

The Silver Lining

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Amanda stood motionless, her eyes fixed upon the building across the street. She watched as flames licked through the broken windows, reaching upwards with their orange and red tongues. There was a creaking sound from within the building and she flinched as a part of one wall caved in, sending up a shower of sparks. Her hands clenched, twisting the yellow plastic tape that stretched in front of her at waist height.

Billy walked up beside her, following her line of sight. At first he remained silent. After all, what could he say that would change anything? Finally, struggling to find his voice, he said, "Amanda."

"Sir?" she replied, but her gaze didn't waver from the devastation in front of her.

"I think you should go home, get something to eat, maybe lie down for a while."

"No." She turned to face him. "I'm not going anywhere until..." She let the rest of her sentence just hang in the air, as if by not saying it aloud it wouldn't be true.

"At least have something to eat," he advised gently. "There are some sandwiches in the command centre." He put an arm around her shoulders and began to steer her away.

They saw a TV crew filming an on the spot segment, and carefully kept out of the camera range. Unfortunately this didn't prevent them from hearing the report.

"We're standing here, outside what remains of the old Brittington Industries factory," the reporter said in that voice all TV reporters seem to have, displaying intense but quiet enthusiasm for their stories. Amanda wondered for a moment if they were taught that modulation technique at school and then laughed at herself. What a thing to be thinking of at a time like this. Her mind seemed to be grasping at anything else to focus on, other than the reality of the situation.

"Police and other government officials are waiting for the fire to burn itself out, so they can search what is left of the building," the reporter continued. "Yesterday evening, Reuben Archdale, who escaped last week from a maximum security prison, took refuge here with several hostages. By midnight he had released all of the hostages but one. Hope for a peaceful solution ended just after noon today, when the building was rocked by a massive explosion.

"Archdale is the prime suspect in the murder of Senator Langford. The Senator, who played a key role in putting Archdale in jail while a District Attorney, was shot dead in his home three days ago.

“We have no way of knowing for sure, but it would appear that Archdale, realizing that he was sure to face the death penalty if recaptured, and seeing no way out, took his life and that of his unnamed hostage in the most dramatic manner possible. It is highly unlikely, if not impossible that anyone could have survived the initial explosion or the resulting fire.”

Amanda flinched at his words and quickly walked out of earshot. Unnamed hostage. Was that to be Lee’s epitaph, after all his years of service to the government? she thought to herself bitterly. She knew the Agency couldn’t compromise its identity nor that of any other agents, but it seemed so cold, so impersonal. For a moment tears pricked at her eyes, but she resolutely forced them back. Unnamed hostage. That’s all the rest of the world would ever know.

“Francine,” Billy called over to a group of people standing nearby. “Can you get those television crews to back up a bit? This isn’t helping.”

“Sure.” Francine’s normally elegant features now wore the same look of anxious concern as Billy’s. A mask of efficiency dropped into place almost automatically as she walked over to the TV vans parked along the curb. She just wished she could control her inner emotions so easily.

Billy guided Amanda to a seat in the command centre van. She sat there as if frozen in place, her surroundings barely registering. All of sudden she felt incredibly weary, her body reminding her that she hadn’t slept in over thirty hours, and eaten only minimally in that time.

Billy handed her a sandwich and some coffee, and her reflexes took over. He watched as she went through the motions of eating and drinking but doubted whether she tasted a thing.

In a way Amanda was grateful for her body’s physical reminders - they were the only things that told her she was still alive. The rest of her felt numb, as if she was wrapped in a thick layer of cotton, shielding her from the reality of her situation, as if all of this must be happening to someone else.

She and Lee had cheated death so often, how could she arrogantly assume that it would always happen? She had been aware of the danger and risks since the day she signed up with the Agency, but she never let her mind dwell on them. No agent could and remain effective. Yet it left her ill prepared to face the current situation.

A sudden surge of anger flared up, how could Lee have done this to her? He should have waited for her to come back to the office before he followed up that lead on the Senator’s death. She would have gone with him, if she had been there things might have turned out differently. But no, he had gone alone and in the end perhaps it wouldn’t have made any difference anyway. Instead, maybe they both would be...

Dead. The walls of the van seemed to close in on her and she gasped for breath, as the word formed in her mind.

Billy reached out and put a hand on her shoulder. “Amanda,” he said, and almost asked her, “Are you alright?” What a stupid question, he berated himself harshly, of course she wasn’t alright.

“Sir.” She looked at him with hollow eyes that were somehow empty and yet full of pain at the same time. “I think I need some air. I’m going to take a walk.” She moved towards the door of the van.

“Want some company?” he asked kindly.

“No, if you don’t mind, I’d like to be alone.” She stepped down onto the pavement and slowly walked away.

Billy sighed, he knew that she’d be anything but alone, and that the memories of Lee she carried would be a heavy load to shoulder just then.

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After hours of patient effort, Lee had finally managed to untie himself. Not wanting to wait for his captor to return, he tried to find a way out of the tiny basement room where he was being held. The door was secured with a deadbolt and the hinges were on the other side. Quickly Lee scanned the room for an alternate exit. There were no windows, of course, but he found a small grate in the floor. Using one of the chair legs as a lever, he at last managed to pry it open.

His bruised and cut body bore testimony to the tight squeeze it had been to force his body through the opening. At least, Lee thought, Archdale won’t be able to follow me in here, when he discovers I’m gone. The criminal was at least 50 pounds heavier and had a much bulkier frame. Lee smiled; Amanda said he could always find the silver lining in any situation.

He found himself in a large drainage pipe, knee deep in what he hoped was water. In the dim light he noticed a walkway along the left side and scrambled up. Now to find another way out. Lee had moved no more than ten feet down the walkway, when he was thrown by the force of a massive explosion in the building above him. The sudden change in air pressure tore at his lungs and he was flung to the ground, losing consciousness.

When he awoke, it was to find the passage filling with smoke. Lee struggled to breathe. He quickly took off his shirt and tore it into strips. Not the most effective solution, but they would function as an impromptu breathing mask against the thickening smoke.

Damn! he thought to himself, he should have known that Archdale would have had a contingency plan. Once he found that his last hostage had escaped he must have realized he no longer had any leverage. He had achieved his goal of revenge against Senator Langford, and, Lee smiled grimly, he might still achieve his other goal of killing an agent as well. Stetson, he thought to himself, you’re not out of this yet.

The smoke was getting denser by the minute and Lee forced himself to his feet. There didn't seem to be a part of his body that didn't ache. He started walking; there had to be another exit further down. Certainly there was no question of being able to go back the way he had come.

Visibility in the passage had been minimal to begin with, and now with the added difficulty of the smoky haze, Lee was forced to cautiously feel his way along. After what seemed like an eternity, the pipe veered sharply to the left. Rounding the corner, he abruptly came upon a steel mesh, effectively preventing anything non-liquid from continuing down the passageway. What caught his eye though, was the other pipe that joined with his, just beyond the grate. Faint daylight seemed to be coming from another opening, not too far away. If only he could get there.

Lee pushed against the mesh with all his might, striving to reach the entrance to the other pipe, so tantalizingly just out of reach. The metal didn't budge. He sighed, and began to methodically run his fingers over the bars. Somewhere there had to be a weak point.

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The fire had finally burned itself out, the roof falling in at the last with a tremendous crash. Only two walls still remained upright, their bricks enclosing a pile of smouldering debris. The fire chief approached Billy, saying, "It'll still be a few hours before we can move in. There's no way anyone could have survived and I'm not going to risk my men just to find a couple of bodies."

Billy looked over to where Amanda stood, hoping she hadn't heard his callous words or tone. She stood by the van, looking either at the ruin that was all that remained of the building or else nothing at all. He walked back over to her. "Amanda, why don't you go home? You need some rest. There's nothing you can do here." He spoke half-heartedly, not really expecting to have any more success convincing her this time.

She shook her head. She knew it was absurd to have any hope left at all, but somehow until they found his body she just couldn't really believe that Lee was gone. Billy sighed and put his arm around her again.

Their attention was diverted by a sound coming from a large metal grate about thirty feet to their left. It lifted slightly and then moved a few inches to one side. "What the.." Billy said in surprise, walking slowly towards it, Amanda following close behind.

The grate shifted again and the small opening widened. They saw a hand reach up over the edge of the hole, the knuckles whitening as the person inside used his other hand to push the grate open even further.

Amanda stopped dead in her tracks, convinced she must be hallucinating, but Billy's reaction beside her indicated he saw the same thing. "I'll be damned, Scarecrow made it."

Time seemed to stand still as she watched Lee struggle to hoist himself through the opening and onto solid ground. Her feet unfroze from where she was standing and she ran towards him, desperate to cover the distance between her and her husband. He was bruised, cut, covered in soot and smelled of smoke but she had never felt anything as wonderful as having him in her arms again. “Lee,” she half sobbed, “you’re alive.”

“Amanda,” he sighed, holding her equally close. There had been times in the past day and a half when he had wondered if he would ever see her again. He pressed his lips to hers, beyond caring who might see them.

They kept their arms around each other and turned to face Billy.

“Scarecrow, you’re a mess,” was his only comment, but the look on his face showed the relief he also felt.

“Really?” Lee answered. “I feel fine.”

“We’ve got an ambulance standing by. Doc McJohn will have a quick look to make sure you’re okay. In the meantime, Amanda, I’m having someone drive you home. We’ll take good care of Lee for you, I promise. You can see him again after we get his statement and you get some sleep.”

“No,” Amanda protested holding onto Lee even tighter, “I’d rather stay.”

Billy frowned. “This time I’m making it an order. You’ve been up all night and there’s nothing you can do here.”

“He’s right.” Lee looked down at her pale complexion, broken only by the dark circles under her eyes. He pulled her close and whispered, “I’m fine, really. Now go home and get some rest. I’ll call you as soon as I can.”

She turned to Billy. “Okay,” she reluctantly agreed and headed towards her car.

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Relieved to finally be home again, Lee stripped off what remained of his tattered clothing, discarding it in a heap on the bathroom floor. Damn, that had been one of his favourite suits. He grinned at the thought, he was lucky to still be around to claim it on his expense account.

He turned on the shower full blast and stepped in. The pelting needles of hot water felt invigorating against his body as they washed away the grime that clung to him like a second skin. It took three shampooings before he was satisfied that he had managed to eradicate the smoky smell from his hair. He stood under the spray for a few additional minutes, just letting the water wash over him.

Finally he shut off the tap and stepped onto the bath mat. The small room was filled with steam, immediately bringing to mind the smoke filled passageway he had negotiated that afternoon. Quickly wrapping a towel around his waist, he grabbed another and began drying his hair as he walked out of the bathroom.

He was startled to find Amanda sitting on his bed. “Amanda,” he said, “I didn’t expect to see you so soon.”

He looked at her closely. She had apparently also showered and changed, but from the looks of it still hadn’t slept.

“I thought you were at home getting some rest. Billy’s orders, remember? I’m the one who’s supposed to flout them, not you.” He smiled but she didn’t respond in kind.

“I had to see you again,” she admitted quietly. “I still can’t believe you’re not...” She choked up and looked away.

Lee dropped the towel from his hand and sat down beside her, gathering her into his arms. “Shh... it’s okay, I’m here. It’s all over.”

Amanda sobbed quietly in his arms, finally able to release the tears she had been holding in for so long. “I’m sorry,” she said, after she regained her composure. “I’m getting you all wet.”

“That’s okay, I was already wet from the shower anyway.” He released her and got up to retrieve the towel from the floor, intending to dry himself off.

“Let me.” She stood up, one of her hands closing on his wrist, the other insistently pulling the towel from his grasp. She brought it up to his face, tenderly moving over his features. Lee caught up a corner of the towel to do the same for her, wiping away the last of her tears.

Taking the towel out of his hand again, she began to dry off his upper body. Her hands roamed over his shoulders and chest, gently fingering the bruises and other marks of his ordeal. She leaned down and brushed her lips across the place where he had scraped his ribcage against the mesh in his efforts to get free.

She stepped closer as she reached around him to dry off his back. His nerve endings seem to come alive at the soft touch of the towel and the even softer feeling of her fingers running down his naked back. He shuddered as his body began to respond to her proximity to him. He forced himself to keep his hands at his side, focusing on the reactions she was eliciting in every fibre of his being.

She moved her hands lower, coming in contact with the towel around his waist. He watched as she pulled loose the corner he had tucked in. Her fingers were cool and demanding as she used one hand to push the towel away from his hips and it fell to the floor.

Using the towel she still held in her other hand, she slowly dried him off, Lee gasping at the feel of the terrycloth against his erection. She dropped the towel and retraced her movements with her hand, smiling softly as she felt his response intensify. Her hands moved with the certainty that five months of marriage had brought, over a body that had become as familiar to her as her own.

Unable to remain still any longer, Lee reached for her zipper but she stepped away from him. “No,” she whispered, firmly pressing her hands against his chest, until he was once again seated on the bed. “Just sit there,” she directed him.

Lee smiled. Although Amanda was anything but passive in their lovemaking, tonight she seemed to have a fierce need to reassure herself that he was actually there. Her hands had wandered over his body restlessly as if tactile sensations were the only way she could convince herself that he was still alive.

Now she stood before him, her eyes locked on his as she reached for the bottom hem of her sweater. Slowly she pulled it up over her head, her dark curls catching in the collar, lifting and then settling back down on her bare shoulders. Next she undid the zipper at the front of her jeans, the metallic click of the teeth as they separated the only sound in the room. She pushed her jeans down then quickly pulled off her socks. Her eyes met his again, as she used her feet to push her discarded clothing to one side.

His hungry eyes roamed over her nearly nude body, the lace of her bra and panties doing little to conceal her from him. Amanda reached behind her back again. With one swift motion, she undid her bra and slipped it off, freeing her breasts.

She took a step towards him, capturing his hands in hers. Her soft brown hair brushed against his face as she leaned down. “Touch me,” she urged him, her tongue tickling his ear as she moved even closer, and at the same time, brought his hands up to her breasts.

He groaned as he felt her nipples harden under his touch almost immediately. Apparently she was every bit as aroused as he. Amanda rested her hands on his shoulders, kneading his muscles as his hands caressed her. She felt his hot breath as he brought his mouth into contact with her body, his lips brushing against her right breast. She dug her fingers into his back as he slowly ran his tongue around her nipple and pulled with his lips ever so slightly.

Lee tried to slip his hands around her back, intending to pull her down with him, but again she stopped him. “Wait,” she insisted, “not yet.”

He groaned again, not sure just how much longer he could hold back. He forced himself to be still and watched as she stepped away from him. Her hands moved to her hips and she swiftly slipped off her panties. His eyes devoured her again; never had he desired a woman more.

She moved towards him once more, pushing him backwards onto the bed. He held his breath as she moved onto the bed beside him, leaning over so their lips almost touched. She slipped her

left leg between his, supporting herself on her knees and one hand. As she ran the fingers of her free hand across his lips, she said, "I thought I had lost you."

His eyes pierced into hers. "Never," he reassured her fiercely, "I belong to you."

She moved her hand away from his face, reaching down for him again. Slowly, deliberately, she stroked him before taking his hand in hers and pressing it between her legs. "Now," she murmured, "make me yours."

He needed no other encouragement, swiftly sliding his right arm around her back and easing the fingers of his left hand into her. She moaned for the first time as he found and stroked the soft wetness of her inner core. He pulled her down onto him, simultaneously rolling over and moving towards the head of the bed. She clung to him, a soft cry escaping her lips again as their bodies came into full contact.

Lee began to kiss her, moving downwards from her mouth, to her neck, to her breasts. Her hands tangled in his hair as she pushed him even lower. He trailed his lips and tongue down her stomach, feeling the muscles contract at his touch. His hands slid over her thighs as his tongue pressed into her, tasting, exploring, and exciting her all at once.

Amanda felt as if she would explode, torn apart by the powerful sensations coursing through her body. She writhed beneath his touch, her fingers twisting in his hair. Just when she thought she could take no more, Lee raised himself up on his elbows, his eyes meeting hers. Neither of them said a word as he pushed himself up towards her, their gaze never shifting.

She reached down for him again, but he caught her hand with his, lacing their fingers together. "No," he protested thickly, "no more games. I want to be inside you, now." He pushed forward with all the urgency of his aroused state, her wetness guiding him into her body.

He began to move rhythmically, and felt her fingers tighten around his. His other hand reached to capture hers in the same manner. He raised their linked hands up over her head, pressing down into the mattress. His mouth met hers, their tongues sliding against each other with each downward thrust of his body, their ragged breath escaping their lips each time they temporarily lost contact. He could feel her breasts beneath him, her nipples rubbing against his chest as he moved. She encircled his legs with hers, pulling him in closer and deeper.

They were both in such a heightened state of arousal that they reached their climaxes almost at once. Lee felt Amanda arch her back and press against him, her muscles clenching tightly around him as she gasped out his name. At almost the same instant, he felt his own release and shuddered against her.

Afterwards, he rolled off of her and pulled her close. The stress of the ordeal they had gone through combined with the total release of their sexual encounter left them both physically and emotionally worn out. Amanda was barely aware of Lee getting up to turn out the light and cover her with a blanket. She felt the gentle touch of his lips against her forehead, as her body



surrendered to the sleep she had denied it for two days. Lee lay back down, nuzzled his head in the hollow of her neck and nodded off himself.

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Amanda woke in the middle of the night, jolted out of sleep by the terrifying images that had been running through her mind. She sat upright, disoriented, unsure of what had been simply part of the nightmare and what was real. She looked down, sighing in relief at the sight of Lee sleeping peacefully beside her.

Her gaze lingered on his features, utterly defenseless in sleep. She watched the gentle rise and fall of his chest, marveling again that he had come back to her. He hadn't died in the fire, spared once again by whatever powers there were that had originally brought them together.

A frown crossed her face as she remembered how she had felt when she had heard the sound of the explosion. It had seemed to rip through her heart at the same time as it destroyed the building. Her mind had fought against the realization that she would never see Lee again, not wanting to believe that she would have to face a future without him. It could have happened so easily, and maybe next time they wouldn't be so fortunate.

She lay back down again, trying to block out that possibility. She didn't want to disturb his much needed rest, but she didn't think she'd be able to get back to sleep herself unless she could physically reassure herself that he was there beside her. Carefully she eased her body close to his, fitting herself against him and laying her head on his shoulder. Lee murmured something indistinct in his sleep and turned slightly towards her. His arm slipped around her shoulder, pulling her close. Amanda closed her eyes, breathed in his scent and dropped back off to sleep.

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The next time she awoke, it was full daylight. Lee was just stepping into the bedroom from the bathroom, already showered and dressed. "Hi, sleepyhead," he greeted her with a smile. "Finally decide to join the rest of the world?"

"How long have you been up?" she asked.

"Not long. Hungry?"

She yawned and stretched. "Don't tell me you actually want breakfast."

"It's a little late in the day for that."

"Brunch?" she guessed.

He shook his head, his grin widening.

"Lunch? Dinner?" She sat up. "Just what time is it anyway?"

“Almost three pm. We must have both been exhausted.”

“I’ll say. I wasn’t able to relax for a moment since I heard that you had been taken hostage.”

“What about me? Not only did I manage to escape from that terrorist but I immediately fell into your clutches. And I wasn’t nearly as successful eluding them.”

Lee ducked the pillow Amanda threw in his direction. “Don’t con me, Stetson,” she said, “You loved every minute of it.”

“Too true,” he grinned. “If that’s the reaction a close call gets from you, I’m going to ask Kendall if I can join his bomb diffusing team.”

“Don’t you dare,” she said as she got out of bed and slipped on her robe. “I want my husband in one piece, thank you very much.”

He walked up behind her and put his arms around her. “Have any particular piece in mind?” he teased, sliding his fingers beneath the sash tied around her waist.

She batted his hands away. “Stop it,” she said, but without much conviction. “I’m going to take a shower and then I want something to eat. Why don’t you make yourself useful and go cook something while I’m in the bathroom?”

“If I order takeout, I can make myself useful in other ways,” Lee suggested. “Need someone to scrub your back?”

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Lee and Amanda sat on the floor in front of the couch, empty Chinese food cartons littering the surface of the coffee table. She leaned back against him as he put his arms around her. He rested his head on her shoulder and sighed in contentment. For a time, they sat there quietly, just enjoying the tranquility of the moment.

Finally Amanda broke the silence. “Lee, I’ve been thinking.”

“What about?” he asked contentedly.

“What do you think of the idea of having a baby?” she asked.

“A baby?” he repeated, startled. “What brought this on?”

“I don’t know,” she replied. “It’s sort of been in the back of my mind for awhile now. Plus, I’ve got an appointment with my doctor on Monday for my annual checkup.”

Lee turned her by the shoulder so he could see her face. "It would mean a lot of changes," he began slowly. "Starting with going public with our marriage."

"I know, just promise me you'll think about it."

"Okay, but speaking of children, we seem to have been neglecting the boys the past few days."

She shook her head. "I sent them to Joe's when this whole mess started. He's dropping them off later tonight."

"Well, let's at least be there to welcome them home." Lee got up, and reached for her hand to pull her to her feet. "And to make it up to them for depriving them of their mother the last three days, what do you say we take a little trip? Tomorrow's Saturday, we could go to Baltimore for the day."

Amanda smiled. "Incredibly enough, neither of them has any kind of outing on their schedules."

"What no baseball, Junior Trailblazers, or camp outs?" he asked in mock amazement. "Not to mention that the Orioles have a home stand."

She shook her head. "Sounds like it was meant to be. Joe said he'd be have them home by eight, why don't we head on over?"

"You go ahead. I'm going to make a few phone calls and see if I can get some tickets to the game. I'll be there in a little while."

"Okay." She gave him a quick kiss and headed for the door.

"Amanda," he called after her.

She stopped and turned around. "What?"

He smiled the slow, teasing grin she loved so much. "I had a great time last night."

She smiled back, but, he was pleased to notice, didn't blush in the slightest. Turning back to the door, she said over her shoulder, "Anytime, Stetson, anytime."

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When Amanda didn't return to the office for lunch on Monday, Lee figured her doctor must have been running behind schedule. By midafternoon though, she still hadn't shown up and he started to get worried. He phoned over to her house, but it was Dotty who answered.

"Lee, the boys are still talking about Saturday. But when are you coming over for dinner again? And don't give me that excuse of being busy at work."

"I'll come over some night this week," he promised.

“Tonight,” she insisted.

“Okay, tonight,” he agreed. Surely he would have managed to find Amanda by that time.

Lee frowned as he hung up the phone. It wasn't like Amanda to just disappear. He called his apartment but got the machine. Unable to sit around any longer he decided to drive over there before shifting into serious panic mode.

He sighed in relief as he pulled up to his building and saw Amanda's Wagoneer in the parking lot. Getting out of his car, he noticed she was in fact still sitting in her vehicle. He hurried over and opened the door. “Amanda, what are you doing out here?”

When she didn't respond, he continued, “How long have you been here anyway?”

“I don't know,” she said listlessly. “I went for a drive after my appointment. I ended up over here and I just...” Her voice trailed away.

He saw the desolate look in her eyes and felt the icy fingers of fear wrap themselves around his throat. Obviously something was very wrong. Not wanting to have this conversation out in the parking lot, he reached for her hand. “Come on, let's go upstairs.”

Amanda was silent during the elevator ride up to his apartment. As he watched the floor indicator light, Lee could feel his urge to panic increase along with the numbers. The doctor must have found something terribly wrong.

They entered his apartment and he led her over to the couch. Sitting down beside her, he held both her hands in his. He took a deep breath and asked, “Okay, what happened?”

A solitary tear escaped from beneath Amanda's eyelid and slowly trickled down her cheek. She spoke so softly that Lee had to lean forward to catch every word. “I told my doctor that I was seeing someone seriously and was thinking about having another baby. And she said... she said...” Amanda dissolved into tears, unable to continue.

Lee quickly gathered her into his arms, trying to soothe her with his touch and words. “What did she say? Please tell me.. we can face anything together.”

Amanda made an effort to collect herself. “That the hormone levels from my last physical indicated the odds were slim to nil of me having another baby. She's sending my new samples over to the lab to be sure, but...”

Lee felt relief wash over him. “That's what this is about? Oh Amanda, you scared me. I thought you were going to tell me you were really sick.”

She pulled back from him. “Lee, don't you understand? We'll probably never have a baby.”

“I understand that. But as long as you’re all right, that’s all that matters.”

“No, it’s not. I wanted to give you a child, to let you see what it’s like to be a father. But I can’t.” She put her hands up to her face, muffling her next words. “You should have married someone who can give you what you need.”

He sat there for a moment, stunned, not sure if he had heard her correctly. “Amanda, don’t do this.”

“What?”

“Start saying things like that.” He pulled her hands down and forced her to look him in the eyes. “You know you’re the only one I want to be married to.”

“But aren’t you upset or angry or disappointed?”

“I’m disappointed because this means so much to you. But not with you. Amanda, this didn’t just happen to you or me. It happened to us.”

“I just feel so bad about taking something so precious from you,” she whispered. “I’ve got Philip and Jamie, I wanted you to see what it’s like to be a parent.”

Seeing the look of sadness on her face, Lee took a deep breath, and tried to be calm. “Amanda, you haven’t taken anything from me. You’ve given me so much. Every hour, every minute I’m with you is a gift to me. Before I met you, I thought I would end up living my whole life alone. I had lost everyone I had ever cared for. I never expected I would find someone to share my life with.”

He paused for a second, then took her hands in his again. Looking into her deep brown eyes, still bright with tears, he continued, “When you came into my life, instead of realizing what I had been given, I took every opportunity to push you away. I could have missed out on all of this but you wouldn’t let me. That’s what you’ve given me.”

“Is this supposed to be the silver lining in all of this?” she asked bitterly. “You showing me once again that you can make the best of things?”

“I am not making the best of things,” he objected. “Amanda, this morning you found out about all of this, and spent the rest of day obsessing about how you think I feel. Now do you want to know how I really feel?”

“Lee, your family was taken away from you when you were so young. Don’t try to pretend that this isn’t important to you.”

“I’m not going to.” He chose his next words carefully, picking his way through the minefield of their conversation. “I’ve spent a lot of time thinking about this, especially since you brought it up last week. Part of me would like nothing more than to create a new life with you.”

Amanda's eyes welled up again with tears. "And that's not going to happen."

"Hold on a second, I said part of me. Another part of me is much more selfish. I also realized that having a baby would change everything. If you were pregnant you couldn't work in the field. And after the baby was born, I'm not sure I would want you to."

He put his arm around her shoulders, holding her close. "Amanda, it took me so many years to find you and even longer to realize what we had together. I threw away so much time we could have spent together. Now I want to share every moment I can with you. I don't want to work with another partner. I want you by my side."

"And I want to be with you too," Amanda replied softly. "I guess I didn't stop and think about how a baby would change our whole working relationship."

Lee smiled, encouraged by her response. "You are the most important person in the world to me - baby or no baby. And you've already given me a family. Your mother, your boys, they're part of my family now too."

"But they don't know that."

"Maybe we should do something about that," he said without any hesitation in his voice.

"What?" Amanda was startled.

"Obviously if you wanted to have a baby, you were ready to tell them. So let's forget about this part-time marriage thing. I want to be with you and our family as much as possible. We should seize every moment we can." He leaned over and gently brushed his lips against hers. "I love you, Amanda, more than I ever thought I could love someone."

"I love you too," she whispered. "I'm sorry about what I said about you marrying someone else. It was a stupid thing to say; I was just so scared."

"It's okay. I'm not angry. You just surprised me. I don't want anyone else. Only you - for however long we have." They sat there quietly for a few minutes, both lost in thought. "You know," he finally broke the silence, "I think that's what all of this is really about. I'm not sure you really want another baby. You thought you lost me the other day. I think you're afraid of it actually happening."

Amanda took a deep breath. "Last week, when I didn't know if you were alive or not, it was the worst experience of my life. Even after I found out you were alright, I kept remembering what it felt like to lose you. I had a horrible nightmare that night. I dreamed I was in the warehouse where you were being held. I looked for you everywhere, but I couldn't find you." She gulped down a sob. "And when I finally saw you, I ran towards you, but there was a huge explosion... and you were gone," she concluded. "It was all over."

Lee put his arms around her again. “Amanda, I’m here. I’m not going anywhere.”

“But you can’t know that.”

“No one knows how much time they have. Every day, people die in car accidents, they have heart attacks, no one is invincible.”

“But most people don’t have the type of jobs we do,” she pointed out.

“True. There are risks, but we take precautions and prepare ourselves, as much as we can.”

“Does anyone ever really feel prepared for something like this?”

“Not really.” Lee shook his head. “Sometimes on the nights when you’re not here, I’ve had this recurring nightmare about you. I’m at the train station with the package. I know there’s someone I’m supposed to give it to and when I do, everything will be all right. I’m searching everywhere and finally I see you. I go up to you and try to hand you the package. But you just give me this blank look and walk away, leaving me all alone.”

“Oh, Lee.” Amanda reached out and caressed his cheek. “I would never have done that.”

“Why not?” he asked. “Why would you trust a complete stranger? Why did you?”

She smiled. “I’ve asked myself that a million times.”

“And?”

“I don’t really know. Maybe because you never felt like a stranger to me. Maybe for the same reason you picked me out of the crowd. We were just meant to be together.”

Lee took her hands in his again. “Since the day I met you, I felt there was something missing in every other woman I dated. I wasn’t sure exactly what I was looking for, but it wasn’t them. It was you. And once I realized that I was in love with you, I’ve never looked at anyone else. You’re the only one for me. I said all the days of my life and I meant it. So don’t tell me what I should or shouldn’t want. I want you.”

“Really?” She looked at him, knowing the answer of course, but still needing the comforting reassurance of hearing it again and to see the expression of love on his face as he said it.

“Really.” He reached out and stroked her cheek. “Only you. Amanda, not being able to have a baby with you isn’t the worst thing that could happen to me. Never having met you, not having you in my life, that would be the worst. Speaking of silver linings though, there is an upside to all of this.”

“And what exactly would that be?”

“Your doctor didn’t say you couldn’t get pregnant, just that it wasn’t very likely. We could have fun trying.” He smiled at her, a teasing grin.

“I wonder what the odds are?” she mused aloud. “One in a million?”

“Then we’d better get started.”

Amanda laughed and pushed him away. “You’re incorrigible, you know that?”

“Nope, just insatiable.” Lee smiled, glad to have broken her melancholy mood. He leaned over and kissed her quickly. “Your mother’s expecting us for dinner. I’m going to change into something more casual and we can drive over there.”

Amanda stood up and wiped the last tears from her eyes. “I should probably freshen up a bit too. I’ll be ready in a couple of minutes.”

“Sure.” Lee followed her into the bedroom. As she headed toward the bathroom, he hung up his suit jacket and loosened his tie. Sitting on the bed, he took off his shoes and socks. Glancing up when the bathroom door opened, he stopped cold, one sock still dangling from his hand. Amanda stood in the doorway, wearing only a silk slip. He smiled and managed to get out, “Well, that’s a bit more casual than I had in mind.”

She crossed the room and sat down on his lap, as Lee put an arm around her waist to hold her close. She reached over and delicately ran her fingertips over his face, touching his eyebrows, cheeks, and nose. Leaning down, she retraced her path with her lips.

“You do realize that this is still an after effect of our close call,” he pointed out.

“Hmm..” Amanda murmured, moved her lips to his neck, tracing a path down to his shirt collar. “Is that a problem?” she asked as she finished removing his tie, and tossed it aside.

“No problem at all,” he said. “Just thought you should be aware of it.”

Using his free hand, Lee nudged her slip’s strap until it fell off her shoulder and down her arm. He moved his hand lower and gently fingered the trim along the top of her slip. The material slipped down, exposing the curve of her breast. Ever so slowly he began to caress her, stroking and cupping her soft skin.

Amanda closed her eyes and leaned against him, feeling her tension and unhappiness dissipate as swiftly as morning fog vanishes at the touch of the sun. Lee was right, she should think about how much they had together, and not worry about what might or might not happen in the future.

She ran her hand along Lee’s jaw line and around the back of his neck, massaging and encouraging his gentle strokes. Moving her hand into his hair, she insistently pushed his mouth closer to her breast. She moaned softly as his lips captured her flesh and his hot breath teased her nipple into hardness.



Lee tightened his grip around her waist, pulling her closer. At the same time he slid his other hand lower, running his fingers over her silk clad torso. Amanda took his hand in hers, pressing it between her knees. She could feel his strong fingers firmly push her legs apart, demanding more access. His hand slipped beneath the hem of her slip, caressing her inner thighs, then moving even closer.

“Oh, Lee,” Amanda sighed, putting her hands on either side of his head, forcing him to look her in the eyes. She pulled his face back up towards her, meeting his lips in a soft wet kiss. As his tongue pressed against hers, she began to lean backwards, pulling him down along with her.

She could feel his hands insistently tug at her slip, drawing it up over her body. Breaking their kiss for an instant, she lifted her arms, allowing him to pull it over her head. He carelessly tossed her slip off to the side, the silken rustle as it hit the floor drowned out by her soft moans. Settling back against the bed, she felt his caressing hands trail along the length of her body. She tried to do the same for him, but was hampered by his remaining layers of clothing.

“Hold that thought,” Lee said as he stood up. He quickly finished unbuttoning his shirt and dropped it on the floor. Next he removed his pants and boxer shorts. Her eyes followed every movement hungrily, drinking in the sight of his naked body as each part became exposed.

Catching her eye, Lee paused. “What are you thinking about?” he asked teasingly.

Amanda smiled back. “How lucky I am to have fallen in love with someone who happens to have the most incredible body.”

“What a coincidence,” he replied. “Me too.”

As he took a step closer, Amanda quickly tucked her legs up under herself and knelt in front of him on the bed. She reached out, weaving the fingers of one hand with his, her other hand firmly reaching out for him. Her soft fingers brushed along his shaft, lightly at first, her touch intensifying along with his response. Amanda could feel his fingers tighten around hers as she leaned forward and ran her tongue over his naked chest. She smiled and continued her caresses.

Lee closed his eyes and concentrated on how good it felt to have Amanda touch him. His body was attuned to her every movement, responding to her slightest touch. Back when they had been dating, he had boasted to her about the ability of his ‘magic fingers’. Now, he was quite willing to admit the title more appropriately belonged to her.

Amanda moved even closer, eagerly pressing against Lee as she pulled her hand from his. She swiftly moved her fingers around his hips and grasped his buttocks. Their bodies joined together, her fingers guiding him in. Lee slipped an arm around her shoulders, tenderly cradling her against him as he lowered them both back down onto the bed. They moved in rhythm, her hips rising to meet his downward thrusts, trying to maximize their contact. Within a few minutes they had brought each other to fulfillment, sharing their moment of climax.

Afterwards, as they lay back against the pillows, Lee reached over to gently run his fingers along Amanda's cheek. His eyes held hers as surely as his hands had held her body only a short time before. In this most intimate of moments, they could almost feel their souls joining together, their physical actions having served only as the outward expression of their deep feelings.

"You are everything I need," Lee said quietly, "and so much more."

"I love you." Her eyes brightened, as she reached out to cover his hand with hers. "And that's what I want too."

"What?" he asked, puzzled.

"What you just said," she smiled. "More." She moved his hand lower and once again the world around them faded away.

**The End**