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Synopsis: An alternate reality look at how Lee and Amanda might have met if she hadn't gone to the train station that morning.

THE OTHER FIRST TIME

It has been said that a person can change their destiny by missing a bus. This might seem to be exaggerating the cosmic importance of the local transit authority but it cannot be denied that the most profound changes in a person's life can sometimes hinge on seemingly insignificant factors. A case in point would be Amanda King.

Amanda's life was totally altered by the fact that the weather forecast for Monday, October 3, 1983 included a 35% chance of rain. Had it been any less and her boyfriend Dean McGuire would not have worried about his newly washed car sitting in a potential rainfall and would not have asked Amanda to drive him to the train station. And then Amanda would not have met Lee Stetson that morning.

Of course if Dean wasn't so utterly predictable and regimented as to get his car washed every single Saturday he wouldn't have had to worry about the car at all. His mother did bring him up to be reliable if nothing else. But that's another story.

So what if Lee and Amanda hadn't met that day? Certainly their lives would have been very different...

"I can't believe I was so stupid. We spent so much time trying to plug that security leak and it was me all along." Francine Desmond sat in Nedlinger's Washington Pub literally crying into her drink.

"Don't beat yourself up Francine, none of us had a clue either. Just be glad that it's all taken care of now." Lee Stetson was tired of trying to bolster Francine's ego. The arrests of the enemy agents had taken place a week earlier and no one at the Agency seriously blamed Francine.

Francine however continued on in the same vein. "I think I'll take it as a sign that I'm not meant to learn how to cook. I still can't believe that Mrs. Welch was coding our operational data into her recipes. Do you realize that thousands of

housewives all over the eastern seaboard have been transcribing classified information for the last few months? I'm sure it added some much needed excitement into their humdrum little lives when they found out the truth. The PTA's and carpools must still be buzzing."

"Speaking of adding excitement to someone's humdrum life," Lee broke in, "did I mention I almost gave the package of information to a civilian? When I realized that there was no way I could get it to Guthrie myself I almost picked out a commuter to ask them to take it onto the train."

"Well considering that the Russians were onto him, it would have been a disaster if he had received the package. We wouldn't have received the information we needed to plug the security leak. I'd still be blabbing away to Mrs Welch and endangering even more lives," Francine sighed. When it was obvious that Lee wasn't going to offer up any more sympathy she continued, "So why didn't you hand off the package? That method served you well in Munich with Dr. Forbisher's formula."

"I know but somehow something seemed wrong this time. I don't know - the right person just wasn't there."

Francine laughed, "You were expecting to just instinctively know the perfect person? Size them up in minute and pick out a natural? Come on Lee, they were a bunch of suburban commuters. Hardly potential counter espionage agents."

"You're right as usual Francine. Well drink up, we've got to get back to work."

As Lee and Francine were leaving the bar, two women came in. Lee held the door for them and the younger one momentarily caught his eye. He stood there for a few seconds watching as she sat down at a table. He was sure he had never seen her before but there was something about her...

"Lee are you coming?"

"Oh, sure." Lee broke out of his day dream and caught up with Francine out on the sidewalk.

Meanwhile back in Nedlinger's Amanda King and her mother Dotty West perused the menu. "I had better not have the caesar salad," Dotty mused. "I don't think the dentist would appreciate garlic breath, do you Amanda? ... Amanda?"

"Hmm," Amanda seemed lost in thought, "Mother, have we ever had lunch here before? It just seems so familiar somehow."

"I don't think so," Dotty replied. "Anyway, while I'm at the dentist why don't you go to the produce market around the corner? They always have the best fruit. If you buy some peaches I can try that Pilgrim's Peach Puff recipe. I know, I know, Mrs. Welch turned out to be an international spy but that doesn't mean her recipes aren't any good. Don't look at me like that."

Amanda protested, "I wasn't laughing at you Mother - I was just thinking what if you had been taking private lessons with Mrs. Welch. You could have been there when the government agents burst in and arrested her!"

Dotty smiled too. "Imagine me in the middle of a spy ring - and federal agents running all over the place. Isn't that the most ridiculous thing you ever heard of?"

"Absurd," Amanda agreed.

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Time moved on as it does and soon more than a year had gone by. Lee Stetson continued to work alone although pressured by his section chief Billy Melrose from time to time to consider taking on another partner. Lee felt it was still too soon after the death of his previous partner. Anyway he was doing just fine on his own. Why would he need someone else?

Amanda meanwhile had accepted a job at Honeycutt Typewriter. Her boss Warren Davenport was quite the flirt but harmless. Besides one of the other new workers seemed to be genuinely attracted to him. (Although Amanda felt that she herself would never get involved with a co-worker. It would just be too awkward. And of course she had Dean.)

Dean and Amanda had been dating for almost a year and half and Dean was beginning to mention marriage with increasing frequency.

One Saturday evening they were preparing dinner together while Dotty picked up Amanda's two sons at a friend's house. "All I'm saying," Dean said, "is that it's not unreasonable to want an answer. I want to marry you. I love you. I love the boys. I even love your mother. So what's stopping us? More specifically what's stopping you?"

Amanda looked at Dean. She knew that he did love her. And that Philip and Jamie enjoyed having him around. And that without a doubt her mother approved of him, maybe even a bit too much. So what was wrong? She could see her future stretching out before her: married to Dean, quiet evenings in their home in the suburbs, dinner at six, dishes, TV until nine... Part of her knew she should want it but that was very different from actually wanting it.

So what did she want? Excitement, romance, mystery? She wasn't a teenager anymore. Maybe it was unrealistic to expect...magic. Maybe all she needed was a bit more...

"Time." Dean broke into her thoughts, "It's time to fish or cut bait as I told you on our Arkansas trip. I can't go on like this. I'm going to be taking care of the boys next Saturday when you're busy with that big charity auction and car show. But when you pick them up Saturday night I want an answer. If this isn't meant to be, we're not doing either of us any good by just drifting along."

"Okay," Amanda agreed and thought to herself, "Maybe all I need is some pressure to figure out how much Dean means to me."

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"Elisa, this really means a lot to me. I wouldn't have asked except that I'm desperate." Lee smiled at Elisa Danton across the table at Emelio's restaurant.

"My favourite way to have you, darling."

"I'm serious. We couldn't find any way to get someone into this charity event. It's invitational only. It was a lucky break that you have friends on the organizing committee. I'm really in your debt."

"Well cherie, I'm sure we can work out a repayment schedule. I just wish I could be there this weekend, but I've got to dash off to London tomorrow. Wouldn't I love to see you working as a waiter - you certainly could serve up something for me." Elisa smiled mischievously.

Lee returned the look. "I don't think that's on the menu."

Elisa was one of the perks of working the social duty roster. She travelled in high enough social circles to attend numerous events requiring government security. Elisa's presence always made an evening entertaining for Lee. She was beautiful, glamorous, fun and undemanding. At times Lee thought he might just have found the perfect woman.

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"Okay, so maybe Dean isn't the perfect man," Amanda thought as she waited for him Saturday morning. "But he's a good man and I'm lucky to have him. I'm going to tell him yes tonight. Definitely. For sure. I think."

Dean was punctual (as always) and arrived at 8 am. "We'll see you tonight," he said as Amanda headed out the door. "Don't worry if you're late. I'll bring the boys back here after supper and I'll wait up for you."

"Hey Mom," Philip called to her, "can you bring us back one of those cool cars from the auction?"

"They're a bit out of our budget sweetheart," Amanda replied.

"Well you know what I want you to give me," said Dean as he kissed her goodbye, "and it's not a car. Just say yes."

For the first few hours of the car show Amanda was too busy to think about Dean. She was nominally sharing responsibility for the refreshment committee with a Mrs Coleman. What that really meant was that Mrs Coleman cozied up to all the celebrities and important sponsors while Amanda was left with all the drudgery.

About half way through the afternoon Amanda was busy checking the ice supply to make sure they would have enough to last through the day when Mrs Coleman came

up behind her. "Amanda, do be a dear and have a pitcher of martinis made up. The Senator and I are working up quite a thirst looking at all these cars." She was gone before Amanda could even open her mouth.

So she dutifully had the bartender mix up some martinis and flagged down a waiter. "Could you please take these over to Mrs Coleman - that woman across the arena in the red dress."

Lee Setson reached for the tray of drinks but momentarily froze. "I beg your pardon?"

"Could you please take these drinks to the woman in the red dress?" Amanda repeated her request.

"Of course," Lee said but didn't move or stop staring at Amanda.

"Is there something wrong?" she asked.

"No.. I uh.. excuse me but have we ever met before?" Lee said.

"I don't think so," Amanda replied. "Did you work the car show last year?"

"No, this is my first year - I was a last minute replacement. I'm sorry I shouldn't keep Mrs Coleman waiting." Lee picked up the tray and walked away with the strangest sense of déjà vu.

Amanda stood there for a minute watching him go. She also had an odd feeling about the encounter. He had looked into her eyes as if searching for something, as if he knew her already. And the really weird thing was that somehow she felt as if she knew him too.

PART TWO

Lee delivered the drinks to Mrs Coleman and then headed into the main building. According to the bits and pieces of information their wiretaps had picked up an important meeting was being held sometime in the afternoon.

Later in the day Amanda was on her way into the auction room to check that the inside bar was set up when Lee nearly ran her down in the hallway. "You again," she said.

"You've got to help me."

"What are you talking about?"

"Here take this. Put it somewhere safe." Lee thrust a manila envelope at Amanda.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Never mind. Just do it. Please, it's a matter of life and death." Lee looked at Amanda with pleading eyes.

Amanda was riveted to the spot. "Okay," she whispered.

Lee pushed her into the auction room and closed the door just as two men came running down the hallway. Lee took off in the opposite direction and they pursued. Unfortunately it turned out to be a dead end - all the doors were locked.

Amanda stuck her head outside the door just in time to see the men catch Lee. She gasped as one of them punched him in the stomach. The other man produced a gun. Amanda ducked back into the room hoping she hadn't been seen.

The two men forced Lee back down the hall and into the room where the secret meeting had been held. Jerry Perrine was waiting for them.

"Well we caught him boss but he hasn't got the envelope."

Perrine stared at Lee. "Scarecrow, I believe. Don't look so surprised. I knew the Agency was trying to get in here this weekend. I just didn't think you would get this far. So what did you do with the envelope?"

When Lee didn't say anything Perrine continued, "If he hasn't got it on him, he must have stashed it somewhere."

"Impossible, boss. There's no where to hide anything in the hallway. And he didn't have time to go into any room."

"Then he must have given it to someone. Did you see anyone else?"

"Just that dame in charge of the bar. She was going into the auction room."

"Well let's invite her in for a chat."

A few minutes later one of the men escorted Amanda into the room.

"Come on, Mrs ..."

"King. Is there a problem with the car show, Mr Perrine?" Amanda's voice trailed off as she caught sight of Lee.

"Okay Mrs King, let's take it from the top. We know Scarecrow took the envelope. We're sure he passed it to you. We want it back. Now what did you do with it?"

Amanda just stood there staring at Lee, her eyes imploring him - what should I do? She finally said "I don't know what you're talking about."

Slap! Perrine hit her full across the face. Hard. "Wrong answer. You're going to tell me what I want to know." He aimed his gun directly into Amanda's face. "I could kill you right now. But instead I think I'll start by making you watch your friend die."

He swung the gun around and pointed it at Lee. "Say good bye to Scarecrow, Mrs King," he said as he slowly began to squeeze the trigger.

"Stop!" Amanda cried out. "Stop, I'll tell you where it is!"

"Well..." Perrine said.

"I hid the envelope in one of the charity auction items."

"Which one?" He pointed the gun at Lee again.

"The trip to Hawaii - it's in the fruit basket with the airline ticket voucher."

"Now was that so hard? Don't just stand there. Go get it!" Perrine turned to one of his henchman who immediately left the room.

He was back in a few minutes but was empty handed. "The auction's about to start. Everyone's going into that room."

"Well then I guess I'll just have to attend the auction. I'm in a charitable mood so I think I might just buy a trip to Hawaii."

"Should I kill them now?"

Amanda's eyes widened as she listened to their conversation. Kill them?

"No," Perrine replied, "the shots might be heard. Besides I want to have that envelope in my hands before we cut off this source of information. Make sure they're tied securely and follow me."

A few minutes later Lee and Amanda were alone. Only then did Amanda start breathing normally again. She looked at Lee. "Scarecrow?" she asked.

"My code name," Lee answered. "I guess after everything that's happened so far today you deserve the truth. I'm a government agent." He began to try to untie the ropes that held him to a chair.

"Are you telling me you're a spy?!" Amanda's eyebrows shot up.

"I've never really cared for that word," Lee replied. "Anyway we received a tip that some big formula to control the commodities market was being sold here at the car show. So I went undercover as a waiter, snooped around and grabbed the envelope containing the formula. Unfortunately they were too close behind me and I"

"Handed it off to me," Amanda interrupted.

"I never meant for you to get so involved. I'm sorry."

"What do we do now?" Amanda asked nervously.

"Well obviously we shouldn't be here when they get back. I'm trying to untie myself but they did a pretty thorough job. How much time do you think we have?"

"The trip to Hawaii is one of the biggest items in the auction. They're auctioning it right before the intermission - maybe half an hour."

"Great. Why couldn't we get one of the seven percent of bad guys who tie your hands in front?" Lee continued to struggle with the knots.

Amanda watched him and said, "So is this how you usually spend your Saturday nights? Tied up and threatened by criminals?"

"And what would you rather be doing? Watching TV with the kids and hubby?"

"Boyfriend. Actually I'm supposed to be giving Dean an answer to his proposal tonight."

"Well don't keep me in suspense. Yes or no?"

"I'm not sure."

"You must really be in love with him. What's the problem?"

"I don't know. He's a great guy, he gets along with my two boys and my mother. He's really responsible and dependable. He's got a steady job at the weather bureau." Amanda couldn't believe that she was telling a total stranger all about her personal life. But there was that weird feeling again, that they weren't really strangers to each other at all.

"He sounds like a real catch," Lee said. "And you might let him get away? Is this how normal people live?"

"Pretty much. Aren't you a normal person?"

"Not that you'd notice. I've spent most of my life bumming around the globe. I've mastered French, Dutch, a little Urdu. But no, I have very little experience with normal people."

"Never a Mrs Spy, no little spies?"

"No."

"Are you enough of a normal person to have a name? Other than Scarecrow I mean."

Lee smiled. "Lee Stetson. Look I'm going to need some help getting untied."

"What do you want me to do?"

Lee hitched his chair around until he was directly behind Amanda. "Just hold this rope."

"Which one? This one?" Their fingers fumbled together.

"No, the other one." Their hands clasped momentarily.

A minute or two later and Lee was free of the ropes. "Now let's get you out," he said.

Lee untied Amanda's hands and then knelt beside her to work on the ropes holding her legs to the chair. He glanced up at her. "So do you have a normal person name? Other than Mrs. King I mean."

"Amanda," she said looking down into his eyes. "This is ridiculous," she thought to herself, "I've known Dean for almost two years but I've never felt like this."

"Well Amanda, it's nice to meet you. Now let's get out of here." Lee had her untied at last. Grabbing Amanda by the hand he went to the door, cautiously opened it and peered down the corridor. "Okay, the coast is clear."

PART THREE

Amanda and Lee crept down the hallway to the room where the auction was underway. Lee pushed open the door a crack. They stared at the backs of the crowd of people inside and listened for a few minutes.

"Damn," Lee said. "They're already auctioning the trip. Perrine's up to \$10,000 already."

"Well let him go up a few thousand more - it's for charity," Amanda said.

Lee turned to her with an incredulous look. "Amanda, I don't want him to get his hands on that formula again. It's a matter of national security."

"But it's no problem," she whispered back. "The envelope isn't with the trip tickets."

Lee glared at her. "Then where is it?"

"I hid it behind the bar, underneath the ice supply."

"Well let's retrieve it before Perrine finishes buying that trip and finds out the envelope isn't in the basket. I'll go get it."

"I should be the one to go in," Amanda said.

"No."

"Yes."

"No."

"Yes. Lee, I'm in charge of refreshments. I'm the most logical choice."

Lee tried to hold onto his patience. The really infuriating thing was that Amanda was right. "Okay, but be careful. Make sure Perrine and his men don't see you."

Amanda stood up and entered the room. She tried to be nonchalant as she walked over to the bar. She knelt down, lifted up the container of ice, grabbed the envelope and straightened up. So far so good.

"Amanda King there you are!" Mrs Coleman exclaimed as she approached the bar. "I was beginning to think you had disappeared altogether."

Amanda started to walk back towards the door as people's heads began to turn in her direction. "Amanda where are you going?" Mrs Coleman said loudly, too loudly.

Perrine spotted Amanda and signalled to his henchmen. Amanda broke into a run as she went through the door. "Come on," she yelled at Lee, "they're right behind me."

Frantically Lee and Amanda ran out of the building and into the parking lot. "My car is right here," Amanda said.

"Which one?" Lee called to her as they ran.

"The wood panelled station wagon in the third row."

"Station wagon. Of course." Lee rolled his eyes. "More normal person stuff right? Give me the keys."

Amanda dug the keys out of her pocket and tossed them to Lee. They both jumped in and Lee raced out of the parking lot.

"We've got our command centre set up in the stables across the road," Lee explained. "I'm going to get us some backup."

As they drove past the stables Lee pulled the car over for a moment. An agent named Fred Fielder ran over to them. Lee told him, "Perrine and his goons should be along any second. I'll let them follow me and you can try to block them in from behind."

"Sure," Fielder replied.

Lee gunned the engine and drove off. A minute or two later they noticed a black car following their every move. Lee quickly made a right turn. "That sign said No Exit," Amanda pointed out.

"I know. It should be the perfect place to box them in."

"Lee, look out!" Amanda cried out as they rounded the next corner and a dead end sign loomed directly ahead.

Lee pulled the wheel hard to the left and the car swung around. It stopped broadside to the top of a steep embankment. "That was close," Amanda breathed.

"Only counts in horseshoes," Lee said as they got out of the car. "Look out, here they come."

Perrine's car raced towards them, also coming upon the dead end abruptly. The car screeched to a stop next to Amanda's. Perrine and his men jumped out.

Perrine pulled out a gun. "Alright Scarecrow, you've got nowhere to hide. Let's have the formula."

Suddenly they heard another car accelerating around the corner. Fred Fielder drove up followed by agents in two other cars. Fielder's car slammed into Perrine's which in turn nudged Amanda's. It teetered on the edge of the incline for a moment before the law of gravity asserted itself. Amanda's car disappeared over the embankment.

Lee quickly took advantage of the distraction. He kicked Perrine's gun out of his hand and punched him once, knocking him out. Then he turned his attention to Perrine's men. One of them grabbed Lee from behind as the other punched him in the jaw. Amanda seeing that Lee was outnumbered glanced around. She picked up Perrine's fallen gun, stepped forward and yelled "Freeze!"

The two men froze. By this time several agents had gotten out of their cars. They quickly took Perrine and his men into custody.

Lee went over to Amanda and took the gun from her. "Thanks," he said.

Amanda walked over to the edge of the hillside and looked down. Lee followed her. Her car had rolled over end to end a few times, before coming to rest upsidedown at the bottom of the gully. "My car!" Amanda wailed as she stared at her ruined vehicle.

"I know how you feel. I totalled my vintage Porsche on a case a few months back. Don't worry the Agency will cover the replacement cost."

"You had a Porsche. What did you replace it with?"

"A Corvette." At Amanda's look Lee said, "Let me guess. Not exactly normal person choices right?"

"Right."

One of the other agents walked over to where Lee and Amanda were standing. "Billy," Lee greeted him, "nice of you to show up."

"Save it Scarecrow. Did you get the formula?"

"Right here." Lee indicated the envelope Amanda still clutched in her hands. "Amanda, I'd like you to meet Billy Melrose, my section chief. Billy, this is Amanda King."

Billy and Amanda shook hands. "Nice to meet you sir," she said.

Lee continued, "Billy, Amanda helped save the formula. I was about to get caught with it and I handed it off to her."

Billy sighed, "Munich again."

"Anyway she hid it from Perrine and helped me get it out of the building. She even managed not to break when Perrine caught us and was threatening to shoot us."

"You can tell me all about it in the car." Lee and Amanda got into Billy's car and he drove them back.

"So thanks for all your help," Lee said to Amanda when they were back at the estate and had finished their report to Billy.

"That sounds like a goodbye."

"That's because that's what it is."

"Wait a minute," Billy interrupted. "Not so fast. Mrs. King, we do use civilians from time to time. I trust we can count on your cooperation if the need should arise."

"Of course," she said. "If you really think I could help."

"Well you were a big help today. You've got good instincts. I'll be in touch."

"Come on Amanda, I'll drive you home." Lee and Amanda headed into the parking lot. As they walked along Lee placed his hand in the small of Amanda's back. His arm around her felt so natural that neither of them even noticed.

"Was Mr. Melrose serious?" Amanda asked.

"Sure, if something comes up where we can use you. But don't quit your day job. It's not like he's planning to offer you a full time job as a field agent."

"I know that." Amanda told Lee her address and they got into his Corvette.

"So the envelope was never with the Hawaiian tickets?" Lee said as they drove away.

"Nope."

"Amanda that guy was going to shoot me. If you were going to lie to him anyway why didn't do it as soon as you were captured?"

"Witness for the Prosecution."

"What?"

"Witness for the Prosecution. It's a short story by Agatha Christie. This man is accused of murder and his wife is afraid the police won't believe her testimony to get him off. So she tells them a lie and makes them drag the truth out of her. If you tell someone what they want to know right away they'll be suspicious. But if you make them work for it they'll believe anything. Of course in the story it turns out the wife still lied to the police in the end but they believed her."

"I don't believe you!" Lee interrupted her babbling. "That's the way your mind works! We could have both been killed!" Lee raised his voice.

"But we weren't."

They drove on in silence for a few minutes. Then Lee said, "Do you want to get a drink somewhere? Talk about everything that's happened today?"

He was suddenly loathe to let Amanda just walk out of his life again. It was the strangest feeling - she was just a housewife from Arlington but he felt this incredible connection with her.

"Thanks," Amanda replied, "but I've got to be going. You know get back to my boring normal person life."

"Amanda I didn't really mean that."

"I know. But I do have to get home to my boys."

"And Dan."

"Dean."

"You know I don't think you should marry this guy," Lee said. "I don't see the two of you together."

"What are you talking about? You've never even seen him," Amanda replied.

"If you really love someone and they ask you to marry them your first response is going to be 'Oh yes, I'll marry you.' But look at you. He had to give you a deadline and you still can't make up your mind. Doesn't that tell you something?"

"And what makes you an expert? How many times have you asked someone to marry you?"

"Just once."

"And..."

"And she shot me."

"What?!"

"She shot me. Really. She turned down my proposal which was actually a good thing since a year later I found out she was a Soviet agent. That's when she shot me. Hey she was a lousy shot - it was only a flesh wound. You know I honestly believed that she loved me but it turned out she was only using me. So I guess I'm not an expert."

"Well I'm sure Dean won't shoot me when I turn him down. If, I mean if." Amanda quickly corrected herself.

Lee just smiled and drove on.

THE END