

Crying Uncle

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Timeframe / Synopsis: The main time frame is early 1988; Lee and Amanda's marriage is common knowledge. Interspersed between the 1988 scenes are scenes from Lee's childhood. These are not memories: they are "windows" through which we see important people from his past. Beyond the opportunity to see how past events have shaped Lee's personality and relationship with his uncle, there really isn't any plot, so don't be surprised when you don't find one.

Note: This story does not break canon, exactly. However, it does employ a great deal of "literary license" to fill in unknowns from Lee's past. Also, where inconsistencies exist in the writing of the show, I have "chosen" canon as follows: (1) Lee's parents died when he was five (as per "Unfinished Business"); (2) Lee went to live with his uncle when he was seven (as stated by Colonel Clayton in "A Relative Situation"); (3) Lee's paternal grandmother was still living when his parents died (as shown in the State Department papers in "Unfinished Business").

Feedback: Yes, any constructive comments are welcome.

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Lee Stetson pressed himself against the wall as he moved slowly and soundlessly down the carpeted hallway. Coming to a halt before one of several identical doors, he paused to listen for any evidence of activity within, then he carefully turned the knob and pushed the door open just enough to allow him to pass into the dimly lit room. Peering through the semi-darkness, his eyes immediately focused on his goal : a sleek hand carved secretariat desk against the far wall, just to the right of the lace-curtained window through which the early morning sun provided the only source of light.

After a quick but intense visual sweep of the room, he moved stealthily toward the desk. He had almost reached it when a slight movement caught his attention, and he pivoted to confront the shadowy figure which had slipped quietly into step behind him.

A tender smile crossed Lee's features as he slid one arm around a slender waist and dropped a light kiss on his wife's forehead. "Good morning, beautiful," he murmured. "I didn't mean to wake you. I forgot your shopping list."

Amanda wrapped both arms around him and rested her head against his shoulder as he placed second kiss on her slightly tangled chestnut curls. Stifling a yawn, she responded in a sleepy voice. "That's okay. I need to be up. I want to freshen the guest room before you get back from the grocery store."

Tightening his arm around her, Lee moved his other hand to her chin, gently raising her head so he could search her coffee brown eyes. "You're supposed to be resting," he chided softly. "The Colonel doesn't expect you to go to any trouble. He's used to pretty stark accommodations."

She wrinkled her nose and rolled her eyes, clearly incredulous that anyone would consider such a basic attention to the comfort of a guest unnecessary. "It isn't any trouble, Lee," she lectured in the tone usually reserved for explaining the fundamental tenets of good housekeeping to her sons. "And I want to do it. He's part of my family now, just like Mother and Phillip and Jamie are part of yours."

Lee shook his head and chuckled. "I definitely got the better end of that deal."

Amanda's eyes twinkled as her lips twitched into the barest hint of an amused smile. "Well, I can't argue with that," she agreed. "But this is the first time he's come to stay with us, and I want everything to be, you know, extra nice. Although it would be easier," she added with mock severity, "if someone would tell me what he likes and what he doesn't, so I wouldn't have to guess."

Lee studied her wordlessly for moment before a rueful laugh escaped him. "If you want everything to be just the way the Colonel likes it, maybe I should bunk down at the Agency for a few nights. Billy's always willing to set up a cot in the TAC center for an agent on evasive maneuvers."

Amanda pursed her lips in silent admonishment and swatted his arm reprovingly. "That's not funny," she finally said, her voice something between a sigh and a

chuckle. "The way you've been acting, a person would think this visit was some new form of KGB torture."

"I know," Lee responded with a slightly sheepish grin. "I'm thirty-seven years old, and the Colonel still makes me feel like I'm a new Army recruit about to fail my first white glove inspection."

Amanda arched a delicate brow as she studied him appraisingly. "Maybe it would help if you were a little less formal," she suggested gently. "You call mother's sister 'Aunt Lillian.' Have you ever tried calling him 'Uncle Robert'?"

Lee cocked his head and squinted as though looking back in time. "Not that I remember," he said slowly.

Jennifer Stetson smiled indulgently as a small blonde boy whirled into the kitchen, a toy helicopter clutched in one grubby fist and a miniature soldier clutched in the other. Even though he was not quite five years old, Lee was already the image of his father, and he could wrap her around his little finger almost as easily. "Mommy, Mommy, is Uncle Robert comin' for my birthday?" her son asked, fixing her with wide hazel eyes and an engaging grin.

Jennifer sighed. She hated to disappoint him, but it couldn't be helped. "No, I'm sorry, darling. Uncle Robert won't be able to come this time," she answered, reaching out to tousle his already mussed hair.

"Why not, Mommy?" the child asked plaintively, his smile melting into a slight pout. "He said next time he comes he'd take me for a ride in a real helicopter," he reminded his mother, bouncing slightly on the balls of his feet in anticipation of the promised treat. "Just like the one he flew in the war. I'd be the bestest birthday present ever."

"I'm sure it would be the *best* birthday present ever," Jennifer corrected automatically, kneeling to face him and placing both hands on his shoulders to still his exuberant movements, "and your Uncle Robert would love to be here. But he's out of the country, and he can't come home right now."

"Is he swooping down and rescuing people, like he did in the war?" Lee's pout vanished, excitement suddenly sparkling again in his eyes. As he spoke, the toy

helicopter sprang to life, propelled by its young pilot in a series of ascents and dives around his mother's head.

"No, not this time," Jennifer responded as she intercepted her son's hand just in time to prevent the helicopter's imminent collision with her left ear. "He's on training maneuvers."

The boy frowned and cocked his head slightly, apparently mulling over this puzzling adult behavior. "Why'd he hafta go on trainin' manubers? He's already the *best* pilot ever." He offered his mother a beguiling smile as he emphasized the corrected pronunciation.

She rewarded his effort with a brief hug and a quick kiss on the head. "Well, your uncle is a very good pilot. But even though the war is over, he needs to practice, so he'll be ready," she explained in patient tones.

"Ready to swoop down and rescue people?" With only one of his mother's hands remaining on his shoulder, Lee managed to resume his bouncing.

Jennifer sighed again. Ever since Robert had told Lee about flying search and rescue missions during the police action in Korea, her son had been obsessed with the idea of rescuing people. "Yes, honey. He has to be ready to swoop down and rescue people. That's one of his jobs, in the Air Force."

"When I grow up, I'm gonna be just like Uncle Robert. I'm gonna swoop down and rescue people, too." With that, Lee extricated himself from his mother's loose embrace and whirled back toward the living room to rescue more toy soldiers from the the imaginary dangers lurking there.

Jennifer gazed after him, smiling wistfully. Not quite five, and he already wanted to save the world. Just like his uncle; just like his daddy. Saving the world had its rewards, of course, but it wasn't the kind of life she wanted for her son. Maybe, with her influence, he would grow up to be a doctor or an attorney instead of a soldier or, heaven forbid, a spy. What she wanted for her son was a nice, normal life. That was one reason she and Matt were in this line of work themselves — so their children would be able to grow up in a safe, secure world. With a slight grimace and a shake of her dark curls, she turned her attention back to the meatloaf she was making for dinner.

"Meatloaf," Amanda muttered skeptically, as she perused the shopping list she had retrieved from her desk. "Are you really sure you want meatloaf for dinner tonight, Lee? Meatloaf's easy, and it's filling, but it's not very, um," she paused and shrugged her shoulders delicately. "Well, what I mean is, meatloaf's kind of ordinary, for a guest."

"I like your meatloaf," was the simple reply, spoken in a tone that left no doubt as to her husband's sincerity. "I know it isn't exactly gourmet fare, but it's . . . homey. It makes me feel like I'm home, where I belong."

"All right, if that's what you want." Amanda smiled warmly, reaching out to squeeze his fingers between her own. "Let's go down to the kitchen, so I can check this list one more time. I don't want you to have to make two trips. It's a lot further to a supermarket from this house than it was from the house in Arlington."

As they moved toward the doorway, Lee swiped up Amanda's robe from the foot of the large four-poster bed and held it as she slipped her arms inside. Then he waited while she pulled the belt snugly around her waist before taking her hand again and leading her through the door.

They walked in companionable silence toward the stairs. As they passed the open guest room door, however, Lee paused and turned to her with a concerned frown. "I meant what I said earlier, Amanda," he lectured. "You're supposed to be resting today. I don't want you to overdo."

"I'm not going to overdo," she promised, leaning against him to brush her lips against his cheek. "How much effort do you think it will take to dust a dresser, run a vacuum cleaner, and make up a bed?"

"Is the vacuum cleaner upstairs? I don't want you lugging it up the steps."

"Jamie carried it up for me yesterday, before Joe took the boys for the night," she answered casually, moving away from him to examine the large potted plant which resided on the second floor landing.

Something in her tone and actions made Lee look at her suspiciously. "Joe wasn't upset, was he? About Phillip and Jamie coming home this afternoon instead of tomorrow?"

"Not really," she hedged, stooping to finger the soil in the earthenware pot and effectively avoiding her husband's eyes as she answered. "I need to water this Ficus later. Don't let me forget."

Lee's eyes narrowed as he closed the space between them and recaptured her hand to gently pull her upright. "You can't distract me that easily, Amanda. 'Not really' sounds more like a yes than a no."

"He really *wasn't* upset about them coming home early," she sighed. "He didn't have anything special planned for this weekend. I think it just bothered him a little that the boys agreed to cut his weekend short without any argument. He's a kind of sensitive about how close Phillip and Jamie have gotten to you, especially since you handle some of their antics better than he does."

"He'd do a lot better if he'd loosen up," Lee opined sagely, with the newfound confidence of a man who had lived for six months under the same roof as the two teenagers. "Joe takes their bickering and sniping at each other way too seriously. He should know boys do stuff like that. It doesn't mean anything."

"I know," Amanda agreed, exasperation with her ex-husband written clearly on her expressive face. "He can't see that forcing them to spend time together doesn't make them closer; it just causes them to get on each other's nerves."

"I'm glad to hear you say that," Lee laughed. "I wouldn't want to find myself locked in a room with my uncle for a day of male bonding."

Matthew Stetson set down his pipe and rubbed his eyes. He needed some fresh air. Although he was pleased that he and Jennie had been able to convert their home's forgotten jam cellar into a secret office and hideaway, the tiny, windowless room made him feel a bit claustrophobic. Laughing softly, he recalled the time he had spent the better part of a day trapped in his grandparents' root cellar with his younger half-brother, Robert Clayton. That experience was probably the reason he and Rob both disliked dark, cramped places. Of course, he and Rob were similar in many ways. The two boys, now men, shared very little physical resemblance, but they were much alike in temperament, and they had always been close. In fact, they had been nearly inseparable during the early years of their lives — until their careers had separated them, often by thousands of miles and months at a time.

Thinking of his brother reminded Matthew of his decision to tell the other man about this hidden room. He would feel much more secure knowing that Rob was

helping guard his secret. The last two assignments he and Jennie handled had been more complicated — and more risky — than he liked. And he had a nagging, unsettling feeling about the Blackthorne case. He couldn't quite put his finger on it, but there was something about Thomas Blackthorne that . . . Well, he would be glad when the investigation was over and Blackthorne was behind bars, where he belonged.

Matthew grimaced and pushed aside the file he had been reading. He knew his work was important, but he didn't enjoy it as much now as he had ten years ago. Adventure and danger weren't quite as appealing to a man who had things to live for. And he couldn't help berating himself for getting Jennie involved in such a dangerous lifestyle. Jennie was very good at investigative work, her sharp mind and never ending patience providing the perfect compliment to his more physical skills, and she found their work rewarding in a quiet, understated way. But Matthew knew she didn't care for what she laughingly called 'the seamy side of detective work.' Besides which, they had Lee to consider. If anything should happen to them . . . Yes, telling Rob would make him feel a good deal better; he knew he could count on his brother to step in if anything went wrong.

Rising from the hard-backed chair, Matthew pulled the chain that controlled the room's solitary light bulb. As darkness closed in around him, he climbed up the wooden ladder and pulled himself out through the small, square opening. Easing the trap door shut, he carefully replaced the carpet that concealed it from casual observers. Only when he moved to the stairs did he notice his son sitting on the top step, watching his progress.

"Lee, what are you doing here?" He intoned sternly. "You know the basement is off limits."

"But I'm not in the basement, Daddy," Lee pointed out with perfect five year old logic. "I'm way up over the basement."

Matthew paused at the bottom of the staircase, looking up at the small, obviously unrepentant, boy. "The stairs are part of the basement, and you aren't supposed to be here," he stated, careful not to show his amusement at his son's rapidly growing power of persuasion.

"I'm five now, Daddy," Lee reminded his father in his most grownup manner. "I sn't five big enough to go through the secret door?"

"No, Lee. Five isn't big enough," Matthew responded, climbing the steps and leaning down to lift his son to his feet.

"Is six big enough? I'll be six on my next birthday," his son queried doggedly.

"Your next birthday isn't for a long, long time," Matthew countered. "And you need to be a lot bigger than six," he added, hoping to curtail what he knew from experience could prove to be a long and onerous debate.

"Is twenny big enough?" the boy persisted. "I hafta be able to go through the secret door when I'm twenny 'cause twenny's as big as I can count."

Matthew gave up the effort to hold in his amusement. Smiling broadly, he lifted his son into his arms, opened the basement door, and stepped into the brightness of the hallway. "When you're twenty, we'll discuss it," he promised. "But for now, I want you to forget all about the secret door; do you understand?"

"Uh huh," was the uncharacteristically glum response. A moment later, however, his son's eyes brightened. "When I play at Johnny's house, we go in the basement. Johnny has a baby brother. Maybe he got a baby brother 'stead of a secret door."

"Maybe he did," his father agreed with an amused chuckle.

"Do you think I could have a baby brother since I hafta forget the secret door?" Lee questioned ingenuously.

Matthew laughed again. "Baby brothers are pretty special," he said with a conspiratorial wink. "But that's something we'll have to talk over with mommy."

"It's too bad Joe didn't have a brother," Amanda lamented as they moved slowly down the stairs and traversed the short hallway into the sunlit kitchen. "It might have helped him understand Phillip and Jamie better. Although," she continued, eyeing her husband, "you didn't have a brother, and you seem to understand them pretty well."

Lee laughed softly. "I have you. I didn't need to figure them out for myself."

"You also had at least one example," she pointed out, arching an eyebrow as she gazed at him speculatively. "Were your uncle and your father close?"

"I don't know." Lee shrugged, shifting uncomfortably under her scrutiny. "The Colonel never said."

Amanda paused for a moment. "And I'll bet you never asked."

Lee took a step away, his stance guarded and his expression unreadable. "I guess it's a good question," he finally admitted. "I've just never thought about it."

"Maybe you *should* think about it," Amanda suggested softly. "He's the only living blood relative you have, at least for five and a half more months," she added, trailing one hand over her slightly rounded abdomen. "Aren't you even a little curious? He could probably answer a lot of questions you've never thought about, and someday he won't be around."

"Yeah, I guess," Lee mumbled noncommittally as he wrapped both arms around her from behind. She leaned back into his chest, and they stood for several moments, enjoying the unaccustomed morning silence and their own thoughts.

The quiet was broken by a sudden clattering noise. Lee reached reflexively toward his left side, where he normally carried his gun, but almost immediately he relaxed again. "If Wizard is going to live in the utility closet, we're going to have to clean it out," he grumbled. "With all the clutter in there, he's constantly knocking things over."

"It's only temporary," Amanda murmured sympathetically, glancing toward the utility closet, its door slightly ajar to allow their new pet access to his chosen retreat. "I know he's a little skittish, but . . ."

"A little skittish?" Lee interrupted with a snort. "Amanda, we got him almost a week ago, and I can count on one hand the number of times I've even seen him."

"He needs some time to settle in and get used to us — just like you did a few months ago."

"Well, you've got me there," Lee conceded. "If your utility closet in Arlington had been bigger, I would have ducked in there more than a few times during the first few weeks after I moved in."

With a laugh, Amanda walked across the kitchen, opened a cabinet and removed a small can of kitten food. "At least he usually comes out when he's hungry." Carefully removing the lid from the can, she scooped the contents into a plastic

bowl and moved to a position just outside the utility closet. Placing the bowl on the floor, she began calling softly "Here kitty, kitty. Here kitty, kitty."

After a moment, a tiny pink nose and several long white whiskers appeared at the open door. Two small white paws and a black and white head slowly emerged, their owner moving apprehensively toward his breakfast. Just before he reached the bowl, however, the shrill ring of the phone caused him to freeze momentarily and then scamper back into his hiding place.

As Lee shook his head and reached for the phone, Amanda knelt down near the bowl to resume her efforts to coax their newest family member into the room.

Eileen Stetson Clayton knelt in front of the closet, attempting to coax her five year-old grandson from its depths. Behind her, Captain Robert Clayton stood awkwardly, clearly feeling out of place in the room where, until only a few days ago, his brother and sister-in-law had slept. "Lee, come out and say hello to your Uncle Robert. He came all the way from Germany to see us," Eileen urged gently.

"No." Lee Stetson poked his blonde head out and glared at the man behind his grandmother, then just as quickly he disappeared again.

"Lee, please come out. I know you've missed Uncle Robert," his grandmother tried again, her voice soft and pleading.

"I don't wanna see him," came the muffled reply.

With a shake of her head, Eileen stood and turned to face her surviving son. Surviving son: she hated the sound of that. Children were supposed to survive their parents, not the other way around. She had been certain she had borne the worst pain life could offer when she buried her second husband, but this . . . It was still almost surreal, the concept of losing Matt and Jennie. She didn't want to deal with such unimaginable grief herself, much less be responsible for helping her small grandson through it. "He's been sitting in there for nearly three days," Eileen sighed weakly. "I really hoped he would come out when you got here; he's always been so fond of you."

"I should have been here sooner," Robert Clayton growled, as he began pacing across the small room. "The military transport got diverted to Greenland, and we were weathered in for almost two days."

"You got here as soon as you could. It's not your fault. You did your best to . . . " Eileen began, trying to force her thoughts to back their most immediate problem.

Whatever else she meant to say was cut off as Lee suddenly emerged from his hiding place to confront his uncle. "It *is* your fault!" The boy shouted, angry tears sparkling in his hazel eyes. "It's your fault my mommy and daddy died. You're supposed to swoop down and rescue people. It's your job!" He yelled, launching himself into his uncle, his small fists pummeling Robert Clayton's midsection. "I hate you. I hate you." Then, almost as suddenly as the assault had begun, Lee whirled around and disappeared back into the dark closet.

The stunned captain stepped toward the closet, only to be restrained by his mother's gentle hand on his arm. "Let him go, Robby. He's still reeling from losing Matt and Jennie. Give him some time."

Robert Clayton looked sadly into the hazel eyes of his mother. "Maybe he's right. Maybe it is my fault. If I had been here . . ."

"What? You think you're responsible for a hit-and-run driver forcing them off the road? Don't be ridiculous," Eileen admonished him sharply.

"I've heard rumors of some kind of investigation. Maybe it wasn't an accident. Maybe Matt was involved in something dangerous, something that got out of hand," the Captain argued.

"Just stop it right now, Robert Clayton," Eileen ordered, exhaustion and irritation overcoming better judgment. "Matt and Jennie were in an accident. And you aren't responsible for every bad thing that happens in the world. You weren't responsible for this. You weren't responsible for your dad's death in the war. You weren't responsible for Maggie's plane going down . . ." Eileen stopped abruptly. She hadn't meant to reopen old wounds; she was just so tired.

The young man stiffened, his face a mask of self-recrimination. "Maggie was on her way to visit me," he said tonelessly. "I shouldn't have been so impatient. I could have waited a few months to see her; I would have been home for the wedding. But I talked her into . . ."

"Stop it," his mother demanded, more gently this time. "We don't have time for this. We have to decide what to do about Lee."

Robert Clayton's brows rose in surprise. "What to do about Lee," he repeated blankly. "He's going to stay with you, isn't he?"

"He is for now. But you know you'll have to make a home for him someday. I'm not a young woman." Looking from her son's suddenly panic-stricken face to the dark closet, Eileen sighed again. Then she took Robert's arm and nudged him out of the room. "Let's go down to the kitchen. You must be starving, and I could use a cup of tea."

"I'm going to make myself a cup of tea." Amanda glanced at her husband as she abandoned her position beside the kitten's bowl. "Do you want anything?"

"No, thanks." Lee frowned and shook his head, absently passing the phone receiver from hand to hand several times before replacing it in the cradle. "The Colonel's aide said his flight plan was changed; he's going to be here three hours earlier than we expected."

Amanda bit her lip as she cast a worried look toward the kitchen clock, but when she spoke, her tone was light. "That's not a problem. I'll shower and dress while you're at the store, and if I don't have time to finish the guest room before we leave for the air base, I'll do it after we get home."

"He's going to meet us at the Officer's Club," Lee muttered, still directing a preoccupied frown at the phone. Then he shook his head again and crossed the room to his wife's side. "And the first thing you're going to do is have your tea," he stated firmly as he placed an arm around her shoulders and guided her toward the table. "I'll fix you a cup and a piece of toast before I leave for the store."

"I'm not an invalid, Lee," she protested as she snuggled against his side. "I'm almost past the morning sickness. You don't have to baby me."

"I know I don't have to," he acknowledged, pulling her against his chest and nuzzling her neck. "I want to." Wrapping both arms around her, his voice lowered to a seductive whisper. "Although it wouldn't take much encouragement for me to forget all about your tea . . ." he began, dropping a kiss on her nose, ". . . the grocery store. . ." he added as he brushed his lips against hers, ". . . and the Colonel," he finished, capturing her mouth in a deepening kiss.

A loud growl from Amanda's stomach caused him to pull back with an amused chuckle. "We've always had a problem with timing," he quipped. "But I think this is the first time you've actually growled at me."

"Sorry." Amanda's eyes danced as she rubbed a hand over her rumbling midsection. "I guess my stomach took that offer of tea and toast more seriously than my lips did."

"Then we'd better feed you." With another quick kiss, Lee released her and pushed her gently into a chair, then turned back to the counter to prepare her breakfast. "I don't remember seeing these before," he commented a few minutes later as he carried a dainty china teapot and a matching cup and saucer to the table. "They're very pretty."

"Mother gave the set to me yesterday. It was packed away in one of the boxes from the attic in Arlington." A reminiscent smile crossed Amanda's features as she fingered the floral pattern of the cup. "She thought it might increase the appeal of decaffeinated tea," she added as she turned to Lee with a lopsided grin.

"And does it?" he queried, looking dubiously at the herbal concoction his wife was pouring into her cup.

"Not really. But it does bring back a lot of happy memories," Amanda answered with a soft smile. "It belonged to my maternal grandmother. Nana died when I was ten, but I remember using this tea set when I visited her. We had the most wonderful tea parties, just the two of us and Lois Ann."

"Lois Ann was your doll, right?"

"Yeah," she nodded. "It's funny, the things you remember from childhood. Last winter seems so long ago, but I remember those tea parties like they were yesterday." As she spoke, she looked up to meet her husband's eyes with a contemplative expression.

He cocked his head to one side, picked up one of her hands, and placed a gentle kiss in her palm. "What?" He asked in response to the unspoken question in her eyes.

"I just wondered what you remembered best about your grandmother," she said with a delicate shrug. "I know you went to live with your uncle when you were seven, and I know — before that — you lived with your dad's mother. But you never talk about her."

Lee's swallowed as he lowered his gaze to the floor. "She died when I was seven. I don't remember her very clearly — except that she was sick a lot," he said gruffly. After a short silence, he looked back up, running one hand through his hair. "I mostly remember that I hated hospitals . . ."

Father David Kent exited the elevator and walked purposefully down the hospital corridor toward the third floor nurses' station. He hated hospitals — a definite liability given his calling, he thought wryly, as he wrinkled his nose against the antiseptic smell. Pausing for a moment to scan the area, his eyes came to rest on a small blonde boy sitting just outside the arched doorway to the waiting room. The boy looked decidedly out of place on the orange vinyl chair, his red and white Keds swinging a few inches above the floor, and his eyes focused on the black and white pattern of the tiles. As Father Kent watched, a nurse hurried past the boy, and he looked up expectantly, but she walked on as though the child didn't exist, too busy or too obtuse to bother with a seven year old, even if he was the grandson of one of her patients and a frequent visitor to her ward.

Bracing himself for his unpleasant task, Father Kent resumed his steps toward the child. "Hello, Lee," he greeted the boy kindly. "Mrs. Miller told me you'd be here," he continued, referring to the elderly neighbor who usually called to advise him that Eileen Clayton was ill again, placing her young grandson in need of temporary care and supervision.

Lee Stetson looked up as the young clergyman spoke. "Hi," he responded sullenly to the greeting, his eyes meeting Father Kent's for the briefest moment before returning to the floor.

Father Kent studied the blonde head silently while he weighed his next words. However, before he could decide on an appropriate opening, Lee suddenly looked up again.

"Did the doctor tell you how long my grandma's gonna be here this time?" Lee questioned bluntly. "They never tell me nothin'," he complained, directing a petulant glare at the nurses station.

Sympathy for the boy's plight overshadowed any reproach Father Kent might normally have made for his grammar or his attitude. The child had every right to be irritable. Since losing both parents in an automobile accident slightly over two years ago, his life had been erratic, living in the custody of a grandparent who was often too depressed and too ill to provide for even his most basic needs. Indeed, it

often appeared that the child was caring for his guardian, not the other way around. And now the boy's world was about to change again, and Father Kent couldn't be certain the change would be for the better. "Actually, Dr. McKeller did speak to me about your grandmother," he responded carefully to Lee's inquiry.

The boy cocked his head to one side and waited silently. "Dr. McKeller doesn't think your grandmother is going to get better this time, Lee," Father Kent informed him gently.

"Oh," Lee muttered expressionlessly before returning his gaze to the floor. After a long pause, he asked in a subdued voice "Am I gonna come stay at the parish then? Like I usually do when she's sick?"

"No," Father Kent replied. "I was told you're going to live with your uncle, Robert Clayton."

"Oh," Lee repeated in the same toneless manner, offering no hint of how he felt about this obviously unexpected news.

"You know your uncle, right?" Father Kent pressed, concerned by the child's unemotional response.

Lee fidgeted slightly, but his tone remained non-committal. "Yeah, kinda," he mumbled.

"Kinda?"

The boy's jaw hardened slightly, but he continued to sit impassively. "I don't remember him much. He never comes to visit no more."

"He's in the military, and he's been out of the country for the past few years," Father Kent explained. "I understand he was just recently stationed on the west coast."

"That's not why he never comes," the boy growled, anger suddenly sparking in his hazel eyes. "I heard Grandma tell Mrs. Miller they had words." Lee's eyes narrowed and his lip curled into a slight sneer. "That means they had a fight."

Father Kent shook his head; this was going to be even more difficult than he had imagined. "Not really a fight, son. When grownups have words, that just means they talked something over."

"He made my grandma cry," Lee stated harshly.

Father Kent closed his eyes, uttering a silent prayer for divine intervention. How could he possibly explain to a seven year old that his grandmother had cried, not because of any wrongdoing on the part of his uncle, but because of her own perceived missteps. Mrs. Clayton confided to him almost two years ago that she had made several unintentionally hurtful statements to her son after the untimely death of his only brother — and she had compounded her error by avoiding the subject afterward as their communication dwindled into uncomfortable silence. The clergyman had been counseling her ever since to clear the air with Captain Clayton, but he was reasonably certain the stubborn woman hadn't even told her remaining son she was seriously ill. And now it was too late. The doctor didn't expect her to live through the night, and — although she had left specific instructions regarding the transfer of custody of her grandson — she still refused to allow anyone to call her son, asserting that she had no right to seek his comfort or forgiveness at this late date.

Father Kent shook his head again; there was nothing he could do about Eileen Clayton's misguided sense of justice, but at least he could see that Lee had an opportunity to say good-bye to the woman who had acted, however ineffectively, as surrogate parent for the past two years. "Have you been in to see your grandmother yet?" he asked the boy.

"No," Lee grumbled scornfully, his face twisting into a grimace far too sardonic for his tender years. "They won't let me in her room 'cause I'm just a kid. It's against the rules."

"Well, you know what I always say?" Father Kent whispered, scanning the temporarily deserted area. "Rules are made to be broken." And taking the boy's hand, he moved quickly down the hallway toward room 330.

"We're supposed to pick the boys up at 3:30," Amanda reminded her husband as he set a plate onto the table in front of her. "Since your uncle's going to be early, we'll have to go into D.C. twice — unless you want to sit at the Officer's Club for a couple of hours."

Lee looked thoughtful as he sank into the chair beside her. "It would have been a tight squeeze in the Wagoneer, anyway," he responded with a casual shrug. "The

Colonel always travels light, but I can't believe how much stuff Phillip and Jamie take for a night or two at Joe's apartment."

Amanda shook her head as she nibbled a corner of her toast. "I know," she acknowledged ruefully. "You should have heard the boys protest when their dad tried to set a one-bag rule. I thought Phillip was going to faint when Joe told him he'd have to choose between his basketball and his cassette player."

"Maybe we should leave the Colonel at Joe's for the week," Lee suggested derisively. "The two of them should get along just fine — they both live by a rule book."

Amanda rolled her eyes at her husband's mockery, but her brow wrinkled in puzzlement as she took another bite of toast. "It's strange, though. You told me your uncle hasn't been promoted above Colonel because he's an innovator. That doesn't sound like someone who lives by a rule book."

Lee picked up her free hand and caressed her fingertips with his thumb as he considered her words. "I guess it is a little strange," he finally agreed, staring out the kitchen window at the barren winter landscape. "Maybe he likes to make his own rules."

Amanda shook her head. "I don't think so. At least not where you're concerned," she assured him. "I remember him telling me, the day you left him with me in Arlington while you were investigating those downed fighter jets, that he wished you had come with a manual. He said he didn't like making up rules as he went along."

Lee nodded, gently shaking her hand for emphasis but still avoiding her eyes. "See — that's what I was talking about. With the Colonel, everything has to be done by the book."

Amanda entwined her fingers through his while she finished her last bite of toast and picked up her tea-cup. After taking a careful sip of the hot beverage, she glanced back at his profile. "I think you're more like him than you realize," she stated cautiously.

Lee's brows rose in surprise as he turned toward her, clearly appalled by the idea of any similarity between him and his uncle. "What?" he asked incredulously.

Her eyes met his and held them. "I just mean," she began slowly, "well, I seem to remember that you read *several* books on step-parenting last spring, when you

were trying to break the ice with Jamie." As she paused, she arched one eyebrow delicately, as though daring him to argue with her.

Lee looked at her thoughtfully for a moment "Yeah, I did," he finally admitted.

After a short silence, she squeezed his hand. "I'm sure you've done a lot better than he did," she said softly, "but maybe the circumstances he was dealing with were a little harder, at least in the beginning."

"Yeah," he repeated, returning his gaze to the scene outside the window. "I guess they were."

"And you had over six months to get to know Phillip and Jamie before you moved in," Amanda reminded him. "You and the Colonel couldn't have spent much time together in the two years after your parents died, if he was stationed out of the country."

"And I had you to guide me through it," Lee finally added with a deep sigh, bringing her hand to his lips. "I wonder whether the Colonel had anyone to turn to . . ."

"I appreciate your watching the boy for me while I'm gone, Barn," Robert Clayton said briskly as he straightened his sleeves and brushed an imaginary particle of dust from the lapel of his immaculate uniform.

"It's no problem, Cap'n," Barney Dorsey replied genially. "He's a good kid. You'd see that, if you ever spent any time with him," Barney continued, wishing for once the younger man would listen to someone's advice on dealing with his orphaned nephew.

"He doesn't want to spend time with me," Clayton reminded his friend in clipped, military accents. "He's made that clear," he added grimly, the flicker of pain in his eyes quickly disappearing behind his customary stoic mask.

Barney snorted and shook his head. "He made it clear when he was seven," he argued, in another futile attempt to reason with the stubborn officer. "He's older now. You should try. He's the only family you have left."

Clayton's eyes narrowed as he closed his briefcase with a snap. "I'm doing my duty by the boy," he stated gruffly, turning away from the other man's concerned gaze.

"You could do your duty by sending him off to boarding school and visiting him once or twice a year. You don't have to keep him with you." Barney gripped Clayton's arm

to prevent him from walking away, determined for once to say what needed to be said. "If you didn't want him with you, you could take the kind of assignments that would make you a general before you're fifty. As it is, you'll be lucky not to end your career as a Major."

"It doesn't matter," Clayton muttered, pulling his arm free and pacing across his small office. "The boy's my priority."

Barney frowned. "You don't act like it," he stated bluntly.

"And you don't understand," Clayton mumbled almost incoherently.

Barney sighed. He understood a great deal more than Robert Clayton gave him credit for. He had watched the changes his friend had gone through as he lost many of his closest comrades in Korea and later as he lost his fiancée, his older brother and finally his mother. Barney had watched as walls were slowly erected to protect the other man's wounded heart. Walls which his young nephew couldn't begin to understand, much less breach. "The boy does have a name, you know. When was the last time you used it?" he asked, moving on to another recurrent gripe.

Robert Clayton ran a hand through his short, cropped hair. "It's funny. Everybody used to call my mom 'Lee'. Now, when I look into his eyes and open my mouth, the word just sticks in my throat. I can't make it come out."

"He looks like both of them, doesn't he?" Barney motioned toward a small photograph on the edge of Clayton's neatly ordered desk. The picture showed a laughing woman hugging two small boys, the older of whom was the image of young Lee Stetson.

"Yeah, he does. They have the same eyes, mom and Matt and . . ." Clayton paused again and cleared his throat. "When I look at the boy, I see both of them so clearly."

"You can't avoid him forever," Barney urged, more gently this time. "Don't you think he at least deserves to know something about his father? You're the only one who can tell him."

"If he ever wants to know, all he has to do is ask . . ." For a moment, Clayton looked into Barney Dorsey's disapproving face, then he shrugged and turned toward the door. "I'll tell you what," he conceded. "If he doesn't ask by the time he has a kid

of his own, I'll bring it up." Then he picked up his briefcase and hefted his bag onto his shoulder.

"Let me take that for you, Sir," Lee Stetson offered as he reached across his uncle to place a hand on the older man's suitcase.

Robert Clayton brushed aside his nephew's arm as he hefted the bag's leather strap to his shoulder. "I can handle it," he stated brusquely, straightening his aging spine with military precision.

Lee's jaw tightened for a moment before he shrugged and took a step back. "Fine," he muttered, shoving both hands into his pockets and exhaling loudly.

As the two men faced one another in the solemn atmosphere of the Officer's Club, Robert Clayton studied his nephew, looking him slowly up and down in the same manner he might have inspected a new recruit. Apparently satisfied with what he saw, he nodded his head as his mouth relaxed into the hint of a smile. "It looks like married life agrees with you, Sk—," he began, before halting abruptly and lowering his eyes. Clearing his throat, he shifted his feet almost imperceptibly before raising his head to meet the younger man's annoyed gaze. "It doesn't really fit you anymore, does it?" he admitted wryly. "I don't think you're going to skip out this time."

"Not a chance," Lee returned, his features relaxing only slightly as he stood stiffly before the man who had reared him from the age of seven.

Their eyes remained locked as silence stretched between them. Again, the conversational lapse was broken by the Colonel. "I spoke to Barney Dorsey a few days ago," he stated in an offhand tone. "He said to give his regards to you and to Amanda."

Lee blinked in surprise. "I didn't know you kept in touch with Barney," he responded, his expression warming at the mention of his former mentor.

It was the Colonel's turn to shrug. "I don't see him very often, since he retired. But he still calls now and then to check up on me."

"So, how is he?" Lee asked with genuine interest.

The Colonel snorted. "He's still a meddling old man, just like he's always been. He called to remind me of a promise I made, a long time ago . . ." His words trailed off as though he had said more than he intended.

A puzzled look crossed Lee's face, but before he could question his uncle further, the older man changed the subject. "So, are we going to get out of here?" he queried gruffly.

Lee hesitated. Removing his balled fists from his pockets, he flexed his fingers several times, glancing back and forth between the outside doors to his right and the Officer's lounge to his left. With a determined look, he finally turned back to his uncle. "Actually, since you're early," he suggested evenly, "I thought we'd have a drink before we head out to Rockville." As he spoke, he motioned toward the lounge.

The older man swallowed, and his jaw worked as though he might make some objection, but he nodded in agreement and turned in the direction indicated. As the pair settled at a small table in the nearly deserted bar, they were spared the necessity of further discussion by the immediate appearance of a waiter, and both looked slightly chagrined as they simultaneously requested coffee. As the waiter stepped away, Lee's eyes drifted downward, and the Colonel once again took the opportunity to study his nephew. "Something on your mind, . . . Lee?" he asked awkwardly after a long pause.

Lee rested both arms on the table and returned his gaze to his uncle's weathered face. "I just thought we should have some time alone together, to talk," he answered quietly.

A flicker of amusement showed in the Colonel's eyes. "Was this your idea, or your lovely wife's?"

"She let me think it was my idea," Lee admitted with a rueful grin.

"Smart woman," the older man observed in a low, admiring voice.

"Yeah," Lee murmured, as he appeared to lose himself in a pleasant daydream. "The best . . .," he added, appearing for a moment to forget the man on the opposite side of the table.

The Colonel waited. "So, was there something particular you wanted to talk about?" he finally prompted, a wary look appearing on his normally staid features.

"Yeah," Lee repeated , once again meeting his uncle's eyes. "I thought maybe we'd talk about . . . my dad."

"Your dad," Robert echoed softly. Clearing his throat again, he nodded as he reached inside his breast pocket to remove a slim leather case. Easing it open, he ran a finger lightly over the battered snapshot before placing it carefully on the table. It showed a laughing woman hugging two small boys, one of whom was a younger version of the man seated across from him. "Did I ever tell you about the time your dad and I got locked in your great-grandmother's root cellar?" he began slowly, without raising his suddenly misty eyes from the picture. "I was about eight at the time, and your dad and I were pretending we were escaped POWs . . ."

The End