

Past The End Of His Nose

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Timeframe: This story takes place late third season, between "Three Little Spies" and "All The World's A Stage." I don't believe canon is broken.

THANKS to Kara and Tricia for reviewing this for me.

Feedback: Feedback is welcome. However, keep in mind that positive comments and constructive criticism encourage me to try harder; flames burn up my computer so I can't write anymore. . . .

Lee Stetson rolled over and raised himself slightly to glance at his bedside clock. 2:30. He had been lying awake for hours, and he needed to get some sleep. Punching his pillow with one fist, he forced his head back down and squeezed his eyes tightly closed. He was going to fall asleep, right now; he was going to fall asleep. He took several slow, deep breaths. 'Come on, Stetson, fall asleep!!!' He forced himself to lie completely still, to continue taking slow, deep breaths. Sleep. Sleep. Finally, he cautiously opened one eye to peer at the clock. 2:34. With a groan, then a resigned sigh, he sat up and threw his long legs over the side of the bed. He obviously was *not* going to fall asleep.

Pulling himself upright, Lee wandered out of his bedroom toward the kitchen. Maybe he needed something to eat — or something to drink. He veered off toward the wet—bar in the living room. However, after spending several minutes rattling bottles and glasses, he decided he wasn't thirsty. He was tired; he needed sleep. Christ, when had something so mundane as getting a decent night's sleep suddenly become such an impossible struggle? 'Rhetorical question, Stetson,' he chided himself. He knew exactly when sleep had become so elusive. Two weeks ago. Two weeks ago, when he had looked deeply into a set of hypnotic brown eyes and uttered those inspired words, "You've got a cute nose." Lee Stetson — suave, debonair federal agent — had looked deeply into the eyes of the woman he hadn't

been able to stop dreaming about for weeks, the one he wanted to take into his arms and kiss senseless, the one he wanted to hold in his arms and never let go, and told her she had a cute nose. A CUTE NOSE!!! 'Yeah, you're really the last of the red hot lovers, Stetson old boy,' he decided with a shake of his head. 'A few more lines like that one, and you'll have every woman in the western hemisphere falling at your feet. With laughter.' He shook his head and sighed again. No, the problem was that he probably *could* charm most women with nothing more than glib line of nonsense and a rakish smile. But not Amanda. Amanda knew him too well.

Slumping down on his sofa, he ran both hands through his already thoroughly mussed hair and tried to figure out when his life had become so complicated, when his feelings for Amanda had become so complicated. How long had she been worming her way into his life, his heart, his very soul, without his even noticing? From the very first time he met her, he had felt — even though he would have denied it to the death — that she was someone nice to have around. Someone pleasant and cheerful and comfortable. And he felt responsible for her, of course. It was only to be expected that, since he had recruited her, he would feel responsible for her. So when had his sense of responsibility crossed the line from being a burden to being a blessing? When had he come to depend on the trust and devotion she bestowed on him, whether he deserved it or not? When had he started feeling lonely when she wasn't around? When had he started to realize that she was a beautiful, desirable woman? When had it become so difficult to be near her without telling her? He had no idea. No idea at all.

His mind drifted back to an evening only a few weeks ago. Amanda's persistence in tracking a "dead" terrorist had prevented a major disaster at the Hotel Monroe. Afterward, she had invited him home for dinner, and he had jumped at the chance. He jumped at any chance to spend time with Amanda lately. As they relaxed on her sofa with cake and coffee, he was almost overwhelmed by the desire to tell her how much he wanted, how much he wanted . . . Even now, in the crushing privacy of his apartment, it was hard to put into words what he wanted. At the time, speech had failed him completely. But she had leaned into him and put her fingers on his cheek. She might actually have kissed him if her family had not returned unexpectedly. Would she have kissed him? God, how he wanted that kiss! But a few minutes later, when he slipped out the back door, and she slipped out to join him, he had frozen again. He pulled her into his arms and, seeing her startled expression, fearing he had misread her earlier actions, he settled for a light, almost brotherly, kiss. And then he ran away.

He hadn't mentioned it to her afterward. What could he say??? "Hey Amanda, guess what? I've just realized you're a gorgeous, sexy woman." Smooth, Stetson, really smooth. Or how about, "Oh, Amanda. Remember all those times I've told you

we aren't involved? I've changed my mind." Yeah, that would go over well. . . Besides, even if he found the perfect words, he doubted his ability to get them out of his mouth. Lately, when he was with her, he felt like an awkward teenager. An awkward, scared teenager. There, he had admitted it, he was scared. Fear was the real reason he had spent the last several months dancing around the issue of his growing attraction for Amanda. He was afraid of making the wrong move and losing her friendship. It was better to have her in his life as a friend than to not have her in his life at all, right? Lately, he wasn't so certain.

He was just going to have to find the right words and tell her. He couldn't go on like this. Maybe it wouldn't even be so tough, once he got started. He was pretty certain she was feeling some of the same things that he was; he couldn't possibly generate so much electricity all by himself. Maybe she was even hoping for him to make a move, but she wasn't going to make the first one. At least not without a hell of a lot more encouragement than he had been giving her.

He burrowed further into the sofa cushions and closed his eyes. If he couldn't sleep, he could at least lose himself in his favorite fantasy for the next few hours .

. .

Amanda King stood in her cheerful kitchen, her hands fidgeting in a sink of soapy water, staring blindly through the window into her backyard. She didn't see the sunlight dappling the patio, the daffodils and tulips peeking out of the freshly weeded flower beds, or the new leaves unfurling on the branches of the trees. She saw a pair of enigmatic hazel eyes, daring her to unravel their secrets. She closed her own eyes and shook her head. Lee Stetson was driving her out of her mind, and she didn't know how much longer she could stand it.

With a sigh, she thought back over the past few months of their . . . Of their what? She had no idea anymore. Their acquaintance? No, they were much more than acquaintances. Their friendship? Yes, Lee was unquestionably her best friend. Actually, he was more than her best friend. She had no doubt at all that he would give his life for her, a conviction that had been put to the test more often than she liked. And she was nearly certain that his feelings for her went deeper than friendship. She could sense it every time he reached for her hand — the electric warmth that confirmed their fingers belonged entwined together.

Yes, she knew there was more than friendship. She also knew Lee was resisting the attraction between them. He had lost so many people in his life; it was understandable that he shied away from emotional ties. But, until a few weeks ago,

she had felt that they were drifting slowly but inexorably in the right direction: a gentle kiss on the cheek to show his concern after she had foolishly followed her mother into danger; a relieved hug when he had rescued her from imminent death at the hands of a group of murderous vigilantes; a sweet kiss on her patio after they had successfully thwarted the plans of a shadowy terrorist; an endearingly hesitant flirtation on an eastbound jet while unwinding from the stress of an assignment that had blurred the distinction between enemies and allies. Given their halting overtures and agonizingly slow progress, her relationship with Lee sometimes seemed more like a junior high school romance than a dalliance with the dashing Scarecrow, a man whose sexual exploits were discussed with a fervor bordering on awe around the Agency water cooler.

But something had gone wrong. The past few weeks, Lee had been quiet and edgy. He seemed uncomfortable around her; their time together was punctuated with awkward silences instead of the easy camaraderie she was used to.

She thought back to the dinner they had shared a few weeks ago, after their run — in with Stephen Salee. That was the last time they had been truly relaxed together. During the following days, she had attributed Lee's tension to the stress of the case they were working on. It had been difficult for him to set aside the beliefs and habits of the past dozen years in order to work with Russian and Chinese agents, so she hadn't considered that there might be another reason for his moodiness. Only after their return from Los Angeles had she realized there was something else bothering him. Had she made her feelings too obvious? Was he regretting the gentle kiss they had shared on her patio? Their brief kiss had been one of the most tantalizing that Amanda had ever experienced, but maybe Lee hadn't felt the same and was trying to let her down easily.

Was it possible he had a new girlfriend? He certainly looked like he wasn't getting any sleep. But she usually knew about his women: Margo, Kitty, Crystal, Randi, Leslie . . . He certainly didn't try to keep his love life hidden, from her or anyone else. And he hadn't mentioned anyone — even a casual date — since Leslie.

"Amanda. Have you heard even one word I've said to you?" her mother's voice interrupted her reverie.

"What?" Amanda jumped slightly and peered over her shoulder, to find her mother's concerned eyes. "Oh, I'm sorry Mother. I didn't hear you come down."

"Obviously not," her mother responded wryly, watching her carefully. "You looked about a million miles away."

Not a million miles, thought Amanda. Just across town, to wherever Lee Stetson happens to be this morning. Shaking her head and trying to collect herself, Amanda realized the dish water had grown cold. She turned on the warm water and reached for another dirty glass. "I was just thinking about, um, about work, Mother."

"About work. Right." Responded her mother skeptically. "You know, Amanda, I think you should bring some *work* home with you. I would really like to get to know more about this fascinating *work* that seems to hold your interest 24 hours a day, seven days a week."

Lee automatically straightened his tie as he exited the elevator and headed down the wide corridor toward the bullpen. He didn't need the raised eyebrows that followed his progress toward Billy's office to tell him he definitely did *not* look his best. The lack of sleep, as well as the stress of hiding its cause, was definitely showing. One of his fellow agents gave him a sly wink as they passed each other wordlessly. He was sure he knew exactly what Dave Kenner was thinking about his worn and red-eyed appearance. The thought made him scowl slightly. If only Dave knew the real reason. The Great Scarecrow, whose romantic liaisons were practically Agency legend, was lying awake every night trying to figure out a way to tell a suburban divorcee how he felt about her.

Luckily, his grim expression was enough to dissuade any coworkers who might have considered impeding his progress toward Billy's office. Reaching the closed door, he knocked lightly and proceeded inside without waiting for a response. He found Billy, Francine and Amanda passing around a small snapshot. "Something up?" he asked.

Francine, who was holding the photo, turned toward him. "Billy's showing off the newest addition to his family. Just precious, Billy" she added, although it was clear from the tone of her voice, and the look on her face as she passed the picture to Lee, that she wouldn't be caught dead touching the real article.

Looking down, Lee took a brief glance at the brown and white furball, but his attention was actually focused on his partner, who had already seen the photo and was moving toward the door with a small stack of files. "A cute nose," Lee muttered. At the words, Amanda startled slightly, her eyes flying to his face for a moment. The flicker of hurt confusion he saw in her eyes, before they looked away, caused his chest to tighten. Several files dropped to the floor from the stack she carried. Good Lord, had he actually said that out loud?? Had just told the most

beautiful, desirable woman he had ever known that he categorized her under the same heading as Billy's new cocker spaniel?

For a moment, Lee felt frozen to the spot; then, as Amanda stooped to pick up the dropped files, he almost shoved Francine out of the way to help. Kneeling beside Amanda, he hurriedly gathered the remaining papers and placed them back into her hands, gently brushing her fingers as he did so. She pulled her hands away as though burned, while her eyes stayed glued to the floor, refusing to meet his. After a moment, she seemed to regain her composure and turned her gaze toward Billy, smiling weakly. "I'll take these over to Grace right away, sir." Then she slipped past Lee without looking at him and quickly exited the room.

Lee's eyes followed Amanda until she had left his line of vision, then he turned back toward Billy's desk. Billy was frowning at Lee in a puzzled way; he had obviously noticed but failed to understand the tension between his two favorite employees. "What was that all about?" he demanded.

"Yeah," added Francine, with cynical smile. "You and your partner having a little spat, are you?"

"Can it, Francine," growled Lee. "We aren't having a spat." Swallowing the temptation to take out his frustration on such an easy target, he turned back to Billy, trying for a lighter tone. "I think Amanda had a cocker spaniel when she was a kid, and it got run over or something. The picture probably reminded her. You know how sentimental she gets."

The story sounded rather lame to Lee's ears, but Francine at least seemed to buy it. She gave an exaggerated shrug and headed out the door. Billy, however, continued to study Lee with the same puzzled expression for several more seconds. Finally he, too, shrugged. "Well, if you are having a spat, I hope it isn't going to interfere with your. . .

"I told you, Billy, we are not having a spat," interrupted Lee firmly. Perhaps too firmly.

Billy's eyes narrowed slightly. "Good," he began slowly, "because I have an assignment for you, and you're going to need Amanda."

"Fine," Lee answered quickly. But he didn't even try to meet Billy's eyes. Instead, he ran a hand through his hair and looked through the blinds in the direction his partner had departed.

Billy shook his head again. Whether Lee admitted it or not, something was wrong between him and Amanda. Something that made his top agent nervous and edgy. He thought briefly about giving this contact to someone else, but he decided against it. This particular job shouldn't be dangerous, so it didn't really matter if Lee's mind wasn't one hundred percent on the task at hand. And maybe it would force Lee to talk the problem over with Amanda instead of taking the usual Stetson path through emotionally troubled waters: the avoidance pattern.

After a moment, Billy held a file folder toward the man before him. "Just take a look through this, and I'll tell you what I need you to do."

As Lee climbed the steps to the Q Bureau, he straightened his shoulders, composed his features, and prepared to be calm, cool, and collected. 'Just pretend nothing happened, Stetson,' he told himself. 'You don't mention it. She won't mention it. I'll blow over.' As he pushed open the office door, he prepared one of his charming Scarecrow smiles, a smile that only faltered for a moment at the sight of his partner's troubled face. Not wanting to give her an opportunity to speak first, he immediately plunged into a discussion of their assignment. "Oh, Amanda, I'm glad you're here. I need to take you for a walk. Billy wants us to . . ." Lee saw her eyes widen, and he couldn't get out another word. He suddenly felt that he was strangling, and he automatically reached one hand up to loosen his overly tight collar.

Amanda swung around to face the window, obviously fighting some inner battle, and then turned stiffly back toward him. She looked briefly into his eyes and then redirected her gaze to the floor. "Look, you can stop the puppy dog analogies. I get the point, okay. Just please stop." Her voice shook, and she clasped her hands in front of her, as though to stop them from shaking too.

"Amanda, I didn't mean . . ." Lee began desperately.

"Yes, you did. " Amanda cut him off, in a subdued voice. She took a deep breath and looked back into his eyes, her own reflecting hurt and puzzlement.

Lee hesitated. He had to talk to her about this. If he didn't do it soon, it was going too late. But now wasn't the right time. They only had thirty minutes to get to their contact point. He gritted his teeth and tried to get a grip on himself. "Look, Amanda, I didn't mean that the way it sounded. Honest. I just meant that Billy

wants you to go with me to a meet, and we have to walk." His eyes begged her to understand.

After what seemed an eternity. Amanda straightened her shoulders and nodded her head. "Okay," she said in a resigned voice. "Where are we going and who are we meeting?"

"So we're meeting someone from the State Department here?" Amanda asked as she strolled with Lee through the wide walkways of the National Mall. Since they had left the Agency, she had done her best to keep both her tone and her demeanor professional and impersonal, but when he had taken her hand in his, the warmth of his fingers began having its usual unsettling effect on her senses. And how could she possibly remain upset with him when he smiled at her like that? She abruptly turned away as she started to melt under the influence of his solicitous gaze.

"Right," Lee responded, continuing to direct his most charming smile toward Amanda, hoping to undo some of the damage caused earlier in the day by his bumbling tongue. "The State Department contact — his name is Chad Turner — asked to meet me here."

"Chad Turner," Amanda's nose wrinkled slightly as she turned the name over in her mind. "I think I've met him somewhere. The name sounds familiar." Her voice trailed off as she tried form a picture of Chad Turner.

Lee, who had met Chad Turner several times, suddenly recalled a diplomatic reception a few months back. He had been there to intercept a microdot, and Amanda had been his "cover date." He remembered with blinding clarity how Turner — dark and good looking, in a rather unsavory way in Lee's opinion — had made several passes at Amanda. At the time, Lee had been incredibly annoyed at continually needing to sidestep Turner while scanning the room for his contact. Now it occurred to him that perhaps Turner was using this investigation to maneuver himself into Amanda's presence again. The Secretary had only requested Agency assistance; it was Turner's suggestion that the assistance be in the form of Lee Stetson. And Turner had probably guessed that Lee would bring Amanda, since he was supposed to have a "cover" escort for this meet. The idea made Lee's blood pressure rise several points.

Attempting to stifle his irritation at Turner, Lee redirected his attention to the lovely woman at his side. He could tell that she was still processing the information

he had already given her about their assignment, and he couldn't help smiling. Amanda would never make a good poker player; it was too easy to read her thought processes just by watching her facial expressions. Well, about most things, anyway. He wished he knew what she had been thinking about him recently. Was he making a total fool of himself?

Amanda's voice brought him back to the present. "Okay, an aide to the Secretary of State was found dead in his home office. He was shot at close range with his own gun. But the police haven't determined whether it was suicide. Why does the Secretary want the Agency involved?"

"It seems this guy, Harrison Blanding, had access to some very sensitive documents, and one of them is missing," Lee explained. "The Secretary needs to know what happened to it, and whether it had anything to do with Blanding's death."

"So they think Mr. Blanding might have been murdered to get the document." It was apparent that Amanda was doing a mental inventory of the possibilities.

"Maybe. Or, if someone was blackmailing him, he might have handed over the document and then committed suicide." Lee thought this was the most likely scenario.

"Could the shooting have been an accident?" Amanda queried. The idea of a successful 50 year-old man being stressed to the point of suicide clearly disturbed her.

"Yeah, it could have," Lee admitted. "According to the initial police report, there were several guns and a gun cleaning kit in Blanding's office, and his housekeeper said he kept the guns loaded and he cleaned them at least once a week. The shooting might not have anything to do with the Sandstorm list. It's only one page; Blanding could have filed it somewhere."

Amanda frowned in concentration. "You said there was no suicide note. Were Mr. Blanding's fingerprints on the gun?"

"That's part of the problem," Lee responded. "By the time the police got to the scene, there weren't any recoverable prints. According to her statement, the housekeeper was so rattled when she discovered the body that she accidentally knocked the gun off Blanding's desk into a bucket of soapy water."

Amanda nodded. She obviously didn't think a bucket of soapy water would be out of place at the scene of a fatal shooting. "So what are we going to do?"

"First, we're going to review records on the Blanding's activities over the past few months, check for anything unusual. Turner's bringing us access codes, so we can get into the State computer files. Then we're going to talk to the police officer who did the initial investigation, anybody who has worked closely with Blanding recently, and anybody who was in the vicinity when he was shot and when the body was found." Lee shrugged. "Then we'll decide whether there's anything worth spending more time on."

"If we're going to be talking to State Department employees — why are we meeting Mr. Turner here?"

Good question, Lee thought grimly. Maybe he should take Turner aside and ask him that very thing. Lee didn't have time to finish this very satisfying thought, however, as he noticed Chad Turner a few feet to his left, arm in arm with a statuesque blonde woman. The pair appeared, just as he and Amanda did, to be simply out for a late morning stroll. Guiding Amanda to a position just behind the other couple, he established a tenuous hold on his temper and moved to intercept them.

Lee followed Amanda into the Q Bureau and closed the door quietly behind him. Crossing the office, he dropped several file folders onto his desk and carefully considered his next move.

He really needed to talk to Amanda; she had been more distant and reserved than usual during their walk, and he was certain that his earlier faux pas was disturbing her. As much as he hated to admit it, she had seemed more relaxed during the few minutes she had walked arm in arm with Chad Turner, after the gentlemen had traded escorts to facilitate the exchange of information, than she had been with him either before or after the meet.

Lee grimaced. Amanda seemed to enjoy Turner's company; the two of them had acted like old friends, while he had barely exchanged five words with that blonde woman. What was her name? Julie . . . Julia . . . Juliette . . .? She hadn't been a pleasant companion at all; she'd gotten her nose out of joint just because he asked her to be quiet so he could listen to Turner's conversation with Amanda. Her nose? God, he really needed to talk to Amanda about that 'nose' comment.

Dismissing both Chad Turner and his blonde coworker from his mind, Lee tried to decide how to proceed with Amanda. Maybe he should invite her to lunch; it was past noon, and she was probably getting hungry. No, it would be difficult enough to say what he wanted to say in private — it would be almost impossible in a crowded restaurant. Besides, what he really wanted to do was kiss her, and it was less likely that they would be interrupted here in the Q Bureau than anywhere else he could think of. His apartment flashed briefly into his mind, but he didn't have an excuse to take her there in the middle of a workday, and doing so would be taking unfair advantage of their friendship anyway. If she didn't want a romantic relationship with him, she would feel trapped. Did she want a romantic relationship with him?

"Do you want it, Lee?" Amanda's voice interrupted his reflections. What had she asked him? He glanced around the room nervously until his gaze fell on her, standing in front of the small office refrigerator. "Want it?" Choked out through his constricted throat.

Amanda gazed at him in puzzlement. "A Coke," she repeated. "I have an extra one. Do you want it?" When he still didn't respond, she added, "I can make you some coffee, but I need a cold drink. I'm really hot."

"Hot. Yeah, you're, ah, yeah" Lee mumbled. He shook his head and tried to clear the mental fog that prevented him from forming coherent thoughts when he looked at her.

"I don't remember the last time it was this warm in May," Amanda continued, oblivious to Lee's torment. "So, do you want it or not?" Amanda held the soda can toward him.

Lee closed his eyes for a moment before reaching to take the cola from Amanda's outstretched hand. "Coke, yeah, thanks," he managed, setting the drink down on his desk without even looking at it and slumping into his chair.

Amanda meanwhile walked to the the sofa with her can. Sinking down on the cushions, she reached forward, removed both shoes, and slowly flexed her toes several times. When she looked up and saw him staring at her, she flushed. "You don't mind, do you?" she asked in an embarrassed voice. "These shoes are new, and I didn't expect to walk so far this morning." As she spoke, she unconsciously rubbed her hands over her calf muscles, causing Lee to swallow convulsively as he focused on her shapely legs.

Several moments passed. "Lee, are you alright?" Amanda finally inquired, her eyes growing concerned. Rising gracefully, she padded back across the office to perch on

the corner of his desk, leaning close to lay a cool hand on his forehead. "You're really flushed, and you feel warm. Maybe you should lie down." Her fingers brushed lightly against the lapels of his suit jacket, causing his heart to beat erratically. "And you should take off this jacket. You shouldn't have worn such a heavy jacket today."

Lee closed his eyes again and tried desperately to concentrate on something besides Amanda's hand on his chest and her face inches above his own. After half a dozen deep breaths and a several slow, silent repetitions of his mantra, he was able to gain a modicum of control over his hormones, and he opened his eyes to meet her worried gaze. "I'm fine," he said in a voice that was surprisingly steady, considering his mental state. "I guess I got a little dehydrated this morning. I'll be okay after I drink this." Reaching past her, he grabbed the soda can, popped it open, and downed the contents in three gulps." Choking slightly from swallowing the carbonated beverage so quickly, he smiled weakly and tried to focus on a spot just beyond her left shoulder. "I'm fine," he repeated, as much for his own benefit as hers. "I feel better already."

"Okay," she said slowly. After watching him for several more moments, she slid off the desk and walked back toward the sofa to retrieve her shoes. Glancing back at him uncertainly, she sighed. "If you're sure you're alright, then I guess I'll go downstairs now and start reviewing some of those State Department records." She gestured toward the file folders on the corner of his desk before returning her attention to her shoes.

"No," Lee almost shouted.

"No?" she questioned. "You don't want me to help review them?" Surprise and disappointment were apparent in her voice.

"No." Lee shook his head. "I mean, yes. I want you to help review them. But no, not right now." Pausing again to get a grip on himself, he continued, "Look, why don't we grab some lunch, and we can go over the files and decide on the best approach."

"Yeah, okay," she said, letting out a perplexed sigh as he hurriedly rose from his chair, grabbed her hand, and pulled her out of the office.

By the time Amanda got behind the wheel of her car for the drive home, she had a throbbing headache which was unrelated to the three hours she had spent in front of her computer screen that afternoon. Why did she let Lee Stetson do this to

her? She felt like she had been on an emotional roller coaster all day. She had been shocked and hurt by his puppy dog comments this morning. But then he had been so sweet and charming during their stroll around the National Mall. At least until Chad Turner arrived. For some reason, Lee had seemed quite hostile toward both Mr. Turner and his associate, Julianna Monfort, and his behavior had been erratic for the remainder of the day.

Amanda frowned in concern as it occurred to her that perhaps Lee was ill; she chewed her lower lip as she recalled that he had received several memos from Dr McJohn in the past few weeks. He had hurriedly stuffed them into a desk drawer saying that were just follow ups on a study he had been monitoring, but maybe he was trying to hide a serious health problem. He certainly had seemed unwell in the Q Bureau after their walk this morning.

But that didn't explain why he was acting so strangely around her. After practically dragging her out to lunch today, he had barely spoken to her in the 45 uncomfortable minutes they had spent at Emilios. Then he had called her four times in the three hours she sat downstairs reviewing computer records after their return, and he seemed genuinely anxious for her help on the State Department investigation. He had even insisted on picking her up at home tomorrow morning, so they could spend the day working together on the case.

As Amanda approached her Arlington neighborhood, she recalled that her mother was going to be out late this evening. Deciding that she didn't feel like cooking tonight, she took a side trip through Marvelous Marvins to pick up burgers, fries and shakes for the boys. She wasn't the least bit hungry, herself. She felt like she had a knot the size of melon in the pit of her stomach.

Finally arriving home, she unlocked the front door and hurried to the kitchen, juggling her keys, purse, and Marvelous Marvins bags.

"Marvelous Marvins! I hope you got double burgers, I'm starved!!" Exclaimed Jamie, skidding into the kitchen and peering hungrily past her shoulder as she began emptying the contents of the white bags onto the counter. However, he pulled back as Amanda muttered "Oh shoot." "What's wrong, mom?" he groaned. "They didn't forget the extra sauce again, did they?"

"No, sweetheart. The sauce is here, but I ordered two chocolate shakes and they gave me a chocolate and a vanilla." She grimaced as she anticipated the argument between her sons over the chocolate one. Just what she needed this evening.

"Oh, that's okay, mom." Jamie mumbled, guilt apparent in his subdued tone. "Phillip can have the chocolate one. I'll take the vanilla."

Amanda looked up and studied her youngest son suspiciously. "You don't mind?"

"Naw, it's okay," he muttered without meeting her eyes.

"Is there a reason you're being nice to your brother?" she pressed.

"No, not really." Jamie looked down and shuffled his feet. "Well, I kind of gave him a hard time about something." The boy paused for a moment and pushed his glasses up his nose with one finger before continuing. "I think it, I mean the something I gave him a hard time about, not me giving him a hard time, I think it was bothering him a lot. So he can have the chocolate one, that's all."

Amanda eyed him appraisingly for several more seconds, but she knew better than to ask him what was bothering his brother. The boys might pick at each other in typical sibling fashion, but they didn't break confidences. "Okay, thanks," she said, reaching over to tousle his hair. "That's nice of you. Now, you can wash your hands and take your dinner in to the table while I go get Phillip."

Two minutes later, Amanda knocked quietly on her sons' bedroom door and stuck her head into the room. Phillip was sprawled across his bed, chin in his hands, staring morosely at the red and black checked pattern of his bedspread.

"Hey, is everything okay, sweetheart?" she asked, trying to reach a careful balance between casual and concerned.

"Yeah," Phillip mumbled without looking up.

"Are you sure?" she prodded.

"Yeah," he repeated in the same toneless voice.

"Okay, well, if there's nothing you want to talk about, I brought some burgers from Marvelous Marvins for dinner, so you can wash up and come down to the table." Amanda noticed that Phillip wasn't as enthusiastic as she might have expected from her normally ravenous teenager.

"Mom?" Phillip said suddenly, running a finger studiously over the pattern of the bedspread. before casting a sidelong glance in her direction.

"Yes, sweetheart," she encouraged.

"You used to be a girl, right?" he began; then he flushed and looked back at the bedspread. "You know what I mean."

Amanda walked slowly across the room and sat on the edge of the bed. "Yes, I know what you mean, sweetheart. And yes, I used to be a girl."

Phillip spent several moments struggling for words before continuing. "Well, if a guy said something really stupid to you, and he didn't mean it. I mean, if it came out wrong, and he was really sorry, would you still hate him?"

Amanda paused to consider her son's question before responding carefully. "I'm sure I wouldn't hate someone, just because he made a mistake. Of course, he would have to tell me it was a mistake, and apologize. . . . Do you think a girl hates you?"

"Katie Michaels," he moaned.

"Katie Michaels," Amanda said in surprise. "Sweetheart, you've known Katie Michaels since third grade. She's one of your best friends."

"Yeah, mom, but that's the problem," Phillip explained. "We've been friends for a long time, but now it's different. I mean, now she's a girl."

"Maybe you should talk to her," Amanda suggested gently.

"I tried. But it came out all funny, and now she probably thinks I'm the biggest doofus in the universe, " he lamented.

Realizing that it would do little good for her to tell her son he wasn't a doofus, Amanda asked, "is that what your brother was giving you hard time about?"

"Kinda. See, I couldn't talk to her at school, cuz she kept looking at me, and I couldn't think straight. So I called her when I got home. But I couldn't think of anything to say, so I just asked her when our geography project is due. Then I called her back a few minutes later, and . . ." Phillip paused again.

Amanda waited, but it appeared that Phillip wasn't going to continue. "And?" She prompted.

"Well, I called her a couple of times," he admitted. "Jamie was right; it was pretty lame."

"Well, just keep trying," Amanda urged him. "You'll think of the right thing. Now, why don't you wash up and come down to dinner before your fries get cold." Dropping a quick kiss on the top of his head, she moved back across the room.

Amanda smiled to herself as she closed her son's door and headed for the stairs. Poor Phillip. While her mothers' instinct wanted to protect him from the teenage angst he was beginning to experience, and she knew that he needed to work through some issues for himself, she also felt bad that he didn't have a steady, dependable male influence in his life. She thought back to her own tumultuous teenage years and knew she would not have weathered them nearly as easily without her mother's help; the boys would probably be able to discuss this kind of thing much more easily with a man.

With a sigh, she realized that her love life now was not much different than her love life at thirteen, when she had spent weeks agonizing over a boy in her class, only to discover much later that he had spent the same weeks agonizing over her. Teenagers, she thought again with a shake of her head. For some reason, an image of Lee Stetson flashed into her mind. Not Lee as a suave, sophisticated federal agent, but Lee as a lovelorn teenage boy. As the thought formed, she suddenly stopped mid stride, her eyes wide and an arrested expression on her face. "Oh my gosh!" she whispered.

Lee settled back in his chair, content to allow Amanda to handle this interview. He personally felt that their visit to the home of Harrison Blanding's ex-wife, Sandra, was a waste of time since she had an airtight alibi for the morning of his death, but Amanda insisted that speaking to her might be helpful, and he didn't have any better suggestions. They had spent the past four days working on the State investigation, and they had very little to show for their efforts. In fact, the only redeeming value of the entire week was that he and Amanda had managed to move beyond the awkwardness of Monday.

Lee wasn't sure what had brought about this welcome change, although he knew that Amanda's attitude had a great deal to do with it. When she left the Agency on Monday afternoon, it was clear that she was both hurt and disappointed in him, and he spent another miserable, sleepless night as a result. But by Tuesday morning she had apparently forgiven him. In fact, she seemed more amused than offended — which made it possible for him to see the humor in the situation. From that point,

it had become easier for him to simply relax and enjoy working with her. Once he had shaken off his uncharacteristic attack of nerves, he had become increasingly confident in both the depth of his own feelings and the certainty he would ultimately find the best path through what was, for him, uncharted emotional territory if he just moved slowly and carefully. And if he kept Amanda away from Chad Turner, he thought with a stab of jealous irritation. The man had called the Agency a dozen times this week, on the flimsiest excuses. Lee was convinced that Turner was planning a move on Amanda.

Refocusing his attention on the two ladies, who were seated on a sofa across the room, Lee studied Sandra Blanding appraisingly. She was in her late forties, short and plump, with an expressive face and an apparently cheerful disposition. As he listened, Amanda guided her through a discussion of her marriage and divorce. From the older woman's description, the divorce had been quite amicable, and the couple had remained good friends over the subsequent fifteen years. In fact, Sandra Blanding spoke with genuine affection for both her former husband and his second wife, Barbara, who had died the previous year after a lengthy illness. Her comments echoed those of several of Harrison Blanding's coworkers at State who had described his despondency over his second wife's death — a circumstance that gave some weight to the possibility he might have committed suicide and the entire matter might be unrelated to the missing Sandstorm list.

Only as Sandra Blanding began speaking of her current financial situation did a note of bitterness creep into her voice. "The child support payments were going to end next month anyway, when our daughter turns eighteen," she explained to Amanda. "But Sherri was really counting on her father's help with college expenses. She's supposed to start classes at UV this fall, and I don't know how we're going to manage without Harrison's help."

Amanda nodded sympathetically. "College is so expensive these days," she commiserated. "My boys are eleven and thirteen — and I haven't saved a penny for college."

"Harrison used his entire savings on experimental treatments for Barbara." Mrs. Blanding shook her head sadly. "He even mortgaged their house. Not that I begrudge him that, of course. But he promised Sherri it wouldn't affect her education. It's been hard enough on her, losing her father so suddenly, but she feels betrayed that he didn't keep his promise to her."

"Didn't he have life insurance?" Amanda asked quietly.

Sandra Blanding sighed. "Yes, and I suppose he expected it to take care of Sherri. But now everything is so complicated."

Amanda reached across the sofa and gave Mrs. Blanding's hand a gentle squeeze. "What do you mean?" she prodded.

"Harrison had insurance through the State Department for work-related injuries or death, so his private life policy was written to exclude activities related to his job. I guess the coverage was less expensive that way. Sherri is the primary beneficiary on both life policies, so there should be money coming to her. The whole life policy even covers suicide. But until it's determined whether Harrison's death was work-related, neither company is willing to pay. I suppose it will get straightened out eventually, but for now Sherri is the one who is going to suffer." The woman broke off and looked at Amanda hopefully. "If you don't find out what happened, and the two insurance companies decide to fight it out in court, it may be years before Sherri gets any help."

"We'll do everything we can to clear this up as soon as possible," Amanda assured her. With a swift glance at Lee she was able to convey both her sympathy for the Blandings and her determination to help them.

At that moment, a flash of lightning brightened the room, and it was followed shortly by a loud clap of thunder. The unseasonably warm weather of the first few days of the week had given way to a series of violent thunderstorms, and Lee could tell from the heavy patter of raindrops against the roof and windows that this one was going to be severe. Catching Amanda's eye, he signaled her to wrap up her questioning as soon as possible. In response, she thanked Mrs. Blanding graciously for her cooperation and promised to contact her as soon as the investigation was completed.

Less than five minutes later, they stepped out into the storm, and Lee pulled Amanda against him under a large black umbrella. He moved as quickly as possible down the wet sidewalk, attempting to skirt the numerous puddles that had resulted from the intense downpour. They were closer to Arlington than to the Agency, and he decided against fighting his way back to DC through the inevitable traffic snarls the wet roadways would be causing. Since it was at least an hour earlier than Amanda's family would be expecting her, he would find a quiet spot to park the Vette so they could have their long overdue 'talk.' This would be his last opportunity for several days, as Amanda had already told him she had committed her entire weekend to a fundraiser at the boys' school. If he didn't broach the subject this afternoon, he would have to wait until Monday. And although he had

been content to move slowly, he didn't know whether his patience would extend quite that long.

They were within a few yards of his car when Amanda slipped on the wet pavement and stumbled against him. Almost simultaneously, a particularly loud clap of thunder roared overhead. She jumped slightly, and almost involuntarily his arm tightened protectively around her, pulling her against his chest. Looking down, he found her face only inches from his, and his pulse quickened. As they stood staring into each other's eyes, the storm, the traffic, and the investigation all faded from consciousness. He was aware only of her: her dark eyes gazing into his, the damp tendrils of hair curling around her flushed face, her shallow breathing as her chest pressed against his. Without thinking, he lowered his head until his lips hovered only centimeters from hers, and she gave no indication of pulling away from his embrace and impending kiss.

"LOOK OUT!" a high-pitched voice suddenly shouted from somewhere behind him. Only seconds later he heard the faint skid of rubber against water and concrete, and simultaneously he felt a chill cascade across his backside. The umbrella offered no protection as a sheet of water splashed from a large puddle behind him. The next instant a young boy on a bicycle came to a wobbly halt beside the drenched agent, "Gee, I'm sorry mister, lady." the boy groaned. "I didn't see that puddle 'til the last minute, and I couldn't get stopped. Are you okay?"

Lee removed the arm from Amanda's waist and swiped ineffectively at the back of his soaked trousers. "Fine. Just fine." He muttered.

The weekend crawled by, but Monday finally arrived. Lee arrived at the Agency earlier than usual, anxious to see Amanda. They hadn't exactly parted the way he had intended Friday afternoon. She had been so concerned he might catch cold in his rain-soaked clothing that she had insisted that he drop her off and go straight home to shower and change. At least he had spoken to her a few times over the weekend. She called him shortly after he arrived at his apartment to make sure he had gotten there safely through the mounting storm and again late Saturday afternoon to make sure he wasn't ill. And he called her Sunday to ask her to meet him in the Q Bureau first thing this morning. It was amazing how much he missed her in only two days. Two days and three long, lonely nights . . .

Taking his badge from Mrs. Marsten, Lee was mildly annoyed when the gray-haired receptionist informed him that Billy Melrose wanted to see him the minute he entered the building. Casting a longing look at the stairs to the Q Bureau, he

turned toward the closet elevator. "Mrs. King is supposed to meet me in the Q Bureau this morning," he informed her. "Would you tell her that I got called downstairs and ask her to wait for me?"

"I'll tell her," Mrs. Marsten responded with a smug smile as he disappeared behind a curtain of overcoats. 'Although I suspect she already knows,' she thought to herself, 'Amanda King might not be the usual Agency type, but I'll bet she could teach the Lee Stetson a few things about reading people . . .'

Lee was about to knock on Billy's door when it opened and Francine stalked out. "Here he is now, Billy." she said, casting a glowering look at Lee and mumbling something inaudible toward him before flouncing away. Lee watched her retreating back for a moment before proceeding inside. "What was that about, Billy?" he questioned.

"Francine's just a little jealous," Billy commented good-naturedly, motioning Lee toward one of the chairs on the opposite side of his cluttered desk. Stuffing the remaining bite of his morning donut into his mouth, he washed it down with a large swallow of coffee.

Instead of sitting, Lee stepped to the office window and glanced into the bullpen. He could see Francine at her desk, phone against her ear. Jealous? Were his feelings for Amanda that obvious to everyone? Even so, why would Francine be jealous? They hadn't been more than friends for years. . .

"She would love this assignment," Billy continued, setting aside his coffee cup and picking up several forms from one corner of the desk.

Lee's eyes narrowed as he turned back to his boss. "Assignment?" he questioned warily.

"Sun, sand, the beautiful people. Right up Francine's alley. But I can't spare her for a month."

"A month?" Lee repeated, his mind snapping to full attention as the implication of Billy's words sank in.

"A month. Maybe five weeks if you're lucky, " Billy responded, oblivious to Lee's lack of enthusiasm as he signed the forms and then reached for a stack of folders.

"What are you talking about, Billy?" Apprehension crept into Lee's tone. This was beginning to sound like an overseas assignment. A long overseas assignment. . .

"Monaco." Billy pulled two folders from the stack and pushed one toward Lee, opening the other on the desk in front of him. "We've been getting tips that something big is going down there in the next month or so, but we haven't been able to pinpoint a target. In the next few weeks, there is a symposium at the Aquatic Research facility and another at the Museum of Prehistoric Anthropology; there are several major performances at the Grand Theater that will bring in dignitaries from all over the world; plus there is the Monte Carlo Grand Prix. And the Casino is always packed with VIPs. Our man there, Francois Benning, is laid up with appendicitis, of all things. So I've been asked to send someone to check things out."

For a moment, Lee was stunned, then his mind began to race. Monaco? For a month or more? No way!! No way was he going!! Ignoring the file, Lee studied the top of the older man's head while he debated his response. He couldn't refuse such a plum assignment without raising Billy's suspicions; he needed to take a more indirect approach.

"Well, uh, Billy. I'm right in the middle of that State Department investigation," Lee reminded his boss, trying to keep his voice casual. "The Secretary of State won't be happy if I take off for Monaco for a month; his office specifically asked for me, you know."

"They've had you for a week," Billy snorted, without raising his eyes from the file he was reading. "Fred Fielder isn't doing anything critical. I'll have him take over for you at State, and Amanda can help him out. She's been on it from the beginning."

Lee paced across the office, his mind churning furiously. He had to think of a way out of this, and fast. He needed an excuse, any excuse. He just couldn't go to Monaco right now. "I can't" he blurted out.

"What?" Billy finally looked up from the file. "You can't what?"

"I can't go, Billy. I, uh" Lee faltered for a moment before inspiration struck. "I have to take my physical," he stated solemnly as a self-satisfied smile spread over his face.

"Your physical," Billy repeated blankly.

"Yeah, Billy, my physical," Lee affirmed. "I've been putting off my annual physical for months. Doc McJohn's sent me half a dozen memos about it; he's threatening to

pull my badge if I don't schedule it in the next two weeks. So I can't go to Monaco." He gave a nonchalant shrug before adding, "You said Fielder isn't doing anything critical. And he speaks French as well as I do; his mother is French, you know. Send him."

Billy Melrose stared at his top agent. It wasn't very often that anyone caught a dumbfounded expression on the face of the Field Section Chief — but he was wearing one now. "Let me get this straight, Scarecrow. You're turning down a month in Monaco to spend three days in the hospital being — how do you usually put it — poked and prodded by a bunch of blood sucking leaches?"

Billy's sarcasm apparently went right over the head of the man before him. Lee rocked gently back and forth on his heels, a grin on his handsome face. "Exactly. Rules are rules, you know. I have to take my physical." 'And Amanda will spend every spare minute with me,' he thought complacently. 'She's not gonna give Chad Turner the time of day while I'm in the hospital.'

Billy was still staring at Lee when the office door opened and Francine walked back in. "I've got the tickets and hotel reservations" she reported in a businesslike manner, before giving Lee a slight scowl. "You should have just enough time to pack your vacation clothes and head to Dulles."

Billy continued to study Lee for several more moments. "Can it, Francine," he finally muttered with a slight shake of his head. "There's been a change of plan. Fielder's going to Monaco."

When Lee finally arrived in the Q Bureau, he found Amanda at his desk, surrounded by papers. She frowned in concentration as she absently chewed on the end of a worn pencil.

"Amanda," he said, drawing her name out in a way that indicated his mild amusement at her intense focus. "Are you reading those same statements again?"

Amanda didn't look up. "Yeah. I have this feeling that I'm missing something."

Lee opened his mouth to protest that there couldn't possibly be anything to miss. Half a dozen people had reviewed those documents without finding a single clue. However, he stopped himself abruptly without uttering a word. He had worked with

Amanda for long enough to finally realize that, when she thought they were missing something, she was usually right.

"Lee," she interrupted his silent musing, "did you know that Hattie Kendall's father committed suicide?"

Lee mentally reviewed the background checks on Harrison Blanding's elderly housekeeper. "Yeah. I think I remember reading that somewhere," he responded slowly. "But that was decades ago. I don't see what relation it could have to Blanding's death."

Amanda didn't look up from the paper in front of her, but her eyes had taken on a far-away look. "Mrs. Kendall was seventeen at the time," she stated slowly.

"Okay," Lee said, waiting patiently for Amanda to make her point. They had already discussed the housekeeper at length, and neither of them considered her a suspect in Blanding's death. She had seemed genuinely grief-stricken, besides which she had no discernible motive. It was unlikely she could have masterminded the theft and sale of an important document when she was all but illiterate.

"Sherri Blanding is seventeen." Amanda pointed out in the same meditative voice.

"Okay. But I don't see . . ."

"I want to talk to Mrs. Kendall again," Amanda interjected without waiting for him to finish his argument. As she spoke, she rose from the desk and began gathering the papers and stuffing them back into their folders.

Lee again opened his mouth to protest but decided against it with a shrug. They didn't have any other leads to follow, so they might as well speak to Mrs. Kendall. At least it would get them away from the Agency for a while, in case Billy had second thoughts about sending Fielder to handle the Monaco assignment.

As they drove through the streets of DC on the way to the housekeeper's tiny apartment, Amanda suddenly recalled Lee's summons to the bullpen.

"What did Mr. Melrose want this morning," she asked with a worried frown. "I hope he wasn't upset that the State investigation is taking so long." It had occurred to

her that perhaps Mr. Melrose wanted to remove them from the case, and she really wanted to help Sandra and Sherri Blanding.

Lee hesitated, unsure whether he should tell her about Monaco. If he told her he had turned down the assignment, she would want to know why — and he was certain she wouldn't accept the excuse about his physical at face value. She would have questions, ones he wasn't prepared to answer at this precise moment. On the other hand, it was inevitable that she would find out about Fielder's departure, and judging by Francine's reaction, certain undesirable embellishments would be added to the story as it passed through the grapevine. With a slight sigh, he decided on an offhand approach, giving her enough information to satisfy her curiosity without revealing too much of his discussion with Billy.

"He wanted my input on an overseas assignment he's sending Fielder on," Lee stated carefully. "I told him I think Fred can handle it." Flashing Amanda a wicked grin, he added "I don't think it will call for disarming any missiles.' And if it does, Lee thought to himself, Fielder can always get a police bomb squad; the Monte Carlo police had enough experience in that type of situation.

Amanda tossed Lee an amused smile. "Maybe I have an old Bombers button lying around somewhere that I can give him for luck," she quipped.

Lee laughed as they pulled up to the square red—brick building where Hattie Kendall lived. Swinging out of the Vette, he hurried around to the passenger door to take Amanda's hand.

A few minutes later he was edging his way through Hattie Kendall's living room, feeling every bit like the proverbial bull in the china shop. The tiny space was crammed with spindly tables adorned with delicate statuary and bric—a—brac. Amanda had gracefully maneuvered through the area, pausing periodically to comment on some trinket or other, but his larger frame was decidedly out of place here. Finally reaching the relative safety of a chair, he glanced at his partner and raised one eyebrow questioningly. During the drive, she hadn't told him what she wanted to discuss with Mrs. Kendall and her only comments, so far, had been about various pieces of ceramic and porcelain they had passed on the way to the faded sofa and armchairs. Amanda, however, ignored his inquiring gaze, politely declined Mrs. Kendall's offer of tea, and told her kindly that they had stopped by to see how she was doing.

"I know you were close to Mr. Blanding, having worked for him for so many years," she stated gently to the older woman. "His death must have been difficult for you."

"Yes," Mrs. Kendall agreed with a misty smile. "First Mrs. Blanding last summer, and now Mr. Blanding. It has been hard. They were both like family to me."

"And they were your only source of income," Amanda added sympathetically. The comment caused Lee to direct another questioning look at her; Mrs. Kendall had told the investigating police officer that she was reasonably comfortable, between her monthly social security and the small life insurance settlement she had received when her husband had passed away three years ago. She only continued to work for the Blandings because she felt they needed her during the difficult years of Mrs. Blanding's illness and the even more difficult months since her death. With no living family of her own, Hattie Kendall had more or less adopted the Blandings.

"Well, I really didn't need the money," Mrs. Kendall replied, echoing her earlier statements. "I would have retired years ago, but I couldn't leave the Blandings."

"Well, that's good," Amanda smiled in apparent relief. "I thought you might be as angry with him as Sherri is."

"Sherri?" The older woman looked startled.

"Yes. This had been hardest on her, I think." Amanda paused and looked sincerely at Mrs. Kendall. "Of course, you would understand what she's going through. Your father died when you were about Sherri's age, didn't he?"

"That was different," Mrs. Kendall responded gruffly, wiping her eyes with a dainty lace handkerchief. "My father didn't love me; he left me alone and destitute. Mr. Blanding provided for Sherri."

"I'm sure Mr. Blanding intended to provide for Sherri," Amanda agreed. "But unfortunately, his life insurance won't pay until we can determine the cause of the shooting. Sherri might not even be able to start college this fall without the insurance money."

"Can't you just report that Mr. Blanding's death was an accident?" Mrs. Kendall pleaded. "He loved Sherri; I know he did. He didn't kill himself; he wouldn't do what my father did."

"We can't finalize the report until we're certain. We'd like to help Sherri, but there isn't much we can do at this point."

Mrs. Kendall looked down at her lap, clasping and unclasping her hands in agitation. "I've known Sherri since she was three," she whispered. "She's such a sweet girl. She shouldn't have to go through this."

"I know," Amanda said softly. "But she has her mother to help her through it. Wouldn't it be better for her to know the truth than to think her father didn't provide for her?"

Hattie Kendall sat silently for several moments, then she rose slowly and walked across the room to a small desk. Opening a drawer, she removed a paper and returned to where Amanda was waiting patiently. She held the paper toward his partner with a shaking hand. "I didn't mean to cause any trouble," she said in a wavering, tearful voice. "I just didn't want Sherri to have to go through what I went through, the shame of having her father kill himself, the pain of being abandoned . . ." Her voice drifted away as she sobbed quietly..

Amanda reached for the paper and studied it for moment. "It's a suicide note," she said softly with a glance at Lee. "Mr. Blanding says he can't go on living without his wife and he. . ." As she spoke, Amanda turned the paper over in her hands, and her eyes widened in surprise. "Lee," she gasped, her voice barely above a whisper. "I think this is the Sandstorm list."

Lee dropped his overnight bag on the living room carpet feeling happier than he had felt in weeks. The State Department investigation was complete; his physical was over; Chad Turner was out of his life; and he had a dinner date with Amanda tonight. Of course, Amanda didn't realize it was a real 'date' yet — but he had every intention of letting her know. Tonight he was going to put an end to this torment; tonight he was going to take her in his arms and kiss her.

To be honest, the last few days hadn't been as bad as he anticipated. Amanda had spent most of her time at the hospital, keeping him up-to-date on Agency operations and entertained between tests. He had maintained a careful balance between being sullen enough that she would feel needed but not so surly that she would stop visiting. Only once had his facade slipped: when she confided that she had asked Chad Turner not to call her anymore, it had been a struggle to keep a grin off his face.

Glancing at his watch, he wondered what Amanda was doing right now. Probably finishing up her regular Friday afternoon filing in the Q Bureau; she liked to keep the office tidy and well-organized, but the filing always seemed to be pushed aside

until Friday afternoon. Then she had to drive home through the rush hour traffic and take care of her family before preparing for this evening. He hoped she would wear the black dress with the spaghetti straps tonight; she looked incredible in that.

He was about to head for the bathroom to shower off the faint hospital smell that still lingered around him, when he heard a hesitant knock on his door. Hurrying to answer it, his heart leapt at the sight of Amanda — but almost immediately plunged again when he saw her expression. She looked upset. In fact, she looked really angry. It didn't appear she was mad at him, though; she smiled weakly as soon as she saw him.

"Hi," she said softly. "I know you're not expecting me . . ."

"Is something wrong?" Lee interrupted, studying her face closely as he gently ushered her into his living room.

Amanda looked down at her hands, and her voice conveyed a mixture of anger and distress when she replied. "I have to cancel dinner. I wish I didn't have to, but . . ."

"Amanda. What's wrong?" Lee interrupted again, concern apparent in his tone.

She gave him another half-smile before returning her gaze to the floor. "Joe was supposed to take the boys for the weekend," she sighed. "He promised to take them camping, and they've been looking forward to it for weeks. But he called this afternoon and canceled; he said he was going to be tied up at work all weekend." Amanda met Lee's eyes, begging him to understand. "Mother is going to be away all weekend too — so I really need to take the boys. I'm sorry, but they need me."

Lee gritted his teeth to stop himself from swearing out loud. He was terribly frustrated about having his plans spoiled, but he couldn't ask Amanda to abandon her children to be with him. Silently, he cursed Joe King. Aloud, he said, "It's okay. The boys must have missed Joe a lot when he was in Africa."

Amanda was silent for so long he didn't think she was going to respond. Finally she shook her head, gazing absently across the room. "Actually, I think it was easier for them when he was so far away." She paused again before continuing slowly. "He's been gone so long. Jamie doesn't even remember when he lived with us, and Phillip barely does, and Joe didn't even visit very often. So the boys didn't know any different. I mean, they really didn't know what they were missing when he was gone. But now — it's like they've gotten a little glimpse of something good. They never realized they didn't have it before, but now they do, and they want it, and it

hurts that they don't have it." Amanda shrugged. "That probably doesn't make any sense to you."

Lee reached out and trailed one hand down her cheek, gently turning her face so that their eyes met. "Yeah, it does. It makes perfect sense. I know exactly what you mean," he assured her. He wanted to take her in his arms and comfort her, but once again he realized the timing was wrong.

Amanda smiled gratefully at him, a hint of tears in her eyes. She touched his arm softly. "Thank you for understanding. We'll take a rain check, okay."

"Yeah. A rain check." Lee tried valiantly not to let his disappointment show; Amanda had enough to worry about without feeling bad for letting him down. "Look, you probably need to get going. Why don't you head home, and I'll see you Monday morning."

"Yeah, you're right," she sighed again, turning to walk slowly toward his apartment door. Just before she reached it, however, she turned back to him. "Oh, Lee. I almost forgot. I've been kind of borrowing your office the past few days."

"Borrowing?" he asked, quirking one eyebrow.

"I've been working in the Q Bureau every morning, and I've left some things up there."

"What kind of things?" he asked, his words tinged with amusement.

For an instant, Amanda's eyes twinkled mischievously. "A few lock picks," she responded with a slight smile. "A case of doorknobs and some padlocks," she added with an exaggerated shrug. "And I think there are a couple of locking briefcases and maybe a safe. Leatherneck has been teaching me how to pick different kinds of locks," she explained, seeing his baffled expression. "He said we're going to work on handcuffs Monday morning, but we meet early, before you normally get in. I'll have everything cleaned up by nine o'clock."

"Don't worry about it, Amanda," Lee reassured her. "The Q Bureau's half empty. You can keep anything you need there." Opening the door, he impulsively leaned down and kissed her cheek. "I'll see you first thing Monday morning," he promised. "We have a lot to talk about."

The End

(Next week's episode is "All The World's A Stage" guest starring. . .)