



turned. Applying gentle pressure to the door, she was both unsettled and relieved when it noiselessly swung open.

The first sight that met her eyes was that of her partner, still unconscious and sprawled out on a huge four-poster bed, his wrists and ankles bound and tied to the brass fittings. A stocky man sat guard, deeply engrossed in a newspaper.

Thinking quickly, Amanda snuck past the doorway, moving silently to another, fully open one at the opposite end of the hallway. Spying a heavy brass lamp as she entered the room, she devised a plan. Lifting it from the nightstand, she placed it just inside the room for later use.

Spotting a large ashtray, she picked it up and carried it into the hall, hiding herself around the corner. With all her might, she threw the ashtray into the vacant room. It caused the desired effect as it clattered against the wall and then dropped to the floor.

She heard the large man shout, "Hey, who's there?" Seconds later, his heavy footsteps plodded down the hall, his weight causing the floor to groan loudly in protest. For a moment, Amanda thought he might fall through to the floor below, but he made his way to the empty room and warily looked around.

Seizing the opportunity before her, she tiptoed to the doorway and picked up the lamp. Just as he was about to turn around, she hauled back and crashed it forcefully on top of his head. The sickening thud made her fear she'd killed him as she watched him fall noisily onto the floor. She quickly checked for a pulse. Finding one, she wasted no more time.

She hurried back down the passageway. "Lee?" she called.

Entering the room, she saw that he was still unconscious. Stepping closer to him, she noticed the bruises that were beginning to color his face and neck. Lightly running a hand over his abrasions, she whispered, "Lee . . ." Working quickly, she pulled the ropes free of his wrists and then moved to free his ankles.

From outside came the sound of a vehicle pulling up, causing her to work faster. There was no way the Agency backup team could have arrived so quickly.

Lee moaned and tried to sit up, squinting. "A . . . Amanda? Why am I . . ."

"Shhh," she admonished. "I've gotta get you loose, and we need to get out of here, fast."

"Where's 'here'?" he asked, looking around the room in confusion, then back at her. He groaned and squinted against the light, bringing one hand up to shield his eyes. "Why's it so damn bright in here?"

She quickly freed his left leg and went to work on his right. "Lee, please," she begged. "Be quiet."

"Kay," he replied, watching her. He still seemed very disoriented. She wondered just how hard they'd hit him, and whether he had a concussion.

As if on cue, he put a hand up to his head. "Ohhh!" he exclaimed, wincing. She knew he must have been hit pretty hard, but she couldn't afford to worry about that, yet.

"Okay, c'mon," she whispered. Helping him up, she felt him wrap his arm around her shoulders for support. Together they left the room and made their way down the hall. They didn't dare try the stairs; there wasn't enough time. Entering another room around the corner, she looked up and caught sight of a pull-down ladder for an attic.

Seeing an old desk chair, she wheeled it over to just below the attic entrance. "If I can just get up there . . ." she began speculatively, stepping up onto the chair.

"Amanda, be careful," Lee instructed, holding the chair in place. He put his hand on her lower leg to steady her.

From downstairs, the sound of the front door opening caused Amanda to redouble her efforts. The hatch creaked as she pulled it, but so far there hadn't been any sound inside the hotel to indicate that anyone had entered, and she was pretty sure the one she'd hit wouldn't be awake yet.

Descending from the chair with Lee's help, she instructed in a whisper, "Okay, now climb up there and I'll put the chair back --"

He took the chair from her. "I'll put it back, Amanda. I'm not helpless," he complained.

She stared at him, shaking her head. "Just hurry, then."

He replaced the chair and then came over to peer up at her. "What's going on, Amanda?" he asked, sounding clearer and more cognizant.

"Shhh." She motioned for him to climb. "Just get up here. Carefully."

Nodding in compliance, he ascended the feeble ladder and joined her in the small space above the hotel room. Deftly, she eased the hatch closed and sighed in relief.

"Now what?" he questioned in the damp, darkened space.

"Now," she replied, "we wait. I called for backup."

"Amanda," he protested. "You didn't have to bring us up here. I could have taken care of this."

She let out a short, derisive laugh. "Oh, yeah," she retorted quietly. "You have no gun, you were beaten senseless and out cold until five minutes ago, and there are at least three of them, but you could've taken care of the situation? Sure, you had it well in hand. The mighty Scarecrow . . ."

"Okay, okay," he grumbled. "You've made your point. How long until the backup gets here?"

"Five . . . maybe ten minutes," she told him, rubbing her hands together to keep warm.

"It's cold up here," he remarked, peering at her in the dark.

She nodded, shivering slightly at the sound of his voice, just inches away from her ear. "Yeah, sure is."

Lee reached over and wrapped his arm around her shoulders. He pulled her closer, gently rubbing her arm. "We can keep each other warm till then."

Momentarily stiffening, she relaxed against him when he kept his arm firmly in place. "Thanks," she murmured awkwardly. It was difficult to be so close to him; she never knew what to expect. She was also finding it harder to keep her feelings in check when she was near him.

"This was a good idea," he whispered, patting her arm. "I didn't mean to give you such a hard time just now."

She shrugged. "Don't worry about it. Your head must be killing you."

"It's been better," he admitted.

A moment later, they heard footsteps on the staircase, followed by sharp, angry voices.

"Where the hell is he?" one of them asked.

"Damned if I know!"

"Well, where's Roger?"

"In here, across the hall! He's out cold!"

In the ensuing moments, neither Lee nor Amanda dared to take a breath. More vehicles screeched to a halt in front of the dilapidated building, followed by shouting voices and general sounds of chaos.

Finally, someone entered the room above which they were hiding. "Lee? Amanda?" a familiar voice called.

"Francine!" they responded simultaneously. Kicking the ladder down, they descended, grateful to leave the cold, dank space.

"Are you two all right?" Francine asked.

"Fine," Lee responded. "We're both . . . fine." He winced, holding a hand up to his head.

"Good." She nodded. "Then I'm going to go finish up downstairs. Cozy hiding place," she commented with a glance at the attic door. Turning, she headed down the hallway, leaving them gaping after her.

Lee faced Amanda. "So. You, um . . . saved my life," he said simply.

"No," she demurred, feeling her face redden. "I didn't . . ."

"Yes, you did," he cut in, an insistent note in his voice. "I just remembered that you weren't with me when they shoved me into the van. You followed it here . . . I just want to thank you."

Shifting nervously, she avoided his eyes. "Well, ah . . . you're welcome, then. But I really didn't do . . ."

Before she could get another word out, he reached out and pulled her into a hug. Taken off guard, she slowly placed her arms around him, returning the gesture, wondering again how hard a hit he'd sustained. She felt his hand rub up and down her back, and her heartbeat doubled in time.

"Yes, you did, Amanda," he insisted again. "You followed me here, instead of worrying about your own safety and waiting for backup. Now, stop acting like it's no big deal," he told her, sounding slightly impatient. "Because it is," he amended, softening his tone.

"Well, you would've done the same for me," she replied. "Right?"

"Yeah," he agreed, smiling.

He pulled away, but only slightly. As she looked up into his eyes, it seemed like he tilted his head down toward hers. Was he going to kiss her? She felt her eyes widen in anticipation and she reached one hand up to his neck, pulling his head down toward hers. Without thinking, she touched her lips to his.

She felt him stiffen and suddenly realized what a terrible mistake she'd made. He hadn't been about to kiss her! What was she thinking?

Not registering the fact that he had tightened his grip on her when she kissed him, she abruptly pulled away. She put a trembling hand up to her lips, which were still tingling from the brief but electrifying contact with his. Her face was burning, flushing hotter than it had the time she'd kissed a boy in the ninth grade and had been caught by her homeroom teacher.

"Ohh." Her voice faltered, and she dropped her hand to her chest to steady her erratic breathing.

He was watching her, looking more bewildered than angry. His eyes were wide with surprise and his breath came in short, rapid bursts. Fleeting, it crossed Amanda's mind that he looked much the same way he had when they'd kissed in San Angelo at their 'wedding.'

Not sure what to make of his reaction, she continued. "I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to . . . do that . . . Lee, I'm so . . ."

Any further apology was interrupted and forgotten when he reached out and swiftly took her back into his arms, pulling her even closer, if possible, than before. A soft sound, somewhere between a sigh and a moan, escaped him and then he swiftly claimed her lips. A thousand sensations coursed through her body as his mouth devoured hers. She placed one hand on his chest and felt his heart beating wildly.

Giving herself up to the moment, she kissed him back, willingly. There was no denying the passion rushing between them. Again, she heard that almost inaudible groan escape his lips and felt the vibration of his voice against her mouth. She felt an answering whimper begin deep in her throat.

Suddenly, he ended the kiss, staring at her in surprise as though he'd just realized what he was doing. He quickly released her and stepped back, clearing his throat nervously as a confused frown appeared on his face.

"Amanda, I'm . . ." he stopped, looking away and taking a deep breath. He swallowed hard and looked at her again, his face displaying his obvious confusion. It took her a moment to catch her breath as well. "What?" she asked, already certain of what was coming.

Almost pleadingly, he said, "I'm sorry about . . . that. I don't . . . I don't know why

I . . . what came over me . . . us. Listen, can we . . . let's just, uh, forget what just happened, okay?"

She wasn't surprised, but she was disappointed. There was no way she would forget that kiss. "Umm . . . Okay," she agreed hesitantly. She was still reeling from the intimate moment they'd just shared, even as he was disregarding it. What had come over him?

Initially, she had misinterpreted his intentions, acted without thought. But his reaction had taken her by complete surprise. She had expected him to awkwardly leave the room or ask her what she thought she was doing. Rather, he had stared at her as she'd clumsily apologized, and then taken her back into his arms and kissed her with passionate abandon.

He spoke, breaking into her reverie. "After all," he went on, almost too eagerly. "It was nothing, right? We were both just so happy to be done with this case . . ." He stopped and ran a hand through his hair.

"But you . . . I mean I . . . and then you . . ." She tried to contradict him, but couldn't complete the thought, wondering if he was trying to convince her or himself of what he was saying.

"I know," he nodded, sounding contrite. "But I was . . . we were just . . ." he trailed off, staring at her again as if asking her to help him explain it away.

Amanda felt a sting of disappointment and hoped he couldn't see it. Listening to him fumble for words, she wanted to end his discomfiture. He wouldn't admit what was really going on between them - maybe someday, but not today.

She stared at him for a long moment, then nodded, resigned. "We were . . . emotional," she supplied helpfully.

"That's right!" He snapped his fingers, a characteristically crooked smile crossing his face. "You're right; we were emotional. I was thanking my partner for saving my life . . ."



She spread out her hands in a wide gesture, wanting to explain away her own actions as well. After all, it was she who'd initiated the kiss. "And I was just so glad that you were okay . . ."

"Absolutely," he agreed, nodding. "Who can blame us? I t was just two people . . . who got lost in the moment. I t didn't mean anything."

"Right . . ." She paused, suddenly unsure again. The way he'd kissed her belied everything they were both saying. "I t didn't mean anything," she repeated, feeling numb.

He grinned, having almost regained his composure. I f he sensed her hesitation, he didn't let it show. "Right. We don't, I mean, we're not . . . you know."

"No," she replied with a soft sigh. "We're . . . not."

"We're . . . friends. Good friends," he went on, still trying to salvage the situation.

"Right," she concurred slowly, wishing she were brave enough to contradict him, let him know that she knew there was more to it than that. "That's right. Good . . . friends."

"So it's forgotten?" he asked, somewhat nervously.

"Completely," she assured him as nonchalantly as she knew how.

Lee gave her a strange look, as if evaluating her reaction for any hint of deceit, then shrugged. "Good. Well, we'd better get downstairs," he replied, obviously more than happy to forget about what had just occurred.

"Right," she agreed, and walked out ahead of him. Next time, she promised herself, she would contradict his denials and bring him to his senses. I t was high time Lee Stetson got a wake-up call.

**The End**