

Where The Road Goes

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### Prologue

*The thick foliage distorted the sound of the gunfire, making it impossible to pinpoint. Ignoring the sweat trickling down his spine, he pushed aside the tangled branches, automatically scanning the trail. Eyes narrowing, he sucked in a breath and reached again for the walkie-talkie hanging from his belt.*

*"Houdini, do you read me?" His words were as clipped and harsh as the short staccato bursts that had broken the tenuous silence moments ago. He glanced at his companion, grimly shaking his head as he tried one last time. "Houdini, this is Scarecrow, come in."*

*"You think they got him, too?"*

*He shrugged, frowning until a deep line formed between his eyes. "Don't count him out yet."*

*"You shouldn't have come. If it wasn't for me, you'd be home with. . ."*

*The words trailed off, smothered in another explosion of gunfire. The bullets cut the air over their heads, closer this time than before. Scarecrow leaned in, instinctively covering his companion like a human shield.*

*A stifled groan came from somewhere beneath him.*

*"Are you. . ."*

*Static exploded from the walkie-talkie, cutting short his question. "Houdini to Scarecrow, Houdini to Scarecrow. Come in, Scarecrow."*

*Smiling in relief, he quickly depressed the transmit button. "Houdini, we were beginning to think this was one rabbit you weren't going to pull out of your hat."*

*"Just had a slight difference of opinion with the locals, Scarecrow, but I'm ready and able to take delivery on the package."*

*"We'll be right there. Ten-four." He replaced the walkie-talkie on his belt clip, exhaling softly as the rhythmic sound of the rotors announced the helicopter's imminent arrival. "Come on," he urged, pulling his companion from the protective cover of the underbrush. "If we can hear it, so can they."*

*Leaning heavily on each other, they started down the trail. Another explosion filled the air as the bullets pierced the ground in front of them, cutting off their escape.*

*"Damn," Scarecrow muttered, firing a volley of his own as he pushed them both behind a fallen tree branch. He took a deep breath, speaking his decision before his mind had fully registered it. "Go on ahead. I'll hold them off as long as I can, then follow."*

*"No, Lee. You should be the one to go. This is my fault; let me stay."*

*"There's no time to argue about this," he shot back, returning fire as a fresh round of bullets riddled the bushes beside them. "Head down the trail, Houdini should be just over the hill. The code is Firefly. I'll be right behind you. Get going," he ordered, his tone brooking no refusal as he broke fire to reload. He deftly snapped the new clip firmly into place, right hand automatically steadying his left. Glancing over his shoulder, he caught the look in his compatriot's eyes, his younger stepson's face unwillingly taking shape in his mind.*

*"Get out of here," he urged, a bit more gently this time. "Let me keep my promise."*

*His comrade nodded. From his vantage point behind the bush, Scarecrow watched him disappear, buying him time with a few well-placed shots. Patting his back pocket, his fingers located the last ammo clip. Enough to allow his injured companion time to reach the safety of the copter, but not enough for him to follow. He snapped it in place with a resigned sigh; nothing to do now but make a run for it.*

*He took off down the dusty mountain trail, running blindly as he fired over his shoulder. He heard the ever-increasing volume of footsteps behind him, the sturdy boots of the rebel army pounding the ground. His inner voice spurred him on - only a little further, down the hill and up over the next. Then home, his family, and. . .*

*Gunfire sounded again, and he felt the bullet graze the tip of his left ear. He automatically tucked and rolled, sharp rocks jabbing him as he slammed into the ground. Gravity took over, completing the painful slide down the small hill. "I'm sorry, Amanda," he thought sadly as the blackness claimed him.*

Friday, October 28, 1988

"And would you care to tell me again why the hell you didn't think Field Section needed to be informed?"

The words were muffled, but there was no mistaking their tone. Amanda paused briefly in front of the office, checking the 'lay of the land' through the window. One brief glance told her all she needed to know.

It had been almost a year since his promotion to Chief of Field Section, but Scarecrow still looked slightly ill at ease behind the mahogany desk that had served Billy Melrose so well. Sitting stiffly in his chair, the phone wedged awkwardly between his chin and shoulder, he drummed his pen in an impatient rhythm on the papers scattered in front of him. Amanda pursed her lips; she could almost feel his blood pressure rising as she watched him through the window.

Sighing, she reached for the door handle, balancing a coffee cup and a stack of files precariously against her rounded stomach as she entered. Pregnancy had its advantages, but this definitely wasn't one of them, she thought ruefully as she struggled to hold onto the folder and the cup. The papers spilled out, scattering haphazardly across the carpet.

"Never mind," Lee said, a smile invading the corners of his mouth. "Your status report has just arrived."

Giving him a caustic look, she set the steaming coffee on the edge of his desk. As he replaced the phone in its cradle with a loud click, she bent down on hands and knees to retrieve the scattered data from Central American Operations.

"A **-man** -da. "

She heard him drawl her name with that unmistakable inflection that somehow seemed to turn it into an accusation. It was a tone he'd honed to perfection in the early days of their 'unofficial' partnership. Muttering under her breath, she stretched to reach the upended file folder.

"Will you please let me get that?" that irritating voice continued. "You shouldn't be crawling around on the floor in your condition."

"Lee, I'm pregnant, not incapacitated," she shot back in exasperation.

"I realize that," he responded just as testily, grabbing the sheet of paper that had drifted under the chair. "I was just trying to. . ."

"I know what you were trying to do," she snapped, rolling her eyes as she pulled the last few pages together. "But it's not necessary."

She heard him exhale loudly as he rose and, glancing up, she caught his eye. Guilt washed over her as she recognized the hurt his annoyance couldn't quite manage to hide.

"Will it disturb your sensibilities if I help you up?" he inquired as he ran his fingers energetically through his hair. "Or is that crossing the line, too?"

"I'm sorry," she murmured as she accepted his outstretched hand. "It's just been one of those days." She entwined her fingers with his, giving him a gentle squeeze. "Am I being hormonal again?"

"Maybe a little," he agreed, grinning at the ready acknowledgement of her snappish mood. "Just around the edges." He briefly checked out the bullpen before bringing her fingers to his lips for a quick kiss. "But they're very attractive edges."

Amanda raised an eyebrow in response, her hand automatically massaging her expanding waistline. He gave her his warmest smile in return, and she found the last vestiges of her aggravation dissolving under her husband's appreciative scrutiny. Even in her current condition, Lee Stetson could still make her feel like the sexiest woman alive.

If only he could stifle his overprotective tendencies as easily. They had definitely slipped into overdrive when her doctor had officially confirmed their impending parenthood. Most days, she understood his predilection to treat her like spun glass, but there were times lately when it wore a little thin.

"Hey, you know how much I appreciate your concern," she said, her softer tone attempting to mitigate her earlier sharpness. "But it really is okay for me to clean up after myself." Smiling, she leaned in a little closer. "Besides, I think it was crawling around on the floor that landed me in this condition in the first place."

"Yeah," he agreed, his wicked grin highlighting his dimples as the memory rekindled. "Best birthday I ever had."

"Well, if it's all the same to you, I think next year I really will get you that watch."

His deep, rumbling laugh relaxed her, breaking the tension for both of them.

"About before," he began, glancing sheepishly in her direction as he gathered the last of the papers. "I'm sorry if I sounded like. . ."

"That old 'Scarecrow' I used to know?" she asked sweetly.

"Uh, okay," he grinned, helping her settle into the chair. "Sorry. I guess I've had a bad day, too. I really wanted to take you to your doctor's appointment this morning."

"I know you did, but it's pretty routine at this stage. You can catch the next one if you want to."

"You know I want to."

Amanda smiled softly; she knew that all too well. Lee refused to believe that she was fine unless he heard it straight from the doctor's mouth. She caught his eye, nodding her approval as he walked to the window to close the privacy blinds.

"So," he said, crossing the room and leaning down to touch his lips to hers. "Maybe we can begin this again. How is the most beautiful expectant mother in D.C. doing today?"

"Just fine," she whispered, her fingers tracing his five o'clock shadow. She hesitated for a fraction of a second before adding, "My blood pressure is a little elevated."

His eyes narrowed. "How 'little'?"

"A little higher than normal, that's all," she replied, rubbing his arm lightly. "But Elaine doesn't anticipate any problems."

"And our son?"

Amanda smiled. "He's just fine, too. Right on schedule."

"Four more months," he sighed, kissing her lightly again. "I can't wait, Mrs. Stetson."

"That makes two of us."

"I'll just be relieved when this is over. When I think of everything you've been through already. . ."

"Hey, I love you, and I love our baby. I wouldn't change a thing, okay?"

"Okay," he agreed, but she could tell from the way he sucked in his lower lip that he didn't believe her. Even though the doctor had assured them that everything appeared to be okay, she knew Lee had a hard time accepting that the violent morning sickness she was still experiencing on occasion was anything approaching normal. More than anything, her husband hated to feel powerless. If that wasn't bad enough, in this situation, he felt responsible as well.

It hadn't been an easy pregnancy. Lee had been so focused on what he'd jokingly termed 'Operation Baby' that he hadn't given much thought to what might happen once the mission was successful. Only Scarecrow could turn something as straightforward as conceiving a child into a maneuver worthy of the most complex Agency scramble. His discomfiture when they failed to bring home a permanent souvenir of their second honeymoon had been amusing at first, but as their continued efforts proved fruitless, it had grown less so. Even though she suspected that they only needed to give nature a fair chance to take its course, she'd agreed to see a specialist in May to ease his mind. It had almost been worth the trip just to see the expression on her husband's face when he realized what he had to do with that cup.

"What's so funny, Mrs. Stetson?"

"Oh, I was just thinking about cups," she replied, chuckling softly to herself, "and coffee. Here," she added, handing him the mug she'd deposited on the edge of the desk. "I brought you some. I thought you might need it to make it through dinner tonight."

"I'll take something stronger than coffee to get me through dinner tonight," he mumbled, taking a large sip as he settled himself once more behind his desk. "What time are we supposed to be at Joe and Carrie's?"

"Seven-thirty." She shook her head, recognizing the look in his eyes. "Lee, it's Friday night. Please don't tell me you're going to be late again?"

"Uh, not if I meet you there?" he rejoined, raising an eyebrow in apology.

She tried to look stern, but couldn't quite carry it off. Jamie had worn that same expression last week when he'd confessed to eating the piece of chocolate cake she'd been craving all day.

"Since I was heading home now anyway," she began, finally giving in to the smile that was tugging on her lips, "I suppose I can collect the boys. Of course, now I'll have to hog-tie Phillip all by myself."

"Stop by Leatherneck's supply office - I'm sure he can give you something more efficient than rope."

"Lee Stetson, I'm not going to use one of Leatherneck's contraptions on my son," she admonished firmly, muttering under her breath, "even if the idea does have some appeal." She shook her head, sighing as she rested her cheek wearily on her hand. "Sometimes I

wonder what happened to that little boy who used to tell me all about his day over cookies and milk."

"That's simple," Lee laughed. "He became a teenager."

"You're right. But I'm afraid there's nothing simple about it at all."

"Give him some time. He'll sort himself out."

"I know he was thrilled to make the football team this year, but maybe we were wrong to let him play."

"I played football in high school, Amanda, and actually managed to graduate in one piece."

"That's not what worries me. Although, I have to admit, I'm not thrilled to see my little boy on the bottom of a pile of bodies." She wrinkled her nose at the thought. "I like soccer much better."

"I know you do. But you have to let kids make their own choices."

"It's not the game I really have a problem with," she said, wondering if her husband realized what was really at the heart of Phillip's sudden interest in the sport. She had a strong suspicion it had more to do with following in his stepfather's footsteps than making new ones of his own. "It's these older kids he's hanging around with now. They're so different from the old crowd." She sighed, nibbling lightly on her lower lip. "Oh, I don't know. Sometimes I think. . ."

"Think what?" he prodded.

Amanda shook her head. "I can't help wondering if all this stuff he's been going through lately isn't some kind of delayed reaction," she began, trying to put her scattered thoughts into some kind of order. "You know, to everything that happened. The sudden move, the new house. . . we were so worried about Jamie after that business with Mason that maybe Phillip kind of got lost in the shuffle. Maybe he could have benefited from some counseling, too."

Lee shrugged. "I guess we could always talk to Dr. Barr – he seemed to do Jamie a world of good."

Amanda nodded. Jamie's transformation this past year had been truly amazing. It was good to see him finally making new friends and really enjoying school again. But sessions with Dr. Barr aside, her younger son's new self-confidence seemed to spring from that

'father-son' Junior Trailblazer outing he'd shared with his stepfather. He'd come home with more than a trophy that weekend.

Phillip, on the other hand, had grown increasingly more uncommunicative. Lately, his life revolved around the football team, partying with his new friends and whichever girl happened to be monopolizing his attention at the moment. He didn't have much time to spare for Jamie, let alone the thought of a new sibling. He seemed to find that prospect mildly boring at best, downright embarrassing at worst.

Amanda had been a little hurt by his behavior, but had chalked it up to typical teenage moods. That is, until they'd announced that the baby they were expecting was a boy. That's when she noticed Phillip's attitude really begin to sour. He seemed actively jealous of the new baby, almost as if he somehow resented Lee's biological connection to his son. She'd tried to broach the subject with Lee a few times, but somehow the timing never seemed right. Either he was tied up in another late night meeting or she was otherwise occupied in the mornings.

"It's funny sometimes how things turn out," she said, sighing wistfully. "Jamie was the one we were so worried about, while Phillip. . ."

"I know. He seemed to make such an easy adjustment," Lee said, finishing her thought. His brow furrowed as he considered the situation from every angle, and Amanda couldn't help but smile as she observed him. Who would have guessed, all those years ago, that Scarecrow would one day take to parenting as completely as he had to the intelligence game? She trailed her hand lovingly across her stomach. This was going to be one lucky little boy.

"Phillip's basically a good kid, you know that," he said at last, his voice soft and reassuring. He's just testing his wings right now." Catching her eye, he gave her a short laugh. "It's not easy to be a popular jock, you know."

"Speaking from personal experience here?" she teased.

"Maybe," he grinned, shrugging off her look. He leaned forward on his desk, resting his chin on his interlaced fingers. "I think Phillip just wants to be accepted. Isn't that what most teenagers are looking for?"

"I guess you're right. I just can't help wishing he didn't care about that quite so much. He thinks he's so grown up, but. . ."

"He's gonna be sixteen in March," Lee reminded her. "Your car has the dents to prove it."



"Don't I know it," she lamented. "One more thing to worry about."

She watched as her husband left his seat, rounding the desk to squat beside her chair. "Hey, Mrs. Stetson, what have we all been telling you about that?" He took her hand, giving it a gentle squeeze.

"Lee, mothers worry, and there's not a thing you or anyone else can do about it." She reached out, tenderly brushing her fingers along his cheek. "It's part of the job description."

"Not for the next sixteen weeks. I'm supposed to be doing your worrying for you." He rose, flashing her a grin as he perched on the edge of his desk. "That's part of my job description."

She gave him a wry grin as she raised her eyebrows. "I'll try to remember that the next time you miss dinner four nights in a row."

"It's gonna be five night's in a row if you don't get out of here and let me get through that status report you delivered so gracefully." He laughed as she playfully swatted his knee. Reaching out to her, he offered his hand as he stood.

She accepted it, allowing him to pull her up into a brief embrace. She could tell by the way he held her that he needed the comfort of her touch, however fleeting. She smiled wryly; Lee's method of dealing with job stress was eminently more enjoyable than Billy's bottle of Tums. She rubbed his back, resting her head on his shoulder as she breathed in the blend of soap and aftershave that was uniquely Lee.

He held her for a moment longer, then reluctantly let go. "I'll see you at Joe and Carrie's," he promised, his hand gently massaging the small of her back as he guided her to the door.

Hand on the knob, she hesitated briefly, unconsciously biting her upper lip as she turned to him. "You'll try talking to Joe one more time?"

"Amanda, I don't really think. . ." He sighed, running his hand through his hair with unusual zeal. "I thought we agreed last month when he made his announcement that we were going to stay out of it?"

"I know. It's just that the boys need him in their lives. They've gotten used to having him around again. And I can't help wondering if Joe's decision to take this new assignment with the EAO isn't partly responsible for Phillip's recent behavior. He still remembers what it was like before, with his father coming and going all the time." She paused, sucking

in a breath. "Not to mention where Joe's going. . ." She nodded at the report on his desk. "I glanced through that on my way to your office."

Lee nodded solemnly. "I'll grant you Santarilla isn't the most stable assignment, but then neither was Estoccia." She caught his eye and heard his sigh of acquiescence. "All right, you win. I'll give it a shot."

"Thank you." She leaned forward, brushing his lips gently with her own. "I know it probably won't do any good - Joe was always pretty stubborn when he made up his mind."

She saw her husband's raised eyebrow. "Okay, okay, I can be just as stubborn. But at least I'll feel like we tried."

Laughing with her, he leaned in to kiss her one last time before re-opening the privacy blinds. "Hey," he called, giving her conspiratorial wink as she started through the door. "Don't let Phillip talk you into letting him drive."

"Don't worry. My blood pressure couldn't take it," she grinned, "let alone my car."

She closed the door, looking in through the window one last time. Lee had already retreated behind his desk, pen in hand once again as he attacked the report from Central American Operations. The look on his face sobered her. She fervently hoped Joe would listen to him, but she had a feeling what little warning they could give him would fall on deaf ears. Her ex-husband was always passionately committed to his job.

Sighing, she headed for home.

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"Phillip. . ." Jamie called, banging his fist on his brother's door. He shifted from foot to foot as he waited for a reply. He knew Phillip was in there; he'd seen him disappear upstairs shortly after he came home from school. Besides, the music blasting from his stereo was a dead giveaway. His brother used to have much better taste, he thought with a frown. This latest Van Halen tape must be courtesy of his new best friend, Jeremy Wilson.

"Phillip," he tried again, louder this time, "Come on, open up, will ya?"

The volume on the stereo rose a few notches, and Jamie sighed. Talking to his brother when he was in one of his moods was about as productive as talking to the wall. Of course, he didn't need to actually see him, and it really was no skin off his nose if Phillip got himself in hot water again.

"Mom called. She's almost home," he shouted, delivering his message to the front of the door. "She said to be ready to go to Dad and Carrie's when she gets here."

His task completed, he headed for the stairs. His foot was on the second step when he heard his brother's door open.

"Cut the noise, Worm Brain."

Jamie whipped around at the sound of that nickname. It had been the cause of more than a few wrestling matches over the years, the most notable ones resulting in a recurring hole in the wall of the bedroom they'd shared in the house on Maplewood Drive. His mother had muttered ominously each time she'd plastered over it.

"Well, Worm Brain?" Phillip repeated. "I thought I'd warned you about banging on my door."

Glancing up, Jamie encountered his brother's eye. He was leaning nonchalantly against the doorframe, looking suitably bored, the remains of a ham sandwich in his hand. Narrowing his eyes, he looked appraisingly at Phillip's tall, athletic body. Even though his once slender frame was beginning to fill out, his older brother could probably still wipe the ground with him, Jamie thought with a sigh. But one of these days. . .

He glared back hostilely, his anger seething as Phillip only grinned. "Mom's almost home," he said through gritted teeth. "She said to be ready to go. . ."

"To Dad and Carrie's," Phillip finished. "Yeah, I heard you."

"Then why did you ask?" he demanded, shoving his clenched fists into his pockets.

Phillip shrugged, silently turning back into his room. Jamie could still hear his stereo, but the volume was lower and his door half-open in casual invitation. He frowned slightly, rubbing the spot where his glasses rested on the bridge of his nose. Lately, Phillip always locked the door when he was in his room. Curiosity winning out, he started back up the stairs.

"Hey," he said neutrally as he crossed the threshold, cautiously testing the water. When Phillip didn't immediately order him out, he relaxed, knowing he'd made the right choice. Flopping on the bed, he grabbed the nearest pillow, flinging it playfully at his brother. "Quit calling me Worm Brain, would ya? I'm not ten any more."

"I'll try to remember that," Phillip laughed, tossing the pillow back at him. "Worm Brain."

Jamie made a face, dodging the pillow as he watched Phillip cram the rest of his sandwich into his mouth. "Why are you eating? We're supposed to be having dinner at Dad's."

"Self preservation," he smirked. "I'll lay odds that we don't eat until late. Lee will get hung up at work, and we'll all end up waiting for him." He looked down, absently picking the lint off his school sweatshirt. "If he shows at all."

"Mom said he's meeting us there."

"Uh-huh," Phillip said, exhaling loudly as he walked over to the window. "Well, even if he does, I'm not sure I'd make it through another one of Carrie's gourmet meals."

"Yeah," Jamie agreed with a grimace. "What was it she made last time?"

"No clue," Phillip stated, wrinkling up his nose at the memory. "All I can say is, I don't like to eat stuff I can't pronounce."

"Hey, maybe that's why Dad's taking that new assignment," Jamie joked. "He's too polite to tell her he doesn't want to eat her cooking."

"Yeah," Phillip replied, his sarcasm unmistakable. "That must be it."

Propping himself up on his elbow, Jamie looked at his brother. His folded arms were pressed against the windowpane, his body bent as he studied the view.

"Remember that tree house we used to have at the old house?" Phillip said in a low voice. "The one Dad built for us?"

Jamie nodded. "All the neighborhood kids liked to hang out there."

"We used to have to chase that pest Bobby Kenwood out every day when we came home from school."

"Yeah. Then all of a sudden, he stopped coming over. I wonder why."

"Grandma called his mother," Phillip said with a short laugh. "He got grounded for two weeks and never spoke to us again."

"That's right, I remember now," Jamie grinned. "You know, he really drove me crazy, saying he had squatter's rights and everything. But I kind of missed him when he didn't

come around any more." He took a deep breath, remembering. "Do you ever miss the old house?"

Phillip shrugged, moving away from the window. "What's to miss?" he asked, picking up his football. "It's not there anymore, anyway. The people who bought the lot built a brand new house." Sighing, he tossed the ball to his brother.

Jamie scrambled up, efficiently catching it. "The tree house is still there, though," he informed him, pitching the ball back to his brother with a grunt.

Phillip gripped the ball tightly as he caught it. "How do you know?" he asked, hesitating almost imperceptibly before forcefully returning the pass.

"Lee and I drove by there last month," Jamie answered, his voice slightly breathless as the pointed end of the ball thudded against his chest. He clasped it tightly, breathing in and out through his nose.

"Why?"

"I was curious," Jamie told him, tossing the football in small circles. "The people painted the new house yellow." He threw the ball back to his brother, adding thoughtfully, "It was really ugly."

"I'll bet."

"It was good to see it, though," Jamie sighed, his finger running along the seam of Phillip's bedspread. "Good, but sad at the same time. It's hard to explain."

"Yeah, well, I don't want to see it," Phillip said, his voice hardening as he spoke. Frowning, he tossed the ball vigorously at the far wall. It hit with a bang, bouncing a few times as it rolled back across the carpet. "There's no point," he added, his eyes glued to the spot in the middle of the floor where the ball had finally come to a stop. "Just like dinner tonight."

Jamie sighed. "Are you ticked at Dad for leaving again?"

"The only thing I'm ticked about is missing that party at Jeremy's to go to his stupid goodbye dinner," Phillip answered, opening his closet door with a bang. "Christy Carlson is going to be there, and this was my big chance with her."

"Phillip, it's okay if you're mad," Jamie said knowingly. "I wish he wasn't leaving, too."

"I couldn't care less," his brother returned. "If he wants to go to Timbuktu for six months, I guess that's his business. "

"He's going to Santarilla."

"Whatever," Phillip grumbled, ducking his head into the closet. "It's all the same to me."

"I'm kind of mad, too, you know."

"For the last time, I'm not mad." Phillip's voice sounded oddly flat through his clenched teeth. "Now get the hell out of here, I've got to change before Mom gets home. I wouldn't want to be late for the command performance."

Sighing, Jamie pulled himself up off the bed. His brother was bent over, his back bristling with tension as he turned his closet inside out searching for his favorite jeans. "Yeah, right, not mad at all," he muttered to himself, shaking his head as he headed for the door.

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Lee set his folded napkin on the table, smiling warmly as Amanda caught his eye.

"Carrie," his wife stated pleasantly as she returned his look. "Thank you so much for dinner. It was just delicious."

"There's plenty more if you'd like some," Carrie King returned in kind. "I'll just hop into the kitchen. . ."

"Oh, no thank you, I couldn't eat another bite," Amanda sighed, her hand brushing over her protruding belly. "Not as much room these days."

Lee quickly turned away, not trusting himself to look at Amanda any longer. He could tell by the slight inflection in her voice that he'd definitely be making a Marvelous Marvin's run later on tonight.

"But it really was wonderful," he heard her add, an almost imperceptible crack in her voice. "Whatever did you do to the vegetables to get that flavor?"

"It's a new recipe from my cooking club," Carrie replied enthusiastically. "The seasoning gives it a very unique taste."

"Yeah, real unique," Jamie whispered under his breath, his foot knocking his brother under the table.

"Ouch," Phillip announced loudly, glaring smugly at Jamie's hapless expression.

Lee cleared his throat as Amanda shot them both a warning glance. He listened in quiet admiration as his wife effortlessly diffused the situation, distracting the group with small talk as she gathered up Phillip and Jamie's plates. She could certainly teach his new freshmen a thing or two. Carrie hadn't even noticed the boys' practically untouched dinners. He made a mental note to make that take-out for three.

"Lee?" Carrie asked expectantly. "How about you? Seconds?"

"Ah. . .I, uh. . ." Lee sputtered, watching his youngest stepson choke on his water as he tried to stifle his laugh. "No, I'm fine, too. But thanks." Before Jamie could recover enough to make a suitable remark, he slid his chair back from the table. "I'd better check on Amanda," he said quickly, watching her disappear into the kitchen. "You know, if she, uh, drops anything, it's hard for her to bend over to pick it up."

Rising, he beat a hasty retreat, Carrie's offer of dessert falling on seemingly deaf ears.

"'It's hard for her to bend over?'" Amanda mimicked in a low stage whisper as he came through the swinging door. "That's the best you could come up with, Stetson?"

"I was under duress," he grinned, carefully extricating the dishes from her gesticulating hands and placing them in the sink.

"Would seconds have been so bad?" he heard her chuckle. "After all, she is family."

"Family or not, that's above and beyond the call of duty," he stated emphatically, shaking his head as he turned to face her. "Nowhere in either of our wedding ceremonies did I ever promise to love, honor and consume pseudo 'haute cuisine'."

"Oh, come on," she teased, "give it a whirl, Scarecrow." She placed her arms around his, guiding him as close as her expanding waistline would allow. "I thought a high level operative was trained to withstand every form of exotic torture."

"I must have slept through that part of the course," he laughed, leaning forward to brush his lips tantalizingly across hers. "Honestly, I don't know how she does it. I've had better food in a Turkish prison."

"Shhh, she'll hear you," Amanda cautioned. "You're worse than Phillip and Jamie."

"Okay, okay," he laughed. "I'll eat her dessert, will that satisfy you?"

"For starters." She gave him a low, throaty laugh as she trailed one finger seductively down his chest. Her touch was light, but her intention unmistakable. Lee felt himself shiver. He'd never realized pregnancy could make a woman so. . .erotic.

"Okay, Mrs. Stetson," he said, stopping her hand before she evoked a stronger response. "But you have to promise me one thing."

"What's that?" she asked, one eyebrow elevated in mock apprehension.

"Next time, they come to our house. I've all but exhausted Billy's hidden stash of 'Tums'."

"Okay," she laughed, leaning in to kiss him. "I promise."

"Oh, sorry," Carrie apologized as she breezed into the room, a smile tugging at her lips. "Didn't mean to interrupt. . ."

"Don't be silly," Amanda laughed. "After all, it is your kitchen."

"I was just going to get a few of these dishes out of the way. . ."

"I'll be happy to help you."

"Oh, no, Amanda, you don't have to do that. You guys both go on and relax. The boys took their dessert downstairs to the game room, and Joe's in the living room."

"It's no trouble at all," Amanda assured her. "Two can finish the job easier than one."

Lee watched his wife join Carrie at the sink. He didn't need to see that slight nod of her head to know what she wanted him to do. He let out a breath, shrugging almost imperceptibly. Amanda raised an eyebrow in return, and he silently acquiesced. He sincerely hoped that she wasn't counting on him to change Joe's mind, he thought with a frown as he made his way into the other room. He and her ex might have arrived at a friendly plateau, but they were far from friends. Lee doubted that they'd ever breach that summit.

He found Joe comfortably sprawled in a corner of the sofa, one hand rubbing his eyes, a few plates of Carrie's latest concoction spread out in front of him on the coffee table. Looking up, Lee saw his fleeting smile.

"Everything okay in the kitchen?"



"Yeah," Lee sighed as he settled into a large, overstuffed armchair, hoping for his stomach's sake that Joe wouldn't offer him dessert. "Amanda gets annoyed if I'm too helpful these days, so I considered it the better part of valor to get out of there."

"I understand that," Joe laughed in response.

Lee grinned too, smoothing back his hair as he considered how best to broach the sensitive subject of the EAO. Maybe dessert was the more attractive option after all. If this were Billy or Francine, he'd intuitively know exactly how to begin, but he couldn't help but feel this conversation had two strikes against it from the start. He and Joe King had been coerced into friendship by circumstance, not choice. And the common ground they did share seemed fraught with too many minefields for comfort.

He exhaled again, absently fingering the nubby fabric of the chair. "So," he began hesitantly, carefully following the upholstery's intricate pattern with his eye.

"So," Joe echoed, equally fascinated by the seascape hanging on the far wall.

They looked up at the same moment, both finding temporary camaraderie in nervous laughter. While Joe hid it well, he could see that he was equally ill at ease. He'd spent too many years in the intelligence game not to recognize the overwhelming desire to flee when he saw it.

To his credit, Joe broke the tenuous silence first. "Lee, I need to ask you a favor."

"I guess so," Lee responded tentatively, noting the concern in Joe's eyes. "What do you need?"

"Take care of the boys while I'm gone?"

Lee watched as Joe slowly rubbed the wrinkling lines on his forehead. "You don't have to ask that," he assured him, guessing how much that particular request had cost him. They were still hammering out the fragile definition of father and stepfather. "You know how much I care about Phillip and Jamie."

"I'm worried about Phillip. He seems awfully closed off these days."

Lee nodded, feeling a sudden kinship with Joe in their mutual concern. Despite his statements to the contrary this afternoon, Phillip's behavior patterns were beginning to bother him, too. He knew that arrogant air of false bravado only too well. He'd employed it

himself every time his uncle dragged him to yet another air base, and he found his world changing too fast.

"It's a short-term assignment," Joe continued, "six months at the outside. And when it's over, I intend to stay put for a while." He looked down, his eyes focused on the peaks of whipped cream adorning his wife's highly decorated chocolate cake. "As it is, my traveling has already cost me too much time with Phillip and Jamie. Sometimes I think I hardly know them anymore."

"Then why take the assignment at all?"

"Because John Stevenson, the head of the EAO, asked me to as a special favor." Joe rose, pacing back and forth across the small room with restless energy. "This project is very dear to his heart. I'm sure I don't have to tell you that Santarilla is key to our position in Central America."

"Granted, but with all due respect to Stevenson, I think he's been woefully misinformed about the situation there."

Joe frowned, pausing as he turned to face Lee. "How so? Our own government has just inked an aid agreement with President Sanchez. And if you ask me, it's long overdue. I've seen the films," he continued, his voice rising as he warmed to his subject. "The suffering of those poor people. . . if the EAO can bring some relief, we need. . . no, more than that, we have a duty to be there."

Lee shrugged. "Maybe so. But we've been picking up some disturbing rumors regarding Sanchez's security forces."

"He's promised our teams full protection," Joe stated, a note of hesitation creeping into his voice.

"I just hope he can deliver."

Joe sighed. "Unfortunately, this is something I have to do. Stevenson's been very good to me over the years. After that disaster in Estoccia, he found a position for me with the EAO here in the States so I could spend more time with Phillip and Jamie. I owe him." Falling wearily back down on the sofa, he added, "So now you can tell Amanda you've done your duty, too."

Lee shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "Joe, it's not a question of duty. Amanda just feels. . ."

"You don't have to tell me her feelings on the EAO - I'm well aware of them," Joe returned sharply. "I always have been."

Lee drew in a deep breath, exhaling loudly as he looked away. He was beginning to feel a little annoyed with his wife for pushing him into the middle like this. He had no desire to trudge down the dusty back roads of the past with Amanda's ex. Still, he had promised.

"Her present concerns aren't without foundation," he tried again, his voice adopting the neutral tone of a briefing session. "Maybe if you waited a month or so, gave the new government a chance to settle in. . ."

"The sooner I go, the sooner I get back. Carrie's taking a sabbatical next semester to join me down there, and I want to be back in time for her to teach the summer session. Besides, I trust Stevenson. He wouldn't send me down there if it was dangerous."

Lee bit his lip. "His hands may be tied. I've heard Senator Rattigan is pushing pretty hard. Ever since the mess a few years ago with Ambassador Harcourt, formalized aid to Santarilla has been on the top of his priority list. He's made certain promises; and in this case I suspect that means sending in the EAO." He took another deep breath, struggling to navigate the narrow tightrope of 'need to know'. "But the FMNL forces. . ."

"Are fighting in El Salvador, not Santarilla," Joe broke in.

"Maybe, maybe not." He took a deep breath as he continued. "Joe, it's certainly your decision. . ." He heard the muffled sounds of a scuffle from the stairway and immediately lowered his voice. This conversation didn't need any additional ears. "Amanda and I just wanted you to have a clearer picture of what you might be in for down there."

"I appreciate the word of warning, I really do. But I've seen my share of tricky assignments over the years." He smiled resignedly, his hand rubbing his eyes again. "I can take care of myself."

"Then I'd watch my back on this one if I were you."

"I will." He let out a long breath. "Don't worry. I'm not looking to win a medal here. If things look iffy when I get over there, I can always take the next plane out."

"Hey," Carrie interrupted rather abruptly as she hurried into the room with Amanda on her heels. "Could I interest you two in some more dessert?"

"Uh, no thanks," Lee said guiltily. His little discussion with Joe seemed to have brought in reinforcements.

"Yeah," Joe agreed, equally chagrined. "We're just fine."

Lee caught Amanda's eye, shaking his head slightly in response to her questioning look. She tried to cover her exasperated sigh with a yawn, putting in hastily, "I hate to be a spoilsport, but I'm having a hard time keeping my eyes open."

"Then I guess we should hit the road," Lee added, rising as he caught her unspoken signal. He was rewarded with a grateful smile as she called the boys to bid their goodbyes. As he watched Amanda bestow a parting kiss on her ex, he found himself wishing that Joe hadn't dismissed their concerns so lightly. The past had a way of rearing its ugly head when it was least expected, he thought with a sigh. It had colored any warning of Amanda's before it was ever spoken. Where the EAO was concerned, Joe King only heard the housewife she had been, not the agent she'd become.

Offering his hand, he politely wished Joe luck with his new assignment. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught sight of Phillip slouched sullenly across the arm of the sofa. "Hey, Chief," he called, tossing the car keys in his direction. "You can drive me home."

"Seriously?" Phillip replied, his eyes a mixture of excitement, disbelief, and awe.

He smiled at his stepson. Phillip knew very well that he seldom, if ever, parted with the keys to his Corvette. "Yeah, well, just watch your heavy foot," he grinned.

Lee said goodnight, Amanda eliciting a promise that they would, indeed, buckle their seatbelts. They were just rounding the corner when he realized Phillip had never actually told his father goodbye.

Saturday, November 5, 1988

"Mother?" Amanda called, pausing at the base of the stairs to secure the few stray tendrils of hair that had escaped her banana clip.

"In here, dear."

She found her mother seated comfortably at the kitchen table, architectural blueprints spread out in front of her. "John dropped off the latest drawings, I see," Amanda said, peering over the older woman's shoulder.

They were in the process of converting the old stables on the edge of their property into a carriage house apartment for Dotty. With their new addition in the offing, they'd all felt some adjustments to their living arrangement were also in order.

"Yes," her mother responded, perusing the papers with lively interest. "They arrived by messenger while you were taking your bath."

When Dotty generously offered to move out a few months ago, Lee had suggested the renovation. It seemed to be the perfect solution for everyone; Amanda would still have her mother close by, Dotty would gain her own space and the boys could keep theirs.

"What do you think?" she asked, rounding the table to eye her mother expectantly. This was the fourth set of plans their architect had drawn up; Dotty had managed to find something wrong with each of the others.

"You know, dear, I think he's finally hit the nail on the head this time."

Amanda met her mother's satisfied smile with one of her own. When Lee had joked last week that the baby would be in college before Dotty came to a decision, she had told him confidently that her mother would okay the very next set of plans. They presently had a very interesting little wager riding on it.

"So," she inquired, "where's Captain Curt taking you tonight?"

Dotty chuckled conspiratorially. "Out dancing, then to L'Etoile for a late supper."

Amanda joined in her laughter. She'd guessed her mother's indecision had more to do with her special friend's recent interest in a Beech Jet 400 than any real dislike of the plans themselves. Once the poor Captain had seen enough of their very handsome architect, approval was only a question of time. Men really didn't have a clue. She was definitely going to enjoy collecting her winnings from Lee.

Still smiling to herself, Amanda sat down at the table, silently watching as Dotty re-rolled the blueprints to make a space for her. Breathing deeply, she leaned forward, resting her chin on her folded hands. It had been an exceptionally long week, and she was suddenly glad that everyone was occupied for the evening. It had been quite a while since she'd spent any quiet time with her husband, just the two of them, no pressures or worries. She was definitely looking forward to it.

"Tired, dear?"

Feeling a pair of very sharp eyes studying her, she carefully framed her reply. "A little bit, I guess. The bath helped," she added quickly, fearful her mother would take the admission too much to heart. She knew Lee was certain to receive a full report later. Between the two of them, her every ache and pain was duly noted and catalogued.

"There's nothing more relaxing than a good soak in a tub," her mother observed, evidently satisfied that she was feeling fine. "It always makes me feel brand new."

"Yeah, well I'd better enjoy it while I can," Amanda grumbled, stretching to relieve the kinks in her back. "I think pretty soon it will be out of the question. Why is it once babies are born, we tend to forget all the little inconveniences it took to get them here?"

"Because if we didn't, the world would be grossly under-populated," her mother retorted dryly.

Amanda caught her eye and they both broke into a grin, their shared laughter suddenly lifting her spirits.

"Oh, Darling," she heard Dotty sigh, "I felt the same way when I was expecting you. I kept thinking that there had to be an easier way. In the end, though, it was all worth it. . . everything." She smiled softly, remembering. "But I don't have to tell you that, do I? And just think - soon there will be a brand new member of the family."

"It can't come soon enough for me." She bent low over the table, resting her forehead wearily against her folded arms as she let out a heartfelt sigh. It felt good to commiserate with someone who understood her feelings. It was a conversation she didn't feel comfortable having with Lee; she didn't want him to mistake her grumbling for regret.

"You know," she told her mother softly, leaning back in her chair once again. "It all seemed so easy with Phillip and Jamie. This time. . ." She took a deep breath, her finger tracing a small nick on the weathered oak table. "I'm not complaining, though. I really am happy. . ."

Her mother nodded. Rising, she came up behind her, laying a comforting hand on her back. "This baby means a lot to Lee."

"I know it does." She leaned back, resting her head against her mother's arm. Dotty gave her shoulder a squeeze, and Amanda felt the familiar pressure that always told her everything would be all right. She let out a long sigh as she added wistfully, "I guess it was just a whole lot easier to do this at twenty-two."

"Wasn't everything?" her mother teased, giving her one last hug before taking the empty chair beside her. "But you know, darling, this time around does have some advantages. You won't have to do it alone."

"I know," she answered in low voice, marveling that her mother had so easily named her most private fear, the one she had only recently allowed to see the light of day.

"It wasn't that hard to figure out," Dotty said evenly. "I lived through all that with you, remember." Amanda watched as her mother pursed her lips, almost as if she was deciding whether or not to pursue this particular subject. "So, how does Carrie feel about Joe leaving her alone for their first Thanksgiving as a married couple?"

"She seems to be okay with it. She'll be joining him when the semester's finished, in time for Christmas. She told me last night that she's looking forward to the 'adventure'."

"Well, she doesn't have two little children to worry about, so I suppose that makes her decision easier." Dotty looked at Amanda closely. "Does it bother you that she's so eager to join Joe?"

"Not really. I just wish. . ." Amanda frowned, absently twisting her wedding set. Perhaps if Carrie wasn't quite so enthusiastic, Joe would be more willing to listen to her concerns. Still, she was happy that he had finally moved on with his life. After all, wasn't that what she'd wanted for him?

"Oh, I don't know," she added with a sigh, banishing her confusion once and for all. "I'm glad Joe's finally found someone who wants the same things he does."

"The same way you have," her mother gently reminded her. "Having a home and a family are important to Lee."

Amanda smiled softly to herself. "That's because it took us so long to finally get here. That silly mystery marriage, all the months of being apart - it makes what we have now all the more precious."

"It's something Joe still hasn't managed to learn. Honestly, how can he expect to forge a real relationship with his sons if he's always running off to God-knows-where?"

"Joe cares about his family, Mother," she intoned automatically, wondering even as she spoke why she still felt the need to jump to her ex-husband's defense. "It's just that he's always felt that he has something to give." She sighed bitterly. "I just wish he didn't feel the need to give it right before the holidays. It's been nice for the boys to have their

father around the last two Christmases, and I hate to see this cycle starting all over again."

Dotty nodded. "You know, I love Joe, but I've never understood how he can be away from the boys over the holidays."

"It's complicated, Mother. To be fair, I didn't try to stop him from taking that job with the EAO all those years ago. Maybe if things had been working between us. . . oh, I guess it really doesn't matter any more. Joe and I just saw things differently, that's all. He wanted to make the world a better place; I wanted to make a better place for the boys."

"That's exactly what you've always done, Amanda. A home, a family. . . you gave that to them," Dotty stated, her eyes flashing. "Even before Joe went to work for the EAO. And as for making the world better, why, look at you and Lee – as far as I'm concerned, the two of you both manage to do what you do and still give your children a stable life."

Amanda looked up, the breath she'd drawn catching slightly in her throat. Her mother had made more than a few snide references to her job since that day her double life had ended so abruptly, and Amanda had always felt compelled to defend her choices. This time, she felt only her mother's pride in everything she'd struggled to accomplish.

"Thank you," she whispered in a shaky voice, her eyes slightly misty. This stamp of approval, however belated, meant more than she could say.

"You're welcome," Dotty replied in kind, reaching out to gently tuck a wayward lock of hair behind Amanda's ear. "And as for Joe and the boys. . . that will sort itself out, too. It always does."

"I know. I thought I'd finally put all this to rest when Joe and I talked last year, but I guess this whole business with the EAO just brings back feelings I would have preferred to keep in the past where they belonged."

"What you need is a little pampering," her mother stated wisely, "and some time alone with your very handsome husband. Of course," she teased, playfully catching Amanda's eye, "that's probably responsible for your condition in the first place."

"Mo-ther," she moaned, covering her embarrassment with a self-conscious laugh. Some things never changed. Here she was, a married woman with two teenaged children and another on the way, and her mother could still manage to make her blush.

\* \* \* \* \*



"Amanda," Lee said, gently nudging his wife's shoulder, "Wake up. Let's get you into bed." They were comfortably ensconced on the couch, the television illuminating the otherwise darkened family room.

"Hmm," Amanda replied, snuggling deeper into her husband's lap. "I'm watching the movie."

Lee laughed, his hand traveling down her arm to rest lightly on her stomach. He felt the baby flutter inside her, as if acknowledging his presence. Sometimes it didn't seem possible that she was actually carrying his child; in the muted glow of the television she looked almost like a child herself.

"Come on," he whispered, leaning down to move his lips affectionately through her hair. "The movie's been over for forty-five minutes."

"What?" She quickly sat up, swaying slightly as a wave of dizziness rushed over her.

"Whoa," Lee replied, his hand quickly steadying her. "Take it easy. You've been asleep."

"No, I haven't," she insisted, shaking her head a few times to clear it. "Phillip isn't home yet. You know I can't sleep until everyone is where they're supposed to be."

"Uh-huh," he laughed, his arm encircling her. "Then that was a pretty good imitation."

She tilted her head, looking at him through heavy lidded eyes, and he couldn't help but laugh at her guilty expression. "Okay, you win," she murmured, suppressing the yawn that threatened to overtake her. "What time is it, anyway?"

"It's late," he told her in a low voice. "And before you ask, yes, he's late, too."

She snapped to attention, suddenly wide-awake. "How late?"

"Almost an hour," he informed her with a shake of his head. "But there's no need to panic yet."

"Panic?" she said, looking at him as if he'd grown another head. "I'm not going to panic. I am, however, going to lock him in his room until he's twenty-one." Lee watched as she brought her fingers to her throat, reaching automatically for the heart-shaped necklace she'd obviously forgotten she wasn't wearing. "You don't think anything's happened, do you?"

"No," he assured her quickly. "Honestly, I think he just lost track of time."

"But he knows better than that."

"Amanda, he's fifteen, and at a 'cool' party with his friends. And that little cheerleader – what's her name?"

"Christy," Amanda supplied with a groan.

"That's right, Christy," he said with a throaty laugh. "She's a pretty cute distraction. The clock is probably the last thing on his mind right now. Trust me," he laughed again. "I speak from experience."

"Somehow I don't find that too reassuring, Stetson," she told him, slapping him playfully in the midsection. "I've heard too much about your checkered past for comfort."

"Amanda, my past was hardly checkered at Phillip's age." Pulling her closer, he let his lips rest tantalizingly against her ear. "Of course, if you want to fast-forward a few years, I could tell some stories that would. . ."

"I think I'll pass."

He felt her stiffen in his arms. He should know by now that teasing never worked when his wife's maternal instincts were in overdrive. "Hey, don't worry," he whispered, massaging her back lightly until he felt her begin to relax. "He'll probably show up any minute with a dozen very plausible excuses."

"You're probably right." She released the breath she'd been holding, and Lee felt her melt into his embrace as she finally let go. "So," she whispered, "how did the Colonel handle things when you eventually waltzed in?"

"K.P. duty." He groaned at the recollection. "One solid month, every day after school."

"Did it cure you?"

"Let's just say I spent a fair amount of time in the mess hall," he said with a laugh.

"Where did you think I got that aversion to peeling potatoes?"

"I've never been brave enough to ask," she grinned in return. "After you told me about that weekend in Madrid, I decided there were some secrets that should remain just that."

"That's okay, I can think of a few other things we can share." He bent down, nuzzling her neck with his lips. "That is," he murmured, "if you want to." Feeling her shiver, he let his

tongue lightly tease along her collarbone, stopping to press gently into the hollow of her throat.

She drew a shaky breath, lifting his face to capture his mouth with her own. Lee shifted slightly, deepening the kiss, his tongue gently probing. She moaned lightly in response, parting her lips, and, encouraged, he slid his hand inside the opening of her robe. He moved his fingers beneath the strap of her nightgown, then down over her left breast. It was fuller now from her pregnancy, and he felt his body beginning to respond. Not sure how far she wanted to take this, he pulled back, his eyes seeking hers.

Sighing, she gently pushed his hand away. "It's not that I don't want to," she said wistfully. "It's just that Phillip. . . I'm worried. . ."

"It's okay," he told her softly, thinking that he'd happily murder Phillip at the moment. "Do you want me to go over there and retrieve him?"

"I don't know." She hesitated, glancing at the clock on the mantel. "He was supposed to be home by midnight and it's nearly one now. What do you think?"

"I think he'll be suitably mortified, but what the hell? It serves him right. He shouldn't be worrying you right now."

He released her, kissing her forehead as he rose. Stretching, he headed for the kitchen, removing his keys from the wooden holder mounted on the wall as he glanced back at his wife one last time. She was frowning slightly, taking a few deep breaths.

"Amanda," he called, "is everything okay?"

"Yeah," she whispered breathily. "I just had a cramp. I'm fine now."

Lee walked over, squatting in front of the sofa. He gently covered her fingers with his right hand, his left tilting her chin up so he could search her eyes. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," she said, leaning forward for a brief kiss. "I'm sure."

"Okay." He rose, reluctantly releasing her. "Why don't you get into bed while I go collect our wayward child? I won't be long."

She nodded, walking towards the stairs without an argument. Lee watched her closely, his brow knit together in a frown.

Pausing at the doorway, she looked back at him. "I'm fine," she assured him one more time. "Really. Go on."

"Okay." Still frowning, he pocketed his keys and headed for the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lee gripped the steering wheel and depressed his foot slightly, feeling the answering roar of the Corvette's engine. Driving on the open road usually relaxed him, but the narrow streets in their quiet, residential neighborhood seemed to be having the opposite effect.

Taking a deep breath, he stole a brief glance at his stepson. Phillip was still staring resolutely out the window, his face full of teenaged indignation. Dragging the boy unceremoniously from the party had probably irretrievably tarnished his image as the 'cool' stepfather, but at the moment, he was far too angry to care.

They'd exchanged only a few tense words since leaving Jeremy's house. At the moment, Lee didn't trust himself to speak. It must have been some bash, he thought with a dismal smile; he briefly wondered what Phillip was using for a brain these days. Picturing the very well endowed little blonde cheerleader, he had a pretty good idea.

"I can't believe you did that."

The words grated harshly in the uncomfortable silence. Ignoring his stepson's self-righteous wrath, Lee turned down their street, the car fishtailing as he took the corner a bit too quickly. He saw Phillip glance nervously at him for a minute before snapping his scowl firmly back into place.

"Is that all you have to say, Phillip?" The boy shrugged, and Lee gritted his teeth. "Where were Jeremy's parents?"

Phillip mumbled something indistinctly. Feeling the slow ache beginning to build just below his jawbone, Lee tersely repeated the question.

"I said I don't know." Phillip's voice was a bit too loud, and Lee could hear his bravado cracking. "Gone for the weekend, I think."

"Did you know that when I dropped you off?" He wondered guiltily if he should have checked more closely before leaving the boy there. Amanda probably would have. He felt his annoyance multiplying exponentially.

Phillip shrugged again. "He may have said something about it. I don't remember."

Lee pulled into the driveway, slamming his foot forcefully on the brake. They both jerked forward as the car instantly responded. Phillip reached for the door handle.

"Hang on," Lee snapped. "I'm not finished."

"I am," Phillip muttered, looking at his stepfather challengingly for a minute before quickly turning away.

"Don't push it," he warned, his temper flaring despite his best intentions. "I'm pretty pissed off and angry right now. Do you have any clue how many rules you broke tonight?"

"John's dad was supposed to take me home," Phillip finally mumbled, looking at the floor mat with unusual interest. "He left without me."

"You know all you had to do was call us for a ride," he accused, his professional demeanor asserting itself. "Try again."

Phillip shrugged, his eyes still on the floor, and Lee exhaled loudly. Reminding himself that the fifteen-year-old was only guilty of adolescence, he turned to him again, his debriefing taking a gentler tone. "You worried your mother unnecessarily tonight. You know she doesn't need the added stress right now. I'm waiting for an explanation."

Phillip's eyes flashed for a moment, then unconsciously softened as he looked away. "I meant to call," he began haltingly, "but Christy and I were. . . I mean, she looked so. . . and I guess I forgot. . ."

"You forgot what, Phillip?" he prodded, longing for the confidence his stepson seemed determined to withhold. He seemed so intractable lately. Studying the boy's solemn profile in the semi-darkness, Lee was suddenly struck by how much he resembled his father.

"Look," he continued as evenly as he could manage. "Believe it or not, I was your age once myself. And I've done more than my share of. . ." He frowned, searching for the right words. "What I'm trying to say is, if there's anything you want to talk about. . . about Christy in particular or anything else in general. . ."

"I've known about all that stuff for a long time," Phillip replied smugly, his hand energetically massaging the back of his neck.

"I'm glad you do," Lee told him, smiling faintly. "But sometimes it's hard to remember, especially when you throw alcohol into the mix."

"I wasn't drinking."

"Phillip, there was enough beer at that party to open a brewery. You guys were just lucky it was me at the door and not the Montgomery County cops, or we'd be having this little discussion at the police station right now."

"I didn't have anything to drink," he protested again, slowly emphasizing each word. "And as for the rest, I think that's pretty funny coming from you."

"What exactly do you mean by that?"

Phillip turned to him with cold eyes. "I guess you and Mom forgot a few things five months ago, too, huh?"

"That's just about enough." Lee's temper flared, his patience spent. "For your information, this baby was not an accident. And even if he was," he added angrily, "I'm pretty sure that it's none of your business."

"Yeah, it's always none of my business." Phillip drew a deep breath, shaking a little as he let it go. "Just like it wasn't my business that you and Mom got married or that you lied to us about working for a film company."

"We did that to protect you, not hurt you," Lee stated, folding his arms across his chest defensively. "And you know since then your mother and I have both tried to include you in all the family decisions."

"Nobody asked me if I wanted to move," his stepson continued in an angry monotone, "But here we are. And you know, I'm sorry Mom's been sick, but that isn't **my** fault. You guys didn't even tell us about the baby until you had to."

"Your mom and I both explained that," Lee said tersely, feeling as if he'd suddenly stumbled into emotional quicksand. "We weren't intentionally keeping things from you. We just wanted to wait until we knew things were all right before we said anything."

"Yeah, right, so much for being included in family decisions." Turning, he pushed against the door, muttering under his breath as he fumbled blindly with the handle. "Who wanted another brother anyway. . ."

Lee put a restraining hand on his arm, holding him back. "I really don't care at this point what you did or didn't want," he responded harshly. He saw the flash of tears in Phillip's eyes, but at the moment he was too angry to care. "You will not give your mother one more thing to worry about - understood?"

He saw Phillip bite his lower lip as he nodded almost imperceptibly, and he added sternly, "And no more unsupervised parties at Jeremy's. In fact, I think it would be an excellent idea if you didn't hang out with him for a while."

"That's not fair," Phillip cried hotly. "I'm sorry about worrying Mom, I didn't mean to. . . but Jeremy's my best friend. I'm not gonna stay away from him."

"I'm sorry, Chief," Lee said in a calmer voice. "But that's the way it's got to be."

"You can't tell me what to do," Phillip shot back angrily. Twisting slightly, he stiffly straightened his back, looking Lee squarely in the eye. "You're not my father."

"If that's the way you want it," he said flatly, his eyes focused on the steering wheel's leather covering to counter the unexpected sting of his stepson's childish words. "Then just consider me the guy who's grounding you for the next two weeks."

He turned back in time to see Phillip's unceremonious scramble from the car. Slamming the door loudly behind him, the boy sprinted towards the garage. Exhaling loudly, Lee sank back into the familiar caress of the Corvette's leather upholstery, the vague recollection of similar words spoken long ago echoing in his mind. He diligently pushed the memory away.

Running a hand through his hair, he vaguely wondered if he'd overstepped his bounds. Amanda usually handled the disciplinary issues that popped up with the boys. So far, they'd been minor – misplaced homework assignments, exploding cans of soda in the kitchen, a neighbor's shattered window. Phillip seemed determined to set the bar a little higher.

Pulling himself from the Corvette, he glanced at the far corner window. The light was out; Amanda was probably asleep. It was too late to go into all this tonight anyway. She'd trusted him to handle this, he thought with a pang, so that's what he'd do. He only hoped the 'step' in his parenting wouldn't prove too large a hurdle to overcome.

Shaking his head uneasily, he headed for the door.

Wednesday, November 9, 1988

"Mother, could you pass the syrup, please?" Amanda asked, helping herself enthusiastically to some more pancakes.

"Certainly, darling," Dotty replied with a short laugh as she handed her the bottle. "It's nice to see you able to eat in the morning again." Turning an eye on her son-in-law, she asked pointedly, "Lee, what about you?"

"Ah, no thanks, Dotty," he replied with equanimity. "I'm not hungry."

Dotty leaned back in her chair, folding her arms authoritatively across her chest. "Lee Stetson," she began sternly, her voice filled with motherly concern. "I'm not letting you get away with this breakfast boycott of yours. Now, what can I fix you?"

"Not a thing, really," he explained with infinite patience, clinking his spoon absently against the side of his cup. "Coffee is just fine. I've never been a big eater in the morning."

Amanda struggled to conceal her smile as the two of them played out their morning ritual. She knew her mother had long ago given up any hope of reforming Lee's eating habits, but the daily inquisition remained. While Lee frequently moaned about Dotty's dogged persistence, it was without any real conviction, and she suspected that her husband secretly enjoyed his mother-in-law's attentions. It had almost become a private game between them.

"Now, Lee," her mother continued in her most pedantic tone, "I don't know how someone who's obviously as intelligent as you are can fail to realize that breakfast is the most important meal of the day." Shaking her head, she began to clear the dishes, barely missing a beat. "Your body needs fuel. How can you expect to function in the morning without something in your stomach?"

Coughing slightly, Amanda turned her head in time to catch her husband's seductive smile. "Would you care to answer that one?" he whispered as he reached across her for the newspaper.

"He's a lost cause, Mother," she responded, shooting him a look as she devoured the last few bites of food. "You can't argue with years of reheated coffee and stale rolls."

"Well, it seems to be catching," Dotty mumbled, the telltale squeak of the hinges on the front door instantly alerting her. "Phillip," she called, "aren't you going to eat something before you leave?"

"I don't have time, Grandma," he answered, cramming a large notebook into his backpack as he stuck his head into the kitchen. "I'm already late."

"If you want to eat, I can give you a ride," Lee said evenly.



Phillip scowled, hoisting his bag onto his shoulder. "No thanks, I'll take the bus."

"Suit yourself," Lee responded, taking refuge behind the newspaper.

"Remember, you're still grounded," Amanda put in, coming to his rescue. "We expect you home right after school today."

Phillip let out an exaggerated sigh. "Okay. But if I don't go now, I'll miss the bus."

The door slammed shut with a bang, and Amanda turned to Lee, running a hand along his arm. "Don't let it bother you. Phillip's just acting out. He knows he was wrong, and you had every right to ground him for his behavior the other night." She gave him a light squeeze. "It's exactly what I would have done."

"Maybe," he sighed. "But you probably would have handled it more diplomatically."

"I wish you'd tell me what you two fought about."

Lee frowned, refolding the paper and tossing it on the table. "It's nothing you need to worry about," he assured her. "It'll straighten itself out eventually. Besides," he added, leaning over to give her a light kiss, "As long as he's home on time and civil to you, he can expend all the excess energy he wants hating me."

"Phillip doesn't hate you, Lee," Dotty observed wisely. "If you ask me, I think that's the crux of his problem."

Hearing her husband suck in a breath, Amanda resumed her gentle pressure on his arm. "Maybe you should try talking to him again, Sweetheart," she told him carefully. "Once you've both had a chance to calm down."

"I'm perfectly calm now, Amanda," he began testily, then catching her look, his tone unconsciously softened. "Okay. I'll try to..."

"Mom, Lee," Jamie called suddenly. "Come here, you've gotta see this."

Pushing her chair back from the table, she shot a quick glance at Lee. He was halfway into the family room, responding quickly to Jamie's urgent tone.

"I was watching the news for my social studies report when they made this special announcement," Jamie said apprehensively, his words tumbling over each other as he spoke. "Is that..."

"Hang on a minute, Sport," she heard Lee say as she entered the room close on his heels.

Glancing briefly at her husband's face, she immediately recognized the concentrated scowl usually reserved for work emergencies. Her expression matching his, she, too, turned her attention to the television.

"Sporadic fighting continues in and around the capital city," the announcer intoned with modulated self-importance. "Sources close to Santarilla President, Paulo Sanchez, tell us that the rebel forces are holding an undisclosed number of hostages, seized early this morning from Government House. It is not yet known if any Americans can be counted in their number. On the local front. . ."

"Lee," Amanda began, quickly catching her husband's eye. She saw him shrug slightly, raising an eyebrow as he stole a quick glance at Jamie. Evidently this news was as much of a surprise to him as it was to the rest of them.

"Do you think Dad's okay?"

Amanda looked at her son's solemn face, searching for the words to reassure him. Her first instinct was to shield him, but something in his eyes spoke his need for the truth, however frightening. There had already been enough well-intentioned lies between them to last a lifetime.

"I don't know, Jamie," she told him in a low voice. "It may not be as bad as it looked."

"But they said. . ."

"Your mother's right," Lee stated with studied calm. "Let's not worry until we have all the facts." Giving the boy a reassuring pat on the back, he quickly added, "Come on; I need to get going. Grab your books, and I'll drop you at school on my way."

Jamie silently agreed, biting his lower lip as he sprinted for his room.

"Damn," Lee muttered as soon as the boy was out of earshot. "That really came out of left field. The last report said things had settled down in Santarilla."

"What do you think?"

Lee ran a hand briefly through his hair. "I honestly don't know. It could be nothing."

"And I could be the Easter Bunny," Amanda laughed bitterly. "Lee, it broke on the morning news. That means whatever happened had to have been picked up by the Agency flash data reports. . ."

"Last night, at least," he agreed solemnly. "Yeah, I know. I should have been notified. Unless maybe Billy. . ."

Unless Billy knew it was serious and had decided to 'spare' her, she thought with a grimace. She could tell by Lee's restless pacing that he, too, was thinking along similar lines.

'Damn it, Joe,' she cursed inwardly, torn between anger and concern. 'Why couldn't you have stayed home?'

Friday, November 11, 1988

Lee yawned wearily as he quietly closed the back door. Glancing at his watch, he saw that it was almost midnight. He hadn't realized it was so late. After his meeting had ended a few hours ago, he'd gone for a drive, needing to clear his head before facing Amanda. Bad news always took the long way home.

Exhaling loudly, he dropped his jacket over the back of the chair, and, in answer to his stomach's rumbling, opened the refrigerator. He vaguely remembered eating something appropriately unappetizing earlier, but it couldn't be called dinner by any stretch of the imagination. Although, at the moment, his tired brain couldn't make heads or tails of what was passing for food in his refrigerator, either.

The sound of muffled breathing behind him immediately put him on guard. He whirled around suddenly, his left hand reaching reflexively behind his back.

"Sorry," his stepson muttered quickly, his eyes darting nervously to the floor. "I didn't mean to sneak up on you."

"You usually can't." Relaxing his stance, he casually returned his hand to the refrigerator door, hoping Jamie hadn't picked up on his defensive posture. Even though he no longer routinely carried a gun, the habits of his previous life were still deeply ingrained. He gave the boy a reassuring smile, adding with a yawn, "I must be more tired than I thought."

"Mom left you some dinner," Jamie said, pulling out a chair. "I n the green container."

"Ah, what was it?" Lee asked, tilting his head slightly as he lifted the lid.

"Some kind of chicken casserole, I think."

Placing the container on the counter, he stole a quick glance at his stepson as he rifled through the drawer for a serving spoon. Hunched over the table, he had rested his chin somewhat plaintively on his hands as his foot rhythmically knocked against the leg of his chair. In the low kitchen light, the boy looked considerably younger than his fourteen years. Lee was suddenly reminded of the times he'd sneaked into old Barney's kitchen at the Air Force Base looking for someone to talk to.

"So," he asked kindly, indicating the well-filled dish on the counter. "Do you want some?"

"Sure, I could eat," Jamie agreed readily. Looking at Lee to gauge his reaction, he added in a low voice, "I guess I didn't have too much dinner."

Lee nodded his understanding, dividing the food into two portions. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Jamie retrieve two Mountain Dews from their hiding place at the back of the refrigerator. Raising his eyebrow, he caught Jamie's gaze.

"I won't tell Mom if you won't," the boy grinned.

"That's a deal," Lee laughed. Amanda had given him the appropriate lecture on the evils of caffeine when she discovered he'd introduced Jamie to this particular brand of soda on their camping trip last year.

Reheating the leftovers quickly in the microwave, he joined Jamie at the table, setting the plates in front of them. Opening the can of soda, he raised his hand in a quick toast before taking a long drink. Smiling, he watched Jamie do the same.

"So, Sport," he began as he reached for some silverware, "what's keeping you up so late?"

"I don't know," Jamie shrugged, picking lightly at his food with his fork. "Just stuff, I guess."

"Stuff about your dad?"

"Maybe." The boy took a deep breath. "I watched the news tonight at eleven; they didn't say anything new."

Lee bit his lip. "Maybe there wasn't anything new to say."

"Or maybe they just can't say anything more."

Shaking his head, he met his stepson's challenging look. He started to speak, then stopped himself, putting his fork down slowly and deliberately. Resting his arms on the table, he leaned forward. "How did you know that?"

"I didn't know for sure," Jamie said in a small voice as he slumped back against his chair. "It was just a guess. Mom was acting weird at dinner, so I had a pretty good idea something was wrong."

"Weird, huh?" Lee smiled ironically; his wife could pull the wool over a gaggle of Soviet agents, but this bespectacled fourteen-year-old could see right through her.

"Yeah," Jamie said solemnly. "She was talking all the time, and she kept giving everyone seconds on green beans." He paused, looking directly at his stepfather. "The last time she acted like that was the night she told us you guys had gotten married."

"I see." Lee drew a deep breath, exhaling slowly as he shifted uncomfortably in his chair. He retrieved his fork, silently returning to his dinner. He could feel the boy's eyes on him as he ate, patiently waiting for him to finish. Jamie seemed to understand instinctively that he would tell him what he needed to know in his own time. One more trait that had been passed from mother to son, Lee noted with a sigh.

Clearing his plate and Jamie's, he retreated to the sink, rinsing them quickly before placing them in the dishwasher. Amanda had commented a few times on his predisposition to use the sink as a catchall, and, in view of his stepson's persistent gaze, this suddenly seemed like the perfect time to heed her admonitions. He even took a few extra minutes to make certain that Dotty would find the counter spotless in the morning.

"Lee. . ."

Exhaling loudly, he turned back to Jamie, folding his arms across his chest and he leaned back against the sink. "There's really not too much I can tell you at this point," he began, watching as Jamie lifted his glasses slightly to rub the bridge of his nose. "We don't have any official word on your Dad. That could be very good news. . ."

"But it could be..." the boy paused, and Lee watched him set his glasses on the table, carefully rubbing his eyes. "Lee," he said slowly, putting his glasses back on as he looked him squarely in the eye. "Do you think my dad is. . ."

"The only thing we know for sure, son, is that he's missing," Lee explained carefully, softening the truth as best he could. The situation from the Regional Section Chief down there had been less than promising. "He could be a hostage, or he could be. . ."

"Dead," Jamie finished in a low voice.

"I was going to say, he could be hiding, and just can't get word to anyone," Lee said firmly. "The point is," he reiterated, coming over to put a comforting hand on Jamie's shoulder, "We just don't know yet." That much was true. Officially, they knew nothing. Unofficially, . Lee sighed. Joe King could very likely be dead, and it would be weeks or months before they knew it - if ever.

Jamie nodded, his eyes bright with tears as he examined the tabletop. "Why do you think he went down there?" he asked suddenly. "I know you tried to talk him out of it. Phillip and I heard you guys at Dad's house that night," he added quickly as Lee started to protest. "If he knew it could be dangerous, why did he go ahead and do it anyway?"

"I can't answer that, Jamie," Lee said quietly. "I think that's something your dad's gonna have to explain."

"I think maybe. . . maybe it was my fault."

Lee looked at the boy strangely. "Your fault? How so?"

"Remember last year, when he couldn't take me on the Junior Trailblazer campout and you went with me instead?"

"Yeah?"

"Well, I was kidding Phillip that we won first place and he and Dad only won third," Jamie said, his finger working back and forth across the wood the same way his mother did when she wrestled with a problem. "I think maybe Dad overheard us and thought I didn't want to go with him."

Lee sighed, shaking his head as he put a comforting arm around Jamie's slim form. Jealousy really was a complicated monster. He and Joe should have worked harder to overcome their personal issues instead of putting Jamie in the middle of them.

"Your dad knows you love him, Jamie," Lee told him with all the assurance he could muster. "He didn't go to Santarilla because of anything you did or didn't do."

"Then why did he. . ."

Lee shook his head, looking down at Jamie thoughtfully. He still saw things in black-and-white, right-and-wrong terms. He hadn't lived long enough to know that sometimes things were at best only a murky shade of gray.

"It's hard to explain," he tried again. "Sometimes, even though people tell you not to do something, you just can't stop yourself. Even if doing it hurts the people you care about the most. Do you understand?"

"Yeah," he said in a low voice. "Kind of like Phillip, huh?"

"Yeah," Lee stated, patting the boy on the back again. "A lot like Phillip, actually." He shook his head sadly. "Come on, it's late. Time we hit the sack."

"Okay," Jamie agreed with a long sigh. Rising, he followed his stepfather as he started towards the stairs. Pausing in the hall entryway, he rested his hand on the wall, absently fingering the polished woodwork. "Lee," he asked haltingly. "Will you promise me something?"

"Sure, if I can."

"If it turns out that Dad is. . ." His finger trailed down, picking at a small sliver of wood. "If something happens to him, just tell me, okay?" He took a shaky breath, struggling to control the tremor in his voice. "I can take it if I know you'll tell me the truth."

"Jamie, your mom and I will always tell you the truth," he promised, walking over to where his young stepson was standing. His eyes softened as he stared down at the boy. "Tell you what," he began, silently observing the trace of a tear in Jamie's eyes. "I'll go you one better. If you promise me to forget all the nonsense about this being your fault, I'll promise you to do everything I can to make sure your dad gets back here safely. Deal?" He raised his eyebrow, extending his hand.

Jamie gave him a solemn smile. "Deal," he replied, gripping his outstretched hand firmly.

"Okay, then," he returned, flashing Jamie a smile of his own. "Go on, get some sleep."

Nodding, the boy headed for the stairs, while Lee turned off the lights and quickly followed. Jamie paused for a moment, one foot on the bottom step, and looked tentatively over his shoulder. Turning quickly, he threw his arms around his stepfather's midsection, giving him a violent hug. Then, just as swiftly, he bolted for his room.

Blinking to clear his own eyes, Lee slowly mounted the stairs.

Monday, November 14, 1988

Amanda heard the telltale squeak of the bathroom door as it slowly opened.

"You aren't asleep in there, are you?"

Opening her eyes, she found Lee squatting beside the tub, a lopsided grin on his face. "No," she answered in kind. "Just relaxing a little." Reaching out, she laid her hand against his face, the prickly evening stubble like sandpaper as she traced the curve of his cheek. "You're late again."

"I know," he grunted, rising to sit on the edge of the tub. "Couldn't be helped."

"Did you eat something, at least?"

"Billy ordered us something from the cafeteria," he replied, stifling a yawn as he leaned over to plant a soft kiss on her forehead. She sighed as he pulled back, pursing her lips together as she saw the look in his eyes. Lately, they always seemed to wear that same tired expression, but this time she thought she caught a flash of something else before he turned away.

"So, need someone to wash your back?" he offered before she could comment.

"Sure." Passing him the sponge, she leaned forward, struggling a bit as she shifted position. "What I wouldn't give right now for that Jacuzzi we had on the island," she griped as she accepted his helping hand.

"I know," he agreed, a note of longing creeping into his voice. "But I'm afraid this tub is definitely not made for two." She heard his low laugh as he moved to a kneeling position behind her. "I'm not even sure it was made for one and a half."

"Watch it, Stetson," she warned ominously. "I may be a bit bulkier these days, but I can still put up a pretty mean fight." She splashed some water playfully in his direction.

"Maybe, but your aim still hasn't improved much," he laughed as the water missed him and hit the floor. "Okay, okay," he added quickly, grabbing her wrist before she could prove him wrong. "You win. You could take me." He leaned in, and she felt his lips against hers. "I wouldn't even put up much of a struggle."

He kissed her again, lightly at first, then with quickly building intensity. It produced that same familiar, tingly feeling in the pit of her stomach. She wanted to respond, but she felt



herself holding back. The edginess she'd just glimpsed in his eyes was also present in his kiss.

He suddenly stopped, and she knew he'd recognized it, too. Sighing, he rested his forehead wearily against hers.

"Lee. . ."

He took deep breath, quickly looking away. "Sorry," he whispered in a low voice. "I promised to wash your back, didn't I?"

Before she could answer, he quickly moved behind her again, retrieving the floating sponge. She heard the soft ripple of the water as he dipped below its surface. Following his usual pattern, he began to wash her lower back with light, even strokes, traveling higher on each circular pass. The familiar routine produced a feeling of intimate comfort. By the time his rhythmic rubbing had reached her neck and shoulders, Amanda could feel her tension ebb along with his. She knew that they had both reached a decision.

"You don't seem too surprised that my session with Billy ran late," he told her at last.

"Carrie came by tonight. I really like her, you know? It's funny - when Joe first told me that he hoped we'd be friends, I didn't really think it would happen. I mean, I thought. . ."

She felt Lee give her shoulder a gentle squeeze, and she exhaled softly. "They heard from the EAO."

"Do the boys know?"

She tightened her arms around her knees, pulling herself as far forward as she could manage. "Yes. I didn't want to lie to them."

"Well," he sighed, "you did the right thing. They deserve to know the truth. . ."

"The truth," she snorted, twisting her neck to relive the kinks. "I'm not sure I even know what that is any more. Carrie said the EAO wasn't going to pay the ransom."

She heard his sharp intake of breath as he tucked the sponge behind the small bar on the soap dish. His fingers brushed through her hair before moving over her shoulders, then down to gently knead the soft flesh on her arms. "They can't negotiate with terrorists," he whispered, his warm breath lightly tickling her left ear. "You know that as well as I do."

"Yeah, I do," she croaked, swiftly banishing the unwelcome image of dark, piercing eyes from her mind. "Joe must be so scared. . . and alone. I remember what that felt like."

She saw Lee quickly avert his eyes, his attention suddenly focused on the thick white grout framing the tiles. They seldom talked about what had happened with Addi Birol. Time had passed, but guilt kept the memories still painfully fresh - his for not being able to protect her, hers for being the unwitting cause of his purported treason.

He exhaled loudly, gifting her with a bittersweet smile as he gently kissed the tip of her nose. "I was so proud of you," he told her in a voice barely more than a whisper. "You held on like a trooper. You have to believe that Joe will, too."

"I did have one advantage," she murmured, her brown eyes locking on his hazel ones. "I knew you'd come for me."

His head shook almost imperceptibly as he leaned forward. It was a simple kiss, his lips barely grazing hers as they made contact, but the emotion flowed between them like a living thing, her eyes stinging with unexpected tears. Turning slightly so he wouldn't see, she extended her hand. "Help me out of here, will you?" she asked, her voice cracking despite her best efforts. "I'm about to turn into a prune."

Rising, he grasped both of her arms, pulling her easily from the tub. "Watch the water," he warned, grabbing a towel and covering her as he helped her alight.

"Carrie was beside herself," she said sadly, shivering a little as he gently patted her dry. "Without help from the EAO. . . well, she doesn't think she can raise the money to pay them herself."

"Five million is pretty substantial," he agreed, reaching for her robe. "Even if she could get her hands on that kind of money, it probably wouldn't do any good."

He held open the soft terrycloth material and she turned, slipping her arms inside. "How did you know the amount? She said Stevenson from the EAO only found out early this evening."

"They requested Agency intervention." He looked away, not quite meeting her eye.

"And?"

"Officially, the answer is, 'no'. Bush may denounce the taking of American hostages, but at this point, the only stand he's willing to make is a verbal one."

She watched as he began to methodically unbutton his shirt, focusing an inordinate amount of attention on a task that was second nature to him. Avoiding her gaze once more, he swiftly removed it, tossing it carefully into the hamper.

"And unofficially?" she prompted softly as he started on his pants. Slipping out of them, he waited until they were neatly folded before finally meeting her eye.

"Unofficially is another story."

She sighed. "It always is."

"I told Billy I had to talk to you."

She turned away this time, bracing her hands against the sink. Looking up, she glanced into the mirror, but Lee's reflection was indistinct, blurred by the steamy remains of her bath. She heard the sound of running water behind her, and his murmured promise to be out in a few minutes. She briefly wondered if he'd made his decision before or after she'd so conveniently placed the notion in his head.

Sighing once again, she headed into the bedroom. Reaching into the drawer, she drew out a nightgown, discarding her robe and pulling the soft blue material quickly over her head. This was her favorite, the one she'd taken to wearing whenever Lee worked late. The soft fabric was warm and comfortable, the memories more so. It brought to mind red-capped men and gray October mornings.

She heard the shower shut off. Lee emerged a few minutes later, a large yellow bath towel wrapped securely about his waist. He paused by the dresser, humming an indistinct melody as he towel-dried his hair with short, vigorous strokes. When he finished, he slid open the top drawer, its annoying creek grating like fingernails on a chalkboard. One more thing he somehow hadn't gotten around to fixing. She turned away as he rummaged through it for something to wear, knew even without looking that he'd selected the usual boxers and t-shirt.

When she spoke, the words came out in a whisper. "Who would your partner be?"

"John Pierce." He closed the drawer with his hip, then walked slowly into the bathroom to discard his towels. "Houdini is a good man," she heard him call. "I've worked with him before."

"Still. . ."

He left the bathroom, hesitating for a second in the doorway before slowly closing the distance between them. "Amanda, there was a tape." His arms tightened around her from behind, his lips nuzzling her ear. "If we wait for this to play itself out through official channels, it might be too late."

She felt his fingers wander down her arm, then across her abdomen in slow circles. The baby inside her kicked lightly; an elbow or maybe a knee, she thought distractedly. Leaning back against her husband with a tremulous sigh, she covered his hand with hers, pressing it against her. "He needs his daddy."

"No one knows that better than I do," he croaked, his voice hoarse and raspy. "But so do Phillip and Jamie."

She twisted in his arms, reaching up to gently cup his cheek. "I know that, too."

Grasping her hand, he lightly kissed her palm, drawing her with him to the bed. Turning out the light, he slid beneath the covers. He held open the sheet in invitation, and she sank down beside him. Spooning against her, he enclosed her in his arms and whispered softly in her ear.

"Think about it."

Friday, November 18, 1988

"Are you set?"

Lee nodded, swiveling his chair slightly to the right. "I've got my regular passport, my I SP, and Amanda's working on the duplicates for Joe if. . . when. . . it's necessary."

His boss nodded. "And on the other end?"

"I'll have to play that by ear. There's a guy in Santarilla I think I can work with." Lee gave a short laugh. "He'll work with anyone as long as the price is right. I'll rendezvous with Houdini, and the two of us will take it from there." Lee picked up the pen from his desk, rolling it back and forth between his fingers. "And if it comes to that, La Gaviota is still operating."

"That's kind of a crap shoot, isn't it?"

"It's all a crap shoot, Billy," he told him with a sigh. "You know that."

He grunted his reply. From across his desk, Lee watched his friend lean back in his seat, struggling for a comfortable position in the small, straight-backed chair. "I still can't get used to you sitting on that side of this desk," Lee grinned. "It somehow doesn't seem right."

"You sound like Jeannie," Billy teased, crossing his ankles as he finally settled into the chair. "She can't seem to get used to my heading off to New York on a regular basis." Smiling, he added, "It must be the peace and quiet. After all these years, I don't think she can sleep if the phone doesn't ring at least three times a night."

Lee tossed his pen onto his desk, watching as it rolled to a stop by a stack of files. "I guess there's been a lot to get used to in the past year."

"For everyone. It's funny," he said, folding his hands across his stomach in a way that made Lee suspect that ulcer of his was acting up again. "I thought we were getting used to the idea of this promotion."

He returned his attention to his desk, studying the 'Officium in Umbris' seal etched carefully on the top file. "I wouldn't worry," he said finally, his hand brushing through his hair. "I'm sure we'll all adjust eventually. It just takes time. At least," he added in a low voice, "that's what Amanda keeps telling me."

"You should listen to her. She always did have more common sense than you did, Scarecrow."

He raised his eyebrows as he shrugged his shoulders. "I do, Billy. Trust me, that's one lesson I've finally managed to learn." He took a deep breath, expelling it before he continued. "We've talked this up one side and down the other. We don't see any other way out."

"I didn't realize you and Joe King had become such good friends."

"It's complicated. He's important to Phillip and Jamie, and I can't just sit here and do nothing when their father. . ."

"You're about to become a father yourself," his friend stated quietly.

"You think I don't know that?" he snapped, forcefully pushing his chair from his desk. Rising, he began to pace the room, making three circuits before finally coming back to perch on the edge of his desk. "Sorry," he told Billy brusquely. "I guess I'm on kind of a short fuse these days." Sighing, he ran his hand through his hair. "I know, on the face of it, this solution might seem a little. . . extreme. But Billy, this is my job. It's what I do -

have done - for over ten years. If I can get Joe out of there, I have to try. Besides," he added in a low voice, "I've got a debt to pay."

"A debt?"

"Yeah." Titling his head, he caught his friend's eye. "When I was in trouble from Dr. Smyth's secret organization. . . Joe took me in, hid me at his place, no questions asked."

"I don't follow you, Scarecrow. Wasn't Amanda the one who brought you there? I'm sure Joe did that as much for her as. . ."

"Exactly." He drew a deep breath, watching as the older man's bewildered expression changed first into painful understanding, then finally, resignation. Mirroring his look, he added in a quiet voice, "Did I thank you for giving me the okay to do this?"

"You know officially my hands are tied. But I guess it doesn't hurt that you have the new Director of Covert Operations in your hip pocket," Billy laughed gruffly. "He seems to have a soft spot for you. If Cartwright was anything like Dr. Smyth, you know I'd never be able to cover something like this."

"Cartwright's a good man," he replied, memory fleeting quickly across his face.

"As long as you're aware that this is an exceptional circumstance. The Section Chief is usually expected to stay put."

Lee nodded, acknowledging the gentle reminder that he was no longer a field agent. As much as he loved his new life, he realized with a pang that a small part of him still longed for the excitement of the chase. And maybe always would.

Guiltily, he rose, two long strides taking him to the corner of the room. Resting his hip on the edge of the smooth mahogany file cabinets that lined the back wall, he looked out into the bullpen. He could just make out Amanda sitting quietly at her desk, her cheek resting on her hand as she talked on the phone. He could see the rounded bulge of her stomach, and his face unconsciously softened. Eyes on the window, he spoke in a low voice. "I'm afraid I need one more favor."

"Whatever you need," came his friend's reply. "After all these years, I've kind of gotten used to sitting out on that limb with you."

"Then this one should be a piece of cake." Pulling his eyes away, Lee looked pointedly at his ex-chief. "Keep an eye on Amanda until I get back? She's still a good three months from

her due date but with everything we've been going through with Phillip, and now this mess, I'd feel better if I knew she had someone to count on. You know, just until I . . ."

Billy cut him off with a wave of his hand. "That's one promise easily kept." Arms folded across his chest, he gave Lee a sharp look. "As long as you promise to get your butt back here to work ASAP." He rubbed his stomach appreciatively. "I know this used to be my section, but I think doing this job is detrimental to my health."

Lee smiled. "I guess that means I can't lure you into taking a quick trip to Mickey's."

"Scarecrow," Billy said with mock severity. "When have you ever known a little thing like my stomach to keep me from the best chili dogs in D.C.? Let's get going, and that's an order." He trod briskly to the door, his hand resting on the handle as he shot one final glance over his shoulder. "Just remember one thing the next time you see Jeannie - this little excursion is strictly 'need to know'."

"Yes, sir." Nodding towards the bullpen, he added with a laugh, "That goes both ways."

\* \* \* \* \*

"All packed?"

"It wasn't too hard," he replied, holding up the small nylon bag with a grimace. "I'm traveling light."

She nodded solemnly, snuggling deeper into the comforter's fluffy warmth. Absently, she traced its white on white pattern, the down filling bunching beneath her thumb and forefinger as she stroked. She could feel Lee watching her and, looking up, she caught his eye.

She saw her own feelings written plainly across his face. This same scene was played out every day in countless homes - a typical husband and wife, hashing out the details of a business trip. Except that they weren't typical, and never would be.

"I wish you'd let me drive you," she told him wistfully, taking refuge behind the façade of normalcy they strove so hard to maintain.

"Amanda, we've been over this." Depositing the bag by the door, he sat down stiffly beside her. "I'd rather picture you at home in our bed, getting the rest you need. Besides," he added, leaning in to kiss her lightly. "You know I hate public goodbyes."

"You don't have to leave just yet, do you?" She caught his gaze with her own, watching closely until Scarecrow's intense look unconsciously softened into her husband's easy countenance.

"I guess we still have a little time," he murmured, kicking off his shoes as he switched out the lamp beside the bed.

She threw back the covers, letting out a long breath as his arms came around her. The bathroom door was partially open, spilling a narrow corridor of light into the darkening room. It cast a soft, penumbral glow across the features she loved so well. She pulled herself deeper into his embrace, her words muffled against his chest.

"You'll be careful, won't you?"

"You know I will." His lips brushed the top of her head. "Houdini is a good man. Rumor has it he's going to be the Section Chief in the New York office soon."

"He could be Director of the Agency, and I'd still think it's my job to watch your back."

Leaning forward, he planted a tender kiss on her flattened belly button before drawing back to catch her eye. "You just watch your front right now," he rejoined, "and let me worry about the rest."

She sighed, the plaintive sound drifting off into the darkness as she settled down beside him. Fitting her head against his shoulder, she clutched his shirt with unusual zeal. "It sure will be a quiet Thanksgiving without you." She shut her eyes, crumpling the smooth cloth into her closed fist. "And I thought we were going to have so much to be thankful for this year."

He rubbed his hand tenderly across her stomach. "We still do, Sweetheart. Don't worry; things will work out all right."

"You know, I think that's the first time I've ever heard you say that," she whispered incredulously.

"That things will work out?"

"No," she smiled, giving him a tender kiss. "'Sweetheart'."

She heard his gentle laugh. "You must be rubbing off on me."

"Or things must be worse than you'll admit."



He took a deep breath, exhaling loudly. "I'll get Joe out of this, I promise. Trust me?"

"You know I do." She sighed again, releasing her death grip on his shirt. Her fingers smoothed the fabric, feeling the comfort of his strong chest through the roughened material, but it wasn't enough. Her fingers quickly found the top button, fumbling a little in her haste to undo it. "I'm just so worried about the boys. Jamie's so upset again and Phillip. . . well, it's just impossible to know what he's thinking these days."

"I tried to talk to him earlier when I was saying goodbye to Jamie," Lee told her, his voice a husky whisper. "But the cold war is still raging."

She felt the heat of his gaze as she turned her attention to the next button, her fingers tracing small circles across his skin as she quickly exposed it. "It's funny," she said sadly, sliding her hand around to caress his back and shoulders. The feel of his flesh beneath her fingers, solid and warm and *here*, soothed her overwrought nerves. "I've always worried that Jamie was too introspective for his own good, but at least he knows what it is he's feeling. Phillip just gets mad. I remember when Joe left on his first assignment for the EAO. . . ." Sighing, she burrowed deeper into her husband's arms. "He refused to talk for three whole days."

Lee chuckled softly. "I once avoided saying anything to the Colonel for an entire week."

"Yeah?" She smiled wistfully. Since her pregnancy, he'd been more open about his childhood, slipping in these little tidbits of information when she least expected them. "So, what started you talking again?"

"I think it was when I realized that he really seemed to enjoy the peace and quiet."

He didn't offer any more information, and Amanda knew he would tell her the rest in his own time. Two years of marriage had taught her that the less she pushed, the more he revealed. Resting her head on his shoulder, she pushed his shirt aside, her fingers stroking soothingly across his skin.

"I think it's a pretty safe bet that Phillip's just as worried about his father as Jamie is," she heard him say at last, his voice dropping lower as her hand moved in a similar direction. "He just doesn't know how to show it without ruining that tough guy image he's been working so hard to perfect." He sighed, his own fingers playing caressingly over her arm. "Sometimes the hardest thing of all is to admit that you need someone to help you."

"You tough guys," she murmured, her lips barely grazing his cheek. "You're all alike; aren't you?"

"Maybe we are at that." He gave a bitter laugh, his forced grin slowly melting into a frown. "I really blew it with him the night he missed his curfew. I was so angry that he'd upset you that I let it get in the way and I . . . Damn, Amanda, I never thought I'd say this, but I think I've actually become my uncle."

"I highly doubt that," she laughed, giving him a playful squeeze. "He's much shorter." She turned his face towards hers, straining forward to lightly kiss him. "I hate to break this to you, Lee, but no one's perfect. Making mistakes isn't something that's only reserved only for stepparents - or uncles. Mothers and fathers do it all the time."

His fingers wandered across her abdomen. "Do you think it'll be any easier with him?"

"I can practically guarantee that it won't." She moved his hand a little to the left. "See, he's already giving me a hard time, and he's not even here yet."

She heard Lee's rumbling laugh. "I don't know how you manage to sleep."

"He's pretty active," she laughed. "I must be getting used to it. Your son seems to have his days and nights completely turned around."

"Well, I used to be a night owl myself."

"Oh yeah? What changed?"

He put his lips against her ear, nibbling lightly. "I grew up and saw the benefits to that 'early to bed' stuff much more clearly."

She gave a low laugh. "I see your point." She draped her leg over her husband's, pulling herself even closer. "I don't want to lose you," she whispered, her mood suddenly serious.

"You won't," he murmured in an equally shaky voice as his lips sought hers. Amanda felt the power in his kiss, drawing her in and making her believe. "I promise."

He started to move away. "Not yet," she entreated, burying her lips in his neck as she quickly pulled him back.

"Amanda," he whispered, running his hand caressingly across her cheek. He swept her hair back and away from her face, catching the ends between his thumb and forefinger. When he sighed, it was with indescribable longing. "Amanda," he repeated, his hands moving down to grip her arms, stilling her movements and forcing her to look at him. "Please. This is already hard enough without. . ."

"Sh-shh." Her lips covered his, cutting off his refusal. She knew what he was trying to tell her. They usually kept their physical relationship in check when the stakes were this high. She knew, too, that Scarecrow was already gearing up for what lay ahead. She could see it in his eyes, in that quiet intensity smoldering beneath her husband's loving gaze. When the time came, she would let Scarecrow go; but for the moment, Lee still belonged to her.

"Please," she whispered tenderly. Leaning in, she traced the outline of his ear with her tongue. She felt him shiver in response, pulling her as close as her belly would allow, and she murmured softly, "Please, Lee. . . make love with me."

His eyes locked on hers, and she watched as he lost the battle, giving in to the same desire that gripped her. It was a longing of the heart, not the body. The need for one last emotional connection was almost overpowering.

He rolled away, quickly shrugging out of his shirt. She could hear the sound of his zipper, followed by a dull thud as his pants hit the carpeted floor. She shivered slightly, already anticipating the feel of his hands on her body. As her pregnancy advanced, their lovemaking had subtly changed. Wild abandon had been replaced with a loving tenderness that was somehow even more arousing. The burgeoning presence of the life they'd created with their love strengthened their emotional bond tenfold.

Lee turned towards her, his hands gently cupping her face. His gaze was so intense, almost as if he was trying to commit her tiniest feature to memory. He sighed softly as he leaned in, and she murmured in response as his lips found hers. He kissed her, tenderly at first, then with steadily increasing pressure as his arms tightened around her. She parted her lips, enjoying the feeling as he entered her mouth. As their tongues met, the fears they'd been afraid to voice were temporarily put to rest. The kiss ended, but his mouth still lingered, nibbling sensuously on her upper lip as he held her close.

His hands moved surely to her nightgown, tracing a path along her body as he raised it up over her head. She shivered slightly as the air made contact with her bare skin and, overcome with a sudden, inexplicable vulnerability, she looked away, unable to meet his eye.

"I love you, Amanda." The words were whispered close to her ear in soft yet distinct tones, and she marveled again at his uncanny ability to sense her deepest feelings.

"I love you, too," she echoed as she felt him press his body close to her right side. His desire was clearly evident as he rubbed against her, and she breathed deeply in response. He leaned closer, his warm mouth covering her right breast as his hands searched out the places that made her feel warmer still. His fingers worked, and as her breath came in shorter and shorter gasps, she pulled away, inching down to take him slowly into her mouth.

She heard his quick gasp of pleasure and took delight in it, enjoying what she could still do to him despite her rapidly increasing girth. She could feel it in the way his body tensed and trembled, hear it in the softly muffled sounds that escaped his lips despite his best intentions. His hands clenched in her hair and, realizing she'd unintentionally pushed him almost beyond the edge, she stopped abruptly. She didn't want to finish it like this; tonight more than ever, she needed him inside her.

Looking up, she caught his eye and, seeing the same urgency mirrored there, she rolled on her side, backing up against him as he quickly grabbed a pillow to place between her lower legs. He shifted and nestled up close behind her until there was no space between them, and she let out a satisfied sigh as she felt their bodies fit perfectly together.

Resting his weight on his forearm, he leaned over her, his lips brushing tenderly through her hair. His free arm embraced her, fondling her breasts and caressing the taut skin on her belly. He kept himself to slow, careful movements, but he still felt powerfully large as he filled her again and again, penetrating more deeply with each gentle thrust. The feeling warmed her blood, and she voiced her approval with a soft moan.

Closing her eyes, she tried to give in to the pleasure of pure physical sensation, to let their union wash the worry from her mind. Despite her best efforts, unwelcome thoughts still intruded. She sensed Lee struggling to wait for her, but as she felt the tension gathering in every part of his body, she realized with a sigh that mutual ecstasy was out of reach tonight. They were both far too distracted.

She reached over his arm, her fingers rubbing tenderly along his hip. He groaned, a muted sound that bespoke his frustrated desire, and she responded automatically, tightening her muscles around him and drawing him in as deeply as she could. His breath came in roughened gasps as he let go, flooding her with warmth. She sighed softly, feeling his arm slowly relax its hold as he collapsed down into the bed.

She felt his lips nuzzle her neck as his arm snaked around her. "I'm sorry," he murmured softly against her shoulder. "Here, let me. . ."

"I don't care," she replied in a shaky voice, stopping his fingers as they began to probe between her legs. "Just hold me. That's all I want."

He complied, pulling her to him in a tender embrace. The light from the bathroom filled the bed with a golden glow as darkness completely claimed the windowpanes. She lay with him in dream-like suspension, her pulse beating powerfully in her wrist where his strong hand enveloped it. She pressed her back tightly against him, so close that they breathed together.

"I'll be back before you have time to miss me, Amanda," she heard him whisper in soothing tones as he clasped her to him. "I promise."

Thursday, November 24, 1988

"I think that's the last one." Dotty groaned in relief, passing the small crystal dessert plate to her daughter. "It's about time. You know, dear," she continued, stretching out her back in an exaggerated motion. "We do have a perfectly good dishwasher. Tell me again why we can't use it?"

"Because these dishes belonged to Grandmother West and she always washed them by hand."

"Darling, your Grandmother West washed everything by hand, including her unmentionables on an antique washboard. I hate to disillusion you about a blood relation, Amanda, but the woman was certifiable."

"Mother."

"When your forty year old son believes he's Merlin the Magician, then the apple doesn't fall very far from the tree, if. . ."

". . . You know what I mean," they finished in unison.

"Your father had the strangest relatives," her mother declared with an exasperated laugh.

Amanda smiled wryly. "You're forgetting about Uncle Iggy."

"That's not the same thing at all," Dotty retorted, hands on her hips in mock consternation.

"Yes, Mother."

"Besides, he may have been a nut," she laughed, returning her attention to the dishes, "but he was **my** nut. I always had a soft spot for the man. I remember one Thanksgiving. . ."

Amanda replied with an absent nod, her gaze fixed on the window while Dotty rambled on about turkey legs and wishbones. The night seemed darker than usual, her imagination painting the shadows in the yard blacker and more sinister. Nights like these, she half expected something to pop up out of the shrubbery. Or someone.

"Darling?" Her mother's voice drifted over her. "Have you heard one word I've said?"

"Something about, um, a drumstick recipe for Uncle Iggy?"

"Not exactly." Dotty eyed her daughter suspiciously. "Amanda, dear, is everything okay?" she demanded with sudden concern. "Did Mr. Melrose tell you something when you went outside after dinner? That's it, isn't it? He's heard from Lee. I knew it; something's wrong, something you can't tell me."

"No, Mother," Amanda assured her. "Lee made his check-ins. That means everything's okay."

"I don't know how you do it," her mother confided, the catch in her voice unmistakable. Amanda watched as she leaned against the sink, aimlessly tossing the wrung-out dishrag from one hand to the other. "How do you manage to stay so calm?"

"Some days are easier than others." She sucked on her lower lip, nervously chewing the edge. "This is the first time, isn't it?"

"The first time?"

"That you've known about the danger before it was all over." She let her iron control slip just a little as regret softened her features. "The first time you've needed to know. I'm sorry."

Dotty folded her arms across her chest as she discarded the dishrag carelessly into the sink. "Maybe I'm finally getting a first hand glimpse of why you kept your job a secret for so long. I know this can't be easy for you."

"You know me," Amanda intoned. "Great in a crisis, fall apart afterwards."

"That's not true at all. I don't think I've ever seen you fall apart, Amanda. Not when Daddy died, not after the divorce. . . the closest you ever came was that day in the kitchen, when we thought Lee was de. . . well, you know. I think I'd feel better if you did just let it all out. You keep everything locked up inside. Just like Phillip."

Frowning, Amanda shrugged, picking up the rag to give the clean countertop another swipe. "That's because if I 'let everything out', I just might start screaming." She clutched the edge of the counter with her left hand, while her right scrubbed ruthlessly at an imaginary spot. "Part of me is worried to death about Joe, down there all alone facing God-knows-what. If something happens to him. . . well, I don't know how the boys will deal with it. Me either, for that matter. But then there's that other part - the one that wants to

personally throttle him for going down there in the first place and putting us all through this."

"Darling, what happened to Joe. . ."

". . . It's not his fault. I know that. He didn't ask to be taken hostage, but the result is the same. Now Lee's down there alone, without me to watch his back." She drew a deep breath. "That's been my job for the last five years, and it's kind of hard to let go. I should be there with him, instead of sitting here, out of my mind with worry. If it wasn't for the ba. . . my condition. . ."

"Then I'd be at my wits' end about the both of you," Dotty stated in a low voice. "I nstead of just Lee."

"He'll be okay, Mother." She sighed again, tossing the worn-out rag into the trash. Taking a deep breath, she straightened her back, turning to catch her mother's eye. "And he'll get Joe out of there. I have to believe that." Her right hand absently massaged her stomach. "For everyone's sake."

Dotty put an arm around her shoulder. "I'm glad you invited Carrie today. The poor dear looked like a lost soul."

"The boys are part of her family now. I think it did her good to spend some time with them. And it was good for the boys, too." She smiled, remembering the hopeful camaraderie of their holiday table. Patting her mother's hand, she added, "Thanks for being so nice to Billy today."

"His winning personality must be growing on me."

Amanda leaned back against the sink, kneading her stiff neck muscles with her right hand. "Mother, he's been a very good friend to Lee - and to me. Billy and Jeannie both."

"He does have a very nice wife," her mother answered wryly.

Amanda sighed. "You won't give an inch, will you? I'm sure it's as much my fault as his that you two started off on the wrong foot."

"Amanda, I don't dislike Mr. Melrose. I just associate him with some unpleasant things I've tried to forget and I. . . hey," she called as Phillip thundered through the kitchen.

"Where's the fire?"

"I'm in a hurry, Grandma. Have you seen my football jacket?"

"Where do you think you're going?" Amanda inquired.

"Jeremy invited some of the guys over," he said quickly. "I told you about it."

"That was tonight?" She shook her head slowly. "I didn't think you meant tonight, Phillip. It's Thanksgiving."

"Jeremy has people over every year, Mom. **His** parents think it's fine."

"Well, that's great, but **I** happen to think today is a family day."

"You told me I could go," Phillip declared defensively. "You can't just take it back."

"Phillip, I'm not. . ."

"Please, Mom. You promised. . . all the guys will be there."

"You mean Christy Carlson will be there," Jamie said, wrinkling his nose as he came into the room. "If it was just the guys, you wouldn't even care. They're a hot item," he informed his mother and grandmother with a grin.

"Shut up, Worm Brain," his brother threatened.

"Why don't you make me?" Jamie shot back. "Besides, I thought you weren't supposed to go to Jeremy's any more."

"What are you talking about?" Amanda asked as Phillip finished the argument by giving his brother a shove. "Boys, I've had enough of this," she remonstrated as Jamie showed every sign of returning the favor. "Now what's this about Jeremy?"

Jamie squirmed uncomfortably as his brother fixed him in a lethal stare. "Lee told me I couldn't hang out with him for a while," Phillip mumbled through clenched teeth. "The night I got grounded."

"Why? Come on Phillip," she prodded as he refused to meet her eye. "Lee must have given you a reason."

Phillip shrugged, suddenly inordinately interested in his shoelaces. Glancing at her mother who seemed equally in the dark, Amanda pursed her lips.



"Jamie, would you excuse us for a minute?" she said as she caught Dotty's eye. "I need to talk to your brother alone."

"Come on, Jamie," Dotty said, putting an arm around his shoulder. "Let's go pick out a movie to watch."

Jamie nodded, shooting Phillip an apologetic glance as he allowed his grandmother to steer him to the family room.

"So," she began in a quiet voice when the others were safely out of earshot. "Do you want to tell me what's going on with you?"

Eyeing the floor, Phillip traced a small square with the toe of his sneaker. "Nothing."

Ignoring his surly tone and equally sullen expression, Amanda took a step towards him. "You know, it's all right to be scared about your dad," she began, folding her arms around him and pulling him into a hug. "Things will be okay."

He squirmed in her embrace, but he didn't back away. "I wish you'd talk to me, Phillip," she urged, her voice low and soothing. "We used to be able to talk."

"I, um. . ."

She gave him a hopeful glance, patting his back lightly, the way she used to do when he was small. He seemed different somehow, his resolve softening, as if he was finally on the verge of opening up. "Phillip," she murmured again, "tell me what's wrong." She leaned closer, the baby shifting with her motion to kick emphatically under her ribs. She felt Phillip stiffen in her arms and pull away.

"Nothing's wrong. I just wanted to go to hang out with the guys at Jeremy's; it was no big deal."

Amanda straightened up, a pain in her back causing her to flinch. She placed her fist solidly against it, her knuckles pressing against the soreness. "I'm sorry, but until you want to talk to me, you aren't allowed to go to Jeremy's."

"That's so unfair. They're expecting me. . . what am I supposed to do tonight?"

She grimaced again as the pain spread down and across her lower back. "You're welcome to watch the TV with us like we do every Thanksgiving."

"I'll just go to my room," he mumbled, pointedly looking away.

"If that's what you want." As she watched her son shuffle from the room, she couldn't help but remember last year's holiday celebration. Her guys' unbridled enthusiasm over the Dirty Harry film they'd elected to watch, her mother's pretended horror. It was their first Thanksgiving in the Rockville house; after all the false starts, she'd felt they were finally becoming a family.

Rubbing her back, she headed into the family room, wishing for the hundredth time that day that her husband was waiting for her on the sofa.

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Lee's eyes followed the swirling pattern on the dingy apartment wall. Stirring his food again, he quickly jammed a bite into his mouth, grimacing slightly as the spicy sauce burned his pallet.

"What's the matter, Scarecrow?" Houdini laughed loudly. "Dinner not to your liking?"

He hesitated as he brought another bite to his mouth, eyeing it suspiciously as it hovered in front of him. Wrinkling his nose, he tossed the fork on his plate in disgust. "I really hate beans."

Houdini's laugh punctuated the air.

"That's it. Laugh. But a guy could starve to death eating this swill," he grumbled, rocking his chair back and forth. "I don't know how you've survived here this long."

"What were you expecting, a home cooked meal? You know the field as well as I do."

"I guess my memory has gotten a little hazy."

"You've just been spoiled, sitting behind that desk of yours, eating 'three squares a day'."

"Maybe. It's odd, you know, the things you miss." Lee chuckled softly. "The next time my mother-in-law nags me to eat breakfast, I think I'm gonna do just that."

"Breakfast - you **are** getting soft, Scarecrow." Lee watched in disgust as Houdini popped the last bite of roll into his mouth. "Best Thanksgiving dinner I've had in years."

Lee smiled; looking at John Piece was like viewing a distorted version of himself. He'd spent countless holiday dinners just like this over the years, burying himself in a case so he wouldn't have time to think about what he was missing.

Things were very different now. Rising, he walked to the window, looking down at the scene below. The dusty roads of the capital city of San Miguel were quite a contrast to the well-paved highways of home, this year's meager dinner fare starkly different from last year's feast in Rockville. A turkey big enough to feed an army, the muted lights of the candles in their dining room, and his wife smiling back at him across their table. He turned away with a sigh, catching his friend's curious eye.

"You know, maybe I am soft at that," he told him with a knowing grin. "But I think I like it."

Houdini shook his head, placing a hand over his heart in mock agony. "Never thought I'd live long enough to hear you say that. I remember back in - what was it - '81? We were in. . ."

"Germany."

"Frankfurt," Houdini reminded him with a sly smile. "There was that cute little blonde and her sister, the one with the poodle - you couldn't have forgotten?"

"How could I?" Lee grinned, crossing back over to the rickety dining table. "That damned dog of hers ate the key to the safe deposit box and we had to sift through all that. . ."

"Yeah. And you couldn't find any rubber gloves." Houdini let out a rumbling laugh. "Not exactly the memory I was talking about though."

Lee raised an eyebrow. "Funny, that's all that comes to mind."

"Selective amnesia. . . in some cases a good thing. When we get back to the States, I've got to meet the woman who caused it."

Lee grinned, rolling his shoulders helplessly.

"Well, Scarecrow, look on the bright side - with any luck this should all be over in a few days, and we'll get you home where you belong."

"Can't be soon enough to suit me. I don't think I'll complain about riding a desk anymore."

"I'll believe it when I see it." Houdini began to clear the table, tossing the dishes carelessly into the sink.

"Believe it, my friend, believe it," Lee said with a grin, helping him remove the last of the plates. They were old and chipped, just like everything else in this town. Opening the small refrigerator, he grabbed a couple of beers.

"I've done some checking," Houdini said gruffly, accepting the beer Lee offered him. "Your friend, Carlos, seems to have the right connections. It's possible he can do what he promised."

Lee leaned forward, running a hand through his hair as he studied the wrinkled map Houdini had spread out on the table. "Then everything's a go."

"Yeah. He takes the supplies to the rebel army camp every week. Somewhere in here." He pointed to a small speck. "This time he'll bring a few bottles of wine."

Lee grinned. "A very special vintage."

"Special enough to keep the guards neatly distracted. You pick up the package and I'll meet you. . . here."

Lee felt Houdini's eye on him. "What?" he said cautiously. "You have a problem with the plan, tell me now."

"Not really. You're sure about using La Gaviota?"

"It's not without its risks, but they got a friend of mine out of here a few years ago when everyone thought he was dead."

"Something about this Carlos still bothers me," Houdini said, scratching his head with his index finger. "It all seems too neat somehow. These FMNL guys would love to get their hands on an American agent, you know."

"Houdini. . . if you're having second thoughts about this, you can cut out now. I'd understand."

"And miss all the fun?" he exclaimed, absently brushing his vest. "Besides, I promised Billy I'd keep an eye on you. Make sure you don't pull some foolhardy stunt you'll regret."

Lee gave a short laugh. "That's usually Amanda's job. She's damn good at it, too."

His friend smiled. "That's what I hear."

Lee's reply was cut off by the sound of distant gunshots. "Must be a few stragglers from the FMNL army," Houdini put in quietly. "There's still sporadic fighting in places around the city."

"I know. This forged truce is tentative at best. We need to get in and out of here as quickly as possible. I know Carlos seemed a little skittish the other day when we met him," he added, more to himself than his friend, "but he's still our best shot. If there's a chance we can get Joe out, I've got to take it."

"Why don't you let me take it, Scarecrow? This could get sticky," he added before Lee could protest, "and you're the one who has more to lose here."

Lee gave his partner a long look. "I appreciate the offer, but it has to be me."

"Why?"

"Joe knows me," he said, smoothing his hair again. "He'll trust me."

Houdini let out a long breath. "Okay. But let's go over the contingency plans again, so there aren't any surprises."

"Surprises are part of our business, Houdini," he reassured him. "Besides," he added sarcastically as he raised his beer bottle in a mock toast. "What could possibly go wrong?"

Friday, December 2, 1988

"Phillip?" Jamie called, knocking lightly as he entered his brother's sanctum. "Have you seen Mom? I need her to. . ."

He paused, puzzled by the empty room. He could have sworn his brother had disappeared into his bedroom right after dinner. Shrugging, he turned to leave when sounds of muffled conversation caught him by surprise.

It appeared to be coming from the closet. "Phillip?" he repeated, moving forward in cautious steps. His brother's behavior was just getting stranger and stranger. Closing his hand around the knob, he pushed his glasses back up his nose and flung the door open.

He could just make out Phillip's tall, lanky form in the corner of the walk-in closet. "Jeez, you scared me," Jamie exclaimed, wiping his brow.

"I don't remember saying you could come in here, Worm Brain," Phillip grumbled, kicking his jeans into the corner as he turned to glare at his brother.

"I was just. . . never mind. Why are you hiding in your closet?"

"None of your business," he replied sullenly as he pushed Jamie in the direction of the door, adding brusquely, "get out of here."

Jamie bowed his head obediently as he reluctantly moved away, shoulders suitably cowed. He heard Phillip's sigh of relief and, grinning, he mouthed, "Make me." Whirling around, he made a beeline for Phillip's laundry pile.

"Jamie," he heard his brother yell as he scrambled frantically to pull him back. He felt hands grab his leg, pulling him to the floor with a resounding thud.

"I 'm gonna kill you, Twerp," Phillip growled, pinning him down as he rolled him onto his back. "Give," he demanded, invoking their time-honored signal of surrender.

"No," Jamie replied stubbornly, his hand closing around something beneath the dirty t-shirts. "Phillip, cut it. . ."

"Guys, what's going on up there?"

They both froze, exchanging a worried look as their mother's voice reached them from the stairway. "Nothing, Mom," Jamie called, "I just dropped my, uh, skateboard, that's all."

"You know that doesn't belong in the house, Jamie," she called as the brothers exchanged a conspiratorial grin. "Take it outside, okay?"

"Okay, Mom," he called as Phillip gave him a silent thank you. His brother rolled away, letting him up.

"Geez, Phillip," he exclaimed wide-eyed as he unveiled Phillip's hidden treasure. "What's your problem? It's just the telephone."

"Yeah, well, I was, uh, on the phone with Christy."

"So? You're always on the phone with her."

"I was making plans to meet her tomorrow night." Phillip hesitated for a moment, then added hastily, "Jeremy's parents are gone this weekend, and he's having a blow-out party."

"And you're going?" Jamie asked open-mouthed. Scrambling to his feet, he walked over to Phillip's bed, throwing himself on the tousled bedspread. "Boy, you must really like her."

Phillip shrugged, dropping down beside his younger brother. "Yeah, I do."

Jamie whistled. "If Mom finds out, you're gonna be grounded for life."

"She won't find out, unless you decide to spill your guts again." Phillip gave his brother a pleading look. "Promise not to tell? She thinks I'm going to Tommy's."

"I promise."

Phillip rolled onto his back to stare at the ceiling. "Thanks. I just really need to see Christy tomorrow. When I'm with her, I don't think about... well, stuff. You know?"

"Yeah." Jamie turned over, mimicking his brother as he concentrated on the nubby white ceiling. 'Textured', his mother called it that day they'd moved in. All the rooms in the new house had 'textured' ceilings. He remembered wondering why it was such a big deal – it just looked bumpy to him. The ceilings on Maplewood Drive had been smooth.

Shutting his eyes, he let out a long breath, his tongue carefully exploring the roughened surface of his braces. "Do you think they're okay?" he whispered shakily. "Dad and Lee, I mean. Mom doesn't say anything, but I can tell she's really worried."

"I don't know," Phillip murmured in a similar tone, his foot drumming repeatedly on the metal bed frame. "I really don't know."

\* \* \* \* \*

Lee crouched low, listening to the sounds drifting to him from the camp. Raucous laughter mixed with occasional gunfire. The party was in full swing, the tired soldiers evidently making full use of the supplies Carlos had so generously provided. He smiled grimly. So far, the plan was working like clockwork. It won't be long now, Amanda, he thought with a sigh of satisfaction. Just a few more days...

Ruffling noises in the brush startled him and his hand closed around the butt of his gun. He silently cursed his lack of control. He shouldn't have let his thoughts drift towards home; there was too much at stake right here.

"Scarecrow," a lightly accented voice called from the darkness.

"Over here," he responded, holstering his gun. Reaching out, he grabbed Carlos by the shirt, pulling him into the bushes. "What the hell is this? We're supposed to be under contact zero."

"Don't worry, they're all busy celebrating," the thin man reassured him. Glancing around, he ran his tongue across his upper lip. It was a nervous habit he seemed to employ all too frequently; Lee noted that both his lips were cracked and dry.

"Okay. You have information?"

Carlos nodded. "They moved the prisoner. He's in the shed - over there." He pointed to a small, ramshackle structure on the edge of the encampment. "They locked him in. This way they don't have to waste a guard."

"He's not guarded?" Lee asked skeptically.

Carlos shrugged. "No one wanted to sit out the fun. They had a big 'discussion' about it."

Lee nodded. "What about you? When I get him out, will you be compromised?"

"No, I should be okay." He ran his tongue across his lip again.

"All right. Then get the hell out of here. I don't want you near when I make my move. And Carlos." His eyes narrowed as he frowned. "From now on, contact zero."

Lee sighed as his contact disappeared, swallowed up by the night. He listened for a few minutes, certain that the only noises belonged to the celebrating rebel band. Satisfied, he reached for the walkie-talkie hanging from his belt, adjusting the volume for the earpiece.

"Scarecrow to Houdini, come in."

"Houdini here. What's your status? Over."

"The shoe is about to drop." He hesitated for a moment. "Looks like it's a size twelve."

"Size twelve. Got it. See you in a few days. Houdini out."

"Affirmative. Scarecrow out."

Grunting, he replaced the walkie-talkie and stashed the small backpack in the brush. Noiselessly, he edged closer, moving towards the target in halting increments. Pausing at the edge of the clearing, his eyes carefully swept the perimeter of the camp. Most of the soldiers were sprawled around the fire, the guffaws of the few who were still awake quickly fading away. Tugging on the collar of his black, Agency-issue jumpsuit, he began to belly crawl across the open space to the small shed that housed Joe King.



Pulling his small, silver lock pick from his pocket, he made quick work of the padlock, pulling the chain through the door handles as quietly as possible. Opening it a crack, he slipped inside, wincing as the hinges creaked. He listened for a minute, barely breathing, heaving a silent sigh when all remained quiet. Squinting, he peered through the darkness.

"Joe?" he whispered. Receiving no response, he spoke a little louder, his tone rough and authoritative. "Joe King?"

"What 'ya want?"

Lee exhaled loudly. The voice was barely recognizable. "Joe," he called again, more gently this time. "I t's me, it's Lee." Blinking as his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he could finally make out the crumpled form resting in the corner. Crossing the distance, he squatted in front of him, quickly taking in his condition.

"Lee," Joe croaked, finding his voice as recognition sank in. "What are you doing. . ."

"Getting you out of here." He ran his hands lightly over Joe's shoulders and arms. "What kind of shape are you in?"

"My leg's not so good," Joe moaned as Lee's hand gently brushed across him.

"Can you walk?"

"I think so. Hell, if it means getting out of here, I'll crawl."

"Lean on me," Lee told him brusquely, pulling him to his feet. "And be careful. The guards are otherwise occupied at the moment, but we need to be quiet."

"Lee, I . . ."

"Shhh." Lee held up a warning hand, his ear trained on the door. The sharp crack of a breaking twig immediately put him on guard. Depositing Joe in the corner once again, his hand automatically went to his gun as he quickly flattened himself against the wall behind the door. Cautiously, he checked the silencer, finger primed on the trigger.

"Who left this chain unlocked," the roughed voice demanded in slurred tones as the door creaked open, adding under his breath, "I warned them once about leaving the prisoner unguarded. . ."

As the husky soldier approached Joe, Lee kicked the door shut with his toe. Whirling, the man began to fire at the sound, but Scarecrow beat him to the punch, efficiently dropping him with two shots to the head and throat.

"Is he. . ." Joe said in a hushed voice.

"Yes."

"Lee, I. . ."

"Save it," he said tersely. "Let's get out of here." Re-holstering his gun, he extended an arm to Joe. "Come on, before his friends decide to join him."

Saturday, December 3, 1988

"Go, Eagles."

Amanda cheered with the crowd as the junior high's eighth grade team scored another basket. From her perch behind the concession stand, she caught Jamie's eye, acknowledging his bashful grin as the coach substituted him into the game. The team was up by almost ten points now; the second string would get a chance to play after all.

She watched with pride as he raced down the court, wishing Lee could be here to applaud with her. He had worked so hard to help Jamie improve his skills last summer. Those endless drills every night after dinner had finally done the trick. He would never be the star athlete his brother was, but being part of the team this year had made all the difference for her youngest son.

One title he wouldn't hold for much longer, she thought as the baby made his presence known. Pretty soon there would be another little guy around to claim it. She'd expected Jamie to be bothered by that, but he actually seemed excited at the prospect of being a 'big' brother.

If only Phillip felt the same way. She'd tried to understand his attitude, but despite her best intentions, she still felt a little hurt. It was unreasonable, she knew; at almost sixteen, it was really no surprise that Phillip would be more excited by a new car than a new brother. Still, she missed the little boy he had once been, open, cheerful and always ready to lend a helping hand.

"Cheese nachos, please."

The little girl tilted her head, her beribboned pigtails bouncing as she moved.

"Here you go, sweetheart," she said, handing her the order. The child's bright hazel eyes struck a familiar chord. It would have been so nice to have a daughter, Amanda thought wistfully. A little girl who was the image of Lee had been her secret wish, but the look on her husband's face when she told him she was giving him a son was something she would always treasure. She closed her eyes for a moment, focusing on that memory instead of the troublesome fact that he'd missed his check-in this morning.

"Amanda, did you see it?" her mother asked, excitedly joining her at the stand. "Jamie scored a basket!"

"He did?" She looked over in time to see her son receive his teammates' congratulations. They continued as the buzzer sounded, the boys cheering loudly as they lined up to shake hands with the losing team. Acknowledging the woman who was taking the next shift with a nod, she made her way to the doorway with her mother to wait for Jamie.

"Good game," she praised him when he finally arrived.

"Thanks," he grinned, shifting his black canvas bag to his right shoulder. "It was a lucky shot."

"Lucky?" Dotty exclaimed. "After all that practice?"

"Well, Lee showed me a couple of things," he grinned.

"You know," Dotty continued, "My Uncle Orloff used to have a bank shot like that. He wanted to be a professional player, and I think he even had an offer from a team or two, you know, the ones with the funny names, but Aunt Shirley refused to move to Seattle. What?" she exclaimed, catching the expression on Amanda and Jamie's faces. "Her hair frizzed in the rain. Perfectly acceptable reason."

Amanda smiled. "Who's hungry for pizza?"

"I could sure go for some. Hey, can we go to Mario's?" Jamie paused, his forehead scrunched thoughtfully. "Unless you're too tired. . ."

"We used to go there almost every week, didn't we?" Amanda replied thoughtfully as they crossed the parking lot in search of the Wagoneer.

"Yeah."

"Phillip used to love that place," Dotty said wistfully as they spotted the car. "Too bad he was going out tonight. . . Amanda, dear, do you want me to drive?"

Amanda and Jamie exchanged a look. "Ah, no thanks, I've got it."

Dotty nodded. "Well, okay. It is a shame Phillip isn't here, it would be just like old times."

"He hasn't seen Tommy Nelson in a long time, Mother. I'm glad he's spending time with some of his old friends. . . Jamie," she asked quizzically as she noticed him standing like a statue beside the car. "Is something the matter?"

"Uh, no," he stammered, bending down to re-tie his black and white sneaker. "Everything's fine. I'm just hungry."

"Me, too," Dotty added as she settled into the front seat. "Now what was that perfectly awful concoction we used to order – the one Phillip loved?"

"Pepperoni, bacon and green pepper," Amanda laughed as she and Jamie piled into the car. "Don't cringe, Mother, but, actually, that sounds pretty good to me right now."

"Oh, Amanda," Dotty groaned as they pulled out of the parking lot.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Lee. . . wait." Joe King fairly choked on the words as he doubled over, chest heaving.

Lee nodded, slowing perceptibly as he caught the note of desperation in Joe's voice. He watched as the older man braced his hands awkwardly against his left knee, wincing as he swallowed great gulps of air. Pursing his lips, he laid a comforting hand on Joe's shoulder.

"How's the leg?" he asked in a low voice.

"I'll live," Joe returned between raspy breaths. "I think. Just don't ask me to run the four minute mile right now."

Lee chuckled softly; at least Joe's sense of humor seemed to be intact. Listening to the man with one ear, his eyes cautiously swept the trail. "We can take a minute if you need it. I've bought us a little time."

"I thought they'd be hot on our trail."

"They think we're meeting La Gaviota, so they'll look for us by the water for awhile. My friend, Carlos, looked a little too 'twitchy' the last time we talked," he added in response to Joe's puzzled look, "so I altered the plan."

"Carlos?"

"My contact. My partner had a bad feeling about him right from the start." As always, Houdini's instincts had been right on the money. Carlos had more than likely sold out to the highest bidder. Lee smiled grimly. He certainly didn't want to be in the poor man's shoes when his other employers discovered the tables had been turned.

"So," Joe asked, interrupting his thoughts of revenge. "Just where are we headed?"

"Inland - about one day's travel from here, give or take. There's nowhere in this area to land a helicopter. Once we rendezvous with Houdini, we'll head straight to the airport. . . and home. Piece of cake."

Lee smiled reassuringly at Joe's doubtful look. He knew only too well that the plan contained some flaws, the most glaring of which was Joe's physical condition. The grueling pace they had to set would try the most seasoned agent, let alone a civilian - and an injured one at that. A detail both he and Houdini seemed to have overlooked; one he was certain Amanda would have picked up on instantly. He realized belatedly just how much he'd come to rely on her instincts over the years.

Watching the pain flash through his companion's eyes, he offered a steadying arm. "Here, lean on me," he urged, half-lifting him as he helped him off the trail to a small clearing. Depositing him against a fallen tree trunk, he, too, dropped to the ground, wincing as he searched for a comfortable spot. "A few more minutes of rest won't hurt either one of us."

Reaching for his canteen, he offered it to Joe. "Just a little," he cautioned, "it's got to last us a while." Resting his hand on the side of the container, he guided it to Joe's parched lips.

Sighing as the water soothed his throat, Joe leaned back wearily. "Lee, tell me the truth. How much time do we really have before they come after us?"

He shrugged, removing his cap and wiping the sweat from his forehead. It wouldn't take the rebel soldiers too long to realize they hadn't headed for the coast. They'd double back, no doubt able to make much better time. Sighing, he fitted the cap carefully back into place. That silver lining he always clung to was becoming more elusive every minute, and he silently cursed their luck.

"Sorry I'm slowing us down," he heard Joe mumble through gritted teeth, struggling to stifle his groan as he slumped down against the moss-covered tree trunk.

Lee shifted to one side, expertly assessing Joe's condition as he gave him a quick once-over. His leg wound was seeping again. "Here, let me take a look at that," he said matter-of-factly, rifling through his small backpack for the first-aid kit.

Using a pocketknife, he carefully cut away what was left of Joe's pants, whistling softly as he saw the full extent of the injury. Even to his layman's eye, the wound was obviously infected. "I'm afraid you're gonna have to settle for a field dressing until this is over," he told him as he retrieved the small tube of antibacterial ointment from the kit. "We can't risk medical attention, not until we get back to the States. They'd be all over us in a second."

"It's okay. I t's waited this long. . ." Joe closed his eyes tightly, his face taking on a grayish hue as Lee treated the wound, wrapping a light gauze bandage around the infected area.

"When did you get this?" he asked, hoping to distract him. He'd seen Joe wince a few times as he'd worked, and he knew his efforts hurt as much as helped.

"Two weeks ago," Joe grunted through gritted teeth. "Hasn't been this bad for that long, though. . . maybe just a couple of days. I t's hard to say exactly; I kind of lost track of time there for a while, you know?"

Lee nodded soberly. "Have you been alone this whole time?"

"No," Joe replied in a small voice. "They grabbed three of us that first day. There were soldiers, too, in the beginning - always watching us, never letting us rest. Manuel - he's the one you shot - he was the worst." He sighed bitterly, closing his eyes as his mind relived a memory too private to share.

Lee recognized the look; he'd seen it too many times in other debriefings, on the faces of agents pushed beyond their level of endurance. He ran a hand nervously through his hair, observing Joe King with renewed concern.

"Then one night the guards were suddenly gone. They were celebrating, they'd just gotten new rations or something," Joe continued blandly, his tone prickling the hair on the back of Lee's neck. "Just like last night. Anyway, we made a break for it. We didn't know the perimeter of the camp was booby-trapped." Joe laughed cynically. "Must have been why they weren't that worried about us."

Lee narrowed his eyes, fairly certain of what was coming. "You were the only prisoner in the camp," he said, stating the facts in the softly modulated tones of a class 'C' interrogation. He watched dispassionately as Joe wiped his forehead, his fingers lightly massaging his right temple.

"Bill Johnson, he was a local contact for the EAO. . . he fell. A spike punctured his chest. I . . . I tried to help him and took one in the leg."

"And the third?" Lee continued gently. He knew the answer, but he also knew that Joe needed to tell him.

"He wasn't hurt," his companion whispered softly, clutching the canteen to his chest. "A small group of soldiers came for him the next day. We didn't know if they'd moved him to another location, or if they'd. . . well, at any rate, they didn't have to worry any more. Bill and I weren't in any shape to try to escape again." Joe's eyes clouded as he lost himself in the memory. "When he finally died three days later, I couldn't be sorry. I was just glad he wasn't suffering anymore. I t should have been me," he finished, his voice rising sharply. "The escape was my idea."

"I t was a gutsy move, Joe," Lee told him with grudging admiration. "I 'd have done the same thing."

Joe smiled grimly. "You wouldn't have been here in the first place. I should have listened to what you were trying to tell me that night at dinner – you and Amanda." He cast a quick glance in Lee's direction, handing him back the canteen with a rueful look. "Thank you for not saying 'I told you so'."

"You're welcome," Lee stated blandly as he took a small swig of water. Recapping the canteen, he stood, stretching his cramped muscles before slowly extending his hand. "How about it, think you can cover a few more miles before dark?"

"Absolutely," Joe declared, shuddering as he allowed Lee to pull him to his feet. "Let's get the hell out of here."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Well, that does it, that really does it," Dotty sighed as she brought the large laundry basket down the stairs.

"What does?" Amanda called from the family room couch, adding as she caught sight of her mother, "The boys are old enough to bring down their own stuff, you don't have to be doing that. Besides, I thought we were going to watch the late show."

Dotty set the basket on the floor with a thud. "Amanda, I certainly don't want you carrying this, and if I waited for Phillip to do it, he wouldn't have a stitch of clothes to wear. Honestly, darling, that boy can't tell the difference between the floor and a laundry basket. Where are you going?" she asked as Amanda headed to the kitchen. "The movie's started. . ."

"I need a glass of milk. I've got the worst indigestion."

"I told you not to eat that last piece of pizza," Dotty called over her shoulder. Tilting her head to the side, she sighed as Amanda came back into the room. "I just love these old Doris Day movies. They just don't make them like that anymore, you know?"

"I know," Amanda replied, rubbing her belly as she eased back down onto the couch. "Mother, leave those clothes for tomorrow."

"I can do this as I watch," she said, leaning forward as she began to efficiently sort the colors from the whites. "Just look at these jeans," she exclaimed, holding up a wadded ball of denim. "These I found under Phillip's bed, in exactly this condition." Shaking her head, she returned her attention to the T.V. screen. "You know, Amanda, how can Doris fall for such a line? I mean, no one is that gullible. . ."

Amanda raised an eyebrow. "No, Mother, you're absolutely right." She leaned back into the soft cushions, shifting as she struggled to find a comfortable position. Lately she'd spent so many evenings like this, curled up on the couch with Lee, his broad chest her pillow. It was so hard to be without him. She wondered how they'd ever survived the lonely months of their 'mystery marriage'.

Maybe he was feeling the same ache right now, missing their quiet time together. After all, it was only an hour earlier in Santarilla. She closed her eyes, letting that image fill her mind. He was okay; she just knew it. She'd told Billy exactly that an hour ago when he reluctantly informed her that Scarecrow and Houdini had both missed their second check-in.

"Amanda, dear," her mother stated softly, "why don't you head up to bed? I'll wait up for Phillip."

"No, that's okay - I couldn't sleep anyway until he's home." A dull pain cut across her lower back and she squirmed, glancing at the clock. Phillip was allowed out until twelve-thirty tonight; thirty more minutes, then she would go to bed. A good night's sleep would give her a different perspective.



"I could watch this movie a million times," her mother observed with a grin as she finished going through the wash, carefully checking the pockets of all the pants. "I hope Phillip is having a good time with Tommy tonight – he's such a nice. . ."

"A nice what?" she murmured absently, giving Dotty her full attention. Her mother had paused, frowning, her hand frozen in the pocket of Phillip's jeans. "Mother, what is it?"

"That's just what I was thinking," Dotty said curtly, removing the small, square package and holding it gingerly between her well-manicured thumb and forefinger. Eyebrow raised, she looked from Amanda to the screen. "Think Doris has an answer for this?"

"Oh my gosh."

Dotty looked at her queerly. "Amanda, your fifteen year old son has a condom in his pocket, and that's all you can say?"

She shook her head. "At the moment, yes." She pursed her lips. "Maybe it doesn't mean what we think it does – maybe he's just carrying it around, you know. . ."

"In case of an emergency?" Dotty smiled grimly. "I don't think they covered that one in the Junior Trailblazer Handbook, do you?"

"I'm obviously going to have to talk to him," Amanda groaned.

"Obviously. Where do you suppose he got this?" Dotty asked, tossing the item on the coffee table.

Amanda reddened, recognizing the brand. "Uh, I have a sneaking suspicion he's been looking in places he shouldn't. Another thing we'll have to talk about. . ."

The phone rang, cutting her off. Amanda struggled to rise, but Dotty waved her back. "Sit still, I'll get it." She stuck her head in the room a minute later, a puzzled expression on her face. "Amanda, it's Phillip; he wants to talk to you. He sounds upset."

"Coming," she moaned, pushing off against the arm of the couch. Taking the receiver from her mother, she spoke quickly, Dotty looking on with an anxious face.

"Phillip?"

"Mom? I'm really sorry, I really am," he said breathlessly.

"What's the matter?" she demanded, clutching the phone as she unconsciously straightened her back. "Phillip, you aren't making any sense. Where are you? Have you had an accident?"

"Not exactly," Phillip answered cryptically. "I'm, uh, at the police station."

"The police. . ."

"Mrs. Stetson?" a strong voice interrupted. "This is officer Sam Harris."

Amanda clutched the phone, her frown deepening as she listened to the man's cursory explanation. "Thank you, officer," she said through gritted teeth when he finished. "I'll be there in a few minutes." She replaced the phone in its cradle, leaning against the wall as she tried to ignore the pounding of her heart.

"Amanda. . ."

"Phillip's been arrested," she said in a low voice.

"Arrested! What on earth. . ."

"For underage drinking. There was a party at his friend Jeremy's house. Evidently he wasn't spending the evening with 'nice' Tommy after all." Amanda sighed. "I've got to go pick him up. It seems they'll release him to a parent's custody." Grumbling under her breath, she headed upstairs to change her clothes.

"Do you want me to go with you?" Dotty called after her.

"No, stay here with Jamie. I'll be fine." Whether or not Phillip would be fine remained to be seen; she doubted the drive to the local police department was long enough to completely cool her boiling anger.

Rubbing her lower back, she ran the rest of the way up the stairs.

Sunday, December 4, 1988

"Cold?" he asked, casting a quick look at Joe's shivering form.

"A little," Joe replied, rubbing his arms vigorously. "Felt like this the last day or so. It comes and goes."

Lee threw a few more twigs on the dwindling fire. "We can't let it get much higher. I don't want to take the chance of being spotted."

"I can live with being cold," Joe said, his chattering teeth belying that statement. "But what would really hit the spot right now is a home cooked meal. Hell, I'd even settle for some of those crazy concoctions that Carrie calls food."

Lee rubbed his neck, twisting away from Joe to hide his grimace.

"Yeah, I know," Joe commiserated. "Carrie's an awful cook. She dearly loves to take those cooking classes, but I wish she'd get a new hobby." He gave a short laugh. "For all our sakes."

Lee laughed conspiratorially. "Maybe when you get back you can kinda steer her in another direction."

"Right now, I'd give my eye teeth for the chance." He leaned back, resting his head on his hand as he struggled for a comfortable spot on the unyielding ground. "You think they're right behind us, don't you?"

"I haven't seen any sign that we're being followed."

Joe laughed mirthlessly. "I feel a 'but' coming."

"But," Lee grinned grimly, "I have a bad feeling. . ." He leaned back against a large boulder, stretching his long legs out in front of him. "It's probably nothing. Too bad Houdini can't land at night." He sighed again. "He'll be here at daybreak, then we'll be out of this mess once and for all."

"We'd be out of here by now if I hadn't been holding us back," Joe stated apologetically. "I'm sorry I've been such a burden - I guess I'm better suited to pushing papers across my desk than my body across country like this."

"You're being too hard on yourself, Joe. After what you've been through, you've done as well as can be expected. Better, even." He gave a short laugh. "Hey, look on the bright side, things could be worse - at least we're not handcuffed together."

"Handcuffed?"

"Just thinking of another time. Uh, Amanda and I found ourselves in that position once upon a time in the Virginia woods. Running from a group of self-proclaimed survivalists. We ended up in a swamp, cold, damp and hungry." Lee chuckled softly. "Interesting night."

"I still have hard time picturing Amanda in your . . . line of work," Joe said incredulously. "She always seemed so content to stay at home and raise the boys."

"She still loves raising the boys. She's just developed a few other interests as well."

"That's exactly what she told me when I came home from Africa. She wasn't the same woman I'd married, that's for sure. She was. . . I don't know, so much more." He smiled sadly. "Or maybe she'd been that way all along, but I was just too preoccupied with my own issues to notice."

"People change, Joe," he said after a minute of awkward silence. "Sometimes we get so caught up in what we want to see that we miss the obvious."

Joe shook his head, stifling a groan as he carefully shifted his leg to a more comfortable position. "When we first met, Amanda was so full of life," he said wistfully. "Always ready for anything. I think that's what attracted me in the first place. I guess we never took the time to talk about what we really wanted. Seemed like everyone we knew was getting married. I guess it was kind of like running downhill; we were just swept along. Maybe we should have taken the time to really get to know each other."

Lee smiled to himself. "Become friends first."

"Yeah," Joe said in a strangled voice. "I guess for us, friendship came along too late in the game."

He paused, and Lee watched the older man's eyes grow dark as he relived a distant memory. "We both had such big dreams. . . the kind you have when you're very young and see the world a certain way. But then Phillip was born, and Jamie so soon after, and I don't know, things just changed. Amanda wanted a home, a picket fence – the whole nine yards. I still wanted to conquer the world. Having children seemed to pull us in different directions."

Lee nodded, looking away from Joe and into the waning fire. Amanda's fluctuating moods these past few months suddenly made perfect sense; her reluctance to cut back at work even when she clearly needed rest, her annoyance when he offered even the simplest assistance. He could see now that her responses had less to do with hormones and more to do with the echoes of her past.

Joe picked up a small twig, drawing a line back and forth in the dirt. "I have a confession to make," he stated softly, glancing up at Lee. "That summer after Carrie broke things off, I thought maybe there was a chance. . . a chance for Amanda and I to finally pick up

where we'd left off all those years ago." He cleared his throat, tossing the twig into the fire. "I was such a fool, refusing to acknowledge what was right in front of me. Amanda was a different woman when I returned from Africa, but you were the one who brought that wonderful sense of adventure back, not me."

"No, it wasn't me, either," Lee said in a quiet voice. "It was Amanda." He smiled softly, picturing the woman he'd first met at that train station years before, the woman he'd overlooked for so long. He couldn't take responsibility for her transformation. It was something she'd done herself, an accomplishment he knew she looked on with pride. Somewhere between the bomb threats and the bake sales, she'd achieved the perfect balance.

The same way he had evolved. Looking back, he couldn't fix the day or the hour when it had happened. He only knew that he woke up one morning and hamburgers had become more palatable than vichyssoise, the late night movie more appealing than nightclubs, and one woman more attractive than all the names in his four black books combined.

"Tell me something, Lee," Joe entreated, his voice jarring as it disturbed his reverie. "Why'd you come down here after me? Not that I don't appreciate it, but we haven't been. . . well, let's just say things between us have been polite at best."

"Why did you help me when I was in trouble with the Agency?" Lee queried.

"Because you mattered to Amanda," Joe told him honestly. "When she thought you were dead, well. . . something died in her, too. If I could bring that spark back by helping you, then I was glad to do it." He let out a breath. "And after everything she'd done for me, it seemed the least I could do."

"Ditto," Lee echoed softly. "Amanda tends to have that effect, doesn't she?"

"She must be out of her mind with worry."

He stretched out on the ground, hands pillowed behind his head as he looked up at the night sky. "She understands," Lee stated succinctly. He hadn't explained his actions to Amanda in so many words; she'd known, the same way she always did, that this was something he'd been compelled to do. Even so, he knew he belonged back in Rockville with her, not out here in the middle of nowhere.

For a brief moment, he allowed himself to think about his wife, safe and warm at home. . . their home. How he loved that little parcel of land and the life they'd made together, its very normalcy somehow strangely imposing. Still, everything about the place appealed to him - the white shutters contrasting against the red brick, the stone edging Amanda had

chosen with careful concern, the flower beds Dotty had tended with aching care last summer, secure in the knowledge that this time they wouldn't end up mysteriously trampled. And in the upper right hand window, the lone light that always burned late at night to welcome him.

"You know, I told myself I came down here for Phillip and Jamie," he told Joe at last, "but honestly speaking, I think it had more to do with me."

Joe rolled on his side, giving him a puzzled look. "I don't understand."

"It's complicated," Lee said in a low voice, wondering a little that he was baring his soul to, of all people, Joe King. Their trial by fire must be having an unexpected side effect, or maybe that ring around the slivered moon cast some odd truth spell. He only knew that for some unfathomable reason, he needed Joe to understand.

"I was five when my parents were killed," he began in a strained voice, absently rubbing a small scratch on his hand. "And afterwards, I, uh, went to live with my uncle."

"The Colonel, right?"

"Right. Although growing up, I think I had a few other words for him," he grunted softly. "It wasn't easy - my uncle was gone a lot, busy with maneuvers. I guess he wasn't exactly equipped to handle a kid."

Rolling over, he sat up, running a hand through his mussed hair. "Anyway, every time my uncle would go off on one of his missions, I used to pretend that he'd gone to bring my parents back. I'd build up this whole crazy scenario in my head." He gave a bitter laugh, his brow wrinkling at the recollection. "Of course, my fantasy never happened; dead is dead. But the thing is, you weren't - dead, I mean - so for Phillip and Jamie, the fantasy could come true." He sucked in another breath, looking Joe in the eye. "It's hard to lose a parent, whether you're five. . .or fifteen."

"Thank you," Joe said simply. "I really do appreciate everything you've done; not only for me, but for Phillip and Jamie, too. I guess I haven't always been the most attentive father, but I love my sons. I've tried so hard to make it up to them for missing out on so much of their lives, but it isn't easy." Joe sighed, settling back against the hard ground. "Especially now that they have another father figure in their lives."

"I may live with them, Joe, but you're the one they call Dad - that will never change."

"I've seen the way Phillip looks up to you, Lee. Believe me, it's pretty hard to compete with that kind of hero worship."

He laughed shortly. "I don't think you have to worry. Phillip and I aren't on speaking terms at the moment. Trust me, I'm much less glamorous as an authority figure."

Joe shook his head. "You really don't see it, do you? What do think this whole football thing last fall was all about? He only wanted to play because he's heard you talk about your college football days."

"I don't think. . ." He paused, running a hand through his hair. Amanda had intimated the same thing on a few occasions, but he'd brushed it off. Suddenly, Phillip's behavior over the past few months became a lot clearer. His withdrawal from family activities, his surly attitude about the new baby; they were classic signs of jealousy, and he'd been too caught up in the wonder of expectant fatherhood to notice. He winced, remembering the accusatory look in his stepson's eyes that night in the car. He shouldn't have kept their fight from Amanda. If he'd talked to her instead of trying to 'spare' her. . . he let out a breath. Maybe one of these days he'd finally learn.

"Listen, Joe," he said firmly. "I've made my share of mistakes, too - especially with Phillip. I guess it's pretty obvious he's feeling none too secure right now." He looked down at the older man. "Maybe when we get back we could both try to change that."

"You mean try to work together for a change?"

"Yeah," Lee agreed. "As Amanda told me a few weeks ago, it's not the mistakes that matter - it's how you deal with them."

Joe offered his hand. "As friends, then?"

"As friends," Lee echoed, grasping it firmly. His eyes met Joe's for a moment, then darted away in embarrassed emotion. "Come on," he urged, resting his head on his elbow as he settled in for the night. "Try and get some sleep - with any luck, by this time tomorrow we'll be on a plane, headed home."

Monday, December 5, 1988

She looked up when she heard the sound, wondering for a moment if her ears were playing tricks on her. Her eldest could usually be mistaken for a thundering herd when he came into a room. These steps were the kind usually reserved for skulking in the shadows.

Setting her newspaper aside with a grim smile, she turned towards the sound. "Hello, Phillip."

"Mom."

Amanda watched him back away in stunned surprise, the package of cheese in his right hand dropping to the floor with a loud plop. "I've been waiting for you to come downstairs all afternoon," she continued in a low voice, ignoring his startled look. "Get something to eat if you want, then sit down."

He bent over to retrieve the package, shrugging as he resealed the airtight container. "I'm not that hungry, I guess." Eyes glued to the floor, he cautiously bit his lip. "I thought you'd still be at work."

"Then who were you avoiding?"

"Grandma and Jamie," he admitted reluctantly. "I just didn't want to. . . you know. . ."

"I know," she sighed. "Come on, let's go into the family room, it's more comfortable. This straight chair is hard on my back."

"Do we have to?" His foot tapped rhythmically against the floor as he folded his arms across his chest. "I really just want to be alone right now."

"Yes, we have to," she stated firmly. "It's time."

"Mom, please. . ."

"No, Phillip. I left you alone when we came home from the police station Saturday night. I left you alone all day Sunday. I left you alone after we met with your principal this morning. But that's it. Come on," she reiterated, putting an arm around his shoulder and guiding him to the other room. "We're going to talk."

They sat in silence as they both sought a comfortable position, Amanda drumming her fingers on the sofa's sweeping arm, Phillip absently kicking the leg of the coffee table with his foot.

"Where is everybody?" he asked at last in a small voice.

"Grandma picked Jamie up from basketball practice and took him for pizza and a movie."

"On a school night?" Phillip squinted, slowly rubbing his forehead. "You must want to talk pretty bad."

"Yeah," she smiled. "I guess so."



He looked down, picking at the tweed design with his finger.

"Phillip," she continued, ignoring his reticence. "We have things to discuss, even if it's only the logistics of your suspension." She shifted uneasily as the nagging pain she'd been experiencing with some regularity for the last half hour intensified. Refusing to acknowledge it, she forced her attention to the problem at hand.

"Do you know how lucky you are that your school is part of the new pilot program with the police department?"

"It sure doesn't seem lucky. A three-day suspension, probation and community service. . ."

"It's a lucky break, trust me."

"But what am I gonna do? I can't participate in extra-curricular activities for three months. . ."

"You could try doing your homework, for starters."

"Yeah, right."

She struggled to hold onto her temper as he leaned back against the couch, rolling his eyes in typical teenage fashion. "Look, I know this is about more than just one bad decision at a party," she tried again with as much patience as she could muster. "This latest issue is just a symptom. You've been upset for the past few months. I've given you some space, hoping you'd come to me or Lee or your Dad about it. But I can't do that any more."

Eyes fixed steadily on his lap, he mumbled something, his fingers twisting the folds of his t-shirt.

"I couldn't hear you."

"I don't know what else you want me to say," he repeated, his voice still barely above a whisper. "I already told you I was sorry."

"Well, you could try explaining why it happened."

"I don't know. . ." He leaned away, chin on his hands as he rested his elbows on the arm of the couch. "I didn't mean to. . . it just. . . happened."

Amanda reached out, laying a gentle hand on her son's shoulder. She felt him stiffen, but she ignored it, instead giving him a reassuring squeeze. "How long has this been going on? The drinking, I mean. Please, Phillip, tell me the truth," she added, her other hand rubbing the hardening knot in her stomach. Willing it away, she patted Phillip's shoulder again.

He shifted suddenly, meeting her eye, and said in a rush, "I haven't been drinking, Mom, honest. Just this one time."

"Okay," she said, letting out a deep breath. "I believe you. But you've been at other parties where this stuff was going on."

Phillip nodded. "Yeah. That night I missed my curfew. . . that's why Lee said I couldn't, you know, hang out there any more. He was pretty mad."

"I see," she said, things suddenly falling into place. The uncomfortable silences, her husband's uncharacteristic reserve where Phillip was concerned. . . "He should have told me," she murmured under her breath.

"I think maybe he didn't want you to worry," Phillip muttered, glancing tentatively at his mother before quickly looking away.

"Yes, I see that, too." In spite of her distress, she found herself smiling, heartened by Phillip's telling need to jump so quickly to Lee's defense.

"I didn't go there to drink, Mom," her son continued with a sincerity she hadn't heard in a long time. "I was meeting Christy and we. . . she. . ."

His hesitancy triggered a new set of alarm bells. "You what, Phillip?" she asked, not sure she was ready to hear the answer.

"She dumped me," he said disconsolately.

"Dumped you?" she echoed incredulously, trying to disguise her joy as she sighed with relief.

"Yeah. . . for a senior. I thought we were. . . I mean, I was. . . I thought she really liked me, the way I liked her. And there she was with this other guy. . . I was really upset and, well, I had a few beers. I thought it would make me feel better."

"Did it?"

"Not really. I was just getting ready to leave, when all of a sudden the police were there. I guess the neighbors called them."

"Must have been some party," Amanda said softly, gently kneading her back.

"Yeah. Then things got really crazy. A lot of the guys just took off," he confessed, catching her eye before he looked away. "They got away. Some girls started crying, and I . . . I didn't know what to do. When the officer asked me if I'd been drinking, I was so scared, I just told him the truth. Jeremy said that was stupid, I should have lied about it and then nothing would have happened. . ."

"Well, Jeremy was wrong," she said, slowly shaking her head. "It's always better to tell the truth. I'm proud of you for that." She reached out, gently cupping his face, forcing him to look at her. "But not for the rest. You told me you were going to Tommy's, but you went to Jeremy's instead, after both Lee and I had told you it was off limits. You broke the trust between us. You lied to me."

"I know," Phillip said softly. "But so did you, Mom. . . for a long time."

Amanda sucked in a breath, chewing unconsciously on her lower lip. "There were reasons for that, Phillip, reasons I've explained to you at length."

"But I don't understand. If you say it's always better to tell the truth. . ."

"It's not the same thing." She paused, fumbling over her words as she tried to explain again. "You see. . . I took an oath, an oath of secrecy. . . at work. There were things I **couldn't** tell you about."

"Yeah, but then you and Lee got married and didn't tell us that, either," he muttered darkly. "That didn't have anything to do with work."

"I've tried to tell you why. . ." she began, then broke off, turning her head away. Through misty eyes she could just make out the family photo on the mantle, the one taken on their first anniversary, almost one year ago. They all looked so happy. It had seemed so right, their friends and family gathered to bear witness to the promises they'd given voice to again that day. She could almost forget that other solitary picture safely tucked away upstairs in her dresser drawer.

As if not displaying it could somehow undo the damage. Their elopement would always be a treasured memory, but the very secrecy that had made that first ceremony so intensely personal had just as effectively shut her family out of an important part of their lives. Oh, it had seemed feasible at the time; she could still recite every justification with unerring

logic. But somehow, in the clarity of hindsight, those same reasons sounded hollow. No matter how she looked at it, the price of their mystery marriage had been too high. Two years later, they were still paying the bill.

"You're right, Phillip," she said suddenly, looking her firstborn directly in the eye. "It was wrong. More than wrong, it was inexcusable. We should have told you the truth. I'm sorry." She took a deep breath. "But that doesn't give you license to do the same. Lying is wrong, no matter what. Can you understand what I'm trying to say?"

"Yeah, I guess," he mumbled. "But. . ."

"But what?"

"You guys lied about the baby, too."

"Lied? Phillip, I don't know what you mean. We never lied. . ."

"You didn't tell us first," he blurted out. "Just like before. You never asked. . ."

"The decision to have a baby is a personal one, between a husband and a wife," she said in a low voice, frowning slightly as she drummed her fingers against the sofa cushion again. "I'm sorry, Phillip, you just don't have anything to say about it."

"But that's so unfair."

"Maybe, but that's the way life is sometimes. I'm sorry if you think that 'stinks'," she said quickly before he could protest again. "I kinda think what you did this weekend 'stinks', too. But that doesn't mean I don't love you, because I do." Leaning over, she gave him a hug, adding in a quiet voice, "Very much."

"I love you, too, Mom," Phillip whispered, returning her embrace. "And I'm sorry, I really am."

Pulling back, she looked at him closely. Smiling, she tousled his hair, the way she used to do when he was small. She felt they'd at least made a small dent in their problems today. Still, they had a long way to go. Phillip had issues about his place in their family, feelings that he hadn't acknowledged yet, even to himself.

"Come on," she urged, bestowing one last hug. "I don't know about you, but I'm starving. Let's get something to eat. Life always looks better on a full stomach."

He nodded, smiling at her almost shyly. "That's what Grandma always says."

"Well, your grandmother's a wise woman." She smiled softly in return, nodding towards the kitchen. "Let's go."

The familiar pain hit her as she rose, beginning in her back and radiating around to the front. Breathing roughly, she sat back down again, her hand automatically massaging her belly.

"Mom, are you okay?"

She closed her eyes, blowing out shallowly through her mouth. There was no denying it this time. "I don't know."

"Mom," Phillip cried again.

Hearing the panic in his voice, she struggled to stay calm, but it was a losing battle. This couldn't be happening now; it was way too soon. She felt the pressure of Phillip's hand gently rubbing across her arm.

"It's okay," she intoned automatically, trying to think. "But. . . I think I need to go to the hospital." She took a deep breath, willing them both to relax as she exhaled slowly through her mouth again. "Call an ambulance, okay?"

"I'll take you."

"Your grandmother has the Wagoneer," she said doubtfully. "I don't think. . ."

"We can take the 'Vette, I can handle it. I know how to drive it - Lee lets me sometimes. I'll be careful. Please, Mom, it'll be faster."

Amanda nodded slowly, gritting her teeth as another pain seized her. "Okay, let's go."

Phillip helped her to her feet, and she gave him a weak smile in return. He suddenly looked so grown up, so confident; like his father. . . like Lee.

Lee. . . who'd been out of contact for four days now.

Pushing those thoughts away, she took another deep breath, leaning on her son as he helped her into the low sitting car. The engine roared to life, and Phillip quickly stepped on the brake, carefully easing down the driveway. Her thoughts turned once again to the baby and to Lee. Shutting her eyes tightly, she mouthed a silent prayer.

\* \* \* \* \*

"No luck yet?"

"No," Lee replied, clipping the walkie-talkie back into place. Frowning, his eyes swept the perimeter again. Everything seemed quiet. Too quiet, he thought grimly; the uncomfortable lull before the storm.

He'd been feeling the warning signs since daybreak. Something was off, something he couldn't quite put his finger on. Of course, the nagging fact that Houdini was more than eight hours overdue certainly wasn't helping matters.

"Okay," he told Joe, "time to head out of here." Pausing, he reached into his backpack, retrieving a spare gun. Snapping the ammo clip efficiently into place, he caught Joe's eye. "Here," he said gruffly, pressing the weapon into the startled man's hands. "Do you know how to use it?"

"I . . . I think so."

Lee took the gun back. "Safety off," he demonstrated matter-of-factly, "finger on trigger. . .fire. Try to hit your target." Engaging the safety one more, he thrust the weapon back at Joe. "Let's go."

"Go where?" Joe asked again, clutching the gun with awkward fingers.

"South," Lee replied curtly, reacting to the thinly disguised panic in Joe's tone. "Try to work our way back towards the coast. It's our only shot. If we stay here much longer. . ."

The bullets whizzed past his head and he ducked reflexively, pushing Joe to the ground as a second burst filled the air.

"What. . .who. . ." Joe began, trying to twist out from under Lee's weight.

"Shh," he replied, putting a finger to his lips as he listened carefully. The thick foliage distorted the sound of the gunfire, making it impossible to pinpoint. Ignoring the sweat trickling down his spine, he pushed aside the tangled branches, automatically scanning the trail. Eyes narrowing, he sucked in a breath and reached again for the walkie-talkie hanging from his belt.

"Houdini, do you read me?" His words were as clipped and harsh as the short staccato bursts that had broken the tenuous silence moments ago. He glanced at his companion, grimly shaking his head as he tried one last time. "Houdini, this is Scarecrow, come in."

"You think they got him, too?"

He shrugged, frowning until a deep line formed between his eyes. "Don't count him out yet."

"You shouldn't have come. If it wasn't for me, you'd be home with. . ." The words trailed off, smothered in another explosion of gunfire. The bullets cut the air over their heads, closer this time than before. He leaned in, instinctively covering his companion like a human shield.

A stifled groan came from somewhere beneath him.

"Are you. . ."

Static exploded from the walkie-talkie, cutting short his question. "Houdini to Scarecrow, Houdini to Scarecrow. Come in, Scarecrow."

Smiling in relief, he quickly depressed the transmit button. "Houdini, we were beginning to think this was one rabbit you weren't going to pull out of your hat."

"Just had a slight difference of opinion with the locals, Scarecrow, but I'm ready and able to take delivery on the package."

"We'll be right there. Ten-four." He replaced the walkie-talkie on his belt clip, exhaling softly as the rhythmic sound of the rotors announced the helicopter's imminent arrival. "Come on," he urged, pulling his companion from the protective cover of the underbrush. "If we can hear it, so can they."

Leaning heavily on each other, they started down the trail. Another explosion filled the air as the bullets pierced the ground in front of them, cutting off their escape.

"Damn," Scarecrow muttered, firing a volley of his own as he pushed them both behind a fallen tree branch. He took a deep breath, speaking his decision before his mind had fully registered it. "Go on ahead. I'll hold them off as long as I can, then follow."

"No, Lee. You should be the one to go. This is my fault; let me stay."

"There's no time to argue about this," he shot back, returning fire as a fresh round of bullets riddled the bushes beside them. "Head down the trail, Houdini should be just over the hill. The code is Firefly. I'll be right behind you. Get going," he ordered, his tone brooking no refusal as he broke fire to reload. He deftly snapped the new clip firmly into place, right hand automatically steadying his left. Glancing over his shoulder, he caught the look in his compatriot's eyes, his younger stepson's face unwillingly taking shape in his mind.

"Get out of here," he urged, a bit more gently this time. "Let me keep my promise."

His comrade nodded. From his vantage point behind the bush, Scarecrow watched him disappear, buying him time with a few well-placed shots. Patting his back pocket, his fingers located the last ammo clip. Enough to allow his injured companion time to reach the safety of the copter, but not enough for him to follow. He snapped it in place with a resigned sigh; nothing to do now but make a run for it.

He took off down the dusty mountain trail, running blindly as he fired over his shoulder. He heard the ever-increasing volume of footsteps behind him, the sturdy boots of the rebel army pounding the ground. His inner voice spurred him on - only a little further, down the hill and up over the next. Then home, his family, and. . .

Gunfire sounded again, and he felt the bullet graze the tip of his left ear. He automatically tucked and rolled, sharp rocks jabbing him as he slammed into the ground. Gravity took over, completing the painful slide down the small hill. "I'm sorry, Amanda," he thought sadly as the blackness claimed him.

Wednesday, December 7, 1988

She studied the encapsulated view from the window for the hundredth time that day, her eyes following the bare, twig-like branches as they bent beneath the wind. Turning away with a shudder, she focused instead on the silent figure sitting in the ugly green vinyl chair. She could just make out the faintest hint of a frown as he read, one leg tucked up underneath him.

"Mom," she heard him ask in a small voice, and she suddenly noticed that he was staring back. "Are you okay? Can I get you something?"

"No, I'm fine," she told him with a sigh. "Just a little sleepy."

"Grandma called earlier. She and Jamie will be here after his basketball practice."

She nodded. "And then you should go home, Phillip. You really don't have to sit here. There isn't anything you can do."

"I don't mind. I kinda wish I could come here instead of school tomorrow."

She smiled faintly. "Not a chance."

"Aww, Mom," he grinned back.

"Besides, they may let me go home tomorrow."



Phillip put his history book down, coming around the other side of the bed to look at the monitor. "His heart sure beats fast," he whispered in awe.

"It's supposed to," she assured him. "It means he's okay." She reached out to take his hand. "Thank you, Phillip."

"I didn't do anything special," he mumbled.

"You were here with me. That's pretty special."

He shrugged as he looked down, and she smiled softly, watching his fingers weave in and out of the blanket's small holes. One minute he seemed so adult and serious; the next, exactly like her little boy. Maybe that's what growing up was all about after all - finding a balance between the two.

She heard him mumble something under his breath. "I was really scared," he repeated in response to her puzzled look. "You know, it's kinda funny. I thought I hated. . . well, you know, didn't want. . ." He stuffed his hands in his pockets, shifting his weight from foot to foot. "But then when I thought maybe there wasn't going to be a baby after all, I don't know. . ." He looked up, smiling shyly at his mother. "I guess he really is a person, huh?"

She trailed her hand lightly across her belly. "Yeah, I guess so - with a definite mind of his own. Phillip," she added, resting her hand lightly on his arm. "I know Lee and I have kind of been caught up in Jamie's problems, then all this baby stuff. I . . . we . . . didn't mean for you to feel left out. I really do love you. Every bit as much as Jamie and your new brother."

"I know, Mom," Phillip said, struggling to hide his embarrassed grin. "Me, too." He glanced over at the monitor again. "You know, you guys really oughtta give him a name."

"Well, we were thinking about calling him Matthew, after Lee's father."

"Matt," Phillip said, slowly trying it out as he eyed the small blips on the screen. "Yeah, I like it."

"I like it, too."

The words spoken in familiar, deep tones caught them off guard.

"Lee!" Phillip exclaimed, his face breaking into a smile as Amanda struggled to find her voice. "You're back."

He nodded slowly, crossing the room and bending down to give Amanda a tender kiss on the forehead. "Yup, I'm back. In one piece, more or less."

"Are you. . ." Amanda began, taking in a quick breath.

His hand found hers and their fingers quickly entwined. "I'm fine. Although," he added with a short laugh, "I didn't expect to find a welcoming committee here at the hospital."

"How did you. . ."

"Billy's downstairs. He met us in emergency."

Phillip looked up uncertainly. "Is Dad. . ."

"Your dad's fine, too," he said, smiling at both of them. "Or he will be. He has a little infection from a leg wound, so they're admitting him. In fact, he should be in room 248 in just a few minutes."

"Mom?" he asked tentatively, and she nodded.

"Go on," Lee agreed. "Carrie's on her way, but I'm sure your dad would appreciate seeing you about now."

"Okay." Phillip paused by the door, smiling thoughtfully at the tableau by the bed. "Thanks, Lee."

The boy disappeared through the door and Lee frowned, puzzled. "What was that. . ."

"It's a long story," Amanda sighed. "I'll keep. Come here." She inclined her head for a kiss as Lee pulled up a chair, sinking into it and brushing his lips gently across her cheek.

"I'm kind of a mess," he murmured apologetically, his eyes locking with hers.

She reached up, her hand gently caressing his bearded face. "As if I care."

Smiling, she watched him lean in, felt his lips close on hers in a warm, deep kiss. As her hand came around the back of his head, pulling him closer, he suddenly flinched. "What on earth," she said, her touch turning maternal as she quickly inspected him for injuries.

"It's nothing," he said a little too quickly. "Just a little bump on the head."

"Little bump? That's an understatement if I ever heard one, Stetson." She turned her head, taking in his appearance in one long, knowing look. "I think maybe you should be admitted, too."

"I'm fine, Amanda, really. I've been officially poked and prodded." Rolling his eyes, he added with a grimace, "Billy insisted."

"Good. Now you can tell me exactly what happened to you."

He took her hand, bringing it to his lips. "Nothing much," he parried, nibbling lightly on her fingertips. "I just lost an argument with hill and a couple of rocks, that's all."

"Uh-huh," she said, pursing her lips. "If you say so. See, look what happens when I don't watch your back."

He laughed, leaning in for another kiss. "I guess I'll just have to make sure you do from now on."

"I'm gonna hold you to that." She took a deep breath, searching his eyes. "Lee, you missed your check-ins. . . I thought. . ."

"Shh," he whispered, "it's okay. It got a little dicey for a while and I couldn't risk it, that's all."

"Is Joe really okay?"

"Physically, he'll heal. As for the rest. . . that might take a little time." He let out a long breath. "After his debriefing, Billy's going to have Pfaff see him. But how are you? When I heard. . ."

"I guess things were a little dicey here, too, but I'm fine now." She smiled, placing his hand on her stomach. "And so is Matthew. . . that's all that matters."

"Billy said you went into labor."

She nodded. "They gave me something to stop it. I've been a little uncomfortable, but it seems to have worked."

"I'm so sorry you had to go through that alone," he said, a funny catch in his voice. "Damn, I should have been here."

"You're here now, that's what counts."

He squeezed her hand, bringing it to his lips for a tender kiss. "From now on. I promise."

"Phillip was with me when it happened. He was wonderful, Lee. He drove me to the hospital, stayed with me the whole time. Oh, ah, by the way," she added with a mischievous laugh. "Your car is down in the hospital parking lot. I wouldn't let Mother drive it home."

"Thank you," he teased, squeezing her hand. "I appreciate. . . wait a minute. Phillip drove you in my car?" He grinned, clutching his heart. "And it's in one piece?" She nodded and smiled, as he added, "I guess we have a lot to talk about."

"Yeah." She took a deep breath, her hand closing around his. "Lee, when they let me go home, I'm going to have to be on bed rest."

"It's okay, we'll manage."

She sighed, frowning as she stared down at the nondescript hospital blanket. "I guess I'll be starting my maternity leave a little sooner than I thought."

"We'll manage that, too," he assured her. She felt his eyes on her and she looked up, suddenly encountering his lips. "It won't change anything, you know," he whispered as he pulled back to search her face.

"What won't?" she asked in a small voice.

"The baby. Amanda, you don't have to worry. He won't pull us in different directions."

"I don't know what. . ."

"You're still my partner," he told her in a low voice. "You always will be."

She sighed, looking away for a moment before returning his gaze with equal intensity. "I guess we really do have a lot to talk about," she told him softly.

"Unfortunately it's gonna have to wait a bit. I've got to be debriefed."

She tightened her grip on his hand. "Right now?"

"Yeah." He smiled ruefully. "As it is, I had to bully my way up here. They refuse to officially sanction this mission, but now that I'm back they can't wait an hour for the information. Go figure."

"Some business we're in, Scarecrow." She gave a short laugh. "Go on, get it over with before Billy sends out the bloodhounds."

He brushed his lips gently across her forehead. "I'll be back as soon as we finish."

"Uh, don't take this the wrong way, but you might want to take just a few minutes to clean up a bit."

"You don't like the 'jungle look'?" he teased as he rose, pushing the chair back into place. "That's too bad, I was thinking of keeping the beard as a memento."

"Keep it if you want," she laughed. "I just won't be kissing you any more."

"Oh, yeah?" He paused in the doorway to give her a playful wink. "We'll see about that, Mrs. Stetson."

Friday, December 9, 1988

Lee looked up, motioning as he saw who had rapped softly on his office window. "I was wondering where you'd disappeared to, Houdini," he said as the exhausted agent walked through the door.

"Had a few things to finish up, but I wanted to say goodbye before I head out." He grinned, taking in the surroundings with an appraising glance. "Never thought I'd say this, but you actually look pretty good behind that desk, Scarecrow."

"Never thought I'd say this," Lee echoed with a laugh, "but it feels kind of good, too. I think maybe it's finally starting to fit."

"That's good to hear. Especially since it looks like I just signed up for an office of my own."

"You accepted the Section Chief job?"

His friend nodded. "My flight leaves for New York in a few hours."

"Well, Billy couldn't find a better man." He rose, extending his hand. "Congratulations, John. If anyone deserves the promotion, you do." Pierce gave an embarrassed cough, and Lee quickly looked away. "Uh, if you're leaving, I'll walk you out," he told him, absently piling a few scattered files neatly in the corner of his desk. "I'm on my way to the hospital to pick up Amanda."

"She and the baby are okay then?"

"Yeah, we were lucky." He nodded to the empty desk in the corner as they walked through the bullpen. "Looks like she'll have to stay off her feet for the duration, though."

"That's a tough break."

"For the Agency. But personally, I'm kind of glad she'll be at home from now on. She's been pushing way too hard." He laughed dryly as he pushed the button for the elevator. "I guess that makes me a male chauvinist at heart."

"Or a guy in love. There's probably a subtle difference."

"If you say so. I don't think I'll debate that point with my wife though," he added with a grin as the elevator opened.

Shoving the coats aside, he stepped inside, Houdini right behind him. He felt the familiar whoosh in his stomach as the elevator began its ascent. Old fashioned or not, he really was relieved that Amanda would be taking some time away from work before the baby was born. A break would do them all some good. It appeared they had some pretty important family issues to work through. The changes that were about to take place in their family dynamic, for one thing; his evolving relationship with his partner and best friend, for another. This respite might just give them the time they all needed, and for that he was grateful.

Tossing his I.D. to Mrs. Marsten, he nodded a goodbye as he exited the Georgetown foyer, Houdini doing the same as he followed closely on his heels. He paused on the steps, taking a deep breath of the brisk December air. The stiff breeze tousled his hair, causing the sign that proclaimed the building 'I.F.F.' to swing on its hinges with a grating squeak. He turned to his friend, offering his hand again.

"Good luck in New York," he smiled as John Pierce forcefully returned his grip.

"Thanks, Scarecrow. As always, it was fun." He laughed, slapping his 'partner' on the arm. "Desk or no desk, maybe we'll the chance to work together again sometime."

Lee raised an eyebrow. "Under better circumstances, I hope."

"Yeah." Heading for the street, he waved a goodbye as he quickly hailed a passing cab.

"Hey, Houdini," Lee called guiltily, briskly closing the distance between them with a few long strides. He gave him an awkward smile, giving voice to the words that, before Amanda, would probably have been left unsaid. "Thank you."

The tall man narrowed his eyes, giving Lee a long look. "For what?"

"For saving my life, for one thing; for helping with an unsanctioned operation, for another. You took a chance, and I'm grateful."

Houdini laughed lightly. "Life isn't much fun if you always have to play by the rules, you know that." He paused to zip his jacket as the wind whipped up again. "But as for saving your life," he continued, clearing his throat with a short grunting sound, "I'm afraid I can't take credit for that."

"Don't be so modest. You pulled me out of there with a bunch of FMNL revolutionaries breathing down my neck. If it wasn't for you. . ."

"You'd probably be in their hands right now. I didn't do anything, Scarecrow - I didn't have time." He paused again, looking his friend squarely in the eye. "Joe King got you out of there, not me."

"Joe?"

Houdini nodded. "He saw you go down and doubled back. Dragged you all the way to that clearing." The seasoned agent whistled softly in admiration. "I'm still not sure how he managed with that leg of his. When I set the chopper down, he was holding them off with what was left of your ammo."

"My God," Lee exclaimed, running a hand through his hair. "I thought you. . ."

"He wanted it that way," Houdini said simply. "Made me promise not to say anything. But I, uh, had a feeling you needed to know."

"You were right. Thanks."

Houdini started to say something, but changed his mind, shrugging instead as he stepped into the cab. Lee stood watching, frozen on the sidewalk as the taxi disappeared around the narrow street corner. Then, turning abruptly, he strode purposefully to his car.

Joe King certainly was full of surprises. Sliding behind the wheel, he reached for his car phone, dialing quickly as he edged into the Georgetown traffic. He needed to tell Amanda

that he would be a little late; he had another stop to make at the hospital before he picked her up.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Thanks, fellas," Amanda said as Phillip and Jamie cleared away the last remains of their 'welcome home' feast. "I can't remember when I've enjoyed a meal more."

"Glad you liked it, Mom," Jamie answered as he handed Phillip her tray. "We thought since you had to, um, stay in bed, an indoor picnic might be kind of fun. You know," he added with a lopsided grin, "like the ones you always used to make for us when we were sick."

"That's really sweet, Jamie, but you know I'm not sick, right? Just, uh. . ."

"On hold temporarily," Lee finished with an impish grin.

"That's a pretty good way to describe it," Amanda put in, giving her husband a playful shove. Lee had told her that Jamie had been exceptionally quiet the last couple of days, a warning sign they'd both learned to recognize. Some extra reassurance usually did the trick.

"Well, I think the picnic was a great idea," Lee encouraged, handing his tray into the boy's waiting hands. "And it sure beats the food I've been eating lately." Smiling, he included Phillip and Amanda in his gaze.

"I'll bet," Phillip replied, watching the warm look that passed between his mother and his stepfather with a growing smile. "Come on, Worm Brain," he called to his brother, inclining his head towards the door. "Let's go give Grandma a hand with these dishes."

"Phillip, cut it. . ." Jamie began, breaking off as he caught his brother's exaggerated nod. "Oh, ah, right, the dishes," he agreed with a sheepish grin. Balancing the tray on his right arm, he headed for the door, pausing for a minute before leaving. "I'm really glad you're okay, Mom," he said, his foot absently knocking against the smooth woodwork. Giving Lee a bashful glance, he added quickly, "Both of you." Turning abruptly, he tagged after his brother, faint strains of 'Hey, Meathead, I told you not to call me that name' echoing back softly from the hall.

"Ah, the sweet sounds of home," Lee intoned, gifting Amanda with a dazzling smile. "Back to the status quo?"

"We're getting there. I just wish. . ." Her voice trailed off as she stroked her hand protectively across her belly.



"What, Amanda?" he prodded gently. At her noncommittal shrug, he continued, "Are you still worrying about this business with Phillip? I know I should have told you about that first party at Jeremy's house. I meant to," he added hastily, "then everything hit the fan with Joe and. . . well, I was worried about Jamie, and leaving you. . ."

"Lee." She placed her fingers gently under his chin, her thumb brushing across his lips to silence him. "I understand. I was a little preoccupied myself. Phillip kind of got pushed to the back burner, I guess."

Lee nodded. "I think things have been tougher on him than we realized." He reached out, gently tucking a few stray hairs behind her ear. "If it's not Phillip, then what's bothering you? Is it the baby?"

"Matthew," she said with a soft smile. "We said we'd start calling him that, remember?"

"Yeah." He gave her belly a gentle pat as he caught her eye. "But you didn't answer my question."

"I'm not really worried. . ." She looked down at her lap, absently brushing a few leftover crumbs from the striped comforter. "I don't know. I guess I just wish things would get back to. . . to normal."

"Be careful what you wish for," he warned with a teasing laugh. "'Normal' for us is a trainload of men in red hats and dodging stray bullets from the KGB." He reached for her hand, running his thumb lightly across her palm. "I, for one, could use a little 'abnormal'."

She gave him a grateful glance, relieved he'd evidently elected not to force the issue any more tonight. Squeezing his hand gently, she continued with a smile, "I could get used to more evenings like this myself." She lovingly caught his eye, her smile deepening as the moment lengthened.

"Come here," he entreated, his voice little more than a whisper.

She moved inside his open arms, resting against his chest in companionable silence. She could feel her tension begin to drain away, her head rising and falling in a lazy rhythm as Lee's breathing slowly evened out. His hand brushed tenderly across her arm in a feather-light caress, and she closed her eyes, savoring the moment. Breathing deeply, her thoughts drifted to days long forgotten, when such a simple touch could convey so much. A friendship that had endured the test of time, a partnership built on ever-growing respect, and the promise of love yet unspoken, but nonetheless felt.

"Don't let me go to sleep," she heard him murmur in a weary voice, fighting the yawn that overtook him as his body relaxed completely. "If I do, I won't wake up until morning."

She opened her eyes, stealing a quick glance at her husband. His fading bruises bore silent testimony to the recent ordeal, as did the fatigue his good humor couldn't quite disguise. "You don't need to wake up, you need to sleep," she admonished gently, her finger tenderly tracing the tip of his ear where an errant bullet had left its mark. "For a good twenty-four hours, at least. Right here with me."

He let out a soft groan, snuggling closer. "As tempting as that sounds, I can't. I promised Phillip and Jamie I'd take them to the hospital tonight."

"Oh, Lee. They'd understand if you. . ."

"No, really, I don't mind. They're both so anxious to go." He released her, stretching lazily, then rubbed his eyes with the palms of his hands. Shaking his head lightly, he reached for her again, his fingers seeking hers. "I think they have some, uh, things they need to tell to their father."

She nodded, looking down at their joined hands. "I overheard you before dinner. With the boys."

He sucked in a breath as he drew back to look at her. "Are you upset that I told them about what Joe did for me? I know he didn't want to worry them needlessly after the fact, but. . ."

"But Phillip and Jamie are both growing up. They should know the truth about what happened down there," she finished, pulling him back down beside her. "You did the right thing. It's time we stopped walking on eggshells around them - you, me and Joe."

In a look filled with love, she saw Lee's tacit agreement. Reaching out, she trailed a finger lovingly across his roughened cheek. "It's all so complicated, isn't it?"

"What is, Sweetheart?" he replied, giving her finger a soft kiss as she touched his lips.

She sighed wistfully, her eye catching his. "Family."

Lee chuckled lightly in response. "Tell me about it." Rolling over, he crossed his hands behind his head, studying the tiny textured bumps on the ceiling. "But worth every complicated minute," he added, his voice deep and low. "You realize that when you come so close to losing it."

"Yeah."

Resting her head against his shoulder, Amanda drew a cleansing breath, reveling in the feeling of having her husband home again. The baby inside her kicked lightly, while from the kitchen below, she could hear the faint sounds of her mother and the boys finishing the last of the dinner dishes. No, it wasn't easy, she thought with a bittersweet smile, not any of it - growing up, growing old, growing a family. But, most days, the joy outweighed the sorrow.

"We have some time to work on it," Lee said, giving voice to her thoughts as he laid a gentle hand on her stomach. "All of us - together."

She rested her hand lightly on his. "Together. I do like the sound of that."

"Me, too, Mrs. Stetson," he whispered warmly. "Me, too."

Friday, December 16, 1988

The heavy footsteps on the stairs roused her, and she looked up, turning her head inquisitively towards the sound. "Lee?" she called uncertainly, carefully adjusting her position in the bed. "I didn't expect you back so soon. Was your mission successful?"

"It's me, Amanda." The familiar voice came from behind the semi-closed door. "May I come in?"

"Sure, Joe," she exclaimed, tossing aside her half-finished book. "What a nice surprise. I thought you were still in the hospital."

The door opened and he stuck his head in, pausing tentatively at the threshold. "Released me this afternoon. I wanted to stop by and see Phillip and Jamie, let them know I'm okay."

"I'm sorry, they're not home. They went with Lee to get a Christmas tree for the bedroom." She chuckled ruefully. "Since I seem to be stuck here for a while, they decided to bring the holiday to me this year."

Joe smiled, leaning heavily on his cane as he moved closer to the bed. "That's what your mother told us."

"Us? Is Carrie with you?"

"She's downstairs. Getting step-by-step instructions from Dotty on how to cook a Christmas goose."

She raised one eyebrow archly. "No nouvelle cuisine this time?"

"Uh, no. Carrie's sister and her family are flying in next week, and I kind of suggested she might want to try a more traditional recipe." He gave her a conspiratorial smile. "Especially since Marvelous Marvin's is closed on holidays."

"Lee has a big mouth," she muttered ruefully. "That was supposed to be 'need to know'."

"Well, we were in those mountains for a long time," Joe grinned. "It seemed like the safest subject to discuss."

Amanda's light laughter mixed with Joe's, her merriment slowly changing to concern as she watched him lean heavily on his cane with both hands. "Your leg's giving you a lot of trouble, huh?" she asked, noting the grimace of pain he was struggling to hide.

"It's improving, but slowly," Joe mumbled, clenching his teeth as he limped towards her. "The doctors said I was lucky not to lose it. A few more days and it might have been too late. I probably should have taken those crutches they offered, but they just made me feel like such an invalid."

"Oh, Joe. . . here," she said quickly, scooting to the middle of the bed to make room. "Take your weight off it. You shouldn't overtax yourself, you just got out of the hospital for goodness sake."

"I'm okay," he murmured, glancing nervously over his shoulder. "I don't want to. . ."

"Don't be silly," she said, smiling dryly at his hesitation. "It's perfectly safe. Lee won't materialize suddenly with an overwhelming urge to defend my honor. I think we're all past that point by now, don't you? Come on," she added in response to his smile, "sit down before you fall down."

"Ohhh," he sighed as he eased himself down on the end of the bed. "That's a lot better, thanks."

"Good." She made a show of pulling the quilt around her, taking a few seconds to really look at her ex-husband. He appeared remarkably fit considering his ordeal, if you didn't count the far-off, wintry look in his eyes, the deepening lines on his forehead, or the gray in his hair which suddenly seemed more pronounced. "So, Joe," she asked in a quiet voice. "How are you, really?"

"I don't know," he replied honestly. "Shell-shocked, elated to be home, thoroughly exhausted, very grateful to be alive – you name it, I think I've felt in the last few days."

"A real roller coaster ride, huh?" she sympathized. "Give yourself some time. It will even out eventually."

"The voice of experience?" he asked, his eye catching hers in a look of ineffable sadness. "I've never asked you, Amanda – I guess it never occurred to me until now. You know what I'm going through, don't you? You've experienced it firsthand."

"I'm glad you're home, Joe," she said, wrapping her arms around herself as she turned her gaze toward the window. A few wispy clouds filled the rectangular frame, white darkening to grey in the orange-blue evening sky. "Let's just leave it at that, okay?"

"Okay." His eyes swept over her appraisingly, a silent acknowledgment of the seasoned professional she'd become. "I should have listened to you, Amanda," he said in a low voice. "You and Lee both. Instead, I insisted on going down there, insisted on putting myself in the middle of a powder keg."

"You thought you were helping. You care about people, Joe King. It's one of the things I've always loved about you."

"Do I? I don't know anymore." He looked down, wincing slightly as he carefully positioned his leg on the side of the bed. "I had a lot of time to think while I was enjoying the hospitality of the FMNL. Time to think and to wonder. . ."

"Wonder what?"

"About past choices," he said at last, emitting a sigh from deep within his chest. "You know, when I took the job with the EAO all those years ago, I told myself I wanted to make a difference in the world. But maybe my motives weren't so noble at all. Maybe. . . I was just being selfish."

"Oh, Joe, I don't believe that for one minute."

"I think, on some level, I wanted the job with the EAO to make a difference with us, Amanda. Hear me out," he added quickly, seeing that she was ready to interrupt again. He took a deep breath, leaning forward slightly to look her in the eye. "You know things weren't working for us before I left that first time. To be honest, they hadn't been since Jamie was born." He sighed deeply. "I guess I thought maybe if you joined me in Africa,

could really share my work, that it might turn the tide. It would give us something new to focus on and then maybe. . . well, maybe our marriage would work again, too."

"Kind of like a partnership," she said in a small voice.

"Yeah. See, when you found excuse after excuse not to go with me, I told myself you just wanted a more traditional life, that you didn't want a career." He sighed again, his eyes darkening in resignation. "But you just didn't want it with me."

"Be fair, Joe. You didn't really want it with me, either. Or things wouldn't have ended the way they did."

"You're probably right," he admitted, rubbing his forehead thoughtfully. "I guess I've just had too much time to take stock of my life lately," he stated sadly. "And I'm not sure I like what I see."

"Sweetheart," she asked, frowning slightly as he massaged his neck with his hand. "Is everything okay between you and Carrie?"

"Yes. Things are fine with Carrie. I've just been thinking a lot about the boys." He gave her a bittersweet smile, shifting uncomfortably on the edge of the bed. "I guess sometimes I feel a little like the odd man out where they're concerned."

"That's ridiculous. Phillip and Jamie certainly don't feel that way," she stated emphatically, adding quickly as she caught his puzzled look, "I thought the three of you had talked things out the other night in the hospital. That's what the boys told me."

"We did. They're really great kids, you know. I just wish I'd played a bigger part in making that happen."

"They love you, Joe. You're their father."

"An absentee father, Amanda. At best, that's what I've been. At worst. . ."

"Don't talk nonsense," she admonished sternly. "You've been a huge part of their lives since you moved back to D.C. And even while you were away, they always knew you how much you cared."

"Even Phillip?" he asked doubtfully. "A lot of his problems can be laid directly at my door."

"Sorry, I can't let you take all the credit for Phillip's problems. That's something you're going to have to share equally with me."

"You're not the one who left him without a father."

"No, I'm the one who lied to him," she snapped. "You don't have a corner on the guilt market, you know." She reached out, closing her hand tenderly around his, adding in a gentler tone, "Which is something you'd realize if you were thinking clearly at the moment. Give yourself some time to get past what happened in Santarilla, and things will look better. Trust me."

"Maybe." He exhaled loudly, giving her a brotherly pat as he laid his other hand atop hers. "So, what **are** we going to do about Phillip?"

"Give him a little space, I think. That's what Lee and I are trying to do. And let him know we love him. He's a good kid, and this incident with the police has shaken him up pretty badly. He'll figure things out, I know he will."

"And you, Amanda?" He looked at her searchingly. "Are you okay?"

"I'm just fine."

"When Phillip told me that you'd almost lost the baby, well. . . I'm not sure I could've handled that. If Lee had been here with you instead of running after me. . ."

"It wouldn't have changed anything." She let out a deep sigh, turning her gaze briefly to the window, then back again. "I would have still been pushing myself too hard. What happened - happened," she continued in a low voice. "What matters now is that we made it through okay. All of us. The past is past, Joe, we can't change it."

"You're right, as usual," he agreed, the beginnings of a smile playing at his lips. "It's the future that matters."

"And it's gonna be a great one, don't you think? We all have a lot to look forward to - Lee and I, you and Carrie."

She watched Joe draw another deep breath, his face brightening visibly as he let it out. "I guess we're all pretty lucky at that." The loud clatter of pans reached them from the kitchen below, Joe's smile dissolving into a broad grin as he caught Amanda's eye. "Especially if your mother can manage to teach Carrie how to cook."

"Well, it is the season for miracles," she laughed. "I guess there's no harm in wishing for one close to home."

"Nope," he grinned in return, gently squeezing her hand. "No harm at all."

Sunday, December 18, 1988

Lee pulled the silver Corvette to a stop on the quiet residential street. He watched quietly as his stepson pushed himself out of the car, the click of the closing door jarringly loud in the painful silence. He sat for a few minutes, giving the boy some space before joining him on the curb.

"I used to park here a lot," he told him as he leaned back against the car door.

"Why?" Phillip asked quietly, imitating his posture as he, too, rested against the Corvette.

"From here I could see almost every light go out, and I knew you guys were all okay."

"That must have been tough," the boy said, shaking his head sadly. "I mean, always being on the outside like that."

"Sometimes. Not as much at first, but later, after your mom and I were married. . . well, you do what you have to do."

"I guess I'm learning that." Phillip tilted his head to one side, and Lee could feel him taking his measure as he stole a few carefully disguised glances in his direction. "You guys honestly thought it was better not to tell us?"

"As ridiculous as that seems now, yes, we honestly did." He exhaled loudly, running a hand through his hair as a short burst of wind bit his face. "Maybe not better, but. . . safer, anyway."

"For who?"

"That's not an easy question to answer." He leaned back against the car again, buying some time as he turned his collar to the wind. The boy's insight had taken him by surprise; unlike his brother, Phillip generally took people at face value. He'd grown up this last month more than they'd suspected.

"I thought I was trying to keep you and Jamie safe," he answered in a low voice, "but I think in a way, it was for me, too. It's not as hard to lose what you don't really have, you know?"

Phillip nodded thoughtfully. "I guess so. Still. . ."



Lee flinched at his tone, the painful undercurrent still evident in that one simple word. Turning away, he looked down the street. A brown and white station wagon pulled into a distant driveway, and he watched with an eerie feeling of déjà vu as two small boys bounded after their mother into the house. He shook his head sadly. "People make bad decisions sometimes, Phillip. I'm afraid no one is immune."

"Yeah," the boy said ruefully. "That's one lesson I sure learned the hard way."

Lee smiled, giving him an encouraging pat on the back. "How's the community service going?"

Phillip shrugged. "I've only been a few times, but the people Dad knows at the legal aid clinic are really neat. And it's kind of interesting, the way they use the law to help people. I think I'm actually going to like it." He laughed suddenly. "Is it wrong to enjoy your punishment?"

"I don't know," he replied, the long talks with his pal Barney as he served his time in the mess hall flashing suddenly through his head. "Maybe not. There can be an upside, too. Sometimes when you least expect it."

Phillip chuckled softly. "That silver lining Mom's always talking about." He drew a deep breath, looking his stepfather in the eye. "Like with Dad. Now that he's back home - it's kind of like we all have another chance, isn't it?"

"I guess we do at that."

"Thanks, Lee," he whispered softly. "Thanks for saving his life."

"He saved mine, too, so I think we came out just about even."

"Yeah, that was pretty cool. I never thought. . . I guess sometimes we get used to seeing people a certain way. Silly, huh?"

"Yeah." He smiled, remembering a simple housewife from Arlington he'd once considered a millstone around his highly trained neck. "Sometimes people have depths to them you don't even imagine."

"Lee," he said, sneaking a quick look at the older man as he ran a hand carefully through his hair. "Do you think people really can change?"

"Um. . ." He turned to Phillip, watching the boy's profile in the early evening light. So much like his father's, yet in many ways, vastly different. "Yeah, I think they can. People

change all the time. They make mistakes, but they learn from them. Hopefully they become better people for it."

"Yeah, I guess."

"Yeah, well, I know." Six months ago he wouldn't have dreamed he'd ever call Amanda's ex-husband a friend, but somehow, he'd become that and more. As had Phillip and Jamie. They were all part of the crazy melting pot called family.

"Phillip," he began, feeling a closer kinship with the young man standing beside him. "I'm, uh, supposed to have a talk with you. About Christy and..."

"I figured."

"You did?"

He heard the boy's sudden laugh. "Lee, we could have found that special brand of eggnog at the supermarket in Rockville. Mom didn't have to send us all the way to Arlington to get it."

"Guess we're both more transparent than we thought," he grinned.

"Yeah, you are. But that's okay. You guys don't have to worry. I'm not gonna... well, you know. Guess I almost made another big mistake." He sighed softly. "But I did learn from it."

Lee nodded. "As long as you know that if you want to talk, we're here. Your mom and I. Not only about Christy, but anything else that might be bothering you."

"Thanks. I appreciate it but... there's some stuff I'm not quite ready to talk about yet. I just need some more time to... well, to think, okay?"

He nodded. "Okay."

Phillip took a deep breath, watching his stepfather out of the corner of his eye. "Lee, I, uh, I didn't mean it."

"Mean what?"

"What I said to you that night in the car. You're a great Dad. I'm... I'm glad you and Mom got married."

"You're a great son, too." He grinned, tossing the car keys in the boy's direction. "Just as long as you don't get a scratch on my car."

Phillip smiled as he headed for the driver's seat. "At least I don't leave tire tracks in the driveway," he teased as he opened the door. Pausing, he solemnly looked up and down the street one more time. "Jamie was right," he said at last. "The new house those people built really is ugly. Let's go home."

Saturday, December 31, 1988

"So, do you feel like a fire tonight?" Lee asked as he placed the wooden tray carefully on the chest of drawers. "It's pretty cold outside."

Popping the cork on the sparkling cider, he deftly filled the antique crystal champagne flutes, a recent gift from Dotty. 'Since we have so many blessings to celebrate this year,' she'd told them with an indulgent smile when they'd opened the package on Christmas morning.

"What do you think, Aman. . ." He stopped suddenly, a smile forming as he took in the scene. The slightly lopsided Christmas tree in the corner blinked a greeting in red, green and white, the bed's lone occupant resting blissfully unaware. Replacing the glasses on the tray, he re-capped the bottle, switching out the light as he eased noiselessly from the room.

"Where are you skulking off to, Stetson?" a low voice called. "I thought we had a date for New Year's Eve."

He turned, his eyes blinking as he adjusted to the darkness. "I thought you were the one who'd stood me up, Mrs. Stetson."

"Just resting my eyes," she returned with a quiet laugh.

"Uh-huh."

She stifled a yawn, reaching over to turn on the small lamp by the bed. "Just a tiny little cat nap, honest."

He inspected her closely in the soft lamplight. Despite the enforced rest, exhaustion still hovered around the edges of her eyes. He strode quickly over to her, leaning down to kiss it away. "It's okay," he told her, his voice deep and low, "If you're tired, we don't have to watch the ball drop tonight."

"Yes, we do," she said in a determined voice. "You know what New Year's means."

"I do," he told her, gently tracing the curve of her cheek with his finger. "Thirty weeks. . . another milestone. A few more and we can breathe a little easier."

"Yeah, well, I'll wait until they let me out of this darn bed before I do that," she sighed. "I already feel like I'm going crazy."

"Amanda." He reached out, cupping her face with his hands, his thumbs rubbing lightly across her cheeks. "Everything is gonna be all right. You do believe that, don't you?"

She shrugged, pulling away slightly as she dropped her eyes to the bed. Slowly, thoughtfully, she traced an imaginary line on the quilt with her fingernail. "You don't know that, Lee," she whispered. "No one does. I know I shouldn't complain about having to lie here. If something happened to Matthew now, I don't know what. . ."

"We'd deal with it," he stated firmly.

"How?"

"The same way we always do, Amanda, as a team." He reached out, stilling her restless hand with his larger one. "Okay?"

"Okay," she agreed, letting out a long breath.

"Besides," he added with a laugh, "there's nothing to worry about. I had a little talk with our son, told him to stay put for a while." His hand stroked caressingly over her belly. The baby kicked lightly in return, and he smiled. "See, Matthew agrees with me. He listens better than his mother."

She made a face, swatting his arm playfully. "Go make your fire, Stetson, before I forget how thankful I'm feeling that you came home in one piece."

He laughed, ducking out of her reach as he sprinted for the fireplace. Squatting, he struck a match, lighting the gas log they'd installed last fall. The flames responded instantly with a mighty 'whoosh', and he adroitly adjusted the valve down to produce a warming glow. Satisfied, he rose, groaning slightly as he stretched out the kinks in his back.

"Still having those muscle spasms?"

"Um, yeah, off and on. I guess I'd forgotten that wonderful 'morning after' feeling that goes along with field work." He laughed ruefully. "That desk of mine is starting to look a whole lot more attractive."

"Oh-oh, Scarecrow, you'd better watch it. You're starting to make noises like a contented administrator. Your reputation will be shot."

"Better it than me," he grinned, retrieving the glasses of sparkling cider on his way to bed.

"I'll drink to that."

Smiling, he handed her the fluted glass, shedding his robe as he slid in beside her. Leaning back against the pillow, he thought how wonderful it felt to stretch out on soft sheets after those nights spent on the run in Santarilla. Even though it had been weeks since his return, the memory of the cold, unyielding ground was still far too fresh. He closed his eyes, pushing it back to the corner of his mind, concentrating instead on his wife. The scent of her shampoo wafted pleasantly over him as she rested beside him, wonderfully, comfortingly close.

"Lee."

Her voice was halting, tentative, and he started at the sound, apprehension growing as he saw her lightly fingering her glass.

"What is it?" he asked gently. "Are you all right? It's not the baby. . . I mean, Matt. . ."

"No," she said quickly, "I'm fine. He's fine. I was just. . .oh, never mind. I'm okay."

He frowned at the sound of her frustrated sigh, and placing his glass on the nightstand beside the bed, he held out his arms. With a grateful glance, she set her own glass down and crawled carefully inside their protective circle. He pulled her close in a gentle embrace, exhaling loudly as she settled in against him.

"Something's been bothering you, Amanda," he told her softly, his lips against her ear. "I've known it ever since the day you came home from the hospital. You're always telling me to share my feelings," he added quickly, silencing her as she started to cut him off. He rubbed her arm lightly, reaching up to finger a wayward strand of dark hair. "The same goes for you. I can't help you if I don't know what you're thinking. I can't read your mind."

He heard her light laugh, a wonderful tinkling sound like the high notes on a harp. "I'm not so sure about that. Sometimes I think you can and do with startling regularity."

"Not tonight." He gave her a gentle squeeze. "Come on, Amanda, talk to me."

He felt her silent sigh and he pulled her closer, his lips brushing encouragingly through her hair. "Talk to me," he urged once more.

"It's hard. . ." She leaned into his chest, planting a tender kiss on the soft material of his favorite t-shirt. "I was so scared in the hospital," she began in a small voice. "Lying there, not knowing if the medication was going to work, not knowing if you. . ."

"I know," he said regretfully. "I'm sorry I worried you, it just couldn't be helped."

She nodded, drawing a deep breath as she plunged in again. "It wasn't that you were missing that frightened me so much. I mean I was worried when you missed your check-ins, but I knew you were perfectly capable of getting yourself out of a tight spot or two; I'd watched you do it myself so many times. But the thing is, usually I was there, too," she sighed, the words tumbling out faster and faster as she finally opened up. "I wanted to be there this time. . . wanted to be your back-up. Like you said, we're a team. And if it wasn't for the baby. . . well, I would have been with you. So when I almost lost him, I thought. . . I thought maybe it was some kind of retribution."

"Retribution?" He looked down into a pair of brown eyes tinged with sadness. "For what?"

"For, well, you know," she mumbled, quickly averting her gaze as she finished in a breathless jumble, "for all the mixed up feelings I've had. For wanting to be back in the field with you, instead of at home, pregnant."

"Amanda. . ."

"It's just that I'd been struggling with that awful morning sickness," she added in a rush, "and sometimes I couldn't help thinking. . .wishing. . . but I didn't really mean. . . I want this baby more than anything. It's just that I've had all these jumbled emotions and. . . I feel so guilty about them."

He leaned in, kissing her tenderly on the forehead. "Amanda, if anyone should feel guilty here, it's me. I've known all along that you only agreed to this pregnancy in part because you knew I wanted it so badly."

"Maybe at first that was true," she said, her eyes on the bedspread. "At least on some level. Not anymore. Matthew is part of me now, part of us. But wanting something doesn't make the doubts go away. It's hard to change your life so drastically, Lee, you have no idea."

He smiled softly. "Don't I? Amanda King, why do you think I dragged my feet about us for so long?" He leaned closer, resting his forehead against hers. "All those endless months of denying my feelings, keeping them in check, when all I really wanted to do was hold you." His arms closed around her, pulling her against his broad chest, safe and warm. "Kiss you," he whispered, his lips a light caress as they trailed across her cheek. "Make love to you," he finished, increasing the pressure as his mouth discovered hers.

Her lips parted sweetly, and he slipped his tongue inside, gently exploring her. He felt her return the intimacy with equal ardor, her mouth almost devouring his as their lips met again and again. For a few moments, he forgot everything else, losing himself in the feel and taste of her, the soft, pliant flesh of her breasts, the faintest hint of apples on her lips. He couldn't seem to get close enough. He felt her hands on his back, moving softly, tantalizingly, in ever widening circles. . .

Her longing sigh brought him up short and he broke off, drawing a ragged breath as he gently cupped her face. "I'm sorry," he whispered hoarsely. "I shouldn't have started that. I know we can't. . ."

"Well, I can't," she said with a tender smile. "But if you need. . ."

"Uh-uh." He rubbed his hand softly over her abdomen. "This is a team effort, remember?"

She nodded, and he kissed her again, lightly this time, winking as he pulled away. "Not that the offer isn't appreciated."

She chuckled lightly. "A little different from last New Year's, huh?"

He gave a short laugh, the memory of their celebration filling his mind. The party at the British embassy, one stellar bottle of Dom Perignon, and their own personal fireworks afterwards as they ushered in 1988 in the luxury of their brand new king-sized bed. "I guess by comparison this year is, ah, how did Phillip put it when he left?"

"Dullsville, I think he said."

"Well, I wouldn't go that far," he grinned. "At least I get to ring the New Year in with my best girl."

"Phillip should be thankful he even made it out of the house this year," she said in exasperation. "Even if it is only to spend the weekend with his brother at Joe and Carrie's."

"Yeah," he laughed. "Tough break. Having to settle for your little brother when a few short weeks ago he had big such dreams of 'what's-her-name'."

"Christy." He saw her shudder slightly. "At least that crisis seems to have been averted."

"For the time being, anyway." He leaned back, taking her with him as he settled down against the pillows. "He's growing up, Amanda. You can't stop it."

"Yeah, well, I can try to stunt it," she teased, pulling the covers up closer around them. "At least for a little while longer."

"Good luck," he laughed, nibbling on her ear. "When you figure out how to do that, let me know."

She grinned, nestling her head in the crook of his shoulder. "It was good to see Joe and Carrie earlier."

"Yeah," he nodded. "I thought he looked a lot better."

"Physically, maybe, but. . ."

He clasped her hand, his thumb absently stroking her palm. "But you're still worried about how he's handling it emotionally."

She nodded, shifting her gaze to the window. "It's not an easy experience to get over. You know how I feel about Joe, but I can't be his emotional support system anymore."

"I know." He gave her hand a gentle squeeze, and she smiled, turning her eyes back to meet his. "He'll be okay," he assured her. "He's got Carrie now. Plus, he's going to keep on seeing Pfaff for a while. For some odd reason, they seem to have hit it off."

She smiled. "Joe always did have a fondness for ice cream. I hope Pfaff can help. . . wait a minute, Stetson," she asked suddenly, turning to catch his eye. "How did you know about that? I didn't have a chance to tell you. Carrie only told me tonight, when they picked up the boys."

"I, uh. . ." he stammered, breaking away from the intensity of her curious gaze. "I might have stopped by Joe's place on my way home the other night. Just to see how he was doing. You know, for Phillip and Jamie."

"And I suppose you wouldn't know anything about why a civilian rates an Agency therapist?"



Lee shrugged. "Maybe Pfaff needs the extra income. An ice cream fetish like his can be expensive."

"Yeah, that's what I hear." Leaning in, she gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. "I love you, Stetson, you know that?"

He grinned in embarrassment. "Yeah, well, the feeling's kind of mutual."

She turned, pulling his arms around her once again. "What about you?" she asked in a low voice.

"What about me?"

"Well, Joe seems to be working on coming to terms with his past. I was just wondering if this trip exorcised the ghosts for you, too."

"In a way. The look on Phillip and Jamie's face when they saw their father back safe and sound helped. But sometimes it's still hard." He bent over, burying his face in her hair. "Didn't think it would be after all these years, but I still miss them. I wish my parents could have known you." He ran her hand lovingly over her stomach. "Known him."

"I know. But they'll always be a part of Matthew's life. We'll see to that."

"And I'll always be there for him, Amanda; for both of you. I promise you that."

Lee felt her silent sigh as she snuggled deeper into his arms. He pulled her close, watching the tiny twinkling lights on the tree his stepsons had helped him set up in the corner. Amanda had teased them about their scrawny choice, but what the tree lacked in size they'd made up for in decoration. Besides, he'd confided later, Jamie couldn't bear to leave it on the lot. Like his mother, he had a soft spot for things that fell short of perfection.

He felt Amanda's lips graze his chest in the lightest of kisses and he smiled, his fingers tangling in her soft hair. Only a few short weeks ago, he'd risked losing moments like these forever. Never again, he thought with a silent shudder; for better or for worse, he was through with the field for good.

Still, he was grateful for the new relationship he'd forged with Joe. He really was a good guy; it had just taken a troop of gun-toting rebel soldiers to make him realize it. He marveled at those pangs of jealousy he'd suffered once upon a time. In the light of the last few weeks, they seemed so utterly out of place.

He could see now that he and Joe King were two very different people, the road they'd both chosen taking them on divergent paths. While it had led Joe to a life and career a continent away, he had journeyed in the opposite direction, to this acre and a half of land tucked away in a small corner of Maryland. Where that road would go in the future, only time would tell. But no matter the circumstances, he knew he and Amanda would travel it together.

"Hey, Mrs. Stetson," he exclaimed, shaking her gently as he reached for his glass of cider. "It's almost midnight. What shall we drink to?"

"To 1989," she replied with a bright smile as she reclaimed her own glass. "And our family."

"To Phillip and Jamie," he toasted, raising his glass. "And Matthew."

"And Matthew," she echoed softly as she rubbed her hand lovingly over her stomach. In the radiance of her smile, he could tell the last of her doubts had finally melted away. Whatever changes and challenges little Matthew would bring to their lives, they would face them as they had every other - as partners.

"Happy New Year, Lee," he heard her whisper as she touched her glass lightly to his once more.

"Yeah," he smiled, "I think maybe it's gonna be. . . for all of us."

**The End**