

Any Other Man

By Kate Simon

Charlie Spencer tried to watch her son's t ball game. She tried to focus on Matty's form or lack thereof. She tried to focus on her boy's adorable face as he focused on running to first base. She tried, but all she could think about was her jerk of an ex and how he'd missed another game. And another support check. The check was probably the reason he skipped out on Matty. Michael wouldn't want to risk a confrontation with her. Instead she'd have to call her very expensive lawyer, again.

"Earth to Charlie."

"What?"

"Where are you? I was saying Matty is really improving."

"Thanks, Amy." Charlie had met Amy Caldwell when she moved to Warrington six months ago. Amy was also the divorced mother of a six year old boy. What was it about their men that made them bail? Breaking up a relationship, a marriage, she understood. But you don't get to break up with your kid. Charlie and Amy sons had become best friends. Matty and Sammy did everything together, including t ball.

"Is it Michael?"

"He should be here. How can he ignore his son?"

"We have established both are exes are charter members of the putz club."

"That's for sure. He's also late on his check, again. I've got a leaky roof and no way to fix it."

"My dad could help you."

"I don't like asking for help."

"Hey, I don't know what I would do without my dad. He's always there for me. Plus he's a retired contractor."

"I don't know." Charlie didn't like the idea of some aging pensioner climbing around on her roof.

"He's stopping by the game soon. I'll ask him."

“Amy, I can’t afford a contractor right now.”

“Let me ask him.”

“Fine, ask.”

Charlie watched the game and cheered as her son rounded home base. He looked over at her and waved. He was so proud of himself. She’d have to stop for ice cream on the way home. She heard a motorcycle and glanced in the direction of the parking lot. A man was walking toward them. He looked about six feet tall with brushed back hair, sandy brown with streaks of grey. His jeans were fitted, but not tight. His leather jacket had patches on it. As he got closer she could see they were from a motorcycle club. Squared off aviators covered his eyes. He got to the bleachers and pulled off his shades, tucking the stem into a pocket. He looked at her and everything stopped. Sound, breathing, heartbeats, everything. He had the bluest eyes she’d ever seen. He smiled and Charlie caught her breath.

“Dad, over here.”

Charlie looked over at Amy who was smiling and waving. “That’s your father?”

“Yeah,” she smiled as he climbed up the bleachers and joined them. He leaned over and kissed his daughter’s cheek.

“Hi, sweetheart. How’s our boy doing?”

“It’s t ball, Dad.”

“He’s doing great,” Charlie said.

“Dad, this is my friend Charlie. Charlie, this is my Dad, Sam Stewart.”

Charlie extended her hand. “It’s very nice to meet you, Mr. Stewart.”

“Call me Sam. Mr. Stewart makes me feel ancient.”

“You’re definitely not that,” Charlie said without thinking and then wished the ground would swallow her up.

“Wait,” said Sam. “This is your friend, Charlie? The one you go out with?”

“Yeah. Her boy Matty and Sammy are best friends.” Amy smiled at her. “We have to be friends. We don’t have a choice.” She looked at her father and sighed. “Dad, did you think Charlie was a guy? I told you after Mark, I’m done with all that.”

Charlie tried to recover and smiled. “My real name is Charlotte and I’m not a guy.”

Sam gave her a lopsided smile. “Well, you’re definitely not that.”

Sam Stewart was standing in the bleachers and cheering as his grandson was rounding home. "Way to go, Sammy!"

The boy heard him and turned and waved. "Grandpa! Did you see?"

"I sure did, buddy. Great job!"

He sat back down next to his daughter and his daughter's cute friend. Who was he kidding? She was more than cute. She was beautiful. Her long dark hair and deep brown eyes were made even more beautiful by her pale skin. She was sexy as hell when she blushed. But she was Amy's friend. Damn.

"Dad, Charlie's got a problem with a leaky roof. Do you think you could take a look?"

"Sure, sweetheart. I could stop by tomorrow."

"Great."

"I don't want to be any trouble," said Charlie.

"It's no trouble. I was going to stop at Amy's tomorrow. I'll stop at your place first."

"She lives two streets over on Belair," said Amy.

Sam smiled at the now blushing Charlie. "See, no trouble at all."

The game was over and the tiny victors came running toward them. Matty and Sammy both scored and were proud as peacocks.

"Grandpa!" Sammy shouted as he ran into Sam's arms. "Did you see me?"

"I did, buddy. You did terrific. I'm very proud." Sam was so in love with his little grandson. He was a gift from God, coming just before his wife Donna passed away. She'd had only a month with him but he'd given her great joy. Now that Sammy's no good father was out of the picture, Sam made sure he was a presence in the boy's life. He gave his grandson a loud kiss on the cheek. To his delight, Sammy kissed him back.

“Mama, did you see me?” asked Sammy.

“I sure did, honey. You were awesome.”

“Mom, did you see?” asked Matty

“Of course I did. You were great. I was thinking we should stop at Friendly’s on the way home for a burger and some victory ice cream.”

“Yay! Can Sammy come?”

Charlie looked at Amy. “Care to join us? Awesomeness deserves ice cream.”

“Sure.” Amy looked at her father. “Dad, can you join us?”

“Come on, grandpa! They have curly fries.”

Sam smiled at his grandson. Then he caught Charlie’s gaze. It looked like she was hoping he’d say yes. He was crazy. “How can I say no to curly fries?” The boys gathered up their things as he looked back at his daughter’s friend. She looked over at him as she helped her son, then look embarrassed she’d been caught. Was he crazy?

Sam sat at the table between Amy and Charlie. Sammy and Matty grabbed the available crayons and started coloring in their placemats. For the first time in longer than he could remember, he felt awkward around a woman. “Charlie, tell me a little about the leak. I’ll be sure to have the right gear.”

“You really don’t have to. I think it’s something with the roof. I’ll call someone.”

“There’s no need.” He smiled. “I can handle it.”

“Her house is the same layout as mine,” said Amy.

Sam smiled. “I’m very familiar with what can go wrong with that house. How’s ten tomorrow morning for you?”

“That would be fine, Sam. Thank you,” she smiled and Sam wondered why a woman like her would be smiling like that at him.

Charlie straightened up the living room and took a passing look in the mirror. She'd taken extra care with her hair and she'd put on a little makeup. To clean the house? Yeah, no. She'd lost her mind. Sam was hot, there was no denying it. But he was Amy's dad. Damn.

"Matty, did you pick up your toys?"

"Yes, Mom."

"I don't want Mr. Stewart tripping over your things."

Matty came to the top of the stairs. "Sammy's grandpa? Is he bringing his motorcycle? Maybe he could give me a ride."

She put her hands on her hips and looked at her son. He was quickly becoming a handful. "Yes, no and absolutely no. Mr. Stewart is being nice enough to check on the leak in the ceiling. He has to bring tools so I doubt he can carry them on his bike. And don't you even think about getting on his bike. You're far too young."

Matty put his hands on his hips, mirroring her. "You're no fun," he stomped off to his room. Charlie tried not to laugh at his six year old outrage. Her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of someone pulling into her driveway. She walked to the door and smiled. Sam's shiny red truck might make up for not bringing his motorcycle. He stepped out of his truck and Charlie forgot about everything but Sam's blue eyes. He followed her in the house as Matty came bounding down the stairs.

"Hi, Mr. Sam. You didn't you bring your motorcycle."

"Sorry, Matty, not today. I brought my truck."

Matty looked out the window. "Can I have a ride?"

"Matty, not now. I told you Mr. Stewart came by to look at the leak."

"Maybe later, buddy."

Charlie sent Matty out back to play while she led Sam upstairs. Fortunately the leak was in the guest room. The room was rarely used so it was clean and free of Matty's

toys. She pointed to the ceiling in the corner of the room. "I spotted this the other day. It doesn't look too bad."

"I've seen this before. Your chimney is right above here. I'll get out on the roof and take a look."

"The chimney? Oh God. That sounds expensive."

"Don't borrow trouble. Let me get a look at it first." Sam got a ladder out his truck and leaned it against the roof. Charlie told herself that she was standing at the bottom of the ladder for safety's sake. It had nothing to do with getting an unobstructed view of Sam's very fine ass. He looked around for a few minutes and came back down the ladder. "It's what I thought. The flashing around the chimney has come loose. That's where the leak is coming from. I have what I need in to fix it in my truck. It won't take long and I've got enough supply to replace the drywall. Do you have any ceiling paint? It will be easier to match if I use the same stuff."

"I think so, in the basement."

"Good. I'll patch the drywall. I'll come back tomorrow when it's dry. Then I can paint."

"Sam, you don't have to do that."

"I always finish what I start."

"I'm sure you do but I feel like I'm taking advantage."

Sam leaned close and smiled. "It's what you do for friends."

"Does that means we're friends, Sam?"

He pulled some flashing material from the back of his truck. "Sure we are. You've been a great friend to Amy."

"She's been a great friend to me. She was very kind to me and Matty when we moved into the neighborhood."

Sam smiled. "She's a good kid. She hasn't had it easy but she's made a good life for herself and Sammy. I'm really proud of her."

"She had a good example."

"Thanks, Charlie." He stopped and took another look at her. "Why would anyone call you a boy's name?"

"Brothers, nicknames, you know how it goes."

"Huh."

Charlie was a little unnerved. It was like he was studying her.

"I better get to it," he said as he carried his tool box up the ladder. He came back down and carried the materials he needed up the ladder. Charlie forced herself to stop watching him, and it did take a supreme effort.

She looked up from the base of the ladder. "Sam, are you okay up there if I go check on Matty?"

He looked over the edge of the roof. The sun flared behind him, outlining his trim frame. "Yeah, I'm good. I promise not to break my neck."

"Good. I'd rather all your parts stay together."

Charlie walked around the side of the house to check on her son, wondering why she had no filter around Sam Stewart.

Sam worked quickly around the chimney. He'd done this work more times than he could count so he moved almost on autopilot. That was good because he couldn't take his mind off Charlie. It had been a long time since a woman had fired him up like Charlotte Spencer. He'd had a few dates since Donna, but nothing serious. They'd mostly been fix ups from friends who couldn't imagine he was okay being alone. He and Donna had a great life together. They'd worked hard to create his contracting business while raising their daughter. They'd hoped to travel once he retired but that never happened. She'd fought her cancer hard for three years. She'd been so brave. He knew she'd held on long enough to meet her grandson. He stood and watched Charlie kicking a ball with her son. Somehow she knew he was watching. She looked up at him and he knew he was in way over his head.

Sam turned and picked up his tools. He climbed back down and walked around to the back yard. "I'm finished on the roof. If you let me inside, I can take care of the ceiling."

"Hey, Mr. Sam, can you take me for a ride in your truck?" asked Matty.

"Not right now. I have to finish fixing your ceiling." Sam smiled at Matty's pout. "Would you like to help me?"

"Are you sure?" asked Charlie.

"Matty can help carry things for me." Sam walked back to his truck and started pulling out what he'd need for the ceiling. He handed Matty the roll of mesh tape and Charlie carried a small container of drywall mud. He carried his toolbox upstairs and went back for the small sheet of drywall. He brought up a small ladder from the basement and cut out the damaged part of the ceiling. It only took a few minutes to cut out the damage. "Matty will you hand me that flashlight." The little boy smiled at being included. Sam took the flashlight and looked inside the opening. "Good news. It looks like that was the only source of the leak. There's no more damage. You caught it before it got bad."

"That's good news."

Sam measured the drywall and secured the new piece. Sam helped Matty up the ladder and showed him the proper way to spread drywall mud. Matty was as thrilled as he was rounding home.

“Good job, honey,” said Charlie. “Why don’t you go wash your hands.” She smiled as she watched her son walk to the bathroom. “That was really nice of you, Sam. He really enjoyed that, even though he got more himself than he did on the ceiling.”

“It was nice to have a little helper.” Sam smiled as he started packing up his things. Charlie moved closer as she handed him his flashlight. His hand reached for it but didn’t let go. He was caught in her eyes.

“All clean, Mom.” Matty walked back into the room and broke the spell. “Can you I go for a ride now, Mr. Sam?”

“Matty, Mr. Sam has done us enough favors for one day. He’s going to visit Sammy and his mom.”

“I wouldn’t mind giving you ah, him, a lift to Amy’s.”

Charlie looked at him and bit her lower lip. Sam thought it was sexy as hell. She looked at Sam like she couldn’t decide whether she wanted to be in the truck with him.

“I’ll call Amy and see if it’s okay. We can’t just pop in on her.”

“She’ll say yes, Mom. She always does.”

Twenty minutes later Charlie and Matty were buckled into his truck and they were on their way to Amy’s. God help him.

“Thanks for inviting us.” Charlie handed her container of potato salad to Amy. She’d invited them to lunch so Charlie brought some food. Even though they were good friends, she hated to impose.

“You know you two are always welcome.”

Sam gave his daughter a kiss. “Hi sweetheart.”

“Hi, Dad. How’d you make out at Charlie’s?”

“Fine. It was a small leak around the chimney. She caught it before it was a big deal.”

“I wish you’d at least let me pay you for your supplies, Sam.”

“Charlie, I told you that’s not necessary. The supplies I used were leftovers from other projects.”

She sighed, knowing she couldn’t win. “Thank you, Sam.”

“You’re welcome.” He looked at Amy. “Want me to fire up the grill?”

“Like I could stop you.”

“I’ll go check on the boys.” Charlie used the boys as an excuse to escape Sam’s smile.

Sam turned on the grill and got his tools ready. Amy brought out the burgers and set them next to the grill.

“Thanks for helping Charlie, Dad.”

“It was no problem. It was a pretty quick fix.” He set a few burgers on the grill and took the soda Amy offered. “Thanks, sweetheart.” He glanced over at Charlie. “Your friend doesn’t like taking help.”

“No, she doesn’t. Her ex-husband made her feel so dependent that once she finally broke free she insists on standing on her own.”

“Even the most independent person needs help now and then.”

“You know that and I know that but it’s taking her awhile.”

Sam watched Charlie as she tied Sammy’s sneaker. “Do you know the husband?”

“I’ve met him briefly one of the few times he came to pick up Matty. He’s a doctor with a overblown sense of his importance.”

“Why did they break up?”

“Other than him banging nurses? He’s a miserable father. Everything falls on Charlie.”

“I’ll never understand how a man can do that.” Sam was surprised when Amy kissed his cheek.

“I know, Dad. That’s what makes you so great.”

“Ah, thank you, sweetheart.”

Charlie set a plate for Matty and then grabbed one for herself. She tried to not focus on the fact that Sam was sitting directly across from her. She didn’t know what it was about Sam Stewart but her heart hadn’t stopped racing since she’d met him.

“Are you going to come with me next week?” asked Amy. They were supposed to go to a science fiction convention next week. They had bonded over their love of all things Firefly. She wanted to go but with Michael three checks behind, she couldn’t afford any extras.

“I don’t think so.”

“Oh, come on. Nathan Fillion will be there! We’ve been talking about this for months.”

“I already got the tickets,” said Sam.

“What?” said Amy and Charlie.

“It was supposed to be an early birthday surprise for you, sweetheart. I was going to take Sammy for the day. I can take Matty too.”

“Wow! Happy birthday to me! Thanks, Dad,” said Amy as she kissed Sam’s cheek. “Now you have to come with me.”

Charlie smiled. “I guess so.”

Sam was cleaning the grill when Amy grabbed the rest of barbeque tools. “Good grill work, Dad, as always.”

“Thanks, sweetheart.”

“You have no idea what convention we were talking about, do you?”

Sam smiled. “Not a clue.”

“You could tell she couldn’t afford it.”

“Yeah, well, I didn’t want her to feel bad. Neither one of you have it easy. You should have a chance for some fun.”

“That’s really sweet, Dad.”

“I know how much you love all that science fiction stuff and if Charlie goes with you I won’t have to.”

“Very funny. You know those tickets aren’t cheap.”

“I was wondering what to get you for your birthday. It’s not every day you turn forty.”

“You’re going to take Matty and Sammy, all day?”

“I’m thinking a trip to that trampoline place.”

“That will make the official best grandpa ever.”

“I already am, sweetheart. At least according to Sammy.”

“Well, my boy is exceptionally bright.”

“Takes after his grandpa.” Amy laughed as she gave him a tight hug. He looked over at the kitchen window and saw Charlie looking back.

Charlie finished getting dressed and looked at her watch. Sam said he'd be there soon to finish fixing her roof. She'd had a good time with Sam and Amy yesterday. It was so nice to see a father so close with his child. Amy had said her father a good guy and she could always count on him. She'd just never mentioned her Dad was smoking hot.

"Hi Sam," she said as she opened the front door.

"Hey, Charlie."

Sam followed her up to the guest room where the ladder was still waiting for him. She'd brought up the can of ceiling paint from the basement. He'd brought with him a fresh paint brush, roller and paint pan. She knew better than to offer to pay for it. He'd just say no. He climbed up the ladder and rubbed his hand over the drywall mud.

"I'm going to do a light sand before I paint. It won't take long."

"Okay. It's almost lunchtime. At least you can let me make you lunch."

Sam smiled. "I'd like that."

It took Sam less than thirty minutes to finish the repair. He rinsed off the brushes in the bathroom and carried them downstairs. "All finished. I'll just drop these in your basement."

"There's a shelf next to the sink where I keep that stuff."

Sam made a couple of trips, putting the brushes and the ladder away and putting what was left of the paint back on the shelf. He walked back upstairs to see Charlie setting the table. "This is nice of you."

"I'm very glad to have the company."

"I imagine it's been a while since you've had a kid free meal."

She laughed as she set a chicken salad in front of him. "At least six years."

"What about dates?"

“What dates?”

“Amy said you’ve been divorced for a while.”

“Three years.”

“Well, you’ve dated since then.”

“No,” she said as she took a bite of her chicken.

“No? That’s crazy.”

“I’m a single mother. An old single mother.”

“Old? You’re kidding right?”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be whining. I guess forty hit me harder than I expected.”

“Charlie, you’re a beautiful, young woman.” Charlie blushed and gave him a smile that made his heart skip. “So tell me why,” he said as he sipped his ice tea. “Since I’m pretty sure all of the men on the planet haven’t been struck blind, I think it’s safe to assume you’ve had to had offers.”

“You’re very sweet, Sam.”

Despite knowing it was a bad idea, he reached for her hand. “Charlie, I’m not trying to be nice. I’m trying to understand.”

She sat back against her chair. “I don’t want to go through all that again.”

“Amy told me you had a rough time.”

“So did she. Amy’s been a great friend.”

Sam decided not to push. “How did you meet Amy?”

Charlie seemed to relax. “At the kids school. The boys became such good friends we started hanging out together. I loved this neighborhood. When this house became available I sold my condo and moved here. I grew up in a family neighborhood like this and I wanted this kind of life for my son.” She glanced down. “I know you can see the

place isn't in the best shape. It's the reason I could afford it. I figure I can do a project at a time."

"Charlie, there is no reason to be embarrassed. Your house is very nice. You obviously take good care of it and your son."

"Thanks, Sam." She smiled at him and it made him feel something he hadn't felt in a long time. She stared at him for a minute. "I don't understand why you're single."

"What?"

"You, single, why? I know the entire female population hasn't been suddenly struck blind, so why?"

"Touché," he chuckled. "I'm not as young as I used to be."

"Who is?"

"True." He took another sip of his tea. "I've had a few fix ups in the last couple of years but nothing ever took. I haven't asked a girl out since I was fifteen. Donna and I were high school sweethearts. We were barely out of our teens when we got married. I started my construction business and Donna helped with the books. We had Amy pretty quick and we worked hard. We thought after we retired we'd travel."

"You didn't get a chance."

"No."

"You still can. You're retired now."

"I like to be here for Amy and Sammy."

"You're a good guy, Sam. But you deserve to have a life outside your family."

He laughed and stuck out his hand to shake hers. "Hello pot. Kettle here. Nice to meet you."

Charlie laughed. "Touché."

“I don’t sit around waiting for Amy to call. I do some volunteer work. It keeps me pretty busy.”

“What kind of work?”

“Habitat for Humanity. I help build houses.”

“I thought you retired from construction.”

“It’s how I serve God.” He almost laughed at Charlie’s stunned expression.

“What?”

“You know, God, the Lord, the man upstairs.” He smiled and pointed up.

Now Charlie looked embarrassed. “I’m familiar with him, I just, I don’t know, a little surprised.”

“Are you afraid I’m going to go all holy roller on you.”

“Well, I…”

He smiled and touched her hand. “Don’t worry, that’s not me. I live my life the best way I can. I don’t expect others to live the way I do just because it’s the right way for me.”

“Can I ask you something? It’s kind of personal.”

“Sure.”

“How can you have such faith after what happened to your wife? She was so young when she died.”

“I admit it was tough. Sometimes it still is. I couldn’t understand why she had to suffer. Why I did. Sometimes I still think I need to tell Donna something, then I remember.” He took a breath. “But I did a lot of reflection. After a while I choose to focus on what I did have. I had thirty three years with a wonderful woman. I have a daughter and grandson I love and I they’re kind of fond of me too,” he smiled.

“More like crazy about you, but continue,” she grinned.

“I’m healthy and happy and I’m doing my best to leave the world a little better than I found it. That’s how I serve.”

“You really are an extraordinary man.”

“Thank you.” He tried to cover his blush. “And thank you for a very nice lunch.”

“You’re very welcome,” she smiled. She stood and picked up the dishes. She put the dishes on the counter and turned the knob on the faucet. And it came off in her hand. “Damn it!”

“What happened?”

“Nothing. It’s nothing.”

He took the knob from her hand. “Let me.”

“No it’s okay.” Sam saw her hand was shaking as she tried to put it back on the stem. “I can’t believe this. Not today,” she said as she banged the knob on top of the stem. Her eyes welled with tears.

“Charlie, please, let me help.” He took the knob from her hand and saw the threads were stripped. The whole unit need to be replaced. He looked at tears running down her face. “Charlie, it’s okay. It’s just a faucet.”

“No, it’s not. It’s everything. I bought this place to give Matty a better life but I was an idiot to think I could take care of everything myself.”

“Matty’s father...?”

“Couldn’t care less. Ah, damn it.” She grabbed a sheet from the paper towels and blew her nose. “I’m sorry. I can’t believe this is happening now, in front of you.”

“Why in front of me?”

Charlie started sobbing. “Because I just wanted to have a nice lunch with a nice man. Not turn into a blithering mess.”

Sam couldn’t help himself. He pulled her into a hug. “It’s okay. You’re allowed to have a meltdown. You’re probably so used to keeping it together that you’re overdue.”

Charlie looked up at him. "How did you know?"

"You're a strong woman. You have no choice, you have to be. But nobody can keep up a front like yours forever."

She stepped out of his arms and reached for another tissue. "You're right. I don't have a choice. I haven't for a very long time. Even when I was married, everything fell on me. I supported Michael while he was finishing his residency." She looked at Sam and smiled. "I'm an RN."

"I bet you're a damn good one."

"Yeah, I am. Or I was. After Michael went into practice I wanted to stay home for Matty. The deal with the divorce was enough support to keep me at home until Matty hits high school."

"But he's slacking on payments."

"He's three months behind and I'm going to have to call my lawyer, again. My very expensive lawyer. Sam, I'm just so tired of always being in charge, the responsible one. I'm so damn tired."

He threaded his fingers through hers. "I understand." He looked into her eyes and fought his urge to kiss her. He was ashamed of himself. Here she was letting down her guard and all he could think of was how beautiful she was. He stepped back and handed her another paper towel. "How about this? It's still early. Matty won't be home for a few hours. Let's go to Al's hardware store and get a new unit for the sink."

"Oh no, it's okay. I'll get it. I've been working with this thing for months."

"It's shot. The whole thing needs to be replaced. Let me help."

Sam saw her spine straighten. "I'm no charity case."

"No, of course you're not. But we're friends, at least I hope we are. Aren't we?"

She smiled and nodded. "I suppose so."

"Good. Then let your friend help. Besides, Al gives me a discount."

He was relieved when Charlie smiled. “You really are a good man, Sam Stewart.”

He watched as she went upstairs to retrieve her keys and he whispered, “You’re one hell of a woman, Charlotte Spencer.”

It hadn't taken Sam long to replace Charlie's kitchen faucet set up. While he did it he spotted half a dozen things that needed to be done. He wouldn't offer now, but he'd be ready to make the repairs if she needed him. He turned on the faucet and checked the spray arm.

"This is great, Sam. Thank you so much for doing this," said Charlie.

"You're very welcome." As much as he knew he should let this go, he couldn't. Charlie was struggling and he wanted to help, he needed to help. "I've been thinking about something. You may tell me to mind my own business, but I'm going to say it anyway."

"Okay," she smiled.

"I hate that you have to struggle because of your ex. You said he was a doctor. I was thinking I'd make an appointment with him, then buttonhole him about your support checks." Charlie smiled, then chuckled, then full out laughed. "Okay, not getting the humor."

She took a breath and smiled. "He's a gynecologist."

"Well, that could be a problem," he smiled. Then they both laughed until they cried.

"Oh, Sam, I haven't had a laugh like that in ages."

"Glad to be of service," he smiled.

"It's really nice of you to want to help, but Michael won't care. He won't do anything for me that the court doesn't force. He doesn't care about anyone or anything but his practice and his golf game."

"He plays golf? Where?"

"Hideaway Country Club. He loves that place. He spends every free moment there."

Sam chuckled. This was gonna be good. "Hideaway huh?"

"He kept the membership in the divorce. Do you know it?"

“I built it.”

“You did?”

“Yes I did. A lifetime membership was part of my contract. I’m on the board.”

“Wow. You don’t seem the golf type.”

“I’m not but I love their pool and racquetball courts.”

“You play racquetball?” she smiled. He was startled by the look in her eyes.

“When I can. I have an idea that might work if you will let me try.”

“Well...”

“You can trust me, Charlie.”

She smiled and nodded. “Yes, I can. Okay, whatever you can do will be most appreciated.”

Sam called Adam Martin, the board chairman and a friend for thirty years, ever since he’d hired Sam to build the club. He’d asked Sam to join the board, mostly to help with construction and maintenance issues. He’d done a lot of favors for Andrew and now he was calling in one of his markers. Adam had found out that Michael Spencer was a regular all day Wednesdays, along with a dozen other doctors. Nothing like being a stereotype. Sam came dressed in a polo and khakis so as to not frighten the locals. His bike leathers could put people off. He met Adam in the bar at lunchtime, mid point in Spencer’s thirty six hole day.

“Hey Adam, thanks for this.”

“You’re welcome, Sam. I don’t know the guy so I asked around. He’s part of a tight group. They’re known for being a little too loud and cheap tippers.”

“That’s not a surprise.”

“His dues are paid in full for the year. He’s never late on his club house bills.”

“Of course he is. That’s important to him. His son isn’t.”

“Damn, I hate guys like that,” said Adam.

“So do I,” he said as he watched Spencer and his group walk in and move to be seated in the main restaurant. Michael Spencer was tall with dark brown hair and classically handsome. He could see how women would be attracted to him. Sam saw beneath the veneer. This was a smarmy guy. All show and no substance. Sam looked at Adam. “You ready for this?”

“Hell yes,” he smiled.

Sam walked over to the table and took the seat next to Spencer. Adam took the seat on the other side, leaving Spencer’s golfing buddies standing.

“Michael Spencer?” asked Sam.

“Yes. Who are you and what are you doing?”

“My name is Sam Stewart. I’m on the Hideaway board. This is Adam Martin, the president of the board.” Sam saw Michael’s eyes dilate.

“Ah, hello. We’ve never met. I’ve been a member for years.” He tried to shake their hands but pulled his hand back when Sam and Adam didn’t move.

“Yes, we know,” said Sam. “You are great at paying your bills here, but not for paying your child support.”

“What? Who the hell are you?”

“I told you. I’m Sam and I’m a member of the board. Your son and my grandson are best friends. Apparently you care more about golf than you do your own flesh and blood.” Sam was equally gratified by Michael’s red face and the murmurs of his friends. “So I’m here to tell you what’s going to happen. You’re going to messenger a certified check for four months child support to your ex-wife by the end of business today or the board will call a meeting tomorrow morning to have your membership terminated.”

“You can’t do that!” Michael protested.

“Not alone he can’t,” said Adam. “But as president of the board I will back what Sam wants. Sam can count many members of Hideaway as friends, including all the members of the board. Bottom line, Spencer, if Sam wants it done, it will be done.”

Sam looked at Adam and nodded. He’d always been a great friend.

“I don’t owe her that much!”

“Yes, I know you owe her three months. Twenty five percent of your yearly support payment. Call the extra month a jackass penalty.” Sam looked at his watch. “You only have a few hours to get this done, so I would hop to it. I better hear that you have sent four months payment by the end of business today or you’ll lose your membership tomorrow. If I hear that you are ever late again, you will face the same consequences.”

Michael looked back and forth between Sam and Adam and realized he was outmatched. He pushed his chair back so hard he knocked it on the floor. He stomped out of the restaurant leaving his friends stunned. Adam called over the waitress.

“Jenny, these gentleman’s lunch is on the house today.”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Martin.” The men nodded and murmured their thanks. Sam followed Adam back into the bar.

Adam slapped him on the back. “That was fun.”

“Well, I’ll agree when Charlie calls to tell me she has a check.”

“Charlie?”

“His ex-wife, Charlotte.”

“Oh, I remember her. Pretty girl. Lots of dark hair.”

“That’s her.” Sam smiled.

“Well, it’s about time.”

“What?”

“The look on your face. She’s more than a kid’s mother.”

“She’s a friend of my daughter’s.”

“Uh huh.”

“Really. I’m just trying to help out a friend.”

“Sam, who are you trying to convince, me or yourself?”

Sam shook his head. He should know better than try to get something past Adam.
“Come on, I’ll buy you lunch. It’s the least I can do.”

“Oh my God! How did you do this?!”

Sam smiled because Charlie didn’t even say hello. “I had a word with him.”

“A word?! This is everything he owes me plus next month’s.”

“No, that’s a penalty payment for being late.”

“What? Did you threaten him?”

“Well, sort of...”

“What did you do?”

“I sat down with him at the club. I gave him a choice. He could pay you four months support or he could lose his club membership.”

“Can you do that?”

“I can, especially when I brought the board president with me.”

“I don’t know how to thank you.”

“You don’t have to. I’m glad I could help.”

Charlie hadn't seen Sam since he'd pulled off the miracle. He'd gotten her all her back child support Michael and an extra month payment on top of it. She'd been able to get all her bills caught up and now she'd be able to afford a few souvenirs at the convention.

"Matty, come on. Mr. Sam is going to be here soon." Matty ran downstairs and headed straight to the front door.

"Is he here yet?"

"Hold your horses. He'll be here soon. Now I want you to listen to me. I know you're excited about going to the trampoline center."

Matty started bouncing in place. "It's going to be so much fun!"

She held her son in place. She did not envy Sam. Two hyper six year olds and trampolines. God help him. "Settle down and listen to me. You have to promise me you will listen to Mr. Sam and do what he tells you to do."

"Okay Mom."

Charlie held out her hand. "Pinkie swear." They only used pinkie swear for the most serious of occasions. She smiled as Matty held out his hand.

"Pinkie swear."

She heard Sam's truck pull up in the driveway. She opened the door and Matty immediately tried to run out. "What did I just say?" Sam got out of his truck and Charlie's breath caught. Sam was wearing jeans and a t shirt that showed just how fit he was. Amy got out of the passenger side of the truck as Sammy stayed hooked into the back seat. "Hi guys."

"Hi. You all ready to go?" asked Amy.

"Yes. Let me get my bag." She grabbed her purse and locked the front door. "Sam, Matty's under strict orders to behave. We did a pinkie swear."

Sam smiled at Matty. "Pinkie swear, that's pretty serious stuff."

She place her hand on Sam's arm. "Thank you for this. Thank you for everything."

"You're very welcome. Go have some fun."

"We sure will."

"We'll see you back at my house," said Amy.

"Take your time, sweetheart. Enjoy yourself."

Charlie got into her car and waited until Sam pulled out and turned down the road.
"It was so nice of Sam to get two tickets. I'm really looking forward to it."

"What was that look?" asked Amy.

"What look?"

"The way you looked at my father. You were checking him out."

"No I wasn't"

"Please, you were practically drooling."

"I was not drooling, but, okay, I notice your father, of course. He's a very handsome man."

"Charlie, he's my father."

"That doesn't change the fact that he's a very handsome man."

"You're not...you and my father aren't..."

"No!"

"He's spent a lot of time here recently."

"He fixed my leaky chimney. And I told you he got Michael to pony up what he owed me and then some. I was really hurting for money. Amy, your father is a good man. He was helping out his daughter's friend. It's what he does."

"Yeah, I suppose. You could get any other man. You don't need my father."

Charlie stared ahead at the road, knowing she'd just lied through her teeth to her best friend.

Charlie and Amy had the best time at the convention. It was great to be able to let go of all her issues and geek out with her best friend. They checked out all the vendors and Charlie treated herself to a new Firefly t shirt. The panel with the members of the Firefly cast was amazing. They even got autographs and took pictures with the cast. Amy was staring at her picture of herself looking at Nathan Fillion. Charlie sighed, almost sad they were driving home. But she'd get to see Sam again and that made her smile. He was so handsome.

"Isn't he handsome?" Amy asked sighing.

"What?" she asked. "Who?" she asked hoping Amy couldn't read her mind.

Amy faced her picture towards Charlie. "Nathan Fillion, that's who."

"He really is. I was surprised at how funny and nice he is," said Charlie.

"They all were. I don't know how they can be so nice to thousands of people all at once."

"I guess all the fans who go to these things know how to behave so that helps. Thanks for including me in your birthday gift. I had a great time."

"What's better for a fortieth birthday than totally geeking out like a twelve year old?"

"Not a thing."

"We'll have to do something equally geeky for your fortieth. You never did tell me when it was."

"It was a couple of weeks ago."

"What?! Why didn't you tell me?"

"We were never big on birthdays in my family. My brother's called to say hi. If they hadn't reminded me I probably would have forgotten all about it."

“Bull. Nobody forgets their own birthday, let alone your fortieth. In two weeks I’m have my birthday barbeque. Everyone’s coming because its being the last barbeque of the season. We’ll make it a joint party.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“Of course I do. Just tell me who you want to invite.”

“We know all the same people. My brothers both live down south. There isn’t anyone else.”

“Aren’t their people from your old neighborhood?”

“What few people I knew where Michael’s friends.”

“Okay, it’s settled. Joint birthday party two weeks from today.”

Charlie smiled. Amy was such a good friend. She took after her father. Now Charlie had to convince herself to forget about him.

Sam had dozed off in the recliner after he brought the boys home. They'd been well behaved but they were two, high energy six year olds. He bought some burgers on the way home and fed them their dinners. Both boys started falling asleep after their busy day so he put both of them in Sammy's bed. It was a full size and there was plenty of room for both. He got them tucked in, changing Matty into one of Sammy's pajamas. He got only half way through a bedtime story about dragons before he saw they were both sound asleep. He took a sip of his soda when he heard Amy's car pull up. Amy came in with a large bag.

"Hey girls. Did you have a good time?"

Amy gave him a big hug. "Dad, it was awesome! We had so much fun. Look." She opened the bag and pulled out the cardboard folder with her prized picture.

"That's nice. It's a good picture of you."

She sighed and pointed to the picture. "Not me, him. That's Nathan Fillion."

"Who's that?"

Amy looked at Charlie and sighed. "See what I mean. He has no clue."

Charlie smiled and shook her head. "Seriously? Nathan Fillion, Firefly, Castle, all kinds of shows."

"Oh yeah, I thought he looked familiar."

"Dad, you don't have a clue, do you?"

He laughed and hugged her. "Not a one. I'm just glad you had a good time."

"You have to see the video of Amy flipping out." Charlie pulled out her phone and pulled up a video. Sam laughed when Amy spotted her idol and squealed out like Sammy at the trampoline center.

"Oh this is great. You sound like a little kid," he said.

"We both did," said Amy. "Here, let me." She took Charlie's phone from his hand.

"Speaking of kids, where's mine?"

“Upstairs out cold. They had a great time but they were falling asleep in their happy meals.”

“I’m going to run upstairs and look in on him.” She pointed to her phone. “Try not to laugh too hard at me.”

“Don’t count on it,” said Amy.

Sam watched Charlie go upstairs then turned his attention back to the videos They looked relaxed and happy. This is just what he wanted for both of them. “It looks like you two had a great time.”

“We did, Dad. You couldn’t have picked a better present. Speaking of birthdays…”

“Don’t worry. I didn’t forget. I’m manning the grill in two weeks.”

“I want to make it a double party. Charlie told me her fortieth was just a few weeks ago. She didn’t have so much as a cake. She has no family here.”

Sam smiled and gave his daughter a kiss on her forehead. “You’re a good girl, sweetheart.”

He looked up as Charlie came back down stairs. “He’s out cold. I gave him a kiss but he didn’t move. You really tired them out.”

“They bounced their brains out for hours. You’re not the only one with video.” He pulled out his phone and pulled up a video of Sammy and Matty bouncing and giggling.

“Oh, that’s great. You’ll have to get me a copy.”

He looked at Amy.

“Don’t worry, Dad. I’ll show you how.”

“Thanks, sweetheart.”

“It’s been a busy day so I’m going to get going. Do you mind if I leave Matty here?”

“Of course not. If he wakes up I’ll call you. Join us for pancakes in the morning.”

“Sounds great. Thanks again for inviting me.” Charlie looked at him and smiled.
“And thanks for the tickets. We had a great time.”

“You’re very welcome.”

“See you tomorrow.”

“You’re going home to hang up your picture with Nathan,” Amy grinned.

“Oh, like you’re not,” she smiled. Charlie left and Amy started pulling the rest of her things out of the bag. She proudly showed off a t shirt with a picture of the actor.

“Looks good, sweetheart. Before I forget, show me how to send the video to Charlie.”

“Sure.” Amy took the phone from him and looked at his contacts. “You have her in your contacts?”

“Yeah. I gave her my number if she needs any repairs. Do you remember when your heat went out at four a.m. last winter. Would you want a stranger in your house at that hour?”

“No, but...”

“But what?”

“Well, she is really pretty.”

“Amy Lee! She’s a friend of the family who needs some help. You’re the one who asked me to help her.”

Amy’s shoulders slumped. “Sorry, Dad. Here let me show you how to send this.” She pulled up Charlie’s contact and she showed him how to attach the video. She hit the button and the video was sent. They heard a beep behind them. He saw Charlie’s phone was still sitting on the table. “Damn. Charlie forgot her phone.”

“So call her and tell her.”

His daughter rolled her eyes. “Only you still have a landline. No one else does, including Charlie.”

“Give me the phone. I’ll drop it off on my way home.”

“Thanks, Dad. Matty would be upset if he wakes up and can’t talk to her.”

“It’s no problem. I’m going to take off anyway. Those kids wore me out. I need some sleep.”

“Come for pancakes in the morning?”

“I’ll see. I’ll call you in the morning.”

“Okay.” Amy gave him a tight hug. “Thanks again, Dad. I really had a terrific day and I was able to completely relax because I knew Sammy was with you.” She kissed his cheek. “I love you, Dad.”

“I love you too, sweetheart.” Sam got into the car and set Charlie’s phone on the passenger seat. He looked back at his daughter’s home and reminded himself that a sin of omission was still a sin.

Charlie pulled out her souvenirs from the convention and looked at the picture. Any other time she'd have been mooning over a picture of her with a famous TV star. But now wasn't any other time. And Sam Stewart wasn't any other man. Trying to control herself around Sam was getting so difficult. She sat on the couch and leaned her head back. What was she going to do? She closed her eyes and dreamt not of a space cowboy. She dreamt of a handsome contractor with the bluest eyes she'd ever seen. She startled awake with a knock at the door.

"Sam? Come in. Is Matty okay?"

"He's great. Still sound asleep." He pulled her phone out of his pocket. "You forgot your phone."

"Oh God! Thank you. Matty would freak if he couldn't talk to me."

"And so would you."

Charlie smiled. "So would I. I really appreciate this, Sam, thank you."

"You're welcome." He looked at her and she saw it in his eyes. Suddenly she knew, it was now or never. "Sam, you said we're friends, right?"

"Of course."

"Friends can be honest with each other."

"Sure."

"I have to tell you something."

He took her hands in his. "You're shaking. What's wrong?"

"I need you to know," she took a breath and looked in his eyes. "I can't stop thinking of you."

"What?" he whispered.

"This isn't because you've helped me with the house and with Michael. I haven't stopped thinking about you since I first saw you walking across the ball field. I keep

looking at you.” She smiled as she looked him up and down. “Even Amy saw me noticing you.”

“She did?”

“Yeah, today she warned me off you.”

“She did what?”

“She saw me checking you out. I told her that of course I noticed you. You’re a very handsome man. But it was nothing, we’re friends.” She held his hands to her. “Sam, I lied right to her face. There is something between us, something electric. I’ve never felt anything like this before, not in my whole life. Sam, I know you feel it too. I can see it in your eyes. I see the way you look at me.” She stepped closer. “Can you tell me I’m wrong?” She moved a little closer. “Tell me I’m wrong, Sam.”

“You’re not wrong,” he whispered.

Charlie threaded her hands around his neck. She gave him a soft kiss and whispered, “Sam.” She saw the wall crumble and fall.

“Charlie,” he growled as he pushed her against the arm of the couch. He held her tight against him as she dug her hands into his hair and pulled him into a deep kiss. Everything in her that had been asleep for so long blazed to life. He kissed and ran his hands down her back and cupped her ass. They kissed until they had no more breath. He kissed and nipped at her neck and shoulder. “My God, Charlie.”

“Sam,” she whispered as she cupped his cheek with her hand.

He kissed her softly. “I never expected this.”

“Neither did I.”

“Now what?” he smiled. She took his hand in hers and led him toward the stairs. “Are you sure?”

“Sam, if you don’t make love to me right now, I may burst into flames.”

“Well, we can’t have that, can we?” he grinned, then picked her up in his arms and carried her upstairs.

“Sam!” she squealed as he carried her into her bedroom. He set her on her feet and smiled.

He pulled her close. “Such a beautiful angel.”

“Well not so much,” she giggled. “If I were an angel I wouldn’t have been preoccupied with thoughts of this.” She slipped her hands under his t shirt and pushed it over his head. She ran her hands up his chest. “Damn,” she growled. “Even better than I imagined.” She placed her lips on him, tracing his strong muscles with kisses, then her tongue. She looked up into his eyes and saw a fire she’d never seen before in anyone. She felt his passion on every inch of her skin. He unbuttoned her blouse and let it drop to the ground. She heard him gasp as he ran his fingers over her skin. He reached around and unhooked her bra and let it fall.

“Charlie,” he whispered.

“Sam, I want you.”

Clothes hit the floor in record time. Charlie pulled back the covers and slid to the top of the bed. She felt more passion from Sam just looking at her body than she’d had her whole life.

Sam wrapped his arm around Charlie as she cuddled close to him. She looked up at him and he gave her a soft kiss. "Well, this is kind of a big deal."

She grinned and slid her hand down his waist. "It sure is."

He chuckled and gave her another kiss. "I meant taking this step."

Charlie pushed herself up on her shoulder. "Yes, it is. Did I push?"

"No, you didn't push. You were right. This is something we both wanted." Charlie suddenly looked shy.

"I just hope...well. It's been a long time. I hope it was, I was..."

He silenced her with a kiss. "Angel, you were wonderful." He kissed her again and smiled. "Very passionate, very sexy."

"I'm glad. I don't have a lot of experience."

"Neither do I."

"What?"

Sam smiled at her stunned expression. "I met my wife when I was fifteen. We were together for thirty three years."

"Do you mean...?"

"You're only the second woman I've ever been with."

She fell back and looked at the ceiling. "How is that possible?" she gasped.

"I was married most of my life."

"No, I get that. Married, faithful, of course, but you've been alone for a long time. And you're, well, you!"

"Excuse me?" he chuckled.

"Sam, you are, to put it mildly, smoking hot! How has some woman not found you in the last six years?"

He leaned over her and brushed her hair aside. "Because, my darling girl, this is a very big deal to me. This couldn't have happened with just any woman." He saw her eyes well with tears as she smiled.

"This couldn't have happened with any other man. It's been just as long for me."

"What? You've been divorced three years."

"Michael was through with me the moment I got pregnant."

Sam was dumbfounded. Her ex was a jackass. "Let me be very clear, you are a beautiful, sexy, passionate woman. I couldn't be happier that we found each other." Charlie's eyes darkened and she pulled him in for a blazing kiss. They had a lot to face, but for now, it was just the two of them.

Charlie heated up some leftover roast beef and gravy. She hadn't been hungry after the convention but now she was starving. She smiled as Sam wrapped his arms around her waist and kissed her neck. "Hey mister, why don't you make yourself useful?"

"I thought I was," he chuckled as his hands travelled down to her hips.

"Grab some plates and silver. I'll put on some veg." She grabbed a bag of steam s vegetables and popped it into the microwave. She put some bread on the plates to make open face sandwiches. She dished out the hot roast beef and gravy. She put the vegetables on the table and sat across from Sam.

"Looks good," he said.

"It'll do in a pinch." She reached for his hand. "Someone made me hungry." She was about finished her meal when she realized Sam was staring. "What?"

He took her hand and kissed it. "You're so beautiful."

Charlie laughed "After I just inhaled my dinner."

"Yes you are."

"Finish your dinner," she smiled. "I'll start the dishes." She was reaching for her dish when she heard her phone. "I better get that. It could be Matty." She grabbed her phone and sighed. "It's Amy." She put her finger to her lips as she answered. "Hey, Amy. Is Matty okay?"

"They're both sound asleep. I tried to call you an hour ago but you didn't answer. I wondered if my dad forgot to drop you phone off to you."

Charlie smiled. "No, he brought me my phone."

"So where were you?"

"I fell asleep when I got home."

"I'm too jazzed from the day to sleep. Do you want to come by for some wine?"

"Wine? Now? Sorry, no." She looked at Sam and smiled. "What I really want now is to go back to bed."

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

“Okay. Call me in the morning.”

“Will do.” Charlie disconnected the call. “What are we going to do about Amy? She’d be very upset if she knew.”

Sam sat back and sighed. “I don’t want to lie to her.”

“Neither do I. How about this? We keep this to ourselves until we decide what we both want.”

“I want to take you out, on a real date. I don’t want to hide.”

“I want that too.”

“What would you like to do? Dinner? A movie? Both?”

Charlie smiled. “You know what I’d really like?”

“What?”

“Would you take me for a ride on your bike?”

“Really?”

“Yes, I’ve never been on one before.” She grinned as she blushed. “I like the idea of holding on to you while we ride.”

“I like that idea too,” he grinned. “We could ride up to Quakertown. There’s a café there I like. We could stop for lunch.”

“I’d really like that.”

“And Matty would be in school. We wouldn’t have to explain anything to him.”

“Yes. Are you upset with me?”

“No. Of course not. We’re not telling my kid yet either.”

“This is going to get complicated.”

He reached for her hand. "Yeah, it is. But we're not going to figure it out right now."

"That's true."

He pulled her to her feet. "Now I do believe you said something about going back to bed."

Sam sat through an awkward breakfast the next day at Amy's. Charlie arrived about thirty minutes after he did. They both focused on Amy and the boys and not each other. He wanted to kiss her the way he had early that morning when he'd left her house. Amy hadn't made any further comments so he assumed they'd been discreet, but he hated it. Now he was getting ready to pick Charlie up on his Harley for her first ride. He'd dropped his extra helmet in her garage yesterday before breakfast. Charlie opened the door and grinned. He walked into the living room and she gave him a kiss that made him forget everything.

"Well, hello to you too," he grinned. "Are you ready to go?"

"Are these okay?" she asked as she showed him her sneakers.

"They're fine."

"Good. I'm really excited." She ran her hands down his leather jacket. She gave him a wicked grin. "I'm really looking forward to being your biker babe."

Sam chuckled. This was going to be fun.

After a quick explanation of what to do and not do, Sam fitted his spare helmet on Charlie. He loved how excited she was for a new experience. He helped her on then climbed on himself. She grabbed on to his waist and he gave the engine an extra gun before taking off down the road. He traveled down a less used road to Quakertown. It took longer to get there but there was less traffic and a better view. He pulled into the parking lot of the café and turned off the bike. Charlie jumped off the bike and pulled off her helmet.

"Wow! That was great!"

"I'm glad you enjoyed it."

She slipped her hands around his waist and gave him a kiss. "Thank you for taking me."

"How about some lunch?"

“Sounds good.”

They ordered the special, a spicy chicken wrap that turned out to be delicious. They split and order of fries and Sam marveled at how normal it felt. “The birthday party is next weekend.”

Charlie sat back against her chair. She knew where this was going. “Yeah. Sam, this is as tough for me as it is for you. I don’t like hiding from Amy. She’s my best friend. I don’t know how she’s going to take it.” She reached for his hand. “I think we should figure out what we are before we tell her.”

He smiled. “Or tell Matty.”

“Or him. He loves being around you, Sam. You’re the only consistent male influence he has in his life. She threaded her fingers through his. “And I couldn’t ask for a better man in his life, or mine.”

Charlie got ready for the party and wrapped a small pair of earrings she'd gotten for Amy. Sam was picking them up in a few minutes. He'd told Amy it was so Charlie could drink at her own birthday party and not worry about driving. The truth was they wanted a few minutes alone, at least relatively alone. She looked out the window and saw Sam's truck pull into her driveway. She ran downstairs and opened the door, hoping for a few minutes before Matty realized Sam was here. She was surprised when he got out of the truck with a large wrapped box.

"What's this?" she asked as she gave him a quick kiss.

"Your birthday present."

"My birthday was weeks ago."

"Irrelevant." He set the box on the dining room table. She ran her hand over the beautiful paper and bow. "Aren't you going to open it?"

"It's been so long since I've had a gift to unwrap."

"What? Why?"

"Santa brings me and Matty presents but I wrap them myself." She carefully opened the package and folded the paper. When she pulled off the lid she gasped. It was a black leather jacket. "Oh, Sam. This is amazing." He pulled the jacket out of the box and helped her put it on.

"If you're going to be my biker babe you need the jacket."

She ran to the closet and opened the door, looking in the full length mirror. "Oh Sam! I love it!" She turned and smiled "Thank you." She gave him a soft kiss.

"You're very welcome."

She slipped the jacket off and hung it in the closet. Fortunately, the Indian Summer of late September made it too warm to wear to the party so she wouldn't have to explain the jacket to Amy. But she could tell from the look on Sam's face, he knew what she was doing. She leaned her head against his chest and he held her close until they heard Matty come out of his room.

Charlie had to admit Amy was a born hostess. She'd invited most of the PTA. A few of them brought their kids and the children were playing on the massive Sam built jungle gym. "What can I do to help?"

"Nothing," said Amy. "I've got this."

"You really should think about doing this as a profession. You throw a great party."

"Especially when it's for our own birthdays. It takes my mind off of turning forty. Ugh."

"Yeah, not the easiest number."

"Which is why I invited Karl Hopper. You know he has a crush on you."

"Oh, Amy, you didn't."

"He's good looking and he's a single lawyer."

"He's a pompous ass. If you like him so much, you date him."

"You know Mark cured me of men."

"So you want me to take one for the team? No thanks." Charlie saw the disappointed look on Amy's face. "I may not want to date him but he's our guest. I'll be nice."

Amy handed her a plate of hamburgers and hot dogs. "Take these out to my Dad. The grill should be ready. Then mix and mingle."

"Fine." Charlie smiled. Amy was a good friend with good intentions. She walked the food out to Sam and set it on the table. "How's it going?"

"Grill's hot and ready for my magic."

Charlie leaned close and whispered. "So am I." She laughed when he dropped a hot dog. Sam smiled and winked. She was about join the party when she glanced back sliding door. Amy was stock still and staring. "Oh God."

Sam turned off the grill and followed Charlie into the kitchen. Amy was walking back and forth in the kitchen and crying. He locked the door behind him so none of the guests would walk in on them.

“Charlie how could you?! You lied to me!”

Charlie looked at him with tears in her eyes. “She knows.”

“He’s my father! You’re my best friend.”

“Amy Lee!” he yelled. “When did you become so selfish?” His accusation stopped her in mid rant.

“What?” she asked through her sobs.

“My father, my best friend. Mine, Mine, Mine. Where is this coming from?”

“Are you kidding me, Dad? Do you think it’s normal to have your father sleeping with your best friend?”

“Sam, I can’t do this,” Charlie cried. “I can’t come between you and your daughter.” She turned to leave but he grabbed her hand.

“Oh no you don’t. You’re don’t have to go anywhere.” He looked at his daughter and tried to soften his tone. “Amy, I know you’re not a selfish person. Tell me where this is really coming from.” She sighed and looked at him.

“I can’t go through this again.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Mark didn’t just leave me. He left me for someone I thought was my friend. They’d been having an affair behind my back for a year.”

Sam took a breath. She’d never said a word. “Okay, now I understand. But now I need you to understand something. You are my baby girl.” He leaned closer and smiled. “My forty year old baby girl.” Amy gave him a sad smile. “I love you the way you love Sammy. That hasn’t changed because I’ve fallen in love with Charlie.”

“You what?” asked Amy.

“You what?” asked Charlie.

Sam looked at Charlie. “I’m in love with you, angel.”

Charlie smiled and wiped her cheek. “I’m in love with you too.”

He smiled. “We’re going to have a conversation in a minute.” He looked back at Amy.

“You’re in love with her?”

“Yes, I am. Very much.”

“But you and Mom...”

“Sweetheart, I had more than thirty wonderful years with your mother. I loved her with all my heart. You know that.” Amy nodded. “Charlie has to be pretty brave to follow that. Amy, I’m only sixty years old. I’m planning on being around for at least another forty years. Do you expect me to spend all those years alone?”

“You have me and Sammy.”

Sam pulled her into a hug. “Yes, I do and I thank God every day for that fact. But you know it’s not the same.”

“But Dad...”

He had to get through to her. “Is it Charlie you object to? Is there something about her I don’t know? Is she a bad mother, a bad person?”

Amy looked at Charlie and sighed. “No, she’s great.”

“So is it me? Do you think I can’t be trusted with your friend?”

“No, of course not.”

“Sweetheart, I’m sorry you found out like this but we’ve been figuring things out before we told you and the boys.”

“Have you figured it out?”

He looked at Charlie and smiled. “Yeah, I think we have.”

“Well, I guess I’ll get used to the idea...” Amy looked at her father and smiled, “Eventually.”

Sam kissed her forehead. “That’s my girl.” He pulled a sheet off the paper towels. “Here, blow your nose. Go turn the grill back on and I’ll be out in a minute.”

Charlie moved closer. “Amy, are we okay? I couldn’t stand it if we weren’t.”

“Do you really love him?”

Charlie smiled at him. “I do, so much. You know what kind of man he is. How could I not?”

Amy smiled and gave her a hug. “Okay. I’m not going to promise it won’t make me uncomfortable on occasion but I’ll try.”

“That’s all we can ask,” said Sam.

She looked at Charlie and grinned. “But I am never going to call you Mom.”

Charlie laughed. “Oh I don’t think that’ll be an issue.”

“Well...” Sam smiled.

“What?” Amy asked.

“What?” Charlie gasped.

Amy rolled her eyes. “I need a drink.”

Sam waited for Amy to leave before he pulled Charlie into a passionate kiss. “That’s much better.”

“Sam, what were you talking about ... about Amy not calling me Mom.”

“I hadn’t planned on bringing this up so soon but, you know me. I’m a forever kind of guy. I’m not in this for anything casual.”

“Neither am I,” she smiled.

“Good. Let’s put a pin in that for now. We need to get used to being a real couple, out in the open. But when we’re both ready, we’ll talk about it.”

Charlie gave him a passionate kiss. "Deal."

Charlie walked out on the large patio where most of the guests were gathered. Amy walked up to her with two glasses of white wine. She accepted one and they touched glasses in a quick toast. "Thanks."

"I guess if I had to choose I couldn't find someone better for my Dad."

"Thanks, Amy. I really appreciate that." She took a sip of the much needed wine. "I'm going to check on the boys." She walked to the back of the half acre yard to where the children were playing. Along with Matty and Sammy were four other children. "Hey, Matty. Are you having a good time?"

"Mom, you should see Kathy. She can hang upside down. Kathy, show my Mom." A little blonde girl moved with surprising agility and climbed up on a crossbar. Charlie gasped as the girl grabbed the bar with her hands and dropped upside down.

"Wow, that's very impressive." The girl flipped over and landed on her feet.

"I do gymnastics. My coach says I'm a natural," said Kathy.

"I think your coach is right."

"Is it time for cake?" asked Sammy.

"Not yet. Your grandfather is grilling the burgers. I'll call you when they're ready."

She walked back to the patio and mingled with the guests as promised. Michele Chase was the mother of the very agile Kathy. "Hi, Michele."

"Hey Charlie. Happy birthday."

"Thank you. I just saw your daughter hanging upside down."

"She does that. The girl's been climbing on things she came out of the womb. I got her into gymnastics so she'd at least know how to do it without breaking her neck."

“Matty was very impressed”

“It’s a nice party. Amy is quite the hostess.”

“It’s her natural element,” she smiled.

Charlie glanced over at Sam who seemed to be finished with the first batch of hot dogs and hamburgers. “I should go help Sam and Amy serve.” She made it halfway when she was stopped by Karl.

“Hello, Charlie. It’s been a while.”

“How are you doing, Karl?”

“Oh, I do just fine,” he grinned.

Charlie cringed. Why did she have to invite this tool? “If you’ll excuse me, I need to help serve.” Karl ignored her request.

“So, Charlie, are you finally going to go out with me?”

“I’m sorry, no.”

“Come on, Charlie. I’ve been asking you for months.”

“Karl, no. I’m in a relationship.”

“Since when?”

Sam picked that moment to come to her side. “Hey, sweetheart. Would you like me to freshen you drink?”

Charlie grinned. She knew what Sam was doing. He was proclaiming her as his. “Yes, thanks, babe.” She gave him a quick kiss.

“Oh, come on, seriously?” asked Karl.

Sam took a step forward. “Seriously. Now back off, junior.” Karl wisely rejoined his friends. “I’m sorry, Charlie. I know you’re perfectly capable of handling jerks like that but I didn’t like his tone.”

“I didn’t like his tone, either. But I’m not mad you stepped in.” She took his hand in hers. “Honestly, I glad to have a man in my life who thinks I’m worth defending.”

Sam slipped his arm around her waist and whispered in her ear. “Always, my sweet angel. Always.”

Charlie sat Sam and Matty at the large picnic table. Amy sat on the opposite side, next to Sammy. The boys didn’t seem to notice the difference but everyone else did. She knew they were the number one topic of conversation at the other tables. She leaned toward Sam. “We need to tell the boys before someone else does.”

“Agreed. I see it too. Apparently these people don’t have anything else to talk about.”

As they started to clear the tables, Sam asked the boys to help. Always happy to be treated like big boys, they carried plates inside. They waited until it was just Amy and the boys in the kitchen. Sam took Amy aside. “We need to tell the boys before someone else does.”

“Yeah, I can see Karl is having a field day with this.”

“Boys can you come here a minute? I need to talk to you,” said Sam. “First, thank you for helping with the dishes. We really appreciate it.” He looked at Charlie and she smiled.

“Go ahead,” she said.

“Boys, you know how sometimes men and women go out together?”

“You mean like boyfriends and girlfriends?” asked Matty.

“Yes, like that.”

“Yeah...” Matty said.

Sam put his hand around Charlie’s shoulder. “Well, that’s what Charlie and I are doing.”

Both the boys squinted at them as if they were trying to understand what they were seeing. "But he's my grandpa," said Sammy.

"I always will be your grandpa, but that's not the only thing I am, buddy."

Matty looked at Charlie. "Mom?"

She brushed a lock of hair off his forehead. "Sweetheart, I like Mr. Sam very much. We have a good time together."

Matty suddenly brightened. "Does that mean I get a ride on your bike?"

"Not yet, buddy. You two are still too young. But I'll be happy to take the two of you in my truck."

"Well...okay. Is it time for cake yet?"

Charlie smiled. "Not yet. Why don't you go outside with the others. We'll be out soon."

Sammy tried to follow Matty but Sam stopped him. "Okay, it's just us. Talk to me buddy. What's wrong?"

"You're my grandpa!"

Amy sighed. "This is on me, Dad." She pulled out a kitchen chair and sat down. "Come here, sweetheart." She looked him in the eyes and smiled. "I had the same reaction when they told me. It's hard to think of grandpa being anything but my dad and your grandpa, but he is." She looked at her father and smiled. "He deserves to have someone in his life who makes him happy."

"But we make him happy!"

"Yes we do, but it's not the same kind of happy. You like Mrs. Spencer, right?"

"Yeah."

"So do I. So I think if we're going to share him with someone, it's nice it's Mrs. Spencer."

“Do I have to share him with Matty?”

“Sammy, I know how much you love hanging out with your grandpa. You have a lot of fun together.”

“Grandpa’s the best.”

“Yes, he is. Matty doesn’t have a grandpa.”

Sammy looked at Charlie. “He doesn’t?”

“No, Sammy, he doesn’t.”

“Matty’s your best friend. If you share grandpa you’ll make him really happy,” said Amy.

“Well...I guess that would be good.”

Amy gave her son a tight hug. “That’s my boy.”

“Come here, buddy,” said Sam. He pulled him into a hug. “I love you, Sammy.”

“I love you too, Grandpa.”

“Can I get some of that?” asked Charlie. Sammy walked over and Charlie gave him a gentle hug. “Thank you for being such a good friend to Matty.” Sammy left to join the other kids.

Sam pulled Amy into a tight hug. “I am so glad you’re my kid.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

Charlie looked at the Sam and Amy and thought for the first time, this might actually work.

Sam followed Charlie into her house and locked the door behind him. “Well, that was an interesting day.”

Charlie slipped her arms around his waist. “It sure was. I’m so glad we don’t have to hide anymore.” She gave him a quick kiss that quickly became more. She pulled back and smiled. “It was so nice of Amy to take Matty tonight. As uncomfortable as it may be for her right now, she understood we need some alone time.”

“She’s such a good kid. I’m a lucky man.”

“How about you make us some coffee. I want to change.”

“Sure.”

“Decaf,” she called after him.

Sam set up the mugs and put in a decaf pod. It had been a difficult day but well worth it. He could see Amy was at least trying to come to terms with his relationship with Charlie. He was proud of his girl for backing him up with her son. He was sitting at the kitchen table, drinking his coffee when Charlie walked into the kitchen wearing nothing but her new leather jacket and the smallest of black panties. The sight stopped him mid sip. “Damn,” he whispered.

“I’d like to celebrate my new biker babe status. Pull out your chair,” she whispered. He pulled his chair out and Charlie straddled his lap. She ran her hands through his hair and smiled. “Tonight, it’s just about us.”

Sam ran his hands underneath the jacket and up her back. He pulled her into a deep kiss.

“Mmmm. You taste like coffee.” Charlie gasped when he pushed the jacket aside and ran his tongue up her skin.

“You taste like a dream.”

Charlie’s eyes were smoky dark. “I’m very real and I’m all yours.”

Sam lost his tenuous grip on control and then he lost himself in her.

Sam and Charlie spent the next few months getting into a comfortable routine. They spent time alone when Matty was at school. Sam wanted to keep some things private at least for now. Spending time together as a family was becoming more and more normal. Charlie and Matty had joined him on his latest Habitat for Humanity project. While Sam worked on electrical and plumbing, Matty helped Charlie cleaning and polishing. Charlie added her own touches to the project with her great sense of design.

Amy seemed to have gotten more comfortable with Sam and Charlie as a couple. She'd offered to host Thanksgiving for the whole family. The day was hectic and loud and perfect. Except for when both Amy and Charlie yelled at him for being glued to football. He tried to tell them he was schooling the boys in the time honored tradition of men watching football on Thanksgiving. They didn't buy it.

Sam made time for just him and his grandson. Sammy's father, Mark, was almost as useless as Matty's. He spent most of his time with his new wife and baby. His absence was rough on Sammy and Amy. He walked into Amy's shortly after Thanksgiving to find her in tears.

"What's going on?"

"Nothing." She grabbed a tissue and wiped her eyes.

"Bull. Tell me."

"Sammy had a meltdown. Mark was supposed to take him this weekend and he cancelled again."

"Why the tears?"

"He blamed me. He said it was all my fault. Maybe it is. Maybe if I'd been a better wife..."

"Stop right there! Under no circumstances do you go there. You did everything for your family. You were a better wife than that shit deserved. Now where is Sammy?"

"In his room."

Sam walked to the foot of the stairs. “Samuel Stewart Caldwell get your ass down here right now!”

“Dad, he’s had a bad day.”

“Tough. He doesn’t get to make you cry.”

Sammy stood at the top of the stairs, obviously frightened by Sam’s tone. Good. “Come down here, young man.” Sammy walked slowly downstairs. Sam pointed to the couch. “Sit.” He did as he was told. “Your mother tells me you were rude to her.”

“Grandpa, I…”

“No talking. Just listening.” Sam tried to calm himself. “I understand your father cancelled your weekend. I also understand that you blamed your mother. Well, buddy, that doesn’t fly with me. I know you’re upset about your father. You have every right to be. He shouldn’t treat you like that. But you don’t get to take your anger out on your mother. If you’re upset about something you can tell us and talk about it. We’ll figure it out together. So now, you talk.”

“Sorry,” he said quietly.

“Don’t tell me, tell your mother. She’s the one you made cry.”

Sammy looked shocked, then started to cry. “Mommy, I’m sorry I was mean.”

Amy pulled him close. “It’s…” she looked at Sam and he shook his head. He knew she was about to say it’s okay. It wasn’t okay. He’d taught her to accept the consequences of her own actions. Sammy needed to learn the same lesson. “I accept your apology, sweetheart.”

“Are you mad at me?”

“No, sweetheart, I’m not. I understand why you were so angry. But what you said really hurt my feelings.”

Sammy gasped through his tears. “Do you still love me?”

She hugged him tight and kissed the top of his head. "I love you to the moon and back. I always will." She set him back and looked him in the eye. "Just because I love you doesn't mean I won't get angry with you if you do something wrong."

Sammy used his t shirt to wipe his eyes. He took a breath and looked out into space. "Why doesn't he love me?"

Sam wanted to snap his former son in law in two.

Amy took a breath and looked in her son's eyes. "He does honey, in his way. Unfortunately, he's just not very good at loving people."

"Like loving you?" he asked.

Amy nodded. "Like me."

Sammy through his arms around his mother's neck and kissed her cheek. "I love you, Mommy."

Amy giggled through more tears. "I know, baby. I love you too, so much."

Sammy turned toward him. "I guess we're not going to the comic book store."

Sam looked at his grandson and smiled. He could see Sammy relax. "We're still going. You manned up about what you did and apologized. I want you to promise me you'll try to be nice to your mother. She deserves nothing less than you're best behavior."

Sammy looked like he was giving his answer some thought. "I promise to try to behave."

"That's an honest answer. I'll take it," he smiled. "Now, go put on your shoes and we'll get going."

"Mom?"

Amy smiled. "Go on, sweetheart. Don't keep grandpa waiting." They both smiled as he dashed up the stairs.

Sam moved closer to Amy on the couch. "Are we okay? I did kind of bulldoze my way through that situation."

“We’re great, Dad. You didn’t say anything I wouldn’t have said if I could have pulled myself out of my pity party. Sometimes I feel so overwhelmed by the whole single parent thing. Knowing you have my back makes things so much better.”

Sam gave his baby girl a tight hug. “Whatever you want, whatever you need, I will always be there for you.”

Charlie finished putting the last of the decorations on the Christmas tree. She smiled as Sam put the angel at the top of the tree. She was never tall enough to reach it. Of course she'd never had help before.

"What do you think?" he asked.

She looked at him and smiled. "Perfect." She slipped her hands around his neck and pulled him in for a kiss. "Mmmm. Absolutely perfect." He gave her that adorable lopsided smile that made her heart race. "It was nice of Amy to include Matty in her cookie baking, leaving us with an afternoon to ourselves."

Sam gave her another kiss. "I wasn't kidding when I told her I wanted to do some Christmas shopping." He took her hand and led her to the couch. "I want to talk to you about something."

"Uh oh."

"No uh oh," he smiled. "Remember that conversation we put a pin in?"

"Yes," she said as her heart started to race.

"I'd like to talk about it now." He took her hand in his. "Charlie, I...jeez, I really suck at this. I wanted this to be perfect."

"Sam, just talk to me."

"We said we'd wait until we were ready. Well, angel, I'm ready. I hope you are too. I love you. I want to spend the rest of my days with you. I love Matty. I want us to be a family, officially." He took a deep breath. "Charlie, will you marry me?"

Charlie grinned. "I'm ready too. Yes, Sam. I'll marry you." She brushed her fingers over his cheek. "I love you and I can't imagine the rest of my life without you by my side. And just so you know, your proposal was perfect."

“I can’t believe you were serious about shopping,” said Charlie as they walk toward the mall.

“I have something to pick out and I need your help.”

She grabbed his hand. “Okay, but I want some alone time with my new fiancé.”

He gave her a quick kiss. “Deal.” He led her down a row of stores until he stopped in front of a jewelry store.

“We need to pick out your engagement ring.”

“What?” she gasped.

“I went to look on my own but I couldn’t decide. I want you to be happy with it.”

“What?”

“Ring, you, me, engaged.” He pulled her along. “Come on.” Sam waved at a woman behind the counter. “Hi Linda, I’m back.”

“I see you’ve brought reinforcements.”

“Linda, this is my fiancé, Charlie.”

“It’s nice to meet you.”

“You too.” She looked at Sam. “You were here before?”

“He’s been here a few times,” Michele smiled. “We narrowed it down to three but he finally decided you needed to choose.”

“Let’s see what he picked.” she smiled.

Linda pulled out a ring and set the in a display pad. It was a large round diamond, surrounded by smaller diamonds on the bezel and diamonds down the band. “This is one of our most popular styles.”

“That’s a bit showy for me.”

She put the ring back in the case, then she showed her one with a large round center stone and small round stones on either side.

“That’s nice.”

“I wanted more than nice for your ring, sweetheart.”

The last ring was a stunning oval stone on plain white gold band.

“Oh my,” gasped Charlie.

“That’s the one he liked.” Linda chuckled.

Charlie looked at Sam and smiled. “You know me so well.” He pulled it off the display and slipped it on her ring finger. “Oh, Sam. It’s so beautiful.”

“So are you,” he whispered as he gave her a soft kiss. He looked at Linda. “Cut off the tag and ring it up.”

“Are you sure, Sam? It must be very expensive.” She tried to turn the ring to look at the tag. He took her hand away.

“Oh no, you don’t.” He held her hand out so Linda could snip off the tag. “Why don’t you go look at wedding rings while I pay for this.”

Sam carried the two coffees to the food court table where Charlie was staring at her ring and smiling. “Earth to Charlie.”

“I can’t stop staring. It’s so beautiful.”

“I’m glad you’re happy.”

“Sam, I’ve never been happier.”

Charlie’s smile went straight to Sam’s heart.

“Sam? Sam Stewart?” They both looked toward a stocky man with short dark hair.

Sam stood to greet the man. “Hi Joe. It’s been a long time.”

“Ten years. I heard you retired.”

“Yes. Forty years was enough for me. I wanted to spend time with my family.”

The man's smile faded. "I heard about Donna. I'm sorry."

"Thanks, Joe." He turned to Charlie. "Joe was one of my subcontractors. He's a stone mason."

Joe smiled. "This must be that daughter I heard so much about."

Sam felt his face flame. Charlie jumped into the awkward silence.

"No, I'm not Amy. I'm Charlie." She extended her hand. "It's nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you too," he said looking back and forth between Charlie and Sam. "Ah...it's good to see you again. I best get back to the wife. We're trying to finish Christmas shopping."

Sam shook his hand. "It was nice to see you again, Joe."

They walked into Charlie's and Sam tossed down his keys. "I think I'll put away the decoration boxes..." he said.

"No. Tell me what's wrong."

"What? Nothing's wrong."

"Bull." She took his hand and led him to the couch. "Sit, please. Let me guess. You're upset that the guy mistook me for Amy."

"No, I..."

"Sam, don't hide from me."

"Yeah, I guess I am."

She smiled and gave him a kiss. "Get over yourself."

"Excuse me?" He wasn't expecting that.

"Sam, we are twenty years apart. That's a fact we can't change. People are going to look sideways at us both. I've already caught some flak at the PTA."

“You have? From who?” He’d moved from embarrassed to angry.

“A couple of the women and some of the men.”

“Let me guess. Karl.”

She chuckled. “They think either I’m a gold digger or that I can’t possibly be as happy with you as I could be with a younger man.” He tried to speak but she put her finger on his lips. “You know I’m not a gold digger. I’m not looking for someone to finance my life.” She smiled. “You can answer now.”

“Yes, Charlie, I know that.”

“Good. Now, as for the other thing.” She shifted herself into Sam’s lap. “I can tell you about that I am one very happy girl.” She gave him a quick but passionate kiss. “And I believe you’re pretty pleased with our love life,” she grinned. “Please, answer now.”

“Here’s my answer.” He pushed her against the arm of the couch as he gave her a searing hot kiss.

“Mmm...I’ll take that as a yes.”

“Absolutely.”

“Good to know.” She ran her hand through his hair. “Sam, we’re going to run into this a lot. But when you do, remember this. I love you with all my heart. You make me happier than I’ve ever been.” Her eyes welled as she glanced at her ring. “And I can’t wait to spend the rest of our lives together.”

“I love you too, angel. I never imagined this would be my life at my age, and I couldn’t be happier.”

“Now we just have to tell our kids.”

“They can wait a little longer,” he smiled as he led her upstairs.

Amy's house smelled of Christmas tree and cookies. Charlie took a deep breath and looked at Sam. "Are you ready for this?"

Sam took her hand in his. "It's going to be fine." They walked into the kitchen to find the boys dusted with flour. Cookies were piled up on the kitchen table. "How many cookies do you think we can eat?"

"Some of them will go to school with the boys," said Amy.

"Did you two have a good time?" asked Charlie.

"Yeah, we had lots! Look, Mom. I made these all by myself. Mrs. Caldwell showed me."

"That was really nice of her. Did you say thank you?"

"He did," said Amy. "Like a proper gentleman."

"Good job, buddy," said Sam. "Why don't you two go upstairs and get washed up. We want to get to the Roberto's before the rush." The boys ran out of the kitchen on the promise of pizza.

"If you guys could help me out here, I need to wash up too. I'm covered in flour."

"Of course but I want to talk to you first, baby."

"Uh oh. Calling me baby means trouble."

"No, it's not trouble but I need to talk to you." He took his daughter's hand. "Amy, I've asked Charlie to marry me." He took a breath and smiled. "And she said yes."

"Wow," she said quietly. "I knew you were thinking about it."

Sam put his arms on her shoulders. "Amy, honey, I thought you were okay with us."

"I am, really, it's just, this makes it real, you know...I still think of you with Mom."

"Amy I loved your mother very much."

Amy smiled. "I know you did, Dad. That's how I knew my marriage was done. I know what a good marriage looks like because of you and Mom." She took a breath and smiled at him. "I know who you are and you wouldn't be getting married if you didn't love Charlie." She gave Sam a tight hug. "I'm happy for you, Dad. I really am."

"Thank you, baby." He kissed the top of her head.

She looked at Charlie. "I'm still not calling you Mom."

Charlie laughed and received a hug from her best friend. "Look what your father got me." She held out her ring and Amy squealed.

"Wow! It's beautiful. Good job, Dad."

"What's a good job?" asked Matty as the boys came back into the kitchen, relatively clean.

"Boys, sit down," said Sam as they took seats at the cookie laden table. "We have some news." The boys sat at the table and reached for cookies.

"No more cookies," said Amy. "You've had enough sugar...for a week."

Charlie looked at Sam and he nodded. This news needed to come from her. "Matty, Sammy, Mr. Sam, asked me to marry him, and I've said yes."

"Do we have to move?" Matty asked.

"No, Mr. Sam will move in with us."

Matty seemed to consider it, then looked at Sam. "Does that means you'll be my Dad?"

Sam caught Charlie's shocked look and jumped in. "Well technically I'll be your stepfather, but I'll be very happy to keep doing things with you like I have been."

"Cool!" said Matty as he jumped out of his seat to give Sam a hug. "You can come with me to school when the other dads come."

"Of course I will. Being your stepfather also means that I'll be telling you to pick up your clothes and do your homework, and to behave yourself."

“That’s okay. Mom says I’m good. Almost always.”

Charlie’s eyes were filled with tears. “That’s right, baby. Almost always.”

Sam saw the stunned look on his grandson’s face. “Sammy this doesn’t mean anything changes for you and me.”

“But I wanted you to come to school with me on father days.”

“Come here,” he said as he pulled Sammy to his side. “I can do both. You’re both in the same class. You’ll have the same events.”

“Like the Perkins kids?”

“Who are the Perkins kids?”

“Twins,” said Charlie.

“Yeah,” he smiled. “Kind of like that.”

“Does that mean Matty is my brother now?”

“Actually, he’ll be your stepuncle and you’ll be his stepnephew. And your mom will be Matty’s stepsister.”

Matty looked at Amy. “Mrs. Chandler will be my sister?”

Amy chuckled. “Matty, considering I’m about to be your sister, I think it’s okay if you start calling me Amy.”

“This is weird,” said Matty.

“A little bit unusual,” said Sam. “But we’re a family, all of us together.”

Amy clapped her hands together. “Okay boys, go get your jackets while we clean up here.” She waited until the boys left the room. “Charlie, what is it?”

“Did you hear what Matty said? He said ‘will you be my Dad?’, not my new Dad. He doesn’t think of Michael as his father. I need to talk to my son.”

Sam put his hand on her shoulder. “Not yet. We’ve given him a lot of information to digest. Let’s go have dinner. We can talk to him tonight.”

“We?” she smiled.

“Of course. We’re a family now.”

Amy put her hand on her father’s shoulder. “He’s really good at this stuff, Charlie. I don’t know what I’d do without him. Dad’s right Charlie, we’re a family. A very unusual family, but we’re stronger together.”

Sam stood and pulled his daughter into a tight hug. He whispered in her ear. “I’m so proud of you.”

Charlie stood and wiped her tears. “I love you, Amy. You’re the best friend I could ever want.”

Amy gave Charlie a hug. “I love you too, kiddo. But I’m still not calling you Mom.”

They had a nice time at dinner but between decided to wait until the next day to talk to Matty. Between the excitement of the day and the cookie sugar rush, Matty had crashed as soon as they got home. Sam stared at the ceiling as Charlie cuddled against him. He was a little uncomfortable staying overnight with Matty in the house but Charlie convinced him that it was time Matty got used to his presence in the house.

“Mmm. Good morning,” said Charlie.

He leaned over and gave her a kiss. “Good morning.”

“How about I start breakfast.” She looked at the alarm clock. “We have maybe an hour before Matty is up.”

“Let me grab a shower and I’ll be right down.”

Charlie rolled on top of him and grinned. “How about I join you?”

He rubbed his hands down her back and under her shirt. “As much as I love that idea, we want to be ready when Matty wakes up.”

Sam came into the kitchen with his damp hair combed back. “I smell bacon.”

“Eggs, bacon and some fairly yummy hash browns if I do say so myself.”

He grabbed a fork and took a bite of the chopped red potatoes. “Oh, that’s good.”

She handed him a mug of coffee. “I knew we talked about you moving in after we get married but we don’t know when that will be. I was thinking maybe you should move some things in now, at least some clothes. I think it will be good for Matty to see you as a regular presence in his life.” She slipped her arms around his waist. “And it will be good for us.”

“Sounds like a good plan. Do you have any ideas for our wedding?”

Charlie grinned. “Well, I don’t want to wait too long. I want you living here all the time. Maybe something in the spring. We could rent a tent and have something in the backyard.”

Sam gave her a quick kiss. "I don't want to wait too long either. I made a call."

"Oh you did, did you?" she grinned.

"What?"

"I know you making a call means you've covered all the bases and have a plan firmly in place."

"It's not firm. It's just an idea."

"Tell me what you've got, babe."

"I called Adam, the president of Hideaway."

"Michael's club?"

"My club," he smiled. "Adam said they have an open Saturday in February."

"Sam, it would be beautiful but the club is pretty pricy."

"Sweetheart, as a member of the board I get the use of the facilities for free and I get the food at cost. The only full price expense is the wait staff. So you see, having our wedding at Hideaway is the fiscally responsible choice." Charlie's eyes welled with tears. "What's wrong?"

"Not a thing. It sounds perfect. I guess we're getting married in February."

Sam was about to lose himself in kissing Charlie when Matty joined them. Kids were good for that. "Good morning, buddy."

"Hi."

"Sit down. Breakfast is ready."

Sam realized his soon-to-be stepson was not a morning person. They finished breakfast waiting for Matty to start talking. "Matty, buddy, your Mom and I wanted to talk to you. We wanted to know how you're feeling about me coming to live with you."

“It’s okay.”

“What do you think about me being your stepdad?”

Matty shrugged. “It’s okay.”

Charlie reached for her son’s hand. “Matty we want to know how you feel about your other Dad.”

“I don’t know. He’s never around.” Matty’s eyes teared. “I don’t think he likes me.”

Sam tamped down his fury. It wouldn’t help Matty but breaking a few body parts on Michael would make him feel better. “Matty, come here.” Matty got out of his chair and stood close. Pulling Matty into his lap felt completely natural. “I can’t explain why he does what he does. I can tell you it’s not because you’re unlikeable.”

“Do you like me?”

Sam saw tears running down Charlie’s cheek. “Matty, yes, I like you very much. But you know what else?” Matty shook his head. “I don’t just like you. I love you.”

“You do?” He looked at Charlie. “You’re saying that because of my Mom.”

Sam really wanted to kick Spencer’s ass. He’d destroyed the trust of a six year old child. “I love you, and not just because I love your Mom. I love who you are as a person. I love how you are with Sammy. It’s like you’re brothers. You’re a good boy and you’re going to be a great man. Matty, I want you to understand something. I will always tell you the truth. The truth is I choose you to be my son.”

“For real?” he said as his chin quivered.

“For real and forever.”

Matty threw his arms around his neck. “I love you too, Mr. Sam.”

Sam held him tight and kissed his cheek. “You know, buddy, I’m going to your stepfather pretty soon. Mr. Sam seems awfully formal. If you want, you can call me Sam.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

Matty thought about it. “Could I call you Dad?”

Sam couldn’t hold back his tears. “That would make me very happy.”

Charlie wiped her eyes. “Matty, honey, why don’t you go get dressed? Amy and Sammy are expecting us.” As Matty left the kitchen, Charlie wiped Sam’s eyes with paper towel. Then, she gave him the sweetest of kisses. “I didn’t think I could love you more. I was wrong.”

Planning a wedding, even a small one, was a test of a couple's compatibility. Charlie and Sam seemed to be doing fine. The guest list was pretty simple. Most of the list were friends of Sam's from work and the club. Charlie had a few friends from the PTA and her brothers were coming up from Florida. Charlie had chosen Matty as her Man of Honor. Sam had chosen Sammy as his Best Man. Amy had agreed to the title of Matron of Honor and Best Woman. The layout of the club's banquet room stretched out over the kitchen table. Charlie thought Sam was looking particularly dashing while wearing his reading glasses.

"I'd like to put all the board members at tables next to each other."

"I think that's fine." Charlie pushed him back from the table.

"Charlie, what are you doing?"

She nipped at his ear. "I'm amusing myself. What were you saying?"

"I thought we were going to focus on wedding plans."

She kissed his neck as she rubbed her hand down his chest. "I know but I have a problem."

"What problem?" he asked as she nipped at his shoulder.

"My fiancé is smoking hot and I can't seem to keep my hands off him."

"Oh yeah?" he laughed.

"Hell yeah," she said as she pulled him into a deep kiss. Sam had just pulled her t shirt over her head when there was a knock at the door. "Are you kidding me?" She grabbed her shirt and tugged it on. Sam glanced at her and then down at his lap.

"Ah...I'm going to need a minute."

"Keep that thought." Charlie laughed. "I'll get rid of whoever it is." Her good mood vanished the minute she opened the door. "Michael. What are you doing here? Matty's in school."

He pushed his way inside, not waiting to be invited. "I hear you're getting married."

“Yes, I am.”

“At MY club! It’s not enough that you got that old geezer to embarrass me in front of my friends. Now you’re getting married! It’s on the club calendar. Do you know how many of my friends have asked me about this?”

“No, I don’t, nor do I care.”

“I don’t give a damn what idiot you got to marry you, I forbid you to do it at my club.”

“Forbid! Who the hell do you think you are? I’ll get married where ever I want. Now get out.”

He grabbed her arm. “Not until you call the club and cancel.”

“Get your hand off her.” Sam walked out of the kitchen and straight toward Michael.

“What? What the hell is he doing here?”

“I believe you’ve met my fiancé, Sam Stewart.”

“Him? You’re marrying him? You can’t be serious. He embarrassed me in front of my friends.”

“You really enjoy pissing me off, don’t you Spencer?” said Sam.

“Michael, get out of my house,” said Charlie. She walked him back out the front door and slammed it in his face.

“That’s it. I’m pulling his membership.”

“No, Sam, don’t. He’s already angry. I don’t want to poke the bear.”

Sam took hold of the arm Michael grabbed. “Are you hurt. If he hurt you I’ll break him in half.”

“I’m okay, Sam. I promise.”

He pulled her into a tight hug. “Are you sure?”

“I am, really. Are you? You’re so angry you’re vibrating.”

“It was all I could do not to deck him. He’s a crap father and then he does this to you? He deserves to be decked.”

“Agreed, but it won’t solve anything.”

“But it would make me feel better.”

She smiled and put her arms around his neck. “You know what makes me feel better? You do. Knowing you have my back makes everything better.” She could feel his muscles relax.

“It’s you and me, now. You and me and Matty.”

Charlie smiled. Even with Michael as a perpetual thorn in her side, her life was pretty good.

Sam was working inside one of the Habitat houses reworking the electric. He loved his work with Habitat. It reminded him of when he first started his business when he did everything. He had multiple certifications, including electrical and plumbing. By the time he'd sold his company he spent more time in board rooms than work sites. This work brought him back to his roots. Being able to look at what he'd created with his own hands gave him great satisfaction.

"Hey Sam, how's the groom-to-be?"

"Hi Jeff. I'm good. I'm really looking forward to it." Sam smiled. Jeff was the volunteer coordinator for the county. He'd had recruited Sam when he heard Sam had sold the business and retired. "You and Carol are coming, right?"

"We wouldn't miss it for the world."

Sam heard his phone ring and grabbed it out of his tool box. "Hi babe. What's up?" All he heard was sobbing. "Charlie? What's wrong? Is it Matty?"

"No," she whispered. "We're both fine but I need you. Can you please come?"

"I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

He drove as fast he could without getting pulled over. He pulled into Charlie's driveway, threw it into park and ran into the house. "Charlie! Where are you?!" She came out of the kitchen with tear swollen eyes. "Baby, what's going on?"

"He's suing me for full custody." She pulled a folded stack of papers off the dining room table. Sam opened the papers and read saw red.

"That son of a bitch! Being kept from his son! That's bullshit. He never shows up. He ignores Matty. He never even calls him."

"I have to call my lawyer."

"No."

"No?"

“No. It’s time to bring out the big guns. I’m sick to death of this prick. Nobody messes with my kid!”

Charlie managed a little smile. “Your kid?”

“Hell yes. He’s my kid now, and nobody messes with me and mine! I know a lot of people in this town. Hell, I built most of this town.” He pulled out his phone and called Adam. “Adam, I need information.”

“Sure Sam, what do you need?”

“You know that ass, Spencer? Well he’s pissed Charlie and I are getting married at the club. He’s decided to sue for full custody of Matty. I know most of the lawyers at the club but I need to know who handles custody issues. I need a shark, Adam. I want him to make this guy bleed.”

“Then you need Lyle Burnett. He’s the biggest family law guy in the state.”

“I remember him. I played against him in the seniors racquetball tournament.”

“Who one?”

“Ahh, I did.”

“That’s okay. He’s a good guy. He likes a good competitor. Let me give him a call and I’ll have him call you.”

“Thanks, Adam. I owe you.” He hung up the phone and pulled Charlie close, more for his benefit than for hers. “Adam tells me Lyle Burnett is the biggest family law guy in the state. Adam’s calling him and will have him call me.”

“Sam, he sounds really expensive.”

He took a breath and tried to calm down. He took her by the hand and led her to the couch. “Come on. Sit.” He put his arm around her shoulder. “Charlie, let me explain something. You know I worked hard forty years building my business.”

“Yes, I know.”

“By the time I sold the business I had over one hundred full time employees. I built most of the housing developments in three counties. Thirty years ago I started a commercial division.”

“That’s when you built Hideaway.”

“Right. I’ve also built half the office complexes and shopping centers in the state.”

“Wow.”

“I’m not trying brag. What I’m trying to say is money is not an issue for us. You will never have to worry. I have more than enough to take care of us and Amy and Sammy.”

“Sam, I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything. You and Matty are my family. I will do whatever it takes to protect you.”

Charlie rested her head on his chest. “I love you.”

His phone rang from a unknown number. “Hello?”

“Sam, it’s Lyle Burnett. Adam Martin asked me to call you.”

“Yes, Lyle. Thank you. My fiancé’s ex, Michael Spencer, is pissed we’re getting married. He’s suing for full custody.”

“Spencer. I know him. He’s a member, right? Dark hair, golfer, kind of a tool.”

“That’s him.”

“So what’s his deal?”

“He’s pissed at me specifically because when he was three months late on his child support I threatened his club membership. He said I embarrassed him in front of his friends. This is all my fault.”

“Sam, no,” whispered Charlie.

“Sam, I’ve been doing this for thirty years. Trust me, guys like this are all about themselves. Don’t blame yourself. I’ll text you an address. Get me all the information you’ve got. I’ll call you as soon as I have a plan.”

“Thanks Lyle.”

“After this, you owe me a rematch.”

Sam laughed. “You’ve got it.”

Charlie paced back and forth. Sam would be here any minute to pick her up for the hearing. She spent most of the night staring at the ceiling and worrying about today. She'd tried hard not to telegraph her tension to Matty. She made him his usual breakfast and sent him off to school. As soon as he got on the bus, she'd tossed what little food she'd eaten. She dressed in her most conservative dark suit and low heels. Her hair was pulled back and clipped low against her neck. She hoped she portrayed the image of a responsible parent. She couldn't lose Matty. She just couldn't. The front door opened and she gasped. "Wow."

"What?" asked Sam.

"I've never seen you in a suit before." She gave him a quick kiss. "You look so good. I'd drag you upstairs to bed if I wasn't so scared right now."

Sam pulled her into a hug. "Okay, first, you will never have to drag me to bed. I will always be your very willing, very enthusiastic partner." He kissed her. "Second, I know you're scared. So am I, but we have the best lawyer in the state."

Charlie rested her head on his chest. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

Sam put his finger under her chin and held her gaze. "You'll never have to find out."

Sam held tight to Charlie's hand while they found the right conference room. Lyle Burnett was sitting at the table reviewing a file. Burnett cut an impressive figure, six feet three inches of perfectly groomed attorney. He stood to greet them. "Sam, Mrs. Spencer, it's good to see you again."

"Charlie," she said.

"Charlie," he smiled.

"Lyle, tell us the truth. What do you think about our chances?"

“I’m not arrogant enough to give guarantees but I’ve been doing this a long time and I’m really good. You’ve given me the ammunition I need. I’m very confident in the outcome.”

Sam held tight to Charlie’s hand. He couldn’t dare admit he was a terrified as she was. Michael Spencer sat at the opposite table with his lawyer. He glared at Charlie and Sam could feel her shudder. “I’m here, babe.”

The judge entered the courtroom and called the room to order. Sam was surprised at his youth, appearing no more than forty five. He had sandy brown hair and round glasses. “We are here in the matter of the custody the minor Matthew Shepard. Plaintiff alleges custodial interference. Mr. Baker, call your first witness.”

Michael’s lawyer, Paul Baker was a stocky man in an ill fitted suit. Next to Lyle Burnett, everyone looked second best. “I call to the stand Dr. Michael Spencer.” Michael took the stand and continued to glare at Charlie. “Dr. Spencer, How has Mrs. Spencer interfered with your relationship with your son?”

“When I call, she refuses to let me speak with him. She refuses to adapt her schedule for me. She refuses to take into consideration that I am a physician. I bring children into this world. They do not come on her schedule. That is preventing me from seeing my son.”

“Dr. Spencer, why have you brought this action?”

“My son is getting older.” He drilled Sam with a glare. “He needs to know who his real father is. He’s being subjected to the brutish influence of a biker. My child’s future is in peril.”

“No further questions.”

“Mr. Burnett?” asked the judge.

“I have no questions for this witness.”

Sam leaned toward Burnett. “What are you doing?”

“He’s only going to lie. Trust me. I’ve got this.” Burnett stood and faced the judge. “I call Mrs. Charlotte Spencer to the stand.” Charlotte took the stand as Burnett picked a stack of papers from the table. “Mrs. Spencer, can you please identify this document?”

“It’s my phone bill for the last six months.”

“Can you identify the highlighted numbers?”

“These are the phone numbers from Michael’s office and his cell phone.”

Burnett showed the papers to Baker. “If the plaintiff could please confirm they are his phone numbers. Baker showed them to Michael, who nodded. Before he handed them back to Burnett, he studied the highlighted lines. He rolled his eyes and looked at his client. He knew where Burnett was going. Burnett turned to Charlotte. “Mrs. Spencer, how many calls to your home are indicated from Dr. Burnett’s number in the past six months?”

Charlotte flipped the pages. “Four.”

“Can you please tell us the time indicated for each call?”

“One p.m., ten a.m., eight thirty p.m. and nine p.m.”

“What time does your son attend first grade?”

“He leaves for school at eight thirty in the morning and is home at three in the afternoon.”

“Your son is six years old. What time does he go to bed?”

“He’s in bed by eight p.m.”

Burnett went back to his files and brought up another stack of papers. “Mrs. Spencer, will you please identify these pages?”

“These are my bank statements for the last year.”

“Can you identify the highlighted items?”

“They are the deposits on Michael’s support checks.”

“How many payments are there?”

“Seven.”

“Are Dr. Spencer’s support checks due on the first of the month?”

“Yes.”

“Are any of these checks deposited within the first week of any month?”

“No.”

“How many times have you had to take Dr. Spencer to court for non-payment since your divorce was final?”

“Four times.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Spencer. I have no further questions.” Burnett looked at Baker.

“No questions,” said Baker. Michael whispered something to him and Baker shook his head. Charlie returned to her seat and Sam took her hand.

“Well done, angel.”

Burnett looked at him and nodded. “I call Samuel Stewart to the stand.” They’d talked strategy and they were prepared. From the look on Michael’s face, he wasn’t. “Mr. Stewart, you are engaged to Mrs. Spencer.”

“Yes, I am,” he smiled. “We’re getting married in two weeks.”

“You are also on the board of Hideaway Country Club, correct?”

“Yes.”

Burnett pulled another stack of papers from his folder. “Can you please tell me what this is?”

“It’s the schedule of tee times. The highlighted items are the tee times for Spencer.”

“Can you explain the club’s policy for tee times?”

“Yes. Members are required to make reservations, especially for weekend tee times. To discourage members from making reservations they don’t keep there is a fee for missing your tee time.”

Burnett handed Sam another page. "Please identify this page."

"It's the club's financial statement for Michael Spencer."

"Objection!" yelled Baker. "Confidential information can not be released without the Dr. Spencer's expressed consent."

"This information contains no confidential banking information. This is strictly the statement of charges from the club. You will also see included a statement signed by every board member releasing the information to Mr. Stewart." He turned back to Sam. "Mr. Stewart, are there any cancellation fees or late fees of any kind on Dr. Spencer's statement?"

"No, there are not."

"How far in advance to you have to make tee time reservations?"

"During the week, at least two weeks. For the weekend, four weeks."

Burnett pulled more papers out of his file. He handed a copy to Baker who reviewed the page. He tossed down his pen and sat back against his chair. Burnett handed the page to the judge. "Your honor, you will see the left column are the visitation dates that were set during the divorce proceeding. The right column are the dates Dr. Spencer was on the golf course. You can see the corresponding dates where Dr. Spencer claimed he was prevented from seeing his son. He, in fact, had long standing plans to play golf." He turned to Sam. "Mr. Stewart, I'm going to ask you something before my colleague asks you. Did you use your position as a member of the board of to give us this information."

"Absolutely."

"You admit it."

"Of course. Charlie and Matty are my family. You come after my family and I will do whatever it takes to protect them." Sam glared at Michael.

Burnett smiled at Sam then turned to Baker. "No further questions."

Baker shook his head. "No questions."

“What? Do something!” Michael shouted.

“Shut up,” said Baker.

The judge pounded his gavel. “Order! I’m prepared to render my verdict. It’s obvious from this documentation that the plaintiff’s claims are without merit. The plaintiff is obviously a financially delinquent and absentee father. I find in favor of the respondent, plaintiff to pay all court costs.” The judge pounded his gavel and left the bench.

Sam saw that Charlie was crying. “Sweetheart, what’s wrong. We won.”

“We’ve made him very angry. He’s going to take it out on us.”

He took her hand and they followed Burnett out into the hallway. Sam pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped Charlie’s eyes. He held his hand out to Burnett. “Lyle, I can’t thank you enough.”

“You’re very welcome.”

“You bitch!” Michael shouted as came into the hall.

Sam moved in front of Charlie. “Back off, Spencer.”

“You! You’ve ruined me in this town! You humiliated me in front of my friends. People have stopped returning my calls. All this to get into that bitch’s pants!”

“You bastard,” Sam shouted as he lunged forward. Charlie grabbed his shoulders.

“Sam, don’t. He’s not worth it.”

“You won’t be able to do spite me anymore. I’ve sold my practice. I have to leave the state and it’s all your fault.”

“You were going to take my son out of state?” asked Charlie. “Michael, what happened to you? How could you be so cruel to your son?”

“It doesn’t matter any more. I’m starting over, without you and the kid dragging me down.” Michael turned to leave.

“Michael wait.”

“What?”

“Michael, you’re starting over. A new state, new practice. You’d like not to have the support payment hanging over your head.”

“What do you want?”

“Surrender your parental rights. You do that and you get out of any more support payments.”

He looked at Charlie and Sam with undisguised hatred. “Send the paperwork. I’ll sign.” Then he turned on his heels, walked down the hall and out of their lives.

Charlie sighed and her knees buckled. Sam caught her before she hit the floor. “Conference room.” Burnett opened the door and Sam got her into a chair. Burnett brought her a cup of water.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

Sam was worried about her pale look. “Are you okay? Should I call for help?”

“No, I’m okay. I can’t believe I did that. I’m sorry I didn’t check with you first.”

“It’s fine, sweetheart, really. You’ve gotten him out of our lives.”

Burnett smiled. “I have to admit, it was a brilliant move.”

“He was just so angry I didn’t want him to have any access to Matty. I couldn’t trust what he would do.”

Sam sat down next to her. “You’ve done what you needed to do to protect our son. I’m very proud of you.” He gave her a gentle kiss.

“Matty may hate me. I’ve taken his father away.”

Sam thought for a moment. “Somewhere down the road he may question the decision but we’ll be there for him. We will let him know every day that he’s loved and wanted. It’s all we can do.”

Two weeks had flown by in a flurry of paperwork and preparations. Charlie looked into the mirror and smiled. Her long, strapless satin gown was covered with a long sleeved lace over dress. Her long hair was twisted and pinned up. Long crystal earrings made for a dramatic effect.

“He’s going to be blown away.”

Charlie turned to see her Amy standing in the dressing room. She looked lovely in a blue satin gown that complimented her fair coloring. “Do you really think so?”

“I guarantee it.”

She gave Amy a tight hug. “Thank you.”

“Just telling the truth.”

“No, I mean thank you for everything. Thank you for being my best friend. Thank you for loving my son. Thank you for allowing me into your life.”

Amy waved her hand in front of her face. “You’re not going to make me cry! We spent way too much to the makeup artist to have it run down our faces.” She grabbed a tissue from the vanity and blotted her eyes. “Charlie, I’ve watched you two and I see how much you love each other. I never thought I could imagine my father with anyone but my mother, but you’re good for him. He deserves to be this happy and so do you.”

Charlie gave her another hug. “I love you, Amy.”

“I love you too, Charlie. But I’m still not calling you Mom.”

Sam stood at the front of the aisle with Sammy. He looked so handsome in his tuxedo. The boys were being very serious, like little men. He and Charlie had given the boys strict orders to behave themselves. He heard the music change and he took a deep breath. The doors at the back of the room opened and Amy walked down the white carpet runner. He smiled and winked at his girl as she took her place on the opposite side. He knew she struggled with the idea of his remarrying but she'd done her best to unite their two families. The guests smiled as Matty walked up the aisle and took his place next to Amy. He looked up at Sam and he gave him a nod and a subtle thumbs up. Sam was rewarded with a broad, proud grin. He loved this little boy with all his heart. He glanced back at the open door and he saw a beautiful vision. He didn't know if he'd taken a breath in the time it took for Charlie to stand next to him. "My God. You're so beautiful."

"You look very dashing," she grinned.

Sam didn't remember most of what the minister said. All he heard was "You may now kiss the bride." After that he heard hoots and hollers from the guests. He must have taken it a bit too long kissing his new wife. They walked down the aisle and back to the main dressing room. He closed the door behind him and pulled Charlie into a deep kiss. "Hello Mrs. Stewart."

"Hello Mr. Stewart."

"I can't take my eyes off you. You're stunning."

She brushed her hand over his cheek. "You look amazing. Very James Bond."

Sam spotted a bottle of champagne and two glasses with a note. "Congratulations, Mr. and Mrs. Stewart. Best wishes, Adam Martin."

"How nice," said Charlie.

Sam popped the cork and poured two glasses. "To us."

"To us."

A knock at the door interrupted their toast. "We were supposed to have a few minutes to ourselves."

"It's okay, Sam." She set down their drinks. "Come in," she called.

The door opened and Amy entered followed by Sammy and Matty. "Hi guys."

Amy leaned close and kissed his cheek. "Congratulations, Dad."

"Thank you, sweetheart."

Amy kissed Charlie's cheek. "Congratulations."

Sammy reached his hand out to shake Sam's hand. "Congratulations, Grandpa."

"Thank you, Sammy." He shook his hand like a proper gentleman. He saw Charlie was grinning ear to ear. Sammy turned to Charlie.

"Congratulations, Grandma."

Sam and Amy exploded in laughter as Charlie shot Amy a look.

"I'm sorry," she laughed. "I couldn't resist." Matty approached Sam and Charlie got quiet.

"What's going on?" he asked.

Matty got very serious. "My Mom told me what happened, you know, with my other Dad."

Charlie saw his shocked expression. "I know we said we'd talk to him together but he asked about him. I had to tell him."

"Mom said I won't see my other Dad again."

"Are you okay with that?" Sam asked.

"I guess so. He wasn't very nice. But she said I have you and you want to be my Dad. Do you really?"

Sam fought back tears. "Yes, Matty. I really do."

"Mom said I could ask you."

"Ask me what?"

“She said we could ask a judge to make us for real. Will you?”

“Will I?”

“Will you adopt me?”

Sam scooped Matty into his lap. “Yes! Yes of course I’ll adopt you.” He hugged Matty tight to his chest.

“You’re crushing me, Dad.”

Sam laughed and set him down. “Sorry.” Charlie handed him a tissue and he wiped his eyes.

Matty smiled and looked at Sammy. “You’re my nephew now.”

“You’re my uncle,” Sammy laughed.

Matty looked at Amy. “You’re my sister.”

Amy directed the two boys to the door. “Okay, little brother. Let’s give our parents a few minutes to themselves.”

Sam gave his daughter a kiss. “You’re really okay with this?”

Amy smiled. “Our family tree may be as twisted as a bonsai, but it’s our family. Yeah, I’m just fine with it.”

“I love you, baby girl.”

“I know, Dad. I love you too. Now, drink your champagne, kiss your wife and then get out there. We have one hundred people waiting for their dinner.”

Sam closed the door behind Amy and looked at Charlie. “Wow.”

“I hope you’re not mad. He asked me last night and it seemed like the right time to tell him.”

He pulled Charlie to her feet. “You were right. We shouldn’t hide anything from him. As soon as we get back from the honeymoon I call Lyle. We’ll get started on the paperwork.” He picked the champagne flutes and they touched before taking sips.

Charlie gave him a delicate kiss. "A year ago I couldn't have imagined that I would be taking this step. I couldn't have imagined ever trusting anyone again as much as I trust you. I couldn't have imagined loving someone as much as I love you, Sam Stewart."

"A year ago I thought my life was as good as it could be. I had my daughter and my grandson and rewarding work. I couldn't have imagined that a beautiful woman and her adorable son would come into my life. I couldn't have imagined I would have a wife and son. I love with all my heart, Charlie Stewart." Sam pulled her into a deep kiss.

Matty pushed opened the door. "Mom! Dad! Come on! Amy says we don't get to eat until you're there!"

"We'll be right there," said Sam. "We can't keep them waiting."

"They can wait a little longer," she grinned as continued kissing him.

"Parents!" Matty exclaimed.

Sam laughed as he finally followed Charlie and Matty into the reception. He could have never imagined.