

## THE CIRCLE GAME

**AUTHOR:** EmilyAnn (jd2b@mn.mediaone.net)

**RATING:** PG - mild invectives and sexual innuendo

**DISCLAIMER:** SMK and the characters therein belong to Shoot the Moon Enterprises and Warner Brothers Entertainment Television. This is a work of fiction based thereon with no rights asserted, transferred, or implied. Insofar as the story stands apart from the show, however, it belongs to the author and may not be reproduced or redistributed, in part or in whole, without her permission.

**TIMELINE:** Season 3 between 'Wrong Way Home' and 'Fast Food for Thought' and the early 70's and 80's. Try as I might, I couldn't entirely reconcile the Amanda and Joe timeline, so I actually picked a mid-point b/t the Amanda as 34 in 'YODT' and Amanda's reunion being the 15<sup>th</sup> in 'Triumvirate'. Mrs. McDonald's boarding house never was.

**AUTHOR'S NOTES:** I can't explain it, but I have a soft spot for Joe. So often, I'm saddened by stories that portray him as either a jerk or a criminal, b/c frankly, I think it's a reflection on Amanda, and I can't see her getting involved w/ someone like that. I prefer to think that they were two great people that just weren't great for one another. So, I decided to write their story my way.

**THANK YOU'S:** So very, very many people helped me through the writing process, and I owe much to each of them. 'The usual suspects,' - ya'll are great. Lori - your encouragement and gushing were food for my soul and one of these days I promise to learn the difference b/t 'to,' 'too,' and 'two.' Kim - do you still like beta-ing more than writing your own stuff? Pam - I bow down before you, oh comma queen. Merel - for asking questions I couldn't answer. And lastly but by no circumstances leastly - to a special phantom . . . you are wise beyond your years, and I appreciate you more for always being honest w/ me and telling me when I'm wrong. Thank you for many well-needed kicks in the rear!

**WRITTEN:** March 2001 - July 2001

**WARNINGS:** I've been told I need a tissue warning, so here it is.

\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

AND THE SEASONS, THEY GO ROUND AND ROUND  
AND THE PAINTED PONIES GO UP AND DOWN  
WE'RE CAPTIVE ON THE CAROUSEL OF TIME  
WE CAN'T GO BACK; WE CAN ONLY LOOK BEHIND  
FROM WHERE WE CAME  
AND GO ROUND AND ROUND AND ROUND IN THE CIRCLE GAME  
JONI MITCHELL - *THE CIRCLE GAME*

\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

### ***December 1985***

She pushed another onion off to the side of her plate. She noticed him watching her and blushed. "I don't like onions," she offered, explaining the obvious.

"So I see." He smiled, spearing his last spinach leaf. Finished, he pushed his plate away and sighed. "This is nice."

She glanced around the room, wondering to what he was referring. His expression, one of quiet contemplation, revealed his meaning, but she nevertheless decided to press the matter. "Yes, Spencer's always has such good food. I think all their dressings are homemade," she answered blithely.

"Actually, I was talking about the company."

She felt a familiar warmth spreading from her toes to her chest and constricting her throat to the point that the only word that she could choke out was, "Yeah."

Lee didn't seem to notice her inarticulateness. He picked up her hand, tracing the shape of her fingers with his. "I'm glad you agreed to come tonight. I wasn't sure . . . with your ex-husband being home again now and, well . . ."

"You thought Joe and I might want to reconcile?" The time for game playing had passed, and though the conversation was uncomfortable, she knew she had to be direct.

He looked uneasy, seemingly surprised by how frank she'd been. "Yeah," he finally admitted. "When I saw you all together in the gym, I couldn't help wondering - with family being so important to you . . ."

"You know . . ." She pulled her hand away and took a sip of water to clear both her palate and her head. "Joe asked me the same thing the other night."

"Oh?" The revelation seemed to take him by surprise.

"Yeah, he asked whether I wanted to go back . . ." She found the disclosure easier than she had expected. Taking a long breath through her nose, she expelled it through her mouth before answering his unspoken question. "I told him I had too much to look forward to."

Lee reached across the table and took her hand again. "What *else* did you and Joe talk about?"

"He said I'd changed," Amanda answered after a beat. Lee's fingers once more wended their way through hers, filling her mind with thoughts of anything but her ex-husband. She struggled to refocus on the conversation. "That I, uh, wasn't the same woman he'd married."

Lee nodded, and she continued. "And he's right . . . I was so different when we met – so young."

The waiter brought their entrees and Lee waited until the young man had retreated to ask, "How did you meet? I don't think you ever told me."

"I didn't?" She laughed, although not really surprised by how many things had escaped their growing relationship. She had fought to keep Joe out of the picture, her past with him as safely tucked away as he was in Africa. Now, though, her past and her future seemed destined for a head-on collision, and she stood in the middle of the highway, hoping to control that traffic flow.

"Well, I don't see how it matters now, Lee. The case is over, and Joe's innocent. You can put your criminal psychology books away." She viciously stabbed at a steamed carrot.

Lee shook his head. "I'm not asking as an agent. I just . . . was wondering."

"Just wondering . . ." She paused, recognizing the subtle distinction between Lee the agent, and Lee the man, and trying to make sense of it all. After a sip of wine, she began again, "Okay, well, I was only nineteen – it was at a mixer. We were both in our second year at UVA. I was a Kappa, you know, and Joe was a brother in Sigma Nu . . ."

### **September 1970**

Amanda had just stepped through the door of the Sigma Nu fraternity house when a pert blond greeted her. "Mandy! Hi! You made it."

Not bothering to correct the other young woman's use of the nickname she hated, Amanda

shifted her weight and laughed awkwardly. "Yeah, I don't know what I'm doing here."

"Don't be such a square, Mandy. This is the first mixer of the year, and Sigma's got some **totally boss** new pledges. You should really think about hooking up with one of them. So," the young blond continued and handed Amanda a sweaty bottle. "Have a beer and loosen **up** already!"

"Right, loosen up . . ." Amanda took a hesitant sip from the bottle, fighting the impulse to spit out the bitter, frothy liquid. Glancing around the room, she spied some activity in the far corner.

"Peggy, who's that?" She pointed to a group of men playing pool. "He's got such interesting eyes."

"Oh, him?" The other young woman shrugged indifferently. "That's Joe King. He's a second year, too, but he's older – spent some time in 'Nam. He's flat-out intense, a poli-sci major – wants to be a lawyer or somethin'. Don't waste your time; he's only into his books. Wouldn't even give me a second date. I'm surprised he even came out of his room tonight."

Having offered her opinion, Peggy took another deep swig of her beer and surveyed the room. "Hey! There's Jeff. I'm gonna go say, 'hi.' You'll be okay by yourself?" she asked, and then answered her own question. "Of course you will." She squeezed Amanda's shoulder and breezed away.

Amanda sighed and looked down at the bottle in her hands. Spying a tall plant in the far corner, she crossed the room. Once there, she turned her back to it and tried to empty the bottle inconspicuously into its pot.

"Hey there! Slow down! The night's still young. You don't want Oskar to get drunk this early, do you?"

Amanda jumped, and the empty bottle slipped out of her hand, hitting the carpet with a thud. "Oh, my gosh!" She knelt to retrieve it. "I'm sorry. You startled me."

She looked up and into the pale blue eyes she'd been admiring earlier. "You're Joe King."

"Yes." He took her hand and helped her to her feet. "But I'm afraid you have me at a disadvantage; I don't know who you are."

She blushed. "Amanda . . . Amanda West." Then, changing the subject, she asked, "Who's Oskar?"

He gently turned her so they were both facing the plant. "Amanda West, meet Oskar, our

figus."

"Ahh . . ." She nodded at the plant in mock seriousness. "Pleased to meet you." Turning back to Joe, she continued with her questioning. "Why did you name the ficus 'Oskar'?"

"Well, I didn't. The brothers did. It was either that, or Leonard. We flipped a coin and Oskar won. He's sort of our unofficial mascot."

Amanda nodded, although not quite sure she followed the logic. "I see."

They stood facing one another awkwardly for a moment, until Joe broke the silence. "Tell me, Amanda." His eyes ran over her face like a gentle caress, and she felt goosebumps rising on her arms. "Do you play pool?"

"No, not really." Her blush deepened under his scrutiny.

"Would you like to learn?"

"Yes." Her voice had slipped to a level barely above a whisper. "I think I'd like that very much."

"So would I." He placed his hand on the small of her back and directed her toward the pool table.

As he helped her to select a cue, he asked, "Can I get you anything to drink – water, milk, soda?"

"Water's fine – with ice, if you have it."

"One ice water coming up." He winked at her. "Oskar likes that better, too."

Looking away nervously, Amanda returned her attention to attempting to rub chalk over the end of her pool cue.

\* \* \* \* \*

"You're sure you've never played before? I think you're hustling me." Joe had lost his second game in a row, but was still smiling.

"I think you're throwing your game." She looked at him in challenge, daring him to deny it.

He shrugged. "You caught me. I just can't stand to let such a beautiful, charming young woman lose."

She rolled her eyes. "I think you've had too much to drink, Joe King."

He didn't attempt to contradict her. Instead, looking at the clock, he said, "Res Life is gonna be here soon to close us up for the night. May I walk you back to your dorm?"

"I just live across the quad," she began, but then, seeing the look in his eyes, added, "but if you want to . . ."

\* \* \* \* \*

He reached for her hand as they made their way toward her building, and she met his grasp, enjoying the casual intimacy of the contact.

"How do you like the sorority house?" He gestured to the ivy-covered brick building with a large blue ? sign on the side.

"It's okay," she answered. "I've got a great roommate, and it's nicer than the dorms . . ." she searched for words, unwilling to cut the evening short.

"Well, Amanda West." He stopped on the steps, and took her hands in his. "I'd like to thank you for the most enjoyable evening I've had in a long time. May I see you again . . . soon?"

"Tomorrow, I have to finish a paper for my English class and I have play rehearsal on Monday until six - I'm playing the Wailing Walrus, but if you wanted to maybe go to dinner then, I'm free," she offered, inwardly berating herself for not being more succinct.

"Dinner on Monday at six," he confirmed and gently kissed her cheek.

"Bye. . ." She waved her fingers tentatively after him.

\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

### ***December 1985***

"What's wrong?" Her companion's face bore a far-off expression that piqued Amanda's curiosity.

Lee blinked. "Just imagining what you were like in college," he answered, a dimple playing at the corner of his mouth.

"Oh," she answered. "I wasn't that different. Well, I mean I was younger, and well . . . you

know, I think I've got a picture in here somewhere." She plucked her purse from the back of her chair, and began to dig until she pulled out her wallet, and from it, a faded, yellowing snapshot.

The woman in the picture was clearly Amanda, merely younger. Wearing a long, loose-fitting, flower print dress and a crocheted shawl, she was standing next to a statue of Thomas Jefferson, smiling brightly.

Handing it to Lee, Amanda explained, "Joe took that after we'd been seeing each other for about a month. It was early in December, right after Thanksgiving . . ."

~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

### ***December 1970***

"Well . . ." Kitty looked up from her notebook as Amanda came into their room. "How was dinner with Joe?"

"Honestly?" Amanda asked, kicking her shoes off and throwing her jacket over the tiny desk chair.

"Honestly!" Kitty's eyes glinted in anticipation.

"**WONDERFUL!**" Amanda exclaimed and fell backward onto her bed, her arms stretched out in complete abandon. "Just wonderful."

"Ohhhhh . . ." Kitty grinned. "You've got it bad!"

"Yeah," she admitted, looking over at her roommate and drawing her lower lip between her teeth in her excitement. "I guess I do. He's just so . . . so . . . **perfect!** He's not like anyone else I know. He's sweet; he's funny; he's smart; and he knows what he wants to do with his life . . ."

"Yeah, I know." Kitty clasped her hands in front of herself primly and recited. "He's gonna be a lawyer, fight injustice and stick up for the little people." The words, repeated back in the mock serious tone, sounded so ridiculous that Amanda giggled in spite of herself.

Sitting up, she said, "It's not like that; he really means it. He's very passionate."

"Passionate, huh?" Kitty's eyes flashed, and she joined Amanda on the narrow bed, leaning in closely. "Have you . . ." she began, but was interrupted by a knock at the door.

"Amanda?" It was the housemother. "You have a phone call; I think it's your mom."

Amanda shrugged and wrinkled her brow, unsure of why her mother would call this late on a Saturday night, and went to the hallway to take her call.

"Amanda?" Her mother's voice came through the receiver, and Amanda could tell right away that she had been crying. Her heart skipped a beat from fear of what could have caused her to do so.

"Mother? What is it?"

"Amanda, Daddy had a heart attack. They took him to the hospital. The doctors . . . the doctors did everything they could, but . . ." Amanda heard her mother inhale sharply, and she knew what was going to come next. She gripped the receiver and leaned against the wall, willing the room to stop spinning as her mother said, "He didn't make it."

"No." It was a denial. She would not concede that her father was gone, that she had been unable to say good-bye. Only two weeks ago, she had hugged him at the bus depot after Thanksgiving, promising to study hard for her finals and to be home for Christmas. Now, she was being told he was gone. "No," she repeated with a growing firmness.

"Amanda, darling." Her mother's voice grew desperate.

She refused to accept it, again saying, "No."

"Amanda," Dotty ignored the repeated denials. "I'm going to wire you the money for a bus ticket tomorrow. Try and get some rest, baby, and I'll talk to you in the morning. I love you."

"Okay," she agreed, not really sure, however, what her mother had said. "I love you, too," she added, not realizing over the sound of the blood roaring through her ears that her mother was no longer on the line.

"Amanda?" The house matron looked at her with concern, as Amanda slowly replaced the receiver. "Is everything okay? You seem a little shaken up."

"Oh, yeah, I'm fine." She headed for the door. "I'm just gonna get some air."

She bolted from the building and across the quad as though she were being chased. It had begun to rain, and she had neither a jacket nor shoes, but she welcomed the chill that coursed through her skin like icy needles. It was a pain she could deal with.



The Sigma Nu house was quiet – the brothers having put away the beer in favor of books as the shadow of final exams hovered closer. The difference between a 'C' and 'D' was more than just a point on their GPA's; it was the difference between maintaining an academic deferral and being sent to Vietnam.

She found Joe's tiny, corner room easily and knocked cautiously, hoping to get his attention without disturbing anyone else.

"Amanda! My God!" He ushered her into the room. "Look at you! You're **soaked**."

She looked down at her dress, now plastered to her body, and reached up to run her fingers through her hair, which hung down her back in dripping tendrils. "Yeah, I guess I am," she agreed, as though only just coming to the realization. Then in the same tone, she announced, "My father's dead."

"Oh, sweetheart!" Not caring anymore about her rain-soaked condition, he drew her into his arms and held her close as hot, salty tears coursed their way down her face.

When her tears had given way to a series of deep, shuddering breaths, he produced towels and a change of clothes. "I'll go wait in the lounge, you can get changed and then if you want to . . . talk, or . . ."

"Thank you." She ran the back of her hand across her face and then took the offered items.

\* \* \* \* \*

"So, I guess I'll be going back tomorrow . . . I can get a bus ticket with some of the money I've saved from babysitting for Professor Hall . . ." Amanda finished, silent tears running unchecked down her face. She brushed them away with a sense of disconnect, trying to remember when she had begun crying.

He handed her a box of tissues and said, "I could go with you if you want."

"Thanks," she reached over from her perch on the bed and squeezed his hand, "but I need to do this on my own."

He looked from her to the clock on his bedside table. "It's three A.M. Do you think you can slip back to your room without anyone seeing?"

"I'll try." She stood and stretched the kinks out of her back. Then, she reached up and planted a chaste kiss on his cheek. "Thanks for being such a good friend," she whispered and then paused, adding, "You're really special, Joe."

\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

### **December 1985**

"Oh, Amanda." Lee continued to move his salmon over his plate. "I, well . . . I knew your father was gone, but I never really . . ." He paused, searching for the words. "I'm sorry . . ."

"It's okay," Amanda met his eyes as she answered, knowing he spoke from personal experience.

"I was lucky. I have some really good memories . . . that first summer was almost overwhelming, though. Joe had an internship in California, and I was helping Mother settle Daddy's estate. We really racked up the long distance bills." She laughed slightly, embarrassed by the memory.

She felt Lee watching her again, and looked down at her plate. "Gosh, listen to me; I've been talking all night. You don't want to hear about Joe 'n' me."

"No," he contradicted her. "I **do** want to hear, please."

She could hear the earnestness in his voice and wondered what it was that made him so curious about her past. Was he trying to figure out what went wrong, or what went right?

"Well, okay . . ." she nodded "After we got back to UVA that fall we both knew it was pretty serious. So, Mother started *encouraging* me to bring him home for Thanksgiving . . ."

### **November 20, 1971**

"You've been awfully quiet tonight – ever since your mom called," Joe commented, and reached over to brush a stray lock of hair back from her face.

"I need to ask you something and I'm trying to figure out how to do it." She kicked her shoes off to draw her legs up underneath herself on the couch in the common lounge.

She bit her lip, waiting for him to say something. When he didn't, she continued, words pouring from her mouth before she had the opportunity to think about them. "It's not really that big a deal. Well, not to me anyway. To my mother and . . . maybe to you, I don't know. And you don't have to say 'yes,' it's just that, well, my mother thought maybe it would be nice and I agree, so . . ." She sighed and then in a rush, asked, "Would you like to come to my place for Thanksgiving?"

"Is that all?" he asked with a chuckle when she finished.

"Well, my mother's sisters will be there -- Edna, Minnie, and Lillian, so you'll have to put up with the 'aunt farm'." Amanda rolled her eyes. "They can come on a little strong sometimes."

"Sounds like fun; I always wanted a big family." He picked up her hand and ran his thumb over her knuckles. "But I want something in return."

Blushing at the intensity of the moment, she licked her lips before asking, "What's that?"

"Come up to my parents' place in Chevy Chase that Saturday. They've been dying to meet the wonderful girl I keep telling them about. Dad's even suggested that I made you up."

She laughed and squeezed his hand. "It's a deal."

"Good." He brought her hand to his lips to seal the pact.

\* \* \* \* \*

### ***November 23, 1971***

The trees had shed their leaves, and the Virginia sky hung silvery blue over the rolling hills of the Piedmont. The air seemed charged, as though it had been sparked by the energy of the students preparing for their long weekend.

"This sure beats Greyhound," Amanda commented, lifting her suitcase into the trunk of Joe's car.

"Well, we're going the same way, and it's my pleasure besides." He teased, wrapping an arm around her waist to draw her nearer, and captured her lips in a light kiss. She returned it and it grew in intensity, as he slid his hand under her sweater to caress the smooth skin of her lower back. She melted against him, her fingers weaving through his short, curly hair.

"Hey, you two!" one of the Sigma Nu brothers hollered as he passed them in the parking lot. "Get a room!"

She gasped and sprang away from him, her face reddening as the other student walked away chuckling at his own joke.

"I guess we ought to get going," Joe mumbled and slammed the trunk closed a little harder

than necessary. She nodded and climbed into the passenger's seat before he could get the door for her.

\* \* \* \* \*

An awkward silence descended over the pair as Joe's car rolled northeast along Rt. 29 toward Washington, DC. Joe's hands rested lightly on the steering wheel, his fingers thrumming in time with the mellow, monaural music coming from the AM radio. Amanda, her eyes focused on the bare treescape, sighed and shifted her weight against the vinyl seat.

Finally, he broke the silence. "Amanda, I'm sorry about what Nick said back there. He didn't know . . . he just . . . I'm sorry."

"S'okay." She kept her eyes trained on the swiftly passing scenery.

"It's okay?" He repeated, sounding as though he didn't believe her.

"Yeah . . . it's fine." She turned away from the window and stretched her legs out in front of her – studying the way her feet moved at the ankles.

Spying a picnic area down the road, Joe downshifted and took the turn-off. He eased into a parking spot and silently set the handbrake. Then, getting out of the car, he opened Amanda's door and took her hand to lead her to one of the many vacant tables.

Never letting go of her hand, he used his other one to tilt her chin in his direction. "Then what *is* wrong?"

"Everything . . ." she whispered in spite of the noise of passing holiday traffic.

"*Everything?*" He repeated the word as a question, running his fingers along the line of her cheekbone. "Come on! Talk to me, Amanda." She found it odd that his tone seemed to be both pleading and demanding.

Not willing to deny him on either count, she said, "I'm just so confused . . . this is going to be the first Thanksgiving without . . . my father. This time last year was . . . was the last time I . . . saw him. And going home is just making everything . . . fresh again."

She took a long shuddering breath and continued. "I almost don't wanna go. Then, I wouldn't have to . . . face it. But then I feel guilty for thinking that way, because I know how much my mother needs me." Her tears were flowing freely by this point, and she wiped at them in frustration before adding, indignantly, "And to top it all off, I think I'm falling in love with you, Joe King!"

He nodded quietly, seeming unsurprised by her admission, and asked, "Is that really all that bad?"

"No. . ." She wiped her tears away with a wan laugh, realizing how it must've sounded. "Just a little overwhelming, confusing . . . it's all so new." She looked down at the ground again.

"Well, we'll just take it one step at a time – together." His ice blue eyes studied her warm brown ones, asking for and receiving permission, before he leaned in and kissed her. Her lips bore the salty remnants of her tears and he gently kissed them away before moving to trace the rest of her face with his lips.

Cupping her cheeks in his hands, he leaned his forehead against hers, to whisper "I love you, too . . ."

"I'm so glad you're here." She looked into his eyes, seeing both herself and their future reflected therein.

"Me, too," he answered, drawing her closer. "Let's go for a walk; it's a beautiful day."

She took a deep breath of the cold, damp air, and looked around at leafless trees. "Yes, it is."

\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

### ***December 1985***

As she finished speaking, she saw Lee's lips tighten and a muscle in his jaw twitch. She felt herself again in the middle of the busy intersection of her past and present, the traffic rushing all around her, ignoring her desperate attempts to control it. Lee was jealous of Joe. The realization didn't surprise her. She'd subconsciously acknowledged the possibility a long time ago.

At the same time, however, she knew he would never admit to the feelings. She had to assuage them without acknowledging them. She sighed, hating the helplessness and confusion she felt, and saw Lee look up at her.

Glancing at his watch, he said, "The night's still young. Would you like to go for some ice cream?"

"Ice cream? In December?"

"Coffee, then," he amended.

She answered easily, knowing it was not the destination, but their time together that was important, "Okay, but then I have to get home – Mother will start asking questions."

With a smile, he handed her the coat check tickets. "All right. Why don't you pick up our coats while I take care of the bill?"

They left the restaurant hand in hand, and then drew naturally closer against the cold air as they made their way down the block to the tiny coffee shop.

"Look at that!" Amanda pointed at a building across the street. "Dooley's. I didn't realize we were so close."

"Hmmm . . ." Lee made a non-committal noise.

She glanced back at the building, measuring her words as she tried to break the ice without falling through it. "You know, that's where Joe proposed to me."

"Huh . . ." his answers remained monosyllabic.

"Yeah," she confirmed. "It was over Christmas Break, right after New Year's . . ."

~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~

## ***January 1972***

Dooley's was empty save the couple in the secluded rear booth. Colored lights, still up from Christmas, twinkled brightly amidst holiday holly and ivy. In another window, someone had taped a paper menorah – a nominal recognition of Washington, DC's Jewish population.

"You know, I've been thinking about the housing for next year." Joe shifted in his seat and she wondered why he seemed uncomfortable.

"Won't you just be staying in the frat house?"

"Well, you know . . ." he paused to take a sip of his beer. "President Nixon's been keeping his promise to pull more troops from 'Nam. There'll a lot more guys coming in on the GI Bill. If I gave up the my room in the house, they could use it for another brother, and the school could school could use his dorm room for another GI . . . Anyway, I thought maybe if we . . ."

She interrupted him with a sense of surprise and incredulity, "Are you asking me to move

in with you, Joe? I don't really think . . ."

He shook his head to stop her and pulled a tiny diamond ring from his pocket. "Actually, I was trying to ask you to marry me."

She gasped, bringing her hands to her mouth. "Oh, my gosh!"

"Is that a yes?"

"Yes! Yes!" She agreed easily and let him slip the ring on her finger. She smiled, feeling a sense of destiny. This is the way things were supposed to be, a wonderful and natural progression of their relationship.

"Would you care to dance?" His voice was soft and low, barely audible over the soft jazz playing in the background.

"Hmm?" She looked up, surprised by the question.

"I asked if you wanted to dance?" He smiled. "Or would you and the ring rather be alone?"

"Stop that!" She playfully swatted at him. "You know I'd be happy with a pop top as long as I have you." She held her left hand up to the light, studying the solitaire's sparkle. "But it is very nice."

"I'm glad you like it." He reached for her hand and eased her away from the table. "Come on; let's dance."

As they spun about the empty floor, Joe pulled her closer possessively. "I can't wait to spend the rest of my life with you."

\* \* \* \* \*

She stood outside the bedroom door and knocked softly. "Mother?"

"Amanda, **darling** . . . It's almost three in the morning." Dotty cracked the door, and pulled her sleep mask off to ask, "What is it?"

"I'm sorry . . ." Amanda tried, and failed, to look contrite. "I wanted to talk to you."

Trying unsuccessfully to keep her face a mask of solemnity, Amanda held out her left hand for her mother's inspection. "Joe asked me to marry him; we want to have the wedding in June!"

In the dim light of the early morning, she watched her mother's face, noticing lines that hadn't been there a year before and a weariness around her eyes. Patiently, she waited for the joy that she felt to be reflected back at her. Instead, her mother said, "But you're so young!"

"I'm twenty-one, Mother. Joe's twenty-six. And we *love* each other." Amanda leveled her deep brown eyes with her mother's and saw the same stubbornness mirrored therein.

"What about school?"

"I'm not gonna drop out of school. UVA has married student housing, you know." She placed her hands on her hips, waiting for the next argument.

To her surprise, Dotty sighed and leaned back against the doorframe. "I sound like my own mother did after I came home bursting to tell her about this handsome soldier at a New Year's party who told me he loved me." She reached out and took Amanda's left hand between hers.

"I really am happy for you, baby. It's just hard sometimes to remember that you're grown up." She stood on tiptoe to kiss her gently on the forehead. "Let's go to bed. We have a wedding to plan, and you go back to school in a week."

~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~

### ***December 1985***

"My mother was really great about the whole thing, after she got over the shock." Amanda finished, feeling the need to talk and fill Lee's silence.

Finally, he spoke, "So you were a June bride? With your mother planning the wedding, I bet it was the event of the season."

"It was just your traditional, church wedding." Amanda equivocated, "Big, but nothing spectacular. If . . ." she began and then stopped herself.

"What?"

She busied herself with a sugar packet, desperate to change the subject. "Nothing."

"No. You were gonna say something then; what was it?"

"It's not important, really. I was just thinking that if I were to ever, maybe, get married again, that it might be nice to keep things simple for a change." She played down the



thought.

"If you were to ever get married again," he echoed, unable to meet her eye.

She nodded, "Right." She paused for a moment, thinking some more, and stirring her coffee. "You know, when I think back on it, it seems so far away, and almost as if it had happened to someone else. . ."

~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~

### **June 1972**

"Are you happy?" Dotty smoothed the crisp lines of Amanda's wedding dress and straightened the veil.

Amanda scrutinized her reflection in the mirror, stretching and straining against the precisely tailored bodice before answering. "What a silly thing to ask, Mother! Of course I'm happy." She looked at her reflection again and tugged on her sleeves. "And I'm scared to death!"

Dotty laughed. "That's normal, darling . . . now, turn around; let me look at you." Dotty placed her hands on Amanda's shoulders and directed her attention away from the mirror. "You look beautiful."

Amanda hugged her mother awkwardly, taking care not to wrinkle her dress or crush her mother's corsage. "I'm gonna miss you."

"Hush!" Dotty scolded. "I'm not going anywhere." She handed Amanda her bouquet. "Take your flowers, Miss West; it's time for you to shine. I'll be right there in the front row . . . trying not to cry."

\* \* \* \* \*

She stood outside the doors to the sanctuary. At any moment, the organ would start playing Wagner's ubiquitous march, and she would make her way through the doors and down the aisle to the man who would soon be her husband.

The days leading up to this moment had been a blur - rehearsal dinners, meetings with the reverend, last minute alterations, and now it would all be over, and in less than half an hour, she would go from being Miss Amanda West to Mrs. Joe King. She only hoped she didn't trip on the hem of her dress on the way down the aisle.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I now pronounce you husband and wife," Reverend Mills declared solemnly. "You may kiss the bride."

Amanda couldn't decide whether everything was happening too quickly or too slowly. She could feel scores of eyes watching her as Joe drew her into his arms and lowered his lips to hers. He drew her lower lip between his and she felt an almost electrical surge from the contact that made her clutch his arms more tightly. In that moment she felt contentment such as she'd never known; she wanted it never to end.

"What do you say we skip the reception and go straight to the honeymoon?" he whispered as they broke apart and turned to face the waiting crowd.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," the minister raised his hands above the couple, "it is my pleasure to present to you for the first time, Mr. and Mrs. Joseph King."

"My mother would never forgive us," she responded out of the corner of her mouth, trying to keep her face still.

He sighed in tacit acknowledgment of the statement and reached for her hand, and together, as husband and wife, they walked back up the aisle.

\* \* \* \* \*

The rest of the afternoon was a rush of dancing, drinking, and dining. She felt blinded by the recurring bursts of flashbulbs, and her feet were numb from countless turns about the dance floor.

As she and Joe stood before the cake, slicing it, their hands intertwined over the knife, Amanda felt his breath caressing her neck, she shivered.

"Cold?" he asked, wrapping his free arm around her from behind and drawing her closer to plant kisses on her neck.

"Not any more," she answered.

"Smile, you two." The photographer again appeared in front of them, and Amanda shifted her attention in the direction of the camera and complied.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~

***December 1985***

"We . . . uh . . . went on our honeymoon then . . ." she explained, blushing.

Lee drained the last of his coffee and nodded. "Yeah. Barbados, right?"

"That's right," she answered and swallowed hard. "Joe's parents paid for it -- their present to us."

He cleared his throat and glanced around the small shop, before looking down at his watch. "You, uh, didn't want your mother to get worried, right?"

"Right," she agreed and slid into her coat.

Snow had begun to fall softly, melting as it hit the sidewalk. Amanda slid her hands deeper into her pockets and stepped lightly through the slush. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Lee glance up at Dooley's as they passed it again, a contemplative expression on his face.

"You know, Lee . . ." Amanda began, slipping one of her hands out of her coat pocket to grasp his. "I meant what I said earlier tonight. I wouldn't trade my time with Joe for anything – I have a lot of great memories and two wonderful boys, and we were very happy together until the last few years, but that doesn't mean I want it back. I've already lived that part of my life . . . and now, well I couldn't imagine giving up you . . . or the Agency," she quickly added.

"I know what you mean," he replied and dropped her hand to wrap his arm around her shoulders.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hi, Mom!" Amanda's older son greeted her from the den couch when she walked inside.

"Sweetheart, it's eleven thirty. What are you doing up?" She sat next to him on the couch, gently nudging him with her hip to make more room.

"I wanted to finish my book." He held it up for her inspection.

"Arthur Conan Doyle." She saw the author's name on the spine. "You like detective stories?"

"Yeah, this dude's really good. He always finds the killer from clues that you would never think to look for. Like you do, Mom."

"Like *I do!*" She blanched.

"Yeah, like how you know whether Jamie's been riding his bike when he's not supposed to by looking for grease on his pants legs, or when you know whether I did my homework from the eraser crumbs on the table. This dude's just like that."

She nodded in understanding and then kissed him on the crown of the head. "Okay, sweetheart. Don't stay up too late. Your dad's gonna come by early tomorrow to take you two out before the Redskins' game."

"Mom," Phillip stopped her as she headed up the stairs. "Are you glad Dad's home?"

"Of course! I'm always glad when your father's here."

"Do you think you two might . . . maybe get back together?" He set his book down and looked her in the eye.

She couldn't read his expression, but she decided he was old enough to hear, and handle, the truth. Making her way back down the steps, she then wrapped her arm around his narrow shoulders. "No, Phillip, your father and I are both happy with the way things are now."

"Okay. . ."

"You're not disappointed, are you?" She drew him closer.

"Not really, I'm just tryin' to figure things out," he admitted, his voice neutral.

She hugged him again quickly. "You're getting to be a fine young man. I'm proud of you."

He slipped out of her embrace, embarrassed by too much maternalism. "G'nite, Mom."

"Good night, sweetheart. I love you."

\* \* \* \* \*

Running a brush through her hair in the privacy of her room, she paused to study her reflection. On his next birthday, Phillip would be a teenager. She was both proud of how well he had turned out and amazed at how far things had come.

She often didn't feel that different than the young wife she had been, and other times felt so different that she couldn't believe she was the same person.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~

**May 1973**

Her head was spinning. She lifted it off the pillow with a groan, and then quickly let it fall back into place.

"What's the matter, sweetheart? Are you still not feeling well?" Joe sat at her side and brushed her hair back.

"Not really," she admitted.

"Did Health Services say what it was?"

"No . . ." she tried to make her mind focus on something other than the rapid revolutions of their bedroom. "They ran some tests and said they should have the results later today."

"Well, why don't you get some rest then. I'll be quiet."

"Nope." She propped herself up on one elbow and tried to ignore the lurching in her stomach. "There's some Alka Seltzer in the bathroom; our folks'll be here soon and I've got to get ready."

"Are you sure?" He looked incredulous.

Swinging her legs over the side of the bed as though to convince both him and herself, she nodded. "Yeah, see, I'm fine. Let me just go . . ." she paused, swallowing hard and placing a finger over her lips. "Find that Alka Seltzer."

She looked at the contents of the medicine cabinet with a sense of betrayal. Picking up the small compact of pills, she thought back on her visit to Health Services earlier that week.

Three pills more than there should've been. She'd counted them over and over again with her pocket calendar, hoping that the mistake she'd made was one in counting rather than administration.

How could she have been so stupid? The past few weeks played again through her mind. Final exams, late night cram sessions, preparations for their graduation, term papers, newspaper layouts, rehearsals, and one very memorable study break.

Her fingers gripped the Formica edges of the sink so tightly that her knuckles turned white. Yet, even as she assailed her own stupidity, a part of her was excited about the prospect. A baby.

She relaxed her hold on the countertop and let her hand drift down to her abdomen.

"Amanda!" Joe knocked on the door. "Nurse O'Dell is on the phone. She says she has your test results."

She opened the door and stuck her head around the corner. "Really?!"

Joe nodded, and she came the rest of the way out. "Thanks."

"Hello?" She felt her breath catch in her throat, and she realized she wanted the results to be positive as much as she wanted them to be negative.

"Mrs. King?" The nurse's rich alto greeted her.

"Yes . . ." The phone was uncomfortable against her ear, but she dared not move it lest she miss any of Nurse O'Dell's words.

"Mrs. King, we have the results of your pregnancy test. Congratulations. It was positive."

"Oh, my gosh."

Amanda swallowed hard, as the room spun around her again. She said not a word, and Nurse O'Dell spoke again, "Mrs. King?"

"Oh, my gosh," she repeated, finding no other words fit the situation so well.

"Mrs. King?"

Stunned, she said, "Thank you. I need to go talk to my husband now." Then, quietly, she hung up the phone and prepared to break the news to Joe.

"Joe, sweetheart?" she called as she opened the bedroom door.

"Amanda! Hello!!" She was greeted by her mother-in-law. "Look at her, Jack; isn't she just radiant? Married life must really be agreeing with you. Joe, dear, I don't know what you were talking about, Amanda doesn't look sick at all."

"Hello, Rose." Amanda hugged the matron and kissed her gently on the cheek. "I wasn't expecting you this early." She looked down at her clothes in sudden embarrassment. "I'm not even dressed."

"Oh, hush! You look gorgeous; you always do. Jack and I were so excited that we couldn't

sleep, so we just decided to get in the car and go this morning at about five. We haven't seen you two since Christmas, and besides, it's not every day that our only child and his only wife both graduate college with honors."

"Speaking of that, son." Jack broke into the conversation for the first time. "Have you given any more consideration to my offer? The firm could use a clerk this summer and we pay better than the EPA. If you and Amanda are ever gonna start a family, you're gonna need to put a little away."

"Dad, I told you. The EPA is where I think I can make a difference."

"Joe, sweetheart." Amanda came around to where he was sitting and wrapped an arm around his shoulder. "Maybe you should think about your father's offer."

"Amanda." Joe's forehead wrinkled in confusion. "I thought we discussed this."

She leaned in closer, drawing amused and curious glances from Joe's parents. "Oh, I know, sweetheart, but I've been thinking about it some more, and maybe your father's right. It might be a good idea for you to take a higher paying job this summer." She leaned in to kiss him on the cheek, and then pulling away, caught his ear to whisper, "I'm pregnant."

His eyes grew wide, and she nodded in confirmation.

"You know, Dad," Joe spoke slowly. "Maybe Amanda's right. I think we'll discuss this some more, and I'll let you know before you go home for the weekend."

"Good man!" Jack clapped his son on the shoulder. "Listen to your wife, she knows what she's talking about."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Pregnant?" Their parents had left and they were alone again. Joe sat at the table, nursing a tall glass of iced tea. "Pregnant?" he repeated. "Amanda, how could . . . how?"

Amanda went to the refrigerator and poured a glass of milk. After taking several quick gulps, she answered. "Look! I know this isn't the way we planned it, but it's not that bad. I'll be out of school so I can work until the baby comes, and we'll be closer to our parents, so we'll have some help. It's just different, but it's not bad. Can't you just be a little happy?"

He rose from the chair and made his way to where she was standing. "I'm happy," he reassured her, wrapping his arms around her. "I'm just . . . well, I'm surprised. And I'll take that job at my dad's firm, so we can have some money for the baby."

After a moment, he paused, and pulled back, leaving his hands on her shoulders. "What about you? You're okay, right? Nothing wrong?"

"Oh, yeah, I'm fine." She smiled weakly. "Perfectly normal pregnancy."

~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~

### ***December 1985***

"Hi." Joe stood just over the threshold, shifting his weight from foot to foot and jingling the change in his pocket. "Are the boys ready?"

"Yeah, I'll just go get them." She turned and began to head for the stairs. She trod slowly – her steps as heavy as her spirit. When had they become so awkward with each other?

She had changed so much since he'd been gone. The small talk seemed forced, and being unable to tell him about the Agency, or Lee, left even less for them to discuss. She missed him, but she didn't want him back.

Forcing herself to smile, she knocked on her sons' door. "Hey, fellas. You ready? Your dad's here."

"Yeah, we heard the bell," Phillip acknowledged.

"I'm just looking for my jacket." Under the lower bunk, she saw the feet of her youngest just sticking out.

"Have you tried the closet?" she asked dryly.

She saw him inch back out from beneath the bed and rise, turning to her with his coat in hand. "No, I knew it was under here; I just couldn't see it right away."

"Okay, you two. Let's get downstairs; I don't want to make your father wait any longer."

She followed them as they bounded down the stairs, and stopped halfway as they greeted him, not wanting to intrude on their moment. She felt oddly like a visitor in her own house.

"Well, are you ready?" He looked at her, as though asking for permission as he asked them.

A chorus of, "Yes! Oh yeah! I hope the 'Skins crush the Cowboys!" erupted, and she



nodded.

"Have a nice time, fellas. Be good!" She descended the rest of the stairs and stood, watching with the door ajar as Joe's dark sedan pulled away from the curb. When had things grown so complicated?

### ***February 1975***

"Come on, sweetie, open your mouth." Amanda waved the medicine doser tantalizingly in front of the lips of her young first born, but they remained resolutely closed. Crocodile tears moistened the corners of his eyes, but she was determined to out-stubborn him. Holding the spoon with one hand, she reached out and gently pinched his nostrils closed with the other.

After about fifteen seconds, he opened his mouth to breathe, and she used the opportunity to slip him the baby cold medicine. He erupted in a scream of protest just as Joe came in the front door.

"Jesus Christ, Amanda! Isn't the heat fixed yet? It's as cold in here as it is outside!" he shouted over his son's cries.

"I called Mr. Biggins this morning; he said he'd get to it as soon as he could." Amanda began to wipe Phillip's tears away.

"Well, did you let him know it's freezing in here?" Joe asked rubbing his hands briskly together.

She rolled her eyes at him and pulled Philip out of his high chair. "No, Joe, I figured I'd just tell him there was something wrong with the heat and let him guess what the problem was. Of course I told him it was freezing!"

"Okay, okay . . ." He followed her into the nursery while she changed Phillip's diaper. "By the way, the deadline on my law review article was pushed up. Do you think you could have it typed by tomorrow?"

"I don't know. Congresswoman Fenwick has that speech on the energy crisis later this week too; I've been trying to help her get that ready. Is there anyone at school you could pay to do it?"

"I don't know why I should have to pay someone, when . . ." he began, and she narrowed her eyes at him, letting him know that he'd gone too far. "Yeah, fine . . ." He turned and walked out.

Phillip began to cry and she looked down to realize she had stuck him with the safety pin when she was fastening his diaper. "Oh, I'm sorry, sweetheart. Mommy's sorry." She kissed him gently on the crown of his head. "Mommy's sorry . . ."

"Joe . . ." She peered around the kitchen's dividing wall with Phillip in her arms. "I'm gonna take the baby to my mother's. He's sounding a little croupy, and I don't think it's good for him to be in this cold building."

"It's not good for any of us . . ." he grumbled under his breath.

"I'm sorry?" She pretended not to have heard him.

"Nothing . . ." he shook his head and returned to his notes.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hi . . ." Amanda walked into the apartment with a sense of confusion. "What smells so good?"

She found her husband in the kitchen, one of her ruffled aprons tied around his waist and had to stifle a giggle.

"Mulled wine." He stirred a pot and sipped a bit from the long-handled wooden spoon. "I thought it might help us stay warm."

"Good idea," she acknowledged and then continued, "You know, Joe . . ."

"Wait . . ." he opened a cabinet and pulled out a box wrapped in red paper. "Open this first. It's an early Valentine's Day present."

"Joe, we really . . ."

He interrupted her again, "Just open it, please."

She nodded and tore at the paper. Opening the box, she pulled out a red, satiny chemise, elegant in its understatedness. She held it up against her, the material ending just at her thighs. "It's very . . . short," she commented, bemused. "Looks more like a present for you than for me."

"Well . . ." He fingered the hem of the nightgown, letting the back of his hand brush her thighs as he did so. "I kinda thought it could be for both of us."

She said nothing, and he continued. "We've both been so busy lately. . . I miss you, Amanda. I miss *us!*" He concluded plaintively.

She let the nightgown slip to the floor as she slid her arms around him. "You're right; it's been too long."

~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~

***December 1985***

"Jamie!"

She'd been straightening the den and was surprised to see him come running in the front door.

"I forgot my glasses," he explained before she had a chance to ask the question. "I can't see the game without 'em!"

She fought back the impulse to give him a gentle admonishment. She wasn't the one inconvenienced, Joe was. She'd let him handle it, if he deemed it necessary.

In her heart though, she knew there would likely be no discipline. Joe's time with the boys, even now, was too precious to be spent on things like that. First it had been school, then his career, then a job overseas. Now, as he fought to redefine himself stateside, he confided in her over the phone earlier that week, he wasn't even sure where he fit into their lives.

"Love them," she'd advised him. "The rest will come." It was advice that she'd learned to live by over the past several years, and as she watched her son dash back out of the house, his glasses in hand, she once again reminded herself to 'just love him', the rest would come.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~

***June 1980***

"Africa . . ." she repeated, sitting on the edge of the bed.

"Estocia," he clarified from the closet, changing into his pajamas.

"It's still Africa." She hadn't moved.

He leaned against their dresser, facing her. "I told Jack Crawford I'd give him an answer tomorrow."

"You really want to go," she acknowledged.

"I really want *us all* to go," he answered. "I think it would be a great opportunity, and I know I could make a difference."

"You know how I feel about it . . ." she began, referring to the countless discussions they'd had on the subject over the past weeks. "The boys are so young, and . . ."

"And you want a home," he finished for her. "We could have a home in Africa."

"It wouldn't be the same, Joe. You know that." She swallowed hard, unwilling to cry.

"I wouldn't be asking if I didn't think I could make a difference."

She pulled at a thread on the bedspread. "Go," she whispered. "I can't hold you here; it wouldn't be fair."

He knelt in front of her, taking her hands in his. "That's not what I meant."

"Joe, you can't ask me to go with you any more than I can ask you to stay here." She bit her lip, fighting back impending tears. "The boys are just gettin' settled in school, and I can't even get them to take their vitamins. How would I get them to take quinine pills every day? Our family is *here*, and I need to be here for them."

"I don't want to lose you over this . . ." He reached out to run a hand along her cheekbone, and she realized it was shaking. She grasped it, wrapping her own around it, and brought it down to her lips to plant a gentle kiss on his palm.

"I'm right here," she answered. "And I'll be right here when you get back. You haven't lost me." Even as she told him that, however, she wondered whether she might have already lost him.

\* \* \* \* \*

### ***September 1980***

"I'll miss you . . ." she inhaled sharply in front of the gate, fighting the impulse to beg, plead, or threaten him into staying in Virginia. She knew if she pushed hard enough that he would. She also knew that he would be miserable the whole time.

"Go, save the world, huh," she commanded, and then added, "and be careful . . . I'm gonna want you *healthy* when you come home at Christmas."

He nodded, and she watched him board the plane. She continued to stand at the window long after it had taken off. A gentle hand on her shoulder interrupted her thoughts.

"Let's go back to my place for some tea."

"Okay, Mother."

\* \* \* \* \*

She sat in the living room, watching her sons crawl around on the floor playing with Matchbox cars. The ambient noise they provided seemed only to amplify the silence that existed between mother and daughter.

"Funny." Dotty finally broke it.

"What?" Amanda set her cup and saucer down on the end table.

"When you were growing up this house never seemed big enough." She looked around the room, from the mantel laden with photographs, to the large bay windows. "But your Daddy and I could never seem to justify the expense of a larger house once we found out that it was going to be just the three of us."

Dotty paused, to take another sip of her tea. "Now, though, it seems I have more space than I know what to do with."

"You know, Mother . . ." Amanda began, and then stopped to scoop Jamie up on her lap before he could hit his older brother over the head with a car. "Joe and I have a spare room, and now that he's gonna be gone so much, maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea for me to have some help around the house . . . if you wanted to, that is."

Her mother nodded slowly. "Are you sure you wouldn't mind having your mother hanging around?"

"I wouldn't mind at all." Amanda smiled, and then turned to her sons. "How about you two; how would you like it if Grandma moved in with us?"

"No!! I want Daddy back!" Jamie yelled and turned to face her, an angry scowl on his face.

"Sweetheart, he's gone to help people far away, he'll be back soon, though. Right after your next birthday."

"I wish it was my birthday tomorrow," Jamie groused.

"So do I, sweetheart. So do I . . ."

~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~

**December 1985**

Lost in her thoughts, she jumped when the phone rang, and the voice on the other end did little to quell her disquiet.

"Amanda . . . hi. I t's Lee."

"Hi," she answered, feeling the odd need to ask for privacy from the empty room.

"I'm not interrupting anything, am I?"

"Oh, no. Mother's out all day Christmas shopping with her sister, and Joe's taken the boys out to a Redskins' game. What's up?"

"Well . . . I, uh . . . I have tickets to the Nutcracker tonight. One of my informants - well he won't be able to make it. And I thought . . . maybe . . ."

"Love to," Amanda answered. Although finding his discomfort endearing, she decided to take pity on him and answer the question.

"Great! Wonderful! I'll pick you up in half an hour?"

"Make it forty-five minutes," she contradicted him softly, anticipatory goosebumps already rising on her arms. "I t takes girls a little longer."

"Yes, ma'am." He chuckled softly and she felt a shiver run down her spine in response.

Realizing that the night would only begin after the conversation ended, she reluctantly sighed, "Good-bye." Hanging up the receiver, she looked at her watch; only for Lee would she agree to go to the ballet on forty-five minutes' notice.

\* \* \* \* \*

His hand had slipped naturally into the small of her back as they made their way through the crowd to the bar at intermission.

"You look . . ." He paused and she blushed as she felt his eyes course over her frame. "You look . . . ver . . . am . . . lovely."

"Thank you." She reached for his fingers as they walked to the windows overlooking the

Potomac.

"So, the boys are with Joe tonight?" he asked casually.

"Yeah . . ."

"You know," he began slowly, and clasped her hand a little more tightly. "Joe King may be a lawyer, but he's a fool."

"What do you mean?" Amanda kept her gaze directed at the lights on the water, knowing that if she looked at him, it might lead to something she wasn't sure either of them were ready to handle.

"He should never have left you."

She stood stunned, Lee's breath teasing stray hairs at her neckline, and then turned to face him. "Joe didn't leave me. Not really . . ."

~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~

### ***April 1982***

"Hi . . ." Joe slipped into the bedroom and dropped his suitcase just on the other side of the door. "I'm sorry; the plane got delayed."

"That's okay." She slipped out of bed to take his coat. "You should've called anyway; you didn't have to take a taxi."

"I didn't know if you'd still be up . . ." He dug in his suitcase for a pair of pajamas. "And then after our talk last week . . . I didn't want to wake you."

"Oh, Joe!" She pulled out her vanity chair and turned it to face him. "You should know I'd never be able to sleep waiting for you."

She ran her fingers along the neck of her nightgown as she continued, "But, Joe, we . . ."

"Have to talk," he finished the sentence glumly. "I know."

"I hardly see you anymore. It's just not . . ." She fought the impulse to bolt, instead taking a deep breath and facing the inevitable, knowing the fear of the unknown was always worse than actually facing it. "It's just not working out."

"You've given this a lot of thought . . ." He sat down heavily on the bed.

"I just don't see any other way." She slid out of the chair to sit next to him on the bed. "Joe, I love you, but you're not happy, and neither am I. We can't keep pretending like nothing's changed. You have another life now, in Africa, and I can't ask you to give that up. I love you too much for that."

"I wish that there were some other way."

"So do I." She opened her closet to pull out a blanket. "I'm just gonna go down to the couch; you need your sleep."

"What are we gonna tell the boys?"

"We'll worry about that tomorrow." She slipped around the door. "Goodnight, Joe. I *do* love you."

\* \* \* \* \*

### **October 1982**

"Okay, Mrs. King. We've drawn the paperwork. You will retain physical custody, and you and Mr. King will share joint legal custody. Joe will pay you child support of \$900 a month adjusted yearly based on the cost of living until James is eighteen. I know you've waived alimony, but I want to be sure you understand that you're entitled to a share of his income for five years or until you remarry."

"I know." Amanda popped the cap off and on her pen, as her lawyer continued to explain the terms of the settlement agreement.

"Mr. King has arranged to pay off the mortgage on the house, and will also cover the property taxes for the first two years."

"Okay . . ." Amanda continued to assault the pen cap.

"Now all you need to do is sign the papers, and I'll file them at the courthouse this afternoon and it will be final."

"Okay . . ." She nodded and reached for the papers after he slid them across his desk, precisely signing her name on the lines that had been flagged.

"That's it." He closed a manila folder over the papers. "You umm . . . have my card if anything comes up?" he asked awkwardly.

"Yeah . . . thank you." She collected her purse and coat reminding herself that this was for



the best. Everything had a way of working out.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~

### ***December 1985***

The mezzanine doors opened and the crowds poured out, alerting the pair that they had talked their way through the second half of the performance.

"It looks like it's time to go," Lee commented with a nod in the crowd's direction.

"Yeah . . ."

"Amanda," he began, running the back of his hand slowly along her jaw directing her face gently toward his. She sighed, opening her lips slightly. Joe was in the past; she was ready now for the next step.

"Lee! Amanda!" She jumped back quickly, recognizing the voice. "I didn't know you were ballet fans. Wasn't the performance divine?"

"Francine, hello." She forced a congenial smile on her face.

"Well, I have a post-theatre engagement, so I'll see you two later!" She waved good-bye.

"I, uh . . ." Lee began.

"Yeah," Amanda agreed. "I think I probably ought to be getting home."

They walked together through the doors and down the steps of the Kennedy Center. "You know, Amanda, I think you're right." Lee broke the silence and reached for her hand.

"What?" she asked, surprised by both the contact and his words.

"What you told me you said to Joe the other day." Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him smiling. "It's going to be a great future."

She squeezed his hand in response, "Yeah, it is."

**END**