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SUMMARY: Lee and Amanda struggle with the aftermath of a case that hits a little too close to home. This story, set in 1996, is the conclusion to the **With or Without You** series.

Author's notes: this is **not** the sequel to Through A Glass. That one is coming. There are some veiled references to that story, but nothing that will spoil it.

One Heart, One Life, One Truth

Prologue

She stood alone at her kitchen window, watching the explosion of color in the east. The quiet of the early morning was a soothing contrast to the hectic pace of her life. It was in these few magical minutes that she could distinctly hear the echoes of their past...

A hastily exchanged smile as they both hurried to work...

Laughter welling up from deep inside as they shared a private joke...

Their children playing quietly in the background of their lives...

And the words, drifting to her through a hazy fog of memory - one heart, one life, one truth.

One heart... demanding a choice...

One life... blended from two...

One truth... nothing stayed the same.

Chapter One
Sunday, August 25, 1996:
“Amanda”

The warm summer breeze fanned her face as she set another pitcher of lemonade on the picnic table. She quickly surveyed the scene, making sure nothing else was needed. Everyone seemed to be having a good time, enjoying the pleasant conversation and the relaxing hush of a Sunday in late August.

Her guests all seemed so happy, their troubles carefully put away for the afternoon. It was an eclectic mix of personalities, this group she considered her extended family. Her ex-husband, Joe, and Jonathan Stone were animatedly discussing the town’s latest political debacle. Francine Desmond Stone was perched nearby, surveying the scene as she absently fingered the buttons on her blouse.

An Armani original, Amanda thought with a smile, recognizing the label. Marriage and motherhood had not altered Francine’s sense of style one iota. She watched as her friend followed the conversation with polite boredom. She could sympathize. After spending her workdays knee-deep in politics and intrigue, she would prefer it not intrude on her weekend, either.

Her gaze wandered to the middle of the yard. Phillip and Jamie, both home for the occasion, were tossing a baseball with their little brother. Francine’s daughter, Jackie, looked on with unconcealed admiration. Amanda smiled as she listened to her oldest son explaining the finer points of pitching to her youngest.

Amanda liked nothing better than to see her three boys together. They were all so different, yet equally special. Phillip, twenty-three, now in his second year of law school; Jamie, the serious, sensitive one, a senior at Georgetown, majoring in psychology; and her youngest, Matthew Robert, named for his grandfather and his great-uncle, currently pursuing a career in Little League. They covered all ends of the spectrum.

On the far side of the patio, her mother was busy recounting the highlights of her latest airplane flight to a captive audience. Joe's wife, Carrie, and Jeannie Melrose both grinned benignly as Dotty waxed enthusiastic about 'glide paths' and 'winds aloft'. Kate Markham, Phillip's girlfriend of two years, listened with rapt attention. Amanda had a feeling that after today, Phillip might have a hard time keeping that girl's feet on the ground.

She really was proud of her mother. It had taken her five long years, but she had finally done it. Amateur pilots, beware... Dotty West had joined their ranks. Amanda couldn't help but grin at the image of her mother actually piloting a plane. She remembered a time when she could barely drive a car.

She instinctively sought out Lee, to share her joke with him, then stopped herself. The unspoken communication they'd developed over the years was a luxury she couldn't afford these days. She was afraid of what she might find if she looked into his eyes too closely.

His voice floated to her from across yard. From his affectionate tone, she knew he was talking to Jenny. She risked a quick glance, her face unconsciously softening at the sight of father and daughter sitting together side by side.

She almost couldn't believe that their 'baby' was turning five today. She was glad everyone had been able to make it this afternoon for the party. The years flew by so quickly; special occasions were the only time they had for get-togethers anymore.

The birthday girl certainly seemed to enjoy being the center of her father's attention as she held court under the sheltering branches of the old oak tree. Amanda marveled at her small daughter. After four tries, she had finally succeeded in producing a child who looked exactly like her. And, like her, she had eyes only for Lee.

"Hey, Mom."

Phillip's voice interrupted her nostalgia. She looked up to see her son walking towards her, his face lit up with an impish grin.

“Jamie and I thought maybe you’d show Matty your famous hook slide.”

“Very funny,” she replied, giving him a look.

“You know how to do a hook slide, Mrs. Stetson?” Kate asked, turning towards Amanda and Phillip with a smile.

“Not too well, I’m afraid.” Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Jenny dragging Lee towards the picnic table.

“Amanda used to coach Phillip and Jamie’s team,” her mother explained with a laugh. “In another lifetime.”

Amanda shot her mother an exasperated look. Ten years, and she still couldn’t resist needling her about the past. Sometimes she wished her mother would just agree to marry Curt. It might give her a whole new perspective on life.

“Mom was a great coach,” she heard Phillip state in a teasing voice. “She single handedly guided our team into last place - and still managed to make the world safe for democracy.”

Everyone laughed at Phillip’s remark, including Amanda. She had to hand it to him – he always seemed to know exactly how to diffuse the tension in any situation. He would make a good mediator.

“I think it’s nice that your mom took time to coach,” Kate retorted, slapping Phillip soundly in the ribs. “My mother spent most of my childhood in a courtroom.”

“I guess that happens when you’re one of the top trial lawyers in New York,” Joe put in kindly. “Are you thinking of following in her footsteps, Kate?”

The group turned towards Kate expectantly and Amanda could feel her discomfort.

Phillip came to the rescue again. “Actually, Dad, Kate’s mother said there would be a spot for both of us in her firm after we graduated.”

Amanda watched as Joe twisted uncomfortably in his chair. No wonder Kate had been so reluctant to say anything – she knew from Carrie that Joe half expected Phillip to go into practice with him.

“I see,” Joe said in steely voice. “Are you considering it?”

“Yes,” Phillip said, reaching for Kate’s hand. “We’re both giving it some serious thought.”

“You should,” his father returned. “You know, it’s not easy to mix a personal and professional relationship.”

“It’s seemed to work out all right for Mom and Lee,” Phillip stated testily.

In the uncomfortable hush that followed Phillip’s remark, Amanda couldn’t help but look at her husband. Their eyes met for a moment before he pointedly looked away. He adjusted the bow on Jenny’s ponytail with infinite care. Even Phillip seemed at a loss for words and Amanda saw her older sons exchange a puzzled glance.

“I think I should check on that birthday cake,” Amanda mumbled, beating a hasty retreat and heading for the back door.

“I’ll give you a hand, dear,” Dotty announced, rising from her chair.

“That’s okay, Mother, I’ve got it,” she called hastily over her shoulder. She didn’t feel up to her mother’s probing questions right now.

Amanda sighed in relief as she reached the quiet sanctuary of her kitchen. Leaning on the counter, she drew several deep, calming breaths. Her shoulders slumped and she fought down her tears. Don’t fall apart now, Amanda, she chided. Not with a patio full of guests. There’s plenty of time for that later.

“Amanda?”

At the sound of Francine’s voice, she snapped to attention, straightening her shoulders and blinking away the remaining tears.

“Do you need some help?”

She heard the kindness in her simple words. Somehow, it almost made her feel worse.

“No,” she replied haltingly, her hand smoothing a lock of hair. “I was just...ah...looking for the birthday candles. I can’t seem to remember where I put them.”

“Sit down and let me look.”

“Francine...”

“Amanda, don’t argue.” She raised her brows, her blue eyes enlarging to emphasize her words. “I’m more than capable of locating five candles and putting them on a cake.”

“Okay, you win.” She rested her chin on the palm of her hand as Francine conducted her systematic search. She had the routine down perfectly.

“So,” Francine began as she carefully inserted the pink candles into the cake. “I take it things are as strained at home as they are at work.”

“Yes,” Amanda admitted with a frown. “Although I was hoping to get through the day without that being too obvious.”

“You’ve got to give it some time, Amanda. It’s been a rough summer... for all of us.”

Amanda could hear the mixture of sympathy and pain in her friend’s voice. “I know... so many changes.”

Francine rested against the counter, her right hand smoothing the cuff on her blouse. “At least Jeannie seems to be doing better.”

“Sometimes I don’t know how she does it. I really admire her.”

“She probably spent a lot of years preparing herself for this scenario.”

“I wonder if you can ever really be prepared for something like this. Billy was administration - he was supposed to be ‘safe’.” Amanda paused, her fingers massaging her forehead.

“Yeah,” Francine concurred, shifting her gaze to the window. “At least as safe as you can be in this business.”

“Even when you live with the possibility every day, you never really think...” She broke off, remembering that day so many years ago when Billy stood in her living room on Maplewood Drive and told her Lee was dead. She could still feel the cold finality of those words, the pain mixed with a smoldering anger at the capriciousness of life. They’d been wrong that time, Lee had come back to her... but Amanda knew she’d rather die herself than ever go through that pain again.

“Has Lee said anything more about taking Billy’s job? Cartwright is pushing for a decision.”

“Not really. I know he’s still considering it. Although,” she added bitterly, “he’d probably be more likely to discuss it with you than me these days.”

“Amanda,” Francine said sternly, moving quickly towards her friend. “Lee loves you. You can’t doubt that. It’s patently obvious to anyone with eyes.”

Amanda smiled as she felt Francine’s comforting hand on her shoulder. Motherhood had taught her the importance of touch. The Francine Desmond she had met all those years ago would never have comforted her that way.

“I know he does,” she replied in a small voice. “Unfortunately, love isn’t the issue.”

Francine nodded sadly. “I know.” She turned her attention to the cake, straightening the candles with infinite care. “Well, I think that’s perfect. Shall we head outside and feed the birthday girl?”

“Tell them I’ll be out in a minute.” Amanda rose wearily from the chair. “I just want to find the special birthday plate.”

“Okay,” Francine said, hesitating for a fraction of a second before she left. “You sure you’re all right?”

“I will be.”

She heard the door click shut as Francine left her alone and she shivered, the words echoing in her ears...

“You sure you’re all right?” she asked him, rubbing the goose bumps on her arms. It was unseasonably cool for the tenth of June.

Lee sat at the kitchen table, his head in his hands. “I will be. It’s just been a horrendous day.”

Amanda nodded. Horrendous didn’t even begin to cover it. Everyone at the funeral today seemed to wear the same shell-shocked expression. In a business where death in the ‘line of duty’ was part and parcel of their everyday routine, they had seemed remarkably ill prepared for it to happen to Billy Melrose.

She placed a comforting hand on Lee’s shoulder. “I just never believed...” He left the thought unfinished as he turned and buried his head in her chest.

Her arms closed around him, her fingers moving soothingly through the short hair on the back of his neck.

“I’m going to miss him, Amanda.”

“I know. I will, too. Earlier, at the service, I kept thinking about the first time we met. In his office, after that Mrs. Welch business.” Amanda smiled, her hands tenderly cradling her husband’s head. “It’s funny, after all these years, that’s what sticks in my mind. The beginning, not the end.”

“I’ll always be grateful that he wouldn’t let me get rid of you.” He pulled her down into his lap, smiling at the memory. “He knew right away what it took me years to see.”

“That’s why they paid him the big bucks,” she rejoined, repeating the line Billy Melrose had used with persistent regularity over the years.

"It's not fair, you know," Lee said bitterly. "He was eight months away from retirement. He and Jeannie were finally going to take that world cruise he'd been talking about for years..."

"I know. Nobody ever promised life was fair." Her lips brushed across his forehead. "I think you told me that once."

"They're not going to get away with it," Lee stated, the venom pouring through his words. "And that's one statement I can assure you is fair. I intend to see to it personally."

He stood up, sliding her gently off his lap. "Lee..."

He hugged her lightly, his lips barely grazing hers as he headed towards the door. "I'm goin' out for a while," he mumbled as he grabbed his car keys. "I need to do some thinkin'."

"Do you want some company? I could call Mother to come over..."

"I think I need to be alone," he said, his eye meeting hers in a prayer for understanding.

"Go ahead." She wished she knew the words to comfort him. She could feel his pain even across the room. It was almost a living thing, reaching out to crush them both. "Take all the time you need. I'll wait up for you if you want," she managed to choke out.

"Okay." He hesitated for a minute, his hand on the doorknob, and he turned to her with a sad smile. "Thank you."

The anguish on his face closed around her heart like a vise...

With a start, Amanda jerked herself back to the present. Through the screen door, she heard Jenny noisily demanding her cake.

"Hold on," she called. "Mommy's coming..."

Chapter Two
Sunday, August 25, 1996
"Lee"

He was almost to the garage door when he spotted them. His stepsons were leaning against Amanda's car, their backs to him. They were too engrossed in whatever they were discussing to hear his quiet footsteps. He couldn't help but smile as he paused for a moment to observe them through the window. He still couldn't believe that these two tall young men were the same little kids he'd watched in a similar fashion through Amanda's windows on Maplewood Drive.

Those days were long past now, the old house destroyed in a blinding explosion on that fateful night so many years ago. That event had marked the beginning of his official role as their stepfather. A relationship he'd entered into hesitatingly at first, but that had enriched his life tenfold. Lee Stetson, family man. There was a day when he would never have recognized that description as his. Phillip and Jamie had shown him what it really meant to belong to a family, to be a father. Matthew and Jenny now reaped the benefit of the lessons his stepsons had taught him.

He started to announce his presence when the last part of Phillip's sentence caught him off-guard.

"...you didn't tell me they were having problems."

"That's because I had no idea," came Jamie's subdued reply. "They've been kinda quiet since they got back, but I thought that was because of Billy."

"You're the one who's been around – you should know what's going on."

"I don't live here anymore, Phillip," he heard Jamie shoot back. "You didn't see them when they were in New York? Or were you too busy with Kate to notice?"

"They were working. Kate and I called a few times, but..." A note of panic crept into his voice. "God, you don't think that's it, do you? Do you think they found out we're living together?"

"I don't think so. You really are paranoid, you know. Must be feeling guilty for hiding it from Mom and Lee. Not to mention Dad and Carrie."

“I’m not afraid to tell Mom. Actually, she would probably take it better,” was Phillip’s philosophic reply. “Dad seems too determined these days to organize my life. And don’t psychoanalyze me... you’re not quite ‘Doctor’ King yet.”

“I don’t need an advanced degree to figure you out. Tell them... you’ll feel better.”

He heard Phillip’s exasperated sigh. “I plan to. I just thought maybe they had enough to deal with, after everything that happened. And now, I don’t want to add to their problems...”

Lee rounded the corner and entered the garage, coughing loudly to make sure they heard his entrance.

“Hey guys,” he said with a guilty grin. He really shouldn’t spy on his family, but past experience had taught him that a parent often learned some interesting things that way. He never dreamed his professional training would be so useful in his personal life. “I didn’t know you two were in here.”

They didn’t believe that one for a minute. He saw Phillip and Jamie exchange a nervous glance, wondering exactly how much he’d overheard.

“I was looking for those storage boxes I left here,” Phillip said quickly. “I thought Mom said they were in the garage.”

Lee wasn’t fooled. Phillip wore that same guilty expression the day he’d borrowed the Corvette without permission to impress his girlfriend... and had that unfortunate altercation with a tree.

Lee smiled at the memory. Time had blurred the edges of his anger over that incident. Looking back now, he only remembered his relief that Phillip and Julie had both emerged unscathed. If only his beloved car had been so lucky. Poor Phillip – he’d spent the rest of the summer working to pay off the repair bill. At least he’d learned a valuable life lesson. Flashy, expensive cars were equally expensive to fix.

He turned to his stepson with a smile. "I suppose you thought you'd con your brother into carrying your stuff."

"Yup. Only they don't seem to be here."

"Then I have no idea where you should look," Lee said, retrieving a baseball mitt from the large box in the corner. "You'll have to ask your mother."

He caught their anxious exchange at the mention of Amanda's name. Phillip looked pointedly at his brother. Lee suppressed a sigh. Evidently Jamie had been elected spokesperson. For all that he and Phillip had in common, it was Amanda's younger son that he'd developed a special rapport with over the years. It was something he'd never have predicted, given their shaky beginning.

He folded his arms across his chest, leaning back against the wall for support. "Okay, guys, out with it. What is it you're trying to ask me?"

Jamie cleared his throat, pausing as if to turn each word over carefully in his head.

"Phillip and I were just saying that Matty seems a little quieter than usual," he began tentatively. "We were wondering if everything was okay with him."

Lee smiled sadly. "He's okay, fellas. He's had a rough summer. Billy was his godfather. And he's seen how upset we've all been. I'm afraid I haven't done a very good job of hiding it."

Jamie nodded solemnly. "It's his first experience with losing someone."

"Yeah." Lee looked away, remembering his own first experience with inexplicable loss. For a minute he saw the face of a confused five year old in the windowpane before his own image snapped back into place. At least his son had been spared the pain of losing a parent. He should be grateful for that.

"I should come by more often," he heard Jamie state guiltily.

Lee turned away from the window and patted him comfortingly on the back. "You're too hard on yourself, Jamie. You've been busy with school and work. We all understand that."

"Still, being busy is no excuse."

Lee could hear the echo of his mother in Jamie's words. They really were very much alike. He suspected it was that likeness that had in the end drawn them closer together.

"We're always glad to see you, you know that. I know it means a lot to your mother that you both could make it for Jenny's birthday." He included Phillip in his glance. "Kate, too."

Phillip's face reddened at the mention of Kate's name, while Jamie finally found the courage to state the question they really wanted to ask.

"Speaking of Mom... Phillip and I were wondering if everything was okay with her... with both of you."

Lee avoided their gaze. That was a tougher question to answer. How do you define 'okay'? If the very fabric of your life had been ripped apart, then clumsily stitched back together, were you 'okay'? He didn't know.

"I won't deny it's been a pretty bad month," he began, trying to be as truthful as he could. "It has nothing to do with you guys. Some stuff from work just spilled over into our personal life." His hold on the truth slipped a little as he added, "Don't worry, we'll work things out."

"Why do I feel like I've heard that same speech before?" He saw the skepticism written on Philip's face as he added, "Right before Mom and Dad divorced."

Lee shifted uncomfortably. "I think you're getting a little ahead of yourself. People have problems all time, Phillip. It doesn't mean they always have to end in divorce." He fervently hoped that was true. "And you know," he added, taking the heat off his personal life, "if you're adult enough to be involved in a serious relationship yourself, then you're adult enough to understand that."

“Oh, sh...” he stopped himself. “You guys know? How did you find out?”

“We have our ways,” Lee laughed. “And your mother doesn’t know.”

“Are you going to tell her?” Phillip asked nervously.

“No, you are... before you leave, okay?” He raised an eyebrow as he looked at Phillip. Over the years, he’d found he could accomplish more with that expression than by raising his voice.

“Okay, I will,” Phillip replied reluctantly.

“Good. Jamie’s right, you’ll feel better.” He smiled at his stepson, wondering when he’d grown into such a pragmatic young man. He was proud of the part he’d played in shaping his life. “Your dad and Carrie were getting ready to leave a few minutes ago. I think they wanted to say goodbye.”

They both nodded and headed for the door. Lee tossed the mitt in Jamie’s direction. “Give this to Matthew and tell him I’ll be there in a few minutes, okay?”

“Sure.”

He could hear the muffled concern in Jamie’s voice and he knew he hadn’t succeeded in reassuring him. They were both still worried. Hell, for that matter, so was he. ‘Pretty bad’ was a poor epithet for the strain of the last few months. It had permeated every part of their lives. No wonder everyone was now caught in the emotional backlash. He closed his eyes, remembering...

“I can’t believe I’m hearing you correctly,” Amanda said, her eyes flashing expressively. Her words were measured and low since they were in his office, but he could hear the anger underscoring everything she said.

“Amanda, please...”

“It’s not even your jurisdiction. This went down in New York. Shouldn’t this be Pierce’s territory?”

John Pierce was his counterpart in the New York office. He was more than capable, but surely Amanda didn't really think he could leave the investigation into Billy's murder with him? It was the beginning of July and they still hadn't made any real progress on the case.

"I asked Cartwright to give it to me." He explained carefully, so she'd understand that this really was his decision.

"And he didn't have a problem with crossing the 'official' boundaries?"

"Well, since he's been hinting about giving me the East Coast Operations Chief position, he seemed more than happy to oblige."

He couldn't meet her eye as he offered that last piece of information. Cartwright, the Agency's director, had in fact been pushing him to accept for the past few weeks. He still wasn't sure. Amanda had been working in his administrative section ever since she'd come out of the field eight years ago. If he filled the hole Billy's death had created, he knew he'd be breaking up their professional partnership a second time.

"We both know what you're talking about here," his wife replied heatedly. "You don't intend to run this case administratively."

She looked at him knowingly, with eyes that seemed to see right into his soul. It was one of the few disadvantages of working with someone who knew him so well. He let go of the breath he'd been holding. At least she didn't seem inclined to discuss his promotion at the moment.

"I just can't sit back and let someone else handle this."

"You promised, Lee," she said sadly. "When our son was born... no more field work."

That tone bothered him more than her anger. That he could deal with in kind. But to know what he was doing was going to hurt her cut so much deeper.

"If there was any other way, don't you think I'd do it?" he asked in quiet desperation.

"There is another way. You just don't choose to use it." She sighed loudly as she sank down on the couch. "Part of you wants to be 'back in the action'. Don't deny it."

He walked over and sat beside her, taking her hand gently in his. His fingers rubbed over her wedding and engagement rings. "I've never regretted the decision to leave the field," he said in a low voice. "Our family means everything to me, you know that."

"Then don't risk it now," she pleaded.

"That's just it, Amanda. This is about family, too. Billy was our son's godfather. Damn it, he was practically a father to me. And I won't wait another thirty years to put this to rest."

"I know how long it took you to finally put your parents' death behind you, but..."

"I have to do something, Amanda. I can't live with this one."

He heard her sharp intake of breath and he ran his hand caressingly over her arm. "You've got to understand, Billy was always there for me. When I was a freshman, he's the one who showed me the ropes. He went out on a limb for me professionally more times than I care to remember. And personally...."

He paused, drawing in a deep breath before continuing. "He's the one who picked me up after I drank myself into oblivion the night Eric died. He let me in to see you when you were in the hospital after Birol...you know. And he kept me sane the night Matthew was born and we didn't know if you two would live or die." He turned away to hide his anguish. "I owe him."

She read his distress anyway. He felt her hand touch him tenderly, her fingers caressing the tense muscles on his shoulders. It was amazing what that could do to him, even after all these years. He felt the tension slowly begin to evaporate. "I can take care of myself," he added softly. "I promise."

He heard her sigh of resignation and instinctively knew he had won this round. She squeezed his shoulder one more time. "If you're determined to do this - well, okay, then," she said in reluctant agreement before calmly blowing him out of the water with her next statement.

"I'm going with you."

He felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end and he wrenched himself away. Rising, he turned to face her, pulling himself up to his full height as he enunciated plainly, "You most certainly are not."

She gave him a determined smile. "Sorry. It's non-negotiable."

"Amanda..."

"You aren't doing this alone, Scarecrow. Get used to the idea."

She moved off the sofa to stand in front of him. He found his senses suddenly assaulted by the provocative scent of her perfume. He took a step back to keep a buffer zone between them.

"I understand how you're feeling," she said as she took a step forward, refusing to allow his retreat. "Billy was family to me, too."

He looked into his wife's brown eyes and saw his own grief over Billy's death. He stopped running and slowly opened his arms.

"I can take care of myself, too, you know," she whispered against his chest. "It'll be okay."

He said nothing, simply held her tighter. He could argue all he wanted, but in the end she would still do exactly what she wanted. After all this time, they were more alike in that than he cared to think. At least working together had one advantage. He could make sure she was safe...

Make sure she was 'safe'... Lee shook his head sadly. He should have known better. He should have locked her up in an Agency holding cell so she couldn't follow him. He'd been such a fool to think he could protect her. You couldn't protect anyone in this business.

He shook off the memories as he heard the commotion in the front of the house. The guests were leaving. He really should say his goodbyes. With a loud sigh, he headed towards the noise.

Chapter Three
Sunday, August 25, 1996

“Amanda”

Amanda glanced around the room one more time. Everything was in its place, the last remains of the birthday party finally swept away. She stood for a minute in the quiet solitude of her immaculate kitchen.

After all the guests had finally departed, Amanda felt herself beginning to fade. She didn't know where Phillip, Kate and Jamie had found the strength to go out. Must be that boundless energy you seem to have in your twenties. When Lee volunteered to take over the kids' bedtime, she had gratefully accepted.

She switched off the light and climbed the stairs. She paused at the landing, listening for a minute on the way to her bedroom. She could hear Lee in Jenny's room, reading her favorite story.

“You missed a part, Daddy.” Her daughter's sleepy voice reached her in the hall.

“Did I?” she heard Lee laugh. Amanda grinned, too. Jenny always seemed to know when they tried to shorten her bedtime ritual. Tired as she was, she was still determined to hear every word.

“Yeah. Now you have to start at the beginning.”

Amanda could almost picture her small head nodding authoritatively. She heard Lee obligingly start the story again. He was such a pushover where their daughter was concerned. From her first breath, she had completely captured her father's heart.

Jenny was their 'miracle', the baby the doctors told her she'd never have. After the complications of Matthew's birth, neither of them had minded not being able to have another child. The drama of their son's untimely arrival had taken its toll. They had no desire to relive the experience. When she'd discovered that she was pregnant again at the age of 41, they were both in a state of shock.

Despite the doctor's predictions, it had been an easy pregnancy. It was almost as if this child was destined to be. And the first time she saw her daughter, she had fallen in love. Jenny seemed to have that effect

on her entire family. Everyone doted on her. Amanda knew they had all been blessed.

Stifling a yawn, she started towards her room, stopping for a minute to check on Matthew. Instead of in bed, she found him sitting at his desk playing with his miniature soldiers.

“Hey buddy, you’re up kind of late, aren’t you?” She tousled his hair affectionately.

“Just a few more minutes, Mom,” he begged. “I’m not that tired. Besides, Dad said he’d be in when he finished with Jenny.”

He looked up at her with his father’s questioning expression. She no longer wondered what Lee had looked like as a child. The answer was sitting right in front of her. Their son was the mirror image of his father; identical hazel eyes, that captivating smile. His face even wore the same look of pointed concentration as he solemnly moved his little soldiers around the table. Only the hair color was different, Matthew’s a few shades lighter and streaked by the summer sun. It was little wonder that Francine’s daughter always shadowed him with such obvious admiration. Amanda had to smile... that devastating Stetson charm, clearly evident even at seven years old.

She bent over and kissed him goodnight. “A few more minutes, then right into bed, okay?”

“Okay. ‘Night Mom.”

“Night, sweetheart,” she called as she headed into her own room. Closing the door, she sank down on the bed. The strain of the afternoon seemed to have finally caught up to her. She felt a hundred years old.

Lee used to have a sure-fired cure for that feeling - bubble bath, champagne and a full body massage. She smiled at the memory. Thinking back, that was probably exactly how their daughter had been conceived.

A bath would feel good tonight, though, she thought with a sigh. If only she had the strength to move. Pushing herself off the bed, she entered the bathroom. Wearily, she ran the water, breathing deeply as

the room filled with steam and the scent of jasmine. Shedding her clothes, she slipped beneath the bubbles, the warm water covering her like a silken blanket. She lay back and closed her eyes, feeling herself begin to unwind.

Amanda loved the master bathroom. Lee had redone it for her as an anniversary present. That year she'd spent the 13th of February in the hospital, recovering from Matthew's birth. When she came home, this surprise was waiting for her. There were two crews working around the clock to finish it in time, he'd told her with a proud grin. The best feature was this tub, a large Jacuzzi exactly like the one on the island where they'd spent their second honeymoon only the year before. Lee had whispered that it might be a while until they could christen it properly, but promised the wait would be worth it. As usual, his prediction had been absolutely right.

She heard a noise in the bedroom and opened her eyes. "Lee," she called hesitantly, "is Jenny settled in?"

"Yeah, finally," he answered with loud sigh. He sounded tired. The door opened slowly and he stuck his head in. "She was pretty wound up."

"I know. She's been looking forward to her party for weeks." Amanda smiled at her husband. "A whole day with you."

Lee smiled, too, his eye catching hers for a minute. She shifted slightly in the tub, the water splashing and displacing some of the bubbles. She watched her husband's expression slowly change, his eyes filled with a hunger she hadn't seen in a long time.

"Lee..." she began in a soft voice.

"Matthew's in bed, too," he interrupted, looking away abruptly. "I'm going downstairs to, ah, get a glass of water."

"I can remember a time when seeing me in this tub would send you downstairs for wine, not water," she muttered in disappointment.

He stopped for a minute, his hand on the doorframe. "It's hard, Amanda," he said at last, still refusing to look at her.

"It's hard for me, too."

"I know that. We've just got to give it some more time." He looked at her again, then quickly turned away. "Do you want anything?" he asked, resolutely keeping his eyes on the floor.

"No," she answered sadly, adding under her breath as she watched his retreating form, "what I want, you don't seem able to give me."

She leaned forward, hugging her knees to her chest. The bubbles tickled her nose and she closed her eyes...

"That feels wonderful," she sighed as Lee deftly washed her back. She leaned forward, the bubbles tickling her nose playfully.

"I'm glad you like it," he said, his voice warm and inviting. She felt his lips brush across her neck as he finished in a whisper, "I aim to please."

His hand slipped lower as he continued his massage. Amanda sighed softly. She leaned back, resting her head against his arm. She felt his other hand tenderly caress her face.

"Why don't you get rid of that robe and join me?"

He leaned over and kissed the top of her head. "I'll be right there. Do you want some more wine?"

"Not if you have to leave this bathroom to get it."

"Nope. Brought the bottle up here with me."

"In that case, I'd love some."

She smiled as she watched him refill their glasses. Setting them on the flat ledge on the side of the Jacuzzi, he quickly discarded his robe and slid in behind her. She fitted her back against his chest and his arms closed around her.

"It was nice of mother to take the kids for the night. It's convenient that she's so close."

“Yeah. See, I told you that stable on the back of the property would come in handy.”

“Are you comparing my mother to a horse, Stetson?”

“No,” he answered with a laugh. “I love your mother, you know that. But I also love having the house to ourselves.” As if to prove his point, his hands began to wander.

She let out an appreciative sigh. “I have to agree with you there.”

“I thought you might,” he laughed, curtailing his explorations for a minute as he handed her the wine glass. “To more evenings like this.”

She clinked their glasses in response. “With our children safely tucked away at Mother’s.”

Amanda relaxed, settling her head in the crook of his neck. The kids enjoyed nothing better than spending the night at their grandmother’s ‘car’ house, as Jenny called it. After Matthew was born, they had converted the old stable into a comfortable carriage house for Dotty. Amanda enjoyed having her mother nearby, still a part of their daily lives. But she suspected the added privacy was something Dotty appreciated, too.

She took a sip of wine, feeling the warmth spread through the length of her body. Lee picked up the washcloth, wringing it out and letting the drops trickle down her chest. He traced their path lightly with his finger.

Amanda sighed contentedly. “I’m glad we could grab some time alone before we go to New York.”

She could feel his body tense behind her and she mentally kicked herself. She’d been too relaxed to monitor what she said. Even though Lee had reluctantly agreed to include her, the investigation into Billy’s death was still a sore subject.

“It’s not too late for you to change your mind and stay here,” he reminded her for the hundredth time, his lips against her ear.

She took another sip of wine before responding. “That applies to you, too, you know. Pierce could handle this.” When he didn’t answer, she added pointedly, “We’ve been ‘round and ‘round this, Lee. If you go, I go.”

“We agreed you’d go before we knew ‘Cyclops’ was involved. Infiltrating that organization isn’t going to be easy. This could get dicey. No pun intended,” he added with a forced laugh.

“And that’s supposed to make me kiss you goodbye and put you on the plane to New York by yourself?” she said incredulously, ignoring his feeble attempt to diffuse the brewing argument. She twisted completely so they were face to face. “If you think that, then you really don’t know me very well.”

“I know you well enough to worry that you might get in over your head,” he replied tersely. “Do I need to remind you that things are different now? We have two children who happen to need their mother.”

“They happen to need their father, too,” she countered. “You should know that better than anyone.”

He didn’t reply, placing his glass down with studied care. She knew she’d struck a nerve and, sighing deeply, she tried again.

“You know, Lee, Phillip and Jamie weren’t that old when we first started working together. And don’t tell me I was just a civilian,” she added, seeing the look on his face. “There were still risks.”

“You did seem to have an uncanny knack for finding trouble,” he grinned.

She returned his look, splashing some water playfully in his direction, before continuing on a more serious note. “I know we both worry about Matthew and Jenny, but we’ve taken precautions. Our covers are good. We’re not using any known operatives from the New York office - our D. C. team will be anonymous there. Including me. Besides, I’m not the primary contact. You are.”

“Sometimes, you do everything you can and it’s still not enough.” He met her eye with a look of infinite sadness. “Covers get blown.”

She knew he was talking about what had happened to Billy. He’d let a personal vendetta draw him back into the action. A lot like Lee was doing now. And Billy had ended up with a bullet in his head. She unconsciously shivered. She would not let her husband do this alone.

"You're the one meeting Styles in that restaurant. I'll only be there to watch your tail. I can take care of myself in the field." She reached out to tenderly caress his face. "Remember, I was trained by the best."

He captured her hand, lightly kissing her palm. "Flattery is not going to change my mind. Amanda, Franklin Styles is no one to mess with. Everything we know tells us that he's the power behind Cyclops - Charles Canaan's heir. You know what T.P. told us about that group."

"The most powerful criminal organization in the western hemisphere. I remember."

"Powerful and dangerous."

"I know that, too. We took them on once before - you and me. And Billy."

"And you can see now where that got Billy."

"I know." She could tell how much he was still hurting by the way he said Billy's name. She rested the palm of her hand on his chest, just above his heart. "It'll be okay."

"Amanda..."

"Lee, I'm not going to argue about this with you, naked, in a Jacuzzi. It's already been decided." She set her wine glass next to his, turning to him once more with a sultry smile.

"Now," she whispered, her fingers trailing provocatively down his chest, "if you can't come up with something better to do right now, then you're not the man I married."

She felt him shudder as he responded instantly to her touch. He leaned forward and cupped her face with his hands. His eyes looked searchingly into hers.

"I love you, Amanda."

She could almost feel as well as hear the intensity behind his words. Hot tears pricked behind her eyelids. She opened her mouth to tell him she loved him, too, but his lips cut off her response. Instead, she returned his kiss with passionate desire. She moaned softly, drowning in the taste and feel of him. She could feel her emotions spiraling out of control as he...

Amanda shivered as she snapped herself out of the past. She traced her lips lightly with her fingertips. The memory was so intense she could almost feel Lee's mouth on hers. She blinked back the tears. That night in mid-July was the last time they'd made love.

These days, her husband seemed to shirk even the most innocent touch of her hand. She missed him, missed the familiar pressure of his lips, the feeling of his body covering hers. But even more than that, she missed the casual intimacy of their day-to-day life. His smile as his eye caught hers, the brush of his hand across her arm as they passed in the hall, a rushed embrace before they hurried to their next meeting. All the inconsequential moments that had been part of the mosaic of their marriage for the past ten years.

She rose from the tub, drying herself as she reached for the nightgown hanging on the hook. She silently opened the bathroom door, the light spilling into the darkened bedroom. Lee was already asleep, or at least pretending to be. He lay on his right side, his face to the wall, as close to the edge of their king size bed as he could get without actually ending up on the floor. No danger that they might accidentally encounter each other in their sleep.

She flipped off the bathroom light and slipped noiselessly beneath the sheets. She hugged herself, running her hands up and down her arms. She ached to touch him, to feel his arms around her again. To find a way out of the hopeless mess their life had become. Instead, she continued to play this childish game, careful not to cross the imaginary line he'd drawn down the center of their bed. Turning over on her left side, she closed her eyes and prayed for the welcome oblivion of sleep.

Chapter Four
Monday, August 26, 1996
“Lee”

His hands clenched the wheel and he shifted gears, feeling the car respond to the nuances of his touch. Sitting behind the wheel of his Viper Sport Coupe, all that power at his fingertips, he felt in control of his life again. Six speed manual transmission, acceleration from 0 to 150

in thirty-one seconds...as the ads so aptly said, for those who feel the 'need for speed'. He felt that need tonight.

He remembered how upset Amanda had been when he'd bought this car four years ago. They'd spent the better part of a week 'discussing' the damn thing. It wasn't the money; his uncle's death had left them financially set for life. She finally confessed that she saw the car as symbol, a longing for his bachelor days. He was astounded that she would actually think that.

They'd celebrated the end of that argument as they had many others over the years, with pizza, champagne, and a locked bedroom door. It had become something of a ritual, a salute to their second wedding night at the Crystal Springs Inn. Unfortunately, at this moment Lee didn't see any pizza in their immediate future.

He sighed as he headed out onto the highway, taking the long way home yet again. He felt himself begin to relax as the traffic thinned out. Driving seemed to help him put things in perspective. He smiled sadly as he thought about the countless hours he'd spent behind the wheel trying to fit together the pieces of the puzzle that was Amanda King.

Unfortunately, he seemed to be no closer to figuring her out now than he had been fourteen years ago. And his feelings were just as jumbled. That is, when he allowed himself to feel anything at all. Since their return from New York, he tried to keep his emotions smothered beneath layers of cotton. It was easier that way.

Sometimes, though, no matter how hard he tried, she filtered through his defenses. Last night, after he'd put the kids to bed, he'd gone into the bathroom without thinking. She'd looked so beautiful with her hair piled on top of her head and her cheeks flushed from the bath. He felt all his senses being assailed by the sight. He'd never wanted or needed her more.

Instead, he'd turned away. The part of him that recognized the same longing in her eyes told him he wasn't being fair. But the other part, the one that kept his emotions in a vise, had the upper hand. That was the part that wouldn't let him forget.

He couldn't forget as he headed to the kitchen for the glass of water he didn't want. He couldn't forget as he lay next to her in the darkness, knowing she was only a touch away. And he couldn't forget as the sound of her even breathing filled him with a sense of loneliness more profound than he'd ever known.

There were times when he almost succeeded, when he kept New York neatly compartmentalized his mind. Today had actually started out better than most. It was a pattern they had settled into over the past month. Almost as if each new day unconsciously brought a new resolve to find their way back to each other.

He'd greeted Amanda in the kitchen with a hesitant smile. He was still not a big eater in the morning, but they had reached an effective compromise over the years. Amanda didn't fuss with an elaborate breakfast; he drank his coffee at the kitchen table and ate some toast.

For a few blessed minutes, life had almost felt normal again as they discussed Phillip's situation across the table. Amanda had been remarkably philosophical about Kate. He'd wondered if she would be upset about her oldest son's new living arrangement, but he could only detect relief that the two of them weren't rushing headlong into marriage. Lee had wholeheartedly agreed. He remembered himself at twenty-four. He definitely lacked the maturity to make that kind of commitment. Marriage was difficult under the best of circumstances. Amanda had looked as if she wanted to say something, but in the end had merely sighed and turned away.

He'd realized with a start that this was the heart of their problem. No matter what they discussed, it always led them back to the same place. There seemed to be no escape from what had happened, at home or at work. Even a simple staff meeting now seemed fraught with booby traps.

Poor agent Kimble had unwittingly sprung one this very afternoon with his announcement that Franklin Styles had been transferred to their maximum-security facility. His simple statement had been met with unaccustomed silence. For a few uncomfortable minutes, Lee wondered if everyone in the room knew the details of that case. No, he thought with relief as he glanced out at the sea of faces. They merely

looked a little puzzled by his reaction. Only Amanda and Francine suddenly seemed inordinately interested in their file folders.

Just a few people knew what had really gone down that night. John Pierce, Francine and... Amanda. He'd called in a few favors. The Styles case had been closed with an alpha-one priority seal, 'eyes only'. At this point, it would take a presidential order to re-open it.

The meeting had ended shortly after that unfortunate reference. Amanda had lingered for a moment to ask if he would make it home in time for Phillip's goodbye dinner; he promised to be there. Neither seemed able to meet the other's eye.

From there, the remainder of the afternoon had quickly deteriorated. After three weeks of successfully dodging the issue, the Agency's Director had finally cornered him. Cartwright needed an answer about Billy's job by the end of the day. Lee could almost feel the time running out. He patted the airline ticket resting in his jacket pocket. One way or the other, he had to make a decision.

He wished again for a simple solution. For the first time in their professional life, working so closely with Amanda was actually painful. There were too many reminders of the past.

But to give up their partnership... that would be tough. Since he'd taken the job as D.C. Field Chief and Amanda had joined his administrative staff, they had evolved into an even more efficient team. She had an eye for detail, he thought admiringly, and a knack for tactfully pointing out things he and his field agents had overlooked. The duties Lee hated most about his administrative position, she ploughed through with unbelievable ease. It was almost as if they were complementary halves of the same whole. She really was the perfect partner.

In the end, though, it was that partnership that had landed them in this mess. That, and a complacent self-assurance that they could get themselves out of any scrape. After all, they had done it so many times in the beginning, before their marriage. The Stemwinder mess, Addi Birol, countless brushes with the KGB... it had all seemed so easy then. He should have known better.

Of course, deep down, he did. It was the reason he'd wanted them both out of the field in the first place. Their work was difficult enough without adding such an intense personal relationship to the mix. As Billy always said, emotional attachments were a luxury a field agent couldn't afford. Billy... he'd been so right. They should never have gone back...

"Amanda, I don't like the way this is coming down."

The D.C. covert team sat around the conference table in John Pierce's office - Amanda, Francine, and special agents Johnson and Kimble. The latter two looked a little nervous. Lee knew being picked for this mission was a feather in the young agents' cap. They were both extremely capable, yet still 'new' enough not to be recognized. And a little awed to be working directly with 'Scarecrow and Mrs. King'.

Amanda frowned, her lips pursed tightly together. "I know this isn't the way we initially planned it, but it'll work. Besides," she added perfunctorily, "if we want to nail Styles, what other choice do we have?"

She fidgeted nervously with the edge of the file. Lee heard what she wasn't saying. It was a good plan and if it was another operative, he wouldn't hesitate. Unfortunately, when Amanda spoke, he heard the voice of his wife, not an agent.

"Call it instinct, but something about this doesn't sit right. I was supposed to be the contact, not you."

"It makes sense, Scarecrow," Francine interrupted, coming to Amanda's aid. "She fits the profile. Everything we know about Franklin Styles indicates that he gravitates to women with Amanda's 'look'. Dark eyed brunettes in her age group with a background in fundraising, an understated sense of fashion and..."

"Thank you, Francine," Amanda replied testily. "We get the picture."

"I was merely stating that this is probably a lucky break for us," Francine countered in a slightly aggrieved tone. "You've gotten farther with Styles this past week than Lee would have. You already have an invitation to his house for the weekend."

"Which is exactly the problem," he'd interjected. "The situation is moving way too fast. And it's entirely too volatile."

He looked across the room at John Pierce. The New York operations chief had been strangely silent.

“What’s your take on this, Houdini?” he prompted, invoking the man’s code name. It was certainly appropriate. In his day, Pierce had extricated himself from almost as many sticky situations as the legendary Scarecrow. Billy couldn’t have chosen a better person to fill the spot in New York. He and his team had done the legwork on this case with infinite care.

Houdini cleared his throat, carefully measuring his words before he spoke. “This is basically an in-and-out mission. Intelligence has pinpointed the evidence we need in the study on Styles’ estate. Our ‘TAC’ team will be standing by. The two of you go in, the rest of us ring the perimeter as back-up. It’s a classic operation. And,” he added soberly, his eyes meeting Lee’s, “I think that if we lose this chance to nail Cyclops, we’ll never get another one. Something big is going down. Billy Melrose was my friend, too.”

The room was strangely silent, as they all seemed lost in their separate memories. No one wanted to see Billy’s murderer behind bars more than he did, Lee thought with a sigh. But too many things had gone inexplicably wrong on this mission already.

That night in the restaurant, he was supposed to be the primary contact. Amanda was background, just another anonymous face in the crowd. “Window dressing’, he thought with a frown. Instead, Styles had turned the tables, making contact with Amanda and forcing him into that role.

He had to admit she had reacted to the situation with flawless instinct. Part of him was proud of her innate ability to make the most of the unexpected turn of events. Another part of him wanted to yank her right out of there. But he hadn’t. His training kept him rooted to the spot, silently observing her work their target with practiced ease.

Still, the situation bothered him. He looked around the room at the group; they all appeared to be waiting anxiously for the final clearance. But in the last analysis, it was his team and his call.

“I still have a few reservations about this scenario,” he said at last. “I’m not sure I want one of my agents in that position.”

Amanda's eyes flashed. "Is it your agent or your wife you don't want in that position?"

Lee could hear the controlled anger in her voice. With equal control, he turned to the rest of the group. "Would you give us a minute, please?"

He saw Amanda flinch as they hastily left the room.

"I'm sorry for that," she said as the door clicked shut. "I shouldn't have brought our personal relationship into this meeting."

"You're right, you shouldn't," he responded through clenched teeth.

"But that goes both ways, Lee," she said, her eye catching his. "Stop treating me like your wife and start treating me as a member of this team. You'd allow anyone else to take this risk. Admit it."

"Damn it, Amanda, you aren't 'anyone else'. That's the problem. It always has been."

She stood up and crossed over to him, perching lightly on the edge of the polished table. He felt her hand rub gently across his arm.

Lee sighed deeply at her touch. They'd allowed themselves very little physical contact since their arrival in New York almost two weeks earlier. Like fighters in training, they had stayed focused on the task at hand. An operation of this magnitude required all their energy as well as a clear, dispassionate head.

He felt the pressure again on his arm and he unconsciously covered her hand with his. "Amanda, running a peacock dance is risky at best. But this weekend, with a man like Styles..."

"Things won't get that far," she assured him. "The party is on Friday night. I can get you in. I'll keep him mildly distracted, you'll get the evidence we need, then our 'TAC' team will mop up. We'll all be out by midnight." She leaned a little closer. "Then this case will be finished, the demons put to rest, and we'll have a celebration of our own."

He found himself smiling in spite of himself. "I'd like the celebration part. I just wish there weren't so many things that could go wrong before we get to it."

"I know," she said with a shake of her head.

Lee looked up and encountered her eye. He silently weighed the risks one more time. "I wish I knew why that first meeting went off the wire," he said at last.

"You heard what Francine said. Unfortunately, I happen to be his 'type'."

"Gee, Amanda," he retorted, bestowing on her his best sarcastic look. "I find that so reassuring." He absently rubbed his right hand across his forehead, his left beating a steady rhythm on the table. "I just can't shake the feeling that I'm overlooking something."

"Lee, we both knew the risks involved in this job. We both accepted them. Let's finish what we started." She squeezed his arm once again. "For Billy."

He let out the breath he'd been holding and nodded in reluctant agreement. "Okay. For Billy."

'For Billy', they'd said. Funny... Billy Melrose had been the one who had brought them together. Now, he was the one who was tearing them apart. How he would have hated that.

He glanced at the clock on the dash. It was getting late. If he didn't hurry, he'd be late for dinner. Sighing, he dialed Cartwright on his cell phone. Right or wrong, he'd made his decision.

Chapter Five
Monday, August 26, 1996
"Amanda"

The thunder rumbled ominously in the distance as Amanda made her final bed check. Matthew was sleeping soundly, hugging his pillow to his chest, his covers scrunched into a tight ball at the end of the bed. She patiently straightened them out, pulling the light sheet up around him. She knew it would only be a matter of time before it was at the bottom of the bed again. Like his father, Matthew was a restless sleeper.

Next door, his sister appeared to have finally succumbed to exhaustion, too. It was a welcome bi-product of the night's excitement. She smiled as she tucked the covers comfortingly around her. Jenny's

dark lashes were such a contrast to her ivory complexion, her wavy hair forming a perfect 'C' on her cheek. She looked like an angel when she slept. Amanda hoped she was tired enough to stay that way through the coming storm.

Jenny had developed a sudden aversion to thunder storms that summer. The noise, she said solemnly, made her feel 'skittery'. Amanda suspected the 'skitters' were really an excuse to snuggle in her father's arms until she fell asleep.

Sleeping safely tucked in Lee's arms was something she longed to do again, Amanda thought wearily. She paused for a minute outside her bedroom door, collecting herself before she faced him. True to his word, he had been home in time for tonight's celebratory dinner, although he had seemed a trifle preoccupied. After the goodbyes had been said and Phillip and Kate had departed for the airport with Jamie, he'd pleaded a headache and quickly disappeared upstairs.

After their breakfast conversation this morning, she'd started to hope that maybe they were finally closing the distance between them. That belief had buoyed her spirits straight through to the afternoon staff meeting. Until agent Kimble delivered his report on the Styles case. When he'd finished, she stole a glance at her husband to gauge his reaction. His expression said it all; the barriers were firmly in place once again.

Feeling a little apprehensive about his mood, she crept quietly into the room. The empty bed caught her by surprise. She'd fully expected to find Lee in his usual hiding place beneath the covers. If he had indeed waited up for her, maybe it was a sign that he was finally ready to talk. She thought that was what she wanted, but faced with the possibility, she suddenly felt unsure. Taking a deep breath, she called out anxiously, "Lee?"

"In here. I'm looking for my gray suit."

She followed the sound of his voice to his walk-in closet. "It's still at the cleaners. I meant to pick it up today, but I never got there. I'll stop tomorrow."

“That’s okay.” He emerged from the closet, suitcase in hand. “I can get by without it.”

For a fraction of a second she felt her nightmare becoming reality. “Are you leaving?” she choked out, nervously twisting the plain gold band on her finger.

“No,” he replied, his manner seemed so coolly professional that she felt as if they could have been standing in the middle of the bullpen instead of their bedroom. Then his eyes softened and he added kindly, “I’m just going to New York.”

“New York,” she echoed quietly. The queasy feeling from the staff meeting returned again. “Any problems with...”

“No,” he said brusquely as he deposited his suitcase on the bed and sat down.

She sank down next to him in relief. “I thought maybe there was more to Kimble’s report than he said this afternoon.”

“No,” he repeated again as he stood up and headed for the bathroom. “The case is closed.”

Amanda sighed as she watched his retreating back. Unfortunately for them, the case was far from closed. She wondered briefly if it ever would be or if the specter of Franklin Styles would always be there, standing between them.

“I accepted the East Coast Operations Chief job today.”

The words floated to her from the bathroom and her head snapped up. For a minute, she wondered vaguely if he was speaking a foreign language. The meaning just wouldn’t register. Lee reappeared, his spare shaving kit in hand.

She turned to him in disbelief, her voice quivering with barely repressed anger. “You did what?”

“I told Cartwright I would accept Billy’s old job,” he murmured, refusing to meet her eye.

“Were you planning on informing me of this little development?” The battle lost, her anger oozed out between her words. “Or was I supposed to read about it in an inter-office memo like the rest of your staff?”

“Of course I was going to tell you,” he replied in kind. “I thought that’s what I was doing now.”

“I don’t call walking into our bedroom to find you packing, ‘telling’ me anything,” she snapped as she watched him calmly walk to the dresser.

“You knew Cartwright’s been pushing me for an answer,” he replied coolly, collecting his underwear and socks from the drawer and dropping them perfunctorily into his suitcase.

“Well, since any notion of discussing things seems to be out of the question,” she responded angrily, “did it occur to you that maybe I had the right to at least comment on something that’s going to change our lives? Or is this just one more thing you didn’t think I had a ‘need to know’?”

“No,” he snorted, “I believe that’s your department these days.”

She flinched at his retort, turning away to stare out the window. For one brief moment, she was back in that dark New York hotel room, her husband’s angry words echoing in her ears.

Lee spoke again, snapping her back to the present. “The job isn’t permanent, Amanda.” His tone was more conciliatory this time. “I told Cartwright I would only take it on an interim basis. I’ll alternate weeks in New York and D.C., the way Billy did.”

“Damn it, Lee,” she whispered under her breath, adding in a stronger voice, “I thought we still made these decisions together.” She shook her head as she numbly watched him pack his shirts. “Or have we given up even the pretense of being husband and wife?”

Amanda saw the pain flash across his face at her words and she watched his businesslike façade begin to crumble. It somehow gave her a

strange sense of satisfaction to see that he could still hurt as much as she did. "When are you going?"

He hesitated for minute. "I'm on the noon flight tomorrow."

"Wonderful," she retorted sarcastically, "and what do you suggest I tell our children?" She was suddenly overwhelmed with a feeling of *deja vu*. Maybe history really did have a bizarre way of repeating itself. She could almost hear the echo of Joe's words so many years ago, telling her he was taking a job with the EAO.

"I'll talk to them in the morning. I'm leaving the state, Amanda, not the continent. An hour and twenty minutes away by plane."

Her head whipped up and she regarded him coldly. She had never hated his uncanny ability to read her thoughts more than at this moment. What she'd once deemed an intimacy seemed, in light of their current problems, more like a violation.

She stood up at last, crossing to the fireplace and leaning against the mantel for support. "That's not going to matter to your children, Lee. Gone is gone."

She knew she'd hit a nerve as she watched him run his hand nervously through his hair. The faint outline of the healing scar stood out just below his hairline.

"I'll be home on Friday."

"Home'... sometimes I don't think we even have one any more." Their eyes caught and held and she added softly, "But maybe walking away is what you really want."

"You know it's not."

"I'm not sure what I know." She took a deep breath. "And I'm not sure how much longer I can go on like this, living with you like a polite stranger."

"Amanda, I'm trying."

“You have a funny way of showing it. You won’t talk about it, you won’t let me talk about it..”

“What’s to talk about? I told you I understand.” He snapped his suitcase shut, placing it by the door. He turned to look at her, his tall frame slumped against the doorframe. “Living with it... that’s another matter.”

She stared at the carved wood on the fireplace, tracing and retracing the pattern with her finger. “It’s not exactly easy for me, either.”

“I know that,” he sighed, pausing for a fraction of a second before continuing. “I’m sorry. I’m not trying to make unilateral choices here. I thought the time apart might give us both a breather.”

She took a few slow breaths, letting herself absorb the full impact of his words. She walked over to the bed on wobbly legs. “Time apart will only pull us further apart.” If only he would agree to therapy... she looked at him questioningly, her unspoken entreaty on her lips.

“We’ve been through this, Amanda,” he snapped, reading her mind once again.

“It couldn’t hurt to get some professional help. We don’t seem to be dealing with this on our own.”

“I’m ‘dealing with it’ the only way I can,” Lee responded, moving away from the door as if he’d been stung. He began to unbutton his shirt, tearing off the top button in the process. They both watched as it fell silently to the floor. “Damn,” he muttered, bending over to retrieve it.

“I don’t know how else to fix it,” she whispered, her arms hugging her chest. “And this job is no solution.”

“Maybe not,” he agreed sadly, placing the button on the dresser. “But it’s my decision.”

“Your decision’,” she mumbled under her breath. “Is that what we’re left with now?” She looked away, carelessly chewing her lower lip. She had never felt more helpless. As she absently rubbed her temple,

something on Lee's nightstand caught her eye. Reaching over, she picked up the small compact clock.

"Here," she muttered in hopeless resignation, "you'd better take your travel alarm. That time you left it at home, you almost slept through your meeting."

"Yeah," he whispered, "I remember." He crossed the room, reaching out to take the clock from her outstretched hand.

She jumped as the sound of the thunder filled the room. The clock slipped from her grasp, landing on the thick carpet with a small thud. "I'm sorry," she murmured, bending down to pick it up. "The noise..."

"That's okay, I've got it," she heard him say in a quiet voice as he, too, stooped to retrieve the fallen object. Their hands closed over it at the same moment. She felt his fingers brush tenderly across hers and heard his sharp intake of breath. Trembling slightly, she raised her head and encountered his eyes. The emotion hiding there took her breath away.

"Amanda." Pain and yearning were blended in equal measure as he spoke. "I..."

The thunder sounded again and suddenly Jenny was in the room. In two quick jumps she was in her father's arms. "I'm scared, Daddy."

He sighed, giving their daughter a reassuring hug. "It's only noise, Pumpkin. It can't hurt you."

Jenny regarded him with all the skepticism of her five years. "It might. Can I sleep in here?"

She saw Lee hesitate as he glanced over at her. His mask slipped back into place, his emotions once more under control. "Tell you what," he told Jenny quickly, "I'll sleep in your room tonight. Until the storm's over, okay?"

"Kay," she yawned sleepily, resting her small head on his shoulder.

He paused at the door, holding their daughter in his arms. “Some breathing room, Amanda. That’s all I’m asking for. Let me work through this in my own way.”

The door clicked shut, the lock on the discussion firmly in place once again. She collapsed on the floor, leaning back against the bed. Her life was falling apart around her in slow motion and all she could do was sit and watch it happen. Lee had distanced himself emotionally and now, even if he refused to admit it, he was doing it physically as well. The rain pelting the roof seemed to emphasize her aching loneliness. Unwanted memories assailed her. It had been storming that night, too...

The sound of the thunder reverberated through the hall as she systematically checked each door. Five minutes past eleven and still no sign of Lee. She’d seen him leave the party over an hour ago, undoubtedly heading for the safe in Styles’ study.

He should have returned long before now. The TAC team was scheduled to close in at midnight, but she didn’t intend to wait that long. Something had gone wrong; her intuition screamed that Lee needed back-up now.

Stopping at the door across from her bedroom, she tried the handle. Locked. Removing the ‘double diamond’ from her hair, she deftly picked it, creeping cautiously across the threshold of the darkened room.

The light from the hall spilled into the room and she saw him. He lay on the bed, his hands cuffed behind him. There was blood oozing from a gash on his forehead just below his hairline. She held her breath as she touched his neck, feeling for his pulse. She noted with relief that his skin was warm and his pulse strong. But he was unconscious. She ran her hand over his head, whispering his name as she tried to rouse him.

“What are you doing in here, my dear?”

The sound of his voice startled her and she whirled around, quickly removing her hand. He stood in the doorway, flanked by two guards, the lightening illuminating his muscular form in an eerie strobe effect that somehow made him appear even larger. And more powerful. She was suddenly filled with an unaccountable feeling of dread.

Pushing it aside, she snapped the guise of the cool professional firmly into place. “Frank, you scared me.”

“Did I?”

“Yes,” she said, flashing him a smile as she tried to gauge his mood. “I looked for you downstairs and couldn’t find you.”

“And you thought you’d find me in here?”

Something in the tone of his voice made her blood run cold. “The door was unlocked,” she lied, turning her back on him. She felt the outline of her gun in her purse, but there were too many of them to use it. “It looks like this man needs a doctor,” she parried, playing for time.

“Not for long,” Styles stated, his words rattling ominously amid the thunder. “I caught him going through my safe. He won’t be a problem much longer, believe me.”

“Your safe? But the deal...”

“Will go through, I assure you. This little problem is easily fixed. I intend to take care of it personally. I have a patented method for plugging leaks.”

She turned as she heard the click of his gun, her fear escalating as she watched his eyes. They observed her with penetrating coldness and she willed her heart to stop racing.

“Right now?” She placed herself directly between Lee and their adversary. “Your guests downstairs...”

“I don’t like unfinished business.”

She glanced at her husband as she quickly weighed her options. Moving to intercept Styles, she flashed him a sultry smile. “Neither do I.”

He reached out, running his hand caressingly over her cheek. She fought the urge to pull away. Lee was depending on her. She unconsciously gritted her teeth as she returned his caress. The clammy feeling of his skin repulsed her and she felt the bile rise in her throat as he bent to kiss her.

“We’ll have plenty of time once this inconvenience is disposed of,” he told her in a low voice. “Why don’t you wait for me across the hall?”

“What’s the hurry, Frank?” she asked in a silken voice. “He doesn’t look like he’s going anywhere. I’m sure he can wait.” She willed herself to stop trembling. Stepping closer, she allowed him to catch a whiff of her perfume, adding in a whisper, “I don’t think I can.”

Pulling back, she watched the full gamut of emotions flicker across his face. She knew he wanted her... he’d made that pretty obvious this week. But she didn’t know if his desire for her was stronger than his desire for blood. At the moment, it was the only advantage she had. If she could get him alone, she might have a chance. She was no match for three armed men. Not to mention the other guards he undoubtedly had strategically placed throughout the house.

She felt his eyes rake over her as he made his decision. Their cool appraisal seemed to stare right through her and she unconsciously pulled her shawl tighter around her shoulder. She watched his fingers move almost sensuously across the barrel of his gun. Flashing her a cryptic smile, he holstered it. With only a cursory look at his prisoner, he gruffly ordered the guards to remain, offering her his arm with a flourish.

She silently accepted it, allowing him to lead her to the bedroom across the hall. She racked her brain, trying to come up with an alternate plan. A quick glance at her watch told her the arrival of their TAC team was still forty-five minutes away. And her partner was unconscious, under guard. No help there. What happened next was up to her. She had to stall until help arrived.

She heard the door click shut with a dull thud and she automatically felt for her gun. Turning, she watched Styles quickly close the gap between them, leaning in to brush his lips across her cheek.

“Here, let me,” he told her, taking the purse that contained her weapon before she could stop him. She watched helplessly as he removed his jacket, wrapping it around her purse and placing it on the dresser.

“Frank,” she began, heading to retrieve it. “I need my purse. There’s something in it...”

“Don’t worry,” he told her, stepping between her and the dresser. His hands cupped her cheeks, then moved slowly to her neck and her shoulders. They wandered down her arms to brush across the underside of her breasts. “I have everything we need,” he whispered. She could feel his breath warm in her ear, as he added, “I always take precautions”

Despite her resolve, she felt herself shiver. She turned her head, desperately searching the room for something, anything, to distract him. Her eyes fell on the bottle of champagne waiting in a corner of the room. If she could get him to drink, she might be able to drug him.

Breathing deeply, she faced him again, extending an inviting smile. "Some champagne would be nice," she stated softly, edging slowly towards her suitcase.

"Anything you'd like, my dear." He crossed the room in three steps, his large hands reaching for the bottle. She watched as he wrestled with the cork, almost ripping it open. Such a contrast from Lee's polished precision.

She wrenched herself away, focusing her thoughts on the task at hand. Quickly opening her suitcase, she searched for the vial of knockout drops hidden in the corner pocket. She couldn't seem to put her trembling fingers on it.

"Can I help you find something?"

His voice startled her and she felt a hand close powerfully over hers. She was suddenly reminded of his strength, which was more than a match for her own. He snapped her suitcase shut, his fingers deftly twirling the combination lock.

Stepping closer, he caressed her cheek with the back of his hand. "What were you looking for?"

She could almost count the dark hairs adorning each finger. "An aspirin," she lied, fighting her revulsion. "I seem to have a small headache. I guess it's all the excitement."

"I have a cure for that," he told her quietly, his fingers on her temple. She flinched as he pressed just a little too hard, a cold knot of fear growing in her stomach.

He seemed to sense her reluctance and pulled away. "Perhaps it would be better if I let you rest. Remember, I do have some pressing business to take care of."

His hand patted the gun resting in his shoulder holster. She looked at him uncertainly.

“Amanda?” he asked again, his hand on his gun. “Tell me what to do. It’s totally up to you.”

His words chilled her to the core. Totally up to her. She turned away, knowing only what course of action remained, but not sure if she was capable of executing it. She tried to take a deep breath, but it caught in her throat. Her thoughts turned to her husband lying helplessly in the other room and she silently implored him to tell her what to do. The vows they’d spoken to each other echoed in her ears; vows she knew neither had ever broken. She felt her carefully constructed calm begin to crumble.

She heard the click of the gun behind her and Styles’ voice droning in her ears. “No more games. Do I stay or do I go in the other room and kill your... ‘partner?’”

The way he said that word made her shiver. Pivoting to face him, she saw him watching her with calculated coldness, his eyes piercing straight through their cover. She fought to quell the churning in her stomach.

“How long have you known?”

“Since the beginning. Trust me, I’m not the fool you two take me for.”

He took a step forward, cupping her face with his left hand while he clutched his gun with his right. She felt herself flinch at his touch and she struggled for control, clenching her teeth so tightly that for a minute she thought they might break. She could not, would not, allow herself to fall apart now.

“You started this amusing little game,” he continued, his tongue flicking over his lips. “Now you tell me how it plays out. In here, with you...” He motioned to the door with his gun. “Or in there, with him?”

She felt her breathing quicken, her heart drumming painfully against her chest. There had to be something else she could do. Anything else. She searched the room one more time for possibilities.

“Stay or go, Amanda,” he repeated, his voice a threatening caress. “It’s your choice.”

Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes. Her partner needed her; he was depending on her to do whatever was necessary. Here and now, in this moment, she’d run out of options. Forcing the bile back down her

throat, she turned the reins over to her professional side. She had to buy Scarecrow some time, any way she could.

A barrage of emotions assaulted her heart, but she shoved them aside. She couldn't afford them now. There would be time enough later for regret and recrimination... a lifetime's worth. She hardened her features into a frozen smile and opened her eyes.

With a courage she didn't feel, she said simply, "Stay."

The sound of the thunder reverberated in the room, bringing her back to the present with a jolt. She willed her breathing to return to normal. Franklin Styles was in prison, Lee was safe, and it was over. Over, she thought ironically, but not done with. It would never be done with – she would bear the emotional scars from that night for the rest of her life. She took a deep, cleansing breath and headed for the bathroom. She needed to take another shower.

Chapter Six
Tuesday, October 8, 1996
"Lee"

Lee frowned as he quickly scanned the same sentence for yet a third time. Trying to concentrate on last night's priority flash data report from D.C. was becoming an exercise in futility. For some unfathomable reason, the simple, straightforward commentary read like gibberish.

Here in New York, the main branch of the Agency seemed a million miles away. After spending so many years deep inside the pyramidal structure of the Washington office, it felt strange to suddenly be above ground again. In a way, it reminded him of his days in the Q-Bureau. The view was just as pleasant and the workplace spacious, if maybe a little large for one person. He couldn't help thinking there should be another desk in there, sitting kitty corner from his.

Then, of course, there were the flowers. Over the years, he'd grown used to the fragrant scent that filled his office. His New York headquarters was drab, devoid of any kind of greenery. And his new assistant – well, the guy was capable, but he lacked the ability to anticipate his questions before he voiced them. He didn't have much of

an eye for seemingly insignificant details, either. He never reminded him to eat when he'd worked through lunch. He never closed the shades in his office or intercepted his calls when the stress built to the breaking point. And he certainly couldn't brighten his day just by entering the room.

He missed Amanda and he missed his family. The word 'loner' no longer applied to him. After almost a decade of marriage, the cynical man who had tried to ditch Amanda years ago on the steps of the Jefferson Memorial no longer existed. Sitting in his too-quiet apartment, he longed for those everyday annoyances that spelled home – the sound of his children's playful bickering, the careful negotiations to balance everyone's schedule, the inevitable bedtime struggle. He even missed Dotty dropping in to share a joke or deliver the latest bit of neighborhood gossip. During his first few weeks here, he'd spent so much time with Phillip and Kate that they jokingly asked if he'd like to move in.

He'd thought taking this job would somehow lessen the tension at home, but it had only served to reinforce it. His relationship with his wife had gone from bad to worse. Lately, every word they said to each other seemed suspect, filled with some hidden meaning or unannounced agenda. On his last trip home, he'd found himself sleeping in Jamie's old room, under the guise of not wanting to 'disturb' her.

And the kids weren't much better. The pattern was always the same on his weeks at home. For the first few days, Matthew and Jenny seemed subdued, almost as if they were wary of him. By mid-week, their feelings began to thaw. Then, when things felt almost normal, it was time for him to leave again.

Matthew's behavior was beginning to worry him. When he looked at his son, he could see himself so clearly at that age. He could sense the carefully disguised hostility simmering below the surface. Matthew clearly held him personally responsible for his mother's pain.

Hell, maybe Matty was right. Sometimes even he wondered what he was doing here in New York, so many miles away from the people he loved and needed. And who needed him. He found himself unconsciously reaching for the phone to call Amanda, simply to hear the

sound of her voice. Until some inconsequential thing slapped him in the face, reminding him with a jolt exactly why they were so far apart.

The other day, it was John Pierce. The New York field chief had quietly handed him the follow-up medical on Franklin Styles, outlining the latest tests done after his transfer to their maximum-security facility. He'd read the report in silent relief. They had all come back negative, again, including the screening for HIV. He knew Amanda needed to know, but his hand shook as he held the receiver and he couldn't bring himself to complete the call. Stamping the report 'eyes only', he'd forwarded it under a priority heading to Francine. As the acting field chief in D.C. and Amanda's friend, he trusted Francine to brief her.

He still couldn't bring himself to broach the subject with his wife. He knew she desperately wanted and needed to talk. So did he. Except whenever he tried, the anger started to erupt from somewhere deep inside him. He was afraid of what might happen if he let it out. It seemed safer - and easier - to keep it buried.

If Amanda had just confided in him, trusted him to understand, it might have been different. Instead, she'd shut him out again, preferring to deal with everything on her own. It was an all too familiar pattern with her. She'd done it years ago as she struggled with the aftermath of her kidnapping by Addi Birol. She'd even done it to a lesser extent when he'd returned from the 'dead', preferring to keep him at arm's length rather than acknowledge her feelings. And she'd done it once again after that unfortunate business with Colonel Holstein.

If only she had come to him, told him. It might have killed him to hear her say it, but in some ways it would have been easier. At least he wouldn't have been blindsided by Franklin Styles. Day after day, he replayed that scene in his mind. Night after night, he heard those words ringing in his ears. And week after week, when he yearned to take her in his arms, the image of that bastard's smirking face prevented it...

"Any progress?" he asked John Pierce as he covertly watched Styles' face through the one-way glass. So far, at Francine's urging, he'd left the man's debriefing entirely to Pierce. Even though he had priority as the team leader of record, the case was technically in New York's jurisdiction.

Pierce shook his head. "He's been pretty uncommunicative. We have the evidence, though. The codes he was trying to peddle, the contract for the hit... on Billy." They took a moment, each lost in their respective memories of their friend.

"The Cyclops operation?" Lee asked, unconsciously fingering the small bandage on his forehead.

"Just a framework," came his colleague's weary voice. "Nothing but the bare bones."

"I've already spoken to Cartwright. He intends to hold firm."

"But if there's still information to fill in?" Pierce wondered. They both knew the Agency's propensity to bend to the prevailing political wind.

"No deals," Lee stated emphatically. "Styles goes down for this. We fill in the blanks ourselves, if it comes to that."

Pierce nodded. "Do you want me to continue or do you want to do the honors today?"

Lee hesitated, weighing his answer. "I'll do it."

"Okay, Scarecrow," Pierce demurred. "It's your show."

"I want you there for corroboration," Lee said, acknowledging his friend's authority. "I don't want to hear any screaming later about 'procedures'. Wait for me inside... we'll give the man something to think about for a few minutes."

Lee watched through the one-way glass as Pierce silently entered the room. Styles seemed unperturbed, demonstrating his indifference with a calculated yawn. The man looked like the cat who'd swallowed the proverbial canary. For a minute, Lee considered passing on the interrogation. There was something here he was missing, some part to the puzzle that didn't quite belong. He had a bad feeling that maybe he didn't want to know.

The piece that didn't fit was Amanda. There was something in her reaction to this man Styles that unnerved him. He'd still been pretty out of it when the back-up team had closed in that night. Francine had insisted he be checked out and for once he'd felt too lousy to argue. When he'd asked about his wife, she told him that Amanda had some business to

attend to and would meet him at the hospital when it was finished. She had evidently been instrumental in Styles' arrest.

It was after three a.m. when Amanda finally turned up. He remembered the time because he had been on the verge of bolting from his hospital bed and hunting her down. She'd looked worn out. In response to his questions, she would only say that things had taken longer than expected and she wanted to go home. Whether she meant their hotel or Rockville, he wasn't quite sure.

They'd returned together to their suite. Amanda was oddly quiet, almost jumping out of her skin at his touch. Normally at the conclusion of a difficult case, they immediately sought release in each other's arms. When he'd suggested they try to unwind she'd hastily declined, retreating into the bathroom and locking the door behind her. When she finally emerged, she'd pleaded a headache and said they should both get some sleep.

That had been three days ago. Since then she'd grown even more distant and preoccupied, not wanting to touch or be touched, her headaches more frequent. This morning had been the last straw. Telling her that he had an errand to run, he'd left her resting in the darkened room and headed purposefully to the Agency.

Opening the door, Scarecrow eyed his adversary as he entered the room. He could almost feel them each mentally taking the other's measure. Three days, and Franklin Styles hadn't given an inch. Considering the interrogation techniques he'd been up against, the man showed incredible fortitude. It was almost as if something was driving him, some hidden agenda they had yet to discover.

He calmly sat down in the chair opposite Styles, resting his hands on the small oblong table. "It's time you and I had a little talk."

"Well, well, if it isn't my erstwhile intruder. I wondered when you would get around to paying me a visit."

Styles' pointed laugh made the hair on the back of his neck stand on end. It was a convincing act, but he thought he detected a chink in the man's armor. Every so often, his left eye twitched. Franklin Styles looked like he was constantly winking at some phantom conspirator.

He turned to him with a smile of his own. "Glad I didn't disappoint you."

“Tell me,” Styles continued, his lips curving up in a leer, “how is your charming partner?”

“I’m asking the questions, not answering them,” Lee snarled, feeling his blood pressure beginning to rise. He absently ran his hand through his hair, struggling to keep his voice even and controlled.

“Let’s discuss this man.” He opened a folder, thrusting a picture of Billy Melrose under Styles’ nose.

“Hmmm. Nice framing, interesting use of shadow. Of course, the background is a little out-of-focus. And the lighting... must have used the wrong f-stop.”

Scarecrow frowned. Something about this guy really got under his skin. For the first time since his days as a freshman, he found himself unconsciously reciting interview techniques. Maximize the response, minimize the effort.

He motioned to Pierce, who immediately moved a tray of vials and syringes into Styles’ line of sight. “There are two ways to do this,” Scarecrow began, reaching for a syringe. “There’s the easy way – I ask a question, you answer it. Then, there’s this way...” He removed the cap, holding the needle up in plain sight. “The end result will be the same. But, trust me, when we’re done, you’re gonna to wish you’d taken the easy way.”

Styles shrugged, as if the threat fell on deaf ears. Scarecrow smiled coldly. “Tell me you want to do this the hard way, Styles. After what you did to Billy Melrose, it would really give me a lot of pleasure.”

Styles laughed, a raspy, cackling noise that sounded as if he had something caught in his throat. “It won’t give you half as much pleasure as you’ve already given me.” He leaned forward, his voice little more than a whisper as he added, “Or should I say, as your partner has?”

He grabbed a piece of Styles shirt, jerking him roughly to his feet. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Houdini tense, ready to spring if the need arose. He relaxed his hold, shoving Styles back down into the chair.

“This is getting old,” Scarecrow said, motioning Houdini forward. He held Styles arm, while Pierce calmly injected him. Scarecrow relaxed in his chair, smiling as he waited for the drug to take effect. “This is just a little something to help you loosen up,” he grinned. “You can’t be expected to talk to us if you aren’t relaxed, right?”

Styles clenched his teeth, beads of perspiration beginning to form on his forehead.

“What’s the matter, Styles?” Scarecrow asked, his eyes taking in the change in demeanor. “You’re beginning to look a little nervous.” He leaned in closer, his voice soothing. “There’s no need to be afraid. You only have to tell the truth. And,” he added, remembering the motto that had been drilled into him years ago, “‘truth fears nothing but concealment’.”

“I’ll be happy to tell you the truth.” Styles spoke through tightly clenched teeth. “Just make certain you’ll be equally happy to hear it.”

Scarecrow ignored the barb, dispassionately pointing once again to the picture on the table. “Let’s start with this man.”

“Ah, Mr. Melrose.” A bead of sweat dripped slowly down Styles’ chin, splashing silently onto Billy’s picture. “Yes, I hear he met with a most untimely accident.”

“Let’s talk about that ‘accident’. Perhaps you could think of a better word to describe it. ”

Styles blinked a few times. “Perhaps ‘accident’ isn’t quite the right word. Maybe it would be better described as ‘phase one’. All part of the elaborate little game we’ve been playing.”

“Game?”

“Yes, game. Does the name Alan Igheney mean anything to you? Eleven years ago... Charles Canaan was running the Cyclops organization...”

A look of understanding passed between them as Lee remembered reading the case file. A friend of Billy’s had been killed when he’d discovered the Cyclops organization was about to steal millions of dollars electronically from a banking consortium. Billy had gone rogue to stop them and avenge his friend’s death. Dr. Smyth had given Lee forty-eight hours to either help his boss or bring him in. Since he was acting unofficially, he couldn’t use the Agency’s resources and Amanda had helped him. Together, the three of them had smashed Canaan’s operation.

“Charles Canaan was my half brother.”

Lee looked up as the full import of his words registered. This whole recitation was starting to take a decidedly personal turn.

“He was more than a brother to me - he was a mentor. I watched Charles die little by little in prison, everything he’d built taken away from him. That’s when I decided the three of you would have to pay for what you did.”

Lee shook his head. *“Billy may be dead, Styles, but you’re the one sitting in this holding cell. And you’re the one who’s going to end up just like your brother.”*

“You think that matters to me? Melrose, he was the easy one. You and your partner, you were more of a challenge. There was the easy way - put a bullet in your heads, too. Then there was the other way... more work, but so much more rewarding. I figured I’d let you two make the choice.”

“You’re crazy, Styles. I think your little plan for revenge has eaten through your brain.”

“You still don’t get it, do you Stetson?” The man’s eyes had an eerie glint and his voice had taken on a strange, singsong cadence. “You think you’re the one in control here, don’t you? It was so easy to lure Melrose back into the action - just a few well-placed indicators that one of his friends was in trouble and he was off on another crusade. Just like killing him made it that much easier to entice you and Amanda into coming after me. And your wife is very enticing, don’t you think?”

Lee clenched his fists, perspiration beginning to dampen the slightly graying hair of his temples. *“Leave my wife out of this.”*

“Oh, but I can’t,” Styles grinned. “She’s very much a part of this. You think it was an accident that I contacted her in that restaurant?” His voice became deadly quiet. “Once she was in the game, it was only a matter of time until you followed her to my country estate. Going for those codes was so predictable, Stetson. You’ve really been out of the action far too long. It shows.”

“Shut up, Styles,” he snapped, fighting the urge to smash his fist into the man’s face.

“I thought you wanted me to talk?” he taunted. “Of course, Amanda and I did a lot more than talk that night while you were ‘indisposed’. I envy you, Stetson. All that fire and passion in such a classic package.”

“You filthy sonofa...”

“She’s really a tiger when she’s aroused. It was all I could do to satisfy her.”

In an instant, Lee’s hands were around the man’s neck. The table overturned as they both crashed to the floor. Alarm bells sounded and somewhere through a foggy haze, he heard Pierce vainly calling his name. None of it registered in his mind. All he could think about was tearing those vile words right out of the man’s throat.

“Scarecrow, let go,” he heard Pierce shout again, as two other agents worked to break his chokehold. “Scarecrow... you’re giving him exactly what he wants.”

Little by little he released his grip, his ragged breaths slowing the wild drumming of his heart. The guards pulled him up, each holding an arm. He watched in detachment as Styles rolled over on the floor, taking in air in great, rasping breaths. He had a fleeting impression of Pierce’s clouded eyes and Francine’s equally horrified expression as the room came slowly back into focus. He vaguely wondered where she’d come from.

“I’m okay.” He spat out the words, trying to wrestle away from the men who held him firmly. Pierce nodded almost imperceptibly and they released him. Another nod, and Francine and the guards retreated, leaving the three of them alone in the sterile interrogation room.

Styles smirked up at him, massaging his vocal cords. “If you don’t believe me, why don’t you ask her?” he taunted. “After all, ‘truth fears nothing but concealment’.”

His eyes hardened into an impenetrable mask as he looked at Styles. “He’s all yours,” he told John Pierce in an icy tone. He silently left the room, managing to close the door before collapsing against it. Francine was waiting for him in the hall.

“Lee...”

“Don’t say anything, Francine,” he cut her off sharply. Styles had to be lying, his fevered mind screamed at him. He looked up and saw the truth written on Francine’s face. She’d known what had happened... of course, she had to. She’d been part of the clean-up team that night. That’s

why she'd tried to steer him clear of Franklin Styles since his arrest. If only he'd listened to her...

If only... the world seemed full of those these days. If only Amanda had come to him; if only they had dealt with the pain right away, instead of allowing it to fester and grow; if only it hadn't infected every part of their lives. If only she hadn't insisted on following him back into the field. If only she had learned, once upon a time, to wait in the car.

But she hadn't. She'd always led with her heart, never thinking about the consequences. More times than he cared to admit, her intuition had saved his hide. He knew better than anyone what a dirty business this could be. Maybe Styles had been right about one thing – he had been out of the action too long. Amanda had been right, too. He should have stayed that way.

He took a deep breath. 'Scarecrow'-the-agent understood what Amanda had done; now, Lee-the-husband needed to do the same. In the final analysis, they both had choices to make. They could go on as they were, living in this sterile purgatory of their own creation; or they could try to find a way out, a way back to each other. Exhaling softly, he dialed the phone and invited his wife to New York.

Chapter Seven
Saturday, October 12, 1996
"Amanda"

"Would you like some more wine?" Lee asked solicitously.

Amanda shook her head, leaning back in her chair as she watched him pour the remainder of the bottle into his glass. Music drifted to her from across the dance floor and she closed her eyes, enjoying the moment. It had been a long time since they had seemed this relaxed around each other.

When Lee had issued his invitation earlier in the week, she'd accepted with no small amount of trepidation. In the weeks since he'd taken Billy's job, she sometimes felt as if two people inhabited her body. One person understood his reasons; the other shouted that he'd run

away. One person rejoiced at the sound of his voice and demanded she rush to New York; the other nursed a smoldering anger and told her to stay home. In the end, her heart won the battle with her head and she'd boarded the plane. There were things she needed to tell him, whether he was ready to hear them or not.

She opened her eyes and saw Lee flash her a familiar smile as he leisurely sipped his wine. Despite her misgivings, it had been a wonderful day. That same smile had greeted her this morning, dissolving her anxiety in an instant. The sight of it stirred something deep inside her, reaffirming her decision to make this trip. When he looked at her like that, she could barely refrain from flinging herself into his arms.

Instead, she'd accepted his awkward hug, giving him a shy 'hi' in return. As he took her carry-on, he quickly ran down the plans for the day. She'd listened to the full itinerary with a silent sigh – lunch with Phillip and Kate, a museum exhibit in the afternoon, dinner reservations at eight. The day seemed conveniently jammed with people.

Still, it had been good to spend time together, even if they were always in a crowd. Safer, too, her mind whispered in silent relief. At the moment, she was content merely to enjoy the feel of his hand resting on the small of her back as they crossed a street or to revel in the warmth of his laugh as they discussed Jenny's part in an upcoming Halloween play. Simple things, things he did without thinking, things she'd always taken for granted until they weren't there any more.

"Amanda?"

His voice filtered through her thoughts and she quickly looked up. "Hmm?"

"I asked if you wanted some dessert."

"No," she declined pleasantly, "I couldn't eat another bite. Dinner was wonderful."

"I'd heard they have a world class chef."

“I wasn’t talking about the food.” She watched him shift restlessly in his chair, giving her a non-committal ‘yeah’. For a minute he looked so much like Matthew that she had to smile.

“Phillip and Kate seemed happy today,” he added, abruptly changing the subject.

“I know,” she rejoined, suppressing the inevitable sigh. Lee was evidently still skirting their personal issues. Even so, he did appear to be trying. Despite the occasional flash of nerves, she couldn’t remember the last time things had felt so ‘normal’ between them.

“I like Kate,” she told him, recalling the way the petite red-haired girl had looked at her son that afternoon. “She’s good for Phillip. They aren’t alike, but they get along, you know?”

“I know,” he answered in a quiet voice. “They’re good friends.”

She looked up in surprise, hearing the words he didn’t utter. Phillip and Kate reminded him of their beginnings.

“That can carry them through almost anything,” she murmured softly.

“I hope so.”

It was a simple phrase, but spoken with such an intensity of feeling that she shuddered, letting out a shaky breath as her eyes met his across the table. He broke the gaze, suddenly infinitely interested in the small floral arrangement adorning the table. His thumb and forefinger absently stroked the soft petals and Amanda stared, mesmerized. It had been so long since she’d felt his touch.

“Did, ah, Matthew’s team win their soccer game?” His uncharacteristic stammer as he quickly cast about for safer subject let her know her reaction hadn’t gone unobserved.

“Yes,” she replied with a calm she didn’t feel. “Thanks to your son. He’s fast becoming their star forward.” She hesitated for a minute. “His last game is in a couple of weeks. Do you think you’ll be home for it?”

“Yeah, I wrote it in my calendar.”

She nodded, glancing away to hide the tears that sprang unexpectedly to her eyes. Jotted notes on a planner... it was such an ordinary thing, a necessity, really, with their busy schedules. She didn't know why it suddenly filled her with such a deep sadness.

“Were the kids okay with your leaving this weekend?” he asked tentatively. She could tell he was fishing for the reason behind her sudden shift in mood. Unwilling to let anything spoil the evening, she brushed her melancholy aside, answering his question with a smile.

“Mother had a full agenda planned. They'll probably be too busy to realize I'm gone. Jenny's new 'best friend' is coming over and Matthew has a birthday party.” She laughingly added, “He was the only boy invited to Susie Jenkins' party.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah. Sometimes I think your son is too charming for his own good.” His face broke out in a grin and she couldn't help but smile in return. “Just like his father.”

His laughter mingled with hers as their eyes met, the remaining tension evaporating. The orchestra began to play a slow song. “Amanda,” he said haltingly as he casually extended his hand. “Would you like to dance?”

“I'd like that very much,” she replied softly, her fingers slipping familiarly into his. The comforting pressure on her hand produced a warm feeling throughout her body.

He led her to the middle of the crowded dance floor. They paused for a few interminable seconds in awkward hesitation, almost as if they both wondered suddenly how they'd gotten there. Other couples revolved around them as they stood quietly facing each other. Lee shrugged, smiling slightly as he shook his head.

“Yeah,” she murmured in tacit understanding, her expression matching his as she stepped into his waiting embrace. As she felt his arms tighten around her and heard him exhale softly, she realized that

she too, had been holding her breath. She slowly released it, marveling at the wonder of his body pressed against hers. She rested her head against his cheek, closing her eyes in silent relief when he didn't pull away.

They stayed that way through the next two songs, moving to the music in silent symmetry as they drank in the other's touch. Lee might seem like an emotional stranger these days, but her body recognized his instantly. The ever-present knot in her stomach began to loosen as the wonderfully familiar sensations washed over her – his fingers on her back as they traced an imaginary line, the scent of his aftershave, the sound of his breathing as he held her close. Her thoughts shut down and she drifted contentedly in his arms.

“Amanda.” Though barely more than a whisper, his voice roared in her ears. “Do you want to get out of here?”

His lips brushed tenderly through her hair sending a shiver of anticipation down her spine. She slowly pulled back, searching his face for a clue to what was going through his mind. Despite the crowded room, all she could see were his eyes. They filled her field of vision, obliterating everything else, as they had done on that first day so long ago. She knew without hesitation, as she had then, that she would go anywhere he asked.

She nodded her assent, her hand firmly encased in his as she followed him off the dance floor. Pausing for a minute in the archway between the dining room and the bar, he said in a low voice, “I'll go take care of the check and be right back.”

She nodded, shuddering slightly as he released her hand. He'd held onto her fingers so tightly that they tingled. She absently rubbed them across her lips as she watched him hunt for their waitress. Her mind screamed to slow this down, that the things standing between them loomed too large to be resolved this way. But her heart was beyond listening.

She knew they needed to talk, not make love, but she didn't know how to tell him. After what had just passed between them on the dance floor, he would never understand her refusal. She could barely make

sense of this sudden reluctance herself. When she made the decision to come to New York, she'd wanted this very thing to happen.

Why couldn't she just stop thinking and ride the wave of her emotions? She was so tired of analyzing every word and feeling. All she wanted to do was forget. How wonderful it would be if you could just flip a switch and turn off the painful memories. One little click and it would all be erased... everything that had happened the past July, all the hurt they'd inflicted on each other since. But most especially the words that had been spoken that night in their hotel room...

The door closed with a jarring thud and she jumped at the sound. "Lee?" she called hesitantly, "Is that you?"

When he didn't answer, she quietly opened the bedroom door, cautiously peering into the sitting room of their suite. She saw his tall figure standing by the bar, shoulders slumped as he hastily poured himself a drink. He brought the glass to his lips with a shaking hand. She could almost hear his sigh of relief as the liquid coursed down his throat.

"Lee?" she asked again in a halting voice. "Why didn't you answer me? Where have you been?"

"Out, Amanda," he replied, refilling his glass. "I've just been... out." His chest heaved as he fought to catch his breath and she watched in grim fascination. "You weren't worried, were you?" His voice sounded so strange that she involuntarily shivered.

"A little," she admitted with a puzzled frown. "You left here hours ago to run an errand. You never said where you were going."

"Didn't I? I'm sorry. Must have slipped my mind." His laugh sounded oddly forced as he added, "I'm sure you of all people can understand that, though."

"Lee..."

"I mean, you know how that can happen, right? You get so busy, those little details fall through the cracks. Things like where you're going, the people you've talked to... slept with..."

"You've been to the Agency, haven't you?" she said in a strangled voice as the full realization hit her.

“Yes, Amanda. I’ve been to the... Agency.” The way he said the word was strangely chilling, as if somehow the place itself was repugnant to him. “I was taking care of business.” He turned around slowly, the pain of knowledge indelibly stamped on every line of his face. “But I guess that’s something else you understand, don’t you?”

They stood a few feet away from each other. She’d known from the start that this moment would come. She had no choice now but to face it. “Lee,” she began, “I...”

“Tell me it isn’t true.”

She gasped as his words took on a sharper edge, cutting her heart to ribbons. Her eyes brimmed with the tears she was powerless to stop.

“Tell me everything he said was a filthy lie.” His voice started to shake and she could see him fighting for control. “Just tell me that and I’ll believe you.”

“I can’t,” she whispered as the tears ran down her face unchecked.

His right hand tightened around the glass, squeezing until the knuckles were white. Without warning, he flung it against the wall. It exploded as it hit, shattering into a million pieces.

“God damn it, Amanda, why?”

He slumped on the bar, his head in his hands. Silent tears still streaming down her face, she approached him almost in a trance. She reached out with a tentative hand, her fingers gently stroking his hair.

“Don’t touch me,” he snarled, jumping back as if he’d been struck. “Just answer my question. Why?”

“He was going to kill you,” she whispered in a voice as heartbroken as his.

He looked at her for a long moment as if somehow trying to process her words. Every fiber of her being screamed to take him in her arms, to tell him she was sorry, that she wished she had done something, anything, else. Something indefinable in his eyes told her just as loudly that he wouldn’t accept it. They looked lifeless, as if something in them had just died. Maybe it had, she thought with odd detachment.

"I had to do it," she stated in a low voice. "I couldn't just stand there and let him put a bullet in your head."

"I wish you had," he said flatly. "It would have been less painful."

"'Less painful'?" She almost choked on the words.

"Yeah," he spat as he paced restlessly behind the bar. "Instead you let him..."

His words trailed off, as she watched him search vainly for another drink. She backed away, struggling with the blind emotion that gripped her heart and mind like a vise.

"Yeah, I 'let him'," she croaked, as the screws twisted tighter. Memories she'd tried vainly to forget assaulted her again... the peculiar scent of tobacco and cologne, the sandpapery feel of a growing beard, the intricate textures hidden in a plain white ceiling. "I 'let him' so my husband wouldn't be shot in front of me," she repeated with growing anger. "I 'let him' so my children wouldn't grow up without their father. Jenny's not even five years old yet. How easy did you find that, Lee?"

"That was a different situation entirely," he replied with an unaccustomed coldness that chilled her to the core. "My parents didn't have control of the situation. You did." He found another glass and filled it, swallowing the contents in one gulp. "I've been in that position enough times to know you can always find other options."

"Yeah, I'm sure the great Scarecrow would have found another way out," she exploded, the emotional turmoil of the past few days spilling through her words. "Except at the time he was unconscious and handcuffed to a bed."

"You find other options," he repeated angrily. "Years ago, I could have slept with Sonja Chenko if I'd wanted to. God knows, she did."

She flinched, turning away to study the impersonal hotel wallpaper. "That's not the same thing and you know it."

"You're right. We weren't married at the time. We hadn't made promises to each other. Promises I've never broken."

Something between a sob and a scream caught in her throat as she whirled to face him. "You act like this is something I 'wanted' to do, like I

haven't felt sick to my stomach every minute of every day since that night."

"Why didn't you tell me?" he demanded. "I've asked you what was wrong these past few days more times than I can count. Why did you let me hear it from that piece of slime?"

"Because I didn't want you to know," she said in a hushed voice, her building fury suddenly deflated. "You didn't need to."

"I didn't 'need to know'," he laughed bitterly. "That's wonderful. I guess that's one lesson the Agency taught that you finally took to heart."

"Do you honestly think if I'd had another option I wouldn't have used it? There was no other way to save your life."

"Well, I suppose you can consider yourself a fully qualified field agent now," he spat. "Congratulations."

"I'm not proud of what I did," she said sadly, stung by the bitterness behind his words. "But it was my decision. I'm the one who has to live with it."

"No, Amanda. We both do."

She drew a shuddering breath. Looking up, her eyes met his in painful acknowledgment as the hollow comfort of her misconceptions suddenly fell away. Up until now, she'd only allowed herself to think of what had happened in professional terms. On paper it all looked so clear cut. Chapter seven, subsection six, paragraph two: 'in the event of life threatening circumstances, the agent team must first and foremost secure the success of the mission and the safety of their members.' Words like love, faith and trust didn't enter into the black and white of the Agency manual. But they were written across her husband's face with agonizing clarity. Her tears began to flow again as the full impact of her decision struck her with devastating force.

He turned away, his head bowed in resignation. "You've never been able to let me help you, Amanda," he whispered sorrowfully. She watched as he stared at her again with those lifeless eyes. "In all the years we've known each other, with everything we've been through, as close as I thought we were..."

"I wanted to. I tried..."

“Not hard enough.”

She shut her eyes, the bite of his words reverberating through her every nerve. She'd wanted to tell him, wanted him to hold her and make it all go away. To hear him say he understood what she'd done. Her lips just wouldn't form the words. She could barely face her own reflection in the bathroom mirror, let alone what she would see every day in his eyes if he knew.

She opened her mouth to try to explain, but the words still wouldn't come. Instead, she could only whisper weakly, “It was business.”

“‘Business’ be damned,” he shouted. “Stop kidding yourself. It doesn't get more personal than this. You should have told me. At the very least, you owed me that much.”

“I thought if I could handle it alone, you wouldn't have to.”

“You were wrong.”

“I know,” she moaned, more to herself than to him. She stood in the middle of the room, her arms hugging her chest as her tears began to flow again. She heard him move away from the bar and she jerked her head up. His back was to her, his hand on the door.

“Where are you going?”

His eyes met hers for a moment before he quickly turned away. “Right now, I thought I'd get drunk. After that, I really don't know...”

“Lee...”

The anguished word was lost on the hotel room door. The name turned into a low wail as she listened to his footsteps die away in the hall. Grabbing for the nearest piece of furniture, she clung to it for support, her legs wobbling as she fought the tide of emotion that threatened to engulf her. Lee was right; this was their life, not some dossier compiled for an Agency scenario. A life based on friendship, trust and love. In that world, she was a wife, not an agent. And she'd destroyed it all by losing sight of that one unforgettable fact. Her tears gave way to wracking sobs as she sank down onto the floor, one arm still gripping the arm of the couch, her grief-stricken voice repeating his name...

“Lee,” she repeated softly, her fingers moving over her lips as they formed the word.

“Right here.”

His voice came out of nowhere and startled her, pulling her back with a jolt. Slightly disoriented, she glanced quickly around the room. They were in an upscale New York restaurant, not that dark hotel room, and Lee had gone to pay the check.

“Ready to go?” he asked, his voice low and intense.

“Yes,” she answered softly, turning away to brush off the tears that had mysteriously appeared. He seemed in a hurry to leave as he closed his arm around her possessively. She took a deep breath, pushing her apprehension aside. She owed him this. And in the final analysis, she loved him too much to say no. Taking a deep breath, she quickly matched his pace.

Chapter Eight
Saturday, October 12, 1996
“Lee”

He inserted the key in his apartment door and slowly opened it, stepping aside to allow Amanda to enter. He was keenly aware of her as he flipped on the dim foyer light. Standing beside her in the peculiar intimacy of the semi-darkness, he could feel the tension building again.

He’d caught glimpses of it all day – at the airport this morning, at lunch with the kids, then later as they walked through the streets of New York. It had been an ever-present entity for so long, lurking just below the surface of even the most ordinary things, that he’d almost come to expect it.

Somehow, though, tonight’s dinner had been different. He couldn’t say why, exactly; he only knew that somewhere between the appetizer and the main course, he looked across the table and suddenly recognized the face of his best friend. All the loneliness of the past three

months dissolved in the warmth of her eyes. He knew intuitively that it was the same for her.

The feeling had grown even stronger on the dance floor. Having her in his arms again, the orchestra playing softly behind them, had reawakened all his senses. The faint smell of shampoo on her hair was more intoxicating than the finest bottle of Beaujolais. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt this way. He'd wanted nothing more than to have her completely to himself. He ached to lie beside her in the darkness and erase everything that had happened the previous summer, to somehow make her 'his' again. He had sensed her willingness as they moved to the music in a familiar rhythm and quickly suggested they leave the crowded restaurant behind.

He'd left her briefly to take care of the check, but even that short span of time seemed to somehow alter the mood. As they left in search of a taxi, he could feel their tenuous connection beginning to slip away. Afraid that words might dissolve it completely, they passed the short ride to his apartment in a state of apprehensive silence. He was terrified that if they lost it this time, they might never get it back.

Now that they were here, his panic was growing even stronger. The more he hesitated, the more he seemed unable to move. His wary eyes followed her slim figure across the living room, watching as she brushed a wayward lock of hair from her eyes in that way he found so endearing. That simple gesture filled him with a passionate longing. He drew a deep breath as she reached for the lamp by the sofa.

"Don't," he croaked, suddenly finding his voice.

"I was just going to turn the light on," she murmured questioningly, her fingers poised on the switch.

Springing into action, he quickly crossed to her, putting a restraining hand on her arm. "Leave it off." He could feel her slight tremble and somewhere in the back of his mind he sensed her reluctance. He pushed the feeling away, refusing to give it credence. All he wanted was to feel her body under his once more, to touch his lips to hers and forget.

"Lee, I..."

“Shhh,” he interrupted, his lips grazing her forehead as he removed her coat. He tossed it carelessly over a nearby chair, throwing his own overcoat and suit jacket in the same general direction. He undid the knot of his tie, pulling it off, and it, too, joined the growing pile.

She looked up at him, nervously chewing her bottom lip. When she spoke, it was in the barest of whispers. “We need to talk.”

“I don’t want to talk.” He drew another ragged breath, quickly closing the remaining distance between them.

“There are things I need to tell...”

He leaned in closer, closing his lips over hers to drown out her halfhearted protest. She tasted tantalizingly familiar, the sensation eliciting a small groan from the back of his throat. Her arms came around his neck and he felt the weight of her body as it suddenly sagged against him. He crushed her to him, his tongue parting her lips, demanding entrance.

He broke the kiss, both of them gasping as he pulled her down with him onto the couch. She started to say something, but he didn’t give her the chance, instead covering her mouth again insistently with his own. He explored her with his tongue, shivering slightly as it encountered hers. The raw emotion that consumed him caught him off-guard. Unwelcome images invaded his mind, of another mouth covering hers and other hands traversing the curves and contours he knew so well. Even after all this time, the wound still seemed so fresh. If he could only stop thinking and blot it out, maybe it would finally close.

He kissed her again, harder this time, filled with a primal need to possess every inch of her. Pushing her back on the couch, he covered her, his hands roaming forcefully across the body he’d missed so much, as if by touch alone he could reclaim what was his. Her skin felt wonderfully warm beneath his seeking fingers as they traveled up underneath her dress. He pressed his lips to her neck, feeling her heartbeat in the hollow of her throat. His mind screamed to stop, that he needed to regain some measure of control, but the blood pounding in his ears overpowered the quieter voice of reason.

The sound of his name reached him as if from a great distance and he was suddenly aware that she was struggling beneath him. The quiet desperation in her voice brought him back to himself with all the force of a stinging blow. Feeling something wet against his cheek, he looked down to see that she was silently crying.

“Amanda, I...” He rolled off her, sliding from the couch onto the floor. His head in his hands, he leaned back against the sofa with a heartfelt sigh. “My God... I don’t know what to say. I’m... I’m sorry.”

He reached up and switched on the lamp, sinking back down on the floor as the light filled the room. She lay back on the couch, a limp rag doll. Her tears drew two dark mascara lines as they tricked down her cheeks. The sight of her flooded him with remorse, its taste more bitter because he could feel her pain as surely as his own. He started to pull her dress down over her legs, but her hand caught his wrist in an iron grip.

“Don’t.”

He recoiled at the sting of her voice. She sat up quickly, some unseen force galvanizing her into action. He watched in contrition as she straightened her dress and wiped away her tears. He looked away, unable to meet her gaze. He could hear her deep, uneven breaths as she fought for control.

“Would you like to explain to me what that was all about?” she questioned, her soft-spoken words more potent than a roar.

He could only answer in a strangled voice, “I don’t know.” It sounded unbelievable, even to him.

“Well, when you figure it out, let me know.” He could tell she was holding herself in check. He couldn’t decide if he was thankful for her restraint or saddened by it.

He glanced up in time to see her close the bedroom door. He rose to go after her, but stopped short as he wrestled with what to say. ‘I’m sorry’ seemed poorly inadequate, but it was all that came to mind. He seemed incapable of speaking any other words.

She emerged from the bedroom a few minutes later, her makeup repaired, trailing her suitcase behind her. He struggled to find his voice, the seconds stretching into minutes. “You’re going,” he finally managed to choke out. It was more of a statement than a question.

“Yes,” she said flatly. “I’m going home. It was a mistake to come here this weekend.” He heard her sigh as she continued sadly, “Part of me knew that before I got on the plane, but I ignored it.”

“Amanda, I don’t think…” he began, stepping towards her.

“Please don’t,” she said softly, her words stopping him in his tracks. “Just let me finish. This isn’t easy for me to say.”

He nodded impassively, his hands dangling restlessly at his side. Not knowing what else to do, he jammed them into his pockets and waited for her to speak.

“I can’t go on like this, living a ‘half-life’ with you,” she said slowly, her eyes meeting his in steely determination. “I know I’ve hurt you, but you’ve hurt me, too. We can’t ignore it anymore, hoping it will all just go away. We’ve tried that for the last three months and it doesn’t get any better.”

“I know,” he sighed, running a hand through his hair as he grappled with the implication of her words. “I just don’t know how.”

“I can’t help you with that, Lee,” she said sadly. “I’ve got to help myself. That’s part of the reason I came to New York this weekend, against my better judgment. There were some things I needed to tell you, was trying to tell you, before you decided to behave like a cave man.”

“Amanda…”

“I’ve been seeing an Agency therapist.”

“A therapist?” he echoed softly.

“Yes. For about six weeks now. Ever since you chose to solve our problems by moving to New York. I didn’t want to at first, but when

Francine became Field Chief, she made it mandatory. I know what you think of all that," she continued after a brief pause, "but it's helped me. I think it would help you, too. Help us. God knows after tonight's little display, it's pretty obvious that you need someone to talk to. I realize now that it shouldn't be me. But you need to resolve this anger before it consumes you... and us."

He opened his mouth to say something, but the words caught in his throat at the wounded look still haunting her eyes.

"Anyway, what I came here to tell you this weekend is that...I'm sorry. Not for what I did, because if I had it to do all over again, I would still make the same choice. I'll never be sorry that you're alive. How could I face our children, knowing that I could have saved their father's life and instead..."

She paused and he watched the emotion flash across her face as she struggled to continue. "But I should have told you the truth. I should never have let you stumble across it the way that you did. I was wrong. For that, I am truly sorry."

"Amanda..." He could see the determination on her face and his words trailed off. Stunned into silence, he waited for her to continue.

"Where we go from here is up to you now. Maybe too much has gone wrong and we can't work this out; I don't know. But I'll be at home, waiting, if you decide that you want to try."

Reaching for the handle on her suitcase, she turned and headed to the door. Her hand on the doorknob, she looked back over her shoulder one last time. "Just be careful you don't take too long. I can't go on like this forever and neither can our children."

He flinched as he heard the door click into place, the automatic lock engaging. Her words seem to hang in the air, a double-edged sword that pierced his heart. He unconsciously headed for the small wet-bar, the sound of his shoes on the hard wood floor magnified by the oppressive silence.

He reached for the scotch and poured himself a generous drink. The amber liquid burned his throat, a subtle reminder of the pain that

had taken up permanent residence in his heart. Her words had rocked him to his core. He knew it wouldn't help, but he took another swallow anyway. The same way he had that night almost three months earlier...

He downed the contents of the glass in one swallow, setting the empty glass on the bar. He nodded to the bartender, his eyes flashing as the golden liquid flowed into the glass. "Leave the bottle," he said, his voice like sandpaper as he rasped the words. The man did as he asked, placing the bottle on the bar with a slight shake of the head.

He gathered his glass and his bottle of scotch, heading for an empty table in the corner. He was in no mood for conversation and he silently cursed himself for choosing to come to Monahan's. The New York version of Nedlinger's was crawling with agents, bureaucrats and other 'espionage junkies'. There was no escape, it seemed.

He hadn't really been thinking when he'd left the hotel room a few hours earlier. He only knew he couldn't stay there any more, couldn't listen to her explanations. Part of him knew he should understand, did understand. 'Scarecrow' would have done the same thing. Somewhere in the back of his mind, Magda Petrack's voice echoed across the years as she pondered the cost of her new life. What he'd asked of her that night to save Amanda wasn't so different. In this business, you learned early on to do what was 'necessary'. He brought the glass to his lips, closing his eyes to blot out the images that engendered. He didn't want to think about it... didn't want to think at all. Looking at the bottle, he judged that oblivion was still another hour away.

The door to the tavern swung open, the boisterous group entering in an enthusiastic rush. It was painful to watch people who were so overtly happy. Their laughter hammered home everything he'd lost. He quickly looked away, almost missing Francine. He caught her out of the corner of his eye as she stood in the doorway, purposefully scanning the bar. Groaning, he tried to blend into the woodwork, but to no avail. She spotted him, marching in his direction with a suitably dour expression.

"Hello, Francine," he mumbled as she came to a stop in front of him, her hands on her hips. She looked exactly like his daughter when she recited her 'teapot' rhyme, he thought with grim smile. Except he had a feeling the only thing Francine was about to 'pour out' would be some bitter recriminations. Her expression told him exactly whose side she was on.

"Scarecrow. I've been looking all over this town for you."

“Oh, yeah? I’ve been right here,” he replied with equanimity. “I’d ask you to join me, but as you can see, I’m a little busy.” He took a long drink, setting the glass back down on the table with an emphatic thud.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she asked pointedly as she settled into the empty chair beside him.

“Your powers of observation must be slipping, Agent Desmond,” he answered with a bitter laugh. “I thought ‘what I’m doing’ would be pretty obvious.”

“This isn’t going to help anything, Lee. You’re just going to regret it in the morning.”

“Yeah, I’m probably gonna regret a lot of things in the morning. This, unfortunately, won’t be one of them.”

“You talked to Amanda?”

“Yeah, I ‘talked’ to Amanda...” He heard her sharp intake of breath as he looked deeply into his glass.

“It’s rough, I know, but Lee...”

He smiled dismally as she searched for the right words. Hell, he didn’t know what to say, either. That’s why he was sitting here in this dingy bar with a bottle of scotch.

“You have a lot of things to be grateful for,” he heard her say finally. “Unlike Billy, you’re still here.”

“‘Still here’... that’s a matter of opinion, I think.”

“You’re not lying in an alley with a bullet in your brain,” she responded sharply. “And you can thank your partner for that.”

“Yeah, I know. I should be... grateful.”

“Yes, grateful. You have two beautiful children, two great stepsons and a wife who loves you enough to... you should be damn grateful.”

“Look at that glass, Francine,” he said suddenly, resting his chin on his hands. “What do you see?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” she answered in confusion.

“Some people would say it’s half full, some people say it’s half empty. I never could decide who was right. It’s confusing, you know? Only one way to settle it.” He lifted the glass, saluting her with it before he drained it. “Now it’s definitely empty.”

“And you’ve definitely had enough,” she retorted, snatching the scotch before he could refill the glass. Motioning for the cocktail waitress, she quickly ordered two mugs of coffee.

“Fine,” he smirked as the waitress headed towards the bar with his Chivas Regal. “I can always get another bottle later. You can’t sit here all night.”

“Watch me, Stetson,” she grinned in reply. “I can be as stubborn as you are when I’m pushed. Ask Jonathan.”

“I am your boss, you know. I could order you to get the hell out of here.”

“Get over yourself. I’m off duty.” The waitress arrived with the coffee, setting two steaming mugs in front of them. “Here, drink this,” Francine stated flatly, pushing the mug in his direction.

“Oh, that’s awful,” he grimaced as the liquid slid over the tip of his tongue. “It’s black.”

“Yeah, well, remember that the next time you think you can solve your problems in a bottle.”

He could feel her eyes watching him, waiting for the coffee to take hold so she could talk with him ‘reasonably’. It was going to be a long wait. Reason had nothing to do with feeling. And, unfortunately, all he could do at the moment was feel.

“Why didn’t she tell me, Francine?” he asked suddenly, his eyes filled with a sorrow beyond his understanding. “Why couldn’t she just come to me? I’m her husband, for god’s sake.”

“That’s exactly why she couldn’t. I’m not sure I’d tell Jonathan something like that.” He watched her warily as she waited for her words to sink in. “Of course,” she added wryly, “he doesn’t have an Alpha 16 green priority clearance, either. That tends to complicate things.”

"It's done nothing but for the past ten years. Ever since I took that first promotion."

"But at least in this case it should help you understand what happened."

"Maybe I would have understood it if she'd only told me and let me help her. I don't know." He took another sip of coffee, sighing as the bitter taste rolled over his tongue. "Now I guess I never will."

"She's probably had her hands full dealing with her own pain," Francine said in a quiet voice. "That's hard enough without taking on yours, too."

He looked up at the sound of Francine's sigh. Her eyes had a faraway look, staring vacantly at a spot on the wall somewhere above his head. "You have absolutely no idea what it's like to be a woman in this business, Scarecrow."

"I know how hard Amanda's worked," he began.

"You haven't got a clue how hard any woman has to work. Longer hours, trickier assignments, just to prove you can do the job. And when you do, the snide remarks, jokes whispered around the water cooler. The same set of rules apply, you know... but when a woman is forced to follow them, suddenly it's not 'acceptable' behavior." She sighed, pausing for a minute before she continued. "You shielded Amanda from all that, you know. It's probably part of the reason I used to resent her."

"I thought..."

"Oh, that was all a long time ago," she interrupted quickly. "She's worked hard to prove herself. Sometimes I think you forget that for a while, she was my partner, too."

"I haven't forgotten."

"It can't have been easy for her, being labeled your 'protégé'," Francine continued quietly. "But on the other hand, it had some advantages, too. She started in a place it took some of us years to reach. She missed the grunt work... the unsavory meetings in too many dingy hotel rooms, countless interrogations spent 'softening' a suspect. It's all part of what we're trained to do... you know that. We're trained to back up our partner, no matter what the cost. You can't fault her for doing the same thing you would have done if the situation was reversed."

“Maybe,” he said sadly. “But I would have gone to her and told her the truth.”

“What’s the truth, Scarecrow? That she loves you? That she’s damn good at her job? That she was willing to do anything to save your life? It’s all relative, you know.”

He shrugged, pausing to take another swig of coffee. “It’s my fault, all this,” he said sadly, rubbing his hand across his forehead with a frown. “I never should have let it get this far. I should have pulled the plug when things first started going off the wire.”

“Bull,” she rejoined brusquely. “You can’t control everything. You seem to forget we’re dealing with volatile situations and people whose reactions can’t be predicted or controlled.”

“Maybe.”

“No ‘maybe’ about it. Sometimes we have to improvise – you know that as well as I do. I would have made the same decision in her place. And I have, on more than one occasion,” she added quietly. “I learned to live with it. You and Amanda will, too.”

“I don’t know.”

“Yeah, well I do. Come on, Scarecrow, I’m not the one you should be talking to about this. Let’s get you home.”

“I can’t, not yet,” he muttered, resting his head in his hands. “I think I’ll sit here awhile.”

“Lee...”

“It’s okay, Francine. I’ll stick with the coffee, I promise. I just need to be by myself for a while.”

“Okay. If you need anything... I’ll be at the hotel.” He saw the concern hiding behind her eyes as she looked at him. “You’re sure I can’t give you a lift?”

“You already have,” he smiled from behind his cup. “Thanks.”

He stared down at his glass, swirling the scotch once before dumping it down the sink. Drinking didn’t solve anything; when the

hangover subsided, the problems were all still there. Francine had spoken the truth about that.

He'd sat in the bar that night after she left, drinking his coffee and trying to make sense of what had happened. When the last patron said his goodnights and headed for home, he rose stiffly and did the same. He walked in the direction of their hotel with measured tread, his head no clearer than when he'd left hours earlier.

Now, three months later, here he stood, still in a fog. Amanda was right... he had to come to grips with his anger, at himself, at her, at the entire hopeless situation. If he couldn't, they didn't have a prayer of survival. He didn't know why he'd been able to talk to Francine that night, but still be totally unable to open up to the woman he loved so dearly.

Love, of course, was the problem. It muddied the waters until it was impossible to see anything anymore. With Francine, it was all so straightforward and uncomplicated. He hadn't slept beside her for the past ten years, listening to her quiet murmurs as she surrendered to sleep. He hadn't seen the funny little smile that lit her face when she looked at their children. She hadn't closed her arms around him as she broke the news of his uncle's death or paced the floor with him over Jenny's first fever. And she hadn't repeated his tender words of love as their bodies shared their passion.

Francine had told him they would learn to live with it, but what if the only way to do that was to live apart? Even in the midst of all this hell, he couldn't conceive of a life without her. There just seemed to be no way out. Lonelier than he'd ever felt in his life, he headed into the other room and another sleepless night in his empty bed.

Chapter Nine
Monday, October 21, 1996
"Amanda"

“I think that should just about do it, Amanda.” Dotty leaned back in the kitchen chair as she held up Jenny’s Halloween costume. “Add some shoulder pads, and she’ll be all set.”

“That looks perfect, Mother,” she praised. The miniature uniform her mother had crafted looked amazing. Lately, Dotty stopped in almost every night with something she’d made for the kids or to share a cup of tea. She appreciated the company.

“You know, Amanda,” her mother continued, rubbing her eyes as she removed her bi-focals, “I can’t tell you how many years I wished for a little granddaughter to dress up. Now that I finally have one, what does she want to be for Halloween... a fairy princess? A cheerleader?” Dotty lifted her eyebrow archly. “No, she wants to be one of the Washington Redskins.”

“I guess that’s what happens when you have three older brothers.”

“And a father who’s a football fan,” Dotty observed dryly.

“Yeah.” Grabbing the dishrag, she gave the spotless kitchen counter another swipe. Since her trip to New York, her gears had been running in overdrive. Household chores kept her from thinking too much.

“Amanda.”

She could feel her mother’s sharp eyes on her back. Turning her attention to the front of the microwave, she muttered crossly, “It’s impossible to keep up with these little fingerprints. I don’t know how Jenny manages to reach up here.”

“Amanda,” her mother repeated, more insistently this time. “Going through this house like a tornado isn’t going to help things. Unless you’ve entered some housekeeping contest that I don’t know about?”

“Mother...”

“It might do you some good to talk about it. Sometimes a new perspective helps.”

Amanda sighed, tossing the rag into the sink. “Do you want some tea?” She filled the kettle without waiting for an answer, setting it on the stove with a bang.

She felt a warm hand touch her shoulder. Turning, she accepted her mother’s waiting embrace, smiling as she felt her arms surround her. These same arms had rocked her when she’d fallen off her bike, comforted her when she’d failed to make the volleyball team, held her when she cried painful teenage tears over her first lost love. She used to think her mother had the power to fix anything. Even though she was old enough now to know better, a part of her wished she still believed it.

“I’d tell you if I could,” she said at last, reluctantly pulling away. “But you know there are things I’m bound by oath not to discuss.”

“The reason your husband sleeps in Jamie’s old room is a matter of national security?” her mother asked, her arms folded across her chest.

“In a roundabout way, yes,” Amanda replied ironically. “How did you know...”

“Jennifer Dorothea Stetson is a fountain of information.” Dotty smiled at her daughter wryly. “I don’t think she’ll be following in her parents’ footsteps.”

Amanda laughed in spite of herself. Jenny was a happy, open child, a lot like she had been at her age. She wondered briefly who else she’d discussed her father’s current sleeping habits with.

“You know, darling, I was hoping your trip to New York might remedy that situation.”

“So was I.” She repressed a shudder at the memory of their last encounter, adding sadly, “I think it only made things worse.” Except for some briefly exchanged messages on the answering service, she hadn’t really spoken to him since that night.

“Yes, I’d noticed Lee was conspicuously absent over the weekend. You know, Amanda,” she continued in a worried tone, “if your job is

interfering with your marriage, it might be time to consider if it's worth the cost."

The kettle shrieked and Amanda let out a long breath. Even inanimate objects seemed to have a comment on her life these days. Turning off the gas, she filled the waiting cups with water and handed one to her mother.

"If quitting my job would make everything okay," she began, cautiously sipping her tea, "don't you think I'd do it? It's not as simple as that."

"There are always choices, darling. Sometimes they aren't easy ones."

"Believe me, I know that. But not everything fits into those 'black and white' compartments you're so fond of," she stated despondently. "Lee and I work in a world where there are just differing shades of gray."

"You're right, Amanda," her mother responded shortly. "I don't understand your jobs and I don't think I want to. But I do understand you. I've known you all your life and I've come to love Lee like a son. It hurts to see you both in such pain and not be able to do anything."

"I know." Amanda abandoned her tea, pacing restlessly between the counter and small cooking island. "Everything's just fallen apart since Billy died and we got mixed up in this..." She broke off, realizing she'd almost said more than she'd intended.

"You can't fix it?" her mother asked simply.

"I'm not sure anymore how to do that. We've both hurt each other so much..."

"He loves you, Amanda. I see it every time he looks at you. Are you telling me you don't love him?"

"No," she whispered. "I love him more now than the day I married him. But sometimes love isn't enough."

“It’s more than a lot of people will ever have,” her mother stated quietly. “Trust it to see you through this.”

“I’m trying to,” she said in a shaky voice, studiously avoiding her mother’s eyes. She heard a familiar echo in her words. Once upon a time, Lee had told her that very thing. They seemed so far away from the people they had been then.

“Amanda...”

“Do you mind staying a little longer?” she asked abruptly. “I think I’d like to take my walk now.”

“I don’t mind at all, darling,” her mother replied hesitantly, “Curt isn’t coming by until ten. But are you sure you want to go out? The weather’s turned pretty cold.”

“I need to do some thinking.”

Her mother nodded, pursing her lips tightly. Amanda knew that look. Grabbing her jacket, she bade her a hasty farewell before Dotty could draw her back into the discussion. She couldn’t talk any more tonight - not while her feelings about Lee were still so jumbled.

Shoving her hands in her pocket, she breathed the cool autumn air in great gulps as she set out on her usual route. Their neighborhood was awash with Halloween decorations - one holiday she’d be happy to see over and done with this year. All those damned scarecrows, everywhere she looked.

She shivered and picked up her pace, the thought of a life without Lee chilling her more than the bitter wind. She didn’t know how to reach him anymore. She’d watched their tenuous relationship disintegrate even further since he’d taken Billy’s old job, their encounter in his apartment last week just one more reminder of the wall that stood between them.

‘Encounter’... that was way her mind chose to describe it. Every night for the past week she’d lain in their bed, trying vainly to blot out the memory of his lips crushing hers. She had never seen him like that before, so coldly passionate, his mouth harsh and demanding, his

touch... she shivered again. There were times when she thought she knew Lee Stetson better than she knew herself. This angry stranger was a man she barely recognized. That fact frightened her more than his actions that night.

She wanted her husband back, the man whose arms held her so gently at night and whose lips caressed hers with a tenderness that spoke his feelings more eloquently than words. The man who helped Matthew with his homework and tucked Jenny in at night, patiently rereading her favorite story as if he'd never heard it before. She was beginning to realize that maybe it might be too late.

She'd managed to raise Phillip and Jamie for more years than she cared to remember without a father in the house. The thought depressed her beyond words, but she would do it again if she had to. She just didn't know why it all seemed so much harder this time.

Her heart formed the answer before her mind finished posing the question. Lee was a part of her in a way Joe had never been. Her divorce from Joe had been a natural parting of the ways. Since she'd felt more of a sense of failure than a sense of loss, she'd directed her anger inward rather than at Joe and their friendship had survived.

With Lee it was a different matter entirely. She felt as if he had been ripped from her life, leaving a gaping hole behind. She couldn't imagine a time when she could sit in a room with him and see only a friend. Despite everything, she still missed and needed him on so many levels - in their office, in their home and in their bed.

The wind whipped up again, sending a shower of leaves down on her head. She pulled her hand from her pocket to brush them away, a small, white paper fluttering to the ground. Stooping to retrieve it, she noticed the familiar number. It was the business card of the attorney Joe's partner had recommended. She'd shoved it in her coat the other day when she'd headed out the door.

She had intended to contact him that morning at work, but couldn't bring herself to complete the call. She'd tried before on a number of occasions; once she'd even gone so far as to let the receptionist answer before hanging up. Each time she'd been stopped by the memory of a pair of familiar hazel eyes.

They invaded her mind with painful regularity. She saw them in every stage of their relationship, pleading with her in a crowded train station, filled with bitter remorse as they stood together in Nedlinger's and weeping softly as he mourned his parents. She remembered their shining light as he asked her to marry him, their awe as he placed a gold ring on her finger and their unbridled joy on the morning after their wedding. She shared their wonder as he held his son for the first time, their tenderness when he brushed his daughter's soft curls, their pride when he talked about their family. And, through the grief and loneliness of the last few months, she recalled their quiet entreaty to hold on just a little longer...

She paused at the door for a minute, uncertain whether to knock or just walk in the way she usually did. She could see him through the open blinds, sitting stiffly behind his desk, staring down at a file. Every few minutes, he paused and rubbed his eyes, a habit she knew only too well. It had become a subtle signal to her over the years to lighten the pressure.

She didn't know how to do that now. For the first time, she was part of the problem, not the solution. He had said very little since that night in their hotel room when she had confirmed what had happened with Styles. She could only guess at what might be going through his mind. With a persistence she was beginning to find annoying, he'd neatly sidestepped her every attempt to talk. Sitting beside him on the flight home, he seemed more like a polite stranger than the man she'd been married to for almost ten years. She had hoped that would change once they were back in familiar surroundings. It hadn't.

Their professional relationship seemed as troubled as their personal one. He brought his calculated formality into the workplace, too, keeping her at arm's length here as well. He'd effectively shut her out of any developments in the Styles case. When she'd cornered Francine, her friend had informed her that Lee had removed himself from the case, instead turning it over to the New York office. Francine had tried to cover her surprise that he hadn't told her, but Amanda knew her too well to be fooled.

Looking up suddenly, she realized that she was still standing in front of Lee's office. She could feel the watchful eyes of the bullpen and knew there would be another hot topic for the water cooler tomorrow. Sighing, she quickly rapped on the door.

“Yes?” came the curt reply from the other side.

“I’ve got that report you were looking for from European Operations,” she stammered, her discomfiture increasing as she entered.

If he thought her behavior was odd, he didn’t say so, informing her tersely to leave it on the desk. Nodding, she dropped it beside a stack of color-coded files...red for alpha one, blue for eyes-only, green for situation contained. She wondered briefly what color would describe what had happened to them.

She was turning to leave when the name on the top file caught her eye. With a brief glance at Lee, she reached for it.

“Leave it.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, slightly aggrieved. “It’s code green, I didn’t think it was a security issue.”

He stood up suddenly, snatching the file from her hand. “It’s Pierce’s status report from the New York office on the...” He hesitated, unable to say the name.

“Oh,” she said softly, understanding dawning. He didn’t reply. Instead, he stood behind his desk, still as a statue, clutching the case file in his hand. She watched as his knuckles turned white, the stamped motto ‘Servicium in Umbris’ crinkling as his grip tightened.

“Lee, I...”

“Just so you know,” he informed her, his voice low and gravelly, “I’ve called in a few favors. They won’t need your testimony at the hearing. And I’ve had the file sealed.”

“Thank you,” she whispered, wondering if he’d done that to spare her feelings or his own. She rubbed her finger along the smooth grain of Billy’s old desk. “Lee, I need to talk to...”

“Can it wait?” he asked brusquely. “I have a load of work to do and I’d like to get out of here before midnight.”

“No, it can’t.” She met his eye, almost challenging him to look away.

He faced her with an air of resignation, walking purposely to the windows and closing the shades. "Okay," he grumbled, hand on the wand, "what's so important that it can't wait until we get home?"

"I talked to Francine today," she began slowly. "She suggested that maybe I... we... should get some outside help."

"Francine should mind her own damn business," he growled.

"Lee, I think she's right." She stepped closer, forcing him to look at her. "We aren't dealing with this."

He grimaced, backing away a little and massaging his neck with his hand. She could see the tension written plainly on every muscle. She watched as he tried to work it off, restlessly pacing the small office. Desk, chair, sofa...sofa, desk, chair. She was reminded of a tiger in a cage.

"Amanda," he said as he finally came to a stop by his desk. "I told you that morning in New York before we came home that I understood. Isn't that enough for now?" His fist clenched and unclenched to some unheard rhythm, the tiny vein in his neck keeping the same beat.

"I don't know," she said, shaking her head sadly. Lips compressed, she tried one more appeal. "Will you at least think about therapy..."

She heard him suck in a breath, the sound almost painful. "Can't you leave it alone, Amanda? Jenny's birthday is next week. Let's try to get through it with some semblance of normalcy."

"Normalcy," she murmured almost indistinctly. She watched him standing by his desk, stiff and unbending, the picture of control. The wounded look in his eyes told a different story. Knowing she was the one who had put it there, she acquiesced. "Okay. We'll give Jenny a 'normal' birthday."

"Okay," he said, sitting back down behind his desk, the issue closed. Sensing a dismissal, she headed for the door. Her hand on the knob, she heard his voice.

"Give it some more time, Amanda. Please."

She nodded, shivering as she heading back to her desk...

Amanda shivered, pulling her jacket tighter around her. Time... he'd said it over and over, like some kind of mantra to erase what had happened. She was tired of counting her scars while she waited for his heart to find its way back to hers. One way or another, they needed to settle things.

As she fingered the neatly embossed letters on the lawyer's card one last time, she realized that her legs had unconsciously carried her home. Skirting the house, she headed for the back door. She had almost reached the patio when she saw him. His sudden appearance should have startled her, but she could only think how natural it felt to find him lurking in her back yard.

"Hi," he said shyly as he emerged from the shadows, taking a few uncertain steps before stopping.

"Hi," she echoed, her heartbeat a bit too fast. Even after everything that had happened, he still had the power to do that to her. She didn't know if that made her happy or sad.

"What are you doing out here?" she asked, quietly pushing her confusion aside.

"Waiting for you," he replied haltingly. "Your mother's putting the kids to bed, so I thought I'd, ah, just stay out here. I didn't want to upset them... well, you know, in case..." He cleared his throat, shifting his weight from foot to foot.

"In case what, Lee?"

He looked away, tracing his upper lip with his tongue. "In case you didn't want me to stay."

She took a deep breath, her right hand closing spasmodically on the attorney's card. "I guess it depends on why you're here." Noting the absence of a suitcase, she added, "And for how long."

"I guess that depends on you," he said, his voice rising uncertainly as he stepped towards her. His hand reached out as if to stroke her cheek, but he changed course at the last minute, brushing it nervously through his hair instead.

“Amanda,” he paused, studying the patterned brick of their patio. “I came to say... well, I came to say I’m sorry. For what happened at the apartment that night.”

“You don’t have to,” she began automatically, her face unconsciously softening at his obvious distress.

“Yes I do,” he said emphatically. His eyes narrowed as he frowned. “I don’t know why I behaved that way, like some kind of...” He looked up suddenly, shaking his head sadly. “The last thing in the world I wanted was to hurt you.”

“I know that. It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not. I can’t get it out of my mind.”

“Lee, I knew it was a bad idea before we started. I should never have let it get that far.” She looked over his shoulder at the lights shining from the carriage house.

“Amanda, don’t take the blame for this. It was my fault, not...”

“I understand,” she croaked, “really.”

“Then you’re doing better than I am,” he said glumly. “I’ve tried to call you so many times since that night, but I just didn’t know what to say. Then I realized that what I needed to tell you couldn’t be said over the telephone.”

She looked away, nervously chewing her lower lip as she steeled herself to face him. “What’s that?” she asked in a shaky voice. Despite her earlier resolve, she wasn’t sure she was ready to hear that he was leaving.

“That I need you.”

She stared at him open-mouthed, unbelieving. She’d wanted to hear him say that for so long; now that he finally had, she didn’t know what to say.

“I want you back,” he reiterated, reacting to her expression. “I want ‘us’ back. And I’ll do anything it takes to make that happen.”

“Anything?” she asked breathlessly, the unspoken question hanging in the air between them.

“Anything,” he affirmed. “I’ll go to therapy if you think it will help.”

“It’s not what I think that matters, Lee. It won’t work unless you want it to.” She paused, her eye catching his. “Unless you’re ready to give it a chance.”

“I know. I think I am... now.”

The tenor of his voice struck a nerve and she moved closer in the darkness. “Are you all right?” she asked quietly. “Did something happen...”

“Yes,” he stated quietly. “Can we just leave it at that for now?” His eyes looked at her imploringly.

She sighed softly, feeling like she was missing a vital piece to a puzzle. Something had sent him home, something he didn’t feel able to share. Still, he was here; maybe right now the ‘why’ didn’t matter.

“Okay,” she agreed. “For now. As long as you understand that we have to start talking each other. We can’t go on the way we have been.”

“I know that. I’ll talk to Cartwright tomorrow, work something out so I can stay in D.C. for a while. I need... I want to be here... with you and our family.”

Her mouth turned up in the barest hint of a smile. “It looks like you’ve been doing some pretty heavy thinking.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t have all the answers yet, but...” His eyes caught hers and she saw their unspoken promise. “I thought maybe we could work on finding them together.”

“That sounds like a pretty good plan to me.”

“Yeah.”

“Come on,” she said, nodding towards the door. “Get inside. It’s cold out here.”

“Amanda,” he stated, his voice deepening as he spoke her name. “Thank you.”

“Come on,” she whispered again, offering him her hand. “There are a couple of children who’d be pretty happy to have you tuck them in tonight.”

She felt the familiar pressure as his fingers entwined with hers and, smiling, she led him to the door.

Chapter Ten
Sunday, November 24, 1996
“Lee”

Lee rolled over again, searching for a comfortable spot in the narrow twin bed. No matter how hard he tried, his feet somehow ended up hanging over the edge. Sighing, he resigned himself, trying not to think about Amanda stretched out in their king size bed just down the hall.

Whatever the sleeping accommodations, he was glad to be home. Those last few days in New York had been the darkest of his life. He felt as if he’d been traveling in a tunnel for so long and he was only now beginning to emerge into the sunlight.

It had made him grateful for every minute spent with his family. For Jenny’s serious tone when she told him about school or the look on Matthew’s face when his team won their final game. He’d never realized lukewarm pizza eaten on a damp soccer field with a bunch of seven year olds could taste so good.

Actually, it was more than their joint attendance at his game that had made Matthew so happy. The awful tension that had permeated

their lives seemed to be lessening. He could almost feel the collective sigh of relief from the entire family.

Their therapy sessions actually seemed to be helping. He'd been nervous at first and more than a little resistant. He knew he wouldn't be able to hide behind his standard avoidance patterns any more. As much as he recognized that they had been part of their problem, it still scared him to let them go. But as the days passed and he saw how hard Amanda was trying, he knew that he couldn't give any less.

Lately, he almost looked forward to their sessions. Having a neutral place to talk seemed to validate their feelings. And once acknowledged, they could figure out how to make their marriage work again. They had both come to realize that they needed to find a way back to their friendship before thinking about the next step. And they had both admitted that walking away was an option neither wanted to accept.

The last few weeks had been wonderful as they rediscovered the special camaraderie that had been the foundation of their relationship. He'd almost forgotten the pleasure that came from the simplest things; driving to work together in the morning, a spur of the moment lunch grabbed between meetings, a quick phone call to say 'hello'.

Or the delight in her eyes that night he'd knocked at their kitchen window. He'd arrived home later than usual from his meeting and on impulse he'd headed decided to use the backdoor. He saw her framed in the windowpane, contentedly chatting with Dotty as she finished the dishes. She looked relaxed and happy, her dishtowel slung over her shoulder. The years suddenly melted away, so much so that he almost ducked out of sight when her mother joined her at the sink.

He'd laughingly caught Amanda's eye, motioning for her to join him outside. Her smile matched his as she met him on the patio and they snatched a few private minutes together. It seemed so natural to meet like this and he had reached for her hand as they talked almost without thinking. Moments like that made him glad they had agreed to take things slowly. Although as he thrashed from side to side, he had to admit that they should have bought Jamie a larger bed.

Wrapping himself in the covers, he punched the pillow a few times before settling down. He was just entering that hazy area between wakefulness and sleep when the sound of soft footsteps startled him back to consciousness. Rising up, he came face to face with a pair of brown eyes.

“Jenny, what are you doing up, sweetheart? It’s late.”

“I don’t feel good,” she whimpered softly, her head tilted to one side as she rubbed her ear. “Can I sleep in here?”

He opened the covers and she carefully crawled in beside him. “My ear hurts, Daddy,” she said somberly, a few tears trickling down her face.

He kissed her forehead tenderly, noting that her skin felt dry and hot. She’d had a cold, but this definitely seemed like something more.

“Does it hurt as bad as it did the last time?” he asked, trying to mask his worry. She’d had a series of ear infections last year and he knew Amanda had been concerned about them. Jenny nodded and moaned a tearful ‘I want Mommy’ as she buried her head in his chest.

Scooping her up, he headed down the hall, cautiously entering their bedroom. The light from the hall spilled across the bed and he stood for a moment watching Amanda sleep. She presented such an achingly familiar picture with her pillow hugged to her chest, her hair falling across her face. He could barely refrain from brushing away those tangled strands and tenderly kissing her.

Jenny wiggled in his arms and he tucked his yearning safely away. “Amanda,” he called, gently shaking her awake.

“Lee?” she asked, her eyelids fluttering open. “What...”

“Jenny’s ear is bothering her,” he told her quickly. “I think she has a fever.”

She sat up and switched on the light, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. Jenny reached out and he transferred her to her mother’s arms.

“She does feel warm,” Amanda said, running a hand over their daughter’s head. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes had a sleepy, glazed look. “Can you get me the thermometer? It’s in the hall bathroom.”

“Sure.” He could hear Jenny’s muffled sobs as he rifled through the medicine cabinet. Locating the thermometer, he quickly brought it to Amanda. She settled it under Jenny’s tongue while he sat beside them, rubbing his daughter’s back with gentle strokes.

“It’s almost 104,” she whispered. “I’m gonna have to give her a bath to bring it down. Take her for a minute while I get it ready and find her some Tylenol.”

She quickly handed him their squirming daughter. He felt so helpless when the kids were sick, almost as if he was giving fate yet another hostage. He carried her into the bathroom over her protests and together, he and Amanda plopped her into the tub, splashing the water playfully to distract her. After a while, the tepid bath appeared to do its job and her eyelids grew heavy as her body cooled. Lifting her out of the tub, he carried her to her room, holding her as Amanda dressed her in fresh pajamas. They both tucked her into bed, watching her surrender to sleep almost before her head hit the pillow.

“How does she manage to do that?” he whispered as they listened to the sound of her even breathing.

“Instant sleep? I think it’s a gift,” she laughed. “Probably won’t last too long, though. Let’s get out of here before she wakes up again.”

He followed her into the hall, stopping at their bedroom door. “I’ll stay up for a while and listen for her if you want to get some sleep,” he offered, looking at her appreciatively as the soft light from the hall illuminated her slim form. He’d never realized how wonderfully transparent a wet nightgown could be.

“I think there’s more water on us than there was in the tub,” she said with a nervous laugh and glancing down he saw that he was equally soaked. Motioning for him to follow, she retrieved a dry t-shirt from his drawer, tossing it in his direction. She disappeared into the bathroom, emerging a few seconds later in her robe, her hair pulled up on top of

her head. The dimly lit bedroom conveyed an aura of intimacy they hadn't shared in a long time and he found himself staring wistfully at her.

"Amanda..." His voice trailed off as he vainly tried to piece together a coherent thought.

"You'd better change," she interrupted in a hoarse whisper. "I don't want you sick, too."

He nodded, feeling almost bashful as he quickly removed his wet shirt. He could sense her watching him and he resisted the urge to take her in his arms. There were still too many words that needed to be said.

"Amanda," he began again, pulling the clean shirt over his head, "I..."

"I'm glad you were here tonight."

"Me, too." He thought he detected a carefully hidden sigh and he wondered if that's what she'd really intended to say. "Sure you don't want to get some rest? It's no trouble for me to..."

"No, that's okay. I don't think I could sleep anyway."

"Me, neither."

"We could keep each other company if you want." She smiled hesitantly, taking a few steps forward, her fingers toying with the belt on her robe. "Maybe talk a little bit?"

"Okay," he agreed. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so awed by her quiet grace. He sighed, thinking just how deeply he'd missed her. And how badly he wanted to show her.

Out of habit, they headed to the bed. Amanda paused almost imperceptibly, but it was enough to betray her confusion and he immediately understood. They needed neutral ground. Smiling, he opened the bedroom door a little wider. "So we can hear Jenny if she wakes up," he explained. Switching off the lamp, he sat on the floor, his

back against the bed, patting the carpet in invitation. Grinning softly, she settled down beside him.

They sat for a few moments without saying a word, the gentle rise and fall of their breathing taking on an intimate rhythm. It had been such a long time since they'd been able to sit quietly together without worrying about the silence. In the soft glow from the hall light, he cataloged her features – the dark eyelashes contrasted against her ivory complexion, the smooth line of her cheek, the endearing curve of her nose. It was a face as familiar as his own.

She stirred beside him, drawing her legs up to her chest and resting her chin on her knees. "I'll have to take Jenny to the doctor tomorrow," she said, so softly that he almost mistook her words for a sigh. "I hate to leave her when she's sick, but I've got to get to the Agency for the afternoon report."

"I know. I wish I didn't have to be in New York in the morning. I hate to put all this on you again..."

"It's all right. Sometimes it can't be helped."

"Do you ever get tired of feeling pulled in so many directions?" he asked suddenly. "I mean, nothing ever seems to change. We go to work every day where we make questionable decisions that we tell ourselves are for the 'right' reasons and for what?" He ran his hand through his hair, exhaling loudly as he added, "Lately, I wonder if our jobs are worth the cost."

When she didn't respond, he shot her a quick glance. Her face wore a clouded expression, her finger carefully tracing circles on the carpet. "Amanda," he said hastily, "I wasn't talking about what happened with..."

She nodded, still intent on her pattern. Reaching over, he captured her hand in his. "I was talkin' about me. The things I've done." He shook his head sadly, muttering under his breath, "Almost done."

She turned to him with a quizzical look. "What do you mean? 'Almost done'?"

His words caught in his throat. "It's nothing, really," he quickly parried. He didn't know how to tell her about the incident that had finally brought him home. He felt her hand resting comfortably in his and he wanted to confide in her, but what he'd almost done that day still scared him. At least he now had a better understanding of why she'd decided to keep things from him last summer. Sighing, he added, "Sometimes, it just all seems so... pointless."

"I believe I asked you that very thing once," she smiled softly. "Years ago."

"Oh, yeah? What did I say?"

"That you did it because you believed you were making a difference." Her fingers entwined with his and she gave them a gentle squeeze. "I guess I still believe that's true. If I didn't, I couldn't keep on doing it."

She drew a deep breath. "Lee, about what happened..."

He opened his mouth to tell her she didn't have to say anything, but stopped himself. If she needed to tell him, then he needed to listen. "Go ahead," he told her, their hands still joined.

She nodded thankfully. "That day in the hotel room, when you came back from seeing... from the debriefing. You said an agent always had options..."

"I said a lot of things I probably shouldn't have that day."

"I've asked myself a million times if maybe you were right, if there was something else I could have done." She paused, her eyes fixed on some unseen spot in the hall. "Maybe I should have hit him over the head or kicked him in the... well, done something. I was afraid if I didn't knock him out and he managed to call for help... oh, I don't know anymore. In that moment, I honestly thought there wasn't any other way out."

He sucked in a breath, letting go of her hand to rub his forehead. "You made a judgment call - like you were trained to do. I was wrong to second guess you," he told her in a low voice. "You were right - I'd never

do that to another field agent.” He paused, leaning his shoulder against the bed. “It’s just that - right or wrong - I can’t think of you that way. You’re so much more.”

Some indefinable emotion flashed across her face and she turned away. “You know, it’s not easy trying to stay on top of that pedestal you’ve always put me on. Gets kind of lonely, too.” Eyes on her lap, she twirled the band of gold on the third finger of her left hand. “I hated taking this off to work that case. It felt like a part of me was missing. Then, after... I wasn’t sure you wanted me to put it back on.”

“Amanda,” he said in a voice thick with emotion. “That day in New York... the things I said... I was so caught up in my own pain - I never let myself admit what it must have cost you.” With gentle fingers, he turned her face towards his. “I’m sorry. For a lot of things - but especially for what you went through for me.”

She looked at him, barely breathing, a few tears escaping from her eyes. He reached out, brushing them away with his thumbs. “I’m sorry, too,” he heard her murmur as her hand moved slowly towards him. He felt the gentle touch of her fingers on his face and realized that he was crying, too.

“I didn’t mean to shut you out again. I was just so busy trying to be strong. I think on some level I thought if I didn’t tell you, it wasn’t real. It all felt so... I felt so... cheap.”

“Never,” he said vehemently. “This wasn’t your fault. I’m as much to blame as anyone for what happened. I knew it was a mistake to get back in the game, but no - I had to handle things myself. I let that... I let him use Billy’s death to suck me back in. He played us both.”

“I’m so tired of blame,” she whispered fervently, “so tired of thinking about everything we’ve lost. We can’t change what happened, to you, to me or to Billy. All we can do is...”

“...is hold on to what we still have,” he finished for her. “Our family... each other.” He leaned slowly towards her, aching to kiss her, but still uncertain. After everything that had happened and the way he’d behaved in New York, he was afraid now to move too fast. Breathing deeply, he forced himself to stop.

She seemed to sense his hesitancy as she gave him a shy smile. He felt her hand slide around his neck, her soft fingers caressing him, pulling him closer. Her lips barely grazed his as she kissed him, but the feeling was unmistakable. Knowing she wanted this too, he touched his lips to hers a second time.

She moaned slightly as they parted, a plaintive sound. It struck a chord deep inside and, rising to his knees, he drew her up with him. Wrapping his arms around her, he held her close, burying his head in her shoulder. She stroked it with trembling fingers, murmuring his name over and over like a prayer. Shifting slightly, he brought his mouth to her ear. "I love you, Amanda," he whispered in a shuddering voice.

"Oh, Lee," she gasped, his name almost a cry, and he realized how long it had been since he'd spoken those words.

"I never stopped," he said tenderly. "I just wasn't able to... you know..."

"I know," she murmured against his cheek. "I love you, too. So much."

He could feel her body trembling against his and he pressed her closer, soothing her with words and hands. "Shh, shh. It's all right. We're gonna be okay."

She drew a shaky breath as her body stilled, pulling back at last to look at him. Smiling into her eyes, he suddenly felt whole again and he knew he'd found the piece of himself that had been missing for so long. Cupping her face in his hands, he kissed her almost reverently, first on her forehead, then each eyelid in turn. He felt her hands on his back, underneath his t-shirt, reawakening sensations that had been dormant for too many months. His lips closed on hers in a long, slow kiss.

She was just beginning to respond when he heard Jenny's cry. They broke apart, realizing as they scrambled to their feet that they had completely forgotten what brought them together tonight in the first place.

Grinning at her, he slowly shook his head. "As usual, our timing really stinks."

"I'd better go to her. She's probably feeling pretty miserable."

"I know," he returned, seeing the look on her face. "Go on, it's okay. I'm not going anywhere."

"I'll try to get her back to sleep," she said, her smile full of promise.

His eyes followed her as she disappeared down the hall. Gingerly massaging the kinks in his back, he stretched out on their bed, realizing with a start how long it had been since he'd slept there. A trace of her perfume still clung to her pillow and he closed his eyes, drinking in the familiar scents of home.

He didn't want to leave again. Hopefully tomorrow's trip to New York would be his last for a while. He remembered how much he used to love that city, but now he never wanted to set foot in it again. The painful memories were still too fresh. He didn't need any more reminders of what had almost happened...

Eyes straight ahead, he approached the checkpoint, flashing his Agency I.D. "Scarecrow," he said tersely, "Security clearance Alpha 16."

Removing his gun from his belt clip, he handed it to the guard, placing his briefcase lightly on the table. Without speaking, he moved through the sensors. The guard placed his sidearm into a slot for later retrieval and opened the briefcase. Giving it only a cursory glance, he handed it back to him. He gave the guard a grim smile. He'd known gaining access to the prisoner would be easy. Rank, after all, had some privileges.

His steps were unhurried as he walked down the long hallway to the interrogation room. Flashing his badge once again, he requested a private interview, ordering the monitoring devices turned off. Once again, the guards complied without question. In addition to being a senior agent, he had been the team leader of record on the case. Besides, those who hadn't worked with him still knew him by reputation. They had no reason to doubt Scarecrow.

Placing his briefcase on the table, he opened it with deliberate care. With a quick glance over his shoulder, he placed himself between the table and the two-way mirror, pretending to study the transcripts of the earlier debriefing sessions. He wasn't sure what he hoped to accomplish by confronting Styles again. He only knew that he felt compelled to do it.

He'd stayed late at the Agency again the previous night, sitting alone behind his polished desk. He watched as his staff one by one signed out to go home, watched while the night cleaning crew meticulously vacuumed the hall, watched as the shadows on the wall blended into a dark blur. He went over everything in his mind one more time.

Since Amanda had walked out of his apartment the week before, he'd barely slept. He reported to work automatically every day, initialed his reports and made the prerequisite small talk, feeling more like some kind of programmed robot than a man. As the days passed and he found himself unable to face her even through the wires of a telephone, he felt even more detached from everyone and everything he loved. He realized then that he had to see Styles one more time.

Franklin Styles... he could barely say the name. Everything that had happened this summer could be laid at his door. The events he'd set in motion - the murder of his friend and mentor, the destruction of his family, the haunted look in his wife's eyes - this man was the cause of so much pain for so many. And there he sat, in an Agency detention center, an unnecessary drain on the government's resources.

Still able to breathe the air that Billy couldn't. Still able to think about the way it felt to touch his Amanda. Still able to savor his moment of triumph that day in the interrogation room. Still making them all dance to his tune.

But not for much longer. Today, this game would finally end. Smoothing his hair into place, he gritted his teeth and waited.

The door swung open and the guards escorted him in. Nodding, he signaled the guards to remove the prisoner's cuffs, then indicated that they should leave. Lee Stetson knew procedure demanded that the guards remain, but Scarecrow gruffly overrode him. Again, the guards obeyed without hesitation.

He turned to Styles coldly. Their eyes locked in an absurd contest, each daring the other to look away first. Scarecrow stood his ground, the pulse in his cheek left cheek twitching, staring until Styles broke contact.

He watched as the man flopped down into the chair, pretending a bravado it was obvious he didn't feel. Lee almost pitied him. Almost. Scarecrow regarded him with a cold eye.

"Back for another interview, I see," Styles taunted, lifting his upper lip in a surly sneer. "Or are you here this time to ask me for some pointers?"

Scarecrow didn't reply. Styles had changed since their encounter last July. The months he'd spent in prison had taken their toll, but the fact gave him little satisfaction.

"I'm always happy to oblige, you know," the man continued, his grin revealing a row of teeth that could use a good brushing. "I'm sure your wife would appreciate any help I could give you."

Lee tensed, wondering again what he was doing here. Answers, he thought, his eyes locked on Styles. You came here for answers. For Billy. For Amanda.

For you, Scarecrow whispered with a grim smile. Stop fooling yourself. This has nothing to do with your friend or your wife. His hands clutched the back of the chair.

"Yes, looking at you, I'm definitely sure she would appreciate it," Styles grunted, his tongue licking over his cracked lips. "You really look like shit, Stetson. Amanda must be a pretty unhappy girl these days."

His eyes narrowed as he tightened his grip on the chair. He listened to the staccato rhythm of his heartbeat, tiny beads of perspiration breaking out on his forehead. Scarecrow forced his breathing to slow.

"Actually, if you'd like, maybe you could arrange for her to visit me here." Styles lips parted in a knowing smile and he heard the cackling sound that passed for his laugh. "I'm sure we could pass another very pleasant hour or so together."

He sprang forward, moving with the practiced ease his years of training had given him. In seconds, he stood behind Styles, left arm gripping the right, his adversary's neck securely held in a lethal chokehold.

"What's the matter, Styles," Scarecrow growled, his teeth tightly clenched. "Suddenly run out of things to say?"

If the man was afraid, he didn't show it. Scarecrow could usually detect panic in an adversary, but the only fear he could feel in the room was his own.

"It's been so easy you know," Styles gasped, his tongue swiping his lip again. "All of it. First Amanda, now you. It's comforting to know that sometimes, things do go exactly according to plan."

He sucked in a breath, his muscles tensing. His knuckles were almost white where they gripped his arm and he tightened his hold on Styles' neck imperceptibly.

"I gave her a choice that night you know," he continued with a raspy laugh. "She wanted it... just as much as you want to finish this now."

"You sonofa..." he began, clamping down on his throat. He could hear the choking noises as Styles struggled for a breath. "How does it feel to be powerless?" he spat, his arms pressing down spasmodically. "Just twist and snap... what should I do? Why don't you choose, huh, Styles?"

"Go ahead, Stetson," Styles goaded again. "Do it. Put all of us out of our misery."

He arm quivered slightly, his breathing coming in harsh, rasping gasps. He didn't understand where his hesitation came from. He wanted to do it. He needed to do it. He wasn't a virgin, he'd killed before. Why couldn't he now?

Just do it, Scarecrow ordered. Twist and snap, and it would all be over.

It would all be over, Lee reminded him. His career, his life, his family. His pain.

Twist and snap.

Amanda's face floated before his eyes. In a crowded train station, confusion and doubt written plainly across it. But still trusting him. In a dingy, gray room, filled with terror and joy. But still knowing he would get there in time. In the hospital, etched in pain and exhaustion. But still radiant as he told her their daughter was perfect. And consumed with anguish as she faced him in a New York hotel room.

Twist and snap.

His stepsons stared back at him. At first their eyes held only polite tolerance, but later, unqualified acceptance, and, finally, unconcealed love. He remembered Phillip's unabashed pleasure as he handed him the keys to the Corvette for the first time, Jamie's murmured thanks when he made the 8th grade basketball team. The shared laughter on family campouts, countless birthdays, the first move to college. And the shared pain as they asked if their family was breaking apart for the second time.

Twist and snap.

His children looked up at him. He thought of the countless hours running behind Matthew while he learned to ride a bike, promising not to let go, and the pointed concentration that covered Jenny's face as she struggled to color in the lines. And their eyes, filled with love and the unconditional trust that their father would always be there. The same way he had looked before reality taught him how fragile a child's fantasies really were.

He could feel Styles begin to sweat, the beads trickling down onto his jacket. Scarecrow felt his arm begin to shake.

"What's the matter, Stetson?" Styles' voice rasped his name. "Haven't got the guts?"

Guts... he blanched at the word. Styles deserved to die, but did he deserve to win? Was he still playing him, even now pulling unseen strings? He turned his head, suddenly catching their reflection in the two-way mirror.

He saw two men, fused together in some sort of bizarre dance. One wore a look of smug triumph, the other, blind hatred. It was the image of a man he didn't recognize. Scarecrow drew a deep, shuddering breath. Lee Stetson released it. The answers didn't lie here, in this stale cell with this wasted shell of a man. They lay at home, in Rockville, with his wife and his family.

"Stetson..."

His body relaxed and he released his grip. Styles clutched his throat, gasping for breath. Lee watched his look of victory dissolved into confusion and finally bitter loathing as understanding dawned.

"Stetson..." he gasped again, still choking on the word.

Taking another deep breath, he calmly retrieved his briefcase, crossed to the door and left the room. He could hear Styles screaming his name as he headed down the hall, heard him even as the guards ushered him back to his cell. He didn't look back. Eyes straight ahead, he put one foot in front of the other, passing through the checkpoint without bothering to retrieve his gun. He moved out the door and across the parking lot to his car, sliding behind the wheel. Without hesitation, he drove to the airport. He was going home.

He shuddered slightly at the memory of that dismal afternoon. He'd told himself he'd gone there for answers, but part of him knew he'd had a darker purpose. He had single handedly appointed himself judge, jury and executioner. And that scared him, more than he cared to admit. He knew without a doubt that Scarecrow could have easily ended Styles' worthless life that afternoon, but by the same token Lee would have also ended his own. And Styles' victory would be complete. To let his children grow up without their father, to never again feel the warm acceptance in his wife's smile...no, it was unthinkable.

He had to tell her. He realized with a sigh that he couldn't make love to her unless he shared everything. Until he did, they would never truly be back together again. In her eyes tonight, he'd recognized the love he had built his life on. In that instant, he'd known that, no matter what had happened, it had never wavered. Just like his love for her. It was the one fundamental truth of their lives.

Breathing deeply, he lay back on the pillow and waited.

Chapter Eleven
Wednesday, November 27, 1996
"Amanda"

Putting the final touches on the dining room table, she glanced nervously at her watch. Almost seven o'clock. Even with the holiday traffic, he should have been home by now. Taking a deep breath, she told herself to be patient. The day before Thanksgiving was the busiest travel day of the year.

Everything was ready. The food was warming in the oven, the champagne chilling in the ice bucket. Matthew and Jenny were at the

carriage house, looking forward to their evening of hamburgers and videos. Her mother had assured her it was no trouble to keep them overnight, promising that they would all be over in plenty of time for their traditional pancake breakfast on Thanksgiving morning. Phillip was due in tomorrow for the long weekend and Jamie had volunteered to swing by the airport on his way home. That left the house conveniently empty for the night.

Her mental roll call complete, she headed for the kitchen, stopping to admire the bouquet of red roses on the counter. They'd been waiting for her when she arrived home from work, along with a card that had caused her cheeks to redden. She wondered how he'd had the nerve to dictate that over the phone. But it was so typically Lee that she couldn't help but smile.

It was a side of him she was afraid might have been lost forever. Little by little this past month, she'd caught glimpses of the old Lee. In his air of deliberate nonchalance when he dropped by her office, in the crooked smile that made his dimples seem even deeper, in the spark that smoldered just below that surface as he watched her from across a room. She could feel the walls they'd erected slowly begin to crumble.

The last one had finally come down on Sunday night. In a low voice, he'd told her what had happened the day he'd visited Franklin Styles. Sitting beside her on their bed, in the comforting darkness, he'd poured everything out – all his anger, fear and regret. She'd held his hand tightly in hers, listening to him until the first streaks of sunlight appeared through the window and there were finally no more words left to say. The expression in his eyes told her exactly how much this particular truth had cost him, but it had taken away Styles' power over them. She'd seen him off on his business trip with a heart full of promise, for the first time feeling that they could truly put the past behind them.

At least they seemed to be headed in that direction. They had talked more on the phone the last two nights than they had in person the last two months. In a strange way, the distance had given them both a little breathing room. The feelings they'd reawakened on Sunday were so strong that they were almost overwhelming. They both needed some time to get their bearings. But lying in the dark last night, his sweet

goodnight still ringing in her ears, she'd known she was ready for him to come home.

Pacing restlessly, she caught her reflection in the mirrored glass of the oven door. A few wispy hairs had escaped from their clasp and she patted them back into place. Turning slightly, she contemplated the cut of her new dress. It was a little black number, complete with a plunging neckline and back, and it hugged her curves in all the right places. It had seemed like a good idea in the store, but standing here in her kitchen, she wasn't sure. Maybe she still had time to go upstairs and change.

Taking a deep breath, she willed herself to relax. This was Lee, her best friend, the father of her children, the man she'd been married to for almost ten years - and here she stood, as nervous as a bride. She'd spent the entire morning at work staring at a blank computer screen debating what to do about dinner. Under normal circumstances, she knew their first stop would be the bedroom, but this felt anything but normal. In many ways, it reminded her of their first time.

A first time, she mused, that came with a whole new set of anxieties. At least on their wedding night, there had been no preconceived expectations. What if, after everything they'd been through, it wasn't the same? She knew their love had survived, but their passion was a different matter. The churning in her stomach began again and she wondered if maybe they were rushing things.

"Hi." His voice startled her and she turned around to see him leaning against the door, his eyes sparkling. It only took one look to know she'd made the right choice about dinner.

"I'm sorry I'm late," he told her, tossing his overcoat casually on the chair. "The traffic from Dulles was a nightmare."

"No harm done. Everything's in the oven on low and I haven't opened the..."

"Dom Perignon?" he grinned, lifting the bottle for a closer inspection. "I definitely approve. Shall I do the honors?"

“I’d like that.” She watched his fingers work the top with practiced ease. “Thank you for the flowers,” she began, the distinctive pop of the champagne cork catching her off-guard. Breathing deeply, she silently cursed herself for her nerves. “They’re beautiful.”

“Not as beautiful as you are.” He abandoned the champagne, removing a single rose from the vase. Stepping closer, he ran the soft petals gently over her forehead and down her cheek and she sighed, drinking in the sensation and the scent. “You look...”

“Too overdressed for dinner?”

“I was going to say absolutely incredible.” Pausing, he added with a grin, “Of course, if you want to take the dress off, I wouldn’t complain.”

She felt herself blush at his words and she looked down, studying the subtle pattern of his suit jacket. “How’s Jenny?” she heard him ask.

“Probably driving Mother crazy about now.” Reaching up, she automatically brushed a piece of lint from his shoulder, her fingers smoothing his lapels. “The antibiotics have kicked in.”

“That’s good,” he said with a smile, capturing her hand and bringing it to his lips.

His lips on her fingers bespoke the reassuring familiarity of their courtship yet at the same time sent a tingle of excitement down her spine. “Are you hungry?” she asked absently, distracted by the odd mixture of emotions he was evoking.

He laughed in response, a throaty sound that made her shiver. “I’ve missed you,” he said, leaning in to kiss her forehead.

“Me, too,” she echoed, raising her eyes shyly to his. They looked almost green in the light from the kitchen, the irises picking up the color from his shirt. “Welcome home.”

Smiling, he leaned forward, his lips pressing against hers in a gentle kiss. As if sensing her jumbled emotions, he drew back to look at her. “Amanda,” he said, his voice low and soothing, “is this okay? We

don't have to, you know. I don't want to do anything you're not ready for."

"It's okay," she answered automatically and, kissing him a second time, she knew it was true. "It's more than okay."

"So," he said, his face breaking out in a smile. "What's for dinner?"

"Ummm...pizza."

"Pizza," he repeated and, glancing at the champagne, his smile grew wider. "Did I ever tell you how much I like that cold?"

"Actually," she said, her hands smoothing the front of her dress, "I hear it's better that way."

"Shall we?" He glanced toward the hall, one hand resting on the champagne bottle.

She nodded, bringing their half-filled glasses and heading for the stairs. She felt his hand on the small of her back, guiding her towards their bedroom. As he paused to let her enter, she felt the butterflies again in her stomach. She didn't know why his simple gesture of courtesy could make her so edgy.

Brushing the feeling aside, she crossed the threshold. She could sense him behind her and she turned in time to catch his grin as he looked at the room. The covers on the bed were turned down invitingly, scented candles strategically placed on each nightstand.

"Very nice," he said, taking in all her little touches.

"Thanks. I thought maybe you'd want to light a fire." She nodded towards the match waiting on the mantle.

"Oh, I think that's exactly what I want to do," he said, his voice low and inviting. Flashing her his most provocative smile, he deposited the bottle on the dresser and headed to the fireplace. In seconds, she heard the familiar 'whoosh' as the gas ignited.

“It really looks perfect,” he told her, grinning as he glanced around the room again. Crossing to her, he took their glasses, placing them next to the champagne. “You seem to have thought of everything.”

“Yeah,” she laughed, the butterflies returning with a vengeance. “Everything except how to stop my stomach from doing flip-flops. I don’t know why I’m so nervous.”

“It’s okay,” he whispered, taking a few tentative steps forward. Smiling in reassurance, he opened his arms. “Come here.”

Taking a deep breath, she stepped into his waiting embrace. “I’m a little nervous myself,” he whispered as his arms closed around her, his hands moving soothingly across her back. She rested against him, content to simply be held and hold him in return. Being here with him, like this, made her feel safe.

“Amanda,” he said, his lips against her ear, “we’ve got lots of time. Let’s take this slowly.”

She nodded, pulling back to study his face. She knew that look so well that she couldn’t help but smile. “What exactly did you have in mind?”

“Well, I was thinking a soak in the Jacuzzi might make us both relax.”

“That sounds really nice.”

“Why don’t you get started,” he said, planting a kiss on her forehead as he reached around to unzip her dress. “I’ll be right there.”

She silently acquiesced, heading for the bathroom. She knew what he was doing - giving her the time and space she needed to work through any lingering issues from that night with Styles. They had discussed her experience in their therapy sessions and again on the phone when they had made their plans for this evening.

“Lee,” she said softly, pausing to rest her head against the doorframe. “Thank you.”

Without waiting for a reply, she entered the bathroom, turning on the faucet and adjusting the dials. As the tub filled, she quickly removed her clothing and slipped beneath the water, her body already relaxing as it covered her. Closing her eyes, she listened to the sounds from the other room - the rustling of drawers, the clink of crystal glasses, the distinctive squeak of the bathroom door. Her eyelids fluttering open, she saw Lee smiling down at her.

“I thought we could use a little ‘atmosphere’ in here, too,” he said quickly, turning away and placing some candles strategically on the sink.

She watched as he lit them, his long fingers dexterously striking the match, his breath swiftly extinguishing the flame. Despite the steamy warmth of the bath, she felt herself shiver. Sitting up, she hugged her knees to her chest, her eyes following him into the other room. He’d turned off the lights and lit the candles in there as well. He headed back to her, champagne bottle in hand, switching off the bathroom light as he entered. Filling their glasses, he casually handed one to her, then moving out of her line of sight, he sat behind her on the edge of the tub.

Glancing over her shoulder, she watched him rest his head against the tiled wall. The flickering candlelight played across his face and Amanda sighed, thinking how great he looked, even after all these years. The lines around his eyes had deepened along with his voice and his hair was tinged with gray, but she still saw the man who had touched her very soul so long ago. The months they’d been apart suddenly seemed like years.

Her eye met his, the emotion on his face unmistakable. Realizing that his feelings matched hers caused her earlier misgivings to evaporate. Smiling in invitation, she handed him the sponge.

He knelt by the tub as he began the familiar ritual and, resting her chin on her knees, she closed her eyes. Her world narrowed as she keyed in on her remaining senses - the smell of the candles as their scent filled the bathroom, the feeling of the sponge on her neck and shoulders, the sound of the water as he moved it tantalizingly lower.

Breathing deeply, she turned to face him. "I think you have me at a disadvantage," she whispered, her hand fingering the sleeve of his robe. "You're still dressed, and here I am in this tub..."

He laughed, dropping the sponge and reaching for his glass. "Here's to your disadvantage," he toasted, clinking their champagne flutes together. He stood slowly, his motions deliberate. Pausing, he caught her eye, his hand on the belt of his robe. Suddenly imbued with an overwhelming shyness, she averted her gaze, scooting forward so he could slide in behind her. It seemed silly to feel like this with the man she knew so intimately, but she couldn't shake the feeling. In many ways, she felt more bashful than she had that first time together.

She settled back hesitantly against his chest, exhaling deeply as she felt his arms and legs wrap securely around her. She'd almost forgotten the incredible feeling of her skin rubbing against his and she marveled at the sensation it produced in every part of her body. She could tell from his reaction that he felt exactly the same way. Smiling at the promise of things to come, she closed her eyes and let herself drift.

"Feeling better?" he whispered, pulling her closer.

"Umm-hmm," she murmured, her hands massaging the outside of his legs. "I was just thinking."

"Pleasant thoughts, I hope," he murmured, the sponge making small circles on her abdomen.

"I was thinking about our wedding night. I never thought I'd ever feel that nervous and that excited again." She sighed softly. "I was wrong. I feel the same way tonight."

"I know. This is kind of a new start for us." She felt his breath on her ear as he took her earlobe between his teeth and lightly pulled. "At least we don't have to worry about the help tonight."

"Ten years and you still can't get over that?"

His deep laugh filled the bathroom. "Amanda, on our golden wedding anniversary, I'll still remember that damn maid."

“That’s a long time,” she said, smiling at the implication of his words. A few months ago, that milestone seemed out of reach.

“Some things are impossible to forget,” he murmured. He moved the sponge gently across her chest, squeezing the water into droplets that traveled down her breast. “Like by the time we realized we hadn’t eaten dinner, every restaurant in town was closed.”

“Some great memories you’ve got, Stetson,” she teased, stirring slightly at the sensation he was creating.

“And,” he whispered softly, “that as much as I loved you that night, it doesn’t compare to the way I feel now.”

Sighing deeply, she twisted around to face him, her hand on his chest. His eyes looked deeply into hers and she recognized the renewal of the promises they’d made to each other all those years ago. One heart and one life... she saw the future stretched out again in front of her. Leaning forward, she kissed his cheek, her lips outlining the shadow of his beard.

“I should have shaved,” he said in a gravelly voice, his hand running across the roughened area.

“It doesn’t matter,” she breathed, her mouth inches from his. “I think it’s sexy.” Her heart pounding in her chest, she leaned forward to kiss him. His response was immediate, his tongue against her lips seeking entrance. Opening her mouth, she gave him access, her hands stroking over his body even as his did the same to hers. When the kiss finally ended, she sighed, leaning her head against his chest.

“I’ve been so scared,” she said, her voice so low it was barely audible.

“Of me?” he asked uncertainly, his fingers playing along her back.

“No,” she confided, sitting up to face him. “Of ‘us’ I guess... I was afraid we’d never get past the night that I... that it wouldn’t be the same between us.” She looked away, her eye on the flickering candle. “I was afraid you’d never want me again.”

“Not want you?” she heard him say. “Oh, Amanda.” He reached out, cupping her face in his hands, forcing her eye to meet his. “I ache for you.”

His eyes blazed with a desire deeper than anything she remembered. Their lips met again and when they parted, they were both breathing hard. Their eyes locked and she nodded, stepping out of the tub. He followed her and, reaching for the large bath towel, he wrapped her in it, drying her lightly. Grabbing another for himself, he quickly toweled off, securing the folds tightly around his waist. He reached for her hand and led her into the bedroom.

Stopping in front of the fireplace, she felt his eyes on her again. The minutes seemed to stretch as they stood before the fire. Hesitantly, she placed her hands on his chest, running them slowly up to his shoulders. His skin was still moist from the bath, a few tiny droplets of water clinging to his forehead and cheeks and she drew a shaky breath.

His hand cupped her cheek, his thumb moving across her lips. He reached up slowly and released her clip, combing his fingers through her hair as it tumbled down. His finger trailed down her neck, sensually outlining the top of her towel. Never taking her eyes off his, she unknotted it, letting it fall to the floor. Exhaling softly, he slowly dropped his own towel.

They stood in silence, eyes relearning soft curves and harder lines. She couldn't say who made the first move, but suddenly she felt his arms surround her. His hands caressed her back and she did the same, cupping his buttocks, drawing him closer. He groaned softly and she could feel the full extent of his need as his erection pressed against her.

Leaning down, he kissed her, lightly at first, his mouth barely moving across her upper lip, then more completely, his tongue gently exploring her. The kiss finally ending, they broke apart and, looking into her eyes, he grasped her hands again as they walked the few final steps to their bed. His mouth locked on hers as they sank down, his arms gently lowering her.

Stopping his kisses for a moment, he pulled back and she looked up into his eyes. They were bright with an emotion that stirred her soul. She started to say 'I love you' but suddenly what she felt was beyond

words. Love, desire, friendship and the sense of finally coming home blended together in a moment of the truest intimacy she'd ever know. She felt the tears prick behind her eyelids as she caressed his cheek and mouth with shaking fingers.

He kissed them lightly, but made no move towards her, continuing to stare into her eyes. She sensed the cause of his hesitation and, closing her eyes for a minute, she breathed deeply and took control, turning them until she lay lightly on top of him. She needed to show him that she was really ready for this.

She caught his eye again and he smiled, lying back passively, letting her do whatever she wanted. The months of separation made their sudden closeness more heartfelt. The little things that had become almost second nature over the years, the feel of his skin beneath her fingers, the taste of his flesh, all seemed intoxicatingly new. With trembling lips she kissed his neck, drinking in his scent as she trailed her tongue across his collarbone. Delighting in the rediscovered freedom, she lightly teased his nipples. His soft moans turned louder as she traveled down his abdomen, pausing for just a moment before continuing.

“Oh, Amanda,” he sighed as her tongue circled the tip of his penis. She suddenly felt as if she couldn't give enough and she took as much of him into her mouth as she could, lightly sucking.

He groaned her name again and she paused, looking up to meet his eye. “I want... I need to touch you,” he gasped, his voice thick with desire. She kissed her way back up his chest, sighing as she felt his hands on her. Shifting position, he covered her, the weight of his body almost as erotic as his touch. His lips touched hers again, this time in a kiss so soft she had to strain to feel it. His tenderness in a moment when she knew how badly he wanted her moved her beyond words. Tears threatened again and this time she let go, unable to hold them in any longer.

He froze and she saw the confusion on his face. “Don't stop,” she cried, her breath coming in shallow gasps. “I'm okay. I just...”

He seemed to understand what she was trying to say. Leaning his weight on his right forearm, he used his free hand to gently brush away

her tears. Smiling, he touched his lips to her forehead, then lightly traced the tracks of her tears with his lips and tongue.

“You are so beautiful,” he breathed as his mouth moved down her body, forging a link so strong it was almost primal. His tongue swirled around her nipples as he explored her with expert fingers. The sensation was electrifying, her tears replaced by a desire to belong to him completely. Unable to stand it any more, she reached for him, guiding him toward her.

“I love you, Amanda.” Closing his lips on hers, he slid inside, filling her completely. They lay barely moving, savoring their union. Staring deeply into his eyes, she knew that in that moment they had joined more than their bodies. Their emotional reconnection was so strong it was almost tangible.

His lips closed on hers again and she moved hungrily against him. She wrapped her legs around him, pulling him in deeper. Closing her eyes, she gave herself up to the sensations of their lovemaking, each physical stroke cementing their emotional bond. She felt herself let go, crying his name, and moments later he did the same.

They lay still, prolonging their intimate contact for as long as they could. When at last he rolled away, her sense of loss was almost unbearable. He seemed to feel it, too. Reaching down to pull the covers up around them, he drew her to him. She settled against his chest, warmed by the quilts and their closeness. They lay together quietly for a while, listening to the reassuring noises of their home. The hiss of the gas fireplace, the tick of the clock in the hall, a car horn sounding in the distance – all wonderfully familiar.

“Amanda,” he said, his voice interrupting the silence, “are you okay?”

“Yes,” she assured him, planting tiny kisses on his chest. “You?”

“Yeah. I was just... thinking.”

“About?”

“About how good it feels to be here again with you, like this. About all the time we’ve wasted. And what a damn fool I’ve been for the past few months.” His hand stroked her head, his fingers playing with her hair. “I’ve missed you... more than I... well...”

“I know,” she said quietly, her hand stroking his cheek. “Me, too.”

“I don’t want to lose you.” He crushed her to him, his arms reaffirming his words. “I don’t ever want to take ‘us’ for granted again.”

“I feel the same way. It’s okay.” Reaching up, she brushed her lips across his. “We have time to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

“The rest of our lives.”

She sighed deeply, accepting his promise and silently pledging one of her own. These moments of quiet understanding, her body resting comfortably against his, were the ones she had missed the most. She would never lose them again.

She could feel the tension leave him and she smiled softly. “I love you,” she whispered as the even rhythm of his breathing told her he was surrendering to sleep. He gave her a gentle squeeze before his body relaxed.

Shifting slightly, she moved so she could watch his face. She was tired, too, but still too keyed up to sleep. Careful not to disturb him, she casually stroked his head. He looked serene and untroubled, the turmoil they’d endured since Billy’s death finally put to rest. Perhaps, now, it would finally stay that way. Billy... he’d been more than a friend, to both of them. They owed him so much...

“Lee,” she said, sticking her head in his office door. “Are you ready...” She stopped mid-sentence, her eyes instantly absorbing the tension in his stance and the determined set of his jaw. She wondered briefly if she’d stumbled into some new crisis.

“Ready...?”

“Our therapy session,” she reminded him. “If we don’t leave, we’re going to be late.”

He nodded, fingering the pile of well-worn files.

“Are you in the middle of something?” she asked, noting his distraction. “I can call and reschedule...”

“No,” he answered quickly. “With the holiday coming up, we won’t get another chance. I have to be in New York next week.”

Amanda nodded, a small smile playing over her lips. They had come a long way in the past month. At first, Lee had approached their sessions with all the enthusiasm of a deer trapped in the headlights of a car. The night he’d appeared on their doorstep, he’d volunteered to go, but she suspected his willingness was in part because he knew how badly she wanted it. She didn’t care how she got him there, as long as he went. He’d come home, and she had no intention of letting him run away again.

Lately, though, she felt as if they had been making real progress. His reluctance to reschedule their appointment spoke volumes. She knew whatever he was doing had upset him; she watched his hand smooth his hair as he glanced nervously at the box on his desk.

“Are you sure that can wait?” she asked with concern.

“Yes,” he sighed. “This isn’t an emergency. I was just going through some old case histories before they’re archived.”

She looked at him, confused. “Since when do you de-classify files?”

He took a deep breath, casually catching her eye. “These are Billy’s.”

“Billy’s.” That explained the uncharacteristic rigidity in his upper body. She crossed the room, perching on the edge of his desk, her hand flipping idly through the stack. “There’s a lot of history here, huh?”

“Yeah.” He gave her a hesitant smile, but his eyes seemed far away, caught somewhere between the present and the past. “Look at this one,” he said, handing her the file on top.

She accepted it warmly. He might still be hurting, but at least he didn’t feel the need to face the memories alone anymore. She glanced quickly through it, her eyes perusing the signature. “Lancer?”

“His code name,” Lee told her with a small grin. “He hadn’t used it much since he left the field. I remember this case... one of the first drops we set up. I’d barely lost my freshman status. Damn,” he said, shaking his head sadly. “That was a long time ago.”

She nodded in agreement. The enthusiastic naiveté of her own freshman days seemed equally distant. A job somebody has to do, she thought solemnly. But sometimes the cost was too high.

Sighing, she leafed through the box that contained the remnants of Billy’s career. All neatly categorized, his accomplishments filed for posterity. Except for... the parchment-like paper was wedged into a corner of the box. She pulled it from its hiding place, turning it over carefully. “What’s this?”

“What?” He took it from her hand, shaking his head as he read the peculiar symbols. “How did this get in here?”

“I can’t make it out,” she said, frowning at the unfamiliar writing.

“It’s a Vedic Sanskrit text...” He sighed again, the significance still lost on her. “Roughly translated it means, ‘one heart, one life, one truth’. His mantra.”

“Mantra?”

“One of Harry Thornton’s infamous tools,” he explained. “Back when he was running the Agency, every an agent had a personal mantra. It was used to focus the mind... a sort of self-hypnosis, I guess. It was used to subvert an enemy interrogation or to sharpen thoughts under stress. The more personal the meaning, the more effective it becomes. It’s a very private thing. An agent generally didn’t share it, not even with his partner.”

“But you knew Billy’s?”

He nodded, his eyes suddenly far away. “The night Matthew was born... I was a wreck. I thought I was going to lose you both.” He looked at her, then quickly away. “Billy sat with me at the hospital while we waited for word. He shared it with me that night. ‘One heart, one life, one truth’...”

“I remember,” she said suddenly, recognition dawning on her. Looking up, she caught his eye. “That’s why it sounded so familiar. You were sitting by my bed...”

“..holding your hand. Murmuring those words...

“...over and over.” She smiled, the memory fresh in her mind. “All this time, I thought that was a dream. I guess on some level, I must have heard you.”

“Billy was right, then. It worked.” Their gaze held and for a long minute she felt as if she could see straight into his heart. Then, reluctantly, he looked away. His fingers smoothed the wrinkled sheets almost reverently before he finally spoke. “I know this is part of the official file and it’s not supposed to leave the Agency, but... I’m going to make sure Jeannie gets this.”

Reaching out, she gave his shoulder a squeeze. “I think Billy would approve of that.”

He took a deep breath, replacing the paper in the file. “It’s later than I thought,” he told her, taking a quick glance at his watch. “Come on. We’d better get going.”

“Yeah,” she agreed, following him to the door. Looking down, she realized he’d taken her hand. Billy would probably approve of that, too, she thought with a smile...

And of this, too, she grinned, lying securely in her husband’s arms. They had never loosened their hold, even as he slept. Lifting her eyes, she observed his strong profile in the candlelight. Billy had told her once how good she’d been for Lee. Actually, that was only half the story. They were good for each other.

She felt him stirring and she rolled closer, resting her chin on his chest as she watched him wake. His eyes fluttered open and he smiled, the one that always made her breathe just a little faster. He reached out to her almost shyly, lightly tracing her cheekbone with his finger. She knew what he was feeling. After all the time apart, it was almost overwhelming to be here like this, together.

Smiling, she kissed his chest lightly before resting her head against him. She lay quietly in his arms, listening to the low beat of his heart. His hands brushed tenderly through her hair, every so often singling out a strand to twist around his fingers.

She heard his stomach rumble and she smiled again, realizing with a start that it was long past dinnertime. She suddenly felt hungry, too. Shifting her weight, she tried to slip from his arms.

“Going somewhere?” he whispered, his muscles tensing as he pulled her back to him.

“Only to rescue our pizza from the oven. I thought you might be hungry after your nap.”

“Did I fall asleep?” he asked, almost ruefully.

“You did,” she teased. “I don’t know, Stetson. You must be getting old.”

“Old?” he retorted, the laughter bubbling up from deep inside. His arms tightened around her as he rolled her swiftly onto her back. Leaning on his elbows, he rubbed his body against her. “Would you like to see just how ‘old’ I am?”

She looked up into his eyes, their expression so lovingly familiar, and she knew dinner would have to wait just a little longer. “Go ahead,” she challenged, her tongue teasing his lips. “Show me.”

Chapter Twelve
Thursday, February 13, 1997
“Lee”

Lee whistled to himself as he jogged lightly down the stairs. Pausing at the end of the entry hall, he leaned for a minute against the doorway, quietly observing his wife as she went about her work. Lips pursed in concentration, she systematically wiped the counter, left to right, in a sweeping motion. It was a ritual he’d witnessed countless times, at first from a distance through the window of her old kitchen, then later standing quietly beside her here, in their own. He never grew tired of watching her.

She appeared lost in some pleasant, private thoughts and he smiled, marveling at the remarkable woman he’d married exactly ten

years ago. In all that time, she'd never ceased to amaze him. He'd offered to take her anywhere she wanted to go to celebrate their wedding anniversary, but she had graciously declined. With Matthew's eighth birthday only two days before, she didn't want to be away from home. What she really needed, she'd informed him longingly, was to spend a quiet day with their family. They had come so close to losing everything this year that she treasured these moments even more.

He watched in silent admiration as she bent to put the last of the dinner dishes in the dishwasher. Moving noiselessly across the kitchen, he wrapped his arms around her from behind, pulling her up to him.

"I wish you would have at least let me take us all out to dinner tonight," he told her, leaning his chin on her shoulder. "You shouldn't have to do dishes on your anniversary."

"I don't mind at all," she smiled, relaxing her body against his. "I wanted to spend the evening here, in our house, not an impersonal restaurant. Trust me," she said, twisting in his arms to plant a small kiss on his lips, "this was exactly the celebration I wanted."

Smiling, he leaned in, kissing her more completely this time. Since their reconciliation at Thanksgiving, he seemed to want and need this simple pleasure more and more. He found himself seeking her out at odd times during the day for no other reason than to touch his lips to hers. He knew he was behaving like a newlywed, but Amanda didn't seem to mind. Thinking back, he realized that they'd never really had the chance to act like typical newlyweds. Their mystery surrounding the start of their marriage had neatly circumvented it.

"Are the kids in bed?" she asked with a sigh, snuggling against him.

"Uh huh." His fingers raked through her hair, massaging her neck lightly. "I tucked them in while you were finishing up in here."

"They've had a pretty busy day."

"Me, too, Mrs. Stetson." He leaned closer, breathing in her scent. It was a provocative blend of perfume and soapsuds. Lemony fresh.

Tonight he found it exceptionally erotic. “Think I could get ‘tucked in’ soon?”

He heard her deep, throaty laugh, the one that always gave him chills, and he covered her mouth again. Moving back to look at her, he felt her fingers lovingly trace his lips. He pulled one into his mouth, circling it with his tongue.

“If you can behave yourself for, say, half an hour,” she grinned as she retrieved her finger, “I think that can be arranged. Matt and Jenny should both be out cold by then. They were so excited to be spending the day with us instead of in school that they hardly slept last night.”

“Maybe I can think of some harmless fun to help pass the time,” he offered, feeling her shiver as his tongue tickled her ear. He smiled benignly, knowing exactly what that move did to her. The last few weeks, while they’d been on leave from the Agency before starting their new jobs, he’d had plenty of time to practice it.

“Why don’t we take our wine into the other room?” she suggested, pulling herself from his embrace. “It’s getting kind of warm in here.”

“That’s the idea,” he laughed, laying a small kiss on the tip of her nose. “But okay. I think I can hang on thirty more minutes if it will insure an uninterrupted evening.”

Emptying the remnants of the dinner wine into their glasses, he followed her into the family room. He handed her a glass, then settled down beside her on the sofa. She leaned back into the cushions, kicking off her shoes and tucking her feet up on the couch.

“I think we did too much walking earlier. Matthew didn’t let us sit down for a minute.”

“It was your idea to let the kids decide what we’d do today. You know how he loves the Smithsonian.”

“I should,” she laughed. “We can never get him out of the Air and Space Museum.”

“I know. I kinda like that one myself. Here,” he said, watching her rub her foot, “let me.” Setting down his wine, he pulled her legs across his lap, slowly removing her socks. She placed her wine glass next to his and, scooting back on the couch, she leaned comfortably back against the pillow.

“Lee,” he heard her sigh as he pressed down on the ball of her foot.

“Hmm?” he murmured absently, concentrating on his task.

“You didn’t mind that we weren’t alone today? I know it’s silly, but I just wanted...”

“Our family around you,” he finished, his hands manipulating the muscles of her calf. “I don’t think it’s silly at all. Sentimental, maybe... but that’s one of the reasons I love you.”

He caught her eye and she gave him an embarrassed smile. “Hey, I enjoyed today, too,” he told her, switching his attention to her other leg. “Besides, you did agree to let me take you away tomorrow. We’ll have plenty of time in the next few days to be alone.”

“I know,” she grinned, running her free foot up the inside of his thigh. She stopped just short of her goal, her toes wiggling against him. He squirmed at the sensation and she tossed him a wicked smile. “That’s why I hated to take Mother up on her offer to watch the kids tonight. She looked kind of tired and I know she’ll have her hands full this weekend.”

“Amanda, it’s been a perfect anniversary so far,” he responded, removing her foot as he leaned over to kiss her. “And, kids or no kids, I’m sure the ending will be even more spectacular. In fact,” he added, his finger provocatively following the inseam on her jeans, “I guarantee it.”

She sighed, reaching for her wine as she sat up and cuddled against him. “Phillip and Kate seemed happy tonight. Did I thank you for sending them the tickets?”

“Well, a family dinner wouldn’t have been the same without all our sons.”

Her lips curved up in a smile and he knew the reference was not lost on her. Ten years ago, Phillip and Jamie been familiar strangers, part of the package that came with the woman he loved. Today, he cared for them both in their own right, the 'step' in their title fading until only 'sons' remained. He considered them as much his kids as Matthew and Jenny.

"I like Jamie's girlfriend," Amanda said, resting her head against his shoulder. "I'm glad he included her tonight."

"Yeah," he laughed. "I suppose we should be thankful she agreed to eat here again after her experience at Thanksgiving."

"Don't remind me, Stetson. That was all your fault, you know. You told me you'd turned on the oven."

"Hey, if you want to get technical, you only asked if it was 'turned on'. I didn't know you were referring to the oven." He felt her hand playfully slap his ribs and he added, "Besides, everyone had gone to look at Curt's new plane. We couldn't let an opportunity like that pass us by."

"What an introduction to the family," she moaned, elbowing him again.

"Aww, come on, we ate eventually. And your mother even produced her own can of whipped cream."

"And a few choice comments to go with it."

He laughed at the memory, nibbling at her neck as he headed for her ear. "It was worth it, though, wasn't it?"

"Oh, yeah," she whispered, her body shivering slightly at his touch. "Absolutely."

She put her wine down again, her arms encircling him as she cuddled contentedly against his chest. He pulled her closer, resting his chin on her head. They sat together in silence, watching as the fire burned down in the grate, the embers glowing almost hypnotically. He

felt her breathing slow as she relaxed and he automatically sought the same rhythm.

Closing his eyes, he thought how perilously close they'd come to losing moments like these forever. Never again, he vowed, tightening his hold. He needed her, needed their family. Without them, the boundaries of his life had no definition. He merely existed. He'd realized that so clearly that first morning together, when he'd once again awakened to find her sleeping peacefully beside him...

He yawned widely, smiling as his eyes took in the familiar surroundings. After all the weeks in Jamie's old room, it was especially good to wake up here in his own bed, with Amanda sleeping beside him, the memories of their night together still replaying in his mind.

Leaning on his elbow, he pushed the hair from her face, tenderly brushing his lips across her cheek. He felt her stir lightly and he curved his body around hers, pulling her closer. Holding her in his arms, he felt as if the pieces of his life had been returned to him, stronger and more complete than ever before. He never wanted to let go.

"Good morning, Mrs. Stetson," he whispered, blazing a trail of tiny kisses down her neck and shoulder.

"Hi." She turned and he was greeted by her sleepy smile. "Is it morning already? It feels like we just closed our eyes."

"That's probably because we did," he laughed. They had spent most of the night in each other's arms, at times simply touching tenderly, at others, talking in hushed intimacy. When exhaustion claimed them, they drifted off to sleep, only to wake up and begin the cycle all over again. There was suddenly too much to feel and say to waste even a minute.

She snuggled up against him, her hands brushing across him as she searched for a comfortable position. "I've missed this so much," she whispered, her breath warm against his skin. "I wish we could stay here all day. Whatever possessed us to have everybody here for Thanksgiving?"

"Must have been temporary insanity," he teased. "Shall I call your mother and tell her dinner is at her place?"

They both started at the sudden noise in the kitchen. "I think it's too late. The troops are home." Sighing, she started to move, but he drew her back.

"Lee," she remonstrated weakly. "We've got to get up... the kids..."

"...will be busy watching the parade on TV." He pressed his lips urgently to hers.

"We have company coming for dinner," he heard her gasp when at last he released her. "And Phillip and Jamie should be here any minute."

"Then they'll be more than happy to entertain their little brother and sister."

"But Mother...breakfast..."

"Your mother makes a mean pancake all by herself. I've seen her do it on a number of occasions. And I can guarantee she won't object this morning." Dotty had, in fact, intimated more than once how happy she was to have her favorite 'son' back home where he belonged.

Amanda smiled her agreement and his lips sought hers again, kissing her deeply. As he felt her body relax against his, he released her. "The world is just gonna have to get along with out us for a little longer," he informed her, springing purposefully from the bed and sprinting to the door. Blowing her a kiss over his shoulder, he firmly locked it.

Turning, he glanced over at her. He found her staring at him from the bed, her face covered with a teasing smile.

"Okay, okay," he told her ruefully, "It's cold out here. You're gonna have to give me a minute."

"I was looking at your face," she laughed, hitting him playfully with the pillow as he slipped beneath the covers.

"Oh, yeah?" he asked, grinning as he deftly disarmed her.

"Yeah. It just reminded me of something, that's all."

"Of what?" He propped himself up on his elbow, his eye catching hers.

“Of that day in the Q-Bureau. You know, when Billy...” She stopped suddenly, her expression frozen.

“It’s okay,” he sighed, lying back on the pillow and wrapping her again in his arms. “Not all the memories are painful. We need to hold onto the good ones. He would have wanted that.”

“I know. It’s just that for so long, I’ve watched every word I’ve said, not wanting to...” She buried her head against him, her lips moving across his skin. “I guess it’s a habit that’s hard to break now.”

“Then that’s something we’ll definitely have to work on.” Rolling over to lay on top of her, he rested his weight on his elbows as he searched her eyes again. He could see the painful remnants of the past few months still hiding there. There was so much to make up for. He wondered briefly if a lifetime would be long enough.

“Hey,” she breathed, her hand soothing his forehead. “I’m sorry I brought that up. We agreed last night, no more unhappy thoughts.”

“Yeah.” He marveled at how she intuitively sensed his mood. “It’s hard sometimes, that’s all.”

“I know. But not today, okay? It’s Thanksgiving. And I think, big fella, that we have a lot to be thankful for this morning.”

“You’re right,” he smiled. “We need to move forward now, not backwards.”

“Maybe I can help.” He felt her hand rubbing small circles on his back, then slip lower to his buttocks. “How’s that?” she whispered teasingly. “Warming up?”

“Oh, it definitely helps,” he replied, his voice deepening as her fingers stroked between his legs. He could feel his body responding forcefully and he bent to kiss her, his tongue slipping into her as she parted her lips.

“Mmm,” he moaned against her mouth, losing himself again in the wonder of rediscovery. He let his hands stroke leisurely over her body, purposely seeking out her most sensitive places. He’d taken painstaking care to revisit them all in the course of the night.

The sounds of breakfast being readied in the kitchen reached him from a distance and pressed her closer. He felt an emotion stir deep

within him and he lost himself in the singular joy of making love to his wife again, in their own house, in their own bed. Her murmurs of pleasure told him her arousal was as complete as his. He took her breasts into his mouth, first one and then the other, all the while pressing his fingers into her. He moved with deliberate slowness, letting her soft moans guide him. He wanted to prolong the moment, to let her know with every part of him how much he had missed her, missed their times together.

She evidently had the same thought. He felt her hands on him, slowing him down. He saw the unspoken question on her face and he smiled, allowing her to roll him over as he willingly relinquished control. As she bent over him, he caught sight of her eyes. They seemed to be filled with the exact sentiment he'd experienced a few minutes ago.

Closing his eyes, he felt her press her lips against the hollow of his throat, teasing him lightly with her tongue as her hands began a sensuous journey down his body. He shivered as her nails trailed lightly across his skin, leaving a tantalizing tingle in their wake. Down his chest, across his abdomen, then mischievously down his legs and back up again. His hips shot up involuntarily, thrusting towards her. Her light touch seemed to be everywhere except the place he needed it most.

"Amanda," he gasped, almost choking on the word. "Please."

Looking down at him, she gave him a wicked smile. She deftly closed her hand around him, rubbing up and down a few times before gently squeezing him. He felt himself swell almost to the breaking point and, despite his efforts to be quiet, a loud groan escaped him.

"Shhh," she remonstrated, straddling him and bending down to stifle his cry with her mouth. His hands moved down her back, over her hips and down her legs, then between them to stroke her gently. He felt her body contract at the touch of his fingers and she called his name over and over again, softly at first, then louder.

"Lee...Lee... Lee..."

"Lee..."

"Huh?" he asked, shaking his head as the scene in his mind dissolved.

“I was going to say ‘penny for your thoughts,’” she laughed, “but from the look on your face I think they might be worth considerably more than that.”

“I was just thinkin’,” he smiled repentantly, the vividness of the memory still clinging to the edges of his mind.

“Evidently,” she chuckled softly, her fingers brushing across the remains of his daydream. “Maybe you’d like to share your thoughts with me upstairs, huh?”

“That sounds like a perfect plan to me.”

Rising, he saw her glance at their wine and she turned to him with a questioning smile. “Do you want to bring that with us?”

“No,” he grinned. “I think I’m already intoxicated enough.”

Laughing softly, she retrieved their glasses, stopping in the kitchen to rinse them while he turned off the lights. He waited for her and, hand in hand, they climbed the stairs. The upstairs hallway was silent as they made their way to the bedroom.

“Only a few more days like this,” he whispered, careful not to wake their children. “Then it’s back to work.”

“I know,” she returned quietly, giving his hand a squeeze as they entered their room and closed the door. “Have I told you how proud I am of you? The youngest Deputy Director in the history of the Agency.”

Turning, she smiled wistfully, her hands resting on his chest, her eyes focused somewhere over his left shoulder. He felt her fingers against him, toying ever so slightly with the buttons on his shirt. Despite her pride at his accomplishment, he knew she had reservations. They had discussed them almost constantly since Cartwright had made the offer.

“Don’t worry,” he reassured her again, capturing her hand and kissing her fingertips. “I know the politics that come with this job. If I don’t like it, there are always other options. And I have a feeling I won’t be a ‘conventional’ DD.”

He drew a long breath, tilting his head to look at her as he exhaled deeply. "One thing I do know - at least it will keep me out of the field."

"I know. I just worry that you won't be happy."

"I could say the same thing about you. You've spent your entire career in Field Section." Although, he had to admit, Training and Recruiting was probably a good place for her, even if it meant they would no longer be working together. Beeman's old job of Freshman Supervisor really seemed like a perfect fit.

"I think I'll like my new job a lot," she said, echoing his thoughts. "The only thing I'll miss is working with you."

"And you're sure about the name thing?" he questioned. She'd surprised everyone by announcing that when she made the move to the new section, she would be using her married name.

"Now you're starting to sound like Francine," she laughed. "She spent the better part of an hour last week telling me I must be out of my mind to drop my 'professional' name. I have a feeling she thinks I'm single handedly out to destroy the nineteenth amendment."

"Well, you have been 'Mrs. King' for a lot of years."

"Only at work. I think it's time for a fresh start there. 'Mrs. King'... well, justified or not, I'm not especially proud of some of the things she's done."

"She was a damn good partner," he whispered, closing his arms around her. "And a good agent."

"But sometimes it didn't make her a particularly good wife," she sighed, burying her face in his shoulder. "Amanda Stetson always remembers who she is. That's what I want."

He closed his arms tightly around her. He understood her feelings only too well. 'Scarecrow' would always be a part of him, too, but he would no longer allow him to direct the course of his life. Neither of

them could afford to operate in the field again, especially together. They were each other's greatest strength, but also their greatest weakness.

"I guess it is kind of like the end of an era," she sighed, pulling back to look at him. "After all these years, no more 'Scarecrow and Mrs. King'."

"I know. And with my new job... well, this time we really are dissolving our partnership." He gently cupped her face with his hands, his thumbs brushing over her cheekbones. "Any regrets?"

"None," she replied without hesitation. Reaching out, she tenderly stroked his face in return. "Lee, the best part of our partnership is sleeping right down the hall."

Smiling, he knew it was true. 'Scarecrow and Mrs. King' were easily relegated to past, another legend for the Agency archives. This, their life together, was the only reality that mattered. And Matthew and Jenny would always remain their greatest achievement.

"Come on, Mrs. Stetson," he whispered shakily, unable to keep the emotion out of his voice. "I think it's time we went to bed."

Epilogue

He stood at his kitchen window, a silent observer of the moonlight flooding the yard. The stillness of the evening always brought with it a comforting sense of peace. It was in this quiet time of waning day that he'd always been able to push aside past mistakes and listen to the promise of the future...

To joyful holidays shared with family and friends...

To his children's hands clasped tightly in his own...

To his wife's warm smile lighting the path of his life...

And the words etched forever in his mind - one heart, one life, one truth.

One heart... demanding a choice.

One life... blended from two.

One truth... love will survive.

The End