

Title: My Soul To Take

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Summary: A case with a very personal twist forces Scarecrow and Mrs. King back into the field. Will danger reunite them or drive them apart forever? Timeframe: March, 2000. **Major angst warning: this story deals with character death.**

Author's notes: If you happen to be in the city of Chicago and you also happen to wander over to the corner of Michigan and Randolph, sadly, you won't find the Agency's Midwest Division. You will, however, find 'Stetson Avenue,' so I felt a little creative license was definitely in order.

Last, but not least: A big thank you to my wonderful beta team. You are the absolute best! You find my typos, point out the 'flat' scenes, and let me know what works and what doesn't -- even when forced to read 200 pages! I have to say a special thank you to Pam, for her wonderful 'in progress' comments (and for her insistence on an explanation for Francine's behavior). And very special thanks go to Ann, who beta'd this monstrosity from its inception -- almost three long years ago when it was nothing but a stray idea floating through my evil, angst-ridden brain. This story has been a long time coming.

MY SOUL TO TAKE

PART ONE

"Now I lay me down to sleep . . ."

~ I ~

Scarecrow wearily pulled open the door to the Georgetown foyer. Acknowledging the receptionist with a nod, he silently accepted his I.D. In a routine born from years of habit, he clipped it to his jacket pocket before giving the cleverly disguised elevator button a forceful jab.

Shifting his weight, he kept his eyes focused straight ahead on the brightly painted closet door. Candy apple red. The hotshot decorator's idea of nouvelle décor never failed to set his nerves on edge. Just like the sharp rat-tat-tat of the receptionist's well-manicured fingernails on the desktop.

He groaned inwardly, wishing yet again that Mrs. Marston hadn't retired. Well, nothing stayed the same in this business -- that was the first thing his mentor Harry Thornton had drilled into him some twenty-five years earlier. A theorem Harry had proved himself yet again just last month, succumbing to a heart attack at the tender age of seventy-nine.

The elevator door opened with a creaking moan and, giving the wrinkled apparel a careless shove, he stepped inside. His stomach lurched as the conveyance began its rapid descent. He stole a glance at his watch -- only a little past nine. His day was just beginning and already he felt as if he'd put in a full shift. He must be getting old. There was a time when he could go twenty-four hours straight without so much as a second thought.

His head whipped back as the elevator arrived at his level with a skidding thud. Emerging from the cramped enclosure, he avoided eye contact as he traversed the narrow hall to the bullpen. Though early, his section was already in full operational mode.

"Carter!" he barked, threading his way through the extraneous bodies as he crossed the crowded room. "My office. Now."

The fresh-faced brunette jumped from her chair, gratefully accepting a sympathetic smile from fellow agent Francine Desmond as she gathered her files. Clutching the papers to her chest, she made her way to her section chief's door.

"Just give me cursory summaries," Scarecrow said as his young assistant entered his sanctum. "That's all I have time for. I've been tied up with Dr. Smyth for the last hour."

Agent Carter scanned her notes. "Johnson and Fielder's report on the Thompson business, status unchanged. Franklin is still under cover on the Los Lobos operation. There, uh, seems to be some activity there -- he's requested surveillance teams at both airports. Nothing alpha priority on the flash data reports. The Q-Bureau Chief is waiting to see you . . ."

"Tell Desmond she can have five minutes now or thirty minutes after lunch -- it's up to her." Frowning, he massaged the painful muscles in his neck. "Oh, and call maintenance about that dammed elevator. It's malfunctioning again."

"Yes, sir."

Yanking out his chair, he dropped down, simultaneously reaching for the telephone. "That'll be all, Carter," he muttered as the young woman lingered uncertainly by his desk. "I said we'd pick this up later."

She licked her lips as she fingered a sealed file. "Uh, Mr. Stetson, there **is** one more thing."

His fingers beat a staccato rhythm on the cradle of the phone. "What?"

"This report came in from Chicago early this morning -- flagged Delta Orange."

"Agent Carter, do I have to hold your hand? Certainly you have clearance to handle something as basic as a Delta Orange. Even a civilian could . . ." He stopped abruptly, forcing his attention back to the open folder on his desk.

"But sir," she ventured, her thumb and forefinger pressing tightly against the envelope's creased edge. "You have a standing order for personal notification on any matter having to do with the name, uh, King."

He looked up sharply. "Thank you."

"Yes, sir."

Carter laid the file on his desk and slipped noiselessly from the room. Scarecrow noted with a sigh that she'd forgotten to close his door once again. How could he be expected to get any work done with that racket from the bullpen drifting in? He made a half-hearted attempt to rise, but the file held him firmly in place. A

small muscle in his cheek twitched as he clenched his teeth, and, scowling, he reached for the plain yellow envelope.

"You really should try being a little nicer to her, you know. Carter is still green, but then, once upon a time, so were we."

Drawing a deep breath, he looked up to see Francine Desmond framed in the doorway, her toe tapping out an unspoken accusation. "I don't think they've invented a color yet for Carter," he grumbled, rolling his eyes.

"She's young."

"She's impossible."

"She's the only assistant who hasn't gone over your head to demand a transfer, Scarecrow." The blonde agent straightened, moving across the room to perch unceremoniously on the edge of his cluttered desk. "What is it you really have against her?"

He suddenly became inordinately interested in the stack of papers scattered in front of him. "I don't have anything against her."

As usual, Francine was completely oblivious to the rancor in his tone. "Is it her age?" she pressed, "Or her appearance?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Francine raised an eyebrow. "I'm talking about her brown eyes and dark brown hair," she said quietly.

In the sudden silence, Scarecrow thought he heard a pin drop. "Did you actually want something, Francine?" he demanded. "Or did you just swoop down from the Q-Bureau for the usual morning calisthenics?"

"I thought I'd hand deliver the special whereabouts and activities briefing you requested on one Roberto Salzedo," she replied, handing him an embossed folder with an exaggerated flourish. "But now that you mention it, a little verbal sparring would get the day off to a good start. It might even improve your mood."

"Yeah, well, I don't have time for a workout at the moment, verbal or otherwise," he grumbled, ignoring her teasing smile as he turned his attention back to his

neglected files. "As you can see, I'm busy. Feel free to hang a 'do not disturb' sign on my door on your way out."

"The bear growls," she muttered, her eyes widening as she fixed him in a lethal stare. "I'm sure that works with the rest of your agents, but we go back too far together." She hopped off his desk, smoothing the wrinkles from her skirt. "Besides, I promised Billy I'd look after you."

"Billy's retired; he'll never know." His hand shook slightly as he clasped his pen. "You can slink on out of here with a clear conscience."

Pressing closer, she inclined her body toward him ever so slightly. "Sorry, Stetson. A promise is a promise. So, drinks at Ned's tonight. Just you and me." Her face softened as she gave his arm a gentle squeeze. "It's Friday, and we have a standing date, remember?"

He looked up and caught her eye, a regretful smile crossing his face before he could banish it. "Yeah, I remember. I'm just not sure I'll be very good company."

"That was never part of our deal. I'll see you promptly at seven." She turned toward the door, her hand clutching the wood frame as she paused. "I know what's in that report from Chicago. If you want to talk, I'll listen."

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Rusty hinges screeched in protest as Lee tugged on the heavy wooden door. Though the popular watering hole was definitely showing its age, Nedlindger's Washington Pub was still the unofficial hangout of the intelligence community. And judging by the crowd that greeted his tired eyes, the gang was out in force tonight. He let out a loud sigh; this scene really wasn't his style anymore.

"Lee . . . over here!"

At least Francine had managed to snag one of the few private booths in the place. Acknowledging her with a nod, he quickly navigated the room, ignoring the mumbled greetings of the old timers as he slid in across from her.

She pushed a well-filled glass in his direction. "Here you go," she said, brushing an errant strand of hair from her forehead. "One scotch and water, as promised."

"Thanks," he muttered, taking a long gulp. The amber-colored liquid burned as it went down, the feeling radiating out from his chest as it flooded the rest of his body with soothing warmth. One more sip, and he leaned back against the cool

leather upholstery, his tension finally began to ebb. "You know, this place never really changes, does it?" he asked, gifting her with a tolerant smile.

Francine's grin grew wider. "Somehow, I find that reassuring. People may come and go, but Ned's goes on."

He felt his scowl settle into place again.

"Oh, Lee," Francine gasped as she realized what she'd said. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean . . ."

"It's okay, Francine. Avoiding the subject won't change anything." He drained his glass, setting it down on the table with a resounding thud. "For either of us." He gave her a sympathetic look. "It's been, what, eighteen months for you now?"

Francine fingered the large diamond solitaire now set in a platinum necklace. "Two years next month."

"There, you see? Time *does* fly." Catching the waitress' eye, he raised his glass. "At least it's over and done with. You aren't in limbo any more."

"That's some small comfort, I suppose. Still, it's not easy to admit your marriage was a huge mistake." She ran her finger lightly around the rim of her glass. "Jonathan may have been a complete ass, but I miss him sometimes, you know?"

"Yeah, I know."

Francine laid her hand on his arm. "Things aren't any better, huh?"

"Things are . . . what they are," he said, shaking off her caress. He raised his glass to his lips, then, realizing it was empty, set it back down again.

Francine pretended not to notice. "I saw you at L'Etoile the other night," she began in a low voice. "I was kind of hoping . . . well, that maybe *this* time you'd finally let yourself . . ."

The waitress placed a new drink in front of him, and Lee flashed her a grateful smile. "No," he said, turning to Francine once more. "Leslie and I were only catching up on old times. She's a friend. And I think I know better than to take that path again."

Francine reached out to him once more, but he warned her away with a scowl. He winced slightly as he watched her pull back, her fingers clenching into a fist

as she thrust her hand into her lap instead. Francine was one of his oldest friends; he longed to let her in. But he'd made that mistake once before, and they'd both paid the price. No, it was better this way, better to shore up the invisible barriers once again. Safer, too . . . for everyone concerned. He didn't have friends to spare these days.

Exhaling loudly, he downed the remainder of his second drink. Though Francine's eyes rounded, she managed to bite back her response. "Don't worry," he assured her with an apologetic smile. "I know my limit these days." He shook his glass lightly, watching the small cubes as they clinked together. "So . . . you read the report?"

"Yes." She pulled her lips into a slight pout. "Are you going to look into it?"

He shrugged. "According to the report from the Chicago P.D., it's a false alarm. Everything checks out."

"And you're going to just leave it at that?"

"I'll run our old case files, but I don't expect anything to show up. You know how overprotective . . ." Frowning, he rattled the ice again. "Anyway, it's out of my jurisdiction. Chicago's not exactly in my backyard."

"I'm sure they'd understand your interest. Those Midwestern bureaucrats . . ."

"Do things strictly by the book," Lee stated coldly. "And I'm not going to run off half-cocked. Not again."

Francine leaned back against the worn leather cushions. "Stop it right there, Stetson. What happened wasn't your fault -- you know that. No matter what *she* said."

His stony glare managed to cut her off, but he saw the impenetrable steel behind those big blue eyes. No matter how tough he made it, Francine always managed to hold her ground.

"The board of inquiry exonerated you completely," his friend continued, proving this time was no exception. "It's time you extended yourself the same courtesy."

His eyes narrowed. "What the hell does it matter? It doesn't change anything. Blame or no blame, the outcome's still the same."

"Don't do this to yourself, Lee. You know what Pfaff said."

Lee gave her a wintry smile. "I know, I know. It's not *healthy* to dwell on might-have-beens." He looked away, choking slightly as he cleared his throat. "I've gotta go," he said as he scrambled to his feet. Reaching into his pocket, he dropped a few bills onto the table. "Here, this time's on me."

"Lee, wait," Francine protested. "Let's talk this through . . ."

"Gotta go," he mumbled again, glancing over his shoulder as he executed his escape. Francine was hot on his trail; he could hear her calling his name as he pushed open the heavy door. He struggled to close it, but he wasn't quick enough to drown out her bitter parting words. He even found himself repeating them in his mind as he jogged to his car . . .

'Damn you, Amanda King.'

~ II ~

"Amanda, is that you?" Dotty West called. "Do you have any news? Was your boss in? What did the police say about . . ."

Amanda slammed the door shut. "Mother, please . . . one question at a time." Frowning, she ran quick fingers through her tousled hair. The calendar heralded spring's official arrival today, but the blustery weather in the Windy City had other ideas. March was certainly much more welcoming in Virginia.

"You didn't get anywhere with the local authorities, did you?" Dotty asked, her voice rising as she finished her question.

"Oh, I wouldn't say that." Pausing to toss her black pea coat across the back of the sofa, she faced her mother. "Detective Devine did ask me to dinner."

"Amanda, I'm serious."

She grimaced. "Unfortunately, so was he."

"Make jokes if you want. It won't distract me. I know I'm just his grandmother, but . . ." Sinking down into a chair, Dotty massaged her neck with energetic fingers, managing simultaneously to fix her daughter in her gaze. "I think, this time, I have a need to know."

Amanda put a comforting arm on the older woman's shoulder as she perched on the arm of the chair. "Of course you do, Mother. I'm not trying to keep things from you again. It's just the only way I know to break the tension, I guess."

"Honestly, Amanda, you sound just like . . ."

She jumped up before her mother could finish. No use letting her start down that road again; it didn't change anything.

"I'm sorry, love," she heard her mother say in a tone meant to soothe. "I didn't mean to open old wounds. I'm just so worried."

Nodding, Amanda walked over to the window. She could see Lake Michigan in the distance, the tiny crests of white breaking mercilessly against the iron barrier that guarded the shore. "I know you didn't," she said at last, rubbing her arms to ward off the chill that seemed to eat its way right through the heavy paned glass. "I'm worried, too. Medical degree or not, he's still my little boy. The only . . ." She broke off, her words lost in a strangled sob. Be strong, Amanda, she reminded herself. Tears are for weaklings and fools.

Turning, she caught sight of her muted reflection in the window. She started for a moment, wondering about the too-thin, almost haggard woman who returned her puzzled gaze. Where on earth had she come from? Certainly this couldn't be the Amanda who'd rushed headlong to meet whatever life had to offer. She'd always thought of herself as an optimistic, upbeat person. Why, even in the darkest months following her divorce from Joe, she'd always managed to find the silver . . .

She banished the fleeting thought before it had a chance to take stronger form. Looking back never helped anything, she thought as Dotty called her name again. "I'm sorry, Mother," she mumbled, clutching the sharp pleat on her gray woolen skirt. "What did you say?"

"I asked what the police told you, dear."

"That after talking to the powers that be at North Shore Labs, they're satisfied that Dr. King is merely away on confidential business," she parroted with a bitter laugh. "They see no grounds to get involved."

"But surely after you told them your suspicions? Lisa hasn't heard a word from Jamie in well over three weeks. I'm sorry, Amanda, no matter what he was working on, he'd find time to call his wife."

"You don't have to convince me, Mother. I'm in total agreement." She bit her lip as she began to pace a path back and forth in front of the large picture window. "He's in trouble; I can smell it."

"What about your editor at the magazine?" Dotty asked as she abandoned the comforts of the large wing chair to do some pacing of her own.

"I'm afraid he's taking the same stand as the police. He doesn't think the story's newsworthy. If I just had an inkling of what Jamie had been working on . . ." Trudging over to the couch, she sank down, her burst of energy spent. "Oh, I don't know, maybe if I hadn't been so preoccupied with finalizing the divorce, Jamie would have come to me with what was bothering him. I could have prevented this."

Hands on her hips, Dotty drew her daughter's gaze. "You know how I feel about this cockamamie divorce of yours, Amanda, but I won't have you thinking that way -- not again. You aren't to blame for this, any more than . . . well, it's not your fault," she reiterated firmly.

Amanda ducked her head, unable to meet the sympathy in her mother's eyes. She sensed Dotty moving to the sofa, felt her warming presence as her mother sat down beside her. "They need to get a team in the field to look for him," Amanda stated with a soft sigh. "Before it's too late. I know how quickly the trail can turn cold."

"Darling . . ."

She could hear the uncharacteristic hesitation in her mother's voice, and she unconsciously patted the wrinkled hand that rested on her arm. Had even the outspoken Dorothea West been reduced to treading on eggshells around her? Her formidable mother was beginning to sound just like all her friends back home. Back home . . .

This was her home now, she reminded herself. She'd carved out a new life for herself here in Chicago. It was a good life; her days were full. She had an interesting job, worthwhile causes that laid claim to countless volunteer hours, acquaintances who passed for friends. Yet, when someone mentioned home, she still thought of shady, tree-lined streets in Arlington, Virginia. Or small, well-tended city blocks in the heart of Georgetown.

She pulled herself out of the past with an effort, casting about for something to ground her here in the present, not there, in that other life. Think about Jamie, she reminded herself. Jamie and . . .

"Oh, Mother," she cried. "What am I going to tell Lisa?"

"You'll tell her that her husband will be coming home soon," her mother stated firmly, tucking a stray wisp of hair neatly behind her daughter's ear. "And that you're going to do everything you can to make that happen."

She sighed. "I don't know what else I *can* do. I've pretty much exhausted all my resources."

Her mother gave her a pointed look. "Have you?"

Rising abruptly, Amanda walked back to the window. "I can't do that, Mother," she choked out, her words strangling her.

"Not even for Jamie?" Dotty countered, coming up behind her. "Not even for baby Joey? Darling, that dear little boy is only nine months old. He's going to need his daddy -- just like Lisa needs her husband."

Amanda rubbed her arms as she shivered. "Even if I did . . . ask . . . it wouldn't matter anyway. Not after everything that happened, everything we said . . . *I* said."

"Amanda . . . Stetson." Her mother's voice sounded sharply in her ear, clearly emphasizing the name she never used any more, the name she hadn't heard in over a year. "You don't really believe that, do you?"

Amanda smiled sadly. "I don't let myself believe anything else." Squaring her shoulders, she turned to her mother. "You're right -- there just isn't anywhere else to turn. I'll do it."

Dotty quickly closed her in a warm embrace. "It'll be all right, baby," she crooned, rubbing her back the way she did when Amanda was a little girl. "You'll see -- sometimes things happen for a reason. Maybe . . ."

She stiffened. "Mother, I'm only doing this for Jamie -- that's all."

"I know," Dotty whispered as her hands kept up their calming rhythm. "I know, love."

Amanda savored one small moment of comfort as her mother's practiced fingers worked away the tension. For Jamie, she repeated softly to herself. Yes, for her son's sake she would dare to do the unthinkable. She would face down her past.

The cool breeze ruffled his hair as he worked his way to the back of the abandoned building. It was quiet. Too quiet, he wondered vaguely, only the intermittent 'caw' of that annoying crow to break the silence. Glancing quickly from side to side, he did a rapid analysis. Front exit -- open to the street, no escape there. Rear exit -- hidden, more vulnerable. Yes, the rear was a definite possibility. Biting his lip, he checked his watch. Agency backup should arrive momentarily. Just sit tight, Scarecrow; a few more minutes and this whole protracted mess will be tied up with neat precision.

Then why did the hair on the back of his neck prickle so persistently? Something wasn't right, something he hadn't factored into this tidy little equation. He looked over his shoulder once again. Yes, the car was hidden, safely out of harm's way.

He took a deep breath, made a quick decision. Pulling his revolver from its side holster, he cautiously entered the warehouse.

The world turned upside down.

Noise . . . heat . . . an acrid smell. A persistent throbbing in his temple. He wiped his hand across his brow, blurred eyes focusing on the crimson smear on his palm.

Voices calling . . . a loud crash . . .no, not a crash . . . gunshots! Oh, my God, what are they doing? Why don't they stop? Get up, Scarecrow, move! Pain, blood, falling . . . swirling into the vortex, a cacophony of colors, blue, orange, red . . . my God, so much red . . .

"No!"

Lee was hurled into consciousness with a violent shudder. Heart pounding, his eyes darted fleetingly around the room. A desk, a cluttered bureau, scattered piles of clothes. He was home, then. In his house . . . his room . . . his bed.

Pushing aside the sweat-soaked sheets, he sat up, swinging his legs to the floor with a loud thud. He held his head in his hands as he forced much needed air into his lungs. Damn, he thought as his breathing struggled to return to some semblance of normalcy. He'd had the dream again.

It hadn't hit him with such force in a long time. Must have been the scene with Francine the day before, bringing everything back again. Or more likely that bottle of Chivas Regal he'd polished off last night before bed. He rubbed his throbbing temples. He should have known better.

Sighing again, he turned a bleary eye toward the clock on the nightstand. Almost nine. He pushed himself to his feet, exhaling loudly as he made his way to the bathroom. Turning on the faucet, he cupped his hands, splashing cold water on his face. He shook himself lightly, running wet fingers through his hair as he reluctantly faced himself in the water-spotted mirror.

Bloodshot eyes glared back at him from a taut, beard-shadowed face. Closing his eyes, he banished the image. His fingers gripped the edge of the sink, holding on for dear life. What was that trick Pfaff had taught him? Oh, yeah . . . he forced himself to take a few calming breaths, willing his chest to rise and fall with rhythmic regularity. That's it, almost there . . . almost. He concentrated again, forcing out the siren's faint wail, the bitter odor of burning wood, the sight of the red stain spreading out in an ever-widening circle beneath his fingers.

It kept coming, no matter how hard he tried to stop it . . . stop it . . .

"Stop it!" he told himself sternly, drawing in a few more labored breaths as he ordered his hands to unclench. "Just stop it." With grim resolve, he set about his usual morning routine, drawing comfort from the ritual. In those first few months after Amanda had gone, when the dream still came nightly with merciless regularity, he'd clung to these simple patterns like a lifeline.

Throwing on his robe, he headed downstairs to the kitchen. He shook his head at the sight of the coffee, ready and waiting. How on earth did he have the presence of mind to set the timer last night? Some habits surely died harder than others.

Like living in this house. He wondered why he didn't just take Francine's advice and sell the damn place. Living with ghosts, she'd said. Well, maybe there was some truth in that.

As he sipped his steaming coffee, his eyes were drawn to the pile of mail he'd deposited on the counter last night before reaching for the Scotch. It was still there. The words fairly screamed at him from beneath the scattered envelopes. 'Whereas, wife shall cause to be filed against husband a Petition for Dissolution of Marriage . . .'

Dissolution . . . that's what things had come to.

He considered the word. To evaporate, terminate, conclude. Thirteen years, over and done with, just like that. As soon as he signed on the appropriate dotted line.

What was he waiting for? There wasn't going to be any reprieve, no last minute save from his partner this time. No forgiveness, no blessed benediction. Hell, what did he expect? There were no more words, anyway; they'd said them all last year when she'd left for good. Harsh, hurtful words, words spoken in pain, anger and, yes, blame; words that couldn't be undone.

Letting out a rough breath, he dumped the remains of his coffee in the sink. He'd sworn not to look back anymore, and it was way past time to start his day. Placing his cup in the dishwasher, he headed for the shower.

His foot was on the first step when he heard the phone. It was probably Francine, calling to check on him. He grinned ruefully. Desmond was like a dog with a bone. Might as well take his medicine and get it over with.

"Okay, Francine," he sputtered as he hit the 'talk' button, "I'm sorry about running out on you . . ."

"Hello, Lee."

His fingers closed tightly around the hard plastic. He could hear her light breathing and struggled for control.

A slight hesitation, and that unmistakable voice continued. "It's me, it's . . ."

"Amanda," he said, his tone strangely neutral. Leaning back, he let the counter support his weight.

Another pause, then a throaty, "Yes. I was calling to see . . . well, I just wanted to ask . . ."

"Yes, I got the papers." Holding the cordless phone in a death-grip, he circled the small cooking island. "I'll sign them today and overnight them to your attorney."

"Oh, my . . ." The phrase drifted off into muffled oblivion. "Yes, I remember now, the lawyer's office said they would be mailing them this week."

He stopped his pacing by the kitchen sink. "So," he stated at last when it became apparent that she wasn't going to continue. "I guess that should be it, then." He could see the small buds forming on the shrubs outside the window and forced himself to concentrate on them with dogged determination.

"Yes, I . . . guess so."

She sounded odd, a subtle difference he couldn't quite put his finger on. Her voice, he realized suddenly. It had lost a little of that endearing Southern twang, replaced instead with the smallest hint of Midwestern slur. He took a deep breath. "Well, I, uh . . ."

"No, Lee, that's not why I called," she said in a rush, unexpectedly sounding like herself again. "It doesn't have anything to do with . . . what I mean is . . . it's . . . it's Jamie. He's . . . missing, I guess. He's been out of town, supposedly on business, but . . ."

"Amanda . . ."

"Lisa hasn't heard a word from him since he left, over three weeks ago now," she continued breathlessly. "We've both talked to the police, but . . ."

"Amanda," he said, a little more forcefully this time. "I know."

He heard her slow gasp. "You know?"

"I read the briefing report."

"Oh, I see."

Just those three short words -- clipped and curt. He winced, but pushed on. "The police say the statement from North Shore Labs checks out. He's on a classified business trip. You know that drill as well as I do. The police . . ."

"The police buy the standard company line; I don't." He heard her pause, as if carefully weighing her next words. "Lee, you know it's not like Jamie not to call home. 'Contact zero' or not, he'd find a way. Especially now that he's a father. Something's happened. I know it."

Lee bit his lip. "I've put out some feelers. You know . . . just in case. There doesn't appear to be an Agency connection."

She gave a sarcastic snort. "You sound pretty certain of that."

"I am, Amanda. I crosschecked both our files. There's nothing." Lee exhaled loudly. "But if you want to run a check yourself . . . well, Fleetwood at the Chicago Bureau should be able to help with . . ."

"I've already spoken to Fleetwood." She spat the name contemptuously. "Fleetwood wouldn't give me the time of day. I need more than that, Lee."

He clutched the phone, reminding himself of those slow, even breathing patterns. "I don't do field work anymore, Amanda. You know that."

"Please, Lee. I wouldn't ask if . . ."

He sucked in another breath. He could picture her so clearly, her dark hair held up by a clip, a few wisps escaping the sides to tickle the smooth curve of her cheeks. Something in her voice clutched at his heart; maybe she wasn't whistling in the dark after all.

"Please," she repeated, her voice entreating in its softness. "I can't . . . I can't lose another child."

The small muscle on the side of his neck jumped. "I'll catch the next flight."

~ IV ~

Jamming her hands into the pockets of her coat, Amanda began another circuit of the crowded airport concourse. Outside the rain-spattered windows, rows of dark gray jets with brightly painted tails stood poised and waiting, while inside the crowded terminal, passengers were sprawled across every available seat. She shook her head at the logistical nightmare; the weather had played havoc with everyone's schedule today.

Stopping just long enough to purchase a bottle of spring water from a nearby cart vendor, she continued her enforced march. Twisting off the cap, she drank greedily, unable to assuage the dry tickle in her throat. A small sigh broke from her lips as she checked the arrival board again, then her watch. United Flight 147 from Dulles International was forty-five minutes overdue. It only took a little fog rolling off the lake to slow the world's busiest airport to a crawl.

Should she be aggravated at the delay or thankful for the reprieve? At least she had a little more time to figure out what to say to him. For the umpteenth time since early morning, she wondered if bringing Lee in on this had been such a good idea. Her mother certainly seemed to think so, but Amanda was less sure. It took all her effort at the moment just to concentrate on Jamie. She couldn't spare the energy for anything else, especially not the emotional maelstrom that had marked those last few months with her husband.

Ex-husband, she hastily amended. Or he would be in a few short weeks. The divorce they'd postponed for over a year would soon be concluded, and then

they would be . . . what? Certainly not friends. At least, not the way it had been with Joe. She and Joe had kept their warm relationship to the very end, until the unexpected heart attack had claimed him five years ago. She still missed him sometimes, missed his solid presence on the periphery of her life. Good old Joe . . . he'd never even seen his first grandchild. Then again, he'd never had to know about . . .

She took another long drink, her fingers denting the plastic bottle as she gripped it. No, Lee would never be like Joe; the emotions between them were just too volatile. They'd loved too much, hurt too much, endured too much, and now . . . well, now there was just no going back.

Distracted, she stepped onto the 'people mover,' leaning against the rail to allow the more impatient travelers to pass her by. It had felt so strange to hear that familiar, gravelly voice again -- twice in one day, no less. He'd called her back in less than an hour with his flight information. The exchange had been pleasant, but curt.

She'd only had a handful of conversations with Lee since her move. Those brief exchanges seemed more suited to strangers than husband and wife, but were still infinitely preferable to the harsh recriminations they'd lobbed back and forth in those last bitter weeks together. She could sense he felt it, too. Now that it was finally finished, they'd both run for cover, seeking refuge behind the mask of incidentals -- a new job, a new phone number, a lawyer's address. All the random details of beginning again.

A crisp announcement from United Airlines penetrated the dull background twitter. Amanda quickly stepped off the conveyance and headed for the waiting area, arriving just in time to see the large jetliner slowly approaching the gate. Too late to turn back now. If only her mother hadn't been so insistent . . .

Tossing the empty plastic bottle into the nearest trash receptacle, she edged toward the door, standing a little to one side. Her stomach churned wildly, and she suddenly wished she'd taken the time to eat breakfast. If there was another reason for that quasi-nauseous sensation, she refused to acknowledge it, concentrating instead on the passengers who were just beginning to deplane. Surely, for Jamie's sake, she and Lee could put their personal feelings aside for a few short days? After all, they were both professionals. Focus on the case, she told herself. Just focus, and everything will be okay.

"I, uh, didn't realize you were going to meet me at the gate."

Lost in thought, the sound of his voice took her by surprise. "It seemed like the least I could do," she responded automatically. "I mean . . ."

He had come to a stop directly in front of her and, looking up, she fell into a strangled silence. It was one thing to talk to a disembodied voice over distant phone lines, quite another to look into those clear hazel eyes again. "It was the least I could do," she repeated faintly, forcing the air back into her lungs.

His mouth curved up into a smile that didn't quite reach the rest of his face. "Well, thanks, it was nice of you." Shifting his weight, his eyes drifted over her right shoulder. Amanda followed his gaze, her cheeks reddening as she understood. As the happy couple behind them hugged again in heartfelt reunion, she faced him with an uneasy smile. Pursing her lips, she took the obligatory step forward. He met her with equal discomfort, opening his arms to embrace her clumsily.

"Thanks for coming," she whispered as he released her. Eyes glued to the floor, she added, "I really do appreciate it."

"Amanda," she heard him say, his voice warm and deep as he spoke her name. "You know I'll do whatever I can to find Jamie."

She nodded, for once incapable of words. "Well," she said as she saw him glance at his watch, "I guess we should get going."

He agreed. "I'd like to check in at the Chicago Bureau as soon as possible. See if Fleetwood . . ."

"You don't have to explain, Lee," she snapped. "I'm not a rookie, you know."

"I wasn't implying that you were."

His irritation was clearly evident. Two minutes and here they were, already on the defensive. She stood mutely as he drew in a deep breath, letting it out perfunctorily as he shifted his carry-on to the other shoulder. "Come on," she murmured in a more conciliatory tone, falling quickly in step with the other travelers. "The car's this way."

She heard him sigh again as he silently followed.

The blustery lakeshore breeze stung the back of his neck as Lee followed Amanda down the short walkway that led to the Film Fed Tower. Pushing through the revolving doors, he was struck again with the same sense of amazement he'd experienced years ago on his first visit to the ostentatious Chicago offices. Where the Washington division maintained a low profile to protect its cover, the Midwest branch had chosen to go the opposite route with a vengeance. The Agency occupied the first ten floors of the imposing eighty-six story structure on Randolph at Michigan. Its stylish reception area boasted delicate crystal chandeliers and overstuffed leather upholstery, but the coup de grace was the center of the vestibule, where a bold, circular design spelled out the initials 'I.F.F.' in rich inlaid tiles. Lee felt as if he'd stepped into some bizarre parallel universe, like the ones he used to read about in comic books when he was a kid.

Glancing at Amanda, he wondered if she had the same thoughts. The grim set of her chin as they boarded the elevator betrayed little. Once upon a time, they would have rolled their eyes and shared a laugh over the nouveau riche décor, so obviously built for form not function. But as the uneasy silence they'd fallen prey to in the car persisted, those days seemed farther away than ever.

Maybe he should have handled the problem from D.C. after all. Francine had certainly seemed to think so. The rational side of his brain, the part he listened to these days, knew his friend was right; seeing Amanda would only open the door to more heartache for both of them. Their awkward greeting at the airport was proof enough that the old wounds were still there, bleeding and raw, just below the surface. What good could possibly come from reopening them? But something in the tone of her voice this morning had called out to him, and, in that instant, he'd allowed his heart to respond instead of his head.

As the elevator came to a stop on the tenth floor, Lee placed his hand on the side of the door, allowing Amanda to precede him down the hall. Stopping at the reception desk, he signed the register, accepting their visitor's passes from the taciturn receptionist. They were quickly handed over to a plump but well-coiffed agent who showed them into the large corner office belonging to Herbert Fleetwood.

"The Chief may be a while," their escort informed them, her eyes glued to the floor. "He's on a priority conference call with Washington."

Lee caught Amanda's skeptical glance. "We don't need to disturb him if he's tied up," he told the agent. "If I can log on to the Agency databanks, we'll be out of your hair."

The woman was obviously following orders. "Sorry, Scarecrow," she replied, her cheeks reddening. "Chief Fleetwood must approve all outside system users. I'm sure you understand."

His lips curled up in a thin smile. "Perfectly."

As Amanda rolled her eyes, Lee shot her a silent warning, at the same time wondering what kind of game Fleetwood was playing. As field section chief in D.C., Lee technically outranked him. But here in Chicago, Fleetwood enjoyed home court advantage, and he obviously intended to press it to the hilt. To Lee, it was just another sign of the ever-changing times. Small wonder Billy Melrose had opted for early retirement. Their covert organization had become increasingly self-protective over the past few years. As an administrator, he understood the reasons for the multi-layered bureaucracy, but as a former field agent, he daily cursed its new territorial structure.

Obviously Amanda had no use for either side of the desk. He could see it in the rigid lines of her back as she stood in front of the large picture window, her eyes restlessly scanning the view. The fog had lifted slightly, revealing a few cresting whitecaps far out on the lake. Still, the heavy clouds painted everything in muted, washed-out shades, and it was impossible to tell where the steel-gray water ended and the sky began.

He heard her soft sigh as she turned her back on the scene, her knees shaking almost imperceptibly as she leaned heavily on the desk. Out of instinct, he started toward her, but the door creaked open behind him. Amanda stiffened, and, turning, he saw Fleetwood enter the office, a tight smile plastered on his face.

"Stetson," he said, extending his hand in the requisite gesture of politeness. With a cursory nod to Amanda, he added brusquely, "I guess I don't have to ask what brings you to town. Someone obviously decided to call in the big guns." Before Lee could answer, he added sharply, "I'll tell you exactly what I told *her* about the supposed disappearance of Dr. James King. The Agency has no grounds to investigate what, at best, would be a matter for the local police, and, at worst, a domestic dispute."

Lee could see the beginnings of a tirade on Amanda's lips. Placing a warning hand on her arm, he struggled to reign in his own growing temper. "Look,

Fleetwood, I'm not asking for your help on this case, just the use of your facilities," he said, his patience for the man's posturing growing thin. "Which, I might remind you, are well within my rights to demand. This is a personal matter."

A smile flitted briefly across Fleetwood's face as he looked from Lee to Amanda. "Yes," he said dryly, "I can see that. I suppose I could remind *you* that since personal issues have no place in Agency matters, I'm well within *my* rights to refuse. But," he added as Lee loomed ominously closer, "I've got bigger problems than an alleged missing person at the moment, so feel free. Just don't expect any resources from this bureau. We have our hands full with Los Lobos."

Lee frowned. "Los Lobos? Here in Chicago?"

"Yes, even way out here in the middle of nowhere," he jeered. "Don't you read your flash data reports, Stetson? Or is the Midwest Sector considered small potatoes for you D.C. hotshots?"

Lee bent his head. After seeing the report on Jamie, he'd been too distracted to think of anything else, so he'd merely accepted Carter's summary. The girl had obviously slept through the course on emergent terrorist organizations. Lee turned to Fleetwood with a guilty sigh. "We've been monitoring them closely for some time in D.C., but if they're expanding their interests, we're in for more trouble than we bargained for."

Fleetwood nodded. "Then you'll excuse me if I cut this short." Sitting down behind his desk, he reached for a file, handing it to Lee with a look that spoke his desire to be rid of them. "When I heard you were in the building, I had my assistant pull this information. It's the latest report on North Shore Labs and Dan Roman. I believe that's what you requested on your previous visit, Mrs. King?"

Amanda gave him a smile, the ambiguously polite one that always made Lee nervous. "You know it is, Mr. Fleetwood. But if you're waiting for thanks . . ."

"Then let me be the first to offer it," Lee put in quickly. Taking Amanda by the arm, he ushered her to the door. "If you come up with anything concrete on Los Lobos," he added over his shoulder, "my assistant, Angela Carter, knows where to reach me." With a parting nod for the balding section chief, Lee quickly escorted Amanda out into the hall.

"Lee," she hissed, shaking off his arm. "What are you doing?"

Ignoring her protests, he nudged her in the direction of the elevator. "Let Fleetwood feel like a big man for the moment," he told her, inclining his head toward the gaggle of agents who'd gathered to watch the show in their chief's office. "He doesn't have any useful information anyway."

"How do you know? You didn't even question him!"

"Fleetwood's from the old school, Amanda, and he wears his gun outside his coat just like his mentor, Sid Rollins. Now I remember why I've never liked him," he added under his breath.

"But if there's even a small chance he can help us . . ."

She turned to him at last, looking directly into his eyes for the first time since he'd stepped off the plane. Lee adopted a gentler tone. "Trust me. If Fleetwood thought there was a case here, he'd be crying jurisdictional infringement so loudly Dr. Smyth wouldn't need the telephone to hear him." Holding the door open, he followed her into the spacious elevator. "Besides, I didn't really expect him to help us."

Amanda frowned. "Then why bother?"

"Professional courtesy. He won't worry about us now. And that," Lee said, catching her eye meaningfully as he slowly drew out the word, "will buy us some time to do some investigating of our own."

She grinned suddenly, and for a moment, Lee swore he could detect a hint of the old Amanda. "Where to, Scarecrow?" she asked, her voice filled with anticipation.

His tone matched hers as he replied simply, "North Shore Labs."

~ VI ~

Amanda saw Lee signal her with a brief nod, and she quickly returned the look that spoke her readiness. It was their own personal shorthand, honed to perfection over the years.

"Federal agents," Scarecrow said brusquely, flashing his badge at the records clerk. "We're here for the King file."

His head buried in a newspaper, the young man appeared bored. "You'll need the appropriate authorization. Filled out and signed. In triplicate," he added between yawns.

Amanda braced herself as Lee leaned over the desk, crumpling the young man's copy of the Sun-Times with one hand. "Maybe you didn't hear me the first time," he ground out through tightly clenched teeth. "Federal agents." Opening his badge again, he shoved it under the clerk's nose. "*This* is all the authorization I require. And if you don't get me that file ASAP, *you'll* be seeing stars . . . in triplicate."

The pimply-faced clerk quickly pulled his feet off the desk. "Okay, okay, I get the point. No need to make a federal case out of it." He chortled loudly, evidently amused at his own joke.

Amanda felt Lee bristle again beside her. "I'm afraid we'll need to see everything," she stated in a voice that sounded crisply professional, even to her own ears. "The case notes for every project Dr. King was working on in the last . . ."

Lee smiled at her hesitation. "Six months," he added, briskly picking up where she'd left off. "His entire employment history."

The boy's eyebrows rose. "What's Dr. King done?"

"I'm afraid we're not at liberty to say," Amanda responded with a serious frown. "It's a matter of national security. We could tell you, but then we'd have to . . ."

The young man tensed, staring back at her with wide eyes. She turned to Lee with a quizzical look. "Are you sure the King file is the only one you need? We could extend our investigation to include . . ." She eyed the alarmed clerk speculatively. "Peripheral employees?"

Lee looked thoughtful. "Failure to cooperate with a federal investigation *could* be considered grounds."

A light sheen of perspiration broke out on the young man's forehead. "Hey, hey, hold on a minute. Who says I won't cooperate? I'll pull the file. But I can't give you the originals. I'll have to make copies."

"Copies will quite satisfactory, don't you think?" Lee asked, his eyes sparkling with amusement as he turned to Amanda.

"Perfectly satisfactory," she replied, fighting the urge to smile.

"I'll be right back. Don't go anywhere."

"Wouldn't dream of it," Amanda muttered. Shaking her head, she leaned back against the wooden desk, venturing a quick glance at Lee. Their eyes met as they exchanged a look of mutual understanding. Scarecrow and Mrs. King hadn't lost their touch.

Lee turned to her with a lopsided grin. "Is it my imagination or are they actually hiring children these days?"

"It's not your imagination. He can't be more than . . . twelve."

"With a comparable I.Q."

"Thank goodness for small favors," she sighed, relieved that their little game actually appeared to be working. She watched as Lee stifled a yawn. "Tired?"

He laughed under his breath. "Intimidating gullible idiots takes a lot out of you." He sat down beside her on the desk, his leg brushing lightly against hers as he shifted on the hard surface.

Her body stiffened at the unexpected contact. Vigorously massaging her neck, she gave a brittle laugh as she inched away from him. "We're only an hour behind D.C.," she told him with raised eyebrows. "It can't be jet lag."

He stretched, then rubbed his eyes with his thumb and forefinger. "Didn't sleep very well last night, that's all."

"Are you working too hard again?"

He shrugged. "You know me . . ."

"Yeah," she answered in a soft voice, "I know you."

Their eyes caught and held and, reddening, she looked away. "Where is that clerk, anyway?" she mumbled as she hastily stood up. Wrapping her arms around herself, she began to pace restlessly back and forth.

"Cold?" Lee inquired, his tone soothingly solicitous.

She raised her shoulders and shifted her purse. "I'm always cold in this town. I miss . . ." Biting her lip, she stopped abruptly, her eyes drawn irresistibly to his again. Beneath the florescent lights, they looked enormous, and his dark wool overcoat had turned them an even deeper shade. Hazel eyes, she thought absently -- the color as changeable as the seasons.

The silence grew thicker as the moment lengthened. "Amanda," she heard Lee begin, his voice strained as he took a step nearer. "I . . ."

"Here you go."

She started, but the clerk's nasal voice wasn't an altogether unwelcome intrusion. She suddenly remembered where she was and, more importantly, why. Turning to the young man with an impatient sigh, she eyed the thin stack of files. "That's all of them?"

The clerk wiped his hands on his wrinkled jacket. "Yeah. Dr. King hadn't been here that long."

His words had an unwitting air of finality, and Amanda drew a sharp breath. Would people be forever referring to Jamie in the past tense, too? No, please . . . God wouldn't be that cruel. Not a second time.

"Uh, thanks for your help," she heard Lee say, his voice sounding unusually gritty. Rubbing her throbbing temples, she watched him scrawl an illegible signature on the log. Tucking the papers under his arm, he turned to her. "Come on," he murmured as his hand found its way to the small of her back. "Let's get out of here before someone with half a brain shows up and realizes I have no real jurisdiction in this town."

"Do you want to head back to the Agency?" she inquired, suddenly grateful for the familiar pressure of his strong hand as they walked.

He gave her a sideways glance. "It might not be a bad idea to keep a low profile there. Unless we can find a national security peg to hang this on . . ."

She nodded, meeting his eye with a resolute smile. "Then let's go back to my place and look for one."

~ VII ~

Lee stole a moment to recline against the plush cushions of Amanda's sofa. Pushing his glasses up, he pressed his fingers against his eyes, a habit he'd

acquired during his transition into management. His first week on the job had revealed the inevitable truth discovered by every section chief before him -- multiplying paperwork was an indisputable fact of his new life. Fourteen long months had taught him to tolerate the chore. In the process, he'd gained a heightened appreciation of Billy Melrose's intestinal fortitude -- and the pair of brown-rimmed reading glasses that currently adorned the top of his head. Now, glancing down at the thin stack of papers spread out across the coffee table, he found himself almost wishing for the endless reams of briefing files that usually accompanied a new case.

"I just hope our little sting at the lab doesn't turn into dead end," he muttered absently.

Amanda shifted beside him on the couch. "It won't."

Her tone dared him to contradict her, but Lee let the challenge pass. He hadn't really meant to voice his doubts aloud. His stint behind Billy's desk had evidently left his partnering skills more than a little rusty.

"At least we managed to convince the idiot clerk to give us copies of Jamie's notes," Amanda pointed out with typical optimism. "Now all we have to do is find the clue."

"Easier said than done. At this point, I'm not even sure what I'm looking for."

"You'll know it when you see it." Amusement flickered in her eyes as she raised a sculptured brow. "Sorry, I just couldn't stop myself."

He smiled in return. "I probably more than deserved that."

She sighed, her mood altering like quicksilver as she looked down at the rapidly thinning files. "I know there's something here, Lee. I can smell it."

He watched her bend over the papers once again. Same old Amanda, he thought as the image of two kitty-corner desks filled his mind. His partner had always possessed an uncanny knack for breaking a case with the most insignificant facts. More than one inmate was currently enjoying federal hospitality due to something as innocuous as floor wax.

And if she couldn't work the same magic this time? Sometimes, no matter how hard you tried, the breaks just weren't there. Watching her hopelessly determined face, his smile began to fade. "Amanda," he said, his tone soft, trying to prepare her. "You know as well as I do that . . ."

"That what?" she demanded. Her paper poised in midair, she turned to him with a slightly defiant eye.

"Nothing," he mumbled, beating a strategic retreat under her scrutiny. Carefully sliding his glasses back into place, he returned to the task at hand. No sense reminding her of what she already knew. If Amanda needed to hold onto the slender thread of hope right now, he certainly didn't have the heart to snap it in two.

He'd been there, done that, one time too many.

Fatigue overtook him as he picked up the next file, and he stifled a yawn. The jumbled medical terms were all beginning to run together. It seemed the scrawny little kid who'd always struggled to keep up on the basketball court now wrote reports the great Scarecrow could only interpret as educated gibberish.

And yet, at this particular moment, here on this sofa with Amanda at his side, his world seemed almost normal. He could hear her slow, even breathing, punctuated every so often with the soft sighs that said she was deep in thought. The sound was comfortingly familiar. How many times over the years had they sat together late at night, just like this, immersed in the intricate vagaries of some case?

Except this wasn't just 'some' case, and Amanda was barely holding on. Oh, she tried to disguise it, but it was readily apparent to anyone who knew her as he did. Knew intimately the harsh worry lines that deepened around her eyes or the way the fingers of her right hand kept finding their way unbidden into her mouth. It took all of his strength to fight the overwhelming longing to take her into his arms.

The trouble was, he hated to feel powerless. That's all it could be, right? Watching her like this . . . well, it just brought the memories crashing back. Of her cradled in his arms the first time her bullet found its mark. Or their tears mingling as they'd both cried over her miscarriage. His softly murmured words of comfort when she'd gotten the call about Joe King . . .

. . . the way her relief had slowly turned to horror that day in the emergency room when she'd finally realized whose blood had soaked his shirt.

Lee steadfastly pushed those thoughts from his mind, instead directing his bewildered gaze to her apartment. He'd gathered from his conversations with Jamie that his mother was living in an upscale part of town, but he hadn't

expected the kind of showplace that Francine would proudly call home. Try as he might, he couldn't find his Amanda in the elegant pinstriped wallpaper, the delicate crystal wall sconces or the richly stained crown moldings.

Of course, that was the problem, wasn't it? She wasn't really *his* Amanda anymore.

He forced his eyes back to the page. Here, at least, was something he could attempt to understand. His mouth opened in amazement as he followed the short but illustrious career of Dr. James King. "Wow -- it looks like Jamie had quite a bit of responsibility for someone who'd only been on the job six months."

"Yeah, he'd been doing really well. Of course, he *did* have that internship with them last summer, but still . . ."

Lee smiled at the satisfaction in her voice. "You have every reason to be proud of him."

"When I think of all those nights we spent worrying if we were right to let him graduate early from high school . . ."

"Or whether or not he'd be able to handle the pressure of that seven year college *and* med school program at Northwestern."

A flash of humor crossed her face. "Or if he'd ever find time to date."

He glanced over at the framed picture of Jamie, Lisa and the baby. "I guess that's one fear that proved groundless, huh?"

"Yeah," she laughed, "I guess so."

Lee laid his hand on her arm. "You know, he really has turned into quite a remarkable young man."

Amanda smiled softly. "You had something to do with that, too, you know."

"Well," Lee returned with an embarrassed grin, "maybe a little."

"Maybe a lot," she answered firmly.

He shrugged, sloughing off the compliment with uncharacteristic embarrassment. He felt something soft brush his skin and, glancing down, he

saw Amanda's hand resting lightly on top of his. Raising his head again, he caught her eye.

A deep blush suffused her cheeks, and she quickly removed her hand, her fingers clenching and unclenching as she focused her eyes determinedly on the window. "If only . . ." Her words trailed off with an air of infinite longing.

"If only' what, Amanda?" he prompted gently.

"If only I'd . . . listened to Jamie more these past few weeks," she stammered, her voice lowering as she avoided his gaze. "Been more available. If I'd asked what was bothering him instead of . . . Well, I was just too busy with the . . . with other things. So now all we have to go on are these files. I'm his mother, Lee, and even *I* can't get a sense of my son in all this medical techno-babble. What if . . ."

"Hey, remember, we do have some powerful resources at our disposal."

"Yeah, powerful resources," she stated with a contemptuous sneer. Pushing forcefully off the couch, she gave her arms a vigorous rub. "Like your pal, Fleetwood."

He looked over at her with a resigned sigh. "You know the Agency as well as I do."

She snorted. "Oh, yeah. I *know* the Agency."

"I tried to tell you this morning on the phone," he rejoined, his tone growing pricklier under her criticism. "Chicago is out of my jurisdiction."

"Jurisdiction be damned! My son is missing!" She pressed her arms tightly against her sides, her knuckles whitening as she tightened her hands into fists. "That's all I care about."

Eyes narrowing, he leapt up from the couch. "And you think *I* don't? Jamie may not be my biological son, Amanda, but I love him, too. Every bit as much as I did . . ." He froze, a sharp pain ripping his gut at her horrified expression. Licking his lips, he let out a long, slow breath.

"I'm sorry," she whispered at last, her eyes still locked on his. "I . . . I guess my nerves are a little on edge."

"Yeah, well . . . so are mine." The moment lengthened as he struggled for something to say. Though her luminous eyes glistened with moisture, she

wouldn't allow a single tear to fall. He'd always considered himself a strong man, but her iron control put his to shame. Her face looked rigid, frozen in the emotions of another place and time. Somewhere behind him, the phone began to ring, but he pushed the intrusion away. Making a small, tentative move toward her, he slowly began to open his arms.

The noise continued with annoying persistence. The spell broken, Amanda neatly sidestepped him. "I should get that. It's probably Mother calling from Jamie and Lisa's."

"Oh, uh, sure." Hoping she hadn't seen, he tucked his useless hands under his arms. "Yes, this is Amanda West," he heard her say, and he moved away, walking over to the window.

Amanda . . . West. He repeated her words in his mind, willing himself to understand. Amanda . . . West. His jaw tightly clenched, he looked down onto Lake Shore Drive. Amanda . . . West. He forced his eyes to follow the bright specks of light twenty-two floors below, watching as they made their way through the darkness only to disappear around a curve in the road. Amanda . . . West. He'd been a hairsbreadth away from making a first class fool of himself.

"Lee!"

Something in the way she gasped his name caused the short hairs on the back of his neck to prickle, and he whirled at the sound. "What the . . ."

She stood stiffly, her enormous brown eyes staring blankly at the wall. The upturned phone lay on its side by her right foot, forgotten. "That was Detective Devine," she stated mechanically, "from the Chicago P.D. He said . . ."

Lee felt his blood freeze as he fought an overpowering feeling of déjà vu. "Said what, Amanda?"

"They found a body. They want me to come down to identify it."

~ VIII ~

Amanda choked and sputtered as the acrid smell assaulted her senses. As she propelled herself forward, she felt Lee's hand close reassuringly around hers. "Breathe through your mouth," he reminded her, his own voice little more than a strangled whisper.

"Yeah," she gasped, the odor receding to a tolerable level as she matched her even inhaling and exhaling to his. It was such a rookie mistake. In her terror over Jamie, she'd forgotten one of the cardinal rules of the business . . . never breathe through your nose in the morgue.

Gritting her teeth, she willed her professional self to take over as they followed Detective Devine through the narrow corridor in Cook County Hospital's lower level. With only a second's hesitation, the balding policeman led them to a small room filled with multi-layered drawers. Amanda unconsciously shivered.

"You should have let me do this alone," Lee muttered as Devine consulted his notes.

"No. If Jamie is . . ." She coughed again, struggling to clear her throat. "If Jamie is in here, then I need to know. Now," she stated forcefully, "not an hour from now."

"Okay, then," Devine said, counting down the rows to drawer number 8 - 4. "Let's see what we have here . . . male Caucasian, in his mid-twenties. No identification. Cause of death . . ." He consulted his form once again. "Gunshot wounds to the head and chest. This might not be pretty. Are you positive . . ."

"Yes," she almost shouted.

The detective let out a deep sigh. He was clearly ill at ease and obviously still irritated that Lee had used his federal I.D. to coerce him into acceding to her wishes. Well, that was just too bad. The 'Colombo' wannabe might be more comfortable hiding behind the sterile impersonality of a viewing room, but she was not about to waste precious time waiting for the body to be brought upstairs.

As Devine slowly reached for the handle, Amanda took another series of short breaths through her mouth, resisting the all-consuming urge to throttle the maddening little man. Why didn't he just get it over with? It was as if the detective was deliberately moving in slow motion. Or was that just her imagination? She could feel Lee beside her, knew from his quiet stance that he didn't seem find Devine's actions out of the ordinary. Oh, God, she screamed to herself as panic gripped her. Maybe this time she really was going to lose her mind.

Devine gave the drawer a short tug. It slid open, and he gingerly unzipped the body bag.

Her hands flew to her mouth. "Oh, my gosh," she gasped through splayed fingers as she felt Lee's arms close around her from behind.

Devine turned to her with an expectant gaze. "Ms. West?"

"No," she heard Lee answer for her, his relief almost palpable. "It's not him. It's not Jamie."

"Do you . . ."

"I don't know, maybe . . . I can't seem to place him." Amanda felt him unconsciously draw her closer as he studied the body from a different angle. "He does look vaguely familiar."

"It's Tim Forsythe," she heard her voice croak from somewhere far away. "Jamie's lab partner."

Lee caught her eye. "Lab partner? I didn't realize . . ." He turned gruffly to Devine. "There wasn't anything in your reports about another missing person linked to this case."

"He wasn't missing. He was on vacation in Mexico. At least, that's what we thought," Amanda said as Lee and Devine looked at her strangely. "Lisa was upset when she couldn't reach him to ask if he knew anything about Jamie. They were all very good friends." She shook her head sadly. "Now we know why she couldn't locate him."

As she began to tremble slightly, she felt Lee give her another reassuring squeeze. "Uh, Detective," he said, addressing Devine again with a slight tilt of his head. "Do you mind?"

"Oh, sure," the man mumbled, hastily re-covering the body. As the metal door clanged shut, he turned his attention to his paperwork and quickly made a few notes. "We'll notify the next of kin."

Lee extracted a card from his pocket and handed it to Devine. "I'd appreciate it if you'd e-mail a copy of the final autopsy report. And any other incidentals."

Devine hesitated for a fraction of a second. "I didn't realize this had become a matter for the Agency."

"Not officially. At least, not yet. Let's just call this one a professional courtesy. And," Lee added with a significant look, "if you should ever happen to need a favor, Detective, consider me just a phone call away."

Grinning, Devine fingered the card. "I'll remember that."

"I thought you might." Lee smiled knowingly as he took Amanda's arm. "Come on, let's get out of here."

"I appreciate you coming down to make the identification," Devine told them as they made their way to the door. "I'll keep you informed." He paused, gifting Amanda with a soft smile. "And if there's anything I can do for you, Ms. West, please don't hesitate to ask."

She felt Lee tighten his grip on her arm. "Just send us a copy of that report, Devine. That'll be more than enough."

The room seemed to blur suddenly. Amanda leaned into Lee, letting him steer her swiftly down the hall and up the stairs. There was an odd buzzing in her ears, and her cheeks felt strangely hot. She was suddenly very thankful for his supportive arm around her waist as he guided her through the door and out onto the sidewalk.

The wind shifting off the lake had caused the night to turn cold. Amanda tried to take a few deep breaths as they walked toward the car, but the gusting air carried an unexpected bite, causing her chest to constrict. Despite her best efforts, her head still seemed oddly detached from her body.

"Are you okay?"

Lee's voice sounded distant as her knees began to wobble. "I don't know what's the matter with me," she said, her words almost swallowed up by another burst of the chilly March wind. "Everything's swimming . . ."

"Come here," she heard him whisper hoarsely through the swirling fog in her head. As his arms closed around her, she let out a sigh, shutting her eyes as she rested her head against his shoulder. She was vaguely aware of his scratchy wool overcoat tickling her cheek as she let him support her weight. His scent filled her nostrils, a unique blend of aftershave and something else she could never quite put her finger on. She only knew that it had always made her feel safe.

They stood together on the curb, the steady rumble of the nearby elevated train soothing her. As the minutes passed and her eyes slowly regained their focus,

she found herself staring at the short hairs on the back of Lee's neck. Before she could stop them, images of another kind flooded her mind, of countless other times when her consciousness had reawakened to that same, pleasurable sight. She closed her eyes, willing the overpowering physical sensations to stop. They were only a signature away from finalizing their divorce; how could Lee Stetson still affect her like this?

With something akin to regret, she backed out of his embrace. "I'm okay," she assured him, unable to meet the concern in his eyes. "I'm sorry for falling apart like that. I don't know what's gotten into me."

"Perfectly understandable," Lee said, his tone even and controlled. She felt his eyes look her over from head to toe, as if taking inventory. "When's the last time you ate?"

"I don't know. I've kinda lost track the last few days."

"Well, like it or not, you're going to have something to eat."

"Lee, I'm just not hungry."

"Amanda," he told her in a tone that brooked no refusal, "no more arguments. You won't do Jamie any good from a hospital bed. Now, there must be some place around here where we can get you a decent meal."

Sighing, she looked over at the street sign. "We're not too far from Little Italy. I know a place there that's pretty good, but . . ."

"Okay, then," he stated firmly, enclosing her hand in his so there would be no possibility of escape. "Let's go."

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Amanda let out a satisfied sigh as her gaze swept across the quaint dining room. Despite the late hour, Francesca's on Taylor was still doing a brisk business, and the buzz of conversation in the background acted as a soothing balm to her ragged nerves. Watching the flickering candle cast shadowy patterns on the white tablecloth, she could actually feel her aching exhaustion begin to subside. Whether it was from the companionable ambiance of the renowned West Loop restaurant or the wine Lee had insisted she drink with dinner, she wasn't sure. She only knew that, after the grim scene at the morgue, she welcomed the feeling.

"I guess you were a little hungrier than you thought, huh?" Lee said, his eyes falling on her empty plate with a slightly smug smile.

"I guess I was at that," she replied, hiding her embarrassment behind her napkin as she touched it to her lips. "But don't let it go to your head." She'd caught that flicker of amusement in his eyes; Lee Stetson could be absolutely insufferable when proven right.

This moment was no exception. "Amanda," he said with a grin as he leaned forward to rest his elbows on the table. "Just so I'm perfectly clear on this. Are you actually admitting I was right?"

"Oh, come on," she volleyed back almost playfully. "We've known each other for a lot of years. There must have been at least **one** other time you were right."

"Yeah, how could I forget?" His eyes crinkled warmly as his smile deepened to reveal two incredible dimples. "Well, since you actually **were** hungry," he continued to tease, "I suppose it's a good thing we didn't . . ." Suddenly remembering himself, his expression sobered. "It's a good thing we, uh, didn't, uh, have to wait too long for the food," he swiftly amended.

Dipping her head slightly, she gave him a terse, "Yeah," keeping her eyes fixed on the table to avoid his gaze. It didn't do any good. Their separate plates seemed to stare back at her in unspoken accusation. She let out a short sigh. For as far back as she could remember they had always shared the entrée.

"This place does remind me a little of Emelio's," she admitted in a vain attempt to dispel the awkwardness. "Must be the Italian cuisine."

"Yeah," he whispered roughly as his eyes darted away, "that must be it." Reaching for his wine, Lee swirled the rich, red liquid carefully around the glass a few times before bringing it to his lips.

Amanda observed in stilted silence. Even by candlelight, the pale band of skin on the third finger of his left hand was clearly obvious. She glanced reflexively at her hand. Her finger bore no such mark; summer runs along the lakefront had seen to that. "The house wine's excellent," she heard him remark through the dull roaring in her ears.

"Jamie likes it, too," she managed to say as she watched him drink deeply once again. "In fact, this is one of his favorite restaurants. He treated me to dinner here just before he . . . well, before . . ." Her words drifted off as she looked wistfully across the room.

A glimmer of . . . something . . . flashed across Lee's face as he set the glass back down with deliberate care. "Amanda," he whispered, stretching his hand across the table to cover hers. "It's going to be okay."

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak. She felt him give her hand a gentle squeeze, and, embarrassed, she let her eyes drift out over the restaurant again. It really was a beautiful place . . . why had she never noticed it before? The candles shining in fluted globes on every table . . . the dark wood paneling . . . the lovely murals in the entryway, each scene vividly lifelike beneath the bright track lighting. . . it all seemed to touch some distant chord of memory. It suddenly felt good to be sitting here, in this cozy little room, across from someone who loved Jamie as she did. She could share her fears with him; he would understand.

"Oh, Lee," she exclaimed, her sigh hiding the unexpected quaver in her tone. "I want so badly to believe that Jamie's okay, but I just don't know any more. After seeing poor Tim like that. . ." She shuddered softly.

His concern was mixed with tenderness as he prompted gently, "You said Tim was Jamie's lab partner?"

"And friend. Surely you must remember him from the wedding. He was one of the groomsmen."

"Of course," Lee replied, his fingers sliding up to stroke her bare forearm. "The guy who spilled the champagne all over his tux."

"Yeah." Amanda smiled at the recollection. "He was so embarrassed when he had to stand up and give the toast, remember? And then when Lisa . . . Oh, my gosh . . . Lisa! Lee, someone's going to have to tell her."

"Maybe it should wait until tomorrow," he suggested. "What with Jamie . . . well, this is probably going to hit her pretty hard."

Amanda nodded. "And his poor family, too. They're from Atlanta, I think. His father passed away a few years ago, and now there's only his mother. I can just imagine what the poor woman . . ." Gasping, she fell into a strangled silence.

"Amanda . . ."

His fingers tightened on her arm as she brought her hand to her mouth. Shaking off his caress, she turned her head away.

But it was too late. She'd already read the unspeakable regret in Lee's eyes. For one agonizing instant, she was back there, too, back in the moist heat of that muggy September afternoon. She could even hear the faint wail of an ambulance in the distance. Or was that coming from the street outside the restaurant? Trying to draw a few ragged breaths, Amanda found she couldn't seem to get the air into her lungs. Wrapping her arms firmly across her chest, she closed her eyes.

"Amanda." Lee's voice sounded stern this time. "Help me out here," he went on, seemingly oblivious to her distress. "I've been going over and over things in my mind, trying to get a handle on this. Fill me in again on the facts about Jamie's disappearance, in case I've missed something."

She nodded in relief, the needle-sharp pain in her stomach beginning to dull as he steered the conversation back to business. Focusing her thoughts, she felt her momentary panic recede as she slipped seamlessly back into agent mode. There was an odd sense of comfort in the old patterns; Mrs. King knew how to relate to Scarecrow.

"Jamie seemed bothered by something off and on for the past month," she began in her most professional tone, laying out the pieces of the puzzles again for herself, too. "Something about work, Lisa thought, but she didn't want to press it -- she knew he'd talk about it when he was ready. Besides, little Joey had been teething and she'd had her hands full . . ." Catching his look of dismay, she quickly refocused. "Anyway, three weeks ago, he told her he had to take a short business trip. That he'd be back as soon as he could."

Lee frowned. "He didn't say where he was going?"

She shook her head. "Some kind of conference, that's all he knew. Jamie didn't seem very happy about it even though it was quite an honor to be chosen. He promised to call . . ." She took a deep breath, her voice catching slightly. "After a week passed and Lisa still hadn't heard from him, she contacted NSL. All they'd tell her was that Jamie was involved in highly sensitive meetings and not to worry; he'd be home soon."

Lee's eyes narrowed. "But you didn't believe it."

"Something sounded *off*, you know? When Lisa couldn't get anywhere with Jamie's boss, she asked me to talk to him, but he refused to see me. So, to force their hand, we went to the police and filed a missing person's report."

"But when the police contacted the lab, everything checked out."

"Yes. I couldn't convince them to investigate. No one seemed to buy into our concern."

Lee rapped his knuckles lightly on the table. "I have a feeling they do now."

"I should have followed my instincts," she said, unable to stem the bitter remorse. "Something's going on, Lee, I feel it. North Shore Labs is **not** what it seems."

Lee eyed her speculatively. "From what Jamie told me, he was thrilled with the set-up there."

"Yeah, it seemed that way at first," she said, rising to his unspoken challenge. She could tell he thought she was on to something; his agent's mind just needed to follow it through. "On the surface, the place is a researcher's paradise, a dream come true. First rate equipment, unlimited budget . . . a little too good to be real, you know? I wanted to do a piece on Dan Roman three months ago, but my editor pulled me off the story."

"Fleetwood mentioned that name, but it didn't ring a bell."

"That's because you're not from around here. Dan Roman is North Shore's new Chief Professional Officer. Very politically connected in this town. He's the reason they've landed some lucrative research contracts -- real hush-hush projects, or so I hear." She let out a pent-up breath. "But as far as my editor's concerned, the man walks on water. I guess he wanted to spare him my acerbic wit."

Lee gave her a begrudging smile. "You know, Amanda, I've read some of your pieces. They're really very good."

She shrugged off the compliment. "Guess I finally put that American Lit major to some sort of use." Glancing at him curiously, she said in a low voice, "I didn't realize you read Chicago News magazine."

Toying with his silverware, he studied his dinner with an interest it didn't usually command. "It's a taste I seem to have acquired lately. It beats reading those briefing reports, I guess."

She watched Lee's fork chase a piece of potato around his plate. "Speaking of briefing reports," she stated as he finally speared it, "I'm a little surprised that Jamie's supposed disappearance rated an Agency inquiry. Especially since the authorities here in Chicago took it all so lightly."

Lee bit his lip. "A missing person's report for a relative of any agent with a security clearance above Delta 13 is flagged as a matter of routine. Since our divorce hasn't been filed yet . . ."

"Oh." As she watched him mash the helpless potato mercilessly beneath the fork's sharp tines, she felt her throat tighten. "Lee, she gasped, fighting the all-consuming feeling of suffocation. "You don't think . . . well, that Jamie might be . . . that what happened to Tim means . . ."

"No," he answered, but a shade too quickly for her to believe he didn't have some doubts himself. "There's no reason to think that at this point."

She noted that he, too, couldn't quite bring himself to say the word 'dead.' "That's what I keep telling myself, but it's so hard. Especially when my imagination kicks into overdrive."

"Imagination doesn't have any place in an investigation. Remember, state what you know . . ."

"Not what you think you know," she finished as she, too, skittered back behind the protective cover of agent once again. If she could just treat this as she would any other case . . .

She straightened in her chair. "Okay, then. We know that Jamie was worried about something at work."

"Something he didn't think he could share."

"Yes. Then suddenly he's assigned to some sort of top secret conference."

"There has to be a reason, Amanda." Lee's expression grew serious as he added thoughtfully, "Maybe some project he was working on. If NSL had classified research contracts . . ."

"Exactly," she concurred, her eyes lighting up. "He could have stumbled onto something NSL didn't want him to know about, and they sent him out of town to get him out of the way. There's a clue, Lee. It's somewhere in those files. It has to be."

He nodded. "And when we find it, we'll follow the trail -- wherever it leads."

Rolling over on his side, Lee gave the pillow a few sturdy punches with his fist. Small wonder he couldn't sleep; the damn thing was hard as a rock. Amanda always did love those extra-firm pillows. Too bad he hadn't remembered that when she'd offered him her couch for the night.

Sitting up, he pushed the blanket to one side. Who was he kidding? Pillow or no pillow, he should have been able to grab at least a few hours of shut-eye. He'd slept like a baby in far worse places. Why the hell wouldn't his tired mind cooperate tonight?

Leaning over, Lee held his head in his hands, rubbing his gritty eyes. He knew why. If he slept, he might dream. And, tired or not, the conscious mind had an infinite capacity for self-protection.

Letting out a sigh as he rose, he began to wear a path between the couch and the window. As if putting one foot in front of the other could actually force the endless parade of thoughts from his head. They crowded in thick and fast, leaving little room for anything else. Jamie . . . Amanda . . . Phillip . . . Amanda, who had looked too pale and worn in the unforgiving glare of the morgue lights.

Grabbing his pillow as he passed the couch, he folded it in two, slamming his fist one more time into its too-firm center. This whole situation was making him crazy. He needed to *do* something to find Jamie, not just sit around and wait. Groaning, Lee chucked the beaten pillow to the far end of the couch. He hadn't felt this helpless in a long time. Not since . . .

Damn it, Jamie, he thought with sudden vehemence. You were always the quiet one. Did you really have to turn out to be a carbon copy of your brother?

A door creaked open, and a thin sliver of light filled the hall, followed by soft footsteps. His lips curved up in a tired smile. Insomnia must be catching tonight. Turning toward the sound, he softly called out, "Amanda?"

"No, Lee. It's only me."

He let out a repentant sigh. "Sorry, Dotty. I didn't mean to wake you."

Padding into the living room, she sank down beside him on the sofa. "I couldn't sleep, either." Reaching for the lamp, she asked, "Do you mind?"

"No, go ahead. I could use the company." He quickly stifled the yawn that crept over him.

"You look tired, Lee." As he shrugged, she asked, "Well, are you hungry? I could fix you something."

"No, I'm fine. Amanda and I ate a little while ago."

"Amanda actually ate?" Dotty let out a weary sigh as he nodded. "Well, thank goodness for that. God knows I haven't been able to get her to take more than a few bites." Shifting in her chair, she crossed her legs as she regarded him appraisingly. "Come to think of it, you don't look like you eat much more than my daughter does." Tilting her brow, she fixed him in her steady gaze. "Exactly how much weight *have* you lost, Mr. Stetson?"

Lee grinned sheepishly. "I haven't kept track."

She whistled softly. "You two make quite a pair. She's awake, too, by the way," she informed him, her foot tapping back and forth to some unheard beat. "I've been listening to her pacing around in her bedroom for the past two hours." Clearing her throat, she added pointedly, "I take it you've been doing the same thing out here."

"We've both got a lot on our minds," he offered by means of apology, although why he felt the need to explain, he wasn't quite sure. Dotty's motherly concern could put him on the defensive faster than a phone call from Dr. Smyth. "This, uh, business with Jamie, you know."

"Oh, I know." She punctuated her words with a sharp nod of the head. "Jamie."

"We're both worried about him, that's all," he supplied, beginning to sweat.

"Perfectly natural," she returned, her smile unfathomable. "You're pacing out here, Amanda's pacing in there. And I suppose it never occurred to either one of you that it might be beneficial to do your pacing together?"

He took a deep breath, letting it out slowly before he answered. "No, Dotty, I don't think so," he stated with more patience than he felt. "When Amanda gets like this, she needs her space."

Dotty peered at her son-in-law over the top of her glasses. "You seem pretty certain of that."

"Field experience," he told her in a gravelly voice. "Trust me."

"You know I do. It's just that where my daughter's concerned, I don't think you're seeing things as clearly as you should." Reaching out, she gave his arm a little squeeze. "Talk to her."

He snorted. "Talking doesn't seem to do us much good."

Dotty cast her eyes back toward the bedrooms, one manicured fingernail tapping absently on the arm of the sofa. "I love my daughter very much. But that doesn't mean I don't see her faults. You know as well as I do that she doesn't ask for help, even when she's screaming for it on the inside. And she needs your help, Lee. Trust *me* on this."

He shook his head. "I've tried, Dotty. You have no idea . . . I don't know, maybe if we hadn't been going through a rocky patch at the time, things would have been different."

"Every marriage has rough spots. You hang on and plow through it, and things get better. Surely . . ."

"No. Nothing's changed. She won't accept my help. I learned that first-hand eighteen months ago when . . . well, eighteen months ago," he hastily amended.

"Phillip!" Dotty cried hotly, springing from her chair as she drew herself up to her full height. "He had a name, Lee. It isn't a crime to say it. Honestly, you and my daughter both act as if . . ." Giving her head a vigorous shake, she quickly put some distance between them.

"Dotty . . ."

She shook her head again, cutting him off. Letting out a sigh, Lee leaned back into the couch, seizing the opportunity to look at his mother-in-law more closely. When she'd greeted him that afternoon, all he'd seen was the same old Dotty West, a woman brimming with life, remarkably fit for her age. Now, in the all-revealing wee hours of the morning, he noted the subtle changes the past year had wrought. There was more gray than blonde in her hair, and the fine lines on her face had deepened perceptibly. And there was something about her eyes . . .

She was angry, he realized with a guilty pang. Angrier than he'd seen her in a long, long time. He hadn't heard her refer to Amanda as 'my daughter' this often since the day their mystery marriage had been revealed.

Making his way over to her, Lee put an arm around her shoulder. "Hey, it's late," he told her in a gentle voice, "and you're exhausted. Let's sit down."

To his relief, she agreed, letting him lead her back to the couch with atypical submission. Reaching into the pocket of her robe, she pulled out a Kleenex, drying the corners of her eyes as she sat down beside him. "I just don't understand anymore," she murmured, clutching the rumpled tissue in her palm. "Maybe you can explain it to me, Lee, because Amanda certainly doesn't seem able to."

"That's because we just don't know much at this point. Jamie . . ."

"I'm not talking about Jamie. I'm talking about you . . . you and Amanda."

"What's to explain?" He fell back against the couch with a tired groan, rubbing his thumb and forefinger back and forth across his forehead. "I think it's pretty obvious. I'm in D.C.; she's here in Chicago."

"Yes, I know where my daughter is. I'm the one who's here in Chicago with her, after all. What I'd like to know is . . . why aren't you?"

Lee swept his tousled hair off his forehead. "That's her choice. She walked out, not me."

"Her choice' . . ." Dotty let out a long breath. "Yes, that's the trouble with the pair of you . . . both too stubborn for your own good. Neither one of you wants to be the first to admit you made a mistake."

"Maybe it wasn't a mistake."

"Lee Stetson!" Dotty exclaimed, spinning around to face him. "If I believed you really thought that, I'd be hard pressed not to take you across my knee!"

As his mouth curved into a reluctant smile, she continued, "You know, when Amanda announced she was moving to Chicago to be near Jamie, Lisa and the baby, I understood. I didn't agree, but I understood. And I came with her because . . . well, right or wrong, she's my daughter. She needed me. And I thought, don't worry, Dorothea, it'll be okay. Sooner or later, one of them will come to their senses and end this lunacy. For over a year now I've watched and waited . . ."

Lee chuckled softly. "'Watched and waited?' Dotty West?"

"Well, okay, I may have said just a few things here or there." Reaching across the cushions, she laid a motherly hand on his knee. "You two need each other, Lee. You don't have to be alone. You've both suffered the same loss. It was bad, I

know -- the worst thing that can happen to a parent. But time has a way of putting things in perspective, however painful."

"I'm afraid it doesn't work that way, Dotty," he said, his voice infinitely sad as he rose from the couch. Thrusting his hands into the front pockets of his sweatshirt, he walked to the window in thoughtful silence. The scene below was dark now, but he could hear the distant wind driving the waves against the unforgiving stone barrier. "You think that loss brings people together," he said at last, "but it doesn't. It just pushes them further apart and then . . . sits there, like some insurmountable wall between them. There's no going over it or around it. When he . . . when Phillip died, a part of *us* died, too. A part we can't get back."

He heard Dotty sweep up behind him, felt her arm find its way around his waist. "No, Lee. I won't believe that. I *can't* believe that. You see, I've already lost a grandson; I can't accept losing my son as well."

Wordlessly, he placed his arm around the older woman's shoulder, pulling her closer.

"It will be all right," she promised with an assurance he didn't believe. "I know it will. You and Amanda will work this out and . . ."

"Lee!"

Startled, they fairly jumped apart as Amanda called out excitedly once again, "Lee, are you awake?"

"Uh, yeah." He sidled over to meet her as she burst into the room. "Your mother and I were just, uh, talking about Jamie."

"That's what I wanted to tell you," she continued breathlessly, oblivious to the look that Dotty bestowed on an increasingly sheepish Lee. "I found it!"

"Found what, Darling?" Dotty asked.

"The lead we've been looking for." Excitement fairly radiated off her as she thrust a dog-eared file under Lee's nose. Words bubbling over, she told him quickly, "I don't know why I didn't see it before. It was there in front of me this whole time. I guess I was looking for something else, something in the medical notes. I naturally assumed . . ."

"Amanda." He held up a hand in exasperation. "What am I looking for here?"

She smiled, catching her tongue between her teeth. "Sorry. Right here, scrawled in the margin, with the small asterisk that looks like a speck."

Lee squinted, trying to make sense of the blurry words. "Just a minute," he groused in frustration, absently patting his sweats in search of his glasses. Spying them at last on the coffee table, he slipped them on and sat down on the couch, squinting slightly as he tried to make out Jamie's handwriting. The boy had certainly chosen the right career -- it was practically illegible. Did it really say . . .

Tilting up his glasses, he gave Amanda a curious look. "Iguana Associates, LLC?"

"Yes. It's a Limited Liability Corporation." Perching beside him, she pointed to the report. "And beside it, right there -- the tiny initials, see?"

He looked again more closely. "B.T.?"

"Yes." She gave him a triumphant grin. "Bryce Topping."

"As in Senator Bryce Topping?" Lee raised an eyebrow incredulously.

"None other," she assured him, her smile broadening.

Lee thoughtfully scratched the dark shadow of his beard. "I'm not sure I follow you. 'B.T.' could refer to any number of things."

"I know," she said, her hand absently patting his knee. "But when I remembered the iguanas, well, it all made perfect sense."

His eyebrows shot up. "Iguanas? Oh, Amanda . . ."

"I knew Bryce years ago," she explained with a tolerant grin. "Through the school's PTA group. He had a son, Bennet, who was absolutely crazy about iguanas."

"That's right," Dotty concurred. "Wasn't he in Phillip's class?"

"No, Jamie's," Amanda said, her voice suddenly quiet as she folded her hands in her lap.

"Oh, I think I remember him now. The one with all the freckles."

Amanda nodded. "He and Jamie were good friends all through grade school, but they kind of lost touch after junior high." She turned again to Lee once again.

"The point is -- Jamie would definitely remember him. I think he made the same connection."

Lee looked at her doubtfully. He could see how much she wanted, needed, to believe it. Of course, that same quirky logic *had* been passed down from mother to son. Still . . . "I don't know, Amanda. I think this time you might really be grasping at straws."

She jumped up as if she'd been stung. "Well, I don't see you holding out anything else for me to grasp! If you have a theory of your own, I'd be more than happy to listen."

"You know I don't," he shot back, he, too, springing up from the couch. "But you can't just jump to conclusions on such flimsy. . ."

"Flimsy? I've seen you make a case from much less."

"Okay, okay," Dotty interjected, quickly moving to stand between them. "Neutral corners, both of you." She gave them both a sharp look. "This isn't helping. You're supposed to be on the same side, remember?"

Amanda opened her mouth, but her words dissolved under her mother's icy glare. Instead, she pursed her lips, her foot tapping impatiently on the hardwood floor as she regarded Lee solemnly. "Will you at least run the corporation's name through the Agency databanks?"

"I . . ." He let out a long breath as Dotty turned and caught his eye. "Yeah, sure," he agreed, suddenly chagrined. "I guess it can't hurt."

Nodding her thanks, Amanda walked briskly over to her computer, holding out a chair for him as it booted. He could read the impatient enthusiasm in her stance; she was like a racehorse champing at the bit.

He settled uneasily in front of the screen. Slipping a coded disk into the drive, he quickly typed in the series of number sequences to access the Agency mainframe. As the familiar eagle profile filled the screen, he entered his password, then the information, his knuckles rapping absently on the desktop as he waited for the hourglass to stop spinning. The screen suddenly sprang to life. "I don't believe this," he mumbled, unable to disguise his amazement as he perused the information, punching in another series of numbers as he set the search to dig a little deeper.

"What?" he heard in stereo from over his right and left shoulders.

He swiveled his chair, his expression alternating between discomfiture and pride. "It, uh, looks like you might be right," he said, admiration finally winning out. "Again. It's skillfully buried, but it's there. Take a look at the partnership of Iguana Associates."

He felt a familiar pressure on his back as Amanda leaned closer, her upper body pressing against him. "Topping, B. and . . . Roman, D.," she exclaimed, her voice rippling with barely suppressed excitement. "Dan Roman! There is a connection!"

Her warm breath tickled his ear even as a few stray strands of hair brushed across his neck. Lee shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "Yeah," he said, struggling to keep his voice even. "I guess there is at that."

Amanda acknowledged his unspoken apology with a gentle squeeze of his shoulder. "So you can launch an investigation at NSL now, right?"

He drew in a deep breath. "I wish it was that easy."

"But, Lee, you said it yourself. It's right there in black and white."

"All this tells us," he reminded her, "is that the head of North Shore has a professional relationship with a powerful Washington politician. Hardly grounds for an investigation."

"Then get it. Question Roman."

He rose, restlessly pacing the room. "I'm not sure that would do any good," he muttered. "Not with Fleetwood at the Chicago branch looking over my shoulder every step of the way. I don't have any leverage here."

"Lee . . ."

"I'm going back to D.C."

Hands on her hips, she blocked his path. "You can't just let this drop. It's the first real clue we have."

"I have no intention of letting anything drop," he returned, his icy tone matching hers. "But we're hitting our heads against a brick wall here in Chicago."

"With the police looking into what happened to Tim now . . ."

"Roman's guard will be up." He paused, deliberately engaging her eye. "I'm gonna go knock on the back door."

He heard her suck in a breath. "Topping?"

"Yes. I think the answer's there, Amanda. With the connection you found -- Iguana Associates." His voice lowered as he added, "I'll keep you informed, I promise." He included Dotty in his gaze. "Both of you."

"You bet you will, Stetson," Amanda stated, her voice filled with quiet determination. "I'm going with you."

"Amanda . . ."

"Sorry, it's not up for debate."

"Well, darlings," Dotty speedily interposed, putting an arm around them both. "*I* think that's a wonderful idea. You know the old adage -- and *your* two heads are definitely better than one. Now that we've got that settled," she put in as Lee showed unmistakable signs of interrupting, "I'd advise a little rest. It's late."

Amanda agreed. "I'll make airline reservations first thing in the morning," she said, giving him no room to protest as she headed for the bedroom.

He heard a small sigh escape Dotty's lips as she prepared to follow her daughter. "Goodnight, Lee, darling," she whispered, her arm tightening around his waist for just a minute. "It's good to see you." Her eyes followed her daughter's retreating back, then returned to her son-in-law. "Very good indeed."

PART TWO

"I pray the Lord my soul to keep . . ."

~ X ~

Amanda observed the carefully controlled chaos in the bullpen with a slightly wistful eye. As the agents buzzed around her, moving back and forth from the telex to their desks, then to the main computer screen, she heaved a restless sigh. This must be what it felt like in the eye of a hurricane -- pent-up energy swirling everywhere, while the center merely existed, a perfectly walled-off bubble, unable to act.

"It shouldn't be too much longer, Mrs. King."

Starting, she looked up into the inquisitive brown eyes of Lee's assistant. The name 'King' sounded oddly out of place on the girl's lips; 'West' was her professional moniker now.

"Would you like some more coffee while you wait for Mr. Stetson?" Angela Carter asked, the full pot poised in her hand.

Amanda gave her a terse, "No, thank you," then felt immediate remorse for her uncharacteristic brusqueness. "I've obviously had way too much coffee already this morning," she apologized.

Carter nodded her understanding, gazing at Amanda with a look of shy reverence. "Mrs. King, I just wanted to say . . . well . . ." Her eyes drifted in the direction of Lee's office. Turning a becoming shade of red, she finished summarily, "It's such an honor to work for Mr. Stetson."

Amanda gave the girl a faint smile, wondering briefly if Lee had any idea of the extent of his impressionable young assistant's hero worship. From the way he'd behaved toward her earlier that morning, probably not.

"And now to actually meet you, too," Carter gushed. "Well, what I mean is, Scarecrow and Mrs. King are practically a legend around here."

Amanda raised her eyebrows. The old rumor mill was evidently as effective as ever at creating heroes where none existed. They had only been people doing a job . . . a job that took infinitely more than it gave.

She realized that Carter was still prattling on. Shifting in her seat, she tried to give her a modicum of attention. She'd already been rude enough for one morning.

"You know, Mrs. King, I just hope someday I can be half the field agent you are . . . I mean, were. That is, if I ever get the chance to get out from behind my desk."

Carter's unbridled admiration really was quite touching. "Don't sell yourself short," Amanda found herself telling the girl kindly. "Remember, desk work has its place, too."

As Angela gave her a deferential little nod, Amanda felt a wave of melancholy wash over her. Had she once been as eager as this fresh-faced girl? It seemed almost impossible to comprehend. Her eyes strayed to the comfortable office

where Lee was closeted with Francine -- the office that had formerly belonged to Billy Melrose. How long ago had she stood in that very spot, clutching the bits and pieces of her timesheets as she waited for Billy's signature? Sometimes it seemed as if all that must surely have happened in someone else's lifetime.

"Well," Carter said as she, too, cast an eye in Lee's direction. "I'd better get back to work. I have a stack of files on my desk. Paperwork," she moaned. "Nothing exciting there."

Noting the particularly firm set of Lee's jaw as he barked orders into the telephone, Amanda smiled knowingly. "I'm sure your position as Mr. Stetson's assistant demands its own brand of intestinal fortitude."

Carter grinned. "Oh, Mr. Stetson's bark is much worse than his bite," she confided, warming to her subject. "At least, that's what Ms. Desmond's always telling me." Smiling fondly at the formidable agent standing a little behind Lee's desk, Carter added respectfully, "She should know. The two of them go way back together."

Frowning, Amanda considered the young woman's phrase. 'Way back' was certainly one way to put it. Francine's face absolutely dripped sympathetic concern as her slender fingers worked the unseen knots out of Lee's left shoulder. As his stern facade softened, Amanda inexplicably felt her own scowl deepen. Lee relaxed into his chair, his hand hovering in the air for just a moment before it gently covered Francine's. He smiled up at her, mouthing a few words Amanda wasn't able to discern from the bullpen.

It was only a small gesture between friends . . . good friends. But for some reason she couldn't quite fathom, Amanda found the picture they presented more than a little annoying.

She watched as Lee spoke to Francine again. The blonde agent nodded in response, marching over to the office door and sticking her head out into the bullpen. Although she disguised it well, Amanda could discern a slight stiffening of her shoulders.

"Could you join us?" Francine demanded. Her hand tapped an impatient beat against the doorframe as she gazed somewhat belligerently in Amanda's direction.

"Of course," she returned more pleasantly than she felt, her irritation growing. Dismissing Carter with a friendly nod, she headed in Francine's direction, quickly arranging her face in a neutral expression. While they had never been

close, Francine's condescending attitude had, over the years, morphed into something akin to friendly respect, and the two of them had achieved a pleasant comradeship.

But none of that was evident now in the woman's cool blue eyes. As they swept over her appraisingly, Amanda could almost feel herself being measured and found wanting. She glanced ruefully at the visitor's pass dangling from her belt. The more things changed, the more they stayed the same. Francine Desmond never did have much use for civilians, either in or outside the field of counter-espionage.

At least Lee had a welcoming smile for her as she entered the office. "Sorry you had to wait," he said, indicating the empty chair with a nod. "It's been one hell of a morning."

Amanda shot a pointed glance at Francine as she eased herself into the comfortable leather seat. "As I recall, this is a pretty typical Monday."

Lee's mouth tightened. "Not quite. Franklin's body was found early this morning in a dumpster."

"Tom Franklin?" At Lee's terse nod, she unconsciously stretched her hand across the desk to him. "I'm so sorry, Lee. Tom was a good man."

"Yes, he was. I've spent the past hour dealing with the family and a mountain of red tape." He shook his head sadly. "I guess losing an agent is one part of this job I'll never quite get used . . ."

His words stopped short as their eyes locked, and Amanda swiftly withdrew her hand. "I guess you haven't had much time for the background search on Iguana Associates," she mumbled.

"Francine was just about to fill me in."

As if on cue, Francine cleared her throat loudly. "I *was* able to do a preliminary run-through and, on the surface, things appear to be totally on the up and up. But . . ." Frowning, she consulted her notes. "When you dig a little deeper, the water gets murkier. It seems three years ago, Iguana Associates brokered a deal with, shall we say, a questionable outcome."

Lee raised an eyebrow. "Questionable as in illegal?"

"Technically, no. They brokered the sale of a number of vaccines to a foreign country. While the drugs weren't approved for use in the U.S., laws governing its sale to the small nation of San Cardenzia were a lot looser."

"San Cardenzia?" Lee asked.

Francine nodded, smiling wryly as she handed him the file. "Polo DiGreggorio's old stomping ground."

"Stomping' is pretty apropos," Lee grunted as he quickly perused the information. "If I recall, there wasn't much left of that country by the time DiGreggorio's regime finally fell from power."

"Are we talking about the same 'Polo' DiGreggorio?" Amanda asked doubtfully. "The man seemed pretty innocuous to me."

Francine snorted. "I suppose that would depend on your definition of 'innocuous.'"

Lee shot Francine a look before turning to Amanda. "DiGreggorio himself may well have been harmless, but he surrounded himself with some pretty unscrupulous people. They ravaged the country for their own personal gain." His eyes narrowed as he studied the file again. "Looks like history repeated itself here. Iguana Associates made quite a killing -- figuratively *and* literally."

"Yes," Francine agreed. "The proceeds from the sale were extremely lucrative for the company, but many of the recipients died. And the experimental vaccines were developed by none other than . . ."

"North Shore Labs," Amanda finished as she caught Lee's eye. "I knew there was a connection!"

Lee nodded. "Yes, it looks like your instincts were right on."

Amanda caught the unmistakable admiration in his voice. Warmed by his praise, she leaned a little closer. "This could be what Jamie stumbled onto. Maybe Topping and Roman are trying to do it again."

"Now wait a minute, that's a pretty big leap," Francine broke in, her eyebrows shooting up as she, too, looked expressively at Lee.

"I have a feeling about this."

"Oh, well, fine then," the blonde agent snapped. "I'll just go type that in on the warrant. 'Amanda King has a feeling.' That's sure to get us approval to bring in a U.S. Senator for questioning."

Amanda rolled her eyes. "Francine, I was merely . . ."

"This Agency can't just go barging onto Capitol Hill without just cause, Amanda," Francine continued pedantically. "You should at least remember *that* much."

Lee shifted uncomfortably. "Okay, this isn't getting us . . ."

"I wasn't suggesting that 'this Agency' do anything of the sort, Francine," Amanda continued, ignoring Lee's attempt to play peacemaker. "If you'd let me finish, I was about to suggest a simple fact-finding mission."

Francine straightened in her chair, smoothing the fabric of her skirt as she crossed her legs. "And how would you suggest we go about that, dear? Take out an ad in your news magazine?"

Biting back the retort that sprang to her lips, Amanda appealed to Lee. "A friendly little interview couldn't hurt."

"I just finished telling you that the Agency has no grounds to question Senator Topping," Francine began as Lee sprang to his feet practically shouting, "No, Amanda, absolutely not!"

Amanda glanced from Francine's frosty blue eyes to Lee's deeper hazel ones. "Excuse me, Mr. Stetson, but the last time I looked, you weren't *my* boss." Her sarcasm was unmistakable.

"We don't have any idea what Topping is really into," Lee replied gruffly. "It's too dangerous."

"It's the perfect cover, and you know it. I'm a reporter looking for some information on a high-profile politician. After all," she pointed out with a gleeful glance at Francine, "One of your own agents just finished telling us that this Agency has no grounds to question the good Senator."

Francine quickly moved to Lee's side. "Now wait just a minute, I never meant to imply that a civilian should . . ."

Amanda brushed her objection aside. "Besides, what's the harm in a friendly little lunch in a public place?"

"What makes you think he'll even agree to lunch?" Francine demanded. "Bryce Topping avoids the press like the plague."

Amanda smiled. "Oh, I think he'll agree to see me. Bryce and I are old PTA buddies. Besides, we really don't have any other viable choices here, do we?"

"No," Lee said with a deep sigh, "I guess we don't. Francine's right. The Agency can't officially bring Topping in. Still . . ."

As she saw him begin to waver, Amanda delivered the final touch. "You could even be at the restaurant, too. You and Francine both. It'll be okay, Lee, you'll see." Arching her eyebrows, she added lightly, "With the two of you right there, what could possibly happen?"

~ XI ~

Lee heard Francine let out a long breath as he fairly slammed the phone back into its cradle. His morning was going straight to hell, and it seemed there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it.

"I don't suppose we were lucky enough to catch a break on this," Francine said, echoing his sentiments as she gave him a disgusted look.

Lee shook his head. "Franklin's hotel room has been swept clean. The field team doesn't expect to lift even a single print."

"No fingerprints? In a hotel for transients?"

Lee grimaced. "Yes. You know what that means."

"Someone wanted to erase their tracks very thoroughly," Francine said, tapping her fingernails on the desktop. "And you're positive Salzedo is behind this?"

"Who else could it be? Franklin had been working that case for close to nine months. Then just when it looks like we're about to get our break, he ends up with his throat slit. And, according to your 'whereabouts and activities' report, Salzedo's in D.C."

"It *does* seem to have Salzedo and 'Los Lobos' written all over it," Francine agreed.

"Yeah," Lee said sourly. "He did exactly the same thing in El Salvador four years ago."

"If he follows true to form, this means his deal is about to go through."

Lee nodded grimly. "I just wish we had some idea of who's financing him. Salzedo may be a pig, and I'd dearly love to take him out of the action, but he's only a front man. Someone else is backing him, someone connected enough to know we were on the verge of blowing this latest operation sky high."

"You're not suggesting he has someone here on the inside, are you?"

Lee absently rolled his pen back and forth between his fingers. "I don't want to believe that, but, at this point, anything is possible. Damn," he muttered, tossing the writing implement onto the cluttered desk. "The timing on this couldn't be worse, just when I'm up to my neck in this Jamie business."

"Yes," Francine put in dryly, "I'm sure your unexpected houseguest isn't helping your equilibrium any."

Lee gazed out at the bullpen where Amanda appeared to be having an animated conversation with one of her former co-workers. She looked so natural standing there . . . a fish suddenly back in water. "You know, Francine," he murmured thoughtfully, "she's not exactly a rookie agent anymore."

Francine snorted. "You're right. She's not any kind of agent at all."

Letting out an exasperated sigh, he pivoted his chair in Francine's direction. "Let up on her a little. She isn't in any shape to play your usual game of verbal volleyball."

"You could certainly fool me," Francine said, rolling her eyes as Amanda's laugh reached her from the other room.

Lee compressed his lips, tiny lines appearing around the edges of his mouth. "You didn't see the way she looked a few days ago in Chicago. Her son is missing, maybe even . . ." He stopped, unable to actually put the thought into words. "I don't know if she can survive that again."

Francine let out a breathy sigh. "I understand how tough this is on her. I really do," she protested at Lee's look. "Contrary to popular opinion, I don't have a block of ice for a heart."

A smile tugged at Lee's lips. "You know I never believed those rumors, Francine."

"And I realize that Amanda's been through a lot," she reiterated, ignoring Lee's remark with pointed determination. "But you're the one I'm worried about." Her features softened slightly as she caught his eye.

He looked away. "I can take care of myself."

"That's what I thought when Jonathan and I split," Francine told him, an echo of bitterness in her words. "I know first-hand how painful a divorce can be. And that's when you don't invite heartache right back in through your front door."

"It's not like that," Lee put in quickly. "We're both worried about Jamie, that's all. When we find him . . ."

"Look, Lee, why don't you let me help?" she interrupted, inclining her body ever so slightly toward his. "I could invite Amanda to stay with me."

Lee let out a rumbling laugh. "Oh, yeah, now there's a plan. We'd be mopping up the debris from that explosion until the next millennium. Look, Francine," he added with a sigh, "I appreciate your concern, I really do. And the warning is duly noted. And if you really want to help me, there *is* something you could do."

"Anything, you know that."

"Sign out one of those bracelet devices from supply -- the new experimental one with the built in satellite tracker."

Francine raised her eyebrows, a teasing smile playing around the corners of her mouth. "I don't think it will go with your suit."

"It's for Amanda."

Francine let out a long-suffering sigh. "You're determined to let her go through with this ridiculous 'fact-finding' mission of hers?"

"If I don't help her, she'll just do it without me, you know that as well as I do. At least this way she won't be walking in there without some sort of failsafe."

She sighed. "I'll take care of the paperwork and escort her down to Leatherneck's domain, but if you don't mind, I'll let *him* brief her on its use. Like you said," she finished wryly, "it'll be safer that way."

"Thanks. And Francine . . ." He let out a slow breath. "Lay off the barbs, okay? As a favor to me?"

Francine wrinkled her nose as she headed out the door. "Okay, Stetson, but you're going to owe me big time."

He groaned as he leaned back in his chair. "Aw, come on, you know I've only got one more bottle of the Rosso Picerno '94."

Francine smiled sweetly. "Not anymore."

~ XII ~

"Would you care for some dessert?" Bryce Topping looked across the small table at her, his eyes filled with concern. "You've hardly touched your lunch."

"I'm sorry, Bryce," she replied, letting just the right amount of remorse slip into her voice. It was amazing how quickly all the old moves snapped back into place, she thought as she gave him a warm smile. "I never seem to be able to eat when I'm working."

He immediately returned her look. "Yes, I'm exactly the same way. My aide always has to remind me to take a lunch break. I guess that's why I was so happy to receive your phone call this morning. It's not every day that I'm invited out by such an attractive journalist."

Amanda felt an unaccustomed blush flush her cheeks. Whether it was from Bryce's flattering attention or Lee's icy stare, she wasn't quite sure. Lee's face had seemed to hover in the distance throughout the meal, somewhere just over Bryce Topping's left shoulder. Though she'd tried valiantly to ignore him, she'd still found her eyes drifting time and again to the corner table where her soon to be ex-husband sat just a little too close to Francine.

The Senator's deep, rumbling voice turned her attention back to the table she currently occupied. "You know, Amanda," she heard him say, his tone low and soothing, "I was so sorry about your son's death."

She stiffened slightly. "How did you . . ."

"A man in my position hears things," he said with a tight smile. "I meant to get in touch with you at the time, but I didn't want to intrude. We kind of lost track after Ben and Jamie went to high school, and I wasn't sure . . ."

"It's okay. Nobody really knows quite what to say in a situation like that."

"No, that's not what I mean," he put in quickly. "I lost my nephew about two years ago. He was killed in a car accident, very suddenly."

"You understand, then." She felt the tears gathering behind her eyes, and she drew a sharp little breath, willing them away. "How is Ben doing?"

"Ben's doing very well, thank you," Bryce informed her, responding to her not-so-subtle change of subject with a charming smile. "And how is Jamie? He's a doctor, isn't he?"

"Ah, yes, he is," Amanda stammered, struggling to decipher the puzzling enigma sitting across from her. In the three-quarters of an hour they'd spent together, Bryce Topping had somehow managed to neatly turn the conversation back to her at every turn. And he had obviously done his research before meeting her for this impromptu lunch. The man was either very slick or very sincere, she couldn't quite decide.

"Jamie and his family live in Chicago," she informed Bryce casually, carefully gauging his reaction as she looked into his clear, gray eyes.

Topping seemed unfazed. "Family? You don't mean to tell me . . ."

"Yes, I'm a grandmother," she admitted with a light laugh.

The handsome Senator reached across the table to stroke her hand. "A very beautiful grandmother."

Amanda shivered as his thumb brushed across her knuckles. Despite her ingrained skepticism, she found herself warming to the compliment. It had been such a long time since she'd felt anything but achingly tired.

"Amanda," Bryce said suddenly, regret etched in the fine lines around his eyes. "I have a meeting on the Hill in forty-five minutes." He hesitated for a minute, then warmly squeezed her hand. "I would love to continue this, though, maybe over dinner. Are you free tomorrow night? I have some great new pictures of Ben at my townhouse that I'd love to show you," he added as she seemed to be wavering. "He's living in the Chicago area now, too."

"Dinner at your place?" she asked, ignoring the warning bells going off in her head. She could only imagine what Lee would say to that proposal as she unconsciously glanced in his direction. She wasn't able to catch his eye, though. He seemed totally engrossed in his conversation with Francine.

Bryce gave her hand a gentle squeeze. "What do you say? It would give us a chance to really catch up." He shot her a dazzling smile, one that made the corners of his eyes crinkle attractively. "I have an excellent cook, so no shop talk this time. I want to make very sure you enjoy the meal."

Amanda hesitated. She knew she should say no, but the insistent look in his eyes touched a familiar chord. Something about the man was so appealing, and she found herself responding as she met his ready smile with one of her own.

"I can't think of anything I'd like more, Bryce," she murmured quickly before she could change her mind. "I'll be looking forward to it."

~ XIII ~

Lee tried unsuccessfully to stifle his yawn as he shuffled into the kitchen, shaking his head a few times to dispel the cobwebs from yet another sleepless night. He glanced ruefully at the clock on the oven. Even under the best of circumstances, he'd never been a morning person.

"Would you like some coffee?" he heard Amanda ask, a hint of laughter in her otherwise solicitous tone. "I made a fresh pot."

She sat at the small kitchen table, calmly eating a bowl of cereal. Her face was devoid of makeup, her hair swept back into a simple ponytail, and her silk floral robe clung loosely to her body. Lee sucked in a sharp breath; he'd always loved her in pink.

"I should know better than to offer you breakfast, but there's some cereal left, in case you're interested." She smiled self-consciously at him, as if not quite sure what to make of their sudden domesticity.

"Uh, no, that's okay," he said as he filled the mug she'd left for him on the counter. "Coffee will do just fine." Opening the refrigerator, he grabbed a container of skim milk, pouring a generous amount into the dark liquid.

He heard Amanda's soft chuckle.

"Okay, I'll admit it took a while, but you finally converted me. Besides," he added with a short laugh as he hooked his thumb in his belt, "You were right, as usual. My pants do fit better without the extra calories."

She raised her eyebrows, looking at him in that 'cat that swallowed the canary' way she always adopted when she knew she was right. "Here," she said with a smirk, handing him the Washington Post as he sat down at their breakfast table. "Untouched by human hands."

He grinned thankfully as he opened the pristine paper. Over the years, he'd lost count of the number of times he and Amanda had bumped heads over that particular pet peeve. Perhaps it was because he'd been a bachelor for so long, but a messy morning newspaper drove him crazy. He chuckled softly at the memory of those battles and their inevitable outcome. Living openly as man and wife might have engendered a multitude of mundane little problems, but it had also sparked equally extraordinary rewards.

"Did you sleep well last night?" he inquired from behind the safety of the business section.

"I did, actually." He heard the surprise in her voice. "The stress of the last few weeks must have finally caught up with me."

"I'm still not too sure of that mattress in the guest room. If it's uncomfortable, I'd be happy to . . ."

"No," he heard her answer, a little too quickly. "It's fine, really."

"Uh, yeah, okay," he mumbled, recognizing the same strangled quality in her voice that he heard in his own. Suddenly, he was very grateful for the paper barrier between them.

At least she'd managed to get some rest in her mother's old room. He had tossed and turned in the bed they used to share, the memory of better times weaving seductively through his mind. He cleared his throat, shifting restlessly in his chair. His control must be slipping; it had been a long time since he'd allowed his conscious thoughts to go there.

"Do you have a heavy schedule today?" Amanda asked as she finished the last of her cereal. Lee could hear her spoon scraping against the bottom of the bowl, the sound oddly soothing.

"Moderately," he answered as he gave the editorial page a final perusal. "I have a meeting with Dr. Smyth that I wish I could postpone. The investigation into Franklin's death is going nowhere fast. Smyth won't be pleased to hear it." Sighing, he tossed the paper aside. "You'd think after all these years, the man would be ready to retire."

Amanda smiled faintly. "I think Dr. Smyth thrives on making everyone around him miserable. It's his own personal fountain of youth."

"Then I'm sure after this afternoon, he'll be good for another twenty years at least."

"You can handle Dr. Smyth. Just do what I always did." She shot him a wicked grin. "When the man starts spouting those nursery rhyme clichés of his, picture him actually *in* the nursery . . . wearing nothing but a great, big diaper."

"Thanks a lot," he moaned. "I'll try *not* to remember that."

As the strains of her soft laughter mingled with his, Lee found himself looking at her more closely. A good night's sleep had done wonders. Her deep brown eyes seemed to have regained some of their old sparkle, and he unconsciously edged his chair closer to hers.

"Don't worry about me if you have a busy day," she murmured as she turned her face toward the window. Blinking, she focused her gaze on some unseen object in the distance.

Was that regret he saw in her eyes or embarrassment? He used to be so good at reading her, but he just couldn't tell any more. He only knew that sitting beside her at their breakfast table, mapping out their day the way they used to do, felt damn good.

"I have a lot to keep me busy, too," she continued, pulling her eyes from the window.

"Such as?" Watching her carefully, he took a draught from his mug. Those wispy strands of hair softly framing her face made her look almost like a girl, as did the bangs that brushed her eyebrows. He wondered absently when she'd started wearing her hair like that. It was very attractive.

"Research on Iguana Associates." Her voice drifted warmly over him. "I want to be prepared for tonight."

"What's tonight?" he questioned with a silly grin.

"My dinner with Bryce Topping."

Lee's eyes narrowed. "I thought we decided that wasn't a viable idea."

"No," Amanda replied shortly. "*You* decided, Lee. Not me."

He pushed away from the table. "You know how dangerous this could be as well as I do, Amanda. If it turns out Topping is behind this . . ."

"We don't know that." Her chair made a grating sound on the floor as she jumped up and moved to stand by the sink.

Lee watched her stare blankly out the window. "That's a pretty big about-face," he grumbled. "Only yesterday the man topped your suspect list."

She bit her lip, her hands tightening their grip on the counter. "I don't think he fits the profile. He was totally clueless about Dan Roman."

"Or that's what he wants you to think. One lunch with the guy and suddenly you're his biggest fan." Lee snorted derisively. "Don't tell me you're actually falling for his line."

Whirling, she faced him. "I don't know what you're talking about!"

"I'm talking about the way Topping was drooling all over you at lunch yesterday," Lee sneered, crossing over to the small cooking island. "Probably to throw you off the scent. Looks like it worked."

"Well, I'm surprised you even noticed." Hands on her hips, she set her face in a distasteful grimace. "You seemed pretty occupied yourself."

"'Occupied'? What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"You figure it out," she spat, walking into the den with a determined stride.

Lee watched her retreating form, his back unconsciously straightening to match her rigidity. Amanda could get under his skin faster than anyone he'd ever known. It had always been her particular talent, one she obviously still possessed with a vengeance. He drew a deep breath, letting it out slowly as he followed her into the other room.

"Look," he began, struggling to keep the bubbling anger out of his voice. "Let's not lose sight of what's important here . . . finding Jamie."

"Exactly. *I'm* the one who's been saying he's in trouble all along, remember?"

Lee bristled. "And now you suddenly think that stiff Topping has all the answers?"

Amanda's frown deepened as she pulled herself up to her full height. "How dare you imply . . ."

"I'm not implying anything," Lee said, running his hand absently along the back of the couch as he paced. "I'm just giving you a friendly reminder. You know as well as I do, personal feelings have no place in this work. Facts are the only reality a field agent can trust."

"Well, thank you, Scarecrow, for that extremely helpful refresher course, but I can handle myself in the field."

"There's too much here that doesn't add up," he ground out, his hands clenching into tight fists. "I don't trust Topping."

"Well, I do," she replied, her cheeks flushing as she folded her arms across her chest. "After all, the man is a United States Senator."

"Now there's a recommendation," Lee jeered. "A goddamned politician. Not to mention, the man used to be a lawyer. What better training ground to learn how to lie for a living."

"Now who's stereotyping," she shot back. "Not all lawyers are crooked, you know. I was married to one once."

"And we all know how well *that* turned out!"

"Don't you dare throw Joe in my face! He was a good man, no matter what went wrong between the two of us. You're always so quick to think the worst of everyone. First Joe, now Bryce . . ."

"Maybe because you always insist on seeing everyone through those rose-colored glasses of yours."

"I do not . . ."

"Look, Amanda," he stated sharply, cutting off her protest. "I don't care if the man turns out to be as pure as the driven snow, you don't go to a meet with a suspect without backup. For God's sake, it's such a rookie mistake . . ."

"A 'rookie' mistake?" She drew in a sharp breath, her eyes blazing. "I guess it runs in the family, huh, Lee? Like mother, like son? Or is it the other way around?"

He opened his mouth to repel her attack, but oddly no words would come. He stood facing her instead, breathing mechanically in and out as she delivered the final blow with particular venom. "Regulations didn't seem to bother you so much that day you took a rookie on a hot meet. So please, don't you let it trouble you now."

Wincing, he turned away to hide the ache that surely showed in his eyes. "Do what you want, Amanda," he managed to choke out as he retrieved his car keys and slammed out the door. "You always do."

~ XIV ~

Dousing the small dust rag with a generous spray of furniture polish, Amanda worked the cloth over the edge of the picture frame. She applied a healthy dose of elbow grease, grunting slightly at the effort. If cleaning was a universal cure-all, she would have surely solved the world's problems by now.

Damn Lee Stetson anyway. And damn her for letting him affect her this way.

Less than twenty-four hours under this familiar roof and already the painful epithets were flying thick and fast. Wincing, she recalled the look in his eyes this morning as he'd fled the house. Her cruel words had hit their mark today as surely as the bullets that had torn her son's body eighteen months earlier.

Why was it so important to her to assign blame? It changed nothing. Yet still the angry accusations had spilled from her mouth, almost as if they had a will of their own. A nagging little voice inside her head told her Lee was only a convenient scapegoat for the real culprit. But she wouldn't -- couldn't -- allow her thoughts go back to that dark place.

She'd visited it too often in the weeks and months following Phillip's death. It was a deep hole, filled with monsters that snapped and snarled. They had familiar names, names that tore at her very soul, names like 'regret,' 'recrimination,' and, the thorniest of all, 'what if.'

That was the one that still haunted her dreams.

'What if' the dentist hadn't rescheduled her appointment to the afternoon . . . 'what if' Beaman hadn't let the rookie class out early that day . . . 'what if' Phillip hadn't hero-worshipped his stepfather quite so thoroughly . . . 'what if' she had never taken that package from a handsome stranger so many years ago.

Life and death sometimes hinged on the most inconsequential choices.

Snatching up the Lemon Pledge, she feverishly sprayed her rag once again, applying her muscle to the baseboards. She didn't want all this emotion anymore; it was just too hard. Safely cocooned in a world far away from D.C., she had taken great pains to insulate herself from even the slightest hint of it. In an apartment that bore little resemblance to the warm home they'd once shared, in a job that didn't depend on a partner, in a life that was comforting in its very sterility.

Maybe it was being back here again, in this house brimming with memories. They assaulted her from every side as she moved through the rooms that had once known so much laughter and love. That first family Christmas after their private marriage had finally become a public one; the surprise party the boys had thrown for their fifth wedding anniversary; the special send-off they'd given Jamie before he'd headed off to Northwestern. And that first lonely night as 'empty nesters' that Lee had transformed into another very special beginning.

Gripping her cloth tightly, she desperately cast about for a more productive outlet for her restless energy. There had to be something, some room, some corner that had escaped her cleaning frenzy. Hesitantly, she glanced into the master bedroom. Lee had left the room in his usual state of disarray, clothes strewn haphazardly across the rumpled bed. For a highly trained intelligence operative, he seemed to have an inordinate amount of trouble finding his own closet.

She entered the room without thinking, absently picking up Lee's discarded suit coat as she tossed her rag aside. Gently, almost reverently, she smoothed out the wrinkles. The nubby fabric felt familiar under her fingertips, and she realized it was the very jacket she'd given him for his birthday a few years ago. They had been working some case, a routine surveillance, when he'd spotted it in the store window. One look at the price tag had told her he'd never buy it for himself; her husband's penchant for personal extravagance had long ago been channeled to his family. Which, of course, had only made her all the more determined that he should have it. She smiled, remembering the look on his face when he'd opened the package. His intimate thank you later that night had left her breathless.

She opened the closet, pushing the memories to one side along with the clothes as she reached for a hanger. She carefully placed the jacket where it belonged, on the upper rack for the sport coats, her fingers roaming fleetingly over the other suits before closing the bi-fold doors.

That's when she saw it, sitting on top of the perfectly folded triangle of red, white and blue. Her trembling fingers closed around the small plastic box. A thick layer of dust had accumulated on the clear, see-through surface, the ornately engraved 'Servicium in Umbris' motto all but obliterated. Bringing it to her mouth, she exhaled lightly, carefully wiping it clean with a corner of her shirt.

The Agency Medal of Honor.

She'd never asked Lee what he'd done with it. She hadn't wanted it, hadn't wanted anything from that place, not even the flag they'd solemnly presented her that morning at the cemetery. It was poor repayment for a life wantonly wasted. Still, she couldn't exactly refuse, so she'd accepted it from Dr. Smyth's wizened hands, an implacable smile glued to her face. The entire scene had felt oddly surreal as she'd stood beside the newly turned earth. On either side of her, Lee's and Jamie's eyes had been brimming with tears, and from somewhere over her left shoulder, she'd heard her mother's muffled sobs. Even the steel-gray clouds overhead had leaked out a steady drizzle.

Still, she hadn't shed a tear . . . not even in the cold solitude of all the lonely nights that followed. She needed to be strong, she reminded herself; she would get through this on her own. Without the comfort of her husband's arms, though he desperately wanted to offer it; without a reassuring kiss from her son, though he needed her to accept it; and without the soothing touch of her mother's hands, though Dotty clearly longed to give it.

Feeling her knees begin to buckle, she quickly sat down on the bed. The mattress gave slightly beneath her weight, the familiar creak a strange comfort. Closing her eyes, she took a few deep, cleansing breaths, the kind they taught in Lamaze class. The process of letting go was not that different from giving birth, it seemed . . . and every bit as painful.

The distinctive ring of her cell phone caught her by surprise, and, unconsciously, she jumped. Breathing deeply once more, she reached into her pocket.

"Amanda?" the deep male voice spoke with tender concern. "Amanda?"

She shook herself, her grip on the phone loosening. "Bryce," she rasped, clearing her throat as she added a stronger, "Hello."

"I just wanted to double check that we're still on for tonight."

She paused, Lee's warning echoing in her ears. Could he be right? Looking down, she caught sight of the bright bronze medal lying beside her on the bed. Dangerous or not, she couldn't let this happen again, not if there was the smallest chance she could prevent it. She straightened her back determinedly.

"Yes, Bryce. I'm looking forward to it."

~ XV ~

Lee tried one more time to read the flash data report sitting on his desk. Finally giving up, he set it to one side, running both hands through his hair as he rested his elbows on his desk.

"Still smarting from your interview with Dr. Smyth?" Francine asked as she poked her head inside his office.

Lee rubbed his fingers in small circles on his temples. "What gave me away?"

"Oh, I don't know," she teased as she closed the door and sat down in her usual chair. "Maybe it's that desperate 'I want to jump' look on your face." She let out a tinkling laugh. "Guess Harry must have had administrators like Smyth in mind when he moved the Agency underground, huh?"

"Very funny." Leaning back in his chair, he looked down at the open file. "It's this Franklin business," he grumbled, turning his head away. "It's like we've run into a brick wall. I have dozens of agents scouring this town, and that scum Roberto Salzedo seems to have disappeared into thin air. Damn it, Francine!" Lee exclaimed, pushing away from his desk with a violent shudder. A few papers scattered, floating feather-like to the floor as he began to pace. "When is this all going to stop?"

"You have more on your mind than Franklin's death." He heard Francine suck in a breath. "You might as well tell me -- what did Amanda do now?"

"She's insisting on keeping this ridiculous dinner engagement with Topping tonight."

"For God's sake, Lee," Francine moaned in exasperation. "Just order her to stay out of it."

"Order? Amanda? The woman's as stubborn as ever." A harsh edge crept into his voice as he added, "And she can't seem to let anything go."

"I knew there was more to this than you were saying," Francine stated with a knowing shake of her head. "She lit into you again, didn't she?"

"No matter what we do, it always comes back to the same thing. I was hoping since a little time had passed . . ." He sighed deeply. "I guess there's just no escaping it."

"Lee . . ."

Changing her mind, Francine fell silent, and Lee flinched as he watched her face. Sorrow, anger and an emotion that he couldn't quite identify all blended together as she continued her soundless scrutiny. When she finally spoke, her voice was strangely quiet. "She's wrong, you know."

Lee turned away. "Is she?" he asked, his anguish almost physical. "I don't know anymore."

"She most certainly is!" Francine sprang from her chair, coming up close beside him. "This is exactly what I was afraid of yesterday. Don't let her do this to you again, Lee!"

Shifting slightly, he looked down into her big blue eyes. "Not even if she's right? I was the one who brought Phillip with me that day . . . a rookie." Turning, he walked to the window, his eyes vacantly searching the busy bullpen. "He hadn't even been baptized into this business yet. No wonder he couldn't handle . . ." His sentence drifted off into nothingness.

Gently elbowing him aside, Francine carefully closed the window blinds to outside eyes. Then, slowly and deliberately, she cupped his face with her hands, forcing him to look at her. "What happened wasn't your fault," she stated as she gazed earnestly up at him. "There was a major flap that day, and no one else was available. Your partner was off duty. You were only following procedure."

"If I had waited for backup before entering the warehouse . . ."

She shook her head, drawing her thumbs across his lips to silence him. "You've been over all of this, time and time again . . . with me and with Pfaff. Stop it."

He reached up, grasping her hands in his. "I was the senior agent. I was responsible for him."

"You ordered him to stay put. How could you know he'd disobey you?"

He laughed bitterly as he let go of her hands. "I was exactly the one who *should* have known. Phillip King was genetically incapable of staying in the car."

Francine started to say something then seemed to think better of it, folding her hands beneath her arms as if that alone would keep her words in check.

"What?" Lee demanded in a weary voice as he took note of her rigid stance. "Come on, Francine, we've known each other for way too long. If you have something to say, spit it out."

"It's just that she makes me so damned angry! Especially when she behaves as if what happened was all your fault."

"She's hurting." Lumbering over to the couch, he sank down. "It was harder for her."

"That's a bunch of bull," Francine responded angrily as she moved to sit beside him. "You loved that boy every bit as much . . ." She stopped herself as she caught his eye. Hesitating for only the briefest of moments, she trailed two fingers down the side of Lee's face in a comforting caress. "I wish . . ." She let the rest of the words slip away, lost somewhere in a painful moan.

Reaching out, Lee gently captured her hand in his. "I know," he said softly as she gazed at him longingly. He stared, mesmerized, as she parted her lips, the tip of her tongue sensually tracing her upper lip. Slowly, he drew a deep breath.

"Lee," she whispered, her voice catching in her throat.

His body responded almost automatically; he'd been alone for so long. Closing his eyes, he leaned in to cover her waiting mouth with his own. He could feel her heat as she moved to meet him, a tremulous little sigh escaping her lips.

But the sound that should have been achingly familiar instead struck a dissonant chord. He rose abruptly, dropping Francine's hand as he let out a harsh breath. "I'm sorry," he mumbled as he quickly moved to put some distance between them. "I shouldn't have done that."

He heard her uneven breathing from somewhere behind him. "It's okay," she said at last. "It's not like I don't know better, too."

Pivoting slowly, he faced her, regret and sorrow washing over him as he leaned heavily on his desk. "Francine . . ."

"Don't say it," she said, tugging lightly on her suit jacket as she stood. "We've been down this road before, and we both know where it leads."

His expression unconsciously softened as he met her gaze. Even from across the room, the glistening moisture in her eyes was unmistakable, and his lips curved into a sad smile. "Sometimes I think how much easier it would be if I could only . . ."

Biting her bottom lip, she nodded. "We love who we love, Lee. That's just the way it is." He started to reply, but she abruptly cut him off, her professional mask firmly back in place. "Do you want me to run surveillance at Topping's tonight?"

Lee sat down again behind his desk, absently shuffling his papers. "I have no right to ask you, I know, but since this isn't a sanctioned mission, I can't officially use Agency personnel. And you know she won't wear a wire."

Francine nodded her understanding. "It's not a problem." His eyes followed Francine in silent gratitude as she swiftly re-opened his office blinds. Walking briskly to the door, she told him, "I'll keep you posted."

"Thanks, Francine. And you were right, you know. I do owe you big-time. For a hell of a lot more than this."

"Yeah, you do." Her features softening, she added in a gentler tone, "But that's what good friends are for, right?"

~ XVI ~

"I don't think I could eat another bite," Amanda moaned as she sank into the comfortable sofa. "You certainly weren't kidding about that chef of yours, Bryce. Dinner was absolutely wonderful."

Topping smiled. It was that warm, deep one she'd found so attractive at lunch the other day, the one that crinkled the corners of his eyes. "Then perhaps I can tempt you with a nightcap?"

"Yes, I think you could," Amanda agreed almost without thinking. She couldn't remember the last time she'd felt so at ease.

The evening had, indeed, been one of surprises. Bryce Topping was an extraordinarily entertaining dinner companion, and she'd found herself laughing more than once at his lively tales of life on the Hill. Yet she sensed that beneath his engaging exterior lay a man who approached life with cautious precision, carefully weighing the pros and cons of even the most ordinary matters. It was evident now in the way he studied the well-stocked liquor cabinet, finally selecting a bottle of Baileys Irish Cream, which he held out for her approval.

Amanda caught the subtle gleam in his eye. "How did you know?"

"I spent the holidays with Ben in Chicago," he told her, as if that explained it all. "There's nothing like a shot of Baileys to take the chill out of those December evenings."

She nodded. "Yes. I think that's what I've had the hardest time getting used to. I never knew the meaning of cold until this past winter."

Bryce quickly poured the rich liquid into two small glasses. "With nothing but Baileys to keep you warm?" As he sat down beside her, his eyes flashed with an intensity that was almost tangible. "What a waste."

She felt the blood rise to her cheeks. Quickly accepting the drink he proffered, she turned away to examine the bold design on the arm of the sofa. Its rich, earthy tones spoke of lush green valleys and wide-open spaces. A man's fabric.

A low, gravelly voice intruded on her thoughts. "Feeling comfortable?"

"Mmmm," she murmured, absently sipping her drink. As the smooth liquid slid down her throat, a delicious languorousness did indeed spread through her limbs, warming her from the inside out. She felt the knot that had taken up permanent residence in her stomach of late slowly begin to unravel. "So," she began, meeting Bryce's gaze with renewed strength, "how long has Ben lived in Chicago?"

"Almost four years now. He has a very nice townhouse in Lake Forest. Are you familiar with the area?"

"Marginally. It's a little ways from the city. My mother and I share an apartment on Lake Shore Drive."

Bryce raised an eyebrow. "I'm impressed."

"Don't be," Amanda responded with a tinkling laugh. "We're only 'condo sitting.' The place actually belongs to Jamie's in-laws. They're out of the country at the moment. Lisa's father is a consultant for a multi-national corporation and is temporarily assigned overseas."

Inching closer, Bryce added in a deep, rumbling voice, "Must have worked out well all around, then."

"Uh, yes, it, uh, has," Amanda replied, distracted by the play of his hand. He'd rested it on the back of the couch, his fingers brushing the edges of her hair as they talked. "They're due back sometime this summer," she said, shifting out of his reach. "So I suppose I'll have to think about moving one of these days."

Bryce leaned back against the sofa, bringing his arm down to rest on his thigh. Amanda watched his thumb rub against the side of his glass with slow deliberateness. "Will you be staying by the lake shore?"

"No, I don't think so," she answered a little too quickly, trying not to think of the way those long, tapered fingers had felt on her hair. The familiar gesture had warmed her almost as much as the Baileys. "It's, ah, really not my style," she added, directing her thoughts to more mundane things.

Bryce smiled. "And what exactly is your style?"

She tilted her head, considering the question. "A more homey sort of comfort, I suppose."

"Don't tell me you're the white picket fence type?"

"Actually, I am. Or I used to be." Setting her drink down on the coffee table, she resolutely drove the image of the house on Maplewood Drive and its occupant from her mind. "I can't believe you find my domestic preferences interesting, Bryce."

"On the contrary," he whispered, his hand closing around hers. "I find everything about you absolutely entrancing." Smiling, he brought her captive fingers to his lips.

Amanda shivered as she felt his mouth warm her flesh. Slipping her hand from his, she made a show of crossing her legs, at the same time moving her body

unobtrusively toward the end of the couch. "Do you visit Ben often?" she inquired, channeling the subject once again in a safer direction.

Topping appeared to take the hint. Leaning back, he, too, increased the space between them, and Amanda breathed a short sigh of relief. A buffer zone between herself and the suavely attractive Senator Topping was definitely desirable. She had a sneaking suspicion most of his dates didn't require one.

"No, I don't see Ben as often as I'd like," he informed her, a touch of regret creeping into his voice as he spoke of his son.

Amanda twisted uncomfortably on the sofa. Was the fleeting disappointment she read in his eyes a yearning for his son's companionship or for the small intimacy she had denied him? Whichever it was, he seemed to recover quickly, regarding her once again with a warm smile. "We did spend a wonderful week together last summer deep sea fishing at the island house."

"The island house?"

Bryce nodded. "I think I promised to show you some pictures. That is, if you're interested."

"I'd love to see them," Amanda responded with unusual zeal.

He headed for the large oak desk in the corner of the room. Thankful for some space to catch her breath, Amanda seized the opportunity to check out the rest of the décor. Bryce had jokingly referred to the den as his personal sanctum, and she could easily see that it was true. The richly appointed room possessed the same comfortable charm as its owner, a charm that was, in its own way, potently attractive to the opposite sex. It was no wonder the name Bryce Topping received frequent mention in the Washington society columns.

"Here they are," Bryce murmured to himself as he pulled a small stack of colorful prints from the top drawer. "These are fairly recent. They were taken just this past August."

Amanda quickly crossed the room, bending over the photos that Bryce spread out across the desk for her inspection. The breathtaking panoramic shots showcased a lush, tropical retreat, but her eyes were immediately drawn to the picture of a tall, sandy-haired youth standing beside a darker, stockier man. "This one's Ben?" she asked, suddenly recalling her mother's remark about the boy's freckles.

"Yes," Bryce beamed. "Hasn't changed much, has he?"

Amanda studied the picture. At first glance, Bennet Topping could indeed have passed for that lanky, twelve-year-old she'd once known, but a closer look revealed that wasn't entirely true. It wasn't that Ben still looked like a boy -- the swarthy man next to him just made him appear that way. "Who is this?" she asked curiously.

"Oh, just some business associate of Ben's. Roberto something or other."

"Well, it certainly is a beautiful setting," she said admiringly as she pointed out a shot of an imposing, castle-like structure. "Where were these taken?"

"At San Simeon. It's a small island in the Caribbean."

"San Simeon? Isn't that where . . ."

"Yes," Bryce rejoined with a laugh. "I'm sure you've heard of it. It's the popular lovers' retreat everyone's been talking about."

"Of course. My magazine ran an article on it just last month. It's supposedly booked almost two years in advance."

"Thankfully, our estate is located on the other side of the island."

She laughed lightly as she glanced at the pictures again. "It certainly doesn't look like you have a problem with tourists."

"Oh, it's very private," he assured her. "There's a small air strip on one end of the property that we use to bring in supplies and staff. From the island itself, we're only accessible by launch."

"Oh, my . . . there's no other way in?"

"Well, I suppose you could trek straight across," he told her with a laugh, "but I wouldn't recommend it. The terrain in the center of the island is quite mountainous and the old trails are practically impassable. Believe me, most tourists don't have the stamina for it."

"I imagine you don't need much security then."

"On the contrary. We have a state of the art system -- the Seaforth 2500 series."

Amanda whistled softly. "That *is* impressive."

"I can't take the credit, I'm afraid. It was installed for President Clinton's weekend visit in '98."

"You really have some vacation home, Bryce," she replied, unable to disguise her surprise.

"I'd love to show it to you some time," he offered with a suave smile. "It really is unique, even if I do say so myself. The house dates back to the late 1800's. Of course, the Toppings owned the entire island at that time, but unfortunately my father was forced to sell off some land. Inflation," he added with a self-deprecating laugh.

"Yes," she countered, glancing playfully around the room. "I can see how you're suffering."

Bryce shrugged off his embarrassment, his gray-green eyes twinkling. "I used to love to go to the island as a boy. My great-grandfather was a history buff, and he modeled the main house after a medieval castle. With modern conveniences added, of course."

"Of course," she grinned.

"It was an adventurous boy's dream come true. Dozens of rooms to get lost in, even an authentic dungeon."

Amanda shivered. "Now *that* doesn't seem like much fun."

"You sound like my father," Bryce laughed. "He always referred to the place as the old man's 'moment of lunacy.'"

She studied the picture thoughtfully once more. "I wouldn't go that far, Bryce. I think the place has a stately charm all its own."

"Now I might have to agree with that if you were standing beside it," he said, his presence warming her as he brushed a stray strand of hair from the side of her face. "The way you look tonight, I almost think you belong there."

"I don't know about that." With a nervous chuckle, she took a small step away from the handsome senator. "I'm really a very ordinary woman."

"Who just happens to have led a pretty extraordinary life. You can't fool me, Mrs. King," he grinned. "I'm afraid I've read about some of your exploits. You *and* the formidable Scarecrow."

Amanda raised an eyebrow in astonishment. "Your security clearance must be pretty high. The Agency operates on a strictly 'need to know' basis."

Topping nodded. "My oversight committee approves your budget."

"I see." Walking over to the French doors, she wrapped her arms around herself, rubbing lightly to ward off the chill. Her eyes stared vacantly into the small flower garden. "Then you also know it's not *my* budget anymore."

She heard soft footsteps on the carpet as he moved in close behind her. "I know all about your severance from the Agency, Amanda. And from Stetson."

His words were laced with quiet understanding, and Amanda heaved a sigh as she felt his breath ruffle her hair. "Then you also know my divorce isn't final yet."

"A technicality, from what I understand." Putting his hands on her shoulders, he gently turned her. "Am I wrong?"

She drew a breath, holding it for a minute before letting go. "No," she whispered as she focused her eyes on a small patch of carpet by her feet. "You're not wrong."

"Then I have a chance."

Looking up, she met his gaze. His eyes burned with a fire that was almost contagious and, as he loomed closer, it threatened to burn out of control. "Bryce," she said, neatly side-stepping his embrace. "This is happening too fast."

He moved closer. "Even if it's what we both want?"

"I . . . I don't know. I'm sorry," she sighed. "I need some time."

Bryce reached out, his finger tenderly tracing the curve of her cheek. "Time to think?" he demanded gently. "Or time to run away from what we're both feeling? Don't deny it, Amanda," he added, his voice taking on a new urgency. "I can tell you feel something, too."

She began to protest, but the words died on her lips. He was right. She did feel something, something she couldn't quite explain. Just looking at him stirred

feelings in her she'd thought were a long time dead. Sucking in a breath, she quickly turned away.

"Amanda?" Bryce asked gently. "What is it?"

"Nothing . . . nothing at all. It's just getting late."

"Then I suppose that's my cue to take you home."

She responded with a low laugh. "I brought my own car, remember?"

Bryce heaved a wistful little sigh. "That's right, you did. Guess I won't be using my new convertible to melt your resolve."

"Not tonight, anyway," she told him with a smile, moving to gather up her things. As she reached for her purse, she felt an unusual tickle on her right wrist. Looking down, she caught sight of the sleek sliver bracelet Leatherneck had issued her yesterday, its presence a subtle reminder of the evening's real purpose. A sick feeling stirred in the pit of her stomach. How could she have forgotten Jamie, even for a moment?

She stole a quick glance at the Senator's desk. The pictures they'd been perusing were still strewn haphazardly across the top. She felt a brief flash of guilt as she remembered the affectionate way her new friend had spoken of his family's retreat, but leads sometimes developed from less likely sources.

"Bryce," she reminded him gently, "I'll be needing my coat."

He responded with good humor, though he was obviously still sorry that the evening was drawing to a precipitous close. Amanda watched him cross the room with an odd feeling of regret, her eyes following him until he disappeared into the hall. Positive she was out of his line of sight, she walked purposefully to the desk. With only one small, apprehensive glance over her left shoulder, she deftly slid two of the pictures into her purse.

"Amanda?"

She jumped back at the sound of her name. "Be right there, Bryce," she called, barely able to hear her own voice over the pounding of her heart. Her skills were evidently more atrophied than she'd realized, a fact she fervently hoped had escaped the good senator's notice.

Bryce certainly appeared unperturbed as he helped her on with her wrap. "I had a wonderful time tonight," he sighed, his hands lingering on her arms as they stood eye to eye in the elegant foyer, their bodies perfectly framed in the open front door. "I hope you did, too."

She started to assure him that she had, indeed, enjoyed herself, but her words died on her lips as she recognized the look of longing in his eyes. "Bryce, I . . ."

"Shhh, shhh," he said, laying a finger against her mouth to silence her. "It's okay; I'll give you all the time you need." His face lit up with a sly smile. "But while you're doing that thinking, I hope you'll consider all the arguments in my favor."

With an innate certainty, Amanda knew Bryce Topping was going to kiss her. Knew even before his body leaned toward hers, before his head tilted ever so slightly to the left, before his mouth brushed across her lips with gently persuasive pressure. Knew, and, this time, didn't step away.

"I really do need to get going," she said breathlessly as he pulled his mouth from hers. Raising her fingers, she traced the path his lips had just taken. "Thank you again for the wonderful dinner."

He smiled warmly. "The pleasure was mine. I just hope I didn't bore you too much with all the family stuff."

"I enjoyed seeing the pictures of Ben," she said, one hand convulsively gripping her purse.

Topping didn't seem to notice. "Ben was always such a shy kid," he continued as he escorted her down the short driveway to her car. "I worried about him for so long, but his life has turned out surprisingly well -- a thriving business, even a serious girlfriend."

As she unlocked the door of Lee's silver BMW with the remote, Bryce went on, "You know, I had my doubts when I gave him the seed money to start his company three years ago, but he's already repaid my investment. With interest."

"You must be very proud of him," Amanda said, fighting to keep the slightly strangled quality out of her voice.

"I guess I am at that. Ben's become a real, old-fashioned American success story. Even if he did insist on that ridiculous name." Topping let out an embarrassed laugh. "Damned silly obsession of his."

She felt her stomach drop the rest of the way. "Obsession?"

"Yes. Didn't I tell you? His company is called 'Iguana Associates.'"

~ XVII ~

Gripping his gun in both hands, Lee slowly pushed the door open with his foot. The light inside was barely adequate, but still enough to make out the shadowy figures, even from a distance. From the look of it, they were getting ready to pull up stakes again. Lucky for him he'd caught them in time. His eyes took in the darkened building once again. Five against one . . . yeah, this was his lucky day, all right.

Biting his lip, he ran his mental checklist one final time. Backup should be here any minute. If he could just come up with a creative way to stall for a little while longer. Come on, Scarecrow, think like your partner . . .

He inched forward. Without warning, the world turned upside down, and he was falling, falling . . . enveloped in a wonderful blackness. It was almost tangible, covering him with velvet tentacles. Then . . . blessed silence..

And noise.

And pain that throbbed persistently through his head.

He dragged himself back into consciousness. A cacophony of sounds rebounded from every side, echoing off the cavernous walls of the old Allied Chemical warehouse. There was a stench as well; the foul smell assaulted his nostrils. He wiped his hand across his nose and cheek, blurred eyes focusing on the crimson smear that rubbed off on his palm.

A familiar voice rose above the others, and he looked up, puzzled. He should recognize it, did recognize it, but it refused to register, lingering instead on the tip of his fogged brain.

As his mind began to clear, he could hear more voices . . . was that the Agency backup team at last? The jumbled words grew louder, and he caught a flash of light . . . an Agency issue .38 special. And a loud crash . . . no, not a crash . . . a gunshot . . . more than one. Too many for just the perps. The Agency must have come to the rescue at last . . .

Stop! Wait! Phillip, no!

Damn you, Scarecrow, why don't you move . . .

Oh my God . . .

"Phillip!" He crawled over to where the boy was lying in an ever-expanding red pool. "Phillip!"

Amanda's son smiled up at him weakly. "Sorry, Lee. Guess I . . . I screwed up, huh? Forgot about . . . the recognition signals . . . should have waited."

The room began to swim, colors blending into each other with alarming dissonance. Blue, orange, red . . . my God, so much red . . . screwed up . . . screwed up . . . sorry . . . Lee . . .

Lee . . .

His name floated overhead again, this time soothing him with lilting comfort.

Lee . . .

A burst of light flooded his field of vision. Jerking up into a sitting position, he looked around wildly, eyes blinking against the glare of the lamps. The shadowy world of his nightmare was still so vivid that it took a moment to register that the warm, brightly lit den was, in fact, his own.

"Lee?" The soft dream-voice called out to him again with tender concern. "Are you all right?"

"Amanda?" he said incredulously, not quite sure what was real or what was fantasy. She had appeared so often on the edges of his waking mind that he almost mistook her for an apparition. Poised on the step, her hand still resting on the light switch, he'd never seen anything quite so beautiful.

"I didn't mean to startle you. I just got back from dinner, and at first I didn't realize anyone was in here," she explained in a very real voice, a voice he would have recognized anywhere. Tossing her purse onto a nearby chair, she quickly sat down beside him, giving his knee a reassuring squeeze. "Sorry."

"It's okay," he said, her remorseful tone almost identical to the one that still haunted him on a regular basis. He let out a ragged breath, feigning a yawn to cover the slight tremor in his voice. "Haven't been sleeping too well lately, I guess."

"If all your dreams are like that one, I'm not surprised." She smiled grimly, prying the twisted throw pillow from his grasp. "What was it about?"

"I don't know," he lied, exhaling loudly once again. "I can't remember." Turning his head, he rubbed his eyes, which, for some reason, seemed inexplicably moist. He forced himself to concentrate on the here and now. "Uh, how did your evening go?"

"Fine," he heard her reply in a breathy whisper. "It went fine."

"Then you didn't get anything out of Topping?"

She turned away with a funny jerk of her head. Folding her hands in her lap, she circled her left thumb absently around the right, and he thought he noted a slight hesitation before she gave him an enigmatic, "Not exactly."

The phrase catapulted him off the sofa. He made a show of stretching the kinks out of his back as he glanced surreptitiously over his shoulder. Her attention was still focused on her lap; Amanda never could look at him when she was hiding something.

"So, what 'exactly' is 'not exactly' supposed to mean?" he demanded, losing the battle to curb his growing annoyance. "Either you found something we can use or you didn't."

Wordlessly, she retrieved her purse and removed two photographs, handing him the top one with a peevish smile. "The Topping estate on San Simeon. Quite the vacation spot. Been in their family for years."

"How nice for them," he muttered, his temper stretched to its breaking point. "But I don't see how this . . ."

Amanda cut him off. "Bryce showed me some photographs of his son," she explained, irritation seeping into her voice as well. "They were taken last August, on some kind of fishing excursion."

"I don't see what this has to do with Jamie." Over the years he'd become an expert at deciphering her convoluted thought processes, but evidently she'd taken the art of confusion to a new level.

She abruptly handed him the other picture. "Then maybe this will make things clearer. The tall, skinny one is Ben Topping. Ben as in 'B.' Topping, Lee," she reiterated when he didn't respond. "Of Iguana Associates."

He clutched the photograph tightly, barely sparing a glance for the tow-headed youth who grinned back at him. "Amanda, this other guy . . ." He pointed to the heavier man with dark, slicked-back hair. "How does Topping know him?"

"A business associate, I think he said."

Lee bristled. "Business associate? You're positive those were the words he used?"

"Yes, I'm positive," Amanda assured him testily as she looked over his shoulder. "Why, do you recognize him?"

"You could say that. Most of Field Section is scouring this town for him as we speak. His name is Roberto Salzedo."

"Salzedo? The man you're looking for in connection with Tom Franklin's death?" She frowned. "Are you sure?"

Lee nodded. "I ran afoul of him in Buenos Aires back in the summer of '82. I was forced to watch as he butchered four members of my team under the guise of an 'interrogation.' Trust me," he declared with a harsh laugh. "I'd know that pig anywhere."

"Oh, my gosh!"

"That's one way to put it." He walked away with a thoughtful frown, two long strides taking him to the back door. "Then it's true," he said, tapping his palm with the photo to emphasize his words. "Topping really does have ties to Los Lobos."

He felt a light hand squeeze his shoulder. "Los Lobos?" Amanda asked, her perfume wafting aromatically under his nose. The scent had always been his favorite, and his mind was suddenly flooded with images of another time and place. "The same group Fleetwood was worried about?"

"Uh, yeah," he stammered, forcing himself to concentrate as he moved out of range. "They're a terrorist organization operating out of Central America. We know they have financing inside the U.S., but we've never been able to link them to a specific name. Until now. My God, a United States Senator . . ." He let out a long breath, turning to her with a grudging smile. "This is good work, Amanda. Really good work."

She didn't seem pleased with the compliment. "A U.S. Senator?" she repeated skeptically. "Now I'm the one who's not following."

Her ready defense of that pompous stiff grated on his already raw nerves. "B. Topping," he reminded her. "The connection's obvious."

Her eyes flashed darkly. "I don't see how that makes Bryce guilty of anything other than fatherhood."

"It's more than enough for me," he rejoined, his anger clearly evident this time as she turned to him with a long-suffering sigh. He recognized the look; it was the one she'd always reserved for the boys whenever they'd tried to pull a fast one.

"Bryce Topping doesn't have anything to do with Iguana Associates, Lee," she stated with categorical assurance. "It's Ben's company, not his."

He folded his arms across his chest. "And you know this -- how?"

"He told me."

"Well, then, it *must* be true."

"Bryce was very forthcoming about the whole thing," she insisted, her foot tapping impatiently on the soft carpet. "Definitely not the modus operandi of a man who has something to hide."

"Since when do you blindly accept the word of a suspect? Good God, Amanda, have you forgotten all your training?"

"I haven't forgotten anything," she ground out. "But I have a feeling Bryce is telling the truth."

"A 'feeling,'" he scoffed.

Lifting her chin, she met his gaze. "You used to trust my instincts, you know. They've certainly saved your butt often enough."

"And landed you in just as many tight spots."

He saw her stiffen as his barb hit its mark. "What's gotten into you?" she snapped. "You're sounding like . . . like . . ."

"Like what?" he challenged, tossing the photo aside as he planted himself directly in front of her. "Like what, Amanda?"

"Not what, who -- Francine!" Shaking her head, she turned away from him to study the silk flower arrangement on the coffee table. "Only coming from you, it's ten times worse. I'm conditioned to expect that kind of condescension from her."

He watched as her slender form bent over the artificial leaves, wiping the light layer of dust away with her thumb. "It's not that I doubt your instincts," he said, his tone unconsciously softening. "It's just that for some reason, where Bryce Topping is concerned, you seem to have blinders on."

She whipped around to face him, almost knocking the basket of greenery to the floor. "I do not!"

He realized with a sudden pang that he'd obviously touched a nerve. "Could have fooled me," he retorted, all restraint finally shot to hell. "The two of you share a few meals and some charming words, and suddenly you're defending the guy's honor right and left." His lip curled up in a sneer, and he couldn't stop himself from adding, "Assuming, of course, that's all you've shared."

The sharp crack of her hand across his cheek brought him up short. "I guess it's true what they say about a good offense," he retorted, his fingers rubbing his still smarting skin.

Her wide eyes stared back at him in astonishment, as if she couldn't quite believe what she'd done. "Lee," she gasped, "I'm . . ."

"Don't," he said, quickly cutting her off. "I think that's probably the most honest thing that's happened between us in a long time."

Stooping, he quickly retrieved the picture that had fallen to the floor. "I'm going to head into the Agency," he informed her in his most businesslike tone, "before the late shift signs off. Run this information and see what comes up. I'll keep you posted."

He grabbed the keys she'd tossed on the table and headed for the door, slipping outside before she had a chance to answer. He didn't want to see the pain that by now had surely replaced the flashing anger in her eyes. He could handle all the rage she could muster; he deserved that, and more. It was her grief he couldn't bear.

Sliding behind the wheel of his silver-gray BMW, he pressed the accelerator to the floor and sped away from the curb.

~ XVIII ~

"That's all we have at this point," Amanda said, struggling to keep an upbeat tone. "We have a few leads that may pan out, but nothing definite yet. Yes, I promise, I'll call as soon as we know anything. Give my love to Lisa and the baby . . . Lee? Yeah, he's, um, fine. I've really got to run, Mother . . . Yes, yes, I will. I'll tell him . . . I love you, too."

She clicked off the phone with an exasperated sigh. No matter the crisis, Dotty West still ran true to form. Amanda supposed she should find some small comfort in that, but there were times when she could barely stop herself from screaming at the thinly veiled comments. Why couldn't her mother understand that these less than subtle hints hurt more than they helped?

As the previous day's exertions finally caught up with her, she headed into the den. Unable to summon the strength to climb the stairs, she stretched out on the couch. It seemed to welcome her as an old friend as she fit her neck into the familiar niche along its bulky arm.

She remembered the day they'd bought it as if it were yesterday. Lee had feigned his usual disinterest, but when she'd finally managed to drag him into the store, he'd heartily approved her choice. With a grin that had caused her cheeks to flush, he'd whispered that at last she'd found a piece of furniture roomy enough

for two. They'd soon discovered it served another purpose as well, its large, over-stuffed cushions providing a comfortable retreat when one of them needed a neutral corner. They made war, it seemed, every bit as passionately as they made love.

Maybe she should have sought refuge here after last night's skirmish. Sleep had skillfully eluded her up in her mother's old room as she'd replayed their encounter over and over again in her mind. Despite her almost desperate efforts to the contrary, her emotions still ran high where Lee was concerned. Even now, the man possessed an uncanny ability to infuriate her, especially when his arrows hit a little too close to the mark.

Is that what had happened last night? Had she reacted so strongly because Lee had been an insufferable prig or because he'd been right?

Too antsy to rest, she abandoned the couch, pacing the small room in spite of her fatigue. She had nothing to feel guilty about, she reminded herself. She was a free agent. She didn't owe Lee Stetson anything, and she'd damn well kiss anyone she wanted to. It wasn't as if she'd intended to let it happen. For some unfathomable reason, Bryce Topping had managed to soothe an aching place inside her soul.

She tried to make some sense of it, but her jumbled emotions defied explanation. Yes, Bryce was certainly good-looking, but not fatally attractive by any stretch of the imagination. Frowning, she tried to recall his face, but his features ran together in her mind. Yet still she found herself inexplicably attracted to him. There was just something about the man's eyes; they sparkled when he smiled, and when she looked into their hazel depths, she saw a world of possibilities instead of a reflection of her own pain.

The doorbell squawked irreverently. Eager to put a stop to the sound, she ran up then down the two sets of small steps leading into the foyer. A brief look through the peephole revealed Francine Desmond standing on her front step, her left hand tapping impatiently against her thigh. Amanda groaned. First her mother, now Francine; evidently this was her day for unsolicited aggravation. Pasting a grin on her face, she opened the door.

"Hello, Francine," she cooed. "This is a surprise."

"I'm sure," the blonde agent replied. Brushing aside the pleasantries, she demanded, "I need to see Lee."

"I'm afraid he's not here at the moment," she replied, straining for civility. Francine seemed unusually adept at annoying her these days, and this morning was definitely no exception.

"Well, may I come in and wait for him?" she inquired in her most sarcastic tone, "or would you prefer me to pitch a tent on the lawn?"

Amanda's smile faded. "Be my guest."

As Francine's scowl deepened, Amanda realized she was blocking her way. Her subconscious must be trying to tell her something; in her current mood, a one-on-one with the prickly blonde agent sounded about as pleasurable as a root canal.

Francine appeared equally thrilled. "Look, Amanda," she told her with a put-upon sigh as she swept through the door. "You don't have to pretend you're any happier about seeing me than I am about being here. As soon as I hand off these files Lee requested, you can get back to doing . . . well, whatever it is you do best."

"I'll be happy to take them," Amanda said with as much graciousness as she could muster.

Francine smiled thinly. "Sorry. Classified material. I'm sure you understand."

"Perfectly," Amanda returned, pushing the heavy door closed with a bang. She took a deep breath and counted to ten, steeling herself to face her guest. "Since you're here, would you like some coffee?" she asked with forced politeness as she led the way into the den.

"If it's not too much trouble." Ensnaring herself on the couch, Francine turned to Amanda with a cool smile. "Black, with just a touch of Sweet and Low."

"Sure," she said, adding under her breath as she headed into the kitchen, "no trouble at all."

Flinging open the cabinet door, Amanda selected a mug then, with a shrug of her shoulders, quickly pulled out another. At least drinking coffee would give her something to do. Filling both mugs to the brim, she added a little sugar to hers. Refilling the spoon, she held it tantalizingly over Francine's coffee before her conscience prevailed. Dumping the granules back into the bowl, she let out a remorseful sigh; artificial sweetener was probably a more appropriate choice for Francine anyway.

"Amanda?" she heard her guest call out in appropriately syrupy tones. "Do you need some help?"

"No, I'm almost finished." Quickly placing the mugs and spoons on a tray, she eyed the poppyseed cake she'd whipped up yesterday. In for a penny, in for a pound, she thought dryly, arranging a few slices attractively on a small plate before heading back to her guest.

"Here you go," she said with a neutral smile as she set the tray on the coffee table. "I'm afraid I couldn't find any Sweet and Low, though."

"Don't worry, I'll get it," Francine offered in her most conciliatory tone. "Lee usually keeps it in the cupboard over the oven." Rising, she marched into the kitchen, immediately returning with a small pink packet. Tearing open the top, she sprinkled just a few granules into the mug. "I'm sure this will hit the spot," she stated sweetly, a satisfied smile on her face as she reclined regally against the cushions.

Amanda lowered herself stiffly into the wing chair, her eyes following Francine's manicured fingers as they brought the dark blue mug to her lips. "Mmmm," she sighed appreciatively as she took a generous sip. "This Brazilian blend always was my favorite."

Crossing her legs, Amanda kicked the air with her foot, watching silently as Francine finished her coffee.

"You know, Amanda, you really should ask Lee to give you some of this to take back home."

"Believe it or not, we have coffee in Chicago," she snapped, her fingers pressing more firmly into the arm of the chair.

"Oh, I'm sure you do," Francine chuckled. Stifling a little yawn, her eyes took inventory of the room, nodding nonchalantly toward the Tibetan ram's horn on the corner table. "I've always liked that piece. I remember when Lee found . . ."

"Okay, would you care to tell me what kind of game it is we're playing here?" Amanda interrupted, her patience finally spent. "It might help if I knew the rules."

Placing her mug deliberately on the small tray, Francine eyed her calmly. "I never play games, Amanda," she said in carefully modulated tones. "I thought you knew that."

"Then what would you call this charming little performance?"

"Keeping a promise to a friend."

"A friend? Gee, I didn't know you cared."

Francine's lips tightened into a smile. "I don't actually, but Lee asked me not to fight with you . . . as a special favor to him."

Amanda's eyes flashed ominously as she sprang from her chair. "How gallant. But I don't need him to defend me, thank you very much."

Francine's posture seemed even straighter than usual as she met Amanda's gaze. "Yes," she delivered with quiet aplomb, "you've made that pretty obvious, haven't you?"

"And just what is that supposed to mean?"

"Anything you'd like it to, dear." Uncoiling, she slithered up from the couch. "If you don't mind, I think I will wait for Lee outside after all."

"I do mind, actually," Amanda replied, placing herself solidly in Francine's path as the woman started for the hall. Mounting the small step, she folded her arms across her chest, glaring down into the blonde agent's cool blue eyes. "You've been on my back from the minute I set foot in the Agency the other day. I think you owe me an explanation."

"If you must know, it's just something I felt compelled to do."

Amanda blanched as she recognized the same phrase she'd spoken to Lee when she'd left town a year ago.

"Just what *are* you doing back here?" Francine continued, her hands firmly planted on her hips. "I thought you'd 'had enough of this town to last a lifetime.'"

"My son is missing," Amanda managed to grind out through clenched teeth.

"That's right," Francine sighed with feigned empathy, "and none of us would be able to find him without you. Well, for your information, Lee and I were in this business long before you conveniently took it up. I think we can handle it."

"*I* think I've been a pretty valuable member of the team so far. Even if I *am* a civilian," she added with more than a touch of sarcasm.

"You would think that," Francine snapped, shaking her blonde hair into her face. "I can't believe your gall. You decide to trade in your pistol for a pen, then think you can just waltz right back in any time the spirit moves you . . ."

"I have no intention of 'waltzing back' anywhere," Amanda said, jumping down from her perch on the stair. "But even if I did, it wouldn't be *your* decision to make."

"Well, I hope you don't think it's *yours*. The Agency isn't a revolving door, Amanda. And you forfeited any right to be there the day you abandoned your job."

"I didn't abandon anything," she spat in a breathy whisper, wondering why she felt the need to justify herself to the likes of Francine. "I just couldn't do it any more. It was too hard."

"Yes, I suppose it was. After all, your career was handed to you on a silver platter, so why should you be expected to work at it?"

"I worked damned hard at it," she shot back. "You know, I'm sick to death of this 'poor me' routine of yours. You've been handing it to people for years now. Yes, it's tough for a woman in this business, but try being Scarecrow's protégé on top of that! I was constantly proving myself to the women as well as the men. And my marriage certainly didn't make things any easier."

"And we've seen what you do when things aren't easy, haven't we? You turn tail and run! First from your career, then from your marriage."

Amanda felt her hands clenching into fists, the nails digging deeply into her palms. "What happened to my marriage is *my* business, not yours! And certainly *not* the Agency's!"

"Forget it," Francine shouted, throwing up her hands as she headed for the front door. "I should have known better than to open my mouth."

Amanda grabbed her forcefully by the arm. "You started this, now finish it!"

Francine shook her off. "Oh, you're so sure of yourself, aren't you, Mrs. King? You want me to finish this? Well, I'll be happy to! Lee Stetson was a wreck after you walked out on him last year. I should know," she added with particular venom. "*I* was the one who was there to pick up all the pieces."

Amanda's eyes widened as Francine ranted on. "Yes, *your* son is missing," she said, beginning to pace. "How typical! That's all you've thought about for the past year and a half -- *your* son, *your* loss, *your* pain. Do you have emotional blinders on? Have you given one iota of thought to what it's going to do to Lee if he can't save Jamie? No, of course not. Amanda wants his help, and we all know *that's* what counts here!"

"That's enough, Francine!"

"Can't stomach her responsibilities at the Agency any more?" Francine seethed, the bitter words tumbling over each other in her haste to be rid of them. "That's okay, Amanda can just walk away. Never mind that her partner's relying on her. Can't stomach her marriage anymore? Well, there's an easy solution to that, too. Just pull up stakes and start a new life somewhere else. Never mind that her husband's grieving. Never mind that the Q Bureau's in shambles and his career's in jeopardy because he can't face going into the field anymore. Never mind that he's spent the last year on Pfaff's couch trying to crawl out from under the guilt trip his loving wife laid on him about their son!"

Folding her arms across her stomach, Amanda hunched over as if she'd been struck. "Go to hell! You have no idea what it's like to lose a child."

"No, you're right, I don't. But I do know what it's like to lose my best friend . . . because that's what almost happened last year." Her voice grew stronger as she added forcefully, "And I won't just sit by and watch you and destroy him all over again!"

Amanda straightened, pivoting slowly to face Francine. But instead of the blind fury she'd expected to encounter in the woman's eyes, she found only the remnants of soft tears. "Oh, my gosh," she gasped breathily. "You're in love with him, aren't you?"

Francine turned her head away, brushing back the hair that had fallen across her face. "He's my friend."

"I don't know why I didn't see it before," Amanda whispered, almost to herself. "The furtive little looks, the comforting hand on his shoulder, not to mention knowing where he keeps the Sweet and Low. How long has it been going on?"

Turning on her heel, Francine started for the door again, but Amanda dogged her steps. "Answer my question, Francine," she demanded. "Just how long have you been sleeping with my husband?"

Francine paused in the foyer to lob a parting shot back over her shoulder. "Don't you mean your ex-husband?" she inquired, her cool disdain once again firmly in place. "Surely you don't consider yourself married any more?"

"You don't know what I think," Amanda told her hotly.

"I saw you, Amanda," Francine pressed, clearly on the offensive again. "That was quite a little scene you and Bryce Topping played out at his front door last night. Full of hearts and flowers and touching farewells."

Amanda's fingers unconsciously flew to her lips. "You were spying on me?"

Francine smiled faintly. "That's a rather quaint way to put it, but yes. I was running surveillance. You didn't honestly think Lee would let you go in there on your own, did you?"

The front door opened suddenly and they both started, Francine taking a quick step back. Lee burst through the door, acknowledging Amanda with a brief nod as he turned to Francine. "Good, you're here," he said with familiar abruptness. "Did you sign out those satellite surveillance photos I requested?"

"Ah, yes." Francine glanced ruefully into the other room. "I left them on the coffee table."

"Thanks," Lee replied over his shoulder as he barreled into the den. "I'm gonna need them."

Bestowing a contemptuous scowl on Francine, Amanda followed. She could hear the blonde's sharp heels tap the floor close behind her. Ignoring her for the moment, she turned her attention to Lee.

His face betrayed no sign of what had transpired last night between them, and as he briefly read a note attached to the first photo, Amanda watched his brow knit into the frown she'd come to know all too well over the years.

"It's that bad?" she asked in a low voice.

Lee tossed the file onto the sofa. "Dr. Smyth has officially informed me to drop the investigation into Iguana Associates," he said, including them both in his sweeping glance.

Francine immediately moved to lay a soft hand on his arm. "But the evidence we gathered last night on Salzedo . . . how could Smyth just disregard that?"

Lee chuckled grimly. "It seems the Topping kid assured him beyond a shadow of a doubt that he'd severed all connections with one Roberto Salzedo."

Amanda felt herself unconsciously bristling at the scene playing out in front of her. "And Smyth took the word of a suspect?" she asked, an edge to her voice as she caught Lee's eye.

"No," he replied, matching her tone, "but he did take the word of your good friend the Senator."

"What does Bryce have to do with this?" Amanda demanded with a frown.

"Senator Topping asked him as a personal favor to call off the bloodhounds. You'll have to excuse me if I don't give you his exact words," he snorted, shaking off Francine's fingers in his need to pace. "I've had more than my fill of Mother Goose analogies for one morning."

"What now?" Francine asked uncertainly.

Stopping, Lee gave her a look. "We move as planned."

"You're not going ahead with the mission now?" Francine asked incredulously.

His jaw firmly set, he added without a second's hesitation, "You bet I am."

"But Dr. Smyth . . ."

Amanda smiled smugly at Francine. "Smyth can't order the Agency to become officially involved, but I'm sure unofficially is different matter entirely."

Lee gave her a grudging smile. "Yes, it always is." Turning to Francine, he let out a long breath. "Smyth needs deniability. He'll be happy to take the credit for stopping Salzedo, as long as he can justify it after the fact. If not . . ." Lee shrugged. "Well, in this business, sooner or later, everyone's expendable."

"No," Francine stated vehemently. "There must be another way. I could . . ."

"I appreciate the offer, but I can't accept." Smiling faintly, Lee added, "My career, my decision."

"Lee . . ." Casting a look in Amanda's direction, she abruptly changed tacks. "At least let me be your eyes and ears at the Agency. You're going to need someone on the inside."

Lee hesitated, but Amanda could tell it was only momentary. "You know what this means if Smyth finds out."

Francine nodded, her smile matching his. "My career, my decision."

"Just promise me you won't go so far out on that limb that it breaks," Lee said with a resigned sigh. "One sacrificial lamb is enough for Smyth; I won't give him two."

"I'll do what needs to be done," Francine answered. "That much I can promise."

Amanda watched as the two of them continued their conversation in that special shorthand usually reserved for partners. Lee's eyes drifted in her direction, and, almost as if suddenly remembering she was there, he quickly ushered Francine to the door. "I'll need you to set a few things in motion at the Agency before I go," Amanda heard him say. "It shouldn't be too hard -- I've appointed you acting Chief in my stead."

"Just what I always wanted," Francine chirped. "A field promotion."

"If you need anything, you can rely on Carter. She can be a little trying at times, but she knows the status of the pending cases by heart."

"I can handle it."

Lee's response was lost in the loud creak of the opening door. Frowning, Amanda edged a little closer, straining to hear Francine's words. "Lee," she heard her sigh, her tone full of concern. "Are you sure going rogue is the way to handle this?"

"I don't have much choice," came Lee's steely reply. "Smyth's given me seventy-two hours grace -- no more."

"But the last time you were in the field . . ."

Amanda thought she caught a soft tremor in his voice. "That's my son out there, Francine. If Jamie's somehow gotten himself mixed up with the likes of Salzedo . . ."

"You'll need backup," Francine told him..

"I have it covered. And I know what you think of that idea, so please, spare me another lecture, okay?"

Amanda walked away, not bothering to wait for Francine's reply. Jamie . . . involved with Los Lobos. Was Francine right? Could they already be too late?

She heard the front door close. "Amanda," Lee began tentatively as he joined her in the den. "There's something I have to ask . . ."

She met his eyes with an assurance she didn't feel. Once upon a time, Scarecrow and Mrs. King could have held their own against the best of them; now she wasn't sure. "What's the plan?" she asked in a small voice.

She heard the same hint of doubt in voice as he answered. "I managed to call in a few favors and wangle a reservation on San Simeon for tonight. At 'El Escondrijo del Amante'."

"'Lover's Hideaway'?" She hoped her brittle laugh would cover the uncertainty in her voice. "How subtle."

Evidently he still knew her too well. "Amanda," Lee said, running a hand slowly through his hair. "You don't have to do this, you know."

Grinning determinedly, she met his eye. "When do we leave?"

His smile matched hers. "We're on the three o'clock flight."

Nodding, she started for the stairs, but his voice called her back. "There's one more thing," he said, looking at an unseen spot just over her right shoulder. "I did a lot of thinking last night, and there are some things that need to be said."

"We don't have to do this now," she said in an attempt to head him off. The last thing she wanted at the moment was to rehash old arguments.

"Yes," he countered firmly, "we do. If we're going to be able to function in the field, we can't keep tripping over our personal lives every time we turn around. That's the fastest way I know to a bullet . . ." Stopping short, he turned away.

"Lee, it's okay," she began, Francine's accusations ringing in her ears as for the first time she took full note of his distress. She wanted to reach out to him, but suddenly didn't know how.

"You were right, Amanda," he said, sighing deeply. "I didn't have any right to say those things to you last night. What you do and with whom isn't my business anymore." Reaching into his pocket, he quickly pulled out an envelope, turning it over a few times before placing it in her hands. He raised a hesitant finger to her cheek, caressing her for one all too brief moment. "I've been a fool," he told her with a bittersweet smile, "holding onto the past, not allowing either of us to move forward. I signed the divorce papers this morning. As soon as we get back, your attorney can file them."

She clutched the crisp white envelope tightly in her hand. "Lee. I don't know if . . ."

He didn't allow her to finish. "We should both get packed, Mrs. King. We wouldn't want to miss our flight."

Frozen, Amanda could only watch as he disappeared upstairs. Licking her dry lips, she looked down at the envelope in her hands, her finger sliding underneath the flap. She opened it in slow motion, removing the blue-backed papers with special care. The bold typeset seemed to mock her as her eyes were drawn inexorably down the page.

'Whereas, wife shall cause to be filed against husband a Petition for Dissolution of Marriage . . .'

"No, Lee," she whispered, a solitary tear following the path his fingers had traced on her cheek. "I'm the fool."

PART THREE

"If I should die before I wake . . ."

~ XIX ~

"El Sr. y la Sra. . . ." The desk clerk glanced at his file then looked up with a toadying smile. "El Sr. y la Sra. Stedman, dé la bienvenida al Escondrijo del Amante. Yo lo espero y su esposa tuvo un vuelo agradable."

"Thank you." Lee smiled warmly as his arm snaked out to draw Amanda's body closer. "We had a very pleasant flight, didn't we, Darling?"

She let out a light, melodic laugh, her expression matching his. "Yes, we did."

"Perdóneme, but I thought you had specified Spanish as your language of choice."

Affecting a quizzical look, Lee shook his head. "No, I'm afraid you must be mistaken."

"Enrique must have taken your reservation," the man informed them ruefully. "It is not the first error he has made. Fortunately, he is no longer with us. If there are any inaccuracies with any of the other preferences you specified, you have only to call the front desk. At Escondrijo del Amante, we pride ourselves in attention to even the smallest detail."

"Oh, I'm sure everything will be just fine," Amanda stated as she glanced at Lee with an impatient sigh. "Right, Sweetheart?"

Unable to answer, Lee merely nodded. That name, so casually bandied about, unexpectedly stung him. It was silly, he reminded himself. After all, they were undercover. Endearments were not only necessary, they were expected. Hadn't he just called her 'darling?' It was just that, for a moment, he felt uncomfortably like . . . Joe King.

"Sweetheart?"

He felt the subtle pressure of Amanda's hand on his arm. Slipping back into his role, he turned to the clerk once again, allowing a note of urgency to creep into his voice. "If someone could please show us to our room?"

The clerk's knowing grin revealed a small gap between his front teeth. "Of course, Mr. and Mrs. Stedman." Motioning for a bellcap, he added, "We hope you have a wonderful honeymoon. And, again, if there's anything you need . . ."

Lee dismissed the clerk with a brusque nod. His fingers resting lightly on Amanda's hip, he escorted her across the elegant, two-story lobby. The late afternoon light filtered down on them through the vaulted glass ceiling as they followed the bellhop at a leisurely pace. The quaint, turn of the century furnishings, intimately grouped throughout the large room, lent the feeling of a bygone era. To complete the picture, the tinkling sounds of a piano could be

heard from somewhere above them. Struck by an odd feeling of disconnect, Lee suddenly found himself wishing they were there for no other purpose than to bask in the luxurious comfort of the world-class resort.

The feeling lasted until they reached the antique elevator. "Honeymoon?" Amanda hissed in his ear as they stepped inside, her brow creased in a furious frown.

"I told you, I had to pull strings to get this reservation," he muttered, hoping she'd leave it at that. He knew how little she cared for this type of charade. "I couldn't be choosy."

"Any other surprises you'd care to share?"

The annoyance in her tone was impossible to miss. He shot her a warning glance, inclining his head in the direction of the bellhop who was maneuvering their luggage into the small space. Amanda rolled her eyes, but took the hint.

He could tell she was still angry, though, by the way she toyed with that heart-shaped necklace she always wore. It was a habit he'd come to use over the years as a barometer for her moods. A few casual swipes signaled mild irritation; twisting it around her finger meant he was really in the doghouse. And that time she'd actually gotten it caught on her ring . . .

Her ring.

Lee sucked in a breath. He shot the bellhop an uneasy glance as he quickly folded her hand in his. The boy seemed disinterested enough; perhaps he hadn't noticed her glaringly naked finger after all. Although the boy's eyes *had* seemed to drift curiously in their direction once or twice.

Squaring his shoulders, he turned to Amanda with a stunning smile. Slowly, he drew her hand up, carefully studying each line in her palm with deliberate care. Leaning forward ever so slightly, he traced her lifeline with the tip of his tongue, stopping at the end to place a sensual kiss on the pulse point of her wrist. As if on cue, she shivered slightly, the little sigh that escaped her lips a perfect validation of their cover.

Lee whistled softly; she might be angry, but her timing was as impeccable as ever. Turning her hand, he directed his attention next to her slender fingers, softly stoking each one in turn. By the time he finally arrived at her ring finger, the smirking bellhop had averted his eyes, and Lee reached into his pocket.

Without missing a beat, he slipped a plain platinum band onto Amanda's waiting finger.

The conveyance came to a precipitous stop, the gilt-edged doors opening with a powerful 'whoosh.' As they stepped out into the hall, Amanda seized the first opportunity to remove her hand from his, pushing it forcefully into her pocket as they both followed the bellboy down the long, narrow corridor.

It opened into a small alcove. "Here you are, Mr. and Mrs. Stedman," he informed them as he opened the door marked 554. "Just as you specified, one of our most private accommodations. I hope you enjoy your stay."

"I'm sure we will," Lee replied, stepping aside to allow Amanda to enter. Eager to be rid of their unwanted audience, he hastily slapped a few bills into the boy's hands and picked up their suitcases. "I'll take it from here."

The bellhop grinned appreciatively as he pocketed the tip. "If you need anything during our stay, my name is Simon." With a respectful tilt of his head, he retreated back down the hall.

"Lee," he heard Amanda say irritably as he crossed the threshold. Her eyes flashed as she eyed the phony wedding ring around her finger. "We need . . ."

"There'll be plenty of time to unpack, Darling," he quickly replied, shooting her a warning as he deposited their bags in the corner. She nodded her understanding with a sour grimace. Matching her look, he retrieved a slim, silver case from his pocket, saying in an enthusiastic voice, "I've heard wonderful things about this place. I'm sure the trip will be unforgettable." Keeping up the inane banter, he quickly and efficiently swept the room. It appeared to be clean. Although, noting the particularly grim set of Amanda's jaw as she watched in stony silence, he almost wished the damn bug detector would beep.

Snapping the case closed, he let out a deep sigh. "We can talk now."

"Oh, we can talk now?" she repeated with cool sarcasm, drumming her fingers on her arm as she eyed him frostily. "As opposed to . . . what? Not being able to talk back in Arlington? Or on the plane? Or on the cab ride from the airport?"

Letting out a short breath, he retrieved his small suitcase. "Look, Amanda," he began as he busied himself with unpacking. "I know this is awkward, and you're upset . . ."

"How perceptive of you, Scarecrow."

The use of his codename grated jarringly. "What did you expect me to do?" he grumbled, tossing some shirts haphazardly into a drawer. "I couldn't exactly arrange for separate rooms at this particular resort. It caters to lovers."

She waved her ring finger accusingly in the air. "So you said to yourself, hey, why not take it a step further?"

Ignoring her look, he turned back to his suitcase. He pulled out his sweats, hesitated a moment, then carelessly stuffed them into the same drawer. "Dr. Smyth was breathing down my neck. I had less than thirty minutes to throw this scenario together. I may have let a few minor details slip . . ."

"A few minor details?' For Pete's sake, Lee!" Shaking her head, she quickly crossed the room. "Here, give me that," she ordered as she snatched the jacket from his hands. "It's going to be full of wrinkles." Shaking it with unusual zeal, she marched to the closet, hanging it up with a furious bang. Then, zeroing in on his drawer, she removed the tangled mass of shirts and dumped them on top of the polished dresser. Grabbing one from the pile, she folded it across her chest, energetically smoothing out the wrinkles. "I think, under the circumstances, I had a need to know," she grouched as she placed the shirt carefully back in the drawer.

"I realize that. And I had every intention of . . ." He stopped, glaring at her as she started folding yet another shirt. "I'm a big boy, Amanda," he snapped. "I can take care of my own . . ."

Turning abruptly, she whipped the shirt in his direction, hitting him squarely in the face. "Be my guest."

"And *that*," he returned, stooping to retrieve the fallen clothing with an exaggerated flourish, "is exactly why I didn't tell you. I knew how you'd react."

Pushing him aside, she hefted her own suitcase onto the bed, tugging unmercifully at the zipper. "Then all the more reason to discuss it with me," she told him, grabbing an armful of her own clothing. She started for the dresser, then abruptly changed course, blowing out a sharp breath as she flung the bundle back onto the bed.

He could see the small muscles in her jaw clenching. This argument was escalating into their usual impasse even faster than usual. "Okay, okay," he ground out, struggling to hang onto what remained of his temper. "I get the point."

"No, I don't think you do," she responded, her hands on her hips. "You have no idea what I'm so angry about, do you?"

Lee let out an exasperated sigh. "Look, I'm sorry about all this. The room . . ."

"I couldn't care less about this stupid room. You always **think** you know how I'm going to react in any given situation, but you really haven't got a clue. Why don't you try talking to me sometimes? I might surprise you."

"Amanda . . ."

"Damn it, Lee!" she cried with sudden vehemence. "We're supposed to be partners!"

He bit his lip. "There wasn't time to . . ."

"That's a bunch of baloney," she all but shouted. "You make time for the things you want to make time for."

He narrowed his eyes at her, his entire form stiffening as he folded his arms across his chest. "Just what the hell is **that** supposed to mean?"

"It means that you certainly found a few spare minutes to call your good friend Francine on the way to the airport," she returned, almost spitting the words at him. "And again when we landed."

"I had information to coordinate with her."

Her scowl became a contemptuous smile. "Is that what they call it these days?"

"What the hell are you getting at?"

"As if you didn't know."

Her convoluted thought processes were more than he could take. Picking up his small travel case, he flung it disconsolately onto the nearby chaise. "You know, you're right about one thing -- I don't know how you're going to react any more. Maybe I should have taken Francine up on her offer to come down here with me."

"Yeah, well, I'm sure it would have been **much** more pleasant for you."

"At least Francine and I wouldn't be having this pointless argument. You know the rules of this game as well as I do. Damn, it Amanda, you were easier to work with as an untrained civilian!"

Her sharp intake of breath hit him like a knife, and he knew he'd gone too far. Punching his fist impotently into his palm, he stole a guilty glance over his shoulder. She stood very still, her eyes unreadable as she absently toyed with her make-believe wedding band.

"I guess I should be flattered you didn't tell me to wait in the car until this was all over," she told him, her voice shaking with an emotion she was clearly trying desperately to control.

The pain he had caused was plainly obvious, and he found himself shifting uncomfortably under her gaze. "Amanda, I . . . I didn't mean that the way it sounded." He took a small step forward. "And I didn't mean to . . . well, I'm . . ."

Shaking her head, she quickly held up her hand. Crossing the room, she flung open the French doors, stepping out onto the small balcony. She stood statue-like for a few minutes, her eyes fixed on the scene below. Then, leaning forward on the railing, she sighed loudly.

Lee let out a long breath of his own. She had a perfect right to be angry. He really had intended to discuss all this with her on the plane, but he just couldn't seem to find the words. So, like a coward, he'd let it slide, keeping his own solitary vigil out the small rectangular window instead.

Why had he found it so difficult to brief her? This was simply business, he reminded himself, not an assignation. And he was a professional. He just needed to let Scarecrow take control, the way he'd done countless other times in the field. Anything else was simply counterproductive. He'd signed those damned papers, right? Put those messy emotions to rest once and for all?

Drawing in a deep breath, he joined her on the balcony. The room had a westerly view, and he allowed his gaze to drift out over the horizon. The large expanse of blue-green stretched out as far as the eye could see. The stillness was hypnotic, and, as the fiery orange sun slid slowly into the sea, an unaccustomed feeling of tranquility settled over him. They stood in silence for a time, side by side, watching the small boats dock in the waning light.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?"

He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. A cool breeze wafted off the water, gently ruffling the tendrils of hair that had eluded her clip. "Yes," he answered, "it is."

She shifted her shoulders ever so slightly. "Lee, if we're going to find out what happened to Jamie, we have to work together from now on."

He nodded, his voice catching as she turned and fully caught his gaze. Her eyes seemed darker than ever as they steadily met his, as if she could somehow see inside his soul. There was something different about her, he realized with a start. Or maybe it had been there all along, and he had been too blind to see it.

"So," she went on, her voice barely audible as she extended her hand. "Partners?"

Unable to look away, he reached out to her. "Yeah," he managed to croak as skin met skin. "Partners."

~ XX ~

Amanda smiled as Lee reached out across the table to take her hand. "Dinner was absolutely wonderful, Darling," she told him breathlessly.

"Can I interest you in some dessert?" he asked, gently rubbing his thumb across her knuckles.

She knew it was only a reflex, but the strange intimacy of the gesture caused her to shift uneasily in her chair. "No, thanks," she all but croaked. "I don't think I could eat another bite."

He replied with a rumbling laugh. "Food is the furthest thing from my mind, Mrs. Stedman."

The waiter cleared the last of the dishes, leaving them alone again. Letting out a long breath, she swiftly reclaimed her hand. "You were about to fill me in on your conversation with the bellboy," she reminded him as she abandoned their cover.

She watched as Lee leaned back in his chair, absently fiddling with the Agency-issue wedding ring he'd slipped on while she was dressing for dinner. It obviously felt as foreign to him as the one she wore. "Our friend Simon was very

helpful," he finally informed her. "It seems there *is* an old trail that leads to the other side of the island, but it's not very well traveled."

"Yes, that fits with what Bryce told me," she told him. It was oddly disconcerting to see the unfamiliar flash of silver on his finger, so different from the glistening gold band she'd placed there. "What about the supplies we'll need?"

He took a long, deliberate drink of water, his eyes darting around the room before coming to rest again on hers. "There's a shop in the marketplace that sells hiking gear."

His hesitancy touched off a warning bell, and she leaned forward again across the small table. "Simon can get the stuff we need, right?"

"Yes, he'll have everything delivered in the morning," Lee told her reluctantly.

"Then things are falling right into place."

He turned his upper body slightly as he shifted his gaze toward the window. The lights from the open-air nightclub twinkled invitingly from across the lawn, and Amanda watched him take in every nuance of the scene. She knew what was coming; she'd seen that same look in his eyes enough times over the years. There was a time when Lee used to handle his nerves before a big mission by cracking jokes; ever since the shooting in California, he needed to have 'the conversation.' Sipping her wine, she waited for him to begin their ritual dance.

"Look, Amanda . . . I've been thinking," he said, right on schedule. "Maybe it would be better if you . . ."

"No."

"This isn't going to be a walk in the park."

"I wasn't expecting it would be."

"We could get lost."

"We've got a map."

"Simon said the trail hasn't been used in years," Lee warned. "It could be impassable."

"Then we'll figure something else out."

"Amanda . . ."

She sighed, her exasperation finally showing. "You're the one who taught me you can't plan for every contingency, Lee."

He eyed her as he drummed his fingers lightly on the table. "At the very least, it's a good day's march over some pretty tough terrain."

"We'll handle it together." As she sensed his resolve begin to weaken, she delivered the final parry. "Partners, remember?"

He nodded grudgingly, and Amanda smiled. Their discussion had reached its inevitable conclusion; Lee had resigned himself. "Hey, you don't have to worry about me," she assured him one more time. "In case you haven't noticed, I'm still in pretty good shape."

Lee chuckled, the taut lines in his face suddenly relaxing. "Oh," he responded, his voice deep and low, "I've noticed."

It was Amanda's turn to look away. Lightly fanning herself, she let her gaze drift out over the lawn. Faint strains from the flamenco band could be heard even in the crowded dining room, the brightly colored lanterns strung around the dance floor projecting an almost magical glow. Closing her eyes, she tried to lose herself in the music. It wasn't any use. She could feel his gaze on her still, and her cheeks burned.

It was only the anticipation of what tomorrow would bring, she reminded herself sharply. That jumpy, butterfly feeling she'd always had in school on the eve of a final exam. She knew Lee felt it, too. In the past, more often than not, it had propelled them straight to the nearest bed. Those were the times their encounters were the most intense. Every look, every touch, seemed to burn its way right into their souls. It was as if their bodies demanded proof that they were still in the here and now, together, and very much alive.

"Amanda."

Her eyes flew open at the sound of her name. Lee was standing beside her, his hand outstretched. "So," she heard him say, the whispered word a soft caress. "Do you want to?"

Her mouth suddenly seemed excessively dry. "Want to?" she croaked, reaching for a glass of water.

"Dance, Amanda. You know, you, me, music . . ." He gave her a strange look. "Are you okay?"

His words were barely audible over the roaring in her ears. She tried to cover her nerves with a laugh, but it sounded high and forced. Tossing her napkin onto the table, she quickly stood, brushing a crumb from her dress. "I'm fine," she assured him. "You just took me by surprise, that's all. I thought you hated to dance."

He shrugged, shifting from foot to foot. "It's, ah, you know, part of our cover."

Her thumb brushed over the ring resting on her finger. "Our cover . . . right." Drawing in a deep breath, she straightened her shoulders and reached for his hand. "Just don't step on my foot," she managed to tease as she allowed him to steer her in the direction of the music.

He pretended to be affronted. "When have I ever stepped on your foot?"

"Do I have to remind you again of that debacle in Monte Carlo?"

"That wasn't my fault, and you know it," he laughed as they picked their way down the cobbled steps that led out across the lawn. "I was simply trying to avoid the fallout."

"Yeah," she snickered. "That blonde *was* practically spilling out of her dress."

He gave her hand a tight squeeze. "I was referring to the explosive device under the bandstand."

"Sure you were."

As they reached the intimate dance area, Lee pulled her into his arms. "I promise to keep my foot under surveillance at all times," he said with a grin, swaying her in perfect time to the music. "Scout's honor."

"You always say that," Amanda murmured, struggling to still the slight tremor that had somehow crept into her voice. "But you were never a Boy Scout."

He laughed, the deep, rumbling sound echoing close to her ear as his arms tightened around her, and she leaned into him. Lee's cheek grazed hers, the slight stubble of his evening beard a delightful tickle against her skin. The rare moment of harmony felt good. They seemed to fit perfectly together, their bodies instinctively remembering the other's rhythm. How long had it been since they'd danced? Jamie's wedding, she remembered suddenly. The band had been

wonderful, and they'd lingered on the dance floor well into the night. She couldn't remember when she'd seen Lee so relaxed, without even a thought of the Agency intruding on their time together. He and Phillip both . . .

Involuntarily, she shivered.

"Is the breeze too cool?" he asked, running his long fingers over her back.

"It might be at that," she said, a slight catch in her voice. "Would you mind very much if we called it a night?"

He drew back to look at her with a slightly mocking eye. "Still worried about your feet?"

She shook her head. "I'm suddenly really tired, that's all."

He seemed to understand or, at least, had the good grace not to tease her further. Either way, Amanda was grateful. Lee was the only man she knew who could be totally obnoxious one moment and amazingly sensitive the next.

Avoiding the restaurant, they skirted the lawn, taking the less traveled shortcut to the lobby. Even so, there seemed to be people everywhere, and Lee placed a possessive arm around her waist as he led her to the elevator. A smartly dressed couple followed them in, and she felt him tense beside her. He immediately pulled her to him, angling his body protectively between her and the dark haired couple standing beside them. When the strangers got off one floor below theirs, his sigh of relief was audible.

Amanda understood. This farce they were playing must be taking its toll on him, too. With his hand curved around her hip, it seemed an eternity before they reached the safety of their room. She watched silently as Lee quickly swept for bugs, the stiff lines of his back relaxing slightly when the reading came up clean once again. Removing his jacket, he tossed it onto the chair. "I'm really beat," he groused as he loosened then pulled off his bowtie. "It's been a long day."

Amanda nodded, swiftly retrieving his discarded coat. As his fingers routinely undid the studs on his shirtfront, she moved to the closet, hanging the jacket up with painstaking care. She could hear the loud thud of his shoes as they hit the floor behind her. "Do you want me to leave a wake-up call?" she said, trying to still the trembling in her voice.

"No, that's okay," he replied through a yawn. "I'll probably be up at sunrise. I just need to catch a few hours' sleep."

Nodding, she turned around. Lee was sitting on the side of the large, canopied bed that suddenly seemed to dominate the room. His unbuttoned shirt revealed more than a little of his smooth, well-muscled chest. He'd been working out, she thought as she quickly averted her eyes.

She heard him let out a long breath. "I guess we, uh, should have talked about this earlier."

"What happened to the real Stedmans?" she asked as she walked over to the video cabinet. "Or were they just an invention?"

"They were real. There wasn't time to fabricate a new legend, and when I saw the name, I just . . ."

She stole a glance at him over her shoulder. "Cheated them out of a honeymoon?"

"Nah," he said, his expression endearingly sheepish. "They're enjoying an all-expense paid cruise to Mexico."

"Mexico?"

He grinned. "Spanish was their 'language of choice,' remember."

"Oh, yeah," she said, pulling her eyes away from his smile with an effort. Her finger traced the stack of DVD's in the well-stocked video cabinet. "I suppose we could always watch a movie," she said with a forced laugh.

At Lee's sigh, she turned around. "Look, Amanda," he said, rubbing his neck as he closed the distance between them. "It's okay. I'll just sleep on the . . ." His eyes cast desperately around the room.

"The chair?" she supplied skeptically as she took in the dimensions of the small chaise lounge. "I don't think you'll fit."

"I can take the floor," Lee offered reluctantly.

"It's not even carpeted."

He shrugged lightly. "I've slept in worse places."

"The senior agent always gets the bed," she told him, her voice barely audible as she watched the play of muscles across his chest. "Isn't that the drill?"

"Tell you what," he told her kindly. "I'll defer my senior status to you this time. You've more than earned it."

Her lips curved up in a hint of a smile. "This really is silly, isn't it? It's not like we've never . . ." Walking over to the dresser, she grabbed a t-shirt and pajama pants from the drawer. "We can share the bed," she stated matter-of-factly as she headed for the bathroom. "We both need some sleep if we intend to trek across the island tomorrow."

"Amanda . . ." His voice sounded deeper than usual as he called her name. "Are you sure?"

Pursing her lips, she nodded, giving him one last look as she claimed the blessed sanctuary of the bathroom. "Just don't hog all the covers, okay?"

"You're the one who does that," she heard him retort as she closed the door.

~ XXI ~

Chest heaving, he ran beside the gurney, the persistent wail of a siren echoing in the distance. As a pair of electric doors swung open, a deep, booming voice rose above the general din of the crowded ambulance bay.

"Stand clear."

His head was throbbing. In his still foggy brain, the roar of the explosion seemed to echo interminably, mixed with the cries of the injured. Victim and perpetrator alike, it made no difference. In the chaotic, smoke-filled shell that had once been the old Allied Chemical building, it had been impossible to distinguish friend from foe.

Inside the emergency room at Parker General Hospital, there was bedlam of another kind.

"Male Caucasian, approximately twenty-six years old. Multiple gunshot wounds to the abdomen and chest."

The voices seemed to grow louder as two emergency physicians worked on the patient, cataloging his injuries with textbook precision.

"Small wound adjacent to the breastbone."

"Two wounds to the anterior abdominal wall."

"No exit wound."

The throbbing in his head stepped up a notch as he watched one nurse draw blood with vampire-like efficiency, while another finished connecting the various intravenous tubing that had been started in the ambulance. Their tasks complete, they turned their eyes on him.

"Sir, I'll have to ask you to step outside."

"I'm not leaving."

"Only trained medical personnel are allowed in the trauma unit."

"I'm not leaving. He's my son."

A new hive of white-coated personnel swarmed suddenly. He found himself roughly shunted aside, forgotten in the carefully controlled chaos of changing shifts. The N.E.S.T. team, he realized with grim relief. Phillip was in good hands now. If he could only get closer, make sure the boy knew he hadn't left him.

"Lee . . ."

A shallow, breathy voice called his name. Eyes still stinging from the smoky warehouse, Lee wiped away the excess moisture with the edge of his sleeve. Pushing forward, he blindly grabbed a hand.

"I'm right here."

Cold, clammy fingers closed weakly around his. He squeezed back.

"Shhh, shhh, don't try to talk."

He blanched as he took in the full extent of the damage. He'd seen it before, gunshot wounds from bullets that tore through flesh and bone with the force of a tornado, spreading damage far beyond their trajectories. He looked into his son's too-pale face and lied.

"Everything's gonna be okay."

"Lee . . ." the boy called again.

His voice was weaker this time. Desperation sought an outlet in an old childhood nickname. "Hang in there, Chief."

"Waited . . . should have. Like . . . like you said."

Looking up, he caught the attending physician's eye. It was Sam Crenshaw, the same trauma surgeon who'd treated him last year. Reputedly one of the very best, he ran his N.E.S.T. unit strictly by the book. Strangely, Sam didn't order him from the room.

Phillip moaned, frothy red bubbles at his lips.

"Shhh, Chief, save your strength."

Their eyes met, and in that moment he realized Phillip understood. The boy smiled feebly, shallow gasps punctuating the simple phrases he struggled to utter. "Not their fault . . . waited . . . should have. Tell Mom I . . ."

An alarm rang. Insistent hands tore him from his son as the emergency team sprang back to life.

"I've got diminished breath sounds."

"Paddles."

"Clear."

The room began to swim. In his mind, even their words seemed to eddy and swirl.

"He's coding."

"Clear"

"Flatline."

"No!"

Inside his head, he was screaming, but the word escaped his mouth in little more than a choking whisper. The room seemed to darken around the edges of his eyes as he struggled for air.

"No . . . Phillip . . ."

He managed a few ragged breaths before the floor rose to meet his face. From someplace far away, he heard the team switch their attention to him.

"Phillip . . ."

Hands shook his shoulder, while cool fingers wiped his brow. He tried to shake them off. Damn doctors . . . Phillip was the one who needed their help. Still they persisted, their hands a gentle pressure on his forehead, his shoulder, his chest. They called his name over and over, rousing him back to consciousness with pointed determination . . .

"Wake up . . ."

"No . . ."

"Wake up."

"No!"

He struggled, but still the persistent hands held him back. He had to stop them, fight them off.

"Shhh--shhh, it's okay." Soft words reassured him. "Wake up, Lee, it's me. It's Amanda."

Squinting, he looked up into a pair of agonizingly familiar brown eyes. "Amanda?" he croaked, his heart still pounding in his chest.

"Yes," she said, biting her lip as she looked down at the hands that gripped her forearms.

He tried to move, but the sheets had wound their way into a tangled mass about him, makeshift bonds that nonetheless held him firmly. And there was something pushing on his chest . . . no, not something . . . someone. Amanda had flung herself atop him, leveraging her body weight to pin him to the bed. What the hell . . . He gasped in a breath, perspiration drawing a thin, scraggly line down his cheek.

"Lee," he heard her whisper again. "Let go. You're hurting me."

Responding to her gently prodding tone, he immediately loosened his grasp. "Where are we?" he gasped, his eyes darting around the room.

"San Simeon." Her tone was patient, calm, a mother comforting a fretful child. "The island . . ."

"Oh, yeah," he grunted as memory flooded over him, the spinning vortex of his subconscious no longer dragging him down. "I guess I was dreaming," he told her, moistening his lips with his tongue. His mouth felt like cotton.

"Seemed more like a full-fledged nightmare to me."

Closing his eyes for a moment, he shook his head. "It was nothing, really."

"Do you want to talk about it?" she inquired tenderly, brushing aside his nonchalance.

"Uh . . ." He fell silent as he returned her earnest gaze. The look in her eyes was oddly compelling, touching an aching chord of memory deep inside. Or maybe it was the moonlight streaming through the open window to bathe her face in its soft, penumbral light. He'd almost forgotten how beautiful she was . . . his Amanda.

She tilted her head to one side, a wayward strand of sleep-tousled hair tickling the tip of her nose. "Tell me about your nightmare," she said, more sigh than sentence.

He tried, but the words stubbornly refused to come. In the muted light, Lee could dimly make out the fine worry lines around the edges of her eyes, the shadows that bespoke her own sleepless nights. He couldn't add his burden to hers; he didn't have that right anymore.

He turned his head away. "Must have been that sherry sauce at dinner," he laughed, a dull flat sound that thudded in his chest.

She blew out a sharp breath. "Sherry sauce?"

"Yeah, I should . . . I should really know better."

Amanda quickly rolled away. Tucking her legs beneath her, she sat cross-legged on the bed, frowning as she absently rubbed the small red marks on her upper arms.

"I hurt you," he cried, stung. "Oh, Amanda . . ." He sprang up, turning his back to her as he swung his feet forcefully to the floor. "I knew this was a bad idea."

He heard the soft rustle of sheets behind him. "How often do you have these nightmares about Phillip?" she pressed, her breath coming in short, puffy rasps against his neck.

He clutched at the ends of the blanket, twisting them tightly between his fingers.

"You called out his name," she explained in a sudden rush before he could ask. "I was, uh, watching you. I guess I wasn't sleeping so well, either."

He gave a low, contemptuous laugh. "A lot of that goin' around, huh?"

A tentative hand brushed his shoulder, massaging his back with light strokes. "Tell me about the dream."

"No." Abandoning the bed, he strode to the window, resting his forehead against the pane of glass. It felt deliciously cool. Closing his eyes, he concentrated on breathing in and out.

The floorboards creaked as she came up behind him. Her hand touched his shoulder again, this time squeezing with gently persistent pressure. "Leave it alone," he declared, the bald words sounding harsh even to his ears.

"I can't," she whispered, her voice cracking. "This isn't the first time, is it?"

He stepped deliberately out of her reach. "I don't know what you mean."

"You were dreaming last night, too, on the sofa. I heard you saying something when I came home from . . ."

"Your date?" he snapped, whipping around to face her. She couldn't seem to meet his eye, studying the floor instead with unusual diligence. "Don't worry," he snorted contemptuously, turning back to the window once again. "You don't have to concern yourself about my sleeping habits anymore."

"I do when they tie you up in knots," she rebuked, her voice rising as she jerked her head up. "In case you've forgotten, Scarecrow, we're about to go rogue on a covert op. I have to know if you're going to be able to handle it. I'm your partner, remember?"

"So you keep telling me. Well, thanks for your concern, Mrs. King," he spat sarcastically, "but it's misplaced." Crossing swiftly to the dresser, he blindly grabbed some pants from the bottom drawer, his chest rising and falling unevenly as he struggled into them.

"Don't run away from this, Lee."

"Look who's talking," he ground out, shoving his other leg through the stiff denim fabric. "As I recall, when things got tough, *you* ran clear through five states."

"And a fat lot of good it did me." Sighing softly, she walked over to the bed. "That's the trouble with running," she murmured, her fingers toying with the drawstring on her pajama pants. "Your problems tend to run right along with you."

Lee turned away. Pulling up his jeans, he quickly fastened the button and gave the zipper a vigorous tug, the sound of the metal teeth magnified in the stilted silence. He forced his feet into his shoes before heading resolutely toward the door, glancing reflexively over his shoulder one last time.

What he saw stopped him cold. Amanda sat silently on the edge of the bed, eyes focused on some unknown spot outside in the night. Awash in the gentle moonlight, her complexion appeared paler than ever, her body held with motionless rigidity. A stick figure, he thought suddenly. A caricature of the woman who had once been so full of life.

Yet, even in her unyielding obstinacy, there was some element that defied definition. Maybe it was the misplaced sensuality in the soft curve of her cheek or the way her tongue darted out every so often to tease at her upper lip. Beneath the hard, inflexible picture she presented nestled a small core of vitality, stubbornly kept alive through the agony of the past year. Though brittle, she had never broken; he was the one who had done that.

His anger suddenly deflated. Padding over to the bed, he sat down beside her. "I'm sorry, Amanda," he began in a low voice. "I wish . . . I wish I could . . ."

Pausing, he let out a frustrated breath. "Believe me," he tried again, "I'd talk about it if . . . if I thought it would change things. Hell, I'd even shout about it at the top of my lungs from that balcony over there. But the outcome would still be the same. Nothing I say . . . or don't say, for that matter . . . will wipe away what happened. It replays over and over in my head. I can't stop it. Maybe I don't even **want** to stop it anymore," he realized, brushing his fingers distractedly through his hair. "I just have to live with what happened. What I did . . . **didn't** . . . do."

The tension in her shoulders slowly relaxed. "What didn't you do?" she asked in a small voice.

"I . . . didn't . . . save . . . him."

"**You** didn't pull the trigger, Lee," she said after a moment's pause.

"I may as well have." He risked a glance out of the corner of his eye. Just as he expected, she didn't deny it.

"Friendly fire," she opined with a bitter little laugh. "There's an oxymoron if I ever heard one."

Lee shook his head. "All those years, all that field experience, and . . . when it came right down to it, the great Scarecrow couldn't even get up off the goddamned floor. Couldn't stop our own people from . . ." Breathing roughly, he slammed his fist violently into the nearest pillow. As it collided with the edge of the headboard, he involuntarily winced.

The sound galvanized Amanda into action. "Let me see . . ."

"I'm fine," he choked out between clenched teeth, pulling his hand tightly into his chest.

Reaching across him, she switched the light on low. "Let me see your hand, Lee," she demanded sternly.

"It's okay, see?" He gingerly flexed his fingers a few times. "I just grazed the edge of the knuckle."

Reaching out, she took his large hand in hers. As she tenderly felt the throbbing spots, Lee added with a forced laugh, "At least I had the foresight to smash my right hand."

Pursing her lips, she shook her head. "I don't think anything's broken," she pronounced at length. Her fingers lingered on his flesh, softly rubbing his enflamed knuckle in tiny little circles. The gentle rhythm of her touch soothed him, just as it had all those years ago on that long, cold Christmas Eve in the Virginia woods. He'd barely known her, yet even then she'd possessed an uncanny ability to ease his wounds, seen and unseen. What a long road they'd traveled since, years together that couldn't be foresworn. He shifted toward her ever so slightly, pulled without volition by the power of their shared history.

With quiet urgency, he whispered her name.

She looked up at the sound, so foreign now, her eyes fastening on his. They shone with a bright luminescence, the tears she still stubbornly refused to let fall glistening in the faint lamplight. Reaching out, he tenderly cupped her cheek with his good hand.

Moaning his name with a startled gasp, she leaned into his touch. Almost in slow motion, he felt himself bend toward her, drawn by something beyond his control. Tilting his head, his lips sought hers. She sighed then, her eyelids fluttering shut as she strained to meet him, and he, too, closed his eyes in aching anticipation.

Something bumped sharply against the door. Startled by the sound, he abruptly pulled back.

"What . . ." she began, but he shook his head, bringing his finger to his lips. Footsteps sounded outside for a brief moment, then, just as quickly, faded to nothingness.

Silently springing up, Lee reached into the nearby nightstand to retrieve his gun. Jerking his head in the direction of the noise, he caught Amanda's eye. They crossed the room in tandem, Amanda flattening herself protectively against the wall. At her sharp nod, he flung open the door, one hand bracing the other as, gun pointed, he stepped into the hall.

The small alcove was deserted. Lifting the muzzle, he looked back into the room. On the large canopied bed, two small indentations marked the spot where only moments ago his mouth had been a few scant millimeters from hers. Frowning slightly, he took a few steps into the long hallway beyond their room. Nothing there, either. Had his imagination been conjuring up phantoms to protect him?

"It's clear," he sighed, holstering his weapon inside his belt as he came back into their room. "There's no one out here."

"There was," Amanda assured him as she stepped out from behind the door. Her cheeks reddening slightly, she added firmly, "I heard it, too."

"Maybe I should take another look around, just to be . . ."

"Lee," she interrupted suddenly, her eyes on the floor. "What's that stuck to your shoe?"

He followed her puzzled gaze, bending to retrieve the small piece of crumpled white paper. In his haste to get through the door, he must have stepped on it.

Eyes narrowing, he opened the folded note. "What the . . ." he began, stopping himself as he felt Amanda's hand on his arm. Their eyes met for a moment as they both absorbed the meaning behind the words scrawled hastily in a large, broad hand.

'Go home before it's too late.'

~ XXII ~

"Let's rest for a minute."

Amanda nodded, gratefully dropping her backpack at her feet. Negotiating the steep mountain trail was beginning to take its toll, but she had stubbornly refused to ask for a break. If Lee could keep up this grueling pace, well then, so could she.

Lifting her canteen, she cautiously quenched her thirst. Their water supply should last, but there was no reason to stretch their resources. The bellboy, Simon, had been unable to procure their entire order from the island supply store. Wiping the sweat from her brow, she offered the canteen to Lee.

As he shook his head, Amanda sighed. The silent treatment appeared to be continuing. Lee had been unusually tight-lipped since they'd started their cross-country trek this morning, answering her in monosyllables, if at all. After a while, she'd simply given up trying to talk to him. If he wanted to ignore what had almost happened between them last night, then that was just fine with her.

Feeling Lee's eyes on her, Amanda rubbed her hand self-consciously across the back of her neck. Her cheeks felt flushed; the moist, sticky island heat was a sharp contrast to the chilly Chicago weather she'd grown accustomed to. Untying the red patterned bandana from her neck, she dampened it sparingly with the cool water then quickly pressed it against her neck and wrists.

As her ministrations revived her, her flagging energy also began to return. Considering she was operating on a few scant hours of sleep, she felt amazingly alert. Still, years of field experience had taught her to seize the opportunity to rest whenever it presented itself. Sitting Indian-style on the ground, she took a deep breath and closed her eyes.

The silence in the hills was more profound than the quiet of the city, and Amanda felt her body relax almost immediately. She only wished her mind would follow suit. Despite her earlier vow to put the previous night's events out of her head, as the refreshing solitude settled around her, her thoughts instantly traveled there. It didn't take a genius to understand why. Ever since she'd climbed into that wide, canopied bed with Lee, the past had pulled at her with persistently sticky tentacles. Feelings she thought she'd come to terms with flared

up once again. And something else . . . the memory of that last time they'd shared a bed . . . the last time they'd made love.

The episode still weighed heavily on her mind. In the immediate aftermath of Phillip's accident, loving each other was just too . . . painful . . . to contemplate. Of course, in those first few days, they'd both felt only a blessed numbness. Then funeral arrangements and condolence messages from family, friends and co-workers all blurred together to form one endless waking nightmare. As time passed and the reality of Phillip's death eventually sank in, a funny kind of exhaustion settled over them. Like wind-up dolls, they moved through the days with mechanical precision, doing only those things that absolutely needed to be done. By the time the Agency Board of Inquiry concluded and the angry recriminations began, they'd honed their avoidance pattern to perfection. They simply never went to bed at the same time anymore. A novel to be finished, the late-night news, Jay Leno . . . the excuses were different, but the end result was always the same. It was just . . . easier . . . that way.

But one night when she mounted the stairs, Lee followed. As they slipped between the cool sheets together for the first time in months, he reached for her. Amanda knew she should stop him, knew it in the very depths of her soul, in her heart that still felt as if it was swathed in thick cotton. But somehow she couldn't bring herself to say no. Truth be told, part of her didn't want to -- the part that daily dreamed of the way things used to be. They were still husband and wife, after all, still entitled to the same release normal married couples took as a matter of course. And, oh! How she longed to be normal!

It was an unmitigated disaster. Their perfunctory union held no joy, no passion or completion. When it was finally over, they both rolled away, the unbridgeable cavern between them wider than ever. Curling into a ball, she hugged her knees tightly to her chest. From his edge of the bed, Lee was equally silent, and, after a while, she sensed him drifting into a restless sleep. It was then, to the accompaniment of his soft, intermittent snores, that she came to a bitter realization.

Not even Lee's tender touch could make her feel alive again. Too many words had been left unsaid for too long. Angry accusations had been hurled back and forth in their stead, until even the most basic truth between them had been irrevocably altered. They were only two people going through the empty motions of a marriage, afraid to make love but more afraid *not* to. Lying there in the cloying darkness, she'd never felt more alone. She knew then -- it was finally over. A few weeks later, she'd told him just that . . . told him she was moving to Chicago.

And he'd let her go.

But last night, in that jasmine scented hotel room, the unexpected spark between them had seemed anything *but* a reflex. If it hadn't been for that noise outside their room . . .

"Looks like we're in for some weather."

Lee's voice took her by surprise; lost in the past, she'd almost forgotten their mission. Quickly opening her eyes, she glanced up at the sky. He was right. The white, puffy clouds shading them from the brutal afternoon sun were ominously darker, while the air had grown distinctly cooler, and there was a light rumbling in the distance.

"Is that thunder?" she asked, brushing off the seat of her shorts as she scrambled up from the ground.

Lee nodded curtly. Picking up her discarded backpack, he quickly slid the straps over her shoulders. "We'd better get moving," he told her in crisp, clipped tones. "There's no cover around here, and I have a bad feeling we're going to need it." Securing his own bundle, he started back up the trail, Amanda following a few feet behind.

They'd only covered a few short yards when the first fat drops began to fall. Within minutes, the sky opened up, the rain emptying down with unrelenting power. Adjusting her backpack, she struggled along, pausing only to push a few wet strands of hair from her eyes.

When she looked up, he had disappeared, swallowed up by the cascading sheets of water. "Lee?" she called almost frantically, yelling to make herself heard over the wind. "Where are you?"

"I'm right here." Even as the sound of his words evaporated in the torrential downpour, a strong hand closed tightly around hers. "Come on," he shouted again. "I found another path."

Skirting the mud puddles forming at their feet, Lee pulled her along. As they reached the top of the hill, he veered off the main track onto a smaller trail. It was a footpath, and, from the looks of things, one that had been recently forged. The entrance had been cleverly covered with underbrush. If it wasn't for the gusting wind from the sudden storm, Amanda was sure they would never have discovered it.

The tall trees loomed above them as they trudged down the narrow path. At least here there was more shelter from the pounding rain, even if it came at a price. Their forward progress slowed considerably as Lee was forced to pick their way through the dense foliage. The terrain was rougher, too; she could definitely feel rocks beneath her feet.

"Amanda, look!"

At the excitement in Lee's voice, Amanda turned her head. Off the path to their right, she spied a small cave-like fissure by a grouping of large rocks. Heaving a sigh of relief, she followed Lee's lead.

The opening was small -- barely room enough for two people. "We'll have to leave the gear out here," Lee advised.

"Well, at least it's waterproof," Amanda returned with false cheer. "I wish I could say as much for us."

"Yeah." Dumping his backpack on the ground, he speedily helped to remove hers, then pulled her beneath the sheltering rocks. Water clung to her skin, and Lee casually skimmed his palms over her upper arms in an attempt to dry her. Looking up, she returned his rueful glance. They might be out of the sheeting rain, but the damage had been done. They were both wet to the bone.

"It should be over soon," Lee's voice reassured her from somewhere in the vicinity of her ear. "Simon told me these sudden island storms never last long this time of year."

She nodded, her eyes surveying the dimensions of their makeshift shelter. The ceiling was a bit too short, she realized; Lee had to hunch over to fit inside. It was an awkward position, and he kept adjusting his stance. The last shift had drawn her closer to him, so near that she could feel the uneven rise and fall of his chest.

"It'll warm up in a few minutes," he said from somewhere over her head.

"Um-hmm," she muttered, biting her lip as her fingers brushed across his chest. Lee's rain-soaked shirt clung to him like a second skin.

"My God, Amanda," he cried. "Your hands are like ice."

"I'll b-b-be o-k-kay." Her words chattered almost as loudly as her teeth.

"These wet clothes aren't helping." Pulling her sopping shirt away from her body, Lee began to run his hands up and down the bare skin of her back. "Better?" he asked, concern clearly evident.

Despite her chill, Amanda felt her cheeks grow hot. "What about you?" she asked shakily. "You're just as wet as I am."

"I can handle it."

She pulled back slightly. "And I can't?"

"A-man-da!"

Her eyes narrowed. When he drawled her name like that, with just the right touch of irritation, she always saw red. "Just what is *that* supposed to mean?" she demanded fiercely. If her sudden flash of anger was a shield for something else, she didn't want to think about it, concentrating instead on the look of annoyed exasperation on her partner's face. Pulling away from his grasp, she stepped backward into the rain, jumping slightly as she felt the bite of the raindrops on her shoulder.

Lee quickly pulled her back into the shelter of the rock. His strong arms surrounded her in a bear-hug, holding her to him. "Amanda," he ground out through clenched teeth, tightening his grip as she continued to struggle. "Would you please stay put? I'm cold, too, okay? I need your body heat."

"Oh" she said breathlessly. Willing herself to relax, she allowed his arms to envelop her tightly. "Is that better?" she asked in a small voice.

"Yeah," he whispered gruffly. "Thanks."

Closing her eyes, she rested her head against his chest. She could hear the solid thumping of his heart mixed with the sharp rat-tat-tat of the rain on the rock. From somewhere outside herself, she noted that the storm appeared to be abating. Sighing, she snuggled closer.

"You can be so stubborn sometimes," Lee murmured suddenly, his breathing harsh.

She smiled against his chest. "So I've been told a time or two."

"Well, see if you can curb it until we thaw out."

Tilting her head back, she looked up into his eyes. They had turned a deep greenish-gold, and there was a teasing sparkle in them she hadn't seen in a long time. "I'll work on it," she grinned as new warmth flowed through her.

He returned her look. "Good. After all, it wouldn't do to let my partner catch pneumonia."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah," he replied roughly. "I might need you to watch my back."

She laughed. "I thought you were here to watch **my** back, Stetson," she challenged, stepping back as she cocked her head.

Raking his eyes over her, he let out a low, throaty laugh. "Oh, I suppose I could manage that, too."

She suddenly realized just how transparent a damp white t-shirt could be. Blushing like a schoolgirl, she instinctively crossed her arms over her chest, twisting her body to face the inside of the makeshift cave.

"I'm sorry." His whispered words sounded close to her ear. "I didn't mean to make you feel uncomfortable."

"You didn't. It's just that I . . ." Shaking her head, she drew in a deep breath.

He gently turned her to face him. Forced to stoop in the confined space, his mouth was only inches from hers. "You what, Amanda?"

"I, um . . ." Sighing, she moistened her lips. Her hands resting lightly on his hips, she could feel the tension in his body . . . and the same jolt of electricity she'd experienced last night in their hotel room.

"A-man-da," he whispered softly, drawing out her name once again.

It didn't annoy her this time. As she felt his fingers gently brush the strands of hair from her face, she looked into his eyes. They shone with a bright light, as if he'd suddenly been lit up from the inside out.

"Lee," she began softly. "I was, uh, just going to say . . . that, um . . . well, your pocket's buzzing," she finished breathlessly as the small phone in his pants pocket began to vibrate. "Maybe you'd better answer it."

He all but ripped the phone from his pocket, muttering a terse, "Stetson. Oh, hi, Francine," he added, allowing a softer note to creep into his tone. "Yeah, me, too . . . No, that's okay. I was having trouble with the reception this morning." His hand still played absently along her back, but his attention was focused on his phone call. Frowning, Amanda untangled herself from his now clumsy embrace.

Stepping outside the small enclosure, she realized that the rain had stopped just as suddenly as it began. Stretching, she gingerly worked the kinks out of her cramped muscles as Lee's voice hummed in the background.

"Oh, yeah, I totally agree. Call Carter at home and tell her she doesn't have time to be sick right now. We're shorthanded."

Opening her backpack, she pulled out a fresh shirt. She heard Lee laugh, the deep, rumbling one he'd always reserved for her. "What did you manage to dig up for me?" he asked, suddenly serious again.

She couldn't listen anymore, couldn't listen to him talk to Francine like his . . . his partner. Heading back to the footpath, she walked a little ways up the trail. Certain she was hidden from Lee's view, she peeled off her damp shirt, pulling a clean one from her bag. Her bra, too, was soaked through. She didn't have another; she'd have to make do with the undershirt she'd packed. Her shorts and shoes would just have to dry as she wore them. It shouldn't take too long; the chill from the storm had already left the air.

She started back toward Lee's position, then quickly changed her mind. The intimacy of their little cave suddenly seemed overwhelming. She didn't want to share it with Francine, even by proxy. When he finally managed to tear himself away from his . . . associate . . . Lee could just damn well come looking for her.

"I'm heading back to the main trail," she carelessly called out as she breezed past his position. Not giving him the chance to answer, she trudged away, retracing their steps with greater speed than before. For some reason, the path was much easier to follow this time . . . wider, more open. Puzzled, she stopped to get her bearings. The terrain didn't look familiar. Had she taken a wrong turn? Letting out an exasperated breath, she began to double back.

Eyes on the ground, she heard the distinctive click of the gun before she saw it. "Hands in the air," the sharp voice commanded, and suddenly found herself staring down the barrel of a gun.

"Oh, my gosh!"

The man loomed closer, menacing her with the gun. "I said, get those hands up."

Amanda slowly complied. She knew she should be afraid, but that old Agency training she'd worked so hard to forget over the course of the past twelve months automatically kicked in. Affecting a shell-shocked glare, she stared down her would-be assailant as she began to compile a mental dossier.

Military issue camouflage fatigue pants, an olive-green t-shirt, semi-automatic rifle . . . the man was a soldier, or he had been at one time. He was a good head shorter than she was, but otherwise stocky and well-built. She supposed he could even be called handsome, if not for the long, jagged scar cutting his left cheek in two. And one other oddity . . . his right forearm bore some strange marks. Three small circles in the shape of a triangle . . . cigarette burns, perhaps.

A shiver ran down her spine. Taking a small step backwards, she mentally calculated the distance back to the cave and Lee.

"Don't try it, Mrs. King," the man advised harshly. Tightening his grip on his large gun, he prodded her shoulder with the tip. "Let's take a little walk, shall we? Right over there."

As she moved in the direction the man indicated, she suddenly emerged into a small clearing.

"Okay, stop right there and turn around. Slowly."

She reluctantly obeyed his order. "Look, I don't know . . ."

"Be quiet," he ordered harshly. "Now, kneel down and interlock your hands behind your head."

The classic position of submission; this man knew what he was doing. She said a silent prayer that she did, too.

"Who are you?" she demanded with as much bravado as she could muster. "And how do you know my name?"

The soldier laughed. "You play the game well, Mrs. King. Place your enemy on the defensive and probe for intelligence. Now, let's put away the Agency training manual, shall we? Just give a good yell for Scarecrow -- I know you're dying to, and I'm willing to bet he can't be too far behind."

Biting her lip, Amanda quickly weighed the options. This soldier evidently was well-versed in Agency techniques. Not only did he know her name, but he was familiar with Lee's codename as well. She'd obviously stumbled into some kind of op, covert or otherwise, she wasn't quite sure. If it was sanctioned, the odds of survival were at least a little better. Either way, logic dictated the man had backup nearby.

He spoke again, his tone clearly impatient now. "You've had more than enough time to assess the situation, Mrs. King, and I trust you've correctly concluded that I'm in control. Now, for the last time -- call for Scarecrow. I'm quickly running out of patience."

Amanda stubbornly set her chin. Mustering her courage, she responded boldly, "I think I just lost my voice."

The soldier placed the barrel of his gun squarely against the back of her head. "Find it . . . now!"

Her mouth went dry. As she tried to speak, Amanda caught a sudden glimpse of movement. Praying it was Lee and not the unknown soldier's reinforcements, she cleared her throat and took a deep breath. "I can't call Scarecrow," she informed her captor in a loud voice. "He's too far away to hear me."

"For your sake, you'd better hope that's not true. It would be a shame to splatter such a beautiful agent's brains all over these woods."

"Your intel's outdated," Amanda choked out. "I'm no agent."

The man laughed. "Of course not. You're just a tourist out for an afternoon stroll."

She heard the sharp snap of a twig. "That's right, she is. And you're interfering with her exercise."

Amanda smiled. There was no mistaking that deep, gravelly voice. "Now," Lee continued with a grim laugh, "I suggest you lower your gun before I'm forced to splatter *your* brains all over these woods. Trust me -- it wouldn't be a shame at all."

"It seems you were wrong, Mrs. King. He wasn't as far out of earshot as you thought." To Lee, he added, "Nice of you to join us, Scarecrow."

Lee pressed his gun more firmly against the man's temple. "Do I know you?"

"No, but I know *you* . . .and the lovely Mrs. King here. In fact, I've been expecting you. Ramon!"

A similarly clad, albeit slightly older, soldier suddenly materialized. "Now, I think even you'll agree that the balance has shifted in my favor. Kindly hand over your gun."

The man's eyes had a cold, empty look. His weathered face seemed strangely familiar to Amanda, but she couldn't place him. The odd aura of déjà vu sent a chill down her spine.

Her partner's eerie silence completed the feeling. "Do as he says, Lee," she croaked out. She knew what no doubt was running through his mind, but this was no time for heroics. As she heard the leader mockingly thank him for surrendering his weapon, she breathed a sigh of relief.

It was short-lived.

At the first sound of a scuffle, she reacted without thinking. Grabbing for a fallen tree branch, she made a desperate lunge for the man called Ramon. Two more brawny soldiers appeared out of nowhere, their strong arms restraining her. Open-mouthed, she watched as Lee wrestled the scar-faced soldier to the ground. The man dropped his gun, but Amanda saw the flash of steel through the tangle of arms and legs. Time seemed to stand still as the two men struggled to gain purchase over the knife. Then, as Ramon brought his rifle to bear, it was as if someone had suddenly fast-forwarded a videotape. Everything became a blur as the other soldiers followed his lead, and in the chaos of shouting men and firing rifles, she heard her voice scream out, "Lee!"

~ XXIII ~

The smell of food cooking roused him back to consciousness. Through the fog still clouding his mind, the soft, lilting twang of Amanda's voice reached out to him. He had the vague impression she'd been calling his name at intermittent intervals for some time.

"Lee," she repeated as he began to stir. "Lee, are you okay?"

He moaned as he lifted his head. "Uh, yeah, I think so."

"Thank God. I've been trying to rouse you for over an hour."

Groaning again, he took a deep breath, filling his lungs with much-needed air. His head throbbed rhythmically in time to his pulse. At least he still **had** a pulse, he thought as he numbly lifted his left hand to massage the ache.

"Ouch," Amanda proclaimed loudly. "You can't move like that, Lee. We're chained together."

"What the . . ." He swallowed the obscenity; Amanda hated that kind of language. Blinking a few times, he took stock of their predicament. They were sitting back-to-back on either side of a large tree, their arms stretched behind them on either side of the thick trunk. Just as Amanda said, they were chained together with thick steel handcuffs, his left wrist to her right and vice-versa. He exhaled loudly. It was a truly ingenious way to secure prisoners -- exposed and vulnerable, and not a damn thing they could do about it.

"What happened?" he asked, running his tongue over his teeth. His mouth tasted like month old mothballs.

Amanda sighed. "When you tackled Scar-face back there, I tried to take out the other soldier, but . . ."

"With what?" Lee asked incredulously. "You weren't armed."

"There was broken branch on the ground."

"Oh, Amanda." Lee rolled his eyes. "Of all the lame . . ." he began, gritting his teeth at the pain his small gesture had caused.

"Look who's talking!" she interrupted hotly. "Those two men had semi-automatic rifles. What the hell were **you** thinking?"

He bit his lip. When Amanda punctuated a sentence with **hell**, she was past upset. It was a good question, though, one he almost feared to answer. Why had he tried to tackle those men when he knew he didn't stand a rat's chance of subduing them? It went against every tenet of his training.

As images of the smoke-filled warehouse where Phillip had been shot flashed through his mind, he let out a long breath. When he'd seen Amanda in similar peril, something inside him had just snapped, and he knew he would have moved heaven and earth to save her. It was a damn fool stunt, one that could have gotten them both killed. Maybe Francine had been right after all. He really had no business being in the field anymore.

"Scarecrow?" he heard his partner demand gently. "Are you okay?"

The use of his codename had the desired effect. Snapping his iron control back into place, he assured her roughly, "I'm fine. And you're right -- it *was* a stupid move. It won't happen again."

He heard her suck in a quavering breath. "I thought they were going to kill you."

There a quality in her voice Lee couldn't define. Was it concern for a partner's safety or something more? Pushing the fleeting thought aside, he asked, "Why *didn't* they kill me?"

"I don't know. For a minute there, I thought the soldiers were going to open fire, but they seemed to go out of their way to spare both of us. That scar-faced man who'd stopped me -- he wasn't alone. When you tackled him, the rest of his troops suddenly joined the party."

"The rest of his troops?" He only recalled one other man.

"Yeah. There were six of them. When they started toward you . . ." She drew another shaky breath. "Well, at least they didn't shoot. But one of them knocked you pretty hard with the butt of his rifle instead."

Lee gave a short laugh. "Guess that explains my headache."

"Scar-face was pretty mad. He made them carry you all the way back here." She paused, adding in a quiet voice, "I think they need us alive for some reason."

"That's reassuring." Resting his head against the tree, he looked up. The late afternoon light had faded, and the evening stars now shone against the dark sky. Miniature diamonds, Amanda used to call them. The night sky always seemed so much brighter away from the city lights. In spite of their predicament, he found himself smiling. How they'd both loved those weekend camping trips with the boys.

Closing his eyes, Lee willed the throbbing in his head to stop. He wondered mildly if he had a concussion. His vision didn't appear to be blurred -- that was a good sign. And he wasn't nauseated. In fact, he could really use some food. Whatever the troop quartermaster was cooking in that pot sure smelled good, he thought, recalling what had awakened him in the first place.

Amanda's thoughts echoed his. "So if they want us alive, do you think they intend to feed us?" she asked with a hollow laugh. "I know I should be too worried to eat, but I'm really hungry."

"*You're* hungry," Lee retorted as his stomach protested loudly. "At least *you* ate breakfast."

"See, Stetson," she teased, "you should listen to me. You never know when breakfast is going to come in handy. After all, it's the most important meal . . ."

"Of the day," he finished with a wry grin. "Yeah, so I've been told."

She laughed lightly, then suddenly turned serious again. "Lee, are we in big trouble here or just the regular kind?"

He whistled softly. "I wish I knew. At least they don't seem too concerned with us at the moment."

"Maybe they're hungry, too. Did you see those . . ." She hesitated, and for a moment Lee thought she wasn't going to continue. Then she asked in a hushed voice, "Did you see those funny marks on their arms?"

Lee frowned. "What marks?"

"Burns -- at least, that's what they looked like to me. On their right forearms . . . three small circles."

Lee sat up straighter. "In a triangular pattern?" he inquired, his voice oddly strangled.

"Yes." Amanda let out a breath. "You're not thinking . . .?"

He nodded. "The Triad Corps. My God, I thought they'd been weeded out years ago when Sid Rollins was forced to resign as head of Covert Operations."

"I know that Rollins had an agenda of his own, but how does this Triad Corps fit in?"

Lee sighed. "They were a group of fanatics that all espoused Rollins' half-baked theories of American elitism -- the man's own personal guerilla squad."

"They're Agency, then?"

Lee could hear the anger rippling through her words. "Agency, CIA, FBI . . . the branch didn't matter much to Rollins," he assured her, "only their misplaced idealism. Those marks you saw were the result of their initiation ceremony. Reputedly, they were made by a lighted cigarette. The inductee couldn't move, couldn't make a sound while they were 'branded'. If they did, they were taken out."

"Of the corps?"

"No. They were a dangerous, unsanctioned group, Amanda. Rollins couldn't afford witnesses."

"Oh, my gosh."

"Exactly," Lee replied grimly. "That's part of what makes them so lethal. They'll do anything, follow any order. But I . . . well, I always thought the Triads were more myth than fact. Nothing surfaced about them when we bumped heads with Rollins over that missing poet. Are you absolutely positive, Amanda?"

"Yes. All the men back at the clearing had those identical marks. Well, everyone but Ramon, that is." She let out a deep sigh. "I don't know about the others in camp. None of them have been close enough for me to check them out."

"How many of them are there, do you think?"

"I don't know for sure. I think I've counted about ten so far."

Narrowing his eyes, Lee studied the small group of men huddled around the fire. While they all wore the same green and black camouflage suits, they appeared to be made up of two distinctly separate forces -- one American, the other a nationality of Spanish descent. Perhaps natives of San Simeon . . . it didn't matter. Either way, if they were dealing with members of the Triad Corps, 'big trouble' didn't begin to cover their situation.

Behind him, he could sense Amanda suddenly tense up. "Lee, someone's coming."

Gingerly turning his head, he strained to see the area on her side of the tree. He could just make out the outline of two figures marching toward them. As they came closer, he recognized them. It was the scar-faced leader from the clearing and the other man . . . Ramon.

The man Amanda had referred to as 'Scar-face' let out a laugh. "Well, Scarecrow, glad to see you've joined us again. I hope you and the good Mrs. King haven't found the accommodations too . . . primitive."

Lee raised his arm, Amanda's wrist dangling limply from his. "Just charming, thank you."

"Perhaps you'll find El Legarto more entertaining," Scar-face continued with a knowing smile. "Now that you're awake, he's ready to have a little talk with you." He turned to Ramon. "Libere un par de esposas," he ordered sharply.

Nodding, Ramon produced a small key from his pocket. Stepping to the far side of the tree, he quickly unlocked one set of cuffs. "Levante," he muttered to Lee and Amanda under his breath.

Amanda had already begun to scramble to her feet. Clenching his teeth against the throbbing pain in the back of his head, Lee followed suit. The ground swayed beneath him for a few moments as he fought to regain his land legs, and he braced his free hand against the tree to steady himself. A tender hand stroked his cheek, and large, expressive brown eyes looked up into his.

"You okay?" Amanda whispered softly.

As he nodded, Scar-face warned them brusquely, "El Legarto doesn't like to be kept waiting."

Lee turned a malevolent eye on the man. "Yeah, I sure wouldn't want to do that."

Ramon gave his shoulder a forceful shove. "Muévalo, asshole."

He started toward the burly soldier, but a sharp pressure on his arm brought him up short. "Lee," Amanda rasped. "He's not worth it."

He suddenly remembered their wrists were still shackled together by the remaining pair of handcuffs. Even if he managed to land a lucky punch before Scar-face took him down, Amanda could be unintentionally hurt. His life didn't matter, but he wouldn't place hers in jeopardy. Smiling weakly, he covered her hand with his where it still rested on his arm. "It's all right, Amanda," he told her in a steady voice. "I'm okay."

"Save it for later," their captor interrupted harshly. "If you're still around, that is. Let's go."

As Ramon led the way across the camp, Lee choked down his anger. At least the aborted encounter had jump-started his adrenaline flow. As soon as they got out of this mess, those two were dead meat.

They came to a stop in front of a large tent. Scar-face pulled back the front flap, indicating that they should enter. Lee stole a quick glance at Amanda. Though a little pale, she appeared to be holding it together. Unconsciously, he reached for her hand, entwining his fingers tightly with hers. He'd always admired his partner's grit, but never more than at this moment. Giving her hand a squeeze, he led the way into the tent.

~ XXIV ~

"Apresúrese," the man called Ramon muttered sharply.

Sensing Lee begin to bristle again, she gave him a warning nudge. He raised his eyebrows in response, flashing her that brash smile she knew so well. Amanda heaved a sigh of relief. Since his botched rescue attempt back at the clearing, her partner had been behaving like a powder charge ready to blow. *This* was the Scarecrow she remembered, calm to the point of cockiness under pressure. She desperately needed him to stay that way. His easy assurance was the well from which her own small measure of bravery sprung.

The man in the back of the tent quietly cleared his throat, and Amanda pulled her eyes from Lee with an effort. As her partner gave her hand another reassuring squeeze, she studied the man the others had reverently referred to as 'El Legarto.' His back was to them, so she couldn't see his face, but his form appeared muscular and well-built. Though his full head of hair was mostly gray now, she could tell that it had once been as dark as hers. An old soldier, perhaps -- one who had seen too many campaigns.

"Usted nos puede salir ahora, Ramon." He spoke in well-modulated tones, the soft Spanish words a lilting rhythm to Amanda's ear.

"¿Pero El Legarto, usted piensa que eso es sabio? Usted sabe que estos dos agentes americanos notorios son hábiles y bien entrenados y usted es un hombre importante. . . Importante a la gente de San Cardenzia."

Lee smiled smugly as the man spoke, his eyes alight with possibilities. From the way Ramon glared at him, Amanda knew he saw it, too. Though she couldn't

understand the soldiers' conversation word for word, it was easy to grasp the gist of it. Hero worship was easily translated in any language. As Ramon spoke to his leader, his face shone with a strange inner light. He was obviously hesitant to leave such an important man alone and unprotected with two such notorious American agents. There was something familiar about these men, something she couldn't place. The strange feeling that this had all happened before struck her once again.

At last, Ramon reluctantly left the tent, and the old soldier folded his hands behind his back as he began to pace. He moved with a pronounced limp, favoring his stiff right leg. "You'll have to forgive Ramon," he told them with a deep sigh. "We have been through much together and he is very . . . protective."

"So I gathered." Lee's tone held just a hint of arrogance. Amanda recognized the ploy immediately; it was Scarecrow's usual *modus operandi* when faced with an opponent who had the upper hand. Thank goodness it was business as usual so far.

"He doesn't have anything to worry about," she heard Lee continue. "You certainly have the advantage here."

The man let out a strangled laugh. "Yes, so it would appear. But then nothing is ever as it seems, eh, Scarecrow? One cannot be **too** careful." He turned slowly, his lips curving up in a smile. "So, after all this time, we finally meet formally."

Amanda gave Lee a puzzled glance. He shook his head, lifting his shoulders ever so slightly. Evidently he was as much in the dark as she.

The man chuckled softly. "And the loyal Mrs. King . . . so many years of service and still no code name? Surely, as Scarecrow's partner, you would have merited one. Or perhaps he still has you running his errands, eh?"

"Oh, my gosh!" Amanda stammered as recollection flooded back in an unstoppable rush. El Legarto and Ramon . . . these were the same men who had abducted her from that hot dog stand all those years ago. What was the name again? Milo's Daffy Dogs! Yes, that was it. She had inadvertently picked up a message intended for Lee, and the small band of San Cardenzian rebels had mistaken her for an agent.

Of course, in those days, someone was **always** mistaking her for an agent. Maybe that's why she could still remember events from that first year, even after all this time. As she'd become seasoned, the faces had all blurred together, one case almost indistinguishable from the next, but the experiences she'd had

that first year with Lee were different somehow. Virgin terror left an indelible impression.

El Legarto's grin widened as he saw the recognition in her eyes. "You see, Scarecrow, Mrs. King recognizes me. No matter. I'm happy to refresh your memory. 1983 . . . my men and I had pledged ourselves to deliver our country from the hands of that pig DiGreggorio -- a righteous struggle which your government chose to disavow. You Americans would rather support oppression, it seems -- as long as it's politically expedient."

"You were going to gas Arlington," Amanda accused, her eyes wide. "There's nothing 'righteous' about killing innocent people."

"That doesn't matter to 'El Legarto', Amanda," Lee put in. "After President DiGreggorio was deposed, his party's regime in San Cardenzia thought nothing of massacring scores of helpless women and children."

Springing forward, the soldier stood toe to toe with Lee, his thunderous eyes flashing with fury. "Those women and children were no innocents. They were used as human decoys! They bombed our camps, the houses of our families . . ." Drawing a deep breath, he turned away, limping slowly back to his makeshift desk. "That doesn't matter now," he murmured softly. "That water passed under the bridge long, long ago. Times change, as do allies. I think expediency has put us on the same side now, eh, Scarecrow?"

"What are you talking about?"

Letting out a deep sigh, El Legarto sat clumsily on the edge of his desk. "Sit, Scarecrow, Mrs. King," he requested, indicating two small folding chairs off to the right.

"I think we'll stand, thanks," Lee replied with a supercilious smile.

"I said sit down!" the soldier bellowed in an imperious tone. "Or I will call Ramon in here to teach you some respect. Don't try my patience, I warn you."

Amanda increased her pressure on Lee's fingers, nodding in the direction of the chairs. He reluctantly followed her lead, and Amanda squeezed his hand in a silent thank you as they both sat down.

"That's better," El Legarto replied, looking down on them with a self-satisfied smirk.

Amanda had to admire the man's strategy. Since he was shorter than Lee, he had to look up at his opponent when they were standing. Now, perched on the higher desk, he had the psychological advantage. As Lee shot her a slightly chagrined smile, she knew he was thinking the same thing.

El Legarto drew a deep breath. "Scarecrow is right, Mrs. King. After that pig DiGreggorio was . . . disposed of . . . there was a short period of retribution. But 'El Carnicero' himself was not the harmless playboy he was portrayed as by your American press."

Amanda raised an eyebrow enquiringly. "'El Carnicero?'"

"DiGreggorio's other nickname," Lee supplied with a grim smile. "'The Butcher.'"

"An apt description, I assure you," the soldier stated sadly. "My friend Ramon lost three of his seven children to El Carcinero's 'camps.'" He let out a deep sigh. "A man's children are his future . . . wouldn't you agree, Mrs. King?"

"Yes," she choked out softly, her voice caught somewhere in the back of her throat.

Lee sprang to his feet, his eyes flashing ominously. "Look, El Legarto, or whatever it is you call yourself these days. Get to the point or I'll . . ."

"Lee," Amanda entreated as the infuriated El Legarto swiftly drew his holstered weapon. "It's fine. I'm okay, really. Sit down."

"You should listen to your Mrs. King, Scarecrow. She is a very wise woman."

El Legarto's mocking laugh made her shiver. The man was seriously unbalanced. Shooting another pleading look at Lee, she gently tugged on his arm.

Lee complied, eying the soldier warily as he lowered himself into the chair. As he settled back, he reached for her hand. The reassuring presence of his fingers entwined with hers renewed her strength, and she managed to face their captor with an aura of calm resolve.

"You were telling us about what happened in San Cardenzia," she prompted, forcing a friendly smile.

El Legarto nodded. "Yes -- but only as a point of reference. Under our new El Presidente, our small country flourished, and I resigned from . . . ah, public service. Yet I still dedicated myself to the betterment of our people, as did the

rest of my loyal compatriots. We worked very hard to bring modern conveniences to the people of our country, things you Americans take for granted . . . food, housing . . . health care."

Amanda shot Lee a look. He was leaning forward in his chair, his brow knit into a troubled frown as El Legarto continued his story.

"A few years ago, I was instrumental in bringing new vaccines to our small country. You see, they would ensure our people -- our children -- a better future, free from the diseases that had cut short the lives of so many."

"The vaccine from North Shore Labs," Amanda whispered softly as she caught Lee's eye.

"Yes. The vaccine that brought riches to the coffers of the corrupt American company called 'Iguana Associates' brought only death to the good people of San Cardenzia. You see, Mrs. King, when I was finally released from your American prison and returned to my own country, I married. I had a family, a son." A shadow passed across El Legarto's face, but he quickly threw it off. "To show my good faith, my son was one of the first to receive the new vaccine. And also one of the first to die from it."

"I'm so sorry," she began, but he cut her off.

"So, you see, we have more in common than you might think. I believe you, too, have lost your son to these capitalist pigs."

"My son . . ."

El Legarto smiled bleakly. "Dr. James King . . . I believe he worked for these 'los asesinos.'"

"No," she gasped, fear roughening her voice. "You're wrong . . . Jamie would never . . ."

The soldier raised a hand. "Do not worry, Mrs. King. Your son is not dead . . . not yet. Our intelligence reports that he is being held prisoner in the citadel of American decadence -- your own Senator Topping's seaside fortress."

"He's alive!" Amanda gasped. "Lee . . ."

Lee put a restraining hand on her arm as she tried to leap out of the chair. "And you know this . . . how?" he demanded, his eyes cautioning her.

"We have someone on the inside. As I said, I have allies in this struggle. American allies this time -- I believe you met some of them in the woods."

Amanda looked expressively at Lee. The Triad Corps was an unsanctioned band of ruthless killers. Surely El Legarto knew this?

"If you have American allies, as you say," Lee demanded, "what do you need with us?"

"I know all about the warring factions within your Agency, Scarecrow. I can't let your petty interdepartmental squabbles interfere with my righteous vengeance for my people. For my son."

"We're not here officially," Amanda put in swiftly. "I'm not even an agent anymore . . ."

Lee gave her hand a sharp warning squeeze. "Amanda's right," he agreed casually, his voice devoid of the emotion that had been all too evident in hers. "We aren't here in our official capacity."

El Legarto eyed them carefully. "So what happens to the others is of no consequence to you?"

"That's right," Lee assured him coldly. "Our only interest is in our son."

Frowning, El Legarto rose slowly from his desk. Hands behind his back, he began to pace again, ever so often shooting a puzzled glance in their direction. Pausing at last, he widened his stance as his eyes came to rest on Lee. A look of understanding passed between the two men.

"You understand these butchers must pay for their crimes. Iguana Associates has formed an unholy alliance with Los Lobos. We have long struggled to free our country from their grasp. There can be no quarter given."

"Yes," Lee stated grimly. "I understand. But, in exchange, you understand that our son is not a part of this. He's a victim, too, and must not be harmed."

Amanda held her breath as El Legarto considered the unspoken proposition. "Agreed," the man pronounced at last. "We are set to move at daybreak. As it happens, two of my men met with a small accident two days ago and I find myself . . . shorthanded." El Legarto extended his hand. "Welcome to the ranks of 'Los Combatientes de la Libertad,' Scarecrow and Mrs. King."

"Hold still. I need to get a closer look at this."

Lee sucked in a sharp breath as Amanda's fingers probed the painful bump. "Watch it, will you?" he said, wincing. The back of his head felt as if he'd lost an argument with a sledgehammer.

Amanda sighed her annoyance. "I'm doing the best I can, Lee. I don't have a lot to work with." She let out another long breath. "You have a pretty nice goose-egg here. And a small, jagged looking cut, but I don't think it's deep enough to need stitches."

"Too late for that now anyway," he grumbled. "Guess I'll just have to be thankful for small favors."

"Yes, you will. That was a pretty stupid stunt, Stetson."

"You don't have to remind me. We've already had that conversa . . . ouch!"

He yanked his head away as she dabbed at his stinging cut with the rough cloth. "That hurts!"

"Then stop wiggling," she ordered with mock sternness. It was the same tone she'd always used when one of her 'boys' required some mothering. He could almost picture the look of tolerant resignation on her face as she added, "If I don't clean this out, it could become infected."

Though her touch was gentle, the combination of dirt and dried blood was hours old, and Lee had to grit his teeth as she continued her ministrations. He could tell she hated to hurt him; every time he flinched, she sucked in a tiny little breath. Lee smiled. In an odd sort of way, it was a good pain. Yes, being the object of his wife's tender concern once again felt *damn* good. His wife . . .

"There, you're as good as new," she pronounced as she tossed the wet cloth aside with a flourish. "Now that wasn't so bad, was it?"

"As bad as what?" Lee grouched, gingerly moving his head from side to side. The cut was throbbing like a persistent drum in his head.

"Honestly," Amanda scolded as she settled down beside him on the small cot. "You're just as bad as . . ." Her words suddenly trailed off. Taking a deep breath,

she squeezed her eyes tightly shut. When she finally opened them again, the remnants of the tears she'd fought so hard to control were still evident.

Magnified by the pooling moisture, her luminous eyes looked darker than ever. He couldn't help himself. He trailed his finger along her cheek where the tears stubbornly refused to fall.

"I'm sorry," she choked out, grasping his hand with a slightly embarrassed smile. "I didn't mean to do that. I just can't believe he's really alive."

He cautiously returned her look. "I know. It's wonderful news, Amanda."

"It's a miracle," she gushed, the happy words spilling from her mouth. "I know I kept saying he'd be okay, but part of me was afraid to really believe it. And now to finally know . . . What's the matter?" she demanded hoarsely, alarmed by his silence. "You do trust El Legarto's word, don't you?"

Snorting softly, Lee lifted their still shackled wrists. "About as much as he trusts us." As her face clouded, he added quickly, "But where Jamie's concerned . . . yes, Amanda, I do believe he was telling the truth. There was something in his eyes when he spoke about his son. If Jamie was dead, he would have acknowledged it and used *that* to recruit us."

Shaking her head, she gave him a sheepish smile. "Did we just become mercenaries?"

Lee frowned. Pushing off the cot, he started to move, but the unexpected resistance brought him up short. "Sorry," he said as he sank down once again.

"I'm restless, too." Grinning, she added, "I suppose we could always pace in tandem."

"What we should do is get some rest," Lee advised, struggling to stifle a yawn. As he finally allowed himself to relax, bone-aching fatigue crashed in on him from every side. "Tomorrow's operation is as big as they come."

At Amanda's solemn nod, he surveyed their makeshift quarters. Their supplies were meager indeed. El Legarto had refused to return their backpacks, and outside the tent to which they'd been 'assigned,' a taciturn San Cardenzian Freedom Fighter stood guard. Inside, they'd been allowed only the basics – a lantern, a pitcher of water, some strips of cloth and a basin bowl for washing, a thin blanket and one *very* small cot.

"Well," he muttered apologetically, "I guess we'll just have make do tonight with these, uh, elegant accommodations."

Amanda's lips curved up into a wry smile. "It sure beats that tree," she said as she scooted to the inside of the cot. Lifting an eyebrow, she patted the space next to her. "Come on, I'll share."

Lee glanced down ruefully at the cuffs. "I don't think you have too much choice," he said with a forced laugh.

Amanda looked over at the lantern. "Are we going to fight about that?"

Lee rolled his eyes. "No. You'll just try to turn it off when I fall asleep anyway -- might as well do it now and save the aggravation."

Her face scrunched up into a tiny pout. "Very funny."

A soft darkness surrounded them as Lee switched off the light. He lay down beside her, carefully drawing the thin blanket up over them. The night air wasn't cold by any stretch of the imagination, but they were still dressed in hiking shorts and t-shirts. Trying not to think of how good a hot shower would feel about now, he closed his eyes.

Though thoroughly exhausted a few short minutes ago, sleep was suddenly the farthest thing from his mind. Close beside him, he could hear the sound of Amanda's even breathing; it warmed his skin where her head rested in its familiar niche just below his chin. Her left hand lay comfortably atop his chest, her little finger moving in the gentle rhythm it always unconsciously sought as she reached the outer edge of slumber. Their crude bed was uncomfortable, and every so often he felt her shift against him, a lilting sigh emanating from her mouth. Lee bit his lip. If she didn't settle down soon, this cot wasn't the only thing that was going to be good and hard.

Blowing out a sharp breath, he forced himself to concentrate on tomorrow's mission. Outside their tent, he could hear the sounds of the camp battening down for the night. He managed to catch a few stray words of whispered conversation as different groups of soldiers passed by, but nothing of any significance. Some were obviously on their way to grab some sack time themselves, others to stand guard around the perimeter. From the information he and Amanda had been able to put together earlier, he figured their number at ten. They seemed evenly divided -- five San Cardenzians and five Americans. Lee frowned. El Legarto had mentioned losing two men. Had they been members of his 'Los Combatientes de la Libertad' or the covert Triad Corps?

The sound of Amanda's voice broke the silence. "Lee," he heard her whisper softly. "We've got a problem here."

"Only one?" he retorted sarcastically.

"I'm lying on my right side."

He let out a small groan. "Oh, Amanda."

"You *know* I can't sleep on my right side."

"Well, I don't know what you expect *me* to do about it," he snapped, struggling to quell his body's reaction as she squirmed again.

She gently prodded his shoulder. "Roll over."

"And just how do you propose I do that?" He shook the handcuffs lightly. "We're kinda joined at the hip here, remember?"

Lee could hear her short "hmm" as she considered the situation. "I'll just have to crawl over you," she informed him. Before he could protest, she moved her body across his chest. "Okay, you roll this way and I'll go that way," she instructed as she leveraged her weight against him.

"*This* way?" he whispered harshly. His self-control was stretched to the limit. A few more minutes of this torture and he might just . . .

"No, Lee," he heard Amanda cry in frustration. "*This* way. *I'm* going *that* way."

He grumbled softly under his breath, "Make up your mind."

"Come on," she exhorted, "let's try it again on the count of three. I'd like to get some sleep before the sun comes up."

He grimaced painfully. "Now *there's* a novel idea."

Ignoring him, she began to count slowly and deliberately, "One . . . two . . . three!" Rolling together, they clumsily shifted their positions on the cot. "There," Amanda announced with a satisfied sigh. "Isn't that better?"

Lee grunted. "No. Now I'm lying on those blasted cuffs." He tried vainly to lift his body, but their hands were wedged firmly beneath them.

"I guess it **is** kind of awkward," she admitted with rueful sigh. "Lie still and let me get my arm out from under . . ."

"That's not going to work, Amanda. The chain is too damned short."

"We do seem to be kind of . . . stuck." Her words carried the faintest hint of amusement. "I guess we should have just stood up and shifted position, huh?"

"You're the one who seemed to be in charge of logistics," he said with a sour grimace.

Amanda grinned. "Well, now we're just going to have to roll you back over on your back."

"We?" he rejoined sarcastically.

"Come on, hurry up, I think my hand's falling asleep." Swallowing his retort, he silently complied. "There, I think that did it," she proclaimed as they completed the maneuver.

Her upper body was draped across his chest, her face tantalizingly close to his, but their hands were undeniably free. As a few stray strands of her hair teased his cheeks, he looked up into her deep brown eyes. "Yeah," he choked hoarsely, "I think you're right."

She drew in a deep breath. He could feel the subtle change in pressure against his chest as she let it out with agonizing slowness. "Lee," she began, his name barely a whisper on her lips. "I . . ."

"Toque eso otra vez, asshole, y usted es muerto!"

"Es mi cena. Usted Americanos locos piensan que el todo pertenece a usted."

The angry words sounded as if they were right outside their tent. As Amanda started to speak, Lee shook his head, quickly silencing her. Distinct sounds of a scuffle could be heard, then the sudden click of a rifle.

"Vuelva a sus tiendas, ustedes dos," a third man ordered harshly. "Si El Legarto lo oyen, usted tendrá más que alimento para preocuparse por."

Grumbling under his breath in Spanish, one of the men walked away. The other let out a harsh laugh. "Sorry, Scurto," he muttered, an edge of fearful respect to his voice. "But that damned . . ."

"You stupid asshole," the man called 'Scurto' replied harshly. Lee recognized the voice of the scar-faced soldier, and he carefully catalogued the name. "This is neither the time nor the place. Save it for tomorrow. Do you want to blow everything?"

Their voices became indistinguishable as they moved away from the tent. Amanda raised an eyebrow. "What was that all about?"

"Evidently there's no love lost between El Legarto's Freedom Fighters and our pals the Triads." Lee shook his head. "There's a hellava lot more going on here than meets the eye."

From her perch on his chest, Amanda earnestly caught his gaze. "You can say that again."

Lee exhaled loudly, turning his eyes from hers. "We'd better get some sleep. I have a feeling we'll need to be extra-sharp tomorrow."

"Yeah, I guess you're right." With a bittersweet sigh, she snuggled closer against him, laying her head lightly on his shoulder.

An uneasy quiet settled around them. Outside the door of the tent, he could hear the muffled sounds of their guard's boots as he shuffled his feet, punctuated by the intermittent chirping of a cicada. Now and again, from somewhere outside the camp, the muted hoot of an owl added to the repertoire. Background noise, all of it; the perimeter of *his* world had narrowed sharply, defined by the woman he held in his arms once again. His breath caught in his throat.

"Amanda," he entreated suddenly in a husky whisper. "Promise me something."

"Sure, what?" she murmured against his chest, sleep already slurring her words.

"No matter what happens tomorrow . . . Jamie has to be your first priority. Nothing -- no one -- can get in the way of that."

She was strangely silent. "Amanda," he admonished again. "Please. I have to know he's going to be okay. Nothing can go wrong -- not this time . . ."

Her raspy breath cut him off. "My family is always my first priority, Lee," she whispered harshly. "You should know that by now."

He gave her a tender squeeze. "Good. Then everything will be okay."

She sighed plaintively against his chest. "Goodnight, Lee. Get some sleep."

"Night," he mumbled back indistinctly against her hair. It had a faintly sweet smell, reminiscent of other nights together too numerous to count. Such an ordinary thing really, yet as he breathed in the familiar scent, he knew . . . beyond a shadow of a doubt . . . in the very depths of his soul . . . signing a piece of paper had changed nothing.

He was still in love with her.

PART FOUR

"I pray the Lord my soul to take."

~ XXVI ~

Amanda swept the stick across the dusty ground, ruthlessly felling the small house of twigs she'd been idly building. Off Lee's benignly tolerant look, she sent him a silent apology. "I guess this waiting is driving me a little crazy."

Lee inclined his head toward the small band of soldiers gathered at the other side of the camp. "You're not the only one. One wrong word and that group over there will be at each other's throats."

Looking up, she followed his gaze. Lee was right; the Freedom Fighters and the Triads were definitely at odds this morning. Her eyes narrowed as she turned back to her partner. "What do you suppose their problem is?"

Lee shrugged. "Beats me. They only seem to agree on one thing. We're 'persona non grata' to both sides."

"Maybe they're arguing over who's really in charge of this fly-by-night operation," Amanda postulated as heated Spanish words erupted from El Legarto's tent. Shaking her head, she wished again that she'd paid closer attention to those Agency language tapes.

"They're none too happy about something, that's for sure," Lee informed her, squatting down beside her with a grimace. "That **could** explain why we're still cooling our heels."

Lee's voice rang with the same frustration she was experiencing. El Legarto had ordered the attack for just past dawn; it was almost noon, and, here they were, still waiting impotently in camp.

She stole a glance at Lee. Though she knew he was eager for the operation to get underway, he gave no outward sign. Just the opposite -- his demeanor appeared collected and calm, almost icily so. Was it only yesterday she'd been wishing for the return of that iron control of his? The old Scarecrow **did** appear to be back with a vengeance, but in the bright light of this new day, something about his deliberate professionalism nagged at her. There was an odd sort of disconnection to his lack of emotion . . . almost as if the operation was over and done with, its outcome already decided.

Seizing one of the discarded twigs, Amanda absently drew a series of interlocking circles in the dust. She must be imagining things. Lee's manner had been anything but detached last night. She'd been fully cognizant of the effect she was having on him as they lay together in that darkened tent. He could deny it all he wanted this morning, but his body couldn't lie. He'd felt something; she was certain of it.

Letting out a pent up breath, she tossed the stick aside. She couldn't afford to think about that now. Maybe when all this was finally over and Jamie was safe . . .

"Something's about to break."

At Lee's muttered warning, she quickly looked up. Scar-face and El Legarto emerged from the tent at last, the former sporting a grimly victorious smile. Catching the eye of one of his Triad cohorts, Amanda saw him give the man tiny nod. She looked to Lee to see if he'd noticed, but he appeared to be studying El Legarto instead. Amanda shivered. There was just something about that scar-faced man that set her nerves on edge. Given her choice, she almost preferred the fanatical San Cardenzian; at least it wasn't hard to figure out what motivated him. The man wore his revenge like a finely tailored suit.

With a jerky wave, the old soldier motioned for them to join the group gathered around a small table. Scrambling up from the ground, Amanda brushed the dirt from the olive-green fatigues they'd been issued that morning. El Legarto's man, Ramon, had materialized at first light with the supplies, as well as some food and fresh water. Releasing their bonds at last, he indicated gruffly that they should change clothes. At first, Amanda thought he intended to stand watch as they undressed, but after he and Lee exchanged a few heated words in Spanish, he reluctantly left them alone. Eyes filled with grudging respect, Ramon took up his

post just outside the door of the tent, allowing them some private time to clean up and swallow a few bites of the meager breakfast fare. When she questioned Lee about the man's sudden change of heart, her partner gave her an enigmatic smile, saying only that he'd gently reminded Ramon that El Legarto himself had welcomed them to their ranks.

Despite their leader's endorsement, it was obvious to Amanda that the San Cardenzian contingent didn't fully trust them. One soldier after another had tracked their movements around the camp all morning, a weapon casually trained on them at all times. She wasn't quite sure what they expected, but evidently the small band of Freedom Fighters felt no move was too bold for two such infamous American spies.

Rapping smartly on the small table, El Legarto called the group to attention. "Su atención, hombres," he stated in a loud voice, then with a calculated glance in their direction, he addressed his next remarks in English.

"We have just received word from our 'agente' at the Topping estate. We have been supplied with the final piece of information, and the operation will now proceed as planned."

A few muttered shouts from the San Cardenzian contingent greeted his words. Leaning over the desk, El Legarto pointed to a worn set of blueprints. "Thanks to the efforts of Alejandro and Tomasso, we know their defenses are, for the most part, easily penetrated. They have only a few men outside their defensive perimeter . . . here, here and . . . here." With the end of his crop, he indicated the appropriate places on the dirty map. "All of them members of Los Lobos. Inside, their forces are pathetic . . . the weakling Topping boy and his girlfriend, a few servants. They should provide little or no resistance. Then, of course, there is 'El Lobo' himself. Roberto Salzedo . . ." He snorted derisively under his breath as he spat out the words, "Eso mata puerco."

Amanda glanced hesitantly at Lee. "Butcher pig," he whispered, curling his lip. "Pretty apt description."

Silencing them with a look, El Legarto continued. "El Capitán, as we discussed in the tent, the perimeter guards -- the members of Los Lobos -- will be your responsibility. They must be taken out quickly and silently, before the alarm can be set off. They are highly armed, highly trained and highly . . . dangerous. Choose your men carefully."

Scar-face gave a short nod to the three Triad members directly to his right. They acknowledged him with a brief salute, the third man's wide grin showing his

obvious pleasure at the assignment. It suddenly struck Amanda that the Triad leader always went out of his way not to call any of his men by name.

El Legarto responded with a brusque, "Bueno." Then, eyeing Scar-face with a slight smile, he instructed pointedly, "You and your other man will take care of young Topping and the woman -- and leave Salzedo to us."

The Triad leader frowned. "We never agreed to . . ."

El Legarto cut him off with a sharp wave of his riding crop. "No me contradiga," he barked, his lip snarling up in a sneer. "It is decided."

The Captain's eyes flashed ominously, but he held his tongue. Evidently he had no intention of taking on the San Cardenzian leader. At least, not at the moment.

Beside her, Lee shifted his feet. "El Legarto," he spoke up suddenly. "Just exactly where do we fit into your plans?"

The old soldier shrugged. "As I told you yesterday, Scarecrow, once inside, you and Mrs. King are free to see to your son. I have left specific orders that he is not to be harmed."

Amanda saw Lee frown as he considered the man's words. "According to your description, the Topping estate is pretty weakly fortified. You're certain your intel is accurate?"

El Legarto's face clouded over. "Two of my men gave their lives for that 'intel,' as you call it."

"Then . . ."

El Legarto raised his hand. "¿Quién sabe? Perhaps they feel they do not need a large contingent of men. Perhaps they are needed for something elsewhere." He locked eyes with the Triad captain, his thin lips parting in a grim smile. "Or perhaps they feel their security system is more than adequate to defend them."

Amanda felt a growing unease in the pit of her stomach. Beside her, she saw Lee's scowl deepen as that same small kernel of premonition began to take root in him, too. "Their security system?" he demanded harshly.

"They have a Seaforth 2580 model -- or so our 'intel' informs us." Chuckling softly, he added, "Deactivating it will be the responsibility of our two newest recruits -- Scarecrow and Mrs. King."

Amanda saw Lee's eyes narrow dangerously. "So if we're blown to bits defusing their damned alarm system, *you* still have a full complement of men."

El Legarto raised an eyebrow. "That is one way to look at things, I suppose. But, my friends, I would not send you in with . . . empty hands. Our contact supplied us with the code for the alarm just a few minutes ago. It is what we have been waiting for."

Without warning, Scarecrow made a sudden lunge for El Legarto's throat. Though he was quick, the San Cardenzian soldiers were quicker. In the space of a few seconds, two Freedom Fighters held him fast by both arms, a third delivering a wicked blow to his midsection.

"Lee," she cried, immediately springing to his aid as he doubled over. Scar-face swiftly intercepted her, his hollow laugh echoing close beside her ear.

"Enough," El Legarto snapped harshly.

Lee glared at the man with hatred in his eye. "Tu bastardo," he spat venomously in Spanish so the man could not possibly mistake him. "You're sending us on a suicide mission. The alarm code in that system automatically resets itself every hour. If we're even a fraction of a second late . . ."

"Yes," El Legarto agreed, obviously amused. "The system will defuse either way . . . whether from the code or your life's blood is immaterial to us. However," he added grimly as he caught Amanda's eye, "since perhaps it will be of some small interest to your son, I would suggest we waste no further time with this useless bickering. Vayamos, hombres," he ordered with a short wave of his stick. "Get moving."

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Crouching, Amanda followed Lee up the small hill. "How much time?"

Lee checked his watch with a frown. "Not nearly enough. Looks like our escorts have decided to play it safe," he added with a contemptuous glance over his shoulder.

Amanda nodded grimly. Though Scar-face and his partner had been close on their heels during the march to the estate, they had now allowed a healthy buffer to grow between them, taking up their new position safely out of blast range. If the alarm system blew, they evidently had no intentions of going with it.

Despite their wary distance, Amanda could still feel the soldiers' eyes boring holes into her back. She was reminded of a pair of vultures waiting to feast on the remains of some unfortunate prey. She had no doubt that the cold-blooded Triads would be relieved to have Scarecrow and Mrs. King disposed of so neatly. That they might have actually orchestrated this scenario had crossed her mind more than once.

The same thought must have occurred to Lee. She could see him mentally calculating the failsafe distance between their current position and the security access panel. Turning to her, he sucked in a short breath.

"No."

"Amanda, I want you out of the line of fire."

Setting her jaw, she shook her head. "I'm fully aware of the risks, Lee. Frankly, I'd rather take my chances being blown to bits with you than stay at a safe distance with the two of them. Besides," she added as Lee glanced circumspectly at the pair, "what makes you think I'd be any safer back there? If this is a set up, no doubt they're fully prepared to take me out themselves." A quick shudder passed through her. "Scar-face looks as if he might actually enjoy it."

As Lee silently acceded to her point, she knew her assessment had been right on the mark. His suggestion that she 'wait in the car' had been more habit than conviction anyway. It was obvious Lee had known the minute they'd been issued this assignment that El Legarto had maneuvered them neatly between a rock and a hard place. Whether they died by bomb or bullet mattered little; their one chance lay in staying together and safely deactivating the alarm.

She saw him check his watch once more. "How much time?"

"Five minutes, more or less. Let's just hope it's not less," he added with a mirthless laugh. Reaching into his pocket, he retrieved the paper with the alarm code, handing it to her with obvious reluctance. "This has to be done just right. When I give you the signal, feed me the numbers in their specified groups, with five second intervals in between." Consulting his watch one final time, he reached for her hand. "Okay, partner, let's do this."

Amanda moistened her lips, saying with a slightly forced smile, "Piece of cake."

Lee winked. "You bet it is."

Keeping a tight hold of her hand, he led the way down the hill, crouching low again as they neared the fence. Though no sentries were in sight, Amanda knew the system called for hidden surveillance cameras. She could only pray that they weren't even now starring on someone's video screen.

Stopping by the access panel, Lee immediately started to work at removing the metal cover. Small beads of perspiration were already forming on his brow. Even that first move was tricky; the screws needed to be removed in exactly the right sequence to avoid accidentally triggering the alarm. As Lee concentrated on his task, Amanda's practiced eyes swept the area. Nothing was stirring. The other Triads must have successfully neutralized the perimeter guards.

"Almost there."

At Lee's curt words, she looked over his shoulder. The panel cover was free at last, revealing beneath it a small keypad surrounded by a myriad of wires. Blue, red, green, yellow and black -- twisted together, one wire was almost indistinguishable from the next. It would be literally impossible to isolate and cut the single wire that would harmlessly deactivate the device. She suddenly found herself smiling. The designers of the 2500 series must have subscribed to the blue wire theory, too. They'd certainly gone out of their way to render it moot.

Lee let out a deep breath. "Okay, Amanda. Feed me the numbers."

Her mouth suddenly dry, she nodded. Praying her voice wouldn't fail her, she began to read slowly. "3 - 52 - 37 - 16." As Lee successfully entered the numbers, she continued, more strongly this time. "62 - 78 - 2 - 97." Counting out the remaining five second interval in her head, she finished, "45 - 12 - 52 - 7."

As he punched in the final number, Lee abruptly pushed her to the ground, shielding her body protectively with his. She could feel his heart thumping strongly above her . . . or maybe it was her own, she could no longer tell. Closing her eyes, she held her breath and waited.

Nothing.

Hearing Lee let out a deep sigh of relief, she wiggled lightly beneath him. "Lee . . ."

Pulling himself up on his elbows, he grinned down at her. "Looks like El Legarto's intel is more up to date than he is. We're clear."

"Are you sure?" She felt strangely out of breath, as if the wind had been knocked out of her chest.

"Yeah," he assured her with an even wider smile. "At most, there's a five second delay on the trigger. Amanda," he asked suddenly as she continued to struggle for air. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," she replied, suddenly averting her eyes. "I guess I'm just not used to all this . . . excitement . . . anymore."

"Yeah," she heard him echo softly, "I know what you mean." Scrambling to his feet, he extended his hand. "Come on. We need to find Jamie."

As he pulled her up from the ground, she shot a reflexive glance back up the hill. "I don't see our friends."

"They took off toward the west as soon as we started to disarm the alarm," Lee informed her as he pulled a pair of wire clippers from his pocket. "I saw them leave out of the corner of my eye. Either they were damn certain our code sequence was correct, or they're reckless as hell. Hard to tell with that bunch."

"They've been right so far. Maybe we can trust the rest of their information. Do we look in the east wing then?"

Lee's scowl deepened as he finished clipping a neat hole in the fence. "You tell me. Did Topping give you any details about this place?"

"Not much," she said, forcing herself to remember. In light of everything that had happened in the past twenty-four hours, her dinner with Bryce Topping seemed years ago. "Just a lot of babble about his grandfather -- something about the rest of the family considering it the height of folly that he'd modeled the place after . . . Lee!" She clutched convulsively at his fatigues.

"What?" he demanded, his eyes darting apprehensively around the fenced perimeter.

"Bryce told me that his grandfather built this place to resemble a medieval castle," she eagerly replied. "Complete with what he referred to as an authentic dungeon. He used to play in it when he was a boy. Do you think . . ."

"It does seem like a logical place to hold a prisoner. Tailor-made for their purposes, I'd say."

Amanda frowned. "But El Legarto told us Jamie is being held in a turret room in the east wing. He seemed so certain."

"Yes, he did." Lee's face darkened as his eyes swept over the area once again. "There's no sign of Scar-face or his cohort. Strange, isn't it?"

"They've sure been sticking to us like glue. It's almost as if . . ."

"As if they know exactly where we're headed, so now there's no need to track us."

Amanda licked her lips. "What do you think we should do?"

"I suppose his intel *could* be on the up and up." Removing his cap, Lee wiped his brow, then settled the hat on his head again. "But every instinct I have tells me the east wing is a trap . . ." Shifting uncertainly from foot to foot, he muttered almost to himself, "The last time I acted on instinct . . ."

"Lee."

He refused to meet her eye, instead training his gaze on some unknown point on the distant horizon. Amanda could hear the faint cry of a sea bird; she hadn't realized they were so close to the ocean again. The old trail must have wound around through the center of the island to bring them back to the shore. She could almost smell the salt in the air. She suddenly remembered that trip to the seashore with Joe when the boys were small. How Phillip had loved the water, shouting happily as it lapped at his toes.

Reaching out, she laid a soft hand on Lee's arm. "What happened in that warehouse hasn't got anything to do with what's going on now."

She saw him smile faintly. "Amanda, I know what you're trying to do."

She sighed. "I'm not trying to do anything but set the record straight. I know this isn't the time or place to do it, but I've said a lot of things since Phillip . . . well, things I should . . . never . . ." Breathing deeply, she drew a line in the dirt with her toe. "I was half out of my mind with grief and guilt and . . . anger . . . I guess. At the whole world, but most especially at this crazy business. I just couldn't accept that it was an accident, and . . . well, I'm sorry."

"Amanda."

Her name sounded like a whisper carried softly on the wind, and she tightened her grip on his arm as she went on. "It's too late to change what happened to Phillip. What's done is done, and we have to move on. So I don't give a damn whether or not you trust your instincts, Scarecrow," she stated, her voice growing louder with each shaky breath. "*I* trust your instincts. Now, what's it going to be -- the east wing or the dungeon?"

He slowly turned to face her. "The dungeon," he told her, his gravelly voice thick with an emotion she couldn't quite define. It didn't matter. As she looked up into those deep gray-green eyes, she knew every word she'd just uttered had been the absolute truth. She trusted her husband implicitly -- the same way he'd always trusted her.

Releasing her death-grip on his arm, Amanda calmly nodded. "Let's go find our son."

~ XXVII ~

As Lee cracked open the door to the kitchen, he turned to Amanda with a puzzled frown. "Looks like this room's clear, too. What hell is going on here?"

"Maybe El Legarto's men have already rounded up the servants. It's more than likely they got here before us."

With a derisive snort, he caught his partner's eye. "Do you really believe that?"

She let out a sigh. "No. It's just more comforting than my other theories."

"Yeah," Lee agreed as he pushed through the swinging door into the deserted kitchen. Since infiltrating Topping's seaside retreat through an open window, they had yet to encounter a single living soul. It was all a little too convenient for his taste.

"Oh, my gosh!"

"What?" Lee demanded, whirling at the sound of her exclamation.

"Will you take a look at this kitchen," Amanda gasped, her eyes rounding in awe as she took in the details of the well-apportioned room. The kitchen sported state of the art appliances, including a combination cook-top grill and oven that would move a professional chef to tears.

Lee let out a small laugh. "Somehow I don't think they had it quite *this* good back in the Middle Ages."

"You can say that again." Amanda ran her hand respectfully along the edge of the dark granite countertop, her face breaking into a grin. "Mother would love this place."

"Well, this place gives *me* the creeps." Modern conveniences aside, the room still managed to convey a darkly medieval flavor. In fact, it was downright sinister.

Amanda apparently didn't feel it. "This is really amazing," he heard her remark again in obvious admiration. "Look at how the combination of tile and brick blends the modern with the old . . ."

Lee shot her a look.

"Sorry," she said with a slightly embarrassed laugh. "My first assignment for Chicago Magazine was an article on innovative architecture of the twenty-first century."

"I'll be sure to read it if we ever get out of here," he stated in a voice heavy with sarcasm. "But in the meantime, do you think we could find the door to that dungeon of yours? *If* it exists."

"It exists. That framed sketch we found in the study was a working blueprint. I learned how to read them . . ."

"I know, I know," he groaned. "That article again, right?"

"You got it."

Lee rolled his eyes at her smug smile, directing his attention back to the task at hand. Amanda always *did* have a special knack for applying life experiences to her work. That particular talent had made her a valuable asset, first as a civilian and later as an agent. Even if it tended to drive him a little crazy at times.

"Lee, what do you make of this?"

At her urgent tone, he quickly looked up, following her gaze to the small alcove by the large bay window. Cold cuts, bread and other remnants of an abandoned meal lay strewn about the large oak table, chairs hastily pushed out.

"Looks like someone left in a hurry," he answered with a small frown. His apprehension heightening, he told her gruffly, "Come on, let's find that entrance and get the hell out of here."

Her brow furrowed deeply as she surveyed the kitchen once again. "Okay, let's take this logically. Builders usually put the basement access somewhere off the kitchen, right?"

Lee shrugged as he ran his hands along the surface of the far wall, tilting the large pictures as he checked behind them. "Beats me. Maybe you should ask those architect pals of yours. Or, better yet, maybe we should just go with El Legarto's tip about the east wing after all. I'm starting to think this is a wild goose chase."

"But the blueprints showed . . ."

"Who knows what work they did since those were drawn? Maybe there was an entrance once, but it was bricked up years ago . . ."

"Lee!" he heard her cry in a burst of excitement. "That's it!"

"What's it?" he asked, turning. "Amanda?"

She didn't respond. Hands on her hips, his partner was standing thoughtfully in front of the large floor-to-ceiling hearth that dominated the far wall. She tilted her head to the right, then the left, her lips forming a rounded 'O' as she considered the massive structure from every angle.

Lee moved quickly to her side. "You take the right, I'll take the left," he ordered as he began to systematically pat down the wall. "I'll wager there's a hidden lever somewhere."

"Lee." Struggling to keep her voice even, Amanda said, "I think I've got a loose brick here."

He watched as she traced the edges of the large, buff-colored brick with her finger. The lower right hand corner had a definite wobble. "See if you can find something to pry it loose," he told her as he began to worry the edge.

She handed him a small pocket knife. "Try this. I found it in the top drawer over there, and I thought it might . . . well, come in handy," she explained with a light shrug.

Shaking his head in wonder, Lee freed the thin blade, sliding it easily beneath the loosened mortar. With almost no effort at all, the brick worked free. "There's a button here," he said as he ran his finger over the rough cavity. "But it won't seem to . . ." Letting the knife fall, he applied steady pressure with both hands. A cleverly hidden door began to move, opening inward to reveal a long staircase that led to some sort of cellar.

"Good work, Amanda," Lee said with obvious admiration.

Her voice rose in surprise. "It was all luck, trust me."

Lee smiled faintly. "Well, whatever it was, I'm glad it's on *our* side."

Her grin of appreciation faded as she moved closer to the door. "Do you think . . ."

"There's *something* down there, that's for sure. Something they've gone to a lot of trouble to hide." He inclined his head toward the opening. "Shall we?"

Off her sharp nod, he stooped to retrieve the discarded knife, slipping it neatly into the top of his boot. "It might come in handy," he explained, echoing her words with a wry smile. "Come on."

Clutching her hand, he crossed the door's dark threshold. The stairs led downward in a steep spiral, and a blast of moist, dank air hit them full in the face as they reached the bottom step. Lee took a slow step forward, then abruptly paused, his partner's loud "Oomph," ringing in his ear as she smacked into his back.

"A*man*da," he muttered through clenched teeth.

"Sorry, I can't see a thing."

"I know," he responded with a long-suffering sigh. "That's why I stopped. Our vision should adjust in a minute." The area ahead was already becoming clearer, light and shadow slowly taking form before his eyes.

"What is this place?" Amanda whispered in awed tones.

"I don't know." The dampness was bone-chilling, and he hated to think of Jamie imprisoned down here for long weeks at a time. "There's a light up ahead," he said, pushing his worry to the back of his mind. "Let's move."

At Amanda's nod, Lee cautiously picked his way down the narrow corridor. He could feel the light pressure of her hand where it rested on his shoulder, her body so close her breath grazed his back. It was oddly reassuring somehow.

They hadn't gone far when the narrow corridor suddenly widened into a small, rectangular chamber. Overhead, one bare bulb burned in the ceiling -- the light that had signaled their way. To his right and left stood two heavy steel-plated doors, small covered openings cut into each. While one door was open a crack, the other was bolted shut and secured with a large padlock.

"Bryce said the dungeon was authentic," Amanda sighed from somewhere behind him. "I guess he wasn't exaggerating."

Stepping toward the locked cell, Lee reached for the peephole. It opened with a shrill, creaking noise, vaguely reminiscent of nails on a blackboard. "Authentic as hell," he muttered, peering into the small cell.

"Go away," someone warned gruffly. "I told you, Angie, I'm not hungry."

"Jamie!" Amanda pushed Lee aside to gaze intently through the small window, her knuckles whitening as they gripped the bars. "Jamie, Sweetheart, it's Mom. Are you okay?"

"Mom?" The voice coming from beneath the threadbare blanket sounded unsure. Pushing himself up from the cot with an effort, Jamie blinked a few times as he stared blankly in the direction of her voice.

"Lee!" Amanda gasped as her hand clamped down on his arm. "He can't see!"

Jamie carefully made his way to the door. "I'm okay, Mom," he reassured her, reaching through the bars to clasp his mother's hand. "I just lost my contacts, that's all. Lee?" he stated incredulously as he blinked again to clear his blurry eyes. "You're here, too?"

"Hey, Sport," he returned, clearing his throat slightly as he grabbed the young man's other hand. "Good to see you."

Jamie's bearded face broke into an astonished smile. "I can't believe this," he cried in a voice filled with emotion. "I'd just about given up on anyone finding me. I sure hope you brought the Marines with you!"

Lee saw Amanda glance hesitantly in his direction. "Um . . . well, not exactly."

Jamie squinted his eyes. "You two are it?" he asked, a note of fear in his voice. "What about the Agency . . ."

Lee cut him off. "There'll be time for explanations later. Right now, we've got to get you out of here." Squatting down, he eyed the heavy padlock, running his thumb carefully across the bottom. "I don't suppose your hosts were kind enough to leave the key lying around here somewhere."

"No. Ben has it. Or maybe his girlfriend -- Angie's the one who's been bringing my food for the past day or so. She always does when she's around."

Lee felt Amanda's hand gently squeeze his shoulder. "What do you think?"

"Worth a shot, I guess." Reaching into his boot, he retrieved the small knife, smiling dryly at Amanda as he went to work on the stiff lock. Just as he feared, the mechanism was old and, despite his practiced touch, the gates stubbornly refused to line up properly.

As Lee let out a frustrated growl, he heard Jamie suddenly ask, "What day is it?"

Amanda sucked in a breath. "It's Friday, March thirty-first."

"The end of March? I've been gone over a month?"

"Yes, Sweetheart."

"Lisa must be out of her mind." Jamie's voice took on a new urgency as he demanded almost harshly, "How is she? And Joey?"

"They're both just fine," Amanda assured him. "Or at least, they will be, as soon as we deliver you back to them safe and sound. It's you I'm worried about . . ."

"I'm fine, Mom."

"Are you sure?" she pressed, unable to mask her concern.

"Yes," Jamie replied, his curt answer clearly dismissive. "I'm a doctor, remember?"

"Of course you are," Lee interposed, defusing the growing tension with a quick laugh. "But you can't fault a mother for not wanting to admit that she has a son old enough to have finished med school."

Jamie remained silent and, glancing up, Lee caught Amanda's eye. He'd heard that slight edge in their son's voice, too. Considering the stark conditions, Lee could only imagine what he'd been through, but right now they needed him to hold it together. As Amanda blew out a quick, short breath, he knew she understood that, too.

Despite the distraction, or maybe because of it, Lee felt the tumblers and gates suddenly fall into place. "Got it," he exclaimed with thinly disguised relief. Rising, he swiftly removed the padlock and threw open the door.

Amanda took a tentative step forward. "I promise not to nag you anymore if you let me act like your mother for just one minute," she whispered thickly as she embraced her son. "I've been so worried."

"I love you, too, Mom," Jamie told her, his tone softening as he hugged her back.

Lee put his arm around Jamie, clasping him with gentle roughness. "Come on," he urged, grateful for the control he heard in the boy's voice again. "Let's get the hell out of here."

Over Jamie's head, Lee saw the alarm register in Amanda's eyes. "I'll go first," he declared, acknowledging her apprehension with a silent shrug. Their luck had been damn good so far; perhaps it would hold just a little longer. "You two follow, and stay as close to the wall as you can."

At Amanda's nod, he began to retrace their steps down the short corridor to the stairway. "Put your hand on my shoulder," he heard her tell Jamie crisply, all business again. "I'll guide you."

Frowning, Lee started his stealthy ascent. Jamie's temporary vision problem would slow their progress considerably. Still . . . things could have been much worse, he reminded himself sharply. Despite his month-long ordeal, Jamie appeared to be in remarkably good physical shape. There were bound to be some psychological repercussions, but Lee had a hunch his son would be able to bounce back in that respect as well. Experience had taught him the telltale signs of emotional damage, and he'd noted with relief that Jamie's eyes showed no trace of that bleak, wintry expression all the burn-outs wore. It was a look Lee was intimately acquainted with; after all, it stared mockingly back at him every morning from the other side of his bathroom mirror.

Pausing as he reached the top of the stairs, he quickly forced the doubts from his mind. He couldn't afford to go there; Amanda and Jamie were depending on

him. "Sounds clear," he told them tersely, his ears straining for any noise coming from the other side of the door. "But . . ."

"We'll stay behind you."

Lee gave Amanda a silent nod. Pushing open the door, he stepped into the kitchen, the other two close behind.

A sardonic laugh greeted him. "Well, welcome to the party, Scarecrow."

The words struck him with the force of a blow. The Triad leader was smoking a fat cigar as he waited for them, his vigorous puffing pulling the thin scar on his cheek into an even sharper slash.

Amanda's short gasp echoing in his ears, Lee confronted the man with a satirical smile of his own. "Thanks. Hope we didn't keep you waiting."

"Well, we *did* expect you in the east wing earlier, didn't we boys?" the soldier replied with a shrugging glance at his men. "We must have gotten our signals crossed."

Lee chuckled softly as Amanda tightened her hold on his sleeve. "Well, you know, we thought we'd take a little tour of this place first. Amazing what we found."

The man took another long drag from his cigar. "Isn't it, though?"

As Amanda increased her pressure, Lee turned slightly. Her questioning eyes swept over the room, and he nodded his understanding. There seemed to have been a subtle switch in the chain of command. While three surly Triad soldiers flanked their leader, the San Cardenzian Freedom Fighters were nowhere to be seen.

"So," Lee inquired with forced casualness. "What happened to your good friend El Legarto?"

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about him. He and his men are . . . occupied . . . elsewhere."

Lee raised an eyebrow. "What's the matter, he didn't invite you to his little party with Salzedo?"

Grinning, the Triad leader glanced at his buddies, some unspoken communication passing between them. "In a manner of speaking. But, don't worry, *that* will all be taken care of shortly."

The bright sunshine flowing in through the bay window bathed the soldier's face in an odd glow. Amanda had been right about him, Lee thought with a shiver. This guy was definitely playing with half a deck. "Well," he began with as much bravado as he could muster, "as much as we'd like to stick around and help you guys sort out your difficulties, I'm afraid we'll have to be on our way."

Scar-face's laughter died on his lips. "So soon, Scarecrow? Why, I wouldn't hear of it! And," he added with a thin smile as the soldiers quickly drew their weapons, "Neither would they."

Amanda took a small step forward. "Look," she stated tersely. "We have what we came for, and we couldn't care less about what's going on here. So I think . . ."

As Scar-face took a menacing step toward her, her words fell off. Lee stiffened, angling his body protectively in front of Amanda's.

"Ah, Mrs. King," the soldier crooned. "Would you like to know what *I* think?"

"What?" she replied in a slightly breathy rasp.

"I think the first thing you and your pal Scarecrow here would do once you left us would be to make a call to some of your friends at the Agency. And I'm afraid this little shindig simply can't accommodate any more Feds -- even ones as charming as you." Reaching out, he caressed her cheek in a long, sensuous stroke.

Lee lunged forward. "Get your filthy paws off her, you bastard!" he cried as his hands found the soldier's throat. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Jamie step in front of his mother as one of the Triad's trained his gun on her. The others immediately sprang to their leader's aid, trying unsuccessfully to pry his hands from Scar-face's throat amid shouted obscenities and pummeling fists.

"Lee," he heard Amanda scream from somewhere behind him. "Don't!"

It didn't matter. Rage bubbled up from somewhere deep inside him, not only against the venal scar-faced soldier, but all the others like him . . . all the faceless men he couldn't touch . . . men who had caused untold pain to so many over the years . . . men who were responsible for the death of his son.

A sharp knee in the groin finally broke his hold. Black dots danced in front of his eyes as he doubled over and fell to the floor. Lingered on the edge of consciousness, a sea of angry voices hung in the air above him. He struggled to make sense of them . . . and of the soft, disjointed words that floated somewhere close to his ear.

"Lee, Sweetheart . . . are . . . you . . . all right?"

In a moment of fear, she must have slipped back into their cover. He tried to assure her he was fine, but his mouth couldn't form words yet. Somewhere in the background, Scar-face was making low, choking sounds. "Damn you, Scarecrow," he managed to grind out at last. "You'll pay for that." More angry words, then, "Get them back to the cells."

From where he lay on the cool tile floor, Lee suddenly had a sense of more people in the room. "Only one of the cells is in working condition, Mr. Scurto," the unknown voice carped in a high-pitched whine. "The other door doesn't lock and . . ."

Lee heard a loud 'oof,' then silence. "How many times have I told you, no names?" Scar-face spat out again. "Angie, if you can't keep this boyfriend of yours quiet, find him a muzzle."

"You didn't have to hit him."

The new voice sounded deferential, almost timid . . . and vaguely familiar in an aggravating sort of way. It was the same prickly annoyance he felt on Monday mornings when he was late for roll call and his damned assistant . . .

He heard Amanda's strangled gasp beside him and, driven by a new sense of urgency, Lee struggled to rise. One of the soldiers lashed out, the butt end of his gun viciously slamming him back to the ground.

Lee let out a muffled groan. He was dimly aware of the controlled chaos around him -- Amanda calling his name, Jamie kneeling to take his pulse. But the only thing that registered as Lee finally lost consciousness was the look of startled dismay in the eyes of his young assistant, Angela Carter.

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Sounds floated over him as if from a great distance, a familiar 'hum' that somehow soothed him. Lying very still, he listened, waiting for the words to take shape and form in his mind.

"So that's about the long and the short of it. The conference I was supposed to attend was just a pretext. Their real agenda was to find out what I knew about 'Project X.'"

"And you had no idea at all that North Shore Labs was doing illegal research?" Amanda asked.

"No, Mom," Jamie answered, a hard edge to his voice. "If I had, I would have confided my doubts to you and Lee, no matter *what* was going on between . . ."

"I know, Sweetheart," came the slightly breathy response.

Letting out a large sigh, Jamie continued. "Of course, looking back, that was the beauty of their set-up. We all worked on separate pieces of the project, which taken on their own were totally innocuous. But when you put them together . . . well, it wasn't until Tim and I began to compare notes one night over a beer that 'Project X' took on a more sinister hue." He heard a note of sadness creep into Jamie's voice. "Poor Tim. He was a great guy."

"Yeah," Amanda echoed softly, "he was."

The voices fell silent. Lee could feel a warm presence beside him on the cot and, every so often, the stroke of a gentle hand across his forehead. Part of him wanted to stay here forever, cosseted by such loving concern, but the other part of him knew he had to move. Lives depended on it.

He groaned softly.

"I think he's finally coming around," Amanda said excitedly. He felt a hand cup his cheek, patting softly. "Lee . . . can you hear me, Sweetheart?"

There was that name again. He must still be groggier than he thought.

"Give him a minute," Jamie told her, confirming his self-diagnosis. He felt capable fingers lightly press his wrist. "His pulse is strong, and he's responding to stimuli now. He should be conscious soon."

"He is conscious," he heard himself grumble in a voice that sounded infinitely tired. "He just wishes he wasn't."

"Lee . . ."

"I'm okay, Amanda," he mumbled as he struggled to achieve a sitting position. "But I have one hell of a headache."

"I'm not surprised," Jamie told him with a small laugh. "That was quite a whack you took."

"'Whack?' Is that what they're teaching in medical school these days?" Lee teased as he leaned back against the cell's brick wall, gingerly patting his head. "I hate to argue with a doctor, but 'whack' doesn't begin to cover it. I hope you got the number of that semi."

"You should be grateful it was only a small pick-up," Jamie laughed. "Otherwise you might not be around to talk about it."

Amanda turned frosty eyes on them. "I'm glad you two find this so amusing."

"Trust me, I'm **not** laughing," Lee said, forcing himself to rise. Gingerly testing his legs, he took a few tentative steps forward.

Evidently Amanda had no intention of letting him off that easily. "Those men could have killed you," she said, tenaciously dogging his movements as he began to navigate the small room. "They had guns, in case you failed to notice."

Lee rolled his eyes, grimacing at the sharp flash of pain. Scar-face and his pals must have really done a number on him. "I noticed," he muttered lightly. "I also noticed that the safeties on those guns were still engaged, so I took a calculated risk." Turning, he caught her eye. "I haven't **totally** lost it, Amanda."

"I never . . ."

"Now, since I was forced to take an unscheduled nap, what have **you** done about getting us out of here?" he said, not allowing her to finish.

He heard her sudden sharp intake of breath. Too late, he realized he should have kept his mouth shut and accepted her conciliatory gesture.

"Let's see," she sniped back. "I tried to conjure up a key out of thin air, but the incantation spell doesn't seem to be working."

"Oh, Amanda . . ."

"Well, I figured that must be your modus operandi these days," she snapped, her hands perched solidly on her hips. "Since you seem to think you have more lives than a cat."

"I do not . . ."

Jamie's long laugh intruded on their argument, bringing them up short. "It's nice to see things have gotten back to normal," he told them, looking pointedly from one parent to the other. "Kind of like old times, huh?"

Lee saw Amanda's cheeks redden. "I, uh, don't know what you're, uh, talking about," she sputtered as he ran a hand self-consciously through his hair. Skillfully changing the subject, his soon-to-be ex-wife added in a rush, "Why don't you fill in some of the blanks for Lee? I'm sure he has a million questions."

"Uh, yeah," he put in quickly. "And you can start with Angela Carter. How the hell did she end up in the middle of all this?"

Jamie shrugged. "She's Ben Topping's girlfriend, that's about all I know. She's been with him from the start, although she's not here all the time. I think she commutes to some job."

Lee snorted. "You could say that."

"She's Lee's assistant," he heard Amanda tell him with a short sigh.

Jamie looked at him in disbelief. "Your assistant? You mean all this has been going on right under your nose?"

Unable to meet the boy's unspoken accusation, Lee looked away. It was no less than he'd been feeling ever since he'd seen Carter's face. A dirty agent, operating right under his nose . . . that never would have happened with Billy Melrose in charge of Field Section.

Amanda suddenly spoke up. "If Agent Carter turned, neither Lee nor the Agency had anything to do with it. Things happen sometimes, Jamie," she stated, her voice calm and even. "No matter how many background checks you run, or precautions you take or how much training you receive, in the end, it all comes down to people. Some are good, some are bad . . . and some make mistakes."

There was a strange note of sadness about her, and Lee swallowed hard as she continued. "Sometimes their mistakes even change your life, but that's just . . . the way things are. All we can do is learn to . . . to accept it, I suppose. And change

the outcome when we can . . . because in the end, we're just people, too . . . and prone to the same kind of mistakes as everyone else."

As a sharp, creaking sound split the silence, a low voice could be heard from the open doorway.

"I couldn't agree more."

~ XXVIII ~

Amanda's eyes widened as Angela Carter walked boldly into the cell. Dressed in a pair of simple khaki shorts and matching shirt, the girl gave off the same aura of fresh-faced innocence Amanda had sensed at their first meeting. Yet now there was something in the young woman's eyes . . . a 'world-weary' look, for lack of a better term. This was not the timid, inexperienced rookie she had encountered only a few days ago in the Agency bullpen.

Closing the cell door firmly behind her, Carter took a tentative step forward. "I haven't got much time."

Her tone was different, too, Amanda noted with clinical precision. With her quiet, controlled voice, she seemed every inch the cool professional . . . if you didn't count the white-knuckled grip on her standard-issue service revolver. Despite the girl's best efforts, Amanda could detect a slight tremor in her gun hand.

Angela Carter was nervous.

Lee saw it, too. "Don't worry," he told her with a scornful laugh, "It shouldn't take you too long to twist the knife a little deeper."

Carter shifted her weight slightly from her right foot to her left. "I'm here to explain what's really going on."

"At the point of a gun? Don't waste your breath." Lee fairly spat the words as he leaned ominously closer to the woman who had been his assistant. "I don't listen to traitors."

Carter bit down furiously on her lower lip. "Things aren't always as they appear, Scarecrow."

Amanda saw Lee's eyes narrow at the use of his codename. "Then you're *not* with Scar-face and his band of merry men upstairs?" he jibed. "Because it sure looks that way from where I'm standin'."

Carter's face flushed with anger. "And from where *I'm* standing, it looks as if *you* signed a few new enlistment papers of your own." Her eyes raked over their dark green fatigues as she forced out a laugh. "You and Mrs. King are certainly dressed the part."

Beside her, she felt Jamie stiffen. "My parents would *never* sell out," he shouted fiercely. "They . . ."

Putting a finger to her lips, Amanda schooled him into silence. Though looking as if he'd like to argue, Jamie complied, sitting down again on the small cot with a loud sigh. Amanda felt relief wash over her. She'd seen Scarecrow run this game more times than she could count, and she wanted her son as far from the line of fire as possible.

Lee angled closer. "You're good, Carter, I'll grant you that. You certainly had *me* fooled."

Moistening her lips, Carter twisted the edge of her shorts between the fingers of her left hand. "I'm not a traitor any more than you are," the young woman insisted again, the slight crack to her voice betraying the depth of her agitation. Lowering her gun, she continued, "If you'll just give me a chance to . . ."

Before Carter could finish her plea, Amanda saw Lee make his move. Though the young agent's hand-to-hand skills far exceeded those of a rookie, they were no match for an agent of Scarecrow's training and experience. Carter cried out softly as he twisted her arm sharply behind her back. Giving no quarter, Lee swiftly leveraged his free arm against the woman's throat, pressing sharply. As Carter moved reflexively to break his grasp, the gun fell to the floor. Amanda swiftly snapped it up, left hand bracing her right as she trained it on the struggling agent.

Lee nodded his approval. "Get the key," he ordered, securing his hold on the young agent as Amanda searched her pockets.

"Now, I'm a generous man, Carter," Amanda heard him mutter with false cheer as she backed away, key in hand. "So I'll give you the same chance you and your buddies gave us upstairs -- about thirty seconds."

Carter worked harder to insinuate her fingers beneath Lee's arm. "Don't be a fool, Scarecrow," she managed to choke out. "You need me."

Amanda shivered at Lee's low laugh. "I think *you* need *me*," he told her, tightening his choke-hold to prove his point. "Give me one good reason not to snap your neck."

Carter sucked in a few harsh breaths. "Because . . . we're both . . . on the same . . . side. I'm . . . undercover."

Frowning, Lee loosened his grasp slightly, but Carter's reprieve lasted only brief seconds. As she attempted to extricate herself, he tightened his man-made noose once again.

"It's true, Scarecrow," Carter gasped, letting her body go limp as her brief resistance played itself out. "All I ask is a few minutes to convince you. Why else would I have come down here?"

"I can think of a few reasons," Lee replied curtly. "And none of them for *our* benefit."

Directing a beseeching eye at Amanda, she called softly, "Mrs. King . . ."

Shaking her head, Amanda turned away, slowly moving over to her son.

"Please," the girl pleaded one more time. "You don't know all the facts . . ."

As Carter's phrase struck a chord of memory, she wavered. 'Make your move only when you are in possession of all available facts.' She could almost hear Effram Beaman droning those words to his class of eager freshmen, the Agency training manual clutched tightly in his hand. Amanda smiled faintly; Beaman's bible had never exactly been Scarecrow's style. Still . . . information *was* an agent's lifeline.

Over Carter's head, Amanda sought Lee's eye. "I've got the key and her gun," she told him in a level voice. "She can't go anywhere. Maybe we should at least hear what she has to say."

"Angie's always been a pretty straight shooter with me, Lee," Jamie put in tentatively.

"Listen to them," Carter entreated. "You have nothing to lose -- and everything to gain."

Eyes still flashing ominously, Lee let out a long breath. "Okay," he agreed as he released her at last. "You've got two minutes."

Coughing lightly, Carter rubbed her bruised throat. Gazing at Lee with the same respectful admiration Amanda had witnessed that morning in the bullpen, she added deferentially, "The rumor mill was wrong about you."

Lee snorted. "That's comforting to know. But the clock is ticking."

Drawing one more deep breath, Carter plunged ahead. "I've been running a parallel investigation into Roberto Salzedo and his band of thugs -- an investigation that ultimately led me to your office. You and Desmond were right," she said, shifting uncomfortably. "Someone **was** trying to cover their tracks back in that hotel room where Franklin was killed. But it wasn't Los Lobos . . . or Salzedo, either, for that matter."

Lee's eyes narrowed. "Are you saying that Salzedo **didn't** kill Franklin?"

"No. Salzedo's responsible for Franklin's death. But there's much more going on than meets the eye."

"Damn it, Carter," Lee growled under his breath as he stepped ominously closer once again. "What the hell . . ."

"Maybe you'd better start at the beginning," Amanda quickly interposed as Lee showed unmistakable signs of tearing into the girl again. "For the benefit of those of us who came late to this little party."

One eye on Lee's tightly clenched fist, Angela Carter began to pace. "I guess the beginning would be three years ago . . . shortly after the sale of those illegal vaccines to the San Cardenzians. Roberto Salzedo brokered the deal along with Iguana Associates, but the money never found its way to Los Lobos' coffers. Where it finally **did** end up raised a very colorful red flag in a small office adjacent to Pennsylvania Avenue."

"Pennsylvania Avenue?" Amanda heard an edgy wariness in Lee's voice. "I didn't think that bureau existed anymore." The muscles on his jaw tightened, almost as if he was waiting for something.

"It exists." With a short breath, Carter recited in a low monotone, "Power corrupts."

"And absolute power corrupts **us** absolutely," Lee completed in kind.

Carter smiled faintly. "I see you remember the countersign."

Moving to her partner's side, Amanda tugged sharply in his sleeve. "Would you kindly explain what's going on here?"

Raising an eyebrow, Lee shot a quick glance at Carter, who nodded. Exhaling, he turned to Amanda with a slightly chagrined smile. "Years ago, when Harry V. Thornton founded the Agency, he knew that any organization operating under such a strict mantle of secrecy would necessarily need to be given a lot of leeway. Consequently, its agents **could** fall prey to certain unique . . . well, **temptations,** I guess, is as good a word as any."

Carter's low laugh concurred. "Power corrupts, you see," she explained with an ironic little smile. "So Mr. Thornton created a special bureau within the Agency -- a watchdog division, if you will."

Amanda frowned. "I've never heard of it."

"It was strictly 'need to know,'" Lee sighed. "But you're wrong, Amanda. You **have** heard of it. Remember Blue Leader?"

"Blue Leader? But I thought . . ."

"That he was a man," Lee declared with a shrug of apology. "I know. Your security clearance wasn't high enough in those days to be told the truth."

Amanda folded her arm tightly across her chest. She thought she'd accessed all the Agency's murky little secrets, but evidently the layers went far deeper than she'd imagined. "So, if Blue Leader isn't a man, just what exactly **is** it?" she demanded.

"A euphemism for a top-secret group within the Agency, a group charged with keeping its operations within the spirit, if not the letter, of the law." Lee turned to Carter with a puzzled scowl. "It was my understanding the whole 'Blue Leader' concept had been scrapped during the summer of '85."

"For all intents and purposes, yes. Dr. Smyth, as you know, is none too fond of ultra-secret groups **he** has no control over. But when Mr. Thornton gave 'Blue Leader' its charter, he foresaw just such a contingency. The Director of Covert Operations doesn't have the power to dissolve the bureau -- only the President of the United States can do that."

"So after Smyth's botched attempt to disband the group, 'Blue Leader' went 'dark' instead. Makes a certain kind of sense, I guess." Lee snorted contemptuously as he added, "I should have suspected Dr. Smyth didn't wield *that* much clout."

"Under the new regime, 'need to know' was very strictly enforced, even for those agents who'd had direct dealings with 'Blue Leader' in the past."

"This is all very enlightening," Amanda broke in, her patience stretched to its breaking point. "But what does it have to do with our current predicament?"

"Salzedo isn't working with Los Lobos anymore," Carter informed them. "He hasn't been since before the San Cardenzian deal. Los Lobos was just a smokescreen for his true affiliation."

"Let me guess," Lee said with a significant look at Amanda. "He's acquired a set of triangular burn marks on his forearm."

"Yes," Carter confirmed. "Salzedo is a member of the Triads. That's where Blue Leader's interest lies. Since the Triads originally sprang from the Agency . . ."

"It falls to you to stop them," Amanda finished.

The young woman nodded. "After the dust settled on that first sale, 'Blue Leader' sent me undercover to investigate. My first objective was to ingratiate myself with Bennet Topping to discover exactly how deep the ties to Salzedo went."

Amanda felt Lee's eyes on her as she inquired in a soft voice, "His father?"

Carter shook her head. "No, Senator Topping's a patriot through and through. I'd wager he even dreams in red, white and blue. Besides, Ben's too much in awe of the man to risk bringing him in. He wants -- needs -- dear old dad to think of him as a big man."

"He does," Amanda said sadly, remembering how affectionately the Senator had spoken of his son. "Bryce thinks the world of him."

Lee fixed Carter in an icy stare. "How did you end up as my assistant? Obviously you're no rookie."

"I've been an agent for over ten years," she informed them with a short laugh.

"Ten years," Amanda gasped. "But you look like you're . . ."

"My youthful appearance has come in handy on more than one occasion. But you of all people should know that looks can be deceiving." Carter raised an eyebrow. "They used to underestimate you, too, didn't they, Mrs. King?"

Amanda pursed her lips. It had indeed taken years of work to prove to some of her colleagues that the 'housewife-turned-spy' had earned her position among them. Yet, despite the many hard-fought battles for acceptance and respect, it was her very uniqueness that rendered her so effective in the field. Her adversaries never seemed to think much of her abilities, either.

Beside her, Lee began to pace. "Just exactly **what** was 'Blue Leader' investigating in my section? Or should I say **whom**?" he asked, his voice little more than a loud whisper.

Amanda felt a peculiar tingling along her spine. Lee's eyes flashed furiously -- he was close to the edge.

Carter must have realized it, too; she was obviously weighing how much information to reveal. Finally, she turned to Lee with an apologetic sigh. "After what happened to rookie Agent King, there were a few . . . uncertainties . . . about your capabilities in the field, Scarecrow. Your sessions with Dr. Pfaff . . ."

"Are private," Lee rejoined, his voice ringing with anger. "And none of your damned business!"

"**Everything** is Blue Leader's business," Carter returned, unperturbed. "Especially where national security is concerned."

Lee drilled her with his gaze. "Spies for spies," he muttered, his voice thick with sarcasm. "I think I'm beginning to agree with Dr. Smyth."

Stepping between Lee and Carter, Amanda turned on the latter with a contemptuous eye. "In what way does our very personal grief compromise national security?"

Carter's tone unconsciously softened. "Your son was killed by 'friendly fire,' Mrs. King."

"Tell me something I **don't** know, Carter," Amanda spat, recoiling as the young woman placed her clumsy finger on an aching wound.

Carter sighed again. "**You** left the Agency because of it. Scarecrow, on the other hand . . . well, he stayed. We had to be . . . sure of him . . . and of his loyalties."

Amanda drew in a harsh breath. "Lee's given practically his whole life to this Agency. And now you have the nerve to stand there and tell me . . ."

"Amanda," Lee interjected, putting an arm around her shoulder. "It's okay."

Amanda turned to him heatedly. "It certainly is **not** okay! And I don't understand how you can let them insinuate . . ."

"Insinuation isn't fact." He looked down at her with a troubled frown. "At this point, what a few misguided idiots in some secret division of the Agency think doesn't make a helluva lot of difference to me."

"But I don't . . ." Her words fell off as understanding dawned. A small chill passed through her frame, and, hugging herself, she walked silently to the far end of the cell. After she'd voiced her angry accusations over and over again with such stinging venom, a few unspoken doubts on the part of some faceless bureaucrats could hardly be expected to faze him.

"You're wasting time we don't have, Carter," she heard Lee order roughly. "Get on with your story."

With a curt nod, the agent addressed her next remarks to Lee. "When you and Desmond started to investigate Salzedo six months ago, I was transferred into your office to keep an eye on things."

"Transferred in?" Lee raised a questioning eyebrow. "Just like that?"

Carter's mouth turned up in a slow smile. "You'd acquired quite a reputation for chewing up your assistants and spitting them out again."

Stuffing his hands in his pockets, Lee began to pace the small cell again. "Go on."

"That's about it. We knew the Triads had a new deal in the works with Iguana Associates -- the mysterious 'Project X' North Shore Labs has been developing."

"My project?" Jamie asked, sitting up straighter on the small cot.

She nodded. "They're about to broker another deal, perhaps for another vaccine. I've tried, but I haven't been able to get any solid evidence. Whatever it is, they seem to need Dr. King." She turned to Jamie. "Can you shed any light at all on the project?"

"No. It was compartmentalized . . . the best I can do is an educated guess." Jamie rubbed his eyes lightly. "I suppose it *could* be a vaccine of some sort. It's viral based, that much I know."

Her lips tightly compressed, Carter turned back to Lee. "Blue Leader was afraid your investigation might put the pieces together before we were ready to make our move and the Triads would slip through our fingers again. We couldn't afford to let that happen, so certain information was withheld, evidence altered. To keep you and Desmond off-balance."

Stopping in his tracks, Lee's eyes glinted dangerously. "And just how 'off-balance' did you leave poor Tom Franklin?"

Carter's cheeks flushed. "Franklin stumbled onto the Triad connection, and I was sent in to extract him. But something went off the wire. Salzedo got to him first . . ."

"Yes," Lee broke in curtly. "I saw the results of his handiwork up close, remember?"

"I was doing my job, Scarecrow," the young woman protested in a weak voice.

He gave a contemptuous snort. "No, Carter, Tom Franklin was doing his job. A job *I* sent him in there to do. You and your Blue Leader pals were playing games . . . games that caused a fine agent's death . . . not to mention endangered *my* family." Letting out a harsh breath, Lee grabbed her by the shoulders. "I'm surprised you even bothered to give me the missing persons report on Jamie. You've known he was a hostage all along, haven't you? Haven't you?" he demanded, giving her a rough shake.

"Lee!" Moving quickly to his side, Amanda laid a hand on his arm. When he didn't respond, she squeezed a little tighter. "Come on, Sweetheart," she pressed in a low, urgent voice. "This isn't the time."

Amanda saw Lee's eyes dart toward hers for a brief moment, then, exhaling shakily, he released the agent.

"There didn't seem much point in withholding it," Carter mumbled, her eyes downcast. "'Blue Leader' knew Mrs. King would eventually contact you. I'm sorry. I did my best to keep the two of you out of this. I even tried to warn you . . ."

"Warn us?" Lee asked scornfully.

"The other night, at the hotel," Amanda gasped as understanding dawned. "You were the one who left that note."

"Yes. When I discovered you'd gone rogue, I followed as quickly as I could. I tried to make contact at 'Escondrijo del Amante,' but El Legarto had men watching you at the hotel. So . . ." Biting her lip, she rubbed light circles on her upper arms. "I'm sorry about how this has turned out. I've never had anything but the greatest . . . respect . . . for you, Scarecrow."

Roughly massaging the back of his neck, Lee walked away. "Save it for someone who believes it," he stated coldly as he sat down beside Jamie on the cot with a loud thud.

Amanda moved to stand near her family. "That's the trouble with people like you, Agent Carter," she said, shaking her head sadly. "To you, everyone's expendable . . . as long as the mission stays intact. But people matter more than causes. *That's* the real reason I left the Agency," she said with a long look at Lee. "I didn't want to be part of the system any more. I'd let myself get so caught up in 'saving the world' that I'd lost sight of what's really important in life . . . my family." Her voice caught as she added sadly, "And then, one day, it was too late."

Rising, Jamie gave his mother a quick hug. "It's not too late this time, Mom. We'll find a way out of this mess."

"Yes," Carter concurred in a low voice. "That's what I came here to tell you. I've activated my safety net. I'm getting you all out of here tonight."

~ XXIX ~

Placing his ear next to the keyhole of the thick cell door, Lee listened for any indication of movement, but the small anteroom and the hallway beyond held only an uneasy silence. Scowling, he rose from his uncomfortable squat.

Where the hell was Angela Carter?

Casting a furtive glance in Amanda's direction, he guessed that her thoughts were running in a similar line; she had traversed the same short path between the cot and the wall at least fifty times in the last half hour. Her edginess more than rivaled his.

Only Jamie appeared singularly serene. Drawing the thin blanket tightly around him, he had stretched out on the narrow cot, face to the wall, apparently sleeping soundly.

Amanda let out a short sigh as she momentarily stopped her restless pacing. "Were we wrong to trust her?"

Lee shrugged, unsure how to answer the question that had been plaguing him, too. "I still think Carter is our best shot," he told her, wincing slightly as he worked to loosen the painful knots in his right shoulder. Shooting a hesitant look at Jamie's huddled form, he added in a low voice, "How far do you really think he'd get on foot?"

"I know," she murmured, her mouth tight with strain. "It's just that this waiting is driving me crazy."

He nodded; it was getting to him, too. After outlining the rudiments of her escape plan, Carter had rejoined the others, promising to return for them shortly after dusk. The fall of darkness would help mask their movements as they made their way to the airstrip. She intended to fly them off the island in the small supply plane that was due in late that afternoon. In the meantime, she still had a cover to maintain, as did they. On the face of it, the plan had seemed reasonable enough.

Except that his watch now showed half-past ten. Dusk had come and gone, and still no sign of the elusive Angela Carter.

On the far side of the cell, Amanda had resumed her pacing, maintaining the restive silence she'd adopted shortly after Carter had taken her leave. Lee recognized the signs. His wife had a habit of withdrawing into herself when she was disturbed. He'd always found it strange that the same woman who'd continually urged him to discuss his feelings could have such trouble following her own very sound advice. Then again, maybe it was his fault; perhaps he hadn't been strong enough or persistent enough to break through the defenses she'd built around **her** heart.

Phillip's shooting had certainly proven that. When the Agency board of inquiry had delivered the final findings on the cause of their son's death, Amanda hadn't spoken a word for three solid days. On the morning of the fourth day, she'd marched solemnly into Billy Melrose's office and placed her resignation on his desk. Oddly enough, Billy hadn't even tried to argue with her. Maybe he'd seen something in her eyes, something Lee hadn't wanted to acknowledge. Or maybe it had been the final straw for Billy, too. Less than a month later, his friend and

mentor had departed for the wilds of Northern Michigan, and Lee had found himself out of the field, safely ensconced behind the section chief's desk.

"What time is it?"

Amanda's voice sounded as worn out as he felt. "About five minutes later than the last time you asked," he told her. "Don't worry; Carter will be here soon."

Amanda glanced toward the cot where Jamie slept, then back at Lee. "*If* her cover hasn't been blown."

"A hundred things could have held her up." He tried to reassure her, but his words somehow fell flat. Amanda had always possessed a singular talent for hearing what he wasn't saying.

Frowning slightly, she jammed her hands into the pockets of her olive-green fatigues. "Do you think El Legarto and his men have joined the Triads, too?"

"I honestly don't know. Their beef seemed to be with Salzedo and Los Lobos." He tried for a moment of levity. "It's getting damn near impossible to tell the players around here without a scorecard."

Evidently in no mood for humor, she sent him a sharp look. "It's a convoluted mess. Agents, counter-agents, government factions . . ."

Hearing the strain in her voice, he did his best to reassure her. "We just have to be patient a little longer. Carter will come through . . . it's a *good* plan, Amanda."

With a sardonic tilt of her head, she began to pace again. It *was* a good plan, he reminded himself. Making their escape by air would be quicker and cleaner than traversing the island on foot. Besides, with an incapacitated Jamie in tow, those Triad bloodhounds would track them before they'd gotten a hundred yards off the property.

Running a hand through his hair, Lee winced as he accidentally hit a tender spot. He was definitely getting too old for this kind of thing. Maybe Billy had the right idea after all. Early retirement . . . yes, right now, even that fly-fishing and cross-country skiing his former boss was so fond of sounded damned attractive.

Over by the far wall, he heard Amanda suck in a quivery breath. She gave him a sheepish smile when he cast a curious eye in her direction, as if mildly ashamed to have been caught shivering. "It's so damp down here," she explained with a

sigh, rubbing her arms briskly. Gazing in the direction of her sleeping son, her expression unconsciously softened. "I don't know how Jamie's been able to survive it."

Lee crossed the room to stand in front of her. Without a word, he opened his arms, and, though hesitating for a few brief seconds, she stepped into his embrace. Rubbing small circles across her back, he tried to infuse her with warmth. Even through the coarse fabric of the uniform she wore, he could feel the pointy ridges of her spine. "You're too thin, Amanda," he whispered roughly.

Sighing, she rested her face against her chest. "I'm sorry," she said at last.

"Well, you're just going to have to make a bigger effort to clean your plate," he joked sternly, rubbing his cheek lightly against her head.

"I was referring to my mood," she said with a soft laugh. "Here you are, trying so hard to find the silver lining . . ." She sighed. "Trouble is, I think I *am* a pessimist these days."

Lee stepped back, tilting her chin up to meet his gaze. "Do you trust me?"

Tight-lipped, she slowly nodded.

"I'll get you and Jamie out of this."

"I know you will," she said in a small voice.

Looking down into her deep brown eyes, Lee let out a sigh of his own. There were so many things he wanted to say to her, feelings that had been shunted aside for far too long. But did she want to hear them? Was what he thought he saw in her eyes real emotion or merely a reflexive reaction spawned from the danger they were facing?

"Amanda . . ." He tried to speak, but the words wouldn't come. Instead, he slowly bent down, reaching into his boot to retrieve the small pocket knife. "I guess Scar-face and his pals didn't bother to search us when they brought us back to the cell. Here," he insisted firmly as her face darkened. "I want you to take this."

"Lee . . ."

"No arguments," he interrupted, quickly pressing the knife into her hand. "It will make me feel better to know you have it." To Lee's relief, she silently complied, sliding the small knife into her pants' pocket.

"It'll be okay," he whispered as she stepped back in to the circle of his arms. "We'll be out of here before you know it, and once we're airborne, we can radio the Agency to pick up Scar-face and the rest of his thugs." He let out a light laugh. "Poor Francine must be going a little crazy by now. After I missed our second check-in . . . Amanda," he said quickly as he felt her suddenly stiffen in her arms. "What's the matter?"

Shaking her head, she walked away, her arms folded tightly across her chest. "It's nothing," she replied brusquely, shaking her head as he started after her. "I'm just feeling a little antsy again, that's all."

He frowned. "I don't. . . "

At the rustling noise from the cot, they both turned their heads. Tossing the small blanket aside as he rose, Jamie stood tensely beside the cot. "I think someone's coming," he told them in a loud whisper, looking remarkably alert for someone who had so recently been in such a deep slumber.

"Carter," Amanda sighed, her relief palpable as she moved quickly to Jamie's side. "It's about time."

Lee ran a hand through his hair again. "What the hell took you so long?" he demanded in a loud voice as the door began to open.

"I didn't know you were so anxious to see us." The scar-faced Triad soldier stepped through the door, two of his men flanking him. "I apologize if we kept you waiting, but our mutual friend El Legarto has not been as . . . cooperative . . . as we'd hoped. He seemed determined to waste our time. I certainly hope we won't have that problem with you, Scarecrow," he added with a glint in his eye as one of the soldiers dangled a pair of handcuffs in front of him.

Inclining his head, the leader motioned his man forward. As the soldier began to roughly cuff Lee's hands behind his back, he heard Amanda call out a sharp, "No!"

"Ah, Mrs. King," Scar-face chirped sweetly as he crossed to her. "Don't worry, your turn will come. In fact," he added with a prurient leer, "I'm kind of looking forward to it." He glanced at Lee out of the corner of his eye. "Of course, how

much time we spend together will depend on just how cooperative Scarecrow here turns out to be."

Lee tried to move toward them, but the burly soldier held him fast. "Let's go," their leader ordered sharply. "We have a nice little reception planned for you upstairs." With a brisk salute to Amanda, Scar-face slowly backed out through the door.

"Lee!"

He could hear the faint tinge of panic in her voice. "I'll be okay, Amanda," he assured her quickly as the soldiers hustled him out. "Remember what we talked about last night in the camp . . ." Their eyes caught and held. "Keep your promise," he shouted as the door slammed closed behind him.

~ XXX ~

"Hurry," Angela Carter urged in a muffled whisper. "It shouldn't be too far now."

Amanda bit down on her lip. "Don't worry about us. We're right behind you."

She saw Carter's shoulders stiffen, but the dark-haired agent remained silent. Amanda supposed she could understand the younger woman's frustration; she even shared it. Negotiating the hilly grounds of the Topping estate with a vision-impaired Jamie had cost them precious time . . . and time was the one thing they didn't have to spare at the moment.

Stepping up the pace as much as she dared, Amanda cast a worried eye on the sky. The night air was heavy with the threat of rain, and as the thunder rumbled again in the distance, she felt Jamie's fingers dig into her shoulder. She let out a sigh as she gave his hand a reassuring pat. With everything that had already gone wrong, why had she expected the weather to cooperate?

Halting, Carter pointed into the darkness. "The airstrip is just over that rise. Give me a few minutes to check things out."

As she watched the agent stealthily climb the hill, Amanda motioned for Jamie to take cover behind a small grove of trees. Her wary eyes swept over the countryside for any signs of a tail, but the evening remained remarkably quiet. No doubt the Triads were all too happily occupied elsewhere to worry about what was happening on the grounds.

Taking one last look around, she stuffed her hands deeply into her pockets. Despite the humid heat hanging in the air, her fingers were as cold as ice. Try as she might, Amanda couldn't seem to shake the chill of that small, dank cell. Or the memory of Lee's face as the Triads dragged him out of it.

"It'll be okay, Mom."

Squatting beside a gnarled tree trunk, eyes squinting in the darkness, her son watched her with studied care. Jamie's attempt to reassure her was so much like Lee that Amanda actually found herself smiling. If she had ever doubted that Jamie possessed the same tenacious grit as his brother and stepfather, the events of the past month would have removed any question. Nurture had won out over nature hands down in their family. Joe King may have been Phillip and Jamie's natural father, but, as they'd matured into men, Amanda had seen more and more of Lee Stetson in both her boys. *Their* boys, really . . . hers and Lee's . . . in every way that counted.

As she restlessly shifted her feet, her fingers closed around the small knife in her pocket. If only Lee hadn't insisted on giving it to her, it might have evened the odds a bit. Over the years, she'd seen Scarecrow turn the tables with much less. Of course, back then, she'd always been there to watch his back. Now, he was on his own.

Her thoughts turned again to what Lee could be going through at this very moment. She had no illusions. Carter had materialized in their cell not long after Scar-face had taken him away. In response to their frantic inquiries, she would only say that Scarecrow had been turned over to Salzedo for questioning. Something in her tone betrayed her, and when the young woman steadfastly refused to meet her eye, Amanda knew all she needed to. Angela Carter was first and foremost an agent. Whether or not she'd known what the Triads had planned for Lee, it was clearly evident that she now intended to turn it to her advantage and cover their escape.

"How long will it take for the Agency to send help?" Jamie asked suddenly.

Frowning, Amanda racked her brain for a reply. "We should be able to radio for backup as soon as we take off."

"That's appropriately vague," her son declared with an accusatory laugh. "Exactly what they teach us to do in med school when you don't know the answer."

She expelled a long breath. "I suppose it depends on how quickly they can mobilize a response team. By morning, certainly, I think. I . . . hope."

Jamie looked away toward the hill. "Shit," she heard him murmur forcefully under his breath. "Where the hell is Angie? We're wasting time!"

Amanda flinched. Jamie was worried, all right; her son seldom used that kind of language in front of her.

Of course, the Agency *could* be on the move even now. Lee had missed two prearranged check-ins with Francine . . . surely that must have set off the blonde agent's alarm bells. Francine was obviously head over heels in love with him. Perhaps she could sense that he was in trouble, the same way Amanda had always been able to do. The way she still could at this very moment.

But how effective could Francine be, all the way back in D.C.? Though Amanda had no doubt she would move heaven and earth to mount a rescue, whether or not she could move Dr. Smyth was another story. That thorny demon deniability -- to a man like Smyth, it was a potent motivator. The Agency's Director of Covert Operations would move in his own good time, for his own good reasons. And, as Lee had so succinctly put it back in Arlington, in this business, everyone was expendable . . . even an agent like Scarecrow.

Amanda sucked in a painful breath. In the camp, El Legarto had called Salzedo the 'Butcher Pig.' How long would Lee be able to hang on with a man like that working on him?

A jagged flash of lightning tore the sky, and in the sudden illumination, Amanda saw that Carter had reappeared on their side of the hill. "We're clear," she informed them, her words all but lost in the booming thunder that followed. "The pilot has decided to turn in for the night."

Amanda raised a sculptured eyebrow. "Just like that?"

"Oh, it wasn't too hard to persuade him to wait for me back in my room," the younger agent replied with an air of nonchalance. "The man's been hitting on me for months." Wrinkling her nose distastefully, she added, "He thinks his dreams just came true."

"And you're sure you can fly the plane? This storm . . ."

"Don't worry. I've been flying since I was a teenager." Carter's lips parted in a slow grin. "I'm very good at what I do, Mrs. King."

"Yes, I'm sure you are." Amanda took a deep breath, then slowly let it out. "That's why I'm trusting you to get Jamie out of here safely."

"Mom," Amanda heard her son call out apprehensively as she locked eyes with Angela Carter. "What are you talking about?"

Carter stared back at her gravely. "It's suicide."

"Maybe. But I have to try. I can't leave my . . . partner . . . hanging like that." Turning to Jamie, she said in an urgent voice, "Please understand."

"I do understand, Mom." His voice rang with equal measures of fear and pride. "Maybe even more than *you* do right now."

Amanda pulled him into a fierce hug. "Kiss Joey for me," she said in a shaky whisper. "And tell your Grandmother that I love her." Pausing for a moment, she cupped his face with her hands. "Be happy."

Blinking back his tears, Jamie could only nod. Turning to Carter, she demanded brusquely, "I'm going to need your service revolver."

Hesitating, Carter eyed Amanda speculatively. "I really should use it to knock you out and drag your unconscious body along with us."

Amanda's lips curved into a bittersweet smile. "But you won't, though."

Blowing out a short breath, Carter handed her the gun. "The clip's fully loaded. They've probably got him up on the third floor. There's a small room at the very end of the hall that Salzedo uses for . . ."

She nodded. "I'll find it. Get Jamie out of here."

"I'll radio for reinforcements as soon as we're off. If you can hang on until they get here . . ." Pursing her lips, Carter added in a low voice, "Good luck . . . Amanda."

~ XXXI ~

From behind, one of the Triads gave him a vicious shove. "Keep moving, Scarecrow."

Unable to maintain his balance beneath the thick hood they'd placed over his head, Lee fell hard on the steep steps.

"That's enough," he heard their leader order sharply. "Or *you* can explain to Salzedo why we've handed him damaged goods."

Two pairs of arms grabbed him, shunting him roughly to his feet. "Come on," the soldier instructed harshly, evidently still stinging from his verbal chastisement.

"It would be easier if I could see where the hell I'm going," Lee muttered in a hoarse whisper. "Is this damn rigmarole really necessary?"

"Just a precaution, Scarecrow," Scar-face replied with a laugh. "In case you're entertaining any ideas of becoming a runner."

"Fat chance. I'm cuffed *and* outnumbered here."

"And it's gonna stay that way," the man to his left grumbled as he propelled him forward. "Salzedo told us a few stories about Buenos Aires."

Lee let out a short laugh. "He still remembers. Gee, I'm flattered."

"You won't be when he's finished with you."

Tightening their grip, the two men half-dragged, half-pushed him down what Lee supposed to be an upstairs hall. They must be somewhere on the third floor. After they'd emerged from the basement dungeon, he'd counted two separate flights of stairs.

But that's all he could be sure of. Lee had tried vainly to keep track of their position, but as the soldiers force-marched him tirelessly around the large mansion, he'd lost all sense of direction. In his confused mind, it felt as if they'd been walking for hours, though he knew it couldn't have been longer than thirty or forty minutes at best.

He heard the noise of an opening door. "Step inside," one of the soldiers barked.

Moving cautiously forward, he felt his shoulder brush up against something solid. Another man, perhaps? For a moment, he thought he'd felt a puff of warm breath against his neck.

"That's far enough," Scar-face ordered severely.

Shrouded in darkness beneath the hood, Lee struggled to remain in control. It wasn't hard to guess what they had in store for him. The Triads had obviously

been well trained in interrogation techniques . . . disorientation . . . intimidation . . . the whole standard bag of tricks. He wondered vaguely exactly how much time they'd allotted to this particular game. The longer they played, the better the odds that Amanda and Jamie would be able to make their escape.

Reminding himself to breathe slowly and evenly, Lee endeavored to exhibit no sign of fear. He knew there were people in the room; he could hear their muffled words. And somewhere off to his right . . . or maybe his left . . . he caught a faint whiff of cologne . . . and . . . something else. The smell was sweet, almost sickeningly so . . . vaguely reminiscent of the ether the doctors had used at the base hospital on Guam when they'd performed his emergency appendectomy. He'd been seven years old, and scared out of his wits. 'Good soldiers don't cry,' had been his uncle's response to his unreasoning fear of the tall men behind the large, white masks. 'Good soldiers don't cry' . . .

Lee shivered.

"Well, it has been a long time since that weekend in Buenos Aires, Stetson."

The game was beginning. "Salzedo," he returned, keeping the dread from his voice with a Herculean effort. "I haven't forgotten you, either."

The man laughed. "Welcome back to my little laboratory."

As the hood was abruptly torn from his face, the harsh glare from the overhead lights hit him squarely in the face. Blinking a few times, Lee made a vain attempt to locate the owner of that lightly accented voice, but the grisly scene that greeted him stopped him cold.

In the center of the room, firmly strapped to a large steel chair, lay the motionless body of El Legarto. Pant legs rolled up to his knees, his stiff, bare feet sat in a bucket of water. Wires from the electrodes attached to the man's arms, legs and chest led back to a large, metal box. Even in death the old soldier's face was contorted into an agonizing grimace.

Behind him, Salzedo chuckled softly. "I see my comrades have not yet cleaned up the mess. How careless. *Quítelo*," he ordered sharply.

Lee fought the nausea stirring in the pit of his stomach as one of the Triad soldiers ripped the wires from El Legarto's body then pushed the dead man from the chair with an especially vicious shove. Bending with an exaggerated motion, the soldier grabbed El Legarto's lifeless body by the legs, dragging him slowly from the room. Leftover garbage to be disposed of.

Standing a little straighter, Lee fixed his eyes determinedly on a spot on the wall. He knew the drill. That little performance had been staged for his benefit.

"I am so sorry you had to witness the remains of my . . . accident," Salzedo said as he moved to stand directly in front of him.

The man's breath smelled of stale cigars. "'Accident,' Salzedo?" he inquired, managing to keep his tone even. "Then you *are* getting sloppy."

Salzedo fingered the edge of Lee's collar. "Same old Scarecrow," he stated, his wide smile revealing a row of slightly crooked teeth. "I'm so glad." Motioning toward the vacated chair, he instructed in a low growl, "Fájelo en."

Strong hands forced him to his knees. While Scar-face removed the handcuffs, his cohorts grasped him firmly beneath the arms, lifting him up even as they slammed him down into the chair. Though he tried to resist, it was futile; steel belts were fastened firmly around his waist and arms. Yanking open the buttons of his jacket, one soldier used a large scissors to cut away his t-shirt, exposing his chest, while another roughly removed his shoes and socks.

"Now," Salzedo said as the men began to attach cardiac leads to the areas above and below his breastbone, "It turns out our friend El Legarto had a bothersome little problem with his heart. Unfortunately, it brought our session to a rather . . . untimely . . . close. You'll be glad to know I won't be taking any chances this time."

"I'm overjoyed," Lee snorted. Through veiled eyes, he watched the soldiers place his bare feet in the bucket of water, then restrain his legs in the same manner as his arms. With a parting smile, the last soldier attached the remaining electrodes to his calves then, saluting with mock solemnity, quickly followed his compatriots from the room.

The door closed with a firm click, leaving the two men alone. His old adversary said nothing as he strolled leisurely about the room, every so often checking an instrument panel or referring to a chart. Lee recognized the tactic. Anticipation was in itself a weapon.

To distract himself, he started making a mental composite of his tormentor. Though perhaps a bit thicker around the middle, the years had altered Salzedo's appearance surprisingly little. Dark hair, even darker eyes, what looked to be a permanent five o'clock shadow . . . and a faint scar under his chin from the knife wound Lee had inflicted.

That was a small souvenir from their last encounter in Buenos Aires. Salzedo had tirelessly tortured three members of their team that night before Lee had somehow managed to get the jump on him. It was almost as if the Argentinean had drawn some strange kind of energy from other people's pain. From the look of things, Lee thought grimly, he hadn't changed much in *that* respect, either. As his interrogator turned a curious eye to the EKG printout, Lee began to recite his mantra in his head.

Salzedo finally grunted in satisfaction. "Good. All is as it should be . . . your heartbeat is steady, though perhaps a bit fast," he added with a grin. Pulling up a chair, he sat down beside Lee. "What does the Agency know about 'Project X'?"

As Lee remained stubbornly silent, Salzedo drew a deep breath. "What does the Agency know about 'Project X'?" he demanded again, the timbre of his voice dropping a notch.

Affecting a smile, Lee shrugged his shoulders. "It follows 'W'?"

Without blinking an eye, Salzedo turned a small dial swiftly to the right. As the electric current shot through him, Lee gritted his teeth, trying desperately not to cry out. Salzedo's eyes clearly showed his enjoyment. Slowly counting to three, he released the dial. Panting, Lee collapsed down into the chair.

"What does the Agency know about 'Project X'?" Salzedo repeated calmly.

"Not a damn thing," Lee choked out.

Salzedo turned the dial again, this time counting to five before letting go. "What does the Agency know about 'Project X'?" he demanded one more time.

"I don't know," Lee repeated, his chest heaving. "And even if I did, I wouldn't tell you."

Salzedo's smile sent a chill down his spine. "Oh, but you will tell me what you know, Stetson, make no mistake about it. Each man has his breaking point; it is merely a matter of discovering how long . . . and how much." Rubbing his hand across his midsection with an overstated motion, Salzedo stifled a yawn. "But for now, I find I am tired. This tedious business with El Legarto caused me to miss my dinner. How about you?" he taunted, his face inches from Lee's. "Are *you* hungry?"

Lee tightened his grip on the arms of the chair. "I'm just fine."

Stretching, Salzedo smiled blandly. "Then I won't bother to bring you anything. It is just as well . . . what this machine can do to a man with a full stomach is not . . . pretty. I will see you later, eh?"

Lee's eyes blazed. "Go to hell, Salzedo!"

"All in good time. But you, my friend . . . I am afraid *you* are already there." Laughing, he threw the coarse hood roughly over Lee's head again. "A little something for you to mull over while I enjoy my dinner."

The overhead lights went out, leaving him in darkness. As the last echo from the slamming door died away, Lee let out a shuddering sigh. Though the reprieve was welcome, it was, at the same time, disconcerting. He'd steeled himself for the entire symphony, and all he'd gotten was the overture.

Of course, that was the point. Keep him off-balance, on edge. All too soon, Salzedo would return. His torture would be slow; the man was in no great hurry to break him. No, his tormentor would take his time, savoring each scrap of pain.

Of course, no matter what method he employed, Salzedo would never get the intel he was after. Thanks to Blue Leader's interference, Lee really didn't know a *damn* thing about 'Project X.' On a certain level, he had to admire the irony. Salzedo would never believe him ignorant . . . which would eventually cause that pig to play his trump card.

Lee's blood ran cold; he could only pray that Amanda and Jamie were miles away from here. Underneath the rough hood, he squeezed his eyes shut, his uncle's long-ago words echoing in his mind.

'Good soldiers don't cry.'

~ XXXII ~

Keeping as close to the wall as possible, Amanda slowly crept up the stairs. From the floor below, she could still hear an occasional guffaw from the Triad soldiers she'd discovered playing cards in a small den not far from the kitchen. Unfortunately, Scar-face was not among them, a fact that afforded Amanda no small amount of trepidation.

Her progress had been painstakingly slow. Forced to crouch in the bushes for what seemed like an interminable interval while a soldier enjoyed his evening smoke, she'd half-expected to hear the welcome roar of an airplane's engines

overhead, but the night remained unusually still, save for the occasional boom of thunder out over the ocean. Pushing her worry for Jamie to the back of her mind, she could only hope that her faith in the fresh-faced Agent Carter hadn't been misplaced.

"What are you doing?"

Lost in her thoughts, the sullen voice caught her unawares. Flattening herself against the wall, she tried to be inconspicuous.

"It's bad enough that you've been holding Jamie King against his will all this time."

Someone laughed. "You are in this as deeply as I am, Topping."

To her great relief, Amanda realized they weren't addressing her. Taking a tentative step forward, she continued cautiously to the second floor.

The commotion seemed to be coming from the bedroom at the far end of the hall. Though the door stood slightly ajar, Amanda couldn't see inside, but young Bennet Topping was certainly agitated about *something*. The other man, whose voice she didn't recognize, appeared equally disturbed, though in a quieter, more controlled way. She deduced that he must be the only man she had yet to encounter -- Roberto Salzedo.

Licking her dry lips, she carefully calculated the distance to the second staircase. Unfortunately, she would have to pass right by the open door to gain access to the third floor, where Carter had told her they were holding Lee. She briefly considered waiting until the men vacated the room, but if Salzedo was presently occupied with Topping, this just might be her optimal chance.

Topping's shrill whine split the silence again. "I never signed on for torture," he shouted. "What you did to that man upstairs . . ."

"Was necessary, my young friend, believe me. He refused to tell me what I needed to know."

A shuddering sob began in her chest, but Amanda forced it down with an effort of will. Refusing to acknowledge the possibility that she could already be too late, she began to tiptoe down the long hall. Lee was fine; he had to be.

As she edged closer to the staircase, she heard a radio playing. A country song, she noted absently, its strains intended to muffle the conversation. But as the

exchange grew more impassioned, the men's words were clearly distinguishable over the background noise.

"You're a self-righteous hypocrite, Topping," the other man cried, his accent growing as thick as his anger. "What do you call what that vaccine of yours did to all those people in San Cardenzia, eh?"

"That was an accident -- you know that."

His friend's slow laugh sent a chill down Amanda's spine. "You didn't seem to mind when that 'accident' made you 'el disparo grande.' Have no fear. This new deal will make you a bigger 'shot' than ever . . . not to mention a richer one."

A fist slammed down on a table. "No! I don't want any part of your blood money. What you're planning to do with 'Project X' is treason."

Torn between her desire to find Lee and her curiosity over the mysterious 'Project X', Amanda lingered beside the door. If she could glean some intelligence now, it might prove helpful in the long run.

The man she supposed to be Salzedo cackled softly. "What do you think this is? A kiddie ride you can just jump off of any time you choose? There is only one way to dissolve a partnership like this . . . with a bullet. Are you certain *that* is what you want?"

"Roberto . . ."

"Go ahead. End our partnership . . . if you're man enough." As Topping stifled a small sob, Salzedo went on with a demeaning laugh, "I thought not. Now, stop squealing like a half-grown pig. We have details to discuss before the 'Project X' shipment arrives."

The radio's volume increased suddenly, the rest of the conversation lost in the plaintive voice of the singer who vowed to 'stand by her man.' Smiling at the grim irony, Amanda crept forward, grateful for the music that masked the squeaky floorboards on the stairs. She hoped anew that Carter had been able to alert the Agency. Whatever this 'Project X' was, it certainly had Ben Topping running scared.

As Amanda reached the upper level at last, a long, narrow corridor stretched out before her. It must lead to one of the four turret rooms, she realized as she slowly made her way down the dimly lit hall. Saying a silent prayer that fate had led her to the right spot, she warily opened the door.

The room was dark. Patting the wall to her left, she located a switch, holding her breath as she flipped it to the 'on' position. The inky blackness was immediately replaced by too-bright florescent light. Blinking to re-establish her field of vision, she wished she'd had the foresight to ask Carter for her flashlight.

Her eyes fell on the tense figure in the chair. "Oh, my . . ." Biting back her exclamation, she sprinted across the room. "Lee!" she cried as she quickly tore the rough burlap hood from his head.

"Amanda?" He stared at her in disbelief, as if trying to decide if she were flesh or fantasy.

Cupping his face tenderly in her hands, she smoothed his hair back off his forehead. "Are you okay?"

Her touch dissolved his doubts. "What the hell . . ." he began, his surprise causing him to speak a little too loudly.

"Shhh," she reminded him. "I didn't see anyone outside, but that doesn't mean the soldiers aren't around."

"What are you doing here?" The words came out in a breathy hiss. "Where's Jamie?"

"Hopefully airborne by now. Carter came for us right after the soldiers took you."

He frowned as he searched her eyes. "Why aren't you with them?"

She hastily averted her gaze. "Must have missed the flight. You know I've always had a problem making it to the airport on time."

"Oh, Amanda . . ." Lee groaned lightly as he shook his head.

She caught her bottom lip between her teeth. "We can debate the right and wrong of this later. Right now, we've got to get you out of this . . . this . . . contraption." Her eyes misted as she took in the cruel chair with its insidious attachments of torture. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine," he assured her solemnly. "Luckily Salzedo was in no hurry to begin his interrogation. See if you can find the lever that will release these bands."

Bending her knees, Amanda examined Lee's restraints, her fingers feverishly probing beneath the chair for anything resembling a release mechanism. "I think your friend Salzedo has other problems at the moment. I overheard him arguing with Bennet Topping . . . something about torturing someone?"

Lee nodded. "El Legarto is dead."

"Oh, my gosh," Amanda murmured as she switched her search to the back of the chair. "What about the rest of his men?"

"I would assume they're dead, too. I don't think we can expect any help from that quarter."

"Carter is calling for backup. They should be . . . there, I think I've got it," she proclaimed in satisfaction as the metal bands binding Lee to the chair suddenly sprang open. Pivoting, she started to free Lee's legs from the wires and electrodes. "Sorry," she muttered as she yanked some fine hair off along with the sticky circlets. "These are on pretty solidly."

"I'm just glad to be free of this blasted paraphernalia," he said with a sigh as he began to cautiously remove the cardiac leads from his chest. "Though I still wish . . ." He licked his dry lips. "These guys mean business, Amanda."

Pushing aside his unspoken remonstrance, she concentrated on her task. "Why do you think 'Project X' is so important to them?"

Lee shoved his feet into his shoes. "Your guess is as good as mine. Salzedo wanted to know the Agency's latest intel about the project, but I couldn't tell him anything."

From her perch on the floor, Amanda caught Lee's eye. "Couldn't or wouldn't?"

"Couldn't," Lee enunciated pointedly, his fingers tugging at his shoelaces with unrestrained vigor. "Do you honestly think I'd keep information from you now?"

"Yes, Stetson," a harsh voice demanded in thickly accented tones. "I would like to know the answer to that question myself."

With a short laugh, Roberto Salzedo stepped into the room, closing the door behind him with a dull thud. Gun clutched tightly in his right hand, he appeared unruffled by his discovery of the ill-fated escape attempt. If anything, the anticipatory gleam in the man's eye betrayed amusement, as if he somehow found the scene playing out before him strangely humorous.

All this Amanda absorbed in the mere split of the second it took Lee to pull her to her feet. "Go to hell, Salzedo," he growled, shielding her with his body as he stepped in front of her.

Salzedo smiled. "How inadequate, Stetson. Such lame invocations are starting to make me think you really *don't* know anything . . . which, of course, makes you no use to me whatsoever." Moving toward them, he slowly cocked the trigger.

"Don't . . . please." Amanda's voice cracked as she gasped out the plea.

Salzedo turned to her with a smugly satisfied smile.

Just as she'd intended, Lee made the most of the man's brief hesitation. In the blink of an eye, she saw him swiftly kick out with his left foot, knocking the gun from the stunned Salzedo's hand. Moving just as quickly, Amanda drew her weapon, her fingers closing around the trigger even as Lee tackled their adversary to the floor. Sucking in a breath, she braced her right hand with her left, training the gun on the twisted mass of arms and legs writhing in front of her.

As she worked to still the slight tremor in her hand, Amanda suddenly grasped the sticky 'catch--22' they'd landed in. A shot was certain to bring the Triads down around their heads. Yet, in his present condition, Lee was clearly no match for the stockier Salzedo, who was rapidly gaining the upper hand. Breathing heavily, she pointed the gun toward the ceiling, her wide eyes searching the room for a weapon . . . something . . . anything . . .

She suddenly remembered the knife. Delving into her pocket, she quickly retrieved it, flicking the blade open with her finger. "Lee!" she cried, struggling to keep her voice even. Amanda saw understanding in his eyes as she sent the weapon skidding toward him across the polished floor.

Everything seemed to happen at once. As Lee lunged for the knife, Salzedo tackled him, wrapping his hands tightly around his opponent's throat. Lee countered with a swift chop to the head, but Salzedo's chokehold was too strong. Hatred shone from the man's dark eyes as he tightened the vise-like grip of his fingers. Reaching out blindly, Lee's long fingers searched desperately for the knife. Before she could act, Amanda watched the blade all but disappear into the soft flesh at the base of Salzedo's neck. Collapsing, Lee delivered the last lethal twist.

The two men lay motionless on the floor.

"Lee!" Amanda cried again, her hand reflexively covering her mouth as she looked at the still forms. Lee finally pushed Salzedo's limp body from him with a loud grunt. "Thank God," she murmured under her breath as, rubbing his throat, he struggled to his feet.

Tucking her gun safely into her belt, Amanda crossed to him without a word. She wasn't quite sure who opened their arms first, but suddenly, somehow, Lee's body was pressed tightly against hers. They stood together, swaying slightly, his fingers tangling in her hair. "It's okay," he murmured huskily over and over again. "That pig Salzedo won't hurt anyone else."

She could only nod. Closing her eyes, she pushed closer against him. The beat of his heart was comforting in its steady rhythm, and she savored each thump for a few joyful seconds before reluctantly tearing herself away. "We'd better get out of here," she rasped, finding her voice at last. "Before someone else . . ."

"Happens on this touching little scene? I'm afraid it's too late for that, Mrs. King." Amanda's heart thudded into her feet at the sound of the scar-faced soldier's callous laugh. "This really doesn't seem to be your day, does it? Now, kindly drop your weapon to the floor."

Amanda saw Lee's eyes flash ominously as they rested on the man standing in the open doorway, a semi-automatic rifle braced in his arm. They didn't stand a chance against that kind of firepower, she realized with a short sigh. Scar-face would cut them down before they took two steps, no doubt with a great deal of pleasure. Lee must have come to the same conclusion; nodding, he silently instructed her to comply. As she placed the gun on the floor, Lee stepped protectively in front of her again.

Kicking the weapon out of the way, the soldier touched his forehead in a mocking gesture of tribute. "Let me congratulate you both on a bravura performance. Thanks to your efforts, now I'm only going to waste two bullets instead of three."

Lee shot a questioning glance at Salzedo's crumpled body. "I thought he was a friend of yours. Or are those little marks on his arm just for decoration?"

The Triad leader shrugged. "You know what they say about politics making unlikely bedfellows . . . Salzedo there was becoming a liability. The man's left a trail of bodies a fool could follow. *Two* fools, if you will," he amended with a sudden laugh. "Unfortunately for you, I have no more use for fools . . . though I have found the pair of you more entertaining than most. Now move over there,"

he barked, his congeniality taking a deadlier turn. His bloodshot eyes narrowed as he leveled his weapon. "For Mrs. King's sake, I'll try to make this as painless as possible."

Out of options, they moved toward the wall. Tiny black spots danced suddenly before Amanda's eyes. She drew in a few deep, slow breaths, but for some reason the oxygen wouldn't reach her lungs. Her ears began to buzz.

"Amanda."

She felt the tingling heat of Lee's gaze. "Look at me," he whispered softly, his hands grasping hers tightly.

Pressing her lips together, she nodded. As she locked her gaze on his, she was suffused with an inexplicable feeling of warmth. His eyes had darkened to a deep shade of green, and she suddenly found herself thinking, not of this moment, but of the countless others when she'd drawn strength and solace from those familiar depths. Dimly, she heard the pounding of feet on the stairs -- reinforcements, no doubt. She pushed those thoughts aside, shutting out everything but those amazing eyes that held her fast.

"Captain! Captain!"

Something in the man's tone caused Lee's head to turn. Amanda reluctantly followed his gaze, shivering slightly as she felt their unspoken connection dissolve.

"We've got a problem," the first soldier stated as he burst into the room, another soldier and Ben Topping close on his heels. Beside the well-muscled men, the blonde Topping looked every inch a boy, his eyes clearly betraying his fear as they fell on the lifeless body of his former partner.

"What happened?" he gasped out. "Roberto . . . is he . . ."

"As a doornail," Scar-face confirmed, dismissing him with a curt wave. Turning instead to his Triad compatriot, he demanded tersely, "What problem?"

The soldier's eyed darted from Lee and Amanda then back to his leader. "Dr. King seems to be missing . . . along with the Carter woman and the small supply plane."

"Damn it," Scar-face cursed. "The pilot, too?"

"He's clean. We found him in Angie's room . . . all set for a big night. He thought the woman was coming to meet him. Guess Junior here wasn't quite enough for her," he said with a snide look in Topping's direction.

"Damn," the Scar-faced soldier spat, ignoring the taunt. "I wasn't counting on this. Did you . . ."

"Already taken care of," his ally assured him. "I sent the sergeant after them in the Stryker 900. It has wing power as well as fire power. They won't be a problem for long."

"And if she called for backup?"

The soldier shook his head. "Impossible. The storm is interfering with all the com lines. Sarge will reach them long before they're clear."

Scar-face nodded. Turning a cold eye on Bennet Topping, he demanded harshly, "This complicates things. Exactly when is the 'Project X' shipment due to arrive?"

Topping shifted nervously. "Five or six hours, but . . ."

"What's the recognition sequence?"

"Don't tell him, kid," Lee spoke up suddenly. Nodding in the direction of Salzedo's body, he added grimly, "The heavy artillery's already been eliminated. Do you really think he's gonna keep a toy gun around?"

Sweat breaking out on his brow, Ben licked his lips. "I don't think . . ."

"You're right," Scar-face threatened ominously as he grabbed the boy by the shirt. "*You* don't think . . .*I* do! Now you brought that treacherous little bitch to the party, so you'd better talk fast."

"Um . . ." Topping heaved a sobbing breath as his eyes flitted from the Triad leader to Lee then back to the soldier again. "The code is 'Geronimo,' the recognition, 'Little Big Horn.' But there's another problem . . ."

"What now?" Scar-face demanded, giving the boy a rough shake. "Spill it, Topping," he snarled as Ben struggled to find his voice.

"We needed Dr. King to verify the formula once it arrives. Without him, we'll have no idea whether or not the modification to the chemical agent is sufficiently toxic."

Amanda felt the cold nausea of fear in her stomach as understanding dawned. North Shore Labs had government contracts, some for the military. 'Project X' must be some sort of biological weapon . . . something Salzedo and the Triad's had stolen and modified, for God-knows-what purpose. As Lee shot her an alarmed glance, she realized he, too, had reached the same grisly conclusion.

Scar-face let out a frustrated growl as he released Ben. "So what do you propose we do? This was your project -- surely you and Salzedo had contingency plans."

"There isn't any way to know," Topping reiterated stubbornly. "Not without Dr. King to verify the formula. Unless, of course, you did a field test, but that would mean . . ."

"Field test?" The Triad leader let out a low laugh as his eyes raked over Lee and Amanda with new interest. "Yeah, I think a 'field test' could be arranged. As for you," he said, drilling his eyes into Topping's skull, "I appreciate the intel, kid . . . but you should have taken Scarecrow's advice. Never give away your ace . . . especially when you don't know what hand your opponent's holding," he finished, putting a quick bullet between the boy's eyes. Bennet Topping fell to the ground in slow motion, a slightly puzzled expression on his lightly freckled face.

Amanda clutched convulsively at Lee, burying her head in his shoulder. "Somebody take out the trash," she heard Scar-face bark at his remaining men. "And let me know the second 'Project X' arrives. I wouldn't want to keep our guinea pigs here on tenterhooks any longer than necessary." The man's smirking smile was clearly evident in his voice.

As Lee drew her closer, she slowly raised her head. "Sorry for the change in plans, Mrs. King," Scar-face lamented as his eyes met hers. "I guess this won't be quite as painless as I thought." Sighing, he gave his head an affected shake. "A pity, really . . ." Turning to his men, he ordered gruffly, "Take them back to the cell."

As a soldier motioned roughly with his gun, she felt the subtle pressure of Lee's hand on the small of her back. Closing her eyes briefly, she said a silent prayer for Jamie's safety. It was all she could hope for now.

Lee watched Amanda out of the corner of his eye. "If you keep that up, you're going to wear out the floor," he told her as she made yet another pass by the narrow cot where he lay.

She sent him a thunderous look. "I don't see how you can make jokes at a time like this."

"It sure beats thinkin' about things we're powerless to change."

Her plaintive sigh reached him from across the cell. "I just can't get rid of the picture of poor Ben, his body crumpled in a heap on the floor. He looked so surprised. I keep remembering that little boy who used to sit at my kitchen table eating chocolate chip cookies."

"Some 'little boy,'" he said with a harrumph, launching himself off the cot to map out a circuit of his own.

"I think he just got in over his head. Ben always had this huge need to impress his father. I remember when he ran for class treasurer . . ."

"This is hardly some elementary school nonsense, Amanda." Though he was well aware of her compassionate nature, he found her sympathy for anyone with the last name 'Topping' particularly untenable. "Your pal Ben was every bit as responsible for what happened to Jamie as Salzedo, Scar-face or any of those other assholes upstairs."

"You think Scar-face and his buddies caught up with them, don't you?"

"I didn't say that." Recoiling from the haunted look in her eyes, he marched toward the far corner of the cell. The walls seemed thicker somehow; their dank, musty odor assaulted his nostrils. "Carter's a good agent."

"That's not an answer, Lee."

He could hear the prickly accusation in her voice. "What the hell do you want from me, Amanda?" he shot back. "Yeah, okay, I think Jamie could be in trouble . . . big trouble. Does that make you feel better?"

"Not particularly," she answered coolly. "Does yelling at me make *you* feel better?"

Rubbing the back of his neck, he carefully avoided her eye. "If Jamie **is** in trouble, there's not a damn thing we can do to help him from this blasted cell. I just hope to God that Carter can . . ." Leaning forward, he braced his hands against the wall. "Damn it," he muttered, slapping his palm against the rough brick, "damn it all to hell." Tightening his fingers into a fist, he drew his left arm back.

Soft hands pulled at him. "Don't!" Amanda shouted fiercely, her voice growing huskier as he tried to twist away. "This self-flagellation has got to stop, Lee."

He let out a bitter laugh. "I'm just taking responsibility, Amanda. I thought that's what you wanted."

She sucked in a breath through clenched teeth, the sound a sharp hiss beside his ear. "It won't bring Jamie back," she stated in steely tones, "or Phillip, either, for that matter. Some things are just . . ."

Glaring down at her, he raised an eyebrow. "Beyond our control?"

"Yes." Taking a long breath, she added hesitantly, "That day at the warehouse . . . you know, when Phillip . . ."

He shook her off and flopped back down on the cot. "I can't do this now. I'm just too tired." Covering his eyes with his arm, he cocooned himself in a warm cushion of darkness. Whatever she needed to say, he couldn't let himself listen. It was safer to concentrate on basic things, like where his next breath was coming from.

As Amanda began to pace back and forth again, Lee turned his face to the wall. He couldn't drown out her footfalls, though; they resounded hollowly on the hard concrete floor, the flat 'clomp-clomp' beating in time to his heart. Faint echoes of a past doomed to repeat itself.

In those silent months following Phillip's death, she had paced many a night away just like this. Sleepless and alone in their bed, he'd listened to the staccato sounds drifting up from the kitchen. What was that old saying about husbands and wives taking on each other's traits? Under less tragic circumstances, he might have found the phenomenon amusing, but it had only served to increase his bitter longing for his wife.

Her footsteps ceased abruptly and, jolted by the silence, Lee rolled to his side. "Why is it so cold down here?" he heard Amanda exclaim under her breath.

The edge to her voice was slight, but it worried him. He took in her pinched expression and flushed cheeks in one long look. As he suspected, her chill came more from within than without. Lee understood only too well; the prospect of being injected with 'Project X' scared the hell out of him, too. Scar-face had been right about one thing -- a bullet would have been infinitely kinder.

Forcing himself to sit up, he cast about for a distraction. "You call **this** cold?" he prompted, sending a grin in her direction. "What about that night we spent in West Berlin? We were waiting for our contact in that run-down hotel room . . ."

"And the heat wasn't working," she finished with a weak laugh. "I'll never forget it."

"You kept banging on the pipes with your shoe."

"Don't knock it," she defended, warming to the game. "It always worked with the furnace at home."

Lee laughed. "Must have been the language barrier, I guess."

"Very funny," she said, wrinkling her nose. "Germany wasn't half as bad as that afternoon we spent in the woods up in Minnesota. How long **did** it take for that courier of yours to show?"

He cocked his head to one side. "Too damn long. By the time he finally put in an appearance, I'd almost frozen my. . . uh, **tail** off," he amended quickly at her raised eyebrow. Clearing his throat, he countered, "But that night in Rock Creek Park . . . you have to admit, **that** really takes the prize."

"That was your own fault, and you know it. I told you not to wear those silly Bermuda shorts you'd borrowed from Beaman."

"Hey -- as I recall, Jamie thought they were 'gnarly.'"

Amanda grinned. "**Jamie** was thirteen."

"It was the best I could do at the last minute. The stores were closed, and I needed something to make me look more like a tourist." The memory brought a smile. "Billy was already steamed enough, and I didn't want to blow the assignment."

"But, Lee, they were plaid," she reminded him with a quick laugh. "There was a day you wouldn't have been caught dead in a get-up like that."

He rolled his eyes. "I probably wasn't thinking straight at the time. Billy'd had me on the road for the better part of the month. We were still doing penance for that 'mystery marriage' nonsense, remember?"

Lee watched her cheeks grow hot. "Yeah," she whispered softly, "I remember."

He looked away. It was evident that she recalled the events in the park that night as clearly as he did. Alone for the first time in weeks, they'd barely been able to keep their hands off each other. Lee smiled faintly; after sleeping apart for the better part of a year, they'd anticipated a 'normal' life once they were publicly wed. To their chagrin, they found they'd only traded one set of challenges for another. Still, despite the sometimes daunting demands of his job and his instant family, the first six months of their 'official' marriage numbered among the happiest of Lee's life.

Amanda's wistful sigh tore him from the past. "It's always cold in Chicago," she croaked. "When the wind whips up off the lake, it cuts right through you."

He nodded, flicking a piece of fuzz from the blanket. "This past winter in D.C. wasn't much better."

Tilting her head, she traced the edge of her upper lip with her tongue. "Really?"

"Yeah. 'Unseasonably cold' -- I think that's how your old pal Dan described it."

"Dean," she automatically corrected, her eyes narrowing. "And since when do you watch channel 5?"

He shrugged sheepishly. "I kinda fell into the habit this past year."

"I used to catch him, too, sometimes. On satellite," she admitted in a voice so low he could barely hear her. Staring down at the floor, she gave her arms a few vigorous strokes. "What time is it?"

He ran a hand over his naked wrist. "They took my watch. I figure we've been down here maybe a couple of hours."

"And if Carter and Jamie *did* manage to get through and call the Agency?"

Lee frowned, wrinkling deep creases into his forehead as he considered what she was really asking. "I don't see how they could get here before mid-morning at the very earliest. Scar-face and his cronies are expecting the 'Project X' shipment before dawn."

She ran her tongue across her lips. "The authorities on the island . . . would they . . ."

He shook his head. "Local security is a joke. With the Seaforth system they've got protecting this estate, well . . ." His smile became infinitely sad as he caught Amanda's eye.

Crossing the room, she sank down beside him on the cot. "So I guess we may not make it out of this one after all."

He studied the cracked pattern in the brick on the far wall. "We've managed to get ourselves out of some pretty tight spots over the years."

"Good try, Stetson," she said with a sigh, her fingers toying with the blanket's frayed edge. "But I think we're way past lies at this point, don't you? Even compassionate ones." Resting her hand on his thigh, she added, "I'm sorry I dragged you into the middle of all this."

"I'm not," he told her, his hand covering hers. Despite the small goose bumps on her skin, her fingers felt wonderfully warm as they entwined with his. "If you hadn't called me, then Jamie would still be the one in this cell right now."

She nodded. "At least, with Carter, he had a fighting chance."

"So did you." Leaning forward, he searched her eyes. "You shouldn't have come back."

"We're partners, Lee."

He rubbed his thumb absently across her palm. "Scar-face and his cronies have been one step ahead of us from the get-go on this one. I . . . I didn't want this for you."

She bowed her head. "I knew what the odds were. I suppose it **was** foolish of me to think I could mount a rescue single-handed."

"Foolhardy, maybe," he said with a soft smile, "but never foolish, Amanda."

"Mother always said that stubborn streak of mine would get me into trouble one day." Glancing around the cell, she gave her head a rueful shake. "I guess she was right, huh?"

"Hey, your stubborn streak has saved my butt more times than I can count. I still remember that day you showed up out of nowhere, dressed in that silly den mother uniform, pretending your finger was a gun. That crazy cooking show woman . . . what was her name again?"

"Mrs. Welch," she supplied with a grin.

"Mrs. Welch," he repeated, shaking his head. "I thought she'd burst a blood vessel when she found out she'd been apprehended by a housewife from Arlington."

"We *have* rounded up our share of bad guys over the years."

He gave her hand a squeeze. "And then some."

"It just galls me to think those jerks upstairs are really going to get away with this," she replied somewhat breathily.

He let out a short sigh. "They'll trip themselves up sooner or later. At least Blue Leader knows the Triads are involved."

Amanda snorted. "Yeah, that makes me feel a whole lot better." Pushing off the cot, she folded her arms across her chest as she began to pace again.

Springing after her, Lee caught her by the shoulders. "Amanda," he ordered huskily, "Stop. You're making me dizzy."

"I can't," she returned, her voice cracking on the second word. She held his gaze for a few brief seconds before letting her eyes dart away. "If I stop moving, I'll have to think. I can't do that anymore, Lee. I'm too scared."

He pulled her to him. "I know," he murmured as his hands roamed over her back. "I'm scared, too."

Lee felt a chill sweep through him as she opened her arms and wrapped them tightly around his waist. "All this awful stuff keeps playing over and over in my head, like some kind of bizarre video," she gasped roughly. "I can't make it stop. What they might have done to Jamie . . . all those things Scar-face said about 'Project X' . . . and . . . and Phillip. Wondering what might have happened if *I* had been with you that day at the warehouse instead of . . ." She drew another shuddering breath. "I just want all the pictures to stop."

As her body shook in his arms, Lee pulled her closer. "Shhh," he comforted, the words he'd longed to say for so long spilling out. "It's okay, it's okay. I'm here."

Pulling away from his embrace, she raised her eyes to his. Moisture had pooled in their corners, but she clung stubbornly to her tears, refusing to let them fall. "Make it stop, Lee," she said, a deep tremor running through her voice. "Please . . . for just a little while."

"Amanda . . ." He followed the curve of her cheek with the tip of his finger. "Amanda," he whispered again, his voice gravelly and deep. He saw her eyes widen in wonder, but she didn't pull away. Mouthing her name one last time, he leaned in to kiss her.

Her lips were soft and wonderfully pliant beneath his, just as he remembered them. He ached to deepen their contact, to kiss her long and hard, but for some reason his mouth refused to open. Frozen, he stood there, his lips covering hers, unable to go forward but at the same time unable to pull back. It was an odd, off-balance feeling he hadn't experienced since he was a teenager. He could almost feel his palms begin to sweat. Then Amanda made that little sound, somewhere between a sigh and a moan, in the back of her throat. Desire surged; instinct took over, and his lips parted at last.

She met him with equal ardor, and, driven by a profound hunger, he made quick work of the buttons on her fatigue jacket, slipping his hands underneath the rough fabric. He felt her tremble slightly beneath his touch, and, pausing just long enough to slip the jacket off her shoulders, he lifted the shirt over her head.

She shivered as the cool air hit her skin. Outlined against the backdrop of the dark, barren cell, she seemed particularly vulnerable. He longed to mold himself to her, to hold her body next to his again with nothing between them. Removing his own jacket, he quickly stripped away the remnants of his torn t-shirt, tossing both garments aside. Closing the last distance between them, he enfolded her in his arms, the feel of her next to him setting his senses ablaze. Shutting his eyes, he allowed the purely physical sensations to wash over him, drowning out the words that still hadn't been spoken, the feelings that still needed to be resolved. This response, at least, he could comprehend; **this** he was sure of.

Bending, he lifted her into his arms and moved quickly to the narrow cot. As she returned his fevered kisses, he knew that she wanted this as much as he did. Whether it was a result of the impending danger or the potent pull of the past, he didn't care. There were no more yesterdays or tomorrows, only this moment, and the burning need between them. As he took possession again of what had once been wholly his, he felt it all fall away . . . the squalor of the damp cell . . . the unknown threat they faced . . . the cruel loneliness of the past year. There was always and only the velvet touch of her fingers on his skin, the feel of her lips against his, the surge of emotion in his heart as he lay beside her.

This was no gentle lovemaking. They moved to a cadence beyond his control, a needy, possessive rhythm measured by past pain and present heartache, and a future in which they would play no part. "Oh, Amanda," he whispered, his lips seeking hers once again. As he surrendered at last to the swirling vortex of pleasure and need and regret, a new joy began to grow inside him, eclipsing everything else.

It was only as he held her in the pale afterglow of their spent passion that he realized that, even in their moment of deepest intimacy, she hadn't once called out his name.

~ XXXIV ~

"Amanda." Lee's voice washed over her. "We should get dressed."

She stirred against his side, but even that small effort was too much. The awful uncertainty of the past few weeks had been momentarily banished by the assurance of her husband's loving touch. Warm at last, she didn't want to move.

"Amanda."

She silenced him with a finger to his lips. The steady rhythm of his heart beat reassuringly against her ear; it was all she needed to listen to. Making love with Lee again had shaken her to the core. When his lips had met hers, it was as if there had been no more separation, no more loneliness, just a unity of mind and heart and body she'd forgotten existed. The power of her response had rendered her speechless.

"Amanda." She let out a small sigh; Lee was determined to talk, it seemed. "I think I heard them upstairs."

Alarmed, she raised her head. "So soon?"

"I don't know. But I don't think it's a good idea for Scar-face or his buddies to find us like this, do you?"

"No," she answered in a low voice. She certainly didn't want to give Scar-face any ideas; the man's leers already made her flesh crawl. Reluctantly, she began the process of extricating herself from Lee's embrace.

Lee took a deep breath as he let her go. "You know, I've been lying here thinking about some things."

"Me, too. Kind of hard not to, I guess." Her words were unhurried, lazy, a delicious languorousness governing her tone. The soldiers would either come or they wouldn't, there wasn't anything they could do about it. This moment was just for the two of them.

"Yeah." Lee scrubbed the fatigue from his eyes with the tips of his long fingers. "I figure when they come down here we have two choices -- go quietly like sheep or put up a fight. Personally, I prefer the second option."

The worn blanket slipped from Amanda's shoulders as she stiffened. Struck by the cool air, her skin turned to gooseflesh. Lee's demeanor was more suited to an Agency briefing room than the bed still warm from their lovemaking.

"Whatever's going on here," he continued as he set about working the kinks out of his neck, "it can't be good."

She forced a laugh. "I'd say *that's* the understatement of the year."

He sat up, shaking his head from side to side. "We've got to try to do something."

"Do what, Lee?" Amanda challenged. She had no right to be annoyed, yet she couldn't seem to stem the flow of angry feelings.

Abandoning the cot, Lee grabbed the clothes he'd discarded so willingly only a short while ago. "I don't know . . . something. I have no intention of becoming a test case for some new biological weapon."

"I'm not exactly thrilled about that idea, either." Drawn by the subtle interplay of muscles across his back, her eyes drifted lower. Suddenly conscious of her own nakedness, she wrapped the blanket tightly around herself and looked away.

Scarecrow droned on in full agent mode. "There's got to be some way to stop them."

"I'd like to know how." Her voice was thick with sarcasm, but she didn't care. Stumbling across the room, she snatched her scattered clothes from the unforgiving floor. "We're unarmed and outnumbered."

The elastic waistband on his boxers made a snapping sound as he pulled them on. "I'll just have to get the jump on them," he informed her.

She twisted her t-shirt in her hands. "They'll take you down without batting an eye."

"Maybe," he said, shoving a leg forcefully into his pants. "But while they're busy with me, you can make a run for it."

"Lee . . ."

"Amanda, we've got to find a way to let the Agency know about Project X."

Her eyebrows shot up. "Project X?"

"Yes. God only knows what those assholes plan to do with it." He quickly buttoned his pants. "More than our lives may be at stake here."

The cell floor felt grainy and cold beneath her bare feet. Turning her back, she slipped on her panties and t-shirt. "That may well be, but this so-called plan of yours has more holes than a sieve." Wrapping herself modestly in the blanket again, she faced him. "Suppose by some stretch of the imagination I *did* manage to get out of this cell -- getting off the estate is another matter entirely. I have no idea where their sentries are placed, not to mention the alarm. I'm sure it's been reset, and I don't see how . . ."

"Amanda." Her name on his lips stanchd her ready flow of words. "I want you out of here. Even if it means . . ." Shoving his belt through the small loops, Lee dragged the cloth end through the metal closure, thumb and forefinger snapping the buckle shut. "I'd rather not make this too easy for them, that's all."

Pushing into his shoes, he yanked the laces tight. As Amanda watched him tie them in that backward, left-handed way she used to tease him about, she let out a sigh. "Do not go gentle into that good night, huh?"

Lee shrugged. "Somethin' like that."

"Exactly like that, I think." Amanda smiled sadly. His eyes were filled with an aching sorrow that defied description. Lee had already accepted their fate; it was Scarecrow who needed the illusion of action.

She gripped her hands tightly. "Funny, the things you remember sometimes," she murmured to herself. "Dylan Thomas was one of my favorite poets in college. My sorority used to sponsor readings in the campus coffee house every Thursday night. So many years ago, and now it all seems like yesterday . . ." Raising her eyes, she looked up into Lee's gaze. He was standing right in front of her, and she hadn't even realized it.

"Here," he croaked, offering up her fatigues.

She reached for the clothes, letting the blanket fall. A chill swept through her, but it wasn't from the cold. Standing bare-chested before her, his face shadowed by a two-day growth of beard, her husband had never looked more rugged, more masculine, more . . . alive. She caught a sudden flash of something behind Lee's eyes; he was affected, too. Tilting her head, she offered up her lips, but his mouth kissed her forehead instead.

"You'd better finish dressing."

Stung, Amanda turned away. Whatever Lee was feeling, he couldn't -- or wouldn't -- share it with her. Not even in what could be their last private moments on this earth. Damn him anyway, she thought with angry resentment; damn that controlled Stetson reserve. Damn everything to hell! If *he* wouldn't say it, then *she* would.

His look stopped her. "Did you hear that?"

She turned an ear to the door. He was right; the firm tread of fast-approaching footsteps resounded on the stairs. Their timing remained impeccable to the end.

Taking up his position, Scarecrow motioned her to the other side of the door. Amanda threw on her clothes, quickly doing up the buttons on her fatigue jacket. Outside the cell, the sounds grew louder; something metallic clinked in the lock. Calling up her last bit of courage, she squared her shoulders.

Lee looked at her then, his fierce expression softening for just a moment. It was more than her overwrought emotions could bear. As the door opened, she gulped down a strangled cry and turned her head away.

The scuffle ended almost before it began. Halfway through the door, she mumbled a surprised, "Oh, my gosh!" as Lee cried out, "Francine!" Momentarily frozen, they all gaped at each other.

The blonde agent regained her equilibrium first. Ushering Amanda back into the cell, she called out quickly, "The package is secure. Finish your sweep while I brief the Chief."

Francine closed the door, her big blue eyes growing even larger as she took a mental situation report. Amanda was suddenly acutely conscious of Lee's missing shirt, her own slightly disheveled appearance and the conspicuously rumpled bed behind them.

Lee wiped his hands on his pants. "Francine . . . this, uh, is, um . . ."

Francine cut him off. "Don't. I've bought you a few minutes, but if you don't want this all over the Agency by nightfall, I'd highly suggest you finish dressing."

Though Francine's tone remained professional, her pale complexion betrayed her. Amanda shot a glance at Lee, but he was already reaching for his jacket. "You're certainly a sight for sore eyes," he teased in a half-hearted attempt to break the tension. "How on earth did you . . ."

Francine's eyes swept over Amanda's bare feet and the remains of Lee's torn t-shirt before coming to rest on nothing in particular. "You can thank Dr. Smyth for the rescue party. When Carter didn't report for work the other day . . ."

"Oh, my gosh! Carter! Jamie! They . . ."

"Are both fine, Amanda. Air Rescue picked them up a few hours ago." Francine's eyes softened as she added, "A little water-logged, but none the worse for wear."

"They were shot down?" Lee's words sounded heavy with worry.

"Someone blew their Cessna out of the sky, but they both managed to bail in time." Francine looked at Lee. "I guess Carter wasn't quite as 'green' as we all thought."

He rolled his eyes. "Not by half. She got word through, then?"

Francine shook her head. "As I was about to tell you, when Carter called in sick for work, I decided to go roust her out of her apartment. I didn't find her, of course, but I *did* discover a coded phone number that turned out to be a contact for . . ."

"Blue Leader," Lee finished. "Yes, we know."

"When Smyth found out about *that* connection, he went ballistic and ordered full tactical support." One finger toying idly with the narrow lapel of her smartly tailored jumpsuit, she stared at Amanda. "From the looks of things here, I'd say it was a good thing Smyth decided to act."

Furrowing his brow, Lee managed to tuck in the rest of his shirttail before asking, "The Triads? Were you . . ."

"The situation's been contained. Surprisingly, they didn't put up too much of a fight, except for a nasty looking little man with a scar on his cheek. He's in custody now, and not talking, but I'm sure he . . ."

Lee's grim smile cut her off. "He'll talk when I'm through with him. I have a score or two to settle with that guy."

Amanda's head began to throb to the beat of their verbal volleyball, and she squeezed her eyes shut. "How did you find us?" she asked. "This place is pretty well hidden."

"The tracking bracelet we issued you. We picked up the signal."

Amanda's hand immediately went to the small, deceptively delicate bracelet dangling from her wrist. In the chaos of the past few days, she'd forgotten all about it.

She heard Lee's laugh. "Leatherneck will be thrilled to hear that his newest trinket actually works. Lucky for us you're still wearing it, Amanda."

"Yes," Francine remarked. "This must be your lucky day."

Amanda opened her eyes into Francine's cool glare. It was the same disdainful look she'd bestowed that first morning in the bullpen. Amanda felt once again, as her mother used to say, 'a day late and more than a dollar short.'

"Well, I, for one, am damned glad to get out of here," Lee responded a little too enthusiastically as Amanda turned away. He moved to the door, extending his arm with a flourish. "Shall we, ladies?"

"Yes." Francine's toe tapped the hard floor. "I think that would be an excellent idea."

"Amanda?"

She affected a casual smile. "You two go ahead. I need a minute."

Lee frowned. "I don't want to . . ."

"I'm perfectly all right," she asserted, showing him her back. "Don't shirk your official business on my account."

The door made a grating sound as Lee yanked it open. "Fine, then. I guess you know the way out." Pausing for a beat, he demanded harshly, "Are you coming, Francine?"

She seemed to hesitate, and Amanda silently willed her to leave. "The Com Center's been set up in the study, Amanda," Francine said at last. "When you're ready."

The blonde agent's words sounded almost kind. Shame flushed Amanda's cheeks; the woman had just saved their lives, and she hadn't even offered a word of thanks. "Francine," she began, turning slowly. "I meant to say . . ."

The room was empty. Amanda could hear a blurred murmur from the stairs, then it, too, died away. They must have reached the kitchen. In her mind, she pictured the snapshot -- Lee's hand resting firmly on Francine's back as they stepped into the bright, cheery room.

Exhaustion swept through her, and, stumbling to the cot, she sank down. Too tired to think, she let her hand trail over the mattress. The weight of their bodies had left a mark, two hollows that seemed to mock her. Gritting her teeth, she briskly smoothed them away. She needed no visible memories . . . the ones she carried in her heart weighed heavily enough. The arousing scratch of his beard on her body as he kissed her. The tiny beads of sweat that clung tenaciously to his shoulder. The pleasurable friction of skin on skin. For her, their lovemaking had been filled with passionate yearning; for him, it had been nothing more than a necessary physical release.

Though Lee hadn't actually said it, in retrospect, his actions made it all perfectly clear. His uncomfortable reticence as their passion cooled . . . the sudden attention to business . . . the guilty look as Francine walked through the door. While Amanda had been well aware of Francine's feelings, she hadn't realized how strongly her husband returned them. Was Lee even now trying to explain his lapse to his lover? She could almost hear the words. 'Just two lonely people looking for a little . . .' Well, she supposed he could fill in the appropriate blank.

Still, if she'd lost Lee's love to Francine, she only had herself to blame. She was the one who had walked away from their marriage. Said all those terrible things . . . left him alone for the better part of a year. All that righteous anger. . .

She sighed bitterly. Oh, yes, she'd been angry, all right -- but at herself, not Lee. For not being there to back him up that day at the warehouse . . . for being alive when Phillip was dead . . . for not telling him how weary she'd become of Agency life . . .

For always withholding the part of herself he'd tried so desperately to reach.

That was the part of her that had stubbornly refused his help . . . that had lashed out with hateful recrimination . . . driven her husband from their bed. She'd prided herself on being a private person, self-reliant, self-contained. Amanda West, who had been her mother's rock during her father's illness; Amanda King, who had held her head up high when her husband all but deserted her; Amanda Stetson, who had kept her tears at bay at her own son's gravesite.

Yes, she was a private person. Private . . . and alone.

Holding her stomach, she began to rock back and forth. The first sob started somewhere deep in her chest, a strange, alien sound that seemed to have a life of its own. She couldn't stop it, couldn't hold it in; she simply didn't have the strength anymore. She let herself fall, hugging her knees to her chest as she curled into a ball. There, on the bed she'd shared with Lee, Amanda finally let grief claim her.

She cried.

Cried for the lives that had once been filled with laughter . . . for the family she'd unwittingly torn apart . . . for the little boy named Phillip whose joyful spirit was gone forever.

Most of all, she cried for the two souls who, in the face of unspeakable loss, had somehow become lost themselves.

~ XXXV ~

"The tests on Project X should be concluded sometime next week," Lee reported, "but the preliminary results demonstrate an unusually hardy viral agent with a casualty potential we haven't seen since the Russian bacteria PD-2." Scarecrow acknowledged the young agent with a nod. "Yes?"

"What about the lab that created it?"

"North Shore Labs has been shut down pending the outcome of the investigation. The CPO, Dan Roman, will most likely be indicted for espionage, along with two other silent partners in Iguana Associates."

"Senator Topping?"

Lee's eyes narrowed. "It looks as if he'll be cleared of criminal charges. Though what the long-term consequences this investigation will have for his political career remains to be seen. Topping has called a press conference for this later this afternoon. Desmond and Fielder will cover it." As silence settled over the conference room, Lee concluded, "If there are no more questions, that's it, people. Don't forget, weekly status updates are due by day's end."

As the agents filed out, Lee rubbed his bleary eyes. The days since his return from the island of San Simeon had been brutal. Though Dotty, Lisa and Joey had flown in for the joyful reunion with Jamie, Lee had seen little of them. Between questioning the captured Triad soldiers and formal debriefings with both Dr. Smyth and Blue Leader, Lee had barely made it home each night. Not that it would have mattered anyway; Amanda had removed herself to the Potomac Plaza with the rest of her family. In his one brief visit to the hotel, she hadn't even been there. Dotty had reluctantly informed him that she was helping Bryce Topping with the funeral arrangements for his son.

"Scarecrow."

Collecting himself, he looked up into Angela Carter's dark brown eyes. "I see your final debriefing's been concluded," he told the younger agent.

"Yes. I wanted to say goodbye. And thank you."

Lee shook his head. "I'm the one who should be thanking you. Your quick thinking saved Jamie's life."

Carter shrugged off the praise. "My father was a pilot. The first thing he taught me was to never to take off without a parachute. Or two."

"Good advice, it seems," Lee declared with a ready laugh.

"Well, that day, anyway." Carter's expression softened. "Thank you for crediting me with the bust. After everything that happened, I really didn't expect. . ."

"That I'd stop behaving like the arrogant ass you've been working for these past six months?" Lee smiled at her somewhat embarrassed grin. "No, Carter, it was only fair. You were the agent of record, not me. Dr. Smyth was wrong to insinuate otherwise."

A voice chimed in from the doorway. "Our fearless leader was wrong? No, I don't believe it."

They both laughed as Francine rolled her eyes dramatically. "I almost felt sorry for him at yesterday's debriefing," Carter empathized. "Blue Leader's chief was pretty tough on him."

Francine pulled her lips into an attractive pout. "Good. Maybe he'll retire."

Lee sighed. "I wouldn't count on it. Blue Leader may be on his case at the moment, but Smyth hasn't lasted this long without learning how to land on his feet."

Francine shared a grin. "And here I was about to apply for his job."

"I'm not sure I disagree with him," Lee went on. "At least where Blue Leader is concerned. Their black op cost the lives of more than one good man."

"And kept a dangerous biological weapon from killing countless others," Carter said, frowning. "Sometimes sacrifices are a necessary part of our job, Scarecrow."

Lee's jaw tightened. "Tell that to Tom Franklin's widow. We take enough risks, Agent Carter, without having to watch our backs in the office, too."

Francine cleared her throat. "Where are you off to now, Angela?"

"Chicago. I've been assigned to Chief Fleetwood's office to assist with the NSL investigation. In fact, I'm on the four o'clock flight." She looked at Lee. "I was hoping to talk to Amanda . . ."

"I'm afraid you're too late. Amanda, Jamie and the rest of his family headed home early this morning."

He must have spoken more harshly than he intended; Carter immediately slipped back into her professional mode. "I'll catch up with her in Chicago, then," she stated, her voice reassuringly neutral. "I expect to be spending a good bit of time with Jamie over the next few months."

It didn't look as if Francine was going to let him off that easily, though. Seeing her mentally wrestling with a response, Lee swiftly extended his hand. "Good luck, Carter. I'm sure you'll have the Midwest Division humming in no time."

Carter grinned. "It was a hoot for me, too, Scarecrow. You can tell your next assistant I left my stash of antacids in the bottom drawer of my desk."

Lee rolled his eyes. "I'll miss you, too, Carter."

As his former assistant took her leave, he felt Francine's cool blue eyes hone in on him. Turning away, he immediately opened the flash data report and pretended to study the page.

"Sharpening our field skills, are we?"

Damn, the woman could be downright annoying sometimes. He coughed slightly. "I don't have time to play at the moment, Francine. I'm busy."

"Then perhaps you shouldn't read upside down," she suggested, turning the report around. "It's much more efficient this way."

"I'll try to remember that." Before she could supply a witty comeback of her own, he gathered his papers and threaded his way through the bullpen to his office. He'd seen the look Francine had exchanged with Carter at the mention of Amanda's name, and he had no desire to resurrect *that* topic again.

Desmond, unfortunately, seemed to have other ideas. "There's no sanctuary anywhere," he griped as she closed his office door behind her. "And look at this desk. Did you do any work at all while I was away, Francine?"

His obvious attempt to derail her had no effect. He could see that look of single-minded determination in her eyes that always spelled trouble. "She left?"

Avoiding her glare, Lee added the armload of files to the general clutter and sank down into his chair. "Was there some part of 'heading home' you *didn't* understand?"

"Oh, I don't know," she lobbed back, her tone as prickly as his. "Maybe it was the part where you just let her leave."

He swiveled his chair toward the wall. "Yeah, well, there didn't seem to be much choice in the matter."

"Did you offer her one?"

The large leather chair creaked beneath his weight as he rocked back and forth. He made a mental note to call maintenance about the damnable squeak.

"Did you offer her one, Lee?" Francine repeated.

Her voice sounded too close. Turning, he saw that she'd perched on the edge of his desk in the same sassy way Amanda used to. Francine obviously had no intention of letting him slip through her fingers again today. He knew she'd been fairly bursting to have this conversation ever since they'd returned from San Simeon.

He cloaked his words in what he hoped was an air of finality. "Look, Francine, whatever you think you walked in on back on the island, you're wrong. Nothing's changed. Amanda's as stubborn as ever."

She groaned. "Scarecrow, for a man who's spent twenty-five odd years practicing the art of espionage, you can be incredibly obtuse sometimes. Not to mention a complete idiot."

Lee sprang from his chair. "What the hell do you know about it?"

"I know that you still love your wife."

"Ex-wife," he said harshly. "Amanda's a free agent. Or she will be, as soon as those damned papers I signed are filed."

Francine snorted. "Yeah. About as free as you are."

"I can't believe you," he grumbled, starting to pace. "One stupid little lapse, and suddenly you're Amanda's biggest advocate."

"Stop kidding yourself. We both know it was more than that."

Pausing, Lee sucked in a breath. He knew what it cost her to say that; he could hear the pain underneath her words.

"Look," Francine continued, her voice subdued. "I'm no fan of Amanda's -- I think I've made that pretty clear. But I've got eyes in my head, and I know what I saw. I have ears, too. I was at Carter's debriefing, remember? I heard what went on between you two down on that island."

"Then maybe you should have paid more attention at **my** debriefing. I distinctly told you . . ."

"Yes. And now **I'm** telling **you**. Do I think the woman treated you unfairly? Yes. Do I think she deserves you? Definitely not. Do I think she's behaved like a selfish, self-centered . . ."

"I get the point, Francine." He resumed his pacing. Like a fidgety little boy, he couldn't seem to stay still.

"No, you don't," she shot back, shadowing his steps. "I may think all of that and more about her, but in the end, what *I* think doesn't matter one whit. It's what *you* think that counts -- you and Amanda."

His jaw clenched. "Amanda's made her feelings abundantly clear."

"Yes, she has. The question is -- what do you intend to do about it?"

Lee rubbed his temples. His head was throbbing, and Francine's nonsense wasn't helping matters. "I've got a lot of work to catch up on," he said, dismissing her as he marched back to his desk.

"Lee . . ."

"Tell you what -- you can harangue me all you want over dinner tonight." He gave her his best imitation of a smile. "Say eight o'clock at Emelio's?"

"No."

He dropped down into his chair again. "Then you pick the restaurant. I really don't care."

Straightening her back, Francine drew herself up to her full height. "I won't have dinner with you, Lee. Tonight or any other night."

"Francine . . ."

"I'm sorry, but I'm nobody's consolation prize -- not even yours."

He rubbed his tired eyes. "I never thought you were."

"Yes, but don't you see? In some ways, that's exactly what our friendship's become. And when Amanda came back, and I saw the two of you together, well . . . oh, I don't know, I guess all that anger I felt when Jonathan left started to take hold all over again." Francine let out a sigh. "So much so that I almost let myself make the second biggest mistake of my life the other day in this office. If you hadn't had the good sense to say no . . ."

He started to go to her, but she waved him back into the chair. "Let me finish. You see, Amanda did the same thing to you that Jonathan did to me -- she left. It

didn't matter that the circumstances were entirely different; the end result was all I could see. But she's not Jonathan. I realized that when I saw the two of you together in that cell."

Lee contemplated the design of the trim silver pen lying atop the stack of papers. "We thought we were about to die."

"That's a convenient excuse, and you know it." Leaning over the desk, Francine forced him to meet her eye. "The simple truth is that you love Amanda. And she loves you. Sometimes I think it's obvious to everyone except the two of you. If you don't want to do anything about it, I guess that's your choice. But I won't help you fill your empty evenings anymore." Her voice cracked. "I can't."

Reaching for his coffee mug, he took a long drink. Life was so unfair sometimes. He'd never intended to hurt her, but that's exactly what he'd done. "You're a good friend, Francine. Better than I deserve."

"Go to her," she urged. "Tell her how you feel before it really *is* too late."

He shook his head. "Now I'm the one who can't."

"I'm truly sorry about that, Lee." Francine let out a long breath as she walked to the door. Pausing, she looked back over her shoulder. "You know, a little pride can be a very healthy thing. But too much . . . well, too much can be downright lethal. Think about it."

~ XXXVI ~

"United Airlines flight 851, with nonstop service to Chicago, O'Hare, will begin boarding momentarily," the disembodied voice informed pleasantly. "Please have your boarding passes ready when I call your rows."

"It's about time," Dotty grumbled. "How many 'mechanical difficulties' can one plane have?"

Looking over at baby Joey, Amanda sighed. "I don't know, but I don't think our poor little guy could stomach one more."

Jamie lifted his fussy son from his wife's lap. "It's that tooth he's been working on," he said, holding the baby playfully in the air to distract him. "Isn't it, Joey?"

The baby let out a deep belly laugh, a thin line of drool escaping his mouth to land on Jamie's cheek. "Maybe he's letting his daddy know that he should stick closer to home from now on," Amanda teased.

Grinning, Jamie wiped his face. "It looks like he'll get his wish. With North Shore going under, I'm going to have a lot of time on my hands."

"You know, if you guys need a little something to tide you over until . . . well, I'd be happy to . . ." Amanda saw Jamie exchange a pointed look with his wife. "What did I say?"

"Nothing, Mom. Lisa and I really appreciate it, but we'll be just fine. Besides," Jamie added with a quick laugh, "Lee already offered."

Amanda shifted in her seat. "I didn't realize . . ."

"Well, maybe you would have, Amanda," Dotty informed her in a prickly tone, "if you hadn't been spending every waking minute these past few days with a certain Senator."

Squirming under her mother's gaze, Amanda made a show of looking through her purse. Dotty had been on her case since the moment her plane had touched down in D.C. She knew how her mother felt about Lee, but every pointed comment seemed like one more knife in her chest. Before her mother could speak again, Amanda jumped up. "I need some chewing gum for the flight. I'll be right back."

"I've got some right . . . honestly," she heard Dotty grouse as she kept on walking. "I could throttle that girl."

"Give her some space, Grandma. You can't force something she's not ready for."

Picking up her pace, Amanda went in search of the small concession they'd passed earlier. 'Not ready,' Jamie said. If only things were that simple. A few short weeks ago, she'd known exactly what she wanted. Now, she seemed less sure . . . now, when it was too late. Why couldn't everyone see what, to her, was so painfully obvious? Lee had moved on. Even the blue-backed legal papers rustling in her purse seemed to know it.

Detouring to the large observation window, she looked out at the planes lining up to taxi. So many passengers, their journeys either beginning or ending. Soon she would be one of them. In a few short hours she would be back in Chicago again, back . . . home. The flight promised to be a smooth one; a great expanse of

blue greeted her as she turned her gaze heavenward, stretching as far as the eye could see. 'Clear as a bell,' her mother used to say to her when she was a child. 'That sky is clear as a bell, Amanda.'

Then why did she feel so jittery?

Perhaps it was leftover emotion from the funeral yesterday. She hadn't been able to take her eyes off Bryce Topping as he stood beside his family's crypt. His tall figure looked as if a good wind would shatter it into a million pieces. All the emotions flashing across his face Amanda knew with painful intimacy. All the telltale little signs . . . the tight smile at the murmured condolences . . . the affected nod of the head . . . the silent screaming when people said it would get better in time. They meant well; they just didn't understand. Things didn't get better -- only different. She saw that so clearly now. Every day that she lived, Amanda would be discovering new ways to miss her son. And new ways to deal with her sorrow.

Her heart went out to Bryce. He was such a good man, kind, compassionate and, as her mother would say, 'easy on the eyes.' Later this afternoon, he would announce his resignation from the Senate. He wanted something different, he'd told her -- a way to make up for the grief Ben had caused so many others. Bryce was beginning to care for her; he'd asked her to help him start his new Youth Foundation. Would getting involved with him really make a difference in her life? Or would it just be another temporary band-aid on a wounded heart that would never heal?

"Mom." She felt the comforting pressure of Jamie's arm around her shoulder. "They've started boarding our flight."

She nodded. "Thanks for deflecting your Grandmother's concern back there. She means well, but . . ."

"Her methods leave a little something to be desired. Yeah, I know." Falling silent, Jamie turned his eyes to the window.

Amanda smiled at her son's reticence. Sometimes she could still see the sensitive little boy beneath the strong man he'd become. "I hear a 'but' coming," she prompted gently.

Jamie's eyebrows shot up in a perfect imitation of his grandmother. "I can't say that I disagree with her, Mom. I know Grandma thinks it's her mission in life to 'tell it like it is,' but I watched you and Lee together down on San Simeon. I know you still love him . . . you risked your life to save his."

"He would have done the same thing for me."

Jamie smiled. "Exactly my point. You both care, no matter how hard you try to disguise it. And I can't help thinking how sad it would make Phillip to know that he ended up coming between you guys."

"Is that what happened?" Amanda rubbed her aching head. "I don't even know anymore."

Jamie hugged her closer. "You know, Lee wasn't any happier than you were when Phillip announced he was going into the 'family business.' In fact, the week before he started formal operative training, Lee took Phillip out to dinner."

"I remember." She'd wanted Lee to blackball Phillip's application, and they'd had a huge row about it.

"It was supposed to be a 'guy's night out' sort of thing. But that was only a cover. Lee just wanted to talk to Phillip one last time. Get him to change his mind. Phillip told me Lee tried everything he could think of, but . . . well, you know how Phillip could be once he got an idea into his head."

Amanda nodded. "He was so stubborn."

"Yeah."

Pulling back from Jamie's embrace, Amanda gazed thoughtfully at her son. "Lee never said a word to me about that."

Jamie shrugged. "Maybe he was embarrassed about trying to influence Phillip. After all, you guys raised us to make our own decisions. To stand up for what we believe in."

"Yes," she whispered throatily, "we did."

"You also taught us to go after what we want." His eyes fixed on his mother, he gave her a gentle nudge. "And not to run away when the going gets tough."

"Jamie . . ." She drew a ragged breath. How could she tell her son that she was too much of a coward to practice what she'd always preached? "So many things have happened," she began in a halting voice. "Events . . . people . . . and they . . . well, they complicate things. It's too late to go back."

"You're absolutely right. But it's not too late to go forward. Where there's love, there's hope." Jamie smiled. "A very wise woman told me so."

Through her gathering tears, Amanda shook her head. She wasn't wise at all; her actions bore witness to that. "There's the final boarding call for our flight," she whispered as the intercom blared once again. "Lisa will skin me alive if you miss it."

"Mom . . ."

She propelled him forward. "Come on, Sweetheart. It's clear as a bell outside. A perfect day to fly."

~XXXVII~

Shifting his bag to his right shoulder, Lee pushed his way through the main terminal to the shuttle. He was late. If he didn't know better, he'd swear there was some sort of conspiracy at work. First the cab had been delayed, then the traffic had been a nightmare. And the line at the ticket counter hadn't been a line at all -- it was more like a swarming hive of tourists. It would have been so much more convenient to fly out of National, but Angela Carter was booked on the afternoon flight to Chicago. Besides, once the decision was made, he'd needed to act on it. Four more hours afforded him too much time to change his mind.

With relief, he saw the shuttle for the United Airlines terminal had arrived. Focused on his objective, at first he didn't hear the tentative voice calling his name. He turned when the sound finally registered, only to be confronted by a mass of elbows thrusting toward a common goal. Thinking his mind was playing tricks on him, he joined them.

"Lee!"

He paused again. The throng flowed past him, parting like a wave, until he heard the shuttle doors close. "Amanda," he called, finally free to make his way toward her. "I thought you were on your way to Chicago."

She moved to meet him. "Our original flight was canceled -- some kind of problem with the hydraulics."

"Oh."

She inclined her head toward his carry-on. "Off on more official business?"

"Ah, no. . . not really." The bag was beginning to press heavily into his shoulder, and he let it drop to the ground. "I was just, ah . . . where's the rest of the family?"

"Halfway home by now, I imagine," she told him with a faint smile.

"What, you couldn't all get on the same flight?" he asked, a chill hovering around the edges of his words.

"No. I, uh . . . no."

Her face scrunched up into a frown, and he mentally kicked himself; his question had sounded more like an accusation. "That didn't come out right," he apologized in a vain attempt to salvage the unexpected encounter. "I didn't mean to . . . interrogate you in the middle of the airport."

"And I didn't mean to sound evasive." She pinched the zipper on her black leather purse tightly between her thumb and forefinger. "What I meant to say, was . . ."

Someone pushed her from behind, jostling her in his direction. Steadying her with his hand, he looked around, surprised that another crowd had gathered. "Maybe we should get out of the way of this traffic."

As Amanda nodded, Lee shouldered his bag again. Fitting his free hand into the small of her back, he guided her toward an empty corner. He couldn't help but notice that she kept glancing around, almost as if she was waiting for something . . . or someone. He let his bag fall to the ground with a thud.

She looked up at him. "You didn't say where you were headed, Lee."

He tried to speak, but under the careful scrutiny of those solemn brown eyes, it seemed he'd forgotten how. Damn . . . he was feeling just like a schoolboy again. He'd rehearsed what he wanted to say to her over and over again -- behind the closed doors of his office when Francine had finally left him in peace, in his bedroom as he'd tossed some clothes into his bag, and then once more on the seemingly endless cab ride to the airport. But, here, in person . . . well, he just hadn't anticipated having to face her quite so soon. Maybe he should have followed his first instinct and picked up the telephone. These things had always come easier to him that way.

Amanda seemed to be growing tired of his ridiculous inability to speak. Breaking their gaze, she began rooting around in her purse.

"I was on my way to Chicago," he blurted out.

Pausing, she stared up at him once more. "For the Agency?"

Lee could read her apprehension in the rigid tilt of her head. Well, he'd started this, there was nothing to do now but finish it. "I was on my way to Chicago to see you," he said, his voice surprisingly level despite his churning emotions. "I thought maybe . . . well, I thought maybe we had some unfinished business between us."

She nodded. "That's why I didn't get on the plane. I almost did, but then I realized . . . well, I realized I couldn't leave without seeing you one more time, without giving you this." With a shaking hand, she removed an envelope from her purse. "Here."

Lee ran his finger over the familiar embossed lettering in the upper left-hand corner. "The divorce papers? You've already had time to file . . ." The words choked him.

"Open them, Lee." Amanda's voice seemed to catch in her throat as well. "Please."

Sliding his thumb under the folds, he numbly looked inside. "What the . . ." As he stared at the torn remains of what had once been legal documents, he heard her heartfelt sigh. "I guess I thought we had some unfinished business, too. Maybe we could . . . well, go somewhere and . . . talk . . . about it."

Relief flooded through him as he slowly raised his eyes to hers. "Let's go home."

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Lee closed the door to the house on Maplewood Drive. "Do you, uh, want something to eat? I'm sure I can find a thing or two in the fridge that isn't . . ."

"Green?" She smiled. "No, thanks. I had a big breakfast, so I'm really not all that hungry."

He followed her into the den and sat down beside her on the couch. The uneasy silence that had fallen over them on the cab ride home still lingered, and he didn't know how to dispel it. He knew the words he wanted to say by heart; he just didn't know how to begin.

Amanda seemed to be suffering from the same affliction. "My famous gift of gab appears to have failed me," she told him with a wry smile.

"Amanda King? Speechless?" he teased. "I don't believe it."

Her quick laugh broke the tension, but only for a moment. "It's been a, uh, pretty incredible couple of weeks," she began, embarrassment reddening her cheeks. "You know, I never even said thank you."

"For what, Amanda?"

"For finding Jamie. For going back into the field again." A worried frown crossed her face as she added quietly, "I know what that cost you."

He shrugged off her concern. "I'm just happy that things turned out the way they did. Seeing Jamie back with Lisa and Joey . . . well, that's all the thanks I need. Besides," he grinned, "it wasn't so bad out there in the field again, partner. In a lot of ways, it was just like old times."

"Old times . . ." Folding her hands in her lap, Amanda squeezed her eyes shut. "I'm sorry, Lee," she said at last. "So sorry . . . for what I did . . . what I said . . . for everything. It's pretty inadequate, I know, but I don't know what else to say."

Resting his arm on the back of the sofa, he toyed with the fringe on the blue and white throw blanket. "I'm sorry, too."

She ran her tongue lightly over her upper lip. "I was the one who left, not you."

"I could have tried to stop you, come after you. I didn't." He twisted a long yarn around his finger. "I've made more than my share of stupid decisions this past year . . . decisions I'm not . . . proud of."

She drew a long, slow breath. "We all make stupid decisions, Lee. God knows I have."

"I was lonely after you . . . well, after you left. I thought I could fill that loneliness with . . ." He exhaled loudly, his fingers massaging his forehead. "I've made a pretty big mess of things."

"With Francine?" she asked in a low voice.

Feeling her soft hand brush his arm, he jerked his head up. "You knew?"

Amanda sighed. "She's made her feelings pretty obvious."

Lee shifted uneasily beside her. "We're friends, Amanda. This past year I couldn't have asked for a better one."

"Lee, you don't have to . . ."

"Yes, I do," he told her, shaking off the comfort of her touch. "It's important to me that you . . . understand."

Nodding, she responded with a quiet, "Okay."

She was sitting right beside him, yet her voice sounded so far away. Lee looked down, searching for the right words in the familiar tweed of their old sofa. "You remember how messed up Francine was after Jonathan's business went belly up and he walked out on her again?" he began slowly. "I guess I . . . well, I wasn't in much better shape myself after you left. I needed a . . . a friend, so Francine and I started seeing each other pretty regularly. We didn't plan it, it just kind of . . . happened, I guess. We both had a lot of empty hours to fill, and work . . . well, work only went so far. One night, after dinner, we ended up back at her apartment. I know it's not an excuse, but I'd had more than one scotch too many, and . . ."

Her sharp intake of breath cut him off. "Maybe the past is best left where it belongs."

"I never slept with her. I can at least promise you that much . . . but . . ."

Breathing deeply, he avoided her eyes. He could tell her, but not if he had to face the same brown eyes he'd looked into as he'd spoken his wedding vows. "I'm ashamed to say I probably would have if Francine hadn't had the good sense to call a halt to it."

Amanda took a long breath, then slowly let it out. "I'm in no position to judge you, Lee," she told him at length. "You or Francine, for that matter. I guess we all do the things we need to do to . . . to survive."

Lee looked at her curiously. Her relief was plainly evident, yet there was still an aura of unhappiness about her. He saw it in her cryptic smile, heard it in her voice. Her undemanding response carried unconditional absolution; perhaps she was seeking the same from him. Part of him longed to just leave it at that and move on, but there were too many unanswered questions hanging between them. Things he needed to understand.

She read the uncertainty in his eyes. "It's okay. You can say whatever it is you're thinking. I'm through running."

"Is that why you left, Amanda? Survival?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I've asked myself that a thousand times. I guess I didn't think I could go on anymore, not the way I was . . . well, the way I was with you, anyway."

His body tensed as he sat up straighter. "With me? *I* was the problem?" He knew he sounded defensive, but he couldn't seem to stop himself.

"No . . . I mean, yes . . . I mean . . ." Rising, she buried her hands in the large pockets of her suit jacket. "This is so much harder to put into words than I thought."

"Try."

She walked to the bookcase, and Lee watched silently as she lifted Jamie's wedding photo from its place of honor. Running her finger across the edges of the pewter frame, she examined it with a strange reverence. He understood; more evenings than not, he found himself studying it as well. Taken just three months before Phillip died, it was the last picture of all of them together. It was a typically mundane family portrait, yet there was something behind the eyes of that smiling family that intrigued him. They were happy.

Amanda replaced the photo on the shelf. "I wonder if those people even exist any more," she said, giving word to his thoughts. "When Phillip died, he took part of me with him . . . a part I'm not sure will ever come back to life. At least, that's what I used to think."

Lee wet his dry lips as he asked in a low voice, "And now?"

She turned to face him. "Now, I want to try. But I'm not sure I know how."

Leaning back on the couch, he looked up at the ceiling. "I'm not really sure I know how, either. Maybe . . . well, maybe we could try counseling." As Amanda arched her eyebrows, he flashed her an embarrassed grin. "Yeah, counseling . . . I know. But I don't want to go back to the way things were between us. I don't think I could survive living like that again."

"I know. There were days I just . . ."

He heard a world of sorrow in her sweet sigh. "You just . . . what?" he entreated. "Talk to me, Amanda. Please."

Frowning thoughtfully, she paused to tuck her hair behind her ears before she answered. "I don't know how to describe it. It was everything . . . and nothing. Some days I felt like the world was closing in around me. Some days I wanted to scream. Some days I wanted to scour the Agency for the imbecile whose bullet had taken Phillip's life. And some days I didn't feel anything at all . . . as if the Novocain they'd given me that afternoon at the dentist's office had never worn off."

Lee rose slowly from the couch. "That day in the emergency room, when I told you about what went down at the warehouse . . . I saw the light go right out of your eyes. You don't know how badly I wished then that I could trade places with Phillip . . . that it had been me."

"Not as much as *I* wished it had been *me*." She folded her arms across her chest, hugging herself lightly. "Ironic, isn't it? I lost a filling, so Phillip ended up losing his life."

Coming up behind her, Lee slipped his arms around her waist. Her bones felt fragile, like fine china, and he pulled her against his bulk with guarded caution. "The 'what-ifs' will drive you crazy if you let them, won't they?" he murmured softly in her ear.

Trembling, she managed a throaty, "Yeah."

He gave her a tender squeeze. "I've second guessed myself so many times over the years . . . what if my mother had stayed home that night instead of going to meet Blackthorne with my father . . . what if I hadn't agreed to meet Barney on the dock that morning . . . what if I had only taken one of the other rookies with me to the warehouse that day. But in the end, none of it matters. In the end, life unfolds the way it does, and all the 'what-ifs' in the world won't do a damn thing to change it."

She closed her eyes, suppressing a sigh. "That sounds awfully fatalistic."

"Did you know that my contact was supposed to be at Dulles that morning? He changed the meet at the last minute. Thought he'd blend in better on a train."

Unclenching her arms, she let him tighten his embrace, resting her hands lightly on top of his. "Now that's an understatement if I've ever heard one," she said as

he rocked her gently. "If there was one red hat that day, there must have been twenty."

As their soft laughter mingled, he felt her relax at last, her fingers caressing him with slow, unhurried strokes. It was a heady feeling to know she was in his arms again, but this time because they were going to live, not die. "Why couldn't you have told me all this before?" he asked. "I'm your husband. I would have understood."

"That was the trouble, you see. More than anything, I wanted to feel your arms around me, just like this, to hear you say that everything was going to be all right. But . . . every time I looked into your eyes, I knew."

"Knew what?"

"That you felt the same emptiness I did. And if I couldn't make it okay for you . . . how could you possibly make it okay for me?" She leaned forward, brushing her thumb across Phillip's smiling face. "Everyone always said he was the spitting image of Joe, but that was only on the outside. Inside, he was exactly like me."

"I knew that right from the start." Closing his eyes, Lee breathed in the sweet fragrance of her hair. "Why do you think I loved him so much?"

He felt a shudder sweep through her. "I've said such terrible things to you. And last week . . . Oh, Lee, I even slapped you! I can't even begin to explain *that*."

"You don't have to explain it. *I* wanted to break that damn Senator's neck. The thought of you with him . . . it drove me absolutely crazy."

"I know the feeling. Every time you so much as mentioned Francine's name, I wanted to . . ." She chuckled softly. "Well, maybe it's better if we don't go there."

He laughed lightly in her ear. "Maybe not."

"I *was* attracted to Bryce," she admitted, snuggling against him once again. "At first, I couldn't figure out why, because I hadn't felt that way in so long. But then . . . well, then I realized that all the qualities I felt most drawn to were the ones that reminded me of you." As he laid his cheek against hers, she said contritely, "I was just so scared . . . scared that we were going to lose Jamie the same way we lost Phillip."

"Jamie's safe, Amanda. Safe at home with his family. What happened on that island was terrible, but he's a strong, determined young man. He's going to put all this pain behind him. Just like we are."

"Lee . . ." Her breath caught. "What happened on the island . . . between us . . ."

"When we . . . made love?"

Her cheeks burning, she gave a quick nod. "I needed you so much that night."

"I needed you, too," he said, his voice turning even more gravelly as his thoughts traveled to that small, dank cell and the words they still seemed unable to utter. Fear flashed through him as for one brief moment he allowed himself to wonder if it might really be too late to bridge the distance between them.

"I want it to be like that again," she continued uneasily, "but I just don't know . . ." Her words trailed off into a hushed stillness.

As he felt her begin to pull away again, Lee tightened his embrace. For some incomprehensible reason, her doubt served to banish his. Love was worth the risks it brought; Amanda had taught him that lesson years ago.

Letting out a breath, he held her snugly against him. "It will be even better," he told her, his whispered words a promise. "When we're ready."

She turned slowly in his arms. "I told you what **I** wanted, but what do **you** want? What do you really want?"

"You," he said simply. "That's all I've ever wanted, Amanda."

"Oh, Lee, I . . ." Her eyes were the deepest shade of brown he'd ever seen as she stared longingly up at him. "I do love you."

"I love you, too," he returned ever-so-gently. Tears had wet her cheeks, and he traced their tracks with the tip of his finger. "I love you, too . . . Mrs. Stetson."

Epilogue

The wind ruffled her hair as she knelt by the grave. Though the breeze was cool, the day held the promise of warmth. Springtime in Virginia really was her favorite time of year. Amanda almost couldn't believe she was about trade it in all over again for the cold, gray drizzle of Illinois.

Tilting her head, she sat back on her knees. Quiet surrounded her, and she filled her lungs with the sweet morning air. Everything seemed so peaceful, the beautiful grounds neat and well-tended. There were even fresh flowers by the headstone -- daisies, Phillip's favorite. It must have been Lee, she realized with a guilty pang. It had been a good three months since she'd found time to visit her son.

There had just been so many things to deal with, all the endless odds and ends surrounding yet another move. Finding a brand new place to live in Chicago, closing on the deal . . . selling the house on Maplewood Drive, deciding what to keep and what to give away. Amanda felt as if she was drowning in details. And she really shouldn't have let her editor con her into writing those two latest pieces simultaneously. One of these days she would take her mother's advice and learn to say no.

Of course, 'no' certainly wasn't a word Dotty had much practice with herself. She was currently heading the volunteer committees of at least three charities -- that is, when she wasn't playing bridge with Mr. Harding or trading gourmet recipes with Mr. Miller . . . or babysitting her great-grandson while his parents enjoyed a well-deserved weekend alone.

Jamie was finishing up the first year of his pediatric internship at Children's Memorial Hospital. Research had lost its appeal after his ordeal on San Simeon; these days, he preferred the 'hands on' approach of real, down-to-earth medicine. It was much safer that way -- or so he'd informed her with a wry smile.

Safer, maybe, but the hours were certainly more grueling and the pay considerably less. With Lisa back at work, Amanda was looking forward to being able to give them both a much needed hand. In a few months, Joey would officially enter the 'terrible twos.' She remembered her own boys at that age . . . handfuls, both of them. Her 'boys' . . . No matter how much time passed, she would never stop thinking in the plural.

Brushing aside her tears, she ran a trembling hand over the headstone. The gold wedding band on her finger gleamed in the bright morning sun, its familiar weight oddly reassuring as she traced each carved letter with gentle reverence.

'Phillip Joseph King, 1973 – 1998.'

Very soon now there would be another Phillip King in the world. Jamie and Lisa were expecting another baby in August, and Jamie had asked if it would be too hard for her if they named this new boy after his uncle. When Joey was born, it

had been too soon, but now . . . now it just felt right somehow. 'Phillip Lee'. . . yes, *that* felt very right indeed.

Surprisingly, this move to Chicago had been Lee's idea. At the beginning of May, her husband would take over as the Midwest Division Chief. In the aftermath of Blue Leader's investigation, the Agency had cleaned house. Any agents with ties to Sid Rollins, the Triad's original founder, had been forced out. Remembering the way the pompous Herbert Fleetwood had stonewalled her first inquiries into Jamie's disappearance, Amanda couldn't help but feel a small sense of triumph at the news that he'd been 'scooped.' She was still human, after all, despite Francine Desmond's occasional remarks to the contrary.

She had a feeling Francine held her largely responsible for Lee's resignation as Field Section Chief. Though his new job was ostensibly a promotion, any agent worth his salt knew the real action in the intelligence community was in D.C. The Chicago bureau would seem pretty tame by comparison. However, Francine's very vocal opinion on the matter notwithstanding, Amanda knew this job was exactly what Lee wanted. Her husband was more at home in his skin these days than ever before. With the successful prosecution of Russell 'Scar-face' Scurto safely behind him, Scarecrow had nothing left to prove. He was actually looking forward to a slower pace, and the chance to spend more quality time with his family. Life had taught him just how precious a commodity that was; Francine was just beginning to learn it.

Amanda's reconciliation with Lee the previous year had driven a discreet, but undeniable wedge between her husband and his good friend. The first few months had been pretty rough, but, eventually, they had all achieved a new equilibrium . . . especially after Francine had started seeing Mark Reynolds. Handsome, wealthy and definitely unattached, Mark was a free-lance writer for her magazine. When he'd surfaced in D.C. to research an article entitled 'The Changing Face of Espionage,' Amanda had immediately put him in touch with Agent Desmond. Evidently Mark had found that particular face of espionage especially intriguing; he'd been dating Francine exclusively for almost six months. Amanda smiled softly. Mark Reynolds was one of the good guys; she hoped this worked out for both of them. Underneath Francine's carefully cultivated sophistication lay a lonely, vulnerable woman who deserved to finally find a little happiness of her own.

Happiness . . . that word, Amanda had discovered, was a two-edged sword. It hadn't been easy to put the pieces of her marriage back together. In fact, at times, it had been downright painful. That day Lee brought her home from the airport had been an emotional one for both of them. But, all too soon, that first rush of feeling had passed, leaving a wary awkwardness in its wake. Amanda knew

intellectually that she was exactly where she wanted to be . . . feeling it was another matter entirely. It had taken them nearly three months of counseling sessions to get to the place where they were comfortable enough to make love again.

But, oh! What a night that had been! She felt warm all over just thinking about it. She had spoken her wedding vows once again with her heart and her body. As they'd made love with tender abandon, she knew in the depths of her soul that she would never take anything about her marriage for granted again. Not the stolen dinners at Emelio's, the quick phone calls just to say hello in the middle of the day, the shuddering responses his hands evoked from her flesh, nor the roughly whispered 'I love you's' close to her ear. They had marched through all kinds of hell to get back to this place, but the deep and lasting love they'd rediscovered was worth every bump along the way.

"Hey, Mrs. Stetson."

Turning, she looked up into a pair of sparkling hazel eyes.

"You have the strangest look on your face," her husband told her as he effortlessly pulled her to her feet. "What the devil are you thinking about?"

Reaching out, she traced his lips with her finger. "I'll show you later," she promised with an inviting smile.

Pulling her against him, Lee lost no time covering her mouth with his. The kiss was deep and warm, offering a world of possibilities. "Mmm," he murmured lazily as they parted at last. "I have a feeling we're in for an exhausting couple of weeks."

"We do have fourteen whole days all to ourselves, no magazine, no Agency . . ." Amanda tilted her head as she considered the more appealing options that idea presented. "Maybe we can go for a new personal record."

"I'm certainly willing to try if you are." With a twinkle in his eyes, Lee brushed his lips across hers again. "I think we're gonna have to put those plans to 'christen' our new house into immediate operation."

Amanda smiled. "I'm looking forward to every single maneuver."

He raised an eyebrow. "Even in the kitchen?"

"Especially in the kitchen." Running her tongue over her lips, she added with a slow grin, "I'm starting to develop a real taste for chocolate and whipped cream. Although, Stetson, I still suspect it's your incredibly subtle way of ensuring an adequate caloric intake."

Her husband shrugged his shoulders with a sheepish smile, and Amanda knew that although she had spoken in jest, her words weren't all that far from the truth. Despite her modest weight gain this past year, her family still wasted no opportunity to encourage her to eat. All this misplaced concern drove Amanda more than a little crazy; she'd always been on the thin side. Though she had to admit, Lee's interactive approach did have some pretty amazing fringe benefits.

"Amanda." Her husband's gravelly voice wrapped itself warmly around her. "We really should get on the road before the traffic gets too bad. Are you about ready?"

She nodded, turning her eyes on Phillip's resting place once again. "It is from numerous diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped," she read from the headstone in a low voice.

"Robert Kennedy," Lee whispered as he folded his arms around her from behind. "I remember when Phillip wrote that paper."

"It was his first 'A' in high school; he was so proud." Twisting in Lee's arms, she looked up into his eyes. "Do you think maybe . . . well, maybe that was really true for Phillip? That he made some small difference in this world?"

"He died doing what he believed in, Amanda. And that always makes a difference." Lee pulled her closer, his voice rough with emotion as he assured her, "Phillip would have been the first person to tell you that."

"Yeah," she said with a sigh, "he would have."

She felt the gentle pressure of her husband's arms once again and, nodding, she took one last look around. In her mind, she finished the quote Lee had selected for Phillip's epitaph. '. . . Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope . . .'

Ripples of hope . . . maybe that's what it was all about after all. Her son had touched so many people . . . from the tall man standing silently by her side to the unborn baby who in a few months would bear his uncle's name. The ripples of Phillip's life were unending.

Amanda turned her eyes in Lee's direction. "Come on," she said, "it's time to head to our new home." Slipping her hand into his larger one, she took the first step of the journey.

The end.