

Reaching the Limit

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Rating: PG

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Feedback: Yes, please.

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"Not this time, BUSTER!"

The elevator began its descent. Inside, Amanda King was fuming. Who did Lee Stetson think he was, sending her home like that? It was always the same — Amanda, we have a job for you; Amanda we need your help — then just when things started to get really interesting, it changed to Amanda, go home — Francine can handle it from here.

Just like the time she was supposed to turn over the film cassette to save Scotty and Raul. Instead she ended up waiting in Lee's car while Francine made the drop. Wearing those awful curlers too! How many years of training did it take to throw something out of a window? Long as she lived, she would never understand that one . . . What on earth was wrong with this elevator? Amanda couldn't believe how slowly it was moving. Her foot tapped out her frustration on the carpeted floor as she let out an impatient breath.

Why couldn't she just go with Lee later on to Trans-Oceanic? She could wait in the car. She was good at waiting in the car, a real pro. Did it all the time. Okay, so sometimes she left the car — but there was always a really good reason for it.

Nothing bad had ever happened because she left — well, all right, to be perfectly honest, sometimes things did get a little hairy as a result but they always ended well. Wasn't that what mattered the most in the end?

Finally! Amanda had almost given up on the elevator ever reaching its destination. As the doors slid open she all but exploded into the lobby. She still thought they should be watching the cannery; it made perfect sense. Lee's casual dismissal of her idea was infuriating. Well, Amanda would show him, she'd go watch all by herself. Let him stay and have his nice little dinner with Leslie.

Amanda found her car in the parking lot and flung open the door. Leslie — so she was the reason Lee had turned into an "insomniac" and lost the ability to dress himself in the morning. Why? Sure, Leslie seemed pleasant enough — friendly and open — maybe even kind of pretty if you liked the type, but she was so . . . what was the word she was looking for? She turned her keys in the ignition and the station wagon roared to life.

Leslie was so . . . so . . . So, just who did she think she was, anyway? How long had they been dating? And she let herself into his apartment and started making dinner? Well, it's a miracle there was any food there for her to work with, that's for sure. Amanda was suddenly nearly overcome with an absolutely irrational urge to run home and cook Lee an even better dinner than Leslie's. What a ridiculous idea — where had that come from? She shook her head firmly to clear it.

Driving through an intersection, her thoughts once again returned to Lee's apartment. Ooh, how awkward it had been. She involuntarily shuddered at the memory. The longer she stood there listening to Leslie chatter, the more Amanda wanted to run right out the door. Thank goodness Lee had put away the place setting Leslie had gotten out for her. She didn't think she could have sat there and continued to make polite conversation, especially if Leslie really was planning on pumping her for "delicious things" about Lee.

Stopped at a red light, Amanda closed her eyes for a moment and leaned back against the headrest. In her mind's eye she saw again the scene from the previous morning when she and Lee had been doing the "spring cleaning". He had been talking about the New Year's Eve party they had gone to together — how much fun they'd had, how they'd danced, and how she had "sure looked beautiful." She smiled at the memory, then started as a horn sounded behind her. The light had turned green. Amanda's brow furrowed. Then Lee had asked her where she had gotten the dress; he knew someone who would look "just great" in it and wanted to buy her one. Amanda should have known he must have had an ulterior motive for giving her a compliment. Full of surprises? Yes, Lee Stetson certainly was — yet somehow at the

same time he was still maddeningly predictable. She switched on her turn signal in preparation for a right turn.

Well, Amanda was sure Leslie would look lovely in the dress Lee bought for her, but it couldn't be as nice as Amanda's. Hers was one of a kind. She had spent the better part of two weeks working on it, and it was a wonder she'd ever finished it given all the time she and Lee had spent at work that month. As usual, he had been seriously lacking in the holiday spirit department and had taken on extra assignments for them without taking into account her outside obligations. Things had been hectic, and all of that paperwork they'd had to do as a result certainly wasn't going to file itself any more than Lee was going to do it in a timely fashion.

So Lee had given Leslie the dress to wear to the embassy party tomorrow night. Maybe Amanda should have said that she was going as well — she and Leslie could have both worn their black dresses; wouldn't that have been fun? She looked down and realized that she was gripping the steering wheel so hard that her knuckles were turning white. Amanda loosened her grip, but her mind never left her partner's apartment.

She pictured the two of them, Leslie and Lee, comfortable in his dining room, looking so — well, so — NORMAL. Sitting down at the table eating a nice home-cooked meal and talking about their respective days at work. Well, as much of their day as they could discuss, anyway. The very picture of domestic bliss, she thought wryly.

What was wrong with her? How many times had she tried to get Scarecrow to do just that, to act like a normal person? And here he was, being normal and it made her feel — well, she wasn't sure what it made her feel. She wasn't sure she wanted to know how it made her feel, really. Not right now, anyway. This wasn't the time and it certainly wasn't the place to be thinking about this. She pulled her car to the side of the road, biting her lower lip in concentration as she studied the cannery entrance.

At least it was a new security shift; this security guard would not recognize her as the love-struck motorist she had played earlier. That was something, at least. She clicked her nails on the dashboard while she decided on her next move, grateful for the distraction.

To the right of the guardhouse, a brick wall extended back toward the road. There were a good number of crates and barrels in front of it; Lee had hidden there earlier in the day while Amanda had gained access to the compound. If she wasn't mistaken, it looked as if the far side of the wall also had a similar pile. She put her

car back in gear and pulled around to the other side. Sure enough, it did. Amanda parked her station wagon and got out, easing the door closed so as not to attract attention.

Stooped over, she ran toward the wall. Thank goodness she had worn slacks and sneakers! Yes, this pile of crates would be perfect. Carefully she climbed just until her head and shoulders were above the top of the enclosure. Her vantage point offered an unobstructed view of the front doors, while shielding her somewhat from the road and the driveway. Amanda settled down to wait.

Her thoughts kept returning unbidden to the couple back at Lee's place. There was something that she just didn't like about that relationship. For one thing, Leslie was not at all what Amanda had expected. She was nothing like any of the other women she had seen Lee with — and she had certainly seen him with plenty of women. He had four black books, for Pete's sake — four!

Well, it was a good thing that she and Lee had never taken their relationship beyond friendship. That would have definitely put a strain on their working together. Eventually she would have become just another entry in one of those books — and years later a phone call from the Agency would come to warn her that someone else was trying to kill all of Scarecrow's old girlfriends. Yes, it was a good thing they had never gotten emotionally involved. Her left leg was beginning to cramp; Amanda shifted her position slightly and flexed her foot to alleviate the pain.

But Leslie? What was he thinking? She was definitely not his type. Reluctantly Amanda admitted to herself that if she had met Leslie under any other circumstances they probably would have gotten along very well. Really, she seemed...nice. And normal. You'd never know just by looking at her that she had top security clearance and traveled all over the world as a UN translator. She was very unassuming. So why did the very thought of her with Lee make Amanda wince? "I'm on twenty-four hour call in D.C. . . . I travel between Paris, Geneva, The Hague . . ." Amanda rolled her eyes just remembering the conversation. "Lee has been so wonderful for me . . . the chemistry . . ."

With a sigh she recalled Lee's words about it being "so perfect." Perfect? She doubted it. Perhaps the lack of sleep was affecting his brain. It couldn't possibly last, could it? Sooner or later he would come to his senses and realize that not only did Leslie's name not end in a "i" but that she actually had a brain and then it would be all over.

If she didn't know better, Amanda would have thought she sounded like a jealous

person. That was ridiculous, wasn't it? No, she was just concerned for her partner's well being. Yes, that's all. Friendly concern. A tiny voice deep down inside her started to suggest that there might be a little more to it than that, but Amanda squashed that thought flat before it even had time to form.

A phone rang, jarring Amanda from her train of thought. The guard answered it, and engaged in a brief discussion with the person on the other end of the line. Amanda couldn't hear what he was saying, but the man looked slightly puzzled. Shrugging, he hung up the phone and left the booth, locking the door behind him. Then he turned and walked toward the building, disappearing inside a few seconds later.

What was going on? Amanda wondered. Just then the front doors opened and the man who had escorted her to O'Keefe's office came out. Amanda ducked down as he took a quick glance around the area and headed toward the parking lot. Peering over once again, Amanda watched as he bent down near an "Authorized Parking Only" sign and placed a small gray box on the ground. Straightening up, he walked briskly toward the lot entrance and raised the gates. Amanda quickly dropped out of sight as he headed straight for the very wall she was hiding behind. Venturing another look, she saw him crouch down behind a crate and take a small black device out of his pocket.

Ha! She knew watching O'Keefe wasn't pointless! Amanda glanced up in time to see Lee's Corvette turning into the parking lot. Isn't that a shame, a little voice murmured — he had to leave Leslie's nice dinner. Oh my gosh, where did that come from? Honestly, what was wrong with her?

Amanda returned her attention to the scene in front of her. As Lee's car drew closer, she saw the man in front of her shift his body in anticipation. All other thoughts left her as she realized what she had to do. Whether or not he admitted it, Lee needed her help . . .

The end