

Before the First Time

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Monday, August 22, 1955 was a beautiful summer day in Washington DC. The city had shed its usual summer mugginess, making the weather much more bearable. Jennifer Stetson had taken an all too rare day off from work and was spending it in Rock Creek Park with her five year old son Lee. He was going to start school soon and she wanted to take advantage of this chance to spend time with him.

Unfortunately Jennifer was finding it hard to leave work mentally. She was uncharacteristically worried about their current case. She sat at a picnic table, gazing up at the blue sky but not really seeing the fluffy white clouds slowly passing overhead.

She sighed as she recalled her conversation with Matthew the previous evening. He had been talking again about having another baby. Having grown up herself without any siblings, Jennifer agreed it would be good for Lee to have a brother or sister. However she just wasn't sure of the wisdom of having another child given their line of work. She worried so much about Lee now that he was getting older. It had all seemed so simple when he was an infant.

But now Lee was starting to ask questions. They had in no uncertain terms made their office in the second basement off limits to him, but his curiosity was bound to grow as he got older. How do you explain to a child about national security and 'need to know'?

Maybe she should retire once the Blackthorne case was over and just be a housewife. She thought of the other women in her neighbourhood. They all seemed contented with normal, safe lives. So why wasn't she?

Her mind drifted back to that night years earlier when Matthew had first recruited her. Who would have thought a random encounter with a stranger would turn her life upside down? What if she had refused to take that letter from him? She shook her head. That was preposterous. She and Matthew were meant to be together. She couldn't imagine being married to anyone else. And she loved her job - another thing that took her totally by surprise.

She certainly hadn't planned on a career in counter-espionage when she had enrolled in prep school. Nothing in her sheltered upbringing in a small English village had prepared her for life as a spy. She remembered with a smile the day she had told her parents that she had fallen in love with an American, was going to marry him and move across the ocean. She hadn't known whether to laugh or cry at the look of shock on her poor mother's face. It had been difficult enough for her parents to have their only child move so far away. What would they have said if she had told them the whole truth - that Matthew was an Army Intelligence agent and was getting her a job with him?

She had written letters of explanation for her parents just in case. They were both quite elderly now and living in a nursing home, Jennifer having been an unexpected blessing late in their marriage. She was glad she had taken Lee to see them the previous summer. She didn't know how much, if anything, Lee would remember of the trip, but her parents had enjoyed seeing their grandson.

She had also been writing a journal for Lee. She planned to add to it throughout the years. It would be ready someday when his questions grew more insistent. They'd have to tell him the truth eventually.

Matthew thought she was being a bit paranoid about the whole thing but she couldn't help but worry sometimes. It wasn't the safest line of work they were in, after all. What if something happened to one of them or, God forbid, both. Just two months earlier a good friend of theirs had been killed when he had been ambushed at a supposedly safe drop site.

She shivered. It was this Blackthorne case - she was letting it get to her, that's all. Another couple of weeks and they'd have it wrapped up. Then they could go on with their lives.

In the meantime it was a beautiful summer day and she was wasting it obsessing about things she couldn't change. She looked over to where Lee ran around playing with a soccer ball. At least they had been successful in giving him a normal childhood so far.

As she watched a small brown and white dog ran up barking excitedly. It darted around Lee's legs, trying futilely to grasp the soccer ball in its jaws. Lee laughed and stopped running. He started to pet the dog and laughed again when it licked his face.

Jennifer walked over to him. "Who's your new friend?" she asked as she knelt down beside him and petted the dog.

"I don't know. He just ran up." Lee looked up at her with pleading eyes. "Mummy, can we keep him?"

"I'm sure he belongs to someone. Let's see if we can find his owner."

Jennifer picked up the soccer ball and started to walk in the direction the dog had come from, with Lee and the puppy following behind. As soon as they walked over the crest of the hill, they saw a blond woman walking along with a dark haired girl. "Pinto! Pinto!" the girl called. She broke into a smile as she saw them. The dog ran over to her, barking.

"This must be your dog," Jennifer greeted the little girl as they walked up.

"Yes, this is Pinto. He's my best friend."

Jennifer smiled at the girl's mother. "Lee's been asking his father and me to get him a puppy. We're thinking about it."

The blond woman smiled back. "Thanks so much for bringing him back. I'm Dotty by the way."

"Jennifer."

Dotty pointed a short distance away to where a blanket and a picnic basket sat under a tree. "Would you like to join us for a snack?" When Jennifer hesitated, she added, "To say thanks for bringing Pinto back."

"That would be very nice," Jennifer replied.

As they walked along, the little girl looked up at Jennifer with big brown eyes. "Thank you for bringing Pinto back. I thought he had runned away forever."

Jennifer's heart melted as she looked down at the little girl. Maybe Matthew was right. She would love to have a daughter. "What's your name?" she asked.

"Amanda."

Dotty and Jennifer sat down on the blanket and watched the two children playing. Lee found a small branch and the two of them amused themselves by throwing it for Pinto to retrieve. At least that was their plan. Most of the time, one or the other of them would end up bringing back the stick, demonstrating to the dog how it was done.

"I think Pinto's got them pretty well trained," Dotty laughed.

"I wish I could have half as much success getting Lee to pick up his playthings."

"I know what you mean," Dotty said. She poured them each a cup of coffee from a thermos. Taking a sip, she leaned back, enjoying the sunshine. "What a beautiful day. It's such a nice change from last week's humidity."

"I know," Jennifer agreed. "I love Washington but I do miss summertime in England."

"When did you move here?" Dotty asked.

"After the war," Jennifer replied vaguely. "I had joined up with the WRNS in 1941 and was working in London. Matthew, my husband was stationed there as well. That's where we met."

"That must have been something, living in London, during the Blitz."

"Unbelievable at times. After all the air raids and shortages, it was like coming to the Promised Land when we moved here." Jennifer looked around at the peaceful park setting. The war seemed like a lifetime ago.

"Did you have any family here already?" Dotty knew she shouldn't ask so many personal questions, but her innate curiosity once again got the best of her.

"No, my parents are still back in the village where I grew up. I didn't know a soul over here," Jennifer laughed. "Except Matthew of course. Luckily he was worth the move."

"Do you miss England?"

"Sometimes," Jennifer replied thoughtfully. "But Washington is my home now. My parents are quite elderly and I don't have any brothers or sisters. Matthew doesn't have any close family either, except a half-brother who's still in the Air Force. So it's just the three of us."

They were interrupted by the arrival of Lee and Amanda, both tired and wanting juice and cookies. As they enjoyed their snack, a 53 Chevy pulled into the nearby parking lot.

"Daddy's here!" Lee exclaimed immediately. "There's our car."

Jennifer looked up, startled to see her husband get out of their car. "Lee and his cars," she said. "That was his first word you know."

She stood up and waved at Matthew, who walked over to them.

"Dotty, this is my husband, Matthew Stetson." Jennifer introduced them. "Matthew, this is Dotty..."

"West," Dotty supplied, getting up and shaking his hand.

"Nice to meet you," he said politely, but she got the impression his mind was somewhere else entirely. "Could you excuse us for a moment, please?"

Jennifer and Matthew took a few steps away and began to speak in low tones. Dotty watched them, earnestly talking about something. They certainly made an attractive couple - Jennifer with her dark beauty and Matthew tall and handsome, looking very dashing with his moustache. He seemed to be worried about something.

After a few minutes, Jennifer walked back over. "I've got to get going," she apologized. "Something's come up at work. Come on, Lee, say goodbye and thank you."

"Thank you for the cookies," Lee said shyly. He turned to Amanda. "Thank you for letting me play with Pinto."

"You're welcome," Dotty told the two of them. "I hope we run into you again sometime."

She watched as the family of three walked back to their car, got in and drove away. Jennifer seemed like a very nice person, someone she would like to get to know better. She wondered if their paths would in fact ever cross again.



September 19, 1955

"Daddy, Daddy, Daddy!"

Frank West was barely inside the front door when his daughter flung herself at him, her faithful shadow Pinto close on her heels. He dropped his briefcase and the evening paper to the floor and scooped her up in his arms. "Hi, Panda. What did you do today?"

"I made you a picture at school." She struggled to get back down.

He set her down on the floor and she tugged at his hand, pulling him into the kitchen.

"Hello, darling." His wife Dotty came over and kissed him on the cheek. "Did you have a good day?"

"Work was fine, but the traffic out of DC was a mess. That's why I'm late."

"See, Daddy." Amanda pulled him over to the table where she had a large brightly coloured paper spread out. "That's Mommy and that's me." She pointed to two stick figures in turn. "We're walking home from school."

"And what's that?" he asked, indicating a large green glob dominating the other half of the picture.

"That's the dragon that followed us home yesterday. He was going to eat us but Pinto scared him away," Amanda said in all seriousness.

"I didn't know there were any dragons in Arlington," Frank said dubiously, trying to hide his smile.

Amanda nodded her head vigorously, her dark curls bobbing up and down. "That's why I need a new bike. I have to be able to ride fast so I can get away from the dragons."

"What about your mom?"

"Oh Daddy," Amanda sighed patiently. "She's bigger than me. She can run faster."

"Well, we'll see. Why don't you and Pinto go play in the backyard until supper? I just checked and there are no dragons out there."

Frank and Dotty exchanged amused glances as Amanda headed out the back door.

"Dragons, huh?" he said with a laugh. "You've got to give her points for originality if nothing else."

"You know, she gets this overactive imagination of hers from your side of the family."

"Sure, this from the woman whose Uncle Iggy left his family last year to join a cult and become a wizard," he said with a smile.

"Don't remind me." Dotty rolled her eyes. "I just hope you find this as amusing when Amanda's in her thirties and still telling these outrageous stories."

"I'm sure she'll outgrow it. When's dinner ready?"

"Fifteen minutes. Don't worry you've got plenty of time to relax and read your paper."

Frank retrieved the newspaper from the front hall and sat down at the dining room table. "Want the sports section?" he teased. "I think the Brooklyn Dodgers might actually go the distance this year and win the World Series."

Dotty made a face as she moved Amanda's picture aside and set the plates on the table. "You say that every year, dear and they've never won yet."

Frank's tone grew more serious as he glanced over the front page. "Looks like Peron is going to have to pay the piper at last. The military coup is gaining momentum. Argentina's turning into a real mess."

"I can't help but feel a bit sorry for him," Dotty said. "He's the one whose wife died of cancer a few years ago, isn't he?"

"Yes, but I wouldn't shed too many tears for him. The man turned his elected government into what amounts to a fascist state. He's been little more than a ruthless dictator this past year." He continued to browse through the paper. "Now if you want to feel bad about someone, a young couple was killed in a hit and run accident last night in DC."

"What kind of person would just leave the scene of an accident?" Dotty said indignantly. She glanced at the paper as she put down the silverware. The picture of the accident victims caught her eye and she reached for the paper. She quickly scanned the accompanying text for their names. Matthew and Jennifer Stetson. "Stetson," she mused aloud. "Now why does that name sound so familiar? Oh my gosh!"

"You knew them?" Frank asked, puzzled. He didn't recognize the names.

"I met her a few weeks ago," Dotty said slowly. "I took Amanda to Rock Creek Park for a picnic and we met Jennifer and her little boy. She was such a lovely person and so friendly." Tears welled up in her eyes as she thought back to their conversation.

"I guess he wasn't in the car at the time of the accident." Frank took the paper from her hands and looked through the article. "It says they have a five year old son, but he wasn't with them."

"That poor little boy," Dotty said.

The sound of a pot boiling over brought Dotty back to her surroundings. She turned back to the stove to finish her dinner preparations. As she stirred the gravy, she couldn't help

but let her thoughts drift back to the young woman she had met and whose life had been cut so tragically short.

Frank looked up to see a few tears rolling down her cheeks. He got up and put his arms around her. "Honey, you barely knew her."

"I know, it's just so sad. And her poor little boy. He's lost both parents now."

"I'm sure he'll be fine. There'll be someone to take care of him."

Dotty shook her head. "Jennifer mentioned she didn't have any close family here in the States." She turned to find comfort in her husband's arms. "I'm okay," she said after a minute. "Why don't you get Amanda in from the backyard? Dinner is just about ready."

Frank brought Amanda in and they sat down to dinner. Her daughter's lively chatter soon distracted Dotty from her melancholy thoughts.

Frank is right, she thought as she did the dishes after supper. Surely there will be someone to take care of that little boy. Back when Amanda had been a baby, they had arranged for her sister Lillian to become Amanda's guardian if anything should happen to them. Undoubtedly Jennifer and Matthew had made similar arrangements for their son. Probably that brother of Matthew's. Of course he would have to quit the Air Force if he was going to become the only parent to a five year old boy.

Dotty felt slightly comforted by her musings. Still, as she put Amanda to bed that evening, she held her especially close and whispered, "I love you."

"I love you too, Mommy." Amanda slipped her arms around her mother's neck and gave her a bear hug. "But why are you crying?" Her little face puckered into a look of concern.

"I'm not, darling." Dotty hastily wiped away a solitary tear. "Now you go to sleep."

"Lois Ann needs a kiss too," Amanda protested, holding up her doll.

Dotty obediently kissed Lois Ann, tucked Amanda in and turned out the light. She paused at the door and looked back at her daughter. She looked so peaceful, snuggled up in her blankets, her brown curls a dark contrast against her pillow. Dotty thought of how devastated Lee must be, on this, his first night without his parents. She fervently hoped that she could keep that kind of heartbreak out of Amanda's life and that somehow, someday Lee would find a way to be happy again.



September 18, 1987

Lee and Amanda Stetson stood side by side in Arlington National Cemetery, looking down at a pair of small white headstones.

"Life can be so unfair sometimes," Lee said quietly. "They didn't deserve this." His gesture indicated the row upon row of headstones stretching in all directions.

"They had each other for fourteen years." Amanda slipped her hand into his, offering what comfort she could. "And they had you."

Lee frowned. "I tried to block out the memories for so long. Ever since the Blackthorne incident though... it's started coming back in bits and pieces."

"It was a terrible thing to find out they had been murdered. But at least now you know the truth," she said softly.

"The last year, I've thought about them so often. I don't know if I'm actually remembering more or if it's because I've read my mother's journal so often I know it by heart." He looked down at their hands and entwined his fingers with hers. "What I do remember clearly though is that they were happy together. They loved each other so much."

"And you too." Amanda smiled. "Remember the entry your mother made about the day she brought you home from the hospital? Lee, they couldn't have loved you more."

"I know. I just wish they could have had more time. They were only thirty-five when their lives ended."

"I was only a few years younger than that the day we met at the train station," Amanda said.

"The day my life began." He gently touched her engagement and wedding rings, which were shining brightly in the sunshine. "I've been thinking about that."

"What, that you should have picked out someone else? Saved yourself a lot of complications in your life?" she teased, trying to lighten his mood.

He smiled. "No. I was just wondering if maybe when I was little I heard my parents talking about how they met. Because that day at the train station, I was in a panic. I had no idea how I was going to get rid of the package." Their eyes met. "Then I saw you and it was like something snapped into focus. There was no question of anyone else - you were the person I was there to meet."

"Oh, Lee." She turned to face him and put her other hand in his. "I felt the same way when you handed me the package. You looked at me and I knew I had to take it." She nodded towards the headstones. "Seems to be a common experience in your family."

He smiled down at her. "You know, my mother wrote in her journal that one of the officers had asked her out for a couple of drinks that night in London. If she hadn't accepted and been walking to the pub at that exact moment, she never would have met my father."

"Just like if Dean hadn't asked me to drive him to the train station, we might not be together right now." Amanda shivered, not wanting to think about what her life would have been like in that case.

"I don't know about that," he replied.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I think we were supposed to meet. If not that day at the train station, then some other time, some other place. I think we were meant for each other. You brought something to my life that no one else ever did. That no one else could."

Lee slipped his hands around Amanda's waist and pulled her close. She rested her head on his shoulder. They stood silently for a few moments, until Amanda regretfully said, "We should get going. Our meeting over at the Pentagon starts in half an hour."

Hand in hand they walked back to his car. Behind them, the wind softly stirred the bouquet of fresh garden flowers resting between the headstones.

The End