

A Penny for Your Thoughts

by Lara Zielinsky

I am a professional. I am a professional. Her mantra in place, Penelope Shaddix tucked a lock of hazelnut hair out of her face, and wiped the splatter of mashed peas from the bridge of her nose and faded denim blue eyes.

The six-month old boy in the highchair rapped his spoon on the plastic tray and giggled at her in delight at his prowess.

"Done with your peas, huh?" She nodded as she checked that they had been through better than half of the four-ounce container. Moving it to the neighboring counter to the right of the double sink, she noted that though his eyes followed her with interest, there was no objection. Obviously he was done eating.

However, when she went for the spoon, he immediately protested, pulling it back and shoving its rubber-covered bowl into his mouth and chewing on it with his half-in lower front teeth. The sounds of protest were more grunts than howls. He had discovered a new chew toy, and Penny realized she would have to distract him to claim the spoon, and clean him up from his meal.

A veteran of many similar battles, she knew just the thing.

"James," she coaxed in a clear voice. His eyes shot to her face as she stood up from the chair she had been using and tucked it back under the edge of the formica table in the middle of the kitchen space. "Ready for your dog?"

His expression lit up with interest, the brown flecks in his blue eyes sparkling. She reached to the far side of the table where she had stashed the favorite stuffed toy. The brown denim material with patches for eyes, and stuffed with pillow stuffing, resembled a bulldog.

"Dog?" she questioned again, holding it aloft for him to see. James held out his hands toward the toy, dropping the spoon in the process and grasping the air without a sound. "Do you want the dog?"

"Doh," he emphasized.

"Dog," she repeated, emphasizing the final sound.

"Guh."

"Dog."

"Doh Guh."

Well, two syllables was better than none. "Very good. Dog," she praised, handing him his prize. She had patterned him toward speaking "mom" and "food" the same way. Simple words, simple sounds, and Jami, James's mother, had been astonished by his progress.

While his playing with the toy covered her action, she claimed the spoon and tossed it in the sink unnoticed.

Lifting James and his prize out of the highchair, Penny took him into the apartment's

living room and set him down in the middle of the floor. He balanced on his feet for all of two seconds then rocked and landed on his diaper-padded butt.

She smiled and watched him babble at the toy dog for several minutes, seemingly telling it a story as he looked from her to the kitchen and back at the animal in between grunts and various isolated syllables.

A professional babysitter, Penny still was awed by this practice that all babies went through, but each child's unique approach never ceased to amaze her. James was clearly a storyteller. She wondered if her constant chatter to him through the long days they would spend together had anything to do with it, or if he simply had acquired the trait from his mother or father.

Penny's thoughts turned to the boy's parents. Jami Lawhead was newly divorced from Brian, the boy's father. The 31-year old sales executive frequently traveled as part of her job for Xytec Plastics Corporation, one of Vero's bigger employers.

Which is where Penelope came in. She had been hired to take care of James while his mother was on her business trips. Whenever Jami had an out of town trip, Penny met the woman at the boy's usual daycare, to take the car, drop Jami at the airport, and return here to tend to him for anywhere from the next 24 to 36 hours.

She had to stay once through three days when a late winter blizzard kept Jami's flight grounded in Chicago, half the continent away.

Penelope had other clients, but watching James currently struggling to his feet using the side of the coffee table, and hoping that Jami didn't miss any of James's first steps, she knew Jami and James had become special to her over the last three months.

When he scrunched up his face, an air of concentration about it, it was only a few seconds before Penny caught whiff of the aroma. She smiled in bemusement and collected James from the floor, retreating to the smaller bedroom of two, to change his diaper.

A check of the clock showing nearly 7 PM, made her decide to skip the new diaper immediately and put James in the tub for his nightly bath. Something of a water bug, he liked dunking his face and blowing bubbles, so she had to watch him carefully while she washed.

She finally sat back, nearly as wet as he was, and watched him bat at the colorful baubles on the top of the ring seat in which she had set him.

Before his fingers could turn into pudgy, tiny prunes, she pulled him from the tub despite his protests. Even promises of "storybook" and "bottle" were met with distress.

The challenge of putting him into his nightwear, a onesie with blue trim and little puppy dog images all over, was quickly overcome, and she settled with "Jack and the Beanstalk" on the couch with James tucked between her thighs, looking at the pictures in the book propped on her knees.

Jami Lawhead strode hurriedly from baggage claim. The curved drive was filled with an array of vehicles, from vans, to buses, to private cars, and taxis, from old clunkers blowing steam to a limo with a uniformed driver just shutting the passenger door.

Shifting her carry-on to her left hand, she used her right to wave at the taxi stand drivers sharing smokes and chatter in the far lane. "Taxi!" she shouted, her baritone voice reverberating in the acoustics of the steel and concrete frame overhang.

Five sets of eyes shot toward her. One turned to look at the others, who gave him the nod to take her fare. He quickly dropped into his driver seat and angled his blue and white Crown Victoria through the throngs of cars to her position at the curb.

"Where ya goin'?" he asked, leaping out and grasping her bags without prompting and taking them to the open trunk.

"419 Dinton Avenue." She let herself into the passenger side back seat.

As he slid behind the wheel and started the meter, she sat back, ignoring the hectic area and thinking instead ahead to home and James.

And Penny. Immediately she pictured the light brown hair, the narrow face, the ubiquitous athletic wear. The smiling, undauntable expression.

Jami was certain the young woman had been God-sent. Following her divorce, Jami had been certain that she would have to give up her job, due to the extensive traveling it entailed, in order to settle down to a more routine 9-5 in order to keep James in a stable environment.

Jami's body noticeably warmed at thoughts of James's babysitter. She wondered what Penny would say if she knew Jami had begun questioning her sexuality ever since she had come home one night delayed by a snowstorm from a trip to find the babysitter asleep on her couch, barely dressed in a tank top and bikini underwear. She had immediate visions of finishing that undressing. The late March evening had gotten distinctly hotter on the spot.

Unfortunately, aside from doing a few things that were not strictly in her contract for caring for James, like dishes and the odd laundry load or two, and vacuuming -- which Jami herself despised -- Penny didn't seem to see Jami as anything more than an employer.

Jami on the other hand noticed everything about Penny. The way she so eagerly played with James, the easy banter she kept up the minute Jami entered the door, bringing her up to date on James's developments while she had been gone, and the way she held her tea mug, when they shared the occasional cup, relaxing into the evening before Penny would take the last bus of the night to her own apartment on the other side of town.

Leaving Jami alone, again.

She did not regret leaving Brian. The man had not understood that without her job, Jami felt like she was unimportant. He had bristled at everything to do with James, particularly annoyed the first several times, after her maternity leave was over, that Jami still had to go on her business trips. They separated when she would no longer tolerate being yelled at constantly.

Everything went smoothly when she hired Penny. Three months into the experience, Jami couldn't imagine her or James's lives without the bubbly woman with light brown hair and infectious smile.

She looked up as she felt the taxi slow down and turn, finally, into the complex where she had her apartment.

A check of her watch found the time nearly 10 PM. James would undoubtedly be asleep. She wondered if she could convince Penny to stay the night, rather than leave immediately to catch the last bus which serviced this area, at 10:30. She didn't think she was brave enough to just come out with her feelings, but maybe, just maybe she could talk long enough that the opportunity to leave would pass.

She could then easily suggest that Penny just make herself comfortable and leave in the morning when it would be safer to travel anyway.

Her stomach fluttered as she set her mind to the idea and reached for the handle to open the taxi door.

"Fare?" her driver asked.

"Oh. Yeah." Sheepishly she pulled herself back in and searched her purse for her wallet, coming up with a twenty to pay the driver. "Keep the change."

He nodded and she got out while he went around and pulled her carry-on from the trunk. "Have good night, ma'am."

"Thanks. Hope so." Swallowing her courage, she straightened her back and squared her shoulders, ignoring the taxi as it turned around an island in the parking lot and squealed the tires as it left.

It's just Penny, Jami told herself, but she knew her changed perceptions of the woman were making her nervous as a cat in a roomful of rocking chairs.

She fished out her key to the door as she walked up to the first floor apartment with the "Baby Inside" fire alert sign in the front window. With a quick twist of her wrist she had the front door unlocked and the knob turned. With a sigh of relief, her long two days of traveling over, she entered her home.

Penny snapped upward on the couch, not sure what noise had awakened her. The television continued to drone low, a rerun episode of Buffy: The Vampire Slayer, and currently was running credits. *It's 10 o'clock*, she realized.

She heard another noise and realized it was the front door opening. *Jami's home!*

Quickly Penny slipped into the kitchen from the other direction and turned on the kettle of water on the stovetop for the tea she had planned. Two mugs from a back corner of one of Jami's cabinets sat with the tea bags already in them, on a tray next to the stove.

That accomplished, she exited through the other kitchen entrance, by the front door and surprised Jami with her back to the room as she closed and locked the door. "Welcome home," Penny said.

Jami jumped and turned. "I didn't think I'd find you awake. I was trying to be quiet."

"No problem. I'm making tea. James has been down since eight. He was working on standing again today. A lot. I put stuff on the living room coffee table to encourage him."

"Is he supposed to be standing already?"

"Not particularly, but he's got so much energy, I thought the extra play with his muscles would wear him out. And it did. Aside from not wanting to leave his bath, he was ready for his book, and bed, a lot earlier tonight."

"Oh."

Penny realized that Jami was staring at her, a little expression, like her son's, of concentration, narrowing her brows. "I'm sorry. Here I am going on and on. You sit down." She took the bags from Jami's hands and gestured to the living room sofa. "Sit down. I'll put these in your room and bring your tea."

Jami blinked then nodded slowly and followed directions. Penny watched her back as the woman walked away, eyes drawn to the slim cut business suit and the stocking-covered legs. *Keep your thoughts to yourself*, she warned herself sternly. *She's your employer.*

But oh, what she could do with Jami, Penny thought in brief rebellion of her code,

mentally stripping the willowy brunette naked.

She was pretty certain though that Jami had no idea of Penny's preference for women, and Penny did not want to risk coming onto her, not only to be turned down, but fired as well.

Shaking herself firmly back into line, Penny took Jami's bags to the bedroom, setting them atop a six-drawer side-by-side dresser. She caught sight of herself in the mirror perched atop and closed her eyes against the flushed face looking back.

Thankfully the start of the teakettle's whistle made her turn around barely glancing at the queen-size waterbed with burgundy and lace coverlet and ruffles. *Best not to have those sorts of dreams now.*

With the tray of tea mugs in hand, Penny reentered the living room to find Jami peeling the stockings off, nearly finished as she unrolled the hosiery off her left foot. She stopped, but her arrival had already been noticed.

"Tea?"

"Um," Penny tried to refocus, listening to the baritone voice and finally registering the questioning tone in the single word. "Tea. Mmm hmmm."

Jami pulled her feet off the coffee table quickly and reached up to grasp the tray as Penny stepped forward. The process didn't work well for either of them. Jami just managed to grasp the tray as her knees barked against the table, and Penny stumbled over one of James's toys, pitching headfirst toward Jami's position on the couch.

Jami thought quickly and with a light clatter, the mugs splashing just a little, she set the tray down out of the way and caught Penny by the shoulders, but not before the light body was sprawled against her lap.

The shoulders beneath her hands shook a little and concern had her squeeze them lightly to get Penny to look up. Penny's hands grasped her thighs as she tried to push herself upright as well.

Yep, definitely attracted, Jami thought as she felt warmth pool in her stomach and lower when Penny's gaze intersected hers. The light blue eyes swirled with a mixture of emotions. Jami recognized Penny's embarrassment then a shade of something else darkened the orbs, before abruptly Penny pushed away and broke the connection by turning her head. "I, uh, I'm sorry."

Jami rubbed her hands on her skirt, wishing they hadn't gone suddenly damp. She caught Penny's glance at her hands and a swallow and asked, "Are you all right?"

"Must just be tired. I should get going."

"No. It's all right. If you're that tired, you shouldn't try to go home. You won't be alert enough. Something might happen."

"But..."

"Just... stay," Jami asked.

Their gazes met again, and she took the initiative. Their faces were only inches apart after all. Angling her head slightly to the left, to counter Penny's tilt slightly to her right, she exhaled, leaned forward and briefly kissed the half-parted lips.

There was a gasp against her skin, and then the startled eyes before her own closed and the kiss was deepened by Penny, rousing her own startled moan.

Their breath mingled with soft rasps. Jami tasted the sugar on Penny's tongue, telltale

signs the other woman had licked the spoon used to stir their teas. Finally, she absorbed the firm softness of the body slowly settling into her lap. The fleeting thought 'maybe we talk about this?' entered her mind. Then she inhaled the scent of baby powder dusting Penny's hair and she could only hold more tightly to this precious person. *We'll talk later.*

Penny's hands tightened around her shoulders, equaling Jami in her desire to never let go.

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