

## Need to Know

By Jill Minnich

Rating: PG-13 for language and violence

Synopsis: Lee spills the beans and fireworks follow.

Time Frame: Approx. June 17, 1987 through July 10, 1987

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### Part One:

**Nam et ipsa scientia potestas est.  
Knowledge itself is power.  
Francis Bacon**

## Chapter 1

**Lee Stetson was bored. In fact, he had rarely been so supremely bored in** all his years of government service. He had always known that administrative meetings could be deadly. That was why he had worked so damned hard to avoid them. When he had first been assigned to the Q Bureau, Billy had tried to drag him into these meetings. Lee had argued that managing a room full of old files and cold cases hardly made him an administrator. Wisely, Billy had dropped the issue and bided his time. Then Amanda had qualified as a full-time field agent and had also been assigned to work as Lee’s partner in the Q Bureau. The good news was that they could be together every day without having to make up any excuses. The bad news was that now Lee had become a supervisor. As a first-year agent, Amanda required supervision by a senior agent. Lee wasn’t about to give that job to anyone else. In Billy’s book, heading a department and supervising another agent spelled ‘administration’.

Until now, Lee managed to ditch most scheduled administrator’s meetings by heading out into the field on a hot lead or to meet a contact, but that was impossible today. Amanda was on special assignment with Francine in California. They were holding a series of fact-finding meetings with military, business, and scientific experts on communication, computers and the World Wide Web. They also hoped to meet with Steve Jobs, Steve Wozniak, and Bill Gates, the boy geniuses who revolutionized business and communication by inventing the personal computer and the systems that operate them. The idea was that Amanda and Francine would come back and design some kind of

specialized computer training for investigative federal agents. With Amanda gone, Lee couldn't just head out into the field. In the first place, she'd made him promise that he wouldn't handle any active cases while she wasn't there to watch his rear. In the second place, he was responsible for Phillip and Jamie this week while their mother was away. Dotty was up in Maine taking care of Aunt Minnie (or was it Millie?) and her broken hip. Joe was, well, apparently too busy this week. Lee didn't want to be out of the office if the boys happened to need him. Here he was sitting in this dark, stuffy conference room at a truly unnecessary meeting watching Ralph LaRue drone through an endless overhead presentation on new expense reimbursement policies and the recently revised accounting procedures. Like a typical CPA, Ralph had handed them a one hundred fifty-page manual detailing the new policies and then proceeded to read them the entire manual, word for word.

Tipping his chair back against the wall behind him, Lee pretended to watch the screen where Ralph was now projecting yet another list of approved reimbursable expenses and their dollar limitations. 'Boy, do I miss Amanda right now,' he thought. She usually sat beside him in these meetings and kept him from getting bored or antsy. Surprisingly, he hadn't missed her as much as he'd feared. Work during the day and trying to keep up with the King boys at night had kept him busy enough that he'd barely had time to think about her. It was when the lights went out at night and the house on Maplewood Drive finally quieted down that he found he couldn't think about anything, or anyone else. Last night it was all he could do to keep from grabbing the phone and dialing her number. He'd just wanted to hear her voice. She'd ramble on about her day and the unique timbre and inflection of 'his Amanda' would soothe his nerves and ease his heart. He knew Francine would get suspicious if he called every night, so he lay there on the lumpy, short pullout bed staring at the vague shapes of family pictures on the white family room shelves. One day, one day soon, he would be smiling out of one of those pictures with his wife, his stepsons, and his mother-in-law. He'd fallen asleep thinking about that day. Later that night he'd awoken from a deep sleep and found himself reaching out for Amanda as if she were right there where she belonged, beside him in bed. Then he'd recalled that he was on the sofa bed in the family room and Amanda was on another coast. Damn, it would only be worse next week without the boys. Oh great! Now he was bored and depressed!

He needed to think about something positive, something happy, and definitely something other than the usual and reasonable limitations on meal reimbursements during extended out-of-area assignments! Saturday night, Amanda's last night home—he'd been thinking about that evening a lot. The day had been fairly typical for a King family Saturday: running errands, cleaning up around the house, and yard work. It seemed like Amanda had spent two hours that evening reviewing the house rules and the boys' schedule as if he didn't know them as well as she did by now. Finally, Jamie and Phillip had gone to bed, but under protest. They'd planned to sleep in the family room with him, kind of a

guys' sleep over. They only slouched off to bed when he'd promised them they'd do just that once school was out.

If anyone had told him just two years ago that he'd look forward to sitting on the couch in the family room of a suburban house cuddling with the mother of two teenaged boys, he would've laughed out loud. Even though they 'd been married for four months, he'd still choose lying on the couch with Amanda safe in his arms over a week in Monte Carlo with any other woman. And he'd told her so on Saturday night. She'd chuckled at that and he'd felt her quiet laughter warm his heart. He'd even gotten up the courage to tell her straight out that he wanted to reveal their marriage to the whole family on their upcoming 'family' vacation. He was tired of the 'mystery' part of their marriage. He knew that she hadn't been completely convinced by his arguments, but she had promised she'd think about it while she was away.

A sudden, bright light roused him from his reverie. "Are there any questions?" Ralph LaRue asked in the same nasal monotone he'd used for the entire presentation.

"No, Ralph," Associate Director Katherine Hunter immediately replied. "You were most thorough. If any of the other administrators have questions, they can approach you directly." She smiled at Ralph even as she eyed the crowd jostling in the doorway.

"Daydreaming, Scarecrow?" Billy Melrose, Chief of the Field Section had approached him quietly.

"Just waiting for the bottleneck at the door to clear, Billy," Lee answered with a wink. He picked up the three-inch binder he'd been handed when he'd entered the room and followed his supervisor out of the conference room, down the hall, and into the Bullpen. Billy stopped beside his secretary's desk, "File this for me, please, Cheryl. Were there any phone messages?"

"Yes, sir," she replied briskly, taking the thick binder from Billy with one hand while she handed him a half-dozen pink message slips with the other. "And this one just came in for you, Mr. Stetson. He said it was urgent."

Lee took the pink slip, frowned at the name and number, then crumpled it into a ball and shot it with a snap of his wrist into the nearby wastebasket. "Thank you, Mrs. Rupp. I'll call as soon as I get up to the Q Bureau." Abruptly, he turned on his heel and headed straight for the elevator.

Billy leaned over and retrieved the slip from the trash unfolding it carefully: "11:41A, Joe King, EAO, 555-5345, Urgent!"

## Chapter 2

***Amanda pulled herself out of the hotel pool and reached for the towel she'd*** left on the lounge chair. It wasn't exactly an Olympic-size pool, but she'd swum enough laps to feel pleasantly tired. The last few days had been spent in meetings with computer experts at the California Institute of Technology. Her head was still spinning with bits and bytes, baud and bandwidth, Internet and intranet, html, URLs, IP addresses and DNS servers. She'd already filled an entire notebook with this strange new language she was learning. After several days, it was beginning to make some kind of sense to her. She was very glad for this afternoon off; she needed some time to sort things out. First, she'd rewritten her notes from the morning session, and then headed to the pool for some welcome exercise. Before she'd headed out the door of her hotel room, she'd scooped up her leather-bound journal from the bedside table. Things had been so hectic these last few days, she'd been completely exhausted by the time they'd returned to the hotel and eaten a late dinner. Most nights she'd call home if it weren't too late and then fall directly into bed. She hadn't had a chance to write in her personal journal since she'd left home. Now was as good a time as any. Running her hand fondly over the worn cordovan leather of its cover, she opened the journal with the green ribbon she had long used for a marker and smiled as she saw the entry she'd written late Saturday night.

Saturday, June 13, 1987

What a great day this has been. Lee came over first thing this morning and caught us in the middle of breakfast. Still can't get him to eat a thing—just coffee, please. The boys are so excited about Lee staying with them next week. They took his black duffel and garment bag right into the family room and wanted to fold out the bed then and there! Lee managed to distract them by reminding them of baseball practice at eight.

After practice we ran some errands—the dry cleaners to pick up my dresses and Lee's shirts, the hardware store for white paint and a new shovel and then on to the grocery store. I couldn't believe how patient Lee was with the whole process. He did manage to sneak some chips and guacamole dip into the cart at the SuperSaver, so maybe his motivation wasn't completely altruistic. Then it was home for a quick lunch.

I've put off some of the heavier yard chores this spring—first, there was my recovery which seemed to take forever, and then things were so busy at work and with the boys' crazy schedules. . . Of course, when Aunt Minnie fell

and broke her hip, mother just had to go to Maine to help out. Mother would be appalled at the state of her gardens! We really had our work cut out for us today and we accomplished more in one afternoon than I'd imagined possible. Working together, the four of us got the gazebo painted in record time. One look from Lee stopped an incipient paint fight between the boys, so almost all the paint went where it was supposed to this year! I weeded and Lee turned compost into all of mother's flowerbeds, while the boys mowed and raked the yard. I even got to transplant a few of the annuals I'd grown from seed into the planters in front of the house. I thought I had everything completely under control until I heard the sound of outraged male voices in the back yard. It seems that after he used the hose to clean off the driveway, Phillip decided to turn it on Lee and Jamie! By the time I reached the backyard, all three of them were lying in a wet, tangled mess on the muddy grass. Lee had just regained control of the hose and shut it off at the nozzle. Fortunately, no water had hit the freshly painted gazebo, a fact Lee was very quick to point out. "No harm, no foul, Amanda!" was how he put it! How he leaps to defend those boys and their antics! Phillip managed to look suitably sheepish, so I just herded all three of them inside to clean up while I pulled dinner together. In spite of the water fight, things look spic and span around here, if I do say so myself.

After dinner, I showed Lee the notes I'd written out regarding the 'House Rules' and the boys' schedule for the next few days, as if Lee didn't know those almost as well as I do by now! He'll only have them until school's out, and then Joe will pick them up for two weeks. Well, two weeks with Jamie, just one with Phillip. Phillip will be going to Football Camp the week after school lets out. My little boys sure are growing up quickly. Joe has promised to take Jamie backpacking that week so he can earn the 50-miler requirement for his Raccoon rank. I think it will be good for Jamie to have some one-on-one time with Joe. For some reason lately, he has seemed less than enthusiastic about spending time with his Dad.

I thought we'd never get those boys off to bed. They wanted to have a sleepover in the family room with Lee. They only gave in when he promised them that they would have plenty of time for 'Guys' Nights' once school was out for the summer. Then they insisted that he come up with me to say 'good night'. One minute they're all grown up, going off to Football Camp and backpacking the Appalachian Trail, and the next they want us to 'tuck them in', though they will never admit it publicly.

Boy, did it feel good to finally have a quiet moment all alone with Lee. We don't get enough of those lately. I can still feel his strong arms around me and I am more than half-tempted to go join him on the couch in the family room this very minute! But the way things are right now with our mystery marriage and the boys in the house tonight, that's just not an option. He said the cutest thing when I apologized to him for just cuddling tonight.

"Amanda, I wouldn't trade one night cuddling with you on your couch for a week in Monte Carlo with any other woman." Sometimes he knows just what I need to hear. Maybe I should write down the rest of our conversation tonight while it's still fresh in my memory. After all, I promised him I'd think about it while I'm away.

There was a long silence after that. I remember lying there with my head pillowed on his chest just listening to the steady beat of his heart. I'd almost fallen asleep, I think, when he shifted his right arm a little and whispered into my hair. "Amanda, I want to tell the family about our marriage while we're on vacation." I wasn't terribly surprised. He's been hinting about coming clean for over a month now. It was only a matter of time before he came right out with it. But on our vacation? I'm just not sure that's such a good time to tell them.

"Why not?" he asked. "We'll all be together. We'll be relaxed, having a good time. It seems like the perfect time to tell them."

"We don't know how they'll take the news, honey. They might be upset," I warned him.

"Oh, come on, Amanda," he rumbled back. "Your mother and Phillip have been hinting about a ring ever since we got back from California."

"And what about Jamie?"

"I think Jamie and I have made some real progress over the last few months. Between the photography and helping him with his baseball, well, we've gotten a lot closer lately. I think you're worrying for no reason."

"Lee, honey, I just don't want to chance ruining our vacation, okay?"

"Amanda, I'm tired of going back to my lonely bed in my apartment at night. I want to watch you fall asleep every night. I'm tired of 'quickies' over lunch.

I want to make love to my wife all night whenever I want to without having to engage in logistics that rival the Invasion of Normandy. When I can't go to sleep at night because I'm still thinking about a case, I want to be able to wake you up so we can talk about it. I want the whole world to know how much I love you. I want to be 'normal', Amanda."

"I thought we agreed that it was safer for the boys. . ."

"Amanda, anyone looking for a way to get to me couldn't help noticing that I'm over here practically every night. The Ferguson's have noticed. Mrs. Gilstrap certainly has noticed. She asked me today when I'm moving in. Besides, Mrs. King has made a few enemies of her own in the last year or two, in case you hadn't noticed. When I'm over at my apartment half the time I can't sleep because I want you. The other half, I lie awake worrying that I'm not there to protect all of you. I've begun to think that everyone would be a lot safer with me here at night rather than all the way over in Georgetown. Not to mention, who's going to keep me safe, huh?" At that, he poked me playfully in the ribs.

I had to chuckle. He's right and I know it. We would all be safer together than apart. "But what about work?" I asked him.

"What about work?" he replied casually. He knew exactly what I meant—he was the one who had explained it all to me.

"You know as well as I do that there are no married couples working together in the field at the Agency," I retorted.

"That's true in the States, but there are several married couples who work together in Europe and Asia."

"But none here, not in DC, Lee. Dr. Smyth wasn't thrilled with me to begin with and he isn't exactly your biggest fan either. This could be just what he needs to break up our partnership." I'm really not sure I want to work with anyone but him. I am absolutely certain that I don't want him going out in the field without me there to watch his backside.

"So we won't be able to work together," he replied evenly. "Worse things could happen. Maybe I should take that job offer at State that Dick Myers is always dangling in front of me. It would be a lot more money and the hours

would be more nine-to-five. I'd have to do some traveling, but it would be all administrative stuff, no more guns, bombs and car chases."

He'd hate that—all paperwork and no action. And I told him so.

"Maybe it wouldn't be so bad. I could be home for dinner almost every night. Even help coach the boys' teams." He already does that—unofficially, of course.

"What about me?" I asked. "What will I do?"

"You're a fully qualified field agent now—one of the best-trained in the Agency, if I do say so myself. They'll just have to find you a partner, though I have to admit that I won't be thrilled watching you go out into the field without me."

He trailed off. I heard what he wasn't saying. Maybe I should come out of the field, too. No, I worked hard to get where I am today. I like my job and not just because I get to work with him. (Okay, that is one of the best perks I can't deny it!) It's just that I have found something I enjoy doing. I think I do it pretty well and I feel like I can make the world a little better place by what I do. "Sweetheart, I know what you're saying. You want to be a real part of our family. And you are. Look at how the boys treat you—Phillip doesn't turn the hose on just anyone you know. It was Jamie's suggestion to ask you to come over this week when Joe said that he couldn't do it until next week. And my mother, well as far as she's concerned you're an eleven on a scale of ten!"

He sighed and I felt his warm breath ruffle my hair. He took my left hand in his for a moment and ran his thumb across the place where my wedding set should be. "Yeah, but. . . it's not the same thing," he observed wistfully.

"I know it's not the same thing, sweetheart, but it's the best we can do right now."

"Is it really the best we can do, Amanda?" he was whispering again so I had to turn my head to hear him. "I can act like their step-dad all I want, but the boys don't know I am their step-dad. All I want is for us to be a family. I didn't know it before, but I realize it now. That's all I've ever wanted." His voice was rough with the tears I knew he had no intention of shedding. What else could I say?



"I promise I'll think about it while I'm away."

Maybe this time away will give me a chance to figure out why I'm suddenly so reluctant to end the mystery part of our marriage. It's strange, isn't it? Lee was the one who was reluctant to admit that he was attracted to me, hesitant to share his feelings and to trust me with his heart. Now that he's committed himself fully and completely to me and my family—and I don't doubt for a minute that he adores my boys and my mother—I'm the one dragging my feet. This journal has always been the place where I've been able to be honest with myself. Now I hesitate to write about anything but the most banal daily events. I have got to figure this out. And not just for my own sake, this half-life is hurting Lee, too. I can see that now.

"Amanda, still hard at it, I see." Francine dropped her shopping bags onto the poolside table and flopped down on the end of Amanda's chaise lounge. Amanda snapped her journal shut and barely moved her feet out of the way before her colleague sat on them. "You won't believe the bargains I found!" She pulled a pair of tiny red leather slides with at least 4-inch heels out of one of the bags. "These are regularly \$300 and I got them for just under \$149. You should have come with me, really! All work and no play make Amanda a very dull girl, you know."

"Half-price, that is quite a bargain, Francine." Amanda replied diplomatically as she casually slid her journal under her towel, picked up her iced-tea and prepared to hear a blow-by-blow account of Francine's shopping exploits. She would try very hard not to think about how many pairs of sneakers \$150 would buy for the boys.

## Chapter 3

### ***Lee Stetson stalked into the Q Bureau and tossed the Accounting***

Procedures binder onto the growing pile on Amanda's desk. He didn't even give it a second glance when it threatened to slide onto the floor taking the rest of the files, printouts and updates with it. Throwing himself into his desk chair hard enough to make the bearings squeal, he gave the telephone a look that would've sent shivers down Augie Swann's back before he picked up the receiver and dialed Joe King's office number from memory.

"Lee Stetson, returning Mr. King's call," he blandly informed the secretary who intercepted his call.

"Will you hold for a moment, Mr. Stetson? I know he's expecting your call, but he's on the other line right now."

"Yes, I'll hold," he told her. "What other choice do I have?" he muttered to the classical music that immediately assaulted his ears. Irritated, he tapped his fingers arrhythmically on the desk until he heard the click that signaled Joe had picked up.

"Lee, thanks for calling back so soon!" Joe began without preamble.

"You did say it was urgent, Joe. What's up?"

"There's a situation developing over in Estoccia that I've been trying to handle long distance and I'm not having much luck."

Lee could already hear it coming, but he slipped into 'agent mode' and replied neutrally, "I saw the hot sheets. Relations with their neighbors are strained to put it mildly and, with a growing refugee problem in southeastern Atbarah, the whole area is becoming more unstable by the minute."

"I didn't know you were so up-to-date with the situation in North Africa, Lee. The EAO transportation infrastructure that moves food and medical supplies to the Christian refugees on Estoccia's northwestern borders has been disrupted repeatedly over the last three weeks. I've been trying to negotiate passage for our trucks and for some medical personnel from Medecins Sans Frontieres, but I can't make much headway here in DC. I have a meeting set up with some representatives from the Union of African States tonight, but I don't think it will really accomplish anything. Anyway, I'm not going to be able to pick the boys up from school this afternoon."

A soft knock and an opening door distracted Lee momentarily. He waved Billy into the office before responding to Joe.

"You haven't forgotten that the boys have a big game tonight, Joe?" Billy made himself comfortable on the old leather settee across the room and appeared to be studying the thick file he'd brought with him.

"No, I haven't forgotten the consolation game tonight. I know it's important to the boys. It starts at six so I might still be able to get to the game before it's over, but I can't make any promises. You know how it goes, Lee."

"Yeah, I know how it goes, Joe. Don't worry about the boys. I can pick them up from school and get them to the game. I was planning to be there anyway." Lee was gritting his teeth making the muscle in his jaw jump. Amanda wouldn't thank him for telling Joe what he was really thinking right now. He turned his chair to face the window as Joe continued.

“The thing is, Lee. I’ll probably have to go up to New York tomorrow to see some people at the UN Relief Agency and then on to Estoccia. I’ll be able to accomplish a lot more on site. Is Dotty still up in Maine taking care of Aunt Millie?”

“You mean Minnie?”

“I thought it was Aunt Millie in Maine,” Joe replied in confusion.

“Whomever. Yeah, Dotty’s still up in Maine,” Lee was not about to make this easy for him.

“And Amanda’s on a business trip to California. You know Carrie’s in California, too. Her older sister is having a baby any day now and she’s gone to help out with her two-year-old niece. I don’t know how long I’ll be in Africa, but it’s certain I won’t be able to take the boys for the next two weeks.” Joe sighed. “Well, I guess you’d better give me Amanda’s number in California so I can call and tell her.”

“No, Joe. Don’t do that,” Lee was thinking quickly now. “I’m sure I can handle things here at this end.”

“I know you can take good care of the boys, Lee, and they really enjoy the time they spend with you, too. It’s just that I really think we should consult with Amanda about what’s going on, don’t you?”

“I don’t know about that, Joe. This assignment is a big opportunity for her. If she feels like has to come home to take care of the boys, I don’t know when or if she’ll get another chance like this. You know how she always puts everybody else’s needs before her own. I’d rather get things all arranged on our end first and then let her know what we’ve set up. She’s less likely to come storming home if we can convince her that we already have everything under control.”

“Are you sure, Lee? I mean, I’m supposed to drop Phillip off at Shenandoah Valley Community College for Football Camp on Sunday and then I’ve promised Jamie I’d take him backpacking on the Appalachian Trail for his Junior Trailblazers thing,” Joe didn’t sound like a concerned parent any more, he sounded relieved to tell the truth.

“I’m sure, Joe. I’ll see my boss about getting the time off as soon as we finish talking. Don’t worry about a thing: I’ll take care of the boys and I’ll explain everything to Amanda.” Lee turned his chair back to face the room and saw that Billy was leaning forward with both hands on his knees and a big smile on his face. He wasn’t even trying to pretend that he was interested in the file lying face down on the seat cushion next to him.

“Thanks, Lee. I really owe you one,” Joe told him in a tone of voice that indicated he’d already moved on to the next item on his agenda.

“No, Joe. You don’t owe me anything. It’s the boys who were expecting to spend some time with you. They’re the ones you owe,” Lee replied tightly, hoping Joe wouldn’t be able to read in his voice all the anger he was feeling. “Do you think you’ll be able to get over to the house before you leave to say good-bye to them?” Damn, now he felt like he was begging.

“If I don’t make it to the game tonight, I’ll stop by the house after my meeting no matter how late it may be, that’s a promise,” Joe assured him.

“Sure, Joe. It’s a school night tonight, you know. They have a ten o’clock bedtime. Amanda was pretty firm about that even though it’s the last week of school,” Lee reminded him.

Joe laughed bitterly. “Yeah, Lee. I know all too well how firm Amanda can be about things like bedtimes and sugary snacks. We’ve already agreed that what Amanda doesn’t know, won’t hurt her.”

That gave Lee pause. “That’s not exactly what I’m saying, Joe. I guess I can let the boys stay up a little bit later tonight,” he compromised uneasily.

“See you tonight, then, Lee. I really appreciate this,” Joe repeated before he closed the call.

“Yeah, see you tonight, Joe,” Lee said to the dead telephone line. He gave the phone receiver one more undeserved scowl before he set it back in place.

He raised his eyes to look at a smiling Billy Melrose, who was still sitting expectantly on the couch. “I don’t know what you’re so happy about; there goes my vacation in July!” He was mad as hell at Joe, but it seemed like Billy was the only target within range right now.

“Easy, Scarecrow. Sounds to me like you need some time off. This is no time to take your anger out on your boss, now is it?” Billy was used to dealing with Lee’s temper. It would take more than that little outburst to rattle him after all these years. If he was right about what had just taken place, Lee had every right to be angry right now.

“Sorry, Billy. You’re right. Talking to Joe King sometimes. . . I will never understand how that man can just. . .” Lee stopped himself. He had better be careful or he’d blow his cover for good and all.

“Look, Lee. I don’t see why you can’t take care of the King boys and still take your vacation in July,” Billy told him still smiling.

“What are you talking about?” Lee asked his friend in frustration. Billy’s unflinching cheerfulness was starting to get on his nerves. He got out of his chair and began to pace back and forth across the small rug in the Q Bureau. “You know I already took two weeks to stay with Amanda after she was shot in California. I only have

two weeks of vacation left and now I'm going to have to take that to stay with the boys while Joe flies off to Africa again."

Billy's smile disappeared for a moment. "While I can't do anything about the vacation time you took in February, I don't know why you don't just put in for family leave this time. Every full-time agent gets two weeks of family leave annually cumulative to six weeks, and as far as I know, you've never used any of yours. Of course, if you and Amanda are planning on having a baby this calendar year, you'll only have four weeks available for paternity leave." That got just the reaction Billy had hoped.

Lee stopped pacing and looked at his boss with pure amazement written all over his face. Speechless for almost two full minutes, Lee finally broke the silence by bursting into laughter. Snapping his fingers, he pointed at Billy and asked, "How long have you known? I have some big money riding on this, you know!"

"I think you realized that I was kind of suspicious about your 'trips' from the start. At the time, I figured you were both big kids and I'd already told you that your relationship, whatever it was, was all right with me. So, I didn't start digging until you called me from California with the news that Amanda had been shot and you were staying with her in the hospital there. I finally got a copy of your marriage certificate some time after you got back, around the first of March, I think it was." Billy smiled at his friend and stood up. "I've waited for over three months just to say, 'Congratulations' and 'It's about time you woke up, Stetson!'"

"All right!" Lee cheered as Billy shook his hand. "I told Amanda you'd find out within a month, but that you wouldn't say anything until we did."

"You'd have to go a lot further than Marion County to make it a real challenge! So how about it? Shall we fill out the paperwork for two weeks of family leave for you?"

Lee retrieved his hands from Billy and stuck them in his pockets while he thought things through. He turned and contemplated Amanda's desk. "I don't know, Billy. If I put in for family leave, I'll have to say why I'm taking the leave and that's bound to raise questions in Personnel and Accounting. It won't take very long for my paperwork to make its way up to Smyth's office. Amanda and I still haven't decided when to tell her family that we're married and everyone here at the Agency would already know."

"How long did you think you could keep it secret anyway, Lee?" Billy inquired with a raised eyebrow. He sat back down on the couch, folded his arms across his chest and stretched out his legs. This may take a while.

"Not much longer," Lee turned to look at his old friend with a soft smile. "We were talking about telling the family on vacation in July and then you, of course, as soon as we got back."

"Well, I'm happy to hear that you were planning on telling me eventually," Billy chuckled quietly and thought for another moment. "Well, it's your call to make, not mine. From what I heard of your conversation with Joe, it sounds like you're as worried as I am that Amanda will want to come home when she hears that Joe isn't going to take the boys next week. Lee, I had to go way out on a limb to get this assignment for Amanda. There was no doubt in my mind that she's the best agent for the job, but it took some real fast talking on my part and I had to call in a few favors to convince enough of the other Directors. Harry Thornton, as Director-Emeritus, was behind her all the way, but Smyth fought me right up to the end. I'd hate to see her have to come home early and not just for my own sake."

"Believe me, I know how important this assignment is for her career. I don't want her to come home either. She won't have to. I think I can make this work. I just have to figure out how to get the time off." Lee walked over to his desk again and tapped one long finger lightly on the telephone receiver. Then he took a deep breath and looked Billy in the eye, "Amanda will probably kill me when she gets back, but let's go ahead and fill out the paperwork. I'll talk to the boys tonight and, depending on what they say, I'll turn it in tomorrow morning."

"You're right, Amanda will probably want to kill you, but she won't. She loves you and when you explain things to her, she'll forgive you. That's the thing about our wives, Lee. They know us, all our little quirks, our annoying habits, and bad decisions taken together, and they love us anyway. You're a lucky man to be loved by a woman like Amanda, Lee, and don't you ever forget it. Oh, and by the way, if you ever intentionally do anything to hurt her, you'll answer to me, Scarecrow!"

"Yes, sir!" Lee grinned back at his old friend. His expression suddenly sobered, "To tell you the truth, Billy, I don't know what I'd do without her. If anything ever happened to her . . . or the boys. . ." His voice cracked with emotion.

"Yeah, Lee, I understand better than you know. The Agency takes care of its own," Billy stood up to place his wide hand on Lee's shoulder and gave him a couple awkward pats until the moment passed. "Well, if you're going to be taking some time off, you'd better get some work done around here today before you leave. Here's the Roberson file. I've read it three times and I know there's something missing, but I sure can't spot it. See what you can do with it." Billy crossed the Q Bureau to the door, "And clear up that mess on your desk, too, Stetson!" Billy barked as he left.

Lee didn't exactly clear his desk, but he'd managed to dam the overflowing in-box by the time two o'clock rolled around. He'd also read the Roberson file and Billy was right: the agents assigned to the case were missing something. Lee locked the file in his briefcase. He'd take it home with him tonight and read it again before bed, maybe something would jump out at him the second time

through. Taking a last look around the office, Lee went out the door locking it behind him.

**The street in** front of the Middle School was a mess as usual. Lee decided to park the Wagoneer a block away and walk over rather than brave the hordes of suburban mothers in their 18-foot Town & Country station wagons. Leaning up against a convenient elm tree, Lee watched the doors carefully for the boys. They were expecting their father to pick them up so they would be on the look out for his gray Reliant-K. Jamie was out the front doors before his brother as usual. Lee flagged him down pretty easily considering the crowds of parents and children eddying around the schoolyard.

“Hi, Lee. I thought Dad was supposed to pick us up?” Jamie set his over-stuffed blue backpack and a garish papier-mâché mask down on the ground by his feet and looked up at the taller man.

“Yeah, Sport, that was the plan, but something’s come up. Do you mind if we wait until we snag Phillip so I can just tell the story one time?” Lee really didn’t want to break this news.

“Sure, no problem. Last time I saw him he was talking with some friends by his locker.”

“He’ll probably come out the East door, won’t he?” Lee said as he picked up Jamie’s pack and moved over to stand in front of the other set of double-doors. “That’s a cool mask. Did you make it in Art Class or something?” Jamie grabbed his mask and followed him.

“I did make it, but it was for World Cultures class. Remember when Mrs. Ford had us all do reports on a different country and I chose Estoccia? I made this mask to illustrate how most of the Estoccian people wear their hair and Dad gave me this piece of cloth to attach to it so I could show the class one of the traditional patterns they weave for their clothing.”

“Right, I remember now. The kitchen smelled of that awful paste for days!”

Jamie squinted his eyes against the bright summer sunlight, “There’s Phillip now. Hey Phillip! Over here, meathead!”

“Jamie! You know how your Mom feels about name-calling!” Lee admonished the boy.

“Sure, but you’re a guy and so you understand it’s just a thing guys do,” Jamie shrugged and grinned up at him. Lee had to grin back.

“Right, but since your mother put me in charge, I do have to try to represent the views of the management,” Lee’s attempt to look stern and forbidding only made the boy laugh out loud.

“What’s so funny, worm brain? Hi, Lee! Did you forget that Dad was picking us up today?” Phillip had finally torn himself away from his friends and made his way over to Jamie and Lee.

“No, he didn’t forget. Dad cancelled out on us again,” Jamie informed his brother and then turned his back on him. “Didn’t he, Lee?” Both boys looked at Lee ready for an explanation.

“It’s a little more complicated than that, fellas,” Lee informed them. “What do you say we head to the car, load your stuff in, and I’ll give you the full report when we get home, okay? Do you need a hand with any of that, Phillip?” Phillip was juggling his book bag, a gym bag, and what looked like the bottom of a battered shoebox full of clippings from magazines.

“No, I can handle it. Let’s book!”

It didn’t take them very long to wend their way through the quickly thinning crowd around the school, load the boys’ belongings into the back of the Wagoneer and drive the few blocks to the house on Maplewood Avenue. “Why don’t you guys stow your gear in your room and then come back to the kitchen for a snack?” Lee suggested as he unlocked the back door and entered the kitchen.

Jamie giggled at that. “You make it sound like we’re in the Army or something, Lee. ‘Stow our gear!’ Geesh!”

“Yeah, and then there was that room inspection the other night,” Phillip chimed in. “You’re way tougher than Mom and Grandma!”

Lee ran one hand through his hair and gave the boys an embarrassed smile. “Sorry about that. I promised myself I’d never do that to my kids when I was a parent,” Lee’s eyes grew large as he realized what he’d just said. He stared at the boys wondering how he’d get out of this one.

“It’s okay, Lee. We don’t mind. It’s just kind of different from Mom and Grandma,” Jamie jumped in quickly.

Phillip socked Lee in the arm. “Yeah, it’s no big deal, Lee. Come on, Jamie. Let’s put our stuff away so we can make a dent in those cookies Lee brought home from the bakery.” Phillip retrieved his shoebox and his book bag and ran for the stairs. “Last one up is a smelly sock!” he cried as his brother snatched up his own bag and the African mask then followed him at full throttle.

“Hey, Phillip!” Lee shouted after him. “What about this gym bag?”



“I’ll get it later,” Phillip’s voice floated faintly down the stairs.

“Yeah, right.” Lee kicked the bag toward the laundry room with his left foot. “I don’t know how you do it, Amanda!” He breathed a sigh of relief as he finally put down his leather briefcase and turned to get some glasses and plates out of the cupboard for the boys’ snack. He barely had time to pour the milk and place a dozen chocolate chip cookies on a plate before the boys charged back into the kitchen.

In one swift movement, Phillip snatched a glass of milk and three large cookies somehow managing to cram one in his mouth even before he sat down at the counter. Jamie, on the other hand, took his time to carefully select the cookies that appeared to have the most chocolate chips before he took his place at the counter. Lee had just taken a bite of one of the cookies himself when Jamie asked him, “So why did Dad ditch us this time? Is it a conference call? A visiting dignitary from Durban or a crisis in Cairo?” He was still pushing his cookies around on his plate. Phillip on the other hand had already wolfed down his first three and was eyeing the five still left on the serving plate.

“What difference does it make, Jamie? Dad will make it up to us, he always does sooner or later.” Phillip elected to drink his milk before he tried to sneak another cookie.

“Actually, your Dad has a meeting with some representatives of the Union of African States this afternoon and he thinks it may turn out to be a long one,” Lee began his explanation slowly keeping a weather eye on Jamie’s reaction.

“So, I guess he’s not going to make the game tonight either. We’ve played seventeen games this season and he hasn’t been to one yet!” Jamie’s voice rose in anger as he snapped one of his cookies in half and drowned it in his milk.

“He said he’d try to get there before the game was over, Sport, but he couldn’t make any promises,” Lee temporized. He looked at Phillip as if to say, ‘Help me out here!’

Surprisingly, Phillip caught the cue, “Dad hasn’t been to our games, but Mom and Grandma have been to all of them so far. So has Lee.”

“Yeah, but Mom’s in California and Grandma’s in Maine!” Jamie wasn’t going to be distracted from his anger at his Dad.

“I’m sure your Dad would rather be at your game than sitting in some boring meeting, Jamie.” Lee tried to reassure the boy. “He’s going to stop over tonight after his meeting no matter how late it gets out.” Slow and steady wasn’t working, Lee decided. He might as well just get it over with. “He wants to say good-bye because he has to fly out for another meeting in New York tomorrow and then he’ll most likely have to head over to Estoccia from there.”

Both boys just stared at him, milk and cookies completely forgotten. “How long will he be gone this time?” Phillip finally asked, resigned to the inevitable.

“He’s not certain at this point, Phillip. Sounds like a couple of weeks at least.”

The boys looked at each other across the counter. Then they slowly returned their gaze to their plates. Once again, Phillip took the lead, “So he’s not going to take me to Football Camp on Sunday or go backpacking with Jamie next week. I guess we’d better call Mom, huh?” Phillip reached for another cookie almost absently. He put it on his plate and slowly began to spin it. Jamie had pulled his last two cookies apart and was carefully separating the cookie crumbs from the chocolate chips. Neither boy would look at Lee.

“I don’t know, Phillip. Is that what you really want to do? I thought things were going pretty well here so far. The house is still standing and no one’s contracted food poisoning yet. I think we three men can handle things ourselves for another couple of weeks, don’t you?” Lee held his breath. If the boys really wanted Amanda to come home, of course he’d call her. He watched as the boys raised their eyes from their plates and looked at each other. Some kind of silent communication must have taken place because as one they turned and looked at him.

“It’s been good having you here, Lee. You do cook some weird-looking things with some pretty hard to pronounce names, but they’ve all tasted pretty good. It’s just that we know Dad kind of stuck you with us. You were only planning on being here for a few days,” Jamie smiled up at him shyly.

“I’m having a great time, Jamie. It was going to be real hard for me to hand you over to your Dad on Saturday night. I’d be pretty lonely here with your Mom on a business trip in California and you and Phillip away with your Dad.” Lee waited nervously. Would the boys realize how much he wanted to stay with them?

“Really, Lee? You wouldn’t mind taking me up to Football Camp?” Phillip asked hopefully.

“Nope. I’d really like to drive you to Football Camp on Sunday,” Lee responded quickly.

Jamie still looked worried as he contemplated the two neatly separated piles of crumbs and chocolate chips in front of him. “What about me? What will I do while Phillip is away at camp?” he wondered in a voice almost too soft to be heard.

“Gee, Jamie! I thought you wanted to go backpacking on the Appalachian Trail? I know going with me won’t be the same as going with your Dad. . .”

“You mean you’d really take me backpacking!” Jamie’s smile lit up the already bright and cheery kitchen. “I never thought of you as the camping type, Lee.” The

smile faded slightly as Jamie considered the practicalities of the situation, “But what about your work?”

“I’ll just have to get some time off. I’d really like to go, Jamie. And I’m not totally unfamiliar with roughing it, you know.” Lee paused, suddenly distracted by the memory of one particular night in a foggy Virginia swamp, a one-match fire, and an almost-kiss.

“Great! I’ve got the trip completely planned: food and meals, equipment, each day’s hike and camping place is all mapped out. I’ll go and get the lists and maps in my room!” Jamie leapt out of his seat and disappeared up the stairs in a flash of tan shorts and red-striped Izod polo shirt.

“I’ll take that as a ‘Yes’,” Lee chuckled as he cleared away the dirty dishes and put the milk jug back into the fridge.

“Kids!” Phillip exclaimed. “They’re so excitable!”

Lee laughed even harder at that comment coming from Phillip.

## Chapter 4

*Amanda lay on the queen-size bed with her journal in her lap and listened* to Francine in the bathroom. It hadn’t taken the two women very long to realize that it made more sense for Amanda to use the bathroom first at night since she was in and out in no time compared to Francine. It also gave Amanda some much needed privacy to make her call home and to write in her journal. Whatever it was that Francine did in there every evening took almost two full hours and required enough beauty products to completely cover the bathroom counter! Amanda smiled softly and returned to writing in her journal.

June 18, 1987

I called home tonight to find out how the ‘big game’ went. I think Phillip picked up the phone even before it finished the first ring. He was so excited—they won tonight! That means they finished in third place. Phillip apparently played his usual game. He hit three singles, scored twice and batted in a runner. He also turned a double play. He really enjoys playing shortstop. Then Jamie got on the phone and he was even more excited than Phillip. I guess all those evenings at the batting cages with Lee have paid off. Jamie hit a double, his very first. He batted in two runners even though he got stranded on base. They won the game and at the end the coaches passed out third place trophies. Jamie had his camera there and Mike’s Dad took a

picture of the whole team holding their trophies. Both boys were thrilled because Mr. Carmichael asked Lee to join the team picture since he'd been helping with most of the practices and coaching third base at the games. I bet he was so proud! Oh, how I wish I could have been there tonight! I told Jamie that I couldn't wait to see that picture. Apparently, the whole team went out for pizza and root beer after the game. Mr. Rizzuto, the owner of the pizzeria, asked them what they were celebrating and, when Lee told him, he brought out ice creams for all the boys. What a nice man!

I was rather surprised to find the boys at home. I'd called Joe's townhouse first expecting that they'd be over there since he's scheduled to have them every Thursday. I guess he got stuck in a meeting again. Jamie said he was supposed to arrive any minute. Nine-thirty is pretty late on a school night, but since tomorrow's the last day of school, oh well.

When Jamie finally put Lee on, he sounded so tired! He was just as happy about the game as the boys were, so I had to hear all about it one more time. When I asked him how work was going, he groaned. I know he doesn't like being stuck in the office. He said Billy dragged him into an administrator's meeting on accounting procedures. He probably fell sound asleep! I wonder how deep the pile on my desk will be when I get back. He asked me about my day and seemed genuinely interested in how domestic and international Internet banking works! He asked some pretty astute questions about how the packets were encoded and transmitted. Maybe he did stay awake in that accounting meeting—NOT!

Suddenly, I heard the boys fighting in the background. There was this big crash, and then Lee shouted, "Hold it right there, Phillip King!" in a voice that may have stopped traffic in downtown Arlington! I don't know what he said to the boys next because he excused himself for a moment and put his hand over the receiver. When he returned, he explained that Phillip had been teasing Jamie with the mask he'd made for World Cultures class. In chasing Phillip around the kitchen, Jamie had knocked into a counter stool and that was what I'd heard hit the floor. He assured me that everyone and everything was still in one piece. He also said he loved me and missed me "so much." Darn, if Francine didn't pick that very moment to come out of the bathroom because she needed another tube of French lotion from her bag. I had to wait while she rummaged through the small suitcase she calls a makeup bag. Finally, she returned to the bathroom and I heard the water

running in the sink, so I felt safe telling Lee that I loved him and missed him, too.

It's funny, but through the whole conversation with Lee and the boys, I got the nagging feeling that something was wrong. Before I said good-bye, I asked Lee again if everything was all right and he assured me that it was—he was just tired out, it'd been a long day. Maybe he's not sleeping so well on that sofa bed. I suggested that he might be more comfortable sleeping in my bed. He chuckled and said, "Sleep in your bed, Amanda? What will the neighbors say?" I hope it is just that he's tired tonight. I hate this feeling that something's wrong and he's not telling me. I love him and I guess I'll just have to trust that he'd tell me if it was something important.

You know, maybe that's part of my problem with ending the mystery marriage. It was so hard to go away for this long and entrust my boys to Lee and Joe. I've had to be both Mom and Dad for so long: tucking them in every night, helping with their homework and little projects, managing their teams, making all the decisions. Now that Lee has been around on a regular basis, I've noticed the boys are turning to him more and more. At first, I was thrilled, especially when Jamie asked Lee to help him with his hitting. It seemed like they were turning an important corner. I have to admit that I felt some pangs of jealousy and loss at the same time. I really haven't had to share my boys with anyone but Mother and Mother has always been so careful to defer to me in most of the daily decisions around here. Then Joe came home and became more involved in the boys' lives. He loves to take them places and has them a couple weekends a month, if he's in town, that is. Even so, I still made most of the decisions, big and small. The boys still came to me to share their little triumphs and their problems.

Now, however, Lee is becoming a bigger part of their lives. Not too long ago, Jamie had to prepare a presentation on France and he asked Lee to help him instead of asking me. I know it was because Lee had lived in France and was able to give him all sorts of nifty souvenirs and pictures, but still I felt kind of left out. And then, a couple weeks later I was washing dishes in the kitchen and Lee was helping me dry when Phillip came in to ask for help studying for his history test. I told Phillip I'd be with him as soon as I'd finished with the dishes. He said, "Oh, thanks Mom! But would you mind if Lee helps me? He knows all this Second World War stuff inside out." Phillip's right. Lee is really very knowledgeable about military history and he has a

way bringing it to life as he paints a detailed picture of what was happening and who was involved and why. But, once again, I felt left out. I was glad the boys wanted Lee's help, really I was. Especially when I saw how pleased he was to be asked! I guess I'm just feeling like the boys don't need me as much any more. When we finally tell them that Lee is their step-dad, will they need me even less?

This is so silly—one of the reasons I love Lee is because I admire him so. I want more than anything for the boys to know him and admire him as I do: for his intelligence, his humor, his strength, patriotism, and his loyalty. I know it's only natural that the boys will draw away from me as they grow up and become young men, but it doesn't make letting go any easier for me.

Okay, now I've identified one reason I am reluctant to bring the mystery marriage out into the open—I'm afraid of the adjustments I'll have to make in parenting the boys. How hypocritical can I be? I've always said how nice it would be to be a 'two-parent' family and now that Lee is starting to act like a parent, I have a hard time with it. I'm just going to have to get used to the fact that the boys may need to relate to a man more right now than they need their old Mom. It's a good thing they have two great guys to turn to, really. Joe and Lee are both wonderful with the boys, each in his own way. Now, if only Joe and Lee could reach some kind of understanding with each other. One thing at a time, Amanda!

It's getting late and we have another big day ahead of us tomorrow. We're almost finished here at CIT, just one more day-long meeting and then it's off to Silicon Valley where we're going to practice working with the computer hardware itself and we'll also be shown how to 'exploit security issues in a variety of operating systems'. By the time we're finished with this tour, Francine and I will be able to tear a computer apart and put it back together with our bare hands and 'hack' into a standard computer system or network. I just hope we can figure out what we're supposed to do with all this when we get back. I'm beginning to see how Lee and I could've used some of this knowledge on some of the cases we've worked in the past. The problem is, will we be able to take this back home and explain it to others well enough that they will be able to use it, too? That really has me worried right now. I can tell that Francine is just as concerned as I am. I'm hopeful that having a little time off this Sunday will help us to assimilate some of what we've been learning. I'm beginning to realize that once we get

back, we're still going to have weeks of work ahead of us putting this course together. We did come up with a working title for our course: "Intelligence Technology in Modern Intelligence Gathering." Pretty impressive, if I do say so myself!

***She had been*** listening for that particular sound for practically a week. Yes, there was the familiar sound of his key turning in the double locks on his door. But wait—there were other voices. He wasn't alone. She crept past the old man sleeping in his chair in front of the Orioles game and carefully opened the door to her apartment.

"Guten Tag, Herr Stetson!" she called across the hall to the tall, brown-haired man just opening his apartment door. "Wie geht es?"

"Ah, gut, sehr gut, Frau Wulf. Und du?" He turned with that dimpled smile of his, so much like their youngest son, and greeted her just as she had him.

"Also gut, mein Freund. But these two Kindern don't speak the German, so we should perhaps change to English, ja?" Frau Wulf left her doorway and crossed the hall to the three handsome young men.

"Frau Wulf, allow me to present my companions, Phillip King and Jamie King, Amanda's sons." Lee introduced each boy in turn indicating which was which with a wave of his free hand. He was very proud of the boys' manners as they politely shook the older woman's hand and responded to her greetings.

"Was that German you were speaking, Mrs. Wolf?" Jamie asked when introductions were over. "I've always wanted to learn to speak another language," he told her with a sigh of longing.

"Ach, then you should ask your friend, Herr Stetson, to teach you. He is always speaking so many different languages and all of them so well," she told Jamie in her heavy German accent as the boy looked at Lee with undisguised curiosity.

"How many languages do you speak, Lee?" Jamie asked eagerly.

"Well, I'm only fluent in French, Spanish, and Russian," he told the boy. "But I can get by in several others, including German. Frau Wulf is kind enough to overlook my terrible pronunciation." He smiled fondly at the plump gray-haired woman in her flowered black dress and starched white apron. "You look like we interrupted your work in the kitchen, Frau Wulf and you know that's the last thing I ever want to do!"

She smiled back at Lee just as fondly. "Ach, I know how you love my baking, Herr Stetson. I was watching out for you today just because I have had my oven

going all morning. I made you some Kuchen, you know, the poppy-seed ones you always love.”

“My Mom makes a great poppy-seed cake!” Phillip finally joined the conversation.

Frau Wulf nodded knowingly, “Ja, and well I know it, young Phillip. Herr Stetson brought some over to me last Christmas so I could have a taste, but your mother mixes her poppy-seeds into a batter and pours it into the bundt pan.” She illustrated the process with her hands in the air. “I am making a different sort of Kuchen, a Rugeleh. I roll out my dough very thin and I spread the poppy seed filling onto the layers of the Rugeleh. Then I roll it all up together and bake it until it is brown and flaky.”

“Your Mom’s poppy seed cake is the best, but you’ve never tasted a poppy roll so good as Frau Wulf’s especially when it’s warm from the oven,” Lee licked his lips and looked toward heaven as he contemplated the perfection of Frau Wulf’s rugeleh.

“So, you must try it!” Frau Wulf said decisively. “Wait one moment, Kindern. I will fetch you one and it is still warm, Herr Stetson!” She hurried back into her apartment for the carefully wrapped sweet roll to give to her handsome neighbor and his young friends.

“Wow, you sure have nice neighbors, Lee!” Phillip exclaimed. “I didn’t know that people were that friendly in the city.”

“They aren’t often as friendly as Frau Wulf,” Lee agreed. “I think she likes me just because I’m someone she can converse with in German. She also loves to cook and when her husband was diagnosed with diabetes a year ago, she had to find someone else to eat her baking and I was ‘close to hand with no wife to cook for me’ as she tactfully put it.” He imitated her accented English perfectly.

Frau Wulf bustled back into the hallway with a large, oblong package wrapped in brown paper and tied with string. The boys sniffed the heavenly scents of warm yeast bread, spices and sugar. “Here it is. I wrapped it in newspaper two times, so it will stay warm until you are ready to eat it.”

Lee heard the sound of the phone ringing in his apartment behind him. “Danke schön, Frau Wulf. We’ll save it for dessert after supper, right fellas? Now, if you’ll excuse me, I think that’s my phone I hear.” Lee quickly handed off the Kuchen to Phillip and dashed through the open door of his apartment, but he wasn’t in time to pick up the call before it went to the answering machine. He heard the unmistakable gruff sound of Billy’s voice as he finally reached the machine:

“Lee, if you’re there pick up right now. I tried you at Amanda’s and on your car phone. I really need to talk to you right away, we’ve got prob. . .” Lee finally found the ‘monitor off’ button and grabbed the receiver himself.



"I'm here, Billy. What's so urgent?" he asked turning to watch the boys who had just entered the living room. Phillip looked at him with raised eyebrows and then shook his head slightly before he took the brown-paper wrapped package in his hands into the dining room and laid it on the table. Jamie walked right up to Lee and stood there listening with his head cocked to one side and a worried expression on his face.

"Yeah, okay. Okay! I hear you, Billy, no need to shout. I've got the boys with me here; let me just think for a minute. " Lee put his hand over the receiver and turned to the boys. "Something's come up at work and I need to go in for a little while. Don't look like that, Jamie. I'll be back before supper, I promise. I want some of the poppy Rugeleh while it's still warm, after all." He smiled reassuringly at the boy. "I need to tie up some loose ends before I take the next two weeks off. Will you guys be okay here by yourselves for about an hour or so?"

The boys looked at each other and then back at Lee. "Sure, Lee. You've left us here before, remember? No problem. We can watch TV or something, right Jamie?" Phillip answered first, punching his brother in the arm to get his attention.

"Yeah, Lee. Hurry and get your business taken care of so we can pack for our trip, I mean, trips," Jamie encouraged him with a nervous smile while he rubbed his left arm.

Lee reached out and gently squeezed Jamie's shoulder, locked eyes with him and promised, "I'll see you in about an hour, Sport. Phillip, you remember which videos your Mom decided were off-limits for you two, right?"

"Yeah, Lee," Phillip stuck his lower lip out and jammed both hands into his shorts pockets doing a pretty good imitation of a Stetson pout. "All the good ones!"

Lee narrowed his eyes at the boy, "Right, so you'll stay away from those. I think the Orioles are playing this afternoon and the game should be on TV. If you need anything, just call me at my office number and they'll get me. Oh, stay out of my bedroom and don't answer the phone."

***Fortunately, the trip*** from his apartment in Georgetown to the Agency didn't take very long. The trip in the elevator to Dr. Smyth's office seemed to take as long as a rainy week in late January, however. Lee exited the elevator before the doors were completely open and headed into the Director's outer office.

"Good afternoon, Scarecrow. They're waiting for you. . . and I hope you're wearing your bullet-proof vest!" Mrs. Lipton informed him with a grim smile. She

rose from behind her desk and preceded him to Smyth's office door. Opening it partway, she called into the dimly lit room, "Agent Stetson is here, sir." Stepping aside so he could slip past her, she whispered sotto voce, "Good luck, Lee. You'll need it."

Lee tightened his tie and walked into the room. He was always struck by how different this office had appeared when Harry Thornton was Director. Harry had used the same old battle-scarred oak desk as Director that he'd had when he ran the Bullpen. He'd placed several tall bookcases crammed with well-thumbed reference books, report files, and rolled up maps within arm's reach behind his desk. The chairs in front of Harry's desk had been shabby and comfortable chintz, while a worn brown leather settee had been arranged against the far wall. The same old settee, in fact, that Lee had rescued from the bowels of the Agency for the Q Bureau. Meetings had been held around a wide library table with one wobbly leg, stained by the rings from too many coffee mugs and marked with cigarette burns. Mismatched wooden chairs that became uncomfortable almost as soon as you sat down had surrounded the old table.

By contrast, Smyth's office resembled that of a CEO of a Fortune 500 company. His highly polished, mahogany desk was three times the size of Harry's battered old friend. Visitors sat in two over-stuffed dark leather club chairs, not that Lee had ever been invited to sit down by Smyth! Larger meetings took place at a gleaming teak board table with swivel chairs upholstered in a dark gray material. No antique wooden bookcases for Austin Smyth, he had twin sets of lighted glass and steel shelves displaying pictures of smiling men shaking hands, leather-bound first editions, or tastefully chosen objets d'art.

"Don't just stand there gawking, Stetson. You've already kept us waiting long enough, don't you think?" Dr. Austin Smyth eyed him disdainfully from behind his desk. Dressed in an expensive, but truly conservative, Bill Blass three-piece suit, the man appeared relaxed as he puffed away on his ever-present cigarette. Sitting in the two club chairs were Billy Melrose, Lee's immediate superior, and Associate Director Katherine Hunter, whose bailiwick included both Accounting and Personnel. "Scarecrow and King flew to the west to take a nice vacation. Before they left, they tied the knot. Which Scarecrow forgot to mention," Smyth rhymed ominously.

"I'm sorry, sir?" Lee walked over to stand at parade attention beside the desk. He decided to pretend he'd missed the connotation. Why make it easy for the old man?

"You know exactly what I mean, Scarecrow. It has come to my notice that you married your partner and failed to notify the Agency of your change in status, Smyth stood up as he spoke and came to stand directly in front of the agent, blowing a smoke ring in his face for emphasis.

"I'm sorry, sir. If I'd known you wanted to attend the ceremony, we'd have sent you an invitation," Lee replied smoothly.

Smyth, invading the space in front of Lee's face with his cigarette holder, barked angrily, "Don't play games with me, Stetson. You didn't invite anyone to your little soirée, not even your closest friends!" He turned his back on him and returned to his seat behind his expansive, completely empty desk. "We'd all like to know why."

"Again, I'm not sure I understand the question, sir." He'd take his time and keep his temper. He was not about to let Smyth win this one, this was too important to blow.

"It's a fairly simple question, Agent Stetson. Why did you fail to inform the Agency of the fact that you had married your partner, Agent King?" Smyth leaned back in his black leather executive chair and blew yet another smoke ring. Lee saw A.D. Hunter wrinkle her nose in distaste.

"I guess I didn't think the Agency had a need to know, sir. After all, it was a private matter, a very private matter in fact," he replied as reasonably as he could manage under the circumstances.

"Well, the Agency thinks differently, I can assure you. There are forms to be filled out; people who need to be reassigned when two field agents marry. Or hadn't you noticed that there are no married couples working in the field at this Agency?" Smyth watched Stetson carefully.

He knew that Smyth was betting that he wouldn't be able to keep his temper for very much longer. He heard Billy take a breath, preparatory to coming to his assistance no doubt, but Lee beat him to the punch. "Yes, sir. I had noticed that there were no married field agents working together in DC, but since there were several effective married field partnerships in both Europe and Asia, I assumed that the occasion simply hadn't arisen here."

"There have indeed been married field agents at the Agency in the not-so-distant past. I believe it was after one such couple died in a fiery car crash leaving their only son an orphan that the policy changed suddenly. I think you of all people should be able to understand why, Stetson," Dr. Smyth emphasized his surname and waited with confident smile.

Lee looked up at the ceiling and swallowed hard several times before he returned his somber gaze to the Agency Director. "Yes, sir. I am very familiar with the circumstances of that case, but I hardly think one such incident warrants a complete ban on married agents working together in the field. I might remind you that one of those agents was with British Intelligence, not the Agency, or rather the O.S.S. as it was then."

“That’s neither here nor there, the policy stands regardless,” Smyth affirmed decisively.

“What policy is that, Dr. Smyth?” Lee asked evenly, a carefully practiced expression of complete innocence firmly fixed on his face. “I studied the Policy Manual for Field Operations front to back before I even asked Amanda to marry me and I couldn’t find any paragraph that prohibits agents from marrying or working together in the field after marriage. Could you cite the particular paragraph to which you are referring, sir?”

No one would be fooled by Lee’s expression or his tone of voice. The tension building in the younger agent’s body was obvious as he held his arms rigidly at his sides and clenched and unclenched his fists repeatedly.

“He’s right, Austin.” Kathryn Hunter entered the discussion. “There’s no written policy regarding marriage or married agents in the field.”

Smyth shot his Associate Director a look that would’ve had most men shaking in their boots, but Kathryn Hunter didn’t achieve her high position in the Agency by being easily intimidated. “Well, it’s more an unwritten policy, Kathryn. There are also personnel and financial forms to fill out when an agent marries, as you well know.”

“I did a little research prior to this meeting and Stetson has already filled out most of those, Austin. Late in the fall, he called in and arranged to change his insurance and pension beneficiaries,” Mrs. Hunter informed him.

“But not his medical plan?” Smyth wasn’t going to give up easily.

“No, not his medical plan, but that’s not unusual. Many couples on the Federal plan keep their medical benefits separate even after marriage, especially when the relative value of their salary packages are as far apart as in this case. It makes more sense for Stetson alone to pay the higher co-pay and out of pocket expenses while Mrs. King and her children take advantage of the lower fees at the bottom of the pay schedule,” she explained carefully.

Billy continued to build on the foundation Lee and Mrs. Hunter had so carefully laid. “So what you’re saying is that Stetson made all the changes to the Agency benefits plans that were necessary if he were to marry Mrs. King, even before their ceremony in February?”

“That’s right, Billy. As far as Personnel is concerned, all the necessary blanks have been filled in.”

“Well, well. Then since the policy against married field agents is an unwritten one, I’m not completely certain what we’re all doing here,” Billy summarized raising his eyebrows and looking Smyth right in the eye.

Lee relaxed a little, clasping his hands behind his back and widening his stance on the plush silver-gray carpet.

“The point is, Melrose,” Smyth scowled grinding his cigarette holder between his teeth, “that Stetson deliberately withheld crucial information from his supervisor and from the organization itself. He intentionally deceived his superiors, Billy. Doesn’t that bother you in the least? Why keep the marriage secret in the first place? What else is he holding back because he doesn’t think we have the need to know, eh?”

Billy turned to Lee with a wink and a grin, “Scarecrow, would you please explain to the Agency Director and to Associate Director Hunter why you and Amanda have kept your marriage secret from the Agency and from her family as well?”

Lee noted Mrs. Hunter’s gasp of surprise when she realized that Amanda’s family didn’t even know about their marriage. “Well sir, just after I asked Amanda to marry me, the son of one of my contacts, Kim Tran Khai, was taken hostage and used to force his father to betray me. We thought then that it would be safer for Amanda’s boys if no one knew of our connection.”

“Is that what you still believe, Lee?” Mrs. Hunter asked curiously.

“No, ma’am.” Lee looked fully at Mrs. Hunter for the first time and was encouraged by her understanding smile. “We’ve recently realized that it’s pretty obvious to even a casual observer that Amanda and I are involved. The boys and her mother would be safer if they knew about the Agency and were taught to take some reasonable precautions. We’d talked about telling them while we’re on vacation in July, but we hadn’t made a decision yet. We’re planning to talk about it some more as soon as Amanda gets back from California,” Lee explained truthfully.

“Austin, it seems to me that you’ve called us both here for nothing. As far as I can tell, Lee Stetson and Amanda King have done nothing precluded by the Agency Policy Manual. Unless it compromises their ability to perform their jobs efficiently,” and here A. D. Hunter paused and turned a questioning eye on Billy who emphatically shook his head ‘No’, “then I don’t see where we have any business meddling in their private lives.” She arose from her seat preparing to leave.

“Well, I am not satisfied at all that Stetson didn’t intend to deliberately deceive this Agency. He may play the innocent better than most, but I’m not buying any. He knew as well as anyone else that there was a longstanding if unwritten policy against married agents working together in the field, but Stetson just loves to rewrite the rules for his own pleasure. I cannot and will not allow him to defy me directly this way. Stetson, consider yourself suspended without pay as of this very moment. I’ll inform you when I’ve decided whether you will be allowed to come back to work for this Agency and if so, in what capacity you will be allowed

to serve.” Smyth waved his hand at Lee in dismissal, then swiveled his chair to turn his back on him.

“I take it I am free to go then, sir?” Lee asked his anger under control but barely. Once again, the hand waved, this time from behind the high back of Smyth’s chair. Lee pivoted sharply on one heel and strode from the office not quite slamming the door behind him.

**Before Lee was** even out of the room, Billy jumped out of his seat and slammed both his hands down smudging the carefully polished surface of the desk. Smyth’s chair never moved. “Dr. Smyth, consider this is my official notice that I am calling for a review of this action by the complete Board of Directors!”

“Fine, Melrose. You’ll need a second signature on that request, don’t forget.”

“Bring it to me, Billy.” Kathryn Hunter said shortly. “I’ll sign it and gladly. Even I know that Lee Stetson and Amanda King are two of our best field agents. I don’t want to lose them to another agency just because of some out-moded unwritten policy!” She accompanied Billy out of Smyth’s executive suite, nodding politely at Mrs. Lipton then turning toward her own office as they entered the hallway.

When he got out into the hall, Billy was relieved to see Lee was still waiting for the elevator to arrive. As he approached, Lee slammed his open hand violently against the call button and exclaimed, “Damn it, Billy, these have got to be the slowest elevators in the continental United States!”

“Lee,” Billy called his name softly reaching out with one hand to gently touch his young friend’s shoulder. He was practically vibrating with rage.

“Not here, Billy. Okay?” Lee didn’t even spare him a glance, his eyes locked on the light that would indicate the arrival of the always-sluggish elevator, obviously working hard to keep himself under tight control.

Finally entering the privacy of the elevator car, Billy gripped Lee’s upper arms with his strong hands and turned his friend to face him. “Lee, I’ve known this day was coming the moment I found your marriage certificate and so have you. Let me handle it. Just promise me you won’t do anything hasty that we’ll both regret later.”

“No, Billy. I’m not going to turn in my resignation or take a job over at State, however tempting that may be right now. I have to take Phillip to Football Camp and Jamie backpacking. Maybe by then I’ll have figured out how to tell Amanda that I completely blew our cover at the Agency and got myself suspended to

boot.” He tried to smile at his boss and mentor, but the attempt didn’t come off very well.

“Give it some time, Scarecrow. I’m positive we can work this all out.” Billy patted his left shoulder a couple of times before releasing him completely. “What you’ll tell Amanda, I can’t begin to imagine. Maybe you should send her some flowers?”

“Are you nuts? She’s already a little worried that there’s something I’m not telling her, Billy. You’ve seen her intuition in action. If I send her flowers, she’ll know I’ve done something wrong, something big, too. Nope, I think now I’d better call her. I’ve just got to figure out how to put things so that she won’t come charging home to rescue me.” Lee managed a real smile for his old friend this time.

“Maybe you should wait a little while before you call her, just until we can see how this thing is going to play out. I don’t want her coming home any more than you do. It would just confirm some of Smyth’s arguments against married agents with families working together in the field,” Billy suggested seriously.

“I promise that I’ll think it through carefully and give you a heads up before I call her,” Lee assured Billy as the elevator doors opened and both men headed out. The Field Section Chief turned toward the Bullpen while Lee walked over to wait in front of the elevator to the Georgetown Portal.

**He made good** time back to the apartment although he was a few minutes past the hour he’d promised Jamie when he finally stood in front of his apartment door. Suddenly, the short hairs on the back of his neck stood up and his instincts kicked into high gear. Something wasn’t right. He inspected the corridor minutely and then listened carefully for any suspicious sounds. That was the problem: his apartment was quiet, too quiet for the King boys. Worried and not a little nervous, he drew his automatic weapon before he unlocked his door as silently as possible.

Slipping through the narrow opening, he stepped softly toward the shadowed living room, gun at the ready, but pointed up at the ceiling. The TV screen was dark and both boys were sitting quietly on the sofa. They turned their heads as he entered the room and he barely returned his gun to its holster in time.

“Hey, fellas! What’s the matter? Is the cable out?” he inquired cheerfully as he walked around the couch to stand in front of Jamie and Phillip. It was only then he spotted the three items on the coffee table and his heart jumped into his throat before abruptly plummeting into his stomach. Laid out neatly on the tabletop were a broken picture frame, his wedding picture, and the copy of the wedding

certificate that he'd kept hidden behind the picture. He took a deep breath and then asked more calmly than he'd expected possible, "What happened here?"

The boys were silent. Neither one would look at him. He walked over to lean one shoulder against the fireplace mantle and crossed his arms on his chest. "I'm waiting," he encouraged softly.

Jamie finally looked up at him, his expression completely unreadable. "Phillip and I were horsing around. I wanted to watch the baseball game like you said to, but he wanted to watch a tape—one of the ones Mom said we weren't allowed to. I grabbed the tape from him and he started chasing me around the sofa. When I realized he was going to jump over the couch and nail me, I ran into your bedroom. I know you said to stay out, but I was only thinking about keeping the tape away from Phillip. He tackled me and threw me down on the bed. We were wrestling for the tape, when we heard something break. We looked under your pillow and realized we'd broken a picture you kept under there. We brought it out here to see if we could fix it, but we couldn't. The glass was all smashed. The frame fell apart when we tried to get it out and this white paper landed on the floor. Lee, that's a wedding picture of you and our Mom."

"The paper is a marriage certificate, Lee," Phillip informed him quietly. "We're sorry we went into your bedroom and broke your picture, but we really think you owe us an explanation."

Now Lee was silent. He looked at the carpet between his feet thinking hard. The boys waited. "I guess we should call your Mom now, huh?" he finally whispered.

"No, Lee. I don't think we should call Mom." Jamie told him in all seriousness. "For one thing, it's not even two in the afternoon in California. We'll have to wait several hours before we can reach her at her hotel room. You're right here and we want some answers right now."

Lee looked first at Jamie and then at Phillip. They were both visibly upset and he could understand why. He realized that his relationship with both boys was in serious jeopardy. Phillip had liked and trusted him from the start, but Jamie had been a tougher nut to crack. At first, he hadn't been willing to give Lee the time of day. According to Amanda, he'd been jealous of all the time and attention Lee was getting. In his opinion, Jamie had been afraid that Amanda was going to be hurt and he naturally wanted to protect his Mom. He also suspected that Jamie had been afraid that Lee was going to disappear like so many other men had and so he hadn't been willing to risk being hurt again himself. Slowly but steadily, he'd worked to earn the boy's trust. Now it seemed that both boys were wondering whether they'd been wrong to trust him. It was also possible they were uncertain whether they could trust their own mother. He couldn't allow them to think that way about their Mom. Amanda was one of the most trustworthy people he had ever known. Jamie was right. He was here and he owed them the truth.



He just hoped Amanda would be able to forgive him sometime before their tenth anniversary rolled around.

“You’re right, Jamie. However it’s a long and complicated story, so I hope you’ll be very patient with me.” He began to speak very deliberately, telling the boys how he’d met their mother one desperate morning in an Arlington train station. He described how they had begun working together from time to time and then how she’d become his friend and eventually his partner.

“So you’re finally admitting that you’re not a film director, Lee?” Jamie asked him with a smirk when he paused for a moment.

“What do you mean, Jamie?” Lee replied surprised by the way the boy had phrased the question.

Jamie and Phillip exchanged a quick glance and a brotherly grin. “You tell him, Jamie. You’re the one who recognized him first!” Phillip encouraged his younger brother.

“One Saturday, I decided to take some pictures of the family with that neat camera you’d given me. First, I took a picture of Mom standing in a beam of sunlight folding towels in the kitchen. Next, I got one of Grandma kneeling by her red and yellow tulips with her trowel in her hand and dirt on her nose,” he smiled at the memory. “Then I decided to try an action shot of you and Phillip playing basketball. Just as I got you both framed in the viewfinder, you reached in with one hand and ripped the ball away from Phillip. He lost his cool and tackled you around the waist, knocking you to the ground. I followed the action with the camera just like you showed me and caught a picture of you guys rolling around on the driveway. Suddenly, I remembered the day that Mr. Prescott grabbed us in the gym. This Fed appeared out of nowhere and tackled him taking away his gun. They fought and Mr. Prescott started to get away, but then the Fed swung across the gym on our climbing rope knocking him to the ground. Watching you wrestle with Phillip through the lens of the camera, I realized that you were that Fed, Lee.”

“When he got the picture developed, he showed it to me,” Phillip took up the explanation. “And I saw what he was talking about right away. We weren’t sure at first why you and Mom were keeping it a secret. We spied on you, Mom, and Grandma for a while until we realized that even Grandma didn’t know what Mom really did. We thought maybe you didn’t want Grandma to worry or something like that.”

“Yeah, Phillip. It was something like that all right. So you guys aren’t mad at us for telling you that we were film-makers when we really worked as intelligence operatives for the government?” Lee asked very surprised at how well this was going so far.

“We were a little disappointed that you didn’t trust us enough to tell us the truth, but we figured you had your reasons. Mom usually has pretty good reasons for everything she does, so we just waited until you were ready to ‘fess up. We thought maybe spies weren’t allowed to tell their families or something,” Jamie replied. “What I can’t figure out is why you and Mom got married and didn’t tell us. That seems like it would be a pretty important thing to tell your family.”

Lee thought for a moment about how much to tell the boys. He didn’t want to scare them, but he did want them to know that they’d kept their marriage secret for a very good reason—the boys’ safety. “There were actually several reasons we didn’t tell you about our marriage right away. I’d known your Mom for almost four years, but you two had just met me. We love each other so much we couldn’t wait to be married, but we thought it’d be wise to give you boys some time to get to know me a little better before we announced that I was moving in.”

“You said there were several reasons, Lee,” Jamie reminded him. “Was one of them to protect us from bad guys like Mr. Prescott?”

Lee shook his head. Jamie was sharp—almost as perceptive as his mother. “Yes, Jamie. We also worried that some unscrupulous people might try to hurt you in order to force your Mom and I to betray our country. We wanted to keep you as safe as possible by keeping our relationship a secret.”

“That’s just stupid, Lee!” Phillip declared. “For one thing, your relationship wasn’t such a big secret anyway. Besides, you’re the one who saved us from Mr. Prescott. Don’t you think we’re safer with you around all the time rather than over here in your apartment?”

“You’re right. It was a stupid idea. That’s why your Mom and I were talking about telling you and your Grandma about our marriage while we were all together on vacation in July,” Lee admitted ruefully. He shoved his hands in his pockets and paced back and forth in front of the fireplace a couple times before turning to face his stepsons. “Don’t blame your Mom, guys.” He took his hands out of his pockets and spread them in mute appeal, “It was all my idea. The weird thing is that your Mom usually vetoes my dumber ideas. I guess neither one of us was thinking very clearly at the time. Look, I expect that you’re pretty upset with me for all the lies I’ve told you. If you want to rethink our plan for the next two weeks, I’ll understand. I’ll just go clean up in my bedroom while you two talk it over.”

Lee left the two teens on the couch and walked into his room, shutting the French doors carefully behind him. He turned down his comforter to find that the boys had picked up the broken glass as best they could, but he decided it’d be a good idea to strip the bed and wash all the linens anyway. When he’d stuffed the dirty sheets in his hamper and tossed the comforter back over the bare mattress, he sat down on the edge of the bed and waited nervously for the boys to come to a decision. He didn’t have to wait very long.

“Lee, you can come out now,” Phillip called from the other room.

He squared his shoulders, took a deep breath, and went out to face the verdict.

“Like we told you, we figured you and Mom had good reasons for what you did,” Phillip began.

“Not that we agree with all your reasons, but we know that you both had our best interests in mind,” Jamie continued with hardly a pause and sounding exactly like his Mom. “So we don’t want to change our plans. We still want to spend the next two weeks with you and we really don’t want Mom to have to come back just to take care of us.”

“Do you think we should call her and tell her what’s going on?” Lee inquired of the boys, interested in their take on the matter.

“No way, Lee!” Phillip answered without a moment’s hesitation. “If you tell her Dad cancelled on us, she’ll think she should come home so that she isn’t imposing on you.”

“Yeah!” Amazingly Jamie agreed immediately with his older brother. “If she finds out that you told us about being spies and about the marriage, she’ll come rushing home to see how we’re taking it. You said this assignment is really important, Lee. Was that true?”

“Yes, Jamie. The research your Mom is doing in California is important to the security of our country and finishing out this assignment is very important to her career. Some people didn’t want her to go at all because they thought she’d have to come home to deal with a family emergency.” Lee tried to explain the facts of the matter without applying any undue pressure.

“Then we definitely shouldn’t call her,” Phillip stated decisively. “She’s expecting us to spend the next two weeks with our Dad and we are after all. It’s just not our father who’ll be taking care of us; it’s our step-father, right?”

Lee had to smile at the boy’s reasoning. “You’re talking like a lawyer already, Phillip King. All right. We’ll stick with Plan B. After all, I’ve often found that it’s easier to ask for forgiveness than permission in cases like this.” Lee was very pleased that the boys still wanted to spend time with him and relieved that he wouldn’t have to call Amanda and try to explain everything to her over the phone.

“Um, Lee?” Jamie broke into his thoughts. “I have a couple more questions for you.”

”Okay, Jamie. Shoot.”

“Exactly how dangerous is what you and Mom do?” Jamie had that worried expression on his face again.

“Truthfully, most of the time it’s a lot of hurry up and wait. We interview crime victims and suspects. We do research, some of it using computers. We talk to people who are in a position to collect the kind of information we may need to know. We sit for hours in the car on stakeouts. We attend boring meetings and set up security for Embassy parties or visiting dignitaries. It’s mostly routine stuff like that.” Lee wanted the boy to realize that it wasn’t really like a James Bond movie.

“So when Mom was shot in California. . .” Jamie hesitated, uncertain how to put his worst fears into words.

“That was exactly what we told you—an accident. We were just in the wrong place at the wrong time, Jamie. It could’ve happened to anybody.” Lee wondered how he could reassure the boy.

“Well, I’d like to get my hands on the guy who shot her, I’d put a real hurting on him,” Phillip blurted angrily punching the air one-two with his fists.

“I did get my hands on him, Phillip.” Lee shook his head in regret. “You know if my friend Barney hadn’t stopped me that day, I probably would’ve killed the guy!”

The two boys looked at each other in surprise. They’d never heard that part of the story before.

“Any other questions, boys? I may not always be able to tell you everything you want to know—much of what your Mom and I do is considered ‘classified’ and we’ve sworn an oath to keep it secret,” Lee explained quietly.

“I have a couple,” Phillip replied immediately. “Do you have a badge and a gun? Can we see them? Have you ever been shot?”

“That’s more than a couple,” Lee smiled at his stepson’s native curiosity. “Yes, I have a badge and a gun and so does your Mom.” He took his Agency ID out of his inside jacket pocket, flipped it open with one hand and passed it to Phillip. The boys both inspected it carefully. Jamie reached out and ran his fingers over the badge itself before handing it back to Lee. Then Lee slipped his left hand inside his jacket again and pulled his automatic weapon out of his shoulder holster. He emptied the chamber, removed the ammunition clip, and visually inspected the chamber to be certain it was empty. He offered it to Phillip handle first, pointing it down at the floor with the safety still on. “This is not a toy, it is a dangerous weapon. I never, ever want either one of you to touch any of my weapons or your mother’s handgun without our permission and direct supervision. Do you understand?”

The boys’ faces mirrored his own very serious expression. “Yes, sir!” they responded in unison.

"It's really heavy," Phillip observed hefting it in his right hand. "Can I pull the trigger?" he looked at Lee for permission.

"No, you may not Phillip. One of the first things you learn in handling any weapon is that you never pull the trigger unless you intend to hit what you're aiming at." As Phillip handed the weapon off to Jamie, Lee decided he'd better talk to Amanda about signing the boys up for a course in gun safety as soon as possible.

"You still haven't answered Phillip's last question, Lee. Have you ever been shot?" Jamie never missed a trick.

"Yes, I have been shot a few times," he kept his answer intentionally vague.

"Wow!" Phillip sounded impressed by that. Jamie just looked at Lee in consternation and handed the gun back to him handle first and pointed at the ground just as Lee had given it to Phillip.

"Anything else you need to know right now?" Both boys shook their heads.

"How about we go get some dinner then? All of a sudden, I'm starved!" His suggestion was greeted with loud cheers from both his stepsons. Of course, any mention of food was usually received with enthusiasm by these two.

## Chapter 5

***Above the dark treetops of the small clearing, the Milky Way was a bright*** slash across the black sky. The crisp mountain air was redolent with the resinous scent of Virginia pines and the earthier aroma of fallen leaves breaking down into rich humus. The occasional rustle of some small nocturnal animal going about the business of survival was the only departure from a silence so complete you could almost feel its weight. In the quiet of the forest night, the scrape of the match sounded like a gunshot. The boy held the match to the carefully placed firewood until the campfire was well alight.

"Only one match, well done, Sport!" Lee complimented the boy warmly as he relaxed on the rough wooden bench flanking one side of the stone fireplace in front of the small three-sided A-frame shelter not far from the Appalachian Trail.

"I sure am glad we got to use this hut tonight. I don't mind cooking on the camp stove, but there's something about a campfire, you know?" Jamie reflected as he slipped onto the bench beside his step-dad and watched the flames of his fire flickering on the hearth. "I can't believe this is our last night."

“I know what you mean. This week sure has gone by quickly.” Lee stretched out his long jean-clad legs and crossed his booted feet on the bench across the way. “I really wish we didn’t have to hike out tomorrow!”

“Do you mean that? I thought you’d be glad to get back to civilization: soft beds, hot showers, electric lights, air conditioning, and the Corvette,” Jamie remarked with a smile.

“Well, I wouldn’t mind a shave and I can happily live without the mosquitoes, but I really have enjoyed our time together, Jamie. I’m not anxious to see it end.” Lee scratched at his bearded face and locked his hands together stretching both arms over his head then moving them back and forth to work the kinks out.

Jamie chuckled at the loud cracking sound his stepfather made when he stretched. “Was that a tree falling or your shoulders creaking?” he joked.

“The ravages of old age, my man,” Lee retorted in good humor.

“You’re not that old, Lee.” Jamie assured him, jabbing him in the ribs with his elbow for emphasis before leaning up against him with a sigh. “I kind of like the scruffy look, you know.”

“You do? Why?” Lee asked as he covered up a yawn and placed his right arm across the boy’s shoulders situating him a little more comfortably against his side.

“Well, don’t tell anyone, okay? When I was little and I finally realized that Dad wasn’t coming home to live with us anymore, I used envy the other guys with their dads out running errands on Saturday mornings. I noticed that their dads were dressed in comfortable old clothes and they usually hadn’t taken the time to shave. They seemed so relaxed, casual; I don’t know kind of familiar with each other. When you started coming around, you always looked so neat— suit and tie, clean-shaven and every hair in place.”

“Kind of stuffy, huh?” Lee commented.

“Yeah, I like the faded jeans with the holes in the knees and the scraggly beard better. It makes me feel like you can be yourself with me now. I’m not really explaining this very well,” Jamie was struggling to make his feelings clear.

“That’s okay, I get what you’re saying, Jamie.” The funny thing was, Lee knew just what the boy was trying to say. He remembered only too well watching all the other guys with their fathers and wishing he still had a Dad, too.

They both watched the flames dance in the fireplace for a while. Then Jamie asked, “Did you and your Dad go camping, Lee?”

“Nope, I never had the chance to go camping with my father,” Lee sighed. He could see where this conversation was going. This was something he still had a hard time discussing with Amanda.

“How come? Didn’t your Dad like to go camping?” Jamie inquired.

“I don’t really know, Jamie. My parents died when I was only five years old. There’s a lot of stuff I don’t know about them, you see,” Lee explained softly.

“Gosh, I’m sorry, Lee. I didn’t know. If you don’t want to talk about it, I understand!” Jamie’s quick and obviously sincere apology touched Lee.

“That’s okay, Sport. You couldn’t know. It’s not so bad, I’m kind of used to it by now.” Lee was a little surprised to find that it really was okay. Now that he’d faced the monster with Amanda’s help, the sadness wasn’t as overwhelming anymore.

“So did you grow up in an orphanage like in ‘Annie’?” Jamie was curious about this man he had come to like and respect even more after spending a week hiking in the mountains with him.

“No, at first I lived with my grandmother, my father’s mother, in an old farmhouse in central Virginia. When she died just before I turned seven, my uncle came back from Germany and took me to live with him on an airbase in San Diego.”

“What’s he like? Your uncle, I mean. He’s still alive, isn’t he?”

“Yeah, he’s still alive all right!” Lee considered how to describe Robert Clayton, Colonel, USAF, to a twelve-year-old boy. “Well, he’s career military, a Colonel in the Air Force. He pilots jets and right now he’s commanding a squadron assigned to Hill Air Force Base in Utah. I think by the time I went off to college we’d lived in a dozen different places and in at least a half-dozen different countries.”

“That tells me what he does, Lee. Not what he’s like,” Jamie told him.

“Okay. Let me try again. The Colonel is all ‘spit and polish’, if you know what I mean. ‘A place for everything and everything in its place’ is one of his favorite mottoes. When The Colonel tells you to do something, he expects it done immediately, perfectly, no excuses.”

“Whoa! Why do you call him ‘The Colonel’? That doesn’t sound very friendly,” Jamie commented turning to look at Lee for the first time.

Lee considered the question. “Hmm, I’ve never really thought about it. I guess I call him The Colonel because when I first came to live with him that’s all I heard people call him. His men all called him by his rank, ‘Major Clayton’, or ‘Sir’. I didn’t know what else to call him.”

“So, he never told you what to call him and you never asked?” Jamie wondered how two people could live together that way. Some families sure were different!

“I suppose that’s the long and short of it,” Lee agreed.

“Can I ask you a question, Lee?” Jamie was a little nervous, but he really wanted to know.

“You mean, in addition to all the ones you’ve already asked me this week?” Lee teased his ever-curious stepson.

“Gosh, I’m sorry, Lee. I didn’t mean to bug you!” Jamie quickly apologized and looked back at the fire; worried that Lee was mad at him for prying.

Lee squeezed Jamie’s shoulder with his right hand and said, “Jamie, look at me. I was only joking. I always want you to feel like you can ask me anything you have on your mind. Of course, I reserve the right to plead the fifth!” He smiled into the boy’s big brown eyes and was rewarded with a tentative smile in return. “What do you want to know, Jamie?”

“I was wondering if you would mind if. . . I mean maybe it’s too soon and I’ll understand if you feel that way. . . or maybe you won’t want it at all. . .” Jamie dithered in his anxiety.

Lee tried to follow where the boy was leading, but he lost him somewhere along the way. “Jamie, I have no idea what you’re talking about. Just hit me with it. What’s the worst that can happen?”

Jamie thought about that one and suddenly wasn’t sure he wanted to ask his question any more. Looking into his step-dad’s serious gray eyes, he didn’t know how to get out of it now. “I was wondering when, I mean, if we can call you ‘Dad’?”

Lee was stunned. Never in a million years had he expected that question from Jamie, certainly not this early in their relationship. In fact, he had honestly believed that the boys would probably always call him ‘Lee’ and he was okay with that.

Jamie leaned forward, picked up a thick branch from the pile of firewood on the ground and poked at the ebbing fire, then threw the stick onto the renewed blaze. ‘Well, I’ve really done it now. Maybe Phillip was right. He said, *Don’t even ask, we’ll just do it and see how he reacts.* How had Lee put it? *It’s sometimes easier to ask forgiveness than to ask for permission.*’

“Wow, Jamie,” Lee finally responded. “You really caught me by surprise with that one! I guess you should call me whatever feels right to you. I certainly don’t expect you to feel like you have to call me ‘Dad’ just because I married your mother. You already have a fine Dad. I really wouldn’t like to be called ‘Mr.



Stetson' all the time and don't ever call me late for dinner!" Lee joked trying to ease the tension he suddenly sensed in the boy.

"What if we wanted to call you 'Dad'? Would that be okay with you, Lee? I know you'll never be our real father, but you've been a pretty good step-father already even though we didn't know it." Jamie continued to gaze into the fire, shifting uncomfortably on the bench.

Lee blinked a couple times, there seemed to be something in his eyes all of a sudden. "Jamie, if you and Phillip ever wanted to call me 'Dad', I would consider that the highest compliment you could pay me."

Jamie relaxed, leaning back against Lee once more and breathing a sigh of relief. "Good, because I think having two Dads is pretty neat."

"Well, I think having two sons is pretty neat, too." Lee replied softly, mussing the boy's hair with one hand. 'What was that in his eyes? Must be smoke from the fire!

**'That was one** highly unsatisfactory phone conversation,' thought Amanda as she replaced the telephone receiver and walked across the room to look out yet another hotel window. Even though it was dark, in the lights of the parking lot she could tell that the rain was still pouring down outside. It'd been raining off and on for the last three days only serving to compound her bad mood. She'd been trying to get in touch with Lee for days. She'd left messages on his machine in the apartment. She'd called the Q Bureau and left messages with the Agency operator.

Last evening, she'd called the duty officer. Agent Freeman had only been able to tell her that Agent Stetson was listed as 'Out of the Office' and it looked as though he hadn't picked up his messages in quite a while. Tonight she'd had enough. When Lee still didn't answer the phone in his apartment, she hadn't bothered to leave another message. Instead she'd dialed Mr. Melrose at home. Mr. Melrose had been evasive to say the least. Yes, you could say that Lee was out in the field right now. No, he was not alone. No, he was not at liberty to say exactly what Lee was doing, but it was routine, really, not dangerous at all. So where was he? And what was he doing? He'd promised her that he wouldn't go out in the field without her. He knew how much she worried when she wasn't there to keep an eye on him.

"Amanda! You were so right to skip the drinks in the bar. The jukebox is stuck somewhere in the 1960's and the place is full of computer nerds and engineers. Nice guys, I suppose, with plenty of money, but they can't dress to save their lives!" Francine breezed into the room in full cry, then stopped as she caught

sight of Amanda's posture at the window and her face as she turned around. "Are you all right? You look upset! Is everything okay at home?"

"I'm sure everything is fine at home, Francine. The boys are with their Dad this week. He said something about using a colleague's beach house for a few days, so I expect they're having the time of their lives. Do you want to see what's on TV tonight?" Amanda picked up the local TV listing and held it out to her colleague.

Francine walked over to the breakfast table in front of the window and put down the bottle of Chardonnay and two wine glasses she held in her hands. Looking at Amanda with one raised eyebrow and receiving her unspoken agreement, Francine opened the bottle and poured two generous glasses of cool white wine. Handing one to Amanda, she then crossed the room to sit on the tiny love seat in their suite and patted the cushion next to her. "So, did you and Lee have a fight or something?"

Amanda sighed. She took a sip of the wine Francine had just handed her stalling for time. She knew Francine well enough by now to know that she wouldn't be easily distracted from a piece of juicy gossip. She just wasn't in the mood to make up a believable story tonight. "Francine, have you forgotten that Lee and I broke up? Gosh, that makes it sound like we're fourteen or something!"

"Yes, Amanda. I remember the day you told me that you and Lee had called it quits. Does that sound better? However, all the signs point to the fact that you two are still together. So why don't you just make yourself comfortable and tell me what's been bothering you for the last couple of days?" Francine curled her feet up underneath her and looked pointedly at the seat beside her as she sipped her own wine.

Amanda crossed to the teal-upholstered chair beside the round breakfast table and sat down heavily. "What do you mean 'all the signs'? What signs, Francine?"

"Well, there's been no bragging to speak of in the steno pool or among any of the Agency clerks at all. Although to be honest, I haven't heard that Lee has dated anyone from the steno pool in, oh, the last two years. He hasn't been sighted on the society scene either. At the Kennedy Center Gala just before we left DC, Chloe Sturbridge asked me where Lee's been hiding lately. You two have been very circumspect, I will give you that. However, when Lee and I went undercover at that tennis tournament, I did notice that he found any excuse possible to call you. I'm pretty sure I know exactly why he was in such a hurry to get back to DC and where he went as soon as he filed his reports, don't you?"

"Francine, really! I don't know what you're talking about. Lee and I are partners, nothing more." Amanda stuck to the party line, but her heart simply wasn't in it. Her heart was on the other coast, wondering where her husband was right now. Why didn't her return her calls?

“All right, Amanda. Have it your way. I thought we’d become more than just colleagues on this trip. I thought we’d become friends. I guess I was wrong about that.” Francine got up from the loveseat and headed over to her suitcase to begin preparing for bed.

“Gosh, Francine, I’m sorry! We have become friends. It’s just. . . Oh heck! You’re right. Lee and I got back together. I’m really worried tonight because I haven’t been able to reach him in over a week. I’ve left messages at his apartment and at work, but he hasn’t returned any of my calls. No one at the Agency will tell me where he is or what he’s doing. I even went so far as to call Mr. Melrose at home tonight. I can’t believe I did that. Where can he be, Francine? He promised me he wouldn’t go out in the field without me!” Amanda finally took a breath.

“I knew it!” Francine dropped her black silk negligee back into her suitcase and crossed the room to her friend. Sitting down across the table from her she said, “Amanda, Lee really shouldn’t have made that promise to you. If Dr. Smyth or Billy need him to take a case, he really has no choice but to go and with whatever partner they assign to him. You know that.”

“I know. It’s the not knowing that’s bothering me. Even when he’s away on a case, he usually finds some way to get in touch with me.” The fingers of Amanda’s right hand toyed with her heart necklace. “I’m just worried, that’s all.”

“I understand believe me, but Scarecrow is the best of the best,” Francine assured her friend with a cocky smile.

Amanda smiled back, “Yes, he is. And Lee’s pretty special, too!”

Francine laughed, “Yes, he is. Since you’ve been around we’ve gotten to see a lot more of the real Lee Stetson and I like that. Amanda, I’ve known Lee for a very long time. I’ve seen him with a lot of different women. None of them have ever been able to bring out the best in him the way you have. The way he looks at you, well, if Jonathon ever looked at me like that, I wouldn’t have doubts any more.”

“Thank you. I’ve always known that deep down you really do care about Lee, as a good friend, I mean.”

“If I had to make a list of people I could call on when my back’s against the wall, Lee Stetson would be at the head of the list. You’d probably be in second place, Amanda.” Francine blushed and reached out to lightly touch Amanda’s hand. “I think you’re both pretty special and, even though I may not always show it, I’m glad to know you.”

“I’m flattered, Francine. I know it’s not easy to have friends in this business. Lee explained that pretty graphically early on in our relationship. I really appreciate your friendship.” Amanda squeezed her hand and smiled.

“Amanda, you know when I warned you about Love ‘Em and Leave ‘Em Lee, I wasn’t being completely fair to Lee,” she told Amanda with regret.

“I realize that Francine. I know that you and Lee played ‘backgammon’ and I’m sorry if Lee hurt you in the past. . .” Amanda began.

Francine interrupted her. “No, Lee didn’t hurt me at least not in the way that you’d probably think. Lee would never hurt a woman intentionally. I think I’d really like to tell you about it,” Francine looked at the woman sitting across the table. She couldn’t believe that she was about to open her heart to a woman she had dismissed at first as a suburban housewife who knits or something. She refilled both their wine glasses and launched into her story.

“A couple of months after Lee’s partner, Denny, was killed, Billy began assigning different agents to him, trying to find him a new partner. No one lasted for more than a few months. Eventually, it was my turn. Lee and I worked several cases together, very successfully I might add. When Billy approached Lee about assigning us together permanently Lee objected so strongly that Billy had to drop the idea. I was livid. I felt it reflected poorly on my job performance and I confronted Lee in the Bullpen the next day and told him exactly what I thought of him and his ‘lone wolf’ attitude. He heard me out and then quietly, but firmly, said, ‘I won’t work with a partner, not anymore. I’m sorry, Francine, it has nothing to do with you. You’re by far one of the best agents I’ve ever worked with, but no more partners. That’s final.’ Billy still teamed us together from time to time when he needed a couple to go undercover, but Lee never again worked with another partner. Until you came along, that is.”

“Time passed. Jonathon and I got engaged, set a date, and I planned my dream wedding. The big day finally came and he left me standing at the altar humiliated in front of three hundred friends, family members and co-workers. That Monday I went back to work as though everything was normal, but it wasn’t and I wasn’t. I went through the motions all week enduring the sympathetic glances and the sudden quiet that came over any room the moment I walked in. Each night I went home and emptied a box of tissues. I wasn’t sleeping well. I was hardly eating. I really dreaded the arrival of Friday night. It’d been over a year since I’d even had to think about what to do on a weekend. Weekends had been spent with Jonathon—going out to restaurants, seeing the shows, sharing the newspaper over Sunday brunch. This would be the first weekend I would spend alone in a very long time.”

“I stayed at the Agency as late as possible that Friday night. Even so, it was only seven o’clock when Billy finally forced me to go home. The strange thing was that I noticed Lee was still at his desk when I walked out. Lee Stetson hard at work on his paperwork after seven on a Friday night? Unbelievable. I saw Billy walk over to him as I headed out the Bullpen doors and assumed that Billy was sending Scarecrow on his way home, too. I went straight home, changed into my most comfortable old sweats and turned on the TV just to have a little noise in the

place. The phone rang. Jonathon hadn't made any attempt to contact me since our aborted wedding day and, even if it was that slime ball, I was in no mood to talk to him. In fact, I was in no mood to talk to anyone, so I simply unplugged the damn phone. Thirty minutes later, I'd gotten fed up with TV and switched on the stereo, when my doorbell rang. Looking through the peephole I was shocked to see Lee Stetson standing there with a pizza box in one hand and two bottles of wine in the other. Well, I wasn't feeling up to any visitors, so I told him to go away in no uncertain terms. He wouldn't leave. He rang the doorbell again. He knocked. Then he got out his lock picks and let himself in. It's not easy to keep Scarecrow out, when he wants in," Francine had to chuckle at the memory.

"I know what you mean," Amanda smiled recalling how many times Lee had appeared unexpectedly inside her home.

"I'll just bet you do!" Francine returned her smile and continued her story, "Well, suffice it to say that we finished the pizza and both bottles of wine, one red, one white. We watched the video he'd rented—*9 to 5*, you know the one with Jane Fonda, Dolly Parton, and that comedienne, what was her name? Anyway, I was very drunk by the end of the evening, but I was feeling better. Lee had gotten my mind off of Jonathon. The last thing I remember is telling Lee to lock up behind himself just as I dozed off on my couch. When I awoke the next morning, I was in my own bed fully clothed, mind you, and my apartment was as neat as a pin—no pizza box, greasy paper plates or empty wine bottles to be seen. My crystal wine glasses had been washed and put away in the cupboard. It was as if he'd never even been there."

"Scarecrow strikes again!" Amanda commented in jest.

"No, that wasn't Scarecrow. That was all Lee. The next Friday, he brought Chinese take-out and vintage Cabernet. We ate Moo Shoo Pork and Pot Stickers and killed off two more bottles of wine. We talked until two in the morning, about work, life, and lovers who leave you. Lee had gotten me talking about Jonathon finally. A week later, I wasn't at all surprised to hear my doorbell ring around 7 and find Lee Stetson on my doorstep. This time he had a sack full of groceries. He proceeded to cook me a gourmet dinner: pasta with Myzythra cheese, Greek olives, Caesar salad and a couple bottles of vintage Chianti, of course. After dinner, he reached into the grocery sack and pulled out one remaining item—a dartboard. He robbed my picture albums of a few choice pictures of Jonathon and we threw darts at the jerk. I think that was the night I started to believe that I could survive this with my pride and my heart intact."

"Francine, I still don't see where the 'backgammon' comes in," Amanda prodded.

"There was no 'backgammon' at that point. Lee was always the perfect gentleman and kept everything completely platonic. At work he continued to play his little tricks on me and I plotted to get even, everything went on as usual, except for the fact that I'd recovered my equilibrium and was no longer acting like

the ‘Wicked Witch of the West’. About three months after Jonathon left me at the altar, I was scheduled to be a bride’s maid for my cousin, Rosemarie. She was marrying the most eligible bachelor in all Atlanta, Addison Cartwright, heir to Cartwright Industries. It didn’t hurt that he was also voted one of the ‘Ten Best Looking Southern Men’ by *Southern Living Magazine* either. Rosemarie had been one of my bride’s maids, so she had witnessed one of the worst moments of my life. Now I had to go witness her triumph. I know it sounds petty, but you have to understand that I’ve been competing with Rosemarie since we were small girls. We were only months apart in age, so we were in the same dance classes and went to the Cotillion the same year. We were debutantes the same year. We graduated from high school and university the same year. We lived in the same neighborhood and competed for boyfriends, cheerleading captain, Prom Queen, valedictorian, you name it. On my wedding invitation, she handwrote ‘Francine Desmond and escort’. Then she called me, in all sympathy, to assure me that if I wasn’t up to finding an escort, Addison would be glad to find one for me.”

“Oh, Francine. How awful!” Amanda remembered all too clearly her feelings of abandonment after Joe told her he didn’t think they could work things out. Later, she had been party to the decision to divorce and truthfully she’d seen it coming for a long time, but it was still very painful. To be deserted suddenly and without any explanation by someone you loved and in front of all your friends and family on top of it all would be crushing.

“The worst part of it was that, while I had just begun dating again, I hadn’t met anyone I would even consider inviting to Rosemarie’s wedding as my escort. Desmond family weddings are true Southern weddings. They begin with a huge family picnic on the Sunday before the wedding and involve other family gatherings and parties almost every night of the week leading up to the ‘Big Day’. Then I thought of Lee. When I finally worked up the courage to ask him, I told him that I didn’t really expect him to come down for the whole week—only the weekend of the wedding itself. He immediately insisted on coming with me for the whole week. He thought it sounded like fun! As you can imagine, it was a very difficult week for me, not only did the all dinner parties and showers remind me of my own wedding preparations not so long ago, but my old schoolmates and cousins kept making inadvertent remarks that opened wounds that were only just beginning to heal. They were all married or engaged to be married. I don’t think I could have gotten through the week without Lee’s sense of humor and quiet understanding. The worst part was the ceremony itself, watching Rosemarie make the promises I once thought I would make was almost more than I could bear. Later at the reception, everyone complimented Rosemarie and Addison on the beauty of the service, the cream of Atlanta society toasted their happiness and the champagne flowed like water. I confess that I tried to drown my own unhappiness in alcoholic bubbles.”

“Thank goodness, I’d brought Lee as my ‘escort’. He immediately recognized the symptoms of a tipsy Francine and ‘escorted’ me right back to my hotel room

before I could get loud or obnoxious. Unfortunately for him, I was also feeling very, very sorry for myself. I decided to prove that I was still a beautiful, desirable woman by seducing Lee. He could have pushed me away, but he didn't. He was kind and considerate and made me feel wonderful for one night. When I awoke in the morning though, he was gone. He'd left a note on my bedside table thanking me for the evening right next to a bud vase containing one white rose. I was embarrassed to say the least. I would never have acted that way under normal circumstances. I wasn't certain I could ever look Lee in the face after what had happened the night before. I thought I'd just leave for DC as quietly as possible. No sooner had I finished packing than Lee was at my door to carry my baggage to the airport shuttle. He acted as though the night before had never happened. It was back to business as usual. That morning, I realized what a truly loyal friend I had in Lee Stetson."

"So yes, Amanda, Lee and I 'played backgammon'. It was certainly not at all his intention to get into bed with me. He may have bedded many different women, but they all knew just what to expect. None of them wanted any more out of the relationship than he did. I have never heard that he took advantage of anyone or made any promises he didn't intend to keep. He and I both knew that there could never be more than friendship between us, but at that moment in my life he gave me just the kind of friendship I needed."

"Francine, I really appreciate you sharing this with me," Amanda reached out and laid her hand over Francine's. "I know how difficult this was for you and I value your honesty and openness."

"Thank you, Amanda. It's not only difficult to find someone you can trust as a friend in this business, it is even more rare to find a woman friend. I know I haven't always been warm or even very friendly toward you. Hell, I've been downright condescending and arrogant. You're not the wide-eyed amateur you were at first. You've come a long way, Amanda. It's always been hard for me to show my true feelings. That's why Lee and I are always sparring, I guess. Neither one of us is comfortable admitting that we actually care about one another."

"So when we get back to the Agency, it's back to the usual snide comments and little innuendoes?" Amanda teased.

"I don't know. I think I may be ready to try something new and different. We'll be working together for the next few weeks putting this course together. It would only be natural for a friendship to develop between two women who are working together so closely, wouldn't you think?" Francine divided the last of the wine in the bottle between the two glasses.

"Absolutely. In fact, I think it would be strange if a friendship didn't grow under those circumstances," Amanda smiled and picked up her glass. "To friendship!"

“To friendship!” Francine touched her glass to her friend’s and drained the last of the wine with a contented smile.

***The evening sky*** was painted in glorious hues of pink, orange, red and purple by the time the black Lincoln Town Car pulled up in front of the gabled white house in suburban Arlington, Virginia. A stocky black man dressed in a wrinkled khaki three-piece suit exited the vehicle and started up the front walk. The streetlights had just come on and he could faintly hear the shouts of children playing a game of hide-and-seek and of mothers calling their children home. Gaining the planter bedecked front step of the quiet home, he rang the doorbell and waited.

“I’ll get it!” he heard an alto voice call from the back of the house. The sound of pounding feet heralded the opening of the door.

“Hello,” Billy Melrose greeted the twelve-year-old doorman. “Jamie, isn’t it? I’m Mr. Melrose. I work with your Mom and with Lee. I was wondering if I could speak with Lee?”

Jamie studied his face suspiciously for a moment and then stepped back so he could enter the house, “Oh yeah. I remember you from when you thought Mom and Lee had sold some secrets to some bad guys, but they didn’t. Lee’s in the back trying to fix Phillip’s bike.” Jamie led the way through the house and onto the back patio.

Once on the patio, Billy stopped Jamie King with one hand on his shoulder and put his finger to his lips in a mute request for silence. Lee Stetson, dressed in a ragged pair of red gym shorts and a faded blue T-shirt, was kneeling on the ground with his back to the kitchen door. He had a selection of tools on the ground beside him and was concentrating on removing a damaged part from a blue ten-speed racing bicycle. Facing him across the bike and holding a gauze pad to his right elbow was a very concerned Phillip King.

“Can you really fix it?” Phillip asked anxiously.

Lee sighed as he examined the parts laid out on the brick patio in front of him. “The broken spokes on the front wheel and the bent rim are no problem. The real problem is that you cracked the casing of the derailleur and broke the guide completely off. How did this happen again?” Lee asked as he looked away from the abused bike parts and into his stepson’s eyes.

“I hit a big bump and crashed,” Phillip explained simply.

“You mean you were showing off for some girls, tried to go over a jump and biffed totally, don’t you?” Jamie asked his older brother not so innocently.



“You’re a little tattletale, you know that? It kind of worked for me though. When I crashed, the girls were all worried and rushed over to see if I was okay. Two of them even walked me all the way home.” Phillip smiled sheepishly at Lee and then stuck his tongue out at Jamie who responded in kind.

Lee just laughed at the boys’ shenanigans. “Well, Phillip that’s one way to get the girls’ attention, but don’t you think it’d be better in the long run if the girls liked you for who you are, not just because they feel sorry for you?”

“Yeah, I guess. Are you sure you can fix my bike? That derailleur thing sounds complicated. Mom always takes our bikes to the shop,” Phillip offered sadly.

“Oh, is that what she told you?” Lee replied with a chuckle and a shake of his head. “I seem to remember replacing a rim, some broken spokes and straightening a badly bent fork on Jamie’s old bike a while back.”

The boys looked at each other in amazement. “You fixed my bike when Mom ran over it with that big, black car? Were you the one who finally put our stereo speaker back together, too?” Jamie asked.

“Yup. That was me, Mr. Fix It. Okay, we’re going to need to replace the derailleur and the guide, but we won’t be able to get the parts until the shop opens tomorrow morning. Jamie, why don’t you help your brother carry his bike into the garage for tonight while I put away the tools? Phillip, if your elbow has stopped bleeding, you can throw out the gauze on your way to the garage,” Lee suggested as he put the tools away in the green metal toolbox and began to gather up the broken bike parts.

“Mr. Fix It, eh?” Billy observed.

“Hey, Billy!” Lee finally greeted his boss as he stood up with his hands full and started toward the kitchen door. “What brings you into this neighborhood tonight?”

“Here, let me get the door for you,” Billy offered. He stepped in front of Lee, held the door open for him and flicked on the overhead light. “I just stopped by to bring you up to date on a few things from work.”

“Thanks!” Lee went into the laundry room to put the toolbox back in the cupboard and laid the bike parts on a piece of newspaper on top of the dryer. Returning to the kitchen, he said, “Just let me get the boys headed for bed so we can talk. Can I get you something to drink?”

“You bet,” Billy agreed gratefully. “What do you have?”

“Well, we’re down to a couple of root beers,” Lee peered into the fridge, taking a quick inventory. “Some milk that I’m not too sure about any more, I’ll have to run to the store before breakfast,” he observed, sniffing the milk container warily

before he poured it down the drain and rinsed out the sink. "And some twelve-year old Scotch." Lee looked at Billy and smiled with embarrassment as he said, "Personally, I'd go with the scotch."

"You've sold me, I'll take a very short scotch," Billy laughed at Lee's 'domestic' side. Just then the boys entered, arguing about who would be paying for the repairs to Phillip's bicycle.

"No way is Dad going to pay for your bike. You're the one who wrecked it so you're the one who should pay. Right, Dad?" Jamie appealed to Lee for a judgment.

"Let's see how much it costs first, then we'll decide who pays for what, okay? Right now it's time to get ready for bed. Phillip, it's your night to use the bathroom first," Lee replied reasonably as he removed two old-fashioned glasses and a half-empty bottle of Mac Alan single-malt from the cupboard above the refrigerator.

"Aw, Dad. It's summertime and it's still early," Phillip whined.

"We serve no 'whine' before its time," Lee joked. "I said 'get ready for bed' not 'get into bed'. When you've showered and put on your PJ's you can come back down and watch TV for a little while. Now get a move on!" The boys headed upstairs as slowly as humanly possible.

**Reaching the bathroom** door, Phillip stopped and turned to Jamie, "You can go first tonight, Jamie. I know how you hate it when I use up all the hot water."

"Oh no you don't," Jamie retorted in a whisper. "I want to listen in, too!"

"We can't both listen in, dummy! Dad is expecting someone to get in the shower," Phillip informed him more quietly, irritated that his plan had been anticipated by his younger brother.

Jamie hunkered down on the top step and angled his head so he could hear what the two men in the kitchen were saying. "So go turn the water on in the shower and come back," Jamie suggested. Suddenly, he jumped up and dashed for the bedroom door. "They're going into the living room!" he warned Phillip who immediately shot through the bathroom door and turned on the shower faucet. As soon as they heard two men cross the landing, both boys emerged and took up their listening post at the top of the stairs once more.

**Lee handed a** glass of Scotch to Billy and gestured toward the living room with his right hand. Billy crossed the landing and turned into Amanda's comfortable Colonial-style living room. He sat down on the Wedgwood blue plaid couch while Lee took a seat in the armchair facing the couch. Both men sipped appreciatively from their glasses. Lee waited for Billy to begin.

"Can the boys hear what we're saying?" Billy asked his forehead wrinkling in concern.

Lee tossed a coaster to Billy before grabbing one for himself and setting it on the side table at his elbow. Placing his drink on the coaster, he walked quietly over to the landing and peered up. Returning to Billy in the living room, he smiled and said, "I didn't see anyone on the stairs and I do hear the sound of the shower, but that doesn't necessarily mean much around here. I just found out from Jamie and Phillip that the boys have been spying on the adults around here pretty effectively for the past six months or so."

"We'll just have to chance it, I guess," Billy sighed. "Maybe this business does run in some families. Did I tell you that my oldest just told us she's considering applying to the FBI instead of law school after graduation?"

"No kidding, Billy! How does Jeannie feel about that?" Lee wasn't all that surprised. Roberta, 'Bobbi' to her friends, had been talking about going into law enforcement as long as he'd known her. It had been her parents that were pushing law school.

"I think she's still in shock, to be honest. She'll get over it. She always told the girls they could be anything they wanted to be when they grew up if they just put their minds to it. Now, we'll have to come to terms with the bright, independent young woman we've raised." Billy smiled fondly. "What about you, Dad? Things seem to be going pretty well on the home front for you."

"I think we're still in the 'honeymoon phase', if you know what I mean. Just wait until I have to really send one of them to their room for something or ground them for a weekend. Then we'll see who they want to call 'Dad'!" Lee observed always the pragmatist.

"It's all part of the job description, Lee. Speaking of that, I just got the memo today. The administrative review of your suspension has been scheduled for Friday at nine."

Lee groaned and took a deep swallow of his scotch. "I'd almost forgotten about that, Billy!"

"Don't worry about a thing, Scarecrow. From what I've been able to pick up on the grapevine, the other directors are either confused or outraged by your

suspension. Harvey from Legal told me that if Smyth pursues this, you'd have substantial cause for a civil rights lawsuit. Together with the reports and statistics Francine and I have been gathering together since March, I think we're in a pretty good position overall," Billy assured his friend.

"Francine knows, too!" Lee was chagrined. He'd thought they'd been more circumspect than that.

"No, at least I don't think she knows why I've had her compiling and then comparing solve rates for different partnerships over time. I just dumped it all in with a bunch of other required reports and she certainly hasn't questioned the assignment," Billy considered Lee's question seriously and shook his head. "You never know with Francine, however. We've both seen how she'll hold onto a piece of information until she can put it to good use."

"You're not kidding!" Lee exclaimed with feeling, remembering a photo taken at an office party of him wearing a Carmen Miranda fruit-covered turban and the price he'd been forced to pay for those negatives. "Thanks for the heads up about the review. I'll be glad to get this resolved before Amanda gets back. That will be one less thing I'll have to explain away."

"I take it you still haven't told her about Joe leaving for Africa and your suspension? Or that the entire Agency, no make that the entire intelligence network in the Boston-New York-DC Metroplex knows that you're married? Discretion may be the better part of valor in other arenas, Lee. When it comes to wives, you can only keep things from them for so long before it blows up in your face!" Billy advised the newlywed out of his vast store of experience.

"I know, I know. At first, I wasn't sure how to tell her over the phone, or how much to tell her for that matter. As time went on and things became more and more complicated, telling her over the phone began to look like a very bad idea," Lee explained with a shake of his head.

"Maybe you're right and I hope you are. You know Amanda better than I do. I didn't just come over to inform you of the administrative review though," Billy told him quietly. "There's something else brewing that I think you need to know."

"In Estoccia, Billy?" Lee inquired, not at all certain that he wanted to hear this.

"I'm afraid so. According to our sources in the capitol, Joe King met there with several political representatives of the Soldiers of Islam hoping to negotiate passage for EAO trucks and personnel into southeastern Atbarah. After a long drawn-out negotiation, the representatives finally agreed to allow two trucks to reach the Christian refugees encamped in the highlands on the Atbarah-Estoccian border. Three days later, on their way to those border camps, two EAO trucks were hijacked. The emergency food supplies were stolen and two members of the Medecins Sans Frontieres, a doctor and a nurse, were taken hostage. Al-Mahdi, the self-proclaimed military leader of the Soldiers of Islam,

has claimed responsibility for the hijacking and the kidnapping. He's demanding certain concessions from the Estoccian government in return for the release of the French Nationals taken hostage by his forces. Joe King, no doubt feeling personally responsible for the situation, has offered to try to broker a deal between Al-Mahdi and the Estoccian government."

"Please don't tell me he's headed into the interior in order to meet with Al-Mahdi, Billy!" Lee begged, but not holding out much hope.

"I'm afraid so. That was four days ago, and nothing's been heard from him since. Of course, communication is very slow on a good day and completely unreliable on a bad day in the more rural areas of Estoccia and Atbarah. The Prime Minister authorized several forays by the Estoccian Regular Army. They finally located the burned out hulk of the Land Rover owned by EAO, but there was no sign of Joe or his driver."

"It's just a matter of time before the Estoccian government appeals to us for help, you know," Lee remarked with a sigh of resignation.

Billy nodded his head slowly and drained the last of his scotch. "I don't think EAO will have contacted Amanda about this. You should probably fill her in as soon as she gets back and then decide how much to tell the boys. In the meantime, I'll continue to pass on any new details as I hear them." Billy got up and offered Lee his hand in farewell. "I guess things just got a little more complicated for you, Lee. I'm sorry to lay this on you, but I'm not sure it would be a good idea to inform Amanda officially, yet. I can only hope we'll know a little more by the time she gets back to DC on Friday."

**Lee saw his** friend to the door and then returned to the living room to clear away their scotch glasses. Lost in thought as he walked back along the hallway toward the kitchen, he was startled when he looked up to find the boys blocking his pathway. "How much did you guys hear?" he asked chagrined.

The boys turned and walked ahead of him into the kitchen. "Most of it, I think," Jamie admitted sitting down heavily on a stool at the counter. Phillip took a seat next to him without speaking.

"Tell me what you mean by 'most of it', Jamie." Lee wasn't very surprised to find the boys had been eavesdropping. After all, he'd done it himself when he was a boy. Sometimes it was the only the only way a kid could be prepared for what life would throw at him next. Lee wanted to figure out exactly what the boys had heard and just how much they'd understood. He certainly didn't want to tell them any more than they needed to know.

Jamie held up one hand and pointed to his index finger, "First, you got suspended from work probably because you asked for time off to take care of us. Second, Dad is negotiating with some pretty dangerous people and may have been kidnapped or worse." He ticked the second point off on his middle finger. "Third, you still haven't told Mom about Dad leaving for Africa or getting suspended. Fourth, you're wondering whether to call her now and how much to tell her if you do." Jamie tallied his final two points and then looked at Lee waiting for his response.

Lee cleared his throat in discomfort. "That's a pretty fair summary, Jamie. What do you think, Phillip?"

"That about covers it. I do have a question for you, Lee."

Lee noted the reversion from 'Dad' to 'Lee' and asked, "What's that, Chief?"

Phillip cleared his throat just as Lee had before he asked, "Did you know that what Dad was doing was dangerous? I mean, when you first told us he was going to Africa, you made it sound like it was just another one of his trips for EAO."

"Well, Phillip. It was just another one of his trips for EAO. In all honesty, when he told me where he was going and why, I did warn him that the situation was rapidly becoming unstable in the region. I think he was already well aware of it. He's pretty much lived in Estoccia off and on for the last ten years. He probably understands the politics and tensions in the area as well as anyone." Lee didn't want to make Joe sound rash or foolhardy. He did want them to know that Joe wasn't ignorant of the possible consequences of his actions.

"Do you think Dad's okay?" Jamie asked sounding more like a scared little boy than the confident young man he was quickly becoming.

"I don't know, Jamie," Lee walked over to stand between Phillip and Jamie. He put an arm over each boy's shoulders. "I promise Mr. Melrose and I will do our best to find out what's happened to your Dad, if anything's happened at all! If there's something we can do to help him, you know we will."

"Are you going to call Mom now?" Phillip asked leaning back a little into Lee's one-armed hug.

Lee sighed and squeezed his shoulder. "I haven't made up my mind yet. I think I'll sleep on it. Maybe talk to a few people I know tomorrow and see what I can find out. I'll probably call her tomorrow evening with whatever information I've gathered by that time. Any more questions, fellas?" Both boys shook their heads, 'No'. "Then I think it's bedtime for all of us. We have a bike to repair tomorrow and a lawn that needs to be mowed, too." Lee backed up so that the boys could get off the stools and Phillip immediately headed upstairs.

“And you’re going to see what you can find out about Dad,” Jamie reminded him softly.

“That’s right, Sport. That’s my first priority,” Lee promised him sincerely.

“Thanks, Dad!” Jamie grabbed him around the waist in a spontaneous hug.

“Thanks for being you and for taking care of us and for looking out for our Dad!”

Lee placed his arms around the boy. “You’re very welcome, Jamie.”