

## IN SICKNESS AND IN HEALTH

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**TITLE:** In Sickness and In Health

**AUTHOR:** panda (panda )

**RATING:** PG-13 for sensitive subject matter.

**TIMELINE:** The prologue takes place 4th season, immediately after "Do You Take This Spy"; the body of the story takes place 10 years into their marriage, the epilogue one year later.

**SUMMARY:** Amanda Stetson discovers she has breast cancer.

**DATES WRITTEN:** April 30 - June 10, 2001

**AUTHOR'S NOTES:** This story is a tribute to Kate Jackson's own battle with breast cancer. Her courage and determination can serve as a model for us all. This is the hardest story I've written and it wouldn't have gotten this far without the help of my wonderful team of beta readers - thanks, ladies. I'd also like to extend a special thanks to my partner-in-crime, dixonhill, for prodding me along during the long weeks it took to get this story down, and for assuring me that this story could indeed be told.

**MEDICAL FACTS:** Although I conducted extensive research into breast cancer to write this, I have used vastly simplified medical information in the story itself. My intention was not to bore you by writing a case study, but to write a story that focused on the emotional and psychological impact of breast cancer. I do, however, highly encourage you to visit the imaginis website at [www.imaginis.com](http://www.imaginis.com) to inform yourself about this insidious, but highly treatable, disease.

**STATISTICS:** During the 1990's, there were an average of 100.6 cases of breast cancer per 100,000 women. Among those diagnosed, the 5-year survival rate averaged at 85%, with the best survival rates occurring with early detection. In the U.S., only 66.9% of women over the age of 40 have had a mammogram within the last two years. It is estimated that, in the year 2001, 40,200 women will die from breast cancer. (Statistics taken from the imaginis website.)

### Prologue

*... to have and to hold*

I woke as the early morning light streamed in through a gap in the hotel curtains. I could dimly hear the sounds of someone showering, a ding from a distant elevator, the faint ring of a telephone.

Married - I almost couldn't believe it. I was so happy. The weight of the ring on my finger seemed to mirror the weight of my husband on the other side of the bed, tangible, alive. His soft snores caused me to grin like a schoolgirl.

Oh, but last night . . . last night I sure hadn't felt like a schoolgirl. The sensations he evoked - his touch, his caresses, his kisses - made me feel very much a woman in a way that been all too lacking over the last several years.

He stirred and rolled over, facing me. His features were so soft in sleep, so boyish. I reached out my hand and lightly traced a line from his eyebrow down to the corner of his mouth. In the soft light of early morning his whiskers were already evident, his lips slightly parted, his lashes dark against his cheeks. I ran my finger across his bottom lip and he murmured, waking.

"Mmm . . . mornin'," he muttered as he opened his eyes - those wonderful, deep, soul-piercing hazel eyes.

"Good morning," I said as I leaned in for a light kiss. "How'd you sleep?"

"Fantastic," he responded as he pulled me closer. "I had the most incredible dream."

"Oh?" I turned so my back was to him, snuggling deep into his arms, feeling completely enveloped in warmth and security.

"Mm, hmm," he whispered, his breath tickling the back of my neck. "There was this beautiful woman, and a ceremony, and then . . ."

"Yes?" Chills ran up and down my spine.

". . . the most incredible night of my life," he finished as he kissed my ear.

"Funny, I had the same dream," I managed to say as his lips caressed my neck.

"Only mine featured a dashing spy."

"Mmm, that is funny. How 'bout we try and create another dream this morning?" he suggested, suddenly turning my body to face him. The love and desire I saw in his eyes caused my breath to catch in my throat.

"I suppose I could manage that," I gasped as his mouth descended toward mine. His kiss was tender at first, but soon became more demanding, more insistent. I

returned his kiss with abandon, my own rising desire seeking an outlet in the arms of this man, my husband.

A moan rose from deep in his throat, expressing his eagerness to resume the exploration we had begun last night. His hand moved to caress me, his fingers tracing an intricate pattern across my body. I returned his touch, running my hands across his bare shoulders, enjoying the feel of his muscles rippling beneath his skin.

The feeling of skin on skin, something we had explored only minimally while dating, now served to demonstrate our love for each other, affirming the promise of our future. Our complete surrender was revealed as we explored each other, learning the tender spots, the ticklish places, the areas that set each of us on fire.

As we joined ourselves, his firm, muscular body filling my softer one, there was a confirmation of commitment - a commitment begun in friendship, strengthened in partnership, and given voice to in the vows we had shared. A commitment now deepened by the uniting of our flesh, as, vulnerable in our nakedness, we gave of ourselves wholly, unconditionally.

## Chapter 2

*... from this day forward*

I woke to the sounds of early morning - birds singing, the newspaper hitting the front stoop, commuters' cars traveling down the street. I snuggled further under the covers, relishing the cool breeze entering through the slightly open window. The comfortable weight of my husband sleeping next to me offered the security of routine, a routine born of ten years of marriage.

Ten years - it seemed almost inconceivable. Lee's soft snores drifted across the bed, drawing forth a remembrance of the first time I'd woken to the sound of those snores. Hazy recollections, softened by the passage of time and filtered by the intervening years, came to me. Memories of our wedding night, memories that caused me to grin like a schoolgirl.

As my mind drifted back to the present, I quickly put aside the schoolgirl grin. Nights like the previous one always made me realize how very much a

woman I was. The feelings he induced when we made love brought to the fore a sensuality grown more potent over the years - a sensuality of love, commitment, and maturity.

I rolled over and spooned myself against his warm, sleep-laden body. How I loved waking next to this man, this husband of mine. I smiled as I recalled how our imprudent 'mystery marriage' had come to an abrupt halt after a mere six months. That was as long as we'd been able to stand not waking up in the same bed together.

I felt the change in Lee's breathing as he shifted into wakefulness. "Good morning, Mr. Stetson," I murmured into the back of his neck.

"Good morning, Mrs. Stetson," he mumbled, rolling over to face me. "How'd you sleep?"

"Wonderfully," I responded as he pulled me closer. "I had the most incredible dream."

"Oh?" he asked in the familiarity of a morning routine we'd shared many times over the years.

"Yep," I offered as I leaned in and kissed him lightly on the lips. I twirled the wedding band on my finger as I said, "There was this dashing older man, a candlelit dinner -"

"Older?" he interrupted as his hazel eyes drilled into mine.

"Well, it has been ten years," I teased, trying not to smile at the slightly disconcerted look on his face.

"Older, huh? I'll show you older, Mrs. Stetson." He abruptly rolled me to my back and looked down at me. The love and passion I saw in his eyes, grown stronger over the years, caused my heart to leap. His strong arms supported his trim, muscular figure as he loomed over me - a slight

softening at his belt line and a graying at his temples the only signs of aging his body displayed.

"Well, maybe not that old," I gasped before his demanding mouth covered mine.

As his tongue teased my lips, I eagerly opened my mouth to accept him. Shivers coursed through me as our kiss deepened, serving to heighten the feel of his fingers as they caressed my body. The rhythm of his movements, the demands of his mouth, the touch of his hands - all served to consume me, to draw me into that heightened state of awareness that only two lovers can find.

We joined together with practiced ease, the fluency of our dance having been perfected over the years. Our bodies moved as one - expressing our commitment, our love, our passion - until, intertwined and spent, we collapsed together in breathless surrender.

"So, what's on the agenda for your day off?" Lee asked over the top of the newspaper as he sipped his morning coffee.

"Well, I've got an early doctor's appointment, just a check-up, and a lunch date with Mother; then we're going shopping. Would you like to join us?" I asked playfully.

"Shopping with the West women?" he asked with an exaggerated shudder. "No thanks. I think I'll stick to outsmarting international spy rings; it's less stressful."

"Chicken," I said, swatting his arm with a section of the newspaper. "What time will you be home tonight?"

"Well, I've got to meet with Francine's team about the Chen case. Then there's a briefing with some of the new recruits. I'm also supposed to meet with Dr. Smyth about some possible restructuring of our training facilities," he said with a sigh.

"Busy day, huh? That's okay. We can have a light dinner whenever you get home," I replied as I finished putting my breakfast dishes into the dishwasher.

"I still wonder how Billy managed all those years," he said, a rueful smile on his face. "Being Section Chief is more demanding than being an undercover operative ever was; that's for sure."

I walked behind his chair and leaned down, wrapping my arms around his shoulders and kissing his cheek. "He's very proud of how you've taken over his responsibilities. So am I."

I could feel the reverberation of his deep chuckle through my arms. "Well, you're biased, Mrs. Stetson."

"Me, biased? Just because I sleep with the boss - why would that make me biased?" I retorted, my smile widening.

He stood suddenly and pulled me into his embrace. After a kiss that curled my toes, he finally released me and said, "I'd better go now, or I'm never gonna get to work. You've already been enough of a distraction this morning." Then, with a wink, he grabbed his briefcase and headed out the door.

"Good to see you, Mrs. Stetson," the nurse said as she escorted me to the exam room. "I see it's been two years since your last mammogram. Have you had any problems in the meantime?"

"No, no problems."

"Good to hear. Okay, slip out of your clothes and put this on, and I'll be right back," the nurse said as she handed me a gown and closed the door behind her.

I removed my clothing, shivering as I put on the paper-thin gown. 'Why is it these rooms are always so cold?' I wondered as goosebumps covered my skin.

The nurse returned and led me to the room with the equipment - the impersonal, rigid, coldly diagnostic equipment. The technician was competent and professional, and the hard press of metal on my sensitive flesh, though uncomfortable, was familiar. I knew the routine and the discomfort never lasted long.

Mother had always insisted that our family take good care of our health, and her insistence had rubbed off on me over the years. Ruefully, I remembered how difficult it had been, at first, to get Lee into the family routine of regular check-ups. He'd been unable to resist for long, though, and he was now almost as adamant about health care as the rest of us.

"There we are, all done," the technician said, interrupting my musings as the pressure finally eased. "You can get dressed now, Mrs. Stetson. We'll send the results to your doctor's office and she'll get in touch with you."

"Okay, thanks," I replied as I headed back to the exam room to change.

"It sure is good to see you, Mother," I said as I kissed her cheek.

"You're looking well, dear. How's Lee?" she asked as she sat down at the small, outdoor table where we'd been seated.

"Oh, he's fine. Busy as usual. He has to meet with his boss this afternoon, not one of his favorite pastimes," I said with a smile. "How's Lillian?" I asked as I picked up the luncheon menu.

"Oh, she's great. It's hard to believe she's turning 75 this year. She's still as spry as she's ever been," she offered, chuckling.

"Funny, she reminds me of someone else I know," I said, chuckling in return. The two sisters had discovered a deep friendship after moving in

together five years before. Just hearing about their busy social schedule left me exhausted.

With a look indicating she wasn't going to dignify my last remark with a response, Mother perused her menu and asked, "Have you heard from the boys?"

"Well, Phillip's still in newlywed heaven - all he ever talks about is Lisa." I smiled. "They seem to be doing well. They're even talking about buying a house, can you believe it?"

"Young people do buy houses much sooner, these days. Let's just hope they wait a while to start a family." Mother sipped her water as she looked at me over the top of her reading glasses.

"I just hope they know what a huge commitment a mortgage is. Especially since Lisa wants to go to grad school. What are you having, Mother?" I asked, noticing the waiter had stopped at our table.

"What can I get for you lovely ladies this fine afternoon?" the young man asked, his pen poised over his order book.

"I think I'll have the chicken salad. Something light sounds wonderful. Oh, and an iced tea, extra lemon," she said, looking expectantly at me.

"I'll have the same," I said as I handed the waiter our menus.

"Excellent choice. I'll be right back with your tea." As the young man walked away, Mother's eyes closely followed his athletic figure.

"Mother!" I said, trying hard not to laugh.

"What? Amanda, I may be getting older, but I'm not dead." She gave me an innocent look. "You may be happily married to an 'eleven', but I'm still single, you know," she said, jabbing the air with her reading glasses as she spoke.



Then, changing the subject, she slipped her glasses off and put them away, asking, "So, how's Jamie?"

Shaking my head at my mother's never-failing lasciviousness, I said, "He's doing great. I told you he's interning at the school's photo lab this semester, right?" Seeing Mother nod, I continued, "Well, apparently his professor is very impressed with his work, and they've offered him an assistantship to cover his expenses next year."

"Oh, Amanda, that's wonderful. I'm so happy for him; he has such a love for photography." Mother beamed.

"Yeah, he's been hooked ever since Lee gave him his first camera," I replied, fondly remembering how Lee and Jamie had finally found common ground with that camera.

Mother brought me back to the present as she said, "So, let's decide where we're going to shop. There's this darling new store I'd love to go in . . ."

Walking into the house, I tossed my purse onto the hall table and kicked off my shoes. Shopping with Mother was always an exhausting experience. I was actually glad Lee would be working late - I was much too tired to worry about dinner.

I wandered into the kitchen, intent on a glass of wine. I planned on going into the den and resting my sore feet, maybe watching a little mindless television, or reading some more of that novel I'd started. Pausing near the answering machine, I noticed the blinking light. I pushed the play button.

"Hi, Amanda. It's me. I may be working even later than I'd thought. Call me on my cell phone if you need me. Bye - I love you."

"Call now! Dial 1-800-555-2121 to hear our exciting -" I stopped the message with an annoyed push of the delete button.

"Mrs. Stetson. This is Dr. Granger's office. We have some preliminary test results for you. Please call us when you get in. 555-3782."

I replayed the last message a second time. The way the voice said 'preliminary test results' gave me pause. Deciding to forgo the wine for now, I wet my suddenly dry lips with my tongue and sat heavily on the kitchen stool. Picking up the phone, I dialed the number.

"Hello, Dr. Granger's office. May I help you?" the familiar voice asked.

"Yes, this is Amanda Stetson. I'm calling for some test results," I said, twisting my wedding band around my finger.

"The doctor's expecting your call, Mrs. Stetson. Hold on while I transfer you."

The typical Muzac played over the phone line, doing nothing to quell the staccato rhythm of my heart.

"Mrs. Stetson?" Dr. Granger's voice asked.

"Yes, this is she," I said, wishing I'd gone ahead and poured that glass of wine.

"I don't want you to worry, but we found something on one of your films from this morning." Her voice was clipped and formal, all business.

"What?" I asked, swallowing past the dryness in my mouth. "What did you find?"

"Just a small dark area in your right breast, Mrs. Stetson. It may be nothing. What we need to do is have you come in for some additional tests."

"Oh . . . okay. When do you want me to come in?" The squeak in my voice reverberated in my ears.

"How about tomorrow afternoon, three o'clock?"

"Okay. I'll be there. Thank you, Doctor," I said, trying to sound as business-like as she had.

"See you then, Mrs. Stetson. And don't worry. It may be nothing. Goodbye."

"Goodbye." As the click from the other phone disconnecting sounded in my ear, I moved to hang up, the shaking of my hand as I put the receiver in the cradle catching me off guard.

I decided to have that glass of wine.

"Amanda, I'm home." Lee's voice carried through the house as he shut the front door. "Amanda?"

"In here, Lee," I said, my voice sounding tight.

"You wouldn't believe the day I've had," he said as he set his briefcase down, walking over to give me a kiss on the cheek. "Dr. Smyth must've gone over the plans for the training facility a dozen times. I thought I was never gonna get outta there," he paused, looking over at me as I sat stiffly on the couch. "Amanda, is something wrong?"

I looked up at him and tried to smile, but knew I was failing utterly. "Well, Lee, you remember I had a doctor's appointment this morning?"

He sat next to me, reaching for my hands as he said, "Yeah, but you said it was just a check-up."

"Well, it was. I go for a mammogram every two years like clockwork. That's where I went this morning, and, well . . . Lee, they found a dark spot on one of the films," I blurted, afraid if I stopped I wouldn't get the words out.

"Oh, my God, Amanda." The worried look in his eyes made me want to comfort him. I was suddenly less afraid, knowing I needed to be brave for his sake.

"Lee, it's probably nothing. The doctor wants me to come in for more tests, that's all," I said, trying to sound as confident as my words implied.

"When . . . when do you go back?" he asked, squeezing my hands so tightly that my wedding ring dug painfully into my fingers.

"Tomorrow afternoon."

"I'll take the afternoon off." As I began to argue, he quickly continued, "No, Amanda. I wanna do this. I'm sure it's nothing to worry about, but I want to be with you."

"Okay, Lee, if you really want to. But I don't think it's necessary, it's just -"

He interrupted me with a fierce hug and whispered into my hair, "I love you, Amanda."

"I love you, too, Lee."

The doctor's office was cheery, decorated with brightly colored floral prints and an abundance of family photographs. We both sat quietly in the upholstered chairs that faced the desk, the only sound in the room coming from the softly ticking wall clock.

There was a presence of hope in the room. The spot on the film may have been an error, a processing fluke, a mistake. I held tightly to that hope, gathering it to me like a security blanket.

The door opened and the doctor walked in. She greeted us with a smile and removed her lab coat, hanging it on the back of the door. She then moved to the chair behind her desk and sat down, placing the folder she carried onto the desk blotter.

"Well, Amanda, Mr. Stetson," she began, peering over her glasses. "I have the second film . . . The spot is still there."

There was silence for a moment, then I asked, "What does that mean, Dr. Granger? What do we do next?" My husband increased his pressure on my hand.

"What that means, Amanda, is there's a small mass in your right breast, and we need to find out what it is. A biopsy is the next step. It's a very simple procedure - we do it on an outpatient basis with a local anesthetic. It will cause you only minor discomfort," the doctor said, kindness in her eyes as they met the concern in mine.

"Dr. Granger, how long will it take to get the results from the biopsy?" Lee asked, an edge of unease in his voice.

"Less than a week, once the biopsy is done. We'll schedule the procedure as soon as possible. But, Amanda, Mr. Stetson, it could be any number of things, so let's not worry until we know what we're dealing with, okay?" she suggested as she stood up, indicating our session was over.

"Thank you, Doctor," I said as Lee and I stood to leave, our hands still joined.

"Stop at the appointment desk on your way out, Amanda," she said as she opened the door, ushering us back out to the hallway, back into uneasiness and uncertainty as the hope I still held onto grew smaller.

### Chapter 3

#### *. . . in sickness and in health*

I woke feeling drained. My sleep had been restless at best, nonexistent at worst. I could still feel the pinch where my flesh had been violated during the biopsy. I listened for the birds, but they were strangely quiet.

The morning air had that still, damp quality that indicated the onset of a storm.

I lay quietly, listening to the familiar sounds of Lee's breathing. The steady rise and fall of his chest mesmerized me. I needed the tangible reality of his strength, his health, to reassure myself that the world was as it always had been, that I hadn't fallen into some strange, alternate reality.

He stirred and rolled over, his eyes opening to meet mine. It was as if he'd felt me watching him. "Mornin', Amanda," he whispered tenderly. "How'd you sleep?"

"I slept okay, I guess." I couldn't give voice to the dream I'd had last night. The tendrils of the waning nightmare were finally leaving my consciousness and I had no desire to provide them solidity.

He reached out a hand to caress my cheek as he tenderly said, "I love you."

"I love you, too, Lee." Then I slipped into his embrace, pulling him around me, trying to lose myself in the security of his arms.

I used a towel to clear a circle in the middle of the steamed-over mirror. I stared at myself, thinking that I looked pretty good for 46. The small crows' feet at the corners of my eyes were barely visible, the laugh lines around my mouth shallow. My hair was the same nut-brown, my figure still slender. My figure . . .

I lowered the towel I'd wrapped around myself. I was still trim, my hips gently rounded, the small amount of flesh at my waist the only indicator that I'd carried two children. The scar below my shoulder was all that remained of the bullet that nearly took my life ten years ago. My breasts, while not as firm as they'd been in my youth, were nonetheless nicely shaped. My breasts . . .

I stared hard at my breasts, looking back and forth between the right and the left. The right one gave no sign that it was the carrier of a potentially dangerous disease. There was no puckering, no visible lump, nothing. Other than the small area of redness where they'd performed the biopsy, it looked perfectly normal.

"Hey, are you going to hide in here all morning?" My husband's deep-throated chuckle intruded on my inspection. His strong arms wrapped around me from behind and his lips raised a tingle on the back of my neck. "If you were gonna stand in here naked, why didn't you invite me?" he teased.

Suddenly not caring about anything but being in his arms, I turned hungrily to him. I devoured his mouth in a kiss of desperation, a kiss designed to make me forget, to make me feel only passion, to make me feel like a woman. Sensing my mood, he swept me off my feet and carried me to our bed.

I gave myself to the feel of his lips, his hands, his body as he explored every inch of me. I flinched slightly when he brushed over my right breast, but assured him it was okay, that he shouldn't stop. I couldn't bear for him to stop.

I returned his caresses touch for touch, kiss for kiss, suppressing any feelings but those of desire and burning passion. I needed him to possess me, to engulf me, as I in turn possessed him. Our bodies met in hunger and need, the fulfillment we both sought soon overtaking us and leaving us gasping, our bodies intertwined as we surrendered to each other and became one.

"Mother," I began as I sat across from her, my coffee untouched. "There's something I need to tell you, something serious."

"Has something happened? It's not one of the boys, is it? Oh, Amanda, just tell me; I can handle it. Is it Phillip, or -"

"Mother, will you let me talk, please?" I interrupted, exasperation creeping into my voice.

"Of course, dear. I won't say another word." She made a zip-the-lip motion across her mouth and patted me reassuringly on the knee.

"You remember last week, when we had lunch, and -"

"Oh, yes, and we had that cute young waiter - " she stopped herself, a sheepish expression on her face. "Sorry."

"I told you I had gone for my mammogram, remember?" I saw her nod and plunged ahead, twisting my wedding ring round and round my finger. "Well . . . they found a mass in my right breast."

"Oh, dear God, Amanda."

"I went for a biopsy, Mother. I'm supposed to find out the results this afternoon. I thought you should know." I stopped, not knowing what else to say, mere words seeming woefully inadequate at expressing the morass of feelings inside me.

Perhaps finding words inadequate as well, she pulled me into a fierce embrace. We sat, quietly, while she held me, rocking me back and forth in an unbroken, soothing rhythm.

Déjà vu, I thought, as we sat in the doctor's office. I wondered how many others had sat here waiting for test results, how many others with sweaty palms and dry mouths had watched the second hand on the clock sweep slowly across its face.

Lee held my hand fiercely, determinedly, as if to hold me rooted to existence - our existence, the existence we'd built through friendship, partnership, and marriage. This side road my body seemed determined to take me down had held no place in that existence, at least up until now.



I held to my still present hope. Hope that the tumor was benign, that it was just a cyst, that the dreams that woke me up at night weren't true. As Dr. Granger entered the room, her business-like manner hinting at the news to come, I gathered my hope about me tightly, determined to hold on no matter what.

"Amanda, I have your biopsy results," she said as she sat down. "The tissue we removed was malignant. But . . . Amanda . . . I want you to know that we caught this early. The tumor is small and your overall health is excellent, so the prognosis is very good."

I felt the color drain from my face at her words. My wedding ring dug into my fingers as Lee squeezed my hand even tighter. I didn't know what to say, what to ask.

"We'll fight this, Doctor," Lee finally said, a slight catch in his voice. "Just tell us what we need to do."

"We'd need to perform what's called a modified radical mastectomy. That means we'd remove your right breast as well as lymph node tissue from under your right arm." The doctor quickly added, "The good news is, the biopsy confirmed that it's a Stage I cancer, and should require no further treatment. And, Amanda, Stage I cancer has a 98% survival rate."

The words 'mastectomy' and 'survival rate' reverberated in my head, the images they conjured causing me to pull my hand from my husband's grasp and cross my arms protectively across my chest. Finding my voice, I asked, "You'd . . . you'd have to remove my whole breast?"

"Yes, but, Amanda, reconstructive surgery could be performed as soon as the mastectomy is fully healed."

"And this procedure would remove all the cancer?" Lee asked, his voice sounding strained.

"We won't know for sure until we look at the lymph node tissue, but I'd say our chances are very good." She offered a smile, one that I couldn't seem to return. "Now, I have the names of a couple of oncologists . . . " She handed me two business cards, then continued, "These are both excellent doctors, but you need to choose the one you feel most comfortable with. The oncologist will perform the surgery and advise your follow-up care. Amanda, do you have any questions?"

"I . . . I don't think so." I looked blankly at the names embossed on the cards, names I'd not seen before, names without the comfort of familiarity.

"Well, please, Amanda . . . and Mr. Stetson, if you have any questions, feel free to call me - anytime." She held out her hand to shake as we stood to leave, the gesture striking a chord of finality.

"Thank you, Dr. Granger," Lee said, shaking her hand before guiding me out the open door.

I crossed my arms once more, vaguely aware of the forward motion of my feet as they carried me down the hall. My hope trailed after me like a slowly deflating balloon.

I undressed for bed, pausing as I undid the fastening on my bra. I looked down at my breasts, the right one marginally smaller than the left. 'What will I look like when it's gone?' I asked myself.

I'd been a late bloomer - a result of my thinness, Mother had told me. I could recall how desperate I'd been to develop; it had seemed that all of my friends were buying bras when I could make do with just an undershirt. The presence of breasts had been a rite-of-passage amongst my girlfriends, and boys had certainly paid more attention to the developed girls.

I smiled as I remembered my first bra. Mother had taken me shopping, proud that her little girl was becoming a woman. It'd been both

embarrassing and exciting. I'd blushed bright red when the saleswoman measured around my chest to determine my size. But, later, I'd wanted to wear that bra constantly, even to bed.

In college, I'd gone through a rebellious period. Many of my girlfriends were going bra-less, and I'd been small-chested enough to get away with it. Then, as an adult, the significance of having breasts changed - altered by the blossoming of my sexuality with Joe, then changing again as I became a mother.

Then there was Lee. He'd reawakened a sexuality I'd had to push to the back of my mind as I'd dealt with the absence of, then divorce from, Joe. Lee had reminded me how good it felt to be a woman, a sexual woman, a woman with a body to be loved, cherished, and enjoyed. And, now . . . now I was facing yet another change, a change I was at a loss in dealing with. Sighing, I pulled my nightgown over my head and rolled into bed, burying myself under the comforter.

I felt the weight of my husband compress the other side of the mattress. His strong arm snaked around me, pulling me close to him. My tears fell quietly as I felt the reassurance of his touch.

"I love you, Amanda," he said as he held me tenderly.

"I love you, Lee," I replied. The familiar protection of his embrace, a protection that had always seemed infallible, now felt inadequate. He couldn't shield me from this - from invasive cancer cells assaulting me from the inside, from the shortcomings of my body's own defenses, from the surgical violation that was soon to come.

It felt like someone had tap-danced on my chest. My eyelids were heavy, weighted down by drug-induced slumber. I tried to lick my parched lips but realized my mouth was bone dry. I finally succeeded in opening my eyes and tried to focus. There was a figure dressed in white at the foot of my bed. "Wa . . . wa . . ." I couldn't quite form the words.

"Mrs. Stetson, you're awake," a kindly voice stated as the white figure entered my narrow field of vision. She wrote something in my chart. "Good, I'll let the doctor know. You want a drink?" She must've seen my attempted nod because she said, "Okay, but only a sip at first, you've only just come out of surgery."

She held my head while placing a cup and straw to my lips. She took it away much too quickly, but at least I could now remove my tongue from the roof of my mouth. "My . . . my husband?" I croaked.

"You can have visitors once we move you to your room. The surgeon has to see you first. I'll go get him." She quickly disappeared from view.

It hurt too much to keep my eyes open, so I closed them while I waited. I soon heard voices and opened my eyes to see my oncologist looking at my chart. "Well, Amanda, your vitals are good. How do you feel?"

"Sore," I said, my voice raspy.

"Well, that's to be expected. I'll have the nurse adjust your IV and then move you to your room. I know there're a few people anxiously waiting to see you," he said, smiling. "The surgery went very well, Amanda. The cancer was confined to your right breast, which we removed completely. Your lymph nodes are normal; that's good news. Dr. Granger will be by to see you this afternoon. She'll discuss your reconstructive surgery options with you." He squeezed my hand in an inadequate attempt at comfort, and left.

I lay there trying to digest what had been done to me. I craned my neck in an attempt to see my chest, but it was completely covered. I felt a sense of panic as I lay back and stared up at the clean, white, unblemished ceiling.

Within a few minutes I was moved to my room. It was a private one - Lee had insisted, despite the expense. He'd argued that if I had to share a room I might not sleep as well, which could delay my recovery. Mother had

sided with him, so I'd quickly conceded the point. As the orderly and one of the floor nurses helped me into bed, I was glad for the privacy.

Showing me how the bed controls worked, the floor nurse raised the head of the bed so I could partially sit up. She placed a cup and straw next to my bed and said, "Now, Amanda, I want you to sip the water, just enough to keep your mouth moist. If you drink too much, it could make you sick to your stomach."

I nodded my agreement, acknowledging how painful that would be.

"I'll go get your family, now, Amanda. But don't overdo it. When you feel tired, ask them to leave." She left, the door closing quietly behind her.

I took a sip of water, my mind racing. 'What will my right side look like? Will I ever look normal again? What will Lee think? What - ?'

My introspection was interrupted by a soft knock. Lee peered around the door and smiled tenderly, asking, "May we come in?"

I managed a nod and was soon inundated by family. Lee, Mother, Phillip, and Jamie entered quietly, fanning out around my bed and smiling happily.

"How are you, dear?" Mother asked, fussing about rearranging the few things on my bed tray.

"Mom, do you feel okay?" Jamie asked, a worried look on his boyish face.

"Is there anything we can get you, Mom?" Phillip added, putting his hands in his pockets and shuffling his feet.

"One at a time, guys," Lee interjected, his deep baritone filling the small room. "Give your mother a chance. Amanda? Are you up to visitors? Or should we come back later?" He gently brushed the hair off my forehead and smiled tenderly.

"It's okay," I said hoarsely, reaching for my cup of water, which Mother quickly assisted me with. "It's good to see all of you. My throat hurts when I talk, so why don't you all talk and I'll listen."

"Sure, Amanda," Lee agreed.

"Anything you want, dear," Mother offered. "Lillian sends her love and says she'll come by later."

"Lisa, too, Mom. She thought it should just be the four of us for now; she'll come tomorrow," Phillip's deeper voice informed.

Lee told me of all the get-well wishes sent from work, while Phillip prattled on about Lisa and Mother pattered about like a mother hen. Jamie, however, was quiet - worry creasing his brow. I held my hand out to him, offering the physical contact my youngest always seemed to need. He sat gingerly on the edge of my bed and held my hand, my firm grip offering reassurance.

I quickly tired, and Mother ushered the boys from the room, quietly saying their goodbyes. I wanted, needed to talk to Lee, but I hadn't the strength. I closed my eyes as I felt Lee gently stroke my cheek, his whispered 'I love you' sending me off into sleep.

I was hungry, I realized as the smell of food pulled me from slumber. The nurse had brought my lunch, and Lee was carefully setting everything out on my bed tray. He smiled at me and asked, "Feel like eating? It's hospital food, but it's better than nothing."

I nodded and he helped me sit up, raising the head of the bed and arranging my pillows. I took a sip of juice and tried to spoon up my soup. My hand was shaking, however, so Lee quickly took over. "Here, Amanda, let me. You've certainly done this for me often enough," he added wryly.

Lee made small talk while I ate, his manner gentle as he assisted me. I swallowed as much as I could and then pushed the tray away. I looked at him and said, a quiver in my voice, "Lee, I need to talk to you."

He sat on the edge of my bed and tenderly took my hand in his. The absence of my wedding ring felt strange and a part of my mind wondered who was keeping it for me. I took another sip of water and tried to find the words I needed. "Lee, it's gone . . . they really did it . . . they removed the whole thing . . ."

He interrupted me, his thumb caressing the back of my hand. "Shh, Amanda, I know. I already talked to the surgeon. Honey, it'll be okay. I love you; you know that. The important thing is they got it all, nothing else matters."

"How can you say it doesn't matter?" I asked, tears threatening to flow. "Lee, they removed my breast, my whole breast. Of course that matters. A part of me is missing, cut away. How can you ever look at me the same?"

"Amanda, of course it matters. I didn't mean that. But they got all the cancer, isn't that the important thing? And how can you think I'd look at you any differently? You're still the same person, my partner and best friend, the woman I fell in love with and married." He gazed at me intently, the look in his eyes willing me to understand.

I couldn't understand; didn't he get how this changed things, or was he just putting on a good front, saying what he thought I needed to hear? "No, I'm not the same. They took something from me, Lee. A part of me that I can never get back."

"The surgeon said you could have reconstructive surgery. They can do wonderful things these days, Amanda. Of course this is going to be overwhelming at first, but -"

I listened to his reassuring words, felt his loving touch, saw the tender look in his eyes. It didn't sink in, though. I seemed to be on autopilot, my

mind awirl with conflicting thoughts and emotions as I felt myself withdrawing. "Lee, I'm really tired. Could you come back later?"

The look of surprise on his face gave me a slight twinge of guilt. He recovered quickly, though, and said, "Of course, if that's what you'd like. I'll be back later." He leaned down for a kiss, and ended up kissing my cheek as I reflexively turned my head away.

I heard the door close behind him as tears began to wet my pillow.

"Okay, Amanda, you need to change the bandage like this . . ."

The nurse's voice droned on as she showed me how to care for my wound, explaining each step as she performed it. My wound. That's what my right breast had been reduced to - a wound. The first time I'd looked at it, it had felt as though I were looking at someone else, a clinical objectivity I didn't know I possessed stepping in and taking over.

The puckered flesh held together by black stitches, the absence of rounded flesh, the complete lack of a nipple that had once offered milk to nourish my babies - surely that abomination couldn't be me. I knew my body, and that wasn't a part of it.

Mercifully, the sterile gauze and tape hid my deformity from view and I quickly dressed, putting on the loose sweatshirt and sweatpants I'd had Lee bring from home. Home . . . I was going home today.

I finished signing my discharge papers as Lee poked his head in the room. "Hi, you about ready to go?" he asked, the cautious look on his face bringing a modicum of guilt to the surface of my mind.

"Yes," I answered. "I'm almost done. My bag is ready, if you want to take it down."

He wordlessly picked up the bag and headed out the door, not saying a thing about the large amount of flowers and balloons I was leaving behind.



He'd offered to take them home earlier, but I'd refused. I'd told the nurses to distribute them to patients who could use them.

I took one last look around. I hated that I was coming back here in three months. Reconstructive surgery they called it - as if they could somehow magically recreate that which had been taken from me. The hope I'd so desperately hung onto now seemed swallowed up by anger and despair.

Lee came back and escorted me out, the nurses waving goodbye. We took the elevator ride down to the lobby in silence.

## Chapter 4

*... for better or for worse*

The morning sun stabbed its way into the bedroom while I lay quietly in bed, unmoving, concentrating on producing the illusion of sleep. I heard Lee stirring beside me and felt his arm gently drape over me. I kept my breathing even, my eyes closed. I heard his sigh and felt the shift of his weight as he got out of bed. Then, hearing the start of the shower, I relaxed.

He showered, shaved, and dressed while I lay there, feigning sleep. He walked over to the bed and whispered, "Amanda?" When I didn't answer, he gently kissed my cheek and quietly left the room.

I rolled over, facing away from the window as I mulled over the recurring dream I'd been having. I was on a beach, watching the waves crash against the shore. I knew I had to get to the water, but each time I got closer, the water receded. I'd then start running toward the water, but the faster I ran the further I was from my goal. Then I'd wake up, my pulse racing from my nocturnal exertions.

I'd been home for two weeks, two weeks since my body had become foreign to me. My body had changed before - puberty, pregnancy, even the beginnings of aging. But those had seemed normal, gradual, and right,

while this . . . this seemed abnormal and horrific. I could barely stand to look at myself, much less have Lee look at me.

From downstairs I heard the sounds of Lee's departure. He'd tried to stay home with me, but after five days, I'd told him to go back to work. I could take care of myself, after all, and I'd promised to call Mother if I needed anything. Truth was, I just wanted to be alone.

Sure that Lee was safely on his way to work, I flopped my feet out of bed and stood slowly. I was still sore, and moving gingerly because of it. I made my way into the bathroom and locked the door behind me.

Taking off my pajama top, I stared hard at my reflection. The decade-old scar below my shoulder looked innocuous, its import diminished by the larger imperfection hidden under the bandage below it. That a bullet wound had once been a danger to my life now seemed ridiculous in comparison to the more recent threat, a threat originating from inside, a threat that left me looking like . . .

I carefully removed the bandage from my right side. The grotesque flap of skin that was all that remained of my right breast seemed to stare back at me; it's horror almost giving it a life of its own. I tried to picture what it would look like after reconstructive surgery, but all I could see was a mockery of my former self. I quickly re-banded myself and left the bathroom, and my reflection, behind.

After dressing in the usual sweat pants and loose sweatshirt, I made my way downstairs. I poured myself some coffee from the pot Lee had started earlier and walked into the den. Sitting down on the couch, I pulled a blanket across my lap and picked up the remote.

"Amanda," Mother's voice pleaded over the phone line. "Please let me come over. Your surgery was just three weeks ago; I'm sure you could use some help, or at least some company."

"Mother, really, I'm fine; my arm is hardly stiff at all. Besides, Lee checks up on me all day long. Maybe next week, okay?"

"But, darling, what about your laundry, or -"

"Have you been talking to Lee, Mother?" I asked angrily. "I told him to leave the laundry for me; I'll get to it, I'm not an invalid." I started to twist my wedding ring around my finger, then realized I wasn't wearing it, hadn't worn it, in fact, since coming home from the hospital.

"Of course you're not, dear. Lee's just worried about you; he loves you, you know."

"Mother, I'm fine. I need to go now. Good bye." I hung up before she could start in on me again. Why did everyone think I needed help? It's not like I had a broken limb, or something. Deciding to let the machine answer next time, I went into the den and turned the television back on.

"Lee, I told you I'd get the dishes," I said as I stalked after him into the kitchen.

"Amanda, why won't you let me help?" he asked as he wearily put down the dishtowel. "You've barely been home a month -"

"I've done the dishes for ten years, why should that change now?" I asked as I pushed my way to the front of the sink. I hated the sarcasm in my voice, but couldn't seem to stop myself.

"That's not fair. Why are you doing this, Amanda? You won't talk to me, won't let me help, won't even let me near you. Why are you shutting me out?" The pleading look on his face almost caused me to waver, but I couldn't afford to weaken.

"It's not your problem, Lee. You have no idea what I'm going through; no one mutilated your body. How could you possibly help?" I turned the water on hot, as hot as I could stand.

He sounded as if I'd slapped him. "You do need help, Amanda. You're just too stubborn to admit it. You want to do the dishes, fine, do the dishes. I'll see you later." Thrusting my hands into the hot water, I heard the jangle of keys quickly followed by the closing of the front door.

I had to get dressed. It'd been nearly two months since my surgery and my appointment with the plastic surgeon to discuss my reconstructive surgery was this afternoon. 'What will the doctor think if I show up dressed like this?' I wondered, looking down at my worn-looking sweats.

Determined, I made my way to my dresser. I'd barely opened my lingerie drawer since coming home, opting instead to keep my underwear on top of my dresser. Now, opening the drawer, I rifled through to find a comfortable cotton bra. Taking off my sweatshirt, I put the bra on, fumbling slightly with the fastening. I then walked over to look in the mirror.

My left side looked normal, my dark nipple barely visible through the thin material, my round breast softly filling out the fabric. But the right side . . . It was like looking at two halves of the same person - one half an eager, prepubescent girl putting on her mother's bra as she watched for the first signs of womanhood, the other half a fully mature woman, wife, and mother.

The door to the bedroom opened, causing me to jump and turn my back to the door. Looking over my shoulder, I saw my husband standing in the doorway. "Lee!" I yelled. "Can't you knock?" I stood holding my shirt in front of me, facing the midday sun, which was barely visible through the shaded window.

"Amanda, this is my room, too. You've never asked me to knock before." I could hear him approaching behind me.

"What are you doing home, anyway?" I asked as I quickly entered the bathroom, shutting and locking the door behind me.

Through the closed door, I could hear him sigh heavily. "I thought you might like some company for lunch."

"Well, you thought wrong. I've got an appointment and don't have time for lunch," I informed him as I stared at my reflection, the shirt still clutched to my chest.

His voice barely audible, he said, "Amanda . . . I could go with you, that is, if -"

"No, Lee. I don't need you to come with me. Thanks, anyway." I sat down on the toilet and waited, listening. After several minutes I heard the telltale sound of his car starting up, the tires giving a slight squeal as he pulled away from the curb.

Grimacing, I walked back into the bedroom and quickly pulled on a loose, button-down shirt and a pair of slacks. As I left the room, I absently grabbed a cardigan sweater; it's bulk offering to further screen my deformity from the world.

I lay stiffly, keeping my body rigidly on my side of the bed. I kept my eyes closed as I heard the sounds of Lee getting ready for bed, and pretended to sleep as I felt his weight depress his side of the mattress.

"Amanda?" he whispered. "C'mon, I know you're still awake. Talk to me, please."

Wearily, I said, "What did you want to talk about?"

"How did your appointment go? What did the doctor say?" His hand reached out to grasp mine, but I pulled it away, ostensibly to adjust the covers.

"I really don't want to talk about it, Lee," I said, folding and refolding the top of the sheet. As I felt his hand touch my shoulder I was unable to stop myself from flinching away. The hurt look on his face gave me pause,

but only briefly. I was disgusted, disgusted at my temporary weakness and, on a deeper level, my willingness to hurt him so easily.

"Amanda. This is ridiculous. You're my wife; don't I have a right to know these things?" The exasperation in his voice fueled the anger already welling up inside of me.

"I'm *\*your\** wife, huh? So, that gives you some husbandly rights to *\*my\** life? This didn't happen to you, Lee; it happened to me." I felt like I was somewhere else, hearing myself say these hateful things, but unable to stop. I sat up in bed and looked down at him. "What is it you have a right to know? Do you want to hear that the doctor can fix me, that he can make me look normal again? Is that what you want to hear?"

"That's not fair! Amanda, I love you. That hasn't changed." He again reached for my hand, but it was now busy smoothing my pajama top. At my continued inflexibility, he got out of bed and said sadly, "You don't want my help? You want to do this all by yourself? Fine. I'll be down the hall if you change your mind."

As he left the room, I lay back down and thought, 'Lee, don't you understand? You can't protect me this time. This enemy is too strong, even for you.' I burrowed into the covers and drifted into a fitful sleep.

I heard Lee getting ready for work, but kept myself buried in the cocoon of my own making. He left without saying goodbye, the sound of his car engine almost startling in the early morning quiet. 'Maybe I'll just stay in bed,' I thought as I rolled over, unwilling to face the day.

I opened my eyes, a sound from downstairs having woken me. Blinking at my alarm clock, I saw that it was nearly noon. 'Surely Lee hasn't come home for lunch again,' I thought as I braced myself for another confrontation.

But the footsteps on the stairs didn't sound heavy enough to be Lee's. Concerned, I got out of bed just as the door to my room opened. "Mother,

what are you doing here and how'd you get in?" I asked as the sight of my mother's blond head poked around the door.

"Lee gave me his key; he figured you might not let me in," Mother said in her no-nonsense tone as she made her way down the hall.

I followed indignantly after her. "Oh, he did, did he? And why -?"

Mother cut me off. She turned around, put her hands on her hips, and said, "Amanda, look at this house - unopened mail all over the table, a week's worth of dishes on the counter, laundry piled on the floor. For two months I've been trying to come help you. Well, you're gonna get my help whether you like it or not."

"I suppose this was all Lee's idea. I told him I can handle it, Mother. You -" Mother interrupted my indignant ramble by holding one hand up, palm facing me.

"Now you stop right there, young lady," Mother stated, her tone making me feel about ten years old. "If you could handle it, you would be handling it. Well, you're not. Poor Lee doesn't know what to do. Well, I'm your mother and I'm not going to take any of your lip. So, either get dressed and help me, or get out of my way because I am cleaning this house."

I stood, speechless, while Mother walked down the stairs, head high, determination in her step. She stopped suddenly and said over her shoulder, "I have never seen you give up on anything that was important. I don't believe you're gonna give up now. Amanda, your family loves you, even if you're having trouble loving yourself."

## Chapter 5

*... to love and to cherish*

I woke, suddenly, as a bright flash of lightning invaded the darkness. It had threatened to storm all evening, the sky finally succumbing in the early morning hours. As I lay there, my heart pounding, I realized I'd been startled out of my dream, the dream I'd had every night since my surgery.

But this time it was different. I'd been running to catch the tide when I'd seen something in the sand, something bright and shiny. Curious, I'd bent down to pick it up, only to discover it was my wedding ring. Just as I was about to grasp it, the tide had swept it away. I'd run after it, to no avail.

I felt my finger; the finger where I'd kept my ring every day for the last ten years - every day until my surgery, that is. Since then it'd resided in my jewelry box, hidden away as determinedly as I'd hidden away my feelings, both too painful to deal with.

An abrupt crash of thunder startled me with its intensity and I instinctively reached for Lee, only to remember that he'd slept in the guest room again. As I lay there, alone, I remembered Mother's words, words about not giving up, words about not loving myself. The realization came to me then, as suddenly as the thunder, exactly what I'd been doing.

I'd been keeping everyone at arm's length - Lee, Mother, my friends - pushing them away, rejecting them before they had a chance to reject me. My self-loathing, my anger that my body had betrayed me, my disgust at what my body had become - I'd projected all those emotions onto everyone else, onto everyone I was close to, but especially onto Lee, afraid that he'd not want me, not love me in the same way. 'Oh, Lee, what have I been doing to you, to us?'

I swung my legs out of bed, knowing what I needed to do. Opening my jewelry box I pulled out my wedding band and slipped it onto my finger, fitting it back into the slight indentation where it'd resided for so long. Then, lightning illuminating my way, I padded down the hall to the guest room.

His slight snores greeted me as I entered the room and stood by the bed, a bittersweet smile settling on my face. Tentatively, my hand shaking slightly, I reached out and caressed his cheek, feeling the slight roughness of his whiskers. "Lee?" I whispered, surprised at the tremor in my voice.

"Amanda?" he asked, his eyes fluttering open. "Is something wrong? Do you feel okay? Can I get you something?" He started to raise himself up on one elbow.

Wordlessly, I put a hand on his shoulder to keep him from getting up, pulled back the covers, and climbed into bed next to him. I spooned myself against his body and placed his arms around me, pulling him close.

I felt a shudder run through his body and heard a sob tear from his throat as he said, "Oh, Amanda. I've been so afraid, afraid of losing you, afraid of -"



"Shh, Lee. I love you. I'm sorry I've been so stupid. Just hold me, okay?" I asked as my tears finally came, tears I'd been holding back, tears I hadn't shed since coming home from the hospital.

"I love you, Amanda, more than you can possibly know," he whispered, his tears wetting the back of my neck.

I turned to face him, tasting the salt of his tears as I kissed him softly on the lips. His lips caressed mine with loving tenderness and sweet longing. As I deepened the kiss, I could feel the emotions I'd buried deep within myself finally breaking through, finding release in the strong, loving arms of my husband.

Our lovemaking was slow and gentle, reminiscent of our very first time. We explored each other, rediscovering our bodies as the barriers I'd erected crumbled around us. The pleasure we released held it all - the friendship we'd found, the love we'd discovered, the marriage we'd built, and the future we would create, together.

Outside the rain fell, hard and furious, as we lay together, the storm achieving its own release as we, melded together as one, finally achieved ours.

## Epilogue

*. . . for all the days of our lives*

I woke as the early morning sun streamed into our bedroom, touching my cheek in a warm caress. Outside the open window, a slight breeze teased the treetops, wafting the scent of lilacs in its wake. I could feel the warmth of my husband sleeping next to me, his even breathing keeping time with the ticking of the clock on my nightstand.

One year - it had been one year since I'd faced the worst enemy of my life, one year since I'd withdrawn from Lee and our marriage, one year since I'd been pulled from self-deprecation and back into life. All of the terrors I'd ever faced, even as a field operative, had paled in comparison to the one that had eaten at me from the inside.

But Lee and I had pulled through, together, partners in my fight against cancer as in everything else. My second surgery, surgery to reconstruct

my breast, had been vastly different from the first. Three months after my mastectomy I'd approached it with a new frame of mind, the hope I thought I'd lost resurrecting itself in the loving care of my husband, my lover, my friend.

Hearing his soft snores, I rolled over and draped my arm across him, enjoying the feel of his body held against mine. As he stirred to wakefulness, I whispered, "Good morning, Lee."

"Mornin'," he mumbled sleepily, his hand finding mine.

"How'd you sleep?" I asked as I felt him idly playing with my wedding ring.

"Great," he said, rolling over to face me. "I had this amazing dream."

I leaned in and kissed him lightly. "Oh?"

"Yep. There was this train station, and a beautiful woman in a nightgown . . ."

"In a nightgown? How shocking. What happened?"

"Well, she met this dashing spy and fell madly in love," he teased as he ran his hand up and down my spine, his touch causing my body to come alive.

"She did, did she? Isn't that dangerous, being in love with a spy?" I asked, reaching out to caress his face.

"Ah, but she became his partner and he fell madly in love with her, too. The bad guys didn't stand a chance." He moved his hand inside my nightgown and brushed the side of my breast with his fingertips.

"I see." I gasped as I felt his hand caressing my skin. "So, was that the end?"

"Nope. But the rest, I'll just have to demonstrate," he said as he rolled us over, a teasing smile on his lips.

I looked up at him, seeing the love in his warm, hazel eyes - love that had confronted a common enemy and won, love that had met pain head-on and not given up, love that had faced down bitterness and despair and come out victorious. My last coherent thought as his mouth took possession of mine was the sure knowledge that the dream wasn't over, there was definitely more to the story . . . to our story.

THE END