

## The Thin Red Line

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**Timeframe:** This story takes place between 'Mission of Gold' and 'One Flew East.' Even though those episodes originally aired only a week apart, I believe it would have taken several weeks for Amanda to recover from the life-threatening injury she suffered in 'Mission of Gold.' My story takes place toward the end of her recovery period.

THANKS to Dix, Kara and Tricia who each reviewed this story at various points in time and offered encouragement and guidance.

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Lee Stetson sat on the edge of the sofa in his Georgetown apartment. He got up and slowly circled the room in an effort to dispel some of his restless energy. Running one hand through his hair, he circled the room a second time then returned to his perch on the sofa. Absently, he picked up one of the sofa cushions and punched it with his fist. God, he missed her! He missed her beautiful, adoring eyes and her gentle, loving smile. He missed her soft, warm body. He missed her low, husky voice. He even missed her nervous chatter. He had barely seen her in two weeks, and he didn't know how much longer he could stand it. He wanted to be with her all the time; he wanted to hold her against him and never let her go again. And yet, when he was with her, he pulled himself away, and he came back to this empty, lonely place. He couldn't allow himself to . . .

Lee shook himself mentally and got up to circle the room once again. She was still weak, he told himself. He might hurt her if he . . . But he knew, deep inside, that wasn't the real problem. She was stronger now, almost recovered. Nothing like those early days, when she had fought for every breath, when she had willed her heart to keep beating. And later, when he had supported her first, faltering steps across the cold tile of the hospital corridor.

Glancing down, Lee twisted the gold band adorning the third finger of his left hand. In a way, the ring was a symbol not only of his marriage but also of the turmoil he had felt for the past month. How many times had he slipped it on and

off, as he passed through the roles of partner, friend, boyfriend, and husband? He didn't know how Amanda had managed to separate all of the segments of her life so effectively for the past few years. The effort was exhausting. And even when he managed to go through the motions, the feelings ate away at him; he couldn't just hide them away in the velvet box where he stashed his wedding ring.

But at least he had years of practice in hiding his feelings. The memories that haunted him were fresh and raw: Amanda's slender form slumped in the seat of the rental car, her sweater covered in blood; Amanda's pale face beneath an ancient oxygen tent, her shallow breathing almost drowned out by the rustle of plastic and the steady "beep-beep-beep" of the monitors; Amanda's eyes filled with tears of pain as she stumbled against him on her first day out of the hospital bed.

Lee shook himself again. He wasn't going to play back all those scenes. He couldn't. She was well now. She was strong. Looking around the lifeless room, he took a deep breath and pulled himself together. Yes, this is what he needed; this was his place to escape. Unbidden, a small voice intruded. This was *\*not\** what he needed, it chided. He needed his wife. He needed to talk to her, to tell her what he was feeling, to seek her guidance in dealing with the terrifying memories. But how could he lean on her for emotional support when she was still weak? How could he add more burdens to the ones she already carried? Besides, when was he ever alone with her? And the more time that went by, the more difficult it became. He could hardly look at her anymore for fear of breaking down.

So deep was his reverie that the unexpected knock on his door made him jump. He wondered briefly who it might be. He wasn't expecting anyone. He didn't want to see anyone, anyone but her. He walked slowly to the door, trying to shake the memories out of his head. At least he would have a short distraction. But when he opened the door, when he saw her standing there — almost as though his heart had willed her to come — he froze.

She smiled shyly, almost nervously, as her husband looked down at her, immobilized by surprise. "Hi stranger," she said in the low, husky voice he had been longing to hear. "Care for some company?"

He stepped back wordlessly to allow her to enter, his mind still not totally accepting that the one person he wanted, needed, dreaded to see was suddenly standing in front of him. Unable to tear his eyes away from her, yet unable to reach out, he settled for backing slowly toward the living room, barely registering that she closed and locked the apartment door before silently following him. Only when the back of his legs brushed the coffee table did he finally halt his retreat. Again, he couldn't allow himself to move. If he did, he would crush her against him and hold on until

Monday. Or a week from Monday. Or forever. "Amanda," he said in a voice he knew was unsteady, "what are you doing here?"

She smiled again, a little uncertainly. "Well, it's Friday night. The boys are with Joe for the weekend. Mother is on a retreat with her club." She paused, studying him closely. He knew from the way she chewed slightly on her lower lip and fingered her pendant that she was confused and nervous, but he couldn't reassure her. He could barely breathe. Absently, he began twisting his wedding band again. Finally, she took a deep breath and plunged on. "And I was lonely. I missed you," she finished, a slight note of pleading in her voice.

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They were standing in Lee's living room, only a foot between them, but Amanda sensed that the distance might just as well have been a mile. His stance was rigid; his eyes hooded. He didn't seem even the slightest bit glad to see her. He hadn't wanted to see her in weeks. She didn't understand. Or maybe she did understand; she just didn't want to accept it.

She dropped a small overnight bag on the floor. The thump startled him; she doubted he had even noticed she was carrying it. He glanced down at it, then back at her face, one eyebrow quirked, a question in his eyes. The question wasn't the one she was hoping for. "I thought you might miss me too," she added softly.

Lee stood stiffly in front of her, only the slight tic of his jaw muscles belying his air of detachment. His voice was terse when he finally spoke. "You shouldn't have come." A shadow of remorse crossed his features as she flinched involuntarily, and when he finally spoke again his voice was gentle. "You should be at home. You should be resting. You'll tire yourself."

She sighed. For a moment, her shoulders slumped, and she considered walking back out the door. 'No,' she told herself firmly. 'I'm going to get through this. I have to. We can't keep going on this way.' With renewed determination, she straightened and met her husband's eyes. "I'm not going to tire myself, and you know it. Or you should know it. The Agency doctor said I'm almost one hundred percent." Steeling herself, she enunciated each of her next words slowly and clearly. "I — can — do — anything — I — want — to — do. Anything." She paused again for emphasis. "And I want to be with my husband.'

As she stopped speaking, she watched Lee, uncertain of what to expect. The first few weeks after she had been shot, he had hovered over her so protectively. He had barely left her side. But the last few. The last two weeks she had barely seen

him at all. And when he did come by to visit, he seemed so, so . . . She didn't know how to describe it. He was still protective, still gentle, still tender. His eyes still held that special glow when he looked at her. But he didn't seem to want to touch her, or to let her touch him. When she tried to put her arms around him, or to kiss him, even when her hand brushed against his, he seemed to retreat into himself. Pull away. And now he seemed to actually be avoiding her. She had to ask him. She had to know.

"It's the scar, isn't it." It was a statement more than a question, her voice soft and hesitant. He didn't say anything; he didn't need to. She saw the slight hardening of his jaw, the tiny flicker in his hazel eyes that told her she was correct. She lowered her own eyes, hoping he wouldn't notice the moisture threatening to gather there. Unconsciously, her left hand went to her blouse, faintly tracing a small line across her chest. She swallowed and tried to continue, her voice wavering. "It isn't as big as you might think . . ." Her voice faltered as she tried to continue. "I know it isn't attractive, but it isn't really that, uh, that . . ." She stopped, unable to say more.

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Lee's chest tightened as he realized the implication of her halting words. In the lengthening silence, his gaze moved slowly from the tears gathering in her beautiful brown eyes, staring in a lost way toward the floor, to the delicate hand trembling slightly at her breast. Oh God, he thought, pain twisting his stomach, he had been so lost in his own fears that he hadn't even noticed hers. How could he have let her think . . . "Amanda," he whispered, reaching through the distance between them to take her small hand between his larger ones. Closing his eyes for a moment, he tried to gather the strength to face both their demons. "Amanda, look at me. Please." One hand left hers to gently raise her chin so that she had to look into his eyes. He swallowed the lump that had formed in his throat and continued. "I don't care what the scar looks like. I swear I don't. If you had a hundred scars, you would still be the most beautiful, desirable woman in the world."

He watched the words sink in. He saw the haunted look recede from her eyes to be replaced by a look of confusion. She shook her head slightly, as if to clear it. "But, then, why?" The words were almost inaudible.

Slowly, he gathered her into his arms and held her tightly against him. For a long moment, he simply held her there, breathing in her fresh, delicate fragrance, searching for the words to make her understand. "I don't care what it looks like," he repeated, his voice stronger. "But it's a reminder, a reminder that I almost lost you. I didn't want to think about it anymore. Think about you lying in that

hospital bed fighting for life. " He paused, closing his eyes again before opening them to gaze once more into hers. "Those first few days, I've never been so lost. Even when I was five, when my parents died. I don't think I could have survived if, if . . ." His voice trailed away; his head turned slightly, his eyes staring unseeingly over her shoulder. He still couldn't say the words out loud: '. . . if you had died.'

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She hadn't even realized she was holding her breath until she was able to slowly let it out. She knew how difficult this was for him. He was a man of action. Words, feelings: they didn't come easily for him. Slowly, she wrapped her arms around his neck, drawing his head down onto her shoulder. "I can't make the memories go away, any more than I can make the scar go away. But both will fade with time. Please don't let them tear us apart. I don't think I could survive."

He lifted his head and looked once more into her eyes. "No," he breathed with a slight shake of his head. She trailed one hand tenderly down his cheek, and he turned slightly to press a kiss into her palm. "I love you, Amanda," he promised. "Nothing will ever change that."

"Show me," she urged, her eyes never wavering from his face as she pressed closer and moved her hand to caress the hair on the back of his neck.

His arms tightened around her as he gazed at her intensely. "Are you sure? I mean, are you sure it's okay; you're okay?"

"I'm sure," she said softly as she leaned in to brush her lips lightly against his.

With a groan, he lowered his head and covered her mouth with his, pouring all of his pent up emotions into a kiss so passionate it left both of them gasping. Then he slipped an arm under her knees and lifted her into his arms.

Much later, as they lay snuggled together in Lee's large bed, she took his hand in hers and slowly, gently, traced one of his fingers down the thin, red line of her scar. His tension, and her tension, had been dissipated at least temporarily by their lovemaking. As his finger touched the scar, his eyes found hers. His look was gentle, adoring, content. He couldn't hide it from her, though. She could still see that faint flicker of fear, of pain, lurking behind the love and the strength. She knew the memories and feelings evoked by the scar would be part of him for a long, long time. "I know you can't help thinking about it," she whispered, "But when you do, try to remember how hard I fought to stay with you."

At her words, he smiled slowly, wonderingly. "What did I do to deserve you?" he murmured. Then he leaned down and slowly traced the thin, red line with his lips.

**The End**