

Tutu Much

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Rating: PG-13

Synopsis: Fifth story in the From Here to Paternity series and my submission for the letter "T" in the third smkfanfic Alphabet Challenge. The Stetsons learn that the apple hasn't fallen far from the tree.

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Author's Note: Thanks to Ann, eman, Kim, Pam, and Shelly for being such wonderful betas and friends – and to all of Lauren's admirers who send me those email 'nudges' asking if she's in college yet.

Feedback: But of course!

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Lee rushed through the kitchen door, shedding his coat and loosening his tie. "I'm home!" he called out. Not getting an immediate answer, he walked over and surveyed the stove. A large pot bubbled away, and he smelled the delicious aroma. "Mmmm, Amanda's world famous chili," he murmured.

"You don't deserve any of that." Amanda's voice stopped him in his tracks as he started to pull the lid from the pan for a taste.

"I'm sorry." Lee glanced at his wife sheepishly. "I was trapped."

"Literally?" Amanda quizzed. "Because that's the only thing that will get you out of this mess."

"Yes." Lee nodded. "Believe me. Being handcuffed to a water heater in an abandoned office building is the only thing that would keep me from seeing my daughter's first ballet recital."

"What?" Amanda took a step towards her husband, the concern apparent in her eyes.

"It's okay . . . I'm okay." Lee took her into his arms, hugging her tight. "Wierderhorn arrived just in time. He apprehended the guys as they were loading their surveillance equipment. It just took hours to debrief them. I tried to reach you on your cell phone."

"I turned it off." Amanda looked up into his eyes. "I didn't want it ringing during the recital."

Lee gave her a final hug then turned to slump into a dining room chair. Amanda took the chair opposite him, reaching out to push back a lock of hair that had fallen across his brow.

"How'd it go?" he asked, capturing her hand in his and placing a kiss on her fingertips before releasing it.

"Oh, the recital went very well. Our daughter has a natural talent," Amanda quipped, a Cheshire grin adorning her features.

"For dancing?" Lee queried hesitantly.

"Not exactly." Amanda's grin expanded. "The dance didn't go so well. She lost a shoe, her tutu slipped off, and she ended up facing the wrong way."

Lee winced at the description of his daughter's stage debut. "Then what is her natural talent?" he asked, confused.

"Getting herself out of a tight spot," Amanda chuckled.

Lee raised an eyebrow. "Oh, yeah . . . how so?"

"Well, she found a way to take everyone's mind off her little mishap," Amanda smiled indulgently at her husband.

"And how did she do this?" Lee asked, his voice filled with apprehension.

"Hmmm . . ." Amanda frowned slightly. "She decided to regale the audience with a listing, in alphabetical order, of everyone in her family that has a penis."

"Oh, no," Lee's head dropped to the table. "Not that again."

"Oh, yes," Amanda drawled. "She was quite thorough this time. She even included the Colonel. I'm sure he'll be touched. As will Uncle Billy and Aunt Francine's boyfriend, whom, I guess, were added to the list for fear they'd feel left out."

"Oh my god," Lee mumbled, his face still pressed into the table. He brought his hands up, lacing his fingers together at the back of his head, trying to form a human shield against his wife's words.

"It gets better," Amanda smiled thinly, watching him in his anguish.

"Please, don't . . ." Lee moaned.

"During her recitation, her tutu, which she'd pulled back up, slipped off again, accompanied by a very loud 'Oh, shit'."

"Oh, shit . . ." Lee mumbled.

"I can't imagine where she picked that up," Amanda muttered, narrowing her eyes at the back of her husband's head.

"Ughhhh," Lee groaned. He scrunched his eyes closed, his fingers tightening and ruffling his hair. "Is there nothing sacred to that child?" he murmured through clenched teeth.

"Obviously not," Amanda shrugged. "We're gonna be lucky to get out of her pre-school years with our security clearances intact."

"Have you figured out where she gets this stuff from?" Lee grumbled, looking up at his wife.

"The anatomy lessons are Mother's doing, I think . . . I remember her showing me this article recently about progressive parenting. I think she might have taken matters into her own hands, so to speak."

"Can you talk with her about that?" Lee snipped.

"I will," Amanda said with a nod, "and then perhaps **we** can talk about your daughter's eloquent use of profanity, including yesterday morning's exuberant 'damn it all to hell' when someone beat us to a parking space in front of Toys R Us."

Lee winced. "I'm sorry - "

"You know, Lee, at times she's too much like you. Sometimes it scares me," his wife muttered.

"Me?" Lee exclaimed, his voice rising an octave. "Sounds to me like she has a very strong resemblance to her mother, especially when it comes to 'talking' her way out of a tough situation."

Amanda shot him a look before she rose and walked to the stove, lifting the lid from the pot. "Don't try to change the subject, Lee. You need to be more careful about what you say in front of Lauren. She's very impressionable."

The fragrance of spices and onions wafted through the kitchen. Just as Lee was about to get up and offer to 'test' this evening's meal, he caught a flash of pink netting at the entrance to the kitchen. He glanced over at his wife, his eyes narrowing slyly. "Where **is** the munchkin?"

"She didn't appreciate the fact that I didn't appreciate her actions at the recital - she's having a time out in her bedroom."

As Amanda picked up a small bottle of red pepper and liberally sprinkled the bubbling mixture, Lee watched four chubby fingers appear on the doorjamb. They were quickly followed by a pair of brilliant green eyes peering through a tangle of honey-brown bangs.

Lauren opened her mouth to speak and Lee quickly held a finger to his lips, silencing her. Then he wiggled the same finger at her, beckoning her to him.

Lauren's pink, tight-clad feet made no sound as she tip-toed across the tile floor, her finger to her lips, mimicking her father and appearing more than ready and able to join in the game that Daddy was playing. She silently crawled up into his lap, wrapping her arms around his neck and pressing her lips against his cheek. He whispered something into her ear and then once again silenced her, his finger touching her lips and quieting the giggle that threatened to erupt.

Wrapping his arms about his daughter, and looking down at her, he gave her a wink. "So, Amanda, you told her to stay in her room?"

"Yes," Amanda nodded, continuing to minister to the meal. "She's supposed to stay in her room until I tell her to come out."

"Hmmm," Lee smiled down at his now squirming daughter. "You know, Amanda, I really don't think **I'm** the one that Lauren takes after."

"Oh, no?" Amanda huffed, moving to the sink to rinse the wooden spoon she'd been using.

"Nope." Lee shook his head vehemently, trying without much success to still the wiggling child in his lap. "I definitely think she takes after her—"

"Mommy!" Lauren shouted, unable to keep silent one moment longer.

The spoon clattered into the sink as Amanda turned to see her daughter leap from Lee's lap and rush towards her. Lauren nearly knocked her off balance in her exuberance before Amanda crouched down and scooped the child into her arms.

"I'm sorry, Mommy. I'm sorry. I'll be good," Lauren exclaimed, her bottom lip beginning to tremble.

Amanda balanced the child on her hip as Lauren wrapped her legs around her mother's waist and settled her head on her shoulder. Holding her daughter tight with one arm, she pushed the tumble of curls out of the little girl's eyes. "Lauren, what are you doing out here? Don't you remember what Mommy said?"

"I was pwaying a game wif Daddy," she mumbled, pressing her face into the hollow of Amanda's shoulder.

"Well, I told you to stay in your room, until I came to get you. Did you forget that?" Amanda nudged Lauren's chin up with the tip of her index finger until they were looking into each other's eyes.

"No, Mommy, I didn't forgot. I was 'posed to stay in my room." The child's voice dropped to a whisper as Amanda placed her on the floor. Holding her mother's hand, Lauren gazed up, a puzzled expression on her face. "But I thought you needed me to help set the table, Mommy."

"Lauren, I don't care if you thought I needed you, I told you to stay . . ." Amanda's words slowly dwindled off.

"In the **car**?" Lee supplied, helpfully.

Amanda's mouth dropped open and her gaze shot to Lee, who smiled sweetly back at her.

"No, Daddy, my room." Lauren chimed in. She let go of Amanda's hand and skipped over to her father.

Lee pulled her up into his lap, pinching her nose softly and smiling at her. "Oh, that's right, Munchkin, your room." He glanced pointedly back at Amanda, giving her a sly smile. "I don't know what I was thinking."

Amanda scowled at her husband and child for a moment, then walked over and dropped into one of the chairs by table. "Oh, I give up." She grinned sheepishly at Lee and reached out to tug gently at Lauren's curls.

"It's a lost cause," Lee smiled at his wife and reached out to caress her cheek. "She's definitely a chip off the block, no matter how you look at it. Right?"

Amanda smiled back at him. "Right." She looked down at Lauren who was watching the two of them with interest. "Right?" she asked her daughter.

"Damn straight," Lauren exclaimed exuberantly.

**The End**