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Author: Mary  
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## **WITH OR WITHOUT YOU**

### **PART ONE** ***"SLEEP NOT, DREAM NOT"***

#### **CHAPTER ONE**

*The dark haired man took one more look around the dimly lit room, taking a final inventory of its contents. He smiled slightly, exposing a row of teeth discolored by too many cups of coffee. Everything was set.*

*"You ready?" his partner asked, throwing the last of his tools into a small black bag.*

*"Yeah, c'mon, let's get out of here," the dark haired man answered, moving quickly towards the door.*

*As they left, he bent over to set the timer on the small, oblong device attached to the base of the furnace. Straightening up, he smiled smugly to himself.*

*"Show time," he whispered softly, rubbing his hands together.*

*"Let's go. This gives me the creeps."*

*"I'm right behind you. Did you clean up everything from the meeting?"*

*"Yeah," his partner replied. "Everything's clean."*

*“Okay, we’re outta here.” Making one final sweep with his eyes, the dark haired man moved as quietly and efficiently as possible across the room. Still grinning, he followed his partner up the stairs and out the door.*

*“Too bad we’re gonna miss all the fireworks,” he said as they furtively left the building.*

*“Yeah, it should really be something.” His partner tossed him the car keys. “Here, it’s your turn to drive.”*

*The dark haired man grunted, unlocked the door to the blue sedan, and slid behind the wheel. He waited for his partner to fasten his seat belt, then slowly he eased the car into the street, disappearing into the Washington traffic.*

Lee Stetson woke to the smell of slowly cooking bacon. Momentarily disoriented, he glanced around the room, briskly taking in his surroundings. It took only a few short seconds to realize that he was in Amanda’s bedroom at 4247 Maplewood Drive. Smiling, he recalled last night’s events – the sudden storm and their impulsive decision to stay at Amanda’s instead of making the drive to Lee’s D.C. apartment. Glancing at the clock, he saw that it was only 7:30 in the morning...Sunday morning, at that. Definitely too early to be up. He could hear sounds of cooking emanating from the kitchen downstairs. Lee smiled in resignation – even after six months of marriage, he was still unable to convince Amanda that he really was not much of a breakfast eater.

Stretching his long limbs, he rose from the bed, grabbing the robe he kept hidden in the back of Amanda’s closet. It was becoming increasingly difficult to keep their “real life” and their “secret life” separate. No matter how hard they tried, lately the lines just seemed to blur. For convenience sake, they each now kept a supply of clothes at each other’s houses, sometimes with disastrous results. Lee grinned ruefully when he recalled his conversation with Amanda’s mother a few months ago when his argyle sock had appeared in a load of Amanda’s wash. Even harder to explain were the boxer shorts that turned up a few days later. Luckily, Amanda had been able to intercept those before her mother found them. Not that Lee didn’t think Dotty couldn’t guess what was going on between them...it simply brought up a whole set of questions that neither of them were prepared to answer just yet.

Entering the kitchen, Lee paused a moment, surreptitiously watching his wife. She was totally absorbed in putting the finishing touches on a breakfast tray and didn’t hear him come in. Quietly, he crept up behind her, encircling her waist with his arms.

“Good morning, Mrs. Stetson,” he said, nuzzling her neck.

“Oh, gosh...Lee. You scared me.” She turned to him with a smile.  
“Although I should be used to it after all these years.”

Lee looked into her expressive eyes, then slowly touched his lips to hers.  
“I missed you when I woke up,” he said huskily.

“I was going to surprise you with breakfast in bed,” she answered,  
leaning closer to her husband. “You know, a special reward for last night.”

“You didn’t have to do all this...you know I’m not much of an eater in the morning.”

“Oh, I think you’ll like this breakfast. I’ve got bacon, toast, jam,  
strawberries...and whipped cream,” she finished playfully.

Lee looked over at the tray and then back into his wife’s brown eyes.  
“What time are your mother and the boys due back?”

“Not until 11:00. We have almost the whole morning to be Mr. and Mrs.  
Stetson.”

“Well then, what are we waiting for, Mrs. Stetson?”

“Nothing at all, Mr. Stetson.” Picking up the breakfast tray, she started  
towards the stairs, adding innocently, “Oh, Lee....don’t forget the whipped  
cream.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Lee and Amanda lay quietly together in her bedroom. The rain that had  
come so suddenly last night had started again, making a soft patter on the roof.  
Lee sighed contentedly, drawing Amanda tighter into the protective circle of his  
arms. Amanda glanced briefly at the clock...not quite 10:00 a.m. She pulled  
away slightly, starting to get up.

Lee held her back. “Not yet,” he whispered.

“Mother and the boys...”

Reluctantly, Lee released her and rolled over, staring at the ceiling. “Amanda, this is getting harder instead of easier,” he said sadly.

“What is?”

“All this...you, me, your mother, the boys...living apart. I don’t know...when I said we could make this a “mystery marriage”...maybe we were both just kidding ourselves.”

“You knew what it was going to be like, sweetheart. I know we haven’t been together much recently, but that hasn’t been entirely my fault.”

“What do you mean?” he asked with a slight edge to his voice.

“I realize how hard it is to hide our real relationship from mother and the boys and everyone else, but sometimes I feel like you don’t treat me like your partner at work anymore, either.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“These days, I get the feeling that you’re trying to keep me out of the loop...and lately it seems like you’ve been working with Francine more than with me.

Lee turned away quickly and began pulling on his clothes. “Francine has never been my partner, you should know that.”

Amanda chose her words carefully. “Ever since I was shot in California, whether you realize it or not, you’ve been turning to Francine more and more at work. First, you refused my help on the Brody case...”

“Amanda, I don’t know....”

“Then you wouldn’t let me help you or Francine when you were set up in that Russian sting operation, even though what happened affected me, too. And there’s that whole business with Harry Thornton and the Khrushchev list.” She paused momentarily, considering her next words. “And now, Senator Holstein’s cocktail party last night.”

“I promised Tom I’d stop for a minute and I didn’t want us both to get stuck there all night.”

“Lee, I know there was more to it than just catching up with an old friend. Was Francine there?”

Lee finished dressing and walked over to the bed, taking Amanda’s small hands in his larger ones. He looked down to the third finger of her left hand, tenderly rubbing the place where her wedding band should have been.

“No, Francine was not there.” He was silent for a moment. “You’re the only partner I’ve had since Eric...there’s no one I trust more than you. If I’ve been distant or distracted at work recently, it’s only because hard work seems to be the only thing lately that takes my mind off of our current living situation.”

“Lee...”

“I know we agreed to keep our marriage a secret to protect our family. But Amanda, no one but the two of us even knows it’s ‘our’ family. Sometimes I feel like I’m still just looking in at all of you from the kitchen window. I’m just not sure how much longer I can do this. I love you,” Lee said, cupping her face with his hands. “And I’m tired of not knowing when we’ll be able to spend time together. I’m tired of waking up alone most mornings. I’m tired of being a part-time husband.”

“I understand what you’re saying, but...”

“Amanda, are you home dear?” Voices rang out from downstairs.

“Mother...” Amanda said, a note of panic in her voice. “Lee, you’ve got to get out of here!”

She quickly drew on her robe, shooing her husband towards the window.

“Amanda, it’s still raining out,” Lee hissed. “Besides, maybe it’s time we told your mother the truth.”

“Lee, I’m not about to explain to my teenage sons what you’re doing in my bedroom.”

He gave her a pained look.

“Please, just go. I’ll talk to you later.”

Lee and Amanda both heard footsteps coming up the stairs.

“Amanda, are you home dear?” Dotty’s voice came closer and closer.

With a grimace, Lee opened the window and carefully started down the trellis. “We haven’t finished discussing this.”

Amanda quickly tossed the breakfast dishes under the bed, smoothed the rumpled sheets as best she could, and jumped back under the covers. Her mother knocked once and slowly opened the door.

“Darling...”

“Yes, Mother? I’m sorry, I was resting and didn’t hear you come in. You’re back early.”

“After the rain last night, the campgrounds were all soggy. We were up to our knees in mud, Amanda. So, we packed up and got an early start home,” she said, raising an eyebrow quizzically, “You’re sleeping awfully late this morning. Are you all right?”

“I just have a headache,” Amanda lied. “I’ll be up in a few minutes. Did the boys have a good time?”

“They had a wonderful time, as always. Although, you know, I’m getting far too old for these overnight campouts. I think I’ll take a nice hot bath and try to recover from the weekend.”

“That’s a good idea, Mother.”

Dotty gave her one more look, started to say something, and then obviously thought better of it. She shut the door with a small sigh, softly adding “Amanda, you’d better close that window, it’s raining in all over the carpet.”

Amanda lay back down on the bed, listening to her mother’s retreating footsteps. She turned over slowly, hugging the pillow close to her. She could still smell a hint of Lee’s aftershave on the pillowcase. The morning, so happily begun, slowly disintegrated before her eyes. She walked over to the window and looked out, searching the distance for...something.

“Oh, Lee, I miss you, too. And I wish you’d tell me what you’re really up to.” She reluctantly headed to the bathroom to take a shower and begin the day.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

*The two men sat calmly in the car a safe distance down the street. To the average passerby, they appeared to be two businessmen casually waiting for a friend to begin the morning commute. The dark haired man spoke tersely into his car phone.*

*“No sign yet, Team Three.”*

*His partner scanned the street, cautiously checking the rearview mirror. He looked over at the dark haired man, shaking his head.*

*“Okay, we’ll give it a few more minutes. Phoenix Team Two-out.”*

*The two men settled down to wait.*

Amanda Stetson walked into the kitchen where her mother and two sons were eating breakfast.

“Good morning, Mother, hi, guys,” she said cheerfully.

Phillip and Jamie King smiled at their mother as she sat down at the breakfast table. “Hey, Mom,” Jamie answered, sneaking a Coca-Cola out of the refrigerator.

“Jamie, sweetheart, you know you’re not supposed to drink soda with your braces,” Amanda said, starting to skim the morning newspaper. “Besides, it’s too early in the morning for that junk.”

“Okay,” Jamie grumbled, putting the soda back in the ‘fridge with a bang.

“You should see what he drinks at baseball practice,” Phillip said, grinning.

“Shut up, jerk,” Jamie yelled, shoving Phillip in the arm.

“You shut up, geek,” Phillip pushed back.

“Boys, stop it and sit down and eat your breakfast,” Dotty ordered, breaking up the scuffle. Jaime reluctantly obeyed, still glaring darkly at his brother.

“Amanda, is that all you’re eating this morning? You know breakfast is the most important meal of the day.”

“What did you say, Mother?” Amanda replied absently, her attention caught by an article buried in the back page of the paper.

“Breakfast?” Dotty glanced down at the newspaper article, reading over Amanda’s shoulder. “No clues yet to latest explosion’...what a world we live in. It really makes you wonder sometimes.”

“It says this latest incident was at a friend of Senator Holstein’s,” Amanda thought out loud.

“Now you’d think that would light a fire under the police. I hope no one was killed this time.”

“They don’t say, Mother.” She folded the paper and quickly changed the subject. “Fellas, what are you up to today?”

“We’ve got practice this morning,” Phillip replied. “Remember, our first play-off game is tonight. You will be there, won’t you, Mom?” Phillip and Jamie both looked at their mother expectantly.

“I wouldn’t miss it, sweetheart. Did you remind your father about the game?”

“Yeah, I called him last night,” Jamie said.

“Mom, do you think Lee will be able to come?” Phillip asked, downing the last of his orange juice.

Amanda quickly turned her attention to the newspaper. “I don’t know. I’ll be sure to ask him today.”

Dotty sat down at the kitchen table, stirring her coffee and staring thoughtfully at her daughter. The ‘clink – clink’ of the spoon in her cup was interrupted by a honking horn. “There’s your ride, boys,” she said. “Don’t forget your stuff, Jimmy’s mother said she’d drive you to practice from their house.”

“We’ve got it, Grandma,” Phillip said, heading into the hall to get their baseball equipment. Jamie hung back for a moment, watching his mother finish reading the paper. “Mom, I’ll see you tonight at the game,” he said quickly. “Dad said he’d be there.”



“Okay, sweetheart” Amanda answered. “See you tonight. Have a good day, stay out of trouble,” she called to Phillip.

“Bye, Mom,” Phillip answered. The sounds of the boys’ noisy departure filled the air for a few minutes before the front door closed with a bang and Dotty and Amanda were left in the relative peace of the late August morning.

“I guess I should be going, too,” Amanda said, hastily rising from the table.

“Is Lee picking you up this morning?”

Amanda hesitated by the stairs. “No, not today.”

“Is everything all right with you and Lee?” Dotty probed.

“Yes, Mother, everything is fine.” She headed swiftly for the door.

“I don’t mean to butt into your life, Amanda,” Dotty continued, following her daughter through the hall. “But you know I worry about you...”

“Mo-ther honestly, there’s nothing to worry about.”

“We haven’t seen too much of Lee lately.” Dotty watched her daughter guardedly.

“I told you, Lee’s been busy with some new projects for IFF,” Amanda lied glibly, grabbing her purse. “I’ve got to get going or I’m going to be late for work. See you tonight.”

“Amanda, dear, I need to talk to you,” Dotty shouted to the retreating figure of her daughter.

“Later, Mother.”

“I need to talk to you about Jamie. That girl,” Dotty finished under her breath, “Run, run, run, run, run. I guess I’ll just have to corner her tonight.” As she closed the door, Dotty failed to notice the dark blue sedan that followed Amanda’s Jeep Wagoneer down the street.

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Lee Stetson sat at his desk in the Q Bureau, feet up, drinking his coffee and perusing the morning newspaper. Placing his coffee cup haphazardly on his desk, he absently rubbed his right temple while he finished reading the small article that caught his attention. Lost in thought, he didn't hear the door open or see Amanda watching him unobtrusively from the doorway. Without warning, Lee sneezed loudly behind his newspaper.

"God bless you," Amanda said, walking over to her desk and putting her purse in the bottom drawer.

Lee abruptly removed his feet from his desk and stood up, hurriedly shoving the newspaper into the top drawer. "Good morning," he said, closing the distance between them.

Amanda put a smooth hand on his forehead. "You're not coming down with something are you?"

"Well, I don't know...someone did push me out a window into the rain yesterday."

"I'm sorry about that," Amanda began.

"Hey, I'm just kidding. I'm fine, Amanda, really." He smiled down at her.

"Can I make it up to you?" she asked, returning his smile.

"What did you have in mind?"

"Well..."

They were suddenly interrupted by the sound of footsteps outside the office door and parted, slipping back into their professional personae.

"Lee, I finally got those figures you've been waiting for," Francine Desmond said, forcefully entering the Q- Bureau office.

"Thanks, Francine," Lee responded hastily, motioning towards Amanda with his eyes.

"Oh, Amanda. I didn't notice you there."

"Good morning to you, too, Francine," Amanda caustically replied. "What figures are those?" She looked speculatively at Francine and her husband.

“Oh, nothing, really.” Francine casually closed the folder and passed it off to Lee. “Just some follow-up notes for the case Lee and I wrapped up last month.”

“Uh-huh. Whatever you say.” Amanda sat down abruptly at her desk and opened the top drawer, pulling out a thick manila folder. She busied herself by flipping through the pages of the first report.

Lee dropped the folder on his desk. “Thanks, I guess this will just about take care of it.” He abruptly ushered Francine to the door of the Q-Bureau.

Desmond looked at him closely. “It was no trouble, Scarecrow. I’ll see you at the meeting.”

“Meeting?”

“Remember, we have that senior agent staff meeting for this morning? Ten a.m. sharp?” Francine prodded.

“Yeah, I guess it had slipped my mind. I’ll see you there,” Lee replied, closing the door on Francine. He walked over to Amanda’s desk and perched nervously on the edge.

“Free for lunch?” he asked her casually.

“I don’t know,” she said, her eyes still on the folder. “I’ll have to check my calendar. I think there’s a freshman agent staff meeting today.” There was an unmistakably sarcastic tone to her voice.

“Amanda...” He looked longingly at the unbending figure of his wife. He silently returned to his desk, retrieving the newspaper and the file. “I’ve got to go...I’ll check back with you about lunch.”

Amanda said nothing, purposefully studying her report. Lee hesitated for a moment, then headed out the door.

### **CHAPTER THREE**

*The dark haired man swept the contents of the room with a small electronic box, paying close attention to the constant ‘beep-beep’ it emitted.*

*“All clear,” he said to his partner, carefully packing the instrument away into the small black bag.*

*His partner checked the last of the windows. “All clear on my end, too. We’d better make our status report.”*

*The dark haired man took out a small transmitter/receiver and quickly dialed a number. “Phoenix One,” a familiar voice replied.*

*“Phoenix One, this is Phoenix Team Two. Everything is set for tonight.”*

*“All clear on both fronts?” the voice asked.*

*“She doesn’t appear to be involved in this, Phoenix One. We’re convinced he’s working alone.”*

*“Convinced or certain?”*

*The dark haired man nervously glanced at his partner. The man shrugged, as if to say “Your call.”*

*“Certain...” the dark haired man replied. “Although, there is the matter of Desmond.”*

*“Don’t worry, Desmond knows nothing. He’s our problem...a problem easily taken care of. Phoenix One out.”*

*The dark haired man stared for a moment at the lifeless transmitter in his hand. Talking to Phoenix One always unnerved him. Unconsciously, he shivered. Placing the transmitter neatly in the black bag, he turned to his partner. “It’s time,” he said brusquely. “Let’s get out of here.”*

*With one final check of the small, black device on the furnace, they secured the area and left unobtrusively through the basement window.*

Amanda sat in the bleachers at the ball field next to her ex-husband, Joe King. She twisted uncomfortably on the hard bench, trying to concentrate on Phillip and Jamie’s game, but her thoughts were elsewhere. Lee had never returned to the office after his meeting. Unsatisfied with the way they parted this morning, she waited as long as she could for him to return to the Q-Bureau or at least check-in. Finally, unable to delay any longer without disappointing her sons, she scribbled a quick note on a pad on his desk, left a message on his machine at home and headed for the park. She endeavored to put it out of her

mind, but Amanda was vaguely uneasy about what Lee was up to. Although he hadn't wanted her as backup lately, she couldn't help but worry when she wasn't there to 'watch his tail'. Lost in thought, she didn't hear Joe trying to get her attention.

"Amanda, I said Jamie's on base," Joe chided, gently shaking her arm.

"Sorry, Joe. I must have been daydreaming. Did he get a hit?"

"No, he walked."

Amanda smiled to herself. Phillip was the athlete in the family. Although the boys had been very close as small children, sharing an interest in the same activities, their different talents had become quite apparent in the past year. These days, Phillip seemed consumed with sports, cars, and his latest girlfriend. This past spring he had seemed disinterested in academics, preferring to concentrate on the social aspects of school. She would have to find the time to talk to him about that since he was going to be starting high school in a few weeks. Jamie, on the other hand, was her "A" student. Quiet and sensitive, reading and photography appeared to be taking up more and more of his time. These days he preferred more solitary activities. Since the fourth of July, he had been lobbying to turn a corner of the basement into a small darkroom. His social skills seemed to be hampered suddenly by his glasses and his new braces. Amanda knew he had only stayed with the baseball team this summer due to Phillip's urging.

"Good for you, Jamie." Amanda stood proudly cheering on her son. Jamie smiled shyly at her, seemingly embarrassed, but secretly pleased that his parents were at the game.

She sat back down on the hard bleacher seats.

"Amanda," Joe King asked tentatively. "Is something bothering you? You seem a million miles away tonight."

Amanda smiled to herself. 'No, not a million miles,' she thought, 'just a few miles away with Lee – wherever in D. C. he happened to be.' She took a deep breath, changing the subject. "I know Jamie's glad you could make it to the game tonight, Joe."

"I was glad to be here...it's been hard for me since Carrie and I broke up." He cast a sideways glance at Amanda. "I appreciate being able to spend so much time with you and the boys. It's helped."

“I’m happy to be able to help, sweetheart. You know you’ll always be family.”

“Amanda...” Joe began, but was interrupted by the cheering crowd. They jumped to their feet to watch Phillip head towards second base with a stand-up double. Jamie held up at third.

“Way to go, Chief,” Amanda heard a familiar voice call out. She saw Phillip give an enthusiastic thumbs-up sign from second base. Turning, she watched her husband leave the backstop and walk over to the side of the bleachers where she was sitting with Joe.

“Hi, Joe,” he said, extending his hand affably.

“Good to see you, Lee,” Joe returned, leaning across Amanda to shake his hand.

Lee turned to Amanda and said, “Care to stretch your legs?”

Amanda silently put her hands on his shoulders as he helped her jump down from her seat in the stands. They walked over to the relative privacy of a large, shady tree, keeping an eye on the game from there. The next batter hit a long fly ball, which was caught by the center fielder. Jamie, his gaze focused on Lee and Amanda, wasn’t paying attention when his third base coach signaled for him to head for home plate. Late in leaving the bag, he was caught in a run-down between third base and home and tagged out.

Dejected, the team returned to the bench.

“I can’t believe you did that, Moron,” Phillip told his brother as he came in from the field.

Walking over to the boys, Lee and Amanda caught the end of the exchange.

“Phillip, there are still two more innings,” Amanda reminded him.

“Your mom’s right,” Lee added. “It’s not over yet.”

Jamie stared at the ground, digging a hole in the dirt with his shoe. Joe joined them at the fence. “Good try, Jamie,” he said sympathetically. Not much of an athlete himself, he identified with what his younger son was going

through. “No matter what happens, how about, after the game, we all go out for pizza?”

“Great idea,” Amanda seconded. “Lee?”

Joe glanced at him out of the corner of his eye.

“Sure,” he replied, ignoring Joe’s look.

Phillip exhaled loudly, turning his full attention to the game. “At least we have last ups,” he muttered, still glaring at his brother.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lee and Amanda followed the boys into Amanda’s house. Dotty sat at the kitchen table, studiously working at the computer on her latest simulation assignment for her aviation class.

“Mother, we’re home.”

Dotty glanced up at the solemn faces of her grandsons. “Did you lose the game? Oh, hi, Lee, I didn’t see you there,” she said with surprise as she saw Lee follow Amanda into the kitchen.

“Hi, Dotty. Still working on that pilot’s license I see.”

“Yes, and I’ve crashed twice into Lake Michigan on approach to O’Hare. At the rate I’m going, it will take me three times as long to become a pilot as it took me to get a driver’s license.”

She looked quickly from Phillip to Jamie. “Don’t look so sad, boys, there’ll be other playoffs.”

“Their team won, Mother.”

“Yeah, no thanks to Jamie,” Phillip grumbled. “I still can’t believe you got tagged out!”

“Well, I didn’t ask to be on this team,” Jamie said sourly. “You’re the one who forced me to play.”

“Yeah, well, I didn’t realize what a stupid idea that was,” Phillip shot back.

“Boys, enough,” Amanda said, trying to play peacemaker. “You won the game - that’s all that matters. Let’s not rehash every play. Now, both of you, it’s late. Hit the showers and get to bed.”

“Okay,” Jamie said, his voice still subdued. He headed up the stairs without a word.

“Goodnight,” Phillip said, starting to follow.

“Phillip,” Amanda said, walking over to her oldest son. “Cut your brother a little slack. Even the best player can have a bad game, you know.”

“But Mom, he never pays attention to what’s going on.”

“Maybe if you worked with him a little bit it would help. You know he looks up to you.”

“I think he’s hopeless,” Phillip muttered under his breath. Catching his mother’s look, he said, “Okay, I’ll try. Night, Grandma, ‘night Lee.”

“Goodnight,” Lee said, watching him head for the stairs.

Dotty looked subtly from Amanda to Lee. “I think I’ll call it a night, too. Staring at this screen is giving me a headache. Goodnight, Darling.” Smiling at Lee, she followed her grandsons up to bed.

Exhausted, Amanda headed for the sofa. She silently extended her hand to Lee. He crossed the room and dropped down beside her, pulling her close.

“Better?”

“Much.” They sat quietly for a few moments, holding each other close and enjoying the peace. Finally, Amanda pulled away slightly and looked at her husband.

“What?” he asked apprehensively, seeing the look in her eyes.

“I missed you at lunch today. I thought you said you’d check in.”

Lee sighed and ran his left hand absently through his hair. “Do we really have to talk about this now?” he said, trying to pull her back beside him.



“I guess not,” she said, relaxing back into his embrace. They sat quietly together for a few minutes. “I just thought it was curious that the house where Senator Holstein held his cocktail party on Saturday night was burned to the ground yesterday. And I was thinking that maybe it had something to do with the mysterious case you’ve been working on with Francine.”

Lee released her and sighed. Slowly, he left the sofa and began pacing the room.

“And disappearing for hours on end and forgetting to check in is starting to become chronic with you. That is, assuming Francine doesn’t know where you are.”

“Amanda, for the last time, I’m not working with Francine.”

“You can tap dance around this all you want, but I didn’t buy your little performance in the office this morning for one minute.”

“Performance?”

“You, Francine, the meeting that so conveniently slipped your mind? Since when do you forget staff meetings?”

“Francine was just getting some figures for me, nothing more.”

“That used to be my job, you know.”

“I think you’ve got your hands full now right here,” he said, trying to change the subject.

“You mean with Jamie. Why is it everything suddenly seems so complicated?”

“Maybe because it is.” Lee moved back over to the sofa, sitting down beside her and tenderly taking her hands in his. “I know I’ve said this before, but now may really be the time to make our relationship public. I think all this sneaking around is taking its toll on all of us. You, me, the boys, your mother...even Joe.”

“Joe?”

“I think Joe is interested in being more than just your friend.”

“He’s just been at loose ends since he broke up with Carrie...”

“And I also think Joe might have something to do with Jamie’s attitude lately.”

Amanda looked at him sharply.

“Just a theory,” he answered quickly.

“I think Jamie’s problems have more to do with the fact that he’s fundamentally very different from his brother. When the boys were little, they were really inseparable - it was just Mother, the boys and me. And I guess there was Dean,” she finished, smiling slightly.

Lee snorted at the mention of Dean’s name.

“Now there are a lot more people to juggle in their lives. With their father’s reappearance last year, their mother’s new full time job this year, my being shot in California, our relationship...it’s a lot for anyone to deal with.”

“I realize that.”

“That’s why I’m not convinced that now is the right time to go public with our relationship,” she put in reluctantly. “And what about the boys’ safety? I thought that was the main reason we decided to keep our marriage a secret. And that doesn’t even begin to cover the Agency and our working relationship.”

“You know, sometimes it all comes down to deciding what’s most important in our lives. I’ve been doing a lot of thinking lately...especially since you were shot last February. Has being apart really kept us out of danger? Sometimes, no matter what you do, bad things just happen. No matter what precautions we take, no one is ever completely safe in this business. As I said before, since we take all the chances, maybe we deserve all life has to offer. And that includes being together on a full time basis,” Lee pleaded.

“Right now, I’d settle for having my partner back.”

He broke her gaze, getting up and beginning to pace the room again.

“I’m well aware that things are not the way we thought they would be,” Amanda continued hotly. “But I did think that even though I had to settle for

having a part-time husband, I still had a full-time partner. There are times lately when I'm not sure I have either." Tears were beginning to form in her eyes.

Lee stopped pacing and turned to look at her. He started to speak, but was cut off by the ringing of the telephone. Amanda picked up the receiver reluctantly.

"Hello...he's here, just a minute." She turned towards Lee, handing him the phone. "It's Francine...for you." She walked through the back door into the August night, crossing over to the white gazebo beside the house. The air had a chill to it - an unwelcome reminder that fall was just around the corner. Amanda unconsciously shivered. After a few minutes, Lee joined her, coming up behind her and putting his arms around her waist.

"I've got to go." He kissed the back of her neck tenderly.

"Something come up on your non-existent case?" Amanda inquired sarcastically.

"Amanda, please believe me...for the last time, I'm not working on a specific case. Just..."

"Just?"

"Some loose ends I'm trying to tie up. It's probably nothing."

"Lee, why won't you let me help you?"

"I'm sure it's nothing. Trust me, if I need help, I'll yell."

"Have it your way. I'm through begging." She pushed him away in anger.

"I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"If you remember to check in." Turning her back on him, she silently traced the pattern in the latticework on the gazebo with her finger. When she turned to say goodbye, Lee was gone.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

*The dark haired man and his partner watched as the last person filed into the red brick Georgetown house. Keeping one eye on the front door, they expertly scanned the perimeter, searching for a figure in the shadows. Satisfied, the dark haired man nodded to his partner and spoke quietly into his two-way receiver.*

*“All clear.”*

*A black limousine pulled slowly down the street, coming to a stop in front of the house. The door slowly opened and a tall man emerged from the interior.*

*“Everything in place?” he demanded brusquely in the tone of one who was used to getting what he wanted.*

*“Yes, sir,” the dark haired man quickly answered.*

*“Good. This will be the last time we’ll meet for awhile. Things are getting too hot.” He smiled cryptically at the last remark. Taking one final look around, the tall man continued emphatically, in a voice that brooked no disagreement, “Make sure your teams take care of business before you leave here. If you have any questions, ask them now...we won’t speak again.”*

*The dark haired man and his partner exchanged an apprehensive glance. “Everything is ready, sir,” he reiterated.*

*“Good...for your sakes, for all our sakes, you’d better be right.”*

*The tall man walked up the steps and entered the house. The dark haired man and his partner took one final look around. A rustling sound, almost imperceptible to the ear, caught the dark haired man’s attention. He nudged his partner and pointed to the shadowy area to their left. Slowly, they worked their way to the side of the house, taking cover in the darkness. The dark haired man pointed to the basement window, indicating that security had been breached. Grinning, he poked his partner in the arm, heaving a sigh of relief.*

*“Looks like our fish is on the hook,” he murmured, smiling with relief. “It’s show time!”*

Amanda made her way through the bullpen, heading to the small conference room next door to section chief Billy Melrose’s office. She had spent

an anxious night, unable to turn off her thoughts. Sleep had proved as elusive as her husband had and she steeled herself to face the coming day. Avoiding her mother, she left the house earlier than usual, heading quickly for Georgetown. But her precipitous arrival at the Agency this morning had done nothing to quell the uneasy feeling growing in the pit of her stomach. Now, sitting in the small, stuffy conference room, she still hadn't been able to shake it. She couldn't tell if this nagging dread was real or a product of her own overactive imagination.

She wished she'd been able to touch base with Lee. She had called him first thing this morning to put matters right after their conversation last night, but there was no answer at his apartment. The ringing phone only fueled her determination to get to the bottom of things today. All this secrecy had gone on long enough. She and Lee had enough things to deal with these days on the home front without adding work problems into the mix. Whether he liked it or not, Lee Stetson was going to accept her help before this day was out.

She sat down at the polished conference table and waited for the others to file in. She greeted the other agents with a quiet smile. These faces could belong to a group of ordinary businessmen, lawyers or accountants maybe, instead of men and woman who chose to make a living by routinely putting their lives on the line.

The discordant sound of someone's clicking heels broke into Amanda's reverie as Francine Desmond entered the room in a rush and took her seat, acknowledging Amanda with a nod of her head. Billy Melrose followed, carrying an armload of files. Amanda took a final look around. She half expected to see her partner's familiar form follow Billy through the door.

Melrose glanced at his watch a few times and shot her an inquisitive look. Amanda shook her head and shrugged her shoulders. Nervously, Billy cleared his throat and began.

"Okay, let's get started." He looked down at the pile of files on his desk, then back at the faces around the table. "As I'm sure you're all aware from the news, the police have been investigating a series of explosions in D.C. and the surrounding area over the past three months. These fires have resulted in at least four fatalities so far. Normally, we would leave this to the local police or even the FBI," he stated, pausing slightly before continuing. "Yesterday, this became an Agency matter. Senator Holstein, as you all know, has important connections in this town. His cousin's house was the latest target and the Senator himself had just left a party there on Saturday night. As a personal favor, the White House has asked Dr. Smyth to look into the matter."

In the corner of the room a chair began to pivot slowly, revealing a lean, taciturn man holding a cigarette holder in his right hand. He rose with affectation, casually greeting them all.

“Continue, Melrose,” was all he said.

Billy acknowledged the Director of the Agency, Dr. Smyth, with a nod. Continuing, he said “There was another explosion and fire last night in Georgetown. Senator Holstein is missing.”

A murmur of voices greeted this latest remark. “As you all know, the Senator has been a major player recently. The White House wants to get to the bottom of this before the trade conference scheduled for next month. People, we need some answers. This case now becomes an Alpha One priority.” Melrose took a deep breath and continued. “Amanda, I see that Scarecrow attended the party for Senator Holstein on Saturday night.”

“Yes, Sir.” She was silent for a minute as all eyes turned on her speculatively, then continued, “It was just routine social duty, sir. Senator Holstein’s aid is an old friend of Lee’s.”

“Okay,” Melrose replied. “In that case, I want you and Scarecrow to get on this as soon as possible. Hit the streets, see what you can stir up, find out what, if anything, links these explosions. Then talk to the Senator’s aid. Francine, make friends with the computer and get me a list of similar incidents in the past five years. Mason, you and Thomas act as liaison to the arson squad. See if there’s an I.D. yet on the remains they found last night. Johnson, you and Crane cross-reference old cases, see if Senator Holstein’s name pops up in any of them. Start with this year and work backward from there. Status reports to me A.S.A.P. Any questions?”

Melrose quickly scanned the room. The group shook their heads and started to leave.

“Just a minute, children,” Dr. Smyth said abruptly. He paused, dramatically taking a puff on his cigarette holder. “And just where is the elusive Scarecrow this morning?”

“Sir,” Amanda replied, “He had an urgent meeting with a source. I’m sure he’ll be here soon.”

Dr. Smyth looked her up and down with contempt. Amanda could feel the disapproval in his stare. “Well, then, if he’s too busy to make this staff

meeting, I'm sure he'll be relieved if Melrose gives his assignment to..." Smyth looked carefully around the room. "Mr. Mason and Mr. Thomas...why don't you two hit the streets?"

They automatically glanced at their section chief who nodded his head almost imperceptibly.

"Yes, sir," they answered in unison.

"I'm sure Billy can find something else for you to do, Mrs. King," Dr. Smyth added sarcastically, nodding at Melrose as he left the room. "Carry on."

The other agents turned to follow, silently filing out of the room.

"Mrs. King," Billy said, the strain evident in his voice. "And just where is Scarecrow, really?"

"I don't know, sir," she answered, tension becoming more and more evident in her voice. "He hasn't checked in this morning or picked up his messages."

"Is this some new habit?"

She hesitated. "Not really, sir. It's happened a few times lately."

"Well, when he does make an appearance, tell him I want to see him A.S.A.P.!" he growled in annoyance.

"Yes, sir."

"In the meantime, give Francine a hand with the computer. Then both of you check with the arson squad. You two can act as the Agency liaison."

She turned to go.

"Amanda, make sure I'm notified as soon as Lee checks in?"

Amanda nodded, that nagging feeling growing by leaps and bounds. She turned and headed up to the Q-Bureau.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sitting stiffly at Lee's desk in the Q-Bureau, Amanda absently stared at the computer screen. After returning to the Q-Bureau, she'd placed a call to Lee's friend Tom, the Senator's aid, but was told he was out of the office for the day. The hands on the antique wall clock showed two o'clock -- and still no sign of her partner. Billy had phoned three times, demanding to know if he had checked in yet. This morning's simmering anger had grown into a full boil by the last call and he muttered something about suspension if Lee didn't check in by three o'clock. But she could tell by the tone of his voice that he was worried, too. He was Lee's friend as well as his section chief; he had bent the rules for both of them on more than one occasion. Dr. Smyth, on the other hand, had no love for Scarecrow, his sometimes-unorthodox methods, or the "housewife turned spy" as he had referred to Amanda on more than one occasion. After the Stemwinder incident last fall, Lee had told her that Dr. Smyth never holds a grudge, but she still wasn't entirely convinced that was true in her case. She sighed as she tried once more to concentrate on the computer screen.

The door opened a crack and Francine poked her head in. "No word?" she asked, trying and failing to hide her concern.

"Nothing," she replied, shaking her head.

"Well, I've wrapped up my preliminary report for Billy -- are you ready to head over to Metro?"

"Yes, let's go."

The two women walked down the stairs in silence, nodding to Mrs. Marsten as they left the building. Getting into Amanda's car, they pulled carefully out of the parking lot and headed for the Metro police department to check with the arson squad's special investigators. Amanda glanced sideways at Francine, who seemed lost in thought, absently twirling a lock of her blonde hair with her fingers. That was certainly unlike the perfectly coifed Ms. Desmond. She seemed uncharacteristically quiet this morning. Amanda's own thoughts were certainly not on the case at hand, but with Lee and whatever he had been secretly investigating. 'What do you know that you aren't telling?' Amanda wondered, casting a sideways glance at Francine. After her phone call last night, Lee had left abruptly. She debated whether or not to broach this particular subject with Francine. Even though Francine had never been particularly supportive of her new career, she and Lee did go back a long way at the Agency. She appeared to be worried, too. Amanda decided to plunge ahead.

"Francine, what were you and Lee working on?"



“What makes you think we’re working on something?”

“Yesterday morning, you brought him a folder in the Q-Bureau and he disappeared with you to a meeting that had ‘slipped his mind’. Last night, you phone him at my house, and he takes off without a word and no one has seen him since.”

“Amanda, dear,” Francine replied in a condescending tone. “You’re not jealous, are you?”

Amanda rolled her eyes.

“Well, you seem to be implying that there’s something going on between Lee and me.”

“I’m worried. And so is Mr. Melrose. Dr. Smyth is just looking for an excuse to come down on him. The last thing Lee said last night was ‘I’ll talk to you tomorrow’. He hasn’t checked in or picked up any of his messages. He wouldn’t miss a staff meeting. I think he’s in trouble. If you know where he is you’ve got to tell me,” she finished emphatically.

They pulled into the metro lot and parked in a space marked ‘visitor’. “Francine, I know you were gathering information on something for Lee. He admitted that much to me last night. I think he has this misguided idea that he’s keeping me ‘out of the line of fire’.”

Francine hesitated for a minute. “If we were looking into something, don’t you think you should respect Lee’s wishes and stay out of it? Maybe he had good reasons for keeping it from you.”

“He’s my partner. I need to know he’s okay.”

Francine took a deep breath. “I honestly don’t know, Amanda. I’m worried, too. We might as well go talk to the Metro boys and get it over with. Lee will probably have checked in by the time we get back to the Agency.”

They entered the offices of the Metro police, flashed their badges and asked for the special investigation team. They were ushered into a small, private office and introduced to special investigator Lewis.

“Mrs. King, Ms. Desmond, have a seat.” Lewis courteously pointed to the chairs in front of his desk.

“We’ve been assigned as special liaison to your department for the Agency,” Francine began professionally, “Investigating the recent series of explosions.”

“Yes, I received a top priority phone call concerning you this morning,” Lewis smiled. “Our department is to give you every possible consideration.”

“Detective Lewis,” Amanda began, “What exactly do you have on the these explosions?”

“Not all that much, when you really get down to it,” he shrugged. “But you’re welcome to any of our information, however sketchy.” He indicated the files spread out on his desk.

“Why don’t you just summarize them for us?”

“This is what we know so far, and believe me it’s not much. There have been six explosions in D. C. and the surrounding area since the beginning of July. Two warehouses, an abandoned office and an old apartment building in D. C., a house in Arlington belonging to Senator Holstein’s cousin, and now this residence in Georgetown last night.”

Amanda briefly scanned a red folder as Detective Lewis continued. “In the first five cases, we found evidence of a sophisticated device attached to the furnace in each building. That seems to be the cause of the explosions. We’re still waiting for word on the Georgetown incident. In every case but one, human remains were found.”

“Any idea as to who’s responsible?”

Lewis shook his head. “Just a gut feeling. The remains have been identified as belonging to key members of two major crime families. I think we’re seeing some kind of turf war here.”

“Senator Holstein’s cousin has ties to organized crime?” Francine inquired skeptically.

“That’s the stumper. The cousin’s house doesn’t fit the pattern.” Lewis admitted reluctantly. “And there were no fatalities.”

Amanda looked up from the file she’d been scanning. “It says here that remains were discovered at the site of last night’s explosion.”

“Yeah. It looks like three people this time. We’re still waiting for positive identification of the remains. The bodies were pretty badly burned and of course have to be identified through dental charts... well, you know the drill – it’s a tedious process.”

Amanda and Francine nodded in agreement.

“Care to hazard a guess as to who might have been in the house?” Francine queried.

Lewis shook his head. “We do know that they don’t belong to owners of the house, the, ah...the Smythes,” Lewis continued, consulting his notes. “The family has been out of the country since the beginning of June. I’d lay odds it’ll turn out to be more of the same scum we’ve found at the other sites.”

Amanda and Francine exchanged a look. “We appreciate your cooperation. You will, of course, forward copies of all your files to the Agency?”

Lewis nodded in Amanda’s direction. “Already done. They should be there waiting for you.”

“And you will give us a call as soon as you have a positive identification on those bodies?” Francine added, handing him her card. “You can reach me at this number after hours.”

“I’ll be in touch as soon as we have some word.” Lewis escorted Amanda and Francine to the door.

The two women crossed the parking lot, heading for the car. “What do you make of that?” Amanda asked.

“That was a total waste of time. Either he’s not telling us everything or they really know remarkably little.”

Amanda paused, her hand on the car door. “Would you mind taking a cab back to the Agency?”

“A cab?” she answered with a wilting look.

“Yes, Francine, a cab. I want to drop in on T.P. Aquinas and see what he’s heard about all this.” ‘And what he knows about Lee,’ she finished to herself.

\* \* \* \* \*

Amanda walked through the back door of her comfortable Arlington house. She sighed in exasperation. Her entire day had been one long exercise in frustration. Her visit to T.P. Aquinas had proved fruitless on both counts. T. P. had promised to dig up whatever information he could find on the alleged gang war, but if the easygoing antiquarian knew anything about Scarecrow's investigation, he wasn't saying. Amanda suspected that Lee had asked him to keep her in the dark. Feeling helpless, she tossed her purse carelessly on the kitchen table and sat down, unconsciously rubbing her temples with both hands.

"Amanda? Is that you?" Dotty asked, breezing into the kitchen. Glancing up, Amanda was relieved to notice that her mother was dressed to go out.

"Do you have a date, Mother?"

"Yes, well, I suppose you could call it that. It's just my regular meeting of the Rose Growers Association. This is our annual potluck dinner." She pointed to the covered casserole on the counter. "I've made my seasoned new potatoes."

Amanda raised her eyebrows at this last remark.

"You know, Amanda," her mother countered, seeing the look, "That nice-looking Mr. Jeffries will be there. And you never know..."

"You're right, Mother, you never know," Amanda replied, the corners of her mouth turning up slightly.

Dotty observed her daughter closely. "Are you feeling alright, dear? You look a little pale."

"I'm fine, just tired."

"Well, Joe came by and picked up the boys around five – they went to get a bite to eat. They should be back any minute now."

"Okay."

"You know, Amanda," Dotty added speculatively, "The boys certainly seem to be seeing a lot of Joe lately."

Letting her mother's latest remark pass, Amanda rose from the table and rifled through the kitchen cupboard, searching for an aspirin. At the sound of a car horn, Dotty snapped to attention, grabbed her casserole and quickly headed

to the front door. “That will be Mr. Jeffries now,” she smiled to herself. “He’s picking me up.”

“Have a good time.” Hearing the front door close with a bang, Amanda closed the cupboard and walked into the den. About to sit down, she heard the doorbell ring and veered instead towards the hall. “Did you forget your key again, Mother?”

Opening the door, Amanda found herself staring abruptly into the clouded eyes of Billy Melrose. His sudden appearance caught her off-guard.

“May I come in, Amanda?” he asked with care. “I waited until I saw your mother leave.”

“Certainly, sir.” She stepped aside to allow him to enter. Billy walked up and then down the short flights of stairs leading into the den, Amanda following.

He hesitated briefly before nervously clearing his throat, as was his habit lately.

“We received positive identification on those remains found in the Georgetown house last night.” He turned his eyes down and studied the carpet for a moment, as if uncertain where to look.

“Sir?”

“We have conclusive proof, Amanda—there’s absolutely no doubt,” he continued, almost to himself. “There were three fatalities last night. Senator Holstein, his administrative aid, Tom Fellows, and...”

“And?”

“And an Agency operative. There’s just no easy way to tell you this.” Melrose paused again as if somehow, by not saying the words, he could change the course of events that took place not quite twenty-four hours ago in the red brick house in Georgetown. Turning a sympathetic eye on Amanda, he forced himself to say the words.

“Amanda, Lee was the operative killed in last night’s explosion.”

***END PART ONE***

## **PART TWO** **“IN DARKNESS LOST”**

### **CHAPTER FIVE**

*The man woke to the sound of voices coming from the other room. Groggy and disoriented, he was unable to discern his whereabouts in the darkness. He sensed that he was in a small damp room, perhaps a cellar. He appeared to be lying on a makeshift bed of sorts, his hands and feet bound with something – duct tape, he thought – holding him firmly in place. An I. V. drip was attached to his right hand.*

*How long had he been here? He had the memory of waking a few times before, but time had no meaning in this place. In the cloying darkness it was impossible to tell if it was day or night. It was difficult to think clearly through the painful throbbing in his head. He pushed the pain aside as he had been trained to do. He had a feeling anyway that there was more in store for him – this was just the overture.*

*A creaking sound somewhere to his left jolted him to attention. The crack of light coming from the open door allowed him to see more of his surroundings. He was indeed in some sort of basement.*

*“Well, well,” a humorless voice responded. “Look who’s awake and ready to talk.”*

*The man vainly tried to place the voice – it sounded familiar, floating somewhere out there on the edges of his memory.*

*“He’s come around, Doc,” the same familiar voice called in louder tones. “Better get in here – it’s show time.”*

From her bedroom window, Amanda watched the neighborhood children file down the street, slowly heading for school. It was as inevitable as the changing seasons or the ebb and flow of the tide. It didn’t matter if the world wagged on in perfect harmony or wantonly turned people’s lives into chaos. Every September, clutching new backpacks, with faces reflecting eagerness and apprehension, children everywhere began this journey. She found the ritualistic sameness oddly comforting. Her life may have been turned upside down, but this, goes on.

When Billy first informed her of Lee’s death, Amanda had refused to believe it. The legendary Scarecrow had been in and out of more than his share of

life and death situations and always come through just fine. After all, hadn't she even attended his 'funeral' the first year they worked together? She half expected to suddenly turn and see him standing there in her family room. But after carefully reviewing the agency reports, Billy sadly assured her that in this case there would be no happy ending.

Sighing softly, she banished these anguished thoughts to the back of her mind. She really needed to get moving – she was due back at work this morning. Even though Billy had offered her the “standard two weeks”, agency policy when you lost a partner, she had opted to take only a few days. If she had been the one in that house instead of Lee, she knew that he wouldn't just sit around and feel sorry for himself. Lee would move heaven and earth to find out what had happened.

She looked away from the window and made her way across the room to her closet. Carelessly rifling through its contents, she searched for something, anything, to wear. Her fingers caught in the folds of a familiar fabric. Tears filling her eyes, she buried her face in the material of Lee's robe, searching vainly for any trace of his familiar scent. How quickly it faded, leaving no tangible reminder of the man who had filled her thoughts and her heart for the last four years.

She heard her mother rattling around in the kitchen, finishing the breakfast dishes. The boys must have already left for school. She hadn't been there for them these past few days, but Joe had been wonderful. He had stepped right in, taking care of school registration, meeting with Phillip's counselor and even helping Jamie with his new photography project. Joe was supervising the construction of a small darkroom in the basement. Amanda was grateful for his help. The boys were deeply upset by Lee's death and this project had kept them occupied. She hadn't expected Jamie to share her loss so keenly. Of her two sons, Phillip had been closer to Lee, sharing many of the same interests. He'd even talked about taking a film class this year in school. If he only knew what IFF really was.

These thoughts were getting her nowhere. She had been indulging her grief for too long. She couldn't do this anymore — there were no answers here, only questions and memories that caused more pain than solace. She brushed away her tears and grabbed her pink skirt and blouse. She reminded herself once again of what Lee would do in this situation and was suddenly filled with a renewed sense of purpose. She would go back to the Agency, talk to Francine, and find out for herself exactly why her husband had died. But first, she had to make one stop.

\* \* \* \* \*

Amanda inserted the key in the door of Lee's D.C. apartment. As she slowly opened it, she steeled herself against the maelstrom of emotions she expected to feel. Walking into the apartment, she automatically tossed her keys on the shelf by the door. This simple action brought back their first official fight as newlyweds, when she had put his car keys in that exact spot and Lee had accused her of hiding them. Making up the next afternoon certainly made that spat worthwhile, she recalled with a smile. Her eyes once again filled with tears. Coming here was a mistake. These walls held too many memories. Since Billy had informed her that Lee had been killed in that Georgetown explosion, sometimes just getting through the day was like negotiating a minefield. She had to tread very carefully to avoid the hidden booby traps of memory that constantly threatened to explode in her face.

Amanda glanced quickly around the room. The apartment had a closed up, musty smell, as if it knew its occupant would not be returning. She didn't want to dwell on that. She was here for a specific purpose and would not allow herself to get sidetracked again by her grief. Breathing deeply, she walked purposefully into the bedroom and opened the top drawer of the large chest. She felt around until her fingers closed on the small jeweler's box containing her husband's wedding band. Retrieving the ring, she held it in the palm of her hand, remembering the day she had placed it on Lee's finger. Lost in thought, she didn't hear Francine until she was right behind her.

"Don't creep up on me like that, Francine."

"How did you know it was me?"

"I could smell your perfume. French. Very expensive."

"I'll have to watch that."

Amanda turned to face her. "Would you care to explain exactly what you're doing here?"

"I could ask you the same question."

"Francine, I think we really need to talk." She led her back into the living room and sat down. Francine perched nervously on the edge of the sofa. Amanda weighed her words carefully searching for the right way to begin the conversation.



“You and I have never been what you would call friends.”

“You could say that, I guess,” Francine replied, staring at the carpet.

“But I always thought we were colleagues. And I think you know Lee was more than just my partner. So let’s stop playing these games. I need you to tell me what you two were working on.”

Francine hesitated for a moment debating the course she should take with the woman sitting stiffly beside her on the sofa. “He asked me as a special favor not to say anything to you about it.”

Amanda clutched Lee’s ring tightly in the palm of her hand. “Francine, this has hit me really hard. I need to get some answers if I’m ever going to accept his death.”

“I didn’t lie to you when I said Lee and I weren’t working together,” Francine said at last. “I don’t know for certain what he was doing.”

“But you have an idea.”

“Lee got a tip that someone was funneling large sums of money through the Agency. He asked me to help him track down the dates and departments these funds came from...and I did. That was the report I handed him in the office that morning.”

“Did he know what the money was being used for?”

“He suspected some sort of Black Ops scenario. Whoever was moving the funds used an odd code that didn’t mesh with any of the standard ones in crypto. I have an old friend at the CIA. We go back a long way, if you get my drift. Lee asked me to sound him out, see if the code word ‘Phoenix’ rang any bells. When I phoned him that night at your house, I told him my friend had reason to believe there had been similar financial transactions at the CIA, and other intelligence agencies, all feeding into the same account – code named ‘Phoenix’. Lee thanked me and said he’d take it from there.” Francine seemed lost in thought. “He said he was going to meet with someone who could help him clear everything up. He told me to keep quiet about it and not to worry – that he knew what he was doing. I asked him not to go alone – I offered to back him up if he didn’t want you involved. He thanked me again for my help and ordered me to stay out of it. That was the last thing he ever said to me – ‘stay out of it’. Amanda, you can’t know how many times this past week I’ve wished I’d never listened to him.”

“You can’t blame yourself, Francine. The world is full of ‘what ifs’. And Lee was stubborn when he wanted to be. There was nothing you could have done.”

“I should have told Billy. Even if Lee didn’t want me to.”

“He didn’t want you to tell Mr. Melrose?”

“No. He was very clear on keeping everyone at the Agency in the dark. Including you.”

“Do you still have the data you gave to Lee?”

“No. Actually, that’s what I was doing here. It’s probably a long shot, but I hoped he might have left a copy in his apartment. I’ve already come up empty at the Q-Bureau.”

Amanda rose, still holding Lee’s ring tightly in her hand. It would give her the strength she needed to see this through. She turned to Francine. “Then let’s get to work.”

‘I’ll finish what you started, Lee,’ she thought. I promise.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

*Fearful the noise would prompt his interrogators’ return the man tried to stifle his groan. He vainly attempted to shake the cobwebs from his mind and force himself to think clearly. It was impossible to tell how long these ‘sessions’ had been going on. Time no longer had meaning for him - past, present and future ran together in an indistinguishable blur. He was certain he hadn’t told them anything. If he had, they wouldn’t still be pushing him so hard.*

*His training had served him well so far. He banished everything from his mind, reciting his mantra over and over in his head. It blocked out everything, the drugs, the pain. He tried to keep his mind a blank. It was only now, in the spaces in between, that he allowed her to creep back into his consciousness. It seemed wrong somehow to bring even a thought of her into this place, but it appeared he was powerless to stop her from infiltrating his dreams. There were moments when he let himself believe he would see her again, hold her in his arms, smell the sweet scent of her perfume. When he was lucid enough to know better, he felt despair. At times, he could hear her faintly whispering his name; at others, the sound of her tears beat a painful rhythm in his heart.*

*The creaking door jolted him from his bittersweet reverie. He let her slip into the dark shadows of his unconscious mind, into a place they couldn't reach. It was time to begin again. Slowly, he recited his mantra...*

Amanda stared helplessly at the pile of files spread haphazardly across her desk. As each minute passed she felt increasingly more frustrated. After reviewing the updated reports from Metro during the past week, she was discouraged to find there had been surprisingly little progress in the investigation of the Georgetown explosion that had taken Lee's life. In light of the fact that a United States Senator had also been killed in the incident, she found the lack of progress extremely odd. The police still seemed intent on chalking this up to a simple turf war between rival crime lords.

It was difficult to concentrate here in the office she had shared with her partner for the past eighteen months. People dropped by all day, ostensibly to say hello, and the conversation would invariably turn to Lee. He had become somewhat of a legend since joining the Agency more than ten years ago and everyone assured her that he would be deeply missed.

While she appreciated how much Lee's absence would be felt at the Agency, her co-workers' well meaning concern made it all the more difficult to return to her job. The hardest conversation had been with Billy. He stopped by the Q-Bureau to personally check on her. Amanda always suspected that Billy knew more about her relationship with Lee than he ever let on to either of them. She knew he was pleased that they'd found each other. After all, it was his idea to put them together all those years ago. That partnership had turned out better than any of them had expected.

Billy's concern touched her deeply. He told her kindly to take all the time she needed to acclimate herself to work again. Hesitant to pair her with a new partner right off the bat, he said they would take things one step at a time for now. He assigned her to the security detail at the upcoming trade pact conference, working primarily with Francine. She was thankful for this turn of events. It would give them both an opportunity to take a closer look at the events surrounding Lee's death without raising a flag here at work.

These thoughts were suddenly interrupted by what Lee had once jokingly referred to as "Hurricane Francine" bursting unannounced into the office. One look at her face told Amanda all she needed to know. Francine Desmond was livid.

“You won’t believe what Dr. Smyth just did,” she spouted furiously.

Amanda sighed. She would believe Dr. Smyth capable of just about anything.

“I just came from a meeting with Billy. Dr. Smyth has officially closed the Agency’s part in the investigation of the explosions.”

“He can’t do that.”

“He can and he has. The entire matter has been turned over to Miller at CIA.” Francine ground her teeth painfully, trying to hold in her anger. “Miller, of all people - that man couldn’t investigate his way out of a paper bag.”

“What reason did he give?”

She looked away quickly, walking over to Lee’s old desk. “Amanda, Smyth doesn’t need a reason.”

Amanda narrowly observed her studying the grains of wood on Lee’s desk. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“All right – Smyth implied that Lee might have been at the house in Georgetown that night because he was somehow involved in the explosion.”

“He what?”

“Billy was livid – I’ve never seen him so mad. I thought he would burst a blood vessel. Especially when Dr. Smyth said the CIA could do a more thorough job because none of their operatives were implicated in the incident.”

“Implicated?”

“Yes. I gather evidence has surfaced tying Senator Holstein’s office to organized crime. Dr. Smyth inferred that Lee and the Senator were involved in some sort of deal that backfired.”

Amanda paced the small confines of the office, inwardly seething. Dr. Smyth had never been Lee’s biggest fan, but she always believed they were part of the same team. It seemed that her world had been turned upside down in more ways than one. Nothing made sense any more.

“Amanda, Lee hadn’t been checking in recently or picking up his messages. Dr. Smyth implied it was because he and Holstein were up to something. Miller’s department at the CIA is forming a special task force to look into the allegations.”

“Mr. Melrose can’t believe Lee was involved in anything dirty.”

“Billy’s hands were tied. He had no choice but to follow orders. Amanda, do you know any reason why Lee needed money recently?”

Amanda looked at her in surprise.

“Dr. Smyth tossed that out as a motive,” Francine added in response to her look. “Lee’s account showed some pretty hefty deposits...and the dates correspond to the explosions.”

“Francine, Lee must have stepped on someone’s toes pretty hard. They’ve constructed a very neat frame to discredit him.”

“It doesn’t help his case that no one knew what he was investigating.”

“Maybe not. I think it’s time we paid another visit to T.P.”

\* \* \* \* \*

They located T. P. Aquinas at his favorite park bench, happily feeding the pigeons. He smiled at Amanda when he saw her approach with Francine.

“Mrs. King, I wondered when you would get around to paying me a visit. I’ve been expecting you.”

“Hello, T.P.”

“How are you doing?”

“Taking it one day at a time.”

T.P. Aquinas looked at the two women standing in front of him. “I suppose this isn’t a social call,” he said wryly. “I suppose you’re here to ask about the information I gathered for Lee.”

“We’re trying to piece together exactly what Lee was working on,” Amanda said.

“Anything you could tell us would help,” Francine added.

T.P. rolled his eyes towards the sky and shook his head. He paused for a second before continuing. “Lee came to me to see if I could find the source of an unidentifiable code he’d discovered in use recently. That code word was ‘Phoenix’. The name rang a bell and what I heard scared the hell out of me.”

Amanda and Francine exchanged a look at T.P.’s uncharacteristic language. They both waited anxiously for him to continue.

“Lee had tracked a series of cash deposits to a top secret bank account authorized by that code. It’s an old code referring to a rather ruthless group that operated under deep cover during the 50’s and 60’s. They dropped out of sight for a while, but that code seems to indicate they’ve resurfaced again right here in D.C. And believe me, they aren’t anyone I’d want to tangle with alone.”

Francine regarded T.P. with skepticism. “Are you saying they’re somehow connected to the Agency?”

T.P. nodded affirmatively. “Yes, I think our boy stumbled onto a very dangerous, covert operation right here under our noses. Like the legendary phoenix that rises from its own ashes, this group has appeared again here in D.C.” He paused and looked thoughtfully towards the horizon. “And they considered Lee a threat.” He carefully took Amanda’s hand in his, looking her straight in the eyes. “You need to be very careful. From what little I’ve heard, this is an extremely dangerous group. It’s one of the reasons he kept this a secret. Lee didn’t know if he could trust anyone at the Agency. And he didn’t want to put either of you in danger. He told me he had to go this alone.”

Amanda nodded sadly. “Thank you, T.P. I appreciate your candor.”

The old antiquarian smiled. “I just hope he doesn’t come back to haunt me for telling you this much.”

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

*The dark haired man descended the narrow cellar steps. His partner sat quietly on a small, hard chair, a lamp burning dimly beside him.*

*“It’s about time,” he snapped, glaring at the dark haired man in anger.*

*“Sorry, I had to check in before heading over here.”*

*His partner grunted in reply.*

*“Everything okay?” the dark haired man inquired, indicating the locked door across from him with a nod.*

*“I took care of it yesterday. He won’t give anyone any trouble again.”*

*“Final instructions from Phoenix One said its ‘too hot’ to ignite this one. We’ll have to get rid of the evidence the old fashioned way,” grinned the dark haired man.*

*His partner smiled wanly at the cellar door. “This time, you do the honors. I got rid of the body, you can take care of cleaning up after the ‘debriefing’.”*

*The dark haired man moved reluctantly toward the door. He paused, looking over his shoulder at his partner one last time.*

*“What are you waiting for?” he asked sarcastically. “Go ahead – isn’t it show time?”*

Amanda walked into the kitchen, wearily setting down her bag of groceries. Joe was taking the boys away for the weekend and she had promised to bake a batch of cookies for them to take along. But after pushing herself to get to the grocery store coupled with the frustrations of the past week at work, she just couldn’t summon the energy. She and Francine kept running into one obstacle after another in their investigation. Forced into secrecy by Dr. Smyth’s edict, the few leads they had seemed to go nowhere. And it looked like the better part of next week would be spent on security arrangements for the upcoming trade pact negotiations. At least it was Friday. She could use a couple of days to regroup before returning to the Agency and the myriad of unanswered questions that waited there.

Amanda rubbed her eyes and concentrated on the task at hand. Joe and the boys loved her chocolate chip cookies and she didn’t want to disappoint them, but she was gut-wrenchingly tired. Without Lee, every step she took felt like she was trudging uphill with a fifty-pound pack on her back. She wanted only to close her eyes and sleep for six months – anything to stop the terrible feeling of emptiness that haunted her days and nights. Abandoning her cookie dough, she plopped herself down at the table and rested her head in her hands.

Dotty found her sitting and staring aimlessly into space when she came in from the backyard. She observed her daughter with concern. She couldn’t remember ever seeing her so despondent, not even after her divorce.

“Amanda, are you all right, darling?”

“What, Mother?”

Dotty sat beside her at the kitchen table. “You’ve really got to try and pull yourself out of this, dear. You know Lee would want you to go on with your life.”

Amanda covered her face with her hands, letting her tears fall unheeded. “How do I do that, Mother? Tell me, because I haven’t got a clue here.”

Dotty put her arms lovingly around her daughter. “Oh, Amanda, darling, I know how you feel. When your father died I felt like my life was over. But I couldn’t stop living. I had a daughter who needed me. I had to go on.”

“It’s just so hard. Everywhere I look, I bump into memories. Here, at work...”

“Why don’t you go with Joe and the boys this weekend? You know Joe asked you to and the boys would love it. They have that nice little cabin in the mountains. I think a change of scenery might do you good.”

“I don’t think so, Mother. I have work I need to do, I promised Jamie I’d pick up the materials for his photography project...”

“That’s nothing that can’t wait, Amanda King. Besides, Jamie will be at the cabin — he won’t have time to work on that this weekend. Go, darling. It’ll do you good.”

“Go where?” Jamie asked, coming into the kitchen and heading to the refrigerator.

“I’m trying to persuade your mother to go along with you guys for the weekend.”

“Mom, that’d be great. Come with us – we’ll have a good time,” Jamie pleaded, looking happier than he had in a long while.

Amanda wavered. Spending the weekend in a cabin with her ex-husband was the last thing she wanted to do. She wanted to be alone to relive in her mind all the things she’d shared with Lee in the past five years.



Phillip ran into the kitchen with Joe following close on his heels. “Dad’s here, he says we can leave early if you’re ready to go.” He nudged his brother playfully.

“Come on, Mom, please go,” Jamie begged. He turned to his father. “Dad, tell Mom she should come with us this weekend.”

“I can’t force her, Jamie. But you know we’d all love you to go, sweetheart.” Joe looked at Amanda in anticipation.

“Yeah, Mom, it’ll be fun,” Phillip joined in.

Amanda looked at the faces staring at her with different levels of expectation. Maybe she should get out of here for a while. Maybe her mother was right – going away might give her a fresh perspective on her problems.

She sighed in resignation. “Okay, if you all insist. Just give me a few minutes to throw something in a bag.”

“We’ll be ready when you are,” Joe answered happily. “Come on, boys, let’s get the car packed.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“It’s really beautiful up here, Joe.” Amanda looked out over the treetops. “It’s so peaceful.”

“Yeah, a friend of mine was out of the country, and he loaned me the key to his cabin.”

Amanda tried to block out the familiar voice in the back of her mind that said, “Crump’s in Argentina, he gave me the key to his cabin.” Suddenly, instead of the pine trees, all she could see was Lee’s face smiling at her from across the restaurant table. She pulled herself back to the present with an effort.

“I’m sorry, what were you saying?”

“I said I thought this would be better than camping,” Joe replied. “We don’t have to ‘rough it’ as much.”

Amanda smiled and walked over to the couch, sinking down into its cushions. She leaned back and stared into the flames of the dying fire. Earlier

that evening, the boys had roasted marshmallows and made 's'mores'. It took her back to their Junior Trailblazer days – no ghosts there, only happy memories.

Joe walked over and sat down. He tentatively put one hand on hers. "This is nice, isn't it?"

"What is?"

"Being together like this with the boys. It's nice to feel like a family."

Amanda shook off his hand and abruptly moved back to the window. How had she let herself get talked into this? The last thing she needed right now was a trip down memory lane with Joe.

Oblivious to her turmoil, Joe crossed the room and came up behind her and placed both hands on her shoulders. "I've thought for so long how great it would be for the four of us to be together."

Amanda reacted as if she had been stung. "What do you think you're doing?"

The look on her face caught him off guard and he stepped back from her, reeling. "Amanda, you must know how I feel about you...about us. I thought it was obvious. I know you need a little more time to get over Lee's death, but I want to be there for you. I want to help you through this the way you helped me when Carrie and I broke up. I want us to move forward - together."

Amanda paced back and forth, trying to keep her temper in check. Suddenly, it was all too much to hold inside – the aching loneliness she felt at the thought of never seeing Lee again, her inability to fit together any of the pieces of the puzzle surrounding his death, and the lies and evasions of the past year. Like an erupting volcano, she vented all of her pent up frustrations on Joe.

"You want us to be a family? That's what you want, Joe?" she demanded hotly. "Where were you when that's what I wanted? Where were you when the boys were little and needed their father? I'll tell you where — doing what you wanted to do, traipsing all over the globe. I know, it was important work – well, so was your family. I raised those two boys alone and I never reproached you for not being there. Maybe it's time you faced up to a few truths."

Flattened by the full force of her hostility, Joe simply stared. Her voice began to rise, as she was unable to stop the words from spilling out.

“You know, you left us all alone to chase whatever it was that was so important to you – then you waltz back into our lives and expect everything to be here waiting for you. And you have the nerve to tell me that I’m ‘not the woman you left behind’. Well, you know, you’re right. Did you ever stop to think why?”

“Amanda, please, lower your voice. You’ll wake up the boys.”

Amanda ignored Joe’s pleas and continued her diatribe. “Lee was the reason I changed. When I met him, my whole world expanded. He believed in me, treated me like an equal. He didn’t expect me to make my needs secondary to his. We were partners as well as lovers. And you think that’s something I can just ‘get over’? Well, think again.”

“Mom, Dad – please don’t,” Jamie yelled from the bedroom door.

Amanda stopped abruptly, as if she’d been doused with cold water. Joe turned towards his son with an anguished look. “I’m sorry we woke you, Jamie. Your mom’s just upset. We didn’t mean to raise our voices.”

“Speak for yourself,” Amanda said under her breath. She walked over to Jamie and hugged him.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart. Your father and I need to discuss a few things. Why don’t you let us finish and then I’ll come in and we can talk? Is your brother asleep?”

“Yeah,” Jamie mumbled, unwilling to meet her gaze.

For once, Amanda was thankful for Phillip’s ability to sleep through anything. She hugged Jamie once again. “Just give me a few minutes and then I’ll be in, I promise.”

Giving Joe and Amanda a sideways glance, Jamie reluctantly turned to go back into the bedroom.

“You know I love you, Jamie,” Amanda reassured him.

“We both do,” Joe added.

She suddenly felt totally spent. She headed over to the couch and sat down, fighting the feeling of total exhaustion that threatened to overwhelm her. She buried her face in her hands.

Joe, too, looked worn out. He sank into the couch with a weary sigh.

“I’m sorry, Amanda. I had no idea you felt all this resentment. Everything seemed fine between us when I came back from Africa.”

“It just seemed pointless to bring it up then. It really didn’t matter anymore - it all belonged to the past. I didn’t want to go there. I just wanted to live in the present and look to the future. Lee was there.”

Joe turned to her, a look of confusion on his face. “I don’t understand. I thought you met Lee when he when he helped us with that problem I had in Estoccia.”

She smiled weakly. “Let me tell you a little story, Joe. A story about a man in a red hat.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Joe fell back against the ample cushions of the sofa, stunned. “Amanda, I am so sorry. I had no idea, no idea at all.” He tenderly squeezed her hand, offering what little support he could. “I thought you and Lee were just... a passing fancy. If I had only known, I would never have...” he paused uncomfortably. “I’ve been such a fool. If there’s anything I can do, just ask.”

“Actually, it feels good to finally be able to talk about this to someone.”

“And no one knows you were married? Not even at the Agency?”

“No. We thought it was better, for now, if it stayed a secret. A ‘mystery marriage’ Lee called it. We thought it would keep everyone safe.” Amanda stifled a sob. “It’s just that it was so much harder than we thought - and it looks like Jamie’s paid the price for our secrecy.” Amanda rubbed her temples absently with one hand, trying to sort through the shambles of her life. “Just before he was killed, Lee told me he didn’t want to keep the secret anymore. I guess hindsight really is 20/20--how I wish now that I’d listened to him.”

At this, she broke down, at last allowing herself to really cry. Joe simply sat beside her, one arm around her shoulder, waiting patiently for her to finish. Finally, she stood up, wiping away her tears. “Thank you, Joe. That felt good.”

“I’m glad I could do something right tonight.” He smiled sheepishly. “Why don’t you try and get a little sleep? I’ll talk to Jamie – it’s the least I can do. I’m partly responsible for the way he’s feeling. I let him think...”

Amanda looked at Joe sadly. He refused to meet her gaze, but instead stared into the dying embers of the fire. “You can deal with all this in the morning. One thing about your problems,” he added to himself. “They’ll still be there tomorrow.”

Amanda returned a bitter smile. “I think I’ll take you up on that... thanks.”

## **CHAPTER EIGHT**

*The dark haired man and his partner gathered the last of their tools and checked the damp cellar one last time. They needed to make certain there were no traces remaining to testify to the events that had transpired over the past ten days.*

*“Everything set?” his partner asked.*

*“Yeah – let’s clear out for good.”*

*“Did you take care of the last of it?”*

*“No one’s gonna know what went on here. After we stash this, we can have the rest of the weekend for a little ‘R & R’.”*

*“Do you want me to do it or do you want the honors?” his partner asked with a sneer.*

*“Let’s flip for it,” the dark haired man replied ghoulishly. He took a coin from his pocket. “Call it.”*

*As the coin flew into the air, his partner yelled, “Tails.”*

*The dark haired let out a sinister chuckle. “Heads. Looks like I win again.”*

*“All right, I’ll dump it. I take care of all the dirty work.”*

The sun came up in the East with an explosion of color. Amanda sat sipping her coffee and admiring the view. It seemed that the old adage was true - the truth really was cleansing to the soul. Telling Joe last night about her

relationship with Lee had given her the first peace she had known since Billy came knocking at her door almost two weeks ago. When Jamie came out of his room a few minutes later, he found his mother with a trace of a smile on her lips for the first time in a long while.

“Hi, Mom,” he whispered, not wanting to wake anyone else. It was still very early.

Amanda turned towards her youngest son, a smile spreading across her face. “Hi, yourself. Did you sleep well?”

“Okay. Dad came in and talked to me last night. He said you were tired.”

“I was – but I feel better this morning. How about we go for a walk, just the two of us?”

Jamie returned her smile. “Okay.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Mother and son hiked silently together through the woods. The air was cool, a typical September morning, promising warmth later in the day. Amanda eyed Jamie carefully in the early morning light.

“Jamie, I know something’s been bothering you lately – all summer, in fact. I think it would help if we talked about it.”

“I guess.” Jamie shrugged his shoulders, reluctant to begin.

“You know, your Dad really helped me a lot last night.”

“It sounded like you were fighting to me.”

Amanda chose her words carefully. “You know both of us love you very much. Whatever problems we had when we were married had nothing to do with you or your brother. They were our problems, Jamie. We just needed to get a few things straight between us.”

Jamie hesitated for a minute. “I kinda hoped you would get back together.”

Amanda put her arm around him and hugged him tightly. “Jamie, I love your father, I’ll always love him. When I look at you and Phillip, I’ll always be

glad I met your Dad. But I don't love him in the way you should love the person you marry. Can you understand that?"

Jamie nodded wisely. "Yeah, you don't love him the way you loved Lee."

"No, I don't. I loved Lee very much. I miss him – I'm gonna miss him for a long time. I'm just glad I have you and Phillip to help me."

They continued to walk in companionable silence. After a while, Jamie said in a small voice, "It's all my fault."

"What is?"

"I wanted you and Dad to get back together. I heard him and Carrie arguing. Carrie said he was still in love with you and that's why she wouldn't marry him." Jamie paused for a minute, absently peeling the bark from a tall tree. "When they broke up, I thought you'd get back together if Lee wasn't around. I wished he wasn't. And then..."

Amanda pulled Jamie close, resting her chin on his head. "You didn't cause Lee's death by wishing, Jamie. It was an accident. I just wish you'd talked to me about what you were feeling." Amanda tousled his hair affectionately. "And we should have been honest," she murmured to herself. Turning to Jamie, she said aloud, "Lee and I should have talked to you about our feelings. I'm sorry we didn't. I hope you can forgive me."

Jamie put his arms around his mother. "I love you, Mom. I want you to be happy. I guess partly I was just jealous."

"Jealous of what?"

"I know I'm not good at sports like Phillip. He always gets along with everyone and he's so popular at school."

"Don't waste time wishing you were like your brother. Be just who you are – Jamie King, who likes books and photography and who always cares about what I'm feeling. No one wants or expects you to be anyone else."

Jamie looked down at the ground doubtfully. Amanda turned his face back up to hers. "Who gave you your first camera, Jamie?"

"Lee did."

“He didn’t expect you to be like Phillip. He told me how glad he was that you loved to take pictures with the camera he’d given you.”

“We had a good time on the Fourth of July at Rock Creek Park. I took all those shots of the people in the park that day. There’s one I’m using for the contest at school.”

“That would have made Lee really happy,” she replied wistfully.

Now it was Jamie’s turn to comfort his mother and he put his arm around her. “I love you, Mom.”

Amanda hugged him back. “Then we’re okay?”

He nodded.

“Then lets get back and get some breakfast. I’m starving.”

\* \* \* \* \*

It was late Sunday evening when they pulled into Amanda’s driveway. Phillip and Jamie helped Joe unload the car, while Amanda headed for the house. She wanted only to escape upstairs, soak in a hot tub and crawl into bed. It had been an exhausting but rewarding weekend. She smiled to herself, knowing that her talk with Jamie had at least begun to build the bridges he needed to come to terms with the world and his place in it. She and Joe would both be there to help him. She just needed to make sure she kept the lines defining their relationship distinctly drawn in the future.

“All done,” Joe said, coming into the den with the Phillip and Jamie.

Amanda galvanized them all into action. “All right, boys, say goodnight to your dad and get upstairs and hit the showers. You brought home a ton of dirt.”

They complied with a minimum of coaxing. “Night, Dad – we had a great time,” Phillip said.

“Yeah,” added Jamie with a shy smile for his mother.

Amanda turned to Joe with a friendly pat on the shoulder. “Thank you, Joe, for everything.”



“No, Amanda, I’m the one who should be thanking you. You gave me a lot to think about. I’ve handled things with Jamie badly. I knew what he was hoping for and I let him believe...”

“It’s okay. We both made mistakes. He’ll be all right. I think he understands things better now.”

“If there’s anything I can do for you, please let me know. I really mean it.”

“I know you do, and thanks. Just talking this weekend helped.”

“I guess we should have had that conversation a long time ago.”

Amanda walked him to the door in silence, her arm linked with his. Kissing him on the cheek, she said quietly, “Don’t make the same mistake I did, Joe. If you still feel anything for Carrie, don’t waste your chances. Talk to her. You never know what’s around the corner.”

Joe smiled sadly at her. “We’ll see. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, sweetheart.”

With a brief wave goodbye, Amanda closed the door and headed for the kitchen. Her mother descended the stairs, following her, looking for some milk.

“Amanda, the boys are up there with mud all over the bathroom. I think they brought home half the mountain.”

“They had a good time, Mother.”

“And you?” Dotty probed. “You seem different.”

“I am. I’m glad I went with them. It helped to clarify a lot of things.”

“Would you care to share them with your mother?”

“Maybe tomorrow. Right now, I just want to soak in a hot tub.”

Dotty hugged her daughter, relieved to see her in better spirits. “Goodnight, darling. Take this milk up with you – it’ll help you sleep.”

Amanda took the glass from Dotty and turned to leave. She was almost to the stairs when Dotty called out, "Oh, Amanda, I almost forgot, you have a package. It's on the shelf in the den."

"In the den?"

"Yes. It must be some sort of Halloween present," her mother rattled on. "Although Halloween's over a month away. Why would anyone send you a scarecrow, Amanda?"

The glass slipped from her fingers, crashing on the hard wood floor.

"Don't move," Dotty ordered. "There's glass everywhere. I'll get something to clean it up."

"Mother," she replied in a strangled voice. "When did that package come?"

"This morning, by special messenger."

Amanda walked over to the shelf in a trance. She clutched the small ceramic scarecrow hotly in her hand. "Was there a card?" she asked in a halting voice. "Did the messenger say who it was from?"

"That's the strangest part. I'd almost forgotten. I'm supposed to tell you it's from the man in the red hat."

**END PART TWO**

## **PART THREE**

### **“TROUBLE DEAF HEAVEN”**

#### **CHAPTER NINE**

*The man lay unobtrusively among the discarded boxes, just another homeless person searching for a brief respite from the night. The constant pain in his side made it difficult to find a comfortable resting-place. He pushed this new torment to the back of his mind, in a place with the other things too painful to deal with.*

*He felt confident that he could lie here undisturbed for a time. It had taken all his strength to make it this far. The throbbing in his head punctuated by waves of dizziness made it impossible to concentrate for very long. He had been moving on autopilot for the last few days, pushing himself to do what needed to be done. Now, there was nothing left to do but wait.*

*He closed his eyes and finally allowed his thoughts to drift to her. She had been his touchstone throughout the ordeal. When he had been tempted to give up, to let the cool blackness take him, she had always pulled him back again. He hadn't let himself think of her often in that place; he couldn't let them turn her into a weapon to be used against him. But now he could indulge himself for a few minutes; he didn't have to move again until morning.*

*The pain washed over him without warning, drowning his thoughts and carrying her away with it. He wanted to surrender to the merciful hands of oblivion but instead he fought once more to stay conscious. He had to hold it together a little longer. Once contact had been made, he could let go, retreat back into himself and heal. Just a few more hours...he would endure a little longer. He had no choice. He settled back, gritted his teeth, and waited for the dawn.*

Amanda pushed her way through the throng of Monday morning commuters crowding the train station. Her emotions had been in turmoil ever since her mother delivered her bombshell twelve hours ago. She endured a sleepless night, impatiently waiting for the first hint of morning, not knowing what to think. Her heart whispered that only one person could have sent a package with that particular message, but her mind refused to let her believe. Nevertheless, she decided not to call Francine for back up and go to the train station alone, even though it was a serious violation of all her training. If this turned out to be a trap, then she would walk into it. But if not...then she needed to be there alone.

She scanned the faces of the crowd, businessmen impatiently waiting for the train. She tried to calm her nerves by pacing up and down the platform, but she kept craning her neck for a glimpse of his familiar form. As the 7:30 express pulled slowly into the station, the crowd pushed forward. The surge of bodies pressed in on all sides and carried Amanda along with them. As she struggled to break free, someone grabbed her by the arm.

“Keep walking straight ahead and don’t look around,” the familiar voice said, pulling her away from the crowd. “I don’t know if we’re being watched.”

Amanda felt her heart pounding and something between a sob and a laugh caught in her throat. She closed her eyes and prayed this wasn’t a dream. No, the strong arm that held hers felt real enough. Her voice filled with emotion, the word sounded more like a sob than a name. “Lee.”

“Is your car in the parking lot?” he asked through clenched teeth, the strain evident in his voice.

“Right over here.” Her own lips were tightly compressed, trying to keep her feelings from spilling out all over the asphalt.

They reached the car and slid quickly inside. “Drive,” was all Lee managed to say before passing out in the seat beside her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Amanda watched Lee’s unconscious form sprawled unceremoniously on the bed. After leaving the train station, she’d driven through the busy streets in a state of shock, traveling in circles. Even though her thoughts were turning upside down, she still had the presence of mind to make certain they didn’t have a tail. She racked her brain trying to decide what to do next. Judging from the looks of things, Lee was in bad shape, but she didn’t dare risk a trip to the hospital until she had a better idea of what was going on. She needed a safe haven; somewhere they could both hide without arousing suspicion. She hadn’t wanted to do it, but she was out of options. She’d headed for Joe King’s Washington apartment.

With Joe’s help, they had gotten Lee upstairs. Luck was finally on their side – no one saw them drag Lee inside. If he hadn’t lost so much weight, Amanda would never have been able to manage it, even with Joe’s help. She studied her husband’s motionless form with a worried frown. He hadn’t fully

regained consciousness after collapsing in her car, but his intermittent moaning at least assured her he was still alive.

“My God, Amanda,” Joe said, watching in shock from the doorway. “He needs a doctor.”

Amanda looked from Joe’s anxious face to the pale visage of her husband resting on the bed. “I know. But I can’t take him to the hospital. Joe, I don’t have any idea what Lee was mixed up in - until I do, until he can tell me, I don’t know who I can trust.”

Joe sighed fretfully, pacing the room. Seeing his distress, Amanda stammered an apology. “I’m sorry for involving you in all this. I just didn’t know where else to go...”

Joe tried to reassure her. “You know I’ll do anything I can to help you, sweetheart, but no matter what you say about not going to the hospital, Lee needs medical attention.” He paused a moment, considering their options. “My next door neighbor is a doctor...at least let me call him and have him take a look.”

Amanda hesitated, torn between the risk and her concern for her husband. She looked at Joe with tears in her eyes. “You trust him not to say anything?”

“Yeah, he owes me a favor. I helped him out with a sticky legal problem last month. He won’t say anything if I ask him not to. Of course, showing him your federal I.D. couldn’t hurt,” Joe added, a smile playing across his face.

She took a deep breath...she had to do something. “Okay. Call him.”

Joe picked up the phone. Amanda heard his hushed tones and then the louder click of the receiver.

“He’ll be right over. Try not to worry.”

Amanda smiled wanly, her thoughts on Lee. She smoothed her hand over his forehead and down his cheek. “Oh, Lee,” she whispered softly, a solitary tear running down her face.

Joe King watched the scene in silence wondering how he could ever have imagined their relationship a ‘passing fancy’. She looked at Lee Stetson in a way she’d never looked at him.

The doorbell rang and Joe answered it, greeting his neighbor. “Dan, we really appreciate this.”

“Glad I could be of assistance. You helped me out of a tight spot – now I can return the favor. Where’s your friend?”

“Right in here.” Joe ushered his neighbor into the bedroom. Amanda sat silently at Lee’s side, lovingly holding his hand in hers.

“Amanda, this is my neighbor, Dr. Dan Roberts. Dan, this is Amanda King, my ex-wife.”

Dr. Roberts nodded hello, but his attention was focused on Lee. “Our friend here was mugged,” Joe continued.

Dr. Roberts took one look at Lee, automatically reaching over to take his pulse, then looked back at Joe and Amanda skeptically.

“Will he be all right, Doctor?” she whispered.

“I can tell you right now this man belongs in a hospital,” Dr. Roberts said tersely. He turned to look at the solemn faces of Amanda and Joe. “I take it that’s out of the question or you wouldn’t have called me. Joe, I think you’re the one who’s going to owe me after this. In fact, I should probably get free legal advice for the next year. Why don’t you both wait in the other room and let me examine him?”

Joe pried Amanda from Lee’s side. “Come on, let Dan take a look.”

She reluctantly allowed Joe to lead her into the other room. Joe sat her down on the couch, his protective arms holding her close. Amanda’s eyes stayed focused on the bedroom, wanting with every fiber of her being to be in there with Lee. She rested her head in her hands, murmuring to herself. “He’s got to be okay. I can’t lose him all over again.”

Feeling helpless, Joe simply sat with his arms still around her while they waited for the Doctor to finish his examination. After what seemed like an eternity to Amanda, Dr. Roberts entered the room.

“How is he?” She sprang from the couch, pushing Joe aside.

“I’d feel better if he was in a hospital. There are tests I’d like to run. This was no mugging.” Roberts’ tone was accusatory.

Amanda retrieved her Agency I.D. from her purse. "I'm afraid a hospital is not an option right now," she stated authoritatively. "We're going to have to treat him here."

"I thought you people had your own doctors?"

"I'm afraid that's not an option, either. Please, Dr. Roberts. I need to know my partner's condition."

Dan hesitated, looking from Amanda to Joe. Joe shot him a pleading look. "Okay, I'll do what I can for him here. Your partner's been worked over pretty thoroughly and by the looks of it, I'd say by someone who knew what they were doing. Of course, I can't tell without x-rays, but my best guess is he's bruised, maybe cracked, a few ribs. He doesn't seem to be having any difficulty breathing and doesn't appear to be in shock, so I don't think he's punctured a lung. That's a good sign." His voice was calmly reassuring

"Why isn't he conscious? He seemed okay at first, then he passed out in my car and we haven't been able to bring him around."

Roberts frowned. "Any nausea or vomiting?"

"No," Amanda answered.

"He seems to have sustained a pretty nasty bump on the head, so it's likely he has a concussion. What I'd really like is a CAT-scan," he mumbled to himself. He turned to Amanda cautiously. "I think there's more going on here than just the head injury, though. He's responsive to pain, so he's not deeply unconscious. There's evidence of restraint marks on his wrists and legs, needle marks on his arms. My gut feeling - whatever he still has in his system is complicating things. Without a blood work up, I can't even begin to tell you what drugs were used, but it's fair to say somebody pushed him - and hard." He smiled grimly. "I take it that's not unusual in your line work?"

Amanda said nothing, but walked over to the window. Joe again followed her and put his arms around her, offering her a supportive shoulder.

Roberts continued. "You say he was conscious earlier?"

"That's what Amanda said."

“Then let’s hope for the best. I’ve got some medical supplies next door at my place. We’ll see what we can do. There are some signs you should watch for. You’ll want to check his level of consciousness — his reaction to stimuli, ability to move, persistent vomiting. And I think it’s pretty safe to say when he does regain consciousness, he’ll have quite a nasty little headache.” He smiled thinly, taking Amanda’s hands in his. “Right now we have to watch and wait. It’s all I have to offer at the moment. Sometimes, in cases like this, a person’s will makes all the difference. I’d say your partner must be a pretty determined guy to have been on his feet at all.”

“You have no idea, Doctor,” Amanda replied with a smile.

## **CHAPTER TEN**

*The dark haired man read the dinner menu with gusto. “I’m hungry tonight,” he stated jovially. His partner regarded him silently, absently playing with his tie.*

*“What’s the matter with you...lost your appetite?” The sarcasm in his voice was impossible to miss.*

*His partner said nothing.*

*“Know what I think your problem is? I think you’ve lost more than your appetite for dinner. I think you’ve lost your appetite for this entire line of work.”*

*Again, his partner declined to comment. Instead, he glanced furtively around the room at the other diners.*

*“I hope Phoenix One doesn’t find out about your change of heart. This job doesn’t come with a retirement plan,” the dark haired man goaded him.*

*His partner had finally had enough. “I don’t have to like my job to do it,” he hissed. “Phoenix One knows I’ve been loyal. I’ve done everything he’s asked...and more. After all, I’m the one that’s been doing your dirty work all along now, haven’t I?” He glared ominously across the table at the dark haired man.*

*It was now his companion’s turn to be silent as they both took refuge behind their menus. Catching his partner’s uneasy mood, the dark haired man began to squirm nervously in his seat. After a few minutes, he spoke in a low voice. “She didn’t report for work today. I checked.”*

*“Is that supposed to mean something?”*



*“I guess I’m just wondering if you took care of business the way you were supposed to.”*

*“I did what I had to do.”*

*“She’s probably just shacking up with the ex again,” the dark haired man grunted in response. “But maybe, just to be sure, we should check it out after dinner.”*

*“Suit yourself. I’m going home.”*

*“If you want something done right, do it yourself,” the dark haired man muttered ominously. “I’ll take care of it.”*

*They silently returned to their menus.*

“You’ve been sitting here all day, Amanda,” Joe King gently chided. “Why don’t you come into the kitchen and let me get you something to eat.”

Amanda shook her head. “I’m not hungry.” Her eyes lingered on Lee, resting fitfully on the bed. He still hadn’t regained consciousness, but every once in a while he groaned and tensed, as if fighting invisible monsters only he could see.

“Dan said it could be a while before we know anything. You need to keep up your strength.”

“I can’t leave him, Joe.”

Joe King sighed, realizing he couldn’t change her mind. Her stubbornness had always been one of the main stumbling blocks in their relationship. “I’ll be in the other room if you need anything.”

Amanda looked up tentatively. “There is something you could do. I told Mother I’d be tied up with work for a few days. It would help if I didn’t have to worry about the boys...”

“No problem. I’ll check on them.”

“Jamie has that photography project due. I promised to help him with it,” she added as an afterthought.

“I’ll take care of it.”

Amanda watched Joe disappear into the other room. She knew she wasn't being fair to him. He was such a good man – he didn't deserve this. After their confrontation over the weekend, she had been determined to put some distance between them, for Joe's sake and Jamie's. Now circumstances were forcing them together once more. If they got out of this one, she and Lee would both owe him a great deal. Amanda sighed. Lee had been right about a lot of things, including their "mystery" relationship. She hoped they would get the opportunity to put things right. They needed to finally tell everyone the truth so Joe could get on with his life. As things stood now, they were all caught in this spider web of lies, however well intentioned.

"If we get out of this one," Amanda said softly. She sighed once more and put her head down on the bed next to Lee. With her face buried in the covers where no one could see, she allowed her tears to finally fall unheeded.

"Don't cry, Amanda," groaned the all too familiar voice she longed to hear. "You'll shake the bed and I've got one hell of a headache."

She looked up through her tears. "Lee."

"Don't cry. I'm here." He weakly took her hand in his.

She held on as if as if she'd never let go. "Oh, Lee. They told me you were dead." Smiling through her tears, she laid her head gingerly on his chest.

With his free hand, Lee tenderly ran his fingers through her hair. "Believe me, it's as close as I ever want to come."

"I love you so much. I never thought I'd have a chance to say those words again."

Lee brought her hand to his lips, kissing her fingers. "I love you, too." He stirred slightly. "How long have I been out?"

"Since this morning. You passed out in the car. Do you remember?"

"Everything's still a little foggy." He looked over at the I.V. drip attached to his right arm. "What's in that?" he asked sharply, struggling to sit up. "Where are we?"

"Only I.V. fluids," Amanda reassured him, pushing him back down on the bed. "You're dehydrated. Just rest. It's okay...we're at Joe's."

“Joe’s?” he asked, raising an eyebrow skeptically.

“Yeah, I know. It was a spur of the moment decision. I couldn’t think of anywhere else go. Under the circumstances, your place and my place were both out of the question,” she added with a forced laugh. “I didn’t think you’d want me to take you to the hospital. His neighbor is a doctor,” she answered, following his gaze to the I.V. drip in his arm. “You were in pretty bad shape when we got here. Don’t worry, he owed Joe a favor. He won’t say anything.”

Once more, Lee tried to get up and failed. Groaning, he rubbed his head with his good hand. “I don’t suppose he left you an aspirin.”

“He didn’t want to mask your symptoms. I can go call him, though.” She started to leave but his hand pulled her back.

“No, don’t go. I don’t need a doctor...I just need you.”

“Just try and get rid of me.”

“Amanda...”

“It’s okay.” She gently stroked the beard that had started to grow in on his face. “Don’t try to talk right now. We have time. Close your eyes. I’m not going anywhere.”

Sighing, Lee complied, allowing her to take charge for now. He was so tired. “Amanda,” he said groggily, as sleep claimed him once again, “Got to be careful. Can’t trust anyone...at the Agency. Don’t - let - them suspect...can’t know I’m alive.”

“Shhh. It’ll be all right. Just rest.”

He fell into a troubled sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lee woke abruptly from the nightmare, breathing heavily, uncertain of his surroundings. The darkness closed in around him as it had done so many times since the explosion. He called out automatically.

“Amanda.”

To his surprise, she answered quickly, turning the light on low. "I'm right here."

He eased himself back down on the pillows, holding her hand tightly as if it was a lifeline. He never wanted to let it go again. "I'm okay," he said in response to her unasked question. "I just didn't remember where I was for a minute."

She continued to hold him in her steady gaze, her expression telling him she wasn't buying any of it. Sometimes, when she looked at him like that, Lee thought she could see right into his soul, to the place where he kept all those hidden secrets he'd never been able to share before knowing her.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Lee took a deep breath, looking at the ceiling. "I can't right now. It's too soon. I need a little time." He brought her hand to his lips and kissed it. Looking deeply into her eyes, he said, "Trust me."

"You know I do."

Lee looked at her sitting stiffly in the chair next to the bed. "What time is it?" he asked, still slightly disoriented.

Amanda checked the clock on the nightstand. "It's early – not quite 4:30 in the morning."

"You look exhausted. That chair can't be very comfortable. Why don't you come over here and lie down?" He indicated the space next to him on the bed.

"I don't want to disturb you."

"You won't," he replied with a smile that lit up his face, beard and all.

Amanda quickly shed her skirt and blouse and carefully crawled in next to him. She accidentally brushed his tender ribs with her hand. "I'm sorry," she said with a quick intake of breath.

"It's okay, I'll live."

"Don't joke about that."

He smiled, putting his arm tenderly around her. “Now that’s better. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve dreamed about just holding you.” He stifled a yawn. “I wish I could stay awake for more than a few minutes,” he complained as sleep caught up with him once again.

“Your body needs the rest. You should listen to it. I’ll be here when you wake up.”

“Okay. But leave the light on.” He closed his eyes and snuggled closer, the sound of her even breathing lulling him back to sleep.

## **CHAPTER ELEVEN**

*The blue sedan was parked unobtrusively under a tree by the upscale apartment building. In this spot, the dark haired man could observe subjects entering and leaving the building, while keeping a low profile himself.*

*He took a deep breath, absently rubbing his chest with his left hand. He should have known better than to order the chicken oriental at dinner – way too spicy for tonight’s festivities. He reached into the glove compartment of his car and retrieved his ‘Tums’, quickly downing a handful.*

*Damn his partner anyway. Probably stretched out in bed right now relaxing, while he was stuck here waiting in the cramped confines of his car. For that matter, the object of his surveillance was probably stretched out in bed, too, he thought ruefully - with the ex.*

*He shifted uncomfortably in the seat. He could feel that damn spicy pepper he’d accidentally swallowed at dinner slowly working its way down into his stomach. The dark haired man popped another ‘Tums’. It was going to be a long night.*

Amanda surfaced slowly through layers of sleep, enveloped by an aura of warmth. It had been a long time since she’d felt like this. She fought against awakening. She didn’t want this feeling to end; she wanted to stay right here in this imaginary place she visited in her dreams, safe in the protected comfort of her husband’s arms.

The full force of memory suddenly hit her like a sledgehammer and she jerked herself awake. The dream hadn’t ended - Lee was right beside her, quietly watching her sleep. “It wasn’t a dream, it wasn’t a dream,” she murmured over and over to herself.

“Definitely not. This headache is real enough.”

He groaned as he struggled to achieve a sitting position. Amanda reached for an extra pillow, gently placing it behind his back.

“Better?”

He nodded affirmatively.

“You took out your I.V.” She glared at him accusingly.

“I’ve had enough needles to last a lifetime.” He looked down ruefully at his attire. “I take it these belong to your ex?”

“Well, your clothes were a mess. We had to do something.”

“This is certainly one for the books – I never dreamed I’d ever be lying here in bed with you in Joe’s pajamas.”

“You’re making jokes, you must feel better.”

He cupped her face with his hands. “I’m really okay. Oh, Amanda, I missed you so much,” he added in a quiet, intense voice, slowly drawing her to him for a kiss. Before their lips could meet, they were interrupted by the sound of Joe’s voice.

“Amanda, Dan’s here to look at Lee...sorry,” he mumbled apologetically, looking quickly down at the floor.

Amanda quickly pulled the covers around her. “It’s okay - just give me a minute.” Interrupted again, she thought wryly. Things were definitely getting back to normal.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Here’s your breakfast.” Amanda set a tray with a small serving of oatmeal, Jell-O and weak tea in front of Lee.

“What is this stuff? You know, I spend the last six months trying to convince you not to cook me a big breakfast and the one morning I’m starving, you come up with this.”

“It’s called a bland diet and that’s all you get for a few days. You must be feeling better, you’re starting to sound like the Lee we all know and love,” she added in a teasing voice. “The one who’s such a model patient.”

Lee toyed with his oatmeal, letting it drip off the spoon in big globs, a sour expression on his face. “I’m sorry. I guess I’m already getting antsy. It’s hard to lie in here when I need to be out there getting some answers.”

Amanda sat down on the bed beside him, absently rubbing his leg. “Do you feel up to filling in some of the blanks for me?”

Lee exhaled sharply, twisting on the bed to find a comfortable position. He pushed the breakfast tray to one side. “I can try. How much do you know?”

“Not a lot. Francine and I have been trying to piece things together.”

Lee raised an eyebrow skeptically.

“Yeah, I know, who’d have thought it – Francine and I, partners,” she said in response to his look. “The trail is pretty cold. We talked to T.P. – he told us about this ‘Phoenix’ code word you’d asked him to check on. And of course, Francine knew about the paper trail you’d been following at the agency. Other than that...”

Lee sighed. “I inadvertently stumbled onto a covert operation the extent of which I’ve never seen before. A secret organization operating on a level so deep...this Phoenix Group has given new meaning to the Agency motto ‘Service in the Shadows’. There’s evidence they’ve infiltrated the entire intelligence community... FBI, CIA, you name it. A hidden department operating across bureaucratic lines.”

“An Agency within the Agency,” Amanda intoned solemnly.

“Yeah...and believe me, these guys have taken inter-departmental cooperation to a new level. According to my source, they’re into everything - the destabilization of foreign currency, arms deals, the assassination of foreign dignitaries, you name it.”

“T.P. said they’re very dangerous.”

He nodded in agreement. “And they’ve been around for a long time. Hell, one report even places them on the grassy knoll in Dallas.”

“Who tipped you off?”

“You remember, I went to Senator Holstein’s party to meet my old buddy Tom? He was my source. It seems the good Senator had gotten in over his head and wanted out. He figured I could help. Somehow, he found out I’d been nosing around. Holstein was going to name names. We were supposed to talk that night, but the meet turned sour. Then, later, there was the explosion and fire.” His mouth dry, Lee paused for a moment to take a sip of tea. “We agreed to try again the next night in Georgetown. Tom promised Holstein would give me all the details. I know, I should have had back-up. I didn’t want to drag you or Francine into this until I had a better idea of the reach of the Phoenix Group. And I couldn’t involve Billy until I knew for sure how badly the Agency had been compromised. In retrospect, pretty stupid.”

“Go on,” Amanda prodded.

“I thought I’d take the preliminary meet and then decide how best to proceed.” Lee’s voice became low and intense as he was drawn back to the events of that night. “I was supposed to meet with Tom and Holstein in the basement of the house in Georgetown. I went in through the window as planned. Tom was waiting, along with Senator Holstein. It was a trap.” He hesitated for a minute, trying to pull himself out of that basement and back to the present. He shook his head in an attempt expel the shadows still clouding his mind.

Amanda held his hand tightly, gently encouraging him to continue.  
“What then?”

“It happened so fast - it’s still a little hazy. They struck without warning. We were surrounded before we knew what hit us. Before I could react, we were all cuffed, hoods thrown over our heads, and stood against the wall. I had a sense of eight, maybe ten men in the room. I know at least two of them had me. I couldn’t move. I tried to get them to talk but no one said a word. Looking back, it was their silence that made it all seem so surreal. Holstein started blubbering like a baby, crying over and over that it was all a mistake. It didn’t do any good. They shot him and then Tom – two bullets each, in the head. I heard the silencer. It was professional, quick – no hesitation. Then they put the gun to my head. I knew I was next. I can still feel the cold steel against my temple,” he said, absently running his hand over his forehead. “I tensed, waiting for the bullet. Instead, someone hit me on the back of the head. Then everything went black. When I woke up, I was in hell.”

Amanda leaned forward and took him in her arms. “It’s over. You’re here, we’re together...it’ll be all right.”



“I know.” He held her tightly, burying his head in her shoulder. A twinge in his side forced him to break the embrace and he collapsed back against the pillows in a cold sweat, still clutching her hand. He breathed slowly in and out, trying to quiet his thoughts. He looked at his wife’s face, the worry lines etched plainly across it. “Amanda, I’m so sorry you had to go through this. I know should have confided in you. It’s just...”

“Just...what?”

Lee looked away uncomfortably. “When you were shot on our honeymoon, it scared me. I didn’t want to put you in danger again. I couldn’t risk losing you. I never stopped to consider that maybe you felt the same way.”

“You know, I thought you were dead,” she answered in a small voice. “Billy came to the house to tell me. He said there’d been an explosion and you’d been killed. A positive identification – absolutely no doubt.”

“They must have falsified the evidence. The reach of this group is very long.” He seemed momentarily lost in thought. Rousing himself, he looked at Amanda tenderly. “I knew I had to find away to let you know I was okay without putting you in danger. And I was still in pretty bad shape from whatever they’d pumped into me.”

“I liked your present,” Amanda said with a smile.

“I managed to get word to one of my ‘family’ – he delivered the package. I tried to hit on something only the two of us would understand. I didn’t dare risk contacting you myself. In case they were watching. We’ve got to play this very carefully. The people who ‘debriefed’ me were Agency, Amanda. I’m sure I’ve known them, worked with them. I just can’t put faces to the voices. It’s all a haze,” he said in frustration.

“We’ll put it together – you know there’s nothing the two of us can’t do, partner.”

He smiled at her uncertainly. “Amanda, someone inside this operation wanted me to unravel it. Why am I still alive? My instinct says they should have finished the job they started. But instead of a bullet in the head, I was dumped from the backseat of a speeding blue sedan. It’s amazing the little details that stick in your mind when you think you’re about to die.” He rubbed his ribs gingerly. “That’s where I got this. I think I must have hit a rock or something. I

don't know, maybe they expected the fall to take care of things--but that doesn't jibe with the way Tom and Holstein were executed. You don't leave witnesses."

"Lee, I think we should bring Billy in on this."

"Not quite yet. I need a little more time to figure this out."

She eyed him thoughtfully. "Current police theory connects the series of explosions to organized crime. But you think they're tied in with the group that held you?"

"Yeah. But I'm convinced these incidents are just a smokescreen for the real objective. Organized crime is just a red herring. Amanda, you've got to get me the Agency files on those explosions."

"They've been sealed and turned over to Miller at CIA."

"CIA?"

"Yeah. Dr. Smyth implied that you may have been implicated somehow in the incidents and yanked the Agency off the investigation. The police suspect you and Senator Holstein were involved in some sort of drug deal."

"On what grounds?"

"Evidently some hefty deposits were made in your checking account and the dates correspond to the dates of the explosions. Dr. Smyth felt the Agency had been compromised and it would be handled more impartially by another department."

"Typical," Lee replied in exasperation. "I guess that's about par for the course with our fearless leader."

"Dr. Smyth may not have had a vested interest in solving this case," Amanda said, smiling cryptically, "But I did. I made copies of the files before we turned them over."

"You didn't take them home?"

"You trained me better than that. There're in the vault in the Q-Bureau, misfiled under an old case heading."

“Good thinking. You’ll have to go to the Agency and retrieve them,” Lee said thoughtfully. “You should report in anyway, we don’t want the wrong people getting suspicious. Where did you say you were yesterday?”

“I’m not myself,” Amanda replied sadly. “I’m still upset over my partner’s death. I need some personal time. Billy was very understanding.”

Lee shook his head guiltily. “I hate keeping him in the dark. He’s a good friend. I just can’t be sure yet how far up this goes.” He leaned forward with an effort and brushed his lips against Amanda’s. “Tread very carefully at the Agency. In case you’re being watched.”

She nodded. “I’ll go as soon as Joe gets back. He had to check in with his office this morning, but he promised to be back by noon.”

“I don’t need a babysitter,” Lee said testily.

“Dr. Roberts said you’re supposed to be on bed rest for at least a couple of days. I know you, Stetson. As soon as my back is turned, you’ll be out of that bed. So don’t try anything. In your present condition, I think it’s safe to say Joe can take you,” she finished with a laugh.

He shot her a withering look. “Very funny.” He considered for a moment. “You know, maybe you should let everyone at the Agency think you’re seeing Joe again. It’s a good cover,” he added with a touch of regret.

She sighed sadly. “I hate it that we’re using him like this.”

“I know. But better we do this than risk bringing the Phoenix Group down on our heads.”

“Lee, when this is over, I want to stop all this deceit. I want to tell everyone the truth about us. Mother, the boys – even the Agency. It doesn’t matter anymore what their ‘unwritten policy’ is... if I’ve learned anything this past month, it’s that I want a full time husband more than a partner.”

Lee leaned forward and looked deeply into her eyes. “The Agency be damned. I don’t care what they think. When this is over, I’m ready to walk away from all of it. The only thing that matters is us—you and me and our family.”

They held each other in silence.

## **CHAPTER TWELVE**

*The dark haired man blinked a few times in the bright sun. His eyes felt grainy from lack of sleep. All the stress of the past few months was catching up with him. He'd been tempted to call it quits last night but he couldn't ignore the persistent little voice in the back of his head, the voice that kept telling him things didn't add up. His partner may have felt secure in the belief that all the loose ends were tied up tightly, but he was far from satisfied. His every instinct screamed that something just didn't jibe. And he hadn't survived this long by ignoring his instincts.*

*His thoughts lingered appreciatively on her. Pretty soon he'd know all there was to know about her. The idea made him smile. This was almost too simple. He hoped they were planning another rendezvous for tonight. The dark haired man almost envied him. Lucky guy - he was certainly seeing enough action this week. Should prove to be some interesting listening, he thought with a leering grin.*

*A quick glance at his watch told him he was running late for his appointment. His partner was probably furious by now. Well, let him fume. He wasn't the one who'd spent the night in the narrow confines of this car. Just a few more minutes should do it. Then tonight...*

Lee stood rigidly in the small shower stall letting the hot water cascade over him. Standing in the spray, he tried to rinse the last remnants of the past week from his body. It felt wonderful to finally feel clean. He ruefully catalogued his assorted bumps and bruises, starting with the knot on the back of his head to the now colorful hues of blue and yellow on his shoulders, back and rib cage.

Too bad the shower couldn't wash away his thoughts. It would take more than soap and water to expunge the memories of that Georgetown basement. He had been in this business for over ten years, in and out of more than his share of tight spots, but he really had never given much thought to what he stood to lose until now. Since Amanda, life had become a precious commodity. Now he had a reason to be more cautious, a reason to look forward to the coming years. He wasn't alone any more – he finally had a family. That one small fact cast everything in a different light.

Towelng off, he put on Joe's pajama bottoms and robe. The simple act of bathing had been exhausting and painful. Still, it was well worth the effort-it had been too long between showers to suit him. The aftereffects of the drugs his interrogators used on him had sapped his strength. He still wasn't thinking clearly. Fighting the temptation to crawl back into bed and sleep for a week, he

instead moved stiffly into the living room. Joe King sat comfortably on the sofa scanning some legal files. Lee held his breath as he cautiously eased himself down into the chair. Wincing, he propped some pillows on either side of his tender ribs as he shifted to find a comfortable position.

“You certainly look better than when you arrived,” Joe grinned from behind a legal pad.

“Thanks for the loan of the razor.”

Joe smiled ruefully. “Yeah, well Amanda will probably skin me alive for letting you get out of bed.”

“I’ve tangled with her temper a time or two myself,” Lee answered with a laugh. “But believe me, I appreciate it. I think I’m finally starting to feel human again.”

An awkward pause followed this brief exchange. Lee broke the silence. “I appreciate everything else you’ve done, too.”

Joe shrugged. “Well, I couldn’t leave my sons’ stepfather twisting in the wind.”

Lee shot him a quizzical look.

“Amanda told me. Let me be the first to congratulate you.”

“Thank you,” Lee answered haltingly, uncertain of what to make of his words. There was a small edge to Joe’s voice as he spoke. “I get the feeling there’s a ‘but’ coming in here somewhere.”

“No... I’m sincerely happy for you both. Amanda was devastated when she thought you were dead. All I want is for her to find the happiness she deserves. And I realize now that means you.”

Lee didn’t know how to respond to this. Deep down, he’d always been a little jealous of Amanda’s relationship with Joe. Their open affection sometimes made him mildly uncomfortable. He understood logically that he couldn’t change the fact that Amanda and Joe had been married any more than he could erase the parade of women in his past. But Phillip and Jamie would always be a tangible reminder of that past, two ties that bound her inexorably to Joe King. He knew this was something he had to come to terms with if they were ever going to be a family.

Joe looked over at Lee a moment, debating whether or not to continue. Deciding there would never be a better opportunity to clear the air, he plunged ahead. "I guess any reservations I do have concern the boys' welfare."

Lee glanced uncomfortably at Joe.

"As long as I've started, I might as well finish. I guess I'd be lying if I said I wasn't worried about Amanda as well. But she's an adult and she's always made her own decisions. She chose this life. The boys didn't."

"I understand what you're saying, Joe. But you have to know how much Amanda loves Phillip and Jamie. They've been her whole life. And I care about them, too. Neither one of us would do anything to put them in danger. That's one of the reasons we've kept our relationship a secret."

"Your relationship is none of my business," Joe answered testily. "But my sons' welfare is. And I can't help but worry about them."

Lee's reply was cut short by the buzzer. "Are you expecting anyone?"

"I ordered some groceries. I told Amanda I'd pick up a few things, but I was held up at the office this morning and didn't have time to get to the store. That's probably them now."

Lee cautiously made his way back to the bedroom as Joe buzzed the delivery boy up. 'Amateurs,' he thought in annoyance. Joe King really didn't have a clue about what they were up against.

\* \* \* \* \*

Amanda briskly entered the Q-Bureau, heading for the vault. Deep in thought, she didn't see Francine until it was too late to avoid a collision. She sent her armload of files scattering across the room.

"I'm sorry, Francine," she muttered, stooping to help her retrieve the files. She skimmed the folders quickly as she gathered them into her arms. "What do you want with these old cases?"

"I'm supposed to turn these over to agents Mason and Thomas. Orders from Dr. Smyth himself." Francine wrinkled her nose in distaste. "They're our new Agency liaisons with CIA."

“The CIA is checking on Lee’s closed cases?”

“Yeah, go figure. Mason and Thomas are on their way to pick these up, but they’re late.”

“I’ll sort this mess out for you,” Amanda offered kindly. “It’s the least I can do after practically knocking you over.” Before Francine could stop her, Amanda quickly scooped up the remaining papers and returned to the vault. While pretending to straighten out the mass of files, she quickly extracted the information Lee needed.

The door to the Q-Bureau opened and Mason greeted Francine with a leering grin. “Hey, beautiful, got what I need?”

His partner shook his head in disgust. His disapproval of his Mason’s breezy manner was clearly apparent.

Francine bestowed her most contemptuous glance on Mason. The man was really such a slob – he looked like he’d slept in his clothes. “Mr. Mason, if you are referring to the files Dr. Smyth requested, Mrs. King is compiling them now.”

“Here you are.” Amanda handed the files to Thomas in a businesslike manner. “I believe that’s everything you need.”

“Thank you,” he replied kindly.

“I didn’t realize you were back, Mrs. King,” Mason put in.

Amanda walked over to her desk and sat down. “I’m not back officially – I’m only in part-time to tie up a few loose ends.”

“Tommy and I were both sorry about Scarecrow,” Mason responded sympathetically. Thomas silently nodded his head in agreement. “He was one hell of an agent. For the record, neither of us are happy about this fishing expedition Dr. Smyth has us on with the boys at Langley.”

“Thank you.”

“Do you have everything you came for, Mason?” Francine asked coldly.

“Never have everything I came for with you Francine.” He winked at her with a smirk. “At least, not yet. But these files will do for now.”

He paused momentarily at Amanda's desk. "I am sorry about Scarecrow," he reiterated. He slowly stooped to retrieve a paper that had slid partially underneath her desk. "You really ought to brush up on your filing skills, Francine," he goaded, handing the paper to her with a flourish. He looked over at his partner. "C'mon, Tommy, let's hit the road. We've got a meet with Miller at CIA." He absently ran his hand through his dark hair. "It's show time."

**END PART THREE**



## **PART FOUR**

### **“FEAR NO MORE”**

#### **CHAPTER THIRTEEN**

*The dark haired man carefully adjusted the earpiece of the listening device, fine-tuning the knob for the best reception. The Q-Bureau was coming in loud and clear. He smiled, thinking how easy it had been to plant the ‘bug’. He knew Desmond would be too put off by his remarks to pay much attention to what he was doing. As for her...he wasn’t too concerned. He always suspected who pulled most of the weight in that partnership.*

*A worried frown crossed his face. Things were going too well. He thought he had covered all the bases. It had been almost too simple to plant the device at her home in Arlington. He’d merely posed as the furnace inspector—the mother had been more than happy to give him access to the house. Talk about gullible—the family had no idea at all about what she was up to with the ‘ex’. He laughed to himself at his private joke.*

*The device in the Q-Bureau was working nicely. He heard her making plans for tonight. The bug the ‘grocery boy’ planted at the ex’s apartment should be operational by tonight. All systems were go. At least this evening’s listening should prove entertaining.*

*He laughed mirthless to himself. No, the ‘housewife turned spy’ didn’t worry him. She was a useful tool, nothing more.*

“Mother? Guys? I’m home,” Amanda called to the empty house. Silence greeted her in return. It was only 4:30 in the afternoon; this time of day usually found the boys shooting baskets in the driveway and her mother doing battle with a roast for dinner. She stood in the kitchen in puzzled confusion.

Suddenly it hit her. Jamie’s photography contest – it was this afternoon. She glanced at her watch. Too late now, she’d missed it. He would be so disappointed. He had worked so hard on his entry. She sighed in sorrow. Another important moment in her son’s life lost forever. Sometimes Amanda felt the price she paid for her career was too high. Her sons would never be this age again. She’d already missed so many of the little milestones that marked their growing up years. But she had a right to a life of her own, apart from her sons. They wouldn’t be small forever. And she truly believed she and Lee were making a difference in the world her sons were growing up in. She only hoped she could make Jamie understand.

At least now she could pick up the things she needed to stay at Joe's tonight without facing her mother's inquisition. 'I guess there's a bright side to everything,' she thought with a smile.

\* \* \* \* \*

Amanda came through the door, arms laden with packages. "Joe," she called from behind the bags, "I picked up a few things for..." She stopped abruptly, her eyes resting on Lee sitting in the chair. "You're out of bed," she stated happily, momentarily reassured to see him upright. "Where's Joe?"

"He had an errand to run."

She threw her bags haphazardly on the coffee table and bent down to give him a kiss. "I like the clean shaven look," she whispered as she laid her cheek against his.

"I missed you, too. How did things go at the Agency? I was starting to get worried."

Amanda stood up and retrieved the packages she'd tossed aside.

"I had a few errands to run. A little shopping. Some clothes for you, since I didn't think you wanted to go on wearing Joe's," she grinned.

"Thank you. That's definitely appreciated."

"Some clothes for me, since I'm spending tonight in the editing lab. And a few files for both of us," she finished conspiratorially, lifting the Agency paperwork from the bottom of the large bag.

Lee reached for the papers, grimacing as he leaned forward too quickly. Groaning slightly, he lay back against the chair.

Amanda immediately moved to his side. "You should really be in bed."

"I'm okay," Lee lied glibly. His eyes roamed speculatively over the files. "Did you have any trouble getting these?"

"I almost didn't get them. A few minutes later and these papers would have been in the Miller's hands at CIA." She made an appropriately disgusted face. "All of your closed cases are being investigated."

“I guess Dr. Smyth wants to pick up where ‘Trojan Horse’ left off a few months ago. I’m starting to feel the sides of the frame closing in again.”

“We won’t let him,” she stated passionately.

“I can’t believe the guy - even when I’m dead, he still can’t cut me a break.”

“You and I are more than a match for Dr. Smyth. But first, we need you back on your feet again. Come on, Stetson, let’s get you to bed.”

Lee smiled seductively. “Normally, that’s an offer I’d find hard to refuse. But under the present circumstances...”

“I meant to sleep.”

“Amanda, I’ve got to go through those files...”

“The files aren’t going anywhere. I’ll make you a deal. You rest, I’ll make you some homemade soup, then we’ll both see what we can find out.”

Lee reluctantly allowed her to lead him back to bed. She helped him settle back on the pillows, kissed him briefly on the lips and turned to leave. He tenderly caught her small hand with his larger one, holding on to her for an extra minute. He sighed longingly, lovingly looking into her eyes. “When this is over...”

Amanda raised her eyebrows questioningly.

“When this is over,” he repeated firmly, “We’re going to take some time for ourselves. No conspiracies, no bullets, no worries-just you and me, alone, getting re-acquainted.”

She leaned over and kissed him one more time. “I’m going to hold you to that. But right now, you need to rest. I want you at 100%.”

He smiled in compliance. She waited until his eyes drifted shut, then crept quietly out of the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

Amanda sighed in her sleep and buried her head deeper in her pillow. She was in the midst of a wonderful dream. She lay securely wrapped in Lee's arms as he slowly and sensuously moved his hands over her body. The feeling was exquisite. He held her closer, his hands traveling upward until they found her breasts. She blinked her eyes, waking slowly, but the dream continued. Involuntarily, she smiled. Now this was the way to start the day.

Lee was in the process of trailing tiny kisses down her neck and right shoulder. She turned in his embrace and caressed his cheek with her hand.

“Good morning.”

He answered her with a kiss that conveyed exactly how much he'd missed her. It began slowly but quickly built in intensity as their tongues found each other. She moaned slightly, giving herself over to the moment, responding to him the way she'd dreamed of doing ever since their reunion at the train station.

“I take it you're feeling better?” she gasped when he finally released her.

He nodded in affirmation, leaning in to kiss her again. “I love you so much,” Lee whispered as he hungrily laid claim to her body. For a few precious moments they lost themselves in each other, finally allowing themselves the luxury of surrendering to their emotions. Amanda wanted nothing more than to shut out the rest of the world and stay here in the protected haven of her husband's arms. She'd been dreaming of nothing else ever since Billy had appeared on her doorstep nearly a month ago.

Lee pressed closer, his kisses becoming more urgent. A noise from the other room suddenly registered in the corner of her mind that was still capable of thought. Reluctantly, she broke the embrace.

“Lee, stop, we can't do this.”

“Why not? We're married, remember,” he joked, resuming his task.

“Because Joe's out there.” She pushed him away with a gentle hand. “I can hear him in the kitchen.”

“He's a big boy, Amanda, I'm sure he won't be shocked.” He began to slide her nightgown slowly down her shoulder.

She caught his hand with hers. “I can't do this. Not with him in the other room.”

Lee saw the look in her eyes and sighed. Reluctantly, he released her and lay back on the pillow. "I guess next time we'll have to remember to find a more private hide out."

"That's not funny." Amanda turned on her side, raising herself up on her elbow to look at him. "I'll make this up to you as soon as we get out of this mess. And I promise you'll enjoy your return to the land of the living."

Rising slightly, he brushed her lips lightly with his. "Let's hope it's soon." He fell back onto the bed, wincing slightly as he settled into a comfortable position.

Amanda looked at him with concern. "How are you, really? You went out like a light last night. I think you slept for about 14 hours."

"I'm better. I think I've finally shaken whatever it was out of my system. The rest will heal."

She snuggled down next to him for a moment and he turned and held her without speaking. Words were unnecessary. Sighing again, he broke the embrace. "If we're ever going to get to that celebration you have planned, I guess we'd better see what we can make of this." He indicated the Agency files sitting on the nightstand.

Amanda rose to retrieve the files, stopping to throw a robe on over her nightgown. They were interrupted by Joe's hesitant knock.

"Come in," Amanda called absently.

Joe unwillingly stuck his head in the door. "Dan dropped by - he thought he'd check on Lee before he headed to the hospital."

Lee grimaced.

"Tell him to come in," Amanda replied, ignoring her husband's pained expression. "Lee would be happy to have him take a look."

\* \* \* \* \*

Joe and Amanda finished their coffee in the living room in an awkward silence. Amanda looked at Joe out of the corner of her eye. Now that Lee was getting better, she was feeling more and more uncomfortable about staying here

at Joe's. They needed to find another place to stash Lee until they figured out who was behind this conspiracy at the Agency. The strain was beginning to tell on all of them. She finally broke the silence.

"I'm sorry for landing this mess on you. Lee is much better. Just give us another day and we'll get out of your hair, I promise."

Joe nodded in silent agreement. He moved to the window to stare at the trees just starting to change color.

Amanda sighed. This was typical Joe behavior – studied avoidance of whatever was bothering him. It had always driven her crazy when they were married.

"What's on your mind, Joe?"

He hesitated before finally speaking. "Maybe the boys could stay with me for awhile – just until you sort this out."

Now it was Amanda's turn to be silent.

"I'd feel better knowing they were safe and out of harm's way until this was over," Joe finished strongly.

"The boys are perfectly safe right now."

Joe started to speak, but thought better of it. Amanda looked at him with concern. "I know you mean well, Joe, but I don't want to disrupt their lives right now any more than I have to. Especially with all Jamie's been through. He's just starting to deal with a lot of the problems he's been struggling with since you and Carrie broke up. The last thing he needs right now is more conflicting signals about our relationship."

"I am thinking of Jamie. I think you're too caught up with your career and your husband right now to give him the attention he needs. He was hurt that you didn't make it to the contest at school yesterday."

Amanda looked at him sharply. "Did he say that?"

"No. But I could tell what he was feeling."

Amanda clenched her teeth. That double standard was rearing its ugly head once again. Joe was such a hypocrite. He was 'caught up in his career' for

years, but that was okay because he was a man – it was expected of him. She bit back a bitter response and instead opted to pour oil on the troubled waters.

“I’m sorry about the contest and I have every intention of making this up to him, Joe.”

“Just for your information, he won first prize.”

“First prize?” Amanda repeated with pride. “He must have been thrilled – he worked so hard on that project.”

Joe sighed. “Okay, Amanda, we’ll table the discussion about the boys for now. I’m really not trying to make things more difficult for you. Just know the offer is always open if you need it.”

Lee emerged from the bedroom, showered and dressed. Amanda smiled at him from her seat on the sofa, giving him a quick once-over. “Hey, you look pretty good in those new clothes, pal.”

“Thanks. The person who bought them had good taste,” he said, returning her look.

“You’re moving better, too.”

“The ribs are still a little sore, but not bad.”

Joe rose quickly, picking up his briefcase and heading for the door. “I’ve got to make an appearance at the office,” he said ruefully. “I’ll see you later.”

Lee watched Joe’s unbending form beat a hasty exit. When they heard the door close, he spoke.

“Did I interrupt something?”

“Not really. Joe was busy making a point about the boys’ safety. I can tell from your expression that this doesn’t come as a surprise.

“Not really. He mentioned the subject to me yesterday. But I’m not convinced his concern rests entirely with the boys.”

Amanda sighed. “You’re right. That’s only a small piece of it. He’s having trouble dealing with the idea of me moving on with my life.”

“He’s jealous.”

“That, too. I think he’s using the boys as an excuse. And to compound matters, I forgot about Jamie’s photography contest yesterday. He won first prize.”

“That’s great.” He saw the look on her face. “Hey, I wish we could both have been there.”

“Jamie seems to have finally found an activity he likes better than baseball,” she grinned. “You know, he really is pretty good. He’s been using the camera you gave him.”

“Yeah, you should have seen him on the Fourth of July at the park, taking pictures like a professional,” Lee stated proudly. He couldn’t believe how much he was actually looking forward to being a full-time stepfather.

“This business with Joe worries me. I don’t think he trusts us to take care of them. He could decide to make things difficult.”

“We need to find another place to stay. Joe says he can handle our relationship but it’s one thing to accept it intellectually and quite another to have it thrown in your face on a twenty-four hour basis.”

“I know.”

Lee looked at his wife lovingly. “Amanda, you know how much I love you and the boys. I’d never do anything to put them or your mother in danger.”

“I know that – I just wish Joe knew it, too.” She let out a tired sigh. “I’ve got to get going. I told Francine I’d lend a hand with the final preparations for the trade talks. The Presidential reception is scheduled for tonight. Then I have to stop by the house and mend some fences there.” She kissed him briefly. “Can I trust you to stay put today?”

His eyes twinkled in response to her question. She knew him too well. He nodded affirmatively.

“Promise?”

“I’ve got work of my own to do,” he stated, indicating the files she’d placed on the coffee table. “I swear I’ll be right here when you’re all through.”



## **CHAPTER FOURTEEN**

*The dark haired man stretched, keeping a lazy eye on the doorman. Trust the ex to live in a secure building. 'I guess lawyers can afford the finer things,' he thought wryly. Well, for that matter, so could he. It was one of the fringe benefits of his double life. And when he brought Phoenix One the information he'd gathered, he'd be set for life.*

*He couldn't believe his partner's stupidity. Once again he'd been forced to take care of the loose ends. No one crossed Phoenix One and lived to tell about it. He figured his partner was one sorry guy right about now.*

*The dark haired man forced himself to concentrate on what was going on in the apartment. Too much static - the 'bug' was malfunctioning. He could hear their voices but couldn't quite make out what they were saying. It didn't matter. He knew they were still inside.*

*He checked out the building once more. He debated calling for backup but quickly decided against it. When he took care of this problem, Phoenix One would be most grateful. Why share the glory? No, when the time came to move, that stupid doorman would pose no problem.*

*He was growing tired of these cat and mouse games. They would all be sorry. After tonight, the dye would be cast, all accounts settled. Smiling contentedly, he lay back against the seat to listen and wait.*

"Amanda, this is so frustrating. I keep thinking the answer has to be in there somewhere." Lee flung the papers down in front of him on the sofa in anger. He lay back against the cushions, rubbing his head with his hand.

"Tired?" Amanda replied with concern, replacing his hands with her own. She began to gently rub his temples with her fingers.

"That feels good." He allowed himself the luxury of closing his eyes for a few seconds.

"We've been at this for hours. I don't think the answer's in those files."

"I didn't really think it would be," Lee said downheartedly. "I was just hoping."

Amanda settled back next to him, resting her head on his shoulder. “We’ll get those answers. It’s just gonna take some more time.”

“Time is a luxury we can’t afford. Every hour the trail grows colder. If I could just remember who was holding me...sometimes I think it’s right there and then just as suddenly it’s gone.”

“Maybe it’s time to bring in Billy. Your ‘death’ shut you out of the system. We need help from someone who has a higher level of clearance than I do.”

“You’re right, maybe it’s time to give him a call.”

“First thing tomorrow morning. Right now he’s tied up with last minute preparations for tonight’s reception. The President is attending, along with some of our most important European representatives. It would look pretty suspicious if Billy wasn’t there.”

“Okay.” Lee took her hand in his. “How did things go on the home front? Any repercussions from yesterday?”

“I didn’t get a chance to talk to Jamie. He was at the park with Phillip. But my mother let me have it with both barrels. I think she still holds it against me that I missed Jamie playing Rip Van Winkle last year.” Amanda smiled, remembering. That time they were busy helping Billy out of a jam.

“When this is over, we’ll both make it up to him.”

Amanda nodded in agreement. “I picked up his winning photo when I was home. I thought I’d get it framed for him as a surprise.”

“He won’t miss it?”

“No, he has about ten copies in his room.” She handed it to Lee proudly. “He called it ‘Faces’. It’s really very good.”

Lee took the photo from her hand. “Hey, this is from the park on the Fourth of July,” he said in surprise. Jamie had perfectly captured a family enjoying the holiday celebration. Other faces in the crowd framed the man, woman and their children. Lee was about to hand it back to her when something in the background caught his eye.

“Amanda, does Joe have a magnifying glass?”

“In the desk, I think. Why?”

“Just get it. There’s something here...” He put the picture under the light and studied it through the magnified lens. “My, God, Amanda. That’s my friend Tom Fellows – with agents Mason and Thomas.”

“What would they be doing at Rock Creek Park on the Fourth of July?”

“I don’t know.”

“Maybe they were there for the fireworks show? Looks like it’s almost time.”

“Show time?” Lee murmured to himself.

“Not you, too. I think that’s Mason’s favorite phrase,” she stated in annoyance. “He uses it constantly.”

“Amanda...the people who held me...” He stammered, the missing pieces falling suddenly into place. “That’s what I’ve been trying to remember. I kept hearing that phrase during my ‘debriefing’.”

“You mean...”

“Mason and Thomas. We’ve finally got a lead. Let’s go.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Lee and Amanda parked their ‘borrowed’ car down the street from Thomas’ house. He lived in a small but expensive house in Georgetown not too far from the Agency.

“I hope Joe’s neighbor doesn’t miss his car,” Amanda said contritely.

Lee gave her a look. “Would you rather have him miss his car or have half the Agency trailing yours? We couldn’t take the chance of being followed.”

“I know.” Amanda whistled appreciatively. “Not too shabby. Thomas lives pretty well.”

“Family money. He inherited this house.”

Amanda looked at him inquisitively.

“Tommy and I go back a long way. Actually, we began our training at the same time. Went on our first assignment together.”

“You never told me that.”

“Not much to tell. We were supposed to meet with a courier. We were both so green - it was supposed to be routine – just a low priority drop. That’s why they gave it to two rookies. Tommy took the meet and I covered his back.” Lee shrugged his shoulders. “It was a trap. I had to take out the courier.”

“You saved his life?”

“I guess you could say that. It was the first and last time we worked together. The Agency congratulated me for being able to ‘think under pressure’. Shortly after the incident Paul chose me for the Oz Network. Tommy got the more ‘routine’ assignments.” He paused, deep in thought. “A common beginning...and we both went in such different directions.”

Amanda put a comforting hand on his shoulder. “Ready?”

“Let’s get this over with.”

Guns drawn, they approached the house with caution. He slowly tried the door. It was open. Motioning to Amanda, he signaled her to go around back. He carefully entered the house.

He saw Amanda approach purposefully from the kitchen, shaking her head to indicate Thomas wasn’t in there. Together they began to climb the stairs.

After checking out the other bedrooms, Lee zeroed in on the master suite at the end of the hall. With a raise of his eyebrow, he pointed towards the door. They deliberately made their way down the hall.

Lee nudged the bedroom door open slowly with his foot, flattening himself back against the wall. They were greeted by a deafening silence. Lee poked his head through the door.

Thomas lay motionless on the bed with his hands and feet bound tightly together. He appeared to be unconscious. Holstering his gun, Lee walked over to the bed and felt for a pulse.

“He’s alive, but barely. Amanda, call for an ambulance.” He reached for the knife that was lying on the dresser. Ignoring the dried blood, he cut the ropes that bound Thomas. Shaking him, he tried to bring him around. Amanda came back into the room.

“They’re on their way.”

“You hear that, Tommy? Hold on – the ambulance is coming.”

His efforts were rewarded by a groan. “Too late,” Thomas replied in a weak voice. “Poison. Too late for the antidote.” He doubled over in pain. Amanda and Lee waited helplessly for the spasm to pass.

“Mason’s own special brand of irony. This is what they ordered me to give you.” The pain washed over him again. He panted shallowly until it passed. “I couldn’t do it, though. I owed you. You saved my life. So I decided to let fate decide whether you lived or died. I guess now the score is even.”

Lee gripped his hand tightly. “Hang on, Tommy. There must be something the doctors can do.”

“I did what I had to do. Told Mason that. Mason got suspicious. He started trailing your partner. Must have found out you were still alive. Phoenix One doesn’t take betrayal lightly.” He coughed suddenly, waiting through the agony until he could continue. “The joke’s on him, though. Got proof. Kept a log. That self-righteous bastard thinks he’s so smug. He won’t have the last laugh.”

Thomas gripped Lee’s arm, dragging his ear closer to his lips. He spoke in a whisper. “On the bookshelf. Top shelf. Third from the end. Volume of Shakespeare has a hollow cover. It’s all in there. Take care of it, Scarecrow. Take care of Phoenix One once and for all.”

Thomas closed his eyes, the rigidity in his form relaxing suddenly. Lee looked at Amanda and shook his head. Amanda shifted her eyes down to the floor.

The wail of a siren in the distance spurred them to action. Locating the book Thomas had indicated, Amanda quickly glanced at its contents. Her face suddenly turned pale.

“What is it?”

“Names, dates places...he’s documented it all. Lee,” she said in a strangled voice, staring at him in disbelief. “It says here that Phoenix One...Lee, it’s Dr. Smyth!”

## **CHAPTER FIFTEEN**

*The dark haired man made his way carefully to the elevator. True to his earlier prediction, the doorman had proved to be no obstacle at all. He had actually turned out to be a blessing in disguise. His clothes made the perfect cover. No one gave the doorman a second look.*

*Maybe he would be merciful this time and make it quick. He grinned expectantly. Or maybe not. Gun drawn, he burst into the apartment.*

*He was greeted by a deafening silence. A quick search proved fruitless. His prey had somehow slipped by him. He should have called for back up, he thought remorsefully. Phoenix One would be displeased.*

*Despondent, he sat on the couch. This latest turn of events unnerved him and he squirmed uncomfortably. The photo on the coffee table suddenly caught his eye. He studied it carefully, a broad smile spreading across his face. Maybe he could salvage something from this after all. Phoenix One hated loose ends and this photograph was as loose as they come. He could still turn this to his advantage.*

*He smiled as he thought of the small device waiting unobtrusively on her furnace. A quick search of the house and it would go up with the other one. A smaller statement, but just as important. It would serve her right for eluding him. She had played him for a fool and the dark haired man didn’t like to look foolish.*

*He smiled in delight. It would make a pretty sight. ‘I guess it’s show time,’ he thought with a smile. The dark haired man strode purposely through the door.*

“Ready?” Billy signaled to the team of agents gathered outside Dr. Smyth’s estate. “Okay, people, listen up. On my signal, we move and move fast. You each have your assigned target. Take out his bodyguards quick and hard – let’s not give them the chance to react.”

His glance fell on Lee with concern. “Are you up to this, Scarecrow?”

“Don’t worry about me. This is one party I wouldn’t miss for anything.”

“Okay. I think you’ve earned the right to do the honors. Smyth is in his library. You have five minutes to get inside and into position. Francine, take point and Amanda, you’re back-up. Move when I give the signal. Let’s check our watches – go.”

The team moved stealthily into position inside the grounds. Billy took one final look at Lee who responded with the thumbs up sign. The countdown was about to begin.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dr. Smyth stood in front of the mirror adjusting the tie on his tuxedo. In a few minutes he would head to the President’s reception to make his appearance. He rubbed his hands together in anticipation. He’d waited a long time for this moment. Tonight they would see over a year of planning come to fruition. Victory tasted sweet indeed.

The knock on the door broke into his reverie. Smyth was so caught up in his expectation of triumph that he barely glanced at the agents who came through the door.

“Is the car out front?”

“Oh, it’s out front,” the familiar voice intoned as Lee followed Francine deliberately through the door. Amanda trailed close on their heels. “But I’m afraid there’s been a slight change in plans. Your invitation to the President’s reception has just been rescinded.”

They took up positions on all sides of Dr. Smyth. He regarded them with a bored expression. If he was surprised to see the man who addressed him, he didn’t show it.

“Well, well Scarecrow. Found a fresh bale of straw I see. Stuffed some life back in.” He boldly reached for his cigarette holder on the desk.

“Don’t try it.” Dr. Smyth hesitated, stopped cold by the look in his adversary’s eyes.

“Come now, Scarecrow. The condemned is always entitled to a last cigarette before the executioner pulls the trigger.”

“Oh, I’m not in charge of the firing squad tonight, Smyth. Although, truth to tell, I am sorely tempted. But that would be the easy way out. And you don’t deserve to get off that easily.”

Dr. Smyth smiled enigmatically as he reached for the cigarette. “Then I’ll take the chance and have a final smoke. While I answer all those questions I’m sure you’re just dying to ask.”

He eased himself into the leather chair behind his desk and puffed his cigarette with his usual affectation. Lee motioned to Francine and Amanda to take up position on either side of his chair. He perched unceremoniously on the desk.

“The picture’s really pretty clear, Smyth. I can probably even guess why. You’re really not as clever as you think.”

“No?”

“No. You’re just like every other megalomaniac who decided he was better at making policy than following it. But where you’re going it won’t be an issue. As you’re always so fond of telling me, there’s a stiff penalty for treason.”

Dr. Smyth smiled in response. “You think you have it all figured out, don’t you? That I’m the traitor? You people haven’t got a clue what you’ve done. You’ve single handedly condemned this country back to mediocrity.”

The three agents exchanged a glance. Smyth continued his tirade. “We used to be a power to contend with. Now we react instead of act. Ineffectual leadership is quickly turning this country into a second rate power. And you know how we all hate to be second best. But we’re going to change all that. It’s too late to stop it.”

Billy entered the room and nodded quickly to Lee. “We’ve cracked your little Phoenix network, Smyth. It’s all over. The only thing you have to look forward to is a lengthy trial and a long prison term,” Lee stated emphatically.

Dr. Smyth turned to face Billy with a melodramatic swirl. “Here in time for the final act, Melrose? You may think you’ve stopped me, but have no fear, the Phoenix will rise from the ashes.” He suddenly started to gasp for breath. “I wouldn’t count on that trial,” he explained wanly. “You see the cigarette holder was laced with a fast acting poison. I’m told it’s painless. Not like the stuff we gave to poor Thomas. I’d say the curtain is about to come down on this little drama. And it doesn’t look like I’ll have time to take that last bow.”



Before anyone could react, Dr. Smyth slumped back in his chair. Lee reached over quickly to take his pulse. He shook head at the others and they holstered their guns.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lee and Billy watched as they wheeled the sheeted body of Dr. Smyth from the room. Their expressions reflected their conflicting emotions.

“You know,” Melrose said at last, “This whole thing is really unbelievable.”

“I know. I guess even I never thought Dr. Smyth would be guilty of treason.”

“Well, that, too,” Billy rejoined with a laugh. “But I was referring to your miraculous return from the dead. It’s good to see you.” He slapped his friend on the back.

Lee returned his grin. “Thanks. It’s good to be seen.”

Amanda shouldered her way into the room. “Our people have picked up almost everyone on the list, sir. Just a few stragglers left.”

Billy nodded in affirmation. “We’ll get them.”

“Sir, there’s something I don’t understand.” That nagging feeling of doubt was beginning to plague her again. “Dr. Smyth seemed pretty confident that we were too late to stop him.”

“Yes?”

Amanda continued thoughtfully. “Lee, when we were talking about those explosions the other day, you said you thought the earlier ones were a smokescreen for something else, something bigger.”

They both looked at her expectantly.

“What if they had a final explosion planned, an explosion Smyth believed we’d be too late to stop. Maybe something scheduled for tonight?”

Lee and Billy exchanged a worried look. “The trade talks,” Lee said suddenly. “The President’s reception...”

“Yeah. And Smyth said they wanted to change the direction of our foreign policy. That would certainly be one way to do it.” Billy walked to the phone and quickly began to dial. “Get me presidential security.”

Francine brushed brusquely past the team of agents sweeping Smyth’s study to where Lee and Amanda were standing tensely. “Well, it’s official. We’ve picked up everyone on the list except Mason. That worm is still out there. We found his ‘bug’ in the Q-Bureau. Can you believe his nerve?”

“Easily,” Lee replied darkly. “I was his guest recently for about a week. Thomas told us he was tailing Amanda.”

Francine concurred. “That’s why I had them do a sweep of Joe King’s apartment. Turns out he had bug problem, too.”

Amanda clutched Lee’s arm tightly. “Lee,” she said in a strangled voice. “If he had the apartment under surveillance, then he might know about Jamie’s photo.”

“What photo?” Francine looked from one to the other.

“Jamie took a photograph in the park on the Fourth of July,” Lee explained quickly. “He accidentally caught Mason and Thomas in a meet with Senator Holstein’s aid, Tom Fellows. That’s what tipped us to Thomas.”

“Lee, you don’t think...”

“With the evidence Tommy gathered, that photo is really a moot point, Amanda.”

“But, Lee – he doesn’t know that.” Her voice cracked almost imperceptibly.

He grabbed her hand. “Let’s go. Francine, we’re headed to Amanda’s. Tell Billy and send back up.”

## **CHAPTER SIXTEEN**

*The dark haired man noiselessly entered the house through the kitchen. There was no sign of the occupants - it appeared deserted. He smiled grimly – so far, so good. It would give him the time he needed.*

*It was all falling apart. Events were out of control. He suspected it was already too late to stop the avalanche his partner had set in motion by letting Stetson live. Just that one little thing caused the future he'd so carefully planned to disintegrate before his eyes. His arrogant dreams of power brought to naught.*

*It didn't matter. Nothing mattered anymore except his revenge. This was all their fault – Scarecrow and Mrs. King. Their interference had reduced him to this. He had no choices left. They would have to pay the price. Carefully cocking his gun, he sat back on the sofa to wait.*

They heard the sirens in the distance as their car approached the house at 4247 Maplewood Drive. Amanda gripped Lee's arm tightly. Swinging quickly onto her block, they found the way suddenly barred by police barricades. They abandoned the car and advanced towards the house as quickly as they could on foot.

The policeman stepped in front of them and effectively barred their way. "Sorry, folks. I'm going to have to ask you to vacate the area. This is a crime scene."

"You don't understand, officer, that's my house. And that's my mother over there." Amanda spotted Dotty a few feet away and began to push her way towards her. Dotty stood anxiously behind the police barricade with both arms around Phillip. Their tear-streaked faces testified to their fear.

"Mother..." Amanda hurried over to both of them.

"Oh, Amanda...that awful man. He's in the house. He's got Jamie." She began to sob uncontrollably.

"What man? Mother, you've got to calm down. Tell me what happened."

Her ragged sob caught in her throat as she tried to speak. "The boys and I walked to the park tonight after dinner. It was such a pretty night. I think we were there for about an hour. Phillip wanted to stay for a few more minutes to play basketball with some friends, so Jamie and I walked home alone. We ran into Mr. Stevens outside the house and I stopped to chat with him for a few minutes while Jamie ran on ahead. The next thing I knew, I heard him yell. He

must have surprised a burglar. I tried to get to him, but the man said he'd kill him if I came any closer. Oh, Amanda, that awful man had a gun to Jamie's head." She broke down and sobbed on Amanda's shoulder. Phillip stood next to her, his own eyes filled with tears.

"It'll be okay, Mother." She looked over her mother's head to Lee. "Mason must be inside. He has Jamie." Her voice was calm, but her eyes betrayed her true emotions. Lee knew she was barely holding it together.

"Dad." Phillip spotted Joe approaching from down the street. He ran quickly to his father.

"I called Joe right after the police," Dotty explained. "I didn't know what else to do."

Joe came up to them with his arm around Phillip. He immediately tore into Amanda and Lee. "I guess this is what you call keeping my sons safe."

"This isn't helping, Joe," Lee began quietly. "Let us handle it."

"The way you've done so far?"

Dotty and Phillip stared at the angry tableau in shock and disbelief. All the color drained from Dotty's face as if she'd seen a ghost. "My God, Lee? What are you..."

"I'll explain later, Mother. Right now we need to concentrate on Jamie."

Lee pulled her aside. "Let's find out who's in charge here. I'm not carrying any I.D. Do you have yours?"

"No. We took off from Dr. Smyth's so quickly..."

"That's okay. Billy's here." He signaled to Billy and Francine who were pushing their way through the crowd of blue uniforms. "Let me see what they know."

He took off in their general direction. Amanda turned to Phillip and Dotty, ignoring Joe's hostile look. "You two stay here. I'm going with Lee and find out what's going on."

“Amanda, it won’t do any good. I’ve talked and talked and they won’t tell me anything. They won’t even let you near the house.” Dotty’s eyes threatened once more to overflow with tears.

“It’s okay, Mother. Phillip, take care of your grandmother. We’ll get your brother out of this. I promise.”

Phillip nodded soberly. Amanda scooted around the police, heading for Lee, Billy and Francine in what appeared to be the command center. They waved her through the barricade while Dotty and Phillip watched wide-eyed from a distance. As she approached them, she caught the end of Billy’s conversation.

“...move those barricades back another four blocks. And get a mobile phone unit out here.” The policeman nodded in silent agreement. Billy turned to Lee. “It looks like we have a hostage situation on our hands. We’ve got to try to establish communication.”

Lee indicated Amanda’s presence with his eyes. “Amanda, you know we’ll do everything in our power to get your son out of there safely.” Billy patted her arm in reassurance before moving off to check with the police detective.

“Lee, Jamie...”

“I know.” He opened his arms and she moved into their protective embrace. “I’ll get him out of there, Amanda. I promise. You know it’s my family, too.”

Francine watched the exchange in amazement. As she opened her mouth to comment, Billy returned with the phone unit.

“Okay, the police psychologist is going to try and establish contact.”

Lee intercepted the phone. “Let me, Billy. My guess is Mason would love to get his hands on me again – to finish what he started. I’ll get him to trade Jamie for me.”

Billy hesitated, the phone resting on his chest. He looked at from Lee’s determined face to Amanda’s anxious one. He handed the phone to Lee. “Talk him out, Scarecrow.”

With a glance at Amanda, Lee dialed the number. On the tenth ring, Mason picked up. "You're slipping, Scarecrow. I expected you an hour ago."

"I'm here now. Let's talk, Mason. Just you and me."

"Go ahead. I'm listening."

"Not like this. Let me come inside."

Lee could hear his heavy breathing on the other end of the phone. "C'mon, Mason. You can finish what you started last week. Just let the boy go and you can have me all to yourself. They won't interfere. You have my word."

Mason hesitated, his tension evident even through the wires of the phone. "It's a tempting offer, Scarecrow. But I think I like these odds a little better."

Lee let out the breath he'd been holding. He shook his head negatively.

"Let me," Amanda cried, taking the phone from him. "Mr. Mason, it's Amanda King. Let me come in and talk to you. Jamie's just a little boy. He doesn't belong in the middle of this. Let's you and I talk."

Once again, Mason hesitated. "Okay, Mrs. King. If you wanna talk, come on in. I won't stop you. But the boy stays here. Come in unarmed - and no wire. Just us."

"Okay. I'll be right there." She turned to Lee and Billy. "It's the only way. Give me the chance to talk him out."

Billy shook his head. "Amanda, I can't let you go in there. Then he'd have two hostages."

"I have to try. That's my son in there, sir."

Lee nudged Billy. "It's worth a shot. Besides, I've got an idea. With Amanda inside, she can create a diversion. I'll go up the trellis and in through the bedroom. Then I'll take him out." He looked to Amanda. "It's risky, but it's the only way. We can't afford to let this drag on. Mason has to know he has nothing more to lose."

Billy reluctantly agreed. "Okay, we'll give it a shot."

Lee turned to Amanda. "Be careful."

“You, too.”

“Always.”

Amanda walked slowly and deliberately towards the house. Reaching the front door, she paused, looking back over her shoulder at Lee. His smile reassured her as she warily entered the house.

Mason stood in the hallway holding Jamie in front of him with his left hand while his right hand brandished a gun. “Welcome to the party, Mrs. King. Glad you could join us.”

“Are you all right, sweetheart?” Amanda started to move towards Jamie.

“Sweetheart is fine. And he’ll stay fine just as long as you keep your distance.”

Jamie stared pleadingly at his mother, terrified beyond the power of speech. She smiled her reassurance.

“Mason, come on, this isn’t going to get you anywhere. We know about everything. Your partner had proof. He kept detailed records.”

“You know about everything, huh? Then you know why I can’t just walk out of here.”

From the corner of her eye, Amanda caught sight of Lee’s shadow on the stairs. She moved towards the living room in attempt to draw Mason out of his line of sight.

“Then let Jamie walk out of here. You don’t need him.”

“Maybe not. But it makes you and Scarecrow so much easier to control.” He raised his voice. “That’s your cue to join us, Stetson. And leave the gun on the stairs. Unless you want to see junior here splattered all over the hall.”

Lee slowly complied and moved over to join Amanda. Mason laughed. “What a pretty picture this makes. And here I thought all week it was the ex who was getting all the action.”

Lee made a move forward.

“I wouldn’t try it,” Mason warned. “You see, you’re so predictable, Scarecrow. I knew if I invited Mrs. King inside you’d obligingly join the party. This way I get two for the price of one. Now, why don’t we all move in to the other room, away from the windows? We don’t want to make things too easy for the sharpshooters.”

Mason motioned them towards the other room. He followed closely, holding Jamie by the neck. He directed them to sit on the sofa, shoving Jamie roughly towards them. Amanda put her arms around him and pulled him close, kissing the top of his head. Mason trained his gun in their direction.

Lee turned on his adversary with a cold eye. “It really is all over. Your little organization has fallen apart. Your boss committed suicide tonight.”

“My boss?”

“You know, Phoenix One – whom we fondly referred to as Dr. Smyth.”

“Well, I guess I really don’t have anything left to lose now, do I?”

Lee caught Amanda’s attention with a casual glance of the eye, indicating Phillip’s baseball partially hidden between the sofa cushions. Imperceptibly, she nodded. He continued talking to Mason, casually standing up. “We’re in no hurry, Mason. We can out wait you. Sooner or later you’re going to slip. You can’t take both of us – and the other one will get you.”

“Who says I have to wait that long? Don’t move any closer, Scarecrow.” He aimed the gun in his direction glancing quickly at his watch. “I only need a few more minutes anyway. Then the boys outside will be in for the surprise of their lives.”

Lee and Amanda exchanged a look. Oblivious, Mason continued. “Kind of poetic justice, don’t you think? You were supposed to die in an explosion, now you will.”

“What have you done?” Amanda choked out the words.

“The same thing I did in all those other houses. There’s a very efficient little device attached to your furnace. Your mother was so obliging the other day when I paid her a visit. In a few minutes, we’ll all go out in a blaze of glory. It’s almost show time.”



Amanda fell back helplessly on the sofa cushions. Covering her actions with gasping sobs, she quickly felt for the baseball. Her fingers closed tightly around it. Suddenly, without warning, she fired the ball at the television screen, shattering it.

The sound caught Mason off guard and he hesitated for a fraction of a second before firing. Lee threw himself in front of the gun, the bullet he meant for Jamie catching him in the shoulder. Ignoring the pain, Lee jumped Mason and they struggled for the gun. At the same time, Amanda pushed Jamie towards the door, yelling at him to run.

The sound of a shot rang through the house as they collapsed on the floor, Mason falling on top of Lee. Grabbing the table lamp, Amanda hit Mason over the head and shoved his body aside.

“Amanda, get out of here,” Lee ordered.

“Not without you. Come on.” She roughly helped him to his feet and together they staggered out the front door. As they crossed the threshold, the house exploded behind them, the force flinging them forward. Lee fell on top of Amanda shielding her from the blast. She felt the heat from the flames behind her before she lost consciousness.

## **CHAPTER SEVENTEEN**

*Stunned neighbors clustered together, the peace and calm of their late September evening irreparably shattered by the unexpected turn of events. The siren from the speeding ambulance wailed plaintively in the distance.*

*Two men stood together amid the other curiosity seekers morbidly watching the grim spectacle unfold on the dimly lit street. They shook their heads in silent disbelief as the firemen worked the spray from their hoses over the smoldering remains of the house. It was over. Wordlessly, they disappeared into the night.*

The bright light hurt her eyes. As she slowly struggled to open them, she blinked several times, trying to bring the room into focus. Her gaze fell on Dotty slouched in a chair by her bed.

“Mother?”

“Amanda, you’re awake.”

“Where am I?”

“You’re in the emergency room at Galilee General. You’ve been unconscious, but you’re going to be fine.”

The events of the past few hours suddenly fell into place and she struggled to sit up. “Jamie…”

“Jamie’s fine, Amanda. Don’t worry. Stay put and let me call the Doctor.”

Dotty stepped around the curtain and spoke briefly with the nurse. “He’ll be right here,” she reported. “Just lie still.”

“Jamie’s really okay?”

“Yes. They checked him out just as a precaution. He’s out in the waiting room with Phillip and Joe.”

The emergency room Doctor brusquely entered the cubicle. “Well, Mrs. King, you’re awake. How are you feeling?”

“I have a headache.”

He briefly shone the penlight into her eyes. “I’m not surprised. You have a mild concussion. But it doesn’t appear to be too serious. And it’s not unusual to be disoriented after a head injury like this. Tell me, what’s the last thing you remember?”

“There was an explosion…” She turned suddenly towards the Doctor. “Is my husband all right? Did they bring him in with me?”

Dotty caught the Doctor’s eye. “I think she must be a little confused,” she whispered. “Her ex-husband’s in the waiting room.”

Amanda sighed in exasperation. “No, Lee Stetson – my husband. He was shot. What’s his condition?”

Dotty looked at her with a sympathetic shake of the head. “Everything’s going to be fine, Amanda. You just need to rest.”

“I don’t need to rest, Mother. I need to find out how Lee is.”

“I believe there was a gunshot wound brought in at the same time you were. I didn’t examine him, though. You need to calm down, Mrs. King. I’ll have one of the nurses check on his condition.”

The doctor left Amanda and Dotty alone in the small cubicle. Her mother patted her hand reassuringly. Francine stuck her head around the drape and signaled Amanda with her eye. She nodded in acknowledgement. “Mother, could you do me a favor? Go out and tell Phillip and Jamie that I’m okay?”

“Sure, darling. I’ll be right back.”

Francine waited for her to clear the area, then came quickly around the drape to Amanda’s bed.

“Francine, how’s Lee? No one will tell me anything.”

“He just got out of recovery. They operated to remove the bullet. Don’t worry - the N.E.S.T. doctors said it was routine. He should be fine.”

Amanda breathed a sigh of relief. She stood up slowly, holding onto the bedrail until she got her land-legs. Francine put a restrictive hand on her arm. “Amanda, where do you think you’re going?”

“I think I’m going to see Lee.”

“He’s under ‘restricted visitation’ tonight. You can see him tomorrow.”

“Sorry, Francine. That’s just not good enough.” She gave Francine a look that brooked no interference and headed into the corridor.

Francine trailed after her. “Amanda, trust me, they’re not going to let you see him. I tried. You’d have to be a relative to get in there tonight.”

“I think I qualify. If you’ll excuse me, Francine, I’m going to go check on my husband.”

She left a thoroughly shocked Francine standing alone in the hall.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Feeling better?” Amanda entered the room carrying a large floral arrangement. She put them by the window and kissed Lee hello.

“Hmm. I’m feeling much better now. How are you doing? Everything quiet on the home front?”

“It’s been a rocky few days, but I think the seas are finally calming down. Once everyone recovered from the initial shock of my big announcement.”

Lee grinned. “Francine was pretty shocked, huh?”

“The look on her face was definitely one for the record books. But I think it paled in comparison to Mother’s. Especially when she found out that we don’t really work for a film company.”

Lee grimaced. “I’m sorry you had to face all this alone. How’s Jamie doing?”

“Better. Joe and I are both encouraging him to talk about his feelings. His doctor did suggest some counseling to help him deal with the repercussions of the Mason incident. But I think he’ll be okay given a little time.”

“We’ll both be there to help him.”

Amanda smiled. “Phillip’s been a big help. He’s calling him the hero of the hour – it was his photograph that cracked the case.”

“Amanda, I can’t begin to tell you how sorry I am that any of this touched the boys.”

She took his face in her hands. “None of this is your fault, Lee.”

“If it hadn’t been for me…”

“If it hadn’t been for you, Jamie would probably be dead right now. Thank you for saving his life.”

Lee shook his head. “No Amanda, don’t thank me. This is my fault. Despite everything we’ve done, we couldn’t keep the Agency out of your family’s life.”

“That’s ‘our’ family, Stetson.”

“I’ve had a lot of time to think the last few days. Maybe it’s time to walk away from this business while we still can.”

She sat on the edge of the bed and held his hand tightly in hers. “Lee, even if we didn’t work for the Agency, the end result would still have been the same. Did you know that the winning photograph was going to be published in the local newspaper? Mason would still have come looking for Jamie’s picture, but maybe we wouldn’t have had the resources to protect him. If there’s one thing I’ve learned recently, it’s that life is precious. And it’s time for us to start to live ours — with the boys, as a family. If you want to walk away from the Agency, I’ll support your decision. But don’t do it for me. Do it because that’s what you want to do.”

He leaned forward and touched her lips with his. “I love you, Mrs. Stetson.”

“I love you, too.”

As she leaned in to kiss him, they were interrupted by a knock on the door and Billy walked in. “Scarecrow, how are...I’m sorry. Didn’t mean to interrupt.” Billy looked down at the floor.

“It’s okay, Billy,” Lee laughed. “I’m just trying to make up for lost time with my wife.”

A large grin covered Billy’s face. “Congratulations to you both.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Thought I’d stop by to fill you in on a few things. It’s been a pretty hectic few days.”

“No problems with the trade pact talks, I hope?” Lee inquired.

“No, thanks to you two. The bomb squad swept the reception area that night and found three of those devices – enough explosives to take out a city block. The death toll would have been horrendous – not to mention the international implications. You saved a lot of lives.”

Lee looked at Amanda and shook his head. “No, Tom Fellows and Senator Holstein are the ones who are really responsible. They’re the heroes – after all, they paid the highest price. I just followed a paper trail.”

Billy shook his head sadly. “Right to the Agency. It’s going to take the intelligence community a long time to recover from this. Which brings me to the other reason for my visit.”

“What?”

“A job offer. There’s going to be a total reorganization at the Agency. Colonel Jack Holstein is going to be named acting Director.”

Amanda raised her eyebrows. “The Senator’s cousin?”

“Yes. The President will make the announcement the first of next week. He has a pretty extensive background in intelligence – and a vested interest in ‘cleaning house’.” Billy paused a moment before continuing. “I’ve been offered a promotion – head of East Coast Operations. I’ll have responsibility for our D.C. and New York departments.”

Lee smiled. “That’s wonderful, Billy. If anyone deserves it, you do. Congratulations.”

“Yes, congratulations, sir.”

“Which brings me to my point. Lee, I want you as my Director of Field Operations in D.C.”

“Me? Administration?” Lee said skeptically.

“Not exactly. When I say Field Operations, I mean just that. You’d have staff to handle the administrative end. You’d be primarily responsible for the assignment and supervision of field agents. You wouldn’t necessarily be trapped behind a desk. You could pick and choose your assignments. Work with whatever agents you choose. Of course, as the East Coast Chief I would have the option of clipping your wings if you decided to go off alone on some highly dangerous mission again.” Billy smiled over at Amanda. “Although, given your present circumstances, I have the feeling that’s not going to be a major issue.”

“I don’t know what to say, Billy.”

“Say yes.”

“If you’d asked me this a month ago, I would have jumped at the chance. But after everything that’s happened...”

“The pay starts at GG18 – management level.”

Lee glanced at Amanda. “A lot of things have changed in the last month. And we have a lot of decisions to make. I’ll have to let you know.”

“I understand, Scarecrow. Take all the time you need. You have some leave coming. It may help put things in perspective. But I hope your answer’s yes. We need you.” With a nod to Amanda, Billy left them alone together.

Amanda held his hand, intertwining his fingers with hers. “That was a pretty nice offer, Scarecrow.”

He sighed. “I should be pleased, I know.”

“But?”

“Amanda, it’s just that – for the past ten years, I’ve put my life on the line every day because I believed in what I was doing, believed the Agency was making a positive difference in the world. To find out the corruption reached through so many layers – it’s like discovering you’ve built a house on a rotten foundation. Sometimes it’s just too damn late to rebuild.”

Amanda brought his hand to her lips and kissed his fingers. “Like I said, whatever you decide is fine with me.”

He smiled. “Whatever ‘we’ decide. This is our future. No matter what, I’ve got you.”

“And I’ve got you.” His lips closed on hers in a kiss.

\* \* \* \* \*

Amanda threw open the apartment door, setting the small suitcase down just inside the hall. Lee followed close behind her, shaking his head in amazement.

“God it feels good to be out that hospital.” He glanced briefly around the room. “There were times I thought I’d never see this place again.”

Turning to him with a smile, she put her arm around his waist. “Come on, let’s get you off your feet.”

“Amanda, I’m not an invalid. I don’t need to be fussed over.”

“I’m afraid you’re just going to have to get used to it.” She led him to the couch and helped him sit down. Despite his protests to the contrary, Amanda could see that he was still suffering from the aftereffects of his month-long ordeal. The simple trip home from the hospital appeared to have exhausted him, but she knew Lee would never admit it.

She left him comfortably ensconced on the couch and went to retrieve his suitcase, bringing it into the bedroom. Lee’s voice called to her from the other room.

“Amanda, where is everybody?”

She poked her head into the room. “I took Mother to the airport this morning. She’s going to spend a month with Aunt Lillian.”

“What about Phillip and Jamie?”

Amanda smiled. “Didn’t I tell you? They’re at Joe’s.”

He frowned slightly. “Is Joe still giving you a hard time about their safety?”

“No, nothing like that. We had a long talk and I think he’s okay with it. Actually, he’s okay with everything. We just agreed that the boys would spend a few weeks with him. We both thought it would be good for Jamie. With everything he’s been through, we felt he should be in familiar surroundings and he’s comfortable at Joe’s.”

He eyed her warily. “But you would tell me if there was a problem?”

She smiled at him from across the room. “Yes, I would tell you if there was a problem. Now, can I get you anything?”

He returned her smile, nodding his head affirmatively. He patted the spot next to him on the sofa.

She slowly crossed the room. “Okay, we’ll sit for a minute. Then you really need to get into bed.”

He put his arm around her and pulled her close, kissing the top of her head. “Okay.”



Amanda twisted slightly to look at him. "I meant to sleep."

"Amanda..."

"You need your rest. Your body needs to heal."

His lips curved up in their most seductive smile. "Trust me, that's not what my body needs right now."

She smiled in response, cupping his face in her hands and gently tracing the dark circles under his eyes with her fingers. "You look pretty exhausted to me. And the doctor said you're supposed to be on bed rest."

He leaned forward and kissed her tenderly. "Let's go to bed and I promise not to get up for a week."

She put a restraining hand on his chest. "Lee, I don't know if we should."

He looked at her with a puzzled expression. "Amanda, is something wrong?"

She looked away quickly. "I'm just worried about you, that's all."

He leaned back on the couch, pulling her into his arms. She sighed softly, feeling her body instinctively relax against him. She felt his arms tighten around her, holding her so close that she could feel the steady rhythm of his heartbeat. He rested his chin on her head.

"Amanda, you don't have to worry about me. I'm fine. Nothing's going to happen to me."

She buried her head in his chest, a single tear trailing down her cheek. "I thought I'd lost you for good. I can't even begin to tell you how that felt." She pulled away slightly, avoiding his gaze. "And now that there's nothing keeping us apart, all of a sudden, I'm scared."

He placed his hand on her chin and tilted her head up until she was forced to look him in the eye. "Of me?"

"No," she whispered, "of how much I love you. Lee, there's nothing I want more than to go into your bedroom and make love with you." She caught the expression on his face and immediately amended her statement. "I mean our

bedroom.” Her voice fell to a whisper. “It’s almost all I’ve thought about since our reunion at the train station.”

“Me, too.”

“But I’m afraid...” she took a deep breath, the words spilling out of her mouth in a jumble. “I’m afraid that if I let you get that close again and something happened to you, I’d never survive it this time. I guess it’s just been easier to deal with the fear by keeping you at a distance. Does this make any sense?”

“Amanda, you’re talking to the man who couldn’t admit to himself that he loved you for over a year. I understand what you’re saying perfectly. Believe me, I’m the past master at keeping people at a distance.” He tenderly brushed the hair from her eyes. “But as you’re always telling me, if you’re really going to live, sometimes you have to take a chance. And if I’ve learned one thing from this experience it’s that I need you. My life doesn’t make sense without you.”

He paused for minute, looking over her head at the picture on the wall. “I’m sorry for what you went through when you thought I was dead. I don’t even want to think about how I’d feel if the situation was reversed. And I’m sorry for not confiding in you from the beginning. I was just trying to protect you and I know I ended up hurting you more than if I’d been straight with you from the beginning.” He took a deep breath before continuing. “This marriage stuff is new to me and I’m still working on getting it right. I can’t promise you I won’t make the same mistake again. I can only promise you to try and do better.” He paused nervously and looked into her eyes. “Amanda, talk to me. This is the longest you’ve ever gone without speaking since I met you.”

“I don’t want to talk right now.” She rose slowly from the couch and held out her hand. “Let’s finish this in the bedroom.”

\* \* \* \* \*

They stood facing each other in the darkened room, the soft light from the candles casting flickering shadows on the wall. Lee tentatively moved towards her, closing the distance that separated them with a hesitant step. Wordlessly, he took her in his arms, holding her until he felt the tension slowly drain from her body. The room was quiet and in the stillness they listened to the rise and fall of each other’s breath. Neither one seemed willing to make the first move, so they simply held each other in the candlelight, feeling their hearts beating in tandem. Encircled in each other’s arms, it was easy to turn off all thought and simply drift, each taking the comfort they needed from the other’s touch. For the moment, it was enough to simply hold each other.

Slowly, the feeling of comfort began to subtly change and Amanda felt the beginnings of a response stir within her. She sighed, holding him closer, drinking in his familiar scent. She felt his hand move almost unconsciously up and down her back, his touch feather-light upon her spine. She echoed his movement, running her hand gently across his back. His soft caress produced a pleasant tingle in every nerve. Little by little, this light, pleasurable sensation was replaced by a familiar fire building in the deepest core of her being and, looking into Lee's eyes, she knew he felt it, too.

No longer hesitant, he pulled her closer, his mouth closing on hers in a demanding kiss. She parted her lips as his tongue explored her mouth, almost as if reclaiming what was already his.

Amanda felt a wave of emotion suddenly wash over her and she fought back the tears, afraid Lee would misunderstand their cause. She almost didn't understand it herself. She only knew that she felt more for him in this instant than she had ever felt for anyone before in her life. It was as if almost losing him had somehow heightened every sensation. She loved him so much it was almost painful.

Somehow he seemed to sense what she was feeling. He kissed her eyelids, brushing away her tears, and then moved over to tenderly whisper in her ear. "I love you, Amanda Stetson."

She drew a ragged breath and held him closer. "I love you, too. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to cry."

He pulled away and smiled. "Then why don't you show me what you meant to do?"

She drew a deep breath, shyly returning his smile. "I meant to do this." She unbuttoned his shirt, kissing each area as she slowly exposed it. She ran her hands hungrily up and across his bare chest to his shoulders, her thumbs brushing lightly over his nipples. She smiled again as she heard his breathing quicken and she continued to run her hands down the outside of his arms, slowly removing his shirt. Her eyes rested on his injured right shoulder and she gently caressed the area that was still covered with a small dressing. She trailed her fingers down his chest, her nails sending shivers up his spine. With a swift intake of breath, she unbuckled his belt and carefully freed it from the loops on his pants, letting it drop unneeded to the floor. With the barest hint of a smile, he quickly kicked off his shoes. She lifted her eyes to meet his and in them she recognized a look of love and desire that perfectly mirrored her own. Never

taking her eyes off his, she slowly unzipped his pants and pushed them down over his hips, watching while he stepped out of them and pushed them out of the way with his foot.

The corners of her mouth turned up in a sensual smile. “So,” she whispered, her voice itself a caress, “what did you mean to do?”

He responded with a throaty laugh. “A little of this,” he whispered as he quickly undid the small pearl buttons on her blouse. “And a little of that.” Reaching around her, he moved his hand underneath her blouse and deftly unfastened her bra. He ran his hands gently across her thin back as he pulled her closer. “You’ve lost weight,” he murmured as he trailed tiny kisses down her to her shoulder, pushing her blouse out of the way.

“Maybe a little,” she admitted reluctantly, her own hands rubbing small circles on his back, then feeling the bone and muscle of his shoulders. “So have you.”

She felt his hands move up her back to her shoulders, stripping away her blouse and bra. He bent once again to kiss her, then slowly turned her around. His arms encircled her from behind, pulling her close while his hands cupped her breasts, her nipples taut beneath his fingers. She could feel his arousal pressing into her back and he rubbed against her, his breath hot on her ear.

“I’ve missed you,” he whispered as his hands released her breasts and moved down to undo the buttons on her slacks. He pushed the material slowly, sensually down her hips, his thumbs catching in the sides of her silken panties, pulling them off with the slacks in one motion. As she stepped out of them and turned to face him, he took a deep breath and quickly stripped off his shorts.

They moved together quickly and their mouths met in a hungry kiss. He guided her to the bed and threw back the covers, gently pulling her down on top of him. Amanda could see that he was favoring his right shoulder and she shifted her weight to his left side.

“Lee,” she whispered as he turned to kiss her, “we still have our socks on.”

“I have it on good authority that we can still do this with our socks on,” he laughed as he ran his hand down her leg to her feet. “But if you insist...” He slowly peeled them off, running his hands over her feet as he bent to kiss them. With a smile he removed his own socks, deftly tossing both pairs across the room.

Her laughter mingled with his as they lay back against the pillows. She turned on her side, her head resting on her elbow, and reached out to caress his cheek. "I've missed you, too."

Suddenly serious, he caught her hand in his and tenderly kissed the palm. He looked deeply into her eyes, running his hands hungrily over her slender body as if he had never touched it before. He kissed her again, almost drowning in the taste and feel of her, the familiar suddenly new. He held her to him, her skin against his skin, her softness curving against the harder muscles of his body as if she was melting into him. He ran his hand over her again, down the silken curve of her hips and across her thighs, rolling her onto her side and gently parting her legs. His fingers stroked her, feeling her wetness and need.

Beneath his insistent hands, Amanda felt the last of her fears melting away in the heat of her desire and she opened herself to him. Moaning softly she reciprocated his actions, her hand closing around his swollen penis. She slowly stroked up and down, her fingers lightly circling the tip. She heard him groan in pleasure as he gently moved her hand away. His body pressed against her, demanding yet comfortingly familiar, and as he entered her, she rose to meet him with a passionate force.

Mindful of his injured shoulder, she turned them, rolling over until she was on top. He reached up and pulled her head down, his mouth closing on hers as they began to move in perfect rhythm, one body and one heart. "Oh, Amanda, it's been so long," Lee whispered as he breathlessly tried to hold on. She closed her eyes and moved against him, enclosing him, and moments later heard him cry out. With a shuddering gasp she let go, giving herself up to the pleasure that coursed through her body in heavy waves.

Spent, they collapsed against each other, the shimmering candlelight a reflection of the glow created by their love. Feeling Amanda shiver, Lee reached down and pulled the covers up around them. Taking her face in his hands, he silently brushed a lock of hair from her eyes, and pulled her close. "I love you, Mrs. Stetson," he whispered, trying to suppress a yawn.

She snuggled happily against him, listening to the even rhythm of his breathing. She watched as he closed his eyes, finally giving in to his fatigue. "I love you, too," she murmured with a smile, secure in the knowledge that they were both finally back where they belonged. She lay beside him in the flickering candlelight, quietly watching him sleep.

## EPILOGUE

*The two men met quietly in the shadows. The taller one passed an envelope to his compatriot.*

*"It's all there – should be more than enough."*

*"Any trouble?"*

*"No. Things are beginning to run smoothly again."*

*"Good. I always knew that fool Smyth would turn out to be good for something. Imagine - that idiot actually believed he was running the show." The two men smiled at their private joke. "I need to drop out of sight for a while. It'll be much healthier."*

*"A few years in a warm climate should work wonders."*

*"No one suspects?"*

*"No. Everyone thinks you're dead. They're convinced it's finished."*

*"Good. Then things are all going according to plan. If you have any questions, ask them now. We'll be at contact zero for the next few years..."*

*"No. Don't worry. Things are set on my end. We won't need to meet again until..."*

*"...until the Phoenix rises from the ashes."*

*The two men shook hands. "Good luck, Jack," Senator Holstein called to his cousin, the Colonel. He turned and headed quickly to his waiting plane.*

The clouds spit a few flakes of early snow into the November afternoon. Hand in hand, Lee and Amanda Stetson walked down the steps of their new house in Rockville. Amanda glanced over her shoulder at the front porch swing and the small stable in the distance. Lee put his arms around her and smiled.

"Nice, isn't it?"

She brushed the tears from her eyes. He looked at her with concern. "You okay? You're not sorry we didn't rebuild in Arlington, are you?"

She shook her head. “No. These are happy tears. We’ve waited so long to really be a family. Sometimes all this seems to good to be true.”

“You’ll just have to get used to being happy. That’s the order of business from now on.”

“It will be good to have the boys back here with us. Joe’s been great to have them stay with him while we’ve been ‘homeless’, but I’ve missed them.”

“I know you have.”

She smiled and kissed him briefly. “But it’s been nice to have the time alone with you.”

“I’ve enjoyed it, too,” he grinned. “But it’s time we were all a real family. I can’t believe Joe didn’t give you any hassle about the boys’ safety.”

“He’s let that subject drop.”

“Still, that’s quite an about face.”

“Well, he knows you saved Jamie’s life. But I suspect the fact that he’s spending Thanksgiving with Carrie may have had something to do with it.”

Lee raised an eyebrow. “I hope that works out. I’m glad he’s starting to move on with his life. Us, too. It’s back to work on Monday.”

She nodded solemnly. Lee looked at her with sudden concern. “You’re not sorry I accepted Billy’s offer, are you? You know it’s still not too late for both of us to walk away.”

“No. I knew all along you couldn’t turn your back on the Agency, Scarecrow. This is your chance to help rebuild what you’ve worked for all your life. With a solid foundation this time.” She smiled warmly at him.

He glanced at his watch. “If we’re going to pick up Phillip and Jamie before we meet your mother at the airport, we’d better get going.”

“I know. Mother’s had a good time visiting her sister, but I suspect she’ll be glad to be home. And glad to see the boys.”

“And me?”

“You don’t have anything to worry about. My mother is your biggest fan. She once told me that on a scale of one to ten, you’re an eleven.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Don’t let it go to your head, Stetson.”

He pulled her to him and kissed her softly.

“What was that for?” she asked teasingly.

“That was a thank you. For my new family.”

She smiled in return. “You can thank me some more later.”

“Count on it,” he grinned. “Let’s get going, Mrs. Stetson.”

**THE END**