

**\*DISCLAIMER\*** Scarecrow & Mrs. King is copyrighted to Warner Brothers and Shoot The Moon Production Company. The original parts of this story however, are copyrighted to the author. This story is for entertainment purposes only and cannot be redistributed without the permission of the author. Situations and some dialogue have been used from the episode "The Wrong Way Home", written by George Geiger. No infringement of copyright is intended.

## **All The Way Home**

Joe King put his fork down and pushed away his plate. "Well," he said, leaning closer to Amanda, "I guess I'm just going to have to face it."

"Hmmm... what?" she replied with the barest hint of a smile.

"You're not the woman I married... you're not even the woman I divorced." He shook his head, trying to put his finger on exactly what was different about this person he had once known so well. "You've changed, Amanda King."

"Well," she answered cryptically, "I've just developed some outside interests."

"Yeah? Whatever they are, they suit you." Joe stared at her from across the narrow table, intrigued by the woman who returned his gaze. "You mean you don't want to go back?"

"No, I want to go forward." Amanda smiled as she thought of the long miles she'd traveled on the road to self-discovery. "It's going to be a great future."

Joe held her hand warmly in his. It had been an eventful day. First, the Orioles game, spending some time getting to know his sons again. They were such great kids... Amanda had really done a wonderful job raising them. Now, sitting here with her hand clasped in his, he felt like he had finally come home. No matter what she said, the past was a powerful magnet. It was hard to resist its pull. Maybe it wasn't too late for the four of them to finally be a family again.

He looked into her warm brown eyes. "How about some music?"

"Great." As he headed for the jukebox, Amanda opened her fingers, feeling his hand slide away from hers. She recognized the longing in Joe's voice. Everything about him seemed wonderfully familiar. The way his eyes still crinkled up when he smiled, the kindness in his voice. Whoever said that time heals old wounds certainly knew what he was talking about.

The jukebox began to play a familiar melody and she walked towards Joe with a nostalgic smile. His arms closed around her and she rested her cheek against his for a moment. Feeling him hold her in the relaxed intimacy of the dance floor, all she could think about were the good times. The comfort of their shared past beckoned to her; it would be all too easy to slip back into old patterns.

Except for one inescapable fact. Joe was right -- she wasn't the same woman he'd left behind. She pulled away from his gentle embrace, looking at him through eyes tinged with sadness. There was no way back for them. Joe was a great guy and she loved him... but only as a friend. Her heart undeniably belonged to someone else.

She looked up and there he was, staring back at her from across the room. Their eyes met and the moment seemed to freeze. Somehow, it didn't surprise her to see him standing there. After three years with Lee Stetson, she'd come to expect the unexpected. The man had an uncanny ability to materialize out of nowhere, especially when she needed him most.

"What..." Joe turned his head and followed her gaze. "Oh, isn't that Mr. Stetson?" He paused for a minute as he looked at her more closely. She seemed a million miles away.

"Amanda?" he prodded gently. "If you don't mind, I'll ask him to join us for a drink."

"Joe, I... uh..." Amanda stammered nervously, looking at her ex-husband with growing alarm. She felt her two worlds colliding for the umpteenth time this week. She was almost at the breaking point. "I really don't think..."

"After everything he did for us," Joe persisted, "it's the least we can do." Oblivious to Amanda's distress, Joe motioned for Lee to join them.

Lee acknowledged them with a nod, his expression unreadable as he headed in their direction. He couldn't stop staring at Amanda as he negotiated his way through the now crowded dance area. As he was leaving Dooley's, he'd heard the song and spotted her dancing with Joe. The perfect ending to a perfect case, he'd thought with more than a hint of sarcasm.

Throughout the investigation into the Prime Minister's 'death', Lee had felt like he was on pins and needles. Watching his partner revisit the past with her ex had been no picnic. But to his surprise, he found it even more painful to pretend that Amanda meant nothing to him. He wondered for a minute why he'd suggested it. At the time, he thought he was protecting Amanda. Seeing her now with Joe, he realized he might have been protecting himself.

No matter what his motivation, it had been agonizingly hard. All week he'd been acutely aware of how often he put his arm around her or reached for her hand when they walked down the street. He never realized how much he took that simple pleasure for granted until he couldn't do it anymore. For him, their physical contact was an outward manifestation of their emotional intimacy. And now here she was again in Joe King's arms. Those metaphorical needles suddenly got sharper.

"Hi, Joe... Amanda," he said with studied politeness as he finally reached them.

"I thought that was you over there," Joe said affably. He reached for Amanda's hand, but found only air. He glanced down to see that she had her hands in her pockets.

"Yeah, I had a few loose ends to tie up from your case," Lee informed him, watching Amanda's body language with heightened interest. "There was the little matter of the Prime Minister's bar tab. I thought I'd better settle it before it turned into an international incident with Estoccia."

"I'm glad I saw you," Joe continued, as Amanda's face grew more flushed under Lee's gaze. "I wanted to thank you for everything you did the other day. For my sons."

"You don't have to thank me," Lee said quietly. "I couldn't let Prescott hurt them."

Amanda smiled at his words as Joe continued, "I know it's your job, but still, I'd like to say thank you. Let me buy you a drink."

"Oh, that's really not necessary." He looked closely at Amanda, cataloging her features for future reference. "I should be going."

"Don't go," she said simply.

"Okay," he answered automatically.

"Great," Joe put in. "Is beer okay? It's the specialty of the house."

"Beer's fine," Lee replied, thinking with a sigh that Amanda had never looked so beautiful. Her eyes seemed to have a special sparkle tonight. It must be this place.

"I'll be right back." With a smile for Amanda, Joe headed towards the bar.

Amanda and Lee faced each other in the middle of the dance floor. The song on the jukebox changed. Around them, more couples seemed to appear like magic, swaying romantically to the music.

"I'm sorry," Lee said at last, breaking the awkward silence. "I didn't mean to intrude on your... date."

"You didn't," Amanda answered quickly. "I mean, it's not a... Joe took the boys to a ballgame and we got a pizza when he... you didn't," she finished somewhat breathlessly.

"Oh," Lee said, feeling the tiniest bit of relief at her nervousness. "I thought..."

"No," Amanda reiterated again. She blushed as Lee continued to stare at her. She ran a finger nervously beneath the neck of her sweater. It was beginning to feel very warm in here. And crowded. Some enthusiastic dancers accidentally nudged her and she lost her balance, falling forward.

Lee's arms reached out to steady her. "Maybe it would be safer if we sat down," he said with a funny half-smile.

"Maybe," she nodded, looking up at him. His touch produced a pleasant tingle along her spine. A feeling she definitely wanted to prolong. "Or we could dance?"

"We could," he answered, his smile deepening.

His arms surrounded her and they instinctively fell into step. Amanda closed her eyes and listened to the music. Something felt different between them tonight, something she couldn't quite define. She remembered the first time they'd danced, at that crazy party so long ago. And all the other times, at countless embassy functions. Lee had always been so self-assured, in perfect control of the situation.

Maybe that was the difference. Tonight, he was the one who seemed tentative and unsure. For the first time since they met, he was on her turf. They had finally come full circle. It was a heady feeling.

Joe deposited the pitcher of beer on the small table, wondering what had become of Amanda and Stetson. He'd expected to find them waiting for him when he returned from the bar. He craned his neck as he searched through the horde of students. Dooley's was filling up fast. It reminded him of his law school days. Back then, he and Amanda had stopped in practically every night. When the place got too jammed, they always went into the alley for a little air.

Maybe she'd done the same thing again tonight. He was on his way to the side door when he spied them in the middle of the dance floor. Amanda's face was flushed, the way she always looked when she felt flustered. He felt guilty for leaving her alone with Stetson -- she hadn't seemed too enthusiastic about his joining them. Smiling to himself, he headed over to rescue her.

An odd feeling came over him as he shouldered his way through the crowd. He suddenly had the impression that he was watching the two of them through a telescopic lens. Except that the closer he got, the more out of focus things became. He couldn't put his finger on it exactly, but he was beginning to pick up on some very strange vibrations from the pair. It wasn't anything they said; the couple seemed unusually quiet as they moved in perfect time to the music.

Maybe that's what was bothering him; as they danced together, Amanda and Stetson looked like a couple.

Coming up behind her, he put his hand on Amanda's back. She started, jumping back as if she had been stung. Joe caught her eye, puzzled by what he saw there. She looked almost annoyed at the intrusion.

"The drinks are on the table," Joe said, raising his voice to make himself heard over the music. "Shall we?" He took Amanda by the arm, guiding her through the throng of dancers. He felt her pull away from him almost imperceptibly. This entire situation was beginning to bother him more than a little.

They took their seats and made the usual small talk as they drank their beer. The weather, the Orioles' chance for a pennant win, the current political situation in D.C. It wasn't what was said but the way it was said that made Joe feel so uncomfortable. It dawned on him that he had misjudged the situation on the dance floor earlier. Amanda may have looked ill at ease, but she didn't need or want him to rescue her. He was starting to feel remarkably like a fifth wheel.

"So, Joe, are you planning on staying in D.C.?" Lee's voice interrupted his thoughts.

"For a little while, I think. The E.A.O. is headed for a total reorganization. And I'd like to spend some time with my sons." He smiled at Amanda as he mentioned the boys.

"I'm sure they'll be thrilled to have you around, Joe," she responded quietly. "They've missed you."

"So I guess the first thing I need to do is find an apartment," Joe continued genially. "I'm staying at Mrs. McDonald's for the time being, but I definitely need to find a more permanent place. Looking at all those kids makes me feel a little old."

Amanda smiled, but said nothing. Lee simply nodded, his expression neutral as he turned his attention back to his glass. Joe thought with a jolt that Stetson was probably very good at his job. He gave absolutely no clue as to what he could be thinking. For that matter, neither did Amanda.

Joe sipped his beer thoughtfully, trying again to assess the situation. The Amanda he remembered had never been so... enigmatic. Perhaps asking Stetson to join them for a drink hadn't been such a good idea after all. It might be an even better idea to bring this evening to a close.

"Well," Joe began, glancing at his watch, "I guess it's getting kind of late..."

"And I should be heading home," Lee finished. " I have to work tomorrow."

"So do I," Amanda said, her eyes on Lee.

They left the table and headed for the door, Amanda leading the way. The trio lingered for a minute on the sidewalk outside Dooley's, the air deliciously cool after the stuffy bar.

Amanda cleared her throat, breaking the silence. "Joe, Mrs. McDonald's is just around the corner, there's no need for you to drive all the way back to Arlington tonight. I can get a cab home."

"It's no trouble," Joe began.

"I could, ah, give you a ride if you'd like," Lee offered tentatively. "I'm headed in that direction."

"That would be nice," Amanda agreed quickly, struggling to hide her smile. If Lee was heading into D.C. via Arlington, he was definitely taking the scenic route. "Thanks for the pizza, Joe," she finished, turning to Joe once again. She gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. "I'll tell the boys goodnight for you."

"Tell them I'll see them next weekend," Joe sighed, wondering why her goodnight sounded more like goodbye. "Maybe I'll take them fishing."

"I'm sure they'd like that, sweetheart."

"Well... goodnight." Joe smiled sadly as he said the words. He headed down the street towards the boarding house, glancing over his shoulder at her one last time. For some inexplicable reason, he suddenly felt thoroughly exhausted.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lee stood silently next to Amanda, watching as her eyes followed Joe's retreating form. Despite the dance they'd shared earlier, he still felt ill at ease with her. Or maybe it was because of it. There seemed to be an invisible wall between them that he didn't know how to breach.

The scene he'd just witnessed between Amanda and Joe baffled him. Just when he felt certain Joe was safely tucked away in her past, Amanda called him 'sweetheart' and the guy bounced right back into their present. After two and a half years he thought he'd finally achieved an expert rating in reading his partner's signals, but her feelings for Joe King were shrouded in some kind of indecipherable code. And he seemed to have temporarily misplaced his codebook.

"Well?" she said, turning to him with a smile.

He hadn't seen her look at him that way in days. Five days, to be precise. Ever since Joe King had blown into town from Africa. "Well," he echoed, "My car's around..." Her expression caused him to mysteriously stumble over his words.

"Around the corner?" she finished for him.

"Actually, around the corner and down a few blocks," he clarified with a grin. "I didn't want to park the 'vette where it might get dinged. You know, all those students..." Concern for his car caused him to sigh audibly. Or maybe it was the way the light from the street lamp played across her face.

"I know," Amanda answered, blushing slightly under his scrutiny. It was a look he reserved for his more difficult cases, the real puzzlers. She suddenly felt like a file tailor-made for the Q-Bureau. Maybe that was fitting, after all. There were times when the status of their relationship seemed like the biggest question mark of all.

"It's a gorgeous night," she sighed, looking up at the stars as they walked side by side down the street.

"Yeah," Lee replied vaguely. It might be a 'gorgeous' night, but it couldn't compare to her. These days, every time he saw her, her looks seemed to attract him more and more. Tonight, though, he felt almost angry at himself for feeling that way and he didn't know why. Maybe it was guilt. Here he was, selfishly engrossed in his own feelings, when he knew Amanda was struggling so hard to sort out her own.

They headed for the car, their silence punctuated by innocuous remarks about the coolness of the evening or the changes in the neighborhood. Safe topics, Amanda



thought with a sigh. The kind of thing they used to discuss with persistent regularity before their friendship had deepened.

Lee took a deep breath as they turned the corner. His arms dangled uncomfortably at his sides as they walked along. Only last week, holding Amanda's hand was the most natural thing in the world. Now he felt like a gangly teenager out with his first girlfriend, unable to make a move.

Her eyes met his as they came to a halt in front of the car. They stood together, staring silently for a few seconds before Lee broke the moment and opened the car door. She looked away, saddened at their seeming inability to say what was on their minds. It had been a long time since the walls between them felt this thick. She started to get into the car, but the curb on this street was high and she lost her balance. Instinctively, she reached for him.

His arm came around her automatically and he inadvertently inhaled her perfume as he helped her settle into the seat. It was a comforting scent, familiar yet exciting. He smiled in spite of himself. He might be having a problem talking tonight, but his senses didn't seem to have any trouble relating to Amanda. He slammed the door and circled the car, slipping silently into the driver's seat beside her.

Amanda glanced nervously at her partner as he eased the Corvette away from the curb. She could tell he was still on edge by the way he gripped the steering wheel. His knuckles were almost white. She knew her distant behavior this week had caused this tension. The last thing in the world she'd wanted to do was to hurt Lee. But despite the best of intentions, she feared that's exactly what she'd done.

Seeing Joe again had really thrown her. Stepping into that room at good old 'Mrs. McDragon's' was like taking a giant leap into the past. Right back to all the happy times she'd shared with Joe. She had been so young and in love. If anyone had told her back then how things would turn out, she would never have believed them. Being with Joe again in those surroundings had forced her to come face to face with her failure.

In truth, it was more than that. Joe had looked so lost and vulnerable, not knowing where to turn. He needed her. After all, he'd been her husband for a long time. She couldn't turn away from him when he was in trouble -- he had been an important part of her past.

Almost as important as Lee was becoming to her present, maybe even her future. Many times during the past few days, she had looked up to find him watching her. The uncertainty clouding his eyes spoke right to her heart. Lately, they had started to take the first tentative steps towards each other. Now Joe's unexpected arrival appeared to have temporarily derailed them. More than anything, she wanted to find a way back to the breezy flirtation that had marked their relationship of late. She feared that might be impossible after what had happened this week. Somehow, she had to find the words to make things right between them.

Lee pressed his foot down on the accelerator, comforted by the Corvette's instant response. He was acutely aware of Amanda's presence in the intimate confines of his car. He fought the overpowering urge to reach out and touch her.

Slowly over the last few months, he had started to admit to himself what he really wanted. Or more aptly, who. The depth of the emotions Amanda had awakened scared him. He remembered the night in the swamp when they had almost kissed. The feeling had been overwhelming, propelling him forward on a course he knew would forever alter things between them. If those bullets hadn't shattered the moment... afterwards, he'd tried to backtrack, to pretend he was only reacting to the danger and not the heady feeling of having her so close. Amanda had steadfastly refused to allow him to talk his way out of it. Ever since that day, he found himself daydreaming about intriguing new possibilities.

Sailing up the Potomac the previous week, he thought he finally had a pretty clear picture of where they were headed. They didn't need a fire that night to keep them warm. In the close quarters of the Mata Hari II, the sparks between them were unmistakable. His self-control was almost spent by the time they docked. A few more seconds on that ketch and he would have taken her in his arms and kissed her until they were both out of breath.

Now, suddenly, everything had changed. Her reunion with Joe seemed to have hurled them in opposite directions. He'd had flashes of jealousy before, but nothing like this. None of the other men she'd taken an interest in had come close to threatening their relationship. Lee had always felt secure in the knowledge that, on some level, Amanda's heart belonged to him.

Seeing her with Joe King made him look at her with different eyes. He suddenly realized how much he needed her in his life. Joe's arrival had forced him to confront the fear that had been holding him back. He knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that he wanted Amanda not only in his present, but also in his future.

Now that he'd finally admitted that, he was afraid it might be too late. Amanda seemed to be slowly slipping away. Joe King was the father of her children. He'd realized exactly what that meant when he saw the four of them together in the school gym. It was a bond he couldn't compete with. He'd decided then and there that if Amanda wanted her family back, he wouldn't stand in her way.

At this particular moment, though, he almost felt as if the last few days had been part of a dream. Sitting here beside her in his car seemed so 'normal'. It was a feeling he'd sorely missed. He needed to know, once and for all, exactly where he stood.

Before he knew it, they were turning down Maplewood Drive. Looking up, Amanda noticed it, too. They suddenly began to speak at once, before the chance slipped away entirely.

Lee answered her first. "Yes, the case is all wrapped up, my report's even ready to be filed," he finished with a small grin. Evidently, she had the same idea. They both wanted to talk, but needed a safe place to begin.

"And the boys are doing fine," Amanda returned, her light laughter filling the car as he pulled to a stop a few blocks from her house. She felt slightly reassured by the tone in his voice. This was the Lee she'd come to know so well these past few months, not the taciturn stranger who'd driven her home tonight. She watched him get out of the car, quickly moving to help her. She retrieved the keys he'd left in the ignition with a grin, dangling them in front of him with her left hand as she reached for his arm with her right.

"I think it was a good thing that I took Friday off to be with them, though."

"I'm glad they're okay," he stated once more as he pulled her from the car. His fingers brushed lightly over hers as he retrieved his keys. He caught her eye, holding his breath for a brief moment as he swung the car door closed. The noise reverberated in the still night, causing them both to jump.

They fell into step together, making their way quickly down the street. "I meant what I said earlier, Amanda," Lee continued, finishing in a low voice, "I'd never let anything... you know."

"Yeah, I do." Despite the danger inherent in their work, from the start she'd always felt the boys were safe with Lee to watch over them. The same way she felt every time she looked into his eyes.

Lee risked a quick look at her as they hurried along. "I, for one, will be glad to see you back tomorrow," he said with feeling, hastily adding, "that paperwork seems to get out of control when you're gone too long."

"I'm glad the file cabinets have missed me," Amanda teased, glancing up at him with a smile. Even after all this time, Lee still couldn't come out and say what was on his mind without qualifying it.

"They weren't the only ones," he added almost inaudibly.

To his chagrin, Amanda heard him. Her mouth opened slightly as she turned to him in surprise and pleasure. The look in her eyes made the impossible suddenly seem possible.

They skirted the house, heading for the backyard, stopping briefly in the gazebo. It seemed to shrink around them as she looked up at him, her face mere inches from his.

"Well, " Lee said softly, suddenly feeling as nervous as Amanda looked. "You're... ah... home."

She nodded silently.

"I guess I should be going."

He started to turn away, but her arm held him back. "Lee..."

"Yeah?"

"Can you stay for a minute? I need to talk to you."

"Okay." He hesitated, as if debating whether or not to finish his thought. "I wanna talk to you, too."

His words caused her to shake her head sadly. "For two people who want to talk to each other, we've done a pretty poor job of it so far."

"It's hard, Amanda," he explained in a pained voice. "A lot of stuff has been hard this week."

"I know. That's what I wanted to talk about."

"Okay," he stated flatly. Part of him wanted to make this as difficult for her as the past few days had been for him. The other part sensed her discomfort and his face unconsciously softened. "I'm listening," he added, a gentle tone creeping into his voice.

She looked at him with longing. "What I wanted to tell you... I mean... what I wanted to say is... I'm sorry for the way I acted this week." She took a deep breath as she nervously fingered the sleeve of her sweater. "I didn't mean to shut you out. Everything got all jumbled up somehow... Joe, my job, you... it was really confusing."

"For me, too."

"I know," she sighed, forcing herself to meet his eye. His confusion was still written painfully on his face. "I'm really sorry for that."

She shook her head sadly. Her heart knew the words that would make this all better, but her head told her it was still too soon to say them. She tried to find another way to make him understand the emotional chaos she'd been in since Joe's return.

"It's hard to explain," she whispered, moving to bridge the distance between them, literally and figuratively. She stood in front of him, almost as close as they'd been on the dance floor earlier. His leather jacket was open and she could almost feel his heart beating through the thin fabric of his shirt. She took a deep breath.

"It was a crazy week," she whispered, her eyes glued to the middle of his chest. "It felt like the past and the present blurred suddenly and I got lost in it. For a while I kind of misplaced who I was... who I'd become."

"Do you know now?" Lee asked in an intense voice.

She looked up and met his eye, finding the answer plainly reflected there. "Yes."

"Good," he replied simply. "I've missed that Amanda the last few days."

"She's right here... and she's not going anywhere."

They stood together in silence for a few moments, Lee's fingers tentatively touching hers in the darkness. Somehow, this time, Amanda's hand found its way into his.

"Lee," she began, his actions prompting her to speak her mind. "Can I ask you something?"

He gave her hand an encouraging squeeze. "Sure."

"What were you really doing in Dooley's tonight?"

"Well, I, ah... I felt responsible... you know... for getting the Prime Minister in that mess the other day," he stammered. "You know how I hate loose ends."

"Uh-huh." She shook her head skeptically. "Since when do you handle routine duties like settling a bar tab?"

He looked down into her eyes. She was so near... if he leaned forward just a little bit, his lips would accidentally brush against hers. He fought the feeling as he looked into her eyes, instead speaking what was in his heart.

"Since I missed my partner so much this week." His eyes captured hers in a moment of perfect understanding. It was a wonderful feeling, like coming home after a long trip. He smiled at her, adding quietly, "I just wanted to be... well... you know."

"Yeah, I know," she replied breathlessly. His words caused her cheeks to redden, but she refused to turn away. Amanda held her breath as he leaned closer, shutting her eyes in eager anticipation. His lips were almost on hers...

"Amanda?"

Her eyes fluttered open at the sound of her name, realizing with a jolt that it wasn't Lee's voice that called to her.

"Mother?" she answered incredulously at the untimely intrusion. They never seemed to get a break. She shrugged her shoulders at Lee in resignation as she hastily called out, "I'll be right in."

Lee looked back at her with the barest hint of amusement. "I guess it's later than we thought." One of these days, he groaned silently, their luck was going to change. He intended to see to it personally. But for now, he merely added, "I'd better get going."

"Thank you for everything," she said one more time, her arm resting lightly on his. "The ride... and you know, what you did for the boys the other day."

"I'll see you tomorrow at the Agency," he replied, his mouth turning up in a smile. "You know, those file cabinets really have missed your special touch."

"I guess I'll be in early then," she laughed, giving his arm a playful shove. "Goodnight, Lee."

"Night, Amanda," he answered, turning to wink at her as he disappeared into the darkness.

That one simple gesture spoke volumes. Amanda headed into the house, greeting her mother with a radiant smile.

Her expression was not lost on Dotty. "I hope I didn't interrupt, dear," she apologized almost before Amanda was through the door.

"You didn't."

"Joe didn't want to come in?" Dotty inquired with a disappointed look. "I thought you two might like dessert. The boys and I made some cookies earlier."

"No, I think it's kind of late for dessert," her daughter answered with a cryptic smile. "I'm going to head upstairs. It's been a long day and I have to be at work first thing in the morning. Goodnight, Mother."

"Goodnight, darling," Dotty sighed as she put the cookies away.

Amanda slowly climbed the stairs, her thoughts drifting back over the evening. Things tonight had turned out better than she'd ever expected. For the first time, she felt a sense of closure with Joe. The past was finally where it belonged... behind her. The look on Lee's face as he dashed away filled her with longing for the future. She suddenly felt happier than she had in a long time. Despite every obstacle, they were almost home. One of these days, they'd make it all the way.

**The End**