

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 Two**

**"I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love  
will have the final word in reality."**

**– Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.**

**8:55 PM, Wednesday, September 16, 1987 Arlington Police Department, Arlington, Virginia**

The reception area was remarkably busy for a Wednesday evening in a quiet suburb like Arlington, Virginia. Lee Stetson waited impatiently for his turn to speak to the very attractive African-American policewoman on desk-duty.

Stepping up to the desk at last, he removed his Agency ID from the inner pocket of his suit coat and said, "Lee Stetson. I'm here about my stepsons, Phillip and Jamie King."

"Are you armed, Agent Stetson?" the Sergeant asked him as she handed back his ID.

Taking a quick look at her nametag, he replied, "Yes, Sergeant Harris. Do I need to turn in my weapon?"

"No, I just need to see it and log it's make, caliber and serial number for our records. Just in case you should happen to have cause to discharge your weapon while you have business in the building." Lee removed his semi-automatic handgun from his shoulder harness and waited, shifting from foot to foot, as she wrote down all the information she needed. "How many clips?" she asked without even looking up.

"Two," he said. "One partial in the gun and a full one in my pocket."

“Okay, sign here please,” she instructed him pointing to a line on the clipboard she’d turned toward him. “Go through that door on your right. Straight down the hall and through the double doors at the end. Ask for Detective Buscadelli.”

“Yes, ma’am. Thank you, ma’am,” Lee headed toward the door she’d indicated.

“Oh, Agent Stetson!” Sergeant Harris called after him. Lee stopped in the doorway and looked at her expectantly. “You don’t happen to have any younger brothers, do you?”

“No, ma’am. I’m afraid I’m an only child,” he smiled at her and then continued on through the heavy wooden door.

“Pity,” she muttered. “Next!”

Lee found himself in a typical utilitarian hallway consisting of cement block walls painted an ugly green with brown and white linoleum tile beneath his feet. The only decorations to be seen were bulletin boards covered with faded wanted posters and PBA or FOP announcements. He strode quickly down the hall and through the double doors labeled, ‘Detective Division.’ Looking around the large room filled with beige cubicles, he immediately recognized the same organized chaos that characterized the Agency Bullpen most days. Crime victims were being interviewed and suspects were being questioned. Unable to spot Jamie and Phillip right away, he began to make a circuit of the room when he heard the most welcome sound he could ever imagine, “Dad! Over here!”

Turning in the direction of Phillip’s voice, he finally saw the two boys sitting at a small metal table in one of the interview rooms. Lee was already on his way over to them when a very large, dark-haired man in street clothes stepped into the door of the room, said something to the two boys, and then closed the door behind him.

Offering Lee his hand he said, “Mr. Stetson, I’m Detective Buscadelli. Will you please come with me?”

“I’d like to see the boys first, if I may,” Lee told the plainclothes officer grasping his hand in a firm handshake.

“In a moment, sir. We need to have a little conversation first. My desk is right this way.” Detective Buscadelli gestured to his right.

Lee reluctantly followed Detective Buscadelli to a nearby cubicle and sat down in the hard metal chair as the detective went around behind the desk. Glancing at a police report on the desk, the officer looked up at Lee and said, “The boys have told me their side of the story and now I’d like to hear your explanation, sir.”

“My explanation? Detective, I’m still not clear about what exactly is going on. How did the boys end up at the police station in the first place?” Lee asked leaning forward in his chair.

“Well sir, James and Phillip were picked up by Patrol Officers Stracelsky and Kang on their final sweep of the park at dusk. Apparently, the boys were about to walk home. The officers gave them a ride to their home address and when no one was at home, they brought them back here. Now, what I’d like to know is why you left them standing there until dark, Mr. Stetson!” Detective Dominic Buscadelli had four children of his own and certainly wouldn’t want any of them hanging around Metro park after dark.

“Me? I wasn’t the one who was supposed to pick them up tonight, Detective!” Lee was no longer confused about what had happened. Wait until he got his hands on Joe King!

“The boys told the officers that they were waiting for their father to pick them up from football practice. When we asked them for a number to call, they told us to call their father and gave us your number, Mr. Stetson.” The detective was obviously beginning to lose his patience.

“I can understand your confusion, Detective Buscadelli. The boys’ father, Joe King, was supposed to pick them up tonight. I have no idea what could have happened. He’s usually very good about letting us know ahead of time when he won’t be able to follow through on any plans he’s made with the boys. He’s a very responsible father.” Lee thought to himself, ‘You are going to owe me big time for this one, Joe!’

“So you’re not the boys’ father?” the officer asked, consulting the police report in front of him one more time.

“No, sir. I’m the boys’ stepfather. And I’d really like to see them now. I expect they’re pretty upset about all this,” Lee stated firmly, standing up and looking the detective right in the eye.

“I see. I hope you realize that if we hadn’t been able to contact any responsible adult, the boys would have had to be taken to the Morrison Youth Shelter. Do you have any idea the kind of experience that would have been?” Detective Buscadelli was not about to let him off easily.

“Believe me, Detective. I am only too familiar with what goes on in places like that and the kind of kids who end up there. I can assure you, this will definitely not happen again,” Lee spoke resolutely.

“Good. Now, if I can just see your ID?” he said holding out his hand. Lee placed both his Agency ID and his driver’s license in the man’s wide hand and sat down again to wait while the Detective went over to make copies of them for his report. “All set. Let’s get you and your boys out of here.”

A very subdued trio made their way out of the Police Station and over to Lee's vehicle in the Visitors' parking lot.

"We're really sorry about all this, Lee," Phillip broke the heavy silence.

"Hey! What happened to 'Dad'? This is *not* your fault, fellas. Somehow we adults got our signals crossed. I only wish you'd called me sooner!" Lee wanted to reassure the boys immediately.

"Well, we knew you were in an important meeting and all. We didn't want to disturb you," Jamie chimed in.

"Now wait just a minute! There is no meeting on earth more important to me than you guys. Got that?" Lee put an arm around each boy's shoulders and turned them toward the vehicle he'd borrowed from the Motor Pool.

"Thanks, Dad. We knew we could count on you," Phillip told him. "What are you driving anyway? Grandma has the Wagoneer and Mom took the 'Vette to her conference. You got a ride into work with your boss, didn't you?" The boys exchanged a glance wondering how they were going to get home when Lee stopped them in front of an older model military-issue Jeep.

"It's not the Corvette, but it runs. Climb on in," he instructed them.

"Wow! Where'd you get this? It's radical! Can we put the top down?" Phillip had already recovered his customary exuberance.

"I think it's a little cool tonight to ride with the top down," Lee said shaking his head.

"Oh man! Please, Dad? It's not too cold for us!" both boys begged.

"Okay," Lee gave in with a grin, "Give me a hand then. This canvas top has to be unsnapped all around." The top removed and stowed in the back, Lee slid behind the steering wheel and started the engine. As usual, the boys argued over who would ride shotgun until Lee threatened to leave without them.

Once on the road, he decided the story of the Jeep would probably take their minds off the events of earlier that evening. "I've actually had this Jeep for almost twenty-one years. I bought her military surplus for five hundred dollars back when I was sixteen. I fixed her up and drove her all through college. After I got back from Viet Nam, I got another, better car, but I've held on to this old baby anyway. She was my first, after all." He smiled and patted the dashboard fondly. "Say, I haven't eaten yet. Are you fellas hungry?" he asked as he turned into the drive-through lane of the local Marvelous Marvin's.

“We’re starved!” the boys shouted in unison. “We haven’t had dinner yet either,” Jamie finished the explanation.

“I guess that means we’ll super-size everything,” Lee declared as he drove past the menu and right up to the hamburger-shaped speaker.

### **9:45 PM Wednesday, September 16, 1987, 4247 Maplewood Drive**

Amanda Stetson felt herself begin to relax as she turned onto Maplewood Drive. It sure was good to be getting home. The boys were with Joe tonight and her mother had taken an overnight trip to the Botanical Gardens in Philadelphia with some of her Garden Club pals. Apparently, there was a big Fall Flower Show going on this week. Tonight she would finally get some private time with her husband. It seems like they had been riding an emotional roller coaster ever since they’d returned from the family vacation out West. Maybe a little one-on-one time would start to put things back on a more even keel.

Turning into the driveway, she was surprised to see an old Government-issue Jeep sitting in front of the garage. She took a closer look at the vehicle as she got out of the ‘Vette to open the garage door. ‘Oh, no! That looked like the black Jeep from the Motor Pool that Leatherneck and Lee had been tinkering with for the past few weeks.’ She got back into the driver’s seat of the ‘Vette and pulled it very carefully into the garage. ‘I’m going to kill him! He couldn’t have invited Leatherneck over tonight of all nights!’ She got out of the car and gathered up her belongings. ‘The other possibility was that Lee had bought that old Jeep from Leatherneck. He had been bugging her to go with him to pick out something that had more seats than the ‘Vette. If he had gone and purchased that old rattletrap without even consulting her, he had another think coming!’

By this time Amanda was almost at the back door. Looking through the window, she could see the remains of a Marvelous Marvin’s meal for more than one on the kitchen table. She could also hear Lee’s voice, but couldn’t see who he was talking to at the moment. Taking a deep breath, she entered her kitchen ready for whatever she might find. She was taken aback when she saw that Lee was talking on the telephone and Phillip and Jamie were arguing in front of the freezer about whether they could open the new container of Choco-chunk ice cream.

“Hold on a minute,” Lee said into the phone and then, covering the receiver, “Boys! I already told you it’s much too late for ice cream. Go get ready for bed, right now!” Phillip sighed and put the ice cream container back into the freezer.

“What about our homework?” Jamie asked.

“I’ll write you a note in the morning. For now, it’s showers and lights out, okay?”

“Sure, Dad!” Jamie answered immediately and started for the stairs never noticing his mother in the doorway.

“What exactly are you going to put on that note?” Phillip wondered aloud.

“Don’t you worry about that, Chief. I have more than a little experience with making excuses. I’m certain I can come up with something. Now, get!” Phillip exited with a wave and a smile for his mom. Lee turned around at that, gave Amanda an apologetic smile, and returned to his phone conversation.

“Sorry about that. Had to get the boys moving toward bed. . . Yeah, I do understand the situation. It’s just that I need to know that this will never happen again.” Lee listened for several moments while Amanda put her things away and re-entered the room. “Okay, you and I both know that we were lucky this time. Things could have turned out much worse for everyone involved. . . So, you have all my numbers now? Good. . . Yeah, we’ll talk again when you get back in town. . . She just walked through the door.” Lee held the phone out to Amanda, “It’s Joe. He wants to talk to you. I’ll go up and check on the boys.”

**“Hi, Joe. What’s up?”** Amanda greeted her ex-husband cheerfully even though she already suspected what had happened tonight.

“Amanda, I just wanted to apologize for not picking the boys up tonight like I had arranged. I know Lee was pretty pissed when he called tonight and for good reason—having to leave an important meeting like that. I wouldn’t want to be called out of a meeting with the Vice President either! I’ll try to make things right with him and with the boys when I get back from Geneva.”

“Oh, Joe. When are you leaving? Does this mean you’ll have to reschedule this weekend, too?” Amanda asked with a sigh of resignation.

“Yes, I’m afraid so. I need to see some people there about a case that may be going to The Hague sometime in the next few months. I can’t put it off or reschedule, so there goes my weekend with the boys. As I told Lee, I’ll give you a call when I get back in the country because I don’t know how long this may take.” Lee came into the kitchen carrying a full laundry basket, which he took into the laundry room. He then returned to begin gathering up the trash from the boys’ fast food meal.

“All right, sweetheart. I know it can’t be helped. We’ll talk to you in a couple days,” Amanda reassured Joe.

“More like a couple of weeks, hon. Listen, I really am sorry about tonight. I’m sure you and Lee had plans. I’ll make it up to you somehow. ‘Night, Amanda,” Joe ended the conversation.

“Bye, Joe. Sleep well,” Amanda hung up the phone and looked over at her husband who was now leaning up against the counter beside the sink.

**“I don’t know** how he can, considering,” Lee grumbled his anger still bubbling just beneath the surface.

“I thought we’d agreed that I’d make all the necessary contacts with Joe, just to avoid little debacles like this? I know you don’t agree with the choices Joe’s made in the past or even with many of the choices he makes now, but he is my ex-husband and the boys’ father. I expect you to honor my request that I be the one to deal with him, Lee,” Amanda reminded him sharply.

“Amanda, I really don’t think that was an option in this case,” Lee began to explain why he’d called Joe in the first place, but Amanda interrupted him.

“I’m sorry you were inconvenienced when Joe couldn’t pick the boys up from practice this evening. I know you were in an important budget meeting this afternoon and I appreciate the fact that you were probably embarrassed to be called out of the meeting to go get the boys at the last minute, but these things happen when you are part of a family, Lee.”

“Is that what you think this is all about, Amanda? Being inconvenienced and embarrassed? I wish that was all that had happened tonight!” Lee exclaimed vehemently. “Do you know how I found out that the boys needed a ride home? No, of course, you don’t! Joe had his secretary call here and leave a message on the machine. Since no one was at home today, I didn’t find out they needed to be picked up until the Arlington Police Department called. When I got there, I got the third degree because they thought I was the one who’d left them standing in Metro Park until after dark!” Lee was shouting now. “This wasn’t about convenience or what other people might think, this was all about the boys’ safety!” Lee pointed up the stairs. “Do know where the boys would have spent the night, if the police hadn’t gotten hold of me? Jamie and Phillip would have been turned over to the Division of Family Services and taken to the Morrison Youth Home. Have you ever spent the night in a youth shelter, Amanda? I bet not! Well, I spent almost three weeks in one when I was Jamie’s age and I wouldn’t wish that on my worst enemy!” Lee’s anger exploded, “You go right ahead and make your little rules, Amanda, and I will break every one of them if I have to in order to keep those boys safe!”

Amanda stepped forward and reached out for his left arm, but he instantly shook her off. “Lee, I am so sorry,” she began quietly.

“Well, I’m not!” he retorted and stalked angrily toward the backdoor, slamming it behind him as he left the house. Amanda remained standing beside the counter, tears streaming down her face.

**Lee blew through** the back gate and it closed with a resounding bang. He came to a sudden stop in the middle of the driveway. ‘Where the hell am I going? Damn, I really lost it in there.’ He took several long deep breaths to try to regain some semblance of control and realized he was still shaking in anger. Needing something to do with himself, he went over to the Jeep and untied the canvas cover stowed in the back. Throwing it over the top of the car, he worked his way carefully around the vehicle until all the snaps were fastened. Leaning up against the Jeep, he considered his next step. He certainly wasn’t ready to go back in and face Amanda just yet. ‘Boy, am I going to pay for that little outburst. Did I really tell her that I wasn’t sorry? Of course, I’m really not sorry for calling Joe, just for losing my temper with her.’ Opening the door of the Jeep, he slid into the driver’s seat. Resting his arms on the steering wheel, he laid his head on his arms for a moment.

Suddenly, he was twelve years old again. It had sounded so simple when his uncle explained it. He had to go fly some training missions with the squadron. They were new on this base and so he hadn’t found anyone to take care of Lee while he was gone.

“You’re twelve years old, Skip, perfectly capable of taking care of yourself for a little while.” Young Mrs. Spencer would look in on him to make sure he did his homework and got to bed on time. Lt. Spencer would know how to get in touch with his uncle in an emergency. “And there had better not be any emergencies, do you read me, Skip?”

Great, he’d thought—two whole weeks without the Major breathing down his neck all the time. Two days after his uncle left, he answered the door of the apartment in the BOQ and came face to face with a strange woman flanked by two MP’s. The woman was asking him all sorts of questions about his Uncle. Where was he now? When would he return? He wouldn’t answer her questions—the Major had been very clear with him that he wasn’t to talk to strangers while he was gone. That didn’t get him anywhere with this lady, she already knew that the Major was TDY for fourteen days of training. He tried to tell her that Lt. Spencer’s wife was looking after him, but she wouldn’t listen. Even though he protested loudly and resisted with all his strength, in moments he was being escorted to her car by the two tall Military Police officers and driven away from the base. The confusion, fear, and anger hit him just as hard now as it had twenty-five years ago.

That first night in the shelter, he had made the mistake of getting up to go to the bathroom. Just as he finished, he realized he was not alone. Turning around, he saw three of the bigger boys blocking the door.



“Fresh meat,” one had called him and the next thing he knew he was face down on the cold, tile floor with his pajama bottoms down around his ankles. Two of the boys held him down while the biggest starting touching him. For a long time, he’d blocked out the details of what happened next. He’d only remembered fighting as hard as he could to get free. When the dorm monitor appeared in the doorway, one of his attackers was bleeding from his nose, another had a split lip, and the third was unconscious on the floor. He’d ended up with a black eye and some bruised ribs.

The adults all tried to get him to talk about it for days. He’d flatly refused. The dorm monitor, Bill, kept telling him they knew what those boys were trying to do to him and it was okay to tell on them. The social worker and some psychiatrist guy tried to help him ‘deal with the experience’. But he didn’t know who to trust and he wasn’t taking any more chances. He just wanted out of there. It was almost a week before he saw the Major and another nine days before they let him go home with him. He and his uncle had suffered through ‘surprise inspections’ from Children and Youth Services for almost another year. He’d lived in constant fear that they would take him away again. That was the first time he was ever glad to be transferred to another base—they closed the case.

Boy, how he hated it when memories blind-sided him like that. Most days he could keep things locked down tight. It was just at night they would slip past his defenses and come out to haunt him. Since he’d been with Amanda, the nightmares had really decreased. Whenever she had spent the night with him at his apartment, he would be fairly certain of a good night’s sleep. But since he’d moved in with her family, they were back. Tonight would be a bad one.

**Amanda heard the** gate crash closed and listened for the sound of an engine. Silence. He was still here. Should she go out to him? No, they were both too overwrought. Crossing into the den, she took several tissues out of the box on the end table. She wiped her tears and blew her nose. She’d go up and change for bed and then return downstairs to wait for him.

**Twenty minutes later** the back door opened quietly. Lee saw her sitting on the couch in the den. Wearing her nightgown and robe, she had a magazine open and was idly flipping pages. He walked into the room and stood nervously in front of the coffee table.

“Hi,” he said quietly running his right hand through his hair. “I’m sorry about that.”

“No, Lee. I’m the one who should be apologizing. I didn’t give you a chance to explain. Again. I’m sorry.” Amanda looked into his green-gray eyes and hoped he could sense her sincerity.

“We seem to be doing that a lot lately. Apologizing, I mean,” Lee sighed heavily and stuck his hands in his pockets.

Amanda put her magazine aside and asked, “Won’t you sit down, Lee? I’m starting to get a crick in my neck looking up at you.” She smiled and patted the sofa beside her. Lee looked at the sofa, but sat instead on the chair across from it.

“Lee, we have some things we obviously need to talk about. . .” Amanda started hesitantly.

“Yeah, we do. But like you’re always saying, now is not a good time. And you’re right,” he sighed again. “But as soon as this conference is over, we have to talk. Sometime and somewhere that we won’t be interrupted by work or family. I just hope. . .” he stopped suddenly and looked away.

“You just hope what, Lee?” Amanda whispered.

He shook his head and swallowed hard a couple of times, “I just hope we *can* work this out, Amanda.”

“Oh, sweetheart!” She moved across the room now, kneeling in front of him with her hands on his. “We will work this out! I know we will because I know how much you love me, and the boys and mother. And I know how much I love you!”

“What if love isn’t enough, Amanda?” he asked her sadly. “What do we do then?”

“If it’s not enough then we’ll just find whatever else we need. I’m not giving up on you, Scarecrow, and you’d better not give up on me!” Amanda told him decisively.

He looked down at her then and gave her that crooked smile she loved so much, “I do love you, Amanda. I just don’t always know how to say it best.”

“You’re doing just fine, Lee,” she said and pulled him up to his feet so she could give him a hug.

When he hugged her back, she looked up at him and asked, “Ready for bed? It’s getting late.”

He leaned down and placed a gentle kiss on her lips. “Yeah,” he agreed. “I think I’ve had enough excitement for one day!” But he knew it would be a long time before sleep would come tonight, if it ever did.

**12:45 PM, Thursday, September 17, 1987, The Q Bureau**

Billy entered the Q Bureau and was very surprised to find it empty. He always liked coming up to the Q Bureau. His first office at the Agency had been in this older part of the building. He would give anything to have the warmth of these old wooden floors or some incandescent lighting in his office now—and to have a real live window that looked out on the world! Amanda's desk was as neat as a pin. Of course, she and Francine had been working in Conference Room B for the past two weeks getting ready for the ITMIG Seminar. Portions of Lee's desk were actually visible today—the files that were usually scattered everywhere were all neatly organized in piles of varying heights. Mrs. Marston had assured him that Scarecrow hadn't left the building yet, so he must be in the vault.

"Hey, Lee, doing some filing I see. Are you sure that's wise?" Billy joked.

Lee looked up from the open file drawer and chuckled, "Well, it was either do some filing or post avalanche warnings."

"You know Amanda is going to complain for months that she can't find anything!" Billy warned him.

"I figure that's better than having her come in here and find me buried under paperwork!" Lee rejoined. "What can I do for you, Billy? As you can see, I'm kind of busy here."

"My sources inform me that you have been surviving on stale doughnuts and bad coffee. I'm here to take you to lunch," he told him with a big grin.

"Gee, Billy, that sounds great, but I'm really behind the eight ball here in the Bureau. I'd better take a rain check," Lee replied with obvious reluctance and returned to his filing.

"Sorry, Scarecrow, this is not an invitation," he informed him as he grabbed Lee's jacket off the hat stand behind him and handed it to his young friend. "This is an order. I'm going to Nedlinger's for lunch and you're coming with me." Lee opened his mouth as if to protest, but Billy just shook his finger at him. "Now, no more arguments. I'm the boss so you have to do what I say. Right?"

"Right, Billy. You know I always do what you say," Lee joked as he followed his boss out the door.

By unspoken consent, Billy and Lee both headed for the corner rear booth once they arrived at Ned's. On their way across the room, both men were stopped several times by greetings from colleagues and acquaintances. Settling into the booth, Lee slid across the bench seat so he could rest his back against the wall. Neither one picked up a menu—they both ate here enough that they already knew what they would order. Billy studied his friend as Lee scanned the room. Lee looked tired, but then it had been a

difficult couple of weeks. Maybe he shouldn't have asked Lee to cover for Francine at the same time that Amanda was out of the Q Bureau. But Scarecrow really was the best man for the job. Others had fought him on that, Smyth in particular. But Lee's performance over these past three weeks had proved all the scoffers wrong. He'd really gotten things done. Maybe he hadn't done them the way Francine would have, but he'd gotten them done.

"What'll it be today, gentlemen?" the waitress asked them.

"I'll have the roast beef and Swiss on pumpernickel, Sandra, and iced tea" Lee placed his order first.

"Your usual then, Lee!" Sandra said. "Will it be cheese fries or potato salad today?"

"How about onion rings?" Lee asked.

"Whatever you want, honey." She looked at Billy with raised eyebrows.

Billy sighed, "Turkey on whole wheat, no cheese, no mayo and a salad with oil and vinegar on the side. And bring me a decaf coffee."

"No chili fries, Billy?" Sandra asked in surprise.

"Nope, Jeannie has me on a strict diet and there are no fries on this diet anywhere," Billy told her with a grimace and a deep sigh.

"So, how are things going for you, Lee?" he inquired as soon as the waitress left with their orders.

"I think they're going pretty well. I'm keeping up with most of Francine's work, though I'm getting behind in the Q Bureau. It's a good thing we don't have any really hot cases right now. I've mostly been reviewing and archiving closed cases."

"I've been meaning to tell you what a good job you've been doing. Despite what Fred Fielder had to say, I've been pleasantly surprised at the way you've handled the administrative chores. The other agents seem to respect your opinion and you've come up with some truly unique solutions to our manpower shortages." Billy's compliment brought a pleased smile to Lee's face.

"Thanks, Billy. It's been really interesting. I have a new appreciation for all the things you and Francine do every day to keep the Section running. I am also considering buying my own bottle of antacids!"

Billy laughed aloud, "No, I think that punching bag is a better idea for you, Stetson!"

Sandra brought their meals and conversation took second place to food for a few minutes. Taking a sip of his coffee, Billy casually asked, "So how are things on the home front, Lee?"

"Well, it's been hectic this week with Amanda staying so late every night at the conference and the boys' busy schedules. I think Dotty and I have managed to keep everything running fairly smoothly so far," Lee answered his friend.

"So, what was that about last night, then? The phone call and the rush to get home?" Billy couldn't help but be curious. He'd seen Lee's face when he'd picked up that call and he'd looked as scared as he'd ever seen him.

"Well, Joe was supposed to pick up the boys from Jamie's Pop Warner practice. Something came up, a conference call to Africa, and he had to cancel. Instead of getting in touch with Amanda or me himself, he left it to his secretary. She thought it was sufficient to leave a message on our answering machine at home! The Arlington police picked them up waiting there in the park after dark! And it was no picnic convincing the detective to let me take them home with me."

"I can't believe Joe would do something like that!" Billy exclaimed. "He's always impressed me as a pretty steady guy."

"Yeah, he had better not pull a stunt like that again or he'll really regret it!" Lee was still pretty angry about the whole situation.

"It can't be easy adjusting to a ready-made family, Lee. But it sounds like you're doing pretty well for a long-time loner and confirmed bachelor."

"Honestly, Billy. The family part is great. Dotty is terrific. When all hell breaks loose at the office, she steps in and catches all the balls we might drop. The boys and I are finally figuring each other out. They're as different as night and day. Phillip can pick up any sport and do it first time every time. He's so out-going. I can't keep up with the names of his 'girl friends' because he seems to change them as often as he changes his socks! Jamie is a real thinker though. He takes his time and works everything out ahead of time."

"Sounds to me like you're really having a good time with those boys!" Billy remarked.

"Yeah, they're great. I thought Jamie would never warm up to me, but lately I think I really have more interests in common with Jamie than I do with Phillip. Weird, isn't it? Who'd have predicted I would enjoy driving carpool and coaching Pop Warner!" Lee looked at his mentor with a grin.

"And you and Amanda? How's that going?" Billy probed gently.

Lee glanced out over the room again eyeing the door longingly, "Fine, Billy. Just fine."

“Come on, Lee. I’ve known you for what? More than ten years now. You can fool almost everyone else, but don’t try to fool me!”

Lee looked back at Billy and sighed. “I’m not too sure about this husband thing. I’ve never been in a relationship that’s lasted this long. Maybe all this stuff is normal. How would I know?”

Billy was sorry to have his concerns confirmed this way. But maybe Jeannie was right and he could help. “What seems to be the problem, Lee?”

“I don’t really know. I wish I did. No matter how hard I try to do what Amanda wants, I always seem to do something wrong. I thought having a ‘mystery marriage’ was tough, but having a public marriage has turned out to be a lot harder than I expected. I wish I could figure out what I’m doing wrong, Billy. I’m really afraid. . .” Lee stopped suddenly realizing what he was about to say.

“You’re really afraid of what, Lee?” Billy prodded him kindly.

“I’m really afraid I’ll mess up so bad and Amanda will be so mad at me that I’ll lose everything,” Lee admitted quietly.

“You know, I’ve watched you and Amanda go a few rounds in the office. She gets mad at you, especially when she’s right and you won’t admit that you’re wrong, but she’s still your partner. She’s not going anywhere.” Billy smiled as he thought about some of the battles he’d witnessed.

“Yeah, but it’s different fighting at the office,” Lee said thoughtfully.

“How so?” Billy waited patiently for Lee to think it out.

“Well, for one thing, I feel like I have home field advantage there. I am the Senior Agent. And there’s really not much for me to lose whether I win the argument or she does. It’s just a job.”

“But at home, there’s more at stake?” Billy asked.

“Yeah, I haven’t had a real family since I was five, Billy. I haven’t ever had anyone who trusted me or loved me the way Amanda does. I can’t afford to lose all that!” Lee locked eyes with Billy. “I don’t know what I’d do if I lost Amanda!”

“And so, you’re afraid to fight with her at home? Because you might lose her, is that it?” Billy was beginning to get a handle on the problem. Damn, if Jeannie hadn’t been right all along.

“You know, Jeannie and I had a similar problem when we were first married,” Billy offered.

“You were afraid to fight with Jeannie! Come on, Billy. I don’t believe that for a minute!” Lee laughed.

“No, Jeannie was afraid to fight with me. She was the youngest in her family and kind of an ‘unexpected blessing’, if you know what I mean? Anyway, anytime we had a little difference of opinion and I got a little upset. . .”

Lee laughed even louder at that, “I’ve seen you get ‘a little upset’. You rattle the windows, Billy!”

“Oh yeah? Who’s telling this story anyway?” Billy picked up his narrative. “When I got a little upset, she’d shut down on me. She’d give in completely to whatever I wanted, but I knew deep down that she wasn’t happy—that we hadn’t really resolved anything. So, we decided to go talk to our pastor about it. That’s when I found out that Jeannie had never heard her parents argue—by the time she’d come along they’d smoothed off most of the rough edges. On the other hand, disagreements in my family were always loud, boisterous affairs: never mean or unkind you understand, but very, very loud. I had a model for marital arguments that I’d gotten from my parents and Jeannie had one from her parents.”

“Sounds more like she had no model at all, if she never remembered her parents fighting,” Lee broke in thoughtfully.

“Right,” Billy waited to see if Lee would say more. When he didn’t, Billy went on, “What we needed was a way to work out our difficulties so that Jeannie didn’t get overwhelmed and we both could express what we wanted and needed. Our pastor suggested that we use some rules to keep our fights fair.”

“Rules for fighting? Isn’t that impractical?” Lee asked.

“That’s what I thought at first, too. But we’ve been using them for over twenty years now and they’ve proven to be eminently practical for us. Maybe they’d work for you and Amanda, too,” Billy suggested hopefully.

“I don’t know; we tried that list thing you suggested and that was a total disaster. I paid for that for weeks!” Lee told his mentor with doubt in his voice.

Billy closed his eyes briefly and then apologized belatedly, “Lee, I **am** sorry about that. When I mentioned it to Jeannie later that night, she reminded me that the lists had never worked for us either—somehow one of us would always get our feelings hurt.”

“Now, you tell me!” Lee exclaimed with a frown.

“But these rules for fighting fair really have worked. Jeannie made me promise that I’d share them with you, if I got the chance,” Billy waited to see if Lee would bite.

Lee looked down at the table for several seconds, and then looked back at his friend with a wry smile, “I suppose it couldn’t hurt to try. What I’m doing now sure isn’t working. Lay on, Mac Duff!”

“The first rule is to make an appointment to fight. . .”

Lee interrupted him immediately, “Make an appointment for a fight! You’re kidding me, right?”

“No, I’m totally serious. This is probably one of the most important rules. You don’t want to discuss a problem when one or both of you are upset. Setting an appointment gives you an opportunity to calm down, to look at things more rationally, and to prepare yourself to work things through.”

“That makes sense,” Lee admitted. “Hold on a minute, I think I’d better write this down.” Lee reached into his jacket pocket, took out his notepad and pen, and flipped to a clean page. He quickly jotted down what Billy had already told him.

When he was ready, Billy continued. “Rule two is that you set the topic for the fight ahead of time. You only deal with one issue at a time. If other things come up in the course of your discussion, you make a note of them and set another time to deal with them—one at a time. Rule three: No low blows.”

“Billy, I know what a ‘low blow’ is in a street fight, but what does it mean in a marriage?” Lee found himself feeling more optimistic than he had all week. This was beginning to make sense.

“In a marriage, you must always treat your partner with the respect and love she deserves and that’s even more important when you disagree. That means, no name-calling, no bad language, no blaming, and no verbal or physical threats. Sarcasm, stonewalling, and emotional withdrawal are also off-limits,” Billy explained.

“Boy, that sounds tough,” Lee commented writing as quickly as he could and wishing once again that he took shorthand.

“It is hard, but it is well worth it. This is the most important relationship in your life, you don’t want to do anything to destroy it and you want to do everything in your power to make it better!” Billy saw in Lee’s eyes that he understood what he was saying. Who would have thought that a housewife from Arlington could change Scarecrow so completely!

“Now, where was I?” Billy asked himself.



But it was Lee who answered looking down at his notes, "Rule three: no low blows."

"Right, you can avoid low blows by using I-messages."

"Eye messages? What are you talking about, Billy?" Lee thought he was getting this stuff, but 'eye messages'?

"An I-message is a way of stating the problem without blaming the other person or making an accusation. Most people would say, '**You're** such a slob. **You** leave your dirty clothes all over the floor. Why can't **you** just put them in the hamper like a normal person.' In a fair fight, we don't want to start a sentence with 'you'. Instead, we start with 'I'. For instance, 'I feel irritated when you leave your dirty clothes all over the floor because I end up picking them up. I wish you would put them in the hamper instead.'" Billy looked at Lee to see if he understood what he was getting at.

"I don't know, Billy," he said looking up from his note taking. "Isn't that a little awkward?"

"Of course, it is at first. It becomes second nature after a while," Billy said with the certainty born of long experience. "Why don't you give it a try with one of the problems that you and Amanda have been having lately?"

"O-Kay, let me think for a minute. How about the dishwasher?"

"The dishwasher?" Billy raised his eyebrows at his agent.

"Yeah, don't you remember the dishwasher that you have to jiggle the blue wire to get it to work?" Lee said in disgust.

"You mean, she still has that dishwasher? That was almost three years ago!" Billy was clearly surprised that Amanda hadn't replaced or repaired her quirky appliance yet.

"The very same," Lee told him. "She is the only one who can get that sucker to work. Even so, she rarely uses it herself. She'd rather do the dishes by hand! Well, I can tell you that the rest of us **do not** enjoy doing the dishes by hand, but she won't even consider replacing the darn thing. It's an 'unnecessary expense'!" Lee said heatedly.

"Okay, then. Take a couple deep breaths, Lee, and try using an I-message just like you would with Amanda," Billy could see that Lee felt pretty strongly about this.

Wrinkling his forehead in thought and running his free hand through his hair a couple of times, Lee tried to formulate an I-message. "I feel angry that you won't replace the dishwasher because it clearly doesn't work and nobody but you likes doing the dishes by hand," Lee began.

"That's a good start, but you probably want to keep the rest of the family out of things unless it's really necessary," Billy advised.

Lee puffed a short breath out through his lips and started again, "When you won't replace the broken dishwasher, I feel angry because I hate doing the dishes by hand. We can afford a new dishwasher, I wish you would just pick out one you like and buy it. Oops! I didn't start with 'I'!"

"That's okay, the 'I' was in there and so were your feelings. And you **almost** avoided blaming Amanda for the problem. It's probably better if you don't use 'loaded' words like 'hate' though. Try again," Billy encouraged him.

Lee sighed and began one more time, "I feel angry when you won't replace the dishwasher because I don't like doing them by hand." He stopped for another moment of thought, "We can afford a new one and I wish you would pick one out."

"Better, much better!" Billy applauded his effort. "Now, if this were a real situation. . ."

"Believe me, it is!" Lee retorted.

"If you and Amanda were really trying to resolve the dishwasher issue," Billy resumed, giving Lee a look that said, 'Interrupt me again at your own peril!' ". . .then, Amanda would re-state what you just said. When you both feel that she understands the problem, one of you would suggest a solution. Back and forth you go, until you find a solution that you both can agree on!"

Lee wrote frantically for several more seconds and then looked up. "Is that it?"

"That's it! Well, except for one piece of advice that comes from my personal experience as a married man. . ." Billy looked at Lee to see if he wanted to hear more.

"Come on, Billy, spill it! I need all the help I can get here, man," Lee obviously wanted to hear it.

"When the woman brings up the issue, don't jump to the solution too quickly. Men want to get the problem solved and move on. But for Jeannie, at least, feeling 'heard' is just as important as solving the problem. She wants to know that I value her opinions and understand her feelings. In fact, some problems get resolved when all I do is listen to her. After all, some things are out of our control, some things we can't 'fix' no matter how much we want to, then we listen and let her know we understand," Billy smiled to see Lee was still writing in his pocket notebook.

"Whew!" Lee looked up at his friend with renewed hope in his eyes. "That's a lot to remember!"

"Jeannie and I typed it up on a 4 x 6 file card and kept it on the table in front of us the first few times we scheduled 'fights'. Jeannie keeps all that stuff. Somewhere. I'll see if

she can find it and I'll make a copy for you and Amanda," Billy was very pleased; this conversation had gone a lot better than he'd predicted.

"It's getting late," Billy Melrose commented to Lee as he looked at his wristwatch and slid out of the bench seat. He reached for the check, but Lee was faster.

"I've got this one, Billy. I owe you much more than a lunch for all the help you've given me today!" he said as he stood up himself.

"You don't owe me anything, Lee. I'm just glad to see you happy and alive. There were times I didn't expect you to live out the week," Billy said shaking the younger man's hand and slapping him a couple of times on the back. "Just do right by that wife of yours, or you'll answer to me!"

"Yes, sir. Whatever you say, sir!" Lee replied, giving his boss a mock salute.

"R-i-g-h-t!" Billy was not buying that act. "If that's the way things are going to be then, I'm going back to the office and you're going home."

"Home? What are you talking about? Have you seen the pile of work I have waiting for me in the Q Bureau?" Lee exclaimed as he paid the lunch check at the cash register.

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I have. But I also know you don't want to be late for Phillip's first start as a member of the JV team. You'd better get a move on, if you and Jamie are going to make the beginning of the game."

### **6:10 PM, Thursday September 17, 1987, Hilton Embassy Row, Washington D.C.**

The Hilton Embassy Row was without question one of the premiere hotels in the D.C. area. Apart from its convenient location right off Dupont Circle, it boasted concierge service, luxury one- and two-bedroom suites, a glittering ballroom which was regularly used by many smaller foreign embassies, and state-of-the-art meeting facilities. The powers-that-be had complained about the expense associated with hosting the weeklong "Intelligence Technology in Modern Intelligence Gathering" Seminar off-site, but Amanda and Francine had finally persuaded those who held the purse strings of the real necessity. In order to attract agents from all the agencies and authorities associated with intelligence gathering in the United States, it would be necessary to hold the seminar in a 'neutral' location so-to-speak. It had the added advantage of drawing very little unwanted attention. Companies often used downtown DC hotels to host technology learning seminars for employees from all over the world. The ITMIG seminar, which had been given the innocuous title 'The Internet and the Modern Manager', looked like just one more corporate workshop among many.

One of the perks of scheduling a corporate affair at the Hilton Embassy Row was the Hospitality suite set aside for the Seminar Leaders. Consisting of two bedrooms and a well-appointed entertaining/living area, it had been a welcome retreat for Francine and Amanda. Francine had actually elected to stay there for the week in order to be more available to conference participants. It also allowed her to closely supervise the security arrangements for the seminar. Though Amanda traveled home each evening, she and Francine had found the privacy of the suite useful during the day for evaluating the progress of the seminar and for making plans for the next day's agenda. At the moment however, the suite was being readied for its intended purpose—a last-minute party was being set up. Drinks, wine and soda, were being laid out on one long table against the north wall. Hot and cold hors d'oeuvres were arriving as well and smelled heavenly. Later, a simple, but elegant meal would be served to a small, but elite group.

When Francine had announced to the seminar participants that the Thursday evening session was being cancelled because the seminar was now ahead of schedule, all the agents cheered. Little groups had formed to plan an evening's entertainment in the nation's capitol city. Kate Graham, representing the six women attending the training, immediately approached Amanda. The women had apparently decided to form a private party and wanted Francine and Amanda to join them. It was a rare opportunity for female intelligence operatives from several different organizations to share experiences and to do a little 'female' bonding. Francine had instantly taken over as 'party planner' making all the arrangements with hotel catering, while Amanda found herself on the telephone waiting for someone at home to pick up. The evening sessions rarely went past nine. Something told her this little gathering would go later—much, much later probably.

"King!" Jamie's voice answered the phone.

'Oh no,' Amanda thought ruefully. 'They are picking up Lee's atrocious phone manners!' "Good evening, Jamie. This is your mother. How are you tonight? Got your homework done?"

"Hi, Mom!" Jamie's manner instantly returned to that of an enthusiastic twelve-year old boy. "We just got back from Phillip's JV game. It was awesome—he even got to play! We're eating dinner and working on our homework at the same time. Well, except for Dad. The Ferguson's dog is stuck under their porch and he went over to help Mr. Ferguson get it out."

Amanda had to smile at that. After all the times that poor dog had been blamed for the damage to her mother's flowerbeds when it had really been Lee's size twelve feet, he owed that pup a rescue or two!

"Wait one minute, Mom. Here he comes now. Dad, it's Mom for you."

Amanda heard Phillip's voice in the background, "Hey, dweeb brain, I wanted to talk to her, too! I gotta tell her all about the game." Amanda detected the sounds of a struggle through the telephone.

Then Lee's deep voice came through the receiver loud and clear even though it was obvious that he hadn't taken the phone from Jamie yet. "Phillip, let go of the telephone right now. You will get a chance to talk to your Mom, if she has any time before her evening session, I promise, and don't call your brother names. Don't you kick your brother in the ankles either, Jamie King. . ."

Amanda was laughing aloud when Lee finally gained possession of the handset. "Hi, Amanda. What's up?"

"Lee, I have a favor to ask of you," Amanda began. "We cancelled the evening session because we were ahead of schedule. . ."

"Great," Lee interjected. "Does that mean you'll be home early tonight? I have something I want to discuss with you. . ."

"Well, not exactly, hon. Hear me out," Amanda chided him subtly for breaking in.

"Sorry, go ahead," Lee allowed.

"The women decided it might be nice to spend the evening together. Talk about common issues and experiences, share ideas—what's worked and what hasn't, you know stuff like that. So, I may actually be a little later than usual. If that's okay, that is," Amanda felt badly about taking even more time away from her husband and family, but she really wanted to stay tonight.

"That's okay, Amanda. It sounds like a great opportunity. I know you haven't gotten the chance to meet many other people in our business, especially those outside the Agency. And it's not often that so many women from all over are gathered in one place. Us guys get to chew the fat all the time; you should make the most of this chance to benefit from the experience of other female operatives. What is it Billy is always trying to get us to do? Network, that's it! Go for it, Amanda."

"Thanks, Lee. I promise to spend all of the coming weekend making it up to all of my men!" she said gratefully.

"Speaking of this weekend, can we schedule a fight?" Lee changed the subject rather abruptly.

Amanda exclaimed, "Schedule a fight, Lee?!" She lowered her voice when she realized all the other women were looking at her, "What **are** you talking about?"

Taking a deep breath, Lee plunged on, "You know how we said we had a lot of things to talk about once this seminar is over? I thought it would be a good idea to set aside some time on Saturday afternoon to talk. Your mother said she could take the boys out to a movie so we won't be interrupted for a couple of hours and I thought it would be easier to talk about just one thing. Say, the dishwasher, for instance." Lee waited apprehensively for her response.

"Lee, where is all this coming from?" Amanda had the distinct impression she was being set up.

"I had lunch with Billy today and he told me all about how to 'fight fair'. There are actually rules you can use when you have a fight, did you know that?" her husband explained with enthusiasm. "I just thought we could give it a try. Talking about everything all at once is kind of overwhelming, don't you think?"

"You know, Lee. That sounds like a good idea. Are you going to share these rules with me?" Strangely enough, she was relieved to find Lee taking the lead in this.

"Billy has them written down on a card. He's going to give me a copy at work tomorrow and I can explain them to you, I think. I did take notes."

"Saturday afternoon, it is then," Amanda confirmed.

"Great!" Lee sounded truly happy. "And now I'd better give the phone to Phillip before he explodes with excitement. 'Bye, Amanda. I love you.'"

When Amanda finally got off the phone with Phillip, the party was in full swing and so her bright smile was not completely out of place. Only she knew it had more to do with her conversation with her husband than with the lively activities taking place around her.

**1:45 PM, Saturday, September 19, 1987, 4247 Maplewood Drive, Arlington, Virginia**

Amanda Stetson had a smile on her face as she bustled around her sunny kitchen putting away the remnants of a late lunch. It was so good to have the ITMIG seminar over and done with. So far, this weekend had been relaxing, fun, and completely normal. Listening to the conversation around the picnic table on the patio, she couldn't help think about how much she had missed her family. Last night, they'd gone out for pizza and ice cream to celebrate the end of the seminar. She'd been expecting the boys to beg to stop at Movie Junction to rent a video, but they had asked to play a family game of Monopoly instead. At ten o'clock, she and Jamie had finally declared the game a draw to the great relief of Phillip and Lee who were mortgaged to the hilt and distinctly cash-poor. This morning they had all piled in the Wagoneer for the short ride to Jamie's Pop Warner game against the Georgetown Generals. It was hard to believe that this

was the first game she'd been able to attend. When the boys were younger, she'd never missed one of their activities, well almost never.

Arriving at the field in Georgetown, she and Phillip had gone to find seats in the stands. She'd been surprised to find that Lee had gone down to the sidelines with Jamie. According to Phillip, Lee had been drafted to work with the receivers and special teams after Coach Gallagher had heard him giving Jamie some pointers at one of the first practices. Lee had been helping coach Jamie's team all season and she'd had no idea. The game had been both exciting and frightening. Jamie had to be the smallest player on the field. And they kept throwing the ball to him!

With less than a minute to go in the fourth quarter, the Generals were beating the Arlington Lions by just two points. The Generals had the ball and Phillip explained that they were playing it safe in order to run down the clock. Suddenly, the Generals' quarterback dropped the ball. One of the Lions' players, a very large boy wearing the numeral ninety on his jersey, picked it up and started running with it while being chased by practically all the Generals. Running down the field right beside number ninety was number twenty-one, Jamie King. Just as number ninety crossed the ten-yard line, two of the Generals' players had almost caught up with him. In the blink of an eye Jamie went down in front of them. The nearest player tripped over him while the other boy slowed down and ran around the minor collision, which allowed number ninety to cross the goal line and win the game.

In the car on the way home, Jamie had admitted that he had gotten his feet tangled with the Georgetown player and that was how they both fell down. Phillip immediately chimed in with, "Klutz-boy's clumsiness finally pays off!"

Lee glared at Phillip in the rearview mirror and said, "Jamie, that had nothing to do with being clumsy. Players often get tangled up when they're running full out like that trying to catch another player. If you'd tripped the other boy intentionally, a penalty would have been called the play would have been over."

Jamie thought this over and asked, "You mean because it was an accident, there was no penalty and the score counted?"

"That's right and being a lineman, Roger isn't a very fast runner over distance. If you hadn't picked up and started blocking for him, the faster Generals would have caught him for sure," Lee told him confidently.

"Sounds to me like you're the hero of the game, Jamie King!" Dottie exclaimed proudly.

Arriving home, she and mother had thrown together a late lunch during which the three 'men' had relived the game play-by-play. Amanda was beginning to understand some of what they were talking about and the simple good cheer of the conversation washed over her completing the job of relaxing her overstressed nerves. Her smile was one of true contentment as she wiped the last of the crumbs off the counter into her hand and

tossed them into the trash. Just as she finished, the boys pounded into the kitchen carrying the empty lemonade pitcher and the folded tablecloth dropping them both onto her clean countertop.

“You’d better not take forever to change, Jamie. I want to get to the mall sometime today!” Phillip shouted at his younger brother’s back as he was already on his way to the stairs. “Maybe I’d better go up and make sure he doesn’t take too long, Grandma,” Phillip volunteered as he leapt up the stairs after him.

“That’s certain to be trouble,” her mother commented with a smile as she placed a tray holding five empty glasses on the counter.

“I thought you were going to the movies,” Amanda said to her as she filled the sink with soapy water.

“That was my idea, but the boys would rather go to the Arcade,” Dotty told her as she placed the dirty glasses in the sink.

“Did Lee get lost?” Amanda peered out the window trying to spot her husband in the backyard as she washed the few dishes they’d used for lunch.

“Not exactly. Ray White, from three doors down, came over. He needs some help pulling an air conditioner out of their dining room window. They finally got central air, you know.” Her mother was always completely up-to-date with any changes in the neighborhood. Talk about intelligence gathering!

“We’re ready to go, Grandma, hope you have a ton of quarters!” the boys declared as they clattered back into the kitchen.

“I’m all ready for an afternoon at the Arcade,” she replied holding up two rolls of quarters, a set of earplugs and her latest romance novel, “Red River Roundup”.

“But you’re not ready, Jamie!” Lee admonished the boy from the back door. “Unless you think the patio is the place to store your cleats, shoulder pads and helmet?”

“I’ll put them away when I get back,” Jamie promised anxious to leave.

“You’ll put them away now, son.” Lee told his stepson firmly.

“Just do it, Jamie. So we can get going, huh!” Phillip urged his younger brother.

“Come on, Phillip. We’ll wait for you in the car, Jamie.” Dotty smiled knowingly at Lee and Amanda before heading out the door with a “Have fun, you two!”

“Yeah, have fun!” Jamie echoed as he finally made his escape.



“Well,” said Amanda looking across the kitchen at her instantly somber husband.

“Yeah,” replied Lee returning her gaze.

“I guess we have a fight scheduled, is that right?” Amanda was suddenly rather nervous herself.

“I guess so,” Lee responded.

Amanda turned and retrieved a half sheet of paper from the side of the refrigerator. “I looked over the ‘Rules’ Billy gave us and, I guess as the person who raised the issue, you have to start first.”

“Right,” Lee looked at the kitchen table. “Why don’t we sit down?” When they were both seated on opposite sides of the kitchen table, Amanda placed the list of rules between them, folded her hands on the tabletop and looked expectantly at Lee.

“Okay. Here goes.” Lee took a deep breath and began, “Amanda, I feel irritated when you won’t replace the dishwasher because I don’t enjoy doing the dishes by hand.” He took another deep breath and waited.

Amanda glanced quickly at the ‘Rules’ and replied, “If I understand you correctly, you are frustrated with me because you don’t like doing dishes by hand and you want to replace the dishwasher?”

“Ummm, that’s kind of it. Except I’m not really frustrated with you, just with the situation.” Lee told her after a moment of thought.

“Okay, you’re frustrated with the broken dishwasher and not with me?” Amanda clarified.

“Well, I do wish you would replace the dishwasher. We can afford a new one, you know.” Lee told her hesitantly. Amanda sighed and looked down at the table for several minutes. With every second that ticked by in silence, Lee became more and more concerned.

Finally, Amanda looked up at him pensively. “I’ve been thinking about this ever since you mentioned the dishwasher on Thursday night and you’re right. With two salaries now, we can afford a new dishwasher. I guess I just got so used to doing without things that it’s a little hard to change my mindset now.”

“Oh, is that what it was?” Lee said with relief. “I thought that the reason you wouldn’t let me contribute more to running the household was because you didn’t trust me not to take off and leave you in the lurch.”

“You know, now that you mention it, that may have been part of it as well.” She hurried on when she saw the hurt in his eyes. “I do trust you, Lee, I know you would never abandon us. But I’ve been doing this all on my own for so long now that it’s hard sometimes to make room for someone else,” Amanda confessed.

“I can understand that, Amanda. When Billy kept assigning you to ‘help’ me at first, it was just as hard for me to let you in,” Lee reminded her.

“There is one other reason I am reluctant to give up washing the dishes by hand,” Amanda told her husband coyly.

“What’s that?” Lee took the bait.

“Well, for the past few years now, every so often an attractive man would pop up in that window and persuade me to join him in some new adventure. I wouldn’t want to miss that!” Amanda said with a wink.

“The only man you are going to have any new adventures with is now inside the kitchen,” Lee said decisively.

“So, I guess we’re going shopping for a dishwasher, huh?” Amanda said.

“And you’re going to let me pay for it?” Lee queried.

“You can pay half,” Amanda told him.

“That’s not really fair, Amanda. I make more than twice what you do, so I should pay at least two-thirds of it,” Lee countered.

“Let’s see how much it will cost and decide who should pay how much at that point,” Amanda suggested. “But you make a good point, Lee. Maybe we should sit down and rework the budget. We could set up a joint account so that we both can contribute to household expenses.”

“That sounds great to me,” Lee enthused. “When do you want to do that?”

“Sunday afternoons are usually fairly quiet. If we get everything worked out, then we could set up the account at the Credit Union some time on Monday,” Amanda thought out loud.

“Oh shoot!” Lee exclaimed.

“What?” Amanda asked in confusion.

“We got off the topic. We were only supposed to talk about the dishwasher. If anything else came up we were supposed to jot it down and schedule another time to talk about it,” Lee explained shaking his head.

“We were bound to make some mistakes the first time we tried this, Lee.” Amanda comforted him.

“Yeah, I guess so.” Lee didn’t sound completely convinced.

“When do you want to go out dishwasher shopping?” Amanda attempted to return to the original topic.

“How about now?” Lee suggested eagerly. “The boys and your mother won’t be back for at least another hour or so!”

“Oh no, Stetson, now is not a good time at all. We still have one more thing to do before we’re finished here,” she said as she got up from her seat and walked over to stand in front of her husband with her hands on her hips.

“Really?” Lee leaned forward and read through the ‘Rules’ one more time wondering what he had missed. “I don’t think so, Amanda. We’ve gone through all the steps on Billy’s list.”

“This one is not on the list, but it is definitely the final step,” she told him with certainty.

“Well, don’t keep me in the dark! What is it?” Lee demanded looking up into her face.

Amanda sat down in his lap, reached up to play with the hair on the nape of his neck and looked deep into his gray-green eyes, “The making up part, silly.”

“Oh,” Lee replied with a groan. Amanda leaned forward and gently touched her lips to his. “That part,” he was having a hard time concentrating all of a sudden. Amanda kissed him again more deeply and rejoiced as his breathing became ragged.

She said, “Hadn’t we better take this upstairs, big fella?”

“Just my thought exactly,” Lee replied quickly. He shifted his right arm beneath her knees and easily stood up with his wife in his arms. “The making up part, I think I’m going to like this kind of fighting after all,” he said as he started up the stairs.

“I can guarantee that you’ll like it a lot,” Amanda whispered as she kissed her way from his lips, along his jaw line and down his neck.

“Oh my gosh!” Lee moaned just after he kicked the bedroom door shut behind them.

***It was well*** after four o'clock when Lee heard the Wagoneer pulling into the driveway. Looking down with a fond smile at his wife as she slept, he decided to intercept the boys before they disturbed her much needed rest. Dressing quickly, he managed to reach the kitchen just as they did.

"Hey, fellas! Have a good time at the Arcade?" he greeted them cheerfully.

"Oh yeah, it was awesome!" Jamie cried enthusiastically. "I almost nailed all the zombies!"

"Good for you, Sport!" Lee clapped him on the back. That must be a new one. Last time he'd gone to the Arcade with the boys they'd been blasting alien invaders.

"And there's this really cool new game where you sit on a life-size motorcycle and feel like you're really driving it," Phillip informed him revving an imaginary throttle in his excitement.

"Hey guys, keep it to a dull roar, okay. Your Mom is upstairs napping."

"Oh, sorry!" the brothers apologized in stereo.

"Are you up for some basketball, Dad? We're ready to mop the court with you in some two-on-one!" Phillip looked at Jamie for confirmation.

"Oh yeah? In your dreams, Phillip! But we'd better play at the park so we won't disturb your Mom." A little basketball sounded really good to Lee.

"All right! I'll get the ball," Jamie was out the door in a flash.

"Can we take your Jeep? I'll take the top off!" Phillip volunteered.

"Sure thing. I'll be right out," Lee told Phillip as the boy raced outside after his brother.

"Well, I guess your little 'talk' went pretty well. You certainly look more relaxed than I've seen you in a long time, son." Dotty winked at him as she reached for her apron so she could start dinner.

"Well, you were right about one thing, Dotty. Making up certainly *is* worth it," he returned her wink and flashed both dimples as he followed his stepsons out the door.