

# Operation Rimrunner

by

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Rating: PG, mainly for some language.

Timeline: Nearing the end of third season, but with definite overtones of AU.

Synopsis: An incident between Lee and Amanda causes Billy to make some changes.

## Chapter 1

" . . . can't believe you!"

The raised voice from the corridor filtered into the bullpen, even through the closed doors, causing Billy Melrose to look up. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Francine Desmond roll her eyes.

"I tell you, it would have worked if you'd just . . ."

"**Me?!?**" the first voice replied incredulously. "You mean I was expected to **do** something? I thought I was supposed to wait in the car!"

By this time, all activity in the bullpen had ceased as everyone waited eagerly for the quarreling pair to appear. Billy knew there was an office pool going on which one of the two would win the most arguments in any given month. Last he'd heard, Lee Stetson was losing pretty handily. One of the guards reached out and opened the door, allowing Scarecrow's answer to ring clearly through the room.

"Why do I even try? Getting you to do **anything** you should is totally pointless!"

Amanda King stormed through the door. In her dark gray coat, wool plaid skirt and soft pink sweater, she looked the perfect image of the suburban housewife. "Thank you," she said automatically to the guard, before pivoting to face the target of her ire. "Doing what I **SHOULD**? I'm your partner! What I should be doing is covering your back, not being relegated to the car all of the time."

Lee Stetson followed her in through the door without so much as a look at the guard. In contrast to Amanda, he was definitely worse for wear. He carried his overcoat in one hand and was moving with a decided limp. One sleeve was torn out of his suit jacket and his face and the rest of his clothing were smudged with dirt.

"If you were so determined to get in the middle of it, why did you wait so long?" he snapped unreasonably.

"Well, excuuuuse me for not coming to your rescue quickly enough. Seems I just can't do anything right, can I?"

"And that's another thing! You found my gun on the ground. Why the hell didn't you just shoot him?"

"And risk hitting you? Are you crazy??"

"Oh, but you're not afraid to hit me with a garbage can lid, are you?"

"That was an accident! And the last I looked, you were still alive! I figure that should count for something!" Turning her back on him, she stalked off toward her desk. As she passed her boss and co-worker, she nodded stiffly. "Sir. Francine."

"Are you all right, Amanda?" Billy asked in concern.

"Yes, sir. I'm fine." Looking back over her shoulder, she glared at her partner once more. "If it's all right with you, I think I'll just go upstairs to the Q Bureau to write my report. I'm sure Scarecrow can fill you in on all of the details of our assignment. After all, he's the *professional*."

Billy winced at the sarcasm. "Fine. Fine," he agreed hastily. He'd definitely never seen Amanda King this angry before . . . even at Lee Stetson.

"Thank you." She yanked open the bottom drawer of her desk, snatched out her purse and a large file folder, and slammed the drawer. Straightening, she

glared at her partner one last time and then stalked off, muttering a dark litany under her breath all the way out of the bullpen.

"Well, sounds like you've really done it this time, Scarecrow," Leatherneck observed with a laugh, leaning lazily against Francine's desk. "She is **not** happy with you."

"Yeah," the lovely blonde agreed. "One more word and she probably would have slapped you silly."

Lee just snorted derisively and limped off toward Amanda's desk. Billy sighed and shook his head. "Scarecrow, in my office . . . now."

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Amanda didn't remember ever being this angry at anyone. Why did **he** try? Well, why did **she**? She stopped in front of the elevator and stabbed the call button viciously. She fidgeted impatiently, wishing the elevator would arrive. She really didn't feel like talking to anyone right now and the longer she stood here, the more likely it was that she'd have to do that. For the first time since it happened, she finally had the chance to think back over the entire incident. Abruptly, she felt like she could hardly breathe and her stomach knotted painfully. *I almost lost him today*, she thought, and she felt herself beginning to shake. *Not here*, she told herself desperately, staring blindly at the floor as tears blurred her vision. *Don't go to pieces here*.

With a soft ping, the elevator door sighed open and Amanda lunged forward, thinking only of getting away before anyone saw how upset she really was. Her breath exploded out of her painfully as her body came into sharp contact with something. Her purse slipped from her grasp, the contents scattering in every direction as it hit the hallway floor, and the bulging file folder in her other hand quickly followed suit, adding to the mess. Focusing abruptly, she looked up . . . and up . . . and up . . . until her gaze locked with a pair of the deepest blue eyes she had ever seen.

"Oh, my gosh . . ." she gasped weakly, color flooding her face. "I - I . . ."

Strong, long-fingered hands reached out and caught her arms, steadying her as a deep baritone voice replied, "I am most frightfully sorry! Are you all right? Please, let me help you . . ."

With an effort, she wrenched her gaze from his and turned away, mumbling, "Oh no . . . no, p-please don't bother. It was all my fault." She wiped frantically at her eyes as she knelt and began shoving things back into her purse. "I wasn't paying attention. I-I'm so very sorry. My mind was somewhere else and I wasn't watching where I was going, and . . ."

"That's quite all right. I don't mind a bit. I wasn't paying attention, either," he replied, crouching down a short way from her and gathering up the papers scattered across the floor.

Using the brief reprieve to get her ragged emotions in hand, she eyed the handsome stranger out of the corner of her eye with interest. Thick blue-black hair that drooped becomingly over his forehead, blue eyes like a clear mountain lake, distinguished nose, a tall, lean body that was firmly muscled . . . yes, the man was positively gorgeous. Unable to help herself, she noted the lithe, easy way he moved.

A smile quirked the corner of his mouth as he looked at her again. "I must say I can't feel too sorry about it, however. It's given me the opportunity to meet you." As they both rose, he handed the reassembled file to her, his fingers brushing hers gently. "Please allow me to introduce myself. My name is William Randolph Windsor, IV. I'm here as part of an intelligence exchange program from Great Britain." The voice was calm and liquid, its accent flowing in a way that was very pleasing to the ear. Something about him naturally put her at ease. Amanda returned the smile spontaneously.

"I'm very pleased to meet you. My name is Amanda King." She juggled the things in her hands awkwardly and then took the hand he offered. After a moment, the name registered. "Windsor? As in . . . I mean, are you . . ." she squeaked.

"The relationship is very distant," he interrupted smoothly. Then, as though making the connection, he added, "King? As in Mrs. King? You're the legendary Scarecrow's partner?"

She nodded, her eyes falling in the face of his intense interest. She blushed again. "Well, I'm not exactly his partner," she qualified hastily. "I'm just a civilian aide . . . part time, you know . . . I work with him from time to time. When Mr. Melrose asks me to. On random things." She finally seemed to run down.

"Then, the pleasure is definitely mine. I've been looking forward to meeting both you and your Mr. Stetson. Is he here, too?"

Amanda stirred uneasily, reminded again of this morning's fiasco. "I believe he's in the bullpen with Mr. Melrose." She tugged gently trying to free her hand, which he still held in both of his. "I – it's very nice to have met you, Mr. Windsor. I'm really sorry, but I should go. I have a report to write . . ."

"William, please. I'm to be here for several months and I hope we'll have the chance to meet again, and possibly even work together." His smile was absolutely dazzling as he added hopefully, "May I call you Amanda?"

"Of course," she replied automatically, her heart stuttering uncertainly. *Is he flirting with me?* she wondered uneasily. *Men at the Agency never flirt with me.*

His fingers were warm against her skin as he raised her hand and kissed the back of it lightly. "Thank you, Amanda." Something caused her to glance up and she saw Lee and Billy standing just outside the bullpen doors staring at them. Lee's already sour expression darkened considerably and for a moment Amanda was certain that he was going to come storming down the hall to interfere with the conversation. Her earlier anger flickered to life once more and she deliberately ignored them. Turning her attention to her handsome companion again, she heard him say, "I hope we'll see each other again, then."

She smiled up at him and felt herself blush again as she replied, "I'll look forward to it. If you were looking for Mr. Melrose, he's the shorter of the two men who just stepped out of the bullpen." She gestured toward them and noticed that Billy now had a firm hand on Scarecrow's arm.

William glanced quickly up the hall and then smiled at her once again. "I was. Thank you. Until later?"

She nodded mutely and with one final light caress, he released her hand and turned away. After a moment, she turned to step into the elevator and promptly walked into the closed doors. With a martyred sigh, she reached out and punched the elevator call button once more. The last thing she saw as the doors closed behind her was Lee's annoyed expression.

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It was an hour later, as she was putting the final touches on her report, that Lee appeared in the door of the Q Bureau. During that time, her anger had faded and she had begun to worry about him again. The fight that had ensued as a result of their blown surveillance had been hard and dirty, and Lee's assailant had struck several vicious blows before she had been able to distract him sufficiently for Lee to knock him out. And it was true that she had hit Lee with a garbage can lid. It was the only weapon other than his gun that she could find, and he ended up in the wrong place at the wrong time.

"Are you all right?" she asked as he limped across the room toward her. She rose hastily from his desk and moved out of the way so he could sit down. "What did Dr. McJohn say?"

"I'm fine," he replied in a sullen tone. "I don't need to be poked and prodded by McJohn. A shower and clean clothes and I'll be as good as new."

"You really should . . ."

"I said I'm fine!" he snapped, glaring at her as he eased himself down into the desk chair gingerly.

"Okay, fine. I was just worried about you."

"Yeah, well, don't bother."

She reached out and gathered up the papers lying on the desk in front of him. Silently, she scanned the end of the report one final time, picked up a pen, signed it, and then inserted it neatly into the waiting file folder. As she turned away, he spoke again.

"I met your friend."

"What friend?" Amanda replied in confusion, looking back at him again.

"Your friend by the elevator. The Brit. You know, the one you seemed so taken with."

"You mean William?"

"William," Lee drawled in a sarcastic tone. "Yeah, that's the one."

She nodded. "He seems very nice. Said he was here on some sort of intelligence exchange program. Fostering cooperation between agencies or something, I suppose."

"Oh, I'll bet he's really good at that," Lee muttered darkly to himself.

"What?"

"Nothing. Just do me a favor, and stay away from him. I've got a really bad feeling about the guy."

She looked at him in surprise. "What kind of a bad feeling?"

Lee shrugged. "I don't know. I just don't like him, and I don't want to see you hurt."

Lee saw the anger flicker in her eyes again as she replied shortly, "I'll keep that in mind." Picking up her coat and purse from a nearby chair, she said coolly,

"I'm going to take this down and turn it in to Mr. Melrose and then I'm going home. "You'd better do the same."

It took Lee a moment after the door closed behind her to realize that she hadn't wished him a good night.

## Chapter 2

Amanda was just handing Phillip and Jamie their lunches the next morning when the phone rang. She heard her mother pick it up in the living room and after a brief moment, Dottie appeared in the doorway and said, "It's for you, Amanda."

"Thank you, Mother. Can you see that the boys have everything they need for school?"

"Certainly, darling. What are we forgetting, fellas?"

With a smile, Amanda left the kitchen and picked up the phone. "Hello?"

"Good morning, Amanda."

"Oh, good morning!" Glancing over her shoulder, she carefully lowered her voice. "Is there anything wrong, sir?"

Billy Melrose sounded decidedly cheerful as he replied, "Nothing at all. I was just wondering if you'd be available to work for a while on a more or less full time basis. I've got an assignment that you'd be particularly well suited for and I'm hoping you'll be willing to take it."

"Oh," she said, not quite sure what else to say. After a moment, she added, "Well, of course I'd be happy to help out any way I can."

"Good. Good. Why don't you plan on being in here about 11:00 and we'll go through what's needed."

"Yes, sir. I'll be there." She hesitated briefly. "Do you know if it will run late? If so, I probably should warn my mother . . ."

"No, it shouldn't. This one is very much of a daytime enterprise."

"Oh. Well, I'll be there, sir."

"Good. I'll see you at 11:00."

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As Amanda crossed the bullpen heading for Billy Melrose's office a little before 11:00, Francine Desmond intercepted her.



"Not there. Everybody's down in the conference room. Come on."

Amanda gave her a sidelong look as she dropped into step with the other woman. "So what's up, Francine? Something big?"

Francine shrugged noncommittally. "I'm not really sure. It could be something, or it could be a whole bunch of nothing. But in the interests of international good will, I guess we're going to get involved in it. Frankly, I think it will probably be a colossal bore."

"Right up my alley, is that what you mean?" Amanda replied dryly.

"Well, Billy seems to think so." With that, she pushed the conference room door open and went in with Amanda close on her heels.

Melrose glanced up at the two of them and then nodded. "That's everybody, so let's get started. Turning, he picked up a remote and pushed a button. The lights dimmed and a picture of the U.N. building in New York flashed up on the screen. "Over the last six to nine months, rumors have been circulating about a new group of black-market information peddlers. The rumors were spotty and largely unsubstantiated so no one pursued them actively. Then, about three months ago, this group supposedly sold the details of a proposed United Nations nuclear disarmament package." Melrose shrugged. "This isn't as dire as it might sound. It did no real damage because there had been a lot of people involved in crafting the terms and there wasn't anything particularly secret about it. But it is disturbing because it would seem that this group has begun to be much more active than was first thought."

He triggered the remote and the picture changed again. This time, the scene depicted was that of Buckingham Palace in London. "A few days after the U.N. incident, an extremely valuable portrait that was housed in Buckingham Palace disappeared in what could only have been a daring daylight robbery. The thief couldn't be identified, but again, the rumors credited this black-market information group with providing the thieves with the necessary floor plans and security information to accomplish the robbery. Again, there's been no way to substantiate the rumors, but they can't be reliably discredited, either."

In rapid succession, Billy flicked through a series of slides, each showing recognizable scenes from various European cities. "The pattern keeps repeating itself . . . in Paris, Bonn, Athens . . ." Billy shook his head. "There's no apparent rhyme or reason to what's been leaked. Sometimes it's national security info, sometimes it's corporate big-business stuff, and sometimes it's personal dirt on important people. It's more like someone is anticipating what there's going to be a market for and then generating the interest."

"Tough one to chase," Peter Selensky commented, rubbing his neck.

"You've got that right, Magician. But we may have gotten a break." Melrose gestured to the tall, dark haired man sitting at the end of the table. "Some of you have already met our new guest. For those of you who haven't, this is William Windsor, on loan from MI6 in Britain. Commander Windsor brings with him a piece of information that may be the break we need. Commander?"

William rose effortlessly and looked down the table at the waiting agents. His eyes warmed slightly when he spotted Amanda King sitting at the far end. "We've had every agency in Britain looking into the Buckingham Palace robbery. Needless to say, the apparent ease of the burglary leaves us extremely uncomfortable about the security of the Queen and the rest of the royal family. While going over all of the background checks of people who had been in the area immediately preceding the burglary, we discovered an interesting point. For two weeks prior to the burglary, one of the men who had been working as part of the household staff at the palace had been visiting a rather prominent auction house in London. The man made no effort to disguise the visits and when questioned about it, he appeared to have a perfectly plausible reason for being there. Normally, we wouldn't have given the matter any further thought, but . . ." The man shrugged slightly. "Let's just say that we were all uneasy enough to pursue it further than we normally would have. Also, keep in mind that this man was not the only one we were investigating. We followed him for some weeks, but nothing turned up.

"Then, with no warning, he quit his position in the palace and disappeared." He watched the people at the table closely as he added flatly, "Totally." He nodded at the sudden sharp looks of interest. Regardless of what most people thought, it wasn't that easy to totally disappear with no trace. "About the same time, Lord Barrington-Smythe hired a new stable boy for his Newcastle racing stable. It was pure coincidence that one of the boys from research in MI6 was also a close friend of the Lord and happened to be there one day. He realized that he had seen the new stable boy before . . . in the same auction house that the man from the palace's household staff had frequented. Less than a week after that, Lord Barrington-Smythe suddenly announced that he had sold his entire racing organization and retired permanently from the sport. With a great deal of effort, we discovered that the Lord was being blackmailed and was forced to sell. By the time we realized what was going on, the stable boy had also disappeared."

William Windsor stepped back, looking at Melrose, who nodded and rose. "Thank you, Commander. That gave us a starting point," Billy resumed, "and we began coordinating with other intelligence agencies on the prior cases. The pattern held. It wasn't always an auction house . . . sometimes it was a gallery, a theater, a library, or a museum . . . but in every case, it was a public place frequented by wealthy patrons and people of influence. We can only assume that they find their targets there or that it's some sort of drop." Billy's eyes

made the rounds of the people at the table once more. "So that brings us to today. There's no way to get a handle on this, people. We have no clue who their next target may be here in the States, and we also have no idea where their drop locale is. So we've got to start looking. Magician, I'm teaming you up with Beaman. We're going to use his freshman agent candidates to start searching for potential targets. We'll want to see if we can't find a pattern. Something is tipping these people off on what's liable to be hot on the market. I want to know what it is." The two men nodded.

"Patterson, you and Nighthawk are to work on the money angle. Lord Barrington-Smythe admitted that the blackmail price he was forced to pay was the total amount of the sale of his racing organization, which was in excess of three million pounds. And the portrait stolen from Buckingham Palace was worth at least that much. That's a lot of money. It has to be going somewhere. If we can figure out where, maybe we can follow the trail back to the people who control it. Use every accountant in your department, Patterson, if that's what it takes. Just find and trace that money.

"Leatherneck, I know that you don't usually work actively in the field any more, but I'm going to ask you to on this one. You've got a dual assignment. I'm going to need surveillance gear and a monitoring team. You're to get that all set up and then work with Francine on delving into the weak points in the government. That's where we're likely to be the most vulnerable. Who on the Hill has a secret that could be used as leverage to turn a profit for someone else."

Francine snorted derisively. "Who *doesn't*," she asked rhetorically.

Billy grinned sympathetically and then turned to the remaining two people at the table. "Amanda, you'll be working with Commander Windsor." Billy saw the speculative looks that were passed between the various other agents at the table, but chose to ignore them. "The two of you have the job of searching for the drop point. Through your work with various charities, you've come into contact with many of the people that run the most likely locations. It's also an easy cover to establish. Commander Windsor will be a guest director who's here to work on a BBC documentary on the Revolutionary War. Your various trips can easily be explained as background research."

Amanda nodded and then glanced at the Brit. "You said you thought the auction house in London may have been a drop. Do we know if this was a dead drop or was the contact made in person?"

Windsor shook his head. "We have no idea. The contact itself was never witnessed." Amanda nodded again and looked back at Billy.

Melrose glanced around the assembled agents quickly. "This operation will be code named Rimrunner. Reports will route directly to me. Francine will second if I'm not available. Any other questions? No? Then let's get to it." Everyone nodded and rose, moving to file out of the room. Amanda hung back, waiting to talk to Billy, and was startled to suddenly find Windsor at her elbow.

"Well, I said I hoped we would have the chance to work together," he said with a smile. "I'm delighted it's going to be so soon."

She smiled at him tentatively. "I'm glad you're pleased. Remember, I'm not a full agent. I'm just a civilian aide who helps out on occasion."

He laughed softly. "I'll take a talented amateur to a sloppy professional any day. Your reputation precedes you, Mrs. King."

Flustered, she blushed and dropped her eyes. Then she smiled at him again. "Could you wait for me outside for a minute? I just need to speak with Mr. Melrose and then I'll be ready to go."

"Certainly. Why don't you tell me where I can find your coat and I'll get it for you."

"Just ask Francine and she'll show you where it is."

Windsor nodded agreeably and strode out the door, pulling it shut softly behind him. Tentatively, Amanda approached Melrose. "Sir, what about Lee? Will he be working this one, too? He *is* my partner."

Billy smiled at her kindly. "I know he's always been assigned to you in the past, Amanda, but I don't think I'm going to put him with you on this one. The two of you do work well together, but you haven't been assigned to him on a permanent basis and I think it's time to see how well you do when assigned to work with another agent." Billy lowered himself down onto the edge of the table and contemplated her thoughtfully. "You know that I feel you have a real talent for this kind of work." Amanda nodded hesitantly. "The truth is, I'd like to see you as more than a civilian aide. I think you'd make a fine agent . . . on a full time basis. Do you think you would be interested in that?" Billy watched as she stared blindly at the top of the table, considering the idea.

"Yes, sir," she replied finally, looking up to meet his eyes. As their gazes locked, she straightened and replied with new confidence, "Yes, sir, I think I would be very interested."

Billy nodded, smiling privately to himself in satisfaction. Yes, she would do very well. Then he continued, "The fact that you've gotten into this kind of work in a somewhat unconventional manner is something of a strike against

you, but not one that you can't overcome. I've made arrangements for you to start working with some of our trainers on the aspects of the job that you've missed out on. I know you've done a little work at the range, but we'll get you some more. I also want to put you into hand-to-hand combat classes. If you do well in those, we'll see about getting you into Beaman's agent training classes with the next wave of trainees. But one of the pieces of ammunition I'd like to have available when I go to Dr. Smyth to get authorization to do this is your ability to work well with agents other than Scarecrow. To do that, I need to assign you to work with others. This seems to be the perfect opportunity."

Amanda nodded, carefully disguising her uneasiness at the thought of working with anyone other than Lee Stetson. "Whatever you think is best, sir."

Billy sighed. "After watching the two of you yesterday and then talking to Lee after you'd left, I'm beginning to think that maybe pairing you with him consistently may not be in your best interests anyway."

"Oh no, sir. Lee is a wonderful partner! A person couldn't ask for a better one. I mean, he's . . ."

"Amanda," Billy said kindly, cutting her off. "I'm not getting down on Lee. To be honest, pairing the two of you has been the best thing in the world for him. It's made him a better agent. But I'd be a poor section chief if the only thing I did was take into account what Scarecrow needs. I also have to consider what *you* need to become the best agent you can be. And right now, I think that it's probably partnering you with someone else for a while. You've earned a reputation for being creative and quick on your feet. Let's let you work with someone who respects you and your reputation coming in the door and gives you the chance to spread your wings a little."

"Yes, sir," she replied in a small voice.

Billy patted her shoulder gently. "You'll do fine, Amanda. Windsor is a good man. I've seen his work before and I know that I can trust him to be as good a mentor for you as Scarecrow has been. And he doesn't come with the emotional baggage, so it will give you a bit more freedom."

"Emotional baggage?"

Billy grinned. "Lee still feels guilty for dragging you into this kind of work, particularly when things start to turn dangerous. Why do you think he's constantly trying to leave you in the car?" Billy laughed outright at Amanda's grimace. "Working with Windsor, you won't have to fight against Lee's innate biases. It will be good for you." Then the smile disappeared and his tone turned serious. "Just be very careful. Your end of this assignment is reconnaissance. Search and identify, and then call in backup. Don't pull a

Scarecrow on me and try to go in on your own . . . even with Windsor as backup. Are we clear?" Amanda nodded wordlessly. "Good. Now, go on. The two of you should get started."

Squaring her shoulders, she nodded. "Yes, sir. We'll get them, sir."

"I don't doubt it a bit." A sudden thought stopped him. "Wait . . . Amanda. One other thing."

She turned back to him, her hand on the door. "Sir?"

"Call it a rite of passage if you want, or maybe the fact that you've earned it, but I've been thinking that it's time you had a code name." He saw her breath catch and her face lit up in excitement. "From now on, you'll officially be known as Phoenix."

"Phoenix," she breathed softly, testing the sound of it.

Billy nodded. "The beautiful bird who rose from the ashes of destruction to fly free once more. A fitting code name, I think."

Her smile was brilliant as she replied, "Yes, sir, it's perfect. Thank you so much."

Billy nodded and then gestured at her. "Now go out there and find those people and let's put a stop to this nonsense."

"Yes, sir!" The bounce in her step made Billy smile. But it dimmed slightly as he watched Windsor holding her coat for her. This had been the easy part. Now he had to tell Scarecrow what he had done, and Billy Melrose knew in his heart that Lee Stetson wasn't going to like it one bit.

## Chapter 3

**"NO!!!!!!!!!"**

Billy winced and leaned back in his chair, putting a bit more distance between himself and his irate senior agent. Lee planted his hands on the desk and leaned over it belligerently. "Amanda is *my* partner! You can't assign her to work with someone else!"

Billy frowned forbiddingly and replied, "I can and I have, Scarecrow. This issue is not open for debate."

For a long moment, Lee stayed where he was. Then with a sound of frustrated aggravation, he flung himself upright and began to pace restlessly.

"Then assign me to work with them. You know that Amanda and I work best as a team."

"I think, after yesterday's incident, that it's time the two of you go your separate ways for a while. Windsor's a fine agent and he'll be good for her."

Lee spun to face Billy once more. "What do you mean, 'good for her'?" he demanded harshly. Billy studied the man in front of him with a mixture of surprise and quiet amusement. Did Lee Stetson even realize how much of himself he was revealing?

"I meant that it will be a good professional experience for her to work with someone new. What did you think I meant?"

Suddenly, Lee seemed to hear himself. His face flushed and he turned away hastily, starting to pace once more. "Nothing," he mumbled. "I just meant . . . well . . . nothing." Taking a deep breath, he tried again. "Amanda's not a trained agent . . ."

"Windsor knows that," Billy interrupted him smoothly, barely hiding his grin. "I've explained her status to him and as it turns out, she'd already told him herself. He has no problem with it and assures me that he'll keep an eye on her."

"Oh, I'll bet he will," Lee muttered sourly under his breath. "I don't trust him," he said aloud. "He's too smooth."

That statement caused Billy to grin openly. "You don't even know him. I swear, Scarecrow, if I didn't know you better, I'd suspect you were jealous."

"Don't be ridiculous," Lee snapped, just a bit too quickly. "She's my partner. It's my job to watch her back."

"It wasn't so long ago that if I made that comment, you'd all but take my head off," Billy pointed out.

Lee sighed and ran a hand through his hair in frustration, his temper momentarily derailed. "I know," he finally admitted reluctantly. Looking at his boss helplessly, he added, "I don't trust anyone else to take care of her, Billy. She just attracts trouble, and I'd feel really awful if something happened to her. You know, I never should have gotten her involved in any of this."

Melrose shook his head. "You may have drawn her into this initially, Lee, but you had nothing to do with her *staying* in it. For God's sake, man, think about it. You did everything you could to discourage her and she kept coming back for more."

"I know. She's just so *stubborn* . . ."

Billy rose and came around his desk to pat the younger man on the shoulder consolingly. "Lee, you know as well as I do that there are some people in this world who seem born to do this kind of work. As strange as it may sound, I believe that Amanda King is one of them. I haven't seen anyone with instincts as good as hers since . . . well, since the first time I saw you."

Lee snorted. "Don't let Francine hear you say that."

Billy chuckled. "Amanda will be fine. Her assignment is strictly reconnaissance and I've made it *very* clear to Windsor that she is not to be put into the line of fire. He'll watch her back and keep her out of trouble."

"He better," Lee muttered darkly. "And just to be sure, I'm going to keep an eye on both of them . . ."

"You won't have time," Billy interrupted firmly. "I've got an assignment for you, too, and it's going to take all of your attention." He snagged a folder off of his desk and handed it to Lee. "This one is important and I need you to concentrate on your job."

Lee flipped the folder open and scanned the first page quickly. "Rome?!? You want to send me to *Rome*? Now??? I don't want to . . ."

"I don't care what you want, Scarecrow!" his boss cut him off sharply. "This is your assignment and you're going to do it! Your flight leaves at 8:00 a.m."



tomorrow morning. You be on that plane . . . with your mind on your job . . . and leave Amanda King and her new assignment to me. Got it?"

For a minute, Billy actually thought that Lee would refuse. However, he finally snapped the file shut and replied bitterly, "It seems I have no choice. Is that all?"

"Lee, she'll be fine . . ."

"Yeah, right." He spun and stalked to the door. Right before he opened it, he turned back to his boss one last time. "She'd better be." Then he walked out, slamming the door behind him.

Ruefully, Billy shook his head. "Well, that went better than I expected . . ."

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The house on Maplewood Drive was finally quiet as Amanda set the kettle back on the burner and added some milk to her tea. It was shortly after ten o'clock, the boys were safely in bed, and her mother had just headed upstairs with a book to read for a while before going to sleep. When she heard the soft tapping on the kitchen window she wasn't particularly surprised. She'd halfway expected that he would show up tonight. Turning, she saw his face hovering like a ghost in the window above the sink. His hesitant smile brought an answering one to her lips. She just couldn't seem to stay mad at him, no matter how hard she tried. She crossed to the kitchen door and opened it, drawing him inside the warm house.

"Whoa, it feels good in here," he breathed softly, shivering. "It's turning cold out there."

Amanda eyed him in concern, reaching up to lay her palm on his cold-reddened cheek. "You're frozen!" she exclaimed in quiet agitation. "How long have you been standing out there? Here, take this." She shoved her tea into his cold hands. "Let me have your coat. Now you stand here by the stove until you get warm. What were you thinking? You could catch pneumonia . . ."

Lee stood quietly, listening to her soft, scolding litany and letting her concern wash over him. Somehow, it seemed to warm him in a way that had nothing to do with the temperature of the room. Finally, he looked up and smiled at her. "I'm fine, Amanda. Really."

"How long were you out there?"

Lee shrugged. "I don't know. An hour, maybe. I was just waiting for your family to settle in for the night. I needed to talk to you."

"A couple of . . ." she sputtered, but he laid a gentle finger across her lips, silencing her.

"I didn't mind." He looked at her, realizing that he couldn't admit to her how often he stood in the backyard just watching her. There was something about the way she interacted with her family . . . "And I really did want to talk to you," he added hastily, trying to force his mind away from that thought. His gaze fell under her inquisitive look and he eyed the cup in his hands intently. "I – I wanted to apologize to you for yesterday. I think I probably would have been toast if you hadn't hit Rocker with that trash can lid when you did."

"I'm sorry I waited so long."

"I told you to stay in the car. It's my own fault. I should know better by this time. I just . . . I didn't . . ." he sighed softly. "I was afraid you might get hurt and I didn't want to risk that."

"Instead, you were the one that got hurt. Are you really all right? I've worried about you all day. What did Dr. McJohn say?"

Lee shrugged negligently. "I'm fine. A few bumps and bruises. You don't need to worry about me, Amanda."

She smiled at him fondly. "I do, though. After all, it's my job. You're my partner."

He sighed deeply. "Not any more. Seems I lost that right yesterday when I acted like such an ass in the office."

Amanda caught his arm, squeezing it gently. "I'm sure it's only temporary, Lee. Billy just wants me to get a little experience working with other agents so he can make a better case to Dr. Smyth for getting me admitted to the next freshman candidate class."

"I don't like it, Amanda," Lee replied, his voice rising slightly as he looked at her. "I don't like the fact that you're going to be out in the field without me. I don't like the fact that you're going to be working with someone I don't know. And I particularly don't like the fact that I'm not going to be close at hand if you get into trouble and need me."

"Keep your voice down," she whispered, laying her fingers across his lips. "Mother's gone upstairs, but she's still awake." Then she looked at him with a troubled expression. "Billy's given you another assignment?"

Lee nodded, disconsolately. "Yeah. He's sending me to Rome. From the look of it, I could be there all the way through the end of the month."

"Who's going to be your partner?"

"No one." Lee shrugged and slumped against the edge of the stove, still cradling the tea mug Amanda had given him. "It's a cooperative mission with the Italian Security Agency. I'll be a training officer for a newly formed Italian anti-terrorist task force. It's logistical and training . . . no actual mission work." His eyes caught hers and she saw that they were cloudy and sad. "He's getting me out of the way."

"No, he's not, Lee. Mr. Melrose wouldn't do something like that. If he assigned you to this it's because he believes that it's important. You know that he considers you his best agent. He wouldn't waste your talents like that."

"He would if he thought I was interfering in the development of another agent."

"You *aren't* interfering in my development as an agent," Amanda replied swiftly. "You're the very best partner anyone could ask for and you don't know how lucky I feel to have that. If it hadn't been for you, I probably wouldn't even be doing this job today!"

If anything, that statement made him look even more downcast than before. "You know, Amanda," he replied slowly, staring fixedly at the cup in his hand. "I feel really bad about that sometimes. I never should have involved you in that business at the train station. If you were to get hurt, I don't think I could ever forgive myself."

She reached out and placed her palm against his cheek, forcing him to look up at her. "This was my choice, Lee," she replied in a voice filled with conviction. "You tried everything you could think of to keep me out, but the truth is, I don't want to be out. You've said it yourself. This is a job where a single individual can make a difference. I want to be able to make that difference."

"I understand that," he replied in a low voice, reaching out to touch the hand that still cupped his cheek with feather-light fingers. "It's why I've stuck with it for so many years." Then he dropped his hand and shook his head slightly. "But it doesn't make it any easier for me to see you going into dangerous situations. And thinking about you doing it when I'm not even in the same country . . ."

"Yeah, well, that idea doesn't exactly thrill me, either." She smiled at him gently. "But we'll just have to cope. After all, it won't be forever." She laid her hand on his arm and gazed into his hazel eyes seriously. "You have to promise me that you'll be careful. No crazy stunts and no going headfirst into

dangerous situations without thinking. I'm not going to be there to watch your backside . . ."

Lee snorted softly and then shook his head. "We're a real pair, you know that?" Straightening, he set the mug on the counter with a sigh. "I suppose I should go. My plane leaves first thing in the morning and I still have to pack." Reaching out, he caught her hand and squeezed it gently. "You be very, very careful. Billy seems to trust this Brit, but I don't." His eyes lost focus as he gazed blindly over her shoulder into the darkened living room with a thoughtful expression. "Nighthawk's a good agent, if a little bookish. You'd be safe enough working with him on tracing the money. Maybe you could get Billy to partner the two of you. Or Francine . . ."

"Lee . . . enough." Amanda looked at him with amused resignation. "You just can't leave it alone, can you? I can't follow the money . . . Patterson's doing that. It's his expertise, after all. And Nighthawk is assigned to him because his bookishness hides a mind that's good at seeing patterns. Furthermore, I'm on this one because of my charity contacts and volunteer work. If Billy's going to reassign anyone, it's more likely to be Magician."

"No!" Lee exclaimed in alarm. "Not Pete."

Amanda raised an eyebrow at his reaction. "What's wrong with Peter?"

"That man's all libido. He'd spend all of his time trying to make time with you and he wouldn't concentrate on the job." Lee frowned. "Windsor's gonna be just as bad."

"Lee . . ."

"I mean, after that business yesterday." He looked down at her indignantly, his voice starting to rise again. "What was that all about, anyway? Kissing your hand and fawning all over you . . ."

"Lee, stop! This is ridiculous . . ."

"I tell you, he was looking at you like you were fresh meat!"

"I'll take your word for it. Heaven knows, you should know the look," she said drolly and then laughed softly as he winced. "I'm kidding. And would you please keep your voice down? Mother is . . ."

"Amanda?" Dottie's inquiring voice drifted clearly to both of them. "Is somebody down there?"

Shaking free from Lee's grasp, she took a few steps toward the living room door and called back to her, "No, Mother. I just had the radio in the kitchen on. Go on to bed."

"All right, dear. You should come, too. It's late and if you have to be in to work early in the morning . . ."

"I'll be there in a few minutes. Good night!" Turning back to him, Amanda caught his shoulder and pushed him gently toward the back door. "You need to go, Lee. And I want you to stop worrying about me. I'm a big girl and am perfectly capable of dealing with the advances of male co-workers. William and I will do just fine. Okay?"

He watched as she crossed the room to pick up his coat. "That's what I'm afraid of," Lee muttered softly to himself.

"Did you say something?" Amanda asked, returning with his coat.

"What? Um, no . . . no, it was nothing," Lee replied, a bit flustered. *I've got to get control of myself*, he thought. *This simply won't do*. He started to wish her good night, but his voice died in his throat as their eyes locked and he found himself getting lost in their warm brown depths. It seemed he'd been doing that a lot lately. Without even realizing it, he raised his hand and cupped the side of her face, his thumb caressing her cheek lightly. "You will be careful," he said hoarsely. It wasn't a question.

"Yes," she replied softly. "You promise you will, too?"

The world seemed to fade away as he stood there gazing at her. Her skin and hair were so soft under his fingers and warmth seemed to radiate from the hand she laid against his chest. "I promise . . ." The words were little more than a breath of air that washed over her lips as he leaned toward her.

"Amanda . . ."

Dotty's voice struck both of them like a bucket of ice water, causing them to jump apart as though stung. Flustered, Amanda turned away from Lee self-consciously. "What is it, Mother?" Her voice cracked and she was forced to clear her throat before she continued, "Do you need something?" Then both of them heard the clear sound of someone descending the stairs. Amanda turned back to Lee hastily, shoved his coat into his hands, and began pushing him toward the door. "Quick!" she hissed at him. "You have to go *now!*" She all but shoved him out the kitchen door, closing it just as Dottie walked into the kitchen. "Mother!" she said breathlessly. "I thought you'd gone to bed."

"Oh, I had, but I couldn't sleep. I thought some warm milk might help. What were you doing? Why is it so cold in here?"

Amanda laughed nervously, leaning against the door. "I was just checking the weather. They say it's supposed to turn really cold tonight."

"That's what Dean was saying on the 6:00 o'clock news. Did I tell you that he called here yesterday? You know, Amanda, I really think he's still interested . . ."

As Dottie babbled on happily, Amanda turned back to lock the door. She gazed out the window and for just an instant, she saw him again, standing alone on her back patio in the cold winter moonlight. She could feel his eyes on her and was startled by the wave of loss and longing that washed through her. Then, in the blink of an eye, he was gone.

## Chapter 4

The next nine days flew by for Amanda. She was in the office by 7:00 a.m. almost every day, working mainly from Lee's desk up in the Q Bureau. Her early mornings were spent researching the various galleries, auction houses, and charity organizations that she and William would be visiting that day. She also made it a point to review the Revolutionary War material the research department provided her and supplemented it with information specific to the places they were to visit that day. The rest of the day was spent with William, going from one place to the next. Amanda still wasn't exactly sure what they were looking for, but decided that all she could do was keep her eyes and ears open.

She found it interesting to be working with William and the other Agency operatives. For the first few days, Amanda felt as though she was fumbling in the dark. William turned unerringly to her for direction as they began their search through the world of glitter and wealth that was Washington D.C. With little to go on other than her familiarity with the area and her own gut instincts, Amanda had hesitantly set their search pattern and begun the process. As one day led to the next and they seemed to get nowhere, Amanda's frustration grew. That the others in their team were having no better luck seemed little consolation.

William responded to her ideas without question or condescension, seemingly prepared to be guided by whatever she suggested. Surprisingly enough, she found herself being irritated by that unquestioning willingness. Lee would have argued with her over many of the ideas she proposed and she would have had to fight with him to get him to agree to investigate any of them. William, on the other hand, would set off cheerfully to look into anything, no matter how ludicrous it sounded. It took her a while to realize what it was about that willingness that bothered her. She and Lee had developed a pattern of working together that she wasn't sure either of them even realized existed. Rather than being a hindrance, their arguments actually served a very useful purpose. Having to defend her ideas and thought processes to him forced her to focus rationally on the idea. In the process, the ideas often clarified themselves and became something much more useful than when she first suggested it. Once she realized this, she was able to force the clarification process in her own mind before voicing an idea aloud. Most often, it took the form of an argument with Lee in her own head. More than once, she'd been in the middle of one of those little internal arguments when she'd been drawn back into the real world only to find William gazing at her rather than Scarecrow. It was extremely disconcerting.

Lee had been right about another thing, too. With him gone, it seemed that "Amanda King Season" had officially opened and every male wolf in the Agency had a permit to hunt. She had always found it a little funny that she never had to field the advances of male colleagues in the office. She'd had to contend with that kind of thing all of her life and if she was to be truly honest with herself, it had hurt a little bit that no one at the Agency seemed to have any interest in her. In that respect, the previous nine days had been a real eye-opener. Her fight with Lee had been loud and extremely public. Everyone knew she was angry with him. Then, the next thing anyone knew, he was off to Rome on an assignment that looked like it might be long-term, and she was partnered with someone new. She winced a little bit, thinking of what the Agency rumor mill had made of that one. They had no way of knowing that she and Lee had parted on good terms, and that neither of them wanted to be assigned to work different cases. It was no wonder the wolves had come out in force.

Even so, she was surprised to find how strong the interest was. Dinner invitations, flowers, candy, and flirtations began in earnest the first morning he was gone. After the first couple of invitations, Amanda began to wonder if maybe Lee might have warned everyone away from her. That thought had been at least partially confirmed by Leatherneck. When she pleasantly turned down his invitation for dinner and dancing, he had laughed cheerfully and shrugged, saying that with Lee safely across the ocean where he couldn't retaliate, she couldn't blame him for trying.

Privately, Amanda had to admit that the most fun was watching Francine's reaction to the entire situation. The fact that it didn't seem to matter that Amanda was a suburban single mother of two who served as a cub scout den mother, went to PTA meetings, and helped sponsor bake sales really appeared to irritate the other woman. She was always making snide remarks about the situation, and was heard to comment several times that she simply didn't know what was happening to the taste of the men in the Agency any longer. After that, Amanda made it a point to give her all of the candy she received. By the fourth box, Amanda could see her expression turning desperate, but Francine simply couldn't seem to turn the offering down.

Lee had been right about Peter Selensky, too. He was the most persistent of the lot. He asked her out to dinner at least twice a day and didn't seem the least bit put off by her pleasant but firm refusals. Amanda shook her head ruefully, thinking again of her comment to Lee. It wasn't that she couldn't handle the sudden attention, but life certainly had been easier when she hadn't had to.

She leaned back in the chair and stared out the window at the bright morning sunshine, thinking closely about Lee for the first time since he'd left. Up until now, she'd made it a point not to do that. It was dangerous to her emotional



health. *How long have I been in love with him?* she wondered. She'd finally admitted it was true. For better or worse, there was no point in denying it any longer. "You are a fool," she told herself. Loving Lee Stetson was like loving a hurricane . . . it was both terrifying and exhilarating at the same time . . . and definitely designed to leave you bruised and battered when it was all over. And eventually, it *would* be over . . . she had no illusions on that score. She was certain that he didn't feel the same way . . . he wouldn't allow anyone that close. She'd learned to recognize the signs years ago. Lee Stetson had been hurt. She didn't know for sure when, by whom, or how many times, but it had cut him so deeply that he'd spent years learning to wall himself away so it would never happen again. Heaven only knew, she'd tried to reach him, but it just wasn't happening. Not that it stopped her from loving him anyway. At least she had managed to become his friend and she was just going to have to settle for that. "You suffer from a real martyr complex, Amanda King," she told herself ruefully. "Do you know that?"

"Do you really?"

Amanda jumped violently and spun the chair around. She flushed a brilliant scarlet at the sight of Billy Melrose standing less than three feet away, staring at her quizzically.

"O-oh, Mr. M-Melrose," she stammered weakly. "I - I didn't hear you come in." She paused and then added belatedly, "G-good morning, sir."

"Good morning, Amanda. How are you being a martyr? Is someone trying to take advantage of you in some way?"

"Oh, no sir! That's not what I meant at all. I mean . . ."

"Amanda," Billy said in a warning tone.

"No sir, really. I - I was thinking about . . . about . . ." She searched her mind frantically for some excuse to explain her comment. "It's just, my PTA group, my friends, my son's school teacher . . . It's always something, you know? And good old Amanda . . . seems like they always come to me first, and . . ."

He laughed and nodded. "And you just can't say no. You need to work on that."

"Yes sir. I know and I am trying. Did you need something?"

Billy nodded and then asked, "How are things going?"

She shrugged and sighed softly. "It's a bit like looking for a needle in a haystack, I'm afraid. We don't seem to be getting anywhere."

Billy nodded sympathetically, leaning against Lee's desk. "I know. I figure we'll give it a couple more days and if we still haven't managed to break anything, we'll put it on the back burner for a while. There simply may be no way to get a handle on this until something new happens. But in the mean time, let's give this a try."

Taking the two envelopes Billy held out to her, she opened one and pulled out a gilt invitation. She raised her eyebrows in surprise and looked up at her boss. "The Van Houssin's winter fete? That's one of the most important society events of the year."

Billy nodded. "Yes, it is. It took some doing, but we managed to get two invitations for it. I want you and Windsor to attend Sunday evening. Mrs. Van Houssin is the president-elect of the local chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution here in town, so the cover will be perfect. The two of you shouldn't have any trouble getting close to her. She and her husband seem to fit the target profile perfectly, so I figure it's worth a shot."

Amanda nodded thoughtfully. "It helps that I know Veronica slightly. It will make things easier."

Billy eyed her in surprise. "You do? I wasn't aware of that."

"We worked together briefly on one of the Save the Potomac restoration projects a couple of years ago," Amanda replied with a shrug. "It was a passing acquaintance, at best. You know the way those things work . . . there's a coordinating committee with a whole series of smaller groups that focus on specific sites along the river. The coordinating committee is the political lobby and fundraising organization and the site groups are actually in charge of the hands-on cleanup and implementation at the restoration sites. Veronica was on the coordinating committee and I was the head of one of the site groups in Arlington. We worked together for a couple of weeks on the project and then went our separate ways."

"You never cease to amaze me, Amanda," Billy said, shaking his head with a grin. Then, settling onto the edge of the desk comfortably, he turned serious. "So how are you doing on this assignment?"

"Just fine, sir. I mean, I know we don't seem to be getting anywhere, but I'm sure . . ."

"No, that's not what I meant. I mean, how are you doing working with Windsor, Nighthawk, Magician and the others."

"You mean, how am I doing without Scarecrow," she corrected him gently.

Billy nodded, watching her closely.

"It's harder than I thought it would be," she admitted. "I – I don't think I ever really gave it much thought . . . I mean, about the *way* we work together. This all just seems rather . . ." She paused, searching for the right word. Then she finished hesitantly, ". . . awkward?"

But Melrose nodded immediately. "I understand perfectly. Some teams learn to work together through years of painstaking practice and others just seem to mesh immediately on some instinctive level. And then there are those that simply refuse to learn to work with a partner." Billy sighed softly. "Ever since Eric died . . ." He trailed off, staring vacantly at the floor.

Amanda watched him for a long moment and then asked softly, "Eric was Lee's partner, wasn't he?"

After a long moment, Billy blinked and looked at her again. Slowly, he nodded. "Yes. He's only had two. Until you, that is."

"Eric and Dorothy," Amanda replied.

"He's told you about them?" Billy asked in surprise.

"A little. Not much. He's a pretty private person."

"Yes, he is." Billy grimaced. "Too private sometimes. He internalizes too much. Keeps it all bottled up inside. I'm afraid that one of these days, it's all going to get to be too much and he's just going to explode." He leaned forward and gazed at Amanda earnestly. "It's one of the reasons I've put you two together so often. You have a way of getting to him that I don't quite understand. You seem to prevent him from getting to wrapped up in the things that go wrong."

Amanda laughed softly. "What you mean, sir, is that he gets so angry and frustrated at me that he loses his temper and yells."

"Well, there is that," Billy agreed with a rueful chuckle. "But there's more to it. Before, when things used to go wrong, they would eat at him. He would just close up somehow."

Amanda grinned, shaking her head. "I don't let him do that to me. I keep after him and after him until it's just easier for him to tell me what's on his mind than to stay quiet about it."

Billy snorted. "Yes, and for some reason he lets you get away with it. He's never put up with that from any of the rest of us. I've known him since the day he first came to work for the Agency, Amanda. I was here when Dorothy died and I was his Section Chief when we lost Eric. Each time, it was like some part of him died right along with them. He started to shut himself off . . . refused to let anyone close again. The longer he did the job, the more remote and unfeeling he became. While I know that a certain amount of that is necessary in this line of work, it seemed like it was getting to be his primary personality. But since he's started working with you, that remoteness is cracking. He's making real contact with people again. Take the kid in the middle of that A.C.M. business a couple of years ago . . ."

"You mean Alexie?"

"Yeah. I never thought I'd live to see the day that Lee Stetson would volunteer to take in a 12 year old kid rather than sending him to one of the Agency safe houses. That wasn't the Scarecrow we'd all come to know." Billy stared at her unblinking. "That was your influence, Amanda. You've been really good for him."

She smiled back at her boss shyly. "I'm glad that I can help him. Working here has been good for me too, you know." Billy smiled at her approvingly. Under his gaze, her eyes fell and she studied the blotter on the desk closely. His recent interest and concern seemed to unlock a part of her that she had kept locked up for a long time and with difficulty, she added, "I – I needed . . . needed to k-know . . . that . . ." She trailed off, the sudden upwelling of emotion catching her unaware and causing her throat close up until she couldn't seem to talk any longer. Tears welled up and she closed her eyes tightly against them. After a moment, she felt a warm hand under her chin that forced her head up. When she opened her eyes she saw Billy gazing at her solemnly.

"Needed what, Amanda?"

"T-to know that I-I could be something . . . that I w-wasn't really a failure . . ." She took a shaky breath, fighting the tears that still threatened to spill over. "A-after the d-d-divorce, it was so hard . . . I-I never realized how much of myself I gave up when I . . ." She pulled away from his gentle grasp and wiped at her eyes with both hands, ashamed at her lack of control. "I'm so sorry, sir, you don't want hear this."

"Don't take all of your lessons from Scarecrow, Amanda," Billy scolded her gently, handing her his handkerchief. "I've known from the beginning that you had something to prove. Not to us, but to yourself. There's nothing wrong with that. I've had no doubts about your capabilities from the beginning. The way you figured out that business with Mrs. Welsh and managed to pull

Scarecrow's butt out of the fire was all it took to convince me. You could have walked away from it. But you wouldn't let it go."

"How could I?" she protested. "People were dying. If there was anything I could do to help, I couldn't turn my back and walk away."

He smiled at her. "Yes, but there's the difference. Nine people out of ten *would* have. But not you. You worried at it, found a lead and followed up on it . . . all on your own, I might add." He shook his head, still amazed at the feat. "And once you'd made the connections, you walked straight into the lion's den without any backup." He shook a finger at her playfully. "Don't make a habit of that. It gives both Scarecrow and me ulcers." He grinned as the color flooded her cheeks again. "The point is, Amanda, that some people work well with others and some don't. Ever since Eric died, Lee Stetson has been unable to work well with anyone. Even those people he's known for years. By the time you came along, he'd turned into a first class loner and that kind doesn't generally last very long in this business. So it came as a real surprise to all of us when you arrived on the scene and found a way to mesh with him so well. There are still times when he fights against the instinct to work with you. I can see him doing it. And yet, once he gives in, both of you perform better than either of you would alone."

"You mean this has been . . ."

Billy nodded. "A test? Yes. I know how Lee works both with and without you. I needed to know how *you* would do without him."

"And did I pass, sir?" she asked hesitantly.

"There was no pass or fail. Just an evaluation. You've done an outstanding job. You get along well with everyone on the team. You're sharp and innovative even without Scarecrow's interaction. And you're good at putting people at ease and getting them to talk with you. Windsor has mentioned that in particular as being your single strongest attribute. He can't seem to say enough good things about the way you perform in the field."

"It's nice of him to say so," she replied, embarrassed.

"I don't think he was saying it just to be nice, Amanda. He's only reinforcing what I've heard from everyone else ever since you started working for the Agency." Billy rose from the edge of the desk and smiled at her. "So you and Windsor will handle the ball Sunday evening?"

Amanda gazed at the invitations she held in her hand a bit blankly, still rather stunned by this entire conversation. "Ball? Oh – oh yes, sir. Yes, William and I will be sure to be there."

"Good. Keep up the excellent work, Phoenix. Something is bound to break eventually." And with that he was gone, leaving Amanda more than a little dazed.

## Chapter 5

"No, I don't think so. Perhaps some other time." Lee smiled mechanically at the lovely, dark-eyed vixen that clung possessively to his right arm. He could feel her body pressed against him from elbow to ankle and the smell of her perfume all but overwhelmed him. Detaching her hand as gently as he could, he eased away from her, gesturing toward the table in the far corner of the club. "I'm here with friends."

"I could join you," she said suggestively. "I wouldn't mind meeting your friends . . ."

Lee shook his head again. "Not tonight," he replied firmly. Tossing a handful of lire down on the bar, he snatched up his drink and beat a hasty retreat. As he threaded his way through the milling crowd, the heavy dance beat triggered a painful throbbing behind his eyes. Carefully, he edged out of the crowd and retreated to a shadowed corner against the wall, as far away from the flashing lights and brittle laughter as he could get.

*What the hell am I doing here?* he asked himself wearily. *Why didn't I just beg off and go back to the hotel?*

But he knew why. He'd really had very little choice. Once again, his reputation had preceded him and he'd been under pressure to go out and party since the day he arrived. At first, things had been so busy, he hadn't had much trouble finding excuses not to go. But after a few days, a routine developed and he began to find his nights free.

He could feel them watching and waiting. Here was the great Scarecrow himself . . . the infamous ladies' man . . . the one that never went home before the clubs closed . . . and then never went home alone. They wanted to watch him work, to see if he was as good as everyone claimed he was. And certainly there wasn't a shortage of candidates. Within the first day, all of the eligible females in the Italian agency had dropped hints of one kind or another, as had several who weren't as eligible as they should be for the kind of things they were insinuating. It was no different than it had ever been. But for some reason, this time all it did was leave a sour taste in the back of his throat.

Leaning against the wall, he closed his eyes and tried to shut out the driving rhythm. All he wanted was to go home. Back to the comfort of the familiar D.C. streets, to his own office, his own car, his . . . Amanda. He saw her again in his mind's eye, color rising in her cheeks, her brown eyes sparkling, her full lips slightly parted. The intensity of his sudden desire jerked him rudely back

to reality. With a sharp oath, he drained the drink in his hand in one long draught.

*Stop being a fool!* he swore at himself. *She's your partner. You know what can happen when you start thinking like this.* Shoving off from the wall, he waded back into the crowd, making his way back to the corner table where his co-workers were seated. The crowd had grown since he left it. He'd come to this club with Paulo and Vincente, the two Italian coordinators for his latest assignment. Both were single and loved the nightlife. They were the ones who had been urging him to join them for a night on the town, and tonight they'd been particularly persistent. Finally, he'd bowed to the inevitable and agreed to go.

They'd made the rounds of the Rome club scene, finally ending up here about an hour ago. Since that time, he'd been hit on three separate times, the last being up at the bar. Lee noted that since he'd left the table, both men had acquired companions. There were also two men he didn't know and a third that he did. Lee shook his head and sighed regretfully. He should have expected this. After all, the man was assigned to the southern European theater and it wouldn't have taken the grapevine long to spread the word that Scarecrow was in Italy.

"Hey, look what the cat dragged in," he drawled as he came up to the table. "What took you so long? I expected you days ago."

The blonde head tilted back and emerald eyes gazed at him with friendly humor. "Well, well. It's Scarecrow himself. How ya been, buddy?"

Lee rounded the table and dropped back into his chair, setting his empty highball glass on the table in front of him. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Paulo catch the nearby waitress and point at his empty glass. Ignoring him, Lee leaned back and eyed the man across from him with a wary smile. "Life's good, Scorpion. Things must be going well for you, too. You're still alive."

"I'm too good for them to catch me, Scarecrow, you ought to know that by now."

Lee snorted. "It's not going to be the enemy that takes you out, my friend. It's your questionable choice in women. Whatever happened to . . . what was her name, anyway? The blonde Russian . . ."

"Katiana? Found her just rewards, but not with me. She's married to an Austrian count now."

Lee laughed. "What is it with you, Patrick? You're always losing your paramours to wealthy aristocrats."



Patrick Eldridge, aka the Scorpion, grinned amiably. "At least it leaves 'em happy."

"You have a point, I suppose."

Patrick looked around pointedly and then quirked an eyebrow at Lee. "You look a bit underdressed, Lee, my friend. I'm accustomed to seeing you with a lady on at least one arm . . . usually on both. What's up?"

Lee shrugged. "Been busy."

"Don't buy that one," Patrick said taking a swallow of his drink. "Paulo says that you've been in this club for over an hour. That's more than enough time for the infamous Scarecrow. Furthermore, I saw the little lovely you sidestepped at the bar a while ago."

"She wasn't my type," Lee replied, trying to stifle his irritation. The waitress came up and set a fresh drink down in front of him. He eyed it warily and then glanced over at Paulo.

"Double scotch on the rocks." He gestured at Patrick with his chin. "He said that's what you drink."

Resignedly, Lee picked it up. Raising the glass in a mocking salute, he sipped it cautiously. The liquor slid down easily, the mellow flavor marking it as a good single malt. Lee looked over at Paulo in surprise. "Very nice. Thanks." Feeling eyes on him, he looked back at Patrick again. "What?" he demanded. The expression on Scorpion's face made him very uneasy.

"When I heard, I just couldn't believe it. I told Sandman he was delusional. Not Scarecrow . . . *anyone* but Scarecrow. But by God, I think he was right."

"What are you talking about?" Lee asked irritably, taking another swallow from his glass. He shifted his shoulders uneasily, trying to ease the building tension within himself.

"You. And all those nasty rumors."

"What rumors?"

"About the gorgeous brunette . . ."

"Brunette? What brunette?" Lee cast his mind back frantically, trying to remember whom he'd been dating. His mind drew an utter blank. He couldn't remember dating *anyone* recently. He spent most of his free time with

Amanda. That realization caused panic to curl through his gut. "You mean Leslie?" he finally asked in desperation.

Patrick shook his head, his grin widening even more. "No, not Leslie. I've heard about her. Not exactly your type either, I'd have thought. Way too brainy. No, from what I hear, this one's named Amanda."

"Amanda!" *Oh God*, Lee thought frantically, *what do I say?* He leaned back in his chair and laughed, draining his glass once again, but the alcohol didn't seem to be helping. He was still way too tense. "You had me going this time, Scorpion. I'll admit it."

"So you're saying you don't know a woman named Amanda?"

"Where the hell have you been? Of course I know a woman named Amanda! Compliments of Billy Melrose, I've been saddled with Amanda King as my on-again, off-again partner for the last couple of years."

"Saddled?" Scorpion asked with an inquisitive look. "So you're not interested in her."

"In Amanda? She's a suburban housewife with two kids, for God's sake. What do you think?"

"I'll admit that it doesn't sound like your style. I've heard she's a real looker, though."

Unbidden, the image of Amanda rose in Lee's mind, and that sharp pang of desire lanced through him again. *What is wrong with me*, he asked himself desperately. *Dorothy . . . remember what happened to Dorothy!*

"What do you mean? What have you heard about Amanda?"

Patrick contemplated him for a minute, then slowly and with apparent relish, he said, "Soft brown hair, brown eyes to get lost in, smooth skin, full lips, a supple body, and legs so long they never seem to end. She sounds heavenly. I've been thinking of requesting a transfer back to the States. If she's fair game . . ."

Lee felt his vision focusing sharply on the man across the table and a loud roaring filled his ears as rage rose up in him like a wave. *I'll kill him*, he thought blindly. *If he goes near her, I'll kill him.*

His breath seemed to freeze in his lungs as that thought really registered. *Oh God . . . Oh God . . . What's happening to me? Amanda? Not **Amanda!!*** Lee

took a deep breath, fighting desperately to hide his panic from those around him. He forced a hollow laugh and shrugged. "I suppose Amanda's all right, if you like the type. You know me, I prefer blondes." The waitress suddenly reappeared at Lee's elbow and set another drink in front of him. When he looked at her questioningly, she stepped back and gestured toward a nearby table.

"Compliments of the lady in green."

Lee leaned forward and looked toward the table. A long-legged redhead in a tight green dress lifted her glass with a smile. *Or redheads*, he thought frantically. *A redhead will do . . .* Lee smiled back and raised the new glass in reply. Clamping down ruthlessly on the radiant memory of Amanda's face, he knocked back the drink hastily and then rose from the table. "If you will forgive me, gentlemen, I believe that's my cue . . ."

## Chapter 6

It was 7:00 p.m. on the nose when the doorbell rang at the King house on Maplewood Drive. Amanda was darting around her bedroom in a mild frenzy, still getting dressed for the society function that she and William were to attend that evening. As usual, what with one thing and another, she was running late. She heard Phillip's ringing voice calling that he'd get it and a few moments later, murmured voices as her mother spoke with someone in the front entryway. Assured that her mother was taking care of whoever was at the door, Amanda disappeared into the closet to get her dress. As she was removing the garment bag from around the elegant blue velvet gown, she heard a knock on the door and then her mother's voice calling to her.

"Amanda?"

"Right here, Mother." She stepped out of the closet with the dress in one hand and her good black heels in the other. Her mother's wide-eyed, stunned expression caused her to pause in concern. "Is something wrong?"

"Amanda, there is a man downstairs . . . the most gorgeous man I think I've ever seen! He says he's your *date*."

"My date? I don't have a date for this evening, Mother. I'm going with . . ." Trailing off, she finally put two and two together and then sighed. "Did he tell you what his name is, Mother?"

"Commander William Windsor. And he's British." Dottie's eyes were huge as she asked unsteadily, "Is he . . . I mean, the name . . ."

"The relationship is very distant," Amanda replied resignedly, thinking that it was probably going to be a very long night. "Can you help me with this, Mother? I'm running late . . . or he's early, I'm not exactly sure which." *And he wasn't supposed to come here*, she thought in silent aggravation. As she dropped the dress over her head, she glanced again at her mother's stunned expression and added, "And he's not my date, Mother. He's my boss."

Dottie blinked. "I thought your boss' name was Stedman."

"Stetson, Mother. Not Stedman . . . Stetson. And he's out of the country working on another project right now. Commander Windsor is here on special assignment from the BBC to do a documentary on a Brit's perspective of the Revolutionary War. I've been assigned to work with him while Lee . . . Mr. Stetson . . . is away."

"Oh, I see. And this function tonight . . . I suppose it's work, too."

"Of course, Mother. We're going to Veronica von Houssin's winter fete this evening. She's associated with the D.C. Chapter of the DAR, you know."

Dottie frowned for a moment. "Don't you know her from somewhere?"

Amanda nodded. "That's why we're going tonight. I'm providing the Commander's introduction to her. Can you find my sapphire pendant? It should be in a box in the top left-hand drawer of the dresser."

As Dottie began searching for the specified item, she commented, "That dress turned out very nicely, dear. I must admit, when you started it, I had my doubts. It seemed a bit too . . . risqué. But you do look very nice in it."

Amanda turned to look at herself in the full-length mirror and nodded slightly. The dress was one she had made herself. It had wide-set shoulders with a modestly low-cut neckline, long tapered sleeves, and a bodice that fit snugly in all the right places. When it reached her hips, the fabric fell away to the floor with a slight flare that allowed for freedom of movement so she could dance easily. The risqué part, as far as her mother was concerned, was the fact that it was virtually backless. Only four crisscrossing cords of the same midnight blue velvet kept the gown snugly against her body. Fleeting, she regretted the need to wear it tonight. She had hoped to keep it for a special occasion. Her hair was pulled up on top of her head in a cascade of soft curls and as she added her jewelry, the entire image clicked into place. *Not bad for a suburban housewife with two children*, she thought smugly. *Take that, Francine!* Her co-worker had not taken the news that Amanda King was going to be attending the premier social function of the season with very good grace. In fact, Amanda distinctly heard the phrase "suburban housewife" at least three times through the closed door of Billy Melrose's office when she found out about it.

"That about does it, I think." She turned and grinned at her mother. "Time to face the music."

"You look absolutely lovely, dear," Dottie assured her as she preceded Amanda out of the bedroom and down the hall toward the stairs. "You will make a very handsome couple."

"Mo-ther."

The two women descended the stairs with Dottie leading the way. As Amanda reached the ground floor, William materialized in the doorway from the living room. A smile lit his face as his eyes swept over her from head to foot. Then softly, he said,

"She walks in beauty, like the night

Of cloudless climes and starry skies;  
And all that's best of dark and bright  
Meet in her aspect and her eyes."

Amanda could feel the blood rush to her face and, flustered, her eyes fell before his openly admiring gaze. Behind her, she could hear her mother literally whimper at the romantic gesture.

William stepped forward and offered her his arm. "You truly are lovely and I'm honored that you've agreed to accompany me tonight."

"Thank you," she replied unsteadily. "You're very kind." Finally, she raised her eyes and looked at him. "It really wasn't necessary to come all this way to pick me up. I would have been more than happy to meet you in the city."

"What kind of a gentleman would allow you to do something like that?"

She just shook her head, not trusting herself to say anything else. As she did so, she caught sight of Phillip and Jamie. Both of them were standing in the doorway staring at William with their mouths hanging open. The boys really weren't accustomed to her dates quoting poetry to her in the entryway. Laughter suddenly welled up inside. In her wildest imagination, she couldn't begin to envision Dean doing something like this. The disbelief on her sons' faces finally served to bring Amanda back down to earth. Smiling, she crossed the entryway holding out her arms to them.

"Come here." She hugged both of them quickly. "Now, you be good and mind your grandmother tonight, okay? Is your homework done?" Both boys nodded. "What about your science project for school, Phillip?"

"Almost. Grandma said she'd help me finish the painting after you left."

"Okay. Please remember to lay newspapers down before you start. I'm still trying to get the last of the red paint off of the kitchen floor from the last time."

"I will," he promised. Then hesitantly, he added, "You really do look great, Mom."

"Why, thank you, Phillip!" She kissed his forehead gently, then leaned over and did the same to Jamie. "In bed by 9:30, you understand?"

"Yes, Mom," they said in chorus.

With one final hug, she turned back to her mother in time to see Dottie handing William her velvet dress cape. "I don't know how late I'll be, Mother, so you can expect me when you see me."

Dottie waved her off with a laugh. "Just enjoy yourself, dear. We'll manage just fine."

William swept the cape around her shoulders and with a chorus of final goodbyes, the two of them stepped out into the wintry air. The wind swirled around them as they moved up the walk and Amanda shivered. Her companion immediately picked up on it and drew her closely against his side, in an effort to shield her from the cold. He led her quickly to the sleek black Mercedes sedan waiting at the curb. *Where did he get that?* she thought distractedly. His proximity was making her more and more nervous, and Lee's voice echoed softly in her ears, "*Billy seems to trust this Brit, but I don't.*"

He deftly seated her in the car and then went around to get into the driver's seat. As he started the car, he gave her a charming smile and said, "I hope you'll forgive me for being early. I know you said that you would meet me at the Agency, but that didn't seem quite proper. So I anticipated how long it would take you to drive in to make our scheduled appointment with Leatherneck and arrived at your home about the time I anticipated you would be leaving."

"It really wasn't necessary," she repeated. "Lee has me meet him places all the time."

"Ah, but I'm not your Mr. Stetson, and I never turn down the opportunity to spend extra time with a beautiful woman."

Amanda turned her head away and gazed out the side window wistfully. She felt so strange sitting in this expensive European sedan next to this man. She also knew she wouldn't feel the least bit awkward if it had been Lee sitting there beside her.

"Furthermore," he continued, "I had an ulterior motive. I had hoped you'd agree to have dinner with me before moving on to the party. I'm told that there is a place called Emelio's that has wonderful food and it's not out of our way."

"Oh, I doubt that we'll have time for that," she said, looking back at him in surprise. "The invitation said 8:30 and we've still got to go into the Agency before we get there."

"No, we don't. I spoke with Mr. Melrose right before I left and filled him in on our plans for this evening. He knows I was planning to pick you up and that we would be going directly to the party rather than returning to the Agency."

"But what about the hardware?" she objected. "Mr. Melrose said that he wanted me to be wired."

William reached into his pocket and pulled out a small object, which he held out to her. "You will be. Here. This is a miniature transmitter. It will easily drop into your evening bag. We'll check in with the monitoring team outside of the Van Houssin estate to make sure it's operational and we'll be all set. So you see, there's no reason to go all the way down to the Agency. Furthermore, I am very hungry. You kept me running around all day and I missed lunch." Reaching out, he captured her hand and squeezed it gently. "Take pity on this poor, starved, displaced foreigner and have dinner with him."

The wheedling tone of his voice and the almost boyish smile struck her forcefully, causing her uneasiness to grow. Trying to free her hand, she again wished desperately that Lee was here. Then, she shook herself. *You're being silly*, she thought sharply. *All he wants to do is have dinner. Be nice, Amanda!*

"Oh, all right," she conceded in a tone of amused resignation. "I can hardly have you starving to death before we even get to our assignment, now can I?"

"It would be very bad form," he agreed with a satisfied laugh. Putting the car in gear, he pulled smoothly away from the curb and turned the car back toward D.C. "Now, all we need to do is find the restaurant."

"I know it. You'll want to take a left at the first stoplight . . ."

An hour and a half later, Amanda leaned back and sighed softly. Dinner had been wonderful. Emelio's was a city favorite, well known for its classy ambience, excellent food, and outstanding wine list. Amanda had been here several times with Lee and had always enjoyed it. But tonight, the restaurant's dimly lit intimacy was making her edgy. Lee had been right about at least one aspect of William's character . . . he had a lot more on his mind than business. Oh, his advances were tactful and highly flattering, but there was no mistaking what he had in mind.

He had steadfastly refused to discuss business, focusing instead on her. He'd coaxed her into telling him about her college years, what she had enjoyed doing as a child, and how she'd gotten into government work. In return, he'd told her about growing up in rural England and what it was like being distantly related to the British royalty. His stories were entertaining, his handsome features animated and filled with laughter, and his blue eyes sparkled in the candlelight. Under other circumstances she might have enjoyed his company. But even as he was being the perfectly charming dinner companion, he was also doing his best to excite her senses. With unconscious ease, he would brush against her or his hand would reach out to capture hers, toying with her fingers in a sensuous caress. When she had started to excuse herself to go to the ladies room, he was on his feet with lightning quickness, taking her arm to assist her as she rose, and allowing his hand to stroke the bare skin at the



small of her back fleetingly. He had also tried to ply her with wine all throughout the evening, but with the exception of a single glass with dinner, she had refused this firmly. She reminded him that they still had work to do and she couldn't do it with her mind clouded by even the finest wine.

He had taken all of her refusals with grace, assuring her that he understood her perfectly and agreed. But Amanda had begun to wonder if she wasn't going to end up having to abandon being polite and tell him point blank that she simply wasn't interested. He may understand her, but he definitely wasn't taking the hint.

Just as she was about to say something, William smiled at her regretfully. "As much as I've enjoyed this interlude, I suppose it's time we get to work. Are you about ready to go, Amanda?"

"Yes," she replied, trying very hard to disguise her thankfulness at the realization that he *did* still have at least part of his mind on work. Tossing a handful of bills on the table, William rose and offered her his hand. Smiling apologetically at him, she rose without his assistance and the two of them made their way to the coat check room. A short time later, they were speeding toward the Van Houssin estate. As they approached, William slowed and shortly, they both recognized the non-descript brown stepvan that was routinely used for Agency surveillance. The sleek black car glided to a stop behind the vehicle, and the two occupants exited the car and moved silently to the rear door. William knocked softly and a moment later the door opened and Leatherneck stuck his head out.

"There you are!" he exclaimed in relief, opening the door wider and allowing them to enter. Pulling it closed behind them, he added, "We'd begun to wonder what happened to you."

Francine looked up and scowled at the two of them as William replied lightly, "It's always better to be fashionably late, old man. I thought you knew that."

Leatherneck snorted and gestured at Amanda. "Take off your cape, Amanda. Let's see if we can rig a mike in your dress. A purse is always a bad idea . . ."

William reached out and took the cape as Amanda turned toward the Agency's technology expert. He examined the dress, circling her carefully in the close confines of the van. Then he grinned somewhat impudently. "Very nice, but it does pose a few problems with hiding a mike . . ."

Amanda blushed becomingly as she heard Francine's low, "Oh, please . . ."

Finally, Leatherneck shook his head and muttered, "Can't do anything with the dress without being seriously crude."

"That's never stopped you when you were wiring me," Francine said crossly.

"I've never had to contend with Lee Stetson's jealous temper when I've been trying to outfit *you*," he replied humorously. "I value my skin, thank you very much."

"Lee would never . . ." Amanda began indignantly, but Leatherneck cut her off.

"Let me see one of your earrings."

"Lee is not jealous," Amanda muttered rebelliously as she carefully removed the sapphire earring. "You be careful with that, Leatherneck. It belonged to my grandmother . . ."

"Not to worry," he said soothingly, examining it. Then he nodded. "This will work well and it will only take me a minute." Turning to a nearby workbench, he worked for a few moments and then handed the earring back to her. "Put that back on and see if you can tell the difference."

Gingerly, Amanda inserted the post through her ear and refastened it carefully. Then she gently shook her head. The teardrop shaped gemstone danced, glittering in the reflected lights from the control panel. "It feels okay," she finally ventured. "A little bit heavier, but not uncomfortable."

Francine came up and examined her closely, making Amanda squirm. Finally she pronounced, "The fit isn't noticeably different either. That should work." Begrudgingly, she added to Amanda, "Nice. I like the necklace, too."

"Thank you," Amanda replied in surprise.

Leatherneck rubbed his hands together and in a business-like voice he said, "Good. To activate it, you press the back in the center of the drop. The mike fits behind the gemstone and I don't think it will be noticeable."

Amanda reached up and tugged gently at the hair around her ears, pulling some of the soft curls down to frame her face more closely. "Is this better?"

Both men eyed her closely and then Leatherneck nodded. "Yes. Windsor, you're wearing that jury-rigged family heirloom of yours, right?" William nodded, fingering the stud with the Windsor family crest in his lapel absently. All the while, his frankly admiring gaze never left Amanda. She glanced away uneasily and her eyes were suddenly caught by Francine's. Amanda's expression must have communicated something to the other woman because a fleeting look of sympathy crossed her face.

"Let's check the levels and reception," Leatherneck said, turning to sit at one of the control panels. "Both of you, flip the mikes on."

After a few minutes of fiddling, Leatherneck seemed to be satisfied. "Okay, you're all set. We'll be here if you need us. Have fun, you two."

"I don't know why she gets to go instead of me," Francine grumbled as she followed the two to the door. William stepped down out of the van but before Amanda could move to join him, she felt a hand catch her arm. Francine's voice reached her as little more than a whispered breath of air in the ear without the mike. "Watch that one, Amanda. He's got more on his mind than business." Catching Francine's hand and squeezing quickly she gave an imperceptible nod and then stepped out to join him. Just as Francine pulled the door closed, Amanda heard Leatherneck's laughing reply.

"Amanda got to our foreign friend first."

## Chapter 7

Billy Melrose entered the bullpen with a determined stride. The place seemed jammed with people, but the overall impression was that of orderly chaos. While the Agency was never quiet, no matter what the hour or day of the week, the *amount* of activity going on now *was* unusual for 10:00 p.m. on a Sunday night. That, even more than the late phone call, warned Billy that something somewhere was starting to come loose.

"Nighthawk!" he bellowed fiercely. "Where the hell are you!?"

"Right here, my illustrious leader," Nighthawk called, appearing from around the corner with a big grin on his face.

"This had better be good," Billy said sternly.

"Oh, I think you'll like it. The pieces are finally beginning to come together. Patterson's people finally got a line on the money and they've been chasing electronic transfers back and forth across the globe since about 6:00 this evening. We finally managed to narrow the trail down to a single account in the Cayman Islands and began back-tracing it. Compliments of some very fancy maneuvering by Patterson's resident computer genius, we managed to backtrack several of the transfers to a bank here in D.C. We put a watcher on it, and lo and behold, I believe we've identified our men."

"Well, it's about time! Have you moved on them?"

"Unfortunately, no. Our methods of tracing the money weren't exactly legal and it would never hold up in court. But, I think we're in luck. Rumor is in the wind that our group is moving on a target tonight."

"How do we know that? And who's the pigeon?"

"The European Section came through with the 'how' about an hour ago," Magician offered, joining the group. "Profiles of the people that were spotted in Britain were circulated to other involved intelligence services and they have been canvassing all of the people in and around the previous targets. What ended up being pieced together was a picture of four men. They seem to move from place to place, rotating who serves as the contact person for the target. Turns out, the same four men were the ones we matched up to the money."

Billy had been following Magician as the man led the way toward the conference room. As they entered, he saw that they were obviously prepared for his arrival. Pictures were spread out across the table and a flurry of faxes,

telexes, and computer printouts covered every flat surface, including a good portion of the floor. Going over to the wall-mounted display board, Magician pointed to the four pictures prominently displayed there.

"Here are our major players," he said in satisfaction. "We think there may be three or four others, but these four are the driving force behind our black market information group." He tapped two pictures. "These are the leaders . . . a pair of brothers by the name of Kyle and Nate Perkins. Chicago natives with records for petty theft, joyriding, criminal damage to property, all small time stuff . . . dating back to before they even turned ten. Eventually, they graduated to more adult stuff and gained some finesse at the same time. They started pulling jewelry heists in Chicago. I guess they were pretty good. The Chicago cops had them pegged for a string of about 12 burglaries to stores and jewelry exchanges, but could never get enough evidence to nail them. Then they made a mistake and tried to branch out into residential burglary. They were hitting the house of a wealthy downtown attorney when the man and his wife came home early. The two of them managed to get out of the house, but the lawyer had a gun and followed them. Kyle tried to take the gun, they struggled, it went off and Kyle ended up in the Joliet State Pen, convicted of manslaughter. Baby brother Nate got away scott free. The attorney was the only one that actually saw them and when he died, the cops couldn't even prove that either one of them had been in the house." By this time, everyone was listening intently.

"While Kyle was in Joliet," Magician continued, stepping sideways to reveal another picture, "he met this man . . . Aaron Davis Abernathy."

"Abernathy?" Billy said sharply. "You can't mean **the** Abernathy? The one they call 'The Thinker'?"

"No, that was the old man. He's dead. This is his grandson, and from all reports, the grandson inherited the old man's gifts with a vengeance. An unforeseen accident while he was coordinating the theft of \$50 million in negotiable securities caused one of his henchmen to be caught, and the man cut a deal with the prosecutors. They sent Abernathy away for a long time. By all reports, he was a model prisoner . . . quiet and cooperative, with no obvious inclination toward violence. He also has the analytical mind of a human computer and he's diabolically clever . . . without a doubt, the brains of this quartet."

"What about the last man?" Beaman queried when Magician paused.

With a grim expression, Magician thumped the last picture sharply. "George Stockton. This guy is really bad news. He's violent, has a hair-trigger temper, and by all accounts, enjoys killing. He was also in Joliet, sentenced to life for beating his neighbor to death with a lead pipe. Prison officials believe he had a

hand in the deaths of at least six men on the inside, including two prison guards. And two weeks before our rash of thefts, leaks, and pressure tactics started, these three men disappeared from a maximum security state prison like smoke in the wind."

"You mean they have no idea how they escaped?" Billy said in disbelief.

"Absolutely none. It seems like one minute they were there and the next they were gone."

"Abernathy's doing," Nighthawk observed grimly.

"No doubt," Magician agreed. "Things began coming loose early this evening when a series of sketches and pictures of people who turned up missing following the various incidents began putting Stockton, Abernathy, and/or the Perkins brothers in the right places at the right times. We're pretty sure that there may be two or three others involved at any given time, but they appear to be hired as muscle for a single job." His expression darkened. "At least two of these people have since been found dead under mysterious circumstances. Stockton's doing, in all likelihood."

"This is all very well and fine," Billy said, folding his arms across his chest. "But does it get us closer to putting a stop to them?"

Magician grinned. "I said things have begun to come loose. About two hours ago, we hit the jackpot. One of Beaman's "children" got a positive I.D. on little brother Nate. For once, we can be grateful the kid has been taking Scarecrow lessons. Rather than trying to call in and risk losing Perkins, he took a chance and followed him. Nate led him straight to where they were staying. Once he had the address, the kid found a phone and called in. We took Nate and he's on ice downstairs. I left a team sitting on the apartment."

"Good job!" Billy said approvingly. "Now it's just a question of mopping up." Something about Magician's expression caused Billy to pause. "Isn't it?"

"Well, we may have a slight problem."

"I don't want to hear this. What kind of a slight problem?"

"It appears the plan was already in motion. The score is set for tonight and the reason the others are gone is because they were already moving when we dropped on little brother." Suddenly the man sighed and began to pace. "We've gotten that much out of the man, but that's about all. I have this feeling . . ." He trailed off uneasily, drifting to a stop.

"What?" Billy snapped.

After long moment, Magician's eyes focused and he looked at Billy with a troubled expression. "There's something not quite . . . right . . . about this guy."

"In what way?" Billy encouraged, a sudden cold chill running up his spine. Magician was a senior level agent, and had been around a long time. Things rarely rattled him. But this one was obviously doing so.

"He's too cold . . . too . . . smug. I feel like he's . . ."

". . . a sociopath," a new voice cut in. All of them turned to see Martin Pfaff standing in the doorway. "There's very little doubt about it. All the classic symptoms are there."

"But he's never been openly violent -" Magician protested, but Pfaff cut him off again.

"Up until now. All sociopaths have to start somewhere and they tend to work up to their full potential. They don't spring to life as full-blown Ted Bundys. If we were to look at his background closely, I suspect we'd find that people have always found him a bit strange . . . a bit too cold and a bit too callous for comfort, morbidly fascinated by pain and death. In all likelihood, he tortured animals as a child, had a fascination with blood, that sort of thing. But in most cases it takes some event to really trigger the latent compulsion for violence."

"You think it's been triggered, Martin?" Billy asked him.

Pfaff nodded definitely. "Without a doubt, probably by his exposure to Stockton."

"So what does that mean in this case?" Beaman asked uneasily.

"It means that somewhere out there is a time bomb just waiting to go off," Pfaff replied. "I've talked to Nate Perkins. He definitely knows something and whatever it is, he's *far* too pleased with it."

Billy looked at Magician sharply. "You said that the score was already in motion." The agent nodded. "Does the pattern you've put together tell us whether all four men participate in the actual execution?"

"We don't have a complete picture, but from those incidents we've been able to piece together, I'd say yes."

Billy looked from one man to another as that cold thrill of fear crawled up his spine again. "And what happens when something disrupts one of their plans?"

The others looked at him blankly. Finally, the Magician replied, "I don't know. If one of them has been disrupted before, we don't know about it."

"But something will happen," Nighthawk replied flatly. "If Abernathy is involved, you know he'll have planned for every contingency."

"Who's the target?" Billy demanded harshly.

Magician began to pace again. "We don't know. He won't tell us."

"Yes, he will," Billy replied coldly, decision written plainly on his face. "This has all the signs of being a potential bloodbath . . . something we cannot afford. Magician, you're with me. Pfaff, you too. Nighthawk, you're to put out a priority recall. I want every field agent we can find on the streets looking for these men. Beaman, find McJohn. Tell him I want him to meet me downstairs in holding on the double with whatever he needs to make this man talk. We're running out of time, people . . . I can feel it."

"What about Francine, Leatherneck, Windsor, and Mrs. King?" Nighthawk asked as they were leaving the conference room.

Billy thought about it for a moment. "What does your research say about the likelihood that the Van Houssins are the new target?"

"Slim," Beaman replied. "They're not quite wealthy enough to come up to this group's usual standards. The only reason they were on the list was because of Dr. Van Houssin's association with the head of the classified documents section of the Pentagon."

"Pretty tenuous," Billy said thoughtfully. Making a decision, he nodded to Nighthawk. "Leave Windsor and Mrs. King in place, but let's pull Leatherneck and Francine. With her civilian status, Amanda doesn't qualify to be part of a priority recall and Windsor doesn't know our procedures. He'll be adequate backup under the circumstances and we can put our two trained people to better use elsewhere."

"I'm on it."

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

In the stepvan, about a quarter of a mile from the Van Houssin estate, Francine stared at Leatherneck in shock.



"Pulling us off? Why?" she demanded.

Leatherneck shrugged. "Nighthawk just said things are breaking. They called a priority recall and we're to head directly back to the Agency for assignment."

"But what about Amanda and Windsor?"

"Nighthawk says we're to cut 'em loose. They're on their own."

"But – but we can't get that word to them." Francine sputtered. "Those mikes aren't two-way. They won't know we're gone."

Leatherneck contemplated that idea for a moment and then turned back to the console, his expression turning grim. "There is a way . . ."

## Chapter 8

Amanda sighed softly, once again resisting William's attempts to draw her more closely into his arms. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw his grin widen fractionally as he felt her resistance. Then, tightening his hold on her waist and hand once more, he spun her into a broad, sweeping circle in perfect time to the strains of the Strauss waltz. They'd been playing this cat and mouse game of seduction ever since they left the van. Upon their arrival at the party, they had sought out and greeted their hosts. Amanda and Veronica exchanged light pleasantries, and then Amanda presented William to her. After a few comments and a promise of a more lengthy discussion later, the two had moved out into the ballroom and the dance had begun in earnest . . . William regularly trying to find ways to get closer to her while she carefully found ways to prevent him from accomplishing it. More than once, she had regretted her decision not to lay it out plainly for him at dinner. And now, with Leatherneck and Francine listening in on every word they said, she no longer had the option. How was she going to make it clear to him that no matter how sexy he was or how intent on her, she just wasn't interested?

*Why not?* a small voice inside her suddenly asked. For the first time, she seriously thought about that question. It wasn't that the games they were playing were putting her off. She'd been down this road before . . . certainly more times than Lee Stetson was ready to give her credit for. And she knew that anything she might feel for her partner was probably wasted effort. So why wasn't she taking advantage of William's interest to have a good time? He danced as well as Lee did, and was equally as good looking in his own way. He was also a lot more romantic and definitely more attentive. So why . . . Her eyes widened suddenly. *What am I **doing**?* She felt the color flood her face as she thought in horror, *I'm **comparing** him to Lee! Have I gone crazy???* *Lee Stetson is my partner! Not . . . not . . .*

"Are you all right?" William asked suddenly, looking at her closely. "You're all flushed."

"Oh . . . oh, yes . . . yes, I'm fine," she stuttered, desperately searching for a way to explain her sudden embarrassment. "I-I just got a little warm all of a sudden, that's all."

"Perhaps we should get you something to drink."

She smiled at him apologetically. "No, really. I'm just . . ." She jumped noticeably in his arms as a sudden soundless vibration seemed to penetrate the bones of her right ear. Reaching up, she pressed her forefinger into the

hollow at the base of her earlobe and rotated her head, trying to ease the sudden sharp pain. And then, just as quickly as it started, it was gone again.

"Amanda?" William asked quietly, beginning to sound concerned. "What is it?"

"I – I'm not sure," she said in a low voice. "It was like . . . Oh!" Once again the soundless vibration stabbed at her, sending the sharp pain through her ear and radiating up into her temple. This time, however, the vibration seemed to stutter a bit before it died away, only to start again almost immediately. The intensity of the pain caused her to shake slightly as it radiated through her entire frame. It took a minute after it faded away for Amanda to realize that the third vibration had the exact same rhythm as the second. She felt William slow as he prepared to lead her off of the dance floor, and she grabbed at him, pulling him close and holding him where they were. "No!" she whispered at him frantically. "Keep dancing!" Taking a deep breath, she leaned against him intimately, her lips a scant two inches from his lapel. "Leatherneck, is that you?" she breathed.

William drew her close, cupping her right ear with his hand just in time to feel the supersonic vibration that sent another sharp wave of pain through her ear. He felt her knees start to buckle as she sagged against him. "Good Lord!" Windsor cursed softly. "Stop it, you bloody idiot. You're going to rupture her eardrum!"

"No, it's all right," Amanda gasped faintly. "He's trying to tell us something. Yes or no questions, Leatherneck. Once for yes, twice for no. Is there a problem?" A single sharp pain stabbed at her. "Here?" The staccato that echoed through her head caused her to clench her teeth and she leaned her forehead against William's chest with a stifled sob.

"A recall," William muttered. "Priority?" He didn't need to feel the vibration from the mike in Amanda's earring to know the answer. The small jerk that shook her frame telegraphed the response clearly. "All right," he breathed. "We'll make our excuses and be on the way as quickly as we can."

The swift staccato response caused Amanda to whimper softly and he saw a single tear overflow and slip down her cheek. William's jaw knotted and he drew her even more closely against him, curling his head down and nuzzling her hair comfortingly. "All right!" he snarled in a muted, angry tone. "No more! I understand. We're to stick with this, but you've got to go. We're losing our backup. Just go and leave her alone!"

He could feel Amanda's head loll on his shoulder as she lost consciousness and turned to dead weight in his arms. Looking around, he found himself on the edge of the crowd. Supporting her carefully, he swept her neatly off the dance floor and then quickly ducked through a nearby doorway and out of the noise

and flurry of the ballroom. He found the corridor deserted. Sweeping his unconscious companion up into his arms, he carried her down the long hallway and quickly mounted the stairs he found at the end of it. Emerging onto the second floor, he looked around swiftly. It appeared deserted. Choosing the room closest to him, he tried the door. It opened silently to reveal a nicely appointed but somewhat sterile bedroom. Slipping in, William closed the door behind them and then crossed the room to lay Amanda gently on the bed. Sitting down beside her, he caught her chin and rolled her head carefully toward him so he could inspect her ear. He breathed a sigh of relief when he found no trace of blood.

Rising, he moved to sit in the chair next to the bed and waited for her to regain consciousness. Sometime later, she moaned softly and turned her head on the pillow. Windsor rose quickly and went to sit next to her on the bed again.

"Amanda?" He caressed the side of her face gently and then massaged the bone behind her ear soothingly. "Can you hear me?"

She sighed softly and a smile touched her face at the sound of his voice. Then, her eyelids fluttered and she murmured, "Lee?"

William looked at her with sudden understanding and regret. "I'm afraid not," he replied with a touch of sadness. He watched as she turned her head toward him and struggled to focus.

"W-William?"

"Yes. Are you feeling better?"

"Ohhhh, what happened?" She started to sit up, but William caught her shoulder and pressed her back against the bed.

"No, don't sit up. Just lie there and rest for a few minutes. Your two friends decided to communicate with us using supersonic frequencies broadcast through the mike in your earring. The sound set up a sympathetic vibration through the bones in your inner ear, putting pressure on your eardrum." Grudgingly, he added, "I'll give the man credit . . . he knew how far he could push it without doing real damage."

Amanda winced, massaging behind her ear gingerly. "So did you figure out what he was trying to tell us? I think I lost it before the end of the conversation."

"As close as I can tell, the Agency's put out a priority recall; however, we are to stay put and continue what we're doing. We've lost our backup, though."

"Oh. Well, okay." Amanda sat up, rolling her head carefully. After a minute, she smiled at him. "I think I'm okay, now."

"Then we probably should . . ."

Out in the corridor, the sudden sound of voices caused them to pause. A woman's voice, pitched too low to hear, murmured something. From the tone, she sounded distressed.

"No, I don't think so, sweet cheeks," a harsh male voice answered. "You're gonna stay with us." Again, they could hear that distressed murmur, and then the man replied, "Oh, he'll do what we want, one way or the other. You're just an added insurance policy."

Amanda and William rose and crossed quickly to the door. Cautiously, William turned the doorknob and eased it open. They both watched as two men pushed Veronica Van Houssin up the hallway toward a door on the opposite side of the corridor. The woman was obviously terrified.

"Please . . ." she whimpered in a shaking voice, but the man who gripped her by the arm simply snarled and slammed her body into the door with such force that swung it open behind her. An instant later, both William and Amanda heard the sound of breaking glass, followed by a loud thud. The silence that followed was deafening.

William pulled Amanda back and closed the door silently as the woman's assailant turned back in their direction. Even through the closed door, both could hear the man swear at his companion.

"Listen, Abernathy, somethin's gone wrong. Nate was due here an hour ago and you know he wouldn't miss this party."

"Of course he wouldn't," his thin, somewhat prissy companion replied with distaste. "He's gotten to be too much like our friend downstairs. I agree . . . something's gone wrong."

"Then we gotta find 'im!"

"Your brother is your problem, Perkins. My problem is to find a way to get those papers and get them copied. We went to a lot of trouble to put General Morgan's aide into the position of needing a safe place outside of the Pentagon to store them temporarily and I don't intend to lose this chance. When they decide to move the United States' store of weapons grade plutonium, we'll be able to name our price for the route that will be used for the transport."

"I don't get it," Kyle Perkins complained. "How can you be so sure they're gonna move it? If we sell those plans and then it turns sour, we're gonna be dead men."

Abernathy shook his head. "You have no faith. Of course they'll move it. We simply insure it by seeing to it that everyone out there knows where it's currently stored. They'll have no choice."

Perkins grunted. "Sounds like a lotta ifs and maybes ta me. And what if Stockton can't get them plans of Van Houssin?"

"I have every faith that our friend can extract the information we need. And if he won't talk, I'm sure your lady friend in there will. We need to speed this project up. I'm going to go find Stockton. You stay here and keep an eye on the lady. We don't want her going any place."

The sound of footsteps retreating down the hall was followed a second later by the squeak of hinges and the click of a door latch. Then the hallway was silent once again.

Amanda looked at her companion with wide eyes. "Oh my gosh. I – I think we found them . . ."

"Bloody hell!" William swore in a low voice. "We can't let them get those plans!"

"And we can't leave Veron . . ."

"Now listen to me, Amanda," William said, obviously not paying attention to her. "I'm going to follow that Abernathy fellow."

"But what about . . ."

"I want you to find a telephone and contact the Agency. They need to know what's going on here. There are too many people at risk and we're outnumbered. We need help."

"Okay. I can do that. But what do we do about . . ."

"Once you've called in, I want you to find a safe place and stay out of sight. If anything goes wrong, things could turn into a bloody mess, and I want you out of harm's way."

Amanda stared at him in disbelief. "You want me to . . . to wait in the *car*?"

William returned her outraged stare somewhat blankly, his mind obviously not on what she was saying at all. "The car? It's too far away and you'd make too

good of a target if you tried to reach it. Just find somewhere quiet and stay there. I'll find you once this is all over."

Swiftly, he eased the door open, checked the hall, and then slipped out into the corridor. With a final soft, "There's a good girl," he was gone, leaving Amanda standing alone with her fury.

Breathing deeply, she fought to get her anger under control. She'd had just about enough of this. *When the time comes, I'm going to give a few choice people a piece of my mind*, she promised herself fiercely. But now definitely was not the time. Taking another deep breath, she eased the door open and checked the corridor. She needed to find that phone. Seeing that the coast was clear, she slipped out, closed the door and moved down the hallway. She hesitated briefly in front of the room that Veronica was being held in, but then continued past the door reluctantly. William was right. If they didn't get backup, they were going to be in real trouble. The phone first, and then she'd think about what to do about Veronica.

Choosing the room as far from Perkins as she could get, Amanda opened the door and looked in. Another guest bedroom. A cursory glance showed her no sign of a phone. Closing the door, she went on to the next one. This one turned out to be a linen closet. She wondered briefly what it was about rich people that caused them to want to keep all the doors in their house shut all of the time. It took her four tries before she located what was obviously the master bedroom. With a quiet sigh of relief, she slipped in and closed the door behind her, knowing that somewhere here she would find what she was looking for.

She spotted the desired item almost immediately and crossed to it without hesitation. Picking up the receiver, she breathed a word of thanks as she heard the comforting sound of the dial tone. Pressing buttons quickly, she waited until a calm, uninflected voice answered.

"Department 553."

Searching her mind for the words she'd heard Scarecrow use in the past, she replied, "This is Phoenix. Priority Red. Operation Rimrunner. I need a flash priority scramble to the Van Houssin estate in Chevy Chase. We have ignition. Risk of casualties high. Repeat, Priority Red . . . Operation Rimrunner . . . flash priority scramble. Agents need assistance."

"Confirmed, Phoenix. Operation Rimrunner to flash priority scramble, condition red, at the Van Houssin estate. Current status?"

"Contact with partner lost. Civilians known to be targeted. National security documents at risk."

"Acknowledged, Phoenix. Backup will be en route. Hold your position for further instructions."

"Can't do it. Just tell that backup to hurry."

"Phoenix, wait . . ."

"Tell them there are at least three of the opposition here. Their names are Perkins, Abernathy and Stockton. There may be others, but I don't know for sure. Windsor's gone after Abernathy and Stockton. I'm on Perkins."

"Phoenix, you're not authorized . . ."

"Too bad. Tell Mr. Melrose . . . Well, tell him I won't wait in the car anymore!" Dropping the receiver back into the cradle, she crossed back to the door, eased it open, and peered out into the hallway. Now to see what she could do to help Veronica Van Houssin.



## Chapter 9

A knock on the interrogation room door caused Billy Melrose to look up. Nighthawk stuck his head in the door and motioned for him to come out into the hallway. Melrose hesitated and then nodded. Turning to McJohn, he said curtly, "Keep at it. We need that information." With one final disgusted look at the man lolling in the chair, he spun and stepped out into the hallway. McJohn had been at it for close to an hour now, but Nate Perkins was turning out to be a much harder nut to crack than any of them had anticipated.

Out in the hallway, he found Francine Desmond, Leatherneck and Nighthawk waiting for him. "Where have you two been?" Billy asked sourly.

"Sorry," Leatherneck replied. "Pile up on Connecticut. Got stuck in it."

"At this hour?"

"Drunk driver. What can I say?"

Billy waved him off. "Windsor and Amanda?"

"Still in place," Francine replied. "Leatherneck managed to let them know they were on their own, though."

"I thought their equipment wasn't two-way."

Francine smiled slightly. "It wasn't, but he found a way."

Leatherneck snorted. "Yeah. Just do me a favor and don't tell Scarecrow how I did it. He wouldn't be pleased. So what's up?"

Billy outlined what they knew. "We're still trying to get the target out of Perkins, but so far McJohn's had no luck. What about the search teams, Nighthawk?"

"Nothing," he replied with a sigh. "I'd say that they were already in place when we intercepted our friend in there. They aren't going to show until they're ready to run."

"And that's liable to be too late," Billy replied, smacking the wall in frustration. "We need answers . . ."

Without warning, the lighting changed to a glowing red and a voice echoed through the hallways.

"Red alert. Flash Priority Scramble. Operation Rimrunner. Agents need assistance. Repeat, all available field agents . . . Flash Priority Scramble. Operation Rimrunner . . ."

All four were moving at a run for the elevator before the telecommunicator even began the repeat. The noise level in the bullpen had risen substantially by the time they arrived. Billy's voice sliced cleanly through the din.

"I want a report. Who's called the scramble?"

"Phoenix, sir. She called in by land line from the Van Houssin estate. Said they have ignition on Operation Rimrunner. She confirmed the presence of Perkins, Abernathy and Stockton. Said she didn't know how many others there might be."

"Son of a bitch!" Leatherneck swore violently. "And we left them hanging out there with no backup!"

"You said the Van Houssins weren't the target!" Billy snarled at Beaman who had joined the group.

"They shouldn't be! There's nothing there that this group could want!"

"There is or they wouldn't be there. We've obviously missed something. Did Phoenix say what action they were planning?"

The woman who had taken the call shook her head. "She just said that Windsor had gone after Abernathy and Stockton and that she was on Perkins. I tried to tell her to wait, but . . ."

"But what?" Melrose demanded, when the woman paused uncomfortably.

She sighed. "She said to tell you that she wouldn't wait in the car anymore."

"Oh that's just great!" he said sarcastically, and shook his head. "I suppose she isn't even armed." Leatherneck shook his head silently. "I want all four of you on your way to the Van Houssin estate on the double. Windsor can handle himself, but this is way more than Amanda King *ever* bargained for. You are to see to it that those two get out of there in one piece. And I want Perkins, Abernathy and Stockton. Go. **NOW!**" As Billy spun and headed for his office, his worry over his novice agent triggering the acidic pain in his stomach. *If something happens to her . . .* he thought miserably. That thought suddenly reminded him of the last thing Lee said to him before he left for Rome. He'd promised his best agent that his partner would be all right. '*She'd better be,*' had been his only reply. Melrose sighed softly as he opened the bottom drawer

of his desk and pulled out the antacid tablets. Popping two of them, he thought morosely, *If something happens to her, Scarecrow is going to kill me.*

## Chapter 10

Lee stared blankly into the frenzied crowd feeling numb. Around him, the mass of people showed no sign of thinning. He looked down at his watch blearily . . . 2:10 . . . early morning here in Rome . . . a little after 8:00 on a Sunday evening in D.C.

*What are they doing?* he wondered drunkenly. *Those people that I call friends back in the U.S. What are they doing right now?*

Billy would be with Jeanine and the kids. That was a given. The Agency never stopped. Morning, noon, and night . . . one endless day after another . . . year upon year . . . it continued relentlessly. But somehow Billy had learned how to put the brakes on and find some small measure of calm in the endless ebb and flow of the work. Had made a place in his life where normalcy ruled and there were people who loved him unconditionally waiting. *What would that be like?* he wondered. *To have someone waiting when you came home . . . to know there was someone who really cared . . .*

And Francine? What would she be doing mid-evening on a Sunday? Out, most likely, with a senator or some other wealthy aristocrat. Power and money, that was what she looked for in a companion. No common, everyday, run-of-the-mill guy for her . . . not since Jonathan. No one knew better than Lee the price Francine had paid for letting her guard down and allowing Jonathan to get close. She'd never been the same after he left.

*Like you,* his little voice whispered. It had been nagging at him for days. *You let your guard down . . . let her in. Just like you let Dorothy in.*

“Go away!” he snarled under his breath. Amanda. Lee shook his head, clutching the bar abruptly as the movement unsettled his balance. He didn’t want to think about Amanda. He looked around for the redhead, but she was nowhere in sight. *How the hell long does it take to go to the bathroom?* he thought irritably. As long as he had her to focus on, he could keep the thoughts of Amanda at bay.

“What can I get you?”

Lee turned unsteadily to look at the man behind the bar. “What?”

“I said, what can I get for you?”

Lee stared at him uncomprehendingly for a long moment. Then he shook his head abruptly. “Nothing. I don’t need anything.” Pushing away from the bar,

he stumbled toward the back of the club. He wasn't entirely sure what drove him. All he knew was that he had the sudden urgent need to talk to someone sane . . . someone who knew him for who he really was . . . not Scarecrow, the covert operative – the spy . . . but Lee Stetson, the man. The compulsion was overpowering and irresistible.

Struggling through the crowds unsteadily, he pushed toward the back of the club. He knew he'd seen a phone somewhere. He wasn't quite sure where, but he knew he had to find it. Finally forced into asking one of the bouncers in the club, he was directed to a dim back corner of a dingy corridor far away from the dance floor. Here the sounds of the club were blessedly muted and the dull light seemed to ease the ache in his skull.

Fumbling a little, he picked up the receiver and pressed the code for calling card dialing. Reluctantly, with a series of pops, clicks, and static, the connection was made and he blindly began entering numbers. His hand seemed to move with a life of its own, entering access codes, card numbers, country codes, and finally a phone number. He gave no thought to the numbers . . . just keyed them in instinctively. And then it was ringing. Once. Twice. A third time . . .

“Hello?”

Lee blinked, struggling to force his mind to register that someone had answered.

“Hello? Is someone there?”

This time the words registered clearly and he clutched the phone like a lifeline, recognizing the voice and knowing suddenly what number he had called. “Is Amanda there?” A blast of static caused him to pull the phone away from his ear sharply. When he returned it, he could barely hear the voice on the other end.

“Hello? Are you still there?”

“Yes. Is Amanda there?” Abruptly, the interference disappeared and the response was as clear as if Dottie was right next door.

“No, I'm sorry, she's not. You just missed her.”

“Oh.” She wasn't home? On a Sunday night? He clutched the phone tighter. How could that be? “Do you know when she'll be back?”

“I'm afraid it will be late,” Dotty replied. “She has an engagement for the evening. May I tell her who's calling?”

Lee staggered back and leaned heavily against the wall. She was out . . . on a date. Again, the crackle of static blurred the connection and then receded once more.

"Are you still there? Hello? I can't hear you . . ."

"I-I was hoping to talk to Amanda," he said, still reeling.

"Who is this?" Under normal circumstances, Lee could have fielded the question easily, but the combination of liquor, his emotional turmoil, and Dottie's sharply demanding tone pulled a response from him before he even realized what he was saying.

"L-Lee." There was a brief pause.

"Lee? Lee wh . . . oh, wait! Her boss? Lee Stedman? Or is it Stetson?"

"Stetson," he agreed numbly. "Lee Stetson."

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Stetson. I don't know why I can't keep that straight. For some reason, I got Stedman stuck in my mind and I just can't seem to get rid of it! That's just like me."

"Yes. Mrs. West, I –"

"I really am sorry, Mr. Stetson, but Amanda isn't here. That nice Commander Windsor took her out for the evening. They were going to some fancy dress ball. They just left." Dottie sighed happily. "She looked so lovely in that new gown . . ."

The pain that welled up inside of him was so intense that for an instant he thought he was going to be forced to his knees. His eyes closed and he leaned against the wall, struggling against the maelstrom of emotions that raged inside of him. *Amanda, no!* his mind cried to her. But she wasn't here. She was with Windsor. The memory was so clear . . . Amanda standing there looking up at him with that sweet, shy smile while he brought her hand to his lips and kissed it. Windsor had wanted her. It was written in every line of his body and every look he gave her. "Amanda . . ." he cried out under his breath.

"I beg your pardon? Mr. Stetson are you still there?"

With a mighty effort, he forced his mind back to the phone again. "Yes," he replied huskily. "Yes, I'm here, Mrs. West. I'm sorry. I got distracted. What did you say?"

"I asked if I could take a number or a message for you."

That question brought him abruptly back to awareness. "No!" he responded frantically. She couldn't know he'd called! Then, realizing how it must have sounded to Amanda's mother, he moderated his tone as best he could. "No, Mrs. West. It's not necessary. D-Don't even tell her I called. I wouldn't want her to think I was ch - . . . that she had missed my call. It's nothing urgent. I was just touching base . . . to see how things were going."

"Oh. Well, surely I should tell her that -"

"No! Please! She gets so . . . upset . . . if she thinks I wanted something and that she wasn't available. It - it is Sunday, after all. I-I just expected her to be home, that's all."

"I'm really very sorry."

"It doesn't matter. I need to go. Goodbye." He slammed the receiver down, not even giving a thought to what Amanda's mother must be thinking.

Amanda. And Windsor.

Jealousy, rage, fear, helplessness . . . the storm of emotions that tore at him at that thought left him shaking. What was happening to him? When had what Amanda King was doing . . . or who she was doing it with . . . become something that could rock his entire world?

*When they decided to take her away from you, that voice in his head whispered to him again. Why are you surprised? You were hateful to her . . . hurt her so often. She put up with your temper tantrums and your attitudes, had absolute faith in everything you did, and accepted your half-hearted apologies without question. How long did you think she could continue that way? How long did you think **Billy** would allow it? Now he's going to give her a new partner and has put you as far away as he can so you don't interfere. And Windsor . . . he knows what he wants and won't hesitate to go after it. There's no way you can stop him.*

With a ragged breath, he shoved himself off of the wall and stumbled back toward the lights and sounds of the club. He had to get back . . . back to the man he used to be . . . the man who was safe behind his walls . . . to the life he knew. If he didn't, he was lost.

The din hit him like a sledgehammer as he exited the back corridor into the main room. Without an instant's hesitation, he veered away from the dance floor and made straight for the bar. Gesturing imperiously to the bartender, he demanded, "Scotch . . . on the rocks . . . a double." When the man set it in

front of him, he snatched it up and drained it swiftly. "Again," he commanded hoarsely. The bartender shook his head but did as he was told. Catching a flash of bright green in the corner of his eye, he turned his head and saw the redhead coming toward him.

"Here you are," she said in her heavily accented English. "Where had you gon' to? I look, but could not fine . . ." The slur in her voice was unmistakable. *Drunk, Lee thought unsteadily. Both of us . . . but not drunk enough.*

He took a gulp of the new drink and reached for her. The heavy scent of her perfume enveloped him as he put an arm around her and pulled her tightly against his side. He smiled and asked in slightly slurred Italian, "Did you miss me?" Dropping his head, he rubbed his face in her hair and nibbled at the top of her ear. "Jus' had a li'l business to take care of," he whispered. "Din't want it interrupting the rest of our night. Now, I'm alllll yours."

She giggled and rubbed against him suggestively. "Les dance," she said, drawing away and pulling him toward the dance floor.

"But I jus' got a new drink."

"Bring it. I want to dance. Then I leave . . . you will come, yes?"

Taking another swallow from the glass he held, he staggered after her, "I will come, yes."



## Chapter 11

"This is a stupid idea, Amanda," she muttered to herself as she stood in the corridor leaning against the master bedroom door and gathering her courage. Trouble was, she couldn't think of anything better. Taking a deep breath, she straightened and called out in a ringing voice, "Veronica?" Knocking on the door of the room behind her, she opened the door, closed it again with a noisy click, moved up the hallway to the next door in line, and did the same.

"Veronica, are you here? It's Amanda."

Knock . . . open . . . close . . . click.

Knock . . . open . . . close . . . click.

She systematically worked her way up the hall toward the room in the middle of the corridor, calling inquisitively. Reaching it, she rapped and grasped the doorknob tightly. But before she had the chance to do anything else, the door was jerked open. Not expecting that action, Amanda was thrown off balance by her hold on the knob and she stumbled into the room. Directly in front of her, Veronica Van Houssin sat rigidly behind a large mahogany desk. Her eyes were huge and terrified and her skin was so white, it might have been carved from alabaster. Its purity made the growing black bruise on the right side of her face look almost obscene. With senses heightened by fear, Amanda could feel Perkins behind her. The faintest breath of air caressed her bare back as he swung the door closed once more. Pretending to be unaware of his presence, she moved quickly to put distance between them.

"Veronica? I was looking for you. I thought maybe we could . . . are you all right?" She scurried to the other woman, hastily putting the huge desk between the two of them and her adversary. "Have you had an accident?" she babbled, hoping to put Perkins off balance by her sudden appearance and incessant chatter while her eyes searched frantically for anything she could use as a weapon. "That looks just terrible! You really need to call a doctor. Surely there's one downstairs among your guests. Whatever did you hit yourself on? That lamp? Oh, and it's broken. What a shame. Such a lovely thing . . ."

"Who are you?" Perkins demanded in a harsh voice when she finally had to stop to take a breath.

Amanda jerked around for her first real look at the trouble she was facing. Almost as tall as Lee, he probably outweighed her partner by a good 75 pounds. His hair was an indiscriminant color somewhere between light brown and gray. He wore faded denim jeans, a long-sleeved black T-shirt, and worn

leather boots. But it was his eyes that drew her. A light, cold amber that froze her where she stood, they reminded her of the eyes of the cobra she had taken Jamie and Phillip to see at the National Zoo last fall. Watchful and deadly. She would only have one chance.

"Oh, h-hello. I-I'm a friend of Veronica's . . . one of her guests," she stuttered breathlessly. Forcing herself to turn her back to him again, she eyed Veronica carefully. The glazed look warned Amanda that she'd better not plan on help from her. "Thank goodness you're here. She's been hurt. Can you bring me some water for her?" Out of the corner of her eye, she suddenly spotted a wooden stand. Sitting by the window in a nearby corner, it held an assortment of umbrellas, a cane, and other oddities. But what caught Amanda's eye was the heavy wooden walking stick that was partially hidden by the folds of the draperies.

Shooting a swift look over her shoulder at Perkins again, she smiled, pretending not to see the gun he held in his right hand. Gesturing toward a wet bar on the far wall, she said, "It's over there. And if there's a napkin, please bring that, too. She seems to have hit her head. It's just so easy to trip and fall, particularly on throw rugs like those. And with all the sharp edges in a room like this . . . well, it's amazing more people aren't hurt. It's one of the reasons I have carpeting in my house. No rugs to stumble over. And it's so much easier to take care of, don't you think? A good vacuum cleaner is all you need . . ." Glancing at him again, she noticed a slightly dazed look on his face. Lee always did say her incessant chatter could overwhelm the most rational man.

"A-Amanda?" The hesitant voice drew her attention back to Veronica. "I . . ."

"Hush," she commanded firmly. "You've hit your head. You just take it easy for right now."

"That man . . ." Veronica murmured dazedly.

"It's okay," Amanda replied comfortingly.

Suddenly, from somewhere downstairs, they all heard the unmistakable sound of a gunshot. As Perkins whirled toward the door, Amanda grabbed the opportunity. Taking two quick steps, she snatched up the walking stick and was rounding the desk before Perkins was even aware of her movements. The man whipped around, snapping off a shot at her. But she was moving too fast for him to get a good aim and the bullet whistled past her right shoulder. Before he could take aim again, she planted her feet, grasped the walking stick in both hands like a baseball bat, and swung with all her might. It caught him full in the stomach and he doubled over, struggling for breath. Yanking it free, Amanda raised it over her head and brought it down across his shoulders. The

man dropped to his knees and gasped in pain as Amanda heard something break. In the distance, she heard the escalating sound of screams and then more gunshots. Gritting her teeth, she swung the stick one more time in a bunting motion, catching Perkins in the right temple. The man slumped to the floor, unconscious.

"And Francine makes fun of my coaching Little League," she panted. Dropping the walking stick, she snatched up Perkins' gun and then rounded the desk again. Veronica was staring at her blankly.

"Come on, we have to get out of here!"

"Y-You hit him!" Veronica sputtered.

"You're darned right I did. Now come on!" Grabbing the other woman's hand, she pulled her out of the chair and dragged her across the room to the door. Opening it, she scanned the hall quickly and then darted out, pulling Veronica with her. "We need to get out of the house. Which way?" Before Veronica could reply, they both heard the sound of running footsteps to their right. "Definitely not that way," she said breathlessly and began running in the other direction. But before she reached the staircase, she heard footsteps coming up that way, as well. Darting to one side, she pulled Veronica into the guest bedroom she'd been in earlier and locked the door behind them. "How many of them are there?" she hissed softly to Veronica.

"I – I don't know," Veronica replied hesitantly, starting to come back to life. "There were at least three men who seemed to be in charge . . ."

"Perkins, Abernathy, and Stockton. I know about them. Any others?"

Veronica looked at her strangely. "Yes, but I don't know how many."

Gunshots came again, this time sounding closer. Amanda spun, scanning the room frantically. "I have *got* to find my partner! I have no idea what he's doing." Fervently, she wished that it were Lee Stetson out there rather than William Windsor. She'd know what Lee was planning without his even needing to tell her. But Windsor? She had no clue. Crossing the room swiftly, she threw open the doors to the terrace. Bitterly cold wind swirled around her, tugging at her dress and hair. "Is there a staircase off of this balcony?"

"No. Amanda, who *are* you? And what's going on here? Those men kept telling Matthew that they wanted the plans he was holding. I have no idea what they were talking about . . ."

"Veronica, I'm sorry, but I don't have time for this right now. My partner's down there alone. It's my job to guard his back and I can't do that up here.

Help's on the way, but we've got to hold out until they get here and you've got a houseful of potential hostages that can really complicate matters. Now, is there any way out of here?"

"Well, there's a trellis . . ."

Amanda sighed. "That figures. Where?"

The woman gestured to the far opposite end of the house. "Down there. It's mounted on the side of the house so the ivy has something to climb."

"All right. You . . ." But Amanda never had the chance to finish the thought. The doorknob was suddenly jiggled and a voice Amanda recognized called from the other side of the door.

"Stockton! Down here. This door's locked!"

Veronica turned terrified eyes to Amanda who hissed at her, "Too late. Come on!" Grabbing the other woman by the arm, she dragged her out onto the terrace and closed the doors behind them. Then taking her arm again, she ran for the other end of the house.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

"Francine, are you there?"

Billy Melrose's voice was sharp in her ear and there was a tension there that warned of more bad news. She peered anxiously out the front window of the helicopter, straining for a view of the Van Houssin mansion. Beside her, Magician gripped the controls tightly, fighting the gusting wind.

"I hear you, Billy."

"Leatherneck's people have finally managed to boost the gain on a receiver enough to pick up the signal on Amanda's transmitter. It's breaking up very badly, but we've picked up the sound of gunfire."

Leatherneck swore in frustration from the back seat, and Nighthawk demanded, "What about Windsor's transmitter?"

"Nothing."

"That doesn't necessarily mean anything," Leatherneck cut in. "His equipment came from MI6 and we had trouble picking up his signal from any kind of distance. What about Amanda? Can you tell if she's okay?"

"It sounds like she's running and we don't think she's alone. We're getting broken bits of a conversation with someone we think may be Veronica Van Houssin."

"Come on, Pete, give this thing more gas," Francine urged the agent next to her. "They're in real trouble."

"Lay off, Francine," Magician snarled in response. "I'm worried about her, too, and I'm doing the best I can. Furthermore, I don't want to be on the receiving end of Scarecrow's temper if anything happens to her!"

"What is with you guys?" Francine demanded in aggravation. "You all make it sound like Lee takes a personal interest in *anything* to do with Amanda King. For God's sake, she's just a . . ."

". . . 'suburban housewife'," the three agents in the helicopter finished in chorus.

"Geezus, Francine, put your personal prejudices aside and open your eyes," Leatherneck snapped. "Amanda King means a lot more to Lee Stetson than just being his partner!"

"When he's around, he won't let *anyone* near her. You think we don't hit on her because we don't *want to*?" Magician demanded. "God, the first time I even *looked* in her direction he all but took my head off! I'd say Scarecrow is well and truly caught."

"Even if he hasn't quite realized it yet," Nighthawk added.

"Right now, I don't care how he feels about her," Billy interrupted. "I just want her out of the middle of that mess."

"There's the house!" Francine interrupted. "Where's the rest of the backup?"

"You should have local cops within five minutes and an agency response team within another five."

"Don't let the locals come in lights and sirens!" Magician instructed sharply. "They do that and our friends are liable to start using all those guests for target practice." He glanced over at Francine. "I'm gonna put us down here. We'll go in across the estate grounds and come in from the rear."

"Just do it!"

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

The sound of the gunshot from the other end of the house echoed clearly in the frigid night, even over the sound of the wind. Amanda balanced precariously on the icy balustrade and looked back toward the single light at the far end of the terrace. *They've shot the lock out of the door*, she thought. *They're not trying to disguise their actions any more.* Shadows moved against the light and Amanda knew they were running out of time. The gun was cold against the base of her spine where she'd thrust it to free up her hands. Clutching the corner of the house, she leaned out as far as she could, searching for the trellis. Her fingers curled around it and she tugged experimentally. It shivered but held.

"Amanda!" Veronica's low wail held definite panic. Amanda looked up just as the terrace door swung open and a man with a gun stepped out.

"Come on!" she said urgently, grabbing the other woman's arm as she dropped down off of the railing onto the terrace once more. Amanda knew that her dark gown would provide her with a little bit of cover, but Veronica was dressed in pure white. For all that it was cold and windy, it was also clear and there was a moon. Veronica was going to show up like she was luminescent. She had to get her off this terrace. "Climb up on the rail, reach out and grab the trellis. Get your fingers and toes into it and then climb down as quickly as you can. Once you get to the ground, get out of sight. They'll come down here sooner or later and you don't want them to see you standing down there."

"I – I don't think I can . . ."

"You have to! Go on! I'll be right behind you."

Hesitantly, Veronica climbed up onto the rail and reached out as she was instructed. Amanda pressed herself against the side of the house, watching the man she assumed was Stockton cross the terrace and look down toward the ground. A soft gasp caused Amanda to look back. Veronica now clung to the trellis, seemingly frozen.

"Go on!" she said urgently to the terrified woman. "He's coming!" Amanda watched tensely as the woman felt hesitantly for a foothold and with painful slowness, began to descend. Amanda knew that she didn't dare try to get onto the trellis until the Veronica reached the ground. It wouldn't take the weight of both of them. Knowing she had no choice, Amanda hoisted herself over the railing and felt for a handhold along the edge of the balustrade. Her fingers found the decorative edge of the roofline and without hesitation, she grabbed it and lowered herself until she hung off the edge of the roof by her hands. Above her she could hear footsteps moving along the terrace. She looked down and saw Veronica release the trellis and drop the last two feet or so to the ground. She fell as she hit, but immediately stumbled to her feet and fled for the shadows against the house.

Amanda felt her arms begin to shake as the combination of her weight and the cold began to take its toll. She struggled, swinging her feet in an effort to move toward the trellis. She froze as a flailing foot struck something up underneath the terrace roof. Stretching out with her foot, she found it. Peering into the darkness, she could make out a lattice-like network of light and dark at about the level of her knees and about a foot in front of her. She pushed on it with her foot again. Definitely lattice, with some kind of a trim rail. Her own backyard suddenly flashed into her mind and she knew what this was. Privacy fencing. Desperately, she released one hand and sought some kind of handhold that would get her close enough to be able to wedge a foot into the lattice. She found the ceiling mounted storage rack just as she heard Stockton immediately above her. Without a second thought, she grabbed the icy metal and threw herself into the sheltering darkness underneath the balcony. Hanging by her hands and praying the rack would take her weight, she held her breath. The seconds seemed to creep by like an eternity.

Finally, she heard the man grunt and the sound of footsteps began to retreat. "There's no one out here and no way down off of this terrace," she heard him call. "We don't have time for this. Let's get the other one and then get out of here."

Amanda let out a shaky breath and then began searching with her foot for the privacy lattice again.

"Amanda?" Veronica's hoarse whisper reached her. "Amanda, where are you?"

"Over here, just under the roof," she called back softly. Under her foot, she felt the lattice again, but putting her weight on it caused it to bend precariously. It would never hold her. "Is there a ladder out here anywhere?"

"I – I think there's one in the shed here."

"Get it quickly! I don't know how much longer I can hang on." Amanda could hear the other woman shuffling around below her and she gritted her teeth. Her hands were going numb from the cold of the metal rack and she was shaking constantly now as her body heat bled away in the bitter cold.

A moment later, Amanda heard the scrape of wood on the tile below her and then Veronica called, "It's the only one I could find in the dark. Can you reach it?"

Feeling around with her leg, she suddenly banged her ankle against the side of it. "Yes, but it's a little too far over. Can you move it more toward the outer edge of the terrace? There! Stop. That's good. Now hold it steady . . ." Finding the top step with her foot, she put her weight on the ladder and

attempted to release her handhold on the rack. She felt a sharp pain in her left palm as she pulled her hand free. Hissing softly, she doubled her injured hand into a fist and eased her way down the ladder. Reaching the ground, she gestured to the other woman.

"Come on. We've got to get back inside."

"No! I don't want to go back in there with them!"

"Veronica, we have to. My partner's in there. And it's too cold for us to stay out here. You know this house. What's the best way to get back in?"

"I – I don't . . . The kitchen door maybe . . ."

"Show me!" Pulling the gun out of the back of her dress, she pushed the other woman to get her moving and then the two of them stumbled across the terrace toward the lights that marked the kitchen. They were still several feet from the door when dark shapes suddenly materialized out of the surrounding blackness. Amanda gasped and spun, trying to bring the gun to bear. A familiar voice stopped her.

"No! Amanda, don't! It's me."

"Francine!" She staggered in relief and felt supporting arms encircle her.

"You're going to freeze to death out here dressed like that," Leatherneck scolded her.

"Better than getting shot by Stockton. Trust me."

"What's the situation?" Magician demanded.

"I don't know for certain. William is in there somewhere, but I don't think they've taken him yet because I'm still hearing gunfire. I think he must be trying to draw them away from the guests because the shots seem to be coming from the other end of the house, away from the ballroom. I'm pretty sure Perkins is still out of commission, but I don't know how many others we're dealing with. We should be able to get in through this door."

"Us, not you," Magician said. "Billy wants you out of this now."

"No way," she replied flatly, pulling away from Leatherneck sharply. "That's my partner in there. I don't go without him." Before any of the others could react, she spun away and dived for the door which Veronica now had open. She was through it before anyone could stop her.



"Dammit . . ." Magician swore as they followed. "How does Scarecrow put up with this?"

Nighthawk snorted. "I'd say it's payback. He's been doing it to the rest of us for years."

## Chapter 12

Billy paced the length of the bullpen restlessly. He'd had no word from his backup team since they left the helicopter and headed onto the Van Houssin estate. Mentally, he kicked himself again for pulling the backup team assigned to cover Windsor and Mrs. King. Not only would MI6 never forgive him for losing one of their best agents, but he had no idea how he would explain what happened to Scarecrow if Amanda didn't make it out of this one. Billy had suspected for a long time that there was more going on between those two than they admitted, and the overheard conversation between Magician, Nighthawk and Leatherneck only supported that feeling. If Scarecrow was being that possessive . . .

"Mr. Melrose, Francine Desmond on line two," one of the telecommunicators called to him.

"Finally!" he said and ran for his office. Snatching up the phone, he barked, "Francine! What's going on? How is . . ."

"Take it easy, Billy," the calm voice on the other end replied, cutting off his questions. "Amanda and Windsor are a little worse for wear, but they'll both be fine. It's all over except for the clean up. Stockton's dead, Perkins is alive but a long way from functional, and Abernathy's not giving anyone any trouble."

"What about the Van Houssins and the other party guests?"

"No one was hurt, thanks to Windsor. Abernathy had hidden about six other hired goons among the wait staff, but they weren't particularly bright. William was able to spot and pick them off pretty quickly. Then he went after Stockton and Abernathy. By that time we'd gotten there and Nighthawk, Magician and Aman – I mean, Phoenix – went after him."

"You let Amanda King go with you? I told you I wanted her out of there!"

There was a long pause and when Francine finally replied, there was no mistaking the sound of quiet respect in her voice. "No, Billy, we didn't *let* Amanda King go. We went in as a team and Phoenix is part of that team. She'd earned the right. Before we ever got there, she took out Perkins single-handedly and then managed to get Veronica Van Houssin out of that house with Stockton and Abernathy right on their heels. If she hadn't managed that, things would have turned out a lot differently."

Melrose was quiet, thinking again about Amanda King's fury over Scarecrow's attempts to force her out of the line of fire and the message she'd sent him earlier that night. *We're all guilty of it*, he realized with chagrin. *She arouses*

*the protective instincts in everyone around her. We all keep saying that she's really good, and yet when things get tough we expect her to run and hide. It's not just Scarecrow she's angry at . . . it's all of us.*

"You're right," he agreed quietly. "We've got to quit selling her short."

Francine snorted. "You should hear Veronica Van Houssin. She thinks Amanda's Wonder Woman, Jacqueline Kennedy, and Joan of Arc all rolled into one."

Billy laughed. "What about the rest?"

"Magician was right about Abernathy. He wanted no part of getting his hands dirty. The minute anyone got near him, he gave himself up. Stockton fought. Barricaded himself in the office upstairs where Amanda left Perkins. In the end, Nighthawk had to shoot him. I guess even Amanda was shooting at him before it was all over!"

"I thought she wasn't armed."

"She took Perkins' gun."

"Good for her! What about injuries?"

"Windsor took one in the shoulder. Stockton got him right at the end of things. Mrs. Van Houssin got smacked around some and her husband may have a concussion, but those were the only injuries to anyone at the party. Oh, and Amanda lost some skin off the palm of her left hand. That was it. We were really lucky."

"Skin off her hand?" Billy asked incredulously.

He could almost hear Francine grimace. "Peeled it off on a frozen metal rack while she was trying to escape from Stockton with Mrs. Van Houssin."

Billy just shook his head. "Lucky is right."

"Yes. We're sending all of the guests home now and Windsor and the Van Houssins have been sent to a nearby hospital by ambulance. Paramedics treated Phoenix and let her go and she's already on her way back to the Agency with Abernathy. Insisted on bringing him in herself. Leatherneck's with her. What do you want the rest of us to do once we finish here?"

"Where's Perkins?"

"On his way to the maximum security wing at Bethesda. I didn't want to send him anywhere local."

"Okay, once you finish there, you can call it a night. Wrap up meeting will be in the Agency conference room at 9:00 a.m. tomorrow morning with written reports to me by noon."

"Will do. See you then, Billy."

"Night, Francine."

Billy dropped the receiver back onto the phone and leaned back with a sigh. It was over. And they hadn't lost anyone. Thank God. He glanced at the clock . . . a little after one. It had been a long day. He started to lever himself up out of the chair, intending to go home, but then paused. No, maybe he'd wait a little longer and talk to Amanda when she got here with Abernathy. She'd done a hell of a job and deserved to hear it. Billy smiled, settling back into the chair again. Glancing at the clock, another thought struck him. Maybe her mentor would like to know how well she'd done, too.

## Chapter 13

The harsh buzzing jarred Lee awake rudely. Raising his throbbing head, he rolled over and clawed frantically at the alarm clock, trying to still the incessant racket. It struck the far wall with the sound of shattering glass and went blessedly silent. Sunlight shone on the floor in a dazzling wedge and he buried his head in his arms, moaning pathetically. Slowly, memories of the previous night began to filter back to him. The club, Scorpion and the others, the redhead . . . Dragging himself into a sitting position on the edge of the bed, he rested his head in his hands and fought to still his heaving stomach. God, what had he been thinking? And what happened last night? Painfully, he tried to sort through the jumbled memories without success.

With shaking hands, he picked up the phone and ordered large quantities of black coffee from room service. Then he stumbled into the bathroom, turned on the shower, and stepped under the deluge. He stood there, his mind blank and his body unmoving, until he heard the pounding on the room door. He stumbled out of the shower, wrapped a towel around his waist, and, dripping water the whole way, crossed to answer the door. Waving the waiter into the room, he gestured at the dresser and then staggered to the nearby chair and fumbled in his pants for money. Shoving a fist full of bills into the man's hand, he gestured at him to leave. The man's effusive thanks as he backed out of the door hardly even registered.

A shower, six cups of coffee and four aspirins later, the headache had dulled to an ache that matched the acidic pain in his stomach, but at least he could open his eyes without the incessant throbbing in his head and he no longer felt the constant need to retch. With a sigh, Lee started to think he would live. As he began to dress, he attempted to sort out the dim memories of the night before. He remembered dancing with the redhead until well into the early morning hours. He also remembered more scotch . . . a lot more scotch. But what happened at the end of the night? And how did he get back here? Lee frowned, the effort to remember causing his head to renew its incessant throbbing. Moving slowly, he retrieved the various pieces of his suit, which were scattered throughout the room. There was russet-colored lipstick on the collar of his shirt and the entire suit reeked of cigarette smoke, alcohol, and cloying perfume. He sniffed it again and shuddered. He knew that fragrance. It lingered on everything she had come in contact with, including him.

He sat down slowly on the edge of the bed with his suit jacket still in hand, as the fragrance triggered forgotten memories. There was a cab . . . he was with her in a cab. It had taken them to a building on the edge of the city. Not a house . . . a – an apartment building, he thought. In an old, but elegant part of the city. They had both been rip-roaring drunk. He frowned. What was her

name? Rubbing his forehead, he struggled to remember. They had spent some time in the living room. She had certainly been willing enough. Her bedroom was on the second floor . . . he remembered them struggling up the stairs, so drunk they were barely able to stand.

Swearing viciously, he flung the jacket at the garbage can. God, what was her *name???* Surely he hadn't sunk so low that he took a woman to bed without even bothering to ask her name? The flutter of paper caught his eye as the suit sank into the trashcan. Stumbling over, he picked it up and turned it over in his hands. It was a calling card . . . Ariana Stephanos . . . and there was a phone number written on the back.

"Ariana," he whispered aloud. Something about that name struck a chord. He was fairly sure that was her name. But did he sleep with her? Slowly, self-loathing filled him as he acknowledged that he had absolutely no idea. It was gone . . . swallowed up in a drunken haze.

When the phone rang a few minutes later, he was sitting on the edge of the bed staring blankly at that wedge of sunlight on the floor. After several rings, he fumbled the receiver off the base and responded dully, "Stetson."

"Scarecrow?"

He didn't respond, just continued to stare numbly at nothing.

"Lee?" the voice said, more urgently. "Lee, are you there?"

Slowly, he stirred. "Here," he replied in a voice that sounded about two octaves too low.

"Scarecrow!" the voice rapped sharply, demanding his attention.

"Billy?" Lee winced at the sound and licked his lips, struggling to bring his mind into focus. "Is that you, Billy?"

"Of course it's me! What the hell are you doing over there? Why haven't you reported in?"

Lee rubbed his face and struggled with that concept. "Report in? Was I supposed to report in?" He looked around for the clock. Spotting the pieces against the wall, he sighed. "Ah, shit. What time is it?"

"Damn it, Scarecrow . . . "

"Billy . . . please don't yell. My head is killing me. Just tell me what time it is."

"It's about 1:15 here."

Sluggishly, Lee factored the time change. "7:15 here, then." He ran his hand through his hair in distraction. "I don't even know what time I got to bed." Then the time registered. "You said 1:15 *in the morning*?" Cold fear suddenly curled through his gut. "What are you doing there at that hour? And why are you calling me? Has something happened to . . ."

"Calm down. Everything's all right. I'm just tying up the loose ends on an operation. I was starting to get concerned because you hadn't reported in for a couple of days."

"What's to report in about?" Lee snapped sharply, his earlier fear venting in a fit of temper. He pressed his fingers against one temple to try to dull the throbbing in his head once more. "It's a damned training mission. I'm only here because you wanted me out of the way."

There was a long pause before Billy replied carefully, "What are you talking about?"

"You're hunting for a new partner for Amanda and you wanted me gone so you could test her with others."

"Is that really what you think?"

"Hell, yes."

Billy sighed. "Lee, I sent you on this assignment because no one I have knows counter terrorism better than you do. And every agency in the free world knows it. This was important. We need the good will of the foreign agencies if we're going to win the war against terrorists. What better way to generate it than to send the very best I have? It only makes sense. You understand politics like this."

Hunched over, Lee rubbed the back of his neck. "Yeah, I know," he replied reluctantly.

"As for searching for a new partner for Amanda, what ever made you think I was even considering that idea? Yes, I have her working with other agents right now, but you know she needs that experience. Furthermore, it's not like I could have sent her with you to Rome. She's not a full agent and being a part time civilian aide gives her the right to have other priorities."

Lee sighed again, "Her family. Yeah, I know that, too."

"Yes, I did think the two of you needed a break from each other for a while, but that's all it was. Lee, as a team, you are magic. I've rarely seen any pair of agents work together as well as you and Amanda King do. I'm not about to permanently break up something that works so well."

Lee closed his eyes, sagging slightly in relief. "Thank you, God," he breathed softly to himself.

"So tell me what's really going on. What's wrong?"

Lee stared blindly at the sunshine for a long time. His voice was low and hoarse when he finally replied, "I – I want to come home, Billy."

"Say that again," his section chief commanded, clearly startled.

"I want to come home. Please."

"Lee, has something happened?" Billy demanded, sounding seriously shaken. "The mission . . ."

"Is fine," Lee replied wearily, cutting him off. "We finished the last of the training scenarios yesterday. There are still two lectures to give, and the last of the materials still need to be translated and reviewed, but that's it."

"You're way ahead of schedule then."

"Yes. I've pushed, trying to get it finished."

"Then you're done," Billy said flatly. "They can manage what's left on their own. Get cleaned up and into the Italian Agency. By the time you get there, your immediate recall orders will be in their hands along with flight information back to D.C. You'll be back here by early evening."

"Thank you," Lee whispered, sinking slowly back until he lay flat on the bed. After a long moment, he asked, "How is she?"

Billy didn't need to ask who Lee was referring to. "She's been doing a good job." Lee could hear the smile in his voice as he added, "Not inspired, maybe, but holding her own quite credibly." Lee wondered if Billy knew it was what he needed to hear.

"She's good."

"Yes, she is. But the two of you together are better. Come home, Lee."

"Yes," he sighed. "As fast as I can get there."



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Billy carefully placed the telephone receiver back into the cradle and leaned back in his chair feeling seriously shaken. In all the years he had known Lee Stetson, he had *never* heard the man sound like that. He didn't know what was wrong, but if **Scarecrow** was asking to come home . . . and in that tone . . . *Burn out*, a soft voice whispered in the back of his mind. Billy shook his head in denial. No, not Scarecrow. The man lived for this life. It was in his blood, and always had been. *For God's sake, Lee was born to it!* he thought desperately. Both of his parents had worked in covert operations. But Billy knew that even the best operative could burn out. He'd seen it time and time again. Push them too far and it was all over.

*Have I pushed him too hard?* Billy wondered. He'd been on edge recently. Everyone had noticed it. He was jumpy, his temper was incredibly short, and he was barking at everyone. There'd also been a couple of times when Billy had gone looking for him in the evening, but he was nowhere to be found. He hadn't thought anything about it at the time, but now he began to wonder.

The sudden sound of applause and catcalls interrupted his reverie and he got up to see what was going on. Opening the door, he couldn't help but grin. Amanda and Leatherneck had just entered the bullpen and Amanda was receiving the enthusiastic congratulations of everyone present. In the background, Leatherneck just stood grinning and let her take the credit. As usual, she seemed embarrassed by all the attention and was stuttering and stammering her thank yous to all the well-wishers. He also noted that the catcalls he'd heard were definitely deserved. The woman really was stunning. The midnight blue of her gown was the perfect color for her and her slightly disheveled appearance only served to emphasize her delicate beauty. *Not to mention, triggering every male protective gene in this place*, he thought ruefully as he watched her working her way through the crowd toward him. Judging by the bemused expression on his face, even Leatherneck, the resident cynic, wasn't immune.

"Fine job, Amanda!" he said by way of greeting when she finally made it through the crowd to his office. He grinned at her. "I knew you could do it."

"Thank you, sir! I really appreciate that. We brought Abernathy in. He's down in holding."

"I know. Francine called in to update me. I stayed until you arrived because I wanted you to hear directly from me what a good job you did."

He saw her hesitate for an instant and then she squared her shoulders and looked him straight in the eye. "I wonder if I could talk to you about that, Mr. Melrose. I know it's late, but I'd really appreciate it if you could give me a few minutes."

*Now what?* Billy thought in resignation. "Certainly. Come on in." She followed him into the office and quietly closed the door behind them. Billy waved her to a chair as he sat down, but instead of sitting, she planted herself in front of his desk. Clenching her hands into tight fists in front of her, she took a deep breath and looked him squarely in the eyes.

"You know, sir, that I've always done everything I could for this agency. I've taken every assignment you've given me and I don't think I've ever complained."

"No, of course not . . ."

"And I think I've tried very hard to learn everything I can to get better at this job . . ."

"Yes, I -"

"Even when you haven't seemed very willing to help me. I mean, I don't know how many times I've asked a question because I really wanted to know because nobody's ever bothered to tell me and then I feel like you think I'm really stupid for asking."

"I'm sorry, Amanda . . ."

"But I don't *know* and I've never had any training. And I understand that there are some people who've worked their whole life to be here . . ." The color had risen in her face and her eyes flashed as she warmed to the subject. "I understand that it's just the way Francine is, but I can't tell you how tired I get of her comments. She's got no idea what it takes to raise children or run a household. And trying to keep everybody in the dark about my job *and* the strange hours I have to -"

"Amanda . . ."

"keep just really makes it hard sometimes. And I don't want you to think I'm complaining, because I'm really not. I like my job and I wouldn't want to do anything else, even when it gets dangerous and all . . ."

"*Amanda . . .*"

"But I really think that I've proven that I can be of use, so why is it that I have to fight so hard to be *included?*" And with that she finally seemed to run out of words. She took a few hesitant steps and dropped into the chair as though suddenly exhausted. There was the sound of tears in her voice as she asked plaintively, "Why does everybody always try to make me wait in the car?"

The silence stretched for a long moment as Billy regarded the woman in sympathy. It really hadn't dawned on him until the last few days just how difficult it had been for this woman to make a place for herself at the Agency. He had a tremendous amount of respect for Amanda King already, and with that rambling speech, it rose several more notches. Knowing her as he now did, he could only imagine how much it had cost her to come into this office and say what she had. And for everything that she had accomplished, he owed her honesty. Leaning forward, he folded his hands on his desk and looked at her seriously.

"I'm sorry," he said simply.

She blinked in surprise. "Sir?"

"We all owe you a profound apology, Amanda. Until tonight, I don't think I really realized how pervasive our habit of trying to protect you had become. You are one of the most gracious, caring, gentle people any of us have had the privilege to work with. You've seen what this work is like. Even though we've tried to protect you, you've met some of the worst people this business has to offer."

"I've never asked you to protect me, Mr. Melrose," Amanda objected.

"I know you haven't. The response is instinctive in all of us. You've become a friend to almost everybody here and we all react badly when you get in trouble." Billy shook his head ruefully. "I chose to pair you with Windsor to get you out of Lee's protective influence for a while and look at what happened. He did it to you, too, didn't he?" Amanda nodded silently. "I thought so. And I was no better. My only excuse is that I didn't even realize I was doing it. I know it's hard, but can you forgive us and be patient? We'll try to do better."

Her eyes were very bright as she regarded her section chief. Slowly, she nodded again.

"You *will* get the training you've been asking for, Amanda. I promise. And one way or the other, I'm going to have you as a full time operative. You're an asset to the Agency and I'm not going to lose you."

Amanda cleared her throat and whispered, "Thank you, sir." Then she rose and said, "It's very late and I should let you go home. I'm sorry for having kept you."

"It's all right, Amanda. I'll want you back in here at 9:00 tomorrow morning for team debriefing and then I'm going to give all of you a couple of days off. But there is one other piece of news I thought you might like to know."

"Yes, sir?"

"Scarecrow is on his way home." He watched as her face broke into a radiant smile. He held up his hand, trying to quell her obvious excitement. "I don't know exactly when he'll arrive, but it should be by the end of the day tomorrow." He glanced at his watch and then shook his head, correcting himself. "Today, rather. I'm going to give him a couple of days to recover; he sounded exhausted when I talked with him a little while ago. I'll tell him to report back in to work on Wednesday. Why don't you plan to be here at 8:00 that morning, too."

She nodded eagerly. "Yes, sir! I'll be here."

"Good. Now go home and get some rest, and I'll see you tomorrow morning at nine."

"I'll be here. Thank you, sir."

He smiled at her again. "Good night, Amanda."

"Good night, sir."

## Chapter 14

It was mid-afternoon and Billy was just finishing the last of the written reports on Operation Rimrunner when a knock caused him to look up.

"Come in."

The door swung open slowly and he saw Scarecrow leaning against the doorframe. The two stared at each other for a moment and then Billy leaped up and circled the desk hastily, reaching out for the other man.

"Good Lord, Scarecrow, what happened to you? You look like hell!"

Lee smiled and shoved himself upright wearily. "Not enough sleep, too much travel, and the single worst hangover I've ever had in my life. Don't worry. I'll live."

Billy shook his head and waved at a chair. "Sit down before you fall down. How the hell did you get here so fast? The reservations the travel department set up didn't have you getting in until sometime after 7:00 tonight. It's only 2:00!"

Lee shrugged as he sank into the indicated chair and scrubbed at his face bleakly with one hand. "The flight they booked out of Italy didn't leave until after 10:00 and then I had a layover in Paris. I didn't want to wait that long, so I caught an early flight out of Rome to London. My luck was running. I got in with just enough time to exchange the Agency tickets for a seat on the morning flight out of Heathrow on the Concorde. That got me into New York about 9:30 this morning, I waded through customs, caught the first flight with a seat on it to D.C. and here I am."

"Good Lord! No wonder you look so awful. When was the last time you had any sleep?" Lee just shrugged. "And you do know that the Agency can't reimburse you for the difference in the cost of the airfare on the Concorde. Not for something like this."

"Doesn't matter," Lee replied. "I'll eat it. I just wanted to come home."

Billy stared hard at Lee, that nagging fear gnawing at him again. Trying to lighten the mood a little, he forced a grin and sniped humorously, "What were you doing, carousing the whole time you were over there?"

"Hey, I only went out the one night, and if it hadn't been for Scorpion, things would have been fine."

"Scorpion got you drunk?"

Lee shifted uncomfortably. "Well, you know how it goes. One thing led to another, and . . ."

"Uh huh," Billy said knowingly. "You know, I thought you'd pretty much outgrown that tendency."

Lee rubbed his aching head and admitted, "So did I. You don't have any aspirin, do you? And I'd take some of those Tums you keep in your bottom drawer, too, if you can spare them."

Billy contemplated him for a second and then shook his head. "I don't think so. What you need is food and sleep, in that order. Go get them. I don't want to see you in this office before Wednesday."

"What about my wrap up report on Rome?"

"I've had glowing reports from the Italian Agency; they are extremely pleased, and for now that's all I need to know. You said there were no problems, right?"

*Problems*, Lee thought despairingly. *Yes, I had problems*. Lee considered the days in Rome and suddenly they seemed to blur right into the rest of his life. An endless litany of strange places, continuously changing faces, long days, even longer nights, brittle laughter, loneliness . . . and nowhere that ever felt . . . right. He'd never seemed to belong anywhere. He'd drifted from place to place, pulled along first by his uncle and later by the Agency . . . never seeming to develop any attachments or roots. After a time, he just found it easier to live that way . . . particularly after Dorothy died. And Eric. No attachments . . . never allowing anyone or anything to get close enough to hurt him. Yes, sometimes it was a lonely life, but he was a loner . . . born and bred. It was the way he always thought he wanted it. But this last week had been a revelation of sorts. Particularly last night, in that noisy club surrounded by co-workers and people he once might have called friends . . . last night he had never felt more alone or desolate. And what had he done to try to drive that loneliness out? Bile rose in his throat every time he thought about it.

*Were there problems with my assignment in Rome?* he asked himself again. *No*, he finally acknowledged, *none that I didn't take with me*. The problem wasn't the assignment. It was him. Billy was right. He had outgrown that life. He wasn't sure when it happened . . . or even why . . . but last night in that crowded bar it had finally hit home. He wasn't the man he used to be. The high-flying, devil-may-care lifestyle, with all of its glitter, excitement, and adventure wasn't enough. And when he finally realized that, it had scared him witless. If he couldn't live the life he knew, then what did he have left?

Through the long hours of the return trip today, he'd contemplated that epiphany. At first, he'd tried to shrug it off, thinking that the aching loneliness and depression were little more than the aftermath of his drunken night of debauchery . . . that when he got home everything would be fine again. But it wasn't. If anything it had grown worse. His old life was a thing of the past. He understood that now. But he had no idea what came next, or even where to go looking for answers.

Unbidden, the images that had been haunting him for the last year stirred again. The deep brown eyes that looked at him with such fondness and concern. The radiant smile that seemed capable of lighting the darkest hours. The soft laughter that could make his heart soar. And the warmth that filled him in the face of her fierce determination to stick with him, no matter the cost. As he envisioned her face, that warmth returned again and it seemed to drive the loneliness and depression away. It finally dawned on him, then, that maybe his own subconscious had been trying to tell him something for a very long time.

**"SCARECROW!"**

Lee jumped violently and his head snapped up. "What? What did you say?"

"What is *wrong* with you?" Billy demanded, frowning in concern.

"Nothing. What was it you asked me?"

"I asked you if there were any problems in Rome that I need to know about."

"No," Lee replied. "Everything went smooth as silk."

Billy rose from his chair and came around to sit on the corner of the desk near Lee's chair. Reaching out, he laid a hand on his friend's shoulder. "Lee, I'm getting seriously worried about you. Are you **certain** you're all right?"

Lee repeated wearily. "Yeah, Billy. I'll be fine. I'm just dead tired." He hesitated and then asked carefully, "Is Amanda around anywhere? I thought I'd let her know I was back."

Billy shook his head. "No. They wrapped up Operation Rimrunner last night. Final mission reports were turned in this morning and I've given the principals a couple of days to unwind."

"Amanda was working last night?" *It wasn't a date . . . it was just a job!* Lee felt a glimmer of hope stir in the midst of his loneliness and depression. "Her case was the reason you were in here so late?"

Billy nodded. "Yes. It was starting to come loose, and she and Windsor broke it wide open." Lee straightened sharply, fear written on his face. Billy reacted immediately, laying a reassuring hand on his shoulder once more. "And before you start to get wound up about it, they did a hell of a job. No civilians hurt, all of the involved parties accounted for and safely out of circulation, and only a few minimal injuries."

"Who was hurt?" The tension in Lee's voice was clear.

"Windsor was shot in the shoulder and Amanda had a slight injury to one hand that was treated by the paramedics. Nothing to worry about. She's one hell of an agent. You should be proud of her."

"I am." Lee rose stiffly from the chair. "Can I take off then? I'll write up the mission report on Wednesday when I get back."

"Fine," Billy agreed readily, walking him toward the door. "Just leave your notes and mission folders with me in case I need to check anything and then go home and get some rest."

"Thanks, Billy. I will." But as he walked away, Lee thought to himself, *After I make one other stop.*



## Chapter 15

Lee stared blindly out the window of the cab as it turned onto his street. In the distance, he saw his car parked along the curb in front of his apartment building. It occurred to him that he should be glad to see it, but even the silver Corvette seemed to mock him. He had left the Agency, flagged down the first cab he saw and directed the driver to Maplewood Drive. But when he got there, Amanda was nowhere to be found. Her car was gone and when he'd gone around to the back door and tapped on the kitchen window, there had been no response. For a while, he'd hovered by the back door, not sure what to do. Finally, after about half an hour, he gave up. There was no way of knowing when she'd get back and the weather was still bitterly cold . . . too cold to stand outside. He could have let himself in, but he realized that it would be pointless. It was almost 3:00 p.m. Jamie and Phillip would be home from school soon and he would have to leave anyway. Feeling even more depressed and lonely, he'd left her yard, trudged along Maplewood Drive until he found a payphone, called another cab, and directed the driver to take him home.

Home. He stood on the curb staring at the building. It was all he'd thought about for the last week, and now he was here. Why didn't he feel better? With a sigh, he picked up his suitcase and walked up the sidewalk wearily. He returned the doorman's greeting half-heartedly and then went into the building. Once he reached his door, he leaned against the wall and fumbled with his keys, suddenly so exhausted that his hands shook. He finally got the door unlocked and shoved it open. Warm, fragrant air washed over him, carrying the scent of roasted meat and fresh brewed coffee. He stepped in the door, looking around in confusion. What . . .

"Lee?"

She appeared in the kitchen doorway, her face flushed from the heat of the stove, and smiled hesitantly as though unsure of what he would say to find her there.

"Amanda?" He blinked, half convinced he was hallucinating.

"Hi." She moved a few steps into the living room and stopped. "Billy told me you were expected home today. I was just . . . well, knowing how you never have any food in the house . . . and I thought you'd probably be tired . . . and . . . well . . ."

"Oh God . . . **Amanda** . . ."

He didn't remember moving, but one minute he was standing in the doorway and the next he was across the room and clinging to her like a drowning man. *She knew*, his mind kept repeating over and over. *Somehow, she knew . . .*

"Lee?" she murmured in confused concern. He could feel himself shaking, a low, continuous tremor that he thought was frightening her. "Lee, what's wrong?"

"God, I've missed you," he choked out, burying his face against her neck. For a long time, she just held him much as he'd seen her hold Phillip or Jamie when they were upset or hurt, running her hands up and down his back, caressing his hair, and making soft soothing noises. Eventually, she caught his shoulders and pressed him away from her. Under the gentle pressure, he finally eased his stranglehold enough that she could lean back and look at him. He was struck again by that look of warmth and concern on her face. This woman honestly cared what happened to him.

"Oh, Lee, look at you! You're so cold and tired, you're shaking! Come over here and sit down." She led him to the sofa and began tugging on his coat. "Give that to me. And your suit jacket, too. Now you just sit down right there and rest."

He sank into the soft cushions and gratefully propped his feet up as he watched her drag his suitcase out of the way, close and lock the door to the apartment, and then take his coat and jacket and hang them up in the front closet. When she was done, she returned to pull off his shoes and remove his tie as well. The entire time she kept up a soft, scolding chatter. He had no idea what she was saying. At that moment, all that mattered was that she was *here*. His eyes followed her everywhere, and for the moment, he was content to sit and allow her presence to actually become reality to him. He'd gone hunting and couldn't find her . . . because she was here waiting for him. It was almost more than he could comprehend.

Suddenly, she disappeared into the kitchen.

"Amanda!" he called, sitting up abruptly. "Don't go . . ."

"Here," she said, reappearing with a large coffee mug in her hand. "I'm not sure caffeine is what you need right now, but it's hot and that's probably more important."

There was something so familiar about reaching out to take the coffee cup from her hand that suddenly, he felt all of the tension and strain of the last week start seeping away. Accepting the cup from her, he dropped his head back against the sofa and reached out for her hand, drawing her down to sit beside him. "It's so good to be home," he said, and finally knew it was true. Not just

home to D.C. or his apartment . . . but to the woman who was waiting . . . she was "home". He opened his eyes and looked at her again. "I missed you," he repeated.

"I missed you, too," she agreed, squeezing his fingers slightly. "I'm really glad you're back."

The silence that stretched between them held no hint of tension. There was simply a feeling of deep contentment to be able to sit quietly together. Finally, he asked, "What smells so good?"

"Oh, it's nothing fancy . . . just a pot of beef stew. I know what you keep in this house to eat, Stetson, and I figured you'd be too tired to go out or to fix yourself something. I picked up the stuff this morning and came over here to fix it."

"I didn't see your car."

She smiled at him, looking a little embarrassed. "Mother needed the car today, so I . . . well, I borrowed yours."

He smiled and twined her fingers with his, squeezing gently. "That's fine. You're welcome to use it any time you need to."

She seemed a little surprised at that but returned the pressure with another smile. For a long moment, they sat there gazing at each other without saying a word. Finally, her eyes fell and a becoming flush touched her cheeks. "I'll get you something to eat and then I should go so you can go to bed."

His hand tightened on hers again. "Please don't go . . . not yet."

"All right," she agreed giving him an unreadable look. "I can stay for a while if you want me to."

"I do."

"You wait here and I'll bring your dinner."

Reluctantly, he released her and watched as she disappeared into the other room. After a moment, he called after her. "I went looking for you."

"What?"

"I went looking for you today . . . when I got back in town."

She reappeared carrying a large bowl and a spoon. "Here you go. Would you like some warm bread? It's in the oven and all ready. You went looking for me? Why?"

"Because I wanted to see you. I checked in at the Agency and Billy said he'd given you a couple of days off." He reached out with his free hand and caught her arm, pulling it so he could look at her bandaged hand. "He said you'd been hurt . . ."

"It's nothing."

"That's what Billy said, but I wanted to see for myself. I also wanted to let you know that I was back. And . . ." Suddenly, old habits of self-defense kicked in and he trailed off.

She gave him a piercing look and then smiled at him again, a flush touching her cheeks. "And I wasn't anywhere to be found," she finished for him. "I'm sorry."

"I'm not. I – It was much nicer to come home to find . . . well, not to come home to an empty apartment."

Gently, she freed her hand and said, "You aren't eating. Go on. I'll get your bread."

As she disappeared into the kitchen again, Lee rose and followed her as far as the dining room. Setting his bowl and coffee mug on the table, he sank into the chair and began to eat. The stew was wonderful, full of large chunks of meat and vegetables in a thick, flavorful sauce. With the first bite, he realized that he was positively famished. He felt her at his shoulder and looked up just as she set a small plate with two slices of homemade bread on the table.

"You want some more coffee?"

"No," he replied, continuing to eat. "You're right. I don't need any more. This is wonderful."

"I'm glad you like it. There's more in the kitchen if you're still hungry when you finish that."

"Why don't you get a cup of coffee and sit down with me?"

She smiled and shook her head. "No, while you finish your dinner, I'm going to go tackle your suitcase. That way you won't have to worry about it later."

"Amanda, you don't have to do that," he protested immediately. "You're not hired help."

From the living room, he heard her derisive snort. "You don't have any hired help, Stetson. Or if you do, they should be fired. This place was a mess."

Swallowing the last bite of stew hastily, he snatched up the remaining piece of bread and followed her voice through the living room and into his bedroom. "You've been cleaning up after me again," he scolded, looking around. "You don't have to do that." But even as he said it, he knew in his heart that he loved the fact that she cared enough to take the trouble.

"I know. But I'm always interested to see what kind of new and exotic creatures you have growing in this place. The fuzzy purple stuff I found in the refrigerator was definitely unique."

He laughed. "I don't even remember what it was."

"I can believe that." She lifted the vest that was sitting on the top of the suitcase out with two fingers and held it away from her with a grimace. "I take it this needs to go to the cleaners."

Even from his position several feet away, he caught the stench of cigarette smoke and stale perfume. Lunging forward, he snatched it out of her fingers and threw it violently toward the garbage can. "**No!** Throw it away. I don't want it any more." She stared at him in astonishment, but before she could think of anything to say, he'd snatched up the suitcase, carried it into the kitchen and upended the entire contents into the trashcan. He stood there for an instant, staring down at the jumble of clothing and other miscellaneous items and then violently tried to shove the suitcase in after them.

"Lee! Lee, stop! What are you doing?" Her voice finally penetrated and he looked up at her. She grabbed his arms, pulling him away from the garbage can. "Lee, what is it? What's wrong?"

"I don't . . . just . . . just throw it all away." He swallowed convulsively, fighting nausea. "I don't want it . . . any of it . . . any more."

"All right, if that's what you want. Just calm down. Come on . . . you're exhausted. You need to get some sleep." She tugged on his arm, drawing him out of the kitchen and toward the bedroom. "I want you to go to bed."

He followed her reluctantly, the memories triggered by the cloying perfume fighting to overwhelm the reality of his apartment and the loving woman who was staring at him so intently. "Amanda . . ."

"Where are your pajamas?" She left him standing motionless in the middle of the room as she disappeared into his closet. She reappeared a moment later and began going through his drawers. Finally she pulled out a pair of silk boxer shorts and handed them to him, gesturing at the bathroom. "I can't find them. Will these do?" When he didn't move or reply, she reached out and caught his face in her hands, caressing his eyebrow with her thumb gently. Her eyes were clouded with worry as she asked, "What happened to you over there?"

He closed his eyes against the sight of her and laid his forehead against hers. "I'm *sorry*, Amanda," he murmured. "I'm so sorry." After a moment, he felt her arms go around him and draw him close.

"Shhhh. You have nothing to be sorry for. Whatever happened, it doesn't matter. I want you to go to sleep. Please. Will you do that for me?"

He burrowed his face against the side of her neck and clung to her. "Please don't leave me."

"Lee, please. Bed." She looked up at him imploringly. "For me?"

"All right."

She picked up the boxers from the floor, handed them back to him, and led him to the bathroom. "Here. Put these on and then come back out to me." Without another word, he disappeared into the bathroom and closed the door behind him.

Amanda stared at the closed door for a long moment, love and fear for him holding her motionless. *What in heaven's name happened to him over there?* she repeated to herself in despair. She'd never seen him this shaken. Finally, she turned back to the bed and began turning it down. She was just finishing when she heard the bathroom door open again. She turned to him, noting that his pajamas had obviously been in the bathroom since he was now dressed in them.

Her eyes fixed on his and she felt her breath catch. He stood with his eyes closed and she could see him sway slightly, as though it was taking everything he had just to stay upright. Whatever was haunting him carved deep grooves between his closed eyes, and his shoulders sagged as if he'd been beaten. Crossing to him, she caught his hand and tugged at it, drawing him toward the bed. "Come on," she urged him softly. "You're tired. Get into bed." With gentle insistence, she bullied him into lying down and tucked him in. Then she sat down beside him and caught his chin, tilting his head until he looked up at her. "I want you to sleep now," she told him firmly as she ran the back of her fingers over his cheek. "But before you do, I want you to know something.

Whatever happened in Rome is over. You're home safely and that's all that's important."

He searched her face for a long moment and then he turned his head away again. "You deserve better than someone like me," he said in a low voice she could barely hear.

She froze, staring at him. What did he mean by that? Surely . . . Taking a slow, even breath, she laid her hand against his cheek again and tried to turn his head toward her, but this time he fought her. "Lee, look at me. *Lee* . . ." Reluctantly, he opened his eyes. "What happened in Rome . . . *whatever* it was . . . doesn't matter. Not to me."

He swallowed convulsively. Then, as though trying to explain something very important, he said desperately, "I was afraid, Amanda."

"Afraid of what?" she questioned, stroking his hair gently.

He searched her face. "Afraid of what's been happening to me . . . of everything I'm feeling . . . of . . . of . . ."

"Of what?" she encouraged him. He closed his eyes again and she thought she saw a shimmer of tears.

"I loved Dorothy so much."

"Shhh . . ."

"For so long, I wished that I had died with her. I – I didn't know how to go on without her." His eyes opened again and the desperation was back along with a trace of fear. With no warning, he reached out and grabbed her, pulling her down to lie across his chest. Burying his face in her hair, he continued, "I know you hate it when I try to keep you out of things. But, Amanda, I don't know what I'd do if something happened to you . . ."

"Lee . . ."

"I've spent months making excuses to myself about my feelings for you. I know you're my friend . . . you're my best friend. But last night in that club . . . with Scorpion needling me and talking about coming back to the States and you being fair game . . . I – I . . ."

Sitting up out of his arms, she laid her fingers against his lips. "Hush. You're too tired and you don't know what you're saying. I want you to get some sleep. We can talk about this later."

"No, Amanda! I know . . . "

"Lee, listen to me." Her eyes caught and held his. She could see the fear growing. "I know that whatever happened in Rome has shaken you. I'd also bet you haven't had any rest since then. The conversation I think you want to have is too important to do when you're exhausted and not thinking clearly. I don't want you to look back and regret what was said. Do you understand me?"

"Yes," he finally acknowledged. "But, Amanda, I want you to know . . ."

Again, she stopped him with a hand on his lips. "Not now," she insisted. Then, unable to stand the fear in his eyes any longer, she leaned over and pressed her lips to his in a tender, lingering kiss. "Don't worry. I'll be here when you're ready." As she moved to rise from the bed, he reached out and caught her by the nape of the neck, drawing her back to kiss her again. The intensity of it left her gasping.

"Are you going to leave?" he asked when he finally released her.

"I have to. The boys will be home from school by now. I'll clean up the kitchen and then go."

He nodded silently, reluctantly accepting her need to return to her family. Catching her injured hand in both of his, he gazed at it for a long moment, running his thumb along the edge of the bandage. She could tell that he was thinking hard about something. Finally, when he looked up at her again, she could see that he'd come to a decision of some kind.

"Amanda, I know you've said that you don't want to talk about this right now, and I understand your reasons. I even agree with them. But there is something I *have* to say. If I don't, I'll never get any rest."

She sighed in resignation and nodded. "All right."

"What happened to me in Rome . . . it had nothing to do with the job. It was . . . I don't know . . . a – a personal epiphany, I guess. The details don't matter. I'm not proud of them, but at least they finally opened my eyes to the truth and for that I'm grateful." He paused, searching her face carefully. Then, with quiet deliberation, he said, "I love you, Amanda King."

"Lee . . ." she breathed softly and he watched as her eyes filled with tears. Finally, she nodded unsteadily and replied, "I love you, too."

He nodded, seemingly content with that response. "That's all I needed to say. The rest can wait." He reached up and allowed his fingertips to brush her lips



lightly. Turning into his feather-light caress, she kissed his fingers and then whispered, "Go to sleep. I'll check back on you later."

Lee sighed and finally allowed his eyes drift shut. After a moment, he said drowsily, "Billy says you tied up Operation Rimrunner."

"Uh huh. Finished the final paperwork this morning."

"How'd you like working with Windsor?"

An impish smile tugged at the corner of her mouth and she replied, "It was a whole lot like working with you." His eyes flew open and he looked at her with a hurt expression. Her lips twitched, as she added, "He tried to leave me in the car, too."

They stared at each other for a heartbeat and then they both began to laugh. Drawing her hand to his lips, he kissed it tenderly.

"Like you ever do what you're told . . . "

### **The End**

Poetry excerpt from *She Walks in Beauty* by George Gordon Byron, Lord Byron.

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