

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 Three:

**Who has not felt how sadly sweet
The dream of home, the dream of home,
Steals over the heart, too soon to fleet,
When far o'er sea or land we roam?
Thomas Moore**

Chapter 12

Amanda King Stetson entered the Georgetown foyer and greeted the ubiquitous receptionist, “Good morning, Mrs. Marston. The word is ‘nosegay’.” She recalled with a smile Lee’s theory that Mrs. Marston never actually went home but kept wardrobe changes stashed in the nearest Ladies’ Room. She took her badge and began to attach it to her sweater even as she turned toward the steps up to the Q Bureau.

“Mrs. King! Mr. Melrose left a message that he wanted to see you down in his office as soon as you came in this morning. He was most insistent,” she reported with a sympathetic smile.

“Thank you, Mrs. Marston.” Amanda headed into the closet-elevator with her customary smile even though suddenly her heart was beating in a frantic tattoo. Once inside the elevator car, she dropped any attempt at pretense as she carefully repositioned the coats and then leaned back against the wall. Closing her eyes, she tried to think positive thoughts as the car made its slow descent. ‘It’s probably just routine—a question about a report we filed or maybe a change in the dates for ITMIG conference.’

“Good morning, Jamie.” Dotty greeted her youngest grandson cheerfully as he shuffled sleepily into the sunny kitchen. “You’re just in time. I finished cooking the sausages and was trying to decide whether this was a pancake or French toast sort of morning.”

Jamie covered a yawn. “I really don’t care, Grandma.”

“Yeah, whatever you make will be just fine,” Phillip chimed in as he passed through on his way to the television in the family room. “I’m going to turn on the news.”

Dotty followed her grandsons into the next room. “Since when are you two so fascinated by the news?”

“I guess it started while you were away, Grandma. News and sports are pretty much all our step-dad watches.” Jamie’s eyes were glued on the TV screen as Phillip tuned to CSN.

“So, you’re watching the news this morning because that’s what Lee likes to watch?”

Phillip sighed and turned toward his grandmother. “That and because Mike told me he saw a story about Estoccia on CSN last night and he thinks they showed a picture of our father. He didn’t hear what they’d said about him though because he’d come in on the middle of the story.”

“Oh, I see. Well. Then you don’t trust your Mom to keep you informed.”

“We don’t want to keep bugging Mom about it. We don’t want to stress her out, you know? We’d just like to know as much as we can about what’s going on over there.” Phillip kept one eye on the news anchor.

“Mom thinks we’re still little kids. She’s trying to protect us. She doesn’t realize that not knowing worries us more than knowing,” Jamie tried to explain.

“When you love someone, you try to protect them. It doesn’t mean you think that they’re immature or weak. You do it because you love them,” Dotty suggested. “Your mother is certainly a grown woman, but I still try to protect her because I love her. Just like you two are trying to protect her by getting your information from CSN.”

“Okay, Grandma,” Phillip agreed with one of his one-armed hugs. “We get the idea.”

“How would it be if I told you what I know about what’s happening in Estoccia?” Instantly she had Jamie and Phillip’s complete attention. “The Estoccian army

has been fighting with Islamic groups in the western highlands since Monday. We haven't heard anything about the hostages yet. That's what your Mom means when she says, 'No news is good news.' Maybe we'll hear something today. You know how communication is between here and Estoccia. Your father is lucky if he can put a call through once a week when he's over there."

"That's right and half the time we get cut off right in the middle of a sentence," Jamie confirmed with a nod.

"I've decided it's a waffle morning. You two may have your breakfast in here while you watch the news. . . on one condition."

"What's that, Grandma?" Phillip and Jamie asked in unison.

"We'll be careful not to spill," Jamie promised readily.

"That would be nice, dear. My condition is that you call me right away if that Estoccian story comes on."

"You bet, Grandma!" Phillip assured her as he turned up the volume on the television and plopped down on the sofa.

The elevator doors finally opened. Amanda pasted a pleasant expression on her face and began the long walk from the elevator and on through the busy Bullpen, returning morning greetings automatically. She tried to catch Francine's eye, but the blonde agent was busy with a phone call. The closed blinds only increased her anxiety. She knocked three times and opened the office door when Mr. Melrose called, "Enter!"

Mr. Melrose was leaning against the front of his desk calmly watching the bank of surveillance screens arrayed on his far wall. "Good morning, Amanda. Close the door behind you," he instructed with a warm smile. "How are you this morning?"

"Just fine thank you, Mr. Melrose." She fidgeted with her wedding set as she waited for him to explain the reason she'd been called down to the Bullpen. He continued to watch the monitors for a moment.

"Hah! It's about time," he barked with a grin. "Look at the first monitor on the left, Mrs. Stetson."

She stepped forward to squint at the small black-and-white picture and then gasped, "Lee!" There he was ambling casually out of the elevator with Leatherneck at his back. They were both dressed in the green gabardine and khaki of the service "A" uniform worn by the United States Marine Corps.

Amanda turned to rush from the room, but Mr. Melrose gently blocked her hasty exit.

“He’s on his way here, Amanda. I thought you’d both appreciate a little privacy for this reunion.” His eyes narrowed at something he saw on the surveillance monitors.

“Yes, sir. That’s very thoughtful of you,” she told him as she turned back toward the screen and saw that Dr. Smyth had intercepted Lee just a few steps away from the elevator. “I wish I could hear what they’re saying!”

“You and me both!” Mr. Melrose said with feeling.

“You may think you’ve gotten away with something, Stetson! You may even feel that you’ve won this round,” Smyth concluded vehemently as he stood toe-to-toe with Major Lee H. Stetson in the hallway outside the Bullpen. “This is far from over, Scarecrow. I can guarantee it! I’m going to be watching for you to put just one toe outside the line. If you think you’re ever getting out of the Q Bureau while I’m Director of this Agency, you can think again.”

Even without turning his head, Lee could swear he felt Leatherneck bristle as he stood there behind him. He smiled broadly and adopted a relaxed stance before he shot a quelling glance over his left shoulder at his friend. Looking Dr. Smyth in the eye, his voice dripped with false sincerity, “Thank you, sir. I appreciate your confidence in me. I can’t tell you how happy I am to know you’re so satisfied with my work in the Q Bureau. If you’ll excuse me, I was ordered to report to my Section Chief as soon as I finished in Debriefing.”

With a mocking salute, Stetson smoothly moved past the irate Director to the Bullpen doors with Leatherneck at his back. The two MP’s on guard snapped to attention and saluted crisply before they swung the doors open. He and Leatherneck returned their salutes just as crisply and headed into the bustle of the heart of the Field Section.

“Scarecrow! Leatherneck! Nice job in Estoccia,” called Frank Duffy as he jumped up from behind his desk and offered his hand in welcome. Work came to a standstill as a crowd of agents and clerks, anxious to hear all the details, surrounded both men.

Lee extricated himself from the impromptu party as quickly as he could, leaving Leatherneck to handle the barrage of curious well-wishers. He’d gone straight from the airfield to a long and drawn out briefing at the Pentagon and then into three hours of debriefing here at the Agency. He intended to touch base with Billy and then find his wife. They had some unfinished business.

“Nice power suit, Scarecrow!” Francine greeted him with a smile and a friendly hug.

“That’s Major Stetson to you, ma’am.” He returned the hug with a distracted smile. “Where’s Amanda?” he asked stepping back to scan the crowded room one more time.

“I think she’s in a meeting this morning. I’ll tell her you’re back as soon as I see her.”

“Oh, thanks. I’d appreciate it.”

He checked to be sure his tie was still neatly tucked into his shirt and rapped on Billy’s door, reaching to turn the knob even before he heard the familiar voice bellow, “Come!” He came to a complete halt as soon as he stepped inside the door. She was standing there looking like an angel in a white cotton sweater, blouse, and skirt.

“Amanda! Gee, I am so sorry,” he blurted as he swept his hat off his head.

“I’m going to give these files to Francine,” Billy commented to no one in particular as he went out the door and closed it behind him.

“I should’ve called you. I made a big mistake. It’s just that I was really enjoying my time with Phillip and Jamie and I was afraid you’d feel like you had to come home with Joe taking off and all,” he continued contritely without even noticing that his boss had just left.

Amanda crossed the room and stopped his rambling apology with a soft hand on his lips. “I know, sweetheart. You explained everything beautifully in your letter. I forgive you.”

“You do? Really?” he asked against her fingers.

“Yes, of course I forgive you,” she assured him, caressing the slight reddish-brown stubble on his jaw with one finger. “Do you forgive me?”

“Forgive you! You didn’t do anything wrong. You had every right to be angry with me that night.”

“I may have had the right to be angry, but I should’ve given you a chance to explain. I should never have thrown you out of the house. I’m so sorry. Please forgive me,” she appealed in a low voice, moving her hands down to his lapels and looking up into his eyes.

“It’s your house, Amanda.”

"It's our house now, Lee. I really need you to forgive me and I want you to promise me something," she begged softly. "Do you forgive me, Lee?"

"I forgive you, but I still don't see what you did wrong," he shook his head slightly.

"Thank you. Now promise me that if I ever try to throw you out of our home, you won't go."

"A-man-da!"

She shook him gently for emphasis and leaned in so closely that her soft lips almost touched his. "Promise me, Lee. I mean it."

"Okay, I promise." He pulled her into his arms and bent his head so that their lips finally touched. He closed his eyes and reveled in the feel of her. Her arms slipped around his waist and the kiss deepened. This was where he belonged. This was where she belonged. She offered him her warmth and her trust asking little in return. She'd seen his pain, endured his anger, and the darkness he'd hidden deep within. She dismantled the walls around his heart and built a home there instead. She did things to him that no other woman had ever been able to do. If he'd could, he would have shouted aloud, but someone else was already shouting. No, someone was calling his name. He could hardly hear it over the roaring in his ears. Then the darkness crashed over him.

"Lee. Lee!" Amanda tightened her arms around his waist as he suddenly swayed on his feet and his hat hit the floor rolling into the corner. Then his knees buckled and she crumpled beneath his dead weight, barely breaking his fall onto the soft carpet of the office floor. With an effort, she managed to push him over onto his back and crawled out from under her unconscious husband. She pressed her fingers just below the corner of his jaw and was relieved to feel a rapid, but steady pulse. She loosened his tie and opened his collar. Rushing to the door, she flung it open and called out urgently, "Mr. Melrose, Lee collapsed. Francine, please call Dr. Joyce!"

She hurried back to Lee and gently pillowed his head on her lap. Billy Melrose came to kneel at her side and began to remove Lee's tie and uniform jacket.

"Dr. Joyce is on her way!" Francine announced as she entered the office on the run with Leatherneck right behind her. "She hasn't seen his medical jacket from this mission, Billy. Do you have it?"

"It must be in the pile on my desk. I haven't taken the time to look at the mission reports the Marines sent over this morning myself." He sorted through the manila folders extracting the green mission folder with its distinctive globe and anchor.

He flipped it open just as Dr. Claudia Joyce strode into the office. "Damn! It says here he has a gun-shot wound in his right arm."

Dr. Joyce, a tall angular woman in her early sixties, knelt on the floor, took Lee's left wrist in one hand and looked at her watch for a count of six. "Let's get him out of this shirt, so I can work." Billy came back over and helped her remove Lee's shirt.

"Hmm," she muttered as she inspected the bandage on his right arm, listened to his heart and lungs and checked his blood pressure.

Lee moaned and started to stir. Billy put one large hand in the middle of his chest holding him down as Lee's eyes popped open and he tried to rise. "No, you don't. You stay flat on your back until Dr. Joyce says different!"

"I'm fine, Billy. Just got a little dizzy there for a minute," Lee protested as he attempted to sit up for a second time.

"Nice try! The medical term for your condition, Scarecrow, is 'out like a light.' Let's have a look at that arm." She gently unwound the gauze bandage and removed the slightly bloody pads. "Hmm, looks clean and fairly dry. No sign of infection."

"I told you I'm fine!" Lee stated again a little more loudly. He didn't try to get up this time, however. Amanda had begun running her fingers slowly through his hair.

Dr. Joyce pulled a syringe and two test tubes out of her black bag. "When was the last time you sat down to a hot meal and slept in a bed, Stetson?" she asked as she wrapped a latex tourniquet around his upper arm and felt for a vein. He tried to jerk his arm back, but stopped when Billy glared and slapped him on the shoulder.

"We had a hot meal sometime Tuesday night or really Wednesday morning, I guess. We didn't sleep until we got on the C-130 though," Leatherneck answered for Lee.

"Just as I thought," Dr. Joyce muttered as she finished bandaging Lee's injured arm once again. She returned her equipment to her bag and slipped the two full test tubes into her lab coat pocket. "I'm going to run some blood tests anyway, but I suspect it's just a combination of low blood sugar, blood loss, and fatigue. What antibiotic did they put you on?"

"Can I get up now?" Lee asked irritably.

"You can get up slowly and carefully move into this chair. Now, about that antibiotic?"

Amanda helped her husband up and over to the chair as Leatherneck answered for Lee once more, “They only had penicillin and scant little of that. He was supposed to get something here.”

“All right then. Desmond, go get a soda out of the machine in the break room. And none of that diet crap you drink. I want something full of sugar. Billy, what have you got in that stash you keep in your bottom desk drawer? Donuts or cookies would be best,” Doctor Joyce ordered everyone about with impunity.

“I have a cinnamon swirl I was saving for my coffee break,” he admitted with a guilty grin.

“Well, you don’t need it and Stetson obviously does. So hand it over, man!”

With Amanda’s help, Lee had managed to put his shirt back on and was tying his tie. He took the sticky sweet roll from Billy with a scowl and began to eat it only because he knew when he was hopelessly outnumbered. He wolfed it down and wiped his hands on the napkin it’d been wrapped in. With a resigned sigh, he started on the Coke Francine had opened and placed in his now empty left hand.

Doctor Joyce turned to Amanda, “When you get him home I want you to see he eats a decent meal—something with some protein and complex carbohydrates would be best. Ham and cheese on whole wheat and a glass of milk is what I’d recommend. Then see that he gets some rest. Change the bandage twice a day. More often if it gets wet. You know to watch for signs of infection? Good. I’m pulling him out of the field and putting him on light duty until the stitches are removed. Fill this in the dispensary on your way out and see he takes the whole course. He usually takes it for a few days and then stops because he feels fine.”

Amanda took the script and looked it over carefully. “Yes, doctor. He’ll take every dose. I’ll see to it,” she promised giving Lee ‘the look’.

Chapter 13

The ride home began in an awkward silence. Lee slumped down in the passenger seat with his eyes closed, but Amanda could tell that he hadn’t relaxed into sleep. By the time they’d reached the outskirts of Arlington, she could stand it no longer.

“The boys are going to be so excited to see you. They’ve really missed you, Lee.”

Without opening his eyes, he replied, “I missed them, too.”

More silence.

"I never thanked you for taking such good care of Phillip and Jamie. I know you didn't expect to stay with them for three weeks," she offered with a sidelong glance at her husband.

"You don't need to thank me, Amanda." Lee opened his eyes and straightened a little in his seat. "I told you I had a great time. They're good kids. Anybody could take care of Phillip and Jamie for three weeks."

"Apparently not. Their own father couldn't," Amanda remarked dryly without taking her eyes off the busy road.

"Yeah, it's too bad really. His loss is my gain I suppose. I only wish Phillip and Jamie weren't always on the short end of the stick." Lee sighed heavily and shifted in his seat trying to find a comfortable position for his right arm.

"I think knowing that you're their stepfather now will help to even things out a little."

"I hope so." He paused. "You know it wasn't all easy. I never realized how hard it would be to say 'no'. One night they were begging to stay up and watch this awful midnight horror movie. I wanted to give in just to get a little peace and quiet, but I knew we'd all pay for it the next day. By the time I'd finally convinced them to get into bed, I had the strangest urge to call my uncle and apologize," Lee chuckled softly and shook his head.

"I know just what you mean," she said as she turned onto Maplewood Drive and then into the driveway.

"Oh come on, Amanda!" Lee objected as he got out of the Wagoneer. "I'll give you ten seconds to come up with one time you defied your parents or you intentionally broke a rule." He opened the rear passenger door and retrieved his hat.

"Well, there was the time. . . No, that wouldn't count. . .How about when I. . . Hmm. . .Once in Junior High, a bunch of us. . . No, there wasn't really a rule against that. . ."

Lee started to laugh, when suddenly he was crushed against the car door by Jamie's enthusiastic hug. He winced slightly, but covered it quickly.

"You're finally back. I was so worried!" Jamie exclaimed into his shirtfront. "Did you find our father? Is he okay, too?" He stepped back and looked up at Lee.

"Yes, I found your Dad. He hurt his ankle and got a cut on his head, but other than that he's all right." Lee explained as he carefully returned Jamie's hug and offered his hand to Phillip.

“Welcome home, Dad. Seriously cool gear. You’ve sure got a lot of medals!” Phillip had sauntered over slowly and shook Lee’s hand, covering his own relief with teenage sang-froid.

“Thanks, Phillip. They’re called ‘service ribbons’. Some of them represent decorations I’ve received and some are campaigns I’ve served in.”

“Phillip, why don’t you get Lee’s duffel out of the back of the car for him,” Amanda suggested opening the back of the Jeep.

“Sure thing!” Phillip hurried to grab the green nylon duffel bag out of the cargo area and immediately dropped it with a loud thud onto the cement driveway.

“I don’t know, Amanda. It’s awfully heavy,” Lee said as he moved to intercept the boy. Amanda shook her head at her husband and he hesitated.

“I can do it,” Phillip insisted struggling to sling the heavy bag over his shoulder.

“I’ll help,” Jamie volunteered. With his brother’s assistance, Phillip managed to hoist the bag onto his back. The two boys started for the gate, carrying the duffel bag between them.

Amanda hurried forward to open the gate and smiled back at Lee as he followed slowly with a worried expression on his face. “They’ll be fine,” she whispered taking his hand and leading him into the kitchen.

Just inside the back door, Lee whipped his hat off his head, “Dotty, you’re home!”

“Why does everyone say that? Yes, I’m home. Welcome home yourself, Lee! You look so handsome in your uniform. What happened to your hair? Oh well, I suppose it will grow,” Dotty cried crossing the kitchen to give him a hug. She stepped back and looked up into his face. “Are you feeling all right? You look a little pale!”

“I’m fine, really,” Lee assured her.

“What he means by ‘fine’,” Amanda broke in as she poured a glass of milk and looked over at her husband with a frown, “is not what you or I mean by ‘fine’, Mother. He has a bullet wound in his right arm. He’s under doctor’s orders to eat something and then rest. Sit down, Lee, and take this pill,” she commanded handing him the glass of milk and an antibiotic capsule.

“A bullet wound! Awesome! Does it hurt a lot?” Phillip exclaimed from the other side of the counter where the boys had stopped to rest with the duffel bag.

“It is definitely not ‘awesome’, Phillip King!” Dotty corrected wrinkling her brow and frowning sternly.

"Of course it hurts a lot, lame brain!" Jamie chimed in punching his brother in the arm. For once, no one took the time to chide him for his name-calling.

"I was just fixing some sandwiches for the boys' lunch." Dotty carried a salad and a bowl of fresh peaches to the table. "Sit down, Lee." She returned to the counter where she started to put together several more sandwiches.

"Where do you want us to take this, Mom?" Phillip indicated the over-sized duffel.

"Why don't you two take it up to my, I mean, our bedroom," she suggested smiling bashfully at Lee. "Then come right back down for lunch. Sit down, Lee."

"Sure, Mom!" The boys began to hoist the heavy bag one more time.

"Wait a minute! I want to get a couple things out of there before you haul it upstairs," Lee ignored Amanda's frown of frustration as he crossed the kitchen in three long strides. Unfastening the top of the duffel, he removed his folded body armor and handed it off to Phillip with a "Hold this for me, will you, Chief?"

"Outrageous!" Phillip put the desert camouflage Kevlar vest on with a smug grin.

"It's a little big, don't you think?" Jamie teased his older brother.

"About as big as this will be on you, Sport," Lee rejoined lightheartedly as he planted his helmet on Jamie's head and continued to search through his bag.

It was Jamie's turn to beam proudly and exclaim, "Radical!"

"Aha! Gotcha!" Lee triumphantly pulled three cloth-wrapped bundles out of the duffel. He placed them on the counter, refastened the top of the bag, and told the boys, "You're good to go now, guys!"

"Whoa, are those presents?" Jamie asked. He pushed the helmet up so he could see better as he helped Phillip drag the heavy bag toward the landing.

"Yeah, just a few things I came across in the marketplace," Lee shrugged. It was his turn to grin proudly now.

"How come there's only three?" Phillip observed, grunting as he pulled the duffel onto the first step.

"Phillip!" Dotty and Amanda scolded in unison.

"Because two of the presents are wrapped together and the sooner you get that bag upstairs, the sooner you'll find out what's inside," Lee encouraged his stepsons with narrowed eyes and a mock scowl.

"We'll unwrap presents after lunch," Amanda interjected firmly.

“Aw, Mom!” Jamie and Phillip protested half-heartedly and started up the stairs. They were kind of hungry after all.

“Sit down, Lee. Now. I mean it.” Amanda gave her husband ‘the look’ and pointed to a seat at the kitchen table. Lee pouted, but it got him nowhere so he casually strolled over to the kitchen table. He made a point of removing his uniform coat and draping it with care over the back of his chair before he finally sat down.

Lunch was over in record time even for the King boys.

“I’m done! How about you, Jamie?” Phillip announced after inhaling a Roast beef and Swiss on rye, potato salad and fresh sliced peaches.

“All finished!” Jamie agreed swallowing his last bite of salad.

“It was delicious, Dotty. I’m stuffed,” Lee concurred leaning back in his chair.

Mother and grandmother exchanged an indulgent smile. “Well, then as soon as the table is cleared, we can open presents,” Amanda declared, laughing quietly as her sons and her husband all left their seats at once. “Phillip and Jamie will clear the table, Lee. You may bring the presents over.”

In no time at all, the dishes were cleared and scraped, all the food was put away in the fridge, and they gathered around the table once again.

“Who wants to go first?” Lee asked looking around at the eager faces of his family.

“You’d better give Phillip and Jamie their presents before they burst with anticipation,” Dotty recommended with a fond smile for her excited grandsons.

“Okay, yours are wrapped together,” Lee told his stepsons as he handed them the larger oblong package.

Amazingly, the brothers worked together to untie the cloth as rapidly as they could. Exchanging a glance, they each took one of the beautifully sheathed belt knives and breathed, “Wow!”

“Lee!” Amanda cried in consternation. “What are you thinking giving such dangerous knives to two little boys?”

“Mo-om! We’re not. . .” Phillip began to object when Jamie butted in.

"I know what these are. I read about them in my research on Estoccia for World Cultures class," Jamie reported breathlessly. He looked up at Lee with pure admiration in his eyes.

"Is that right, Sport? You want to explain for your mother?" Lee urged the boy.

Jamie looked at his mother and grandmother and began to lecture. "In Estoccia, when a boy is about thirteen or fourteen, his father will give him a belt knife as a sign that he's on his way to becoming a man. Even small children in Estoccia know that these are to be treated with care and respect. They're the tools of a man, not a child's toy." He turned his eyes on his stepfather first and then on his brother. "How expensive and elaborate the knife is shows how highly the father thinks of his son."

Both boys pulled the knives slowly and cautiously out of the ornately embossed leather sheathes. Their eyes grew large when they saw the detailed carving on the handles and the gilded and intricate engraving on the sharp blades.

Phillip was the first to find his voice. "Thanks, Dad. I think this may be the best gift I ever got."

"You're very welcome, Phillip."

Amanda was now gazing at Lee with love and pride gleaming in her eyes. His dimples showed as he returned her smile with relief that was readily apparent.

"Thanks, Dad." Jamie looked at Lee with a peculiar mixture of gratitude and mischief. "But this is only the second best gift I've ever gotten."

Lee raised his eyebrows at his stepson's honesty. "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah, my camera's still the first!" he declared with a big smile that his step dad answered with one of his own.

Dotty cleared her throat. "I think I've been waiting very patiently, don't you, Amanda?"

"Yes, I think we both have been very patient, Mother!" Amanda and her mother looked at Lee expectantly.

"Which gift is Mom's and which is Grandma's?" Phillip asked curiously.

"Let's see if I can remember which is which," Lee stalled, wrinkling his brow in thought and tapping his chin with one long finger. "It wouldn't do to give the wrong present to the wrong person."

"Lee!" Amanda slapped him lightly on the left arm.

Lee chuckled as he handed the package wrapped in silver-shot blue cloth to his mother-in-law and the one wrapped in a gold and red design to his wife. Mother and daughter unfolded them at almost the same moment, each taking out a small brass box.

“It’s beautiful, Lee. I love it. Thank you!” Dotty held the colorfully enameled box almost reverently.

“You’re welcome, Dotty, but you haven’t even opened it yet!”

Dotty raised the lid and took out a gorgeous openwork gold bracelet. Amanda looked inside her box and saw that it also contained a golden bracelet. She lifted her eyes to her husband’s smiling face.

“I read about those, too!” Jamie blurted out.

“Go on, Jamie,” his stepfather encouraged him.

“When an Estoccian man gets married, he gives his mother-in-law and his wife each a bracelet to wear. The bracelets are usually engraved with pictures or symbols showing what he’s paid to his mother-in-law as a bride price and what he’s offered to his wife as a bride gift.”

Dotty inspected her bracelet more closely, “My bracelet is worked in intertwined flowers. How perfect, Lee! Don’t think that I haven’t noticed and appreciated all the hard work you’ve put in on my flowerbeds this summer—especially that pesky one right under the kitchen window. Of course, I’ve never forgotten the lovely bouquet you brought me after Harry had to leave for Gstaad. What’s on your bracelet, darling?”

Everyone looked with interest at Amanda, but she just smiled and shook her head as she blinked back tears. After a moment, she whispered, “My bracelet is covered with interlaced hearts.” She left her seat and wrapped her arms around her husband’s neck.

Lee pulled her onto his lap and whispered in her ear, “I guess that means you like it.”

She laughed aloud, kissed him soundly, and took the tissue her mother passed her. “I love it and you know it,” she declared softly. “Now that lunch is over and the presents have been opened, it’s time for your nap, Lee. Fellas, I want you to take your knives upstairs and put them someplace safe for now. We’ll review the Trailblazer’s Woodchip Safety Rules later.”

“Aw, Mom!” Phillip and Jamie complained. “We know all about knife safety. Tell her, Dad!”

“If I’ve learned anything in my many hours of survival training, it’s that you don’t get between a mother and her young. It won’t kill you to go over the rules, guys!”

Amanda gave him another kiss for that and smiled warmly at her husband’s growing parenting skills. Lee had managed to dodge that bullet at least. “Thank you, sweetheart. After you’ve taken care of your knives, boys, I want you to find something quiet to do or make yourselves scarce for a couple of hours.”

Amanda stood up and took Lee by the hand leading him up the staircase. She opened the bedroom door and preceded him into the room, then turned to watch his reaction.

He took two steps into the room, “Amanda, when did you. . .how did you. . . I can’t believe you moved my stuff! I didn’t expect you to do that!”

She was relieved to see that he was surprised, but not angry. “I had some time on my hands since my husband was out of town. Strangely enough, my sons were very eager to help!” She went to her dresser and pulled out a pair of tennis shorts and a pale pink polo shirt. Looking back at Lee, she saw he was still staring at his desk and dresser with a look of astonished wonder on his face. “Do you need any help changing, dear?” That got his attention.

“I told you I was fine, Amanda,” he began in irritation, and then his expression changed dramatically. “If you want to help me though, I won’t turn it down,” he drawled with that sexy smile and his eyes glittering in a manner that Amanda had come to recognize as dangerous. Capturing her eyes, he slowly crossed the room toward her, removing his khaki necktie as he came nearer and dropping it onto the floor.

Amanda turned away, breaking eye contact, and opened the closet. She could feel the heat of him behind her just before he reached out, took her lightly by the shoulders, and pulled her back against his hard body. He brushed her hair to one side and began kissing her neck, then he reached around to unbutton the top button of her blouse.

“Oh no, you don’t! Save it for later, big fella. A nap is the next thing on your agenda,” she objected even as she used one of her self-defense moves to escape his embrace and faced him once again, hands on her hips.

Lee winked and moved to close the gap between them once again, “Funny, I’m not feeling very tired right now!” He pulled his shirt out of his trousers and began to unbutton it slowly. He raised his eyebrows as he reached the last button.

"I know exactly what you're feeling right now and, believe me, I'm feeling it, too!" Her heart was pounding and she knew she sounded as breathless as she felt. She had to be firm right now, for both their sakes. "Dr. Joyce said you needed to eat and then rest and that's exactly what you're going to do. We've waited this long, honey. We can wait for a few hours more."

"I've already waited more than four weeks, Amanda!" he growled throwing his khaki shirt onto the floor with his tie. He started to unbuckle his belt as he kicked off his shoes. "I don't want to wait any longer."

This was getting out of hand in a hurry, she had to do something fast. "Lee," she purred in her most suggestive voice, "my love, you're going to need to be very well-rested for what I have planned for you later tonight." She ran one hand down his bare chest, batted her eyelashes, and turned to change out of her skirt and blouse.

"Is that right?" Lee commented, intrigued, unfastening his trousers and stepping out of them. He sat down on the edge of the bed to strip off his socks.

"Lee! I've never seen you in white briefs before!" Amanda exclaimed with a giggle as she pulled on her shorts and tucked in her shirt.

Lee looked down at his underwear with a crooked smile. "These are officially 'Drawers, Cotton, Briefs, White.' Regulations, Amanda."

"The Marine Corps has underwear regulations!"

"Are you kidding? The Corps has regulations for how and when you clip your toenails. Of course, they have underwear regulations!" He stood up and crossed to his dresser pulling out a clean pair of blue boxers. "You win. I'll rest, but I expect to be well rewarded later for my good behavior." He returned to lay down on the bed with a submissive sigh and regarded her through half-closed eyes.

"It will be well worth the wait, Lee, I guarantee it!" She leaned in close and kissed him softly on the lips. Giving his hand a little squeeze, she started to rise.

"Stay with me until I fall asleep," he appealed in a whisper.

"Of course I will, sweetheart!" If a sexy Lee Stetson was difficult to resist, the vulnerable little boy was completely irresistible. She sat down beside him on the bed and began to run her fingers lightly through his too short hair. He closed his eyes and sighed with a soft smile. Minutes passed. His breathing became slow and regular. She watched with love as his face eventually relaxed into sleep. Once again, she started to rise, but he whimpered and stirred in his sleep. She reached out and caressed the side of his face. A small smile appeared briefly then disappeared. She decided to leave his clothes on the floor this once and tiptoed softly out of the room.

Downstairs, Jamie was sitting on the family room couch with a book and her mother was peering into the freezer compartment with a frown on her face.

“Amanda, good! Phillip left for Andy’s house. I told him to be home by four. I want to make a special ‘Welcome home’ dinner for Lee, but I just realized I don’t know what his favorite foods are!” Dotty closed the freezer door with a rattle-thump and looked expectantly at her daughter. “It doesn’t help that, no matter what I serve him, he tells me it was delicious.”

“You’re right, Mother.” Amanda’s brow crinkled in thought as she considered her husband’s truly eclectic eating habits. “When we’re out, he often orders a steak, but he eats such a wide variety of dishes that I can’t say I’ve noticed any particular preferences myself!”

“He likes your meatloaf, Mom. And your fried chicken, Grandma. He thinks mashed potatoes and corn-on-the-cob go with everything,” Jamie supplied from the family room couch.

“How do you know that, Jamie?” Amanda asked.

“When you’re backpacking and eating dehydrated meals out of a Sierra cup, you talk about stuff like that. Actually, when you’re backpacking, you talk about a lot of stuff.” Jamie got a pensive look on his face.

“Which will it be—meatloaf or fried chicken?” Dottie inquired. “We don’t have all the ingredients for either dish.”

“I’ll run out and pick up whatever we need, if you’ll make me a list, Mother. Why don’t we have fried chicken tonight and meatloaf tomorrow?”

The sound of water rushing through the pipes distracted Amanda momentarily as she beat the chocolate cake batter by hand. Lee must be through with his bath. He hadn’t rested quite as long as she’d hoped, but his arm was probably bothering him. He’d refused to take anything but aspirin for the pain. She glanced at the clock and noticed that it was just past four o’clock. Phillip had better be walking through that door any minute! She began to fill the cake pans with batter when the back door rattled and Phillip burst into the room.

“Is Dad up yet?”

“Yes, he’s just getting cleaned up.”

“What’s for dinner?” Phillip sidled up to his mother eyeing the mixing bowl and spoon in her hands.

Amanda handed him the bowl and spoon to lick then went to put the pans into the oven to bake. “Fried chicken. Did you have a good time at Andy’s?”

“Oh, yeah. We rode bikes and listened to music.” Phillip had dabs of chocolate cake batter on his chin and cheek now. The doorbell rang and mother and son looked at each other curiously.

“I’ll get it,” Phillip offered dropping the clean spoon into the equally spotless bowl.

Amanda was taken aback to hear Joe’s voice at the door. She wiped her hands on a nearby dishtowel and smiled in greeting as he entered the kitchen on crutches with Phillip and Carrie behind him.

“Hi, Amanda. I realize we probably should’ve called first,” Joe looked apologetically over his shoulder at Carrie who was rolling her eyes. “I was anxious to see Phillip and Jamie. And Lee. Lee did get home okay?”

“Joe, you know you’re always welcome here. Why don’t you all go into the family room? Can I bring you some iced tea or lemonade?” Amanda began to bustle around the kitchen gathering glasses onto a tray and removing two pitchers from the fridge.

“Iced tea would be good,” Joe told her gratefully as he slowly moved into the family room.

“Lemonade for me,” Phillip called as he followed his father into the other room pelting him with question after question about what had happened in Estoccia.

“May I give you a hand, Amanda?” Carrie offered shyly. Amanda wondered once more how to put Joe’s new wife at ease. Carrie always seemed so uncomfortable in her presence. Amanda took some trays of ice out of the freezer and dropped a few cubes in each glass.

“Thanks, Carrie. Would you pour some tea for Joe and me? I’ll get Phillip’s lemonade. What would you like?”

“Ice water, if that’s no trouble.”

The two women arranged the drinks on the tray with a plate of Dotty’s home-baked sugar cookies and Amanda carried the tray into the other room. “I don’t know where Jamie’s gotten to. He was reading on the couch all afternoon and now he’s disappeared!”

“He’s probably up with D—Lee. Ever since that backpacking trip, it’s like they’re joined at the hip or something,” Phillip suggested as he took his lemonade from his mother.

Amanda handed the ice water to Carrie and said, “I’ll just go up and let him know you’re here.”

“Good idea, Mom. I’ll keep Dad company,” Phillip volunteered.

For some unknown reason, she entered the master bedroom quietly and paused where she found that she could see quite well into the bathroom using the full-length mirror on its door. Her youngest son was seated on the closed toilet seat. Lee was standing at the sink, towel wrapped around his waist and a container of shaving cream in his hand.

“So when do you think, I’ll start to shave?” The bathroom tile amplified Jamie’s voice and it carried quite clearly into the dim bedroom. “Phillip thinks he has a mustache already, you know. He’s been bragging that you’ll have to teach him to shave before school starts.”

Lee laughed. “The only mustache I’ve noticed on Phillip was a milk mustache at lunch. I guess I’ll have to look a little closer.” He dispensed some shaving cream into his right hand and started spreading it across his cheeks.

“Maybe you should get your magnifying glass out,” Jamie suggested.

“Good one, Jamie!” Lee took a dollop of shaving cream on his finger and daubed it on Jamie’s nose. Lee caught Amanda’s eye in the mirror and raised one eyebrow at her before he continued thoughtfully, “I don’t know why you two are in such a hurry to grow up. Though I do remember the frustration of thinking I was the only high school junior who wasn’t shaving yet!”

“You didn’t have to shave until you were a junior! I guess I’m not so weird then.”

“What makes you think you’re weird, Jamie?”

“I’m the smallest boy in my class. Some guys even call me ‘Shorty’. Everybody else is taller and they’re getting muscles and they’ve got hair in places, well, you know, that I don’t.” Jamie was blushing now.

“Yeah, believe me, I know. It’ll come in time. Everybody grows in their own way and at their own pace. Being tall isn’t all that great, you know. I was already nearly six feet tall in junior high. Some guys called me ‘String Bean.’ I felt like

such a geek—always tripping over my own feet and knocking things over. It was pretty awful.”

“No, really? I can’t believe you ever felt like a geek!”

“Yeah, I really did. I grew out of it eventually and so will you, partner.”

“Dad, can I ask you another question?”

“Sure, Jamie. Fire away!” Lee encouraged as he rinsed off his razor and used a damp washcloth to clean away the leftover lather on his smooth chin. He patted on some aftershave and waited.

“Why do you do it?”

Confused, Lee turned toward his stepson and leaned one hip on the counter, “Why do I shave?”

“No, why do you do what you do? Why are you a fed?” Jamie was avoiding his stepfather’s gaze now, straightening the fringe on a hand towel.

“Your Mom asked me that question once and I told her, ‘It’s a dirty job, but someone’s gotta do it and I happen to do it well,’” Lee offered with a wink in the mirror for his hidden wife.

“That’s no answer!”

“Your Mom felt the same way, I’m afraid,” Lee chuckled.

Jamie waited. Lee sighed.

”When I was in college, I bounced around a lot—never finding anything I specially wanted to do. There were lots of things that interested me, but nothing that reached out and grabbed me. My uncle was pushing for me to enlist in the Air Force. He thought it’d make a man of me, or something.” Lee paused, once again catching Amanda’s eye in the mirror on the door. “A man approached me during the last semester of my senior year. Harry took me to lunch and offered me a job. It was a job with the Agency. I thought, what the h—heck, I needed a job and I sure didn’t want to enlist.”

“So you became a fed because you didn’t know what else to do?” Jamie asked.

“Pretty much. Thing is, I discovered that I was good at it. And I liked it. It essentially pulled together all the different things I enjoy doing.”

“Like what?”

“Well, I like to travel and it uses the knowledge I picked up while the Colonel was dragging me all over the world. It’s physical. I hate sitting around behind a desk—

I get to go out, talk to people, find things out. I like to know what's going on and I don't like unanswered questions. When things don't fit, I have to try to find the connections and make some sense of things."

"I can understand that." Jamie hesitated for a moment, reaching out one finger to touch one of the faint scars on his stepfather's body. "It's dangerous."

"Sometimes, yes it is. Sounds like this isn't so much about why I do what I do as how you feel about it, Jamie?"

"It kind of scares me. Why do you have to do it? Why can't it be somebody else?"

"Let me ask you another question. If I don't do it, how can I be certain that someone else will and that they'll be able to do it as well as I do?" Lee folded his arms across his bare chest and watched as Jamie thought about that one.

"You can't be sure," Jamie finally admitted.

"In the 1770's, a gentleman by the name of Edmund Burke put it this way, 'When bad men combine, the good must associate; else they will fall one by one, an unpitied sacrifice in a contemptible struggle.'" Jamie looked confused. "What that means to me is that the bad guys will certainly win, if the good guys stand by and do nothing. I guess deep down that's really why I do what I do, Jamie. I believe that some of us have to pay the price for all of us to be free."

Jamie nodded, his eyes serious behind his glasses. "I understand, Dad. I really do. I'm proud of you."

"But. . ."

"I love you and I don't like seeing you hurt. I don't want to lose you either, not when I just found you," Jamie whispered looking up at Lee.

"I love you, too. I give you my word that I'm as careful as I can be, Jamie."

"When you go to work at the Agency, do you have body armor to wear like the Marines give you?" Jamie asked.

"Yes, the Agency supplies me with a Kevlar vest to wear under my clothing." Lee looked into the mirror and rolled his eyes at Amanda.

"And do you wear it, Dad?" Jamie persisted.

"Sometimes, when I know that there may be some shooting. It's kind of hot and uncomfortable to wear all the time, Sport."

"Hot and uncomfortable is better than cold and dead, Dad. I wouldn't worry so much, I guess, if I knew you were wearing your vest all the time."

Lee sighed as Amanda finally joined the conversation, "I think that's a wonderful idea, Jamie!"

Jamie started and shot an accusatory glance at Lee. "You knew she was there, didn't you?"

Lee winked. "It's what I do, Jamie."

"Well, dear, what do you say? Will you start wearing your vest all the time now?" Amanda recognized a window of opportunity when she saw one and didn't want to waste it.

"I promise I will wear my vest whenever I go out into the field. Satisfied?" he asked his wife and stepson with an annoyed look at his wife.

"I'm satisfied. I know you always do what you promise to do, Dad. How about you, Mom?"

"Oh, I'm very satisfied, Jamie." She crossed to Lee and kissed him on the cheek, running one finger lightly down the bandage on his arm. "Thank you."

"Did you want something in particular, Amanda? Or were you just practicing your surveillance skills?"

"I came up to tell you that Joe is here. He came over to see the boys and to see you, Lee."

"Oh. I wondered who was at the door. Well, I'll be down as soon as I'm dressed then," Lee said as he reached over with a washcloth to wipe the glob of shaving cream off Jamie's nose.

Jamie giggled, "Yeah, we'll both be down in a minute, Mom."

Ten minutes later, Lee entered the family room with Jamie right on his heels. "Hi, Carrie. Hey, Joe. Don't get up." He leaned over to shake Joe's hand and crossed to an empty armchair, removing the small pillow on the seat and tossing it to Joe as he sat down. "How's the ankle? You're probably supposed to be keeping it elevated, huh."

"Thanks," Joe said as he caught the pillow, leaned forward to place it on the coffee table and put his foot up. "It's not broken. I just tore some ligaments. How's your arm?"

“It’s fine.” Lee told him. “Really.” Jamie sat down on the floor, leaning back against Lee’s right leg.

“I don’t want to intrude and I know it’s getting close to dinner time.” Joe paused and looked around the room. “Jamie, Phillip, I apologize for missing our time together. I want to make it up to you. I know with my bum ankle backpacking is out of the question. . .”

“That’s okay, Dad,” Jamie broke in. “Lee took me. I already got my Fifty-miler.”

“Oh, good.” Joe looked a little deflated at that. “I was thinking we could do something else anyway—like maybe hang out on the beach for the next couple weeks. I have a friend who has a house in Ocean City he’ll let me use.”

“That sounds great, Dad,” Phillip answered with regret. “But we’re leaving on a family vacation next Saturday. We’re going to a real-live cattle ranch in Wyoming and we’re going to ride horses, and round up cows, and even go whitewater rafting on the Snake River.” Disappointment had been quickly replaced with boyish enthusiasm.

“Yeah, and we’re going to Yellowstone National Park to see ‘Old Faithful’ and bison and elk and maybe even a bear!” Jamie was just as excited as his older brother.

“That sounds like a wonderful trip you have planned, boys,” Carrie filled in, giving Joe a chance to recover.

“Yeah, you’re going to have a great time, maybe we can do something when you get back,” Joe suggested hopefully.

“Well, it gets kind of complicated after that, Dad,” Phillip told his father looking at his mother for help.

“Yes, it certainly does, Phillip. Football practice starts the first week of August, Joe,” she told her ex-husband. “Phillip is going to play for the Ninth-Grade team and Jamie has signed up for Arlington’s Pop-Warner team.”

“What happened to soccer?” Joe asked, looking first at his sons and then at Lee.

“We decided to give football a try this year,” Phillip supplied.

“Yeah, we’ve been playing soccer practically forever. Besides, football has cheerleaders.” Jamie smiled shyly up at his father even as he wrapped one arm around his step-dad’s leg.

“I see. Well, you can hardly argue with cheerleaders. Can you, Lee?” Joe raised his eyebrows and smiled knowingly.

"Me, I try never to argue with cheerleaders. Or ex-cheerleaders, for that matter!" Lee joked, looking right at his wife who cheerfully stuck her tongue out at him.

"I'm certain we'll be able to work something out in August, honey. A long weekend should be possible at the very least." Amanda felt badly for Joe even though it had been his choices that put him in this position in the first place. "We'll give you a call as soon as we get back from Wyoming."

"That sounds great." Joe reached for his crutches and struggled to get off of the soft couch. Lee jumped up and offered Joe his left hand.

"Thanks, Lee. I don't know how I'll ever repay you for taking care of the boys and for everything you did for me in Estoccia."

"No need to thank me. It's what I do." Lee answered Joe smoothly, but he was looking down at Jamie.

"Well, thanks anyway. And thanks for the tea, Amanda. I guess I'll talk to you in a couple weeks," Joe shook Lee's hand once again and started slowly for the back door.

Amanda kissed him on the cheek as he passed and said, "We'll walk you out." She gathered her family with her eyes and nodded toward the door.

"I'll get the door, Dad," Phillip offered.

"That has to be the best fried chicken I've ever eaten," Lee told his mother-in-law as he finished his third helping and pushed his chair away from the linen-covered table in the formal dining room. He'd been very touched when he found out about his special 'Welcome home' dinner.

Dotty chuckled, as she looked at all the empty serving dishes, "You always say that no matter what I put on the table, Lee. I'm beginning to think you're a little too easy to please."

"Honest, Dotty. I've eaten fried chicken all over the world and that chicken was the best!" Lee insisted.

"Dad's right, your fried chicken is the best. Better even than the Quicky Chicky Snack Shack chicken. Boy, I really miss that place! Is it time for dessert now, Mom?" Phillip asked licking his lips.

Amanda's eyes smiled as her husband turned his laugh into a cough. "Yes, I hope you all saved some room for dessert."

“Before you bring in the cake and ice cream, Amanda, just let me ask a couple questions. Jamie, did anyone you know get engaged today? No? Well, did anyone get married?” Dotty persisted.

“C’mon, Grandma. All my friends are too young get engaged or married for that matter. We’re not even dating yet,” Jamie answered patiently.

“How about you, Phillip? Any engagements or marriages that you know of?”

“No, Grandma. No one I know got engaged or married today.” Phillip didn’t sound nearly as patient as his brother.

Lee looked at his wife just as Dotty turned to her and asked, “Anything interesting happen today at work, dear? Did anyone get engaged or married at IFF?”

“No, Mother, no one at work announced an engagement or wedding today. I think Sheila in Accounting may be pregnant, but I’m afraid to ask. What if she’s just gained a couple pounds?” Amanda stood up and began to stack the dirty dishes.

“Lee, have you heard of any engagements or marriages lately?” Dotty turned to her son-in-law with a deceptively innocent expression on her face.

“No, but I wasn’t really in a position to hear any news. My friend Billy is about to celebrate his twenty-fifty wedding anniversary though.” Lee tried to catch Amanda’s eye, but she managed to avoid looking directly at him as she worked.

“That’s wonderful! Thank you, Lee. You know how I like to keep up on what’s going on in the neighborhood and in my family,” Dotty observed wryly. “Heaven knows, I’m not a gossip like Edna Gilstrap, but I don’t like to be left in the dark either. Jamie, it’s your night to help clear the table. Hop to it!”

When Amanda, Dotty and Jamie had all left with dishes in their hands, Lee leaned toward Phillip and asked in a low voice, “How long has this been going on?”

Phillip checked the door to the dining room before he whispered back, “Ever since Mom told Grandma that you two had gotten married in February. She hated being the last to know.”

“Technically, she’s not the last to know. I still haven’t called my uncle yet,” Lee observed.

Phillip laughed at his stepfather’s predicament. “I don’t think telling her that’ll help. There’s nothing you can do about it anyway.”

“How long do you think she’ll keep it up?” Lee worried.

"I don't know. I think she's pretty upset about missing the wedding. A few years ago, we had this big snowstorm and my friends and I built a snowman in the front yard. Andy got the idea to make a snow woman for him. So I swiped Grandma's apron and one of her old wigs and we built a snow person with, uh, female features, if you know what I mean." Phillip colored with embarrassment.

Lee snickered quietly, "I get the picture, son."

"Well, Grandma freaked. She said we'd humiliated her in front of the entire neighborhood. She made me pay for that one every day for three whole months!"

"Oh boy!"

"Yeah!"

Lee shot out of his seat and hurried upstairs two steps at a time. He sure hoped that Amanda had put everything back where she'd found it when she moved his stuff! He slid back into his seat at the dining room table just as Amanda re-entered the dining room carrying the chocolate cake. Dotty and Jamie followed right on her heels with ice cream and dessert plates. Once everyone was seated, Lee reached out and took the cake knife from Amanda just as she prepared to cut the first piece.

"Uh, Amanda. Would you mind waiting a moment to serve dessert?"

She looked at him curiously as he came and went down on one knee in front of her. "Lee, what do you think you're doing?" she asked in an urgent whisper.

"Just follow my lead here, Amanda," he begged taking her hand in his own.

He continued in a louder voice, "Amanda King, you are the best, the bravest, the smartest, the most beautiful woman I have ever known."

Amanda's eyes grew big as she realized what he was doing. "I love you," she responded on cue.

"Then will you marry me—again?"

"Marry you again? How can we? We're already married, Lee!"

"A real wedding, Lee. What a wonderful idea!" Dotty clasped her hands and looked at her daughter wondering what in the world she was waiting for.

"I'm fairly certain the first wedding was very real, Mother!" Amanda replied quickly.

“Amanda, they do it in Europe all the time. They get married at the courthouse first and then have a church ceremony later. Marry me again in a church this time—in front of your mother and your sons and all our friends?” Lee pleaded softly.

She looked into his hazel eyes and instantly saw how important this was to him. “Of course, I’ll marry you again!”

Lee reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a simple “Poesy” ring. “I found this ring in an envelope attached to my mother’s journal. When my parents were married in secret during the war, my father gave my mother this ring to wear on her right hand until they could be married publicly.” He slipped the ring onto the third finger of Amanda’s right hand. It fit perfectly. She smiled. He smiled and leaned forward to kiss his wife as his family cheered enthusiastically.

“Well, we have some big plans to make!” Dotty exclaimed excitedly when the kiss finally ended. “When would you two like to renew your vows?”

Lee and Amanda regarded each other for a long moment. “I think I’ll leave all those little details to you ladies,” he finally stated rising stiffly from the floor and regaining his seat.

“Oh no, you don’t!” Amanda and her mother objected immediately.

“Oh well, it was worth a try!” He smiled sorrowfully and began to play with his dessert fork.

“Why not on February thirteenth? The thirteenth falls on a Saturday next year. That way we’ll have plenty of time to plan and Lee will only have one anniversary to forget!” Amanda winked at her husband who was eyeing the cake and ice cream longingly.

“Hey! I haven’t forgotten an anniversary yet!” Lee protested, hands in the air.

“That’s because you haven’t had one yet!” Phillip reminded him with a smirk.

Lee stuck his tongue out at his stepson when Amanda wasn’t looking. Phillip thumbed his nose at his stepfather, which both his mother and grandmother caught, of course.

“Phillip King!” they scolded in unison.

“You mean you actually got married on Friday the 13th! Isn’t that bad luck?” Jamie observed.

Lee reached out and took his wife’s small hand into his large one, “Bad luck? Are you kidding? We’re the luckiest two people on the face of the earth!” He leaned over and kissed his wife soundly.

Dotty cleared her throat, "February the thirteenth it is, then. We'll have to call Reverend Mills right after dinner to reserve the church. Being so close to Valentine's Day that may be a popular choice. I'd better get some paper and pencil so we can start making some lists." She started to rise from her seat when all three males groaned loudly.

"Can we please have the cake first?" Phillip moaned.

"Yeah, the ice cream's melting," Jamie observed practically.

"Personally, I don't think I can face any more wedding plans without chocolate cake!" Lee declared.

Amanda looked around at her family with shining eyes, "Cake and ice cream, for everyone!"

"Mother, Mother please," Amanda interrupted a detailed description of the delightful floral decorations at Sheila Hampton's youngest daughter's wedding just this last May. "We don't have to plan the whole wedding tonight, do we?"

Dotty followed her daughter's affectionate gaze and regarded her son-in-law. Earlier in the day, she'd noticed how good he looked even in worn khakis and a faded chambray shirt with the sleeves rolled up over his tanned forearms. Now, he was sprawled limply over one of the wing chairs, Bride Magazine open in his lap, and he was snoring softly. "I guess Lee has hit his limit on wedding planning," she observed fondly.

"Hit his limit? I think we took him way over the limit!" Amanda chuckled as she crossed the room to her dozing husband. "Lee, Lee! I think it's past your bedtime, sweetheart!"

"Wha--, um, I wasn't sleeping, Amanda. I was just resting my eyes," Lee protested groggily, straightening in the chair and dropping the magazine to the family room floor in a flutter of full-page color photos.

"Of course you were, dear." Dotty gathered her lists and recovered her magazine from the carpet in front of Lee's bare feet. "Well, children, I'm off to bed. This has been quite a day."

Lee ran one hand through his short sleep-tousled hair and quickly covered a yawn. "Good night, Dotty. Sleep well."

"With all the excitement, I expect I'll sleep very soundly tonight. Probably won't hear a thing until morning." She winked at her daughter now sitting on the arm of

Lee's chair and bent down to kiss her son-in-law on the cheek. Lee looked pleasantly abashed at the kiss from his mother-in-law.

"Good night, Mother." Amanda called to her retreating back. "Now, buster, it's time you were in bed, too." She stood and took his left hand gently pulling him to his feet.

Lee followed her obediently enough, but at the bottom of the stairs he paused briefly. "Amanda, do you remember earlier today? You promised that if I was good—"

"I remember exactly what I promised, Lee." She let go of his hand and ran lightly up the stairs ahead of him. Truthfully, she'd forgotten her promise until just now. It wasn't that she hadn't been looking forward to this moment for quite some time. She'd often fantasized about this night. Fantasies and reality, however, were two different things entirely. Entering her bedroom, she looked around realizing that it was a completely different space tonight. It was no longer her bedroom. It was their bedroom now. She started slightly when Lee placed his hands lightly on her shoulders and turned her slowly around. She hadn't even heard him come in and close the door behind him.

"So much has changed in such a very short time," he said, speaking her thoughts aloud as he had begun to do more and more often lately. He pulled her into his warm embrace and rested his chin on the top of her head. "I don't know if I'm quite ready for this."

His hesitation seemed to give her renewed courage. "Ready or not, here we are!" she joked. Stepping back to glance up at him, she cupped his beloved face in her hands. He really did appear uncertain. She smiled encouragingly at him as she stroked from his eyebrow, across his cheek and along his jaw to his chin. His dimples showed briefly, before he leaned forward and gently touched his lips to hers. They both sighed.

She slowly began to unbutton his shirt, watching his face intently all the while. His eyes began to sparkle when she was halfway done. Taking her time unrolling his cuffs, she finally reached up and pushed his shirt off his shoulders. She stepped back and studied his well-muscled chest for a moment.

"Do you remember that night in Betsy Ross Estates when you started to take off your shirt to get ready for bed?" Lee just smiled. "You knew exactly what you were doing to me and you enjoyed it, Stetson!" His smile just got bigger. She reached out and ran her hands very slowly from his strong shoulders down across his chest to stop at the waistband of his khaki pants. He closed his eyes and shivered under her touch.

"Yeah, but do you have any idea what you were doing to me?" he asked softly, when her hands finally stopped roving.

“Me?” she tried to sound innocent and failed. “I was just an average ordinary house-wife from Arlington.”

“Amanda, there has never been anything average or ordinary about you. At least, not as far as I was concerned. That’s why you scared the hell out of me from the very beginning.” The intensity in his gray-green eyes never failed to send a thrill of anticipation through her whole body. He reached out and slowly began to pull her pink polo shirt up over her head. The shirt hit the floor landing right on top of his. Her shorts followed in very short order. He let his eyes run over her and his frank appreciation touched off sparks of desire wherever his gaze rested.

She reached out and unfastened his trousers deftly, allowing them to drop to the floor unhindered. Barefoot, he simply stepped out of them and waited. She examined his body more thoroughly. There were new bruises on his ribcage, abrasions on both his shoulders and his left thigh. The white gauze bandage on his right arm covered two new scars. Even bruised and battered, he was incredibly attractive and sexy. She longed to take him in her arms.

Stepping over to the bed, she took the quilt and sheet in her hand and flung them to the bottom in a single motion. Lee watched and waited in silence. She returned, ran her fingers through his hair, and stretched up to find his lips again. He placed his hands on her waist and pulled her closer, intensifying the kiss. She ran her hands down the outside of his arms, careful of his wound, and took both his hands in hers. Breaking the kiss reluctantly, she pulled him over to the bed with her hands and her eyes. Turning him around, she pushed him tenderly down onto his back on the bed. As she reached to turn out the bedside light and slipped onto the bed beside him, she heard him whisper, “I sure hope your mother isn’t a light sleeper.”