

"Please, Lee?" she begged.

"Okay. . ." At the look in her eyes, he decided to leave it alone for the moment. "When we're finished here, how about I take you out to lunch?" Lee asked, in an effort to lift his partner's spirits.

"Yeah," Amanda said, forcing a smile. "That'd be nice, Lee."

"Good." He grinned despite his concern. He was determined to find out what was bothering her and help her fix whatever it was. He didn't know when he'd become so involved in her life, but he found that he enjoyed it immensely.

She was still smiling up at him, staring into his eyes with an unfathomable expression, when - echoing through the park - two shots rang out. Her smile quickly turned to shock as her body lurched and she collapsed against him.

"Amanda!" he shouted, putting his arms around her. "No!"

She sagged forward, and he sank to his knees with her in his arms. Turning her, so that she was on her back, but still in his arms, he saw the scarlet stains soaking through her pink blouse, burn marks darkening her blouse where she'd been hit, twice, in the chest.

He removed his jacket hastily, yanking it roughly off his shoulders, and pressed it into Amanda's wounds, hoping to staunch the flow of blood.

"No," he repeated. A sob ripped through his heart and traveled up into his throat. "Please. . ." his tremulous voice pleaded with her.

"No. . .Amanda. Please, no."

Frantically, Lee grabbed Amanda's wrist and felt for a pulse. He found one, but it was slow and faint. "Damn!" he muttered under his breath.

T.P. had heard the gunfire and had seen Amanda reel from the blow. He'd immediately called 911, and run across the park to where Lee sat with Amanda in his arms.

"Lee! I called the paramedics," T.P. shouted as he drew closer. He was stunned by the severity of Amanda's wounds and the haunted expression on Lee's face.

In the background, they could already hear the mournful wailing of sirens - sounding like a death peal in Lee's ears. Blankly, he stared at T.P., and the older man wondered if Lee even knew he was there.

"Amanda. . ." he began, shock and pain evident in his features. Memories of the last time he'd lost a partner flashed through his mind. How could it be happening again? "Oh, God. . ."

"Lee, I can't believe it," T.P. said remorsefully.

Lee looked down at her again. "Please, Amanda," he pleaded. His voice shook, sounding unlike himself. "Amanda, please hang on. Don't leave me, Amanda."

Amanda's face seemed to pale visibly, and Lee felt an onslaught of panic.

"Amanda, can you hear me? Open your eyes." The prodding words tumbled out of his mouth.

"Come on, Amanda. Open your eyes.

Please. . .oh, my God!"

Her stillness chilled Lee to the core. His flow of words eventually ceased, and he just held her, staring at her face.

"Baby. . ." It was almost a whisper, followed by shuddering exhalation. His hands were trembling violently, and he felt as if he was going to be sick. His grip on her tightened, as did his hold on the makeshift compress.

Paramedics raced up to them and gently took Amanda out of Lee's arms. After administering initial aid on the spot and stabilizing her, they carefully loaded her into the waiting ambulance.

Lee moved forward to climb in with them, but they forcefully prevented him from doing so, insisting that he would only impede their ability to help her.

"Sir, there's no extra room for you. Why don't you meet us at the hospital?" they suggested as they hurried to leave.

"Amanda!" he called out in anguish. "Amanda."

Slamming the doors shut, the emergency vehicle raced away. Lee and T.P. stood watching helplessly, then looked down at his shirt. He was drenched in Amanda's blood.

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For the fourth time in half an hour, Lee stood at the nurses' station in the emergency ward, demanding information on Amanda's condition.

"Sir, I'm asking you, again, to please have a seat, and when. . ." the young nurse began patiently, determined not to be intimidated.

"All right," he interrupted, holding his hands up in resignation.

He strode back to the waiting area and sat down next to Billy and Francine. She placed a comforting hand on his arm.

"Lee, I'm sorry. . ." she whispered.

He nodded mutely, not looking at her, but instead staring at the carpet. Billy noted the overwrought look on Lee's face, the nervous movements of his hands. He had never seen his best agent look so emotionally drained.

Dr. Kelsey opened the double doors and strode over to the waiting area. She hated to be the bearer of bad news, but it came with the territory.

"I'm sorry to have to tell you this. Mrs. King. . ." she began quietly, sitting down across from them. "Sustained fatal injuries. She lost a lot of blood. I'm so sorry. We did everything within our ability, but her injuries were too severe, and we were unable to resuscitate her."

At the mention of the word 'fatal', Lee had paled dramatically and gasped. He now sat, stone-faced, as the doctor walked away from them.

Francine was stupefied. Shocked and gaping, she looked at Lee. "Oh, Lee, I'm so sorry," she whispered somberly.

Lee didn't respond. The muscles in his jaw tightened, and he closed his eyes. Images of Amanda's bloodied body replayed in his mind.

"I want to see her." Lee stood.

Billy stood, too, grasping Lee's arm. "I don't think that's a good idea, Lee. That's not how you want to remember her, is it?"

"I don't want to remember her as dying in my arms, either, Billy!" Lee shouted. His body began to sag, and he reached out an arm to steady himself on the waiting room sofa.

Billy grasped his arm. "Lee?"

"I have to go," Lee said quietly. He stood up, fishing in his pocket for his keys. He suddenly

couldn't deal with seeing Amanda lying dead on a gurney. The thought made him feel nauseated.

"Lee, let me drive you," Billy offered.

"No." Lee rejected the offer. He started walking towards the exit, but feeling dizzy, he veered instead into the men's restroom.

Billy watched in concern, then followed him. Lee didn't acknowledge his presence. He stood at a sink, his white-knuckled hands gripping the porcelain edges, staring into the mirror.

Billy walked over to him. "Lee. . .let me drive you home."

"She's dead," he said simply, sounding as if he couldn't get used to the idea. It was almost a question.

"Yes," Billy answered quietly, hating to see Lee in such obvious agony.

"I didn't protect her. . .She was right there, at my side, and she got shot. . ." Lee's voice was strained and tight, raw with emotion.

"It wasn't your fault," Billy insisted softly.

"It happened again, Billy. I . . ." he stopped, squeezing his eyes shut against the self-accusing voice in his head.

"Lee, what happened again? This was not your fault, man!" Billy insisted, disturbed by the vision of the broken man in front of him.

"I have to leave," Lee repeated. He appeared to be barely clinging to his composure.

He strode out of the restroom and towards the exit. Francine approached him and gave him a hug. He barely responded, numb with grief.

Francine and Billy followed him worriedly. Lee got to his car and stopped, staring over the roof for a long moment. As his boss watched, Lee got into the driver's seat.

He sat still for a moment, then reached to open the glove compartment. Picking up a small object, he studied it intently.

It was Amanda's lipstick. She had left it in his car two days ago, and he'd found it after dropping her off at her own car. He had chuckled at the time, planning to drop by and return it.

He dropped the lipstick in his lap and pressed his hands against his eyes. Billy, moved with pity for the man before him, stepped over to the car and opened the door.

"Lee, come on and get into my car," he offered again. "I'll drive you home."

Red-rimmed hazel eyes met Billy's brown ones, and Lee nodded. Without a word, he got out of his car and meekly followed Billy.

Francine said goodbye to them and got into her own car, watching Lee sadly. She'd never seen him so defeated.

"I'm going to kill whoever did this, Billy," Lee swore vengefully, getting into the passenger side of Billy's car.

"No, Lee. I don't want you involved in this one," Billy warned.

"Billy..." he protested hotly.

"No," Billy said placing a hand on Lee's shoulder. "Stay out of it, Lee. You're too close to the situation. I'll have another Agent look into it."

As Lee started to argue again, Billy said, "It's an order, Lee."

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Lee watched the unreal scenes playing out in front of him as he stood in a black suit at Amanda's graveside. He stared at the coffin, willing himself to wake from this hideous nightmare.

He didn't awaken. Instead, he saw Amanda's mother, sons, ex-husband, neighbors, and friends standing around somberly, just like him.

Eyeing Joe King through narrowed lids, Lee bitterly thought to himself how ironic it was that Joe, who claimed that people in Estoccia needed him more than his own family did, could fly home for Amanda's funeral. What need did she have of him now?

The entire day had gone by in a blur for Lee, from the services until now. He didn't speak a word, not even to Billy or Francine. They had expressed their condolences to Dotty and her grandsons, introducing themselves as coworkers of Amanda's.

As he watched the coffin being lowered into the freshly churned ground, Lee's vision was distorted with newly familiar tears. Turning away, he strode to his car without looking back.

Lee waited down the street for Amanda's mother and sons to leave. He'd overheard that they were going to stay with relatives in Maine. Their flight was to leave in two hours.

He felt a desperate need to be close to Amanda somehow. Short of dying himself, this was the only way he could think of.

After a few minutes, he watched as Dotty and the boys brought their bags out to the waiting taxi cab. He exhaled in relief, and got out of his car.

Letting himself in through the back door, Lee half expected to see Amanda's surprised face as he walked into her kitchen.

Looking around, Lee felt again the warm familiarity that always surrounded him when he was in her home. The house was eerily quiet and still.

Feeling his grief like a physical pain, he moved through the lower rooms, looking around at her things. Stepping into the laundry room, he saw a basket of clothes on top of the dryer. One of Amanda's sweaters had been flung carelessly atop the pile, ready to be washed.

He pulled it off the stack and held it, breathing in Amanda's scent. He could still smell her delicate perfume clinging to the fibers of the garment. Laying it back down, he exited the room and headed for the stairs.

He felt drawn, like a magnet, to her bedroom. He sat down on her bed and looked around, still trying to absorb the fact that he would never see her again.

Unable to resist, he opened the drawer to her nightstand, wanting to feel a connection to her in some way. To see her handwriting, or a personal effect he would recognize.

A notepad lay in the drawer, Amanda's writing all over it. It was strange to see Amanda's handwriting. Her quirky penmanship was familiar to him, and brought back poignant memories of notes she used to leave on his desk.

On the front page of the pad was a grocery list and some phone numbers. Curious, he flipped through it and saw that she had used it for to-do lists, addresses and recipes. He was about to replace it when he noticed something behind the first few pages.

An envelope, with his name on it. Feeling his face flush with emotion, he replaced the notepad closed the drawer, keeping hold of the envelope.

Obviously, her mother hadn't yet started going through Amanda's things. Dotty would never know this was missing, he reasoned.

He felt overwhelmingly compelled to go straight home and read her letter. He couldn't read it here, in her bedroom, among her things. That would be too much.

Downstairs, Lee paused by the hall closet. Arguing with himself for a moment, he finally gave in and opened the door. Inside, he saw what he wanted - Amanda's camel-colored wool coat, the one she had been wearing that first day at the train station.

Arriving back at his apartment, Lee immediately sat down on his couch, setting Amanda's coat in his lap.

Taking a deep breath, he pulled out the letter and began to read her words.

"Dear Lee,

If you're reading this, then it's because I'm gone. I have started and shredded and restarted this letter more times than I can count. I'm having a hard time wording this, and will most likely shred this one, and start over again.

I want you to know that I'm really glad to have known you. The day you charged into me and my world was one of the better days of my life. I've learned a lot from you, and I want you to know that you rapidly became my best friend.

I also want you to know that I love you - more than I have ever loved anyone else. I never could have been able to tell you that in person, but it's something that I want you to know.

I feel an intrinsic connection between us. I guess you don't feel it, though. That's why I was so careful to hide my true feelings from you. I would rather have kept you as a friend, than lose you by risking so much.

And don't get a big ego, either, Scarecrow. This transformation has been rather recent, at least my realization of it has. Don't think I've been pining for you since the train station, because that's not the case.

Oh, my gosh, I can't believe I've written these things down. I . . ."

The letter abruptly ended there. She hadn't finished it, no doubt not expecting to lose her life so soon, so suddenly.

Lee read the letter, again. It told him so much. . .and so little. How long had she felt this way? How could he not have known? He knew the answer to that question, though. He always held her at arm's length, never allowing her past the barrier he'd built.

His throat was suddenly dry, and he could feel a large lump forming there, even as his heart seemed to empty itself, again growing cold and lonely. He picked up her coat and inhaled her lingering scent. Before he knew it, its fabric was damp with his hot salty tears.

Lee woke up the next morning, lying on his couch. His head rested against Amanda's coat. In his hand he clutched the letter and her lipstick. Remembrance washed over him anew, and he laid there listlessly for over an hour, not even glancing at the clock.

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Sitting behind his desk, Billy dialed a number and waited for an answer. After several rings, when he was about to hang up, a voice answered.

"Hello?"

"I didn't think you were going to pick up," he teased lightly.

"Sorry, Sir, I was in the other room, and ran to pick it up as soon as I heard it. It rings pretty softly, so I guess I didn't hear it right away."

"That's all right," he said, smiling into the phone. "Are you doing okay, so far?"

"As good as can be expected, Sir."

"Do you need anything?" he asked.

"No, thank you. How. . .is he?"

"He took it a lot harder than I thought he would," Billy said honestly.

"Oh, gosh. . .I don't know what to say. I hope this is over soon."

"Me, too," he replied. "I'll call you again in a couple of days."

"Yes, Sir. Goodbye, Sir."

"Goodbye, Amanda."

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Billy and Amanda hung up, and then another phone was hung up, down in the Agency basement.

"I knew it," Dwayne Carson gritted through his teeth.

So Mrs. King wasn't dead. They were playing games with him. He could deal with that. He had no idea where her family was, but he intended to find out. He did, however, know where her partner was, and he had no problem with switching his agenda around.

Scarecrow would be the first to die.

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Amanda settled herself into her rooms at the safe house. There was a bedroom, a sitting room, a kitchenette and a bathroom. The house was well equipped with a television and VCR, a collection of VHS movies, shelves of books suited to her tastes, as well as crossword puzzles and other solitary games.

She already felt that she would go stir-crazy from loneliness. She missed her sons and her mother, but at least they knew that, in reality, she was safe and sound.

With Billy's permission, Amanda had gathered her family together and explained what was going on and what needed to be done. They were shocked and concerned when she told them that she had to fake her own death.

After many questions, and even more tears, they agreed that they wouldn't tell anyone that she was really alive. They would attend her "funeral" and act bereaved. Then, they would fly to Maine, and spend the following weeks with relatives.

Amanda didn't tell them anything about the Agency, nor did she go into detail about the letter. She told them that the police would be looking for the lunatic who wanted to kill her and her family.

The letter. It still gave her chills. She clearly remembered how frightened she'd been when she'd received it.

She'd held the note in her trembling hand. Nausea attacked and she hurried upstairs, promptly emptying the contents of her stomach. She could literally feel her nervous system shutting down.

Standing up and bracing herself on the bathroom counter, she looked at herself in the mirror. The woman looking back at her was not Amanda King. At least, she wasn't the woman Amanda usually saw.

This woman staring back at her was pale, her skin almost transparent. Her mouth, usually on the verge of a cheerful smile, was drawn and quivering. Her eyes were enormous, the usual brown had deepened to almost black, or was it just that her pupils were so enlarged?

Shakily moving into the bedroom, and sitting down on the edge of her bed, Amanda dared to look at the note, again. Typewritten on coarse, yellowed paper that could have been ten years old, the note was seriously threatening.

"Amanda King:

Did you think you would escape my wrath forever? Revenge will be swift and unerring. First, you will watch your children die. Then, your mother and your ex-husband will be executed. Last, but not least, Mrs. King, your beloved partner, Scarecrow, will suffer, disgracefully, and then die a violent death. Are you frightened? You should be. Don't think me incapable. I am ready, willing, and perfectly prepared to execute swift judgment upon one who has caused me enormous loss and suffering. After you have lost the people you care most about, you yourself will suffer and die. Until we meet again.

An enemy of your own creation" ###

Sighing, Amanda hoped that this nightmare would be over soon.

Lee thought she was dead. And from what she could tell from his reaction to her being shot, was probably miserable right about now. She had known he would be upset, but she hadn't expected the raw, heart-breaking emotion he had displayed.

Obviously, she had been wrong in her assumption that his feelings went no deeper than the affection between a coworker and a friend. Guilt and sorrow washed over her in a wave so strong, she felt dizzy. 'What have I done?' echoed through her mind.

It had taken all she had in her to keep her eyes closed, lay motionless in his arms, and breathe shallowly. That part had actually fairly easy. She'd been given an injection that was time-activated and designed to slow her pulse and make breathing difficult.

Thinking about the measures that had been taken to assure realism sickened Amanda. She'd been wearing a bullet-proof vest, covered with packets of blood. The reaction to being shot had been easy, as the bullets slamming into her slender frame had been horribly painful.

Amanda had actually felt the blood drain from her face as she listened to Lee's pleadings. She shivered at the memory of the tender way he had held her, at the agonized sound of his voice as he repeated her name over and over again. He had pleaded with her not to leave him, and it had been in her power to acquiesce. But she hadn't - she couldn't.

Billy had said that in a couple of days, she could choose to fly to anywhere outside of the state, that the Agency would pick up the tab for a hotel and all her expenses. Right now, she didn't even want to think about it.

She had unpacked her one small suitcase and placed the items in the room's dresser drawers. All new toiletries had been purchased, and these filled the counter and drawers in the bathroom.

Billy had wisely insisted that she take only a minimum of her own things. If, he had reasoned, Lee or anyone else had gone by her house, he would be suspicious if all of Amanda's clothes and other personal effects were missing.

So she had taken only some undergarments, pajamas and a few blouses and sweaters. The rest had been purchased for her and left in the wardrobe and drawers of the safe house.

She had even left her purse at the hospital, and it had been picked up later by Dotty, before she and Phillip and Jamie had flown to Maine.

She could picture Lee, covertly entering her house. She felt sure that he had probably already been there. Billy was right - his plan had been well thought out and thorough. There was no danger of Lee suspecting a thing.

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Billy had been searching unceasingly for the writer of the threatening letter. He had run a complete check on all of the cases Amanda had worked on or assisted with for the last two years, but so far had come up with nothing.

He had a few select agents, sworn to secrecy, assisting him. They had determined, oddly enough, that the letter had been typed on Agency issue paper stock, and typed on an old typewriter from down in the basement.

Grimly, Billy realized that Amanda's enemy was on the inside. He knew he had made the right decision on not allowing Lee in on the secret. His distraught behavior, though disturbing to see, contributed to the realism of Amanda's supposed demise.

Casting his mind back, he went over the conversation he'd had with Amanda, grateful again that she had come to him. He wondered if he should have done things differently. . .

Billy Melrose read the letter again, keeping an eye on Amanda as he did. She was obviously on the brink of a nervous breakdown, and he wondered how much longer she could hold herself together.

"Have you shown this letter to anyone else?" he asked, his brow creasing in consternation.

"No," she replied softly. In her lap was what had been a tissue. It was now tattered into tiny fragments, her fingers picking up minute pieces and shredding the bits even more.

"Not even Lee?" he questioned.

"No," she shook her head. "I was afraid. . .the letter threatened him too, I thought that if. . ." she paused, unsure of how to put her fears into words.

"That's good, Amanda," Billy nodded. "You did the right thing."

Without warning, the door to Billy's office opened, and Lee strode in. He stopped short when he caught sight of Amanda, who appeared stricken. She met his eyes for only a second, then turned her face away from him.

"Lee. . ." Billy began.

"Amanda," Lee whispered in urgent concern, kneeling beside her chair and placing his hand upon her arm. "What's wrong?"

She didn't answer him. She didn't even look at him. In fact, she was squeezing her eyes shut, her fingers busily shredding at the already tattered tissue.

"Lee," Billy interjected firmly, placing a hand on Lee's shoulder. "Please, leave. Mrs. King and I are in the middle of something here."

"Billy," he argued, his hands clenching into fists as he raised himself up from his kneeling position. "You can't expect me to just walk out of here. She's my partner. I want to know what's going on!"

Turning to Amanda, he knelt down again. "Amanda, please, tell me why you're so upset. Let me help you."

Before Billy could respond, Amanda spoke, surprising both men. "Lee," she almost sighed his name, sounding infinitely woeful. "Please, go."

He looked into her eyes, and wanted to gather her in his arms and comfort her. But her eyes were pleading with him to leave the office. He stood, undecided, for a moment. Then, squeezing her shoulder, he wordlessly turned and walked out.

Later, Lee was to remember that moment. Had he known what the future held at that at the time, he would have never agreed to leave her side, no matter what she asked of him. He would have forced her to confide in him. But foreknowledge wasn't a luxury Lee had been afforded.

Billy sighed, watching as Lee closed the door behind him. For a moment, he closed his eyes and tried to ward off the headache that was rapidly developing.

"You have no idea who this might be from?" he finally asked.

"No," she said miserably. "I wish I did."

They went over the letter several times, trying to imagine who could possibly want to take such vindictive revenge against her. In the end, after discussing several possibilities, they reached a conclusion.

"If they know Lee's code name, they may know much more about the Agency than they're letting on. There are no fingerprints on the note or the envelope, so we have no leads. I'm afraid there's only one solution," Billy said regretfully.

"I'll do anything," Amanda told him, leaning forward in her seat.

"Well," he said quietly. "If you're thought to be dead, he may not feel the need to go after your family and Lee."

"You mean. . ." she began, leaning forward.

"Yes," he confirmed. "We can stage your death."

"But, Sir. . .my mother and the boys. . ." she began, seeking words that wouldn't form. If possible, her face paled even more.

"I know," he shook his head, knowing where she was headed. "It would be asking too much for you to let them think you're dead. Who knows how long it'll take to track down this maniac?"

"Thank you," she said fervently.

"Is there somewhere they can go?" Billy continued, mulling it over. "You could tell them the truth, explain what's going on, that they're in danger. They could go away and we could have a team protecting them. Do you think they would go along with it? Attend a funeral service, play the part, and everything?"

Amanda shuddered at the thought of her own funeral, her eyes cast downward. "Yes," she said firmly.

"It'll have to be pretty convincing," Billy mused thoughtfully. "We won't have an open coffin. I don't think we could pull that off. The problem is Lee."

Amanda looked up sharply. "Lee, Sir?"

"He can't know," Billy said seriously. "Your family, I'll allow, and besides, you'll send them away. But no one other than them, and me, can know you're really alive. Not even your ex."

"I don't think that not telling Lee is a good idea, Sir," she said.

"Amanda, listen to me. The letter mentions Lee's code name. That means that this lunatic knows a lot more than he's letting on. He may watch Lee very carefully once news gets out about your 'death'. Lee can't act like he thinks you're dead twenty-four hours a day."

"No, but..." she interjected.

"No buts," Billy insisted. "This is need-to-know, and Lee doesn't need to know. You said yourself you didn't show Lee the letter because you were afraid for him. Now if he's in on the whole thing, you know he'll have to be told the whole story, see the letter. I think he'd impede the case. He isn't exactly objective when it comes to you."

Amanda blushed at Billy's indication and looked at the Section Chief doubtfully. "Lee won't be easily convinced..."

"I know," Billy nodded, thinking. "It won't be easy, unless he has irrefutable proof."

"What do you mean?" Amanda asked nervously.

"Well, he'll believe it if he's with you when it happens," he said, the regret apparent in his words and expression.

"No. . ." Amanda began, shaking her head in disbelief. She had been on the receiving end of that cruelty, and she didn't want to inflict it on Lee.

She hadn't even known him that long when he'd had to fake his death and hide the fact from her, but she'd been devastated. She also knew that Lee would find a way to blame himself.

"Amanda, you have to trust me on this. It's the only way," he reasoned. "Otherwise, he's not going to believe it. He'll demand to see a body."

"I don't know if I can. . ."

"You will," he told her firmly. "I'm not giving you a choice here, Amanda."

"But, Sir. . ." she faltered, feeling helplessly out of control. "It's going to be. . ."

"Very difficult," he finished.

The next day, Agent McPherson, code name Grim Reaper, had called to let Billy know he was on his way to the park where Amanda and Lee would be.

McPherson existed at the Agency for the sole purpose of "assassinating" other agents as well as other related business. He was skillful and thorough. No one aside from Billy and his superiors even knew McPherson existed. ###

Billy rubbed the memory away, applying pressure to his aching temples. They had to wrap this mystery up soon, for Amanda's sake and for Lee's.

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Lee went back to work two days after the funeral. Billy had encouraged him to take a week, but Lee couldn't stand being alone with his grief and disquieting thoughts.

He had gone to the park without Billy's knowledge or consent, and asked around for information about the shooting, but no one who had been there on the day of the crisis, had seen anything or anyone at all.

At the Agency, he avoided everyone who tried to offer condolences on the loss of his partner. He walked away without a word the second her name came into conversation.

He realized, now, more than ever, how many people had genuinely liked Amanda. Her name cropped up in conversations constantly. He couldn't walk through the Bullpen without hearing coworkers talking about her.

"Remember when Amanda. . ."

"Mrs. King always used to be so good at this. . ."

"She was so sweet. What will Lee do without her?"

Each time he heard her name, he died a little more on the inside. Worse than the overheard conversations, however, were the compassionate looks he received from everyone. Therefore, he walked with his eyes glued to the floor, passing everyone as quickly as possible.

Everyone noticed that he looked like he'd had no sleep and too much to drink. No one, however, attributed his ragged appearance to late nights with a new girlfriend.

"Have you found anything?" he demanded when he burst into Billy's office.

"Not yet, Lee," Billy answered honestly.

Lee left abruptly, angry that there was nothing he could do. No leads, no threats, nothing. She was gone, and he couldn't even avenge her death.

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After a few days, Billy contacted Amanda, again, from a protected location outside the Agency. He didn't want to take any chances of being overheard on an inside line.

He told her what he knew, so far, which wasn't much. He asked her if she'd thought of anyone who could possibly have such a grudge against her, but she could think of no one.

He asked if she wanted to escape from the safe house, and by this time, she was ready. She couldn't read another page of a book or watch another movie. Not that she'd spent much time doing those things, anyway. Most of her time was spent reliving those awful last moments in Lee's arms.

She kept hearing his words over and over. "Amanda, no. . .Please! Oh, God. . ." The genuine grief in his voice was just as overwhelming in her dreams. She could feel his arms around her, the pressure of his hands on her chest as he tried to save her life.

She tried to imagine what she would say when she saw him again. She knew that he would feel incredibly betrayed and angry, just as she had when she'd thought he was dead. The thought of such a reunion tortured and tantalized her.

Would he ever speak to her again? Once more, she turned her thoughts to the trauma that she'd experienced when she'd thought he was dead. Sighing, she tried unsuccessfully to vanquish the disturbing thought from her mind.

"Amanda, Amanda - are you there?" Billy's voice was rising in concern.

Shaking herself out her reverie, she answered. "Yes, sorry, Sir. Yes, I would like to get out of here. I don't know if I can stand it much longer."

"Where do you want to go?" he questioned.

"I was thinking of Bristol, in Rhode Island," she suggested.

"Any particular reason?" Billy asked.

"It's just a nice, quiet little town, from what I hear. I've always wanted to go there, and I don't have any friends or family there, so there'd be no chance of me running into anyone." She took a deep breath. She'd been unrealistically hoping that Billy would tell her that the entire ordeal was over.

"I'll make the arrangements. And, Amanda, you haven't tried contacting your family, have you?" he asked quietly.

"Of course, not," she replied.

"Good," he replied approvingly.

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Lee stood absolutely still in the shower. Eyes closed, he let the hot water pound his chest, his thoughts and emotions in turmoil. He felt as if there was a gaping hole where his heart should be.

Automatically, he reached up and ran a hand over his chest. He could feel his heart beating, but he could swear it was beating slower than before Amanda's death.

Death. Amanda was dead.

She couldn't be dead. But she was, and, now, he felt utterly alone. Why should he feel that way? He was no different than he was before he found her at the train station.

No, that was wrong. He was completely different now. She had made that difference in him. Without a doubt, he knew he'd never go back to the lifestyle he'd lived before Amanda came into his life. It simply held no appeal for him.

She had cared for him. She had loved him, but she never would have said it when she was alive, he knew that much for certain. She had said as much. He had made it abundantly clear to her that they were nothing more than "work associates".

Of course, they had become friends, but even then, he kept a certain distance from her, not allowing her too close to him. He'd held her away, and she'd known he was holding her away.

Ironically, he had often found himself helplessly lost in her hypnotic brown eyes, hoping that she would be the one to take the first step towards becoming more than friends.

At the same time, however, he had dreaded the transition. She must have seen that fear in his eyes. No, she would never have said anything.

Amanda had become an integral part of his life; she'd become his best friend. More than that, she'd become an integral part of him. A part of him that was now dying as surely as she had died.

He moved his face into the spray, letting the pulsating stream wash away the tears that had escaped from the corners of his eyes. He could feel a sob rising in his chest, and he desperately tried to swallow it.

Her face appeared in his mind. He could see her features as clearly as if she was there with him, as if he could reach out and touch her face. If only he could have a second chance, how different things would be!

He wondered if that were true. Shutting off the tap, he stepped out into the cold air and grabbed a towel off the rack. He dried himself quickly, and noted that his entire body was aching from the pain of losing her.

If only the whole thing was some huge mistake, he mused. Maybe there was something going on that he didn't know about? No, Amanda never would have kept something like that from him! Unless. . .

'Get a grip, Stetson!' he berated himself. 'She's dead, and she's not coming back. Stop grasping at straws!'

Swallowing, again, he roughly pulled on a pair of sweat pants and raked his comb through his dripping hair. He looked into the mirror and found that he could not meet his own eyes.

The acute pain of loss was threatening to break through the emotional barricade. He'd been so young when his parents were killed, and he'd been very young when he lost Dorothy. He knew, now, that he had loved Dorothy only as a friend.

With Amanda, he had subconsciously pursued more, allowing himself to dream of her, to play "what if" in his mind. At night, in the safety of his own bedroom, he had fantasized about being with her, about getting to know her family, about being a part of her life.

The emotions and sensations created from just thinking about her far surpassed any reality with anyone else.

Sighing, he went into the living room for a drink. Pouring himself a scotch, his eye was drawn to the blinking red light on the answering machine. Someone must have called when he was in the shower.

Depressing the 'play' button, he heard Francine's concerned voice. "Lee, I was calling to see how you're doing. Are you there? Do you want to go out for a drink or something? Okay. I guess you're not there, or you don't want to be disturbed. I understand. Call me if you need anything."

Apathetically, he punched another button, intending to delete the message. Instead, he accidentally hit the button that played saved messages.

The machine beeped twice. Lee turned, thinking that another message must have come in after Francine's. His heart leapt for joy the second he heard the familiar, cheerful voice, then plunged as he realized it was an old message.

"Hi, Lee, it's Amanda. I was just calling with a question on a report I'm typing up for Mr. Melrose. It's not a big thing, but I do want to be accurate. I guess you're out, huh? Yeah, you must be out, since you didn't answer the phone. Unless you're busy, or in the shower, or something. Okay. Well, anyway, I'll just see you tomorrow, okay? I'll ask you what I

need to, then. Unless you want to give me a call when you get in, but you don't have to. Goodnight."

"Amanda..." he whispered pitifully.

Lee had turned up the volume as he listened to her voice, a small, pained smile finding its way to his mouth as he listened to her. He had initially saved the message because he'd found it amusing. A typical Amanda Ramble, as he'd come to think of her wordy style.

He gripped the tabletop as he listened, willing her to come back. When the message finished, he pressed the button again. And again.

He listened to it five times before his shaking hands, ragged breath, and hammering heart culminated in a soul-searing howl. It started down in his gut, rising steadily and unavoidably, until it escaped his throat, sounding foreign to his ears.

Blindly, he found his way to his bed, aching for Amanda. Crawling in between the sheets, he buried his face in his pillow in a vain attempt to stifle the uncontrollable sobs that tore through his body.

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At that very moment, in a hotel room in Rhode Island, Amanda was slept off and on. She dreamed, as always, of Lee. Sometimes she dreamed that she'd never had to leave, while other times she dreamed of when she would see him again. This time she was in his apartment.

He was on his bed, face down in the pillow. His entire frame was shaking, and he was uttering the most heartbreaking sounds she'd ever heard. She tried to walk over to him, but found that she was unable to move. Hot tears flowed from her eyes until she sank to her knees.

Amanda woke with a jolt and sat up in the bed. Gasping for air, she placed her hand on her chest. What had just happened? The entire scene had been fantastically real. It was as if she had actually been there, in Lee's bedroom.

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Dwayne Carson sat outside Lee Stetson's apartment. All the lights were out; it was well past midnight. The element of surprise would be on his side. Better to get it over with - just kill the man and focus on finding Amanda's mother and children. She had no right to be so beautiful, so vital, when his lovely Karen was dead. He had met

Karen after her transformation into Amanda's double, and promptly fallen in love with her.

Before meeting Karen, Dwayne had had a crush on Amanda. He had even asked her out when she was new to the Agency. Having worked there for a few years himself, he'd wanted to be nice and show her the ropes. But she'd only had eyes for Stetson.

Lee Stetson, who could have any woman he wanted. Lee Stetson, whom every woman wanted.

Dwayne had met Karen by chance, and had thought she was Amanda. Karen had shown an interest in Dwayne. He soon agreed to provide her with information about Amanda King. He was only a two-bit janitor, anyway. What loyalty did he owe the Agency?

So he had watched Amanda and reported every detail to Karen. He'd photographed her every day, so that Karen could duplicate her wardrobe. He'd recorded her voice, so Karen could sound like Amanda.

Soon, she became Amanda. And Dwayne fell in love with her. He refused to listen to the inner voice telling him that she was merely using him. No, she would have married him, he was certain.

But now, she was dead. Thanks to Amanda King and her partner, Scarecrow. Karen had plunged to her death because Lee Stetson had realized who the real Amanda was and had saved her life.

Well, now, both of them would pay dearly for his loss.

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Lee lifted his head from the pillow and glanced, puffy-eyed, around his darkened bedroom. Emotionally drained, he squinted and blinked.

He cleared his throat, which felt parched and sore. The emotional outburst was something completely new to him. Though he didn't feel any better about things, he did feel oddly relieved.

He stood, his eyes adjusting slowly to the night. He didn't know what he was looking for, but moments before, he had sensed a strange feeling, as if he wasn't alone.

Frowning, Lee stepped a few feet past the foot of his bed and stopped, feeling the strange sensation again. After a moment, though, the feeling dissipated, and he figured he

was overly tired.

Sighing, he left his bedroom and headed to the kitchen for some water and drank three full glasses before returning to bed, stopping by the couch and picking up Amanda's coat.

Lee took it with him into the bedroom, and laid down on his side, clutching the coat to his chest. He fell asleep with thoughts of Amanda filling his mind.

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Dwayne crept along the hallway to Stetson's apartment. He wasn't an agent, but he worked with agents, and from them he'd learned how to make fast work of even the best lock. It was a skill that came in handy when he was missing a key. Tonight, it would come in handy for another purpose.

In under three minutes, he had the door open and had stepped into the entryway. Allowing himself a moment to gain composure, he took several deep breaths.

Slowly, he reached into his pocket and pulled out the knife. Stepping cautiously, he made his way to the bedroom door, which stood open. Lee had his back to the door, so Dwayne advanced into the room wielding the sharp blade.

He stood for a moment, staring at the man who had allowed Karen to die a terrifying death, all to save Amanda King.

No, Dwayne wasn't good enough when 'Stetson, Lee Stetson' was around. 'Women always went for the heroes', he thought with a smirk. 'Stupid James Bond wannabe.'

Well, how much of a hero would the revered Scarecrow be tonight? Murdered in his bed by a puny little janitor. A giddy chuckle rose in his throat, and he had to gulp it down so as not to rouse his victim.

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Francine parked her car and headed for Lee's apartment. He had never returned her call, and she was worried about him. She wanted to make sure he wasn't drinking himself into a stupor.

She hated to admit it, but Amanda had been good for Lee. At first, she had balked at the

housewife. But as time had passed, Francine had developed a grudging respect for Amanda, and had seen drastic changes in Lee.

She had noticed how his eyes lit up, and a smile came readily to his lips, when his partner walked into a room. Amanda had seemed oblivious to Lee's growing attraction, however, and Francine figured that in Lee's eyes, that was part of Amanda's charm.

Francine doubted if Lee had known how hard he had fallen for Amanda until she was gone. No wonder he was so distressed. He was realizing what he'd had. . .yet hadn't.

As Francine approached Lee's apartment door, she was alarmed to see it standing wide open, completely dark inside.

She started to call his name, but stopped herself as she heard a struggle, a strangled cry, and then a crash. Automatically reaching for her gun, she ran into the bedroom and switched on the light.

There, pinning a man to the floor, his knee jabbing into the man's back was Lee. He was pale and his breathing was shallow.

"Lee!" she exclaimed. "What happened?"

"Call Billy," he panted. "It's Dwayne Carson."

"The janitor?" she raised her voice in disbelief.

"Yeah," he replied, annoyed. "C'mon, Francine! Call Billy."

She walked around Lee to use the phone on the nightstand. As she picked up the receiver, she noticed the blood saturating the back of Lee's shirt.

"Lee! Oh, my God. . ." she began.

"I know!" he shouted impatiently.

Dwayne was babbling to himself as Francine made the call. She was patched through to Billy at his home. As she reported the situation to him, Lee tried to make out what Carson was talking about.

"You. . .bastard! You let Karen die. You killed her." The words were slurred and barely distinguishable.

After stabbing Lee, Dwayne had pulled out the knife to stab him again. Lee had turned his

body quickly and kicked Carson in the stomach, then punched him in the face several times. The man had lost a few teeth and had a bloody nose. He probably had a few bruised, if not broken, ribs, as well.

"What are you talking about?" Lee demanded.

"Karen. . .Karen," he repeated with a sob. "I failed you."

Karen Watson - Amanda's 'look -alike.' As Lee realized what the pathetic man was talking about, anger seized him. "Did you kill Amanda, huh?" Lee dug his knee deeper into the man's back, causing him to cry out.

"Lee," Francine warned. "Billy's on the way. Relax."

She touched Lee gently and indicated for him to sit down on the edge of his bed. She took over holding Carson, her gun trained on him, not that he could have gone anywhere.

"Mrs. King wouldn't go out on a date with me," he muttered. "Too good for me, she thought. She wasn't near as nice to me as Karen."

"Did you kill her?" Francine repeated Lee's question harshly, knowing it made sense.

"I wish I had," he said venomously.

He refused to say anything else. Moments later, Billy arrived with a team. Carson was cuffed and led out of the apartment, and Lee was taken to the hospital for treatment of his injuries.

Francine had recognized Amanda's coat laying on Lee's bed, and had pointed it out to Billy. He worried about how Lee would react to seeing Amanda alive.

"Billy, was it Dwayne Carson?" Lee asked. Carson had said he hadn't killed Amanda, but if it wasn't him, then who?

"Tomorrow, Scarecrow," Billy said gently, noting his friend's appearance. Lee was in no condition to hear that his partner had faked her death. Billy wanted him to have time to at least start down the road to physical recovery before tackling the emotional one.

Besides, Amanda wouldn't be back, yet, anyway, and Lee would want to see her immediately. Better to wait just a little while.

Lee nodded weakly. What difference did it make? It wouldn't bring Amanda back to him.

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Amanda was awakened in the early morning hours by the insistent ringing of her phone. Startled, she jumped up, flinging the covers back as she reached to answer the call.

"Amanda, it's Billy," he greeted her. "Are you ready to come home?"

The last vestiges of sleep fell away. "Wha. . .you found him? My family and Lee are safe?"

"Yes, we found him, Amanda. You won't believe who it was. It was Dwayne Carson," he informed her.

An instant picture came to Amanda's mind, of a short, stocky, bespectacled and balding man with a flamboyant mustache. He'd always reminded Amanda of the Mayor of Munchkin City.

"Dwayne. . .the janitor?" she asked in disbelief.

"Yes. He confessed to the whole thing," Billy informed her. "He wrote the letter and planned to do everything he threatened."

"But what does he have against me?" she asked, perplexed.

"It's a long story, but I guess you turned him down once when he asked you out?"

"Yeah, I remember. But I wasn't mean to him - I declined the date nicely. I was always nice to Dwayne," she defended herself staunchly, in her typical style.

"Of course, you were, Amanda. You're nice to everyone," he said soothingly. "But this guy has a screw loose. He fed information to Karen Watson, your look-alike, which is why she was so convincing as you," he informed her, and waited for her response.

It was predictable. "Oh, my gosh. . ."

"Anyway, come home. We'll talk more then," he suggested.

"Does Lee know. . ." she began hesitantly.

"No," he replied. Something in his voice caught her attention. "No, he doesn't know."

"What's wrong, Sir?" she questioned him nervously.

"Amanda, Lee was stabbed," he began. Hearing her gasp, he quickly continued. "He'll be fine, don't worry. He has a deep wound to the left shoulder and a bump on his head, but he's going to be all right."

"Oh, my gosh," she said again. "I'll be home as soon as I can."

"Good," Billy said firmly, then added. "Lee's been really distraught, Amanda. I've never seen him react this way before, about anything."

"Yes, Sir," Amanda said quietly.

"I don't know how he'll handle. . .seeing you," he added quietly.

Amanda sighed. "I know."

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The next morning, Lee woke up in a hospital bed. It took a moment for him to realize where he was and why he was there. He sat up slowly, wincing at the pain in his shoulder.

Reaching up with his other arm, he felt the bump on his head and grimaced. 'I must look like a conehead,' he mused to himself.

A chipper red-headed nurse entered the room. "We're awake!" she greeted him, her voice musical.

"Yes, *we* are," Lee answered, his hospital patient persona already emerging.

"We have a shot for the pain," she announced, drawing out the word "pain" into two musical syllables.

"*We* don't want it," Lee argued, sarcasm dripping from his voice.

Ignoring him, she came around to his left side where he could least resist her and applied pressure to his flank.

His body rolled and he felt the inadequate hospital gown slide, revealing his entire backside to the nurse, who quickly poked the needle into the flesh of his upper hip.

"There we go!" she sang out.

A whirlwind of energy, she was out of the room a second later, leaving Lee to try and regain his dignity as he adjusted the gown and pulled up the blanket, again.

A knock at the door indicated another visitor. "Yes?" he called out, irritated.

Billy entered the room, bearing a plant from the gift shop. "How are you feeling, Lee?" he asked, setting his gift on the window sill.

"I've been better," Lee grouched. "Thanks for the plant."

"You're welcome," Billy said. "Dwayne Carson was in love with Karen Watson. He helped her to become Amanda's double," he informed Lee, getting right to the point before Lee could ask.

"He killed Amanda?" Lee questioned, glaring.

"No. It's a long story. Best to wait until you're feeling better," Billy suggested.

"It all fits, Billy!" Lee insisted, his voice beginning to slur from the shot he'd been given. "That's why Amanda's dead. He wanted Amanda to die, but Karen died instead!"

"I know, but. . ."

"Oh, come on, Billy!" Lee exclaimed, but his eyelids were growing heavy.

"I'll talk to you more later, Lee," Billy stood to leave, relieved not to have to finish the conversation. Lee's eyes had closed, and he was breathing evenly.

Billy ran into Amanda in the hallway. She looked tired and anxious, and he doubted if she'd even been home, yet. He knew that she had contacted her family and that they should be home soon, as well.

"How's Lee?" she asked anxiously.

"He's okay. Asleep for now," Billy replied. "Let me tell you a little of what happened. . ."

He filled her in on Dwayne Carson and his plan. Amanda listened quietly, almost feeling sorry for the janitor. It was obvious that Karen had been using the disturbed man.

Billy noticed Amanda beginning to fidget, twisting and untwisting the strap of her purse. He gave her a fatherly smile.

"You can go in and see him, but he probably won't even know you're here."

"Thanks," she smiled gratefully.

"Oh, and Amanda," he stopped her.

"Yes, Sir?"

"Did you want me to talk to Lee? You know, be the one to break the news?"

"Thank you," she replied, placing a hand on his arm. "But I think I'd better do that on my own. I owe it to him."

"I think you're right," Billy agreed, relieved. "He'll still chew me out, but I'd rather take it after he's seen you."

Amanda smiled. After Billy had walked away, she crept into Lee's room. She felt her heart respond to seeing him. She approached the bed, and reached out to stroke Lee's forehead.

"I'm home," she whispered.

He stirred, mumbling, "'Mmmanda?"

"Shhh," she soothed, wondering how he'd heard her. He obviously wasn't awake or cognizant. She couldn't help taking his hand in hers. She felt him grip hers back, and looked at his face. His eyes were still closed, but a small smile played upon his lips.

Amanda tried to gently extract her hand, but he tightened his hold and moaned, frowning.

"Don't go, again," he whispered. "Stay."

"I can't right now. I'll come see you when you're feeling better," she told him, knowing that he was talking in his sleep.

Slowly, she pulled her hand away and left the room. Moments after she'd gone, Lee's eyelids fluttered open, and he thought he smelled a trace of Amanda's perfume.

"Amanda?" he called. Getting no response, he grunted in confusion. Closing his eyes, again, he told firmly himself that he was going to have to get over these crazy apparitions.

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Later that day, Lee was released from the hospital, not required to return until his stitches were ready to be removed. Billy came to pick him up and drive him back to his apartment.

As they drove along, Lee again took up the argument that Carson must have been the one who shot Amanda. He was frustrated, and couldn't understand why Billy was so resistant to the idea.

"Don't you see? There hasn't been any other line of evidence to come up that you haven't told me about, has there?" Lee demanded. He was anxious for Amanda's killer to be brought to justice.

"Lee, trust me," Billy sighed. "We can continue this discussion tomorrow, if you still want to, but not right now."

"Why not? We're just wasting time, Billy!" Lee nearly shouted in frustration.

"There's a lot that you don't know, Lee," Billy hedged.

Lee exhaled in frustration. "I just feel so helpless. There's nothing I can do. I keep thinking, what could I have done differently? Is there anything I could have done to save her? Billy, I'd give my soul to have her back right now, and it's killing me that I can't even avenge her death."

"Just remember, that, Scarecrow," Billy advised cryptically.

"Remember what?" Lee asked, confused.

"That you'd give your soul to have Amanda back."

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Amanda had left the hospital, and gone home to wait for her family. Once reunited with them, she gave them a watered-down version of the truth. She explained that a man had lost someone he loved, who had looked a lot like Amanda. He had sadly gone crazy, and wanted to punish Amanda for being alive.

She assured them that he wouldn't be able to hurt them ever again. They were relieved and happy to be home again.

They had lunch together, and Amanda tried to answer all of their questions to the best of her ability. As she didn't have every answer herself, she had a hard time explaining some of the things that had happened.

After eating, Amanda went up to her bedroom to unpack her things. It felt good to be home again, and the only thing bothering her, now, had to do with her partner. She wasn't sure, yet, what to do about him.

How did one handle such a situation? she wondered. "Hi, Lee. Just thought I'd drop by to let you know I'm not dead."

Shaking her head, she busied herself with putting her new garments away and sorting the things that needed to be laundered.

The phone rang once, and she figured her mother had grabbed it. Amanda remembered the letter. Had he come here? It wasn't likely. Still, she felt compelled to check.

Dotty hollered up the stairs a moment later, "Darling, phone!"

She'd been reaching for the drawer, but picked up the telephone instead. "Hello?" she greeted.

"Amanda, it's Billy."

"Hello, Sir."

"I just wanted to call and let you know that Lee's at home. They released him about an hour ago."

"Okay," she said nervously. "Thanks."

Sensing her apprehension, Billy tried to reassure her. "Just explain what happened. Blame it on me, I did make 'contact zero' an order, after all. He's been in the business long enough to understand something like this. I'll fill him in on my reasons later, if you don't want to broach that subject."

Billy sounded to Amanda like he was trying to convince himself as much as her. She thanked him for calling and hung up. The knowledge that Lee was home, and the trepidation she felt about facing him made concentrating on anything else impossible.

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Lee moved about the apartment carefully, so as not to jar his shoulder. He hadn't eaten lunch at the hospital and was famished, but couldn't find much to eat. After searching through the scant contents of his refrigerator, he settled on two slices of leftover pizza.

The last time he and Amanda had worked late, she'd come over to his apartment and they'd ordered a pizza. His stomach seemed to tighten into a knot. Everything he did reminded him of Amanda.

Would this ever get any easier? He knew it wouldn't. Suddenly losing his appetite, he put the pizza back into the box and headed into the bedroom. The shot was still making him drowsy, and he decided to take a nap.

First, he opened his nightstand drawer and pulled out Amanda's letter. Reading it made him feel close to her. He focused his attention on the line, "I feel an intrinsic connection between us."

Intrinsic connection. He did feel it, contrary to what she had thought. That was exactly how he had felt. It was how he still felt. He was still very much aware of the bond they had shared. How could he feel it if she was gone? He replaced the letter carefully and closed the drawer.

Within minutes, he was sound asleep. His dream took him back to the day he lost Amanda, and he relived the entire incident. She was in his arms, again. Rocking her back and forth, he repeated her name over and over again.

Lee sat up quickly, his heart trying frantically to burst out of his ribcage. His face was wet with tears, the rest of him was drenched in sweat, and he could still feel Amanda's limp body in his arms.

Staggering to the bathroom, he peeled off his clothes and stepped into the shower. He didn't hear the doorbell ring, five minutes later.

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Amanda waited with unsteady nerves for the door to open. She knocked, again, wondering if he was sleeping.

She tried the door, and it was locked. Shrugging, she pulled out a lock pick and quickly opened the door.

Worried that he hadn't come to the door when she'd knocked, she let herself in, and could hear the shower running. She set down her purse and removed her sweater, wondering again what had happened to her coat.

'Must be in the same place as my missing lipstick,' she told herself. She folded and unfolded her hands, wishing Lee would hurry up.

After another minute, she heard the shower shut off. It was suddenly difficult to breathe. She faced the hallway and waited for him to come out.

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Lee dried off and pulled on the robe that hung on the back of the bathroom door. He was hungry, again. He figured he'd eat the pizza after all.

Maybe later, he'd drive by her house, just to see it. Maybe he'd look through the window and check on her mother and sons if they were back home. Just the thought of doing these things made him feel oddly comforted.

He opened the bathroom door and headed into the living room. He ran a hand through his still-damp hair and looked up. What he saw made him stop dead in his tracks, his breath catching in his throat.

Oh, God. . .Amanda.

"Amanda. . ." he whispered, wondering if she was a hallucination.

She didn't respond, just stood there staring back at him, on the verge of tears.

He rushed towards her, until he was only a foot away, and she was still there. This couldn't be happening. Every nerve ending in his body was aware of her. He could feel her there, he could smell her. Could he touch her?

He reached out a tentative hand and touched her face. She was real! He felt himself start to shake. How could this be?

Amanda swallowed hard at his touch, and put her own hand over his. "Lee. . ." she breathed.

"Amanda," he said her name again, wonderingly. Suddenly, he took her forcefully into his arms and held her tightly. "Amanda."

When he released her, she had tears in her eyes. "Lee. . ."

"Why?" he asked, his voice cracking. "How?"

"I had to, Lee. Please understand," she pleaded.

He shook his head, not understanding at all. "Why?" he asked again, able only to gasp out the lone word.

"Come here." She took his hand and they sat together on the couch. Lee sat right next to her and kept her hand tightly in his own.

She haltingly explained everything to him, from the moment she received the letter to her meeting with Billy, and what they decided had to be done. He listened intently, his eyes never leaving her face.

"So it was all a set up?" he said slowly.

"I had to 'die' to protect Mother and the boys and. . .you," she said regretfully.

"You could have told me," he replied, the pain reflected in his eyes. He pulled his hand away from hers.

"No," she shook her head.

"Yes, Amanda! You could have trusted me." He was becoming more and more agitated the more he thought about the situation.

"Mr. Melrose said. . ." she began.

"No, Amanda. This is about you and me. Not Billy! *I 'm* your partner!" he shouted, accusing her with his eyes. His face was contorted in pain and anger.

"Lee. . .you were in danger, too. If you had known the truth, Dwayne would have known. . ."

"You didn't know it was Carson, Amanda. Not until after the fact!" He backed away from her, towards the corner of the couch.

He could see that he was hurting her, but he didn't care. He had just been through hell because he thought he'd lost her forever. Horribly, now that he had her back, all he wanted was for her to feel the agony he'd felt.

"And that's supposed to make a difference? Lee, listen to me! Regardless of how things went, if you had known the truth, Carson would have been able to tell. He'd been watching us; watching you. Would you rather have had me tell you? If he'd known, then he would have tried to kill you sooner, and probably gotten to my family, too. Is that what you want?"

She stopped, unable to say anything else for the moment. They stared at each other for what seemed like an eternity. Lee held her eyes, unrelentingly.

Finally, she flinched and looked away, then spoke again. "We've been through this before, Lee. I thought you were dead once, too. I . . ."

"Amanda!" he interrupted loudly. "That was a long time ago! That was different. It was before. . .before. . ."

"Before what?" she asked, holding her breath.

"Before we really got to know each other. . .before we were friends," he finished weakly. It wasn't what he'd been about to say. He knew it, and he knew she knew it.

"Lee, I'm sorry. It was the only thing to do. Billy told me I couldn't tell you. It was a direct order. I tried to convince him otherwise," she tried desperately to explain. "But his reasons made sense, and. . ."

"I thought you were dying in my arms," Lee said evenly, cutting off her explanation. "I would have taken your place if I could have. I was begging you not to leave me, Amanda!"

"I'm sorry," she whispered, unable to acknowledge the sheer torment she'd listened to him going through. "I'll understand if you never want to see me, again. Do you want me to leave?" the hurt and guilt in her eyes and voice was evident. She was giving him the choice.

He didn't respond. Amanda waited, and still he said nothing. She nodded, then slowly stood and walked over to the door, waiting for him to call her back. She turned to find him watching her, all emotion had drained from his face.

He shook his head, slowly, transfixed by her soulful eyes. What was he doing? He'd been ready to give anything - his soul - to have her back, and he'd gotten his wish. And here he was, arguing with her, hurting her feelings, and making her think he hated her.

She turned the handle and pulled the door open.

Running a hand through his hair, he forced himself to speak. "No. Don't leave," he said simply.

Amanda stopped and closed the door, leaning against it to support herself. "Okay," she agreed, relieved beyond words, but still anxious.

"Amanda. . .this whole thing has been a nightmare," he told her as he began to pace.

"For me, too," she told him.

"I know, you had to be away from your family. . ." he spoke quietly, sounding disappointed.

"That's not why," she interjected.

"Then why?" he asked, stopping to face her, but staying across the room.

"Lee, when I agreed to this plan, I - I knew you'd be upset. I knew it because we're friends, and we work together, and because I've been through it with you, but. . ." she faltered, looking away. "I didn't know you'd be as. . .upset as you were. I had no idea. . ."

Lee knew what she was talking about. Of course, she had heard his grief-stricken reaction when he'd thought she was dying.

"You're very important to me," he offered warily, acknowledging what she was getting at. "I didn't want to lose you, Amanda. The thought made me crazy."

"You. . .called me 'baby'," she said awkwardly, cringing slightly as she looked up at him. She bit her lower lip in embarrassment, waiting for his denial.

He crossed the room to stand before her and took her hand. Her eyes never left his, as if she was trying to read in them what he wouldn't say aloud.

"I know," he said quietly, averting his eyes. "It was. . .I was so afraid," he began. He shook his head and swallowed over the lump that had risen in his throat, blocking his vocal cords.

Looking back up, he brought his hands up to her face, touching her almost wonderingly. "I was so scared. . .You have no idea how scared. I thought I had lost you."

"I'm so sorry," she whispered again.

"You're really here," he said hoarsely, the reality of the situation sinking further into his tortured psyche.

She nodded. Her hands moved of their own accord up to his forearms. His thumbs wiped the tears from her eyes. Lee could see her true feelings for him reflected in her deep brown eyes. How had he never seen how she felt before?

He bent his head, his eyes now focused on her lips. Almost without thought, he took a step closer to her and touched his lips to hers. Hearing Amanda's breath catch in her throat, and feeling himself respond in kind, he took possession of her mouth and kissed her with passion.

He removed his hands from her face and wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her even closer, never breaking contact with her lips. Marveling at how perfectly she molded against him, he deepened the kiss and clung to her.

She was here, in his arms, alive! That was all that mattered. His hands roamed from her shoulders to her lower back, still wanting to assure himself that she was really there.

When they pulled away, they gazed at each other, absorbing the newness of intimacy. Amanda was the first to look, her features registering uncertainty. He tilted her chin and kissed her forehead.

"Hey. . .what's wrong?" Lee asked tenderly.

"You're not going to say you kissed me because you were just relieved that I'm not dead, are you?" she asked seriously.

"No," he replied firmly, shaking his head to emphasize the word. "No more evasions. I'm through fighting my feelings for you. Thinking I had lost you brought home all the things I should have done differently. I need you, Amanda."

She studied his face, and knew he meant it. "I need you, too."

"We have a lot to talk about," he said, kissing the tip of her nose.

"I know," she agreed, sinking back into his embrace.

After a moment of just holding each other, Amanda broke the silence. "I don't want to leave you, but I've got to get home. I told Mother I'd be back in an hour."

His body stiffened, and he shook his head firmly from side to side. "No. Don't go."

"I don't want to, but. . ." she began, but closed her mouth, transfixed by the intensity of his gaze.

"Then don't," he repeated, lowering his lips her neck. "I'm not going to let you leave. Not yet."

"Oh. . ." she exclaimed at the sensation of his breath and kisses on the column of her throat. She capitulated, unable to resist him, and nodded weakly. "Okay. I won't leave."

Lee smiled into her hair, having obtained victory. "I know."

"I'll just think of something to tell Mother. . ." she trailed off breathlessly as he trailed kisses around to just beside her mouth.

"Please, don't put me through this ever again," he suddenly pleaded. "It would kill me."

"Never again. I promise," she said, placing her hand on his cheek.

"I mean it, Amanda. I don't care what the circumstances are," his voice was commanding and forceful, his eyes compelling.

All she could do was nod. Satisfied that he had made his point, Lee led her around to the couch and they sat down. They held onto each other as if afraid that physical separation would somehow break the spell that had been cast.

The quiet was eventually broken and they were able to talk about the previous few days. Lee had questions, and Amanda was able to answer them to his satisfaction. He admitted that the experience had drained him emotionally, but that it had also roused feelings that he'd been unwilling to deal with before.

Lee admitted to Amanda that he'd gone to her house after the funeral, to be close to her.

"That's so sweet," Amanda told him, obviously touched.

"Oh, I almost forgot. I'll be right back," he said suddenly, and disappeared into his bedroom. He returned with her coat and her lipstick and handed them to her.

"You left your lipstick in the 'Vette," he smiled, thrilled to be able to give it back.

"And my coat?" she questioned.

"Oh, yeah, your coat. . ." Lee paused. "I took it," he confessed, sitting down and placing an arm around her shoulders.

"You took it?" she repeated, her eyebrows raising in question.

"Yeah. I wanted it," he said gruffly, slightly embarrassed.

"Why?" she asked him, perplexed.

"Because you were wearing it the day you changed my life," he replied sincerely.

Her eyes shining with unshed tears, she took it from him and kissed him on the cheek. "That was a beautiful thing to do."

He kissed her again, to assure himself that she was really back and in his arms, where she belonged.

Lee didn't tell her about the letter he'd found. For that, he had other plans.

~~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Later that night, after Amanda had left, Lee drove over to her house with a mission in mind. He picked the lock on her back door and stepped into the kitchen. With the stealth of a cat burglar, he made his way upstairs and into Amanda's bedroom.

He could tell by the sound of her even breathing that she was asleep. He crept over to the bed, and slowly pulled out the drawer of her nightstand.

After replacing the letter where he'd found it, he closed the drawer, purposely leaving it out an inch, the edge of the envelope clearly visible. He bent down and placed a soft kiss on her cheek, then left the room and her house.

~~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Amanda awoke the next morning to the sounds of Phillip and Jamie arguing in their bedroom. Dotty stuck her head into the room and said a cheery good morning.

"Good morning, Mother!" Amanda greeted.

She sat up in bed and stretched. She noticed that her nightstand drawer was ajar and that something was hanging out.

Grasping the corner of the envelope, she slowly drew it out from the drawer. She immediately recognized it as the letter to Lee she'd been writing. Frowning and perplexed, she pulled out the folded sheets.

Her heart skipped a beat when she saw Lee's writing scrawled on the back of the last page. He'd found and read her letter. . .not that it mattered anymore.

As she read his answer, a smile formed and grew into a grin by the end of his words.

"Dear Amanda,

I couldn't find the words to tell you, yesterday, that I'd taken this letter. When I came to your house after the funeral, I just wanted to be near you somehow. I came into your room, looking for some memory of you that no one would miss, and found the envelope with my name.

I'm sorry that I made you feel you had to hide your true feelings from me, especially since my own feelings so closely mirror yours.

You're my best friend, too. Not everyone gets a second chance in life, but I did, and I will be grateful every day for the rest of my life.

I don't think either of us is ready to speak those three words out loud, yet, but I want you to know that the feeling is mutual. The day you came into my life was the best day I'd had up until then. Every day since has been progressively better and better.

Love,

Lee"

The End