

## Smokescreens

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**Note #1:** I may have taken some liberties with structural aspects of Lee's apartment and apartment building. If this offends anyone, I apologize.

**Note #2:** I have received several requests to "chapter" these stories together. Unfortunately, I haven't yet mastered the mechanics of doing so.

Thanks again to Kara for reviewing this story and offering comments and encouragement.

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Amanda King put her car into 'Park,' turned off the lights, and unbuckled her seat belt. She took a few deep breaths in an effort to soothe her slightly frazzled nerves. She needed to calm down. While she finally had reason to believe that Lee Stetson's feelings for her were more than platonic, she still needed to take things slow. She couldn't push him; she had to wait until he was ready. Easier said than done. Sometimes, when he looked at her with those gorgeous hazel eyes, when he flashed one of his dazzling smiles, even when he closed his warm fingers over hers, it was difficult to keep her own emotions in check. She might have a great deal of self-control, but she was only human.

She wondered wistfully whether he would ever be ready. When Lee asked her to dinner — just a casual evening with a good friend, he had explained — she knew immediately that his motive was neither casual nor romantic. He had spent the last two days trying to get information out of anyone he thought might have access to the DeJaVu study. He hadn't specifically mentioned it to her since the afternoon of his last Dr.ug trial, but she had felt his questioning eyes on her several times. He suspected that she was withholding information from him, and he was going to make an attempt to get it out of her. Tonight.

What should she say to him? She had asked herself the same question a hundred times, and there was no good answer. She simply couldn't tell him the truth. How could she possibly explain what had happened during the interrogation? On the

other hand, she doubted she was capable of looking him in the eye and telling him a direct lie, at least not a believable one. So that left the option of telling him she knew some of the research results but wasn't allowed to divulge them. The thought made her wince slightly. This might be the last meal they shared in a very long time.

As she exited her vehicle, Amanda smoothed the fabric of her jeans and straightened the sleeves of her soft, white sweater. She wished she could have worn her new red one — Lee seemed to like it on her — but she felt that would have been pushing her luck. Dr. Quorn and Mr. Melrose had assured her Lee wouldn't remember anything from the interrogation, but how could they be certain? No, she wasn't going to wear something that might trigger a memory she preferred to stay buried.

White was probably a better color for tonight, anyway. Amanda smiled as she recalled a conversation with one of Joe's law professors many years ago. "If you ever find yourself the defendant in a criminal trial, Amanda, be sure to wear white," the elderly attorney had lectured her solemnly. "White always helps ladies appear innocent." Amanda sighed and wondered whether his advice applied to an interrogation by dashing a federal agent.

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Lee paced from his kitchen to his living room, making sure everything was ready. He had wanted to cook something special for Amanda tonight, but he had gotten out of the office much later than he intended. Luckily, one of his contacts worked at The Blue Fox; with just a quick phone call, he had been able to have a complete dinner delivered on barely an hour's notice. Now, the salad was in the refrigerator, the lasagna and bread were in the oven on 'warm', the table was set, and the wine was breathing on the sideboard.

He was a little surprised at himself for going to so much effort. Amanda might not know any more about the DeJaVu research than he did. Well, he was going to find out tonight. First, he would relax her with dinner, wine, and friendly banter. Then, he would light a fire and settle her comfortably on the sofa. She would be putty in his hands. No, not literally in his hands. He determinedly squelched the image that tried to form in his mind. This was Amanda, he reminded himself. His hands were not going to be involved in this operation.

Lee glanced at his watch. She was due to arrive in a few minutes. He paced a few times around his living room and ran a finger under the neck of his dark turtleneck sweater. He shouldn't be feeling so nervous. He'd had dinner with Amanda dozens

of times. It must be guilt, he decided. He felt guilty for inviting her to a casual dinner when he had an ulterior motive. His relationship with Amanda was generally open and straightforward. At least as open and straightforward as a relationship could be when it involved someone in his business. Wait a minute, he chided himself. He didn't mean 'relationship'. He didn't have a relationship with Amanda. He meant his friendship with Amanda. Yes, that was right. Friendship. He glanced at his watch again. Almost on cue, he heard a soft rap on the door.

Taking a deep breath in an effort to shake off his uncharacteristic nervousness, he made his way to the apartment door. He opened it to find Amanda standing in the soft glow cast by the hall lights. There was a shy smile on her lips and an enigmatic look in her large, brown eyes. Damn she looked beautiful!

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Amanda hummed softly to herself as she moved around Lee's small kitchen. Despite her earlier qualms, the evening had been delightful so far. The food — - catered, Lee had admitted with an engaging grin — had been delicious, and the conversation had been light and pleasant. She told Lee about Phillip's most recent girlfriend, Jamie's science project, and her mother's determination to investigate every store in Arlington Mall during this week's "midnight madness" sales. Lee told her several amusing tales of his adventures while on assignment in Europe the year before they met. She didn't quite believe some of his stories: she suspected he skimmed over the more disturbing parts and embellished the comical ones for her entertainment, but she didn't mind. It was a sweet gesture; she appreciated his sensitivity to her distaste for the more violent aspects of their job.

After they finished eating, Amanda had insisted on clearing the table and loading the dirty dishes into the dishwasher, while Lee carried their wine glasses and the half empty wine bottle into the living room. It felt oddly comfortable, Amanda thought, to be working in Lee's kitchen like this. It was something she could easily get used to.

Amanda had finished the dishes and was wiping the counters when she heard Lee's voice. "Amanda, you don't have to do all that. Come out here." Draping the dishcloth over the oven handle, she went to join him.

Lee was kneeling in front of the fireplace. "It's pretty cool tonight. I thought you might like a fire," he said with a winning smile.

Amanda approached and stooped down for a closer look. Although she had been in his apartment several times, she had never paid any particular attention to the fireplace. "Is that gas?" she asked.

"Yeah, see, you can turn the flame higher or lower with this little switch." He demonstrated, causing the flames to flare up and then recede. "It doesn't put out quite as much heat as a wood fire, but it's easier."

"And you don't have to stop what you're doing every fifteen minutes to add wood, either," Amanda commented lightly. A sudden image of things he might be doing that he wouldn't want to interrupt caused her to blush and turn her head.

"Hey, are you okay?" Lee queried gently, reaching around to place a comforting hand on hers. She looked up into his eyes and saw they were puzzled and concerned. Amanda swallowed and forced the troubling image aside. She couldn't change Lee's past, whether or not she was going to be part of his future. "Yeah, I'm fine," she assured him with a warm smile. "I've really enjoyed this evening."

"Good, now come sit and enjoy the fire for a few minutes," Lee urged. Pulling her upright, he placed his hand on the small of her back and guided her toward the sofa.

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Lee settled Amanda on the sofa with her wine, picked up his own glass, and sank down beside her. It was time. He wanted that information. He faltered for a moment, however, when he glanced at Amanda's face. \*Was\* there something bothering her? She had denied it, but she didn't seem as relaxed as he had hoped. Ignoring another wave of guilt, he decided to forge ahead. "You know, Amanda, this has been really great. Dinner and talking and everything. But there is one small business matter I want to discuss with you." He spoke with practiced nonchalance. Finishing his wine in one gulp, he placed the empty glass on the coffee table and turned to face her again.

"Oh. What's that?" Amanda set her glass beside his and smiled hesitantly.

"Well, I'm sure you've heard about the DeJaVu research at the Agency," he stated, trying to maintain an even, offhand tone.

"Yeah, I have. Mr. Melrose mentioned it to me," Amanda replied. She looked nervous, Lee noticed.

"Then you know I was one of the research subjects," Lee continued.

"Yes, I know that." For a moment, she looked down at her hands, which were clenched in her lap. Then she raised her eyes back to his.

"The thing is, I've been asking around, and no one seems to know what happened during those interrogations." As he spoke, Lee looked steadily into her eyes.

"Oh, I think that's just how the Medical department works. The only people who know are the people who are supposed to know," Amanda said with a nervous flutter of her hand and a shake of her head.

"Like you?" Lee watched her carefully.

"Me?" Amanda's voice wavered.

"Yeah. I mean, we're friends, right? So, you'd tell me if you knew something." Lee's voice was low and compelling. He quirked an eyebrow expectantly.

There was a long pause before Amanda responded. "Oh, well, yeah. We're friends. Right. So I'd tell you if I knew something. Unless, of course, I'd been ordered \*not\* to tell, in which case I really \*couldn't\* tell, because I might get into trouble. And you wouldn't want me to get into trouble. Because we're friends. Right?" Amanda shrugged her shoulders delicately and gave him a disarming smile.

Lee hesitated. He blinked slowly and ran a hand absently through his hair. When she put it like that... Hell, of course he didn't want her to get into trouble. But she wouldn't get into trouble just for giving him a few details about a medical study. Would she? His "need to know" warred with his protective instincts. No one stirred his protective instincts quite like Amanda. She was so naive, so vulnerable, so innocent. He wasn't going to do anything to hurt her. He wasn't going to let anyone do anything to hurt her.

Silence stretched between them. For some reason, Lee's throat began to feel dry and his palms started to sweat. He shouldn't have turned on the fireplace; it was too hot in the room. He noticed that Amanda looked slightly flushed. His brain told him to get off the sofa, turn down the fire, and open a window. His body didn't obey. He found himself almost hypnotized by the sparkle of Amanda's heart-shaped pendant above the scooped neckline of her sweater. The tiny diamond chips caught and reflected the flames from the fire as her chest rose and fell with each breath. Forcing his eyes upward, he felt a sudden urge to reach out and touch the silky, chestnut curls framing her face. He looked into her eyes: they were dark

and soft and warm. He couldn't seem to tear his own away. Mesmerized, he felt an almost irresistible desire to lean forward and press his lips gently against hers. He moved toward her slightly. She didn't back away, and he moved closer.

EEEEEEEEEEEEPPPPPPPP! EEEEEEEEEEEEEPPPPPPPP! EEEEEEEEEEEEEPPPPPPPP!

Lee and Amanda sprang apart as a loud, shrill sound shattered the quiet of the night.

"What the hell!!!" Lee growled, jumping to his feet.

Amanda rose more slowly. She felt disoriented, and she knew the erratic pounding of her heart was only partially due to alarm. Just a moment ago, she had been almost certain that Lee was going to kiss her. She looked into his face and saw that he had snapped back into agent mode. Trying to focus on the piercing shriek that continued to assault her ears, she finally realized what she was hearing. "It sounds like a smoke detector," she stated.

Lee turned a full 360 degrees, his eyes scanning the room warily. "You're right, but I don't smell smoke in here," he said slowly. "It must be the smoke detector in the outside hallway. Come on." Reaching for Amanda's hand, he moved so quickly toward his apartment door that she barely had time to grab her purse off the end table where she had left it earlier. As he put his free hand on the doorknob, however, he stopped. "Wait here for a second," he ordered. He strode into his bedroom and returned a moment later tucking his gun into the waistband of his jeans. "I don't want to go out there unarmed, just in case."

Lee took Amanda's hand again and slowly opened the door. As he pulled her through the doorway, she saw that the hall lights were still illuminated, but clouds of thick, dark smoke cast eerie, shifting shadows on the walls. "Come on, we'd better head for the stairs," Lee shouted, barely audible over the almost deafening wail of the smoke detector, which was now almost directly over their heads. He reached into his pocket and handed her a handkerchief. "Put this over your mouth and nose."

Amanda held the handkerchief over her face, and Lee pulled the collar of his turtleneck sweater up to cover his own mouth and nose. Still clasping hands, they moved cautiously through the hallway, down the stairs and out into the chill spring night.

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Lee stood on the pavement outside his apartment building, one arm draped casually around Amanda's shoulders. Most of the residents had been forced to wait across the street with the usual crowd of spectators, but he and Amanda had been allowed to stay closer, just behind the line of emergency vehicles, after he had flashed his federal I.D.

The Fire Chief had told them the chaos was caused by a kitchen fire, which had flared out of control and spread through the adjoining rooms. Luckily, although the building's hallway had filled with smoke, damage appeared to be confined to one apartment. Several people had been treated for smoke inhalation, but there had been no serious injuries. The Chief had been adamant, however, that no one — including federal agents — would be allowed to reenter the building for at least another 30 minutes.

Lee looked down at Amanda as he felt her shiver slightly. The night air was cold, and he didn't even have a jacket to offer her. He had almost suggested going to a nearby coffee shop to wait, but then he remembered that his apartment door was unlocked; he needed to stay in the immediate area. Watching her for a moment longer, he decided he couldn't let her shiver for another half hour. "Look, Amanda," he urged, "it's really getting cold out here. You don't have to wait. Why don't you just head home."

Amanda looked at him uncertainly for a moment before responding, "Yeah, you're right, I should get going."

Lee took her hand, and they walked to her car in silence. He felt strangely awkward. The memory of those last few moments on his sofa flashed through his mind again. Had he really almost kissed her? Yes, he had, and he didn't know whether he was relieved or disappointed by the interruption.

Deep in thought, Lee was almost startled when Amanda stopped beside her car door. "Thanks again for dinner. I'll see you Monday," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. Then she surprised him by reaching up and kissing him softly on the cheek before she climbed into the vehicle and closed the door.

Lee watched as she fastened her seat belt, started the engine, and pulled away. He remained frozen in position until her taillights disappeared from view. Turning back

toward his building, he shook his head slowly. He had a lot more to think about this weekend than DeJaVu.

### **The End**

(I now return Lee and Amanda to their regularly scheduled third season programming, already in progress...)