

It's Never Too Late

Author: Shelly

Rating: PG

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Summary: Sometimes you really can love someone too much. Fate gives Lee and Amanda a second chance.

Timeframe: October 1993, six years after the marriage.

Feedback: Expected, please!

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Sensitivity Warning: Some readers may be upset by the subject matter of this story. Please be aware that I have taken this into consideration and do expect to offend some readers. On that note, however, I think I have presented ample evidence to validate the character's actions and decisions. At least, I hope so. My goal here is to present a believable and honest interpretation of what *might* have happened.

Credits: Lyrics to "Against All Odds" from part 16 by Phil Collins, copyright 1984.

Author's Notes: I almost didn't write this. It was started a few different times, in a few different ways and each was scrapped, but the idea wouldn't leave me alone. But, it's finally finished and I'm ready to share. I hope you enjoy it for what it's worth.

I want to thank Sybil, for being so patient with this and helping me out along the way. I've found a true friend here and will be forever grateful for that. For the other eyes that helped me along with notes of encouragement (and correction) - THANK YOU! Without you, this would still be a jumbled mess on my hard drive and a nagging obsession to be dealt with. The demons have finally been exorcised!

It's Never Too Late

October 1993

Stepping out of the office building into the cool October air, the man squinted and shielded his eyes from the bright mid-day sun. He carefully walked down the steps; steps that in his younger days he would have traversed two at a time. He smiled at how age was creeping up on him. His hair had started to gray at the temples, lending him a distinguished air that made him appear especially dashing to the younger ladies in his department.

He reached the sidewalk and started walking in the direction of the restaurant that had become his lunchtime haunt, when something stopped him. He stood in the middle of the pavement for a few moments, considering his actions. Then, strictly on a whim, he turned around and hailed a cab.

The ride to Georgetown took less than fifteen minutes, and the cab pulled to a stop in front of a restaurant. He stepped out, looked at the neon letters on the side of the building, and smiled. The driver cleared his throat, and the man turned around, apologizing as he paid his fare. Nodding in thanks, the cab driver pulled away, leaving the man alone with his thoughts. After what seemed like an eternity, he sucked in a breath, squared his shoulders, and walked through the door.

Nedlinger's looked as it always had with its dark wood paneling and dim lighting, but the people were different. When none of the faces looked familiar, he felt a flicker of disappointment. He asked for a small table against the back wall and ordered a glass of ice water. As he looked over the menu, wondering what had possessed him to ride to Georgetown for lunch, he thought he heard her distinctive voice.

His first instinct was to jump up and find her, but his reasoning and sensibility took over, and he continued to gaze at the menu, telling himself that the odds of it being her were slimmer than little to none. Still, he was certain that it was her voice. Working himself up for another dose of disappointment, he casually looked to his left, glancing at the bar.

She had seated herself on a barstool and was talking animatedly with the bartender, a tall drink in one hand, gesturing with the other. The bartender burst into laughter, and she took a sip of her drink. As she did, she glanced around, her eyes drifting over him, pausing for an instant, then returning back to the bar. Once more, she glanced in his direction, squinting a double take against the dim lighting. The bartender asked her a question, and she shook her head, turning back to him to continue their conversation.

He continued to watch her from the relative safety of his corner table, oddly relieved that she had apparently not recognized him. Dressed in dark slacks and a matching blazer, her hair upswept off her neck, small wisps falling out of their clasp and framing her face in delicate curls, she looked no different than she had five years earlier.

He stood, and for the second time that afternoon, took a deep breath. It was now or never. Slowly and deliberately, he walked toward the bar and the woman he'd lost a lifetime ago. He was able to creep up behind her, unnoticed. He paused for a moment, reconsidering his actions, when the bartender looked at him over her shoulder and nodded. Knowing he'd been caught, he touched her sleeve and leaned close, "Hiya, toots," he whispered with what little voice he could muster.

She gasped and turned on her barstool, nearly knocking over her glass in the process. "Oh, my gosh! It *is* you! I mean, I thought it was you in the corner, but it was dark, and I figured it couldn't possibly be, but here you are!" The words came out in a rush, tumbling over one another.

Her outburst was followed by a moment of awkward silence, each searching for the appropriate thing to say. Finally, the woman pulled out the barstool next to hers and patted the seat. "Lee, sit down and have a drink with me. Do you have time?"

Lee Stetson smiled and took the offered seat. Nodding, he whispered, "I'll always have time for you, Amanda."

She smiled and lowered her head slightly, playing with the lip of her glass, slowly ringing her finger around the rim. "So . . . what brings you to this neck of the woods?"

"I have no idea," Lee truthfully replied. "I usually have lunch a bit closer to the office, but something . . ." he looked at Amanda, drinking in the sight of her, "something drew me here today. What are you doing here?"

"I usually have lunch here on Wednesday's," she replied. Then as his words registered, she asked, "You're not working near here anymore?" Her eyebrows knit in confusion. She lowered her voice to a near whisper and glanced surreptitiously around the room. "Have they moved the Agen . . . office? Or can't you tell me?" She winked and smiled.

Lee laughed and shook his head. "No, I FF is still in the same old place. Too much work went into that building to discard it so quickly. But, I'm not too far away. I took a position with the State Department."

"Lee, that's wonderful!" Amanda reached out and touched Lee's sleeve, but withdrew her hand just as quickly. "What are you doing there?" She casually wrapped her hands around the safety of her drink and waited for his reply.

Lee reached up and unconsciously ran his hand over his arm, feeling the void left behind when Amanda had severed the contact. "I'm chained to a desk now. The official title is Assistant Director of Field Operations, Northeast Sector, but I'm basically a babysitter." Amanda chuckled and he looked up. "What's so funny?" he quizzed.

"That's pretty much how I describe my job." She took one last sip of her drink and motioned to the bartender for a refill. "Would you like something to drink, Lee?" she asked.

"Just some water, thanks." He looked at Amanda's glass and wondered what she was drinking at one-thirty in the afternoon. "So you're a babysitter, too?"

"Supervisor for Candidate Screening and Training, over with the Company." Lee nodded in recognition and she continued, "I've been there . . . well, since I left . . . just over four years now, worked my way up through the ranks. It's not as exciting as chasing Russian spies through the streets of DC, but it's a lot safer."

Lee took a deep drink from the glass of water that had appeared before him, avoiding eye contact with Amanda. The safety issue was one of the many that had caused all their problems a few years back. He'd followed her advancing career from a distance, keeping up with her and watching out for her as much as he could without her knowledge, and he was being careful now not to give that away.

"Lee, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that." She again touched his arm, and he looked up into her soft, brown eyes. This time, she left her hand there, and the warmth of her touch sent waves of nostalgia coursing through him.

"I know," he forced out. He found it hard to concentrate with her hand resting on his arm. She seemed to notice his discomfort and slowly removed it again. By now, though, the damage had been done. He'd tried so hard to avoid her over the years, hoping that his feelings would lessen with time, but he was finding that one conversation with Amanda was enough to make him long for more.

Lee glanced at his watch and shook his head. "Damn, I've got to get back to the office." He hesitated for a moment, debating his next step, and forged ahead. "How about we get together this weekend and have dinner? I'd love to get caught up on what's been going on with you and the boys." He couldn't believe he was asking and noticed a hint of hesitation in her eyes. He quickly amended, "We promised to keep in touch and haven't done a very good job of it. Come on, we can even go Dutch if it will make you feel better."

Amanda smiled and nodded in agreement. "You're absolutely right. After all, what harm ever came from eating dinner with an old friend?"

He smiled and rose to leave. "Great! Friday night at seven?" She nodded in acceptance. "I'll pick you up then. Dress up, okay?" She nodded, again, and with a spring in his step, he left her sitting on the barstool.

Part 2

Amanda King walked out of Nedlinger's awash in conflicting emotions. She had accepted the invitation to dinner with much trepidation, and was now unsure if the ache in the pit of her stomach was from hope or nerves. A soft breeze played with her hair as she began to walk the four blocks back to the nondescript office front the CIA used for its Special Operations Recruiting Division. The weather was calm and cool, a stark contradiction to the stormy feelings found herself Amanda dealing with.

'A harmless dinner date,' she thought. "Why now?" she blurted up to the sky. "Why, after all this time, does he walk back into my life?" She shook her head when the sky offered no answer other than a passing cloud. She smiled at the absurdity of it all and reached into her purse, pulling out her cell phone.

"Extension 7337, please," she said and paused, waiting for a reply. "Barbara? It's Amanda . . . I know . . . Look, I'm not feeling well . . . Yeah, it's probably that flu that's been going around." She closed her eyes against the fib she was telling and charged ahead. "I'm just gonna head home, all

right? You have both of my phone numbers if anything comes up . . . I've got that meeting tomorrow morning, so I'll be in after lunch . . . I will, thanks . . . Bye." She dumped the phone into her purse and changed direction, heading for the bus stop that would take her to the Metro.

Amanda unlocked the front door and walked into the silence that now filled her home. Locking it behind her, she headed for the kitchen, dropping her keys on top of the small table on the landing as she walked past. She poured herself a glass of milk and made her way upstairs to her bathroom. Pulling a bottle of aspirin out of the medicine cabinet, she popped two pills and downed them with the milk in one shot. 'Maybe I am getting that flu,' she reasoned, denying the fact that the headache had started the same instant she had agreed to dinner.

Flopping down on her bed, kicking off her shoes in the process, she stared at the ceiling. "How am I going to make it through the rest of the week?" She covered her eyes with her arm and cursed whatever fates had led Lee to Nedlinger's for lunch. Suddenly, the bed lurched and she jumped, startled. She moved her arm just enough to confirm a warm, fuzzy presence. The cat, which Amanda affectionately referred to as 'the furry gray slug,' curled up against her leg and began to groom herself.

Amanda reached down and patted the animal. "Be thankful you're a cat, Amber," Amanda sighed. "You don't have to worry about men, or relationships, or marriage, or divorce . . ." Her thought trailed off as the cat licked her hand and began to purr. After a few restless moments, Amanda forgot about taking a nap and sat up. Amber turned her orange eyes toward her owner, annoyed at being disturbed, and jumped off the bed, waddling out into the hall. Pulling out the drawer of her nightstand, Amanda removed a small, black leather book and carried it downstairs to the kitchen.

She poured herself another glass of milk, picked up a pen from beside the telephone on the island, and settled onto a stool. Carefully opening the cover of the book, she flipped more than halfway through to a blank page. After a moment of thought, she began to write.

October 6, 1993 - Wednesday

How odd that I only just now recognize the date. It's only days over 10 years since Lee and I met at the train station. I wonder if he knew that when he just happened to stop by Ned's today? I don't know what to think. I can read back over the past 5 years of journal entries to try and remind myself why we're not together, but my heart wouldn't want to believe my words.

He wants to have dinner with me this weekend. I said yes. I don't know why; I can't explain what came over me, but I said yes. Something made me go to Ned's today an hour later than usual. Something made him show up at Ned's when he claims he eats lunch on the other side of town. Coincidence? I don't know. Someone once said that there's a very fine line between coincidence and fate.

I suddenly feel like the heroine in one of those bad romance novels Mother reads. Has my Prince Charming come back to carry me away on his white steed? I hope not. I'm still allergic. And a lot more cynical than I was 10 years ago.

Details. I walked to Ned's today, my usual Wednesday lunch location, and my usual lunch. I was an hour later than normal because of some trouble with a new recruit at work. So I got there, sat down at the bar, and started talking to Doug, the bartender. I look forward to seeing him every Wednesday. He reminds me a lot of Jamie.

Anyway, I had glanced around at one point and thought I'd seen Lee, but disregarded it, thinking he was just a ghost, I guess. Doug and I were laughing and joking around a bit when the hairs on the back of my neck stood up, and I noticed Doug looking over my shoulder. Then, I heard this familiar voice say, "Hiya, toots."

My heart stopped. I turned, thinking it couldn't possibly be him, but boy was I surprised. I invited him to sit and he did. We made some small talk. He was as charming as ever. It was almost as uncomfortable as when we first met. No, uncomfortable is the wrong word, more whirlwind. Once it started, I didn't know how to stop it. It was strange, though. We were talking, and he said something, I don't remember what now, but I reached over and touched his arm. An innocent gesture, but I felt it again. There was the same spark, the same electricity that was there before, all those years ago.

I guess there are some things that time can't kill.

So now I have a dinner date with my ex-husband on Friday night, and I have no idea what to wear, or how to behave, or how I'm even going to get through the next 48 hours. I feel like a schoolgirl.

Amanda closed the book and laid the pen down beside it. With a shudder, she looked toward the kitchen window, half expecting to see his face there, and was surprised to find she was very disappointed when all she saw were the trees in her backyard.

Part 3

July 1987

Lee looked up as he haphazardly stuffed a change of clothes into a duffel bag. He noticed Amanda cringe at his lack of folding, but continued with his task. She was angry. He had never seen her as angry as she was at that moment. She was standing in his bedroom doorway, arms crossed in front of her and a scowl on her face that, had he the time to really think about it, would have frightened him.

"Amanda, you don't want to come along anyway," he tried to placate her while fishing in a drawer for some socks. "It's just a stake-out, and I'll be cooped up in the car all night, then who knows what? I might not be home for a few days." He nodded to the now bulging duffel bag, trying to drive home his point.

He could feel her eyes on him, and her reply was as cold as ice. "How do you know what I want?"

Lee stopped and turned. Her stance was still defensive, and he considered his words before responding. "I don't think it would be good for you to be cramped up in the 'Vette all night long." He

gestured to her left shoulder, stopping short of actually pointing to where she had been wounded, where the scar would always be, and shrugged. "It's not that I don't want you with me, but . . ."

"But you don't want me with you," Amanda interjected. She lowered her arms and lit into him. "You've been treating me with kid gloves ever since I was released for field duty. In case you've forgotten, field duty means work other than behind a desk! At first, it was sweet that you were so concerned for me, but now, it's not."

Throwing his hands into the air, Lee zipped the duffel bag and slung it over his shoulder. "I don't have time to go through this again, Amanda. I have to get going." He started toward the door, but she stood her ground, blocking his way. "Come on," he pleaded, but she wouldn't move.

"When are you going to have time for this?" she asked. "It's been five months since I was shot, and I'm ready to move on. When will you?" Lee inwardly cringed at the word 'shot.' He didn't like to think about that, just as much as he disliked the conversation they were currently having.

She lowered her voice and looked down at the floor before continuing. "You keep telling me that Billy is assigning rookies to you, to help Beaman. I talked to Billy this afternoon, Lee," she paused and looked up into his eyes. "He said you're the one requesting the rookies; that I've told you I'm not quite ready to go full-time."

His heart quickened as his lie was revealed. "I can explain that," he blurted out, but the look on her face told him another story. He nervously rubbed the back of his neck with his free hand, his mouth suddenly dry. No amount of explaining was going to get him out of this one.

"Suddenly, I'm not in the mood to talk," she whispered as she moved through the doorway to the couch. Lee followed her, reaching for her hand, which she pulled away, crossing her arms again, closing herself off.

"Amanda . . ."

"You're going to be late," she shrugged him off. "I think I'm going to head home and go to bed."

Lee nodded and started for the front door. "We'll talk about this soon?" he asked as he opened the door. He turned to her and she nodded. He smiled thinly, stepped through and closed the door, shaking off the feeling of foreboding that was creeping up on him.

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October 1993

Lee woke with a start and sat up in bed, the dream fresh in his mind. He remembered that day well, recalling every word that was said. Amanda had not come into work the next day. She'd called in sick and stayed out for the rest of the week. When he had called to check on her, Dotty told him that Amanda was sleeping and didn't want to be disturbed. He had understood that she was hurt and angry, and he'd wanted to talk to her about it, but she had wanted nothing to do with him. By the end of the week, however, she'd broken down and they had made up. Had he known then what he knew now . . .

Glancing at the clock, he groaned at the digital numbers glaring back at him. He still had two hours before the alarm would go off, but knew he'd never be able to fall back to sleep. Instead, he decided to move his restlessness to the living room. With his pillow tucked under his arm and a blanket trailing behind him, he padded to the couch and turned on the television for companionship.

The weatherman was predicting an unseasonably warm and wet weekend when Lee reached for the remote. "Twenty-four hours of weather, how did we ever survive without it?" he mumbled as he began to flip channels at a furious pace. The images flashed before him, lulling him into a trance. His mind began to wander back to that afternoon at Nedlinger's and his chance encounter with Amanda.

He had run across her several times since the split, but he usually avoided her and the situation. How their paths had never crossed professionally was a bit of a mystery to him, and one that he had never questioned. He chuckled, but was somehow reassured by the thought that she'd probably given clearance to a few of his employees.

With a deep sigh, he leaned his head back and stared at the ceiling. What had possessed him to ask her to dinner? Why had he spoken to her in the first place? Did he think things would be different now? He admitted to himself that he'd wanted to do that very thing, talk to her, invite her to dinner, something, every time he ran across her, or even thought about her. He'd driven past her house many a night, hoping to see her in the front yard, hoping to screw up enough courage to say hello.

He resumed his channel surfing, trying to clear his mind of Amanda, which he knew would be impossible for the next forty-eight hours. Lee stopped on one of the local networks that had started its morning news broadcast. That was when it hit him. It was October 7th. He had wandered to Nedlinger's almost 10 years to the day after their first meeting. All he could do was shake his head in wonder.

Part 4

Thursday

Her meeting had gone better than expected, and Amanda was making the drive back from Lewisdale in record time. Her dark green Toyota 4Runner whispered along the highway while she went over the interview in her mind. Usually, she would have sent out one of the field representatives for a final evaluation, but this time, she'd wanted to get out of the office and see the world for a change. This particular candidate was coming to them from the Justice Department, and the thought had crossed her mind to ask him if he'd ever worked under, or knew of, Lee Stetson, since the CIA fell under its jurisdiction. She hadn't, though, keeping her personal feelings out of the interview.

Opening the center console, she pulled out the cassette Jamie had given to her for Mother's Day. He had titled it, "Mom's Sappy Stuff," and explained that he had compiled all of her favorite songs onto one tape for her driving enjoyment. She slid it into the cassette player and absentmindedly sang along as the scenery whizzed past.

Amanda was trying to keep from thinking about Friday night and 'the date' as she now labeled it. Every time she thought about it, her stomach did a flip-flop, and her head began to swim. What on earth had possessed her to agree to such a thing? The answer was obvious. It was extremely hard for her now, as it always had been, to say no to Lee Stetson.

She still loved him and she knew it. This scared her. The fact of the matter was that she had never really stopped loving him. But so much time had passed, and so many things had happened to each of them . . . She mentally kicked herself for not checking out his left hand. Had he remarried? Now that he had a desk job, had he found someone else and settled down? On some level, she didn't want to know. Not knowing was probably less painful than realizing that he'd found Miss Right and had two kids and a mortgage. Of course, she doubted in her heart that he would have invited her out if he was married, or at least he would have told her up front.

Their own marriage hadn't been a particularly easy one. What had once been a juggling act between two lives had quickly become even more difficult with the extra ball thrown into the act. On one hand, she was Amanda King, suburban mother to Phillip and Jamie. On another hand, she was Agent Amanda King, partner to one of the better-known and respected agents in the intelligence community. On the third hand, she was Amanda Stetson, secret wife to the most wonderful man she'd ever known.

It was the third hand that ultimately brought the whole routine crashing to the ground. Late night rendezvous with her husband after a long day at work, and quick stops at home in between, had worn her too thin. She recalled the day she realized something was going to have to give . . .

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August 1987

"Amanda, dear, are you going to work today?" Dotty peeked in the bedroom as Amanda rolled over, blinking her eyes against the light streaming through the sheer curtains.

"What time is it?" she asked, her voice raspy with sleep.

"It's nearly eight o'clock," Dotty replied and sat on the edge of Amanda's bed. "Are you feeling okay?" She laid a hand on her daughter's forehead, sliding it down to rest on her cheek.

Amanda smiled at her mother's cool touch. "No, Mother, I'm fine, just tired." She sat up, threw the covers off, and padded to the bathroom. "And if I don't get moving," she called over her shoulder, "I won't make it to work before noon."

Dotty addressed the partially closed bathroom door, a smile in her voice, "Maybe if you weren't coming in so late every night, you'd get enough rest, so you could wake up in the morning."

"Mother," she mumbled through a mouth full of toothpaste, having turned to glare at her well-meaning mother through the crack in the door, "please?"

Dotty raised her hands in mock surrender. "Okay, okay, I'll let it go this time." Amanda nodded and turned back to the sink. "I'm leaving now." She stood and straightened the bedclothes while the sink faucet turned off and the shower turned on, "Have a good day. Will I see you for dinner?"

"Yes," Amanda called over the sound of the running shower. She waited a moment, until she heard her bedroom door shut, then undressed and climbed into the tub.

"Stupid, Amanda, really stupid," she mumbled as she shampooed her hair, "Late, again. You're gonna blow it if you're not careful." She rinsed and scrubbed the rest of her body as quickly as possible, shutting off the water and toweling dry while walking toward her closet.

"What to wear?" A pair of slacks was tossed onto the bed, followed by a matching blouse. She turned to inspect the ensemble, stopping to do a mental check of her day's schedule. Her eyes flew open wide and she turned to check the time. The clock glowed an ominous eight-fifteen.

"Damn!" She threw on the slacks and rushed to the bathroom to fix her hair.

Ten minutes later, her clothes on and her hair pulled back into a ponytail, she was struggling to put on her tennis shoes while gathering her keys and purse. By eight-thirty, she was on the road to Georgetown.

Amanda entered the Georgetown foyer and bid Mrs. Marston an abrupt hello as she collected her badge and clipped it to her lapel. With a nod, she rushed up the stairs to the Q-Bureau, hoping that he was still there.

The locked door indicated to her that he'd already left. She slid the key into the lock and opened the door to find the office empty and a note taped to her vase.

Couldn't wait. Meet me there if you can. -L

Cursing herself under her breath, she tucked the note into her purse and started for the stairs. When she rounded the corner, in her haste, she nearly knocked over Billy Melrose.

"Whoa, where's the fire?" Billy smiled. He held out a steadying hand and glanced over her shoulder. "Is Lee behind you?"

Amanda shook her head while regaining her footing. "No, sir. He's already gone. I have to hurry if I'm going to meet him in time." She was inching her way toward the stairs as she spoke; hoping her explanation would be sufficient to get her away from her boss and out of the building.

Billy nodded and gestured for her to go ahead. In a flash, she was down the steps, out the door, and running for her Jeep.

The ride to Rock Creek seemed to take longer than usual. The traffic was uncharacteristically heavy for the time of day, and Amanda was quickly growing impatient. She was wondering what could

have come up; what would have bumped up the meeting time and convinced Lee to go without her. A thousand horrible thoughts tumbled in the back of her mind. Stifling a yawn, she reached her destination and pulled to a stop next to Lee's Corvette.

She climbed out of her car and quietly made her way through the park, being mindful not to walk into the middle of something that Lee would have a hard time explaining. As she rounded a bend in the path, she saw a flurry of activity with Lee in the midst of it all. Paramedics were scurrying about, and one was wrapping Lee's arm, despite his protests.

Breaking into a run, Amanda reached his side in seconds flat. He looked up at her, a humble smile on his face. "Hiya," he said through clenched teeth.

"What happened? Are you okay? Why are the medics here? What went wrong? Why didn't you wait for me? Where's your back up?" The questions tumbled out before she could control herself. Lee watched her, wide-eyed, waiting for her to stop and catch her breath before attempting to answer.

His chance came and he jumped in. "I'm fine; it's just a nick, that's all . . . I really don't need all this attention." This seemed to calm her, so Lee continued, making a face at the Agency paramedic who was taping the gauze firmly in place around his left bicep. "I don't know what went wrong, yet. I got here, then Lenny showed up. He started to tell me about last week's break-in when all Hell broke loose."

The paramedic finally finished and walked away, leaving Lee and Amanda in relative solitude. "I'm sorry, I couldn't wait for you. When I got in, there was a message from Lenny asking to meet at eight instead of eight-thirty. You weren't in yet, so I rushed out and didn't grab any back up." He placed a hand on her arm, squeezing lightly.

"Oh, my gosh," she whispered. Throwing caution to the wind, she leaned forward and hugged her husband, fiercely. "I'm so sorry I was late this morning. If you'd had back up, this might not have happened."

"It's not your fault, Amanda," he comforted, "I should have asked someone to go with me. I know the regs as well as you do. I should have had someone here to watch my back. You would think I'd know better by now." He looked up at her, his eyes wide with apology.

Amanda took a deep breath and stepped back. "You were covering for me?" It wasn't a question, so much as a statement of fact.

Lee looked down and scuffed his shoe in the grass. "What are you talking about?" He was trying to sound nonchalant, but wasn't pulling it off. Amanda knew he had been making excuses for her late mornings, but also knew that if she hadn't been late, he would have found another excuse to keep her in the office.

"You know exactly what I'm talking about, Lee." She shook her head and reached for his hand. "Come on, we'll talk while I walk you to your car." He took the offered hand and stood, flinching when the sudden movement caused a momentary bolt of pain to shoot through his arm.

She waited until they were far out of earshot before she spoke. "Lee, I'm tired."

He stopped walking, turning her to face him on the wooded path. "Tired?" he questioned. "What do you mean?"

"Simply that," she took his other hand in hers and rubbed the backs of his fingers with her thumbs, a gesture she hoped would calm him enough to hear her out. "I overslept again this morning. I didn't hear the alarm, and would probably still be in bed if Mother hadn't woke me up." She took a breath and continued. "It's all the late nights, Lee. I'm running myself ragged between work and home and evenings with you."

"What are you trying to say?" His patience had run thin, and his tone was less than pleasant. He frowned at her, and she decided to speak her mind, before she lost her nerve.

"Something's got to change. I obviously can't stop being a mother, and I don't want either of us to quit our jobs, even though mine has been rather boring lately with all the paperwork I seem to be doing . . . Maybe we should think about going public with this thing."

"Thing?" He pulled his hands from hers and threw his arms in the air, too upset to remember the wound on his arm. His right hand immediately shot up to the bandage, and she heard him curse under his breath. Too flustered to speak for a moment, he turned away to collect his thoughts. Amanda took a small step back, waiting for the deluge of excuses that always flowed whenever she brought up this particular topic.

He turned back to her and spoke through clenched teeth. "Is that what our marriage is to you? A 'thing?'" She started to speak, but was silenced when he continued. "We've already talked about this, Amanda. We can't do that."

Amanda stuffed her hands into her pockets and rocked back and forth on her heels. She pursed her lips and mentally counted to ten, trying to remain calm. If she let her emotions get away from her, there would be no stopping the disagreement, and someone had to stay in control. By the look in his eyes, she knew that that someone was certainly not Lee.

"Well?" he bellowed, staring at her.

"Do not yell at me," she whispered. "Can't you see what this is doing to us?" Against her wishes, she could feel her eyes welling up and quickly turned away from him, before he could notice. She could hear his breathing begin to steady, and she was beginning to get control over her emotions as well. She turned back to face him, and caught him staring at her with an expression she couldn't identify. It was something between passion and despair, but she couldn't be sure which.

He took a step toward her and grabbed her arms. "You know I love you," he whispered. She nodded, and he smiled with relief. "You're right," he concurred, "we do need to talk about this, but not here, and not now."

Amanda shook her head. "Then when?" she sighed, "When are we going to talk about it? We keep putting it off and putting it off. It's tearing us apart." She was shaking now, and knew that he knew

it, too. Her control was quickly evaporating and was completely gone when he pulled her into his arms and held her tight. The tears came too easily, and she was powerless to stop them once they'd started.

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October 1993

Amanda jolted back to the present just in time to veer across two lanes of traffic and catch her exit. She waved an apology to the beeping drivers she'd cut off, and silently thanked the Agency for the defensive driving courses they'd provided as part of her training. Running into Lee had opened the floodgates, and memories were rushing back, bringing with them emotions she'd had buried for several years.

She could only hope that their dinner wasn't going to reopen the old wounds for either of them, let alone rub salt into them.

Part 5

Lee arrived at his downtown office early Thursday morning and went straight to work. He had completed his assignment review and was looking over the day's hot sheets when his secretary, Christina, arrived. She poked her head around his office door and looked at him in surprise.

"What are you doing here, already?" she asked, startling him into dropping his croissant. The thought that Amanda would be pleased that he now ate something for breakfast, instead of just grabbing a cup of coffee, crossed his mind.

"Damn, Chris, you need to wear a bell or something." Lee picked up his breakfast and brushed the offending crumbs to the floor. "What time is it, anyway?"

Chris snapped a ponytail holder off her wrist and was pulling her long blonde hair back as she replied. "It's just a little past eight-thirty. Do you want me to get you some coffee, or have you beaten me to that, too?" She crossed her arms and looked at him.

He popped the last bite of croissant into his mouth and grinned. "Beat you to it," he mumbled, nodding toward the half empty mug in front of him. "Besides, I've told you a hundred times that I can get my own coffee." Swallowing, he continued, "Beat you to the hot sheets, too, so you don't have to worry about them, either." She nodded, and he suddenly felt the need to explain himself to her. "I had trouble sleeping, okay?"

She raised her hands, gave him her best 'who's asking' grin, and returned to her desk to get herself prepared for the day.

Turning his chair around, Lee leaned back, staring out the window. In less than thirty-six hours he was going to be sitting across a table from Amanda, having to navigate through an entire conversation with her, and the thought terrified him. It suddenly dawned on him that he had no

idea where to take her. Emilio's was out. It held too many memories, and he didn't want to make her as uncomfortable as he knew he was going to be.

"Chris," he called out, turning around, "does your cousin still work at 1789?" He heard her muffled 'yes,' and sighed in relief. "Can you get me a reservation?" There was silence for a moment, and then she popped back into the doorway.

"A reservation?" He nodded. "Sure, for when?"

Smiling sheepishly, he replied, "Tomorrow night."

She raised her eyebrows and propped her hands on her hips. "All right, Stetson, spill it. Who is she?"

He laughed nervously at her sudden interrogation, loosened his tie, and swallowed. "I don't know what you're talking about. An old friend is in town, and I want to take her out to dinner. What's it to you?"

"You're getting awfully defensive, aren't you?" she teased. She dropped her smile and allowed her concern to show through. "Look, you're never early, and all of a sudden, you want me to get you reservations at an expensive, not to mention romantic, restaurant, all for an 'old friend?'" She took a few steps forward and sat down in the chair in front of Lee's desk. "I've been working for you almost four years now, and I've never seen you act quite like this." She leaned back and grinned, "Of course, there have been dates, and women here and there, but you're acting weird. It's my job to be concerned."

Lee ran a nervous hand through his hair and nodded in surrender. "You're absolutely right. I have a dinner date with . . . an old girlfriend, and I want to make it special."

Chris smiled at him and patted his desk while she stood up. "See, that wasn't so hard, was it? I'll get that reservation taken care of for you right away." She turned with a flourish and nearly skipped out of the room.

"Yeah," he whispered behind her, "not hard at all." He rolled his eyes and tried to return his attention to the computer reports in front of him, but, for some reason, he just couldn't focus on the words.

Amanda sat at her desk, twirling a pencil in her hand, staring at the finished case file in front of her. She'd been sitting in silence for several minutes when her assistant, Barbara, cleared her throat. Amanda snapped back to the present and forced a smile.

"How long have you been standing there?" she asked the younger woman.

"Long enough to know you should probably just go home," she replied with a wicked grin.

Amanda smiled back and dropped the pencil on her desk. "Yeah, I guess I'm a little preoccupied today."

Barbara snorted. "A little? That's the understatement of the century!" She took a step forward and sat down. "I haven't seen you this morose since Jamie left for school."

Rolling her eyes, Amanda leaned back and crossed her arms. "I'm not *that* bad," she started to counter, but stopped when Barbara gave her a look. "Okay, maybe I am," she sighed, giving in. "I met up with an old friend yesterday."

Barbara's eyes flew open and she scooted forward in her seat. "Do tell!"

Amanda laughed, then took a deep breath. "Okay, but it's really not as big a deal as you think." Barbara nodded an 'oh, sure,' and Amanda continued. "It's nothing really. I went to Ned's for lunch yesterday and ran into him."

"Him?"

"Yes," Amanda smartly replied, "him." She turned her attention to the top of her desk and began to fidget with her pinky ring. "We talked for a few minutes, and then he asked me out to dinner."

"Dinner, eh? Sounds serious." Barbara leaned back and tapped her fingertips together. "So . . . when's the big day?"

"Friday," she sighed. "Tomorrow night."

"Well, that was quick," Barbara observed. "How long has it been since you've seen this guy?" She sat forward, again, and reached for a mint from Amanda's candy dish, popping it in to her mouth in one fluid motion. "I mean, is he an old buddy from school?" she asked, slurping the candy.

Amanda closed her eyes, recalling how uncomfortable Lee had seemed while sitting next to her at the bar. "Last time I spoke to him was five years ago." She cleared her throat and continued. "We used to work together. As for it being quick? I think it was a spur of the moment thing; I know my accepting the date was."

"Amanda," Barbara chewed and swallowed what was left of the mint, leaned toward the desk, and placed her hand on Amanda's. "We've been friends for a few years, right?" Amanda opened her eyes and nodded. "I know there are certain things you don't like to talk about, like what you did before you started working here." Amanda opened her mouth to speak as Barbara raised her hand to stop her. "But I've never seen you like this. I don't know if that's good or bad, but if you need someone to talk to, you know you can come to me, right?"

Amanda smiled and nodded, momentarily caught off guard by the younger woman's show of friendship. "Thank you, Barbara. If I decide I want to talk about this, you'll be the first to know. I promise." Amanda raised her right hand in a mock oath as Barbara smiled and stood up, grabbing another mint in the process. "Cool! I'm glad we agree." She turned to leave, but stopped at the doorway and spun around. "So is he cute?"

Amanda smirked. "Oh, yeah," she nodded, again recalling his smile and charm. "He's very cute."

Barbara smiled a self-satisfied smile and whirled around, leaving Amanda alone, again, with her thoughts.

Part 6

September 1987

Lee unlocked the apartment door and pushed it open with the toe of his shoe. He carried a storage box heavy with files that Billy had insisted he take home with him over the weekend. Muttering under his breath, he dropped the box on the floor and worked himself out of his overcoat, which was damp with the light rain that had started falling that afternoon.

This was not how he had wanted to spend his weekend.

He started for the bar, ready to pour himself a shot to relax, when he thought better of it. Instead, he walked to the kitchen and grabbed a can of soda from the top shelf of the refrigerator. He still had to call Amanda to cancel their plans and knew it would be best to do so with a clear head.

He took a long drink from the can and flipped on the stereo as he walked by. The soft sounds of jazz filled the room, and Lee sat on the couch, trying to think of how he would be able to explain everything to Amanda.

This was supposed to be their weekend to get things worked out, to talk everything through, and try to come to an agreement on all the issues they'd been butting heads over for so many months. It had been Amanda's idea. Apparently, she thought they never got a chance to talk about the important things. Their time alone was growing more and more scarce.

She was right, and it worried him.

Now, after they had painstakingly worked out all the plans, even agreed on what they'd talk about and what the ground rules would be, he was going to have to call her and cancel.

He had tried to explain to Billy that he had very important plans and that the assignment could easily wait until Monday, but Billy would hear nothing of it. He had even hinted that Amanda would understand as if he knew Lee's important plans involved his partner.

Partner. That was one of the issues they were going to discuss. Amanda was still insisting that she was ready and able to do more fieldwork. Lee was still finding every excuse in the book to try to keep her in the office. By doing so, he realized, he had created a monster.

Amanda had taken the extra time to hone her skills in the classrooms and training facilities. She was now fully certified for hand-to-hand combat, and her marksmanship had improved by over one

hundred percent. Francine had even commented, with uncharacteristic admiration, that Amanda was becoming a dead eye with her sidearm.

Lee took another sip of his soda and tried to figure out if he was proud of his wife or terrified for her. On one hand, he was thrilled to see her take such pride in her abilities. He had always known, even if he hadn't admitted it, that she had a knack for the business. But knowing that she was now capable of carrying and, worst of all, using her weapon, worried him.

Where was the soft and gentle woman he'd fallen in love with? The woman who hated violence, and the woman who would try to talk her way out of a situation, rather than cause pain to anyone or anything? The woman who used to hold a gun with her fingertips as if it were a pair of month old gym-socks?

She was becoming hard and cynical, but damn good at her job. And that was the bottom line. He knew she was good, and he knew she deserved to be out in the field to show everyone just how good she was, but he was afraid.

He closed his eyes and could clearly hear the beeping of the heart monitor and the click-whir of the respirator. If he kept his eyes closed long enough, he knew he'd be able to reconstruct every fine detail of that hospital room in California. The room where he'd almost lost her. The room where everything had changed. It haunted him every day, and he was terrified of ever having to relive any of it. If he could only make her see it his way.

With a sigh, he reached behind him and picked up the telephone receiver. He slowly dialed Amanda's number, dreading what he had to tell her. He hated having to cancel any plans with her, but these were very important plans.

Hopefully she would understand.

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October 1993

A knock at the door brought Lee out of his memories. He looked up to see Chris smiling at him, leaning against the doorframe.

"Hello, dream-weaver," she teased. "Back from lullaby-land?"

Lee scowled at her and straightened in his chair. "I don't know what you're talking about," he countered, but let a grin slip out to show her he knew he had been caught.

"Uh-huh," she nodded, "I got that reservation for you. Everything's set. Tomorrow night at eight o'clock."

Filled with relief, Lee let out a sigh. One obstacle had been overcome. He had found a wonderful restaurant at the last minute, someplace as special as Amanda was to him. Now, if he could only get over this incredible case of nerves, everything would be perfect.

Part 7

November 1987

Billy dismissed them from the briefing, and Lee led the way to the Q-Bureau, their assignment in his hands. Amanda followed behind, a spring in her step. Today marked her first full, official day back in the field, and so far, she was enjoying every minute of it.

The same could not be said for her husband.

He had tried, once again, to load her up with paperwork, but Billy would hear nothing of it. Every argument Lee had offered, Billy had countered, even sneaking her a sideways wink once or twice. Now, Lee was mumbling under his breath as he tromped up the stairs to their office. Amanda had to remind herself that gloating was not going to help his mood any.

He opened the door and tossed the file folders onto Amanda's desk while he sulked his way to his own. Amanda quietly took her seat and opened the first folder, reading over what Billy had touched on just moments before.

After a few moments of silence, she laid the folder down and looked to her partner, who was scowling in her general direction. She smiled and raised her eyebrows, considering her mode of attack before beginning.

"I suppose," she said, looking down at the file, "that we should probably start with the Congressman's niece, since she seems to be the most likely source for the leaks." Leaning back, she took in a breath, waiting for Lee's rebuttal.

He offered none. He looked at her, and the corners of his mouth started to turn up in a smile. This took Amanda by surprise, and she held her breath, waiting to see just what was going to happen.

"I suppose," he finally responded, "that is the best idea I've heard all morning." Standing, he pulled his car keys out from his pocket and started for the door. Amanda sat still, watching him in awe, amazed at his apparent one-hundred-and-eighty degree turn-around, and wondering when the other shoe was going to drop.

"Well?" He was waiting for her, one hand on the doorknob.

"Let's go," she replied. She stood, and he opened the door for her, placing his hand on her back as he walked beside her down the short hallway to the stairs.

The next few days were wonderful. Amanda felt as if things were finally getting back to normal. They were actually working together, in the field, and Lee was behaving like his old self. Everything seemed to be going well, until they started to wrap up the assignment.

The niece's boyfriend, as it turned out, had been using her to get information that he'd been selling to the highest bidder. Lee and Billy had talked to the Senator and his niece, explaining the situation to each of them. They then proceeded to plant some false information to pass on to the boyfriend in order to smoke him out.

All arrangements managed to leave Amanda fully out of the loop. She had sat in the Section Chief's office, watching as Lee and Billy worked out the details. Each time she tried to jump in to offer some advice, Lee would plow right over her, interrupting her and cutting her off. Halfway through the impromptu meeting, she got up and left the office without a word.

Now, she sat in the Q-Bureau, alone again. Lee had exited hastily when the call had come in that their information had been passed, and he hadn't bothered to call her to let her know he was leaving. The more she thought about it, the angrier she became, until, finally, she stood up and headed down to Billy's office.

Billy sat expressionless as Amanda told him everything. She told him about their engagement, about their marriage, about their honeymoon. She then told him about Lee and how she felt he was holding her back.

"Sir," she continued, "I know you've said that our relationship was okay with you, but I'm pretty sure you meant only if it didn't interfere with our work." She paused, and Billy nodded for her to continue.

"Clearly, this is affecting me. I'm not sure what to do now, and I wanted to talk to someone. Someone who would understand." She raised her eyes to Billy, who was smiling thinly at her.

"Amanda," he began, "this is a lot to digest. I won't say that I didn't suspect this was going on, but not to the degree that you've just revealed." Billy leaned back and rubbed his temples. Amanda shifted in her chair, feeling responsible for creating another problem for her Section Chief.

"You've both done a relatively good job of keeping this secret, but as you've pointed out, you're not entirely happy." He paused and looked her deep in the eyes. "Amanda, what do you want?"

The question caught her off guard, and her voice caught in her throat. "Me?" she croaked. "I don't know. I . . . I guess I want everything to be the way it was . . . before."

"But it's not, and it can't be," Billy pointed out. "You two have changed that, and it will be impossible to go back."

Amanda sighed and rested her head in her hands. "I know, I know," she whispered. "I've been telling myself for months now that it was just transitional, that once we got back into our old habits, things would work themselves out, but, dammit, sir, I'm tired. I'm tired of the sneaking around, and I'm tired of being pushed to the side whenever things get touchy."

"So what do you want, Amanda?" Billy asked again, his voice soft.

"Do you think, maybe, if I were to take another position, maybe in another department or at another agency, that Lee and I could work it out?" Her eyes were beginning to well up, and she took the tissue Billy offered.

"I don't know," he replied. "That's something that you'd have to discuss with Lee. I can transfer you, or even pull some strings and get you in someplace else if you'd rather do that. You're a damn fine agent, Amanda. I knew that from the start, and I hate to see you wasting your talent. But . . ." she looked at him and could see pleading in his eyes, *"please, talk to Lee about this first. It may seem that this is something you need to decide on your own, but it's going to affect him, too."*

"Okay, sir. I'll talk to him when he gets back." Amanda started to stand when Billy stopped her.

"When he gets back? Where is he?" Billy looked somewhat alarmed at this revelation.

"He went off to finish up the assignment, sir." Amanda was confused, thinking that Billy should have known where Lee was, since it was he who had sent him there.

"He's gone off without you?" Billy asked, incredulously.

"Well, yes, I thought you knew . . ." her words trailed off when Billy shook his head.

"I told him to take you. I specifically told him to take you." Billy was getting visibly angry as Amanda's temper began to rise.

Now he was disobeying a direct order in his attempt to keep her out of harm's way. This was more than Amanda could take. Before she knew what she was doing, she was making the request that would mark the beginning of the end.

"Sir, please look into that transfer for me, immediately to another department, then, preferably, to another agency, if you can swing it. I'm going to go home, now, if you should need me." Billy nodded and she turned to leave.

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October 1993

"Amanda?" Barbara knocked on the doorframe, and Amanda looked up, the memory of Billy's words ringing in her mind. "It's after five; I'm headed home. Are you going to be okay?"

Amanda smiled halfheartedly and nodded, "Yeah, I think so."

"Good," the younger woman replied. "I don't want to have to worry about you, ya know."

Amanda nodded as she picked up her purse. "You're right; I can't have you worrying about me. Let's go; I'll follow you out."

Part 8

Friday

Lee sat at his desk Friday morning, early again. Chris had stopped short of making more comments, much to Lee's relief. He was nervous enough as it was without her teasing.

He'd spent most of the night on the couch, flipping channels and drifting in and out of sleep. Most of his dreams had been of Amanda and the two of them together again. As he finished his coffee and brushed muffin crumbs into his trashcan, he wondered whether it could ever be more than a dream.

He felt a presence and looked up to find Jack Newman smiling at him. The Director of Field Operations walked through the door, making himself comfortable in one of Lee's plush office chairs.

"Good morning, Stetson," Director Newman boomed, his deep voice echoing through the room. Lee had always been impressed with his supervisor, both in size and reputation. He had been one of the deciding factors when Lee had been offered the position five years earlier.

That and the fact that there would be no constant reminders of Amanda everywhere he turned.

"Good morning, Jack. To what do I owe this honor?"

A tiny voice told Lee to be on guard as Jack grinned and scooted forward, lowering his voice to a whisper. "That, Lee, is 'need to know.'" He laughed at Lee's scowl and leaned back. "Actually, I need a favor from you."

Lee's eyebrows rose in question. His supervisor had never asked him for a favor before, and he was intrigued, and worried, at the possibilities. "And what would that be?"

"There's going to be a shin-dig at the Italian Embassy Monday night. Our friends at the Agency are supposed to be getting some information from an Italian operative and have requested that you be their point man." Pulling a fat cigar out of his jacket pocket as he spoke, Jack refrained from lighting up out of respect for Lee's 'no smoking' policy. He popped the end of the cigar into his mouth and started to chew on it while he watched Lee for his response.

"The Agency requested me?" Lee turned his chair around and looked out the window. "Who at the Agency, if I may ask?"

"You may. It was Section Chief Desmond," Jack replied.

Lee nodded his recognition and turned back around to face his supervisor. "I thought as much," he muttered. Francine had been promoted to Section Chief three years before when Billy had finally retired. Lee had been invited to the retirement party and had been relieved that Amanda had not come, sending a gift and a card in her place.

Now, Francine wanted him to handle a pass. It had to be important for Francine to have asked for him by name, but he remained hesitant. "Jack, I haven't been in the field for five years. I'm a paper pusher, for cryin' out loud."

"Yes, you are, but they want you." Jack smiled broadly. "What can I say, you're a very popular gentleman back there. You've got quite a reputation."

Lee snorted, "I bet I do."

"Which reminds me," Jack continued, "you're going to have to bring a date, so fish through your sea and pull out a catch, okay?" With that, the Director stood and walked out of the office.

Lee sat at his desk, stupefied. A date? Who could he ask? He hadn't seriously dated in years. He'd gone out a few times after the divorce, but the allure had worn off, and he just hadn't bothered with the opposite sex. No one could ever compare with what he'd lost, and he'd stopped trying. Now, with his dinner with Amanda looming in front of him, he had to worry about this as well? That was when it occurred to him. He could ask Amanda. Maybe, if dinner went well, she wouldn't mind coming along, for old time's sake.

Amanda stood in front of her open closet door, regarding each stitch of clothing with contempt. It was only a dinner, and she had a closet full of dresses and pantsuits. So why did she have nothing to wear?

"Because you don't have an appropriate selection of clothes to wear when you're going out to dinner, to who knows where, with your ex-husband, who you're pretty sure you still love," she answered her unspoken question. She shook her head at the absurdity of it all. Why was this such a big deal? She had been asking herself that same question for the past two days and had yet to come up with a decent answer.

Dress after dress was pulled from the closet, examined, and then unceremoniously tossed on her bed. She was beginning to wonder why she hadn't gone shopping for something new when she spotted a dark green gown in the far corner of the closet. She reached in and pulled it out, looking it over from top to bottom. Satisfied, she hung it on a hook on the back of the closet door and started digging for a matching pair of shoes.

Part 9

Lee parked his dark gray, BMW convertible just shy of Amanda's front yard and shut off the engine, realizing, after the fact, that he could probably have parked directly in front of her house without arousing any suspicion. There was no need to hide in the shadows anymore, but some habits were hard to break. He looked at his watch and groaned. He was ten minutes early, and he wasn't about to walk up to the front door just yet. He didn't want to seem as anxious as he really felt. Leaning back in his seat, he asked himself, for the hundredth time, what it was he thought he was doing.

He had already admitted to himself that he still had feelings for Amanda. That much was obvious the moment he had laid eyes on her in Nedlinger's. His spur of the moment invitation had left him

reeling, and now, as he sat in front of her house, after so many years, he could feel the pangs of nervousness. His dry mouth and the butterflies in his stomach were not unlike what he had experienced when he had locked the Q-Bureau door so many years ago and kissed her for the first, meaningful time.

But what were those feelings? Did he still love her? For that matter, did she still love him? Maybe she had moved on and she had another man in her life. He hadn't thought to check out her left hand when he'd seen her on Wednesday. What if she was married and was humoring him with dinner tonight? No, she wouldn't do that. That wasn't her style. Besides, he'd driven by her house so many times over the past five years that he felt confident he would have noticed a regular visitor.

He closed his eyes and recalled the many occasions on which he'd wanted to kiss her, or tell her he loved her, but he was always so afraid of what she might say to him. So much wasted time, he mused. Why had he waited so long to confess his heart to her? He felt that way now, nervous and afraid. He had no idea what to say to her or how to act. He knew that he wanted to get to know her again, but he didn't know if that was something that she wanted, too.

Again, he looked at his watch. It was time. He opened the door and stepped out into the street, straightening his slacks and suit jacket. Reaching behind the driver's seat, he picked up a bouquet of flowers and quietly closed the car door. He started up the front walk then got a devilish idea. Smiling to himself, he rounded the corner of the house and quietly made his way around the gazebo to the kitchen window.

Lee was about to tap on the glass when he heard Amanda's voice. He ducked under the window and listened.

"I'm shaking inside. I'm nervous as all get out. I want things to go well tonight; I don't want to make it seem like I want more out of this than he does, but I have no idea what he's thinking. I have no idea how to act or what to say. I don't even know if he's got a girlfriend!"

Now, here was a dilemma. Lee hadn't seen any cars in the drive, other than Amanda's, and was relatively certain that there was no one else with her. So to whom was she talking? Feeling slightly guilty for spying on her, he stood and glanced around the kitchen. Seeing only Amanda, he tapped on the glass. She jumped, turned to face the window, and looked at him for a moment until he waved and nodded toward the back door. Nodding back, she started through the kitchen. He held the flowers tightly and walked through the grass to the backdoor.

Earlier, Amanda had paced the kitchen, glancing first at her wristwatch, then at the kitchen clock, then back again, wondering why time seemed to be standing still. She was pleased with the green dress, which she'd worn four years earlier for a blind date Dotty had set up, and had then hung in the closet and forgotten, almost as quickly as the date had been.

It was dressy, but not too dressy. Perfect for an occasion when you weren't sure where you were going to end up. It was made of a light and airy material that emphasized her figure in all the right places and had a calf length skirt that flared when she twirled around, perfect for dancing. It was

sleeveless, with inch wide straps and a low cut neckline that perfectly accentuated her neck. She had pulled her hair up off of her neck, partly because it looked best that way with that particular kind of dress, and also, partly, because she'd remembered that it used to drive Lee crazy.

She'd smiled at herself in the mirror when she had finished her hair and makeup, quite pleased with the results. She reasoned that she wasn't going out of her way to make herself look spectacular, but on a deeper level, she knew she really wanted to take Lee's breath away, and she was certain this ensemble would do the trick.

Continuing to pace, the click-click of her heels on the tile floor kept time with the tick-tick of the kitchen clock. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a furry form slip in from the laundry room. Amanda paused and knelt to pet the cat, which seemed blissfully unaware of the nervousness of its owner.

"Amber, you're gonna have to watch the house tonight. I'm not sure how long I'll be gone." With her deep orange eyes, the cat looked up at Amanda and began to purr. Amanda stood and straightened her dress, then sat on the stool, as the cat began to groom herself in the middle of the kitchen floor.

"What am I gonna do?" Amanda groaned. "I mean, I know what I want to happen, or at least I think I do. Am I expecting too much out of this?" She picked up a paper napkin and began to fold and unfold it as she spoke. "I've been thinking a lot lately, reliving things that happened with Lee. I still love him, Amber." The cat stopped grooming herself for a moment and looked intently at Amanda.

"Okay, I don't know that for certain; I'm so confused," she confessed as Amber resumed her bath. "I'm shaking inside. I'm nervous as all get out. I want things to go well tonight; I don't want to make it seem like I want more out of this than he does, but I have no idea what he's thinking. I have no idea how to act or what to say. I don't even know if he's got a girlfriend!" She paused and looked at the mangled remains of the napkin in her hand when a tap on the window nearly scared her off her perch.

She turned to see him standing there, an impish smile on his face. He nervously waved and motioned toward the back door with a nod of his head. It was as if in a dream that Amanda walked to the door and unlocked it; years had simply washed away, and their relationship was once again new. He opened the door and stood there, looking at her with a smile of approval. He was wearing a black suit and held a small bouquet of yellow roses in his hands.

They stood there for a moment, drinking in the sight of each other, until Lee cleared his throat, snapping Amanda out of her fog and back to reality.

"Um . . . may I come in?" He blushed ever so slightly and looked down at the bouquet. "Oh, I brought these for you." He offered her the flowers. She accepted, mouthed a silent 'thank you,' then backed up to allow him entry. "I thought flowers would be a good idea, since I ruined so many of them over the years," he laughed nervously, tossing a furtive glance over his shoulder to the backyard as he followed her into the kitchen. He watched as she pulled out a vase, filled it halfway with water, arranged the roses in it, then set it on the counter.

"They're beautiful," she said quietly, without looking up.

"So are you," he replied, just as quietly, but not so softly that she didn't hear him. She looked at him and her cheeks colored. Quickly, he added, "I mean, that dress is wonderful and the color is . . . well . . . exquisite on you."

Again, a nervous silence enveloped them for what seemed an eternity as they stared into each other's eyes. A few seconds later, Amanda reached for her evening bag. "Well then, shall we go?"

Relieved, Lee nodded. "Absolutely."

Part 10

The maitre d' seated Lee and Amanda and handed them their menus. Amanda quietly thanked him and glanced around at the surroundings. She smiled her approval at Lee, and he smiled back. They sat in silence for a moment, looking over the fare and, as Amanda examined the menu, she noticed that Lee seemed not to be able to keep his eyes off of her.

She looked up at him only to see him quickly glance down. She could tell he was nervous, and she reveled in it. He concentrated on his menu, playing with the corners, while he fidgeted in his chair. Knowing she wasn't alone in this somehow made it all the more bearable. She cleared her throat and lowered the menu. In response, Lee raised his eyebrows in question and placed his menu on the table.

"This place is wonderful, Lee," Amanda offered. The short ride across town had been in nearly complete, awkward silence. She was now ready to have some meaningful conversation. "How did you hear about it?"

"My assistant's cousin works here," Lee replied, his features relaxing with the safety of the topic. "I've never been here before, but I thought it might be a nice change of pace. Something new for both of us. That is, assuming you've never been here, either."

"No . . . no, I haven't," Amanda sighed, looking at her menu again. "It's lovely, though. Everything looks so good; I have no idea what to order."

Lee hesitated before responding. "We can always split an entrée, if you like," he offered, quietly.

She looked at him, a smile in her eyes, knowing full well that his memories of their many dinners together had to be just as vivid as hers. "Oh, no, that won't be necessary," she replied, shaking her head. "Besides, I think the management might frown on that. But, if we each get something different, we can share."

"Yeah, we can share," Lee agreed, his voice hoarse and just barely a whisper. They returned to their menus and decided what they would each try when their waiter arrived, and Lee ordered for them both, also requesting a bottle of wine. Returning shortly, the waiter opened the bottle and, after receiving approval from Lee, poured the wine into their glasses.

Amanda thanked the waiter and was about to take a sip when Lee raised his glass in a toast. She paused, the glass at her lips, and waited.

"To old friends and new friendships," he said, looking deeply into her eyes.

The sincerity of his words warmed her more than the wine ever could. They each drank, wondering how to continue. Their salads were delivered, and they both hid behind the comfort of the meal. It was Lee who finally dove into conversation.

"So," he asked, "how are the boys doing?"

"Very well," Amanda beamed. "They're both off at school now, moved away." Placing her fork on the side of her plate, she took a sip of wine and continued. "Jamie left just a few months ago for Cal Tech. They have a good Photojournalism Department. Ever since you bought him that camera, it's been his life's devotion."

Lee laughed, remembering the camera he had given the young man as a peace offering when he and Amanda had first gotten married. It seemed like so very long ago, but the memory of Jamie's smile, and the genuine pleasure he'd gotten out of the gift, had stayed with Lee over the years.

"And Phillip? What's he up to these days?" Lee watched Amanda's face darken a little as she considered her words before she started speaking.

"He's in Florida, at FSU. He's going for a degree in criminal law, and I suspect he's been talking to the FBI about a job." She scowled and forced a smile, "I'm not too thrilled about it, but he's a big boy and I can't very well tell him what he can and can't do with his life." While she spoke, she chased a crouton around her plate with her fork, watching it intently. She finished with a sigh and looked up at Lee, who was watching her, amused. She sat up straight and looked Lee dead in the eyes. "I'm his mother; I'm allowed to worry. Don't sit there smiling like you don't know exactly what I'm talking about."

Holding up his hands in surrender, Lee leaned back and laughed. "I don't remember inviting *your* mother to dinner."

"Touché," she mouthed as the waiter cleared away their salad plates and delivered the main course. Lee refilled the wineglasses, and once more they sat in silence, enjoying the meal and each other's company.

"By the way, how is your mother?" Lee asked between bites of his dinner.

Amanda snorted and shook her head. "I am so glad insanity doesn't run in my family." Lee laughed, causing Amanda to chuckle a little herself. "She's living with Curt. You remember, her flight school instructor?" Lee nodded and Amanda continued. "He proposed to her a few years ago, and she accepted, but they still haven't set a date. Apparently, there's something to be said for 'living in sin.' He bought her a Cessna for an engagement gift and they're spending their days flying all over the country."

"Sounds like she's having the time of her life," Lee observed.

"She's giving me gray hair," Amanda groaned. "She keeps threatening to take me somewhere in that plane of hers, but I won't set foot near it." She shuddered at the thought of actually allowing her mother to *fly* her anywhere. Looking up, she noted that Lee seemed more relaxed and was smiling warmly at her. "You *do* remember her driving lessons, don't you?" He nodded emphatically, and she smiled back, then turning the conversation to him. "How's Francine doing? Do you keep in touch?"

Lee nodded. "Yeah, we talk from time to time. The last time I actually *saw* her was at Billy's retirement party."

"I wish I could have been there," Amanda interrupted, "but I was working on getting Phillip settled in school. I sent a card."

"I know," Lee replied. "She's Section Chief now."

"I'd heard," Amanda beamed. "She really deserves it after all the hard work she's put in." The silence settled in again, and Amanda wondered for a moment what might have happened if she'd gone to the party, after all. She really had been getting Phillip ready for college, but that had only been a convenient excuse.

Amanda couldn't tell if it was the wine or not, but she was beginning to feel more and more comfortable with Lee. She took another sip and asked, "Why did you ask me out to dinner, Stetson?"

Lee nearly choked on his entrée and drained his glass to clear his throat. Amanda sat still, watching him, waiting for an answer.

Finally regaining his composure, his eyes cast downward, he replied quietly, "I don't know, really. I guess I just wanted to see that you were doing okay."

Amanda reached across the table and softly touched Lee's hand. He looked up and she smiled. "I'm fine," she whispered.

He turned his hand over and gripped her fingers, holding them tightly, yet gently. "I can see that," he replied, his voice hoarse with emotion.

The rest of the world seemed to fade away, leaving Amanda and Lee alone, staring at each other. She could feel the warmth of his hand on hers and knew, without a doubt, that she never wanted it to go away. But this was too fast, too uncertain. The courage brought on by the wine disappeared, and she slowly pulled her hand back and picked up her fork, intent on finishing her dinner.

Lee pulled to a stop at Amanda's front gate and killed the engine. Dinner had gone surprisingly well, and the evening was now nearly over. Despite a few tense moments, Lee felt pretty confident that he might be able to convince Amanda to go to the Italian Embassy with him on Monday night. He stepped out and quickly rounded the front end to open her door. Offering his hand to her, he helped her out.

He followed her to the front stoop and waited while she fished her house key out of her small evening bag. She retrieved the key and was about to unlock the door, but hesitated and turned to face him.

She was within arm's reach, looking up at him, expectation written in her eyes. Lee was filled with an intense sense of longing. At that moment, all he wanted to do was pull her into his arms and hold her. He wanted to tell her how much he missed her, and how he wanted her back in his life. But he stood still and quiet.

"I had a lovely time, Lee," Amanda finally said. "I really do hope we can do it again, sometime."

Lee swallowed and reached for her hand, taking it tenderly in his own, searching for the proper words to say. He didn't want to scare her off, but he also didn't want her to think he wasn't interested. Softly, he ran his thumb across her knuckles. "So . . . are you available?"

"Available?" she asked, her voice cracking, mid-word.

"For something Monday night," Lee quickly amended.

"Of course," Amanda blurted out.

Lee chuckled. "You don't even know what we'd be doing," he pointed out.

She rolled her eyes and sighed. "Haven't you learned, yet, that I'd go anywhere with you?"

Her words left him speechless and he leaned in close, pulling her toward him. She didn't resist and tipped her head back, smiling softly. 'I could kiss her,' he thought. 'I want to kiss her.' Their lips were inches apart; he could smell her perfume and found it intoxicating. Then, in a moment of clarity, he pulled back and released her hand.

"Um . . ." he coughed once, "It's a Ball at the Italian Embassy. Actually, I'll be working." He scuffed the toe of his left shoe on the landing, wishing it were something more than work. "Francine needs me to do her a favor and pick up something from one of the guests. I kind of need a date."

"Window dressing," Amada offered.

"Yeah," he laughed, "window dressing. That is, if you don't mind."

"I don't mind at all." She turned and unlocked the door, opening it a crack, then turned back toward him once more. "Thanks again, for dinner."

"You're welcome," he replied. "I'll pick you up Monday evening around seven?"

Amanda nodded and walked inside, closing the door slowly. He waited until he heard her lock and set the deadbolt, then turned and walked back toward the street and his waiting car.

Part 11

Saturday

Amanda awoke Saturday morning feeling more light-hearted than she'd felt in ages. She found herself humming while she worked on the Post's daily crossword puzzle at her kitchen counter. Her thoughts kept returning to dinner and what had almost happened on the front stoop the night before.

He'd been ready to kiss her. She knew it. What had stopped him? One second they were both caught up in the moment, then, the next, he had pulled away and was making safe conversation about work.

"Well, that's nothing new, is it?" she asked the cat as it waddled into the kitchen. With a small 'meow,' Amber agreed. "You don't even know him," Amanda defended, "and I need to get some real friends to talk to before I'm locked up for confessing to a cat."

The cat winked at her and continued its patrol of the house, leaving Amanda with her thoughts.

Her journal was still sitting on the counter and she picked it up, opening it to the next blank page.

October 9, 1993 - Saturday

Had dinner with Lee last night. It was nice. Strange, but nice. He was a perfect gentleman, and the restaurant was wonderful. We talked about the boys, and Mother, and a little about Francine. We talked very little about work, though. I guess I wasn't ready to hear how much he enjoys working - without me.

He walked me to the front door, and we talked a little there, too. That's when he almost kissed me. Of course, I can't be sure, but it seemed that way. How I wanted him to. But he pulled away. He invited me to go with him to a Ball at the Italian Embassy on Monday night. I quickly agreed. What woman in her right mind would turn down a date to the Italian Embassy, especially with Lee Stetson as her escort? Even if he was her ex-husband.

He'll be working, though. He said it's nothing, but I'm still excited. I'm just not sure if it's because of his assignment or the thrill of another date with him.

I think it's the date.

This is crazy. I've been thinking back over all the reasons behind why we split up in the first place, and it's occurred to me that I just wanted him to be happy. He was always worried about me, always watching out for me. I guess I truly thought that he would be happier without me there to cloud his judgement. Or, maybe I wanted to be happy and I couldn't be with him 'protecting' me all the time. Who knows?

But what was I thinking?

It seems he's doing well for himself. Maybe this was what we needed? Maybe we needed some time apart to get our lives in order and find ourselves, before we could be truly happy together.

Of course, I'm assuming that he wants to be with me. That's a pretty big stretch, since I've only seen him a few times in the past five years. Granted, I avoided him, and I don't think he ever saw me but . . . I need to get myself together. I can't build myself up for something that might never happen. He's right, though; we were good friends. Maybe we can be again.

Amanda read over what she had written and snapped the book shut. Somehow, writing down her thoughts helped her see things clearer. She would just have to make it through this weekend, and work on Monday, until she could see Lee again. Then, maybe, if things went well, she'd ask him what his intentions were. No sense going through more time wondering what he was feeling. They'd done that before and Amanda didn't feel like wasting that much time again.

Part 12

The rain spat against Lee's window on Monday morning, as he looked over the file that Francine had sent over. It contained information concerning the hand-off at the Ball that evening. He was hoping that the rain would let up, but he'd been watching the weather reports all weekend and knew it didn't seem likely. He had planned to take Amanda to the Ball, then, maybe, go for a walk around the Reflecting Pool afterward.

The rain was going to make that nearly impossible.

Christine walked in to Lee's office carrying a cup of hot coffee. Lee looked up in time to see her set the cup on his desk and then sit down. He raised an eyebrow and she smiled.

"I've told you before that you don't need to bring me my coffee," he teased.

She smiled and nodded. "So . . . how was dinner?" she asked.

"Fine," he replied, picking up the cup and taking a sip. "Did you need something?"

Christine rolled her eyes. "Um, yes . . . details?"

"There are no details to share," Lee stoically answered.

"No details? Oh, come on!" Christine threw her hands up in the air in disgust, and Lee laughed.

"I didn't say there weren't any details, just none I'm willing to share." He smiled at her slyly and winked.

"So it went well?" she prodded.

She was nothing if not relentless. Lee decided to give her something to chew on. "It went much better than I'd thought, and I'll be seeing her again, tonight."

Christine clapped her hands in delight. "Thank goodness! I was hoping it would go well for you!" Lee nodded as his words seemed to register with her. "Wait . . . you're taking her to the Ball tonight? Is that safe?"

"It's perfectly safe," Lee assured her. "She's a professional. Besides, she won't even be involved in the 'business' side of the evening. And if anything were to go wrong, I can't think of anyone else I'd rather have watching my back."

Christine smiled warmly and stood up. "Well, that's a ringing endorsement if I've ever heard one. You'd better work on keeping this one around for a while."

Lee nodded and looked down at the file in his hands. "I intend to," he promised.

Amanda hung her umbrella on the coat rack just inside her office and was taking off her trench coat when Barbara walked past.

"I don't know why you insist on taking the Metro on rainy days like this. You have a perfectly good car sitting in your driveway." Barbara shook her head while Amanda wiped her hands on a small towel she kept in a file cabinet drawer.

"We've been through this before," Amanda said as she ran her fingers through her damp hair. "I only drive in when I have to. There's no sense burning gas and adding to the traffic when I can avoid it," she grinned at her friend.

"I swear you do these things just so I can worry about something," Barbara grumbled as she took a seat.

Sitting down, herself, Amanda straightened her desk blotter. "Barbara, I think you'd find something to worry about even if I weren't around. It's your lot in life."

Barbara stuck her tongue out at Amanda, and they both laughed. "So how'd it go Friday?"

"I thought you'd never ask," Amanda sighed. "It was wonderful."

"Do tell," Barbara said, leaning forward and placing her hands on the edge of Amanda's desk.

"There really isn't much to say, except that it went better than I thought it might and . . . " Amanda paused, adding to the drama, knowing Barbara was sucking it up.

"And?" Barbara prodded, her eyes wide, fingers drumming on Amanda's desk.

"And . . . we're going out again tonight." Barbara laughed and sat back while Amanda continued. "He's invited me to a Ball at the Italian Embassy."

"Wow!" Barbara was visibly impressed. "How'd he get *that* invitation?"

"He works for the State Department. It's a business thing, but he needed a date, so he asked me," Amanda offered as few details as possible, but just enough to still be honest.

"Well, hopefully the weather will cooperate with you, and it'll be a beautiful evening for you both." Barbara got up and left Amanda alone with her thoughts.

"I hope so, too," Amanda replied. "I hope so, too."

Part 13

January 1988

A winter storm's icy rain beat solidly against the fogged car window. Amanda rubbed her arms in an attempt to stave off the damp chill that was creeping in, despite the heater blowing at full blast. The windshield wipers flip-flopped in time with the music on the radio, alternately opening a curtain to the crowded airport terminal then, just as quickly, closing it.

She silently cursed the icy January weather and hoped that Lee's flight had not been delayed. She'd called the airport before leaving home, and the recording assured her that the flight from Dallas was on time. But, as she watched the weary travelers running to their waiting rides, briefcases over their heads, she wondered if perhaps she should park and head inside to the gate.

Checking her watch, she decided that she had enough time to find a parking space and make her way to the gate before Lee's plane landed. She reasoned she could always camp out at baggage claim if it took her longer than she expected in the parking garage. She wiped the fog that had formed on the inside of her car window with the sleeve of her sweater and signaled her intended merge into traffic.

Within fifteen minutes, she was inside the terminal, checking the boards for Lee's flight. The red 'DELAYED' blinking next to the plane's number settled her nerves a bit. She knew she was early, even for an on-time arrival, but she was still worried that he might somehow get past her, and she'd lose him in the crowd. The time delay listed on the board gave her an easy thirty-minute window to find his gate and wait for him to arrive.

Amanda walked through the terminal, taking in the sights and sounds of hundreds of busy travelers. She passed a coffee shop and was lured in by the warm aroma of fresh brew. Thinking of her cold hands and the late hour, she stopped and bought a cup, carrying it with her as she resumed her trek.

When she reached Gate 24, she noticed several people milling around, looking out at the ghostly empty taxiways. Finding a vacant seat near the large plate glass window, she sat down to enjoy her coffee. Lee wasn't expecting her to pick him up. He had asked Francine to meet him and drive him back to the Agency for debriefing. She had been set to go when, at the last minute, something important had come up, and Francine had no other choice but to ask Amanda to fill in for her.

'Poor Francine,' Amanda thought. She had no idea what was going on between Lee and Amanda, or why Amanda had recently asked to be transferred to a different department. Amanda was certain that Francine had chalked the request up to Lee's 'scorched earth policy,' and that he had finally tired of Amanda.

This was fine with her, and Lee, for that matter. They had discussed it briefly, and decided that the rumors would be more interesting and less harmful than the truth. No one but Billy ever needed to know that they were married and that things were rocky, at best. In fact, Lee was almost relieved that Billy had been told, much to her own relief.

A woman's sudden sobs startled Amanda from her thoughts, and she turned away from the window to see what was going on. Standing at the information counter near the gate was a young woman. She was quieting down, but still visibly shaken. The airline attendant patted the woman's arm, trying to console her, but it didn't seem to be working. Amanda tore herself away from the drama behind her, only to see another drama unfolding on the tarmac before her.

Several fire engines and ambulances sped by, followed by a number of vans labeled with an airline logo. The logo of the airline Lee was currently flying. Her curiosity getting the better of her, Amanda stood and made her way through the growing crowd to the information counter. The haggard attendant looked up from his display screen and thinly smiled at her.

Amanda asked the question to which she knew she didn't want an answer. "Is there some sort of problem with one of the flights?"

The attendant looked at her with a haunted look in his eyes. "Ma'am, flight 1247 from Dallas is having engine trouble, and they'll need to make an emergency landing."

Amanda's world slowed as the words soaked in. Lee's flight was in trouble. She reached into her purse and pulled out her government ID, showing it to the attendant. "My partner is on that flight," she whispered. "I need to know what the chances are that his flight might not make it." Her words were calm and professional, a stark contradiction to the jelly-like consistency of her insides.

"Ma'am," the attendant lowered his voice and leaned over the counter, "it doesn't look good. They're giving it a fifty percent chance of success."

Amanda nodded and thanked the young man. She looked around the ever-growing crowd of people, attempting to find a pay phone. Her first thought was to call Billy and let him know what was going on. Logically, she knew she would do Lee no good by getting hysterical and panicking. Realistically, there was nothing she could do for him right now, but pray that he would be okay.

She called the Agency and was patched through to her boss. She relayed the information to the Section Chief who immediately wanted to come to the airport to wait with her. She turned down his offer, and thanked him. Assuring him that she was fine and would keep him updated, she returned to her window seat to wait.

Amanda watched the tarmac as the icy rain began to fall at a more rapid pace. The raindrops beat against the plate glass window, then ran down it in rivulets, hypnotizing her. It was then that she

realized she wasn't worried about Lee. She tried to put a finger on what she was feeling. It certainly wasn't fear, worry, or despair. Her husband was on that plane . . . a plane that had a fifty-fifty chance of crashing and burning, yet she wasn't overly concerned.

With a measure of surprise, she discovered that she was angry. She was furious with Lee for being on that plane. It was his fault she was sitting here, waiting to find out if he lived or died. It was his fault she was working with Beaman, screening the new recruits, rather than sitting in the Q-Bureau with her partner. And finally, it was his fault she wasn't on that plane with him.

"This isn't healthy," she whispered as the gravity of her thoughts came to light. Just as she was hit with this epiphany, a cheer rose from the crowd of people around her. She looked up to see the plane, Lee's plane, being directed to the gate. A wave of relief washed over her, but only momentarily, as it was quickly replaced by the anger.

She stood up and moved closer to the gate, so she could grab Lee's attention over the throng of waiting friends and loved ones, of which she suddenly felt she was neither. Finally, she caught sight of him walking through the tunnel, carrying a satchel, his trench coat slung over his arm. As he exited the tunnel, he looked around and was visibly surprised to see Amanda standing there, waiting for him. She waved to catch his full attention, and he nodded.

He moved toward her, his arms outstretched, smiling broadly. She forced a smile in return, but rather than fall into his waiting arms, she reached out and took his trench coat from him. Turning away, she didn't see the smile fade from his face.

"Let's get your bags," she called over her shoulder. "I'm parked in short-term, and I don't want have to pay an arm and a leg." She glanced behind to see that he was, indeed, following her, and continued. "I'll hang around while you're being debriefed. I want to drive you home. There's something I need to discuss with you."

She stopped and turned to face him. He nodded, his face devoid of expression, and she wondered if he knew what she was going to say.

~~

October 1993

Amanda shook her head and turned away from her window. The rain beating against it had brought her back to that night: the night that had changed it all. Now, after one lovely dinner with Lee, and another looming on the horizon, she found herself wondering if it was possible to give things another chance.

With a shiver, she realized she wanted that more than anything.

Part 14

January 1988

Lee stepped out of the tunnel into the chaos of the arrival gate. Husbands and wives were clutched to one another, reveling in the knowledge that some higher power had kindly given them a second chance. He looked over their heads, trying to find safe passage through the crowd when the sight of a familiar face caught his eye.

Amanda was waiting for him.

She was standing near the throng of people, but a step back, apart from the insanity. He caught her eye and she waved, a labored smile on her face.

'She must be a wreck,' he reasoned. He knew how unnerving and frightening things were on the plane, and he was fairly certain, from the outpouring of emotion all around him, that things hadn't been much different on the ground. He walked through the crowd with open arms. He had reached her and was about to pull her into an embrace, reassuring her that he was all right, when she took his coat from his arm and turned away.

He stood for a moment, dumbfounded, then realized she was talking and hurried to catch up to her. He heard her saying something about short-term parking, and that she wanted to talk to him after his debriefing. Her words were short and unemotional, and caused an ache in the pit of his stomach that he'd never felt before. He was confused and afraid.

As he followed her through the terminal, he went over the events of the past year, one by one, trying to make sense of where their relationship was ultimately headed. He knew things had been strained. He snorted at that thought, and Amanda looked over her shoulder at him. He smiled weakly and cleared his throat. Strained was an understatement, and he knew it.

They picked up his bags and quietly walked the rest of the way through the terminal to the parking garage. They loaded Lee's bags into her Jeep and carefully wound their way through the city to Georgetown, neither uttering a word.

Amanda had waited for him in the Q-Bureau while he underwent questioning about his case. When Billy finished with him, it seemed as if no time had passed, and he almost tried to stall. Then, realizing that he was putting off the inevitable, he quickly said his good-byes and found his way to the foyer.

He looked up the stairs toward his office. Their office. Even now, he still considered it so. Scads of memories were held within those four walls. She was there, waiting upstairs for him. If this was going to be it, he resolved it wasn't going to happen here. He headed up the stairs to get her and take her back to his apartment. Only happy memories belonged in that office. His apartment was another story.

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October 1993

A crack of thunder startled Lee, and he quickly turned around to see the rain falling steadily. He flipped on his radio in time to hear the news report. The storm was expected to continue for the

next few hours, and parts of the Metro system had already flooded and were closed. He checked the clock and found that it was only three in the afternoon, even though the dark skies led him to believe it was much later.

Perhaps it was the weather amplifying his dark mood, but he couldn't stop thinking about that night after he'd come back from Dallas. Amanda had been cold, quiet, and thoughtful. They had gone to his apartment and calmly discussed a divorce.

He couldn't remember, now, who had brought it up first. He only knew that it had been a mutual decision. After Amanda had asked for her transfer, things had become much worse. Lee had found out that she was also looking for work outside the Agency, and it was very possible she would be leaving soon. Granted, it wasn't as uncomfortable at work as it had been when he was unwittingly trying to keep Amanda from risking her life on a daily basis. At least he had succeeded in that aspect.

No . . . he corrected himself. He had succeeded in chasing her away. He had succeeded in ruining his only chance at real happiness, and he knew it. Now, looking back, he would have done it all differently. He never would have agreed to a divorce. He would have relented and worked *with* Amanda, rather than against her.

But that was then, and he hadn't been thinking clearly. Now, after their dinner on Friday night, and the Embassy Ball on tap for the evening, things were beginning to look up again. Even if they were only able to rekindle their friendship, Lee realized that would be enough.

He stood and grabbed his coat and umbrella from his coat rack. With a shout to Chris, he headed off to prepare for the Ball.

Amanda tried to concentrate on her paperwork, but the memories wouldn't leave her alone. That cold January night, they had driven back to the Agency in complete silence, and she had waited for him in the Q-Bureau, the office that had once been theirs, but had been his alone for over a month by then. While she waited, she had mulled everything over in her mind, debating how to broach the subject.

Eventually, and inevitably, she had heard his footsteps on the stairs, and they had gone back to his apartment.

The discussion had been relatively short, and they both had been very calm. She couldn't remember who had actually brought it up first, but she knew that when it was finally out in the open, she felt a sense of relief, followed by a sense of deep sorrow. She distinctly recalled wanting to jump up and shout "No!" to put an end to the madness, but deep in her heart, she knew that it would be best for both of them to just end it while they had the nerve.

She wondered for a moment what would have happened if she'd told him that she'd changed her mind. Would things have changed? Would they still be married now? Would they have split eventually anyway? There was no way to know.

Shaking her head, she was closing down her computer when Barbara called to her from down the hallway, "Amanda, how are you getting home tonight?"

"I'm taking the Metro, why?" Amanda shouted back.

"No, you're not," she declared, now standing in the doorway. "Haven't you been listening to the radio?"

"Um, no," Amanda shook her head, "should I have been?"

"Well, yes!" Barbara walked past her and turned on the radio just in time for the tail end of the rush hour traffic report.

". . . and commuters are stuck between a rock and a hard place with the Orange Line flooded out and closed until the water recedes."

"See?" Barbara turned off the radio and asked Amanda once more, "How are you getting home?"

"Wow, I knew it was raining a lot, but not that much," she muttered while she set about collecting her things.

Barbara cleared her throat, and Amanda looked up, momentarily startled. "Do you want me to drive you home?" she asked.

Amanda smiled at the offer, but turned it down. "No, I couldn't ask you to do that. You live on the other side of town. It would be too much of an inconvenience. Why don't you call me a cab?"

Barbara shrugged and walked past Amanda, shaking her head. "All right, suit yourself," she said. "If it will make you feel better, you're a cab."

Amanda was taken aback, then rolled her eyes. "That's just not funny," she shouted as her friend walked down the hall. "That's just not funny," she reiterated under her breath, recalling the friendly banter she and Lee used to share. She looked at the clock, realizing that waiting for a cab was going to seriously cut into her preparation time. Luckily, she had already decided on her outfit. Now, if she could only get home in time to get dressed.

Part 15

The rain seemed to be letting up while Lee looked into the mirror and straightened his tie. He listened to the weather report in the background, but the forecast wasn't sounding any better than it had earlier that afternoon. He examined his reflection, picking a small piece of lint off his lapel, and smiled in approval. Even he knew he looked good in a tux.

He was ready, with time to spare, and decided to call Amanda on the off chance she, too, might be ready early. He picked up the phone and dialed the number from memory. It rang several times, and he was about to hang up when a breathless Amanda finally answered.

"Amanda, it's Lee," he said, suddenly nervous and wondering why.

"Hi," she replied. "Is something wrong?"

"I was just wondering the same thing," he said while he twisted the phone cord around his finger and back again. "You took a while to answer the phone."

She laughed, "Oh! I was in the shower. Sorry about that."

He was caught off guard by her candid response and was momentarily flustered. His mind flooded with memories of his wife stepping out of the shower, drops of water still glistening on her body. He shook the image from his mind and tried to focus on the conversation at hand.

"Uh, no problem, I'm sorry for interrupting," he said, hoping he sounded calmer than he felt.

"I was done anyway," she assured him.

"Good," he let out a sigh of relief. "I was calling to make sure we were still on for tonight."

"Of course we are!" she said, and he could tell by the way that she was breathing that she was towel-drying her hair as they spoke.

"Do you think you might be ready early?" he asked. "The weather is still looking pretty ugly, and I don't want to be late."

"I don't see why not," she said. "I've got everything laid out and can be set to go in about thirty minutes."

"Great," Lee said, untangling himself from the phone cord that he had managed to wrap around his legs with his restless pacing. "I'll see you then."

He hung up, scowling at the phone. "I've got to break down and get a cordless," he muttered, and returned to the bedroom to give himself one more look before grabbing his black overcoat and heading out.

Amanda was putting the finishing touches on her makeup when the phone rang. She grabbed the cordless handset from the bathroom counter and answered, expecting Lee, again. However, the voice on the other end was not Lee's, but just as welcome.

"Hi, Mom," Phillip greeted.

"Hello, sweetheart," Amanda replied as she walked downstairs, her shoes in one hand and the phone in the other. "Is everything okay?"

"Why is it I can't call without you thinking something's wrong?" he joked. "You'd think you were my mother or something."

"Well, who would have ever thought?" she teased back. She reached the bottom of the stairs just as Lee knocked on the front door. She opened it and wordlessly invited him in, motioning to the phone on her shoulder.

"Who's at the door, Mom?"

Amanda hesitated, then decided to tell him the truth. There was no sense in starting the subterfuge all over again. "It's Mr. Stetson. We're getting ready to go out."

Instantly, she regretted telling Phillip anything. He wasn't known for his subtlety, and his dislike for the man had not been something he had kept to himself. He had brooded and stewed for months after the divorce, adding to his mother's dark mood, but not knowing why.

Amanda, however, knew he had felt abandoned, again, just as he had when Joe had left. Phillip had formed a friendship with Lee and had looked up to him as a father figure, whether he knew it or not. Lee's sudden departure from their lives and the lack of explanation from Amanda hit Phillip harder than she had thought possible. In retrospect, she was grateful that Phillip hadn't known the full scope of her relationship with Lee. Had he, his reaction would have been much worse.

"Are you serious?" he asked. "Why are you going any where with him?"

Amanda held up a finger to Lee, asking him to wait just a minute while she finished the call. He nodded and stood patiently in the entryway, watching her intently. She stepped up to the landing and faced the living room.

"Phillip, calm down," she whispered. "This is nothing you need to worry about. We're both adults and old friends. He needed a companion for a work function tonight, and I agreed to go with him. That's all."

"Mom, look," Phillip implored, "Hear me out. I remember how things went down a few years ago, and I know how upset you were when he stopped coming around. It hurt me, too, you know. I gave him a chance, and he blew it. I just don't want you to get hurt again."

Startled by this admission, Amanda felt a closeness to her older son that she hadn't felt in a long time. Phillip was always the distant and closed-off one. Jamie was more emotional, and this was something that she honestly would have expected from him, not his older brother.

"I don't know what you think happened five years ago, sweetheart, but it's different now. Believe me. I'm not saying that I want something to happen, but if it does, I know it will be better this time."

"Just be careful, Mom," he pleaded.

"I'm always careful, sweetie. You have no idea how careful I am." She glanced over her shoulder and finally got a full look at her date for the evening. He was stunning in a tuxedo, and the sight of him made her heart skip a beat. "I have to go," she told Phillip. "I'll call you tomorrow?"

"Okay, Mom. Love you," he replied, then hung up.

Amanda placed the phone on the charger and returned to the entryway, where Lee was hunched down, petting Amber.

"Who was that?" he asked, without taking his eyes off the affectionate cat.

Amanda sighed. There was no point in lying to Lee, either, she reasoned. "It was Phillip," she explained. "He was a little put out that I was seeing you tonight."

Lee cocked his head to one side and looked up at Amanda, an apologetic smile on his face. "I guess he wasn't too happy with me, huh?"

With a small laugh, Amanda nodded in agreement. "You could say that."

Shrugging, Lee turned his attention back to the cat. "I didn't know you had a roommate," he said, smiling as Amber purred her approval.

"Yeah, I picked up this little loafer after Jamie left for college." Amanda slipped her shoes on and goosed the cat out of the way. "You've got cat hair on your pants now," she pointed out. "Come stand on the steps."

He complied, and she picked up a lint brush from the nearby shelf. "I keep this handy for just such an occasion," she explained as she wiped the fine hairs from his trouser legs. "It's a small price to pay for a sympathetic ear that usually doesn't talk back."

"Is that who you were talking to on Friday night?" Lee asked.

"You heard me?" She stopped brushing and stood, looking at him, wondering what he might have heard her say.

"I just heard your voice," he quickly explained. "Nothing specific."

"Oh," she said, inwardly relieved. She remembered spilling her emotions to the cat that evening and would have been mortified if he'd heard her.

"Are you ready to go?" he asked, stepping down past her to the floor. "The rain is slow right now. We should probably make a break for the car."

"Sure," she said, adding, "just let me grab my wrap." She walked past him to the closet and pulled out a shawl, draping it loosely across her shoulders. Turning to see him staring at her, she smiled, pleased with herself for picking out another winning ensemble. She had spent most of Sunday afternoon going through her closet looking for something suitable to wear, finally settling on a simple, black, sequined evening gown, accented with diamond drop earrings and her heart pendant.

"Ready?" she asked, allowing him a moment to compose himself. He nodded, and they walked out the door into the dampness of the night.

Part 16

Amanda was the hit of the Ball. At least she was in Lee's eyes. They had arrived during a lull in the storm and were immediately welcomed into a warm and inviting atmosphere. The architecture and interior décor enchanted Amanda, but Lee only had eyes for her. He knew it must be obvious to anyone watching that he was smitten, but he didn't care. This was their evening, and he intended on making it something very special for Amanda.

The music had started not too long after they had arrived, and they had started dancing soon thereafter. Lee had almost forgotten how amazing it was to dance with Amanda. It was as if their minds and bodies were one as they glided effortlessly across the floor. It also afforded Lee the opportunity to hold her close and enjoy her warmth, without too much awkwardness.

Several hours had passed, and they were still on the dance floor, catching their breath with a slow ballad. The Italians had decided to mix up the music with some of the classics as well as instrumental versions of some better-known American hits. Lee realized they were swaying in time with a song he knew well, one that often made him think of Amanda. He sang along with the tune in his mind, repeating the words that summed up the entire range of emotions he still felt over losing her.

"How can you just walk away from me, when all I can do is watch you leave? 'Cause we shared the laughter and the pain, and even shared the tears. You're the only one who really knew me at all."

He felt Amanda hold him a little tighter and wondered if she was thinking the same thing. He tightened his grip on her in return, savoring the feel of her body against his, debating how he might hold her again soon.

"Lee," she whispered.

"Yeah," he whispered in reply, his heart pounding in trepidation at what she might want to say to him.

"It's about time for the drop," she reminded him.

"Oh . . . right," he sighed, hoping he didn't sound as disappointed to her as he did to himself. He escorted her from the dance floor to the hallway that led to the library. "You can wait here," he motioned to the entryway, "while I take care of this. Then we can get back to the dance floor." He looked at her and noted the frown on her face.

"Are you sure you'll be okay?" she asked, not letting go of his hand.

"It's a cake walk, Amanda," he assured her. "I'll be fine."

"What if something happens?" she asked, her eyes wide with concern.

"Nothing is going to happen," he replied, looking over his shoulder at the library door. "That is, unless I'm late."

She still refused to let go of his hand. "Lee, this is me you're talking to. Something always goes wrong. You know it. I know it." She was nearly pleading now, "Please, let me go with you."

He couldn't deny her logic. He never had been able to before, he thought; what made him think he could now? "Okay," he relented, "you can be the lookout. Just stay where I tell you, and let me know if anyone starts coming down the hall."

Beaming with excitement, she followed him down the corridor. They reached the library door, and he held a finger to his lips, pointing at the floor just outside the door. She nodded in understanding and leaned against the wall to the side of the door. He smiled, knowing in his heart that she was enjoying this nearly as much as the dancing. With a quick knock on the door, he went inside to take care of business.

Amanda stood quietly outside the library, her breathing quick, and her heart pounding with excitement. She was worried about Lee, and feeling a bit silly about it. She knew this was a simple meet and drop, but she could count on both hands and a foot all the times something 'simple' had turned into a national emergency. Still, it was exciting to be back in action, even it was only as a lookout.

She hadn't been waiting long when Lee came out, tucking an envelope into his jacket pocket and smiling with accomplishment. He took her hand and led her back to the main ballroom.

"Well?" she asked when they were back in the mix.

"Everything went smoothly," he replied as they drifted across the dance floor once again. "Do you want to get a drink?"

She nodded at his suggestion and they swayed their way to the buffet table and bar. Lee picked up two glasses of wine and led her out onto the balcony. There was no one else outside, and the sudden quiet was oddly deafening. Lee offered Amanda the glass of wine, and she took a sip, nodding her approval.

"It's nice out tonight," she remarked. The rain had nearly stopped, and the stars were beginning to peek out from behind the remaining scattered clouds. They stood still for a moment, sipping their wine and winding down from the excitement they'd shared indoors. Amanda jumped when Lee suddenly laughed out loud.

"What's so funny?" she asked.

"Just like old times, eh?" he replied. "How'd it feel?"

She grinned and leaned in close. "Honestly?" she asked, and he nodded. "It felt amazing," she whispered. "This whole evening has been amazing, Lee. Thank you for asking me to tag along."

He took the wineglass from her hand and placed it on the railing next to his own, then took both of her hands in his and held them to his chest. Her breath quickened as he caressed her fingers with his thumbs. "I can't think of anyone I would rather have with me," he whispered as he narrowed the distance between them.

Amanda shut her eyes and held her breath, praying that he wouldn't stop this time, that he would kiss her. Then, his lips were on hers. She felt as if she were floating and found that she had to concentrate on just standing. In a rush, she remembered the countless times he had kissed her before, but for some reason, this was more powerful than any she could recall. It lasted only a second, and then he pulled away. She could still taste him as he looked at the sky, searching for something to say.

"I'm sorry," he finally said, quietly.

Worried that he might think she was upset with him, she reached up and placed a hand on his smooth face, turning his gaze back to her. "Don't be," she whispered. Simple, yet telling. That was all she needed to say.

"Let's get back inside, before they start to miss us," Lee said, smiling warmly.

She nodded, picked up her glass, and followed him back to the ballroom. He had crossed some invisible line, and she felt that she had helped him understand that it was okay. He seemed relieved that she hadn't slapped him and stormed out, and he hadn't forced the issue. That was the most important factor to Amanda. From what she could tell, he wanted to take things slow, too, but he seemed to want the same thing.

As guests filed out, Lee helped Amanda with her wrap. He'd finished out the evening, careful not to overstep his bounds with her, but he felt confident that the small kiss they had shared was only a taste of what was yet to come. He wanted to take things slow, though. There was still a lot they needed to talk through, but he wanted to wait until the time was right. He could still feel her lips on his, and that was threatening to cloud his judgment.

They walked out into the cool night, which was continuing to clear, and waited for the valet to bring around the car. When it arrived, Lee wordlessly opened the door for Amanda, and they started back toward the city.

"You know," Lee stated after a few minutes, "It's turning out to be a beautiful evening. Can I interest you in a walk along the Pool?"

Amanda hesitated, looking at the clock on the console. He knew she was thinking about how late it was and how early she was going to have to get up for work the next morning. He expected her to turn him down, but she surprised him with, "Why not?"

His heart skipped a beat, and he smiled at her, quickly making a correction in their course, so they were headed toward the Mall.

They parked and began their walk near the Lincoln Memorial, marveling at the Washington Monument lit up in its entire splendor. The rain had washed the city and left it smelling crisp and clean. The water in the Pool was calm, allowing for a spectacular reflection. All in all, Lee knew he couldn't have hoped for a more perfect setting.

They walked down one side, then crossed over at the end of the Pool. They had started up the other side when Amanda broke the silence. "Lee, do you remember what it was?"

The question took him by surprise, and he wasn't sure what she meant. "What 'what' was?"

"The reason why we decided to call everything off," she answered.

He stopped walking and turned to face her. "You have no idea how many times I've asked myself that same question." He looked down at his feet and thought for a moment. "I guess I just wanted you to be happy and, at the time, that just wasn't something I could guarantee." He lifted his gaze in time to see her wipe a tear from her eye. "Are you okay?" he asked, worried that he might have said the wrong thing.

"I'm absolutely wonderful," she assured him, smiling broadly, "But I'm awfully tired, and tomorrow morning is going to come early."

He nodded in understanding and took her hand, knowing she would explain everything when she felt the time was right. "Let's get you home. We can't have the office girls starting a scandal about you," he teased, and her laughter was music to his heart.

Part 17

February, 1988

Amanda sat in the cold, informal courtroom, her insides a quivering mass of jelly. She had dreaded this day. Absolutely dreaded it. Deep inside she had hoped and prayed that they could have worked something out, but she knew it wouldn't happen. Too much would have had to change, and it wasn't fair to ask that of either of them.

So this was it. Amanda had agreed to be the party to attend the divorce hearing at the courthouse. They decided that it would be more convenient for her to handle it, since Lee was busy with an assignment, and she was currently between jobs.

Besides, she reasoned, she'd been through this once before, so, by all rights, she'd be an old pro at this sort of thing.

The bailiff stood and called the court to attention, and everyone stood along with him. Amanda's mind was in a fog, and she was just going through the motions. She stood and sat with the rest of the room as the judge walked in and took her seat, banged her gavel, and a day of broken marriages began.

Amanda hadn't allowed herself to feel bad about the situation until that point. When the judge called the room to order and the court clerk read the first case, Amanda let her mind wander. And wander it did.

Why am I doing this? Why aren't I fighting for him? I know I love him and he loves me. Why can't I make a marriage last?

The last question caused her to catch her breath. She looked around to see if anyone had heard her, but they were all too immersed in their own personal dramas to pay any attention to the woman in the middle row. With quick resolve, she forced the thought from her mind. There was no use thinking these things now. It was too late for second thoughts . . . or second chances. The papers had been signed and filed. Quick, no muss, no fuss. All that stood between her and another failed marriage was the bang of the gavel.

With a start, she realized that the judge had called her name. She stood, feeling as if she weren't in her own body, as if she was watching someone else tear her life apart. The judge asked a couple of summary questions, which Amanda answered automatically.

Then it was over.

It was really over.

There was no going back.

Amanda left the courtroom in a daze and mindlessly walked to her car. She opened the door and sat inside. Turning the key in the ignition, she rested her head on the steering wheel and cried, allowing herself to finally feel the pain she had denied herself for the last few weeks.

Ever since they had agreed that a divorce would be mutually beneficial, she had steeled herself, made herself the strong one. Not having to see Lee everyday helped. It allowed her to focus her thoughts on her transfer to the CIA. Billy aided in her distraction, helping her manage the details involved with her move, and she had walled up all the emotions with as much skill as her most recent ex-husband.

The dam had burst now, and she was alone with her feelings of failure and despair. She let herself cry it out and when she finally regained her composure, wiped her eyes and shifted into drive. That had been the last time she cried for her failed marriage. She called Lee's house when she got home and left a simple message. "It's done." Then she hung up and started the first day of the rest of her life.

Lee threw himself into his work that day. He ferociously focused on the assignment, not allowing even a sliver of a personal thought to enter his mind. At least, that was the plan. Inside, he was dying. Today was the day that he would lose Amanda . . . forever.

Logically, he knew that he had lost her months ago. His stubbornness had assured that. But, then, she hadn't put up much of a fight when they'd broached the subject a little over a month before. He still loved her, with all his heart, and knew that would never change. That was the sole reason why he had agreed to this debacle in the first place.

It was his love for her, and his desire to see her happy, that had bought this to fruition. Never mind that his heart still ached for her. Never mind that his body still longed for her. Never mind that he wanted to jump in his car and speed to the courthouse and stop her before it all fell apart.

All these things aside, he knew this was the right thing to do. He could only hope he still felt that way next week, or next month, or next year.

He made it through the day on autopilot, and finally made it home in one piece, opening the door to find his answering machine blinking. He walked toward the machine in a trance, knowing Amanda was going to leave him a message letting him know how things had gone. He avoided listening to it, though, hoping against hope that perhaps if he didn't hear it, it wouldn't be real.

"Get a grip, Stetson," he told himself, then pushed the button.

Two words.

"It's done."

He silently walked to the bar and poured himself a shot of bourbon. He carried it to the couch and sat down, drinking it in one swallow. Staring at the glass for a moment, he thought about all the things he and Amanda would never share. The reality of it hit him, and he threw the glass, smashing it against the wall. The shards of glass fell to the floor like so many pieces of his heart, and he began to sob.

It only lasted a moment, and he quickly wiped away the tears. Still, he felt better having let out a little of the hurt out. He knew, from Amanda's example, that keeping his feelings bottled up would likely kill him. Better to let it out, even if it was a little at a time.

Part 18

October, 1993

Tuesday

Amanda was sitting at her desk, trying to stay awake. Her late night with Lee had wiped her out, and she was merely going through the motions, trying to make it to a decent hour when she could leave for home without raising too many eyebrows. Lee had joked about causing a scandal, but he had no idea how close he was to the truth. The office gossip pool was always hungry for some fresh meat.

She was straightening up a case file when the phone rang.

"Amanda King, how may I help you?" she answered, holding back a yawn.

"Mrs. King?" a familiar voice asked, "This is Mr. Stetson, with the Justice Department. I would like to invite you out to dinner tomorrow night. It's a matter of national security, you understand."

"Lee," Amanda laughed, "how are you today?"

"I'll be better if you say yes," he replied, and she thought she heard a 'whoop' in the background.

"What was that?" Amanda asked, leaning back in her chair and rotating her neck in an attempt to work out the kinks.

"That," Lee scowled, "was my old secretary. Too bad I had to fire her for being nosy."

Amanda laughed when she heard a very defensive 'Hey!' in the background, followed by an office door slamming shut.

"There," he said, "we finally have some privacy. So, dinner, tomorrow night?"

"I don't know," Amanda hesitated. "You don't think this is going too fast?"

Lee responded with a snort. "Fast? There's nothing fast about two old friends getting together for dinner. But if you'd rather wait another five years . . ."

"Wait!" Amanda jumped in. "I didn't say no, for Pete's sake." She closed her eyes and quietly smacked her head for being such a dolt. Why would she even assume that he wanted a romantic involvement so soon? "Of course I'll go out to dinner with you."

"Great!" Lee replied. "Is someplace casual okay? We can meet right after work."

"That sounds wonderful," Amanda agreed, "but why don't you pick me up here. I'm riding the Metro into town, now that it's open again, and won't have my car tomorrow."

"Sounds like a plan," Lee said, and Amanda gave him the address. She hung up after they had agreed to when and where they would meet.

Her exhaustion finally caught up with her, and she decided it was close enough to quitting time. Straightening up her desk first, she picked up her purse and walked out the door, calling a quick goodbye to Barbara on her way out.

Walking the short distance to the parking garage, she thought about where things were headed with Lee. Was it possible for them to be friends? There was no denying the physical attraction she felt for him. The kiss they had shared at the Ball was evidence of that. Just the memory of it caused shivers to course through her.

She couldn't help but wonder if she even wanted this to end at friendship. Sure, she was still friends with Joe, and she even loved him to some degree, but she wasn't in love with him. And she was still undeniably in love with Lee Stetson.

But was he still in love with her?

Part 19

Lee whistled as he walked down the hall with his cup of coffee. It was Wednesday, and he was going to see Amanda again. Nothing could possibly spoil his day. He sat down at his desk and thought back on all the things that had driven them apart. As he dissected them, he realized that there were no obstacles to overcome this time around. They could be seen together, they could date; it wouldn't have to be a secret. She didn't have to worry about his being in danger at work, nor he her. It was as if fate was giving them a second chance, but this time, everything was in place.

He was thinking about where to take her for dinner when Chris poked her head around the corner.

"Good morning, grumpy," she said, with a wrinkle in her nose.

"Who's grumpy?" Lee asked. "Just because you can't mind your own business doesn't make me grumpy."

She smiled and walked in, "So did she say yes?"

"You just don't give up do you?" he asked, and she shook her head, crossing her arms in front of her. "Yes, she said, 'yes.' Are you happy, now?"

"I'm very happy . . . for you," she teased as she walked out the door, "simply because a happy you makes an easy work day for me. Which reminds me," she stopped and turned around. "Carol is going to be a little late today. There was an accident on the Metro."

Lee stopped mid-sip and set his cup down. Instantly alert, the hair on the back of neck prickling, he shook his head. "What?"

"I'm surprised you didn't hear anything on the radio. The Orange Line derailed this morning. They're saying it's from the flooding a few days ago. Something about deterioration of the track or something." She was watching him as he picked up his phone and dialed a number. With a scowl, he hung up.

"The Orange Line . . . is that the one that comes in from Arlington?" he asked as he stood up and grabbed his coat.

"Well . . . yes . . ." Chris replied, watching Lee's actions with concern.

"Was anyone hurt?" He brushed past her and walked briskly to the elevator.

"A few people were taken to the hospital, but that's all I've heard. That line will be shut down for a while."

Lee didn't hear the last half of her statement through the closed elevator doors. He knew she was wondering why he'd left without a backward glance, but he could only think of Amanda. She had taken the Metro to work this morning, had even made a point of telling him that when they had been making plans for this evening. And now, she wasn't answering her phone at home.

Lee tried to get through to Amanda's office several times on his way to Georgetown, but she hadn't answered there, either. With each unanswered ring, Lee's panic level went up a notch. He told himself that she was certainly okay, that he would know if something had happened to her. They had always had that kind of connection and he was relying on it now. Still, there was a nagging fear in the back of his mind. The fear that he was going to lose her . . . again.

He found her office building and screeched to a stop in front, double-parking, but beyond caring. He stormed inside and up to the receptionist, asking for Amanda.

Part 20

Carrying an empty grocery bag, Amanda walked into her office and tossed her purse and keys on her desk. The phone rang and she rounded the desk to see the light lit that indicated that it was the receptionist. She answered, only to be greeted by the sound of someone shouting in the lobby.

"Mrs. King?" the receptionist said, obviously cupping the mouthpiece to ensure she was heard.

"What is that racket?" Amanda asked.

"He's here to see you; he says his name is Lee Stetson. Should I send him up?"

"Oh, my gosh." Amanda could hear Lee in the background saying, 'Damn straight you'll send me up,' and tried not to laugh. She had no idea what could possibly have him so worked up, but was certain the receptionist would be talking about the crazy man in the lobby for weeks. "Yes, yes, send him up," she told her and could almost hear Lee running to the elevator.

Within minutes, he came rushing down the hall, shouting her name.

"I'm down here," she called and was instantly picked up in a wild embrace. He held her tight, nearly crushing the breath out of her. "Lee," she gasped, "what's wrong?"

"Oh, my God, you're okay," he breathed into her hair, still holding her tightly.

"Why wouldn't I be?" she asked, wiggling a little to get him to loosen his hold. "Lee, you're scaring me."

He released her, and she closed her office door. "Now," she said, "what is going on?"

Lee caught his breath, sat down and reached out for her. She gave him her hand and sat on the edge of her desk. "You didn't take the Metro this morning?" he asked.

"No, I had to pick up some things for the break room so I drove after all. Why?" She watched him as he breathed a sigh of relief.

"There was an accident this morning and the Orange Line derailed. I was afraid you might have been hurt . . . or worse," he confessed.

"Oh, my," Amanda covered her mouth with her free hand, letting the news sink in. It could have been her, if she hadn't remembered, at the last minute, that they were out of creamer. "I hadn't heard," she said.

Lee looked down and regained his composure, still holding her hand tightly. "I thought I'd lost you again," he whispered. "I thought it was really over this time." He looked up, and Amanda could clearly see the pain and fear still in his eyes.

"I have to say something, Amanda, and please don't stop me until I'm finished." She nodded, and he swallowed. "These past few days have been great. I've been doing a lot of thinking, a lot of soul searching, I guess." He released her and stood, running a hand through his hair, making Amanda smile.

"I've been thinking about why we got divorced, and while it seemed like a good idea at the time, I wish now that I'd fought to keep you. All I ever wanted was for you to be happy, and I thought I could do that by letting you go. Now, I'm not so sure that was the right thing. I still love you, Amanda, and if you'll have me, I'd like to try to make another go of it."

The depth of his words touched Amanda, and she found herself speechless. He was watching her, waiting for her reply. Thoughts and emotions were tumbling over one another inside of her, and she struggled for a moment, trying to make sense of what was happening.

"Lee, I don't know . . . how to respond . . ." she started, "I know what you're saying, and I understand it completely. I've been doing a lot of thinking, too, reliving a lot of the problems and wondering if there might have been some other way to solve them. I haven't been able to figure that out yet, but I do know that I never stopped loving you."

Her admission startled both of them, and they found themselves looking at each other, waiting for something to happen.

"Well," Lee finally said, "I guess there's only one thing to do." He pulled her into his arms and held her close to him, pressing his forehead to hers.

"What's that?" she asked, a quaver in her voice. She looked at him and saw his eyes darkening with desire. Then, his lips were on hers and the whole world simply melted away. If their kiss at the Italian Embassy had been amazing, this one was earth shattering. There was nothing sweet and innocent about this kiss. This one was filled with the passion and desire of five lonely years.

Lee drew back and Amanda tried to catch her breath. Smiling, he answered her question. "We live happily ever after."

Part 21

October 1995

A cool autumn breeze blew through the open bedroom window, playing with the tendrils of hair resting on Amanda's neck. She was examining her reflection in the mirror and listening to the sounds of the guests mingling in the backyard as she fastened her sapphire earrings, a gift from her mother that nicely covered the 'something new' and 'something blue' categories.

A knock at the door startled Amanda, and she looked up from her reflection. "Yes?" she answered and the door opened.

Lee stepped inside and quickly shut the door behind him. "If your mother catches me in here, I'm toast," he whispered. He paused for a moment and stared at her.

Amanda self-consciously turned and looked at herself in the mirror. "Is something wrong?" she asked while smoothing out the pleats in her simple gown.

"You look absolutely breathtaking," Lee assured her, and she could see him still staring at her reflection in the mirror.

Amanda felt herself blush and turned to face her fiancé. "You look handsome, yourself," she replied.

"Are you almost ready?" he asked, offering her his hand.

She stepped forward and placed her hand in the crook of his arm. "Let's get this show on the road," she laughed. "And this time . . ."

"This time," he interrupted, "we're going to get it right."

"Absolutely," she promised, and they headed out into the hallway and down to join their guests.

Part 22

October 1998

Amanda walked downstairs to find her husband sitting in the living room, rocking slowly in an old wooden rocker that they'd brought down from the attic. He was softly singing a lullaby; the cat lay curled up at his feet, keeping him company in the darkness of the early morning. Amanda watched him from the landing for a few moments, wondering how she had ever let him get away from her and thanking fate for putting them back together at the right place and time.

He stopped singing and whispered her name. She walked to him and took the empty bottle he held out to her. "Do you want me to take over for a little while?" she asked.

"No," Lee replied, "she's finally asleep, and I'd hate to wake her." As if agreeing with the adult holding her, the baby wiggled and gurgled, then settled back to sleep.

Amanda smiled, marveling at the tiny miracle Lee held in his arms. There had been a time when she wouldn't have believed she would ever see this sight, but here they were, and the scene was pure magic.

"You know what?" she asked, and Lee raised his eyebrows. "Have I told you lately how glad I am you decided to come to Ned's for lunch five years ago?"

Lee looked at the clock on the wall, noting the early hour. "Not today," he teased, "but then, the day is young."

"How about how glad I am that your assistant didn't know the difference between the Orange and Red Lines?" she teased in return.

"Christine has never gotten over that, you know," Lee replied. "She swears that's what she heard on the radio."

Amanda smiled and brushed a stray lock of hair from the infant's face. "She looks like her father; that could be a problem," she noted.

"Just as long as she doesn't take after him," Lee moaned. "I seem to recall a rather stubborn tendency in that one. I'm just glad he was able to let bygones be bygones."

Amanda chuckled, leaning forward to kiss her husband on the top of his head. "You realize," she said as she sat down on the couch to keep Lee company, placing the bottle on a table as she walked past, "when Phillip and Melinda get back tomorrow, they're going to think it was me that spoiled their child. I don't think they'll believe me when I tell them it was Grandpa."

Lee laughed, and the baby stirred again. Quickly, he got serious and lowered his voice. "Look, I didn't get this with Phillip and Jamie, so they're just going to have to deal with it for a little while. I'm living vicariously."

"Yes, dear, I guess you are." Amanda yawned and snuggled into the cushions, watching Lee rock his granddaughter. It suddenly occurred to her that if someone had told her, ten years ago, that she would be sitting in her living room watching Lee Stetson rock a baby, she would have thought they were crazy. She smiled and whispered, "I love you, Lee."

"I love you, too," he softly responded, reaching out his free hand to her.

Grasping his hand with her own, Amanda closed her eyes and leaned back her head. "I've been thinking . . ." she started.

"Uh-oh," Lee muttered.

Amanda shot him a look from the corner of her eye. "Stop it," she chastised. "Seriously, I've been thinking about how stupid I was . . . you know . . . back then." She lifted her head to find Lee staring at her, his eyes sparkling.

"No," he replied. "You weren't stupid, just confused. I was the same way. And the more you look back on it, the more you're going to wonder if there wasn't something that we could have done differently." He squeezed her hand and looked into her eyes, pure conviction written on his face. "Hindsight is twenty-twenty."

"Coulda, shoulda, woulda . . ." she whispered. "Life is full of what if's," and she squeezed his hand in return.

"Thank you," he said, running his thumb over the back of her fingers, causing those familiar, yet tantalizing shivers to course through her body.

"For what?" she asked, finding her voice.

"For giving us a second chance," he replied.

Amanda thought about that for a moment, then stood up and turned to where her husband sat holding their granddaughter, in the house they now shared. They were finally living a life together, and Amanda had never been as happy as she was right then. She leaned forward, careful not to wake the sleeping infant, and kissed Lee gently on his lips, lingering there, her fingers in his hair.

"You know what else I've been thinking?" she whispered, her lips brushing his as she spoke.

"Hmmm?" he asked, planting tiny kisses around her mouth.

"It's never too late to start over," she replied, "especially when it's meant to be."

The End