

The Family Secret

By

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# The Family Secret

## Chapter One

The morning had been nothing short of perfect. The Florida sky was a beautiful shade of azure blue, dotted with the occasional fluffy white cloud. And there wasn't even a drop of rain predicted. Len scanned the busy street for any sign of his missing family members. He wished they'd hurry up as he was starving. They'd had an absolutely wonderful day at the theme park, but he was ready for a short break.

"There they are, Uncle Len."

He looked up to see his nephew Tyler and his wife Amanda coming down the street. His wife, Livia, appeared out of nowhere with Trevor's two children in tow.

"Okay, so we've visited almost every gift shop here. I still haven't been able to find that Minnie nightshirt that Brianna has got her heart set on. I'm just about ready to give up."

Len placed a gentle kiss on his wife's sexy mouth. They'd been married for thirty years, and he still thought that she was the most attractive woman he'd ever seen. With a riot of red curls and a sprinkling of freckles across her nose, she looked far younger than her years. She'd just turned fifty-four on her last birthday, and damned if men still didn't stare at her. It almost seemed like she got better looking as she got older.

They'd met right after college when they'd both worked together for a few months. She'd eventually become tired of the boss's constant sexual harassment. The guy was a huge jerk. Len had offered to smack him the next time he spouted off. And that might've been how any other woman would have handled it. But not his Livia.

She'd finally heard one comment too many and punched the guy in the mouth herself. It'd been quite a surprise when the diminutive redhead had packed such a punch. After picking himself up off the floor, the humiliated boss had fired her on the spot. Len had quit shortly after that himself, having lost all respect for the boss and the company. But he'd never quite forgotten the red-haired firebrand.

At that time, he'd been dating his college sweetheart. Candace had been the absolute opposite of Livia. She'd been sweet, demure and soft spoken, the absolute picture of a Southern belle. Len knew that she'd make someone a good wife. Just not him. He'd known, even then, that he wanted a woman who would be his equal in all things. Candace hadn't even been close to that woman.

He often liked to think that fate had intervened. He was attending a bachelor party for one of his college buddies when he ran into Livia again. This time, he didn't let her get away. They were married six months later, and he still thought that it was the best thing he'd even done. He'd take a spirited woman like his wife any day of the year. Her voice interrupted his thoughts.

"So what do you think?"

He was confused. "About what?"

"The nightshirt. Oh never mind, I swear men never listen to a word you say."

Within a few minutes, the whole family had assembled at the restaurant podium. They were then escorted into the themed restaurant and seated almost immediately. Looking down the long table, he realized again how lucky he was. Trevor was the older of his two nephews. He and his wife, Jill, were there with their two children, Ben and Brianna. Tyler and his wife Amanda completed the picture. It was a small but perfect family.

He'd turned sixty on his last birthday. He'd thought then, as he did so often, of his parents. They'd both been gone for many years, as had his only brother. While everyone deals with the reality that eventually parents die, nothing had prepared him for losing his brother at age fifty. Phil went to work one day and had a massive heart attack. He'd lived long enough for his wife, Karen, his sons, and Len to get there.

His dying words to Len had been to ask him to take care of his boys. And he'd honored that request with everything that he had. He and Livia had done all they could for the boys and Karen. Karen had eventually remarried and currently lived in a small town in Ohio with her new husband. The boys visited her often, but it was as if Len and Livia had become their parents. It was a responsibility they took very seriously.

Len watched as everyone got settled. The kids and Trevor's wife, Jill, were sitting next to Livia. The children just adored her, and the feeling was definitely mutual. She was a wonderful grandmother. Tyler was sitting across the table from them, and for some reason, Mandy was sitting as far away from her husband as she could. There was something going on with those two

that he just couldn't put his finger on. He made a mental note to talk to Tyler if things didn't improve.

The waitress came and took orders, while Brianna and her older brother Ben argued about which ride they wanted to do after lunch. Living in Florida, they were fortunate enough to be able to come to the theme park several times a year. So the kids were already experts on what they wanted to do and see. He watched as his wife patiently helped the kids map out their afternoon. Watching Jill and Mandy head for the bathroom, he thought about the women that his nephews had married.

Jill and Trev had been married for almost ten years now. She was a dark-haired beauty, smart as hell, and had a wicked sense of humor. Somehow, she managed to raise two wonderfully well-adjusted children while working full time. It seemed to him that they had a very good marriage. Much like he and Livia, they were very good partners.

Amanda and Tyler had only been married for two years now. She was a knockout blonde who had wrapped his nephew around her little finger with amazing ease. The air crackled when the two of them were together. He knew from his own experience with Livia that often that kind of chemistry could take some work. He hoped that Tyler had it in him. And he wasn't sure, but he thought that maybe there might be some trouble brewing with those two.

\* \* \*

Jill came out of the stall to find Mandy washing her hands. Reaching into her purse, she pulled out a brush and started on her hair. She tried to undo the damage that a whole morning of rides had done to it. She noticed that Mandy didn't seem to be in any hurry to get back to lunch.

"Did you talk to him yet?"

The blonde shook her head. "No."

Jill couldn't believe what her sister-in-law had just said. "Really, Mandy?"

"Yeah, really."

"You have to tell him, and his ego be damned. Have they called you again?"

"Yes, several times. I just know this could turn into something wonderful. Except Tyler is ruining it for me. I can barely remain civil to him. Thank God, I'm such a good actress."

Amanda had her feathers ruffled at Jill's laugh. She'd been serious.

"Oh, Mandy, you aren't fooling anyone. One look, and you can tell that you're pissed at Ty. You need to stop playing all these games and be honest with your husband. He deserves it, and so do you. And we both know that the men in this family aren't exactly tolerant of misrepresenting the facts."

Amanda wondered what Jill meant by that. Whatever she'd meant, it was wonderful to have the older woman to talk to. Jill had welcomed her into the family and treated her like the sister that she'd never had. And while Amanda knew that on some levels Jill was right, the issue was so complicated. And every single day, her resentment against Tyler was just getting bigger. She wiped a tear from her eye as she followed Jill back out into the noisy, busy, happy restaurant. She still didn't have an answer.

\* \* \*

Len finally finished unpacking the rest of the minivan. He emptied the coolers and washed them out, finally putting them away in the garage. He carried the luggage back into the house, setting it down in the family room while he went to the kitchen for a drink. He watched as Livia started to pick the suitcases up.

"Hey, put those down, woman,"

She set them gently back down. "I can lift them, Len."

He was adamant that she wasn't going to lift anything. "No way. I will not watch you hurt your back, go back to what you were doing before."

For once, she listened to him. Lately, she did more of whatever she wanted and much less of what he told her. Things had certainly changed in their marriage. Shaking his head at that thought, he went back out to the garage to finish putting everything else away. Soon, she brought him out a sandwich. He sat down at his workbench to eat.

"Thanks, babe."

"You're welcome, Len. Wasn't it a wonderful trip? The kids really are the perfect age for the theme parks."

Len chuckled. "Which kids, Liv? The little ones or the big ones? Did you see Trevor and Tyler on that roller coaster? They were both screaming like little girls. They rode the damn thing four times."

Livia smiled, and his heart turned over. What was it about his wife that still got to him? He was so grateful for all the blessings in his life. Once again, he thought about his brother and was overcome with sadness. Knowing him very well, his wife put a gentle hand on his arm.

"Thinking about Phil?"

He nodded. "It's just so unfair that he died without even seeing the men that these two have become. He would've loved Brianna and Ben so much. It just breaks my heart. I think about the graduations and weddings he never got to attend, the births he never saw. Or how about Brianna's first step, or Ben's first little league game."

His wife looked as sad as he felt. "I heard someone from a grief group once say that death is like the sky, it's spread over everything."

He wondered how it was that his wife could be so acutely in tune with exactly how he was feeling. He knew that he'd never get over the loss of his brother. That it had changed who he was on a fundamental level. But he'd gone on and would continue to honor his memory by loving the two of the dearest things that'd been in his life. His sons.

"C'mon, honey, lets go back into the house. If I can find the fixings in the kitchen,, I'm going to make some of my world famous chili."

He steered his beautiful wife into the house with a gentle hand on her lower back. He put all the sad thoughts out of his mind, knowing that if he wanted to remember his brother, all he had to do was to look at the faces of his two sons.

\* \* \*

Looking around their large back yard, Tyler cursed. He'd hoped that taking a few laps around the back forty would change things somehow. But he knew damn good and well that it hadn't. He wondered how many times other husbands were put to the test like this. Or was this something that only his wife did? They'd only been back from their family vacation for three days. They'd gotten along better when they were with the whole family, but now Mandy was right back to where they'd started. She was being impossible, with a side of hateful and angry. He didn't know how much more he could take.

He debated calling his older brother for some advice or wisdom, or just to talk with someone that was capable of being reasonable. But he knew there was no way in hell that he



could even begin to explain this. Especially since Trevor seemed to have the perfect wife in Jill. Tyler would bet his truck that his older brother never had to put up with all the crap that he did.

He shoved a hand through his light blond hair. He wanted, in the worst way, to just head for the barber and get it cut. But she loved it long. And for some ridiculous reason that he couldn't even begin to understand, she almost always got her way with him. That, no doubt, was part of the problem.

Against his better judgment, he reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out his cell phone. Hitting speed dial, it was a mere second before he had his older brother on the line. He made an honest attempt to explain her latest escapade to him, ignoring all the chuckles coming from the other side of the conversation. He'd known that this was a bad idea from the start, but he'd needed the reassurance that only another really married guy could provide.

"Look, Ty, you know that I adore Mandy, right?"

Tyler shook his head, even though he knew his brother couldn't see the affirmation. It was true. His entire family loved his wife. They had from the very first time he'd brought her home. But the fact that everyone loved Amanda, he supposed, was part of the problem.

"But the truth is, little brother, she tends to be a bit high strung. She needs a guiding hand. It'd make your life a whole hell of a lot easier."

Tyler was confused and had no idea what his brother was talking about.

"What does that mean, Trev?"

"Just think about Aunt Livia and Uncle Len."

Trevor sucked in a breath as he remembered something that he'd pushed to the back of his mind. It'd been there all this time, but he rarely allowed himself to think about it. Could Trevor really be talking about that? Maybe he'd just misunderstood.

"Are you talking about that day in the garage?" He felt his face flush at even the mention of that day.

"Yes, little brother, I'm talking about that day. That day changed my life, and I think if you'd step up to the plate here, it could change yours too."

Now Tyler was simply confused in regards to what his brother was talking about. He couldn't possibly mean what Tyler thought he meant.

"Are you trying to say that that's the way it is with you and Jill?"

"Hell no, I'm not trying to say, I am saying it."

If there'd been a chair nearby, Trevor would've collapsed into it. Trevor and Jill had the best marriage of any one he'd ever seen. He felt as if he'd fallen into another dimension on hearing this admission. His brother must have known just how shocked he was by his resounding silence. Never a man of many words, Trevor finished off the conversation.

"Try it. It works. Now get off the phone, stop bellyaching and go be a man."

The click in his ear left him feeling even more dumbfounded than before. He took another lap around the yard and thought about the thing that his brother was referring to.

It'd happened when Trevor was twelve and Tyler was ten. They'd been staying overnight at Uncle Len's house. At that time, he'd just been married to Aunt Livia a few years. Both Tyler and his brothers had adored her from the first moment they'd been introduced to her.

She'd been a natural beauty, with flaming, curly red hair and freckles. In fact, she still was a beauty, even all these years later. Her tall, curvaceous figure hadn't changed much either in all these years. She had a laugh that, to this day, made him smile to hear it. She was one of his favorite people in the whole world, both then and now.

But he'd never forgotten what'd happened that day. He and Trevor had been playing video games in the house all afternoon. He thought about the difference in the games they'd had back then and what his nephew played now. There was no comparison. So, no surprise, they'd gotten bored after a short time and headed into the garage to grab a basketball. Uncle Len had always allowed them to take the ball and go over to the park across the street to shoot hoops whenever they wanted.

Trevor had opened the side door with Tyler following behind. The scene they'd witnessed would remain burned into Tyler's memory forever. Aunt Livia was bent over the workbench with her shorts and panties around her ankles. Uncle Len didn't hear them come in as he was obviously too busy using a wooden spoon to spank her fire engine red bottom. She was crying hard and promising to be good if he'd just stop.

Both boys quietly let themselves out of the garage, the basketball all but forgotten. They'd talked about it for a while, trying to figure out what they'd seen. The most puzzling aspect of it all was that, later that night, they'd both watched the adults, and it'd seemed like nothing at all was wrong between them. Neither brother had ever mentioned the event to another living soul.

When he'd gotten older, Tyler had realized what it was that they'd witnessed. He'd learned that some men spank their wives. He could even think back to that day and remember that Aunt Livia had been scolded at breakfast for not making the car payment on time. It was an easy stretch to assume that was what had gotten her spanked. He'd watched them in the years to follow as well. They had a solid marriage.

And now, Trevor had just admitted that he spanked Jill. That was another punch to the midsection. His sister-in-law was a registered nurse, working in the ICU. People's very lives depended on her. And she'd never looked like less than a million bucks in all the time that he'd known her. Even when the four of them went camping, she came out of her tent every morning looking absolutely beautiful. She was warm, caring and as loving a person as he'd ever met. In fact, she kind of reminded him of Aunt Livia.

He couldn't, and wouldn't, ask any more personal questions about the subject to his brother. In respect for Jill. But he needed to understand this. He knew that he was at a crossroads of sorts in his own marriage. But whom could he turn to for answers? He looked over the fence and saw his neighbor putting a golf ball. It was as if the answer had been sent to him. He took his car keys out of his pocket and headed for the car.

\* \* \*

He pulled into the parking lot of the small golf course. It was one of three in the park system close to his house. The sky was clear and blue; the well kept course a study in green. If he hadn't been feeling so miserable, he would have enjoyed it much more. He noted the golfers, in their almost-matching uniforms of shorts, polo shirts and matching caps, walking to their cars, clubs in hand.

He walked through the small building that housed the gift shop and the pro shop. Still not finding the one person he'd come to see, he entered the snack shop with the intention of getting a cup of coffee. Maybe if he had something to hold, his shaking hands wouldn't be so apparent.

"Tyler! What the hell are you doing here, boy?"

He felt a warm hand clap him on his shoulder. Turning, he found himself face to face with his Uncle.

"Hey, Uncle Len. How are you?"

His uncle eyed him suspiciously. "I'm just fine, maybe a little puzzled, though. I can tell from your clothes that you aren't here to golf. So what gives?"

Tyler sighed, not sure if he wanted to go any further with this or even if he should. His uncle worked part time at this golf course. He'd been retired for five years, and bored, he'd wanted to find something that got him out in the sunshine every day. Add to that the fact that he'd always been a golfer, and here he was.

"Do you have a break you could take? I kind of need to talk to you about something personal."

He followed his uncle as he went into the pro shop and explained that he was taking his lunch a little early. He then walked over and got into a golf cart, motioning for Tyler to do the same. Tyler held on tight as Uncle Len maneuvered the little vehicle well past the course and into a rather densely wooded border. Shutting the cart off, Len turned to his nephew.

"Okay now, kiddo, spill it. Something is obviously wrong. What is it?"

Tyler had always had a lot of respect for his uncle. He was a straight shooter who faced things head on. Tyler only hoped that he could do the same. He took a deep breath and forced himself to begin, hoping to cause as little embarrassment as he could.

"Mandy and I are having some problems."

It surprised him when his uncle snorted. "Yeah, no kidding. That little lady is a handful. Love her like my own, but a handful no less."

Tyler was beginning to feel some consternation that everyone in his family knew how difficult Mandy could be. He ignored it and pressed on.

"I need some advice."

Uncle Len nodded and made a motion with his hand to indicate that Tyler should continue. Tyler felt his face getting red as he forced the words out.

"About spanking your wife."

He saw the surprise on his uncle's face, but he covered it well.

"And how come you're coming to me about this, Ty?"

Here was the tricky part for Tyler. How to put this without letting his uncle know about what he'd witnessed as a boy, without causing either of these dear people in his life undue embarrassment. He was still trying to come up with something when his uncle spoke again.

"I thought I saw you boys that day in the garage out of the corner of my eye. But I'd convinced myself it was just my imagination. It wasn't, was it?"

"No, sir."

Uncle Len just shook his head. This made Tyler feel even worse.

"We never told a single soul. In fact, we never really even discussed it with each other after that day. We understood that it was private."

His uncle reached over and squeezed his thigh. "Thank you for that, son."

Tyler felt as if he needed to explain himself.

"Look, Uncle Len, you and Aunt Livia have one of the best marriages that I know. So whatever dynamic goes on between the two of you, it obviously works. You don't have to be in the room with Aunt Livia for two minutes to know that she is a spitfire. That's one of the reasons that we all love her so much. In fact, I find it interesting that both Trevor and I have married women a lot like her. I just don't know if I can..."

Tyler stopped in mid sentence, not able to articulate what he was thinking. Not able to speak the words 'stay married' aloud. But, apparently, his uncle was also a mind reader.

"So you're thinking about divorce, then?"

Tyler stopped for a moment and thought about it. If he were being honest, he'd have to admit that was exactly what he was thinking about. And the real shame of it was that he loved Amanda. And he knew that he always would.