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Synopsis: Alternate reality version of the end of season two and first half of season three

Author's Note: When SMK was originally on the air, I always liked to think "what if this..." and "what if that..." Well, what if Byron Jordan hadn't been killed by his partner in "Murder Between Friends" (the second last episode of season two) Things might have worked out very differently for Lee and Amanda.

The Right Way Back

Billy paused at the door to the Q Bureau. The door had been left unlocked - a clear indication that Lee should be returning soon. He surveyed the room, marvelling at how thoroughly it had been transformed. Five months earlier, when Larry Crawford had been the agent in charge, the Q Bureau had been little more than a dumping ground for dead end cases. Now although the film library remained cluttered, it had an active feel to it.

"Billy, what are you doing up here?" Lee walked in the door, interrupting his train of thought. "I was just filing my last report on that whole Bart Stoler/Ambassador Hardcourt mess. Did you need something?"

"No, I just wanted to see how you were doing. You've really turned this place around. Suddenly people are expecting results when they send a case up to the Q Bureau."

"Thanks," Lee replied guardedly. He had a feeling he knew exactly where Billy was headed with this conversation.

His instincts proved to be right on target as his section chief continued, "You really should give some more thought to taking on a ..."

"No," Lee cut in abruptly, a closed expression dropping over his face. "I don't work with partners, you know that."

Billy sighed. Lee had made himself clear on this issue on more than one occasion but he still hoped to convince him to end this self-imposed isolation. "Lee, you need to slow down. You've already handled more cases than Crawford did in all of last year."

"Is there something wrong with my work? Surely Dr. Smyth isn't complaining that I'm too efficient."

"No, not at all. But that's my point, you're pushing yourself too hard. You need to have more in your life than just this job."

Seeing the unyielding look on Lee's face, Billy acquiesced. "Okay, have it your way. But at least let me assign one of your new cases to Francine. Her work load is rather light this week." He casually reached for the copy of the weekly report sitting on top of Lee's desk.

"Forget it, Billy, I already saw it." Lee's voice stopped his arm in midair. "At least I assume that's the case you were going to just happen to give to Francine."

Billy looked at him with concern. "Don't you think it would be better if she took care of it? She's not as close to the situation as you are."

"It's been six months. I'd hardly say I'm close to the situation," Lee pointed out. "Look, I appreciate your concern, but I can take care of this. Besides, Francine is the last person who should be given this case. She'd just end up making a bunch of snide remarks and we'd get no cooperation out of ..." He stopped abruptly.

Billy asked quietly, "Have you talked to her at all since..."

"No." The coldness Lee infused into the monosyllable plainly told Billy not to pursue the matter any further. "I told you, this isn't going to be a problem. I can handle the case just fine on my own."

"Well you're going to get some outside help whether you like it or not. The Estoccian government is not impressed that the key suspect in the assassination of their prime minister just happens to be an American. They're sending an inspector Shamba out to assist with the investigation. He's arriving on the 11 am flight into Dulles. Why don't you go meet him and I'll start making a few calls over to EAO." He turned and left the room without waiting for Lee's reply.

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Amanda walked in the door of Jordan Security with a sigh. Only ten o'clock in the morning and it already felt like it was going to be one of the longest days ever. Hearing her come in, Byron Jordan came out of his office.

"Morning, Amanda. Any more news?"

"No," she sighed. "I still have no idea what is going on. Sorry about coming in late, I ended up going over to the EAO office."

"Amanda, this is the first time you've been late since you've starting working here. Not to mention that you called to tell me about it this morning." Byron poured her a cup of coffee and sat down on the corner of her desk. "Did you have any luck finding your ex-husband?"

"Thanks." Amanda took the coffee and sat down. "No, there was just that one call early this morning. I just can't understand what Joe is doing back in the States. Or why he wouldn't have told me he was coming over for a visit."

"Has he ever done anything like this before?"

"Never." She shook her head as she sipped the soothing liquid. "He usually comes back once or twice a year, mostly for business, but he always lets me know so I can arrange my schedule for him to spend time with the boys."

"What did they say over at EAO?"

"Just that they also want to talk to Joe. Something quite serious must have happened." Her expression grew more puzzled. "I just wish I knew what was going on."

"You're not the only one. You've had one phone call from the Agency already this morning. Apparently they're also looking for him."

"The Agency?" Amanda was caught off guard. "What would they want with Joe?"

"They didn't say. You should probably give them a call," Byron said, closely watching her reaction.

"Who called? Lee Stetson?" The question was out of her mouth before she before she could stop herself. She blushed, embarrassed at how easily Lee's name came to mind again.

Byron gave her a quizzical look, wondering again just what Amanda's relationship with Lee Stetson was. He and Amanda had gone out for dinner a few times at the start of her employment but it had never developed into anything more. He replied slowly, "No, it was Billy Melrose."

"Thanks, I'll see what he wants." Amanda picked up the phone. It took her a minute to recall the number that had once been so familiar to her. As she started to dial, Byron stood up and went back into his office.

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"Mrs. King, how nice to see you again." The cool tone of Mrs. Marsten's voice was in direct contrast with her friendly words. Amanda smiled, some things never changed.

She took the visitor's badge offered to her by the Agency's official guardian of the Georgetown foyer, as the older woman continued, "Mr. Melrose wants to meet with you in his office. Ordinarily you'd need an escort, but I expect you know the way."

"Yes, thank you."

Amanda stepped into the closet elevator and pushed the button to close the doors. A myriad of memories from her days working at the Agency came rushing back at her. She clipped the plastic badge to her lapel, thinking of all the times she and Lee had taken this elevator together down to the Agency's more secure levels. She wondered if she would run into him today. Perhaps he was out of the country on assignment. Or maybe he was avoiding her.

She stepped out into the hallway leading to the bullpen and stopped. It was just on this spot that she had seen Lee for the last time. Her mind jumped back to the events of half a year earlier.

It was the day after Glen Tucker had been arrested. After his unsuccessful attempt to murder his partner, Tucker had evaded capture for a few days. They had all been shocked to find that he was in fact the head of a terrorist for hire group. His connections at the security company and its contracts with the Agency had almost enabled him to succeed in kidnapping prime minister Nabuti during an official visit to the States.

Byron met Amanda in the course of the investigation, and soon offered her a job with his firm. She had accepted hesitantly, seeing no other possible way around her financial difficulties.

On that last day, she had returned to the Agency to make a formal statement about her part in the investigation. Billy had taken advantage of the situation to call her into his office and discuss her future plans.

Afterwards Lee had met her as she crossed the bullpen and headed into the hallway. "Billy told me the good news," he grinned. "I knew he'd find some way to give you a raise. Just don't let Francine hear where the money came from. She stretches her undercover clothing budget to the max every year."

He seemed so happy at the thought of her staying on at the Agency that for a moment Amanda's resolve wavered. She quickly reminded herself of all the things she had considered during the past few sleepless nights. Lee was just being charming because that's the way he always was. She shouldn't read anything more into it.

She wanted to tell him the truth about how much she had come to care for him. But apparently he didn't want to hear it. Anytime a case upset his emotional equilibrium, he would back off. He was always ready with his standard speech of "It was just part of the case, nothing more to it."

Sometimes she would catch a fleeting expression on his face or in his eyes that would make her think he did actually feel something for her. But what did it matter, if he wouldn't acknowledge his emotions to himself, much less to her? Either way, whether he did care or not, her feelings were making it more difficult to be around him.

She hadn't thought about leaving the Agency though, until confronted with Byron's job offer. Was it fate giving her a push in the right direction as it had that day at the train station? Or maybe it was just the coward's way out.

Oddly enough, it was Glen Tucker who had really started her thinking about why she had accepted Byron's job offer. He bore such a resemblance to her ex-husband that her mind kept drifting to the reasons her marriage broke up. She had spent so many years waiting for Joe to change his mind and

choose a life with her, and now she seemed to be heading in the same direction with Lee.

In the end Joe had stayed in Africa and she had had to admit their relationship was never going to work out. Would the final outcome with Lee be any different? Would she spend years working with him, waiting for him to say he cared about her on a personal level, only to have to walk away in the end?

Lee stood there, looking at her expectantly. "Billy did tell you about the raise, didn't he?"

"Yes, Mr. Melrose offered me my old job back," she said with difficulty. "And I turned him down."

Amanda pulled her mind back to the present day, not wanting to think about the expression on Lee's face as her words sank in. Shaking her head as if to push away the memories, she continued down the hallway and into the bullpen.

*** As Lee drove down the highway out to Dulles International Airport, his mind was also occupied with the past. He could still hear the finality in Amanda's voice as she had told him she wasn't coming back to work at the Agency.

"Yes, Mr. Melrose offered me my old job back. And I turned him down."

Maybe he had been overly sensitive to read it as a personal rejection, but that was the way her statement had hit him. "Why?" he asked in surprise. "I thought money was the issue." His voice trailed off as it occurred to him that perhaps she had other reasons for accepting Jordan's offer.

She hadn't looked him in the eyes. "It was one of the reasons. This job also offers more regular hours so I can spend more time with the boys. Not to

mention that it's a lot less dangerous. Besides, how can I quit now? Byron just lost his partner, he needs me right now."

"I need you." The words leapt into Lee's mind but he didn't give voice to them. She'd obviously given her decision a great deal of thought. "Well, you have to do what you think is best," he said coldly, trying to mask his hurt feelings.

"So I guess this is goodbye," she said quietly.

"I guess it is."

Amanda turned away and walked over to the elevator. He watched as she waited for the car, got in and disappeared out of his life.

Part of him had wanted to rush after her and plead with her to stay. The cold voice of reason intruded, telling him that maybe this job offer was something she had been looking for... a graceful way to remove herself from the Agency. He remembered all the times he had pushed her away, refusing her offers of friendship, not letting her get too close to him. No wonder she finally took the hint. And it was better this way, he told himself pointedly, he didn't need anyone, least of all a housewife with two kids.

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Amanda smiled as she surveyed the busy hum of activity that was the Field Section bullpen. At least half the desks were empty, their owners no doubt off on some type of secret mission. The smile faded from her face as she glanced over at Lee's desk. Another agent sat there, busily taking notes as he talked to someone on the phone. Apparently it was no longer Lee's desk. Had he, in fact, been transferred somewhere else?

Was that why she hadn't seen or heard from him at all since her departure? Although she missed Lee, she had fought every urge to contact him. It had

been difficult enough to walk away from the man she loved once without putting herself into his path time and time again. And if part of her had secretly cherished the hope that he would call her, it was soon disillusioned.

"Amanda, thanks for coming in," Billy interrupted her reverie as he came out of his office.

"Sir, what's this all about?" she asked. "I met with Darrell Prescott at EAO but all he would say was that there was some kind of civil disobedience incident in Estoccia a few nights ago and that they wanted to talk to Joe. Then I get to work and Byron tells me the Agency is also looking for him."

Billy figured there was no point in beating around the bush. "Amanda, the Prime Minister of Estoccia was murdered the night before last. Your ex-husband is their prime suspect."

Amanda didn't know what she had been expecting to hear, but it certainly wasn't that. "That's absolutely ridiculous," she said in amazement. "Joe couldn't kill anybody."

"Well, Estoccia is a very dangerous place, we don't even know if..."

Amanda cut him off. "No sir, makes no difference. I know Joe."

"It's not his habit to pick up in the middle of the night and disappear is it?" Billy asked.

She shook her head. "No, sir."

"Well, we've thrown out all the nets for him along with the CIA, FBI and Security Task Force. I hope we can count on your cooperation in locating him. The sooner we find him, the sooner we can figure out what's really going on."

"Of course."

Francine walked up. "Welcome back, Amanda," she said in an artificially bright tone. "I might have known you would end up here sooner or later. Only I thought it would have been as part of your job, not as the ex-wife of a international killer."

"International suspect," Billy pointed out. "I promise you, Amanda, we'll do everything we can to get to the truth."

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Lee sighed in relief as he guided Inspector Shamba down the hallway towards the bullpen. During the ride from the airport he had been subjected to a constant string of inane chatter. On the surface at least, Shamba appeared to be nothing like Lee's expectations. For a police officer whose prime minister had recently been assassinated, he was remarkably low key. Lee wondered how much was genuine and how much an act to throw him off his guard.

He had found it impossible to concentrate on Shamba's ramblings about his first visit to the States. Instead his mind had wandered again and again to Amanda. As much as he hated to admit it, she was the best lead they had to find Joe.

By the time they finally reached the Agency, Lee had decided that his best course of action would be to simply give her a call and ask her to write up a list of places Joe had lived and any close friends he still had in the DC area. With any luck it wouldn't be necessary to see her in person.

The first person he saw upon entering the bullpen was, of course, Amanda. She was standing by Billy's office, deep in conversation with Billy and Francine. Lee knew the look on Amanda's face only too well, Francine was giving her a hard time about something.

Damn it, why had Billy asked her to come in? For the last six months he had successfully resisted every urge to call her or even drive by her house. At first he had hoped she would contact him, but as the weeks went by it became apparent that she planned to make her break with the Agency complete. Then the opportunity to take over the Q Bureau had come along. He had immersed himself in his new responsibilities, finding that overwork, if not a panacea to his feelings of loneliness, at least left him exhausted every night.

Looking over at Amanda with an unhappy expression, Lee reflected that seeing her again would be so much easier if she did, in fact, look like the frumpy housewife Francine always accused her of being. Instead Amanda was even more beautiful than the last time he had seen her. Her hair, which six months earlier had been closely cropped, now rested on her shoulders in soft curls. She wore a white blazer with blue accents, which brought out her dark brown eyes and ...

"Mr. Stetson?" Inspector Shamba cleared his throat loudly, jolting Lee back to his surroundings.

At that same moment, Amanda caught sight of the two men standing at the entrance to the bullpen. Her heart skipped a beat as she recognized Lee. He should have appeared ridiculous as he juggled a two suitcases and a garment bag of the most garish luggage she had ever seen. However, she realized with dismay that she had been right all along, he wasn't as handsome as she remembered him. He was even better looking.

Lee and the other man made their way towards them, Lee struggling with his armload of zebra patterned luggage before depositing it in a heap. He didn't look at Amanda but quickly began introductions. "This is Asam Ali Shamba, Inspector of the Royal Estoccian Police Force."

The Inspector waved his hands in a ritual greeting. "May all your wives be pregnant," he proclaimed loudly. Reacting to their startled looks he

explained, "A traditional greeting at home. Totally out of date, of course. We have too many people as it is."

Lee continued, "Inspector, may I introduce Billy Melrose, my section chief, Francine Desmond, a colleague of mine and..." He stopped short, realizing that he wouldn't be expected to know who Amanda was under normal circumstances.

Billy stepped in smoothly. "This is Amanda King, the ex-wife of the man we're looking for. She's been very cooperative. Mrs. King, this is Lee Stetson, the agent in charge of our investigation."

Lee cleared his throat and extended his hand. "Nice to meet you, Mrs. King," he said slowly.

Amanda shook hands first with Lee and then Shamba. "Nice to meet you, too," she replied, forcing her voice to sound normal.

Breaking the awkward moment, Billy said, "Francine, why don't you take Inspector Shamba down to the Quartermasters and get him acclimatized to America."

Francine, never loath to display her many talents, started a conversation with the inspector in his native language as they walked off.

Billy sighed as he looked after her. Sometimes even he found Francine a bit much to take. He turned back to Lee. "I've pulled files on Joe King from several government databases. They're on your desk. Why don't you and Mrs. King work on a list of haunts and habits." He turned and entered his office, leaving Lee and Amanda standing there alone.

"Well, why don't we get started with those files?" Lee said after a moment.

"Sure," Amanda replied, glancing around the bullpen. "Which one is your desk now?"

"I moved upstairs a few months ago."

Amanda followed Lee back to the closet elevator. The ride back to the upper levels was spent in uncomfortable silence, neither one quite sure what to say. Finally they reached the ground floor and Lee led the way up the stairs.

As they walked down a short hallway, Lee explained, "The entire Agency used to be up here. They moved underground in 1960 when they ran out of room. Now things are getting crowded downstairs and the old offices are being used again."

He opened a door with a slight flourish and ushered Amanda inside. "Welcome to IFF's film library - actually the Q Bureau."

"Q?" Amanda asked curiously.

"Q as in question mark," Lee explained. "I get all the oddball cases that don't fit in anywhere else or that no one else wants."

Amanda took in the small airy room. "Much nicer than a cubicle downstairs," she observed with a smile. "Quite a step up. I mean, you're actually above ground."

Lee relaxed and smiled back. "I take it you're impressed?" he asked.

"I am," she replied. "It seems like a great deal of responsibility. Congratulations, Lee, I'm sure you deserve it." She paused and asked softly, "So how have you been?"

"Fine. Busy with this new assignment. How about you? How do you like working at Jordan Security?"

"Well I haven't been shot at once," she said in an attempt at humour. Their eyes met for the first time and they fell silent again.

Finally Lee cleared his throat. "Okay, why don't you have a seat and make a list of places Joe lived. Start with the most recent and go back chronologically. Oh, and include possible contacts, people he might try to get hold of in a bind."

"He called me this morning," Amanda admitted reluctantly.

"He did?" Lee said in surprise. "What did he say?"

"Just that he was in DC and not to try to find him. He said it was too dangerous for him to risk seeing me or the boys."

Amanda sat down at the desk and began making out her list. Lee picked up the small stack of folders Billy had assembled and started skimming through them.

As he opened the first file, a small official snapshot of Joe fell out. Lee observed it closely, then turned to look at Amanda. Although he had known from the start that she had been married, somehow today's events highlighted the fact that there were huge parts of her life that he had no part of. He sighed and returned to perusing the documents.

A short while later he looked up at Amanda. "Something doesn't quite fit here," he said.

"What?"

"I'm comparing your ES12's. His account of the divorce isn't exactly the same as yours."

"Really? Let me see." She glanced at the folder Lee handed to her. "No, this is mine. I want to see what Joe said."

Lee passed over the other folder and she quickly began to read. "Hmm..." she muttered to herself.

"What?" Lee asked quickly.

"Nothing, it's just some of this stuff is a little misleading, the legal talk and all that. It says here that I'm resistant to change and that can't be me, I was never a stubborn person." When Lee didn't respond, she persisted, "Lee, I'm not stubborn, am I?"

"Well, you do know how to get what you want," he pointed out.

"Not always," she said quietly, thinking over the past six months. "Oh, look, we didn't agree on everything, that's all."

"Care to elaborate on that?" he asked with interest.

"No, I really don't," she answered firmly.

Lee leaned closer. "Amanda, I need to know the truth...even if it's tough."

Amanda handed him her completed list and sat back for a moment, thinking. "Okay, Joe and I were married in 72. Joe started law school in 1973 and I had Phillip in 73. And then Joe graduated in 75 and Jamie came along..."

"I can read, Amanda," Lee interrupted her. "Tell me what isn't in the file. What went wrong?"

"With my marriage?" Amanda shook her head. "Why?"

"I don't know." Lee realized some of the questions he was asking had nothing to do with the investigation. Somehow though he wanted to find out what had happened between Amanda and her husband, as if it could also help him understand why the two of them had gone their separate ways. "Call it criminal psychology. Look, I'm trying to put the pieces together here. Joe is

wanted for murder. Now everything you've told me about the guy leads me to believe that he's just some mild-mannered lawyer."

"He's a great guy," Amanda cut in. "He really is. And I feel a little uncomfortable in this situation."

They were both startled by a knock at the door, followed by the entrance of Inspector Shamba. Apparently the 'Americanization' had been a success, as the man was now sporting a Baltimore Orioles cap. "How's it going?" he asked, referring to a small handbook of American phrases.

"Fine." Lee stood up and moved away from Amanda. "Okay, Mrs. King," he said in a business like tone, "Of the list of people and addresses you've come up with, whom do you think Joe would be most likely to contact?"

"I don't think he'd call any of his old friends," she answered thoughtfully, wondering in the back of her mind why Inspector Shamba looked so familiar. Earlier in the bullpen she had been distracted by seeing Lee again, but now she was sure she had seen him somewhere before. Dismissing it as one more mystery in already strange day, she continued, "He'd be worried about putting them in danger. Wait, I know, he might call Mrs. McDragon."

"Who?" Lee asked blankly, scanning the list.

"That's what he called her. Her real name is Mrs. McDonald. She ran a big boarding house by the university. Joe lived there when he was pre-law. If she's still in business she'd be the logical place to look for a temporary place to stay."

"Okay, let's head over there and see what we can find out." Lee put his suit jacket back on and started for the door.

"Wait a minute," Shamba interrupted. "Mrs. King, I assume that your ex-husband wrote to you and your sons while he was in Estoccia."

"Sure, about once a month," Amanda replied.

"Do you keep his letters?" When she nodded, he continued, "Well, there might be something revealing in one of them. Why don't you go home and check through them?"

"That's not a bad idea," Lee admitted reluctantly. "You can always catch up with us in a hour or so at Mrs. McDonald's."

"Okay." Amanda turned for the door.

Lee called after her, "Thanks for all your help, Mrs. King."

She stopped and looked back at him for a second. "You're welcome, Mr. Stetson."

*** As Lee and Shamba drove across town, Lee asked, "So have you ever met Joe King?"

The inspector glanced at him and replied, "No, but we have many foreigners working in Estoccia. Unless there is an incident like the other night, there is no reason to involve myself with them."

"What happened that night, anyway?"

"There was quite a bit of shooting, for starters. Besides the Prime Minister, a guard was also killed at Government House. And word of his death started some local panic in the neighbourhood which spread into a night of looting and fires."

"But no one saw Joe actually..." Lee began to point out.

"Pull the trigger? No, but someone saw him running away." The inspector punctuated his speech with flowing hand gestures. "Now it is enough, if not for justice, then vengeance. It's hard living in Estoccia now. The food is in

short supply, the land is parched like a desert. The people have a few good things, but they love their prime minister and they want their own revenge for him."

"I wonder why Joe headed for DC? With the EAO headquarters here, it's not very likely that he's simply looking for a place to hide." Lee mused aloud.

The inspector commented, "In Estoccia, a running man only runs two ways, away from something or towards something."

"Well, Joe doesn't seem to be running away. He came straight here and seems to be staying in the area."

Shamba frowned. "It does seem strange that he isn't staying in contact with either his employers or his ex-wife. She's quite adamant that he couldn't have been involved."

"She's been very helpful in this investigation. I wonder how she'll feel if we find Joe only to prove his guilt." Lee hoped Amanda's faith in her ex-husband wasn't misplaced. "With any luck he's using this Mrs. McDonald's house as a base and we'll find him there. Of course, that's assuming he's still in the area. Amanda, I mean Mrs. King was the last person to hear from him and that was early this morning."

"He came straight from Estoccia to DC. I don't think he's going anywhere. But what could he want here?"

"Whatever he is after, I hope we find him soon. I don't think he has any idea of how rough this game can get." Lee smiled grimly and drove on.

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Dotty sat on the couch surrounded by discarded letters. "Right here in his letter from the 3rd he says, 'We're doubling the food distribution staff. I'll have to clear away the legal deadwood, three months easy.'"

Amanda came down the stairs and into the room, another stack of letters in her hand. "Okay, this is it. These are all the letters from 82 and the rest from 83."

Dotty looked up at her with a puzzled expression on her face. "What exactly am I looking for?"

"I don't know, Mother." Amanda smiled, remembering how the numerous times she had asked Lee the same question. What had he always said to her? 'You'll know it when you see it.' "Anything out of the ordinary, anything he doesn't usually write about. You know, anything that's not the amount of rainfall or how big the lizards are. Maybe he had a fight with someone, I don't know."

Dotty started skimming through the letters again. "Well, this is sort of unusual. Joe doesn't often name drop."

"What do you mean?" Amanda asked curiously, looking up from the letters she'd started to go through.

"Last Christmas, Joe and the rest of the EAO staff attended a party at the Prime Minister's residence. He sent us a snapshot of him with the Prime Minister, remember?"

Amanda stared at the small photograph Dotty held in her hand for a second. "I've got to get going, Mother" she said hastily. "Now, if Joe calls, try to find out where he is, or at least get a number."

"Wait a minute, where are you going?" Dotty asked her. "If he does call, you would be much more persuasive."

"I've really got to leave. I promised that federal agent I would help him look for Joe."

"You said you already gave him a list of Joe's past addresses. How much more help could you be? Besides, what makes you so sure you can trust this federal agent? How do you know he really wants to help Joe?" Dotty got the distinct impression that her daughter was not giving her the entire picture.

"Mother, he seems very trustworthy," Amanda said in exasperation as she hurried into the hallway and towards the front door. "I'll call you later. Everything's going to be alright, don't worry."

"That's easy for you to say," Dotty muttered as she turned back to the pile of letters.

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Amanda was half way to Mrs. McDonald's boarding house when she realized she might have picked up a tail. By the time she reached her destination she was sure of it. She fervently hoped that whoever they were they'd be content to watch from a distance, and that Lee would be at the house waiting for her.

Hurrying into the large rambling dwelling, she found Mrs. McDonald in the front hallway. "Amanda West! What is this, some off-year reunion?" the motherly woman asked in surprise. "I mean, first your old boyfriend needs a place to stay for a few nights and now you're back, too."

"I don't mean to be rude, Mrs. McDonald," Amanda interrupted hastily, "but were there two men here looking for Joe about an hour ago?"

"Sure, I think they're still in his room - top of the stairs, second door on the right. Normally, I'd have refused to tell them anything but one of them had federal ID."

"Thanks, Mrs. McDonald, I'll talk to you later." Amanda hurried up the stairs. Opening the door to Joe's room, she was dismayed to only find Inspector Shamba. "Where's Mr. Stetson?" she asked.

"One of the students said they saw Mr. King last night at some local bar called Dooley's. Mr. Stetson went to check it out while I waited to see if Joe would return here."

"Well, we'd better find him and quickly. I was followed from my house back here."

As Amanda opened the door, they heard the sound of an argument coming from downstairs. "No, you can not just go up there," Mrs. McDonald was protesting loudly. "My boarders are entitled to their rights and that includes the right to privacy."

Amanda grabbed the inspector by the hand and pulled him out of the room. "There's a back way out of here," she hissed. "Quick, down this hall."

At the end of the hallway she opened a small door, revealing a long narrow flight of stairs. She hurried up to the attic, Shamba following close on her heels. Behind them they could hear the cursing of the men who had discovered Joe's empty room. "Come on," she said, "we'll have to go down the fire escape."

The two of them cautiously made their way down the metal staircase, their footsteps sounding loudly in Amanda's ears. Quickly she surveyed the side alley, relieved to find it empty. They moved quickly through several backyards before exiting onto a busy street.

Amanda led the way into a small coffee shop and over to a booth. She motioned for Shamba to sit with his back to the entrance. "I don't want them to spot you in here," she explained, carefully staying out of view of the front entrance herself, while keeping watch out the front window.

"Why don't we go find Mr. Stetson?" Shamba asked her.

"No, Dooley's is over ten blocks away. I can't take the chance of someone spotting you, Mr. Prime Minister," she replied.

He looked startled for a moment. "How did you figure it out?"

"Joe sent a picture of the two of you in one of his letters. You told me to go home and look through them, remember?" she smiled.

They were interrupted by a waitress who took their order for two coffees. As soon as she was out of earshot, the Prime Minister asked, "So what do we do now?"

"I think the best thing would be to keep you in protective custody. If someone has already attempted to kill you once, there's nothing to stop them from trying again. I'm going to put in a call to the Agency."

She walked over to the nearby pay phone and quickly dialed the number. She spoke softly, trying to keep her companion from overhearing her, but realized his safety was more important than maintaining her cover.

"Okay, they're sending someone right over," she said, returning to her seat after a short conversation with Billy.

"So what happened in Estoccia that night?" Amanda asked after their waitress had brought them their coffees. "Why is Joe being hunted as a suspect for your murder when you aren't even dead?"

"Joe phoned me earlier that afternoon. He wanted to talk to me about some irregularities he found in the files at EAO. He said he couldn't give me any specifics over the phone but needed to meet with me in person. I took a roundabout way to my office and saw my police chief Shamba waiting for me with a gun. He fired, I fired and he was dead."

"But why did you think the assassination attempt was connected to Joe?"

"I could see that there was a plot against me and hurried out of the palace. Joe had just arrived and was speaking to one of the guards. I saw one of Shamba's men fire at Joe. He killed the guard instead and Joe ran off. I could see that he was my link to understanding what was going on and decided to follow him back to the States."

"In the meantime you thought it a good idea to stay dead," Amanda concluded.

"Why be killed twice?" the Prime Minister said with a grin. "My friends in Estoccia, my trusted friends, are seeing to it that my first death lasts as long as they are able. Hopefully your associates at the Agency will be as accommodating."

"They're not really my associates," Amanda pointed out hastily.

"Right." He smiled. "Apparently I'm not the only one who has been keeping up a pretense today. Or does every housewife in America know the Agency's phone number by heart and senior agents by name?"

When Amanda looked away, he continued. "Joe often spoke of his family. He never mentioned that you were a government agent. Does he even know?"

"No, Joe doesn't know anything about it," she conceded at last. "And I don't work for the Agency anymore. I was there for two years but quit six months ago."

"Why?" the Prime Minister asked in surprise. "From what I've seen today you seem to be quite good at it."

"Things just got too complicated," Amanda explained evasively. "Then I had an opportunity to take a normal office job with regular hours, no one shooting at me..."

"Sounds like a very... logical choice," he said, not believing it for a minute.

Amanda smiled in relief as a car pulled up outside and Steve Thirsk, an agent she recognized got out. "Come on, your ride's here," she said, leading the way out of the coffee shop.

"Mrs. King, is everything okay?" Thirsk asked politely.

"It's okay, Steve, he knows I'm Agency," Amanda explained. "Or that I was. Did you catch the men who followed me?"

"They were gone by the time we made it over to the boarding house. Fielder's there now, getting a description from the landlady. You need a ride back to the Agency, Amanda?"

She shook her head. "No, I'm going to catch up with Lee over at Dooley's"

"Good bye, Mrs. King," the Prime Minister said, shaking her hand. "Thank you for all your help today. I hope you find Joe soon." He hesitated for a moment before getting into the car. "There is another saying in my country: sometimes the future is just the past waiting for you to return to it."

Amanda stood there for a moment, her mind in turmoil. She had only met the Prime Minister that morning. Was he that good a judge of character or was she simply that transparent? She watched the car drive away then slowly headed back to where her car was parked.

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Joe King entered Dooley's and cautiously scanned the area. Stepping up to the bar, he ordered a beer and sandwich. He ran a tired hand through his hair, only two days on the run and he was exhausted already. He knew exactly what was going on at EAO, but how on earth could he prove his suspicions? Maybe he should turn himself in and hope the authorities would listen to him.

"Excuse me, Joe King?"

Joe looked up, startled at the sound of his own name. He hadn't noticed the man making his way towards him through the crowd until now.

"I'm a federal agent," the man said quietly enough so that no one else could hear. He took out a billfold and showed Joe his ID.

Agency, Joe thought to himself. Not FBI or CIA, but the big boys. They weren't fooling around. He should be grateful that at least this one seemed willing to talk instead of shooting at him.

"I've got a few questions for you," the man continued. "Why don't we sit down?" He gestured towards the back part of the restaurant.

"Okay, mind if I have a bite to eat at the same time? Being on the run builds up an appetite."

The agent smiled at him. "Sure, go ahead."

He followed Joe as he carried his drink and food to a back table. Joe noticed his companion was careful to keep between him and the exit at all times.

As they sat down, Joe asked, "What do you want to know, Mr...?"

"Lee Stetson. You're aware that the Prime Minister of Estoccia was assassinated two days ago?"

"Yes." A look of sadness passed over Joe's face. "He was a very good man. I met him last year at a Christmas party he had for EAO and we became friends."

"According to Inspector Shamba you murdered your friend." Lee watched his reaction carefully.

"Shamba?" Joe spat out the word as if it left a bad taste in his mouth. "That man is as corrupt as they come."

"Well, he's here in the States looking for you. Airmail special, just for this case."

"I'll bet. If he can pin the murder on me, he won't have to find the real killer." Joe wondered how good the trumped up evidence against him was. Maybe this Lee Stetson didn't believe a word he said.

"Any idea who that might be?" Lee asked neutrally.

"I have a few suspicions." Joe's face took on a surprised expression as he looked past Lee towards the front door. "What on earth is she doing here?" he asked in bewilderment.

"Who?" Lee asked, quickly turning in his seat.

"My ex-wife."

Amanda caught sight of the two of them and headed towards their table. Joe stood up as she approached and they hugged warmly.

"Joe," Amanda greeted him, keeping her arms around him. "Are you okay? I was so worried about you."

"Amanda, I told you to stay away from all of this." He pulled back from her.

"Joe, what's going on?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out." Lee stood up and cleared his throat to get their attention.

"I'm sorry," Joe said. "Amanda, this is Lee Stetson. He's a federal agent."

"Yes, I know," she said as they sat down. "I've been working with him all day, trying to find you."

Lee continued, "I was just asking Mr. King if he had any idea who would want to kill the prime minister. Assuming he's innocent, that is."

"Well, of course he is," Amanda said immediately.

Joe tried to soothe her. "Sweetheart, he's just doing his job."

Lee's face hardened at the casual use of the endearment. He would have felt a lot better if Joe and Amanda's divorce hadn't been quite so amiable.

"No, that's not what I meant," Amanda explained. "Joe couldn't be guilty of murdering the Prime Minister because he's not dead."

"What?" Joe and Lee exclaimed in unison.

"He's not dead," she repeated. "Mr. Stetson, the man we thought was Inspector Shamba is really the Prime Minister. I recognized him from a photo Joe sent home with one of his letters. Apparently the real inspector Shamba tried to kill him. The Prime Minister shot him in self defense and then took on his identity in order to try to figure out what was going on."

Joe broke out into a grin. "Amanda, that's wonderful news." He laid a hand on her arm. "You'll have to excuse my ex-wife," he said to Lee with a smile. "She tends to ramble on when she gets excited."

Lee ground his teeth - Joe was trying to explain Amanda to him. "Where is the Prime Minister now?" he asked.

Amanda glanced over at Joe before answering Lee. "Um... some of your fellow agents have him in protective custody. They're taking him to some kind of safe house, I think you call it."

"Right." Lee wondered what exactly had gone on. He looked forward to hearing the whole story when Joe wasn't around. "Now, why would the head of the Estoccian police want to kill his own Prime Minister?"

"Simple - money," Joe said. "A few weeks ago 900 metric tonnes of wheat arrived in Estoccia. Only it wasn't 900 tonnes, it was 700. So I did a little investigating and I found out it wasn't the first time. Somebody's been doctoring the paper work. I was on my way to see the Prime Minister when all hell broke loose."

He looked into their faces, looking for a sign that they believed him. "These people are starving and somebody's taking the food out of their mouths," he continued desperately. "Somebody here."

"I assume you have evidence to back all of this up?" Lee asked.

"I did, in Estoccia. When they tried to kill me I just ran. I was lucky to get out before they closed the airport. I didn't have a chance to get back into the office to get my paperwork." He sighed dispiritedly. "I'm a lawyer, a paper pusher. I should have stayed out of all this."

Amanda spoke up. "No, you did what you thought was right, that's who you are." She smiled at him, before looking back at Lee. "So what do we do now?"

He turned to Joe. "Well, somebody obviously knew you were onto them. Killing the Prime Minister and framing you for the crime is a pretty neat way of eliminating two of their problems in one fell swoop. Did you confide in anyone about your suspicions?"

Joe thought back. "Four days ago I spoke on the phone to Bryan Foster, head of EOA here in DC. I told him I thought there was something strange going on with some of the deliveries. I said I'd get back to him when I had something more concrete to go on."

"And suddenly the roof fell in," Lee concluded. "The timing's too neat to be coincidental."

"But how do we prove he's involved?" Joe asked.

"Easy," Lee replied, "we give him what he wants - you."

"What?" Amanda exclaimed.

"We set him up," Lee explained. "Joe, you'll go to see Foster and tell him you want to be cut in on the action. Threaten to expose him to the authorities if he doesn't agree. Tell him he has 24 hours to get back to you. Then we sit back and wait."

"Wait a second," Amanda objected. "This sounds way too dangerous."

"Not at all. We'll put a wire on Joe before he meets with Foster. Plus we'll set up a complete surveillance of Foster, tap his phone lines, the whole bit. I'll make a few phone calls and set things in motion." Lee got up and went to the phone booth in the back.

When he returned to the table Joe and Amanda were engaged in a polite but heated discussion.

"What's the problem?" Lee asked.

"I'm trying to convince Joe that he should come back to the house tonight while you wait for Foster."

"Amanda, I really don't think that's a good idea," Joe said.

An unwelcome image popped into Lee's head - Joe and Amanda at her house together, the boys upstairs in bed, her mother keeping discreetly out of the way. "Joe's right," he said hastily. "We'll be keeping a close watch on Foster but we shouldn't take any chances."

Amanda shot him an annoyed look but stayed quiet.

"Besides," Lee continued, "once Joe makes contact with Foster we'll need a place for him to phone Joe. I don't think your house would be the best for that."

"I could wait at your office," Joe offered.

Amanda panicked for a second. Lee's office. If Joe saw anything indicating IFF, her cover for her previous job would be blown. Looking over at Lee, she saw the same thing had occurred to him.

"No, no, I think you might as well stay at my apartment," he quickly offered. "I'm taking a surveillance shift anyway."

"Okay, then, let's go," Amanda said, standing up.

Joe looked at her in surprise. "Amanda, where do you think you're going? Mr. Stetson just needed you to help him find me. I'm sure he doesn't want innocent civilians trailing along tonight. You could get hurt."

"That's right," Lee smiled. "I think you should just go home."

As Joe walked ahead of them out of the restaurant, Lee said sotto voce, "At least someone seems to be able to get you to listen. All those times I asked you to stay in the car..."

"Stow it, Scarecrow," she whispered back. "The only reason I'm going home is so Joe doesn't figure out what I used to do for a living."

Joe and Lee entered his apartment. "You want something to drink? Coffee? Something stronger?" Lee asked.

"No, coffee would be great." Joe looked around the apartment. The grey decor, the modern furniture all seemed to indicate bachelor pad. "I take it you're not married."

"Me?" Lee laughed. "The life of an agent isn't exactly conducive to stable relationships. Too much uncertainty, too little time at home..."

"I know exactly what you mean." Joe sank wearily down onto the sofa.

"How long were you and Amanda married anyway?" Lee couldn't keep himself from asking.

"Nine years. Officially that is. I was living in Africa for most of the last five or six years, so I guess you could say we were really separated for most of that time."

"Did you ever think about taking a job here in the States?" Lee asked nonchalantly from the safety of the kitchen. He wondered what Joe thought about all these personal questions.

"Sure, but I wanted to be where I could do the most good. Here in the States I would have been chained to some desk job, far from the people who really needed me."

"Your wife and sons didn't need you?" Lee asked bluntly.

"It's not the same thing," Joe protested. "Besides, if she had really loved me it wouldn't have mattered where we lived. I guess she just wanted to be a housewife and that's all she had in her."

Lee felt a surge of anger build up at this offhand dismissal of Amanda. He suddenly realized why it sounded vaguely familiar. Wasn't it the same way he had felt about Amanda when he first met her?

"I have to admit though, I was glad to see her again today. I had forgotten how loyal she can be. It sure felt good to have someone who believed in my innocence unconditionally."

"You know, sometimes people can surprise you," Lee said, carrying in a tray filled with coffee mugs, sugar and cream. "One of the best partners I ever worked with was a housewife before I recruited her."

"You're kidding." Joe looked up in amazement.

"Nope. She had great instincts for the job. We can train people all we like, but it has to be in them to begin with."

"So does she still work with you?" Joe asked with interest.

"No, she finally decided it was too dangerous for her family and walked away. Can't really blame her, either. It's not much of a life sometimes."

Lee watched as Joe added cream and sugar to his coffee. He tried to picture Amanda and Joe as a couple. He wondered what she had thought that afternoon, seeing her ex-husband again. Anger? Regret? Relief?

"Is everything okay?" Joe asked, catching his eye.

"Oh, sure, I was just thinking about the case." Lee looked away. "Okay, you must be exhausted. Why don't you get some rest? You can take the bedroom; I'm going to be covering the midnight to 6am shift at Foster's house."

The phone rang. "This could be it." Lee motioned for Joe to pick up the receiver.

Joe listened for a moment before handing the phone over to Lee. "It's your office."

Lee took the phone. "Hi, Billy. What's up? What? Thirsk can't have the flu! He's supposed to be covering Foster's house with me tonight."

"I'll tell him you said that." Billy sat at the desk in his office, wondering if he was doing the right thing.

"All right, all right, who else do we have available?" Lee grumbled.

"No one."

"What?"

"No full agents, that is. I do have a replacement for you though. I've already called her and she's waiting at her house in Arlington for you to pick her up," Billy said hurriedly, trying not to laugh.

"What? Billy, wait." The line went dead.

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Amanda stood just outside her front door, nervously waiting for Lee. What on earth had she been thinking, she reprimanded herself, accepting this assignment. She didn't work at the Agency anymore. Surely they could have found someone else.

She tensed as a car came into view down the street. Her front yard was briefly illuminated in the glare of headlights then plunged back into darkness. She relaxed as the car continued down the street; it wasn't Lee.

She resumed her inner dialogue. It would have been so much simpler if things had been more awkward between her and Lee that afternoon. After all that time apart she would have thought their relationship would have been much more strained. But now in a strange way it was almost as though those six months had never happened.

But then, she reminded herself, time had never really been an issue with the two of them. From the first moment she had seen Lee and looked into his eyes, she had felt a strange sense of connection with him. She had responded instinctively to his request for help, as if they had known each other a long time. But had he felt the same way? And if he had, why did he just let her go without a word? Of course she was the one who had walked away from the Agency, a small voice inside her protested. He hadn't asked her to leave.

Okay, she shook herself mentally, what was in the past was just that - in the past. She couldn't go back and change anything. The important thing tonight was to make sure that she didn't let herself get emotionally tangled up again. After all she had done just fine without Lee Stetson for the past half year, he was nothing to get worked up about.

"Amanda?" She jumped at the sound of his voice.

"Don't do that," she said, abruptly brought back to earth from her reverie.

"Sorry. Are you ready to go? I'm parked around the corner."

They walked down the sidewalk in silence, Amanda continuing with her internal pep talk. "Do your job, just don't get distracted," she lectured herself. "Just stay aloof and detached."

"You let your hair grow," Lee said out of the blue.

Amanda was taken off guard. She reached up self-consciously. "Yes, I thought I'd go back to my old hairstyle. I don't know what I was thinking when I let my hairdresser cut it so short last year."

"It looks nice."

"Thanks."

Lee stopped beside a car parked at the curb. It was an older model sedan, dark blue in colour, and anything but sporty. Amanda had to laugh. "New car, Lee?" she said without thinking. "Or did it come with the Q Bureau? It's not exactly a step up from the Corvette you know."

Lee smiled. "No, but it's a lot less conspicuous on a stakeout."

He opened the door for her, automatically reaching for her arm and helping her in. Amanda remembered he had often done that in the past, as their comfort level had built up with each other. They would be walking somewhere together and he would almost unconsciously touch her arm or put his hand on the small of her back. She also recalled how good those small gestures had felt. So much for being aloof and distant, she thought with dismay as she fastened her seatbelt.

They drove through the silent city streets, meeting little other traffic at that late hour. Amanda thought about the people in the cars they passed. They were all heading home for the evening, not going to sit in a parked car for six hours watching an international thief's home. Somehow though, it felt so right to be sitting beside Lee again, going out on an assignment. She wondered if he felt the same way.

She shivered, why did she feel so comfortable around Lee? Shouldn't he be a distant memory by now? Surely she had more self-control than to just fall back into the same old pattern.

"Sorry about the cold," Lee apologized, mistaking her reaction for physical discomfort. "The heater's actually on. This car is the biggest hunk of junk but it was the only thing I could get out of the Agency pool for tonight."

Once they arrived at Foster's house, they settled in for the night. Lee made radio contact with the agents in the command centre van parked a few blocks over. So far, Foster hadn't made any telephone calls or left his house.

Since they hadn't been able to plant any bugs inside the house there was little to do but sit and wait.

"Might as well make yourself comfortable, it could be a long night," Lee said, undoing his seatbelt and relaxing against the back of the bench seat. "Why don't you fill me in on how you managed to figure out who Shamba was?"

Amanda gave her report mechanically, her mind only half on what she was saying. Lee had noticed she had seemed preoccupied since he had picked her up and wondered what she was thinking of. Her ex-husband maybe? That's none of your business, he reminded himself.

He realized Amanda had stopped speaking and was looking at him expectantly. "Um," he said quickly, "That was fast thinking on your part. How did you know about the attic and the fire escape?"

She flushed slightly. "Joe used to use them when he had to get back into the boarding house after curfew."

Lee desperately tried to think of a topic of conversation that wouldn't lead them back to Joe. "So how is your job at Jordan Security working out?"

"Truthfully? It's kind of boring. Mostly deskwork. Byron's had to do a lot of fence mending after people found out his partner was a criminal. So I'm stuck in the office most days."

"Sounds much safer than casing dives with me."

"Undoubtedly." They smiled at each other for a brief moment before Amanda continued, "I do miss the Agency though. The hustle and bustle of the bullpen. Never knowing when I go in at the start of a day if I'll spend it transcribing tapes or end up dodging bullets with you."

"This job certainly keeps you on your toes," Lee admitted. "I should never have given you that package in the first place. All I did was put your life in danger time and time again."

"Lee, that's not true," she interrupted. "Besides I'm an adult, no one forced me to take it. I knew there were risks."

"At least you were smart enough to get out when you did." Lee looked away from her, out the window at the dark street. "And it only took you two years to figure it out." Turning back to her, he said, "Amanda, can I ask you something about your marriage?"

"You really can't let that go, can you?" she groaned.

"No, I just..." He fell silent. He knew he had no business asking her anything so personal but the questions kept nagging at his mind.

"What do you want to know?" she asked in resignation.

"Why did you wait so long to divorce Joe? He left for Africa in 75 but your divorce wasn't finalized until 82." Lee couldn't reconcile the Amanda he knew with the idea of Joe stringing her along for so many years.

She nervously twisted her hands in her lap. "It's funny what you can convince yourself of when you want to badly enough. I guess I hoped that sooner or later he would come back. But it never happened."

She sounded so sad that for a moment, Lee felt the urge to put his arms around her and pull her to him. Damn it, this was not the way the evening was supposed to go! He was a trained operative, surely he had more control over his emotions. How did Amanda manage to do this to him, to get him to lower his guard time and again?

It had happened more often in the past than he cared to think about. His mind wandered back to two instances in particular. The first time was when

he had risked treason charges to save her from the Russians. Then there had been the time when she had had amnesia and he had taken her back to his apartment. On both occasions, she had been sitting beside him and looked up at him with those soul wrenching brown eyes. The next thing he knew, he had his arms around her, and was trying to comfort away her confusion and fear.

Well, it wasn't going to happen this time, he vowed, turning back to the window. Surely six months of separation should help keep some distance between them.

Was that why he hadn't called her even once during that time, he asked himself. Was it easier to pretend that she was the one who had wanted out rather than admit that this housewife from Arlington scared the hell out of him? Of course not, he told himself fiercely. Amanda King was just someone he had worked with in the past, there was nothing between them at all.

So why did his arms ache with wanting to hold her, his lips with wanting to kiss her, his hands with wanting to touch her, to crush her to him, to...

Amanda sighed. Lee couldn't even look at her. Earlier she had wished that things were more awkward between them. It now looked like she had her request. It was better this way, she told herself. After all, she'd probably never see him again after tonight. But why did her heart feel so empty at that thought?

She shivered again as Lee turned back towards her. "Still cold?" he asked.

"Just a little."

Then it happened again, just like in the past. Without any conscious thought, Lee moved towards her and slipped an arm around her shoulders. "We can huddle a bit closer, let our body heat warm us up a bit," he said, thinking at the same time, "This is a really bad idea, Stetson. What the hell are you doing?"

For a second Amanda tensed up, then she too moved towards him. He pulled her even closer and she fit herself against him. Leaning against his body, she rested her cheek on his shoulder and let out a soft breath.

This is a really bad idea, she chastised herself. So why did it feel so good? She closed her eyes, wanting to treasure every detail for the future - the fabric of his jacket against her cheek, the scent of his aftershave, the soft ends of his hair brushing against her forehead, the feel of his arms around her, the way his hands held her tightly, the warmth of his body pressed up against hers, everything that said Lee, and that she knew she would never have again.

"Are you okay?" Lee asked compassionately. "I mean, really? This has to have been a tough day for you, seeing your ex-husband again." He wasn't used to seeing this side of her. He remembered her as being so bright and cheerful, always trying to make others feel better. He wasn't entirely comfortable with the role reversal, feeling somewhat inadequate as he tried to find words to comfort her.

"Not to mention, going back to the Agency too," she confessed. "I really miss the people there. Mr. Melrose and even Francine sometimes." She laughed. "Don't tell her I said that."

"Don't worry, I know a thing or two about keeping a secret." Lee looked into her eyes. "Do you miss anyone else?" he asked gently before he could stop himself.

Amanda looked down to where her hands rested against Lee's chest. After all this time, should she try again? Should she tell him the truth? Could she? An old quotation from Emerson that one of her professors had been fond of suddenly popped into her head. Something about how the highest price you could pay for something was to have to ask for it.

"Lee, I..." she began, hesitantly.

"What?" he whispered.

"I just want you to know that I..." She lifted her eyes to his again and stopped. The words hung on her lips, but she simply could not say them. Sometimes the price of having to ask was too high.

"Really am glad I got to see you again," she concluded in a rush. Coward, she reproved herself. How could she expect Lee to be honest with his feelings if she couldn't do it herself.

"Well the same goes here," Lee said. "It hasn't been the same, working without you."

"Really?" she asked in surprise. "I always thought I was kind of a burden to you - always getting in the way on your cases."

Lee considered that for a moment. Maybe he had felt that way at the beginning but it was a long time ago. "No, I learned a lot from you Amanda, about myself and other people. You know, stuff they don't teach at the Agency."

"That's really nice of you to say." Amanda snuggled back against him.

"You know what?" she said after a minute.

"What?" he asked.

"I was just thinking, if you hadn't given me the package that day at the train station, we would still have met today. Joe would still be in the same predicament, and you would have contacted me to help you find him."

Lee smiled. "I wonder how that would have gone."

"I don't know, our first impressions of each other weren't exactly complimentary."

"What do you mean?" he protested. "You thought I was this dashing, adventurous spy."

"You mean I thought you were an egotistical womanizer. And you thought I was some annoying housewife interfering with your case."

Lee laughed. "And we would have found Joe and gone our separate ways, never knowing how wrong we both were."

They fell silent, both thinking of how much they would have missed if that had been the case. The only sound in the car for a time was that of their breathing.

Amanda idly fingered a button on Lee's shirt front. "It was hard seeing Joe again today," she admitted. "Made me think back to decisions I've made and wonder if I did the right thing."

Lee took a deep breath, trying valiantly to concentrate on their conversation. He wondered what it would feel like if she undid his button and slipped her hand inside, over his chest. He shook his head, the situation was rapidly getting out of control.

"You did the best you could, given your circumstances at the time. Besides you can't go back and change the past," he said, wondering if she was only thinking about her decision to leave Joe.

"I know, but it was difficult for me to admit my marriage was never going to work out." Amanda couldn't figure out what was possessing her to make all these confessions. But it did feel good to have it all out in the open and to try to have Lee understand.

"Amanda, there were two of you in that marriage," he reminded her. "Don't be so hard on yourself."

"Maybe if I had really loved him I would have gone with him," she said wistfully.

Lee recognized Joe's words from earlier in the evening and wondered how often they had been hurled at Amanda in anger. Now as he looked at her, her deep brown eyes reflected a depth of sorrow and regret he had never seen there before. For an instant he wanted nothing more than to lean down and kiss away her unhappiness.

Instead he said, "That goes both ways, you know. If he had really loved you he wouldn't have asked you to make that choice. I mean, you had two little children at home to think of."

Amanda nodded. "Jamie wasn't even a year old when Joe took the job at EAO. I didn't want to move him and Philip around all the time, six months here, six months there."

"You wanted to be a housewife," Lee finished for her.

"I wanted us to have a home," she corrected firmly, "to be a family together. Joe saw things differently. So he took the job and went anyway."

Lee could hear the pain behind her words and wondered what it had been like for her to have someone she loved just turn his back on her. At least with his parents, he had known they hadn't wanted to leave him.

Amanda tried to lighten the mood. "Hey, it's not so bad. Life's turned out okay."

Lee spoke from the heart, "But okay isn't good enough for you."

This time he knew he was going to kiss her. Amanda felt his arm tighten around her shoulders as he drew her towards him. Their eyes locked again and she could see the desire in his. As Lee leaned in closer she closed her eyes, anticipating the soft touch of his mouth against hers.

Just as their lips were about to meet, the radio crackled to life. They both jumped and pulled away from each other. Lee grabbed for the radio. "Stetson here," he said hastily.

"Foster just made a call to Joe King."

"What'd he say?"

"Foster asked him to meet him here. We've got someone driving over to your apartment to pick him up."

Lee turned to Amanda. "Okay, I'm going over to the command centre van. Just wait here."

"I'm coming with you," she said quickly.

Lee smiled. "Exactly how would you explain that to Joe when he shows up? Just wait in the car, okay?"

He quickly got out of the car and walked down the street.

Amanda sighed. "Wait in the car, Amanda," she mimicked sarcastically. "Some things just don't change."

Twenty minutes later she saw a car come up the street from the opposite direction then turn into Foster's driveway.

She turned the radio on. "Lee, what's going on?"

"Joe's on his way to meet with Foster. Don't worry, we put a wire on him. Hang on and I'll patch the signal through. Just keep an open channel and you can listen to the whole thing."

The first thing she heard was the opening of a car door followed by a door bell. Foster opened the door and greeted Joe. "Mr. King, why don't we go into my study?"

"I'll get right to the point." Amanda could hear the nervousness in Joe's tone and hoped that Foster wasn't picking up on it as well. "As I said this afternoon, I'm aware of your misappropriation of supplies meant for Estoccia."

"I assume you have proof," Foster asked calmly. "Or am I just supposed to give in to your demands on your say so."

"How about the 5th of this month?" Joe replied. "A 900 metric tonne shipment of wheat somehow transformed itself into 700 tonnes on route between the States and Estoccia. And the 21st of last month, half of a shipment of powdered milk also managed to vanish. Shall I go on?"

"No, no, I've heard quite enough." Foster cut him off. "May I see the invoices for these alleged discrepancies?"

Joe laughed. "I didn't bring them with me. What kind of a fool do you think I am? If you want the invoices it's going to cost you."

"And exactly how much is it going to cost me?"

Joe managed to keep his voice from shaking as he named his price. "A million dollars."

"That's a rather steep price," Foster observed, but in a tone that seemed to indicate it wasn't entirely out of the question.

"Not really. I'm assuming, of course, that the shipments to Estoccia aren't the only ones that have been coming up short."

"I'll need some time to get the money together," Foster hedged.

"Fine. I'll call you, say noon tomorrow. We can make arrangements for the transfer then. Have a good night, Mr. Foster."

"Good night, Mr. King. I think you know your way out."

Amanda didn't relax until she saw Joe's car leave the estate. He had managed to pull it off. Maybe Lee's plan was actually going to work.

....

Lee helped Joe off with the wire after he had returned to the command centre van.

"You did just fine, Joe," he said. "We'll have some invoices dummied up for you by tomorrow and..."

"Foster's making a call." another agent interrupted him, turning from the console at the back of the van and facing them.

"Put it on speaker," Lee instructed.

They stood there and listened to the exchange.

"Prescott? Foster here. King just left."

"What was his price?"

"That's Darrell Prescott, another senior EAO employee here in DC," Joe identified the other voice.

"A million dollars."

"You've got to be kidding." Prescott laughed.

"We're not going to cut him in on our little game, of course," Foster snorted derisively. "But I have to get my hands on those invoices."

"So now what?" Prescott asked.

"I think we can come up with something else he might be willing to trade with," Foster said maliciously.

"Such as?"

"His sons. You mentioned earlier that his family lives in Arlington. Why don't you drive over there right now and pick them up."

"Sure. I'm over in Alexandria so it's going to take me awhile to get there."

"Fine, just call me when you have them and I'll pass the word on to King."

Joe took a step towards the speaker as the line disconnected. "He's going after Philip and Jamie," he said in disbelief.

Lee was already half out the door. "I'm heading over to Arlington. I'll call as soon as we have Prescott and you can move in on Foster," he said to the other agents. "Don't do anything until you hear that those kids are safe." Turning back towards Joe, he added, "I think you should stay here."

"Stay here? I don't think so," Joe protested sharply.

"Joe, just let me handle it, okay. My partner and I can be there well before Prescott." They could hear a car pulling up outside.

Joe grabbed hold of Lee's arm. "Those are my sons we're talking about."

"I know that." Their eyes met for a moment and Lee acquiesced. "Okay, Jensen, can you drive Joe over? But you stay back out of the action until it's all over."

He hurried out of the van and over to the waiting car. "I assume you heard all of that," he said to Amanda as he got in.

She nodded. "Lee, he's going after the boys," she said anxiously as she slid over to let him drive.

"Well, he's not going to get them," Lee snapped with an edge of steel to his voice. "We've had a team of agents in your neighbourhood all day."

"Somehow you neglected to mention that earlier."

"It was need to know and you didn't. I didn't want you to worry that something like this was going to happen."

"Except that it did," she pointed out.

Lee was silent, not knowing how to answer her. He drove swiftly through the streets, accelerating through amber lights with barely a glance at the crossing intersections.

"Okay, here's the plan. With any luck, we should get to your house at least fifteen minutes before Prescott does. You wake up your mother and the boys and take them out to the Agency van. They'll be safe there."

"What are you going to do?" Amanda asked anxiously.

"I'm going to wait inside your house for Mr. Prescott," he said grimly.

"What about me?" she demanded.

"You'll wait in the van with your mother and boys." Lee knew she wouldn't like that idea.

"No."

"No?"

"No."

By this time they were pulling up in front of her house. "Look, Amanda, I don't want you getting hurt. Besides, you don't work for the Agency anymore remember? Now, we don't have much time, so go get your family out of there."

Lee waited in the car as Amanda went into her house. About five minutes later she herded her family out the front door, the boys sleepily rubbing their eyes. An unmarked van pulled up in front of the house. They climbed in and the van moved further down the street.

He picked up the radio. "Everything okay in there?"

"Oh, sure, everything's fine," he heard Francine's acerbic reply. "We've just turned our command centre into a daycare."

Lee smiled at the thought of Francine trying to calm down Amanda's mother and deal with two young boys. He adjusted an earpiece and body mike. "Okay, I'm going into the house. Let me know if there's any sign of Prescott."

He stealthily made his way around to the back of the house and into the kitchen. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness he looked around the once familiar room and thought poignantly of all the times he had met with Amanda there.

Down the street in the command centre van, Philip and Jamie looked around in fascination at the floor to ceiling display of technology. Francine glanced

down to find Philip's gaze fixed on her. "Are you really a secret agent?" he asked in an awed voice. "Have you ever shot someone?"

Francine rolled her eyes and looked over to where Amanda was trying to pacify Dotty.

"Mother, please, I don't know anymore than you do. They phoned the house about fifteen minutes ago and said we had to get out."

"But why? What's going on?" Dotty demanded.

"They said it had something to do with Joe." She kept her voice low so that the boys wouldn't hear her. "I'm sure they'll tell us everything we need to know."

Dotty glanced from her own bathrobe to Amanda's attire. "Right, like what you were doing up and fully dressed at two in the morning."

Amanda turned her attention to her sons. "Boys, I don't think those people need you bothering them. Come on over here and sit down."

"Heads up, this could be it," Francine said as a car came down the street. "Lee, do you copy?"

"Loud and clear. Is it Prescott?"

"Could be him, the car's stopping, someone's getting out. Yes, he's headed for the front door. Get ready."

Lee crouched out of sight in the dining room, listening to the sound of the lock pick being used on the front door. He waited until the man had entered and moved to the foot of the stairs.

"Prescott!" he called loudly, stepping out of the shadows and into the hallway.

Startled the man turned around and fired blindly. Lee dove back into the dining room, then set off in pursuit as the man fled out the front door.

Amanda peered anxiously through the windshield as two figures came flying out her front door, both apparently uninjured. She hoped that the entire neighbourhood hadn't been awakened by the gun shot. She sighed in relief as she saw Lee disarm the other man with a few well placed blows and kicks.

"Did you see that?" Philip exclaimed excitedly at her elbow. "That was great!"

Francine turned to the radio. "Okay, looks like things are under control here. You can move in on Foster." She headed out the door, calling back to Amanda and her family, "Just stay here," she said. "I'll let you know when you can go back into your house."

Lee yanked Prescott to his feet. Francine hurried up with a set of handcuffs and escorted him away. Within a few minutes several other cars had pulled up, the normally quiet neighbourhood now a hive of activity.

"Dad!"

Lee looked up to see Jamie and Philip break away from the small knot of people standing by the van and run towards their father. Joe knelt and caught both of them up in his arms, engulfing them in a bear hug. Amanda stood a bit to the side, looking at the three of them with affection.

Lee felt a lump form in his throat and turned away. The four of them looked like the perfect family. He wondered how long it would be before that thought occurred to Amanda or Joe. He began to head back towards his car.

"Lee."

He turned to see Amanda walking towards him. "I just want to thank you for everything today," she said uncertainly. "Without your help, things could have turned out a lot differently."

"No problem," he replied, deliberately avoiding eye contact with her. "I'm glad it all worked out okay."

"About what happened earlier tonight.." "What happened in the car tonight..." They both spoke at once and then broke off.

"You first," she offered.

"I was just going to apologize for what happened. I'm sorry, things just got a bit out of hand. It was just... you know... two cold bodies seeking a bit of warmth."

Amanda felt like a candle that had been snuffed out. He was apologizing? She took a deep breath and tried to keep her voice from shaking. "That's funny, that's exactly what I was going to say," she managed to get out.

"Listen, I've got to help them get Foster under wraps," he said hastily, suddenly feeling an urge to get away as quickly as possible. "Billy will probably want you to come in sometime in the next couple of days to make a statement. Maybe I'll see you then."

"Sure. Well, I should go see how the boys are." Amanda turned away from him, blinking fiercely to force back the tears that had suddenly sprung to her eyes. How dare he? She tried to open up to him and he gave her some trite apology. Nothing ever changed, he was still incapable of admitting he ever had any emotions at all. Well, he could just go back to his solitary life and his Q Bureau! She was done with him for good. She might have to go back to the Agency one more time, but hopefully she wouldn't have to see Lee Stetson ever again.

Lee stood there watching her walk back to where Joe stood with their two sons. The four of them followed Dotty into the house and the door closed behind them.

....

Amanda knocked on the door of Billy's office and waited for him to wave her in. "Sir, you wanted to see me?" she asked hesitantly.

"Yes, come on in, Amanda, have a seat." Billy gestured towards the sofa. He sat down, not in his usual place behind the desk but in one of the more comfortable chairs, turning it to face her. "I read the reports about what happened this week and I wanted to thank you for all your assistance on this case."

"You're welcome, sir," she replied. "I was glad I could help."

"You really enjoy this type of work, don't you?" He said it more as a statement than a question.

"Well, yes," she admitted.

"Enough to consider coming back to work here?" he asked with a twinkle in his eyes.

Amanda sat back, at first not quite sure what to say. "But, sir, I've got a full-time job at Jordan Security. I can't just walk away from it."

"I spoke to Byron this morning. He's agreed that if you want to return to the Agency, he'll let you go without any notice. We'll send someone from the steno pool to assist him temporarily and help him find a replacement."

Amanda looked away. "Sir, I don't know if I can go back to the way things were before."

"No one's expecting you to. I'm not talking about civilian auxiliary help. This would be a full time job and you would be in training as a full agent candidate."

"I don't know what to say," she said, bewildered. "I wasn't expecting this. Can I have a few days to think it over?"

"Of course."

Amanda got up and headed for the door. She paused and turned around. "What department would I be working in?" she asked slowly.

Billy smiled. "I've got a couple of possibilities in mind. Including an opening in the Q Bureau."

Amanda sighed, shaking her head. "That's what I was afraid of. Sir, I don't know if this is such a good idea. Or if Lee would even want me there."

"Amanda, the job is yours whether you want to work with Lee or not. But I have to say, the two of you make a great team. Not to mention..." he broke off.

"What?" she asked, wondering what he was trying to say. Usually Billy was careful to keep their conversations on a purely professional level.

Billy hesitated for a moment, then took the plunge. "How much the two of you care about each other."

She sat back down. "Sir, I appreciate what you're trying to do, but I think you're mistaken. Six months ago Lee just let me walk out without a word. He didn't even ask me to consider staying."

Billy knew he really had no business getting involved in their personal lives but he was afraid that left on their own Lee and Amanda would let another opportunity slip through their fingers. "Amanda, I've known Lee for over ten

years. Believe me, he does care. He just doesn't always know how to express his emotions or deal with them. You have to give him time."

"How much time? Two years, three years?" A note of bitterness crept into Amanda's tone. "I can't wait forever for something that might never happen."

"But you do care about him?" Billy persisted, at the same time sympathizing with her frustration.

"Yes, of course I do. That isn't the issue." She took a deep breath. "Billy, I just don't think it will work out. We're too different."

"What? To love each other?" He wondered briefly why he was making such a point of trying to convince her. Lee should have been the one doing this months earlier.

"No, to make it work." She glanced at her watch nervously. "I have to get going. Joe and I are taking the boys out for the afternoon. I'll give you my decision on Monday."

She stopped at the door, and turned with a smile. "By the way, I hope Thirsk is feeling better." Her eyes met his for a moment. "Thanks for trying."

Billy smiled back as she left.

....

Heading out through the Georgetown foyer late in the afternoon, Billy was surprised to see Lee coming down the stairs, apparently also on his way home. Billy sighed, "Okay, I had to stay and finish the month end reports. Why on earth are you still here on a Saturday afternoon?"

"Paperwork doesn't get done on its own you know," Lee pointed out. "If you ignore it, it's still waiting for you the next day."

"Unfortunately the same isn't always true for people," his friend replied cryptically. "Come on, let's get a beer at Randy's before I head home."

Fifteen minutes later they were seated at the bar, a pitcher of beer between them.

"Okay, so what's up?" Lee asked, filling both their beer mugs.

"I interviewed someone this morning as a potential second agent for the Q Bureau," Billy stated nonchalantly.

Lee sighed. When was he going to get the message? "How many times do I have to say this?" he grumbled. "I don't need any help."

"Sure, you'll work yourself to death and save the KGB the trouble," Billy remarked with a short laugh. "Besides, I think I've found the perfect person."

"Billy..." Lee trailed off warningly.

"Freshman agent candidate."

"A rookie?" Lee gave a short laugh. "I thought you wanted to save me work."

"Actually she has quite a bit of field experience already. Spent two years working with one of my top agents." He grinned and took a swig of beer.

"Billy..." Lee protested again, clueing in to what his friend had in mind.

"Mother of two, from Arlington. Great instincts, thinks on her feet."

"What did she say?" Lee asked in spite of himself. He quickly downed half his glass of beer to avoid having to make eye contact.

"She's thinking about it. I'm hoping she'll at least agree to come back to the Agency." Billy paused, waiting to see if Lee would react at all. When the younger man maintained his pose of indifference, he continued, "The Q Bureau is another matter entirely. Six months ago you let her leave without even asking her to stay."

"It wasn't like that," Lee said defensively. "She had no reason to stay."

"Or you made sure she thought she didn't," he lectured. "You know, I'm no longer surprised that she left. The real question is why did she stay as long as she did."

"Billy, there was nothing between us, we just worked together. That's all. Besides, she'd made her decision." Lee stared into his drink, as if the amber liquid somehow contained the answers he was looking for.

"No, I think you made it for her," Billy argued. "Anyone else would have given up on you long before. Lucky for you Amanda isn't anyone else. But she's not going to wait around forever." He got up and tossed a few bills onto the bar. "She's giving me her decision about the job on Monday. I just hope that this time she has all the relevant information before she makes up her mind."

Billy put on his coat and headed for the door. Turning back for a moment, he delivered one parting shot. "Lee, friend to friend, most people search their whole lives for something you have sitting right in front of you. I hope you've changed enough in the last six months to make the right decision this time."

....

It was well after midnight by the time Amanda returned home. She flicked on the kitchen light and then sat on the couch in her den in the semidarkness. Leaning against the back of the couch, she closed her eyes in exhaustion. What a waste of an evening. Billy was wrong, things were never

going to change between her and Lee. She had gotten her hopes up yet again, only to have them disappointed.

The late night silence was broken by the sound of someone tapping on the window. Amanda sat up, startled, and glanced towards the French doors. She couldn't help but smile at a sight that had once been so familiar to her. She got up, opened the doors and warned her visitor in a whisper, "Lee, my mother and the boys are asleep upstairs."

"I just want to talk to you for a few minutes," he said earnestly. "Can I come in?"

"Okay, but quietly." Amanda sat back down on the couch. "Did you want something?"

Lee stood there for a moment, trying to figure out exactly what to say. He berated himself, after four hours of sitting in his car waiting for her to return home, he should have at least managed to come up with an opening sentence. "Um.. Amanda," he started awkwardly.

"Yes?"

"Billy told me he offered you a job back at the Agency."

"Yes, he talked to me this morning," she replied coolly, wondering where he was going with this.

When Lee remained silent, she prompted him, "And..."

"And I just wanted to tell you that I hope you accept it."

"Why?" She looked at him steadily. She knew what decision she wanted to make, but she also had no intention of falling back into the same old pattern. If Lee wanted her to come back, it had to be for the right reasons.

"Because I think you have the potential to be a really good agent," he answered. "Think of how much help you were this week. It's a waste of your talents to be sitting behind a desk all day."

"Thanks, I appreciate the vote of confidence," Amanda said uncertainly. Was that the only reason he wanted her to return to the Agency?

"Did Billy tell you that the job is full time?" he continued. "You'd be training to be a full agent. So your pay would increase, of course."

"He mentioned all of that," she said tonelessly.

Lee hesitated again, glancing at her while searching once more for the right words. "Did he also tell you there is an opening in the Q Bureau?"

When she didn't reply, he continued hastily, "But I'm sure he can find a place for you somewhere else in the Agency if that's what you want."

"What do you want?" Amanda didn't know where she found the courage to ask Lee such a direct question. All she knew was that she was tired of dancing around the issue.

"I want... I want..." Lee realized that if he wasn't honest with her this time it would all be over. "I want you to come back," he admitted in a rush, "I want us to be partners again."

"Because I've got such great potential as an agent?" she asked.

"No, I mean, yes, I mean, it's not just that..." He cleared his throat uncomfortably and tried again. "Amanda, I've missed you. Seeing you again this week made me remember how much I enjoyed working with you, spending time with you, just being with you." He sat down beside her on the couch. "I should have told you all this six months ago. I was an idiot to let you go." He took a deep breath to calm his nerves. "Is it too late? How do you feel?"

She looked into his eyes, hardly daring to believe his words. "Do you know where I was all evening?" she asked softly.

Lee looked away. "Out with Joe," he answered bitterly with a sinking feeling in his heart. So that was it. She had made her decision already. Just as Billy had warned him, he had waited too long and now it was all over. He stood up and took a few steps away from her, unable to keep the disappointment from showing in his voice. "Well, I should be going."

"No, Lee, wait." Amanda got up quickly, alarmed that she might have been too hard on him.

She whirled around as she heard a noise from the hallway.

"Amanda? What are you doing up so late?" Dotty asked sleepily.

"I was just getting some warm milk, Mother," Amanda improvised quickly. "I'll be up in a few minutes, go back to sleep."

As soon as she heard her mother's footsteps retreating up the stairs, Amanda hurried out the back door. Her heart sank as she anxiously scanned the darkened patio. Lee was nowhere to be seen. Despairingly, she sat down at the picnic table. She closed her eyes and quietly said, "Lee Stetson, you are an idiot. So why am I still in love with you?"

"Can you say that again?"

Her eyes flew open to see Lee come around the corner of the house.

"What?" Amanda smiled. "You're an idiot?"

Lee slowly walked over to her. "No, the other thing."

"Oh, that." She blushed as he reached out and captured her hands in his.

He pulled her to her feet and towards him, fastening her hands around his waist. At last he could do what he had wanted to since seeing her again in the bullpen. He reached up, slowly caressed her cheek and ran his fingers through her soft brown curls. His face mere inches from hers, he whispered, "Amanda, you asked me what I wanted. What do you want?"

"You," she finally admitted, moving to close the last distance between them.

He met her halfway, pressing his lips to hers in a tender kiss. She tightened her embrace, moving her hands up his back to pull him closer. Their kiss intensified as each of them felt the other's eager response.

Breaking away at last, Lee said, "So if you weren't with Joe this evening, where were you?"

Amanda smiled. "Sitting in the hallway outside your apartment for over three hours."

As the meaning of her words sunk in, Lee felt a flash of happiness infuse his entire being. "You mean...you were waiting for me?" he asked in amazement.

She reached up and softly touched his cheek. "All of my life."

The End