

K-I-S-S-I-N-G

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Timeline: Late fall of 1987. Marriage is common knowledge

Rating: PG

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With a growing sense of anxiety, Lee glanced at the desk clock in the study of his new home. Quarter past three. With the precision of a member of NASA's ground control, he began a mental count-down. 'Ten, nine, eight . . .'

On 'one', he heard the front door burst open, and with it came dueling adolescent male voices.

". . . Sittin' in a tree . . ."

"Shut-up!!"

"K-I-S-S-I-N-G . . ."

"I said SHUT-UP!"

"First comes love . . ."

The last verse was cut off with a yelp of pain and, unwilling for his stepsons to suffer bodily harm at one another's hands, Lee pushed away from his desk and strode into the living room.

"Hey!" he called sharply to get their attention.

The young men stopped in mid-scuffle, struggling to untangle their arms and legs and present a semblance of decorum despite their indecorous presence on the living room floor.

"Lee . . ." Phillip stood up quickly and spoke first, running a hand through his hair to straighten it. "What are you doing home?"

"Your mother had an appointment, so I decided to catch up on some paperwork at home." He paused before asking a question of his own. "What's going on here?"

"Nothing . . ." Jamie mumbled. He shifted his weight from foot to foot and his eyes, scowl-darkened, were deliberately cast toward the floor.

Phillip smirked. "Nothing but that hot lips here was . . ." Before he could finish his sentence, Jamie was on him again, covering his mouth with both hands.

"Shut up!" he hissed, eyes blazing.

"Okay, hold it! Both of you!" Lee pulled Jamie off his brother. "Phillip, why don't you go upstairs and get started on your homework? I know you have a report due on Friday. Jamie, go put your books away, and then come back down stairs. I want to talk with you."

"Lee, I . . ." the younger boy began to protest.

"Unless you want to tell your mother why the two of you were fighting . . ." Lee raised his eyebrows meaningfully.

With a sigh and the affected air of a martyr, Jamie nodded slowly. "Okay."

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Waiting for the teen to come downstairs, Lee busied himself by righting a lamp that had been knocked over in the scuffle and fetching two cans of soda.

Popping open his can, he grabbed two coasters as an afterthought. He placed both on the coffee table in front of him and waited, trying to appear more at ease than he felt.

Moments later, Jamie slunk into the room and sank onto the couch wearing an air of practiced indifference. "What?"

"Why don't you tell me?" Lee responded with gentle firmness. "It must've been something pretty big for you to jump on your brother like that. You know Phillip can mop the floor with you."

"It's nothing, okay? I don't want to talk about it." Jamie turned away and squared his shoulders.

"If it's nothing, then why don't you want to talk about it?" Lee shifted closer to the boy.

"It's personal." The teen traced the pattern on the arm of the couch.

Cautiously laying a hand on his stepson's shoulder, Lee asked, "Is this about a girl?"

Jamie blushed, but remained resolutely mute. Carefully, Lee pressed further. "Why did your brother call you 'hot lips'?"

In a barely audible tone, Jamie mumbled, "He saw me kissing Jan Cushing in the library."

"And now he's teasing you about it." Lee nodded in understanding.

"Yeah," Jamie confirmed glumly. "It's not like *he's* never done it before," he added with a touch of resentment.

"What's Jan like?" Lee asked, changing the subject.

Jamie's face brightened noticeably. "Oh, she's great! She's a lot of fun to hang out with. She's got dark hair and really blue eyes. She's really smart too -- helps me with my pre-algebra homework."

"Since when have you needed help with . . ." Lee began, and then stopped, realizing the answer to his own question. Instead, he remarked, "She sounds pretty special."

"She is . . ." Jamie's face grew more contemplative. "Was it like that with first girl you kissed?" Jamie asked.

Lee thought momentarily before answering. "Yeah, it was . . . her family lived next-door to my uncle on an Air Force base in Manila. She had big . . ." he began and then paused, "brown eyes, and was very . . . mature for her age."

With the creak of the front door, Lee turned to the adolescent. "Sounds like your mom's back, sport. You'd better go upstairs and get started on your homework."

"Yeah," Jamie agreed. "If Phillip'll leave me alone."

"You can't let him bother you," Lee answered.

"Yeah, but . . ." the young teen began to protest, but Lee cut him off.

"Jamie, how do you think Jan would feel if she knew you were embarrassed about kissing her?"

"Pretty bad," he answered after a moment's thought and smiled shyly. "Thanks, Lee."

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"What was that all about?" Amanda came into the room in time to watch her son retreat upstairs.

"Guy talk," Lee answered cryptically as she took a seat next to him on the couch.

"Guy talk?" she echoed with a raised eyebrow.

"Yeah, first loves, first kisses . . ."

"First kisses?" She blanched.

"It's okay, Amanda," Lee reached over to squeeze her hand. "I was about that age when I had my first kiss. It's completely innocent."

She looked at him skeptically, but relaxed. "Yeah, I guess you're right . . ."

"Anyway," Lee continued, "Phillip's been teasing him about it, so Jamie and I talked about how it was nothing to be embarrassed about."

Amanda smiled in agreement, then, watching him closely, asked. "So, who was your first kiss, Stetson?"

"No one important; I think her name was Hannah Kincaid." He traced small circles on her hand with his thumb.

Amanda smiled. "She must've made quite an impression on you."

"Oh, she did," he answered with conviction, "but it lasted about a month and then she started going out with the son of an enlisted man . . . no accounting for taste, I guess." After a beat, he asked, "What about you?"

"My first kiss?" Amanda thought a moment. "Bryan Sharpe. Our mothers were in the PTA together, and he used to call me 'the Wicked Witch of the West'. Then one day, right before sixth grade was out for the summer, he cornered me on the back of the school bus."

Lee studied her for a moment, regretting that he hadn't had an opportunity to know the twelve-year-old Amanda, but thankful to be spending his life with the woman she'd become. "Sounds like a real charmer," he finally responded.

"Oh, he was," she confirmed dryly. "I understand he has a wife and five kids now, and sells used cars in Sheboygan." She squeezed his hand gently before asking, "You know what I remember better?"

"Hmm?" he asked, continuing to trace small circles on the back of her hand with his thumb.

"The first time we kissed," she answered.

He smiled, his heartbeat quickening. "Yes, that was quite memorable."

Gently running her hand along the strong line of his jaw, she said, "Well, we waited long enough, but it was well worth the wait. Even . . ." She turned to face him, drawing her feet up underneath her on the couch and punctuated the sentence with a trail of fleeting kisses from his jaw down his throat . . ."if . . . it was . . . interrupted . . . once . . . again."

He pulled back, confused. "What do you mean?"

"Our first kiss . . ." she answered as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"What?" he studied her face, searching her eyes carefully.

She smiled and reached out to smooth the front of his shirt. "Don't tell me you don't remember that night . . . after we solved the Sallee case, and my mother came home and interrupted us. You waited for me on the back porch, and . . ."

"Amanda, that wasn't our first kiss." He ran a thumb along her lower lip. "Don't you remember?"

She furrowed her brow in concentration, as he brushed the backs of his fingers teasingly along the line of her cheekbone. "No . . . unless . . ." She brightened. "Are you talking about the Q Bureau . . . when you locked the door, and we . . . ? Well, that was a lot more enjoyable, but, it wasn't really our first. I like to count the one on the back porch; I'd been waiting so long, and it was so sweet, so gentle . . ."

"No," he contradicted her and placed a gentle, fleeting kiss on her lips. "You're right. It was very special, but it was not our first kiss."

"Oh?" She arched an eyebrow at him. "When, then?"

"Don't you remember?" he asked, kissing the corner of her mouth and then pulling away. "San Angelo . . ."

"No, that doesn't count." She pulled away, tightening her lips, and shook her head emphatically. "You took it back."

"I was stupid," he answered. "It scared me; I never realized that it would be so . . . that kissing you could make me feel so . . ." His sentence trailed off as he searched for the words.

"Soo . . .?" she prodded.

"Let's just say," he began and brought his lips to hers. "That kissing you . . ." he whispered after he pulled away, "is anything but innocent."

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