

Marking Time

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Author's notes: I'd like to say a big thank you to Merel and Fling for putting this second fanzine together – what would I do these days without deadlines! And to all my wonderful betas - most especially Pam and Ann – many thanks. I couldn't do it without you.

Summary: The date: January - February, 1989. The place: The Stetson residence, Rockville, Maryland. The plot: A glimpse into the 'normal' life of one Lee and Amanda Stetson as they await the much-anticipated birth of their first child.

This story is part of the "With Or Without You" series, and directly follows "Where the Road Goes."

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Marking Time  
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Lee Stetson ran a hand through his hair as he came down the stairs, his jacket slung casually over his arm. Jarring voices from the breakfast table intruded on the edges of his still-foggy mind, and he entered the kitchen with a battle-weary groan.

"Well, I think you're wrong," Phillip stated heatedly, leaning ominously closer to his brother. "We've been studying this for two weeks, so I know what I'm talking about."

Jamie snickered, making a face as he gulped his orange juice. "Like I'd take your word for it -- Phillip 'thank-God-I-got-a-C-in-history' King. Hey, Lee," he called in a loud voice as he caught sight of his stepfather. "Phillip's trying to snow me with his own version of the battle of Gettysburg . . ."

"I just finished a paper on this, Worm Brain," Phillip grumbled. "I did a lot of research on the Civil War."

"Research? In those comic books you read? Lee, he said. . ."

"Hey, I worked hard on it. The Civil War . . ."

"Was **not** fought in this kitchen," Dotty interposed sternly. "Now, leave Lee alone and finish your breakfast, both of you, or you'll miss your school buses."

The boys grimaced, their grumbling dropping to a dull roar as they concentrated on shoveling their food into their mouths. Lee gave Dotty a grateful glance. Despite two years in the bosom of this family, mornings were definitely not his best time.

Especially these days. Rubbing his throbbing temples, he tossed his jacket across a chair before making his way to the cabinet to grab a couple of Tylenol.

"Rough night?" his mother-in-law inquired, one eyebrow rising expressively as she handed him a cup of coffee.

Lee shrugged. "Amanda had a hard time falling asleep. Then when she finally did. . ." Glancing over his shoulder at the boys, he lowered his voice. "She had another nightmare."

"The same one as before?" Dotty's voice was filled with quiet concern.

"I guess. She didn't want to talk about it." He popped the oblong white pills into his mouth, downing them quickly with a gulp of coffee. Coughing slightly as the hot liquid hit his throat, he wiped the excess spillage from his lips with the back of his hand. "It doesn't matter," he told his mother-in-law with a tired sigh. "It's not hard to guess what they're about."

"Something happens to the baby."

"Yeah. I don't know, Dotty," he added, his frustration clearly evident as he greedily swallowed the rest of his coffee. "There's got to be something I can do to help her through this. She can't go on like this, keeping everything bottled up inside."

Dotty laid a soft hand on his shoulder. "Just be there for her. She's been ordered off her feet for the duration of her pregnancy, so I'm guessing she's more than a little frustrated. It's not easy to feel powerless to control your own body."

Lee let out an irritated sigh. "So why can't she just say that instead of insisting everything is fine? I thought we were supposed to be in this together."

Dotty's sharp pressure on his shoulder reminded him that Phillip and Jamie were within earshot. "She'll talk when she's ready, Lee. We both know how stubborn my daughter can be."

Lee snorted as he placed his empty cup in the sink. "Tell me about it."

"Amanda is the most giving person I know, but . . ."

"Yeah, I know," Lee nodded. "She just can't handle it when the tables are turned."

"She's always been a very private person, even when she was a little girl." Dotty smiled wryly. "Must have been her daddy's fault -- she certainly didn't inherit that trait from **me**."

Lee chuckled softly. Reserved was definitely **not** a word he would apply to his mother-in-law. Dotty's busy social schedule alone would exhaust a woman half her age. A 'healthy outlet,' she called it. Maybe that's what Amanda needed -- an outlet. Though perhaps not quite as 'healthy' as Dotty's, he thought wryly. Just something to take her mind off her worries about the baby.

Hastily retrieving his jacket, he called out suddenly to his stepsons, "Who wants a ride to school?"

"I do," they both replied, their voices almost lost in the clattering of dishes as they quickly cleared their places.

Lee shook his head. Teenagers actually helping without being asked -- it was just another mark of the uneasy atmosphere in their house. Given his choice, he almost preferred the bickering.

"Come on then," he urged, waving a hasty good-bye to Dotty as he shrugged on his suit-coat. "If you want, we can rehash that Civil War battle in the car."

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***Excerpt from Amanda's journal, January 9, 1989***  
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All right, I feel absolutely ridiculous, but here goes. I guess a month flat on your back can make a person do just about anything. You know, this unique form of torture could make a great new interrogation technique. Forget the needles -- just subject the suspect to bed rest and before long he'll be singing like a bird. I'll have to suggest it to Lee.

He certainly seems full of his own helpful suggestions these days.

"Come on, Amanda, give it a try," Lee cajoled last night when he brought this beautiful red leather book home. I must have looked at him as if he'd grown another head, because he tried again, this time sparing none of the legendary Stetson charm.

"Please," he implored in his most persuasive tone, his eyes completing the plea quite effectively as his hand found mine. "Work with me."

Who could refuse when he put it like that? If I couldn't do it years ago to a stranger on a train platform, I certainly didn't have the strength to deny my husband in the intimacy of our bedroom. He looked so handsome and so hopeful as he placed the small package atop my protruding stomach. The lopsided bow proclaimed that he'd actually taken the trouble of wrapping it himself.

"I'm worried about you, Amanda." His voice sounded even deeper than usual as he stroked his thumb across the palm of my hand with just the right amount of pressure. "I know you're still having nightmares. If you don't want to talk about it, fine, but maybe this could help."

"I don't know, Lee," I told him, grimacing at the thought of actually writing down my most private fears. Committing words to paper somehow seemed so . . . irrevocable.

He squeezed my hand. "Elaine said she recommends it to a lot of her patients in similar situations."

"Elaine?" I inquired, my eyebrows shooting up. I hadn't realized Lee was now on a first-name basis with my obstetrician.

He shifted uncomfortably on the bed as I continued to stare at him. "We may have, uh, talked this morning," he informed me with an unusually sheepish grin.

I responded with a long-suffering sigh. Ever since I'd been ordered to bed for the 'duration,' Elaine had been my rock, coping daily with my endless questions and ever-changeable temper. High-risk pregnancies are her specialty, so I guess she's used to dealing with the mercurial moods of stressed-out expectant parents. But I wondered if even a seasoned veteran like Dr. Elaine Parker was equipped to cope with the Scarecrow in full protective mode. I'd barely survived just a taste of his tender concern after being shot in California. I could only imagine how much more formidable my husband would be now that he was worrying for two.

*His lips suddenly took me by surprise and I closed my eyes, trying to let their gentle pressure wipe away my thoughts. Lee has the most incredible lips, soft yet firm at the same time. That's what had almost taken my breath away the first time his mouth met mine. Funny, how the silly, inconsequential things can actually move you the most. I don't know what I'd expected from the legendary Scarecrow, but it certainly wasn't **that**.*

But last night something seemed strangely lacking, and I let out a frustrated sigh as he pulled back. "Hey, Mrs. Stetson," I heard him whisper, his voice gently accusatory. "You're the one who's always telling me how much better it is to talk about your feelings. Just think of this as therapy."

"Therapy," I muttered, rolling my eyes. "Look who's talking."

He pressed the small package into my hands. Tearing off the last of the wrapping, I absently flipped through the pristine pages. They seemed to mock me with their very whiteness. I've never kept a journal before -- not even as a teenager, when all my friends were busy scribbling frantically in their diaries every night. Whispered confidences, secret dreams, which lucky girl would be asked to the 'Spring Fling' dance . . . for me, those wonderfully tortuous feelings of adolescence couldn't be consigned to a two-dimensional page. Emotions neatly sorted and catalogued. No, not for me. I'm a 'doer,' not an observer.

At least, I used to be. Since this new little Stetson attempted to make his untimely appearance in early December, my 'doing' has come to a screeching halt. Sometimes while I lie here, I try to imagine what he'll look like, this tiny little piece of Lee and of me. All I can picture is sandy blonde hair, long, tapered fingers and beautiful hazel eyes. And if what it's taking to get him here is any indication, this little guy will turn out to be a bigger handful than his infamous father.

Lee smiled when I told him that, that special grin that lights up his whole face. It still takes my breath away, even after two years of marriage. "Oh, our son is already smarter than I am," he joked, depositing a chaste kiss on my forehead as he rose. "He's managed to do in six months what I couldn't do in six years." Backing quickly toward the door, he added dryly, "He's found a way to make you stay put."

The pillow missed his head by at least an inch. Scarecrow may have traded the field for a desk, but his reflexes are still pretty good.

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Lee glanced nervously at his watch as he walked along the narrow sidewalk. "I don't know how I let you talk me into this."

"Ah, come on, Lee," Francine cajoled, smiling sweetly as she looped her arm through his. "You need to relax, even if it's just for a little while. You're wound tighter than a drum."

"When I said I'd meet you for a drink, I didn't know you wanted to come here," he complained loudly as they approached Nedlindger's Washington Pub. "I hate this place."

"What are you talking about? Ned used to keep a barstool here with your name engraved on it."

"Yeah," he muttered to himself. "That's exactly what I'd like to forget." Since that day he'd let his cover as a burned-out agent get the best of him, he could count on the fingers of one hand the number of times he'd frequented the popular watering hole. Somehow, patronizing the place where he'd accidentally struck Amanda seemed like an added betrayal.

"Let's make this quick, huh?" he put in hastily as Francine ushered him through the door. "I promised Jamie I'd look at his photo essay tonight."

Francine chuckled lightly. "Don't worry, Scarecrow, I'll have you back on the yellow brick road in no time."

"Very funny," Lee groaned sarcastically in her ear. "Booth or bar?"

"Booth. It's a little crowded over there for my taste." She smiled wryly, nodding in the direction of the bar. "Hey, look who's staked a claim on your old stool."

Lee followed her gaze. He instantly recognized Hank Hennessy, one of the Agency's latest hotshots. Surrounded by a group of perfectly proportioned admirers, the young agent was determinedly holding court. "Rookies," he scoffed as he followed Francine to a quiet corner. "Work all day, play all night."

Francine smiled benignly at the gold wedding set that adorned her ring finger. "I'm very glad those days are over," she said with a grateful sigh.

"Me, too." Corralling a waitress, Lee ordered two drinks with clipped efficiency. "I should get going soon," he stated absently again, guilt weighing on him as he slid into the booth beside Francine. It seemed wrong somehow to even think about enjoying himself when his wife was trapped at home.

He heard Francine clear her throat as she leaned back into the well-worn leather. "So, how are things on the home front, really?" she asked in a gently questioning tone.

His pat answer froze on his lips; Francine was too good a friend for his standard line. Instead, he shrugged, letting out an exhausted sigh. "Honestly speaking, there are times I don't know if I'm coming or going."

"As bad as that, huh?"

"Worse," he admitted frankly. "It's kinda like riding a roller coaster blindfolded -- you never know what's gonna pop up next." The waitress set their drinks in front of them, and Lee took a grateful sip, his tension beginning to unwind as he unburdened himself to his friend. It was something he wouldn't allow himself to do with his family. For them, he needed to be strong.

"Amanda seemed to be in better spirits yesterday," he continued, warming to his subject. "But when I left this morning, her mood had taken a one-eighty in the opposite direction." Lee lifted his glass, swallowing hungrily. "Staying in bed all day is really driving her crazy."

Francine laid a gentle hand on his sleeve. "I guess that makes two of you, huh?"

Lee groaned. "It's that noticeable?"

"You have that 'lean and hungry look,' Scarecrow. You're starting to make the rookies nervous."

"Maybe it'll keep them on their toes." Letting out another long breath, he looked pointedly at his friend. "You know, when those black moods strike, I try to tease her out of it, but it just seems to make her more tense. I don't know what she's thinking." His hand tightened around his glass. "She won't talk to me, Francine."

"I suspect it's pretty difficult for her to lie back and watch the world pass her by."

Lee drained the remainder of his drink in one long gulp. "And it's equally hard to know it's all my fault."

"Lee . . ."

His eyes narrowed as he glanced nervously at his watch. "I've really got to get going. I'm sure the boys are home by now, and Dotty said something about wanting to see Curt tonight."

Francine gave him an understanding smile. "Tell Amanda I'll stop by later in the week. And Lee," she added, resting a light hand on his arm. "Try not to worry. I'm sure things will be okay. Hey, I used to be her partner, remember? She's much too determined to let anything go wrong."

Smiling, he tossed a few bills onto the table. "Dotty calls it stubborn."

"Well, you know," Francine quipped, her blue eyes sparkling. "I thought for once I'd take a stab at tact."

Lee chuckled. "Thanks. I know what you're trying to do, and I appreciate it. It's just that . . . oh, hell, I don't know. There are times . . . I mean, I just . . ." He shifted nervously from foot to foot. "Well, I just can't sit still, that's all."

Francine caught his eye, a smile tugging at her lips, and he grinned knowingly in return. His convoluted mumblings were beginning to sound exactly like his wife's.

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Excerpt from Amanda's journal, January 12, 1989
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*Why on earth did I let Lee con me into this ridiculous exercise in futility?*

*When I called yesterday to vent my frustration to Elaine, she just calmly repeated the same advice -- give the journal a try. Easy for her to say. Sometimes I think she's as bad as Lee. He's always trying to 'fix' things . . . because if I'm okay, then he'll have permission to feel okay, too.*

*That really wasn't very nice, was it? Maybe if I could just find a way to convey to him how darned frustrating this enforced inactivity is . . . but sometimes I can't even bring myself to meet his eye. He's my best friend, my husband, the father of this baby. He knows me inside and out, has touched me in a place more deeply intimate than anyone else I've ever known. So why can't I talk to him about the things that are really bothering me?*

*I am feeling more than a little guilty about that. Francine stopped in yesterday, dropping some opaque hints about Lee. The accusatory look on her face told me she didn't understand why I'm shutting him out. I can't explain it, why I've come to rely more on my doctor these days than my husband. Dr. Pfaff would probably lick his ice cream cone and say it's some form of weird transference. 'Perfectly understandable, Mrs. King.' Well, for whatever reason, I can tell Elaine Parker things I wouldn't dream of confiding to Lee. Not because he wouldn't understand, but because he would.*

*Maybe that's the real problem. Deep down inside, I know he's just as scared as I am about losing this baby. So how can we possibly help each other?*

*And I know he keeps saying that we're in this together, but this isn't happening to **us**, it's happening to **me**. Lee's life hasn't been turned upside down. He can still get up and go to work every morning. He can still cheer Jamie on at his basketball games, have drinks with friends, or go running whenever the mood strikes him. He can still be out there in the world making a difference.*

*But I guess I understand Francine's point. I've got to stop treating Lee like an outsider in all this. He's worried; I can see it in his eyes. And guilty, too. Oh, yes, Scarecrow's very good at guilt. He blames himself because he wasn't with me when my pre-term labor began so suddenly last month. No, my present husband was down in Central America, rescuing my former husband. The world is certainly a strange place sometimes.*

*Whatever possessed Joe to go to Santarilla in the first place? Despite our repeated warnings about the instability of the region, my ex-husband had pig-headedly insisted on heading down there with the EAO. And the man used to call **me** stubborn.*

*When it all blew up in his face and he was taken prisoner, I thought the boys had lost him for good this time. The authorities refused to become officially involved, so of course that tossed it right back in our lap. What else could we do? I mean, we couldn't just let him rot down there, could we? The man **is** the father of my children. And the boys do need him, even if Phillip doesn't want to admit it at the moment.*

*Thank God it all worked out, and Lee and Joe both survived. And I survived my threatened miscarriage. So things turned out okay. They really did. And I know I've said it before, but it really wasn't Lee's fault that I was rushed to the hospital in early labor. I mean, that he wasn't **here** when I was rushed to the hospital in early labor.*

*Of course, that's what I mean . . . damn those nightmares, anyway . . .*

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"Thanks for picking me up, Lee." Phillip slid into the Corvette and dropped his backpack at his feet. "Tommy was going to drop me at the Legal Concerns Center after school, but he just got his license and his mother won't let him drive in the snow."

"Your grandmother can pick you up, right?" His tone was unintentionally brusque as he glanced at the clock on the dash. Almost three-thirty -- he hadn't counted on the snow. Negotiating the Corvette carefully over the unplowed pavement in front of the high school, he let out a frustrated groan. He probably should have taken the Wagoneer this morning, but he hadn't anticipated having to pick up Phillip. How did Amanda always make juggling family and work appear so effortless?

"I'm really sorry, Lee," he heard Phillip say with a mournful sigh. "I know how busy you are."

Noting the distraught look on the boy's face, he silently berated himself for his lack of self-control. "It's no big deal," he reassured his stepson, schooling his features into a neutral expression. No need for Phillip to know this little field trip would probably mean another late night at the Agency.

"It's just that I didn't know who else to call." Phillip twisted in his seat to face his stepfather, his expression unusually solemn as he continued to explain. "Mrs. Sanderson took Jamie to basketball practice and Grandma's with Mom, so I didn't think I should ask her -- 'cause I know Mom's not supposed to be alone -- and when I tried to get in touch with Dad, he was in some meeting and wouldn't take my call." Phillip's disdain was plainly evident in his voice. "With everything Mom does for him," the boy added bitterly, "Dad can't even make an effort to help out when **she** needs something."

Lee let out a sharp breath; when Phillip started to ramble, that spelled real trouble. "Hey," he said, his tone gently teasing this time. "Don't worry -- national security hasn't been breached by my leaving the Agency for an hour or two."

Phillip grinned. "Anyway, thanks, Lee. I really, well, I didn't want to cancel today. The Center's counting on me."

"I know how important this is to you." Lee settled back comfortably against the leather upholstery. They weren't going anywhere soon; the traffic was already snarling.

"Yeah, I guess it is important," Phillip admitted with a touch of embarrassed pride. "I mean, at first, it was just my community service, you know? Just a pain the butt thing the school was making me do so I could keep my eligibility next year."

Lee smiled. "Paying your debt to society is never easy. I speak from experience here."

"Really?" Phillip rejoined eagerly, his interest obviously piqued. "What kind of experience?"

Lee shook his head. Amanda would kill him if he started filling the boy's mind with tales of his own rebellion. Sticking it to the Colonel had been his life's work when he was a teenager. "Trust me," he told his stepson with a short laugh, "my high jinks could fill volumes. At least you seem to have learned a valuable lesson from yours."

"Yeah, well, I don't want to see the Montgomery County cops again anytime soon, that's for sure. And I'll definitely be staying away from drinking parties from now on. That is, if you guys ever let me out of the house again," he added with a rueful laugh.

Lee eyed the boy carefully. Phillip had been a real trooper since he'd been busted last month, accepting his punishment with unusually good grace. "Maybe it's time you were paroled for good behavior," he told his stepson matter-of-factly.

"Seriously?" Phillip asked, clearly overjoyed at the sudden prospect of hanging with his friends again. "You guys said I was grounded until my birthday."

"I'll talk to your mother."

Phillip's face broke out into a wide grin. "Thanks, Lee. You're the best."

Grinning himself, Lee inched the Corvette into the next lane. He wished he had as much confidence in his powers of persuasion as Phillip obviously did. This was certainly a far cry from the petulant kid who'd sat in this very car a few months earlier and pronounced in no uncertain terms that Lee was **not** his father.

"Hey, Lee. Can I, uh, ask you something?" Phillip said haltingly.

Lee absently tapped his hand on the wheel while waiting for the light to change. "Sure, Chief, ask away."

"Would you be really disappointed if I . . . well, if I decided not to play football next year?"

"Thinking of taking up soccer again?" That would definitely make Amanda happy. She took a decidedly dim view of heavy bodies piling on top of her first-born.

"Uh, not exactly." Taking a deep breath, Phillip hesitated, then suddenly plunged ahead. "The Center might be looking for some permanent help. Mr. Underwood, the head attorney, said maybe, if I was interested, and if it was okay with you guys, I could have the job. With the juvenile justice program. Kind of an unofficial clerk, he said."

Lee was a little surprised at Phillip's interest. "Working with the peer jury? That sounds like a pretty big time commitment."

The boy shrugged. "I know I wouldn't have time to play organized sports any more, but, well, I kinda like it there. It's interesting. And I was, um, thinkin', well, maybe it's something I might like to keep on doing. You know, uh, later on."

"So you want to be a lawyer like your dad, huh?"

"No," Phillip replied forcefully, sitting up stiffly in his seat. "Not like Dad."

As his stepson fell into a moody silence, Lee quietly switched on the radio, hoping a little background noise might help Phillip sort through his confusion. After a few minutes, he heard the boy sigh, his voice unsteady as he began the conversation again. "I just . . . well, I didn't want you to think I didn't want to play football because . . . um, because I didn't, well, like it anymore or somethin'," he finished, the rest of his words falling into an indistinct mumble.

Lee recognized the source of the boy's distress. Feelings were a complicated business, especially where stepparents were concerned. "Hey, Phillip," he told him kindly. "You don't have to explain. Whatever you want to do, you know your mom and I will support you."

"Thanks, Lee. I . . . well, I really appreciate it."

There was a sudden break in the traffic, and he quickly eased the Corvette forward. As the congestion cleared and his car began to travel swiftly over the road again, Lee felt his body unconsciously relax. It was kind of nice to get away from work for a while. Maybe he should do it more often.

Whistling softly, he sneaked a glance at Phillip. The boy had switched stations on the radio and was absently singing along. Funny, he'd always thought his stepson bore such a strong physical resemblance to Joe King, but he couldn't see it anymore.

Lee smiled faintly. Stepson . . . now **that** was a misnomer if he'd ever heard one. Phillip King was as much his son as the new baby he had yet to meet. And there just wasn't any 'step' about it.

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***Excerpt from Amanda's journal, January 16, 1989***  
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It snowed today. I lay here in bed watching in fascination as the big, fat flakes tumbled and swirled outside my window, caught up in the shifting eddies of wind. So light, so free . . .

I wondered absently if Lee was driving the Corvette or the Wagoneer. He dearly loves that car of his, but it doesn't have very good traction in the snow. Funny -- I never seem to worry about things like that when I'm with him. Tucked away up here in this room, I feel so removed from life.

There's a whole world 'wagging on' out there without me. The boys breeze by, yell a quick hello, and I wonder what they're thinking. They don't come to me with their problems anymore. Okay, that's probably a little melodramatic. They're teenagers; they don't go to anyone with their problems anymore.

Except that's not entirely true . . .

I had an unexpected visitor this morning. I was just pondering how someone who does nothing but lie in bed could actually feel tired enough to need a nap, when my ex-husband stuck his head in the door.

*I greeted him with a sleepy smile. "Hi, Swe . . . uh, Joe. What a nice surprise!" I punctuated my sentence with an enthusiastic grin, hoping to cover my gaffe. I've promised myself **not** to call Joe 'Sweetheart' any more.*

Joe must have caught my little slip of the tongue because the atmosphere suddenly took an awkward turn. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to wake you," he mumbled, his ears twitching the way they always did when he felt particularly self-conscious. I made a great show of rearranging the covers, silently cursing my mother as I tried not to stare. I'd never noticed that particular physical trait of Joe's until I was pregnant with Phillip, and Mother had casually remarked that she hoped the baby wouldn't inherit his father's ears.

*"No, it's fine," I stated hastily, my cheeks burning as I struggled to redirect my thoughts. At least that was **one** thing I didn't have to worry about with this pregnancy. Lee has really cute ears. Actually, he has pretty cute. . . no, **that** line of thought definitely wasn't helping matters, I decided, feeling my face grow even hotter.*

"Sit down, Joe," I managed to choke out, embarrassed to have left him standing so long. "Excuse my manners. I think I've been cooped up in here too long."

"So I gathered from Phillip," Joe volunteered. "He called me the other night."

"Really?" I asked, struggling to hide my unease when Joe didn't elaborate. If Phillip had voluntarily called his father, he must have had something pretty important on his mind. I think Joe's trip down to Santarilla with the EAO opened a lot of old wounds for Phillip. Whenever his father's name is mentioned, he gets that odd, pinched look on his face, just like he did years ago whenever Joe left town. I only wish my son would talk to me about his feelings now the way he did when he was little.

*I looked eagerly at Joe, but apparently **he** had no intention of discussing his feelings with me, either. He silently crossed the room, lowering himself into the small chair by my bed with careful precision. I could see that he was still favoring his right leg. He must still be feeling the injuries he'd acquired while a prisoner of the FMNL rebels in Santarilla. My time as a guest of Addi Birol sprang unbidden to my mind, and I shivered lightly. Some wounds take longer to heal than others.*

Biting my lip, I sheepishly caught Joe's eye again. If rambling thoughts were a measure of my concern, I must be way beyond worried now. "It's okay, Amanda," he assured me, his voice low and soothing. "Phillip and I will find our way eventually." More confused than ever, I wondered if I'd actually voiced my apprehension out loud. Then I felt the light pressure of his familiar hand on mine, and I realized that I didn't have to speak for this man I'd known almost half my life to understand what I was feeling.

*The baby kicked lightly inside me, a gentle reminder of **his** presence in my life now. I smiled ruefully as I rubbed my stomach. Like father, like son.*

"Uh, Amanda," Joe began, suddenly pulling away. "There's something I need to ask you."

"What is it?" I inquired, a little apprehensive. Joe hadn't looked so uncomfortable since our lunch at the Isle of Capri restaurant when he'd dropped the unexpected bombshell that he was getting married again. He must have something on his mind.

"I guess there's no way to tell you except to say it straight out," he said, coming right to the point this time. "Carrie and I had a long talk, and we wanted you to be the first to know. I'm resigning from the EAO."

"You are?" I could hear the surprise in my voice mixed with something else I couldn't quite define. Or maybe I just didn't want to. Still, if Carrie had been the one to finally succeed in keeping Joe at home, more power to her. "The boys will be glad to know you're going to be around," I told him, trying to be gracious.

"Yeah, well, that's really why I wanted to talk to you today . . . the boys. I have a favor to ask." Rising from the chair, he drew in a deep breath, exhaling sharply as he limped restlessly around the room. Finally pausing by the fireplace, he lightly fingered the framed picture of Lee and Phillip I kept on the mantle -- the new one taken just this past Christmas. It's an interesting shot; Jamie has been playing around with light and shadow a lot lately.

Joe seemed to think so, too, because he studied the image carefully, an unfathomable look on his face. Then, clearing his throat, he began to speak in a rush. "I have some free time at the moment, so Carrie and I were able to get last minute reservations at Williamsburg. There was a cancellation for next weekend. We'd like to take the boys with us. We're leaving on Thursday night and coming back Monday, so they'd have to miss a couple of days of school, but. . ."

"Oh, Joe, I don't know. . ." I wrinkled my nose, trying to remember the boys' schedules. "I think Jamie has a basketball game."

"It's only a junior high game," Joe said, proving how little he really knew his own son. Jamie had worked long and hard to make the eighth grade basketball team. Athletics don't come as easily to him as they do to Phillip. Phillip . . .

"Phillip has his community service every Saturday," I informed him with a frustrated sigh.

*He set the picture down with a loud thud. "I could talk to the people over at the Legal Concerns Center. I **was** the one who got him into the juvenile program there, you know."*

Joe was beginning to sound a tad defensive, and I found myself wondering what had really transpired during that phone conversation with Phillip. "I thought we decided it was important for Phillip to finish his community service sooner rather than later," I reminded him.

"It's only one weekend, Amanda," Joe admonished. "You have the boys all the time; I barely see them."

*'Whose fault is that?' I wanted to snap, but somehow managed to restrain myself. This was no time to open **that** can of worms. My blood pressure was high enough without any help from Joe. Fighting to keep my tone even, I said, "If the boys want to go, it's fine by me. Go ahead and ask them."*

Joe's face lit up in a warm smile; I hoped it would still be there after he'd talked with his sons. "Thank you, Amanda," he said with what seemed like heartfelt sincerity. "It really means a lot to me."

*I felt my attitude unconsciously soften. Joe had worn that same expression on our first date, and somehow I'd instantly known that here was a **good** man. "You're welcome," I replied, holding out my hand.*

As he grasped it, I felt inexplicably sad. Must be the hormones, I told myself, suddenly hoping Lee wouldn't be stuck at work until all hours again tonight.

I missed him.

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Lee pulled into the long driveway of his Rockville home. Late again, he thought with a sigh -- the third night this week. Gingerly feeling the tender spot beneath his left eye, he took a quick glance into the rear view mirror. Just as he suspected, the skin was already turning a deep bluish-purple. Damned congressional bureaucrats -- someone should chain them to their desks until the urge to delve into the finer points of investigative techniques passed. It would certainly make his life easier. Well, maybe not easier, he grimaced, but certainly less painful.

With a small groan, he pulled himself from the low-slung car, wondering what had possessed him to take the Corvette to Station One in the first place. Maybe he was getting too old for flashy cars. Pausing only to stretch the kinks out of his stiff muscles, he headed toward the backyard, the sound of the bouncing basketball guiding him. The outdoor spotlights were turned on, brightly illuminating the makeshift basketball court along side of the garage.

"Hey, Sport."

"Hi, Lee," Jamie responded flatly as he dribbled the ball toward the net.

Lee regarded him curiously. "A little late for shootin' hoops, isn't it?"

"My homework's done," the boy replied, never missing a beat as he sent the ball sailing through the hoop with a loud swish.

"Hey, that's pretty good," he volunteered as Jamie set up for another shot. "I think your technique's improving."

The boy acknowledged the praise with a shrug. Aiming at the backboard, he let the ball fly again, but, this time, it skimmed off the rim. "I don't know," he groaned. "I'm still having some trouble with the lay-ups."

Shedding his overcoat, Lee tossed it casually over the picnic table. "I think your stance is still a little off," he commented as he stooped to capture the rolling ball. "Try this." Dribbling, he approached the hoop, slowing imperceptibly before he released the ball. It bounced off the backboard to land neatly in the net. "Just take another second to set up before you release."

"Thanks," Jamie mumbled as he grabbed for the rebound. "I always seem to rush . . ." He stopped, ball in hand, his eyes widening as he stared at Lee's face. "What happened to you?"

Lee responded with a sheepish sigh. "I, uh, walked into a door."

"A door, huh?" Curling his lips, Jamie tossed the basketball at his stepfather's chest. "You really think Mom's gonna buy that?"

Lee sighed as he met the boy's steady gaze. Jamie's eyes might be blue, but they were filled with the same cool skepticism as his wife's deep brown ones. "Probably not." He passed the ball back to Jamie. "Okay, hotshot," he challenged, switching the subject before the boy could probe any deeper. "You, me -- one game."

"Horse?" Jamie grinned.

Lee shook his head. "Pig. I haven't eaten dinner yet."

"Okay, but you're still gonna lose, ya know. I've been practicin'."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Let's see your stuff."

"Sure thing." Jamie put up a quick shot from the left side of the hoop, which Lee easily repeated, then did the same thing from the right. Lee copied his moves again, raising his eyebrows skeptically.

"I'm just letting you warm up," the boy told him with a laugh. "Seeing as you're injured and all."

"Mighty nice of you, Sport, but not necessary."

They played in silence for a few minutes, each one mirroring the other's actions. Lee smiled at the look of rapt concentration on Jamie's face as he lined up each shot with slow deliberation. He moved with surety and self-confidence now, no longer a rookie. A lot like his mother.

Jamie's voice broke the silence. "Your shot, Lee."

"Uh, yeah," Lee frowned, absently bouncing the ball against the driveway. When he finally put it in the air, it bounced awkwardly off the left side of the net.

"I think that's 'P'," the boy pronounced triumphantly.

"I think you're right." Lee eyed the boy suspiciously as he moved to the other side of the net. "You've been practicing out here a lot tonight, huh?"

Jamie shrugged, letting the ball fly. "For a while, I guess."

Lee sent the ball through the hoop again. "Something on your mind, maybe?"

"I dunno. I guess."

Lee nodded as he watched Jamie line up his next shot. "I do the same thing."

Pausing, Jamie looked up, a quizzical expression on his face. "Do what?"

"Exercise when I need to think. Except I run."

"Oh, so that's why you've been on that fitness kick lately," Jamie declared knowingly.

"I guess it is," Lee replied with a laugh as the boy put another shot through the middle of the hoop. "At least your way of dealing with stress has some added benefits. Keep it up and you'll be starting in next Saturday's game."

Jamie frowned, shrugging lightly. "If I play."

"Why wouldn't you play?" Lee asked, turning his head curiously as he released the ball.

"That would be an 'I'," Jamie grinned as the ball missed the net by a wide berth.

Retrieving the ball, Lee tossed it back to his stepson. "Why wouldn't you play?" he repeated softly.

Jamie bit his lip, then bounced the ball a few more times. "Dad called this afternoon. He wants me and Phillip to go to Williamsburg with him next weekend. Miss two days of school and everything."

"Miss school, huh?" Lee ventured cautiously. "Sounds like fun."

"Phillip says he won't go." Jamie sent the basketball forcefully toward the hoop with a sudden lurch. "Guess that's a 'P' for me," he grumbled lightly under his breath as the ball missed its target.

Lee watched Jamie disappear into the darkness to recover the bouncing ball. "So why doesn't Phillip want to go?" he inquired as the boy returned. "I would have thought if he was going to miss school, his bags would already be packed."

Jamie hunched his shoulders. "He's mad, I guess."

"At your dad?"

Jamie shook his head. "No, at me. I told him to quit being such a dufus about Dad."

Lee scratched his head. "Let me get this straight. You want to go to Williamsburg and Phillip doesn't?"

"No . . . I mean, yes. I mean . . ." Jamie scuffed his sneaker against the ground a few times, then let out a loud sigh. "I don't really want to go to Williamsburg, either, but I didn't think it was fair of Phillip to be so nasty about it. I mean, Dad tries. He can't help it if he . . ." The boy let his words trail off.

Lee groaned inwardly; Amanda usually dealt with this Joe stuff. Besides, after his return from Santarilla, he'd vowed to stay out of Joe's relationship with his sons. It really wasn't any of his business. Still . . . Phillip had certainly been bothered about **something** the other day in the car, and now, here was Jamie, looking positively miserable.

"Come here, Jamie," he said at last, motioning the boy over to the picnic table.

Jamie followed reluctantly, twirling the basketball in his hands. Straddling the bench, he sat down, bouncing the ball lightly against the hard wooden seat.

Exhaling loudly, Lee reached out to still the ball as he lowered himself onto the bench. "I guess you're feeling pretty mixed up about your dad, huh?" he probed gently.

The boy shrugged. "I guess so. I mean, it's hard when he calls at the last minute and asks us to do stuff. It's not like it was when we were little. He really doesn't get it that we've got our own stuff to do sometimes."

"Like basketball," Lee stated knowingly.

"Yeah. And I really don't want to miss the game. But at the same time, well, he's our dad, and he should get to spend time with us, I guess."

"I'm sure it's important to him."

"Phillip says it's his own fault that he wasn't around when we were growing up."

"He's around now, though." Smiling lightly, Lee added, "And I'm pretty sure you guys are still growing up."

"Phillip says he doesn't have the right to drag us off for the weekend if we don't want to go."

"But you think you should go?"

"I don't know. Kinda. I mean, he **is** our dad and all. And maybe I do want to go. Kinda. But Phillip says . . ."

"Jamie, it doesn't matter what Phillip says," Lee told him, resting his hand gently on the boy's arm. "He has his own relationship with your dad, separate from yours. If you want to go to Williamsburg, then go."

"Without Phillip?" Jamie's eyes widened as he considered the question. "I don't think I've ever gone for a weekend with Dad without Phillip."

Lee smiled grimly; that certainly explained a lot about Joe's relationship with his sons. "It's okay to make your own decision, Jamie," he told the boy with a shrug. "It's part of that growing up you're still doing."

"Yeah, maybe." He looked up at his stepfather, one eyebrow raised expectantly. "So you think I should go?"

"I think you should do what makes you happy. Let your brother work out his own problems in his own way."

Jamie nodded solemnly, doubt still written across his face. "Maybe . . . yeah, maybe I will. I'll think about it."

"Good. Now come on, Sport," he added, his growling stomach propelling him toward the back door. "It's getting late, and I need a steak."

Jamie's frown melted away he sprang after his stepfather. "For your eye or your stomach?" he teased.

Lee lightly fingered the bruise beneath his eye. "At the moment, it's a toss up," he laughed, giving the boy a friendly slap on the back.

"You're just afraid I was gonna wipe the ground with you," Jamie grinned, flipping the ball in the air.

"The way you're playing tonight, that's a distinct possibility."

"So you'll concede, then?"

"No way," Lee stated firmly. "You, me -- tomorrow night. Then we'll see who wipes the ground with whom, pal."

"You're on. But remember, you're starting with two letters."

"Two letters?" Lee replied in an aggrieved tone. "Is that anyway to treat someone who's injured?"

"Excuses, excuses," Jamie returned with a laugh, their voices trailing off as the mudroom door slammed closed.

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Excerpt from Amanda's Journal, January 19, 1989
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*Mother and Jamie presented me with a paper chain yesterday, one link for every week left to go. Seven intertwined circles, hanging on the bedpost, a tangible reminder that soon all this will be a memory.*

*Then why does the road seem longer than ever?*

*"Cheer up, darling," Mother said sanguinely as she deposited my lunch tray on the bed. "Things could be worse. At least you still have bathroom privileges."*

*She did have a point -- although, it's a little hard to find the silver lining when the highlight of your day is getting up to pee.*

*If only I didn't feel so out of things. I know something's going on with the boys, and I can't even try to mediate from this bed. Take the other night, for instance. One minute it was ominously quiet in the hallway and the next the walls were reverberating with loud voices and slamming doors. Then Lee came home and suddenly it was too quiet again.*

*"Oh, you know, it's just kid stuff," he muttered with a put upon sigh when I asked about the ruckus. "Nothing you need to worry about."*

*Yeah, right. I know my boys; it sounded like they were fighting about Joe. Let's see, what was it I heard Phillip shout at his brother? Something about 'Williamsburg' and 'hell freezing over.'*

*Of course, Jamie sloughed it off as nothing when I questioned him. Extracting information around here these days is tougher than interrogating a rogue member of the K.G.B. From the few tidbits he did let drop, I gathered that Phillip is gung-ho to spend the weekend with friend Tommy Nelson instead of going to Williamsburg with Joe and Carrie. Jamie mumbled something about Mrs. Nelson calling to ask about it. But when I pressed him for more information, my youngest son only smiled, his benign expression rivaling Lee's best. "It's okay, Mom," he informed me sweetly. "You don't need to worry about it."*



*When Lee came to bed last night, I finally got him to admit that Irene Nelson had indeed given him a call. Evidently, the Nelsons are going to a reunion in Baltimore and told Tommy he could invite a friend to 'ease the pain' of the family gathering. Lee felt we should lift Phillip's restriction for the weekend and let him go with Tommy. But, of course, if I was dead set against the outing, then he'd just tell Phillip no. The whole thing was, as I suspected, something I didn't 'need to worry' about.*

*'Need to worry' seems to be the buzzword lately; must be some strange new derivative of 'need to know.' And it's twenty times more frustrating.*

*Okay, I understand why everyone seems so determined these days to treat me as if I was made of glass, but it's driving me straight up the wall. Do they honestly think one candid exchange will cause me to shatter into a million pieces? My family seems to be taking Elaine's 'no stress' prescription to a whole new level. I know my blood pressure has everyone worried, but certainly I'm still capable of having a simple discussion about my son?*

*Oh, maybe Lee's right about letting Phillip go away for the weekend. We **do** have to trust him again at some point. After the drinking incident, we'd discussed the situation -- Joe and I, that is -- and agreed to ground Phillip until his sixteenth birthday in March. But Phillip really has applied himself lately, as Lee managed to point out before he declared the subject closed with a loud snore. Phillip's semester report card was nothing short of amazing. While his overall grades were still on the low side, his counselor had included a note with the grade report. Phillip had aced every single one of his finals.*

*I'd really like to talk to Lee about all this for more than a scant few minutes before he falls into an exhausted asleep.*

*But even Mother takes his side these days. "Cut the poor man some slack," she advised when I grumbled about my husband's latest avoidance pattern. "He's up to his ears with that Congressional Commission. You know," she added with a sympathetic sigh, "the one that's looking into his budget."*

*No, I didn't know. **That** would require a real conversation, something my husband seems determined to avoid at all costs. But if that's the game we're playing, it's okay by me; 'Mrs. King' can be just as devious as 'Scarecrow' any day of the week.*

*I called Francine. Evidently 'need to worry' hasn't quite caught on at work yet.*

*"Oh, it's that Congresswoman Faber," she moaned. "Honestly, Amanda, she has this entire section jumping through hoops." Chortling softly to herself she added, "Lee says her memory is even longer and pointier than her nose."*

*The Congresswoman had demanded imperiously to be taken through every phase of Station One, including the daunting 'Assassin's Alley.' There, according to Francine, is where it 'all went bad.' As close as I can make out, there was some incident involving the good Congresswoman, the rookie Hennessy and a 'pop-up villain' in the makeshift bar. Not only did that explain how Lee ended up with his world class shiner, but apparently he was forced to spend the next four hours charming the persnickety Ms. Faber, not to mention filling out a ream of incident report forms. "It was Scarecrow's worst nightmare," Francine told me with a conspiratorial laugh, "the infirmary, diplomacy and paperwork -- all in the same day."*

*So I guess that ridiculous story of his about walking into a wall was the truth, in a manner of speaking. A steel plated perpetrator **does** technically qualify.*

*Still, I think he fared better than Hank Hennessey. Lee's eye is almost back to normal, but, according to Francine, Hennessey is still running surveillance at the airport. Poor Hank -- for some reason, the unfortunate rookie rubs Lee the wrong way, has right from the start. Airport duty is just the latest in a long line of so-called 'chicken feed' assignments for the poor kid.*

*"Hennessey doesn't even have a codename yet," Francine stated wryly, unable to pass up the chance to needle me about my so-called 'back-door' introduction to the world of espionage. Good old Francine; I can always count on her for a reality check.*

*Maybe that's why I secretly like Hennessey -- neither one of us has been inducted into the official codename club. Not to mention that he's a carbon copy of a certain brash young agent I used to know.*

*I'll bet Hennessey never identifies himself on the phone, either.*

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Exhaling loudly, Lee ran a hand through his hair. "I hope I did the right thing."

Dotty turned to him, dishrag in hand. "I take it Joe wasn't happy about your decision?"

"You could say that," Lee groaned as he replaced the phone in its cradle. Rubbing his stiff neck, he added with a frown, "He thinks we should **make** Phillip go on this family excursion to Williamsburg. I tried to tell him that you don't **make** teenagers do anything."

Dotty exhaled loudly as she energetically scrubbed the saucepan. "You know, I always thought Joe King had a lot of sense, but these days, I'm not so sure."

Lee shrugged and poured himself a cup of coffee. "Oh, Joe's not a bad guy."

"No, he's not," Dotty agreed with a short bob of her head. "He just wants what he wants when he wants it. You know, he should be grateful Jamie still wants to do family things with him. One of these days, he'll have interests of his own."

"He already does." Lee leaned back against the counter, running his finger around the rim of the mug. "Jamie just feels too guilty to tell him that. He doesn't want to hurt his father's feelings."

"Just like Amanda," Dotty murmured, swiping angrily at the pan a few more times.

Lee sipped his coffee. "He could have a worse role model."

"As far as I'm concerned," Dotty said, eyeing Lee pointedly, "my grandson has best role model possible."

"Amanda's done a great job with both the boys. You have every right to be proud of her."

"Oh, I'm very proud of my daughter," Dotty told him with a grin. "But I'm not talking about her, and you know it."

Lee smiled, busily refilling his coffee cup to hide his embarrassment. "Joe wanted to talk to Amanda about all this," he added, "but I told him absolutely not."

"You did the right thing. That's the last thing she needs right now. Her blood pressure's high enough without being dragged into the middle of this latest fight." Dotty let out a long sigh. "Joe King is a changed man since he came back from Santarilla."

"It's not unusual for someone who went through what he did to come out of it a little . . . well, different."

"Different is putting it mildly." Dotty wrung out the dishrag, twisting it sharply in her hands. "Joe was always mildly inconsiderate, but lately his self-absorption has reached an entirely new level. To pull those boys out of school on a whim . . ."

"Cut him some slack, Dotty. He's had a tough time."

"He's the one who put himself in that situation to begin with," Dotty countered with grim vehemence. "Not to mention throwing this family into even more upheaval by forcing you to go down there to rescue him."

"It all turned out okay."

Dotty shot him a look. "Did it?"

Lee sighed. Watching his mother-in-law's flashing eyes, he once again reminded himself never to get on her bad side. Dotty West could be a formidable force when angered -- especially when her family's well-being was at stake.

"You know," he heard her warn ominously as he took another long draught of coffee. "If you keep pouring that stuff down your throat, you're never going to get to sleep tonight."

Leaning against the counter, Lee rubbed his tired eyes and stifled a yawn. "I'm afraid it's gonna be awhile until I sleep tonight. I've got to head back to the Agency."

"At this hour?" Dotty exclaimed, her eyebrows shooting up.

"It can't be helped. I've had a slew of pompous politicians on my back this week, and I haven't been able to get anything done. I need . . ."

Dotty folded her arms across her chest. "What you **need** is to march yourself upstairs and get some rest."

Lee smiled sadly. "As appealing as that seems, it's just not possible tonight."

Dotty pursed her lips. "I suppose by now I should know better than to ask why."

"Yup," Lee told her with a short laugh, "you should." Putting an arm around her shoulder, he gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. "I will take your advice about the coffee, though," he teased as he poured the remainder of his cup into the sink.

"You're way too charming for your own good, Mr. Stetson," Dotty chuckled warmly. "I tried to tell my daughter that."

"Good thing she never listens to you," he laughed, giving her a sly wink as he backed out the door.

"Yes," he heard Dotty murmur softly as the door closed. "A **very** good thing indeed."

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*Excerpt from Amanda's Journal, January 24, 1989*  
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*It looks like I might get my life back again soon! Elaine is 'cautiously optimistic', whatever that means. Actually, I don't really care **what** it means, as long as it gets me out of this bed. Just to sit in another room, even for a few short hours . . . an unheard of indulgence!*

*Who knew lying in bed could be so stressful? The prescription certainly seemed simple enough when Elaine explained it that day in the hospital. 'Go straight to bed, be as quiet as you can. Only get up to go to the bathroom . . . no, Amanda, you should not even stand up long enough to make yourself a cup of tea. Don't lift anything heavier than a paper plate with food on it that someone **else** has prepared for you . . . no, Amanda, you will **not** be going into work in the foreseeable future.'*

Thank goodness for Mother. I don't think I could get through this without her, and I know Lee feels the same way. She seems to be in perpetual motion these days, taking care of all of us without even being asked.

Lee has absolutely refused to let her clean the house, though. He insisted on a cleaning service, and I backed him up. Mother finally acquiesced, although I suspect she's still 'straightening a few things' when she thinks no one is looking. I'm not sure where this new enthusiasm of hers comes from. I was the one who always practiced the spring cleaning ritual with unbridled zeal, while Mother grumbled that I was just like my grandmother. Maybe she's 'nesting' these days because I can't.

She really has been in her glory this week. The construction crew finally started work on the conversion of the stables, and I don't think they've driven so much as a single nail without her supervision. They don't seem to mind, especially when she brings them coffee and homemade poppy seed cake every morning. I think Phillip said that yesterday she even made them a hot lunch.

"They've got to keep up their strength, Amanda," Mother informed me when I called her on it. "After all, that's my new home they're working on." Lee told her teasingly that at this rate the crew may want to move in permanently.

Should I admit that I'm kind of looking forward to a little more privacy? I know, here I am in one breath saying that I couldn't manage without her and in the next counting the days until the carriage house is finished.

*It really has nothing to do with Mother. It's just that Lee and I have never really had the chance to be alone. Of course, with three children, I guess **alone** is going to be a relative term.*

I think Mother's looking forward to a little privacy herself, thanks to her burgeoning relationship with one very attractive pilot. But when I hinted that she might want to make her relationship with Captain Curt permanent, she only laughed. "Darling," she intoned in her most serious air. "Trust me, at this point in my life I have absolutely no intention of washing one more man's underwear."

I really am going to miss her. We all will.

"I can't believe Grandma's really gonna move out." Jamie turned away from my bedroom window where he'd been watching the commotion outside as the workmen left for the day.

"Does that upset you?" I asked gently.

He shrugged, giving me a reluctant smile. "I guess not. It's just that things are going to be . . . well, different, that's all."

I smiled; Jamie likes a well-ordered life and has always been resistant to change. "I know," I told him sympathetically, "but Grandma's not going far. You watch, she'll be in and out of here every day. You know she's going to be taking care of the baby when I go back to work."

Sighing thoughtfully, Jamie tucked his leg underneath him as he flopped down in his usual seat beside my bed. "I was just thinking," he said, resting his elbow on the arm of the chair. "When we were little, you were always there to do stuff with us. I mean, you coached Little League, did Junior Trailblazers and everything." He sat up, his gaze level as he caught my eye. "How are you gonna do that for the new baby if you go back to work?"

I squirmed a little. Jamie's eyes seemed enormous since he'd started wearing his new contacts. It was almost like looking into two miniature mirrors; the problems I've been wrestling with were unexpectedly reflected back with unsettling clarity.

"I probably won't be able to do some of those things," I said, suddenly feeling inexplicably sad. "But Lee will be around to help out, too."

"Mom," he intoned seriously. "You and Lee work a lot, you know. I mean, I don't mind, really. I know you guys have important jobs and all. But I'm a teenager. The baby might not understand that."

"I guess we'll just have to make it up as we go along," I told him with a sigh. Was I the one who said raising this baby was going to be less complicated?

Jamie shrugged, leaning back into the chair with a knowing look. "Sometimes things aren't as simple as they seem, huh, Mom?"

"No," I agreed solemnly. "Sometimes they aren't." I watched as he silently tapped his leg. "So you've decided to go on that trip with your Dad next weekend?"

"I guess so. It'll be kinda weird, though, without Phillip."

"It might be kind of fun to be an only child for a couple of days."

"Maybe. I hope Dad and Phillip stop being mad at each other," he answered with a groan. "I hate it when everyone's fighting."

Reaching out, I gave his knee a squeeze. "There are some things you just don't have any control over, Jamie."

"Like you having to stay in bed?" my son asked in a quiet voice.

*"Yeah," I replied, expelling a pent-up breath. "Like that." I looked at him, my serious, sensitive child. I'd forgotten just how wise he can be. Maybe Lee and I should be letting him guide **us**.*

I'm worried about Lee . . . he looked unusually stressed last night. I tried to call Francine today, but she was out in the field and couldn't be reached . . .

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"What the hell were you thinking, Hennessy?" Lee demanded, his hands clenching into fists. "You handed off sensitive material to a total stranger! And a civilian, no less!"

"I was thinking that I didn't want those Red February goons to get their hands on the documents," the young agent snapped back. "They were swarming all over the airport!"

"Well, maybe that was your first clue that you were compromised," Lee shouted. "What the hell were you doing in Silver Spring, anyway? You were supposed to be at National. And for some reason your partner and half this Agency seemed to be under the impression that you were on your way to Baltimore."

"It was a last minute hand-off. There wasn't time . . ."

"The hell there wasn't," Lee replied hotly, his voice rising as the young agent's expression grew even cockier. Out in the bullpen, heads began to turn. "An agent **makes** time! An agent worth his salt, that is!"

"I thought . . ."

"You didn't **think** at all," Lee continued, letting his anger take control. The damn kid didn't even have the sense to look sorry. "You just arrogantly **assumed** that everything would turn out okay."

"But it did! The woman handed off to agent Desmond, just like I'd asked her to . . ."

"You were damn lucky, and you know it! This could have all gone down the tubes because of your stupid little stunt." Breathing heavily, Lee began to pace in a short circle around Hennessey. "The lives of a lot of damned good agents were on the line!"

The young rookie shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot. "I know an agent shouldn't make a move without proper back up," he began, "but . . ."

Lee cut him off. "Oh, then you **have** actually read the Agency Tactical Manual? That's good to know."

The young man eyed his superior curiously. "I know I didn't follow regular Agency procedures, but I thought **you** of all people would . . ."

"Get the hell out of my office, Hennessy," Lee barked roughly, cutting him off. "In fact, get the hell out of this Agency for the rest of the day. I don't want to even hear your name for twenty-four hours. Have I made myself perfectly clear?"

"Yes, sir," he replied coolly. "Perfectly." Turning on his heel, he marched out of the room, closing the door behind him a little too loudly.

"Damn it," Lee grumbled. Letting out a long breath, he walked back to his desk, dropping down forcefully into the leather chair. Grabbing the pen he'd been using to sign reports, he began to beat it firmly against the edge of his desk. The kid didn't have the first clue about how to work the field. Cocky young agents, he snorted derisively. They think they have all the answers. Damn them all to hell! Blowing out a short breath, he flung his pen forcefully against the far wall.

"Well, hello to you, too, Scarecrow," a deep voice boomed from his now open doorway.

"Billy!" Lee exclaimed, running a hand through his hair as he rose. "I didn't, uh, see you there."

"So I gathered," Billy Melrose replied dryly. Closing the door firmly behind him, he calmly proceeded to the windows, systematically closing each set of blinds. Then, with deliberate slowness, he lowered himself into the chair opposite Lee's desk and folded his hands across his stomach. "I'd ask how you are, but that's pretty obvious."

"I guess so," Lee replied with a chagrined sigh as he sank back down in his seat. Unable to meet Billy's eye, he added softly, "I thought you were scheduled to be in New York this month."

"The New York office can get along without me for a little while. I'm not so sure about D.C."

Lee's face reddened at the subtle chastisement. Friend or not, Billy was head of the Agency's East Coast Operations, and his direct superior. "Hank Hennessey just gets under my skin, that's all," he offered weakly, his knuckles rapping briskly on the desk. "The damn fool kid . . ."

"Yes, I read the report."

"Then you know I've got it under control. Our network hasn't been compromised."

"I'm certainly relieved to hear that," Billy replied with a snort. "But as to having it under control . . ."

"Hennessey took matters into his own hands."

"It happens, Scarecrow. I don't have to remind you of **that**, now do I?" he added, his bushy eyebrows coming together as he wrinkled his forehead.

Lee bit his lip. "No, I guess you don't," he said at last.

Billy smiled faintly. "What's really bugging you -- that Hennessey made use of one of your rather unorthodox methods or that he actually made it work?"

Lee looked up sharply. "Of course I'm glad it worked. I certainly didn't want those cutthroats from Red February to compromise us. It's just that when I think of what **could** have gone wrong . . ." Pushing out of his chair, he walked to the window, tapping lightly on the pane. "I'm responsible for them, Billy. Yet what happens to them is out of my hands. I send them out into the field, and I can't do a damn thing to help them!"

Billy cleared his throat. "How is Amanda doing?" he asked in a quiet voice.

Lee let out a deep sigh, his eyes fixed resolutely on the closed blinds. "Everything seemed to be going well. Then suddenly her blood pressure just shot up again. The doctor is talking about an early delivery if things don't turn around."

"I see."

"Damn it, Billy!" he cried, turning from the window. "We've done everything the doctors said, followed every instruction to the letter, and things just keep getting worse."

"How far along is she now?"

"Almost thirty-four weeks." Lee walked back to his desk, perching precariously on the edge. "I know the picture was much bleaker back in December when she went into premature labor. But it's just that when I think about everything that might still happen . . ." He let out an agonized groan. "She must really hate me for making her go through this."

Rising, Billy walked over to Lee, laying a comforting hand on his friend's shoulder. "I felt the same way when Jeannie was pregnant with our first. But you're forgetting that Amanda wants this baby as much as you do. Talk to her about how you're feeling."

Shaking off his friend's arm, Lee began to pace. "I can't."

"Can't or won't?"

Lee exhaled loudly. "I'm not supposed to upset her."

"So you just pretend that everything is all right?" Billy demanded, his eyes narrowing.

"Uh, yeah."

"And the Agency? I guess you probably don't want to burden her with work, either." As Lee nodded mutely, Billy continued, a smile starting to tug at his lips. "What about the boys? And the house?"

"I've, um, kind of been taking care of all that, too," Lee mumbled.

Billy folded his arms across his chest as he faced his colleague. "Let me get this straight. You don't talk about the baby, you don't talk about the office, you don't talk about Phillip and Jamie, and you don't talk about what you're feeling. What **do** you talk to your wife about?"

"The, uh, weather," Lee answered, a sheepish grin covering his face as understanding suddenly dawned.

Billy shook his head as he walked over to his friend. "No wonder her blood pressure's up, man," he said as he slapped him on the back. "Go home, Lee," he told him with a wide smile. "And that's an order. Go home and talk to your wife."

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Excerpt from Amanda's journal, January 29, 1989
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*I've just experienced the most amazing forty-eight hours. And to think I have Billy and Mother to thank for it. A more unlikely pair of schemers you'd never hope to find.*

*Mr. Melrose came into town unexpectedly from New York on Thursday and promptly ordered my husband to take a few days off. Our boss thought Lee would benefit from a little 'one-on-one' time with his family. I always knew Billy was an amazingly perceptive man.*

*Mother, for once, seemed to be in total agreement with him. No sooner had Lee arrived home than she announced that she was taking off for the weekend with Captain Curt. That set the domino effect in motion. With Jamie going to Williamsburg with Joe and Carrie, it made perfect sense, or so Mother said, to let poor Phillip off the hook and allow him go away with Tommy's family. Yes, this particular scenario had 'conspiracy' written all over it.*



"Nonsense, darling," Mother returned with easy assurance when I challenged her. "You spies think everyone has a hidden agenda."

"There's nothing hidden at all about your agenda," I countered with a smile, employing my best Class C interrogation technique. The routine was a bit rusty, but, after all, Mother was a civilian; I should be able to break her with a minimum of effort. "I think you and Billy engineered all this . . . for our own good, of course."

"We did nothing of the sort," she protested, wrapping her innocence around herself like heavy shield. "Do you honestly think I would plot with **that** man? Why, Amanda," she cried, "you should be ashamed of yourself! I just happen to think you and Lee would benefit from a little time to yourselves, dear. You've both been so . . . tense . . . lately."

"We haven't . . ." I bit my lip, silently catching her eye. Evidently **her** Class C skills were right on the money; she already had me on the defensive.

"Goodness knows, I could certainly use a little 'R and R'," she continued blandly, ignoring my feeble protest as she brought out the big guns. Whipping Rebecca's latest fantasy out of its blue striped box, she inquired with a wicked little laugh, "**This** ought to knock Curt's socks off, don't you think?"

"Mother!" I cried, my cheeks flushing as I took in the translucent little piece of nothing in a pale shade of yellow.

"Amanda, dear," she remonstrated with a shameless grin. Ignoring my gaping mouth, she assured me solemnly, "Trust me, it's **much** more fun with your socks off."

I guess that's something I wouldn't know about these days. Having my socks knocked off is strictly taboo at the moment.

I leaned back on the pillow, smiling weakly as Mother trotted off to her rendezvous with her handsome pilot. I had a feeling the good Captain had quite a weekend in store for him. Enough said on **that** subject. This **is** my mother I'm talking about, after all.

So that's how Lee and I ended up with a weekend alone. It's kind of funny, when you think about it. Once upon a time, when our marriage was still a mystery, we used to plot endlessly for a little private time together. Now it seems we're reduced to having other people plot for us.

They were right, though, Mother and Billy. Lee and I both knew there were things we desperately needed to talk about; we just didn't want to. But we couldn't go on avoiding each other, especially with the house all to ourselves, so I knew that sooner or later, we'd end up confronting those thorny demons of ours. I suppose it's a little like wading barefoot in the dark through broken glass. It's out there, and you do your best to avoid it, but you know that, sooner or later, you're going to bleed.

Part of the fault lies at my door. I haven't leveled with Lee, not about the things that still plague my dreams. And if I haven't been honest about **my** feelings, how can I expect him to be honest about **his**? I know we can't be together at the moment the way we'd like, but I never expected the enforced moratorium on our sex life to spill into our emotional life as well.

I miss making love to my husband. But more than that, I miss that special bond we've always shared. Breathless intimacy aside -- and I'm not knocking it, believe me -- it's our friendship that's seen us through all kinds of hell these past six years.

*When did it start to slip away? Probably on the day we started hiding things. Small, inconsequential things at first -- a stray thought here, a feeling there. Oh, we had the best of intentions; we only wanted to 'spare' each other. Except that we didn't, not really. Instead we took out our frustrations on each other. Not in the things we said -- no, **that** would have been too easy -- but in the things we didn't say.*

*What will we do when we don't have to measure every word, every action or reaction, on the weighted scales of this 'complicated' pregnancy? In a strange way, I think I might actually miss the strain. It's become almost a physical part of me, like a third limb grown with unaccountable care. I wouldn't be at all surprised to hear someone say, "You must know Amanda Stetson -- brown eyes, dark hair, petrified she'll lose her baby."*

*I told Lee that, finally, in the quiet solitude after dinner Friday night. He rested his hand on top of mine. "It's been kinda tough for me, too," he confessed. He took a deep breath, then let it out, his eyes glued to the patterned quilt. "Amanda, I know that this . . . all of this," he added with a sweeping gesture, "is my fault."*

*"Lee, it is **not** your fault," I returned, almost by rote. But I could see he didn't believe me. I didn't believe me. If he hadn't gone down to Santarilla . . .*

*"Come on, Amanda," he cajoled, his lips curving up into a sad smile as he looked up. "Can you honestly say you really don't blame me? If I hadn't gone down to Santarilla . . ."*

*I sucked in a sharp breath, shifting uncomfortably under his troubled gaze. Lee had actually spoken my angry thoughts out loud. But, somehow, giving voice to my unspoken accusation took away its power. Revelation socked me squarely between the eyes. I wasn't angry at Lee at all. I had been using him as a convenient scapegoat for my conflicted feelings . . . feelings so painful I hadn't even wanted to acknowledge them as my own.*

*How could I love little Matthew so much, yet at the same time hate what his very existence had done to my life?*

*I let out a deep groan. "None of this is your fault. If you hadn't gone down to Santarilla, then Joe would probably be dead right now. It's me I'm angry with, Lee, not you. I pushed myself too hard. I guess, on some level, I resented what being pregnant was doing to me . . . to my career . . . so I stupidly tried to pretend nothing had changed."*

*Lee smiled softly. "I knew that, Amanda. Do you think I, of all people, can't understand how much your career means to you? Without it, there wouldn't be an 'us.'"*

*"But work isn't all we're about, Lee!"*

*He squeezed my hand. "I know that, too."*

*I sighed. "I should know it. I should have trusted in us more and taken better care of myself."*

*"You take excellent care of yourself," he rejoined without the slightest hesitation, "and of everyone else in this family, for that matter. Right now it's our turn to take excellent care of you. I want to be here for you -- if you'll just let me."*

*I looked into his beautiful hazel eyes through a film of tears. When would I stop listening for the echo of Joe in Lee's words? My husband was right here in front of me, not off in some third world country. I didn't have to do this alone.*

*My voice became a raspy whisper. "It's just not fair. This is **our** first child. We're supposed to be painting the nursery and buying baby clothes. Instead I'm lying here blaming you because I'm going stir crazy, and you . . ." I let my fingers entwine with his. "You're being pulled in a thousand directions at once, at home **and** at work."*

*"Oh, Amanda," he groaned, bringing my hand to his lips. The kiss was light, almost tentative. "It's not forever."*

*I shrugged my shoulders, unsure exactly which one of us he was trying to reassure. Another sigh escaped my lips, almost of its own volition.*

*"Enough, Mrs. Stetson," he ordered gently. Crawling into bed beside me, he gathered me carefully into his arms. "Stop blaming yourself for things you can't control."*

*"But Lee," I moaned. "When I was pregnant with Phillip and Jamie, things were so different. I mean, I had the usual morning sickness and a few aches and pains, but this . . . well, this is definitely **not** normal."*

*"You expected **normal**?" As he tilted my head toward his, I suddenly realized what I'd said. He began to laugh, a deep sound that rumbled up out of his chest, and, letting my iron control slip at last, I laughed with him.*

*It felt good.*

*At length, as we both gasped for breath, my eyes sought his once again. What I saw in them almost made me dizzy. It had been a long time since Lee had looked at me with such passionate longing. I felt oddly off-balance, but in a good way.*

*While I was still struggling to regain my equilibrium, he kissed me. Not the obligatory brush of his lips against mine that we'd both adopted lately, but the deep, soulful kind, filled with unspoken yearning and feelings we'd both denied for far too long. It warmed me all the way down to my toes, made me feel loved, cherished and, best of all, desired.*

*"Lee," I whispered softly, my hand snaking lightly along his leg. "Let me . . ."*

*He strained closer. I could feel the tension in every muscle as he kissed me again. "It's okay," he whispered, his voice oddly hoarse as his hand stilled my stroking. "You don't have to."*

*"I know I don't have to," I responded with a guttural groan. "I want to."*

*"But we can't . . . you can't . . ."*

*I pulled my hand from his, feeling deliciously decadent as I traced the seam of his sweats with my finger. "There's more than one way to make love, Lee."*

*His breath caught slightly. "Amanda . . ."*

*"Shhh," I whispered, kissing him again. "Stop arguing and enjoy it, Stetson."*

*He grinned, both dimples revealed as his sparkling hazel eyes met mine. "Yes, ma'am," he returned, his features evening out as he suddenly relaxed. Oh, how I wanted him then, even more than on those long, tortuous nights of waiting before our wedding. But at least now I could indulge my passion to touch him.*

*"Lee," I murmured into his ear as he snuggled closer. "Why don't you take off your socks . . ."*

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Lee flipped on the kitchen light, setting the large white sacks on the counter with a loud thud. "Hey, fellas," he shouted in the general direction of the stairs. "Food's here."

"Thanks, Lee." Jamie grinned broadly as he suddenly materialized at the counter. Eying the multitude of bags emblazoned with pictures of smiling hamburgers, he added, "You're a real lifesaver."

A thundering noise came from the stairs. "Great, you're home," Phillip whooped as he sprinted into the room. He lunged for a bag, only to be blocked by his brother. "I'm starved."

"Gee, and here I thought you were glad to see me," Lee kidded as he removed his overcoat, shaking off the excess rainwater before hanging it on the hook in the mudroom. The weather had made the trip home a nightmare.

Phillip grinned. "Hey, we're always glad to see you, Lee -- especially when you bring the Marvin's." Then giving his brother a friendly push, he ordered ominously, "Move it, Geek Breath."

"I was here first," Jamie protested loudly, shoving back as he grabbed for the biggest white sack.

Phillip quickly snatched the bag from his hands. "Possession is nine-tenths of the law," he taunted, holding the food up just out of Jamie's reach.

"Exactly," Lee countered, extricating the sack from Phillip's grasp with one quick move. "And the way I see it, this Marvelous Marvin's belongs to me. If you two behave, I just might share it."

The boys regarded each other with guilty smiles. "Sorry," Phillip murmured, settling himself on a stool. "But, man, I'm really hungry. Worm Brain here ate the last bag of chips after school."

"Did not," his brother returned as he, too, sat at the counter. "They were already gone when I got here. I think Grandma gave them to the workmen."

"Those guys are going to eat us out of house and home before they're through," Lee grumbled as he located the paper plates and the large bedside tray. "Guess that means a run to the grocery store after dinner."

"Hey, I'll go with you," Phillip offered.

"That's very generous of you, Phillip."

Jamie laughed. "He just wants to see Ashley Montgomery. She works check-out on Tuesday nights."

Phillip kicked his brother under the counter. Blatantly ignoring his rather loud, "Ouch", Phillip turned to Lee with smile. "See, in another six weeks when I get my license, I'll be able to do all that stuff for you. You can just give me the car keys, then sit back and relax."

Lee rolled his eyes. He had a feeling relax was **not** a word he would be associating with Phillip and car keys any time soon. "Good try, Chief," he replied, giving the boy a knowing grin. "But that's something your mother and I are gonna have to take under advisement."

"Yeah," Jamie laughed. "And I'll bet they think the Wagoneer is just great for hauling groceries."

"Okay, Jamie," Lee put in quickly, forestalling any further debate about his Corvette with the promise of food. "Here you go. We've got one torpedo burger, extra sauce, jumbo fabulous fries and a mega mug-o-cola."

"You didn't forget, did you?" Jamie questioned imperiously, raising an eyebrow as he peered into the smaller white bag.

"Nope," Lee assured him. "No ice." No matter how many times he'd gotten it right since, Jamie never failed to remind him of that first botched Marvelous Marvin's mission. "Now Phillip," he said, turning to the older boy. "Let's see, that was a jumbo onion rings, choco-blocko shake and the double whammo with extra cheese, pickles, mustard and," he added emphatically, "absolutely **no** tomatoes."

"Thanks," Phillip laughed as he tore into a battered onion ring. "You know your burgers these days, Lee."

"Yeah, well, I have to," he laughed with a pointed look at Jamie. "And for your mom, we have a fish burger, double tartar sauce, a jumbo choco-blocko shake with extra whipped cream, and a side order of, uh, fried pickles," Lee added with a shudder. He looked at both boys curiously. "I thought your Grandmother was going to fix her something."

"Grandma offered to before she left for her book club meeting," Phillip informed him, "but Mom wasn't hungry then."

"No one was," Jamie put in, wrinkling his nose. "Carrie dropped off a casserole." Giving his stepfather a look, he added wryly, "Want some, Lee? I think there's plenty left."

Lee snorted. Carrie King's attempts to master the culinary arts were nothing short of infamous. There were times Lee felt downright sorry for Joe. "Uh, that's big of you, Sport, but no thanks. I've got myself a colossus burger, no secret sauce, and a double order of onion rings."

"Smart move," Phillip agreed with a mouth full of food. "The casserole looked really gross."

"**That's** really gross, Phillip," Lee rejoined. "Don't talk with your mouth full."

"Sorry," the boy muttered, running his napkin across his lips. "But you'd think someone would just tell her she can't cook."

"Yeah," Jamie laughed as he slurped his cola. "And she bought two new cookbooks at the Colonial Cookery store in Williamsburg. Hey, Lee," he added, the accompanying noises from his straw suddenly ceasing. "You aren't workin' late or anything Friday night, are you?"

Lee ran a hand through his hair. The Red February case young Hennessey had stumbled into seemed to be getting murkier and murkier. "I don't know, Sport. Depends on how a few things go in the next few days."

"Oh," Jamie sighed, deflated.

"Is there something I've forgotten about?" Lee asked quickly. Between the growing problems at the Agency and the ever-shifting home schedule, he needed another calendar just to keep everything straight.

"The Worm Brain here is gonna start in the basketball game on Friday night," Phillip announced, bumping his brother lightly on the shoulder.

"It's no big deal," Jamie added, embarrassed. "The coach didn't say for sure. He just said maybe."

"Hey," Lee said, slapping the boy on the back. "It **is** a big deal, and I'll definitely be there. I promise." If push came to shove, Francine could cover for him for a few hours. She owed him for that weekend excursion with Jonathan.

Jamie nodded, catching his eye with a diffident smile. "Now," Lee added, setting the rest of the Marvin's on the tray. "I'm going to go eat with your mom. Who has homework to finish?"

"I do," Phillip groaned, "just a little."

"Well, no T.V. until it's done," Lee stated, smiling at how easily those words rolled off his lips these days. Picking up the tray, he headed for the door. "And Phillip," he called over his shoulder. "Lose the name calling, will you? I think that's three times since I came through the door."

"Kay," he heard Phillip mumble with a reluctant sigh. Satisfied another name wasn't forthcoming, Lee made his way into the hall, suddenly looking forward to a little quiet conversation with his wife. Maybe he wouldn't go running tonight after all. Even though the rain was stopping, it **was** still pretty wet outside. Maybe, instead, he'd just run down this Hennessey business with Amanda. She could probably shed some light on it, and a fresh perspective might be just what he needed. Billy was right; his partner had a real eye for detail. It was time to let her apply it.

Whistling softly, Lee climbed the stairs.

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***Except from Amanda's Journal, February 1, 1989***  
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I can't believe it -- today marks the start of a brand new month. As Lee affirmed this morning before he headed to the office, we're really moving into the home stretch now. Only five weeks until my due date.

I mentioned it to Elaine when she dropped by for one of those surprise check-up visits of hers. It's funny how often she seems to be just 'in the neighborhood' these days. I must have the only doctor in Maryland who still actually makes house calls.

"Thirty-five weeks, Amanda," she officially pronounced with a wide smile. "Good job."

'Good job.' Those two simple words seemed like a benediction. All we've heard since December is that we have to bring this pregnancy to term. I think I'm finally starting to believe it's actually going to happen. I guess that elusive silver lining is getting easier to find these days. Especially when you let other people show you the way.

Elaine was certainly was right about keeping this journal. It **has** made a difference, maybe in more ways than she'd originally intended. Part of me wishes I didn't have to destroy it in a few short weeks. But in our line of work, keeping a journal indefinitely is just too dangerous. If an agent's weaknesses were to fall into the wrong hands . . .

Maybe I can learn to sort out my feelings in a less structured way. Maybe see Pfaff on a more regular basis. The psychological exercise requirements for administrative one are less stringent than those that govern field work, but that might not be such a good thing. It's something I really should discuss with Lee. There are a lot of useful tools to defuse stress that we're not using, in the field and out. I know letting off a little steam between the pages of this book has definitely helped me.

Take last night, for instance. I had the nightmare again. I woke up shaking, tiny beads of perspiration covering my forehead. Lee didn't ask any questions this time, only pulled me closer to him in the darkness. But as I lay there, feeling the familiar beat of his heart next to mine, I suddenly wanted -- needed -- to tell him. I knew with unerring certainty that he could share the burden; he'd understand.

It wasn't easy. I know, I talk a good game, always encouraging Lee to open up and share his feelings, but, truthfully, it's something I struggle with myself. I don't know, maybe it's a holdover from my first marriage. Sharing my feelings with Joe always turned into an exercise in futility; he still packed his bags anyway and headed for parts unknown. So after a while, I just stopped trying.

But this is a new marriage, a new life, and I don't want to taint it any more with leftover feelings from the old. Goodness knows Lee and I have enough ghosts to deal with already without adding the specter of my first failed relationship.

So, taking a deep breath, I confided in him about my dream. It started just after Christmas, and it's been recurring ever since with alarming regularity. The nightmare begins differently each time, but always ends the same way -- in a screaming ambulance and a foggy haze of pain. Something bad is happening with Matthew. I can see the panic in everyone's eyes, Mother, the boys, Francine . . . even Elaine. And no matter how loud I call, I can't seem to find Lee.

"Hey," my husband whispered softly in my ear as his arms tightened around me. "You don't have anything to worry about. I'm right here, and don't plan on going anywhere. Even Billy's staying in D.C. for the duration."

I nodded, trying to push the nagging fear to the back of my mind. It's not that I actually believe in premonitions. I'm not great-uncle Iggy, after all. Telling the future may have been his stock and trade, but it's never held any charms for me. But even though I know it's a just a silly dream, it still unnerves me. Although, I have to admit, talking about it **did** seem to make it seem less sinister.

"I guess I'm just being silly," I told Lee with a sigh.

He rubbed my stomach gently. "You have every right to be as silly as you want."

"Oh, Lee," I sighed, holding his hand over the spot on my belly where Matthew was kicking. "I love you both, so much. I'm just scared, I guess. That something is going to go wrong. If anything happens . . ."

"We'll face it and get through it. Just like everything else." He gave me a comforting hug. "No matter what happens, Amanda, we've got two great kids. Nothing can change that."

*His whispered words brought tears to my eyes. I'd never actually heard him refer to Phillip and Jamie as **ours** before. Oh, I knew he cared about them, loved them, if you will, because they were a part of me. But as he actually gave voice to his feelings, I suddenly realized that my husband's relationship with his stepsons had undergone a gestation of its own these past months. While I was busy up here creating a new life, Lee had been just as busy creating a new family. It didn't take some life-shattering event to make it happen, either. All it took was time and love.*

If only Joe could grasp that. Instead, he dangles special trips and gifts in front of the boys, trying to substitute intangible things like shooting hoops or checking homework with objects you can see and touch. But time is irreplaceable. It slips away in the night, one year blurring softly into another. Before you know it, your toddler is walking out the front door clutching the car keys.

As much as I struggle with how to balance my family and my career, I know in my heart that's something Lee and I will always do for Matthew -- make time. I've been thinking a lot about that lately as I lie here in bed . . . the passage of time and what it all means.

When Phillip and Jamie were small, we marked time with tangible signs -- a straight line penciled in on the wall over a boy's head, a brightly lit candle on a birthday cake, a class picture from a new school year. Nowadays the signposts are less substantial. Advice on how to ask a girl to that first junior high dance, a casual invitation to parents' night, a hastily mumbled request for a ride in the Corvette -- milestones, all of them, yet they pass almost unremarkably, lost in the hectic complexities of day-to-day living.

Will my new son ever really know his brothers? They are so much older, after all. Just like Lee's father and uncle. The Colonel confided once that though he'd loved his big brother from his mother's first marriage, he'd never really known him. By the time he was old enough to be a companion, my baby's namesake was off on adventures of his own. Still, despite everything, the Colonel came through when his brother needed him. But would he have been able to embrace his nephew more warmly if there had been more camaraderie and less awe in Colonel Clayton's relationship with his older brother?

Eventually, I know I'll figure it all out; little Matthew isn't even here yet. We all have plenty of time, years really, to mark the signs of one family blending into another. For right now, I'm content with the concrete ones.

Time to tear another link from that paper chain . . .

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