

## After All

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*"Death ends a life, but it does not end a relationship, which struggles on in the survivor's mind toward some resolution which it may never find." - Robert Anderson*

"Good morning, Washington! It's a beautiful sunny Wednesday; the high today should reach 46 degrees. Our top headlines: after a gap of 117 years, the US re-established full diplomatic relations with the Vatican yesterday. Suvann Phuma, the premier of Laos died last night at the age of 82. In local news, the year's first fatal stabbing occurred last night outside a bar in Georgetown. Police are releasing few details until next of kin are notified. Complete news, weather and sports after these messages."

Amanda reached an arm out from under her comforter, blindly searching for the off button on her clock radio. She was a morning person herself, but did those radio announcers have to sound so alert at such an early hour? The urge to stay cozily under the covers was more than slightly tempting. Recalling the busy day she had planned, she resolutely got up, put on her robe and headed for the bathroom.

By the time her mother came downstairs half an hour later, Amanda had showered, dressed, made coffee and was busy setting out ingredients for the boys' lunches. "You're up early, even for you," Dotty observed, pouring herself a cup of coffee.

"I promised to bake some chocolate chip cookies for the fundraiser Phillip's class is having tomorrow," Amanda explained. "Not to mention the mountain of laundry and errands I've got to do before you and the boys leave for the weekend."

Dotty nodded and continued fixing her coffee. Amanda sighed softly; her mother's casual acceptance of her words created an all-too-familiar twinge of guilt. While the rational part

of her mind accepted the necessity of telling her family what were at best half-truths and at worst outright lies, her essentially truthful nature found it hard going at times.

In this particular instance she had left unsaid her plans to stop by the Agency with some of the freshly baked cookies for Lee. He had tried to laugh off the death threat the other night but it had to be unsettling. And since he refused to accept her help professionally, a little comfort food seemed in order.

Her reflections were cut short by the sound of Jamie and Phillip racing each other down the stairs and into the kitchen. Soon the room was full of the usual morning clamour of lunch-making and breakfast preparations. The shrill ringing of the telephone broke off an argument between the boys over whose turn it was for the glow-in-the-dark plastic centipede found at the bottom of their box of Crunchy Crawlers.

"Who on earth would be calling this early?" Dotty grumbled.

"I'll get it, Mother. Sit down and enjoy your breakfast," Amanda said, picking up the phone. "Dean," she greeted the caller. She listened for a few minutes, making sporadic comments. "Three weeks from Monday?...No, it's good thing you're asking this early, never hurts to have lots of advance notice... Yes, I can keep that afternoon free... I'll see you later; have a good day."

After hanging up the phone she grabbed her toast out of the toaster, sat down in the breakfast nook and waited for the interrogation to begin.

Dotty didn't disappoint her, asking almost immediately, "So, what did Dean want?"

"His mother is going to be in town next month and he wants us to get together."

"That's wonderful," her mother replied enthusiastically. "It's about time we met some of his family... I'm mean, if the two of you do decide to..."

"Moth-er!" Amanda cut her off, staring at her toast as if buttering it was a task requiring the concentration of a neuro-surgeon. "I told you, I'm not ready yet." She glanced up at her two sons who were closely following their exchange. "Eat your cereal," she prompted them.

The phone rang again. "My turn," Dotty said as she got up. "How does everyone know just when we sit down for meals?" She answered it, then turned back to Amanda and held out the receiver. "It's for you again."

Amanda got up, took the phone and waited for her mother to sit back down. There was always the chance that an early morning call was from the Agency, and Dotty's eavesdropping abilities would be the envy of half the operatives who worked there. Her mind wandered to one particular agent. A smile formed on her face as she wondered if Lee was calling to say that he had once again been 'forced' into using her on another case. Seeing her mother go back to her cereal she brought the receiver up to her ear. "Hello."

"Amanda, I'm sorry to be disturbing you at home." Unexpectedly it was Billy's voice she heard, not Lee's.

"Sir," she greeted him, straightening up a bit and turning her back to her family. "Do you need me to come in this morning?"

"No, it's not that," he replied. He paused for a moment then continued with a slight catch in his voice, "I'm so sorry to have to tell you this, but..." Amanda got the distinct impression that he was having trouble telling her something. A small lump began to form in her throat as she realized that it probably wasn't going to be good news.

"It really is no trouble, if you need me," she hurriedly broke in. "My mother and the boys are going to Williamsburg this weekend and I've got a lot to do to help them get ready, but if you need me..." Normally she wouldn't interrupt her boss, but in that one split second, she knew. She knew exactly what he was going to say. The tone in his voice immediately brought back the day Dotty called her at college with the news of her father's heart attack. Her rambling died out as Billy said her name again.

"Amanda, that's not why I'm calling."

"No," she whispered. It was ridiculous but part of her felt that if she could keep him from saying the words, they wouldn't be true. "It's Lee, isn't it?"

"Yes," he confirmed her fears. "He was stabbed last night outside of Monk's. The paramedics did everything they could but he didn't even make it to the hospital."

She stood there silently, her hand gripping the phone so tightly that her knuckles turned white.

"Amanda, are you still there?" Billy asked.

"Yes, I'm here," she said woodenly. Lee was dead. It didn't seem possible. She had seen him only the other day; how could he be dead? It had to be a mistake.

"The funeral is going to be held Friday morning. Lee left instructions with his life insurance policy; it's just going to be a short service in the cemetery."

Amanda mechanically took down the details of time and location, thanked Billy for calling and hung up. She stood motionless for a few moments, leaning against the island countertop for support. It couldn't be true. It just couldn't. Any minute she'd hear a knock at her window and Lee would be there, asking her to help him on a case or come and feed his fish again because he was off to Borneo for two weeks.

"Darling, your breakfast is getting cold," Dotty called over to her.

She walked back to the table, sat down automatically and picked up her toast.

"So what do you think about the idea of having Dean's mother over for lunch?" Dotty returned to their conversation. "I think it would be a nice way to get to know her better, don't you? Amanda?" She gazed at her daughter in concern. "Amanda, are you all right?"

"What? I'm fine, I just..." Her voice trailed off.

"So what about lunch with Dean's mother?" Dotty persisted.

"Sure, that sounds fine." Amanda chewed and swallowed and chewed and swallowed, and tried to make appropriate responses to her mother's chatter, so that she wouldn't guess that anything was amiss. Apparently her efforts were successful, since Dotty rambled on, proposing and then rejecting various luncheon menus.

She could never recall afterwards how she made it through the next hour without breaking down in front of her family. Somehow she managed to find the strength to hold her emotions in check long enough to see the boys off to school and her mother out the door. As soon as Dotty's friends picked her up for their day of shopping and she saw the car heading down the road, the first tears began to trickle down her face. The lump in her throat seemed to have dislodged itself and moved into her stomach, where it sat, a dead weight, on her recently consumed breakfast.

Blindly she turned and walked into the den. As her knees gave out from under her, she sank down onto the floor beside the couch. Burying her face in her hands, she gave herself up to her emotions. Her shoulders shook as sobs wracked her body, sobs pulled out of the gaping hole torn in her heart. She mouthed Lee's name in a hoarse whisper, the reality of his loss sweeping over her in waves of pain.

Gradually her tears died down and she became aware of the roughness of fabric against her cheeks. Sniffling a bit, she reached out and traced the damp spots her tears had made

on the couch cushions. If only she had someone to confide in. There was nothing that anyone could do, of course; Lee was gone and that couldn't be changed. Still, she longed for some type of comfort - even as simple as having someone there to hold her hand or give her a hug. Someone who could tell her that it was a terrible situation but that they were there for her, and that they sympathized with her grief.

Amanda straightened up and gazed dully around the room. The reality of her situation was that no one was there with her. At times the secrecy her job necessitated was quite exciting, but now she perceived what a huge barrier it could be as well. There was no one she could confide in. Her mother and friends had no idea of the true nature of her work. While that secrecy kept them safe, it also kept her isolated from them. She had no one she could share her grief with, no one who would understand her feelings. Ironically, she realized that the person she wanted most to talk to was Lee. And that she never would get the chance to again.



Amanda had had every intention of going straight home after Lee's funeral. Instead she found herself taking a roundabout route through the city. It was still so hard to be at home, pretending that nothing out of the ordinary had happened, trying to maintain her cheerful facade in front of her family. Her mother's plans to take the boys to Williamsburg with some friends couldn't have come at a better time. If she could just make it through the afternoon, she'd have the whole weekend to try to get herself together. She just needed a bit of time to sort out her feelings from the funeral.

She parked her car on a side street not far from the Botanic Gardens and got out. With no particular destination in mind, she walked slowly down the sidewalk. Breathing deeply, she let the cold air fill her lungs. She wasn't sure why exactly she had ended up on the Mall, but it was certainly a place with an abundance of solitude. Few tourists braved the chill of a DC winter to visit the nation's capital at that time of year.

She paused part way down First Street. On her right the dome of the Capitol blended in against the gray and white clouds hanging overhead. Walking onto a small terrace overlooking the Mall, she glanced idly down the two-mile long tract of land stretching all the way to the Lincoln Memorial. The snow that had seemed so beautiful on Christmas Eve had melted in a thaw the previous week, leaving a landscape bleak and desolate enough to suit her mood. The grass was tired and brown, dotted here and there by mounds of shoveled snow, now dirty and congealed into icy lumps. Summer was a faint memory and, evidence of previous years notwithstanding, she felt as if this might be the year that spring failed to arrive.

Turning abruptly, Amanda realized why she'd been drawn to this particular location. She reached out with a gloved hand and gently touched the base of one of the statues adorning the terrace. In the chill of the January morning the site was as deserted as it had been the night she had met there with Lee to tell him about Phillip's discovery of the music box and the information it contained. The words he had said to her then now echoed through her head.

"Amanda, I think you should stay out of all this. It could get dangerous. Even worse, you could screw things up."

She sighed. That evening she had been furious with Lee for trying to give her the brush-off. Today she found herself wondering if perhaps she should have taken his advice. Maybe she had screwed up her life; it certainly felt that way. And yet, what else could she have done? "Que sera, sera." Alec Belmont had used those words as part of his eulogy for Lee. What will be, will be. Somehow from the moment Lee had grasped her by the arm in the train station and thrust the package into her hands, she had felt that her involvement with him was something that was meant to be.

But it was all over now. What will be, will be. Was Lee's death meant to be? And what about things that never had a chance to be?

Again she was struck by the irrational thought that the one person she really wanted to talk to about all of this was Lee. She recalled the pain in his voice the one time he had mentioned his previous partner's death to her.

"No, no, no, no, no. You were not a partner. You were an emergency. A partner's a guy who laughs at your jokes, loans you his socks and one day takes a bullet through the head for you." He had turned away from her then, as if he had inadvertently revealed much more than he had intended to.

"Were you friends for a long time?" she had asked softly.

"Not long enough."

Amanda now knew exactly how he must have felt. Not nearly long enough. Not long enough at all.

She only hoped that she had in some small measure been a real partner to Lee. They had laughed together often enough and she'd bought him socks for Christmas. And in the end he had died, not from a bullet to the head, but a knife to the chest. He hadn't been killed protecting her personally, but his death was a direct result of his job. She knew Lee had willingly accepted the risks, but right now, to her, it all seemed like such a waste. She

hadn't had the chance to know him nearly long enough.

When she'd first met Lee four months earlier, she'd thought she had him all figured out. He was an egotistical playboy who had no concept of the way real people lived and little respect for the routines of normal life. But after spending time with him, she had quickly come to realize that her first impression of him was no more valid than his dismissal of her as an insipid housewife.

Getting to know the real Lee Stetson was a long term process, one that she only recently felt she was making much progress with. While driving to meet a contact on Christmas Eve, he had actually offered up some personal information about his childhood - telling her about the loneliness of the holidays he had spent with his uncle on various Air Force bases. Amanda found it fascinating to try to piece together the tantalizing snippets he would let slip about his personal life, together with her own observations during the cases they worked on together. Whatever he might be, Lee certainly was not an easy man to figure out.

She had gradually come to realize that so many of her first impressions only reflected Lee's carefully polished facade. He dated many women but he treated her as a human being, not as a bimbo. Much of his fear of 'normal' life stemmed from his total lack of familiarity with it. His military upbringing had been reinforced by his choice of a career in which his duty to his country outweighed any desire he might have for a stable family life.

Wrapping her coat tightly around herself, she sat down on one of the benches near the statue of Ulysses S. Grant. Although their relationship had progressed a great deal from that morning in the train station, there was still so much she didn't know about him. And now never would. Her throat constricted and for a moment she was afraid she might start crying again.

She thought back to the day she had been kidnapped in Lee's place. Although she hadn't known it at the time, he had risked treason charges to get her back. She wondered again, as she had so many times in the past, if he had actually felt something for her personally or if he would have done the same for anyone he worked with. What she did remember with startling clarity was how she had felt, sitting beside him in the golf cart, sheltered in his arms. Closing her eyes, she could almost hear his voice soothing her, murmuring words of comfort.

She quickly pulled her mind back from following that particular train of thought. It was difficult enough, knowing how much she would miss Lee as a friend. Thinking about what might have been would only make things worse. Besides, even if Lee had lived, he never

would have become involved with someone like her. They'd managed to bridge the gap from being strangers to friends, maybe even good friends. But anything more than that...

She knew she cared for him a great deal. But she had never been able to sort out in her mind how she really felt about him. Was it merely friendship? Love? Hero worship? Fantasy? She honestly didn't know. And with Lee gone, she wouldn't have to figure it out. She felt ashamed at the slight feeling of relief that washed over her at that thought but couldn't help it.

The fact that she hadn't yet broken off her relationship with Dean was proof enough that she was more than a little confused about her situation. She had to smile as she realized what she had just thought. She hadn't YET broken up with Dean. One thing the events of the last few days seemed to have made clear - she'd have to end it with him, and soon. It wasn't fair to him to keep on dating when she knew she could never marry him. Even if the only time Lee had held her in his arms was to comfort her during a case, it didn't lessen the effect he'd had on her. She'd never get to explore any type of romantic relationship with him, but he had given her a glimpse of the passion and romance life had to offer, and it was so much more than she had ever felt for Dean.

The coldness of the stone bench worked its way through the cloth of her coat, forcing her to stand up again. She knew she needed to head home anyway; her mother would be wondering why her morning's errands were taking her so long. She just had to concentrate and get through one day at a time. As she walked back to her car, she thought of one more stop she wanted to make before heading to Arlington.



"Amanda, what are you doing here? I thought you were going home."

Amanda glanced up to find Billy Melrose standing beside her, a look of concern on his face.

"I'm just having a quick drink," she explained. "Lee took me here Monday evening after I asked him where he spent his spare time. So I thought I'd stop in and have a last drink. Sort of say goodbye."

"Mind if I join you?" He gestured towards the chair opposite hers.

She shook her head. "Actually it would be kind of nice to have some company."

Billy sat down and motioned for a waiter to come over. While he placed his order, Amanda glanced around the bar. Typical for most bars early on a Friday afternoon, Monk's was less

than a third full. She recognized a group in the corner as some of the agents from Lee's funeral. Apparently going back to their regular routine after the service had been as distasteful an idea to them as to her. Other patrons were in a much more cheerful frame of mind, laughing and talking, as they started their weekends a few hours early.

She returned her gaze to the man sitting opposite her. "I keep thinking, maybe if I'd been here the other night, things would have happened differently. Maybe Lee would still be alive."

Billy quickly cut her off. "Amanda, you can't do this to yourself. Things happen and you can't change them."

"I know. I'll be all right." She swiped at her cheeks with a napkin, quickly brushing away the tears that trickled out despite her best intentions. "When we were here on Monday I told Lee he was treating me like a tourist. But the more I think about it, the more I realize he was right. I am a tourist in this kind of life. Government operatives, double agents, terrorists - sometimes I wonder what I'm doing here at all." She sniffed and continued in a low voice, "But the funny thing is, I don't know if I can just go back to the way things were before, either. Four months ago it was the only life I knew and now I'm not sure it's enough."

"Amanda, you're not thinking of quitting the Agency?" Billy asked in dismay.

"Maybe. I'm just... I just don't know where I belong anymore."

"Well, promise me you'll wait a few days at least before you make any decision. It's not always going to seem this bad." The waiter returned with a mug of beer. Billy waited until he was out of earshot before continuing, "Believe me, everything's going to be okay."

"I'm just still in shock over this whole thing. It doesn't seem real."

"I know what you mean," he said in a comforting tone. "The first time you lose a friend like this isn't easy."

Amanda idly ran her fingers up and down the side of her glass, playing with the beads of condensation, the liquid pooling together to form larger drops which eventually dribbled down onto the table. "You're not trying to tell me that you get accustomed to having your friends murdered?"

Billy looked at her with troubled eyes. "No, I didn't mean that. In fact, in some ways it gets more difficult. This isn't a business that allows for a lot of close relationships, so you

learn to value the friends you have. When someone special comes along, the last thing you want to do is let them go."

Amanda twisted her glass around and around, intent on the water rings left on the table. "It's funny. I can accept that Lee became part of my life in an instant, but I can't let him go the same way. I've got this hollow feeling inside, as if something's left unfinished, like there was supposed to be more. Everything this week just feels so wrong. Even the funeral."

A note of bitterness crept into her voice. "I can't believe his uncle didn't even come to the funeral. And there were only people from work. It shouldn't be that way. Lee spent his whole life trying to make the world a safer place for everyone else. And he ended up ..." Her voice choked off. She cleared her throat and tried again, "It just shouldn't be that way."

Billy said sympathetically. "It's rough line of work. Lee was lucky to have a friend like you."

Amanda glanced up at him again, her lips quirking into a small smile despite her low spirits. "I'm not sure he would have seen it that way." Her eyes met his across the table. "Sir, can I ask you something?"

When he nodded, she continued, "Why didn't you just let me go after that first case? Lee certainly wouldn't have made any objections, and I had no say in the matter. Why did you push him to use me on those other cases?"

He smiled at her. "You flew the helicopter."

She frowned in puzzlement. "I don't understand. What helicopter?"

"That first case you were on. The day after we arrested Mrs. Welch, Lee took you back to the Agency and you told Francine and me the whole story. You were so excited as you described rescuing Lee and getting away in the helicopter."

Amanda shrugged, not really sure where he was headed. "I was just acting out instinct - fear mostly. It's not like I had any other options. If I hadn't flown the helicopter we would have been captured. Anyone else would have done the same thing."

Billy shook his head. "You only think you had no other choice. Believe me, Amanda, most people would have collapsed in a panicked heap. You kept your head and did what needed to be done. And even when it was all over, you were still so enthusiastic about everything. I remember you said flying the 'copter was just like running your ..."

"Dishwasher," she concluded for him. "Give it a kick and it goes just fine."

He smiled broadly. "I guess I thought there were a few other things around the Agency you could kick and get going. And it turned out I was right."

"Lee being one of them."

He nodded. "Field agents have a tendency to shut other people out, and Lee was better at it than most. He refused point blank to let me assign him a new partner through conventional channels."

"So you made him work with me." She smiled at him over the rim of her glass and took a short sip. "You changed my whole life, you know."

"I know." He looked at her intently for a few moments before continuing, "Was it wrong of me? Do you wish I hadn't?"

She paused for a second. "There were times this week when I would have said yes. It just hurt so much. But no, overall it was something I needed. My own life needed a kick-start as much as Lee's. I just never thought it would end like this."

Billy sighed. "As I told you at the funeral, no one ever does. We all know the risks, but you can't dwell on them. Good field agents walk a fine line. Too much fear and they're incapacitated. Not enough and they take stupid risks."

"I'm still afraid," Amanda said softly.

He looked at her in confusion. "I don't understand," he said. "You haven't received any threats, have you?"

She shook her head. "No, nothing like that." She paused for a moment, trying to find the words to explain her jumbled emotions. "You keep saying that things are going to seem better if I give it some time."

Billy nodded. "And they will be. You have to trust me on this, Amanda, I've been through this before."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

He looked over at her, eyebrows drawn together as he tried to follow her thought process.

Amanda stumbled on. "Right now, I can remember Lee so clearly. Every memory of him is right there. When I try to sleep at night, I close my eyes and all I can think of is what happened. But after a few weeks, months, I know all of this will fade. The bad incidents, like this week, but the good ones too."

Billy nodded. "You have to live in the present. You remember the good parts, but you have to move on."

"But the thing is, when you move on, you end up losing the person. I know it's the mind's way of coping - the bad memories blurring as time passes. But it happens to the good ones too. One day I'm going to wake up and realize that the collection of memories I have of Lee have become the reality. And that's going to be the day I really lose him. I don't want that to happen." She said the last words in a whisper, looking down at her trembling hands.

Billy reached over and put one of his hands over hers. "Amanda, I'm sorry. I didn't realize how difficult all of this was for you."

"It's not as if it's your fault," she said, looking him in the eye. "Lee was your friend too; you didn't want this to happen any more than I did."

An odd expression crossed Billy's face, as if he was as going to say something but then changed his mind. Instead he glanced at his watch and quickly got up. "I really should be heading back to the Agency."

Amanda stood up, a bit puzzled at his sudden haste. "I have to go too," she said. "Mother and the boys are getting picked up in an hour and I should be there to see them off. At least I'll have the house to myself this weekend and won't have to keep pretending that everything is fine." She smiled faintly. "Last night I made meatloaf for dinner just so I could stand in my kitchen and cry while I chopped the onions."

Billy smiled back. "Believe me, Amanda, you're going to be just fine. Trust me on this one. Just promise me you'll go straight home this time."

"I will. And thank you, sir, for everything."

She hugged him briefly, then watched as he hurried out the door. She put on her coat and walked to her car. As she unlocked the door, the sun broke through the gray clouds, temporarily filling the winter afternoon with light. Amanda paused for an instant, enjoying the warmth of the sunlight against her cheeks. Billy was right. Lee might be gone, but her life was still waiting for her. Maybe she wouldn't quit the Agency after all. Maybe things would seem different after a day or two. Maybe... She got into her car, started the engine

and drove home, ready to rejoin life and whatever it might bring next.

**The End**