

No Place Like Home

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Author's Notes: This is a filler story for the 'With Or Without You' universe, this sequel to 'Rites of Passage' is set in October, 1991 - Phillip King's freshman year in college.

~I~

"There he is!" Amanda cried as she walked briskly across the quad. "Phillip, over here."

Lee shifted their luggage to one side, placing his free arm tightly around his wife's waist. "Cool it, Mom," he advised, giving her a loving squeeze. "You don't want to spoil his image."

Amanda smiled self-consciously, leaning into Lee's embrace. "I keep forgetting he's not my baby anymore."

"He's not even close." Lee watched as his tall, lanky stepson quickly closed the distance between them. "Look at him; I think he's grown a foot. Must be all that healthy college food," he added with a laugh.

"Hey, Mom, Lee," Phillip said as he jogged up. "It's great to see you guys." He slapped Lee on the back, then turned to give his mother a hug. "Gee, Mom, you're so skinny."

"Yeah, I should hope so, since the last time you saw me . . ." she pulled away to give her eldest a closer inspection. Lee was right, she thought wistfully. He did look different. Taller. Bigger. Grown-up.

Phillip smiled sheepishly, the little boy inside clearly visible again. "So, how is my new baby sister?" he asked, taking one of the bags from Lee as he led them towards the Campus Inn. "Jamie says she looks just like you, Mom."

"Well, she has dark hair, but I'm not holding my breath. I fully expect it to fall out and come in blonde."

"She'd still be absolutely beautiful," Lee said fondly.

Amanda laughed as she reached for his hand. "Yeah, six weeks old and Jenny already has her daddy wrapped very securely around her little finger."

"Takes after her mother," Lee whispered, entwining his pinky finger with Amanda's. Turning to Phillip, he added in a louder voice, "She really is a little angel. Good as gold."

She gave her husband a playful nudge. "That's because whenever *he* sees her, she's sleeping peacefully. It's a totally different picture at three in the morning. I hope your poor grandmother survives the weekend."

"She handled things pretty well when Jamie and I were little. No matter what we came up with, she still managed to stay one step ahead . . ." Catching his mother's raised eyebrow, Phillip immediately changed course. "Uh, on second thought, maybe Grandma does deserve a medal," he added with an embarrassed laugh.

Lee grinned. "I don't know about a medal, but I believe a trip to Elizabeth Arden was mentioned."

"Seems like a pretty fair trade for all that sleep deprivation," Amanda laughed.

"Apparently Jenny still has her days and nights mixed up," Lee explained as they entered the lobby. "Hopefully that little problem will be ironed out by the time you come home for Thanksgiving."

"Oh, I think I can take it," Phillip replied stoically as they made their way through the crowd of parents and students. "After three months in 'Animal Hall', a little noise isn't going to phase me."

"Animal Hall?"

"Yeah," he grinned. "My dorm's, uh, nickname."

Amanda smiled dryly. "Do I want to hear why they call it that?"

"Well," Phillip began, "I guess a few years ago, this group of guys who lived there had this pig, and. . ."

"That's okay, Phillip," Amanda interrupted with a laugh. "There are some things in life a mother doesn't need to know. If you guys will excuse me, I'll just go check us in."

The two men exchanged a grin as she made her way to the desk, and Phillip added matter-of-factly, "Gee, compared to some of your exploits, it was really kinda tame."

"I think she's in denial," Lee joked. "I'm not sure your mother wants to acknowledge that she has a child old enough to have colorful stories of his own."

Phillip gave his mother an appraising look. "She really does look great. Everything really went okay? With the baby, I mean? I hated leaving for school right before she was born. Jamie said . . ."

"Everything went absolutely fine," Lee reassured him. Laying a comforting arm on his stepson's shoulder, he guided him to a more private spot by the far wall. "It wasn't anything like last time, Phillip."

He nodded, giving Lee a bashful grin. "It's not like I was really worried or anything . . ."

"I'll let you in on a little secret," Lee stated as the boy's words trailed off. "I was plenty worried." As Phillip made a show of studying the brochures in the display rack, he added, "But your mother. . . she was absolutely certain, right from the start, that everything would be fine. And, as usual, she was right."

"She's always right," Phillip laughed, glancing at his mother with undisguised admiration. "How does she do that?"

"I'm still trying to figure that out myself." Leaning against the wall, Lee let his eyes wander over to his remarkable wife. Phillip was right; she really did look incredible. True, she didn't resemble the flamboyant, well-coiffed beauties he'd once been drawn to, but her dark hair fell in soft waves that perfectly framed her face, and her jeans accentuated her slim figure so well she could almost be mistaken for a college student herself. Her softer, almost effortless beauty was so much more alluring.

Why had it taken him so long to realize it? Other men had certainly noticed, and still did, he thought with a touch of annoyance. Just like that idiot at the front desk she was talking to right now. Stifling his irritation, he turned to Phillip.

"How's college life treating you?" he asked, one eye still on his wife and her all too obvious admirer. "Any girlfriends to report?"

Phillip grinned. "I'm keeping my options open. There is this one girl, but, well, she's really just a friend."

"Better watch your back, Phillip," Lee told him with a teasing grin. "That's the most dangerous kind of female."

"No, really, it's not like that. Debbie's a sophomore, and she's into all that theater stuff. She's the lead in the play we're going to see tonight," he informed his stepfather with a more than a hint of pride.

"Oh, yeah? She any good?"

Phillip's lips curved up in a cryptic smile. "I don't know yet."

"I meant in the play, Chief," Lee laughed, giving his stepson a friendly nudge.

"Oh, so did I," Phillip returned, echoing his laugh. "I just haven't had a chance to see it."

"We're all set," Amanda interrupted, stopping short as she caught sight of their faces. "What's so funny?"

Phillip raised an eyebrow as Lee gave a hearty laugh. "Uh, nothing, dear." Taking the key from her hand, he deftly changed the subject. "What took you so long?"

"There was some sort of confusion about the room," she replied, giving him a wilting look. "I thought you were going to confirm the reservation last week."

"I did." Noting his wife's expression, he added, "I, uh, think."

"Lee, you told me you'd taken care of it."

"That might have been the day La Rue pitched his semi-annual fit about expense accounts," he said with a sheepish smile.

Amanda rolled her eyes. "At least they finally managed to scrounge us up a room."

"You seemed to be enjoying yourself while they looked," Lee observed. Nodding at the tall man who had left the front desk to talk to a group of parents, he added testily, "Who's your new best friend?"

"Jim? Why, he was just trying to be helpful," Amanda said innocently, noting her husband's expression. It was gratifying to see that after almost four years of marriage and two children, Lee's jealous tendencies were still healthily intact.

"Just what the world needs," Lee grumbled. "'Helpful' desk clerks."

"He's a very nice man," she added, struggling to hide her smile. "And he's not really the desk clerk. He actually owns the hotel, and I believe he's a professor here as well."

"Yeah, that's my freshman advisor, Professor Walters," Phillip informed them. "He's a really great guy."

"So it would seem," Lee grimaced.

Amanda shook her head, giving her husband a playful slap in the midsection. "Now," she said, turning to Phillip with a grin, "what's the plan for the evening?"

Phillip smiled. "Um, there's a buffet at the dining hall, but I made reservations at a restaurant in town. I thought that might be more fun."

"Not to mention more appetizing," Lee put in.

"Yeah, the food service here is kind of . . . institutional," Phillip stated with a laugh. "It's bad enough we have to eat it tomorrow for the banquet."

"Are your dad and Carrie going to be joining us for dinner?" Amanda asked.

Phillip frowned slightly. "No, Dad called yesterday. He had to work this afternoon, so they won't be here until late."

"That's a shame," Amanda sympathized. "I know Carrie was looking forward to the play tonight."

"It's okay," Phillip replied philosophically. "Gives us more time together."

Lee and Amanda exchanged a look. Her son seemed more relieved than upset about Joe's late arrival. Perhaps Phillip's disagreement with his dad during orientation weekend went deeper than either of them had let on.

"What time is dinner?" Lee inquired, breaking the slightly awkward silence that had sprung up between them.

Phillip glanced at his watch. "About an hour."

"Okay," Lee nodded, retrieving their suitcase. "We'll get changed and meet you down here in, say, forty-five minutes?"

Phillip smiled. "That should be fine. It'll give me just enough time to wish Debbie good luck for tonight." Waving, he headed out the door.

"Debbie?" Amanda exclaimed as they headed towards the elevator.

Lee rolled his eyes. "Come on," he urged, his finger on the 'up' button. "I'll explain while we change."

~II~

Amanda closed the door, flipping the deadbolt into place. While she'd thoroughly enjoyed the evening with Phillip and his friends, it had reminded her just how far removed she was from her own college days. She'd been more than happy to head back to the Inn a little before midnight.

Heading for the nearest bed, she sank down in relief. "My feet are killing me," she groaned as she kicked off her shoes. Leaning over, she began to slowly massage the ball of her foot. "I should have known better than to wear new shoes."

"Funny, they didn't seem to be bothering you a few hours ago," Lee grumbled as he hefted his canvas bag onto the other double bed. Quickly unzipping it, he gave the contents a cursory glance, mumbling under his breath, "You and 'what's-his-name' . . ."

Amanda looked up. "'What's-his-name'?"

"Your buddy from the lobby."

"Oh," she grinned, "*that* 'What's-his-name'."

He gave her a sour look. "Yeah. The two of you cut a pretty mean swath across the dance floor."

"Just for the record, his name is Jim. And I think I danced with him a grand total of two times," she replied archly, leaning back on her elbows as she watched him grapple unsuccessfully with his tie.

"You could have fooled me," Lee grouched again, finally managing to rip off the offending neckwear. "Every time I glanced over in your direction, there he stood."

She laughed lightly. For a highly trained agent who could recite numerous codes and ciphers on command, Lee Stetson seemed to have an inordinate amount of trouble recalling a simple name. It was a trait she found more than a little endearing.

Rising, she came up behind him. "He's Phillip's advisor, and I didn't want to be rude," she told him in a low whisper, placing her hands gently on his shoulders. Easing his suit coat down his arms, she tossed it on the bed, then began to slowly work her hands along his back. "I don't know why you're complaining," she whispered softly as she felt his tension begin to subside. "You sure didn't seem lonely."

"Phillip was introducing me to some of his friends," he countered. Turning, he caught her in his arms, pulling her tightly against him. "I didn't want to be rude."

Her fingers traveled up his back to tangle lightly in his hair. "Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah," he answered, his eyes sparkling.

Amanda laughed. "Have you noticed that all of Phillip's friends appear to be of the female persuasion?" she asked, moving her hands to the front of his shirt. She opened the top button, her nails skimming lightly over the hollow of his throat.

Lee drew in a deep breath, exhaling slowly as he caught the impish sparkle in his wife's eyes. Grinning, he stilled her roaming fingers, bringing them to his lips for a kiss. "Oh, he had a perfectly logical explanation for that," he informed her, leaning in towards her ear. She could feel the light tickle of his breath as he added, "At this university the girls outnumber the boys two to one."

"I didn't know that," she replied, her voice cracking as Lee turned his attention to her neck.

"Evidently a major point in its favor when he was going through the admission process," Lee confided, moving her sweater aside to give him better access.

Sighing, she rested against him. He had the most wonderful lips, she thought hungrily; and, oh, my gosh . . . how she'd missed the feelings they stirred in her.

He seemed to read her thoughts. "It's been a long time, Mrs. Stetson," he murmured in gravelly tones as he drew back to catch her eye.

"Close to three months," she whispered, shivering slightly as she met his gaze. She could see her own passionate longing reflected back at her. She watched him lean in, his lips barely touching hers as he bestowed a tender kiss. It wasn't nearly enough and, straining forward, she pressed her lips to his again, this time more firmly.

His response was immediate. Her mouth parted instinctively to his tongue as she let go, melting into the steadily increasing intensity of their kiss. She heard him groan, a low, rumbling noise from deep inside his chest, and she echoed the sound, fanning the flame as she pressed even closer.

Breaking away at last, he ran his finger softly across her cheek. "Oh, Amanda," he whispered, "I've missed you so."

"I've been right here," she answered in a shaky voice.

"Yeah, but you've been . . . we've been . . . occupied with other things," he told her with a longing smile. "Not that I'm complaining, it's just that . . ."

She smiled wryly. "Parenthood has a way of sucking the passion right out of a relationship."

"Only if we let it." He pulled her against him, his lips brushing tenderly through her hair. "I don't know about you, Mrs. Stetson, but I've got a whole lot of passion left in me."

"Oh, yeah?" she asked with a low laugh, rubbing seductively against him. "I don't suppose you'd care to demonstrate?"

He flashed her a breathtaking smile. "I'd like to very much," he replied, his voice low and inviting. Leaning in, he kissed her again. It was slower this time, more leisurely than demanding, yet somehow it made her ache for him even more.

"Wow," she murmured softly as they broke apart, leaning her forehead gently against his.

"Yeah," he echoed, breathing deeply. "Amanda," he began, hesitating as his eyes searched hers. "Is this gonna be okay? The doctor did say you could . . ."

Her thumb caressed his lips, silencing him. "Yes, it's perfectly fine. Elaine gave me a clean bill of health at my check-up."

"Whew," he whistled, breaking into a grin. "In that case, hold that thought. I'll be right back."

"Back?" she exclaimed. "You're going somewhere . . . now?"

"I happen to have a very special bottle of wine in the car," he informed her, his raised eyebrows emphasizing each word. "One I've been saving for an equally extraordinary occasion."

She laughed lightly. "Wine glasses, too, I suppose?"

"Damn," he muttered as he started for the door. "I knew I forgot something." Eyes searching, he picked up the standard hotel room issue. "Will these do?"

She smiled softly. "We've managed with a lot less."

"You're absolutely right, Mrs. Stetson." Crossing the room, he kissed her again. "Don't go anywhere, I'll be right back."

"Is it okay with you if I get out of these clothes?"

He flashed her a winning smile. "I was kind of looking forward to helping you with that."

"Oh, you still can," she laughed. Reaching into their suitcase, she pulled out a flimsy wisp of satin, waving it enticingly in front of her. "I brought this along with exactly that in mind."

His eyes widened. "Amanda . . ."

"What? You weren't the only one with plans for this weekend, you know."

Grinning slyly, he blew her a kiss as he headed out the door. Amanda stood still for a minute, her fingers rubbing the soft fabric of her nightgown, wondering how she'd gotten so lucky. Marriage hadn't dimmed their desire in the least; if anything, their passion had deepened as their growing family had added patience, humor and a real sense of sharing to the mix.

Qualities that had been sorely needed of late. She really hadn't been very receptive to physical affection in the long weeks before Jenny's birth, and since coming home from the hospital, she'd moved through the days in a haze of fatigue, her only goal to snatch a bit of uninterrupted sleep. Only this past week had she glimpsed the light at the end of that proverbial tunnel when Jenny had finally started sleeping for longer stretches of time. She sent up a silent prayer that her mother was having an easy night with her.

Grabbing her nightgown, she headed for the bathroom, trying not to dwell on thoughts of home. She'd been so torn about leaving little Jenny this weekend, but she was looking forward to spending some time with her husband that had nothing to do with diapers, formula or feeding schedules.

And she'd been anxious to see Phillip, too. While he had never said it in so many words, she knew how much he'd been counting on their visit. She still felt a little guilty that something as momentous as his departure for college had been swallowed up by the chaos of his baby sister's imminent arrival.

Little Matthew had felt it, too. Phillip's leaving had been especially hard on him. A new baby sister who did nothing but eat, sleep and scream was a poor substitute for the big brother he adored, and Amanda had been trying to give him some extra attention while she was still on maternity leave. He was not quite three, still a baby in his own right. It was only natural to feel some pangs of jealousy over losing that title.

At least Jamie seemed to be on an even keel these days. No longer overshadowed by his athletic older brother's accomplishments, he seemed to be thriving this year in high school. He suddenly had an active social life, and he'd even taken a date to the Homecoming dance last weekend. Amanda smiled, remembering the look on his face when Lee had presented him with the keys to the Corvette for the occasion. Yes, her second son seemed to have finally found his niche.

Now, if only she could reclaim hers, she thought plaintively. It's not that she minded being a housewife again for a little while, but part of her was already longing to get back to work. Matthew's unbridled joy at having her home made her

feel more than a little guilty for wanting to 'have it all', but, oh, how she missed working with Lee and the adrenaline rush of that other life they shared.

Not to mention the passionate fire of their intimate relationship. At least this time away would give them an opportunity to put that back on track. Removing her clothes, she slid the silken nightgown over her head, examining her reflection in the mirror with a critical eye. Better, but not quite there yet; another month of exercise should do the trick. A small price to pay, she thought as she turned slightly, smoothing the nightgown down over her stomach. Her new baby daughter was worth a lifetime of stomach crunches.

Satisfied, she headed into the other room. At least Jenny's unusually swift arrival had spared her another c-section. After her ordeal with Matthew, the doctors had been so insistent, but like a true Stetson, Jenny had other ideas. Amanda smiled at the memory; they were lucky they'd made it to the hospital in time.

Placing her folded slacks and sweater neatly in her suitcase, she turned her attention to the bed closest to the wall. Not as luxurious as the Crystal Springs Inn, but it would do. Pulling back the quilted spread, she smoothed the sheets and plumped the pillows, wishing she'd had time to pick up some of those little chocolates they loved. Well, perhaps for their next trip . . .

She heard the soft knock, and, smiling in anticipation, she turned towards the sound. "Forget your key, big fella?" she called teasingly as she opened the door. "You know, there was a day when you could've picked that lock in ten sec . . ." Mouth open, she froze in the doorway, staring in startled surprise.

"Uh, hi there, Amanda," Carrie King mumbled apologetically, her eyes wide. "I'm, uh, really sorry to disturb you . . ."

"But we've got a little problem," Joe stated crossly, exhaling loudly as he folded his arms across his chest.

"Problem?" Amanda said weakly, having trouble processing his words. Glancing down at her attire, her cheeks reddened, and she quickly scooted behind the door, peering around it with a self-conscious smile.

"Well, it's really more of an oversight, I guess," Carrie explained sheepishly, her own cheeks flaming as she watched Amanda hiding behind her makeshift shield.

"Oversight?" Joe grumbled. "It's stupidity, pure and simple. I made the reservation over a month ago, two nights, and now that clerk can't find it."

"Well, that's not totally true," Carrie corrected. "He did find a reservation, it's just, well, canceled."

"And whose fault is that, huh?" Joe exhaled again, rubbing his hand across the back of his neck.

"I don't know, Joe," Carrie hissed, her blue eyes flashing, "but if you say it a little louder, perhaps someone down the hall will tell you." Pursing her lips, she turned apologetically to Amanda. "Could we please come in?"

"Uh, sure . . . just give me a second," Amanda replied, hastily searching the room for something to throw on over her negligee. Grabbing Lee's discarded suit coat, she pulled it on, turning to greet her unexpected guests. "So," she began, clearing her throat as she ushered Joe and Carrie into the room. "You were saying?"

"The front desk messed up our reservation," Joe told her with an exasperated sigh. "Evidently some idiot clerk accidentally canceled it."

"Don't most hotels usually hold a few rooms for emergency?" Amanda inquired.

"They filled their last 'emergency' reservation late this afternoon. At least, that's what they claim." Joe shook his head in disgust, adding vehemently, "Idiots; nothing but a bunch of idiots."

"Joe, calm down," Carrie said soothingly. "They were very apologetic. And they did find us a room for tomorrow night."

"Generous of them," he replied testily, "but that doesn't help us tonight, now does it?"

"Well, maybe if we'd left D. C. at a decent hour, we wouldn't be dealing with this at midnight," Carrie shot back.

"So you told me several dozen times in the lobby." Taking a deep breath, Joe turned to Amanda. "Would you mind if I used your phone? The manager gave me a couple of other hotels to try."

"No, go ahead," she sighed, pulling Lee's coat tighter around her.

Joe dropped down on the bed, the springs creaking beneath his weight. Grabbing the phone, he removed a small card from his pocket, squinting as he read it. Shaking

his head, he let out a long breath, his fingers slamming down on the buttons as he punched in the number.

Carrie sighed, taking in Amanda's nightgown and she carefully turned down the bed with an apologetic glance. "I'm so sorry for barging in like this," she whispered, folding her arms across her chest as she moved to the window. "Joe was just so upset. He called Phillip, and he gave us your room number."

Amanda put an arm around her shoulder. "Hey, it's okay," she told her reassuringly. "That's what family's for, right?"

Carrie nodded, unable to speak.

"Come on," Amanda urged, one eye on Joe as he dialed another number. "Everything will work out just fine."

"Sorry I took so long," Lee apologized as he breezed into the room. "The corkscrew was under the seat. You weren't lonely, were . . ." He stopped dead in his tracks, wine bottle in hand, as he took in the scene.

"Uh, not exactly," she answered, meeting his flabbergasted look with a feeble smile. "Joe and Carrie seem to have a slight accommodation problem."

"Problem?" Lee echoed, one lip curling up incredulously.

"It appears the front desk lost their reservation, and now there's 'no room at the Inn'," Amanda explained wryly.

"I'm so sorry for barging in on you guys like this," Carrie repeated. Tucking an errant strand of blonde hair tidily behind her ear, she looked woefully from Lee to Amanda. "I'm sure we'll get this resolved and be out of your way in no time."

"Carrie, please, don't worry about it," Amanda told her again, putting an arm around her shoulder. "It's perfectly all right."

"Yeah," Lee added dryly. "Perfectly."

Shooting him a warning look, Amanda turned once more to Carrie. "I hope you had a nice drive down at least," she put in quickly.

Carrie shook her head. "By the time we got on the road, the traffic was a nightmare. Fridays," she added with a sigh. "I told Joe . . ."

The phone slammed down, and they all looked up. "Well, that tears it," Joe stated angrily as he rose from the bed. "There isn't a hotel room to be had tonight anywhere in this town. Oh, hi, Lee," he sighed, extending his hand.

"The entire town is booked?" Lee replied incredulously as he returned Joe's greeting.

"Well, if they aren't booked, they've closed their reservations for the night. Guess it's kind of late to check in. Is that wine?" Joe added, staring pointedly at the bottle Lee still clasped in his hand. "I could really use a drink."

Lee gave him a sickly look. "Oh, uh, sure," he responded, heading for the bathroom, mumbling under his breath, "it's not like I've been saving it or anything."

"I'll give you a hand," Amanda put in quickly. "Joe, Carrie, sit down, both of you. You guys look exhausted."

Entering the bathroom, she caught Lee's expression. "Don't say it," she whispered hastily. "Believe me, I know, but I feel so sorry for Carrie . . ."

"Amanda," he moaned, fighting with the corkscrew. "You aren't suggesting . . ."

"Well, what are we supposed to do?" she hissed. "Let them sleep in the car?"

"I'm thinking about it," he replied, pulling out the cork. "My Gottanara '75. Do you have any idea how long I've been saving this?"

She shook her head weakly.

"April of 1987, Amanda," he told her with a raised eyebrow. "Ever since T. P. replaced it for me."

"Well, you did say you wanted it for something extraordinary," she told him with a widening smile. "I think this qualifies. A cozy little evening, just the . . . four . . . of us. Come on," she laughed in response to his somewhat painful grimace, "you have to admit it's kind of funny."

"Funny isn't the word that comes to mind at the moment," he grumbled as he filled the glasses. His eyes swept over her appraisingly. "Uh, nice outfit, by the way."

"I'm sure Joe and Carrie appreciated it, too, especially when I answered the door sans jacket," she sighed. "Oh, my gosh . . ."

"You can say that again," he commiserated, passing her two glasses. Picking up the wine bottle, he emptied the rest into his glass, filling it to the rim. "Come on," he told her with a groan, "let's go offer our guests a bed for the night."

~III~

"Here you go," Lee said, stifling a yawn as he set the well-filled plate on the table.

Amanda raised her eyebrows. Shenandoah-style chicken, barbequed pork, red bliss potato salad and cole slaw. Evidently Lee had decided to sample everything the 'Picnic on the Commons' had to offer.

"You really expect me to eat all this food?" she asked incredulously.

"No, I expect you to eat all **this** food," he grinned, placing a small salad in front of her. "The rest, I thought we'd share."

She shook her head in amazement. "You do realize there's enough there to feed a small tribe?"

"I'm starving," he replied testily as he sat down beside her. "That happens when you get about twenty minutes of sleep."

"You didn't have to get up at the crack of dawn and go running," she said, calmly spooning some dressing onto her salad.

"Trust me, Amanda, I did. I couldn't lie there next to you any more, not while you were wearing that. . . well, **that**," he told her with a sheepish grin.

"Yeah, well, I know the feeling. Maybe if you'd packed some pajamas, you wouldn't have had to peel off those sweats in the middle of the night."

He gave her a sour look. "I wasn't anticipating a need for pajamas."

"My gosh, Lee," she told him sharply, "Joe and Carrie were less than a foot away."

"They were perfectly oblivious," he retorted, shoveling a large forkful of potato salad into his mouth. "Did Joe always snore like that? No wonder you two. . ."

Her eyes narrowed. "I wouldn't go there, if I were you. Besides," she added as she watched him tear into a chicken leg, "Last night wasn't my fault."

"Oh, yeah? The group 'campout' sure wasn't my idea."

"Yeah, well, maybe if you'd bothered to confirm our reservation when I asked you to," she said, enunciating slowly and plainly, "the hotel wouldn't have had to give *us* their last emergency room yesterday."

"Of all the convoluted . . ." Tossing his half-eaten chicken leg back onto his plate, he leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms. "That's the most idiotic reasoning I've ever heard, Amanda."

"Are you implying that I'm an idiot, Stetson?" she returned, her back stiffening.

"I'm not 'implying' anything," he retorted. "I'm saying that you . . ." He stopped abruptly, the angry words hanging in the air as he caught Amanda's eye. Taking a deep breath, he ran a hand through his hair. "I'm saying," he finished in a softer voice, "that you and I are both exhausted. Maybe we should call a truce before we say something we'll regret?"

Amanda let out a breath of her own, her anger deflating just as quickly. "I guess Joe and Carrie's bickering must be contagious, huh?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

Sighing again, she fiddled with the paper napkin on her lap. "I'm sorry I nagged you about the reservation. It's just that I've been feeling so . . . I don't know, 'hemmed in' I guess is the best way to describe it." Reaching for her cup, she sipped her coffee, a thoughtful frown settling over her features. "Some days I have to remind myself that there's a world out there beyond Jenny's feeding schedule."

He smiled wistfully. "And some days that world out there is exactly what I'd like to forget." Leaning forward, he rested his elbows on the table as he rubbed his eyes. "I've just been buried in paperwork and aggravation lately. These damn budget cuts. . ." He gave her a soft smile, his hand covering hers. "I guess I miss my administrative director. Field section doesn't run as smoothly without her."

"And she misses working with you, too, Scarecrow. Among other things." Eyes sparkling, she reached under the table, letting her fingertips brush enticingly along his thigh.

Shifting in his seat, he quickly removed her hand. "You're incorrigible, you know."

"So I've been told. Guess that's what happens when I miss out on . . . sleep."

"Too bad I didn't know that years ago," he grinned, raising his eyebrows expressively. "All those wasted stake-outs . . ."

Shaking her head, she rolled her eyes. "It's comforting to know that your ego is still as healthy as ever."

"That's why you love me," he teased, leaning in for a brief kiss.

She sighed, running her thumb lightly over his bottom lip. "Eat your lunch, Stetson. You're gonna need all your strength for tonight."

He flashed her a grin. "Promise?"

"Count on it." Smiling, she watched Lee attack his plate again with renewed gusto. Her own lunch held less appeal, and she idly toyed with a few lettuce leaves. "What do you think has gotten into Joe and Carrie?" she asked suddenly. "I've never heard them argue like that."

"Not a clue," he mumbled, spearing a small piece of chicken. "Who can figure Joe out these days?" Holding out his fork, he turned to her with a conspiratorial grin. "But here - I think you're the one who needs to keep up your strength right now," he advised, nodding in the general direction of the quad. "Look."

She turned in time to see Carrie approach the table with a grim expression, an unusually silent Joe and Phillip trailing behind. Hurriedly accepting Lee's proffered food, she addressed Carrie with a too-bright smile. "You're not eating?"

"No, thanks, Amanda," Carrie replied, settling down into the small wooden chair. "I haven't had much of an appetite lately. My, uh, allergies really kick up in the fall."

"That's too bad," Amanda replied. "It really is delicious."

"It sure looks good," Joe agreed, a taut smile on his face as he took a seat beside his wife. "Why don't you just try a bite?"

"I'm not hungry, Joe," Carrie said coldly, turning her chair slightly to the right. Leaning forward, she rested her chin on her hand.

Amanda shot Phillip a questioning look. He shook his head in reply, shrugging slightly as scooted in between his mother and stepfather. "Well, I'm starving," he informed them sanguinely. "They don't usually feed us this well, so I figure I might as well enjoy it." Glancing tentatively around the table, he added with a sly grin, "Make sure you get the most out of your tuition dollar."

Lee laughed loudly. "That's mighty thoughtful of you, Chief."

"That's me," Phillip countered, taking a large bite of chicken. "Always thinking ahead."

"If that's the case, maybe we should have gone to the academic reception this morning, instead of rowing on the river," Joe stated pointedly. "The schedule said they were having departmental tours."

Amanda glanced at Phillip out of the corner of her eye, her motherly alarm bells ringing at her son's pinched expression. "Oh, the weather's much too nice to waste the day indoors," she put in quickly, "and I wouldn't have missed that canoe trip for anything. The valley on the south fork of the Shenandoah is absolutely beautiful."

"I just thought it would be more educational to find out what this University has to offer," Joe responded, his voice strained. "Academically speaking, that is."

"I know exactly what they have to offer," Phillip said quietly. "I did do some research before I decided to come here."

Joe's brow furrowed. "It's just a good idea to review all your options. That is, if you want to get into a good law school."

"You know, I don't really know what I want to do right now, Dad."

"You don't have to know, Phillip," Carrie said as she shot Joe an exasperated look. "A good liberal arts education will prepare you for anything." She turned to her stepson warmly. "You can certainly get that here. Your mom's right, it's a lovely campus. I'm sure you're going to love it. I tell all my students that's half the battle."

"I'm sure your students don't need much encouragement," Joe countered. "Georgetown has very high standards."

"And this university doesn't?" Phillip demanded. "Is that what you're saying, Dad?"

"No, no, not at all," Joe put in hastily. "Don't be so defensive, Phillip."

"I wouldn't be if. . ." Phillip took a deep breath, catching his mother's eye. Rising abruptly, he muttered, "I think I'm gonna go check out the dessert."

"I'll go with you," Lee offered, hastily pushing back his chair. "I could use some dessert myself." He gave Amanda a tense smile. "Bring you anything?"

"Something high on chocolate and low on calories would hit the spot," she replied, sending him a silent thank you.

"We'll see what we can do," he said, returning her look as he rested his hand on Phillip's shoulder. "Come on, let's check out the food."

Lost in thought, Amanda watched their retreating backs for a few minutes before returning her attention to her luncheon companions. Carrie was contemplating the small tear in the paper tablecloth, while Joe rocked energetically on the back legs of his chair. Amanda started to say something, but the words caught in her throat, and she bit down on her lower lip with a careful frown as she tried to frame her thoughts more diplomatically.

"You know, Joe," she began again, her fingers toying with the diamond tennis bracelet Lee had given her for their last anniversary. "I really don't think . . ."

Joe rolled forward, the front legs of his chair sinking deeply into the grass as he landed with a muffled thud. "If you'll excuse me, I'm going to head over to the Inn," he said in a rush, placing his folded napkin over his plate. "I want to make sure they have our room ready for tonight."

Carrie glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. "I'll go with you," she added, quickly scrambling from her chair.

"It's not necessary . . ."

"I'll go with you, Joe," she repeated pointedly. She turned to Amanda with an apologetic smile. "If you'll excuse both of us."

"Oh, uh, sure." She smiled weakly. "Why don't we all catch up with you at the football stadium?"

Joe nodded mutely, his hand massaging the back of his neck as he stepped aside to let Carrie pass. Leaning forward, Amanda rested her elbows on the table, exhaling audibly as she watched the pair trudge across the commons, their arms dangling awkwardly at their sides.

Something was definitely off kilter. Joe was usually so calm and easygoing - that had been one of the main reasons she'd been attracted to him all those years ago. And to ride Phillip like that. . . he never did that, at least not since right before their . . .

She bit her lip again. No, it had to be something else. Joe and Carrie had a good, solid marriage. He was probably just involved in a big case; she knew first-hand how work could absorb him. And Carrie . . . well, it was the start of the academic year at Georgetown, always a hectic time for her. Not to mention the volunteer hours she put in at the children's center, and the course work for her doctorate. No, she was probably way off base.

She sighed, giving her neck a slight twist to stretch out the kinks. From across the commons, she could see Lee and Phillip slowly making their way towards her. Phillip appeared to be his old self again, his face animated as he listened to whatever Lee was telling him. Involuntarily, she smiled. Pushing back her chair, she walked over to meet them.

~IV~

Amanda took the two steaming cups from the concession stand clerk, fitting them carefully into the small slots of the cardboard holder. Grabbing some napkins, she made her way to the small wooden bench nestled beneath the trees.

"I know it's not really cold enough for this," she said, passing a drink to Carrie King as she sat down. "But it just seems to go with football somehow."

"I know what you mean," Carrie replied. "When I was in high school, there were times we'd buy hot chocolate just so we could hold onto the cup during the games - to keep our fingers warm. It could get pretty cold in October."

"I keep forgetting you didn't grow up in this part of the country."

"Oh, I've lived here for so long, it seems like home now. But I remember when I was a little girl. . ." Carrie leaned back, breathing deeply as she closed her eyes. "My sister and I used to really look forward to the winter weather. Snow for the

holidays. . ." She opened her eyes, turning to Amanda with a sad smile. "I don't know, somehow the older you get, the less appealing all that becomes."

"I've always loved the fall myself," Amanda said wistfully. "No matter how busy he was, Daddy always made time to take us camping every September. Such happy times. . . maybe that's why I was so anxious to take the boys when they were little. I just hope I'll be able to do the same with Matt and Jenny, but with work . . ." She sighed. Sometimes it seemed the world had been less complicated when Phillip and Jamie were growing up. She took a long drink from her cup, the liquid warming her. "I'm not sure my mother would consider that a tragedy, though. She definitely prefers to do her camping indoors."

Carrie smiled softly. "Just like my dad. To him, roughing it meant a resort with four stars instead of five." Carrie shook her head. "Probably why I've always steered clear of those fishing trips Joe loves. No frame of reference."

"Jamie said you all had a good time at Williamsburg last summer."

"The apple doesn't fall so far from the tree after all," Carrie laughed, tucking a stray blonde hair neatly behind her ear. "I guess I prefer vacations that include brunch, too." Her eyes darted quickly in Amanda's direction as she added, "It **was** a wonderful time, though. Joe was so relaxed." She drew in a deep breath. "I enjoyed taking a family vacation again. After my parents died and my sister moved to California . . . well, it was a lonely time for me."

Sipping her drink, Amanda regarded her companion thoughtfully. "You miss her a lot, don't you?"

Carrie nodded. "You'd think I'd be used to the distance now, after all these years. But I still find myself wishing she lived right around the corner. Especially lately. . . I don't know if I've ever told you this, Amanda," she added quickly, "but I've really appreciated how you've always gone out of your way to include us . . . well, me . . . in your family. It's really meant a lot."

Amanda gave her arm a light squeeze. "I'm just happy that you and Joe found each other. Even if we did get off to a slightly rocky start."

Carrie took a deep breath, exhaling softly as she gripped her cup. "That was my fault, not yours. At first I just didn't understand how you and Joe . . . well, you both just seemed so . . . close." She sipped her cocoa thoughtfully. "You have to admit, there aren't many ex-husbands and ex-wives who are able to maintain that kind of relationship."

"No matter what happened - or didn't happen - between us," Amanda replied carefully, "Joe and I have always respected each other. He really is a great guy."

"He feels the same way about you," Carrie said in a quiet voice.

"We never seemed to have a problem making our friendship work," Amanda admitted. "I think it was when we tried to make it something more that we got into trouble." She let out a heartfelt sigh. "Oh, I don't know, who really understands what they want at twenty-one? I just wish sometimes that . . . well, that Phillip and Jamie hadn't paid the price for our mistakes."

Carrie nodded pensively. "I guess no divorce is painless . . . no matter how friendly the circumstances."

Amanda bit her lip as she regarded Carrie with friendly concern. "No, it isn't." Shivering slightly, she pulled her sweater tighter around her. The afternoon, so pleasantly begun, had taken a decidedly chilly turn. Sighing, she turned to Carrie once again. "I guess nothing is ever as easy as it seems. But when I think of everything the boys have gained through this extended family of theirs - two great stepparents, a new brother and sister - I know things turned out for the best after all. You know, Carrie," she added candidly, "two people as fundamentally different as Joe and I would never have made each other happy in the long run. And that would have been even harder on Phillip and Jamie."

Carrie pursed her lips, swirling the hot chocolate around in her cup. "But you and Lee aren't exactly . . ." She broke off, her eyes studying the tiny bubbles forming in the brown liquid.

"Go ahead," Amanda laughed. "Say it. You certainly wouldn't be the first."

Carrie looked up, a slow smile forming as she caught Amanda's eye. "I'm sorry, Amanda. It's just that you and Lee seem so different, and yet . . . your relationship . . . well, it really seems to work. I used to spend a lot of time just watching you two, trying to figure it out."

"And what did you decide?"

"That there just doesn't seem to be any rhyme or reason why two people fall in love."

Amanda smiled softly to herself. 'Rhyme or reason', indeed. She'd spent more hours than she cared to count trying to figure out who or what had managed to bring a suburban housewife and a dashing spy together. If Dean hadn't been worried about the paint job on his car one cloudy October morning, if Scarecrow's circumstances hadn't been quite so desperate . . . if, if, if. She sighed softly. The vagaries of fate didn't lend themselves well to rational explanations. Maybe, in the final analysis, happiness really did hinge on something as seemingly insignificant as a weather report.

"I'm sorry, Amanda, I didn't mean to upset you."

Carrie's voice cut through her reverie, and she shook her head. "You didn't upset me; I just got sidetracked for a minute." Quickly downing the remainder of her hot chocolate, she tossed the empty cup into a nearby trashcan. "Lee and I may come from two very different worlds, but what we want out of life really isn't so different at all. I think, when all's said and done, that's what counts."

Carrie's lips curved up in a smile. "You're absolutely right. It doesn't matter where you started out, as long as you end up in the same place." She sighed deeply. "I really envy you that."

Amanda gave Carrie a long look. "Surely you and Joe . . ."

"Joe and I . . ." Carrie poured the remainder of her drink into the shrubbery, crumpling the stiff cardboard cup in her hand. "Things between us have been . . . difficult . . . lately."

Amanda sucked in a breath. "Joe has seemed a little, well, tense this weekend."

"Joe's a little 'tense' most of the time these days." Carrie's breath caught and she quickly turned her head away. "I don't know," she added in a tremulous voice. "Ever since he was held hostage in Santarilla . . . well, let's just say he's not the same happy-go-lucky guy he used to be."

Amanda laid a hand on Carrie's shoulder. "If there's something you want to talk about, you know I'd be happy to listen. Sometimes it helps to have a sounding board . . . someone who knows you both."

Carrie turned to Amanda, her eyes filled with tears. "I just don't know what to do anymore," she began in a trembling voice. "We fight all the time. About everything. About nothing. Oh, Amanda, when I see the way Lee looks at you . . . don't hate me,

but sometimes I'm so jealous. I don't think Joe ever notices me anymore, not as a woman anyway. He won't . . . He's been so . . ."

"Well, well, I can't believe my good fortune." The deep, masculine voice sounded behind her in charming tones. "I'd hoped to see you again today."

Looking over her shoulder, Amanda encountered the dark brown eyes of Professor Jim Walters. "Oh, uh, hello," she answered with steely politeness. Lee had a point; the man really did seem to be everywhere. "You caught me by surprise."

"I'm a little surprised myself to find you sitting here," he returned pleasantly. "I thought everyone would be attending the football game this afternoon."

"Oh, the guys were having such a good time, we thought we'd seize the opportunity to catch up a little," Amanda replied, hoping he'd take the hint. To her dismay, he didn't leave, but instead sat down next to her, resting his arm casually on the back of the bench. She stiffened, inching imperceptibly closer to Carrie.

"Well, then, this definitely is my lucky day," he told her with a grin. "Encountering two such beautiful ladies." Amanda's eyes widened as he leaned across her, extending his right hand to Carrie. "Jim Walters," he stated suavely. "And you are?"

Amanda saw Carrie tilt her head slightly, her finger dabbing at the corner of her eyes. "Oh, I'm sorry," Amanda put in quickly, giving Carrie a chance to regain her composure. "This is Carrie King." Turning to Carrie, she explained, "We met yesterday afternoon. Professor Walters is Phillip's advisor."

Carrie greeted him with a strained smile. "And I'm Phillip's stepmother," she clarified, reaching out to accept his offered hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Believe me, the pleasure is all mine." He smiled warmly at Amanda. "I enjoy meeting my student's parents - and stepparents," he added, including Carrie in his toothy grin. "It's one of the perks of teaching at a smaller university."

"I imagine so," Carrie said, her expression brightening as she warmed to the subject. "It's not something we get to do too often at Georgetown. I teach in the English department there."

"How wonderful," Professor Walters exclaimed. "And do I have the distinction of addressing Dr. King?"

"Not quite yet," Carrie informed him shyly. "But next year . . . I only have one more semester until I finish up my PhD."

"I'd love to show you our English Department if you have some time," he offered gallantly. "It's not Georgetown, but we're very proud of it."

Carrie glanced at her watch. "Well, we do have an hour or so before the end of the football game . . ."

He flashed her a stunning smile. "Excellent idea. There's no time like the present, I always say." Turning to Amanda, he added, "You'll join us, of course?"

"Well," she began hesitantly, "I really do need to phone my house. My mother's alone with the children . . ."

"Oh, please, come," Walters encouraged. "I'm sure your mother must be an old pro at handling babies."

"I don't know . . ."

"Yes, Amanda, please do," Carrie cajoled, her eyes sparkling with delighted anticipation.

Amanda shifted uncomfortably in her seat. "Well, okay," she said at last. "I suppose it *could* wait another hour."

"Wonderful," Walters replied. Rising, he offered both arms. "Shall we, ladies?"

"I'd love to," Carrie replied falling into step beside him. The pair turned to Amanda. She gave them both a weak smile, and rising, she gingerly accepted Professor Walters arm.

~V~

"The was nufheetig thereto startire."

Poking his head out from behind the crinkled shower curtain, Lee cast a curious glance at his wife. "Care to translate that?" he demanded, sending a few errant drops of water cascading to the floor as he gave his head a vigorous shake.

Amanda swished the toothbrush around one last time, holding the top of her towel closed as she bent over the sink. "I said," she repeated slowly and distinctly as she finished rinsing, "there was enough heat in there to start a fire."

"Oh, *that's* what you said," he laughed, pushing his dripping hair back from his face. "I thought for a minute you'd been working with codes and ciphers on the sly."

"Very funny," she groaned, her sarcasm unmistakable. "I'm glad you find the situation so amusing, but I'm really worried." Shoving her toothbrush forcefully into its plastic tube, she looked down at the rapidly dampening floor with a small frown. "Lee, you're getting water everywhere."

He flashed her a tantalizing grin. "That's easily fixed. Just come in here with me."

"No time," Amanda replied, shooting him a regretful smile as she pulled her towel tighter across her chest. "The banquet starts in forty-five minutes."

"Spoilsport," he mumbled, yanking the curtain closed with an exaggerated motion. Standing under the spray, he closed his eyes, letting the needle-sharp streams of water beat over him. "I think you're blowing this thing with Joe and Carrie way out of proportion," he called, wiping his face as he turned his back to the showerhead. "Everything seemed fine at the football game."

"Trust me, it wasn't so fine in good old 'Jimbo's' office."

He shook his head. "'Jimbo?'"

"Professor Walters." She rolled her eyes. "Evidently his 'good friends' all call him that, or so he informed us."

"You've got to be kidding," he mumbled disparagingly under his breath. "Now I'm certain the man's an idiot. I haven't heard anyone actually called 'Jimbo' since I was sixteen." Shutting off the water, he reached a hand around to the towel bar, his fingers encountering nothing but air. Pulling back the curtain slightly, he found himself staring at an empty room. "Amanda," he called, his voice reverberating in the small space. "Could you do me a favor?"

She materialized suddenly in the doorway, one knee bent as she leaned against the frame, and Lee's eyes widened. "Did you say something?" she inquired in a soft voice.

Lee gave her a long, lingering look, his dimples deepening as he took in every last nuance. "Could you bring me a towel?" he asked innocently. "Mine seems to have grown two very sexy legs and walked away."

Her lips curved up in an evocative smile. "Uh-uh, Stetson," she stated with a throaty laugh as she grabbed a towel from the shelf above the sink. Careful to keep her distance, she tossed it to him. "I've fallen for that line one too many times. Dinner, remember?"

"How could I forget?" he murmured to his wife's retreating form. Quickly drying off, he knotted the bath towel around his waist, following her over to the open closet door. "Need some help?" he whispered, his finger tracing the edge of the towel along her back.

"Cut it out," she told him with mock sternness, wiggling her shoulders as she stepped to one side. Reaching for her blue dress, she added, "I've got to get out of this towel."

Inching closer, he let his breath lightly tickle her ear. "I couldn't agree more."

"Lee," she entreated, a note of desperation in her tone, "It's getting late."

"Oh, I know," he returned, his voice deep and low. Feeling her weakening, he pressed his advantage. Pulling her hair to one side, he kissed her neck, his lips following an invisible line down to her shoulder. "I've been waiting all day to do this," he murmured with unabashed longing. He snaked his free hand between the folds of her towel, stroking his fingers across her hip as he pulled her tightly against him.

"Oh, Lee," she sighed, one hand reaching behind her to finger his wet hair. Her nails trailed across his scalp, leaving a pleasant tingle in their wake. Turning her slowly, he bent forward, his lips seeking hers. She mumbled something indistinct against his mouth, nonsense words, and, sensing the fire beginning to burn, he thrust his tongue deeply inside. He could feel her breathing quicken as the moment lengthened and, slowly but surely, he moved backwards, guiding her with him to the bed.

Feeling the edge of the mattress against his calf, he pulled her down, his lips still on hers. Her body rested on his, a familiar, feather-light pressure that never failed to arouse him. He knew that seemingly delicate frame hid an invisible strength far more powerful than it appeared. The dichotomy sometimes still amazed him - fragile steel. Always an intriguing mixture in a field agent, he found it even more potent in a lover.

Raising his head, he took her lips again, increasing the pressure demandingly. His fingers moved over the bare skin of her neck and shoulders in ever-widening circles, edging slowly beneath her terrycloth covering. Raising his knee, he placed his foot on the mattress, pushing towards the head of the bed as he rolled them both over. Their towels unknotted in the process, and he felt the welcome touch of flesh on flesh as he covered her. Burying his face in her neck, he nuzzled her tenderly as his hand moved to cup her breast. She made a soft, mewing sound as his fingers tweaked her nipple, and he pulled back, resting his weight on his elbows.

"Amanda," he whispered hoarsely, giving her a gentle shake. "Look at me."

Sighing, she slowly opened her eyes, her gaze locking with his. Her lips parted in a shy smile as she raised her hand to his face.

He recognized the emotion etched across the features he loved so well. It had been longer than he cared to think since they'd been able to take pleasure in each other like this, as husband and wife. Leaning his weight on his right forearm, he reached up and captured her hand, bringing it to his lips. "I love you, Amanda," he whispered, planting a tiny kiss on her palm.

"I know," she said, slipping her hand from his. She trailed her fingers leisurely down his chest, stopping briefly at his waist before continuing. "I love you, too," she told him in a throaty whisper as she began to work her hand over his penis in maddeningly sensual strokes. He groaned lightly as he felt himself stiffen almost painfully against her palm. She smiled in response, biting down playfully on her lower lip, and he knew she, too, had taken note of the change.

Letting out a deep sigh, he bent to kiss her. Her mouth parted sweetly, and he pushed her back down into the mattress as he explored her depths with his tongue. He felt her shudder slightly in response, opening her legs in invitation. Pausing briefly to flash her a mischievous grin, he began to kiss his way slowly down her body.

The first ringing noise registered somewhere in the back of his consciousness, but he conveniently shoved it aside, concentrating instead on smooth curves and soft, pliant flesh. The shrill sound continued, however, annoyingly persistent, and he heard her sigh as her fingers gently tugged his hair. He breathed deeply, burying his face in her soft, rounded abdomen for a few seconds, then, lifting his head, he caught her eye. She shrugged slightly, and he rolled his eyes, moving away from her to answer the phone.

"Stetson," he stated tersely, somewhere between a hiss and a greeting. There was a confusion of jumbled noises, and he was just about to hang up in exasperation when the tiny voice sounded in his ear.

"Daddy?"

Lee drew a deep breath, exhaling loudly. "Hey, Pal," he replied, his expression softening as he turned to meet his wife's indulgent smile. "How's my big boy?"

"I played ball!" little Matthew exclaimed, his words ringing with excitement. "I hit a home run."

"Hey, that's pretty good, son," he praised, leaning over so Amanda could hear, too. "Did you do that all by yourself?"

"Jamie helped."

Lee grinned. "You're gonna have to show me that."

"Okay," he agreed happily. Lee heard the sound of a stool moving and muffled voices.

"No, no, Pal, I mean you can show me when we get home," he added hastily, laughing at his son's literal mind. "Matthew . . . Matty, are you still there?"

More scraping noises, and the small voiced piped up, "When're you comin' home?"

"We'll be home tomorrow, okay?" Lee told him, while Amanda mouthed 'Let me talk to him' as she quickly refastened her towel.

"Mommy wants to say hi," he told the small boy. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Hi, Sweetheart," Amanda crooned, all but grabbing the phone from his hand. "Are you being a good boy for Grandma?"

He watched his wife's face break into a smile as she listened to the little boy's endearing prattle. "All right, then . . . put Grandma on the phone, okay? Hi," Amanda continued, her voice suddenly serious. "How's it going? Is Jenny giving you any trouble?"

Letting out a frustrated sigh, he crossed to the other bed, delving into his suitcase for his boxers. Pulling them on, he flopped back on the empty mattress. Glancing at

Amanda out of the corner of his eye, he could see that her features had settled into a contemplative frown as she listened to Dotty's briefing. His wife was definitely in full 'mother' mode once again.

Not that he blamed her. Until Matthew was born, he'd never fully understood how completely a child could take possession of your heart. Not that he didn't love his stepsons, but they'd been older when he'd come into their lives, past that achingly vulnerable baby stage. Having children really was akin to giving hostages to fate. And there was definitely something about little girls . . .

The phone clicked back into place and, a minute later, he felt the mattress sink lightly beside him. "I'm sorry," his wife murmured softly. "Matty was napping when I talked to Mother earlier, and I told her she could probably catch us before dinner."

"She sure did," he said with a short laugh. Turning slightly, he met his wife's apologetic gaze, and he reached up to cup her cheek, brushing his thumb gently across her lips. "So," he said in a low voice, "how's Jenny?"

"Slept through the night," she answered in amazement, her fingers smoothing his hair with short, rhythmic strokes. "I guess Mother hasn't lost her touch."

"Neither have you," he smiled, planting a chaste kiss on her lips as he rose.

"Lee . . ."

"Shh-shh," he whispered, "it's okay." Glancing quickly at the clock, he added regretfully, "We'd better get going if we're going to make that dinner. We don't want to disappoint Phillip."

She opened her mouth as if to say something, then changed her mind, silently nodding her assent. Lee watched her push gracefully off the bed and walk to the closet, her brow knit in a pensive frown. Turning away, he grabbed his own clothes, pulling on his shirt and pants in record time. "So, she slept through the night, huh?" he called over his shoulder. "I guess we shouldn't have worried. When it comes to handling babies, your mother really is a pro."

"I guess so," she mumbled softly, her hand absently fingering the plastic dry-cleaning bag that covered her dress.

Sitting on the bed, he pulled on his socks, surprised to find Amanda still standing by the closet door. "Hey," he called to her as he slipped on his shoes. "If you don't get going, we really are going to be late."

She nodded vaguely, moving almost in slow motion. "Lee," she said, drawing out his name with deliberate care. "Did you say anything to Professor Walters last night? About Jenny, I mean," she added quickly as she noted his expression.

"Amanda," he replied, bending down to tie his shoes, "I've said a sum total of two words to the man, neither one of them about Jenny." Looking up he caught her eye. "Why?"

"Well, I didn't say anything about her, either." She drew in a deep breath, scrunching her forehead thoughtfully as she let it out. "And he said practically the same thing to me earlier today. About my mother being able to handle babies." Shaking her head, she folded her hands across her chest as she paced the short distance between the bed and the door.

He rose, quickly moving over to her. "I'm sure there's a perfectly rational explanation," he stated emphatically. "He's Phillip's advisor, right?"

She nodded almost imperceptibly.

"There, you see? I'm sure he's mentioned her. Come on," he whispered, closing his arms around her. "You just talked to your mother; everything's fine at home. There's absolutely nothing to worry about." Placing his hand under her chin, he gently tilted her head up towards his. "Okay?"

"Okay," she echoed, giving him a weak smile.

"Good." Bending over, he kissed her gently. "Then do me one more favor," he added, grinning slightly. "Go change your clothes in the bathroom. There's only so much frustration a man can take in one afternoon."

Rolling her eyes, she draped the dry-cleaning bag over her arm, gathering up her underwear and slip as she headed for the small bathroom. Turning to close the door, she caught his eye. "You want me to lock it, too?"

He gave her a playful wink. "Oh yeah, definitely."

With a gentle laugh, she gave the door a light slam, and Lee heard the distinctive click of the lock. Moving purposefully to the phone, he dialed quickly, pacing in a small circle as he waited for the call to go through.

"Night stream," a neutral voice intoned on the other end of the line.

"Morning glory," he countered, his foot tapping impatiently on the carpet.

"You have priority one, Scarecrow," the voice replied. "Is your phone line secure?"

"Negative."

"Hold please."

One eye on the closed bathroom door, he shifted his weight from foot to foot as he listened for the series of clicks that would secure the connection. "Go ahead," the voice said at last, and, exhaling in relief, he turned his attention to the phone.

"I need a special background security check run ASAP," he ordered, his hand running unconsciously through his hair. "Walters, James. Professor. Harrisonburg, Virginia."

"How far back do you want it to go?"

"To the stone age," he barked.

"Check, Scarecrow. Additional orders?"

"Yes," he muttered through gritted teeth. "Activate 'Operation Watchover'. My house."

~VI~

Lee scanned the noisy convocation center, automatically searching the crowd for anything out of place. He wasn't sure exactly what he hoped to find, but the clusters of parents and students enjoying themselves at the 'Casino Night' tables seemed frustratingly normal. Maybe he really was suffering from a belated case of 'shadow shock' after all - seeing conspiracies where none existed. Running a hand through his hair, he exhaled loudly.

"What's up, Scarecrow?"

He turned to find his wife standing to one side, her hands folded carefully across her chest. "That obvious, huh?" he asked, giving her a sheepish smile.

"Just to me. Although, if you keep circling this room, I might not be the only one asking questions." She eyed him suspiciously. "You know, you've been awfully 'cloak and dagger' all evening. Just where did you disappear to after dinner?"

He shrugged, giving her his most ingenuous smile. "Can't a guy take a trip to the men's room without issuing a bulletin?"

"I'll bet it was pretty crowded in there. I noticed good old 'Jimbo' pulled a vanishing act right around the same time.

He raised an eyebrow innocently. "Who?"

"You know who. Your buddy 'Jimbo' Walters."

He laughed in reply. "Good. The guy's a royal pain in the . . ." Catching her look, he quickly leaned over to give her a kiss. He intended to keep it light, but as soon his lips met hers, he could feel the flame they'd ignited earlier begin to rise again.

"So Mrs. Stetson," he began in a teasing voice, "we managed to survive that three course masterpiece they called dinner . . ." He drew closer, their fingertips barely touching, and he saw her smile widen. "We listened attentively to all those speeches from the department heads," he continued in an intimate whisper, "and we even put in an appearance at this imitation Las Vegas gala." Toying idly with her wedding and engagement rings, he brought her hand up to rest on his chest. "Think we've done our parental duty for the night?"

She hesitated for the briefest of seconds, a small frown passing across her face. "There's nothing I'd like better than to give you an unqualified yes, but . . ."

He followed her gaze across the room. Phillip and Carrie were standing side by side at the makeshift roulette table, talking animatedly, while Joe stood to a little apart, watching with an unusually somber expression. "Playing chaperone all night isn't the answer, you know," he stated flatly.

He felt her tense beside him. "I just want this weekend to be nice for Phillip," she stated plaintively. "Is there anything wrong with that?"

Rubbing his finger idly across the back of her hand, he glanced at the King trio once more. "No, of course not. But whatever's going on with them, they're gonna have to sort out on their own." He looked down into his wife's soft brown eyes and shook his head sadly. "You can't fix everything, Amanda, no matter how much you want to."

"That's not fair," she protested, quickly withdrawing her hand. "I'm not trying to . . ."

His lips curved up in a smile. "Oh?"

She let out a deep sigh, ruefully biting her bottom lip. "Well, all right, maybe I am, but I'm a mother. It's what we do."

Putting an arm around her, he pulled her against him. "Okay, in the interest of détente here, I'll concede that point. Of course," he added with a dimpled grin, "you'll need to make a concession of your own."

Tilting her head, she looked him squarely in the eye. "Oh, yeah, Stetson? What would that be?"

He moved his fingers tantalizingly along her waist as he gave her a little squeeze. "Even mothers take a night off now and then."

"We-ell," she drew out the word, grinning as her tension dissolved. "Since you put it that way . . . Let's go say goodnight to Phillip."

"Anything you say, Mrs. Stetson," he agreed pleasantly, quickly guiding her through the crowd. "Anything you say."

~VII~

Amanda smiled contentedly as she soaked up the delightful sights and sounds of the perfect Virginia night. The breeze was uncommonly warm, the almost full moon shone brightly on the Shenandoah River and Lee's strong fingers were comfortably entwined with hers. Letting out a contented sigh, she leaned into him as they strolled along the riverbank in companionable silence.

"Cold?" she heard him ask as he lightly stroked her arm. "Maybe we should have headed straight back to the inn."

Amanda shook her head. "No, this is nice. It's so peaceful here." Looking up, she caught Lee's eye. "It's been a long time since we had a quiet moment to ourselves."

"I know," he replied in that deep voice she loved so well. "Not since our very special getaway."

Amanda felt a hot blush overtake her cheeks. Yes, she recalled that late November excursion to Pine Top very well. It was one of those golden memories she pulled out on evenings when Lee was tied up in meetings. On their own, just the two of them, she'd felt almost as if they'd traveled sideways in time. Though the skiing was phenomenal, they'd never left their cabin; the thick rug by the fire had been too tempting, the hot tub too inviting, the isolation too alluring. It was a weekend she'd never forget, even if she wanted to; sometime during those glorious forty-eight hours, their birth control had failed utterly and completely.

"Here," Lee said as she shivered again. "Take this."

"No, I'm fine, really. You'll be cold."

Ignoring her protests, he gently wrapped her in his suit coat. "I can't have the mother of my children freezing to death," he teased. "I have big plans for her tonight." He bent over, and she felt his lips brush gently through her hair.

The gesture brought unexpected tears to her eyes. "I'm sorry about my mood earlier," she said, her words catching slightly. "I guess sometimes I feel like I'm still riding an emotional roller coaster. I shouldn't be, I know, not any more," she added in a breathless rush. "Not when everything turned out okay."

"That's the funny thing about stress. You get so used to it . . ." He shook his head, adding in a voice that was more guttural than usual, "Well, sometimes you don't notice it any more until it isn't there."

Amanda could only nod, her lips pursed tightly together. There was no denying the last nine months had levied a heavy emotional toll. As if the still vivid memory of their son's arrival wasn't tough enough, the physical complications from his delivery posed a substantial risk to subsequent pregnancies. That little Jenny had been born, healthy and thriving, was nothing short of a miracle.

"You were always so positive about everything," Lee continued in obvious awe. "When I think about what might have happened. . ." They had reached a small stone balustrade, and he paused, turning to look out over the wide expanse of river. "Amanda," he said with feeling, "We . . . I . . . can't go through that again."

Moving closer, she slipped her hand into his. "That's why I had the surgery. You know there won't be another 'surprise'."

"I would have gladly . . ."

"I know. It was better this way." She gave his hand a gentle squeeze. "I don't want to go through that again, either."

He let out a deep breath, bringing her hand to his lips. "I think I owe you an apology, too. These past months, I . . . well, I've let myself get too caught up in work." He frowned slightly, his eyes fixed on a spot on the distant riverbank. "I think maybe I did it to distance myself, so I wouldn't have to think about what could happen."

She pulled her hand from his, her fingers tenderly caressing his cheek. Slowly, tentatively, she turned his face back to hers. "I knew that," she said, her voice soft and low. "But we were lucky. Everything turned out okay."

"For which I'm very, very grateful." Leaning forward, he touched his lips lightly to hers. "And I promise, from now on, no more using the Agency as an emotional shield."

She nodded, her own eyes following the swiftly flowing current. She felt Lee move behind her, his arms slipping beneath the jacket she wore to wrap her in his embrace. Sighing sweetly, she leaned back against him.

"I don't have any illusions about your job, Lee," she told him in a low voice. "I've known right from the start how much time and energy it requires." As she felt him tighten his hold, she added, "Remember that day Billy came to your hospital room? And he talked about rebuilding what Dr. Smyth had destroyed?"

"Yeah," he said with an almost imperceptible nod. "I remember."

"There was a look in your eyes . . . no matter how much you said you wanted to, I knew you wouldn't - couldn't - walk away. So, you see, I understand. And I don't mind you being caught up in work. What I mind," she finished with a short sigh, "is not being caught up in work with you."

He gave her a tender squeeze, then released her. Folding his arms across his chest, he leaned back leisurely against the low stone barrier. "Is this your not so subtle way of telling me you're ready to come back?"

She smiled, shrugging her shoulders lightly. "I was thinking maybe part time for a while. Kind of ease back into things."

"What about Matt and Jenny?"

"I had a long talk with Mother last week. She really does want to watch them." She took a deep breath. "So . . ."

He flashed her a smile. "So that means I've got my partner back."

"You bet you do." She extended her hand, and he rose slowly to grasp it, their fingers entwining once again. "I'll even make you a promise of my own," she stated as they strolled leisurely along the path. "I'll work on putting my 'mother' hat on the shelf, at least part of the time."

He gave a short laugh. "I hear a 'but' coming."

"Old habits die hard, I guess." Shivering again, she pulled Lee's coat closer around her as they veered off the path, heading towards the Campus Inn. As they fell back into step together, she added, "I don't know. This thing with Phillip and Joe . . . well, I can't help wanting to fix it. I guess I've always felt like it was somehow up to me to make sure my sons had a good relationship with their father."

His arm tightened around her as he pulled her closer. "That's not your responsibility," he said at last, choosing his words carefully. "Not anymore. Phillip and Jamie aren't little boys." Turning, he caught her eye, adding in a low voice, "And neither is Joe."

"I know, I know," she murmured softly. "He has to take some responsibility here."

"Some responsibility? Amanda . . ."

"Oh, Lee, it's hard to explain," she began, her words tumbling out. "I'm not defending him, really. I . . . well, I'm just used to standing between them, making sure everything's okay."

She heard him groan. "That's not a particularly comfortable place to be, Amanda."

"I know. But you've got to understand, for a long time, I was Phillip and Jamie's conduit to their father. I kept him a part of their lives even when he was a continent away. No small feat, believe me." She sighed as she felt Lee's breath on

her forehead. "I'm not looking for sympathy here. I'm just trying to explain why I sometimes have a hard time letting go."

They had almost reached the Inn, and he stopped suddenly, drawing her off into the shadows. "Maybe that's something I can help you with," he whispered. He reached out to her with an endearing hesitancy, his right hand barely brushing her neck as he slid it slowly up to her face. She gasped slightly as his fingers traced her lips with gentle affection. She took a small step forward, smiling faintly as he did the same. Their motions were jerky, hesitant, almost as if they were somehow afraid to touch. Then, suddenly, he grasped the edges of the suit coat he'd draped across her shoulders, pulling her in towards him.

She raised her hands as he crushed her against him, her fingers splayed across the smooth hardness of his chest. Through the light fabric of his cotton shirt, his skin felt invitingly warm. Their lips met, briefly at first, then with more urgency. She gave a little gasp when he finally let her go, lovingly wiping the lipstick from his mouth with a shaky smile.

"Lee," she whispered roughly, "let's go to our room."

Nodding, he leaned forward once again, his lips brushing across hers as he placed a guiding hand on her back. She sighed contentedly as they walked briskly through the lobby to the elevator. The ride to their floor was mercifully brief. They made their way down the hall in silent anticipation, Amanda shaking her head as Lee made a frantic search for the room key.

"Right here," he assured her, his relief evident as he drew the thin magnetic card from his back pocket. "Now, how does the old saying go? 'Alone at last?'" Opening the door, he stepped aside to allow her to enter.

"Hey, Mom, Lee."

The low voice from the darkened room caught them both by surprise. Drawing a deep breath, Amanda quickly flipped on the light. "Phillip? I thought you were spending the evening with your dad and Carrie. What happened?"

"The same thing that always happens," he said disconsolately. "Dad and I had a big fight, then Dad and Carrie had a big fight. I just had to get out of there. My dorm was a zoo, so I came over here." He smiled self-consciously. "I kinda convinced the night housekeeper to let me in."

"Oh," she said, handing Lee his jacket as she sat down on the bed. Looking towards her son, she indicated the space beside her. "If you need to talk, we'll be happy to listen, you know that, Sweetheart."

Phillip hesitated. "Um, well. . . I appreciate the offer, but . . . I was . . . well, I was kind of hungry."

"Sure," Lee put in quickly. "Why don't you and your Mom go grab a bite to eat?"

"Well, the only place to get food this late is the Huddle," Phillip began, shifting his weight uncomfortably from foot to foot. "And they only serve burgers." He looked at his mother, tensing slightly before letting his gaze rest eagerly on his stepfather.

Amanda read her son's eyes. "Oh, I think it's a little late for a burger for me," she replied, masking her disappointment with a yawn. "I'm kind of tired."

Phillip nodded, visibly relieved. "Lee?"

"Uh, sure," he answered haltingly as he quickly caught Amanda's eye. "I could eat."

Amanda gave them both an encouraging smile. "You guys have a good time."

Phillip thrust his hands in his pockets, shooting his mother a slightly guilty look. "Are you sure, Mom?"

"Yes," she stated, almost too quickly. "I'm sure. Go on."

"Okay," Phillip agreed as he practically bolted for the door. "Come on, Lee."

Amanda watched in mild dismay. Subtlety was definitely not Phillip's strong suit tonight. Her son must be more upset than she'd guessed. She looked at Lee once more. "Go on," she whispered with careful casualness.

He raised an eyebrow, then nodded, blowing her a quick kiss as he followed Phillip to the door.

~VIII~

Stepping onto the bathmat, Amanda wrapped the warm terrycloth robe around her. Pulling off the plastic shower cap, she fluffed her hair, smoothing back a few damp

tendrils that curled around her face. Like the mat, those standard issue hotel caps always seemed to be just a little too small.

At least the water had relaxed her. Wiping a large round spot in the steamy mirror, she studied her reflection. The face of frustration, she thought, rolling her eyes. The weekend certainly hadn't turned out the way she'd envisioned. Between the 'group campout', the ill-timed phone call and the unforeseen family crisis, she and Lee would have had more privacy at home.

Retrieving the bottle of lotion from the edge of the tub, she began to apply it to her legs with unusual enthusiasm. This whole business with Phillip and Joe disturbed her more than she wanted to admit. She knew she shouldn't let it get to her, but it did. Why was her ex-husband's relationship with his sons still so important to her?

Pride, she thought dourly, pure and simple. If the three of them still functioned as a family unit - at least on some level - then her first marriage couldn't be classified as a total disaster.

Folding her towel, she draped it carefully over the side of the tub. Perhaps Lee would be able to get the bottom of things tonight. Phillip had certainly made no bones about wanting to talk to him alone. What a change from his behavior only a few short years ago. At least that was one father-son relationship that didn't need her constant intercession.

She didn't really understand Joe at all any more. How could he have so little understanding of what it took to be a parent? He'd enjoyed such a warm, loving relationship with his own father, whereas Lee . . . Amanda smiled wryly. No, she definitely wouldn't call the Colonel the demonstrative type. Yet here stood her husband, with no role model to speak of, an exceptional father and stepfather. So much for nurture vs. nature.

Stretching, she headed into the other room, stopping by the door to release the chain she'd engaged while she was in the shower. No percentage in locking Lee out. With any luck, they could still salvage some of their evening when he returned.

The sudden, unexpected knock made her jump. Willing her pounding heart to still, she instinctively glanced over at the clock. It couldn't be Lee and Phillip, not this soon. Not even Lee could solve a problem in twenty minutes.

"Who is it?" she called, unconsciously pulling robe closer around her.

"It's me, Amanda. I'm sorry to bother you, but I need to talk to you for a minute."

Joe's voice sounded oddly strained. "Uh, sure," she replied, holding the lapels of her robe together as she opened the door.

Hands in his pockets, Joe King was busy tracing the small, boxed pattern on the carpet with his toe. Biting her lip, she struggled to conceal her annoyance. "It's late, Joe," she said, a bit more curtly than she'd intended.

He gave her a tired sigh. "I know, Amanda. I really am sorry, but . . ." Tilting his head to one side, he reluctantly encountered her eye.

His little-boy expression looked so much like Phillip that she found herself taking a sharp breath. "Come in," she said, her tone softening in spite of herself.

He entered expectantly, but his face fell as soon as he saw the empty room. "I'm sorry to bother you," he said again, drawing his hands in and out of his pockets. "I was . . . hoping . . ."

"Phillip's not here," she informed him tersely. "He and Lee went out to get something to eat."

"I wasn't looking for Phillip," he quickly rejoined. "I thought maybe Carrie . . ."

"Why would Carrie be here?" she asked, realization hitting as she watched him flinch. Phillip's earlier information came flooding back. "Oh, Joe - you guys had another fight?"

He shrugged. "We've been doing that a lot lately," he stated with a bitter smile. "As I'm sure you've noticed."

Her annoyance waning, she reached out to give his arm a tender squeeze. "Yeah, well it was kind of hard to miss."

He nodded, sitting down despondently on the bed. "We had a pretty big one tonight. When she didn't come back . . ."

Amanda sat down beside Joe, resting her hand lightly on his knee. "She probably just needs some space. She'll be back, you'll see."

"I don't know. I said some hurtful things, some things I should never . . ." He let out a long breath. "I guess I was grasping at straws, but I'd hoped she'd come here to talk to you."

"No, I haven't seen her." She hesitated, adding, "Was she angry enough to head home?"

He shook his head. "I have the car keys, and she doesn't have any money. She ran out in such a hurry . . . left her purse, everything." His voice caught a little. "She didn't even take a coat. That's why I thought . . ."

"Then she'll be back, Sweetheart. If she's not here . . . well, it's not like she knows anyone else . . ." She stopped a bit too abruptly, frowning as she bit her lip.

"What?" Joe asked quickly.

Rising, Amanda walked over to the window, pulling back the heavy room-darkening drapes a crack to stare out onto the lawn. "It's nothing," she said quickly. "I'm sure."

Joe came up behind her, his hands on her arms as he slowly turned her to face him. "Amanda, please, if you know something, just tell me. I don't deserve to be 'spared', trust me. I just want to find her."

She looked away, kneading her neck muscles with her right hand. "Well, earlier today, while you guys were at the football game . . ."

"Amanda," he entreated again as she faltered.

She looked up, wincing slightly as she caught his eye. "We ran into Phillip's advisor, Jim Walters. I'm sure it's nothing, Joe, really. He's just a very friendly person, that's all. Some people are like that, you know. And they're both professors, so they had a lot in common. It's perfectly natural that they would have a lot to say to each other," she explained, her words spilling out faster and faster. "Really, I don't think . . ."

"Amanda, are you saying . . ."

"No, of course not," she put in breathlessly. "I was just thinking that if she needed someone to talk to . . . well, he seemed very happy to lend a sympathetic ear, that's all."

Exhaling loudly, Joe turned away, pacing agitatedly in front of the two double beds. Amanda watched as he absently massaged his right leg, his face crinkling into a taut frown. She could see a light sheen of sweat beginning to form on his forehead. She

suddenly remembered Carrie mentioning just last week that the leg was giving him some trouble again. She had a sinking feeling that wasn't the only reminder of Santarilla that was giving Joe pain.

Wincing, Joe turned to her. "Amanda, I can't just wait here, I've got to at least do something. Do you have any idea where I can find this Walters guy?"

"I have no idea where he lives," she told him. "I've only been to his office on campus."

"But . . . he'd probably have a home address on file there, don't you think?"

"Yeah, maybe," she agreed, folding her arms across her chest. "But it's late, I'm sure his office is locked now." Her ex-husband looked at her expectantly. "No way, Joe," she stated resolutely.

"Amanda . . ."

"No, Joe," she repeated forcefully. "I'm not breaking into the man's office for you."

"But you're a federal agent," he cajoled.

"Who's officially still on maternity leave," she protested, a little more weakly this time. "And agent or not, I just can't go around breaking into people's offices. Not without cause. My gosh, Joe, you should know that; you're a lawyer."

"I just need his address."

"Joe . . ."

"Please, Amanda," he entreated again. "I have to find her. I can't leave things this way between us. If she left me . . ." He paused, slowly raising his head to engage her eye. "Please. I'm in real trouble here."

She rolled her eyes, muttering under her breath, "The last time I fell for that line I ended up taking an unscheduled joyride in a helicopter." Seeing Joe's mournful look, she added in a louder voice, "Okay, okay. When will I ever learn?" Still grumbling, she began to rifle through the small canvas bag. "Lee must have a half rake in here some place."

"Thanks, Amanda," Joe said, heaving a relieved sigh as she located her husband's favorite double diamond. "Like you said, I'm a lawyer. If anything goes wrong, I'll be happy to represent you - no charge."

"Gee, thanks, Joe," she muttered, rolling her eyes. "But if anything goes wrong, I think I'll take jail. It'll be easier than explaining to Lee." She grabbed a dark sweater and matching jeans. "I'll just be a minute," she assured him. Despite her misgivings, she could feel that old familiar rush beginning to build. It felt good to be back in the action.

~IX~

Wiping his mouth, Phillip tossed his crumpled napkin onto his plate. "I'm stuffed," he told his stepfather with a large grin. "Thanks, Lee."

Lee took another sip of his beer. "Me, too."

"But you hardly ate anything."

"Didn't need to," Lee laughed. "Watching you was more than enough."

Phillip grinned again, shrugging his shoulders in embarrassment. "Guess I didn't eat much dinner." Feeling Lee's eyes on him, he added quickly, "This is a pretty neat place, huh?"

Lee looked over at the cute little waitress who was giving Phillip the eye. "Yeah," he agreed, "pretty neat." He smiled as Phillip squirmed in his seat. "So, Chief, I've helped you wrangle a phone number from our very attentive waitress over there, watched you swallow the Mega-Burger special practically whole . . ." He eyed Phillip's empty glass. "I've even looked the other way when you flashed that impressively professional fake I.D. of yours." Drumming his finger on the table, he added with a smile, "And under the right circumstances, I could even be persuaded not to tell your mother about that last one."

"Oh, yeah?" Phillip rejoined with a conspiratorial laugh. "Do I have to take out the trash every night when I'm home on break? "

"No, nothing so drastic as that," Lee returned. "All you have to do is tell me what's got you so wound up."

Phillip gave a hollow laugh. "Taking out the trash isn't really so bad."

"You're forgetting we have a baby in the house again," he teased. "You know, speaking from experience here, you might feel better if you get it off your chest." Pausing briefly, he regarded his stepson carefully. "Want to tell me what's really going on with you and your dad?"

Phillip exhaled loudly, his eyes darting away from Lee's. "Same old stuff, I guess."

"Define 'stuff'."

Phillip shrugged. "You've seen him this weekend - the guy never lets up." Pushing away from the table, he began to rock vigorously on the back legs of the chair. "It was the same thing orientation weekend," he continued, the words tumbling out to keep pace with his rhythmic motion. "First, he kept reciting a whole stream of 'things not to do' all the way here. If that wasn't bad enough, when we finally got here, he was so uptight. He didn't want to do anything, wouldn't meet any of the other parents or go to any of the activities. All he cared about was picking my classes and setting up a study schedule. If it wasn't for Carrie, the whole weekend would have been a disaster."

He leaned forward, letting his chair hit the wood floor with a forceful thud. "It doesn't matter what I do, Lee; nothing is ever good enough for him."

"He seems pretty pleased that you're talking about law school."

Phillip snorted. "Yeah, because he thinks I'm gonna be a junior version of him." Grabbing his napkin, he began to tear it into little pieces. "Believe me, that's the last thing I'm ever gonna be."

Lee picked up his fork, tapping it absently against the edge of the plate. "Your dad cares about you, Phillip. It may not be the kind of caring you want or even appreciate, but that doesn't mean he doesn't feel it. People do the best they can, in their own way."

"You're getting as bad as Mom. You really don't have to defend him, you know."

Lee tossed his fork down on his plate with a loud clang. "Joe and I don't always see eye to eye, you know that," he said in a low voice. "But the one thing we do agree on is you and Jamie. We both want what's best for you."

"But you and Mom let us decide for ourselves what that is. You don't try to control everything we do."

"Your mom and I want you to think for yourselves - that's what every parent wants. We just have a different way of showing it, that's all. Believe me, we make mistakes, too. Nobody's perfect. Joe is just a little . . ."

"Obsessive-compulsive?" Phillip smiled at Lee's raised eyebrow. "That's what Jamie says," he joked.

Lee chortled appreciatively. "I'm not sure I'd put it quite like that, but okay. Who am I to argue with the future 'Dr.' King?" Leaning closer, he caught his stepson's eye. "If that's the case, then you just have to figure out a way to deal with him. You're a lot younger than he is, Phillip; more than likely, he's not going to change."

"Yeah, well, that's easier said than done. Especially when he's always on my case. You have no idea what it's like when your father . . ." Stricken, he bit his lip. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean . . ."

Lee leaned back in his chair. "I know you didn't," he stated quietly. "But you're wrong about not understanding. You think you have it tough with Joe? Try being raised by a military machine. Trust me, you don't know what tough is."

"But the Colonel was such a great guy . . ."

Lee rolled his eyes. "Let's just say, when you got to know him, your mother had mellowed him considerably. When he was younger, the man gave the term 'obsessive-compulsive' a whole new definition."

Phillip leaned closer, resting his weight on his forearms as he looked at his stepfather thoughtfully. "So how did you handle it?"

"Not too well. For years, if the Colonel said something was black, I said it was white, just on general principles. And I did stuff that probably turned his hair gray a whole lot sooner than Mother Nature intended."

Phillip grinned. "So that's how you always knew what I was up to before I did."

"The benefits of a misspent youth," Lee laughed in reply. Folding his arms across his chest, he gave his stepson a long look. "I also managed to get myself kicked out of a succession of universities in a concerted effort to piss the old man off."

"Did it work?"

"After a fashion. He told me in very succinct terms that after three 'failures', I was on my own. He held up the next distribution of my parents' trust fund and refused to pay my tuition." Lee shrugged. "Looking back, I'm sure I deserved it, but . . . well, the two of us didn't really speak for years." Lifting his glass, he quickly downed the rest of his beer. "We lost a lot of time together. Time we never made up."

"Is that why . . ."

Squirming under his stepson's earnest gaze, his voice faltered slightly. "Why . . . what?"

Phillip took a fist full of shredded napkin, holding his hand over his plate and letting the crumpled pieces fall like tiny flakes of paper snow. "I know, Lee," he answered at last in a small voice. "I overheard you and Mom talking last summer."

"Phillip . . ."

"I know you paid Dad's half of my tuition when he refused."

Lee shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "That was supposed to be a secret," he said at last. "I didn't want you to know . . ."

"That my father's a giant asshole? Why shouldn't I know? And why shouldn't Jamie? No," he added quickly, "I didn't tell him. I wanted to, but I didn't."

"Your father's not an asshole, he's just a little . . . 'rigid'. Like the Colonel. He thinks . . ."

"That he should live my life for me," Phillip jeered, his lip turning up in disgust. "Who gave him that right? Just because I wouldn't go to Georgetown, he refuses to pay my tuition anywhere else. If that isn't an asshole, I don't know what is."

Lee shook his head. "I suppose in his own convoluted way, he thinks he's doing what's best for you."

"Doesn't he understand that I wanted to do this on my own? I never asked for his help. And I sure didn't want Carrie to pull strings to get me in somewhere I don't belong." Phillip sighed, his face set in a grim smile. "Don't worry, Lee, I have no intention of flunking out. And I'll pay you back every penny."

"There's no need to pay me back. You're my . . . you don't have to pay me back," he repeated, staring down at the remains of his dinner.

"Thanks," Phillip returned, equally interested in the restaurant's china pattern. "I really appreciate . . . well, I, uh, you know."

"Yeah, I know." Looking up, he caught the boy's eye with a sly smile. "I probably shouldn't admit it, but using part of the money the Colonel left me to pay your tuition . . . well, there's a certain poetic justice to it that I find eminently satisfying." As Phillip grinned back at him, Lee rose, tossing some bills on the table. "Come on, let's get out of here. I don't know about you, but I could use sure a walk to work off this little snack."

~X~

"Amanda, can't you hurry?"

Exhaling loudly, Amanda paused, tapping the half-rake against the heavy door of the administration building. "Joe," she began, struggling to maintain an even tone, "it doesn't work that way. It's not like using a key, you know."

Joe licked his lips as he pivoted, checking the deserted quad with a series of short, jerky motions.

"What on earth are you doing?" Amanda queried as she glanced over her shoulder.

He turned to her with a puzzled expression. "You told me to watch, so . . . I'm watching."

"You look like one of those dogs with the bobbing heads," she muttered under her breath as she fought a smile.

"Whose head?" he inquired in a loud whisper.

"Uh, nothing," she choked out, turning back to her task. "Never mind that - hold that little flashlight up so I can see."

Joe raised the light, his arm twitching slightly. Taking a deep breath, he braced his wrist with his hand. "How long is this going to take?"

"A lot longer than it should if you keep rushing me," she hissed. Narrowing her eyes, she wiggled the slim tool a fraction of an inch to the left.

"It's awfully quiet out here," she heard Joe murmur breathlessly.

"That's because it's almost midnight. All the sensible people are in bed. Where I wish I was," she added dryly. Forcing herself to concentrate, she turned her wrist just a little further. "Almost . . . almost . . ."

"Amanda . . ."

"Got it!" she exclaimed in triumph. Straightening, she stretched out her back, rolling in a small circular motion as she worked out the kinks. "Come on," she urged, slipping the half-rake carefully into the pocket of her jeans. "I think his office is this way."

They crept stealthily down the wide hall, Amanda trying to retrace her steps from earlier that day. She didn't want to risk taking a shortcut and getting lost in the cavernous administration building. Lee probably wouldn't be tied up with Phillip for too much longer, and she didn't really feel like explaining what she'd been up to with Joe.

Turning off the main hall, she motioned for Joe to stay behind her. Pausing, she tried to get her bearings. Was it left or right? Everything looked different at night. No, it was this way; she was certain of it, and she silently beckoned to Joe.

They were halfway down the corridor when she heard the sudden noise. Startled, Amanda pressed herself against the wall, her arm quickly shooting out to push Joe back as well.

"Amanda . . ."

"Shhh," she whispered, bringing her finger to her lips. Inclining her head towards the light spilling from the office at the far end of the hall, she began to creep closer. The indistinct murmurs suddenly became louder, a female voice rising sharply.

"That's Carrie," Joe stated in surprise, the muscle in his cheek twitching ominously. Pushing her restraining arm away, he started for the door.

"Joe, wait a minute," she cried in a loud whisper. "You don't know what's . . ." Sighing in exasperation, she watched him disappear into the small office. She bent over, letting out a long breath as she braced her hands against her knees.

"Well, well. Hello, Amanda." Straightening, she saw Jim Walters himself illuminated in the doorway. He gave her a satisfied smirk as he added, "You look lonely out here. Why don't you come on in and join the other Kings?"

His voice reminded her of fingernails on a blackboard. "Uh, no thanks," she countered, automatically rubbing the goose bumps on her arms. "It's late. I think I'll just let you all discuss this in private." She began to slowly inch away.

"Oh, but I'm afraid I'm going to have to insist," he returned, pulling a terrified Carrie from the room. Grinning, he cocked his gun, placing it squarely on her temple.

Amanda grimaced. "Since you put it that way . . ."

"Oh, I do," he replied sanguinely. Pulling Carrie towards him, he stepped aside, motioning for Amanda to enter. "Why don't you just join your ex over there?"

Biting her lower lip, she did as he requested, moving quickly to Joe's side. They exchanged a look, and she shook her head grimly.

"Now isn't this cozy?" Walters told them smugly. "I wasn't expecting such a big party, but don't worry, I'm very good at improvisation."

Amanda eyed him warily. "And just what do you need to improvise?"

Walters grinned at her. "Why, my exit strategy, of course. I had a much more grandiose departure in mind, but when I caught wind of the dogs sniffing around me tonight, I knew I'd have to settle for a more spur of the moment plan. I was fortunate enough to run into my new friend Carrie."

She could feel Joe bristling beside her, and she put a warning hand on his arm. Carrie's lower lip was trembling uncontrollably, and her ex-husband was showing unmistakable signs of heroics. Trying to stay in command of the situation, she turned to Walters once again. "Taking an early retirement? They must pay professors here pretty well."

He smiled, revealing a row of too-perfect teeth. "As I'm sure you've guessed, *that* was only a sideline."

Amanda looked sharply at the open file spread across his desk. The technical drawings appeared to be some sort of weapons specs. What kind of game was Walters into? She took a small step closer, straining to get a better look at the blueprints.

He moved suddenly, placing himself and Carrie squarely in front of the desk to obscure her view.

"Selling something that doesn't belong to you?" she queried lightly.

"Depends on how you look at it, I guess. I wouldn't, if I were you," he advised, raising the gun to Carrie's head again as Amanda edged towards him. "You're much too clever for your own good . . . Mrs., uh, King. I believe you still go by that name professionally." He looked at Carrie in mock horror. "Now this must be really confusing. How do you all keep it straight? It's too much for me," he added with an artificial grin. "Maybe I should just call you Mrs. Scarecrow."

She narrowed her eyes, curling one side of her lip as she leveled him in her gaze.

"Stay right where you are," he warned again, brandishing his pistol. Frowning, he glanced at his watch. Pulling Carrie roughly towards him, he slid open the top drawer of the desk, pulling out some lengths of rope and two pairs of handcuffs.

"Joe, you've been awfully quiet. Why don't you make yourself useful and pull those two chairs together? Back to back . . . there's a good fellow." He squeezed Carrie's arm until she made a small, mewling sound.

"You bastard!" Joe spat, his eyes flashing menacingly.

Walters pulled Carrie closer. "Come on, no false heroics. I'd hate to see you become a widower. Okay, now you and the ex sit down. Interlock your arms behind your back, that's it." He turned to Carrie, handing her the cuffs. "Okay, your turn to be helpful. Thread this through the back of Amanda's chair, then cuff Joe. That's good; now do the same for the lovely Mrs. Scarecrow there."

"I'm sorry," Carrie whispered breathlessly, fastening the cuffs with trembling hands. "I ran into him on the quad, and he'd been so nice earlier . . . he . . . he offered to call me a cab, so I came back here with him."

"It's okay," Amanda said. "You had no idea." Looking towards Walters, she added, "None of us did."

Carrie drew a shaky breath. "Joe, I . . ."

He looked at her tenderly. "Don't worry, Sweetheart, it'll be okay."

Walters laughed. "Of course it will, 'Sweetheart'. Once I make my final sale and get the hell out of here." Quickly collecting the scattered papers, he placed them carefully in his jacket pocket. Tossing Carrie four short lengths of rope, he ordered brusquely, "Now tie their ankles to the legs of the chairs."

Amanda craned her neck, fixing her eye on Walters. "You won't get away with this. Lee is probably looking for me right now."

"I don't think so. I happen to know Scarecrow is occupied at the moment. Carrie and I saw him headed for the Huddle with Phillip, didn't we, Carrie?"

She nodded mutely, and Amanda bit her lip.

"I'm meeting my business contact in a few minutes, then it's hasta la vista. I'll be long gone before Scarecrow even realizes you're not where you're supposed to be," Walters continued in a mocking tone. "I'd be grateful for that, if I were you. I don't like to think of myself as a murderer, but if my hand is forced . . ." He chuckled softly, his eyes resting ominously on Carrie.

"I always knew I'd have to pull up stakes here sooner or later," he continued matter-of-factly, "but I'm sure you can imagine my surprise when I saw Phillip King's name on my advisee list. And then the timing of this Parents' Weekend . . . well, it couldn't have been worse. When I saw that all of you were coming, I was afraid the formidable Scarecrow might recognize the man I'm meeting tonight. I tried to get rid of you by canceling your reservations at the Campus Inn, but then my helpful assistant remembered we had one room on emergency reserve. I thought then if I just kept an eye on you, things might still work. Of course, when someone started poking into my credentials today, I knew my luck had finally run out."

He laughed, a cackling sound that made Amanda's skin crawl. "It didn't take a genius to figure out who was behind it," he went on, smiling as Carrie finished securing the last rope. "Scarecrow's stepson. . . of all the luck. Oh, don't feel left out, Mrs. King," he added as he saw Amanda's eyes harden. "Your name is pretty well known in certain circles, too. That's what put me onto you two in the first place."

Reaching out, he pulled Carrie to him, twisting her arm behind her back. She cried out softly, whimpering Joe's name.

"If you hurt her . . ." he began ominously.

"You'll what? I think you'll sit right where you are, at least for the time being."

"Come on, Walters," Amanda coaxed, "you don't need her. She'll just slow you down. Tie her up and leave her with us."

He pretended to consider her offer, then grinned. "I don't think so. She's my insurance policy. Just in case those bloodhounds Scarecrow let loose get a little too close."

Amanda glanced at Carrie's terrified face. "Then why not take me instead?" she offered. "That is, if it's really Scarecrow you're worried about . . ."

"An interesting offer, but I think *this* Mrs. King will be a lot more amenable. Won't you, my dear?" Turning to Amanda and Joe once again, he added with a short laugh, "Now don't worry; if you two are very good and don't make any noise, I promise I'll release her once I get where I'm going." He leered softly at Carrie, running his hand up and down her arm. "No worse for wear."

Smirking, he gave them a final salute. Then, switching off the light, he left, dragging a sobbing Carrie King behind him.

~XI~

Lee glanced at his stepson out of the corner of his eye as they rounded the corner of the student union. "Feeling better, Chief?"

Phillip exhaled loudly, expelling his tension along with his breath. "Yeah, I guess so. At least I don't feel like slugging something anymore. Or someone," he added ominously.

Slapping the boy lightly on the back, he gave a short laugh. "Glad to hear it."

They walked on, each seemingly lost in thought. The campus was unusually quiet for a Saturday night, only the occasional stereo blaring now and then from an open window. Lee smiled wryly. Definitely not the normal state of affairs; the sudden influx of adults must have put a temporary crimp in the usual weekend carousing.

Cutting over to the north quad, they headed towards Phillip's dorm, their footsteps unusually loud on the hard concrete walk. Lee heard Phillip sigh noisily once more, and he pursed his lips, the sudden likeness to Amanda catching him by surprise.

"Lee, can I ask you something?" Phillip said suddenly, the similarity stronger than ever.

"Um, hmm," he murmured, still feeling oddly off-balance. He usually saw his wife much more clearly in Jamie.

Phillip squinted his eyes, his forehead wrinkling. "You finally worked things out with your uncle, right?"

"Yeah, I did," he replied, his voice catching almost imperceptibly.

"How?"

"You don't ask the easy ones, do you?" he sighed, frowning. "It's complicated. I guess the short answer is - your mother. She helped me see that, where the Colonel was concerned, maybe I didn't have to have the last word after all." He ran a hand briskly through his hair. "I could accept the good things about him and overlook the bad."

"That's it?"

He gave Phillip a long look. "It didn't happen overnight. It took a lot of hard work."

He heard his stepson groan lightly. "I guess you're saying I should talk to Dad."

"I'm not saying you should do anything, Phillip. I don't know, maybe the best thing to do is to give things a little time."

Phillip laughed. "How about the rest of my life?"

Lee grinned. "I suppose that's one way to go. But the bottom line is - yes, he's your father and yes, he has some pretty strong ideas about the path he thinks you should take, but remember - just because he has an opinion on the matter, there's no law that says you have to agree with it. You're your own person."

"I guess so." Slowing their pace, he absently kicked a stray pebble with his foot. "He's different, you know," he said in a low voice, jamming his hands into his pockets. "Since he got back from Santarilla."

Lee nodded. "I know. An experience like that . . . well, it can . . . change . . . a person," he finished haltingly.

"I know. I try to cut him some slack, I really do, but . . ." Phillip looked up suddenly. "Do you think he and Carrie are gonna split up?"

Lee sighed. "I don't know. It sounds like they're going through a rough spot right now, but I'm sure Joe doesn't want another . . . well, I'm sure he and Carrie both want to make their marriage work."

"I don't know how she can stand . . ." He stopped abruptly, his mouth falling open as he looked over Lee's shoulder in stunned surprise. "Well, maybe I do," he said, his face pinched.

Turning, Lee followed his gaze. Jim Walters was crossing the quad with none other than Carrie King, his arm wrapped around her possessively. Oblivious to their surroundings, they appeared to be heading straight for the path along the river.

Carrie stumbled slightly, almost falling, and Walters pressed her even closer. "Shit, I can't believe this," he heard Phillip exclaim behind him. The boy started after them, but Lee quickly pulled him back.

"Look, Lee," he protested loudly. "Dad may be a first class jerk, but you saw them! I can't just let her . . ."

"Phillip, listen to me," he said sternly, one eye still tracking the fleeing pair as he caught his stepson by the arms. "I need you to do something for me."

"Lee, we've got to . . ."

He reached quickly into his inside jacket pocket, thrusting a small card into the stunned boy's hand. "Call this number and say, Scarecrow, alpha one, code blue. Got that?"

"Yeah, but . . ."

"I don't think she's going with him willingly." Grimacing, he looked the boy in the eye. "Do you understand?"

He sucked in a breath, nodding solemnly. "What're you gonna do?"

"I'm going to follow them," he said brusquely over his shoulder as he headed towards the river.

Phillip took a step forward. "Let me go with . . ."

Lee stopped abruptly. "No, you're not," he stated in no uncertain terms. "You're going to call in my backup, then go to your dorm room and stay put. Understand?"

"Lee . . ."

"Phillip, I don't have time for a debate," he barked in a tone that brooked no refusal. "I'm losing them. Do as I say . . . now!"

Phillip still looked as if he wanted to argue, but he quickly bit his bottom lip. "Yes, sir."

Waiting only long enough to see his stepson start for his dorm on a brisk run, he disappeared into the shadows.

~XII~

"Come on," Amanda urged between breaths, "we've got to do this together or it's not going to work."

Joe paused, panting slightly as he tried to gauge the distance to the door. "What are we going to do when we get there?"

"I haven't quite worked that part out yet," she replied through gritted teeth. "Let's go."

Joe kept his feet firmly planted on the floor. "Amanda, this is ridiculous," he told her firmly. "The door's locked. I heard that bastard turn the key."

"Joe . . ."

"No."

She moaned deeply as he steadfastly refused to budge. Civilians . . . this worked so much better when Lee was the one chained to the other chair. She tried again. "Come on, Joe, we've got to do something . . . we can't just let him get away with it."

"Don't you think I know that?" he croaked hoarsely. "It's my wife he took hostage."

"But?" she challenged.

"But . . . I can recognize a hopeless situation when I see one, Amanda." Taking a sharp breath, he added sadly, "You never could."

Amanda abruptly halted her movements, whistling softly. "No, I guess not. I wouldn't have lasted long in this line of work if I did."

Joe didn't reply. Cautiously stretching her stiff neck, she took stock of their situation again. Even though her eyes had grown accustomed to the darkened office, it was still next to impossible to get any real sense of her surroundings. She groaned impatiently. She could hear a clock ticking away the seconds from somewhere across the room, and she vaguely wondered if Lee had missed her yet. How long would he wait before he began to suspect something? True, he'd been wary of Walters from the start, but how much of that uneasiness was Lee's jealousy and how much Scarecrow's uncanny instinct?

No, he wouldn't be worried yet. He knew she could handle herself. Although at the moment she wished she hadn't worked quite so hard to convince him on that score. She let out a short sigh. Walters seemed to think the Agency was hot on his trail; she could only hope that he was right.

Somewhere behind her in the darkness, Joe coughed. "You okay?" she questioned kindly. His labored breathing worried her. She'd barely broken a sweat from their exertions, while Joe seemed oddly winded.

"Yeah," he said at last. "Just worried about Carrie."

"She'll be okay, Joe," she told him with an assurance she didn't feel. "Like he said, he's not the murdering type."

"How can you possibly know that?" Joe said, clearly vexed. "Or is there something you're not telling me? Have you and Lee been investigating this guy all along?"

"Honestly, neither one of us had ever seen or heard of the man until yesterday."

She could feel Joe bristling behind her. "Not to hear him tell it. If it wasn't for your damn jobs . . ."

"As I recall," she hissed, "those 'damn jobs' have saved your butt more than once."

An unsettling silence closed around them, broken only by the occasional heaving breath from Joe. Amanda compressed her lips, restraining her anger with a Herculean effort. Fighting wouldn't solve anything, not now; she knew Joe's acrimony stemmed mostly from worry, anyway. "I'm sure Walters is only interested in making his deal," she said, trying again to bolster his sagging spirits. "Men like that usually only have money on their mind."

"You think so?"

She heard the slight tremor in his voice. "Yeah," she lied, steadfastly refusing to entertain thoughts of every female agent's worst nightmare. "I'm sure of it." She reached for him, but their arms were entwined in a way that kept his hand just out of hers. She settled for giving his arms a small squeeze instead. She understood his distress only too well; she'd felt it enough times herself when Lee was in danger.

"May I ask you a question?" she asked suddenly. She needed to do something - anything - to take his mind off his helplessness.

"Could I stop you?" Joe replied wryly.

She chuckled softly. "Probably not. But you have my express permission to tell me to mind my own business if you want."

She heard his sigh turn into a low laugh. "How can I turn down an offer like that?"

"Why haven't you and Carrie had a child of your own?"

At Joe's sharp intake of breath, she swiftly added, "I've seen how she is with Matty. She's crazy about him; Jenny, too." Joe was strangely silent, and she resolutely ploughed on. "I mean, every time you guys come over, Carrie practically devotes herself to both of them. And Matty, he feels the same way about her. It's so obvious she'd like . . ."

"We can't have children," he stated gruffly.

Amanda bit her lip. "Oh, I'm sorry, Joe. I guess I really should learn to keep my mouth shut. She must be . . ."

"It's not Carrie's fault," came the icy reply.

Amanda felt a flush spread over her face. "I, uh . . ."

Oblivious to her discomfiture, Joe continued. "Carrie wanted a baby, but I . . ." He took a deep breath. "I just . . . well, I just couldn't. After Santarilla."

"Oh, my gosh."

"I mean, I *wouldn't*," he hastily clarified. "I had a vasectomy."

Amanda shifted uncomfortably. "I'm sorry, Joe. This really is none of my business. I didn't mean to . . ."

"Sure you did," Joe said gravely, "but it's okay. I don't mind talking about it . . . well, not to you, anyway." He sighed deeply. "Carrie and I discussed it for a long time, and she eventually saw things my way. With the kind of people in this world doing the kind of things they do to each other . . . I worry enough about Phillip and Jamie, let alone bringing another innocent life . . . well, it's just too hard, Amanda. I don't know how you and Lee can do it. Especially with your jobs."

Amanda sat very still, listening to Joe's shallow breathing. "I think we do it *because* of our jobs," she said at last in a small voice. "When you see too much . . ." She took a deep breath, letting it out ever so slowly. "Let's just say family, children . . . it all starts to mean a whole lot more. It's kind of a promise that things will go on."

He whistled in admiration. "You always did see that glass half-full, didn't you?"

"It's no business for a pessimist," she quipped, her laugh echoing in the darkness. The hollow noise continued, and Amanda strained to listen. "Joe," she said in a rush, "did you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"Shh," she admonished, adding in a gravelly murmur, "That!"

They sat frozen, listening to the fast-approaching footsteps in the hall. "Hey, in here," she yelled, while Joe added a resounding, "Help!"

The door burst open, light suddenly flooding the small room. "Federal agents," the first man intoned, while two other men joined him, guns drawn.

"What the . . . ?!" the second man cried suddenly, his exclamation trailing off into a sheepish smile. "Amanda?"

She craned her neck to get a better look. "Hank?" she said incredulously as she recognized one of the agents from their section. "What are you doing here?"

He smiled as he holstered his gun, instructing the other men to do likewise. "Scarecrow put out an alpha alert earlier tonight when the special background came back on this fellow Walters," he explained. "I popped over to reel in the net." He bent down, trying unsuccessfully to stifle his laughter as he went to work on their cuffs. "I didn't expect you'd turn up in it, though."

"Ha, ha," she groaned, rubbing her sore wrists as he freed her from her bonds. "I walked into the middle of something." Standing, she stretched out her cramped muscles. "Where's Lee?"

"I don't know," Hank replied vaguely. "By the river, I think. Something's going down."

"Where exactly by the river?"

"Uh, the stone bridge."

Her eyes narrowed sharply. "Give me your gun, I'm not armed."

"Amanda, Scarecrow will have my head if I let you over there."

"And I'll have your head if you don't," she snapped. "Don't make me remind you that I outrank you."

"I'm going with you," Joe said suddenly, jumping to his feet as the other agent freed him. His breath came in wheezing gasps. "Carrie's there."

"No, you're not," she replied harshly. Softening her expression, she looked Joe in the eye. "You need medical attention."

"I'm perfectly fine . . ."

Amanda regarded him with narrowed eyes. "You are not **fine**," she told him grimly. "Please, Joe. I don't need one more person to worry about."

Joe drew another ragged breath, rubbing the handcuff mark on his left wrist with a shaking hand. "Okay, okay," he said, reluctantly conceding the point.

Nodding, she turned back to the agent. "Come on, Hank," she said in a softer tone. "I'm not going to leave my partner hanging. I'll tell him I made it an order."

Engaging the safety, he handed her his gun with a small groan. "You'd better," he warned. "I hate working nights and weekends."

Smiling grimly, she tucked the weapon inside the waistband of her jeans. "Me, too."

~XIII~

From his vantage point behind the shrub hedge, Lee kept a watchful eye on his quarry. Walters had stopped by the low, stone railing, one arm still securely around Carrie as his eyes searched the shadows. Lee ducked a little lower; the man was clearly looking for something . . . or someone. A partner, perhaps? That made sense. What other reason could a man obviously bent on flight have for hanging around?

The air was oddly still. Below, he could hear the relentless surge of the powerful river, above, the occasional cry of a night bird. Gritting his teeth, he absently patted his hip. He felt strangely naked, and he cursed himself again for not bringing a weapon this weekend.

He could remember a time when he'd always been armed. Of course, he'd been a field agent then - a different life. Now, firmly entrenched behind the administrative barricades, like Billy Melrose before him, he kept his gun safely locked in his desk.

At least the territory was familiar, he thought with a sigh. That gave him some small advantage. He had walked this same path, paused at that exact spot with Amanda just . . . what . . . a few short hours ago? The night was much darker, he noted with consternation, the moon that had shone so brightly earlier now partially obscured by clouds.

He frowned slightly. How had Carrie ended up in the middle of this mess? She should have been in her hotel room with Joe, safely out of harm's way. And where the hell was the Agency? He said a silent prayer that Phillip had followed his orders. That surprising flicker of Amanda he'd glimpsed in the boy earlier was starting to make him extremely nervous.

The response shouldn't have taken this long. After all, his agents were supposed to already be watching Walters. He'd ordered alpha priority surveillance shortly after dinner. Around the same time the erstwhile professor had dropped out of sight, Lee thought grimly. Damn, the man must have known he was being followed. That would make him doubly desperate.

Leaning forward, Lee strained to hear the conversation, but he couldn't make anything out. Although, he really didn't need to, the pair's body language told it all; Carrie standing tense and straight as a board, Walters' foot tapping impatiently on the concrete walkway. Something was about to pop.

Taking a deep breath, Lee made his decision. Zipping up his jacket, he quickly turned up the collar, hunching down inside. Not much camouflage, but it would have to do. With a little luck, Walters would be too distracted waiting for his meet to notice little details.

Stooping, he affected a limp as he slowly started towards the pair. Don't make eye contact, he reminded himself, fighting the urge to look up. Keep him feeling safe.

He was halfway to the railing when he heard it, the sharp popping sound just over his left shoulder. Instinctively, he dropped and rolled, even before the strident "Lee, look out!" reached his ears. Startled by the shout, Walters straightened, stepping away from Carrie, the bullet meant for Lee catching him squarely in the right shoulder. Crying out, he lowered his gun arm, and Scarecrow reacted instinctively. Springing from the ground, he tackled Walters around the midsection, pushing him over the small stone fence. They rolled down the slight embankment, both struggling for Walters' gun as they headed for the river.

It was over as suddenly as it began, the distinct discharge of a weapon abruptly curtailing the scuffle. He could hear a commotion somewhere above him, more shots fired, a woman crying - Carrie, most likely - then the familiar voice he'd recognized a few minutes earlier calling to him from the top of the wall.

"You okay?"

He gave himself a cursory check as he rose. He didn't think he was hurt, but that was the thing about bullet wounds and adrenaline - sometimes you didn't feel a thing. No, he was okay. The gun they'd fought for had only fired once, and the shot had found another mark.

He looked up, his partner's face illuminated by the intermittent flashing of a blinking light. "Yeah, I'm fine," he stated tersely. "You?" He knew the answer before he asked. Amanda looked coolly professional and positively vibrant.

"I'm fine, too," she assured him calmly. He watched her stance relax, her weapon falling harmlessly to her side. "The Agency backup arrived. They took out the shooter up here."

"Good," he grunted, grateful that she hadn't had to discharge her weapon. He looked at the inert form at his feet. "Looks like our pal Walters is out of commission, too."

"Wounded?" she inquired, her voice unruffled.

He knelt down, his practiced fingers searching for the carotid artery. "No," he answered curtly. "Dead."

~XIV~

Heading purposefully for the blinking red light of the ambulance, Amanda pushed her way through the swarming officials. She shook her head wearily as she approached. From the sound of things, Lee was giving the poor paramedic his usual hard time.

"Mr. Stetson, please," he pleaded as her husband tried to extricate himself from his professional clutches. "I have to clean this."

"I'll do it," she said, elbowing the young man gently out of the way. Grinning sweetly, she pointedly held Lee's gaze. "I've had lots of practice."

As the grateful medic relinquished his position, Amanda ripped open the antiseptic swab, sitting beside her husband in the back of the open ambulance. "Well, Stetson," she stated as she gently attended to the cuts on his forehead and cheek, "you sure know how to show a girl an exciting weekend."

"I try," he returned with a flippant laugh. "Although, this wasn't exactly the kind of excitement I had . . . Ouch!" Frowning, he jerked his head out of her reach.

"Don't be a baby," she grumbled good-naturedly as she scooted closer. "Come on, Lee, I have to get the dirt out."

"It hurts," her husband informed her petulantly, suddenly sounding remarkably like little Matthew.

She struggled to hide her smile. "I'll bet. That's what you get for rolling down a brambly embankment like a . . . a field agent."

"Seemed like a good idea at the time." Looking pointedly at the weapon secured by her belt, he added, "You're a fine one to talk."

"And you're lucky you don't need stitches," she told him, ignoring his remark. She felt him tense again as she started on his cheek. "Be brave," she coaxed sweetly, "and I'll make it up to you later."

"Is that a promise?"

She gave him a slow smile. "Most definitely."

He surveyed the scene with a regretful sigh. "I'm probably going to be tied up here most of the night." Nodding, he indicated the gaggle of agents surrounding the two body bags. "They have a positive I.D. on Walters' contact. Gunter Green."

Amanda raised her eyebrows. "The 'Financier?' I'm impressed. Our humble little professor was keeping some pretty heavy company."

Lee nodded. "And this may only be the tip of the iceberg. Looks like Walters may have been a conduit for more than information."

"Weapons shipments?"

"Among other things. Green had his fingers in a lot of pies."

She whistled. "Some university. Guess Phillip inherited my knack for attracting trouble."

"At least he didn't inherit your knack for disobeying orders." Lee shook his head remorsefully. "I'd have never forgiven myself if he'd ended up in the middle of this."

She bit her bottom lip as she finished tending the last of his scrapes. "There," she stated in an unusually quiet voice, "all set."

He smiled warmly at her. "Thanks. Feels better."

They sat side by side, watching in silence as the scene played out in front of them. They worked so hard to build a wall around their family, she thought glumly, struggled to keep the Agency firmly outside it. Then, when they least expected it, trouble slipped in through an unexpected chink. At her son's college, of all places, where danger was supposed to mean partying too hard on a Saturday night.

"I talked to Phillip," she told him in a small voice. "They're going to keep Joe at the hospital overnight for observation. He was throwing some PVC's."

"Heart attack?"

"No, just too much stress, I guess. Phillip is going to the hospital to stay with Carrie."

She heard Lee exhale loudly. "Amanda, what you did tonight . . . it was pretty foolhardy. Breaking into Walters' office with a civilian . . ."

She rolled her eyes. "Don't get all holier than thou with me, Scarecrow. You may be my section chief, but . . ." She gave him a brittle little laugh. "I seem to recall a suspended agent breaking into a United States postal facility with a civilian once upon a time. Besides," she added testily, "maybe if you'd cared to share your investigation of good old 'Jimbo' with me, I wouldn't have gone there with Joe in tow."

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him run a hand through his hair. "Point taken," he replied, folding his arms across his chest. "I just didn't want to worry you. That offhand comment he made about Jenny and your mother . . . well, it set off some alarm bells for me, too, so I activated a security net."

She tensed suddenly, searching his eyes. "Everything's okay at home?"

"Everything's fine at home." He leaned over, brushing his lips gently across her forehead. "Matt and Jenny's lights were out at 8:30 sharp, your mother spent a quiet evening with Captain Curt and Jamie . . ." He shook his head dramatically. "Well, I'm afraid Jamie came in ten minutes past his curfew."

She slapped him lightly on the chest. "Probably wouldn't be quite fair to hold him accountable for that."

He laughed in return, catching her hand in his. "Probably not."

"Scarecrow."

She felt Lee quickly let go, and, turning, she saw Hank motioning. "I guess I've gotta go to work," Lee groaned, rising gingerly.

"I see that." As she hopped down easily from her perch on the ambulance, she wondered how many bruises he'd be sporting tomorrow. Reaching for the firearm, she handed it to her husband with a hint of a smile. "Uh, you might want to give this back to Hank."

"That's not all I'd like to give him," he added wryly. "I know, I know," he added off her look, "you wouldn't take 'no' for an answer. Are you going back to the Inn?"

She shook her head. "I think I'm going to check on things at the hospital. Maybe talk to Phillip a bit - make sure he's okay."

Lee nodded. "I'll catch up with you later." He started for Hank, then stopped, slowly turning to catch her eye. "One of these days, Mrs. Stetson," she heard him say in the tone that always made her shiver.

"Yeah," she replied in a hoarse whisper.

He gave her a sexy wink. "Hold that thought."

As she watched him make his way over to the other agents, she let out a plaintive sigh. Thoughts were more than likely all she would be holding again tonight.

~XV~

Lee stood in the doorway, silently observing as his wife leaned over little Jenny's crib. The low night-light on the dresser illuminated her slim form, and he could just make out the smooth curve of her hips and her long, lithesome legs beneath the silken nightgown. Listening to her soft hum as she laid a gentle hand on the baby's stomach, he felt something indescribable tug at his heart.

It was good to be home.

Creeping up behind her, he wrapped her in his arms, watching with a smile as she fingered the soft strands of Jenny's fine hair. Kissing his wife lightly by the ear, he gave a low laugh, adding in a teasing whisper, "Hasn't turned blonde yet."

"Just give it time," she rejoined, elbowing him playfully in the ribs. "There's a conspiracy in this family, I know it."

He pulled her closer against him, and she rested her small hands lightly atop his larger ones. They stood quietly, locked together, watching their baby daughter's chest rise and fall in a peaceful rhythm.

"I think she grew an inch," Amanda stated solemnly in awed wonder.

He gave her a little squeeze. "We were only gone forty-eight hours, Amanda."

His wife shook her head emphatically. "She just looks different to me."

"She just looks asleep to me," he told her, adding with a soft chuckle, "Which, considering the weekend we've had, is a very good thing, don't you think?" He gave her a light kiss, his lips lingering lovingly on her neck.

"Is Matty in bed?" she whispered with a barely detectable shudder.

"Um-hmm," he murmured, smiling at her tremulous tone. Almost five years of marriage had surely taught him its meaning. Pulling her closer, he slowly moved his hands up to brush the soft undersides of her breasts. She sighed in response, shivering once again.

"Come on," he urged, gently tucking the crib blanket around his tiny daughter. "It seems both of our children are asleep. Let's not press our luck."

He felt her hand tighten around his as she let him lead her from the room, stopping briefly to look in on Matthew. Their son was scrunched up in a tight little ball, one chubby hand clutching his beloved stuffed rabbit. He was still wearing the JMU sweatshirt his big brother 'Pip' had sent home for him.

"Poor baby," Amanda commiserated, "he's all worn out."

"Well, fighting those flying monkeys tends to do that to you," he laughed. "Your mother said he watched that damned movie all weekend."

"You know how he is when he latches on to something. Remember that awful Mr. Rogers phase?"

Lee shuddered. "How could I forget? He had to be the guy's biggest fan. Twice a day, no less." He shook his head, marveling at his son's single-mindedness. "But

Amanda, of all the videos in the store, why does he have to be fixated on the Wizard of Oz?"

"There is a certain irony to that, I suppose," she laughed lightly. "Mother was thrilled, though; it kept him happily occupied."

"Glad to know it was good for something," he grumbled.

"You know," she began in a teasing tone, "I used to love that movie myself when I was little." She grinned, running her finger delicately over his lips. "I had a soft spot for the Scarecrow."

Lee returned her look, feeling anything but soft at the moment. "Come on, Mrs. Stetson," he entreated with newfound urgency. "Come to bed."

Glancing at him almost shyly, she nodded, following him through the door. "What time did Jamie say he'd be home?"

"Eleven," he replied as she fit herself comfortably into the curve of his arm. "He's working on that report with Cathy Wilson."

"A report?" She raised a sculptured eyebrow. "Do we really believe that story?"

Lee gave a short laugh. "No. But it's nice to see Jamie goof off a bit. He's always been so serious."

"I know. Sometimes I'd swear he's sixteen going on thirty." She smiled softly as she preceded him into their room. "It's nice not to worry about him for a change."

He shook his head, carefully closing their bedroom door. "So instead you're going to worry about Phillip."

She only smiled, crossing over to the fireplace and trailing her finger absently along the edge of the polished mantle. It had been a real wood-burning fireplace when they'd purchased the house, but, tired of the hassle, they'd happily converted it after that first year.

"Shall I?" he asked, catching her eye as he reached for the tin of matches.

"If you want."

Taking that as a yes, he squatted down to open the glass doors. Striking a match, he deftly turned the key that released the gas, the familiar 'whoosh' settling down as he adjusted the level of the flame. "There," he said, looking up expectantly. "How's that?"

"Hmm," Amanda murmured absently, and he saw her fingering the small pewter-framed picture of Phillip and Matthew with obvious care.

Rising, Lee sucked in a breath. "Tell you what," he said thoughtfully as he set the match container down. "I've got to fly Harrisonburg on Wednesday to clean up this Walters mess. Why don't you hitch a ride on the Agency plane, and we'll both take Phillip out to dinner?"

He watched as she carefully considered his offer, slowly returning the picture to its place of honor on the mantle. "No, I don't think so. Phillip made it pretty clear he didn't want to talk to me about this Joe business. It's better if you take him out alone."

"Amanda . . ."

"No, really, it's okay. I'm not upset." She laughed at his raised eyebrow. "Well, okay, I'm not upset . . . much. I just think I have to take a step back. Phillip and Joe have to solve their own problems. I can't play referee any more; it's too exhausting."

Lee nodded. "I just hope he and Carrie work things out. If they don't . . ."

"They have a lot to deal with. I can't believe Joe could dismiss Carrie's desire to have a baby so easily. That doesn't sound at all like the man I remember."

The haunted face of a gaunt figure huddled in the corner of a shed suddenly found its way into his mind. "People change, Amanda," Lee said in a low voice. "Sometimes more than they want to."

"If Carrie feels strongly about it, they could adopt."

"Right now it sounds like they have their hands full just getting their relationship back on track."

She nodded sadly. "She told me last night Joe's agreed to get some marriage counseling. I hope it works."

"Me, too." He gave the back of his neck a vigorous rub. Joe King was an okay guy; he didn't deserve what had happened to him in that rebel camp in Santarilla. For that matter, neither did Carrie.

"I like Carrie, you know?" Amanda added in a small voice, echoing his thoughts. "She's a good person; just like Joe. I just wish . . ."

He cocked his head slightly. "Wish what, Amanda?"

She shrugged, and he watched a frown pass fleetingly over her face. Then, sighing softly, she looked up, locking him in her gaze. "Have I told you lately how much I love you?"

He slowly shook his head.

"I do, you know," she stated in a voice that was little more than a whisper. "I let myself get too caught up in other things sometimes. Mother, the kids . . . even Joe and Carrie." She drew a shaky breath, letting it out slowly through her mouth.

"I'm just as guilty as you of letting things get in the way," he put in quickly. "Lately, we just haven't had any time to . . . be ourselves."

He saw her smile at his words, a faint blush suffusing her ivory skin. "I want to," she stated in a throaty whisper as she took a small step forward. "I want to very much."

He moved to meet her, his eyes still on hers. They stood by the fireplace, facing each other with unspoken yearning. The heat from the flames felt wonderfully warm, and he watched her for a long moment, letting the world slide further and further away.

"I love you, too," he said finally, stepping even closer. "I've wanted to show you all weekend. It just seemed like the timing was never right."

"The best laid plans'," she quipped, but her body language belied her lighthearted tone. Her breath caught in her throat, then she murmured his name so softly it was almost a sigh.

He embraced her with his eyes. He could almost see her thoughts as her own eyes grew darker, feelings so deeply intimate they couldn't be put into words. They held him in place, frozen, unable to move.

"Lee." She said his name again, a diffident smile playing at the corners of her mouth. "We've both been waiting for this." Closing the last distance between them, she kissed him.

He felt the same flash of astonishment he'd experienced on their brief honeymoon. Her boldness then had delighted and amazed him. It was both pleasurable and unsettling to discover Amanda had hidden depths he'd never expected. He should have guessed, he knew. Hadn't she always surprised him, right from the start?

Just as she did now. He was keenly aware of her as she led him to their bed. Her smile, teasingly inviting, the fleeting brush of her hand against his thigh as they walked, the soft satin of her gown against his bare skin as he hastily discarded his robe.

He grasped her nightgown, his hands moving softly along her thighs. Nodding, she raised her arms over her head, and he lifted the gown up and off, carelessly tossing it aside. She was so beautiful, her skin flushed with warmth, that he could only stand and look at her again, drinking in the sight. He held his breath, half listening for the baby's cry, an unwanted phone call, something - anything - that might interrupt. As the house answered with uncharacteristic silence, his lips parted in a slow grin.

Once again, she made the first move, her hands skimming ephemerally over his chest. He watched as she carefully catalogued the bumps and bruises he'd acquired in his recent scuffle, her eyes narrowing as she took in the large, black and blue area below his ribcage. Catching his eye, she shook her head, then knelt down to place soft, butterfly kisses over his tender skin.

He sighed as her mouth gently moved lower, her fingers resting tentatively on the waistband of his boxers. Widening his stance, he silently encouraged her to draw them down his legs. She complied with agonizing slowness, and he impatiently kicked the offending garment aside as he quickly stepped out of it. Reaching down, he reclaimed the initiative, pulling her up and against him as his lips closed on hers with renewed desire.

As skin melted into skin, he felt himself growing rock hard, and he quickly guided her to their bed. He pulled her down on top of him, her slender body molding itself to his broader form as he sought her mouth once again. When the kiss finally ended, she reached up to switch off the light, but he shook his head.

"Leave it on," he told her hungrily. "I want to look at you."

She nodded, smiling as she stretched out on the mattress. Hovering above her, he swept his eyes over her admiringly. Amanda kept saying she still had 'baby' fat, but he couldn't see it. Her body looked as lean as ever, her breasts small, delicate, her legs seeming to go on forever. She looked so diminutive beside him, small and achingly vulnerable. It filled him with an overwhelming desire to protect her.

He heard her sigh again, plainly impatient with his hesitancy. Reaching up, she gently traced the scratches on his cheek and forehead with her fingers, then clasped her hands behind his head, pulling him firmly down to her. He touched his lips to hers, softly at first, reverently, and she moaned almost plaintively in response. He smiled against her mouth, knowing she yearned for the same thing he did. There had been too much slow and sweet since her pregnancy and not nearly enough passionate abandon.

He kissed her again, parting her lips this time, driving his tongue into her mouth. Like a smoldering ember suddenly stoked back to a roaring blaze, her response was immediate. He felt her breasts flatten beneath his chest as she pressed against him, her legs tangling with his in her endeavor to be closer. He felt the stress of the past months dissolving slowly but surely in the fiery heat of her embrace. She moved beneath him with powerful certainty, caressing, stroking, bringing him to the edge much sooner than he wanted. His longing became almost desperate as he returned her touch, seeking the familiar places that always drove her crazy.

Her breathing quickening, she arched beneath him as his weight pressed her into the bed. Her legs parted and, with a low moan, he shifted slightly, ready to enter her. She was clearly experiencing the same passionate hunger that drove him. It had been so long, he thought with a sudden rush of desire, then, in his last moment of clarity, he remembered why.

With a superhuman effort, he stopped his forward motion, kissing her lightly on the lips instead. "Amanda," he whispered tenderly. "I don't want to hurt you."

"It's okay," she told him with a low groan. He wondered briefly if she meant it was okay, he wouldn't hurt her, or okay, she didn't care. "Don't stop," she murmured again as her hands pressed against his buttocks. "I want you so badly."

He didn't need to hear more. Slowly, gently, he pushed forward, settling himself deep inside her with one long motion. He heard her draw a sharp breath as she shifted position, and he waited, letting her adjust and set the pace. After a few minutes, she began to move, slowly at first, then with ever increasing urgency.

He met her eager response stroke for stroke. "Yes," she cried as he thrust firmly against her, the passion they had been denied all weekend overwhelming them both. Closing his eyes, he gave in to the sensation, their rhythm building to a furious crescendo. Then, poised on a thin precipice, he let out a shuddering gasp as he willingly followed her over the edge.

"Oh, Amanda," he groaned as the waves of pleasure began to ebb. They pressed against each other with small movements, each savoring the last few moments of their long-awaited union. He tenderly kissed her closed eyelids, his lips following the smooth curve of her cheek as he reluctantly slipped away. "I love you," he mumbled breathlessly in her ear, and she murmured her own reply.

They lay together, recovering, the damp tendrils of her hair pressed against his cheek. He ran his hand soothingly over her back, feeling her skin cool as they relaxed languorously in the comfort of their bed, their limbs still entwined in an intimate tangle.

Feeling her shiver, he drew the sheet around them. She let out a long, low breath, her hand searching for his. Interlocking their fingers, he pressed his lips tenderly to her forehead. "You okay?"

She gave a wicked little laugh. "Couldn't you tell?"

"Well, I, uh . . . yeah," he said at last, feeling ridiculously embarrassed. No other woman had ever possessed the power to do that to him. "It was a pretty spectacular finish to our weekend," he added with a silly grin.

She laughed again, a happy, lazy sound. "You know what they say," she teased, her fingers straying carelessly over his chest. "There's no place . . ."

"No," he warned ominously, "no, please don't . . ."

". . . like home," she finished, laughing as he moaned in mock consternation.

"I swear," he growled under his breath, "one of these days . . ."

She raised up on her elbow, looking down at him with a satisfied grin. "One of these days - what?"

"One of these days, I'm gonna toss that video right in the trash." He grinned sheepishly. "Well, as soon as I can pry it out of Matthew's clutches."

She settled down beside him again, chuckling softly to herself. "It could be worse, you know. . . 'neighbor.'"

He laughed with her, tightening his embrace. "I guess it could at that," he said with a tired yawn. "I might have to walk around the house in an old cardigan sweater."

She raised her head, kissing him affectionately as she switched off the light. "Get some rest, Sweetheart," he heard her whisper softly in his ear. "It was an exhausting weekend."

He nodded, settling himself comfortably against her. He knew she wouldn't sleep yet, even though she was equally tired. She would check on Matt and Jenny one more time, then patiently wait for Jamie to come in.

"I love you, Mrs. Stetson," he muttered again, his eyes closing. His last coherent thought as sleep claimed him was that maybe - just maybe - that damned video had a point after all.

It sure did feel good to be home.

The End