

Once Upon A Christmas

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Christmas Eve, 1954

Lee burrowed down underneath the covers. It was dark and warm inside, like a tunnel. . . like the rabbit hole they'd found in Tommy's back yard. If he scrunched up into a ball he could pretend. . . nah, it didn't seem like much fun to be a rabbit. And stupid old Tommy said if his dad found the hole, he'd take the hose and. . .

He scrambled frantically for his pillow, taking a couple of deep breaths as he emerged from the sheets and blankets. Whew, that was better. . .

Was it morning yet? Night was so long. . . of course, this night had to be, if Santa was gonna get to every house. How did he do that, anyway? And how did he bring you presents if you didn't have a chimney? Susie's house didn't have a chimney, but she said Santa came in through the front door. Girls could be so dumb sometimes. . .

Maybe he would just take one look outside. Mom said Santa wouldn't bring him what he wanted for Christmas if he got out of bed, but. . . just one look wouldn't hurt, would it?

He tiptoed cautiously to the window. A guy had to tiptoe or Mom would hear. She could hear just about everything. . . especially when he got anywhere near the basement door. Maybe she had super hearing, like Superman. . .

He didn't really like to go in the basement anyway. The steps were kind of scary. They didn't have any backs, and you could see right through them. And it smelled funny. . . not good smelly like Dad's pipe, but bad smelly, like his babysitter's old sweater. . .

He pulled back the blinds, squinting his eyes as he pressed his forehead against the windowpane. It sure was dark, all right. You couldn't see much of anything from here. . . just the neighbors' roof. And they didn't have any kids, so. . .

But that big tree in the front yard. . . it was so tall. . . you could see just about everything from there, he thought with a sigh. Maybe even Santa. . .

Maybe it was almost morning. Maybe Santa had already come. Maybe he'd brought him that bike he wanted. Dad said it was too big for him, but it had training wheels. . . and it was red, with the best horn. He grinned; you could make a lot of noise with a horn like that. Dad sure had a funny look on his face when he'd gone ahead and asked Santa for it anyway. . .

Of course, what he really wanted was a puppy. He hadn't told anyone about that, though. Not even Santa. . . Dad said next year, when he was older, they'd go to the pet store. Maybe even in the summer. Mom said he should wait until summer. . .

That was okay. He was still gonna get a lot of neat stuff. Santa was going to bring those trains, the same ones he and Dad played with at the department store. And enough track to go all the way around the tree. It was a great set. It had an animal car, and animals to go inside it. . . and real whistle, and a train station and. . .

Maybe he'd just peek downstairs. . . it had to be almost morning. He could be really quiet and really sneaky like a. . .

He grinned. And maybe Santa didn't eat all the cookies he'd left him. . .

Padding softly to the door, he opened it just a tiny crack. Holding his breath, he peered cautiously into the hall. It sure was long. . . and dark. But there was a light downstairs. Were Mom and Dad still up? Or maybe it was. . .

Creeping to the top of the stairs, he hunched down on all fours, listening.

"Why do they make these things so complicated?" he heard his Dad grumble.

Mom laughed, a light tinkling sound that always made him feel warm. "Stop complaining, you're the one who insisted on buying it."

"That's because you didn't see his face light up in the department store. I could hardly drag him away from it."

His mother laughed again, but he couldn't hear what she said. Crawling on his stomach, he leaned down over the first step.

"Thanks," he heard his father say with a funny little laugh. "You have a decided gift for deciphering the undecipherable, Jennie."

"If only I could make it work on this case," he heard her sigh. "The paper trail gets more convoluted by the day."

He crawled down a few more steps. A trail out of paper, he thought with a grin. That sure wouldn't work; the wind would blow it all away. Well, Mom was a girl, after all. She really didn't understand about things like. . .

"We'll figure it out," Dad said.

"I just worry, Matthew. If anything happened. . ."

"He'd be taken care of, you know that."

His mother sighed softly. "I'm not talking about money. I know he'd be set financially. But he hardly knows your brother. We only had that one brief visit last summer. I wish he'd been able to come for Christmas. . ."

Christmas. It was almost Christmas. If they kept on talking, Santa might not be able to come. . .

"That's my fault as much as Bob's," he heard his Dad say again. "We've both been so busy. But you know he was more than willing when we broached the subject."

"I guess we'll just have to watch each other's backs," he heard his mother laugh. "And when this business is over, then. . ."

". . . we'll both get out," his father finished.

Their voices got lower and he couldn't hear anymore. He felt his way down a few more steps. He was almost upside down; this was kind of fun. . .

"Did you hear something?" Mom said suddenly. "I'm sure I. . ."

He tried to go back up, but the steps were too narrow to turn around, and somehow he found himself sliding down to the bottom instead.

"Lee!" his mother cried sternly, her hands resting on her hips. "What did I tell you about getting out of bed?"

"Sorry," he mumbled, one hand rubbing the side of his head.

Her dark eyes softened, and she reached for him, hugging him close as she kissed his bump.

He smiled; she seemed more worried than mad. "Did Santa come yet?" he asked hopefully.

"Not yet, Chief," his Dad said, winking at him over his mother's shoulder. "You've got to go to sleep first."

He nodded, suddenly very tired. Stifling a yawn, he snuggled sleepily into his mother's arms. "Merry Christmas, Mommy," he murmured against her shoulder.

She cuddled him closer, kissing his head again as she carried him back upstairs. "Merry Christmas, Lee."

Christmas Eve, 1958

The young captain consulted his watch. "Come along, Lee, we haven't got all day."

"Yes, Sir." He reluctantly abandoned the shiny train display. It looked like it would all through the toy department, he thought with a sigh. Doubling his pace to keep up with his uncle, he bobbed and weaved his way through the crowd, ducking to avoid the purses that all seemed to be aimed directly at his head.

"This is the last aisle," the Captain told him briskly. "Take a look down there, then we'll make a final decision."

He nodded solemnly. "Okay." Walking down the long aisle with measured steps, he carefully considered the offerings. Nothing appealed to him as much as those trains, but his uncle had already told him very plainly that they weren't an option. And as for the pet store. . . well, he'd refused to even discuss it.

Sighing, Lee studied the array of trucks, cowboy hats and six-shooters again. Maybe the coonskin cap and rifle set, he thought with a sly grin; the Captain really hated Davy Crockett.

"Hi, Lee."

He looked up at the sound of his name, smiling shyly at the girl standing beside him. "Hi, Alice. What are you doing here?"

"We're taking my sister to see Santa." She pointed out the little girl holding onto her mother's purse, her long dark braids bouncing up and down as she hopped impatiently on one foot. "She's really excited," the girl said, rolling her eyes expressively.

Lee looked over at the tall brunette woman talking to the Captain. "I didn't know your mother knew my uncle," he said in surprise.

"Yeah - my dad is in his unit. Don't worry, I didn't tell her what you said about him," she whispered conspiratorially.

"Good," he replied under his breath as his uncle motioned for him to join them. "He'd ground me again for sure."

"And I'm sure you're as busy as we are with all the holiday preparations," he heard Alice's mother say as they approached. "It's certainly been chaotic at our house the past few days. Hello, Lee," she said, turning her clear brown eyes on him. "Merry Christmas."

He started to say hello, but something in the way she smiled down at him suddenly made him feel inexplicably sad. Nodding mutely, he slid his hands in and out of his pockets as he looked down at the floor.

"Lee, stop fidgeting and remember your manners." His uncle's voice sounded stern. "Say hello to Mrs. Peterson."

He reluctantly looked up. "Hello, Mrs. Peterson," he said in a low voice as he politely extended his hand.

"It's very nice to see you again," she told him with a warm smile. "Alice always says so many nice things about you."

"Yes, Ma'am." Grinning slightly, he caught Alice's eye.

"So, Captain," she said to his uncle. "Finishing some last minute shopping?"

"Taking the boy on the annual excursion," he explained with a polite smile, "to pick out his Christmas gift. "With all the extra maneuvers this past week, I'm afraid I've left it to the last minute again."

Her eyes widened as she looked down at Lee. "You let him pick out his own Christmas presents?"

"A very efficient process," his uncle informed her with a precise shake of the head. "No disappointment on Christmas morning."

"I . . . suppose so." Smiling faintly, she quickly changed the subject. "I've been meaning to call you - to say thank you," she clarified as his uncle gave her a puzzled look. She included Lee in her gaze. "Alice told me how you stood up for her last month when those boys were teasing her."

"Oh, the playground incident," his uncle replied, shifting his hat in his hands. "Yes," he smiled, "Lee can be quite a scrapper at times."

"I was really quite concerned, Captain. Those boys were a lot older, and Alice said he took a pretty bad beating before the teacher intervened."

"Handled it like a trooper," the Captain stated proudly. "You're never too young to learn to stand up for what you believe in - even if you do end up with a few bumps and bruises in the process. Right, Lee?"

He shifted imperceptibly from foot to foot. "Yes, Sir."

He heard Mrs. Peterson sigh. "It can't be easy, Captain," she said in a low voice. "Raising a little boy all by yourself."

"You do what you have to do," his uncle responded, his words oddly stiff. "There was no one else." Frowning slightly, he looked at his watch once again. "I'm afraid we have to get moving. I have a large stack of fitness reports waiting on my desk."

Mrs. Peterson nodded. "I have to run as well. I have presents to buy, and we still need to see Santa." Taking both daughters by the hand, she smiled a goodbye. "Merry Christmas, Captain; Merry Christmas, Lee."

"Yes, Ma'am," he responded automatically as he followed his uncle down the aisle. Turning briefly, he cast a longing look as the trio made their way towards the festive Santa display.

"Come along, Lee," he heard his uncle call purposefully. "You're much too old for all that sentimental junk. Now, have you made your decision?"

"Yes, Sir," he responded smartly. Looking at the over the shelves once more, he picked up the silver cap gun and holster. Handing it to his uncle, he mumbled, "This is fine."

His uncle smiled. "The Tombstone Fanner. . . good choice. Come on, we can pay for this quickly and get back to the base."

Lee nodded. With one last look at the trains, he followed his uncle to the check out line.

Christmas Eve, 1965

"That's just great," he mumbled under his breath. "Broken again." He tossed the stereo's mangled needle into the trash. Just one more casualty of the United States Air Force; after six moves in seven years, he should be used to it by now.

Exhaling loudly, he flopped back down on the narrow twin bed, the springs groaning sympathetically beneath his weight. "Another castoff from the BOQ," he muttered under his breath. Somehow, it made him feel less alone to speak his thoughts out loud. "Just like these quarters."

From the small window, he could see that the sky growing ominously darker. The rainy season was supposed to be over in November, but evidently the drops smacking the windowpane hadn't been informed yet.

"I can't believe we're back here again," he told the standard issue dresser drawers grimly. "Of all the places to end up, the Major has to draw another tour of duty at Andersen!"

His friends back at the airbase in northern Michigan said he was a lucky dog to be trading in months of snow for balmy sunshine, but he knew better.

"Tropical paradise," he grunted derisively. "Whoever coined that phrase sure never lived in Guam. 'Typhoon Alley' is more like it."

He'd really been looking forward to skiing this winter.

Jumping off the bed, he restlessly paced the small room. He should probably unpack the rest of those boxes before the Major pulled another surprise inspection, but it was Christmas Eve, after all. A guy oughtta get a little time off for the holidays.

"Maybe I should go for a walk," he grumbled as he made his tenth pass in front of the small mirror. "Anything to get out of this room." Pausing, he studied his reflection. He'd really shot up this past year. At fifteen, he was already a good inch taller than his uncle. He felt a strange sense of satisfaction that the man now had to look up to meet his eye.

He glanced at his watch – four-thirty. The Major was never back this early, even on Christmas Eve. "Just like every other day," he mumbled. Sun comes up, sun goes down. . . He glanced at the window again. Rain or not, he had to get out of here – the walls were closing in. And there were those girls down by the dock. . .

Shutting his door carefully, he crept down the hallway. The deep voice in the living room caught him off guard, and he quickly flattened himself against the wall. Some luck, he thought with a groan; the Major was home after all. Trying to blend into the woodwork, he listened.

"Thanks for the offer, Frank, but we'll have to make it another time. . ."

Silence, followed by the Major's voice. He was on the phone, then, Lee thought with a relieved sigh. He might still have a chance.

"No, but I really appreciate it," his uncle said again, followed by a short laugh. "It's Christmas Eve, and I've got to put in diaper duty for the next few days."

Bristling, Lee ran his hand over the back of his head. He could still hear the Major's voice, but oddly, the words all ran together and he couldn't understand them. Taking a couple of shallow breaths, he bolted for the door.

"Where are you skipping off to in such a hurry?"

The clipped words had the effect of a bucket of cold water, and he stopped short. One hand on the knob, he turned to face his uncle.

"I . . . I was just going for a walk, Sir."

The Major nodded, his hands behind his back as he rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet. "In the rain?"

Lee shrugged, as his uncle added, "I presume your gear is stowed away?"

"Yes, Sir."

Striding purposefully to his nephew's bedroom, he threw open the door. "Would you care to amend that assessment, Skip?" he demanded crossly.

Lee pulled himself to his full height. "It's all stowed, Sir. Right there in the box."

"In this room, young man, right now," the Major snapped. "I don't expect you to leave it until everything is put away – and I don't mean in the moving crates." As Lee trudged reluctantly down the hall, his uncle added, "Is that perfectly clear?"

"Yes, Sir."

The Major nodded. "I'm going to meet a few of the men at the Officers' Club for a drink. Call me when this clutter is cleared up," he said conciliatorily, "and we'll meet at the mess hall at for dinner."

"Yes, Sir." Marching into the small room, he avoided his uncle's sharp gaze as he began to slowly unpack his belongings. He could feel the older man watching him, but he stubbornly refused to meet his eye.

"I'll see you in a little while then," he heard him say from somewhere over his left shoulder. He could almost sense the older man's unease as he added in a softer tone, "We'll make our trip to the BX next week. The timing of the move – well, it's unfortunate. I think you could, uh, probably use a new stereo. Well, that's it then," he finished haltingly as he cleared his throat. "Merry Christmas, Skip. Don't forget to wear a suit for dinner tonight."

The door clicked closed, and Lee let out a long breath. A new stereo, he thought, the words seething in his mind. Like it didn't even matter, like everything could be fixed just by replacing it. Oh, someday. . .

"Someday, I'm gonna tell him exactly what I think," he muttered darkly. "And I'm gonna leave my stuff anyplace I want. Eat and drink anything I want. And spend the whole day just lying on the sofa."

Sighing again, he began to slowly put his things away.

Christmas Eve, 1972

Dragging himself reluctantly from the car, he trudged up the short flight of stairs to his uncle's Washington club. Hand on the door, he automatically ran through his mental checklist. Shoes polished, suit pressed, hair. . . well, two out of three would just have to do.

Moving through the darkened entryway, he quickly scanned the crowded bar. A few generals, and even a prominent member of the Department of Defense; Pete's uncle had said this spot was a favorite among the ranking military personnel in this town. He still hadn't figured out how the Colonel had managed to rate a membership here.

"Skip. Over here."

Exhaling loudly, he turned towards the sound. "Hello, Sir." He awkwardly extended his hand. "Uh, Merry Christmas."

His uncle smiled, grasping his hand with sturdy precision. "Yes. Merry Christmas to you, too." Clearing his throat, he added, "Well, come along, our table's ready."

He could feel the Colonel's sharp eyes on him as they sat down. "So, how are things? Still working at the campus bookstore?"

"Yes, Sir. I t's closed over Christmas break, though."

His uncle laughed curtly as he opened his menu. "That explains it then. Can't afford a haircut."

He ran a hand through his long hair. "A lot of the guys wear it this way," he said defensively as he retreated behind his own menu.

"So I 've noticed," his uncle informed him dryly.

Lee could feel his anger begin to simmer. Better do something, he thought grimly; can't afford to let it blow.

'I see a red door and I want it painted black. . . '

The words popped into his mind. Grinning, he silently sang along, his foot tapping the beat beneath the table. Nothing like a little classic Rolling Stones to set the mood for lunch with the Colonel.

He heard his uncle cough loudly, and he looked up into the waiter's smirking face.

"I'll have the roast beef," the Colonel ordered, "medium rare." Turning to Lee, he added pointedly, "The roast beef is the club specialty."

Gritting his teeth, Lee handed his menu to the waiter. "I'll just have a hamburger, well done," he stated in a monotone. "And a large order of fries. With ketchup."

The Colonel stiffened in his chair. "And bring me a bottle of your best Merlot," he added brusquely.

Scowling faintly, Lee stared down at his lap.

'I see a line of cars and they're all painted black. . .'

Why did the Colonel even bother to call, anyway? It's not like either one of them was into holiday cheer. Last minute orders to report to Andrews, he'd said. Typical. The man had to be ordered into town before he could fit him into his schedule.

"Well, Skip, how's school?" His uncle's voice reached him through a haze. "Classes going well?"

"Yes, Sir," he replied automatically, adding in a low voice, "I'm graduating in May, you know."

The Colonel laughed grimly. "Yes, I'm aware of that. I took a leap of faith and paid your graduation fee. History major, right?"

"Political Science, Sir."

"Oh, that's right," his uncle replied. "History was the last university. Or was it the one before that? I can never keep them straight."

Lee toyed absently with his fork.

' . . . I could not foresee this thing happening to you. . .'

Why the hell hadn't he just said 'no'? Well, okay, he had tried. Told the Colonel that he was having some car problems; that he was a guest at Pete's house; that the Thorntons might have plans. But somehow, he'd ended up at his uncle's club anyway. Enemy territory; trust the Colonel to stage a meeting on his own turf. . .

"How is Barney doing, Sir?" he heard himself ask abruptly, a little startled by the sound of his own voice. "I haven't heard from him in a while."

"Oh, yes," the Colonel said, absently patting his pockets. "I'm glad you reminded me." He pulled out a red envelope, handing it quickly to his nephew. "He asked me to give this to you."

Lee fingered the card, smiling. Good old Barney; he never forgot the holidays.

"Dorsey's out in California, you know, looking at retirement property," his uncle added pleasantly. "It's never too soon to think about your future."

Lee nodded, his eyes fixed on a spot just over the Colonel's right shoulder.

'... I have to turn my head until my darkness goes...'

These command performances made him feel like he was a kid again. Damn, how had the man managed to hunt him down? He thought he'd covered his tracks pretty well this year when he'd accepted his friend Pete's Christmas invitation. Whoever had talked was dead meat.

"Have you given any more thought to yours?" he heard his uncle ask.

"Uh, excuse me?" he said, looking up with a sheepish smile.

"Your future," his uncle clarified in an impatient tone. "Major Johnson's son will be starting Officers Training School this summer, you know."

Lee bit down on his lower lip. "Well, I was luckier than Tom, Sir. I have a high lottery number."

The Colonel scowled. "So being drafted is the only reason to serve your country?"

Lee studied the small lines on the starched linen tablecloth. "No. I just want to explore some other options, that's all."

"I see." The Colonel sighed. "Would you care to enlighten me?"

Lee shrugged. No use putting it off any longer. Even Mick Jagger couldn't save him this time.

"I, uh... I've been talking to Pete's uncle about a few opportunities."

The Colonel narrowed his eyes. "Harry Thornton's approached you?"

"Yes." Lee shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "I didn't know you knew Mr. Thornton, Sir."

"I don't know him personally. I've . . . heard of him. He . . ." The Colonel paused, pursing his lips as the waiter approached the table with the wine. "Yes, that's fine," he told him absently as he tested it. He took a deep breath, his eyes flicking speculatively over his nephew.

"Just a minute," he called to the waiter as he quickly turned over Lee's wine glass.

Lee raised an eyebrow in surprise. His uncle had definite ideas about who should and shouldn't drink wine. His uncle had definite ideas about almost everything.

The Colonel caught his eye. "Well, go ahead, Skip," he said, his voice unusually soft. "As you're so fond of telling me, you're over twenty-one."

"Yes, Sir." He obediently reached for his glass. The holidays were certainly having a strange effect on the old man this year, he thought as he sipped his wine. Still . . . He stole a quick glance at his watch. Had it only been fifteen minutes? It was sure going to be a long lunch. . .

Setting his face in a fixed smile, he let his mind drift again, his finger tapping idly on his knee.

'I see a red door and I want to paint it black. . .'

Christmas Eve, 1979

Lee held his breath as he made his way quietly down the deserted hallway. The shadows didn't offer much cover, and he glanced nervously over his shoulder. No one in sight, but he still felt strangely exposed. The feeling unnerved him, and he paused, deliberately modulating his breathing as he quickly calculated the distance from his current position to his target.

'Make a run for it,' the small voice inside his head told him in no uncertain terms. Taking a deep breath, he sprinted forward. Almost there. . .

"Hey, Scarecrow, where are you skulking off to?" The voice of his friend and partner Eric Jarvis broke the silence with a merry laugh. "The party's this way."

Lee slowed his steps, but didn't stop, calling out to Eric over his shoulder. "I have a couple of reports on my desk to finish up."

The young agent laughed again, nodding at the bullpen. "Well, last time I looked, your desk was this way, too."

Lee sighed, turning reluctantly to face his friend's laughing blue eyes. "Okay, you nailed me. I was going to grab some food."

Eric lounged against the wall, holding up a plate for Lee's inspection. "You can grab some food right in there." As if to emphasize his point, he took a large bite of some kind of cake.

"I'll take your word for it," Lee laughed. "What the hell are you eating, anyway?"

"Fruitcake, I think. Billy's wife made it." Eric crammed the last piece into his mouth. "It's terrific. Come on, try some."

"I need something more substantial than the usual party crap," Lee grouched as he edged toward the elevator. "I'm on the duty roster tonight."

Eric eyed his partner suspiciously. "Since when? We've been working round the clock to close the Kandefsky case."

Lee shrugged innocently. "Who knows? My name's there, that's all I know."

Eric shook his head. "Then it's an oversight. You heard Billy say we both had the next few days off, same as I did. Talk to him – he'll understand. You know how he feels about everyone in his section rating vacation this time of year."

"It's not a problem, really. It's not like I have any. . ." Lee sighed, running a hand through his hair as he eyed the elevator longingly. "But you go on," he encouraged, eyeing the spiked eggnog in his friend's hand. "Tie one on for me."

"If you insist, Scarecrow," Eric laughed, raising his glass in a mock salute. "But you don't know what you're missing. That new agent's in there."

"New agent?"

"Yeah, you know the one," he whispered conspiratorially. "The cute little blonde who transferred in. . . uh, Fanny or Franny. . ."

"Oh, you mean Francine," Lee grinned. "Don't let her hear you call her that, Range Rover, or you'll be smiling out of the other side of your shorts. Trust me, that one has the instincts of a barracuda."

"You obviously know her well," his friend laughed. "Why don't you introduce me?"

Still grinning, he edged strategically toward the elevator. "Uh-uh, you're on your own on this one, pal."

To his dismay, Eric followed him, deploying a maneuver of his own. "Will we see you at my folks' house tomorrow for dinner? If you're taking a shift tonight, you should be free."

Backed against the wall, Lee felt for the button, jamming his finger down forcefully. "Uh, I don't think so, but thanks for the offer."

"Come on, Scarecrow, dinner at our house with all the trimmings is practically a holiday tradition."

"The holidays and I called a cease-fire years ago, Jarvis, you know that," he grumbled. "I don't bother them and they don't bother me."

"Well, the invitation's open if you change your mind," Eric told him, finally surrendering as the elevator doors sprang apart. "You know where to find me."

Lee stepped inside, one hand holding the door open as he smiled at his friend. "I have a serious date tomorrow with a football game and a bowl of guacamole. Maybe next year."

Eric rolled his eyes. "I won't hold my breath."

Shrugging, Lee smiled, waving a dismissal as he removed his hand. "Merry Christmas, Scarecrow," he heard Eric call as the doors closed. "Hey, and wash my socks next time before you bring them back!"

Christmas Eve, 1984

"It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas, all around the. . ."

Groaning, Lee quickly fitted his key into the lock. The holiday party next door was already in full swing. Those people sure loved to celebrate, he thought sourly. Maybe he really should consider moving again when his lease was up.

Flipping on the light, he went to the bar and hastily poured himself a drink. Favoring his right leg, he headed for the couch, sinking down gratefully into the cushions. Sighing, he took a long drink, letting the scotch do its job.

No doubt about it. Tonight's mission had been a total, unqualified disaster. Two weeks work gone right down the drain, along with one agency sedan, a large plate glass window and a very unfortunately placed Christmas tree.

"Seasonal insanity again," Billy had labeled it as he read him the riot act. Well, granted, taking off after Stratinsky on his own probably wasn't one of his brightest moves, but there hadn't been time to call for backup. Couldn't Billy see that? He took another short drink. At least he'd had the foresight not to take the Corvette.

"And bringing Amanda King wouldn't have made one bit of difference," he announced sourly to the coffee table. Yeah, she'd been a godsend a few weeks ago when they were tracking down that bomb, but tonight had been dirty work and. . .

Besides, wasn't she taking the kids to some Christmas pageant at her church? He seemed to remember her rambling on about that while they had been going through Bartov's notes the other day.

Holding the half-empty glass against his throbbing temple, he leaned forward, reaching for the answering machine. Forefinger on the button, he hesitated for a fraction of a second. Oh, what the hell, he thought grimly as he pushed down.

"Hello, Skip." The Colonel's voice caught him slightly off guard, and he unconsciously straightened. "Wanted to wish you a happy holiday." A pause, followed by a loud breath. "All right then, I'm going to be out of the loop for a while. I've been working on a new maneuver for one of my squadrons and there's a few bugs I have to. . . well, anyway, I'll be in touch when I get things in order. Maybe we can have dinner."

Clicking the machine off, he fell back against the couch. Same old Colonel, he thought with a roll of his eyes. The man was a regular working machine, even on. . . shaking his head ruefully, he quickly pressed the button again.

"Try our introductory holiday special," the prerecorded voice told him. "Clean two rooms of carpet and get the third room free. Call. . ."

Wincing, he quickly sped to the next message. "Lee, darling," the soft voice purred. All right, this was a little more interesting. "Where the hell are you? I thought we had a date tonight." Whoops, he'd done it again, he thought ruefully. At least she didn't sound too mad. . . "This is the third time this month," the voice continued, a little more shrilly. "If I don't hear from you by nine o'clock tonight, I'm making other plans." Okay, amend that, he thought with a sigh; she was pissed.

Damn. When the mess with Stratinsky came down so suddenly, his date with Margot had totally slipped his mind. True, strictly speaking, seeing her tonight hadn't been his idea; she'd invited herself over for a little Christmas cheer. Still. . . hand on the phone, he hesitated. Margot was fun, and she might be just the diversion he needed. He glanced at his watch. Almost nine-thirty - with a little luck, he could still salvage the evening. He'd just clear the rest of these messages. . .

"Hi, Lee, it's me. . . Amanda," the familiar voice told him as he pushed down the button. "I missed you at the party this afternoon and I just wanted to wish you a Merry Christmas. Francine said you were on an assignment, so I hope everything is okay. Are you there? Why do I have this feeling that. . . well, I guess I just really hate these machines," she went on with a light laugh. "Anyway, I hope you have a happy holiday. Goodbye."

He shook his head and smiled, taking another long sip of scotch. Amanda was brimming over with holiday cheer. How on earth did she manage that? Now, what was Margot's number? 555- 6210? No, 12. . .

The doorbell rang as he reached for the phone and, grinning, he abruptly changed course. His holiday luck was changing - Margot must have decided to keep their date after all. Brushing off his suit coat, he gave the apartment a quick once over as he quickly crossed the room.

"Margot, sweetie," he grinned as he flung the door open. "Merry. . ."

". . .Christmas," Amanda finished with a weak smile.

"What are you. . ."

"I brought you. . ."

They both smiled sheepishly. "I'm sorry Lee, I should have called. Well, I mean, I did call, and you weren't home so. . ."

"Uh, no," he said with an awkward sigh. "I, uh, was working. I just got in a few. . ."

". . .so I was just going to leave this next door for you. But then I thought maybe. . ."

"She reached out hesitantly, her hand hanging tentatively in the air for a minute before clutching the neatly packaged dish once again. "You've got a smudge of dirt on your cheek," she stated in a low voice, inclining her head towards his. "Right there."

"Oh, yeah," he replied with a silly smile, rubbing vigorously at a spot below his eye. "I lost an argument with some shrubs." He gave her an apologetic look as he added, "Long story."

She tilted her head slightly to the right. "Well. . . I just wanted to stop by and bring you a little Christmas cheer," she explained, holding the plate out in front of her. "We had plenty of food, enough to feed a small army, and I thought. . .well, you need to eat something more substantial than chips and guacamole. . ."

He took the heavy dish from her hand. He could feel his stomach begin to rumble, and he suddenly remembered he'd skipped lunch. Her timing really was uncanny. . .

"Thanks, Amanda," he said, flashing her a grin. "I didn't get a chance to get to the store yet." He took a small step forward. "Would you. . . like to. . . come in?" He lifted the platter gingerly. "I t, uh, feels like there's enough here to share."

He watched her take a deep breath, then slowly let it out. "Oh, thanks, but. . . well, Mother and the boys are out in the car." She looked slightly embarrassed as she shrugged. "I promised we'd drive around to look at the Christmas lights."

He grimaced slightly as he shifted his weight off his sore leg. "Oh, sure, I understand."

"And you've got Margot coming over," she added hastily. "I wouldn't want to. . ."

"Yeah, right, Margot," he said with short sigh. He fingered the heavy casserole dish. Somehow, an evening with Margot's overstated charms suddenly seemed less appealing. The usual holiday gloom must be setting in.

"Well, I should probably go then," he heard Amanda say. "Mother and the boys. . ."

He nodded. "Thanks for the food," he told her simply.

"Merry Christmas, Lee."

He gave her a tentative smile, letting her dark brown eyes draw him in for just a moment before he quickly looked away. He suddenly wished. . . he didn't quite know what he wished. "Uh, yeah," he mumbled softly as he watched her turn towards the elevator. "Merry Christmas."

Frowning, he closed the door with a firm shove. All that music next door was really starting to grate on his nerves. . .

Christmas Eve, 1986

He watched the fire crackle and spit as it died down, a few careless embers spilling onto the hearth. As the laughter finally quieted, the low strains of what was obviously a well-loved Christmas album filled the room. Running a hand through his hair, Lee pressed his back more firmly into the couch.

Amanda sighed quietly beside him, and he gave her a cautious smile. "Looks like we did it," she said, returning his glance. "We survived another holiday."

"Well, I'm not so sure about the family room," Dotty retorted as she surveyed the remains of torn wrapping paper and ribbon. "It looks like a small bomb went off in here."

"A teenage bomb, you mean," Joe King put in with a laugh. "Come on, boys, let's get a garbage bag and clean up this mess."

Groaning slightly, Amanda's sons reluctantly scrambled to their feet, continuing their private debate as they trailed after their dad. "C'mon, I was half right," Phillip insisted in a loud stage whisper. "Sweaters, vests. . . what's the difference? They're still red."

"And Aunt Lillian took the price tags off, too," Jamie grumbled, equally dismayed. "We might actually have to wear 'em!"

"That's my sister, all right," Dotty moaned as the back door closed with a bang. "Absolutely clueless." Giving the two occupants of the sofa a sideways glance, she continued, "But I think I'd better run upstairs and check on her. Those headaches of hers are starting to worry me."

As her mother marched from the room, Amanda turned to Lee. "How about you?" she queried as she rested her hand lightly on his knee. "You have a headache yet?"

"I'll let you know," Lee replied with a grin.

Amanda chuckled softly. "Christmas in our family can be a little overwhelming."

"It certainly seems to agree with you," he said, tweaking her nose lightly with his finger. He couldn't remember when he'd seen such a glow on her cheeks or such a mesmerizing twinkle of happiness in her eyes.

"You've been kind of quiet tonight."

He shrugged. "Just thinkin', I guess."

"That can be dangerous, Scarecrow," she teased, motioning him closer for a kiss.

They heard the playful scuffle outside the back door and quickly jumped back. Exhaling loudly, he said a silent thank-you that Amanda's sons seemed incapable of doing anything without an accompanying fanfare.

"Hey, fellas," he heard her admonish yet again as they burst into the room, "no running, remember? That mess isn't going anywhere."

"Except right into the garbage bag," Joe added as he followed behind them. "Be sure to get that paper you tossed in the corner." Sinking down into the wing-backed chair, he slowly shook his head. "They've been like that all day."

"You should have seen them in church," Dotty added with a sigh as she came back downstairs. "I don't know what it is with boys and Christmas. . ."

"It's all the gnarly presents, Grandma," Jamie informed her, pushing his oversized glasses back up his nose.

"As long as you remember all the gnarly thank you notes that go along with them," she reminded him with a laugh.

"Oh, Grandma."

"Now you've done it," Phillip muttered darkly, giving his brother a playful shove.

"Like she was really gonna forget," he retorted, tossing a piece of crumpled paper at Phillip's head.

"Was everything okay with Aunt Lillian?" Amanda asked quickly.

"She was sleeping," her mother replied. "I t's been a long day."

"I guess it is getting kind of late," Lee put in as he shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "Maybe I should. . ."

Amanda put a hand on his arm. "I t's not that late."

"Amanda's right," Dotty agreed. "Why, you two practically just got here. Working so hard, and on Christmas Eve, too. You know, you really should complain to your boss. . ."

He stole a quick glance at Amanda. Smiling back at him, she mouthed a silent 'stay', and he felt an inexplicable yearning come over him. Christmas in the King house certainly did odd things to a person, he thought with a sigh.

"Lee?"

He heard Dotty call his name expectantly, and he suddenly realized she'd asked him a question. "I 'm sorry, Mrs. West," he said, turning his eyes from Amanda's with an effort.

She looked at him speculatively. "I asked what kind of film you two are making? That you had to work on Christmas Eve?"

He cleared his throat, shooting Amanda a tentative glance. "I t's a, uh, documentary," he stammered, wondering why he suddenly found himself at such an unexpected loss for words.

"An exposé, really," Amanda embellished with practiced ease.

"An exposé!" Dotty exclaimed, warming to the subject. "How exciting! What about?"

"Toys, Mother," Amanda put in quickly, giving Lee a covert smile. "Just toys."

"Toys?" her mother replied incredulously. "And you have enough material for a film?"

"Yes, we got everything we needed tonight at the Titan plant," she grinned.

"Humph," Dotty said, crossing her arms over her chest. "I guess I never realized there was anything that intriguing about manufacturing toys."

Lee gave a short laugh. "You'd be surprised."

Phillip looked up from his seat on the floor. "Did you get any free samples?" he asked, while Jamie appeared equally interested.

"Boys," Joe put in quickly, glancing from Lee to Amanda. "Haven't you two made a big enough haul this year? I don't think. . ."

"It's okay," Lee said with a friendly laugh. "I do have a few things in my trunk, but I'm not sure you guys would be interested. They're all pretty low tech." Reaching into his pocket, he retrieved his car keys, tossing them to Phillip. "You're welcome to take a look."

"Cool," Phillip cried. "Come on, Jamie."

"Take the trash out with you," Amanda called as they made a beeline for the front door.

"Never a dull moment with those two," Joe said as he watched his sons' hasty exit. "Or a quiet one."

"They're pretty wound up," Amanda agreed. "They've really enjoyed having you around this year, Joe."

"I've enjoyed it, too. They're both getting so grown-up." He shook his head sadly. "When did that happen?"

"I don't know. It seems like only yesterday that they were waiting for Santa." She caught Joe's eye. "Are you coming for dinner tomorrow, Sweetheart? You know you're more than welcome."

"Oh, I think I've been underfoot enough for one holiday season, don't you?" Joe gave her a warm smile as she started to object. "I did promise a friend I'd stop over."

"Well, if you change your mind, we have more than enough food."

"Thanks, I'll remember. . ."

"Hey, Mr. Stetson, your car's really cool," Phillip interrupted as he thundered down the short flight of stairs into the family room. "I t'd be great to have a ride sometime."

"Uh, sure," he replied, giving Amanda a questioning smile. As she nodded, he added, "I think we could arrange something."

"Gee, thanks." Shifting from foot to foot, Phillip slowly pulled something out from behind his back. "This is kind of cool, too," he grinned, holding up a furry cat-like creature clad in a blue scarf.

"Phillip," Amanda said, looking at her son as if he'd grown another head. "You really like that?"

"No, but he thinks Linda Thompson will," Jamie informed them as he suddenly materialized in the doorway.

"Well, see, I kinda forgot to get her a present," Phillip explained sheepishly as he returned Lee's keys.

Jamie rolled his eyes. "'Forgot'? You spent the last of your Christmas money on that smelly aftershave."

"I needed that!" Phillip cried indignantly. "I've got an image, you know."

Lee gave him a knowing look. "You're more than welcome to that, uh, whatever it is, Phillip."

"Thanks, Mr. Stetson," Phillip smiled appreciatively. "You're a lifesaver. See," he whispered, bumping his shoulder against his brother's, "I told you it would be okay."

"Enough, fellas," Amanda stated emphatically as the boys' running battle showed signs of a fresh skirmish. Glancing at the clock, she added, "I think it's about time to hit the sack."

Phillip groaned. "Aww, Mom. . ."

"Hey, you know you won't find what you want under the tree on Christmas morning if you don't get into bed," she responded with a teasing laugh.

"Your mom's right," Joe chimed in as the brothers exchanged a 'give-me-a-break' look. "And it's past my bedtime as well." Pushing himself up from the chair, he turned to Lee, saying with a pleasant smile, "Good to see you again."

"Same here," Lee replied, rising to shake Joe's proffered hand. Taking a small step back, he watched as Amanda's ex-husband said the rest of his goodbyes. For some reason, the exchange made him feel oddly uncomfortable; as if he was intruding in territory clearly marked 'family'. Stiffening, he shoved his hands into his pockets.

"Well, everyone," he heard Dotty chime in suddenly, "I think I'm headed to bed, too. Come on, boys," she added with a less-than-subtle smile as she corralled her grandsons, "we'll walk your dad out." Effectively shepherding them towards the door, she called back over her shoulder, "Merry Christmas, everyone."

"Merry Christmas," he heard Amanda reply. Surprisingly, she didn't follow the departing troops, but instead moved to his side. Jamie, too, hung back, one foot poised on the steps leading into the hall.

"I hope you liked your scarf, Mr. Stetson," he said with a diffident smile.

Lee looked over at the bespectacled youngster. "I did, Jamie, thanks."

"Yeah," he replied, "Mom said you would." Grinning widely, he turned and bolted up the stairs.

He turned a speculative eye on Amanda. "I suppose I deserved that."

"Jamie hates to shop, too," she said with a wry grin.

He sighed softly, running a hand quickly through his hair. "You know, I really should hit the road."

"After Mother worked so hard to clear the room? She'll be devastated." She reached for his hand, giving it a comforting squeeze. "Come on, just a little longer."

Looking down into her eyes, he let out a long breath. Every instinct was telling him to run; after all, he'd been heeding their insistent call all week. And yet. . .

Where was the old Stetson panache he'd come to count on? 'Damn holidays', he cursed silently as he let her lead him back to the couch; they always made him feel oddly off-balance.

She snuggled deeper into his embrace, and he sighed. "Thank you for giving Phillip that silly creature," she told him softly. "You sure Bernie won't mind?"

"Nah. He'll just be happy we got to the bottom of that mess at Titan Toys. By the way," he added dryly, "good save with your mother."

"Practice makes perfect'."

Lee looked into her eyes. "I guess I never realized how hard this must be for you," he murmured. "The constant. . ." He broke off, racking his brain for the right word.

"Creative fabrication?" she supplied with a grin. "No, you're right, it's not easy, but. . ." She lifted her lips to his. "Definitely worth the effort."

Lee bent over, covering her mouth once again. He pulled her against him, kissing her fully and deeply, the way he suddenly realized he'd wanted to do all evening - openly, for everyone to see.

"Dinner's at one tomorrow," she informed him with a sigh as they finally broke apart.

Breathing heavily, he stumbled over his words. "Amanda. . . I don't know. . . I mean, I want to, but. . ."

"It's not open for debate," she told him in no uncertain terms. "I know this isn't easy for you, Lee," she continued, reaching for his hand. "I've watched you run your holiday avoidance pattern very effectively for what, three years now?" Sighing, she fixed him in her gaze. "We're engaged to be married; you're going to be part of this family. I think now's as good a time as any to start, don't you?"

"Amanda, I. . ."

"You can't say no, Stetson," she told him simply. "I've already bought the guacamole."

He exhaled loudly, looking at her with a grudging smile. "I guess I can't."

"Good," she murmured, entwining her fingers with his as she nestled in beside him again.

Leaning back against the couch, he closed his eyes. Maybe he should start listening to Amanda instead of those old instincts of his, he thought as he gave her hand a little squeeze. It did feel good to be here. Very good indeed.

Christmas Eve, 1989

"Well, Scarecrow," Amanda moaned as she opened the back door to their house on Maplewood Drive. "It looks like we've done it again. I think they're all in bed."

"Damn," Lee muttered as he followed his wife into the darkened kitchen. "I'm sorry, Amanda. This was supposed to be just a milk run – easy in, easy out. I never would have agreed to back up Francine if I thought. . ."

She quickly cut off his apology. "Oh, Lee, I know that." Twisting the kinks from her neck, she flipped on the light. "I was just hoping this was the year we'd finally break with tradition, that's all."

"Yeah, I know," he whispered, coming up behind her. "Me, too." He heard his wife's contented sigh as his fingers started to work their magic on her neck.

"What time is it, anyway?" she asked quietly, tilting her head to one side.

"Late. It was almost twelve-thirty when we left the emergency room."

"At least Francine's going to be all right. Ever since she and Jonathon split. . ."

Lee gave her shoulders a tender squeeze. "She's been taking chances; I know, I've seen it, too. That's why I thought we should go tonight. . ."

"Shush, stop apologizing." Turning, she placed a cool hand on his forehead. "Right now, you're the one I'm concerned about. How's your face?"

"Feels like someone used a sledgehammer on it," he mumbled under his breath. "The adrenaline rush must be wearing off."

"Oh, Lee." Pursing her lips, she gave him a careful inspection. "Well, it's definitely starting to bruise."

"I'll be fine, Amanda," he reassured her.

"It looks painful," she told him, wincing in empathy as she gently fingered the purplish area beneath his right eye. "Maybe you should have let the doctors look at you, too."

"It's fine." Stilling her fingers, he brought them to his lips for a kiss. "Really."

She rolled her eyes. "At least let me get you some ice."

He threw his hands up in mock surrender. "Okay, okay, I give up." Flashing her a lopsided smile, he headed for the sofa, lowering himself stiffly onto the soft cushions. Somewhere over his shoulder, the sound of rattling drawers mingled with ominous muttering as his wife ransacked the kitchen. "I think Phillip had the ice pack last," he reminded her with a weary sigh. "He jammed his finger in the game the other night."

A cabinet crashed shut. "Found it," she called guiltily. "I swear that boy never puts anything in the same place twice." He heard her quiet laugh. "Your habits must be rubbing off."

"Very funny," he began, twisting around to look over the back of the sofa. "I'm not that. . .agghhh. Damn, I must have pulled something in my back, too," he groaned, straightening cautiously as he sank into the cushions.

"You're getting old, Stetson," she teased as she sat down beside him. "Maybe we should take this as some sort of sign."

Sighing, he closed his eyes. "Maybe so."

"Here you go," she said in a low voice as she laid the cold pack comfortably against his cheek. "This should help."

"Thanks." Her whispered words were almost as soothing as the cool ice, and he felt himself begin to unwind. Exhaling loudly, he reached for her hand. "Much better than those ER docs."

She brought his hand to her lips, tenderly kissing his bruised knuckles. "I think you could use some ice here, too." Letting out an exasperated sigh, she reclined beside him, his hand still clasped in hers. "Whatever possessed you to tackle that big guy in the Santa suit, anyway? He weighed two-fifty easy."

Lee gave a short laugh. "Who knew all that padding was real? Besides," he stated, looking down into his wife's dark eyes. "I couldn't wait to get home and open my present."

"Do you want your present now?" she inquired, her voice low and inviting. "Or later?"

"How about now and later," he quipped. Tossing the ice pack onto the coffee table, he inclined his head slowly towards hers.

Pulling back, she laid two fingers against his lips. "I thought you were injured?"

"Don't worry, Mrs. Stetson," he told her with a teasing laugh. "I'm pretty sure I can still rise to the occasion."

"That's a relief," she grinned. "Hold that thought while I get your present." Pushing him away gently, she scrambled up off the couch. Walking purposefully over to the bookcase, she quickly searched the shelves.

"Amanda," he asked with a puzzled frown, "what are you. . ."

"There it is," she said, her fingers closing over the worn volume at last. Returning to the sofa, she handed it to Lee with a sly smile.

He glanced curiously at the title. "Dickens? You're kidding, right? Or is this your subtle way of telling me we've been working too hard during the holidays?"

"I gave up subtle years ago, Mr. Scrooge," she laughed as she sat down beside him. "Just open it."

"Very funny," he groaned as he opened the book. "I haven't been that bad this year. I even went to the mall with you twice. . . what the. . ." He eyed her suspiciously as a blue and red envelope dropped into his lap. "What's this?"

"I know it's been a long time, Stetson, but I thought you'd still recognize airline tickets when you saw them," she teased. "Merry Christmas."

He looked up at her in shocked surprise. "Where... when..."

"Hawaii," she informed him with a smile. "And 'when' is next week. The boys are going on that trip with the ski club, and I thought it would be the perfect time. You know, we never really got around to finishing our honeymoon," she continued in a rush "and, well, I've already talked to Billy. . . he's okayed the time off."

Everything's set. All you have to do is. . ." Noting his bemused expression, she stopped abruptly, staring down at the discarded tickets in his lap. "If you don't want to go. . ."

"No, Amanda, it's not that," he said quickly. Tilting her chin up, he forced her to meet his eye. "It's a perfect present, really. In fact. . ." He gave her an embarrassed laugh. "I, uh, have a little surprise of my own." Pushing himself wearily off the couch, he retrieved the picture of Dotty and the boys from the top shelf of the bookcase. Turning it over, he carefully extracted a white envelope from the frame, handing it to her with a slightly chagrined look. "Merry Christmas," he said with a short laugh. "Now I know why Billy could hardly keep a straight face when I talked to him last week."

Amanda's eyes widened. "You got tickets, too?"

He nodded. "Great minds, I guess. A week in Aspen - just the two of us." Setting the picture on the coffee table, he dropped back down beside her, taking her hands in his. "I thought maybe we could use the time," he explained, rubbing his thumbs gently over her knuckles. "We have some life-altering issues to discuss, Mrs. Stetson."

"I know." She gave his hands a comforting squeeze. "We need to make a decision before my biological clock makes it for us. Thank you." Leaning in, she gave him a gentle kiss. "First things first. Do you care where we go?"

He pulled her with him as he sank back into the couch. "Nope. We could go to the North Pole as long as we get some time alone," he stated with an emphatic sigh.

"What about the extra tickets?" she asked, swinging her legs across his lap.

"We'll give 'em to your mother and Curt," he replied with a throaty laugh. "I'm sure they'll enjoy them."

She groaned softly. "Lee, she's my mother. You know I can't think about her like . . . oh!" She gasped as he nibbled lightly on a spot below her left ear. "That feels wonderful. . ."

"Mom? Lee?" Jamie's concerned voice mixed with Phillip's deeper one. "Is that you?"

They both jumped slightly, and he gave her a good-natured smile. "Some things never change, huh?"

Shrugging apologetically, she quickly swung her legs to the floor. "In here, fellas," she called as she blew him a kiss.

There was a scuffling noise, followed by, "I told you it wasn't a burglar, Worm Brain," as the two teenagers burst into the room.

"Hey, what did I tell you guys about wrestling on the stairs?" Amanda admonished as she fought to control her smile. "Your grandmother says she's not painting over one more smudge."

"Sorry," they chorused, Jamie's look a little more contrite than his brother's. "You guys missed an awesome dinner, Mom," he told them, while Phillip added, "Hey, Lee, what happened to you?"

"Uh, nothing much," he replied sheepishly. "A little trouble at work. I guess I sort of zipped when I should have zagged."

"What's all that racket?" Dotty demanded as she came down the stairs. "Boys, if you're into those presents again, you're in big trouble. I told you to wait for your mother and Lee. . . well," she exclaimed as she entered the room, "it's about time!"

Amanda smiled at Lee. "Merry Christmas, Mother. I'm sorry we're so late."

"Merry Christmas, darlings," Dotty replied. "Did you have anything to eat? I saved you both a plate. Now I don't guarantee. . . oh, my gosh!" she gasped as she caught sight of Lee's face. "What happened to you?"

Lee laughed weakly. "Would you believe I ran into a door?"

"No, I wouldn't," she returned in an unmistakably sarcastic tone. Crossing her arms over her chest, she continued to peer at him closely.

Amanda cleared her throat. "Hey," she said quickly, "as long as we're all here, how about we open a few presents? After all, I think it's officially Christmas."

"Awesome," Jamie responded, while his brother's head and shoulders were already buried under the tree.

"Turn on the tree lights while you're under there, Phillip," Dotty told him with a wry smile, "While I get the eggnog. We might as well do this right. And I think there are some cookies left. Oh, Lee, darling, your uncle called earlier tonight," Dotty

informed them as she headed into the kitchen. "To wish us all a happy holiday. Such a charming man, and he didn't seem at all surprised when I told him you two were still working."

Lee caught his wife's eye, but she merely shrugged, shaking her head as her mother continued the evening's play-by-play. "And Joe and Carrie stopped by with the baby. Oh, Amanda, she's just precious. I hardly recognized her - she's gotten so big," she added breathlessly. "Can you believe it? Walking now. . ."

Lee and Amanda exchanged another glance, and she reached for the ice pack. "Mind if I borrow this?" she asked with a teasing smile.

He laughed lightly. "Be my guest." Smiling, he opened his arms, cradling Amanda closely against his chest. From the kitchen, his mother-in-law continued her monologue, while his stepsons sat cross-legged on the floor, methodically grouping the presents as if they hadn't done it a million times already. Letting out a contented sigh, he brushed his lips tenderly through his wife's dark hair.

"Merry Christmas, Lee," she told him soothingly as she pulled his arms tighter around her.

Drawing in a deep breath, he gave her a tight squeeze. "Yeah."

Christmas Eve, 1992

'Not a creature was stirring.'

Running a hand through his hair, Lee sighed, wearily checking the perimeter one more time.

'Not even a . . .'

He groaned lightly. "Damn silly poem," he muttered under his breath. He couldn't seem to get it out of his head. For almost solid month, little Matthew had demanded a daily reading. By now, the entire family could practically recite the ridiculous thing in their sleep.

Pausing by the old maple tree, he listened carefully, automatically filtering out the usual night noises - the rev of a car engine, a siren in the distance. Nothing that didn't belong. Letting out a deep breath, he anxiously consulted his watch again.

Almost midnight. Two hours overdue. And now the whole operation was hanging by a thread. He must have been out of his mind to trust. . .

"Pssst." Pricking up his ears, he cautiously checked the shadows. "Pssst." The hissing sound appeared to be coming from the bushes. Suddenly wishing he'd arranged a different transfer, Lee moved guardedly towards the noise.

"It's about time you got here," he growled as he dragged the stealthy figure out from behind a large shrub. "Where the hell have you been?"

"Hey, it's Christmas Eve," the man protested weakly. Raising an eyebrow, he picked a few stray twigs from the front of his black jacket. "And I've got an image to maintain. I'm an important man these days, you know."

Lee gave him a quick once-over. Pants an inch too short, imitation leather jacket two sizes too big - his old informant was still in desperate need of a tailor. "Save it for someone who believes it, Augie," he said with a broad grin.

"Lee, my man, you wound me. . ."

Exhaling loudly, he rolled his eyes. "I've been waiting for you for over two hours. You got the package?"

"Well. . ." Augie nervously cleared his throat. "It wasn't easy, you know. It's not like the old days."

Lee bristled. "Listen, you worm," he snapped, grabbing the man forcefully by his shoulders. "Thanks to you, so far tonight I've had to sweep the back walk, take out the trash, and deliver a Christmas coffee cake to that nosy busybody Edna Gilstrap. I'm clean out of excuses, and my wife's not exactly a rookie. So you'd better not tell me. . ."

Augie Swan pulled himself up to his full height. "Hey, pal, I'm the one doin' you the favor here. I'm an information broker, you know, not a fur peddler."

"Okay, okay." Lee gritted his teeth, dusting off the man's jacket. Nights like this made him thankful he'd traded the field for the section chief's office. "Did you get it or not?"

"Well, it's like this," Augie told him with a toothy grin. "I was supposed to pick up the goods from a guy in a Rolls parked on M Street, but he got nervous and changed the rendezvous. So I headed to the Mall, but this metro cop kept strolling by. You

can't sneeze there these days without. . . " He coughed lightly into his palm as he caught Lee's expression. "Well," he finished, "then I finally made contact at the Washington monument and. . ."

Lee groaned. "Cut to the chase."

"Have I ever let you down, Lee old boy? Of course I got it." Swan moved his hand to his chest, his thumb and forefinger resting tantalizingly on the zipper of his jacket. "You got the cash?"

Rolling his eyes again, Lee reached into his back pocket, swiftly pulling out some bills. He'd almost forgotten how annoying Augie Swan could be. One eye on the slippery broker, he cautiously counted out three twenties.

"Aw, come on," Augie whined, patting the front of his jacket. "It's Christmas, and this is prime merchandise. I could get three times that on the street."

Mumbling under his breath, Lee thrust the remaining bills into the man's pocket. "That's my final offer, you shark. You owe me, remember?"

Augie shuffled his feet. "Yeah, I remember." Letting out a deep breath, he slowly unzipped his jacket. "Here you go," he said, gingerly handing off the squirming puppy.

Lee cradled the tiny bundle of fur against his chest. "Thanks, Augie," he said with a grin. "I guess that makes us even."

"Anytime, pal. I . . ."

"Lee?"

His wife's voice drifted out of the darkness, and he watched in amusement as a light sheen of sweat broke out on Augie's brow. "Go on, you coward," he urged as he glanced nervously over his shoulder. "Get outta here before she. . ."

"Are you talking to someone?"

Amanda's voice sounded uncomfortably close to his left ear. Stepping to the side, he efficiently blocked the view while Augie melted into the darkness. Holding the puppy firmly in the palm of his hand, he turned around, shifting the wiggly fur-ball behind his back.

He greeted her with a nervous smile. "Uh, hi, honey. Did you, uh, get Matthew tucked in?"

Amanda eyed him suspiciously. "Matthew's been sound asleep for over an hour." Edging slightly to the right, she added, "You know that as well as I do."

"Oh, yeah." He shifted uncomfortably as the puppy began to chew on his thumb. "Phillip and Jamie get back?"

"Yes, and before you ask, the Colonel's at his hotel and Mother and Curt made it back to their place just fine." Her eyes narrowed as Lee backed away. "What are you up to, Stetson?"

"Uh, nothing, dear," he said as he started to sweat. For such a little guy, this puppy had remarkably sharp teeth.

Amanda rolled her eyes. "There you go with the endearments again. Now I'm certain you're up to no good."

"Amanda," he protested as she continued to advance on him. "I really don't. . ."

She abruptly switched tracks, murmuring sweetly, "Okay."

"Okay?" he echoed nervously.

"Okay." She gave him a soft smile. "I guess I'm not really being fair. I can wait for my present until tomorrow."

He grinned as he saw a familiar spark in her eyes. "Uh, well, maybe I'm the one who's not being fair," he replied, flashing her a smile. "Why don't you wait for me upstairs? I'll be there in just a minute."

She ran her tongue lightly over her upper lip. "Don't take too long."

"Don't worry." His mouth seemed involuntarily drawn to hers and, without thinking, he leaned in to kiss her.

She evaded him with ease, quickly reaching behind him. Her eyes widened as her fingers closed on soft fur. "What on earth. . ."

Lee gave her a weak grin, slowly bringing his hand out from behind his back. "Merry Christmas?" he said hopefully.

"Oh, my gosh!"

"Cute, huh?" he stated enthusiastically, holding the small bundle of fur next to his face. As if on cue, the puppy gave his cheek a swipe with his tongue.

"Lee!" his wife exclaimed as she shook her head in frustration. "I thought we'd agreed on this."

"Actually, I believe we decided no horses," Lee corrected her with an innocent smile. "This is a dog."

"Yeah, I can see that." There was an unmistakably sarcastic tone to her voice, and Lee winced. "You knew exactly what we were talking about," she continued unhappily. "Phillip and Jamie are both away at college, and Matthew's only two - he's much too young to have the responsibility of a pet."

"We'll all pitch in," he offered. "It'll be fun. Come on, Amanda," he urged, sidling up to next to her. "It's just a little dog."

"'Little', my foot! Have you seen the size of this paw?" She reached into his arms, holding up one soft, padded foot. "And I can tell you exactly what's gonna happen here." The puppy began to lick her fingers, and she absently stroked his head. "You'll end up with all the fun, and I'll end up with all the work."

"Fifty-fifty, partner," he stated firmly. "I swear."

Amanda rolled her eyes. "Where have I heard that before, Stetson?"

"Amanda," he rejoined defensively. "That was the meanest guinea pig I'd ever seen. Even Jamie said so. Come on," he cajoled, flashing her his brightest smile as she showed signs of weakening. "Every little boy wants a dog."

"Lee..." She bit her bottom lip. "Every little boy?" she asked pointedly as she moved a step closer to her husband. Reaching out, she gave his shoulder a light squeeze. "Or one in particular?"

He shrugged lightly, unable to meet her eye. Rubbing his thumb and forefinger along the dog's neck, he said in a low voice, "He's a cute little guy."

"Yeah," she whispered, "He is at that." She sighed softly. "Okay, okay. Who am I to stand between a boy and his dog?"

Grinning, he gave her a light kiss on the cheek. "I love you, Mrs. Stetson."

"Yeah, well, it's cold out here," she returned, a smile tugging at her lips. "We should probably get our newest family member inside." Linking her arm through his, they started for the house. "And I love. . ." Stopping suddenly, she gave him a curious look. "Just exactly where did this dog come from?"

"Where do most dogs come from?" he parried, not quite meeting her eye.

"I know where most dogs come from; where'd you get this one?" She fixed him in her gaze. "Pet stores don't deliver at midnight."

"Uh, well," he muttered guiltily. "Um, Augie Swan picked him up for me."

"Augie Swan. . ." she repeated in disbelief.

"Yeah. I ran into him unexpectedly last week. You wouldn't believe what he's into now. . . Well, anyway," he put in hurriedly as her eyes narrowed, "he knew a guy who knew a guy who knew another guy who deals in rare breeds, so. . ."

"Lee Stetson," Amanda said sternly, her arms folded across her chest. "That dog is hot!"

"He's not hot," Lee stated sheepishly, running a hand through his hair as she continued to glare at him. "Maybe just a little lukewarm."

She let out an exasperated sigh. "You were so close, Stetson, so close. You almost had a normal Christmas Eve. . ."

"Amanda. . ."

"And I had such hopes for you this year," she continued blithely. "We ate dinner on time, we sang carols, we opened presents. We even went to church; all without a single bad guy in sight. And then. . ." With a final roll of her eyes, she opened the back door, mumbling over her shoulder as she entered, "And then you go and blow it all by getting us a hot dog. . ."

Lee watched the door swing shut with an emphatic thud. Grinning sheepishly, he held the puppy up. "Don't worry, little fella," he soothed, looking into the dog's soulful black eyes. "She never really liked 'normal' anyway."

Christmas Eve, 1997

Lee closed the door carefully so he wouldn't disturb the sleeping household.

"Down, Hotdog," he stated in a loud whisper as the black and white mutt greeted him with an enthusiastic whine. Genuine Australian shepherd, my foot, Lee thought ruefully; he should have known better than to trust Augie Swan.

Running a hand through his hair, he checked his watch. One-fifteen in the morning; he'd missed all the Christmas Eve festivities. Amanda would probably have his head on a platter. Not to mention he'd disappointed Matthew again.

The dog continued to nuzzle his leg. "What are you doing down here, fella?" he asked, giving him an affectionate rub. When Amanda was around, Hotdog was never far from her side. "You in the doghouse, too?"

"I'm in here."

The words were spoken in little more than a whisper, but there was no mistaking their tone.

Sighing, he dropped his keys onto the small desk in the foyer, picking his way through the scattered boxes as he headed for the family room. They'd just moved into the new house in Rockville last weekend. With the holidays and their hectic job schedules, there hadn't been time to finish all the unpacking.

"I'm really sorry, Amanda," he began before he even entered the room. "There were problems with the Martinson debriefing and I got called back to. . ."

"When were you going to tell me, Lee?"

The words drifted over to him from the sofa, oddly disembodied in the darkness, and he realized with an unpleasant jolt that she wasn't talking about last minute glitches in tonight's case. Taking a deep breath, he carefully plotted a course across the room.

She flipped on the light. Marching briskly past him to the desk, she retrieved a folder, handing it to him in ear-splitting silence. His face paled slightly as he recognized the embossed seal.

"Phillip told you?"

Pursing her lips, she nodded gravely.

"Amanda. . ."

"At least he had the courtesy to finally come clean," she stated with simmering anger. "When were you intending to let me in on this, Lee, the morning he reported for his freshman candidate classes?"

He ran a hand awkwardly through his hair. "It wasn't my place to tell you. This was Phillip's decision."

Turning away, she hugged her chest. "Don't con me - you didn't try to discourage him."

"I didn't encourage him, either, Amanda. There's a distinction, you know."

Whirling around, she faced him again, eyes blazing. "A damn subtle one, Stetson."

"Phillip did this completely on his own," Lee protested. "He even used an alias on the application. I didn't know until he'd been approved and the security check kicked his form back."

"You could have told me then. I'm the freshman supervisor, Scarecrow. I didn't have a need to know?"

"He wanted to tell you himself. Did you look at this file? I mean, really look at it?" he added as she showed signs of interrupting. Handing the manila folder back to her, he added, "The second highest evaluation score of all the new applicants."

"How nice for the two of you. You must be very proud."

Lee stepped back, stung. "That's not fair, Amanda."

"Isn't it?" she returned bitterly. Walking over to the desk, she replaced the file in the top drawer, slamming it closed with her hip. "You and Phillip both kept this from me, Lee. Excuse me if I feel a little ganged up on here."

Lee took a deep breath. "He didn't want any special treatment," he explained, taking a tentative step towards her. When she didn't back away, he continued in a low voice, "He wanted to come to you on his own with this. I respected his decision,

that's all. Amanda," he entreated once more. "Try to understand. This is what he wants to do."

"He's only twenty-four; how can he know what he wants to do with the rest of his life?"

"He's a year older than I was when Harry Thornton took me under his wing. I haven't turned out too damn badly." He gave her a diffident smile. "At least that's what you keep telling me."

She looked up, her eye finally meeting his. Shaking her head slightly, her rigidity relaxed, and she sighed. "Joe will have a fit, and I'm not altogether sure I can blame him."

"I know." He looked at her questioningly. "I thought maybe we'd all tell him together?"

He heard her take a deep breath, then let it out ever so slowly. He didn't know which one of them took the first step, only that suddenly she was in his arms, her cheek against his, her anger spent.

"Oh, Lee," she sighed. "He's my little boy. I don't want this life for him."

"I realize that," he murmured, caressing her with his words. "And so does Phillip. He didn't make this decision lightly."

She sighed again, relaxing against his chest. "Of all the careers he could have chosen. . . why couldn't he just accept the job Joe's law firm offered?"

He moved his hand soothingly up and down her spine. "Granted that would have kept the peace, but Phillip's pretty determined. If I hadn't accepted his application, he would have gone to the FBI or CIA. At least at the Agency, we can keep an eye on him."

"Wishful thinking, and you know it. I suppose I should have seen this coming," she added with a sigh. "Maybe I did, I don't know; the signs were all there. I just didn't want to face them." Pulling away, she looked up at him, lightly caressing his cheek with her palm. "Phillip always hero worshipped you, you know."

"Amanda, I didn't recruit him. I would never. . ."

She cut him off. "I know. Let's not talk about this any more tonight," she said, looking down at her hands as she smoothed his lapels. "It's Christmas Eve – or Christmas morning, actually. Do you realize we're having close to twenty people for dinner in about twelve hours?"

Leaning in, he kissed her lightly on the forehead. "I'll help you."

"Lee, this place still looks like a hurricane went through it! Men," she added, shaking her head. "Absolutely clueless."

She tried to walk away, but he pulled her back, enveloping her in his arms again. "You know Matthew will have us all up at the crack of dawn to open presents," he told her with a teasing laugh. "So your 'men' will have this place in shape before the waffles cool." Leaning back, he flashed her a smile. "Scout's honor."

She rolled her eyes, fighting the grin that threatened to overtake her. "It ought to be illegal, you know," she said at last.

"What should?" he queried, tilting her chin up with a long finger.

"What you do to me when you smile." She let out a tremulous laugh. "After all these years, you'd think I'd be immune."

"Oh, but that's not the way it works, Mrs. Stetson," he told her in a throaty whisper as he ran his finger in a line from her chin to the middle of her chest. He felt her answering shiver, and his grin deepened. "The more time passes, the more potent it becomes."

"You sound pretty sure of yourself for someone who missed church, dinner and caroling tonight," she retorted, pushing his finger aside half-heartedly.

He pulled her closer. "I'm here now," he murmured, rocking her slightly in his arms. "And totally at your disposal."

"Good. Then you can start by cleaning the kitchen."

"Not exactly the room I had in mind," he stated, his fingers tickling her ribs. "Come on, say uncle," he teased as they collapsed against the couch.

"Lee, cut it out," she gasped between belly laughs, her hands struggling with his. "We'll wake up Matt, and then. . . okay, okay," she added breathlessly. "I give."

Pulling back, he caught her eye. "You sure?"

Reaching up, she traced his lips with her finger. "I'm very sure." As he lowered his mouth, she stopped him, adding breathlessly, "Let's go upstairs. With the house full of kids, this is definitely not the time to christen this couch. Besides," she added as she saw their scruffy-looking pet lying by the family room door. "Your dog is watching."

"Hotdog won't talk," Lee teased. "He was trained by the best."

"Thank you," Amanda said archly.

"Very funny." Leaning closer, he nibbled tantalizingly on her earlobe.

"Give it up, Stetson," she laughed. "That's not going to work again. I'm still reeling from the last time."

"Hey, something good came out of that," he told her with a barely suppressed grin. "At least the night janitor never forgets to knock now before he cleans my office."

Pushing him aside, Amanda struggled off the couch. Turning, she held out her hand, her lips curving into an inviting smile. "Come on, Lee. If you don't get into bed, you might not get what you want for Christmas."

Entwining his fingers in hers, he let her coax him off the couch. "Will you tuck me in, Mrs. Stetson?"

Grinning, she linked her arm through his. "What do you think?"

Leaning down, he brushed his lips lightly through her hair as they headed for the stairs. "I think morning's gonna come way too soon."

Christmas Eve, 2001

"Mmmmm, something smells good," Lee said as he entered the kitchen. Coming up behind his wife, he wrapped his arms around her waist. "I thought you weren't baking this year."

"I hadn't intended to, but. . ." She let out a deep sigh. "Jeanie Melrose brought over that fruitcake this morning and I started to feel guilty. You know how she

used to love to hand them out when Billy was. . . " Sighing again, she wiped her forehead with the back of her hand.

"I know," he said, giving her a gentle squeeze before he released her. "I miss him, too."

"All the time I was talking to her, I kept seeing this picture of Billy's face. . . that Christmas they gave him the big white cowboy hat."

He nodded sadly. "We've lost too many of the 'good guys' this year."

Pursing her lips, she nodded, frowning slightly as she reached for the flour. "Did you settle the problem at Statik Aerospace?"

Lee nodded as he leaned back against the counter. "One of the microchips in their Seaforth Eleven System was malfunctioning."

"Do you have to go over there?" she asked, stirring the dough with unaccustomed zeal.

"Nope. I sent one of the techs over to replace it. They should be functional again in, uh, thirty minutes or so," he finished as he consulted his watch. Catching Amanda's eye, he gave her a playful wink. "See, I told you when we started this little venture last year there'd be perks to being the boss."

"I think your exact words were there'd be perks to 'sleeping' with the boss," she replied archly as she emptied the contents of the sifter into the bowl.

"Hey," he assured her with a grin, "as the senior partner of 'S & S Consulting', I'm happy to offer a full range of benefits." Stepping closer, he took her by the shoulders, turning her gently towards him. "Including flour removal," he teased as he brushed his finger lightly over the tip of her nose, "and a few other personal services which I'd be more than happy to demonstrate."

He inclined his head towards hers, but she stepped back, placing a hand lightly on his chest. "I'll have to pencil you in," she informed him with a half-hearted smile as her eyes swept over the kitchen. "Somewhere between the cookies and the cranberry sauce."

Sighing, she tried to turn away, but he took a quick step forward, effectively cutting off her retreat. He carefully removed the sifter from her hand, dropping it onto the cluttered counter with a loud clang.

"Hey, Mrs. Stetson," he told her with tender concern. "I think your famous holiday spirit seems to be sagging a bit." Pulling her closer, he locked his fingers together behind her back. "Maybe you could use a little TLC to shore it up?"

She shrugged lightly, casting her eyes downward. "I'm not sure anything could improve my mood this year." Sucking in her lower lip, her finger traced and retraced the small fir tree pattern on his green and white sweater. "I haven't exactly felt very 'festive' lately."

He rubbed her back soothingly, leaning in to plant a gentle kiss on her forehead. "So I've noticed. Still. . ." Placing his finger under her chin, he tilted her face up towards his. "It's not like you to let the little things get you down, Amanda." Hesitating for a moment, he added in a tentative voice, "I thought once we decided to retire from the Agency last year, things would be. . . easier. . . between us."

Her eyes widened remorsefully. "Oh, Lee, they have been," she assured him. "They are. . . I'm sorry, my bad mood has absolutely nothing to do with you." Sighing, she leaned into his embrace.

"Then tell me what's bothering you," he pleaded as he gently stroked her hair. "How can I help if I don't know what the problem is?"

Drawing a deep breath, she pulled him closer. "You'll think it's silly," she murmured against his chest. "I think it's silly. Especially when we have so much to be grateful for. It's just that. . ." She sighed again, adding in a low voice, "It's Christmas Eve, and I miss my family."

"I wasn't upset at first that no one was coming home this year," she continued as he tightened his grasp. "I know the boys are grown and it's perfectly natural for them to want to live their own lives. And of course I understand why Jamie wants to spend the holidays with Maggie's family. . ."

Lee tilted his head to look at her. "They are getting married when he graduates from medical school in May."

"Yeah, I know - I'm not 'losing a son', I'm 'gaining a daughter'," she said dryly. "Though for all we see of him anymore, it sure doesn't feel that way."

He leaned in to kiss her forehead. "And?" he prompted gently.

"And Phillip. . . well, he had to leave so abruptly a few months ago. . . and yes, I know, I should understand," she stated in a breathless rush. "I know how the Agency works as well as you do, it's just that my son is on assignment god-knows-where doing god-knows-what with god-knows-who. And I know I don't 'need to know', but it's Christmas, and I guess I really do 'need to know'. . . you know?"

His lips twitched slightly as he fought a smile. "Amanda, it's been almost twenty years now - of course I know."

"And then Mother and Curt. . ." Pushing him away gently, she began to pace the short distance between the cooking island and the stove. "I guess when they called last night. . . well, that was just the final straw."

Folding his arms across his chest, he reclined against the sink. "And here I thought you'd be glad they'd finally decided to stop 'living in sin'," he teased. "You've only been lobbying for them to tie the knot for the past ten years."

Stopping in her tracks, she looked over at him with a delicately raised eyebrow. "I'm thrilled they're getting married; that's not the point. Did they have to run off like that?"

"I believe they 'flew off'," he countered with a laugh. "Oh, come on, Amanda," he told her in a teasing voice, "Curt was probably so glad your mother finally decided to make an honest man of him that he didn't want to give her the chance to change her mind."

She groaned lightly. "But Lee, Las Vegas, of all places?"

"Yeah, I can see it all now," he grinned. "Dotty and Curt Weller pronounced man and wife in the Elvis Chapel of Love."

She narrowed her eyes. "You're not helping, you know," she warned him. "I just don't understand - they've been living together for years, why the big rush? All I wanted was to give her a nice wedding to mark the occasion, maybe an afternoon or evening ceremony, right here at the house. . ." Looking up, she suddenly caught his eye with a horrified smile.

"Oh, my gosh! It's happened, hasn't it? I've actually become my mother!"

"I'm not sure I should answer that," he grinned. "It's getting too cold to be sleeping outside." He quickly covered the distance between them with two long

strides. "You know, Amanda," he told her wryly, "we're hardly in a position to complain about their elopement."

She gave him a pointed look. "So Mother informed me. I believe her parting shot was, 'at least I didn't wait six months to tell you about it'."

Shaking his head, he held out his arms. "I'm sorry," he told her as she moved into his embrace. "Damn stupid mystery marriage. Whose idea was that, anyway?"

She chuckled softly against his chest. "Some nut I happened to be crazy in love with at the time. I have to admit, it did have its moments, though." Looking up, she caught his gaze, her face flushing slightly at the memory.

Smiling, he traced the edge of her lips with his finger. "Oh, it did at that," he replied, his voice low and deep. Leaning forward, he replaced his finger with his lips, murmuring a soft "hmmm" as she responded. Closing his eyes, he deepened the kiss, his hand right hand moving up under her hair to caress her neck.

The back door flew open with a bang, and they jumped slightly as Matthew clattered into the kitchen, the dog at his heels.

"Eeww, yuck," he groaned as he caught sight of his parents. "Mush. I thought you said you were makin' cookies."

"And I thought you said you were taking out the trash," Amanda answered, grinning at Lee as she pulled away. "The waste basket is overflowing, young man."

Matthew flashed her a dimpled smile, swiping his finger through the cookie dough as he edged towards the door. "In a minute, Mom," he called over his shoulder as he slipped out of the room. "I think I hear the doorbell."

"Matthew William Stetson," she called sternly, her voice swallowed up by the dog's excited barking. Shaking her head, she looked up at her husband. "I swear that child can disappear faster than you ever did."

Lee gave a short laugh. "Must be an inherited talent."

"Let's hope that's all he inherited," she groaned. "One spy son is more than enough, thank you very much."

Pulling her against him again, he caught her eye with a teasing smile. "I never really cared for that word, you know."

"No?" she answered with a shake of her head.

"No," he smiled as he leaned towards her again.

"Well, it's nice to know some things never change around here," the deep voice said.

Lee grinned as Amanda whirled towards the sound, her face breaking out in a smile. "Jamie!" she cried in surprise. "What are you doing here? I thought you were going to Maggie's."

"I was, but. . ." He grinned sheepishly. Glancing at Lee, he added quickly, "A guy can change his mind, can't he? I got a flight out tomorrow afternoon, so I'll still see her for Christmas. Besides," he added, shaking his head in disgust, "her family actually serves fish for Christmas Eve dinner. Can you believe it? It's their tradition or something."

"Well, don't worry, our goose is big enough to feed an army," Amanda informed him happily.

"I can always count on you, Mom," Jamie stated with a hearty laugh.

"Me, too," an almost identical voice echoed.

"Phillip, oh-my-gosh!"

"You know, you guys really shouldn't leave the front door wide open," he grinned. "You never know who might wander in."

"I can't believe it!" Amanda cried happily. "When. . .how. . .?"

"My op wrapped a little earlier than expected," he explained in a low voice as he gave his mother a big bear hug. "Good surprise?" he asked as he pulled back to catch her eye.

"The best," she said, hugging him again. "How long can you stay?"

"Indefinitely. Seems I've been reassigned to the Georgetown Bureau." He smiled at his stepfather. "I thought I might bunk in here until I find a new apartment? Dad and Carrie's place is a little cramped."

"You bet," Lee told him enthusiastically. "There's nothing we'd like better."

"This is so cool," Matthew chimed in happily. "Now that you guys are here, we can have a real game later. I'm getting a new basketball hoop for. . ." Looking guiltily from his mother to his father, he quickly clammed up. "Hey, Phillip, I'll help you take your stuff upstairs," he added with a grin.

"Good idea, Little Chief," Phillip laughed, patting his youngest brother on the back. "I'd get while the getting's good, if I were you. Come on, Jamie," he called as they headed upstairs. "We'll unload your stuff, too."

Amanda turned to Lee. "I suppose breaking and entering is in the genes, too, huh?"

"Yeah." Lee rolled his eyes. "Guess I'd better do something about that lock on the garage door."

Walking over to him, she gave him a quick kiss. "Thank you."

"Well, since I'm the one who showed him how to use a lock pick, it's the least I can. . ."

"That's not what I mean, and you know it," Amanda said with a laugh. "I saw all those looks flying around the room. Thank you for all this."

Lee gave her an embarrassed smile. "I didn't do much. Jamie was already having second thoughts about missing the holiday and Phillip. . ." He shrugged lightly. "Well, Francine still owes me a favor or two." Leaning in, he kissed her tenderly. "I'm afraid I couldn't do much about your Mother and Curt, though. . ."

"What about us?" Dotty said with a laugh.

"Mother!" Amanda exclaimed, turning in Lee's arms. "You're here, too?" Looking over her shoulder, she caught his eye.

"Not me this time," Lee smiled, kissing her cheek as he wrapped his arms more securely around her waist. "I swear."

"We flew in this afternoon," Dotty informed them. "Curt's getting the bags out of the car. You didn't really think we'd miss Christmas, did you, darling?" Shaking her head, she folded her arms across her chest as she gave Lee and Amanda a speculative glance. "Okay, you two, enough of that. I'm the newlywed here, not you. Amanda, this kitchen looks like a bomb went off - I can see I'm sorely needed."

Well, come on," she added with a laugh, "let's get going if we expect to eat before midnight!"

"Yes, Mother," Amanda stated with a happy sigh. Folding her hands across Lee's arms, she gave him a tender squeeze.

"Merry Christmas, Amanda," he whispered softly in return.

Rocking gently in his arms, she smiled. "Yeah. Merry Christmas, Lee."

The End