

Author's Notes: First off, HUGE thanks to my beta readers - this one really came down to the wire and yet you guys never complained about the short turn around time. And of course thanks to the 'Through the Years' editors - I just squeaked this one in and I want to say thanks for letting me be part of this project. You all are a great group and I'm happy to be able to call you my friends.

This is my third story told from the perspective of Emily Farnsworth. The two episodes she was in were among my favourites - I always wished they'd used her a few more times. Anyway, this one is set sometime before "Nightcrawler". Enjoy!

The Middle of Somewhere

There's an odd fact about the ancient Babylonians - when they recorded their stories, they began and ended in the middle. I'm not sure exactly where I picked up that arcane bit of knowledge (A dinner party back when James was stationed in Cairo? One of numerous visits to the British Museum? Research for some obscure case?), but at any rate, it somehow became lodged in my gray matter, so there you are.

I'm wandering from my topic, though. It's just that particular piece of trivia popped into my head recently while having dinner with Lee Stetson at my London townhouse. In a way, it was a commentary on my relationship with him. We'd known each other for many years and always seemed to enter and leave each other's lives at midpoints. I'd be working on a case and discover that the focus of my investigation had an American target in mind. Or Lee would be on this side of the Atlantic on some business or other, then abruptly have to leave when a development led him out of the country.

This evening was no exception to the pattern we'd established over the years. Lee was in London to pick the brains of MI-6's domestic anti-terrorism squad, as he was in the midst of setting up a similar unit for our American counterpart. I'd been more than happy for the chance to invite him to dinner. Although, come to think of it, he'd been the one to suggest that we go back to the quiet of my home.

I wasn't the only one glad to see Lee again; my housekeeper, Marlene, has always had a soft spot for our young American friend. You'd never have known from the evening's menu that for the past six months, she'd made me an unwilling participant in her low-fat regime. No, tonight, she'd pulled out all the stops and prepared every one of Lee's favourite dishes. No wonder he groaned in contentment as she cleared the table at the end of our meal.

"Marlene," he sighed, "you have to give me the recipe for your apple crumble. As always, it was absolutely delicious."

She blushed slightly at his effusive praise. "You know I can't do that, Lee. I've told you before, it's a family tradition." Continuing her work, she added slyly, "Of course you

could always become part of the family. Did I mention that my niece Marjory just broke up with her boyfriend? You could have the recipe as a wedding present if you married her.”

Was it just my imagination or was there a brief flicker of something in Lee’s eyes at her mention of marriage? Or was it simply that, as James used to tease me, I’d spent too many years as a spy and was always finding mystery and intrigue where none existed?

Whether anything had been there or not, the moment was gone in an instant. Lee leaned over, took one of Marlene’s hands in his and threw in a wink for good measure. “Now why would I want your niece when you’re available?”

I couldn’t help but smile. Lee, like his father before him, has never been short on charm around the ladies.

Marlene just laughed at Lee’s attempt to flatter her. “Go on with you, now,” she said, pulling her hand away. “There’s coffee and tea set out for you in the library and I’ve got work to do.” As she walked past Lee, she added, “And if you’re lucky you might find an extra dish of apple crumble waiting for you there too.”

“So how are things at work?” I asked after we were comfortably seated in the library. As promised, Lee had an extra portion of dessert, complete with thick cream, to accompany his coffee.

“Chadwick’s being an incredible help,” he commented between mouthfuls. “This A-TAC team is going to be even better than I first thought.”

“A-TAC?” I raised a curious eyebrow.

“Anti-domestic Terrorism Action Coalition.” He rolled his eyes. “Can you believe we pay someone good money just to sit around and come up with these ridiculous acronyms?”

I leaned against the sofa back and took a sip of tea. “Funny thing you should mention Chadwick. I ran into him yesterday and your name came up.”

“Oh?” Lee was suddenly absorbed in scraping up the last bits of apple crumble from his dish. “Must have been a slow day if the two of you couldn’t find anything better to talk about.”

“The thing is, Chadwick told me that he’s going to be in the States next week. Some meeting or other with the Secret Service about the upcoming royal visit.” I avoided Lee’s eye, pretending to be busy stirring another lump of sugar into my tea. “He said

that he'd offered to get together with you then, but apparently you were adamant about hopping over to this side of the pond."

"I didn't want to wait that long. This project is priority one," Lee insisted weakly. "With a bit of luck, we may even be able to get Yusef el-Kabir on loan from Saudi Arabia."

"If I didn't know better," I continued, ignoring his feeble attempt to throw me off the scent, "I'd think that you had some other reason for wanting to come over here. Maybe someone you wanted to see. Or something you wanted to discuss." What I wasn't mentioning was that Chadwick had disclosed Lee's enquiry as to whether I was out on assignment or would be in town.

Lee, it seemed, was determined to play the good spy and stick to his cover story. "You know, Emily, it could just be a coincidence. We don't see each other often enough, so I thought I should look you up. Since I happened to be in the neighbourhood anyway."

"Mmm." I said noncommittally. "Lee, how long have we known each other? You forget I knew you back when you were first learning the art of lying. Professionally, that is."

"Okay, okay, so I figured I might as well take advantage of the chance to visit you." He held up his hands in a gesture of mock surrender. "Besides, Billy had already cleared my travel plans, so there didn't seem to be any reason not to come over here."

I didn't press Lee further about the exact topic he wanted to discuss with me. I still have my sources in Washington and their reports over the past few months had been more than a bit intriguing. "So how is everyone in DC?" I queried, changing my tactics. "Is your caseload still as heavy?"

Lee relaxed and leaned back, apparently assuming that he'd successfully put a stop to my earlier line of questioning. I waited patiently as he spent the next ten minutes recounting assorted snippets of news from the DC office. Given enough time, I knew he'd stop going around the proverbial mulberry bush.

"Oh, Amanda said to say 'hello,'" he mentioned ever so casually as he got up to refill his coffee cup from the urn on the sideboard.

I had a sudden feeling we'd finally arrived at the real point of his visit. "From what I hear, she's had a busy few weeks," I said cautiously.

Lee turned back to me and nodded. "I hardly see her some days."

"And that's a bad thing?" I quickly lifted my teacup and took a sip to hide my smile.

Lee sat back down and looked over at me. "Well, yeah . . ."

“How times have changed,” I commented. “I can recall a time when you felt quite differently.”

“What do you mean?” he asked guardedly.

For an intelligence agent, Lee can be incredibly oblivious sometimes. Did he really think I hadn't noticed his change in attitude towards his co-worker over the last few years? Everything about the way he now spoke of her was markedly different than it had been in the not so distant past.

I could recall more than a few occasions when he'd said her name with much less affection in his voice. Not long after they'd begun working together, I'd been subjected to a tirade about how 'that King woman' was totally impossible, and that no one could be expected to get along with a civilian who had the lunacy to ask Billy to be taught 'how to hit'.

Less than a year later, I'd had the opportunity to observe their interaction first hand. Amanda had been instrumental in helping solve a case in Austria, but that hadn't prevented Lee from being abrupt and even condescending with her on occasion. I was developing a real affection for this civilian-turned-agent, and knowing Lee's moods as I did, I wondered how she found the patience to put up with him at times.

Her patience seemed to have paid off, though. A few months ago, I'd called Lee to congratulate him on a joint mission involving several Chinese and Soviet agents. He had been quite lavish in his praise of Amanda's contribution to the case. Not only that, but I'd gotten the distinct impression from some of his comments that his association with his partner was no longer exclusively on a work related basis.

“I understand Amanda's received a promotion,” I remarked now, pointedly ignoring his question.

There was no mistaking the pride in his voice as he answered, “Yeah, she's now a trainee for full agent status. And you should see how she's throwing herself into her course work. She's sure to graduate top of the class.”

“Does Billy have an assignment in mind for her after she qualifies?” I asked innocently.

Lee looked up, a startled expression on his face, as if the idea of Amanda being assigned anywhere else had never occurred to him. His coffee cup remained frozen in place half way to his lips as he said slowly, “I think he wants her to keep working the Q-Bureau with me.”

I really should have resisted the urge to tease Lee, but in a way, it felt good to see him so concerned about Amanda. There was a genuinely distressed note in his voice as he added, "You don't really think . . ."

"I'm sure there's nothing to worry about," I reassured him. "Or is there some reason Billy might consider breaking up such a successful partnership?"

"Well, you see," Lee faltered, "Amanda and I, we're sort of . . . seeing each other."

I summoned up all my skill as an actress and tried to inject a note of surprise into my voice. "Dating? You and Amanda?"

"Yeah." Lee looked at me with a mixture of sheepishness and pride. "I know, I wouldn't have believed it myself a few years ago."

"Well, Billy might not approve of working partners dating," I said slowly. "It's not always the most conducive arrangement. I've seen even the best agents let their personal feelings compromise their professional judgement."

"Well, the thing is . . . Billy doesn't know we're dating. Actually no one does." Now he was looking down as if fascinated by the patterns in the carpet.

"What? Why on earth not?" This time my surprise was genuine. Lee had never been shy about flaunting his romances in front of co-workers. Then again, I might have known this time would be different. Of course, Lee Stetson couldn't have a serious relationship in a normal fashion. I sighed and set down my teacup. Why did he always have to make things so difficult for himself?

Lee just sat there for a few moments. I refused to let him off the hook, but continued to gaze at him steadily and rephrased my question. "Lee, exactly what has been going on with you and Amanda?"

"Well, to start with Amanda's family hasn't even met me," he said, a defensive tone creeping into his voice as he looked up again. "So I'm just supposed to show up out of the blue as her boyfriend?"

"Undoubtedly the situation will improve the longer you keep dating," I said wryly. "I can't believe you still haven't met her mother. Even I have!"

"I know, that's one of the reasons I wanted to talk to you. You're the only one who knows all the pieces of Amanda's life. I really needed a good friend to talk this over with. And you're the only one . . ."

“Lee, I’ve known you far too long to be susceptible to your flattery. Okay, so you haven’t had the chance to meet Amanda’s family. But for heaven’s sake, why the secrecy at work?”

“It’s not my fault,” he protested. “Or Amanda’s either. It just kind of happened that way. When we first started going out, we wanted to keep it to ourselves. You know what the rumour mill can be like. And I didn’t want anyone to think Amanda was just another one of my . . .” He broke off in embarrassment.

“You could have told them later,” I pointed out.

“But it just got more and more complicated the further things went on. Makarov sprung that whole Stemwinder trap on me and Amanda and I ended up on the run with the Agency convinced we were traitors.” He sighed and leaned back in his chair. “So, the long and the short of it is, no one knows. And I guess I just wanted to talk to someone who knows both of us. And you’re the closest thing to . . .” He cleared his throat uncomfortably and tried again. “I mean, you’re a good friend to Amanda and me. And I’ve known you a long time. So I was hoping you would . . .”

“Are you asking me to give you my blessing?” I supplied.

“I guess I am.” He nodded and looked down again. “Pretty silly, I know.”

“It’s not silly at all. Lee, I’m honoured you thought of talking to me. And of course you have my blessing. You and Amanda are both very special to me and I’m glad you found each other. But what are you going to do about work? It’s not going to take Amanda all that long to get through her training and then Billy’s most likely going to formalize your partnership.”

Lee sighed. “I know, and I don’t want to put him on the spot by telling him we’re involved. He’ll be caught between a rock and a hard place if Dr. Smyth goes on one of his ‘everything-by-the-book’ rampages’.”

“Really? How so? You really think he’ll be that upset just because you didn’t disclose the fact that you were dating?”

He hesitated for a moment, then said in a rush, “Well, it’s not official policy, but if the Agency doesn’t approve of partners being involved romantically, they’re even less thrilled with partners who actually get married.”

“Lee!” I set down my teacup and looked up. “You don’t mean that you and Amanda are . . .”

“Engaged? No.” He broke out in a grin, revealing both his dimples and a quick flash of teeth. “Not yet, anyway.” Reaching into his inner jacket pocket he extracted a small velvet box.

“Can you believe I bought this within a week after we started dating? Well, officially dating, that is. Amanda’s ring size was on file in the Agency database, of course.” Lost in thought, he paused for a moment, . “All those times we pretended to be husband and wife. And now it’s going to be for real.” He gave a small laugh. “At least I hope it is. I only hope she reacts better than the first time we had to use that for a cover.” Self-consciously he ran a hand through his hair. “At first I wasn’t even sure I’d be able to convince her to go along with the arrangement.”

I took the velvet box from him, and extracted the ring. It was a large diamond solitaire, enclosed in a classically simple setting. Grasping the slender gold band between my fingers, I held the ring up to the light. The flawlessly cut gemstone winked down at me, its numerous facets catching the light. “I don’t think you have anything to worry about,” I commented. “I mean, you’ll be sure to make it clear that she can’t have this shiny bauble unless she takes you as part of the package, right?”

“Very funny.” Lee reached out and took the ring back. I handed him the box and watched as he carefully replaced its precious contents. His fingertips gently caressed the surface of the diamond before he snapped the cover shut again.

“So what’s holding you back?” I asked. “You aren’t seriously concerned that she won’t accept?”

Lee began a restless pacing across the width of the room. “Emily, it’s like I told you, I haven’t even met her family yet. They have no idea she’s even seeing anyone. For all I know, her mother is still scheming to get Amanda back together with that idiot weatherman she used to date. Or more likely, with her ex-husband.”

“Except it doesn’t matter what her mother wants,” I pointed out. “Amanda’s the one with the decision to make.”

“But maybe I’m just complicating her life. I mean, first I go and drag her into this whole thing with the Agency. Then I start dating her without anyone else knowing about it. Now I’m asking her to get engaged to a man her family doesn’t know exists.” It was like watching a child’s mechanical toy that had been wound too tightly. Five long strides to the end of the room, turn, a restless hand through the hair, then another five steps back.

“Lee, why don’t you stop wearing a hole in my Oriental rug and sit down,” I said firmly, patting the seat beside me. I waited until he complied and then continued. “Amanda loves you and you love her, right?”

He nodded and smiled a bit self-consciously. "Yes. More than I ever thought possible."

"Then this," I indicated the ring box he still clutched in his hand, "doesn't matter." I took the container from him and set it on the side table. "When it's the right person, you don't need a ring, or for other people to approve. You know in here," I tapped him on the chest, "that it's right. And I'm sure Amanda does too." I paused for a moment, then added, "You do realize though, that once you're engaged this secrecy thing is out the window. I mean, you can hardly get married without telling anyone."

"That does sound like the most ridiculous idea ever, doesn't it," Lee laughed. "But before we get around to making public announcements, I have to figure out exactly when and how to propose. I want it to be something really special." He made a move to get up again, but I held onto his hand.

"That's another one of those things that doesn't really matter. I mean, yes, you want it to be special, but that's going to happen anyway no matter what you plan." I looked down at my hand, my eyes drawn to my own engagement ring.

"How did James propose?" Lee asked, clearly following my line of thought.

I leaned back on the sofa and let my mind drift into the past. "It was the last night my acting troupe was performing in London. We were scheduled to leave for the States the next day and I was afraid there was a very real chance that I'd never see James again. With war looming on the horizon, I knew there probably wouldn't be much, if any, travel across the Atlantic for awhile."

"And," Lee prompted me when I paused, lost in my memories.

"James came backstage after the performance. He presented me with a dozen roses, took me by the hand and led me back onto the stage. The theatre had cleared out by then so despite the hustle and bustle behind curtain it was as if we were the only two people there." I smiled, thinking back to that evening so long ago, yet still so clear in my memory. I could almost smell the perfume of the roses and feel the pick of a stray thorn as I nervously clutched their stems. "James pulled out the program from the play we'd just done, and a small slip of paper fluttered out onto the floor. It was one of those last minute cast changes they stick in." Lee nodded, and I continued. "He picked it up and handed it to me."

"What did it say?" Lee asked.

"That for the rest of this lifetime, the role of Lady Farnsworth would be played by Emily Caine. He took my hand and slipped the most beautiful ring I'd ever seen onto my finger."

I held up my hand and gently touched my ring, still on my finger, and now nestled against the wedding band that had followed a few short months later. "Of course, I'm a little biased. The real beauty of the ring was that he'd given it to me."

"You were very lucky," Lee said softly, taking my hand in his and giving it a squeeze. "You both were."

I tightened my hold on Lee's fingers. "The thing is, James and I came from very different backgrounds. Some of his friends and family weren't all that keen on his relationship with an 'upstart Yankee'. And living on an estate and being lady of the manor certainly wasn't what I had envisioned for my life back when I was growing up in Santa Barbara. But James and I knew we belonged together and we made it work." I looked Lee in the eye and said earnestly, "Basically, it all came down to this - we were so happy together. It's hard for other people to argue with happiness."

"So the question is, do you and Amanda belong together? Do you make each other happy? Dotty, the boys, they're all part of who Amanda is, so you have to ask yourself, do you want to try to make your lives fit together?"

Lee nodded and said intently, "Absolutely. A few years ago I would never have pictured myself saying that, but I do. More than anything else in the world."

I gave his hand another encouraging squeeze. "Then you need to head back to the States and tell Amanda. Believe me, Lee, it doesn't matter how much thought and planning you put into your proposal. It might turn out they way you plan or maybe it'll be something totally different. But I promise you, no matter where or how it happens, it'll be a moment neither of you will ever forget."

The End