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Title: True Companions

By: Mary

Rating: "R" for situations in parts one and four...

Summary: An inside glimpse at "Scarecrow and Mrs. King" through four very different sets of eyes...

## TRUE COMPANIONS

### **PART ONE: LEE STETSON "FATE"**

Three years and four months after meeting Amanda King at a train station in Virginia, I married her. If any of my associates had asked me back then if that day would ever come, I would have laughed out loud - right after suggesting a quick trip to Dr. Pfaff, our agency's resident shrink. After all, I'd spent the better part of my life avoiding emotional entanglements of any kind. Somehow it just seemed safer to live that way.

Of course, 'safe' is something I only applied to my personal life. Professionally, I'd never shied away from taking chances, risking life, limb and other parts I won't mention on more than one occasion. The greater the danger, the better I liked it. It was probably the main reason I'd become an intelligence operative in the first place.

"You're a spy?" Amanda asked incredulously as I tried to charm her into helping me. Although it's a term I'd never cared for, it summed my life up pretty accurately. My days were spent gliding effortlessly from one dangerous scenario into another, while my nights. . . well, let's just say those encounters held even more intrigue and excitement. A dangerous profession like mine deserved some fringe benefits.

Unfortunately, not everyone shared that opinion.

"If you want to waste your life chasing shadows, go right ahead," my uncle told me when I announced I'd just been recruited by the Agency, an elite organization with a top-secret profile. I tried to bite back the caustic remark that immediately sprang to mind, having learned long ago that disagreeing with my paternal half-uncle was a lost cause. The man had begrudgingly taken me in at age four and never lost an opportunity to remind me that raising an orphan was an obligation no righteous man could shirk. Yes, Colonel Robert Clayton always did his duty. And he made no secret that mine was to follow him into the military.

"I thought you'd be happy I finally decided to do something serious," I responded sarcastically, despite my good intentions. He had made it crystal clear after I'd been asked to leave that last university that I'd better clean up my act or he'd do it for me. Granted I had, as the Colonel so succinctly put it, changed colleges as often as I changed socks, but I did finally manage to graduate. I'd even secured a job for which there had been a slew of qualified applicants. Most parents would have been proud.

"Well, Skip," he rejoined, invoking the old nickname I hated, "when you wash out of this, too, don't come running back here. You're on your own this time."

"I always have been, Sir," I replied, turning on my heel and walking away. For the first time in the course of our tenuous relationship, I'd rendered him speechless.

We saw each other only sporadically after that incident, a few stray lunches and dinners spread thinly across the years. That is, until Amanda. She somehow managed to change patterns and responses that had been drilled into both of us for as long as I could remember. Believe me, where the Colonel and I were concerned, that was no small miracle.

Of course, in those days, I wouldn't have recognized a miracle if it had jumped up and bit me on the ass. I was pretty cocky back then, determined to be the best of the best in my new profession. I think at first I was so driven to succeed merely to prove my uncle wrong. However, I soon discovered that after what seemed like years of searching, I had finally found my niche. Fresh from my training, I was prepared to defend my country from all enemies, foreign and domestic.

I was immediately shipped to London.

It was the last place on earth I wanted to be. A token tribute to inter-agency cooperation was hardly the way I'd intended to begin my illustrious career, and veteran MI-5 operative Emily Farnsworth was definitely not the person I'd anticipated working with. I just didn't see her as a sp. . . operative. Conservative in word and dress, she appeared more suited to infiltrate a formal tea than a counterfeiting ring. I decided she would soon find me more than competent for our simple little assignment and I would be off to bigger and better things.

Instead, Emily merely seemed to find me amusing. "A gun won't get you out of every situation, my boy," she stated in staid British tones. "You have to learn to use your brain, not your brawn." I would later discover that Lady Farnsworth was really an American from Santa Barbara who'd married into

her British heritage, but she seemed to instinctively understand that it worked to her advantage in my case. While I was reluctant to offend a Brit on my freshmen mission, I was just brash enough back then to have told a fellow American exactly where she could put her unsolicited advice.

Of course, Emily was right. What working in Intelligence requires more than anything else is . . . intelligence. Patience, control and, above all, looking before you leap. Emily Farnsworth taught me all that, along with what it means to have a true friend in a business where that can often be a distinct liability. By the time I headed back to the States, I knew exactly how lucky I'd been on my first venture into the twilight world of espionage.

That luck didn't hold too long, though, and on my next endeavor I thought my uncle might at long last get his wish to see me in uniform. Along with a select group of seasoned agents, I found myself loaned out to Army intelligence for a brief stint in Vietnam. It may have been a plum assignment for a rookie like me, but it didn't seem that way trudging through the steamy jungles near Da Nang. When I was recalled stateside six months later I was thankful to be returning to D. C. with all my parts still in good working order.

I expected to be assigned to one of the outlying bureaus for a few years, but it seemed I was slated for bigger things when shortly after my return, I was chosen for the prestigious Oz Network by Paul Barnes.

It was a real coup to be working for him. The Wizard, as his codename so aptly dubbed him, was already an Agency legend at the tender age of thirty-two.

If Emily Farnsworth and the Southeast Asian jungle had started to teach me restraint, Paul Barnes seemed determined to finish the job. "You'll be a good agent when you finally develop a brain," he chided after I'd demonstrated my penchant for foolhardy stunts one time too often. Grinning from ear to ear, he promptly gave me my official codename. "Stick with the Wizard, Scarecrow," he told me, "and we'll see about replacing that head full of straw with something a little more functional."

I never repeated that to anyone, neatly sidestepping Amanda's incessant questioning on the subject during the first year of our partnership. Of course, in those days, sharing personal confidences was a habit I'd lost long ago. But even when those early feelings of annoyance had been replaced with a strong friendship that was well on its way to something more, I still managed to dodge the issue. I told myself I was too embarrassed to admit that 'Scarecrow' had once upon a time stood for something else entirely, but deep down I knew there was more to it than that. While my still evolving brain insisted that Amanda cared enough to accept me flaws and all, I was reluctant to acknowledge that most of my macho reputation was really nothing more than bravado. She had a way of looking at me that made me feel ten feet tall, and a part of me still foolishly clung to my Superman image. If I confessed how far it was from the truth, she might realize that deep inside lay a frightened four year old still crying for his parents.

It was while I was under the Wizard's care that I experienced my first really serious relationship. Appropriately enough, her codename was 'Dorothy'. When she joined the team, our connection was instantaneous. We just had so much in common. We were almost exactly the same age, our birthdays less than a week apart. She'd lost her parents in an accident when she was ten and had been shuttled

back and forth between indifferent relatives. We both felt we'd finally found the sense of family we'd been searching for in Paul's elite team.

"Oz never had it so good," she liked to joke, her eyes crinkling up when she laughed in the way I grew to love.

We had six months together. Then one day our world exploded in a barrage of gunfire on a routine mission that went sour. The Russians had a nice little export business operating out of the Silver Spring Airport, running weapons out of the country hidden in boxes of flowers. Long stemmed roses, to be exact. We arrived at the field that morning to shut them down, but suddenly the tables turned. When the gunfire finally subsided, my hero Paul Barnes had been temporarily neutralized and two team members lay dying on the hard ground.

I found Dorothy's body on the middle of the deserted airstrip, riddled with more bullets than I cared to count. Everywhere I looked, I saw those damned roses - red ones, the same color as her blood. I cradled her in my arms, trying to breath life back into her, but the hands that had held mine just that morning remained deathly still. And our shiny future was suddenly reduced to three words on a piece of paper.

Agent killed - betrayed.

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Oz recovered from the blow, but I had a harder time of it. While my affection for Paul Barnes was still as strong as ever, the memories were too fresh, and I left the network shortly after Dorothy's death. I spent a brief stint with European Operations before finally settling into the D.C. office under the scrutiny of brand new Section Chief Billy Melrose. By that time, I had honed my reputation for pushing things to the limit, taking impossible missions and succeeding where more cautious agents failed. Truth be told, I enjoyed living on the edge. Taking chances appealed somehow to my twisted sense of order. As if I was daring fate to fix the mistake she'd made when she'd taken everyone I loved and left me still standing.

A lone wolf.

And at the time that was just the way I wanted it. I didn't even like to work with a partner. I'd made that mistake only once, relaxed my guard long enough to let Eric Jarvis into my life. Why Billy thought we would work well together, I have no idea. We were a pretty unlikely team. Eric had grown up in a big family; I was the consummate loner. And for some unfathomable reason, my new partner seemed determined to change all that.

Not too long after Billy put us together, Eric dragged my reluctant butt to Christmas dinner at his parents' house. "Sitting around stuffing your face with guacamole and feeling sorry for yourself is no way to spend the holiday," he bullied, refusing to accept my usual excuses. "We watch football at our house, too. I'm not taking no for an answer."

It was the first real family Christmas I could remember. Hanging around the mess hall on countless Air Force bases when I was growing up didn't count. As I told Amanda once, fighting over the dark meat with four hundred other guys didn't make for a very festive holiday.

After that, Eric and I developed a pretty close friendship, working together by day and carousing together by night. I allowed myself to depend on him, trust him, like him. It lasted for almost two years. Until fate reared her ugly head once again and delivered him the bullet that was slated for me.

I reverted to type after that, tackling difficult assignments solo once again. Which is what led me to that particular train station one cloudy October morning.

I was busy doing what I do, on my way to a drop with a package that was the key to plugging our departmental leak. Unfortunately, I'd brought two Russian goons along with me. You can always tell the KGB by the way they dress. . . their suits never quite fit. Anyway, Ivan and his 'brother' were hot on my tail and I knew I had to think of something - and quickly.

That's when I spotted her - a special delivery from Fate, carefully disguised beneath a tan coat and scarf.

At the time, I didn't think the meeting had any great significance beyond expediency. Amanda King was an emergency, nothing more. I intended only to alter my game plan, not my whole life. After all, I'd employed the same tactic in Munich with great success. There was no reason it shouldn't work again. She was supposed to simply pass on the package, then pass right on out of my life. Lucky for me she never did anything she was supposed to do.

Of course, it took me a while to recognize just how fortunate I'd been that day. I'm sorry to say that in the beginning I saw her as more of a curse than a blessing, laughing along with my good friend and fellow agent Francine Desmond over Amanda King's total lack of everything.

Although I probably should admit that my slightly bruised ego might have been the one doing the talking. The only things she really lacked were the pretense and artificiality of the empty-headed girls who usually attracted me.

She was a divorced mother of two living in Arlington with her mother and her sons. She valued her home and her family. She was a real person with real emotions, the kind of woman who genuinely saw the good in everybody, even me. She had everything I'd secretly longed for all my life. No wonder I ran like hell in the opposite direction.

I hadn't had much experience with women.

Well, okay, let me qualify that - I hadn't had much experience with the caring, nurturing types like Amanda. I'd grown up in a totally male environment and the closest thing to a mother I'd known was old Barney Dorsey, the mess hall Sergeant on my uncle's air base.

Amanda was a good mother. You only had to see her with her two sons, Phillip and Jamie, to know that. Despite the lack of a permanent male influence in their lives, Amanda made them feel happy, secure and loved.

Yet I suspected even then that she had a lot more than motherhood inside her. And I didn't think she should be wasting it on that bozo she was dating when I met her.

Dan, Don, Dean. . . hell, whatever his name was, he didn't belong with Amanda. It only took one look at his plaid jacket to know the guy gave 'boring' a new definition. I just couldn't picture the two of them together.

I told Amanda that very thing, and it was shortly afterwards that she stopped seeing him. I kind of expected her to turn her attention to me when they broke up. I knew she had a crush on me. I recognized all the signs - the flustered talk, the furtive glances when she thought I wasn't looking. So I got ready to offer her the usual brand of Stetson charm, all the while preparing my standard speech, office version - 'Amanda, we are business associates, nothing more.'

I never got to use it. To my chagrin, I discovered that my conceited little fantasy couldn't be farther from the truth. Evidently, Amanda King found my usually irresistible charms totally resistible.

I was intrigued. The only thing she was prepared to offer me was the last thing I sought from the opposite sex - friendship. At the time, my only female friend of consenting age was Francine.

And even that had started in the bedroom. A few years ago we'd played a thoroughly enjoyable little game of 'backgammon,' as Francine jokingly referred to our brief physical liaison. I knew at the time I wasn't the only guy Francine had played that particular game with, so I was kind of shocked to discover she'd taken our interlude much more seriously than I had. When I realized what was happening, I quickly pulled out the speech, trying to let her down easy. That any kind of friendship survived the experience was, I suppose, a testimony to both of us. Though maybe that's why at times we seemed more like friendly rivals than actual friends.

After Francine, I swore that I would never again blur the lines between personal and professional. And I have to say, while I managed to date my way through most of the Agency at one time or another, I never extended anyone else true friendship.

Until Amanda. I don't know what it was about her that made me break my hard and fast rule. I didn't even want to work with her at first. It was Billy Melrose who insisted on throwing us together. She was a nuisance and, at the same time, a necessity. A hindrance to my job and the greatest asset I'd ever found. She was an aggravating pain in the ass yet had an uncanny knack for making me laugh. She was hopelessly average and at the same time, uncommonly beautiful. In other words, I'd never felt so confused in my entire life.

Since it was my fault that she'd ended up in this crazy business in the first place, the very least I could do was make certain she stayed safe. I told myself that every time I reached for her hand while we were on a case; every time I swung by her house late at night on my way home; every time I

pulled her against me in the name of our cover. The funny thing is, for the longest time I actually believed that was true.

Then one day, I finally pushed things past the breaking point. The trouble with undercover work is that sometimes the lines between what's real and what's not aren't so clear anymore. Playing my part with a little too much gusto, I accidentally slapped her.

"It's okay," she whispered, unable to meet my eye, but I knew it wasn't. The look on her face said it all. I'd hurt her - maybe not physically, but in a way that was much more painful. I wanted to take her in my arms and kiss the ache away, but my stupidity had just rendered that impossible. I settled for a stumbling apology that did little to convey what I was really feeling.

Naturally, she forgave me; she was just that kind of person. She forgave her ex-husband for deserting her and their two small children, so what was a little slap compared to that? We fell back into our friendship when the case was finished, but it wasn't as comfortable anymore, at least not for me. Something had changed.

I had changed.

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We began to work together more frequently. I'd just been handed the Q-Bureau and Amanda, for all intents and purposes, became my partner. 'Unofficially official', as Billy liked to say, she was suspended in the gray area between civilian and agent. Our personal life seemed to have that same status, too. We certainly weren't dating, but we were spending more and more of our off-duty time in each other's company. I told myself it didn't mean anything; after all, she was my best friend. It was only a concert here, a simple dinner there, a night shivering together in a swamp. We were just two cold people, right?

"Not exactly," she answered enigmatically, and for the first time, I started to believe that might be true.

Until her ex-husband suddenly hit town a few months later. Accused of murder and on the run, Joe King had never appeared more vulnerable, and I watched as the past tugged at my Amanda with invisible emotional strings. Of course, she didn't know I thought of her as 'mine' - I'd foolishly believed we could continue our little dance until I felt ready.

Unbelievably, when the smoke cleared, she was still there. I didn't think she would be, especially when I saw her in Dooley's Bar with her ex. But when she looked across the room and caught my eye, her face told it all. Joe King might have hold of her arms on that small dance floor, but I had hold of her heart. In that moment I knew that I was undeniably in love with her.

After that night, we moved ahead, seemingly more certain that the convoluted path we traveled would ultimately bring us together. It was full of twists and turns, moving us forward in leaps and bounds, then driving us back. Admitting to myself that I loved her didn't automatically change either one of us. We were still the same two people who could disagree over something as simple as the weather.

I got a taste of that first hand when Billy 'assigned' her to nurse me back to health in the aftermath of the Brody case. Five days of enforced bed rest may have been good for my concussion, but it turned out to be a bit more than either of us could handle. Of course at that point, the last thing I wanted to do with Amanda in bed was rest; even so, I instinctively knew that it wasn't the right time to embark on a physical relationship. However, knowing it and feeling it were two entirely different things, and by the time I got back to the office, my mood had gone from bad to worse.

I don't know whether Amanda was taking my nitpicking in her usual stride, or if maybe she just understood my misplaced frustration better than I did. She always had an uncanny way of knowing what I was feeling, even when I couldn't express it. But I couldn't stay aggravated at her for very long, as she once again proved her talent for seeing those obscure little clues I sometimes overlooked.

That's when I realized the unthinkable had finally happened. Not only did I love her, I was fast approaching a point where I couldn't get by without her.

I was no longer a loner.

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The realization rocked me for a moment, but I quickly recovered my equilibrium and, making the best of my new situation, decided it was time to get to the source of my frustration.

Amanda King.

While I knew we couldn't just jump into bed, I thought it was time to at least move in that general direction. After what seemed like a run of absurdly bad timing, I took matters into my very capable hands one morning. Telling fate in no uncertain terms that I was the one in control, I locked our office door and proceeded to kiss her.

I was totally unprepared for my reaction.

Touching my lips to hers this time was unlike anything I'd ever imagined. Oh, we'd kissed a few times in the line of duty and even shared a wonderfully flirtatiously little peck a few weeks ago on her patio. I thought I knew what to expect, but this was entirely different. When she ran her hands over the lapel of my coat, I could have sworn I felt my spine tingle.

"Yeah," she breathed, shaking her head, so I knew that whatever it was, she'd felt it too. As my mouth closed over hers, I could feel the emotion welling up inside both of us, demanding to be released. I pulled back for a minute, looking into her eyes. I saw total acceptance there, and a love that had ever so patiently granted me the time I needed to complete this three-year journey home. Burning all my bridges, I leaned forward again. This time, she opened her mouth, and I felt her tongue against mine. I shivered. Then, like a starving man at an all-you-can-eat dinner, I practically devoured her.

We continued that way for what seemed like hours, but was in reality only a few minutes. "Maybe we'd better, ah, finish that report," I stammered, still overwhelmed by the unexpected intensity of our encounter.



"Yeah," she whispered again, her fingers moving to gently wipe her lipstick off my face. I kissed them tenderly as they moved over my lips, my eyes still on hers.

"That report," she reminded me with a smile, seeing that I was in no shape to remember.

I sat at my desk, trying in vain to concentrate, but it wasn't any use. Having Amanda right across from me was too distracting, and after a few more minutes I abandoned even the pretense of work.

"Come on, let's get out of here," I said, grabbing her hand and practically dragging her to the door. "Billy's report can wait until tomorrow."

For once, she didn't seem inclined to argue. We spent the rest of the day together, sharing a quiet lunch, walking along the Potomac hand in hand and doing the silly things people in love usually do. At sunset, I reluctantly relinquished her to her family, but not before indulging in another series of spectacular kisses as we said goodbye in my car. If I'd had a better day, I couldn't remember it.

We spent the summer officially 'dating', stealing whatever time we could to be together. I was more certain than ever that I loved her, but somehow I couldn't bring myself to say the words anywhere except in my head. Who knows how long I would have been struck dumb if Alexi Makarov hadn't intervened. Using the Stemwinder War Games as a springboard, the crafty Russian sorcerer wove a complex web of lies, turning my own Agency against me and forcing me underground. I didn't know when I'd be able to see Amanda again. Even though I had a strong suspicion that she knew exactly how much I cared, I couldn't disappear without giving voice to my feelings at least once.

When I finally spoke the words to her face, she looked almost embarrassed. She told me later it was because she was scared. Not of Alexi or the mess we were in at the Agency, but of the power of our feelings for each other. Scared or not, she insisted on coming with me. I made a feeble attempt to keep her out of the line of fire, but she pushed my arguments aside.

"I'm all mixed up in this, too," she told me, and I knew she was talking about more than Stemwinder. "It might be dangerous for my family if I stay here and I can't do anything to help them from an Agency holding cell," she finished, her rationale logical and precise.

"And I love you, too."

That was one justification I couldn't refute. Besides, I told myself, searching for a way to validate my selfish need to have her beside me, she did have a point. I'd come to rely on her in the field. I might not be as effective alone.

Those days we spent together on the run were both heaven and hell. Even though Dr. Smyth, the Agency's Director of Covert Operations, had forced through a shoot to kill order, we still had each other. The joy of waking up beside her every morning might have been tempered by circumstance, but it was joy nonetheless. Part of me wanted it to last forever.

But as all things do, it came to an end. Alexi was caught, his frame-up exposed and we returned to our lives. Amanda went home to her family, and I returned to an apartment that seemed even emptier after the time we'd spent together.

I knew then that I wanted to marry her.

I didn't act on that revelation, though. Amanda had been accepted into the Agent Candidate Program, and she was suddenly inundated in freshman class work. I decided it would be more prudent to wait until the newness of her status wore off before making her an official part of my personal life, too.

So I bided my time, mulling the idea over as I tried out different scenarios in my head. I saw myself in a tux, with roses and champagne, solemnly asking her to be my wife. Sometimes we were at the train station, me in a red hat, casually handing her a package that contained a suitably romantic proposal.

Of course, when I did ask her, it wasn't the way I had planned it at all. Fate stepped in once again and laid waste to all my careful plotting. The setting was far from ideal, her hostage cell in a house that was a front for a ruthless terrorist group. I wasn't entirely sure either one of us would live to see the light of another day. Despite our precarious situation, she answered me in typical Amanda fashion.

"We're the luckiest two people on the face of the earth," she gasped, sitting on a rumpled cot in a room guarded by a madman. Only my Amanda could see things that way.

I did manage to do a little better when I gave her the engagement ring, though. I'd given the matter a lot of careful thought while she'd been recovering from the aftermath of her kidnapping and finally decided on a plan.

I'd missed her while she'd been on leave after our rescue. We hadn't seen much of each other since she'd agreed to marry me. After the ordeal she'd been through at the hands of that lunatic Addi Birol, she deserved some quiet time with her family, and I didn't feel comfortable with them just yet. While I had managed to introduce myself to her mother in her absence, things hadn't progressed much farther. My sudden appearance at her dinner table would open a can of worms we'd both prefer to keep closed at the moment.

Truthfully, her family made me more than a little nervous. I wasn't sure exactly where I fit in. Children were foreign territory to me, and I didn't have the foggiest idea how to relate to two young teenagers. I was beginning to understand how clueless my uncle must have felt when I'd been deposited on his doorstep. I didn't know what kind of a stepfather I'd make, but I wanted things to be different for me with Phillip and Jamie. Personal experience had taught me that the Colonel's boots were not the ones I wanted to walk in.

So I bided my time, alone again in the office I'd come to regard as ours. Her empty desk seemed to be waiting for her return, just as I was. Looking around, I noticed all those little Amanda touches, marveling that in the few short months her desk had officially occupied that spot, she'd managed to

almost remake my workspace. The same way she'd remade my life. I knew then that her desk was the perfect place to make our private life official as well.

She seemed to appreciate the sentiment. After I slipped the ring on her finger and leaned in for a kiss, she flashed me a cryptic little smile that I didn't know how to interpret. Her voice barely more than a whisper, she told me that she'd thought only life and death situations brought out the romantic in me. My confusion must have shown in my face because she brushed her hand gently across my cheek and kissed me again. Her laughing brown eyes reflected the sparkle of the diamond on her hand and I knew that, despite the trauma of the last few weeks, she was happy.

We both were.

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Unfortunately, the rose-colored glasses were soon ripped from both our eyes.

It started out as another routine case. A Vietnamese delegation bent on destroying accord with the U.S. decided to use my friend Kai's son as a bargaining chip. We managed to rescue little Kim and defuse the situation with the Vietnamese, but the damage had been done. As I put Kai and his family on a plane for California, it wasn't his children I saw, it was Phillip and Jamie.

I knew then that I'd been kidding myself. A marriage, children, a sprawling house in the suburbs. . . it was a beautiful dream, but one built on shifting sands. Fate was too stern a mistress to allow me even the facade of a normal life. As much as I longed to be part of Amanda's family, I'd have to settle for being a secret part.

"We'll make the best of it," she stated stoically when I told her, and her tone said that she'd recognized the problem long before I did. A nagging voice in the back of my head told me to let her go, to allow her have a normal life with someone else, maybe even someone like Joe King.

But I couldn't do it.

Maybe it was selfish, but I'd crossed the point of no return long ago and now it was too late.

And so we married in secret, traveling all the way to Marion so we wouldn't be discovered. It was a small ceremony without any of the usual wedding fanfare. Just the Justice of the Peace, the two of us, and His Honor's nosy clerk for a witness.

It didn't matter to me. In a cathedral or a cabin, all I wanted was to make Amanda King my wife. She looked so beautiful in her simple classic suit, her eyes bright with happy tears. Her voice almost broke when she repeated the vows, and I could feel her hand tremble when I slipped the ring on her finger.

"You kiss now," the clerk said unnecessarily as we were pronounced man and wife.

I didn't need a second invitation. Smiling, I leaned down, and for the first time, my lips touched the lips of Amanda Stetson. It produced a euphoria that was almost indescribable.

The feeling lingered as we finished up the paperwork, grew stronger as we thanked the judge and his clerk and showed no sign of abating as we headed into the brisk February night. Maybe this is what happened when you made a lasting commitment to another person, I mused; maybe this was 'normal'. If that was the case, then normal was something I could definitely live with.

We paused by the car, and I felt the gentle pressure of her hand in mine. It was already dark and in the foggy light from the streetlamp, she had never looked more beautiful.

"Are you hungry?" I asked, reaching out to brush a stray hair from her face.

"Not for dinner," she whispered, her hand caressing mine where it rested on her cheek. Looking down, I saw the desire in her eyes rivaled my own.

"Why don't we just head over to the inn?" I suggested, leaning in to press a kiss on her lips. They were wonderfully pliant, warm and inviting. I traced them lightly with my tongue.

"Step on it," she murmured, reaching into her coat pocket and handing me the keys.

As I slid behind the wheel, I wondered again how we'd ever been lucky enough to find each other. Amanda and I were finally married; and we had an entire week together to enjoy it.

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I smiled at my new wife as we pulled up in front of the Crystal Springs Inn. It was a picturesque little place, off the beaten track, and Amanda had fallen in love with it at first sight. When I saw that special light in her eyes, I knew it would be the perfect place for our first night together as man and wife.

Actually, it was our first night together, period. Oh, we'd shared a bed last fall during the Stemwinder mess and on our one weekend ski trip to Pinetop, but our activities had been confined to sleeping and little else. A few years ago if someone had told me I would have been with a woman for this long and still not had sex with her, I wouldn't have believed it.

But Amanda was different. At first, I'd hesitated because I didn't know quite how to deal with my feelings for her. Then later, I had waited out of respect for hers. And at the end, simply because I loved her so completely that I wanted our wedding night to be special. When she smiled up at me in the lobby of that quaint little inn, I knew that the wait had been worth it. And when her hand closed possessively around mine, I was equally glad that it was finally over.

Of course, as it turned out, we were damned to wait just a little longer. Due to some sort of snafu I couldn't quite decipher, housekeeping was still working on the second floor. The management was suitably apologetic, but it did little to alleviate the frustration we were both feeling. The next thirty minutes seemed more like thirty hours as we were forced to watch the maid finish her cleaning checklist. Where they found their help, I have no idea, but it was little wonder the rooms weren't ready on time. The woman moved like a snail. I was beginning to think it might take her the rest of the night just to finish this one.

I could feel Amanda's impatience as she stood next to me in front of the fireplace, beating her head against my shoulder in sheer exasperation. "I know, I know, I know," I mouthed, wondering whether it would be bad form to bodily eject the offending housekeeper from the room. Who needs satin sheets, anyway? I was pretty sure everything I needed was standing right next to me.

The maid finally finished her routine and giving her handiwork an approving nod, left us alone. Turning to Amanda, I immediately kissed her, releasing the pent up passion I'd been suppressing for months.

"Wow," she whispered when our lips finally parted. I felt exactly the same way. Smiling, I kissed her again, pulling her closer.

"Oh," she said in surprise, evidently feeling the full extent of my need as I pressed up against her. My hands slid down over her hips and she made a small groaning sound, returning my kiss with equal desire. I walked her slowly towards the bed, my lips never leaving hers.

"Lee," she gasped as we broke apart, her hands caressing my chest lightly. "Wait..."

"Wait?" I replied, not quite comprehending. "Amanda, we've been waiting for three and a half years. I'm not sure I have much more 'wait' in me." I kissed her again to emphasize my point.

"Just give me three and half minutes," she whispered breathlessly, kissing her way down my neck. "I want to change out of these clothes."

"I could help you," I grinned, slipping my hands underneath her jacket.

"I'm sure you could. But I think I need to do it myself. . . this time." She looked up at me, the expression in her brown eyes an odd mixture of promised passion and nervous anticipation. I ached with love for her.

"Take all the time you need," I whispered, trying to curb my enthusiasm as my lips brushed though her hair. "I'll be right here."

"I just need a few minutes," she reiterated, "and my overnight case. I have a little something in here I think you might appreciate."

"I don't think I could appreciate you much more," I teased, folding her in my arms again.

"Yeah, I can tell," she laughed, trying to hide the catch in her voice by moving her hands across my back in maddening little circles. "But let me try anyway. It will be worth it. . . I promise."

What man could argue with that? I let her go, watching as she disappeared into the bathroom. As the door clicked closed, I let out the breath I'd been holding, exhaling loudly as I deposited my jacket and tie in a nearby chair. The collar on my shirt suddenly seemed uncomfortably tight and I paused to undo it, my fingers fumbling over the small buttons. Evidently the nerves Amanda had felt a few minutes ago were contagious. I circled the room a few times, absently smoothing my hair,

contemplating the enormity of the step we were about to take. This wasn't just a casual acquaintance behind that bathroom door; it was Amanda, my partner, my best friend, my. . . wife.

That realization was almost overwhelming. I'd waited for her for so long. Faced with the prospect of actually having her, I suddenly had no idea what to do next. Although far from being a novice in these matters, the moves that had served me so well in the past now seemed horribly inadequate. Sighing, I switched off the bright lamplight, praying that the friendlier glow from the fireplace would cover my uncharacteristic confusion. From day one, Amanda King had complicated my life; it should come as no surprise that she would complicate my sex life as well.

The door opened abruptly, and Amanda walked through it. She stood across from me in a silky negligee that left very little to the imagination, brushing the hair from her face as if she didn't quite know what to do with her hands.

"Hi," she murmured shyly, her eyes darting from the fireplace to the bed before finally fixing me in their gaze.

"Hi," I echoed, watching her in quiet fascination. In spite of her uncertainty, she still seemed to possess such effortless grace while I, the great ladies' man, was reduced to a mountain of jelly.

I stood there like an idiot, wanting to go to her but incapable of telling my feet to take me there. I might have stayed in the same spot all night, making love to her with my eyes, if she hadn't suddenly made everything all right. Her lips parting in a smile, she sighed sweetly. What had appeared so complicated was suddenly reduced to its simplest form.

She loved me.

And, letting the feeling flow through me, I discovered I knew exactly how to show her that I loved her, too.

"You look beautiful," I whispered, automatically closing the distance between us.

Her delight in the compliment spread across her face. "Thank you," she answered, absently smoothing the front of her nightgown.

"And you were right. . ." I traced the curve of her cheek with my finger. "The wait was. . ." Leaning down slightly, I kissed her forehead. . . "Most definitely. . ." Following the path my finger had taken with my lips, I paused briefly by her mouth... "Worth it," I finished, my mouth covering hers in a long, deep kiss.

"Oh, Lee," she whispered when I finally let her catch her breath. "I've wanted this for so long. I can't even tell you. . ."

"You don't have to tell me anything," I murmured, my face buried in her neck. "I already know. . . I feel the same way."

Her hands moved up and down my back, straining against me, forcing me to hold her closer. Then suddenly, she pulled away, her eyes sparkling as they rested on mine. "If I don't have to tell you," she began, her fingers playing along my chest, "then let me show you. The way I've wanted to. . ."

She smiled up at me then, her tongue lightly moistening her lips as she reached for my shirt. Her fingers moved quickly, adeptly releasing the remaining buttons. Tugging on the bottom, she pulled my shirttail from my trousers, her hands slowly massaging my chest as she worked her way up to my shoulders. Every so often she paused, burying her face in my skin, her lips kissing, teasing, caressing.

It felt wonderful. She pushed my shirt off, letting it fall to the floor, then made quick work of my belt, undoing the buckle and pulling it from the loops. Dropping it, she turned her attention elsewhere, and I felt my stomach muscles clench involuntarily as she pushed against them. She nimbly worked the button on my trousers and tugged the zipper down, and I sucked in a breath as her fingers trailed over me.

"Wow," she whispered again with the hint of a smile, this time giving the word a whole new dimension.

"Is that a wow of approval?" I joked, shooting her an inquiring look. Even the most self-confident types can use a little reassurance in a moment like this.

"Oh, definitely." She laughed then, the mellow sound rippling over me seductively as she moved closer. "Although at this point, I'd say it's still in the preliminary stages." She flashed me a sultry grin. "I'm reserving the final 'wow' for later."

Her overt sexuality caught me entirely by surprise. It seemed totally at odds with the picture she presented to the world. Amanda really was an amazing mixture of contradictions, an alluring seductress disguised beneath flowing skirts and matching sweaters. She never ceased to amaze me.

"Yeah," she muttered as I reacted to her touch, her teasing tone belying the seriousness of her face. "Most definitely later."

"Oh, Amanda," I sighed, anticipating what was about to happen between us. The thought alone was taking me places I didn't want to go yet, and I vainly tried to recall the rushing yardage from the recent Super-Bowl. It would be kind of embarrassing to have this end before it even started.

Realizing the effect she was having, her movements stilled and she took a small step backwards. Her eyes roamed over my body as if taking inventory. She moved her hand slowly and sensuously across my chest, coming to rest on the healing wound from the bullet that had grazed me earlier in the week.

"Does it still hurt?" she asked seriously, her fingers lightly stroking over it.

"Not when you do that," I told her with a smile, covering her hand with my own. "Besides, I've had worse."

She nodded and removed her hand, suddenly subdued. She tried to cover her reaction by turning away, but she wasn't quick enough, and I could see her struggling to keep the concern in her eyes

from turning to fear. She walked over to the fireplace, staring into the comforting flames, searching for an answer there we both knew she'd never find.

"Amanda," I said, moving towards her, trying to avoid tripping over the trousers that were still around my ankles. I took a minute to kick out of my shoes, pushing the offending clothing out of the way as I peeled off my socks. Coming up behind her, I wrapped my arms around her.

"You know it's all just part of the job," I told her, softly kissing her shoulder.

"I know." She crossed her arms over mine, encouraging me to hold her closer.

"And I'm careful." I squeezed her reassuringly. "Nothing's going to happen to me if I can help it."

"I don't want to lose you," she sighed, leaning her head back against my shoulder. "Especially after last week."

"I know," I whispered as I tightened my embrace. I'd just had a narrow escape from PD-2, a new chemical weapon developed by the Russians, and we were both still a little shaken. I hadn't looked my own mortality that squarely in the eye for quite some time. I sighed deeply, resting my cheek tenderly against hers.

"I've always known it was a possibility," she continued, giving my arms a gentle squeeze in return. "It's just that. . ." She fell silent as she looked into the fire again.

"That. . ." I prompted, wondering a little at her reticence. I was the one who usually needed a crowbar to loosen my feelings.

"I don't know. . . it just hit me. As hard as it would have been before. . . after tonight, it's going to be a thousand times worse. I don't know if I could stand it if something. . ."

"It won't," I told her quickly. "I promise."

"You can't promise that, Lee, and you know it."

"Maybe not," I agreed soberly, "but, Amanda - there are risks in just plain living every day. Maybe in a way we're luckier because we recognize that better than most. And we'll make every day count."

She tensed for a moment, then I felt her relax against me. "Starting tonight," she whispered, turning in my arms.

"Starting tonight," I responded, my mouth seeking hers. She parted her lips, opening herself to me, offering me both her body and her heart. The emotions she awakened seared my soul, and for the first time since I could remember, I offered myself equally in return. "I love you, Amanda Stetson," I whispered roughly when we parted. "I don't think you have any idea how much."

"It can't be as much as I love you," she murmured in reply. "It wouldn't be possible."



"Come on then," I said, stepping away from her. "I think it's time we showed each other." I extended my hand, my lips turning up in an expectant smile.

"Way past time," she answered, her fingers grasping mine. Hand in hand, we moved together toward the bed.

\* \* \*

Stopping at the edge, we faced each other. This time, I took the initiative, resting my hands on her shoulders and gently fingering the straps of her nightgown. Leaning in, I touched my lips lightly to hers, moving from her mouth down her neck and shoulder. Her perfume heightened all my senses, more intoxicating than the champagne that still lay untouched in the ice bucket. I moved back across her collarbone, my tongue pressing into the hollow of her throat. I could feel her rapid heartbeat. Pausing for a minute, I pulled away to look at her. She smiled back, and I saw the unspoken permission in her look.

I slid the straps of her negligee down. She really was so beautiful. My eyes drank in every detail - the emotion hiding behind her eyes as they boldly met mine; the way her dark hair framed her face, almost brushing her shoulders; the small freckles that dotted the smooth skin of her chest; the gentle swell of her breasts as she drew the ragged breath that spoke her desire. I reached out, my palm tenderly caressing the smooth curve of her cheek.

She closed her eyes and sighed. The sound played like an erotic melody in my ears, and I gently cupped her face in both my hands, drawing her towards me. My lips closed over hers, the kiss building until I heard her breathing quicken. I felt her hands in my hair, her fingertips trailing tantalizingly along my scalp. I buried my face in her neck, drinking in the delicate scent that belonged to her alone.

"Lee..."

My name on her lips excited me, and I kissed my way back up towards her mouth. Pressing my body to hers, I felt her hands stroke across my back then rest for a moment on the elastic of my boxers. I helped her remove them, tossing my last piece of clothing across the room to land on the pile in the middle of the floor. She stood motionless for a fraction of a second, the edge of her tongue resting in the corner of her mouth, her expression unreadable as her eyes swept over me from head to toe. Then, taking a deep breath, she looked up and caught my eye. She grasped the folds of her nightgown and drew it up over her head ever so slowly. I watched it drop to the floor, a silken puddle at her feet.

She was totally naked beneath it. I don't know why it astonished me, but it did. My body reacted instantly to the sight, my eyes moving over the slim yet provocative form that had reduced me to such a frenzied state of desire. I had never wanted a woman more, never needed anyone on such a primordial level, flesh and spirit and soul.

I reminded myself to breathe, inhaling and exhaling with studied slowness. I wanted to tell her what I was feeling, but found my brain incapable of forming even the smallest syllables. She seemed to know anyway, or maybe her feelings just matched mine, for she stepped closer and took me in her

arms. Reveling in the feeling of her smooth skin against my own, with nothing between us, I kissed her deeply. She responded with equal passion, our hands roaming freely as our mouths joined again and again.

Our touching became heated, our kisses demanding more and, gasping, we both fell on the bed. It was an age-old sexual journey, yet one I realized I had never truly appreciated until this moment. By this point, I was usually too firmly focused on the ultimate goal to fully enjoy the little side trips along the way. Tonight, with my wife, foreplay seemed to have a beauty and symmetry all its own. The most amazing emotions rushed over me, yet at the same time I felt we were moving almost in slow motion. I was keenly aware of the most inconsequential things; the slightly dampened tendrils of her hair as they curled around her face, the rhythmic thumping of our hearts as I crushed her against me, the flash of the rings on her finger as her hand traveled down my body.

"Lee." The sound of my name reached me from a distance, a whispered prayer in my ear. "I want you so badly."

"I want you, too," I choked out in gravelly tones.

"Now. . . please." The urgency in her voice struck a familiar chord and my world was suddenly reduced to tactile sensations and immediate needs. I clasped her hands tightly, and as her eyes locked on mine, I felt our souls joining along with our bodies.

I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that I could never let her go.

\* \* \*

We lay together in silence. Amanda's head rested contentedly in the hollow of my shoulder, the fingers of her left hand lazily tracing imaginary patterns on my chest. I reached out and clasped that hand in mine. In the dwindling firelight, I could barely make out the rings on both our fingers, but I could feel them there, a symbol of our commitment for all the world to see. At least for the next week.

There were so many things I wanted to say to her, but try as I might, I couldn't form the words. I didn't know why, even after the intimacies we'd just shared, it was still so hard for me to give voice to my feelings. Instead, I contented myself with holding her, my lips brushing through her hair, trying to convey with a touch everything I wanted to put into words. We stayed that way for a time, our arms and legs tangled together, so close that it was hard to tell where I stopped and she began. Then I heard her sigh.

"Amanda," I asked, turning her face towards mine. "Are you okay?"

"Yes," she replied quickly, her arms tightening their hold. "I'm more than okay." She placed a series of feather light kisses across my chest. She was quiet for a minute, then she spoke again, this time in a voice so low I had to strain to hear it.

"Lee, can I ask you something?"

"Anything," I responded, surprised by the plaintive note in her voice. Releasing her, I rolled over, leaning up on my elbow to look down into her eyes. "There's nothing I won't tell you."

"Was everything... I mean, when we... was it. . ."

I reached out to gently stroke her cheek with the back of my hand. "It was perfect. I can't believe you have to ask that."

"Well, it's just that after waiting so long. . . I was afraid maybe reality might not live up to fantasy."

"Oh, it did and then some." I grinned, kissing her lips lightly. "And believe me, I've had some pretty vivid fantasies this past year."

"Me, too." Her low laugh sent a shiver up my spine and I could feel the stirring of desire once again. I leaned in to take possession of her mouth, but she spoke again before I had the chance. "But I've been a little worried, too."

"About what?" I drew back, suddenly puzzled. She'd never given me any indication that she was concerned about our physical relationship. In fact, the brief glimpses of passion we'd shared, especially during the last two weeks, had been evidence to the contrary.

"You've had so much more experience than I have," she explained, turning onto her back and staring at the ceiling. "I didn't want to disappoint you."

"There is nothing about you that could disappoint me, Amanda," I assured her, lying back down beside her and pulling her close. "I thought we'd talked this through at Pine Top when we decided to wait."

"I know we did," she answered in low tones, "but it all seemed much more academic back then." She snuggled into my arms, but I could still sense a small hesitancy in her embrace, and I realized that the only way to lessen her insecurity was to confess my own.

"You know," I murmured softly, my hands caressing the smooth skin on her back, "maybe I have a few things I'm worried about, too."

"Really?" she answered and, in typical Amanda fashion, her voice immediately filled with concern.

"Really. I, uh. . ." I exhaled loudly, mentally cursing myself for still stumbling over the words. I'd started this, now I needed to finish it. "I just. . ."

"Tell me," she said simply, squeezing my hand as she entwined her fingers with mine.

"I just hope. . . that I'm able to be the husband and step-father I want to be," I finished in a rush. "I may have had more experience in some areas, but Amanda - where this family stuff is concerned, you're definitely the senior agent."

"Oh, Lee. . ."

I felt her hand on my cheek, gently turning my face to hers. I could see everything she felt for me, everything we felt for each other, so clearly reflected in her eyes. I allowed her to pull me into a kiss.

"I'll make you a deal," she said when at last we parted. "You help my with my insecurities and I'll help you with yours."

"Sounds like a good plan to me." I leaned in again, lightly tracing her lips with my tongue. "I could start right now."

"Right this second?"

I could almost feel her desire running like a hidden undercurrent beneath the seemingly innocent words. "Even sooner," I responded, nibbling tantalizingly on her lower lip before engaging her in a heated kiss. "Remember, though," I admonished as my mouth relinquished hers, "experience or not, it's been a while. . . I may be a little rusty."

"Oh, yeah?" she teased, and I could hear the laughter back in her voice. "If you call that rusty, I think I'm in trouble." Her hand trailed seductively down my chest, belying the truth of that statement. "Although, you know what they say, Scarecrow," she whispered, her breath hot in my ear. "It's just like riding a bike. You never forget."

"Is that so?" I grinned, rolling suddenly and pulling her on top of me. "Then in that case, Mrs. Stetson, would you care to go for another ride?"

"Only if it's a marathon," she replied, her face inches from mine.

"I'll give you the entire 'Tour de France' if you want it," I murmured, my mouth against hers.

She smiled, and, parting her lips with my tongue, we began our journey.

\* \* \*

The sunshine filtered in through the window, hitting me in the face. Rubbing at the spots dancing behind my eyes, I turned my head away from the light and rolled onto my back, displacing Amanda's hand from my waist. She moved with me, murmuring indistinctly as she turned onto her left side, and I knew that she wasn't quite ready yet to start the day. We'd only spent a handful of mornings together, but already her sleeping and waking noises were becoming almost second nature to me.

She sighed again, pulling the sheet around her as she snuggled down into the mattress. Her hair fanned out across the pillow and I gently fingered a few strands, marveling again at the remarkable woman lying beside me. She'd certainly earned some well-deserved rest.

We were both thoroughly enjoying every moment of our newlywed status, so much so that we'd almost missed our flight to California yesterday. I'd deliberately made the reservations for late afternoon, not wanting to rush our first morning as husband and wife, but I'd underestimated my new wife's

innate ability to transform even mundane things like breakfast into a sensual exploration. I was starting to believe she might just be right when she called it the most important meal of the day. She'd certainly made it the most exciting. We'd arrived at Dulles with only minutes to spare, winging our way across country in an exhausted daze. I made a mental note to stock up on strawberries and whipped cream when we got home.

It supposedly never rains in southern California, but popular song lyrics aside, we were greeted by a steady drizzle when we reached our hotel, thwarting my plans for a suitably romantic stroll beneath the stars. Ever the optimist, Amanda immediately found the silver lining.

"A perfect excuse for room service," she grinned, and my complaints about the uncooperative climate died on my lips when I saw the look on her face. I said a silent prayer that housekeeping on the west coast was more efficient than its east coast counterpart. I couldn't wait to escape to the privacy of our room, couldn't wait to have her in my arms again, her slim body fitted so perfectly beneath mine.

Making love with Amanda was so different from anything I'd ever experienced. I'd known for a long time that I loved her, but I was totally unprepared for the depth of the connection I now felt. Maybe because we'd been best friends long before we'd ever been lovers, the new bond we'd just forged seemed so much stronger.

I thought about all the glamorous, jet-set women who'd littered my past, all those brief physical encounters I'd deemed so exciting. In actuality, they were all only hollow imitations of the real, emotionally fulfilling passion I'd discovered with a simple housewife from Arlington. But maybe that epithet was the real oxymoron after all. There was nothing simple about the wonderful woman who slept so contentedly beside me.

She stirred and sighed, and this time I knew she was waking up. I rolled over, fitting my body against her back as I pulled her close. "Good morning, Mrs. Stetson," I whispered, kissing her bare shoulder.

"Good morning to you, Mr. Stetson," she answered, turning in my embrace.

I smoothed the hair from her face, leaning in to kiss her awake. "Sleep well?"

"Wonderfully. What time is it, anyway?"

"What does time matter on a honeymoon?" I quipped, my lips trailing down her neck.

"I think it matters to your old pal Barney," she laughed. "Especially if we're going to meet him at . . . Lee," she exclaimed, pushing me aside as she looked at the clock. "It's after ten o'clock. . . we're gonna be late."

"We have time," I insisted, burying my head in her neck. "We don't have to be at his house until eleven thirty."

"Maybe by a man's standards we have time," she laughed, "but not by a woman's. I've got to shower, fix my hair, put on some make-up. After all, he's one of your oldest friends."

"Don't worry, he'll think you're incredible." I kissed her again. "Just like I do."

"I love you, too, but I still have to take a shower," she grinned, and I reluctantly released her.

"Okay, okay. I give up." I watched her rise, glancing regretfully over her shoulder as she left the bed. I rolled over, hugging her pillow to my chest, letting out a deep breath as my eyes followed her wonderfully supple body as it disappeared into the bathroom. Her new 'naked' look really seemed to suit her, and I marveled that she seemed to have no qualms about letting me enjoy it.

I heard the sound of running water, and I was just thinking how easily we'd embraced this latest intimacy when her head popped around the door. "I thought you were in a hurry to get your shower?" I asked, wondering what she was up to.

"Oh, I am," she began, her lips curving up in the most seductive smile I'd ever seen. "But there's no law that says I have to shower alone, is there?"

"None that I can think of," I laughed, whipping the pillow across the room in my haste to join her. She disappeared into the bathroom and I followed, eyeing the large Jacuzzi longingly. 'Later,' I thought with a grin as I slid behind her in the much smaller shower.

The quarters may have been a little cramped, but neither of us seemed to mind. The water beat down, filling the stall with steam. She turned and smiled at me, and I watched, mesmerized, as she lifted her face up to the water, a look of delight in her eyes as it cascaded over her face. She reached for the soap but I caught her hand, my fingers lingering for a minute on hers.

"Let me," I mumbled, taking the bar from her hands.

"With pleasure," she said, trailing her hand across my chest.

Rushing off to Barney's house was suddenly the last thing on our minds. We were lost again, deep within the sensuous world of our own making, those tentative moments of our first few times now a thing of the past. I knew she wanted me every bit as much as I wanted her. I closed my eyes, delighting in the pure joy of simply being alive. I loved the feel of her body wrapped so tightly around mine, loved the tremor in her voice as she spoke my name, loved the way her eyes flashed in the heat of passion, loved. . . her. My Amanda. My wife.

\* \* \*

"California was a great idea for a honeymoon." She flashed me her typical smile as we drove along, her eyes mapping the scenery while her fingers mapped my thigh.

I caught her hand, giving it a comforting squeeze. "Getting married was a better one. You know what, Barney's gonna love you. He's like family - and while my uncle was traipsin' around the world, he stood in like a sort of back-up dad. I spent more time in his mess hall than I did in school."

"What did he say when you told him we were going to be late?"

"Nothin' much. He just laughed and said he should have known better than to spend all morning cooking." I saw the expression on her face and I laughed, too. "Amanda, it's fine, really. I'm only kidding."

"I wanted to make a good impression." She gave me a playful slap on the leg.

"Hey, don't mess with the driver when he can't fight back," I teased. "Seriously, you have nothing to worry about. He said it was no problem, and he'd just meet us at the pier instead."

"The pier?"

"Yeah, there's someone there he wants us to meet. He wouldn't say on the phone, but I think he's gotten involved in . . . something. I know, I know," I said, reacting to her look. "No work on our honeymoon, but. . ."

She smiled. "But he's your surrogate father, and you love him."

"Yeah," I said sheepishly, amazed again at her ability to put a label on my unnamed feelings. "I guess I do."

"You want to tell him we're married, don't you?"

"Well, Amanda - he doesn't know anyone we know, except my uncle. And he won't say a word if we ask him not to."

I glanced at her as I pulled the car to a stop. The look in her eyes said it all - she was dying to tell someone, too. She nodded her head, flashing me her best conspiratorial grin. I thanked her silently, smiling at the thought of actually calling her my wife in the presence of someone I knew. It didn't seem fair somehow that no one knew the most important fact in both our lives. I'd never realized that some secrets would be so hard to keep.

I gave her hand one last squeeze before we both got out of the car.

"Get down - get down, Lee; they're shootin'!"

Barney's voice hit me like a ton of bricks before I even had the door closed. Reacting instinctively, I ducked for cover, yelling a quick warning to my partner. "Amanda, get in the car!"

Barney and another old geezer joined me, all of us crouching together behind the back fender. Bullets pierced through the peaceful morning, then suddenly stopped. My eyes cautiously swept the perimeter. "It looks like it's clear but be careful, let me go first."

Everything was quiet. I nodded back at Barney and his pal, then turned to Amanda, shaking my head ruefully as I opened the door. I opened my mouth to call her name, but the words died on my lips.

That's when I saw it. . . the tiny hole that had caused the crackling effect on the windshield and an almost identical circular pattern on her chest.

"Oh my God. . ."

\* \* \*

The wait seemed interminable. The afternoon had faded into evening as Barney and I sat in the small corner of the Community Hospital. I shook my head, looking around at the facilities. If we'd been in D.C. or even a larger city, N.E.S.T. and anything else she needed would have been right at our fingertips, but I'd had to bring her to this sleepy little town.

"Don't lose hope," Barney told me, and I remembered him saying those same words to me when I was ten years old and my uncle's plane had been missing.

I told him. About Amanda, our marriage, how we met. . . everything. I talked, the words pouring out, as if by speaking them I could keep her with me. Then, suddenly, there was nothing left to say. Barney laid a comforting hand on my shoulder, but I was lost again, alone with the memories.

"Mr. Stetson, Dr. Neely would like to see you now." The nurse's words cut through the oppressive silence of the waiting area.

"How is she," I asked as I jumped up, unable to read anything from her demeanor. "Is she all right?"

"Follow me, please."

It wasn't good news, then. She would have delivered good news herself.

"I'll be right here if you need me," Barney muttered, his thoughts evidently running in a similar direction.

I bit down on my lip as I followed her to the ICU, meeting the doctor as he came through the door. I tried to get past him. I didn't want to hear him say the words.

He barred the way.

"Ah, Mr. Stetson, I'm Dr. Neely." He caught my eye, then looked briefly away before facing me again. "She's out of surgery, but I'm not going to kid you, we still have a long way to go."

"She is going to be all right. . . isn't she?" I refused to hear what he was implying.

"The next few hours will be crucial," he informed me in the same professional tone I'd used myself when I'd had to break similar news to some victim's distraught family. "It's a miracle she's alive. The bullet went through her chest - a fraction of an inch higher either way and she wouldn't have had a chance."

"When can I see her?"



"It's going to take a while, and there's nothing here for you to do." I tried to slip past him again, but his hands stopped me. "Get some rest, but leave your number. I'll phone you." He paused, and I read the carefully hidden concern in his eyes. "Please, Mr. Stetson. . ."

"All right," I answered tersely, heading back to Barney. He was standing in the waiting room with another man, some representative from the local police.

"Lee. . ." Barney's eyes asked his unspoken question.

"She's alive, but it's. . ." I paused, taking a quick breath, "it's touch and go. The next forty eight hours are going to tell."

"This is Sheriff Borderhouse, Lee." Barney indicated the uniformed man standing beside him.

"Pleased to know you," the sheriff mumbled almost indistinguishably.

"He's going to need a statement," Barney continued. "I've told him what I could."

"It's not urgent, Mr. Stetson," Borderhouse replied kindly. "Barney says you'll be staying with him, so I know where to find you. We'll get to the bottom of this, that I guarantee."

Damn straight we will, I thought angrily, wishing there was something, someone, I could punch to put a stop to the pictures that kept flashing in my head. "Thanks, Sheriff," I muttered, dismissing him. I'd deal with this myself. "Barney, I have to make a phone call."

I turned towards the pay phone, trying to think of something to tell her mother. Nothing came to mind, except the unwelcome images I couldn't banish - my uncle's sternly solemn expression when he told me my parents were never coming home; the sickly sight of roses littered over Dorothy's torn body; the slightly puzzled expression on my partner Eric's lifeless face; and a bloodstain on a white sweater, a crimson inkblot I knew only too well how to interpret.

I'd heard the regret in Barney's voice earlier, knew he'd felt responsible, but it wasn't his fault.

It was mine.

I'd been selfish, foolishly thinking we could have it all. I had scoffed at fate, broken all my carefully constructed rules and let her get too close. But this time, I wasn't the only one who had to suffer for it. Now her family, too, would be forced to pay my bill.

Taking a deep breath, I dialed the phone.

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**PART TWO:  
DOTTY WEST  
"TRUTH"**

"Phillip King, hang up the phone this instant," I said, trying to keep the exasperation out of my voice. My oldest grandson had abominable telephone manners. He'd kept that thing tied up for hours, and I was expecting a call from my occasional boyfriend, Captain Curt.

"He's talking to Nancy Crawford," Jamie muttered, rolling his eyes as he tried to sneak a cookie from the jar. He had developed a sweet tooth as a toddler, and Amanda and I both fought an endless battle with his atrocious eating habits. Fruits and vegetables were just so much healthier for a growing boy - especially one with braces.

I gave him a look that conveyed exactly what I thought of that particular snack. Shrugging his shoulders, he accepted the orange I offered. "She makes him call her at least twice a day, Grandma," he added, working industriously on the peel. "They're in love."

"Your brother may be in love, but he's going to be in the doghouse if he doesn't HANG UP THAT PHONE," I repeated, raising my voice to emphasize the last few words. Adolescence really was the most trying time. I remembered when Amanda was a teenager - the phone ringing at all hours of the day and night, waiting up for her to come home from a date, worrying about where she was going, what she was doing - and whom she was doing it with.

Come to think of it, life hadn't changed much some twenty years later. I guess motherhood is one job that doesn't come with a retirement package.

I'd moved in with Amanda and the boys a little over five years ago. My husband Carl had just died, and we were all reeling. To make matters worse, Amanda was going through a painful divorce. She needed me; we needed each other. Loss is never easy to take, no matter what form it comes in.

I loved being a daily part of their lives. It gave me something new to focus on, something positive. Although I soon discovered raising two rambunctious boys to be a tiny bit more challenging than raising a daughter. Well, maybe challenging isn't quite the right word. Whatever it was, it was definitely messier. What wonderment little boys see in the great outdoors, I'll never be able to fathom. Maybe that is the fundamental difference between the sexes after all - boys aren't able to have fun unless they can get dirty. As far as I was concerned, trees could most definitely be left to the birds. I preferred to do my camping at the Holiday Inn.

Still, it was good to be needed. Though there were times lately that I felt more like their mother than their grandmother. I'd been standing in for Amanda at countless functions, both in school and out. She was so wrapped up in that job of hers that she was hardly ever home. She'd totally forgotten about Phillip's last open house at school and missed seeing Jamie play Rip Van Winkle last year at Family Night - after she'd given me her solemn promise to be there. Why, she'd even had to work on Christmas Eve.

Of course, if it **was** work that had her so enthralled. I wasn't entirely convinced. I had a few theories of my own on that score, but I hadn't been able to get a straight answer from her yet. Over the last few years, my daughter had turned dodging my questions into a new art form.

I couldn't help hoping that one of these days, she'd decide to remarry and settle down. We really could use a man around the house - if for nothing else than to keep Amanda from attempting any more plumbing repairs. We were still sorting through the mess from her last project. Although, as Jamie put it, the upstairs bathroom was gnarly - as long as you remembered that hot really meant cold. After that fiasco, she'd finally agreed to use professionals for future household repairs.

However, she still met all my matrimonial hints with that same tolerant smile - the one I was beginning to find very irritating. After all, she was my only child, and I just wanted what was best for her.

She had dated a simply wonderful man three years ago, Dean McGuire, but nothing ever came of it. It certainly wasn't for lack of trying on Dean's part. He was just crazy about Amanda. And did she care? Not in the least. I mean, here he was, a dependable man with a good steady job, and my daughter wasn't the tiniest bit interested. I blamed it all on that crazy film company, IFF.

Of course, once I'd finally met her boss, Lee Stetson, the picture became a lot clearer. She could deny it until the cows came home, but there was more between the two of them than cameras and projectors. Amanda wasn't fooling me one tiny bit - after all, I'd known her since the day she was born. I'd seen her in love before.

"I'm off the phone," Phillip told me, adjusting the sunglasses that hung around his neck as he flashed me his best boyish grin.

"Well, it's about time." I struggled not to smile. Phillip had a way about him, and I was determined not to let him wheedle out of this one. "You're not the only one in the house with a love life, you know."

"I know, Grandma," he laughed, and I couldn't stay annoyed any longer. He really was growing up so quickly. He'd shot up like a weed in the few short weeks since Christmas. And his unexpected sensitivity when I'd had to break things off with my gentleman friend Harry Berrigan had really been quite touching.

"Have you two finished your homework? Tomorrow's a school day," I added with appropriate grandmotherly concern.

"You never used to make us do our homework, Grandma," Jamie muttered.

"Times change, and I have to change with them," I teased. Amanda had made me promise to keep their noses to the grindstone this week. In fact, she'd left me an entire list of chores - as if I wasn't perfectly capable of running this household alone when I had to. Of course, it didn't take a genius to know what she was really up to. That list was nothing more than a smokescreen to keep me from asking too many questions about her little trip.

Jamie tossed his orange peel into the trash with an exaggerated motion, grumbling under his breath about rules and homework, and I pushed my thoughts of Amanda aside. His uncharacteristic behavior took me by surprise. He was our 'A' student who always completed his assignments on time.

"Come on," I cajoled, ignoring his mood and opting for a light approach. "I'm sure it won't take you that long to finish up." I reached out and tousled his hair affectionately. "You know your mother will expect a full report when she gets back."

His face clouded over momentarily as he pulled away, and my suspicions were confirmed. My youngest grandson was losing his battle with the green-eyed monster. He'd seemed a little subdued lately, but I had hoped it was my imagination. He did have a lot on his plate at the moment, I thought with a sigh. His father had just announced his engagement, and his brother seemed to be pulling away, the two-year gap in their ages widening every day. I could certainly empathize; I'd been the baby of my family, too, always tagging along behind my sister Lillian. I'd tried to reassure him that Phillip was just going through a phase and his involvement with this latest girl was just a passing interest, but it didn't seem to help. I suspected the heart of the problem lay in his mother's not so passing interest in Lee Stetson.

The phone rang and Phillip sprang to answer it.

"No, you don't," I interjected quickly, beating him to the receiver. "This time it's for me. And I expect some privacy."

"I never get any privacy," Phillip complained.

"When you get to be fif. . . my age," I quickly amended, "you can have all the privacy you want. Now scoot, both of you. It's late - go on, do your homework."

I watched them run up the stairs, thankful that Curt was at least determined. A less persistent man would have hung up by now.

"Hello," I answered absently, my thoughts still on Jamie as I picked up the phone.

"Hello, Mrs. West?"

It wasn't Curt on the other end of the line, but I immediately recognized that distinctive voice. "Lee, is that you?" He was the last person I'd expected to hear from. Despite Amanda's numerous protestations to the contrary, I'd been convinced that they were together.

"Yes, it's Lee."

"Lee, dear. . . how are you doing?" I purposely kept my tone non-committal, fishing for information. I really was hoping that my daughter had finally decided to do something about this one. Even on a bad day, he was a definite '11'.

"Well, I'm afraid. . . I'm not doing. . . so well right now."

Call it mother's intuition, but something in his tone told me that I didn't want to hear what was coming. I knew Lee still felt a little awkward around me, but his halting sentence was a bit extreme, even for him. "What's the matter?" I asked, holding my breath.

"It's Amanda." He paused, and I backed away from the counter, falling into the hard comfort of the kitchen chair. "There's been an accident."

"An accident? What kind of accident? What happened? Is she all right?" A million questions popped into my head, and I couldn't seem to keep them out of my mouth.

"Please, Mrs. West. . ."

The strain in his voice was clearly evident. I took a deep breath. "Lee, tell me what happened."

"There was a shooting. . ."

"Oh my God. . . she's not. . ." I couldn't say the word.

"No, no, she alive, but. . . she just got out of surgery. The doctor said she was really very lucky. A fraction of an inch higher or lower. . ."

"Oh my God," I repeated. "How is she?"

"Well, she survived the surgery. They didn't think. . ."

His voice broke, rendering us both silent. "It's touch and go," he finally continued painfully. "The next forty-eight hours are critical. If she can hang on. . ."

"I'll be there as soon as I can," I said immediately. He didn't argue, in itself a testimony to the precariousness of my daughter's hold on life. "I just have to make arrangements for the boys. . . the boys. . . oh, Lee, what should I tell them?"

"You'd better tell them the truth." He paused briefly before adding tersely, "I think they need to know."

"Okay," I whispered, rubbing my hand back and forth across my chest while I considered the options. "It's probably too late to get a flight tonight, but I'll be there tomorrow."

"Do you know where. . ."

"Amanda left me your itinerary," I responded, noting that he didn't even try to cover. I guess that was one question answered, but it hardly mattered now.

"Okay. Let me give you the hospital's phone number and the number where I'm staying, in case you need it."

I numbly copied down the information. "Take good care of my baby," I told him, trying to keep my voice from shaking.

I could hear his harsh breathing, and I had a strange feeling that I'd unwittingly said the wrong thing. There was an awkward pause, and we were both thrust into limbo - miles apart yet still oddly connected through the invisible wires of the phone. "Lee. . ."

"I will." He spoke quickly, a funny quality in his voice that I couldn't quite place - almost as if he somehow considered the accident his fault.

"I'll be there as soon as I can," I repeated, not knowing what else to say. "Hang on. . . both of you." I had the feeling that Amanda's Mr. Stetson needed mothering as much she did.

I numbly replaced the phone in its cradle and slumped over the kitchen table, my head in my hands. I felt as helpless as I had when I'd gotten that other phone call, the one informing me of Carl's fatal heart attack. Amanda had been my rock then, but now. . .

I heard the playful scuffling of the boys upstairs, and I tried to think of what she'd want me to do. Someone had to tell them. I couldn't handle this alone.

I picked up the phone and dialed Joe.

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The plane hit another bumpy patch and the 'fasten seat belt' sign switched on. Clear air turbulence again, I thought automatically, remembering my first flight lesson with Captain Curt. I shifted in my seat, trying in vain to get a little sleep.

I felt as if I'd been traveling for days instead of hours. First, there had been the mix up with my ticket, then the flight had been delayed due to mechanical difficulties. And when we finally did get underway, I'd been forced to listen to a blow-by-blow description of my seat partner's fiancé's hemorrhoid surgery. Normally, I enjoyed getting to know people when I traveled, but today I couldn't summon the energy or the inclination. I finally pleaded a headache, and she left me in peace. I felt a little guilty for the lie, but I was too worried about Amanda to deal with anything else.

I'd spoken briefly with Lee before I left, and he hadn't been very encouraging.

I could tell he hadn't slept a wink. I could hear it in his voice, that bone-weary fatigue which in itself was a pretty clear indicator of Amanda's condition. Actually, I hadn't fared much better myself in that department. Every time I closed my eyes, I pictured my daughter, alone in California without any of her family, fighting for her life.

I sent her another silent prayer to hang on.

The boys weren't coping any better. The fear on their faces as their and I told them the news had almost broken my heart. They liked to think of themselves as so grown up, but they were really just little boys. Phillip naturally felt it was his duty as the eldest to be strong, but I could see that underneath his brave front, he was just as shaken as his younger brother. And I didn't have the words to reassure either one of them - or to answer their unspoken question.

At least their father was there for them. Joe really had been wonderful, immediately volunteering to come and stay for the duration. "I think they need to be in familiar surroundings," he told me gravely, his own concern showing plainly on his face. The boys frequently spent weekends at his small apartment, but the house on Maplewood Drive was home.

"Thank you, Joe," I responded, gratefully accepting his supportive hug. "I'm sure Amanda would want you to be here." She had heartily approved when he had stepped in last fall. She had been in trouble with the government over some ridiculous security mix up and was hiding out from some equally ridiculous federal agents. Amanda on the 'most wanted' list - how absurd! It was just one more example of the way the government wasted our tax dollars.

Of course, Lee Stetson had been in the middle of that mess, too. He appeared to have the strangest effect on my otherwise sane daughter. I was beginning to think their relationship was a puzzle I might never decipher.

Now Amanda and Joe - that I could understand. She had never made a secret of her feelings for Joe King. The way she talked and talked about him after their first date - well, suffice to say I was convinced she considered him 'the one'. Getting her to say even the tiniest thing about Mr. Stetson was like pulling teeth.

Despite their divorce, Amanda and Joe were very close. I knew he still considered Amanda and the boys his family. When he'd decided to move back to Washington, I'd hoped there might be a future for the two of them after all.

"I'm always gonna love Joe, but we're just good friends," Amanda told me when I'd finally cornered her about it. I could hear that wistful note in her voice, and I did wonder if she'd considered getting back with him. After all, he was the father of her children. But she assured me again that it wasn't true, that she didn't care for Joe in that way. I had a strong suspicion that there was someone else she did care about, but once again she slipped out of the room before I had the chance to ask.

Turning her back on the past hadn't been easy for her. I'd seen how hard she'd tried to make her marriage work - even when it had been less than ideal.

After graduating from law school, Joe had accepted a crazy job with the EAO and was moving constantly. Amanda felt the boys were too little to be continuously uprooted, so the three of them remained in Arlington while Joe traveled all over, mostly to third world countries. He'd spend a few months here, a few months there, dropping in to visit between assignments. When he was home, they always seemed like a picture perfect family. But when he left, I could see the melancholy

settle over their household again. Amanda tried to stay busy with the boys, but I knew it wasn't enough. A woman needs a husband, too.

I didn't really understand that job of his, and I told her so, but she defended him. "Joe just has a lot inside he wants to give," she said, hiding her tears after he'd departed yet again, this time for Africa.

"If that's the case, Amanda, then he should think about giving a little of himself to his family, instead of gallivanting all over the world," I answered sarcastically. "He has responsibilities here, too."

"He does the best he can, Mother."

"If you say so, darling." If Amanda was anything, she was loyal. Just like her father. And she always seemed inclined to defend Joe after one of his lightning trips home. I wasn't sure if she was trying to convince me, or herself.

After a few more years of their commuter marriage, even Amanda finally had to acknowledge that it just wasn't going to work. It almost broke my heart to see her in so much pain. I couldn't help but remember the radiant look on her face as she'd walked down the aisle on her father's arm. Carl had been beaming, too. He'd really thought so highly of Joe, we both did. It was such a beautiful, lavish wedding; it was just a shame the marriage ended so dismally.

She hated to admit that marrying young might have been a mistake. Amanda could be very stubborn sometimes. My sister Lillian was exactly the same way. It was a trait, I'm afraid, that most of the women in our family shared.

I hoped it would stand her in good stead now.

\* \* \*

It was late by the time I arrived at the hospital. After inquiring at the desk, I was directed to intensive care. The hallways were quiet, almost eerily so, the few visitors still in the waiting areas speaking in hushed tones. Why did a hospital always make people want to whisper? As if speaking too loudly might interfere with the life and death dramas being waged behind closed doors.

The atmosphere certainly seemed dramatic. I felt as if I had stepped right into one of my afternoon soap operas. Everything seemed so surreal. Any minute now, I thought, this nightmare would be over. I'd hear Amanda's voice telling me I'd fallen asleep in front of the TV again, and the two of us would share a good laugh.

I stopped in front of room 346C. A small sign on the door indicated oxygen in use, and I felt my heart begin to pound furiously. I reached for the door, but it opened from the inside as a nurse emerged from my daughter's room. She smiled sympathetically as she swept by me, but she never quite made eye contact. Amanda's condition must be even worse than I imagined.



I quickly stepped into the room. She lay flat on the bed, an oxygen tent covering her face and chest. This must be a very small hospital, I told myself uneasily. I hadn't seen one of those contraptions in years. She looked unnaturally still under all that plastic. Deathly still.

Lee didn't look much better. The man sat like a statue beside her bed, just staring at Amanda's pale face. He didn't even hear me come into the room. He looked oddly lost, almost like a little boy, so unlike the Lee Stetson I'd come to know. It suddenly struck me that he didn't believe she was going to make it.

"Oh my God. . ." My hands flew to my mouth as I involuntarily spoke the words.

He turned, his back unconsciously straightening as his eyes rested on mine. He hurried over to meet me, hesitating for a fraction of a second before placing a calming hand on my back.

"She's stable," he reassured me, "but still in critical condition. All we can do is wait."

I clasped my hands together in another silent prayer. "She's going to be fine, she's going to be. . . absolutely. . . fine." I kept saying the words, as if repetition might actually make them true. His arm tightened around me, and I could feel how badly he wanted to believe that, too.

"Lee," I said, doing my best to comfort him. "I've never seen her give up on anything that's important. And she's not going to give up now." I moved closer to the bed, looking down into my daughter's face, the steady beep—beep of the monitors echoing in the background. An annoying sound, yet at the same time, strangely comforting.

"My God," I exclaimed again. "What happened? Who did this? Why? It doesn't make any sense."

"Come on," he murmured soothingly, his arm on my back again. "I'll tell you everything I know, all right? Come on," he urged once more, guiding me from the room.

I paused to look back at her once more, my beautiful daughter, my baby. So helpless. . . "Ohh," I whispered, stifling a sob as I headed into the hall. The lights were very bright, glaringly so, and I blinked as I struggled to make the transition from the relative darkness of Amanda's room. I glanced back over my shoulder one last time. Lee stood by the door, his eyes still on Amanda, as if he couldn't quite tear himself from her. Then very slowly he backed away, staring at the floor as the door drifted shut.

"Lee. . ." I called quietly.

He took a deep breath and moved towards me, his arm snapping back into place on my back. "Why don't we go to the cafeteria," he suggested. "I'm sure the food on the plane wasn't fit to eat."

I opened my mouth to tell him I wasn't hungry when I realized that he needed to do something - anything - to get his mind off the situation. I understood the feeling. It was agonizing to be so helpless. Especially, I thought with sudden insight, for this man standing beside me. The only

concrete thing I could do for Amanda right now was to help the people she cared about. If pretending to eat would do that for Lee, then I was more than willing to try.

We made our way to the cafeteria in silence. Visiting hours had ended long ago and the hallways were practically deserted. We passed only the few other unfortunate souls who were, just like us, keeping watch on their own critically ill loved ones.

"What would you like?" Lee asked solicitously as we entered the equally empty cafeteria.

I stood by the counter, looking at the food, unable to make a decision.

"The sandwiches don't look too bad," he prompted, but I noticed he didn't make a move to take one.

"Maybe later," I told him, unable to keep up the charade. I was just too tired, too worried, too scared.

He seemed to understand. "How about some coffee then?" he suggested kindly.

"That I can handle." I picked up a tray, sliding it to the end of the counter. Lee paid the cashier while I filled two cups, grabbing some cream for him and some sugar for myself.

I caught him looking at me strangely. "Amanda told me," I responded, answering his unspoken question. "That day you two helped out with Harry."

"Oh, yeah," he nodded sadly. "That day." Exhaling loudly, he took the tray from me, making his way carefully across the room. I followed closely behind him, our footsteps clattering loudly in the silent cafeteria.

We settled on a table in the corner. He set the tray down with deliberate care, running a hand through his hair before pulling out my chair. I sank into it, thankful to be off my feet. I wasn't sure how much longer my wobbly legs would have supported me.

Lee did the same. I watched as he fiddled with his coffee, adding a little cream and absently stirring, then repeating the process all over again. He never bothered to take even the smallest sip.

"Lee," I said, finally interrupting, "you were going to tell me what happened to Amanda."

He nodded, dropping the spoon on his plate. It made a sharp clanging sound, the noise reverberating through the room. He took a deep breath, then slowly exhaled, leaning forward on the table.

"We were, um, visiting an old friend of mine," he began, resting his chin on his hand. "Down by the pier. We were just getting out of the car when the shooting started. My friend Barney yelled a warning, and I told Amanda to take cover. Then it stopped as quickly as it started. I found her in the front seat. The bullet had gone straight through the windshield - into her chest."

"No one saw anything? Or heard anything?" I asked incredulously. On television, guns always made a lot of noise.

"Whoever it was, he used a high powered, telescopic rifle fitted with a silencer. That wouldn't give any warning sound. The next thing I knew, Amanda was hit."

"Hit?" He sounded like a man who knew his subject well - like Ephram Zimbalist, Jr. on my favorite old show, 'The FBI'.

"Shot," he added quickly, smoothing his hair again. "Anyway, that's what the sheriff said."

"Does he have any idea who did this?"

"He's 'looking into it'," Lee said contemptuously.

"Someone needs to do something," I sputtered, drumming my nails on the tabletop. "I mean, what kind of police force is it? They can't just let nuts like that run around, shooting innocent people. . ."

I felt his hand on mine, and I suddenly stopped. "Don't worry, it'll be taken care of." The look of steely determination in his eyes worried me a little, and I closed my other hand over his.

"I'm sorry," I sighed, giving him a careful pat. "All that doesn't really matter, does it? Amanda is the one who matters."

The lights suddenly seemed too bright, and I closed my eyes. The images flashing in my mind were infinitely worse, so I quickly opened them again. "Was she awake?" I asked suddenly. "After it happened, I mean. Was she in any pain?" I needed him to tell me that she hadn't suffered.

"No," he answered, the lines on his forehead deepening as he frowned. "She never regained consciousness. In the ambulance, I almost thought she was. . . but she made it to the hospital. The doctors took her. . . they wouldn't let me stay with her. She went right up to surgery."

"Lee. . ." I leaned across the small table and gently shook him, forcing him to look at me. The expression on his face brought tears to my eyes, and I knew then just how deeply this man loved my daughter. I felt a rush of warmth for him, like a mother for a son. I automatically rubbed his shoulder, the same way I did to the boys when they needed my special brand of comfort.

"Amanda is a very determined woman," I said, reminding myself of that fact along with him. "She won't leave the people she loves."

"That's what I keep telling myself, but. . ."

"No 'buts' about it," I insisted. "My daughter always gives 110% to everything she does. This won't be any different. Why, I remember a few years ago, before she got her job with IFF, she had this little pet and plant business. She took care of people's pets - dogs, cats, even a chimpanzee once - and watered their plants. You know, when they were away," I explained, catching the quizzical look

on his face. "She got so caught up in it - I actually found her crying one day over a plant that had died."

I saw that I had finally made him smile. "Amanda's just like that," I continued. "She cares about everything."

"Yeah, she does." His eyes had a faraway look, and he seemed lost in some private memory. He shook his head slightly and turned to me. "I'm sorry I didn't call you sooner," he told me apologetically, his hand absently patting mine. "But I didn't know what to say. It seemed like she was in that operating room for days. I wanted to have some good news to tell you, but Dr. Neely wasn't very. . . hopeful." Abruptly, his words stopped and I could see him drifting away again.

"Dr. Neely?" I prodded, bringing him back to the present.

"Her surgeon."

"What exactly did he say?" Maybe there was some tidbit of information Lee had overlooked.

"Too damn little. He just keeps talking in circles, repeating that we have to wait. He won't say so, but I know gunshot wounds like hers are usually. . . I don't think he expected her to. . ." He took another deep breath. "I think he's surprised that she's still alive."

"Then he doesn't know our Amanda very well, does he?"

His looked up then, rewarding me with a truly genuine smile this time, one that lit up the whole room. "No, I guess he doesn't."

He glanced down at his watch. "Why don't we head back? It's been almost forty-five minutes, maybe they'll let us back in to see her. They only allow one visitor," he explained sadly, "for fifteen minutes, on the hour."

"Then you go on," I told him, smiling warmly at the look of gratitude on his face. As badly as he needed to be with Amanda, he would have let me go to her instead.

"Will you be okay?"

"I'll be fine." I gave his hand another squeeze. "Go on - I'm just going to sit here and finish my coffee, then I'll join you."

"I'll meet you in the waiting area down the hall from her room," he told me, his chair making a scraping sound as he rose. He turned to go, then stopped for a minute to look back at me. "Thanks, Dotty."

As I watched him head for the door, I realized it was the first time he hadn't called me 'Mrs. West'.

\* \* \*

We spent most of the night in that small alcove that served as the waiting room, waiting for the minutes to tick by so we could see Amanda again. We took turns visiting. Her condition remained unchanged, but I supposed it was the best news we could hope for right now.

I was worried about my grandsons. I had talked briefly with Joe after my arrival to give him an update on Amanda's condition. It was late here and even later in Virginia, but Joe had made me promise to call. The boys were holding up, he told me, but were very quiet. Especially Jamie. The PTA mothers at their school were organizing some dinners for them. Carrie, his fiancée, had been over as well. He told me not to worry about the home front, to just concentrate on Amanda. But I could hear the anxiety in his voice.

Toward morning, I caught Lee looking at his watch. He cleared his throat a few times, as if he wanted to say something, but then thought better of it. It was obvious that he couldn't sit still much longer. I had the feeling that waiting was not Lee Stetson's strong suit.

I sent him off to get some sleep, and this time he agreed without any argument. I knew then how badly he needed to escape the atmosphere here. I hoped he would finally be able to rest.

I dozed now and then, but I couldn't make myself leave the hospital. Dr. Neely tried to convince me to go to the hotel, but I steadfastly refused. I couldn't leave my baby. I'd been with her when she came into this world and if she was going to leave it. . . well, I'd be with her then, too. I was her mother.

Somehow the time passed. Lee checked in every few hours, but I had nothing to tell him. Amanda was still holding her own, but Dr. Neely stubbornly refused to give me a definite prognosis, no matter how many times I inquired. Lee tried to hide his disappointment, but I understood how he felt. I longed to be able to tell him that Amanda was awake, looking more beautiful than ever, but we'd both just have to wait a little longer for that to happen.

The last time we spoke, he told me he was on his way. I was just thinking that maybe I'd go grab a little sleep once he arrived, when it happened. The floor suddenly sprang to life - a flurry of carts, medical personnel everywhere, and all the while, that awful monotone hum sounding in the background.

The loudspeakers shouted the news, "Code blue, room 346C," and all I could think about was Amanda at five years old, bravely letting go of my hand as I left her at school for the first time and marching boldly through the door alone.

I met Lee in the corridor as the emergency equipment rushed by us. "Lee," I gasped, "it's Amanda." We both hovered helplessly outside her door.

"Where's that bicarb?" I heard Dr. Neely ask tersely.

"Right here, Doctor," came the nurse's calm reply.

He muttered something in response, but my mind couldn't grasp the words.

"You'd better stay here," Lee warned me, taking hold of my arms as I tried to enter the room.

"No," I told him firmly, laying a restraining hand on his chest. "No." I couldn't just stand out in the hall while Amanda slipped away from us. I needed to be by my daughter's side, to will her back to life if necessary.

He seemed to understand. We both cautiously entered the room, my clenched fist automatically flying to my mouth as I watched the scene play out.

As soon as Dr. Neely saw us, he immediately blocked our way. "Mr. Stetson," he said firmly, including both of us in his gaze. "You can't help us save her life, but if you get in the way, you will help us lose it. Now get out of here," he finished a little more harshly. "Now!"

It felt as if my own heart had stopped beating as the full meaning of his words hit me. Amanda could die. . . was dying. And there was nothing either one of us could do to stop it.

\* \* \*

"What's taking them so long?" I asked, my hand drumming on the arm of the chair. "Why won't they tell us something - anything? I just don't understand doctors." It had been forty-five interminably long minutes since we'd been relegated to the waiting room.

"I don't know," Lee answered grimly, leaning back against the small sofa. "But I'm sure if she was. . . if it was bad news, we would have heard by now." He closed his eyes, his hands clasped together, absently rubbing the fingers of his left hand with his thumb.

"You're right," I agreed, reaching for my half finished cup of coffee. It was cold, but I drank it anyway. "I guess we just have to look for the silver lining."

He looked at me and smiled. "Yeah, I guess we do. She's gonna be all right, Dotty. She has to be."

We both fell silent again, lost in our own thoughts of Amanda. I somehow felt better knowing Lee was beside me, that we both shared a common bond. I was beginning to understand what it was about him that my daughter found so attractive. It was more than just his looks, which were definitely above average. But there was something else, an indefinable quality that I couldn't put my finger on. A quiet strength mixed with an endearing vulnerability that he kept carefully hidden from the world. I suspected he was a very complex man.

We were both sipping that awful hospital brew again when Dr. Neely finally entered the room. We jumped to our feet, and Lee immediately put a strong arm around me. I prepared myself for the worst.

"We almost lost her," he announced solemnly, "but she didn't give up for a second."

"Ohh," I sighed, leaning against Lee for support. He tightened his hold, and I could feel the tension in every muscle of his body. Despite our positive words to the contrary, I think we'd both believed she was dead.

"She's holding on," the doctor continued, "so we're back where we started. With still a long ways to go." His words were full of caution, and I knew we weren't out of the woods yet. But the underbrush had just gotten a lot thinner. I gave him a grateful smile.

"The woman's a fighter," he replied in wonderment. I nodded my agreement as he added with a cautious smile, "That's good."

"Thank you," Lee murmured as the doctor left us alone. I turned to look at him. His eyes were still a little clouded, but I could sense that his relief equaled mine. "Oh, boy," was all I could say, shaking my head as I thought about how close we'd come to losing her.

"I know what you mean," he said, letting out a deep sigh. We both collapsed back down on the sofa.

"Lee," I said, taking a careful look at him. The dark circles under his eyes told me he'd passed exhaustion long ago. "When's the last time you had some decent sleep? In a bed, I mean. And don't lie to me now," I added, as I could see he was on the verge of telling me he was fine.

"I don't know, a few days ago, I guess," he admitted, a wistful look on his face.

"You have to get some rest. You won't do Amanda any good if you end up in the hospital, too."

"I will get some rest," he said intractably. "As soon as she wakes up and tells me she's gonna be okay."

"You're just as stubborn as my daughter," I grinned, marveling that the two of them had ever gotten together in the first place.

"No, Dotty, that's not possible," he replied, the sparkle suddenly back in his eye. "No one is as stubborn as your daughter."

"That's true," I agreed with a laugh. "Amanda always had a mind of her own - even when she was a little girl. I remember when she was only four years old, she refused to eat anything but rice for a solid month. She nearly drove me crazy."

Lee smiled, and I eyed him closely. "So, what were you like at four years old?" I asked, returning his smile.

"My parents were killed in a car accident when I was four," he said in a quiet voice.

"Oh, Lee, I'm so sorry," I said quickly, trying to remove my foot from my mouth. "I didn't mean to pry."

"It's okay," he said, squeezing my arm. "I don't mind telling you."

I had the feeling that he didn't normally confide such things, but I guessed the experience we'd just been through had brought us closer. "Who raised you then?" I inquired. I realized how little I really knew about this man who'd become such a big part of Amanda's life.

"My uncle. He's in the Air Force, so I kinda grew up all over the place. Greenland, Guam, Germany. . . you name it, I lived there."

"That must have been hard on you, always moving like that."

"I survived," he replied in a low voice, and I wondered what he wasn't saying. Children shouldn't be dragged all over the world; they needed a home and stability. Amanda had been right about that. I realized with a start that Lee needed some good old-fashioned mothering even more desperately than I'd previously suspected. I had the impression that this man sitting beside me was very good at hiding his pain.

He reached for his coffee, absently taking a sip. "Ugh, that's cold. I think I'll get another cup."

I turned to say something, but he'd already disappeared around the corner. He was even better at evasion than my daughter. I could see I had my work cut out for me.

He reappeared a few minutes later with coffee for both of us, and I smiled my thanks as he placed the cups on the small table. I wanted to continue our conversation, but I had the distinct feeling that Mr. Stetson had bared his soul more than enough for one day.

"I saw Dr. Neely," he said quickly, deftly changing the subject. "They have to run a few more tests, but he said we could see Amanda as soon as they finished."

"Good. I want to check for myself that she's okay. I mean, I believe them, they wouldn't lie about a thing like that, but I really need to see her with my own eyes. Just to make sure."

"I know." He ran his hand through his hair, something he seemed to do quite often when he had something on his mind. "After that," he said in a tired voice, "maybe we should both take Dr. Neely's advice and get out of here for a while. There's nothing else we can do tonight."

I knew he was right, but I still hated to leave. If Amanda had another crisis. . . no, I wouldn't think that way. She would be okay. I looked over at Lee. Yes, she would be more than okay. My daughter had too much to live for to give up now.

\* \* \*

It was sometime after three a.m. when Lee finally dropped me at my hotel. I stretched out on the bed, intending to lie down for only for a few minutes before getting into a nice hot bath. My mind still felt too anxious to rest, but my body evidently had other ideas. I was asleep almost before my head hit the pillow.



It was not quite ten o'clock when I finally awoke. I read the clock with a mixture of shock and guilt. I never slept that late. Upset at leaving Amanda alone for so long, I showered quickly and hurried back to the hospital.

The nurses informed me with a smile that the remainder of the night had been uneventful. And Amanda's vital signs appeared a bit stronger this morning. A very good sign, they all assured me.

I was beginning to catch a faint glimmer of hope in their words - as if she'd passed some impossibly difficult final exam and now was just waiting to collect her 'A'. Her color did look a little better, I thought happily. I settled into my customary perch beside her bed.

I talked to her in a quiet voice, filling her in on all the news from home. That Joe was taking good care of the boys, so she didn't have to worry. About Phillip's hot date last Saturday with the exceptional Nancy, all of Jamie's plans for this year's science fair. Joe said that Mr. Pietry had even fixed that awful doorbell, I informed her with a laugh - with only minimal damage to our liquor cabinet.

I told her that it was time to wake up. We'd been very patient, Lee and I - but it was way past time. "And I think that man is going to go out of his mind if you don't sit up and talk to him soon," I added in a low voice. "He puts on a pretty good show, but he's not fooling me. He needs you, Amanda. So you hurry up and come back to us. To him."

I was standing up, stretching the kinks out of my back when I heard it - a low, guttural sound, more a moan than a word.

"Lee. . ."

"Amanda?" I turned to her, my eyes filling with tears. "Darling, it's Mother. I'm right here."

"Ummm," she groaned again. Her eyes blinked as she tried to focus. "Mother? What. . . where. . ."

"There was an accident, Darling," I told her soothingly. She was a little disoriented; it was hard to tell if she was fully conscious or just floating on the edge. "You're in the hospital."

"Where's Lee?" she asked, her eyes drifting shut once more. "I want him."

"He'll be here soon. Don't try to talk. I'm going to get the doctor." I turned toward the door, but Dr. Neely was already in the room, the monitors evidently alerting him to Amanda's changing condition.

"Well, Mrs. King," he said with a relieved smile, "I see you've decided to join us."

"Umm," she murmured again, even that small sound a huge effort.

Dr. Neely asked me leave while he examined her, and I readily complied. I staggered into the hall, leaning against the wall, weak from relief while I waited for the verdict. I knew without a shadow of a doubt that this time, the news would be good.

After what seemed like an eternity, he reappeared in the hall.

"Oh, Doctor." I smiled through the tears that were streaming down my face. "She is going to be all right." It was more a statement than a question.

"It's going to take some time and rest," he smiled in response, "but I think I can promise that Mrs. King is going to be okay." The man's face told it all - we had our miracle. Amanda was back.

"How can I ever thank you?" I gasped, gripping his hand as I pumped his arm up and down enthusiastically.

"Believe me, in this case, being able to deliver good news is thanks enough." He cleared his throat, retrieving his captive hand. "She's asking for Mr. Stetson again, so I've sent the nurse to track him down. We've taken her off the oxygen and if all goes well, we'll probably be moving her to a regular room sometime tonight or at the latest tomorrow. You're welcome to go back in," he added, heading off my question. "She'll probably sleep most of the day, but I think it will do her good to see a familiar face when she wakes up."

He smiled one last time before heading off down the hall. I took a few deeply relieved breaths, something I'd been almost afraid to do in the past few days. "Ohh," I sighed to myself, happy tears flowing again.

I cautiously entered her room, tip toeing to the bed so I wouldn't disturb her. She appeared to be sleeping again, thoroughly exhausted from the effort of waking. The room still echoed the steady 'beep-beep' of that infernal monitor, but I was glad to see they'd removed that awful oxygen tent. I reached out and brushed my hand softly across her forehead.

"Lee," she murmured again, then drifted back to sleep. I watched her lying there, watched the peaceful rise and fall of her chest. From the look on her face, her dreams were all pleasant. And I had a pretty good idea who was starring in them.

The simple truth was plain to anyone with eyes. She couldn't hide it any longer. My daughter loved Lee Stetson every bit as much as he loved her.

\* \* \*

There was a commotion in the hall and I heard voices outside Amanda's door.

I'd just been speculating on whether Amanda would want another big wedding when Dr. Neely's words broke through my pleasant daydream. "I wanted you here, you made good time."

"Get out of my way, I'm goin' in there," Lee stated in no uncertain terms. I walked to the door, anxious to tell him the good news myself.

Dr. Neely beat me to it. "Of course you are," he responded, a hint of tolerant good humor in his voice. "A little TLC is. . ."

"Doc. . ." Lee interrupted, his patience spent.

". . .Just what the doctor ordered for a quick recovery," the surgeon finished emphatically.

I burst through the door and, unable to stop myself, I threw my arms around Dr. Neely's neck. "Ohh, she's going to be all right," I said for the umpteenth time that morning. "I told you so." The words literally poured out of me, I couldn't seem to stop them.

"Oh, Lee," I cried, turning to him. "You oughtta see her, she looks beautiful!"

"Yeah," he answered somewhat breathlessly, his focus on Amanda, waiting for him just beyond the door.

I smiled knowingly and let him pass, concentrating my enthusiasm again on her savior Dr. Neely. "Oh," I exclaimed, catching my breath, "I'm going to tell you something. After a few weeks in bed, I'm going to have her hopping around like nothing ever happened. Oh, Dr. Neely, she's going to be as good as new!"

I took his arm and we started down the hall while I continued to enumerate my plans for Amanda's convalescence. He smiled benignly, as if my behavior was the most natural thing in the world. Maybe it was. In his profession, unbridled gratitude was probably a daily occurrence.

We parted company at the pay phone. I realized with a pang of remorse that Joe and the boys hadn't heard the good news. I checked my watch. Three hours later in Virginia. My grandsons should be just getting home from school by now.

Jamie answered on the third ring. "Hello, sweetheart, it's Grandma."

"Hi, Grandma." His voice sounded flat, unemotional. He must have been out of his mind with worry over his mother. I was more than glad to be the bearer of such happy tidings.

"I have really good news for you, darling," I told him enthusiastically. "Your mom's going to be just fine."

"That's good," he replied in the same monotone.

It certainly wasn't the response I'd anticipated. Jamie acted as if I'd just given him the weather report.

"Is that Grandma on the phone?" I heard Phillip ask. "How's Mom? What did she say?" Now Phillip sounded exactly the way I expected him to.

"She said Mom's going to be okay," I heard Jamie hiss to his brother. "Leave me alone."

"Woo hoo," came Phillip's enthusiastic response. "Hey, Dad," he yelled, "Mom's gonna be okay. Give me the phone, Worm Brain, I want to talk to Grandma."

"Cut it out," came the muffled response. There was a loud bang in my ear and the sounds of a scuffle, then Joe's strong voice came through loud and clear.

"Dotty?" he asked, the relief evident in his voice. "Amanda's out of danger?"

"Yes, she's. . ." The altercation began again and he momentarily excused himself. I could hear yelling in the background, Joe's stern tones, then suddenly everything was silent.

"I'm sorry, Dotty," he sighed when he finally came back on the line. "You were saying?"

"Joe," I asked, "what on earth is going on there? And why are you home at three-thirty?" Joe King never left the office in the middle of the day without good reason. Something was definitely amiss. "Is Jamie all right?"

"He's okay, but he's had a pretty rough few days, so I thought I'd try to be here when he got home today. There was some incident at school. . ."

"Incident? What kind of incident? What happened?"

"Some silly fight with one of his friends that got a little out of hand. We're dealing with it. Carrie is going to talk to him."

I wasn't sure exactly what Joe thought his fiancée of one month could accomplish, but I held my peace. I was too relieved about Amanda's prognosis to debate this now.

"Really, Dotty," he continued reassuringly, "don't worry about this. You have enough to handle. Tell me how Amanda's doing."

"Oh, Joe, she's doing wonderfully," I began, warming to my subject. "The doctor said she's out of danger. He expects a full recovery."

"Well, that is good news. I know the boys will be very relieved. They've both been worried - actually, we've all been worried. Amanda is very special."

"Yes, she is," I agreed. "But Joe - I'm a little concerned about Jamie."

"He'll be fine. Just some growing pains, I think." I heard his tired sigh. "He and Phillip have been at each other's throats. I think they've just been so worried about their mother - I'm sure things will ease up once they can talk to her. Is she awake or. . ."

"She's still in intensive care, but she should be moved tonight or tomorrow. I'm sure she'll want to talk to the boys as soon as she's able. Lee's with her now. . ." I bit my tongue. I hadn't meant to bring that up - it had just slipped out. I took a deep breath, unsure of my ground here.

"Dotty," he asked, his voice suddenly brusque. "You never did tell me how this happened."

Something in his tone sent up warning flags. Joe's anger seemed a tad inappropriate. Surely he couldn't be implying that Amanda would be in any danger from Lee?

"It was an accident, Joe," I answered, slowly and plainly so he couldn't mistake my words. "It was simply a matter of being in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"She wasn't working, was she?"

"Working? No, I told you, she took this trip for some rest and relaxation." Joe's questions were starting to annoy me.

"Well, Lee Stetson was there," he said truculently, as if that in itself was explanation enough.

This conversation was becoming stickier and stickier. I took a deep breath, trying decide exactly what to say to my ex son-in law. I'd always been a firm believer in honesty being the best policy, but it wasn't my place to tell him about Amanda and Lee. It really wasn't any of his business. Joe King may have been the father of my grandchildren, but that didn't necessarily give him license to butt into my daughter's personal life.

I was on the verge of telling him exactly that when he abruptly changed course, his tone conciliatory again. "Tell Amanda the boys send their love and that our prayers are with her. We'll all be waiting for her call."

He ended the conversation before I could reply. How did things ever get so complicated?

\* \* \*

I walked down the hallway to Amanda's room, smiling a greeting as I passed the nurses' station. After almost three weeks here, Community Hospital's west wing staff had become our second family. I think they understood that Amanda's recovery was nothing short of miraculous and in some small way wanted to share in our joy. Everyone loves a happy ending.

As wonderful as they'd made our stay, I knew Amanda was as anxious as I was to bid this place farewell. Comfortable or not, this was a hospital, not home. I wouldn't be able to really relax until she was back where she belonged, safe and sound under our own roof on Maplewood Drive.

She still had a ways to go before that would happen, though. Her speedy recovery had absolutely astounded Dr. Neely and the staff, so much so that he had promised to release her from the hospital in the next few days. But he still adamantly refused to allow her to travel for at least another week.

I myself would be en route to Virginia in just a few more hours, while tonight Lee would be flying in the opposite direction, heading back to California and Amanda. Much to his frustration, he'd been recalled to work ten days ago to deal with some sort of distribution emergency concerning their latest project. He'd tried to find someone else to cover it, but evidently Doc somebody or other, the head honcho at IFF, had been quite insistent. He'd had no choice but to return.

I stopped in front of Amanda's room, shifting my small suitcase and the cumbersome plant I was carrying to my other hand. I was about to push open her door, when the sound of her voice stopped me. "Yeah, I know, I feel the same way." I hesitated, not wanting to intrude as I heard her continue. "It's just been hard, that's all. This isn't the way it was supposed to be."

I could tell by her tone that she was talking to Lee. Whenever she spoke to him, her voice took on this tender little quality. It was probably something only a mother would notice. I actually found it quite touching.

I started to back away, intending to give her some privacy, when her impassioned response pricked my ears. "Lee, I wish you wouldn't say that. What happened was an accident. Nobody blames you." She was silent for a moment, then added, "Well, that's his particular problem, then. It's my fault, I should have told him that day we had lunch, but he was so caught up in his news about Carrie that I didn't know how to start."

This was about Joe, then, I thought, shaking my head as I let the door swing closed. He still seemed to be having a difficult time with Amanda and Lee's relationship, something I found a little puzzling since the man was getting married in July. I guess old bonds were the hardest to break. Perhaps I could help smooth the waters when I got home.

As much as I hated to leave her, I knew Amanda would be happy to have Lee take my place. Their goodbye hadn't been easy, I suspected - for either one of them. Actually, I'd hated to see him leave myself. Lee Stetson had a knack for taking my daughter's mind off the physical pain of her recovery. He had us both in stitches one night, his lively tale about his escapades in Europe taking more twists and turns than my current adventure novel. Apparently the documentary film business was much more intriguing than I'd imagined.

For my own part, I enjoyed watching the two of them together. They didn't seem to need to communicate in words, instead understanding almost instinctively what the other was feeling. Amanda tried to tell me it was because they'd worked together for so long, but the connection between them had nothing to do with any job. It was very special, and stronger than anything I'd ever seen between my daughter and Joe. For almost ten years, I'd watched her put her own needs second. Unlike that one-dimensional relationship, she and Lee seemed to have a real partnership. In many ways, it reminded me of what I'd known with her father.

My arm began to tire, and I shifted my burden again. I decided I'd rather interrupt Amanda than risk the wrath of the nurses who would have to clean up the debris if this plant fell on the floor. I knocked loudly to announce my arrival, clearing my throat as I entered.

"I'll see you tonight then," I heard her finish as she smiled, motioning me into the room. "Yeah. I do, too. Bye."

"Everything okay in D.C.?" I inquired, dropping my suitcase by the door and depositing the planter on the window ledge.

"Yeah. Lee will be here tonight," she told me, settling back down into the pillow.

"That's good," I answered, checking the soil to see if the plant was dry. "I was afraid he might get stuck at work again," I finished, a bit distracted by the state of neglect I discovered. I never understood why flower shops couldn't simply water a plant before they delivered it.

"Actually, he has a short term assignment for IFF out here, so there's no danger he'll have to leave again. He'll be able to stay until I can fly home." She smiled and closed her eyes, evidently savoring some thoughts too secret to share. I left her to them, filling the water jug in the bathroom and giving our latest acquisition a drink.

"Who's that one from?" she asked, grimacing a little as she shifted position.

"It's from the Soccer Moms, 'wishing you a speeding recovery'." I glanced over at her as I read the card. She appeared to be suffering a moderate amount of discomfort today. Dr. Neely had assured us that it was to be expected and would fade with time.

"That was nice of them," she responded automatically, and I had a sneaking suspicion that her mind was still focused on that phone call. "I can't believe all the people who've sent their support."

"Well, any more well wishers, and we'll be able to open our own shop. Although," I added wryly, "the deliveries should slow down a bit once Lee arrives. I'm sure the shopkeepers in D.C. will be sorry to see him go."

"He has been a little over enthusiastic," she laughed, shaking her head she ruefully surveyed the room. "I think he felt guilty that he had to go back to work."

"That man is head over heels in love with you, Darling," I teased, "and you have an extensive assortment of exotic greenery to prove it."

She treated me to that wonderful laugh of hers again. Only a short time ago, I'd worried that I might never hear it again. It's amazing how quickly the balance of life can shift.

"So," I asked, relaxing into the chair beside her bed. "Joe still being Joe? I couldn't help overhearing," I said contritely as I noticed the beginnings of a frown.

"Yes," she sighed, her lips pursed together in that way she had when she was troubled. "Lee stopped by the house to pick up some things for me, and I guess he gave him a hard time. Jamie, too." She wrinkled her nose. "I can handle Joe, but I'm at a loss as to what to do about Jamie. With his father's new life and now this - his world's kind of been turned upside down."

"Yes, change has a way of doing that sometimes," I agreed, giving her hand a comforting pat. "He just needs a little patience and understanding."

"He's barely said two words to me on the phone."

"He's been concerned about you, darling," I reassured her. "And sometimes, worry wears a funny face. Especially when you're twelve years old."

"I guess so," she answered sadly.

"Of course, the good thing about being twelve is the innate ability to bounce back quickly. He'll snap out of it, wait and see, and then," I grinned, "you'll wish you could get him to stop yakking."

"Speaking of bouncing back," she said, clenching her teeth as she swung her feet over the side of the bed, "Could you give me a hand? I need to do another lap before Dr. Neely gets here if I want to convince him I'm ready to be sprung from this place."

I nodded, handing her the pink robe. I watched as she set her jaw in a dogged grin, willing her discomfort to the background.

I had to admire her determination. When Amanda decided to do something, there wasn't anything she couldn't accomplish. Her recuperative efforts these past two weeks had certainly paid off. Even though she still seemed a little weak, she was getting around much better with each passing day.

We headed into the hall, beginning our daily ritual with slow, deliberate steps. "If you keep this up, you'll be out of here in no time," I praised, watching proudly as she accepted the smiles of encouragement from people who passed by.

"The sooner the better."

"And you're certain staying at Mr. Dorsey's is a good idea?" I was still a little worried about the plan. I would have preferred the convalescent hospital I'd found across town, but Lee's friend had insisted that he could make her more than comfortable.

"Oh, Mother, I'm so tired of hospitals," she sighed. "I'll be fine at Barney's. Besides, he has enough room for Lee, too."

He did have a very nice apartment with a spectacular view of the ocean. And if there was a better cook, I hadn't met one. He'd treated me to one of his special dinners just the other night. At the very least, his culinary delights might be able to get some meat back on my daughter's bones. I could feel her ribs where my hand rested just above her waist.

"I guess it should be fine," I agreed, adding knowingly, "especially the part about having Lee there."



"Mother. . ."

"Amanda, it's all right," I reassured her, struggling to hold in my grin. "I'm really not that easily shocked you, know."

She concentrated on the floor as if her eyes were somehow connected to her feet. I knew I'd managed to embarrass her. I didn't understand my daughter sometimes. She was behaving like a teenager who'd been caught necking on the couch. My goodness, she was a grown woman and entitled to a little happiness.

"Amanda," I began again, determined to clear the air. "You don't have to be self-conscious about this. I've had some romantic getaways of my own, you know. It's not that hard to understand."

I continued on, ignoring the pained look she gave me. "Remember that lovely long weekend with Hunter? We had the most wonderful time. . ."

"Oh, Mother," she moaned, looking exactly like Jamie when he rolled his eyes at his brother. "I really can't discuss Daddy's friend Mr. Conrad with you."

"And why not?" I laughed. "We're both over twenty-one. And Hunter really was a very attractive man, especially for his age."

"Ohhh. . ." She shook her head, making that exasperated little sound again. I noticed that we'd made it halfway around the hall and she was still going strong. Nothing like a little honesty to get the old adrenalin flowing, I thought with a grin.

"I know we haven't discussed the fact that you and Lee were out here together," I continued, deciding to lay all my cards on the table while I had the opportunity. "But I think we should just get this right out in the open. They say that truth will cleanse the soul, and the truth of this particular situation is that the two of you love each other. Don't deny it," I added, seeing her begin to form the usual protest, "it's as plain as the nose on your face."

"I can't deny it," she said at last. "I do love Lee, very much."

"And when the two of you are married. . ."

"Mother," she said firmly, pulling away and walking on her own. "You've been trying to marry me off ever since my divorce. Please, let's not go down that path again."

"Amanda Jean West, are you going to stand there and tell me that you don't want to marry Lee? Because," I told her emphatically, "I'm simply not going to believe that."

"I didn't say that," she countered, grasping my arm to steady herself. "It's just that sometimes things are more complicated than they seem."

"What's so complicated? You love each other. It doesn't get any simpler than that."

"Love is simple," she sighed, absently twirling the tie on her robe, "life isn't."

"Amanda," I began, trying to decipher what she was trying to tell me.

"Lee and I need some more time to get things sorted out, that's all."

"You know I would never pressure you, dear. I trust you to know what's right." I put my arm around her again and gave her a little squeeze. "All I want is for you to be happy."

"I know you do," she said, a tiny catch in her voice. "I am happy. It's just. . ."

"It's just that you've been pushing yourself too hard. Nothing looks good through tired eyes. Come on," I said, guiding her down the hall, "Let's get you back to your room."

I expected an argument, but instead she only gave me grateful smile. I helped her settle into bed, pulling the covers up around her as I tucked her in. I adjusted the bedrails so she wouldn't fall out then stepped back, taking a long look at her sweet face. She seemed so young and vulnerable lying there, just as she had when she was three. A tiny little girl sleeping in her big bed for the first time. The only thing missing from the picture was her beloved doll, Lois Ann.

"Mother." She caught my eye, as if wanting to confide her secrets, the same way she did when she was little. Then, just as quickly, glanced away, saying only, "Thank you."

"For what, darling?" I asked in concern. Her voice spoke of her weariness and something else I couldn't quite decipher.

"For everything."

"You don't have to thank me. I love you, Amanda, you know that, there is nowhere else I would be."

"Not just for being here now," she said quietly, reaching out to take my hand. "For the past five years, too. I know I don't tell you very often, but it's meant a lot -to me and to the boys. I just wanted you to know that."

"Of course I know that." I looked at her closely, wondering a little at her mood. "Amanda, are you okay?"

"Yeah," she said, taking a deep breath. "I guess I'm just feeling a little emotional. I can't explain it. Sometimes events just move so fast and you get all caught up in them. You find yourself doing things you wouldn't have dreamed of in other circumstances. Things you realize later will hurt the people you love. But you have to do them anyway, you know? You can't stop."

She looked as if she was going to cry. "Darling, you're talking nonsense. You would never deliberately hurt anyone. You're just tired - you've been pushing yourself too hard to get back on your feet." I

sighed, reaching out to smooth her forehead. "I think a little rest and relaxation in the California sun is going to be just what the doctor ordered."

"Maybe."

"Now," I said, glancing at my watch, "I've got to get to the airport or I'm going to miss my plane. You close your eyes and get some rest. Before you know it, Lee will be here and everything will look different."

"Okay," she agreed, giving in to her fatigue. "Give the boys a big kiss for me and tell them I'll see them soon."

"I promise. And you do the same to Lee. But I guess I don't have to tell you to do that, do I?" I laughed.

"No, you don't," she answered, a smile back on her face.

I grabbed my suitcase, pausing at the door for one last look. Amanda's eyes were closed, her anxiety dissipating as she surrendered to sleep. I told myself not to worry, that everything would be fine as soon as Lee arrived.

My head was down as I left the room, adjusting the tote strap on my suitcase, so I didn't see the man until it was too late.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," I apologized, a little guilty for almost slamming him in the face with the door.

"No harm done, ma'am," he replied gallantly. "I'm looking for Amanda's room?"

He was an older gentleman, a little on the heavy side. From his attire, I guessed he was someone who spent a lot of time by the ocean. "Well, you've found it," I joked. "I'm her mother, Dotty West."

"Pleased to meet you, ma'am. I'm Gus Weinstein, a friend of Barney Dorsey's."

"Oh, yes, Mr. Weinstein. I believe Barney's spoken of you." Actually, the man's name didn't ring a bell, but it seemed like the gracious thing to say. "I'm afraid Amanda's sleeping right now, but I'm sure she'd love a visit when she wakes up."

"Oh, that's all right, I won't disturb her. I just wanted to check out for myself that she was okay."

"She's just fine," I smiled, touched by the concern of an almost total stranger for my daughter. I checked my watch again, making a move toward the elevator. I didn't want to miss my flight. "I was just on my way to the airport, Mr. Weinstein. "

"I'll walk out with you then, if you don't mind. Actually, I'm leaving myself later tonight - off to visit my son and his family. I'm just getting out of the hospital myself."

"Oh?" I enquired, more out of politeness than interest. "Nothing serious, I hope."

"Actually, I had a pretty close call with some carbon monoxide poisoning."

"I'm sorry to hear it," I answered absently, my mind already on the trip home. "I guess you can never be too careful with things like that. They say twenty-five percent of all accidents happen in the home."

"Oh, this was no accident," he said, shaking his head in disgust as we left the hospital. He graciously hailed me a cab. "That whole Bodega business turned out to be a lot more than any of us bargained for."

"Um, yes," I said, frowning a little. I had no idea what this man was talking about.

"That's why I felt so bad about what happened," he continued, oblivious to my confusion. "Lee and Amanda are such a nice young couple, and I kinda felt responsible."

"Responsible?"

The cab pulled up and he opened the door, handing my suitcase to the driver. "You know, for her being shot and ruining their honeymoon like that and all."

He smiled, held the door open, and politely assisted me inside. "Well, please tell them I wish them every happiness."

The cab pulled away from the curb. I sat very still, staring out the window until Mr. Weinstein became a small dot on a blurred horizon. Then very slowly, I turned around.

The most inconsequential things suddenly seemed important. I studied the driver's picture, watched the numbers change on the counter that recorded the fare, traced a small tear in the seat's upholstery with my finger. The cabbie really should do something about that. One small little tear like that can turn into a gaping hole that can't be repaired. I slid my finger between the vinyl and the cotton stuffing. Mr. Weinstein must have been mistaken, I told myself emphatically. This was only a vacation, nothing more. My daughter didn't lie. She'd always told me truth.

Always.

I heard a telltale ripping sound as that tiny perforation in the seat became wider. I remembered Amanda standing in her bedroom, solemnly assuring me that she had absolutely no idea where her best friend Debbie Ann McCabey could be. And all the time, the girl was sitting in the attic just one floor above my head, while her parents and the police frantically scoured the town. If I'd only had eyes to see.

But that was long ago. Why, she hadn't been much older than Phillip at the time. This was different - she was an adult now. Surely my daughter wouldn't hide something like this from me?

I toyed with the frayed edges of the seat, trying to ignore that nagging little voice in the back of my head. Amanda hadn't really confided in me in a long time, it told me - and certainly not in the last few years. I had a sudden picture of her dashing out the door as she tossed off another excuse. Vague stories about class reunions and some mysterious club I didn't even know she'd joined. Trips to the drug store that seemed to take all day, not to mention all those unexplained emergency sprayings by the termite man. And where had she been those times she'd packed us off to visit the relatives? I mean, that ridiculous story about saving Washington from a bomb was just too outlandish to be believed.

I felt the balance of life shift again; I could no longer tell what was true and what was a lie. Or maybe the emotional upheaval of the last few weeks suddenly cast a clearer light so that things I'd always overlooked now made perfect sense. Lee's evasive answers when I'd questioned him about signing the permission forms for the surgery, Amanda's obvious distress earlier when I'd broached the subject of marriage. It had been there all along, right in front of me, as plain as . . . as the unspoken promise in both their eyes whenever they looked at each other.

I suddenly knew without a doubt that Mr. Gus Weinstein had been telling the truth.

But why all the secrecy? Why would Amanda tell a stranger about her marriage and not her own mother? We were so close, weren't we? At least, I'd always thought. . . I drew a deep breath, then slowly let it out. Maybe, I realized sadly, maybe I didn't really know my daughter at all.

No, I couldn't accept that. There must be an explanation for this, I reasoned, something I just couldn't understand right now. Maybe she'd intended to tell me, then all of this had happened - the shooting, her surgery, a slow recovery ahead - and she didn't know how. She really wasn't herself at the moment. After all, she had almost died.

Maybe it was Lee. Maybe he didn't want a big wedding. With his background, I could understand that an instant family might be a little overwhelming. Still. . .

The cab came to a stop in front of the terminal. I quickly handed the driver some bills, retrieved my suitcase and headed inside. Numbly, I checked the departure information. My flight was on time; they were even boarding. Putting one foot in front of the other, I marched to the gate, handed my ticket to the agent and slowly made my way down the plane's narrow aisle. Automatically stowing my luggage, I settled into the cramped seat, resting my head against the small oval window. In a few short hours I would be back on familiar ground. Maybe then everything would make sense.

I took another deep breath, remembering how I'd felt at the beginning of this journey, not knowing if Amanda would live or die. Now, that was the one thing I did know for certain. And the rest - well, the rest we would just have to sort out in time.

The plane began its taxi down the runway, and I closed my eyes. Amanda was my only child; she would tell me the truth. I just needed to give her the chance. Until then. . . well, I could keep a secret, too.

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PART THREE:

**JAMIE KING**

**"ACCEPTANCE"**

I really didn't like Lee Stetson. I spent one whole afternoon trying to decide what it was about him that bothered me so much, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't come up with anything except a vague, uneasy feeling. Like whenever he talked to me, he seemed to have one eye on the nearest exit.

Don't get me wrong, he made all the right moves. Whenever my brother Phillip and I saw him, he was always polite and friendly. I guess you could say he tried to be our pal. He let Phillip mess around under the hood of his Corvette one morning, something I could have told him was a big mistake. He even offered to take me with him to the track the next time he took his car out for a few test laps. Of course, I wasn't going to hold my breath waiting for that to happen. Adults always say things they don't mean, especially to kids.

Nobody else seemed to share my opinion of him, though. My mother seemed to like him a lot, but that was no real surprise. After all, he was her boss, and I'd heard her tell Grandma that they worked together on special projects all the time. Grandma said he was a real buff hunk. Of course, I'd seen her pick up a total stranger at the produce counter in the supermarket, so I didn't usually think too much of her opinion. Phillip thought he was an okay guy, but then again, Phillip liked everyone, including that rude Nancy Crawford who currently had him on a leash. Even my dad seemed to get along with him just fine. In fact, when Mr. Stetson had come over to our house on Christmas Eve, Dad had acted like they were friends.

I'd been looking forward to the holiday for a long time. As far back as I could remember, it had always been my favorite time of year. I know lots of kids say that, but to me it wasn't just about all the gnarly presents Phillip and I received. When I was little, Christmas always meant that my dad was coming home.

Even when my parents were married, Dad didn't live with us year round. He was an important lawyer, and his job took him all over the world, to really neat places like Japan and Africa. Mom said that he was busy giving back to people who were less fortunate, and that Phillip and I should be very proud of him. I was glad he wanted to help people build a better life, but sometimes I thought it might be nice if he was around to help me build a tree house or practice my reading.

But no matter where he was during the rest of the year, he always came home at Christmastime. Mom would spend weeks getting ready, cleaning the house and baking all sorts of good things to eat. Phillip and I would pitch in, too, drawing pictures to hang on the refrigerator and helping with the

decorations, and all my grandparents would come for Christmas dinner. Grandma West would make her special sweet potato pie, Grandma King would fuss over us all and my grandpas would play gin rummy. And my mom would laugh a lot. I think that's what I loved best - Mom was always so happy when we were all together.

Until one year when everything changed.

I had just turned seven that November. I remembered it so clearly because I'd had a really big party - Mom had let me invite my whole second grade class. But the best surprise was when Dad came home the night before my birthday.

Although for some reason, Mom didn't seem too glad to see him. I can remember getting out of bed for a drink of water and hearing them arguing. I knew I should have been in my room, but I was thinking about all the presents I was going to get the next day, and I couldn't sleep.

"I can't believe you'd pick today of all days to do this, Joe," I heard my mother tell my dad in an angry voice she'd never used before. They hardly ever fought around us. "In case you'd forgotten, tomorrow is Jamie's birthday."

Of course he knew it was my birthday, I thought with a frown, rubbing my bare foot across the carpet so hard that my skin burned. Why would Mom think he'd forget something like that? He'd come all that way just to help me celebrate. It made me feel very grown up and every bit as important as all those people who depended on Dad for help.

"I'm sorry about the timing, Amanda, but it was the only week I could spare," my dad answered. He sounded really tired, and I wondered why he didn't get some sleep. He always went right to bed when he came home for one of his visits. Mom had explained that flying so far made you really exhausted. "The big holiday drive at EAO begins next week," he continued as I crept closer to their bedroom. "And I thought it might be easier if we told them together."

"Nothing is going to make this easier, but I suppose you're right. I just didn't want. . ."

The breeze from the open bathroom window blew the door shut with a loud thud and suddenly both my parents were in the hall staring down at me.

"How long have you been standing there, Jamie?" Mom asked, glancing nervously at Dad. Her voice was very low and her eyes were all red, like mine had looked that time I'd broken my arm. It had really hurt and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't stop crying.

"You need to get to bed or you'll be falling asleep in the middle of your party," Dad joked, picking me up and carrying me back to my room. He tucked me in and gave me a kiss goodnight. "Now close your eyes. Tomorrow's going to be a great day."

Dad was right; it was a great day. Everyone had fun. I didn't even mind that I'd been forced to invite Phillip's stupid friends, too. I can still remember the smallest details from that party; the big

bunch of red and blue balloons that hung on the front door, the neat electric car Tommy Newhouse gave me, and Phillip's friend Jimmy Deason with frosting smeared all over his nose.

And the miserable look on Mom's face the next day when she and Dad told us they were getting a divorce.

They'd called us both into the living room. Phillip and I sprawled on the sofa while they sat across from us, Mom smoothing the wrinkles out of her skirt and Dad repeatedly clearing his throat. They both still loved us, they said, that would never change; but they had decided they shouldn't be married anymore. Phillip cried a little then, even though he denied it later. Dad patted his knee and promised that things wouldn't be that different; he would still see us whenever he could. I just sat there, kicking my shoe against the cushions, thinking about how happy I'd been yesterday when he'd helped me open my presents.

He'd told us things wouldn't change, but they did. Grandma moved into the guest room permanently; Mom started to look for a part-time job; and Dad didn't come home for Christmas any more.

This year was a different story. Dad had moved to Washington permanently last January and had his own apartment about fifteen minutes away. Even so, he was spending the Christmas holidays at our house - just like old times. My mother was glad, too. At least that's what Grandma thought. I'd overheard her mention to my Great-Aunt Lillian that she hadn't seen Mom this happy in years.

Mom had been in a really good mood lately. It was a real change from the way she'd been acting at Thanksgiving. She'd seemed so down, which wasn't like her at all. She'd tried to shrug off my questions, saying that she was just trying to forget some nasty stuff that had happened at work. But I had a feeling it was more than that; I could always tell when she was upset.

I was happy that having Dad around this year had put her in such a good mood.

A mood she seemed to want to share with all her friends. Like Mr. Stetson. Mom was a pretty generous person, so it was natural for her to want to include him in our Christmas. Especially since he didn't seem to have anywhere else to go. It wasn't the first time she'd done something like that. Her good friend, Dean, had come for dinner one year. He'd even brought me an entire junior weatherman kit, with a barometer and everything. I remembered thinking it was a lot cooler than he was.

Grandma had really liked Dean - even more than Mom did, I think. She kept saying that Mom and Dean were going to get married, and Phillip seemed to agree with her, but I was pretty certain they were both wrong. My mother never looked at Dean in any particular way, never made him special meals or gave him those little hugs she used to give my Dad. And, as it turned out, I was right. Mom began to spend more time at work, and Dean slowly stopped coming around. The only place Phillip and I ever saw Dean McGuire these days was on the weekend weather reports on Channel 4.

So that's why I didn't think too much of Mr. Stetson coming to Christmas Eve dinner. Or even of Mom kissing him when he left later that night. After all, Phillip had hung that mistletoe by the



front door on purpose, so that everyone who came in and out would get caught. But I did think it was a little strange when the guy showed up again the next day. Especially after Dad left early, saying he had a previous engagement for Christmas dinner.

That's when Mr. Stetson really started to bug me.

And every time he came over, he seemed to get under my skin more and more. Maybe it was the way my mother looked at him or held his hand when she thought no one could see. Or the way Grandma fussed over him and started talking about marriage again whenever Mom was out of the room. And then there was Phillip. . .

Phillip just wouldn't stop yakking about him. To hear him tell it, the guy walked on water or something. And Lee - well, Lee seemed to like my brother just as much. He didn't look like he wanted to get out of the room when he talked to Phillip.

Of course, that was nothing new. People always liked Phillip. Especially girls. I mean, what wasn't to like? He'd grown a foot since Christmas, he was a starting forward on the basketball team, and he hung out with the cool crowd at school. Plus, he had 20/20 vision and straight teeth.

Definitely not what I saw when I looked into the mirror.

There were times I wondered if we were even related. When I was little and Phillip was mad at me, he used to tell me that I was adopted. I'd believed him for about a month, until I finally found the courage to ask Mom. I knew from the expression on her face that Phillip was in for one of her little 'talks'. It couldn't have happened to a nicer guy.

Of course, I loved my brother, I really did, it's just sometimes he was a bit much to take. Especially when he was around that stupid Nancy. Man, her I really couldn't stand; especially after she'd called me 'Zorba the Geek' in front of a bunch of Phillip's friends one afternoon at the mall.

That had been Lee Stetson's fault, too, in a round about way. Mom had promised to drive me to pick up the book on cellular mitosis I'd special ordered at the bookstore, but at the last minute she'd had to go into work. She was working on a complicated project, she told me by way of apology. It must have been a pretty messy one, too, because I'd heard Grandma complaining that morning about the pile of sooty clothes she'd left in the hamper for her to wash. Still, if it hadn't been for Lee and that stupid project, I wouldn't have had to tag along to the mall with Phillip, and Nancy Crawford wouldn't have called me that awful name that somehow seemed to stick.

And to make matters worse, Dad invited us all out to dinner the next week to meet his new fiancée.

Mom said she couldn't go; she had a doctor's appointment after work. Just routine, she assured us, but she'd already missed it once, and she'd be in big trouble if it happened again. Grandma snickered and said that it was amazing the lengths some people would go to get out of a simple dinner engagement.

She was home and waiting for us when Dad dropped us off. "Did you guys have a nice time?" she asked, her face glued to her magazine. We both knew she was really asking if we'd liked Carrie.

"Yeah, she seemed okay," Phillip told her, and I agreed. Actually, she'd been more than okay. She taught advanced biology at a Bethesda high school, and she'd offered to work with me on my science fair project this year. Since it was a pretty safe bet that Mom would be too busy to be much help, I'd gladly accepted. Besides, science wasn't really her best subject. I hadn't forgotten that radio receiver disaster from a few years ago.

"Dad said the wedding would be sometime in July," I informed her, flopping down next to her on the sofa. "He said he wants us both to be ushers." I watched her closely, trying to gauge her reaction. I thought she seemed a little sad when I told her the part about us being in the wedding. I hoped she didn't mind because I was kind of looking forward to wearing a tux and everything.

"That will be nice, fellas," she said at last, mussing up my hair like she used to do when I was a little kid, and I guessed she was okay with it. Mom never said anything she didn't mean.

"Dad really wants you to meet her, too," I'd added, giving her a hug in return. It was true. He'd said that no matter what happened, we'd always be his family.

"As soon as I get back from my vacation, I promise." Giving us both a big grin, she sent us off to finish our homework and get into bed. She sure seemed happy about her vacation. I smiled back as I turned to follow Phillip upstairs. Carrie might have more time for my project, but she could never take my mother's place.

I was going to miss her when she went on her trip.

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Phillip had been looking forward to Mom's vacation almost as much as she had. And even though I was still a little ticked that she hadn't taken us along, I had to admit that we usually had a pretty neat time when Mom went out of town. Grandma was such a pushover. She always let us stay up to watch the late show with her and drink Chocco Blocko shakes instead of milk for dinner. And she hardly ever made us eat green beans.

We were full of plans for the week. It had taken some doing, but I'd finally convinced Grandma that she didn't really need to go with me to get my haircut tomorrow. I had an idea about how I could get rid of that 'Zorba the Geek' nickname once and for all. And Phillip had conned her into letting him study with Nancy on Tuesday night. Although, I don't know if that was such a wise decision on Grandma's part. With their approach to homework, I had a feeling neither one of them would see a high school classroom next year if they were left to their own devices.

Homework. That's what Phillip and I were doing when we heard the news. At least, I was; Phillip was lying on his bed listening to his Walkman. He was so absorbed that he didn't even hear the knock on the door or see Dad stick his head inside.

"Hey, Dad, what are you doing here?" I was a little surprised. We saw a lot of him, but never unannounced on a Sunday night, especially when Mom was out of town and we had school the next day. Mom and Grandma had very particular rules about school nights.

He walked into our bedroom, Grandma right behind him, and I knew by their expression that something was really wrong. So did Phillip; I could see it in his reaction when he finally tore the headphones off his ears. The sounds of U2 blared out as they dangled around his neck.

"Hey, fellas, we need to talk," Dad said somberly, sitting down beside me on the bed. "I'm afraid I've got some bad news."

We both sat very still, waiting for him to continue. It wasn't like him to beat around the bush like that. Dad and Mom were both pretty direct.

He took a deep breath, shaking his head as he looked first at Phillip, then at me. I looked away, focusing on the yellow line that ran through the red plaid design on my bedspread.

"Your mother's had an accident." I heard the words but I couldn't really process them. Phillip dropped his Walkman and it hit the dresser with a sharp crack, and all I could think was how mad he was going to be if it was broken.

"Mom had an accident?" I repeated, pushing my glasses back up my nose. They didn't fit right and were always falling down. Mom had told me we'd go get them readjusted as soon as she came home from her trip. I raised my head and encountered Dad's face.

"Yes, she's in the hospital in California," he said in a subdued voice that told me just how worried he really was. I'd never heard my Dad yell when he was angry or upset; instead, he just got quiet. "She was shot earlier today and just got out of surgery."

"Shot? With a gun?" Phillip asked.

"Yes," Dad answered in a voice that was even lower.

"Is she okay? Can we talk to her?" I could tell by the way Phillip's foot was tapping on the floor that he was just as upset as Dad. I was glad he'd had the nerve to ask the questions I was too afraid to voice.

Dad and Grandma glanced quickly at each other, then looked away. "Not right now," Grandma replied, her own voice a little shaky. "When I spoke to Lee, he said that she was in intensive care."

I sat there, trying to take it all in. Nothing made any sense. Mom had been shot. And Lee Stetson was there. It was a few minutes before I realized that Grandma was still talking.

". . .so that's all we know right now. I'm going to fly out there tomorrow, boys, and your Dad is going to stay here with you. At least until we know for sure what's going to happen. . ."

"Is she going to. . ." I couldn't finish my question, but it didn't matter. Neither Dad nor Grandma seemed able to answer it. Instead, Dad put his arm around me and pulled me close, motioning for Phillip to come sit on his other side.

"No matter what, we'll get through this together," he said somberly, while Grandma looked as if she was trying not to cry. "Your mother's a strong woman. She'll do her best to come back to us all."

I hoped my Dad was right, but nothing seemed certain any more. I only knew that I didn't want my mother to die. She was the glue that held my family together.

He talked to us for a little while longer, then finally left us alone to try and get some sleep. I lay there in the dark, listening to my brother's raspy breathing, trying not to think about what had happened to Mom. And what still might happen.

"Phillip, are you okay?" I asked when I couldn't stand to hear him any more.

"Mom's in intensive care in a hospital three thousand miles away, Worm Brain, how do you think I am?"

I could tell that he'd been crying. Phillip always got particularly nasty when he'd been caught doing something he considered 'unmanly'. Last fall, when Mom had been on the run, he'd never missed an opportunity to act out his tough guy image. I could tell it was going to be the same thing all over again this time. I wished sometimes he didn't feel like he had to pretend with me. I was just as worried as he was.

"What do you think will happen to us if Mom. . ." I couldn't say the words out loud, but I couldn't keep from hearing them in my head. If Mom dies.

"You heard Dad - I guess we'd live with him and Carrie."

"Yeah."

I wasn't sure exactly what I thought about that idea. Sure, I loved my Dad, but this was home. And Grandma - if we went to live with Dad, then what would happen to her? If Mom died, she'd be all alone. She'd need us. I didn't want to leave her; and I knew Mom wouldn't want that, either. But what if we didn't have a choice?

There were just too many questions running through my head. I closed my eyes with a sigh, trying not to think about all the possible answers.

\* \* \*

"You're really in for it now," Phillip announced me as he bounced the basketball off the wall in our room. "I've never seen Dad's face look purple before."

I lay on my bed, staring at the ceiling, trying to pretend Phillip was someplace else. It was kind of hard, though, with all the racket he was making with that stupid ball.

This had been the worst day. When Grandma had called from California to tell us that Mom was going to be okay, I didn't even know what to say. I knew I should feel happy - that I was happy - but all I could think about was the look on the principal's face when she told my Dad I'd been fighting during recess.

"Is it true Mrs. Dennis had to call Dad out of court to come into the office?" Phillip continued in his most irritating voice. "That's what Jimmy told everyone. And that she felt sorry for you 'cause of Mom, so she went easy on you." How Phillip's friend Jimmy, a guy who was still reading on the fifth grade level, had managed to find all that out, I couldn't fathom. The school's underground must have been working overtime.

"Hey, maybe now that Mom's gonna be all right, you'll get suspended after all," Phillip added happily. There were times I really wished he would do the world a favor and disappear.

I really couldn't help what had happened. Tommy Newhouse, a guy I'd thought was my friend, started calling me that stupid 'Zorba' nickname. On top of everything else in my life, it was just too much to take. I'd had to punch him. Then one thing led to another and before I knew it, I was in Mrs. Dennis' office listening to her tell my Dad that my behavior, while understandable, really couldn't be overlooked. She'd been forced to give me a week's after-school detention. Tommy got off with just a couple of days, which I didn't really understand since I was the one who'd ended up with the black eye.

As it turned out, detention wasn't such a bad thing after all. At least it gave me a chance to get some reading done in relative peace and quiet. Our house was anything but these days, with Phillip still acting like a jerk and Dad trying to finish up all the work he'd brought home from the office.

The only bright spot was Carrie. She came over almost every night to cook dinner, and she always brought something new for me to read. Sometimes it was a book; other times, an article she'd shared with her class. She'd even offered some pretty good advice on how to deal with Tommy Newhouse and the other guys that were giving me a hard time at school.

"I don't see why you like Carrie so much but you don't like Lee," Phillip asked me one night as we got ready for bed. "He's really a lot more fun."

The two of them had played a quick game of one-on-one earlier when Lee stopped by to pick up some of Mom's things. Phillip said Lee was flying back to California to stay with her until she was well enough to come home, which should be in another week or so.

"How do you know all that?" I'd asked suspiciously. Phillip wasn't always the most reliable source of information.

"Lee told me, Bozo, how do you think I know? He'd have told you, too, if you ever bothered to say two words to him."

I turned my back on my brother, heading to the bathroom to brush my teeth. I hadn't been very nice to Lee today. He'd invited me to play basketball, too, but I'd mumbled something about homework and escaped upstairs. I knew that Mom would be ashamed of my behavior if he told her, but I couldn't help it. I really didn't want to see Lee Stetson right now.

I think Dad felt the same way. I'd accidentally overheard them arguing in the back yard when I took out the trash. I shouldn't have eavesdropped. Mom wouldn't have approved of that, either, but I'd never heard Dad so upset - not even when he told us Mom had been shot. Even though his voice was eerily quiet, I could still feel the anger radiating off him.

I unconsciously held my breath as his tone grew louder. "I've tried to be understanding about the choices she's made," Dad told Lee, "but this is too much to be expected to handle. I've had to bite my tongue not to say anything to Dotty."

I couldn't hear Lee's response, so I took a few tentative steps towards the gazebo and peered around the corner. Dad was pacing back and forth, his right hand rubbing his neck as if he was trying to work out a kink. "Some partner you turned out to be," he stated harshly. "Or is that the way you people normally operate? Don't you usually have back-up?"

"Of course it's not and yes, we do," Lee answered evenly, smoothing his hair back with his hand. "When we're working." He was either really miserable or really angry, I couldn't decide which.

"I assumed. . ."

"Well, you assumed wrong," he finished, his tone conveying an odd sense of calm that somehow seemed dangerous. I crept closer so that I could hear better, flattening myself against the house so they wouldn't see me. I didn't have to worry, though; they were both too engrossed in each other to notice me.

"Then just what were you doing out there?" Dad demanded, his eyes squinting the way he did when he was trying to figure out a puzzling point of law.

"You'll have to ask Amanda that question, Joe." Lee took a deep breath, pausing to exhale loudly before adding, "I'm not the one who can answer it for you."

They stared at each other in hostile silence, Dad frowning until a deep line appeared between his eyes, Lee biting his lip as if to force the words back into his mouth. Finally, Dad was the one who looked away, saying only, "I see."

"Joe. . ." Lee began, then suddenly stopped. I took a second to study him more closely. He had a funny expression on his face, the same look guys in school wore when the teacher was about to ask a question, and they hadn't read the assignment.

"Well," Dad finished, looking down at the white bench like he'd never seen it before, "Tell Amanda the boys send their love and we'll - they'll - be waiting for her to get home."

Lee nodded, brushing past my Dad and heading for his car. I'd crept out of there and headed back upstairs, trying to figure out what I'd just seen. No matter how hard I tried to understand, it didn't make any sense.

\* \* \*

Phillip and I were happy to have Grandma home. Dad moved back to his apartment and his regular life, and we returned to ours. It was almost like Mom was away on one of her trips, and I could pretend that nothing bad had happened to her.

But it had. She'd almost died.

I could see how much it had affected Grandma. She really wasn't herself at all, especially for the first few days after she came home. I couldn't ever remember a time when she'd been so preoccupied; she hadn't once raised her voice to either one of us or reminded us to make our beds or pick up our room.

After a few days like that, I started to think that maybe Mom wasn't as okay as everybody kept saying. But if that were true, then Grandma wouldn't have been so short with her when she'd called the other night. She was always so protective of Mom, even when she only had a cold. The whole thing was very peculiar. Almost like they'd had a fight and were too stubborn to make up.

Although, Mom had seemed pretty cheerful when I'd talked to her. She'd sounded so much like her old self that I'd forgotten how upset I'd been for the last month. I'd told her all about my science fair project, tactfully omitting Carrie's part in it, and the new book I was reading for school. She'd promised to listen to the whole story when she came home tomorrow. When I'd hung up the phone, I couldn't wait to see her, even if it did mean that Lee would be there, too.

Grandma might have been distracted, but she was still cooking all my mom's favorite foods for her homecoming dinner. And I could tell by the way she'd fussed over the table that she was almost as anxious as I was to have Mom back. As if she, too, was hoping that nothing had changed.

Mom had been away one month and two days. After everything she'd been through, I kind of wondered if she would look different.

She didn't, though. Well, maybe she was a little thinner and moved a bit more slowly, but her smile was still the same. So was the big hug she gave to me and to Phillip as soon as she walked through the door.

"I missed you guys so much," she said, the tears welling up in her eyes, and I knew this was going to turn mushy. "And I think you've both grown a foot." She hugged us again and looked around in wonder, as if she was memorizing everything - me, Phillip, the house. And all the while, Grandma stood silently on the landing by the stairs, just watching.

My mother noticed that, too, and turned towards her kind of shyly. "Hi, Mother," she said in a quiet voice, almost like she was testing the waters, and held out her arms.

Grandma looked at her for a minute, then slowly smiled, coming down the stairs into her waiting embrace. "I'm glad you're home, darling," was all she said, holding on to Mom for dear life.

Then we were all talking a mile a minute, Mom telling us about California, Phillip going on and on about the spring dance, and Grandma saying she hoped the pot roast turned out okay because you couldn't trust the new butcher at the supermarket.

No one seemed to notice Lee standing quietly on the front step. That is, until Mom smiled at him and held out her hand. He grinned back then moved through the door, setting her suitcases by the stairs. He walked slowly over to her and closed his hand around hers, their fingers intertwining as she led him into the den. They sat down side by side on the couch, and Mom rested her head on his shoulder.

My brother immediately tried to entice him into shooting some hoops, but Grandma intervened, saying dinner was almost ready. So instead, Phillip regaled us all with the latest statistics from the school basketball team playoffs. To hear him tell it, he'd scored most of the points himself. I felt my smile begin to melt into a frown.

And dinner wasn't much better. If it wasn't Phillip, then it was Grandma, asking everyone if they wanted seconds and fussing over Mom, worrying that she was too tired or too cold.

"I'm fine, really, Mother," she said in exasperation, and I wondered why everyone just didn't leave her alone. She always hated it when people hovered over her.

"Don't let her tell you that, Dotty," Lee said, smiling at Mom again. "She's exhausted - she's just too stubborn to admit it."

I watched them with a scowl, wondering who'd appointed him her protector. Mom didn't seem to mind, though, and instead of protesting, she squeezed his leg under the table. I looked down at my plate, rearranging my peas between bites of pot roast. I didn't want to hurt Grandma's feelings, but suddenly I really wasn't very hungry.

"May I be excused?" I asked, wanting nothing more than to escape to my room.

"Are you okay, Jamie?" Mom asked, with typical concern. "You didn't eat much."

"Yeah, I'm fine," I answered hastily, already clearing my plate. "I have some homework to finish up."

Putting my plate in the sink, I ran up the stairs two at a time so I wouldn't have to listen to them discuss my eating habits. I lay on my bed, trying to decide what had made me so upset. The conversation from the kitchen drifted up the stairs, Mom complaining that she was well enough to help clean up and Grandma insisting that she sit down. Grandma must have won that battle, because everything became quiet. I could hear the sound of the basketball hitting the concrete outside, and I figured Phillip had finally conned Lee into that game. They seemed to get along so well, all of them - just like family. A new family. And I wondered exactly how I fit into the picture.



\* \* \*

"Keep pushing!"

My brother was screaming his usual brand of encouragement in the background, but I blocked him out. I tried to dribble the ball with one hand and keep Lee off of me with the other, but he was guarding me pretty hard, and I was quickly running out of steam. Plus, it had rained that morning, and the basketball court near Lee's apartment was still wet, so I was a little nervous about my footing.

"Jamie, throw it - throw it," Phillip yelled again. I was suddenly so mad that I chucked the ball at Lee, aiming for his stomach. He deflected it with his arm at the last minute, but I had a feeling he knew I'd done it deliberately. I doubled over, putting my head down so I didn't have to look him in the eye.

"Nice," Phillip commented, walking over to me, his arms swinging like he wanted to take a punch - almost as badly as I wanted to take one at Lee.

"Sorry," I shot back. "I'm not Larry Byrd."

"I noticed," he returned sarcastically.

"Hey, hey, hey, c'mon," Lee interjected, trying to keep the peace. "It was a good try, what'ya want?"

"It was a bad pass," I replied angrily, "and this is a stupid game."

"So, are you gonna quit?" Phillip leaned in, glaring down at me. He was itching for a fight, but I thought I was pretty safe. I figured Mom wouldn't be too impressed with Lee's parenting skills if he let my brother pop me one.

"Hey, Chief, why don't you go get the ball, huh?" Lee said, patting him on the arm and pushing him in the general direction of the bushes where the ball had disappeared. "Go on."

Then he turned to me, bending over to try and look me in the eye. "Hey, Sport," he said, still a little winded by our game. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah," I lied, wishing he would just go away.

Unfortunately, he didn't take the hint. "What are you so uptight with your brother for?" he asked, searching in vain for a way to fix things.

"I'm not uptight," I replied, refusing to give an inch. "I just hate doing everything he wants to do."

"Well, I thought you two wanted to shoot some hoops."

"Well, I know you did." I was really acting like a jerk, but I couldn't seem to stop myself.

"We don't have to play, you know," he shot back, his annoyance clearly apparent this time. I could tell he was finally beginning to get mad. Actually, the way I'd been behaving, I was surprised it had taken him this long.

"Well it's a little late for that now." It was a little late for a lot of things, I thought sadly.

Lee turned away then, and for some reason I couldn't explain, I felt even worse than I had before. My reaction puzzled me. I should have been happy; I'd wanted to tick the guy off, didn't I?

I sat down on the bench and watched Lee and Phillip play one-on-one for a while. He gave Lee a pretty good run for his money, and I thought sourly that my brother had become a pretty decent player. A much better player than I was. Maybe I should have taken Lee up on one of his offers to practice.

That thought depressed me as we all walked back to Lee's apartment. And being forced to listen to Phillip's stupid jokes certainly didn't help; jokes that for some reason Lee seemed to think were pretty funny. By the time we reached his floor, I was in a really foul mood.

"Mmm," Lee said as he opened his apartment door. "It smells like your mom's been cooking up some of that world class chili of hers."

"I could go for a BIG bowl of that," Phillip agreed enthusiastically.

"Yeah," Lee concurred, looking around for Mom. "Amanda?"

She didn't seem to be there.

"Uh, look," Lee said suddenly, "why don't you guys go clean up? The bathroom's down the hall. Okay?"

We both nodded, heading down the hallway in strained silence. I still didn't feel like talking to Phillip, and he sure didn't want to speak to me. I could tell he was still pretty steamed.

"Listen, guys," Lee said when we reappeared a few minutes later. "A friend of mine is having some car trouble, and I'm going to go help him out."

"Okay," Phillip told him agreeably. "I can hold down the fort."

"I'll bet you can," Lee smiled back. Again I found my irrational jealousy at Lee's statement confusing. I mean - I couldn't stand the guy, right? So what did I care if he liked Phillip, anyway?

"Ah. . . the VCR's under the TV," Lee continued, "you've got tapes, movies, whatever you want. Okay? And, ah, let the answering machine take the calls."

"Okay. Take care." Phillip headed for the VCR, while I retrieved my book. Plopping down into the big chair, I retreated behind the pages. Lee came back into the room, and I could feel his eyes on me,

but I didn't want to acknowledge him. For some strange reason, I felt like I wanted to cry, and I didn't want him to see.

"Hey, Jamie," he said kindly.

I looked up. I could tell he was worried about me. His eyes had the same expression as Dad's when he wanted to have a serious talk. That was the last thing I wanted.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Sure," I mumbled, burying my nose in my book again.

"You sure?"

"Sure," I repeated, glancing up at him, then back down just as quickly.

"Okay," I heard him say as he headed out the door.

"You're such a doofus," Phillip muttered as he put a tape in the VCR.

"Why don't you shut up?" I told him, refusing to take my eyes off the page. He finally obliged me, shifting his attention to the TV screen where Dirty Harry was busy telling everyone to make his day.

And me? I just kept right on reading. With any luck, I'd get through three more chapters before Lee got back.

\* \* \*

"Hey," Phillip asked, looking up from his skateboard. Yesterday he'd finally started speaking to me again, and now I couldn't get him to stop. "How about we invite Mr. Stetson to the skateboard competition on Saturday?"

We were in the back yard preparing our boards for the big event. "He can have my ticket," I snarled, slamming the oil bottle back down on the table. I wished we could do just one thing without Phillip having to mention Lee Stetson.

"He's an all right guy," my brother returned, beginning to get angry all over again. "If you would just loosen up!"

"Look," I explained one more time, in plain terms that even a moron like Phillip could understand. "I don't like the guy. I'll NEVER like the guy, okay?"

"Come on," he said, throwing his wrench down on the table.

I was about to walk over and cram it down his throat when Mom's voice suddenly interrupted us.

"Okay, fellas," she began pleasantly, before stopping suddenly by the back door. "Your dinner's in the oven," she continued a little more slowly as she tried to figure out what we'd been fighting about. "And I'll probably be in the editing room all night. . ." She took a deep breath, coming up right beside me. "What's going on out here?"

"Nothing," I muttered, not wanting to meet her eye.

"Junior here's just jealous of Lee," Phillip volunteered with a suitably sour expression. "I'm going outside to practice." Standing up, he grabbed his skateboard and beat a hasty retreat, leaving me to face the music alone.

"Jamie," Mom said quietly, grabbing my hand. "Let's talk." She sat down by the picnic table, and I could tell that her patience with me had just about run out. She held both my hands in hers and looked me straight in the eye, posing the question I'd been trying to answer to ever since Christmas.

"You're jealous of Lee?"

I looked right back at her and raised my eyebrows in pained confusion, still unable to put a label to what I was feeling.

"Hey, look," she told me, kissing my hand as if that could make it better; the same way she'd always done when I was little. "You don't have any reason to be jealous of Lee. . . okay?"

"Yeah," I murmured, struggling to believe her.

"Look, when I was out in California," she continued, "it was knowing that you and Phillip loved me that helped me get through that. You know that, now come on." She reached up and brushed her fingers across my cheek, the way she'd done a thousand times before when she'd tucked me into bed at night or comforted me when I had a bad dream. It was simple gesture, but it made me feel good, secure. . . loved.

"I love you," she went on, echoing my thoughts, "just as much as I love Phillip or your Grandmother. . . or Lee."

"Sure," I answered, clinging to my animosity. "Whenever you're around."

"Oh, sweetheart," she said, spinning me around and pulling me down next to her. "I know, I know." And it suddenly occurred to me that maybe she felt just as confused as I did - needing to be at work with Lee but at the same time needing to be home with us, too.

I heard her take a breath, and I suddenly realized something. She loved Lee Stetson. It was the first time she'd actually said those words to me out loud. She seemed so sad, sitting there talking to me so seriously. Like one adult to another. I began to feel kind of bad that I'd acted like such a jerk to someone she really cared about.

"Oh, gosh," she said, resting her cheek against my head. "You know, one day, you're gonna grow up and you're gonna fall in love. Does that mean you're gonna stop loving me?"

"No," I answered, thinking that it was a pretty stupid question. After all, she was my mother. No one could take her place. That's part of the reason I'd been so upset - I was scared of losing her.

"No?" she asked again in a teasing voice.

"No," I repeated in the same manner.

"Oh," she kidded, "then you understand."

"Yeah." At least, I was starting to.

"You understand that just because you love someone new doesn't mean you stop loving the people you already love, does it? Well, that means I still love you."

"Yes."

"And you know that."

"Yes."

"So you feel better." She leaned over and gave me a kiss.

"Yes," I answered again, and suddenly I really did feel better - for the first time in a long time.

"I love you. Now come here," she ordered, turning me around to face her, "And give me a hug."

I let myself be pulled into the comfort of her arms. Even though I would never admit it out loud, it felt good to have her hold me, just like she did when I was a little boy.

"I really do love you," she told me again, pulling me even closer.

"I love you, too," I replied, and I realized it was the first time I'd said that to her since her accident. Maybe deep down I'd been angrier than I'd wanted to admit; and jealous, too. And worried that my life was changing too fast. It was a lot to think about.

"All right. Then everything's okay." I felt her give me a gentle pat on the back. That same little gesture that had always said everything between us was fine.

"Yes," I admitted, feeling like a great weight had suddenly been lifted off my chest. I could actually breathe again.

"All right. Then go out there and teach your brother a lesson." She handed me my board. "Go ahead - go get 'em!"

I smiled and headed off to find Phillip. Maybe she was right after all. Maybe things really were okay. My mother did still love me; that hadn't changed. So maybe the very least I could do for her was to give Lee a chance.

\* \* \*

Things didn't quite get back to normal after that, but they did get better. Mom was almost back at work full-time, Phillip was all caught up in his 8<sup>th</sup> grade graduation activities and even that stupid Nancy Crawford seemed to have lost interest in tormenting me.

And I had a new hobby - photography. Lee had loaned me a really neat camera after we'd invited him to the skateboard competition. I took one look through it, and the whole world suddenly appeared different. It wasn't an unhappy place any longer where I didn't fit in; it was anything I wanted to make it through the frame of my lens.

Lee didn't seem to bother me as much, either. Dad had been kind of busy with work and his wedding plans, and I started to like having another guy around. Especially after Lee had admitted he didn't have a clue how pictures actually ended up on film. It was comforting to realize that even someone as cool as Lee Stetson didn't know everything. I'd probably never have as much in common with him as I did with Carrie, but I'd finally come to the conclusion that Philip might just have a point after all. Maybe Lee really was an okay guy.

Of course, once I'd made up my mind to try and like him, I started to worry that he might not be around too long. Most guys didn't stay. I mean, if my own father had left us, why on earth would Lee stick around?

And Mom and Lee suddenly seemed to be fighting a lot. Like they were tonight. Sometimes I really couldn't figure them out. This latest argument appeared to have something to do with work. Or at least that's what I surmised from my hiding place at the top of the stairs. Lee seemed worried about some new documentary Mom was working on without him about. . . bees? That's what it sounded like to me, anyway. All I could hear was 'I don't like you working with bee' and something about a sting before Mom cut him off. She sounded really steamed, and I almost felt sorry for Lee. He seemed genuinely worried about her. Then they both said something that I couldn't hear, and he left abruptly, slamming the front door behind him. In my rush to hide again, I almost fell down the stairs. Luckily for me, Lee had been too furious to notice.

"Don't say it, Mother," came Mom's equally angry voice. "I'm not in the mood tonight."

The banging door must have startled Grandma, too. She'd been in the dining room, working on her flight simulation. Nothing short of World War III could usually drag her away from that screen. She was absolutely determined to get her pilot's license. Personally, I just didn't see it happening in my lifetime.

"I wasn't going to say anything at all," I heard her tell Mom in a prickly voice. I knew she didn't mean it. Grandma always said she had nothing to say just before she gave you an earful of whatever was on her mind.

This time was no exception. She lowered her voice, and I couldn't quite catch what she was saying, so I scooted down a few steps. All I caught was the last line.

". . .And I really don't understand you, Missy."

Mom was in for it now. When *Grandma* used that name, she really meant business. I strained to hear more.

"Or this little game you're playing," *Grandma* finished crossly.

"Mother, I'm not playing any game," Mom stated, sounding almost as tense as *Grandma*. "Lee and I just had an argument. It happens all the time, believe me. No one can drive me crazier than he can."

"Uh, huh."

"You're doing it again, Mother." She sighed loudly, a signal that she was at the end of her rope. This was getting pretty interesting. Too bad Phillip had a late practice tonight. He'd be really mad that he missed this.

"Doing what?" *Grandma* inquired and I could almost picture her arms folded across her chest as she spoke.

"That little nod of the head always followed by that annoying 'uh-huh'. You've been doing it ever since I got back from California. If you have something to say to me, I really wish you'd just come out and say it."

"Amanda, you don't seem to have anything to say to me, so what could I possibly have to say to you?"

"Mother. . ."

"I can see there's no point in discussing this if you don't want to talk."

"Really, there's nothing to talk about." Mom's shoes made a clicking noise on the floor, which meant she'd started to pace. She must be really bothered by this. She hadn't done that since last fall when Phillip and I broke the kitchen window. I listened carefully as she started to speak again in her best 'this is final' tone.

"Lee and I had a disagreement about work. It's not the first time, and it certainly won't be the last. End of story."

"Uh-huh."

"Mother, really, it's nothing. He just ended up with some unexpected time off, and now he's at loose ends. He doesn't like me to work solo."

"Uh-huh."

"Ahhhhg," I heard her yell in frustration. "I'm too tired to do this right now. I'm going to bed. Unlike Lee, I have to be at work early tomorrow."

Mom headed in my direction, and I ran upstairs again, scrambling to get out of sight before she caught me. There was no telling what she'd do if she spotted me eavesdropping. This spying business was dangerous.

\* \* \*

"So," Lee said to us as Phillip and I sprawled comfortably on the couch, "would you guys like to come?"

Mom was perched on the arm of Lee's chair. I watched as she rubbed his shoulder affectionately, last night's anger apparently forgotten. I was glad that they seemed to have patched up their argument.

"Four days in the woods?" my brother repeated, his excitement already showing. "You even have to ask?"

A friend had offered Lee the use of his cabin, and he was anxious to get away for a few days. Taking a vacation in town was driving him crazy, he told us, and if he stayed here any longer, he'd only end up working anyway. And for some reason, he didn't want to go into the office.

"It's a matter of principle," I'd overheard him tell Mom before dinner. "He gave me two weeks off, and I'll be damned if I don't take them. I refuse to give that man the satisfaction."

"Yeah, even if it kills you," came Mom's teasing reply.

Lee cleared his throat as he turned to me expectantly. "So, Jamie," he said as he ran his hand through his hair, "what about you?"

"Um," I began, chewing on my lip as I thought it over. I certainly wouldn't mind missing two days of school; I just kinda wished Mom would be there, too. She'd really wanted to come, but she'd already missed so much work because of her accident that she couldn't afford to take any more time off. Besides, she had a project to finish over the weekend. Lee didn't seem too pleased about that, either, but apparently they'd arrived at this compromise.

"Okay," I said, and Mom rewarded me with a relieved smile. I could tell how badly she wanted all of us to spend time together. If she was actually willing to let us skip school to accomplish that, then who was I to argue? Besides, there'd be no living with Phillip if I said no.

We set out together on Friday morning. The cabin was in the Shenandoah Valley, not too far away, but the drive seemed much longer than usual because we were trapped in the car with Phillip. He spent most of the trip whining about Nancy Crawford. She'd dumped him a few days ago for a high school sophomore, and he'd been mooning around ever since. I felt bad for my brother, but it was



hardly the tragedy he was making it out to be. I figured his ego was probably suffering more than his heart.

Lee seemed to agree, and he good-naturedly told Phillip he was much too young to settle for just one girl.

"Yeah, you're right about that," Phillip moaned. "From now on, I'm playing the field. And they can all forget about sharing my stuff. I let Nancy borrow my new skateboard, and now she refuses to give it back. She said it was a gift and she should be able to keep it. Girls suck."

"Not all of them," Lee laughed. "But as a general rule, Chief, it's a good idea not to loan out your stuff unless you're pretty sure the relationship is a permanent thing." He was having a pretty hard time trying to hide his grin as he added, "I admit that's a lesson I learned the hard way myself."

"Yeah," Phillip commiserated, "Me, too. I really liked that skateboard."

"You loaned Mom your 'Vette this weekend," I said in a quiet voice.

"Well," Lee said, clearing his throat nervously, "it would have been a pretty tight fit in the Corvette - the three of us and all our stuff."

"I guess so," I agreed, but I had a feeling there was more significance to that gesture than he was willing to acknowledge. Mom and Lee seemed to swap cars a lot lately; it didn't seem to have anything to do with any trip.

"I think this is our turnoff," Lee stated, effectively changing the subject before I could press it further. It was kind of funny to see him so flustered. This was turning into a pretty interesting weekend after all.

It was certainly more fun than I'd originally imagined. The cabin itself was really nice, with two bedrooms, a small kitchen and a screened porch on the back. Lee said it belonged to a friend who spent a lot of time out of the country. He'd offered to let him use it last fall, but he hadn't been able to take him up on it. There were some great hiking trails and plenty of neat stuff to photograph. I'd brought along four rolls of film, and by the end of the first day, I'd shot almost all of them. Lee said that at the rate I was going, we'd have to make a run into town for more film tomorrow.

We didn't, though, because it rained most of our second day and we were stuck inside. When we got tired of playing the usual board games, Lee offered to teach us poker. He'd learned himself when he was younger than we were, he told us, from an old corporal on an air base in northern Michigan where his uncle had been stationed. All the kids there used to play. It sounded exciting to me, but Lee denied it.

"It was only a way to pass the time," he told us, smiling as he dealt another hand. "There just wasn't much else to do there during the winter. The base was in a very small town, and they rolled the sidewalks up every night at 8:00."

That might have been the case, but I really liked the game. For the first time, I was actually better at something than my older brother. "This is really fun," I said, enthusiastically cleaning out the remainder of Phillip's matches. Lee had refused to let us play for real money.

"Sometimes it's more fun that way," he joked when I grumbled about how rich I could have been. "I can remember one night in particular when the stakes got pretty interesting. My buddy and I had conned some Colonel's daughter into playing with us and. . ." He laughed suddenly, then quickly changed the subject, saying it was a story for another time.

"Aw, c'mon, Lee," Phillip begged, "I'm almost in high school."

"Well, when you graduate, then we'll talk." He laughed again, putting the cards away. "Anyway, it's late. If we're going to go hiking again tomorrow morning, we'd all better hit the sack."

Phillip grudgingly agreed and we both headed off to bed. I thought about what Lee had said as I brushed my teeth. He seemed to take it as a matter of course that he would be around by the time we graduated from high school. It almost seemed like a promise. If he'd said that a month ago, it would have really disturbed me, but now. . .

Now I would be more upset if he left than if he stayed. I didn't know if that was good or bad. It scared me a little that I cared so much. In some ways, it had been easier when I'd hated him. When did life suddenly become so complicated?

\* \* \*

"Hey, Jamie. . ." Phillip yelled for the umpteenth time.

"What now?" I reluctantly answered. Phillip was driving me crazy. I'd been trying to read the last chapter of my book for the past half hour, but his constant interruptions weren't making it easy.

"I'm bored," he complained. "Want to play a game?"

"I've got to finish my assignment for school," I explained again. "You should actually try it some time."

"Why would I want to do that?" He flopped into the big overstuffed chair, his legs dangling over the arm. "It's almost May; only one more month and I'm out of there."

"Then you should have gone into town with Lee."

"Nah," he said, drumming his foot absently against the side of the chair in that way he had that really drove me crazy. "I didn't want to get in the way."

Phillip may have had a low boredom threshold, but I guess I couldn't fault his sensitivity. Lee had left about an hour ago, supposedly to pick up some popcorn and stuff for after dinner. But Phillip and I both knew the real reason for trip. The general store had the only telephone in town; he'd

just wanted to check in with Mom. Lee may have thought he was fooling us, but I'd seen the way he kept glancing at his watch. It was obvious that he really wanted to talk to her.

"Aw, c'mon," Phillip cajoled again, "you can do that any time. Let's have some fun."

"All right," I sighed, knowing he'd never stop pestering me if I didn't agree. "But you find the game and set it up." That would give me just enough time to finish. Phillip was unbelievably slow when it came to selecting a game to play.

I was just closing the book when I heard him. "Hey, Jamie," he called, excitement creeping into his voice. "Look at this."

"Where are you?" I asked. He didn't sound like he was in our room.

"In here," he yelled again, and I followed his voice to the other bedroom.

"What are you doing?" I asked nervously. "This is Lee's room, you shouldn't be in here."

"Yeah, but look at all the neat stuff in his closet." He stretched to his full height, struggling to reach the stack of games that were piled on the top shelf. They were covered with a thick layer of dust, as if they'd been forgotten for some time. "Come on," he urged, "I'll give you a boost, and you can get them down."

"I don't know, Phillip," I told him uncertainly. "Lee told us to stay out of here."

"Don't be such a geek," he taunted. "We're not going to hurt anything, I just want to get a look at those games. But if you don't want to. . ." He looked me straight in the eye. "Gee, Zorba, no wonder the guys keep calling you that nickname."

I glared back at him, unable to let the challenge pass. "Okay, okay. But then we've gotta get out of here."

He nodded, interlacing his hands as I stepped into them. "Just a little higher," I told him as I strained to reach the top.

"Hurry up," Phillip groaned through gritted teeth.

"I've almost got it." My hands closed around the lowest box just as Phillip let go. We both ended up in a heap on the floor, the entire contents of the closet shelf crashing down on top of us.

"Now you've done it," Phillip grumbled, staring at the jumble of boards and game pieces.

"Me?" I responded angrily. "You're the one who let go."

He looked at me in embarrassment. "Sorry," he mumbled apologetically. "I guess you were heavier than I thought."

'Well, come on, lets clean up this mess.'

We scrambled around on hands and knees, cramming the stuff back into their boxes. I was just putting the last cover on when Phillip called out in excitement, "Hey, Jamie, look at this!"

He held his find gingerly by the handle, letting it dangle from his extended arm. It was a gun.

"Geez, Phillip, put that down. Where'd you find it, anyway?"

"It must have been on the shelf, with the other boxes," he replied, a look of awe on his face. "Do you think it's Lee's?"

"Well, if it is, he'll kill you for going through his stuff."

Phillip shrugged. "Here, hold it while I check and see if it had a box or something."

Before I could object, Phillip thrust the gun into my hand. "What do you think Lee's doing with a gun?" Phillip wondered, raising his eyebrows at me before turning his attention to the back of the closet.

"I haven't got a clue," I said, inspecting the small object with my eyes. It was heavier than I thought and felt uncomfortably cold in my hand. "Why don't you ask him?"

"Why don't you ask me what?" The sound of Lee's voice took us both by surprise; we'd been so engrossed in Phillip's 'find' that we hadn't even heard him come in.

"It's nothing," I mumbled, turning in an attempt to hide our discovery.

It only took a second for Lee to figure out what was going on. I watched his expression slowly change from puzzlement to worry and, finally, anger. "Give it to me, Jamie," he said in a tone that left no room for discussion. I immediately obeyed, unable to meet Lee's eye as Phillip and I both scrambled to our feet.

Lee pressed something, releasing a piece about six inches long, then he cautiously looked inside. I watched his look turn to relief. "At least Crump wasn't stupid enough to leave it loaded," he muttered, still frowning as he deftly disassembled the gun. He squatted down, placing the pieces back into the box that lay upside down in the corner. Then he slowly rose and looked down at us, his hands folded across his chest. I suddenly realized that he was really tall.

"What did you two think you were doing with that?" he said, his anger clearly evident.

"We. . . I, uh, was just looking for a game to play," Phillip stammered. I don't think I'd ever seen him look so scared. I suddenly wished I was at school or at home. . . anywhere but here.

"I specifically told you to stay out of here, didn't I?" Lee asked.

We both nodded numbly.

"Do you two have any idea how stupid that was? You could have been hurt or worse - you could have ended up hurting each other."

"It wasn't loaded, you said so," Phillip replied, his voice little more than a whisper, while I stood by, unable to utter a sound.

"But you didn't know that, did you?"

"No. I'm really sorry, Lee. We. . .I. . . didn't mean to snoop. . . Jamie didn't want to, I was the one who made him."

Lee started say something, then suddenly stopped. He took a slow, deep breath and ran his hand roughly through his hair before exhaling loudly. "C'mon, fellas, let's sit down," he told us quietly. "I need to talk to you."

We sat on the edge of the bed and Lee pulled up a chair and sat across from us. "This is not a toy," he said, holding the box out so we could see the gun. "I'm not going to sit here and preach to you about it, because I'm sure you both knew better than to touch it." His eyes narrowed a bit. "It's a serious weapon that can cause serious consequences. You'd know that if you'd ever seen someone shot."

"Like Mom," I said quietly. I couldn't imagine how it must have felt to witness something like that. I wondered uneasily if there had been a lot of blood. I didn't want to think about my mom, hurt like that - like people you see on TV. It was just too scary to think about.

"Yeah," he said finally, taking another deep breath. "Like your mom." Lee's eyes had a faraway look and I suddenly realized he must have felt like that, too. He stared at the floor for a minute, carefully studying the floorboards.

"Look, guys," he told us in a serious voice, "I can understand you're being curious and not stopping to think. Believe me, I was your age once, and I did a lot of stupid things myself. But firearms are nothing to fool around with, even out of curiosity. Do you both understand?"

We nodded our assent.

"Okay. Now, to answer the question you're both dying to ask, no, this gun is not mine. It belongs to my friend Al. He's an, um, collector, and this is a collector's piece."

"How can you tell?" I inquired, Lee's reaction to this mishap making me feel bolder.

"It's a Colt 1911 .45 ACP," Lee said quickly. "It was an early government model. This particular one was manufactured in 1950." He pointed to some writing on the front of the gun. "You can see the production series number stamped on the barrel. When the clip is out and the safety is engaged,

then you can assume it's empty. But," he added sternly, "You still have to look to make sure there isn't a bullet left in the magazine. Right in here." He showed us quickly before he closed the lid on the box. "Now you don't have to be curious. Or ever touch this again."

"You sure know a lot about guns," Phillip said admiringly.

"Yeah, well, my, um, uncle was a collector, too," he finished, a funny half smile on his face. He suddenly grew silent, as if he was lost for a minute in some private memory. "The truth of the matter is," he confessed, "he caught me doing pretty much the same thing when I was a little younger than you, Jamie."

"Is that when he taught you all that?" I asked curiously.

"Not exactly," Lee said grimly. "My uncle had other ways of making a point, ones that didn't allow for sitting comfortably when he was finished." He exhaled loudly. "Enough said on this subject. How about a quick game before dinner?"

We must have looked confused, because he added with a grin, "Wasn't that what you guys were looking for in here?"

"Well, yeah," Phillip answered, not quite daring to hope he'd gotten off that easily. "But. . . that's all you're going to do to us?"

"Well, I figure you both know how dumb it was to touch that gun," Lee said in an even voice, replacing the box on the top shelf of the closet. "And that nothing like that will ever happen again, right?"

We both readily agreed that it wouldn't.

"Besides," he continued, "when you tell your mother about this, she'll be sure to punish you enough for both of us."

"Oh, no," Phillip groaned, "That's even worse. Mom really hates guns."

I was inclined to agree. "Yeah," I said glumly. "She'll kill us."

"I know," Lee grinned. "But don't worry - you won't be alone. She'll probably kill me too, for letting you find it. Come on, let's play that game before dinner. Loser has to tell her."

\* \* \*

I couldn't seem to sleep that night. I watched Phillip in the bunk across from me, dead to the world, and I wondered again how he could do it. Didn't anything ever bother him? Maybe he was just better at hiding it.

Lee didn't seem to be able having any better luck sleeping than I was. I'd heard him roaming around restlessly in the other room earlier. I could see the light still burning, so I knew he was awake. I

tossed and turned a few times, trying to decide what to do, before making up my mind. Taking a deep breath, I headed out to join him.

"Jamie?" he asked, surprised. He was sitting in the big chair Phillip had occupied earlier, reading some kind of report that he hastily slipped beneath the newspaper.

"I couldn't sleep," I said, quietly watching him as I sat down on the sofa.

"Neither could I," he admitted. "So I thought I'd catch up on some work."

"Reading always makes me tired, too," I said, grabbing my book from the end table. We sat across from each other, both working for a while in companionable silence. The wind had picked up again; I could hear the tree branches scraping against the roof. I tried to concentrate, but it wasn't any use. I finally gave up, closing the covers of the book, and looked up to find Lee watching me.

"Hey, how about some hot chocolate?" he asked before I had a chance to say anything.

"Yeah, sure," I replied, a little surprised by the offer. Somehow I didn't quite see Lee Stetson as a hot chocolate kind of guy.

"Your mother converted me," he laughed, and I realized my face had betrayed my thoughts again. I really needed to try and do something about that. It wasn't too cool when everyone could tell exactly what you were thinking.

I never knew what was going on in Lee's head, I thought solemnly as he returned a few minutes later with two mugs. The night was kind of cool for the end of April and it really hit the spot. We sat in silence for a while, just the two of us, drinking our hot chocolate, each of us busy with our own thoughts. I watched as he looked around the room, his gaze finally settling on the camera I'd left on the table by the window. I caught his eye, and he smiled.

"So, did you get all the pictures you wanted?" he asked, his thumb rubbing across the smooth porcelain mug.

"Almost," I answered, setting my own mug down on the small coffee table. I walked over and picked up the camera. "I'm still having some trouble getting some of the features to work properly. Do you know how this works?" I handed it to him and waited as he looked through the lens, fiddling with the shutter control a few times.

"Actually, I haven't got a clue. Your pictures are already much better than mine," he laughed. "Tell you what - I have a friend who's a photo journalist. How about if I see if we can spend an afternoon with him? He'd be able to help you more than I can."

"That sounds really neat. Do you think he'd do it?"

"I'm sure he would. Bart's a great guy. His wife is in the same business. Actually, they're the ones who helped me pick out this camera last month."

I looked at him in confusion. Lee had told me the camera had been sitting around gathering dust for a long time. He must have realized his mistake, because he suddenly became extraordinarily interested in the rim of his cocoa mug.

"You went out and bought a camera just so you could loan it to me?" I asked quietly.

"Well, um, yeah," he stammered, smiling contritely. "I thought it might be something you'd be interested in. And I know how your mother feels about expensive gifts, so. . ." He shrugged his shoulders, looking away in embarrassment.

I couldn't believe he'd cared enough to go to all that trouble. Especially after the way I'd treated him. "Thanks," I told him, shyly returning his smile. "I appreciate it."

He nodded, and I suddenly found the courage to say what had been on my mind all night. "Lee. . . I'm really sorry about this afternoon." It felt good to get that off my chest and I let out a deep sigh of relief.

"I know you are, Jamie," he told me kindly. He hesitated a minute, then continued. "It just really scared me, thinking about what could have happened if. . . well, let's just say I'm glad it turned out the way it did."

"We shouldn't have been in there after you asked us not to," I said in a low voice. "And I should have just told Phillip no when he handed me the gun. It's just that when he called me a geek, like Tommy did that day at school. . ." I took a deep breath. "I probably shouldn't have slugged Tommy that day, either, it's just that he made me so mad. . ."

"I know. Sometimes it seems like punching someone will make you feel better, but it really doesn't solve anything, does it?"

"No, it doesn't."

He smiled compassionately. "It's hard to do the right thing, especially when you're worried about what other people will think of you," he told me, and I could tell he understood exactly what I'd been feeling. "But you should never be ashamed of standing up for what you believe in. Even if everyone else tells you it's wrong. Try to remember that next time."

"I will," I promised. I watched thoughtfully as he finished his drink. "Lee, if you want, I'll tell Mom that this wasn't your fault. I wouldn't want her to be mad at you for something stupid we did, or not let us come again."

He looked at me with a strange expression, and I added hastily, "I mean, if you wanted to invite us again."



"Of course I want to," he said, a funny inflection in his voice. He seemed genuinely affected by what I'd said. "I'm glad you had a good time. I wasn't too sure if you'd want to come."

"I probably wouldn't have a couple of months ago," I admitted. If he was going to be honest with me, then I felt I should return the favor. "But things are kind of different now."

He smiled when I said that, and I could tell he'd sensed a change in our relationship, too. Maybe all of this had been just as tough for him, I thought suddenly. Maybe change wasn't easy, no matter how old you were.

"Lee," I asked abruptly, "Are you and Mom. . ." I wavered, wanting to ask the question, but afraid to at the same time. He didn't press me to finish, merely waited patiently until I was ready. "Do you think you and Mom will get married?"

He looked at me thoughtfully. "Would it bother you if we did?"

"I asked you first," I grinned, and he shifted uncomfortably in his chair. Adults always turned things around on you when they were trying to avoid a straight answer. I watched him struggle to find the appropriate words. "Tell me the truth, please," I added in a serious voice.

I watched his face grow equally solemn. "There's nothing I'd like better than to be an official part of your family," he said finally. "Especially if I had your blessing. Yours and Phillip's."

I traced the box-like patterns of the plaid sofa with my finger, frowning slightly while I tried to decide how that made me feel. Lee would probably be a pretty decent stepfather; he'd more than proved that today.

"So," he said after a few minutes of silence between us. "I answered your question; how about you answer mine?"

I looked up and encountered his eye. I recognized the look on his face instantly. I felt the same way at school when the teacher handed back a test. I knew there was nothing I could do to change the grade, but I was apprehensive anyway. In a minute I would have it in my hands; in a minute I would know. . .

"It wouldn't bother me," I said at last, suddenly feeling really tired. I leaned back into the sofa cushions. "Actually, it could be kind of cool. Sometimes I think Mom is lonely."

Lee looked over at me, watching as I tossed the small throw pillow into the air a few times. "Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah," I declared knowingly. "She never says anything, but she gets this funny look on her face. It's never there when you're around." He was quiet for a minute, that same look spreading across his features. "Maybe you should ask her," I told him softly.

"Maybe I should at that," he murmured, frowning a little. "When the time is right." He cleared his throat, turning to me with a questioning look. "But right now, how about if we keep this just between us?"

"Okay," I replied, smiling at the prospect of a secret. For once, I'd know something Phillip didn't.

"Hey, Lee," I said, as a sudden thought occurred to me. "If you and Mom got married, would we have to move?"

"I don't know," he said, a frown forming as he considered the question. He rubbed his fingers absently across his forehead. "When I was a kid and my uncle was dragging me all over the world, I always thought it would be great to have a place of my own," he confided. "You know, with some room to have horses and. . ." He looked over at me. "I know how hard it can be to move. I guess you guys wouldn't want to leave all your friends, huh?"

It would certainly be strange to have a different house, a different room. We'd lived on Maplewood Drive for as long as I could remember. But. . . that stupid 'Zorba the Geek' nickname suddenly flashed into my head. It might be equally nice to go to a school where no one had ever heard of my older brother - or any of his stupid friends. "I don't know about Phillip," I said cautiously, "But maybe I wouldn't mind."

"Well, we can discuss it," Lee promised, "but first things first. I really need to talk to your mother." He stood up and stretched, glancing over his shoulder at the clock by the fireplace. "And we should get some sleep. It's later than I thought."

"Okay," I agreed, picking up our mugs and taking them to the kitchen. I could hear Lee straightening up in the living room and switching off the lights. I headed down the short hall to my room, turning back to look at him one last time. My glasses slid down my nose and I pushed them back up again.

"Goodnight, Lee," I told him, adjusting them once again. I really needed to get those stupid frames fixed. Better yet, I should just get contacts. Mom seemed to think I was too young, but maybe I could get Lee to talk to her. I'd ask him about it tomorrow.

I headed off to bed with a grin, Lee's 'goodnight' echoing in my ears.

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**PART FOUR:**  
**AMANDA KING STETSON**  
**"LETTING GO"**

"Oh. . . my. . . gosh!"

I closed my eyes, breathing heavily as my heartbeat sought a normal rhythm. Lee pulled me against him, our legs tangling intimately beneath the covers, his own slightly breathless laugh reverberating in my ears.

"Only you could say a thing like that in a moment like this."

I twisted in his arms, looking up to find his eyes staring at me with more than a hint of amusement.

"Can I help it if you drove everything else right out of my head?" I teased, my cheeks flushing under the growing intensity of his gaze. Lee could say more with one look than he could with a thousand words. I reached up to brush a few dampened strands of hair from his forehead. "Besides," I told him with a grin, "as I recall, those words once saved my life."

"That's true," he laughed, and I knew he recalled the day he'd rescued me from my surgically altered double as clearly as I did. "You were an original even then, Amanda King."

"The name's Stetson, Stetson," I chided, driving my point home with a few well-placed kisses. "And don't you forget it."

"How could I?" he whispered, reaching over to pull me across him. "Especially after the last few hours. What you've been doing to me, Mrs. Stetson, should be illegal." He laughed again, a warm, rumbling sound from deep inside his chest.

"I'm happy to break the law with you any time, Scarecrow," I murmured, snuggling into his arms. I felt his hand brush through my hair, absently twirling a few stray waves around his fingers. The even rise and fall of his breathing soothed me to drowsy contentment. Moments like these occurred all too infrequently in our mystery marriage, and I hated to break the spell.

"Can you stay?" Lee asked almost plaintively, his words echoing my feelings.

"No," I replied, reluctantly pulling away. "I've got to go . . . Mother. . . then the boys will be home and. . . well, you know."

"Yeah," he agreed despondently. "I know."

"Lee, I. . ." My words sputtered off, my gift of gab failing me miserably. What was there to say, anyway? In the few short months since our wedding, we'd said it all a hundred times.

He made no move to stop me as I left his bed. I bent to collect the clothing that had, in our earlier haste, landed unceremoniously around the room. "Have you seen my. . ."

"Right here." He smiled as he playfully tossed my pink satin bra in my direction. The painful moment had passed, and we'd managed to narrowly avoid another argument. Resigned to the inevitable, we dressed in companionable silence. He walked me to my car, the way he always did when our evenings came to a precipitous close, leaning in to kiss me goodbye through the open window. As I drove home

from his D.C. apartment to my empty bed in Arlington, I wondered once again how we could ever make this work.

\* \* \*

I'd always had a very logical mind.

Lee used to roll his eyes whenever I said that, but it was true. So how I'd become so tangled in this web of deceit is anyone's guess. Although, it probably had something to do with a pair of the most beautifully expressive hazel eyes I'd ever seen.

They'd looked right into my soul when he'd suggested this 'mystery marriage', and I'd somehow found myself in complete agreement. I think we both wanted to be married so badly that we never stopped to look past the actual ceremony to the difficult road ahead.

If there was another reason, well - I guess I didn't really want to think about that, either. My relationship with Lee Stetson was very complicated.

I loved him with a passion I was only now beginning to comprehend, but it hadn't always been that way. In the beginning, I wasn't even sure if I liked him. The man had the most aggravatingly presumptuous air about him.

Of course, we had both changed a great deal since that fateful day when Scarecrow first met Mrs. King. The Lee I loved had always been there, buried beneath the layers of Scarecrow's insecurity, waiting to be set free. The same way I'd hidden behind the image of solid, dependable Amanda, divorced housewife and mother.

"Tell me, my dear," Lee's old flame Elisa Danton had whispered conspiratorially as she'd pulled me into her hospital room. "Are you the one who has clipped our Scarecrow's wings so thoroughly?"

I could feel her skepticism as her eyes did a casual inventory. She was recuperating from the aftereffects of smoke inhalation and a mild concussion, injuries she'd sustained while Lee was consulting with her on a case. For some inexplicable reason, my husband seemed to feel responsible. To hear him tell it, she was practically at death's door, but the woman who reclined regally on that narrow, institutional bed seemed bursting with vitality to me.

Of course I'd read about her in the society columns for years, but she was even more breathtaking in person. A carefully cultivated blend of sultry sexuality and a polished, woman-of-the-world air, topped off with impeccable good taste. As she calmly sipped her pirated champagne, her perfectly manicured fingernails tinkling lightly on the rim of her glass, I realized that those wild rumors floating around the water cooler had at least some basis in fact. She was exactly Lee's type.

He rescued me before Elisa's third degree progressed too far, a nervous grin plastered on his face, and the three of us spent the next hour exchanging pleasantries. Life in Arlington suddenly seemed hopelessly ordinary compared to the French Riviera and the glitz of Washington society. As we said our goodbyes, Elisa leaned in to whisper something appropriately witty in Lee's ear. The smile that spread across his face brought that queasy feeling back to the pit of my stomach.

I wondered if somewhere deep down inside, he missed the glamour and excitement of all the Elisa Dantons he'd known.

The uneasiness persisted on the ride home, and by the time we reached my house, I wanted nothing more than to escape behind my 'typically suburban' white picket fence. I reached for the car door, but Lee pulled me back, silencing my protest with a tender kiss.

"Thank you," he told me in a low voice, his hand cupping my cheek.

"For what?" I asked shakily, resting my hand on his.

"For showing me what's really important in life." He smiled, brushing my bangs aside so he could look clearly into my eyes. "Do you know what Elisa said to me as we left?"

I shook my head, a little afraid of the answer.

"She said, 'You're a lucky man, Scarecrow'. She was right." He pressed his lips to mine again, adding in a gravelly whisper, "I love you, Mrs. Stetson."

I sighed and closed my eyes, my nostrils filled with the lingering scent of my favorite aftershave. Life certainly was strange sometimes. I'd spent the entire afternoon feeling outclassed by the glamorously sexy Elisa Danton and all the time, she'd been the one envying me.

"I'm the lucky one," I whispered in return, pulling him closer. "And I love you, too."

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I stepped inside my kitchen, shaking off the memories as I closed the back door.

"Hello?" I yelled to no one in particular. Except for the lone light burning in the den, the rooms were dark. Evidently Joe was late dropping the boys off, and Mother, once again, was nowhere to be found.

I flipped the switch by the wall, and the kitchen was bathed in light. That's when I spotted her note on the refrigerator.

'Amanda', she'd written. 'Out with Mr. Saunderson. Back later. Mother.'

It was something she'd say to a total stranger. Actually, a stranger would have gotten more information. Nothing in those few hastily scrawled words gave the slightest clue to what was really going on with her. If I didn't know better, I'd suspect she was leading a double life. Just like. . . Nah, I thought with a grin, it could never happen. Mother always avoided the train station, especially during the morning rush.

It's just that she had been acting so oddly since California. I couldn't figure it out. She'd been wonderful after I'd been shot; my rock to lean on, the way she'd always been all my life. I'd felt closer to her in that hospital room in California than I had in our own home in Virginia.

Maybe that was the heart of our problem. I knew I'd taken her for granted, brushing aside her comments about the long hours I put in at IFF. I really meant to spend more time with her, but then the telephone would inevitably ring and I would be off again, tossing her another implausible story. Which, for some unfathomable reason, she still seemed to believe.

Perhaps because of the special bond we'd shared when I was growing up. I was an only child, and Mother had put all of her energy into raising me. Even after I was a mother myself, that hadn't changed. The boys looked on her almost as if she was their second parent, especially with their father gone so much of the time. We weren't a family in the traditional sense, but we were a unit all the same. I really owed her a great deal.

That's why I hated lying to her, particularly about my personal relationship with Lee. I knew she hadn't bought that ridiculous cover story I'd fed her about our honeymoon. She certainly didn't seem surprised to discover we were together. Even though I'd obviously lied, she'd never once reproached me about it.

I didn't really expect to get off that easily, though. I knew once Mother returned home and had a little time to think, the inquisition would begin.

I braced myself for the onslaught that never came. If anything, she seemed strangely aloof. It wasn't like her at all, and her unaccustomed shortness hurt and confused me. I began to wonder if perhaps she might not be as thrilled with my relationship with Lee as she'd first appeared. My mother was actually a pretty liberated woman; a fact that had caused me no small amount of embarrassment on more than a few occasions. But maybe it was another matter entirely to see your only daughter practice what you preached.

I was certain things would soon revert to the status quo once we were all back on familiar ground, but they didn't. I returned from California only to find Mother a perplexing mass of contradictions. On my first night home, she'd been absolutely wonderful, just like her old self. She'd made all my favorite foods and welcomed Lee with open arms. Then a few weeks later, she began acting strangely indifferent to both of us. She threw herself back in to her ground school classes with unbridled zeal, determined to be off exploring the wild blue yonder in short order. What's more, she absolutely refused to take a break from her studies, even to discuss something as important as Jamie's problems. Which, according to her, could be summed up in just two words.

Lee Stetson.

"Phillip adores him," Mother informed me when I assured her that they all got along just fine. "But I'm not so sure about Jamie. Do you remember how Mrs. Truesdale's younger son acted when she fell in love?"

"Yeah," I replied thoughtfully. "He was pretty jealous."

"I rest my case," she stated flatly, her eyes glued to the flight simulation on the small computer screen. She wouldn't even look at me.

That's the way it'd been with us ever since. At least I'd been able to talk to Jamie about his feelings, but my mother still remained an enigma. Sometimes I'd turn and catch her watching me out of the corner of her eye, then just as quickly, she would look away, muttering softly to herself as she left the room. Other times she acted as if she wanted to give me a piece of her mind, then thought better of it. As strange as it seemed, I missed the game of twenty questions we used to play about my personal life. At least back then I knew she cared. Now. . .

The front door closed with a bang and I heard the boys' voices in the foyer. "Fellas, what did I say about slamming the door?"

"Sorry, Mom," Phillip called as they both thundered into the den, Joe trailing behind at a more decorous pace.

"Didn't mean to be late," he said with a smile. "We stopped for a bite to eat after the movie and some of Phillip's friends were there. . ." He shrugged his shoulders apologetically.

"Not a problem," I told him pleasantly. "I was just sitting here reading."

"Alone?" Jamie inquired, looking around the room curiously as he perched beside me on the arm of the sofa.

"All by myself," I assured him quickly. He seemed disappointed. He adjusted his glasses, the way he always did when he had something on his mind.

"How was the movie?" I asked, giving his knee a casual squeeze.

"It was okay. Phillip wanted to see 'Cheerleader Camp' but Dad said no."

"And I'm in total agreement," I added, tossing the throw pillow in his brother's direction.

Phillip laughed as he ducked into the chair, the pillow landing behind him with a soft thud. "Yeah, I couldn't get Lee to take us either."

I turned in time to see Joe quickly look away. As he stared distantly at the kitchen counter, I cleared my throat, concentrating my attention on the boys. "Okay, guys, time to hit the sack. You still have school tomorrow."

"Can we get a snack first?" Jamie asked.

"May we have a snack," I corrected automatically, while Joe faced his son in dismay, adding with a laugh, "I just fed you, how can you possibly be hungry?"

"That was an hour ago, Dad," Phillip exclaimed, as if that explained it all.

"Besides," Jamie teased, "he gave most of his pizza to Cindy Johnson."

"She was hungry, Worm Brain."

"Don't call your brother names," Joe and I said in unison. Laughing, I glanced at Joe. "Go on, guys, get your snack while I walk your dad out."

The boys sprinted for the kitchen, their mumbled goodbyes lost as their heads disappeared into the refrigerator. Joe and I walked silently to the door, pausing on the front step to say goodnight.

"Phillip sure is growing up fast," Joe remarked, turning towards me with a nostalgic smile.

"It's hard to believe he's going to be in high school in a few months." I folded my arms across my chest, watching as Joe shifted his weight from side to side. I could always tell when he had something on his mind.

"The boys seemed to have a good time on their weekend with Lee."

"Yeah, they all did," I replied, wondering where this was headed. I'd been thrilled when Lee had suggested that he take the boys on his own. I was working on an assignment for Beeman's class at the time and couldn't break away.

"Do you think it was wise?" Joe asked brusquely. "Letting them go off on their own?"

"They were fine, Joe," I told him, biting back the ruder response that sprang to mind. When he'd been half a world away, he didn't have the first idea about where I let his sons go or with whom. I found it more than a little annoying that he suddenly seemed so concerned.

"What's this really all about?" I asked suddenly. "I don't recall objecting when Carrie was over here all the time while I was recuperating in California."

"I don't have any objections to Lee," he returned defensively. "He seems like a great guy, and the boys certainly like him. It's his job that concerns me."

"As I recall, that job helped you out last year. . . and protected our sons from your enemies."

"I know that, Amanda, and believe me, I'm grateful. But that's just it. Trouble seems to go hand in hand with his - your - business. Look what happened to the two of you on your vacation."

I sighed, lightly fingering the small diamonds on my heart pendant. Since my accident, Joe had become very protective of his family. He'd given Lee a pretty hard time when I'd been out in California with Mother. I understood his concerns, but maybe it was time he understood mine, too.

"It wasn't a vacation, Joe," I began.



"Well, trip, interlude, whatever you two want to call it. . ."

"We generally refer to it as our honeymoon."

His head jerked up, his eyes focused tightly on mine. "Your honeymoon?"

I nodded. "Such as it was, anyway. Lee and I eloped in February."

We stood on the step, the minutes lengthening, and I was suddenly reminded of the day we'd signed the final divorce papers. There had been that same awkward silence as we'd left the lawyer's office, both of us knowing that our lives had irrevocably altered course. We still cared about each other - that would never change. We just didn't know how to get past the moment into the new relationship that lay ahead.

I heard Joe take a deep breath. "I didn't realize you were that serious. I should have," he stammered, his eyes fixed on a spot just over my shoulder. "I mean, when I found out you weren't in California on business. I know you don't take things like that lightly. It's just. . ." He exhaled loudly, rubbing the back of his neck absently as he looked up and finally caught my eye. "You haven't told anyone?"

"No," I answered, feeling more than a little guilty. "I intended to tell you, Joe, I really did - that day at lunch last January. You were so excited about your own engagement and. . . well, I just didn't know how."

"Why all the secrecy, Amanda?" he asked, his brows knit together in a frown. "If you love each other enough to get married. . ."

"For the same reasons you just mentioned. Our jobs, the boys - it seemed like a good idea at the time, but now. . ." I took a deep breath, the look on Lee's face as I'd left him earlier indelibly stamped on my mind. "We're still trying to deal with the aftershocks of what happened - my accident, work, the family. . . I haven't even told Mother any of this."

"Whew," he whistled, shaking his head.

"Yeah," I sighed.

"Where do you two go from here?" he asked gently. "I know you, Amanda, I know what you want from marriage. And it's not a part time husband. Across an ocean or across town - it all boils down to the same thing."

I laughed lightly. "How did you get so smart all of a sudden?"

"I wouldn't call it sudden. It only took me fifteen years and a lot of painful soul searching to figure things out."

I looked into the eyes of the man I'd known almost half my life and smiled. "Carrie's a lucky woman, Joe," I whispered softly.

"So is Lee." He reached his arms out, and I gratefully accepted his hug. "You know I only want the best for you," he murmured as I rested my head on his shoulder. "And you know I'll keep your secret. I just hope that it doesn't have to be for too long."

"Me, too." I sighed, breaking the embrace, and took a step away from him. "Thank you for being so great about everything. I didn't mean to tell you all this on the front doorstep. . ."

"Well," he grinned, "I vaguely recall asking you not to drop that particular bombshell over lunch, so I guess a doorstep is as good a place as any." He leaned in to kiss me. "Tell the boys I'll talk to them later in the week."

"Goodbye, Joe," I said, waving as I watched him walk to his car. I headed back inside, not too surprised to find the boys dawdling in the kitchen.

"Yeah, but it was the sixth time," Phillip joked, cramming the last bites of his sandwich into his mouth.

"Carrie kept asking if we'd been fitted for our tuxes," Jamie explained with a grin as he saw me. "I think they're getting nervous about the wedding."

"Give her a break," I told them. "Getting married is a frightening thing."

"I guess," Phillip laughed, "but I'm taking Lee's suggestion and playing the field."

"I'd say at fourteen, that's a pretty wise decision, Phillip." I smiled at my very grown up son, images of black books and little symbols running rampant in my head. I made a mental note to ask my husband exactly what kind of advice he'd been handing out.

"Okay, guys," I cajoled, clearing away the remainder of their feast. "It's time to hit the sack. It's not quite vacation yet, you know."

"Aww, Mom," Phillip grumbled, dutifully heading for the stairs.

Jamie lingered behind for a second, fiddling with his glasses for a moment. "You know, Lee was just kidding when he said it was good to play the field," he assured me solemnly. "He didn't mean anything by it."

"I'm sure he didn't," I agreed, touched by his new desire to defend Lee. They had certainly made giant strides towards friendship in the last month.

"Goodnight, Mom," Jamie called and we exchanged smiles. He stopped before he reached the stairs, turning back to give me quick hug and kiss. Then, barely concealing his embarrassment over actually expressing affection for his mother, he bolted for his room.

\* \* \*

"I can't believe you actually brought me here." I caught my husband's eye from across the table. Work had been especially hectic this week, with Lee wading through the backlog of cases in the Q-Bureau. Things had really piled up during his two-week 'Trojan Horse' hiatus, as we jokingly referred to the paid vacation he'd wrangled from Dr. Smyth after he and Francine had exposed Chernov's frame-up.

"I thought Emelio's was your favorite?" he asked, tossing aside the dessert menu.

"Oh, it is," I grinned. "It's just that when you said lunch, I kinda thought you had something else in mind." Our noontime excursions usually ended up at Lee's apartment, where he'd introduced me to his sure-fire recipe for the perfect meal - three parts lovemaking, one part 'lunchmaking'. I wondered how we'd ever lived without it.

I could see his thoughts were similarly engaged as he flashed me his sexiest smile. "Well, I was starting to feel a little guilty," he explained, self-consciously clearing his throat. "I think our, ah, 'lunches' are keeping you from getting your strength back. So I decided to actually feed you today."

"Hey, did you hear me complaining, Stetson?"

"No," he answered with an embarrassed grin, reaching out to take my hand in his. "But you still haven't gained back that weight you lost from the accident." I shivered as his thumb gently caressed my knuckles. Lee had wonderful fingers, long and thin. Sexy. Almost as beautiful as his eyes. I struggled to concentrate on what he was saying, not what he was doing.

"I worry about you, that's all."

I looked at him curiously. "Is that what all those little snacks of yours have been about?" I asked, his new fondness for the fattening desserts he insisted we share suddenly making perfect sense.

"Maybe," he responded, not quite meeting my eye. "Ever since California, you've been too thin, Amanda."

"Well, cheesecake and full course dinners in the middle of the afternoon aren't the answer."

"I've noticed," he laughed. "My plan appears to be a total loss. You haven't gained an ounce, but I think I've put on five pounds."

I smiled as he loosened his belt. "I do have a remedy for that."

"Oh yeah? What's that?"

"Exercise, Scarecrow, exercise."

"That's a tempting offer," he rejoined, glancing quickly around the room before bringing my hand to his lips. "But I have to meet Sally Wong in about an hour."

"One of your family?" I tried and failed to hide my concern.

Once again, he seemed to read my mind. "It's nothing serious, really. Besides, Francine's going with me."

"I really wish you'd let me help you, Lee," I told him, annoyed that he'd enlisted Francine's assistance yet again. "I am your partner, after all."

"Not until you're cleared for full field duty," he reminded me with a mischievous grin. "Which won't happen unless you eat."

"You are the most annoying man," I grumbled, unable to keep the exasperation from creeping into my voice. "I'm honestly doing the best I can. The only time I've ever been able to put on weight was when I was pregnant. Then I resembled a beached whale. Believe me, that you wouldn't want to see."

"I don't know," he whispered softly. "Maybe I wouldn't mind." His voice had a wistful tone I'd never heard before, and there was a look in his eyes that could almost be described as longing.

"Are you serious?" I asked skeptically, not quite sure how I felt about the subject. We'd never really talked about having a baby, and I guess on some level, I hadn't let myself think that Lee really wanted a family of his own. Or what it would mean to my career if he did.

"Yeah," he answered with an embarrassed laugh, "I guess maybe I am." He looked away, unwilling to meet my eye.

I studied my coffee cup, frowning as I noted that the gilt edging on the rim was chipped in three places. "How long have you been thinking about this?"

"It's been on my mind for a while." I heard him exhale loudly. I didn't need to look up to know that his hand was nervously smoothing his perfectly combed hair or that the carefully masked anxiety had crept back into his eyes. "I've had a lot of time alone to think lately, Amanda."

I sighed, knowing exactly where the conversation was headed. This really had nothing to do with whether or not we should have a child. It had everything to do with the frustrating limitations imposed by our mystery marriage.

"We should talk about this," I told him, resting my head wearily against the back of the booth.

"We do nothing but talk," he mumbled, still refusing to look at me. "Maybe it's time we actually did something about it."

His tone stung me. "I know things aren't the way we want them to be right now," I responded defensively, "but it won't always be that way." We were quickly reaching our usual impasse. I could

detect the same frustration I'd heard in his voice a few weeks ago when Billy had ordered him to New York and ruined our carefully planned weekend. I reached across the table to gently rub his arm. "It's just going to take some time."

"If you say so." He rose abruptly, shaking off my hand to rifle through his pockets. "But I don't have time for this now. I have to get ready for my meet." He removed some folded bills, depositing them on the table in a careless heap. "I'll try to call you later."

"Lee. . ." I began, not wanting to end our wonderful lunch this way. Despite our intimacy, Lee was still a master at avoiding confrontation when he wanted to be.

"Later, okay?" he said, his clipped words plainly stating that he'd already slipped into work-mode. "Francine's waiting."

He headed for the door without so much as a goodbye glance. And I was left with the remains of a lunch for which I had no appetite and a memory of the times I'd been the one heading off with him instead of Francine.

Life wasn't the way either one of us wanted it to be these days. And I didn't have the slightest clue how to even begin to fix it.

\* \* \*

It was late when I finally headed for bed. The boys and I had gone out for pizza to celebrate their baseball team's fourth consecutive win, and it had taken them a while to settle down for the night. Even my usual threats about unfinished homework fell on deaf ears. A sure sign that summer was just around the corner.

I tried calling Lee a few times, but he either wasn't home, or he was letting the machine pick up. I toyed briefly with heading over there, but Mother was out again, and I didn't expect her back until late. I resigned myself to wait until morning, the uneasy feeling I'd been fighting growing stronger as the evening wore on.

It followed me into my dreams. I was back at UVA, about to take my final exams when I suddenly realized that I had never attended a single class. My panic grew stronger as the exam proctor rapped his knuckles on the desk, calling the group to order. If only he would stop that annoying knocking. . .

I sat up in a sleepy daze as I suddenly realized the sound was coming from outside. Exhaling in relief, I jumped out of bed, stopping to shut my bedroom door on the way to the window. It was stuck again, and I could hear Lee venting his frustration as I pried it open.

"Watch out," I warned as he awkwardly stumbled through the small opening.

"Damn that thing," he muttered as he almost fell inside, grabbing the knee he'd banged against the windowsill.

"Could you please be quiet? You'll wake the entire house." I was half asleep and still a little annoyed by his behavior at lunch. "What are you doing here, anyway?" I hissed, heading back to bed.

"I, ah. . . I don't really know. I was just driving, and suddenly I ended up over here."

His hastily whispered words caused goose bumps to break out on my arms. I could hear his uneven breathing from across the room, and I instantly knew this had nothing to do with the silly difference of opinion we'd had earlier. I switched on the light.

"What happened?"

His eye caught mine, his lips pursed tightly together. "Sally Wong was killed tonight."

"Oh, Lee. . . I'm so sorry."

I wanted to comfort him, but I wasn't sure how. Lee had lost so many people in his life, the usual words hackneyed from overuse. In the end, I simply crossed the room, wrapping my arms tightly around him as I drew him close.

He returned the embrace, leaning in to rest his forehead wearily against my shoulder for a moment before pulling back to look at me. The pain in his eyes tugged at my heart. I pulled him against me again, holding him until his breathing began to relax and I felt the tension leave his body. Then, taking his hand, I slowly led him to the bed.

"Do you want to tell me about it?"

He sat quietly beside me, hesitant, almost apprehensive. My hand still rested in his, his fingers tenderly tracing mine as the words spilled out. "It was Brody, Amanda. He's reactivated his network. That's what Sally wanted to tell me this afternoon. They found her tonight a block from M street with a bullet in her head. It had to be the Death Broker. He must have found out about the meeting somehow. . ." He ran his hand through his hair, his fingers clenching around the last strands before he finally let go. "I don't know," he added quietly, "maybe I wasn't as careful as I should have been. . ."

I tilted his chin up, forcing him to look at me. "You know that's ridiculous," I told him, my hand soothing his brow. "You didn't put that bullet in her head."

"I may as well have. She was part of my family, Amanda. My responsibility."

"You didn't force her to be your contact. She knew the risk she was taking. She did it for the same reason we do - she wanted to make a difference."

He raised his eyebrows skeptically. "Tell that to her family. She had three children and two grandchildren. You didn't have to look at their faces when they heard the news."

"I know," I whispered, wondering whose faces he'd really seen tonight - Sally's family or our own. Lee had faced this situation many times in the past, but having someone of your own to lose made everything more personal. This family stuff was still virgin territory to him.

"Come here," I whispered, giving his shirt a gentle tug. He allowed me to pull him down on the bed, and I took him in my arms, cradling his head against my chest. "You're freezing, Lee," I gasped, for the first time noticing how cold he felt. I shivered myself as I ran my hands vigorously across his back.

"I gave my jacket to Sally's daughter," he said simply.

"Get under the covers, and let's get you warmed up."

He nodded, kicking off his shoes as he slipped beneath the quilt. I reached to turn out the light, glancing questioningly at him. He had finally told me that tale of his week in the Istanbul catacombs, and I understood why the dark still bothered him on occasion.

He smiled at my hesitation. "I'm okay as long as you're here," he sighed, and I knew he was talking about more than simply the light.

I settled down beside him and we held each other tightly, the darkness no longer an enemy because we were together. We rested in each other's arms, each drawing quiet comfort from the other. Words weren't necessary, and I automatically slowed my breathing to match his. The perfectly synchronized rise and fall of our chests produced a feeling of intimacy that was deeply comforting.

We lay that way for a while, my head in the crook of his neck, his hand gently rubbing my back. Soon I noticed a subtle change to his rhythmic stroking, his fingers creeping lower on every pass. I shifted uneasily in his arms. Lifting my head, I started to remind him that Mother and the boys were right down the hall when I encountered his mouth. His kiss quickly turned passionate, and I could feel the familiar fire beginning to build.

"Oh, Amanda," he whispered in shaky tones before I could protest. "I need you so badly." His lips covered mine again, his tongue darting into my mouth. I tried to think of a good reason for him to stop doing what he was doing, but I couldn't come up with one. My own need to offer him the physical comfort he so desperately wanted was just as great. It was amazing how quickly our natural responses had altered in the brief months since our marriage. Before, words alone would have sufficed; now, our bodies demanded our physical union as well.

His hands moved quickly over my body, his touch insistent. I responded in kind, making quick work on the buttons of his shirt, my lips pressing against the smooth flesh of his chest. I felt his fingers trace the curve of my hip, and my breathing quickened as my mouth sought his again.

When he finally broke the kiss, we were both breathing hard. He shrugged out of his shirt, tossing it by the side of the bed. I heard the distinctive sound of a zipper opening, and I quickly pulled off my nightgown as Lee rid himself of the rest of his clothes. Our lips met again, and I moaned against his mouth, the way I did every time I felt his skin next to mine.

"Shh," he admonished, his fingers tangling in my hair. "They'll hear us."

I pulled back, laughter and disbelief mixing as I looked at him. "You picked a fine time to remember that, Stetson."

The urgency that had driven our actions instantly dissolved. He looked into my eyes, his harsh breathing slowing to a normal rhythm. Reaching up, he used his hands to brush the hair from my face before tenderly resting them on my cheeks. "I'm sorry," he said in a low voice.

"For what?" I answered softly.

"For everything," he replied, planting a gentle kiss on my forehead. "For barging in here in the middle of the night, for 'sweeping you off your feet' like that. . ."

"Oh, that," I grinned. "That was my pleasure. Well, almost."

I heard his quiet laugh as he pulled me against him. "Damn, I really needed to see you tonight. Sometimes. . ."

"What?" I whispered, softly encouraging him.

"This job. . . it can just be so. . ."

"So. . ." I prompted again, trying to decipher exactly what he was trying to tell me.

"I don't know," he mumbled almost indistinctly against my hair. "I've spent so many years out on there, trying to make a difference because I thought I could. But nothing ever seems to change. It's like plugging your fingers in a dike; you stop one leak, and before you know it, another one pops up."

I sighed against his chest, my fingers gently stroking his biceps. "You sound suspiciously like you want to quit, Scarecrow."

"Quit the Agency? No." He tightened his embrace, almost as if he needed something to hold on to. "Quit the field? Maybe."

"I can't believe I'm hearing you say that."

"Remember what you told me when Paul Barnes left, Amanda? Even the great ones have to know when to call it quits? I think maybe it's time."

"Is this because of me?" I asked guardedly. "Because of what happened on our honeymoon?"

"Partly, maybe." I felt his lips brush through my hair. "Yeah, what happened scared me, but it's more than that. It's Dr. Smyth sitting in my office, ordering me to do 'whatever it takes' to get



information from Elisa Danton. It's telling Sally's family what happened to her tonight. It's that feeling of helplessness when Birol had you, knowing I couldn't do a damn thing about it. It's the detachment that's necessary to work the field properly - detachment I don't have anymore. Or even want."

I looked up, turning his head towards mine. "I'm not sure I have it, either, you know."

He leaned closer, gently kissing me. "I'm sorry about the way I acted at lunch."

"It's okay." I felt the tender touch of his fingers against my skin, and I burrowed deeper into his embrace.

"It's not okay. I'm sorry for suggesting this ridiculous mystery marriage in the first place, then complaining all the time because we can't be together. I know I'm not being fair. I do love you, you know, even if I'm not around to say it as often as I'd like."

"I really do understand," I whispered, my foot moving soothingly along the length of his calf. "It's hard for me, too. But at least I have Mother and the boys. You're the one who's been left on the outside here."

He silently acknowledged the truth of that statement, and I felt his arms tighten around me. I snuggled against him, the warmth of our bodies momentarily dissolving the cold reality of our separate lives. His heart beat steadily against my ear, and I lay there listening to the comforting sound until I couldn't stay still any longer. Turning, I kissed him deeply, opening my mouth as I pressed my lips to his.

"Amanda," he warned in a whisper, struggling to sit up. "Your mother and the boys. . ."

"Are safely down the hall," I responded, pushing my earlier concern to the back of my mind as I rolled on top of him. I lowered my mouth to his, nibbling lightly against his lips. "You started this, now I intend to finish it. And besides," I told him tenderly, "I love you, too."

He leaned forward, capturing my mouth again, his kiss filled with tenderness this time as well as desire. I could always tell exactly what Lee was feeling by the way his lips touched mine. That he could convey so much with something as simple as a kiss never ceased to amaze me. Maybe it was because we'd both loved each other long before we'd ever allowed ourselves that luxury.

His lips enveloped mine again, and I sighed, surrendering myself to the sensation. He opened my mouth with his tongue, closing his arms around me as he rolled us over. His body pressed familiarly against mine, the bed creaking slightly as he shifted his weight. He stopped abruptly, startled by the sound, and pulled back to look at me with a slightly puzzled expression.

"What?" I gasped, slightly breathless and more than a little frustrated.

"Does this seem strange to you?" he asked, his own voice roughened with the desire he seemed bent on extinguishing.

"Your constant mood breakers?" I teased. "Now that you mention it. . ."

"No, I mean 'this' . . . you, me, here in your bedroom." He shifted his weight to his left side, leaning his head against his hand as he looked down into my eyes. "I just realized this is the first time we've ever made love in this house. . ."

His words trailed off, but I knew what he meant. In this house I'd once shared with Joe. I started to give him a flip answer, but something in his eyes stopped me. I suddenly remembered the insecurities I'd felt on our wedding night. In retrospect, they seemed so silly, but at the time, they had been very real. I knew my history with Joe was as difficult for him as his past was for me.

"We both have ghosts to deal with, Lee," I told him gently. "Is it really so different from your apartment?"

"But that's why I moved last summer," he told me in a quiet voice. "I didn't want us to have any unwelcome reminders. And I think maybe that's part of the reason I had the house-hunting bug last November. You know, before all this secrecy nonsense started."

I remembered it all too well. At the time, his plans had been a little overwhelming, but right now softball games with the boys in our own backyard seemed pretty appealing to me, too. Somehow every conversation led us right back to the same point, and I sighed, wondering how we could ever hope to crawl out from underneath the tangled mess of our good intentions.

"I don't know," I told him truthfully, answering both his spoken and unspoken questions. "Maybe it should seem strange, but it doesn't. It's been a long time since Joe and I shared this house. And even when we did, he was here so seldom. . . sometimes I felt like he was just visiting in our lives, you know?"

He nodded, a slight frown crossing his brow, and I reached up, smoothing the lines with my finger. "This room has some pretty good memories for us, too," I whispered. "As I recall, we were both standing right over there when we said 'I love you' for the first time. That seems more real to me now than anything that happened more years ago than I can count."

"I believe you were staring at a bowl of tutti-frutti when I told you that for the first time," he joked, rubbing his body tantalizingly against me, the somber mood broken at last.

"Phone calls don't count." My arms encircled his neck, pulling him closer. "Now, do you want to continue this conversation," I asked in my most tempting voice, "or make some new memories of our own?"

His face broke out in a smile, the one that always reduced me to a puddle of jelly. "Not another word," he murmured as his lips covered mine. "I promise."

"I intend to hold you to that," I whispered, pushing him down on the mattress. Pressing my lips against his chest, I kissed him again and again. I could feel him shifting restlessly and I paused for

the briefest of seconds, our eyes meeting in perfect understanding. Then, determined to drive all coherent thought from my husband's mind once and for all, I slid the tip of my tongue across his flesh. His response was immediate, and I closed my eyes, all the ghosts finally evaporating for both of us. I could tell the effect I was having by the way his body tensed, and I heard him struggle to stifle his usually vocal reaction.

His hands gripped my arms, stilling my movements and pulling me astride him. His fingers brushed over my skin, pausing slightly as he encountered the permanent reminder of our honeymoon. I heard his quick intake of breath as he traced my scar with light, loving strokes. Even in the shadowy darkness, I couldn't mistake the love on his face.

I bent low over him, and our lips met again in a slow, open-mouthed kiss that set my soul on fire. Every sensation seemed heightened - the erotic sound of his quickened breathing, the scratch of his beard against my cheek, the faint scent that was unmistakably Lee. I wanted him so badly, needed to be part of him; it was almost as essential as breathing.

"I love you, Lee," I murmured breathlessly when we were finished, and his arms quickly enfolded me.

"Oh, Amanda," he whispered, his lips against my forehead, my body nestled close against the warm protection of his chest. I sighed contentedly, filled with the pure joy that our lovemaking always brought. I hated the lonely nights, the cold emptiness of the bed we couldn't share. I sighed again, wishing he didn't have to go. I shut my eyes for just a second, idly wondering how much it would cost to soundproof my bedroom walls. . .

\* \* \*

"Phillip, give that back to me!"

"You'll have to catch me first, Worm Brain."

The usual sounds of the boys' morning routine reached me from a distance. I must have overslept again, I thought drowsily as I nestled deeper under the covers. I'd always been the first one up in our household, but ever since California, more than a few mornings had found me clinging to the edges of sleep.

"Did you take my math homework?"

"No," came his brother's muffled reply. "Check your gym bag, that's where you usually keep it." He sounded like he had a mouthful of toothpaste. It must be later than I thought if they were already in the bathroom.

"Jamie, I'm not kidding." Phillip's voice rose a few decibels, and I debated whether or not it was time to play peacemaker. I yawned and stretched, rolling over on my back as I rubbed the sleep from my eyes. I bumped up against something under the covers and I reached out tentatively.

"Lee," I exclaimed in horror, last night flashing through my head with perfect clarity. "You're still here?!"

"Hmm?" he murmured, his arm automatically reaching out to pull me against him.

"You've got to get out of here," I hissed. "If Mother or the boys find you. . . oh, my gosh, I'll never talk my way out of it."

"I'm sorry," he told me in a strangled whisper, the reality of the situation dawning. "I don't know what happened. The last thing I remember, I was about to get up and leave."

"I know, I only meant to close my eyes for a minute, too." I looked at Lee, the sheepish expression on his face making me smile in spite of the circumstances. We really were a unique pair; it wasn't every husband who had to apologize for waking up in the same bed as his wife. "They'll be downstairs in a minute. Then you can. . ."

"Give it back, Phillip, it's mine," Jamie yelled, his voice perilously close to my door.

"You don't need aftershave, stupid," Phillip teased. "You haven't got anything to shave."

"Like you do," Jamie returned. "Come on, Phillip. Lee gave it to me."

"You gave him aftershave?" I whispered, raising an eyebrow as I fought the urge to smile.

Lee shrugged. "Seemed like a good idea at the time."

"I'm telling Mom," Jamie finished loudly. We both froze, and I could hear his footsteps getting closer. I was frantically thinking how I could even begin to explain this when my mother's voice intervened.

"Jamie, Phillip, leave your mother alone. She needs her rest. Come on, get dressed, the two of you, before you're late for school and I skin you alive."

Grumbling, the boys headed off down the hall, and Lee and I heaved a joint sigh of relief. "That was a close one," he moaned, leaning back against the pillow.

"Too close," I concurred, closing my eyes. "It's a good thing Mother appeared when she did. It's almost as if. . . Lee," I asked quickly, a sudden thought occurring to me. "Where did you park your car?"

"Around the block. Don't worry, no one saw it."

"Maybe." Mother's timing seemed almost too good to be true.

His hand reached out for mine, pushing the uneasy thoughts from my head. We so seldom started the day together like this. The last time had been just before our return from California. That night we'd made love for the first time since my accident. I remembered how self-conscious I'd

been about my scar, but Lee had made everything truly beautiful. He'd been so tender and careful of me; I couldn't remember ever feeling more loved or wanted.

His thumb grazed the palm of my hand, and I sighed. "You've got to get going," I told him sadly, hating to end the moment.

"I know. Why don't you go downstairs and distract them, and I'll make my escape through the window."

"Okay." The grin on his face was contagious, and I felt myself smile in return. "Just watch out for the neighbors - Mrs. Gilstrap has eagle eyes and a big mouth."

"Amanda, I've avoided terrorists, arms dealers and the KGB. I think I can slip past one old lady."

"Don't be so sure, Scarecrow," I laughed. "If the KGB had her on their side, we'd all be speaking Russian."

I bent over to retrieve my robe when he pulled me back. Leaning across the bed, he touched his lips tenderly to mine. "Thank you for last night, Mrs. Stetson." Winking, he rolled away, quickly pulling on his jeans. I caught a fleeting glimpse of his backside as I started for the door.

Now that was a sight I wouldn't mind seeing every morning, I thought as I headed into the kitchen to run my avoidance pattern.

No, I wouldn't mind at all.

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I clung to that memory when Brody upped the stakes, eliminating yet another member of Lee's family. His guilt multiplied exponentially, and his desire to get Brody spiraled into a full-fledged obsession. I stood by helplessly as he slipped back beneath that mask of smooth detachment he'd cultivated for so many years.

He didn't seem able to think about anything else. His single-mindedness infuriated Francine, angered Billy and frustrated me. He stubbornly refused to let me help him, rejecting my offers at every turn. He still clung to the image of that pier in California, and I didn't know how to convince him that he didn't need to shield me any longer.

The boys missed him, too, and even Mother interrupted her busy schedule long enough to ask me if everything was okay. Of course, I had a feeling she'd really wanted to discuss those little items that had somehow found their way into our laundry. Evidently, Lee had left a few essentials behind that morning in his mad dash down the trellis. A sock I could explain, but those boxers were another story entirely.

I was relieved when she offered to take the boys away for the weekend. Soon their summer activities would click into high gear, and there wouldn't be time. If Mother had another reason for wanting to leave town, she didn't say so. But I had the distinct impression that there was something

weighing on her mind. I promised myself to get to the bottom of it once and for all when she returned.

I was really looking forward to their trip. Lee had finally wrapped his case, Brody was in jail and my husband was back where he belonged, with me. I couldn't wait to be Mrs. Stetson for an entire, uninterrupted weekend - the first since our marriage. When Mother called to let me know they were going to be staying in the mountains for another day, it felt like Christmas.

Unfortunately, there turned out to be a fly in the otherwise smooth ointment. For some reason, we seemed to be getting on each other's nerves. I suddenly noticed that Lee had the oddest habits - I mean, waterproof or not, who leaves their watch on the bathroom counter? And why would you want to run into the bedroom to retrieve your car keys, when the logical spot for them is clearly by the door? Not to mention that annoying little noise he made when he was drying his hair. . .

He seemed to think I had a few peculiarities of my own. Over six pages of them, in fact, front and back. Reading his endless list of my supposed faults, I began to wonder why he'd even wanted to marry me in the first place. I was just leaving him a note to that effect when he sauntered through the door, making an elaborate point of dropping his keys on the shelf.

He made some inane small talk about Harry Thornton while I kept my eyes glued to my paper. He stopped in front of me, his hands nervously clutching something out of my line of sight.

"Do you have flowers behind your back?" I inquired in a slightly injured tone, hoping he didn't think he could worm his way out of this one with another bouquet.

"No." He slowly approached my chair, handing me a pad with some writing on it.

"More complaints?" I asked, making an effort to resist that Stetson charm that was already beginning to slip through the cracks.

"No," he smiled. "It's a list of all the things that I love about you." He knelt in front of me, his face level with mine. He leaned in to kiss me, but I stopped him, my finger on his lips.

"It better be a long list," I admonished before finally succumbing to that smile.

His lips caressed mine, and I felt myself forgive him, especially when he shifted them tantalizing close to my ear. "I'm sorry I was such a jerk," he whispered, teasing my lobe with his teeth. "And I swear I'll put my watch and keys anywhere you want."

"I'll settle for you keeping your clothes in your own dryer," I laughed, my lips on his neck, trying to remember why I'd been so angry before. His lips sought mine again and we indulged in a few make-up kisses. I knew we needed to talk about what had really been bothering us. The truth was neither one of us had wanted to stop being Mr. and Mrs. Stetson once the weekend was over, and it was easier to pick a fight than to deal with the real issue. Just as it was easier to let his lips do the talking right now. Sighing, I suggested we take this into the other room.

He pulled away, offering me his most charming grin. "Um, I'd love to," he began, "but I, ah, promised Harry and Christina we'd have dinner with them."

Lee's friend and mentor Harry Thornton had finally been reunited with his long lost love, a Russian woman by the name of Christina Golytzin. "We're supposed to meet them at Emelio's in fifteen minutes," he added, flashing me that smile again.

"You were pretty sure of yourself, weren't you, Stetson?" I teased, pushing him away as I rose from my chair. "Maybe that's an item for my list."

"A complaint," he grinned, "or is that one of the reasons you love me?"

"I'm still debating," I laughed. "Come on, let's get going. If we're lucky, we can eat fast and still have time to come back here for dessert."

\* \* \*

June arrived with remarkable speed, and I was finally cleared to return to the field. I'd been on light duty for almost three months, and I was looking forward to being back with my partner full time. Lee, on the other hand, didn't seem as enthusiastic. I knew he was glad to have me sitting across from him every day again in the Q-Bureau, but at the same time I could sense his frustration. The restrictions of our mystery marriage still chafed, and he grumbled that he'd rather kiss me goodnight in our bedroom than good morning in our office.

I knew we had some big decisions ahead. Making our relationship public would effect every part of our lives - but especially work. It had taken a long time to earn the respect of my co-workers, of people like Francine Desmond. I wasn't sure what my status would be if Lee and I were unable to continue our partnership.

It wasn't always easy being Scarecrow's protégé. My career had always seemed irrevocably linked to his. Maybe it was finally time to discover if 'Mrs. King' could make it on her own.

As for the home front - I didn't even know how to begin to unravel the mess I'd created there. I constantly wrestled with what to tell my Mother. Then there were the boys. . . Phillip and Jamie were both at such a difficult stage, not quite grown up, yet wanting to be. I hated to tarnish their new relationship with Lee by tainting its beginning.

I found Jamie in the den reading when I got home. Lee had been in a meeting with Billy all afternoon, and I'd taken the long route, trying to sort things through in my head. Driving always seemed to clear Lee's mind, but I only seemed more confused than ever.

"Where is everyone?" I asked as I sat beside my youngest son. There was no sign of Phillip or my mother.

"Grandma's out with Captain Curt," he informed me, marking his place as he closed the covers of his book. "I'm supposed to tell you that she'll be back late."

"That's one accounted for," I laughed. "Where's your brother? At Cindy's house?"

"No, Lee came by and took him out," he told me quietly. "They'll be back later, too."

"You didn't want to go?" Jamie and Lee had been getting along really well, and I hated to see his old insecurities cropping up again. Not when we were so close to ending this charade.

"Actually, I called him," Jamie said, his finger drumming on the cover of the book. "I know we're only supposed to use your work number for emergencies," he added quickly, "but Phillip was pretty upset and Grandma said it would be okay."

"It's all right, Jamie," I assured him. The boys were aware that IFF was a government agency and, as such, had stringent security measures, even if they were still in the dark about their true purpose. They never abused their phone privileges, so if Jamie had called Lee, then something was definitely wrong. "Tell me what's going on."

"Dad called Phillip tonight," he began, pushing his glasses back up across the bridge of his nose. "He can't come to Phillip's graduation - he has to be in New York on business."

"I see." I knew how important that was to Phillip. He was going to be receiving one of the all-conference athletic awards at the ceremony and he'd been talking about nothing else for a week.

"I thought he needed some attention," he finished, putting his book down on the table beside him. "So I called Lee. I stayed home 'cause I thought Phillip might feel more like talking if I wasn't there. He was really upset."

Jamie's sensitivity never ceased to amaze me, and I ruffled his hair the way I used to when he was little. "You're a pretty good brother, you know that?"

"Aw, Mom," he replied, but I could tell he was secretly pleased. He took a deep breath, then looked at me hesitantly. "I was kind of mad at Dad, too. I don't understand him sometimes."

"I know," I sighed. "Sometimes it's hard to understand why people do some of the things they do. But you know your Dad loves you both."

He nodded. "Grandma said the same thing."

"She did?"

"Yeah. She said sometimes people do things that hurt you, and you can't understand why. But if you love them, you have to believe that they have a good reason and that someday it will make sense to you."

Tears unexpectedly filled my eyes. "Your Grandmother's a very wise woman," I told my son in a low voice. Taking a deep breath, I added, "Hey, since it's just the two of us, how about if I order a pizza?"



"With pepperoni and bacon?" he asked hopefully.

"If you insist," I grimaced. Lee had evidently found another convert for this bizarre topping combination. I guess it could have been worse; at least he didn't ask for a bottle of Beaujolais to go with it.

\* \* \*

It was almost nine when Lee and Phillip arrived home. They came bearing ice cream for all of us, and Phillip's mood seemed much improved. I looked questioningly at my husband but he only shrugged his shoulders. It would take a little time, but I knew my sons would both be okay. How could they lose with a stepfather like Lee? I was profoundly grateful for whatever twist of fate had brought him into all our lives.

I told him that after the boys went to their room, and for a moment he had the strangest expression on his face. Then I felt him relax beside me.

"You don't have to thank me," he smiled. "It's all part of being a family, right?" He leaned a little closer. "That," he whispered, "and this."

"What are you doing?" I asked, wiggling away as he leaned closer. The boys were just upstairs.

"Hold still," he laughed, his lips inches from my face. "You have ice cream on the tip of your very cute nose." I felt the warm caress of his tongue, and I laughed.

"All part of the service," he grinned, changing course and kissing me on the forehead.

I leaned into him, resting my head against his shoulder. "It's been quite a day," I sighed, my fingers rubbing his thigh.

"You don't know the half of it," he responded, pulling me against him. "Amanda, we need to talk. I was on my way over here anyway when Jamie called."

"Your meeting with Billy?" I asked, the hair on the back of my neck standing up. He nodded solemnly, and I felt my stomach clench. The last thing I needed to hear tonight was that Lee had an undercover assignment.

"Let's go for a walk," he suggested, glancing towards the stairs as he took my hand and pulling me up from the couch. "I don't want them to accidentally overhear us."

This didn't sound good. Yelling up to the boys, I followed him outside. Lee immediately reached for my hand as the door closed behind us, his eyes darting around the backyard.

"What?" I said, giving his hand a squeeze.

"I was just thinking about all those evenings I spent crouching in your bushes," he laughed. "It seems funny sometimes to come in through the front door. And I still have to fight the urge to duck every time I see your mother."

I grinned. "Spoken like a true son-in-law."

His arm came around my shoulder and mine automatically found his waist as we headed down the street. "There's been a development at work," he told me soberly. "Billy called me into his office today to warn me."

"Warn you?" I asked apprehensively. "Are you in trouble - do we need security?"

"Nothing like that," he said grimly. "Although, I might be nice to have some protection from Dr. Smyth."

"Lee. . ."

"Do you remember the rumors going around last week about the permanent ATAC division?" he asked suddenly.

"The new inter-agency Anti-Terrorist Task Force?" I replied. "Yeah, sure. But that's not just us, right? It's supposed to draw from all the bureaus - Agency, FBI, CIA, SDBIR. . ."

"Yeah. Like the coalition that ran the investigation on Addi Birol - only on a much broader scale."

The light was beginning to dawn. "Are you telling me. . ."

"Yes," he sighed. "Evidently Harry Thorton has been lobbying for them to offer me the director's job. With Billy's support."

"What an honor," I told him, not quite sure how I felt about it. "Are you interested?"

"Yeah. . . maybe." He hesitated, stopping and turning to look me in the eyes. "There's a lot to consider. It's an administrative position, but still challenging - and it means a big jump in pay."

"And?" I prodded, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"And it means leaving the Agency, dissolving our partnership. At least for a while."

I turned away. "I see."

"No, you don't," he said, tilting my face back towards his. "There's more." His eyes searched mine, and suddenly I knew what he was about to say. "It would mean a full security review. And it won't take much digging for IAB to unearth our little secret."

I let out the breath I'd been holding. "I guess for a couple of spies, we didn't really cover our tracks very well."

"You'd just had a full review in November, and I wasn't due until '89. I thought we had some breathing room."

I stopped suddenly, turning to look at him. "You said Billy wanted to warn you."

He nodded. "About the review. To give me a chance to head them off if I'm not interested. It seems he knew what they would turn up."

"Oh, my gosh."

"That's one way to put it," he laughed. "Billy had another."

"Was he very angry?" I asked, reaching for his hand. The rug had suddenly been pulled out from under me, and I needed his touch to ground me again.

"I think he was more hurt than angry - that I hadn't confirmed myself what he'd already suspected." He squeezed my hand. "I guess I didn't do a very good job of hiding my feelings when you had your accident in California. Billy said it wasn't a huge leap to put two and two together and figure out what we were really doing out there. He just wished I'd told him myself instead of keeping him in the dark."

I flinched at the look of pain on Lee's face. Billy was one of his oldest friends; it couldn't have been an easy conversation. I turned to him, my hands resting on his shoulders. "So, Scarecrow," I sighed, "where do we go from here?"

"We don't have to go anywhere you don't want to," he said quickly. "If I don't take the job, Billy will keep our secret until we notify him officially." He looked down at me tenderly. "In any case, you don't have to worry. I took full responsibility. I'm the senior agent; I knew better."

"Lee," I laughed. "I'm as responsible as you are. You hardly ordered me to marry you."

"I don't want this to fall on you. It's not fair."

"Whoever promised life was fair?" I sighed, remembering when Lee had said those words to me once long ago.

His soft laughter rippled over me. "Yeah, well, I kind of keep expecting it to be." I felt his lips gently graze my forehead. "At least, I do now."

His arms closed around me as I leaned into him. We must have made a pretty picture standing together on the corner, and I vaguely wondered if Mrs. Gilstrap was looking. The neighborhood would surely be buzzing in a few hours. Somehow, it didn't matter anymore.

Maybe this wasn't such a disaster after all. Sometimes endings are only doorways to new beginnings.

I looked up at my husband's face in the glow of the streetlight. "You want this job, don't you?"

"I don't know if it's the job I want or the chance to end this deception, to really be your husband." I heard his sigh in my ear. "I'm tired, Amanda. Tired of heading home to an empty apartment, tired of being a secret stepfather." He twisted, kissing me lightly on the forehead. "Tonight, with Phillip - it really felt great. I don't want to give that feeling up. I want to build a family - our family - openly, with you."

He pulled back to look me in the eye. "I'm not just talking about having a baby of our own," he continued in a low voice. "Whether we decide to do that or not, I want to be an active part of Phillip and Jamie's lives. I remember what it's like to be their age and not have a father around. And besides," he added, almost to himself, "I promised Jamie something while we were at Crump's cabin - maybe this is my chance to keep it."

My heart ached with love for him, and I reached up to cup his face with my hands. "Then take the job," I said, pressing my lips gently against his. "No matter what happens at work, we're still partners."

"I hate to think of you in the field without me," he said quietly, a pained expression in his eyes. "But it's your decision."

I knew what that declaration had cost him. "Thank you for that," I whispered, pulling him into my arms. "I don't know if that's what I want - it won't be the same without your tail to watch. I do know that I want to keep on working."

"Give it some time and the right thing will turn up," he advised, his hand finding mine as we headed back to the house. "We might be able to work together again someday. But right now. . ."

"Right now, I'll settle for being your partner at home. We'll let the Agency take care of itself."

"Are you sure?" he asked suddenly, and I felt his hand tighten around mine. "I don't want to rush into this decision. We did that last November and look where that got us."

"It got us each other," I smiled, giving his hand a squeeze in return. "Besides, it's not sudden. We've been laying the foundation for this ever since California. This job offer just gave us the final nudge. You know, Stetson, we've always been chicken."

"Yeah," he grinned, "I know. I think that's what got us into this mess in the first place."

"We'll have to tell Mother and the boys," I whispered soberly as we finally reached our back door. "I don't even know where to begin."

"We don't have to decide that tonight. We'll figure out what's right. And I'd be happy to marry you again, Mrs. Stetson, in front of the whole world if you want me to. Just name the time and the place."

"Whatever we decide about the boys," I said slowly, "I want to tell my mother the whole truth. I need her to know, Lee," I stated insistently, seeing the doubt in his eyes. "About everything. It's the only way I can even begin to justify what we did."

He nodded. "I'll square it with Billy. If you want, I can talk to her - explain that this was my lame idea. . ."

"Thanks for the offer, but I have to do this on my own." I leaned forward and pressed my lips lightly to his. "But I will let you pick up the pieces after she kills me."

"It'll be okay, she loves you," he whispered, pulling me into the protection of his arms. "Almost as much as I do."

I sincerely hoped he was right.

\* \* \*

My stomach did a flip-flop when I heard the key turn in the door. I'd almost given up; Mother was late, even by her standards. My courage suddenly failed me, and I debated postponing our talk, but I steeled myself to face her. Now that our marriage was about to lose its mystery status at the Agency, keeping things from her seemed even more wrong.

She walked down the steps into the den, carefully removing her purse from her shoulder and tossing it on the chair. "How was your date?" I inquired, my eyes not daring to meet hers.

"It wasn't really a date," she answered cryptically, kicking off her shoes as she sat across from me on the opposite end of the couch. "Curt and I had some business to discuss."

I turned sideways, resting my head on my hand as I watched her out of the corner of my eye. She seemed lost in thought, crossing and recrossing her legs as she shifted in her seat.

"Mother," I began hesitantly.

"Amanda," she said at the same time.

". . .I need to talk to you," we both finished.

We looked at each other, the apprehensive smile on both our faces finally giving way to a nervous laugh. I tucked my feet up under my legs and took a deep breath, twirling a strand of hair between my fingers while I tried to figure out how to begin.

"You know, you used to do that when you were a little girl," my mother said, a hint of nostalgia in her voice. "When you had something on your mind. In another minute, you'll be chewing on your nails."

She sighed, her hands smoothing the wrinkles from her slacks. "Tell me, Amanda, should I be checking the attic for unexpected guests?"

"Not this time. Although, I wish what I had to tell you was as simple as Debbie Ann McCabey."

I stood up and turned away, restlessly tightening the belt on my robe as I walked over to the bookcase. Mother and the boys smiled down at me from their place of honor on the shelf. There was some dust on the frame, I noticed with a frown, and I carefully ran my finger along its length. I heard Mother clear her throat, and I turned to face her, absently wiping my hand on my robe.

"This is so hard," I began, folding my arms across my chest as I leaned against the shelves for support. "I don't even know where to start. I know you'd say the beginning is a good place, but I don't even know where that is any more. It was all so innocent at first, and I couldn't say anything, and that probably would have been okay if we'd kept everything on a business level. But I fell in love with him, even though I didn't really mean to at the time, and then it all got so out of control and I ended up doing things I never even thought. . ."

I took a deep breath. Mother sat on the couch, her right eyebrow raised in that politely tolerant way she adopted whenever I started to ramble. I rarely did that anymore; my professional training had finally cured that habit. Well, almost. Unfortunately, facing my mother made me feel more like a recalcitrant child than a seasoned agent.

I took a deep breath and tried again.

"Did you ever find yourself in the most incredible situation?" I asked her suddenly. "That everything you'd ever wanted in life was right there in front of you, but to embrace it you had to sacrifice something you valued almost as much?"

"Amanda Jean West." My mother's voice had an odd lilt. "Is this your way of finally telling me that your last name is really Stetson?"

My eyes locked on hers and I had to remind myself to breathe. "You. . . I. . . you know?" I mumbled, searching for the right words. I only seemed capable of jumbled phrases. "How long?"

"Have I known for certain?" she asked with a mirthless laugh. "About two minutes. How long have I suspected? Since I ran into your Mr. Dorsey's friend Gus Weinstein." She took a deep breath, rising deliberately from the sofa.

I watched her in appalled silence, the clouded reasons for her recent behavior sharpening to crystal clarity.

"I met him on my way to the airport," she continued in a conversational tone that, given the subject, seemed oddly out of place. "He'd stopped by the hospital to see how you were doing, and I told him you were sleeping. He was such a nice man, so concerned. He very politely walked me to the door, hailed me a cab, informed me of my daughter's marriage. . . yes, quite the gentleman."

I walked over to the sofa, sinking down into the cold comfort of the foam cushions. "All this time, and you never said a word to me?"

My mother turned on me, her eyebrow rising pointedly again. "I believe that's my line, don't you think?"

She frowned as she sighed deeply, walking over to sit beside me on the sofa. She folded her hands efficiently in her lap, her thumbs drumming the cadence of an imaginary beat as she watched me closely.

"I wanted to tell you," I began, my eyes looking past her into the kitchen. I noticed that one of the boys had gotten into the poppy seed cake I'd made for the new neighbor. Now I'd have to start all over from scratch tomorrow.

"Amanda." I felt my mother's hand gingerly brush my wrist. "I'm listening now. Do you want to explain why you felt you had to keep something as important as your marriage from me?"

I looked at her then, the woman who'd supported me all my life, and I didn't know what to say. The truth, of course, but I wasn't sure what that was anymore. I'd rationalized to myself that I'd kept my secret because of my job, but that was only part of it. If I had to be honest, a part of me had enjoyed the intrigue of my secret life. The thrill had reawakened the adventurous spirit I'd squelched during my marriage to Joe. Regrettably, that same spirit had hurt the people I cared about the most. My mother, my sons. . . even Lee. For months now he'd been trying to convince me to end the pretense, but I hadn't wanted to listen.

"I thought I was doing the right thing," I told my mother in a low voice, and that much, at least, was true. "There's so much you don't know about my job, things I can't tell you yet. I want to, I want to tell you everything, but there are security issues that have to be. . ."

"You don't have to explain. 'IFF works for the government and the government has secrets', right?" she intoned, smiling sadly. "I've lived most of my adult life in this crazy town; I've learned a few things by now, Missy."

"Then you understand. . ."

"I understand there are issues about your job, yes. But I don't understand why that stopped you from introducing your fiancé to your family. I know you had to have been engaged," she put in quickly, as I started to protest. "Don't deny that, please. I've been around the two of you long enough to know that this marriage wasn't a spur of the moment thing."

"I don't really know," I told her truthfully. "I think I was just. . . scared."

"Of what?" she quizzed. "Of telling me? Oh, Amanda - did I put so much pressure on you that you couldn't share the things that were most important in your life?"

"No, it's not that," I murmured quickly, stung by hurt in her eyes. "I know you've always only wanted the best for me. It was myself I was scared of. I'd already failed once at marriage. If it happened again. . ." The words sounded so inadequate, even to me. I blinked and looked away, fighting the tears that unaccountably sprang to my eyes. It was strange; I hardly ever cried.

"Amanda, you aren't the same person who married Joe all those years ago. You've changed a great deal in the past few years."

I turned to her with a trembling laugh. "I don't know if you think that's good or bad?"

My mother shook her head. "Neither one," she sighed, giving my knee a gentle pat. "It just is."

I looked down at her hand, at her fingers absently rubbing my terrycloth robe. "You seem so calm about all this. Why aren't you angrier?"

She looked up at me, lips pursed. "Oh, I was plenty angry, believe me. Why do you think I haven't confronted you long before this? But you almost died a few months ago, and I didn't trust myself to. . ."

She turned away, her eyes focused on the blank television screen. "At first I couldn't understand how you could keep such a thing from me. Then, the more I thought about it, I realized that you'd kept lots of things from me the past few years, not just this. I mean, we've shared the same roof, the same meals, worried about the boys together. . . but all the time, you had a whole other life that I wasn't part of; that none of us were part of."

She leaned back on the couch and closed her eyes, adding, "I think that was the hardest thing to accept. Realizing that you and I weren't as close as I'd always believed we were."

"We are close," I whispered in a shaky voice. "You're my mother. You know how much I love you."

"Oh, Panda," she asked quietly, "how can we be close if we don't share things?"

"I didn't mean to shut you out," I answered, her use of that old nickname causing my voice to crack ever so slightly. "It just kind of. . . happened."

"Maybe so, but it still hurts. I'm sure you didn't set out to do that, but. . ." She stood suddenly, kicking her discarded shoes out of the way as she paced the small den. "I've been doing a lot of soul searching these past few months, and I've come to a few conclusions." She stopped, turning to face me, her arms crossed over her chest. "It's time I made some changes in my own life and stopped obsessing about yours. Curt's offered me a job at the new ground school he's opening in the fall."

"A job?"

"Yes. I've decided to take it. We finalized the details tonight. And," she finished breathlessly, "I'm thinking about moving out once it opens."



"Are you telling me you and Captain Curt. . ."

"No," she replied with a low laugh. "I don't think we're really suited to be anything more than business associates."

"Then what. . . why. . . Mother, this is your home. . ."

"No, Amanda, it's your home - which you've very generously shared with me for the past five years. But I think it's time we put a little space between us." She slowly made her way to the chair, dropping down into it with a tired smile. "I've loved being a daily part of the boys' lives. But I think maybe the two of us lost something when I did. Maybe living together like this made us fall back into old roles. I became the 'mother', while you kept your secrets again, the way you did when you were a child." She looked over at me, her eyes filled with unshed tears. "I'd like to be your friend again."

"Oh, Mother. . ."

"And," she continued quietly, "If I leave, then maybe you can make some changes of your own. You know, you and your husband can't have a real marriage if you're living apart." She frowned slightly, adding in a serious voice, "You of all people should know that, Amanda."

"I do," I sighed softly. "We both do, Lee and I. Mother. . ." I took a large gulping breath, then slowly exhaled. "About Lee. This was my fault, the lies, the deception - I wouldn't want you to blame him."

"I don't," she told me, tilting her head to one side as she stretched the kinks out of her neck. "In a way, it would be easier if I could, but. . . it's hard to be angry with a man who loves my daughter as much he obviously does." She paused, her fingers massaging her neck. "When you were in that hospital in California, I was almost as worried about him as I was about you."

"I love him, too," I confided. "More than I thought possible. Lee hasn't had much experience being part of a family. He lost his parents when he was just a child. . ."

"I know," she said softly, adding in response to my puzzled look, "he told me. In the ICU waiting room. From the little he said, I could tell he hadn't had an easy time of it." She rested her head against the back of the chair, rubbing her fingers around her temples in tiny circles. "Maybe that's why I'm not as angry as I should be at the two of you for keeping this a secret."

"Thank you for that, but you have a perfect right to be angry. If it was Phillip or Jamie, I'd probably skin them alive."

"Did I say I wasn't going to do that?" she asked pointedly, her hand kneading her forehead.

"No," I replied over my shoulder as I headed into the kitchen. I grabbed some aspirin from the cupboard as I quickly filled a glass of water at the sink. Walking back into the den, I handed them to her. "Actually, Lee and I came to a few decisions of our own tonight."

"Is that the reason for the sudden confession?" she mumbled, washing the pills down with a gulp of water.

"I guess so," I answered guiltily. "How they'll take that news at work, I'm not quite sure, but both of us are tired of the lies."

I sat back down on the sofa, crossing my legs as I leaned my head on my arm. "Here," I heard my mother say with a small laugh, "You look like you could use a couple of these, too." She passed the aspirin over to me. I grinned gratefully, popping two small pills into my mouth as she handed me her glass. Quickly swallowing, I set the glass down on the coffee table with deliberate care.

"Mother," I began haltingly, "can you ever forgive me for lying to you?"

She twisted uncomfortably in her seat, shifting her weight from side to side. "You're my child, Amanda. I love you."

"Yes, I know that. But that's not the same as being able to forgive me. I could understand if you couldn't," I told her uneasily. "It's just that I don't want to lose your friendship, either. It's important to me, even if I haven't shown it very well."

"It's important to me, too. That's why this has all been so difficult. . ."

"I really wish you'd stay," I told her quietly. "The boys will really miss you. "

"I'll miss them, too," my mother echoed. "But they're both getting to the age where they could use a man around the house."

"But they'll always need you, the same way I do," I sputtered. "I never would have survived that first year after the divorce without you."

"I needed you just as much." She toyed with the button on her shirt cuff, her face getting a faraway look. "I missed your Daddy so; it was almost like a part of me had died, too. There's nothing more fulfilling than being married to your best friend." She turned to me, her warm smile genuine this time. "But I have a feeling I don't need to tell you that."

"No," I said, my expression matching hers. "You don't." I relaxed into the corner of the couch, pulling my feet up beside me and tucking my robe in around them.

"You know, Amanda, you don't have to live under the same roof to be close. I think we've proved that, don't you?" She took deep breath, exhaling softly before offering the final olive branch. "Maybe with a little distance, we can do better."

"I promise to try," I told her, stretching out my hand to her. "With all my heart."

She reached out and squeezed it. "So do I." Her lips turned up in a smile. "How about we seal our new bargain with a snack? I didn't eat much dinner."

"I did work up an appetite pacing the floor tonight while I waited for you," I agreed conspiratorially. "You know what I feel like?"

She raised her eyebrow slightly. "Peanut butter and. . ."

"Marshmallows," I finished with a grin. "If I can just remember where I stashed them. . ."

"Top cabinet next to the sink, behind that box of Oaties cereal the boys hate."

I stopped in my tracks, halfway to the kitchen as I turned to face her. "You know where I keep the marshmallows?" No one knew my hiding place; it was my one advantage in this household.

"Amanda," she returned pointedly, "I've always known. I just let you think it was a secret."

\* \* \*

The organ played the familiar chords as everyone strained to catch a glimpse of the bride. The groom's eyes were riveted to a spot at the end of the long church aisle, and I remembered another day when I was the one who held his gaze. A lifetime ago.

I felt Lee's hand grasp mine as Carrie met Joe at the altar, and I smiled gratefully up at him. My husband never ceased to amaze me. Even in a moment like this, he had an uncanny ability to sense exactly what I was feeling. Sometimes I marveled how helping out one stranger in trouble had irrevocably altered all our lives. Like a pebble in a brook, the ripples were unending.

I glanced down at the third finger of my left hand. The diamond Lee had given me all those months ago was no longer hidden in a drawer, but displayed for all the world to see, right where it had always belonged. Soon my wedding band would join it when we exchanged our vows for the second time.

"The boys look great in their tuxes," Lee whispered, and I had to agree. Especially Jamie. His contacts had given him a new self-image and it showed. He looked taller and very grown up standing beside his brother at the front of the church.

I wished Mother could be here to see it, but she'd declined Joe's invitation. "I don't belong at my ex-son-in-law's wedding," she'd told me in no uncertain terms, and I understood her feelings. I was just thankful she didn't feel the same way about attending her current son-in-law's wedding.

We'd decided on the backyard ceremony that Lee had talked about so many months ago, before all the mystery marriage craziness had started. Mother was helping us plan it, and I was grateful. It had helped to bridge the distance that had grown between us.

And I'd been given clearance to explain a little bit about our jobs. I knew it couldn't erase what we'd done last February, but, on some level, I think it helped Mother to accept it. I hoped that when the dust settled, she might even feel proud of my job - even if she couldn't brag to Aunt Lillian about it.

She'd agreed to continue living with us, at least for the time being. "Just until I know if I want to make my relationship with Harry a permanent thing," she'd told me with a grin.

Her good friend Harry Berrigan had resurfaced a few weeks ago, claiming that the Swiss climate just didn't agree with him. He and Mother appeared to be picking up right where they left off last year, and I had a secret hunch that it wasn't only the weather that had lured him back to D.C.

"I know he's not your Daddy," she'd confided, her voice brimming with happiness. "But, oh, Amanda, he makes me laugh. And he's awfully good. . ."

"Mo-ther," I'd groaned, my eyes widening in horror.

"Around the house," she'd finished with a pointed look. "Really, dear, you're starting to worry me. Maybe we should take down that trellis by your bedroom window."

I'd rolled my eyes, beating a hasty retreat to the other room. "Well," I heard her say, "I suppose pretty soon your husband will be able to use the front door and it won't matter. Although, that won't be nearly as entertaining for poor Edna Gilstrap."

I winced at the thought. Maybe I should sell this house after all. I had a sneaking suspicion my reputation was shot in this neighborhood.

We were still wavering about how much to tell the boys. Some days I felt that I owed it to them to be completely honest, on others I almost convinced myself they didn't 'need to know' everything. It was just so tempting not to rock the boat.

But when all was said and done, I knew it wasn't a matter of 'if' we should tell them, only 'when'. We'd taken the coward's way out last November; it was past time to put things right. As they frequently reminded me, my sons were no longer small children. I could only hope that they were adult enough to understand why we'd kept them in the dark. No matter their reaction, we were going to be a family. We'd just have to take the good along with the bad.

Things at the Agency were in transition as well. Lee and I were currently on light administrative assignment, spending the last months of our partnership wrapping our cases and briefing our replacement team. It was a bittersweet time, for both of us. The Q-Bureau had played such a big role in our personal relationship; it was sometimes hard to separate the two.

The fall would bring even bigger change. When Lee began his new job in September, Francine would be joining his team. She hadn't been able to work things out with her old flame, Jonathan Stone, and she was looking for a new challenge. For my part, I was glad that my husband would have a supportive friend in his new position. He may have wanted to leave the field, but I had a nagging feeling that 'Administrative One', as he jokingly referred to it, wouldn't be an easy adjustment. But,

as Lee had told Francine in May, he was doing what he'd wanted to do for as long as he could remember. This would just be another way to do it.

Francine's departure had an unexpected benefit. Our department was being restructured, and Mr. Melrose offered me the brand new position of administrative field section liaison. I'd worked with him while I was on restricted duty last spring, and we'd both enjoyed it. In addition to a very nice pay raise, the job came with one other stipulation, he'd told me with a grin. I had to call him Billy.

"After putting up with Scarecrow for four years," he'd added slyly, "that should be a piece of cake."

I tended to agree, but I also knew it wouldn't be easy to end the working partnership I'd grown to rely on. Whatever the challenges ahead, at work or at home, I knew Lee and I would face them together. We'd gone through so many changes already, been so many things to each other. Flirtatious associates, friendly acquaintances, and loving friends; working partners, secret lovers and, now, finally, husband and wife. In twenty minutes or twenty years, it didn't matter; the feeling would still be the same. We were best friends who had the incredible good luck to also be married. True companions.

Life didn't get much better than that.

The End