

Title: Turn About

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Author's Notes and Thanks: I had told myself to stick to small, fluffy fiction. "Try writing something short and sweet," I said. This is what happens when I try to write fluff. A plot forms, then some angst is thrown in for good measure. Finally, what started out as a short piece grew into a monster. I've learned to not fight it. Special thanks go out to Kim, Fling and Mary for their tireless beta efforts and priceless suggestions, not to mention the countless others who helped me out with the finer points. I'm finally posting it, Kim!!!

Dedications and whatnot: This story is dedicated to an ex-boyfriend who had the amazing foresight to move back to town and look me up. He is the basis for this story, even if I've vilified him a teeny-tiny bit <g>. To my son who, as he walked slow motion, Jim Carrey-style through the kitchen, informed me that he "has to make everything epic." So do I sweetie. So do I. And, finally, to my husband who, in his never-ending quest to inspire me to greater writing achievements tells me to end each and every story with "and then she died."

Prologue

The Boeing 747 taxied to a stop at the Richmond airport, and the man disembarked. He looked for a sign to direct him to baggage claim and wove through the crowd like a needle through fabric. He was a study in contradictions; if any of the passersby had been asked, no one would have remembered the man, although his attractive looks and chiseled features were pleasing to the eye. However, he was wholly unremarkable and somewhat forgettable. He was every man and no one, blending in with the crowd as expertly as a lion on the savanna.

He picked up his bags and walked to a pay phone. Inserting a quarter, he dialed a number and spoke softly. "This is not a secure line," he said, paused, then continued. "I've made it to my destination. I'll be making contact within two weeks." He nodded as his instructions were given and then hung up the phone. Without a second glance, he left the airport and hailed a taxi.

Part One

Amanda King sat on the family room floor surrounded by old books and letters. She was so engrossed in her project that she didn't hear the squeak of the back door opening or the soft footsteps of her visitor against the kitchen floor. He was nearly upon her when a shadowy reflection in the television screen caught her attention, and she looked back in surprise.

"Lee!" she exclaimed as he stood still, watching her closely. "When did you get here?"

He smiled and sat down on the couch, just behind her left shoulder, examining the copious store of memories Amanda had collected over the years. "I just walked in," he replied as he reached out to pick up a yellowed letter from the coffee table. "What's all this?"

"I was cleaning some things out of the attic," she began to explain as she stood and joined him on the couch. "But I got distracted when I found a box full of letters and books from high school. I thought it would be interesting to look through them all."

She picked up a book from the floor at her feet and patted the cover. "Yorktown High School, Home of the Patriots, Class of 1970." Amanda opened the cover to reveal a plethora of signatures and well wishes from her classmates.

Lee let out a low whistle. "You must have known everyone in the school," he said, running his hand over the somewhat aged binding.

"Not quite everyone, but I knew most of the graduating class from way back in kindergarten." She flipped to the back of the book and pointed to a group picture. Ten young women in cheerleading uniforms stood proudly on either side of a trophy. "That's me," she said, pointing to herself in the front row. "We won the State Championship that year, and that's the trophy."

"You know," Lee remarked, studying her picture, "I don't think you've changed a bit." Grinning, he continued, "Except for the hair of course."

Amanda glanced at her hair-do and grimaced. It was certainly a style Phillip would happily label as 'ancient.' Quickly, she turned the page.

Lee took the book from her hands and flipped through the pages of seniors' pictures, reading some of the inscriptions. "That's one drawback to being a military brat," he said with a sigh, "you don't get to make a lot of long-term friends."

"I think you did pretty well for yourself," Amanda said, watching Lee as he looked at each page. He was flipping to the back of the class when he stopped in the P's.

"Who's Doug Parsons?" he asked, pointing at a black and white photo surrounded by a hand-drawn, faded red heart. "I don't remember him from your reunion." He cocked his head and frowned at the picture, squinting, as if he were studying it closely.

Undaunted, Amanda glanced over and grinned. "He was my infatuation during senior year. We even went on to college together. He transferred to an out-of-state school after his first year though, and I haven't heard from him since." Her brow knit in concern. "He wasn't at the reunion, and no one there had been able to contact him, either."

His intense scrutiny faded, and he pointed at the heart surrounding the handsome young man. Lee asked, a teasing note in his voice, "Was it serious?"

"It was a serious infatuation," Amanda explained. "Mother hated him. He was . . . bad." A mischievous grin grew as she spoke. "He was everything I wasn't supposed to like in a boy. I guess that's why I liked him so much. We had a good time, while it lasted." Taking the book from Lee's grasp, Amanda snapped it shut and tossed it on the coffee table. "That was years ago, though. I've found a new bad boy to love."

Lee raised his eyebrows in question as Amanda settled on his lap and wrapped her arms around his neck. His puzzled expression melted into a contented smile as Amanda leaned forward and kissed him soundly on the lips.

"Now, let's forget about Doug," she said as she wiped the light sheen of lipstick from Lee's mouth. "Weren't we supposed to be going to the movies?" Putting a halt to any further questions, she quickly busied herself with straightening up so they could leave. She had seen the looks Lee was giving Doug's picture and had a nagging feeling that the questions had only been postponed.

Two Weeks Later

Tuesday

"Phillip, Jamie, I know these aren't *your* shoes on the living room floor," Amanda yelled up the stairs. Her call was followed by an elephant-like stampede as her two teenage sons pushed and shoved their way down the stairs in a mad rush to remove the offending footwear.

"Sorry, Mom," Jamie apologized as Phillip elbowed him out of the way.

The older boy picked up both pairs of shoes, tucking his own under his arm and tossing Jamie's out the back door. "Your sneakers smell like toxic waste," he jibed on his way back upstairs.

"You would know," the younger boy replied. "They smell just like your breath." He took off outside when Phillip's footsteps paused, then started back downstairs.

Amanda rolled her eyes and moved out of the way. Sometimes, she reasoned, it was better to let them get it out their systems. Phillip barreled past her, and she shook her head. She reached for the box of memories still in the corner of the living room, preparing to return it to the attic, but she paused for a moment and picked up her yearbook from the top of the box. She flipped through the pages and smiled, memories of a simpler time making her feel nostalgic and, suddenly, very old.

The ringing of the phone was a welcome reprieve, and she picked up the receiver.

"Hello."

"Amanda?"

"This is she," Amanda replied. "How can I help you?"

"You don't recognize my voice, do you?" the man asked. "I know it's been a while . . ."

Amanda paused for a moment, caught off guard, running through her mental catalog of friends and acquaintances. "I'm sorry," she replied, "I don't know who you are."

"It's Doug," the man replied, and Amanda had to sit down.

"Doug Parsons?" she squeaked. "Oh, my gosh! I can't believe it's you! I was just thinking about you. How are you? Where are you? Wow!"

Doug laughed. "Same old Amanda," he commented. "I'm fine, and I'm in Richmond. I just moved back a month or so ago and have been wanting to look you up and, since you've been thinking about me . . . I'm thinking 'karma'. Are you busy this Friday?"

"Nothing springs to mind," she said. "Why?"

"I'm going to be in D.C. on business later this week and was hoping you and I could go to dinner. You know, get reacquainted."

Without thinking, Amanda quickly agreed. "That sounds wonderful," she gushed. "It's so good to hear from you."

"I'll call you Thursday night and we'll discuss the details, okay?"

"Okay," she said, and before she could say another word, he said goodbye and hung up. She sat on the barstool, awash with amazement that a man she hadn't thought of in years had called the day after she found his picture in her yearbook. Amanda stood up, thinking about how interesting it would be to catch up with an old friend and smiling at the amazing coincidence. She couldn't wait to tell Lee all about it.

Lee. How was he going to react to this news? He was pretty understanding when it came to 'other men' she came into contact with through work, but this was entirely different. She looked at the clock and realized that she only had a few minutes to figure it out. He would be arriving any minute to pick her up. 'Maybe,' she thought, 'I can talk Doug into a nice lunch instead,' but the thought was lost when she saw Lee pull into the driveway.

"Doug who?" Lee asked, his knuckles white on the steering wheel.

"Doug Parsons," Amanda calmly replied, her eyes straight ahead, watching the road.

"The weather man?"

"Good heavens, no!" she exclaimed, turning to look at him. "Doug, from school."

"Oh," Lee grumbled. "The heart guy."

Amanda rolled her eyes and turned her attention back to the landscape. "Yeah," she muttered. "The heart guy."

"Did you tell him you're married?" Lee defiantly asked.

"My own mother doesn't know I'm married, and you want me to tell a person I haven't seen in over fifteen years?" Amanda asked, incredulous.

"It seems like an important fact to leave out," he defended himself.

They reached their destination, and Lee shifted the car into park. He turned to face Amanda and found her staring him down. "I don't like it," he stated.

"I'm not asking you to like it," she sweetly and patiently answered. "It's a simple fact. An old friend has asked me to dinner this Friday, and I wanted to let you know that I'm going."

"Really," Lee challenged her.

"Really," she said. "And, as a matter of fact, I wonder if you'd be reacting the same if this old friend were a woman." She narrowed her eyes at him, meeting his challenge.

Lee cocked his head to the side and studied her before calmly replying. "I wouldn't be reacting this way if it wasn't the heart guy."

Amanda sighed and held out her hand to him. He took it and squeezed. "Look," she said, "That was the action of a seventeen-year-old *and* it was over fifteen years ago. I stopped feeling that way right about the time he moved away. I have you now, Lee. You couldn't possibly think that I'm going to leave you for an old boyfriend?"

Lee hung his head for a moment, assessing Amanda's words. Finally, he took a deep breath and looked up. "Not even the heart guy?" he asked with a sheepish smile.

Amanda laughed. "Not even the heart guy."

"All right," he relented, "I'll drop it. You go to dinner, and I won't be jealous."

Amanda leaned over and kissed her husband on the cheek. "Good, because there's nothing to be jealous about." She leaned back and unbuckled her seatbelt. "Now, let's go relieve Simmons. We can talk about this all night while we're watching that hotel room," she said, pointing to the building across the street.

Part Two

Amanda sat at her desk in the Q-bureau, busying herself with a case file but trying to read Lee. He had been quiet all day, and she knew it was because of her upcoming dinner with Doug. Try as she might, she couldn't get him to open up about it. Every time the subject was broached he brushed it off, insisting that he was *not* jealous and was perfectly okay with her plans.

Now, however, it was Friday. She looked up from her report to find him staring at her, his mouth half open, as if he were trying to get up the nerve to speak. As soon as their eyes locked, he quickly glanced down again, closing his mouth -- and his emotions, as well.

"Lee," she said, laying down her pencil and clasping her hands in front of her on the desk, "Were you going to say something?"

"Hmm?" he replied, looking up at her with a confused expression.

"You looked like you had something to say to me," Amanda prodded. Lee only shrugged and shook his head. She stood and crossed the short distance between their desks, leaning on the corner of his and commanding his full attention. "Are you sure?"

Lee confidently nodded and leaned back in his chair. He glanced at his wristwatch and noted the time. "It's nearly four-thirty," he said without looking up. "Shouldn't you be getting ready for your date?"

Amanda sprung to her feet and pointed at Lee's chest. "Ah-ha!" she exclaimed triumphantly. "I knew it!"

Lee jumped and scooted back in his chair. "Knew what?"

"You still don't want me to go out to dinner with Doug," she said, but was silenced when Lee looked around her to the door.

"Who's Doug?" Francine asked as she closed the door behind her.

"An old friend," Amanda replied while quickly, but discreetly, stepping away from Lee and back to her own desk. "Can we help you, Francine?"

"Billy sent me up here for your surveillance report," she offhandedly replied, but her eyes glinted with the new information she'd just gathered, and she fixed her claws on Lee. "Why wouldn't you want Amanda going to dinner with an old friend? It's not like you two are serious . . . are you?" She dragged out the last two words, looking from Lee to Amanda and back again, her smile growing ever broader.

Amanda glanced at Lee, who looked like a cornered rat. Seeing that he was going to be no help in this situation, she stepped in. She picked up an envelope from the corner of her desk and walked over to Francine. Handing her the report, she turned Francine around, opened the door and pushed her out while quickly offering what she hoped was a reasonable explanation for what Francine overheard.

"Lee wants to do some surveillance tonight and isn't pleased that he's going to have to go by himself. Thanks for picking up that file!" She started to close the door between her and the inquisitive blonde, paused and waved. "See you later."

She waited a moment, listening to Francine's footfalls fade down the stairs. When she felt secure that they were in no danger of being overheard, she turned to Lee.

He let out a sigh and grinned. "Good recovery," he offered as he loosened his tie.

"Thanks," Amanda replied. "That could have been a problem." Lee nodded in agreement, and Amanda started to straighten up her desk. She looked up to see him watching her again, and she hesitated.

"You're getting ready to leave?" he asked, his voice barely a whisper.

"Yeah," she answered, reaching for her purse.

He stood and walked over to her, placing his hands on her shoulders. "Be careful?"

"Always." The purse forgotten, she closed her eyes, and his lips were on hers, kissing her in a way that could only be described as primitively territorial.

Lee pulled away, his eyes dark and deep, and Amanda had to catch her breath. "Wow," she sighed, "That was . . ."

Lee merely smiled, interrupting her thought. "You just remember that," he huskily whispered, running his thumb over her slightly swollen lips.

"How could I ever forget?" she replied, shaking the passion-induced fog from her mind. With a wink, she picked up her purse and left.

Amanda stood on the steps of the Jefferson Memorial, scanning the crowd of tourists for a familiar face. She wasn't sure she'd be able to recognize Doug, but she felt reasonably certain that he'd recognize her. She hadn't changed much over the years, at least not in appearance. With a private smile, she wondered if her new career would make her look any different.

A glance at her watch told her he should be arriving soon. She renewed her search of the crowd as her thoughts drifted to the kiss her husband had left with her at their parting that afternoon. She had purposefully neglected to share the details of their meeting place, having been warned by that small, dark, overly suspicious corner of her mind that it wouldn't be out of the question for a mildly jealous Lee, much less a considerably jealous Lee, to follow them.

She chuckled as the image of Lee, skulking about in a commando suit, popped into her head. While the outfit *did* do something for her, the concept unnerved her, and she found herself scanning the landscape for signs of an ambush.

"Amanda?"

The sound of her name startled her, and she nearly lost her balance as she whirled around to see who had called out to her.

He stood a few feet from her and two steps up. His dark hair was combed into an unassuming but neat style, and his too-dark eyes were trained on her. He wore a plain black business suit with a dark colored tie.

"Doug?" Amanda asked, and the man smiled in reply. He stepped forward and pulled her into a friendly embrace. While in his arms, she glanced furtively around, half expecting Lee to bound out of the bushes. Nothing happened though, and she found herself relaxing.

"I wouldn't have recognized you," she commented as he held her at arm's length. It was true; she never would have known him. He would have blended in with the crowd. There was something about him, though; something Amanda couldn't quite put her finger on. She brushed it off as he began to speak.

"You haven't changed a bit," he said, taking another step back. He squinted as he looked at her eyes again and frowned. "But there is something different about you. It's in your eyes."

Amanda blushed and shrugged. "I'm not sure what you mean," she replied. "I'm still the same old Amanda from school." Quickly, she turned the conversation away from herself. "You look great! What have you been up to?"

Doug smiled and looked around at the scenery. "Not too much," he answered cryptically. "That's something better discussed over dinner. Where should we go?" He reached for her hand, taking it in his as he started to lead her down the steps and around the monument to the parking lot.

Amanda self-consciously, but politely, removed her hand from his grasp, and they walked side by side to their waiting cars. "How about a little bar I know of," she offered. "It's nice, somewhat quiet, and the food is delicious." 'And familiar ground,' she added to herself.

"Sounds great," Doug answered. "Where is it?"

They had reached the parking lot and Doug turned, keys in hand, standing next to the passenger door of a plain brown sedan. Amanda pulled her own keys out of her purse and started to wonder why this meeting was making her a little nervous. Somehow, she thought, she was going to have to at least mention that she was 'dating' Lee. Doug was being a bit too friendly for her liking . . . or was that her guilty conscience?

"The place is in Georgetown," she explained. "It's called Nedlinger's."

Doug seemed to stiffen at the mention of the somewhat famous 'spy bar' and countered Amanda's suggestion with one of his own. "How about we go to this little place near my hotel, instead?" he asked. "It's a bit closer, and we won't have to deal with the evening traffic."

Amanda hesitated, then agreed, the logic behind his statement overshadowing the nagging insistence in the back of her mind that his reaction had been a little off. "That sounds nice," she said. "I'll follow you." She turned to walk to her car when Doug's voice called her attention back.

"I thought we'd just ride together," he said, jingling his keys.

Pausing, Amanda thought back to Lee's parting words. 'Be careful,' he'd said, and she intended to keep her word. "There's no need for you to have to drive all the way back here to get me to my car. I'll just follow you." She turned and walked the few parking spaces to her Jeep and climbed in before he could object.

From behind the safety of her newly tinted windows, she watched him watch her, breathing a sigh of relief when he climbed into his own car and pulled out. Amanda followed, wondering the whole way why she felt like she was cheating. She wasn't, nor had she any desire to. However, the feeling of guilt was there. She wished she could scream from the top of her lungs that she was married, but that was out of the question.

She had been very close to Doug in those months before he had moved. So close that she'd even entertained the idea of marriage. He had felt the same way, or so she had thought, and now he almost seemed to be expecting to pick up where they had left off. Yes, Amanda finally decided, Doug was going to have to be told about Lee. Maybe that would make her feel more comfortable about the whole strange situation.

Part Three

They sat at a small table in the back of a small Italian restaurant. They had enjoyed a quiet meal, half a bottle of wine and some small talk before Doug started the real conversation.

"So, you're divorced?" he asked, while taking a sip of wine from his glass.

Amanda nodded and wiped the corners of her mouth. "Yes," she confirmed. "Joe and I divorced ages ago."

Doug nodded and smiled. "What do you do to keep yourself busy?" He laid his hand on the table, close to Amanda's and reached out a finger to her hand.

Quietly, she withdrew her hand and settled it on her lap. "I work for a film company." Again, Doug nodded and she continued. "I'm in the editing department. It's really not very interesting," she added with a shrug.

"Don't be modest," he teased. "I'm sure it's quite interesting. I can't see you doing anything that wouldn't keep your mind working. You never were the type to sit back and take it easy. Always looking for a challenge, weren't you?"

Amanda blushed and lowered her eyes. Doug had hit it on the nose. She really hadn't changed, except that her thirst for a challenge and excitement had led her in a direction she never would have dreamed possible. Not that she could tell Doug that, though.

"I suppose you could say that," she agreed. Seeing an opportunity, she charged ahead. "I have a great boss, too. We've been working together . . . *closely* together for the past four . . . almost five years." Amanda saw Doug take immediate notice. 'Good,' she thought, 'I can slip Lee into the conversation and end Doug's advances before things go any further.'

"Who's your boss?" Doug asked, obviously curious.

"His name is Lee Stetson," Amanda replied, warming to this topic of conversation. Somehow, bringing up Lee's name made her feel better almost immediately.

Doug was clearly interested. "Lee Stetson, you say?" Amanda nodded. "Tell me again what it is you do?"

The rest of the evening passed with Doug asking endless questions about the editorial film business. Amanda was about to run out of cover stories when Doug signaled for the waiter to bring the check. He settled the tab, and they left the restaurant, walking slowly through the parking lot to their cars.

Amanda pulled her keys out of her purse, unlocked the door of her Jeep and turned around to thank Doug for dinner. She had to step back a pace when she found he was nearly on top of her. He leaned forward to kiss her, and she quickly turned her head, his kiss landing on her cheek. She ducked under his arm, getting out from between him and the car.

"What's the matter?" Doug asked, clearly surprised that his advances had been spurned.

"We're dating," Amanda blurted out, the words tumbling over one another in her mad rush to clear her conscience. "Lee and I are dating."

Doug smiled a strained smile and leaned back against the Jeep. "Dating, huh?"

She nodded and watched him closely, trying to gauge his reaction.

He sighed and focused on a rock near the toe of his shoe. "Too late," he commented, then looked up at her confused expression. "I'm too late," he explained, and Amanda felt the situation quickly surpass uncomfortable. "I should never have left, Amanda. I'm sorry about . . . that." He gestured to where he was standing, apologizing for the impromptu kiss. "Can we at least be friends?"

She smiled, flooded with relief. "Of course we can be friends," she assured him, still wondering what he meant by his comments.

He pushed away from the Jeep and patted Amanda on the arm. "We should go out again, soon. This time, you'll bring Lee. I'd love to meet the guy who was lucky enough to snag you." He winked at her and walked slowly around her Jeep to his own car. With a slight wave, he climbed in and waited for her to leave.

Amanda shook her head, amazed at the roller coaster she'd been on that evening and glad that it was over. Doug knew where things stood and that was all that mattered. She climbed into the Jeep and started the engine. 'I wonder if I should tell Lee that he tried to kiss me?'

She chuckled at herself and fastened her seatbelt. 'That would be a big mistake,' she reasoned. What Lee didn't know wouldn't hurt him. She would just leave that little bit out of the evening's recap. What harm could it do?

A new surge of guilt washed over her and she mentally chastised herself for the thought having crossed her mind. "Amanda Stetson," she told her reflection, "Lee is more than your husband or your partner, he's your best friend. Don't start keeping secrets from him, too."

She'd just have to find the right time to bring it up.

It was nearly ten-thirty when Amanda turned the last corner onto Maplewood Drive. As she neared her house, she recognized the familiar silhouette of Lee's Corvette parked under the tree near the front gate, yet out of sight from the occupants of her house.

Her first reaction was joy and relief followed by annoyance, which was quickly replaced by apprehension. She pulled the Jeep to a stop behind the 'Vette and stepped out, walking up to the driver's side window and tapping on the glass.

Lee rolled down the window and grinned. "Hi," he said hesitantly.

"Hi, yourself," she replied. "Were you waiting for me?" She raised an eyebrow and tapped her foot, playing with him.

"Yeah . . . well, I needed to ask you a question, and . . ." he fumbled.

"And it couldn't wait until morning?" Amanda finished for him.

He shrugged and motioned to the passenger seat. "Wanna go for a ride?"

Amanda regarded him for a moment. Something was wrong, and he wanted her on his level before bringing it up. She nodded and climbed into the 'Vette. Without a word, he pulled away from the curb and headed toward the local park.

They rode in silence, Lee deep in thought and Amanda worried about what might be bothering him. Finally, when they'd reached their destination, Lee turned off the engine and turned to face her, taking one of her hands in his.

"Amanda," he began, then stopped, as if searching for the proper words. "How was dinner?"

"Fine," Amanda uneasily answered. "Why?"

"Just curious," he replied. "What did you two talk about?"

"Work, I guess," she said.

"Your work? His work?" Lee prodded.

"My work." Amanda was starting to feel oddly defensive. "Why all the questions?"

"What does Doug do for a living?" Lee asked, narrowing his eyes and looking at her intently.

"I . . . I don't know." Amanda thought for a moment and realized that they hadn't discussed Doug's line of work at all. "It never came up, I guess." She looked at Lee, confused and concerned.

"Bear with me." Lee released her hand, patted her leg and reached behind her to the back seat, pulling out an oversized yellow envelope. "You said Doug moved to another college before your second year, right?"

Amanda nodded, watching as Lee unfastened the envelope's flap.

"And you married Joe after that?" He looked into the envelope, reached in, then paused and looked up in time to see Amanda nod again.

"How did Doug know how to find you? Did he know you married Joe and weren't a West anymore?"

Amanda thought about that, turning over the events of that time, ticking them off chronologically. "No," she responded. "Doug was gone before I married Joe. He knew Joe, but he left before we got serious." She shrugged and shook her head, becoming frustrated with what was turning into an interrogation. "What is all this about?"

Lee pulled a photograph out of the envelope and turned it around for Amanda to see. Doug Parsons' likeness looked back at her. The photo showed him standing with two other men, each of them holding some sort of automatic weapon. Amanda squinted hard at the photo, trying to make sense of it.

"What is this?" she asked, growing more annoyed by the second.

Lee sighed and slid the photo back into the envelope. He took a deep breath and grasped Amanda's hands. "I sort of had a background check done on Doug."

Amanda jerked her hands back; her mouth dropped open in surprise. "You did what!?"

Holding his hands up in defense, Lee stumbled for something to say. "I'm sorry," he offered. "It was just a vibe I got, that's all. And let's face it. Your track record with men isn't all that spotless. Is it so unreasonable for me to check?"

"You have room to talk! You were jealous; that's not a 'vibe,'" she accused. She faced forward, crossing her arms in front of her, trying to sort out what was happening.

"Amanda, please?" He leaned back against the door and ran a hand through his hair. "Will you hear me out?"

"What's to hear?" She sighed. "You couldn't stand the fact that I wanted to see an old friend so you went out of your way to spy on me." Suddenly the thought of Lee in a commando suit didn't appeal to her anymore.

"Actually," Lee replied, raising his voice, "I want you to see him again."

Silence fell as Amanda absorbed Lee's words. She gave him a skeptical look and turned fully to face him. "I'm sorry," she whispered, "did you just tell me to see Doug again?"

Lee was looking down at his lap. He nodded, then lifted his head. "Actually, Billy wants you to see him."

Amanda swallowed hard, dread welling up in the pit of her stomach. "Billy?" she asked, her voice cracking. "What does Billy have to do with this?"

"Are you ready to listen to me?" Lee asked, defensively. Amanda nodded, and he began. "Something about Doug's picture in your yearbook struck me, and I tried to put my finger on it. Finally, I had to do a check on him, just to satisfy my curiosity." Amanda snorted at this, but held her tongue. Lee frowned and continued. "I requested a thorough background check on him yesterday morning. The report came in just after you left this evening."

"Your old friend Doug is a fully trained operative in a small group based out of Oregon called 'The New Patriots'. He's been with this group since he left college in 1971. They're pretty 'out there'," he circled his right ear with his finger, indicating 'crazy.' "We've been trying to get a handle on them for years. They're into all kinds of things, mostly overseas, but we were afraid that they were going to start running some of their terrorist campaigns in the States. One person was able to infiltrate their group, and he barely got out with his life."

Lee paused, giving Amanda a moment to catch up. Her suspicion mounting, she asked, "Who was that person?" knowing the answer before Lee replied.

"Me, eight years ago." His eyes became distant as the memories flooded back. "I t was close; I almost didn't make it out." Shaking his head, he continued, "That's why I got that vibe. You see . . . he went by a code name, Basilisk, and I only heard them use his actual name once or twice, but something rang a bell when we were looking through your yearbook. The point is *they* know *me*, and I think they're planning on using you to get to me. How convenient for them that my partner and their number one assassin used to date."

Amanda looked down at her hands. "Yeah," she agreed her voice barely audible. "How very convenient. But . . . why now?"

"That's a good question," Lee replied. "About two months ago there was a murder in a prison in Northern California. The man who was murdered had been an informant of mine at one time. Specifically, he had tipped me off about the 'Patriots' and had helped me get in. I'm thinking they might have finally caught up with him and made him talk."

Lee reached out and put one finger under her chin, tilting her head up to face him. "So, do you see what we need you to do?"

Amanda smiled grimly and nodded. "You're going to use me to get to him," she surmised.

He opened his palm and caressed her cheek as he nodded. "I hate to do this to you, in fact, I raised hell about it, but Billy was quick to point out that in a situation like this you have to use what assets you have. Besides," he shrugged, "turn about is fair play."

Part Four

Monday

Amanda walked up the stairs to the Q-Bureau, her mind still awash with the information she'd received about Doug. Lee had driven her home Friday night, telling her to take the weekend to prepare herself for the weeks ahead. He was going to be spending the weekend working with Billy, planning out how they were going to reverse Doug's plan and catch him, instead of Doug catching them. He had promised to call her, but asked her to stay home and let him and Billy worry about the details just in case Doug already had someone watching her.

She had complied, only because she had a lot on her mind. She had spent the entire weekend cleaning the house from top to bottom, giving her a temporary sense of control. Dotty had wisely left her alone, knowing the mood that brought on a power-clean was not something she wanted to mess with. Amanda had welcomed the solitude and now felt she was ready to hear what Lee and Billy had planned.

When she reached the Q-Bureau, she found the door open and Lee already inside. She walked in and smiled, relishing the warm feeling at the sight of her husband. He smiled in return, although his smile seemed forced. She knew he was certainly glad to see her and also knew that the cause of his discomfort would soon be revealed. They were supposed to meet with Billy in less than half an hour.

"How was your weekend?" Lee asked, remaining in his chair but watching her closely as she placed her purse in her desk drawer and sat down.

"The house is spotless," she replied with a wry grin. He grinned in return, and she knew that he was well aware of what she meant. His apartment had been the victim of Amanda's emotion-induced cleanings on more than one occasion.

"I'm sorry I didn't call you last night." His apology was punctuated with a pained expression. No one else would have picked up on it, but Amanda had become skilled in reading Lee -- when he wanted to be read and even sometimes when he didn't. He was deeply troubled by what was happening and it broke her heart to see it.

"That's okay." She looked down at her hands, realized that she was fidgeting with her pinky ring, and quickly dropped her hands in her lap.

"Amanda," Lee started, then hesitated when she looked up at him. He took a breath, and continued, "I want you to know that whatever happens, I'll be with you." He shook his head at her confused look. "Just trust me on that, okay?"

His eyes were pleading with her and she nodded, not understanding why, but agreeing nonetheless.

Billy was standing in the doorway of his office, waiting for them to arrive. Amanda could tell he was pleased that this unexpected coup had practically dropped itself in his lap. His smile, however, was shadowed, and Amanda was sure it had something to do with her.

They entered the Section Chief's office and sat down while Billy closed the door and the blinds. Amanda watched him as he rounded his desk and took a seat. She could see his conflicting emotions almost as easily as she could see Lee's. Neither of them wanted to use her in this way, but both knew this was their only means of taking out Doug before he did the same to Lee. It was that knowledge that had brought Amanda through the weekend. It was Doug or Lee, and there was no contest there.

Billy cleared his throat and started. "Amanda, as you know, Lee and I have been at this all weekend, working on a way to use this new-found information to the Agency's advantage, without taking advantage of you." He paused and Amanda nodded her thanks. "I want you to know that after much heated discussion . . ." His eyes turned to Lee and a small smile played across his features before turning back to Amanda. " . . . It was decided that we're going to use your past relationship . . . romantic relationship," he corrected himself, "with Basilisk to get closer to him."

Amanda shifted uncomfortably in her seat. Billy was suggesting a Peacock Dance, with her husband sitting right next to her.

Lee jumped in, clearing his throat. "We were trying to figure out a plausible way to get you closer to him, without tipping our hand. We think he knows where you work, and that you work with me. That much he's probably gathered on his own. What we're asking you to do is to let on that perhaps we're . . . more than work associates . . . and we've had a falling out."

"Lisbon Variation," Amanda muttered, the memories of Lee's failed Peacock Dance with Sonja filling her mind.

"Exactly," Lee grimly nodded. "Can you do that?"

"It's already done," she said, thinking back to the conversation she'd had with Doug following dinner. Amanda looked up at Billy, then turned her attention to Lee. Noting his confusion, she explained, "I didn't see a need to say anything Friday night, there was so much else being said and I was overwhelmed, I guess," she offered. "When we were talking about what I do for a living, I mentioned that I work with you, that I have for almost five years. In fact, I said I work closely with you."

"That's good," he nodded, withdrawing into himself. "We've already got the groundwork laid." He glanced at Billy. "This may be easier to pull off than we thought."

"Lee," Amanda interrupted. "I also told him we were dating."

Lee's head whipped back to Amanda. She felt the color rise in her cheeks and remembered, too late, that Billy was still in the room. She looked to Billy who was watching this interaction between her and Lee with what seemed to be perverse glee.

Backpedaling, Amanda continued. "You see, when he walked me out to my car, he tried to kiss me." Lee's eyes widened, but he kept himself in check. "He startled me, but I was able to turn away at the last second. I told him we were dating so he'd back off. It seemed harmless at the time."

"Harmless?" Billy interjected. "It was genius!"

"He tried to kiss you?" Lee quietly asked, seemingly stuck on her admission.

"Tried," Amanda affirmed, jabbing a finger into the air. "He actually got me on the cheek, but was aiming elsewhere."

"This is going to work like a charm," Billy said, now paying little attention to the scene playing out before him.

"When were you going to tell me about this?" Lee asked, his hands balled into controlled fists of anger.

"When the time was right," Amanda replied, rolling her eyes toward Billy, trying to tell Lee that now was not the time for this discussion. He seemed to get her message, but his hands were still clenched. Amanda felt sure that if Doug had walked into the room at that moment, he wouldn't have left in one piece. And Lee wanted her to lead the man on? Surely he knew that she'd have to kiss Doug, and maybe even more!

In an attempt to steer the conversation in a different direction, Amanda said, "This all sounds workable expect for one thing. What makes you think he hasn't already planned on this? Why wouldn't I have mentioned to you that I'm having dinner with an old friend and what would keep me from saying who that old friend is . . . just like I did?"

"We've considered that," Billy said. "You'll just need to make sure he's aware that you've said nothing to Lee about him."

"Do you think that will work?" she asked.

"It will have to," Billy somberly replied.

Part Five

"This morning, when you said you'd be with me, what did you mean?" Amanda sat across from Lee in a booth at an ice cream shop on M Street. It seemed he was still distracted by her admission that Doug had tried to kiss her, and she wanted to get his mind off of it for the time being.

Lee looked up from his sundae and smiled. "It's something I had Leatherneck cook up for me," he replied, reaching into his coat pocket and pulling out a tiny ring. "I didn't want you to feel like you were all alone in this so I had him make a duplicate of your pinky ring with a transmitter inside." He handed it to her and she took it gingerly, looking at it closely.

"It's an amazing likeness," she said in admiration of the Quartermaster's work. "But why *this* ring?"

"You never take it off, and you always play with it when you're nervous." He took Amanda's hand, pulled off the real ring and, taking the copy from her other hand, placed it gently on her finger. "I thought that if you got nervous and started fidgeting, you'd touch it and remember that I'm there, if not in body, in spirit. I'll be able to hear everything that's going on. It's a homing device, too." He tried to hand her the real ring but Amanda shook her head.

"No," she whispered. "You keep it until all this is over. You can give it back to me then."

Lee smiled and placed the ring in his shirt pocket. "That's a promise," he said, reclaiming her hand. He hesitated, then squeezed her fingers. "I'm sorry I reacted like that back in Billy's office."

"Don't . . ." Amanda grasped his hand in return. "Don't think about it. I would have reacted the same way, I'm sure." She looked at him then, tilting her head to the side as she considered her words. "Doug wants to kill you, doesn't he?"

"Yeah." Lee breathed the word, rather than spoke it. "That's my guess."

"I may have to do more than kiss him, you know." She watched as a pained expression flitted across Lee's eyes before he looked down at his bowl. "I may have to do things I don't like, but if it's to get him before he gets you, you can be damn sure I'm going to do it."

Lee looked up in surprise at the harshness of Amanda's words. She knew she had spoken out of anger and emotion, but Lee needed to know that this was nothing but a job to her. "He's not the same Doug Parsons I went to school with, Lee. As far as I'm concerned, that Doug is dead. This person, this 'Basilisk,' is a man who wants to see my partner . . . my husband . . . dead. I'm going to do everything within my power to stop him."

He smiled at her, and seemed to relax for the first time in a week. "I love you, you know."

"I know you do," Amanda replied, mirroring his smile. "But you have to trust me in this, too. More than you've ever trusted me before. It wasn't easy for me to sit in the car and listen to you seduce Sonja, and it's not going to be easy for you to hear the things you're probably going to hear between me and Doug."

"I know," he agreed, nodding his head emphatically. "I hated that you had to go through that."

"It wasn't fun," she admitted. "And I know you weren't thrilled about having to do it, but you did it because it was your job. That's what I have to do now. Unfortunately, Doug and I have a history, and that's going to make it a little more complicated. But . . ." she held Lee's hand tightly, and pulled him closer to her across the table, " . . . I'm doing it because I love you."

"Who are you trying to convince?" he asked her, smiling although his eyes betrayed an altogether different emotion. Amanda studied him, and a silence hung heavy between them. She could see the tension building in his shoulders and in the tightness of his jaw.

"We won't be able to see each other," he suddenly blurted out. "He knows who I am and what I do. He may even expect this from us." Amanda looked down at their entwined hands and nodded as Lee continued. "In fact, I probably shouldn't call you at home, and you shouldn't call me, either. There's no telling what these guys are capable of, and I can't very well sweep your house for bugs or check your phones for taps at every turn. The more authentic this looks, the better off we'll be."

Again, she nodded. "At least we have work," she suggested, "and this," she said, pointing to the ring on her finger.

He nodded, his expression suddenly very serious. "I want you to be careful, Amanda. This man is a professional assassin. He'd no sooner flinch at killing you than he would at killing me. Right now, you're the sole link to his goal. That's the only reason I even agreed to this in the first place."

"I understand, and I'll be careful," she promised. The weight of her assignment heavy on her shoulders, Amanda took her hand from Lee's and dipped a spoon into her banana split. "Let's enjoy the rest of the evening, okay? It might be the last we have for a while."

Amanda had just stepped out of the shower when the phone rang. She slipped on her bathrobe and poked her head out of her bedroom door to see who was calling and if it was for her.

"Mom," Phillip bellowed up the stairs, "it's for you."

"Thanks," she called down to him, then closed the door and reached for the receiver on her nightstand. "Hello?"

"Amanda?"

Amanda stiffened at the sound of Doug's voice and waited until she heard Phillip hang up the extension before replying.

"Hi, Doug," she answered with as much enthusiasm as she could muster. Her thumb unconsciously touched the band of gold on her pinky, and she began her job. "How are you tonight?"

"I'm doing just fine," he replied. "I'm going to be back in D.C. later this week. I thought you and your boyfriend might like to join me for dinner?"

"That sounds like a wonderful idea," Amanda lied, "but is it okay if it's just you and me?"

Doug hesitated, then replied, "Well, sure. But why won't he be joining us?"

"We've had a bit of a falling out." Amanda swallowed and audibly sighed. "I'd really rather not talk about it. It's too soon."

"I understand," Doug said, and Amanda cringed at the false sincerity in his voice. "Are you sure you're up to dinner?"

"Absolutely." Amanda sat on the edge of her bed and looked out her window to the night sky. "I'm looking forward to it, in fact."

"Great!" Doug happily replied. "I'll call you later this week to cement the plans. Talk to you then."

He hung up, and Amanda replaced the receiver in the cradle. With a heavy sigh, she sank into her pillow and looked at her ring, her one tangible link to Lee. She began to twirl the ring around her finger and closed her eyes. "It's started," she whispered.

Part Six

Thursday

Amanda drove to work, the events of the week playing out in her head. Doug had yet to call her back, and she was beginning to wonder if he had figured out what she was up to. The days had seemed to drag on, with Lee avoiding her outside of the Agency. It was difficult, at best, for them to leave the office each evening, knowing that they wouldn't be seeing or hearing from the other until the following morning.

She parked her Jeep, and with a quick good morning to Mrs. Marston, made her way up the stairs. It was early, and she was first to arrive, unlocking the door and picking up the pile of old case files from the edge of her desk. Lee had insisted that she read all the available files on 'The New Patriots', and she had been immersed in them for the better part of the week.

The vault door had been left partially open the previous evening, so she stepped inside and began to slowly replace the files. As her fingers automatically moved through the alphabetized file drawers, her mind whirled in a different direction.

Earlier in the week, over lunch in the ice cream parlor, she had told Lee that she might have to do more than kiss Doug in order to get him to trust her. She knew Lee was well aware that this was a job and it would be 'in the line of duty,' but she also knew Lee. If the tables were turned, she wasn't sure she would be handling it as calmly as he was. Deep down, she was sure that he was mentally kicking himself for the position she was in, but his professional persona wouldn't let it show.

It was probably for the best that they hadn't seen each other outside of work since the plan had been devised. Perhaps the distance was helping him to keep an emotional wall between what was work and what was their private life. 'If only it could be that easy for me,' she sighed.

Warm breath on her neck startled her, and she turned to find herself face to face with Lee's deep hazel eyes. Instantly, she was consumed in his embrace, and she felt herself relaxing against him.

"Good morning," he breathed into her hair. Shivers went down her spine, and she fought to keep control. That wasn't an easy feat under the best of circumstances, but now it was all the more difficult, given their recent lack of contact.

"Morning," she replied, hearing the desire in her voice, and wondering if Lee could hear it, too. His hold on her tightened, and she lay her head against his shoulder. "I've missed you," she confessed.

A laugh escaped his lips and he gently kissed the top of her head. "Yeah, I know -- but, you've seen me every day," he reminded her.

She sighed and looked up, "Not like this, I haven't." She closed her eyes as his lips descended upon hers. His touch was gentle, almost reverent, and it caused waves of warmth to course through her body. Her tumultuous thoughts melted away as the kiss continued and suddenly nothing else existed but them. Her sole existence centered on his lips upon hers and the feelings they were eliciting.

The moment ended too soon, and she found herself looking up into Lee's smiling eyes. "You really shouldn't do that," she whispered. "It makes this case much harder to bear." He pulled her close as she spoke, his hands caressing her back in soft, circular motions.

"He hasn't called again?" Lee asked, in an apparent attempt to change the subject to safe ground.

"Not yet," Amanda replied. He loosened his hold on her, and she backed up a step and turned to resume the filing. "These were interesting reading," she remarked over her shoulder. "Especially yours."

"Humph," Lee breathed as he turned away from her.

Amanda turned around and leaned against the file cabinet. "You took some unbelievable risks, you know."

Without turning around, he nodded and then paused. After a moment he turned his head, looking at her from the corner of his eye. "I didn't feel like I had anything to live for back then," he curtly explained, then walked from the vault into the office beyond.

Amanda silently followed him to his desk, watching as he sat down and picked up a pencil, twirling it between his fingers like a miniature baton. She sat on the edge of his desk, waiting for him to continue, but the ringing of the phone interrupted them. Holding up a finger, she indicated to Lee that it was the outside line ringing in.

She picked up the receiver and answered, "Film Library."

"Amanda? It's me," Doug replied.

Amanda's brow furrowed in wonder. She hadn't given Doug her work number. "Hi, Doug," she said, standing up straight and looking at Lee. He sat up and leaned forward, watching and listening to her end of the conversation with great interest.

"I'm in town. In fact, I will be for a few weeks," Doug continued. "Is it too late to ask you to dinner tonight?"

Looking to Lee for support, she charged ahead. "Tonight would be perfect," she assured him. "Where do you want me to meet you?" She followed the instructions Lee and Billy had given her; she would drive to wherever they were to meet, not letting him pick her up. This would avoid giving Doug any advantage over the situation.

"I could always pick you up," he offered.

"Oh, no," she politely declined. "There's no need to go through all that trouble. I'll meet you. Where?" Lee nodded his approval and winked at her. She offered a half smile in return.

"There's a nice little bar near my hotel called P.G.'s. I hear the food is excellent."

"I know exactly where that is," she said. "I'll meet you there at seven?"

He agreed, and she hung up, breathing a sigh of relief. "Well, that's all set," she said to Lee. "I suppose we ought to let Billy know."

Lee silently nodded and stood, leading her out the door and down to the Bullpen.

Amanda sat across from Doug, languidly playing with the salt on the rim of her glass. She had to admit that she was developing a taste for margaritas. She lifted her heavy-lidded eyes to Doug and smiled. He had been charming so far, regaling her with stories of his supposed exploits on the West Coast. Of course, she was well aware that that was all they were. Stories. Stories of a made-up existence.

Their waiter came by, and Amanda shook her head at the offer of a fourth drink. She'd had little to eat and didn't want the alcohol to go to her head. The memory of Lee's instructions came back to her, 'Remember, the injection will neutralize only so much alcohol. Drink enough to let him think you're buzzed, but don't go overboard. Eventually, with enough alcohol in your system, the serum's effectiveness will decrease.'

"So, now I'm a consultant," Doug concluded. "Not very exciting, I'm afraid."

Slightly slurring her words, Amanda disagreed, "Oh, no, I think it's very exciting, Doug." She nodded emphatically as she spoke, but she allowed her eyes to wander across the room in an attempt to convince him that her thoughts were elsewhere.

"How thoughtless of me," he said, reaching for her hand, and this time, she didn't pull away. "I've been sitting here all evening, talking your ears off, when you've obviously been through a lot this

week." His face was a mask of sincerity as he rubbed the back of Amanda's hand, offering, "Would you like to talk about it?"

He'd taken the bait; it was Amanda's turn to play him. "Oh, no," she sighed, placing her free hand on her forehead. "It's nothing, really. I mean, we'd known each other for so long, and I knew what he was like, but . . . I feel like a fool." She shook her head and picked up her glass, quickly draining the remaining liquid.

"You see, he's a ladies' man," she explained, "I thought he'd changed, but obviously he hasn't." Summoning up some anger, she poured it forth in her explanation. "He has a reputation, you see, of playing women and then tossing them when he's through. Well, I found out the hard way that he's through with me. That . . . woman he was with was just as surprised as I was when I interrupted them. I'll bet he used the same lines that he gave me. I found out right after our dinner. I'd stopped by to tell him about our meeting. I'd kept it a secret from him . . . I guess I was feeling guilty . . . and wanted to let him know. I'm glad I didn't, now."

She glanced up to find Doug studying her with great interest. He seemed to be buying her story, no doubt knowing that what she was saying about Lee's character wasn't so far from the truth -- at least the truth as it used to be. "I was humiliated," she finished, "But I'll be damned if I'm going to let him get away with it. I still have to work with him, but I don't have to like it. Someday he'll get his."

Doug regarded her for a moment before speaking. "The best revenge is living well, or so I've been told."

"I've got something more permanent in mind," she hissed, changing her mind about another drink, and raising her hand to motion to the waiter. "Look," she said, leaning closer across the table, "I can lose my job for this, or worse." Doug nodded, leaning closer to her. "I'm not an editor, I don't work for a film company, and Lee's not my boss." She winked and continued, "You're not going to believe this, sometimes I don't believe it myself, but . . . I'm a spy. He's a spy, too, and he's my partner."

Amanda had to hand it to him. The surprise in Doug's eyes was nearly believable. He leaned back, his mouth open as he struggled for something to say. She leaned back in her seat as well, taking the freshly delivered drink in hand. He squinted at her, as if seeing her in a new light, and smiled.

"This is a side to you I never expected," he finally said, "and I think like it."

Part Seven

Friday

Amanda shuddered as she relayed the dinner conversation to Billy and Lee. They, of course, had heard everything first hand through the transmitter in her ring, but this was the first time she'd seen them since then.

"He seemed to believe me," Amanda concluded. She turned a wry smile to Lee. "I guess your reputation is good for something after all."

Billy chuckled as Lee made a face at her. "Do you have plans to meet again?" he asked.

"He's supposed to call me," Amanda replied. "Apparently he has some kind of meeting today and a dinner with some 'clients' tonight, but wanted to see me either Saturday or Sunday."

"Fantastic," Billy said, rubbing his hands together. "Just get in touch with Lee or me when the plans are made, and we'll make sure you have some backup."

"I've one question," Amanda piped in. "Why can't you just arrest him?"

Lee shook his head. "I wish it was that easy," he said. "Unfortunately, he hasn't done anything wrong that we can prove. Taking you to dinner doesn't count," he added with a smile.

"Until we get something concrete," Billy interjected, "we could bring him in for questioning, but we wouldn't be able to hold him."

"I see," she replied.

"Just keep up the good work, Amanda," Billy said. "This will be over before you know it."

Amanda and Lee nodded and stood as they were dismissed from the office. They walked side-by-side to the elevator and were waiting when Amanda pressed her hand to her temple.

"Are you okay?" Lee asked.

"I think I have a hangover," Amanda replied, grinning at her partner. "I thought that serum was supposed to keep me from getting drunk."

The elevator door slid open and they stepped inside, moving coats and rain slickers out of the way. "It does keep you from getting drunk," Lee answered. "I never said you wouldn't get a hangover. What were you drinking, anyway?"

Amanda pinched the bridge of her nose and replied, "Margaritas."

Lee let out a low whistle. "Wow, I'm surprised you're still standing."

Amanda glanced at him, saw the twinkle in his eyes and landed a playful swat on his arm. "Oh, shut up," she chastised him as the door opened into the Georgetown foyer.

Friday passed with little activity, and it was late afternoon before Amanda heard from Doug. He called just as she was getting ready to leave work for the weekend. She answered the phone, hoping it wouldn't be him but not surprised when it was.

"Amanda," he said. "I'm finally out of that meeting. I'm glad I caught you before you left."

"You just caught me," she replied, setting her things down and motioning for Lee to pay attention.

"I've been thinking about what we were talking about last night," Doug continued. "I want to talk to you some more. How about dinner tomorrow?"

"Oh . . . Doug, look. I had a lot to drink last night and probably said some things I shouldn't have." Lee gave her a thumbs-up, and she shrugged.

"It's been my experience that you tend to be more open and up front when you've had a bit to drink," he teased. "Unless that's one more thing about you that's changed?"

"No," she sighed. "You're right." She paused, letting that sink in, then replied, "I'm free for dinner tomorrow. Where should we meet?"

"How about the same place as last night?" he asked.

"That sounds great," Amanda agreed. "I'll see you there around six?"

"Six is perfect. Good-bye." He hung up, and Amanda replaced the receiver with a visible shudder.

Immediately, Lee was beside her, his arms around her. "It's all going to work out," he promised. "Trust me."

Saturday

The day had rushed by and before she knew it, it had been time to get ready for her dinner with Doug. She had made an excuse to her mother and headed to the small restaurant, fiddling with her ring the whole way. They had been seated, and Amanda declined a drink and ordered a simple dinner.

Sitting across from him, she wondered how the boy she'd known in school could have turned out so differently from what she expected. If someone had asked her back then if she thought Doug might become an assassin, she would have replied with a resounding no, without a second thought. On that same token, she knew that no one would have expected her to become a spy.

"You're awfully quiet tonight," Doug said, and she wondered how long he'd been watching her.

She smiled at him and sat up a little straighter. "I'm sorry," she replied. "I guess I was lost in my own little world."

"What's on your mind?" he asked.

"I was thinking about how it used to be, back in school, before everything got so complicated." She shrugged and looked around the room. "I never expected I'd be here."

"I know what you mean," he replied. "You're going through a rough time right now, but I've been thinking about it, and I think I can help you."

Her curiosity piqued, Amanda quickly returned her gaze to Doug. He wasn't going to draw it out at all, as they had thought he might. Either he trusted her to the point that he felt he could quickly move ahead with his plans, or he didn't trust her at all and he was baiting the trap.

"Help me . . . how?" she asked.

"Thursday, you were upset, and you said some things in the heat of the moment. I need to know if you still feel that way." He leaned back in his chair, scrutinizing her.

"You mean about Lee?" Amanda snorted and her tone turned icy. "Of course I still feel that way."

"I mean about getting back at him," Doug prodded. "You were pretty adamant about getting your revenge."

"I still am," she replied, her voice even, unwavering. "He never loved me, never wanted me around. Now that we're separated, he's trying to run me out of the Agency. It's like dealing with a whole different person. I'm tired of being pushed around and looked over."

"I understand," Doug whispered, reaching across the table and taking her hand in his. "But, do you want to do what I think you're thinking about doing?"

"At this point, I don't have anything to lose . . ." Amanda paused, her thoughts drifting off for a moment. "I mean, nothing but my family."

"I can protect your family," Doug offered, "And I can help you. You don't even need to be involved, just help me set everything up."

He seemed so sincerely interested in helping her that Amanda could almost believe that hadn't been his plan all along. "How can you do that?" she asked, allowing him to caress her fingers.

"I know some people that specialize in this type of thing. All you need to do is get Lee where they need him to be to . . . take care of business." He winked and pulled her hand to his lips, kissing her knuckles.

"I . . . I don't know," Amanda replied, slowly pulling her hand away. "It sounds too convenient. How can I be sure that there will be no fingers pointed back at me?"

"I can assure you," Doug promised, "No one will ever suspect you. This would look purely like a job related . . . accident."

A wicked grin formed on Amanda's face, and she tilted her head to the side, locking eyes with Doug. "Give me a few days to think about it," she requested, and he nodded as their dinner was placed on the table before them. Grateful for the distraction, she focused on her meal, trying hard to cover the guilt she was feeling. Of course it wasn't real, but talking about having Lee killed made her feel ill. Outwardly, she kept glancing at Doug and sending him winks and smiles, praying that it would cover how she felt inside.

Doug entered his hotel room and picked up the phone. He dialed a number and sat on the bed, kicking off his shoes while he waited for an answer.

A scratchy voice on the other end of the line said, "Password?"

"Junebug," Doug replied.

"Go ahead."

"I need to talk to Jameson," Doug said, rubbing his eyes with his free hand. "Tell him it's Basilisk."

"Right away." The line clicked as he was put on hold.

"Basilisk? Report." Jameson's voice was so loud and deep that it sounded like he was in the next room.

"All is going according to plan," Doug said. "She's taken the bait."

"Very good." There was a shuffling of papers then, "Don't let your feelings get in the way on this one. When you're done, she's done."

Doug flinched as he was reminded of his instructions and nodded. "Understood." Another click and the connection was severed. He replaced the receiver and walked across the room to the counter, where he decanted a bottle of brandy and poured himself a stiff shot.

Part Eight

Monday

The remainder of the weekend had been agonizingly long, and Amanda was grateful to be back at work, waiting for her meeting with Lee and Billy. She'd gone home immediately after her dinner with Doug and had jumped in the shower, hoping to wash off the disgust she felt. It hadn't worked. Ever since, she'd been eager to see Lee.

Now, sitting at her desk, she wondered if he was feeling the same way. He'd heard everything that had happened at dinner, knew what Doug had asked her to do, knew the plan was moving along nicely. Her ring, the transmitter, allowed him to be right next to her through her encounters with Doug.

Still, she hated lying. No amount of on-the-job experience could change the fact that she was brought up knowing that lying was wrong. How ironic, she thought, that the life and love she'd found revolved around lies.

She jumped and looked around when the door opened. Lee was standing half in and half out of the doorway, a crooked smile on his face. "I thought I'd get here early and surprise you," he explained, closing and locking the door behind him. "It seems you beat me to the punch."

"I woke up around three and couldn't get back to sleep," Amanda admitted. "I've been looking forward to seeing you since Friday." She stood and made it to his side in two steps, hesitating before he pulled her into an embrace.

"I've missed you, too," he whispered, holding her close. "You were great on Saturday. Are you supposed to meet with him again this week?"

"I'm going to call him today," she said, burrowing her head into his chest, not wanting to think about the next step in her game.

Lee continued to caress her back and arms as he spoke. "You're going to have to lay it on thick from now on," he softly lamented. "It's not going to be easy."

"It never is easy," she sighed, "But it is necessary." He continued to hold her, and her thoughts drifted back to what she was thinking about before he'd come in. "I just hate all the lies," she suddenly blurted out. "I hate lying about you."

He chuckled, "But you're doing such a good job. I'd hate to get on your bad side."

"Lee," she shook her head and took a step back. "I'm being serious." He kept silent as she walked around the room, pausing at the corner of his desk. "I don't like saying such awful things about you. I feel like I'm . . . like I'm cheating on you." She watched as he closed his eyes, and sucked in a calming breath. His apparent control was slipping.

Like flipping a switch, his countenance changed and he nervously laughed, running a hand through his hair. "Come on, Amanda. It's not that bad."

"Yes," she shouted, then quickly lowered her voice. "Yes, it is. I want to look into Doug's horrible face and tell him that there's no way I'd want you dead, that I love you and I'm going to spend the rest of my life with you." His eyes flared as she explained, and he took a step closer to her. "I'm not naive, though. I know we're doing this to keep him from hurting you. That's why I'm doing what I have to do. I don't want you to be uncomfortable with it."

"I'd be lying if I said it's not bothering me," Lee admitted. He spoke quickly, and Amanda could see the mask fall. "In fact, if I could end this all right now, I would. I hate the fact that we can't be seen together and that I haven't been able to see Phillip or Jamie or your mother in a week. I hate that we can't spend an evening together, watching old movies on my couch." He softened his tone, "I miss you, Amanda, so yeah . . . this is uncomfortable for me, but it sure as hell beats the alternative."

"Alternative?" Amanda asked.

Lee took another step and grabbed her hands, rubbing his thumbs along her knuckles. "The alternative being not having you on my side, not catching this nutcase before he puts a slug in me."

"Well, when you put it that way," she rolled her eyes and smiled.

"Exactly," Lee laughed. "So, do you feel better?" He pulled her close, and she relaxed, leaning her head on his chest.

"Yeah, I feel better," she sighed. "We should get downstairs before Billy sends out a search party."

The parking garage was well lit, and Amanda walked to the hotel, her thoughts whirling in a thousand different directions. She had called Doug that afternoon, telling him she'd thought about it and wanted to meet with him as soon as possible. He had told her to meet him at his hotel after dinner.

She entered the lobby and walked straight to the elevator, pressing the button for the sixth floor. The ride was slow, and she took the time to straighten her blouse and refresh her lipstick in the mirrored walls. When the elevator dinged her destination, she fingered her ring with her thumb, took a deep breath and stepped into the hallway.

Doug's room was at the far end of the hall, away from any exits or escapes. Amanda noted this and wondered how she would get out if something were to go wrong. Jumping from a sixth floor window was certainly out of the question.

"Just make sure nothing goes wrong," she said under her breath as she pasted on a smile and knocked on the door. She heard some shuffling in the room beyond and then footsteps getting louder as he neared the door. She was taken by surprise, however, when the door opened to reveal Doug in his stocking feet, wearing slacks with his dress shirt open to reveal a smooth, tanned chest. In his hand was a glass of red wine, which he offered to Amanda with a smile.

"I'm so glad to see you," he said as she stepped inside. "I just got in myself," he explained. "Give me a minute while I change?"

Amanda nodded and took the glass of wine. He motioned to a small couch at the end of the room, and she nodded, taking a seat. He stepped into the bathroom, closing, but not shutting the door. She realized that if she wanted to, she could watch him undress in the reflection of the bathroom mirror.

Amanda had to admit this unsavory person was a very attractive man. She turned her attention away from the bathroom door and into her wineglass, as memories unbidden seemed to assault her from every angle. They had been good together, and seeing him again caused a twinge of nostalgia. High school football games and dances flashed in her mind's eye. She remembered sitting in Doug's car after the Winter Carnival, doing a little more than talking, and the memory unnerved her. This was not the same person she'd gone to school with, had shared so much with, she reminded herself. He was very different now, as was she.

The door opened, and Doug stepped out wearing a black T-shirt and khaki shorts. The T-shirt was at least a size too small, fitting his muscled chest snugly, and Amanda couldn't help but admire the way he'd kept himself in shape. It was obvious that he was going out of his way to seduce her tonight, which worked well to her advantage. He sat next to her on the couch and poured himself a glass of wine, sitting back and casually laying on arm on the back of the couch, above her shoulders.

"I'm glad you could see me tonight," Amanda said, smiling demurely as she took another sip of wine. "I've thought over what we talked about and I've decided to accept your help. I'm tired of being walked on and ignored. Maybe with Lee out of the picture, I can get somewhere."

Doug's eyes lit up, and he sidled closer to her, placing his arm on her shoulders. "I'm glad you decided to let me help," he whispered, leaning in close. She could smell his aftershave and recognized it as the same scent Lee liked to wear on occasion. She closed her eyes as his lips touched hers and tried to imagine it was Lee kissing her to keep from jumping up and walking away. "You won't be disappointed," he promised, kissing her again.

Amanda brought her free hand up to Doug's chest, resting it against his heart, which she could feel beating under his shirt. She took in a shaky breath and leaned even closer to Doug, pressing her lips against his with more intensity, tasting the wine on his lips. He responded by running his hand up her back and into her hair, pulling her closer still.

Their lips parted and Doug groaned, "I've missed you, Amanda." He ran a finger over her lips and smiled. "I've thought about you a lot over the years. What you were doing, who you were with, what kind of person you had become." He traced her cheekbone and rested his palm on her cheek. "I'm so glad I've found you again."

"I am, too," Amanda answered with as much sincerity as she could muster. He leaned in for another kiss then he sat back, studying her intently. She smiled. "What?"

"Nothing," he replied, cocking his head to one side. "I was just wondering what little twist of fate brought us back together."

Amanda looked down at her glass and reached for the wine bottle, filling her glass halfway before setting the bottle back on the table. "I don't know," she said between sips, "But I'm not going to question it."

Doug stood and walked a few steps away, his hands jammed into the pockets of his shorts. "I agree," he finally said, turning back to Amanda. "Look, I have a few things to take care of . . . some people to call," he reached for her and pulled her to her feet. "Can you come back by tomorrow night?"

Amanda nodded and reached for her purse. "Same time?" she asked as she walked to the door.

"That would be perfect," he said. "I'll let you know what we're going to do about . . . your little problem." He reached for the handle but paused before letting her out. "I mean it, Amanda," he said, "I've missed you."

Amanda smiled and leaned forward, kissing him deeply, before replying, "I know." She stepped back and put her hand on his, turning the door handle and opening the door. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Part Nine

Amanda felt a little lightheaded as she climbed into her car and started the engine, pulling out of the parking garage. It was late, and the streets were quiet, the streetlights reflecting back at her off the damp pavement. She licked her lips and could taste the wine she had shared with Doug.

The thought of his lips on hers caused a shiver to run through her. She blinked, trying to retain control, but suddenly felt like she might be sick. Without much thought, she pulled over, stopped the car, and rolled down the window to get some fresh air.

She looked up to find that she hadn't made it very far. She was parked on Constitution Avenue, close to the Lincoln Memorial. Thinking a walk might clear her head, she rolled the window back up and grabbed her purse.

She walked east first, toward the Washington Monument, taking her time and breathing deeply the damp air. The rain had stopped, and the full moon occasionally peeked out from the clouds, adding to the mystique of the evening.

When she reached the Washington Monument, she stopped and looked to the south, catching a glimpse of the night-lit Jefferson Memorial through the trees. There was no denying she lived near a beautiful city. Usually, seeing the various monuments and memorials helped her to put things in perspective but, tonight, nothing seemed to help.

She crossed to the opposite side of the Reflecting Pool and slowly made her way toward the Lincoln Memorial, the cherry tree branches swaying in the breeze above her head. She had agreed to help someone kill her husband tonight. Even though she knew it was a ruse, she still felt dirty and sick.

The steps of the Memorial loomed in front of her, solid and unmoving, as she knew her resolve must be. She had made a promise to the Agency but, more importantly, to Lee, and it was one that she knew she must keep, even if it meant selling her soul to the Devil himself.

Amanda walked up the steps and turned to the right, following the edge around to the back. There, she leaned against one of the pillars and looked across the Potomac to the cemetery beyond. Apart from the smattering of cars making their way from one side of the river to the other, the night was quiet and still, a stark contrast to her thoughts.

Several minutes had passed, and she closed her eyes, grasping at the only sliver of hope she could find in this situation -- her husband. Yes, it was dangerous. Yes, she was using an old friend. But, she reminded herself, he was not the same person she had known so many years ago. He had changed, and not for the better.

Out of the stillness, a voice carried to her, and she jumped at the intrusion. "It's not safe for you to be here alone at this time of night," it said. A smile formed which she quickly buried as she turned to confront her visitor.

"It's not altogether safe for you to be anywhere near me, either," she replied as Lee appeared out of the shadows and took a step closer to her. It was so good to see him that she had to control her impulse to run into his arms.

"I followed you here," he explained, his left hand in his pants pocket and the other fiddling with the button of his jacket. "You looked like you might need a friend."

Amanda swallowed hard, a lump forming in her throat. "You could say that," she whispered, turning away from him and looking back out over the water. "I needed to collect my thoughts. It was a difficult evening."

There was silence for a moment, and Amanda wondered if he was really there or merely a figment of her desperate imagination. Then, she heard him sigh and take another step closer, laying his warm hand on her shoulder. "I know," he said, then he wrapped his arm around her, holding her close.

Amanda closed her eyes and drank in the sensation of being near Lee. She could feel his breath in her hair and the steady rise and fall of his chest against her arm. He said nothing, just held her, as if knowing that was all she really needed. For a time, it was. When she felt her emotions were well in check, she shifted and turned to face him.

"Thank you," she said. "I'm glad you came."

He smiled and glanced past her to the river. "I had to," he replied. "The way you were looking over there, it looked like you were thinking about jumping."

Amanda laughed, in spite of herself. "I guess I am being a bit moody," she admitted, then grew somber. "I suppose you heard everything." He nodded, averting his eyes to his feet, and she could tell he'd heard more than just the plans. "Then, it should be over soon . . . right?"

Again, he nodded. "Just a few more days of this nonsense and he'll be behind bars where he belongs." The words sounded full of venom, and Amanda couldn't help but wonder if he wanted to punish Doug for his crimes against humanity or his time spent with her.

She could see the hurt in his eyes and wanted to do something . . . anything . . . to make it go away. She reached for his hand and said, "I'm sorry."

Lee looked up at her, confused. "Sorry? Why?"

"That you're having to go through this. I can see it bothers you. I know you're trying to remain detached from the whole thing. So am I, but it's not working." She took a breath and looked down, regretting what she'd said the instant she'd said it. "I know you don't like talking about this but, maybe we shouldn't work together anymore. Maybe I should quit. Maybe it's time . . ." His hand on her chin stopped her mid-sentence.

As he lifted her face to his, he slid his hand along her cheek to the back of her neck, entangling his fingers in her hair. "Don't say you're sorry, Amanda," he whispered. "And don't even *think* about leaving me."

Amanda looked into his eyes, which were filled with conviction. "But . . ."

Her protests stopped when Lee lowered his lips onto hers. A moan escaped his lips, and she melted against him, relaxing into his arms. His lips were tender but frantic, so different from the kisses she'd shared with Doug earlier. The difference, Amanda realized, was love.

She parted her lips and opened herself to the intensity of the moment, allowing his tongue to explore her mouth. Her hands, crushed between them, found his chest under his jacket and she began to caress him through the fabric of his shirt.

As quickly as the moment started, however, it was over. Amanda came to her senses and stepped back, bumping into the column behind her. "We shouldn't be doing this," she explained, and Lee nodded, wiping his lips and straightening his hair. Trying to lighten the mood, she continued, "Can you imagine me having to explain to Mother why I was arrested for indecent exposure at the Lincoln?"

They both laughed at the thought and the ridiculousness of their behavior. "I'm sorry, Amanda," Lee said through a chuckle. "I was acting like a teenage boy on prom night." Again he laughed, and Amanda smiled, taking his hand.

"This is what I mean," she said, the seriousness back in her voice. "We're living this secret on a daily basis. It's bound to catch up with us sometime." She watched him as he took a deep breath and raised his eyebrows at her. "What I mean, Lee, is maybe we need to think about our situation. After this is through, we need to sit down and make some decisions about where we're going to go from here."

"Yeah," he agreed, exhaling as he spoke. "We'll talk when this is through."

She glanced at her watch and groaned. "It's late, I really need to be getting home." Reaching out, she straightened his perpetually crooked tie and kissed him on the cheek. "I'll see you in the morning." Amanda turned to leave, but stopped, looking back at him over her shoulder. "Thanks again," she said, "for being here tonight. It really helped."

He nodded and winked, turned on one heel and walked back into the shadows. Amanda sighed and started her walk back to her car, feeling better than she'd felt in over a week. Seeing Lee had helped purge some of the bad feelings she'd been having, and she now felt that she could move forward with her assignment, whatever might come of it.

Part Ten

Tuesday

Doug looked up from his newspaper at the sound of a tap on his door. He glanced at his watch, confirming his suspicions. Amanda wasn't supposed to arrive for another hour. Slowly, he stood, picking up his pistol from the dresser on his way past. With a cautious glance out the peephole, he let out breath of relief tinged with annoyance and opened the door.

"What are you doing here?" he hissed.

A man stood in the hallway, dressed entirely in black. "Jameson sent me," he hissed in reply. "Let me in." He shoved his way past Doug and walked quickly to the center of the room.

Doug shut the door, his lips pursed in aggravation. "What the hell does Jameson think he's doing?" he asked. "I don't need any help."

The man looked around at the room, nodding in apparent approval. "Jameson thinks you might be too emotionally involved with this one. He thinks your judgement might be clouded. He sent me to keep an eye on you and your lady friend."

"My judgement is just fine, thank you," Doug replied with forced politeness. "Amanda will be here shortly, and it will not do for her to see you here with me." Doug pointed to the door and raised his eyebrows. The man didn't move.

"She was with him last night," the dark man said. He spoke as if he were discussing the weather or some other nicety that had no consequence.

Shaken, Doug squinted as the words registered. "With whom?"

"Scarecrow," he replied.

"That's impossible," he argued. "She wants him dead. It must have been about work."

The dark man laughed and turned his beady eyes to Doug. "Are you really that naive?" he asked with a flip of his hand. "She left you and went straight to him. They met in secret and were doing much more than discussing work."

Doug was silent for a moment, trying to grasp the possibility that Amanda could be double-crossing him. Finally, he took a deep breath and nodded at his associate.

"I'll take care of it," he assured him. "Tell Jameson that I'll be using Plan B. Wait downstairs in the garage."

"Understood," the dark man replied, and without another word, he turned and left.

Amanda parked in the garage and walked, again, to the lobby. It had taken most of the day, but she'd been able to work up a reasonable amount of courage for the task ahead. As she rode the elevator up to the sixth floor, her thoughts were on Lee and how things would be once this assignment was over.

When she reached the end of the hallway, she was surprised to see Doug standing in the open doorway, waiting for her.

"I had a feeling you were on your way," he said through a smile. "Come in." He stepped aside, and Amanda entered the room, feeling the same uneasiness she'd felt when she'd first met up with

Doug on the steps of the Jefferson Memorial. She quickly brushed off the feeling, attributing it to her own nervousness.

"I hope I haven't kept you waiting," she said as she set her purse on the floor near the dresser. When she turned around, Doug was nearly on top of her.

He pulled her into a strong embrace and held her close. "But you have kept me waiting, Amanda," he whispered. "I've been waiting for nearly fifteen years."

Amanda trembled, and he released her. There was something in his eyes tonight. Something different that she couldn't quite put her finger on. She took a step back and smiled thinly at him. "Is everything all right?"

It was as if someone had flipped a switch. His eyes cleared, and his face seemed to harden in an instant. "The plans are in place," he stated. "Tomorrow, you will call Lee and tell him that you've received a call from one of his contacts. Tell him the contact wants to meet with both of you at this abandoned warehouse." He handed her a slip of paper on which an address was neatly written. "You'll need to go there and lead him to the back. My friends will take over from there. As soon as the first shot is fired, you are to get the hell out of there, do you understand?"

Amanda knew she was staring at him, her eyes wide. "Yes . . ." she stammered. "I understand." She watched in amazement as he changed again, the stiffness leaving him and the softness returning to his eyes.

He stepped toward her and reached for her hand, pulling her to him. He held her loosely, looking deep into her eyes. "I wonder," he said, "if things would have turned out differently if I'd never left you."

"I don't know," she breathed in reply, wondering where this morose reflection was coming from.

"I really have thought a lot about you, Amanda," he continued. "The more I'm with you now, the more I realize how much I loved you back then." He had reached up and was softly tracing her jaw with his fingertips. "I'm only now beginning to realize what I left behind."

His sincerity affected her, and she felt herself feeling sorry for him and the life he'd chosen for himself. "That was a lifetime ago," she said. "We're different people now."

Doug released her and walked toward the door. Amanda picked up her purse and followed. "I know," he said. "We're all different now." He opened the door and turned to face her, stopping her before she could leave. "Some of us more than others."

Before Amanda could ask him what he meant, he leaned forward and kissed her. Oddly, it seemed to be a kiss not of passion or longing, but of sorrow. Their lips parted, and he stepped out of the way, closing the door softly behind her, leaving her to wonder what he had meant as she slowly walked to the elevator.

The sound of her echoing footsteps penetrated her thoughts and she realized she'd walked from the sixth floor to the parking garage in a daze. She chuckled, chiding herself at her lack of

observation and was reaching for her keys when a hand grabbed her harshly across the face. She struggled for a moment then fell into a peaceful, dark oblivion.

Part Eleven

Amanda's eyes fluttered open long enough for her to know it was a particularly bad idea. The bright sunlight stabbed at her naked eyes, causing blinding, shooting pain to wash over her in waves. She screwed her eyes shut, controlling her nausea. She had no idea where she was, only that wherever it was, it was entirely too bright. Concentrating on her breathing, she slowly thought back to the last bits of memory she could piece together coherently.

She had left Doug's hotel room, that much was clear. She didn't remember walking to her car, but she knew she'd been deep in thought, arriving at her car but not remembering how she'd gotten there. She remembered scolding herself for letting her mind wander, and then someone had grabbed her from behind.

That had been in the evening. The light she had been assaulted with was too bright to be ordinary electric light. She surmised that it was either an interrogation style lamp or actual sunlight. If it was sunlight, then it had to be at least the following day. Cautiously, she moved her arms, finding that they were bound but, to her relief, not too tightly. Again, using extreme caution as she had no idea who might be watching her, she slowly ran her left thumb over the underside of her pinky. Her ring was gone.

A door opened, and she froze, listening as footsteps tapped on a wooden floor and the door closed again. "She's been moving," an unfamiliar male voice said. He seemed completely void of emotion as he spoke to the person who, she presumed, had entered the room.

The other person didn't reply, but she heard his footsteps walk past her and, with a soft rattle, the room darkened. Amanda slowly opened her eyes to find Doug standing a few feet from her next to a window with recently closed blinds. She slowly turned her head to the left and saw a small man, dressed completely in black, staring at her with beady, dark eyes.

Slowly turning back to Doug, she frowned a little and said, "Is this some kind of test?"

"No," Doug sadly replied. "It's not a test." He stepped past her and sat on a chair in the center of the room. "This is Plan B."

Amanda knew she looked confused, which was good because it covered her worry. Her ring was missing and unless it had been removed after they made it to wherever they were, there would be no way for Lee to know where she was. She could only assume that he had heard the struggle in the parking garage -- although she was now remembering there wasn't much of a struggle at all -- but he would at least be wondering where she was by now.

"Plan B?" she whispered. Her head was still pounding, probably an after effect from whatever was used on her to cause her to black out. She couldn't feel any apparent injuries as she carefully flexed each muscle in turn. Everything seemed to be in working order.

"Plan B," Doug continued. "That's what happens when you unwisely double-cross me."

Amanda looked up at Doug too quickly, a fresh bolt of pain shooting through her head. "What?"

"My associate here followed you the other night," he explained, nodding to the dark man sitting across the room from them. "He informed me of a little rendezvous you had with your supposedly estranged partner. From what he saw, you aren't as estranged as you made out to be. In fact, it was quite the opposite." He wrung his hands as he spoke, a grimace forming on his face. "It's too bad really," he lamented. "I was going to have to kill you eventually, anyway, but I had hoped we could have a bit more of a . . . reunion before that became a necessity. As it stands, you've only moved up the timetable and removed the element of surprise."

Amanda frowned, surprised at the fleeting thought that Plan B sounded like the better option.

"Speaking of timetables," the dark man interrupted.

She turned to him to see him nodding to a clock on the wall over the door. She could barely make out the time as nine thirty. Lee would be at work now, frantic, wondering why she was running late. Her only hope was that the ring had been left at her car, instantly alerting Lee that something was wrong. She glanced down to see that her necklace was missing as well.

"Doug," she whispered, squinting her eyes. "Can I at least have some aspirin? There's a bottle in my purse."

Doug's associate answered. "Your purse is in your car. Everything that was in your purse is scattered along side the Leesburg Pike along with all of your jewelry."

Amanda nodded. "So it looks like a random mugging?" she guessed, and Doug nodded.

"We didn't want to take any chances that you might be wired, so we dumped your stuff to lead the hounds astray, just in case," the dark man said. His lips curled into an evil grin. "I checked out your clothing thoroughly, though." His eyes appreciatively swept the length of her body, and Amanda cringed.

Doug suddenly snapped to attention and walked across the room, back to where his friend was sitting. With a glance to Amanda, he opened a suitcase revealing what Amanda knew to be a satellite phone. He picked up the receiver and dialed a number, tapping his foot as he impatiently waited for someone to answer.

"Scarecrow," he finally said, and Amanda perked up. "I'll make this quick. I have Amanda. If you want her back, meet me at the old Anaconda Siding warehouse by the wharf in one hour. Come alone or she dies." He left no room for discussion and quickly hung up the phone.

Doug walked back to where Amanda sat and crouched in front of her, resting his hands on her knees. "I'm sorry it's come to this, Amanda," he said as he reached up to touch her face. She pulled her face away, and he frowned, returning his hand to her knee. "I know what you must think of me."

"You have no idea what I think of you," Amanda quietly replied. "You're not the person I knew in school. He's gone."

Doug laughed and stood, turning his back to her for a moment, then facing her again. "I've been gone, then, for a hell of a long time." With a wink, he turned to his associate and nodded. "Come on, Rob," he said, "Let's go get you set up."

Part Twelve

Amanda had been alone in the small room for a few minutes. It seemed to have once been a small office as there were cabinets on the walls and an old, dusty desk in one corner. The only item in the office, other than the desk and two chairs, was the suitcase containing the satellite phone. There was absolutely nothing she could use to her advantage except the chairs.

Knowing she couldn't rely on Lee to save her, she began wriggling in her chair, loosening her already slack ties. She was in luck and in moments, her ties were loose enough for her to work out one of her hands. With one hand free, she worked the other loose then set about loosening the ropes around her feet. Her hands and feet free, she positioned the ropes so it would still seem that she was securely tied.

Time was on her side. As she finished and settled herself back into a subdued pose, Doug walked in, carefully closing the door behind him. With little more than a glance at her, he sat down in the chair his associate, Rob, had been using.

"It's all set," he said, avoiding her eyes. With Rob gone, his hard edge seemed to have softened, as if it had been a front for his friend. "Rob's stationed downstairs. When Scarecrow shows up, he'll get him."

"Then it's my turn," Amanda interrupted. "Are you going to do it, or is your friend?"

Doug looked up at her then, and she could see why he'd been avoiding her gaze. It was evident that he was struggling with this portion of his assignment. "I don't want to have to do it," he quietly admitted. "But, I have my orders."

"You don't have to follow them," she pointed out to him. "You could always surrender, turn yourself over. Maybe you could work for the good guys."

Doug snorted and shook his head, looking back at the floor. "That only works in the movies," he said, raising his head and looking at her once more. "If I were to turn, I'd be dead within the day, I've no doubt of that."

"We could protect you," Amanda pleaded.

"Like they're protecting you right now?" He laughed. "No thanks."

Amanda was thinking of a new line of reasoning to use on Doug when they were both startled by the sound of two gunshots ringing out from below. Amanda closed her eyes, praying that it was Lee who had fired the shots. Doug just smiled.

"That was record time," he remarked, checking the clock above the door. "I knew he'd try to sneak in early. He can be very predictable, you know." His eyes narrowed as he glanced back at Amanda. "Or . . . should I say he *could* be very predictable."

Amanda said nothing; instead she glared at Doug, feeling a hatred for him stronger than any hatred she'd felt before.

"Rob will be back up here in a minute, and we'll get this over with," Doug continued, ignoring the icy stare coming from his prisoner. "I promise, we'll make it as quick and painless as possible."

"Thank you so much for your concern," Amanda hissed, shifting her foot slightly to facilitate a quick escape.

They waited in silence for a few minutes. When Rob failed to return, Doug became noticeably flustered.

"He should have been back by now," Amanda sweetly pointed out to him. "What do you suppose is keeping him?"

"Shut up," Doug whispered, pulling a gun from his waistband. Amanda could hear it, too: footsteps, making their way slowly toward the closed door.

As the footsteps neared, Amanda watched Doug level the gun at the door and slowly release the safety. It was as if she was no longer in control of her actions. Amanda leapt from the chair, her ropes falling to the floor. She grabbed at the gun, pushing it down and away from the door just as it swung open. Her back was to the door, and she could only hope it wasn't Rob finally coming back upstairs to finish her off. If so, her little insurrection would be quickly at an end.

She and Doug were face to face, the gun between them, each struggling for control. Their eyes were locked, willing the other to back down. She didn't want to hurt Doug, and she thought he really didn't want to hurt her, despite his orders. Time was moving in slow motion as he pulled the gun closer to him in an effort to wrench it from her grasp. She held on tightly and found herself within inches of him, the gun pressed between them.

Then, she heard the muffled shot. There was heat, followed by liquid warmth, spreading from her midsection outward. The look on her face was mirrored in Doug's: shock, disbelief, sadness. She heard a strangled cry from behind and wondered, vaguely, who else was in the room with them.

The gun dropped to the floor between them, and Amanda staggered back a step, looking down. Her hands and stomach were covered in blood. One more step back and she felt the chair on the back of her knees. She sank down, sitting on the chair, her arms crossed in front of her stomach, creating a barrier against the horror she was seeing and feeling.

Doug sank to his knees before her, a bloodstain on his midsection identical to hers. Recognition dawned on his face as he looked into Amanda's eyes. She could see him struggling to say something, and she leaned forward, coming out of the chair onto her hands and knees. She crawled the few feet to where Doug was now kneeling.

"I'm sorry," he whispered as the light faded from his eyes. He slumped against her, and she could feel the dead weight pushing against her. With a cry, she gently lowered Doug to the ground.

A hand on her shoulder awakened her from her daze, and she looked up to see Lee standing over her, obviously panicked. "Are you okay?" he asked, crouching beside her.

"Yeah," she replied, realizing for the first time that she hadn't been hit at all. She ran her hand over her stomach, feeling the stickiness of Doug's blood on her shirt. "It's not mine," she dully explained and Lee breathed a sigh of relief.

He pulled her to her feet as he stood and wrapped an arm around her, slowly walking her out of the room to the paramedics waiting below.

Epilogue

Amanda sat on the couch in Lee's living room, a nearly empty tumbler of brandy in her hand. She had showered and was wearing one of Lee's T-shirts and a pair of sweat pants. She'd been quiet all afternoon, alternating between thinking about what had happened and trying to block it out. Lee was quietly sitting next to her, letting her sort through her thoughts on her own.

She was startled from her trance when he stood, taking the glass from her hand and walking to the bar to refill it. Amanda started to protest, but stopped before the thought completed itself. For some reason, brandy appealed to her this evening.

He handed her the refilled glass and stepped behind the couch and out of view. Amanda continued to stare at the window, allowing the muted oranges and reds of the sunset to lull her back into a stupor, taking a sip of the burning liquid to speed the process along.

Bits and pieces were starting to come back to her, and she remembered being whisked away by the paramedics, Lee never leaving her side. She recalled a brief examination before she was taken away for debriefing. There would be a review board and, of course, meetings with Dr. Pfaff before she would be released for field duty, but those things didn't concern her at the moment. Billy had insisted that she take a couple of days to pull herself together, and she hadn't argued.

Lee walked in front of her, breaking into her thoughts and she looked up at him as he sat down. She took another sip and half-heartedly smiled.

"I have something for you," he said and held open his palm. Lying in his open hand was her ring, the real one, and her necklace. "I was able to recover this," he explained as he picked up the chain and fastened it around her neck. "And, I thought you might want this back." He slid the ring on her pinky and lifted her hand to his lips, kissing her knuckles.

The familiar weight of her pendant against her throat helped to further calm her. She placed the half-empty tumbler on the coffee table and leaned against Lee, sighing deeply. "Thank heavens that's over," she whispered, closing her eyes and giving herself up to the added warmth she felt as Lee wrapped an arm around her, saying nothing.

Her mind was beginning to wake up, and a thousand questions began to form. "What happened last night?" she asked Lee.

"I thought Billy was going to have me sedated," Lee admitted. "I was listening to your meeting with Doug, and everything seemed to be going as planned. You made it down to the garage, and I heard what sounded like you dropping something. Next thing I knew, I saw your blip moving on the screen, but not in the direction of home. I panicked and started following. I'd been following for a while when the blip stopped moving. When I reached it, I found your things tossed by the side of the road." He paused and swallowed, squeezing Amanda's shoulder. "I high-tailed it back to the hotel and found your car still sitting there, your purse on the ground by the door. I ran up to Doug's room, but it was empty. That's when I went to the Agency and reported you missing."

"He grabbed me from behind," Amanda explained. "I wasn't paying attention," she admitted, "and he knocked me out with something . . . chloroform, I think. I woke up with a splitting headache."

Lee kissed her on the top of the head. "I'm sorry you had to go through that."

"Yeah . . . well . . . ya gotta do whatcha gotta do," she replied with forced enthusiasm.

Lee chuckled then held her in silence for a little while. Finally, he said, "I thought you'd been shot . . . again."

Amanda nodded, remembering the cry she'd heard after the shot had been fired. "I thought so, too," she said. "I just couldn't let him take a shot at you like that. I didn't even think, just jumped at him." She shook her head. "I can't believe I did that." The horror of the situation finally started to sink in and she closed her eyes. "I killed him, didn't I?"

Instantly, she was assaulted with memories of a seventeen year old Doug, helping her load her suitcases into her car. They had been so excited about leaving home and going off to school, both so full of promise. Briefly, she wondered if his parents would be told the full story, about what he had become. She'd seen several people killed since she'd become an agent, but she'd never *known* them, had never thought about the families they were leaving behind.

"Your life was in danger," Lee gently reminded her, pulling her out of her thoughts.

"Yours, too," she countered, shaking off the past and returning to the present. "I couldn't sit there and let that happen." She wondered if he could tell she was saying these things for her benefit, more than for his. If he did, he didn't let on.

"I don't know what I would have done, though, if it had been you." He paused and breathed deeply before continuing. "I've been through that once before, and I don't want to have to do it again."

"That's the nature of the business," Amanda reminded him, and herself. "Every day, we go out there and take chances . . . both of us."

"I'm starting to think that's a bad idea," he admitted. "I've been thinking about what you said at the Lincoln, and you're right. We do need to talk about this, and soon."

"Not tonight," Amanda whispered, burrowing against Lee's chest and closing her eyes. "I don't want to make any life-altering decisions tonight. I've been through hell today, and I want to sit here with you and just be happy to be alive, is that okay?"

"Of course," he said, kissing her head again.

She began to drift to sleep but was startled awake when Lee cleared his throat. "Amanda?"

"Yeah?" she sleepily replied.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Do you have any more ex-boyfriends I should know about?"

Amanda smiled and drifted off to sleep.

THE END