

Whatever Forward Brings

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Rating: PG

Timeline: Third season, picking up at the tag for Wrong Way Home.

Summary: Would Amanda ever consider remarrying Joe?

Author's Note: Thanks so much to my lovely group of betas; what would I do without you? A special thanks to Dix for her insight into the minds of boys!

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His heart felt as if it were wedged in his throat as he watched them dance together, slow and close. The fear and doubt he'd felt throughout the past week came down to this one moment in time. Seeing Amanda in the arms of her ex-husband expunged any lingering doubts as to the depth of Lee's feelings for her.

Intense jealousy suffused every nerve ending, and he had to fight the primal urge to rush onto the dance floor and cut in, just to get her out of that man's embrace. Why did they have to dance so close together? Of course, he reminded himself, in times past Joe and Amanda King had been *much* closer than they were now. He quickly dismissed the disturbing image.

The two people he was fixated on had been in love, not all that long ago. Were they *still* in love, deep down? They'd lived together, created two children, and known every personal detail about each other. How could they have just forgotten how in love they had once been? And yet, Lee fervently hoped that they *had* forgotten.

He watched as the couple swayed unhurriedly to the music. Joe's arm tightened around Amanda's slender waist, pulling her closer still, and Lee wondered if he was regretting past decisions . . . or worse yet, if Amanda was.

Her face reflected a contemplative mood, almost as though she was lost in thought. Lee indulged himself the brief fantasy that she was imagining herself dancing with him, instead of with Joe. He could feel her in his arms, her lithe body pressed against his as they moved to the music of the jukebox.

Before he knew it, they had turned, and Amanda was facing him. As if sensing his presence, she glanced directly at him, catching his eye. She smiled at him over Joe's shoulder, apparently not very surprised to see him standing there, watching her dance with her former husband.

Smiling back and feeling somewhat ridiculous, he felt his heart sink further into his chest, hoping she couldn't see the dismay he knew must be evident in his eyes.

Unable to stand there any longer, he withdrew, backing into the crowd and heading for the exit. As busy as the place was, it took him a couple of minutes to wend his way through the lively throng. As he reached for the door, a hand upon his arm stopped him in his tracks.

Resigned, he turned to face her. Was the becoming glow on her cheeks and the light in her eyes due to seeing him, to being held by Joe, or simply to the warm temperature of the teeming pub?

"Hi. I didn't expect to see you here," Amanda said, dropping her hand from his arm. She shoved her hands into the pockets of her jacket and rocked back on her heels, watching him expectantly.

He swore silently; he shouldn't have come. But he'd been irresistibly drawn to the place. Somehow, he'd known that he would find them there together. They seemed so comfortable with each other. So . . . intimate. Another stab of jealousy shot through him. If anyone should be holding Amanda, it should be him -- not the man who had deserted her.

Shaking himself slightly, he shrugged with feigned nonchalance. "I was in the area, tying up some loose ends, you know? I just stopped in for a beer and pizza; I don't have anything to eat at home."

"Well, now, I can believe that," she said teasingly, then cocked her head to the side. "So . . . You've eaten? You're already leaving, then?"

Had he detected a trace of disappointment in her voice? Or was it wishful thinking on his part? She wasn't as easy to read as she'd once been; she'd evidently learned a lot from him. There was no way to be sure what she was feeling just by looking into her eyes; but it was an enjoyable thing to do, all the same.

He took a deep breath, wishing he could say all the things he so desperately wanted to. To tell her that she and her sons deserved better than Joe King. To tell her that she shouldn't waste any more years of her life with that loser. To tell her that she had a choice. Instead, he nodded. "Yeah, well, it's been a long week -- a stressful case."

She nodded in understanding, her eyes clouding over with an indefinable emotion. "Yeah, I know. Well, then, I guess . . . I guess I'll see you tomorrow, Lee."

Smiling gently, he nodded. "Yeah, I guess so," he replied, the reluctance he felt to leave registering in his tone.

"Okay. Bye, then." She smiled again and then slowly started to head back to her table.

Hesitantly, he called out to her. "Amanda, wait."

Spinning around, she stood there with a questioning . . . or was it hopeful . . . look on her face. She glanced nervously over her shoulder for Joe, and then took a step toward Lee, saying, "Yes?"

"Take care." He said it with far too much solemnity, and instantly wished he could take back the innocuous words. What had he meant to say? He didn't even know.

Her face a study in puzzlement, she blinked slowly and walked back over to him. Frowning in concern, she asked, "Lee, what's wrong?"

"Nothing. I just . . . want you . . ." He took a deep breath, feeling suddenly dizzy. 'I just want you,' his mind repeated. Stammering, he shrugged and tried again. "Um, I just want you to take care, that's all." His eyes sweeping the crowd casually, he again reached for the door.

She stared at him, nodding slowly. "Okay. It just seemed like maybe you were trying to say something else. Were you?" Looking down at the ground, she shuffled her feet. "Trying to say something else?"

Shaking his head, he gave her a weak half-smile. "No -- nothing else. I'll see you around, Amanda."

Before she could say anything, he pushed open the door with far too much force and hurried out into the cool night air.

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"Hey, what are you fellas still doing up?" Amanda asked, stepping into the family room where her sons lay on the floor in front of the television. The noise of battleships whizzing through space at warp speed filled her ears.

"Grandma said we could watch the rest of this movie since there's no school tomorrow," Phillip explained, loud enough to be heard over the television. "It's not *that* late, Mom." He looked around quickly, as if to make sure his grandmother wasn't around to contradict him.

"Okay, okay," she agreed, kicking off her shoes and sitting down on the couch.

Jamie stood and joined her on the sofa. "How come didn't Dad come in?"

"He was pretty tired, Sweetheart," she told him, placing an arm around his slight shoulders. "It was a busy week for your dad. He wanted to get back to his hotel and go to bed."

"But . . . I mean . . . Couldn't he have slept here? He could have slept on my bed," Jamie replied. "I've been wanting to try out my new sleeping bag, anyway." He shrugged, attempting to effect an air of nonchalance.

Amanda sighed, knowing it was difficult for her sons to understand her relationship with their father. "Yeah . . . But he already paid for his hotel room. Plus, this way he has his privacy."

"Yeah, worm brain," Phillip said, switching off the TV and sitting at Amanda's other side. "Why would Dad want to stay in *your* stupid bed?"

"Phillip, don't call your brother 'worm brain.' Jamie's bed isn't stupid. Now, don't be silly."

Jamie shot Phillip a dirty look, then asked, "But why couldn't he just stay here, instead of a hotel? Besides, won't he move in with us, now that he's back?"

Phillip rolled his eyes, but said nothing. Still, Amanda could tell that he was watching her closely, waiting for her answer.

Leaning back into the cushions and letting her other arm encircle Phillip, she said, "No. You know that your dad and I aren't married anymore. He'll find a place of his own and move in there."

Jamie frowned, picking at a string on his pajama bottoms. "But I want him to live here, Mom. Why *can't* he just live here, with us?" Looking back up at her, he added softly, "Doesn't he want to?"

Phillip leaned over to look at his brother. "Are you dense? They're not married anymore, so he's not gonna live here. You're such a lame brain. Don't you know *anything*?"

"Don't say things like that, Phillip," Amanda warned him sternly. "Your brother has every right to talk about whatever is on his mind, and you do, too."

Phillip looked down at his hands, shaking his head. "We don't need him around here, anyway," he replied stoically.

"I thought . . ." Jamie paused, looking up at her. "I always thought that maybe if Dad moved back here, you guys would get married again, and we would all be together. I mean . . . I know it won't happen, but maybe . . . maybe it could, if . . ." He looked away, embarrassed.

How simple it all must seem to Jamie, even though she'd explained to both boys in a limited way why things hadn't worked out well for her and Joe. The older they

became, the more questions they had, and the harder it had become for her to answer them.

"No," she agreed gently. "It won't happen, sweetheart."

Phillip squirmed out of her embrace, muttering, "Told you so."

"Mom, don't you still love Dad?" Jamie prompted.

"Of course I love your dad, Sweetheart. If it weren't for him, I wouldn't have you and your brother. But we're not going to get married again," she added gently, running her fingers through his hair.

"Dad still loves you," Phillip said offhandedly, shifting slightly to face her. "He told us he does."

"Yeah," Jamie agreed eagerly. "He did tell us he still loves you. He even asked if you had a boyfriend."

Amanda looked at her youngest son, astonished and more than a little irritated with Joe. Still, the boys could have misinterpreted whatever he'd said. "He did?"

"We told him you haven't been out on a date in a *long* time," Jamie offered. "That seemed to make him pretty happy."

"*You* told him that; I didn't," Phillip groused. "Besides, it doesn't mean anything that Mom hasn't been dating."

Still stunned by Jamie's revelation, Amanda couldn't think of a reply. She'd figured her conversation with Joe at Dooley's was just that -- a conversation. That he could seriously be thinking about getting back together hadn't even occurred to her. She was going to have a long talk with Joe. Even if he wasn't looking to get back together, he was going to have to be more careful about what he said to their children.

"Did he ask you about it when you were at dinner with him tonight?" Jamie asked hopefully, ignoring his brother's remark.

Amanda looked lovingly at her sons, giving Jamie a squeeze and reaching for Phillip's hand. "Jamie, Phillip, I love your dad very much. And I'm glad that he still loves me. A lot of people stop loving each other once they're not married anymore. But . . . I'm not *in love* with him. There's a difference. Do you understand that?"

Phillip contemplated her words. "I do. You mean that mushy kind of love, like in the movies."

"Right," she affirmed with a small smile, reflecting on how quickly Phillip was growing up. She could also tell that he was fighting an internal battle with regard to his feelings; he, too, wanted his father back, but was less willing than his brother to let it show.

"But couldn't you love Dad that way again? You did a long time ago," Jamie insisted, beginning to look obstinate as he continued to worry the string, which was now bunching the fabric of his pajama bottoms. "We could go back to the way things used to be."

Phillip rolled his eyes again. "Yeah, right."

She'd known that she'd have to go through this if Joe ever came back, but she'd never imagined how difficult it would be. From their point of view, all they wanted was both of their parents, together in the same house. It wasn't an unreasonable desire for two young boys.

"Jamie," she said, careful not to let Phillip know she knew how he really felt, "I know you don't understand why your dad and I couldn't stay together. It was more than just his moving to Africa. We just . . . we had different ideas of what we wanted. It would be the same way now. Even if we love each other . . ." She paused, thoughts of her partner invading her mind. She certainly couldn't tell her sons that part of the reason she could never remarry their father was that she thought she might be in love with someone else. So she added softly, "Sometimes you can love someone and be too different to be together."

"When me an' Phillip grow up and we're different, will you stop loving us?" Jamie asked worriedly, finally yanking the errant thread.

Phillip snorted, but smiled.

"No way." Pulling both boys into an embrace as they nuzzled into her in a rare display of childishness, she shook her head firmly. "Don't you **ever** worry about that."

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Lee felt incredibly guilty, standing outside the open window at the King house. Having overheard Amanda's conversation with her sons, he was only slightly relieved. He'd seen the possessive, determined look in Joe's eyes as he'd held his ex-wife.

'Sometimes you can love someone and be too different to be together,' Amanda had said, her voice taking on a slightly different tone, as though saying it more to herself than to Phillip and Jamie.

Were he and Amanda simply too different to be together? He didn't feel that they were so different . . . at least not anymore. He found himself yearning for a normal life more and more frequently. Getting to know her family, having dinner with them on a Sunday afternoon, no longer spending his nights alone -- these were things that he longed for, that he thought about seriously.

There was no one he was interested in dating; his black books were filled with names and numbers of beautiful women who had at one time kept him fascinated and entertained. Now the only woman he found fascinating was his partner -- someone he'd barely even thought of as a woman for the first two years he'd known her.

With a sigh, he stepped away from her window, not anxious to be caught spying on her twice in one night. Reluctantly, he headed for his car and drove home to his empty apartment.

He had a restless, sleepless night. He couldn't get the sight of Amanda dancing with Joe out of his mind. What if she decided to get back together with Joe for Phillip and Jamie's sakes after all? He knew she would do almost anything for her sons.

If she decided to give Joe another chance, where would that leave him? Would she quit working for the Agency? Would he ever see her again? That was a thought he couldn't bear to consider. He'd grown to depend on her, not only as a partner but also as a friend, and recently as something more.

What if the catalyst to his recognizing his feelings for Amanda was ironically also the thief that would steal her away from him?

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Amanda walked through the bullpen, her eyes scanning for her partner. She was nervous about seeing him; she hadn't seen or spoken to him since their awkward conversation at Dooley's. When she didn't see him, she went upstairs to the Q-bureau and found him immersed in paperwork at his desk.

"Good morning," she said, noting his slightly disheveled appearance.

"Good morning," he replied with a tired smile. "How are you?"

"Just fine, thanks. I, um, didn't know if you needed me for anything today. If not, I'll just go downstairs and --"

He stood up, coming around the desk to face her. "No. I, uh, I can always use a hand. In fact, I'm finishing the report for our latest case," he told her significantly.

"Oh. Well, what can I do to help?"

He handed her a stack of files. "You could alphabetize these and re-file them in the vault, if you want."

"Sure."

For a few minutes, she worked in silence. When she'd finished with the files he'd given her, she stepped out to find him watching her intently, a pensive look on his face.

"So . . . How's Joe?" he asked, with an obvious attempt to sound offhand.

She shrugged lightly. "I don't know; fine, I guess. He's been spending quite a bit of time with Phillip and Jamie the past couple of days, but he and I haven't talked much."

He raised his eyebrows. "Really? I would've thought you'd have had some catching up to do. Some . . . talking."

She stared at him, trying to find a logical reason for his peculiar attitude. Her heart sped up as she considered the possibilities, but she didn't want to assume anything. He was staring at her as if expecting . . . expecting what? "Talking?" she finally managed. "We, uh, talked a lot during the case and other things at the boarding house, and we talked about the boys at Dooley's the other night. There's really not too much else for us to talk about, you know?"

"Oh . . . okay." He gave the impression that he didn't quite believe her, almost as if he was expecting her to justify herself further. When he spoke again, his voice was low and diffident. "I guess he's just not ready yet to, uh, you know . . . ask you to get back together."

She shook her head, suppressing a smile. "Lee . . ." she said, drawing out his name as she moved closer to his desk. Taking a deep breath, she explained patiently and slowly, as she had to the boys. "Joe and I are *not* getting back together. Really, it's getting a bit . . . silly. Joe hinted at it, but I think it was more that he was trying to figure out how I felt. But Mother has been hounding me about it since Joe got back, and . . . Well, just . . . trust me, Lee. It's not gonna happen. It's not what I want."

He backed away, holding up his hands. "Okay, I'm sorry. I guess I just assumed . . ."

"You assumed what? That as soon as Joe came home we'd get back together, simply because I'm not married to someone else? Lee . . . In a lot of ways, Joe and I have grown even further apart than we were before our divorce. Neither one of us is the same person we were before. I should . . . I should go." She headed for the door, wishing he would tell her what was *really* on his mind.

"Amanda, wait a minute," he called, his voice pleading.

She stopped and turned around, folding her arms across her chest. Why was it, now that she felt that she knew Lee so well, she couldn't figure him out at all? Maybe she didn't really know him as well as she thought.

"What?" she asked in tired resignation.

He stepped forward again, his face contrite. "I'm sorry. It's not that I assumed that you would back together with Joe. It's more that I was . . ." He paused, as if he'd been about to say one thing but then changed his mind. "I guess I was worried that you might. I know he hurt you and your family once. I'd hate to see that happen again. I know your boys would like it if you remarried Joe, but . . ."

An alarm went off in her mind, and as he continued speaking, all she could focus on were the questions his words presented. He knew about that? He had been there, outside her house, when she'd come home from Dooley's and found the boys still awake? Why? Did he even realize what he'd said?

"Wait," she interrupted, holding up a finger. "How'd you know the boys want Joe and me to remarry?"

His eyes widened, his face flushing hotly. "What?"

She licked her lips nervously, wondering just how often he was outside her house, watching and listening. Instead of annoying her or making her feel as though her privacy had been invaded, the thought warmed her immensely. She said calmly, "You said that you know Phillip and Jamie would like it if Joe and I remarried. How do you know that?"

He stared at her for a long moment and then swallowed convulsively. Making a poor attempt at recovery, he said, "Oh. Well, I mean . . . Don't most kids want their divorced parents to get back together? You didn't mention it? I guess I just thought that they would . . ."

She shook her head, dropping her gaze to the floor. "Okay, Lee," she replied with a sigh.

It was amazing to her that Joe, who should know beyond the shadow of a doubt that she would never consent to remarry him, had no qualms about talking to the boys about it behind her back. On the other hand, Lee, who had to know that she would do anything he asked, was reluctant to even be honest with her.

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She'd known he was lying. It was there for him to see, right there in her eyes. She could see right through him, so why couldn't she also see that he was practically falling over himself when he was around her? He stuttered, gaped, froze, and acted like a complete idiot.

He'd certainly been an idiot to let it slip that he'd overheard her conversation with her boys. That was just stupid. He could keep national secrets without a second thought but where Amanda King was concerned, he didn't have the presence of mind to keep his mouth shut.

What had nearly killed him was the look she'd given him as he hastily tried to extricate himself from the sticky mess he'd created. He hated lying to her, even about small things.

If he confessed to her how often he stood outside her window, watching her and her family, she would know exactly how he felt about her. He wasn't ready yet for her to know that, though the return of Joe King had hastened his own acknowledgement of the depth of his own feelings.

The remainder of the day had been strained and quiet. He'd been careful not to mention Joe again, even when Amanda had called him to talk about his arrangements with the boys for the following weekend. When she'd gone home, she'd quietly said goodbye. He'd missed her as soon as she walked out the door.

He glanced at his desk clock; it was late. He'd stayed and finished up a few other things, mainly because he didn't want to go home alone. His empty apartment had, at one time, been a haven. Now, it was only a reminder of all the things he didn't have.

When had he begun to yearn for a normal life? When had he begun to dream of having someone to hold every night as he fell asleep? When had that someone become Amanda King?

He had to see her. The need to tell her the truth was suddenly overwhelming. Hoping he'd be able to talk to her for a few minutes, he drove over to her house, becoming more anxious to see her with each passing minute.

As he made his way into her darkened backyard, he stopped in his tracks as he caught sight of her. She was sitting on a bench by herself, and her expression was one of quiet contemplation.

Silently, he approached her. "Hey," he whispered, afraid he would startle her.

"Hi," she said softly, looking over at him. Apparently, she was so accustomed to his turning up that it no longer surprised her. "I kinda thought you might come by tonight."

He grinned as he walked toward her. "Am I that predictable?"

"I wouldn't call you predictable," she said, patting the bench beside her. "Not you."

He sat down at her side, close enough but not too close. "What are you doing out here all alone?" he asked, studying her face.

She smiled softly, looking away. "Just . . . thinking." She opened her palm, which had been closed around a small, sparkling object.

It was a set of wedding rings. A plain gold band, and a matching diamond solitaire. His throat constricted, and he couldn't say anything.

Unaware of his distress, she said in a low voice, "My wedding rings. When Joe and I decided to get a divorce, he insisted that I keep them. He felt that . . . He really believed that his being on a different continent was the only thing -- or at least the major thing -- keeping us apart." She sighed, shaking her head ruefully. "We were just so young . . . Too young, really, in a lot of ways. I loved him . . . I loved him very much then. We were still in love when we decided to separate but we

knew it would never work out the way things were. I felt like I'd failed. I mean, our marriage didn't even last ten years. It would've been different if the boys weren't involved, but . . . the fact that we had two children made things even harder."

"Amanda, listen," he broke in softly, touching her arm. "You don't have to --"

"Yes, I do. I want . . . I need to." She fixed him with a level gaze. "Anyway, he really believed that when and if he came back, I'd be here waiting for him, and we'd remarry. I knew, though. I knew that we weren't meant to be together. Especially after . . . after I started working at the Agency. I've changed, Lee. Joe knows that now, too. He told me so. And I think he knows, deep down, that it would never work. But despite all his imperfections, he's really just a romantic. The idea of us . . . reunited as a family . . . was a nice dream for him. And I think we're all he has here, so he has . . . he *had* . . . this picture in his mind."

Lee watched her closely. He could see her eyes glistening, though she didn't shed any tears. "And what picture is in *your* mind, Amanda?" he asked, the tremor in his voice betraying his emotions.

She shook her head, the look in her eyes becoming clouded and withdrawn. "I don't know anymore," she said, so softly that he had to strain to hear her.

"Amanda . . ."

Her eyelids fell closed and she smiled ironically. "All I know is that it doesn't include Joe; not as my husband. And . . . somehow, I feel guilty for that, if only because of Phillip and Jamie. I mean, I would do almost anything for my sons, but I can't remarry their father. It would end up far worse for them, for us all, in the long run. And, I guess I'm a bit of a romantic, myself, because I keep hoping to find . . . something." For a long moment, she stared up at the cloudless night sky, then shook herself slightly, as if remembering he was there. She took a deep breath and then continued, changing the subject. "I know I could have gone with Joe to Africa, taken the boys --"

Lee grasped her hand in his. "There's no use going over all that again, Amanda. You both made decisions, and there's no going back."

"No going back," she repeated. "You're right. You asked me earlier about why it didn't work out between us. The truth is, I *could* have gone. It would've been possible to start all over. And I know that if I'd loved him like I . . . like I could have -- should have -- it would have worked out." Her voice softened as she went on, "If I'd loved him like I should have, I'd have followed him anywhere. I know that now." What had she been about to say? Was she speaking from experience; had she loved someone since Joe that she would follow anywhere? Was it possible that she was talking about him? She continued, "So instead, I chose to say that he was the one who left me. But really, we left each other. We just . . . gave up, let go."

Scooting closer to her, Lee wrapped an arm around her shoulders, saying, "Well, personally, I'm glad things happened the way they did. If you'd gone with Joe to Africa, if you'd stayed married to him, you wouldn't have been at the train station with that . . . weatherman . . . the morning I forced a package into your hands . . . and myself into your life," he told her, his voice deep with sincerity.

She blushed in the moonlight and looked at him. "That's a wonderful thing to say, Lee. Thank you."

Nodding, he swallowed the desire to kiss her. It wasn't the right time; he didn't want to take advantage of her emotional state. But he ached to kiss her, and vowed to himself that someday soon, he would. "I mean it, Amanda. I . . . I can't imagine where my life would have been right now without you in it. I can't imagine my . . . my future . . . without you in it."

She bit her bottom lip. "Well, we'll never know now. Like you said, there's no going back."

Giving her a light squeeze, he replied in a whisper, "I wouldn't want to go back."

"Neither would I," she confessed. "I told Joe at Dooley's that I want to go forward. And I do. Whatever 'forward' brings."

Lee nodded and then drew her closer so that her head was resting on his shoulder. "Whatever forward brings," he repeated.

Onward and forward . . .