

Twenty-five Words Or Less

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This story was inspired by the song, 'Twenty-five Words Or Less,' by Bill LaBounty & R. Freeland, Captain Crystal Music (BMI). However, despite my best efforts, the lyrics didn't quite fit into a SMK story. The refrain, on the other hand, simply wouldn't leave me alone, so it's included at the end.

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Timing: Spring 1986 . . . so third season, between "The Boy Who Could Be King" and "Dead Men Leave No Trails."

Feedback: Yes, please. I appreciate all comments.

Author's Notes: MANY THANKS to the ladies who provided advice and encouragement during the writing of this story. While certainly not perfect now, it is an improvement over the first draft.

"Are you sensible or sensuous?"

Amanda's ceramic cup froze in midair as the words registered in her mind. Her concentration shattered, she raised her eyes from the paper she was reading and blinked. "What?" she intoned slowly, wondering whether she had misheard. Why on earth would he pose such a question?

"I asked whether you're sensible or sensuous," came the reply, spoken in the same serious tone. Any suspicion that she was about to become the victim of a boyish prank faded as she looked into the earnest visage before her. Sandy blonde hair fell across a furrowed brow as two solemn eyes scrutinized her closely, gazing at her with a slightly puzzled expression she found endearing. It was difficult to resist the impulse to reach out and brush an errant lock away from his face, even though she was certain it didn't obstruct his vision.

Hoping he hadn't noticed the tinge of pink she knew had crept into her cheeks, she carefully set her cup on the table as she considered her response. "Well," she hedged, unable to keep a tiny tremor from her voice. "I don't know that I would . . . I mean, I've always considered myself a sensible person, but I don't think . . ." She hesitated, shaking her head as she tried to organize her thoughts. "Why exactly do you want to know?" she finished more firmly, regaining the emotional footing that the unexpected query had pulled so suddenly

from under her.

"I was going to use 'sensible' until I looked it up the dictionary, but listen to this." Jamie shifted the large, red book that lay open across his left arm and ran his right index finger over the tiny print. "Sensible. . ." he enunciated slowly, "perceptible to the senses or to reasoning or understanding." He looked up, wrinkling his nose as he appeared to consider the definition. "That sounds like you, because you're reasonable and understanding. But then I looked down the page, and I found 'sensuous.'" Jamie's eyes returned to the book. "Sensuous . . . relating to sensible objects or having strong sensory appeal." Pushing his glasses back into position, he raised his head to again study his mother. "Does that mean sensible *and* pretty? Because then I could get two meanings out of one word."

Amanda cleared her throat softly. "Um, I think *sensible* would be a better word to use when you're describing your mother, Sweetheart." She was spared the necessity of explaining further by the sound of Phillip's footsteps thundering down the steps, and she uttered a silent thanks for her older son's boisterous entrance into the kitchen.

"Do you still have your nose buried in that dictionary, worm brain?" Phillip snorted derisively. "Man, I could write a twenty-five word essay in, like, thirty seconds. I'm gonna sign up for Honors English next year if I can get assignments like that."

"It can't be just *any* twenty-five words," Jamie shot back hotly as he slid into the chair next to his mother's, the heavy book clutched to his chest. "It's supposed to be the *right* twenty-five words. And don't call me --"

"Don't call your brother worm brain," Amanda interjected, directing a stern look at Phillip before turning back to Jamie. "You're supposed to write an essay about me?"

"I'm supposed to write what I like about someone important in my life, in twenty-five words or less," Jamie explained. "But it's hard. When you only get to use a few words, you have to make sure they're all the right ones. Mrs. Banning said we should use a dictionary." Jamie glared at his brother. "She said it was a lesson in, in . . ." His face scrunched with the effort of recalling his teacher's exact instructions. "Precise vocabulary usage." His eyes narrowed as he looked again at his older brother. "So I have to find the right words," he repeated emphatically.

"I think it's terrific that you're putting so much effort into your assignment." Amanda reached out to tousle Jamie's hair and sighed almost inaudibly when he pulled his head away. "I think both of you," she looked meaningfully at Phillip, "should start getting ready for bed now. Your dad will be here to pick you up at seven o'clock in the morning, so you need to be up early."

As the boys pounded back up the stairs, Amanda returned her attention to her reading. After a few moments, however, her mind began to wander. It was odd, but the daily news wasn't nearly as engrossing as it had been a few years ago. The newspaper used to provide tantalizing glimpses into an exciting and mysterious world. But now . . . She realized with

amazement that her own life was often more suspenseful than the average lead story. How many Arlington housewives had the opportunity to rub elbows with royalty and the social elite? And how many of her peers devoted their spare time to keeping their country safe from criminals and KGB agents? In the two and a half years since Lee Stetson had stormed into her life --

A tap at the window startled her, and she turned to see the object of her most recent meditation standing in her back yard. She rose and walked to the door, shaking her head over the fact she considered it routine to find a handsome spy tapping on her kitchen window at ten o'clock on a Friday night.

A knot formed in Lee's stomach as he watched Amanda shake her head, the movement causing her hair to swirl gently around her shoulders. Her smile was enigmatic, her dark eyes unreadable, and he realized with a sinking feeling that he had no credible excuse for this interruption of her evening. Edging backward into the shadows beyond the muted glow of the kitchen light, he had a fleeting urge to vanish into the night before she opened the door. But the need to be near her rooted his feet to the ground just as he was about to turn away.

He watched in quiet fascination as she slipped outside and stepped toward him, gracefully navigating a path between the delicate flowers he had been trampling. "Hi," she greeted him softly. "I didn't expect to see you tonight," she added with nervous glance toward the kitchen window.

Lee flashed what he hoped was a winning smile, before dropping his eyes to study the profusion of tulips and daffodils. Somehow the rakish charms that served him well in every other encounter with members of the opposite sex failed miserably in the presence of his lovely partner.

Shifting his weight uneasily, he shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, you know," he mumbled, risking a glance up from the flowers and foliage. "I was in the area . . . so I decided to stop in and make sure you're okay."

Amanda tilted her head, a puzzled frown furrowing her brow. "I'm fine," she said slowly. Her gaze flitted from his restless feet to his flexing hands.

Before she had a chance to ask the question apparent in her eyes, he reached out to gently grasp her arm, lifting it to examine a small abrasion above her right elbow. "I just wanted to make sure. You fell pretty hard. Your elbow could've been dislocated . . . or bruised . . ."

Amanda laughed softly as she ran a fingertip over the nearly indiscernible wound. "It's just a little scrape, Lee. And the only bruises were to Fred's ego." She met his eyes, a faint

admonishment in her own. "I think he believed you when you said you'd shoot him if he set foot on the stairs to the Q Bureau again."

A wave of rancor swept over Lee at the memory of the afternoon's contretemps. Clenching his jaw, he glanced around the darkened yard as he fought to quell a reaction he knew was out of proportion to the seriousness of the incident. "He'd better not come anywhere near those stairs again. I don't know what he was thinking, trying to carry all those boxes up at once. Fielder's enough of a menace when he can see where he's going." He faced her again, and he saw her brown eyes had widened. "He knocked you completely off your feet; if you'd fallen over the railing you would have been seriously hurt."

"I only stumbled," she corrected him, a hint of amusement creeping into her tone. "And I wasn't hurt."

"You could have been," he insisted stubbornly, uncertain why he felt compelled to argue the point. For several moments, he stared intently at a spot somewhere beyond Amanda's right shoulder. Finally he met her eyes again without releasing his gentle grip on her arm. "So, you're sure you're okay?" he questioned, his voice dropping to a husky whisper. Despite the cool evening breeze, he suddenly felt uncomfortably warm.

She nodded but remained silent, her expression amused, perplexed and . . . something he couldn't quite decipher. "Good," he finally murmured, nodding in return. His thumb absently stroked the skin of her upper arm and thought he felt her shiver. "So, are the boys in bed?"

"Almost," she replied, the slightly raspy quality of her voice more pronounced than usual.

"And your mother?" he asked, the unusual tranquility of the house registering in his mind for the first time.

Amanda flicked her tongue across her lips. "She's at her garden club's annual Spring Gala. She probably won't be home for hours."

Lee hadn't anticipated this opportunity, but he wasn't going to waste it. His gaze drifted down to her mouth and then back to her eyes. Taking a half step forward, he closed the short distance between them, his right hand reaching out to tuck a strand of dark brown hair behind her ear before sliding down her left shoulder. Her shy smile was the only encouragement to lower his head slowly toward hers.

They seemed move in slow motion. Lee felt her warm breath on his face as his lips hovered mere centimeters away from their goal. An erratic heartbeat pounded in his ears, and he wasn't sure whether it was hers or his. Her eyelids fluttered closed, and she began to melt against him. But in the next instant, a loud clattering noise caused him to straighten and twirl both of them around. Sensing a movement from above, he pushed her roughly against

the side of the house and shielded her body with his own -- seconds before a mangled screen and a large red book thudded into the grass near where they had been standing.

As Amanda disentangled herself from his arms to step toward the unusual missiles, Lee heard an angry shout carry down from the open second story window. "Why'd you duck, doofus? You were supposed to catch it." The words stopped abruptly as a head appeared, silhouetted in the space recently occupied by the screen. "Oh, cra-- , uh, sorry, Mom," a boyish voice sputtered.

Finally bringing his ragged breathing under control, Lee moved further into the shadows as Amanda bent to scoop up the book then straightened to frown at the boy. "Phillip King, close that window this minute; you're letting bugs in," she called out sternly. "And after you apologize to your brother, come downstairs so we can discuss how you're going to pay for this." She pointed at the ruined screen. "And, Jamie, you get into bed right now," she added. "You can finish your essay after you get home tomorrow."

As Phillip's head disappeared, Lee took another step away, brushing lightly against the bushes. At the slight rustle, Amanda turned in his direction, her eyes searching the darkness. As he watched, she raised one foot several inches then stamped it down again with an adorable grimace before moving toward the door to confront her repentant son.

After twenty minutes, and a sweeping lecture on the proper treatment of books, brothers and bedroom windows, Amanda again sat in the quiet kitchen. The frustration and upheaval of the last half hour had dissipated, leaving her with only a vague wistfulness..

A vase of yellow and pink flowers decorated the table, and she reached out to touch one of the delicate blossoms. Spring flowers were her favorites, bringing to mind new beginnings and new opportunities. "And missed opportunities," she muttered under her breath. Once again fingering the tiny scrape on her arm, she decided the small injury was well worth the reward of those few minutes in her fragrant garden reveling in the warmth of Lee Stetson's protective gaze.

Glancing at the dictionary she had placed on the table beside the flowers, she thought again about Jamie's English project: describe what you like about someone important in your life in twenty-five words or less. Well, that would be tough. In fact, it might be impossible. She didn't know whether even twenty-five hundred words would be sufficient to describe Lee.

There were so many things she liked about him. He had a great smile . . . a really sensational smile. At times it was cocky and self-assured, at other times hesitant and uncertain, but more and more often, it was warm and open and . . . something else. Something that warmed her to her toes and invaded her dreams at night.

Lee also had the most compelling eyes she had ever seen. Eyes that had drawn her irresistibly to him the first time she met him at the train station. When he'd begged her for help, she had been powerless to refuse him. She should have known better than to give in to the plea of an absolute stranger, and yet his eyes had told her all she needed to know: she could trust him with her life.

But why had she kept returning to help him -- especially when he had seemed so determined to drive her away? Why, each time he appeared, usually when and where she least expected him, did she agree to his entreaties? It was because he'd needed her, a small voice whispered. And not just as an emergency backup, not just as a temporary cover or window dressing. There was a sadness, a loneliness, that called out to her: this man needed a friend. The paradox of Lee Stetson was that his life was so full . . . yet so empty.

Across the Potomac in Georgetown, Lee emptied a small bag of groceries onto his kitchen counter. He quickly put away the bread, cheese and milk, but his hand lingered for a moment on a jar of honey. He rarely purchased the stuff; it brought back one of his few clear memories of his mother -- sitting at the kitchen table on summer mornings sharing toast and honey and laughter.

Once in a while though, when he was in a contemplative mood, he would make himself the treat he had shared with the one woman who had truly loved him, and he would allow himself to remember. Remember what it was like to be part of a family, to be loved, to belong Such memories were invading his thoughts more and more regularly, and they were inexorably entwined with Amanda King. And they were no longer resurrected as a warning, a reminder to keep his distance, to pull away. Now, they were calling out to him, tempting him toward a future totally different from the one he had pictured just a few months ago.

For a moment, he closed his eyes and allowed his mind to wander to those moments in Amanda's yard. To the feel of Amanda in his arms, to the softness of her hair and skin, to her smile . . . Amanda had the most wonderful smile. It touched his very soul. And she had incredible, irresistible eyes. From the first moment he had seen her at the train station, from the instant their eyes met, he had known he could trust her.

But he hadn't realized, until Joe King returned from Africa a few months previously, that Amanda might be lonely. Surrounded by family and neighbors, club acquaintances and business associates, she turned to him when she needed a friend. The realization filled him with a warmth that made him almost giddy.

Lee sighed as he careful placed the honey jar into a nearly barren cabinet. Amanda King was an extraordinary woman living two very different lives. But she was normal, something he hadn't been since he was five years old. Could Amanda be happy with someone like him -- someone who wasn't normal. . . but sometimes wanted so desperately to be

Amanda ran a brush through her dark curls, her mind lingering on that moment in the yard when her lips had almost met Lee's. It had been exciting, exhilarating . . . and terrifying. She had wanted that kiss -- more than she could even express. Yet she was also afraid. Their attraction was so strong, yet she and Lee were so totally different.

Amanda stared at her image in the bathroom mirror. The woman who looked back at her was tall, attractive, and . . . normal. She might visit the world of glamour and intrigue on a fairly regular basis, but could she ever belong there? Did she even want to? And could Lee Stetson ever belong to the world of Marvelous Marvin's and school bake sales, picnics and quiet afternoons in the suburbs? Could he be happy with someone normal? And would their friendship survive if they couldn't make the transition from friends to . . . something more? Every passing day convinced her more firmly that she was ready to find answers to those questions.

Padding slowly into her bedroom, Amanda slipped off her robe and slid between the crisp, cotton sheets. Minutes after she lay her head on the pillow, the phone rang, and she reached for the extension on her nightstand. "Hello," she murmured cautiously, half fearing some late night disaster.

"Hi," Lee returned her greeting. After a brief pause, he continued, "I didn't get a chance to say good night. I hope it's not too late."

Stifling a yawn, Amanda relaxed back into the warmth of her bed, enjoying the rich timbre of his voice as she began to drift again toward slumber. "It's not too late; I'm glad you called," she assured him, smiling sleepily. "Good night, Lee."

"Good night, Amanda." She thought he was going to hang up after those few words, but after a moment he spoke again. "Oh, and, Amanda? There's no rule that someone can't be both."

"Both?" She repeated, her eyes widening.

"Sensible *and* sensuous," was the hushed reply, before a faint click and a dial tone left her staring, wide awake, at the phone in her hand.

*And in 25 words or less, I'll tell you why I like you.
Cause you got the sensational smile, irresistible eyes,
Oh but the fascinatin' thing about you
Is you look lonesome, I'm so lonesome,
You look lonesome too.*

The End