

## Just Under the Surface

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**Rating:** PG-13.

**Timeline:** Third Season, just before Over the Limit.

**Credit Where Credit is Due:** Wow ~ What would I do without my extraordinary betas? Thank you for being there and letting me run ideas by you. Thank you for keeping me on the right track and telling me honestly when something isn't working and why. If I were to detail all the ways in which you help and encourage and entertain me, this section would be longer than the story. Thank you for everything you do; you're all terrific!

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### Chapter One

"Time for a pow-wow, Melrose," Austin Smyth declared, entering Billy Melrose's office and firmly shutting the door.

Billy glanced over at Lee Stetson and grimaced. "Please, come in."

Lee nodded coolly. "Dr. Smyth."

Smyth gave him a tight-lipped smile as he proceeded to close the blinds. "Chief Smyth is on the warpath, and he wants blood. Got me? The smoke signals indicate that there's treachery brewing among the tribe." Pausing for effect, he took a puff from his cigarette, studying the perplexed and annoyed faces of the two members of his captive audience. "Someone's due for a scalping."

Billy leaned forward as Dr. Smyth sat down in the chair next to Lee's. Folding his hands on his desk, he raised his eyebrows and asked, "Are you going to enlighten us as to what this is about? Or are we supposed to guess?" He gave Smyth a smile and waited for the axe to fall.

Smyth's sardonic grin disappeared. "We have a mole, Melrose. A traitor in our midst. A double agent. What *exactly* don't you understand?"

"Who is it?" Billy asked, barely disguising his annoyance.

Smyth wagged a finger, shaking his head. "Not so fast. When was the last time your office was checked for bugs? Never mind, we'll check anyway."

Standing, he opened the door to admit an agent holding a bug detector. As he neared the center of the room, the device began beeping quietly. After sweeping Billy's desk, the agent turned toward Lee. The beeping grew louder and more insistent.

Lee frowned, shaking his head. The agent pointed to Lee's watch, indicating that he should remove it. He removed it and handed it to the other man, who nodded affirmatively and left the room quickly.

"Well, well, well!" Smyth clucked like a roosting hen. "That's not surprising at all."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Lee demanded.

"Scarecrow," Billy interjected. "How could your watch have been bugged?"

Lee shook his head. "It's impossible."

"Obviously, it's *\*not\** impossible, kimosabe," Smyth retorted.

"The only time it was even out of my possession was when . . . Amanda took it to get a new battery put in it for me." Lee frowned, realizing that he hadn't helped matters.

Smyth raised his eyebrows mockingly. "Amanda, hmmm? Does your little partner also take care of your dry-cleaning and cook your meals?"

Lee narrowed his eyes, his fists clenching in frustration. "Of course not. She knew it needed a battery and offered to take it when she took hers, that's all. Just what are you trying to say?"

"Mrs. King has had us all eating out of the palm of her hand, Scarecrow. She has access to information no other civilian helper has. She must have decided that it might be more lucrative to . . . play both sides."

"Amanda?" Lee sprang out of his chair. "This is a joke. I don't know what you're trying to pull, but no way -- *\*no way\** -- is Amanda a double agent."

Billy nodded, but his face was creased in concern. "This does seem rather unbelievable. What kind of evidence do you have?"

"For one . . . She's dating our old friend, Hercules." His pause for effect was obvious.

Lee shook his head, memories of his old nemesis flooding his mind. "What?! That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard. Amanda is *\*not\** dating Thomas La Croix. I don't know where you're getting your information, but . . ."

"Scarecrow!" Billy thundered. "Sit down and be quiet. You're not making this situation any better."

Dr. Smyth cocked his head and looked appraisingly at Lee. "Someone's a mite too protective of the turncoat housewife."

Billy raised his hands to stop the pending argument. "What proof do you have that Amanda is dating La Croix? He was out of the country, last I knew. I can't believe he'd show his face in D.C. or anywhere near it."

"Precisely. It's not *\*his\** face he's showing; he's had extensive work done. And he's going by the name Thomas Williams. He's created a completely new persona for himself, but he's Hercules, make no mistake. And the King woman's his new sidekick."

Scowling, Lee rose from his seat and began pacing. "If -- and that's a big 'if' -- this is true, then Amanda obviously doesn't know who he is. He was gone long before she came to the Agency. There is no way in *\*hell\** that she would be involved in any conspiracy."

Smyth stood and faced the irate agent. "Oh, is that a fact, Scarecrow? Let's hope that you know her as well as you think you do."

"On what basis are you accusing her?" Billy asked, folding his arms across his chest.

"Need to know, Billy-boy, need to know," he answered cryptically. "Her house is being searched as we speak. If any more damning evidence turns up, as I suspect it will, I'm having her brought in for a full-scale interrogation. 'Kay?" He walked out, shutting the door with a resounding slam.

"I don't believe this," Lee muttered. "They're not going to find anything at Amanda's house. What if her mother or sons come home? What if Amanda shows up there?"

"Calm down, Lee. Of course this whole thing is ridiculous. Amanda is due here any minute, her sons will be in school, and if they're searching the house right now, then her mother mustn't be home." He pulled up his sleeve and glanced at his watch.

Lee exhaled roughly, nodding. "Yeah. Billy, what if Dr. Smyth says something to her? What are we going to tell her?"

Straightening a stack of already neat papers, Billy replied, "Let's take things as they come. We'll tell her what's going on when she gets here . . . Prepare her for --"

A brisk knock on the door announced her prompt arrival. "Come," Billy called, flashing Lee a silent warning.

She smiled at both of them. "Good morn . . ." Her words faded as her eyes met Lee's, and she sobered immediately. "What's wrong?"

"Amanda, please sit down." Billy gave her a half-smile and gestured to a chair.

Lee sat down next to her, his eyes never leaving her face. Could she really be dating Thomas La Croix? Why hadn't she told him she had a new boyfriend? He inwardly cringed at the thought.

She glanced nervously between the two men. "Have I done something? I don't think there's been anything lately that --"

"No," Billy interrupted gently and sighed. "Amanda, certain . . . allegations have been made against you. I'm sure nothing will come of it, but you need to be aware that you're under investigation. Your house is being searched right now, and you'll probably be called in for an interrogation."

"What?" Incredulous, she looked from Billy to Lee. "Why am I under investigation?"

Billy appeared to be watching her closely as he said, "Dr. Smyth thinks that . . . you're a double agent."

For a moment, she didn't say a thing, just looked at her boss in amazement. Slowly, she began to shake her head. "That's . . . that's crazy."

Lee nodded in agreement. "That's exactly what I said."

"What makes him think that? I don't understand where he could get that idea." Her forehead creased in consternation as the severity of the situation sank in.

"About four years ago, we discovered a mole in the Agency. He'd been working with the Russians for over a year, but by the time we learned about it, he had changed his identity and fled the country. He's never been back -- until now. But he did a lot of damage to

the Agency before we figured out what was going on. At one time, he was considered to be one of the best . . . his code name was Hercules."

When Billy paused, Amanda shook her head, looking more perplexed than ever. "Mr. Melrose, I . . . I'm sorry, but I really don't see what this has to do with me."

Billy held up a finger. "I'm getting to that. As I mentioned, somehow he slipped back into the country. Changed his identity, his face, everything. He's changed his name from Thomas La Croix . . . to Thomas Williams."

Her eyes widened, then fell closed. "Tom . . ." she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

"So you're . . . dating him?" Lee asked, his voice sounding as choked as it felt.

Silently, she nodded, looking at him.

An unexplainable feeling of dread began to wind its way around Lee's heart. "How long have you been seeing him?"

"Only about a month. I mean -- we're not dating. Not really. We've been out to dinner a few times, and a couple of lunches. But I had no idea that . . . that he's . . . Oh, my gosh."

"Of course you didn't know," Billy said comfortingly. "But we have to prove that to Dr. Smyth. Tell me everything that . . ."

He stopped talking when the door opened and Dr. Smyth stood there, a triumphant smirk on his face. "Greetings, King. Congratulations on having pulled the wool over our eyes."

"Dr. Smyth, I haven't --" she began.

"Tut-tut." Snapping his fingers, he moved into the office as two guards entered, each grabbing one of Amanda's arms.

"Let her go!" Lee shouted, moving toward the men. He stopped short when a third guard entered the office, a rifle in his hands.

"Wait a minute -- what's going on here?" Billy demanded. "Where are you taking her?"

"Beta Level Interrogation, Melrose. Want to watch?" He turned and followed the trio of guards and their prisoner.

Lee made a move to follow, but the third guard turned and shook his head. "Stay here, Mr. Stetson."

"Get out of my -- Oomph!" He doubled over as the butt of the gun made contact with his abdomen.

The bullpen had grown silent as everyone watched the procession in half-curious, half-nervous fascination. Once the doors had closed and the procession was out of sight, a hushed murmur arose.

Francine rushed into Billy's office, her eyes wide. "I just got here. What's going on? Where are they taking Amanda?"

Lee had straightened up and was holding his stomach and trying to catch his breath. "Beta Level Interrogation," he ground out through clenched teeth.

"Oh, my God . . ." she said faintly. "Why?"

Billy regarded her solemnly. "Treason."

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"When did you meet Thomas La Croix?" Agent Richter asked, his voice cold and impersonal.

How many times had she passed Jack Richter in the halls of the Agency? He'd always had a smile for her; sometimes he'd share a joke he'd heard on his favorite morning radio show. He'd even asked her out to dinner once. Now, his eyes were those of a stranger, his voice distant and accusatory.

She swallowed, wishing she had a glass of water. "About a month ago."

"Where?" He jotted a note in his folder and then looked up at her.

"At the Mall. I was passing some time, taking a walk, and I dropped my purse. He was walking by, and he picked it up for me."

"And then he asked you out?" Richter asked. His pen scratched noisily along the paper as he wrote.

She nodded. "Yes. Just to get a cup of coffee."

"And you accepted? Just like that?"

Frowning slightly, she nodded again. "Yes. I mean, we drove our own cars and met at the coffee shop. He seemed like a nice, polite man. We talked for a few minutes after he picked up my purse, and . . . "

Richter held up a hand. "What did you talk about?"

She shrugged, trying to recall the details of that day. "I told him about my family, and um . . . he told me he'd recently moved back to the States after living abroad for four years. He asked if I visit the Mall often, and . . . "

"And do you? Often walk around the Mall?" His manner was so serious that Amanda almost felt that her very life might hinge on the answer to that one question.

"I wouldn't say 'often'. But sometimes I just enjoy being there, when I want to be alone to think . . . "

He leaned back in his chair. "Think about what?"

"Mostly personal things, Agent Richter. Nothing to do with the Agency or its interests."

Richter smiled thinly, pulling at the ends of his mustache. "Where this interrogation is concerned, Mrs. King, you'll find that there is nothing too personal to be brought to light. We will scrutinize every thought in your head. There will be no secrets when we're through with you."

Biting back her natural response, she took a deep breath and said evenly, "I don't remember what I was thinking about on that particular day."

"Why did you plant a bug in your partner's watch?" He raised his eyebrows, as though expecting her to break into tears and confess.

"A bug . . . " She paused, her eyes widening in disbelief. She'd taken Lee's watch to the jeweler for a new battery at the same time she'd taken hers. "I didn't."

He gave her a patronizing smile and tapped his pen on the notepad. "Then how do you explain the fact that his watch was, indeed, bugged?"

"I can't explain that. I took his watch in at the same time I took mine, to get a new battery. I don't know the first thing about installing a bug." She had to fight to keep her hands still.

Leaning down, Richter grabbed a document and placed it on the table. Opening it, he stood and demanded, "Why did you have this codebook hidden in your home?"

Feeling sick, she stared at him. "What? You found that in my house? I've never even seen it before. Don't you see what's happening? I'm being set up! It's got to be Tom . . . Whatever's he's up to, I'm not part of it. I would never do anything . . ."

"Mrs. King, will you kindly \*just\* answer my questions? If you're innocent, as you claim, the evidence will prove that \*for\* you." He sat back down, sighing. Pointing at the documents, he asked, "Now. Where did you get this codebook?"

She shook her head, folding her hands together in an effort to keep calm. "I didn't get it from anywhere. Like I said, I've never seen it before now."

Richter looked up to the ceiling, as if imploring it to grant him patience. "Mrs. King, why does your phone statement show a record of middle-of-the-night calls made to enemies of the government?"

She shook her head, as if this were a nightmare and she would shortly wake up, relieved and exonerated. "I have no idea. I don't make phone calls in the middle of the night. I wouldn't have a clue how to go about making a telephone call to any enemies."

"These records indicate otherwise." He tapped the phone bill statement emphatically.

"We haven't even gotten our phone bill yet this month," she said.

"I suppose you're going to deny having photo-copied several agent files, including your partner's." He pushed them toward her. "These were found in a shoe box in your closet."

Amanda bit down on the inside of her lower lip until she thought it would bleed. "Could I please see Mr. Melrose or Mr. Stetson?"

"No. Answer the question."

Sighing, she squeezed her eyes shut, reminding herself that it would do her no good to get too angry. "I don't know how else to say this. I am not involved with whatever is going on. Everything you've presented as evidence has been a complete surprise to me. Tom has been in my house. He's had opportunities to plant these things, to --"

"To make phone calls in your house, perhaps from \*your\* bedroom, in the middle of the night?" he asked pointedly.

"No!"

"I see. I'm wondering why you would agree to date another man. It's been hinted at, by more than one person, that you're involved with your partner. So the fact that you're seeing someone else only adds to the suspicion mounting against you."

Now they were dragging Lee into this? "Involved with my . . . Look - there is nothing between Mr. Stetson and myself. I don't see why you have any reason to wonder why I would date someone. I do *\*not\** have a relationship with Lee Stetson!"

He leaned forward, as though about to share confidences. "But you'd like there to be, wouldn't you, Mrs. King? Perhaps if he didn't feel the same way, you may have felt that you had justification to do what you've done."

"To betray the entire Agency? The country? *\*My\** country? No. Not that it's any of your business, but there's nothing between Lee and myself. We are not, nor have we ever been, romantically involved. And I would never do what you're suggesting I've done for *\*any\** reason, let alone because I felt rejected." Furious, she struggled to catch her breath, her eyes blazing.

Richter pounced. "So Stetson rejected you! Did he take advantage of you and then tell you it would never work out?"

"No." She tried to put as much steel as possible into her voice, but she wasn't sure how much more of this she could take. "I can't believe how you're twisting everything I say!"

"I'm trying to get to the bottom of this. These are serious charges against you, Mrs. King. This man, Thomas La Croix, wants revenge on Lee Stetson. You're his partner, and you have reasons of your own for plotting against him. You just *\*happen\** to be dating this traitor." He paused, taking a deep breath. Staring at her intently, he added, "You do the math."

She met his gaze levelly. "And I'm telling you that I am not involved in this in any way."

Richter gave her that same tight-lipped cynical smile. "Whatever you say, Mrs. King. Since you refuse to admit to any of the evidence so clearly stacked up against you, I won't bother to present the rest of it. We'll move on to the second phase of interrogation. Have you ever heard of Beta Level Interrogation, Mrs. King?"

Cold terror swept through her body like a brittle winter's draft sweeps through an empty house. "Yes." How had her voice become so small and fearful?

Nodding, he went on, "So you're aware of how very . . . unpleasant . . . it is. Are you sure you won't make this a little easier on yourself and tell me the truth now?" he coaxed, his voice taking on a falsely warm tone.

"I'm telling you the truth, but you won't believe me." She lifted her chin, intent on at least appearing brave.

"Very well."

## **Chapter Two**

"Lee, I think it would be best if you let me do the talking. You're too upset to do any good." Billy spoke calmly but firmly.

Lee glared at the lights that marked the elevator's maddeningly slow descent. "Billy, she's my partner. I can't just stand by and watch this happen. There's absolutely no way she's involved in treason. She would never --"

Billy waved his words away. "I know that, Lee. But \*I'm\* not the one who has to be convinced. All we can do at this point is see how far they intend to take this, and go from there."

Lee clenched his teeth, forcing himself to remain calm. "They dragged her to Beta Level Interrogation. That tells us \*exactly\* how far they intend to take this. I can't even believe they're doing this to her."

"Neither can I." Billy sighed. "Francine is already down there. I wanted her at the monitors, not some stranger. I insisted on it."

"Good." Lee paced the limited area of the elevator. "It's demeaning, Billy. Being observed every single minute, like some kind of death-row inmate on suicide watch."

"I know." The older man's face was set in lines of frustration and concern. "I just wish they'd give us more to go on. There has to be \*something\* we can do. But as long as they're -- as long as Dr. Smyth -- is convinced that Amanda's the key to this mess, we won't be have any influence at all, and you know it."

"Yeah . . ." The feeling of powerlessness was maddening, and he resisted the urge to punch his fist against the elevator walls.

At last, the doors slid open. Hastening out, both men hurried down the hall. Dr. Smyth met them outside the observation room.

"Welcome to the show, kiddies. Come to watch the fun?" His delight at the prospect of breaking Amanda was obvious.

Billy shook his head in disgust, but answered evenly. "We're here to do what we can to help Mrs. King."

Dr. Smyth smirked. "It's out of your control. This matter is not up for debate. I, for one, can't wait until she's injected. I'm interested in hearing what the charming little suburbanite rambles about when she's . . . under the influence."

Lee lunged toward Smyth, stopping only inches from the other man's face. "Why, you . . ."

"Scarecrow!" Billy grabbed Lee's arm, just as a guard appeared and blocked Lee. "This won't get us anywhere. Go see how Francine's coming along and let \*me\* handle this. That's an order."

Lee narrowed his eyes, but backed off, deliberately taking a moment to straighten his suit coat. Infuriated at the audacity of Dr. Smyth, he attempted to compose himself. Billy was right, of course; attacking Dr. Smyth would accomplish nothing.

Striding a few yards down the hall, he opened the door to the small audio/video room and stepped inside.

Francine sat at a desk, in front of a series of closed-circuit television monitors. Each showed a different view of the cell-like room Amanda temporarily occupied. Grimacing, Lee noted that there were even cameras installed in the small adjoining bathroom, and was grateful that Billy had been able to get Francine this assignment.

In the upper left-hand monitor, he saw Amanda. He felt his face redden hotly as he instinctively stepped back and looked away.

Focusing his eyes on the floor, he muttered, "Hey."

"Hi," Francine said softly. "Lee . . . I can't believe they're doing this to Amanda. None of it makes sense. How could they suspect her of working as a double agent? She's not even an agent."

"I know. What's, uh . . . going on?" he asked, indicating the screen and then averting his eyes again. He knew perfectly well what was going on, but felt the need to make conversation.

Francine made a face. "They ordered her to shower so they can prepare her for the procedure; you know how it goes. I'm supposed to keep her in full view the entire time, but I figured I could at least let her keep some of her dignity intact."

Nodding, his eyes again strayed to the profile view of Amanda from the shoulders up. She had her hands over her eyes, letting the cascade of water flow over her head. Guiltily, he turned away and focused on Francine.

"Thanks, Francine," he replied. "Does she, uh . . . know? About all the cameras?"

Francine nodded, rolling her eyes. "Dr. Smyth told her himself -- you should have heard him. I told her that I'd be here and that I wouldn't let Dr. Smyth or anyone else in here. You're an exception, of course."

He shoved his hands into his pockets, still feeling awkward about being there. The feelings of voyeurism he was experiencing made him physically ill. "Thanks," he said again.

"She's out of the shower. Why don't you, uh . . ." She gestured, indicating that he ought to turn around so that she could adjust the next camera angle.

"Oh! Yeah . . ." He turned his back to the monitors, wondering if Billy had made any progress with Dr. Smyth.

The door opened, and Billy, without stepping in, said, "Lee, come on out of there."

Lee turned to face Francine, studiously avoiding the monitors. "Thanks, Francine. I know Amanda appreciates you being here."

She swiveled in her chair to face him, looking surprisingly gentle. Her eyes conveyed both compassion and conviction. "She's resilient, Lee. She'll get through this."

He sighed. "The question is, will she want anything more to do with the Agency when all is said and done?"

"That's a good question," she agreed, turning back to her task.

"Yeah. I'll see you later," he said, and left the small room, closing the door firmly behind him.

"I've arranged for both of us to observe the interrogation. That's the best I was able to do. Dr. Smyth is determined to go through with this farce." Billy shook his head grimly, leading the way.

Lee placed a hand on the other man's shoulder. "Thanks for trying."

Billy stopped and faced him. "I had to at least make the effort. I wish I'd been able to stop this whole thing." He sighed heavily, then started down the hall again. "Let's go."

They followed the long corridor past the interrogation cell. In an adjoining room, several folding chairs were lined up, offering the observers a full view of the proceedings through a one-way mirror. It was only slightly larger than the room Francine occupied a few doors down.

Lee sat heavily and surveyed the gurney and equipment table -- a sight to make any seasoned agent shudder. The room was brightly lit, its white walls accentuating its absolute starkness. A sensation of unreality hit him and he almost expected to wake up and find it had all been a bizarre nightmare.

"Where's Dr. Smyth? I thought he'd have a front row seat," Lee said bitterly, shifting uncomfortably in the folding chair.

Billy shook his head. "I convinced him it would be best for him to observe from his office, on closed circuit. I didn't think you and he should be in the same room. Strangely, he agreed with me." He gave Lee a knowing look.

Lee nodded gratefully. "Thanks, Billy. I really don't think I'd have been able to keep from strangling him at the first hint of a snide comment."

With a grim smile, Billy wagged a thumb at himself. "Me either."

The door to the interrogation chamber opened, and a young female agent ushered Amanda inside. Billy stood and flipped on the audio switch so that they could hear what was being said on the other side of the glass.

"It's so cold in here," Amanda remarked, her voice echoing hollowly. She was clad in a white hospital gown and booties, and had her arms crossed protectively across her chest to keep the thin garment closed. "Of course, I guess my attire might have something to do with that."

"I know," the blond agent sympathized. "Listen, my name is Janet, and I just want you to know that I've heard about your work with Scarecrow. You two are becoming a legendary team. I don't believe for a minute that you're a double agent."

Amanda smiled slightly. "Thanks, Janet."

Lee was unable to help the smile that also sprang to his own lips. They were, indeed, quite a team.

Janet hesitated, then said, "Please understand that I'm only doing my job. If you'll just sit on the gurney and then lie down, I'll start an IV. Would you like to be under the sheet? It might be a little bit warmer for you that way."

Pulling the sheet down, Amanda sat down on the gurney and lay back, resting her head on the small pillow. "Don't worry. I \*do\* understand that you're just doing your job," she reassured the young woman.

"Thanks. Some people take it too personally." Janet smiled and patted her arm, and then pulled the sheet up. "I hope this is over quickly."

"I do, too," Amanda agreed, watching Janet expertly insert an IV needle and tape it to the back of her left hand.

"You're good," Amanda remarked. "I barely even felt that."

"I'm a pro," Janet teased with a smile. "Listen, I'll be here the entire time, so you just try to relax, okay?"

Amanda nodded slightly. "I'll try."

"I need to apply some monitoring devices -- that's why they had you put the gown on with the opening in the front. Gently, Janet opened the gown, exposing Amanda's upper chest and shoulders, and began placing electrodes on her skin. "These will help us keep an eye on your heartbeat and blood pressure during the interrogation, to make sure you stay safe. It's really just a precaution; nothing to worry about."

"Okay," she said, her voice slightly shaky.

Lee watched as Amanda surveyed the austere room. He saw her shiver and cursed the Agency's callous way of dealing with its own people. Finally, she closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

Watching her, indefinable feelings surfaced as he recalled the other times she'd been in danger. At least on those occasions he'd been able to help her. Now, all he could do was stand by and watch it happen.

Moments later, Lee's thoughts were interrupted as the door to the chamber opened and a short, balding man in a white lab coat entered the room. "Mrs. King." He squinted as he adjusted his thick-rimmed glasses.

Opening her eyes, Amanda looked over at him and inclined her head. "Yes, that's me."

"I'm Dr. John Jones. I'm going to perform the interrogation, and Janet will handle the administration of the serum. Do you have allergies to any medications?" he asked, pen poised over a clipboard.

"Not that I know of." Amanda swallowed, watching the man with wide eyes.

"Good. Are you comfortable?" he asked.

"I'm a little chilly."

He nodded. "I'm going to have Janet administer the serum now. I have to warn you that if you physically resist at any time, we'll have to restrain you." He picked up a thick leather strap from under the gurney and held it up for her to see. She nodded her agreement, shuddering a bit.

Janet approached, giving her a smile of encouragement, and inserted a needle into the IV line. "You'll feel the effects pretty quickly, so just try to relax."

Amanda swallowed. "All right."

Lee closed his eyes, unable to watch. Lowering his head, he let out a long breath. What if she had a reaction to the serum? It was still a very problematic drug, its side effects different with each person. What would he do if something happened to her?

"This can't be happening."

Billy agreed. "It does seem surreal."

Lee looked up sharply, surprised that he'd evidently spoken aloud. Both men turned their attention back to the white room. Amanda's eyes were closed, and Dr. Jones had left the room.

As Lee watched, his partner's eyelids began to flicker rapidly, and her breathing seemed to grow shallow.

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Only seconds after Janet had added the serum into her IV line, Amanda had felt a sting as the drug seeped into her veins. Minutes later, she'd begun to feel as if she were floating.

For a while, she tried to focus on the slow drip of the IV bag, but her vision began to blur. Blinking rapidly, she felt her eyes burning and let her eyelids close.

She'd never experienced anything so strange in her life. She wasn't completely asleep, but she wasn't fully awake, either. It was as though she was suspended between the two conditions, alert but somehow disconnected.

It didn't seem likely that this feeling of detachment would result in her spilling her guts to some stranger, but she didn't have anything to hide. She wasn't involved in treason, and she'd had no idea that Tom Williams was a former agent who'd turned against the Agency.

Vaguely, she wondered if Lee was there, watching her. She knew that if it were at all possible, he would be. She hadn't even been able to discuss what was going on with him; she'd barely been in the office five minutes before Dr. Smyth had barged in and had her manhandled right in front of everyone.

She was frightened -- more frightened than she'd ever been, and she'd been in some terrifying situations. What if they still didn't believe her after this interrogation? What else would they do to her? What if she never woke up? Could she live like this -- unable to open her eyes and speak to her family and friends -- but fully conscious inside her own head?

The longer she lay there, the more deeply she felt that she was sinking inside herself. It was similar to the sensations one experienced after spending an entire day on and off roller coasters at an amusement park. Though motionless, you could still feel yourself hurtling through the air.

Thoughts and feelings she habitually suppressed invaded her consciousness, and she fought to keep them down. Her mind insisted on bringing Lee to the fore. She could see his hazel eyes, his cocky smile. She could hear his voice, teasing one moment and reprimanding the next, talking on the phone, making arrangements for a date with some woman named Leslie.

His date was for tonight, she remembered inanely. Why was she thinking about Lee Stetson's social life at a time like this? Would he keep the date? If she was still in this crazy place all alone, would he go out for a night on the town? The thought filled her with a painful sadness. She was usually able to pretend she didn't care about his social life, but right now, it was all she could do to keep from crying.

It had seemed like they were growing closer in recent months, but it must have been her imagination. Vaguely aware that she felt more than friendship for him, she sometimes found it difficult to keep things in perspective. She really ought to just be grateful that he had grown to think of her as a friend and not as a nuisance.

Her thoughts began to blur and gel into each other, and words and phrases became feelings and sensations. How would she form sentences to answer the questions she would be asked?

Falling . . . It was as though she were falling from a great height, slowly spiraling toward the ground. Her own face invaded her mind -- her face, but not \*her\*. But who was it? A name hovered just around a corner in her mind and she groped to recover it . . . Karen -- the woman who had tried to steal her identity and kill Lee.

Karen had plummeted to her death, landing in a broken heap on the ground at the construction site. As Amanda replayed the scene in her mind again, though, Lee saved Karen instead of her. She couldn't hold on any longer, and lost her precarious hold. She gasped, waiting for the impact of her body meeting hard earth.

Her body felt a surge of energy, and her head jerked up off the pillow. "Lee!" she heard herself call out. "Help me!"

She heard a door open and close, and the sound of someone approaching. Her head fell back onto the pillow, and she remembered vaguely where she was, aware that she must have really called out, must have reached for him.

Had he heard her? Would he be able to save her this time? These questions swirled and weaved in her mind, not coherent thoughts, but deeply rooted fears and desires that were more to be felt than understood.

She was retreating once again. This bizarre sensation of being turned inside out was overwhelmingly real, so much so that she wondered if her body still existed.

Leslie. A woman whose face she had never seen, yet for whom she was capable of a primal, jealous antipathy. When she'd casually asked Lee about his new friend, he'd been reluctant to discuss her. What had he said? That she was pretty . . . that she was a brunette with brown eyes . . . and that she was about Amanda's height.

Two women, invading her mind at its most vulnerable: Karen and Leslie. One, a lethal nemesis who looked exactly like her, another, likely bearing more than a passing resemblance . . . whom her partner wanted to know better.

A fleeting insight presented itself and then fled away, colliding with the other jumble of memories and thoughts muddled together in her mind. It reminded her of times when a word was on the tip of her tongue, yet she couldn't recall it, no matter how deeply she searched.

Was she going crazy? Was that a side effect of the truth serum?

She had to get out of this place, had to run away and hide. Struggling, she murmured incoherently, her own voice sounding muffled and alien to her.

"Mrs. King, you must calm down," she heard a voice say firmly. "Don't resist the effects of the serum. Hallucination and memories are a common side effect. Try to relax, and focus on answering all of my questions. Can you do that?"

Could she? Could she even answer him? Try. Try to speak. Take a deep breath. "Y-yes."

"Then we'll begin with a few basic questions. What is your full name?"

"Amanda Jane West King."

"Excellent. West is your maiden name, is it not?" The voice sounded as if its owner were under water.

"Yes. My maiden name." Amanda wondered if she, too, were under water. It would explain the odd, weightless feeling she was experiencing.

"What is your partner's name?"

"Lee Stetson."

A hand lightly touched her arm. She tried to shake it off, but found that her arm was inert. Had they restrained her after all?

"What is his codename?"

Resistance. She couldn't tell them that. Remaining silent, she waited for whatever punishment was to come.

"Mrs. King. You have no need to protect Mr. Stetson from the Agency. You're here, among his fellow agents. What is his codename?"

That's right, she was at the Agency . . . Beta Level I interrogation. ' \*His\* fellow agents?' She knew it was best to cooperate; Francine had told her that. "Scarecrow."

"Very good. We'll begin the interrogation now."

### **Chapter Three**

Lee stood, staring at the glass as if willing himself through to the other side. When Amanda had struggled and called out to him for help, it had taken every bit of his restraint to keep from crashing through the mirror. "Billy . . . "

Billy stood, walked over, and placed a hand on Lee's shoulder. "I know, Lee. But there's nothing we can do but wait."

Lee placed a hand up to the mirror. The need to be with her, to hold her hand, was overwhelming in its intensity. "She's so scared . . . Even though she's under, she's scared. It's almost . . . it's almost like I can feel her fear myself." He dropped his hand, his eyes still trained on her.

"Come sit down, Lee. You need to take it easy." Billy paused. "I know I can't tell you to remain objective, but . . . I didn't realize the two of you were so close," he said, his voice quietly inquiring.

Lee looked up. "What? What do you mean?"

"Well." Billy shrugged slightly, as if his meaning should have been clear. "You just said that it was almost like you could feel her fear."

Taken aback, he realized that Billy was right; he \*had\* said that, and it was true. Gesturing toward his partner, he tried to explain. "I . . . well, I mean . . . I've always felt responsible for her. I sort of dragged her into this whole thing, so I feel . . . guilty. I can only imagine how she's feeling right now."

"I understand, but Lee, she knows the risks. You might have gotten her into this, but she chose to stay. You didn't force her to stay," Billy reasoned, emphasizing the last sentence.

Lee nodded and sat down again. His boss's words had inadvertently brought back an unpleasant memory. He had once said those very words to her in angry belligerence. "I'm not forcing you to stay, am I?" He cringed, recalling how she'd looked at him, as if cut by his outburst. With quiet dignity, she'd replied, "No."

Jones cleared his throat and squinted, bringing Lee back to the present. "Mrs. King, are you ready to answer my questions?"

"Yes."

Lee was surprised at the sound of her voice, which had become subdued and drowsy. "Something's wrong. She . . . "

Billy held up a hand. "No . . . She's just succumbing further to the drug. She's fine, Lee." He glanced into the room again and then looked back at Lee, saying sternly, "Relax . . . And try to be at least a little objective about this. You're not unfamiliar with interrogation procedures."

Lee nodded, knowing that Billy was right. He focused on Amanda, trying to send her his strength, wishing he were in the room with her, holding her hand through this ordeal.

Jones resumed. "Now. Who is Thomas Williams?"

"He's . . . I thought he was a friend."

"How long have you known him?"

"About a month."

"Isn't he a bit more than a friend? Aren't you dating him?"

For a moment, it seemed that she wasn't going to answer. Finally, she sighed softly. "No. We've gone out to dinner a few times, but we're not dating."

Jones pushed his glasses back up from where they'd slid down his nose. "Did you have a prior acquaintance with him?"

"No." She remained perfectly still and calm, her voice registering no anxiety, her pulse and blood pressure steady.

"Did you know that his name is really Thomas La Croix?"

"I didn't know that until Mr. Melrose told me. I only knew him as Tom Williams."

"Before finding out from the Agency that he used to be an agent, were you aware of that fact?" Jones watched her closely, tapping his pen on his notebook.

"No."

"Do you harbor resentment of any kind against this Agency, the country it defends, or any of the agents herein?"

One eyebrow raised as though in irony as she said, "Other than because of what they're doing to me right now? No, I don't."

Jones coughed. Leaning forward, he lowered his voice as though sharing confidences over tea and cookies. "Not even Francine Desmond?" he whispered conspiratorially.

A faint smile crossed Amanda's lips. "Resent Francine? No."

"Doesn't she give you a hard time?"

"She gives everyone a hard time." Though so far under the influence of the drug, the note of wry amusement in Amanda's voice was unmistakable.

Jones nodded, a faint smile on his lips. "That she does. What about your partner? Do you feel any resentment toward Lee Stetson?"

She shook her head slightly. "No. Not at all."

"You seem very certain, Mrs. King. Are you sure you're being completely honest with me?"

"Yes. I have no reason to resent Lee."

His eyes narrowed speculatively. "No reason? What exactly is Mr. Stetson to you?"

After a very slight pause, she answered, "He's my partner . . . my friend."

"And that's all?"

"Yes."

"You're sure?"

"Yes." An edge had crept into her voice, and the heart monitor beeped a little more rapidly.

Lee's own heartbeat increased. What was Jones doing? Why was he pursuing this line of questioning? He looked over to find Billy watching him intently, his brown eyes sympathetic and troubled.

"They're looking for an angle, Lee, you know that. If they can find a weakness, they'll push it to their advantage. They'll try to get her to confess on the grounds of --"

"Of what, Billy?" Lee felt his mouth go dry.

Billy studied the carpet. "Possibly of a relationship problem between the two of you. A jealousy issue on Amanda's part. Since she's not an agent, they would consider it a viable reason."

Lee frowned. "That's ridiculous; there's nothing going on between Amanda and me."

He turned his attention back to the white interrogation chamber. Jones eyed the monitors, then gestured to Janet. She nodded and came forward, injecting a second dose of serum into the IV line.

"What's she doing?!" Lee demanded, rising out of his seat. "They're going to kill her!"

Billy placed a restraining hand on Lee's arm. "No. Think, man! You \*know\* how this works. How many of these interrogations have you witnessed? They always start with a relatively small dose. If they feel the subject is holding back, they often administer a second dose."

"The subject?" Taking a deep breath, he went on heatedly. "This is \*Amanda\*. Not an anonymous 'subject.'"

"I know." Billy sighed, wiping his creased forehead with the palm of his hand. "Lee, I understand how you're feeling . . . This is hard for me, too."

Lee relaxed back into the hard metal folding chair. "I know it is," he admitted, taking in the vexed countenance of his friend. "I'm sorry."

"I'll be back in a little while, Mrs. King." To an unseen entity, Jones said, "Cease recording. We'll resume in ten minutes."

From her corner in the room, Janet moved forward. Lee watched as she smoothed Amanda's brow, studying the monitors.

"How do you feel?" she asked quietly.

Amanda swallowed. "Scared. Angry. I don't like that man."

Janet smiled. "Well, I'll tell you a little secret, Amanda. Most people don't like Dr Jones. Just relax, and tell him what he wants to know. If you tell him everything truthfully, he'll know you're not lying when you can't answer his other questions."

Amanda nodded. "Okay."

"I'll step back now, but remember that I'm here, in the room with you." She patted Amanda's arm.

Shivering, Amanda said softly, "I'm so cold . . ."

"I know. When this is over, you can take a nice hot bath."

The last word came in a whisper. "Afraid . . ."

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"Mrs. King," Jones cleared his throat and resumed. Sitting down, he crossed one leg over the other and said, "I trust you're prepared to be more forthcoming now."

"Yes." Her voice sounded thick and low, as though she were under severe strain, but the monitors showed that her vital signs were only slightly lower than they'd been before the second injection was administered.

Lee and Billy listened as the doctor meticulously repeated the previous questioning, with Amanda giving the same answers as before. Finally, he tried a new tack.

"Mrs. King, from where did you steal an Agency codebook?"

"I didn't steal an Agency codebook." She spoke firmly, with conviction.

"Then, can you explain to me why it was found in your house?"

"No. I know it was found there because I was told today. But I didn't put it there," she replied evenly.

He looked as though he was going to pursue the matter, but apparently changed his mind. Instead, he asked, "How did you plant a listening device in your partner's watch?"

She shook her head, her forehead creasing. "I didn't. I took it to get a new battery for him."

"If you didn't bug it, then who did, Mrs. King?"

"I don't know."

"You didn't have someone plant a bug in Lee Stetson's watch?"

"No," she said resolutely.

"You have no knowledge of Thomas La Croix doing so?" he asked, glancing at his watch.

"No."

"You made phone calls to the Russian Embassy on several nights last month." Without warning, his glasses slid from the bridge to the edge of his nose and tottered there precariously.

"No, I did not."

Jones shook his head, distractedly replacing his spectacles. "Mrs. King, have you been intimate with Thomas Williams?"

"No!" One hand came up to clutch at the opening of her gown.

"You've known him longer than a month, haven't you?" he pressed.

"No. I have not."

Jones sighed, adjusting his glasses yet again. "You're unusually . . . resistant, Mrs. King. Will I have to administer a third dose of serum to get you to be truthful?"

"No more . . ." Her free hand twitched at her side. Her words were slurring more; she sounded utterly exhausted.

He spoke louder, enunciating his words. "Tell me the truth about Lee Stetson. What are you hiding, Mrs. King?"

"Nothing." Again, the heart monitor beeped more erratically than before. "I'm not hiding anything."

Watching the monitors with interest, he continued. "Mr. Stetson has a lot of girlfriends, doesn't he, Mrs. King?" His tone was suggestive.

"Yes, he does," she answered matter-of-factly.

"Have you ever been one of them?"

Sounding annoyed, she replied, "No." She released her gown, her hand returning to her side.

Raising an eyebrow, he asked, "How do you feel about Mr. Stetson?"

A slight pause ensued before she answered. "He's my best friend."

"I'll repeat the question, Mrs. King. How do you *feel* about Lee Stetson?"

Her internal struggle was easy to see. Visible anxiety crossed her features as she licked her lips and knit her brows together. "I feel . . . I feel . . ."

"Come on, Mrs. King. Dig deep down into your subconscious; the answer is there. Tell me how you feel about your partner," he demanded.

Beep-beep-beep-beep. The monitoring equipment now indicated that her heartbeat and blood pressure were much faster and higher than normal.

Her body language displayed classic signs of resistance -- her hands clutched the sheet, her facial muscles twitched, and her head moved slightly from side to side as if she were in denial.

"How do you feel about Lee Stetson?" he asked again, clearly becoming impatient.

She frowned, clenching and unclenching her hands at her sides. Her answer, when it came, was barely audible. "I . . . I love him."

Lee sank back into the chair. "Amanda . . ." he whispered. Mercifully, Billy refrained from comment and kept his eyes on Amanda.

Jones grinned like a mad Cheshire at the apparent break-through, his glasses threatening to plunge off the tip of his nose. He paused to scribble copious notes in his report before continuing.

"By 'love him,' do you mean you . . ." He coughed. ". . . love him as a friend and partner?"

Relaxing visibly, she answered unreservedly. "Yes."

"But you also mean something more, don't you? Lee Stetson is very special to you. You've been working with him for more than two years now. Tell me what else you mean when you say that you \*love\* him." His manner was positively greasy.

Lee held his breath, not sure he wanted to hear her answer. This was so terribly invasive; they were learning about feelings Amanda harbored below the surface of her consciousness. Though under the influence of a powerful drug, it was as though she was still hiding those feelings -- even from herself. Forcing her to confess them was morally incomprehensible.

Still, he couldn't have walked away now if he'd been ordered to.

Her eyelids fluttered and her hands twitched where they lay on the narrow gurney. The monitors continued their interpretation of her body's erratic vital signs.

Finally, she sighed deeply and frowned. "I . . . He's . . ." She paused as though fighting a losing battle. After another deep, resigned sigh, she whispered tremulously, "I'm in love with him."

Lee's sharp inhalation, before he could bring his reaction under control, was audible in the small room. He glanced at Billy, who gave him a sympathetic look.

Unable to speak, Lee looked back into the small room at his partner. Her dark lashes were black against the pallor of her cheeks. He was startled to see tears escaping and sliding down her face and into her ears and hair.

All activity on the monitors began to slow and return to a semi-normal state, as if all her energy had been spent trying to avoid answering Jones's questions about Lee. Now that she'd been pressured into doing so, her body no longer had any reason to fight.

Jones threw a sardonic look toward the mirror and then turned back to Amanda. "And is Lee Stetson in love with you?" he probed.

"No."

"And you resent him for that, don't you?" he asked insistently. "You're jealous over him to the point that you're willing to betray him."

"No."

"Why are you crying?"

She stiffened. "I 'm not crying."

"There are tears escaping your eyes, Mrs. King, indicating that you are, indeed, crying."

Swallowing, she replied softly, "He can't know. I don't want him ever to know. He would . . . He can't know how I feel."

Lee slumped in his chair, feeling nauseous. He knew something about her, something that made her very vulnerable. Something she understandably didn't want him to know.

Jones shook his head. "Mrs. King. Let me suggest that, because Lee Stetson doesn't return your feelings, you felt justified in betraying him and the Agency by aiding and abetting a known double agent, Thomas La Croix."

"That's not true."

Sighing, he asked, "No?"

"No. I would rather die than betray the Agency. I would rather die than betray Lee Stetson," she insisted vehemently.

Jones raised his eyebrows, reaching up to reposition his glasses. "I 'm going to ask you a series of questions very rapidly. Answer with the first thing that comes to your mind. Don't think about what to say at all, and don't hesitate. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Where do you live?"

"Arlington."

"How many children do you have?"

"Two."

"What color is the sky?"

"Blue."

Lee was still reeling from Amanda's reluctant confession and palpable anxiety. How much of this would she remember afterward? He fervently hoped that she wouldn't be able to recall any of it. Surely she would know he had been there, listening to everything.

He knew he had strong feelings of affection for Amanda. He knew that she considered him a very good friend, as well. But this . . . This knowledge he now had gave him an unfair advantage over her, one he didn't want. He should never have heard those profoundly personal words . . . No one should have heard those words.

Suddenly remembering the date he would miss tonight with Leslie, he felt guilty. He ought to have called her, but he'd been unwillingly, and still was unwilling, to leave, even for a moment. What did it matter, anyway?

Droning on, Jones continued to ask his string of inane questions. "How much do you weigh?"

"A hundred and fourteen pounds."

"Who is Thomas La Croix?"

"Someone who is . . ." Here she paused for only a second and then continued. ". . . \*was\* using me."

"Who is Lee Stetson?"

"My partner. My friend."

"You love him?"

"Yes."

"You're in love with him."

"Yes."

Lee closed his eyes and took a deep breath. How could the Agency put her through this? She was like a reluctant open book, telling this greasy little man everything he wanted to know. Lee's hands balled into fists as he listened.

"Has Mr. Stetson ever kissed you?"

"Only in the line of duty."

"In the line of duty," he repeated.

"Yes."

"Give me an example."

"There was a cruise . . . We had to pretend to get married, in San Angelo. He kissed me at the ceremony."

"You were in love with him, even then?"

She shook her head. "No. Not then."

He removed his glasses and wiped the bridge of his nose, then replaced them. "But you enjoyed the kiss?"

Shrugging a little, she answered, "Yes."

For ten minutes, Jones asked more rapid-fire questions at random. Amanda answered quickly and truthfully, with no hesitation, and her vital signs remained steady throughout. He kept going back to questions about Thomas and Lee, but she never wavered. Finally, he took off his errant glasses and wiped his brow.

"Mrs. King, the Agency owes you an enormous apology. This interrogation is over." He stood, gathered his things, and left the room.

Janet moved forward, smiling. "It's over, Amanda. I knew you'd come through it all right. The effect of the drug will wear off fairly soon, and . . . Amanda? Amanda, can you hear me?"

## **Chapter Four**

Amanda felt drained, as if all of the energy had been sucked right out of her body. No longer floating, she was now sinking down into the gurney, becoming part of it.

Someone was talking to her, but she didn't know whom it was, and it sounded as though they were mumbling. What were they saying? Why were they incoherent? She couldn't make out any of the words, and that was strange; she'd clearly heard everything Jones had said.

She felt as if she were detached, both from herself and the situation, and imagined herself floating in the air, watching the scene from a distance. Was the persistent voice real? Could she answer it? She had to try.

Nothing happened. Had she lost her ability to speak? How long would this last? Was this normal? She didn't think so.

Trying to move, she found that she wasn't even able to feel her hand, much less lift it. Her heart was racing, its rapid pump and swish roaring in her ears as she listened to the sound her own blood coursing through her veins.

As her body began to rebel at what it was experiencing, she could feel perspiration running down her face. She felt clammy all over, as if she had run a marathon. The feeling of detachment was ebbing away as she slowly became aware of her surroundings. She could even identify two voices, one belonging to Janet.

"Mrs. King?" Jones was back. At least she could make sense of the words again.

"Dr. Jones, her heart rate is erratic; slow one moment and jumping all over the place the next. I know this happens during interrogation, but she's completely unresponsive."

Amanda tried to say, 'I'm not unresponsive. I hear you,' but she was unable to move her lips to form words.

"Something's gone wrong. Hand me her chart, and then page Dr. Mc John and get him down here, stat!"

Janet gave him the medical chart and then grabbed the phone, pressing the paging button. "Dr. McJohn to Interrogation, please. Dr. McJohn, please come to Interrogation at once." She hung up and cast a worried glance at Jones.

"During the interrogation, Mrs. King told me she weighs 114, didn't she?" Jones demanded.

"Yes, that's right," Janet agreed.

"Who prepared the injections?" he asked in a clipped voice.

"Susan Michaels. Why?"

Jones cleared his throat. "Please go find her."

A long silence ensued. Amanda kept trying to respond, to at least murmur so that he'd know she was conscious. She still couldn't move at all; she felt as if she were covered with several heavy blankets.

"You wanted to see me?" Susan Michaels must have entered the room, Amanda thought, because that wasn't Janet's voice.

"Yes. You prepared the injections for Mrs. King?"

"That's right."

"Would you please tell me, from the chart, how much Mrs. King weighs?"

A moment passed, and then Amanda heard her mutter, "Oh, God . . . I swear when I had this chart before, her weight was listed as 144. I doubled checked it, doctor!"

"Are you absolutely certain?"

Susan sounded frightened and nervous as she answered, "Absolutely. I always double . . . even triple-check. If I'd seen Mrs. King, I'd have known right away that it was wrong. But I just prepared the tray according to the chart. Tom Parker handed it to me."

"Tom Parker."

"That's right."

"I'm going to have a little chat with Mr. Parker." Jones let out a long breath. "Damn it! I wish McJohn would get down here."

Amanda struggled to understand what was being said, but the voices were becoming garbled again. She felt as if she were drifting away again. The harder she tried to open her eyes, the more distant she felt herself become.

"I'm so sorry," Susan said. "I didn't know . . ."

"Susan," Jones said sharply. "No one is blaming you. Just go see what the hell's keeping McJohn. I don't care if he's tied up, you bring him down here, now!"

"Yes, sir."

Amanda tried once again to speak, putting everything she could muster into the effort.

"Help . . ."

Jones grabbed her hand. "Mrs. King? Mrs. King! Can you speak again? Squeeze my hand. Don't let go. Dr. McJohn is on the way; he has your history and will best know . . . "

She'd understood her name, and that it was Dr. Jones speaking. She knew he was having Dr. McJohn sent down. But the voice was fading, and everything was going black. Her last thought was that she hadn't been able to say goodbye to her family and Lee.

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The moment he'd realized that Amanda wasn't responding as she should have been, Lee had bolted from the room. As he determinedly headed for the door leading to the interrogation chamber, armed guards detained him.

"Sorry, sir," one of them said. "We have strict orders to let no one through."

Frustrated, Lee slammed his fist against the wall and cursed. Billy caught up to him, and Lee turned to face him. "Where's Dr. Smyth? Who the hell is Tom Parker?"

"One thing at a time, Lee." Billy took a deep breath. "Something is going on here, and I don't like it one bit. But we won't get anywhere with you charging around adding to the tension. Wait here; I'm going to find Dr. Smyth and get us clearance to see Amanda. Then we'll find out where this Parker guy is."

As Billy strode away, Lee headed back to the room where he'd watched Amanda's interrogation. Entering the room, he was again overcome with the uneasy feeling that he'd snooped into her most private affairs.

Amanda was still lying motionless on the gurney. Dr. McJohn had finally arrived and was hovering over her, checking her pupils. Flipping on the audio switch, Lee could hear the conversation between the two doctors.

". . . can't believe this. Open up that IV line," McJohn ordered in clipped tones. "Give her more saline."

"She's got a double dose of serum coursing through her veins -- enough to put a woman thirty pounds heavier under," Jones said through clenched teeth, manipulating the IV. "This has never happened before. Has it?"

McJohn looked up. "Not to my knowledge, no. What I'm most concerned about is that she's completely unresponsive. Normally, the subject comes out of it relatively quickly,

unless there's some kind of allergic reaction to the serum. Even with the overdose, she shouldn't be this far under. It's almost as if there were a contaminant in the drug."

Jones looked alarmed. "A contaminant? I hadn't thought of that. This has never happened during one of my interrogations. We're going to have to beef up security."

McJohn gave him an annoyed look. "You're probably right. But \*my\* main concern right now is to see what we can do for Mrs. King."

Reprimanded, Jones grimaced, nodding as he continued to work. "Of course. I didn't mean to imply that . . ."

Lee's hand automatically reached up and raked through his tousled hair. They had to help her. His eyes were focused on her face, and he silently willed her to let them know she was all right.

He couldn't get his mind to stop reeling. 'I'm in love with him,' she'd said. Why had they probed so deeply into such personal matters? Logically, he understood; it was procedure. Emotionally, he felt that it was unjust and intrusive. It had potentially changed his relationship with her forever.

McJohn took her hand in his. "Amanda, it's Dr. McJohn. I know you can hear me. Just squeeze my hand, or hum a little. Can you do that for me? Come on, Amanda, just a little strength. Squeeze."

Jones waited tensely, his gaze moving from Amanda to McJohn and back. Pushing his glasses up to their rightful position, he pursed his lips nervously.

'Squeeze his hand, Amanda. You can do it; I know you can.' Lee said the words over and over in his mind, hoping for a miracle.

McJohn continued to hold her hand. "It's Dr. McJohn, Amanda. Focus on my words. You should be able to hear me. Just try to let me know you can. Concentrate on speaking or squeezing my hand."

McJohn watched her expectantly for several minutes. Looking up at Jones, he shook his head. "I'm not sure she's conscious."

The silence was deafening as the two doctors worked in a flurry of activity, checking her pupils, testing her reflexes and assessing muscle tone. Their almost-frenzied movements were in utter contrast to their inert patient.

He had no idea how long he stood there, watching the unreal scene unfold before his eyes. The longer she remained unresponsive, the more afraid he became that she wouldn't wake up.

What would he do? He knew he wouldn't be able to live with his guilt. He'd lost too many people in his life. Taking a deep breath in an attempt to calm his nerves, he realized that he considered Amanda to be the most important person in his life. He couldn't imagine the threatened loss of anyone else causing quite this much distress.

Just how did he feel about her? He tried to work it out in his mind, but he almost felt as though he'd already lost her. Why work out what his feelings were if she was leaving him? A sting behind his eyelids caused him to press his fists against his eyes. He couldn't allow himself to break down -- not here, not now.

After regaining his steely control, he forced his mind away from the possibility that she could die. He simply wouldn't accept it. She was strong; she would overcome this and be fine. "Come on, Amanda," he murmured fervently. "Please wake up."

Without warning, Amanda's lips moved, almost imperceptibly. Lee couldn't believe his eyes and felt almost sure that he'd imagined it.

Jones's eyes widened behind his thick lenses. "She's trying to talk!"

McJohn leaned down excitedly. "Say it again, Amanda."

Again, Lee saw her lips move, but didn't hear anything. He looked down and realized in surprise that his hands were trembling.

"What did she say?" Jones asked impatiently.

McJohn glanced up, patting Amanda's hand. "She said, 'Lee.' She wants her partner." He smiled, looking back down at her. "We'll find him, Amanda. We'll find him."

Lee's heart nearly burst out of his chest at McJohn's words. 'She wants her partner.' He turned quickly and nearly tripped over a folding chair. Stumbling to regain his balance, he raced for the door and yanked it open, coming face to face with Billy.

"She's asking for me, Billy!" He maneuvered around his boss and took off down the hall at breakneck speed, nearly colliding with a fast moving dark-haired man in a white lab coat.

He arrived at the guarded entrance just as McJohn emerged. "I take it you heard?" the doctor said with a wry but relieved grin.

Lee nodded, heading toward the room. "Yeah. Can I . . . ?"

"Go on in." McJohn moved out of the way as Lee barreled past him.

He was shocked at the sight of her. Her skin was nearly as colorless as the walls of the sterile room. The veins in her hands and the bruise at the IV site stood out a dark, chalky blue against the whiteness of her skin.

"Amanda," he whispered. "It's Lee; I'm here." Moving to her side, he picked up one of her hands, taken aback by how cold her skin was. "Can you hear me?"

Her hand remained limp in his. "Amanda?" Lee was vaguely aware of Jones, standing a few feet away, but he ignored the man. "Come on, partner. Give me a sign that you can hear me."

Still there was no movement, no response. Bitter disappointment washed over him like a bucket of cold water. "Why . . . ? She was just awake. What's wrong?" he asked, finally meeting the doctor's eyes.

"We think she must be fading in and out of consciousness. We're going to move her to a different location in a few minutes. You can come along, if you want to."

Lee nodded. "You wouldn't be able to stop me."

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Someone knocked softly on the door to Amanda's new room. Lee looked up to see Billy standing in the doorway, fatherly concern etched into his features, making him look older than his years.

"How is she?" he asked quietly, advancing into the room.

Lee indicated all of the monitoring equipment hooked up to his partner. "So far, her heart rate and blood pressure have returned to normal. There've been no obvious signs of permanent damage, so McJohn is pretty confident that she'll come out of it soon. Still, she won't be able to go home tonight." He shook his head, wondering what he should tell her mother when he called.

Billy stepped closer, looking down at Amanda. "I've already called Mrs. West. I told her that Amanda was tied up with an assignment. It wouldn't be possible for her to come here to be with Amanda, anyway."

Lee nodded, relieved to not have the responsibility of dealing with Amanda's mother. "Thanks, Billy. How'd she take the news?"

"Funny you should ask," Billy said with a chuckle. "She gave me quite a lecture about keeping Amanda so busy all the time for so little pay, and asked me when was I going to give her daughter a raise. I couldn't get a word in edgewise."

Lee smiled briefly. "When this is over, she might not stay even if we offered to double her pay."

As if he knew the thoughts weighing on Lee's mind, Billy said, "Lee, Amanda may not remember most of what she said. Most people don't --"

Shaking his head, Lee interrupted. "But the Agency turned on her. They treated her like an enemy, after all she's been through." He shook his head in frustration. "Did you find Dr. Smyth?"

Billy nodded, rolling his eyes. "Yes. He was practically skipping down the hall. Made some smart-ass remark about Amanda's 'deeply personal confessions'. I could have slugged him." The scowl on Billy's face would have been humorous under different circumstances.

Lee raised an eyebrow. "I'd have liked to have seen that. What did he say? Is he going to assign her to a different partner because she . . . because of what she said?"

"He was going to try," he replied with a grin. "He had his speech all planned, he'd even found the perfect nursery rhyme."

Lee snorted. "So what changed his mind?"

"Well, I told him that there's no involvement between you two, no matter what Mrs. King's personal feelings are," Billy replied, watching Lee closely.

"And . . . ?" Lee prompted, ignoring the implicit question in Billy's eyes.

"And I reminded him that we can't use anything an agent says when under the influence unless it directly pertains to the case at hand or otherwise poses a serious threat to the Agency. Which, in this case, it didn't." Billy folded his hands together and waited for Lee's reaction.

"But . . ." Lee frowned. "That was enough to change his mind? He's not really big on protocol."

"No, but he is big on saving his own butt. About a year ago, he was put under; of course, I can't tell you why. But I will tell you that he shared some very private and very . . . embarrassingly personal information. I just told him that if he could use Amanda's confession against her, that he shouldn't mind my spreading his own news around the Agency."

Lee chuckled quietly, wishing he knew exactly what 'embarrassingly personal information' Smyth had offered. "I owe you one, Billy. I wish I'd been there to see his face."

Nodding, Billy said, "I wish you could have seen it, too. I've never seen the old man so anxious to accommodate. He agreed that I was right; it's best not to dredge up something just to cause trouble."

"Thanks." Lee turned his attention back to Amanda, becoming serious. His hand lightly rested on her forearm. "If she doesn't come out of this . . ." Billy's hand on his shoulder stopped him.

"She will. There's no 'if' here, Lee. This is Amanda." Billy glanced at his watch. "I'll be back. I had Francine pull Tom Parker's file. She should be finished going over it by now. I'll let you know what we find."

"Thanks, Billy. I appreciate that. I'd . . . I'd like to be here when she wakes up."

Billy nodded his understanding. "Tell her I said hello, and that I'll be back to see her soon."

As Billy left the room, a nurse entered. She quietly and efficiently checked Amanda's vital signs and IV fluid and then gave Lee an encouraging smile as she left the room.

He took Amanda's hand in his again. "Amanda, please. Can you hear me now? Please try. Try to wake up. Your family needs you. I . . . your partner needs you."

When she didn't respond, he took a deep breath and closed his eyes. Running his fingers through her bangs, he whispered, "I know you can hear me, Amanda. And I know that if you try hard enough, you can come out of this. You're a fighter."

After about five minutes, he felt her fingers move in his hand and squeeze weakly. "Amanda?"

He was rewarded with another squeeze, slightly stronger this time. "That's it . . . Can you talk?" He reached over and pressed the buzzer to call the nurse to get McJohn. "Come on, Amanda."

Her eyelids fluttered, and she sighed. With seemingly great effort, her lips moved to form a word. "Lee." It sounded like barely more than an exhalation, but he'd definitely heard his name.

A grin of relief spread across his face. "I'm here. It's all over, and you're going to be just fine!"

"Sleepy."

Exhilaration flooding his senses as he said, "You can sleep all you want. Dr. McJohn's coming to see you."

"Kay."

He'd never felt such overwhelming relief in his life. She was going to be fine! Leaning over, he placed a soft kiss on her cheek.

## **Chapter Five**

Amanda had just fallen into a restful sleep when Dr. McJohn entered her room, greeting her cheerfully.

Opening her eyes, she was immediately aware that someone was holding her hand. She tried to focus on who it was, but her vision was blurred. Closing her eyes again, she fought off the feeling of dizziness that threatened to overcome her.

"How are you feeling, Amanda?" McJohn asked.

Who was that? Where was she? She tried desperately to remember. Had she been in an accident? Where was her family? Was Lee all right? Why was she so confused?

"W-where . . . ?"

"You're at the Agency," McJohn told her soothingly. "Do you remember the interrogation?"

She frowned in confusion. "What? N-no."

A worried, familiar voice spoke up. "Is she okay?"

"Lee?" She tried once more to focus on him, but the room refused to stop its insane spinning. Her head ached with a dull but unrelenting throb.

"I'm here, Amanda," he said, his voice comforting. "I'm right here."

She felt her hand being squeezed gently and marveled at the warmth and comfort that flowed from his hand to hers.

McJohn spoke again. "How do you feel?"

She swallowed; her throat felt as if it had been packed with cotton. Coughing a little, she answered hoarsely, "Tired, confused, dizzy . . . and thirsty."

"That's quite a combination." McJohn placed a hand to her forehead. "No headache? Nausea?"

"My head hurts. It's pounding." She tried to put her hand up to her head, but found it too difficult to move.

"That's to be expected. It'll wear off," McJohn explained. "Anything else?"

Trying to lift her hand again and failing, she said, "Can't move."

"Give yourself time," he said, reassuringly patting her arm. "Before long you'll be back to normal. You had us worried for a while there."

Opening her eyes, she looked from Dr. McJohn to Lee. "I did? Was it . . . I mean, was there a car accident or something?" she asked. She couldn't seem to remember a thing, and it was a disconcerting feeling.

McJohn smiled. "No. No car accident."

She sighed in relief. "Good. You said . . . something about an . . . interrogation?"

He nodded. "Not everyone sustains memories of their interrogation. You may recall bits and pieces as time goes on, or you may dream about the experience. I wouldn't worry about it much."

"But . . ." She wanted to ask more about what had happened, but was too fatigued to care very much at the moment.

"Don't worry, things'll get clearer after you've rested. We're going to keep you here overnight, so that we can make sure there aren't any aftereffects of the serum. If you . . ."

"Oh, no," Amanda interjected, becoming even more exhausted with the effort it took to speak. "I want . . . I need to go home."

Lee shook his head firmly. "You don't even remember anything that's happened, Amanda. You need to stay here and rest."

The doctor coughed slightly. "Mr. Melrose told me that he's already called your mother and let her know you're 'on assignment.' We, uh . . . there was a bit of a problem with the dosage. We're running blood tests right now as a precaution."

Dismayed, she frowned. "Dosage? Precaution?"

Lee tightened his grip on her hand. "Just to be safe," he told her.

She could tell he was keeping something from her. "But I don't understand . . . I mean, I can't remember -"

"Amanda, don't worry about it. When you feel better, I'll explain everything." He rubbed her arm lightly. "Let them keep an eye on you tonight. You don't have to worry about anything right now except getting some rest. There are guards posted outside your room; you'll be safe here."

"Guards?"

He nodded. "Guards. Just sleep, Amanda."

Too tired to argue any further, she nodded wearily and sighed. "All right." Her eyelids were already growing heavier, and she allowed them to fall closed.

Lee released her hand, and she felt a great deal of the security she'd been feeling fade away. "Listen, Amanda, I'm going to leave for a little while so I can talk to Billy. He said to tell you he'd be by to see you later, if he can. I'll be back, too. Just try to sleep now."

Sighing, she nodded. Moments later, she was asleep.

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Lee paced back and forth in Billy's office. "So . . . What's going on? Who the hell is Tom Parker?" he asked, hearing the frustration in his own voice.

"He's been with us for about six months," Billy began. Clearing his throat, he handed a file across the desk to Lee.

Ceasing his nervous pacing, Lee accepted the folder. Opening it, he examined the information carefully. "He looks familiar, but I don't get down to Beta Level I interrogation very often. Everything seems to be on the up and up, but obviously there's more." He handed the file back and looked questioningly at Billy.

Billy nodded. "You're right. When he came aboard, it was with high recommendations from another government agency. At that time, the usual background check was run and everything was clean. But I had Francine do a little digging, and . . ."

"And?" Lee prompted, feeling a knot form in the pit of his stomach. "What did she find?"

Sighing, the section chief looked Lee in the eye and went on, "Tom Parker has worked for the Agency before."

"La Croix." Lee stated grimly.

Nodding, Billy confirmed, "Thomas La Croix. Also known as Thomas Williams and Tom Parker and who knows what other aliases he goes by. As you'll remember, Hercules was not only a master of disguise, but also a computer genius. He's obviously tampered with records, making it difficult to track him."

Lee shook his head. "I knew it. I knew it had to be him."

"Francine cross-referenced dozens of data sources, searching for similarities and discrepancies connected to the three names."

"Why is he targeting Amanda?" His jaw stiffened.

"I don't think he is," Billy mused, frowning. "I think he saw her as an opportunity, not a target."

"If he's been here for six months, that means he's had plenty of time to gather information and make his plans."

Shrugging, Billy replied, "He obviously didn't expect Amanda to be called into question this soon. When she was, he must have known that she would deny any knowledge or involvement, and that would cause us to dig deeper. That's why . . ."

"That's why he tried to kill her by increasing the dosage and contaminating the serum," Lee finished, his voice rising. "That means she could still be in danger, Billy!"

Billy held up a hand. "I realize that. She has the best protection we can offer as long as she's here. We tried to locate Parker, but he turned in his badge and left shortly after Amanda came to."

A flash of memory presented itself to Lee. "Let me see the photo of Parker again." Reaching for the file, he opened it and looked closely at the picture. "I just realized this is the same man I almost ran into in the hall on my way to Amanda; I'm positive it's him. Where does he live?"

"I've already got two agents there, searching his house. He's not home. I don't want you going near him, anyway, Lee. I want to talk to the man, and I won't be able to do that if you beat him to a bloody pulp." Billy pointed his finger at Lee to emphasize his point.

"Oh, come on!" Lee flung his hands in the air. "You can't tell me . . ."

"Oh, yes, I can, Scarecrow, and I just did!" Billy stood and walked around his desk. "You and La Croix don't mix. Stay out of it. Don't make me tell you again."

Lee stared at him for a long moment and then nodded moodily. "Fine. But if he's not in custody in twelve hours, I'm going after him myself." He stood and headed toward the door. His hand on the knob, he turned and added, "I need to tie up some loose ends and make a quick phone call, and then I'm going to check on Amanda."

Not waiting for a reply, he left the office and headed for the Q-Bureau. Once there, he made himself dial Leslie's number and waited for her to pick up the phone, glancing at his watch. It was seven o'clock.

"Hello?"

Trying to keep his voice calm despite his inner turmoil, he said, "Leslie, hi, it's Lee."

"Oh, Lee! I'm glad you called. I was beginning to wonder if you'd forgotten about me," she joked.

Feeling like a jerk, he sighed. "Yeah, I'm sorry about that. Look, I'm going to have to cancel for tonight. We have a situation at work -- an emergency -- and I'm not gonna be able to get away."

"Well, I'm disappointed, but I understand. We'll just have to reschedule, that's all. How about Saturday?" she asked.

Lee paused. Why was he hesitating? He knew why; it was because of Amanda. But he couldn't help the way she felt, could he? And she might not even be aware of her feelings herself. What he'd heard shouldn't have any bearing on his taking a rain check with Leslie, yet here he was, debating the matter.

"Lee? Are you still there?"

Shaking himself, he answered, "Sorry. I just have a lot on my mind right now. Can I, uh, call you later?"

After a short pause, she said, "Sure, Lee. Thanks for calling."

"Goodbye, Leslie."

Hanging up, he wondered why a date with Leslie O'Connell suddenly sounded a lot less appealing than it had just this morning. Concern for his partner overshadowed everything and everyone else, though, and he decided to give the matter more attention later.

After taking care of a few other matters, he headed back down to the foyer and stepped into the elevator, hoping Amanda would be awake when he got to her room.

On the way down, he again could hear her voice, reluctantly admitting that she was in love with him. He'd had no idea she harbored such feelings for him, and he didn't feel prepared to deal with the situation. At least she didn't remember any of what she'd said, so he'd have time to assess . . . Assess what? His own feelings? There was no need for that . . . was there?

Awash with these disturbing thoughts, he jumped slightly when the elevator doors slid open. He walked the length of the hall toward Amanda's room.

He looked inside. She appeared to be asleep. He stepped quietly into the room and sat down in the chair next to her bed. She stirred slightly, a small sigh escaping her lips.

As he watched her, he couldn't help but wonder how she had fallen in love with him. They had a great friendship, but he wasn't the easiest person in the world to deal with, and she hadn't hesitated to tell him so on occasion.

In a lot of ways, he realized suddenly, Leslie reminded him of Amanda. Besides the obvious physical similarities, Leslie was also kind and gregarious, not self-absorbed like so of the many women he'd previously dated.

When had his tastes changed so dramatically? Was it due to his relationship with Amanda? Reluctantly, he admitted that he felt a physical attraction to her. He'd never had a friendship with a woman that hadn't resulted in a physical relationship. But he'd never allowed himself to even think of Amanda in those terms.

He did so now, studying her delicate features. She really was beautiful. Her lips seemed to ask to be kissed, and he could imagine them curving into a teasing smile. Laying his hand beside hers, he marveled at how small and fragile hers looked. But looks could be deceiving; Amanda had proven to be a very strong and self-reliant woman.

It had taken him a long time to appreciate her qualities and abilities, but once he'd begun to accept her, he'd been constantly amazed at her. She had a unique but effective way of dealing with difficult situations. Her ability to think fast and act faster had saved their lives more times than he could count. She had natural instincts that it took agents years to acquire.

And yet, on the other hand, she was a great mother, a member of the PTA, had a house in the suburbs, was a terrific cook, coached little league and more.

She was a complex, fascinating blend of so many different facets that he knew there was even more to her than he knew about. Suddenly, he found himself wanting to find out.

He realized that he knew very little about her as a woman. He knew Amanda the friend, the partner, the mother, the daughter, the listener, the antagonist . . . but he didn't know Amanda the woman.

What kind of perfume did she wear? He liked it, but what was it? Did she like to take bubble baths, like her mother? What did she like to read?

Her hand twitched, then curled, grasping the bed sheet. Looking up at her face, he saw her eyelids flutter open. For a few seconds, she blinked as though trying to wake up and clear her vision. Then, turning her head, she looked at him.

"Lee?"

"Hey," he said, his voice gravelly with emotion. "How're you feeling?"

"Better, I guess." She rearranged the sheet, pulling it up higher around her shoulders. "Kind of cold," she explained.

"Do you need another blanket?" he asked.

She closed her eyes, considering his question. "That would be nice, if it wouldn't be too much trouble . . . "

"No," he assured her. Standing, he moved to the other side of the room to a tall cabinet. Finding a soft blanket, he unfolded it and laid it over her. "How's that?"

"Good, thanks." She offered him a small smile. "Lee . . . what happened? I remember now that there was . . . an interrogation, but I didn't think I'd feel so terrible afterward."

Deciding that it was better to be honest with her, he briefly explained what had happened, carefully omitting the details of the interrogation session itself. He explained how Francine had found information on La Croix.

She shook her head, giving him a rueful look. "Goes along with my great track record, huh?"

"Hey . . . You didn't know. There's no way you could have known about him," he told her firmly.

"So, how'd the questioning go, anyway?" she asked. "You'd think I'd remember \*something\* about it."

He hadn't expected her to ask about it so soon. "Umm . . . It was fine. You're not under suspicion anymore, of course, so you don't have to worry about that."

She looked at him pleadingly. "But . . . I don't remember anything, Lee. I hate that feeling. Is there . . . Is there a transcript I could have?"

Alarmed, he thought quickly. He should have known she'd want to know what had transpired. "No, actually they don't make that available. Sorry."

Obviously disappointed, she sighed. "Oh."

Dr. McJohn entered the room, cocking his head at Lee. "Keeping my patient awake, Scarecrow? She needs her rest, you know."

Guiltily, Lee looked at Amanda. He'd hoped to stay with her for a while, but obviously he wasn't going to be able to.

He wanted to take her hand in his, but refrained from doing so. "Look, I'll see you tomorrow, Amanda. Just get some rest. I'm sure you'll feel better in the morning."

"I hope so." Her eyes closed. "I'm getting sleepy again."

"I'll see you tomorrow, then, huh?"

She nodded. "Yeah. See you tomorrow."

~~~~~

Mentally and emotionally exhausted, Lee stepped into his apartment and pulled off his jacket. Dropping it on the arm of the couch, he headed into the bedroom. After changing into sweats and a T-shirt, he rummaged in his kitchen for something to eat.

He decided on a sandwich and settled down on the living room sofa, flipping on the television. Finding nothing of interest, he turned it off again and sighed.

Amanda King was in love with him. Whether or not he wanted to face it, and whether or not she knew it yet, it would have to be dealt with sooner or later. How would it affect their partnership? How would it affect their friendship?

What would he do if she told him she loved him? He honestly didn't know. Resuming his rumination from earlier in the day, he tried again to honestly analyze his feelings for her. The fact that Leslie had attracted him because she reminded him of Amanda was inescapable. How could he ever face Leslie again, knowing that?

He'd already admitted to himself that he was physically -- yes, sexually -- attracted to Amanda. There had been a few times on an assignment when he'd kissed her, not necessarily for cover, but because it was a good excuse to see how kissing her would feel. It had felt . . . right. He hadn't allowed himself to admit it, until now.

He'd always found her attractive; she was very pretty. But the fact that she was a mother -- and his partner -- had always stopped him from going beyond that.

When had that barrier crumbled? When had he allowed himself to imagine kissing her, holding her in his arms? Was it simply curiosity, or did it go beyond that?

He set the plate down on the table and leaned back. Closing his eyes, he conjured up an image of her in his mind. Yes, there was no doubt that he found her fascinating. His heartbeat sped up noticeably as he envisioned himself pulling her body against his and kissing her lips.

His eyes flew open, and he reached for his beer, taking a long swig and downing half the bottle. Reluctantly he realized that there was something there -- below the surface, but definitely there. How far below? What did it mean?

Thinking of her voice, he smiled slightly. She had such a sexy voice. He could imagine her leaning over, whispering into his ear, her teeth teasing his earlobe as she slowly . . .

Shaking his head, he stood abruptly and strode into the kitchen, discarding his half-eaten dinner. Carrying the beer with him into the bathroom, he stared at himself in the mirror.

His eyes looked wild, his skin flushed. He ran water into the sink and splashed it onto his face, then into his hair. Toweling off, he felt like his entire world had been turned upside-down and inside-out.

His partner was in love with him. And he? What was he . . . in lust with her? Surely he couldn't be as shallow as that. But if he wasn't, what was he? Curious? No . . . he respected her far too much to be idly curious.

Whatever it was, he wasn't ready to face it. The idea of any relationship scared him. The idea of a relationship with Amanda petrified him. The fact that he was even thinking about a relationship with Amanda was completely absurd, and yet . . . it wasn't.

Sighing, he realized that he had a lot of thinking and soul-searching to do. The actuality that he was considering such a thing, though, told him volumes about himself. It was too much to digest.

Looking at the clock, he saw that it was only shortly after nine-thirty. It was going to be a long night. He had a sudden desire to call her. In spite of the fact that she was the cause of his disquietude, he needed to hear her voice. Picking up the phone, he dialed the Agency number.

## **Chapter Six**

Amanda had tumbled in and out of sleep for hours. Every time she closed her eyes, she tried to remember something . . . anything . . . from the interrogation. Then, once she

would fall asleep, her dreams would haunt her to the point that she woke up, her heart racing, her hands clutching the sheets as though they were a lifeline. But she could never remember the dreams.

The fact that people were constantly in and out of her room checking her IV line and monitoring her vitals added to her restlessness.

Lee had told her that the Agency didn't make transcripts of interrogations available, but she felt extremely skeptical about that. She was the one they had interrogated; what did they care if she read it after the fact? Why was he reluctant to let her read a transcript of her own interrogation?

Just on the brink of slumber, she was startled by the ringing of the telephone. Fumbling for it in the dark, she finally found it on the fourth ring.

"Hello?"

"Mrs. King, Mr. Stetson is calling for you. Would you like to take the call?" the Agency operator asked.

"Yes." She waited a moment and then heard the click of the line.

Before she could say anything, she heard Lee's voice. "Amanda?"

"Hi, Lee."

"I was just calling to make sure you're doing okay. How're you feeling?"

She smiled, warmed by his concern. "Well, I'm having a hard time sleeping, and I still feel sort of out of it."

She heard him sigh and then say, "I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault. I'm glad you called."

"I wanted to stay with you a while longer tonight. I'm sorry they kicked me out. Is there anything you need?"

"No, but thanks. It's sweet of you to ask."

"Well, you're welcome." He paused. "So . . . I guess I'd better let you get some sleep. You call me if you need to, no matter what time it is," he said firmly.

"Thanks, Lee, I will."

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She was having difficulty remembering where she was. Jones's voice, persistently hammering away at her with questions, insinuations, and accusations, was reverberating like an echo in a cave.

He kept asking her about Lee. Why? Was he trying to blame Lee for treason, too? 'Who is Lee Stetson to you? Who is Lee Stetson to you? Who is Lee Stetson to you?' The same question, over and over, like a broken record.

When would this be over? She felt as though her lungs would implode, explode, or simply cease working. Shaking her head from side to side, she tried to wake herself.

'Who is Lee Stetson to you?' Louder now, the voice was increasingly insistent. What should she say? Lee was her friend, her partner. He was a very special person in her life. What did it matter to Dr. Jones?

'He's my partner. My friend.' Apparently, that answer was not enough, for the question grew louder, more demanding. Her heart began to pump faster and faster; she could hear it as if it were volleying back and forth between her ears.

A deep sense of foreboding seeped over her, like an eclipse overshadowing over the sun. She tried to escape it, to move out of its reach, but it followed her relentlessly.

The voice disappeared. Only blackness remained, overwhelming even her thoughts. Her hands hurt, and she realized that her nails were digging into the flesh of her palms.

As the blackness lifted, she was left with a sensation of having betrayed herself. She hadn't said anything, had she? She must have; she could feel it deep down.

Love. Love? What about it?

Once the darkness had completely faded into light, she looked down at her hands to inspect her sore palms. Her right hand, however, was completely enfolded in a much larger one. Looking up, she found that Lee was beside her, a questioning smile on his face.

'What?' she asked.

His thumb caressed the back of her hand. 'You never told me.'

'Told you what?'

He spoke, but she couldn't hear him. She strained to catch the words, and she could see his lips moving, but no sound reached her ears.

'You're in love with him.' Jones's voice again, quiet, as though coming from a great distance.

'Yes.'

\*\*\*\*\*

With a gasp, she sat up in bed. Again, she knew that her dream had upset her, but couldn't recall why. This time, it had something to do with Lee.

Lee. She missed him, missed his reassuring presence. Just having him there with her had made her feel not quite so alone. His obvious concern had been touching.

Blinking, she looked around the dark hospital room. With a sigh, she decided that she might as well try to go back to sleep. It wouldn't be morning for hours, and she still felt exhausted.

She considered calling Lee. After all, he'd told her to if she needed him. He was probably asleep, though, and she didn't want to cause him to worry needlessly.

Closing her eyes, she pulled the covers up to just under her chin and rolled onto her side. Enjoying the warm feeling of being completely cocooned, she felt herself drifting to sleep.

When she awoke again after a peaceful sleep, it was late morning. Attributing the fact that she'd slept so late to her fitful night, she rolled onto her back and stared at the ceiling.

Dr. McJohn had told her she could go home today. Determinedly, she sat up in bed and then swung her legs over the edge. Standing, she tested herself and found that the dizziness of yesterday was gone, as was her headache. Anxious to get home, she located her clothing in a closet and stepped into the bathroom.

Waiting for the water in the shower to get hot, she studied herself in the mirror. She didn't look too much worse for the wear, except for the fact that her hair was flat and her face void of makeup.

"Fetching," she murmured, allowing the hospital gown to fall from her body.

The steaming spray from the shower felt heavenly. She took longer than usual, letting the water pound the tension from her aching shoulders and neck.

Wrapping a towel around herself, she stepped out and dried off, wishing she had her hair dryer with her. Once she was dressed, she applied what make-up she had in her purse and combed her hair back from her face.

Opening the door, she was surprised to see Lee sitting on the edge of her bed.

"I thought for a moment that you'd already left," he remarked, smiling.

She self-consciously put her hand up to her hair. "Well, I couldn't wait to take a shower and get dressed. Now all I want to do is go home."

"I'll drive you," he offered. "Billy wasn't going to let you go home yet, but last night they found La Croix. He confessed to everything, including tampering with your injections. You won't have to worry about him anymore."

She exhaled in relief. "Good. I hadn't even thought about the possibility that they'd keep me here. What happened? Where'd they find him? What did he say?"

He glanced at his watch. "I'll tell you all about it later. Listen, I'll go find McJohn and have him sign your release form, then we'll get going, huh?"

"Okay." She smiled. "Thanks, Lee."

~~~~~  
~ Three days later ~  
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Lee sat at his desk in the Q Bureau, going over Thomas La Croix's case file. After Amanda signed it, they'd be finished with the whole ordeal, or so he hoped.

It still infuriated him that La Croix had used Amanda and endangered her life. When he'd stopped by her house the other night to fill her in on all that had happened, he hadn't included the details of his own visit to the traitor.

He'd had a difficult time talking to her, under the awkward circumstances. It just wouldn't leave him alone; every time he looked at her, he heard those words again: 'I'm in love with him.' Every time he'd looked into her eyes, he'd found himself searching for evidence of her feelings.

Since the interrogation, he'd been doing a lot of soul-searching. He'd reached the conclusion that eventually he would have pursued a relationship with Amanda. His social life had changed drastically, and now that he'd analyzed himself, he knew that he compared women he met to Amanda, which is why Leslie O'Connell had measured up favorably.

Being faced head-on with the knowledge that his partner was in love with him had hastened the revelation of his own emotions. It had been a struggle coming to terms with the situation, and he was still having a hard time. But the truth was, he was attracted to her. She was beautiful, yes, but aside from that, he enjoyed her company. She was intelligent, sincere, kind, honest, open . . . everything he wanted in a . . .

Girlfriend? The very idea sounded strange to him. He'd had what he'd always thought of as lady friends -- no one constant and exclusive person, no one to have a steady relationship with. Just . . . fun and companionship.

No, he'd have to take one thing at a time. All he knew was that he was unable to get her off his mind.

Checking the time, he decided to go downstairs and see if she was in yet. He hadn't realized how much time had passed as he'd sat there, ignoring his report in favor of thinking about his partner.

He headed down the stairs to the Georgetown foyer, stepping into the elevator. On the way, he tried to quell the anticipation at seeing her and hoped she hadn't called in. Billy had given her a couple of days off, but she was due back today.

He'd see if she wanted to come along with him today; he could use the help, and he wanted her company. Maybe they could catch lunch together.

Stepping into the hall, he headed toward the bullpen. He caught sight of her at her desk and smiled. Eagerly, he walked in her direction.

Drawing closer, it became obvious that she was upset about something. She hadn't spotted him yet, so he had a moment to observe her. Her head was bent down, and it appeared that she was reading something. She was holding one hand up to her face, shielding it from view.

Finally, he stepped closer to her, knocking lightly on the cubicle wall. "Hey. Nice to see you back at work," he said.

She looked up at him quickly. It was clear that she hadn't been expecting him. He took in her reddened cheeks and discomfited demeanor. Her hands were shaking as she closed the thick folder she held.

Clutching it to her chest, she muttered without looking at him, "Excuse me, Lee. I, um . . . Excuse me. Could you please tell Mr. Melrose that . . . that I w-was feeling sick and that . . . that I went home?" Not waiting for his reply, she stood and nearly ran away from him, rushing toward the elevator.

Wondering what had her so disturbed, he almost ran after her. But it was clear that she wanted to be alone, so he stayed where he was.

"Swallow a crow?"

Turning, he came face to face with Dr. Smyth. He stood, puffing at his cigarette contentedly. "Where's the little woman? I thought she'd be right here, combing through her interrogation transcript."

Lee stared at him, feeling the blood rush from his face. "You gave her a copy? Why?! Did she request one?"

Smyth raised his eyebrows. "I met her in the hallway, and she asked me if she could have a copy. I had my secretary deliver one to her. After all, if she doesn't remember a thing, that's got to be disconcerting. I think she has a right to know what went on." He turned and headed toward Billy's office.

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Amanda shook her head. It was no wonder Lee had told her that it wasn't possible for her to obtain a copy of the interrogation transcript. He must have been extremely relieved when she didn't remember anything she'd said.

She'd been so openly exposed, so vulnerable, and they'd ruthlessly taken advantage of that fact. And Lee had been there the entire time, hearing every word. How could they continue to work together, he feeling uncomfortable and she completely humiliated?

How could she continue working for the Agency when they had so little regard for her privacy? Would they now trust her, or if another opportunity came up, would they invade her mind and heart once again?

It had been something of a shock to see in writing her declaration of love for Lee. She knew that she had strong feelings for him, but she'd always kept them in check, being careful not to reveal anything. She had never harbored any serious hope that he would one day feel the same way toward her; they were simply too different. How many times had he reminded her that they weren't involved? He was her friend, and he wanted her to know that their relationship went no further than that.

Grateful that her mother was out shopping and that her sons were at school for the next few hours, she had driven home. He wouldn't follow her; by now he would know she'd read the report and would be as mortified as she was.

Sooner or later, she would have to face him. Either to assure him that she would act no differently toward him and plead with him to forget he ever heard what she'd said, or to say goodbye to both him and the Agency.

Opening the folder again, she reread the entire section where Dr. Jones had delved into her subconscious so ruthlessly.

Interrogator: How do you feel about Mr. Stetson?

Subject: He's my best friend.

I: I'll repeat the question, Mrs. King. How do you feel about Lee Stetson?

S: I feel . . . I feel . . .

I: Come on, Mrs. King. Dig deep down into your subconscious; the answer is there. Tell me how you feel about Lee Stetson.

S: I . . . love him.

I: By 'love him,' do you mean you love him as a friend and partner?

S: Yes.

I: But you also mean something more, don't you? Lee Stetson is very special to you. You've been working with him for more than two years, now. Tell me what else you mean when you say that you love him.

S: I'm in love with him.

Amanda stared at the file. She knew it was true. Somehow, she'd known all along. But in convincing Lee and everyone else that she had no romantic attachment to him, she'd also managed to convince herself.

I: And is Lee Stetson in love with you?

S: No.

I: And you resent him for that, don't you? You're jealous over him to the point that you're willing to betray him.

S: No.

I: Why are you crying?

S: I'm not crying.

I: There are tears escaping your eyes, Mrs. King, indicating that you are, indeed, crying.

S: He can't know. I don't want him to know.

Unable to read any further, she closed the folder and shoved it under her purse. She would have to find a way to shred or burn it. Perhaps then, she'd be able to move forward and away from this chapter in her life.

There was still the problem of Lee, though. She almost felt more sorry for him. Having been on the receiving end of unwanted affection herself, she could sympathize. It was especially difficult when it was a close friend. Things could never truly be the same again.

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Somehow, Lee got through the day. All he wanted to do was find Amanda and talk to her, but both the certainty that she'd want to be left alone and his confusion over his own feelings stopped him.

Arriving back at home, he checked his answering machine in the hope that she'd called, but there were no messages. He thought about calling her, but couldn't bring himself to pick up the phone.

He settled on the couch with his Chinese take-out and wondered how she was doing. He could only imagine how she was feeling right now, especially after all the times he'd warned her that they weren't involved, that agents don't get emotionally involved.

The truth was, *he* was emotionally involved. Ever since he'd committed treason to get her back from the Russians, he'd known that he was emotionally involved with Amanda King. His stern speeches whenever they'd had to get close during a case were as much for his own benefit as for hers, maybe more.

And now? Did he love her? Yes, he reasoned, he thought he might. She was an important part of his life, a very good friend. She'd saved his life as many times as he'd saved hers. He wasn't accustomed to feeling love for anyone, though, and wasn't sure how to define it.

But *in* love with her? The question left him with a knot in his stomach, and he set aside his container of sweet and sour pork. He admitted to himself that he had strong emotions for Amanda. He felt protective, responsible, and a host of other feelings.

She loved him. Despite everything, she was in love with him. He'd never been able to bring himself to believe that anyone would ever truly love him. He was filled, suddenly, with new feelings of wonder and good fortune. That a woman like her would fall in love with the likes of him was truly amazing.

And, yes, he felt physically attracted to her, more in the last few months than ever before. But he'd constantly reminded himself that she was off-limits.

The more he got to know her, the more he liked what he saw. He enjoyed being around her; in fact, he found reasons to be around her, having her with him on cases, dropping by her house.

Often he found himself reaching for her hand, feeling a need for the contact. The feel of her palm against his . . . it was comforting, companionable, and sometimes made him long for even closer contact with her.

Did all this mean that he was in love with Amanda? No. It couldn't. But was he falling in love with her? The more he thought about it, the more he realized that it was a definite possibility.

He wished he could talk all of this over with her. Ironically, if it involved anyone else, he would have. Had this not happened, and he had gone out with Leslie, would he have sought advice from his partner? Would he have told her how great his new 'girlfriend' was?

Cringing, he leaned back against the couch. Thinking of Leslie, he knew that he'd never reschedule their missed date. Spotting the corner of one of his black books on the coffee table, he pulled it out from under the stack of magazines and flipped through it. He was only slightly surprised to find that none of the women listed held any appeal for him anymore.

He wanted to call Amanda, though, or at the very least, to see her. For a moment, he considered driving over to her house just to catch a glimpse of her, but he resisted. He didn't know if, once there, he could keep from knocking on her window.

How many times over the last couple of years had he stopped by? Sometimes she would join him outside for a few minutes, but other times, he had just watched her. He'd watched her with her family, or cleaning the kitchen alone, and a few times he'd even eavesdropped on her conversations with that dull weatherman. Dean had never been right for Amanda.

No one had ever been right for Amanda. The only thing he'd ever felt regarding any of the men she'd dated was irritation. He always felt a strange satisfaction whenever he heard that a fellow agent had asked her out and been turned down.

He tried to picture her with a boyfriend, but became annoyed even with the man he conjured up. Then out of curiosity, he pictured her with him. Why did that not bother him? Why did he continue to let the scenario play out in his mind?

It was easy to let his imagination run wild as he saw himself kissing her and holding her close. He thought back to their assignment on the cruise ship and again saw her in her white lace gown. He pictured her in his cabin after the ceremony. Turning her around, he unzipped the dress, his fingers grazing her soft skin.

He leaned down and planted a kiss in the crook of her neck and felt her melt into him. Peeling the dress from her body, he could see her luminous body, attired in revealing white lingerie . . .

Shaking himself, he sat upright. His heart was pounding against his ribcage and his breathing had grown erratic. Sighing, he forced his mind from its dangerous course and picked up the half-empty cartons of food.

He might not be in love with Amanda King, but he definitely couldn't dismiss the possibility that it could happen quite easily, if he allowed it to.

Setting the leftovers into the refrigerator, he made up his mind to at least go and see her. The sooner they talked, the better things would be. He still had no idea what he was going to say, but he hoped it would come to him once he was there.

## **Chapter Seven**

Amanda had been thoroughly distracted all evening. All through dinner, her mother had been asking her if everything was okay. What could she say? 'Oh, sure, Mother, everything's just fine. Except for the fact that when I was strung out on truth serum at work the other day, I told the world that I'm in love with my partner, who is anything but in love with me. And speaking of Lee, have I mentioned to you how many women he dates?'

So she had insisted that everything was fine and that she was simply tired. After cleaning up the kitchen, her mother rushed upstairs to get ready for her date, while Amanda made sure the boys got started on their homework.

Now she was downstairs alone, taking advantage of the quiet. Picking up a book, she tried to concentrate, but found that she had read four pages without comprehending one line. Sighing, she laid the book aside and leaned back on the couch, wishing there were a way out of her current predicament.

There would be no tap on her window tonight, and maybe no other night. What must Lee be thinking? How pathetic must she seem? Embarrassment and shame welled up within her afresh.

How was she going to face him at work? The same questions and misgivings continued to circle in her mind. How would she handle it if the shoe were on the other foot? What if she had inadvertently found out that a co-worker for whom she had no feelings was in love with her? She might do everything in her power to avoid that person. Then again, she would probably act as if it had never happened, just be friendly and normal.

That's probably what Lee would do, she reasoned, but it wouldn't do anything to alleviate her humiliation. How could she ever look him in the eye again? What if he requested to be

assigned a new partner? It might be for the best after all. Otherwise, this . . . this thing would be there between them all the time, just waiting to be recalled.

"Okay, Darling," her mother stepped into the family room and twirled in her red dress. "What do you think of my new rags?"

Amanda smiled. "You look beautiful, Mother. I'm sure you'll be the belle of the ball."

"Thank you. I hope my date agrees!" She beamed, securing her wrap around her shoulders.

The doorbell sounded, and she grinned. "That's my cue."

"Have a wonderful time, Mother."

Alone again, Amanda puzzled over what she would say to Lee. She'd been in some awkward -- yes, humiliating -- situations before, but this one took the cake. This was Lee. He was a confirmed bachelor, a ladies' man, a playboy. There was no way they could ever be together. They were complete opposites.

Lee ran in circles she only read about. Instead of renting a tuxedo, he owned one. Instead of driving through Marvelous Marvin's, he dined at restaurants whose names she couldn't pronounce. On more than a few occasions, he'd expressed scorn about her lifestyle, and she didn't think much of his, either.

Even if he were physically attracted to her, and he'd never given the slightest indication that he was, a relationship with him would be out of the question. Or was she just trying to convince herself that loving him was pointless?

Maybe she could plead ignorance with him. 'I have no idea what I was talking about, Lee. Really, if those feelings are there, they must be so deep that they belong to a different personality.' Or, 'Jones was asking such leading questions; he must have confused me.'

Or maybe she could simply play it off as no big deal. 'Well, of course I'm in love with you. You didn't know? Don't worry about it; I don't.'

Just what was the socially acceptable way to extricate oneself from such a sticky situation? Miss Manners had never covered this one. Amanda supposed she could just never return to the Agency. That would give him the easiest out possible. But could she bear never seeing him again?

She didn't relish the idea of hunting for another job, either. There was no doubt that she would regret leaving the Agency. Even though they had turned against her, upon reflection, she'd realized that they'd felt that they had to do. They had a responsibility to take care of their organization and its operatives, and they had fulfilled it. Taking it personally would get her nowhere.

What then, a transfer to another department? But then she wouldn't be working in the field; she'd be behind a desk or something equally distasteful and dreary. Would Billy assign her to work with a different agent?

There didn't seem to be an acceptable solution to the problem. The best she could do was wait and gauge Lee's attitude when she saw him. She was determined to put that off for as long as she could, though. She had some vacation days coming; maybe she could take the rest of the week off, and . . .

The sudden sound of knocking at her window startled her. Staring straight ahead, she pretended not to have heard. Why hadn't she gone upstairs to her bedroom when she'd had the chance? She'd been so sure that he wouldn't come by; what was he doing here?

He knocked again, clearly determined to speak to her. Closing her eyes, she sighed, feeling her heart begin to pound in trepidation. She stood and walked over to the foot of the stairs.

"Fellas? I'll be outside for a little while, okay?" she called, hearing her voice crack.

"Okay, Mom," they answered.

She paused. "Are you still doing your homework?"

"Yep," Jamie called.

Phillip took a few seconds to answer. "I'm getting back to mine right now."

"Put the video game down, Phillip."

The temptation to go upstairs and hide in her bedroom was nearly overwhelming. Taking a deep breath, she grabbed a sweater from the closet, walked over to the back door, and reluctantly stepped outside.

She didn't see him at first and hoped that he'd left. Maybe when she'd walked over to the stairs, he'd thought she was going up to ignore him. Maybe . . .

~~~~~

He'd watched her for a long while before tapping at her window. She'd obviously been deep in thought and she had looked indescribably sad. Finally, he hadn't been able to wait any longer and had knocked.

She'd come out now, but because he'd moved back into the shadows, she couldn't see him. He heard her sigh with apparent relief as she reached for the door handle to go back inside.

It was now or never. He came forward. "Hi there."

Jumping, she recovered quickly. "Hi," she said cautiously.

She looked edgy, like she was expecting the worst. Her skin was tinged with pink, indicating her embarrassment. He was startled at the emotional reaction it pulled from him.

"I, uh, I wanted to stop by and see how you're feeling," he said lamely.

She shrugged and raised her eyebrows. "I feel fine, thank you." Her tone was strangely distant.

"Good," he nodded. "Good. Billy said he hopes you're feeling better."

"Well, I am." She looked at him expectantly, as if asking him to get to the point.

"Will you be in to work tomorrow?" he asked, hearing the hopeful quality in his own voice.

She looked down at the ground, crossing her arms over her chest. Her hands were tucked into the ends of her sweater sleeves, making her appear small and vulnerable. "I . . . I don't think so. I was thinking of taking some . . . time, to think. To see what I want to do."

"What do you mean?" He moved forward. "What you want to do about what?"

She shrugged again. "Oh, you know, I've been thinking of doing something different, that it might be time for a change. It might be a good thing." Without saying it in so many words, she was begging him to understand.

He didn't want to understand what she was saying, though. There was no way he was going to lose his partner. "Different how? Within the Agency? Or . . . somewhere else?" His

heart had begun to pound; he was willing to swear she could see his chest palpitating through his jacket.

"I'm not sure. Like I said, I've just been thinking about it . . . today." She met his gaze, and it seemed to him as though it were painful for her to do so.

He shouldn't have come. He wasn't ready to discuss this any more than she was. Realizing it at this late stage didn't do anything for either of them, though.

"Amanda, look," he began, and immediately saw her raise her guard. "Don't . . . make any drastic decisions yet. I'm sure that things will work out just fine. Let a few days pass, and maybe you'll feel differently about things."

She frowned, drawing her arms more tightly about her. "I don't see how that can be possible. Do you?"

There. She'd alluded to what was on both of their minds, without compromising herself. Trying to put himself in her position, he nodded. "Yes . . . Yes, I do. Just don't . . . Just don't leave . . . Please."

Neither agreeing nor dissenting, she edged toward the door. "Listen, if you didn't need anything else tonight, I should get back inside. Mother's out for the evening, and the boys have probably abandoned their homework for television."

With every nerve in his body screaming for him to stop her, take her in his arms and kiss her, he simply nodded, gesturing at the door. "Yeah, you'd, ah . . . better . . ."

"Goodnight, then."

It was as if she couldn't get inside fast enough. He watched her as she hurried up the stairs, disappearing from his sight.

"Great, Stetson, just great." He sighed in agitation and then headed for his car.

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The next morning, after a nearly sleepless night, Amanda dressed and prepared for work. She hadn't planned on going in, but the worst was over; she'd already had to face Lee. He'd seemed anxious to put her admission behind them, so maybe things wouldn't be quite as bad as she'd imagined.

As soon as she got there, she started in on the stack of files and typing jobs piled high on the corner of her desk. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Lee watching her, but she pretended not to notice. If only he'd stop acting like he pitied her, she could get on with her life.

Footfalls behind her caused her to turn. Dr. Smyth stood there, a malevolent grin on his face. "Well, King, enjoy the transcript?" he asked.

"Yes, thank you, Dr. Smyth. It was very interesting." She turned away with as much dignity as she could muster and heard him chuckle as he strode down the hall.

Shaking her head, she went back to the files. If that was how Dr. Smyth entertained himself, she thought, it was no wonder he was such an odd man.

She still didn't feel comfortable, but she also didn't feel that it was the end of the world anymore . . . until Lee Stetson started walking her way, looking determined.

Feigning absorption in her reading, she kept her head down, attempting to concentrate. She heard him clear his throat and she glanced up.

"Good morning," she said.

"Hi. How're you doing?"

She took a deep breath, feeling sick. Maybe this wasn't going to work after all. "I'll be fine, as long as you stop asking me how I am," she snapped impulsively.

His face fell, and she immediately felt guilty. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean anything by it -- it was just a greeting."

"Sorry," she replied contritely. "Look, maybe we should . . . talk."

"Yeah?"

She nodded. "Can we go upstairs?"

"Okay," he agreed, somewhat nervously.

The ride up was painfully uncomfortable. Amanda kept her gaze on the floor, her arms crossed protectively across her chest. She had never in her life been this uncomfortable with him.

Once in the Q Bureau, Lee shut the door behind them and turned to face her, but then he looked at the ground, shifting from one foot to the other.

"I, uh . . . I know this is awkward, Lee, and I'm sorry. Please, can we just . . ." she paused, frustrated. She didn't usually have such a difficult time expressing herself.

"Amanda," Lee began, taking a step toward her.

Shaking her head, she held up her hand. "Lee, this is why I said what I did last night. It's going to be too awkward to work together under these . . . circumstances. I want you to know that I don't . . . I mean, well . . . Obviously, I wasn't aware of what I was saying. I can't believe he brought all of that up. And I wish . . . I really wish there was a way that we could keep this from affecting our friendship and our working together, but there's not. I just . . . I just *\*can't\**. So, I think it would be best if --"

He'd been staring at her as she spoke, looking as if he wanted to say something. She'd rushed on, though, needing to say what was on her mind. Now he interrupted her. "No. Don't say it, Amanda. We need to talk, to work some things out, but you leaving or taking a different position is *\*not\** an option here."

She sighed. "Lee, it's the *\*only\** option. Maybe you can live with the fact that I blurted out that I'm in love with you, but I can't." Had she really said that? Closing her eyes, she put a hand to her face and felt her skin burning beneath it. "Oh, my gosh."

"Amanda, wait." He caught her other hand in his. "We still need to talk about this. Just . . . maybe not here."

She could feel her hands trembling and tried to pull the one he held away, but he wouldn't let go. Feeling tears sting the back of her eyelids, she blinked rapidly to regain control and then looked him in the eye. She would *\*not\** cry in front of him.

"Please, let me go." She spoke firmly.

He shook his head. "Not until you promise to talk to me later."

Knowing he wouldn't move until she agreed, she said, "Okay, fine. I promise."

"Good." He seemed placated, but kept hold of her hand. The look in his eyes was indefinable, and she wondered what it meant. It looked as though he wanted to say something else, but he finally moved aside, releasing her. "When?"

"Excuse me?" she asked, turning from the door to face him once again.

He put his hands into his pockets. "When can we talk? Can I stop by tonight? Or can we have lunch together?"

She shook her head and took a deep breath. "I'm off at noon, and I have an appointment to go to Jamie's school for a parent-teacher conference."

"So, I'll see you tonight, then. Maybe around eight?" he asked, his voice hopeful.

Sighing, she tried again to dissuade him. "I know I'm the one that said we should talk. But maybe that was a bad idea. I just don't see what point –"

He held up a hand. "But I do. I'll see you tonight."

Resigned, she said, "Okay."

## **Chapter Eight**

Lee sat in his car, staring with trepidation at Amanda's house. He'd been sitting there for almost ten minutes. Still not sure what he was going to say to her, he decided to just go with his instincts and hope for the best.

Getting out of the Corvette, he walked resolutely, taking his customary route around to the back. It was unusually quiet for a Friday night; only one lamp dimly lit the family room. There was no sign of Amanda.

He rapped lightly on the glass, watching for any movement from within. Glancing at his watch, he saw that he was still a little early. After a few minutes, he tried again, and this time, he was rewarded with the sight of her coming down the stairs. She went through the kitchen and opened the door to let him in.

"Hello, Lee. Joe came for the boys about an hour ago, and Mother had a date, so you can come in . . . for a few minutes," she said pointedly.

He stepped inside, noting her distant manner. It was amazing how their relationship had changed so drastically; they were like two different people. They were like strangers.

"Thanks," he said. He offered her a smile, which she returned half-heartedly.

Walking ahead of him, she said stiffly, "Why don't you come into the family room?"

He followed her, his heart in his throat. "Amanda . . . "

"No, wait." She turned to face him, holding up her index finger. "Lee, I know what you're going to say, and I appreciate that you still want to work with me. But I've given this a lot of thought. I feel . . . really guilty about having changed everything between us."

When she drew a breath to continue, he lightly touched her arm. "Amanda," he began.

As if she hadn't heard him, she continued, beginning to pace. "But there's nothing I can do to take it back. What you heard during the interrogation . . . Lee, it was *\*never\** meant to be said. I honestly didn't even know that I . . . Anyway, I just don't want you to treat me any differently now that you know --"

"Amanda," he broke in. "No matter what happens, you're my partner. I don't want to work with anyone else. I won't let you quit and leave the Agency over this."

"But --"

Shaking his head, he said, "No buts. I need you to listen to me. We can't let . . . what you said . . . change things between us. We're good friends and good partners." He paused, staring at the ground and groping mentally for the right words. When they didn't come, he looked up to find her staring at him blankly.

"Lee, listen to yourself. You're just saying the same things over and over. And I guess, in a way, I'm glad that you're so . . . unaffected by all this that you just can let it go. But *\*I\** can't." She bit the corner of her lower lip, frowning slightly.

Sighing, he fought to remain focused. She thought that her admission of love left him unaffected? She couldn't be more wrong. Besides, she was the one brushing it aside as if it meant nothing. Why couldn't he say these things to her?

"I'm not . . . unaffected," he said unsteadily. "I just . . . I don't want the consequences to be that we can't work together any more, and you're acting like that's the only option."

She looked away, shaking her head. Lightly slapping her hand against her thigh in apparent agitation, she replied, "And you're acting like there's nothing awkward about this. Would you just please *\*try\** to put yourself in my place?"

"Amanda, that's all I've been doing!" He leaned his head back, feeling the tension build. "I . . . I *\*can't\** put myself in your place, because I've never been there, okay? But I've tried, and I just don't think we should let this tear us apart."

She looked at him for a long moment. "It already has," she asserted softly.

He stepped forward, close enough that he was looking down at her. Taking her by the shoulders, he said softly, "Amanda, I agree that this whole situation is very awkward. I can only imagine how you feel. But it doesn't have to ruin our friendship unless we let it. That interrogation . . . It made you say a lot of things that you normally wouldn't -- I mean, you even admitted how much you weigh."

Pausing, he gave her a small smile, but she didn't appear to find his joke funny. He sighed, trying a different tack. "I've been doing a lot of thinking since then. You . . . you really mean a lot to me. I can't lose you now, Amanda, and I won't stand for it. If you leave over this, I'm not going to leave you alone until you come back."

She stared at him, as if trying to decide what to make of his declaration. Finally, a soft, slow smile lit her face, and he felt his heart thump hopefully.

"Thank you for saying that, Lee. I just don't . . . I still don't think that it's going to work out. I'd always be wondering if you were thinking about it. It's embarrassing . . . humiliating."

He closed his eyes, tensing his jaw. Swallowing hard, he looked at her again and replied, "You shouldn't be embarrassed. I'm really grateful that you care about me so deeply. I never thought anyone would ever . . ." He stopped, realizing where his words were heading.

"See?" She smiled gently, as if talking to a young, confused child. "You can't even talk about it. I admit, I do feel a little better, but I still feel too . . . self-conscious. I just wish it could all be taken back, or that I hadn't read the transcript. Then, you would have known, but I wouldn't have. And I wouldn't have known that you know. It would've been much easier that way, at least for me."

Lee couldn't help but smile at her ramble. "Sounds pretty complicated to me," he remarked, his voice gruff with emotion. He squeezed her shoulders lightly.

"No more so than it is now," she replied, giving him a crooked smile. "Lee? What's wrong? You look . . . You look like you want to say something."

He was losing this battle fast, and he knew that if he didn't say or do something soon, he'd find himself on his way home. The problem was, he wasn't even quite sure what words should be said, or how he should say them.

Gazing at her, all his earlier thoughts about her returned, and he found himself fantasizing about kissing her. Vaguely, he wondered what she would do if he just . . . did.

Realizing that he hadn't answered her, he shook his head and swallowed hard. "Nothing."

"Well, then," she said quickly, clearly anxious for him to leave. "I guess that's that, then. I haven't really decided yet if I'm going to stay at the Agency or not. I guess I need to do some more thinking. But even if I do stay, I think it would be best if we work apart, at least for a while. I t'll take me some time to feel comfortable again. But thank you . . . for being so understanding, and . . . "

He was trying with great difficulty to concentrate on what she was saying. All he could focus on were her lips moving, her tongue periodically licking them between words. Could he risk making things worse than they already were?

". . . so I guess maybe I'll see you Monday." She raised her eyebrows and then moved past him and toward the door. He could smell her perfume, could practically feel her in his arms. She stopped, turned around, and looked at him quizzically. "Lee, are you feeling okay?"

He'd never wanted to kiss a woman as badly as he wanted to kiss her at that very moment. All doubt and thoughts of risk forgotten, he swiftly closed the distance between them, reaching out and putting one arm around her waist before she had a chance to react. Pressing her against him, he moved his other hand up and behind her neck, holding her in place.

Her eyes had grown wide in surprise. She tried to push against him, but he tightened his hold.

Her voice tremulous, she began, "Lee, what --?"

As she started to speak, he swiftly claimed her mouth, kissing her gently at first. Her lips were soft and warm beneath his. Her sounds of surprise and protestation vibrated against his mouth, but he ignored them. If he couldn't convey with words what he needed to say, he'd use whatever means were at his disposal.

For a few seconds, she pushed and struggled against him, but finally he felt her body melt against his, her hands gripping his biceps as if for support. Her breathing became labored, matching his own.

Wanting to taste her, he pressed his tongue against her lips. She gasped, and he pressed his advantage, taking the opportunity to plunder her mouth. He heard a sound somewhere between a sigh and a pleading whimper escape her throat.

His feelings for her, brought to the fore by the intimacy of the kiss, were even stronger than he'd imagined. However, he needed to rein in the physical passion that, were he to allow it, could take over that very instant. Ending the kiss, he gazed searchingly into her eyes.

She stared at him for a long moment, her face an odd mixture of passion, confusion, and . . . anger. Then, abruptly, she forcefully moved out of his embrace. Her hands clenched into fists, and she moved to the other side of the room.

He wanted to speak, to explain, but again words failed him, and he waited in agony for her to say something.

When she did speak, her voice was low and filled with indignation. "Why did you do that? I can't believe you would take advantage of --"

"Amanda," he rasped, struggling to regain control of his breathing. "Don't say that. It's not what you're thinking. This is . . . this is what I was . . . trying to put into words." Approaching her slowly, he took her hands and led her to the couch.

She regarded him uncertainly, her eyes still bearing signs of the recent passion they'd shared and her subsequent anger. Her hands trembled in his. "What you were trying to say? Lee, you're not making any sense. I don't understand . . . "

He released one hand to caress her cheek, stung when she turned her face away. "Amanda, I . . . When I heard what you said, I was surprised. But . . . I couldn't stop thinking about it. It made me feel . . . like in a way I already knew that things were starting to head in that direction for us. I did a lot of thinking, and I just . . . I just knew that eventually, we were going to be . . . more than friends. I wasn't expecting it to be so soon, but I think it was inevitable."

She shook her head, as though unable to believe him. "Lee, no. There was never any . . . I never meant to . . . I mean, how do you know that this is \*you\* feeling this way, and not you reacting to what I said? Because I never felt that -- well, I guess sometimes I did -- but for the most part, I never imagined that you would feel this way. We're so very different, Lee --"

Holding up a hand, he stopped her. "I know that. Trust me, I've thought about this from every angle, and we do have some issues to discuss. You're right; we're very different. I

just . . . I need some time to get used to the idea. I feel like things have kind of been rushed along, but I think we were already headed toward . . . something."

She leaned back, watching him, her brow furrowed as she absorbed what he was saying. Finally, she shook her head and sighed. "I don't know. This is . . . I'm still not sure --"

"I am. I'm very . . . \*very\* . . . sure." Moving toward her, he pulled her forward and into his arms.

She didn't resist, but she held herself stiffly. Regardless of her initial body language, he felt her breathing grow ragged once again in anticipation of what was to come.

"Uh, Lee?" she whispered, her lips only centimeters beneath his. He could feel her breath on his face. "I don't think this is a good . . ."

Capturing her mouth once again, he demonstrated to her how sure he was that he wanted her. He would have to work at verbal communication, but he had no problems with physical demonstration. Besides, his effort at telling her had appeared to have fallen on deaf ears.

He kissed his way from her lips to her jaw and then trailed kisses down to her neck and shoulder, hearing the catch in her breath at his attentions. He felt her body relax against his. Her fingers slid into his hair, her nails scraping along his scalp. She returned his fevered kisses with an ardor that surprised and delighted him.

Her voice, seductively plaintive, caused him to slow things down, knowing they were going too far, too fast. "Lee . . ."

He kissed her one final time and then sat up, bringing her with him. "Sorry," he told her, feigning contriteness.

She took a deep breath. "It's okay, it's just . . . This is a lot to take in, Lee. It's all so sudden . . . I think I need some time to get used to the idea, too."

He watched as she straightened her collar and hair. She smiled self-consciously, heightening the sexy appeal of her smoky eyes and flushed skin.

"Yeah," he agreed, fighting to regain control.

She nodded. "Okay. I really think we need to slow down . . . even back up a bit." She gestured between them, blushing. "I mean, that . . . That was . . ." Pausing, she looked deeply into his eyes and bit her lower lip.

"I know," he agreed. Those few moments of abandon had been remarkably intense; he was glad that she had felt it, too. "We'll take things as slow as you want to."

"I'd like . . ." She paused again, regarding him uncertainly. "I'd like to pretend that things had happened differently. I mean -- If that interrogation had never taken place, and we both feel the way we do, then I think you're right -- things would have taken their own course. I know that we can't change what happened, but we can --"

He nodded, relieved that she felt the same way he did. "We can pretend. Let things happen as they happen. Give us both some time to do some thinking . . ." He trailed off, knowing no more needed to be said. They'd take things slowly, and when the time was right, they'd both know.

"Exactly," she agreed.

"And when we're both ready . . ." He paused. ". . . When we're both ready, you and I will have a lot to talk about." He grinned and leaned over and kissed her forehead. "Maybe it'll turn out that the interrogation wasn't such a bad thing after all."

"What interrogation?" she whispered with an impish grin.

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Monday morning, Amanda lay in bed, thinking about the previous week's events. She was still reeling from all that had happened. Emotionally, it had been both bad and good, both costly and beneficial.

When Lee had come over Friday night, she'd expected that by the time he left, she would no longer be his partner or friend. She couldn't have been more wrong. His distinctive method of communicating had left her pleasantly amazed.

Their agreement to back up and let things progress naturally had been a wise one. Knowing what she was missing out on in the meantime, however, it was going to be a bit of a challenge. If he could elicit the kind of feelings from her that he had with one kiss, then -

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That was exactly the kind of thinking that would get her into trouble. It was enough to know that she wasn't alone in her feelings. True, Lee Stetson might not be in love with her, but he'd demonstrated that he had intense feelings for her. In fact, demonstration seemed to be one of his strong suits.

Again she shook off her train of thought. It would be a while before they engaged in such enjoyable . . . communication again.

She dressed quickly, pinned up her hair, and applied some makeup. Grabbing her purse from her bedside, she noticed the interrogation transcript peeking out from under the bed.

With a grin, she picked it up, took it into her closet, and found a hiding place for it. The terrible need to destroy it no longer plagued her.

She arrived at the Agency, surprised to see Lee's car already parked out front. After obtaining her badge from Mrs. Marston, she took the elevator down to the bullpen.

Catching sight of Lee in Billy's office, she felt her heart speed up a little, as it always did when she saw him. She walked over to her desk and set her things down, then checked her messages, wondering what the day held for her.

Casually, she glanced in the direction of the section chief's office again. It appeared that Lee and Billy were involved in a serious discussion; Lee was leaning forward, speaking earnestly.

"Good morning, Amanda."

She turned to see Francine standing beside her desk, watching her with what seemed to be a mixture of admiration and pity.

"Oh, good morning, Francine. I never got to thank you for all you did for me last week. I really felt a lot better knowing you were in that monitoring room."

The blond smiled, reaching out to pat Amanda on the shoulder. "No problem. I couldn't believe they suspected \*you\* of being a double agent; you're not even an agent to begin with. But I do admire your pluck, being able to come back here like this, after all that's happened."

Amanda shrugged. "Oh, well, I thought about it a lot, and I know that they were just doing what they had to do. It could have happened to anyone."

Francine nodded thoughtfully. "True, but you \*do\* seem to have a talent for getting yourself into trouble." Before Amanda could respond, she went on. "But I wasn't talking about that. I was talking about your . . ." She lowered her voice significantly, looking around before she finished, ". . . little confession."

Amanda cocked her head as if at a loss. "Oh! Well, you know, a hundred and fourteen pounds at my age is a pretty enviable weight. I wasn't too bothered by that."

Francine stared at her, taken aback. Dropping her voice to a whisper, she said, "No, dear, I meant . . . your \*other\* confession." She raised her eyebrows suggestively.

Pursing her lips, Amanda glanced up to the ceiling. "My other confession. I'm not sure I know what you mean, Francine. Could you be more specific? Maybe refresh my memory?"

"Well, I thought there might be something that would maybe . . . affect your working with Lee," she replied, her tone leading.

"Really?" Amanda raised her voice and eyebrows in surprise. "Wow. I really can't think what you could mean."

"Oh." Francine suddenly looked uncomfortable. "Well, if you don't . . . I mean, I thought you'd read the transcript."

Amanda nodded. "Oh, I did. I asked Dr. Smyth about it, and he arranged for me to have a copy. I read the whole thing twice. Do you have a copy, too, Francine? What page is my 'little confession' on?" She leaned forward confidentially.

Francine stared at her, her mouth gaping. She laughed nervously and then said, "Oh, never mind. I guess if you don't feel that there was anything . . . especially delicate . . . then there's no problem."

"No problem that I know of, Francine," she affirmed.

Lee walked up behind them. "Good morning, Amanda . . . Francine. There's a problem? Anything I can help with?"

"Uh, no," Francine answered, her voice unusually high. "No problem here. Well, I guess I'll get to work. See you two later." She spun around and hurried away from them.

"What was that all about?" he asked, giving Amanda a quizzical grin.

She smiled back. "Oh, nothing. Just a little friendly concern."

"Uh-huh." He regarded her skeptically, his head to one side as if trying to decide whether or not he should pursue the matter. "Anyway, Billy would like to see you."

She was amazed at how well they'd both fallen back into an easy camaraderie. "Okay, do we have an assignment?"

"No. He'd uh . . . He'd like to see \*you\* . . . alone."

Surprised, she nodded. "Okay. Should I meet you upstairs when I'm done?"

He shook his head. "No, I'll wait right here."

It was obvious that there was something he wasn't telling her. Giving him one final questioning look, she headed for Billy's office.

"You wanted to see me, sir?"

Billy glanced up from his desk. "Yes, Amanda, please sit down. How are you feeling?"

"Oh, just fine, sir. Much better now." She smiled, waiting for him to go on.

"Good." He folded his hands on the desk, leaning forward. "I'm sorry you had to go through that. It's a difficult experience, even for an agent, and you handled it a lot better than most agents do."

"Well, thank you, sir. That's nice to hear." She smiled, again feeling as if he were leading up to something.

Getting to the point, he asked, "So . . . Is everything okay now? Dr. Smyth told me that you'd requested a copy of the transcript. It can be . . . disconcerting . . . reading things you don't remember saying."

"Oh!" She smiled, knowing now why he was concerned. He must have expected her to request a transfer, at the very least. "It is. But everything is just fine."

A relieved grin spread across his face. "I'm glad to hear it! Well, then. If you'll just go get your partner and have him join us, I have an assignment for the two of you."

"Yes, sir." She grinned back at him and then left the office.

Heading over to where Lee waited at her desk, she saw that he was watching her with a mixture of amusement and affection.

"Well," she said. "Are you ready to get back out in the field? Mr. Melrose has an assignment for us."

"I can't wait," he replied with a knowing grin.

She nodded, feeling his hand lightly rest at her back as they walked toward the office together. She caught sight of their boss, standing in the doorway watching them. He winked at her and disappeared into his office to wait for them.

Turning her attention back to her partner, she smiled and replied, "Neither can I."

**The End**