

DISCLAIMER Scarecrow & Mrs. King is copyrighted to Warner Brothers and Shoot The Moon Production Company. The original portions of this story, however, are copyrighted to the author. This story is for entertainment purposes only and cannot be redistributed without the permission of the author. Situations and some dialogue have been used from the episode "Bad Timing", written by Robert W. Gilmer. No infringement of copyright is intended.

A Question of Timing

Amanda listened to the melodic sound of Lee's voice in the darkened restaurant. He had been recounting one of his crazy anecdotes for the past fifteen minutes, an elaborate mixture of half-truth, half-invention. His face became more and more animated as he embellished the tale, something about a band of Bedouin pirates and the local slave-trading bazaar.

"Is this the truth?" Amanda interjected, barely able to mask the disbelief in her voice.

"Is this the truth?" he parried.

"Um-hmm."

"My word of honor...I swear." He laughed softly at her expression, continuing the story with a twinkle in his eye. "Listen to this..."

Amanda smiled as she watched him. They were sitting side by side in the booth, the dim light from the candle on the table creating an intimate mood. The soft, romantic music playing in the background coupled with the scent of Lee's aftershave made it increasingly difficult for Amanda to concentrate on what her fiancé was saying. His nearness was almost overpowering. The proximity of his leg, a mere inch from her own, caused his words to float over her, 'in one ear and out the other'.

"You're not buying any of this, are you?" Lee asked, suddenly aware that her attention had wandered.

"Not very much of it, no."

"All right, all right...enough of my convoluted stories." He exhaled deeply as he carefully studied her face. She looked so beautiful tonight, the muted candlelight making her seem almost ethereal. He hesitated for a moment, carefully considering his next words.

"What d'ya say we go back to my place and have some...dessert?"

His fingers toyed absently with the diamond she wore tonight on the third finger of her left hand, a symbol of their commitment that was rarely displayed. Sometimes he wished he could tell everyone how he really felt about his 'partner', how much he loved her and how important she'd become in the few short months since their engagement. But he knew it wasn't the right time for that. Someday he would shout it to the entire world; but for now, he'd have to be satisfied with whispering it to the woman he loved. He raised his eyes to hers as he caught the last part of her sentence.

"...and we have to be at work early."

"I know, I know," he responded quietly. Masking his frustration, he gave her hand a comforting squeeze.

"What are we gonna do?" Amanda asked sorrowfully, leaning against him for the briefest of seconds.

"Same thing we always do. Go home alone..." he carefully extricated his hand from hers, adding tersely under his breath, "...again."

He didn't want to push things. He respected Amanda's desire not to make love until they were married. But as he sat in this booth looking into her eyes, Lee found it was getting harder and harder to wait. He placed a tentative hand on her knee, moving it slowly and sensually up and down her thigh.

Amanda sighed as her body responded to his touch. She heard the implicit question in his seemingly innocuous words. Yes, that is what they always did. At the end of the evening, they always headed home, alone, to their separate houses and their separate beds.

In November, after the incident with Lee's friend Kai, they had reluctantly agreed they would have to keep their marriage a secret for her family's sake. Since then, they had been too preoccupied with work to make any concrete wedding plans. Amanda suspected Lee was giving her some space. He was still a stranger to her family. She knew he realized that it would take some time for them to adjust to his place in her life.

Still, knowing that didn't make it easier to deal with. There were times when she suspected Lee still felt like an outsider in her life. A month ago she'd practically had to drag him to her house on Christmas Eve. The thought of an evening with her family still made him kind of edgy. But she hoped things would improve as they all got to know each other better.

She looked up abruptly and caught Lee watching her. There was an elusive 'something' in his eyes tonight. It was a fleeting look, gone almost as suddenly as it appeared, like quicksilver. She knew without a doubt what he was thinking.

Resting her hand on his, she returned his reassuring smile. She knew he understood her feelings, knew that he would never pressure her. She vainly tried to remember why it had once been so important to wait. The reasons that at one time seemed so compelling melted away one by one in the warmth of Lee's eyes. Those wonderful eyes were what had first drawn her to him so long ago at the crowded train station. They could convey with one look all the feelings he kept locked inside. The corners of her mouth turned up in a hesitant smile as she watched him in the romantic candlelight. At this moment the only thing she understood with any certainty was how much she loved him and how right everything suddenly felt.

Resting her head on his shoulder, she leaned into him for a moment, her hand tightly gripping his. "Lee," she said, her voice little more than a whisper as her eyes met his. "I've changed my mind. I think tonight I'd like some dessert after all."

* * * *

Lee cast an anxious glance at Amanda out of the corner of his eye. She had been uncharacteristically quiet since they left L'Ornate. Sitting beside her in the front

seat of the Wagoneer as she quickly covered the short distance from the restaurant to his building, Lee tried to guess what was going through her mind.

Her statement in the restaurant had taken him by surprise. They had been dancing around the issue of their physical relationship ever since the Stemwinder incident last fall, when they had both finally admitted the depth of the feelings for each other.

It seemed to him that it all boiled down to a question of timing...most of it incredibly bad. Even though they had shared a bed while they were on the run, they both implicitly understood that this was not the time to take their relationship to the next level. Trying to deal with the Agency and Alexi Makarov took all their energy and concentration. And Lee knew that Amanda was deeply worried about her mother and her sons. Everything had happened so fast. In the days following their rushed words in her bedroom, he feared she might be regretting her impulsive decision to go with him. But her logic had been right on – if she had stayed, she would undoubtedly have ended up in an Agency holding cell. Dr. Smyth would have seen to it personally.

Lee had thought things would fall into place naturally after the dust settled from the Stemwinder mess, but their lives had grown even more complicated. Then, Amanda began working full time and she was so caught up in her agent candidate classes that their time together seemed very limited. He knew Dr. Smyth's job offer had been an important milestone for her professionally, almost a validation of her efforts for the past three years. He was more than willing to take a back seat to her newfound career for a little while.

Then came the Addi Birol case. It had proved a powerful catalyst for both of them. Lee had always intended to discuss the future with Amanda, but he had never envisioned proposing the way he did, in such grim surroundings. And certainly not with Birol's threats hanging over their heads like a sword, ready to drop at any moment. But from the instant he'd laid eyes on her after his disastrous rescue attempt, he knew he couldn't waste another second. Suddenly, that small dismal room seemed like the perfect time and place to pop the question.

And after her kidnapping and their subsequent engagement, Amanda seemed more than ready to take their physical relationship to the next level. After a lengthy discussion, they decided to let 'nature take its course' on their romantic weekend

getaway to Pine Top. Unfortunately for both of them, nature had other ideas. Amanda, still not fully recovered from the aftereffects of her kidnapping, came down with a bad cold the first night there. Once again, the timing just didn't seem right for either of them. Even the weather refused to cooperate that weekend, Lee thought with a grin, the skiing the worst it had been in five years.

But those days at the secluded resort weren't a total loss. Alone and completely relaxed for the first time in a long while, they spent their time talking, getting to know each other all over again as they held each other close. Snuggling before the fire, they happily made plans for their future.

Amanda whispered that maybe fate was trying to tell them something that weekend...that maybe they should wait for their wedding night to be together completely. Lee had wholeheartedly agreed with her decision. He could see how important this was to her and he was happy to follow her lead. And for the first time, he found that he didn't need to sleep with a woman to let her know how he felt. Their relationship encompassed so much more than just the physical aspects. Even without making love, he had never felt closer to anyone than he did to Amanda.

But as the days went by, their wedding seemed more like a distant promise than a reality. Their plans changed, the ceremony they had originally envisioned turning into a secret elopement to protect her family. From that point, on more than one occasion, Lee found himself regretting their choice to wait. In their business, life was too short and time too precious to dismiss what little opportunity they had to be together.

He'd dropped a few discrete hints, trying to see if Amanda felt the same way. But after she turned down his invitation to spend the weekend at his friend Crump's cabin, he had steeled himself to wait until she was ready. Since she hadn't responded to any of his attempts discuss their sexual relationship, he surmised that the timing wasn't right for her yet. He wanted everything to be perfect. In the final analysis, this step was just too important to both of them to rush it.

Lost in these thoughts, Lee suddenly found himself standing in front of his apartment, Amanda's hand resting lightly on his arm. He wondered for a minute how he had gotten here. Then the comforting pressure of her touch roused him

from his reverie. Smiling tentatively, he unlocked the door, stepping aside to allow her to enter.

Flipping on the light switch, he took a quick look around the room. "Ah, sorry about the mess." Smiling sheepishly, he grabbed the scattered newspapers from the sofa and tossed them hastily onto the coffee table. "I meant to take care of that earlier."

"That's okay," Amanda grinned, a little amused by his embarrassment. Lee looked as nervous as she felt. Sitting beside him in the intimate atmosphere of the restaurant, everything had seemed so clear. But here in Lee's apartment, she suddenly didn't know how to behave or exactly what he expected of her.

"Here, let me take your coat."

She smiled at him as he helped her off with her coat, then watched as he removed his own, hanging them both in the hall closet.

"Would you...ah...like something to drink?" Lee asked solicitously.

"No, thanks," she replied in kind. "I'm fine."

Lee stood awkwardly by the hallway as Amanda sat down on the couch. He watched hesitantly as she settled back against the cushions, a little puzzled by his uncertainty. In the past, in moments like these, he instinctively knew all the right moves, his line practiced and smooth. But suddenly nothing in his usual repertoire seemed appropriate.

When it came right down to it, Lee had to admit that he was more than a little apprehensive about the step they were about to take. In the past, his sexual relationships were usually transitory, fleeting moments of physical passion that never touched him emotionally. Life was simpler for him that way. The less he cared, the easier it was when it ended.

Things were very different with Amanda. Exactly when she had slipped under his skin, he couldn't completely say. He only knew that she was now firmly entrenched in his heart and in his soul.

Of course, he could have totally misjudged the situation. Maybe all Amanda was really anticipating from him tonight was a piece of that cake she had baked for him the other day. He considered that idea, then quickly dismissed it. It may have been a while since his last romantic encounter, but it hadn't been so long that he'd forgotten how to read a woman's signals. Besides, he recognized the look in her eyes. He'd seen it recently during some of their more heated 'discussions'.

"I've got a great bottle of wine that will just hit the spot," he offered again with a smile. "I'll just take a minute to get it." As he headed towards the bar, her voice called him back.

"Lee..."

"Yeah?" He swung around towards her expectantly, a funny half-smile on his face.

"I'm really not thirsty." She looked up and met his gaze, her lips curving up in a sultry smile as she patted the space next to her on the couch. "Why don't you come over here? "

Amanda watched him closely as he nodded in response, casually discarding his suit jacket and loosening his tie as he crossed the room to join her. She found his uncharacteristically bashful behavior oddly reassuring. It was comforting to know that the notorious Lee Stetson, that suave ladies' man, could be as uncertain and vulnerable as anyone else.

She leaned towards him as he settled in beside her, laying her head on his shoulder with a sigh. She felt his arm come around her, instinctively pulling her closer. His lips lightly brushed against her forehead as he softly breathed her name.

"Amanda..."

"Yes?" she whispered, lifting her face to look up at him, his unspoken question hanging in the air.

He leaned in towards her, his lips barely touching hers as he tenderly kissed her. Her contented sigh encouraged him and his lips covered hers again, kissing her more deeply this time. The intensity of their feelings caught them both a little off-guard.

As the embrace ended, Lee pulled back slightly, gently cupping her face with his hands as he looked lovingly into her eyes. "Amanda, are you sure? I don't want to...I mean, if you're not ready..."

"I'm sure," she whispered, touched by his concern.

"But you seemed so certain before, about waiting for the wedding..."

"A girl can change her mind, can't she?" she teased, trying to lighten the mood.

"Are you telling me you've changed yours?"

"No," he asserted quickly, reaching for her hand and bringing it gallantly to his lips.

"I'm sorry if I'm handling this badly," he murmured, lightly kissing each of her fingers. "I guess... I didn't really expect...to be here with you...like this."

"Come on, Scarecrow," she returned playfully, "I thought you were trained to expect the unexpected?" Her eyes twinkled mischievously as she continued, "of course, if you don't want me to stay, I suppose I could always go home and get a good night's sleep." As she started to get up, she felt his strong arms close around her, pulling her back down on the couch.

"Not on your life," he grinned, beginning to relax as he drew her closer. "It's just that this kinda seemed like a spur of the moment decision...one I wouldn't want you to regret later." His voice grew serious as he leaned closer to whisper in her ear. "This means too much to me."

"It means too much to me, too," Amanda said, pulling back a little to look him in the eye. "That's why I've wanted to wait. But Lee," she added, running a caressing hand over his cheek, "I wouldn't be here if I didn't want this...need this. It just seems so right tonight."

Smiling back at her, he stood up slowly, his eyes locked on hers in perfect understanding. "Then shall we?" He slowly extended his hand, glancing over his shoulder as he reached out to her.

Amanda nodded as she grasped his outstretched hand. Together, fingers entwined, they walked towards Lee's bedroom.

Amanda walked slowly through the doorway, the darkness in the room a little disorienting. She had been in Lee's bedroom before, but standing in here this time, anticipating what they were about to do, lent a different feel to the room. Almost as if somehow it was hers as well as his.

Lee flipped the switch by the wall and the room was suddenly bathed in light. She chuckled quietly to herself as she quickly took in the disarray in here as well.

"You know, Stetson," she said with a gleam in her eye. "You might as well confess. Where do you usually stash your mess when you invite me over here?"

"In the closet," he admitted, leaning against the door with a grin. "What gave me away?"

"The clutter on your desk, for one thing – it's a pretty good indicator that you're still a slob."

"Well, I'm usually a little neater than this," he said nervously, stooping to retrieve his laundry. He couldn't understand why being in his bedroom with Amanda suddenly made him so jumpy. He felt as if he was walking on hot coals.

He looked up and caught her watching him. "I guess I left here in kind of a hurry tonight," he laughed, glancing ruefully at his armload of rumpled clothes. "I didn't want to keep my fiancée waiting at the restaurant. She hates sitting there all alone."

"She's feeling a little lonely standing over here all by herself, too."

"Oh?" he said, carefully depositing his stuff in the corner. "Then I guess I'll have to do something about that." He crossed the room slowly and deliberately, kissing her on the forehead as he stopped in front of her. "How's that?"

"Better," she murmured, leaning her head against his chest.

"Good." He breathed deeply, inhaling the scent of the perfume he'd given her for Christmas. It smelled so good...almost as good as she felt in his arms. When he'd left here tonight to meet her at L'Ornate, he had never dreamed that their evening would be ending this way. After all this time, she was finally all his. His hands deftly massaged her back as he held her tightly, partly to reassure himself that she was really there.

Amanda closed her eyes, resting easily against him. She shut off her thoughts and concentrated on the sensation of his hands. They felt wonderful as they moved over her, his touch burning even through the layers of clothing she still wore. She felt his lips on her hair and she moved closer, her own hands drawing an imaginary line down his back. She heard him groan slightly and felt his body's almost immediate response.

He pressed closer to her, trailing tiny nibbling kisses down her neck as his hands traveled a similar path. He knew he was probably moving too quickly, but he couldn't seem to stop himself. He had waited for this moment for so long. He'd begun to wonder if fate or whatever it was that held their destiny in its hands would ever let them get to this point. Time had never seemed so short as he kissed his way to her mouth, his lips closing on hers again in a demanding kiss.

"Oh, wow," Amanda gasped with a smile as their lips parted, shuddering a little at the strength of the feelings he'd awakened. It was almost overwhelming all of a sudden. She tensed involuntarily as his fingers moved down over her hips.

Lee felt it, too. And as he slowly leaned in to kiss her again, he saw her face turn away and felt her deep, uneven breaths as she rested her forehead on his chest. He tenderly murmured her name, mentally kicking himself for his insensitivity. He took a deep breath, trying to get his hormones under control.

Amanda sighed, sensing his distress in the way her said her name. "I'm fine, really," she replied in response to his unasked question. "I just need a minute."

"We'll take this as slow as you want," Lee reassured her. He hugged her lightly, bending over to whisper in her ear, "besides, it's much better that way."

She looked up to meet his eye, smiling softly at his words. She glanced quickly in the direction of the bathroom. "Would you mind if I..."

"Ah, no, go ahead."

"I'll just be a minute," she promised, brushing her lips over his. "Don't go anywhere."

"I wouldn't dream of it," he said lightly.

"I hope not." She gave him an encouraging grin as she closed the bathroom door.

Turning on the light, she observed the reflection that greeted her in the mirror. The image that stared back at her seemed poised and calm. But Amanda knew that underneath that serene façade, her emotions were churning wildly. The way she felt about Lee scared her a little bit.

She knew with certainty that she loved him in a way that she had never loved anyone before, not even Joe. It had been so simple when she and Joe were dating. They were very young and things seemed so black and white. He was her first serious romance and they both knew they wanted to wait. Of course, that's probably part of the reason they'd rushed headlong into marriage. If they had spent a little more time discussing who they were and what they wanted out of life, things might have been very different.

But that was a long time ago in a different lifetime. She wasn't the same woman who'd married Joe King fifteen years ago. Her relationship with Lee was so much more complicated. That was part of the reason she had put off this step for so long. Her feelings just ran too deep. If she had felt less, she probably would have given in to her body's urgings long before now. Lee Stetson had always had a powerful effect on her.

The same effect he seemed to have on a lot of women, Amanda thought ruefully. Just last week, there was that secretary from the temp pool who'd knocked over a tray full of files when he'd walked through the bullpen. Not that Lee had even noticed. But some small part of her worried that maybe she wouldn't measure up to his past romances.

Of course, when she thought about it rationally, she knew her fears were foolish and unfounded. Lee loved her and was totally committed to their relationship. The ring on her finger was tangible proof of that. She glanced down at the diamond on her left hand that sparkled and flashed as it caught the light. If only she could display this ring for everyone to see, maybe those nagging doubts would disappear.

And maybe, when it came right down to it, this was the heart of her dilemma. Lee had been such a big part of her life for so long, but a secret part. In a way, she had been leading two separate lives for the past three and a half years. There was Amanda King, housewife, the woman who lived in the suburbs with her mother and her sons. And then there was Amanda King, soon to be Stetson, who was Scarecrow's partner. She knew that once she and Lee made love, her two lives would be inextricably blended.

But she was ready to take that step. Taking a deep breath, she stole a quick look at her watch. Lee must be going out of his mind by now, wondering what she was doing in here. She should be telling all this to him, instead of to his bathroom mirror.

But maybe it was way past time for talking. What she needed to do right now was go out there and show him exactly how she felt about him. The woman in the mirror smiled back at her as she began to slowly unbutton her blouse.

* * * * *

Lee kept a watchful eye on the bathroom door, waiting nervously for Amanda to appear. He'd spent the past few minutes going over his earlier behavior in his mind, trying to decide if he'd done anything wrong. He used to be so self-assured in matters of the heart. Or at least in matters of the bedroom, he quickly amended. There was a distinct difference, he thought dryly. And that was probably why Amanda always seemed to confuse him. Just when he thought he had things all figured out, she managed to throw him a curve ball.

He recalled the very beginnings of their relationship. Even then, she was always surprising him. He had certainly never expected her to appear out of nowhere that afternoon at Mrs. Welch's, let alone have the presence of mind to disable a car. From the very start of their working relationship, her instincts had amazed him. It had just taken him a little while to admit it.

Almost as long as it had taken to admit his feelings for her and begin to explore a personal relationship. He couldn't fault Amanda for wanting to take things one small step at a time. He was the one who had been dragging his feet for so long. She'd been ready to hear those three little words long before he finally said them. Actually, she had almost said them first - on a cold, damp night in the woods of Virginia.

They had talked about that on their first evening at Pine Top. In the intimate comfort of the mountain resort, that night in the swamp seemed light years away. Chained together, on the run from Peter Sacker and his followers, life had never seemed more precious or the future more precarious. Amanda admitted that she had indeed been on the verge of confessing her feelings that night. But something in his eyes had stopped her. They told her it was the wrong time - it was just too soon. She knew in her heart that he wasn't ready to hear how she really felt.

Lee had reluctantly agreed that her instincts had once again been right. During those days, he was still thoroughly frightened by the depth of his feelings for Amanda. He did wonder, though, what might have happened if they had actually kissed. He had the distinct impression that if he'd tried to make love to her that night, she wouldn't have said no.

Their relationship had come a long way since then. The days when he hid from his feelings from himself were long since past. Now he wanted nothing more than to spend the rest of his life with Amanda. Sometimes he was amazed that he could even concentrate at work with her sitting across the room from him, so near and yet still so far away.

If only he could figure out what she needed from him tonight. At least the ambiance in here seemed better now, he thought with a grin. After waiting so long for this moment, he wanted everything to be just right. He carefully inspected the room one more time. His dirty clothes were out of sight in the closet, the lights were dimmed, and the candles he had found buried in his dresser were lighted and ready. The only thing missing was Amanda.

As if on cue, the bathroom door opened and she slowly entered the room. Lee blinked a few times as if trying to make sure that she wasn't an apparition. The sight of her took his breath away.

"Amanda?" he muttered in surprise, almost choking on the word.

"Sorry I took so long," she replied with a shy smile. "Was the wait worth it?"

Lee nodded slowly, suddenly beyond the power of speech. She had discarded her blouse and slacks, emerging from the bathroom clad only in a pink camisole and panties. The soft light from the bathroom illuminated her slim form like a spotlight. She hesitated by the door, as if waiting for his approval. She certainly had it. Lee stood there almost rooted to the spot. He had never seen anything that look as beautiful as Amanda did at that moment. And she had never surprised him more.

"Amanda," he repeated as he finally found his voice. "You look..."

"Thank you," she responded with a bashful smile, grateful that she'd remembered to change into her sexy lingerie before their dinner date.

"You're welcome," Lee said as he began to slowly move towards her. "Of course, if I'd had any idea that's what you had on under that blouse and slacks, we might never have finished our dinner."

She met him halfway, reassured by his obvious admiration. Glancing around the room, she took in the added touches with approval. Candles were burning warmly on the dresser and the desk and the bed was turned down invitingly. Lee had been busy while she was in the bathroom. But despite his efforts in here, she could tell he was still feeling a little unsure of her. He hadn't even taken off his tie.

She placed her hands lightly on his chest, endeavoring to dispel any doubts her earlier actions had created. Her eyes never leaving his, she slowly and deliberately undid his tie. She pulled it from his neck and dropped it to the floor.

"Actually," she said, her eyes bright, "I'm kind of curious myself about what you might be wearing under that shirt."

"Well, we can't have that," he smiled. "I'm a firm believer in curiosity being satisfied."

"Good," she breathed as she began to unbutton his shirt.

Lee stood quietly in front of her, watching as her fingers moved confidently down his chest. They paused in their journey occasionally to allow her lips to plant a small kiss on his newly exposed skin. He closed his eyes, letting her do whatever she wanted. She had evidently come to terms with whatever was bothering her before. If she didn't feel the need to discuss it at the moment, then he was more than happy to oblige her. He would take his cue from her, this time allowing her to set the pace.

She slowly removed his shirt, her fingertips barely grazing his skin as she pulled it down over his arms. She let it fall unheeded to the ground. Without missing a beat, Amanda let her hands move back up the outside of his arms, then tenderly down and across his chest. His smooth skin felt wonderful under her fingertips.

She looked up to see him watching her intently. She smiled again as she met his eye, almost as if seeking his permission to continue. He returned her look, the warmth of his gaze silently encouraging her. Still holding eye contact, she unbuckled his belt, pulling it slowly through the loops.

Her last movements galvanized him into action. Kicking off his shoes, he quickly removed his slacks. "Well?" he asked, one eyebrow raised as he stood before her in his boxers.

"Not bad," she grinned as she ran her eyes appreciatively over him, her tongue lightly tracing her upper lip. She nodded favorably as her gaze rested on his lower body. "Blue is a great color on you."

"Glad you approve," he laughed, taking a step forward. "I wore them just for you."

"I'll bet." She, too, moved closer, letting her hands rest lightly on his shoulders. "I do have one tiny little suggestion, though."

"Yeah?" he asked, exhaling softly as her hands moved lower.

"Yeah," she continued, her fingers now making tiny circles across his chest. "I'd lose the socks if I were you. They totally clash with the rest of your ensemble."

Grinning, he sat down on the bed, bending over to remove them. Looking up, his eyes met hers once again and he held out his hand. Without hesitation, Amanda reached out and grasped it, allowing him to pull her down into his waiting arms.

Their lips met in a tender kiss as they stretched out side by side on the bed. Amanda looked at Lee's face in the flickering candlelight. His eyes looked so dark, filled with a desire that she had only let herself imagine before. Unconsciously, she shuddered.

"Lee..."

"I love you, Amanda," he said simply, pulling her closer. His fingers caressed her back with feather-light strokes and he felt the tension leave her body as she relaxed against him.

He held her that way for a few minutes, time suspended as she rested in the warmth of his embrace. Lee marveled at how amazing it felt to simply hold her in his arms. With Amanda, every sensation, no matter how ordinary, was one to be treasured. It occurred to him suddenly that this was the real difference between sex and making love. The emotional connection intensified everything tenfold.

Stirring slightly, he brushed away the hair that had fallen in her eyes, leaning in to kiss her. Their lips met, lightly at first, then more passionately. Lee kissed her repeatedly, softly murmuring her name as he worked his way from her lips to her neck and throat. Slowly, he reached for her camisole. As he began to lift it, he felt her fingers close on his and saw her shake her head. Her lips parted in an enigmatic smile.

"Let me," she said in a quiet voice, her hands assertively pushing him back down on the bed. She wanted - no, she needed - to do this herself, as if the simple act of undressing herself proved that in this, too, they were equal partners. She pulled the silken garment up over her head in a slow, tantalizing motion. Tossing it aside, she sat very still as Lee's eyes examined her hungrily. She shivered a little as she observed him watching her. His gaze was so intense that she could almost feel it on her skin.

Illuminated by the soft candlelight, Lee thought she had never looked more beautiful. It was so wonderful to be here with her like this, not as an agent or her

friend, but as the man who loved her. He opened his mouth to tell her that, but he felt so much at that moment that he couldn't translate it into words. He tried to show her instead, more comfortable with this means of communication. Sitting up suddenly, he wrapped his arms around her, kissing her feverishly as he pulled her into a tight embrace.

She returned his kisses with equal passion, pushing him back down on the bed. For the first time, she allowed herself to respond to him the way she had dreamed of doing for so long. She glanced at his face, to gauge the look in his eyes, but he had closed them. Denied that familiar contact, Amanda could only guess at what he was feeling. She began to kiss him again, her hands traveling hurriedly across his body.

Taking a deep breath, Lee reached out to stop her. "Hey," he said, his tone half-teasing, half-serious. "Slow down a little."

Amanda tensed suddenly, confused by his words. Feeling uncertain and vulnerable, she rolled away, wrapping her arms around herself like an imaginary shield.

"Amanda, honey..." Lee whispered her name softly, closing his arms around her from behind in an attempt to bridge the distance between them.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. She took a deep breath, silently willing away the tears that sprang unbidden to her eyes.

Lee looked at her with a puzzled expression as he tried to decipher what she was trying to tell him. As he watched her lying there, unable to meet his gaze, understanding suddenly dawned on him. He kissed her briefly on the shoulder, gently turning her to face him. "Amanda," he repeated tenderly, his voice filled with love, "it wasn't a complaint, believe me."

She nodded quickly, starting to turn away again, but Lee wouldn't let her, tilting her chin up so that she had to look him in the eye. "Hey, you did everything right, trust me." He smiled in reassurance, his finger brushing away the solitary tear that escaped down her cheek.

She smiled back at him weakly, slowly nodding her head. "I guess... I'm just feeling... a little insecure," she said at last. "You've had so much more...I mean,

there's been...and for me, there's only been one other..." She drew a shaky breath, trying to get her emotional bearings. "And for us...we've waited so long, it kind of seems like it's taken forever to get here. I guess I'm just afraid you'll be disappointed."

"Oh, Amanda." He tightened his embrace, trying somehow to protect her from her own anxieties. He hated that his past made her feel that way. He should have guessed that this was part of the reason she'd waited so long to make love with him. Amanda had always been his emotional rock, instinctively knowing exactly what he needed to hear. He wished he'd been able to do the same for her.

"Amanda," he said seriously, trying to make her understand. "No one in my past..." he paused for a minute, looking up at the ceiling, as if he could find the words he was searching for written there. "You're the only...what I'm trying to say is...oh, damn," he said softly as he once again found himself tripping over his emotions.

"Go on," she prodded gently, laying her head on his chest.

"This is so hard for me to..." he broke off, staring up at the ceiling again in frustration. "I guess you don't have a monopoly on feeling insecure."

"Lee, you don't have to say anything," she whispered quietly, their roles reversing as she in turn tried to relieve his anxiety.

"Yes, I do," he insisted, turning them over so they were facing each other. "I want you to understand...okay?"

"Okay," she echoed, running a soothing hand across his forehead.

"All this...you and me...it's a totally new experience for me." He paused a minute before continuing, letting the words take shape in his mind. "No one in my past ever touched my heart this way, Amanda...not like you have." He brushed his lips lightly against hers, wrapping her solidly in his arms. "It's a crazy business we're in," he continued, his words almost indistinct against her cheek. "You get in a habit of not letting yourself feel too much...it's just easier that way. But you came into my life and changed all that. The man I used to be, before I knew you...he doesn't exist anymore. Do you understand what I'm trying to say?"

"Yes, perfectly," she replied softly. "Because I'm not the same person I was before I met you, either." She closed her arms around him, trying to pull him nearer. For so long she had been paralyzed by the irrational fear that she wouldn't measure up to his past. But the truth was, the past no longer mattered - for either of them. The only thing that counted was what they were building now, together.

"I love you," she whispered, her mouth against his ear. "You don't have to say any more." Her hands trailed lightly down his back as she added softly, "I think we've done enough talking for the moment, don't you?"

"Yeah, I do," he answered happily. He pulled away slightly to look at her, his eyes meeting hers with a mixture of anticipation and desire. Reassured by what he saw there, his mouth closed demandingly over hers.

As she returned his kiss, Amanda's heart was filled with an emotion that was impossible to describe. She knew without a doubt that here and now, in this moment, their feelings forged a bond between them that was so powerful it could never be broken. Nothing had ever felt so right.

Lee felt it, too. He stared down at her as she confidently met his gaze in a look as intimate as the act they were sharing. As his arms tightened around her, he knew in a moment of total clarity that they belonged to each other. And that he would never let her go.

Amanda lay quietly in Lee's arms, the rhythmic sound of his breathing reducing her to a state of pleasant drowsiness. They had been holding each other in silence like this for some time, simply enjoying the closeness of their newfound intimacy.

For the first time in a long while, Amanda was totally relaxed. She could feel Lee's fingers on her skin as they drew and redrew imaginary circles on her arm. They paused occasionally as his lips brushed tenderly through her hair, then almost unconsciously resumed their gentle stroking. After a while, his hands stilled and Amanda knew he had drifted off to sleep.

She stole a glance at him, looking up at his face through half-closed eyes. He looked utterly defenseless, his expression youthful and untroubled in sleep. Her

heart swelled with love for him at this unusual display of vulnerability. It was a side of him he rarely let anybody see. Emotion was something that seldom came into play in his everyday world. But here, in the safety of her arms, he could finally let his feelings show. In a way, he had a secret life, too, she thought with a sad smile.

But his was the mirror image of hers. Scarecrow, the cool professional, was the complete antithesis of the man who lay so quietly beside her. His reality was grounded in the world of codes and counter-codes, where life was a game played by deadly rules and death was the penalty for deviation.

Amanda's reality, on the other hand, was her home and family. She still felt like a commuter in that shadowy place where Lee had lived most of his adult life. Despite her recent full-time status, her forays into that realm were still brief. Although she had been subjected to a first-hand glimpse of that grim universe when the terrorist Addi Birol kidnapped her. After her brief sojourn there, she felt she understood Lee better than she ever had before. She now knew exactly why he had such a hard time letting her in.

That experience was part of the reason she'd waited so long to take this final step. This was the life she wanted, the two of them here, together, like this. But at the same time, it scared her. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she realized how much harder it would be for them to do their jobs now.

Amanda let out a long breath as she snuggled against him. She didn't want to think about the Agency or what they stood to lose tonight. There would be time enough for that in the cold light of day. Somehow they would have to find a way to bridge the gap between their personal and professional lives. They would do it together, she thought with a smile. There was nothing they couldn't accomplish as long as they had each other. They had proved that tonight. And right now she wanted nothing more than to stay here in this world, her head pillowed against the chest of the man she loved.

If only that were possible. She glanced at the clock with a frown. Unfortunately, her life as Amanda King had a prior claim on her. And the numerals on the clock testified that it was long past time to return to it.

For a minute she was tempted to call her mother and tell her that she had an all night work session. But the boys had a weekend trip planned and she really needed to touch base with them in the morning. And her mother would never buy the 'working late' excuse again. She'd practically worn that one out. Besides, she'd never pull it off in the morning. One look at her face and her mother would see right through her. She just wasn't up to dodging the endless barrage of questions.

Of course, she was a grown woman and entitled to a personal life. Her mother would probably be thrilled that she was in a serious relationship. The real problem was with herself, not her mother. She just wasn't ready yet to share the full details of her involvement with Lee.

She reached out to touch him, tenderly tracing his profile with her finger. She hated to wake him, but there wasn't any alternative. Much as she wanted to, she just couldn't spend the night. For a moment she debated letting him sleep, but she couldn't bear to leave him without a goodbye. She didn't want him to roll over and find her gone.

"Lee."

He stirred slightly, his arms tightening their grip, as if even in sleep he feared she might slip away.

"Lee," she repeated, gently shaking him. "Wake up, sweetheart. I've got to go."

He let out a deep breath as his eyes opened. He saw Amanda's face staring lovingly into his. His face broke out in a stunning smile as the evening fast-forwarded through his mind. He pulled her head down to him and tenderly kissed her. Looking into her eyes, his voice whispered only one word.

"Stay."

She smiled as her fingers moved over his lips, but she shook her head sadly. "I can't. It's past midnight. Mother..." Her voice trailed off as she saw the disappointment written across his features.

"Can't you come up with something to tell your mother?" he asked, even though he already knew the answer.

"Nothing that she'd believe," Amanda replied with a sigh. "Besides, I have to be there in the morning for the boys."

He frowned slightly as he reluctantly released her. That was one argument he wouldn't even try to win. He knew how hard she struggled to balance all the parts of her life - her children, her mother, and her job. Not to mention their time together. He didn't want to add any more pressure to her already complicated life. Their secret relationship did enough of that already.

"Lee, you know how much I want to stay," she continued, her conflicting emotions reverberating in her voice. She sat up, staring down at him as she fought a losing battle with the tears that threatened to fill her eyes. "It's just that..." She choked on the last few words, turning away to hide her discomfiture.

"It's okay, Amanda," Lee said with resignation. Rising up, he wrapped his arms around her from behind, kissing her lightly on her bare shoulder. "Really, it is." He could hear the distress in her tone and he added in a soft whisper, "we'll have other nights."

"I know, but it won't be the same. Tonight's special." She rested her head back on his shoulder as she blinked away her tears. What she wanted to do and what she needed to do were again in direct conflict. She briefly wondered if this would be the pattern of their life together. Their hellos cut all too short by the obligatory goodbyes.

"It was special for me, too," Lee murmured, his voice low and intense. "But it's only the first of many nights like this." His fingers absently played with a strand of her hair, twirling it around and around. "I promise."

"I'm going to hold you to that," she sighed, the corners of her mouth turning up in a smile as she turned to face him. "Starting tomorrow night. Mother and the boys will be out of town all weekend."

"All weekend?" he grinned, his eyebrows raised speculatively.

"Yeah."

"I guess we'll just have to think of something to keep us occupied then."

"I'm sure you'll come up with something," she grinned, her eyes now sparkling as she returned his look.

"I'll work on it," he laughed in response, giving her shoulder a playful squeeze. "Come on, let's get you home before they send out a search party."

He kissed her again, stifling a yawn as he sat on the edge of the bed.

"You don't have to get up," Amanda said quickly, seeing his fatigue. "It's late. Stay here and get some sleep."

"That's okay. I'll walk you to your car."

"Lee, you don't have to, really."

"Yes, I do...really." He leaned over to kiss her. "No arguments, okay?"

"Okay," she answered, smiling as she read the longing beneath his words. She wasn't quite ready to say goodnight yet, either.

Lee's eyes followed Amanda appreciatively as she bent to retrieve her scattered undergarments. He smiled wistfully at her as she headed for the bathroom to retrieve the rest of her clothes. She glanced back over her shoulder at him with a regretful smile. He knew in that instant that she felt the same way he did.

Consummating their relationship tonight had been a life altering experience. An experience he didn't want to end so precipitously. What he wanted to do was close his arms around Amanda, carry her back to his bed and make love to her again. But what he would do is get dressed and walk her to her car.

He rifled through the pile of clothes in his closet, grabbing a pair of jeans and a shirt. He knew this was just as difficult for her as it was for him. It occurred to him as he tucked in his shirt that their secret marriage was probably a totally lame idea. Saying goodbye after making love wasn't something that would get easier with practice.

Lee pushed these gloomy thoughts to the back of his mind and greeted Amanda with a smile as she emerged from the bathroom. "All set?"

She nodded quietly, slipping her hand comfortably into his. Their fingers interlocked automatically as they headed for the door. Lee paused for a minute to retrieve his wallet from the desk.

"As long as I'm out, I might as well pick up a couple things at the store," he said in response to her questioning look.

"At this hour?"

"Yeah," he said with a self-conscious smile. "It's only a couple blocks away and the walk will do me good. I need to do some thinkin'."

Amanda nodded quickly, her lips curling up in secret understanding. It had been an emotional evening for her, too. In a way she was looking forward to the drive home. It would give her the opportunity she needed to clear her head.

Hand in hand, they left the apartment, all too quickly finding themselves by the door of Amanda's Wagoneer. Sighing slightly, they leaned into each other, their arms instinctively going around each other one last time.

"Tomorrow seems years away instead of hours," Amanda murmured against his chest.

"It's not that far away," Lee rejoined, kissing her forehead tenderly. "Go home and get some sleep. You're gonna need it."

"Is that a promise?" she teased lightly.

"Absolutely." He flashed her a grin as he opened the door and helped her into the car. He watched as she pulled out of the parking lot, looking over her shoulder at him one last time before pulling out onto the deserted street. Lee headed slowly down the block towards the neighborhood store. As long as he was up, he might as well stop and get some coffee. He had a feeling he would need some in the morning. He was way too wound up to get much sleep.

He walked down the street, the darkness closing in on him. He breathed deeply, filling his lungs with the brisk January air. His spirits felt a little lighter as he looked up at the night sky. He smiled to himself as he remembered the evening's events. Every look and every touch was emblazoned forever on his mind and his heart. This wasn't the time to worry about things he couldn't control. Life had a way of working out. After all, in the insanity of their crazy business, he and Amanda had managed to find each other. They would find a way to make the best of this situation, too. He suddenly felt incredible as he strode briskly down the street, his heart buoyed by his dreams for the future. Never had he had so much to look forward to.

They came at him out of the darkness. He had the fleeting impression of three or four men, average build, dressed in nondescript clothing. His well-trained mind noted all this in a fraction of a second as they sprang at him from behind a large bush. Then it all went blank as one of them connected a slamming blow to his gut, knocking him backwards on the sidewalk. They quickly surrounded him.

The next few moments were filled with confusion. Lee lay helplessly on the hard concrete, momentarily stunned, until he was suddenly roused by the sound of a honking horn. His assailants hastily dispersed, disappearing into the darkness as the car screeched to a halt. He heard someone frantically calling his name and he groaned softly as he struggled to achieve a sitting position.

"Are you all right?" Amanda asked in a voice filled with concern. "Oh, my gosh." She helped him sit up, her hands moving over him as she gently examined him.

"They came out of nowhere," Lee stated in disbelief, automatically checking his back pocket. "I don't know...they got my wallet." He couldn't believe that he had actually been the victim of a mugging.

"All right, we've got to get you to the hospital," Amanda cried, more concerned with the state of his health than the state of his pockets.

"No, I, no... Amanda, I don't need to go to the hospital," Lee replied testily, rubbing his sore head with his hand.

"You've got a bump on your head - you might have a concussion," she reiterated firmly in a voice filled with concern.

"No, I don't want to go to a hospital - I don't like doctors, okay?" He looked at her for a moment, his eyes telling her that he had no intention of paying a midnight visit to the emergency room. "Ohh," he moaned as he swayed slightly, fighting the wave of dizziness that washed over him suddenly.

"You all right?" she asked, her voice riddled with doubt. " Ohh..." She caught him as he fell backward, using her arms to propel him forward.

"I will take a ride home, though," Lee agreed weakly, leaning on Amanda as they both struggled to help him stand.

"Okay, come on," she said in acceptance, knowing that this was the only assistance he'd allow her to give tonight. She took as much of his weight as she could carry as she helped him to the car. It was patently obvious that he was in worse shape than he would admit. Lee was so stubborn, she thought grimly as she half-carried, half-pushed him into the front seat. Once he made up his mind, there was no point in arguing with him. Well, she'd let him have his way tonight. But first thing in the morning, Lee Stetson would find himself in the doctor's office, whether he liked it or not.

"Count on it," she muttered determinedly to herself as she swiftly drove him home.

Nightfall had already descended when he circled the house. He could easily have rung the doorbell like a normal person, but he opted instead for his usual unconventional entrance. Even though these days he parked his corvette on the street in plain sight, it still seemed strange to simply march up the steps to Amanda's front door. Coming in this way made him feel as if he belonged here, too.

The light from the comfortable kitchen illuminated the windowpane like a beacon as he moved surely to the back door. He didn't need the light to find his way. Lee could navigate this backyard even in total darkness. He'd done it often enough in

the past three and a half years. He crept up to the window, his hand suspended in mid-air, ready to knock on the glass. A contented smile spread over his features as he quickly surveyed the scene.

The tableau that presented itself was really quite ordinary. He'd seen the same picture countless times before. Yet tonight, it felt totally new, almost as if he was seeing it for the first time. Fascinated, he suddenly realized that the scene wasn't different; they were. What they'd shared last night had bound them together in a way he'd never dreamed was possible.

His mouth formed a crooked smile as he watched her preparing dinner at the kitchen counter. Her fingers rhythmically chopped the carrots, pausing every few seconds to stare dreamily into space. She appeared totally lost in some very pleasant thoughts.

He recognized the look. She was reliving their memorable evening the night before. Lee himself had been guilty of the same thing earlier. All day, Amanda kept popping unbidden into his thoughts at the most inopportune moments. In the midst of his shower this morning, when he walked the corridors of the Agency, during his meeting this afternoon – she was there. He had a feeling that the cream of western intelligence was still trying to figure out how the subject of anti-terrorist tactics could cause his face to break out in a silly grin. Their experience last night seemed permanently engraved on his mind.

Although, when he'd been in the custody of that crusty Doc Kelford this morning, his thoughts of her had been less pleasantly engaged. Amanda was absolutely unbelievable. He'd spent the first fifteen minutes of his medical exam silently enumerating the ways he could pay her back for dragging him down to the Agency hospital. He'd tried to tell her that the only thing he'd injured was his dignity, but she'd refused to listen. Doc Kelford was quick to remind him that Amanda was only following Agency procedure, but he thought he detected some thinly disguised laughter as he examined him. The old man seemed pleased to finally have him in his clutches - Scarecrow's distaste of doctors and hospitals was legendary. Amanda hadn't stopped there, though. She had even visited Billy's office at the crack of dawn, evidently for the singular purpose of informing their boss of his little mishap.

Although he grudgingly admitted that being on the receiving end of such loving attention did make him feel pretty special. And it was wonderful to have someone who cared enough about him to worry about his health and well being. That was a new feeling for him. One he was only just beginning to appreciate. He finally belonged to someone other than himself. As he stood in the dark January night, he realized that Amanda had become his family.

She looked up with a bright smile as he rapped lightly on the glass. Somehow, Amanda didn't seem the least bit surprised to see him lurking in the backyard. It seemed more ordinary than extraordinary to see his face in her window. She gestured for him to enter, pointing to the back door with her paring knife. Discarding the tool on the counter, she happily met him as he entered the kitchen.

"Hi." He kissed her lightly, bestowing an extra hug before he released her.

"Hi, yourself. " Her fingers brushed over his lips, wiping away the trace of her lipstick that remained behind. "I missed you today."

"I missed you, too," he grinned. "I couldn't stop thinking about that reward you promised me for my heroics in Doc Kelford's office this morning."

"Oh, yeah? I was just working on that. " She smiled up at him mysteriously. "The first part, anyway."

"Yeah, I see." Lee followed her with his eyes as she headed back to the counter. She picked up her paring knife and resumed her rhythmic chopping. Lee whistled softly. He'd never realized someone could look so sexy cutting up a carrot.

Amanda could feel Lee's eyes watching her from across the room. She breathed deeply as she continued her dinner preparations. Something in the way he looked at her sent a shiver up her spine. It was something new, something that hadn't been there before. The electricity between them was almost tangible.

"How was your meeting?" Amanda inquired, unable to stop herself from smiling.

"It went well - but longer than I expected."

She glanced up at Lee who was leaning comfortably against the counter. He had the cutest expression as he surreptitiously stole a carrot stick. And his dimple was really adorable when he smiled. Why hadn't she ever noticed that before? The same way he looked last night when he...

"Of course," Lee continued as he munched on his carrot, "the meeting would have been over with much sooner if someone hadn't dragged me off to the doctor this morning."

The sound of his voice startled her and she unconsciously blushed at what she'd been thinking. "Yeah," she said absently, not really hearing what he said. "But it must have been really exciting to have the best minds in counter-intelligence in the same room. That's quite a coup."

"Well, it was certainly productive," he responded, stealing another carrot from her pile. "I think we made real progress profiling some of the newer terrorist groups that are popping up."

He silently watched her finish the carrots and start on some celery stalks. He couldn't remember when he'd seen her look more beautiful. That pale blue blouse and slacks made her eyes look even darker. Her soft hair pulled back with a clip...it was getting more and more difficult to just stand here and not touch her. He quickly crossed to her, his arms encircling her from behind.

"So," he whispered in a low voice, "what's for dinner?"

Amanda closed her eyes in anticipation as she felt his arms come around her. Abandoning her knife, she leaned back into his embrace. "Chateaubriand, wild rice and truffles."

"No oysters?" Lee teased as he tightened his hold. His lips nuzzled her neck, planting tiny kisses along her soft skin.

"I didn't think you needed any," she laughed, reveling in their newfound closeness. It was an exhilarating feeling. She tilted her head slightly to give him better access.

He slowly turned her around, his lips immediately covering hers. He felt Amanda respond to his kiss, their tongues meeting as she opened her mouth invitingly. "I've thought about doing that all day," he breathed as they parted.

"Me, too," Amanda gasped, drawing a shaky breath as she relaxed in his arms. She could feel him beginning to respond to their nearness. She closed her eyes, drinking in the scent of his aftershave. It had always been her favorite. As his hands traveled lightly over her back, her skin began to tingle. A few more minutes like this and dinner would be a lost cause. Much as she wanted to, she wasn't quite ready to follow where this was leading. Reluctantly, she pulled away, stepping back to put some well-needed distance between them.

"It's getting late," she parried, feeling herself flush slightly under the strength of his gaze. "I've got to get the dinner on."

"You're right, " Lee rejoined, his voice low and inviting, "it's very late." He smiled brightly, circling around her like a lion stalking its prey.

"Scarecrow," Amanda warned with a nervous grin, "you keep your distance." She took a deep breath as she watched him sizing up the situation.

"If I do that, you might not get the full effect of what I'm trying to say," he countered, taking a giant step forward and pulling her tightly into his waiting arms. He nibbled temptingly on her ear as his hands roamed down her back. "Actually, I'm not sure this is the right place for this conversation. What d'you say we continue this upstairs?"

"Lee," Amanda croaked, trying vainly to block out the feelings his touch was evoking. She unconsciously shivered as her thoughts ran wild. This would never do. Taking a deep breath, she summoned up what little willpower she still possessed. "Lee," she repeated firmly, "Stay right where you are."

"That won't be any fun." His laughter floated through the air, warming her with its sound.

"I mean it, Scarecrow," she stated emphatically. She looked at him with the barest hint of amusement. "Besides, if you come any closer, you'll spoil your dessert."

Lee grinned back at her, his eyebrows rising suggestively. "Dessert?"

"Yes," Amanda replied with a sultry smile. "You know, the stuff that comes after that special dinner I promised you?"

"You aren't talking about the dishes, are you?" he teased.

"No, I'm not," she responded with a laugh. "Actually, I was thinking of following your example tonight and just leaving them in the sink. I have other plans for after dinner."

"This is starting to look like a very special dinner indeed," he returned, flashing her his most charming smile.

"Just the beginning of a very special weekend." She smiled as her mind quickly replayed last night's encounter. "I think I promised you that last night. And I always keep my promises."

"So do I." He leaned forward to kiss her again, but Amanda stopped him.

"First things first," she said with a grin. "I fought my way through a crowd of Friday afternoon grocery shoppers for that chateaubriand. I don't want it to end up a charred mess." She leaned over and kissed him lightly. "We do have the whole weekend."

"You're right," he agreed affably. "After all this time, what's another hour? I'm sure dessert will be well worth the wait." He returned her kiss, adding in a barely audible whisper, "after all, it certainly was last night."

Amanda's cheeks reddened a little at his words and she quickly returned to her dinner preparations. "So...what did Doc Kelford have to say after I left this morning?"

"Nothing," Lee answered with a pained expression. "Like I told Billy, he poked a little, prodded a little and said I was fine."

"Good."

"By the way, speaking of Billy, he said you were in his office at seven o'clock this morning. Wasn't that a little extreme?"

"I was worried about you," Amanda said with a sigh. "I wanted to make sure you were okay. I knew you'd never tell Billy on your own."

"I'm fine, Amanda." He regarded her warmly, leaning over to place a tender kiss on her cheek. "Really, I am. You don't have to worry."

"I won't worry as long as you're well." She smiled innocently at him as she surveyed the kitchen counter. "Hey, there's a bottle of wine over there that could use your attention."

"Oh, yeah?" He broke into another grin at her uncanny ability to dodge a touchy subject and quickly reached for the bottle of wine. He lifted his eyebrows again as he inspected her choice. "Amanda," he said with grudging respect, "this is a fabulous Beaujolais."

"Glad you like it," she responded with a smile, hearing the unmasked surprise in his voice. When they first met, she didn't know Chablis from Merlot. But three years with Lee Stetson had taught her, among other things, how to choose a good bottle of wine.

Lee focused his attention on the Beaujolais, manipulating the opener with practiced skill. "Someone once said that a good relationship is like a fine bottle of wine," he stated sagely, raising his eyes to glance over at her. "The older it gets, the better it is."

"Well, that's very wise. Who said that?"

"Me."

She looked up at him and smiled. He presented a perfect picture of domesticity as he stood here in her kitchen. This moment had been a long time coming and she quietly savored it.

"It was just a theory though," Lee finished, leaning over to kiss her cheek again. "Until now."

The sound of the doorbell intruded on the scene and they both paused for a minute, starting at the noise.

"Huh," Amanda said, looking at Lee with a quizzical expression. She had no idea who could possibly be at the door. The boys' friends all knew they were out of town. With a shrug of her shoulders, she went to answer it, brushing her hand across his arm as she passed by.

Lee turned his attention back to the wine. He trusted that Amanda would dispose of whoever was intruding on their weekend alone very quickly. Pouring himself a glass, he took a sip. Excellent, he thought once more as its distinctive flavor titillated his pallet.

"Oh, Amanda," he called, heartily approving of her choice, "this wine is to die for."

"Lee." Her voice was tentative as she reentered the kitchen, Billy Melrose in tow. "Uh, Billy's here."

He glanced up in surprise, smiling as his friend followed Amanda into the room. "Hey, what's up?"

"Sorry to bother you, Lee," Billy began brusquely, effectively sidestepping the customary small talk. "But when I didn't find you at home, I..." his voice trailed off and he regarded Lee through eyes laden with concern. "We have to talk." He gave Amanda a nervous glance, and then added, "alone."

"Is it business?" Lee inquired with a forced laugh. Visions of another curtailed weekend flashed through his head. He had a sinking feeling that Billy hadn't tracked him down at Amanda's just to pay a social call.

"No." Billy Melrose deliberately studied the floor. At times like these, he knew with unqualified certainty that he hated his job. He crossed the room, looking anywhere but into the waiting eyes of his friend and colleague.

Lee followed suit, moving over to stand beside Amanda. He suddenly felt an inexplicable need to be closer to her. Billy's uncharacteristic behavior was

beginning to worry him. "Well, then," he said at last, facing his boss with a hesitant smile. "Amanda doesn't have to leave. Right?"

Billy frowned, pausing for a fraction of a second before speaking. "Doctor Kelford phoned in the results of your blood tests. They're not good."

He could feel the heat of Amanda's worried glance. "Meaning?" The hair on the back of his neck prickled as he anticipated Billy's next words.

"You're carrying something called PD-2. A bacteria. The chemical warfare people think it's Russian."

This time Lee met her eyes, allowing himself one brief contact before he asked the inevitable. "Cut to the chase. What's the damage estimate?"

"Death is certain within 72 hours. And we don't have the antidote."

* * * * *

Amanda sat quietly in the Q-Bureau, her anxiety growing with each passing moment. She didn't know if she wanted or dreaded Lee's return. She had a sinking feeling that when he walked through the door, the news would be anything but good.

They had followed Billy back to the Agency after he'd delivered his bombshell in her kitchen. She had wanted to accompany Lee to Billy's office to meet with Dr. Andrew McJohn, the Agency's current chemical warfare specialist, but he had asked her to wait for him up here. Sensing that her presence would only make things harder for him, she silently acquiesced. But now she felt so helpless as she waited for his return. Here she sat, alone in their office, while elsewhere, in the bowels of the Agency, Lee listened to McJohn solemnly pronounce sentence.

Unable to sit still any longer, she began to nervously pace the floor. The Q-Bureau had a different feel to it at night. The silence made the most ordinary things appear ominous. Or maybe it was just her mood. She desperately searched the room for something familiar to hold onto. Something that would tell her this was just another routine assignment, not the beginning of the end of everything she held dear.

Her eyes fell on Lee's cluttered desk and she smiled in spite of herself. It presented such a contrast to the orderly files resting on top of hers. She didn't know how he managed to work amid all that chaos. That particular mess had been sitting there since Thursday afternoon. She'd offered to straighten it up, knowing that his schedule was tight on Friday. But he'd told her that he could never find anything after she'd been on one of her 'neatness kicks'. He'd joked that the mess wasn't going anywhere; he would get to it on Monday. It briefly occurred to her that now he might never get the chance.

She banished that gloomy thought from her mind. They'd been in tough situations before and had always come through. It wouldn't be any different this time. The Agency had lots of resources at its command. If their government didn't have the antidote, there must be a way to acquire it through diplomatic channels. Surely the powers that be wouldn't just sit back and allow one of their best to fall prey to this Russian plot.

Visions of Stemwinder flashed through her mind and that voice in the back of her head told her she was grasping at straws. The Agency dealt with issues not individuals. In this world, everyone was expendable.

No, she couldn't believe that. Billy was Lee's friend; he wouldn't just sit back and calmly watch him die. If she let herself think that help wouldn't be forthcoming from the Agency, she might start screaming. And the last thing Lee needed right now was a hysterical female. Her tears would frighten him more than the ordeal he was facing.

She took a deep breath, trying to gain some semblance of composure. She remembered how happy they had been last night. How right it felt to finally be in his arms and in his bed. The future had never seemed brighter. Now, it seemed like that had happened in some other lifetime. And they might never get another chance to...

'Stop it, Amanda,' she firmly ordered. Thinking like that wouldn't change anything. It only made things worse. Any minute now, Lee would come through that door and she couldn't let him see her despair. She formed her features into an impassive mask, hiding the emotions that churned just below the surface. She would keep her

feelings under tight control. For his sake. She settled back on the sofa once more to wait.

Amanda walked back and forth through the rustic living room. She was far too nervous to sit still. It was much better to keep moving. As long as she kept putting one foot in front of the other, she found she didn't think as much. Focusing on the physical kept her thoughts distracted. If she sat down on the couch, she might be forced to look at that antique clock adorning the wall. She might have to watch the second hand travel endlessly around its face. Or listen to the pendulum tick away the seconds with unerring accuracy.

Lee had been ominously quiet ever since their arrival at the Agency's isolation facility. He had described 'Mrs. McMurty's', as the intelligence community euphemistically referred to this place, as a high security complex with all the comforts of home. If the situation hadn't been so serious, Amanda might have laughed at his use of such an oxymoron.

It was late when they arrived and, at Amanda's suggestion, they'd gone into the bedroom to lie down. Despite being up for most of the night, she knew they wouldn't sleep. But she needed to feel his arms around her and he needed some quiet time to regroup. And they both needed to try and make some sense out of everything that was happening.

She had found the impersonality of the master bedroom somewhat unsettling. She would take the familiar clutter of Lee's apartment any day. Still, despite the chilling decor, it felt good to simply be with Lee. As soon as they climbed into bed, she'd unconsciously fitted herself against him, drawn to him almost like a magnet. It was amazing how quickly her body had grown accustomed to his.

Tucked safely in his arms, she had tried to pretend that everything would be okay. She couldn't read his face in the darkness, but she could imagine only too well what he must be feeling. Her own thoughts were churning violently; wildly optimistic one minute, devoid of hope the next. The implications of what he'd told her in the Q-Bureau kept running endlessly through her mind. An ultra-secret division of the KGB called the 'Scarlet Rose' was conducting a field test for a new biological weapon right here in D.C. The operation was under the personal direction of

Anatole Donek, an old enemy of Scarecrow's. As close as they could figure, his operatives had apparently injected Lee during his walk last night, the 'mugging' staged for effect. According to Dr. McJohn, the prognosis was anything but good. In less than twenty-four hours, Lee would be contagious. After that, it was only a question of time before the matter reached its inevitable conclusion. PD-2 amounted to little more than a death sentence.

She involuntarily shivered when she thought of what might have happened. Donek's revenge had been foiled simply because she cared enough about Lee to insist he be checked out. If the PD-2 had gone undiscovered, its ripple effect would have been disastrous. Not only would Lee have died, but Scarecrow would have been the unwitting means of destroying some of the best agents in counter-intelligence. It would have been a devastating legacy.

None of that mattered now. Selfishly, she could only think that his life was still in jeopardy. Tightening her arms around him, she had tried to shield him from what was happening inside his body. She could sense his growing restlessness, though, and as the dawn finally broke, he gave up all pretense of rest. Bestowing a comforting pat on her shoulder, he'd headed into the other room.

Amanda made her second pass around the living room, rubbing her arms to get her circulation going. Outside, the warm sunshine belied the fact that it was actually January 31st. But inside the cabin, the dampness seemed to pierce right through her. It was the atmosphere in this place that made her feel so cold. To the casual observer, 'Mrs. McMurty's' seemed like a luxurious four-star resort. If you could overlook the surveillance cameras strategically placed throughout the grounds, the barbed wire fences around the perimeter, or the electronic gate with its machine gun toting guards.

You could disguise those little details any way you wanted, but in the final analysis this place was nothing more than an elaborately decorated holding cell. She was beginning to feel like an animal in a cage. And if she felt that way, she could only imagine what must be going through Lee's mind. She watched him standing by the stone fireplace, idly fiddling with the fire. The quiet was unsettling; the only sound in this room was the crackle of the logs. She opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out. There was so much she wanted to say that she couldn't say anything.

I instead, Lee broke the oppressive silence. "Amanda, you saw the film 'Lawrence of Arabia' didn't you?"

"Sure," she answered distractedly, patting him on the back as she passed by. Every so often, she found herself reaching out to touch him, as if somehow trying to commit him to memory.

"You remember the scene where he put his hand over the flame of a candle? He doesn't move...doesn't even flinch." He poked at the logs burning in the grate.

"Um-Hmm." Amanda looked at the windows. Someone had taken great pains with the decorating, choosing the sheer fabric that adorned them with deliberate care.

"Finally someone asks him, 'what is the secret, how do you keep it from hurting?'" Lee's voice was even and controlled as he leaned against the perfectly rounded stones of the chimney. "And Lawrence says 'the secret is not to keep it from hurting, the secret's not to mind it'."

She opened the curtained windows and exposed its iron underbelly. Carefully, she fingered the bars. Tastefully decorated, indeed.

"I think that's the way this business is, Amanda," Lee said sadly.

She folded her arms across her chest as she turned around to face him. She had a feeling she knew where this was leading and she was profoundly grateful that Lee had come to the same conclusion she had.

"I can't say I ever learned not to mind the pain," Lee went on, "but I sure as hell learned to live with it. As long as I could fight back...make a difference."

He tossed the iron poker into the fireplace. Breathing deeply, he quickly crossed over to where she was waiting by the window. "Amanda, I can't do it," he told her in an impassioned voice. "They might find Donek...they might come up with an antidote...I can't sit this one out, do you hear me?" He grabbed her arms, almost daring her to disagree.

"Well, I knew that before we even came here."

He looked at the barred windows, and then back at her questioningly. His hand rested lightly on the iron framework. "I'm an Omega class prisoner," he explained carefully. "Any escape attempt from this place requires a shoot to kill response. A D-1 manhunt goes into effect if I do get out..."

She nodded in perfect understanding. "How do we get through these bars?"

"That's what I thought," Lee muttered in relief as he kissed her quickly. He smiled at her, at the look of unswerving loyalty written on her face. The one that said that together, they had a fighting chance of beating this thing. "Watch."

* * * * *

Amanda sighed as she stood at her living room window. This was the first 'down' time she'd had since their escape this morning from the isolation facility. They had been constantly on the move, trying to stay one step ahead of the Agency bloodhounds. Lee had explained that his escape would cause a major scramble, so he'd taken what steps he could to neutralize it. Their first stop had been to Leatherneck, the Agency's in-house equipment specialist. He had fitted Lee with a 'dead man's watch', a device that would deliver a lethal dose of cyanide at exactly 11:30 tonight. Even though he wasn't technically contagious until midnight, Lee had insisted on the thirty-minute cushion. He didn't want to leave any room for error.

Lee then arranged a 'meet' with Billy. Amanda knew it wouldn't be an easy conversation. Regulations plainly stated that Lee be placed in protective custody. They were asking their boss to cross Dr. Smyth one more time.

Lee had insisted on meeting Billy alone. With the Agency trackers still on the loose, he'd wanted her out of the line of fire. He trusted Billy, but they both remembered the way Dr. Smyth had shadowed him during the Stemwinder mess last fall. Amanda reluctantly agreed to keep watch from a distance.

Even through binoculars some fifty feet away, Billy's reaction to what Lee had done was unmistakable. He didn't like the idea of the 'dead man's watch' any more than she did. Lee had explained that it took two keys to remove Leatherneck's device. He had given one to her earlier; he was entrusting Billy with the other. When and if they found the antidote, the two of them would use their keys to release Lee from

his self-imposed death sentence. With this failsafe in place, Lee knew Billy would agree to keep the dogs leashed and give him the room to track Donek on his own.

Amanda turned away from the window with a sigh, crossing the room to retrieve her dust cloth. The waiting was beginning to get to her; she needed to keep busy. She'd already changed her clothes twice today. Slowly, she set to work on the end tables again, wiping and re-wiping their already clean surfaces. Anything to stop thinking about what she couldn't stop thinking about.

About what had happened in the last few years. About what was going to happen in the next few hours. About the way he sounded when he called her his partner. About the way he looked when he told her he loved her. About the last time they'd kissed. About the first time they'd made love. And about what might not have happened if only she'd stayed in Lee's bed instead of insisting on coming home.

She glanced down at her watch again. Almost four o'clock now. Part of her wished the time would pass quickly so she would know one way or the other how this all would end. The other part longed to hang onto every second in case this was all the time they had. She both wanted and dreaded tomorrow...and all the tomorrows that would follow. They stretched endlessly ahead, as a blessing or a curse, she didn't know which.

She could hear the well-modulated tones of Lee and his informant Fritz 'the Cat' coming from the family room. The voices floated soothingly over her consciousness as she listened to them finalize the plan. She smiled in spite of herself. No matter what the odds, Scarecrow couldn't just sit back and do nothing.

Donek had the antidote and he was safely ensconced inside the Soviet Embassy, for all intents and purposes, untouchable. Since the man obviously had no intention of leaving sovereign soil until Scarecrow's time had run out, they had no recourse except to break in to the embassy and force Donek to talk. Lee had told her Fritz was the most imaginative crook he'd ever run across. Amanda could only hope he was resourceful enough to find a way to successfully breach the security of the embassy.

The operation was a long shot at best. Amanda didn't really hold out much hope anymore. Last night, even this morning, she'd been optimistic, thinking that they would find their way out of this. As the day wore on, Amanda realized how slim was

their chance of success. And that, in all probability, she wouldn't be with Lee at the end. If he didn't get caught in this desperate break-in, then time would most likely run out for him there on Soviet soil. That 'silver lining' Lee always managed to find was finally starting to tarnish.

At least they had Billy and Francine on their side. Amanda knew they were jeopardizing their careers to help them, but it was a risk they both had accepted willingly. It bore silent testimony to how much Lee meant to them. Billy had even gone one step further. After Lee left their meeting this morning, he had given her the other watch key, with the directive to cut Scarecrow loose if they got the antidote. His faith was a double-edged sword. Her heart was warmed by his trust, but she now felt as if she held Lee's life in the palm of her hand.

The sound of the doorbell intruded on her reverie. She answered it almost in a trance. A young messenger handed her an envelope. She patted her pockets, but he smiled, not expecting a tip. With a start, Amanda realized he wasn't a normal delivery boy. He was from the Agency. Young as he was, he had that 'need to know' expression on his face.

She closed the door, heading towards the family room. Her fingers patted the document gingerly. She barely noticed Fritz 'the Cat' as he passed her in the hall.

"See you later, Mrs. King," Fritz muttered as he left, studiously avoiding eye contact. It was plainly evident that he, too, thought this plan was doomed.

Amanda nodded absently as she turned back to the documents with a frown. Still reading, she silently entered the room.

Lee abandoned his floor plans as he heard her come in. Looking up, he saw her stop apprehensively by the bookshelves, her head bent in concentration. He could tell something was very wrong.

He had a sinking feeling he knew what she was holding. Getting up, he approached her with trepidation. She still hadn't looked at him. "Amanda," he asked in concern, "what is it?"

She glanced up, then turned quickly away. "It's from IFF," she answered solemnly. "A messenger just brought it." She gave him a hopeless look as she handed him the papers.

Lee recognized them immediately. "They work fast," he said, turning away, unable to meet her eye. As always, his boss was unerringly efficient. "I asked Billy to take care of this last night."

The room closed in around him as he fingered the papers. He read the first page with a sigh. All these years as an agent and he'd never given these forms a second thought. It hadn't mattered until he met Amanda. His feelings swelled and he fought to keep them under control. He walked away a little, trying to dispel the emotional claustrophobia.

"Amanda," he began, "I've never had a beneficiary for the Agency Life Insurance policy and...I wanted you and your boys to be taken care of, you know just..." He dared to encounter her eye, for the first time admitting that things might not turn out okay. Sitting down on the sofa, he finished with barely suppressed emotion, "just in case."

Amanda took a deep breath, her tears just below the surface. "When do you have to leave?"

Out of habit he glanced at his watch. In its place he saw the timer on his own personal doomsday device. "Billy's here at six."

Amanda stood still as a statue, watching. Lee sat on the sofa, so physically near and yet further away with every second that passed. She wanted to freeze the moment, to stop those numerals on that damn device from their inevitable countdown. She felt the keys to the dead man's watch jingle tantalizingly in her pocket. No, she couldn't do that. Only one thing could stop their flow. Instead she sat down beside him, wrapping him in her arms.

She felt his arms come around her as she rested her cheek against his. Closing her eyes, she soberly intoned, "I want more time."

"So do I." Lee pulled back slightly, looking deeply into Amanda's eyes. He saw in them the same thing he'd seen so long ago at a crowded train station. He knew she'd be there for him no matter what happened.

"Lee," she whispered, her hands gently caressing his face. "I..." She stopped, unable to continue.

"It's okay, I know," he said, smiling sadly at her hesitancy. They sat motionless for a few minutes, then slowly, surely, their lips met. Lee didn't know who had made the first move. Only that when they touched, the emotion they shared was the same.

They leaned back on the sofa, their kisses becoming more urgent as their feelings threatened to run out of control. Lee could feel Amanda's hands on his hair, his back, his arms...everywhere. It felt so good to just hold her and respond to her. For one brief moment to feel and not to think. His fingers moved over her back and hips as he kissed her lips, her face, her ear.

Amanda moaned slightly, pressing him closer. She pulled him down on top of her, reveling in the feel of his body crushing hers. She felt his hands underneath her sweater and she quickly unbuttoned his shirt. She kissed him deeply as her hands moved over his smooth chest. He felt so reassuringly alive. She pulled his shirt down, her need to touch him almost overpowering.

She paused and frowned, suddenly perplexed. For some reason, she couldn't manage to get the shirt off.

They both looked down and saw that it was caught on his right arm. Lee sat up abruptly as Amanda looked away, both recognizing the problem. The sleeve was tangled around Leatherneck's device.

Lee pulled his shirt back on, silently redoing the buttons. "Amanda, we can't..."

"I know," she said, her voice almost inaudible. She, too, sat up, straightening her rumpled clothes.

Lee looked at Amanda, recognizing his own despair in her eyes. He lay back against the sofa and held out his arms.

Wordlessly, she moved into them, resting her head against his chest. She could hear his heart returning to its normal rhythm. She inhaled and exhaled slowly, unconsciously timing her breaths to coincide with his.

"Amanda."

His voice was barely a whisper, but it broke the perfect rhythm she'd achieved. "Yes?" she breathed, straining to get it back.

"No matter what happens, at least we have the other night. Nothing can take that away from us."

"I know," she said quietly. "It meant everything to me."

"Me too."

She moved her hand up and down his chest, pausing to finger the button on his shirt. She quickly unfastened it, sliding her hand inside. The warmth of his skin comforted her as she rested her hand next to his heart.

"Lee..." She hesitated a minute as she struggled to voice the thought that had been eating at her ever since Billy appeared at the door last night.

"What?" he gently prodded. He calmly stroked her arm, his touch begging her to continue. They were long past the point of keeping things from each other.

"I can't help thinking...about the other night." She closed her eyes, fighting the tears that pricked hotly behind her eyelids. "If I'd stayed the way you asked me to, then this wouldn't have happened."

"Amanda." He said her name reverently, his love flowing through every syllable. "This is not your fault. I don't want you thinking like that. Ever." He sat up suddenly, cupping her face with his hands as he looked deeply into her brown eyes. "Promise me."

She nodded sadly, her eyes locked on his. "I just wish..."

"It wouldn't have made any difference, Amanda. Donek would have found another opportunity." He pulled her into his arms again and settled back on the sofa. "If you hadn't gotten me to the doctor, God knows what might have happened. If you had caught this from me..."

"Shh. It's okay," she whispered, her hand rubbing lightly over his chest.

He let out the breath he'd been holding, pushing that thought from his mind with an effort. "I don't want you to have any regrets about us. About anything that's happened over the past four years," he added in a soft voice. "I don't."

"I don't, either."

"I wouldn't change anything, Amanda," he continued, closing his eyes. He could see her face take shape in his mind. The soft curve of her cheek, her ready smile. "If not meeting you could make this turn out differently...it wouldn't matter to me. Even if I knew what was going to happen, I'd still do everything the same."

She drew a shaky breath, silently memorizing the feel of him in her arms. "I love you."

He pulled her closer, his lips brushing tenderly through her hair. He glanced once more at his wrist, at the numerals running backwards all too quickly. Before long, Billy would be here. It would be time to go. He unconsciously tightened his grip.

She sighed as she felt him pull her closer. The silence covered them both like a blanket. They didn't need to speak; they'd already said it all. There was nothing to do now but wait. Wait for Billy to knock on the door. Wait for Dr. McJohn to come up with an antidote. Wait for a future that might go on without him.

She closed her eyes, once more matching her breathing to his.

Amanda pinched herself, trying to make sure this wasn't a dream. Part of her refused to believe it was really over. When the dust finally settled, she and Lee would have quite a few people to thank.

Billy Melrose had proved himself an invaluable friend tonight. Not only had he provided them with med-vans, truth serum to persuade Donek to talk and a team of specialists to concoct the antidote, but he had risked his life and his career to accompany Lee on his suicide mission.

Amanda had hoped Lee would change his mind and let her go in with him, but he wouldn't hear of it. She'd opened her mouth to protest, then realized that this was more than his usual 'wait in the car' line. These next few hours were critical. His energy had to be focused on finding Donek, not diverted to worry over her welfare.

She had resigned herself, acting instead as the mission navigator. If she couldn't be with him physically, she at least still felt connected by microphone. As it was, they almost hadn't pulled it off. The Soviets had discovered their presence at the eleventh hour, Billy taking a bullet in the leg before they could make a clean escape. Amanda knew there would be diplomatic hell to pay tomorrow.

But none of that mattered tonight. The tables had been turned on the cagey Russian and McJohn's team had the antidote. With the truth drug in his system, Donek had little choice but to divulge his secret. Instead of a hero's welcome in Moscow, all that awaited him now was a quick trip to the Gulag.

"What's taking so long?" Amanda muttered to herself as she nervously walked back and forth in front of the closed door that separated her from Lee. After Dr. McJohn had administered the first dose of the vaccine in the med-van, they had lost no time returning to the Agency hospital. Lee needed further medical treatment and Billy needed attention as well.

Francine watched as Amanda crossed her line of sight yet again. This constant pacing was beginning to grate on her frayed nerves. "Relax, Amanda," she groaned, rubbing her eyes to try and get rid of the grainy feeling. "Lee's going to be fine. They got the vaccine inside him in time."

"I'll feel better when I hear that from Dr. McJohn, Francine," Amanda snapped in frustration. She started slightly at the sound of her voice; she hadn't intended to be so curt. These days she usually let Francine's comments run right off her back. She braced herself, waiting for the inevitable retort. But Francine was strangely quiet.

She studied her fellow agent a little more closely. Francine Desmond looked as exhausted as Amanda felt. She had closed her eyes as she leaned against the wall, every once in a while nervously licking her lips.

"I'm sorry, Francine." Amanda smiled weakly as she tentatively offered the olive branch. "I guess it's been a rough twenty-four hours."

"For a lot of people," Francine stated in a low voice.

"I know," Amanda said in painful understanding. This had been a strain for Francine, too, albeit in a different way. "I guess I can't stop thinking about what could have happened," she confided in a small voice. "If we hadn't gotten that watch off him in time..."

"But we did," Francine reminded her gently. "You did. You didn't let the pressure get to you. You got to Lee in time, then helped him get Billy out. You behaved like a true professional."

Amanda thought she detected a note of praise in Francine's voice. This night had been one crazy, emotional roller-coaster ride. She started to thank her, but Billy's noisy approach cut her off. He slowly limped towards them, leaning heavily on a wooden cane. It made an odd thumping sound that echoed through the quiet hallway.

He acknowledged them both with a nod at the closed door. "Any news?"

Francine shook her head. "No. Dr. McJohn's still inside."

"How's your leg, sir?" Amanda asked solicitously.

"It's fine, Amanda. It's only a scratch. I've had worse."

Amanda nodded in silent acknowledgment. Gunshot wounds were part and parcel of the life that went on unseen within these walls. Just like this current ordeal.

"Amanda."

Billy's voice interrupted her thoughts and she looked up and met the concerned eyes of her chief.

"You're exhausted," he stated kindly. "Why don't you lie down and get some rest? If you don't want to go home, I'm sure we can scare up a room for you here."

"No, that's okay, sir. I'll wait for Dr. McJohn to finish."

"All right," Billy sighed. He should have known that prying her away from her 'partner' right now was a losing proposition. He smiled to himself at that euphemism. Back in the van, after the antidote was safely inside Lee, they had reached for each other in overwhelming relief. It only took one look to know how those two really felt.

The door opened abruptly. Amanda tensed and Francine snapped to attention, both of their eyes glued to Dr. McJohn as he came through the door.

"How is he?" Billy's voice was calm, but his hand gripped his cane tightly.

"The antidote is doing its job," McJohn replied with military precision. He rifled through the reports on his clipboard. "The preliminary tests all look very good."

"That's great news," Billy answered.

"Yes, it is," Francine sighed, closing her eyes in relief.

Amanda said nothing, but took a deep breath, bracing herself against the wall for support. She suddenly felt very tired.

"He still needs twelve hours of I.V. medication, then pills for the next few days," McJohn continued. "And of course, we'll monitor with follow-up blood work. But from the way things look now, I anticipate that in ten days or so we won't be able to find any remnants of the PD-2 in his system."

"Thank you for all your help," Billy said, holding out his hand.

Dr. McJohn smiled as he accepted it. "We've been trying to find this antidote for some time. Once we had the right roadmap, modifying the Tetracycline was an easy

job. I'm the one who should be thanking you." He turned his eyes to the closed door. "Both of you."

Billy Melrose shrugged in response. "It turned out well for all of us."

"Well, it's been a long night," Dr. McJohn continued. "I'm going to get some sleep." He looked pointedly over at Amanda. "That's a prescription I'd recommend for all of you." McJohn said his goodnights and quickly left.

"I second that," Billy said, looking at his two exhausted agents. "We could all benefit from a little shut eye."

"You won't get an argument from me," Francine said through her yawn.

"Amanda?" Billy placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. "You need some rest, too."

"I'm fine, Sir. I'd rather wait until Lee's ready to go. You know, just to make sure..."

"If that's what you want, it's okay by me," Billy replied casually, responding to her implied question. He was pretty sure it would be okay with Lee, too.

"Yes, sir." Amanda hesitated a minute as she stood by the door. "Thank you for everything. Both of you." She and Francine exchanged tired smiles.

"Tell Lee I'll see him tomorrow," Billy said, quickly brushing aside her thanks.

Amanda nodded, then headed into the room.

Billy and Francine stood together for a minute in the quiet hallway, watching the door swing shut behind her. "Francine," Billy said thoughtfully, "turn off the surveillance monitors in Lee's room."

Francine raised her eyebrow accusingly.

"We have too damn little privacy in this business as it is," Billy countered. "Let's give them a little tonight."

Billy and Francine shared a conspiratorial look as they turned and slowly walked down the hall.

* * * * *

Amanda shut the door quietly behind her. Lee was stretched out on the bed, his eyes closed. She quickly glanced down at her watch as she had done automatically now for the past day and a half. It was later than she thought – almost two fifteen. She let out a deep breath. Time was no longer the enemy. Everything was going to be okay.

She slowly approached the bed. “Hi, there,” she said as Lee opened his eyes.

“Hi, yourself.” His face lit up in a smile as he felt her hand close around his. “I’ve missed you. I thought McJohn would be in here all night.”

“I know. I was about to go crazy out there in the hall.” She squeezed his left hand as her eyes were drawn to the I.V. slowly dripping into his other arm. “Is that very uncomfortable?”

“I’ve felt better,” Lee confided. “But it’s kind of nice to be able to feel, you know?”

“I’m sure they could give you something if you asked,” she replied in concern. “Let me go find someone.”

“Amanda.” Lee’s hand held her back. “They already offered, but I turned them down. I wanted to see you.”

Amanda nodded in understanding. After the stress of the last few hours, it was good to finally be alone with him. She pulled up a chair and sat by the bed, bringing his fingers to her lips for a quick kiss.

Lee sighed, reaching over to tenderly brush her cheek with his free hand. “You look exhausted.”

“I feel exhausted,” Amanda sighed, leaning her head against his palm.

His finger stroked soothingly over her cheek. "You should probably go home and get some rest."

"Not a chance, Stetson. I'm afraid you can't get rid of me that easily."

"No?" He shrugged at her as he smiled.

"No," she answered, leaning over to briefly kiss him. "Besides, as I recall, you promised me the whole weekend together."

"I vaguely remember something about that," he grinned. "Years ago."

"Turned out a little differently than we'd planned, though," she put in, her laughter mingling with his.

"Yeah. For thing, there were too many people around and we were both overdressed."

"You got that right," Amanda sighed, looking longingly into his eyes.

He returned her look, then suddenly scooted over. "Care to join me?" He patted the bed invitingly.

Amanda hesitated, her eyes darting around the room. Even though it was just the two of them, she couldn't shake the feeling that they weren't alone. But the need to feel Lee's arms around her won out and she crawled in beside him. She settled against him cautiously, careful not to disturb the I.V. attachment.

He gently stroked her back and Amanda felt the tension finally begin to leave her body. She relaxed under his touch, resting her head comfortably on his chest. As she heard his steady heartbeat, her eyes unexpectedly filled with tears. She took a deep breath, trying to stop herself from shaking. She didn't want him to misunderstand.

"Shh," he said in a soothing voice. "It's okay. I'm here."

Amanda smiled through her tears. He seemed to intuitively know exactly what she was thinking. She felt his lips brush through her hair and the tenderness of that simple gesture overwhelmed her. She buried her head in his chest, sobbing quietly as she lay against him.

Lee held her closer. His fingers continued to stroke her back, silently encouraging her to let her feelings out. He'd been waiting for her meltdown. She'd been incredibly strong throughout this nightmare. They both had.

He sighed as he thought about how close they'd come this time to losing it all. He wondered briefly how long their luck would hold, how many other Donek's were waiting out there in the shadows. He determinedly pushed that thought from his mind. He didn't want to think in terms of 'could-have-beens'. It was enough right now that they were together.

His own eyes became moist as he listened to her crying. He tried to imagine how he would have handled things if their positions had been reversed. He couldn't conceive of a life now without her in it. Selfishly, he was relieved that he wouldn't have been the one left behind.

He caressed her gently, trying to let her know with his touch that everything was okay. Eventually, her sobs subsided and he felt her breathing even out. "I love you, Amanda," he whispered in her ear, even though he knew she was sleeping. He closed his own eyes and surrendered to his fatigue.

* * * * *

Lee woke abruptly, momentarily disoriented. He glanced around the semi-darkened room, trying to make sense of his surroundings. The Agency hospital, he thought suddenly, last night's events replaying in his mind.

He looked over at his I.V. bag. It was still almost three quarters full. He guessed they'd been asleep for only a few hours. Every muscle in his body was screaming and he felt thoroughly exhausted. As he twisted around, trying to find a comfortable position on the narrow bed, he felt Amanda stir in his arms.

"Hey," he greeted as her eyes fluttered open. "I didn't mean to wake you. Go back to sleep."

"What time is it?" she answered groggily.

"Does it matter?"

"I guess it doesn't," she responded with a yawn. "Not anymore." She snuggled closer against him, feeling completely relaxed at last. "I didn't mean to come apart like that earlier. I guess I got a little emotional."

"It's okay," he replied gently. "You're entitled once in a while."

She exhaled softly, her fingers toying with the button on his shirt. "It's just when I start to think about what could have happened...what almost happened..."

"I know," Lee nodded. "I feel the same way. We both know the risks we take every day. That's one of the reasons I waited so long to...well, you know."

"I know," she sighed in agreement. They'd said these same words many times before. There was no need to go into it all again.

They lay together in silence for a few minutes. Lee pulled Amanda closer, his hand absently playing with her hair. This had been one hell of a weekend. He suspected that their secret relationship wasn't much of a secret anymore. At least, not where Billy and Francine were concerned. He shouldn't have embraced Amanda so openly back in the van, but at that moment he was in no emotional shape to keep up the concerned partner routine. He needed to feel her arms around him, to remind himself that they had a future after all.

He felt like their relationship had aged years in the last two days. Was it just last night that he had been standing in Amanda's kitchen feeling like an ordinary husband? He realized now that 'ordinary' was an impossibility. This latest business with the KGB had hammered that point painfully home. Sometimes he thought he was growing tired of living his life between the shadowy borders of a violent world. He could pretend all he wanted to, but the Agency would never allow them a normal life.

Okay, Lee thought sadly, so they would never be a 'typical' married couple. He could live with that. It was probably highly overrated anyway. As long as Amanda

was part of the package, he could face whatever problems life or the Agency threw at them. But he didn't want to wait any longer. If nothing else, he understood now more than ever that time was too precious to waste.

"Amanda," he whispered softly in her ear. "Will you marry me?"

"Will I marry you?" she asked in a teasing voice. "I thought I'd already answered that question.

"I'm serious," he admonished in a low voice.

Amanda heard the quiet urgency in his tone. Her arms tightened around him and she gave him the only response she could.

"When?"

"Two weeks?" Lee asked hesitantly. "I think it takes about that long for the blood tests and paperwork."

"Okay," she said, her face breaking into a radiant smile. "Two weeks, then."

Lee smiled, too. He never thought he'd feel this happy lying in a hospital bed. He pulled her closer to seal their agreement with a kiss.

* * * * *

Lee smiled as they walked hand in hand through Amanda's front door. Billy had dropped them both off earlier after he had been released from the Agency hospital. Their friend had been on his way to a conference call with Dr. Smyth and two top-level presidential advisors, but he didn't seem worried. After all, they now had the antidote to the KGB's most potent biological weapon. That would go a long way towards smoothing any ruffled political feathers. Lee knew from painful experience that Dr. Smyth was first and foremost a pragmatist.

"I think we pulled that off pretty well." Amanda's voice sounded relaxed and happy as she added, "you and the boys seemed much more at ease tonight."

"We were," Lee agreed, amazed that the evening had gone so smoothly. For the first time, he didn't feel like an intruder. "Listening to Philip talk about his girlfriend takes me back..."

"I'll bet it does," she laughed, punching him playfully in the ribs.

"Ancient history now," he laughed, squeezing her hand as they came to a halt in front of his car. "Dinner was terrific. Thank you."

"I'm glad you stayed," Amanda said with a smile. "It was nice not to watch you run out the back door when Mother and the boys came in."

"I know," he grinned. "Although, I was hoping that I'd have you to myself for a while."

"Me, too. Wouldn't you know, today of all days, they would get home early?"

"Yeah. I guess we should have cleaned up that mess as soon as we got home instead of getting sidetracked on the couch."

"Probably, but the couch was much more fun," Amanda put in, her eyes sparkling. Lee's reference to her house as 'home' was not lost on her. "It's too bad we were interrupted."

"I know, we seem to have the worst possible timing," he laughed. "And I'm not sure your mother bought that explanation for the computer and the floor plans to the Russian Embassy."

"Oh, she bought it all right. I'm just going to have to come up with better story for why she can't see our documentary on Russian architecture. After all this time, I should know better than to get too creative where she's concerned."

"We'll just have to keep working on it until we get it right." He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her with him as he leaned back against the car. "Remember, practice makes perfect."

"I get the feeling we aren't talking about Mother any more," Amanda teased as she melted against him.

"Yeah," Lee said as his body began to respond to her proximity. "Right now, it's safe to say your mother is the furthest thing from my mind."

She smiled as she raised her head and immediately encountered his lips. All the intensity they'd discovered on their first night together was simmering just below the surface of their kiss. She sighed again in longing.

"I know," Lee whispered, shuddering slightly as he released her. "Probably not the smartest idea. I think I should head home and take a cold shower." He kissed her again, lightly this time, adding with a laugh, "I have a feeling I'm gonna be doin' that a lot in the next two weeks."

"Me, too," Amanda teased back. "We could take them together, but I guess that would kind of defeat the purpose."

"But it would probably be a lot more enjoyable," he laughed as he broke their embrace. It felt wonderful to relax and joke with her again. "Two weeks isn't forever. Besides, we don't have much choice. Doc McJohn said it would take a good ten days to get rid of the last of the PD-2. Better safe than sorry."

"Well, February 13th won't be here soon enough to suit me," Amanda grinned. She had a sudden picture in her mind of the two of them a couple of weeks from now. They'd probably both be climbing the walls by then.

"Oooh," she grimaced as she leaned up against the car, twisting her neck to find a comfortable position.

"That still bothering you?" Lee asked.

"A little. I must have pulled something last night."

"Not the best sleeping arrangements, I'm afraid." He stretched his own neck as he tried to work out the kinks. He leaned over to kiss her cheek, adding in a sexy voice, "I definitely promise better accommodations on our honeymoon."

"As long as you're around to go on a honeymoon, we can sleep on a rock for all I care," she responded, her arms tenderly enfolding him.

"Don't worry. That's one trip I have no intention of missing."

They stood that way for a few minutes, holding each other as they listened to the sounds of the night. Not really wanting to say goodnight, but knowing they had to. Lee made the first move, kissing her on the top of her head.

"One of these days, we'll have to stop saying goodbye at the car like this," he joked quietly, thinking back to the other night. "It's beginning to become a habit."

"One I'll be happy to break," Amanda whispered as she gave him a kiss goodbye. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"You bet," he said as he brushed his lips over hers one final time. He walked around the car, inserting the key and turning the lock.

"Hey, Scarecrow."

He looked up as her voice called him back. She stood on the curb, her lips curving up in a mysterious smile.

"Do me a favor, will you?" she asked with a twinkle in her eye.

"Anything," he replied automatically.

"Go straight home tonight. No midnight walks, okay?"

He laughed as he got into the car. The next twelve days were going to crawl by. But at least he'd still be around at the end of them. He gave the corvette some gas, watching her retreating form in the rearview mirror as he pulled away.

The End