

# MIND THE J'S AND W'S

A short story by Annay Dawson

They were sitting in the backroom of some small and really dirty hovel. It had been bombed out last year and hadn't been used since then. The place was perfect. It was nowhere near any other homes or businesses although that wasn't too hard to do in this province. It helped that the rest of the places had been bombed out during the last year and it had made the place really uninhabitable. It was hot and it was dusty and she felt as if she needed to stand under a shower for three years. The conditions weren't much worse than the last assignment, but going from winter in South America to summer in Afghanistan wasn't what she would have chosen. Then again being covered from head to toe with a burka all day as she did recon hadn't helped. It was now about eight thirty at night and her partner Rob had just returned with two bags.

They worked for a little known governmental department or agency known as the Paranormal Enforcement Department, or 'PED' for short. In the department it was their job is to provide protection, detection, and deception. Jan, as well as others, were part of a grand experiment. They were discovered through bogus psychology experiments in colleges. Then they were drafted into a lifetime of service for the department. All of these agents had one thing in common, they could read minds, and they were partnered with a handler to keep them loyal to the job. And her handler was Rob.

"There better be a gourmet meal and a Coke in that bag," she smiled as she leaned back against the wall, "and the rest of my gear in the other."

"Right on one," and he set one bag down in front of her, the other one in the corner nearby.

"Hell, it was the least you could do after putting me up in such wonderful digs here," and she opened the bag pulling out something that might resemble food. Digging to the bottom of the bag she found it, "Yes!" It was a Coca Cola, actually three.

"Can't help it, you know we go where they tell us," and he sat down futilely trying to brush the dust out of his hair. "I still can't believe we agreed

to do this."

"They needed a second reader to go in," she avoided his eyes. They both knew why they were here. Ward was working on this assignment and had been for the last three months. That meant that it had been at least three months since they had seen each other. It also meant that somehow, and Rob didn't know how, he had gotten them reassigned here for now.

"And, of course, we are the only other team out there," Rob grabbed the sandwich and unwrapped it. Not only had Ward not seen her, but he was willing to put her life in danger just to do it.

"It wouldn't have mattered," Jan opened up one of the cans, "We are always in danger."

"Save your skills for those who need it," he was still miffed and the last thing he needed was her reading his thoughts.

"I am," she caught the sandwich he threw to her, "I was reading your face." Rob had been her partner for many years now. Really he had been more than that. He had been more like the father she never had. He was fourteen years older than she was and although that had caused some problems to begin with, it didn't now. When she was only twenty-two she had graduated from college and also made it through the PED program in record time. Her skills had developed fast and she was eager to be trained in all the defense measures they had offered. Even though she had been assigned early on, she also had continued to take all the training opportunities that she could.

"I don't know how you can not discuss," and that was all he got to say.

"Like you said," and her voice was firm, "we go where they tell us, and no," this time was no different from any other, "I will not discuss him with you. You know nothing about it, and as far as everyone is concerned nothing ever happened."

"Right," and he opened the can, "and Santa is coming here next week."

"I hear he modified the sleigh," and as they

continued to eat she added, "I think we need to focus on the night to come." Rob nodded and they finished the meal in silence. Tonight was going to be stressful enough, no sense in starting it off wrong. Jan knew it was his job to not only to be her partner, but also to keep her from becoming involved with anyone. According to the PED department there should be no long lasting relationships to ever form for a reader; they belonged to the company once they signed the paperwork to join. Funny thing was that once she had met Ward, another reader in the department, she had found something that she never had expected, companionship. It might be love, but even that might be too strong of a term for right now. She was sure of one thing though, they were obsessed with each other.

It was one in the morning and no moon meant, no light. She was on top of the main building and out of the reach of all the security lights. Touching her ear she tapped the lip microphone she had tucked behind it. One click meant she was in and okay. Rob was worried about her; he always was. She was the only one who could enter the complex though. Without her ability to read minds there would be no way to find their operative. If she didn't find the operative, then the meeting tomorrow afternoon would be a fatal catastrophe, and that was not about to happen on her watch. She was dressed in black from head to toe and had even pulled a black silk hood over her head with small slits in it so she could see. It was almost as bad as wearing a burka all day. The temperature had dropped a whole four degrees she would guess. Flattening out on top of the roof she began her search through all the minds in the large house. A trickle of sweat ran down the back of her neck and then another one ran down around her shoulder blade and around to the front of her shirt. She had an advantage; with most people asleep she was in and out of a head in just seconds.

"Have you found him?" The thought entered her head easily. It helped that she was wearing an earpiece. With two quick clicks she gave Rob a negative answer, "I really wish I could have gone in for you." They always had this discussion. He wanted to protect her even if that wasn't what was needed or required from the job.

Jan just smiled at the thought. "Okay, I'll stop playing dad now and tell you to get your butt moving and find this guy." This guy was called Streak, and he was proving harder to find than she expected. The fact that he had been undercover in this operation for many months made her worry, and his bosses worry about his state of mind.

She was to do a full scan of his mind and access his stability before giving him the information about the meet. She was in control of whether or not the mission continued. The lives of four PED agents and one Special Forces team, not to mention this man's life, all depended on her. Many men broke under this kind of strain, and so far, from what she had read in his files he wouldn't, but that didn't mean his superiors weren't worried about it. She closed her eyes and looked for her target. At first she felt the uneasiness below her and to her right. The man moved, and bingo. It was time to start assessing his balance.

His mind was solid, well ordered and quick. It would be a phenomenal comment from a reader for anyone they read, but for him it would be normal. All people who had been recruited for operations that required undercover work for months would be like this. These men and women were the type that would be of the top two to three percent of the population. He would be smart, well organized, a quick thinker, and above average with problem solving skills. It also didn't hurt that he was also trained in all forms of martial arts, weaponry, and hand-to-hand combat. He was also restless and frustrated that he hadn't been contacted yet. Well, in a moment she would deal with the frustration. She began to move across the roof spider-like to make sure she wasn't seen. Clicking her mike once to let Rob know she had found him and was on her way.

It was late at night, but way too hot to sleep even though he only wore a pair of boxers to bed under the light cotton sheets. Patience was one thing he had learned over and over again with this job. He had trained for Special Forces and liked getting things taken care of right away. When he had joined this group he had understood that sometimes he would be out in the field for months without being able to take care of things the way

he preferred and without contact to his superiors. It had proven true more times than not, but this had been his longest stint in the field yet. He contemplated the fowl mood he had been in all day as he stared at the ceiling. Over the past couple of months he had seen some horrendous things, some of which he would never forget.

He tried to change his train of thought and bring it back round to the business at hand. The last time he had called his brother, as he had to call his contact, they had informed him that a friend would be meeting up with him to give him information on the group of operatives who were to be the people interested in purchasing the items his boss had for sale, mostly dirty bomb material. They had taken time to set up and he knew it. They had been in contact with his boss for the last two weeks. Usman Khan was not an easy man to fool, and he was not stupid either.

Once contacted, Streak would be fed some of the names of the group. They would have to be damn good, both the agent that was going to contact him and the plant that was going to purchase the items. This guy had sniffed out two other plants and promptly disposed of them. He had been lucky to stay in the job this long. The CIA had lost a couple of good men, but they hadn't been good enough he thought leaning up on one arm on the bed as he grabbed for the carafe of water. He had left the balcony doors open so that he could get something of the breeze that seemed to move as fast as the tortoises he had seen in Africa on one of his other assignments. When there was a breeze in this hell hole there always seemed to be a good amount of dirt and sand that also came in with it, so much so sometimes that he would have to close the door just so that he wouldn't feel as if he would be buried alive while he slept.

The compound itself was located in a very dicey area of the northern part of Afghanistan although it would be considered a very safe area for terrorists. The grounds themselves were very nice. Once someone left the compound the poverty and the decline were apparent. Add the gunrunners and other mafia types that ran rampant in the provinces of Kandahar and Herat and it was amazing. What was also amazing was the number of people that would

help them for a pittance just to stay alive. There were guards placed every twenty feet or so around the compound as well as in it, and they all had been equipped with the latest and greatest that there was to offer on the illegal arms market. Night vision goggles were just the beginning. Each AK had been equipped with laser scopes just in case a spray of bullets were not enough to disable the enemy and they felt like doing a little target practice. They had been better equipped than any small army in any third world nation.

Although he had been allowed relative freedom of movement they had watched him the entire time he had been outside of the compound. He had gained some of Usman's trust, but not enough. Then again there was only one man Usman Khan trusted, Ata Errol. That was how Streak had gotten involved so deep so fast. The old adage of who you knew and not what you knew held even in this lowly business. He had spent years building up this persona, Razz Crnobog, as a gun and weapons runner that would and could deal in anything that caused death and mayhem. The man had become a legend working under all the major dealer's radars. Streak had made sure that the name Razz Crnobog had caught his attention a few times. Razz had spoiled and stolen a few deals that Ata Errol had set up. The last time he left a calling card that Errol couldn't miss and his number. He knew that signing him onto his team to get his skills and connections would be a coup.

Streak sipped the luke warm water in the carafe; he figured that this must be why the contact hadn't approached him yet. They were having trouble getting a message to him no doubt. Reaching over to place the water back on the nightstand he felt it more than heard it as the hairs on the back of his neck stood up in what seemed a gut response. There was someone else in the room with him, and they were close, too close, to his bed. His muscles tensed and very slowly he moved his hand toward the edge of the bed to retrieve his weapon. He was about to strike when he heard a very feminine voice whisper.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you. Stay still," her voice was barely audible and until something blinked in his peripheral vision, he hadn't been

sure what she was going to do until then. That blink told him that she had just swept the room for bugs. Allowing himself a little smile he let his shoulders relax a bit, still being careful not to move. He had known that there weren't any listening devices in this room; he had taken them all out himself, but this allowed him to be sure of how careful the people who were watching his back really were. The next question that came to mind was why they had sent her in and not just sent a note. "By the way, I'm Barracuda. Nice to meet you Streak," the woman approached the bed and turned on the bedside light. "The room is clean," and she pulled off the hood that had hidden her face. Her hair was in a ponytail in back and it was a golden shade of brown. The black outfit she wore fit her like a glove and she couldn't be more than average height. She was good looking, in good shape, but nothing special that he could tell yet. Suddenly she spun and looked at the door as if she heard something, but he hadn't heard anything.

"Oh damn, we have company coming. Move over," and she stripped off her shirt and bra fast as she slipped under the sheet beside him before he could even take a breath. His first thought was that he might have to change his mind about his thought 'nothing special' as he watched this half naked woman slide into his bed. As she pulled her hair from the ponytail and mussed it up he heard the all too familiar steps outside his room. He didn't know how she had heard it before he had, but she had. There was a knock on the door and then the handle began to move. Whoever this Barracuda woman was beside him, she was full of surprises as she wrapped her arms around his half naked body and pulled him down on top of her. When the door opened, it looked for all intents and purposes, that the man had just interrupted a very intimate moment. The shock on Streak's face only added to the validity of the moment.

"Uh, sorry, didn't know you were entertaining tonight," the man snickered as Jan pretended to be mortified and hide her face. "It can wait 'til morning," it was Errol's assistant and the door closed almost as fast as it had opened. She dropped to the bed and pulled the sheet up to cover her, waiting until she heard the footsteps

fade in the distance.

"You don't have to leave on my account," Streak smiled down at her.

"Don't try anything or you'll see what I can do with my knife that's way too close to your jewels for comfort," and she smiled as she got up and put her clothes back on.

"So to what do I owe this very personal visit?" Streak didn't even try to look away as he smiled at his contact. He had expected someone to get in touch with him, but not to enter the compound or his bed.

"Couldn't risk the operation by contacting you any other way. We'll have time now to talk. My partners and I are ready to finish the deal and bring him down," Jan sat down in the chair opposite the bed. Streak swung his legs out of bed and sat on the edge of it.

"How can you be so sure that your group will be able to do this?" He didn't want to insult them but he really didn't want to see any more deaths.

"You don't have to worry about us as long as we have all the information you can give us," she didn't want to seem over confident so she continued, "The team is made up of ten people; two SEALs, three Rangers, four from my department, and one coordinator." She smiled, "There are at least two teams ready to storm any place that needs to be to collect contraband or men to keep this from going any farther. Satisfied?" Jan sat there looking pleased with the information she had given him. He gave a quick nod and continued.

"Usman isn't going ahead with the meet tomorrow," as he continued Jan just nodded, "He's going to change the time and place to make sure that he's got the upper hand."

"Not unexpected. Do you know the place?" Jan was monitoring his thoughts as well.

"Yes, but he won't give it to them tomorrow. He will call and break it off only an hour ahead of time," he gave her the rest of the details including exactly where the meet would take place. Jan made sure she committed it all to memory as they sat there for the next thirty minutes. By changing the meet, something they had all expected, it would give them time to set up better. When they finished, Streak threw a burka over Jan and took her out of the compound. Rob was a mile out

waiting to pick her up in the old car that they had acquired upon arrival.

By one o'clock the next day the whole team sat around a table as Jan finished filling them in on the meeting she had with Streak. Throughout the meeting each person had taken notes at different points and each person had had their fair share of questions. The only one that had stayed quiet the entire time had been Ward. She had noticed he had changed. His skin was darker as well as his hair. He looked more East Indian than American. As far as anyone else in the room was concerned, they were just two agents and their handlers. They had no clue that Ward and Jan had been communicating continually since before she had arrived, or that they were involved. Even Rob didn't really know how involved they were. As Jan paused she heard Ward's cell phone ring. Everyone turned to him and waited.

"Yes," Ward's Farsi was perfect, "I have made plans and I have the money ready for transfer." There was quiet for a moment, "It wasn't my people," his voice deepened. Jan was listening in on both sides of the conversation. Usman was trying to blame Ward and his people for blowing the cover on their meet today but Ward wasn't going to bite on that one. After all, Ward knew that the cover hadn't been blown at all. "If it were my people then I would have already killed them. Maybe you should be checking your men," he paused and listened again.

"If you don't want to deal just tell me and I'll take my business elsewhere, but don't mess with me," and his voice got deadly, "I will kill you." It was a while before he spoke again. Usman was assuring him that he didn't have to go to another supplier and that in two days he would call them again with a place to meet. "I will meet those conditions," and he paused momentarily, "Just remember, be there with the package. No delays this time," and he disconnected the phone by closing it.

"Right on time," and Ward's voice was completely normal again.

"I'm having a little trouble and not to be sexist, but," Jan knew what was coming next, "we are in a Muslim country and women aren't really an asset on something like this."

"I'm sure you didn't mean anything by your last

comment, but I think I might find it easier to hide the sniper rifle under my burka," she smiled, "I am as well trained as all of you and have spot on accuracy when using a rifle, knife, or hand to hand. Let me know if you have a better idea."

"We've all familiarized ourselves with each other's files and we know that you are an excellent sniper," the coordinator was trying to facilitate the discussion without letting it get out of hand, "you can take the wings off a fly at hundred yards, but he has a point."

"I was just thinking," the same man added, and before he could finish the thought Ward interrupted.

"I want her covering me," and that was the end of the conversation. The team looked over at him and he gave no other indication that there was any other reason for his statement than the fact that he truly believed in her skills.

"She is very capable," was Gregg's response. Gregg was Ward's handler and he would be the only person that would have had a real fit if he knew how Ward and Jan spent their off hours.

"Right," dismissing all other arguments the coordinator, Abe Sanchez, called up a new detailed map on the PowerPoint to look at the area they would be covering when Ward, Gregg and Vince went in to make the deal. They identified three sniper positions and two other logistical positions of interest. The plan was to meet in the nearby town market, midday, to increase the number of people around. This allowed Usman the best tactical advantage. If it was a set up, then the collateral damage would be astronomical considering the material they were dealing in. The purchase was for C4 and weapon's grade plutonium. The two SEAL's on the team were experts in both and had been chosen just for that reason. It was almost a guarantee that he would have the shipment rigged to blow if he felt that anything was wrong. As for the citizens around them, they wouldn't be any help. They might even side with Usman and his men. They would have to be careful not to be noticed by any of them either. People had been sold out for less. This was where readers came in handy. They would be able to get a head's up on anyone ready to inform just before it happened.

That's why you called me in, Jan spoke directly to Ward.

No one knows that we have been able to talk with each other unless, and he felt her negative response. Being able to talk with you on this one is essential Babs, otherwise I wouldn't have called you in. I'd far prefer you someplace safer than here right now.

Let's not get into that right now, the meeting was wrapping up. They were all gathering up their things and getting into smaller groups. She needed to talk to the other sniper on this mission.

I want you to be covering Usman and me; you got it? It wasn't really a question, he was serious about having her sights trained on him.

I've got a great place in Kabul just waiting for us, and his mind drifted off to better things.

Right now that will have to wait until after the op, Jan stood and followed Rob out of the room behind the other sniper.

Two days later she sat on the roof of the government offices that were just to the south of the eating area they were to meet in. Getting into and through the offices hadn't been easy, but she had been able to do it with just a little diversion on Rob's part. As he had approached the counter through the mobs of people she had slowly slid off to the side of the group and when he had started to get loud she just followed some of the officials up and out of the ensuing chaos. Ward knew which seats he needed to be in or out of for her to do her job. She had had time to set up the rifle under the burka and now she just waited as all of her bodily fluids slowly dripped from each and every pore ready at any moment to pull the burka back and fire.

She watched as Streak sat at a table about six feet away sipping coffee as if he was there for the ambiance. Although she was reading his mind she could tell that Usman had put him there as backup to watch for a setup. He sipped his coffee, looked around, and then set the cup down carefully. The cup landed in exactly the same spot each time. He was to use the cup as a compass and depending how far away he put the cup it would let them know the distance they were looking at. So far, he hadn't spotted a one of them and she didn't just know that from the cup. Streak was really wondering where the group

was. The first priority was to get the uranium into their hands, second was to secure Usman and Errol the brains of the group, third was to make sure that collateral damage was low, and if they had time to secure the compound itself. That would take a small army and that was why it was placed last on the list. If they took out the boss and didn't take out the fortress, then the whole plan would be for nothing. Another small wannabe within the unit would just take it over. The plan was to rely on Streak to take it over and dismantle it from within.

"Any movements?" Jan whispered into her lipmike.

"Not yet," came the reply, "Wait." It was nearly impossible to stay still knowing that it was just about to happen. Jan was getting something as well. The energy was changing in the area. She could feel Usman's men entering the area from all corners. She was only worried about the one who was headed toward her area.

"I've got one headed my way," Jan whispered.

"I'm on him," that was Rob she heard and she smiled. There was no way he would let him get close and she let her breath out again.

Let's get this rolling, Ward's comment to Jan as he pointed out Usman to her. Neither one spoke as he walked up and took a seat setting down a large case beside his chair. Errol took a seat at the next table. Each man had another man beside him that resembled a wall. Ward took out the small handheld he carried and placed it on the table without saying a word. Usman didn't seem to move but he looked at all of his men in turn. He must have gotten the answer he wanted because he decided to start the conversation.

"I am here, and you have been wise just to come with your one body guard," Usman looked arrogant. "The last man was not so wise which was why I had to change the place and time. He was aligned with the CIA and was not well, let's say," and he smiled, "not going to return to them in one piece after he tried to deal with me."

"I don't care about your problems," and Ward turned on his handheld, "I want what I came for."

"And you will have it," Jan kept Usman's bodyguard in her crosshairs. He was the one who was ready to kill, "As soon as I have my money."

“Enter your account number,” and Ward spun the machine toward him. That was the signal. Three men jumped out of booths that surrounded the eating area. One went straight for the case and the other two went toward the bodyguards. Ward jumped up and went down and over the table being careful not to block Jan’s sights. His mission in all of this was to take Usman in. What he knew would be useful and whether or not he wanted to tell them Ward would get it out of him.

All was going as planned, that should have been the first warning as Streak stood up and move quickly toward Errol. Ward had taken down Usman, and the two bodyguards had been disabled. He wasn’t quite sure if they were alive or dead and he really didn’t care. He was to take out Errol and he went for him like a lion. Pistol whipping him across the forehead he watched as he fell to the ground holding his head. He wasn’t down for the count though. With his freehand he reached for his sidearm, but not before Streak could drop his knee onto that arm accompanied by the sound of breaking bone.

“I want it all,” was all he said in Russian to him. It was Errol’s smile, blood covering his face and making him look all the more evil as the white teeth broke through the crimson red that unnerved him then. He turned to see it then, another man, one he hadn’t known about; a suicide bomber and he knew he was out of time, they all were.

Jan had opened her thoughts and mind to the entire situation playing out before her eyes. It was the only way to be prepared and it was then she felt it in amongst all the fear and panic that had started as soon as they had started to take the people down. The noise was drifting up to the top of the building and mothers were hurrying their children away, but not fast enough. She got the feeling of total emptiness and devastation. Ward must have gotten it at the same time and faster he could communicate it to his group faster than words could be spoken he communicated it to Jan.

Streak wanted to yell, to scream to clear the area before the man would kill them all. A thousand things went through his mind all at once as if his brain was moving at light speed and his body at a sloth’s pace. The uranium was safely

out of there and that was the only good thought. Collateral damage on this one was going to suck, but the bright side of it, if there was one, was that he wouldn’t live long enough catch the flack for it. He wasn’t going down without a fight. It seemed to take hours for his hand to pull the gun up just a fraction of an inch as he flipped it around in his palm. The blood on the butt of the gun left it slippery and he felt more than he saw it slide from his grasp. Then just as suddenly the bomber was down and Ward was on top of him. Half of his head was missing and Ward had somehow prevented him from pushing the detonator. There was a price. He watched as Usman got up and started to run into the crowd. He then heard the second shot as he watched Usman go down holding his hip. That’s when it hit him that the sniper, or snipers, had fired.

Jan had punched out the two shots quickly and was now certain her vantage point had been discovered. She could do no more to help them down there, a point that Ward had stressed inside her head. He was wanting, no needing, her to get out of there and for once she agreed. She had used gloves so that she wouldn’t have to wipe the rifle if she had to leave it, and it was obvious she was going to have to leave it. It wouldn’t make much difference if they tested her clothes for traces of powder, but with any luck it wouldn’t come to that. Running to the other side of the roof she hid herself behind the loud, archaic cooling units. She just hoped that Rob was on his way.

The door to the roof banged open, but she could barely hear it over the units. There were six men fanning out over the roof looking for the gunman. They immediately went toward the gun that she had left lay on the roof. They were quick, and they were efficient. She could tell that from their minds. The one in command told the others to fan out and search for the shooter. Jan couldn’t help but think Rob could show up just about anytime. She pushed out Ward’s worried thoughts as he had too many problems to deal with himself, and she let him know that. Then she felt Rob’s mind close by. Even though they couldn’t communicate with each other, he knew she would be looking for his thoughts.

On my way partner, and she smiled. She

started to rub her eyes and luckily she didn't have to pretend to cry, as she was soaked clear through her burka.

"Out of my way," the man at the top of the stairs was yelling at one of the officers. His dialect was perfectly accented, "I know she's up here hiding."

"Sir, we are investigating a shooting," the officer was blunt, "you have to leave."

"Not until I find my cheating wife," he pushed past the man, "She deserves the beating she is going to get and she can't keep hiding from me."

"Sir," and before they could stop him again he went right for the cooling units.

"There you are you slut," and he grabbed her by the arm and pulled her out from under the units, "This time I promise to beat you within an inch of your life."

"Sir we will have to question her before you leave. Some one was shot in the market and we need to know if she has anything to do with it or saw anything," just what they needed; a progressive Afghan man.

"Good luck," Rob spat out, "She is deaf and dumb and is only good for one thing." It took her only seconds to convince the men that she couldn't hear say anything as they tried to speak, and yell, at her. She just shook her head in fear and keened when they pulled back the face cover of the burka. After all, women in this country weren't supposed to be educated and those who had a handicap were definitely not worth much of anything to their families except for what they could sell them for. Rob pulled her off the roof and pushed her down the stairs roughly so as not to draw any suspicion. Once down, they quickly made their way out of the area and headed for the major city of Kabul.

"We're clear," he said into his lip mike as he drove away. This mission was done, all except for the clean up and debriefing. Moving the lip mike off to the side he spoke again, "Nice shooting, sorry I wasn't there sooner. I needed to make our friend a bit more comfortable."

It was hours later and dark before they had all been debriefed and were off to their rooms for some much needed rest. Streak was safely back in place at Usman's compound, they had received a coded transmission. The uranium was now

being safely transported back to the states, and Usman, Errol, and the one bodyguard that had survived were all in custody. Ward had traveled back with them and he had been gleaned information that was now part of the files that he had already typed and turned in.

"It's midnight, go get some rest," Rob looked at Jan as she reached for another cold cola.

"In a bit," she smiled and went back to typing her report.

"You're not meeting with him," he sounded more like her father and less like her partner.

"You're probably right," she didn't look at him.

"Jan," his voice chastised her. She just looked at her work.

"Okay," she replied.

"Damn," and he pushed up from his chair. Starting to leave the make-shift offices they had been given on the base he stopped, "He's going to hurt you. He's got to live by the same rules and worse yet he believes in them. You're already too connected. Don't get yourself hurt," he hadn't even turned to talk with her. He couldn't bear to look at her and think that she might actually want a forever with someone. They had all agreed to the rules; they all knew the score on this one. She could go have fun, but don't connect. Problem was, there was a connection. The PED had discovered their mutual attraction, researched it, and then decided to have their handlers nix it. He'd tried but not very hard. What he didn't know was if Ward felt the same way about Jan. He should report it, what she was about to do, that was his job, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. His head dropped a little as well as his shoulders.

"I'll be careful," she said it so quietly he almost didn't hear her.

An hour later she got up and stretched. The hotel they were booked in was just a short car ride away from the base. The driver made good time since no one else was on the road. She had checked in earlier and showered. With any luck, this time when she went into her room, she wouldn't be alone. She tapped her foot as she waited for the elevator and once in punched the button about three times hoping it would make the damn thing faster; knowing that it wouldn't. It had been way too long since they had seen each

other, alone. The closer she got to her room the warmer she felt. She could almost smell the flowers he must have put out for her. And when she opened her door she could hear the soft jazz he had playing in the background. Closing the door there was only dimmed light coming from the bedside lamp and she stripped as she quickly moved to the bed where he lay silently. She fell into his arms as their minds tangled together sharing every bit of each other.

Hours later she woke acutely aware of the soft bed, the comfortable temperature, and the strong warm body beside her. She was wrapped in his arms and from what she could tell he had been awake for at least the last thirty minutes, watching her.

"Hi," she said sleepily.

"Hi," and he stroked her hair, "I've missed you."

"I could tell," and she wrapped her hand around his middle.

"Do you make it a habit to jump into bed half naked with strange men?" They had shared almost everything between their two minds. The missions and their details were off limits and of course if there was anything they didn't want the other to know, but there really wasn't anything in that category that they hadn't shared.

"Sometimes," and she smiled lazily, "but only completely naked with you." Jan wanted to avoid the next conversation but knew that there was no way she could.

"I know you know, but I think it's time I tell you," Jan looked up at him half knowingly and half confused.

"What's up?"

"I want you to know that, well," and this time he touched her chin to make sure she was looking into his eyes and his mind, "I love you and I want to marry you."

"I love you too," and her smile was tinged with a bit of sadness, "but you know we can't get married. They would never allow it."

"We could try, I want more than promises now," he pulled her on top of him so she could look down into his eyes and know that he was serious.

"There'll never be anyone else for me but you," and he kissed her, "you know that Ward, but we can't just walk in there and say we are getting married no matter what."

"You haven't given me an answer," and he raised his eyebrows and looked at her, while his hands played up and down her spine.

"I think you know my answer," and their minds touched again. He let his lips play along her shoulder.

"I may know it," and he stopped on one particular spot letting his lips whisper against her skin, "but I want to hear it."

"Let me think about it at least until after your next assignment is done," she wanted to say yes; she wanted to forget everything else but this room, this man. Try as she might, she just couldn't do it.

"Alright future Mrs. Lowe," he was disappointed but not defeated, "You have one more month until I get back to Phoenix and then I want a real answer like, yes," he kissed her again, "and when can we tie the knot?" He stopped and looked up at her.

"I love you, and I'm so..." and he stopped her.

"Don't say anything more, I know all the arguments, but I also know that I'm not taking no for an answer this time," he smiled into her eyes, "We will find a way. I will be meeting with Bobby and then I am all yours."

"I think you're pretty much all mine right now," and she giggled.

"Now and forever Babs."