

Need to Know

By Jill Minnich

Rating: PG-13 for language and violence

Synopsis: Lee spills the beans and fireworks follow.

Time Frame: Approx. June 17, 1987 through July 10, 1987

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Part Two:

**There is no moral authority like that of sacrifice.
Nadine Gordimer, South African author**

Chapter 6

‘Boy, am I glad to be home and a day early, too!’ Amanda King thought as she handed the Budget Trans Shuttle driver three singles and took her receipt. ‘I’ve had more than enough of hotel rooms, restaurant meals, and Francine Desmond, friend or not!’ Hefting her briefcase with her left hand and slinging her carry-on bag over her shoulder, she grabbed the leash to her matching blue suitcase on wheels and started up the driveway to the back door. As she lifted the gate catch with her left elbow, she almost dropped her briefcase. Recovering her grip, she maneuvered herself and her baggage awkwardly through the back gate and up to the porch. With a sigh of relief, she set everything down for a moment in order to search through her purse for her house keys.

‘That’s funny! It’s not like Lee to leave lights on when he leaves,’ she thought as she noticed the subdued gleam of the light over the kitchen sink. Stepping up to the back door, she peered through the panes into the dimly lit kitchen. The sound of explosions and a flickering blue light from the family room indicated that the TV was also on. Amanda quickly analyzed the possibilities. She knew that her mother was still in Maine—she’d spoken with her just before she left California. The boys should be with Joe for a few more days. She hadn’t been able to reach Lee for almost two weeks, but it was highly unlikely that he would be using her family room to watch TV. She suddenly remembered her neighbor, Marge Larson, telling her that when their house was robbed last summer, the burglars made themselves right at home helping themselves to whatever they wanted in

the fridge and liquor cabinet before making off with the television and VCR not to mention all her good silver.

Rummaging through her purse once more, she retrieved her handgun and took a deep breath. Amanda slipped out of her high heels and then unlocked the door as silently as possible. Pausing on the threshold and removing the safety on her service revolver, she listened for a moment to see if her entrance had been detected. Fortunately, the gunfight on the television set covered any noise she might have made opening the door. Pacing cautiously across the kitchen floor, she stepped over the creaky board just beside the cook top and stopped. She assumed the proper stance and called with more confidence than she felt, "Come out with your hands up, whoever you are! I'm armed and I won't hesitate to shoot."

"Amanda?" a very familiar husky baritone replied in confusion. Two equally familiar hands rose from behind the couch to be followed in stages by the rest of Lee Stetson.

Adrenaline still rushing through her veins, Amanda found that every detail stood out in bold detail. He was wearing a rumpled pair of white rugby shorts and a tight black T-shirt. Lee's hair was tousled and he was unshaven. His hands still in the air, he smiled at her nervously.

"Lee! What are you doing here?" she asked in confusion.

"He's taking care of us!" Jamie informed her as he popped up from behind the couch on Lee's right.

"Yeah, ever since Dad took off for Africa," Phillip added as he stood up from the floor on Lee's left. "Wow! Is that your gun, Mom? Gnarly!"

"Uh, Amanda. Would you mind very much pointing that somewhere else, please?" Lee asked with extreme courtesy. Hands held shoulder high, he gestured pointedly at the gun barrel with his chin.

Amanda looked down and was surprised to find that she was still holding the gun braced in both hands and aimed at the center of Lee's chest just as Leatherneck had taught her. "Oh, my gosh!" she exclaimed as she put the safety back on and lowered the barrel of the thirty-eight automatic until it pointed at the floor. She did a simple deep breathing exercise and then returned her focus to the family room.

Lee had lowered his hands, but all three 'men' were standing stock still, obviously waiting for her to make the next move. Buying a little time to regain her emotional equilibrium, she restored the gun to her purse and zipped it up tight. She then folded her arms across her chest and returned to the matter at hand, "I would really appreciate it if someone would explain exactly what is going on here." She was tired, out of sorts, and in no mood for surprises. Although, it was pretty obvious what had happened here.

“Well, Joe had to go to Africa unexpectedly. He couldn’t take care of the boys, so I just kind of stayed on,” Lee offered tentatively, running one hand through his already thoroughly disordered hair.

“And this happened when?”

“Well, about two. . .” Lee began and then paused, reconsidering his answer.

Amanda just waited tapping her foot impatiently.

“Okay, almost three weeks ago,” Lee replied rather vaguely.

“I see. And just how many times would you say we’ve spoken on the telephone since Joe left for Africa, Lee?” Amanda asked in clipped tones, amply communicating her anger.

“He wanted to call you, Mom.” Jamie explained in Lee’s defense. “But we talked him out of it. We were afraid you’d come home early.”

“Right,” Phillip chimed in helpfully. “We guys had everything under control here. You were expecting us to stay with our Dad and we were. It’s just not our father who’s taking care of us; it’s our step-father.”

“Step-father?” Amanda echoed in shock. “Step-father! I really don’t believe this, Stetson. You decided to tell them that we’re married!”

Lee spread his hands in mute appeal and began, “I really didn’t have much of a choice under the circumstances. . .”

Amanda cut him off with a curt wave of her hand, “There are always choices, Lee! Boys, it’s past your bedtime. Head upstairs right this very minute. I’ll be up to check on you in a few minutes.”

The boys recognized their mother’s ‘Don’t mess with me’ tone of voice, but even so they hesitated for a moment.

“Go on, fellas. Do as your mother says,” Lee encouraged them with a wan smile and a gentle shove in the right direction. It irritated her even more that the boys turned to Lee for confirmation.

“Yes, sir.” Phillip and Jamie agreed with apparent reluctance and slowly started toward the steps to the second floor.

“And no eavesdropping tonight, understood?” Lee warned them with narrowed eyes and no trace of a smile.

Jamie opened his mouth to protest, but Phillip punched him in the arm. “We understand, Dad. No eavesdropping,” he agreed as he dragged his younger brother up the stairs behind him.

Both adults raised their eyes to the ceiling as the sound of the boys’ footsteps crossed the hall and the door of their bedroom opened, then shut behind them. Amanda finally looked back at Lee, who had yet to move from his position behind the couch. “Lee, I don’t think I’ve ever been so angry with you in all the years I’ve known you. I trusted you with the two most precious things in my life—my sons. I can’t believe you betrayed that trust and didn’t even have the courage to tell me what you’d done!” She was speaking quietly so her voice wouldn’t carry upstairs, but the intensity of her outrage still came through loud and clear. She was absolutely furious with him and he deserved it, too. He should’ve told her. She’d even asked him straight out one night if anything was wrong.

“Amanda, I’m sorry. If you’ll just let me explain. . .” Lee tried again, but without much hope.

“Unless I’m mistaken, you’ve already had several opportunities to explain, Lee. At the moment, I’m in no mood to listen to anything you may have to say to me. I am simply too angry for words. I need some time to cool off. I’m going to go upstairs and talk to my sons. I think you’d better go home.” The frost in her tone could have chilled a magnum of champagne.

“Home?” Lee asked quietly. “Amanda, I really think we need to talk about this tonight.”

“No, Lee. I don’t think that would be a very good idea at all. I’m not finished being mad at you. Go home. Now! I’ll talk to you tomorrow when I’ve had a chance to sort things through.” Amanda waited, arms still folded and foot tapping while Lee crossed the short distance between them. He stopped for a second and stretched out one hand as if to touch her arm. She took one step back and shook her head adamantly.

Lee sighed in surrender and let his hand drop to his side. He passed by her slowly, shoulders hunched and his eyes on the floor. He paused once more in the open kitchen door, looking back over his shoulder. Amanda stood like a granite cliff, impervious and unmoving. He stuck his hands in his pockets and headed out into the darkness of the summer night.

Thursday, July 2, 1987

I don't even know where to start. Tonight I returned from a very successful but stressful business trip to find my entire world turned upside down. When I walked through the back door, I discovered Lee had been taking

care of the boys for the past two weeks, not Joe as I'd arranged, and he hadn't even thought to bring it up in any of our phone conversations! Not only that, but the boys know that we're married and about the Agency! I can't believe he still didn't think that was important enough to tell me! What was he thinking? Was he even thinking at all? I was so furious I sent him home until I can get my emotions under control. Not exactly the homecoming I had in mind!

The boys were waiting for me upstairs in their room—ready for bed and ready to talk. They practically fell over one another to defend Lee. According to Phillip and Jamie, this is all their fault! How does he do that—get other people to take responsibility for him? It seems that they discovered our wedding picture and marriage certificate one afternoon when Lee left them alone in his apartment. What could've been so important that he had to leave them alone there? Phillip insists that they made Lee tell them the truth then and there. Jamie claims he knew all along that Lee wasn't in the film business. He remembered him from the school gym that day. He has such a great memory! They were just waiting for us to bring it up first. The boys feel they convinced Lee that if he told me, I'd come rushing home. I know my boys wouldn't lie to me about something as important as this, but I can't help wondering if, at the same time, they're doing their best to cover for Lee.

I guess I can understand that, under the circumstances, Lee felt it was best to tell the boys the whole truth. What I can't comprehend is why he didn't tell me what had happened at his first opportunity!

I think that's what bothers me the most. He's betrayed me on a very fundamental level. I trusted him. He kept me in the dark. He probably did it 'for my own good'. Gosh, I hate it when he gets all paternalistic on me! As if I'm not a mature, intelligent adult capable of rational thought. He forgets that I've been on my own for some time now, making my own decisions. I am an independent and capable woman. He trusts me to watch his back. Why didn't he didn't trust me enough to tell me what was going on with Joe and the boys and then let me make my own decision? Yes, I would've been upset. Yes, I would've been worried about how the boys were taking all the revelations and our dissembling. I honestly don't think I would've come running home from California leaving the Agency in the lurch like that. I am a professional, after all not some silly housewife playing at being a spy!

I don't know how I'll get to sleep tonight. I'm physically exhausted, but mentally and emotionally I'm still all keyed up. Writing it all out in my journal has helped me sort through my thoughts and feelings, perhaps a nice hot cup of chamomile tea will help calm my nerves. I tried to call Lee at his apartment after I talked to the boys and calmed down a little, but there was no answer. With the way I threw him out of the house, I suppose I shouldn't be surprised that he's not at home waiting for my call. I wonder where he could have gone?

“Good morning, Mrs. Marston. The word of the day is ‘obsidian’,” Amanda greeted the dour Agency receptionist cheerfully as she bustled into the Georgetown entry bright and early Friday morning.

“Good morning, Mrs. King, or should I say ‘Mrs. Stetson’?” the gray haired Agency gatekeeper asked with an uncharacteristic smile on her face.

Amanda stopped in the act of attaching her ID badge to the collar of her pink blouse shocked to realize that everyone at the Agency knew about the marriage, too. One more thing Lee Stetson had forgotten to mention! “You know, I haven’t given it any thought. Mrs. King will do for now. Having two Stetsons around here might become a little confusing,” she replied with a polite smile.

“That remains to be seen,” Mrs. Marston answered cryptically. “Ms. Desmond asked me to tell you that she’ll come up to the Q Bureau as soon as she’s sorted through the backlog on her desk.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Marston. Has Mr. Stetson come in yet?” Amanda asked casually as she started up the steps to the Q Bureau.

Mrs. Marston raised her eyebrows in surprise and then turned to shuffle some papers on her desk before answering, “No, Mrs. King. Mr. Stetson hasn’t come in yet.”

Unlocking the Q Bureau door, Amanda was hardly shocked to find her desktop buried under a mountain of manila inter-office mail envelopes, color-coded file folders and computer printouts. Lee’s desk was in its customary cluttered state—hard to tell whether he’d been hard at it for the past few weeks or out in the field. She dropped her purse into her bottom desk drawer and began a careful excavation of the layers of detritus on her desk. Forty-five minutes later, she had created some semblance of order and was considering taking a break to make a pot of coffee when a soft knock sounded on the office door. “Come in! It’s not locked,” she called as she stood up and stretched behind her desk.

"My hands are kind of full! Could you get the door please?" Francine responded and then entered through the open door with the file boxes containing their notes and seminar plans in her hands. "Ragmop is bringing up the rest of it for me. I figured since Lee isn't going to be in the office, we could just work up here." Francine set the heavy boxes on the floor beside Lee's desk.

"What do you mean 'since Lee isn't going to be in the office'?" Amanda inquired uneasily.

Francine rubbed her hands together and leaned up against Lee's desk. How she loved a hot piece of gossip! "You mean you haven't heard? It's all over the Bullpen. When Smyth found out that you and Lee were married, he suspended Lee without pay, indefinitely. Something about 'withholding vital information about an agent's status from the Agency.' Didn't Lee tell you when you saw him last night?"

Amanda backed up slowly, found her chair without looking, and sat down behind her desk. "Suspended? I don't believe this! No, he didn't say a thing." She thought regretfully, 'Of course, I didn't exactly give him much of a chance to explain anything.' She stared at his chair and the mess on his desk as if it could tell her what was going on and where her husband was right now.

Francine crossed to the loveseat, moved a stack of files onto the floor and sat down. "Well, it would have been nice if you'd happened to mention that the two of you were married, since we were sharing confidences and all. After all, everyone else in our little world already knew! Lee is one of my oldest friends. You'd think I wouldn't be the last to know!" She was trying to make light of things, but Amanda could tell that Francine had been truly hurt by their deception.

"Francine, at that point I had no idea that Lee had told the boys about our marriage, let alone anyone at the Agency. As far as I knew, our marriage was still a deep, dark secret. If it's any consolation, you're not the last to know. I don't think my mother knows we're married yet. Boy, I'm never going to hear the last of it when she finds out that everyone in the greater metropolitan area found out her daughter was married before she did!" Amanda shook her head mournfully and looked over at her friend, trying to judge how angry Francine really was. The least she owed her was a sincere apology. "I am sorry, Francine. Lee didn't tell me what was going on. If he had, I would have let you in on the secret first thing. I would never have let you walk into the Bullpen blind like that."

"Apology accepted." Francine nodded once and uncrossed her arms. "That must have been some homecoming last night."

"Oh, Francine, I really lost my temper with him last night and now I don't know where he is. If Lee's not in the office and not at his apartment, then where is he?"

"No one I've talked to this morning seems to know exactly what's going on with Lee. Billy's been in an administrative meeting since eight, so I haven't been able

to tackle him. I tried to track Leatherneck down. He's usually my best source for the down and dirty details, but he must be over in the motor pool. I thought for sure you'd know what was going on."

They looked at each other across Amanda's desk as Billy's voice floated up the stairs from the Georgetown lobby. "Is Mrs. King up in the Q Bureau?" A low murmur was all they could hear of Mrs. Marston's reply before heavy footsteps sounded in the hall and a brisk knock rattled the glass in the door. William Melrose appeared in the opening door.

"Good morning, Amanda. Francine, I'd like a moment with Amanda, if you don't mind." Billy smiled broadly, but Amanda noticed that it didn't quite reach his eyes.

"You know, I think I'll go find out what's keeping Ragmop with those boxes. And I should probably see about reserving Conference Room 4B for the next couple of weeks. We're going to need a place to spread out all the information we've gathered. We certainly don't have the space to work in here!" Francine commented looking pointedly at the disorder on Lee's desk. She stood up and headed briskly for the door Billy was holding open for her. "See you later, Amanda." She smiled encouragingly at her friend as she left.

"Good morning, sir." Amanda discovered that she was playing with the heart on her platinum necklace and dropped her hand into her lap, pretending to smooth her pink pleated skirt.

"I'll get right to the point, Amanda. I have good news and bad news. The good news is that the Executive Board unanimously overturned Lee's suspension. Dr. Smyth was livid, of course, but he was way out of line and the Board let him know it. I have a check here for Lee's back pay," Billy said as he handed her a white envelope.

Amanda looked at it as if she'd never seen a pay envelope in her entire life and then reluctantly took it. "Why are you giving me Lee's pay, sir? Shouldn't you wait and give it to him?" She wasn't really sure she wanted to hear the answer, but she had to ask.

"Before he left, Lee signed a direct deposit slip," Billy continued as though he hadn't heard Amanda's question. "From now on, his pay will be deposited into your household checking account on the first and fifteenth of every month. I'm sure that will help your family budget run a little more smoothly."

She placed the pay envelope precisely in the center of the polished wooden surface on her partially clear desktop and clasped her hands tightly on top of it. "Where did Lee go, sir? How long will he be gone? What exactly is he doing?" She looked at him, dark eyes pleading. "I'm not just his partner. I'm his wife. I think I have a need to know."

“That’s the bad news, I’m afraid. Lee’s been called to active duty. His Marine Intelligence Unit has been sent overseas on a special mission. It happens about once a year. This time the orders came directly from the President. Officially, I’m in the dark, you understand.” Billy walked over to Lee’s desk and ran a dark finger along the edge of the leather agenda that lay partially buried in the office debris. He turned back to look at Amanda and propped one hip on the corner of the desk. “Unofficially, I’ll tell you whatever I can.” He smiled at her and this time, Amanda was relieved to see, his eyes smiled, too.

“Lee is in the Marines?” Amanda wasn’t exactly certain where to begin.

Billy chuckled and folded his arms across his chest, “Another little detail Scarecrow forgot to mention?”

Amanda nodded silently waiting for him to go on.

“Well, you do know that Lee entered the Marine Corps in ’72 after he graduated from college?”

Amanda nodded again. He’d told her that much when he’d explained how he’d met Khai in Viet Nam.

“The group Lee was assigned to in Viet Nam was a Special Intelligence Unit, ‘spooks’ we used to call them, and he was assigned there as the first part of his Agency training. After his two-year enlistment was up, he returned to the Agency, but retained his commission in the Marine Reserves. Quite a few of the agents here at the Agency are also part of a military reserve unit. We have Reservists from the Army, Navy, Air Force, Coast Guard and, of course, the Marines. You may not have noticed because most of the Armed Forces accept our on-going Agency training in place of the customary once-a-month weekend duty. Each agent still serves a minimum thirty-day duty period annually.” Billy paused for a moment before continuing. “Presently, Lee commands a small elite group that specializes in counter-intelligence actions—rooting out terrorist cells, capturing illegal arms caches, rescuing hostages.”

Amanda’s eyes widened as she realized the danger Lee could be in. Who would watch his tail? “He commands a counter-intelligence unit?”

“That’s right. He holds the rank of Major and has a group of twenty-four men in his unit. A hostage situation has developed overseas and I understand that the Prime Minister asked for him specifically. The President didn’t feel that he could justify full military intervention under the circumstances, but he could send a few ‘advisors’ to assist the local military and police forces in retrieving the hostages.”

Amanda was beginning to get a very bad feeling about this. “Sir, exactly where has Lee been sent? Who asked for him specifically? Who has been taken hostage?”

Billy moved across the office and took one of her small cold hands into his large warm ones. “The Prime Minister of Estoccia requested military assistance from the United States and France. The Soldiers of Islam, a North African militia group based in Atbarah, is presently holding three foreign hostages: two French medical personnel and one American Emergency Aid official. We have every reason to believe, but we have received no official confirmation, that the American is Joe King.”

Amanda gasped. Billy tightened his hold on her hand at first and then reached for a Kleenex with one hand as a tear finally escaped to run down her cheek.

He continued in a softer voice as Amanda wiped her face and then held the tissue to her mouth. “France has refused to send help of any kind, military or diplomatic. America’s policy is firm—we do not negotiate with terrorists. However, Estoccia is an important ally in Northern Africa. They’re a budding parliamentary democracy in the midst of repressive Islamic dictatorships. The port of Massa’a provides the United States with crucial naval access to the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. We can’t afford to completely ignore the situation there. The President has sent a six-man Special Intelligence Unit with orders to advise and assist the local government in this matter.”

“You and I both know that Lee won’t stop with ‘advising the local officials’, not if he thinks there’s any way he can rescue those hostages! Who will watch his back?” Amanda finally gave voice to her fear.

“Amanda, I know how you feel, but the Marines have been watching out for one another in dangerous situations for over two hundred years. . . .”

“Forgive me sir, but the Marines are the first ones to jump out of planes and boats into enemy fire. My father was a Marine in the Second World War and I know what Marines do. When there’s danger, they run toward it, not away. They’re the best of the best and I know Lee is the best. I just. . .” She hid her face in the damp, crumpled tissue in her hands.

Billy handed her another Kleenex and waited for her to regain her composure. “If it’s any consolation, Amanda, Lee was not the only agent to be called up and sent to Africa.” She raised her tear-stained face. “Leatherneck received his orders at the same time Lee did. Did you know that he served with Lee in ‘Nam? They’ve been together on almost every mission ever since Lee walked out of the Cambodian jungle in ’73. Leatherneck will watch Lee’s tail almost as closely as you do.”

Amanda smiled faintly. “Thank you, sir. I’m sorry for falling apart like this,” she apologized softly, dabbing at her eyes with the tissue and then tossing it into the wastebasket. She took a deep breath and straightened her shoulders.

“That’s okay, I understand completely.” He took her hands into his once again and explained quietly, “Lee stopped by my house late last night.”

Amanda suddenly couldn't look her boss and, yes, her friend in the eye. Surely he knew about their fight. She had been so certain they'd have tomorrow—time to cool off, time to work things out. She'd sent her husband and best friend away in a moment of anger, into the night and into danger, and she hadn't even given him a chance to explain himself. She hadn't given herself the chance to forgive him.

Billy squeezed her hands gently, "Look at me, Amanda."

She raised her eyes to his and found them shining with sympathy and understanding.

"Lee was so worried about you and the boys. He hated the thought of leaving you without saying good-bye. Especially after what had happened between you last night. He gave me these," Billy reached into his inside jacket pocket and pulled out two plain white envelopes. One was addressed to 'Amanda' and the other to 'Phillip and Jamie' in Lee's distinctive handwriting.

Amanda took the precious letters and clasped them to her breast. "Thank you, sir."

"Amanda, if you need anything while Lee is away, just ask. I'll keep abreast of any African developments and pass on information as I receive it." He gently placed his hands on her shoulders. "My door is always open, if you want to talk or just need a shoulder to cry on." He gave her a quick hug. "Take the rest of the day off. Go home to your sons and regroup," he suggested compassionately.

"No, sir. I'd rather stay here and work," she stated decisively. Looking around the Q Bureau, she observed the piles of paperwork and filing, "There's a lot to be done here. Francine and I have our work cut out for us designing that computer seminar. I'd really rather stay busy right now, if you don't mind."

"I don't mind at all, but don't push yourself too hard. Shall I send Francine up here?" he asked as he opened the door to return to his office in the Bullpen.

"No, tell her I'll meet her downstairs in about fifteen minutes." Amanda opened her bottom desk drawer and slipped the two letters from Lee into her purse. "Oh, Mr. Melrose?"

Billy popped his head back into the office. "Yes?"

"Thank you very much."

"You're very welcome, Mrs. Stetson."

Billy Melrose passed back through the door labeled 'Film Library' and shut it behind him. Even so, Amanda heard him mutter as he started down the hall, "I've waited four long years to say that!"

Shortly after six, Amanda pulled the Wagoneer into the driveway, turned off the engine, and sat there for a moment preparing to face her boys. Reaching for her purse, she couldn't help remembering the letters waiting inside. She retrieved a bag of groceries from the back seat and wondered at the quiet enveloping her usually noisy home. She entered the kitchen through the back door and almost set the groceries on a note from Phillip: 'Andy got a new ten-speed bike. I rode over to see it. Be back around six.' Were we out of chalk for the message board again?

"Hi, Mom!" Jamie came into the kitchen from the den with a paperback book in his hand. "Where's Dad? Didn't he come home with you?" Jamie asked as he busied himself unloading the groceries onto the counter.

"Jamie, why don't you call over to Andy's house and ask Mrs. Larson to send Phillip home? I'm going start dinner. How does spaghetti sound to you tonight?" Amanda bustled around the kitchen putting items away in the cupboards and refrigerator.

"Spaghetti is fine with me. Where's Dad?" Jamie repeated waiting with the phone in his hand for an answer.

Amanda stopped with the box of dry pasta in one hand and a bottle of marinara sauce in the other. "I'd really rather wait until your brother is here, so I only have to explain things once." She knew that sounded rather ominous, but bad news was bad news and it looked like Jamie was already anticipating the worst.

Ten minutes later, the water was heating on the stove and she was doctoring the marinara with a few dried herbs as Phillip came through the back door. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him exchange a glance with Jamie who raised one eyebrow and shrugged his shoulders.

Phillip snatched a tomato slice from the pile that Jamie was cutting up for the salad, then crossed to his Mom to give her a hug. "What's for dinner? Spaghetti? Great! When's Dad getting home? I'm starving!"

Amanda stirred the last of the basil into the sauce and turned the burner to 'low'. She faced her boys and said, "Why don't we go sit down in the family room so we can talk?"

The boys shared another meaningful look, and then Jamie said, "I'd rather talk here. Going into the family room means things are really serious."

"Yeah, just tell us, Mom. Is Dad coming home tonight or what?" Phillip asked with no expression on his face.

Amanda had been thinking about how to approach this very difficult conversation all day long. She knew the boys would be worried and upset. Heck, she was worried and upset. “All right. We’ll talk here in the kitchen. Are you finished with the salad, Jamie?” He nodded as he scattered some green onions over the top and crossed the room to put the paring knife and cutting board into the sink. “Okay, well. No, Lee won’t be home for dinner tonight, but it’s not because he doesn’t want to be here. Late last night, he received orders to go to North Africa. I don’t know how long he’ll be gone, but I’m certain he would rather be here with you guys.”

“He’s gone to rescue our Dad, hasn’t he?” Phillip asked immediately. “He promised he would try to find out what was going on and help him if he could, but I kind of expected him to say good-bye before he left.”

“You know about your Dad and the situation in Estoccia?” Amanda asked in surprise.

“Yeah, we eavesdropped one night when Mr. Melrose came over to talk to Dad about it,” Jamie admitted remorsefully. “That’s why Dad warned us about listening in last night. Gosh, this is confusing sometimes, having two Dads, I mean.”

“Why don’t we all use ‘Lee’ and ‘Joe’ for this conversation—just to keep things straight,” Amanda suggested. “Yes, Lee has gone to Estoccia. His assignment is to advise the Royal Police Force and the Estoccian Regular Army on anti-terrorist strategies and hostage recovery tactics.” Amanda found herself slipping into ‘work-mode’ in order to keep her emotions on a short rein.

“How long do you think it will take Lee to rescue D--, uh, Joe?” Phillip asked speculatively. “Will he still be back in time to go on vacation with us?”

“Will he be back in time to go on vacation with us?” Jamie mocked his brother. “Lee is going to be trying to get Joe back from terrorists, dummy! You know, crazy guys with guns and bombs! What if Lee doesn’t come back at all! Did you ever think about that?”

“Of course, I thought about it, lame brain. I just didn’t want to say it out loud and upset Mom!” Phillip shot back angrily.

Amanda decided to intervene before the argument could escalate any further. She knew that most of the emotional undercurrents were the result of last night’s argument combined with the boys’ legitimate fears for their father and stepfather. “I won’t lie to you, fellas. The situation in Estoccia is very dangerous. We have very little reliable information on the condition of the hostages or where they’re being held. We do know that the Soldiers of Islam are well organized and fairly well armed for a private militia. Their leader, Al-Mahdi, is said to be a master strategist. The President sent Lee over there because he’s an expert in situations like these. I did a little research and found that Lee has successfully disarmed

four other hostage situations just like this in the past nine years. He knows what he's doing and if there's any way to rescue those hostages, then Lee will find it."

"We know that Lee is the best, Mom." Phillip assured her. "I'm sure he'll find our father and the other hostages and bring them home safe. Right, Jamie?"

"Right," Jamie responded automatically. "You'll let us know what's going on, Mom. You won't keep us in the dark to protect us, will you?"

"Jamie, I'll tell you whatever I can. Some things may be considered classified, though," Amanda told him.

Jamie nodded solemnly, "We know, Mom. Lee explained that to us when he told us about the Agency. You know, we're real proud of you and Lee, of what you do for our country."

Amanda's heart filled with love for her boys as she reached out and hugged them both. Whether they wanted a hug or not, she needed to give them one. They were being so grown-up and mature about all this. "It really bothered Lee that he had to leave without saying good-bye to us, so he asked Mr. Melrose to give us two letters—one for me and one for you two."

"He did!" Jamie cried. "Where's our letter, Mom?"

"Can we see it before dinner? Please?" Phillip pleaded.

Amanda went over to her purse, which was hanging on the newel post of the staircase railing. She took out both envelopes and handed the one labeled 'Phillip and Jamie' to the older boy. "There's just one letter for the both of you, so you'll have to share it," she warned.

Phillip opened the plain white envelope with unusual care; typically he ripped things right open. Removing the letter, he slowly unfolded it and held it where Jamie could read it over his shoulder. He looked at the page silently for a moment and then handed it to his younger brother. With a crack in his voice and a forced smile, he said to Jamie, "You read it. I've got something in my eye all of a sudden." He rubbed his right eye with his fist and sat down on one of the stools at the counter. Jamie began to read Lee's letter aloud:

Dear Phillip and Jamie,

First, I want you to know how much I've enjoyed spending this time with you two. I don't think I've ever had so much fun! Not just the backpacking and the trip to the beach, but all the regular ordinary family stuff—mowing the lawn, cooking dinner, doing the laundry. I wouldn't trade these last days with you guys for anything!

Second, I'm sorry that I messed things up with your Mom. It was my decision and my responsibility, not yours. I'll make sure she understands that. Don't worry, your Mom and I will work things out.

I'm also sorry that I have to leave without saying good-bye. I told you that may happen from time to time, but that doesn't mean I have to like it! Remember when we were going through my camping stuff and I told you that I was in the Marine Reserves? Well, part of my unit has been sent overseas on a special mission. I don't know how long I'll be gone, but if I have anything to say about it, I'll be back in time to get ready to go on that family vacation in two weeks. I can't promise anything, you understand.

Jamie, those pictures you were asking about are in a brown box on the bookshelves in my apartment. Your Mom knows the one I'm talking about. Just tell her I said you could look through them. My uncle may have some more pictures of my parents. I know he has some pictures of me when I was younger. I don't know why you'd want to see them, but I'll ask him when I get back.

Phillip, we never did get back to the apartment so you could look through my Jazz albums. When Jamie goes over to get the pictures, feel free to borrow a couple of albums. Just be very careful with the older ones—they belonged to my parents.

I know I don't have to tell you to look out for your Mom for me. You were doing a pretty great job of that before I ever came along. Your Mom is lucky to have two fine young men like you. I'm very proud to know you.

Love,

Lee

Jamie looked up from the letter with glistening eyes. "He's proud of us, Phillip."

"Yeah, just like we're proud of him, huh?" Phillip replied touching the letter with one grimy finger.

Amanda wiped a lone tear from her cheek before the boys could see that she'd been crying, "I think you should put that letter away in a safe place and then wash up for supper. Dinner will be ready any minute."

"Aren't you going to read your letter, Mom?" Jamie asked curiously.

Phillip slapped his younger brother in the back of the head, "She probably wants to read it later, privately, dufus."

“That’s right, Phillip. I think I’ll save it until bedtime,” Amanda answered thoughtfully. “Would you please take it upstairs for me and put it on my bedside table? Thanks, sweetheart!” She handed him the letter and then quickly turned back to the stove to check on the pasta.

Four hours later, Amanda regarded herself in her bathroom mirror. Dinner had been remarkably pleasant. The boys had put aside the name-calling and paybacks in their eagerness to tell her everything they had done over the past three weeks. Football camp and backpacking had given way to trips to the beach and local attractions. It hadn’t been all fun and games, though. Phillip joked about Lee’s ‘daily inspections.’ Whatever he’d done had sure worked! The condition of the house was amazing, given the usually cluttered state of Lee’s apartment. The furniture had been dusted and polished. The counters were clean, the floors mopped and vacuumed. She’d gone looking for dirty laundry after dinner and discovered there was very little to be found. Even the boys’ room and bathroom were immaculate. She was a trifle disappointed—she had hoped distract herself with a good ‘cleaning frenzy’ tonight. Instead, she’d spent some time playing board games with the boys. The usual bedtime routine of showers, PJs and prayers brought some comfort to all of them. Sitting on Jamie’s bed, she’d been particularly touched by Phillip’s heart-felt prayer for the safety of his father and stepfather.

With the boys in bed, she could no longer avoid going into her bedroom. She’d started by unpacking her things. It was then she’d run across three of Lee’s suits hanging in her closet. His duffel bag with neatly folded shirts, shorts and jeans had been tucked away on the floor beneath, right next to a dirty clothes bag. A wave of melancholy had overtaken her. She’d looked at the letter lying beside her lamp. She wasn’t quite ready for that—she’d get dressed for bed first.

Now she was standing in front of the bathroom sink and looking at the woman in the mirror before her. Amazingly, her eyes were still the same color brown. Her hair was still auburn and wavy. She still had that ‘perky’ little nose. Nothing had changed and yet everything had changed. The question was: Was she ready to face those changes in herself, her family, and her life? She put her hairbrush down next to the basin and her gaze passed over the other items on the counter beside her—a man’s razor and shaving cream, a blue toothbrush, a black comb with two missing teeth, and a half-empty bottle of after-shave. She picked up the small clear bottle and removed the silver cap. Hot tears pricked her eyes threatening to roll down her face as she caught the familiar scent. She closed her eyes and tried to picture where he was tonight—probably more than halfway to Estocchia by now. Replacing the cap, she grabbed a handful of tissues. It was time.

Dear Amanda,

I am sorry. You were right. I had plenty of chances to tell you what was going on and there was no excuse for keeping you in the dark. I was wrong.

The truth is I was just being selfish. I was afraid you'd come home if I told you that Joe had taken off for Africa and I wanted to spend more time with the boys. Even if they didn't know I was their step dad, it sure felt good to act like one for a change. Then things got even more complicated. The boys found our picture and wedding certificate and I got suspended. I knew I should tell you. On one level, I wanted to tell you but, after waiting so long, I was sure that you'd be angry and disappointed in me. I chickened out. I doubt you'll believe this, but I was planning to call you that night right after the boys were in bed.

I realize now that I should've told you right away and trusted you to make the right decision. You always do, after all. If I'd been honest with you from the start, then we could have dealt with each problem as it came up and things wouldn't have gotten so out of hand. I guess I'm just not very good at this relationship stuff. I've got a lot to learn and I want the chance to learn it.

I'm sorry. I know I blew it. I only hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me.

Love always,

Lee

The tears ran freely down her face as she read. One thing about Lee: once he finally got it through his head that he'd made a mistake, he always owned up to it. If only she could tell him right now how much she loved him. Could he really think that she wouldn't forgive him? The abrupt ringing of the bedside phone interrupted her meditations. Blowing her nose on yet another tissue, she gathered herself together and reached to answer the phone. Who could be calling this late at night? It couldn't possibly be Lee?

"Hello?"

"Oh, Amanda. Good you're still up. You are still up, aren't you? I didn't wake you? I wasn't sure what time you would get in tonight, so I didn't want to call too early. I just wanted to be certain you arrived safely. You never know with airline travel these days—all those connecting flights are so confusing. It's a wonder anyone ever gets where they're going! I'm so spoiled these days since Captain Kurt is so good about flying me wherever I need to go."

Amanda waited for the familiar rhythm of her mother's voice to soothe her as it had so many times in the past. "No, mother. I was awake. I must still be on California time," Amanda answered her mother vaguely.

"So how are things at home? How are my boys? Did Phillip and Jamie have a good time with their Dad? How's Lee?"

"Things are fine, mother. Phillip and Jamie had a great time with their Dad," Amanda realized as she said this that her fingers were crossed. "Phillip's decided to try out for the position of running back on the Ninth Grade football team. Jamie completed his Fifty-miler requirement for Junior Trailblazers. They also went to the beach and the amusement park."

"It sounds like things went very well then. I was worried about Jamie. He seems to be distancing himself from his father lately. I guess getting out into the woods for a week together was just what they needed," Dotty enthused.

Amanda didn't know what to say. She hated continuing the deception, but she certainly didn't want to tell her mother the truth over the telephone either.

"Amanda? Are you there, dear?"

"Yes, Mother. I'm here. I guess my mind just wandered for a moment. I'm sorry—what were you saying?"

"Are you sure everything's all right there, darling? You sound a little preoccupied," Dotty observed astutely.

"Everything's just fine here," she affirmed. "I guess I am a little more tired than I realized. It was a long trip and there was a lot to catch up on when I got back."

"Of course, dear. You never said how Lee was doing? Did he pick you up at the airport? I bet he really missed you."

"Lee's fine." Amanda rolled her eyes. Even long distance, her mother managed to put her finger right on what was bothering her. "We didn't have much of a reunion though. He had to leave almost immediately for an overseas assignment. How are things with Aunt Minnie and Uncle Walter?"

"Things are coming right along. Minnie is making a little more progress each and every day. She's not ready to run a marathon by a long shot, but she's getting pretty adept at using her walker to move around the first floor of the house. Between the two of us, Walter and I have worked out a routine to cover Minnie's therapy and take care of the Bed and Breakfast. I can't wait to come home though—I haven't worked this hard in years!"

“We can’t wait for you to come home, too. Do you think you’ll be needed there much longer? We really miss you!” It was such a relief to be able to be honest with her mother for a moment!

“Kate and Barbara are making arrangements to take turns staying here now that school is out for their children. I should know within a few days when I’ll be coming home. I’d better say goodnight, darling. I’m not on California time and I have to get up early to start breakfast in the morning. We have a full house this weekend. Give a hug to all my boys—Phillip, Jamie, and Lee when you see him. I love you, Panda. Sleep tight.”

“I love you too, mother. Good night.” Usually talking to her mother made her feel better, but not this time. Amanda gently folded Lee’s letter and placed it inside the front cover of her journal. She turned out the bedside light, but she knew it would be another sleepless night. And her insomnia would have nothing at all to do with being on California time!

Chapter 7

The warm breeze coming through the open window at his back did nothing to relieve the intense heat in the over-crowded room. It only brought with it the scents of sun-dried earth and parched dung. Another trickle of sweat made its way down the center of his back and he wished for a nice, cold glass of sweet tea like his Granny used to make. You’d think growing up in southern Mississippi he would be acclimated to heat, but he’d never felt anything like a July noontide in drought-stricken Estocchia. Scarecrow, however, looked cool and confident just like always. Damn, that man even made sweaty BDU’s look good. The musical combination of Africa and France in General Ali Said Abdullah’s voice brought him back to the present as he realized the briefing was finally breaking up.

“You should receive your orders by 1900 hours. I will expect each unit to be in position at its assigned time. Communication and coordination will be crucial to the success of this operation,” the sturdy African man stated precisely. “Do you have anything you’d like to add, Major Stetson?”

Major Lee H. Stetson, dressed in Desert Camouflage Utilities, stood up from his seat at the conference table and moved briskly to the front of the room. “Thank you, General. You’ve done an excellent job. Gentlemen, along with your orders you will receive updated maps and satellite photos. Once the operation begins, we will do our best to provide you with up to the minute information on enemy movements and numbers.”

The General nodded his thanks to the younger man and the room erupted in motion as he dismissed his field officers and command staff to their duties. Seconds later only four men remained in the large parlor that had been hastily converted into a command center for this operation. The General turned to the Prime Minister with a smile, "I haven't felt this optimistic about an encounter with Al-Mahdi in months. If you'll excuse me, Excellency, I have a lot to accomplish before we move out in the morning."

Elias Ephrem, Prime Minister of the Democratic State of Estoccia, grinned back at his top general. "By all means, my friend, I look forward to receiving your reports from the field." The general set his white dress hat firmly on his grizzled head and then saluted the two American Marines before briskly exiting the room.

Breathing a sigh of relief, the Prime Minister sank onto one of the upholstered chairs beside the large, round table in the center of the parlor cum operations center. "I need to catch my breath. I had forgotten how quickly events begin to move when you are at the center of things, Mr. Stetson. Pardon, Major Stetson."

Lee looked up from the satellite photo he was scrutinizing through a jeweler's loupe, "No need to stand on ceremony, your Excellency. Lee will do just fine when the brass is out of the room."

"Then you must call me Elias, at least when we are in private. Tell me, Lee. I listened carefully as you discussed strategy with General Abdullah and I followed the briefing just now most closely, but I still cannot envision how these sorties you have planned will work to locate and free the hostages," the Prime Minister inquired curiously.

Lee held one finger up to his smiling lips and caught the attention of the other Marine in the room. With a nod, Captain Edward J. Kennedy, better known as "Leatherneck" at the Agency, left his post by the open window and removed what appeared to be an ordinary silver cigarette case from the left breast pocket of his battle jacket. Opening the case he began to quarter the room watching the tiny screen carefully as he moved.

"As General Abdullah observed, coordination and communication are what the Regular Army lacks in dealing with the Soldiers of Islam. That and accurate intelligence. The equipment we brought with us and the resources of the US Marine Corps should work to rectify that situation."

Leatherneck could feel Lee's eyes following him as he finished his scan of the room, stopping beside the central table. He dipped his head beneath the tabletop and removed a tiny electronic device secured there with a piece of ordinary chewing gum. He then scanned to the front of the room and took yet another listening device from behind the paper-covered blackboard they'd been using during the briefing. Replacing the scanner in his pocket, he retrieved a small metal box from the pile of electronic equipment in the corner of the room and

placed the 'bugs' inside. Opening the parlor door, he handed the box to the US Marine corporal standing guard outside, "Here's a couple local insects for Master Sergeant Carson's collection, son."

As soon as the door closed, Lee sank into a chair across from the Prime Minister. Unbuttoning his BDU jacket, he stretched out his long legs and clasped his hands behind his head before answering, "These sorties, as you call them, are not going to rescue the hostages. We're fairly certain that there is at least one of Al-Mahdi's agents inside the military hierarchy and probably very highly-placed at that."

"Your little 'insect collection' sadly confirms your suspicions," Elias Ephrem observed with a shake of his head. "It also explains why, whenever we strike against Al-Mahdi, he always manages to be someplace else."

"Exactly! We're going to use that against him. We've identified three arms caches on the Atbarah border. We plan to strike at all three at once. We'll also hit the two 'training centers' he's set up in the highlands nearby. He doesn't have the resources to move that many men and weapons out of our reach within the next twenty-four hours, so he'll either be forced to fight to protect them or abandon them to the Regular Army. With his attention and personnel focused elsewhere, a very small highly-trained strike force should be able to sweep in and rescue the hostages before he realizes our true objective." Lee grinned broadly and gestured with his left hand, "It's all a matter of not letting your right hand know what your left hand is up to."

"I see. I take it you've discovered where Al-Mahdi is holding the hostages, then?" the Prime Minister queried eagerly, leaning forward on his chair.

Lee looked across the room at Leatherneck and shrugged, "Captain Kennedy and I received some information in the marketplace yesterday evening. Our contacts promised to confirm the location when we return to the market this evening."

The Prime Minister looked shocked. "You plan to return to the market after the attack on your persons last evening! It is too great a risk. I cannot allow it."

Lee tilted his chair onto its back legs so he could put his booted feet up on the chair next to him. "You're talking to US Marines, Elias. Those attackers were barely trained teenagers. The Captain and I were never in any real danger. Now that Al-Mahdi's insider has the details of the operation, he'll know that killing us won't stop General Abdullah from carrying out his plans. We'll be perfectly safe this afternoon. Tonight we'll overfly the area and get some infrared pictures. We'll know the layout, how many guards we'll have to take out and exactly where the hostages are being held before your breakfast is served tomorrow morning."

A determined knock on the parlor door interrupted any further protest from the Prime Minister as Master Sergeant Charles "Chip" Carson entered the room with

two “Meals Ready to Eat”—6X8 inch metallic envelopes containing enough calories to keep a fighting man on his feet. He handed one to Leatherneck and opened the other before he handed it to Lee. “Major, sir. You haven’t eaten anything since yesterday evening and it’s going on fourteen hundred hours,” he declared as, hands on hips, he planted himself firmly in front of his commanding officer.

The Prime Minister chuckled at the grimace of distaste Major Stetson gave the plastic tray in his hand. “You know I don’t like MRE’s, Sarge. I grabbed some dried fruit earlier and I’ll buy something at the coffeehouse in the market later,” Stetson promised as he laid it down on the table and pushed it away with one finger.

“I don’t know what your problem is, Major. These are Air Force MRE’s, the haute cuisine of US men in uniform,” Leatherneck commented between mouthfuls. “Thanks, Sarge. I hadn’t realized how hungry I was until I smelled the food!”

Major Stetson leaned forward and sniffed at the MRE on the table. “I don’t smell any food. Do you, Excellency?” he asked with a skeptical look on his face.

Elias Ephrem also sniffed at the tray of food. “I smell something. I’m just not certain what it is,” the Prime Minister happily joined in Stetson’s little joke. He looked closely at the contents of the tray. “What is this supposed to be again?”

Obligingly, Lee picked up the discarded cover between two fingers and read aloud, “Chicken Divan, or so this claims.”

“Ah, I have never seen a chicken that looks anything like that, Major. I’m not certain I’d risk it. However as you just reminded me of the courage and fortitude of the United States Marines. . .” he trailed off thoughtfully.

“Nope, not gonna touch it. You can’t make me either,” Lee insisted adopting a little boy’s pout.

Sergeant Major Carson took one step forward and attempted to pass the MRE to his commanding officer once again, “Haven’t you seen the starving children, sir? It would be a sin to waste good food in this famine-stricken country.”

Lee looked at the Sergeant and then at the tray in the other man’s hand. Slowly and with obvious reluctance, he took it from the NCO. “All right, you win. It would be offensive to throw this out when there are children starving.” He dropped his feet to the floor and headed for the door. Flinging it wide, he called. “Corporal Washington!”

“Sir! Yes, sir!” the tall African-American Marine came to attention with a smart salute.

“At ease, Corporal. Are you hungry, son?” Major Stetson inquired solicitously.

Corporal Terrence Washington was a fresh-faced twenty-year-old who had been a first-string fullback in high school. “Major Stetson, sir?” he asked in confusion.

“I said, ‘Are you hungry?’” Lee repeated patiently.

“Sir! Yes, sir!” he replied.

“Good! Take care of this for me, will you, son? Be sure and eat all the broccoli!” Major Stetson handed off the MRE to the eager young soldier.

“Yes, sir! Thank you, sir!”

Lee brushed off his hands and winked at the Sergeant Major. “Now that we’ve taken care of that little matter, I’m going to find a quiet place for some shut eye. Wake me in two hours, Captain Kennedy. We have some items to pick up in the market, if I’m not mistaken. With your permission, Excellency?”

Elias Ephrem, Prime Minister of Estoccia, grinned broadly and gestured gracefully down the long corridor. “After you, Major!”

“Thank you, Prime Minister!” The two men, one tall and fair, the other short and dark, walked companionably into the hall.

Three hours later, Leatherneck watched the sky turn slowly from a burnished gold to deep orange as he sat under the awning in front of the little mud-brick coffeehouse. When they’d first arrived, it had been almost empty. Ordering demitasse cups of thick, sweet coffee and a simple meal, they waited patiently for the proprietor to finish his game of dominoes and amble over to their table. He’d arrived with the lentil stew, broiled lamb, and soft rounds of fresh-baked bread. Their conversation had been as desultory as the weather was sultry. Woven into the amusing stories and local gossip, however, had been the information they needed—the name of the herder’s camp where the hostages were being held. Lee had remained lost in thought ever since Samuel Ma’adi had left to begin another game of dominoes with an elderly Arab businessman.

“Sun’s going down,” Leatherneck observed laconically. “Where’re we headed next?”

Lee removed his utility cap and ran one hand through his too short, very sweaty hair, “I need to see Emeth, the sword smith. He sent a message that he has some knives he wants to show me.” Standing up and dropping a handful of Estoccian coins onto the table, he nodded casually at Samuel and exited the coffeehouse terrace. Heading out into the noisy maze that was the local marketplace, the two men dodged stray dogs and groups of boys at play. Local

vendors cried out their wares in a mélange of languages—English, French, Arabic and African dialects created a Babel sound unique to an Estocian market. The smell of spices, familiar and unfamiliar, mixed with the aromas of dried fruit, cured leather, and cooking meat. Underneath it all was the unmistakable tang of body odor, rotting refuse and untreated sewage. Emeth, the sword smith, occupied a sheltered workshop on the lower floor of a well constructed brick home that, from its patina of loving use, had obviously been a family residence for many generations.

Emeth approached as soon as they entered the shop, inviting them to be seated on comfortable cushions at a low table and gesturing to his youngest son to fetch coffee and sweetmeats. When the refreshments had been served and the boy had withdrawn, Emeth began, “I know you will be pleased when you see what I have to show you, Major Stetson. As I said, I have been waiting for the right buyer to come along, someone who would truly appreciate the master-craftsmanship of these two pieces.”

With a flourish, he brought forth a cloth-wrapped bundle and laid it out on the table. Shining on the soft, richly woven cloth were two matching belt knives. Elaborate gilded engraving scrolled the upper-surface of the steel blades, but it was plain that the knives were honed to a razor-fine edge. A full tang could be seen in the carved bone of the handle. Looking at the craftsman for permission and receiving it, Lee picked up one of the knives in his left hand. Leatherneck watched as he hefted it and expertly examined its quality and balance. “You’re right, Emeth. The workmanship of these blades is superb. I’ve never seen better. They are too fine for what I have in mind. I want a memento for my young sons—not fighting blades,” Lee observed apologetically, handing the beautiful weapon back to its creator.

“I knew you would recognize their quality at once, Major Stetson,” Emeth affirmed as he handed the knife on to Leatherneck for his inspection. “A man who truly loves his sons wants only the best for them, does he not?”

And so the bargaining began in earnest. Leatherneck knew that Stetson enjoyed the riposte and parry of the open marketplace almost as much as he did a good bar fight, so he sat back in comfort to watch two masters at work. When all was said and done, Emeth wrapped up the two blades along with two equally beautiful leather sheaths. The final price was far below the one originally suggested by the sword smith, yet significantly above Stetson’s first counter offer. In the evening gloom, Leatherneck almost missed seeing Emeth slip a small piece of paper into one of the sheaths as he wrapped up the purchase.

“The Missus is gonna kill you when you give those dangerous weapons to her little boys you know,” he observed shaking his head at Scarecrow’s sheepish grin.

“The way I left things at home, I could hardly be in any more trouble than I am now,” Lee confessed contritely. “Besides, they’re not little boys any more. Jamie’s almost thirteen now and Phillip’s starting high school next year. Amanda needs to start treating them like the responsible young men they already are.”

“Yeah, well, you may sing a different tune after your first trip to the emergency room for stitches, my man!” Leatherneck warned him clapping him heartily on the back. One of seven boys, he knew only too well how much trouble even a careful boy could get into with a sharp blade. “You’re welcome to camp out at my place any time you’re in the doghouse at home. I have a real nice sofa bed.”

“Thanks, Leatherneck. I’ll keep it in mind,” Lee promised him as they approached Government House. Showing their military ID’s to the sentry at the gate, they hurried upstairs to the large room that had been assigned to them.

Closing the thick wooden door firmly and locking it, Leatherneck checked the room once more for bugs as Scarecrow laid his purchase on the antique mahogany table and unwrapped the knives. He removed the scroll of paper from the leather sheath and spread it on the table underneath the small lamp so they could both see it clearly.

“Bingo!” he exclaimed softly. The paper was a tiny, but detailed map of the herder’s camp where Al-Mahdi had imprisoned the hostages. A number ‘three’ was inscribed on one of the huts while twelve stick figures patrolled the area. “Let’s get in the air, Captain. I want to have a good look at the terrain tonight.”

“Yes, sir!” he answered with more enthusiasm than he felt. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to fly—there was nothing he enjoyed more than a nice night flight. He got an adrenaline kick out of tactical flights where stealth was the essence of the mission. What he didn’t like was the plan for tomorrow night. “I still think you should take Corporal Washington or Private Jimenez with you when you make the drop.”

“We’ve been all through this, Leatherneck,” Lee reminded him brusquely. “Corporals Washington and Miller will be needed here to monitor the satellite feed and relay intell to the General’s troops. With Sergeant Carson and Private Jimenez doubling as payload specialists and gunners, that leaves you to pilot the Huey and me to make the drop. It’s not my fault that the President didn’t allow me to bring the whole unit over. We’re gonna have to play the hand we’ve been dealt, friend.”

“I just wish you’d stack the deck a little, know what I mean?” Leatherneck complained one more time knowing full well it would be fruitless.

“What? Cheat at cards? A fellow can get shot for doing that you know!” he chuckled. “Now, go rev up that chopper while I round up the crew. I want to be in the air over the mountains with plenty of time to reconnoiter.”

Chapter 8

Amanda heard the familiar thunder of sneakers on cement as she reached into the cargo area of the Jeep Wagoneer.

“Hey, Mom! You’re home!” Phillip announced unnecessarily.

Amanda smiled at her eldest son as he stopped just beside her with Jamie right behind him. “Can I get some help with these groceries, fellas?” she asked the two young men.

“Sure, Mom.” Jamie replied agreeably. “Did ya get anything good? Dad always brings home some chips and root beer for us.”

“Is that right?” Amanda commented with a knowing smile. “And which Dad is that?” she asked as she handed the younger boy a brown paper sack.

“Actually, both of them do it,” Phillip answered his mother with a wink. “That’s the great thing about Dads. They’re not as obsessive about healthy snacks as Moms are.” He took the next bag from her and stated with confidence, “I can carry two at a time, Mom.”

“All right, sweetheart. Don’t squish the bread, please,” she cautioned as she handed him another sack. Grabbing the last two bags herself, she set one bag on the drive momentarily so she could slam the tailgate on the Jeep. It was only Wednesday evening, but already this had been the longest week of her life.

Preoccupied with thoughts of Lee and dinner preparations, she was surprised to be greeted by her mother as she entered the kitchen.

“Amanda, dear, I hope you got some more eggs. We’re out. I had to borrow one from Edna to make the brownies for dessert. I threw together a green salad and made some biscuits to go with the delicious stew you have in the crock pot,” her mother rattled on as she took one of the bags of groceries and began bustling around putting away canned goods and fresh produce.

“Mother! You’re home!” she knew that didn’t sound very intelligent but it just came blurting out anyway.

Dotty stopped and looked at her daughter with a patient smile, “Of course I’m home. I told you Minnie’s daughters were going to be taking turns staying with her now.”

"I know you did. I just didn't expect you home so soon," Amanda began to put away the rest of the food, including the dozen eggs she'd remembered to buy on the way home from the office.

"Lee's still out of town, I take it," Dotty probed gently.

Amanda sighed as she folded the last empty grocery sack, "Yes, and before you ask, I have no idea how much longer he'll be gone. It all depends on how long it takes him to complete this project."

"And exactly what is he working on this time, dear? I don't remember where he's gone or what documentary he's directing this time." Dotty skillfully continued her interrogation as she stirred the stew and sprinkled croutons onto the salad.

"I don't think I mentioned any specifics the last time we talked. Why don't I fill you in later, Mother? I'll make a nice pot of tea and we can have a long talk after the boys are in bed. Until then, you know we won't be able to get more than a sentence out before we're interrupted!"

"How right you are, darling!" her mother agreed quickly and called into the family room, "Phillip, unless things have changed around here, Wednesday's are still your night to set the table."

Much later that same evening, Amanda stood at the cook top pouring boiling water over the loose tea in the bottom of her grandmother's brown-glazed teapot. She sighed deeply as her thoughts circled round and round, 'How am I supposed to tell Mother that I've been lying to her for years? Do I start by telling her that I'm a spy or that Lee and I have been secretly married since February?'

"How I missed those boys! They've grown up so much while I was gone. It's not just that they're taller either. They seem so much older than I remember," Dotty commented wistfully as she re-entered the kitchen. "Now that we have a little peace and quiet, you can tell me all about Lee's mysterious overseas project and your business trip."

'That's as good a place to start as any,' Amanda thought to herself as she got out two mugs and placed them on the tray beside the teapot, lemon slices, and sugar bowl. "Why don't we go into the family room where we can be more comfortable?" she suggested picking up the tray and leading the way into the other room.

It took a few moments to pour the tea and get settled on the couch. Amanda looked at her mother and smiled softly, "It's really good to have you home."

"It's good to be home, dear," her mother returned her smile. "Now, where exactly is Lee and what's he filming this time?"

Amanda gazed into her teacup for inspiration and found none. "Mother, I really don't know where to begin."

"I've found it's usually best to start at the beginning and work my way to the end. Whenever I start in the middle, I get all mixed up and end up confusing everyone else as well," Dotty observed with a wry smile.

"The beginning," Amanda mused. "That would be almost four years ago."

"Four years ago?" her mother repeated with a cautious smile. "Whatever do you mean, Amanda?"

Amanda looked up from her tea mug and caught her mother's eyes, "Four years ago, I was at the Arlington train station when a man in a waiter's uniform grabbed me and asked me to help him because he was in trouble. That man was Lee, Mother. Two KGB agents were chasing him trying to intercept the package he was carrying. He pleaded with me to take the package onto the train and give it to the man in the red hat. At first, I refused. Then I looked into his eyes and, I don't know why, but suddenly I felt I had to help him." She watched the emotions flicker in her mother's eyes—skepticism became disbelief then amusement.

"You always did tell the most amusing stories, dear. Why would Russians be chasing Lee? What interest would they have in an American documentary film-maker?"

"Lee's not a film-maker, Mother. That's just his cover. He's a federal intelligence operative." Amanda held her breath as she waited for her mother's response.

"A federal intelligence operative," she repeated very slowly as if considering each word carefully. "I always knew you were hiding something from me, but frankly once I finally met Lee, I assumed you were involved in an affair, not espionage!"

"I'm sorry, Mother. I never wanted to lie to you, but they asked me to take an oath. And Lee said it would be safer for you and the boys, if you were kept in the dark." Amanda could see the hurt and disappointment reflected in her mother's eyes and it nearly broke her heart.

"Who are 'they', Amanda? What exactly do you do for 'them'?" she asked suspecting the worst.

"They' are The Agency, an intelligence organization even more secretive than the CIA."

"Well, than wouldn't take very much! Langley has its own exit on the Beltway, after all! You still haven't said what you do for this Agency," her mother's curt

manner told Amanda that hurt was turning into anger and she hadn't even gotten to the worst part yet!

"I started as a civilian auxiliary, of sorts. I helped Lee type his case reports, track his expenses, keep up with his filing, impersonate his wife, that kind of thing." Amanda trailed off still watching her mother's reaction very carefully.

"'Impersonate his wife'. . . So you have been having a 'thing' all this time, I knew it! I just wanted to hear you admit it, Amanda," she exclaimed with a knowing smile despite her obvious displeasure at the deception.

"No, we haven't been 'having a thing all this time,' Mother. We've actually never had 'a thing'. We became partners at work and then slowly over time we became good friends outside of work. Gosh, I guess I was in love with Lee almost from the beginning. It sure took him a lot longer to decide how he felt about me!"

"That's how it is with men, dear. They never know what they're feeling until we tell them! It was the same way with your father. He was so handsome in his uniform at that USO dance here in Washington! I walked all the way across the room just hoping he would notice me and ask me to dance. When he took my arm and led me onto the dance floor, I looked up into his dark eyes and just knew he was special. He was the one. He didn't realize it then. Or, maybe he did and was afraid to admit it. Phil worried so about the war and about hurting me—he was going overseas and didn't know whether he would be coming back," Dotty shook her head at the fond memory. "So where do you see this relationship going from here, darling? From what I've seen Lee doesn't appear to be one of those men who have trouble making commitments, but I still haven't seen any evidence of a ring!"

Amanda picked up her mug, but the tea had long gone cold. Replacing it on the coffee table, she sighed. "This is the hardest part of all, Mother." She paused trying to think of the best way to phrase things, but there was really no way to say this without hurting her mother deeply, possibly destroying her trust completely. She blinked her eyes, holding back the tears.

Dotty reached out and covered Amanda's hand with her own. "Panda, I came home because when you told me on the phone that you were fine, I could tell that you really weren't fine at all. What has happened? Has Lee left you? What did he say to you? Did he hurt you in any way?" Dotty inquired with some heat, her protective instincts fully aroused by her daughter's obvious distress.

"No, mother. Lee didn't hurt me although we did have an argument before he left. That's only part of the problem. You want to know where our relationship is going," Amanda raised her eyes to encounter her mother's concerned gaze. "We can't be having 'a thing' because we're married."

Dotty was silent for a very long time before she found her voice. "You're married! What happened to getting engaged? What's the rush? Did he get you pregnant?"

Is that why you couldn't even wait for me to come back from Maine? Did you have to elope?"

"No, I am not pregnant, but we did have to elope. Mother, this is very difficult for me."

"This is difficult for you! I'm the one who's just found out that my daughter has been lying to me for years about what she does for a living and now she's gone and eloped!" Dotty stood up and turned her face away obviously trying to regain control of herself.

Amanda tightened her grip on her mother's hand. "Let me explain, please. No matter how badly I behaved, you always gave me a chance to explain," she reminded her mother through her tears. A long moment passed before Dotty reseated herself on the couch still without looking at her daughter.

"Thank you," Amanda realized she'd been holding her breath. She began to speak cautiously, "I hated having to lie to you, Mother. We've always been so close. It was one of the most difficult things I ever had to do. Mr. Melrose and Lee explained that it was for your own safety though. If anyone found out what Lee and I do, they might try to use you or the boys to force us to give away classified information or even betray our country."

Amanda could see the protest forming on her mother's lips as she turned to look at her and so she hurried on. "I know this is hard to believe, but it happened to a friend of Lee's. Khai's son was kidnapped in order to force Khai to betray Lee and the United States government. Lee and I managed to rescue little Kim and Lee got Khai and his family into the witness protection program. We had to face the fact that it easily could have been you or Phillip or Jamie held hostage! We still loved each other very much and wanted to be married, but we decided that day that it would have to be a mystery marriage."

"So what's changed, Amanda? Why tell me now?" Amanda was relieved to see that her mother was listening now, even intrigued by their story.

"Lee asked me to consider telling you all on our upcoming 'family' vacation. He thinks, and I have come to agree with him, that we would all be much safer living together under one roof. I have to admit that living separately has been more difficult than we imagined and more frustrating, too!" She smiled tentatively at her mother.

"I can just imagine! Well, I can't say I agree with your reasoning, but I understand your concern for our safety. I'm glad you're telling me this now. When do you plan on telling the boys? When Lee gets back?"

"Mother, I hate to tell you this, but the boys already know." Her mother's eyes widened at that information so Amanda quickly explained, "They came across

our marriage certificate in Lee's apartment while he was taking care of them during my business trip. He had to tell them about our marriage and our jobs."

"So, I'm the very last to know that my daughter is married to a spy!" Dotty declared indignantly.

"Honestly, I don't think Lee's told his uncle yet," she offered.

"Lee hasn't told his uncle yet," Dotty huffed. "This is the uncle he calls 'The Colonel' and talks to every three years or so? That's small consolation, Amanda."

"I know, Mother. I am so sorry. You don't know how often I wanted to sit down and tell you everything. Sometimes I felt so alone. I couldn't tell you about the first time he kissed me. Or when he finally told me he loved me. Do you have any idea how hard it was to hide my engagement ring and then my wedding ring? I love Lee so very much. I was so happy and excited and I couldn't share him or any of our important milestones with you— my own mother." She covered her face with her hands and wept aloud no longer able to contain herself. Suddenly, her mother's arms were around her, rocking her gently as she cried.

"There's more, isn't there?" her mother observed when her sobs had turned into hiccups and finally quieted.

"Yes. I returned a day early from California. I walked in to find Lee here with the boys. Joe had taken off for Africa and stuck him with the boys for two full weeks. It was then that I found out he'd told the boys everything. Lee hadn't bothered to let me know what had happened even though we'd spoken on the phone several times," she began quietly.

"Lee wouldn't want to tell you something like that over the phone. He was probably waiting until he could tell you face to face," Dotty suggested kindly.

Amanda looked at her mother in shock. That's exactly what she'd done with her mother, after all. "I was tired and surprised and out of sorts. We had a fight about it. I was so angry I threw him out of the house. The next morning I discovered he was on his way to Estocchia. Mother, Joe's been taken hostage by a group of Islamic fundamentalists and I think Lee is going to try to rescue him. They're both in terrible danger over there. I'm so afraid for them. And I never got a chance to tell Lee that I forgive him and I love him so very much." The tears were flowing freely once again.

"Don't worry, Panda. I've seen the passion in his eyes when that man looks at you. He loves you very much and he knows that you love him, too. One little fight won't change that."

"It wasn't a little fight, Mother."

“All fights are little fights, darling. None of them are as big as the love you have for each other. At least, that’s the way it was for your Daddy and me. When we were in the middle of a fight, it always seemed like such a big deal. We’d argue loud and long sometimes. Your Daddy would stomp out into the backyard to smoke his pipe. I’d go into our bedroom and slam the door. After we’d calmed down enough to resolve the problem, we’d be amazed that we’d gotten so worked up about such a little thing really. When Lee comes back, he’ll say he’s sorry. You’ll tell him you forgive him and then you’ll ask him to forgive you. He won’t know what you’re talking about because he’s been thinking it was all his fault. He’ll forgive you only because you’ll insist on it. And then you’ll both wonder why you fought in the first place. It was silly, really.” Her mother stroked her back as she spoke these words of reassurance and calm.

“What if he doesn’t come back?” Amanda whispered.

“He’ll come back. He won’t let a few Islamic fundamentalists and a continent or two stand between you,” her mother whispered back.

“I love you, mother. I’m so sorry for everything. I owe you so much for all you’ve done for the boys and me over these past few years.”

“I love you, Panda. I forgive you. You don’t owe me a thing. All I want, all I’ve ever wanted, is for you and the boys to be happy. Lee makes you and the boys happy. You all make him happy, too. He’ll come home, you’ll see. And we’ll be a real family: all together, no more lying, no more secrets, and no more mysteries!”

“Well, I’m still a spy, Mother, and so is Lee,” Amanda smiled through her tears. “Some things are classified, need to know.”

“Classified, I can deal with,” Dotty assured her with a smile and a hug, which Amanda returned gratefully. Her mother’s wisdom and resilience never failed to amaze her!

Chapter 9

The lone commando stood absolutely still on the narrow rocky trail. He could hear his quarry advancing toward him through the bush and sent up another prayer of thanks for the cloud-cover blanketing the moon tonight. When the last perimeter guard finally realized he was not alone in the darkness, it was already too late. That brief moment of surprise was all the intruder needed as he quickly sprayed the skinny teenager in the face with Leatherneck’s new fast-acting aerosol sedative. He continued to hold his breath even as he reached out to catch the boy and his AK-47 before they thudded noisily to the ground.

Seconds later the unconscious guard was bound hand and foot. Major Lee Stetson was on the prowl again, his night-vision goggles enabling him to glide soundlessly through the nighttime landscape that was bright as day to his eyes. Reaching a small hillock at the edge of the herder's camp, he scanned the area to locate any remaining guards and swore silently. Two older men had remained behind at the campfire, joking and drinking, after they'd sent the younger men and boys out to guard the perimeter. Now where had they gotten to?

Movement over by the prisoner's hut drew his attention immediately. He watched as they dragged one of the hostages out of the tiny mud brick building. Damn, it looked like they'd grabbed the French nurse, Janine Montagne. She was struggling like mad, but they quickly forced her to her knees and then onto her back. He didn't have much time. Heading straight down the hill, he counted on the noise of the young woman's screams and the guards' drunken laughter and sexual threats to cover the noise of his approach. It didn't hurt any that Joe King and Doctor Pierre Dupont were throwing themselves bodily against the locked wooden door of their prison house. The two Soldiers of Islam were so focused on the helpless woman they were assaulting that they didn't notice Stetson even when he walked right up and stood behind the smaller guard who was kneeling on Mademoiselle Montagne's wrists and struggling to hold her still. The larger of the two men was already sitting on the woman's outspread legs working to unfasten his trousers. With practiced economy of motion, Stetson shot the small man in the back of the head and at the same time kned him to one side so that he wouldn't fall on the little nurse. As the larger man looked up in complete amazement, he shot him in the forehead. The impact knocked the would-be rapist over backwards.

Janine Montagne clutched her torn, blood-spattered white shirt across her exposed breasts and scuttled away from him in fear and revulsion. It dawned on Lee that his was a frightening appearance—all decked out in desert camouflage, lumbar pack and body-armor, full helmet with night-vision goggles covering his eyes, carrying both a side-arm with a silencer and an M-16. He replaced his side-arm in its holster on his right hip and slowly raised his goggles onto his helmet. Lowering the cloth that camouflaged his lower face he smiled reassuringly at the terrified woman and addressed her quietly in her native French, "I am called Major Lee Stetson of the United States Marine Corps. I have come to take you and the other captives to safety."

As if he needed any further proof of her courage and fortitude, she stopped screaming with a gasp, blinked several times, and then looked down for a moment to tie the tails of her ruined shirt together with shaking hands. Lee stepped forward very slowly and offered her a hand to help her up off of the rocky ground. She hesitated and then grasped it lightly, still not certain what would happen next. He could feel her trembling and gave her a moment to collect herself. When she was a little steadier on her feet, he led her away from the two dead bodies and over to a flat rock near the fire. "Who else was in that hut with you?" he queried gently in French.

“Seulement Monsieur King et Monsieur le docteur Dupont,” she answered in a shaky whisper.

He smiled encouragingly at her once more before heading back toward the prisoners’ hut. Stooping to retrieve the key from the larger of the two rapists, he moved to stand to one side of the door and addressed the two men inside, first in French and then in English. “It’s time go home, gentlemen. I’m going to unlock this door and I want you to come out one at a time with Joe King in the lead. Do you understand?”

“Yeah, we understand,” came the disgruntled reply.

He unlocked the door and stepped back. As instructed, Joe King exited the mud hut first. Recognizing his rescuer immediately, he stopped in the doorway with his mouth open.

“Joe, Joe!” Doctor Pierre Dupont called impatiently. “You must move forward, if I am to come out, too.”

Joe King limped out of the doorway and came to stand in front of Lee. A bemused smile finally appeared on his face, “I’ll be damned. Lee Stetson, what the hell are you doing here?”

“I thought I explained that already, Joe. I’m here to rescue you.” Lee raised his eyebrows and looked the filthy, bewhiskered Emergency Aid Officer up and down. Drawing the knife from its sheath on his left thigh, he sliced through the cords binding Joe’s hands.

Joe chafed his numb hands, as he peered around at the empty camp, spotting the two dead guards almost immediately, “Not much of a rescue party, Stetson.”

“Sorry, Joe. It was the best I could do on such short notice— government cutbacks, you know.” Lee grinned and clapped him on the shoulder. He cut the doctor’s binds and resheathed his knife.

“I hate to interrupt this sentimental reunion, but they took Janine out of the hut sometime ago,” Doctor Dupont began, peering at Lee anxiously in the gloom.

Lee stepped a little further to one side and gestured to where Janine was sitting hunched beside the tiny campfire. “They bruised her up pretty good and tore her clothes, but that’s all they had time for.” Doctor Dupont didn’t wait for Lee to finish speaking before he rushed to her side and took her into his arms.

“Thank God she’s okay!” Joe exclaimed fervently. “Pierre and Janine were only recently engaged. We tried to keep them from taking her out of the hut, but they had guns. When we heard her screams, we feared the worst. . .”

“There wasn’t much you could do under the circumstances, Joe,” Lee assured him. “We need to move quickly if we’re going to rendezvous with the chopper before day break. Are you badly hurt?” He looked pointedly at the gash evident on Joe’s forehead.

Joe grimaced, first touching his head and then looking down at his right ankle. “I hit my head and bashed my ankle when the Rover crashed into that trench across the roadway. My ankle’s swollen up inside my boot and throbs something awful. Pierre can’t be sure whether it’s broken, but I can walk on it if I have to. I want to get out of here!”

Lee nodded grimly, “I’m afraid walking out is our only option. I’d kind of hoped they’d leave one truck behind, but when the others left, they took anything with wheels. How about the others?” he asked in a quiet voice, looking over at Pierre and Janine by the fireside.

“Well, they didn’t give us much to eat or drink while we were here and Janine and Pierre have been prisoners longer than I have,” Joe offered just as quietly.

“Okay, why don’t you join Doctor Dupont and Mademoiselle Montagne by the fire? Take these protein bars and I’ll go find some water,” Lee suggested. He watched Joe limp slowly over to the others and began to worry in earnest. They had more than four miles of very rough ground to cover to make it to the clearing where Leatherneck would meet them with the Huey. He’d made the drop after full dark. It had taken him almost two hours to scout out the exact location of the camp and then another hour to eliminate the perimeter guards. Time was getting short.

Ninety minutes later they’d covered a little over two miles on foot. Joe’s injured ankle wasn’t the only thing slowing them down. The other hostages had been weakened by malnourishment and dehydration. At this pace, they’ll never make the rendezvous on schedule.

“Monsieur Stetson, please. It is necessary for me to rest, I am afraid. Forgive me,” fatigue roughened the petite nurse’s voice.

“Of course,” he replied at once helping her to a seat on the ground and handing her one of the two canteens on his belt. Joe King and Doctor Dupont approached slowly. It was hard to tell who was supporting whom. Janine handed the canteen to the two men after she’d taken several small sips. Conserving and sharing water was second nature to anyone living in Northern Africa for an extended period of time.

Lee reached up to toggle the call button on his radio, “Bald Eagle, this is Coyote. Do you copy? Over.”

“Loud and clear, Coyote. Where the hell are you? Over.” In the quiet of the desert night, Leatherneck’s voice crackled loudly in his headset.

“We’re not going to make the pick up point tonight. We’ll hole up in those canyons we spotted the other night and rendezvous with you tomorrow night about three hours after full dark. Over.”

“Roger that, Coyote. Keep your head down, Major. Bald Eagle, over and out.”

“You betcha, Bald Eagle. Coyote out.” Lee toggled the radio off and smiled down at his bedraggled little group. “Well, we’re going with plan ‘B’, gang. There are some pretty steep canyons just to our west. We’re gonna find us a nice secluded cave and lay low during the daylight hours. We’ll head out again right after full dark tomorrow night.”

Joe handed the half-full canteen back to Lee. “Do you really think we’ll be able to stay hidden from Al-Mahdi in these hills? He and his men probably know them like their own backyards.”

“That’s true, Joe, but I’m betting he won’t search too heavily in this direction. He’ll expect us to have gone the easier way using the footpath along the dry streambed—it heads more directly toward the road to the capitol. I left a back trail in that direction before I began to take out the guards.” Lee laid his M-16 across his knees and crouched; offering his back to Janine, “Climb on, Mademoiselle. It’s not far now, but we’ll have to cover some pretty rough ground.” Janine Montagne was so tired that she climbed up and put her arms around his neck without any protest. Lee stood up slowly, adjusting himself to the extra weight. “Let’s move out, gentlemen. I’d like to be undercover well before sunrise.” He started out at a slow steady pace leading them northwest toward the cave-pocked canyons.

Another hour of walking and scrambling over rock-strewn hillsides found them halfway down the third narrow canyon they’d explored. The first two hadn’t had any caves large enough for their group. Lee had just spotted several large creosote bushes growing on a narrow ledge about eight feet above the canyon floor.

“Let’s take ten,” he suggested quietly, settling Janine gently on the ground and stretching out the kinks in his back. Pierre and Joe sank heavily onto the nearest boulders. He passed the canteen around again. False dawn was only minutes away. They had to find someplace to hole up and soon. “Wait here,” he said passing his M-16 to Joe. “Joe, keep an eye on things for me, huh?”

Eyeing the dark shadow behind those bushes with hope, he started to climb up the steep side of the canyon. When he gained the ledge, he could see a narrow opening just behind the bushes. Pushing past the aromatic branches, he was

relieved to discover that it widened out nicely. It would do. He returned swiftly to the group.

“There’s a small cave just behind those bushes,” he told them. “I know you’re all exhausted, but once we’re inside, you can rest and eat something. I’ll carry Janine up on my back. Pierre, follow me up, but not too closely. You don’t want to be hit by any rocks I may knock down. I’ll come back for you, Joe.”

Lee helped Janine up from her seat on the sand of the canyon floor and onto his back. It changed his balance dramatically, but with great care he was able to maneuver them both up the side of the canyon and into the cool darkness of the shallow cave. He settled Janine against the back wall and returned to the entrance just in time to give Pierre a hand up onto the ledge. Looking back down the canyon side to where Joe King was still sitting, he noted that the crumbling sandstone that formed the canyon walls showed few signs of their recent climb. Dropping his lumbar pack onto the ground at the cave entrance, he headed back down to Joe.

“I think I can make it up by myself, Lee,” Joe protested handing the M-16 back to him.

Lee slung the rifle over his left shoulder and sighed in exasperation, “Maybe, but I don’t really know whether you’ll be able to support your full weight on that ankle and neither do you. If you fall, you could be injured even more severely. We can’t risk that. I’m sorry, Joe, but I have to insist.”

“C’mon, Stetson! I outweigh you by at least twenty pounds. How the hell are you going to carry me straight up that cliff?” Joe argued angrily.

“Look, Joe. It’s not my preference, but if I have to, I’ll knock you out and carry you up as a dead weight. It would be a lot easier on me to carry you up to the cave conscious and alert. That way I can have both hands free and you can help me balance the load. Either way, I’m carrying you up on my back. What’ll it be?” Lee narrowed his eyes and clenched his left fist by his side, reminding himself that this was Amanda’s ex-husband and Jamie and Phillip’s father.

“Okay, you win,” Joe reluctantly gave in as he struggled to his feet and moved to put his arms around Lee’s neck. “This is so embarrassing.”

Lee chuckled for the first time in a long while. “Just be glad there’s no one to see us! I promise I won’t tell the boys about this, if you don’t.”

Reaching the brush-covered ledge safely for a third time, Lee set Joe on his feet and then crouched to lead the way into their tiny hiding place. Pierre was sitting up against the back wall of the cave with Janine in his arms whispering to her in a loving voice. Joe limped over to the right side of the entrance and slumped heavily to the sandy floor of the cave, stretching his right leg out in front of him and closing his eyes. Pain had carved deep lines in his dusty face. Lee

rummaged in his pack, grabbing three more protein bars and the nearly empty canteen of water. Passing them out to his three exhausted companions, he finished the water in the canteen when it returned to him and took a protein bar for himself before taking up position at the mouth of the cave. Looking back at the others, he saw that they had already succumbed to sleep. Gazing out through the screen of the dusty leaves, he could see the sun's first light gilding the edge of the rim rock.

The sound of voices in the canyon below him brought Lee to full awareness. Gauging the movement of the shadows on the cave floor, he judged he'd been dozing off and on for about six hours. Crawling forward on his belly, he peered through the leafy branches just in time to see two men heading further up the canyon. Their jalabiyas and turbans immediately identified them as Muslims. Edging back into the cave on elbows and knees, he covered Joe's mouth with one hand while he shook his shoulder with the other. Joe's eyes popped open immediately, but he remained silent. Lee removed his hand from Joe's mouth and helped him sit up.

"We have visitors, Joe," he whispered in a voice that wouldn't have been heard inches away. "I'm going down to check them out. I want you to keep watch. Nod, if you know how to use one of these," he said handing him the M-16.

When Joe nodded, he continued, "I'll identify myself by name and rank when I return. If I don't use my rank, nail anybody who comes through that entrance, okay?" Joe's eyes widened in fear, but he nodded again solemnly. Lee drew his side-arm and checked the clip.

As he started silently for the cave entrance, he heard Joe's whisper behind him, "Keep your head down, Lee!"

Every passing minute seemed like an hour. Joe waited, ears straining to hear any sound, the tension building with each heartbeat. Just when he thought he couldn't stand it any longer, he heard scrabbling on the cliff, the soft clatter of metal on sandstone, and the quiet sound of pebbles bouncing down the canyon wall. Training the automatic weapon on the opening before him, he readied himself for action.

His breath escaped from his lungs in a whoosh when he heard a familiar voice call out, "Joe! It's Major Lee Stetson. You can stand down now, I'm coming in."

The entrance went dark for a moment as Lee ducked his head to enter the small space. He set two AK-47 rifles against the wall before he took the M-16 back and sat down across the cave from Joe as calmly as though he'd just run out for a loaf of bread and a gallon of milk.

"Well, what happened out there?" Joe asked breathlessly.

Lee unfastened the chinstrap and removed his helmet, setting it quietly on the cave floor beside him. He ran both hands through his short hair, making it stand up in sweaty spikes. He looked at Joe for a long moment before he answered. "There were two of them, Soldiers of Islam, unless the local hunters and herders have taken to carrying Russian automatic weapons. They won't bother us or anyone else for that matter. I just hope no one will go looking for them until they fail to show up in camp later tonight. We'll need a good head start, if we're going to make it to the pickup point without being captured."

"You killed them? But I didn't hear any gunshots!" he blurted, afraid that he already knew the answer.

"Yeah, well, if there were any others nearby, I didn't want to bring them running," Lee answered dryly. "I don't think you really want to hear all the details, Joe."

"Sometimes, you scare the hell out me, you know that, Stetson?" Joe exclaimed in a soft, but penetrating voice.

In the gloom of their sanctuary, Stetson's eyes appeared dark-gray instead of their usual light hazel. "Sometimes I scare the hell out of myself," he grated wearily, leaning his head back against the cave wall and staring out into the brightness of the canyon.

That took Joe by surprise. He continued a little more calmly, "I tried to warn Amanda about you, you know. I was afraid your job would put her and the boys in danger one day. I also detailed for her what I'd found out about all your women. I was so certain you weren't exactly the home and family type." Lee didn't even glance away from the view outside. Joe continued, "She pointed out, very reasonably, that it was my job that had put the boys in danger and it was you being good at yours that kept us all safe that day when Prescott grabbed our sons in the school gym. I hated to admit it, but she was right." Lee glanced away from his scrutiny of the canyon floor for a moment.

Joe went on reflectively, "She also told me that she wasn't worried about your ability to make a commitment. She said you two had been married in February, but were keeping the marriage a secret because you were just as concerned about the boys' safety as I was."

At that, Lee turned away from the cave entrance and looked at Joe in astonishment, "She told you we were married? When was this?"

Joe thought about it for a moment, “Oh, it was a couple of months ago, I guess. She thought I had the right to know, as the boys’ father and all. She never mentioned it to you?”

“Nope. I guess I didn’t have a need to know,” Lee commented harshly, returning to guard duty.

“When you first starting hanging around the house and spending more time with Phillip and Jamie, I really resented it. It seemed like Phillip started every sentence with ‘Lee says’ or ‘Guess what Lee and I did’! Then you gave Jamie that camera and he joined the Lee Stetson fan club, too.”

Lee broke in with a soft sigh, “Look, Joe. I have no intention of coming between you and your sons. You’ll always be their father. I just want to get to know them a little better.”

“I understand that, Lee.” A small smile crossed Joe’s face as he thought about Phillip and Jamie, back home on Maplewood Drive. It would be the middle of the night in Arlington and they’d be safely tucked in their beds. “The more I listened to them talk about you and the things you guys did, the more I realized how good you were with them. I’ve never been very good at the father-stuff. When Phillip was born, I was terrified of him. I didn’t know the first thing about being a father.” Lee had given up his scrutiny of the canyon floor and turned his intense gaze on Joe.

Joe resumed his reflection on his past and its influence on the present, “I didn’t have much of a role-model, you see. My father was never around. When I was younger he was working eighteen-hour days, scrambling up the ladder in his law firm. He was determined to earn a partnership before he turned forty. When they finally named him a partner, the added responsibilities and social obligations that came with it didn’t allow for much family time. Don’t get me wrong—I love my Dad. He’s a great guy. We had some fun times together. A couple times a year, he’d get box seats to an Orioles game. Or he’d take us on fantastic vacations—scuba diving in the Florida Keys or skiing in Vail. He just wasn’t around for the day-to-day stuff, you know? Mom took care of all that. When I’m with the boys, I never know quite what to do or say. From the way the boys talk about you, you and your Dad must’ve been pretty close.” Joe was brought up short by a bark of bitter laughter from Lee.

“That’s a crock of bull, Joe! I don’t know any more about being a father than you do,” Lee retorted sharply. “My father and my mother died when I was only five years old. I only have a few vague memories of my life with them. There were no baseball games or family vacations for me. For the most part, I was raised on a series of military bases by my father’s half-brother who spent more time with his flight squadron than he did with me.” He went on in a softer voice, “After Amanda first introduced me to the boys, I read some parenting books but frankly, they weren’t a whole lot of help. Most of the time, I’m making it all up as I go along. I

just try to imagine what I would've wanted my father to do or say in the same situation. Sometimes I come up blank. The funny thing is, when I don't know what to say, the boys usually fill in my silence with just what I need to know."

The two men regarded one another across the short distance between them. Joe was surprised that Lee had opened up to him this way. Hell, he was amazed that he had shared as much of his feelings about his own childhood with Lee. "Maybe you're just a natural father, Lee. All I know is that I'm glad you're spending more time with the boys. It means a lot to me to know that you'll be there for them when I can't be. It's too bad they don't know that you're not just Amanda's boyfriend, but you're their step-dad now."

A sheepish grin appeared on Lee's dirty face. "As long as we're being so damn open and honest, I might as well tell you that the boys found our marriage certificate a couple weeks ago. I had to tell them all about our wedding and our jobs. They took it pretty well. It seems Jamie had already tumbled to the fact that I was a 'fed', as he put it. He remembered me from the gym that day we captured Prescott."

Joe smiled back at Lee, "I guess congratulations are finally in order. It'll be good for the boys to have a step-dad around—especially since I've just been offered a newly created position overseeing USEAO African operations. I'll be responsible for auditing our Estoccian relief services as well as those of the rest of the African region. Although I'll still be based in DC, I'll be spending more time traveling to New York, Geneva, and all over the African continent."

"Gee, Joe, that sounds like a great opportunity for you. I know you'll be great at it; after all you caught those fraudulent bills of lading in that Estoccian scam. It's just that, well, I thought you took the job in DC so that you could spend more time with Phillip and Jamie?" Despite his words, Lee didn't sound very enthusiastic.

"I know and I'm going to try to get a couple weekends with them each month. This new job puts me in a position to assure that the people who really need our aid shipments are actually getting everything we send. In the past, far too many of our goods have ended up on the black market or gone to supply fringe military groups like the Soldiers of Islam. I can change that," Joe explained with enthusiasm. "Look, Phillip and Jamie have you now. They don't need two full-time Dads. And the people over here really need my help. Now that you've seen the conditions over here, surely you understand." Joe could see that Lee was disappointed in him. He knew Amanda would be, too. "This is just something I have to do.

"I do understand, Joe. This isn't my first trip to a third-world country, you know. I fought in Viet Nam for two years. I've worked in the slums of Calcutta, Mexico City, Singapore, Romania, and Brasília, to name just a few. You've gotta do what you think is right. I promise I'll do my best by those boys," Lee replied solemnly. Joe could sense his sincerity. It was almost like he'd taken an oath.

“Thanks, Lee. You don’t know how much that means to me!” Joe looked at the angle of shadows on the cave floor. It had to be going on three in the afternoon by now. Lee had been guiding them through the desert all night and keeping watch over them since first light. “You need to get some rest, Lee. I was in ‘Nam, too—in sixty-seven and sixty-eight. Some things you never forget, no matter how hard you try. Let me have one of those Russian guns and I’ll stand guard for a while so you can catch some Z’s.”

Lee handed him an AK-47 with a yawn. “These are actually very similar to the old M-1. They do have a greater tendency to overheat and they jam at the most inopportune moments,” Lee advised. “Wake me immediately, if you see or hear anything suspicious.”

Joe watched as his boys’ step-dad curled up on the cave floor and closed his eyes, left hand still resting on his M-16. “I sure hope I won’t have to use this thing,” he whispered quietly. He saw a small smile cross Lee’s face before he scooted over to keep watch on the canyon below.

It seemed only a brief moment had passed when Lee felt someone gently shaking his shoulder, but he awoke silently, alert and ready for anything. The little cavern was definitely darker. The sun had passed overhead while he’d slept and the afternoon was almost gone. Relieved to see a smile on Joe’s face, he sat up stiffly and stretched.

“All quiet on the Western Front, Joe?” he joked in a whisper.

“I didn’t hear a thing—not even a wild animal,” Joe assured him. “What’s the plan?”

“We’ll have something to eat and drink then head out as soon as it’s completely dark. I want to be in position when the chopper makes its first pass. The fact that two of Al-Mahdi’s men were in this canyon means he hasn’t abandoned the hunt in this direction. When they don’t return to camp, “ Lee trailed off with a shrug and turned to wake the others.

Climbing down the steep canyon walls was even more difficult in the deep African dark, but they managed it without injury and headed across country in a generally eastern direction. They moved slowly and carefully, conserving their strength and trying to remain unseen and unheard by anyone hunting in the night. Resting often, they still covered the last two miles to the pickup point in less than the three hours Lee had estimated. Now all they could do was wait. Lee left his bedraggled little group sheltered under some crabbed thorn trees optimistically growing on the side of a dry wash. He lay on the rim above listening for Leatherneck’s radio call and watching the truck lights slowly approaching from

the northwest. It was a race against time and it would be nice if Leatherneck showed up a little early for a change! “Don’t worry, Amanda. I’m coming home,” he whispered into the warm night air.

Chapter 10

“Amanda! Here’s the rest of the dry cleaning,” Dotty called as she entered her daughter’s bedroom with an armful of summer dresses and skirts. The closet was open, but Amanda was sitting on her bed head bowed. “Darling, are you all right?”

“Yes, Mother. I’m fine,” Amanda replied quickly, though there was little hope that her mother wouldn’t notice how low she was feeling tonight. She stood up and stepped to the closet, carefully hanging the light gray suit in her hands alongside the rest of Lee’s clothing. She ran one hand slowly down the jacket sleeve before turning and taking the clean clothing from her mother. She began to hang her things neatly in the closet, “Thanks for bringing them up. I would’ve gotten them in a few moments.”

“I don’t mind, dear,” Dotty responded turning in a small circle as she surveyed the changes in her daughter’s bedroom. “You’ve been such a whirlwind these last few days. Why, you’ve cleared out half your closet so we could bring Lee’s things over from his apartment. By the way, Leona Harris, President of the Women’s Fellowship, called to thank us for the five bags of clothing we dropped off for the Fall Rummage Sale yesterday. Then today, you went through all the books downstairs and carried box after box of children’s books up to be stored in the attic. It looks like we’ll have plenty of room for Lee’s books and record albums now. And I still haven’t figured out how you and the boys managed to move Lee’s dresser and his desk over here all by yourselves. Are you sure you want to put the desk on that wall, dear?”

Amanda closed her closet doors and sat back down on her bed. “They really weren’t all that heavy once we took out all the drawers. And the desk comes apart so you can move it in two pieces. Lee showed me how it worked the last time he moved. I really don’t know where Lee will want things, Mother. I just know that the only things that he’s kept every time he’s moved are those two pieces—the desk and the dresser,” Amanda smiled as she thought about Lee’s ‘annual migrations’ as Mr. Melrose called them.

Dotty crossed the room and sat down on the bed beside Amanda. “What have you heard from Africa?” she asked softly. “And don’t tell me, ‘No news is good news’. The boys may buy that, but I know you better than that. This is me you’re not talking to. You only go on a good cleaning jag when you’re anxious or upset.

Talk to me, Amanda. You're not the only one who's worried about Lee and Joe, you know."

Amanda smiled at her mother and hugged her briefly, "I know you're worried, too. I really don't have any details, Mother."

"Tell me what you do know then, dear. Remember you promised to tell me whatever you could, if it's not classified, that is."

Amanda got up and crossed to the door checking the hallway. The corridor was quiet. The only light came from a nightlight casting a yellow glow over the top of the stairs. The boys had gone to bed about an hour earlier. Amanda closed the door behind her. She sat back down on the bed pulling her bare feet up onto the heirloom quilt and hugging her knees.

"The only information we have is vague to say the least. Sometime in the early hours of Monday morning, the Estoccian Regular Army launched a coordinated military action directed against Islamic militia groups that have been operating along their border with the nation of Atbarah. So far it appears that Estoccian casualties have been minimal. Two arms caches containing Russian-made automatic weapons and explosives were heavily defended by the Soldiers of Islam. One was captured and the other was destroyed. Prisoners have also been captured and are being questioned. Apparently, Al-Mahdi is still at large. There's been no word about the hostages." Amanda felt like she was giving a report at an Agency briefing.

"Now I understand why you told the boys that 'no news was good news'. This military offensive is taking place right where you think the hostages were being held, isn't it? That's why you're so worried about Joe and Lee?"

"Yes, Mother. There's been no word of Joe or Lee in all that time. The only good news is, they haven't found any bodies. The highlands of Estoccian are sparsely populated and, much like the Badlands of the Old West, they're full of box canyons and dotted with small caves."

"Someone could get lost in there for a very long time," Dotty finished thoughtfully.

"Yes, someone could get lost and never be found," Amanda whispered, hugging her knees even more tightly to her chest.

Her mother moved over to put her arms around her daughter offering wordless comfort. Amanda leaned into her mother's embrace. "Amanda, this may sound silly, but I think if something had happened to Lee you would know somehow."

Amanda raised her head and looked at her mother in surprise. "I had a dream just last night. I was outside. It was dark and quiet all around me. There were lights off in the distance. Just beside me, I heard Lee whisper, 'Don't worry, Amanda. I'm coming home.' When I turned to look, I couldn't see him."

Her mother smiled. "That's just what I mean. Somehow you'd know."

"Thank you, Mother. I really needed to hear that right now."

"That's what mothers are for, Amanda. You know that." Dotty gave her a final squeeze and stood up. "Good night, darling. I love you."

"I love you, too. Good night, Mother."

Thursday, July 9, 1987

Today I cleared some space on the family room shelves for Lee's books and music albums. I sure hope his stereo and speakers will fit on the lower shelf. I carried four boxes of Phillip and Jamie's children's books up to the attic. It was fun to page through them and remember 'reading time' before bed when they were little. How often did I read Goodnight, Moon to Jamie when he was two? I think I still have that whole book memorized. How Phillip loved One Fish, Two Fish and all his truck books! I'll keep them safe and maybe one day they'll read them to their own children at bedtime.

They're both growing up so very quickly. It may be just because I was away from them for almost three weeks, but it seems as though so many things are changing all at once. Phillip is not only growing taller, but he's truly becoming more 'grown up'. He seems to be teasing his little brother a lot less and helping out around here without being asked a lot more. Several times in the past few days, he's come up to me and put his arm around my shoulder for no reason at all.

For his part, Jamie seems to be much less sensitive to his brother's teasing. He just ignores him or laughs it off. He's become more confident and outgoing, too. Yesterday after supper, several girls came over to 'remind' Phillip about the Ice Cream Social that the church youth group is holding this coming Sunday evening. In the past, Jamie would have hung in the background, quietly watching. I was surprised to hear him join right in with the banter. He as much as promised little Mary Kate McConnell that he'd sit with her at the Social! That sounds more like my girl-crazy Phillip than my shy, reserved Jamie.

I can't help but wonder if it's not Lee's influence in their lives coming through. Both boys seem more secure and confident lately. As grown up and

independent as they've become however, they both admit to being terribly worried about their 'two Dads'. Every day when I come through the door, the first thing they ask is, 'Any news?' It used to be, 'What's for dinner?' That was a much easier question to answer!

I hadn't realized how much a part of our lives Lee has already become. He not only left his running shoes by the back door and his aftershave on the bathroom counter, but he's left an indelible impression on both my boys. What will we do if he never comes home?

I had a talk with Mother tonight. She wanted to know what was going on in Africa. I told her what I knew, which wasn't very much. Still, it felt good to share my worries with her. She told me that if something had happened to Lee, I would know. The funny thing is, I had the same idea myself. It's ridiculous, I know. I just have this feeling deep down that he's all right. Opposition forces are on the move. The Estoccian Army is blowing up terrorist's arms depots. There's been no sign of the hostages. Even so, I have this sense that Lee and Joe are out there and they're okay. It's been four days since the military operation began—we should get some news soon. Until then, we'll just keep on hoping and praying.

Chapter 11

Lee heard movement on the slope below him and turned to see Joe laboring up the side of the wash.

"How much longer until that chopper gets here?" he asked, breathing heavily from the short climb.

"Soon, I hope."

"Before they get here, do you think?" Joe asked flatly as he looked further down the wash. Now individual headlights could be seen in the dark night. There were at least three vehicles. Searchlights mounted on the advancing trucks were scanning the dry wash and the bush on either side.

"I don't know," Lee answered honestly. Joe was still carrying the AK-47 that he'd given him in their canyon hideout. "Joe, I don't know about you, but I don't want them to get their hands on Janine again. If it looks like the cavalry isn't going to arrive in the nick of time, I'm going to use that boulder for cover and try to take

out as many of them as I can. Even if I can't get them all, I should be able to give you three a fighting chance to run for it."

Joe laughed harshly. "In case you hadn't noticed, I'm not up to doing any running. I'll lay low here on the rim of the wash. With you behind that rock and me over here, we'll catch 'em in our crossfire. Who knows, we may be able to take them all!"

Lee appreciated that Joe was putting a brave face on things. He was right—running was out of the question with his bad ankle. Lee grasped his shoulder and squeezed it once, "Good idea. I want you to take the M-16 and these extra cartridges. I'll take the AK-47." Lee held out his rifle and the ammo.

"Wait a minute! Didn't you say these Russian guns tend to jam?" Joe protested. "Shouldn't the better marksman have the better weapon?"

"I don't think so. These are automatics, remember? We're not going to aim and shoot. We're going to fire in broad swathes. Try to take out the lights first, then maybe hit a gas tank. A couple distracting explosions could come in real handy. If this damn gun does jam, I'll have a much better chance of getting it working again than you do. When I run out of ammo, I know for certain that my hand-to-hand skills are more up-to-date than yours." Lee pushed the American gun into Joe's hands and took the AK-47. "Even if the chopper gets here in the next five minutes, they'll spot it. I intend to load Janine and Pierre first. I'm counting on you to help me cover for them."

"I'll do my best," Joe said, studying the weapon in his hands.

Lee didn't respond. There was nothing more to say.

The trucks had come within a hundred-fifty yards and Lee was just getting ready to sprint across the open ground toward the boulder he'd picked out when, "Coyote, this is Bald Eagle. Do you copy?" crackled loudly in his ear.

Grinning from ear to ear, he turned to Joe as he answered the call, "I read you loud and clear, Bald Eagle. It's about time you showed up, man."

"Coyote, you got company coming, you know that? Over."

"Damn right! How about a little air support, Bald Eagle, just for old time's sake? Coyote, over," Lee suggested, his eyes on the on-coming trucks. The faint thub-thub-thub of the helicopter's rotors could now be heard. The hunters' searchlights were now scanning the sky, not the ground as before.

The black Huey 212 roared low overhead and swooped past them with a growl. Deafening booms of two AS.12 air-to-surface missiles punctuated the deep staccato chatter of a 12.7-mm machine gun. The ground shook underfoot with the impact as two of the vehicles exploded in flames. In the light of the burning

trucks, shadowy figures could be seen running in every direction. The sole remaining truck began to travel erratically in a generally western direction.

“Coyote, air support as ordered! I’m coming on in, over.” Leatherneck’s voice sounded in his ear again as the chopper returned to hover overhead.

“Bald Eagle, don’t set it down. Do you read me? Stay in the air! Drop the ladder. We’ll come up to you. Coyote, over.” Lee left Joe to keep watch on the rim and slid down the side of the wash in a shower of sand and gravel. He put his right arm around Janine’s back and half-carried her as she struggled up the steep, slippery incline with Pierre following close behind them.

“Roger, Coyote. But this time, I’m not leaving without you. If you don’t come up that ladder, I’m coming down after you. Do you read me? Bald Eagle, over.”

“I read you, loud and clear, Bald Eagle.” Lee looked up to see the rope ladder swinging in the air a few feet away. He grabbed it with his right hand and shouted to Janine over the noise of the chopper, “Ladies, first.”

Janine grasped a rung of the ladder with both hands and began to climb the swaying ladder awkwardly. Lee held the ladder as steady as he could while keeping one hand on his weapon. Stealing quick glances at her progress, he was relieved when he saw hands reach out and pull her through the aircraft door.

“You’re next, Doctor,” he shouted into Pierre’s ear and started the young physician up the ladder. He smiled at Joe, still standing guard on his right. It wouldn’t be long now, but it looked like their enemies had managed to reorganize. The lone truck was headed back in their direction and coming on fast.

“Two chicks in the nest, Major,” Master Sergeant Carson’s voice called in his ear at last.

Lee laid the AK-47 on the ground at his feet. “Leave your gun with me, Joe, and get up that ladder as quickly as you can,” Lee ordered loudly. Joe nodded once, handed Lee the M-16, and grabbed onto the ladder. Favoring his right foot, he ascended even more slowly than Janine.

Bullets whined and ricocheted off the ground in front of Lee as the Soldiers of Islam moved into range. The Huey’s machine guns replied in kind, but using the Air to Surface missiles was out of the question with a civilian on the ladder. Lee fired several rounds in the general direction of the advancing truck even as he attempted to stabilize ladder to ease Joe’s climb. He only dropped to one knee and lost hold of the ladder when a searing pain lanced through his upper right arm. Taking several quick breaths to control the pain, he stumbled back to his feet and fired off twenty or thirty more rounds. He couldn’t wait any longer. Slinging the M-16 over his left shoulder, he leapt to capture the wildly swinging ladder and struggled to climb it as it whirled and twirled frantically in the

backwash of the copter's rotors. The pain in his arm made his right hand slip off the rungs several times on his way up. Hadn't he been climbing forever? He was beginning to feel a little light-headed, when somebody grabbed the shoulder harness on his body armor from above and hauled him bodily into the Huey.

Landing on top of Joe King, he immediately rolled to his left and toggled his radio set, "We're all on board, Leatherneck. Get us the hell out of here!"

G-force dropped Lee's heart into his stomach as the Huey instantly shot up several hundred feet before pointing her nose to the east and taking off at full throttle. He heard Joe King's exultant laughter beside him and couldn't help grinning. By God, they'd made it! They were on their way home. Sitting up slowly and protecting his right arm against his body, he moved to put his back against the far bulkhead. Joe crawled over on his hands and knees to sit beside him. Master Sergeant Carson had hauled the ladder up and was lashing it down onto the deck.

"I don't believe it—a Black Hugh! We'd heard that the spooks used them in 'Nam, but we never saw one," Joe exclaimed over the engine noise, shaking his head in amazement.

"You weren't supposed to see them, Joe," Lee joked. "That was the whole idea!"

While Private Jimenez got Janine and Pierre strapped into the jump seats nearby, 'Chip' Carson came over and squatted down on his heels in front of Lee and Joe. His headset was hanging around his neck. "Did I hear you say you were in 'Nam? I was there from '64 to '70," he directed the question at Joe.

"Oh, yeah? I was stationed in Khe Sanh in '67 and '68," Joe shouted over the engine noise.

"You were in Khe Sanh in '68? During the Tet Offensive?" Carson asked.

"No, I was demobilized two weeks before Tet. Some of my buddies weren't so lucky." Joe closed his eyes briefly, obviously remembering fallen comrades. "Where did you serve, Lee?"

"I was in Tonsunhut for part of '72 and most of '73," Lee answered vaguely. "I was one of those spooks you never saw."

As they were talking, Master Sergeant Carson had taken out a small hand light and was inspecting them both carefully in its bright light. "I'll save you the trouble, Chip," Lee offered reluctantly. "I was hit in my right arm."

"Bring the medikit over here, Jimenez. On the double! The Major's been hit," Carson ordered zeroing in on the rapidly spreading bloodstain on Lee's upper right arm. Private Luis Jimenez dropped the khaki green box on the deck beside

Joe and moved quickly to help the Sergeant ease Lee out of his body armor and BDU jacket.

“Pardon me,” Doctor Pierre Dupont pushed his way between Joe and Lee, opening the medikit and quickly inventorying its contents. “Here, Joe. Hold these here and here,” he ordered as he placed two thick cloth pads over the bloody entry and exit wounds.

Joe wrapped his hands firmly around Lee’s bicep, smiling apologetically when Lee hissed at the contact. “Apply steady pressure while I find some antibiotics,” Doctor Dupont said as he rummaged in the kit on the floor beside him.

“No antibiotics,” Lee ground out between clenched teeth. “I’m allergic to penicillin.”

“Ah, bon. We can use topical sulfa, n’est-ce pas?” Pierre looked at Lee for confirmation. Receiving it, he nodded at Joe to remove the pads while he applied the sulfa to both wounds. Replacing the blood-soaked pads with clean ones, he bound the injury tightly. “You will need sutures when we reach the capitol and a course of antibiotics when you return home.” Lee nodded wearily and laid his head back against the vibrating bulkhead. Cradling his throbbing arm against his chest, he closed his eyes for the rest of the short trip.