

Broken Dates

Scarecrow and Mrs. King fan fiction

by Cat Lady Firebird

Table of Contents

| | |
|--------------------------------|----|
| Pride of Columbia | 2 |
| Down the Long Hills | 6 |
| Ruthless People | 10 |
| Twins Lounge | 13 |
| Herdsmen and Plow | 17 |
| Foundry Branch Tunnel | 21 |
| Apartment Roof | 25 |
| Hundred-Dollar Hamburger | 29 |

Pride of Columbia

Lee Stetson felt his smile deepen as soon as Amanda King got out of her car. She wasn't wearing the black dress he'd once asked her about, but she was equally stunning in burgundy. Was it another one of her handmade creations, perhaps? The woman was an absolute wizard when it came to sewing, a fact that he'd long since come to appreciate every time he'd torn a shirt.



She blushed slightly under his perusal. “Hi.”

“Hi yourself.” He gave her a quick kiss before offering his arm, exulting in the fact that he was allowed to do that now. They'd shared kisses before last Thursday, of course, but those had been especially unique. “Are you ready to go?”

“I think so. Will you tell me where we're going now?”

“Nope.” It was their first official date as a couple, and he was looking forward to her reaction. “You'll see when we get there. It isn't far.”

Indeed, the waterfront wasn't far at all from Georgetown, and the *Pride of Columbia* was moored at Pier 4, the closest to the parking lot. Lee took the opportunity and moved in for another quick kiss as he helped Amanda out of his Corvette. She was happy to comply, and afterward, he found himself humming softly. This was going to be a great night.

“Wow,” said Amanda softly when they stopped to check in. “A dinner cruise? I mean, I've heard about them, of course, but they always seemed so pricey. Oh, Lee, you didn't have to go all out like this. I know you said you were looking forward to getting to know me better, but I've never done anything like this and I'm going to just be so nervous the whole time that someone you know might see us and —”

“Hey.” He broke into the ramble as they stepped off the gangplank onto the ship. “Relax. I've never done this, either. It's not exactly the kind of activity that — well, entertainment you'd find listed on the social register.” It wasn't until the words came out that he realized how they sounded, and he cringed.

She cocked her head. “If it's that terrible, then why are we here all dressed up like this? We're not going to end up bored, are we?”

“No, no,” he answered quickly. “I just meant this isn’t the kind of thing someone does when they want to see and be seen. It’s mostly marketed to tourists.” There, that was definitely better.

“Are we tourists?”

“Or for one-on-one dates,” he amended. “They’re promising a plated meal and then some music for dancing later. I haven’t danced with you nearly enough yet.”

Her shoulders loosened. “Okay, then. Let’s eat and then dance.”

The three-course meal was better than he’d expected, given that the kitchen in question was on a boat. Amanda seemed to agree with him, doing real justice to her plate while she kept up a delightful stream of conversation. He’d never realized that cheerleaders often took dance lessons. “Of course, those lessons aren’t quite the same as what we’re going to do. But I’m not totally unfamiliar with —”

“Amanda. We’ve danced before, remember?” Two years ago, he’d have been irritated or exasperated. A year ago, he’d have been amused. Now, he was charmed. “It’ll be fine.”

“With you? I’m sure it’ll be better than that.”

How could any man say no to that kind of flattery, especially when he knew she meant it? He still couldn’t quite figure out why, exactly, she was attracted to him; she knew his weaknesses better than anyone else. He’d spent time in thought earlier, but in the end, he’d simply put it out of his mind.

Tonight wasn’t the time for that, anyway. Tonight was for celebrating the new step in their relationship. Lee grinned. They were allowed to use that word about themselves now, weren’t they? Why had he spent so long fighting it, anyway?

“Lee?” Her voice brought him out of his reverie, and he looked down to see their plates had been cleared. “We should go out onto the deck. They’re clearing the tables to make up the dance floor.”

“Yeah. Of course.” It felt glorious to tuck her hand under his elbow. “It’s probably cooled down a bit.”

It wasn’t just cooler outside. A light breeze had sprung up, clearing the air as it blew across the Potomac. Lee stopped at a railing, guiding Amanda around to stand in front of him. She pressed back against his chest as they looked out over the water together, enjoying this thoroughly perfect moment.

Then Amanda turned around, burying her face in his neck. “Oh, no.”

“What?”

“To your left. It’s Mother. And Curt. Her latest beau.”

Lee was careful not to move his head as his eyes perused the people around them. Dotty West looked fantastic herself tonight, wearing a rose-colored dress that wouldn’t have been out of place if paired with her daughter’s burgundy.

Thinking quickly, he drew Amanda into a long kiss, making sure he pulled her hair across her face and wishing he dared get as lost in this kiss as he had in the ones they’d shared two days before. But he couldn’t; while this kiss was certainly enjoyable, his attention was primarily focused on listening to footsteps as they passed behind the two of them.

Amanda’s mother sighed as they got to the periphery of his hearing range. “What a lovely night, Curt. And what a wonderful idea for a date.”

Well, thought Lee, *it had been*. Releasing Amanda, he looked down and saw she was — laughing? What?

“You should see the look on your face,” she explained.

“It isn’t funny!” He glanced at his watch. “There are two hours left before we get back to the pier. Two hours we’re going to have to hide!”

“Yes, I know. But you have to admit, you were right. We didn’t run into anyone *you* know out here, did we?”

Shaking his head, he began chuckling along with her.

She reached up and laid a hand against his cheek. “It’s your turn to relax, Lee. We’ll be fine. The band’s almost done setting up, and Mother won’t come back out after they start playing. All we need to do is just stay outside, and now that the sun’s down, it’s actually pretty nice out here.”

He sighed. “I’d really wanted to dance with you tonight.”

“Who says we can’t? Come on,” she encouraged him as she slid under his arm and strode toward the bow, away from the engine noise at the boat’s stern. “The music should carry enough for us to hear it.”

Inside, the band began, and while it took some effort he was, in fact, able to hear the music. He guided her into their first steps while several other couples quickly moved onto the floor inside. To his relief, those other couples included Amanda’s mother and her date.

Amanda was right; the night didn't have to be a complete loss. All they had to do was ensure they disembarked well behind the older couple in order to stay completely out of their sight. Both of them were well-versed in doing such things to remain hidden, so they wouldn't have any trouble.

Still, he'd wanted to celebrate *in the open* tonight, instead of staying concealed in darkness! Lee closed his eyes and leaned his forehead against Amanda's, willing the annoyance and frustration away.

Down the Long Hills

“Watching under the willows,” read Amanda out loud, “Hardy saw three Indians with feathers in their hair.”

Lee shifted slightly, but didn't move his head from her lap, where she'd been stroking his hair.

“All were naked to the waist,” she continued, “and one had a quarter of an antelope on his saddle.”



Now his hand came up to capture hers, although his eyes were still closed. He kissed her fingers gently. Amanda was leaning against a tree trunk, holding the book a little higher than she normally would, while he was sprawled on the blanket that lay underneath them. It was pleasantly warm today, but not hot, and they weren't the only ones who'd decided to take advantage of it by heading for the National Mall.

She kept reading. “They drew up about thirty yards from downstream, and Hardy could hear the low murmur of their voices. He noticed they were not painted, and they carried no scalps. One of the Indians dropped from his pony and lay down to drink.”

“Sounds like a good idea,” Lee murmured. “We still have some water left. You could lie down with me and drink it.”

“I can't read a book out loud while I'm lying on my back.”

He chuckled, and a lilt came into his voice. “Amanda King admitting she has a limitation?”

She put the book down beside her, holding her place with one finger as she smiled. “I admit to having limits all the time. Of course, you know what comes next in the story anyway. It's your book.”

“Yes, but I've never heard it read with such a nice voice before.” Still holding her opposite hand, he rotated it to kiss the inside of her wrist, letting his lips linger. “This was a great idea. Thank you for suggesting it”

As dates went, this was a simple one, but it was something she'd never done with Joe. When she'd come over to his apartment, she'd brought her picnic basket and some sandwiches, saying it was too pretty a day to stay inside. They'd discussed their options as he'd rooted around in his apartment for an insulated bottle.

While Rock Creek Park was their usual spot, they'd decided the Mall would be more crowded and, thus, have more opportunities for them to blend in if needed. "I don't think anything'll actually happen, though," he'd said. "Billy lives in Bethesda, and Francine wouldn't be caught dead doing something so normal. Didn't you say Joe and the boys were going to the Zoo?"

"The Yards," she corrected him. "With their bikes. They're going to ride from the Wharf and back. There's a concert tonight, a local act that he's been following since he got back. The boys were also campaigning for a ride on the water taxi."

"Sounds like fun," he'd answered. "And also nowhere near the National Mall."

Now, she slipped a hand free so she could stroke an errant lock of hair off his forehead as she began reading again. "As he started to rise he hesitated, then stood up. When he came to his full height he looked upstream, and for a long moment seemed to be looking right into Hardy's eyes. The boy knew he could not be seen, but he held very still and prayed that neither Betty Sue nor Big Red would make a sound. After a long, long minute, the Indian looked away."

Lee sighed happily. She understood his feeling.

"Soon all three rode off together, with the others, but even as they left, the one Indian turned and looked back. Hardy held very still until they had gone, and then he woke up —"

"Tasha!" came a shout from somewhere nearby. "Where are you?"

Amanda paused, recognizing the sound of a worried mother. Noticing her tension, Lee opened his eyes and sat up. Based on the volume of the mother's cry, she was just over the bushes from them. Her voice went strident as she called again. "Latasha Jeanette, you come back here this minute! I told you not to run off from us again!"

Lee's hand closed over hers again, but this time it was for comfort and support. "Sounds like they found her."

"Yeah." She let a long breath out, starting to lean back against the tree, but then Lee tensed up.

After a moment, she heard it too. "Tasha, what in the *world* made you think you could run off, and here, of all places! I told you this was a special trip and you couldn't go off on your own."

Amanda would recognize Billy Melrose's voice anywhere. But was it him? His daughters were old enough to know better than to run off, weren't they?

“Yes,” said the adult woman. “Well, your mama used to the same thing, and it wasn’t any better chasing my little sister than it is chasing her daughter!”

Question answered. She’d only heard Jeannie Melrose’s voice once before, so it had taken her longer to recognize it.

“Damn it,” whispered Lee from where he had begun repacking the basket. The path from the other side of the bushes came around in front of them in just a couple doze feet. If they got spotted...

Pushing to her feet, Amanda, dropped the book into the basket and began folding the blanket. Footsteps sounded behind them and off to the side. The family would be in range in seconds.

Abruptly, Lee pulled her right into the bushes. Amanda started to protest as the branches snapped and scratched, but then he shoved her down, curling over her in a protective position. She pressed her face into his neck, trying not to make a sound, regretting her earlier impulse to be outside, pretty day or not.

Above her, Lee froze and went stock-still. She could feel his breath hitching, so she glanced up. His eyes were focused outside the bushes, just past where they’d abandoned their things.

“Huh,” came Billy’s voice from right outside the bushes. “I wonder what happened to these folks. They should know better than to leave things unwatched like this.”

“Maybe,” said Jeannie, “we can wait here until they get back.”

No, thought Amanda. Please, don’t be that considerate.

The Melroses’ young niece agreed with her thoughts. “They’re prob’ly close by,” she argued. “And it’s just a blanket and basket. It’s not like there’s a purse or anything.”

That was true enough. Amanda had left it back at Lee’s apartment, only taking her keys, an ID, and a little bit of cash in her pockets.

“Come on!” said Tasha. “I wanna get to the museums already!”

Billy’s sigh was audible, as were his footsteps as the three of them walked away. After a couple of minutes, Lee sagged against her. His body had gone limp with relief. “That was too close,” he whispered.

“Yeah,” she agreed, wiggling out from under him before extricating herself from the bushes. “Let’s get out of here before they come back by on their way out. I think it’s clouding up anyway.”

He glanced up and sighed, a long exhalation of breath, before offering his hand. Amanda understood that feeling too. Hopefully there would be other days with pretty weather.

Ruthless People

This really wasn't Lee's kind of movie; his tastes ran more toward art-house films with subtle humor. But when Amanda began whispering a hilariously sarcastic commentary about everything the characters were doing wrong, he was able to relax and enjoy the nearly slapstick comedy on screen. It occurred to him that her unique perspective was one of the reasons he lov —



No, he told himself. It was too soon for that. It was one of the reasons he enjoyed spending so much time with Amanda.

But you're dating her now, his mind insisted, and the two of you made it officially exclusive a month ago, even though you'd been unofficial for a while. So why not take the next step? Just give in and admit it, to yourself at least.

Lee shook his head to clear his thoughts, dislodging Amanda's hand from where she'd had it in his hair. At her look, he leaned over and gave her a quick kiss for reassurance. To avoid notice, they'd chosen seats near the back of the theater, and now there was no little amount of temptation to do what teenagers might have been doing back here, if the movie weren't rated R. He took a sharp breath, willing his errant thoughts back under control.

"What is it?" whispered Amanda.

"Nothing." Giving in, he leaned over and gave her the long kiss he'd been thinking about. She responded enthusiastically, even as the scene changed to one where Bette Midler cried about being kidnapped by a bargain store. He pulled Amanda closer, his lips trailing across her cheek toward that place behind her ear he'd discovered fairly early on. She shivered in response, her fingers tightening around his, and Lee began to wish that movie theater seats' armrests flipped up, the way that airplane seats' armrests did.

Of course, on an airplane they wouldn't be hiding in the dark in the first place.

Banishing the sarcastic sentiment from his mind, he kissed his way down Amanda's neck. With another shudder, she pulled away. He hissed his displeasure, but then she turned fully toward him for a long, satisfying kiss on the lips. The ambient

light flickered as the movie kept playing, but he had no idea why and he didn't care. His entire attention was focused on the woman beside him.

Well, mostly. The armrest digging into his side had passed from annoying into aggravating.

Now Amanda was the one whose kisses were trailing across skin, her mouth slipping under his jaw. He leaned his head back to give her better access, dislodging the popcorn tub that had been in his lap. It clattered loudly as it hit the floor, spilling their remaining popcorn and completely ruining the moment. Beside him, Amanda started to chuckle.

"What's so funny?" he whispered.

"Us," she answered. "If it'd been one of the boys, I'd be scolding them by now."

A smile tugged at Lee's lips. "Are you going to scold me?"

"Maybe." Her gaze slid sideways over him. "Or maybe not. It depends how well you behave for the rest of the movie."

"Oh, well, if that's the case —" he stood up. "I'll get us some more popcorn. And when I come back, I'll be a perfect gentleman."

Her eyes flashed a promise. "I hope not."

The flirty banter was exhilarating, and he was glad it had become more common instead of less so once they'd actually started dating. Lee shook his head, smiling, as he made his way into the movie theater's lobby. There were more than a few moments when openly dating Amanda was just plain fun.

Well, open between themselves, anyway.

"Here you go," said the teenager who stood behind the concession counter, handing him another tub of popcorn. "You sure you don't need any more drinks?"

"Nope," answered Lee. "Thanks." As he turned away, he saw something out of the corner of his eye that made him stop for a second look. A movie on a random Wednesday night was hardly something he'd have done in his previous life. Especially not a movie like this one. Surely nobody would have tracked him here!

His breath caught when he realized it. Nobody had.

But Joe King was standing on the other side of the lobby, with a pretty dark-skinned woman. They were discussing something as they perused the movie posters; Joe had two tickets in his hand, but Lee was too far away to guess which movie they were attending. All he knew, based on the intact tickets, was that they hadn't yet gotten

in line yet, which meant they weren't here to see the same showing he and Amanda were.

Turning away quickly, Lee made his way back into the darkened theater. Amanda greeted him and the popcorn happily. "You missed one of the best parts," she whispered.

"No I didn't," he countered. "You're still here."

She chuckled, but then peered more closely. "What's wrong?"

"Who said anything's wrong? I'm at a movie with my best friend, my girlfriend —" it was the first time he'd used the word — "and we're sitting in the back."

She just gave him a look.

He sighed, capturing her hand and bringing it to his lips. "Joe's in the lobby."

Amanda sat straight up. "What?" Her voice echoed across the theater, earning them some dirty looks.

Lee pulled her back down so he could whisper in her ear. "Joe. In the lobby. With a woman I don't recognize. They're not coming to see this. Tickets hadn't been taken yet."

She took a deep breath, her chest heaving and her shoulders drooping as she visibly forced herself to relax. "I guess it's a good thing you drove."

Maybe, thought Lee. Joe had seen his car during the case with the Estoccian Prime Minister, but Corvettes weren't all that unusual. Assuming Joe had even noticed, he'd have had no reason to make any connections. They were safe enough for the moment.

On the screen, the kidnappers argued while their quarry looked on. Scattered laughter came from other members of the audience at various points. But Lee had lost the plot and had no idea what was so funny.

Based on her appearance, neither did Amanda. Her hand twitched slightly when he took it. In an attempt to re-ignite the mood, he tried to feed her some popcorn, but she shook her head.

"I need a few more minutes," she whispered.

Lee closed his eyes and damned the circumstances. Were they ever going to catch a break?

Twins Lounge

Amanda had never tried Ethiopian food before. It was definitely something she wanted to try again, though, at least the tegabino shiro in front of her. The dish was a purée of chickpeas, and the spices and flavoring were amazing. It was an excellent side to the shekla tibs that Lee had ordered, and the combination was more than enough to feed both of them.



In the restaurant's stage area, a jazz quartet had just finished tuning up. They were beginning to noodle around some jams. The hosts of this newly opened venue, twin sisters who'd immigrated a few years before, had said there might be dancing later. Amanda hoped so, although the placement of the tables in the tiny space gave her a little pause.

"Penny for your thoughts," said Lee as he took some more of the shiro.

"Cost you a nickel," she countered with a smile. "Inflation."

He made a show out of reaching into his pocket for some change, but she stopped him with a laugh. "What's the matter, Stetson? Can't stand to have your own words thrown back at you?"

"I have never," he informed her, "charged you for my thoughts." His tone was grave, but his dancing eyes gave away his actual mood.

"Yes, you have," she reminded him. "I clearly remember you saying that to me outside the grocery store, the first time my paycheck got screwed up."

He shook his head. "That was different."

"Oh? How so?"

"We weren't dating then."

"That makes it different?"

His smile bordered on the devilish. "That makes *everything* different."

"Oh, I hope not," she bantered back. "Because I kind of like seeing you during the day."

"I do too. Most of the time."

"Most of the time?" She decided not to let the words sting. Chances are he'd simply put his foot in his mouth again.

“Yeah. Most of the time. But not all, because sometimes I just want to pull you into the vault and —”

“You see that as a *problem*?”

“Of course I do. Because I *can't do it*.” His hand slipped around the table toward hers. “That stupid agreement about how we're going to act at work.”

“It's not stupid,” she responded automatically. They'd had this disagreement before. “It's so we can keep working together. You know that. If someone were to find out, Dr. Smyth might break us up and Mr. Melrose wouldn't be able to do anything about it.”

“Hey,” he said gently. “I'm not trying to start another argument. I just wanted to tell you how gorgeous you sometimes look. It's always on my mind, and there are times it just drives me crazy.”

Amanda relented, forcing a smile and hoping the actual sentiment would kick back in. “All right. I'll let it drop.”

“I hope so, 'cause you heard Ms. Tesfaye when we came in. I can't wait to dance with you tonight.” He picked up her hand to kiss the tips of her fingers. “Oh. These taste like the shiro.”

“You see *that* as a problem?”

“Absolutely not.” He gently sucked one fingertip into his mouth, and she shivered at the feel of it. The gossip in the steno pool was that Lee Stetson was absolutely amazing in bed, amazing enough to overlook his tendency to get bored after a few dates. Amanda preferred not to do such things right away, if at all. That had, in fact, been one of the reasons she'd hesitated about a romantic relationship with him.

She'd been stunned when he'd expressed the sentiment first. “We'll know, if and when the right time comes,” he'd said that day in the Q-Bureau. “And waiting until then will only make it better. For now, though...”

Since then, they'd kept themselves to cuddling, touching, and kissing — all outside of work, of course — and that was more than enough to leave her breathless sometimes. Like now. When she couldn't help but thinking about doing more than that as his tongue flicked over the end of her finger. The warm, velvety texture sent sparks arcing up into her arm. “You're not giving me much of an incentive to dance.”

“Oh, now,” he said, “we can't have that.”

“Assuming there’s even going to be dancing. I know what Ms. Tesfaye said, and the band certainly seems the right kind. But I can’t see where we’d do it. I suppose you could move the tables and chairs back, but even that wouldn’t give us a lot of room, especially if they’re going to be playing swing music. Mother taught me how to do that when I was little, you know, and it takes a lot of space per couple.”

“Amanda,” he said softly. “I don’t want to dance swing with you.”

Now the electrical sparks lanced through her whole body. “What do you want to dance, then?”

“I think you know.” His voice lowered to a purr. “We won’t need a lot of room for that.”

“Lee, we’re in public.”

“I know. But it’s dark in here, and there’s nobody we know, so why should we care? As long as we don’t get ourselves arrested or thrown out, it should be fine.”

“— fine,” echoed another voice, across the room, at the same time. The voice was all too familiar, and made Amanda turn around in her seat.

She froze at what she saw. “Lee! It’s — it’s Francine! And one of her dates?”

“What?” He stretched to look over her head. “The *hell?* I didn’t even know Francine liked jazz. She didn’t seem interested when Billy was performing.”

“Maybe they’re just here for dinner.”

“At this hour?” It was already going on nine o’clock, and a Friday night. “I never imagined her eating Ethiopian anyway.”

“Oh, that isn’t fair, Lee. Francine’s at least as cosmopolitan as you are.”

“Yes, but her tastes are a lot fancier — er, um,” Lee began to stutter. “Higher-end, I mean. Oh, that’s worse.”

“I think you’re trying to say *expensive*.”

He colored slightly. “Yeah, well, I know that’s not always what you want.”

“It isn’t. That’s part of why I suggested we come here, because I didn’t think that — oh, gosh, they’re coming this direction!”

He stood up, pulling her with him, and they slipped toward the back. Navigating the closely spaced tables in the dim room wasn’t easy, but somehow, they managed to keep from calling any attention to themselves. In the corridor that led toward the bathrooms, she pressed her body against his, thinking it would help them hide. That was

when she realized it was a bad idea: now she could feel his heart, pounding as hard as hers, and it made her shiver.

Lee's left hand slipped to its usual spot on the small of her back, but his right uncharacteristically tangled into her hair. She felt his lips warm her temple and had to fight to avoid getting lost in the moment. It wouldn't be smart to lose situational awareness. "Lee."

"Hmm?"

"Did you remember to grab the check?"

His breath was hot against her skin as he sighed. "No. But I can pick it up at the stand, if we can get there without being recognized."

"Let's wait until they have their menus. They'll pay more attention to those instead of the people around them."

"Yeah." Pulling her a little closer, he rested his chin on the top of her head. "So much for dancing."

"We can do it another time. Besides, there's a decent chance Francine's date is a one-time effort. A lot of hers seem to be. It's as though she's afraid of anything longer term."

"She's not," he said quietly, and Amanda was surprised to hear a note of sympathy in his tone. "She's just still skittish after — well, that's a story for another time."

"About you?"

"No, actually." The hand in her hair began to stroke it. "Look, here comes the hostess now. You want to make a break for it?"

She nodded, taking his hand, and they slid along the wall toward the restaurant's entrance. The dimness was a good cover, and both of them had dressed casually, so there was a decent chance their luck would hold. And it did. But once they were safely outside, Amanda sighed in frustration. The food really had been good, and the company even better. It was a shame they hadn't had a chance to dance.

Herdsman and Plow

“Are you sure there are going to be meteors tonight?”

Lee shifted Amanda in his arms as they huddled against the wall of her garage. “I looked it up. The meteor shower is supposed to be unusually bright this year. Plus, the moon’s waning.”

“What about all the streetlights? We are in the city, after all.”



He kissed her temple. “Look, if you want to go back inside or over to my place, that’s fine.” He’d initially suggested they try the roof of his building, but she’d nixed that, so they’d agreed to meet in her back yard at one-thirty a.m. He’d been on time, waiting, and had just about decided to risk another climb up the trellis when she’d finally come out, apologizing for sleeping through her alarm.

“I told you why I need to stay here,” Amanda replied, and she had: her mother had been complaining about her late nights again, and her boys tended to get up earlier in the summer than they did during the school year. It wasn’t the first time her family’s needs had played havoc with their plans, and it wouldn’t be the last, but he’d signed up for this. “Oh, look! There’s one!”

He’d been so lost in his thoughts that he’d missed it. “I’ll have to watch for the next one. Or I guess I could just wait until they’re reflected in your eyes.”

She gave him a tender smile. “That’s so sweet of you.”

Lee’s response was another kiss to her temple. “You bring that out in me, Amanda m—” Not for the first time, he cut himself off before he could finish the endearment: *Amanda mine*. While she used such language as a matter of course, bestowing her “sweethearts” liberally, he’d trained himself out of any such habit a long time ago. They didn’t mix well with short-term flings. Unfortunately, that was all he’d had for...he shook his head, trying to remember exactly how long it had been since the last time he’d tried anything more, before abruptly bringing himself back to the present. Those liaisons didn’t matter now. This relationship did. He wanted it to last a long time.

Maybe, he’d wondered a couple times lately, even for the rest of their lives. But it had only been a few weeks, and tonight wasn’t the time to think about that anyway.

Another meteor streaked across the sky. Amanda's delighted gasp was like music, and he couldn't help his own happy grin. Well, why not? She already knew him well enough to know he'd enjoy this. It was past time to squelch his habit of playing his emotional cards so close to the vest that they were practically inside it. Before this summer, he hadn't realized just how ingrained it had gotten.

Before this summer, he wasn't sure that would have mattered to him.

"Lee?" asked Amanda softly. "Is everything all right?"

He shook his head to clear it. "I'm fine."

"Are you sure? It's awfully late."

"I've been on stakeouts later than this. So have you."

She snuggled back against him. "With lots of coffee and the radio. Well, we have the coffee, but it's so quiet out here. And dark. I hadn't realized what it could be like this time of night. Which meteor shower did you say we were watching again?"

"The June Boötids."

"Interesting name."

"It's supposedly because they appear near the constellation Boötes, which is an old Greek word that means 'herdsman' or 'ox driver.' That must have been what they imagined they saw when they looked up at the sky. He supposedly has his plow with him, too, working on his field."

"Astronomers do a lot of that thing anyway."

"A lot of what thing?"

"Use Greek and Latin instead of more modern languages."

"Hey," he responded. "Greek's still a living language. There are even a couple of people around the Agency who speak it."

"Okay, ancient Greek," she amended, but then he felt her body tense. Her voice dropped to a whisper. "Lee, I think there's someone out there."

"Out where?" He looked around but didn't notice anything amiss.

She pushed to her feet. "In the yard. I don't think we're the only ones here!"

He jumped up beside her, reaching automatically for his gun before remembering he'd left it locked up at his apartment. Stargazing in a suburban back yard wasn't exactly a high-risk activity.

Then Amanda took a single sharp breath and stalked toward the gazebo. "Phillip Thomas King! You get out here this instant!"

There was a scramble of movement inside, before a disheveled teenager appeared. “Mom? What are you doing out here in the middle of the night?”

“I live here!”

“So do I!” he shouted.

“Well, what are *you* doing out here in the middle of the night? And who else is in that gazebo with you?”

“Nobody.”

“You’re already in major hot water, buster. Don’t make it worse by lying.”

Phillip’s expression became sheepish. “Come on out, Mindy. It’s just my mother, and she won’t leave until you do.”

“Just’ your mother?” It sounded as though Amanda’s temper was quickly heating to a full burn. “And where does *your* mother think you are, young lady? Who is she, anyway? I need to give her a call.”

“No!” shouted Phillip and Mindy at the same time. Then the girl appeared, and despite himself Lee had to admit that Phillip had good taste. She was the same age as he was and would have been an absolute knockout if not for the abject fear in her expression.

“You,” snapped Amanda, “are thirteen years old. That is way too young to be sneaking girls into that gazebo at all hours of the night! Especially if you’re doing things that mean you need a few minutes after someone catches you!”

“Mom! We were just fooling around.”

Amanda folded her arms, demanding further details, and Lee couldn’t keep the smile off his face. She’d be upset, he knew, once she got over the shock. But it didn’t seem like anything worse had been going on in the gazebo besides what they themselves might have gotten up to. He’d already been busted for doing a lot worse at Phillip’s age, although at the time his tastes had run more toward older, well-developed girls.

Lee shook his head at the irony, even as he saw a light appear in an upstairs window: either Dotty or Jamie had been awakened by the noise. That would mean even more embarrassment and, potentially, one of those dreaded “family meetings” Amanda had sometimes described.

It also meant that Amanda was about to march all of them into the house so that she could call Mindy’s mother. Which meant that this date of theirs, too, had been thwarted by the presence of someone else. Lee sighed and slipped along the edge of the

garage until he could make his way through her next-door neighbor's yard. He'd see her later, at the Agency, and encourage her to decompress then. Or, if she was exhausted, he'd send her back home to sleep.

Hopefully, he thought, nobody would remember her avoidance of Phillip's question about what she had been doing in the back yard to begin with.

Foundry Branch Tunnel

Amanda focused on the feel of Lee's hand as he led her down the final incline into the tunnel opening.

"What does this run underneath?" she asked him.

"The canal."

"A tunnel *under a canal*? I didn't think you could do that safely."



"Sure you can," he replied. "They go under water all the time to make car tunnels. Which is what this used to be, before it was converted over. It was also a sewer culvert at some point, but I'm not sure if that happened before or after the car tunnel."

That partially explained the tunnel's cool interior, despite the fact that it was ninety-four degrees outside today. She took a deep breath, reveling in the quiet that surrounded them. "So this has been here a long time."

"Fifty or sixty years, according to city records. The exact date they stopped vehicular access isn't clear, but it wasn't any later than about the 1950s."

She favored him with a smile. "How do you know so much about odd little places like this?"

He shrugged. While she couldn't see it in the dim light, she suspected he was also blushing a little. "I ask around. I go look things up. Keeps me busy, when there's not a whole lot else to do but I need to stay close to the office."

"Research for the fun of it?" She hadn't imagined that Lee would be interested in something like that.

"I suppose." He chuckled softly. "You'd be surprised how many Georgetown students have never heard of this place. I'll bet they did when it was a car tunnel, but I guess student bodies have short memories."

"Even though it's right here?" She was intrigued. "You'd think this would be a great place for them to get into all sorts of mischief."

One corner of his mouth quirked up. "Are you suggesting we should be getting into mischief?"

She felt her own lips twitch in response. "Isn't that why you brought us down here?"

“Maybe.” His lips brushed hers. “Maybe I just wanted to share with you.”

They’d slipped away from the office for a late lunch, knowing that it was too pretty a day to risk going anywhere very public, but also knowing they’d be pressed for time. Lee was due in a meeting in an hour, and by the time he was finished, she would be in the middle of the concession booth for the boys’ ball game. She’d somehow managed to pull concession duty for every game this weekend, which meant they likely wouldn’t have any time to themselves again until Monday.

Amanda returned the kiss, snuggling a little closer to him. “Well, thank you for showing it to me. How did you first find out about this place? Were you investigating a case, or looking things up just for fun?”

“Neither, actually,” he replied, and she felt his arms tense slightly. “I was, ah, with another agent, and we —”

“Lee-Lee?”

They froze at the sound of the new voice.

“This,” said Lee in a whisper, “isn’t fair.”

“What, that you brought me to a hideout where you used to meet an old girlfriend?”

Footsteps echoed closer to them. “Oh, my God. It is you!” The speaker was a co-ed who wore a Georgetown sweatshirt not unlike the pink one Amanda often wore to clean the house. She had black hair pulled back in a messy ponytail, and a set of equally black eyes that crinkled and snapped with pleasure.

Lee peered for a moment, and Amanda felt his muscles flat-out stiffen. “Pip-squeak? Is that you?”

“Oh,” said the girl, and Amanda realized that she was far too young even for Lee’s former tastes in women. “You didn’t know, did you. I’m at Georgetown now. Who’s this?”

“This is —” he broke off, hesitating. “Um. Amanda King, this is Andrea Devereux.”

“Andie,” said the girl as she held out a hand. “Lee and my dad worked together.”

“Your dad?” Amanda was surprised. “Is he with —” she nearly said *the Agency*, but then remembered that she was far from the only employee who used the cover story with their families. “— IFF?”

“Well, he’s not anywhere anymore.”

That likely explained why she’d never heard the surname around the office. “Retired?”

Andie shuffled one of her feet. "Um. No."

"Her father was my partner," said Lee quietly. He sounded calm, but she could feel waves of anxiety radiating off him. Well, no wonder: aside from one careless comment on the day they'd first met, Lee had never discussed his former partner. "He, ah, he had a heart attack during a night shoot and..." he trailed off.

"Oh," said Amanda after the silence stretched out longer than it should have. "I'm sorry."

Andie shrugged. "It's all right."

Lee took a sharp breath before continuing the conversation. "Except you were always just a little slip of a thing. How'd you know about this tunnel? Did your dad bring you?"

"No. Like I said, I'm at Georgetown now. Word gets around."

"You're already in college?"

"I'm nineteen," she replied. "That usually comes after eighteen, which comes after seventeen, and that comes after —"

"Sixteen," finished Lee, although he was starting to relax into the banter. "Yeah, yeah. I know. What brought you down here right now?"

Andie crossed her arms. "I could ask you the same thing. Dad always said you had a way with the ladies."

"Amanda is my partner."

"Is that what you're calling it? Because that kiss sure didn't look like anything you ever gave —"

"*Pipsqueak*. Come on, now. Be nice."

"Oh, don't call me that." Andie stuck out her tongue. "I'm staying in a dorm for summer school this year, but the air conditioning went down. I came here to cool off for a little while. But I think it might be better to head over to the pool instead. Call me sometime!" And with that, she was off.

"Well," said Amanda quietly. Their previous mood had definitely been ruined.

Lee shoved his hands into his pockets, rocking back on his heels. "Yeah."

"Why 'Pipsqueak'?"

"She had a terrible schoolgirl crush on me," he answered. "Treating her like I might treat a kid sister was a good way to handle it."

“Does she...” Amanda trailed off. “It sounded like she doesn’t know how her father really died. Does she?”

“You heard me. We told her it was a heart attack on set. She knew about IFF, but not about the Agency.” He glanced at his watch. “Damn it. We need to get going if I’m going to make that meeting on time. This was a pretty lousy idea, anyway, especially since apparently the current students do know about this tunnel.”

“No,” she replied. “It wasn’t a lousy idea. I’m glad you brought me.”

He gave her a sideways look before trudging toward the tunnel entrance. “I didn’t do it to go wandering through verbal minefields. And now that I know this place isn’t as obscure as I’d thought...” he trailed off, shaking his head again, before continuing toward the tunnel entrance.

Catching up with him, Amanda pulled him around into a quick kiss. “I meant it. I am glad. Even if it didn’t end up the way you intended.”

He laughed softly but then offered his hand. She took it as they walked back toward the office.

Apartment Roof

He'd hoped they would have some privacy up here, but asking for complete isolation on the Fourth of July probably had been expecting too much. At least, Lee thought, there weren't too many other people up here on the roof of his building. Looking around, he could see another couple, as well as a mother and two children. They'd staked out opposite corners of the roof already.



He dragged a lounge chair across to the corner he'd chosen. "There should be another one of these around somewhere."

"I don't see one," Amanda replied. "I'll be fine, Lee. Go ahead and sit down."

"By myself?"

She laughed and perched on the side of the chair. "This thing's not made for two."

"But it could be." He guided her into his lap and then leaned back into a semi-recumbent position with her cuddled against his chest. "See?"

"I guess I do. What if I get too heavy, though?"

"You, heavy?" He chuckled and pulled her closer, brushing his lips at her hairline. "Never. I'll probably get too uncomfortable first."

She pushed up so that he could see the raised eyebrow on her face, and that was when it hit him. "Oh. Oh, no. I'm sorry. I didn't mean like that. I just meant that I'm not soft like a pillow."

"Uh-huh." But she acquiesced, nestling back down against him. "How much longer before the fireworks, anyway?"

He had to twist his arm a little more than usual to see his watch, but it wasn't impossible. "Ten, maybe fifteen minutes. I've never known them to start right on time."

"And you're sure we'll be able to see them from here?"

"Amanda," he chided, mildly exasperated. "Don't you think I would've checked before suggesting this?"

"But weren't you living somewhere else this time last year? How can you know for sure?"

He sighed into her hair. “I asked my new neighbors one afternoon, after you’d already left.”

“Oh. Are they up here?”

Lee craned his neck again. “I don’t see them. Doesn’t mean they won’t be later. They’re good folks. I’ve really been enjoying living here so far.”

“Why did you move, anyway?”

How could he explain it without sounding like a hopeless sap? “Lease was up.”

“You could have renewed, couldn’t you? Was there something wrong with the old place that you didn’t like?”

Yes. You weren’t there. The thought leapt into Lee’s mind before he had a chance to squelch it. “I, ah, I just like to switch things up every now and then.”

She hummed softly, but didn’t say anything else. Lee closed his eyes, reveling in the smell of her shampoo, her perfume, and that unique scent that was just *her*. Even when she was dirty and sweaty from working out, or worn out from too long on a case without a break — neither of which were the case right now — that last was always there. He was coming to crave it.

Amanda stroked his face. “This is nice.”

“It is. I’m surprised you were able to make it.”

“You were?” She would have pushed back up again, but he gently held her down. “Why?”

“Wouldn’t you need to take the boys somewhere?”

“Oh.” She chuckled. “I asked Joe to do it this year. It’s about time, don’t you think?”

“I do,” he replied, though he was startled to hear her talking this way about her children. She’d never before implied that they created even the lightest of burdens. “I’m also surprised he didn’t wiggle his way out of it.”

“I didn’t give him a chance. I just asked him last night, and I made sure they were with me when I did. He couldn’t say no without looking bad in front of them.” She shrugged against his chest. “And they were far too excited earlier today for me to be willing to listen even if he had tried to back out of it.”

“What about that lady he was with at the movies?”

“What about her? If she doesn’t already know he has kids, it’s time for her to learn.”

He brushed another kiss at her hairline. “Who are you and what have you done with Amanda King? She’s always happy to spend any time she can with her kids. She’d never blow them off just for a date.”

At that, Amanda laughed out loud. “It’s been seven weeks, and you still think that? No, you’re right. I always want them safe, but they are when they’re with Joe. And for once, I wanted to spend a holiday with you.”

“We’ve spent holidays together before.”

“Only New Year’s. I wanted to try something else.”

Any reply he might have offered was interrupted by a flash of light. The booming noise of the first fireworks followed a second later.

Amanda twisted slightly in his arms, seeking a better vantage point. “That was pretty.”

“That was *early*,” he countered. “Probably went off before they meant it to.”

“Both can be true, you know. That it’s early and that it’s pretty.”

Lee chuckled softly, resisting the urge to shift her to a more comfortable position. Hadn’t he been the one who’d claimed they’d be fine if they shared this lounge chair? It should have been. He’d picked Amanda up before; he knew how heavy she was. So why did it seem like even the tiniest movement from her sent warning tingles through whatever arm or leg was immediately underneath? Come to think of it, why couldn’t he feel his right foot at all anymore?

She shifted again, and the involuntary gasp was out before he could stop it.

Amanda bounced to her feet. “I knew it. Why didn’t you tell me I was too heavy?”

“Because you’re not.” His answer sounded far more petulant than he meant for it to be. “Amanda, come on. Sit back down.”

“No. No, I’ll go see if I can find another chair.”

“Amanda,” he protested, sitting up so he could reach out for her. “I *liked* sharing with you.”

“You might have, but your body didn’t. It’ll only be a second, Lee. I’ll be back before the main show —”

He grabbed for her again, and that was when disaster struck. As his weight shifted to the edge of the lounge chair, it overbalanced and tipped over with a loud clatter. Lee hit the ground hard enough to cause a couple of bruises, but the worst

injury was to his own pride. Since when had he lost the ability to cuddle with a pretty woman on a beautiful summer night?

Amanda started fussing over him. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," he muttered, arranging his legs underneath himself before pushing to a stand. "Just let me get this thing put back —"

"Hey," interrupted a third voice. "You guys mind keeping it down? The fireworks are about to start."

Neither one of them had seen the older of the two children come over to them. Now that he was closer, Lee saw that the word *child* wasn't quite right; the young man was perhaps fifteen or sixteen years old, and by the look on his face, definitely understood what had been going on between the two of them.

Amanda brushed herself off. "I'm sorry. It's just that we had a little accident."

"And my mom says *teenagers* are gross. Yuck. If you want to be like that, you should go back down to your apartment."

"Look," began Lee, irritated. "It's not what you —"

"Whatever. Save it. And do whatever you want with each other. Just at least be quiet so everyone else can watch the fireworks, will ya? My sister," and he vaguely indicated his mother and the other child, "she's already starting to whine."

At this exact moment, Lee couldn't say that he blamed her, but he was supposed to be one of the adults here. Allowing himself a single breath, he nodded. "Well, you can go tell her the show's over. At least the one down here, anyway."

The kid snorted but trotted off. Behind him, he could hear Amanda beginning to chuckle.

"I thought we were going to watch the fireworks," he groused.

"We still can. From separate chairs." She pointed toward an empty one a few dozen feet away. "Just be still. I'll be right back."

With a sigh, Lee closed his eyes and admitted defeat. Maybe, he thought, they could cuddle in his apartment after the show. Assuming the mood hadn't already been irretrievably broken. And this time, there was nothing and no one he could blame aside from his own body.

Hundred-Dollar Hamburger

Amanda became even more skeptical of Lee's "perfect idea" for avoiding others when they got to the Potomac Airport. "Isn't this where the Agency keeps its airplanes and helicopters?"

"Yep," he said as he made a couple of adjustments to the paperwork before leaving it lying on the desk.

"Then how on earth is this supposed to be a good idea for avoiding them?"

"Because," he told her, "we'll be out of here before anyone else gets in." Evidently her apprehension was showing on her face, because he kissed her cheek. "Trust me. Nobody's going to come in this early on a Saturday if they can help it."

"So why did we?"

"I need the flight hours," he answered as he led her out to one of the helicopters. "That's what gave me the idea."

"For a date?" she asked as he helped her into a seat. "Just how many hours do you need?"

He went around to the other side and climbed into his own seat before answering. "Technically, I only need a couple hours every year to maintain my license, but skills can start getting rusty after just twenty-eight days. It's been..." he trailed off. "Sixty-eight for me, if I'm counting right, and if I don't get some landings on record soon, I could lose the right to carry passengers." By now he was flipping switches and adjusting toggles. "Close your door and strap in."

She did, but not without trepidation. "Where are we going?"

He signaled for her to put her headset on. "I know the perfect place. It's only a couple of hours." He grinned. "Relax. It's a good day for flying. And this is going to be a lot different since we won't be under fire or dealing with an emergency."

He was right; this flight was a lot smoother than her previous helicopter flights. After taking off, they maintained an even height and heading, his hands and feet smooth and confident on the controls. He kept his gaze focused outward except for the occasional glance to smile over at her. Amanda found herself relaxing and even enjoying



seeing him do something he clearly loved to do. He'd been right about the morning, too; it really was pretty, and the opportunity to see things from this angle was fascinating.

"How far up are we?" she asked.

"About sixteen hundred feet. I can go farther up if you want. Flight plan's filed to three thousand."

"No, that's all right." Just under a third of a mile was plenty high enough, especially since she could still see details from this altitude. She might not be able to if they went higher.

He brought them down for a smooth landing at a small airport he identified as Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. "You didn't see it because of the route we took in, but we're not too far from the battlefield," he explained. "I've been out here a few times, for cases and sometimes just to explore."

"Is that where we're headed?"

"No." After tying down the helicopter, he guided her through the hangar and out toward the main building, picking up the keys to a rental car on the way. To her surprise, they ended up at a building labeled *McKnight Community Fire Department*. They arrived just in time to pick up some of the first plates of hamburgers and french fries.

"Pilots call this the hundred-dollar hamburger," he explained as they sat down at one of the tables that had been set up on the lawn. "It's when you'll think up any excuse to go somewhere, just so you can fly yourself out there. Even if all you manage to think up is just getting a hamburger at the other end. A buddy of mine mentioned this fundraiser a couple weeks back. When I heard he wouldn't make it, I thought we might come check it out instead."

"Well," she observed, "we never did get around to eating those hamburgers back on the Sinclair case."

He toasted her with the soda that had come with his plate. "So now we have."

"Of course, we still didn't do it the way normal people might."

"That's just details. Don't complain just because I found an interesting way to do it."

But her comment hadn't been a complaint; instead, she was charmed. Who would have ever thought that the debonair Scarecrow, toast of the Washington Social Circuit, could have been interested in rural fund raisers? But it was clear he'd done things like

this before, and his eyes lit up as he watched some children start a pickup game of baseball. “You should’ve brought your mitt.”

“I might, next time. That is,” he continued, “if you ever want to try this again.”

She shook her head, favoring him with a smile. “I’ve come to enjoy being abnormal with you. Besides, the flight was almost fun.”

“Good.” He leaned over for a kiss.

“But I do have one question.”

“What’s that?”

“How are we going to explain this to whoever sees at the airport when we get back?”

At that, his eyes glittered even brighter. “We’ll just have to get even more creative, then. Won’t we?”

*This story was originally written for the **Through the Years 3** fanzine, first made available at SMucK-a-Palooza 2024. The online version has been revised and expanded.*