

## Mending Fences

By Jill Minnich

Rating: G

Synopsis: Uncle Bob comes for a visit. With sincere thanks to Robert Frost.

Time Frame: August 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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"Good fences make good neighbors."

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He'd been sitting in the parked car for quite some time. Long enough to regret the lack of air conditioning and to wonder, not for the first time, what he was doing here anyway. There were no cars in the drive. No one had come or gone in all the time he'd been observing the house. It certainly looked like no one was home. He wasn't really surprised. He had called earlier and the answering machine had picked up again. It was time to make his move and take his chances. As he opened the gate in the white picket fence, he couldn't help admiring the carefully manicured lawn and the colorful flower gardens. Standing on the front step, he raised the wrought-iron doorknocker and let it fall three times. The sound echoed through the house. He'd been right—no one was home. Surveying the open windows on the first floor, he decided to try around back. Just as he stepped off the front porch, the door swept open.

"I'm sorry I took so long to answer the door. I was out in the backyard just finishing up my weeding and my hands were absolutely covered with dirt!" The slender blonde smiled at him cordially. "What can I do for you—Colonel—" she squinted at the nametag on the right breast of his military uniform. "Oh my goodness, Colonel Clayton. How wonderful to finally meet you! Please, do come in."

"I don't want to intrude, ma'am. I just stopped by to see if Skip was at home. I tried at the office and—" He didn't even get a chance to finish his thought.

"My dear man, you're not an intrusion. You're family!" She tugged on the sleeve of his uniform jacket and succeeded in pulling him into the entry hall.

"You must be Mrs. West, Amanda's mother." He stood for a moment just inside the door, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the dimmer light indoors.

"Yes, I am. Call me Dotty, please." She led the way toward the back of the house. The kitchen was in that direction, if his memory served.

“Only if you’ll call me Bob. I get enough of ‘Colonel’ and ‘Sir’ on the base.” He followed her into the kitchen and his lips curved into a half-smile at memories of briefly helping to bake cookies for a scout jamboree.

“Of course, Bob. I was just going to fix myself a well-deserved iced tea. Can I get you something cold to drink?”

“No, no, thank you, ma'am. I really didn't intend to come in, let alone stay. When I got Skip's message about the marriage, I thought I'd just—“ Once again, he was interrupted.

“Nonsense, I know Lee and Amanda would be disappointed if they missed you. You must at least stay for dinner. Unless, of course, you have another commitment?” Dotty retrieved a pitcher of tea and a lemon from the refrigerator.

Colonel Robert Clayton had to smile at the irony of Skip being disappointed he'd missed his visit. Skip usually did everything in his power to be certain he missed visits from his uncle and he'd gotten pretty darn good at it over the years. “No, I don't have another commitment, but I know you weren't expecting me. I can come back another time.”

“Don't be silly, Bob. We're just barbecuing some burgers. Nothing fancy, but there's always plenty of food in this house. We have growing boys to feed, after all. It won't be any trouble to put another plate on the picnic table.” Dotty bustled around the kitchen gathering glasses and ice cubes. She cut the lemon into wedges. “If you don't care for iced tea, we also have lemonade or beer. Lee keeps a bottle of Scotch in the cupboard over the fridge, I believe.”

She was clearly waiting for him to make up his mind. He hadn't felt this outflanked since his plane had gone down behind enemy lines in Korea. “Iced tea would be fine, Dotty. Thank you.”

Dotty fixed two tall glasses of iced tea with lemon. “Do you take sugar? No? I'll hang up your jacket and hat, then we can take our drinks out onto the patio.”

Obediently, he removed his jacket and handed it to Dotty along with his hat. As he did so, he caught sight of a light brown sports coat slung over the back of a kitchen chair. Collecting his nephew's jacket, he followed his hostess to the front closet.

“I see Skip is still scattering his belongings wherever he pleases.” He reached for a hanger and slipped the wrinkled linen jacket into the closet beside his own.

“He's usually pretty good about putting his things away, but he was in a bit of a rush today.”

“In my experience, Skip is always in a rush.”

Dotty nodded knowingly. “Sitting around waiting for something to happen isn't exactly his strong suit, is it?”

Picking up the glasses of tea, she crossed to the back door and he had to move quickly to open it for her. The brick patio was cool and shady thanks to the overhanging branches of a large oak tree. The sturdy tree house appeared to have survived many years of boyish play. A whitewashed gazebo took up one side of the fenced yard. Flower gardens hugged the white fence and billowed beneath the kitchen window. Dotty

handed him a glass of tea before seating herself on a blue-cushioned redwood chair. She gestured toward a pair of fairly new Adirondack chairs, "Make yourself comfortable, Bob. Lee prefers to sit in one of those. He claims that these little chairs are too short for his long legs."

They sipped their tea in silence. He really didn't know what to say. It'd been a long time since he'd been at a loss for words in the presence of a beautiful woman. None of his usual conversation starters seemed to fit this situation. This was his nephew's mother-in-law, after all. Frankly, he'd never expected to find himself in this situation. The thought of Skip married and living in the suburbs had always seemed out of the realm of possibility. The shouts and laughter of neighborhood children at play carried into the sanctuary of the sun-dappled backyard. The faint song of an ice cream truck chimed several blocks away. Birds chirped in the branches overhead. Somewhere nearby a car door slammed and a boyish soprano sang out, "Daddy's home!"

He was transported to another Arlington neighborhood and to another time. That summer day had also been hot and humid. He'd waited on the back porch drinking hot tea from a china cup with his sister-in-law. A transplanted Briton, it appeared she'd never develop the habit of iced tea in the summertime. After all that time overseas, he was anxious to surprise his big brother. He still remembered his astonishment when his three-year-old nephew had managed to lead his father onto the back porch without giving away the secret of his uncle's unexpected visit.

"Bob? Bob!"

The voice calling his name wasn't Matt's. He blinked and shook his head. He felt his face warm with embarrassment. "I'm sorry, Dotty. I guess I was wool gathering there for a minute. What did you say?"

"I said that I had begun to wonder if I would ever meet you."

"I know Skip and I don't get together as often as we should," he shrugged and took a sip of his tea.

"It's just that I have so many questions for you," Dotty said. "There's so much I'd like to know about Lee."

"You probably ought to ask Skip anything you'd like to know." He'd always hated tests in school. You never knew ahead of time exactly what they'd ask. He shook his glass rattling the few remaining ice cubes. He watched with fascination as one lone drop of condensation rolled slowly down the side of the glass and onto his thumb.

Dotty continued undeterred by his evasion. "It should be a simple thing, really. You see, we're having a belated surprise birthday picnic for Lee tomorrow afternoon. With all the coming and going around here this summer, somehow Lee's birthday just got lost in the shuffle. When the boys found out, they were horrified. The surprise picnic was their idea, but I'm the one who has to come up with the menu. I've already decided to prepare fried chicken, but I can't decide what kind of birthday cake to make. What kind of cake did he prefer as a boy? Chocolate or yellow? Or marble perhaps? And what sort of frosting does he like?" Dotty's eyes were bright with expectation.

He thought for several minutes. Nothing. Barney had baked a cake for the boy on his tenth birthday, but he'd been on night flights that week. For the life of him, he couldn't remember what kind of cake Barney had made. He had to say something, "Whatever kind they served in the mess that night, I suppose." Dotty's face fell. He could see that she was disappointed, perhaps even shocked. He felt as though he should apologize. "We didn't make a big deal out of birthdays or holidays, I'm afraid. I took Skip to a Christmas party sponsored by the Officer's Wives Club when he first came to live with me. He didn't seem to enjoy himself. He spent the whole time on a metal folding chair up against the wall and wouldn't even sit on Santa's lap. And then there was the Easter egg hunt in the Sahara. Although, to be honest, I don't think any of the other kids enjoyed that one much either."

"I see. Well, German chocolate cake would probably be the best choice then. It always travels well and gets compliments whenever I take it to Garden Club meetings," she smiled softly and patted his hand, as if she were reassuring a small child. The sound of the Corvette pulling into the drive put a close on an awkward moment.

"There's Skip now." He rose from his seat in relief and turning toward drive.

"Oh dear, I'm afraid not. Amanda is driving the Corvette this evening and Lee borrowed something from the motor pool at work because he'd be picking the boys up from football practice. The Wagoneer is in the shop again. It won't be ready until tomorrow morning," Dotty explained even as Amanda came through the back gate, pretty as a picture in her crisp, white summer dress.

"Colonel Clayton, what a wonderful surprise! I see you and Mother have already met," Amanda crossed the patio with a welcoming smile. "Lee didn't mention that you'd be in town this weekend."

"Skip didn't mention it because he didn't know. I tried to call him several times, but couldn't seem to catch him in his office. I was on the run from meeting to meeting, so I didn't leave a message. Couldn't really say when or where I could be reached, you know. I'm beginning to wonder if the boy really works for IFF at all." He took Amanda's outstretched hands in his own with a smile that belied his gruff complaint. "Call me Uncle Bob, please."

"Of course, Uncle Bob. I'm sorry you couldn't reach us. Lee's been all over D.C. this week. He's had a meeting at the Capitol, a briefing at Langley, and been called in to consult on security arrangements for three separate diplomatic affairs on Embassy Row. Neither one of us has been very easy to track down lately," she apologized.

"I was just about to invite Bob to Lee's surprise birthday picnic and find out how long he can stay with us," Dotty offered with a smile at Bob.

"Oh yes! I do hope you can come to the party. It will be such a nice surprise for Lee. And will you stay with us? It's just a sofa bed in the den, nothing like a nice hotel, but we'd love to have you," Amanda followed on her mother's comments with hardly a break.

He considered his options. Spending the weekend could be awkward, but he was a man with a mission—a mission that might be more easily accomplished if he stayed. "I'd love

to come to the birthday picnic. I'm sure your sofa bed will be much more comfortable than many of the billets I've been in over the years."

"Well, I'm going to put my purse away and change my clothes. Mother, do you need any help with dinner?" Amanda asked.

"No, thank you dear. I've got it all under control. Lee can light the barbeque when he gets back with the boys. I'll have a glass of tea ready when you come back down. Here, Bob, let me refill your glass." Dotty followed her daughter into the kitchen.

Robert Clayton sat back down in the patio chair with a wry smile on his face. Skip sure would be surprised and not just by the birthday party!

Twenty minutes later, the blare of rock music and the unique rumble of a vintage Jeep alerted them to the return of 'the boys.' They heard the tinny bang of the Jeep doors. A shrill whistle halted the clatter of cleats on brick. "Hey, fellas. This football equipment isn't going to unload itself."

"Aw, Dad. We'll get it after dinner. We're starving," promised a light tenor voice.

"Nice try, Phillip. Stow your shoulder pads and helmets on the shelf and leave your muddy cleats by the garage door so I can hose them off," ordered a husky baritone.

"You'd better clean your sneakers, Dad. They're just as dirty as ours," suggested a cheerful alto.

The garage door grumbled. The faucet squeaked and water splashed, one could only hope it was onto the offending footwear. The back gate banged open to admit two young men carrying blue and gold practice jerseys in their hands and dressed for football in cut-off white t-shirts and padded pants. His nephew, wearing khaki trousers and a white dress shirt, followed the boys. All three were in stocking feet. All three were soaking wet. And all three were muddy. They stopped just inside the gate.

"Colonel. Sir. I had no idea you were in town." Lee Stetson came to attention.

Why was it that Skip always looked like a raw recruit caught napping on duty? "I tried to call, but my schedule never meshed with yours, I guess. So I took a chance and just stopped over. I've had a nice visit with your mother-in-law. How about introducing these fine young men?" He smiled at the two boys. They smiled back.

"Yes. Well, Colonel Robert Clayton, I'd like you to meet Phillip King," he clasped the shoulder of the tall, muscular teenager. "And Jamie King," he ruffled the hair of the younger boy with the aviator spectacles and braces on his teeth. "Boys, this is my uncle."

"I'm pleased to meet you, Phillip and Jamie. Would you feel comfortable calling me Uncle Bob?" Skip's eyebrows disappeared into his rather untidy hair. Uncle Bob held out his right hand and was impressed when the older boy, Phillip, stepped forward immediately and returned his firm handshake with assurance.

"I'm pleased to meet you, sir. Uh, Uncle Bob." Phillip grinned and stood aside as his younger brother followed his lead.

“I’m glad to meet you, too.” Jamie smiled shyly and looked over at Skip with a concerned expression on his face.

“How long will you be in town, sir?” Skip asked quietly. He ran his hand nervously through his hair, disordering it even further. As usual, Skip looked as though he was planning a strategic retreat at his earliest opportunity.

“Actually, I’ve been in town all week. Meetings at the Pentagon. I’ve been acting as aide to General Brainerd. We finished up this afternoon. Your wife and mother-in-law have kindly invited me to spend the weekend. I don’t have to be back on base until Tuesday.” Skip’s eyes widened slightly at that information.

“Oh. Great.” Skip shifted his feet and gazed past his uncle in the general direction of his wife.

He’d tried, but he just couldn’t remain silent. “Skip! What the h—eck happened to you? You’re soaked to the skin! And I see you still can’t tell the difference between dress clothes and utilities!

Lee grimaced as he surveyed his muddy, grass-stained knees and elbows. “Well, uh, you see, I didn’t have time to change before practice. I was just supposed to pick the boys up after—“

Phillip jumped in excitedly. “Yeah, it’s not his fault, really. Dad and I were standing around watching the end of the Midgets’ practice when Coach asked us to help him demonstrate how to defend against the long pass.” Phillip faded back as though he were the receiver. “It was awesome. You should have been there! I was playing linebacker covering Mr. Thomas, while Dad was playing safety and covering Mr. Jackson. You know him, Mom. He’s always bragging about how he played fullback for Paterno at Penn State. Mr. Jackson, that is. Coach threw a long bomb right to him. Would’ve hit him right on the numbers. Except Dad just stepped around in front of Mr. Jackson and took the ball right out of his hands. You should have seen the look on Mr. Jackson’s face! He got bright red and tackled Dad. Next thing we knew, the sprinklers came on all over the field. Everybody on the field got soaked.”

“Boys, you’d better head upstairs to get changed. And don’t leave your wet things all over the bathroom like you did last time!” Dotty directed briskly. “Lee, bring your trousers and shirt back down to the laundry room, so I can pre-treat those stains.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Dotty. He knows how to take care of his own clothing. He should, I trained him myself.” He folded his arms over his chest and narrowed his eyes at Skip.

Dotty shook her head and chuckled. “Of course he does, Bob. I don’t mind, as a matter of fact, it’s no trouble at all. Lee, as soon as you’ve changed, I’d like you to start the grill.” She shoosed all three ‘boys’ toward the kitchen door.

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Bob dropped his carryon on the floor beside the sofa and wandered around the obviously well-loved den. Dinner had been great—not just the mouth-watering home-cooked meal, but the company as well. The conversation had been lively covering the weather, baked bean recipes, the Redskins’ prospects, and flying jet fighters. Skip had been quiet, as usual. And he’d spent most of his time passing dishes or pushing beans

around on his plate. No wonder that boy never put on any weight. He'd hoped to have some time alone with Skip after dinner. He'd figured Dotty and Amanda would do dishes and the boys would go play somewhere. While they were still clearing the table however, one of the neighbors came over to challenge Skip and the boys to a three-on-three rematch at the park. Loser would buy ice cream for the winner's whole family. After the King-Stetson team polished off the Henderson's, they all polished off hot fudge sundaes and banana splits at the local soda fountain. Except for Skip, of course, who still preferred vanilla cones.

Books and record albums, family pictures and awards were artistically arranged on open shelves. He gently touched a shadow box displaying Matt's medals then picked up a well-used old pipe and sniffed. Matt had always enjoyed a pipe after dinner and smoked a tobacco blend he'd grown fond of when he'd served in London during the war.

"Excuse me, sir." He started. Skip was standing in the doorway holding some bed linens, a pillow, and a dark blue towel. "Do you want any help making up the bed?"

"Who was it that taught you the proper way to make a bed? No, I don't need any help making the bed," he huffed lightly as Skip tossed the bedclothes onto an old brown armchair. He hadn't meant to be so short with the boy, but standing there in the shadows cast by the lamplight he'd mistaken him for Matthew for a moment. That always threw him off balance.

"I knew you wouldn't want any help, but Amanda insisted that I ask." Skip moved to leave.

"That chair looks familiar," he commented quickly before the boy could escape the room. "I can't believe you still have it with all the moving around you've done. It was always Matt's favorite."

"Yeah, I know." Skip slipped his hands into his pockets and turned to look at the chair.

Bob looked at the pipe in his hand and then back at his nephew. "I can't count the times your father and I sat smoking and talking in the front room after supper. Jenny would be out in the kitchen doing whatever it is women do after a fine meal. She'd come into the room wiping her hands on a dishtowel and scold Matt for letting you stay up past your bedtime. He'd just chuckle at you curled up fast asleep right there at his feet and carry you off to bed. It always amazed me the way you'd be going strong one minute and out like a light the next. You had two speeds—on and off."

Skip quietly took the pipe out of his hand and replaced it on the shelf. "I don't remember any of that. Just the smell of his tobacco."

"Dotty mentioned that you're taking Jamie and Phillip shopping for school clothes tomorrow," he blurted into the awkward silence.

Skip gave him a guarded look, "Yeah, that's the plan. School clothes and school supplies. We have a complete, itemized list and a strict budget."

"I was thinking I'd go along. Help out. Keep you company."

Skip narrowed his eyes. "You're volunteering to go clothes shopping with me and two teenage boys? We're not going to buy five pairs of khaki chinos and five white button-down shirts," he warned.

Bob grimaced at the memory. "I realize that. I've been living in Utah, not the Antarctic. I know what kids are wearing these days. I figured we could take them out to Andrews. You can't beat the prices in the BX and they stock all the latest fashions these days."

"Is that so?" Skip sounded skeptical, but shrugged. "Why don't you ask the boys at breakfast. They think the local Mall is the only place to shop. You might just convince them, if you promise to show them some fighters."

"Is your pilot's license current? Maybe we can even take them up, if we finish our shopping quickly enough. I could make some calls before we leave," he bargained.

"Yeah, my license is current, but I'm not rated for fighters any more. I mostly fly choppers these days." He sounded apologetic.

"Oh well, you Marines always were partial to whirlybirds. Phillip and Jamie would probably enjoy a chopper ride and it would be a lot easier to get clearance for something like that. Good thinking, Skip." His nephew looked surprised at the compliment.

"Well, we'll see what the boys have to say in the morning." Skip crossed the room and then turned back. "Good night, sir."

"Good night, Skip."

Lee entered the master bedroom with a grim expression on his face. "You're not going to believe this, Amanda. The Colonel wants to go shopping with us tomorrow."

Amanda, already dressed for bed, continued brushing out her hair and smiled at him in the mirror. "That's sounds nice, dear. I'm sure you'll have fun."

"Nice? Shopping and fun don't go together when you're with the Colonel. When I was in second grade, he took me shopping for school clothes at the Base Exchange. He bought me five pairs of khaki pants, five white button-down shirts, a pair of jeans, and seven sets of underwear. And a blue tie for Sundays. The only kid who got teased more at school than me was Pam McDonald. She had bright red hair, freckles, and a brace on her leg!" He pulled his shirt off over his head and slammed it into the clothes hamper.

Amanda rose from the vanity bench and wrapped her arms around his waist. "I'm sure you won't buy the boys khaki pants and white shirts, dear. Uncle Bob will follow your lead."

"The Colonel take my advice? That'll be the day!" But Lee paused, as he remembered that the Colonel had taken his advice about the chopper ride.

"Don't you think it's about time you stopped calling him 'The Colonel' and started calling him 'Uncle Bob'? He is the man who raised you. He's asked the boys and me to call him Uncle Bob. It's always seemed strange to me that you call him by his rank," Amanda observed quietly.

Lee shuffled his feet. "He's never asked me to call him anything else."



She grasped him by the shoulders and slowly turned him around. Cupping his face lovingly she spoke kindly, "Oh, Lee, you are not a grief-stricken seven-year-old any more. You are a grown man whose skills and accomplishments are well respected in his chosen profession. You have powerful and loyal friends all over the world. And you have a family who loves you very, very much. Phillip and Jamie think that whatever you do is, by definition, totally cool. My mother once said that you were an eleven on a scale of ten! And your wife—"

"And my wife has me wrapped around her little finger," he chuckled wryly. She ran her pinky finger from his jaw line along his throat and then down the center of his chest until she reached the button of his shorts. She slid her fingers inside his waistband and tugged lightly. He closed his eyes and shivered.

"Is that right, big guy? In that case, I have some other things I'd like to do with my little finger." She tickled him in the secret place only she knew, then dashed toward their big brass bed.

"I've always been fond of your little finger, but there are other parts I've come to like even better," Lee laughed as he tackled her gently and pinned her beneath him on the antique quilt.

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The shadows were starting to lengthen and the puffy white clouds shaded to pink as they drifted past. Across the peaceful lake, the dark-green, wooded ridge was turning blue and gray as afternoon faded toward evening. The area was remarkably pristine considering that it was located a little more than an hour from downtown Washington, D. C. A tractor chugged in the distance. Birds fluttered from tree to tree in the little glade and rhythmic croaks hummed in the background. A rope swing hung limply from an old tree branch. The waterside was calm now—no more shouting voices or cheerful splashing. The air was still warm, but a breeze was picking up as the sun dropped lower in the west.

"Dotty, I have to say that was by far the finest fried chicken I have ever eaten!" Colonel Robert Clayton wiped his hands on the red-and-white-checkered napkin then pushed himself a little further away from the picnic table. Only gnawed bones remained of the fried chicken, though there were a few biscuits and some coleslaw left. Phillip concentrated on scraping the bottom of the macaroni salad container with a plastic spoon.

Dotty shook her head and turned a fond glance toward her son-in-law. "That's exactly what Lee always says, but then I get compliments and a clean plate no matter what I serve him."

"Yeah, he even eats broccoli and Brussels sprouts," Jamie said with disgust as he slid his coleslaw into the garbage sack tied onto the end of the wooden table.

"Brussels sprouts! You used to claim that the only reason God created green vegetables was to torture small boys, Skip." Bob enjoyed seeing the sheepish smile his nephew failed to hide as he handed his clean plate to Dotty.

"When's dessert, Grandma?" Phillip asked around the half a biscuit he'd shoved into his mouth just before his mother could pack them all away.

Skip reached over to lift the lid of the picnic basket, but Dotty rapped his knuckles smartly before he could open it. "Aw, I wasn't going to snatch a bite, I just wanted a peek," he claimed dimples flashing.

"You can just wait and find out with the rest, young man. I think we should clean up dinner before we bring out the treats. What do you say, Amanda?" Dotty inquired sweetly.

"Phillip and Jamie, why don't you go down to the lakeside and throw the ball around while your Grandma and I clear things away. It will go faster without you guys underfoot. We'll call you for dessert," Amanda promised her sons.

"Great idea, Mom!" Phillip agreed as he palmed the soft foam football and chucked it at his brother's head in one smooth motion. Jamie fielded it easily and whipped it right back

"Boys, didn't I hear your Mom tell you to go down by the lake to play?" Skip spoke conversationally, but he had both boys' attention immediately.

"Sorry, Dad." They not only apologized in unison, but turned as one and raced to the shore of the lake tossing the ball back and forth as they ran.

"Sweetheart, would you mind going down and making sure that they play beside the lake, not in it? I don't think we want them getting soaked again just before we leave." Amanda watched her sons with a concerned expression on her face.

"That's probably a good idea, dear. You know how carried away they can get when they're playing ball," Dotty agreed promptly.

"Don't you need my help packing things away?" It was obvious that Skip would rather be playing catch with Jamie and Phillip, but he didn't want to shirk his duties in front of his uncle.

Bob could see where the ladies were going with this and decided to add a little push of his own. "I'll stay and help, Skip. Those two are getting mighty close to the water, don't you think?"

"Right!" Skip smiled crookedly and started to jog toward his stepsons calling, "Beside the water, not in it!"

"That was pretty slick, Amanda. Just as smooth as your mother sending him to check the rope swing as soon as we got here." He chuckled softly as he tossed used paper cups into the trash sack. "I was wondering how you'd keep him from discovering the cake and presents when we unloaded the car.

"I learned from the master. Mother and I had that all set up with the boys before we even left the house. It will be worth it, if it works. I was afraid Phillip was going to let the cat out of the bag when he brought up dessert! It is not easy to surprise Lee!" Amanda shook her head ruefully.

Bob carried the cooler and the folding lawn chairs back to the Wagoneer and then retrieved the sack of birthday presents. By the time he had finished, Dotty had decorated the German Chocolate cake with seven red, white, and blue birthday candles. Cold milk had been poured into clean cups and small blue plates and white plastic forks lay beside the cake. Amanda took the sack of beautifully wrapped gifts and arranged them on the table.

“It looks like everything’s all ready to go.” He was amazed at how festive everything appeared. The gift-wrap was in patriotic colors that had to have been intentionally coordinated with the dishes and candles. Hands on hips, Dotty and Amanda surveyed everything. They gave identical nods of satisfaction.

“We’d better call the boys,” Dotty suggested. “Before they can get into any trouble.”

“Too late.” Bob turned to observe the game of catch just in time to see Jamie and Phillip gang tackle Skip right into the shallow water. He instantly rolled over so that both boys ended up in the drink beneath him. All three came up sputtering, dripping water and duckweed, and with silly grins plastered across their faces.

Amanda sighed with resignation as she cupped her hands around her mouth to yell, “Dessert is served!”

“Yes!” cried the teens who charged up the grassy slope to the table. Skip followed only a few steps behind having stopped to pick up the forgotten football.

Bob realized he was holding his breath waiting for Skip to reach the picnic table.

Skip’s brows drew together in a bemused frown as he took in the party preparations. “What’s with the presents and the cake?”

“It’s a belated birthday party, Dad!” Jamie couldn’t hide his delight in taking his stepfather by surprise.

Bob watched as Skip quickly analyzed everything he knew about the West-King family and came up empty. “Whose birthday is it?”

“Yours, dude!” Phillip laced the words with equal measures of filial affection and teenage scorn.

“My birthday is not in August,” Skip reminded the group at large, embarrassed pleasure beneath his faint protest.

“Of course not, dear. But when we realized we had missed celebrating your birthday, we decided not to wait for next year.” Dotty took him by the arm and settled him on the picnic bench in front of the cake as Amanda lit the candles.

“There are only seven candles,” Skip objected.

“Heck, we didn’t want the fire department to show up, Dad,” Jamie teased eyebrows bobbing.

Amanda reminisced, “When Mother turned twenty-nine for the fifth or sixth time, my father and I developed a system: a blue candle for every decade, a red candle for every five years, and a white candle for one year.” She pointed out the three blue candles, the one red candle and the three white ones.

“But I’m only thirty-seven.” Skip was quick enough with numbers though his report cards had rarely shown it.

Phillip shook his head sadly at this display of gross ignorance of birthday traditions. “The extra candle is for good luck in the coming year. You’d better make a wish and blow them out, Dad, before the icing gets burnt.” The candles were looking more and more like stubs.

“Make a wish,” Skip said in wonder.

“C’mon, Dad! We’re starving to death here!” the boys urged.

Skip closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them, he blew enthusiastically extinguishing every single candle.

Dotty cut the cake giving the first and largest piece to Skip. He waited just until everyone had been served and then asked very casually, “So, when do I get to open the presents?”

Apparently Phillip was even more eager than Skip. “How about right now?”

Skip looked at Dotty and Amanda for permission, set aside his cake, and then hesitated. “Which one first?”

“Open mine first,” Phillip suggested. He grabbed the large oddly shaped present and thrust it toward his stepfather.

Jamie snatched a small flat package from the table. “No, open mine first!”

Before a fight could break out, Skip made an executive decision, “Age before beauty, Jamie.” He took the present Phillip offered, hefted it up and down, and then raised his eyebrows at Phillip. “Big and heavy and shaped like, I don’t know what it’s shaped like! What could it be?” He shook it and a muffled rattle was heard. Carefully folded gift wrap was torn aside revealing a plastic bucket filled with car care items.

“See, I got you a new chamois, one of those soft spray heads for the hose, a special brush for the tires and rims, and that car wax you like so much.” Phillip reached into the bucket displaying each item as he described it.

“Boy, this is great—everything I need and all in one place. Thanks, Phillip.” The eldest boy beamed proudly at Skip’s sincere appreciation.

“Now, mine.” Jamie sounded subdued now as he passed over the smallest gift.

Skip smiled as he turned it over carefully in his hands. He tilted his head and held it close to his ear as he shook it lightly. “Hmmm, doesn’t feel like a book. It’s too thin for a video. Guess I’ll just have to—” Once again, paper flew as Skip quickly stripped it off. He held a small, hinged picture frame in his hands. He opened it and studied the two pictures inside for several long seconds.

Jamie shattered the awkward silence. “I know it’s not much, but I took the pictures myself. I thought maybe you’d want some photos to put on your desk at work. Most dads have pictures of their families on their desks at work, I think. But if you don’t want to put it there, that’s okay. I mean, I’ll understand if you don’t think it’s a good idea...” Jamie rambled into silence again.

Skip looked up at Jamie with bright eyes and a wistful half-smile his lips. He passed the pictures over to Dotty who handed it on to Amanda with a soft smile.

“Jamie, I will be proud to take those pictures into work. But I think I’ll put them on the cupboard behind my desk. That way everyone who comes into the office will be able to see them. If that’s okay with you, that is?” Skip slipped an arm around the Jamie’s shoulders and pulled him into a quick hug.

“That’s fine with me,” Jamie assured him with a relieved smile.

Phillip handed the photos to Bob. On the left, he saw Dotty and Amanda standing beside a mountain lake absorbed in animated conversation. On the right side were three proud fishermen: Skip, Phillip, and Jamie all holding fly rods and rainbow trout. “Jamie caught the biggest fish,” he remarked as he handed the picture frame back to Skip.

“Beginner’s luck,” suggested Jamie shyly.

“No way! You got the hang of that fly fishing stuff right off the bat,” Phillip said loyally. “I was still getting my line tangled in the trees when you caught your first fish. Which one are you going to open next, Dad?”

Skip considered the two remaining gifts as though he really couldn’t make up his mind.

“Goodness knows, I’m no more patient than my grandsons. Open mine, Lee!” Dotty gestured at the fat rectangular present wrapped in blue paper with a scattering of white stars.

Skip took the package with a grin and went through the weighing, squeezing, and shaking routine a third time. “This one is a book, I think.” He pulled the paper off and held a leather-bound album in his hands. He looked up at Dotty with an inquisitive expression.

“When Amanda was a little girl, I used to keep a scrapbook for her. When my grandsons came along, I continued the tradition with them.”

“And you made this one for me?”

Bob peeked over Skip’s shoulder as he turned pages of captioned snapshots, movie tickets, cartoons, postcards, and restaurant menus. There was even a certificate he’d gotten for helping out with the 14-and-under little league team and a map of the backpacking route he and Jamie had used to earn a Trailblazer requirement.

“My mother used to put her photos into albums with black pages and write in them with special white ink,” Skip recalled quietly. He closed the book with care and met his mother-in-law’s eyes. “I don’t know how to thank you, Dotty. A lot of thought and work went into this book.”

Dotty came around the table and kissed her son-in-law on the cheek. “Your pleasure is all the thanks I need, Lee.”

“I guess it comes as no surprise that this one is from me,” Amanda said as she presented him with the last gift. “Open it carefully; you don’t want it to break.”

Skip turned it over and slowly peeled off the red and white striped paper. He pulled another picture frame free of its wrapping. This was not a photograph, however. The large frame held a colorful family tree. Each name was beautifully hand-written with the dates of birth and death noted beneath. In the bottom left-hand corner was the Stetson coat-of-arms and in the opposite corner was the Hamilton coat-of-arms. "Wow!" was all Skip could say.

"A friend of mine who is an artist created the family tree using the one in the back of your mother's journal. T. P. helped me research the Stetson and Hamilton heraldry and found each coat-of-arms for me." Amanda wrapped her arms around Skip's neck from behind and laid her soft cheek against his rough one.

"Thanks, I'll have to find a special place to hang this." Skip turned his head to give his wife a kiss.

"Oh, I have a place in the family room all picked out," Amanda informed him.

"Of course you do." Skip looked around the table at his family. "Thank you, everyone. This is the best birthday I've had in a very long time."

The streetlights were coming on by the time they pulled into the drive and began to unload the picnic things from the Wagoneer. In the cheerful confusion of putting everything away, Bob was able to co-opt the assistance of Jamie and Phillip in retrieving a couple of large items from his car.

"Skip, where do you want these?" He sure hoped Phillip didn't drop the smaller footlocker before they found a safe place to set it down.

Skip glanced quickly at the large overseas locker Bob was maneuvering into the house with Jamie's help. He reached out to catch the end of the footlocker just before Phillip could swing it into the side of the kitchen counter. "Gee, I don't know. Amanda?"

"Why don't you carry them into the family room for now?" Amanda suggested.

"Uncle Bob says the big one is called an overseas locker and it belonged to Grandfather Stetson. He used it all during the Second World War, when he wasn't on a battlefield or something. See, it has his name and rank right here on the sides and top." Jamie informed his grandmother excitedly. "Stetson, Matthew D. Major, then some numbers and letters and United States Army."

"Yes, Jamie. Your Grandfather West had one very much like this when he came home from the war. He was a Marine though, like your stepfather." Dotty ran her hand lightly across the faded stenciling on the top of the trunk.

"Dad and Mum used to keep this at the foot of their bed. Mum covered it up with some white lacy thing. She said it was quite ugly, but much too useful to get rid of." Skip sat down on the corner of the Army green locker. "I used to sit on it while they got ready to go out. Dad would always tell me to stop kicking it with my feet, but I liked the way it boomed—like a big bass drum." He tapped the side of the locker softly with his hand to demonstrate.

"The smaller one has your name on it, Dad. Stetson, Lee H." Phillip read quietly, picking up his stepfather's mood. "There's no rank or anything though."

“Because that one was Skip’s when he was a boy. When military dependents ship overseas, each person gets one of these lockers to hold his personal gear,” Bob explained.

“You had to fit all your stuff in there? That’s not very big!” Phillip narrowed his eyes as though he was imagining having to pack all his favorite belongings into something that size.

“Well, you could ship things overseas in other containers, but they were almost guaranteed to go missing or get broken if you did,” Skip complained. “It just wasn’t worth the risk. You were usually better off selling your best stuff to friends and then replacing it on base wherever you ended up next.”

“Which one are you going to open first, Dad?” Jamie was fingering the padlock on Matt’s locker. It was plain to see which one Jamie wanted to open first.

“I don’t know, fellas. It’s been a busy day and it’s getting kind of late,” Amanda spoke to Phillip and Jamie, but she was looking at her husband who was still sitting quietly on his father’s locker lost in thought.

“Oh, Mom, it’s not all that late and it’s still summer,” Phillip argued, though he was bordering on whine.

“Please, Mom. There’s no Sunday school tomorrow, so we can sleep in. We don’t have to be at church until 10,” Jamie pleaded openly.

“Well, what do you think, Lee?”

Bob admired the way that Amanda left the final decision up to Skip. They were his belongings after all.

Skip shrugged and stood up. “Why not open them tonight? I don’t even remember what’s inside these trunks, if I ever knew.”

“I have the keys to the padlocks in my carryon.” Bob bent over to rummage through his bag. Finding the keys, he turned to hand them to Skip only to discover Skip was already setting the padlock down on the coffee table.

“Umm, I already got this one unlocked,” Skip said. He tapped a lock pick against his thigh.

“Open it, Dad!” “Yeah, let’s see what’s inside!” The boys chorused together.

Skip raised the lid and gazed into the interior of the trunk for a long moment. With a sharp bang, he pushed the lid back so that it would remain open. He lifted a limp stuffed animal out and shook it at his uncle. “You told me this was lost!”

“Gee, I totally forgot that was in there.” Hot with embarrassment, Bob rushed on to explain his actions, “The psychiatrist said it would be for the best. I was worried the other kids would think you were a little strange, eight-years-old and taking a stuffed horse everywhere you went. He said you were fixated or something. For some reason, I couldn’t bring myself to throw it away like he said to, so I filched it out of your trunk after you went to sleep and stored it with your folks’ stuff.”

Skip just stood there for a long moment, absently stroking the black yarn mane of the well-worn spotted horse with his thumb and forefinger. "I knew I'd packed him. I put him in the very last thing, right on top. I knew I hadn't left him behind." He looked at his uncle. "Why? I did what you asked. I left him in my room when I went to school."

"Yeah, you did. But then you stopped going out to play. You just stayed in your room all the time. I was worried about you, Skip." How could he have forgotten that was in there?

Skip continued speaking as if to himself. "My father gave him to me. Usually, when he came back from a trip he'd bring me a small car or a book. I'd been bugging them for a pony for a long time. I wanted to be a cowboy. I had the hat. I had the guns and holster. All I needed was a horse. Dad explained that our backyard wasn't big enough for a pony, but he was working on a plan to get a bigger yard. Until then, I could ride this pony in my dreams every night. He tucked me and Pony in bed. His mustache tickled my cheek when he kissed me good night. Mum smelled like flowers. They were going out. They never came home again."

"Oh, God! Skip, I didn't realize, if I'd known—"

"How could you have known?" Skip interrupted him quietly. He raised his eyes meeting his uncle's gaze directly. "I couldn't explain it. I'm not sure I would have told you even if I'd known how." He stopped stroking the pony's mane with an embarrassed smile.

"Anyway, later on you got me a real pony. Remember?"

"I remember," Bob answered softly, grateful for his nephew's understanding. "In Cherbourg. You fell asleep in his stall every night for a week. You named him 'Pony.' I wasn't sure I'd done the right thing though. It broke your heart leaving him behind when we rotated back Stateside."

Skip smiled crookedly, "Better to have loved and lost, I guess." He gently laid the spotted horse down on the coffee table giving it a fond pat before he turned back to his father's trunk. He set aside the wooden tray and removed a khaki green old-style military hat and woolen tunic.

"Awesome! Your Dad's Army uniform?" said Phillip. Skip passed the tunic to Phillip who slipped it on and he set the hat on Jamie's head. The boys grinned.

Skip reached back into the trunk and withdrew an antique wooden chessboard. "Dad's chess set." He ran his hand lovingly across ebony and ivory inlay on top. He opened the shallow drawer and took out two hand-carved pieces—a black knight and an ivory queen.

"That set has been in the Stetson family since before the Civil War. Matt told me a story about two Stetson brothers, twins as it happens, who enlisted to fight in the War Between the States. One enlisted in the Army of the Confederate States of America and the older brother, who had gone to study law up north, enlisted in the Union Army." Bob looked around the room and saw rapt attention on every face.

"Well, the two boys wrote home as often as they could and each letter contained a chess move. Each one thought he was playing a game against his father, but in reality, their father was only moving the pieces on the board. The two brothers were playing one another."



“What happened, Uncle Bob?” demanded Phillip.

“Both young men survived the war and eventually made their way home to the family farm. Alec Stetson, the Union soldier, had been wounded—he lost his left arm. Kit Stetson had also been wounded and had his right foot amputated. Reunited with their family, they set aside their differences and worked the family farm side by side. They were the ones who built the big farmhouse and lived there together with their wives and children.”

“What happened to the letters?” Dotty wondered aloud.

“My grandfather found them in a trunk in the attic and donated them to the Smithsonian,” Skip answered with quiet pride.

“Wow! Can we transfer our game to this chess set, Dad?” Jamie asked softly.

“Yeah, I think we should. I think my Dad would like that a lot.” Skip replied immediately.

“You’re right, son. Nothing would have pleased Matt more. He and I always played on this set.” Bob smiled warmly at Jamie. “I’m glad that you enjoy playing chess. Maybe we can play a game before I leave.”

“I’m not very good, yet.” Jamie looked over at Skip. “I always lose.”

“But it’s taking a lot longer to beat you—you get better every time we play. It won’t be long before you’ll be beating me all the time,” Skip encouraged.

“I think I’d like to learn to play, Dad. Will you teach me?” Phillip touched the old chessboard with one finger.

“Of course, Phillip.” Skip handed the chess pieces to Jamie and the board to Phillip then he reached back into the locker.

A piece of lace the shade of rich cream was next. He offered that to Amanda. She stood and shook it out gently. “Your mother’s wedding veil. Oh Lee, it’s gorgeous!”

“A wedding veil?” Skip laughed out loud. “This was the white lacy thing Mum used to cover Dad’s trunk!”

Amanda glanced at her mother with laughter and tears in her eyes. She clasped the veil in her arms. “Lee, you know that I’m supposed to wear something old, something new, something borrowed, and something blue on my wedding day, don’t you?”

Skip looked surprised. “You’d wear my mother’s veil when we renew our vows in February?”

“I would love to.” She leaned forward and kissed him gently on the lips. “I love you, Lee Hamilton Stetson.”

Skip just shook his head and ducked quickly to look back into the trunk. “If this is what I think it is, you should unwrap it, Dotty.”

Dotty took the oddly shaped bundle and carefully peeled away the protective layers of old newspaper. “Oh, my! Lee, do you know what this is?” she asked in amazement.

“It’s my Mum’s teapot. She used it every afternoon,” Skip answered promptly.

“There should be some matching cups and saucers, too. I sure hope they didn’t get broken.” Bob moved to kneel beside his nephew. Together they placed more paper-wrapped parcels on the coffee table.

“Son, this is not just a teapot. This is fine Georgian porcelain. I’ll have to check some books at the library, but this could be extremely valuable as well as a priceless family legacy.” Dotty’s eyes were large as she turned the rose-patterned china teapot over and peered at the markings on the bottom.

“I think I remember Jenny saying something about it being her great-great-grandmother’s china. I know it was one of only a few Hamilton heirlooms that survived the Blitz.” Bob unwrapped the last item—a sugar bowl. “If I remember correctly the Stetson christening gown and some table linens are at the bottom of the trunk.”

“What’s in Dad’s trunk?” Phillip turned toward the smaller locker and rattled the padlock. He wasn’t very interested in tablecloths and dresses.

“Well, there are some old photo albums and mementos of Skip’s from when he was a kid. I didn’t know what else to do with them when he went off to Viet Nam, so I stuck them all in there.”

“Are there really pictures of Dad when he was a kid? What was he like when he was my age?” Phillip questioned excitedly.

“Well, he was a typical boy, I suppose.” Bob inserted the key into the lock and turned it easily. Lifting the lid, a maroon and white woolen jacket appeared first. “He liked playing sports and anything that moved—bikes, horses, then cars and planes. The faster, the better. And he didn’t like school.”

“Is that a varsity jacket?” Phillip tugged the garment out of the trunk and held it up against his chest. “You lettered in football!”

Skip just smiled and shrugged.

“He sure did! And it wasn’t easy either with the way we moved around so much. He should have lettered in more than one sport. But just about the time he’d have earned enough points to get his letter, I’d get transferred and he’d have to start all over again from scratch. He not only earned that letter his senior year, but he made the All-State High School team,” Bob bragged. He opened a scrapbook and pointed to a newspaper clipping. “He also set a Maryland State record for interceptions in a single season.”

“Wow!” the boys intoned reverently gazing at a much younger version of their stepfather grinning back at them from a yellowing sports column.

“Well, that’s enough of that,” Skip suggested briskly, starting to lower the lid of the smaller locker.

“Hold on, Dad. There’s lots more in there,” Phillip caught the lid before it could close and plucked out a stack of class pictures and report cards.

“I can’t believe you saved those things!” Skip protested turning pink.

“Of course, I saved them! My favorite is this one.” Bob held up a wallet-sized school picture of an eight-year-old boy with a white-blond crew cut and a tentative smile that

still displayed two missing front teeth. Sure enough, he was wearing a white button-down shirt and a blue tie. "But I like the one with the black eye, too." He handed that one to Dotty.

"How did you get a black eye, dear?" Amanda asked with feigned innocence.

"Um, I don't really remember all the details," Skip tried to evade. "I think it had something to do with a candy bar, a three-speed bike, and a girl with blonde pigtails."

Meanwhile Phillip had opened a manila envelope and slid out an old-fashioned handwritten report card. "Whoa, these are some grades, Dad. Sure makes me feel better about that C in math!" He passed the grade card to his brother.

Jamie's eyes grew large. "I don't get it. You're real smart. You know all about history and geography and you speak all those languages. How could you get C's and D's in school?"

Skip took the yellow, dog-eared card from his stepson with a sigh. "Well," he began. "I guess—"

"I think I can explain that, fellas," Amanda rode to his rescue. "Lee likes to figure out how things work and why things happened the way they did. He hates not knowing and he likes finding answers and discovering the patterns in things. Because he is so smart, he can learn just about anything he wants to learn. The problem is, once he's learned all about something, he doesn't necessarily think it's all that important to show anyone else how much he knows. Lee likes to keep what he knows to himself until he really needs to use the information. I think that's one reason he became a spy."

"Intelligence operative," Skip muttered under his breath.

"Huh, I never thought about it that way, but you're absolutely right, Amanda. Do you know he figured out how to do multiplication before they ever taught it to him in school, but would he do his homework papers and turn them in? Not on your life! It was always the homework assignments that sunk him—he passed every test they gave him without breaking a sweat! What was it they called him? An underachiever—he could do it, he just didn't. It used to really make me nuts. I thought he was just trying to get my goat." Bob looked at his nephew as though he was seeing him for the first time.

"If I had to do it all over again, I'd do things a lot differently, Phillip. Your Mom's right, I didn't care about grades or school and, to be perfectly honest, I did get a kick out of making my uncle a little crazy." He avoided looking at his uncle. "If I could go back, I'd work harder and get better grades—not to prove anything to the Colonel or to my teachers, but just because I can." Skip shook his head as he flipped the grade card back into the trunk. "Sorry, sir. I know I was a load of trouble."

"You were a regular pain in my butt most of the time," Bob told him sincerely. "But you were my pain in the butt and I wouldn't have traded you for any other pain in the butt."

Skip laughed and met his eyes this time. "Yeah, well. Right back at you."

Dotty and Amanda just rolled their eyes.

“Uncle Bob, there’s something I’ve been meaning to ask you.” Jamie busied himself sorting through the papers from the locker separating them into neat piles. “Why do you always call him Skip when his name is Lee?”

“Do you want the reason I gave him or the real reason?” Bob asked fiddling with a small brass baseball trophy.

Jamie and Phillip exchanged a glance. “Both,” answered Phillip.

Bob looked at his nephew as he answered his great-nephew’s question. “The reason I gave Skip was that every time I went looking for him to do his homework or some chore around our quarters, I’d find he’d skipped out on me.”

“And the real reason was,” Phillip prompted.

“In the Stetson family, it was a long-standing tradition to name first-born sons in a particular way. The boy was given his grandfather’s first name and his mother’s maiden name. So, my half-brother, Lee’s father, was named for his grandfather, Matthew, and his middle name was my mother’s maiden name, Davis. Skip was named for his grandfather, Lee, and given his mother’s maiden name, Hamilton, for a middle name. You can see the problem here, can’t you?”

“Sure!” exclaimed Jamie.

“No,” said Phillip scratching his head.

“Well, the problem was you could have two Matthew’s or Lee’s or Christopher’s in the same family at the same time. So the youngster was always called Skip while his grandfather was living. Because the name always ‘skipped’ a generation,” Bob explained to Phillip and Jamie, but he was really talking to Skip.

“Oh, I get it now.” Phillip smiled at his step-dad. “You’re Skip because you were named for your grandfather. I was named for my grandfather, too. Granddad West wasn’t alive when I was born, so it wasn’t confusing to call me Phillip.”

“But Grandfather Stetson died when my father was seven, so my Dad always called me Lee.” Skip told Jamie and Phillip, but Bob knew he was really talking to him. “There was no need to call me Skip.”

Bob sighed. There was no use trying to slip something past his nephew. The boy came by his intelligence honestly, from both sides of his family. “That’s right. I was the one who started calling you Skip—after your father died. You see, every time I called you ‘Lee’, I heard your father’s voice.” He paused and took a deep breath. He was close to losing control. “It hurt too much, at first. Later on, I guess it had just become a habit.”

“But Dad doesn’t like to be called Skip. He likes to be called Lee,” Jamie observed with the blunt honesty of a child.

“I suppose I don’t really mind it so much. Now that I know the real reason, that is.” Skip said thoughtfully. “It’s getting late. Let’s stash most of this stuff back in the trunks. Tomorrow your Mom and Grandmother can tell us what gets put in the attic and what we’ll keep out to use.” Everyone pitched in and soon the floor of the family room was tidy once more.

"I have one more thing to give you, Skip." Bob reached into his pocket and pulled out an antique key ring. He hadn't been certain the time was right, but seeing Skip with his family had convinced him that Skip was as ready as he'd ever be. He placed the keys in his nephew's open hand. "This is the key to the farmhouse and this one is to the creek-house." He touched two old-fashioned heavy iron keys in turn. Then he separated out several shiny silver keys. "These are the keys to the stock barn, the stable, and the sheds."

Skip looked at him in amazement. "The farmhouse? The barns and the stable?" he repeated as he took the keys. "You still own that property? I thought you would have sold it years ago."

"It wasn't mine to sell. It's Stetson land. Has been for over a hundred-fifty years. Your grandmother left everything to you, son. I leased out the fields to a neighbor and he's kept an eye on things for me. The house has been closed up for thirty-years, but I replaced the roof on the house and the barn a few years back."

"Slate Creek Farm," Skip whispered and caught his wife's eye.

"It's an hour or so west of D.C. Dairy farms and horses, mostly," Bob explained to the rest of the family.

"Maybe we should go check it out?" Skip suggested to the room at large.

Dotty stood and shooed Phillip and Jamie toward the stairs and bedtime. "I think a drive in the country after church sounds delightful."

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Lee stopped the Wagoneer in front of the metal farm gate blocking the rutted and overgrown dirt lane. A creek chuckled quietly as it ran along the lane and under an arched bridge leading back to the county road. A small stone house, a cottage really, perched on the banks of the creek beneath a canopy of oak leaves.

"Huh," exclaimed Jamie leaning out the window. "I thought it'd be bigger."

"It is bigger," Bob assured him with a smile. "That's the creek-house. It's even older than the farmhouse. When I was a boy, the handyman and his family lived there."

Without a word, Lee hopped out of the driver's seat and unlocked the gate. Amanda drove the Jeep through the gate and then slid back into the passenger seat. Lee closed the gate behind the car and regained the driver's seat. Shifting into four-wheel drive, they bounced their way slowly up the washboard lane. At last, they came around a curve. The trees thinned out and they found themselves gazing up a gentle rise at a gabled field stone and clapboard farmhouse. Faded green shutters bracketed the windows and a wide porch wrapped around three sides of the first floor. Fed by the little creek which appeared to flow down out of the foothills in the distance, a still pond reflected fluffy white clouds in its sky-blue surface. The tin roofs of more buildings peeked from behind the tall chimneys of the old white house.

"Now that's more like it," Phillip shouted. "Can we go inside?"

"Why not?" Lee jingled the house keys and grinned at the boys. "Let's go exploring!" He drove the Wagoneer into the small gravel-covered area behind the farmhouse and

everyone jumped out. The screen door on the back porch creaked like something out of a late-night horror film, but the lock on the weathered wooden door turned smoothly and they all trooped through the mud room into the big farm kitchen.

“Will you look at this, Amanda?” Dotty cried, turning in a circle in the center of the room. “A slate floor, bird’s-eye maple cabinets and a stone sink! And this deal table. Why, my Grandmother Conway used to have one just like this in her kitchen.”

“The Stetson brothers did all the cabinetry and masonry themselves. You should see the built-ins in the pantry. And the stonework and carving on the fireplaces—it’s a lost art these days. The bones of this house are still rock-solid after a hundred years!” Bob slapped the nearest wainscoted wall with pride.

Amanda dutifully admired each feature, but kept a weather eye on her husband at the same time. He had crossed the kitchen in three long strides and stopped in an open doorway. He started when she laid a light hand on his shoulder. “Lee?”

“It’s all still here.” Lee stared into the dimly lit bedroom at an old four-poster bed and an antique dresser white with dust.

“Of course, it is.” Bob joined them in the doorway. “I didn’t know what to do with it all and there were so many other more important details to be dealt with at the time. It’s just her things, Skip.”

“I came home from school and did my chores just like usual. I knew she was tired a lot and I didn’t want to be any trouble.” He sighed. “It was getting dark and I was kind of hungry so I went in to ask if I could have a snack. She wouldn’t wake up. I ran all the way to the McCullough’s.” Lee shook his head. “Maybe if I’d tried to wake her when I first got home. . .”

“She’d been sick for a long time. She kept it from everyone close to her. Well, Matt might have known. Could be that’s why he and Jenny were planning on moving out here. I sure didn’t know. There was nothing you could have done, Skip. It was her heart.” Bob patted his nephew’s back awkwardly.

“Yeah, I suppose you’re right. Hey! Phillip, let me check those stairs before you go charging up them.”

Shooting a guilty grin at his stepfather, Phillip backed out of a door that opened onto a set of very narrow wooden steps. “Are the rest of the bedrooms up this way?”

“Yes, but those are the back stairs. There’s another set in the front of the house that are wider and better lit. Let’s use those.” Lee led the way out of the kitchen into the main hallway. “The parlor and dining room are that way,” he indicated with a gesture, “and the sitting room and office are over here.”

The main stairs were much wider and guarded by an elegantly curved wooden baluster draped with cobwebs. A large window with grimy jewel-toned panes graced the turn of the first landing.

“Whoa!” Jamie sneezed three times as he followed his family upstairs. “This place needs a serious spring cleaning!”

At the top of the stairs, doors opened on both sides of a wide hallway. The runner down the center was likely decorated with cabbage roses, but it was hard to be certain.

“How many bedrooms are there, Uncle Bob?” Phillip asked.

“There are four bedrooms and two master suites upstairs. At one time, three generations shared this home, remember. Each master bedroom has a dressing room and a smaller room used as an infant nursery. There’s two bathrooms, one on each floor of the house. A bathing room upstairs in a farmhouse was quite an innovation at the time.” Bob chuckled. “Can you imagine Saturday night baths when there were fourteen children and six adults living in this house?”

Dotty raised her eyebrows at the image Bob had drawn. “I sure wouldn’t have wanted to carry all that water upstairs.”

“Which was your room, Dad?” Phillip opened the door beside him and peeked in.

Lee walked in the direction of the backstairs and opened a door. “This was my room.” The rest of the family trooped after him into the spacious bedroom. The simple furnishings included an iron bedstead, a white bedside table and a mirrored dresser. A cushioned window seat looked out over the leaf-strewn porch roof. The pond glistened in the sunlight.

“Cool! Look at all the old books on these shelves. Were they yours?” Jamie questioned as he blew the dust off one of the volumes so he could read the title on the spine.

“They were Matt’s,” Bob said stroking a finger down the cover of Robinson Crusoe with a wistful smile.

“I wonder,” Lee began. Pulling back the dusty rag rug beside the bed, he got out his pocketknife and inserted it between two wide pine floorboards. With a loud click, one popped up. Lee smiled as he reached into the dark opening and extracted a grubby wooden cigar box. “I’ll be darned!”

“What’s inside?”

Amanda and Dotty exchanged a resigned glance as the boys went to their knees beside Lee, oblivious to the filthy floor in their curiosity about the contents of the mysterious box.

Raising the lid slowly, Lee revealed a slingshot, a roll of caps, a handful of tin soldiers, a blue feather, several copper pennies—a little boy’s treasures.

“What are these little clay balls?” Phillip asked as he picked one up and rolled it around in the palm of his hand.

“Civil War musket balls,” his stepfather answered quickly. “Or so I like to think. They’re the right period anyway. I looked them up in a book in the library. I found them when I was helping my Grandmother in the orchard one day. Since there wasn’t a battle fought in this immediate vicinity, it’s more likely that they were used by some Stetson out hunting. But I used to imagine that a Confederate officer got separated from his battalion and made his last stand right in our cherry orchard.”

Bob laughed out loud. "The only battles fought in that orchard were between Matt and I! And we used cherry pits for ammo."

"Hey, up there! Y'all come on down here right now. Y'all are trapassin' and I won't have it. I'm armed, so no funny business, you hear?"

Lee rose to his feet, smoothly drawing his gun out of his ankle holster with one hand and passing the cigar box to Phillip with the other.

"Skip, I'm sure it's just one of the McCullough's. They keep an eye on the place for me since I've leased the fields to them." Bob placed his hand on Lee's forearm to restrain him.

"I sure hope so," Lee smiled grimly, then looked at each of his family in turn. "You all stay here. I mean it, Amanda! Stay here!" He said this slowly spacing the last two words carefully and looking right at his wife. He chambered a round and slipped his handgun into his belt at his back.

Lee paced quietly out of the bedroom and hugged the wall at the head of the main staircase. "I'm here and I'm coming down," he called. He raised his hands shoulder-high and moved slowly down the stairs.

"Sounded to me like there was more than one of you up there," the stocky farmer growled. Clad in faded jeans, a red 'gimme' cap, and scuffed work boots, he held an over-and-under shotgun with relaxed familiarity.

Lee forced himself not to look back at the top landing where his entire family had gathered. "You know, I'm not the one 'trapassin' here, you are. This is Stetson land, not McCullough."

The freckled face broke into a sunny grin. "Stetson land, it is. And you're claimin' to be a Stetson?"

"Sure am, Mickey."

"Lee? Lee Stetson? Well, I'll be gol-durned. It's about time you showed up here-abouts! At least, this time I've got you out-gunned," he returned with a laugh and a shake of his double-gauge.

"Nope, I don't think so, friend." Lee pulled his automatic weapon from behind his back and smiled broadly.

"Well, heck." Shaking his head, Mickey McCullough broke his shotgun and Lee cleared his chamber in response.

"Okay, all clear. Come on down!" He called to his family as he replaced his gun in his belt and bounded the rest of the way down the stairs.

Amanda's eyes widened as she took in the scene at the bottom of the staircase. Her husband had been lifted off his feet in a bear hug and swung in a complete circle. No mean feat when you considered that Lee was over six feet tall. "Lee?"

He would have answered her right away, but he was still trying to recover his breath after being dropped back onto his feet and thumped heartily on the back.

"Colonel Clayton! If I'd known it was you, I never would've come on up the lane!"



“Sorry, Mick. I tried to call before we left Arlington, but I guess you all were still at services.” Bob took Mick McCullough’s hand and shook it warmly.

“I think introductions are in order,” Lee suggested in an attempt to regain some control of the situation. “Dotty West, I’d like you to meet Angus Donal McCullough. He was my best friend when I was six. Dotty is my mother-in-law, Mick.”

“Mighty pleased to meet you, Miz West.” Mick doffed his cap before he took Dottie’s slender hand into his wide callused grip.

“And this is my wife, Amanda.” Amanda smiled warmly as she took Mick’s hand in turn.

“And we’re his sons. I’m Phillip and that’s Jamie.” Lee raised an eyebrow at the form of Phillip’s introduction, but didn’t elaborate. Mick solemnly shook hands with both boys.

“So, are you all thinking of moving back here?” Mick inquired hopefully. “Sure would be nice to have near neighbors again.”

“Well,” Lee began.

“Moving here would be so cool! There’re enough bedrooms that Jamie and I could each have our own rooms,” Phillip proclaimed with enthusiasm.

“Yeah,” Jamie agreed immediately. “And the yard’s big enough that we could finally get a dog. A real big one!”

“A dog! Why, when Miz Clayton ran this place she had two big dogs, a fat old ginger cat, some milk cows and even two horses.” Mick had obviously caught the boys’ enthusiasm.

“And one real mean Billy goat,” Lee added shaking his head at the memory. “Hey guys, we haven’t even talked seriously about moving.”

“Well, I call dibs on Dad’s old room,” Phillip cried.

“No way!” Jamie protested. “I’m the one with all the books! I should get the room with the book shelves, not you.”

“Boys! Boys, no sense in fighting over who gets which room when your parents haven’t even decided to move here yet. Let’s go see what’s in all those interesting buildings outside.” Dotty knew that with Jamie and Phillip, distraction was often the better part of valor.

“Oh, yeah! Can we, Mom?” Phillip asked. Both boys turned hopeful eyes on their mother.

“Yes, Phillip, you may look inside the other buildings as long as an adult goes with you.”

“We’ll see that they stay out of trouble. Won’t we, Dotty?” Bob offered Dotty his arm and escorted her in the boys’ wake.

“Well, I reckon I’ll be getting along myself.” Mick punched Lee in the arm and picked up his shotgun. “Good to see you again, ol’ buddy. You really should stop by the house on your way out. You know Gran will never forgive you if you leave without saying hey. Mom and Dad will be glad to see you, too. And I want you to meet my wife and kids.

Besides, Gran baked peach pies for Sunday dessert,” Mick threw in to sweeten the deal.

“I don’t know, Mick. We don’t want to impose,” Lee temporized.

“Of course, we’ll stop by,” Amanda answered at the same time. “But we really don’t expect you to have enough pie to feed this small army.”

“You don’t know Gran,” Mick and Lee replied in unison, then grinned at each other like a couple of kids.

“You win, Mick. We’ll stop by, but tell your folks not to go to any bother.” Lee wrapped one arm around Amanda’s waist as they waved to Mick from the back porch.

Amanda turned toward Lee and wrapped her arms around his waist. “You do realize that, when we were house hunting and you were talking about horses and backyard softball games, this is what you had in mind all along.”

Lee kissed her lightly. “You’re right, as usual.”

“Lee, all this house needs is a family to love it again.”

“Amanda, this house needs a lot more than a family and a little love. It needs another bathroom or maybe two, which will probably mean new plumbing and new wiring, a new water heater and a new furnace. It needs a whole lot of work just to make it livable again.”

“True, but when you consider the cost of buying a home this large and with this kind of acreage, we could refurbish this one for a lot less, I’ll bet.” Amanda entreated quietly.

“You really like this house that much?” Lee asked. He was surprised by how much moving out here appealed to him. “It’s a heck of a commute from the city.”

“True, but with the way you drive, it won’t take us all that long,” she teased, tickling his ribs for emphasis. “And it does have all the space we’ll need, plenty of room for mother, the boys, and any other little Stetsons that may come along.”

Lee’s arms suddenly tightened around her waist. “Any other little Stetsons,” he repeated slowly and carefully.

“Yes, Lee. I’d like to have another baby.” Amanda studied his face. It was impossible to tell what he was thinking.

“You want to have a baby?” Lee sounded amazed by the possibility. “With me?”

“Yes, dear. A baby. With you. Truthfully, I think a little boy with dimples and eyes that can’t decide whether they’re green or grey would be delightful. What do you think?”

For a moment, all Lee could do was stare at his wife. He had to clear his throat twice before he could respond. “I think having a baby with you would be wonderful, but I never thought...I mean, we already have two boys who are almost grown and you’ve just begun to establish yourself at the Agency. You’d have to come out of the field while you’re pregnant and then someone will have to take care of the baby...” Amanda stopped him with a gentle hand on his lips.

“Yes, having another child will complicate things. But then, we’re good at complicated. We’ll work things out together. I know it seems a little soon to be thinking about babies, but, as mother keeps reminding me, I’m not twenty-two anymore. If we’re going to have a child of our own, we’d better get started right away.”

Lee smiled. “Okay. But I really think we should wait until we get home.”

“Oh, you!” Amanda slapped him on the arm and started to turn away.

Lee caught her before she could escape and pulled her up against the length of his body. He kissed her breathless and then leaned back to tap her on the tip of her nose. “I think I’d rather have a little girl with big brown eyes and a cute nose, if it’s all the same to you!”

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He should have been sound asleep an hour ago. It had been a long and exciting day. The boys had spent the entire drive home campaigning to move to Slate Creek Farm. Even Dotty had gotten into the act. She’d only mentioned “that cute creek-house” a half-a-dozen times. The Colonel hadn’t helped any with all his humorous stories about growing up on the farm. To tell the truth, he’d found the stories pretty interesting. He’d never heard any of those stories while he was growing up. He conceded defeat with a soft sigh. Gently untangling himself from Amanda’s embrace, Lee stood up and hunted for the pair of khaki’s he’d left crumpled on the floor beside the bed.

“Lee? Can’t you sleep, sweetheart?” Amanda turned over with a yawn to check the clock. “Let me fix you some warm milk.”

He fastened his trousers and turned back to gaze fondly at his very sexy, very naked wife. He’d never imagined making a baby could be so much fun. “No, don’t bother. I’ll fix my own drink and go sit out on the patio for a while. You go back to sleep.” He leaned over to place a tender kiss on her forehead. Making his way over to his desk, he removed two items from a box in the bottom drawer and closed the bedroom door softly behind him.

He hadn’t taken more than a couple sips of his scotch before the back door opened.

“Skip? Couldn’t you sleep?”

“Nope. Decided a night-cap might do the trick. Can I get you something, sir?” Lee hadn’t really expected to be able to sneak by his uncle. Especially since he hadn’t really tried to.

“I already helped myself to a scotch on the rocks. You always keep the good stuff.” The Colonel settled into a chair with a sigh. “Nice night.”

Lee puffed on his cheroot a couple of times before answering. “Yeah, muggy though.”

“Is that a cigar you’re smoking?” The Colonel sniffed audibly and leaned forward in his chair. “And are there anymore where that one came from?”

Lee chuckled as he lit the second cheroot from his own and handed it to his uncle.

“Sure. Supposed to keep the skeeters away.”

“Mmmm, Havana, hand-rolled. God bless all the little skeeters.” The Colonel blew a perfect smoke-ring. “I have a friend who passes me a few of these whenever he can.”

“I know. Brigadier General Hopkins.” In the darkness, Lee smiled and waited.

“What do you mean, you know? Are you keeping tabs on me? Because if you are, I certainly don’t appreciate it at all and I can tell you. . .”

“Knowing things is my job.” Lee could tell by the Colonel’s quick indrawn breath that he was about to let loose with yet another lecture. “I’m not keeping tabs on you, it just so happens that I have, on certain occasions, traveled to certain countries which are off-limits to most American citizens and, when I do, I pick up certain items for certain people. I do keep tabs on where those items end up. Of course, I can’t really say what I pick up or for whom.”

“Hmmpf,” was the Colonel’s only response. Perversely, Lee enjoyed the awkward silence.

“I didn’t come all this way to debate career choices with you,” the Colonel grumbled.

“I know that.” Lee puffed on his cheroot and then inquired quietly, “So do I pass inspection or am I going on report?”

“I didn’t come here on some kind of inspection tour.” His tone was gruff and abrupt.

“So, what you’re telling me is that you had no better way to spend a free weekend than on a sofa bed in a den in Arlington, Virginia?” Lee allowed his skepticism free rein.

The Colonel left his seat and paced restlessly to the edge of the patio. “Okay, I confess. I was checking up on you, but not for the reasons you may think. You have to admit all this,” he waved his arm in a broad gesture, “a suburban house complete with a white picket fence and an instant family is not exactly what you and I are accustomed to. After dragging you from pillar to post all around the globe, I know better than anyone that your childhood wasn’t exactly typical. I wanted to be sure you were fitting in all right—that you were making the adjustment to normal family life.”

Lee chuckled softly. “If I learned anything by living in San Diego one year and in the Sahara the next, it was how to fit into any group and how to adjust to almost any circumstance.” He reflected for a moment. “This has been a little more stressful as transitions go. Probably because I can’t just pack up and move on, if things don’t work out. I’m in this one for good.”

“You look like you’re settling in pretty well for an old globe-trotter. Phillip and Jamie seem real comfortable with you. Dotty can’t say enough nice things about you. And it’s obvious,” he cleared his throat. “Well, Amanda is a very special lady and she loves you a lot. You’re a very lucky man. It’s good to see you happy. That’s all I ever wanted.” The Colonel resumed his seat and his smoking.

Lee was speechless. He measured the length of the ash on his cigar for a few moments in hopes of recovering his composure. Happy? He hadn’t been completely sure the word was even in the Colonel’s vocabulary, let alone that he related the concept to his nephew. Lee tapped his ash into the empty soup can he stashed beneath his chair and passed it over to his uncle. “Yeah, I am happy. No, happy doesn’t go far enough.” He



And on a day we meet to walk the line  
And set the wall between us once again.  
We keep the wall between us as we go. 15  
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.  
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls  
We have to use a spell to make them balance:  
"Stay where you are until our backs are turned!"  
We wear our fingers rough with handling them. 20  
Oh, just another kind of outdoor game,  
One on a side. It comes to little more:  
He is all pine and I am apple-orchard.  
My apple trees will never get across  
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him. 25  
He only says, "Good fences make good neighbors."  
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder  
If I could put a notion in his head:  
"Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it  
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows. 30  
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know  
What I was walling in or walling out,  
And to whom I was like to give offence.  
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,  
That wants it down!" I could say "Elves" to him, 35  
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather  
He said it for himself. I see him there,  
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top  
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.  
He moves in darkness as it seems to me, 40  
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.  
He will not go behind his father's saying,  
And he likes having thought of it so well  
He says again, "Good fences make good neighbors."

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