

Tapestry

Rating and Warning: R – for violence and language. Though I may have overrated it, please be advised that this story is going to tackle such cold, prickly topics as racism and domestic violence.

Notes: I hope my ‘see-saw’ style is not too difficult to follow. ><<<<<<< signals a major time shift, =====//===== a minor one.

Thank you; thank you; thank you to my amazing crack team of beta readers – who made me go w/ my gut sometimes and my head others – who read this more times than I can count – and who supplied innumerable ideas and perceptions and without whom, this would be pretty 'limp.' Thank you also to ‘the initial girls’ who very patiently listened to (i.e. put up with) me as I struggled to bring this idea from germination to fruition.

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Timeline: A few months after the mystery marriage, and 1962.

Feedback: Welcome, encouraged, and appreciated.

March 1962

"Do you wanna race the rest of the way?" Amanda looked at her companion with a devilish glint in her brown eyes.

"No . . ." Debbie Ann looked down at her shoes, and absently smoothed the fabric of her skirt. "We're in our school clothes, and besides you always win. Your legs are longer."

"I can't help that; they just grew that way." Amanda felt defensive. As they grew older, she often wished for her friend's petite blonde looks, rather than her own darker coloring and longer limbs. "I'll give you a head start."

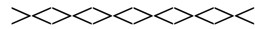
Debbie Ann knew when to give in. Tightening the strap around her books, she rolled her eyes and smiled. "Okay."

"Three-Two-One . . . GO!" Amanda waited a few beats, and then sprinted after her. The two girls in saddle shoes and skirts, long ponytails streaming out behind them, pumped their legs and arms and finally landed in a giggling heap on Amanda's front porch.

"You still won," Debbie Ann gasped breathless. "You should go out for track next year when we get to Junior High."

"Actually," Amanda spoke slowly as though it was an idea that hadn't fully formed yet. "I'm thinkin' about pep squad." Before her friend could respond, she added, "hey, you want me to ask my mom if you can spend the night?"

"No, I think I'd better get home before my dad does." Debbie Ann picked up her books. "Besides, it's a school night."



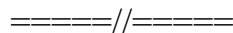
August 1987

"Stay the night?" Lee set his wine glass on the coffee table and eyed her deliberately.

She returned the gaze. Absently dipping her finger into her own crystal goblet, she began tracing circles around the glass lip until it was humming. He was hypnotized – be it from her eyes, the movement of her hands, or the eerie music he couldn't be sure. Finally, she whispered, "it's a weeknight."

He reached out and stilled her hand. "Just for a little while then? Please?"

She placed her glass on the coffee table next to his. "A little while, it is."



"What are you doing out of bed?" He came up behind his wife and placed his hand gently on the small of her back. She was sitting on the couch, bent over, and tying her shoes.

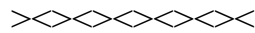
She turned and smiled up at him. "I have to go. I told you last night . . . Phillip and Jamie are leaving to see Joe in New York this morning. They're going to be up in a few hours."

"Oh . . . that's right . . ." his voice was flat and toneless, and he came to sit down next to her. "I hate saying good-bye to you."

"I know." She allowed herself the luxury of leaning back into his embrace for a few moments. "We knew this wasn't going to be easy."

"I know, but I didn't know it was going to be this hard." He felt like a petulant child, but he couldn't help it.

Finally, she sighed and stood. "I'll see you at work; I love you." She kissed him gently, and quietly let herself out the door.



"What're ya doin' outta bed?" He smelled faintly of smoke and gasoline and above that -- alcohol. His words came out slurred, and the young girl shrank against the wall -- cornered. "Answer me!" He took a step closer.

She shrank further against the wall. "Daddy . . . please . . ."

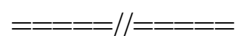
"Dammit, Debbie Ann! I said, 'answer me!'" He raised a hand and struck her across her face. "Answer me!!"

"I . . . I . . ." She took several gasping breaths, trying not to cry -- doing so would only make him angrier. "I heard . . . a noise."

"I heard a noise." He pursed his lips and mimicked his daughter's words in squeaking tones. "Nosy little shit." He shoved his daughter into the wall. "This'll learn ya to get outta bed after I tell ya to go to sleep." Stretching a sinewy arm out of the sleeve of his robe, he struck another sharp blow, splitting her lip.

The blood poured down her face and dripped onto the hardwood floor of the upstairs hall. "Goddamned kid," he growled, seeing the growing stain. With an open palm he pushed her in its direction. "Clean up this mess."

"But . . ." she started to protest, but thought the better of it, instead nodding in meek compliance.



"Hi, Mrs. Macabie. Is Debbie Ann ready?" The older woman's hair hung limp around her face, and her eyes were dark and hollow.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Amanda. She's not feeling well. She's gonna stay home today." The chain was still on the door, and she spoke to Amanda through the tiny crack.

Amanda's face fell, and she shifted her weight awkwardly. "Oh. Okay." Her voice was flat, but she quickly recovered and smiled again, although not as brightly as before. "Tell Debbie Ann I hope she feels better. I'll bring her books this afternoon."

"Thank you, Amanda, but I think she can wait until she gets back to school." Bess Macabie shut the door slowly and gently.

"Okay," Amanda said softly, though there was no one there to hear her.

Without the company of her best friend, the walk to school seemed slower and longer. It was late March, and the world seemed to reflect her mood – gray – nothing but dirty patches of snow melting into oily puddles and a cloudy sky for as far as her eyes could see.

She kicked a clod of snow and watched in satisfaction as it broke into pieces and skidded down the sidewalk in front of her.

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"Hey, Panda, why the long face?" Jacob West came up behind the couch to tousle his daughter's hair affectionately.

"Debbie Ann Macabie was home sick today," Dotty answered for her daughter.

"Again? She sure seems to get sick a lot." He traded a meaningful glance with his wife.

"Amanda, dear." Dotty squeezed her shoulder. "Why don't you go put your homework away and wash up for dinner?"

"Yes, ma'am." She walked slowly up the stairs.

"That's the third time this month," he said as soon as he daughter was out of earshot.

Dotty nodded solemnly. "I know."

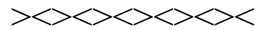
"I think I'll pay them a visit after dinner."

"Oh, Jake, is that wise?" Dotty drew her mouth into a tight line of apprehension.

"Jesse Macabie may be a bigoted, drunken son-of-a-bitch, but he's not stupid. If he knows what's good for him, he'll listen to me. Hey." He reached out to draw her closer. "Dorothea, It'll be fine." He kissed her quickly, and then leaned in for a deeper, more lingering one. Dotty finally broke it off, smiling.

"You wash up too, mister. Dinner's almost ready, and I'm not gonna let you eat with newspaper ink all over your hands."

"Yes, ma'am." He winked at her.



"Good morning, stranger." She stepped deliberately over to his desk and perched herself on the edge. "What're you working on?"

"Guess who's going to the economic summit in Geneva?" Lee looked up from the file folder to ask the question.

"Mikhail Gorbachev," she answered. Seeing his disappointment that she'd beat him to the punch she added, "I ran into Francine in the hall."

"Well, guess who's going to meet with him?" He put the file folder down.

"I don't know, who?"

"We are." He grinned at being able to surprise her.

Amanda only shook her head. "Lee, this is the head of the Soviet Union we're talkin' about. He's gonna know who we are."

"It's all part of the new face of intelligence," he explained. "The KGB gets to meet with some important people here; we get to meet with some of their top brass. Both sides pretend to buy the other's cover, drop some prearranged information, and no one looks bad."

She leaned a little closer. "So, what's our cover?"

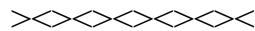
"Standard reporter/photographer setup," he whispered as though it was the most tantalizing secret in the world.

"What's the chance of the hotel losing one of our room reservations?" Her voice grew husky, and she played suggestively with the knot of his tie.

"Well, they are going to be expecting a lot of guests; they can't be expected to keep all of them straight . . ." He traced the line of her jaw, angling her face toward his for a kiss, just as Francine walked in.

"Oh, please!" Francine shut the door a little more forcefully than necessary.

"What do you want, Francine?" Amanda asked as they sprang apart.



"Jacob West. What the hell do you want?" Jesse Macabie answered his front door, and the other man fought the impulse to recoil as the man's whiskey-scented breath hit his nostrils.

"Amanda said Debbie Ann missed school today. I thought I'd stop by to make sure everything was okay." Jacob forced himself to remain in control of the professional detachment he had developed as a reporter.

"We're fine." It came out as a growl, and Macabie moved to shut the door.

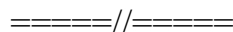
"Is that right, Debbie Ann?" Amanda's father spied the young girl mutely watching the exchange from around the corner of the next room. With a firm hand, he kept the door from closing and then pushed it open a little further. "Are you okay?" He made quick note of her swollen lip and the large bruise covering her cheek.

"I'm fine," she whispered so softly he could hardly hear. "I tripped."

"Your daughter seems to have a lot of accidents, Macabie." Jacob addressed the man through narrowed eyes. "People could ask questions."

"People should know to mind their own goddamned business," Jesse Macabie responded sourly. "Now why don't you get your nigger-lovin' ass off my property before you have an accident too?" Macabie picked up a shotgun from beside the door, and cocked it deliberately.

Jacob nodded in understanding and turned on his heel.



"What the Hell is your problem!" Jesse reached around the corner and clamped his hand tightly around Debbie Ann's upper arm as soon as the door was shut.

She looked up at him, biting her lip on the inside to keep from crying out as he continued to verbally assail her. "Comin' to the door so that nosey, no-good, nigger-lover can see you! Goddamned kid."

He shoved her against the wall, and her head connected with an eerily hollow sound, but she did not cry out. Rather she sat – waiting for what she knew would come next.

He clutched her arm again, yanking her roughly to her feet. "Go to your room. Dinner's over."

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"How'd it go?" Dotty greeted her husband as he walked in the door, though from his demeanor she knew the question was unnecessary.

"I knew Macabie was a jerk, but I didn't realize . . ." he let the thought trail off as he spotted his daughter coming down the stairs. "Amanda, come here please; I want to talk with you." He patted the couch, and she complied without question.

"What's wrong?" The last time she'd seen him look so serious was when she and her mother had come back from visiting Aunt Edna. He'd sent her to her room then, said he needed to talk to her mom alone, but she'd listened through the air vents. He'd been angry, so she didn't have to strain to hear as he recounted something about a burning cross in the front yard.

The next day, she'd looked for evidence of that cross, but all she'd been able to find was a patch of ground that had been carefully re-sod. It wouldn't be for many years later that she understood why he felt it was so important to protect her from that fiery symbol and everything it meant.

Now, he sat before her, his face again a mask of solemnity. He took her hand between his, and addressed her directly. "I'm going to ask you some questions about Debbie Ann, and I want you to tell me the truth, okay?"

Jacob relaxed as his daughter nodded. "Sure."

"Has she ever said anything about her daddy hitting her?" He watched her closely -- again, relying on his journalistic instincts to try and discern whether there was more than what she was telling him.

Amanda thought for a moment and then answered, honestly, "No, she doesn't like to talk about her parents much."

"I see." He nodded his head slowly. "Have you ever seen Mr. Macabie hit her or do anything to hurt her?"

"No," she answered with the same honesty. "I don't like to be there when he's home. He says bad things about you and Mom."

Jacob recoiled. "What sort of things?"

She sat still for a moment, and then whispered quietly, "he says you're a . . . a nigger lover." She looked at the ground on that word. "And that you're gonna ruin America with all your . . ." she paused again. "Your pinko commie liberal ideas. I don't think I like him very much." She scowled.

"Amanda, listen to me." Her small hands were still in his and he gripped them a little tighter. He was pleased, but not surprised, to see the strength of character shining in her eyes. "Do you remember when you and I talked about what I do?"

"That when you write for the paper, you always try to tell the truth and what's important, but that sometimes other people don't like it," she answered, remembering the discussion.

"That's right. Mr. Macabie is one of the people who doesn't like what I have to say. He thinks that Negro people and white people are different, and he doesn't want to share things with people who aren't white. I think that he should, and that's why he disagrees with me."

"Why?"

He studied his hands as though the answer lay in the in the creases of his knuckles. Finally, he answered, "Because sometimes people like Mr. Macabie are afraid of change, and sometimes they're just so full of hate that they don't know any other way of looking at the world."

"Oh." She pursed her lips in thought. "That must be hard for him."

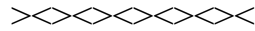
"That's my girl." He hugged her and planted a quick kiss on her forehead, before continuing. "I want you to promise me something now."

She looked back at up him, eyes wide in question, but nodded for him to continue.

"If Debbie Ann ever tells you anything about her daddy hurting her, or if you see him do anything bad to her, I want you to let your mother or me know. Okay?"

"Okay." She wrapped her thin arms around his neck and gave him a quick kiss on his cheek. "I love you."

"I love you too, Panda. Now off to bed!" He swatted her rump playfully, and she ran up the stairs.



"Do you think we should discuss the sleeping arrangements?" Amanda surveyed the hotel room.

"What's there to discuss, Mrs. Stetson?" He came up behind her and began to trail feather light kisses along the nape of her neck.

She turned around to face him. "The expense report . . . what are we going to put on it?"

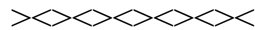
He sighed. "I thought this was your idea."

"I guess I didn't think it through very well," she admitted reluctantly.

"Yeah, well, there's been a lot of that going around lately."

The cryptic comment had barely left his lips, when he drew her close and kissed her softly. "Let's not worry about it now," he whispered after they broke apart, his breath teasing across her ear.

"Now, that's an idea I can agree with," she teased as she let him lead her to the bed.



It was just before dawn when Amanda West awoke to the sound of gravel hitting her bedroom window. Crawling out of bed to examine the source of the sound, she saw Debbie Ann standing in her front yard holding a large duffle bag.

"What are you doing? Are you crazy?" She had opened her window and was hissing at the intruder.

"I'm running away," her friend answered her.

"Where are you going to go?" Amanda wanted to know.

Debbie answered her honestly, "I don't know."

"This is stupid; wait there." She quietly shut the window and crept down the stairs to open the door.

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"Your daddy really did that too you?" Amanda reached out to gingerly trace the shape of the harsh purple bruise marring her friend's cheekbone.

Debbie Ann nodded, plucking at the nap of Amanda's carpet.

"I'm gonna get you some ice."

"Amanda, don't worry about it, okay? I gotta get out of here." Debbie Ann stood, as though ready to leave, but Amanda shook her head.

"I have a better idea. Why don't you stay at my house? We've got lots of room in the attic." Amanda smiled as her idea began to take shape.

"I dunno . . ." Debbie Ann shook her head a little incredulously.

"Think about it!" Amanda had to fight to keep her voice down in her excitement. "That way we can still see each other, and you don't have to worry about where you're gonna go."

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"I can't believe you did that!" She was glaring at him. "Of all the idiotic, chauvinistic, downright . . ."

"I'm sorry." He looked almost ashamed. "It just seemed like it would be easier if I agreed with him. I'd rather let the American intelligence community know we're married before the Russians do."

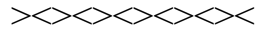
"So now the head of the Soviet Union thinks I'm your mistress!" Amanda seemed oblivious to the odd looks of passersby as they continued to spar just outside the hotel room door. She remembered the word Gorbachev's bodyguard had used, and repeated it, "*Lyubovnitsa*, he called me." It sounded just as sordid in another tongue.

"Your Russian's improving." He smiled weakly trying to diffuse the tension.

"Don't try it; I'm still mad at you." She tried to scowl but found she couldn't pull it off, her expression settling into a mock pout instead.

"Hey." He put an arm around her waist and edged her gently aside to slip the key in the lock. "Let's talk about this inside, okay?"

"Okay," she agreed as he opened the door.



"Amanda don't slam the . . . door," Dotty finished as her daughter did exactly that. Something was up; that much she knew. Amanda was out of bed, dressed, and eating her cereal by the time she'd wandered downstairs to put the coffee on. Now, she was out the door, without even being reminded she was going to be late for school.

Jake had left early, too. The Supreme Court was scheduled to hand down a major decision on voting rights and, as he often told her, the news waited for no man. She had been so proud when he was promoted to editor, one of the youngest in the Arlington Journal's history. And while she admired his views, she couldn't help but be worried, for they were very unpopular.

He had talked about resigning – looking for a job at a paper further north, in a community with a more liberal outlook, but in the end, it was she who wouldn't hear of it. This was their home and this was where she knew he could make the biggest difference.

Her musings were interrupted by a knock at the door.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. West, I was just wondering . . . have you seen Debbie Ann today?" Bess Macabie offered a half-hearted and weary smile to the other woman.

"No. No, I haven't. Come in, please." Dotty opened the door fully and cordially stepped aside to grant the other woman entrance. "Would you like some coffee, and I made some apple strudel . . ."

"Um, no. No, thank you." She felt awkward in this house. So very different from her own, it was as though their two homes were worlds apart rather than merely down the street from one another.

Dotty looked at her neighbor's face with concern. Though they were the same age, Bess appeared substantially older. Her face was lined and careworn, and her eyes were dull and lifeless. She could see bruises running the length of her arms, and Dotty wondered how many of them were as result of more than just everyday events. She

could tell though, by the tension in the other woman's back and hands that she was genuinely worried about Debbie Ann's safety.

"Is it possible that she just left for school early? Amanda was out the door almost before I got up."

"No. She wouldn't have gone in today; she was still . . . not feeling well," Bess finished weakly, knowing how lame the excuse sounded, but holding up the charade as a result of both fear and habit.

"Where's your husband?" Dotty asked.

"He left for work at 4:30," she supplied.

"You don't have to take this, you know." Dotty looked pointedly at the mottled purple marks on Bess' arms.

"You don't know what you're talking about. Just . . . call me if you see her, okay?" She left the house without saying anything more.

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"What's Daddy doing here?" Amanda had been surprised to see his Impala in the driveway when she arrived home from school.

"Panda, come here, we need to talk." She heard her father's voice call her from the living room. Taking a deep breath and then exhaling through her lower lip to blow her bangs out of her face, she walked into the other room.

"Sit down, dear," Dotty smiled softly at her.

"What's wrong?" Amanda sat heavily on the couch.

"Sweetheart, Debbie Ann is missing." Dotty saw no option but to break the news directly.

"Oh." Amanda fidgeted against the unyielding furniture, as her parents watched her closely.

"Honey, do you know where she could've gone? Her mother's really worried about her. The police have been out looking all day." Dotty laid a gentle hand on her daughter's shoulder.

"No," she said quickly. "No, I don't."

"Are you sure? Amanda, this is really important." Though Jake had never known his daughter to lie to him, he couldn't shake the feeling that she was hiding something. She'd been too quick to deny knowledge, and now she wouldn't meet his eyes.

"No . . . I mean, yes, I'm sure. May I be excused? I have to work on my spelling list." She began to stand.

"Amanda Marie . . ." Amanda froze. When her father used her full name, he meant business. "If you know anything . . ."

"Daddy . . . I . . . I have to do my homework." She picked up her rucksack then paused to look at her mother. "Can I bring a sandwich up with me?"

"Yes, you may," Dotty answered. "Peanut butter?"

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"I brought you a sandwich," Amanda whispered as she crawled carefully between the rafters in the direction of her friend.

"Thank you." Debbie Ann wiped away a stray tear and reached for the offered food.

"Is your mouth feeling better?"

"Yeah, it's fine." The battered girl took a bite carefully from the other side of her mouth.

"Debbie Ann, please let me tell my parents? I think they can help." Amanda pleaded with her in harsh whispered tones, as the other girl continued to carefully chew her sandwich.

"NO! They'll make me go home. Please. You promised."

"I promised my Daddy too. I don't like lying to him."

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"I told my mother we were doing a documentary on cuckoo clocks." Amanda set the magazine back in the seat pocket of the airplane, and looked up at her husband.

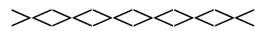
"Didn't you use that one last year?" He brushed a hand through his hair. He had a feeling he knew where this conversation was headed.

"Yeah, I don't think she believed me. I hate lying to her." It was an old refrain, just sung in a different key.

"You know," he began with a degree of certainty, betraying the fact that he too had been giving the subject a lot of thought. "What if you leave your rings on when we get back, hmm? Let me make an honest woman out of you?"

"What are you saying, Stetson? That you don't want to keep this a secret anymore? What will we tell everyone?" Much as she hated the secrecy of their marriage, a part of her was scared about the repercussions of telling the truth after lying for so long.

The stewardess chose that moment to serve them their chicken, and the conversation came to an abrupt halt.

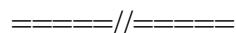


"Can I have some more chicken?" Amanda asked and reached across the table at the same time.

"Yes, you may," Dotty responded, before observing. "You're certainly hungry tonight; you must be starting another growth spurt."

"I think so," Amanda agreed. "My shoes felt a little small this morning. Can I . . . may I be excused?" Shielded by the edge of the table, she worked a napkin stuffed with food into the pocket of her jeans.

"Yes." Dotty smiled, noting that Amanda had corrected herself. "Daddy and I will be up later to check your math."



"Debbie Ann . . ." Amanda poked her head into the attic. "Debbie Ann, what's wrong?"

"I wanna go home . . . I miss . . . I miss my mom!" She was crouched in a corner crying.

"What about your daddy?" Amanda asked. The bruise on her friend's cheek was still prominent, although the edges had begun to fade into garish greens and yellows.

"I don't know." She hiccupped. "A'manda, I'm scared."

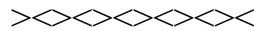
"Why don't you write your mother a letter?" Amanda brightened at the idea. "I'll bring it over, and then she'll know you're okay."

"Okay." Debbie Ann wiped her nose with the sleeve of her shirt. "But Amanda?"

Amanda looked at her, confused.

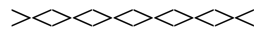
"I hafta go to the bathroom. I've been holding it all day."

"Oh my gosh!" That contingency had not entered Amanda's mind. "Wait there; I'll make sure it's safe."



"Do you want me to wait back at my place?" They were sitting in his car, both filled with a nervous excitement about what would happen as soon as they stepped out of the tiny vehicle and into the outside world -- and the ramifications of what they were about to do.

"No." She kissed him quickly. "It's about time I introduced my husband to my mother."

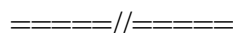


"Dear Mom," Debbie Ann read out loud as she carefully worked the letters in elementary school cursive. "I'm okay. Don't worry. I love you and I miss you. Please don't come looking for me. Love, Debbie Ann."

"Don't forget to put something in there about food. Mothers always worry about that."

"Oh! Yeah. P.S. I am getting enough to eat." Debbie Ann put the pencil down and handed the sheet of notebook paper to her.

"Okay, I'll be back later." Amanda folded the letter and slid it into her jeans pocket.



"Just where do you think you're going, missy?" Dotty cornered her daughter at the front door.

"I . . . I . . . I thought I'd go see if they found Debbie Ann yet."

"Amanda Marie West! It's 8:30 on a school night. You march yourself right back upstairs and into your pajamas, young lady." Dotty wiped her hands on the dishtowel hanging from her waist as she chastised her daughter.

"Did you see that? She was going to go out without telling us! I can't believe she was going to just walk out that front door without so much as a 'how-de-do'!"

"I know." Jacob looked up briefly from the book he was reading.

"Jake, our daughter is hiding something from us." She pulled the book away from his face, and looked at him pointedly.

"I know." He smiled sagely at her.

"Well, what're you going to do about it?" Dotty planted her hands on her hips and looked down at him.

"I'm not going to do anything. Amanda's got a good head on her shoulders. Whatever's going on, she'll tell us when she's ready. I trust her."

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Carefully working the screws with a pair of tweezers, Amanda removed her screen, and eased out onto the windowsill. She said a quick prayer and then leapt for the nearest tree branch. Wincing as she landed stomach first on the bough, she caught her breath and then edged toward the trunk – deliberately averting her eyes from the ground below.

The Macabie's house was two doors down from hers. Running down the sidewalk in the shadows, she quickly found herself standing on their front porch. "You're doing this for Debbie Ann; you're doing this for Debbie Ann," she whispered against her fear as she rang the doorbell.

"Hello, sir, is Mrs. Macabie here?" Amanda was afraid to breathe.

"Whadaya need her for?" He scowled at her.

"I just . . . my mother gave me a recipe she wanted." Amanda was beginning to find the lies came easier, and the knowledge both terrified and invigorated her.

"I'll give it to her." He held his hand out, and Amanda noticed a layer of dirt under his fingernails.

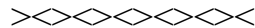
"No, sir, I'm sorry. My mother told me to give it to Mrs. Macabie." She inhaled deeply and looked directly in his eyes. The fear seemed to subside as she confronted it head-on.

"Well then," he sneered. "We wouldn't want to do anything to upset the high and mighty West family, would we? I'll go get her." He started to walk away, and then under his breath added, "little nigger-lovin' bitch."

Bess Macabie answered the door a few minutes later. Her eyes were red-rimmed from crying and Amanda noticed that her lip, too, was swollen.

"Here, this is for you." Amanda thrust the note into her hands and then bolted before Bess could react.

Crawling back up the tree, and through the window, Amanda had just reattached her screen, when the doorbell rang.



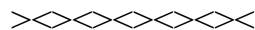
"Mother!" Amanda stepped through the front door and set her luggage down by the stairs. "Mother, where are you?"

"I'm upstairs, darling. What's wrong?"

She gripped her husband's hand for support before answering the question. "Can you come down? Lee and I would like to talk to you."

"Okay, what is it?" Her mother made it to the den in record time.

"Just . . . let's sit down." Amanda took a deep breath and gripped Lee's hand even more tightly.



"Amanda's upstairs. What's going on?" Dotty looked from her husband to Mr. Macabie and back again.

Jacob handed the letter to his wife. "Amanda took this over to the Macabie's a few minutes ago."

"Where the Hell is she? What the fuck have you done with my daughter?"

"Watch your language," Jacob hissed. "I will not have you speak like that in front of my wife. I'm going to go ask Amanda about this now. Wait here."

He started up the stairs, and Jesse followed him. "I said, 'wait here.'" He narrowed his eyes threateningly at his adversary, and Jesse took a step back.

"Fine."

"Dotty," Jacob turned and called back down the stairs. "Why don't you give Sergeant Tanner a call?"

"Right." Dotty headed for the kitchen thankful, for the moment, to be away from the unpleasantness.

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"Amanda, we have to talk." Jacob pulled the chair out from Amanda's desk and turned it around to straddle.

"Debbie Macabie's father is here." He looked at her pointedly.

"Oh?" she questioned.

"He had a note Debbie Ann wrote to her mother," he continued.

"Oh," she said with a note of understanding.

"Amanda, where is she?" He put a gentle hand on her knee.

"In the attic," Amanda admitted with a sigh of resignation. "She made me promise not tell."

"We'll talk about that later. I want you to stay in your room until I come get you."

Amanda nodded, and returned her attention to the book she was reading.

"Amanda, I mean it. Stay here." He watched her carefully from the door.

"Yes, sir," she whispered, knowing he was serious.

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"Debbie Ann, it's Mr. West. Is it okay if we talk?"

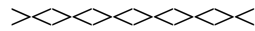
"What . . . what do you want?" She had been crying.

"Your father's here. He wants to take you home." He made his way slowly to the corner where she was cowering.

"Are . . . are you gonna make me go?" Her voice quavered as she spoke.

"Not if you don't want to, but you can't keep living in my attic." He put a hand on a shoulder and winced as she flinched under his touch. "Come downstairs, Debbie Ann."

"Okay . . ." she sighed deeply.



"Okay . . ." Dotty stood, then sat, and then stood again. "You're telling me that you're married – that you've been married for six months?"

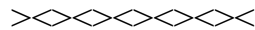
"Yes, Mrs. West," Lee answered for Amanda, who for the moment seemed unable to deal with her mother's incredulity.

"I can't believe it; I just can't believe it." Dotty continued to pace and rant. "You lied to me, Amanda." Her brown eyes flashed with hurt and anger.

"I'm sorry, Mother. We were just . . ."

"You were just selfish! I can't believe it." She went to the closet and pulled out her coat.

"Mother please . . ." Amanda felt miserable as she watched her mother turn her back on her and walk out the door. "What are we going to do?" She buried her head in her husband's shoulder.



"What are we going to do with her?" Dotty turned to her husband after the police had left.

"We're going to have to punish her." Jake said with no reservations.

"I know; I hate this." Tears began to well in the corners of Dotty's eyes.

"It would be better if we were united in this." He wrapped an arm around her waist, and drew her closer.

"I know, but it doesn't make it any easier."

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"What's going to happen to Debbie Ann?" Amanda sat on the loveseat, facing both her parents on the sofa across from her.

"She and her mother are going to live with her aunt for a while," Jacob informed her.

"What about her daddy?" Amanda played with the hem of her pajama top.

"I'm not sure yet," Jacob admitted. "But that's not why we're here."

"I kinda figured." She shifted uncomfortably and began to pluck at the lint pills on the legs of her flannel bottoms. "I'm in trouble, aren't I?"

"Yes." Dotty found herself unable to meet her daughter's eyes as she said it.

"Because I hid Debbie Ann in the attic," she stated simply.

"Because you lied to us," Jacob responded. "Amanda, I know you thought you were doing a friend a favor, but . . ."

"Daddy, I promised her. She was scared." Her brown eyes welled with tears – eyes, Jacob realized, that mirrored his wife's.

"Amanda, you also made a promise to your mother and me. You promised me that if anything happened to Debbie Ann, you'd let us know. Amanda, we're not mad at you, but we are very disappointed. You let us down."

She continued to fidget uncomfortably under the scrutiny, and he continued. "And then there's the matter of sneaking out of your room. I know nothing happened, but that doesn't change things. You could've been killed climbing out of your window like that . . . not to mention what might have happened to you on the street . . ." Dotty reached over and gripped his shoulder, he reached up to squeeze her hand, and drew a deep breath before continuing.

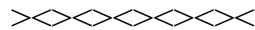
"Your mother and I have talked it over," he began, "and we've decided to ground you. Two weeks. You're to come straight home from school every day, no TV, no radio." He tried to meet her eyes, but she kept them directed pointedly away.

"Okay."

"Darling, your daddy and I love you so much." Dotty moved to kneel in front of the couch to embrace her.

"I know." Amanda smiled softly after her mother had released her. "I'm sorry," she added as she went up the stairs.

"Amanda," Jacob called after her. "Don't ever be sorry for doing what you believe is right. Just be prepared to live with the consequences."



"Amanda," Dotty found her sleeping on the living room sofa. "Amanda, darling, wake up please."

Amanda groaned and opened her eyes in the muted darkness. "Mother?"

"Hi, Panda. I thought we could talk." She edged her daughter over on the couch to sit next to her.

Amanda smiled. "You haven't called me 'Panda' since I was tiny."

"I know; it just felt appropriate right now." She picked up her daughter's hand. "It's a beautiful ring. And you're happy with him. I can see that . . ."

"Yes." Neither the late hour nor the solemnity of the conversation could dampen her radiance. "We're very happy."

"You know," Dotty began, "I thought there was something different about you. You've been so different lately -- content but preoccupied at the same time. I figured he was the cause." Squeezing her daughter's hand, she added, "I'm just sorry you didn't feel you could trust me."

"Oh, Mother!" Amanda's eyes filled with tears. "We trust you. We just . . . I'm sorry," she finished, unable to find any explanation short of the truth, that would suffice, and both unwilling and unable to disclose everything as of yet.

"Amanda," Dotty moved to look her in the eyes. "Was there a good reason for you to do what you did?"

"Yes, Mother, the best." Amanda nodded in sincerity.

"Then don't apologize, darling. We'll talk about it some more in the morning, when we've both had time to sleep on it." Dotty wrapped her free arm around her daughter's shoulders. "You know, I wish your daddy could of known Lee. I think he'd have approved."

"I know he would," Amanda agreed, resting her head on her mother's shoulder.

END