

Lizaveta

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Timeframe: March of 1986.

Author's notes: Although it's not the first piece I've posted, this was my first attempt at fanfiction. My thanks to all of the authors whose wonderful stories provided me with unknowing encouragement. My hope is that my contribution enhances the SMK fanfic world. Thanks for reading!

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Prologue

Friday, March 14th - Mid-evening - Somewhere in the mountains of Virginia

She woke up slowly, wondering why she was having trouble clearing her head. She was disoriented, ached all over and felt as though the world had been turned upside down. There was a painful pressure across her hips, and her right shoulder and chest felt like someone had hit her with a baseball bat. All of the exposed skin on the right side of her face and on her right arm felt raw and bruised. Her head was throbbing. She forced her heavy eyelids open and looked around. What little she could see caused her breath to catch in her throat.

She was in a truck that she didn't immediately recognize. The vehicle was lying on its left side, and she realized that she was, indeed, hanging nearly upside down. The pressure she felt across her pelvis and lower abdomen was from the seatbelt, the only thing keeping her in her seat on the passenger side.

Suddenly, she remembered. Not all of it, but bits and pieces that came flying into her brain like pictures from a late-night TV movie.

She remembered him driving down a narrow dirt road like a bat out of hell, the trees that lined the sides of the road melting into a blur as they sped through the twilight.

A pickup truck behind them and closing fast.

The sound of gunshots.

Their truck veering suddenly to the left.

The sickening feeling as they plunged down the steep, tree-covered slope, bouncing like a pinball off large trees and flattening small ones in the wild descent.

The dizzy sensation of going airborne for a moment as they careened over the edge of another, much smaller embankment.

And last of all, the bone-jarring impact of their final stop.

Chapter One

Tuesday, March 11th - Late morning - The Agency

Lee walked into the Q bureau, grinning as he saw Amanda, hard at work at his desk. "Come on, Amanda. Billy wants to see us in his office."

"Sure, Lee. Give me just a minute." He waited while she finished the last page of the report she was working on.

Moments later, she lifted her eyes to him with a satisfied smile. "I can't believe I finally got caught up," she said. "It looked like I'd be up to my neck in paperwork for the rest of the month." Standing, she rounded the desk and joined him.

"Don't remind me," he returned, placing his right hand on the small of her back to guide her toward Billy's door. "I've been stuck in this office for too long."

Amanda smiled to herself as they entered Billy's office. Scarecrow hadn't been in the field for over two weeks, and the lack of action didn't sit well with him.

They sank into the chairs across from Billy's desk and looked at him expectantly. He finished signing a small stack of expense vouchers before looking up. "I'm glad you two are available," he said. "Scarecrow, I have an assignment for you. There's a meet planned for this weekend, and you are to be the contact."

Lee smiled. At last - a chance to get out of the office for a while. "Sure thing, Billy. Just tell me when and where."

"It's a very special circumstance, Scarecrow," Billy answered. "We got word earlier this morning that Antonin Balanchev is in the States, wanting to pass some information to us."

"Balanchev?" Lee asked with surprise. He straightened in his chair, then leaned forward. "He went missing nearly three years ago. No one's heard from him since that botched drop in Poland. I thought he was out of the picture."

"So did everyone else in the intelligence community," Billy said. "But he got word to one of our informants last week, saying that he wants to meet. He's insisting that you are the only one he'll talk with."

"Of course I'll go," responded Lee quietly. "Where am I supposed to meet him? And why did you want to see Amanda?"

"Amanda will be part of your cover," Billy chuckled. "The meet is to take place near the Wolf Gap Recreation Area, in a rugged section of the George Washington National Forest up near the West Virginia border. We've arranged for you and Amanda to attend a couples-only camping retreat."

"We're going camping?" Lee repeated, remembering the last night they had spent in the "great outdoors". They had been huddled together in a swamp, chained together, hoping that somehow they'd be able to elude Sacker's gang. They'd clung to each other, for warmth and for comfort, and then . . . The sound of Billy's voice brought his mind back to the present.

"Yes," smiled Billy. "The idea is for couples to spend a long weekend relaxing together and learning how to 'get back to nature'. The campsite is remote and isolated so that the couples don't have to

worry about any unwelcome interruptions." He paused for a moment. Anyone could see the growing bond between his favorite pair of agents, and this assignment would throw them closer together than normal. Suppressing a smile at the thought of how they would handle the situation, he continued. "It's a perfect set-up for a meet. You'll be roughing it; no cabins, no soft beds, just tents, sleeping bags, and Mother Nature. We've sent Balanchev all the information he needs, and he'll find you when he's ready to meet. Now you two get with Leatherneck. I want you here tomorrow morning, ready to leave. The retreat doesn't begin until Thursday at noon, but you'll need some time to scout out the area."

Lee took the files from Billy's outstretched hand and escorted Amanda out of the office.

Tuesday, March 11th - Early afternoon - Agency Conference Room

After lunch, Lee watched as Amanda studied the pictures of Balanchev and read an overview of the Russian's association with the Agency. When she had finished, he fleshed out the sketchy portrait the documents had painted and explained his relationship with the Russian.

On one of Lee's early assignments with the Agency, he had found himself in trouble deep within the Soviet Union. When Balanchev had trapped him in an isolated cabin near Novomoskovsk, he'd been sure his life was over. To his great surprise, however, the KGB agent had only disarmed him and then had begun to talk, giving him information about a planned break-in at the American Embassy. Promising that he'd be in touch from time to time, Balanchev had then helped Scarecrow find his way back into Moscow in time to prevent the attack. It was the first contact between Balanchev and the Agency, and it was one of the establishing moments of Lee's career.

Balanchev had loved Mother Russia but was frustrated with the direction the Soviet Union had been taking, especially after the construction of the Berlin Wall had divided Germany and brought the Cold War to a head. His contacts with Lee were infrequent, but the valuable information he passed along once or twice each year had helped avert more than one East-West crisis along the mostly invisible barrier of the Iron Curtain.

"No wonder Billy needed you for this," Amanda said thoughtfully. "You're the only American agent Balanchev has ever really trusted." She looked at Lee with admiration.

"Yeah, and he's the only KGB agent I've ever learned to respect," admitted Lee. He'd revealed more of himself than he was really comfortable with, but she deserved to know as much about Balanchev as possible. "I guess we'd better go see Leatherneck and get our gear for the weekend."

"Well there's one good thing about this overnight assignment," Amanda quipped as they headed for the elevator.

"What's that?" asked Lee, pushing the call button.

"We won't have to worry about who's going to get the bed," she laughed. "We'll both be stuck in sleeping bags on the cold, hard ground!"

The doors opened and Lee escorted her into the elevator. 'True enough,' he thought. 'We won't be sharing a bed. But a two-man tent can get pretty cozy. . .'

Tuesday, March 11th - Late evening - 4247 Maplewood Drive

Lee stood in the shadows outside Amanda's house, watching through the kitchen window as she pulled the last of the chocolate chip cookies from the oven. She poured a glass of milk, put two of the freshly baked cookies on a dessert plate, and disappeared up the stairs.

He picked the lock and let himself in, then poured his own glass of milk and leaned back on the kitchen counter, munching on one of the warm cookies while he waited for her to return.

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He could hear her talking to herself as she came down the stairs. "Okay, I'm all packed . . . my camping gear is in the back of the station wagon . . . all I need to do is finish the trail mix and I'll be all ready to . . ." She gasped as she rounded the corner into the kitchen and nearly ran into Lee. "I wish you'd quit doing that!" she exclaimed.

"I just wanted to check and be sure that you're ready to leave in the morning. Where's your mother?"

"She's upstairs, so keep your voice down," she answered, still breathless from being startled. "And yes, I'm nearly ready to leave. I just want to put some trail mix together for the trip."

Lee watched her discomfiture with amusement. "You don't have to go to that much trouble, Amanda. The club is furnishing all the food. All we're expected to do is show up for meals and spend the rest of the time away from the group, pretending to be a couple. It's the perfect cover for Balanchev to contact me." A fanciful feeling fought its way up from his subconscious mind as his thoughts turned to the weekend, to spending time alone with Amanda in the isolated setting. He shook his head to banish the idea.

"Oh, I'm not packing enough to feed us for the whole weekend, Lee," she answered. "But I always fix a batch of trail mix when I'm going camping. You can get pretty hungry while you're out hiking and doing outdoorsy stuff."

"Amanda, we're not going to be doing that much 'outdoorsy stuff', as you put it. We just have to meet Balanchev!"

"That's true," Amanda replied reasonably, "but part of the cover is to look and act the part, so we'll have to get out some, and I'm just trying to be ready."

"It'll be fine. We'll be fine." Lee smiled down at Amanda. He still couldn't believe how she approached every situation with such enthusiasm. "What did you tell your mother?"

"Oh, that part was easy this time," Amanda said. "Next week is spring break, and Mother is taking the boys to visit Aunt Lillian. They'll leave Friday afternoon, and they'll be gone for the whole week. I'll just be leaving a couple of days earlier than they do. I told Mother I had to go away to scout a location, and that I wouldn't be back until the middle of next week. I'm just so glad that the timing worked out - I still hate lying to her." She looked up at him, and, as always under her gaze, he felt the barrier he'd so carefully placed around his heart threaten to erode.

"That's good, Amanda." He smiled down at her. This assignment was important, and he **did** like the idea that Amanda would be with him. Maybe this time she wouldn't find a way to get herself into trouble. After all, no one knew that Balanchev would be near, and they wouldn't have much interaction with the other campers. 'Besides . . .' another unbidden thought drifted upward into his

awareness, 'it might be interesting to be out there with Amanda. She'll be looking to you to take care of her, and . . .'

'**STOP IT,**' his conscious mind screamed when it realized where the thought was heading. 'This is Amanda! She's just my partner . . . All right, she's a lot more than that,' he had to admit to himself. 'She's a very good friend.' His subconscious got in one more observation before sinking back into obscurity. 'Yeah, right. Just keep telling yourself that, Stetson. Someday you might even start to believe it . . .'

Amanda had been watching Lee curiously. He had become quiet for a few moments as he looked down at her, and a succession of emotions crossed his face before the mask he presented to the world returned. She wasn't sure what she had witnessed, but an electric tingle ran down her spine.

"Lee . . ." Her voice was soft and questioning.

Lee forcibly cut off the unwanted thoughts. "Uh, yeah, I was going to get, uh, an early start tomorrow," he stammered. "I'd better be going." He finished the milk and grabbed another cookie, heading for the back door. "Guess I'd better get out of here," he repeated. "I'll see you in the morning."

"Sure thing," she said. 'What just happened?' she wondered. 'I've never seen him look at me like that before.'

Lee settled into the driver's seat of the 'Vette and watched as she turned out the lights before going upstairs. 'What happens to me when I look into her eyes?' he asked himself. He saw the light come on in her bedroom and waited a few minutes until it went back out, telling him that she was settled for the night. He wasn't sure why he'd come by; she didn't need him to check up on her, and starting tomorrow morning they'd be together constantly for six days. He'd thought that, since they'd been spending more time together over the past few months, he'd be able to forego his habit of checking on her from a distance. But it hadn't worked that way; if anything, his need to make sure she was safe had grown stronger. He didn't even pretend to understand it; he just knew that it was so.

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## **Chapter Two**

*Wednesday, March 12th - Late morning - The mountains along the West Virginia border*

They pulled into the little town of Columbia Furnace, where the group of campers would meet the next day. "Okay if we check in before we get some lunch?" Lee asked Amanda. He needed to stretch his legs and clear his mind. He'd been trying to focus on the upcoming meet by remembering details of his past encounters with Balanchev, but thoughts of Amanda had hovered just beneath the surface the whole morning.

"Sure," she said gratefully. Lee had been pensive all morning. She had tried to get him to talk, but he had cut her off, making the drive somewhat strained. She hoped that he'd be able to relax, at least until Balanchev contacted him, but it didn't seem like that was going to be the case.

Lee pulled into the parking lot of the motel. After checking in, he moved the Bronco to the back of the building and parked just outside room 134.

After he got out of the truck, Amanda drew a deep breath. Playing husband and wife had always been hard for her, but lately she'd realized that the reasons for the difficulties had been changing. Over the past two and a half years she'd gone from worrying about how things might look and about how Lee might act to being concerned about how she might respond to any action on his part. She didn't want to rush into anything, but recently, as they'd begun to explore their relationship outside the confines of their professional lives, it was becoming harder for her to ignore the physical attraction that drew her to him with every touch, every look. She wasn't quite sure what working and living so closely together for the next few days would do to her resolve, and she was more than a little apprehensive about finding out.

"Are you coming, Amanda?" Lee was standing at her door, holding it open for her to get out, but she hadn't moved.

She gave herself a mental shake and returned to the present. "I'm sorry," she said to him with a smile, "I guess I wasn't paying attention."

Able to guess what she'd been thinking about, he gave her an understanding smile as they went to the vehicle's back door to retrieve their bags. He handed her the daypack, her duffle bag, and her jacket, then grabbed his own things and led her to the door, unlocking it and pushing it open for her to enter their room. He watched with some amusement as she struggled to keep relief from flooding her features when she saw the two double beds inside.

"The motel only has double rooms, Amanda," he explained with an almost-regretful smile. "We won't have to worry about the senior agent taking the only bed. But you'd better enjoy what privacy there is tonight," he added. The tent we'll be in starting tomorrow will hardly be larger than just one of these beds."

She set her overnight case on the far bed and turned back to Lee, forcing herself to smile. "You're right, Lee. We'll just have to deal with that tomorrow, though, won't we? Let's go get lunch."

Lee smiled, opened the door, and bowed slightly, gesturing her outside. With his hand at her back, he guided her across the street and into the only restaurant in town. They sat at a table in the back, looking over the soups and sandwiches listed on the typewritten menu. After the waitress had taken their orders, Amanda turned to Lee.

"Are you all right, Lee?" she asked gently. "You seem a little preoccupied."

"I've been thinking about Balanchev all morning," he replied. It was the truth; even the attempts by his subconscious to force him to think of Amanda hadn't deterred him from reviewing in great detail his history with the KGB agent. "I'm sorry, Amanda. I guess I haven't been very good company."

"It's okay, Lee," Amanda answered softly. "It must have been hard for you when you didn't hear from Balanchev for such a long time."

"The man has always been a mystery, Amanda," he sighed. "This is the first time I've ever met with him outside of the Soviet Union or its puppet states, and I'm concerned about what could have made him take the chance to come to the States."

"Are you worried that he's setting you up for something?" she asked.

"No," Lee replied with conviction. "Since I first met him, he's had plenty of chances to bring me down in one way or another. I trust him more than you can trust most people in this business. But I always have to keep my eyes open for anything that could go wrong."

They finished lunch and spent the afternoon driving in the national forest, stopping here and there to leave the road and explore on foot. On one of their hikes, they had visited the Agency cabin near the recreation area, a sort of a rustic "safe house".

"No one from the Agency has had to use the cabin for some time, Amanda," he explained as they left the established trail and began the rough ascent over unmarked terrain. "It's kept stocked with supplies, though, in case of an emergency, and Billy asked me to look in on it while we were in the area."

The cabin was set far back into the woods, out of sight from any of the marked trails. "How could anyone ever find their way here?" Amanda asked Lee as they topped a small rise and saw the cabin, sitting back in the woods. "Anyone who didn't know it was here would just hike right past it."

"That's the whole point," Lee explained with a grin. "We're not likely to need it this time - it's a good six or seven miles from where we'll be camping, but it's one of the reasons the meet was set up for this area."

Amanda was exhausted by the time they arrived back in the small town and went back to the restaurant for dinner. The afternoon with Lee had been pleasant, with no further discussion of Balanchev or the assignment, and dinner conversation was nothing more than comfortable, if uninspired, small talk.

She was looking at Lee, who was seated next to her at the small table. He had turned to face her and had her left hand in his right, absently playing with her rings as he explained to her what to look for when choosing just the right wine to go with Beef Wellington. Unexpectedly, he flashed a brilliant smile her way and encircled her shoulders with his strong left arm. "We're going to have a great weekend together, aren't we, sweetheart?" he asked as he pulled her close.

Amanda hesitated for only a moment before she, too, caught sight of the men approaching their table and relaxed into his embrace. "You bet we are, honey," she crooned, giving him a kiss on the cheek.

Lee pulled back when the strangers stopped and stood near the table. The larger of the two, an immense man, easily four or five inches taller than Lee and nearly twice his weight, was wearing an army green t-shirt under a blue and green plaid flannel shirt. The bottoms of his well-worn jeans covered the tops of his hiking boots, which had obviously seen many miles of use. The giant kept back, not saying a word. His companion, a wiry man about Amanda's height, was similar in dress but completely different in manner.

"Hi, folks," he said. "I saw you unload your gear this morning, and I'm taking a chance that you're going to be part of our 'Into the Woods' experience. Am I right?"

"That you are," said Lee as he stood and extended his right hand. "Lee Steadman, and this is my wife, Amanda. Nice to meet you, Mr. . . ."

"Beau Hewlett, at your service, folks." He shook Lee's hand and touched the brim of his camouflage baseball cap as he nodded to Amanda. He gestured towards his companion. "Big Ernie and I will be your guides for the weekend."

"Oh, well, we're really looking forward to it," Amanda smiled at him. "I've been telling Lee for a long time that he works too hard. I'm so excited that he arranged for us to get away this weekend. He really needs to relax some."

"And I thought it'd be a good chance for the two of us to spend some time together," Lee continued. "With our hectic schedules, it seems that we hardly get to see each other."

"Well, we'll sure be able to provide you with time away from your day-to-day routine," laughed Beau. "And once we get things set up at the campsite, you'll have plenty of time to spend with each other." He let his eyes linger on Amanda a bit longer than necessary, thinking how he would spend his free time if he were Lee . . .

Big Ernie nudged his partner, who reluctantly drew his eyes away from Amanda. Lee's arm had tightened around her shoulders, and the look Scarecrow was giving Beau made him take a half step backwards.

"Uh . . . why don't we um . . . get out of here now and let y'all enjoy your evenin'?" Beau stammered. "We'll be meetin' tomorrow at the front of the motel to caravan out to the trailhead." Deciding to cut his losses and run, Beau started out of the restaurant.

With slight shrug of his massive shoulders, Ernie nodded towards Amanda. He met Lee's eyes evenly as the two men shook hands, then turned and followed his partner.

"I don't like that little man," Amanda said in a low voice.

"The guy's a jerk," Lee replied tersely. "We'll keep our distance from him." He looked down at Amanda, the hardness of a few moments ago now replaced by concern. "You stick close to me this weekend, understand? I don't want to give him a chance to catch you alone."

Amanda nodded and snuggled closer into his protective embrace.

Outside, Beau and Ernie joined a third man, who had been waiting impatiently for them. "Did you talk with him?" he asked irritably.

"Yeah, Mr. Korvinski," Beau answered. "He and his wife were just eatin' dinner." He looked at the Russian with a puzzled frown. "What's so special about this guy?" he asked. "He looks just like any of the bozos who come up here for a weekend, 'cept most of them don't find a honey like that wife of his to keep their sleepin' bags warm."

"That is not your concern," the third man hissed, his accent growing with his exasperation. "You just keep your eyes on them and tell me anything you see. Don't let them out of your sight, or you won't be getting the other half of your money. And be sure to keep your eye out for the other one."

Beau just shrugged and nodded. It wasn't like the guy was asking them to do anything illegal, and if he wanted to pay them the equivalent of two month's wages to keep an eye on the couple and watch for this other fellow or for 'anything strange', whatever that meant, then he and Big Ernie were glad to oblige.

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*Thursday, March 13th - Early morning - The Trail's End Motel*

The night passed more quickly than Amanda had thought possible. She was tired enough to sleep soundly, despite Lee's unsettling presence only a few feet from her in the other bed. She awoke about 7:30 to the sound of the shower. Her half-awake mind leapt to an image of him standing under the falling water, his shoulder muscles flexing as he reached up to rinse the shampoo from his hair. In her imagination, her eyes traveled down his naked torso to his waistline and . . .

She sat up suddenly, blushing at the mental picture. Unsettled, she grabbed her robe from the foot of the bed and, pulling it on, crossed to the front of the room. She pulled back the curtain and looked out at the scenery.

The beauty of the view helped her focus her thoughts on safer topics. The motel backed up to a small valley, with a rocky stream running down its center. The eastern sky was beginning to lighten, and the mist gave the air a shimmering quality, as though she were viewing it through a sheer curtain.

She loved being out like this; the mountains always seemed to bring her a special serenity. She chuckled to herself. She'd be sharing the weekend with Lee, and even though it was 'strictly business', she wasn't sure that 'serene' would be the proper word to describe **this** weekend. Yet, despite her misgivings, she was certain that the mountains would have time to work their magic on her during the five days and four nights they'd be at the remote campsite.

She didn't notice that the shower had stopped. She didn't hear the soft sound when the bathroom door opened and Lee stepped out, covered only by the towel slung low around his hips.

He stopped for a moment, transfixed by the figure at the window. The morning light cast a halo around Amanda's hair, still tousled from sleep. She leaned her head against the window frame and sighed gently. Before he was aware that he had moved, he found himself standing behind her, one hand reaching out.

She didn't jump when she felt his hand on her shoulder; somehow the touch meshed seamlessly into her thoughts. But when she turned to wish him a good morning, she was disconcerted by the intensity of the look he gave her. She blushed and, with effort, broke from his gaze. She looked down at her hands, her gaze passing over an expanse of still-damp, muscled chest and abdomen, only inches from her. She squeezed her eyes shut and turned her head, unable to speak.

"I, uh, just wanted to let you know that the shower is all yours, Amanda," he said. He paused for a moment before continuing. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"Thanks, Lee," she said, moving away from him. "I'll be ready in just a few minutes." She didn't look back as she entered the small bathroom, but when she closed the door behind her, she leaned back against it for a moment to regain her composure. 'I t's going to be a long weekend,' she thought.

Lee didn't relax until the door closed. 'I let it happen again,' he thought, running his fingers through his hair in frustration. 'No,' he corrected himself, 'that's not quite right. I have no control over it. I t's been happening more and more often, and there doesn't seem to be anything I **can** do about it.' He let out a heavy sigh. 'I t's going to be a long weekend.'

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**Chapter Three**

*Thursday, March 13th - Mid-afternoon - On the way to the main campsite*

They had met the other five couples participating in the weekend retreat in the motel parking lot. It was a mixed crew, for sure. The youngest pair in the group were true newlyweds, married only a month before, on Valentine's Day. They scarcely seemed to notice that they weren't the only people in the universe. Two couples were, like Lee and Amanda, in their mid-30's and were on their first venture with the camping club, not quite sure what they had gotten themselves into. Another couple consisted of a 50-something woman and a much younger man. It embarrassed Amanda to see them carrying on. The woman seemed to be working her way through some sort of a mid-life crisis, and the way she openly pawed at her male companion made Amanda's stomach turn. The last members of the group, however, warmed her to the core. The older couple had been camping together in the area for over 40 years and claimed that the fresh mountain air was God's own aphrodisiac. Their affection for one another was obvious in every word, glance, and touch that passed between them.

It took nearly an hour and a half for the campers and their guides to make the fifteen-mile journey to the remote campsite, climbing further into the mountains on what passed for roads but looked more like accidents of nature, clinging to the side of the mountain. Thank goodness the Ford Bronco from the Agency motor pool had 4-wheel drive. Potholes and rocks were scattered along the steep, sharply curving road, and several remaining patches of ice made the way nearly impassible.

They left the vehicles in a clearing just off of the 'road'. Beau and Big Ernie took their time as they hiked in to the main campsite; it took nearly an hour to make the trip. Amanda was glad that they weren't truly backpacking. They carried only their personal gear and equipment; the tents and other large pieces provided by the camping club awaited them at the end of the rugged trail. She managed quite well, with her sleeping bag and a small duffle bag strapped to her backpack.

Lee had been on the alert as they hiked, assessing the terrain and wondering when, where, and how Balanchev would contact him. Walking behind Amanda because of the narrow trail, he smiled to himself. The view ahead of him could match the breathtaking mountain vistas any day. Her jeans fit her like a glove, clinging to all of the right places; he could see the play of every muscle as she made the strenuous climb with seeming ease.

'Thank goodness for TV exercise programs,' she thought as she worked her way up the trail. Lee had made such a big deal of how silly she was, thinking that her experience with the Junior Trailblazers had prepared her for this trip. Maybe he was right. In any case, she didn't want to embarrass herself. She made a vow to match him stride for stride on this assignment, no matter what it took!

Finally they arrived at the main campsite, where a cooking pit and a fire ring would provide the group with a gathering place for their evening meals and for relaxing around the fire afterwards. Their tents were far enough from the main site that they weren't visible from the fire ring. In addition, the woods were thick enough and the tents scattered over a sufficiently large area that the campers would neither see nor hear each other from their individual campsites. They would have nearly complete privacy.

They grabbed the box lunches that were waiting for them and walked up to their 'home' for the next four nights. Lee had managed to secure the tent farthest from the main site and the road, hoping that it would give Balanchev an even better chance of contacting him without being observed.

Amanda put down her pack and walked to a clearing a short distance away from the tent while Lee went to roll out his sleeping bag. As he had predicted, the area was, indeed, no bigger than a double bed.

"Oh, Lee, it's beautiful out here." Amanda looked down the length of the valley, occasionally catching a reflection of sunlight from the mirror of a car driving through the trees far below them; otherwise, there was no evidence of human presence.

He exited the small tent, speculating on what it would be like to try to sleep with Amanda so near. His subconscious thoughts surfaced again, as unexpected and unsought as ever. 'It could be more than you've bargained for, Stetson.' He squashed the thought before his conscious mind had time to dwell on it.

"It is beautiful, isn't it?" he agreed, coming to stand close behind her and putting a hand on each of her shoulders. He almost hoped that Balanchev would wait a couple of days before contacting him so that he could enjoy the time with Amanda before the next phase of their assignment began. "Come on, let's get settled in." He turned her gently and put his right arm across her shoulders before walking her slowly back to the tent.

It was her turn to find space for her things in the small space. The two sleeping bags filled nearly the entire floor, leaving only a small space at the far end for their packs and other gear. Their quarters would indeed be close for the next couple of nights. She felt the goosebumps rise on her arms at the thought. It had been hard enough thinking about sharing the relatively spacious motel room with Lee last night. How was she going to handle the next four nights?

When she emerged from the tent, Lee was waiting for her. "Amanda, we don't have to rejoin the rest of the group until dinnertime. That gives us a good three or four hours. Would you like to take a walk with me?"

She smiled up at him. "I can't think of anything I'd rather do," she said. "You grab the box lunches the guides gave us, and I'll get the rest of the stuff we'll need."

He looked at her, confused. "The rest of what stuff?"

"You know, the map they gave us, the compass, my whistle and Swiss Army knife, some of the trail mix, our jackets, the canteens . . . I filled them at the motel before we left this morning."

"Amanda, you don't need to pack for an expedition. I just want to look around a little."

She continued her inventory of the items in her pack. Everything seemed to be in place. She strapped the small pack around her waist, tucking her jacket under the strap to avoid carrying it while they walked.

"I'm not taking that much. It all fits in my daypack. We'll be hiking through unfamiliar territory. Don't you think we need to have a few things in case we get lost?" she asked him logically.

He opened his mouth to respond, then hesitated. She was going way overboard, but was it really worth getting into a 'discussion' about it? 'Probably not,' he thought. 'Let's just keep this relaxed. If she wants to carry all that extra gear every time we leave the area, it couldn't really hurt anything.'

She fastened her canteen to her belt, then handed him his jacket and canteen with a cheerful grin. "Lead on, Scarecrow. Where do you want to go?"

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They returned to the tent three hours later, after having paid a clandestine visit to each of the other couples' campsites.

"I really don't see why we had to sneak around to all of the other campsites, Lee," she said again. "No one's supposed to know why we're here, or even who Balanchev is, so it's not as though we have to suspect them of anything."

"Amanda," he replied with a wry smile, "I don't have to be suspicious of the people around me before I want to know something more about them. This whole setup to meet Balanchev has me jumpy. I just feel better having located the other tents. It's a good thing that we're so far out from the rest of the group. The seclusion will make it easier for Balanchev to make his move without being noticed."

"We really are a long way from all of the others," she said. "They won't have a hint of anything that happens here."

"Yeah, and I'd just as soon keep it that way." He was a little more relaxed now that he'd familiarized himself with their surroundings and their neighbors. "Do you have any more of those cookies?" he asked hopefully.

"Sure, but I wanted to save enough to share at dinner tonight," she said, ducking into the tent to retrieve the airtight canister of treats. Opening the lid, she offered the container to him.

"Amanda," he sighed, "I don't want to do anything that will draw any extra attention to us. As far as the rest of the group is concerned, we're just a couple looking for a good place to be alone together." He took a large bite from the cookie in his hand. "Besides, I can't think of a single reason why we need to share any of these with anyone else." He popped the remainder of the cookie into his mouth and grabbed another one. "I'm going to stretch out for a few minutes before we go down for dinner." With that, he grabbed a poncho, spread it out in the shade of a large tree, and lowered his long form to the ground. He looked back at Amanda. 'Can't hurt to try,' he thought. Patting the space beside him, he looked up at her. "Want to join me?"

"I . . . uh . . . maybe in a few minutes . . ." she faltered, turning to put the cookie tin back into the tent. "I have a couple of things I need to do first."

"Have it your way," he replied. "But remember, it's a healthy walk down to the main campsite." The activities of the afternoon, paired with the paltry amount of rest he'd managed the night before, got the best of him and he drifted off to sleep.

Amanda busied herself in the tent. The area was so compact that she wasn't sure how she would maintain her modesty, but she was going to try her darnedest. She sorted out her clothes. She'd known better than to try to bring any of her regular clothes to such a rugged place, so her wardrobe consisted of a couple of pairs of jeans, worn enough to feel soft as they hugged her legs, some old T-shirts, and four plaid flannel shirts to go on top of them. Long underwear, several pairs of wool socks and a heavy jacket rounded out her "closet".

She pulled out a change of clothes and underwear, her shampoo, soap, and towel and headed for the makeshift shower at the edge of their campsite. If she had to sleep in her clothes, at least she and they could be clean, and she'd rather get her shower in now, while the mountain air was still reasonably warm.

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She pulled the rope to let a bit more of the clean water run over her hair and down her body, shivering slightly in the cool water as she rinsed away the remainder of the lather. Squeezing the excess water from her hair, she dried off and got dressed. She'd been right - the clean clothes felt wonderful. Looking back to be sure she'd picked up all of her things, she froze as she heard the sound of furtive footsteps not far away.

She risked a peek around the edge of the tarp that formed the shower "stall". 'This isn't good,' she thought to herself as she spied Lee, still asleep under the tree. 'If he's not making the sounds, then who is?'

The sound of whispers reinforced her feeling that things weren't right. She watched with dismay as one shadow and then another crossed the tent and headed away from their site, the sounds fading as the shadows receded. She waited a few more minutes before quickly crossing the area and kneeling down beside Lee on the poncho.

"Lee, wake up!" she whispered. She gently shook his shoulder as she called to him again. "Lee, someone was here!"

His opened his eyes and looked at her, not quite awake. "What are you talking about, Amanda? Who was here?" He caught his breath at the sight of the damp tendrils of hair that surrounded her face in disarray.

"I don't know who it was," she replied breathlessly. "I went to take a shower because I needed to get into some clean clothes, and since it's still afternoon and the sun is still up, it seemed like a good time, because the water would still be kinda warm and besides, you were asleep over here and you wouldn't have . . ."

"Amanda!" He interrupted her. "Get to the point."

"Oh, sorry," she muttered. "Well, anyway, I was just finished and was getting ready to come back to the tent when I heard something. I peeked out and saw you, so I knew it had to be someone else . . ."

"Maybe it was Balanchev," Lee interjected.

"I don't think so," she said, shaking her head. "Because next I saw two shadows, and I heard voices. Lee, if it had been Balanchev, wouldn't he have been alone?"

"That's what I would have expected," he agreed. "Did you get a look at either one of them?"

"No, only at their shadows," she replied. "But I'm pretty sure it was Beau and Ernie. Come with me. I can show you where they were when I saw them."

He followed her over to the shower. "I was standing right here," she said, pointing to the spot. "I didn't want to stick my head out too far, but I snuck a look around the edge of the tarp. That's when I saw their shadows."

"Lee, what do you think they were doing here?" she asked with a worried look.

"I don't know, but I don't think they'll be back." He glanced at his watch. "Will you be all right if I grab a shower before we go down to dinner? You can call me if anything happens."

"I'll be fine," she said. "As long as I stay out in the open, I'll know if anyone tries come back. Just don't be too long, okay?"

"You've got a deal," Lee said with a wink. "I'll be ready in a few minutes."

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It was getting dark when they arrived at the main campsite and sat down with the others to eat around the fire. Tonight, he could let himself relax a little. There was nothing he could do about the assignment until Balanchev contacted him. He'd keep an eye on their guides, especially Beau, but he couldn't really check them out until daylight.

'So - no distractions, no company . . . You have Amanda to yourself. Now what are you going to do about it?' The now-familiar thoughts floated into his awareness. What **would** he do? Maybe it was time to investigate the trail down which his subconscious had been trying to lead him.

The night sky was clear, and the air had chilled dramatically with the setting of the sun. Dinner was finished, and the other campers were moving to sit around the campfire. This was his chance. He wanted her close to him, and their cover story had little to do with it. He led the way to a large log and sat on the ground, leaning back against it, pulling Amanda to sit with him. He positioned her in front of him, between his outstretched legs, and loosely draped his arms around her waist.

She rested against his chest, the contours of her body relaxing soft and warm against him with a comforting presence, and he knew that it was right. Whenever he'd had the opportunity to hold her close like this, whether as part of a cover or just because he couldn't stand not to, he was overwhelmed by how a woman who seemed so delicate in his arms could be as strong inside as he knew her to be. At moments like this, he felt as though he'd found his home - a home he hadn't realized he'd been searching for.

They listened to the others talk for a while before he helped her up for the walk back to their own campsite. There was no more than a sky full of stars and a sliver of moon to light their way, so Lee took her hand in his and guided her over the trail with the help of his flashlight. His mind was on Amanda, thinking how right it had felt to sit with her in his arms, snuggled up against his chest.

He continued past their tent and into the clearing where they had admired the view earlier in the day. Shutting off the light and putting it into his pocket, he watched as she looked out over the dark velvet valley.

"The view is even better at night," she said quietly. Scattered pinpoints of light showed where homes and other structures dotted the valley floor.

"It's beautiful," he agreed. "A little more moonlight would make it just perfect."

Feeling a chill run down her spine, she looked up at him. His eyes were only for her; he was oblivious to the natural vista spread out at their feet. The urgency of his look drew her in. Without thinking, she turned to face him, bringing both her hands inside the open front of his jacket to rest on his chest. He put his own hands inside her jacket, first encircling her waist and then moving them higher up her back, pulling her a bit closer than was his custom. His lips were parted slightly, and his eyelids looked heavy.

'Oh, my gosh,' she thought, 'He's going to kiss me.' The shiver that had traversed her spine moments ago gathered strength and returned. With a sharp intake of breath, she looked down and away from his intense scrutiny. She trembled in his arms, craving the kiss but at the same time fearing its consequences. She'd spent a long time holding back her ever-changing feelings towards Lee, and she'd become almost as adept as Scarecrow at hiding her feelings. She was afraid that, if she began to let them out, she wouldn't be able to control her emotions, and the last thing she wanted was to risk the relationship that they now shared. Here, alone with him in the woods, together in that tiny tent, how would she ever be able to stop with just a kiss?

"Are you cold, Amanda?" His voice rose from deep in his chest. She didn't dare look up at him, afraid that her resolve would melt in the intensity of his gaze.

"Maybe a little bit," she admitted quietly, eyes still turned to the ground. "I think I'd better turn in for the night."

He drew a deep, ragged breath. "Yeah, that's probably a good idea," he agreed reluctantly. "You go ahead and get settled; I'll be along in a few minutes."

"Yeah, a good idea," she repeated, the struggle between what she wanted and what she **should** do still raging inside her. She couldn't just leave him. She moved her hands down and around to encircle his strong chest and hugged him closely for several moments before releasing him and heading for the tent.

'How could I say I was cold?' she wondered. 'Every nerve ending in my body is on fire.' She turned her head back slightly, still not looking at him. "Good night, Lee."

"Good night, Amanda." His reply was a hoarse whisper.

His eyes followed her to the tent and lingered there as the soft glow from her flashlight cast a faint silhouette. Soon, the light went out and left him alone in the darkness.

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## **Chapter Four**

*Thursday, March 13th - Late evening - The 'Steadman' campsite*

Amanda settled herself into her sleeping bag quickly enough, but she was still trembling from the after-effects of her encounter with Lee. Lord knows she had wanted his kiss. No, it was more than a *want*; it was a *need*. She'd always been attracted to Lee, and she couldn't really tell when or how that magnetism had transformed itself into yearning.

She was definitely not Lee's type. She'd seen him with a few of his girlfriends, and she knew better than to think he was interested in them for the fascinating conversations they brought to the relationships, or whatever he called his one-night stands. If she'd had any doubts about that, the way the Scarecrow looked when he dragged in late on so many 'mornings after' would have convinced her.

But his notorious 'mornings after' had come less and less frequently; the last one she remembered was when he'd been seeing Leslie. That had been really hard for her to handle. His attraction to Leslie had shown her that he could be drawn to a 'normal' woman. 'Just not to me,' she thought with a sigh.

Then things had gotten really confusing. Lee had suddenly announced that he wanted to take her to dinner, alone, without 'shop talk'. Since that time, they'd been out together at least once or twice each week; nothing fancy, just dinner or maybe a movie. The evenings out had been pleasant, and she certainly enjoyed his company, but for the most part, he'd still had his mask up, the shield that Scarecrow hid behind to keep anyone from getting too close to a look at the 'real' Lee Stetson, and she'd learned not to let him know about her growing feelings for him.

Over the past two and a half years, she'd seen glimpses of the man behind the self-erected barricades, and it was that man who was so dangerously attractive to her. The only question was, who was asking her out? Was it Scarecrow, whose cool detachment and indifference held her at bay and whose lifestyle she could never accept, or even understand? Or was it Lee, the elusive reality who could warm her with a smile and touch her heart with his vulnerability?

She sighed again and turned to face the side of the tent, leaving the sleeping bag unzipped as a concession to her restlessness. She couldn't even trust her own judgment where he was concerned. Could she trust his? She didn't want to become just one more in the long line of women who paraded in and out of his life, and his bed, but she couldn't bear the thought that she might be giving up the best thing that had ever happened to her. The two of them were standing at a line in the sand, and she wasn't at all sure if she was ready to cross it. She'd come so close tonight, and it had frightened her. Maybe just maintaining the status quo was the best option for the time being.

'You know the status quo will never do. It's time to decide what you want.' It was her last thought before she closed her eyes and drifted into a restless sleep.

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Outside, Lee stood in the secluded silence, staring longingly at the tent that shielded Amanda from him. The emptiness that had formed inside him when she walked away echoed inside his chest like a scream in a cavern. 'This has gone on long enough,' he told himself. 'I'm different when she's around, and I don't know what it means . . . or what to do about it,' he added with a resigned sigh.

"I want her." His head came up with a slight jerk. He'd worked so hard to keep the disturbing thoughts from his subconscious under control, but that one had forced its way out with such force that he had actually spoken the words out loud.

"I want her." He whispered it again, a conscious thought this time. "I think I've wanted her for a long time."

He felt the thought begin to meander through his brain, finding himself unable to stop its progress. He was amazed by the warmth the idea generated as it worked its way past the barriers he had erected around his heart. Before he realized it, the concept of wanting Amanda, of having wanted her, suffused his very being, as though it **belonged** within him, as if it were something that had been missing from deep inside his soul for a very long time. It felt familiar.

He wanted her. He coveted her. He ached for her. And yet it was different from any desire he had experienced before. There had been many other women in his life, probably far too many. He had wanted each of them, but the feelings that were starting to define themselves within him were completely new.

Part of it he recognized as lust. Always before, his libido had been the primary, if not the only, source of attraction, but this time it was only a fragment, a fraction of all that he felt for Amanda. Certainly he'd dreamed of holding her close, of burying his fingers in her hair and kissing her until

her knees buckled, but she was too important for just that. As much as he wanted things to progress, he didn't want to take the chance of losing her. Having her in his life, on any level, was preferable to any other alternative. He suddenly realized that he couldn't imagine his life without her in it.

That was it. What he really wanted, no, what he **needed**, with her was a relationship. And more than just the business relationship that he'd so often insisted was all that was between them, more than the friendship that they'd recently started to explore. He wanted a connection with her on every level imaginable: emotional, spiritual, and, someday, physical.

'That's what's been bothering me,' he realized, with more than a little dismay. 'Part of me has known what I wanted all along, but I couldn't even admit it to myself.' The idea made him uncomfortable. He sat heavily on a large rock, his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands. He'd had little experience with forging a bond between himself and another human being. Since his parents' deaths, he'd been close to only a few people. There were people whom he considered his friends: Billy, Francine, T.P., Emily, and a handful of others.

There had been even fewer times when he'd let himself care about a woman, to dare a serious romantic involvement. Dorothy, of course, was the first, and her death had only strengthened the fortifications behind which he hid his heart. It had been several years before he'd dared to let himself feel something like that again; and when he learned that Eva was to marry Angelo, he retreated back behind the safety of his walls. And then, when she'd come back and the feelings started to surface again, only to be dashed to pieces when he learned what she really was, Amanda had helped him through.

Amanda was always there, helping him whether he wanted it or not, whether he'd needed it or not. He'd been able to talk with her, to confide in her, ever since that first time, when he'd instinctively picked her - a housewife in a nightgown and trench coat - from all the people at the train station. His head snapped up again as he realized that the one person in all the world who knew him the best, far better than Eva, better even than Dorothy, was Amanda. And it scared the devil out of him.

'So what do I do now?' he asked himself. 'What if she doesn't feel the same way about me? What if I tell her how I feel, and it drives her away?'

He sat for a long time, staring into the night and wondering what he should do. He knew now that he had to make a decision, and make it soon. The on-again, off-again approach he'd fallen into with Amanda wasn't fair to her. And he wasn't being fair to himself, either. Swinging between treating her like a business associate and reacting to her as the embodiment of womanhood was driving him crazy and tearing him up inside. He had to decide what he was going to do, and the sooner the better.

Just admitting that there was a decision to be made eased the tension that had been building inside him for the past weeks and months. Now he could finally rest. He entered the tent and crawled into his sleeping bag, taking care not to disturb Amanda. She had her back turned to his side of the tent, but her deep, even breathing told him that she was asleep. He resisted the urge to reach out and stroke her hair, content instead to face her and to mirror the shape of her body, curled in sleep. Only a few inches separated them, and he could almost feel her snuggled up against him as he sank into a tranquil sleep.

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He awoke with a start. Amanda was leaning over him, shaking him. He blinked to bring himself more fully awake and tried to understand what she was saying.

"Lee, wake up," she whispered, her lips nearly brushing his ear. "There's somebody out there."

He threw off the last cobwebs of sleep. "Where, Amanda? How do you know?"

"I heard something outside," she answered. "I think it was footsteps."

He shook his head slightly. "Amanda, it was probably just an animal, looking for some food."

"Well, maybe so, but this animal carried a flashlight. It was just for a moment, but I saw the light shining right there." She pointed to the corner of the tent, near Lee's feet. "And I saw the tent move a little in the light. Then the light was gone and the noises faded."

He shook his head again. She'd been right earlier; maybe there really was someone snooping around outside. He watched and listened for a few moments. The night was as quiet and dark as it had been when he had joined her in the tent a short time earlier. He cautiously flipped on his flashlight and shone it into the corner Amanda had indicated. A small slit had been cut in the back of the tent, and there was a folded piece of paper sticking out of his left boot. He retrieved the note and opened it.

*Friday Five PM At the cars*

*AB*

"What does it say, Lee? Aren't you going to go see who was out there?" Amanda was understandably concerned.

"No, there's no point in it," Lee answered. "It's from Balanchev, and he'll be long gone by now. He's set the meet for tomorrow afternoon, down where we left the Bronco."

"So he really is here," Amanda whispered.

"Yeah, he is," Lee responded. "And tomorrow, I'll finally find out what this is all about. For now, though, let's get back to sleep. This whole assignment falls into place." Lying back down and pulling the top of the sleeping bag loosely over himself, he quickly fell back asleep. Amanda followed his example, and soon the campsite returned to its lonely stillness.

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Chapter Five

Friday, March 14th - Sunrise - The parking area

Karel Korvinski leaned against the Jeep and watched for his hirelings to come down the trail. It was insufferable, having to deal with such imbeciles, but here, in this country, it had seemed to be the only way. If he got too close, he'd scare away his prey. His people wanted Balanchev, and he had followed the man halfway around the world to this damned wilderness.

He'd been watching the American, too. That infernal Scarecrow had always seemed to be in the same area as Balanchev shortly before something went wrong. Korvinski and his people had always suspected that Balanchev was the source of the leaks and that Scarecrow was the recipient, but he'd never been able to catch up with either of the two at the right time, and so the game had continued.

Until a few years ago, that was the way things had been. Balanchev had many friends at high levels within the KGB and had enjoyed the protection that such contacts afforded him. Korvinski and his comrades had little patience for the old crowd in the KGB, the ones who were getting soft, like Balanchev and his friends. Those fools had worked together too long and had so forgotten the importance of suspicion that they didn't realize their colleague had started to go astray.

There'd been nothing Korvinski's group could do about it but watch and wait. Their patience eventually paid off, and one of their number had gained access to the inner circle, where he was able to keep a watch on Balanchev and to keep him from any more of his traitorous mischief. It had worked for nearly three years, but then the transgressor had given them the slip. They'd only recently found his trail and had tracked him here last week.

Something was up, and it was big, otherwise Balanchev would never have risked a trip to America. When they'd learned that the Scarecrow would also be in the area, they'd known they had to strike. Their sources had informed them that the agent would be camping in the mountains this weekend, and from there it had been simple to draw the guides into their service. Korvinski would see to the details himself, but he needed his two - what did the Americans call it? - ah, yes, he needed his two snitches to help him keep an eye on things. The dullards had no idea how important they were to his plans.

A noise from up the mountain drew his eyes to the spot where the trail emerged from the trees, and he watched as his two lackeys neared. Beau, who seemed to have at least half a brain underneath his baseball cap, approached him with a cautious smile.

"Mornin', Mr. Korvinski," he said with a nod. "See you made it up the mountain okay."

"Of course I did, you idiot," Korvinski snapped. "What have you found out for me?"

"We haven't seen that other guy you wanted to know about. And Steadman, well, it's pretty much like I told you before," Beau returned, trying not to let his annoyance at the foreigner's arrogance show. "They're just another lovey-dovey couple lookin' for a little fresh air and a whole lot of privacy, if you know what I mean." He started to wink but covered it by rubbing the corner of his eye when he saw the stony look the Russian was giving him. 'This guy doesn't have much of a sense of humor,' he thought. 'Good thing the job's only for the weekend.'

"They went nowhere, talked with no one?" Korvinski asked.

"No sir," Beau replied. "At least nowhere unusual. They took a hike around the area yesterday afternoon. Seemed to be gettin' their bearin's. You know, finding out where the others were camped and all. After that, they just went back to their own spot." He nodded toward his large companion. "Big Ernie and I looked over their campsite while Mr. Steadman was asleep, but we didn't find anything but what you'd expect."

"You idiot! Why did you take the risk to get so close?" The Russian's eyes narrowed threateningly.

"It wasn't a risk," Beau protested. "I told you the guy was asleep under a tree."

"And the woman, where was she while you were on your fool's errand?"

"She was in the camp shower," Beau stammered. "Come on. You're not worried that she'd have seen us? A woman who looks like that isn't any more than just a bed toy. No way would she be smart enough to catch on to us."

"You'd better be right," Korvinski sneered. "If anything goes wrong because of your bumbling, you'll be very, very sorry."

Big Ernie took a half step toward the Russian, scowling at the man who was threatening his friend. Beau annoyed even him at times, but they were partners, and Ernie didn't want to see him hurt.

"It's all right, Ernie," Beau said, placing a hand to block the big man's way. "Our 'benefactor' here is payin' us plenty to keep an eye on 'em. I guess he's bought the right to have us do it his way." He looked back at the Russian. "So what do you want us to do now?"

"Just keep watching and keep me informed. I want you to be close to him at all times, but do not take any more chances. He must not know that he is being watched. I have other business to take care of now, but I must know what he is doing. Send your big friend down to me at 12 o'clock so that he can tell me what you have seen and what you have learned. Send him here again at 5 o'clock this afternoon. It will soon be dark by that time, and I will follow him back so that I can pay my own visit to Mr. 'Steadman'."

With that, he turned and walked back to his Jeep. Starting the engine, he began the slow trip back down the side of the mountain.

"How'd you ever get mixed up with that guy?" Ernie asked Beau, his disgust barely concealed. He seems like nothing but trouble to me.

"Don't worry about it," Beau replied, with a sneer in the general direction the Russian had headed. "All you have to do is keep the other campers happy. I'll deal with the Commie so we can collect the rest of our dough."

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*Friday, March 14th - Shortly after sunrise - The 'Steadman' campsite*

The sun had already risen above the peaks of the mountains, bringing morning to the campsite with a crisp brightness. Amanda woke first, lazily taking her time about opening her eyes for the first peek at the day. She stretched gently within her sleeping bag, smiling as the arm draped casually across her waist tightened slightly, drawing her closer. She snuggled into his warm form and started to doze off again.

Her eyes flew open with a start. 'Oh, no! How did I wind up cuddled up against Lee? What was I thinking?' It was a point for consideration. She hadn't been thinking at all; she'd been sleeping. She had a chance of maintaining her resolve when she was awake, but what was she supposed to do while she was asleep? She lay there for a few minutes, unable to force herself to move from the comfort of his embrace. Finally, afraid of what she might do if he woke up while he held her in his arms, she slowly eased her way onto her back, trying not to disturb the man whose presence filled the small tent. He mumbled something when she gently slipped from under his arm but did not awaken as she moved back a few inches so that she could watch him while he slept.

He looked so peaceful lying there. Not even the 'mighty Scarecrow' could hide all of the time; his guard was down now and she could see through his mask. She thought back to the night before, when she'd been too unsure of herself to accept his kiss.

She couldn't say when her feelings had turned from the admiration that she'd had for Scarecrow, the hero, to the affection she now felt for Lee, the man. She supposed she'd always trusted him, but there'd been many times, particularly at first, when she'd have been hard-put to say that she

liked him. That had begun slowly but had become easier and easier as she learned to look beyond the show he presented to the world.

It had taken them two years to make the passage from being total strangers to the friendship that she now treasured. Sometimes they had moved forward, sometimes they slid backwards, but overall, they continued to progress. Up to this point it would have been impossible to trace their progress from one day to the next, but expressing their affection with a kiss would be a milestone, an unmistakable signal that things had changed. It could only get more complicated if they passed that marker; but she felt sure that it would happen sooner or later. If it were inevitable, what better time to take the next step than now, while they were away from the friends and family who might inadvertently distract them as they tried to deal with this new phase in their relationship?

It didn't really matter now why she have been so apprehensive last night. She realized now that the only choice she could make was to follow her heart. She wouldn't rush things, but she wouldn't resist, either. If Lee was ready, then she was ready also.

Smiling again, she reached out and gently stroked her fingers across his forehead, smoothing back the stray strands of hair that had fallen over it during the night. She kissed her fingertips, then laid them gently on his lips, drawing back when he began to stir.

"Good morning," she said quietly as his eyes opened and looked into hers. "Did you sleep well?"

"Surprisingly well," he responded easily. He loved seeing her in the early morning, when she was still slightly soft from sleep, not yet ready to face the rest of the world. At moments like this, he felt that she was his alone. "And you?"

"Not too bad," she replied. "After our midnight visitor, I was out like a light." She glanced at her watch, unwilling to make the first move. "But we'd better get up now, or we'll miss breakfast."

"Can't let that happen," he answered with a grin. "We have a lot to do before this afternoon. You go on and wash up first. I'll only take me a few minutes, and I'll be ready anytime you are."

"Sounds like a plan." She pulled on a fresh pair of socks and her hiking boots and grabbed her towel and the soap before exiting the tent.

'It could be a very interesting weekend,' his thoughts whispered to him as he watched her leave. This time he had to agree. "That it could," he said aloud. "That it could."

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"We have to watch out for Beau and Ernie," Lee told Amanda quietly on their way back to their campsite. "Beau had his eyes on us all during breakfast." His arm was around her shoulders, and he gave a gentle squeeze to reassure her.

"I know what you mean," Amanda agreed, her own arm tightening slightly around his waist. "Big Ernie seems like a nice enough fellow, but Beau gives me the creeps. It's like I can **feel** him watching me."

"Well, he's watching us right now," Lee told her. "He's been following us since we left the others." Amanda suppressed a shudder with difficulty. "What are we going to do?"

"We're going to be perfectly normal, perfectly boring campers," Lee replied as they arrived back at the tent. "First, I want him to think we're headed back to the main campsite." He turned Amanda to face him, kissed her forehead, and asked, "It's a great morning. How about a little walk?"

"Anything you say, sweetheart. Let me get our things." Emerging from the tent, she handed Lee his canteen. "We need to go by the main campsite first and refill these," she said.

"I t'll be our first stop," he agreed. "Wait here a minute; there's something I need to get before we leave."

From his hiding place a short distance away, Beau watched Lee enter the tent. He swore softly under his breath, remembering Korvinski's warning not to get too close. "Damn, that means they'll be coming back this way; I've gotta get back. I'll catch them after they've gotten their water." With a last glance over his shoulder, he hurried back up the trail.

Sure that he had given Beau enough time to get on his way, Lee came out of the tent and joined Amanda. He took her hand and started in the opposite direction.

"Lee," she asked. "What are we going to do now?"

"Just come with me, Amanda. I t's our turn to watch Beau for a while." With a grin, he led her into the woods.

Chapter Six

Friday, March 14th - Late morning - The main campsite

Beau paced anxiously in front of his tent. He looked at his watch; it was time for Big Ernie to head down with a report for Korvinski. He wasn't going to admit that he'd lost them; for the moment Ernie could just tell the Russian that they hadn't seen anything out of the ordinary. Ernie had a good head on his shoulders. He'd be able to convince Korvinski that everything was all right. Beau would make sure that things were back under control by afternoon. For now, all he could do was to go back to their campsite and wait for them to return from wherever the hell they'd gone.

Soon, Ernie was on his way. With a final nervous look around the area, Beau headed towards to the Steadmans' campsite. He didn't know why Korvinski was so interested in the guy, but he guessed it didn't really matter. He was getting paid for watching, and he'd just have to put up with the annoyances that came along with the job. They were only on the second day of the retreat. It was going to be a long weekend.

A few minutes after the two guides had disappeared down their separate trails, Lee and Amanda came out from their vantage point on a rise to the north of the main campsite. Satisfied that no one else was nearby, Lee left Amanda as a lookout while he searched the two men's tents.

He materialized at her side a short time later with a grim look on his face. "They're up to something, that's for sure."

"What did you find?" Amanda asked, worried.

"Not really that much," Lee admitted. "But Beau has an envelope in his footlocker with my picture in it." He paused. "And Balanchev's."

"How did anyone find out about him?" she asked in alarm. "I t was only a few days ago that Billy told us that he'd be here."

"Balanchev is an important player, Amanda," Lee responded. "He must be in trouble to have come here in the first place. Anyone who could get him on the run would have to be very powerful indeed."

"So what does that mean for your meeting with him this afternoon?"

"It means that our plans have changed," he replied. "We'll keep our appointment with Balanchev, but we can't stay any longer than that. If someone is on to us, we have to get out of here." He thought for a moment. "Come on, we're going back to the tent."

Friday, March 14th - Early afternoon, The 'Steadman' campsite

Beau shifted slightly to relieve his aching muscles, then turned his attention back to the empty campsite. 'Where the hell are they?' was his ill tempered thought. 'They've been gone for nearly two hours.' Still, he was determined to stay and watch. He remembered the look in Korvinski's eyes this morning, and he wasn't anxious to cross the man. Hearing voices, he looked back up the trail. At last, they were returning.

"So, you didn't like my 'shortcut', huh?" Lee joked as they approached the tent.

"Some shortcut!" Amanda exclaimed. "You dragged me through the underbrush forever before we finally found the main campsite. I thought we'd never get there." She was enjoying the playful banter with Lee and understood how important it was to provide a reasonable excuse for their long absence to the man who was surely watching and listening.

"Well, we're back now," Lee said with a grin, "and I'm starved. What's for lunch?"

Laughing, Amanda retrieved the box lunches they had brought back after breakfast. "Here you go," she said, handing one to Lee and heading to sit on a log lying not too far from the tent.

Beau watched, his own hunger making itself known. He hadn't expected to be out here for so long. He wished he could slip away and get Ernie to take over for a while, but he didn't dare leave now.

They ate in companionable silence. When they were finished, Lee drew Amanda into his arms.

"Wonderful lunch," he said, looking deeply into her eyes. He dipped his head and placed a gentle kiss on her upturned lips, trying his best to ignore the sensations generated by her touch. "Go with me on this," he whispered, a slight quiver noticeable in his voice. He stood and helped her to her feet, taking a deep breath to steady himself. "Now, how about some 'dessert'?"

A chill ran through Amanda as he moved away from her. Only the knowledge that Beau was out there somewhere, watching, made it possible for her to resist throwing her arms around his neck and returning the kiss with all her being. "I can't think of anything I'd like better," she answered, bringing one hand up to stroke his cheek before taking his hand and following him into the tent.

Beau watched them disappear behind the tent flap, his hunger now taking a different form. 'What I wouldn't give to be that lucky son of a bitch right now,' he thought. 'They won't be going anywhere for the rest of the afternoon.' With a leering grin, he rose from his cramped position and headed back to his tent.

Lee gave her a hug when they were safely out of Beau's sight. "You were great, Amanda," he whispered. "Beau's not likely to spend the rest of the afternoon waiting around here for us. We'll give him time to get bored, and then we can start getting out of here."

Amanda was too unsure of her voice to speak. Playing that scene with Lee was one of the hardest things she'd ever had to do, not because it was a stretch, but because it fit so well with some of her recent fantasies. She took a deep breath and found her voice. "How are we going to get out, Lee? What if he's still out there?"

"Just get your things packed, Amanda," he replied. "From where he is, the back of the tent is hidden. Even if he's still there, we should be able to sneak out without being seen. Then we'll circle around and make our way down to the Bronco. I want to have everything stowed away before Balanchev arrives, in case we have to beat a hasty retreat."

She nodded and quickly repacked her backpack and duffel, then rolled up her sleeping bag and fastened it and her jacket to the top of her pack. Ready to go, she looked at Lee. After he had packed his own gear, he used his pocketknife to expand the opening Balanchev had cut in the back of the tent. He helped her on with her pack and gestured toward the new 'back door'.

"Stay low, Amanda, and get as far back into the underbrush as fast as you can without making too much noise."

She crawled out of the tent and into the woods, feeling rather than hearing him follow close behind her. After a few minutes, she felt his hand on her leg, stopping her.

"That should be far enough," he said, relief evident in his voice. "If no one's stopped us yet, we have a good chance of making it down to the Bronco." He helped her up and started into the woods. "Follow me."

Friday, March 14th - Mid-afternoon - The main campsite

Big Ernie had returned by the time Beau got back. As he quickly ate his lunch, Beau filled Ernie in on what had happened while he was gone.

"Good thing you found them," the big man said. "I don't think Mr. Korvinski would take it too well if you hadn't. He doesn't seem to be the patient type."

"That's an understatement," Beau muttered under his breath. He looked up and spoke to Ernie. "Look, the rest of the campers are on their own until suppertime. Why don't you come back with me to Steadman's tent? At least I'll have some company while I wait for him to finish with his 'dessert'. There's only about an hour before you're supposed to head down to meet Korvinski again, anyway. I'll just go instead, and you can watch them until dinnertime."

He headed back down the now-familiar trail with Big Ernie behind him. They settled down in Beau's usual spot to watch.

"Somethin's not right, Ernie," Beau said after a few minutes. "It's way too quiet down there." He hesitated, remembering what Korvinski had said about keeping his distance before he made his decision. "I'm going to go a little closer and check things out. He rose and started to make his way to the other side of the campsite. "You keep your eye on the tent, okay?"

Working his way around the perimeter of the campsite, Beau reached the back of the tent. His stomach dropped at what he saw there. It had been cut open, and it was empty! They must have snuck out while he was back feeding his face. "Damn!"

There was no need for stealth now. He raced through the clearing, yelling for Ernie to come with him, back to the main campsite. If the Steadmans were making a run for it, he knew that they'd have to be stopped, or Korvinski would have his hide. On the way, he explained the plan. Ernie would have to stay and take care of the other campers. With any luck, Beau would be able to hold the Steadman's up long enough for Korvinski to arrive and take care of things himself. He only hoped that he'd be able to catch up with them before they reached the parking area.

Friday, March 14th - Late afternoon - Somewhere in the mountains of Virginia

Lee and Amanda made the descent to the parking area at breakneck speed. They knew they had a head start, but Lee felt certain that it wouldn't take Beau long to figure out that he'd been fooled, and then one or both of their guides would likely be hot on their trail.

He looked back at Amanda. She had stayed right behind him all the way down, never questioning as he led her over unfamiliar terrain in an attempt to stay off the normal trail.

Damn! It wasn't supposed to have happened this way. This assignment shouldn't have been so hazardous. He hadn't wanted to put her in any danger. 'You've never wanted to,' his thoughts came back at him. 'But it seems to turn out that way more often than not. You've made it through in the past, so stay calm and focused, Stetson, and you'll get her out of this one, too.'

He slowed as they neared the open space where the Bronco was parked, then stood for a moment, catching his breath as he looked around the area. There was no sign that anyone else was there. He watched a little longer before turning to Amanda.

"I think we're okay for now," he said, "but we still have to be careful. Let's get our gear stowed, and we'll take it from there."

She nodded and followed him to the Bronco, keeping a watch while he loaded their things into the back compartment and fastened them down with the cargo net. Closing the rear door as quietly as he could, he guided her into the woods at the edge of the clearing nearest the truck. From there, they'd be hidden while they kept watch. Balanchev was due to arrive in less than an hour, and Lee could only hope that nothing else would go wrong before then.

His hopes crumbled a few minutes later with Beau's appearance at the edge of the clearing.

Beau's tension was obvious as he scanned the cars parked there, easing when he spotted the Bronco where it had been parked afternoon before. 'Thank God,' he thought. 'They haven't left yet.'

Not sure what he should do, he looked at his watch. 4:43. Korvinski would be here any minute, and then it would be his problem. Beau walked to the road, watching for the Russian as he paced back and forth.

It wasn't long before he saw the Jeep winding its way around the narrow, convoluted path that served as their road to the camping area. A few moments later, Korvinski pulled into the clearing and got out of his vehicle with a scowl on his face.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded. "Your friend is to be the messenger; your job is to keep an eye on 'Steadman'."

"Well, that's what I'm doing," Beau said, his voice unsteady with apprehension. "This afternoon, they packed up all their gear and disappeared. I figure they're trying to sneak away . . ."

"You imbecile!" Korvinski roared. "How could you let them get away from you?!"

"I guess I let my guard down for a minute," Beau admitted nervously. "They snuck out the back of the tent. But as soon as I realized what had happened, I got right down here. And they haven't left yet," he added gesturing toward the Bronco.

Korvinski glanced in the direction Beau had indicated before turning the full force of his wrath on the smaller man.

Lee watched their interchange with growing apprehension. "Amanda, we're out of time," he said quietly. "That's Karel Korvinski Beau's talking to. He's KGB, and one of the nastiest of the bunch. I want you to sneak down to the truck. I'll cover you, and when you're safely inside, I'll be right behind you. We have to get out of here, and the sooner the better."

"Lee, what about Balanchev?" she asked. "What will he do?"

"I know that old fox too well," he replied. "He's probably here now, watching. He'll have to be on his own for a while longer, until we can get this new wrinkle ironed out, but he'll be all right."

He looked down at the Bronco and at the two men across the clearing. "Are you ready?" he asked.

"As ready as I'll ever be," she answered, trying without much success to sound confident. She started to rise, but Lee reached out and held her back. She looked at him in surprise, barely comprehending what was happening when he lifted her face to his and kissed her tenderly.

The kiss was as full of hope and promise as the green shoots that would soon poke their heads through the late winter snow, and it filled her with a gentle warmth that made her believe that they could do anything together. Before she could respond, he broke away and smiled down at her. "For luck," he whispered. "Now go ahead, and be careful."

She made her way down without difficulty. Beau and Korvinski were arguing a dozen yards away and did not notice her slim form as she reached the Bronco, quietly opened the door, and slipped into the passenger seat. With a quick glance back in Lee's direction, she buckled her seat belt and hunkered down as low as possible.

In less than a minute, the door opened again and Lee was beside her. Not looking forward to driving down the treacherous road in the early dusk, he fastened his own belt, then inserted the key in the ignition and brought the engine to life. He pulled out of the parking area and onto the road as quickly as he dared, slamming his door shut as he rounded the corner and sped past the pair, the Russian cursing under his breath as his quarry got away.

"Quickly!" Korvinski barked at the startled Beau, "Follow them."

Beau turned to object and found himself looking down the barrel of Korvinski's pistol. He nodded his head and gestured to the Russian to come along as he ran to his truck and started the motor. He wasn't happy about chasing anyone down the hazardous road, even in broad daylight, but he'd rather take his chances in his truck than to bet that the crazy foreigner wouldn't shoot him down where he stood.

Amanda clung to the handle above the door as Lee pushed the Bronco around the sharp curves and down the mountain. His hands held the steering wheel tightly, and his concentration on the road ahead was broken only by quick glances into the rearview mirror to see if they were being followed. Damn this poor excuse for a road! In any other situation, he'd match his driving skills with

anyone's, but this was unfamiliar territory, and one wrong move could send them over the edge of the steep embankments along which they traveled.

He took another look in the mirror. "Damn!" He spat the word out in frustration.

"Lee, what is it?" Amanda was as frightened as she'd ever been, and her words expressed that fear.

"They're right behind us," he replied soberly. "I don't see how we'll get away from them." He looked back again to see the truck coming up behind them and pushed the accelerator down further. "I'm sorry, Amanda," he said between clenched teeth. "I never should have brought you here."

"It's not your fault, Lee," she said quietly. Her voice was steady now. She couldn't let herself fall apart. They were in one hell of a mess, and she needed to be strong enough to help him, however she could, to get them out of it.

The front window shattered at the same time they heard the first report from Korvinski's pistol. "Get down," Lee hissed at Amanda. Could things get any worse?

His answer came a few moments and several gunshots later, when he felt something slam into the back of his right shoulder, causing him to lose control of the Bronco and begin the horrifying plunge off the road and down the side of the mountain.

Chapter Seven

Friday, March 14th - Mid-evening - Somewhere in the mountains of Virginia

Now Amanda was wide-awake. She looked toward the driver's side of the Bronco frantically, trying to find Lee. Her search hampered by the blackness around her, she softly called his name.

"Lee . . . Lee?" The volume of her voice increased with her anxiety when her only answer was a deafening silence. She reached out, shuddering when her fingers encountered the sticky wetness of his denim shirt.

Shaking him very gently, she called to him again. "Lee! Can you hear me?" Still no response.

She had to get to him.

Moving carefully, Amanda maneuvered herself into a more upright position, fighting a wave of dizziness as her topsy-turvy world began to right itself. She reached up through her window to grab the roof of the vehicle, trying to avoid the knives of glass that jutted out here and there from the window frame. She had to keep herself from falling onto Lee when she released her seatbelt. Bracing herself as securely as she could, she reached down with her left hand and searched for the button that would set her free.

There! She was loose. She gingerly brought her feet down until she stood, one foot on the steering column and the other on the side of the driver's bucket seat. She reached down and felt for the glove box, searching for the flashlight she knew would be there. Finding it, she hesitated for a moment. What if Beau and Korvinski were still after them, still out there somewhere, and saw the light?

She stood up slowly, bringing her upper body carefully through the hole where her window had been. It was completely dark, with the only light coming from a thin sliver of moon and the few stars

visible through the treetops as they swayed in the gentle night breeze. There were no sounds except for chirping crickets, the hoot of a distant owl, and the quiet murmurs of the night air blowing through the trees. She paused for only a few seconds before making her decision. It had been dusk when they were run off the road; surely it had been too dark for anyone to try to follow them down that impossible incline. She looked at her watch, thankful for its luminescent dial. 7:48. Over two hours since sunset and longer than that since the crash. She had to believe that they were in no serious danger from their pursuers until morning. Right now, she had to see to her partner and friend.

She flipped on the flashlight and shone it down towards Lee. He was turned toward the door, covered in the rounded glass 'pebbles' that had once been the safety glass of the truck's windows. The narrow beam of light showed her the ruined shirt, heavily stained with his blood. She thought she could make out a small hole in the denim in his back, near his right shoulder. His right arm was flung upward, covering his face. She held the beam of light as steadily as she could and watched, trembling, until she saw the subtle movement that meant that he was still breathing. Thank heaven! At least he was alive.

She moved her light around the interior of the Bronco, assessing the situation. Behind the driver's seat, the roof was caved in against the trunk of an enormous tree. The driver's side door had been pushed inward as well and was resting on the ground at the foot of the tree. The area where Lee lay was too cramped for her to reach him from inside the car, but the front windshield was mostly gone, providing her with a means of access to him. Remembering a safety tip she'd heard long ago, she shone the beam of light onto the steering column. She saw the key, still in the ignition, and reached down to switch the ignition off, hoping that no stray spark would find its way to life.

Moving quickly but cautiously, she turned and began to work her way out of the truck. She used her foot to kick away the ragged edges of glass still hanging in the frame, then clambered out and eased herself to the ground as lightly as she could, skipping a heartbeat when the vehicle rocked with the weight shift and grimacing when her landing made her aware of just how much of a battering she'd received during the wreck. Every muscle and bone in her body ached; she felt as though she had been beaten with a chain. She put one hand to her face to find the cuts and scrapes that covered her right cheek and forehead but ignored the warnings her body gave her; all that mattered was getting to Lee.

She shone the beam of the flashlight around the area to get her bearings and realized that they were in a very precarious position. Only a few feet from where the tree had stopped their rapid descent was another drop-off, this one plunging into a darkness that the flashlight could not penetrate. She'd have to be careful not to disturb the tentative balance, or she'd send the Bronco plunging further into the darkness.

She shuddered and turned back, sinking to her knees in front of the destroyed windshield. Here, the roof had not sustained much damage; the opening was wide enough for her to enter with ease. She only hoped that she'd be able to get Lee out through this solitary escape route.

After knocking aside the remaining glass, she reached gingerly through the opening and touched his arm gently. "Lee?! Can you hear me?"

This time she was rewarded with a weak groan. Encouraged, she moved in closer to check the wound she had seen before. The bullet had surely slowed as it passed through the back of the truck and through his seat before hitting Lee, but its impact must still have been great enough to explain why

he had lost control, starting them on their nightmarish ride down the hill. The edges of the bloodstain were nearly dry; most of the bleeding had already stopped, but she knew that it could easily start again.

She freed him from the seatbelt and gently lowered his right arm, cringing when he cried out in distress at the movement. She checked his back again; the wound had reopened and was bleeding slowly. She turned her attention to the front of his shoulder and saw that it was intact. She wasn't sure if the lack of an exit wound was good news or bad, but there was nothing she could do for him here - she had to get him out and away from the truck before it shifted over the edge.

She turned her light toward his face and gasped at what she saw. His left eye was swollen nearly shut, and a deep laceration ran from his cheekbone into the hairline above his temple. The ragged wound was bleeding slowly and was filthy with dirt and debris that had been ground in during the final mad slide down the hill and into the tree.

"Lee!" She called his name again. "Lee, you have to wake up now. Lee, come back to me." She gently stroked the uninjured side of his face, praying that he could hear her.

Her prayers were answered when his right eyelid began to flutter open. He looked toward the sound of her voice, obviously having trouble focusing on her face in front of him.

"A . . . a . . . aman . . . da?" he asked, his confusion apparent. "Wh . . . what happened? Where are we?"

"We had an accident. Don't worry about it right now. I need to get you out. Can you help me?" Amanda had moved herself securely into agent mode; her voice was deceptively calm and steady.

"I . . . I don't know . . . I guess so," came his murmured reply. He tried to sit up but sank back down with a tortured groan. "Oh, god!" He fell silent, trying to catch his breath again. "What . . . happened?" Hadn't he asked that before? Why wouldn't she tell him?

"There was an accident," she reminded him. "You need to get out of the truck through this window. I'll be right here with you, and I'll help you as much as I can. Can you do it?"

"No, Amanda," he snapped. "I'm not going anywhere. I'll be fine. Just let me rest here for a minute."

"I can't do that, Lee," she told him, using the stern tone usually reserved for the times when the boys were being particularly uncooperative. "You have to get out now, before the truck shifts again."

He opened his mouth to renew his protest, then realized that it was no use. He could tell from her voice that she wasn't going to leave him alone, and he was just too tired to argue with her. She just wasn't being reasonable; all he wanted to do was sleep. "All right," he said wearily. "What do you want me to do?"

"That's good, Lee. Just stay with me." She quickly determined that the easiest way for her to get him out would be to get him onto his back so that he could help push himself free. She didn't see any other way to work him around the steering wheel and through the narrow opening. "First, we need to get you headed the right way. I'm going to pull your legs toward the side of the seat and help you turn onto your back."

He shifted slightly, trying to move onto his back as Amanda had instructed. "AARRGGH!" His cry cut through the quiet night like the wail of an injured animal. "God, it hurts!"

"You have several injuries, but right now we need to get you out of the truck," Amanda explained calmly, while inside she was crying, wishing that he didn't have to be in such agony. "Can you move a little more? It's not too far, and then you'll be out and I can take care of you."

"I don't think you're giving me a choice," Lee responded weakly, "but when I'm out, you have to let me sleep . . ." With her help, he rolled further onto his back, avoiding putting any pressure on his injured shoulder.

It was an eternity before they finally got his torso out, Lee pushing as hard as he could with his feet and his uninjured left arm and Amanda guiding and pulling him through the window opening while trying to keep from upsetting the vehicle's stability. The effort depleted his strength and he slipped once more into unconsciousness. Amanda had to drag him the rest of the way out and away from the wreckage. Trying to avoid the injured shoulder, she grabbed him under the left arm and by his belt, but when she began to pull, he cried out again in sheer anguish. She blinked back her tears and did what she had to do to get him away from the wreckage to safety.

Once they were clear of the wreckage, she turned the flashlight on again and surveyed his injuries. The bleeding from the bullet hole in the back of his shoulder had slowed to an ooze, but the gash on his head was again bleeding freely. She thought for a moment. Their gear had been secured in the Bronco's cargo compartment, as had the Agency-issue first aid kit that each agent was issued when they were on assignment.

She walked slowly to the back of the Bronco. The rear window hadn't fared any better than the others, making her job easier. She reached in through the broken glass and released the cargo net, which had withstood the stresses of the wild ride and the crash. Trying not to lean against the truck, she grabbed the first aid kit and the two canteens, then returned for their jackets and packs, her duffle, and the larger of the two sleeping bags.

Leaving the other items behind the Bronco for the moment, she took the first aid kit and the sleeping bag with her and returned to Lee to check his pulse and breathing. Both were weak and rapid, and he was still unconscious, but at least now there was something she could do to help. It was probably a blessing that he was out cold; she couldn't tend his wounds without causing him more pain.

She cut away the denim shirt and poured peroxide over the bullet wound in his shoulder in an attempt to clean it. She waited until the liquid stopped bubbling, then applied a liberal amount of antibiotic ointment and placed a bandage over the wound. He groaned through the procedure but did not awaken. She removed the rest of the shirt, tossing the bloody rag toward the Bronco. She would get a clean shirt for him when she was finished, but she didn't think she could get it onto him while he was unconscious. She used adhesive tape and a cloth bandage from the first aid kit to anchor his right arm to his torso, hoping that his shoulder would cause him less pain if immobilized.

When she was done, she unzipped the sleeping bag, placed it behind him, and maneuvered him onto its padded surface, bringing the other edge up to cover his bare chest. She suspected he was in shock, and she needed to keep him warm against the nighttime chill.

Next, she turned her attention to his ravaged face. There were forceps in the first aid kit, and she used them to remove the larger bits of debris from the major wound and from his many other

cuts, scratches, and scrapes. Then she poured on the peroxide, grimacing as its bubbling and fizzing brought even more dirt to the surface. She cleaned the wounds as well as she could, then applied the antibiotic ointment and a bandage to the large cut. It was hard to find areas of uninjured skin large enough to hold the tape needed to keep the gauze in place.

Satisfied with her work so far, she felt her way down the rest of his body, looking for any additional injuries. Finding his gun, she removed it from the holster at his waist and put it into the waistband of her jeans.

He stirred restlessly when she probed the large bruise forming on the left side of his chest. Some of the ribs were probably broken, but she had no way to treat this particular wound and could only hope that it and whatever other injuries he might have sustained were not serious. She saw no other injuries that she could treat. There was nothing else she could do for him now. She turned her attention to her own injuries.

The right side of her face was covered with small cuts and scrapes, none as bad as his, which made sense to her. He'd probably been injured when the vehicle flipped onto its left side, breaking out the window and dragging him across the ground. Her injuries likely had come from limbs and branches poking into the broken-out window as the truck had sped through the underbrush. She cleaned the cuts as well as she could and put a tiny bit of the antibiotic ointment on them, but she left them unbandaged. None of them were deep, and she was afraid that she'd need most of their medical supplies to care for Lee until they were rescued.

Her head ached and throbbed, and there was a goose egg forming on her forehead, above her right eye. She continued her self-examination, moving further down her body. The straps of the seatbelt had left swollen, painful bruises where they had crossed her chest and hips, but she was sure that they were preferable to being thrown from the vehicle. With each breath, there was a twinge in her left side, so she probably also had a cracked rib or two.

She opened the first aid kit and inventoried its contents. The plastic bottle of peroxide was still about three-quarters full, as were the tube of antibiotic ointment and the package of sterile gauze bandages. The roll of adhesive tape was nearly full.

She continued her survey. A bee sting kit. A small bottle of water purification tablets and a larger bottle of Tylenol. A broken thermometer. Antacid tablets. Cold tablets. A box of matches. Some needles and thread. Two pairs of latex gloves. A couple of tongue depressors. 'What a disappointing assortment!' she thought. There was nothing here that she wouldn't have expected to find in an official Junior Trailblazer first aid kit. Still, it was all they had, and it would have to do. She reached for one of the canteens and swallowed a couple of the Tylenol.

She was dead on her feet and her head was spinning, but there was more to be done before she could rest. She returned to the back of the Bronco and ran the flashlight's beam around the interior, making sure she hadn't missed anything.

Next she rifled through the contents of her pack and duffle bag, discarding those items that now seemed extraneous and packing those that could be of use. She selected fresh clothing, picking pieces that would layer easily, enabling them to adapt to the sudden changes in temperatures common in the mountains this time of year. She repeated the process with Lee's pack, then put the needed items into her pack. The unwanted items she stuffed into the duffle before carefully returning it and the other pack to the Bronco.

She took the jackets and her pack to where Lee lay and checked his breathing and pulse before searching inside the front of the vehicle and around the area, looking for anything that might be helpful. Her heart jumped when she spied the car phone from the Bronco lying near the wreck. If they could contact Billy, they might get out of this mess safely after all. Her hopes were dashed when she got close enough to realize that, somewhere on the way down the side of the mountain, the phone had been damaged beyond use.

Sighing yet again in frustration, she picked up the phone and Lee's ruined shirt. She put the items into the back of the Bronco, then picked up a large, sturdy branch lying on the ground. It was almost too big for her to handle, but she managed to lever its end against the rear bumper. Pushing with all her might, she started the Bronco to rocking again, more violently than before. She kept up the push-and-release rhythm until the motion was enough to send the unbalanced vehicle around the tree and down over the edge of the largest drop-off.

She held her breath until she heard it hit the bottom of the valley, and then for a few seconds more before releasing it in relief. There was no quiet way to wreck a vehicle, but an explosion would have let anyone within hearing distance know that the wreckage had only now completed the journey it had begun over three hours earlier. If Beau and Korvinski came looking for them in the morning, maybe they'd believe that she and Lee were dead in the wreckage at the bottom of the cliff. It wouldn't take all that long for them to realize that there were no bodies in the ruined truck, but she'd take any advantage she could get.

She checked her watch again. 8:53. She was nearly done. There was only one last task before she could rest. His earlier confusion and animosity made her feel certain that he had sustained a concussion, probably from the blow that had caused that gruesome head wound. She would need to wake him up periodically to make sure he was still with her. 'And what do I do if he won't wake up?' she thought to herself. There was nothing she **could** do, but she had to check.

She knelt beside him and called his name. He had been restless since she had wrapped him in the sleeping bag, and it was a little easier to rouse him this time. She gave him two of the Tylenol and then managed to get his good arm into the sleeve of the jacket, wrapping the other side of the jacket over his injured arm and closing the front zipper to help keep him warm. Finally satisfied that she had done all she could, she set her watch alarm to wake her in two hours so that she could check him again.

Yawning, she slipped on her heavy jacket and climbed into the sleeping bag with him, snuggling in as closely as the cramped quarters and Lee's injuries would allow.

She was asleep before her head had settled to the ground.

Chapter Eight

Saturday, March 15th - Dawn - Somewhere in the mountains of Virginia

Beau carefully guided his truck toward the valley into which the Bronco had plunged. He had tried to explain to Korvinski that they had probably died in the crash. If the tumble down the first part of the mountain hadn't killed the unlucky couple, Beau knew that the sharp drop-off a couple hundred yards from the road would have meant certain death.

But Korvinski hadn't been satisfied with 'probably'. He was in a particularly foul mood this morning, furious that they had been unable to kill the American agent last night. It was unlikely that he would catch Balanchev now, after the incident with Scarecrow, but he needed at least one of the two men dead to ensure that their leak had been stopped. He'd deal with Balanchev later, if need be, but for now he had to be certain that the American agent was no longer a threat.

An hour later, Beau headed slowly down a single-lane dirt road that followed the floor of the valley. He'd convinced Korvinski that they should begin their search at the bottom of the cliff. He was confident that they'd find the Bronco and, with it, the two bodies. The thought that he'd had a part in their deaths was disquieting. He wasn't a wimp, but this wasn't what he'd agreed to do when the damned foreigner had first approached him. God dammit! He was supposed to **watch** the couple; he might've jumped at the chance to pull in the extra cash, but this was more than he'd bargained for. He hadn't wanted to hurt anyone, much less try to kill them. And the hell of it was that he couldn't get away from the crazy Russian now. Anytime he even hinted that he wanted out, Korvinski made it quite clear that it was not an option.

As he drove, he searched the mountain slope above him for landmarks, trying to get his bearings. Finally, he pulled the truck to the side of the road and as far into the woods as he could manage.

"We'll have to walk from here," he told the Russian. Pointing up the side of the mountain, he added, "Do you see that patch of rock running across the mountain? That's the cliff their truck would have gone over. And there," as he pointed toward a green patch of pines in the midst of the bare hardwood trees that dominated most of the forest in the spring, "is just about where they went off the road. It's not far to the bottom of the cliff, and when we get there, we can work our way across until we find the Bronco, or what's left of it."

"And, for your sake," snapped Korvinski coldly, "you'd better pray that we find their bodies."

They strapped on their backpacks and started into the woods.

Saturday, March 15th - Dawn - Somewhere in the mountains of Virginia

The beeping of the alarm jolted Amanda into wakefulness and made her wince in pain. It was nearly dawn; at least they'd made it through the night. She stretched gingerly. The aching she'd felt last night was nothing compared to the sensations that racked her body this morning. She forced herself to move out of the sleeping bag and sat up. She turned to check on Lee.

He had looked horribly pale in the bright beam of the flashlight last night, but this morning he had a little more color. The bandage on his head was bloody; apparently the wound had started bleeding again sometime during the night. It would have to be changed, but first she wanted to get him up so that she could check the bullet wound in his back.

"Lee. Lee," she said, patting his right cheek. "It's time to get up. We have to leave soon."

It took a few minutes for him to awaken. When he did, he stared up at her with a confused expression on his face. His left eye was swollen shut, but he seemed better able to focus with his good eye than he had last night.

"Amanda! Wha . . . what happened to you?" His voice was anxious as he scanned her face. He tried to get up onto one elbow but fell back with a pained groan, closing his eyes while he struggled to catch his breath.

"We had a little accident last night," she reminded him. "Don't worry about me. I'm pretty sore, and I'll bet I look like something that would make a cat turn up its nose, but I'm okay, really."

He couldn't think clearly; it was a struggle to comprehend what she was saying. He reached his left hand to gently stroke her cheek, then brought it to feel his own face. Finding the bandage there, he shot her a puzzled look and tried again to sit up. "Amanda, help me up."

"Be careful, Lee," she said. "Your face isn't the only place you're hurt." She reached behind him and helped him maneuver himself into a seated position, leaning against a nearby tree trunk.

"I can tell," he said. His breathing was labored from the effort of the movement. "My shoulder hurts like hell, and it feels like I've got some broken ribs." He sat for a moment, inventorying the sensations being relayed from every part of his body. His breathing was shallow and still more rapid than normal. "What's wrong with my arm?"

"Your arm isn't hurt," she replied as calmly as she could. "They shot you, Lee. They got you in the back, in your shoulder, while they were chasing us. The bullet's still in there. I didn't know what to do, so I just tried to immobilize your arm. I guess you're lucky that it went through the back of your seat before it hit you; that must have slowed it down some."

She took a deep breath before she continued. "Anyway, you lost control of the Bronco, and we went off the road and down the side of the mountain. We slid and turned and bounced, it felt like forever, before we were stopped by that tree." She motioned toward the giant oak that had saved their lives.

"Then where . . . where's the Bronco?" he asked, looking around in confusion. His head was swimming and he was having trouble pulling his thoughts together.

"I thought it would be best if they didn't find it here," she explained. "It was about to slide over the edge of the cliff, anyway, so after I got you out, I took out the things I thought we might need, and then I rocked it until it just fell over the edge. I thought it might give us a little more of a head start if they think that we're at the bottom of that cliff when they come looking for us."

With effort, he focused his good eye on her face and attempted a smile. "Amanda, you seem to have thought of everything."

"I had to, Lee," came the quiet reply. "I just tried to imagine what you might have done in the same situation."

"I think it's very lucky for me that you were here."

"Well, neither of us should be 'here' for too much longer," she said with a small smile. "We need to get out so we can call Billy. But first, I need to change your bandages."

Lee opened his mouth to protest, but realized that he had to trust her to do what was best for him. She retrieved the first aid kit and cleaned each wound again. The laceration on his head worried her; the wound was not closing, and its edges were swollen and red. He drew back involuntarily when she applied the antibiotic ointment and grimaced as she covered the injury with fresh gauze.

He tried his right arm when she had freed it from his chest, hoping to avoid having it strapped down again. The arm itself was a little numb, probably from being confined, but moving it sent daggers of pain deep into his shoulder and waves of nausea down to his stomach. He breathed a long, shaky sigh, conceding defeat by letting Amanda immobilize it again.

She helped him into the t-shirt she had retrieved from his pack. The fabric stretched tightly across his chest and fettered arm. She tucked the right sleeve of a flannel shirt to the inside, helped him slip his left arm into the other sleeve, and fastened the shirt in place. After she had repeated the actions with his jacket, she opened a canteen and brought it to his lips for a drink.

He took a few sips and then leaned back against the tree, exhausted. His memory was clear, to a point - he knew where they were, what their assignment was. As he tried to collect his wandering thoughts, he realized that the nightmares he'd had about being chased down the mountain weren't dreams at all, but harsh reality. The only things he was sure of was that he and Amanda were in a hell of a lot of trouble and that neither his brain nor his body was in any condition for him to get them out of it.

"Take a little more," she advised, interrupting his thoughts as she handed him three Tylenol and took two for herself. "You lost quite a bit of blood last night, and we need to keep your fluids up. Would you like some breakfast to go with that?" She grinned as he took the two chocolate chip cookies she offered. She studied his face as he ate the cookies. He was pale, and his hands shook slightly. She wanted to give him a little longer to get his strength up before they set out. "Lee, would you be able to show me on the map where the Agency cabin is?"

"I think so," he answered. "But why?"

"Well, I know more or less the direction we should be heading, but it's awfully easy to get lost out here, and I'm afraid I'll take a wrong turn. If I knew which direction to go, or if I had some kind of a landmark to watch for, I'd feel a lot better about our chances of finding the cabin."

She spread the map out on his lap. The sun was high enough to provide good light now, and they leaned over the map together. "Here. Now I know that the campsites were here," she said as she pointed to an area near the top of the map. She moved her finger to a different spot. "And down here is Columbia Furnace. So I thought that the cabin must be over here somewhere." Once again her finger moved, this time indicating a wider area.

Lee squinted as he tried to read the map with his good eye. After a few minutes, he looked at her. "It's no use, Amanda," he said, disheartened. "My head is aching so badly that I can't focus well enough to see the details on the map." He thrust the map back to her and ran his fingers through his hair, obviously frustrated with himself.

"Then we'll try it another way," she said patiently. "When we left town for our drive Wednesday afternoon, you obviously knew the roads in the area well. Talk to me; tell me which roads you took and what you looked for as you drove."

"Amanda, I don't know," he replied. "We left town on the main road, heading northeast."

She checked the map, finding the road he was describing. "Good, I've got it. Now go on."

He continued, pausing as she found the dirt road that led around one peak before turning toward another, taller one. "Remember, the road goes partway up a mountain with a big rock dome at its summit, and then it dead-ends at the field where we parked the car to walk up to the cabin. The cabin is on that mountain, around on the north side, only three or four hundred yards from the top. From that parking area, there's a trail that starts out to the northwest. That trail splits about half a mile from where the road ends, and the right hand branch is the one that comes closest to the cabin." He paused again, closing his eyes and leaning his head back against the tree.

Several long moments passed before he began again. "Do you remember where we left that trail, Amanda? It's hardly recognizable as a path, there at the second big curve in the trail. If you head east from there, you'll find the cabin."

"Lee, I've got it," she proclaimed. "The cabin should be nearly due east from here, about 7 or 8 miles, and there's a trail heading that direction. From the map, it looks like it branches off just a little further down and eventually meets up with the trail to the cabin."

She helped him to his feet and shouldered the backpack. Finally, Amanda felt like she might actually be able to find her way. She turned to face her partner. "Well, Big Fella, it's not a short hike, but at least we know where we're headed. Are you ready to get going?"

"Yeah, let's give it a try. I can't move too well," he admitted, "but let's cover as much ground as we can before they realize we're not dead yet."

Saturday, March 15th - Mid morning - Somewhere in the mountains of Virginia

There was no trail leading to the bottom of the cliff, and it took Beau and Korvinski nearly an hour to reach the wreckage of the vehicle. "See," Beau said excitedly when the Bronco first came into view. "I told you no one could survive that crash. You can hardly tell that used to be a truck."

"I'll believe it when I see the bodies," returned the Russian sullenly. He picked up his pace and made it to the wreck before Beau. "And there are none!"

"Maybe they were thrown out on the way down the mountain," Beau suggested hesitantly.

"And maybe they survived after all!" Korvinski roared. "I must know for certain. We must follow the path the truck took down the mountain."

Beau looked up the cliff uncertainly. He had to do his best to placate Korvinski, or he'd be the one whose body was lying in this remote area. "We'd better search around here first," he finally said. There's not much traffic on the road we took to get here, but if they did survive, they'd have a better chance of getting' help around here than if they're further up the mountain. Besides, the trail back up to the top is really a rough one, and I don't want to hike it if we don't need to."

Korvinski reluctantly agreed, and they began their search of the area around the wreckage.

Saturday, March 15th - Late morning - Somewhere in the mountains of Virginia

They had traveled very slowly, stopping frequently for Lee to rest and catch his breath. Each time, he had insisted that they continue after only a few minutes, but now Amanda was determined that they would stop for a longer time. Her own battered body was screaming for rest, and she knew that Lee must surely be in more discomfort than she.

She settled him against a tree behind a thicket a short distance from the trail that they'd been following. All things considered, they had made pretty good time. They were past the cliff and were working their way down the side of the mountain toward the stream running through the valley below. The trail crossed that stream about four miles from the crash site, and Amanda figured that they'd covered more than half of that distance. When they reached the stream, she could refill the canteens and hope that the Agency water-treatment pills really worked. She hoped they'd be able to make it well past the stream before nightfall.

Shrugging out of the pack, she retrieved the trail mix, cookies, water, and Tylenol. She gave him three more Tylenol, coaxing him to drink several swallows from the half-empty canteen. Then they snacked. She took some Tylenol herself, but ate and drank little, wanting to stretch their meager supplies as far as possible. Lee looked so weak; he needed all of the nourishment he could get right now to keep his strength up.

After they had eaten, she checked his injuries. His head wound was still bleeding, and she cleaned the wound again and applied a liberal amount of antibiotic before replacing the soiled bandage. The bandage covering the bullet wound was still clean. Satisfied that he was all right, she returned the food and supplies to the pack. Now she could take a few minutes to rest. Lee was asleep, leaning back against the tree. She sat down beside him, glad for a chance to be off her tired feet.

She was scared. In the past, they had always worked as a team. Even when Lee wasn't with her, she'd known that, somehow, he would come to the rescue. Only a few weeks ago, in the freezer at Marvelous Marvin's, Francine had scoffed at her belief in Lee, saying not to expect him to come charging in on his white horse, but he'd made it just in time, saving them both from death by asphyxiation.

But this time was different. Now he was right alongside her, but he was in no condition to rescue anyone. Lee had told her on numerous occasions that she had 'great instincts', but she wasn't sure that her instincts would be of much help to them in this instance. She felt more alone than she ever had, and she took his hand in hers, seeking reassurance in the touch.

She shook her head and stood up. She had to get moving again. Not quite the 20 minutes she'd hoped for, but when she was still, she had time to think about the impossibility of their situation. When they were on the move, she was too busy to think. She had to keep moving; it was the only thing that was keeping her sane.

She knelt in front of Lee and stroked his cheek. It was warm to the touch; he was still running a fever, but she'd already given him the Tylenol, and they didn't have the luxury of resting any longer. She called his name to wake him up, refusing to think about anything but making it to the cabin.

Saturday, March 15th - Mid afternoon - Somewhere in the mountains of Virginia

Finally, even Beau was convinced that there were no bodies at the base of the cliff. They walked back to his truck. Korvinski got the rifle from its rack in the cab, and Beau filled their backpacks with the camping gear and food that he always carried in the truck. They followed the tributary leading to the trail at the west end of the cliffs and started their climb to the top.

By late afternoon, they made it up the trail and were working their way along the top of the cliff. It was obvious when they reached the path the Bronco had taken; trees were mowed down as if a bulldozer had taken them out.

Korvinski sent Beau to search for bodies along the Bronco's path up the mountainside to the road while he investigated the area at the top of the cliff. He knew they had come through here, but something didn't feel right. Then he saw them.

There were faint boot prints in the ground around the biggest tree. They were only partial prints, and he couldn't tell anything more about them, but he knew from the bits of glass pushed into the ground here and there that someone had walked across this ground after the truck came by.

"I didn't find anything," Beau called out as he returned from his search.

"Of course you didn't," Korvinski bellowed. "They survived the crash. I don't know how, but they did. They're probably miles ahead of us by now." He looked at the darkening sky; it was nearly sundown. "It's too dark to track them now. We'll have to camp here for the night. But in the morning we're going after them!"

Saturday, March 15th - Late afternoon - Five miles farther down the trail

"Amanda, I'm sorry. I need another break." Lee was trembling noticeably. Spotting a fallen tree, he painfully crossed the distance and sat down with a groan.

Amanda was at his side in an instant. "Here, Lee, have some more water. Do you want something to eat?" She swung the pack off her back and opened it, looking for the trail mix.

"No," he said unsteadily. "I couldn't eat anything right now." He sat silently for a few minutes.

She looked at him again. His breathing had become quick and shallow again, and his face was flushed. She placed a hand against his forehead, confirming what she already knew. It was warmer than it had been earlier in the afternoon.

"Here," she said, handing him three more Tylenol and the canteen. "Drink as much as you can, Lee. Your fever seems to be getting worse."

He managed a few extra sips before handing the canteen back to her. "Amanda, I don't think I can make it much further today. I'm even weaker than I'd thought."

"I'll try to find us a place to stay for the night." She pulled out the map. They'd moved more slowly this afternoon, but they had reached the base of the mountain on which the cabin set. They needed all the rest they could get before they started the upward trek to where the trail passed closest to the cabin. "Lee, I need to go look around a little bit and find us a place to stay tonight. Will you be all right here?"

He opened his eyes and spoke slowly. "Yeah, sure."

"Come with me just a little ways off the trail," she said.

"I don't think I can, Amanda." He looked at her again. She could see the pain and tension in his face.

"You don't have a choice, Scarecrow," she returned firmly. She reached for his arm and helped him up, giving him a few seconds to better recapture his equilibrium before she moved off the trail with him in tow. She secreted him behind a group of trees, hoping that he couldn't be seen from the trail. "Now, stay here, and I'll be back as quickly as I can." She looked at him again and turned back. "You take this," Amanda said, pulling his pistol out of her jacket pocket and handing it to him.

He looked up at her in amazement. Even in his weakened state, he realized that that Amanda wouldn't willingly carry a weapon.

She smiled back down at him. "I figured someone had to have it, and no offense, but you didn't look like the best candidate at the time." She turned and down the trail. "I'll be back as quickly as I can."

She returned about 45 minutes later, minus her backpack. "I think we can do it, Lee," she said, kneeling in front of him and reclaiming the pistol. "It'll be a little tough getting up there, but we'll be hidden if Beau and Korvinski are following us. Are you ready to go?"

She didn't wait for an answer but slipped her right arm around his waist and helped him to his feet. "I'm going to have to help you here," she said. "There's a dry water run-off just a little farther down this way, and we'll be able to follow it up. If we're careful not to disturb anything, they'll never know that we left this trail."

She led him to the dried-up waterway and helped him make the ascent. "Now we have to go just a little farther. I spotted an overhang, almost like a cave, and I think we can settle there for the night. The trees and the rocks should hide us from the trail."

It took them nearly an hour to reach the shelter she had described. Lee was obviously exhausted; he'd put his good arm across her shoulders for support, and even then, he'd walked as though his legs were lead weights. She watched him as they walked, suffering with him as she saw the grimace that crossed his face with every step.

She got him settled beneath the overhang. The area under it was little more than an indentation in the side of the mountain, but somehow, thinking of it as a cave made her feel a little more secure.

It was already late; the sun was on its way down, and it was getting dark quickly in the south-facing shelter. She didn't really want to build a fire for fear of drawing the predators' attention to their location, but she needed some light to be able to get them settled in for the night, and she didn't want to run down the flashlight batteries if she could help it. Trusting the same luck that had been with her this far, she decided to take the chance. She had to believe that Beau and Korvinski wouldn't be following them along the treacherous mountainside without being able to see where they were going, and, even if they were closer than she expected, their current location was off the trail far enough that no light should be visible to their pursuers.

It took only a short time to gather as much wood as she thought she'd need for a small fire. It was fully dark outside now. She retrieved the backpack from where she had stowed it at the side of the opening and took out the flashlight, then stacked the wood at one side of the enclosure for a fire. Once it was burning well, she got her Swiss Army knife and the flashlight and exited the cave once more.

She cut a number of pine boughs from the trees in the surrounding area, listening to the sounds of the forest as night fell. She heard the crickets chirping and the hoot-hoot-hoot of an owl in a nearby tree. Suddenly, the soft call was replaced by the beating of wings as the bird fled the area. Almost simultaneously, she heard the crack of a breaking branch, all too close to her.

She immediately extinguished the flashlight and reached into her jacket pocket to reassure herself that the pistol was still there. She'd never fired at another living creature. 'Please don't let tonight be the first time,' she whispered under her breath.

She heard no other sound until, a few minutes later, the forest began to return to its usual nighttime murmurs. She waited a bit longer before she returned to her task. 'It's just my nerves,' she thought. 'I'm hearing things that aren't there.'

Soon she returned to the enclosure, tossing the armload of pine branches to one side as she looked around the small area where they'd be spending the night. Lee was sound asleep again, leaning against the back wall. Last night, she'd awakened him every two hours to check for any complications from the concussion she was certain he had sustained. She looked down at him and sadly shook her head. 'There's not a single thing I could do even if he did start to have problems,' she thought with resignation. 'Tonight, I'll just let him sleep.'

She needed a place to spread the sleeping bag out. Looking around, she chose a likely spot and moved as many of the rocks as she could out of the way, then retrieved the pine boughs and spread them across the floor.

Moving to the backpack, she extracted Lee's poncho and laid it on top of the improvised mattress. Finally, she unzipped the sleeping bag and spread it out on the poncho. She stepped back and assessed her work. The makeshift bed wasn't much, but it should be easier on their battered bodies than trying to sleep directly on the hard ground.

Finally, she fetched the trail mix, cookies, and canteens that would have to serve as dinner. 'Let's see,' she thought. 'I guess the main course will be 'Trail Mix à la Amanda King', with 'Mom's Best Chocolate Chip Cookies' for dessert. And to go with the meal, a superb 1985 water, aged for a day and a half in the canteen.' She shook her head. 'That does it. I'm going crazy.' The stress and exhaustion were beginning to take their toll.

She took the components of the meal and crossed the cave to Lee. She gently shook him awake and offered him the canteen and the food. "How are you feeling, Lee?"

"Not very well," he admitted quietly after taking a few swallows. He took a cookie and a small handful of the trail mix and began to eat. "How far do you think we got today?"

"I'm not sure," she replied, "but I think we made good progress. We're at the foot of the mountain. We don't have nearly as far to go tomorrow to make it to the cabin, but it's mostly uphill."

"Great! With me slowing us down, it'll take forever to get there," he said dejectedly. He ran his hand through his hair in frustration. "Lot of good I am to you now. You'd be better off without me."

She put a finger under his chin and raised his eyes to hers. "Stetson, don't ever say such a thing again," Amanda reproved him. "I'd never be able to face this problem alone. Just knowing that you're here with me gives me the strength to try to get us home safely."

She watched as he tried to digest what she had said. 'Heaven help us,' she prayed silently. 'I hope that we're as near the cabin as I think. I don't know how much longer he can keep going.'

Smiling, she kissed his forehead. "You need to get to bed," she said tenderly, "but first, let me get the first aid kit and I'll change your bandages."

Lee watched her slim form as she crossed the enclosure to get the kit. 'I'd have been in a mess without her this time,' he thought. 'If you were honest with yourself, Stetson,' his subconscious interjected, 'you'd admit that having her around always makes things seem better.' He closed his eyes and wearily leaned back against the rock wall.

Amanda tried to hide her dismay as she uncovered the wound on his head. She'd thought that it had looked worse when she cleaned it earlier in the day, but this time it was definitely more swollen.

Pockets of pus were building up in the places where the cut was the deepest. The surrounding area was turning a nasty crimson. It was definitely infected, and the medicines in the first aid kit weren't doing much to fight it. Time was running out in more ways than one. She had to get him out of here and to a doctor.

She finished tending to the head wound and turned to his shoulder. This was the wound that had concerned her more at first, but it wasn't nearly as worrisome now as the other. Finished with her nursing duties, Amanda helped Lee to the improvised bed and settled him between the poncho and the sleeping bag. He lay on his left side, with his back to the fire, and soon fell asleep.

Amanda stole a small handful of trail mix from their diminishing food supply. She'd not eaten a real meal since Friday's lunch, and she'd been only nibbling on the snack foods and taking an occasional swallow of water as they walked today. Lee should have the lion's share of the food and water, she reasoned. He was injured and sick and needed all the help he could get to make it through this. But the strain of the day was catching up with her, and she realized that she also needed to keep her strength up.

Looking around the enclosure to be sure that everything had been taken care of, she extinguished the remnants of the fire and made her way to the bed. She slipped Lee's pistol under the rolled-up sweatshirt she was using for a pillow and slid under the sleeping bag, moving close to Lee. 'Might as well share each other's warmth,' she thought with a sad smile. This wasn't the way she'd imagined it would be when she fantasized about getting closer to Lee.

'What if?' The thought wasn't really worth following but she couldn't seem to let it go. What if they didn't find a way out this time? Images of her mother and the boys flashed through her mind. This situation was one of the 'what if's' that made her job at the Agency so difficult at times. What if she didn't make it back to tell her family how much she loved them, how much they meant to her? And now, what if she never had a chance to tell Lee how much she really cared for him? There were no answers to those questions.

But would she really have changed anything? She tried to be honest with herself as she mulled over the answer, finally admitting that no, she wouldn't have. The 'danger, excitement, and intrigue' hadn't been quite what she'd imagined during those first few weeks, but she loved her work and the thought that she might, in some small way, be making the world a safer place for the boys and for millions of other people like her family. But most of all, she wouldn't have given up the chance to work alongside Lee over the past couple of years.

Working with Lee . . . It hadn't always been easy. In fact, at the beginning it had been nearly impossible. But, as he'd come to terms with the fact that it **was** going to happen, they'd found ways to work it out. True, much of that responsibility had fallen on her own shoulders as she learned to ignore Lee when he was being rude to her. She'd gradually come to understand that it wasn't her he was lashing out at, it was the world in general. It hadn't taken her long to realize that there was a 'real' man under his Scarecrow façade, and the glimpses of that man were enough to keep her going during the hard times. Even when she thought she'd had all that she could take, she remembered the times when he'd surprised her with his caring concern. From the first few times they'd worked together, she'd somehow known that, in many ways, she could count on him.

And now, when it had seemed that they were finally taking the next step in their journey of mutual discovery, the world was pulled out from under them. At that moment, Amanda vowed that, given another chance, she would never again pull away from Lee because of her own unsubstantiated fears

and concerns. She couldn't change who she was, even if she'd wanted to. But she could and would teach herself to be more open and receptive to any chance to progress in her relationship with the man who now lay beside her.

Stifling a yawn, she snuggled up behind Lee, lightly pressing her length against his and gently wrapping her right arm around his waist. He stirred, moving himself back to bring them even closer, but did not wake. With a small smile, she closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Nine

Sunday, March 16th - Dawn - Somewhere in the mountains of Virginia

The sun was just beginning to make itself known when Korvinski roughly shook Beau awake. In the 20 minutes it took to make a pot of coffee and down the packaged granola bars from the rations that Beau packed, they were ready to start out after the troublesome American pair.

A short time later, they reached the fork in the footpath. "I 'spect they went this way," Beau offered, pointing down the passage that switched back and forth to the right, quickly descending to a gravel road. "It's the fastest way back to town, and they'd have a purty good chance of getting picked up on the road."

"Scarecrow is not likely to do the expected," Korvinski returned coldly. "The roadways are too open, too exposed. He'd not choose a way where he would be so easily seen. We follow the other trail."

Beau forgot his fearful regard for Korvinski long enough to ask, "Who's this 'Scarecrow' guy you keep talking' about, anyway? I thought you were after the Steadmans."

"You utter fool," Korvinski replied with disdain. "Did you think I would have so much interest in an average American? His name isn't 'Steadman'. He is an American agent, and his codename is Scarecrow."

"But why are you after him?" Beau asked, his voice shaking somewhat. He was getting in deeper and deeper, and each new revelation from Korvinski made him realize just what a mess he'd gotten himself into.

"I have come to kill him, you imbecile!" Korvinski roared. "I **will** kill him, and then I'll kill his pretty little partner, too! And if I hear any more foolish talk from you, I just might kill you, too."

He was going to kill **her**, too? Beau opened his mouth to protest, then backed down. "Don't worry, Mr. Korvinski," he stammered. "I'll keep quiet; you know I will."

"I'm most certain of that," Korvinski answered with a malevolent smile. "Now, come along. We must make good time today if we are to catch our quarry." The smile, still directed at Beau, became even more threatening. "And we will catch them today. That is also a certainty."

Sunday, March 16th - Early morning - Somewhere in the mountains of Virginia

The sun shining into her eyes brought Amanda out of a heavy sleep. She went from slumber to full awake in a heartbeat. 'How late is it?' she thought, in a state of near-panic. Her eyes found the watch. 8:19. She had been asleep for nearly nine hours, but she felt like she could sleep at least that much more and still be tired. She should have set the alarm; they should have been up before dawn and well on their way by now.

She sat up and turned to the man lying beside her. She shook him, gently at first and then more forcefully as he resisted her attempts to bring him into wakefulness. "Lee . . . Lee . . . Lee, wake up!"

He stirred, rolling onto his back enough to use his left hand to brush her hand away. "Go 'way," he mumbled, barely coherent. "I don't have to work today. Leave me 'lone."

His response unsettled her. She had hoped that he would be able to think more clearly by this morning. She swallowed her distress and called his name again. "Lee, it's me; it's Amanda. Lee, you've gotta wake up!"

"Oh, God," he murmured. "Is it morning already?" At last his good eye began to flicker open. "Amanda?" He sounded surprised to see her there with him.

"Oh, Lee," she said with relief. "Am I ever glad you're awake. I need to get your bandages changed so we can get back on the trail."

His confusion grew. "What are you talking about, Amanda? What trail?" He reached his hand up to gently touch his throbbing head. "What happened?"

"Don't worry about it right now, Lee," she responded. "For the moment, you'll have to trust me. Now, turn your head so I can get started."

She helped him into position, then uncovered the head wound. Seeing what lay under the dirty gauze, she squeezed her eyes shut and forced the bile back down from her throat. A moment later, she was able to look again. Biting her lower lip until her own blood threatened to flow, she got the first aid kit and began to clean the festering wound.

Lee let out a sharp cry and drew his head back. "No!" he protested. "No, stop it!"

She took a deep breath and looked him square in the eye. "Lee, it has to be done. Remember, you have to trust me here. Now, I need you to lie as still as you can so that I can get this cleaned up."

Somehow, she got through to him and he lay there, trembling with the pain but willing himself not to cry out as she continued her ministrations.

She got the wound as clean as she could, then looked helplessly at the tube of antibiotic that was the only remedy available to her. Knowing that it wasn't helping, she nevertheless worked the last of the ointment into the opening and covered the unsightly area with a clean bandage.

As before, the bullet wound showed no signs of trouble and was quickly cleaned and re-covered. When she had finished, she helped him sit up. "Here are your Tylenol."

When he had swallowed the tablets, she left the trail mix and remaining cookies with him and turned to pack up their things. 'Good thing I made double batches,' she thought. 'Who'd have thought that it would be our staple diet for the weekend?' She smiled to herself. The sleep must have done her **some** good, if she could find anything the least bit amusing about the situation they were in.

The rest of their gear was packed. She added the foodstuffs to her pack and strapped it on again. "Okay, Lee, we have to get going now." She helped him to his feet and handed him the walking stick that she had cut for him the night before.

When he was steady, she looked up into his pale face and gently cupped his cheek in her hand. Reaching up, she placed a tender kiss on his chapped, too-warm lips. "For luck," she said. "I think we could use a little."

He didn't respond. There was absolutely no sign that he even knew she was there. She led him down the rough pathway back to the trail.

Sunday, March 16th - Mid morning - Somewhere in the mountains of Virginia

Beau and Korvinski had reached another fork in the trail.

"Where do they lead?" demanded the Russian, indicating their two choices.

"Well, this one," Beau indicated the pathway that continued in the direction they had been traveling, "heads down to one of the main roads into town. The other one," nodding toward the second trail, "goes back up to the north and away from town. It's a rough trail, and, far as I know, it doesn't go much of anywhere in particular. Just kinda winds around the side of the mountain, here, and then runs along the stream for a ways before it ends." Beau's voice was subdued today. If he could help it, he wouldn't draw the foreigner's attention any more than necessary.

Korvinski looked down both passages, pondering which to follow. "Can you tell if anyone has passed by here recently?"

"Let's see," Beau answered, bending slightly to get a better look at a shady patch of snow. "The main trail, the one to the highway, gets a fair amount of traffic, 'specially in the fall when the leaves are turnin'. The spring hikin' season's just getting' started, and there's been a lot of folks through here already. Hard to say if this Scarecrow fella and his woman went this way or not."

He moved to the other trail. "Not too many folks go this way, though. It's a long 'un, and there's not all that much to see for it to make it worth the hike." He paused. "But it looks like someone's been through here fairly recently," he added. "The prints here in the snow are pretty crisp, so they ought to be fresh."

He looked up at Korvinski. "If I had to bet, I'd say they went the hard way. But I wouldn't want to bet my life on it," he added nervously.

The Russian sneered down at the pitiful excuse for a man. "You just did," he said.

Sunday, March 16th - Late morning - Somewhere in the mountains of Virginia

Yesterday their progress had been slow, but at least they'd been able to keep going. By comparison, today they were hardly moving. Lee was leaning heavily on the walking stick, and they were forced to stop often so that he could catch his breath. Despite the cool spring temperatures, his face was bathed in sweat, a sign of both his exertion and his fever.

Lee was rapidly getting worse. Amanda didn't know if it was the concussion, the infection, or the two combined, but he had begun to drift from the stark reality of their present to the more pleasant images of some imagined 'otherwhere'.

"Amanda, I don't know why, but I'm really bushed," he had said on the first such occasion, after they had surmounted a particularly difficult stretch of the trail. "Let's sit the next few dances out, okay?"

She had been thunderstruck. Not knowing what else to do, she had agreed that it would be good to get off their feet. Maybe he just needed another break. Following the now-established routine, she guided him off the trail to a less-conspicuous spot, where, hopefully, they were less likely to be seen.

Soon they'd been on their way again. Dealing with Lee's physical weakness and his continuing confusion was taking its toll on her. They had to reach the cabin soon; thus far, she'd been able to hold herself together, but the task grew harder with every trudging step.

So it had been for over three hours. They had progressed in fits and starts. For the moment, Lee was quiet, and the only sounds around were the breeze ruffling through the leaves of the sheltering trees and the sound of their own footfalls. Then, suddenly, she heard it. The very distinct sound of human voices, coming from somewhere behind them. 'Not now!' The thought sounded through her brain like an echoing alarm. They had to get off the trail. They couldn't be caught now, not when they were so close to reaching their goal.

No sooner had she found a place for them to hide, lying behind a dense patch of undergrowth only a few yards from the trail, than Lee's mind began to wander once more.

"Amanda," he began, reaching up to touch her cheek, a look of regret on his face. Amanda had never thought she'd be happy because of his current weakness, but his voice was soft and somewhat distant. "Amanda, I hear Billy coming. Damn! He always chooses the wrong time . . ."

Amanda was in a panic. "Lee!" she whispered. "Be quiet! Please, Lee . . ."

He didn't seem to hear or care. His voice was growing stronger. "Just when I think it's safe for me to be close to you . . ."

She heard the voices growing closer. She had to silence Lee, but how? In desperation, she did the only thing she could think of. "Don't worry about Billy, Lee." She moved her body up against his chest and placed her lips against his.

Startled, he hesitated for a moment, until his clouded thoughts focused on what was happening. 'To hell with Billy!' He relaxed in the unexpected embrace and began to respond. He increased the pressure of the kiss and his tongue caressed her lips, seeking entry.

She was trembling all over, less from fear than as a result of the energy generated from their contact. She grappled with her own emotions. 'He doesn't know what he's doing. He probably won't even remember . . .'. Nevertheless, she opened to him and felt his tongue insinuate its way into her mouth.

'Oh!' Her frantic brain tried to process the overload of incoming information from her senses. With difficulty, she tore her mind away from the intensity of the contact so that she could listen.

The voices were very near; she could hear their cadences now. One was distinctly foreign; it had to be Korvinski. The other, carrying the flavor of the mountains, belonged to Beau. As they came closer and closer, she began to make out what they were saying.

"We've made really good time today," Beau asserted cautiously. It was the fastest he'd ever traveled this particular trail.

Lee's hand was moving now, his fingers entangling themselves in her hair. 'It isn't real,' she told herself. "I have to hear what they're saying." Her mind moved back to the conversation, but her body had other ideas.

"Da," his companion agreed, "but still we have not caught them."

"But we will," Beau returned, with a bit more confidence. "The trail's been too rough for them to have left too many prints, but we've seen a few. They're still headed this way, and there's nowhere much for them to go except for straight ahead. This is really backcountry. There's probably not a building around for miles."

"I never said that Scarecrow would be seeking a building," Korvinski replied moodily.

Only the joining of their lips kept Amanda from letting out a gasp as Lee's hand moved again, now gently stroking her back, from shoulder to thigh, thigh to shoulder, over and over again. '**Listen!**' she told herself again. Her conscious mind complied as her back arched beneath his touch. She hoped that the pair below them wouldn't hear the pounding beat of her racing heart as it responded to his nearness.

"Well . . . well, no, I guess you didn't," Beau agreed. "But we're still behind them, and we're bound to be catching up to them. They can't be moving too fast. No one could have come through that wreck without a hell of a lot of hurt."

"Scarecrow is not an ordinary man." The Russian was preoccupied. "At one time or another during the past 12 years, half of the KGB has been after him, and no one has yet been successful. The man has more lives than an accursed cat."

At that, Beau fell silent. A part of him was in awe of anyone who could have survived what this 'Scarecrow' fellow had been through the past couple of days. An even larger part wished the guy luck; nobody deserved to be chased down by a creepy SOB like Korvinski. 'But,' he reminded himself, 'if I even breathe a hint of that thought, it'll be me at the wrong end of the creep's gun.'

They started talking again a short time later, but they had passed and were beyond the distance where Amanda could understand their words. She waited a few more minutes to be sure they had gone, then broke the kiss and lifted herself off of Lee's chest.

"No," he protested, his voice rasping hoarsely. "Don't stop now." His left arm encircled her shoulders and brought her close to him again.

"Lee," she whispered, keeping a safe distance between them. "We have to leave now, and we have to be very, very quiet. Do you understand me?" She slipped out of the backpack and found the canteen and more Tylenol. "Here, Lee, take these before we start." Maybe the painkiller would somehow help them get to the cabin before they were caught.

"No," he said unsteadily. "I don't want anything right now. I feel lousy."

"I'm not asking you to eat anything just now, Lee," she told him quietly. "But you have to have something to drink, and we have to keep trying to make your fever go down. Come on, now," she said, handing him three Tylenol and the canteen. "Drink as much as you can, Lee."

He managed a few sips before handing the canteen back to her. "Just let me rest a few minutes, Amanda, and then we can get started again."

"Normally, I'd be encouraging you to rest," Amanda said ruefully. "But this time I'm going to have to disagree. The sooner we can get to the cabin, the sooner we can contact Billy and get you to a hospital."

"Yeah," he agreed. "That sounds like a good idea."

His words chilled her through and through. There was nothing he could have said that would have frightened her more than that quiet admission. Pushing the thought aside, she helped him to his feet and back to the passageway.

Sunday, March 16th - Early afternoon - A little further along the trail

He walked as if every step were an obstacle to be overcome - as if the burden of his own body were too much for him to carry. They had discarded the walking stick, and now Amanda walked at his side, supporting as much of his weight as she could. Already laden with the pack and other supplies, she wasn't sure she was providing much more than moral support. At least she was mostly successful in keeping him upright and moving forward, however slowly.

Her body was numb from exhaustion, but all of her senses were at full alert. She listened and watched the passageway ahead for any sign that Beau and Korvinski had realized that they were no longer behind their quarry. They were past the first large curve; the second one was not far, and with it came their farewell to the route they'd been on for so long. The pathway to the cabin was neither formal nor well marked, but she'd be able to relax a little when they left the main trail. She had no reason to expect the men who were following them would know that the cabin was there, much less that they'd know the way to find it.

There! Up ahead, the path began a slow but steady curve back to the left. Now all she had to do was to find the place where the two routes diverged.

Closer . . . Closer . . . There it was! Only a few more steps and they'd be on the last stretch.

Lee had been panting heavily as she rushed him down the trail. She knew that he desperately needed to rest, but if they stopped now, it could cost them their lives. They had to keep going. They were close, so close . . .

So close . . . but then she heard it again. The voices were returning, one of them sounding extremely angry. Beau and Korvinski had doubled back and were rapidly approaching them. They had to keep going. She had to get Lee off of the trail and into a safe place. Determination etched in every feature, she urged Lee on, pushing him harder until they covered the last three steps to their destination. They had to keep going . . .

They started up the new path. Of all the luck - the trees were more scattered here; they'd never find a place to hide. The voices were getting nearer - she was beginning to understand some of the

things that the Russian was bellowing at Beau. A little more . . . They had to keep going a little more . . .

Beau and Korvinski must have been within a few yards now. She registered their words but was too intent on getting away to understand what they were saying. There was a boulder, just a little farther up; they could hide behind it. Just a little farther . . .

They were there. Lee collapsed against the huge rock as she tried to help him to the ground. She managed to maneuver him far enough behind the stone that he would be hidden from those below. When she rose from her position kneeling beside Lee, trying to make it the last few feet undetected, her foot slipped on a loose rock and sent it, along with several companions, rolling down to where Beau and Korvinski were passing.

"Up there!" Korvinski roared. "They're just ahead."

Amanda crouched behind the rock, next to Lee. She was now out of sight of the trail below, but what did it matter? They had lost. She could hear the two men scrambling up the side of the mountain towards them. There was only one last thing to try.

She reached into her jacket pocket and pulled out Lee's pistol. There were 9 rounds in the clip and she had found one spare clip in his pocket after she had pulled him from the wreckage.

"God help me," she murmured, not realizing that she'd spoken the prayer aloud. She peered out around the side of the boulder that sheltered them and, spotting movement below, aimed the weapon and squeezed the trigger.

The sounds of pursuit stopped almost immediately. Cautiously, she peered once more around the side of the boulder. There, not 10 yards from her, lay Korvinski, cursing and holding his left arm. If she tried to move Lee now, they'd be back in the open, and even a wounded Korvinski would be able to travel faster than Lee could now. She'd have to try to shoot him again.

Ignoring the shudder that ran through her at the thought of what she needed to do, she closed her eyes for a moment, then wiped a tear from her cheek. 'Dear God,' she thought in despair, 'I've never even fired a gun at a real person before; it's been hard enough getting used to shooting Leatherneck's simulations. Now I have to try my best to kill a man while he's down. Please forgive me. Please . . . I **have** to do it to save Lee.' Her confession made, she rose again to do what she must.

She ducked back behind the rock when she heard the report of a gun and felt the shower of fragments as a bullet ricocheted off the side of the boulder. 'What am I going to do now?'

Almost before she had framed the question in her mind, another shot rang out, this time from higher up the mountain and to her left, away from the cabin. 'Is it Beau?' she asked herself with dread. 'He must have gotten up another way, and now I'm caught between the two of them.'

It took a couple more exchanges of gunfire before she realized that neither of the shooters was now targeting her position. Risking another peek around the rock, she saw that Korvinski was looking in another direction and was firing at the source of the other gunfire. Someone was giving her a chance to get away.

She sat back down and looked at Lee. He had been deathly quiet since they had reached the large stone. His face was ghostly pale, except for the garish red marks streaking down the side of his face, and it gleamed under a layer of sweat. 'Heaven help us,' she prayed again. 'He's unconscious.'

"Not now, Lee," she pleaded. "Please wake up! You have to get up. Please!"

Her words finally reached far enough into his brain to bring him to a state of murky consciousness. "I . . . I don't think I can stand alone, Amanda," he whispered. "Can you help me?"

Without hesitation, she unstrapped the backpack and left it on the ground, then stood and helped him to his feet. She staggered as he leaned heavily on her, but the hope that they might actually make it gave her the strength to half-carry him up the slope to the cabin. All she needed now was a little time, and a lot of luck. The gunfire was sporadic now, but their benefactor was providing her with time. The luck was her responsibility.

They shuffled along at a pitiful pace, but they were making progress, and Korvinski didn't seem to have noticed their escape. It was little more than a quarter of a mile to the cabin, but with every step closer to it, she felt as though she'd won a marathon. Afraid to stop for fear of not being able to start again, she continued, one small victory at a time.

They topped a rise and saw the cabin in a depression behind it. Only a few more yards, and they'd be within the relative safety of its walls. So close. So close. They were nearly there . . .

Her world began to gyrate as they neared the small structure. As hard as she tried, she couldn't fight the dizziness that engulfed her; couldn't stop the pounding that reverberated inside her skull; couldn't stop the blackness that encroached, working its way in from the periphery, narrowing her visual field to nothingness as her legs gave out beneath her.

Chapter Ten

Sunday, March 16th - Mid-afternoon - In the cabin

Lee groaned as he was lowered onto the narrow bed. He felt as though he had been hit by a truck; his head throbbed unrelentingly and he couldn't find a spot, from head to foot, that didn't hurt. He slowly assembled his meandering thoughts and fought his way back to lucidity.

He opened his uninjured eye and made out a large form leaning over him. Struggling to regain his focus, he was finally able to make out a face. "Balanchev?" he croaked.

"Da, my friend, it is I." Even though the man spoke quietly, Lee winced as the deep voice drummed through his head like a jackhammer.

"What . . . what are . . . you doing here?" His raspy voice was hardly understandable.

"Wait, comrade." Balanchev spoke in a whisper now. He held a canteen to Lee's dehydrated lips. "First, you drink. Then we talk."

Lee complied without comment, then repeated his question. "What are you doing here? We missed the meet and . . . Oh, my God! Where is she?" He tried to sit up but was only able to raise his head and shoulders a few inches. "Is she all right?"

Balanchev laid a heavy hand on Lee's good shoulder and gently forced him to lie back. "She is here. She is fine. She is sleeping now. She is safe."

Lee let out his breath. "Thank God," he said in relief. "If I had let anything happen to her . . ."

"Nothing has happened to her, comrade," Balanchev reassured him. "We must call your people for help. What are the codes?"

Lee supplied the requested information. Fatigue was catching up with him again. "Thank you, Balanchev." He could no longer keep his eyes open. "Thank you for rescuing . . ." He slipped back into unconsciousness.

"But I did little for you, my American friend," he said with a slight shake of his head. "You owe your thanks to another."

He rose, moving from Lee's bedside to Amanda's, and sat down once more. His large hand gently stroked her forehead, brushing the tangled curls back out of her eyes. "Lizaveta," he called. "You must wake up now; I need your help."

Amanda slowly opened her eyes, drawing back in fear when she saw the figure seated beside her. As she came more fully awake, she was able to see the concerned smile on his face. She recognized him from the pictures Lee had shown her only a few days before. Balanchev.

"So it was you," she said, as realization began to dawn. "You were the one who drew Korvinski's fire so we could escape."

"Yes, it was I," the big man agreed. "It seemed that you needed a little help, so I did what I could."

She looked around the cabin, her eyes landing on the still figure in the other bed. "Lee! Is he . . ." Her tears rose, threatening to overflow and run down her cheeks.

"No, Lizaveta, he is alive. You have saved him. But now we must call for help. Scarecrow gave me the proper codes to use, but I believe that the Agency will respond more positively to your voice than to mine." He smiled down at her again. "Come, the radio is here."

She used the codes to make direct contact with Billy. "Amanda, where are you? It's been over two days!"

"Yes, sir, I know," she said ruefully. "Lee and I have been a little busy. We're at the Agency cabin, sir. We need you to come as quickly as you can, and bring a Medivac helicopter with you . . . No, sir, I'm fine, but Lee is very, very ill. Please hurry, sir, he needs to get to the hospital . . . Yes, sir, and be careful, there's a KGB agent named Korvinski who's been chasing us. One of the guides from the retreat was helping him, and I think they're still out there . . . Yes, sir, I have Lee's gun, and I'm not alone. Mr. Balanchev is here with us . . . Yes, sir, I'll be careful. Just please hurry."

She turned off the radio and looked up at Balanchev. "They should be here in an hour or so," she said. "Mr. Melrose said there's a clearing about 100 yards east of the cabin that's big enough to let the helicopter land safely. He and Francine have been in Front Royal since yesterday afternoon, trying to find us." She walked across the cabin and sat on the edge of the other bed. She reached out and stroked Lee's cheek, the tears now falling to darken his shirt. "Please, Lee, just hang on a little longer. Help is on the way."

The silence was shattered by the report of a gun. A bullet whistled through the window and dug itself into the log wall behind them.

"Korvinski!" Balanchev exclaimed angrily. "Lizaveta, it is time to end his little game. Can you help me?"

"What do you want me to do?" Amanda asked quietly.

"You must distract him so that I can come around behind him." He crept to the window and cautiously looked out, waiting for another round of gunfire. "Get your gun and come here, but be very careful."

When she was at his side with Lee's pistol, he pulled the curtain back and pointed. "Do you see the rocks and underbrush around the three trees standing together there, to the right?" Another shot rang out, and they jumped back from the open window. Balanchev fired at the target, bark flying when his bullet tore into one of the trees.

"You must fire in that direction, just enough to keep him interested. Do not show your face at the window; just stay behind the curtain and the cabin wall as much as you can." Balanchev looked at her solemnly. "Lizaveta, do not take any chances. I think that Scarecrow would be quite unhappy with me if you get hurt."

"I'll be careful, Mr. Balanchev," she replied. "I just want this nightmare to be over so that Lee can get some medical care. But what about Beau? He might see you coming, even if Korvinski doesn't."

"We don't have to worry about him," Balanchev assured her. "As soon as he saw Korvinski fall from your bullet, he turned and ran back down the trail faster than a Siberian hare. He is most probably halfway back to the town by now." He smiled at her, then went to the back of the cabin, climbed through a window, and made his way into the woods.

Yet another bullet sped through the broken window. Amanda pressed her lips together and took a deep breath. Aiming the pistol toward the underbrush that shielded Korvinski, she fired.

She continued to return his fire, waiting until he'd gotten off two or three rounds so that she could ration her ammunition. After about ten minutes, she spotted movement in the trees behind the hiding spot. She took careful aim, not wanting to accidentally shoot the man who was her only hope of survival, and fired once more, trying to ensure that Korvinski wouldn't hear the motion in the brush behind him.

The next bullet from Korvinski flew wide, striking the opposite end of the small structure. Balanchev had tackled the man as he fired and was wrestling the rifle away from his former associate. In a few minutes, he had the other man in his control. Holding Korvinski with his injured arm twisted behind his back, Balanchev guided him through the door and into the cabin.

"There is rope in the back," he told Amanda, gesturing toward a shelf with a nod of his head. "Let us secure our trophy until your backup arrives."

She fetched the rope and watched as Balanchev securely tied the other Russian to a chair and gagged him. When he was done, he looked at her and smiled broadly. "Well done, Lizaveta."

Amanda asked the question that had been on her lips since the man sitting near her had first spoken the name. "Mr. Balanchev, my name is Amanda King. What have you been calling me?"

"Ah, yes. Lizaveta. It is the name of the heroine in many Russian folk tales. She is the fox, so small and beautiful that only the smallest of the forest animals think of her as a threat. But she is also clever and resourceful, and so full of courage that soon even the larger animals learn to be wary of her." He looked at her with approval. "But she is nothing compared to you, my new friend. Scarecrow has chosen his partner well. You may be Amanda King to others, but to me, you will always be Lizaveta."

Amanda looked down, blushing at the praise. "I think I'd better check on Lee," she whispered, crossing to sit on the bed, beside her partner. It was getting hard to think clearly. 'I'm just so tired,' she thought. 'Can't keep going any longer.' Exhaustion overtook her without warning. She lay her head on Lee's chest and surrendered.

Balanchev eased her legs onto the bed so that she was lying next to her partner. 'Yes,' he thought with a pleased smile, looking with appreciation at the beautiful brunette as he covered the pair with a blanket. 'Scarecrow has chosen very well indeed.' He went outside to await the arrival of the helicopter.

Sunday, March 16th - Early evening - Parker General Hospital, Arlington, Virginia

Billy rushed after the two gurneys as they made their way from the helipad into Parker General, then stared through the window of the emergency room door in futility. The two members of his best team disappeared into separate examining rooms, each greeted by a swarm of physicians and other medical personnel. For now, all he could do was wait. This was one of the worst parts of his job.

At length he turned from the door. He crossed to the ER waiting area, relieved to find himself alone. A worried frown settled across his face as he sat in the chair nearest the door. 'What on earth could have gone wrong out there?' he asked himself. 'Lee looks like death warmed over, and Amanda wasn't all that much better.'

He shook his head sadly. Maybe when Balanchev got there, he'd be able to fill him in. There had barely been room for Billy to accompany the two agents and the Medivac team on the flight back to Arlington, but there was no way he was going to have them make the trip without him. Balanchev, Francine, and the other agents were waiting for a second chopper to bring them and Korvinski back to the Agency.

Nearly an hour had passed before one of the NEST doctors came into the room and sat beside him.

"Do you have any news?" Billy asked impatiently. "What happened to them out there?"

"Mrs. King has some significant bruising and is suffering from dehydration and exhaustion." The doctor watched Billy carefully as he talked. He had dealt with the Section Chief before and understood how fiercely protective he was when one of his agents was injured. "Mr. Stetson has suffered several injuries, one of them life-threatening. He has a concussion and a deep head laceration, which is massively infected. We've started him on wide-spectrum IV antibiotics, but until we get back culture results, we won't know how effective they will be."

"As to what happened . . ." The doctor paused and shook his head. "They were in a car wreck of some sort. Both of them have characteristic seat belt bruising across their chests and hips. Judging from the appearance of the bruises, the wreck happened about two days ago. If that's true, someone has been taking very good care of Mr. Stetson; he could easily have died otherwise."

Dr. Watts continued. "He has also sustained a gunshot wound to his back. Fortunately, the bullet seems to have done little tissue damage. Right now it's lodged against his scapula . . . his shoulder blade. It will have to be surgically removed, but we can't operate until his condition stabilizes and the infection is under control. In addition, he has several fractured ribs and a number of smaller abrasions and contusions."

"But they'll both be all right? They're going to recover?" Billy made the questions sound more like orders.

"All Mrs. King needs is fluids and a few days' rest, and she'll be as good as new," Dr. Watts replied. "As for Mr. Stetson . . . his prognosis is less certain. It all depends on how he responds to the antibiotics. If we can whip the infection, he should recover fully."

Billy's only visible reaction was a hardening of his jaw line and an increased intensity in his gaze. "Is there anything else that can be done?"

"We've done what we can for the moment," the doctor responded with a shake of his head. "From here, it's all up to him. He's a strong man, Mr. Melrose. He has a fighting chance for a full recovery." He looked at Billy again. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to get back to my patients."

Tuesday, March 18th - Late morning - Parker General Hospital, Arlington, Virginia

Amanda awoke to find herself in a hospital room, lit by the sunshine that streamed in through the window across from the bed. Sitting in a chair near the window, lost in thought, was Billy. "Mr. Melrose?"

His head snapped up as he rose and quickly crossed the room to her side. "Amanda! You're finally awake. We've been worried about you." He smiled warmly down at her and patted her hand. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I could sleep for a couple of days," she admitted with a shaky laugh.

"You've almost managed to do that already," he said with a teasing smile. "It's been nearly two days since you were brought in."

Her eyes widened. "That long?" She struggled to sit up without entangling herself in the IV line running into the back of her left hand. "Where's Lee? Is he all right?"

"He's here as well. They'll be moving him from intensive care to a regular room in a little while."

"Oh, sir, I was so scared and so worried about him. He was so sick, and there wasn't anything that I could do for him . . ."

Billy smiled affectionately at the slender brunette. "According to the doctors here, you did as well as anyone could have," he told her. "It was touch and go when they first brought you two in, but his fever's nearly back to normal. It looks like the antibiotics are working."

"Sir, I have to go see him." The intensity in her brown eyes told Billy that she wouldn't back down from this request.

"First, let me go tell your nurse that you're awake," her boss responded. "After they've had a chance to check you out and Lee's been moved to another room, we'll see what they say about your taking a little ride down the hall." He squeezed her hand gently. "I'll be right back."

By early afternoon, Billy was pushing Amanda's wheelchair to room 619, only a short way down the hall from her own room. "He'll be asleep," he warned her. "They've kept him pretty knocked out since he started to wake up yesterday afternoon. He was threatening to tear the place apart if they wouldn't let him see you." Billy smiled at the memory. The threat had been ludicrous; Lee had

barely been able to hold up his own head when he made it, but the medical staff, worried that he would further injure himself if he didn't calm him down, opted to sedate him.

Amanda smiled sadly. "That sounds like him. I know just how he felt."

"All right, Amanda, here we are," Billy said, wheeling her into the room and parking the chair next to Lee's bed. "It's your first time out of bed in two days, and we don't want you to overdo it. I'll come back for you shortly."

"Yes, sir." Amanda hadn't really heard what he said. As soon as she saw Lee, the rest of the world melted out of her consciousness. All that mattered was that he was going to be all right and that she was here with him.

She reached up to brush his hair back from the large bandage on his head. The swelling was going down, and the smaller cuts and bruises were starting to heal as well. They hadn't shaved him, and the four-day growth of beard made him look somewhat sinister. She rubbed her fingers against the stubble, then took his hand in hers. 'Thank you, God, for letting him live.' She sat that way for a long time, just happy to be near him, to touch him, to watch him breathe, then rested her head on their clasped hands and sunk slowly into sleep.

She was awakened a short time later when the hand she held moved within her grip. She looked at his face and saw his eyelids flicker a few times and then open slowly. His eyes met hers and he smiled tiredly. "So they were telling me the truth," he said sleepily. "You are all right."

"Oh, Lee," she responded with a gentle smile, "I couldn't be any better. I was so worried about you, and so scared when I couldn't do anything to help you."

"You did fine, Amanda," he replied, imagining how alone and frightened she must have felt before Balanchev arrived to rescue them. "I don't remember much of the weekend, but I do remember some of the things you did for me. I'd have been in much worse shape if it hadn't been for you. I was useless to you. Thank God that Balanchev was there to help."

Just then, the door to the room opened and Billy entered. "Lee! It's about time you decided to wake up. How are you feeling?"

"To be honest, Billy," Lee admitted, "I've felt a lot better." He looked from Billy to Amanda.

"What happened? Did you get Korvinski and Beau? I remember them chasing us down the mountain, but that's really all, except for bits and pieces - images that don't make any sense to me."

"Korvinski is safely tucked away in one of our holding cells," Billy answered with satisfaction. "And Francine is having a lengthy conversation with Beau. His partner, a big guy named Ernie, convinced him to come in voluntarily and talk with us. We don't think he was ever a real part of the plan; he was just a pawn, being manipulated by Korvinski. He's had lots of interesting things to tell us so far, and he's still talking."

To answer the rest of Scarecrow's question, Billy recapped what the doctors had surmised and what Balanchev had filled in about the weekend, beginning with the car crash and continuing through Korvinski's capture by Amanda and Balanchev. "The doctors say that you got here just in time. In another few hours, the infection would probably have killed you. And they said that if someone hadn't kept that cut cleaned out as well as could be expected under the circumstances, you wouldn't have lasted as long as you did." Amanda looked down, chewing on her lower lip and blushing furiously.

"So at least some of the things I remember were true," Lee said, looking at Amanda with a mixture of appreciation and admiration. "I thought that a particularly insistent member of the Chinese secret police was there, demanding that my bandages needed changing and that I should keep drinking or I'd get dehydrated. But the hands I remember were soft and gentle. It was you, wasn't it?" Amanda, still not meeting his eyes, nodded. Lee squeezed her hand. "It sounds like I owe my life to you and to Balanchev."

Billy interrupted. "Amanda, I'm here on doctor's orders. I've let you stay a lot longer than I should have. They want to keep you one more night, and then tomorrow you'll be discharged."

He turned to Lee. "You, on the other hand, will be around here for several more days." Ignoring the pained look on Lee's face, he continued. "They want to keep you on the antibiotics for another few days to be sure the infection's completely done. Then it'll be safe for them to go get that bullet out of your back. They also want to do some reconstructive surgery to repair the damage that the infection did." He shook his head, trying without much success to suppress a smile. "I'm afraid you're going to be seeing quite a lot of this hospital over the next month or so, Scarecrow."

"But Billy . . ." He started to protest, then sank back against the pillows when the sudden motion sent a bolt of flame through his shoulder.

"It'll be all right, Lee," Amanda reassured him. "I'll be visiting you as much as the doctors will allow. And besides," she reminded him, "it's been only a couple of days since you told me that you'd be happy to go to a hospital."

"I said that?" asked Lee in disbelief.

"Yeah, you did, Lee. And hearing you admit that was probably the single scariest moment of the whole weekend." She squeezed his hand again and smiled. "You need to get some rest now. I'll be back again later."

Billy bit back another smile as he wheeled Amanda back down the hall to her room.

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*Friday, March 21<sup>st</sup> - Mid-morning - Parker General Hospital, Arlington, Virginia*

"Balanchev!" Lee exclaimed as he saw the big Russian enter the hospital room. "I thought you'd forgotten to come see me."

"Never will I forget you, my friend," returned the Russian heartily. "You are looking much better than the last time I saw you." It was true; the color was returning to Lee's face, and all of the smaller cuts and scratches had healed. Only his right arm, still strapped to his chest, and the large white bandage on the side of his face bore testimony to what he had suffered.

"As I understand, I couldn't have looked much worse and still be here to talk with you today," Lee said seriously. "I wanted to see you, to thank you; that's twice now that you've saved my life."

Balanchev gave him a puzzled look. "What are you talking about, comrade? I am not the one responsible for saving you."

"Of course you are," Lee insisted. "I know my memory about what happened isn't too clear, and I know that Amanda is the one who took care of my injuries, but there's no way she could have gotten us both all that way through the forest and up to the cabin alone, with a madman on our heels."

"I agree with you; Scarecrow. Such an undertaking should have been impossible for her; nevertheless, she accomplished it."

"But I saw you," Lee persisted. "You brought me to the cabin . . . Amanda was already there."

"Yes, she was," the Russian agreed. "I carried her inside first. I had been watching Korvinski and the other man, but from a distance, while I searched for you. I caught up with you just a few moments before they did. Your partner managed to get you off the trail and out of sight, but you were talking, and she couldn't get you to stop." He looked at Lee sadly. "Then I did not know what was wrong, but now I understand - the fever must have made you delirious."

Lee nodded in agreement. "Amanda must have had her hands full, trying to take care of me."

"Indeed she did," Balanchev agreed. "I was afraid that Korvinski would hear you, but your resourceful partner found a very interesting way to quiet you. "Her methods were somewhat unorthodox, but they did work," Balanchev continued, unable to keep the corner of his mouth from twitching.

Lee's expression changed. He was in another world, lost in his thoughts. 'Those dreams,' he thought. 'What if they were true?' He sighed, frustrated with his inability to put the bits and pieces of dreams or memories together into a coherent whole, and turned his attention back to Balanchev.

"I was working my way down to help you when that *dyavol*, Korvinski, came back. He truly is a devil; I have never met a more evil man in all my life." His expression sobered at this point. "By this time, Lizaveta had you off of the trail and was ascending along a nearly-invisible path. When she heard them approaching again, she got you out of sight behind a large stone. She fired on Korvinski."

Lee interrupted his friend here, unable to believe what he'd just said. "You don't mean . . . Amanda couldn't have . . . she would never . . ."

"You are surprised that she shot him?" Balanchev asked Lee sternly. The look on the younger man's face was all the answer he needed. "Perhaps it is not in her to nature, but, apparently, if the stakes are high enough, she would indeed do such a thing." He paused again to let Scarecrow absorb what he was saying. "She wounded him, but she did not kill him, and so I began to fire, trying to give her a chance to escape. I had thought that I would shoot Korvinski, or at least drive him away for a time, while she got away and that I would then be able to help you to whatever destination she was so determined to reach, but . . ." He shook his head, still amazed at what she had done.

"But what?" Lee prodded.

"She refused to leave you," the Russian told him. "Instead, she somehow got you onto your feet and then half-carried you up the last few hundred meters toward the cabin. I kept Korvinski pinned down, and when he finally withdrew to find a better position, I followed her." He paused, smiling with admiration for the courage the slender American woman had demonstrated. "She had collapsed, and you on top of her, barely 20 meters from the front door of the cabin. I merely finished the job she had started." He looked at Lee, very serious now. "I was there to help at the end, my friend, but your debt is not owed to me, it belongs to your partner. Even capturing Korvinski was something that might not have been accomplished without her assistance."

"But Amanda couldn't have . . ."

"No, comrade," Balanchev interrupted. "I think you are underestimating your lovely partner. She did exactly what she needed to do to save you . . . and herself."

Lee sat in stunned silence. He had admired Amanda's instincts for the job practically from the beginning, and he had watched with pride as she blossomed professionally under his tutelage. But the resources she'd needed to accomplish what she had over the weekend hadn't come from any Agency training. He believed that she was becoming one of the finest operatives in the Agency, but he hadn't realized that she had already come so far.

She hadn't said anything, hadn't corrected him when he mistakenly credited Balanchev with saving both their lives, but then, she'd never been one to blow her own horn. If he asked her to her face, she'd probably just brush the question aside without answering it, a talent at which he already knew her to be adept. But she'd never lie, and she had been debriefed yesterday afternoon, after her release from the hospital. He'd give up his Corvette for a look at the transcript of that session.

His thoughts were interrupted by Amanda's entrance into the hospital. "Mr. Balanchev!" she exclaimed, delighted. "I heard that you were at the Agency yesterday, but we must have missed each other. It's so good to see you." She put her arms around him and gave him a bear hug. "I never had a chance to properly thank you for all that you did for Lee and me."

He hugged her back, then pulled away to look down at her. "What little I did was unimportant, Lizaveta. You were truly the heroine of this tale."

She blushed and glanced at Lee with an embarrassed grin before returning her eyes to the man in front of her. "That's not true and you know it, Mr. Balanchev. We'd never have gotten out of there without your help."

She changed the subject by walking to Lee's bedside. "Are you ready for your surgery tomorrow morning?" she asked, bending down to brush her lips against his forehead without realizing the intimacy expressed by her action.

Lee smiled at her as she stood looking down at him. He clasped her hand in his. "More than ready," he confessed. "I'm not really looking forward to it, but the sooner they get that damned bullet out, the sooner I can get away from this place for a while." He turned to the Russian. "And where will you be going, Balanchev? Back to Moscow?"

"Oh, no," Balanchev said quickly, shaking his head. "You have not heard. My purpose for coming here was to defect. Comrade Scarecrow, we are now on the same side." His grin belied his serious tone. "The Soviet government has little thought for the Russian people any more. I believe that I can help the motherland more by working from this side for a change."

He continued, a satisfied smile now securely in place. "I will leave Washington tomorrow afternoon for a less visible location. It will take some time for me to give your government all of the information that I have, so I will be out of touch for the next several months." He paused. "But after that, I will be back, and we three will go together for a good Russian dinner, with lots of vodka!"

"It's a deal," said Lee, stretching out his left hand to seal the plan. He glanced over at Amanda. "We'll both be looking forward to it."

"And, with that, I must be gone," said the Russian. "Scarecrow, you must mend quickly, so that you can once again fight the evil that is all around us." He turned to Amanda. "And you, Lizaveta, must be always at his side, to watch out for him and to remind him of what is important in this world."

He kissed Amanda gently, first on one cheek, then the other, then once more on the first, before turning and walking out of the door, closing it behind him.

"He's quite a man, Lee," she said. "No wonder you felt you could trust him."

"He is something special," Lee agreed. "But then, I find that I'm often running into very special people." He looked at her for a moment, his face unreadable. "Amanda?"

"Yes, Lee?"

"What did he call you? I didn't recognize the word."

"Oh, that," Amanda said with a small smile. "Lizaveta is just a character in some Russian folk tale. Mr. Balanchev really is a storyteller, isn't he?"

She was trying to change the subject. He caught the slight blush and her nervous look down at her hands. 'Just one more addition to my list of things to look into when I'm finally out of this place,' he thought, wondering if he'd ever sort out all the blanks from the weekend.

His long-silent subconscious piped up once again. 'You know that you'll be spending a lot of time with her as you recover, don't you?' Strangely, his conscious mind wasn't upset as it might have been only a couple of weeks ago, and he embraced the thought rather than trying to hide it or to chase it away. 'That's true,' he admitted to himself. 'And I think I'll just relax and enjoy every minute of it.'

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## Epilogue

*Thursday, March 27<sup>th</sup> - Late afternoon - Lee's apartment*

Lee closed the last folder and lay back against the pile of pillows at the head of the bed. As soon as Amanda had left last night, after bringing him home from the hospital and helping him get settled back into his apartment, he'd been on the phone to Billy.

Knowing that such records were not supposed to leave the Agency offices until a case was completed and the reports filed, he'd half expected Billy to resist his request to review the debriefing files of the individuals most directly involved - Balanchev, Beau, and, of course, Amanda. But Billy hadn't even protested. It was almost as though he'd wanted Lee to see the files; wanted him to understand all that had occurred. He'd even brought them to Lee personally, early this morning, mentioning as he left that he needed Amanda in the office today and that she wouldn't be by until the afternoon. Lee had spent the whole day reviewing the paperwork and considering the significance of what had happened out in the mountains.

He shook his head in wonder and looked at the clock on the nightstand. Soon, Amanda would be arriving to fix dinner and to spend the evening with him. He rose to change before she arrived, putting the files into the nightstand drawer. His right arm was still in a sling, but at least now he could move it enough to be able to take care of himself.

He walked back into the living room just as Amanda knocked on the door. He crossed the room to let her in, his pulse quickening slightly when she smiled up at him.

"Hi, Lee!" She'd begun to speak as soon as the door had opened and continued as she brought the bags she carried into the kitchen and set them down on the counter. "You wouldn't believe what Mr. Melrose had me doing today. I had to review all of the spring-cleaning reports from the whole Agency and enter them into the computer. I never would've believed that there could be that many groups of strange people in the DC area. I got a good start on them, but it'll take days to get them all entered."

"I have a feeling Billy won't want you to get that involved in it," Lee said with amusement. "I'll talk to him tomorrow and see if he can't find someone else to finish it."

"Oh, would you, Lee? I'm really not looking forward to spending all that time on them." She had finished unpacking the bags. She picked up a tin and turned to Lee. "Mother sent these to you," she said with an unreadable smile.

He shot her a questioning look. "What did you tell her about the trip?"

"I had to come up with something to explain all the scratches and bruises I still had when I saw her and the boys after the chorus trip, so I told her the truth." As he raised his eyebrows, she continued.

"Well, I did. I told her that there'd been a little accident, and that I'd taken a tumble down a hill. And I told her that my boss had bumped his head and hurt his shoulder, and that he'd be staying home for another week or so. She was so concerned that she wanted to send you something special."

"So why do you have that look on your face?" he asked, now eyeing the container with suspicion.

"Open it up and see for yourself," she urged.

He eased the top off the tin and peeked in, then looked at her with an expression of disbelief. "You didn't tell her . . ."

"No, I didn't have the heart." Amanda laughed. "How could I explain that it would probably be a while before you're ready to face another chocolate chip cookie?"

"You're right," he agreed with a smile. "It'll be our little secret."

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After light conversation over dinner, they moved to the couch for some more serious discussion.

"Amanda," he began, "there are still a lot of gaps in my memory of those two days. Can you help me fill in the pieces?"

"I'll try, Lee," she replied earnestly. "If I can."

He decided to be up front with her. "I read the transcripts of the debriefing sessions today; Beau's and Balanchev's . . . and yours."

She looked at him with surprise. "I . . . I thought that those files were supposed to be 'need-to-know' only," she said hesitantly.

"They are," he admitted. "But, Amanda, I **did** need to know; this was supposed to have been my case. Besides, between the things that Balanchev told me and the fragments of memories that I have, I knew that something extraordinary happened out there in the mountains. I needed to know, to understand what had happened. Apparently Billy agreed with me. He brought the files to me

early this morning and then came up with that assignment for you so that I'd have time to myself to review them."

"But . . . why didn't he . . ." She was at a loss for words.

"Don't be upset with Billy, Amanda," he said quietly. "I'm the one who requested the files. He knew that I would find some way to get my hands on them, so his bringing them to me only made things easier. At least this way, he knows where they are."

"It's okay, I guess," she said. "I just hadn't expected you to see what was in there." She sounded almost embarrassed by the idea. She had managed to satisfy the debriefing team without revealing the more intimate details of the ordeal, but she'd had to divulge a lot of personal reactions, and after the interview was finished, they'd congratulated her on her courage and resourcefulness. As much as she appreciated the praise, she still wasn't comfortable having people thinking about her like that. She wasn't anything special, like they all seemed to believe. She was just Amanda King, housewife turned spy.

Except when she was with Lee. When they worked a case together, she felt that nothing could harm her. The trust she had in him overflowed, making her trust herself more as well. Over the past few months, as they'd spent more 'off-duty' time together, he'd given her a completely different kind of strength - the courage to believe in herself. Just his presence made her feel that she could accomplish anything. She thought back to that morning before the world fell apart around her, remembering how frightened she had been of her own feelings for him and remembering the promise she had made to herself to follow her heart.

"And why shouldn't I have, Amanda?" Lee's question interrupted her reverie. "Some amazing things went on out there." He stopped and gave a heavy sigh, then moved closer to her on the couch. "Amanda, you know why I'm having such a hard time with this, don't you? When I'm in control of a situation, I can plan a response instead of reacting, and that's always been a very important part of who I am. Do you understand?"

She nodded, looking down to realize that she'd been wringing her hands. She stopped and nervously wiped her palms against her slacks.

"Well, as soon as that bullet hit, all control was ripped from me. I wasn't able to take care of myself; I hardly realized what was going on." He placed a finger under her chin and turned her to face him. "Look at me, Amanda. Do you know how hard that was for me?"

There were tears swimming in her eyes as they met his. "Yes, I understand. But it was hard for me, too. You're always the one who knows what to do. I can always count on your being there for me. I was so afraid, Lee."

"I was, too, Amanda." Her look turned to one of surprise. "I'm always scared when you're in trouble. I feel responsible for getting you into this business in the first place," he placed a finger on her lips to silence the protest she was about to voice. "I'm not sure how I'd handle it if anything ever happened to you." He hesitated. Exploring his feelings was not an easy thing for him to do, and confessing those feelings, even to Amanda, was an almost insurmountable task.

"But I've learned something very important from all this, Amanda," he continued. "I've learned that you have capabilities far beyond what I expected or thought possible. I've learned that you can handle yourself just fine without me. Amanda, do you know what the best thing to come from this assignment was?"

She shook her head, both to answer his question and to try to clear her garbled thoughts.

"It was my learning that, if I can't be in control of a situation myself, I have a partner who can step right in and manage things by herself. A partner whom I can trust, more than I've ever trusted anyone else. And that realization gives me a new understanding of myself."

A silence settled between them. Words could hardly express how he had been affected; there was really no way to describe it. Most of the hard part was over, but there were other questions he had to ask.

"Amanda, how did you do it? How did you get us away from those two degenerates for so long? How did you keep me going when I couldn't do anything for myself? How did you keep me alive? I know you did it; the debriefing files confirm it."

She took a few moments to gather her thoughts before answering. "I have no idea how I did it, Lee. I only know that I didn't really have a choice. I could no more have let you down than I could have sprouted wings and flown us out of there."

She paused, dropping her eyes again and trying to find a better way to explain it to him.

"Sometimes you read in the paper about a person who manages to do something impossible, just because not doing it isn't an option. You know, like a mother who lifts a car off of her child, or a man who moves a concrete slab to save a friend. There's no way they could have even begun to lift something that heavy under normal circumstances, but when the need is so great, sometimes people can find a strength they never knew they had."

She hesitated again, then lifted her eyes back up to lock with his. "I think I was kind of like one of those people, Lee. Whenever I stopped to think about what I was trying to do, I started to doubt that I could do it, so I didn't stop. I couldn't give myself time to think. I could only do."

Lee put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close beside him. They sat that way for several minutes, lost in their own thoughts.

Finally, Lee broke the silence. There was one more mystery to unravel, and, after hearing the things Balanchev had told him, he'd begun to wonder if one particularly persistent dream he kept having of the weekend's events wasn't a memory instead. He wanted to see how she'd explain it, but he'd have to set it up just right. "Amanda? There's one more question I'd like to ask you about the weekend."

She turned in his embrace to look up at him. "What is it, Lee?"

"Balanchev told me about one incident that I didn't find in any of the debriefing transcripts. He said that the first time Korvinski and Beau nearly caught up with us, you got me out of sight, but that I started talking and wouldn't stop."

"You wouldn't," she responded, not realizing the door that she was opening. "You thought that it was Billy coming, and you didn't seem too happy about it. You said something about his timing always being wrong."

"Balanchev also said that you were resourceful enough to find an 'interesting', albeit 'unorthodox' way to make me be quiet," Lee continued. "How did you manage it?"

Amanda's blush rose quickly, despite her best attempts to control it. "What do you mean, Lee?" she asked. "How did I manage what?"

Another question to avoid answering a question, but this time he was ready. In the last few months, he'd begun to realize that there were ways to keep her on track and not to let her stray too far off the topic without giving an answer. He wasn't going to let her get away with it this time. "I was hallucinating; so you couldn't have reasoned with me. What did you do to keep me quiet?"

It took all of her concentration to keep from squirming. How was she going to answer him? She didn't want to lie to him, but what would he think if she told him the truth? "Oh, Lee, what does it matter? The important thing is that it worked, right? Would you like something more to drink?" She started to rise, but his arm tightened around her shoulders, holding her in place.

"Not this time, Amanda King," he said. Her reaction bolstered his belief that it really had happened. "You're not getting up from this couch until I have an answer. We've shared a lot of secrets tonight, and we're not going to stop until this last little mystery is cleared up. Now, tell me. What did you do?"

Amanda saw no way out. She'd have to tell him sooner or later; she might as well get it over with.

"I kissed you." It was barely a whisper.

"What was that?" he asked, keeping his smile to himself. "Speak up, Amanda. I couldn't hear you."

She again remembered her promise to follow her heart and looked up, a newfound confidence in her features. She was tired of hiding the way she felt. If he wanted so much to know what had happened, then by golly, she'd tell him.

"I kissed you, Lee." This time her voice was steady, with no hint of regret or embarrassment. "I kissed you into the middle of next year, and you'd better believe that it kept you quiet. You couldn't think of anything else in the world except for that kiss."

His pulse quickened. "I'm not sure I believe you, 'Lizaveta'," he said, reverting to Balanchev's name for her. He lowered his head until his forehead rested against hers. "How do you expect me to believe that a simple kiss could have that kind of effect on me?"

She lifted her head slightly, smiling as she closed the gap between them. "I never said it was simple, Scarecrow." Closing her eyes, she touched her lips to his and began to prove her point.

The End