

From Here to Paternity - 2

Rating: PG

Summary: Lee learns a lesson the hard way

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Notes: Thanks so much to all the little helpers that assisted me in fluffing up this little piece of fluff.

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Lee shook the rattle again, hoping to divert his infant daughter's attention and quell her crying. It was as if she knew the minute her mother had left the house. Amanda had only been gone five minutes — he bet she hadn't even made it to the main road yet, when Lauren had started fussing.

He'd heard her at first through the baby monitor. Coming back from his run, he'd planned on catching just a brief afternoon cat-nap. After taking a quick shower, he slipped into a pair of old sweats, and had stretched out on the bed when Amanda called from the bottom of the stairs that she was out of vanilla and needed to run to the supermarket. She'd said something about chocolate cookies for the PTA bake sale, and then there was a jingle of car keys, and before Lee had a chance to offer to run the errand for her, she was out the door.

He'd never been alone with Lauren before, and a brief shiver of nervousness coursed through him. He forced himself to stretch back down on the bed. Amanda was only going to the supermarket to pick up vanilla. How long could that possibly take? Fifteen minutes? Twenty minutes tops? Surely he could handle being alone with his two-month-old daughter for twenty minutes. She'd been fast asleep when he'd checked on her after his run, her chubby cheeks working as she furiously sucked her thumb. There was no reason she wouldn't continue to sleep for another hour, maybe even more.

Unfortunately, with or without reason, Lauren hadn't remained asleep for those twenty minutes. In fact, within moments, she'd begun gurgling and cooing, and it hadn't taken

long before it had turned to short bursts of annoyed screams. By the time Lee had bounded from the bed, racing for his daughter's room, she was shrieking at the top of her lungs.

How could someone so small make so much noise? It was a thought that had flitted through Lee's mind on more than one occasion in the last two months. Usually, the sight of one or both of her parents' faces looming over her crib, was enough to quiet Lauren's ear-shattering squalls. At this moment, however, Lee's was obviously not the face she was looking for.

He tossed the rattle aside and gently picked up his daughter from her crib, holding her against his shoulder, and bouncing her lightly in his arms. She loved this. Usually. But not today. He sat down in the rocking chair, moving Lauren into the crook of his arm and began rocking. Still the shrill cries continued. He sang to her. His heartfelt, if not tuneful, baritone vocals did nothing to soothe the savage beast that now struggled in his arms.

Lee frowned at his disconsolate daughter, his mind working through his quickly diminishing bag of baby tricks. Lauren was seldom this cranky, and he tried to remember what Amanda did to quiet her when she seemed this distraught. The light bulb snapped on and immediately, his face fell.

Closing his eyes, he heaved a heavy and rather melodramatic sigh. His life had been anything but sheltered. Dodging bullets, hanging from helicopters, chasing and being chased by a host of the world's most deadly bad guys, was all in a day's work for Lee Stetson. It was part and parcel of his life as an intelligence operative, and he could handle whatever that life threw at him.

What he couldn't handle was a poopy diaper.

Looking down at his daughter, he gave her a pleading, almost desperate look. "Lauren? Please tell Daddy that you haven't gone doodie? You know Daddy loves you and he'd do anything for you. He'd climb the highest mountain, swim the widest sea. He went to Lamaze class for you, for God's sake. Daddy just can't do this messy diaper thing. Okay? So, please, please, please, don't let it be that."

His imploring tone went unnoticed by his daughter as she continued to struggle, kick, and scream in his arms. Sighing once more, he pulled his body from the chair and trudged over to the changing table. Placing the squirming child on the padded table, he poked a finger, hesitantly, into the leg of her diaper, his face preemptively scrunching up in anticipation of the sight and fumes he feared might await him.

"Oh, what a good girl, Lauren," Lee laughed in relief, his features brightening as he looked down at her. "You are Daddy's little angel. Yes, you are. You are Daddy's best girl ever. Daddy loves you so much." Lee plucked the crying infant from the table, holding her at arms length, and then high over his head. "Now, if you would just stop crying. Lauren? Please, won't you stop crying for Daddy?"

Lauren's cries became even more fierce, her face turning a bright beet red, her arms outstretched and trembling in unrestrained wrath.

"I'll take that as big 'no,'" Lee sighed, pulling her back down and into the harbor of his arms. "Are you hungry? I'm sure your Mommy fed you before she laid you down for your nap. Are you hungry again already? Geez." He glanced about the room, his eyes seeking and finding a bright pink plastic pacifier on top of the nursery dresser.

As his daughter prepared for yet another window rattling screech, he popped the object into her mouth. Furiously, she began sucking on the pacifier, her cheeks working strenuously. It didn't take long for her eyebrows to knit together in annoyance over the fact that the milk she expected wasn't forthcoming from the rubber nipple.

She continued suckling the pacifier, emitting angry grunts and snorts to show her displeasure. "Okay, okay," Lee pleaded, heading out of the nursery and down the stairs to the kitchen. "Give me just a second, will you? I don't have it on tap like Mommy does."

He pulled a bottle of breast milk from the fridge, shoving it into the microwave and quickly tapping in the appropriate time to warm the bottle. Amanda had begun expressing her milk a few weeks earlier, which gave him the chance to help out with some of the feedings and the opportunity to bond with his daughter on a new level. He loved feeding her, holding her as she nursed, burping her when she was finished, and then watching her fall asleep in his arms.

Waiting for the microwave to work its wonders, he jostled Lauren in his arms, hoping the action would forestall the repeat temper tantrum he saw building. She spat out the pacifier and he, just as quickly, popped it back into her mouth. She spat it out again, scowling at him, her blue eyes stormy in her displeasure.

The beeping of the microwave startled her a bit, and Lee hushed and soothed her as he grabbed the bottle and moved into the living room to feed her. Sitting in the wing-back chair near the door, he placed the bottle on the side table and situated himself, tossing a dish towel he'd snared from the oven door over his left shoulder as a burping cloth. No matter how hard he tried, Lauren always managed to spit up on him, and he smiled at the fact that today, shirtless, she'd be hard pressed to ruin any more of his clothes.

He steadied Lauren in the crook of his right arm and disentangled the pacifier from her grasping fingers, tossing it onto the table next to the bottle. Reaching over his daughter, Lee moved to grasp the bottle. At that moment, Lauren, having reached the end of her patience for a meal, firmly latched on to Lee's right nipple.

"Yaaaaowww," Lee shrieked, the bottle slipping from his fingers to land, harmlessly, on the carpeted floor. "Lauren, Lauren," he muttered through clenched teeth, trying to pull the child free of his flesh. "Owwwwww, Lauren. Please. That really hurts. . . sweetheart. . . Daddy is in pain. . . let. . . go!"

"Lee, what in the world is going on?"

Lee looked up to find Amanda staring quizzically down at him.

"Oww. . . she won't. . . let go. . . ahhhhh," Lee grimaced, continuing to try to pry his daughter off his chest. Her mouth, however, was clamped tightly onto him, and even though she was receiving nothing for her efforts, she continued to suckle in earnest.

Amanda leaned over, slipping a finger between her husband's chest and her daughter's mouth. With a sound similar to a champagne cork freeing itself from a bottle, Amanda broke the suction, and Lee immediately threw his right hand protectively over his abused right nipple.

"Geez. Owwwwww. Damn, that hurt." He tossed a pained look at Amanda, who had taken Lauren into her arms and quieted her, the baby instantly rooting her face into her mother's breasts, searching for the food that had been so recently denied her. "We should have named her Hoover," Lee said, glaring at his first-born.

Amanda laughed, sitting back on the sofa opposite Lee. "You should have been more careful. To her, a nipple is a nipple."

Lee watched as his wife unbuttoned her blouse and adjusted her nursing bra so she could feed Lauren. "Believe me, I will be from now on. Wow, I tell you, I have a whole new respect for you," he eyed his wife as she leaned back into the sofa, snuggling her daughter to her, kissing the top of her head.

"Thanks," Amanda smiled at him. They sat in companionable silence while their daughter finished her meal. After burping her, Amanda looked over sharply at her husband. "Oh, Lee, I completely forgot. I brought a few extra things at the market and they're sitting out on the counter. I need to put the eggs away."

"Amanda, I'll —" Lee started, rising from the chair.

"No," Amanda interrupted him, rising and bundling Lauren back into Lee's arms. "I've got to finish those cookies anyway. Why don't you take her upstairs and see if she needs changing." Amanda leaned down and delicately sniffed where Lee's hand supported his daughter's bottom. "Oh, yeah, " she looked up, her sparkling brown eyes meeting his hazel one's. "She definitely needs changing."

Lee, wide-eyed, watched as he wife strolled into the kitchen. Slowly his gaze dropped to Lauren, who was now looking up at him, smiling and gurgling, a long string of milky drool hanging from her plump lower lip. He crooked an eyebrow at his daughter. "What are you laughing at?"

**TBC**