

The Next Step (False Start II)

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Many thanks to my beta team, especially those with a black belt in nagging (you know who you are). Without you this story not only wouldn't be the story it is, it wouldn't even be finished. And yes, Merel, I'm already working on the next installment.

This story is a bit odd for me as it's the first time I've ever written a sequel. As well, it's the sequel to a story that I had never really intended to write. The best way to explain this is to include the author's note that I posted with the original story:

Author's Note: Quite a while back a few of my beta readers and I had a discussion about Alternate Universe stories and how some people take them to mean that the characters can do and be absolutely anything the author wants. One of us remarked that this argument, taken to an extreme, could result in a story where Lee and Amanda ended up having sex the day they met. Of course, we all agreed, this is an absolutely ludicrous idea. The first day indeed! Would never work! Not on the first day! Never in a million years! No one could make that believable. But then my twisted little mind started to think ... what about the second day ...

Well, my twisted little mind did find a way to get Amanda and Lee into bed the day after they met and the result was my story "False Start". I had fun writing it and people seem to enjoy reading it - enough that some of them asked what happened next in this strange universe I had created.

You can read this new story on its own, but it will make more sense if you've read "False Start". To give you a brief synopsis of this universe, after a visit to Lee's apartment results in them consummating their physical relationship, both Lee and Amanda pull back, fearing that the other thinks of what happened as simply a one night stand. Lee takes an assignment to Germany and begins an investigation into an attempt by an East German named Curt Hollander to buy American missiles. His investigation leads him to an American businessman, James Delano. Forced to return to the States to continue his assignment, Lee finds out that Billy has hired Amanda and she now works in the Agency bullpen. Lee invites Amanda out for lunch, and they both discover how wrong their assumptions were. They decide to continue their relationship but at a much slower pace. Lee invites Amanda to a reception Delano is hosting, which brings us to ...

The Next Step

Almost twenty past. Damn. Lee Stetson frowned as he glanced at his watch. Despite his best intentions, he was late. He hastily manoeuvred his Porsche into the first available spot, not even bothering to take the time to ensure his car's safety by finding his customary two adjoining spaces.

He looked at his watch again as he hurried into the hotel and navigated the maze of corridors to the restaurant. After giving his name to the maitre d', he was informed that his table was ready and Mrs. King was waiting for him in the bar next door.

The bar was a long, narrow room, crowded with people celebrating the end of the work week. A blue fog of cigarette smoke hung heavy in the air. Lee stood in the doorway, craning his neck to see around the throng. Finally he spotted Amanda sitting at the bar, sipping a glass of white wine. She was wearing a long black dress, its low neckline accentuating the milky smoothness of her neck. As she reached up to brush a lock of hair back from her face, the material shimmered in the light. His breath caught in his throat as it occurred to him again how fortunate he was to have her there waiting for him. After all, she could very easily have decided not to see him again after his return from Europe.

Lee started to walk into the room but stopped cold after only a few steps. His frown, which had disappeared at the sight of Amanda, was soon back in evidence as he realized she seemed to be having an animated conversation with the man sitting next to her. He watched as the man gave his card to Amanda, unconsciously clenching his hands when she carefully tucked it into her purse. What the hell? This jerk had some nerve, putting the moves on his date. And what was Amanda thinking? The guy looked to be - what? - five foot six if he was lucky, and wearing a bow tie, no less. Surely Amanda wasn't interested in him. Was she?

He nervously brushed his hands over the front of his jacket and reached up to straighten his tie. As he fingered the crisp fabric, it suddenly occurred to him that he was also wearing a bow tie. But with a tuxedo, his mind argued. It was an entirely different situation altogether. That twerp at the bar was sporting an off-the-rack suit, and his tie was some sort of absurd paisley print. It was hardly the same thing.

"Lee!"

He jumped as he realized that Amanda had seen him at last. Her face immediately broke into a welcoming smile as she eased off the barstool and hurried over. He caught her hands in his and gave her a quick peck on the cheek. "Sorry I'm so late," he said, keeping his tone cool. Evidently she'd had no problem finding something to keep her busy.

"Just let me grab my purse." She turned back to her seat, seemingly oblivious to his discomfort. "Thanks, Bernie, I'll keep what you said in mind," she said to her drinking companion before turning back to Lee.

Lee was silent as they returned to the restaurant and followed the maitre d' to their table. With Herculean effort, he managed to restrain his curiosity until the sommelier had taken their order and the waiter had left them with their menus. "So, what are you going to keep in mind?" he asked, trying to keep his tone light.

"What?" Amanda looked confused as she glanced up from her menu. "Lee, what are you talking about?"

"That guy in the bar," he said. Was she trying to play dumb? Did she think he hadn't noticed? "You told him you'd keep what he said in mind."

She rolled her eyes. "Bernie's an insurance salesman. He was trying to sell me a new policy for the station wagon."

"I'll bet that wasn't all he was trying to sell you." He scowled at the list of appetizers. Why did they need to have so many choices, anyway? "What's so funny?" he asked, looking back up at her.

"You," she replied. "I never figured you for the jealous type."

"I'm not jealous," he tried to protest. "Okay, maybe a little." When she continued to smile at him with a knowing gleam in her eyes, he acquiesced. "Okay, maybe more than a little."

Amanda reached over and patted his hand. "Lee, in case you haven't noticed, I'm here with you. But if you really think that guy was interested, maybe I should go back to the bar and give him another chance."

She half rose from her seat before he caught her hand in his. "What, and leave me without a partner for the reception tonight? We're supposed to be working, remember?"

"Hmm ... I'd forgotten about that. Okay, I guess I've got no choice then." She let out an exaggerated sigh, sat down and smiled over at him.

"I'm sorry," he said, keeping hold of her hand. "I just find it hard to believe that every man in the room doesn't want to be with you. Especially when you look so beautiful." He brought her fingers up to his lips for a quick kiss.

"With an apology like that, you are more than forgiven." Amanda let her fingertips graze his cheek. He breathed in her subtle floral perfume and marvelled at the delicate touch of her fingertips. Much too soon, she pulled back her hand.

"You're looking very handsome, too," she said, tilting her head slightly as she studied him appraisingly. "There's just something about a man in a tuxedo."

"Thanks. I want to apologize, too, for being so late. Harry Singer, my contact, called just as I was heading out the door," Lee explained.

"That's okay. After all, I was the one who suggested I take a taxi here, instead of having you pick me up at the house. I just don't think the boys are ready yet to meet someone new. I felt so bad having to tell them that Dean wouldn't be coming around anymore. Although I think my mother took it the worst of all."

"Well, Dean's loss is definitely my gain." His eyes met hers and held her gaze.

The sommelier arrived with their wine, surveyed the situation, then quickly filled their glasses and left them alone again.

Lee picked up his glass and raised it in a toast. "To Dean's loss."

"And Bernie's gain." Amanda's eyes twinkled at him as she raised hers.

"Amanda, stop that. I said I was sorry." He tried to keep a straight face but failed.

"It wasn't a very cheerful atmosphere around the house tonight, anyway. Phillip and Jamie's Little League team was beaten 21 to 0 this afternoon."

"Ouch." Lee winced. "That's not exactly a close game."

Amanda shook her head. "I think the fact that the other team had two girls made it even worse in their eyes."

"Well, they might as well learn now - women will always be one step ahead." Lee smiled.

"Listen, we'd better hurry up and choose something for dinner, or we'll never make it to the reception on time."

She glanced up to find their waiter hovering discreetly a short distance away. After a final scan of the menu, she hurriedly made her selections.

As they waited for their food to arrive, Lee said, "I'm sorry; I don't mean to be rushing you." He ran his hand through his hair and smiled contritely. "I seem to be apologizing to you a lot this evening. Maybe a working date wasn't such a good idea. At least not for our first 'real' date."

Amanda smiled back. "I know. It's so exciting, going on my first stakeout."

"Technically, it's a meet," he corrected her.

"Purist," she shot back. "Fine, it's a meet. But I'd also love to just spend the evening with you. We hardly got to see each other at work this week. It's just Mr. Melrose needed all those tapes transcribed as soon as possible."

"And I was checking into this whole Delano East German mess." Lee reached over and took her hand again. "Okay, so we agree, our next date will be purely a social occasion."

"Agreed."

"How about tomorrow night?" he asked quickly.

She laughed. "Not wasting any time, are you? I'll see if Mother can take care of Phillip and Jamie again."

"It must be a big help, having her live with you. It can't be easy raising two children on your own."

"No, but they're great boys. Definitely the best thing that came out of my marriage."

"What about your ex-husband?" he asked, trying to keep his tone light as he let go of her hand and fiddled with his silverware. "Does he spend a lot of time with them?"

She shook her head. "Joe lives out of the country. They're lucky to see him more than once a year." She paused, then asked, "Lee?"

He looked up. "Yes?"

"Isn't all of this in my file at the Agency?"

He shrugged. "I'm sure it is."

"And you expect me to believe that you haven't read any of this?" Her eyes twinkled at him in amusement as she continued, "You didn't even take a peek at the background check the Agency ran on me after you gave me that package?"

He met her gaze straight on. After all, he'd sailed through countless interrogations with enemy agents; surely he could fool Amanda. "Of course not," he said.

"Because it really wouldn't be fair if you had," she replied. "I mean, considering that I don't have clearance for those types of files about you." He continued to look at her as if he had nothing to hide. "So I guess I'll just have to keep using the office grapevine for my source of information. You'd be surprised at how often your name has come up."

"Amanda, that's just office gossip. You don't think ..." he started to protest.

"Lee, if I believed everything I'd heard, I wouldn't be here with you now." She shook out her napkin, then draped it across her lap again. "Why don't you tell me something about yourself I wouldn't have heard at the Agency?"

He reflected for a few minutes. "I was almost court-martialled when I was eight," he finally offered.

"What?"

"My friend Alex and I thought it was time we learned how to drive. So we borrowed a Jeep, managed to get it started, and drove it straight into a swamp. My uncle nearly had a coronary. I had KP duty for three solid months."

Amanda laughed. "Promise me you won't tell Jamie and Phillip that story. The last thing I need is for them to take the station wagon out for a spin." She ran a fingertip along the rim of her wineglass. "So, were you visiting your uncle on his base?"

His expression clouded. "No, I lived with him." Glancing first at his watch, then around the restaurant, he said abruptly, "I wonder what's keeping our dinners. We need to be at the reception no later than 9:30."

Amanda took the not too subtle hint, apparently realizing that there were large areas of his life that were still off limits. Following his lead, she asked, "So, what am I supposed to do once we get there?"

"Not all that much," Lee said, relieved to be back on comfortable footing again. "Harry sounded pretty nervous on the phone. I don't want to spook him, so it's probably best if I meet with him alone. Basically you should just mingle, keep your ears open. Delano's company is in a lot of red ink; who knows what he's trying to pull with the East Germans."

"My sons are going to be so disappointed if Quickie Chickie Snack Shacks end up closing," Amanda said. "They have the best French fries. Not to mention the only coleslaw that isn't made with that scary green dye."

"I'll keep that in mind," Lee answered. "But I don't think coleslaw is our top priority at the moment. We did manage to get someone on the inside as part of the grounds crew on Delano's estate. He missed his check-ins last night and today, though."

"What do you think happened?" Amanda asked in concern.

"No idea." He picked up his glass and took a sip of wine. "He could be in trouble, or it could be that he just can't get away. I'm hoping Harry can fill in some of the blanks." He reached into his jacket pocket and extracted a couple of pictures. Handing them over to Amanda, he explained, "The top one is of James Delano."

Amanda studied the snapshot. "You know, he's really rather handsome."

"You think so?" Lee quickly took the picture back, his eyebrows drawing together as he scrutinized it.

Amanda laughed again. "Stetson, you are way too easy. Now, who's the man in this other picture?"

"Curt Hollander. Flew in from East Germany earlier this week. He's no one to mess around with, so if he's there tonight, you be sure to stay out of his way." He pinned her with a frank stare. "This reception is supposed to be light surveillance, but you never know what might happen."

"No problem. I'll just blend into the woodwork."

"I'm not sure that's possible." He reached out and slowly trailed his fingers over the back of her hand. Amanda drew back as their waiter announced the arrival of their dinners with a discreet cough.

The reception was in full swing by the time Lee and Amanda arrived. The mood was festive, the dance floor crowded, the champagne flowing freely. Lee kept one hand loosely around Amanda's waist as they navigated their way through the throng.

"At least this time I'm not the only one out of costume," she murmured as a waitress walked by, dressed in a chicken outfit. "I'm glad I didn't wear a yellow dress tonight. It could have been rather embarrassing."

He laughed. "If I'd known about the costumes, I would have arranged for you to work the party undercover. You'd make a cute chicken." He slipped his hand into hers as he continued to scan the crowd of people attending the reception.

"So, are we allowed to dance while you look for your contact? I do a pretty mean cha-cha."

Lee gently squeezed her fingers as he smiled into her eyes. "Normally, there's nothing I'd like better. Unfortunately, I have to head to the men's room. Harry said if he couldn't find me in the main ballroom, he'd be there around 10:15. I'll be back as soon as I can, but this may take a while."

"Be careful," Amanda whispered, giving him a quick kiss on the cheek. She watched as he walked away and quickly disappeared into the crowd. With a small sigh, she headed over to the bar and ordered a drink. At least if she had a glass in her hand, she wouldn't feel so conspicuous waiting there all alone.

She recognized James Delano standing at the front of the room. He was holding a microphone as he waited for the band to finish their song. She observed him closely for a few moments - he really was handsome; that surveillance picture didn't do him justice. Apparently looks were deceiving in his case, since Lee had intimated that Delano was deeply involved with the East Germans. She wondered what could drive a person to turn against his country like that. Maybe it wasn't as bad as it looked. Maybe ...

With a start, she realized that Delano was looking right at her. Oh my gosh, now she'd done it. Spies were supposed to be discreet, and he'd caught her staring right at him. She turned back to the bar and took a quick sip of her drink. Only after the music ended and Delano addressed the gathering did she dare turn around again.

The crowd responded enthusiastically to his announcement about the expansion of Quickie Chickie Snack Shacks into the East German market. Amanda wondered exactly how he'd managed to arrange the deal. A fast food company in a communist country? They certainly wouldn't have much competition. A settlement like that would be worth a great deal of money.

She hoped it was only her imagination, but she thought Delano glanced in her direction several times during his speech. As soon as it was over, she turned her back to the room again and stood at the bar, pretending to be absorbed in her drink. Perhaps she should head out onto the terrace and try to inconspicuously listen in on a few conversations. Or she could check if Lee needed her. No, he had said he was meeting Harry in the men's room. She'd hardly be inconspicuous in there.

"Excuse me, is this place taken?"

She jumped as someone came up beside her. With a start, she realized it was James Delano. "I was just wondering why such a lovely lady was standing here looking so ... abandoned," he asked, leaning against the bar and smiling at her.

"I ... um ... I'm actually only temporarily abandoned," she said. "I'm with someone."

He smiled at her again, a wonderfully warm smile that made her wonder once more how this man could possibly be involved in anything illegal. "If I were that someone, I wouldn't leave you alone for a minute," he said in a velvety tone. "I'm James Delano," he introduced himself and held out his hand.

"Yes, I know," she replied, putting her hand in his for a moment.

He looked amused. "And you are ..."

"Me?" she croaked, suddenly feeling caught out. What should she do? This was her first field assignment and she hadn't a clue what the standard procedure was. Should she refuse to give him a name? No, that would be way too suspicious.

"You do have a name, don't you?"

"Yes, of course," she bantered, trying to buy some time. Should she tell him her real name? If only Lee would reappear right about now. She peered over Delano's shoulder, seeking in vain for her date.

"And it would be ..." Somehow he seemed to have taken possession of her hand again.

"Um ... I'm ..." Amanda frantically tried to come up with a name to give him. "I'm ... I'm Victoria Greenwich."

"Well, it's lovely to meet you, Victoria." He kept her hand in his as he stepped away from the bar. "Would you care to dance?"

"Dance?" she echoed. Would it be better if she accepted or not? Well, she couldn't find a much better vantage point for keeping an eye on him than if she was right beside him on the dance floor. "That would be nice," she finally replied, allowing him to lead her out into the middle of the room.

Lee gave Harry a few minutes head start, then followed him out of the men's room. His expression was grim as he thought back over the information his contact had provided. This assignment was starting to get dangerous. Haunai Saito's cover as a gardener was almost certainly blown, and if he wasn't dead already, he soon would be.

And if people were starting to get killed, it was time to get Amanda out of there. She'd only been working at the Agency for a little over a month and had no field experience. They'd have to find some other way to get someone on the inside. Maybe Harry could help set up something.

Lee walked back into the ballroom and searched the bar area for his date but Amanda was nowhere to be found. He quickly walked around the periphery of the room, checking each small group of people. Where could she be? Surely nothing could have happened to her in such a public place. He glanced out on the dance floor and stopped in his tracks. There she was, in James Delano's arms, the two of them swaying in time to the music. Amanda was glancing down and seemed to be a bit nervous. Delano said something to her, and she smiled shyly and looked up at him. Damn! She probably had no idea how devastating she looked when she did that.

Lee quickly turned to the closest group of people. A rather large matronly woman wearing a dress that resembled nothing so much as a pair of drapes was standing a bit to the side. He scanned the area, but there was no other unattached woman close by.

Walking up to her, he asked, "Excuse me, would you care to dance?"

"With you? Honey, it would be my pleasure." Her eyes lit up as she raked them over him from head to toe.

"I'm Phoebe Hanstable," she introduced herself as they moved out onto the dance floor. She hurriedly put her arms around him, her large handbag swinging around and catching him in the middle of his back.

"Lee Stedman."

"Well, Lee, honey, you're a sight for sore eyes. I thought this entire evening was going to be a complete washout." She licked her raspberry-hued lips and smiled broadly.

As she pulled him even closer, Lee found himself overwhelmed by a cloud of perfume. His eyes began to water, and his nose twitched as he fought back a sneeze. It occurred to him that he should ask her for the name of her scent; the Agency could use it as a substitute for tear gas.

"Lee, honey, are you okay?" Phoebe asked anxiously, catching sight of his face.

"I'm fine," he choked out. "I'm just ... ah ... ah ... achool!"

"Bless you!" she said. Looking up into his eyes, she cooed, "You know, you really are a wonderful dancer."

"Thanks," he replied, suppressing another sneeze. His discomfort was instantly forgotten as he saw Amanda and her partner only a few yards away. Carefully, he manoeuvred Phoebe closer, trying to narrow the gap between them and the other couple without it appearing that he was doing so.

As they moved in, he overheard Delano saying to Amanda in a low voice, "Has anyone ever told you how beautiful your eyes are?"

Anxious to hear Amanda's reply, Lee swung Phoebe around in an awkward attempt to get even closer. Her foot came down solidly on his instep, and he yelped involuntarily.

"I'm sorry, sugar, did I step on your foot? Are you okay?" Phoebe asked anxiously.

"I'm fine," Lee gritted out, watching Delano leading Amanda away.

He just managed to make out the other man's words, "Why don't we get a drink, Victoria? The dance floor seems to be a bit crowded at the moment."

Victoria? Who the hell was Victoria?

"Victoria Greenwich," Amanda explained as they drove out of the parking garage. "She's the heroine of a romance novel I'm reading. It's set during the War of the Roses and she's a noblewoman living on this large estate in England and her husband is awaiting execution in the Tower of London and ..." Catching sight of Lee's incredulous look, she let her words trail off. After a few moments she continued, "Look, I panicked, okay? He came up to me and asked me my name. I didn't know what to tell him."

"What else did he say? Did he mention the deal with the East Germans?"

Amanda shook her head. "He only said that tonight was a turning point for his company. We really didn't talk much about business."

"I see," Lee said crisply.

They drove on through the darkened streets of Arlington, both of them absorbed in their own thoughts. As they got closer to her house, Amanda added, "He, uh, he did ask me for my number."

Lee glanced at her with an expression she couldn't decipher. "So, what did you do?" he finally asked.

"I made one up. 555-4247. I mean, I couldn't exactly give him my home number, could I?"

"No, I guess not." Lee seemed particularly intent on checking the traffic on the cross street before making a right hand turn onto Maplewood Drive.

"Lee, I didn't mess things up, did I?" Amanda asked anxiously. "I was just standing there, minding my own business, when he came up to me."

"Amanda, relax, it's okay. You did fine. I just didn't expect anything like this to happen tonight. Listen, I know tomorrow's Saturday, but would you mind coming into the office? I'd like Billy to hear about this too."

"But what if he tries to call me?" she persisted.

"Well, I can arrange to have that number ring one of the IFF lines. If you're not in, the operator can pretend to be your social secretary. But I wouldn't worry about it." Lee gave a short laugh. "I mean, he's used to meeting women at these kinds of things all the time. He probably won't even remember you, and you can forget all about this."

"Oh," she said shortly as they pulled up in front of her house.

"Look, don't take it personally. This guy runs in a different kind of crowd, that's all. He's used to meeting beautiful, exotic women," he said in a rush. "Women who you read about on the society page. Women who travel all over the world. Women who ..."

"... women who aren't anything like me." Even in the dim light of the street lamps, he could see a spark flash in her eyes.

"No, I mean, he's used to wealthy, sophisticated women who ..." He let his words trail off. "Amanda, you know what I mean."

"Maybe I should go in before you dig yourself any deeper into this hole." She looked at him with a level gaze. "I did have a wonderful time at supper. You remember, back when you were saying that you thought every man in the room wanted to be with me. No, I'll see myself in." She put out her hand as he reached for the door handle.

Lee smacked the steering wheel in frustration as he watched Amanda get out of the car, quickly stride down her walkway and disappear into her house. Damn it! This wasn't the way the evening was supposed to end at all.

The next morning, Amanda arrived at work promptly at 9 o'clock. As she entered the bullpen, she caught sight of Lee and Mr. Melrose deep in conversation in the latter's office. She watched them through the open blinds as she sat down at her desk and put away her purse. They seemed to be arguing.

She was so absorbed in observing them that the sound of the phone ringing caught her off guard. She jumped, then quickly reached down and picked it up.

"Hello," she answered.

"Is this Victoria Greenwich?" a familiar man's voice asked.

"Yes, this is she." In spite of herself, a smile crept across her face.

"The beautiful Victoria Greenwich who made such an impression on me last night at the party?" he continued.

She shot a glance in Lee's direction. So much for Delano not remembering her. "Well, I ... yes," she answered.

"The Victoria Greenwich who is going to have dinner with me tonight?"

"Oh," she said in surprise.

"I know this is short notice," Delano said in a persuasive tone, "but I really would love to see you again."

"Can I call you back in half an hour?" Amanda asked. "I need to see if I can rearrange my social calendar."

"Of course," he said graciously. "I'll be anxiously awaiting your call."

She jotted down his number and stared at it as she hung up the phone.

"There has got to be another way."

"Well, if you come up with something else, let me know." Billy sat down at his desk and opened a file folder. "In the meantime, we're going to use Amanda."

"She's got no training in this sort of thing," Lee continued to protest. "I just don't think this is going to work."

"She doesn't need training. Delano takes her out for dinner, she keeps him occupied for a few hours, and we sweep his house. We'll put a wire on her, so we'll know where he is the entire time. It's simple."

"Simple. Right." Lee paced the length of Billy's office, distractedly running his hand through his hair. "So, what if he doesn't call her, huh? Then this whole thing's a moot point, right?" he asked hopefully.

"You did say that Delano seemed quite taken with her," his section chief mused. "We could arrange for her to bump into him again."

"What?" Lee asked incredulously. "Look, even if she does, we can't force the guy to ask her out. I still think we have to come up with an alternative."

At the sound of a knock on the door, they both turned. Lee opened it to find Amanda standing there.

"Good morning, sir, Lee," she greeted them in turn as she walked into the office. "I'm not interrupting anything, am I?" she asked.

"Not at all, Amanda," Billy replied with a smile. "In fact we were just talking about you. You did some fine work last night."

"Thank you, sir." She sat down, shooting a quick glance at Lee, who remained silent. "I just went with my instincts."

"We were discussing what to do when Delano calls you," Billy continued.

"If he calls you," Lee broke in smoothly, laying particular emphasis on the first word.

"Fine," Billy acquiesced with a roll of his eyes. Lee folded his arms across his chest and propped himself against the doorframe. "Okay, Amanda, IF he calls, would you mind going out with him? Maybe you could give him a hint, mention a restaurant you've been wanting to go to. We need to get inside his house, make a quick sweep, and see if we can figure out what exactly is going on."

Lee broke in, "We need to have a back-up plan, though. That is, if he doesn't call you within the next few days. Don't worry about it though; it's no big deal. I mean he's a busy man, he _"

"... called me ten minutes ago," she segued, looking back to see his reaction.

"What?" Lee asked incredulously, pushing himself off the doorjamb and straightening up.

Billy shook his head. "Doesn't surprise me a bit. So, what did you tell him?"

She tried to keep even a trace of smugness out of her voice as she answered. "He's waiting for me to call him back and let him know if I'll have dinner with him tonight."

"Tonight?" Lee's powers of speech seemed to have shrunk to single word sentences.

"Is that enough time for you to set things up?" Amanda turned back to Billy. "I could tell him another night would be better."

"No, we should be able to manage. But we'll have to get busy with a scenario team. Lee, can you take Amanda down to level six and put things in motion?"

"Sure," he said, not looking at all happy as he held the door open for Amanda and followed her out.

"Amanda? Are you ready?"

"Just give me another couple of minutes, Lee," Amanda called from the dressing room adjoining 'her' bedroom. She stood there clad in slip and stockings, wondering for the tenth time in as many minutes if she had picked the right outfit for the evening.

"Fine," Lee replied. "I've brought you your jewellery for tonight, including a brooch complete with microphone."

"I can't believe how quickly you managed to arrange all of this." She continued the conversation through the closed door.

"It's not like we haven't done this sort of thing before. Besides, we've been compiling data on Delano ever since we realized he was involved with the East Germans." He cleared his throat and hesitantly plunged on, apparently finding it easier to say the words when she wasn't in the room. "Amanda, about what I said last night and this morning ... about Delano not calling you again ..."

"Yes?" Her voice sounded a bit muffled as she slipped the ruffled blouse over her head. Maybe she should have waited to put her hair up until after she had dressed.

"I didn't mean it the way it sounded. I guess I was caught off guard by this whole thing. I didn't realize that ... I never thought that ... Look, are you sure you really want to get involved in all this? Being out in the field is a very different thing than working at your desk in the bullpen."

"Lee, I'm aware of that. And I know I haven't had any training or experience. But Mr. Melrose wouldn't have asked me to do this if he didn't think I could handle it." She eased into the floor-length skirt and adjusted its folds around herself.

"I have no doubt you can. It's just ..."

"It's just what?" she asked, opening the door.

He looked up as she entered the room, at first just a quick glance, then a prolonged scrutiny.

"What?" she asked self consciously, looking down quickly. "Is there something wrong? Do I look all right?"

"You look spectacular," he said in an awed tone.

Amanda could feel the colour rise in her cheeks. "It's the outfit. I feel like I'm ten years old and playing dress-up again. Only with much nicer clothes." She ran a hand over her blouse, smoothing the ruffled fabric over the skirt. "Anyone can look good if they have enough money. I would never be able to afford a quarter of the dresses in this closet."

Lee got up and walked over to her. "No, it's not the clothes. It's you."

"Thank you." She reached out and took his hand in one of hers. "Now, what were you going to say?" she prompted him. "It's just what?"

"It's just I feel responsible for getting you into all of this." He looked down at their hands, absently running his thumb over the back of her fingers. "First giving you the package at the train station and now dragging you to that reception. I wouldn't want to see anything happen to you. This ..." he looked at her again, using his free hand to make a sweeping gesture, "might all seem like a game, but it's very real, Amanda. The stakes could get very high."

"I know, and I appreciate your concern. But Lee, this is something I want to do." She tightened her fingers around his for a moment and spoke with quiet resolution. "I'm not doing this because of you. I'm doing this because I want to."

Letting go of his hand, she sat down at the dressing table and began to tuck in wayward strands of hair. "I'm just worried that I'll make a mistake. There are so many details to

keep straight. All that travel and houses and consulates all over the world. It's like being someone in a fantasy you have when you're a kid."

"Well, you know what happens to some of those fantasies, don't you? You grow up and you find out how lousy things really are." Lee sat down on the bed again, picked up the brooch and began to make adjustments. He frowned as he worked the tiny microphone into place.

"I know. It's just I've never been anyone like Victoria before. She's led such a fascinating life, no wonder Delano wants to go out with her."

Lee glanced up and their eyes met in the mirror over her dressing table. "He can have Victoria Greenwich," he said. "It's Amanda King I'm interested in."

She smiled as she clipped her earrings in place. The heavy golden drops brushed against her cheeks as she reached down and lifted the matching necklace from its box.

"Here, let me," Lee offered, getting up and walking over to her. He set the brooch on the table and took the ends of the necklace from her. The pendant dangled in front of her face as he brought the strands together at the back.

His fingers grazed against the nape of her neck as he struggled with the tiny clasp, finally getting it to fasten. "There," he said, again meeting her gaze in the mirror. "It's perfect."

"Thank you."

Instead of moving away, he slid his fingers along the back of her neck, rubbing gently as he traced patterns against her skin.

"Mmmm ... that feels nice," she sighed.

"I was hoping for a little more enthusiastic response than 'nice'," he murmured.

Tiny prickles of electricity ran up and down her spine as his fingertips slowly caressed her. With a subtle increase in pressure, he began to massage the base of her neck with his thumbs. Amanda closed her eyes and sighed again, basking in his touch. His hands were warm against her skin, the movements of his fingers strong and deliberate. She could feel her body tremble as sensations and images from the night in his apartment came rushing back.

Lee leaned down and brushed his lips against her skin. He gently nuzzled her hair, displacing the tiny curls that had escaped the pins. His hands slowly moved over her shoulders, his fingers slipping beneath the collar of her blouse.

"You know, I used to have fantasies about secret agents," she confessed.

"Really?" he asked, his voice little more than a sigh, his breath tickling the hairs at the base of her neck. "Care to share any details?" He laughed, a low throaty sound that made her pulse jump. He pressed against her once more, his lips seeking her skin to plant another soft kiss.

His next words were a bare hint of breath in her ear. "You know, this exact neck rub once caused a member of a certain royal family to make me a rather indiscreet offer."

Involuntarily, her eyes flew open at his words, and her body tensed. Lee drew back a step as she quickly swivelled in the chair to face him.

"Amanda, what's wrong?" he asked, clearly puzzled.

"You've actually dated royalty," she said slowly. "Sometimes I forget just how different our lives really are."

"Would it help if I told you it was a small country?" he offered with a smile.

She refused to be sidetracked by his attempt at humour. "Lee, I'm serious. It's not like you've ever had fantasies about suburban moms, have you?" she asked quietly as if daring him to contradict her.

"Amanda, why is that important?" She just sat there looking intently at him until he shook his head, finally conceding, "No, I can't say that I ever did."

She twisted her hands in her lap nervously. "I didn't think so."

He knelt beside her, reaching out to cover her hands with his. "Amanda," he said quietly. He tightened his fingers around hers until she finally looked up and met his eyes.

"You're right. I haven't had fantasies about suburban moms." Slowly reaching up with one hand, he cupped her face. "Until recently, that is. And I had no idea what I was missing," he murmured, brushing his lips against hers, tantalizing her with his touch.

Amanda leaned in ever so slightly, just enough to close the minuscule gap between them. She marvelled again at the feel of his mouth against hers, soft yet possessive, seeking, yet moving with a sense of certainty. She pushed back against him, crushing her lips against his, wanting to let him know that she returned a hundredfold the desire she'd seen in his eyes.

Lee slowly stood up, pulling Amanda to her feet. His hands moved from her face to her shoulders then slipped around her back as he drew her even closer to him. She could feel the heat rising from his body through the thin fabric of his shirt as she slipped her hands beneath his jacket. Her actions mirrored his as she ran her fingers down his spine, gently pulling his body towards her.

"Mr. Stetson. Are you in there?"

A knock at the door, as abrupt as a gunshot, caused them to jump away from each other.

"Um ... yes, I'm here," Lee replied, smoothing down his jacket. "I was helping Mrs. King with her wire."

"Well, they called from the surveillance team outside Delano's estate." Amanda recognized the voice of the agent who was posing as her maid. "His limo left a few minutes ago, so he should be here shortly."

"Fine, thanks, we'll, uh, be down in a few minutes."

They stood, silently looking at each other, until her footsteps receded down the hall.

"You know, we really should get that wire on you." Lee gestured towards the brooch still lying on the dressing table.

Amanda quickly fixed a few errant strands of hair. "Yes, I can't exactly go on this date without it," she replied.

"Okay, so here's how you need to pin it ..."

"Victoria Greenwich, where have you been all my life?"

"Which life?"

The sound of James Delano and his date laughing together reverberated through the back of the surveillance van.

"Sounds like they're really hitting it off," Stephan Chaison observed, adjusting the volume level slightly.

Lee scowled at his fellow agent, then at the tape recorder, as if he'd like to wrench the slowly revolving tape from the cylinders and forcibly remove the offending words.

He didn't know what irritated him more - the fact that Delano was so obviously making a play for Amanda, or that she was doing such a good job of pretending she was actually interested in him. If Lee had been the one sitting there enjoying after-dinner coffee with her, he wouldn't have had a clue that she'd been kissing another man only a few short hours before. He had to admit that Billy was right; Amanda was more than up for this challenge.

But did Amanda have to throw herself into the assignment so enthusiastically? After all, she only had to keep Delano distracted for a few hours while a team checked his house. There was no need for her to convince the guy that he had any hope of seeing her again. He

certainly wouldn't, if Lee had any control over the situation. Viciously biting off another chunk of his sandwich, Lee swallowed it in one gulp.

Delano's voice came through the speaker again, distracting Lee from an appealing daydream in which he had the pleasure of turning the unscrupulous businessman over to the authorities. Maybe Delano would put up a fight and he'd get the additional satisfaction of punching out the guy.

"That's a lovely brooch."

"Thank you."

"May I see it?"

Lee's scowl deepened. He knew exactly where Amanda had the brooch pinned and what part of her anatomy Delano was eyeing at that very moment. If he tried to put one hand on her, Lee would be more than slightly tempted to make his imaginings a reality.

Bang! The noise echoed through the van, sounding for all intents and purposes like a gunshot.

"What was that?" Lee asked quickly.

"I'm not sure, but I think she dropped it on the table," Stephan supplied.

His theory was confirmed when they heard a quick apology from Delano and Amanda excusing herself. A moment later her voice came through loud and clear. "To the ladies room, fast," she instructed.

Immediately Lee got up and reached for the door handle.

"No, no, you go," Stephan observed dryly. "No, really, I insist."

Lee shot a glare at his fellow agent, then quickly made his way into the restaurant. As he walked through the foyer, he couldn't help but glance into the dining room. He watched as Delano signalled to the waiter for his bill, then took a sip of his coffee with what Lee felt was an overly smug look on his face. A look that clearly said, "Things are certainly going my way, and the evening's not over yet."

Lee could feel his anger start to build again and unconsciously formed his left hand into a fist. How he'd love to walk in there and wipe that complacent, self-satisfied look off the guy's face. Instead he turned and headed down the hallway to the rest rooms. Luckily, no one else was around to see him enter the ladies room.

"Okay, what happened?" he asked as soon as he was inside.

"What do you mean, 'what happened?'" Amanda replied. "The microphone nearly fell out right in front of him."

Lee caught the brooch in mid air as she flipped it to him. "Who told you to drop it?"

"I didn't drop it," she protested, crossing her arms. "He tried to look at it and it fell on the table." She seemed puzzled by his attitude. "Lee, is everything okay?"

"Well, you could spend more time concentrating on what you're supposed to be doing. We went through a lot of trouble to set up your cover."

"I really am trying. You don't think he's getting suspicious, do you?" she asked anxiously. "I tried to keep everything straight, but he kept asking me all sorts of questions, and it made me nervous."

"Then maybe you should pay more attention to your answers and less to him." Lee knew he was being more than a little harsh, but after three hours of listening to Delano flirting with her, his patience was in short supply. "You got the locations of the townhouse, consulate and boathouse all mixed up."

"I did?" she squeaked out. "Lee, maybe he suspects something. Maybe he was looking for a bug when he asked to see the brooch."

"Trust me, Amanda, he wasn't looking for a bug. I'm pretty sure his mind was somewhere else entirely. You could have the Agency's phone number and address tattooed on your forehead, and I don't think he'd notice."

She opened her purse, took out a compact and began touching up her makeup. "This all feels so strange. I don't like playing with people's emotions. I'm sure to someone like you, this type of thing is just another typical assignment, but to me, it feels wrong."

"Amanda, it's okay." Lee began examining the brooch, relieved that she understood how he felt. "I'm not saying I want to spend every Saturday night doing this, but ..."

"I mean, he thinks this actually is a dinner date," she continued. "He has no idea he's being investigated."

"Wait a minute. You're worried about HIS feelings?" He turned to look at her in disbelief. "Amanda, the man is under suspicion for a reason." He turned back to his examination of the microphone, carefully avoiding eye contact with her as he asked, "Listen, you're not buying his line are you?"

"What are you talking about? Of course not. I'm just doing my job. I can't help it if I feel sorry for him. Jim seems like a very nice and sincere person, and I feel kind of guilty spying on him."

"Jim??" Lee echoed incredulously. His hand shook slightly as he tried to fit the microphone back into place. "Do you have any idea how many other women 'Jim' has been sincere with?"

"And how exactly is that relevant?" Amanda asked, eyebrows raised.

"Dozens," Lee replied, ignoring her question. "You're just supposed to be keeping him away from his house for a few hours, not flirting with him."

"I was not flirting." She shoved her compact back into her purse and turned to face him, a look of indignation on her face. "I was simply making conversation."

"Didn't sound like that to me." He finally managed to wedge the device back into place and shut the cover over it. "Here, it's fixed." Lee thrust the piece of jewellery back into her hands.

She reached out and closed her hand firmly over the brooch. Lowering her voice, she asked, "So, what, just because I'm going out with you, I'm not supposed to talk to anyone else? This is work, remember?"

"Believe me, this guy isn't interested in talking. Now remember what I said about the dress rustle."

"I remember. You explained it three times," Amanda said icily, before carefully pinning the brooch back into place. "Look, he's going to be wondering what's keeping me. I've got to get back in there." She turned and headed for the door.

"Amanda, I'm just saying James Delano is no one to get involved with. So stop encouraging him." He crossed his arms and leaned against the sink.

She turned back with a sigh. "For the last time, I am not encouraging him. I was only making polite conversation while we had dinner."

"If a man finds a woman attractive, that's more than enough encouragement," Lee persisted stubbornly. "In fact, that's an open invitation."

"Lee, I really think you're wrong about Jim. I don't know how he got involved in this mess, but I'm sure he regrets it now. Sometimes people get caught up in circumstances beyond their control. It's not a crime for me to feel some sympathy for him." She turned to head back to the restaurant.

"Trust me, Amanda, the last thing this guy is interested in is sympathy," he called after her.

"Well, you certainly would know, wouldn't you?" she retaliated, turning back once more. Lee was pettily satisfied to see that he had goaded her into losing her temper at last.

Carried away with his own anger, he blurted out, "Let's just hope his limousine doesn't collide with a fire hydrant on your way home, or he may find out exactly how sympathetic you can be."

He wished that somehow he could have bitten back the words even before he finished saying them. The expression on Amanda's face wouldn't have been more shocked if he had slapped her.

"What did you say?" she asked incredulously.

"Amanda, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean that," Lee stammered, unable to believe his own words. He reached out and put his hand on her arm.

"Well, you said it, didn't you?" Amanda replied, pulling her arm away as if his touch burned. Turning on her heel, she left the room without a backward glance.

Lee stood there for a few minutes, stunned. How could he have said that to her? He had to go after her and make her understand that he hadn't meant it at all, that it was just the result of his frustration and jealousy. Not to mention monumental stupidity. He opened the door and hurried into the hallway, only to collide with another patron of the restaurant.

Over her shoulder he could see Delano and Amanda in the restaurant's foyer. Lee watched as Delano helped her with her wrap, then held the door open for her.

He stood back for a few minutes, not wanting the couple to catch sight of him. Of course, by the time he made it outside, the surveillance van was disappearing down the street, needing to keep within transmitter range of Amanda's microphone. He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. It was just that kind of night.

A short taxi ride later, he managed to catch up with his fellow agent.

"Don't even start." Lee held up his hand to ward off Stephan's comments. "What's Amanda's status?"

"Delano dropped her off at the townhouse about five minutes ago."

"Everything go okay?" He tried to keep his tone nonchalant.

"No problems." The other agent removed the spool of tape from the machine and carefully labelled it.

"And Delano? Did he, uh, did they?" Lee paused. How on earth could he phrase what he wanted to know?

"Just a handshake at the door." Stephan grinned at him. "Although he did ask her to a dinner party at his house next weekend."

"And?"

"She's thinking about it. Look, I'm about to head back to the Agency to hand the tapes in. I could have them make you a copy for your personal collection," he offered with a laugh.

"No, thanks," Lee scowled, opening the door and getting out of the van. "I think I'll check and see how Amanda's doing. Do me a favour and tell Billy I'll be there in a while."

Slowly he walked the two blocks to the townhouse on N Street, wanting to see Amanda again, but not knowing exactly what he was going to say to her. Assuming she even wanted to see him, that is.

He got his answer as he approached the house. Amanda was hurrying down the steps, already dressed in her regular clothes. She got into her station wagon and quickly drove off. He stood there in silent frustration, watching her taillights disappear in the distance.

It hit him suddenly how little the two of them actually knew about each other. After all, they'd only known each other a few days before he'd hurried off to Europe. And now it was less than two weeks after his return.

So, had he irretrievably shattered their relationship? Would he always see the shadow of his mistake in Amanda's eyes, or would she eventually be able to forgive and forget?

"Mrs. King, could I see you in my office for a few minutes?"

Amanda was straightening up her desk Monday afternoon prior to going home when Mr. Melrose called to her from the door of his office. As she crossed the bullpen, she glanced over at Lee's empty desk. There had been no sign of him all day. She wondered if it was Agency business that had kept him occupied elsewhere or if he didn't want to see her. Maybe avoidance was his standard tactic for dealing with personal issues. After all, he'd gone all the way to Germany after their last misunderstanding. She just hoped he hadn't run quite so far this time.

Billy was sitting at his desk when she entered his office. He gestured towards one of the chairs and waited for her to sit down before saying, "Amanda, I'd like to bring you up to date on the Delano situation."

"Yes, sir," she replied, nervously crossing her legs.

"I had hoped that the other night was going to be the extent of your involvement," he held up his hand and smiled, "not that you haven't done excellent work."

"Thank you, sir."

"Lee was supposed to meet with his contact this afternoon and get a copy of the guest list for the party this Saturday night. However, things weren't quite that simple."

Amanda felt a flutter of panic in her stomach, and her breath caught in her throat. Had something happened to Lee? Was that the reason she hadn't seen him all day? "Sir, is Lee ... is he ..." she started to ask, then stopped, unwilling to finish the thought.

"No, no, Lee's fine." Billy was quick to reassure her. "Unfortunately, his contact was killed."

Amanda was caught between feeling relief for Lee's safety and sadness for the death of someone she had never met.

Her supervisor continued, "Lee was unable to get the guest list. Which brings us back to you."

"Me?"

"Yes. When Harry phoned Lee yesterday, he told him that Curt Hollander has a plane ticket leaving Sunday afternoon. So it seems that things may come to a head on Saturday night. One way or another, we have to have access to that party."

"Oh," Amanda said faintly.

"Naturally we'll do everything we can to minimize your risk. All you have to do is attend the party as Delano's guest, slip away at some point in the evening and open one of the back doors." Billy sat back for a moment, studying Amanda carefully. "You don't have to decide right away. Think it over tonight, and you can give me your decision in the morning."

"Thank you, sir." She stood up, walked to the door and turned around. "Sir?" she said. "Can I ask you something?"

"Of course." Billy looked up from the file he'd begun reading.

"If I was a regular agent, would you be giving me a choice about whether or not to accept this assignment?"

"Truthfully?" He looked at her steadily for a moment. "No. But Amanda, you're not one of my regular agents - you're a civilian with a family at home. Once this whole thing is over, you'll need to decide if fieldwork is something you seriously want to pursue." He reopened the file. "Was that all you wanted to discuss?" When she nodded, he said, "I'll see you in the morning, Mrs. King," and turned back to the papers in front of him.

Amanda returned to her desk, retrieved her purse, and made her way out of the building. She scarcely took note of her surroundings as she crossed the parking lot, wondering what she should do. She knew Mr. Melrose hadn't tried to pressure her, but she was also aware of the fact she was the simplest and safest way to get an agent into Delano's house.

Still, thoughts of her family kept intruding. She knew that any decision she made about pursuing fieldwork would involve them, whether or not they ever became aware of the true nature of her job. Was it selfishness on her part to want to pursue this type of career? Did she owe it to them to take the safe option, to remain behind her desk, leaving the dangerous parts of the job to others?

As she put her key into the car door and opened the lock, a hand reached out and closed over hers. "Amanda, we need to talk."

She whirled around to find Lee standing close beside her, a troubled expression in his hazel eyes. "Lee! You startled me."

"Sorry. Do you have a few minutes to spare?"

Amanda studied her watch, not wanting to give in too quickly. She could still feel the sting of the harsh words he had thrown at her the other night. "My mother's expecting me home to make dinner for the boys," she said. "She's got a date tonight." Seeing his disappointed look, she relented. "Okay, but I can't be too late."

"Maybe we could go for a short walk," he suggested.

She nodded and fell into step beside him. They walked in silence for a few minutes, Amanda firmly resolving not to be the first to speak. If Lee had something to say, he could just come out and say it. She had no intention of making the situation easier for him.

Finally he cleared his throat and asked, "Did Billy talk to you this afternoon?"

"Yes. I was sorry to hear about Harry." She glanced over at him. Lee had his hands thrust into the pockets of his leather jacket and was looking at the ground. "What happened?"

A muscle twitched in Lee's jaw as his frown deepened. "I'm not really sure. Maybe someone overheard one of our phone conversations. Maybe they were following him at the reception the other night and saw the two of us talking. I don't know. But one minute I was walking towards him and the next he was dead."

"I'm so sorry," she said, softening her tone slightly.

He shrugged. "It's not as if I knew him personally. He called me out of the blue last week and offered some information. Harry was just a regular guy who thought he was doing the right thing." His voice sounded strained as he continued. "And he ended up crushed between a brick wall and the grille of a truck."

"Oh, Lee, how awful." Hesitantly, she reached out and touched his arm.

He turned to her, his eyes meeting hers intently and holding her gaze. "Amanda, this is what I was talking about the other day. Delano may not be doing the killing himself, but he's obviously involved with people who don't mind getting their hands dirty. Two people are dead already, and I don't want you to be next."

"I'm not crazy about that idea, either." She offered him a small smile. "Lee, there's no reason to think that James suspects me. He thinks I'm going out with him because I want to see him."

"I know." He stopped walking. "I think that's what made me so angry the other night - you almost had me convinced that you wanted to be with him."

"Oh, so it's my fault." She could feel a spark of aggravation rekindle deep within. Was this his idea of an apology - making it out as if she were the one in the wrong?

"No, that's not what I meant at all." Lee held out his hand as if to keep her from speaking. "Amanda, what I'm trying to say is, I was way out of line. Back there in the restaurant, what I said to you ..." He averted his eyes, staring at a point over her shoulder. "I should never have ..."

Watching him struggle to find the right words, she felt her exasperation dissipate as quickly as it had come. "Lee, it's okay."

"No, it's not okay." He looked at her again, his hazel eyes boring into hers. "Amanda, what I said was absolutely inexcusable. You have every right to be upset with me."

She knew he was right; she should be angry. And yet, seeing how difficult this was for him, she couldn't stop her natural inclination to smooth things over. "I understand, you don't have to say ..."

"No, Amanda, I *do* have to say this." A brief flicker of annoyance crossed his face. "Now would you let me finish?" She nodded and pressed her lips together.

His expression softening, he reached out and took her by the arms. "Amanda, if there was any way I could change what I said, I would. But I can't. So I just want you to know that I didn't mean it. Not then, and not now. That night in my apartment was very special to me, and I should never have cheapened it the way I did. Amanda ..." He swallowed and cleared his throat. His eyes pierced into hers as he said once again, "I really am sorry."

"Lee, it's okay," she whispered. "I really do understand."

He stood there for a moment, as if wondering if she could possibly mean what she'd said. "Thank you," he said, leaning forward and brushing his lips against hers for much too brief a contact.

Mindful of their public location, Amanda realized that she'd have to settle for this - at least for now. "You're welcome." She smiled at him and slipped her arm through his. They walked

on for another block before she regretfully noticed the time. "I'm afraid I should be heading home."

"I, uh, wanted to talk to you before today, but I wasn't sure what to do," Lee said as they headed back in the direction of the Agency. He looked away nervously then glanced back at her. "This is all new territory to me."

"You could have stopped by the house yesterday," Amanda pointed out giving his arm a reassuring squeeze.

"What, you mean just tap on your window, you sneak out and we have a meet in the backyard?"

"Sure."

He sighed. "You know, I'm really bad at this sort of thing. Normally I give up on a relationship long before it gets anywhere near this complicated."

"Lee, everyone's bad at this."

"Amanda, believe me, I'm bad."

"No ..."

He cut her off again. "No, really, take it from me, I'm bad."

"Okay, fine, you're bad, you're bad. Let's just drop it, okay?" She smiled at him. "Did Mr. Melrose tell you he wants me to go to Delano's party this weekend?"

Lee nodded his head.

Hoping her voice carried more conviction than she actually felt, she said, "I think I'm going to do it."

"I figured you would. Amanda, whoever is involved here has killed two people so far."

She smiled faintly. "Yes, you pointed that out already. Lee, all I have to do is go to the party, open one of the doors and give a signal. It's so simple; how could I be in any danger?"

They reached the Agency parking lot again, and Amanda unlocked her car. She got in, put the key in the ignition and rolled down the window.

He leaned in to give her a quick goodbye kiss. At least that seemed to be his intention, but Amanda immediately reached out and slipped her right hand around his neck, pulling him against her. She buried her fingers in his hair, letting the soft strands slip through her fingers as her lips pressed against his. Lee rapidly followed her lead, their mouths meshing

together. She leaned towards him, her universe shrinking for the moment to one of intense tactile sensations.

Lee's regret over his ill-advised remark was almost palpable and she hoped he could sense her equally sincere forgiveness. She appeared to be successful as he leaned further into the car, deepening the kiss and moving his hands to her shoulders, then ...

HONK! With a gasp, Amanda drew back abruptly, the blaring of the horn filling the interior of the car. Lee yanked his arm back from where it had inadvertently rested against the steering wheel. As his head collided with the top of the door frame, a few choice swear words slipped out.

Amanda bit her lip, trying not to laugh. "Are you okay?" she asked.

"I'm fine." Lee gritted out, reaching up and gingerly touching the back of his head.

"You've probably got a bump on your head." She started to get out of the car, only to have him hold the door closed.

"Amanda, I'm fine, really. Didn't you say your mother was expecting you at home?"

She started the engine. "I'll see you tomorrow then. I'm coming in early to tell Mr. Melrose that I'm going to accept the assignment."

"Just promise me you'll be careful." She had to smile when he simply couldn't resist the impulse to caution her one more time.

"I will. Lee, it's going to work out all right."

As she drove down the street, she just hoped that the events of the coming Saturday night wouldn't make her a liar.

It was the oddest sensation. Amanda felt as if she was wrapped in several layers of cotton batting, cushioning her from the world around her. A jumble of impressions ran through her mind - someone singing an aria from an opera, her purse slipping off her shoulder, a hand reaching out, slapping her across the face, a jabbing pain in her arm, sirens wailing, someone gently touching her cheek, then ... nothing.

She felt as though these images were important, or at least should have been important to her. Yet the sense of detachment persisted, as if all of these incidents had happened to someone else, or that she had only observed them from a great distance.

Opening her eyes, she glanced about, surprised to find herself in a hospital bed, yet still oddly dispassionate about her surroundings. Had she been in an accident? She ran a quick

mental inventory of her body, but aside from a headache and this curious sense of indifference, nothing seemed to be wrong.

Gradually she became aware of voices and realized two people were talking just outside her door. A frown creased her face as she struggled to identify the speakers.

Her contemplations were cut short by the entry of a nurse. "You're awake," she observed. "I know someone who'll be glad to hear that." She bustled out again, only to re-enter the room a moment later, followed by two men.

"Mr. Melrose, Lee!" Amanda greeted them. "What happened? Why am I in a hospital?" she asked.

Lee sat down on the bed and took her hand. "Hollander drugged you. Don't you remember?"

She struggled to sit up, fighting back a wave of dizziness. "Hollander?" Suddenly the blurred images snapped into focus. "Lee! I had just opened the door to the veranda for you, and he grabbed me. He must have seen me flashing the light to signal you."

"I figured as much. As soon as I came through the door, one of his goons tackled me. I took care of him, then went looking for you. Thank goodness you had the presence of mind to leave your purse on the landing. Otherwise it might have been too late by the time I found you."

Billy spoke up for the first time. "Hollander and Delano have both been taken into custody. Unfortunately we still don't know who their buyer was."

Amanda thought carefully. She closed her eyes and let her thoughts drift back through the evening. She was in the darkened study, pressed against the wall, listening to the men in the next room discuss Pershing missile sites. James had been there, and Hollander. They were speaking to a man named ... named ... what had Hollander called him? Commander? No, it was ... "Commoran!" she said aloud. "I'm sure that was the name I overheard."

Mr. Melrose smiled. "Thank you, Amanda. If you'll excuse me, I have an arrest to take care of." He turned and hurried from the room.

Amanda sank back against her pillow. Lee looked at her in concern. "Are you sure you're okay?" he asked her. "Maybe you should stay here overnight."

She struggled to sit up again. "No, I don't want my family to worry. I'm fine, Lee, I just have a headache, that's all. I need to go home."

The nurse frowned as she walked across the room. "I'm afraid that's for your doctor to decide. I'll go to the nurses station and have him paged." She exited the room.

Lee smiled at Amanda. "In the meantime, I'll go over to the townhouse and pick up your clothing and car. I'll be back soon." He leaned over and kissed her forehead. "Try to get some rest, okay?"

She watched him leave the room, then settled back onto her pillows again.

Lee hesitantly walked through Amanda's backyard. He peered through the window and saw her in the kitchen, busily cleaning up the remnants of supper. Her mother had the television on in the next room and was doing a crossword puzzle. As he watched, Amanda's younger son wandered into the kitchen.

"Look, Mom, I've done all my fractions." He held up a paper for her to inspect.

"Jamie, that's just great." She examined the paper, then bent down and gave him a hug. "Phillip, how are you doing on your book report?" she called to the next room.

He appeared at the door. "Almost done. But I don't have to hand it in until Friday, so can we watch some TV?"

"Sure, just scoot upstairs first, brush your teeth, and put your pajamas on. Your grandmother's show will be over in fifteen minutes, and you can watch TV until bedtime."

Lee waited until the boys had disappeared up the stairs, then knocked quietly on the kitchen window. Amanda looked up, smiled softly, and went out the back door.

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything," Lee greeted her. He kept his voice low, mindful that her mother was just inside.

"Only the supper dishes. Victoria Greenwich may not do dishes, but Amanda King has a sink-full."

"You're going to miss her, aren't you?"

"A little, I guess. But I was thinking about what you said the other day about fantasies and how they eventually turn lousy. And I realized that, as glamorous as Victoria's life is, I'd much rather be Amanda King."

"Good." They walked away from the house and headed towards the backyard gazebo. Lee took Amanda's hand in his, entwining their fingers together. "And you're sure you're feeling okay? Maybe we should have the Agency doctor take a look at you again."

"Lee, as I already told you twice on the phone today, I'm fine. Really."

"Okay, you're fine, I believe you," he acquiesced. "But there's a problem with your phone."

"What? Did Hollander or someone tamper with it?" she asked worriedly.

He stopped just inside the entrance to the gazebo. Amanda's momentum swung her around so they were suddenly face-to-face.

"No, it's just when I talk to you on the phone, I can't do this." Lee reached out and slipped his arms around her waist, drawing her close.

"Hmm ..." Amanda smiled into his eyes. "A very good point. And I can't do this." She reached up and gently trailed just her fingertips along his cheek.

"And we ..." he ran one hand up her back and into her hair, weaving his fingers through her silky curls, "... can't do this." He gently pulled her towards him, at the same time bending his head until their lips met.

Soft and slow at first, the kiss gradually built in intensity. Lee tightened his hold on Amanda as he felt her slip her arms around him. He tried to absorb every nuance of the moment - the taste of her mouth, the scent of her perfume, the softness of her lips, the slenderness of her body pressed against his, everything that for a terrifying interval the night before, he thought he might have lost forever.

After they finally broke apart, Amanda sat down on the bench that lined the interior of the gazebo. Lee sat down beside her, slipping his arm around her shoulder and drawing her close.

"I had a long conversation on the phone today with Mr. Melrose too," she said.

"Hmm ... not about the same thing we were just discussing, I hope," he teased, leaning down and nuzzling her neck.

Amanda laughed and pushed him away slightly. "Of course not! He wanted to tell me to take a few days off to make sure I was completely recovered. And to ask what I wanted my role at the Agency to be in the future."

Lee pulled back and looked her in the eyes. "What did you tell him?"

She shook her head. "Nope, first you have to answer a couple of questions for me."

"What kind of questions?" he hedged.

"Well, I know in the ambulance last night, they gave me sedatives and things, and I was just wondering ..."

"What?" he repeated, holding her hands in his.

"By any chance, did you say something nice to me about my work?"

"Like what?" Lee smiled at her.

"Sure, you'll have a fight with me in a public rest room, but I can't even get you to be honest with me about this when we're alone." She pulled her hands from his and hit him lightly in the chest.

"Okay, I give, I give. Last night what I said to you was ..." he took her hands in his again and continued, "that some day you might actually make a decent agent."

Amanda blushed slightly and looked down. "Oh. I was hoping it was something like that. Because when I talked to Mr. Melrose, I told him that I'd like to continue doing fieldwork."

"What did he say?"

"He couldn't promise how often it would be, but as long as my clearance was high enough, and he thought there'd be a use for my talents, he'd assign me to cases whenever he could."

"You don't mind holding back for a while?" Lee asked.

Amanda sighed. "No, in fact, I think it might be a good idea if I don't rush into anything. At least this way, I can take some time to find out what I really want to do."

He leaned back against the wall. "Sounds like a very good idea to me."

They sat there quietly for a time. Lee looked down at Amanda and asked, "You said you had a couple of questions to ask me. What else did you want to know?"

"Well, last night at the party, how did you get me out of there?"

"I carried you."

"Carried me?" A smile crept across her face.

"Yep." He grinned back.

"Past all those people?"

"Yep. Had to make a brief stop to talk to your friend 'Jim' to find out what kind of drug they used on you."

"He's not my friend." Her face clouded. "Lee, you were right the other day. James wasn't doing the killing himself, but he knew all about what was going on. If you hadn't found me, I could have ..." she choked a bit over the word, "... died ... because of his deal with the East Germans."

"Amanda, one of the most important rules in this business is to learn to keep your feelings separate from your work."

She nodded, acknowledging the truth of his statement. "I'm starting to learn that. It's not going to be easy trying to balance our personal relationship with our jobs."

"So we should stop dating?" he asked with a mischievous grin.

He could see the corners of her mouth tugging upwards, despite her attempt to appear to be giving his suggestion serious consideration. She said slowly, "That would be the simplest solution. Maybe then we wouldn't argue so much while we're on a case."

"But think of all the fun we'd miss making up."

"Another excellent point." Amanda reached out and cupped his face in her hands. "That would be a terrible sacrifice." She leaned in and kissed him gently. Lee slipped his arms around her, intensifying their contact. He could feel the pounding of her heart as he pulled her closer to him.

As they drew back from each other, Amanda slid her hands to his chest. She paused for a few moments, then said, "Lee, can I ask you to promise me one thing?"

"What?" he asked guardedly, wondering where she was headed now.

She reached up and ran her hand through his hair. "The next time you carry me somewhere, make sure I'm conscious so I can enjoy it."

"It's a deal." He smiled back at her, then stood up, held out his hands and helped her to her feet. As they headed out of the gazebo, he said, "I probably should be going home. The doctor said you needed to get lots of rest, so be sure you go to bed early."

"Yes, mother." She laughed and followed him into the backyard. "Lee, I have one more thing I want to ask you." He stood, waiting expectantly for her to continue. "Do you have any plans for Thanksgiving?"

"Thanksgiving?" He looked at her blankly for a moment. "Is that coming up already?"

She nodded. "Next Thursday. Do you have anywhere to go?"

"No, I was going to spend the day watching football on TV."

She looked down for a moment, then continued nervously, "I was wondering ... how would you like to spend the day with my family and me?"

"A family Thanksgiving?" He knew his voice sounded slightly panicked and was sure his face showed his surprise as well. "Big turkey dinner? All the trimmings?"

"Even homemade cranberry sauce. Plus, Jamie and Phillip would love to have someone else to watch football with."

He hesitated, and she hastily continued, "But if you think this is going too fast, that's okay. I just didn't like the idea of you spending the holiday alone. So, just pretend I never asked." She turned towards the house only to be stopped by his voice.

"Amanda." She turned around. "I didn't say I didn't like the idea. You just took me a bit by surprise, that's all."

"Then you'll come for dinner?" she asked with an expectant smile.

"I'll be there. Unless something comes up at the Agency." He couldn't help but leave himself a loophole, in case he chickened out at the last minute.

"By the way, Lee." He turned around once more. "Despite what you said the other day, I think you're very good at this sort of thing." She smiled, opened the door and disappeared from view.

The End