

Legacy

Summary: Just my take on Lee's parents' story.

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Notes: Thank you to my fellow queen bees for your help. Although it woulda been a lot *shorter* without your input, it wouldn't have turned out nearly as well. :-)

Timeline: 1944-1949. Told through flashbacks and Jennifer Stetson's words. The journal picks up after her line that "*one night, there he was, peering in the window of my basement flat.*"

I suppose you must now be wondering what happened after that.

Well, I returned his letter to him, and he gave me a very stern lecture about following his directions, and then invited me to go to a pub with him.

I had every intention of saying no. He was a stranger and an American to boot, but something in his eyes told me I should say yes, so I did.

I learned that evening that the mysterious soldier's name was Matthew Davis Stetson, and that he was a major in the army.

We saw each other quite often after that, and I found myself growing increasingly fond of him. He was very charming, very persistent, and told the most amusing stories.

Then, one day, he disappeared without a trace. I tried everything to find him, but no one had any word of his whereabouts.

I thought he was gone for good until . . .

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Jennifer Hamilton looked up from her knitting as the tapping came again. She hadn't been imagining it. Through the soot-stained window of her flat, she could make out the features that collectively formed his face -- the eyes, the dimples, the moustache, the aquiline nose. It was he.

She flew up the stairs and out the door. "Matthew!!"

Pulling him forward by his lapels, she repeated his name over and over again, punctuating it with light kisses along his neck and jawline. It was as though only through the tangible experience that she could be assured that he was real. "Matthew . . . Matthew . . . Matthew . . . Matthew."

Satisfied that he was, in fact, there and in front of her, Jennifer stepped away and put her fisted hands on her hips. "Where have you been?! Why haven't you been in touch with me? I thought you were dead, or . . . or **married!**"

He looked at her contritely, knowing that no answer would fully assuage the hurt and confusion she must have suffered. "As you can see, I'm very much alive, and I promise you, I'm not married . . ." His voice trailed off as though there were more that he had wanted to say, but had thought better of it. Taking her hand in his, he was relieved when she didn't pull it back. "It's a long story. May I come inside?"

"All right," she relented with a wan smile. "I'll make us some tea."

Matthew thought he would never understand the British custom of drinking hot tea on even the warmest of summer afternoons, but he agreed. He'd been hoping for the invitation.

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"One lump or two?" She kept her back toward him as she filled the kettle and placed it on the stove to heat.

"Two, please, and you might be able to use this, too." He came up behind her and pulled something out of his uniform pocket, which he then lay on the counter in front of her.

Her large brown eyes widened even further at the sight.

"A lemon! Oh, Matthew, how ever did you manage to find a lemon?"

"We have our ways." He grinned at her obvious surprise and delight.

She glanced up at him suspiciously, but carefully sliced the citrus fruit nevertheless, setting it out on a plate on her coffee table amidst the fine porcelain teacups and a platter of shortbread. Knowing that the butter and sugar required for shortbread were also in scarce supply, Matthew suspected that Miss Jennifer Hamilton had found ways around rationing as well.

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"You can't sit there all afternoon, Major Stetson." He'd been sitting on her couch staring wordlessly at the tea leaves left in the bottom of his cup -- as though they would provide the guidance he was unable to come by on his own.

"So it's 'Major Stetson' now, not Matthew. You must really be angry with me." He heavily placed his cup in its saucer, and she winced reflexively, apprehensive about the safety of her china.

Satisfied that nothing had been chipped or broken, she moved closer to him on the couch and lay a hand atop his. "Not angry, Matthew," she deliberately said his name. "Hurt. You left without a word."

"You're right." He ran a hand through his hair roughly. "And there's no excuse . . . but I do have an explanation."

She looked at him expectantly, wondering what he would say. He began slowly. "Do you remember the letter I asked you to deliver to the Prime Minister?"

"Yes, of course." She nodded.

"Well," he continued. "That was a message from Charles de Gaulle."

"The head of the French Resistance?" Her eyebrows shot up.

"Yes," he confirmed. "Jennie, I'm part of an Army Intelligence unit that's been working with de Gaulle's movement to destabilize the Vichy hold on France from the inside."

She nodded slowly, her mouth drawn in a tight line as she processed the information.

"I had to go underground suddenly. Word was that the Nazis knew who I was and for whom I was working. Jennie." He laced his fingers through hers. "I couldn't tell you; it wasn't safe until now. If I had, I would've put you at risk, too, and I . . . I care about you too much to do that."

"That's a pretty flimsy excuse, Major Stetson."

Matthew's heart sank until he saw the smile playing at the corner of her lips. "Come here," he whispered and drew her into his arms. He gently brushed his lips over hers. He was chagrined, however, when she began giggling in response.

"What?!"

"I'm sorry." She tried to look sincere, but her smile won out. "It's just . . . I've never kissed anyone with a moustache before."

"Oh!" He was surprised, but quickly offered, "I can shave."

"No! I like it." Jennifer ran her fingers over the bristly hairs. "It's just going to take some getting used to."

"I think I can arrange that." He leaned in to kiss her again, and she responded eagerly.

"Welcome back, Matthew," she whispered breathlessly when they broke apart. Then, more seriously, she placed her index finger against his chest. "And don't you ever think about going anywhere without me again."

"I wouldn't dream of it."

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Your father stayed much later than was proper that evening and well into the night. We spent the entire time learning everything we could about one another. It was as though neither of us had realized how much we missed each other until we were together again, and we were quite reluctant to say farewell again so soon.

He told me about his half brother, your uncle, Robert Clayton, who was also fighting in the war – as a pilot – and about his boyhood in Illinois. I told him about growing up in the country and the beautiful gardens my mother kept.

As the sun started to rise, he asked if I would turn on the radio.

I thought it was a rather odd request, but I agreed. To this very day, I can remember the look on your father's face as we heard the newscaster announce, "The Allies have liberated Paris!"

There was only one other time he has ever looked so happy, and that was when he held you in his arms for the first time.

The months flew past after that. I saw your father nearly every day, and grew used to his tapping on my window at odd hours. As our personal relationship grew, so to did a sort of professional alliance. He began to trust me, in a very unofficial capacity, with more and more of his work.

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She walked down the street at a brisk pace toward the Tower Bridge and entered the lift that would take her to the pedestrian path high above the Thames. Drawing her coat more tightly around her, warding off a chill that wasn't there, she approached a lone figure staring off into the distance.

"It's a beautiful night," she commented, leaning on the rail next to him.

"Bah!" He spat. "You can' even see the starrs." His accent was harsh, and his breath whiskey sour, but he was responding, the way Matthew had told her he would.

"Still, I'm sure the fishing must be good." Jennifer fought to keep her voice even.

He turned and looked at her more closely. "Tha' depends on wha' yer tryin' t' ketch. Wha' 'ave you got fer me."

She reached into her pocket and pulled out a film canister. Pressing it into his palm, she said, "This is from Major Stetson."

"You tell Major Stetson I like the way he's doin' bidness. 'Ave a nice evenin'!" He called after her as she briskly walked away.

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It was almost eight months after your father came back that the news reported that Adolf Hitler had killed himself in his bunker outside of Salzburg. It was as though the whole of Great Britain had been holding her breath and we collectively released it; it wouldn't be long before the war would be over.

A few nights later, rather than tapping on my window as had become his practice, your father came to my door . . .

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Jennifer opened her door to find Matthew standing before her. His face shone with joy, and without warning he picked her up and spun her around gleefully. "It's over, Jennie! Churchill just announced it. We've won! The Germans have surrendered!"

“It’s over?!” She felt goosebumps rising on her arms from the sheer excitement and electricity of the moment.

He nodded, grinning, and she leapt up and threw her arms around his neck. Unwilling to disentangle her, he walked them both awkwardly into the flat and shut the door behind them.

“I feel like I should serve champagne, but I haven’t any. Will tea do?” She made her way into the tiny kitchen. “I don’t suppose you’ve brought another lemon?”

“No, not this time, but I did bring something else.” He slipped behind her and again pulled an item out of his uniform pocket to set on the counter in front of her.

“Oh . . . Matthew.” She lifted a velvet jeweler’s box and opened it to reveal a diamond.

“Miss Jennifer Hamilton.” He stepped around her to pluck the ring from its box and slide it onto her finger. “I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Will you marry me?”

“A Yankee intelligence officer for a husband.” She pretended to consider the proposition for a moment and then said, “I don’t suppose I’m going to be able to do any better.”

He smiled at her quirky sense of humor. “Is that a yes?”

“Yes, Major Matthew Davis Stetson, I’ll marry you.” She wrapped her arms around him and buried her face comfortably against his chest. He brushed his lips over her hair and then angled her head up for a more lasting kiss on her lips.

As they broke apart, she sighed, “Now I really wish I had some champagne.”

“Wait there.” He gave her one more fleeting kiss before crossing the room in two steps.

Opening her door, he picked up a package he had earlier left just out of sight on the threshold. He handed it to her, asking, “Will this do?”

“Dom Perignon!” She gasped upon unwrapping it. “Matthew, you are just full of surprises. How in heaven did you . . .”

“Compliments of General de Gaulle,” was his cryptic answer.

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We drank champagne out of teacups that afternoon. Sitting on the worn horsehair sofa in my dark, musty basement flat, nothing else mattered. We had won the war, and we were going to be married.

Two weeks later, we had a civil ceremony at the American Consulate. It was personal, private, and belonged just to us. We would have a public ceremony, with friends and family, later. For now though, we thought it better that people not know the true circumstances of either our meeting or our relationship.

I wore a simple white dress with a pair of black market nylons and he wore his dress uniform. The consular general's secretary took our photograph . . .

Your father had to return to the states; I remained in Britain to get my affairs in order. I would follow him to the states in a few weeks. Things never work out just as they've been planned, however . . .

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She jumped at the jarring ring of her newly installed telephone. She reached for the receiver immediately. "Matthew?"

"Jennie, my love." His rich baritone sent shivers down her spine. It had already been too long since they'd been together. "I'm afraid I have some bad news."

"What?" She twisted the pair of bands on her left finger.

"I'm being sent to Japan."

She exhaled deeply and then answered, "Well, I'll just go with you."

"Jennie . . ." He struggled with what he had to say. "You can't. It's not safe there for civilians right now."

Continuing her assault on her rings, she asked, "When will you come back?"

"I don't know. Things are very rough. A year -- maybe a year and a half."

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Your father stayed a full two years in Japan, with only a few weeks every six months for leave. During those precious times, we spent as much time together as we could.

I left my flat in London and found another one in Washington while I waited for him to return. I found employment too -- with the British Embassy.

Then, in April of 1949 . . .

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She walked around the table one more time, making sure that all the name-cards were in place, and that each of the twelve foreign ministers had all the materials they would need.

Satisfied that everything was as it should be, she backed out the door of the vast auditorium, so that she could examine her handiwork even longer. As she took another step back, she felt a solid form behind her and jumped in surprise.

Spinning around to see what she'd run into, she was even more surprised. "Matthew!"

"Hi!" He grinned.

"What are you doing here? When did you get in? Why didn't you ring and let me know you were coming?" She peppered him with questions.

"I'm here with the American delegation. I didn't even know I would be here until yesterday; the attaché who was supposed to be here is sick with food poisoning. I only flew in this morning, and . . . I did phone, but you weren't in." He answered each of her questions in order, and she laughed.

"Welcome home." She reached for his hand and squeezed it.

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Our wedding was the next month. Everyone thought we had met and fallen in love that day at the signing of the NATO pact, and we saw no reason to disabuse them of that notion. Since your father planned to continue his career in intelligence, it was safer that way. Your Uncle Robert came, as did several of your father's friends and some of the people I had met working at the embassy.

It was only ten months later that you arrived . . .

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Lee turned his attention from the leather journal to the sepia-toned image of his parents looking down on him from the mantel. Next to it stood his own wedding photo. Two generations, so different, and yet, so very similar. He hoped his parents would have been proud.

Looking back at his mother's words, he read, "*My dream for you, my darling son, is that you will grow up to be honest and wise, and one day meet a woman with whom you will be as happy as your father and I are.*"

Yes, he realized, his parents would have been proud.

END