

Rating: PG-13 (violence and language)

Timeframe: Post season 4 – some flashbacks to seasons 3 and 4.

Notes: This was another circumstance here where the title went through about as many changes as the story itself. I had originally wanted to use 'Absence of Malice,' but that's the title of a book by Scott Turow, so I came up with the next best thing. I hope the use of Latin isn't off-putting.

Written: Started 7/8/00 – Finished 8/10/00

Disclaimer: I'm not rich -- yet, so for the time being, Scarecrow and Mrs. King and the characters therein belong to Shoot the Moon Enterprises and Warner Brother's Television. This story is a product of my own imagination, and I have earned no money in like or in kind from its creation. No part of this story may be reproduced either in letter or in spirit without my express written permission.

Research: Information about government policy concerning the use of deadly force came from: the CFRs online, the FBI online library, USCAn online, and Treasury department regulations – all of which can be accessed via www.findlaw.com. However, the way in which I interpreted this information to create the Agency's policies is my own. Please respect it as such.

Feedback: Welcome, encouraged, and appreciated.

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Thou shalt not kill (The Sixth Commandment, King James Translation)

You shall not murder (The Sixth Commandment, New Revised Standard Translation)

Murder -- *The unlawful killing of one human being by another with malice aforethought; either express or implied*
... (Black's Law Dictionary, 6th Edition)

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As he pulled around the corner, he flipped his headlight switch, and the Corvette's lights dutifully lowered in response. Now was not the time to draw any excess attention to himself. The perimeter of the warehouse was already crawling with police, paramedics, and the usual assortment of onlookers and thrill seekers. The Agency sedans were here too -- parked, like his Corvette, less conspicuously. Soon,

he knew, the television cameras would arrive, and the metaphorical shit would come into direct contact with the metaphorical fan.

Unlike other nights, he was not here as part of the clean-up crew, trying to mop up the mess of a case gone sour. Tonight was a lot more personal, and he had only one goal in mind. “AMANDA!” he called desperately into the night, but received no answer.

At the yellow police barricade, he flashed his badge and exchanged glares with the cop in charge of crowd control. There was no love lost between the “uniforms” and the “spooks.” With only a curt nod, the policeman ushered him through.

“Amanda!” he shouted again, cursing himself for agreeing to let her do this alone – praying that she was okay.

He found her behind the warehouse. She was kneeling in a patch of grass, retching. “Amanda?” He lay a hand on her shoulder and felt her stiffen beneath his touch, but was relieved that she did not pull away.

“Lee . . .” Her voice was raw, and she drew a hand roughly across her mouth and nose before standing.

“You have to go back to the Agency now,” he said, drawing an arm around her shoulders, wishing there were more he could offer in the way of protection. “They’re going to need you to answer some questions, and then I’ll take you home. Come on; it’s gonna be okay.” She was shivering, he realized, and he drew her closer, wondering offhandedly what had become of the coat she had been wearing that evening when she left.

“I don’t want to answer any questions, Lee. I just want to go to bed.” Her eyes were empty, her voice hollow. Somewhere during the night, Amanda seemed to have lost her very essence.

“Shhh . . .” He tried to calm her, and wiped a stray tear from her cheek. “It’ll be fine - just standard procedure, and I’ll be right there.”

“Lee . . . I’m gonna be sick again.” He knelt with her, his arms firmly and protectively around her shoulders, until her stomach was empty and the dry heaves had passed. Then, slowly, they made their way to his Corvette to make the short drive to the Agency. Amanda had a date with the Internal Review Board, and he was not going to let her face them alone.

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The bullet found its way to the center of the woman's chest with lethal precision. The force of the impact drove her into the brick wall behind her, and blood quickly soaked the front of the nun's habit she was wearing. As she slumped, dead, to the ground, Leatherneck returned the gun to Amanda. "You see, Missus King, that's how you do it."

Amanda's mouth was drawn in a tight line. "Thank you, Leatherneck." He flipped a switch and the images before her changed. The nun faded from view, and an open-air Mid-Eastern bazaar replaced the catacomb walls. Amanda had seen this image play several times before, and she knew what she had to do. She squared her shoulders, and took aim. She aligned the barrel of the pistol directly with the heart of the young woman, who at that moment had produced a machine gun and had taken similar aim at Amanda. Within moments, it was over. Amanda had not pulled the trigger once.

Leatherneck took the electric weapon from Amanda's hands and pulled the trigger to end the scene. He was loath for a repeat of her earlier attack on the ceiling. "You know a gun ain't gonna do you no good unless you shoot it. You can't aim a bad guy to death. You wanna go again?" He offered the gun to her.

"No, thank you, Leatherneck. I think I've had enough for today." She left the shooting range, her shoulders slumped, and the usual resolve and self-confidence oddly absent from her voice. He felt bad for the housewife-cum-spy. He didn't like to shoot either; he didn't know a single agent who did. It was merely another part of the job.

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"Mrs. King, could you please tell us what happened when you arrived at the warehouse tonight?" Billy sat at the head of the long conference table flanked by Mrs. Frampton and Francine. Amanda, at the far end of the table, looked unusually small and frail to him tonight, and he wished it were any other agent but her. Just as Lee had become a son to him, Amanda had become a daughter.

Her voice, when she answered, was little more than a whisper. "I was supposed to meet a source tonight. Riley Dias. Lee and I have used him in the past . . ." She stopped, and he watched Lee reach over and lay a hand on her forearm. Seeming to draw from his strength, she continued her narrative with more conviction. "We thought it would be okay if I went alone. When I got there . . ." She paused again, and Billy observed a brief look pass between the two before she continued. "When I got there, he pulled a gun on me."

“Then what, Mrs. King?” Mrs. Frampton, taking notes on a yellow legal pad, prodded her to continue.

“I drew my weapon and ordered him to stand down. He fired. He said Lee and I had betrayed him. I had to return fire. I hit him once in the heart . . . I . . . I killed him.” Her gaze was directed toward the polished black lacquer of the conference table, as she sat in the judgment of her colleagues.

“Thank you, Mrs. King.” Billy closed a file folder on the notes he’d been taking. “As you are aware, Agency policy requires that any agent who uses deadly force be either suspended with pay or transferred to desk duty until an investigation has been completed. Unless there are any objections, I plan for you to assist me with paperwork in the bullpen. Please understand this is in no way an indication of guilt.” He trained his chocolate brown eyes on her in compassion. “All of our preliminary information indicates that you acted within the bounds of your authority as an agent of the United States Government.”

“Thank you, sir. If you don’t mind, I’d like to go now.” Her voice was still low, and Billy nodded at Lee, offering him silent permission to accompany her.

“Lee,” she spoke for the first time in the elevator. “I don’t want to go home.” She studied her feet as she said this, unwilling to meet his eyes, afraid of what she might see there.

“We’ll call your mother from my place,” he answered without hesitation.

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“There, just bring it up a little higher.” Lee kept his arms around her shoulders, hands over hers, guiding her in her grip and stance. “Now squeeze.” Closing her eyes, she pulled the trigger, and the noise from the bazaar stopped as the simulator ended.

“Very good, but next time . . .” His head was still close to hers, and his breath brushed across her ear as he spoke, “keep your eyes open.”

“Lee,” she ducked out of his arms and turned around to hand him the gun. “I STILL don’t like to shoot.”

“I know, but you STILL have to learn how.” He returned the gun to her hand. “One more time. If you break 1000, I’ll buy you dinner.”

He stood back against the wall to watch. The scene this time was a fishing village in Greece. Beefy, olive complexioned men walked swiftly down the stone path toward their boats. They smiled and nodded at Amanda, continuing their steep, rocky descent toward the shore. Suddenly, one of them turned, and from within his tackle box, withdrew an Uzi. She didn't miss a beat. Within seconds, she had aimed, pulled the trigger, and he was on the ground. Her score was 1353.

"You owe me dinner." She announced flatly, before handing him the gun and marching out of the room.

"Yes ma'am," he whispered after her. She had taken no joy in the fact that she'd won the bet. She'd merely done her duty, and she was going to hold him to the same.

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"Here, drink this." Lee handed her a hot toddy. She had just emerged from his shower wrapped in a robe, and joined him on his couch.

"Lee, I don't want to drink . . ." she started to protest.

"It's not that strong – just to help you relax." He waited until she took a sip before continuing, "Your mother's fine, by the way. I talked to her while you were in the shower."

"What did you tell her?" Her voice broke as she asked the question, fresh tears retracing the tracks left by previous ones.

"I told her the truth," he stated simply and then cringed as she blanched, realizing how his words must have been interpreted. He quickly amended, "I told her you'd had a rough day at work, and I insisted you stay here with me to unwind. She thought that was an excellent idea, and gave me the name of an all-night drugstore."

Amanda smiled weakly; they knew that drugstore well. Her mother's presumptions had provided the first moment of levity in a very long day.

"Do you want to talk about it?" he asked when she had started sipping at the mug again.

She shook her head, still avoiding eye contact. "Not now."

"Waiting isn't going to make it any easier." He looked at her solemnly, at the moment assuming the role of mentor over that of husband.

“I killed him, Lee. What does that make me?” She appeared lost to him, her dark eyes drowning in unshed tears.

“He would have killed you.” It was a statement of both fact and absolution. “You did nothing wrong.” He captured his wife’s eyes with his own, willing her to listen to him, to accept what he was trying to tell her. Within seconds she had broken the eye contact, however, returning her attention to the liquid she was sipping.

“Right.” It was a toneless monosyllable with no conviction behind it. His heart sank. Amanda’s self-imposed punishment was worse than anything the Internal Review Board could mete out.

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“I’ve got a surprise for you.” He held his hands behind his back smiling secretively.

“It had better not have been expensive.” In the months since their marriage, he had been showering her with gifts, and she was trying to reign in his spending habits.

“Completely, totally, and one hundred percent free, I assure you. Now, sit down and close your eyes.” She complied and he stood behind her, laying a sheet of paper on the desk so that it would be in plain view when she opened her eyes.

“Can I look now?” She was growing increasingly curious.

“Go ahead.” He stood off to the side to watch her reaction. Opening her eyes, she immediately spotted the paper, and picked it up to study. Reading it over several times, she finally looked up at her husband.

“What’s this?”

“Congratulations.” He grinned at her. “You passed.”

“Passed what?” She was not sure she fully understood.

“Your weapons proficiency certification. I thought we’d go downstairs later and select a gun.” He smiled at her, eyes glowing. “I’m so proud of you, Amanda. You did it!” Amanda never ceased to amaze him. He knew learning to shoot has been hard on her, and the fact that she’d done so, impressed him to no end.

“I passed . . .” her voice drifted off sounding oddly distant in her own head. “Great.”

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The toddy had worked its intended effect, and Amanda was soon succumbing to drowsiness. “Come on, Sleepyhead,” Lee whispered softly into her ear, as he wrapped his arms around her and lifted her to her feet. “Let’s get you to bed.”

“Lee,” she mumbled, wearily making her way to the bedroom.

“Hmm?”

“Does it ever get any easier – when you have to kill someone, I mean?” Her voice was still haunted, and the tone raised goose bumps on his arms.

“No,” he admitted.

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“Amanda, we’ve been looking at guns for an hour and a half now.”

“I can’t decide.” She was growing as exasperated with him as he was with her. “This isn’t something I can do lightly.”

She’d trained on a variety of weapons, and now the time had come to choose the one that would be her’s.

“How about the Sig?” Leatherneck suggested. “It’s compact, but it still packs a punch.”

Amanda lifted the weapon, testing its weight solemnly in her hands. She’d come a long way from the woman who used to hold a gun by her fingertips out in front of her, as though it were a piece of refuse.

“What’s the capacity?” She pulled out the clip.

“Standard law enforcement issue; fifteen rounds.”

“Trigger weight?” With the clip out, she pulled against the trigger, testing its response.

“Five and a half pounds. Pretty responsive little gem, I think.” Leatherneck reminded Amanda of a used-car salesman.

“What do you think?” She turned to Lee.

“It’s a good gun,” he admitted. Taking the weapon from his wife’s hands, he tested it as she had. “I think it’ll suit you.” He finally determined, returning it to her.

“Yeah, it’ll do,” she agreed with a sigh.

“Good choice, Missus King,” Leatherneck nodded approvingly. “Here’s the holster, and I’ll take care of the permits and have them sent up to you by tomorrow morning.”

“Thanks . . . ” She took the equipment, and headed for the door with an air of resigning to something she didn’t care for. With a shrug, Lee followed her.

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Though Amanda had, with the assistance of the toddy, found a fitful sleep, Lee had not. He lay on his side in the bed, watching her twist and turn in the throes of an unsettling dream. He felt helpless --unable to decide whether to wake her, and uncertain that wakefulness would offer any more comfort than sleep.

“Noooo . . .stop . . .” her sleep grew even more fitful. Her cries seemed to be aimed at his very heart, and he had never felt so helpless. Inching closer, he drew her toward him until they were spooned together. Thus situated, he began to slowly run his hand up and down her side in an attempt to soothe her into a calmer sleep.

“Shhh, it’s okay. It’s me; just relax.” He continued to speak to her, in soft words and phrases, until she had settled comfortably against him, into what he hoped, would be a dreamless sleep.

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“Very good, Missus King.” Leatherneck nodded approvingly at the paper target. Of the fifteen shots Amanda had fired, all but one had found their mark. “You’re really gettin’ a handle on that gun.”

She looked at the holes in the silhouetted figure. The heart and head looked like Swiss cheese.

“Very nice!” She had not noticed Lee walk in. At his voice, she turned to him with a questioning glance. “I need to see you upstairs.”

“Sure.” She turned back to Leatherneck, and tossed a courtesy, “Thanks!” over her shoulder before leaving.

"Anytime, Missus King." He watched her exit, talking comfortably to her partner. She was becoming a very good agent.

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The hot water had grown cold, but she did not notice. She let the spray continue to pound her neck and shoulders, wishing the piercing needles of water could drive all the way to her soul, and wash away the dirt she felt there. She had killed a man. She would never be the same.

"Amanda?" The sound of her husband's voice interrupted her reverie. "Are you almost done?"

"I'll be right there." She reached for the handle, and then forced her voice to sound lighter than she felt as she added, "I hope you made coffee!"

His words were forced as he answered her, "Of course. Wouldn't dream of facing the day with out it!" If Amanda was determined to maintain the illusion that nothing had happened, he would indulge her for the moment.

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"Mother, I'm going to be late tonight," Amanda spoke into the telephone, wishing again that she had a nickel for every time she said those words. "Mr. Stetson and I are meeting with a client."

"Good luck, dear." Dotty was understanding, "and don't let those film people boss you around. Be sure to stand firm if you have to."

"Of course, Mother. I'll see you later tonight."

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The corridors in the agency were closing in, growing smaller. Eyes were on her from everywhere -- cold, appraising. She felt as though she had been marked, as if everyone knew that she had someone else's blood on her hands. As she walked into the bullpen, the normal background din of conversation was oddly absent. Had they been talking about her?

"Mrs. King. I'm so glad you're here, I'm just overwhelmed with filing. I'll need you to take these upstairs to the vault first." Billy handed Amanda a stack of file folders,

and pushed her toward the door, saying, "I expect that should last you until at least lunch."

He was being too nice to her. It only served to magnify her sense of guilt.

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"You're sure you can handle this?" He asked her for the fifth time that evening, as they were preparing to leave the Q Bureau.

"Lee I've been a full agent for three months now; I think I can handle a meet." She always felt a combined sense of flattery and frustration at his protectiveness.

"Just checking. I like my wife home in one piece." He crept behind her and planted a gentle kiss on the side of her neck, while letting his hands wrap around her waist.

She struggled with her reaction, half wanting to melt into him, and half too conscious of her professional responsibilities. Finally, she stepped away and playfully swatted at his hands, "Not now, you're distracting me, I've got to get ready."

"Well, it's not my fault you're so irresistible." He adopted a mock leer, and took a teasing step closer, but she held a palm out to stop him.

"Not now, Stetson." She knew herself too well. If he pressed, she wouldn't be able to say 'no.' "Go. Get your car tuned up. We can finish this later." She gave him a quick kiss, and hurried out the door.

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The Q Bureau, without Lee, was a quiet, lonely place. Every movement she made in the vault echoed throughout the empty space, seeming to speak to her in harsh, mocking tones. Step, "guilty." Shuffle, "murderess." Open a drawer, "you killed a man." Without warning, the folders slipped from her arms landing on the ground with a bang that resounded in the enclosed structure with the same sharpness as her pistol had in the empty warehouse.

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"Mrs. King." He stepped out of the shadows to face her; his voice was sibilant.

"Hello, Riley," Amanda offered him a friendly greeting, and eased forward.

“Not another step, bitch!” Had he not lifted gun at her, the iciness in his tone would still have frozen her in her tracks.

“Riley?” She willed herself to remain neutral, to speak to him in a calm, but authoritative manner. “What’s this all about?”

“Don’t play like you don’t know, bitch.” He waved the gun menacingly. “Your Agency boys paid my amigos a visit today. Damn thugs shot Stefano right where he stood. You think I don’t know that you and your gilipollas partner turned on me. Goddamn federal asslickers ratted me out!”

“Riley, I don’t know what happened. I swear.” Maintaining eye contact, she took a hesitant step closer, and was rewarded by the sound of his revolver cocking.

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He found her in the corner of the vault. Hugging her knees to her chest, she wept soundlessly.

Without a word, he knelt beside her, and drew her to his chest. All he could do was hold her.

“What happened?” he finally asked once her tears had been spent.

“I don’t know.” She wiped the corners of her eyes. “I just got to thinking, and . . . Lee, I killed him. . . I . . .” The tears started anew.

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“Riley, don’t do this.” She froze again. “Put the gun down. We’ll work something out; I’ll find out what happened.”

“Too, late,” he sneered at her. “It’s already done.”

“Riley, put the gun down, or I’ll have to use mine. Please, don’t make me do it,” she begged him -- face, eyes, voice, all pleading with him to give her a way out.

“No. Someone’s gotta pay for Stefano. You’re dead, bitch.” He took aim, his finger resting on the trigger, ready to pull at a moment’s notice.

She hit the ground, drew her weapon, and fired in one fluid motion.

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“Amanda, listen to me.” He knelt in front of her, taking a firm grip of both her shoulders, but she turned away. “Listen to me.” He moved his left hand to tilt her chin up to face him. “You did nothing wrong.”

He felt as though he were talking to a wall. She faced him, trembling, but gave no indication that she’d heard. Her face was still unreadable. “Let’s go to lunch.”

Her only response was to offer him a puzzled glance, but she didn’t protest. He gently helped her from the floor of the vault, and guided her down the stairs to the Georgetown Foyer, an arm tightly around her shoulders the entire time.

“Mrs. Marsten, will you let Billy know Amanda and I are going to take the rest of the day off?”

“Will do, Scarecrow.” Mrs. Marsten brusquely nodded at the agent from her sentry point . If she found anything unusual about the closeness between the ace agent and his partner, she did not mention it.

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“Oh, my gosh.” Amanda knelt over Riley’s body. Her first and only shot had found its way directly to his heart, and the blood stained his shirt a stark red. “Oh, Riley. Why?” She reached out to brush a streak of dirt from his cheek, and removed her coat to lay over him, before reaching for the mobile phone in her purse.

With trembling hand, she dialed the number she knew by heart.

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The Old Ebbit Grille was nestled anonymously in the heart of Georgetown. An undistinguished looking pub from the outside, it was a favorite of such varied clientele as Theodore Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, and Harry Blackmun. Though unconfirmed, it was rumored that Reagan had taken Gorbachev there on a visit. The burdens of leadership had never rested so heavily on any of those men’s shoulders however, as those of life rested on the much narrower shoulders of Amanda King. Quietly she and her husband made their way to one of the Grille’s rear booths.

The waitress was at the booth immediately to distribute menus and take drink orders. “Coffee,” Lee requested for himself. “Cream, no sugar.”

“And for you?” She nodded kindly to Amanda.

Amanda glanced up, startled. “Oh, uh, water please.”

When the waitress had disappeared, Lee turned back to his wife. He was going to make her understand what he had to tell her if it took him the rest of the afternoon. “Remember when you found my Purple Heart?”

“Yeah, when we were cleaning the apartment out. You never told me why you kept it in a shoe box in the bottom of the closet.” Amanda seemed glad to have the conversation directed away from her.

“I keep it there, because I’m not very proud of it,” he told her, reaching across the table to take her hand in both of his.

“Why not?” She had a feeling she knew the answer to the question already, however.

“You know I was in ‘Nam,” he began. The waitress returned with their drinks, and just as quickly disappeared, sensing that now was not the time for lunch orders. “We were in the rice paddies, somewhere near Da Nang,” he continued, as she kept her impenetrable eyes on him. “We ran into some Viet Cong. I wound up face to face with one of them. He wasn’t wearing anything but a pair of shorts held on by a piece of rope, and all he carried was this single barrel shotgun. When he looked at me, it was like he saw me as some sort of devil.” Lee shuddered at the memory.

“He shot first – hit me in the side, just below my rib cage; you've seen the scar -- but I shot better.” Lee’s narrative wound its way across the table, and Amanda saw him in the paddies, a bullet hole under his ribs, facing the same anguish that she was facing now as he stood over the dead Viet Cong soldier. “I found out later that he was only fourteen -- Philip's age,” Lee added, as an afterthought. “I’d killed this young boy. And I’d proved him right. In that moment, I was the devil.”

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The paramedics zipped the body into a black rubber bag. The sound of the metal teeth fitting together had an eerie finality. It was done; she had done it. She stood, and watched them load the body onto a stretcher and then into the ambulance.

No lights, she noted, with an odd sense of disconnection. Of course there would be no lights. There was no emergency. He was going to the morgue. He was dead.

Dead. The word echoed in her head. Dead. Dead. Dead.

“Mrs. King.” One of the agents lay a firm hand on her shoulder. “Here.” He handed her a handkerchief. When had she begun crying?

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They sat in the booth together, but alone. Both were lost in their own thoughts.

Finally, Amanda broke the silence. “What happened after that?”

“What do you mean?” Lee asked, and then answered his own question. “You mean after I shot the boy?” At Amanda’s nod, he continued, “I spent a few days in the hospital. They treated me for shock and blood loss – stitched me up. Then I rejoined my unit. There wasn’t very much I could do. There was no room for regrets in Da Nang.”

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Though Riley’s body was gone, Amanda could still smell death In the air, taste its bitterness when she breathed in through her mouth. It filled her lungs, her stomach, her very being, and she had to let it out. Rushing through the doors of the warehouse, she made it to a patch of grass in the back, before it forced its way out. The taste of bile is only slightly preferable to the taste of death, she was thinking when her husband found her.

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Amanda solemnly absorbed all that Lee had told her. It was an introspective side to her husband that he was still learning to share. Her eyes, as she sat in silent contemplation, were distant, focused on something within herself rather than on him or anything in the restaurant. “Amanda.” He reached across the table and lay a hand atop hers. Her skin was ice cold. “What do the Agency regulations say about the use of deadly force?”

As though she was reciting for class, Amanda emotionlessly said, “An agent of the United States Government may use deadly force when necessary to protect their own life or that of a civilian.”

“That’s right,” Lee said, and then pressed her further. “By what standard is the use of deadly force judged?”

“By the reasonableness standard – asking what would anyone else do under the same set of circumstances.” It was the rote answer, and when she had concluded she took another quick sip of her water.

“You must've aced that test.” He smiled gently at her, trying to force a connection that she was trying just as hard to avoid.

“You know I would have done the same thing last night.” Keeping his eyes on hers, and giving her hand a soft squeeze, he continued the thought. “So would Francine, or Billy, or anyone else in the Agency. You did the right thing.”

“Someone’s dead because of it. How was that the 'right thing'?” Her voice was flat, but at the same time, he saw a glimmer of something in her eyes. He was making progress; she was beginning to hear what he was saying.

“Riley was scum, Amanda. He was a lowlife who sold out to the highest bidder, and he would have killed you. His gun was loaded.” He bit a lip as the full impact of the last statement hit home. He had been so preoccupied with helping to assuage her guilt that he had not had a chance to absorb the rest of the events of that past night. He had, once again, come too close to losing her. “Dear God, if you hadn’t shot him, I would’ve tracked him down and done it myself.”

He meant it. Amanda could see the darkening swirls of gray and brown at play in his green eyes. Drawing a deep breath, she spoke again, with a touch of irony, “Amanda King, wife, mother, PTA member, and government agent. She cooks. She cleans. She sews. But best of all, she can kill an armed suspect with a single shot. Lee, this isn’t how I saw myself. I don’t know if I like it.”

“Amanda.” He gave her hand another gentle squeeze. “I would be scared if you did like it. It’s just a part of the job, a very regrettable, messy part of what we do.”

He continued, “If our places had been switched, and I had been the one to shoot Riley instead of you, would you blame me?”

Her answer came swift and sure. “No, of course not.”

“Then please, Amanda.” He swallowed hard. Her pain cutting him as deeply as it did her. “Please don’t blame yourself any more.”

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“Mrs. King,” Mrs. Frampton began. The woman was steely, Amanda thought -- steely eyes, steely hair, steely voice. “We have reviewed the record of your encounter with Riley Dias last week, and stand by our original assessment. Your actions were within Agency regulations, and were what we would have expected of anyone else in your position. Our decision is unanimous. You may return to the field whenever you feel you’re ready.”

So many eyes, she noted. Mrs. Frampton’s gray ones, Francine’s blue, Billy’s brown, and Lee’s green – all different sizes, shapes and colors – but all bore the same expression. At some point, they had all been where she was now. She wondered if they all had the same mixed feelings at their own exoneration as she did at hers.

The Agency psychiatrist had spoken of closure and the importance of forgiving herself. She half listened, wondering if it was the same speech he gave to everyone in her position. For his part, he seemed more interested in discussing how she had come to work at the agency, than the event that had landed her in his office. She would find what she needed in her own way.

“Thank you.” She spoke softly, and nodded at Mrs. Frampton, before turning to Lee. “I’ll be back later this afternoon. There’s something I need to do first.”

“Of course.” He thought about asking what it was, whether he could go with her, but he had a feeling that whatever she was going to do, she needed to do it alone.

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The sun shone coldly through the skeletons of trees. Late November had left them bare, and the grass brown without ushering in any snow to cover either. Kneeling on the grave, she placed a single rose next to the headstone in front of her. Tracing the name carved into the granite, she quietly began to whisper. “I’m sorry Riley. I’m so very sorry.”

Squaring her back and shoulders, she swallowed her tears, stood, and walked quickly away. She had a job to do.

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