

Christmas at the Eleventh Hour

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Notes: When I started this, I was going to set it now, but somehow I just couldn't get the words on paper to sound right--to do justice to current events. So, I've set it within the realm of Tom Clancy's "Debt of Honor" and "Executive Orders," and, I'd like to dedicate this story to the memory of those who lost their lives in the terrorist attacks on September 11.

And a huge thank you to Dix for being a super beta and patiently putting up with my procrastination.

Summary: Scarecrow and Jack Ryan. . . what more can I say?

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Rating: PG

Feedback: Please

December 1994

Chaos and uncertainty had filled the last few months. The uncertainty was still there. You could feel it in the air. He glanced up at the television screen that was bringing him CSPAN coverage of a Pentagon briefing with the volume turned down. He really didn't want to hear it, not right then anyway.

Lee Stetson sat back in his chair and allowed himself to think back on the events that had led to his taking over Billy's position. When exactly had the world fallen apart? Had it come to pieces before or after the assassination of Iraq's leader by Muslim, ok, not Muslim, Muslim's don't believe in violence. Make that crazed, power hungry mad men. The new President . . . Lee shook his head, he was a great President, but the way he came to power. The man, Jack Ryan, a former CIA analyst, had long been opposed to politics within the Intelligence Community, but the ex-president, Roger Durling, had chosen him to take the place of the Vice President who was being ousted due to a sex scandal. Then, the unthinkable had occurred, a Japanese pilot had flown his jet into the House side of the Capitol killing a majority of the Congressmen, and cabinet and leaving the recently appointed Vice President as the new President after only five minutes in office. Japan, Lee shook his head, that was another story entirely.

Lee glanced out the window into the bullpen and saw his agents scurrying around. It was actually quiet. When was the last time it was quiet? Before the war. . . . Lee leaned forward, reading the lips of the new Secretary of Defense. He could say one thing for the President, the man certainly chose men who knew what they were doing to fill the positions left empty by one man's acts of terror. Next on the list, retaliation . . . with a Navy that had been struck by the enemy, leaving two carriers badly wounded. Then there was the economy. A virus thought up by some techno terrorists had messed up Wall Street. Lee frowned, he was forgetting one thing. The biological attack that had been launched by the same people who assassinated the leader of Iraq and started this mess in the first place.

Lee put his head in his hands and tried to fight off the exhaustion that was threatening to overtake him, he hadn't been sleeping much. That was how he'd gotten this job, the President had 'asked' for Smythe's resignation and placed Billy at the top. He had then 'requested' that Lee take Billy's position. Of course, it had been a request, but the way it was phrased left little room for doubt that he was the top choice and the President would be disappointed if he declined.

It was a couple of weeks before Christmas and he still needed to do Christmas shopping. He smiled as he thought about Amanda, who was at home. Her doctor had ordered it. The stress of the last few months just hadn't affected her and the baby very well. Especially after the attack on Jenny's preschool. It hadn't had anything to do with them being agents, the terrorists had been after the President's youngest. Amanda was due in February, and they were hoping for a boy this time. He glanced at the clock and knew he could leave soon. The telephone rang. "Stetson."

The last person Lee expected a phone call from was the President of the United States, but that's exactly who he heard on the other end of the line. Ten minutes later, Lee found himself on his way to the White House. After being thoroughly examined and his car being checked out, he was allowed to pass through the gates and enter the building. He entered the Oval Office to find President John Patrick Ryan standing up, facing out the window. He didn't turn around immediately. "How are your wife and children?"

"Fine, sir." Lee frowned slightly, the President had not been exact about his reason's for wanted to see Lee in person when he requested Lee's immediate presence.

The President finally turned around and looked at Lee. "How's the Agency doing?"

"Fine. Melrose was an excellent choice for director, and I'm still very honored to have been chosen to replace him."

Jack nodded, the strain of the last months evident in his blue eyes. Jack sat down and motioned for Lee to sit as well. "Would you like something to drink?"

"No thank you, sir. Sir, if I may, what is this about?"

Jack grinned at Lee before turning serious and picking up a folder on his desk. "We have eliminated the men behind the biological attacks, but we have another problem."

Lee concealed a groan. Could anything else go wrong? "Sir, why did you call me here? I mean, I'm not on the NSC. Why not Billy Melrose?"

Ryan looked up at Lee, staring directly into his eyes before he spoke. "This problem is one you have expertise in, more than anyone else and as I said to the nation several weeks ago, I want the experts on the job. No politicians--but experts." Jack Ryan handed Lee the folder and waited for Lee to read it.

Lee stared at the black and white pages in utter disbelief. Coming to the picture on the second page he jumped up from his seat. "Amanda!" Lee almost forgot where he was until he heard the calm and firm voice of the President behind him.

"She's ok, Lee. I've put the Secret Service on them. They're ok. I promise."

Lee looked up at the President. One thing that Lee liked about the new President was that his reputation for honesty was rock solid, he never made a promise he couldn't keep and from what little Lee had been able

to discover about his past, he had been an excellent agent. Lee sat back down. "So this cell of the Karbala network is active and you think they had something to do with the current situation in the Mideast? Didn't we eliminate the head?"

Jack stood up and walked around to the front of the desk. "Yes. A week ago. However, the cells that make up the network can still function to a degree unless we eliminate them all. Getting rid of one terrorist, I'm sure you know, won't end terrorism. We have reason to believe that this one was involved in the assassination and in the biological attacks on this country. Their leader is the one we must get. You were personally responsible for bringing down the US arm of that group several years ago."

Lee watched the President carefully, one agent watching another. He'd never worked with Ryan before now. He just knew what the record said. Lee took a deep breath, shifting his position in the chair. "What do you need me for, Mr. President?"

The President walked back to sit behind his desk. "Go to Iraq. Two of our best are already there, the ones that eliminated the leader. You've heard of Mr. Clark?"

Lee smiled slightly in amusement. "Only as much as you can hear about a man who doesn't exist."

Jack returned the smile, there hadn't been much opportunity for levity lately and you took those precious few moments when they came. "Well, he'll know you when you arrive." Jack handed a sealed file to Lee.

Lee looked at the folder. It was of the highest classification. He looked up at Ryan and took a deep breath as the President nodded for him to open it.

* * *

Amanda looked out the dining room window to see the car outside the house. The men in black had invaded her home, or so it seemed. These guys could at least attempt to be inconspicuous, but no, you could spot one a mile away. They had explained politely but firmly that the President himself had ordered their presence and they were not leaving.

She walked back into the kitchen to return to the baking she was trying to do. Christmas was two and a half weeks away and she had a lot to do to prepare. Phillip was coming home from college, as was Jamie and her mother and Captain Curt were, of course, going to come over. She was supposed to not worry. "And how, may I ask, am I supposed to do that?" She spoke to no one in particular as she got out the things she needed to make a cake that she planned to freeze. She knew Jenny was sleeping upstairs in her room.

Amanda fought back the images that had greeted her that day she arrived at the preschool. They thought it would be the safest preschool on earth, after all, the President's youngest went there. Jenny still had nightmares, although she'd gone back to preschool at the recommendations of the counselors. They'd been lucky during the biological attack, but they'd lost a few agents to it. Agents who were on their days off, doing nothing but trying to enjoy themselves. As for the attack on the Capitol, she was forever grateful to that error in manufacture that had caused a run in her hose and a side trip to the store that had made them late, just late enough to arrive at the scene of complete devastation.

And she was supposed to not worry, especially when armed men had suddenly arrived at her home.

* * *

Lee walked into Billy's office. He was glad that Billy had taken over Smythe's job. He was still more than amused at the exit that Smythe had made. It had been polite, but everyone knew that the new President had practically asked for his resignation, to him, politics had no room in intelligence agencies.

"The President said that he's already spoken to you."

Billy nodded slowly as he looked at his agent. "Yes, he has. We know you don't go in the field much anymore, but apparently he believes that the Nation needs you in the field right now rather than in the office. I don't really know what the President wants you for, and I don't want to, but I know you can do it."

Lee nodded. It wasn't too different from other things he'd done, except this time it was one of those 'it never happened' situations. There were no restrictions in how he acted, except that he wasn't going where he 'was' going. The whole thing was veiled in secrecy. "Any suggestion of what I tell Amanda?"

"Your cover story. That's it." Billy watched as Lee frowned and reluctantly nodded. He was to leave in the morning and probably would not return in time for Christmas.

"Yeah. I guess I'll head home and spend some time with her while I can."

"That's a good idea, Scarecrow. Good luck."

"Thanks. I have a feeling I'm going to need it."

* * *

Lee pulled into the driveway of their Rockville home. The house was strung with garlands and lights, presenting the perfect picture for the holidays. He entered the house and was greeted by the warm smell of baking coming from the kitchen.

"Daddy!"

Lee was prepared to catch his three year old daughter as she launched herself at him. He hugged her and swung her around. "Hey! How was your day?"

"Fun. Me and mommy went for a walk."

"Hmm. That sounds like fun." Lee carried her into the kitchen where he found Amanda taking a cake out of the oven. "Hi, honey. I'm home."

Amanda turned around and smiled at the sight of her husband and daughter. Who would have thought Scarecrow would make such a great father? He'd certainly been worried about it himself, but little Jennifer Stetson had her father wrapped around her finger. Amanda crossed the room and kissed Lee on the cheek. "How was your day?"

Lee looked into his wife's deep brown eyes and tried to act as normal as possible. How was he going to tell her? "Fine."

Amanda frowned slightly as she met her husband's gaze. She hadn't been to the office in almost a month, but she could still tell that look of avoidance in his hazel eyes. He was a terrible liar when he was trying to lie to her anyway. She shook her head.

Lee sighed, he set Jenny down. "Why don't you go in the living room and play? Mommy and I need to talk, ok?"

Jenny nodded and took off for the other room. Lee put his arms around

Amanda and pulled her close. He looked down into her warm brown eyes and spoke softly. "Amanda, I . . . I have to leave the country on business for a couple weeks. I'll be in England."

"You'll be back for Christmas?"

Lee winced. Most likely not, but there was that possibility. "I don't know. I hope so."

"Is it dangerous?"

Lee took a deep breath, he hated to lie to her, but he had to, she had to know his cover, and nothing else. "Not at all." He shook his head and smiled.

Amanda looked at her husband, wanting to believe what he was saying, but still not quite certain that he was telling her the whole story. That smile is what did it, it's the one he always used when he was not exactly telling the truth, but didn't want her to worry about anything.

Lee knew this had to be upsetting her, and that was the last thing he wanted to do. She had been so emotionally fragile the last few weeks, more so than he'd ever seen her. The stress and complications of the last few weeks had just compounded because she was in her final couple of months of pregnancy. He had to make it home for Christmas. Lee prayed silently that he would be able to make it home for the holidays.

* * *

Amanda dropped Lee at the airport, the added security prevented her from seeing him off at the gate. She watched as he went in and then returned home.

Her first instinct was to turn on the news, but then she decided

against it. It would only be bad news, and it was hard enough to get in the Christmas spirit. That thought was hard to believe herself, since when did Amanda Stetson have trouble getting in the holiday mood? She took a deep breath and returned to the kitchen to do some more baking before starting to decorate the house.

* * *

John Clark frowned at the sound of Chavez singing "Jingle Bells" slightly off key. If he didn't know better, he'd swear he was drunk. When he saw the young man step around the corner he spoke. "Stop that noise, it's time to go get Scarecrow."

Chavez stopped singing and looked at the older agent. "Why do they call him Scarecrow?"

"He was part of a network of agents called 'Oz' when he first started out."

"Oh. What's he look like?"

"Don't worry, I'll know him."

They were soon at the airport and watching for Lee. Clark spotted the tall agent coming out of the gate and went to him immediately. "Follow me."

Lee knew that it was Clark, although he hadn't been sure how Clark would make contact. The President had just said Clark would know him. Lee followed along, although hesitantly. Although he'd been briefed, he still felt like he was walking into a situation that was unfamiliar.

After following a route that came close to confusing Lee, but not quite, they arrived at the apartment where they would be staying.

"Hungry?"

"Yeah. You want to tell me what exactly we are supposed to do?"

Clark didn't respond. He just went to his room and pulled out a small stack of photographs. "Food's in the kitchen. Any of these people look familiar to you?"

Lee went to the kitchen and managed to come up with the makings for a sandwich as he flipped through the stack. "Yes. But. . . aren't two of these people in jail in the States?"

"They were. Somehow they were replaced by look alikes, about six months ago."

Lee stared at Clark. Six months. How had that happened? "How the hell did that happen?"

"They managed to get some of their people into the right positions. Look, we get them here, they can't go forward with whatever they're planning."

"You think they're planning another attack? What this time?"

"Possibly another biological attack. I don't think they could get a bomb through right now if they wanted to."

"Airplanes?" Lee questioned quietly, the images of the blackened stone of the Capitol burned into his memory forever.

Clark shrugged. "Possible, but not likely. That 747 was an unrelated incident, a pilot acting on his own, seeking revenge."

Lee nodded reluctantly. That didn't help the nagging fear that some terrorist organization would think it was a good idea.

* * *

Jack Ryan looked at the papers on his desk. He had managed to convince the media that they did in fact work for America and the things they said were heard by more than just Americans. That's one thing he could stop worrying about. Hopefully the mission he'd just sent Scarecrow on would be successful. He had every confidence in Stetson, but knew that it was a race against time. If the information was right, there was another attack planned for sometime before the New Year. The Secret Service had been infiltrated, there were few people he could really, truly trust.

He had the two best agents with the best up and coming agent together on this. They would succeed.

* * *

Amanda stood on the steps of the Jefferson Memorial. Lee had tried to get rid of her here several years before, and now as she stood here she couldn't help but notice the change that had come over Washington. She couldn't see the Capitol, in fact she'd avoided driving in that direction since the night of the attack. She hoped Lee would come back in time for Christmas, something inside of her told her that he had gone somewhere other than England although she wasn't sure she really wanted to know the truth.

"Mommy, it's Katie and Mrs. President!"

Amanda smiled down at her daughter who was pointing towards Mrs. Ryan and her youngest daughter who was in Jenny's preschool class.
"That's Dr. Ryan, Jenny."

Katie Ryan bounded up to Jenny and began showing her the new doll she was carrying. Dr. Caroline Ryan walked up to Amanda and glanced back at the Secret Service agents who were standing a discreet distance away. "Someone told me we might find you here."

"Hello, Dr. Ryan, how are you?"

"Please call me Cathy. I'm fine. Katie's missed Jenny in school, is everything all right?"

"Yes. I just haven't felt up to taking her the last couple of days."

"I understand. It's been a stressful last few weeks. I was hoping you would help me with something."

Amanda frowned. She had no idea why Caroline Ryan would want her help. "I've taken leave from work."

"Amanda, this had nothing to do with the Agency--that's my husband's line of work. However, I understand you're familiar with fund raisers."

"Yes."

"Good."

Cathy began outlining her plan while the two women watched their children play.

* * *

Lee stood watching the people go in and out of the building. Clark had gone in several minutes before and now Lee was timing his trip to make sure that he wasn't in any longer than he said he would be. He glanced

down at his watch and then back at the door to see Clark walking out like he had nothing to hide.

Clark made his way back to where he'd left Lee. He just nodded slightly and the two agents returned to their base of operations.

"Well?"

"They are planning another attack." Clark pulled a small camera from his pocket. "I'll develop these and we'll be able to tell more. We'll need to eliminate those that are involved, but also find out exactly what their plans are."

"And stop them."

"Of course."

Lee waited impatiently for the results. He knew the end result of the research would likely be the death of the targets. Arrest just wasn't a practical option. This was espionage at it's darkest moments, times that Amanda wouldn't like at all. He didn't particularly like it, but there were times when it couldn't be helped.

* * *

President Ryan was preparing to have dinner with his wife and children when he was called to the telephone. He picked up the secure line and heard Lee Stetson on the other end.

"Sir, we have the remaining members of the terrorist cell. We're certain they have another attack planned."

"Do you know where and what they intend to use?"

Lee frowned at the telephone. "Not for certain, Mr. President. They wouldn't talk, of course. What we've managed to gather is that the terrorist network that infiltrated the CIA and set off the chain of events in the States and here in the Mideast are related and we did in fact eliminate the primary leader. However, there was a strong cell still active here that has continued with their plans and the operation they have under way is set to launch on Christmas Eve."

"That's forty eight hours from now. Do you know what it is?"

"Well, it isn't another biological attack, sir and we've eliminated the possibility of more technological terrorism. That leaves conventional or nuclear weapons."

"Scarecrow, what's your best guess? Give it to me. I trust you and Clark. I'm not out there anymore and I need you to tell me what you think. Come on."

Lee took a deep breath. "We believe they are planning an attack similar to the one on the Capitol. Sir, we don't know whether their people will simply begin training on that date or whether there will be another attack."

Jack sighed and closed his eyes for a moment. "I'll shut down the airports if I have to, but I need to know to give planes time to land ahead of time, I'd have to ground everything."

"I know that, sir. We will let you know as soon as we can."

"Good work, Scarecrow."

"Thank you sir." When the line went dead Lee held the phone in his hands. He turned to face Clark. "He's prepared to ground all air traffic if necessary."

"I hope it's not necessary."

Lee nodded. They had less than forty eight hours.

* * *

Cathy Ryan sat in the middle of the Stetsons' living room floor, Amanda across from her. They were almost done with their plot. The Christmas Eve fund raiser would be an unusual one. Amanda and Cathy agreed that they wouldn't call upon the usual wealthy donors, instead they would call on the normal citizens of the Washington area. The money they raised would be for the families of those who had died in the attack on the Capitol and the attack on the Navy.

They had the invitations out and were just putting the finishing touches on their plans. Amanda heard a knock on the door and went to answer it, but was stopped by a Secret Service agent.

"Do you have to put up with this everyday?" She asked as she turned to Cathy.

Cathy nodded, her blonde hair bouncing around her face as she smiled. "Everyday. It's gets old very quickly. Try seeing patients with them around."

"Amanda! What is going on. . .oh my gosh! Mrs. Ryan!"

Amanda smiled as her mother stopped in the doorway, literally speechless. Cathy stood up and approached Dottie. "Hello. You must be Mrs. West. Amanda's told me so much about you. Please, just call me Cathy."

The First Lady's warm smile and demeanor was enough to put anyone at

ease, but Dottie was still stunned for another moment before taking the younger woman's hand and shaking it. She then looked at Amanda. "What's going on?"

That's when Dottie noticed it. Amanda was getting her holiday glow back. The forced smile was gone as was the tension in her eyes. Although she still looked worried, she didn't look as tired and depressed as she had the last few weeks. She actually seemed excited.

"We're planning a fund raiser Mother. It's set for New Year's Eve at the White House and it's to benefit the families of the people that died in the attacks on the Capitol and the Pacific Fleet."

"That sounds wonderful dear. Is Lee at work?"

Amanda frowned, she hadn't said anything to her mother yet. "Um, he's out of the country for the office right now. He's hoping to be back for Christmas."

"I'm sure he will be dear, if he said he will be home, then he will be." Dottie smiled at her daughter. "I brought the presents over. I'll put them under the tree."

"Thank you Mother." Amanda smiled and watched her mother take the bags of gifts into the den where she was going to place them under the tree.

Cathy turned to Amanda. "Amanda, Jack and I wanted to invite you and your family over to dinner on Christmas Eve. I know you've got family and a little one who will want to be asleep for Santa to come, but we'd really love to have you over."

Amanda's eyes widened, dinner at the White House? Christmas Eve? Cathy Ryan was smiling, waiting for an answer. Amanda finally found her

voice. "We'd love to. Thank you for the invitation."

Cathy nodded, smiling as she spoke. "It won't be formal, would 6 be all right?"

Amanda found her voice again, still somewhat in shock over the invitation. "That would be fine."

"Good. We'll see you then and I'll call you later this week."

Cathy left and Dottie returned to the living room. "Amanda, you must be feeling better."

"I am. I feel a lot better than I was."

"That's good. Is there anything I can get you?"

"No Mother. I'm all right, really. Thank you for bringing the presents over."

"Where did Lee go?"

"England. He said he'll be home for Christmas."

"Then I'm sure he will be."

* * *

It was the information they had waited for, the key to ending the activities of a particularly annoying terrorist cell. Lee drummed his fingers along the armrest and stared out the window the plane that was taking them back home to the States. After much debate, they had opted to not request a shut down of the airports unless this plan failed at the last minute. They did not want to spook the men they

were after. Besides, the nation had already been brought to a screeching halt once and Lee didn't want to see it happen again unless it was absolutely necessary.

They were one hour away and if the agents he'd requested had done their jobs, then everything would be in place to move the second they landed at Dulles.

* * *

Billy and Francine were waiting with a car as Lee had requested. Lee hadn't said why he needed the equipment he'd requested and Billy decided it wouldn't be a problem if he remained in the dark on this one. Lee approached and got in the car followed by two men that Billy didn't recognize.

Lee was home, but he couldn't act like he was home. To everyone he knew, he was still in England and it had to stay that way until it was over. He checked his gun out and sat back, trying to relax for just a few minutes as they drove towards their destination. It was Christmas Eve and he still wasn't really home.

* * *

When someone betrays their country, they often believe that the people they have sold out to will want them. Somehow Daniel Anderson held that same belief. He stepped out of his car and walked towards the terminal of Baltimore Washington International Airport. He was a trusted pilot, an upstanding member of the community, but he wanted to prove that the government was wrong and he had been approached by people who had the way to prove it.

He saw his contact standing just outside of the airport terminal and walked towards him. "What are my orders?"

The Arab man smiled slightly. He knew he had won this American to their side and he would do his job well. "Here." He handed the American pilot an envelope. "Read them once you are on the plane. Do as you are instructed and you will have a long and happy life. Fail and we will know immediately and your days will be shortened."

"I won't fail."

* * *

Canceling the flights would have alerted the terrorists and possibly sent them back underground, but it certainly would have eliminated the traffic Francine found herself navigating through. She came to a stop in front of the terminal. Lee looked at her. "You know what to do?"

She nodded and looked at him. "Good luck Lee."

"Thanks. You too."

* * *

Lee spotted Anderson heading for his gate. He didn't let himself worry about the other agents, they each had a job to do and would get it done. He followed at a discreet distance through the metal detectors all the way to the designated gate where a 757 waited, already connected to the jet way and being filled with fuel and supplies.

Chavez was in the control tower, keeping in constant contact with the President. If somehow the plane made it into the air, the nearest Air Force base was prepared to strike and shoot it down.

Clark was in his position as well, trying to locate the last member of the group, the one they had no name or description for, they only knew

he was supposed to be there to make sure that Anderson did as he was told to do and if all else failed, do it himself.

Francine and Billy waited, their mission complete. Within the next fifteen minutes they would be able to tell if Lee had made it or not.

The plane pulled away from the gate. Anderson had accepted Lee's presence as co-pilot without question. Lee hoped that Clark had found that missing person. Lee watched Anderson read the letter.

"I can't."

Lee looked at Anderson, careful to just keep his tone neutral and curious. "Can't what?"

"Nothing."

Lee took a deep breath. He had been hoping the guy would crack without any coercion on his part, but it looked like that wouldn't happen. "Look, Anderson, I'm a Federal Agent. I know you're supposed to hit a target with this jet. Stop the plane before you take off and we'll only charge you with conspiracy."

"I can't stop."

"Look, if you take off, the Air Force will shoot you down. Do you really want hundreds of innocent lives on your hands? Haven't enough lives been lost already?"

"But the government, it's killed so many with it's policies."

Lee shook his head. This was that diplomacy talking that Amanda was so good at; however, as much as he would have loved to have her skills at this moment, he was glad she wasn't there. "Then try to change the

policy through the normal means. You think someone's going to listen to you after you blow something up? Come on, stop the plane."

Lee glance out the window as they taxied towards the runway.

"No. They'll see. This will prove our point."

Lee watched as the pavement began passing more quickly under the plane as it turned to prepare for takeoff. "What point? You can kill more people? Who do you really think is going to listen? Do you really want to die? That's what's going to happen. If you think any one will survive a high speed crash of a jet into anything, you're wrong."

The plane stopped. "They promised. . ."

Lee interrupted, his patience thinning. "They lied. Listen to me, you take off, you will die, we all will. You stop now and we can talk."

Suddenly they were interrupted. "You will take off now Mr. Anderson. If you do not, then I will."

Anderson let up on the brakes. Lee looked at the man who was pointing a gun at Anderson. Lee started to pull his weapon when the man turned his gun onto him. "I don't think so. You are an agent?"

Lee was unresponsive. He wondered where Clark was. The plane was picking up speed, it would be airborne any second. Lee felt the cold steel of the gun at the back of his neck. The seconds that pthe gun go off and realized that he was alive he opened his eyes.

"Stop the plane!"

Lee looked to see Clark standing there with a gun, the man he'd just shot lying in the floor of the cockpit. "What took you so long?"

The White House was decorated with lights and greenery. Amanda entered the building with Jamie, Phillip, and Jenny. She still hadn't heard from Lee at all. She saw Cathy and smiled at her. "Thank you for inviting us."

Cathy was beaming. "I'm glad you could come. Jack's in his office, a little last minute business, but he'll be in shortly."

Cathy led the way into the family dining room where Sally, Jack, and Katie Ryan all waited patiently for their parents. Katie and Jenny immediately began comparing ribbons on their Christmas dresses while Sally and Jack talked to Phillip and Jamie.

"I haven't heard from Lee, but I did leave him a message just in case he calls."

"Well, it's not Christmas yet Amanda. I'm sure he's fine."

Cathy smiled in a way that made Amanda a little bit suspicious. Five minutes later, President Ryan entered the room. He went to Cathy and leaned forward to kiss her on the cheek. "He'll be down in a minute."

She smiled and nodded, leading Jack over to Amanda. "Jack, this is Amanda Stetson."

"Amanda. We've met before a few months ago. You're the brains of the best team the Agency has from what I've heard."

"Thank you Sir."

"Jack, please." Jack Ryan smiled, his eyes not giving away the surprises that awaited the Stetson's. "I've got something for you Amanda."

As if on cue, Lee entered the room. He had cleaned up and changed into a suit. He went right to his wife. "Amanda." They held each other for a moment and then he greeted his daughter.

"Merry Christmas Amanda, Lee."

Lee and Amanda looked at Jack and Cathy Ryan and smiled. "Merry Christmas. Thank you."

After dinner was over, Jack stood up. "I'd like to make a brief announcement."

Everyone got quiet and looked at the President as he glanced around the table, his eyes finally resting on Lee. "Lee, you've done a great job over the years and your latest job has benefitted hundreds, perhaps thousands of people. You and I may be the only ones in this room who will ever know all the details, but I do know that you deserve more recognition than a man in your line of work ever receives. You will be rewarded with the intelligence star for your deeds. This is as public as I can do this for obvious reasons, but I did want to give you some measure of public recognition."

"Thank you Mr. President. There were others who helped as well though."

"And they will be rewarded. To be honest I wasn't sure this would be wrapped up by Christmas, but I'm very glad that it has been. Thank you Lee."

Lee nodded, not sure how to respond. Amanda squeezed his hand and looked at him. Her family was back together and this Christmas had gone from being one that she was almost dreading to one of the best. She'd gotten her wish, her husband was home and safe.

END