

Making Up Is Worth It

By Jill Minnich

Rating: R for language and allusions to a sexual assault (non-graphic)

Synopsis: Amanda and Lee learn how to fight.

Time Frame: September 1987

Background: The marriage is known to all. Lee officially moved in with Amanda's family in early July. The family knows that Lee and Amanda are intelligence operatives (spies).

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Part One

**"All happy families resemble one another;
every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way"
– Count Leo Tolstoy**

9:03 PM Friday, September 11, 1987, A Suburban Neighborhood in Arlington, Virginia

The innocuous dark sedan pulled up to the curb and stopped with the motor running in front of the white house with the picket fence. The front passenger door opened and a tall, athletic man emerged slamming the car door behind him. Opening the rear passenger door on the same side, he extracted a light-colored suit coat and a heavy briefcase before leaning back into the side window to speak to the driver. Waving good-bye to the driver over his left shoulder, he turned away from the front walk and sauntered up the wide driveway toward the garage and the back of the house. The driver pulled the sedan forward a few feet and watched his passenger's progress up the drive. He saw him stop and place the briefcase on the walk by the back gate and throw his suit coat over the gate itself so that he could carefully wheel two ten-speed racing bicycles one-by-one past the silver sports car just visible in the open garage. Closing both garage doors, he recovered his jacket and briefcase. The driver smiled as he watched the slender man open the gate in the white picket fence and enter the backyard of a normal suburban home.

Billy Melrose was glad that Lee Stetson had needed a ride home after the budget meeting went into overtime. It gave him an excuse to drag Lee off to Randy's for a drink just like the old days, and it also gave him a chance to try to find out how Lee's new life was working out for him. The sight of the great Scarecrow putting his stepsons' bikes away in that cluttered garage kept him smiling all the way home to Jeannie and the supper he knew she would have saved for him.

Lee Stetson slowly moved further into the dark backyard. 'There was nothing wrong with doing a little reconnaissance before walking through that back door, was there?' he asked himself. Glancing through the window into the well-lit and cheery kitchen, he spotted his wife at the central cook top putting the kettle on and talking over her shoulder to someone. Taking another step forward he could see his mother-in-law's back as she rummaged in the refrigerator. The blue light flickering from the den and the sound of subdued rivalry helped him locate his two stepsons, Phillip and Jamie, getting ready for "Movie Night". 'Okay, that accounts for everyone. Guess he'd just have to bite the bullet and go in.'

Reaching out for the doorknob with his left hand, he was surprised to find the door already opening. "I'll just take these little 'science experiments' I found in the back of the fridge straight out to the trash, dear," Dotty called to Amanda as she started out the back door. "Gosh, Lee! You gave me such a start! How long have you been standing there in the dark? I almost ran you right over! Amanda, Lee's home!" Smiling warmly at her son-in-law, Dotty moved gracefully around him and continued her journey toward the garbage cans at the side of the garage.

Lee walked through the back door and stopped abruptly when he came face-to-face with his wife of almost seven months. She was blocking the entry to the kitchen, hands on her hips and a distinctly unhappy expression on her face.

"Uh. Hi, Amanda?" Lee offered hesitantly wondering exactly what he'd done wrong now.

"It's about time you found your way home, Stetson! Do you have any idea what time it is? Where have you been? The budget meeting was supposed to be over by six! Why didn't you at least call? Do you have any idea how worried I've been?" Amanda Stetson was in rare form tonight, not a single breath in there anywhere. He sensed Dotty coming up behind him and he moved a little to his left so she could get by him and into the house.

"Let me see, according to the clock on the wall it is nine-twelve. I was with Billy. The budget meeting went into extra innings and we didn't get out of the office until after seven. I tried to call several times, but the line was busy every time. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to worry you," Lee replied to her questions in order and instantly regretted it as the expression on Amanda's face deepened into a scowl.

"Very cute, Stetson," she said taking another step closer as he shifted his jacket to the hand holding his briefcase and set them both down on the floor by his feet. He tossed his house keys in his left hand a couple of times as he considered his options, but Amanda didn't give him time for much reflection; "You're not going to just drop those there, are you? You know very well where they belong!"

“Yes, I do,” Lee sighed in surrender. “But I can’t seem to get out of this doorway to put them away and the briefcase was getting kind of heavy. I thought if you wanted to have this discussion in the back door, I could at least put it down for a second.”

“I don’t want to have this discussion in the doorway!” Amanda stated loudly. “I don’t want to be having this discussion at all. You are a grown man, Lee! But you don’t seem to realize that you’re not on your own any more and there are people who worry when you don’t come home when you say you will. People who count on you to fulfill your responsibilities! This is the last thing I need this week and you know it. With the “Intelligence Technology in Modern Intelligence Gathering” Seminar scheduled to start on Monday, Francine and I are up to our ears getting everything ready. I need to know that I can depend on you to keep things going on the home front next week because as Lead Trainer I’m not going to be able to stop what I’m doing every five minutes to fix things here at home or in the Q Bureau! Do you have any idea how important this seminar is to Francine and me? This is the first time in the history of the Agency that such an important seminar has been assigned to two women! Do you understand what this may mean for our careers?”

“Yes, Amanda, I do know what it means.” Lee answered his wife so quietly that she had to take another step forward to hear him.

“I’m not completely certain you or any man can understand what Francine and I have had to go through to get where we are today,” she huffed, her anger dissipating in the face of Lee’s concession.

“You’re probably right, Amanda,” Lee admitted quickly hoping to avoid any further argument. “Can I come in now?”

She took a deep breath trying to recover her emotional equilibrium. Her head snapped up and the look she gave Lee stopped him cold. “You smell of cigarette smoke and beer, Stetson!” she accused.

“C’mon, Amanda. It’s Friday night and you know as well as I do that Billy has to stop at Randy’s on Friday nights. Since I didn’t have a car, if Billy stopped in for a beer then so did I,” he answered watching his wife’s face carefully for her reaction.

“You were already late. You couldn’t get through on the phone and you still stopped for a beer on the way home! Nice! Very nice, Lee. I guess that tells me exactly how important your family is to you!” Amanda’s voice was getting higher and louder by the minute.

“Amanda, if you would just let Leatherneck install a second phone line or, better yet, let me take your mother out and get her a nice, safe sedan of her own, this whole fiasco could have been avoided in the first place!” Now Lee’s voice was rising in volume.

“Oh, so this is all my fault, I suppose?” Amanda retorted at the top of her lungs.

Lee was saved from having to answer this new accusation by the insistent whistle of the now steaming teakettle. Retreating into the kitchen and slamming a mug with a tea bag in it onto the counter beside the cook top, Amanda grabbed the teakettle in her right hand and violently poured hot water into her cup. Turning the burner off with a snap of her wrist, she nailed him to the wall with a look that spoke volumes and said, "I have work to do. I am going upstairs, Lee. I have been using your desk in our bedroom so that I can have some peace and quiet around here. And I **do not** want to be disturbed. **For any reason! By anyone!** Is that perfectly clear to **everyone?**" She stated this last emphatically, as much for the listening ears in the den as for her clearly chastened husband.

"Yes, Amanda," whispered Lee.

"Yes, Mom," called two small voices from the couch in the den.

"Of course, dear." Her mother was standing right behind her now. "We wouldn't **think** of disturbing you this evening," Dotty stated firmly. Amanda heard the note of disapproval in her mother's voice and chose to ignore it. Taking her mug of tea and a plate of cookies with her, she disappeared up the stairs. Lee didn't move from his spot in the doorway for several long moments. He just stared at the spot where his wife had been standing seconds before. Silence reigned in the kitchen.

"Son, have you had anything to eat this evening?" Dotty finally asked Lee, relieved to see the fleeting half-smile that always crossed his face when she called him 'son'. "I saved you a plate from supper."

"Yeah," interjected Phillip entering the kitchen as he spoke. "Mom made her special meatloaf, too. I wanted another slice, but Grandma said, 'No' she was saving it for you."

"You'd already eaten four slices anyway, you big hog!" exclaimed Jamie from the doorway.

For some reason, Lee couldn't even find the energy to correct Jamie for calling his brother a name. "No, thanks anyway. I'm not really all that hungry," he replied picking up his jacket and briefcase and starting past his mother-in-law toward the front of the house. "Go for it, if you're still hungry, Chief." Phillip's face lit up briefly until he caught the 'touch it and you're dead meat, buster' look on his grandmother's face.

Lee dropped his briefcase on the floor just beside the small secretary in the living room and returned to the front hall to hang up his jacket in the closet, checking automatically to see that the front door was locked and bolted for the evening. Crossing the steps that led back to the kitchen he stopped suddenly, realizing he was still wearing his shoulder harness and semi-automatic weapon. He looked up the stairs wondering whether it was worth the risk he'd take of disturbing Amanda to lock it away in the gun safe in the closet of the master bedroom. He immediately decided against it. Amanda had agreed

early on that he could keep one gun unlocked as long as it was on his person. Moving into the kitchen again, he found the little group standing just as he had left them.

“If you’re really not hungry,” said Phillip in a doubtful tone, “Come watch the cowboy movie Grandma rented for tonight. She said it’s a real classic, whatever that means. It’s called ‘Butch and the Sunbeam Kid’, or something like that.”

“You mean, ‘Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid,’” Lee corrected him automatically. “She’s right it is a classic and one of my favorites, too.”

“Great! We’ll get it started,” Jamie offered moving in the direction of the videocassette recorder in the nearby den.

“Um, go ahead and start without me,” Lee suggested quietly. “I think I need a little air.” He headed quickly back out the door he’d just come in.

The two boys looked at their grandmother for guidance. “You two go ahead and start the movie. It’s getting late. I’ll make some popcorn and bring it in to you,” she suggested with a quick glance out the kitchen window. She’d spotted Lee standing just outside the back door, hands in his pockets apparently contemplating the tops of his shoes.

“Grandma, are you going out to talk to him?” Phillip asked hopefully.

“I don’t know yet, Phillip. I think I’ll give Lee some time to think first.” Satisfied with this, Phillip turned to head into the den, but Jamie lingered in the doorway for a moment.

“He’s not going to leave, is he?” Jamie’s eyes looked about twice their usual size behind his glasses as he met his grandmother’s thoughtful gaze. Dotty wondered what kind of memories this little fight had dredged up for the boy.

“No, Jamie. He’s not going to leave. Lee just needs a little space right now and I think we should give it to him, don’t you?” she replied honestly.

“Yeah, I guess so. You know, Grandma. If you do go out to talk to him I think you should give him a hug. Whenever Mom’s yelled at me about something, it always makes me feel better when you come and put your arm around my shoulders for a minute. Kinda like, I’m still part of the family and things will turn out okay,” Jamie suggested thoughtfully.

“That’s a good idea, Jamie. Why don’t you grab couple of root beers out of the fridge and take them into the den with you? I’ll just make you fellas some popcorn and go check on Lee after I bring it in to you. How’s that sound?” Dotty asked her very concerned grandson.

“Sounds like a plan, Grandma!” Jamie grinned at her finally and, grabbing two dark brown bottles of root beer out of the refrigerator, ran into the den yelling at his brother to, “Rewind it to the beginning or you won’t get your root beer, dog breath!”

“‘Dog breath?’ Now where did that come from?” Dotty wondered aloud as she gathered the popcorn popper, popcorn, and butter-flavored oil onto the counter by the sink. She glanced out the open window every so often and found Lee standing in the same place every time she looked. Returning from taking the popcorn to the boys in the den, she was worried when she no longer saw Lee on the patio. She hadn’t heard a car engine start and was relieved to see both sets of car keys hanging on the little rack beside the back door.

She stepped out onto the patio. ‘So, where is he? He didn’t go for a walk at this hour, did he? It’s almost ten o’clock. The Arlington police would pick him up for sure and he’s still wearing his gun! No, wait a minute. There he was sitting in the gazebo.’ She hadn’t noticed him at first because he was sitting all the way in the back. His forearms resting on his thighs, he was leaning forward staring down at his fingers laced together in front of him. It really wasn’t any improvement over his posture on the patio.

Drawing a deep breath and saying a little prayer for wisdom and the tact she normally lacked, Dotty crossed the dark yard toward her obviously dejected son-in-law. He had to know she was coming. No one ever sneaks up on Lee Stetson. But he didn’t look up when she sat down on the bench beside him. He might as well have been a statue.

“Lee, son, are you going to be okay?” she spoke quietly, but she knew he’d heard every word. No reaction. “Lee, maybe you’d feel better if you talked about it with someone.” She was almost afraid to suggest it. “You know, I could be a pretty good sounding board. After all, I have known Amanda her whole life and I was married for twenty-one years to her father.” Silence descended on the gazebo again; a silence so complete and so extensive that she was just about to give up when he finally spoke.

“What am I doing wrong, Dotty?” he asked her and the confusion in his voice went right to her heart.

“Lee, darling, I am not going to answer that question,” Dotty said lovingly.

“Dotty, you’ve gotta tell me,” Lee begged. “I just can’t seem to figure it out by myself, I’ve tried and tried and I just can’t!”

“Blending two families is a difficult job under any circumstances, Lee. You and Amanda have certainly conspired to make things even more difficult than they had to be with all the sneaking around and secrecy at the start,” Dotty replied smiling softly. She thought back to the chaos that had ensued earlier that summer when Lee and Amanda had finally ‘come clean’ at work and at home.

"I know," Lee sighed. "And I can't tell you how sorry I am. That had to be one of my dumbest ideas ever!"

"The way I heard it," Dotty chuckled as she responded, "You weren't exactly working solo in that little adventure." She had hoped to elicit a smile from her son-in-law at that one, but she was disappointed when his expression never changed.

"Lee, you've done a lot of things right over the last few months, you know." Dotty decided to try another tack looking at the bowed head of the young man next to her. "When you first started coming around here, Jamie would hardly say two words to you and now he calls you 'Dad' as often as not. He's really worried about you tonight and so is Phillip. I am constantly amazed at how quickly you've picked up on the house rules and how we do things around here. You've pitched right in around the house and in the yard. You haven't missed a single ballgame this summer. You've driven carpool, helped Phillip get ready for football camp, and gone backpacking with Jamie so he can earn the Jr. Trailblazer's 50-miler requirement. Frankly, I can't think what we did without you!" Dotty paused, wondering whether she dared say what was on her mind. Oh, well, in for a penny, in for a pound, as Phil always used to say. "I have been wondering though. . ."

"What?" His head didn't come up, but she saw the flicker as he glanced at her out of the corner of his eye.

"It's just that you've worked so hard to fit into 'Amanda's family', I've been wondering when you are going make it 'Lee's family', too?"

"Huh? What do you mean, Dotty?" he asked turning his head slightly to the left so he could see her face.

"Well, whenever you and Amanda disagree on something, whether it's replacing the dishwasher or disciplining the boys, you always give in to Amanda. Even when you're the one who is right," Dotty stated watching a surprised look cross his face. "You have good instincts, especially where the boys are concerned. You really need to stand up for yourself a little more around here, Lee. This is your home now, too."

Lee swept his left hand through his hair in a gesture of discomfort that was becoming all too familiar to Dotty. "I don't want to fight with Amanda."

"Lee, married people fight. Amanda's father, Phil, and I were known to discuss issues very loudly from time to time. I'm certain that your parents disagreed sometimes, too, even if you were too young to remember it. You can't avoid it. You're going to have differences of opinion. The important thing is how you work them out. And believe me, making up is worth it!" Dotty told him confidently. 'Maybe Jamie was right about that hug,' she thought to herself. Placing her right arm across his bowed shoulders, Dotty gave him a gentle squeeze. "Everything is going be okay, son," she whispered in his

ear. She was rewarded with a look of gratitude, but the tears she saw gathered in his eyes took her heart by storm.

Lee sat up suddenly and, scrubbing his fists across his face just like one of the boys, whispered back, "Thanks for coming out here tonight, Dotty. Thanks for everything!"

"That's what mothers are for, " she reassured him. "Just think about what I said. Now, I'm going to go back inside and put your dinner in the oven to warm up. You may not feel hungry, but you still need to eat something." Standing up, she looked him in the eye and shook her right index finger at him, "And if you know what's good for you, Lee Stetson, you'll come when I call you and eat every bite!" With that she turned and walked swiftly back into the kitchen.

Lee watched as his mother-in-law passed the lighted kitchen window and smiled to himself. "If I know what's good for me, huh?" he said under his breath. Actually, he was starting to feel a little hungry. He got up and headed for the back door of his home. Dotty hadn't called him yet, but he'd already learned not to keep her waiting.

7 AM Saturday, September 12, 1987, 4247 Maplewood Drive

Dotty tightened the sash on her robe as she made her way down the stairs toward the kitchen. 'Why is it,' she thought, 'that when we're younger and would love to sleep in, we have to drag ourselves out of bed to get children and husbands ready for their day and yet, when we're older and have the leisure to stay in bed, we are unable to sleep past six or seven?' Crossing the kitchen to make the coffee, she was startled to hear a soft, rhythmic noise. Was Lee up already? Had he started the coffeemaker before going out on his morning run? No, that noise was coming from the den.

Walking over to stand behind the couch, she found her son-in-law, still fully clothed and wearing his gun, curled up on his right side, sound asleep. When Lee first moved in, Amanda had warned them that startling Lee awake was not a wise move. Phillip had ignored her warning one lazy Sunday afternoon and found himself lying on his back on the family room floor. It was amazing how quickly Lee had gone from sound asleep in front of the ball game to wide awake with Phillip pinned beneath him. Lee had apologized profusely and Phillip had vowed never to try to shake his step-dad awake again. Jamie had laughed himself breathless at his brother's predicament.

Taking several steps backward, Dotty called to Lee softly. He stirred, but didn't wake. "Lee!" she called a little more loudly. He turned over onto his back and blinked several times. "Good morning, Lee."

“Morning, Dotty. What time is it?” Lee asked as he slowly sat up on the couch stretching and rubbing the sleep out of his eyes.

“A little after seven,” she answered. “I’ll start the coffee.” She returned to the kitchen to begin her day. Seconds later Lee followed her, ruffled and yawning. “Amanda must have worked pretty late last night,” she suggested.

“I suppose,” Lee responded. “But I don’t really know. I guess I fell asleep on the couch.” Lee smiled shyly. “She’s not up yet?”

“No, we’re the only ones stirring this early on a Saturday morning, but I expect Jamie will be along soon, all ready for your morning run.” Dotty scooped coffee into the filter and then reached for the carafe to fill the reservoir with water. When she looked back at Lee, he was staring off into space with a peculiar expression on his face. “You know, I’m pretty sure I put some of your running shorts into the dryer last night when I was doing laundry. You might have a look.” Dotty could see that he didn’t want to go up and get his things out of the master bedroom.

“Really? That’d be great! Then I wouldn’t have to disturb Amanda, she’ll need her sleep after working so late last night.” Lee headed into the laundry room closing the door behind him.

He re-entered the kitchen a few minutes later in stocking feet wearing his dark blue running shorts, a worn black t-shirt with no sleeves, and carrying his gun and holster. Weighing the gun in his right hand, he crossed the kitchen toward the front of the house returning to the kitchen empty-handed moments later.

Pouring a cup of coffee for herself and one for Lee, Dotty tried to sound nonchalant as she asked, “So, what did you do with your gun?”

“I locked it in my briefcase for now. I’ll move it to the gun safe when Amanda gets up,” he reassured his mother-in-law. He knew how little she liked having guns in the house.

Dotty handed him a mug of coffee, then went to retrieve the small container of half-and-half she had started purchasing when she discovered that Lee preferred it to skim milk in his coffee. Amanda had declared it an “unnecessary expense”, but it only cost a few pennies more. Lee poured the cream into his coffee and took a sip. The sound of pre-teen feet thumping down the steps alerted them to Jamie’s imminent arrival.

“Grandma!” He entered the kitchen in full cry. “Do you know where. . . Oh, there you are, Dad! Ready for our run?”

“Ready when you are, Sport!” Lee replied immediately, putting his mug down on the counter and smiling at his stepson’s enthusiasm so early in the morning. He was so like his mother that way! They grabbed their running shoes from the pile by the back door and headed out into the back yard chatting quietly.

'Time for the morning paper,' Dotty thought. Opening the front door and scanning the steps for the "Post", she was just in time to see Jamie throw his arms around his stepdad and hug him tightly around the waist. Lee wrapped his arms around the boy's shoulders before tousling his hair and saying something in his ear that Dotty was too far away to hear. It must have been amusing, however, as Jamie's light alto laughter rang out like a bell in the early autumn morning. Catching her eye across the fence, Lee winked at Dotty and then began to jog after his stepson, gesturing for him to turn right as they left the drive.

Forty-five minutes later, Dotty had finished her coffee and the "Home and Garden" Section of the Saturday Washington Post. She cupped her chin in her hand as she heard the softer footsteps of her daughter on the stairs. "Good morning, Amanda. Late night?" Dotty asked as Amanda entered the room.

"Good morning, Mother. It's awfully quiet around here. I can't believe I slept so late!" Amanda avoided answering her mother's question directly.

"Well, Lee was so concerned about disturbing you that he slept on the couch last night," Dotty decided to push the issue.

"I know he did," Amanda admitted as she poured herself a mug of hot coffee and gestured with the pot to ask if Dotty wanted some more.

"You knew Lee was sleeping on the couch last night?" Dotty ignored the coffee pot. She wanted answers.

"Yes, I brought my mug and plate downstairs around 2:30 and saw the light on in the den. When I went to turn it out, well, Lee looked so peaceful, I didn't have the heart to disturb him."

"Amanda, he was sleeping in his clothes and wearing his gun! How comfortable do you think he could be?" Dotty asked sharply.

Amanda sighed. Her mother was like a badger—once she got her teeth into something it was nearly impossible to make her let go. "Mother, please don't interfere. It's really none of your business how late I worked or where Lee slept last night."

"All right, Amanda," Dotty responded, determined to continue despite her words of agreement. "The last thing I want to be is a meddling mother-in-law, but. . ."

Amanda just knew there would be a 'but'! She braced herself to hear the rest of her mother's opinion.

“Do you remember the only advice I gave you before you married Joe?”

‘The only advice!’ Amanda thought ruefully. ‘I could have filled several volumes with all the advice she gave me before I married Joe.’ “No, Mother. I’m afraid I don’t remember the only advice you gave me.” She might as well resign herself. Her mother would speak her piece no matter what, she always did. She sat down at the table across from her mother and studied the design on her coffee cup.

“I told you never to let the sun go down on your anger. That’s somewhere in the Bible. I’m not sure where, but your father and I always followed that advice and we never went to bed angry with one another. And we had twenty-one happy years together as you well know,” Dotty reminded her daughter watching her face carefully.

Amanda grimaced and kept her eyes on the tabletop.

“Are you still angry with him this morning?” Dotty asked more sympathetically.

“I don’t know what I feel this morning, Mother. I am a little angry with him, but I’m not really sure why. Lately, it seems everything he does just rubs me the wrong way!” Amanda found the courage to raise her eyes to her mother’s face and saw only empathy and understanding.

“You’ve been working pretty hard on this seminar lately,” Dotty suggested tentatively. “Maybe you need to take a little time off?”

“I just can’t right now,” Amanda replied too quickly. “This is just not a good time. . .” She might have said more, but the sound of two pairs of sneakers pounding up the driveway and the click of the latch on the back gate announced the return of the runners.

“**Grandma, you should** have seen the line at the bakery this morning! We were number 78!” Jamie entered excitedly with a small white box in his hand. “But we were still able to get you some of those pain chocolates you like.”

“You say it, ‘pan o shockola,’ Jamie. It’s French,” Lee corrected his stepson’s pronunciation as he came through the door behind the boy with another larger box in his hands. He set the box on the kitchen table beside the one Jamie had dropped unceremoniously in front of his grandmother.

“Did you get anything that doesn’t involve chocolate, fellas?” Amanda asked eyeing the chocolate-filled pastry in her mother’s hand with distaste.

“Oh, yeah! We got glazed doughnuts and plain ‘kwassants’ too.” Jamie answered giving the word it’s correct French pronunciation and looking at his step-dad for approval.

Lee smiled at him and said, "You'd better eat a bowl of cereal first, Sport. You can't play four quarters on nothing but sugar. Although I'm not sure those Fruity Oh's are a whole lot better than glazed doughnuts!" He watched Jamie fill a bowl with brightly colored circles, cover them with milk and start shoveling them into his mouth even before he got back to the table. Retrieving his coffee mug from the sink, Lee filled it again and added half-and-half.

"Aren't you going to sit down and eat something, Lee?" Amanda asked the question even though she already knew the answer. "These croissants are delicious!" she tried to tempt him.

"The best in Arlington. Or at least that's what they tell me!" he replied with a bright smile. Things were going better this morning. Maybe it was just the added stress of the seminar that was rocking the boat. "No, thanks! I'd better get my shower if we're going to get to the football field in time for warm-ups. The game's scheduled for ten o'clock, Jamie. That means we need to be on the field ready to go by nine."

"Right. I'll hurry," Jamie told him as he gulped down his milk, filled his cereal bowl for a second time and grabbed the biggest doughnut out of the box.

"No need to rush, son." Lee assured him with a grin. How those boys could eat! "Just don't dawdle, okay?"

Lee had started across the kitchen toward the stairs when the phone on the central island rang. Grabbing it with his right hand as he passed, he shifted it onto his left shoulder and answered it, "Stetson!" He grinned, turning back to look at his wife. "Yes Francine, she's up. I don't know. . . She's having her breakfast right now and that's the most important meal of the day, you know!" He groaned and turned his back on the audience at the kitchen table. "Yes, Francine. I do know how important this seminar is. I know for a fact that is precisely why Billy assigned it to you and Amanda. He knew you two would knock their socks off!" He took another sip of coffee as he listened to his old friend's response.

"Yes, Francine. I was in total agreement with the assignment. You two know this stuff backwards and forwards and you're two of our best presenters. The only thing I'm afraid of is that you'll 'over-work' the darn thing. There is such a thing as being over-prepared, you know." Lee put his now empty coffee cup down on the island and shifted from foot to foot as he listened. "Right! When was the last time either you or Amanda failed to be completely prepared for any presentation? Huh?"

He laughed suddenly. "Okay, I'll give you that one, but that was Fielder's fault not yours, remember? Look, if you'd take my advice, which you rarely do, you'll run through your plans from beginning to end and then give it a rest until Monday. You guys have been working on this thing practically non-stop for the last six weeks. Enough already!"

He turned to look at Amanda who had walked up beside him and now held out her hand for the phone. "Well, at least you could get together either at the office or at your place. Or even over here. This game of phone-tag you two are playing is a real waste of your time." "Okay! Okay! Here she is. . ."

Lee held out the phone to Amanda with a small bow, "It's Ms. Desmond for you, Madam." He turned and bounded up the stairs two at a time as soon as Amanda took the receiver out of his hand.

Not ten minutes later, Amanda almost ran into Lee as she hurried into the bedroom to dress. "Oh! Sorry!" he apologized immediately. "There's not much room to maneuver with all the piles of paper and files spread out on the floor," he suggested.

"They'll be gone before you know it. Francine wants me to come over to her apartment this morning. It seems someone suggested to her that we should go through the whole thing from beginning to end!" Amanda informed her husband sharply.

"So, you'll be needing the car this morning?" Lee said thoughtfully.

"Well, I'm not going to take the bus with all these papers!" she retorted as she began sorting through her closet looking for something she could throw on.

"No problem," Lee replied quickly. "I'll just wake Phillip and tell him he'd better get moving if he wants to go to Jamie's football game today."

Suiting action to words, Lee headed across the hall to rap quietly on the door to the boys' bedroom. Jamie opened the door and whispered, "I'm almost ready, but I'm going to need your help getting my jersey over these shoulder pads."

"Is your brother awake?" Lee asked.

"Nope, he's dead to the world," Jamie said glancing back into the room.

"Phillip," Lee called to his eldest stepson. "You need to get up and get dressed if you want to go to Jamie's game. We need to leave in fifteen minutes."

"Fifteen minutes?" Phillip's tousled head appeared above Jamie's in the doorway. "Man, why can't I go up later with Grandma?" he whined.

"Phillip, I need the car so that means you have two choices," Amanda, who was now completely dressed, chimed in from behind Lee. "You can either get a move on and go with Lee now in the Jeep or you can stay home from the game."

"Geez, Mom. I gotta shower and dress and eat and everything! How am I supposed to do that in fifteen minutes?" Phillip protested loudly.

"Hold on a minute!" Lee interjected. "I've got an idea. Phillip, you can go ahead and take your time. Shower and dress and get something to eat. There are doughnuts downstairs in the kitchen. Then hop on your bike and ride up to the field. We'll just throw your bike in the back of the Wagoneer at the end of the game, okay?"

"Sure, Dad. I'll get in the shower right now," Phillip said as he headed for the hall bathroom.

"Well, it's a good thing I'm all ready, isn't it?" Dotty said cheerfully as she passed between her daughter and son-in-law in the hallway. "I'll just wait for you in the kitchen, Lee."

"Jamie, what have I told you about wearing your cleats in the house?" Lee asked him pointing one long finger at the boy's feet.

"I know, but I couldn't find my sneakers," Jamie replied sheepishly.

"You were just wearing them! Try looking under your running shorts and t-shirt on the floor by your bed," Lee suggested before shutting the bedroom door and turning to look at his wife.

"Amanda, I was handling that," he said softly to his wife.

"I know. And you came up with a good solution," she had to admit it. Lee was much more flexible with the boys than she could be lately.

"So, why did you jump in?" he asked her tilting his head to one side and cocking an eyebrow.

"Habit, I guess."

"Well, you're not a single parent anymore, Amanda. Unless you want to be," he reminded her brusquely and headed down the stairs after Dotty.

Amanda was still standing in the hall moments later when Jamie clattered out of his room and down the stairs, his sneakers on his feet and his cleats and jersey in his hand. "Bye, Mom! See ya later!" he called over his shoulder.

11:41 PM Saturday, September 12, 1987, 4247 Maplewood Drive

Amanda Stetson set the locked file box down on the back porch and searched for her house keys in her purse. 'Thank goodness, someone left the porch light on or I would never have a chance of finding them,' she thought to herself. 'Oops, was that her pager blinking at her from the bottom of her purse? And there were her keys right next to it!' Entering the darkened kitchen, she hung the 'Vette keys on the rack by the door and started across the room to the stairs. 'Boy, was she exhausted. She was really looking forward to bed tonight! Darn, they'd all gone to bed and left the lamp on in the den again!' Setting the file box and her purse on the island, she detoured into the den to shut it off.

No, they hadn't all gone to bed. There was her husband sound asleep in the brown leather over-stuffed chair that had come with him from his apartment, the autobiography of General James Longstreet he'd been reading open in his lap. Stopping for a moment, Amanda regarded the man sleeping in her den. He was still wearing the dark blue t-shirt and faded jeans she'd seen him in this morning. He had slipped sideways in the chair and one long leg was thrown up over the arm. That couldn't be comfortable, could it? The light from the table lamp cast shadows across his tall form, but even so Amanda could see the reddish-brown stubble on his face. He had never gotten around to shaving. Relaxed in sleep, he looked young and vulnerable something few people ever got to see. Should she wake him? Oh, yes. No way was she going to let her mother discover him sleeping in the den again.

"Lee. . .Lee, honey, wake up!" she called, walking over and sitting on the arm of the sofa.

"Manda? You're home! What time is it?" Lee sat up quickly, barely catching his book before it hit the floor. "Aaugh! Damn! I hate that when that happens!" he exclaimed tossing his book on the table and rubbing his right calf to restore the circulation.

"It's almost midnight," she told him.

"Midnight?" Lee jumped up and starting pacing. "Amanda! The message you left on the machine said you'd miss dinner. Dinner was almost six hours ago!" Lee was obviously put out.

"I know and I'm sorry." Amanda tried to appease her angry husband to no avail. "We actually finished up around six-thirty, but Francine wanted to talk. No, she needed to talk. I guess Jonathan has been less than understanding about all the time she's putting in on this project. She was pretty upset about it and one thing led to another. I lost track of time. I'm sorry, Lee. I really am."

"I'm beginning to see Jonathan's side of things more and more," Lee said looking at Amanda with narrowed eyes.

“That’s too bad, Stetson. Because I just spent most of this evening listening to Francine go on and on about how lucky I am to have such an understanding and supportive husband!” Amanda shot back.

“Huh!” Lee grunted in surprise. “Okay, Amanda. Point taken, but it would have been nice if you’d answered at least one of my pages. When Francine’s line was busy, I tried to page you to find out where you were and when you’d be home. You’re not the only one who worries,” Lee told his wife.

“Oh my gosh! My pager! It was in my purse! I guess we must have left the modem open when we finished transmitting the final seminar outlines to the printer in the Bullpen. I am so sorry, Lee, I should have called. I just don’t think to check it. I’m not used to having it yet, I guess!” She rattled on rapid-fire, her face red with embarrassment.

Lee interrupted her ramble with one raised hand. “Apology accepted. It’s late and I’ve had a long day. I’m going to bed. How about you?” he asked cautiously.

“There’s nothing I’d like more, sweetheart!” she replied with a tired sigh. “Oh, would you mind carrying that file box upstairs for me?” she asked sweetly as she grabbed her purse and led him up to their bedroom.

When she came out of the bathroom wearing her favorite white nightgown, Lee was standing in front of the closet slowly pulling the tight t-shirt over his head. The reason for his care became evident when she observed the dark, rectangular bruise starting at his left shoulder and running at an angle across his back. There was also a matching bruise on his left arm that she noticed for the first time tonight.

“Lee, what happened to you?” she asked with concern.

“Oh, Phillip dropped the ladder,” he explained briefly as he tossed his shirt into the hamper with a groan and began to remove his jeans.

“Phillip apparently dropped the ladder on you,” she said as she took him by the right arm and turned him to face her.

“Actually, he was dropping it on your mother. I didn’t think that was such a good idea,” Lee rejoined with a half-smile.

“So you decided to get in its way?” she asked returning his smile. “That doesn’t seem much better to me!”

“Well, I meant to catch the ladder, but I couldn’t grab it with one hand and move Dotty out of the way at the same time,” Lee shrugged and winced immediately.

“What was Phillip doing with the ladder out in the first place?” she queried.

“After the football game, your mother decided there were a few things around the yard that needed trimming. Frankly, I don’t think there’s anything in the yard that we didn’t trim! In fact, several things that I cut back appeared to be growing in your neighbor’s yard...Anyway, I needed the extension ladder to get to those dead branches in the maple tree. I was showing Jamie how to bundle them up when Phillip decided to help by putting the ladder away for me. Unfortunately, he didn’t realize that he needed to close it before he moved it. It was top-heavy; he lost control and. . .”

“You paid the price,” Amanda finished for him, wincing in empathy.

“He was only trying to help and he was really sorry, Amanda. I think he learned a valuable lesson today and one he won’t soon forget,” Lee didn’t want Phillip to get in trouble with his mother. “It was really my fault,” he said. “I should have been paying better attention.”

“Uh-huh,” Amanda responded with the skepticism of a long-time parent. “Your inexperience is showing, Lee.”

“How do you figure that?” he asked.

She had to smile, “When you’ve been a parent a little longer, you’ll realize that kids of any age only need a split second to initiate disaster mode. I’m going to get the liniment. You lie down on the bed and I’ll be right back.”

When Amanda returned from the bathroom with the liniment in her hand, she found Lee sitting on his side of the bed wearing his light blue boxers and a frown on his face. “I hate that liniment, Amanda. I hate the way it smells and I don’t think it works at all. I’d really rather skip it,” he told her.

“This is the first I’ve heard of it, Lee. Now lie down on your stomach so I can reach the sore spot,” she spoke briskly already beginning to unscrew the lid of the bottle.

Instead Lee stood up and grasped the bottle in her left hand with his right. “No, Amanda. I really don’t want any liniment. I’d rather just get in bed and go to sleep, if it’s all the same to you.”

“But I’ve put this same ointment on your bruises any number of times in the past and it seemed to help. At least, you’ve never complained before.”

“Well,” he said sheepishly taking the bottle out of her hand and placing it on the nightstand, “the truth is I really didn’t like the liniment half as much as I liked the fact that you were putting it on me.”

“Oh! I see. . .” Amanda suddenly understood.

“So, can we skip the liniment and just go to bed?” Lee asked raising his eyebrows and nodding his head at the comforter, which he had turned down while she was in the bathroom.

Amanda yawned, “Whatever you say, Mr. Stetson!”

“Whatever I say, Mrs. Stetson?” Lee asked with a dangerous smile in his eyes and both his dimples showing as he reached to turn off the bedside light.

“Oh, by the way, how did the football game turn out?” Amanda asked suddenly.

“Jamie played really well. I’ll let him tell you all about it in the morning. At the moment, football is the last thing on my mind,” Lee responded.

Amanda’s giggle was cut short as his lips found hers in the dark.

10:30 AM, Monday September 14, 1987, The Agency Bullpen, Francine’s Desk

“Stetson, am I ever going to get my August expense reimbursement or will Hell have to freeze over first? This is the third time you’ve stuck this damn report back in my box this month!” Fred Fielder demanded and all eyes in the Bullpen turned to watch the brewing storm as he waved his expense report in Scarecrow’s face.

Lee Stetson looked up from the computer on Francine Desmond’s desk and gave the indignant agent his best ‘don’t mess with me’ glare. “Fred, I will keep putting the ‘damn report back in your box’ as long as you fail to fill it out correctly. So why don’t you just sit down and do it right for a change, huh?”

“What do you mean ‘do it right for a change’? I hand it in to Francine this way every month and she doesn’t have a problem with it. She just fills in anything that’s missing and sends it on to Billy,” Fielder rejoined.

Several nearby clerks began looking around for cover and even Leatherneck took several steps back towards the coffee pot as Lee slowly stood up from behind Francine’s desk. “Do I look like Francine? Do I sound like Francine? I don’t think so! Frankly, Fred, I could care less what Francine does or doesn’t do for you. I don’t have the time or inclination to fill out your expense reports for you. Do you see this desk?” he waved his left hand at a surface littered with color-coded files, reports, and computer printouts. “I have another one just like it upstairs in the Q Bureau. Does it look like I have the time to do your work for you?”

“What’s the matter Scarecrow? Can’t cope with the administrative end of things without Francine or Mrs. King to hold your hand?” Fielder retaliated. Leatherneck saw the telltale sign from across the room: the muscle in Lee’s jaw began to jump. He started across the Bullpen hoping he could grab Stetson before he tore Fielder limb from limb.

Just then William Melrose came out of his office with a file in his hand. “Scarecrow, do you have those August manpower figures from Surveillance yet?”

Without taking his eyes off Fielder, Lee replied, “Actually, I have preliminary figures for the whole Section. I was just about to send them to the printer when Fielder here started yelling.” Stetson threw himself back into the desk chair and typed the print command into the network computer.

Billy gave Scarecrow the rather thick folder in his hand. “Lee, this is the latest update from the operation in Rouen. Half of it is from the Sureté and therefore completely in French. I want you to look it over and return it to me with your comments before you leave today.” Billy turned toward the other agent with a scowl on his face. “Do you have a problem, Fielder?”

“Yes, I have a problem. A big one. I’ve given Scarecrow my August expense report three times and he refuses to turn it in to you.”

“Is this true, Scarecrow?” Billy asked his reluctant administrative agent.

“Yes, it is-- the absolute truth, Billy.”

“Let me see that report, Fielder.” Billy held out his hand for the paperwork. “Well, I can see why you keep getting it back. There are at least three items just on the first page that have no dates or case numbers attached to them. Fix it and turn it in again,” Billy replied handing the pages back to Fred Fielder.

“I can’t wait until Francine is back in the office!” Fielder proclaimed loudly.

“It can’t be soon enough for me,” Lee shot back for all to hear.

The phone rang on Francine’s desk and Lee reached to answer it. “Stetson!” he barked into the receiver moderating his tone of voice when he realized who was on the line. “Speak of the devil—we were just talking about you. How are things going so far?” Lee looked at Billy and silently mouthed, ‘Francine!’ “Billy’s right here if you want. . . Oh, okay. Yeah, just let me find some paper and my pen,” he said moving piles of paperwork until he located both items. “Uh huh. Uh huh. Slow down, Francine. You and Amanda take shorthand, not me.”

Billy seated himself on the edge of Francine’s desk where he could hear one side of the conversation. “Where are the extra folders?” Stetson bent down to look under the desk. “No, there’s no box there. Uh huh. Check with Debra or Paulette? Shouldn’t be a

problem. I've seen both of them already this morning." Lee tore the top sheet of paper off the pad and started a second list. "Yeah, I got it. Those are minimum requirements. Leatherneck is standing right here. I'll get with him as soon as I get off the phone. Yup. Oh, that. Fred Fielder was just complaining about the hold up with his expense check. The usual game playing, right. Um, is Amanda there? Oh, of course. I understand. You need all this by lunchtime? We'll do our best."

Lee hung up the phone just in time to see Dr. Smyth, ubiquitous cigarette holder in hand, sail into the Bullpen and head straight past the three agents and into Billy's office. "Melrose, we've got a problem!"

"We always do," Billy muttered following the Director of the Agency into his office and shutting the door behind them. Scarecrow and Leatherneck exchanged grins as they watched Billy reach for his bottle of antacids as soon as he sat down behind the desk.

"What's up, Scarecrow?" Leatherneck asked taking Billy's seat on the edge of the desk. Lee handed the Agency Quartermaster the second list and said, "Apparently, six more agents showed up at the last minute, so they're short computer workstations. The Lensman says he can get them set up in time for the afternoon session, if you can get the equipment to him in the next hour or so."

Leatherneck scanned the list and drawled, "Minimum requirements, eh. Well, shouldn't be a problem. Ciphers and Scenarios just ordered some new computers and a brand new server; I'll just 'borrow' them for a little while. Give 'em a test drive, so to speak. Don't sweat it, Scarecrow. I've got it handled."

"Thanks, Leatherneck. I owe you," Lee replied visibly relieved.

"Actually, I'd rather have Francine owe me, good buddy!" Leatherneck slapped his friend on the back as he stood up. Lee winced. That bruise really hurt.

"I'll pass the message on the next time I talk to Francine," Lee assured him before Leatherneck turned and left his list in hand.

"And now, I've got to track down. . . Oh, Debra, do you have a minute?" Lee grabbed the other list, jumped out of his chair and crossed the Bullpen to talk to the brunette in the light gray suit. "Francine says you and Paulette helped Mrs. King put together the folders for the ITMIG seminar. Is that right?"

The younger woman smiled at the handsome field agent and said, "Of course, I don't mind helping Mrs. King. She always lends me a hand when I get swamped, after all."

“Great! Well, they’re short six seminar folders. Do you think you could put some more together in the next hour? That way Leatherneck can deliver them with the computer equipment they requested.”

“Of course, Mr. Stetson, I’d be glad to. I’ll just need the originals and I’ll grab some of those leftover folders. . . I could have them for you in forty-five minutes if I can find a free copier.”

“I’ll print you another copy of the file right away,” Lee told her gratefully.

“Stetson! My office! Now!” Billy bellowed from across the bullpen. Lee smiled apologetically at the attractive clerk and ran back to the computer on Francine’s desk. He found the file and sent it to the printer where Debra Larsen was already waiting. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly just like Amanda was always telling him. Then he braced himself and turned to enter Billy’s office.

“If you are quite done flirting with the hired help, we have serious work to do here. I understand there is trouble in paradise, Scarecrow.” Dr. Smyth greeted him as soon as he cleared the doorway.

“I’m afraid I don’t know what you mean, sir,” Lee replied looking to Billy for an explanation, instead it was Smyth who elaborated, “My intell has the ITMIG seminar in total confusion. It’s a mess, Stetson, and I expect you to go down there and straighten it out.”

Lee leaned back against the window into the Bullpen, folded his arms across his chest, and looked Smyth right in the eye, “I don’t know where you got your ‘intell’, but I just got off the phone with Francine and she said things had gotten off to a good start.”

“Is that right?” Smyth smirked. “Well, the way I hear it they were short materials and had several pieces of crucial hardware fail already!”

Lee laughed aloud. “Yes, several of the computers wouldn’t boot up this morning, but Lensman has them all running like tops now. It wasn’t a problem because the morning session was all introduction and theory. The hands-on session doesn’t start until two this afternoon. Six extra agents did show up at the last minute and their credentials all had to be checked out before they could be admitted to the opening session. We’re sending some more Seminar materials and extra computer equipment over asap so Lensman can have it up and running before their lunch period is over.” Lee crossed his fingers behind his back and prayed that Debra and Leatherneck wouldn’t let him down.

“We’ll see what we shall see, Scarecrow. I still say giving an important conference like this to Desmond and Mrs. Scarecrow was a big mistake.” Smyth stood as he said this and walked over to stand directly in front of Lee. “Melrose, I hope you don’t live to

regret this decision,” he threatened as he exhaled a cloud of smoke right in Lee’s face and knocked his ashes off onto Lee’s shoes. On that note, Smyth sauntered out of the office.

Billy sighed. “Sit down, Lee. And unclench your fists. There’s nothing you can punch in here.”

“I’ve always thought that was a great oversight on your part, Billy. A punching bag might do us both some good,” Lee growled as he dropped into one of the chairs in front of Billy’s desk and ran both his hands through his hair.

“Well, when it’s your office, you can redecorate any way you want, Scarecrow.”

“Don’t you even think it, Billy. The Q Bureau is more than enough headache for me!” Lee told him forcefully.

“Were you on the up and up with Smyth just now?” Billy asked changing the subject.

“Scout’s honor!” Lee assured him raising his left hand in the Boy Scout salute. “Francine filled me in on the phone while you were standing right there. I’ve already got a clerk preparing the folders for the new arrivals and Leatherneck is working on the equipment angle. We’ve got it tapped, Billy, don’t worry.”

“Great work, Lee. Oh, in all the confusion did you happen to pick up those manpower figures you put together for me?”

“Shit!” he exclaimed. And Scarecrow bolted out of the office toward the network printer.

9:43 PM, Monday September 14, 1987, 4247 Maplewood Drive

“Hello, Mother!” Amanda Stetson greeted her mother as she came through the door with her hands full. Placing the small sack of groceries on the counter, she continued into the kitchen. “I didn’t expect you to be home from your date so soon. Is everything all right with you and Captain Curt?” ‘It was so nice to find the shoe on a different foot for a change,’ she thought to herself as she carried her purse and the metal file box into the den and set them down in the corner.

“Everything is just fine with Captain Curt. He has a long flight scheduled for tomorrow so we just thought we’d make it an early night tonight,” her mother replied as she sorted through the items in the brown SuperSaver sack and put each one away in its proper place.

“Things are sure quiet around here! I guess the boys are in bed already,” Amanda commented wistfully.

“Actually, the boys started for bed almost forty-five minutes ago, but one or both of them keep popping out again for one reason or another,” Dotty chuckled with real amusement. “The last time Lee chased them back upstairs I think I heard him muttering something about duct tape! I’m not too sure what happened after that. He had Jamie over his shoulder and Phillip in a headlock at the time!”

“Oh my gosh! I can just picture that,” Amanda’s eyes sparkled as she gazed at a spot on the ceiling just beneath her boys’ room. “Maybe I’d better go upstairs and see how things are going.”

Pausing at the top of the steps to listen, she heard her husband’s deep voice coming from the boys’ bedroom. It didn’t sound like he was angry. It didn’t sound like they were having a conversation either. It sounded like he was reading to them! At twelve and fourteen, they’d decided they were too old for so many things! And bedtime stories had been near the top of the list. She tapped lightly on the closed door and the voice stopped instantly.

“Come,” said three voices in unison, one alto, one tenor, and one baritone. She opened the door to find a cozy little group. The boys had recently rearranged their room placing their beds at right angles. Jamie had found a small corner table by the side of the road during one of his runs with Lee and somehow convinced his stepfather to carry it home for him. Once it had been refinished, they placed the table between the two beds. Now, Lee was lying at the foot of Jamie’s bed with his long legs stretched out and resting on Phillip’s bed and a very thick book in his lap.

“You’re home!” Jamie cried truly glad to see her.

“You’re still up,” she observed. But the three men weren’t too worried, they knew from the twinkle in her dark brown eyes that they weren’t in very much trouble.

“Yeah, Mom. We were kind of stalling,” Phillip confessed.

“Tell me about it!” Lee muttered under his breath.

Jamie chimed in, “You’ve been so stressed out about this seminar-thing that we just really wanted to find out how things went today.”

“So, how’d they go?” Lee finally asked.

“They went,” Amanda replied wearily, motioning for Phillip to scoot over so she could sit down. “They actually went remarkably well. Better than I expected. And now it’s time for lights out.”

“Aww, Mom. Not yet!” Phillip groaned.

“Dad hasn’t finished reading the chapter!” Jamie objected.

Lee looked down at the book in his lap, “And they all lived happily ever after,” he solemnly intoned with a wink at his wife.

“Oh, no way did Tolkien ever write that, Dad!” Jamie told him.

“Yeah, this is the best story, Mom. It has cool sword fights, and wizards and monsters and everything!” Phillip added his two cents.

“Well, I promise we’ll pick up right where we left off tomorrow night,” Lee assured the disappointed boys. “It’s late and it’s a school night. You don’t want to get me in trouble with your mom now, do you?”

“Okay, ‘night Dad!” Jamie gave in first.

“If we start a little earlier, can we read a little longer tomorrow night?” Phillip begged hopefully.

“We’ll see, guys. No promises though.” Lee closed the book, stood up and headed out the door.

“Okay, fellas. Lights out and no more arguments,” Amanda tousled Phillip’s hair with one hand and tucked him in with the other. Crossing the short distance to Jamie’s bed, she placed a kiss in the middle of his forehead before she tucked him in as well. “Good night, boys! I love you,” she said as she switched the overhead light off.

“Good night, Mom. Love you!” came the reply out of the darkness.

“So, things went well?” Lee repeated as she came into the kitchen. He had his back to her while he filled a glass with milk. He replaced the milk jug in the fridge and reached up into the cabinet above it for the Galliano bottle pouring a generous dollop into the milk glass.

“Oh, thank you, darling boy!” chimed her mother’s voice from behind her. Dotty had changed into her nightclothes and robe. “Now where did I leave my new book?” she wondered aloud.

“I think I saw it in the den,” Lee walked into the other room and moved the newspaper, some homework papers, and several magazines aside until he uncovered the book on the coffee table.

“Well, I’m all set for the night now,” Dotty declared kissing Lee on the cheek as she took the book and glass out of his hands. She gave Amanda an awkward hug and breezed back out of the kitchen as swiftly as she had entered it. Amanda laughed out loud at the bemused look on her husband’s face.

“I’m not sure I’ll ever get used to the pace of things around here,” he said shaking his head. “I was just going to pour myself a glass of wine. Would you like one?”

“I’d love one!” Amanda responded immediately. “Bring it to me on the couch, please?”

“You bet! It’ll take a minute though. I have to open a new bottle.”

Amanda took the glass of deep red wine from her husband and sipped appreciatively while he sat down on the other side of the couch. Once he’d settled with his own glass in hand, she shifted over to cuddle up against his warm chest and sighed, “This is more like it!”

“So, things went as well as could be expected?” Lee tried for the third time to figure out how her day had been.

“Yes, for a first day it was great.” She turned her head slightly so she could look up at him, “We knocked their socks off!”

Lee’s dimples showed when he returned her smile with one of his own. “I knew you would.”

“We barely got through half the material we’d prepared. That’s why I’m so late. Francine and I reworked the next couple of days’ schedules. We really learned a lot about the participants today. Most of them are from various offices of the Agency, but we have three from the CIA, six from the NSA, and eight, I think, from the FBI. There’s even one from the DEA.”

“Sounds like the usual government alphabet soup,” Lee responded.

“Several of them are obviously there under duress—they really are uncomfortable having anything to do with computers,” Amanda continued. “Others are more gung-ho. There are only six women in the class though. I think you may know one of them, Katie Graham from the New York office?”

“Oh, yeah. A little redhead? She used to be Michael Murphy’s partner. I worked with her and Mickey when I was assigned to a case in New York a couple of years ago. She’s top-notch—really quick. She’ll keep you on your toes!” Lee informed her.

“She’s Mick Murphy’s partner,” Amanda questioned, her brow wrinkled in confusion. “They acted like acquaintances, not partners.”

“Used to be partners,” Lee repeated. “Their section-chief broke them up shortly after I worked with them. I have no clue why—they were dynamite together. I think Katie’s doing admin stuff now. She’s Francine’s counterpart in New York, if I’m not mistaken.”

“Well, that’s very interesting. I’m going to have to keep my eye on those two from now on,” Amanda stated reflectively. Lee gave her a one-armed hug and took another sip of his wine.

“Boy, this is just what I needed tonight,” she told him.

“Yeah, this is a great little wine. Would you believe it’s from Australia? It’s called a shiraz, kind of a light merlot, huh?”

“I wasn’t talking about the wine, Stetson, although it is very nice. I meant us. Together. Just talking. I’ve missed this.”

“Oh, yeah. That’s much better than the wine,” Lee agreed leaning down and placing a soft kiss in her hair.

“So, how was your day?” Amanda asked him after a long pause.

“Oh, pretty much the same old thing. I think I gave a few people a scare showing up in the office before nine o’clock. Ragmop kept looking at me and then up at the ceiling like he expected it to fall in any minute. Dr. Smyth even stopped by the Q Bureau this afternoon just to see if I was keeping my nose to the grindstone with you out of the office.” Lee chuckled wryly. This was certainly not the time to tell her about the little scene in Billy’s office with Dr. Smyth.

“Lee Stetson hard at work before nine in the morning, will wonders never cease?” Amanda couldn’t help teasing him.

“How did you know what Mrs. Marston said?” Lee returned her teasing with some of his own. “Actually, I kind of liked it.”

“You did?”

“Yeah, it was quiet. The phones don’t ring off the hook before nine. And hardly anybody is in the office so there isn’t a constant stream of agents through the Q Bureau asking me to have a look at this picture or go through this file and tell them what I think. No clerks with papers to be signed in seventeen different places. No distractions,” he enthused softly kissing her again.

“Is this going to become a habit then?” she inquired.

“Are you joking? It’s killing me. I’m exhausted. By four o’clock I wanted a nap. Of course, by then I was already on the road so I could be at the school to take Phillip

home from his football practice at five. Then I had to turn around and take Jamie to Pop Warner practice at six. I didn't get them fed until after Jamie's practice and we did homework while we ate!"

"Poor baby! Maybe I should just take you up and tuck you into bed, too."

"Maybe you should!" A yawn escaped from Lee despite his best intentions.

"Let's go, Scarecrow." Amanda stood up and offered him her free hand. He claimed her hand as he stood. Placing their wine glasses in the kitchen sink the couple moved slowly toward the stairs.

"Amanda, are we really going to bed before eleven o'clock?" Lee asked in surprise.

"Yes, dear. That's what normal people do," she reminded him.

"Are we being normal people tonight," he asked hopefully.

"Yes, we certainly are," Amanda replied as they reached the top of the stairs and she placed her hands on his lower back to propel him down the hall toward their bedroom. "And if you're a very good boy, I will show you exactly why normal people go to bed before eleven every night."

"Amanda, I have been a very good boy all day long," Lee promised her as she finally closed the door behind them. Neither one heard the soft laughter coming from behind Dotty's bedroom door and it was probably just as well.

12:10 PM, Tuesday September 15, 1987, Hilton Embassy Row, Washington D.C.

Lee Stetson opened the door as quietly as possible and listened for a moment before slipping silently into the darkened room. Once inside, he stepped out of the doorway, put his back to the wall and initiated a casual survey of the area. Francine was standing at the lighted lectern presenting at the moment. Amanda was off to one side running the computer. That setup Lenny "The Lensman" Carter, chief techno-geek at the Agency, had put together for this was pretty impressive. Somehow he had managed to project everything Amanda was doing on her computer onto a large movie screen at the front of the room. Seeing exactly what she was talking about right there in front of you sure made following the techno-speak a whole lot easier. Especially since Francine was using a laser pointer to keep them on track. Lee smiled at The Lensman who was stationed at the back of the room behind three computer monitors. It looked like he was playing some kind of game on one of them. Glancing at his watch, Lee confirmed that they should be just moments away from their lunch break, if the schedule in the

computer at work was correct. Maybe Amanda would go to lunch with him after he'd delivered Billy's message to Francine.

He scanned the participants and immediately saw quite a few he recognized. Most were from the Agency. Frank Keiter from Communications, for instance, what was he doing here? Frank is the last person he would pick for an intense course in computer detection. Frank could barely work the old radio system they used to have and he almost quit in frustration when they updated with a satellite system. There was Jim Meyers from Langley sitting in the third row. Bob Waltrip was behind him. Wasn't he Treasury Department now? Okay, there were Mick Murphy and Kate Graham in the very back row on the far right side. He'd suspected that they were involved when he worked with them years back. When he'd heard that their Section Chief had broken them up, he'd felt as though his suspicions were confirmed. Interesting that he'd send them together to a conference out of town.

"Are there any questions about the procedures we have just demonstrated for you?" Francine asked the group.

Frank Keiter's hand was the only one to go up.

"Yes, Frank?" Francine called on the short, balding agent with a tone of voice she generally reserved for very young children or the mentally impaired.

"This really doesn't have anything to do with the stuff you just showed us, but I've been sitting here for a day and half now and I still don't see what this computer junk is going to do for the average field agent."

Lee had to laugh out loud at that one and all eyes turned to the back of the room.

"Hear something funny, Scarecrow?" Frank asked defensively.

Lee levered himself off of the wall and smiled at Frank. "As a matter of fact, yes. I can see what good this will do me in the field right now. These personal computers are getting to be as common as TV's and VCR's. Pretty soon everyone will have one. And what will they be used for? Writing letters, sending electronic mail, keeping records, balancing your checkbook. Let's say I'm after a gun smuggler or the head of a local terrorist cell. Those kind of bad guys depend on two things: communication and money. If I think they're up to no good, I get a search warrant, right? And I confiscate their computer. Even if they have the foresight to wipe their hard drive clean, The Lensman over there can do his magic and recreate most of the deleted files. It's a pain to get the kind of warrant that forces a bank to turn over a customer's financial records, but I can get them all directly from the bad guy's computer with a simple show-cause warrant. What's more, with another simple warrant I can tap his phone line. That way I can get not only his phone conversations, but also anything he does with his computer over his modem. I can read his electronic mail and track any electronic bank transfers he makes. He starts moving a lot of money, I can put him down. I'll have all the hard

evidence I need. Geez, Frank! I can see what good computer technology will do me in the field and I'm not even taking this class!"

"Well, you are sleeping with the teacher after all!" Keiter sniped. Lee watched as Amanda turned bright red and Francine started to open her mouth to respond in kind, so he did the only thing he could: he laughed aloud again.

"That's true Frank, but I can promise you that's not an option for you. I guess you'll just have to stay awake in class, huh?" The room erupted with more laughter as the tension dissolved.

"If there are no more questions?" Francine regained control of the crowd. "Then I think it's more than time for lunch. We'll resume at. . ." she consulted her watch and Amanda, "one-fifteen with the afternoon presentation and hands-on session."

Lee waited at the back while the participants filed out of the room for lunch. Frank Keiter made a point of avoiding him. Nobody seemed to take any notice of Frank. Lee greeted several colleagues and acquaintances from other agencies. Jim Meyer stopped to ask him if he could go out for a drink after the evening session, "Sorry, Jim," Lee begged off. "With both Amanda and Francine tied up over here; I'm swamped at work and I have to prepare for a big budget meeting tomorrow afternoon. Not to mention that I have responsibilities at home and all that."

"No problem, Lee. It's not like I'm from out of town or anything. I'll give you a call sometime next week. There's actually a little business we can do, so we can charge it to our expense reports!" Jim shook Lee's hand heartily before heading out the door.

"Hey, Scarecrow, how's it going?" Mick Murphy and Kate Graham were headed his way now.

"Just great! How are things with you guys in the Big Apple?" Lee asked in turn. "By the way, congratulations Kate. I hear you moved up the ladder into administration."

"Yeah, right after we worked together last. It's different from being in the field every day, but I've gotten used to the higher stress level now," she chuckled. "We should be congratulating you! How come we didn't get an invitation to the wedding?" Kate teased him.

Lee blushed. "That's kind of a long story, Kate."

"Get some lunch with us. You can tell us all about married life and we can relive the good old days," Mick suggested.

"Sorry, but I'm here on an errand for Billy. Maybe another time?" Lee replied with real regret. He'd truly enjoyed working with these two agents.

“Later, then.” Kate said as she directed Mick out the door and toward one of the hotel restaurants.

Lee looked up to the front of the room. Standing up there were two women he definitely didn’t want to mix it up with on a bad day. And they were both looking at him like it was a bad day and it was his entire fault. ‘Guess you should’ve kept your big mouth shut, Stetson. Might as well go up there and face the music.’ “Hey, Francine. Hi, Amanda.” Lee greeted them with forced cheer.

“What the heck are you doing here, Lee? We don’t need you riding in on your white horse to rescue us. Francine and I can take care of ourselves, thank you very much,” Amanda confronted him immediately.

“Sorry, Amanda. Keiter just gets under my skin somehow. I have never been able to figure out whether he is really as dense as he seems or if it’s all some kind of act.” Both hands in his pockets, Lee shrugged his shoulders and gave her an embarrassed grin.

“Next time, just leave it to us. Got it?” Amanda instructed him hands on her hips.

“Yeah, I got it,” Lee assured her obediently. She immediately turned away and began sorting through papers on a nearby table.

“So, why **are** you here, Scarecrow?” Francine asked him.

“I was scheduled for a meeting at the Czech embassy this morning, so Billy sent me over to get the combination to the office safe from you. He needs to get to the petty cash and the printer ribbons,” Lee explained.

“Oh come on, Lee. I don’t buy that for a minute. You can break into that safe faster than you can get over here and back. And you have on several occasions if I’m not mistaken,” Francine reminded him.

“Yeah, I offered to crack it for him, but Billy said he wanted it opened not broken into.”

“Personally, I think Billy just sent you over here to spy on us and I don’t appreciate it one bit,” Francine told him.

“Well, if it’s any consolation, except for ‘thick as a board’ Frank, it appeared to me the seminar has been outstanding so far,” Lee told her happily.

“So you admit that you’re here to spy on us?” Amanda rejoined the conversation papers in hand.

“Not exactly ‘spy’, but I think Billy has been a little curious about how things are going and you know how he likes to have the inside track on what everyone is doing,” Lee suggested.

“Well, what are you going to tell him?” she challenged.

“Exactly what I told him yesterday and again this morning. Things are going great,” Lee replied evenly. “Um, I was hoping to grab some lunch before I have to face that mountain of paperwork back on Francine’s desk. I don’t suppose you’d like to get a bite to eat with me?” Lee asked his wife.

“That’s fine with me,” Francine jumped in. “I know you two haven’t gotten a lot of private time in the last few weeks.”

“Well, I really don’t have time today. I need to go over my notes for the afternoon presentation with Francine and then get with Lenny to make certain everything works for the hands-on session,” Amanda turned him down. She immediately began to rummage through the file box on the floor and so she didn’t see Francine mouth ‘Sorry’ to Lee. She did look up in time to catch his shrug in return.

“Okay then, I guess I’ll run through Marvelous Marvin’s drive-through for a Colossal burger and fries. If you’ll just give me the combination, I’ll be on my way,” Lee was suddenly anxious to be somewhere else right now.

“Wow, did someone turn up the air conditioning in here or what?” Francine asked Amanda after Lee left with the combination to the safe.

“I don’t know what you mean, Francine,” she told her ‘partner’ shuffling more papers as they walked out of the seminar room and turned toward the restaurant.

“You. Lee. And the cold shoulder. Come on, Amanda. I know you two. What’s going on? Did you two have a fight or something?” Francine asked with sincere concern and a great deal of innate curiosity.

“No, Francine. We didn’t have a fight. I mean, sure we fight sometimes, but nothing big. I’m just preoccupied with this seminar. It’s really important to me that everything goes as perfectly as possible and I don’t appreciate any distractions right now. Okay?”

“Okay, but you’ve been there to listen to me lately when Jonathan and I are having our troubles. I just want you to know that I’m your friend and I want to help if I can,” Francine’s overt show of compassion surprised Amanda a trifle.

“Thanks, Francine. But I simply want to focus on the seminar right now.” Amanda definitely didn’t want to discuss this with Francine at the moment. What would she say? She wasn’t even sure what the problem was herself. “I think I’ll have the chicken Caesar salad and an iced tea. How about you?” Amanda asked successfully changing the subject as Francine began to relate the restrictions involved in her latest diet scheme.

8:15 PM Wednesday, September 16, 1987, The Agency Boardroom, The Budget Meeting

Lee Stetson looked around the over-crowded Board Room trying to gauge both how things were going and how much longer they'd be stuck here. Much of the meeting had been like watching a professional hockey game during the finals—plenty of pucks passing with occasional bench-clearing fights. Even though most of the Assistant Directors, all the Department Heads and some of their assistants were gathered around the long mahogany table, most of the action had involved Billy Melrose, Field Section Chief, and the Director of the Agency, Dr. Austin Smyth. Frankly, Lee was glad he'd spent most of his time riding the bench during this meeting. No reason to draw undue attention to himself in this crowd. The Vice President, George Bush, had been pretty quiet himself, allowing Smyth and Billy to carry most of the meeting. Lee wasn't completely sure what was going on here. Billy was fighting Smyth tooth-and-nail for more funding for 'certain undermanned departments' in the Field Section. You'd think the Agency Director would welcome new funding from the Federal Government instead of the usual cost-cutting crap.

Lee and the Secret Service Agents all went on alert as the Board Room door opened beside them. Cheryl Rupp, Billy's administrative secretary, peeked in apologetically. "Pardon the interruption, Mr. Stetson, you have a call out here that I really think you want to take."

Lee looked up at the head of the table as he stood and moved toward the door, "Sorry, sir. I'll try to make it quick."

"No, problem, Agent Stetson. I think this is as good a time to take a break as any," the Vice President told him with a grim smile. Lee was out the door and standing beside the nearest phone in a flash.

"The call is on line two," Mrs. Rupp punched a blinking button, handed him the receiver, and said in a whisper, "It's someone from the Arlington Police Department."

"Lee Stetson," he managed to choke past the lump of fear that suddenly seemed to be blocking his throat.

"Mr. Stetson, this is Officer Kinsey from the Arlington Police Department. We picked up your two boys at the Metro Park a little while ago. We need a responsible adult to come down here and resolve this situation for us."

“Are they all right, Officer? They’re not hurt are they?” Lee asked anxiously.

“No, sir. They’re fine. We just need you to come down here and explain why they were in the Metro Park after dusk,” the officer stated calmly.

“I’m in Georgetown at the moment, but I’ll be there in fifteen or twenty minutes. Thank you for calling, Officer Kinsey. Tell the boys I’m on my way.” Lee hung up the phone only to pick it up again to dial another line inside the Agency. “Leatherneck, I’m glad you’re still here. Listen, is that vehicle we’ve been working on drivable? Good. I need it tonight. I’m on my way over there right now.”

Lee hung up the phone and turned to go only to come face to face with the Vice President of the United States. “Sir, I have to offer my apologies, but I need to leave the meeting immediately,” he said respectfully.

“That’s quite all right, Agent Stetson. I think I’m going to call it a night. I have all the information I need to make my decision. Mr. Melrose tells me you’re the one I have to thank for compiling all the manpower statistics for the various departments. I must say the solve rate for the Q Bureau is quite impressive,” Mr. Bush complimented him warmly.

“Thank you, sir. But I really have to be going now, you see. . .” Lee began to explain, only to be interrupted by Dr. Smyth.

“What’s the rush, Scarecrow? Don’t tell me there’s something more important than a high-level budget meeting with the Vice President of the United States. This is no way to prove you’re administrative material.”

“That call was from the Arlington Police, sir. Apparently they picked up my stepsons in Metro Park after dark. I need to go down there and get them,” Lee appealed directly to Mr. Bush.

“Go, Stetson. Go! I always say that family comes first and Barbara would certainly have my head if she found out I kept you here when your stepsons needed you.” Lee was on his way toward the elevator almost before the Vice President had finished speaking.