

Honeymoon's Over

By Jill Minnich

Rating: G

Synopsis: Lee and Phillip learn a lesson or two about parenting.

Time Frame: Early October 1987

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

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The horn sounded a second time and sneakers pounded down the stairs. Jamie appeared momentarily in the kitchen doorway. "Bye, Grandma! Mrs. Monroe is here, Dad. Gotta go!"

Lee dropped the damp dishtowel over the side of the drying rack and moved quickly across the kitchen to intercept the boy before he made it out the front door. "Hold on a second, Sport! Am I supposed to pick you up when it's over?"

"Nope, Mrs. Templeton is bringing us home. It'll be a little after nine, 'cuz she's gotta drop off a bunch of us, you know. Do I look okay?" Jamie smiled nervously and ran one hand through his damp hair.

Lee walked a little closer and made a big production out of inspecting him from head to toe. He smiled. "You look terrific, Jamie." He reached into the back pocket of his jeans for his wallet. "Here's ten bucks. Buy a snack and play some games. Have a great time tonight."

"Hey, Dad. I'll take some of that, if you're passing out cash!" Phillip entered the front hall dressed in his new Bugle Boy cargo pants and matching striped Rugby shirt.

"Just where do you think you're going, Phillip?" Lee stepped between Phillip and the front door. Behind Phillip, Lee watched Dotty move onto the landing from the kitchen.

"What do you mean? I'm going to the skating party!" Phillip shook his head slightly and eyed his step-dad as if he'd lost his mind.

"I don't think so. You still haven't cleaned your half of the garage, son."

The car horn honked again, three times.

"I'll do it tomorrow morning. See ya later, Dad." Phillip tried to brush past his step-dad.

Lee stepped in front of the boy once more and addressed Jamie over his shoulder, "You go on ahead, Jamie. Tell Mrs. Monroe that something's come up and Phillip can't go this evening."

Jamie looked at Lee and then at Phillip. "Okay, Dad. See ya, Phillip." He quickly made his escape.

“You can’t make me stay home tonight!” Phillip protested loudly, red in the face. “Mom already said I could go!” He feinted left and then moved quickly to the right. Lee wasn’t fooled for a moment. He’d covered guys with a lot better moves in college football.

“What your Mom said, Phillip, was that you could go tonight, **if** you’d done all your chores. The garage is not clean, so you don’t go.” Lee folded his arms across his chest, centered his balance, and regarded the boy calmly. He waited to see what Phillip would do next. He might appear to be calm, but truthfully he was as nervous as a starting quarterback before the first game of the season. This was the first time he’d had to take any serious disciplinary action without Amanda’s backup and this wasn’t a minor penalty either. In essence, he was grounding the boy from an activity he’d been looking forward to all week long. He intentionally avoided looking at Dotty, although he knew she had remained motionless on the landing. This was between him and Phillip.

“I said I’d do it tomorrow and I will. Now, get out of my way!” Phillip set himself as if he was playing fullback for the Ninth Grade team and tried to power his way past the six-foot three blockade of the front door.

Lee didn’t budge an inch.

Phillip’s face got even redder. “I’m going tonight and that’s that! You can’t make me stay here,” he threatened as he turned and rushed for the back door. Dotty, caught by surprise, moved too quickly trying to get out of his way and sat down with a thump on the stairs.

Lee felt a hot surge of anger tighten his jaw and clench his fists. He controlled it with an effort of will. It wouldn’t help to get mad at Phillip. He was just a fourteen-year-old boy whose body was growing faster than his heart and mind. If he was going to learn to control his actions, it would be by example. Lee hurried to Dotty’s side. “Dotty, are you all right? I can’t believe he barreled into you like that! He needs to learn to be more careful. He’s not a little kid anymore.” He was still angry, but he’d keep the lid on. He had to.

She took his arms and allowed him to help her up. “I’m all right, Lee. Don’t fuss! The only things bruised were my dignity and my sit upon.” She smiled up at him and patted his arms reassuringly.

Phillip stomped back into the house slamming the front door behind him. Lee gave Dotty a gentle hug and turned to meet his very angry stepson in the entryway.

“You big jerk! They left without me! I thought you were cool. I thought you understood, but you’re making me miss my big chance with the prettiest girl in the whole youth group! I promised Lindsey Cambridge I’d be there tonight. She said she couldn’t skate and needed a big, strong arm to lean on! Now, because of you, she’ll think I stood her up! She’ll probably skate with Michael Granger all night long.” Phillip moved closer as he spoke and was now standing just inches away from Lee.

“Look, Phillip. I’m sorry you didn’t get to go tonight. I know how you’ve been looking forward to the skating party. I really wish you would’ve thought of that earlier this week. You promised your Mom you’d clean half of the garage. You had all last weekend to do it. You had every night this week after you got home from football practice. You didn’t do

it. All choices have consequences. You made the choice and now you have to live with the consequences.”

“Mom would’ve let me do it tomorrow. You have no right to keep me here. This is so unfair! It’s bad enough you’re forcing us to move to a broken down farmhouse in the middle of nowhere, but now you won’t even let me hang out with my friends!” Phillip’s hands were tight fists by his side, his jaw was clenched, and he was now toe-to-toe with Lee.

Lee took a deep breath and reminded himself to ignore the teen’s accusations, stay focused, and keep to the high ground. “The way it looks to me, you have two choices now, Phillip. You can head out to the garage and get right to work. I’ll take you up to the rink as soon as it passes inspection. Or, you can head up to your room until you’re ready to clean the garage. It’s up to you.”

“By the time I get the garage clean enough to pass your inspection, the party will be over. You’re just trying to ruin my life. You’re not even my real father. I hate you!” Phillip put his shoulder down and shoved Lee hard enough to make him take one step back.

Lee put his hands flat against the boy’s chest and held him in place. “No, I’m not your father and I never will be. But I’m not trying to ruin your life. I am trying my best to teach you the difference between being a boy and a man. A boy makes promises and then doesn’t keep them when something better comes along. A boy throws a tantrum when things don’t go his way. A man does what he says he will do even when it’s inconvenient or unpleasant. When a man gives his word to a woman, especially to his mother or his wife, he keeps his word or he goes down trying.” He took his hands off Phillip’s shoulders and stepped out of his way. Phillip shoved past him on his way up the stairs. Pictures rattled on the wall as his feet pounded loudly on the wooden stair treads. Lee heard the bedroom door slam shut and the stereo began to blast U2’s Rattle and Hum at top volume. At least it wasn’t The Clash.

Lee shoved his thumbs into his front pockets and turned toward his mother-in-law. “Well, that could have gone better,” he commented with a wry smile. “I could use a drink.”

Dotty moved aside as he crossed into the kitchen. He reached for the scotch bottle in the cupboard over the fridge.

“I have to disagree,” Dotty’s tone was brisk and business-like. “I think you handled yourself very well. I’m quite surprised, frankly. I know you don’t have much experience with children, let alone teenagers. He did his best to push your buttons and you stood firm. I was afraid you’d either lose your temper or, even worse, give in. Many stepparents are much too worried about whether their stepchildren like them. You’re not his friend, Lee. He needs a father right now, a good deal more than he needs a friend.”

Lee paused in the act of pouring the single-malt into his glass. “But I’m not his father, as he very accurately pointed out.”

“Well, he’s wrong.” Dotty took him by the shoulders and gently turned him to face her. “You’re the closest thing to a father he’s ever known, Lee. Joe’s a good man, one of the best. But when the boys were younger, he was rarely home. Sure, he’s around a lot more now and he’s trying to spend quality time with them. They love the way he buys

them things at the mall, takes them to the movies or to professional ballgames. They have a lot of fun together. But he's not around day-in, day-out. He's more like a favorite uncle than a parent. You did just fine, son. Phillip isn't very fond of you tonight, but one day he'll be grateful that you took the risk of telling him 'no' when he really needed it. The honeymoon's over, Lee. Tonight you became a real parent."

Before Lee could respond with more than a thankful hug, the phone clamored for his attention.

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Phillip shuffled sleepily into the kitchen to find his younger brother wolfing down a bowl of cereal and his mother at the counter wielding an electric mixer. That was odd, no doughnuts this morning. As he opened the cupboard for a bowl, his mother's voice stopped him dead.

"Good morning, Phillip. Did you sleep well?" she asked sweetly.

Oh, lordy. She had to know. If Lee hadn't filled her in, Grandma or Jamie would have. He stalled for a moment, grabbing a spoon out of the silverware drawer before he turned. "Morning, Mom. Yeah, I slept okay, I guess."

He slumped into a seat across from his brother. Filling his bowl, he tried to sound completely cool as he asked, "Finish your run already?"

"Decided not to go, since Dad wasn't here," Jamie answered around a mouthful of Marshmallow Matey's.

"What do you mean, Dad's not home? Where is he? I didn't hear him leave! I mean, did he go into work? He never works on Saturdays!" Phillip blurted, then caught himself. Aw, heck. Why'd Lee have to pick this morning to suddenly start working weekends!

Jamie didn't answer. He just looked at his Mom across the kitchen. The mixer stopped its rhythmic whirring. Phillip swiveled in his seat.

"You didn't hear him leave this morning because he never came home last night," she told him as she sifted flour into the bowl and began stirring it in with the strong strokes of a long-handled wooden spoon.

"He never came home last night?" Phillip repeated slowly, trying to figure out what that was supposed to mean.

"That's right," Grandma bustled in through the back door her arms overflowing with fresh flowers. "Lee got called into work last night just after Jamie left for the skating party. He told me not to wait up. So, I didn't." She began to arrange the yellow, white, and russet blooms in several heavy glass vases. "These mums are really going gang-busters, Amanda. They just love this Indian summer weather we're having."

"When's he going to be home?" Phillip tried again for casual interest, but he failed miserably. Fortunately, he also missed the knowing glance his mother and grandmother exchanged.

Amanda decided to take pity on the poor boy. "Lee called about three o'clock this morning to say he was back in the office. He had some loose ends to tie up though."

“What does that mean, ‘loose ends’?” Jamie interjected curiously.

“Loose ends means loose ends. That’s all I can tell you, Sherlock.” His mother shook her wooden spoon at his brother, but she was smiling.

Lost in thought, the sharp report of the doorknocker made Phillip start. Jamie leapt out of his seat crying, “I’ll get it!”

Phillip turned his attention back to his cereal bowl. Soggy Marshmallow Matey’s had to be the most disgusting breakfast food ever invented. He got up to dump his bowl just as Joe King entered the kitchen with Jamie clattering behind like a little puppy dog.

“Good morning, Amanda. Dotty, you look as lovely as ever.”

Without even turning around, Phillip knew that his father had leaned over to kiss his mother on the cheek and she let him.

“Good morning, sweetheart.”

She always sounded so happy to see him. She still called him sweetheart. That used to make him feel good. This morning it bugged him. His brother started chattering away about the skating party and this new action movie he wanted to see. Phillip rinsed his bowl carefully and placed it in the dishwasher. He turned around slowly and leaned back against the counter.

“Ready to go, guys?” his father asked with a smile as he inspected the bags dumped by the backdoor. “Is that everything you’ll need? Don’t forget your backpacks! Remember I’m dropping you off at school bright and early Monday morning.”

“That’s everything I need, Dad.” Jamie eyed Phillip from the other side of the cooktop. “Phillip hasn’t brought his stuff down yet.”

“Better get a move on, son. I’ve got a busy day planned.” His father slung his arm across Jamie’s shoulders and grinned at him. “I thought we’d start at the Mall Arcade and go from there.”

“Sounds like fun, Dad. But I can’t go,” Phillip saw surprise mixed with irritation flash across his father’s face before he turned toward his mother.

“What does he mean, he can’t go?”

“I don’t know, Joe. Why don’t you ask him?” His mother’s smile was soft and her eyes were curious as she left the spoon in the bowl, wiped her hands on a towel, and turned to him.

“Okay,” his father drawled, stepping away from Jamie and crossing his arms across his chest. “Phillip, why can’t you go?”

Phillip sighed and straightened away from the counter. “I have to clean the garage. My half, that is.”

His father looked over at his mother. She shrugged. He turned back and stated with a confident smile, “I’m sure your Mom would let you clean your half of the garage some other time, Phillip.”

Phillip avoided looking at his Mom or Grandma. He had to do this on his own. He didn't know how he knew that. He just did. "I know she would, Dad. The thing is, I can't go because I promised her I would do it last weekend and I blew it off. Jamie did his half, so he can go. I didn't do my half, so I can't go."

"Yeah, Lee even grounded him from the skating party last night because of it," Jamie added always so helpful. He smirked when Phillip gave him the evil eye.

"Wait a minute, let me get this straight." His father's voice took an ominous tone. "You can't go on a regularly scheduled weekend visit because Lee grounded you? I don't believe this! Amanda, I already gave up Friday night with the boys because they wanted to go to the church skating party. Now, I come to find out that Phillip didn't get to go because he was grounded and he's still grounded! You may have remarried, but that doesn't give Lee the right to interfere with court-ordered visitation rights. I want a word with him. Where is he, Amanda? I want to speak to him and I want to speak to him right now!"

The room erupted with sound and confusion as four people began trying to explain, each in their own way and all at once. A piercing whistle brought instant silence.

Five sets of eyes turned to the back door.

"I'm right here, Joe. What can I do for you?" Lee stood in the open doorway and covered a yawn. "Is there any coffee left?"

"There's coffee, Dad. I'll get you a cup!" Phillip rushed to get a mug from the cupboard, fill it from the carafe, and hand it to his stepfather.

Lee shut the door and came further into the room to take the mug. "Thanks, Chief. What's the problem, Joe?"

"That's what I'd like to know, Lee. Phillip tells me he can't go with me this morning because he's grounded and has to clean the garage," Joe accused heatedly.

Lee took a grateful gulp of hot black coffee, then set the mug on the counter and stuck his hands in his pockets. He glanced at Phillip as he said, "I'm sorry for the misunderstanding. Phillip, you were grounded from the skating party last night, but I never meant for you to stay home this morning. As far as I'm concerned, your visit with your Dad is much more important than cleaning the garage. You can do that when you get back."

"No, I'm sorry. This is all my fault," Phillip looked his stepfather in the eye as he apologized willing him to see how sorry he really was. Lee was ruffled and unshaven. He looked tired and worried. He must have been up all night. Phillip turned back to his father. "Dad, Lee would never keep me from visiting with you. He's always telling Jamie and me how important it is for us to spend time with you. How lucky we are to have you around so much and all that." Phillip quirked a smile over his shoulder at Lee, "In fact, sometimes he goes on and on about it!"

"Oh, I see." His father wrinkled his brow and looked from Phillip to Lee and back again. He shook his head, "No, sorry, I don't see."

"I'm the one who's grounding me," Phillip explained. "I promised Mom last weekend that I would clean the garage..."

"Oh, Phillip, you know--" Amanda began.

"No, Mom. Please, don't interrupt." Phillip waited for his mother's nod of agreement. "I promised to help Jamie clean up the garage. We'd been dumping our stuff in there all summer and it was a mess. Jamie cleaned half the garage last weekend, but I never did my share. I was too busy hanging out with my friends. I realized late last night that I couldn't go with you today and leave the job undone. I couldn't enjoy myself this weekend knowing I'd let Mom down." Phillip drew a deep breath and huffed in relief as he finished.

His father looked at his Mom.

"Phillip, you haven't let me down. I trust now that you've learned your lesson and you'll clean the garage Monday night," Amanda assured Phillip.

Phillip turned and made eye contact with his stepfather and then looked back at his mother and father. "Okay, maybe I didn't let you down, but I let me down. I have to do this today. I really do. I'm sorry, Dad. I know it's not fair that because of my bad choices you don't get your visit with me. But maybe it's not such a bad thing for you and Jamie to have some time just the two of you. You don't have to do everything with both of us all the time, you know." He waited anxiously to see how his father would react.

"Phillip, I don't think it's going to take all weekend to clean the garage. Maybe you could hook up with your Dad and Jamie a little later. I'd be glad to run you over to your Dad's townhouse when you're done," Lee offered.

"That's a great idea, Lee." Joe replied quickly. "What do you think, Phillip?"

"We'll see," Phillip said slowly. "I don't want to mess up your plans. We'll play it by ear, okay?"

Phillip's reluctance came through quite clearly. Joe smiled at Lee and Phillip. "If that's the way you want it, that's the way it will be. Grab your things, Jamie, and let's get this show on the road. Lee, I want to apologize for jumping to the wrong conclusion. I should have known better." He held out his hand and Lee shook it warmly while Jamie gathered his overnight bag and backpack from the back entry.

"See you later, Lee. Have fun cleaning the garage, Phillip. Bye, Mom. Bye, Grandma!" Jamie waved to his brother and kissed his mother and grandmother on his way to the front door.

"I hope to see you later, Phillip," Joe reminded him as he turned to follow Jamie.

Dotty crossed the kitchen with a vase full of mums in her hands, "I'll see you to the door, Joe."

"Well, I'd better get started," Phillip declared cheerfully. "I'll just back the cars out of the garage..."

Lee drew breath to speak, but his Mom reacted even more quickly, "You'll do no such thing, young man!"

She grabbed two sets of keys off the rack by the door. "You don't even have your learner's permit yet. Do you have any idea what would happen to our insurance premiums if you backed into something?" his mother cried as she strode out the door.

Lee grinned at Phillip, "Nice try!"

As Phillip followed his mother out the door, Lee trudged slowly upstairs.

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Moments later, Amanda was measuring the chocolate chips into the cookie batter and debating the weekend dinner menu with her mother, when Lee came back downstairs dressed in jeans worn white at the seams and a ratty gray sweatshirt with USMC blazoned in black across the chest.

"Just where do you think you're going, big guy?" she asked, stopping him short with a wooden spoon to the chest.

"Out to give Phillip a hand with the garage," he replied as he snuck a hand into the almost empty chocolate chip bag.

Amanda rapped his knuckles half-heartedly with the spoon. "You should be upstairs taking a nap. This is Phillip's job, not yours."

Lee enjoyed his handful of chocolate chips before passing the bag to his mother-in-law. "I'm fine, Amanda. Besides, I helped Jamie last Saturday. It only seems fair to help Phillip, too." He wrapped his arms around his wife's waist and kissed her soundly, sharing the sweetness of the stolen chocolate chips, then picked her up and swung her around in a half-circle. "It won't take very long and I can nap later if I get tired." He was out the back door with a wink and a promise.

"That man is a menace," Amanda exclaimed with chuckle.

"If you're looking for sympathy, you've come to the wrong woman, darling. He's no better and no worse than your Daddy was," Dotty shook her head with a soft sigh. "Now, about that shopping list--"

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Lee found Phillip noisily dragging the steel weight bench out of the back of garage. "Can I give you a hand with that, Chief?" he asked as he reached for the other end of the heavy metal bench and lifted it easily.

"Gosh, Dad. I don't know. I sure could use the help, but..." Phillip hesitated.

"I helped Jamie last week," Lee told him.

Phillip smiled sheepishly. "Because I wasn't around."

Lee raised an eyebrow. "Makes no difference to me."

"Okay, thanks." Phillip resumed backing out of the garage.

For two hours, they worked companionably. Hauling out camping and sports gear. Pulling boxes of holiday decorations and Christmas lights off dusty floor-to-ceiling shelving. Throwing out the trash and wiping off shelves. Sweeping the floor and then

reorganizing everything as they put it back neatly onto shelves or sorted items into boxes on the floor.

“Whew, where did all this stuff come from?” Lee wondered aloud as they paused beside the weight bench, the only item left to go back into the clean garage.

“I have no idea!” Phillip declared as he sat down on the bench and wiped the sweat off his face with the back of his filthy hand. “I don’t even know what most of this stuff is!”

Lee sat down beside his stepson to rest for a moment. “Well, I suppose it’s important stuff otherwise your Mom and Grandma wouldn’t be holding onto it.”

“Dad,” Phillip began quietly. He had put this conversation off as long as he could, but his Mom and Grandma would be coming home from the store any minute. “About last night…”

“Water under the bridge, Phillip.” Lee ruffled his stepson’s hair with his filthy hand and draped his arm across Phillip’s shoulders.

“No, Dad. I really need to say this, please?” Phillip shifted on the bench. Not so far away that Lee’s arm was no longer across his shoulders, but just enough so that he could see the older man’s face.

“Okay, Phillip. Fire away.”

“I said some things last night. I was really mad at you. I said you weren’t my real father and that I hated you,” Phillip paused, ashamed of himself.

“Hey, Phillip. I was fourteen once and I said some pretty awful things to the Colonel. I know you didn’t mean everything you said last night. Well, you meant it at the time, but …” Lee offered a crooked smile and half a shrug.

“I didn’t mean them,” Phillip continued. “I just wanted to hurt you. When I got upstairs I was still so angry, I even thought about climbing out the window and walking all the way to the rink, just to show you who was really boss.”

Lee laughed. “Why didn’t you?”

“Hoo boy! Mom or Grandma would’ve found out for sure. They always do and then they would have had my a-- Well, I would’ve been neck deep in alligators for a month at least!” Phillip pulled one leg up onto the bench, wrapped his arms around his knee, and leaned a little more against Lee. This wasn’t turning out to be as hard as he’d thought it would be. “Anyway, I’m sorry for all those things I said and for all the things I thought about you, too.”

Lee squeezed his shoulder, “That’s okay, buddy. I knew you’d come around once you’d had time to calm down a little. That’s the problem with letting yourself get that angry. Your brain stops working and things can spin out of control.”

“Your brain stops working,” Phillip repeated. “That’s kind of what it feels like. Sometimes, I get so angry and I don’t even know why or who I’m really angry at. I feel like I’ve gotta hit something or I’m going to explode.”

“Testosterone is a bitch,” Lee chuckled. “That’s why it’s important to catch it before it gets away from you. You’ve got to be in control of your anger or it will control you.”

“I know, but that’s not so easy to do.” Phillip paused. “After I calmed down, I got to thinking. About the things you said. Don’t get me wrong, Mom and Grandma are the best. They taught me all sorts of important stuff, like times tables and how to ride a bike and how to hook slide. But they’re still girls. I always worried about how I would learn how to do guy stuff. I worried I’d act like a sissy.” Phillip looked at his stepfather. “I’m glad Mom married you. I’m glad you’re here all the time. And I’m even glad you grounded me last night.”

Lee’s eyes got big. “You’re **glad** that I grounded you last night?” he echoed slowly and with emphasis. Was this kid incredible, or what?

“Yeah, when I thought about it, I realized that real dads do stuff like that to real sons. They tell them stupid, pointless stories about when they were kids. They lecture them ‘til their eyes glaze over. And they ground them from fun stuff for not doing their chores. Last night, I told you that you weren’t my real father and you turned around and proved that you were as real as a dad can get.” Phillip blinked hard a couple times. He would not cry. Guys did not cry. That was a girl thing.

Lee cleared his throat a couple of times. He would not cry. It would embarrass Phillip if he cried. Hell, it would embarrass him if he cried. That was a girl thing. He could do this. “Thanks, Phillip. That means a lot to me. I’m not real sure about this dad-stuff. I don’t remember a lot about my own father. I do know he loved me a lot and I could never get away with anything when he was around. I’m glad we’re okay. I was a little worried after last night.”

Phillip stood up and offered his stepfather his hand. “Yeah, we’re better than okay, Dad.”

Lee took his hand and used it to pull the boy into a hug. Hugs were okay as long as they were short.

When they broke apart, Phillip kept hold of Lee’s right hand. “What’s this?” he asked, pushing the sleeve of the sweatshirt up far enough to reveal a white gauze bandage.

Lee hissed softly at the boy’s touch. “It’s nothing, son. A little accident, is all.” He looked Phillip in the eye and hoped he’d let it drop there. Yeah, right. This was Amanda’s son and Dotty’s grandson.

“What kind of accident, Dad? How bad was it, Dad?” Phillip asked as worry creased his brow.

“Well, I accidentally went through some French doors—without opening them first,” Lee joked.

“How many stitches in a little accident, Dad?” Phillip pursued quietly examining the length and thickness of the bandage.

Lee pulled his arm out of Phillip’s grip and lowered his sleeve at the familiar sound of the Wagoneer turning into the drive. “A dozen or so,” Lee replied.

“Hi, fellas!” Amanda called as she jumped out of the Jeep. “Looks like you’re pretty much finished here. We’ll have lunch on the table as soon as Mother and I get these groceries put away.”

"I'll bring in the sacks as soon as Dad and I haul this bench back into the garage, Mom!" Phillip volunteered as he lifted his end of the heavy piece of equipment.

"Yeah, I'm starved. The sooner the better as far as I'm concerned," Lee agreed hefting the other end of the bench and starting into the garage.

"You're going to have to tell Mom about the stitches sooner or later," Phillip whispered to his Dad in the back of the shadowy garage.

"I know, but when fussing is involved, later is better than sooner as far as I'm concerned," Lee confided sotto voce.

Phillip chortled all the way to the Wagoneer.

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"Well, I guess Lee was right about helping Phillip with the garage. They seem to have worked things out between them," Amanda commented as she sorted canned goods onto the pantry shelf.

"Of course, he was right!" Dotty retorted. "Lee's a natural, after all."

"A natural what?" Lee asked with a dimpled smile, placing two more sacks of groceries on the countertop.

"A natural father," Dotty proclaimed, kissing him on the cheek as she claimed one of the sacks

"You got that right, Grandma," Phillip agreed and dropped his sacks onto the counter.

"What's for lunch? We're starving to death! Right, Dad?"

"Right, son." Lee slapped Phillip on the back and looked across the busy kitchen into his wife's smiling eyes. A natural father? It didn't feel very natural to him, but how could he go wrong with a family like this!