tension slowly drain out of his body.

He murmured his pleasure indistinctly against the pillows. Her hands felt incredible on his sore muscles. He was content for the moment to just lie there, lost in the sensation of her fingers against his skin. A huge burden had been lifted from him by confiding in Amanda. It was something that was long overdue. If only he’d done it earlier, they might have both been spared some of the misunderstandings of the past few months.

His thoughts drifted to the events of last night, remembering how good it had felt to work with her again. But she was right - together they would have to find a way to forge a new working relationship, even if it meant he had to let go. He offered up a silent thank you to whatever fates had spared him yet again last night and given them another chance to get it right. As her hands moved sensuously down his back, he sighed, shutting off his thoughts and giving himself up completely to her touch.

Amanda echoed his sigh as she slowly traced a path down his spine. Scooting herself further down on his legs, she slipped her hands tantalizingly beneath the waistband of his pajama bottoms, pulling his remaining clothing down over his hips. She watched as he raised himself slightly to facilitate the process, sighing his approval as her fingers brushed lightly over him. She began to work the same magic on his legs and thighs, her hands kneading the muscles as she progressed toward his buttocks.

Lee began to squirm beneath her hands as her massage became more and more intimate. Unable to lie back passively any longer, he quickly rolled over, reclaiming the initiative. He ran his hands possessively over her calves and the outside of her thighs, pulling her nightgown up as his hands moved higher. He was somewhat surprised to discover that she was wearing nothing beneath it. Boy, he thought with a smile, I really put a damper on her plans for last night.

He was still smiling as he watched her remove her nightgown, lifting it up and over her head in a fluid motion. He pushed her gently back down onto the bed, lying beside her and supporting his weight on one elbow. He leaned in to tenderly kiss her eyelids and her lips, then moved down to take her breasts into his mouth, first one and then the other. His tongue played slowly over her nipples while his hand stroked the sensitive skin between her thighs. He heard her moan in pleasure, a melodic sound that he found highly erotic.

Amanda lay back against the pillows, her eyes tightly closed, letting the waves of sensation build within her. She felt herself melting against him, floating almost as if in a dream, whole and strong again. Above all, she felt connected once more to the man who had filled her life and her heart as they stood before the judge last February. She reached out to touch him, no longer content to receive pleasure, but needing to give it as well. They made love slowly and completely, tasting each other, laughing softly as the past and present merged once again, the underlying tension that had been woven into the fabric of their lives ripped out by the joy of rediscovery.

Afterwards, they lay tightly entwined in each other's arms, contentedly drifting back to sleep. Amanda suddenly rolled away from him, straining to grasp something that was just out of reach on her nightstand.

"What's the matter?" Lee asked sleepily, reaching out to pull her close again.

“I just remembered,” Amanda answered, settling back comfortably into his arms. “I have something that belongs to you.” She opened her hand and held out his wedding ring.

Smiling, he held out his left hand.

Amanda took his hand in hers, pausing before she pushed the ring back on his finger. “No more secrets? Not even for my own good?”

“No more secrets. I promise.” He smiled as she placed the ring back where it belonged. Pulling her close, he relaxed against the pillows, shutting his eyes as he succumbed to the sleep his body so desperately needed. Amanda’s voice pulled him back to consciousness once again.

“Lee,” she whispered softly into his chest, snuggling closer against him. “As long as we’re going to be completely honest from now on, I have a confession to make.”

He raised his head up slightly, a frown beginning to form between his eyes. “What?”

“Remember last night, in the hotel...when you were telling me how to disarm the bomb, you told me to do exactly as you said...”

“Yes?”

“I didn’t.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I didn’t cut the green wire. I cut the red one.”

“Oh, Amanda,” he sighed, laying back and pulling her even closer, kissing the top of her head. “I guess this is one more time I should be grateful that you never listen to me.”

She smiled as she closed her eyes, tightening her arms around him as they slept.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The young agent grumbled as he looked at his watch. Only a few more hours on his shift and his relief would be here. At least he hadn't drawn Christmas duty, he thought gratefully. Thank heaven for small favors.

It was past time to begin his routine sweep of the agency's holding cells. Used primarily for defecting agents awaiting debriefing, political prisoners and agents involved in in-house investigations, these cells rarely housed the type of guest who was currently ensconced there. In fact, if it hadn't been for the holiday, he thought ruefully, she probably would have been transferred to a separate area by now and he wouldn't have to bother with this.

Sighing, he glanced at his watch one more time. He should have taken care of this an hour ago. Instead, he'd flirted with that cute little secretary from steno who was transcribing Colonel Holstein's latest session with their prisoner. This must be pretty important for the new head of the agency to be involved personally. His mouth turned up in a smile. On second thought, it might have been a stroke of luck after all to have drawn this holiday duty. Agents at his level usually never came to the attention of the big boss.

He approached her cell, quietly glancing in at her. At first glance, she appeared to be sleeping and he almost turned to leave. He suddenly remembered the agency rule requiring verbal verification and turned back.

"Ma'am?" he called softly.

There was no response from the cell. Something didn't add up. Great, and on his watch, too. This certainly wasn't the type of attention he'd been looking for. Sighing, he quickly ran over his mental checklist. Never enter a prisoner's cell without back-up, he recited automatically. His hand on the buzzer, he swiftly sounded the alarm.

Lee stood on the threshold of the room surreptitiously watching his wife. She was wearing that pink satin robe that he loved, its white floral design a pale contrast to the darker strands of her hair that had somehow managed to escape from their clip. He couldn't remember when he'd ever seen her look more beautiful, he thought with a smile, swiftly closing the distance between them and coming up silently behind her.

She jumped as she felt Lee's strong arms wrap themselves around her waist, pulling her against him. "Oh, my gosh, Lee. You scared me. Next time make more noise or something."

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you,” he said, nuzzling the back of her neck. “I need to practice my infiltration skills somewhere...I wouldn’t want to lose my touch.”

Amanda relaxed against him, pulling his arms tighter around her. “Trust me, you haven’t lost your touch.”

“Thank you,” he said with a smile, kissing her neck on his way to her shoulder. He looked at the small recipe card resting on the counter. “What are you doing?”

“I’m trying to decipher my mother’s stuffing recipe for the Christmas goose. But I can’t seem to make this out. She may have a future in crypto.”

“Please, two agents in this family are more than enough.” He looked around. “Can’t you ask her? Where is your mother?”

“She called a little while ago to say she was still at the airport. Aunt Lillian’s flight has been delayed because of the weather.” She nodded towards the window at the snow that was falling steadily. “She’ll probably be a few more hours. She asked me to finish the stuffing. I’ve got to get this in the oven or dinner’s going to be really late. It’s almost four o’clock.”

“I didn’t realize I’d slept that long,” he said, smothering a yawn.

She turned to give him a quick kiss. “You needed it. You didn’t even budge when I got up.”

“Mmmm,” he said, pulling her closer and kissing her again. “You taste like chocolate.”

“I made a pot earlier. I think there’s still some left if you want a cup.”

“Thanks, I think I will.” He reached into the cupboard for a mug, filling it from the hot chocolate pot that sat on the counter. “What time are Joe and Carrie supposed to get here with the boys?”

“I think they were stopping at her parents this afternoon. They’re coming here after – a little before six, I think. So I’ve really got to get this in the oven.”

“Can I help?”

She turned to him with a grin. “You want to cook a goose?”

“I can cook. I even have a couple of Christmas specialties.”

“I know, but Mother’s recipe doesn’t call for guacamole in the stuffing.”

“Speaking of guacamole, do we have any of that? I’m starving.”

“Guacamole and hot chocolate? Lee, that’s disgusting. Here, have a Christmas cookie instead.” She broke a piece off a frosted snowman cookie and popped it into his mouth.

“That’s good,” he grinned, licking the frosting off her fingers.

She retrieved her hand, kissing him quickly on the lips. “Don’t distract me. We’re having company for dinner and I’ve got to give the goose my full attention right now. And then we both should get dressed.”

“You think they might wonder what we’re still doing in our robes, huh? Not to mention why we look so ‘satisfied’,” he said with a wicked smile, ignoring her look as he grabbed another cookie to munch on. “Okay, I guess we’d better cook. What can I do?”

“Do you think you can handle dessert?”

“When I was growing up, Barney used to always let me help him with Christmas dinner in the mess hall. I’ll have you know I can whip up dessert for four hundred at a moment’s notice.”

“Oh, yeah? Well, I’ll settle for dessert for eight. Could you take mother’s pumpkin pie out of the oven so I can get this goose in it?”

“Consider it done.” Locating a potholder, he quickly removed the pie from the oven, setting it on the stove to cool. “Your mother only made one pie? What’s gotten into her?”

“You should know mother better than that by now. Her special strawberry pie is already in the refrigerator. She only has to put the whipped cream topping on it when she gets home. I have orders not to fool with it.”

“No clearance for that, huh?” he teased, sipping gingerly from his mug to test the temperature of the hot chocolate. “Amanda, do we have any marshmallows?”

“If we do, they’d be in the cupboard, “ Amanda called as she quickly washed her hands. “But I think the boys used the last of them the other day.”

“Which cupboard?” Lee asked, opening the doors over the sink.

“The other one.”

“This one?”

“Gee, don’t you live here, too?” Amanda murmured in aggravation, absorbed with the stuffing. “They’re where we always keep them – in the cupboard by the stove,” She squinted at her mother’s recipe again, trying to decide whether she’d written two teaspoons of sage or two tablespoons.

“I don’t see any.”

“Then we must be all out,” she sighed, frustration creeping into her voice. “Why don’t you use some whipped cream?”

“That’ll work.”

Amanda turned her attention back to the goose. She could hear Lee muttering to himself as he rummaged through the refrigerator.

“Amanda, I can’t find any whipped cream, either. Are you sure it’s in here?”

“Yes. Mother made a point of telling me she bought a can for the pies. It’s in there. Why don’t you just infiltrate the refrigerator and find it?”

“Very funny. Oh, here it is, way in the back.” Retrieving the can of whipped cream, he set it down on the counter with a bang. “I didn’t think your mother was the whipped-cream-in-a-can type. I always pictured her as a make-it-from-scratch sort of person.”

“Well, something had to give when she started taking those flying lessons,” Amanda laughed. “Just don’t use too much. She told me at least three times that she needs it for the pies.”

“Don’t worry, I just want a taste.”

“Okay, I give up trying to read this recipe,” Amanda complained. “I’m going to have to wing it. I hope this dinner isn’t a disaster. It’s been a while since I’ve cooked on Christmas Eve.”

“I don’t know, I seem to recall your whipping up some pretty tasty beans a few years ago.”

“Well, if I don’t get this on soon, that’s what we’ll all be eating again this year. And I know how much you love them.” She began to pack the goose loosely with the bread stuffing. Concentrating on her task, it took a few minutes for the noises coming from the other side of the room to register. She turned to see Lee struggling with the can, knocking it against the counter in frustration.

“Don’t tell me that someone with an expert rating in small weapons can’t figure out how to operate a can of whipped cream?” She couldn’t keep the laughter out of her voice.

“Nothing’s coming out. I think it’s broken.”

Amanda sighed. “Here, let me see.” She came up next to him and reached for the can.

Lee pulled it back out of her grasp. “It’s okay, I’ve got it…”

She grabbed for the can again. “Let me look at it, I’m sure I can fix it.”

“No, I can do it. Go take care of the goose.” He turned away and fiddled with the top.

“It’s no trouble.” Amanda reached her hand around him in an attempt to pull the can away from him, but he held on stubbornly.

“Amanda…”

As they struggled for the can, her finger accidentally hit the nozzle. There was a slight hesitation and a hiss of air, then the can sputtered and suddenly exploded, spewing whipped cream all over the ceiling and Lee’s face.

“I’m sorry,” Amanda said, holding the can he’d finally released and trying without much success to stifle her laugh. “I guess it’s working now.”

Lee stood rooted to the spot, whipped cream dripping from his nose. “Uh - huh.” He nodded his head, a playful grin forming on his face.

Seeing the expression on his face, she shot him a warning look. “Lee, come on, I’ve got to get dinner on.”

When he didn’t reply, she began to back away. “I didn’t mean to do it, it was an accident. You did say you wanted a taste.”

“Would you like one, too?” He laughed softly as he advanced menacingly towards her.

“You wouldn’t,” she said, inching still further away from him.

He continued to smile as he moved deliberately closer.

“You would, wouldn’t you?” She suddenly realized that he had literally backed her into a corner as she felt the hard wall behind her. “Don’t come any closer,” she threatened, holding her the can of whipped cream defensively.

“What are you going to do about it?” Lee asked, laughing.

Amanda raised her can of whipped cream, her finger on the trigger. “Stay right there, or I’ll shoot.”

“That doesn’t scare me, Amanda, I’ve seen you shoot.”

“My aim has improved.”

Lee laughed he as quickly closed the distance between them. As Amanda reflexively shot the creamy substance at him, he quickly caught her hand, turning the can instead towards her, forcing her to cover herself with whipped cream. In another quick move, he had effectively disarmed her, pinning her against the wall with a grin.

“What are they teaching in those agent candidate classes these days?” he demanded teasingly, pressing closer against her. “Don’t you know that the first rule in hand to hand combat is to never allow a larger opponent to get the upper hand?”

Holding her arms over her head against the wall with one hand, he raised the can of whipped cream, aiming it at her face with a smile. “Tell me, Mrs. Stetson, just what maneuvers would you use to get yourself out of this situation?”

They were standing almost on top of each other. Amanda returned his smile, lifting up her head to slowly lick the remnants of the whipped cream from his face. "I don't know," she whispered softly, her face against his. "You're still the senior agent. What would you suggest?"

"I see a number of options," he teased, moving in closer to reciprocate, quickly licking the creamy substance from her cheeks. He closed his mouth around a glob of whipped cream by her ear, nibbling at the lobe in the process. "I've found in these situations, it's always best to take the enemy by surprise."

He aimed his can of whipped cream at her, swiftly drawing a line from her neck to her chest, stopping just above the opening of her robe. He covered the area liberally with the sugary substance. Dropping the can to the floor, he pressed his lips to her chest, slowly working his way back up to her lips and lightly tracing them with his tongue. "What do you think?"

"Good maneuver, Scarecrow. But in close quarters like this, you can always bring up your leg in a lifting motion." She grinned, slowly stroking her knee up the inside of his leg underneath his robe. She smiled as she felt his body's reaction and continued to rub against him. "That's usually a pretty effective move."

He nodded, releasing her hands and capturing her lips with his. Leaning against him, she opened her mouth and deepened the kiss, turning in his arms so that their positions were reversed. Pushing him against the wall, she opened the folds of his robe, slowly kissing her way down his chest. Bending down on one knee, she reached inside his boxers and closed her left hand around his shaft, slowly stroking him, distracting him with her expert caress. With her free hand, she felt around on the floor, searching for the can of whipped cream he'd discarded. Securing it in her grasp, she removed her hand from his shorts, running it slowly back up his chest, the can hidden behind her back.

Kissing his lips lightly, she leaned forward to whisper in his ear. "You see, just a few quick moves and I'm armed again." She pointed the can at his chest with a smile. "And now you're entirely at my mercy. Give up?"

He looked her in the eye and flashed her his most seductive smile. "Depends on what you plan to do with that can if I don't?"

"I'd be forced to discharge my weapon," she grinned, freely decorating his chest from the hollow of his throat to the waistband of his boxers. Dropping the can, she put both hands on his shoulders, pushing him firmly back against

the wall. Beginning at his throat, she kissed and licked her way downward, her tongue slipping softly over his smooth chest, lingering on his waist.

Kneeling on the floor, she looked up at him, noting the look of delight on his face with a smile. "I think this situation calls for a more intensive debriefing," she whispered. "Just to be sure I have you where I want you."

She reached up and pulled down his boxers in one quick motion, while her other hand reached for the can of whipped cream, firmly shaking it. Before he could react, she covered his swollen penis with the airy confection. Beginning at the base, she languidly moved upward, removing the whipped cream, feeling him stiffen further at her touch. She lingered at the tip, caressing it with her tongue, before taking him slowly into her mouth.

Lee groaned in response, almost drowning in the sensations she created with her mouth and tongue. Ten months of marriage and he was still discovering new sides to her. In the state she'd reduced him to, he couldn't stand much more of this.

Drawing a ragged breath, he called her name, reluctantly pulling away, needing to touch her as well as be touched. Still breathing heavily, he knelt down beside her, his hands resting on her hips. He leaned forward to kiss her possessively, his fingers moving to deftly untie the belt of her robe. Breaking the kiss, he quickly removed his own robe, spreading it out on the floor. Smiling, he watched as Amanda echoed his movements, adding her own garment to the pile.

He lay down on the soft terrycloth, kicking his boxers off his ankles. His eyes roamed hungrily over Amanda's body as she, too, discarded her panties and stretched out beside him with a look of expectation, shutting her eyes with a sigh. Reading her unspoken cue, he kissed her closed eyelids, then moved downward, following the curve of her cheek and the slender lines of her delicate throat. He felt the softness of her breasts against the rougher skin of his own cheeks as he buried his face in her flesh. He took first one nipple into his mouth and then the other, feeling them grow hard beneath his tongue.

Slowly, slowly, his lips moved lower along the silken lines of her body, down over her belly, feeling her writhe beneath his mouth. He felt her hands in his hair as she opened her legs wider and pushed him lower, her moans urging him on. He slipped his hands underneath her, tilting her hips slightly as he took her with his lips and tongue, exciting her still further. He heard Amanda cry out his name, her body beginning to contract beneath his touch. Raising his head, he saw her need written plainly on her face, a perfect reflection of his own. Without

hesitation, he moved upward, quickly guiding himself into her. They were already both so close to the edge that he knew this wouldn't take long. They instantly found their rhythm, Amanda moving her hips to meet him at each thrust of his body. Almost immediately, he felt her let go, crying his name again as her body shuddered beneath his. He closed his eyes and moved quickly to his own release, groaning at the waves of pleasure that flowed through him in widening circles.

Spent, he collapsed beside her on the floor, rolling slightly and pulling her on top of him. They lay together, holding each other as their breathing returned to normal.

"Amanda," he whispered, kissing the top of her head and pulling her closer to him, "that was..."

Smiling, she raised her head from his chest, looking into his hazel eyes. "I know..."

"You never cease to amaze me."

"And that's a good thing?"

"Most definitely. I think you've just redefined the word dessert."

"Lee..." She sat up suddenly, grabbing her robe.

"What?" He propped himself up on his elbows, watching her search for something on the floor. His eyes roamed appreciatively over her as she frantically crawled around, her robe draped provocatively over her, half-on and half-off. He pursed his lips in an admiring whistle.

Ignoring him, her hands closed on the forgotten can of whipped cream. Shaking it, she tentatively tried the nozzle, hearing only the empty hiss of air. She looked at him with dismay. "There's no whipped cream left."

Lee smiled. "That's okay. I don't think I'd survive another encounter with the stuff."

"I'm referring to my mother's pies," she hissed, pulling her robe around her. She looked at the clock in alarm. "Great - the store closed ten minutes ago. And we're having company in a little over an hour. At this rate we won't be eating until ten o'clock. What are we going to tell everyone?"

Lee looked at her with a grin. “We could always explain that while we were working on some new field maneuvers, there was an unavoidable explosion.”

“I’m not laughing, Stetson.”

“Okay. I can see this situation calls for teamwork. You concentrate on the goose and I’ll clean up this mess,” he said, grabbing his robe and laughing at the remnants of the whipped cream battle on the walls and ceiling.

“And just what do you propose to feed our guests until dinner is finally ready?”

Lee smiled. “Don’t worry, I’ll think of something.”

* * * * *

“Lee, are there any more chips and guacamole?” Philip asked, coming into the kitchen with the empty bowl.

“Right here.” Smiling, he replenished the supply. “How’s it going out there?”

Philip rolled his eyes. “Aunt Lillian is telling another one of her stories.”

“That’s typical,” Dotty said with a scowl. “As if we’ve hadn’t heard them all a million times.”

“Now mother,” Amanda said, smiling at her husband and son. “You know you love Aunt Lillian. And it wouldn’t be Christmas without her stories.”

Dotty sighed. “I know. It’s just that I was trapped at the airport all afternoon...okay, let’s see if we can whip up a few more h’ors d’evres.” She joined Amanda at the counter and began to efficiently cut the carrots into sticks. Her knife poised in mid-air, she paused to stare quizzically at a spot on the wall. “Amanda, what is that on the wall?”

Amanda followed her mother’s gaze to the blob of whipped cream that had somehow eluded Lee’s clean-up efforts. “Gosh, mother, I don’t know,” she replied innocently. “You know, it’s probably paste from the new wallpaper. I thought Lee was going to clean that up,” she added, shooting him an exasperated look.

He flashed her his most charming smile. "I'm sorry, I must have missed that spot. I thought I'd gotten all that paste off the wall."

Dotty raised her eyebrow skeptically. "Amanda, what did you say happened to this goose?"

"Come on, chief, let's take this stuff into the other room and hear the end of Aunt Lillian's story," Lee choked out, ushering Philip into the next room and trying to stifle his laughter.

"Coward," Amanda muttered under her breath as they beat a hasty retreat. She turned to face her mother. "There was a problem with the oven, but Lee fixed it."

"Uh-huh," her mother replied, her eyes plainly showing that she didn't believe a word of it. "I'll bet he did."

"Mo-ther." Amanda was spared further interrogation by the ringing of the telephone. "I'd better get that."

"Uh-huh," Dotty repeated, watching her pick up the telephone with a grin.

Amanda smiled weakly at her mother as she reached for the receiver, turning her attention to the caller. "Oh, Merry Christmas to you, too, sir...no, you're not interrupting dinner at all..." Amanda glanced away, avoiding her mother's knowing gaze. "Just a minute." She stuck her head in the other room. "Lee, telephone...it's Billy."

Lee shot her a quizzical look as she handed him the phone. She shrugged in response, indicating that she didn't know what Billy wanted.

"Billy? When did you get...no they didn't...I had no idea. When did this happen?"

Amanda watched with a worried expression as Lee concluded his conversation. She could tell from his body language that the news wasn't good. And it had almost been a perfect Christmas Eve.

"Damn it," he murmured, hanging up the phone and coming up beside her.

"Problems?" It was more of a statement than a question.

He glanced over her head at Dotty who appeared to still be absorbed with the underdone dinner. “Our lady friend from the airport was found dead a few hours ago. It looks like suicide.”

Amanda looked at him skeptically. “Suicide in an agency holding cell? Is that possible?”

“You wouldn’t think so, would you?”

“And they didn’t bother to inform you?”

“Holstein took care of it.” Lee looked at her, shaking his head. “Billy only found out because he came in from New York earlier than expected and stopped by the Agency on his way home from the airport. They’re chalking it up to a bureaucratic snafu.”

“But you don’t think so...”

“I don’t know what to think.”

“Do you want to head down there?”

“No, there’s no point. Not much can be accomplished on Christmas Eve anyway. Billy and I agreed to wait for the final autopsy results. I’m glad he’s back.” Banishing his gloomy thoughts, he gently squeezed her hand. “There’s plenty of time to think about this later. Let’s just try and enjoy the rest of the holiday. I believe we have company, Mrs. Stetson.”

She glanced at her mother whose head was buried in the refrigerator. “Okay,” she whispered conspiratorially, “let’s get out of here before mother discovers there’s no more...”

Dotty’s voice cut her off. “Amanda, what happened to all the whipped cream? I can’t finish the pie. I could have sworn I bought a can yesterday.” Her gaze shifted suddenly to the spot on the wall.

“Now might be a really good moment to whip up that dessert for four hundred,” Amanda whispered, looking at Lee in desperation.

“I have a better idea,” he replied, returning her look. “Run for it.” Hand in hand, they quickly joined the others.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The sun was just beginning to set in a blaze of orange and purple as the man relaxed on his veranda with a drink. The island management promised 'warm days and warmer nights' and so far, the place had thoroughly lived up to its reputation. He couldn't have wished for a more ideal place to spend the next couple of years.

His reverie was broken by the sudden sputtering of the short wave radio partially hidden in the corner of the large screened porch. Reaching instantly for the transmitter, he frowned as he spoke in terse sentences, his displeasure clearly evident in his tone.

"This better be an emergency, Jack. You know how dangerous any form of communication is at this point in the game."

"It is important. Trust me, I didn't break contact zero just to wish you a Merry Christmas. We have a security breach."

"How serious?"

"There was an attempted hit on me last night. Scarecrow and his partner stopped it."

"How convenient."

"Not for the Chameleon and his partner."

"The Chameleon? Someone meant business."

"Yes. The problem has been contained, but I still thought I should warn you. I don't know who's behind this. You need to be careful."

"I'm pretty secure. No one knows about this island. This resort hideaway is known for its privacy and seclusion."

"Still, we have an unknown enemy, you should keep your eyes open."

"Don't worry. I always keep my eyes open."

"I'll monitor things on my end. And I won't use this frequency again unless there's another emergency."

"Ditto for me. And Jack...have a happy holiday."

Colonel Holstein chuckled softly. "You, too, Senator. Over and out."

Senator Holstein returned the transmitter to its base, shifting his gaze once again to the spectacular sunset.

Lee and Amanda relaxed on the sofa in companionable silence, enjoying the hushed silence of their sleeping household. The large pine tree presided solemnly over the family room, its tiny twinkling lights reflecting gaily on the windowpane. Beyond the glass, the snow continued to fall, considerately providing a mantle of white suitable to the season. Inside, the guests had departed and the last remaining remnants of the holiday celebration had been cleared away.

Lee cast a sideways glance at Amanda who was mesmerized by the holiday decorations, a contented smile playing at the corners of her mouth. He leaned back on the sofa with a sigh, treasuring the moment. Quiet interludes like these occurred all too seldom in the hectic and sometimes hostile framework of an agent's existence. The juxtaposition of the peaceful holiday celebration and the grim reality of Agency life seemed almost too great. Just one of the reasons he'd always hated this season. That, and all those Christmas dinners eaten in countless mess halls at whatever base his uncle happened to be stationed on at the time. Whether it was in Hamburg, Greenland or Guam, after a while, they all looked the same. Maybe that's why as an adult he'd always chosen to spend his holidays with football and guacamole, trying not to think about the family he'd never had and waiting for the hours to pass.

His thoughts drifted back to Christmas Eve one year ago, remembering how uncomfortable he'd felt at Amanda's house that night. Despite their engagement, he was just being formally introduced to Dotty and the boys. He felt like an interloper, almost as if he was intruding on a picture-perfect family unit. Now that family was officially his family, too, and for the first time, he wanted to savor the holiday instead of blindly working his way through it. They had certainly come a long way in the last twelve months.

Amanda continued to gaze at the tree, stealing an occasional look at Lee's profile in the semi-darkness. She couldn't help but think how differently this Christmas could have turned out if the events of the fall had spun in a different direction. She had known how precarious their life together could be ever since the problems with Kai and his family had prompted their decision to keep their marriage a secret. But until she'd lost Lee last September, she had never realized that the line was so thinly drawn between happiness and sorrow. The problems

they'd experienced lately only served to reinforce that belief. She now recognized more than ever how fragile even the strongest relationship could be.

She felt Lee's hand close around hers and turned to him with a smile. He leaned over to lightly brush her lips with his.

"What were you thinking about?" he asked, pulling her close to him on the couch. "You looked so serious all of a sudden."

"Not serious, just thoughtful," she sighed, leaning against him. "I was just thinking how lucky we are to be sitting here together tonight."

"So you like this new Christmas Eve tradition?"

Amanda grinned up at him. "Well, your training maneuvers this afternoon were very enlightening. I think I picked up some great new moves."

"Always happy to be of service," Lee laughed. "I guess it's safe to say you prefer dodging whipped cream to bullets."

"It definitely has its advantages. But next time you could try to do a more thorough clean up job."

"Yeah, sorry about that spot on the wall," he laughed.

"That's okay. It was definitely worth the fallout." She snuggled closer against him.

He quickly kissed the top of her head. "So how upset was your mother about her dessert?"

"All things considered, she took it pretty well. Except that she's exchanging my Christmas present."

"Your present?"

"Yes. She was planning to give me a gift certificate to 'Rebecca's Fantasies'."

"Oh, the catalogue with all those intelligent models. The ones who are so...well dressed."

“That’s the one,” she answered, turning to look at him. “But you can wipe that silly grin off your face, Stetson. She told me that after what happened to her dessert, she was going to give it to Aunt Lillian instead. She said it was it was obvious that I didn’t need it.”

“That’s okay, you look better without the sexy lingerie.”

“Thanks, I think,” she added with a grin. “Okay, now it’s your turn.”

“For what?”

“What were you thinking about just now?”

“Actually, I was thinking how different this holiday felt from all the others. You know, when I used to think that Christmas was just like any other day.”

“You mean twenty-four hours long, sun rises, sun sets and the next day’s the 26th?”

He gave her a bittersweet smile. “You have a good memory.”

“Pretty hard to forget Christmas Eve in a cabin surrounded by Russians drinking vodka and eating beans.”

“I thought it was kind of fun.”

“You would,” she mumbled, jabbing him lightly in the ribs. “But you’ll notice I did break down and buy you your guacamole. And if you’re a very good boy, Santa might just bring you a bottle of Dom Perignon ’73.”

“Chilled?”

“Of course.”

“Ah, the perfect Christmas,” he laughed. “At least the guacamole came in handy tonight...with dinner being so delayed. Philip certainly seemed to like it.”

Amanda laughed. “In case you haven’t noticed, Philip likes everything that you do. He does think you’re pretty terrific.” She gently caressed his cheek with her fingers. “An opinion his mother happens to share.”

Lee planted a kiss on her hand, closing his arms around her again. “Jamie seemed in good spirits tonight.”

“I know,” she sighed with a happy smile. “More like his old self than I’ve seen in a long time. Maybe he’s come through the worst of this.”

“I hope so. I wish I could connect with him as easily as Philip. Sometimes it just seems so hard to know what he’s thinking.”

“Welcome to the wonderful world of parenting. Just when you think you’ve got it all figured out, the rules suddenly change. But you’re doing okay.”

“How can you tell?”

“He didn’t get you a scarf for Christmas.”

“I know, it was a really thoughtful gift. He might have a future in covert operations. I never saw him take that picture of us. Of course, I’m not discounting the value of a really good scarf. I’ve always found them to be very functional presents.”

“Yes, I know,” she said with amusement, relaxing against him as they fell into a companionable silence. After a few minutes, Amanda hesitantly broke the spell, uncertainty apparent in her voice. “Lee...since we seem to be on the subject of parenting, there is something I’ve been meaning to ask you.”

“Yes, I think having a baby is something we definitely need to talk about,” he whispered.

She sat up abruptly. “How did you...?”

“While I’d like to say that I know you so well I can read your mind...”

“Yes?”

“...the truth of the matter is that I read your Agency physical report.”

“You did what?”

“I admit I shouldn’t have,” he said quickly, reacting to her tone. “But when it came across my desk...”

“The full report just happened to find its way to your office? I thought you just received the simple ‘fit for duty’ sheet.”

“I pulled the full report,” he replied, avoiding her gaze. “I was worried about you. It’s no excuse, I know, but I started thinking...the other night in the kitchen when I overreacted to you and Joe...the next day I started to worry that maybe there was something really wrong and I hadn’t given you the chance to tell me. Anyway, I looked at your file and noticed that they ran the test.”

“Then I can assume you also noticed that it was negative?” she stated testily.

He nodded.

“You know, Lee, being my husband doesn’t necessarily give you the right to access my personal medical records,” she added in aggravated tone. “Especially when you abuse your position as my boss to do it.”

“I know, I know,” he said, quickly taking a deep breath. “Amanda, I’m sorry I looked in your file. I didn’t intend to invade your privacy any more than you meant to invade mine when you snooped around in that CIA file about my parents’ death. I was concerned - like you were. I worry about you.”

“I’ve noticed.”

“And I’ve promised to work on that. Let’s not rehash that fight tonight, unless we get to have make-up sex again,” he whispered, pulling her back beside him. He felt the tension leave her body and smiled in relief, secure in the knowledge that she didn’t want to argue, either. “So,” he began tentatively, “what are your thoughts about this baby issue?”

She turned her face towards his. “Honestly? I don’t know. Part of me would like nothing better than to have a child with you. And the other half keeps telling me how much it would change things, both personally and professionally.”

Lee sighed. “It’s complicated, I know, and we certainly don’t have to settle it tonight. Maybe this is something we should both think about for a while.”

“I agree.” She got up suddenly and picked up a small package from underneath the tree, handing it to him with a smile. “Merry Christmas.”

“I thought we’d already our exchanged gifts,” he said with a puzzled expression, displaying the new watch on his wrist. “You didn’t have to get me anything else. Actually, you didn’t have to get me anything. All this...” he indicated the entire room with a sweep of his head, “this is the best present I could have gotten this year.”

“For me, too, but I’m still keeping my diamond earrings,” she teased, a smile spreading over her face. “This is just a little something I picked up. Go on, open it.”

He tore the wrapper off, quickly pulling out the small ornament fashioned in the shape of a scarecrow. He held it up with a quizzical look.

“For the tree. Everyone in the family has a special ornament. My parents started the tradition when I was little.” She went over to the tree, fingering the delicately crafted decorations. “This one belonged to my Dad, this one’s Mother’s and these are the boys’ – and this one’s mine.”

“The panda bear?”

Amanda nodded. “Mother used to call me that when I was little.”

“I remember,” he said, coming up behind her and enfolding her with his arms. “Now I understand that wistful expression on you face when you stare at the tree.”

She leaned into his embrace, covering his arms with her own. “Since you’re part of this family now, I thought you should have an ornament of your own. When I saw the scarecrow, I thought it seemed appropriate,” she laughed.

“How are we going to explain that to everyone?”

“We’ll just tell them you were a fan of the Wizard of Oz as a child. We’re still entitled to a few secrets.”

“Works for me,” he agreed as he hung the ornament on the tree next to hers. “Thank you.” He closed his arms around her again, pulling her against him. “Actually,” he whispered, “I have a little something for you, too.” He quickly retrieved an oblong box that was hidden in the back of the tree. “I was planning on waiting until New Year’s Eve to give this to you, but in light of our ‘no more secrets’ policy, I thought it might be better if I did it now.”

Amanda took the package with a smile, shaking it gingerly. “Thanks, I can always use another scarf.”

“Very funny. Open it.”

She sat down on the sofa and carefully began to remove the tape on one end. Lee groaned as he watched. “Amanda, it’s just paper. It’s okay to tear it. At this rate it will be New Year’s before you’re finished.”

“You have your technique and I have mine. This is really beautiful paper.” She admired it as she methodically folded it into a small square. “You wrapped this yourself?”

“No,” he admitted reluctantly. “Actually, your mother helped me with this particular gift.”

“Really? What did you get me that my mother had to help with? It’s not a ‘Rebecca’s Fantasies’ gift certificate, is it?” she joked.

“Open it and find out,” he replied with a laugh.

She opened the box and slowly removed the folder. “Airline tickets,” she stated in surprise. “We have time now to take a trip?”

“It’s kind of a combination Christmas-Anniversary present. Look at the date.”

She opened the jacket cover. “They’re for February 14th,” she said, a warm smile spreading over her face.

“Yeah, well, after our first honeymoon was sidetracked by a bullet, I thought I owed you one that you didn’t have to spend in the hospital. No guns allowed this time around.”

She leaned forward, taking his face in her hands and gently kissing him. “Thank you, this is wonderful. There’s nothing I’d like better than a second honeymoon.” She glanced at the date on the tickets again. “I hate to break this to you, but our anniversary is the 13th, not the 14th.”

“I’m aware of that. But we’ll be kind of busy on the 13th,” he said with a smile, suddenly kneeling in front of her. “I was thinking that maybe you might agree to marry me again, publicly this time.”

“Oh, Lee...” she looked away trying to hide the tears that suddenly welled up in her eyes.

“Hey, this wasn’t supposed to make you cry.” He tilted her face back towards his, gently wiping her tears with his fingers.

“It’s just that I’m so happy. How did you know...?”

“Well, I’ve seen the way you look when Joe and Carrie talk about their wedding.” He took a deep breath before continuing. “And I haven’t been completely blind to the problems we’ve been having lately. I thought it might be a good thing for us to say those words again out loud. With our family and friends present this time.”

She nodded her agreement. “How did you pull all this together?”

“Well, only some of those phone calls I didn’t tell you about were work related. The others...”

“Were about this?” she asked remorsefully.

“Yes. That’s why I thought I’d better let you in on this now instead of later. We’ve been having too many miscommunications lately.”

“Oh, Lee...”

“It’s okay.”

“And you did this all by yourself?” she asked, the tears pooling once again in her eyes.

“Well, not exactly. Your mother’s been helping me. I think she likes the idea of actually attending her daughter’s wedding. She said we could consider this her birthday present this year.”

“Great. But how will we ever top this next year when she hits the big 6-0?”

“I have an idea, but we just agreed we’d think about it for a while.”

“Yes, we did.” She smiled and leaned over to give him a quick kiss, a sudden thought occurring to her. “Is that why Mrs. Bowman called you yesterday?”

“Now you’ve been reading my messages,” he said in mock annoyance.”

“Listen, Stetson, don’t forget my nosiness saved your life. If I hadn’t read your messages, I wouldn’t have shown up at the Potomac Plaza last night.”

“True. Believe me, I’m not complaining....”

“I hope not,” she said with a smile.

“...and yes, that was what she called about. His Honor would be happy to come to the house and perform our second ceremony.”

“He’s coming here? Isn’t that a bit unusual? I didn’t realize he made house calls.”

“Well, he didn’t want to at first, but he had an unfortunate problem with the IRS that I just happened to straighten out for him,” Lee answered with a grin. “He’s very grateful.”

“The IRS?”

“Yeah, he was going to be audited back into the dark ages. I made it go away.”

Amanda eyed him suspiciously. “That’s pretty convenient. I guess we’re pretty lucky that he just happened to be targeted for such a comprehensive audit.”

“Yeah, isn’t government bureaucracy a wonderful thing?”

“Especially when you have friends in the department,” she said with amusement.

His laughter mingled with hers. “What can I say? I needed him here.”

She reached down and cupped his face with her hands. “Well, I know what to say. Yes, I’ll marry you. Again. Thank you for all of this.”

“I’m the one who should be thanking you. For being patient with my overbearing behavior at work for the past few months,” he added, in response to the question he saw forming on her face.

“Speaking of work,” she began hesitantly, “you’ve been remarkably quiet about what happened tonight at the Agency.”

Kissing her lightly on the lips, he got up from the floor and headed over to the window, restlessly pacing back and forth. “I’ve been trying to put it out of my mind, but I keep going over and over the same ground. I mean, what do we have...an international hit man who is a master of disguise just happens to use me to complete a hit on our new Director, after effectively neutralizing first you at the party and me at the hotel. Then after Holstein personally assumes control of the case, our only link to the Chameleon commits suicide in an Agency holding cell, a pretty difficult feat in the best of circumstances.”

“Not to mention what it would have looked like had ‘you’ succeeded in taking Colonel Holstein out at that party in front of all those witnesses.”

“I know. Assuming I somehow manage to escape his trap at the hotel, I’m framed for Holstein’s murder. Coincidence? I don’t think so. It’s all a little too pat for me.”

“You and Holstein have a common enemy?” she ventured with a frown.

He shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know. The more I think about it, the less I know what to make of it. I keep putting two and two together and coming up with six.” He sighed in frustration. “There’s something in this whole scenario that I’m missing.”

She stood up to join him at the window, putting a tentative hand on his arm. “My partner once told me that there’s a pattern in every case. It’s just not apparent yet. You need to give it some time. The pieces will fit, you’ll see.” She put her head on his shoulder. “Thank you for sharing this with me and for not saying you’ll ‘handle it yourself’. There may be some hope for our working relationship after all.” She joked, smiling up at him. “Whatever’s going on, we’ll figure it out...together.”

He reached out to pull her into his embrace. “You’re right. We’re a damn good team. I kind of lost sight of that for awhile. Thank you for helping me to remember it.”

She smiled. “That’s what a good partner is for.”

“And for practicing those training maneuvers?” he raised his eyebrow questioningly.

“Any time, Scarecrow.” She suddenly stifled a yawn. “It’s getting pretty late and the boys will be expecting their special Christmas waffles first thing in the morning.”

“Then maybe we should head upstairs.” He switched off the tree lights and arm-in-arm they headed toward the staircase. “You know, I’ve been thinking…”

“About what?”

“One of these days we’ve got to decide what we’re going to do with that stable on the back of the lot.”

“You’re right… I was thinking the same thing myself the other day. But first things first.” She hesitated, her foot on the first step and turned to look at Lee with a smile. “I forgot to look… where are we headed for our second honeymoon?”

“Somewhere tropical, where the ‘days are warm and the nights even warmer’,” he replied, unsuccessfully trying to hide his grin, “and where clothing is definitely optional.”

“Good choice. Lots of privacy, too, in case we need to practice some new training maneuvers? We wouldn’t want to get rusty.”

“Just what did you have in mind, Mrs. Stetson?”

“I was thinking… chocolate?”

“I can see the possibilities.” He kissed the top of her head as they started their ascent. “Merry Christmas, Mrs. Stetson.”

“Merry Christmas to you, too, Scarecrow.”

THE END (for now)