

## ***Appetites***

**Author:** Kim C.

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**Timeline:** Third season, after 'Dead Men Leave No Trails' but before 'All the World's A Stage.'

**Author's Notes:** Thanks as always to my wonderful, fantastic beta team. A special thanks to Sybil and Panda for helping me polish it up one final time!

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Amanda King. There is no other woman I'd rather be with right now. I can't imagine ever being with another woman again, and I'm not even with Amanda. Let me rephrase that: I'm not with Amanda, yet; a fact I plan to change in the very near future.

She glances up and meets my gaze. I smile at her, wondering if my face reveals the depth of my feelings. Though a trained and experienced operative, I find myself letting down my guard around this amazing woman. I'm almost ready to tell her how I feel, but every time I start to bring the subject up, I hesitate.

I think she must know how I feel, though; I don't know how she couldn't. Somehow, I know that she's waiting for me to make the first move. It's something in the way she looks at me; it's difficult to explain.

"Are you okay, Lee?" she asks, her voice reflecting the curiosity evident in her expressive face.

I nod slowly, wanting to reassure her but not trusting my voice. "I'm . . ." I finally begin, then pause when I hear my voice crack. Clearing my throat, I continue. "I'm fine, thanks."

She tilts her head and narrows her eyes, as though she's studying me. I feel utterly vulnerable. It's a novel sensation, but for some reason, it doesn't scare me. In fact, it feels kind of nice. "Okay," she says slowly, as if trying to decide whether or not to believe my feeble assertion. "You just seem . . . a little bit distracted tonight."

"Yeah," I agree, running a hand through my hair. "Yeah, I guess I am. You know, a little . . ."

I trail off as I see her watching me attentively. Her eyes are spellbinding, and I find myself entranced for a moment. "... distracted," I finish lamely. Not very smooth, but I certainly don't want to tell her how distracted I am as I watch her red sweater shift slightly to reveal one creamy shoulder, the view tantalizing me.

"Oh," she replies with a slight smile. "I see." Rather than asking what's distracting me, she acts as though I've given her a comprehensive answer. Maybe, in a way, I have.

To collect my jumbled thoughts, I cast a glance around the crowded restaurant and see the waiter approaching the table with our salads. As he grinds fresh pepper onto Amanda's plate, we quietly gaze at each other. I openly study her features, something that has almost become an obsession. She is so absolutely, delicately gorgeous, simply devastating.

"Umm, ma'am? Excuse me, but is this going to be enough?" the waiter inquires, apparently for the second or third time. He gestures uncertainly at her salad plate. "Would you like me to continue?"

We both look down at her plate, which is now covered in a hearty dose of black flakes. I look up to her face, finding her eyes wide with embarrassment as she takes her knife and begins scraping off some of the pepper. I try to stifle my laughter, but I simply can't. Her face is so wonderfully expressive - one of the things I find irresistible about her.

"Oh, my gosh!" she exclaims, bringing a hand up to her mouth. "How stupid of me; I guess I wasn't paying attention."

The waiter smiles at her. "Please - let me bring you another salad," he offers earnestly.

"No, no, no," she tells him, holding a hand over her plate. "It was my fault. I... I wasn't watching. You told me to say, 'when,' and... No. Thank you. It'll be just fine."

Still smiling in a knowing fashion, he shrugs and twists the mill over my plate. I watch on the pepper mill instead of my date, just in case. 'My date' ... yeah, I like the sound of that. I like it a lot.

The waiter leaves, and Amanda glances at me with a self-conscious air. "Well," she declares, looking down at her plate. "I don't see what was so funny about that." Despite her words, I can see a hint of a smile tugging at the corner of her mouth.

Trying to be serious, I wipe the grin off my face. "Listen, Amanda," I begin. "I really like pepper. Let's trade salads."

"No, Lee, it's okay," she demurs, her brow creasing.

I start to switch the plates, but she's already shaking her head. "Really," I repeat, "I'd be more than happy to switch."

She pushes my plate back, holding her own firmly in place. "Lee, really. It's okay. I like pepper . . . I like pepper a lot." She laughs and gestures at her plate. "I like a lot of pepper a lot."

Grinning at her characteristic ramble, I shrug. "Suit yourself."

As I pick up my fork, I lay my free hand across the table, hoping that she'll place hers in mine. All she does, though, is stare at it as if she's transfixed, her eyes glazing over. I take the opportunity to watch her some more, and I find myself envisioning her eyes glazed over in . . . other circumstances.

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My partner, Lee Stetson, is, without argument, the most stunning man I've ever laid eyes on. Sure, I confess, I thought he was good-looking when I first met him. But now . . . now that I really know him . . . Well, let's just say that now that I've seen the whole package, or at least most of it, I want it. I want him.

Lee casually places his hand on the table and I find myself staring at it, wishing I were bold enough to place mine in his. We hold hands all the time. Why, suddenly, am I nervous about doing so?

His hands are magnificent - tanned and strong. With those hands he has both battled KGB agents and gently carried me out of danger. As I often do, I find myself imagining those hands upon my skin and tangled in my hair, gentle in their insistence as they pull me closer to his firm body. I could write a book about his hands; I even have a title. I'd call it, "A Thousand and One Fantasies about My Partner's Hands."

We make meaningless conversation as we eat our salads, Lee breaking into an amused chuckle when I sneeze. I'm so ridiculously edgy, feeling like I have to keep the conversation at a steady flow.

"The boys are gonna watch 'King Kong' after they do their homework tonight," I tell him inanely. Why did I just tell him that? Why would he care about that? Still, I ramble on. "They've never seen the original version before, just the one with Jessica Lange. They were so excited . . ." I trail off, wondering why I can't just keep quiet.

"It's a classic," he says, nodding. But it's clear by the look in his eyes that his mind is not

on old movies.

Nodding, I continue with my absurd discourse. "I never end up liking remakes, you know? They're almost never as good as the original."

He smiles at me, his hazel eyes deepening to a warm olive tone. "I feel the same way," he agrees. "The original is always better than any substitute."

The intensity in his voice is startling. Is he trying to convey something more than what he's saying? I have the uncanny feeling that he's referring to . . . No, he probably doesn't even realize how similar Leslie was to me. Still, I'm unable to think of a reply.

Shifting nervously, I cross my legs under the table, accidentally brushing against his in the process. The effect of the contact is provocatively electrifying. He looks up at me sharply, his eyes wide, and he swallows hard. It's a relief to know that he's as affected by the contact as I am. For a crazy moment, I'm tempted to slide my foot into his pant leg, just to see his reaction.

He looks away and directs his gaze to a spot over my shoulder. I turn to see what he's staring at. Seeing nothing, I look back at him and he clears his throat, offering me another enigmatic smile.

After a moment, I take another bite of my 'pepper salad'. Glancing up at him again, I feel my heart leap into my throat. His eyes are half-closed, and the effect is absolutely mesmerizing. I've often pictured Lee's 'bedroom eyes' and what I'm seeing now is pretty darn close to what I've imagined, if not better.

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I can't seem to stop watching her; I hope she doesn't think I'm being rude. I feel my eyelids lower as I again drift into dangerous territory in my imagination.

I don't know what to make of the new awkwardness between us, as we're normally very comfortable together. Trying to keep the stream of conversation going, I'm interrupted when she lets out a cute little sneeze, and I chuckle again.

"I don't know why I let him go for so long with the pepper," she says, shaking her head in self-deprecation.

In an attempt to tease her, I ask, "What were you thinking about?"

Her cheeks redden slightly and she averts her eyes. "I, uh . . . I don't remember. I just

wasn't paying attention, you know. Um . . . To the waiter."

I think - I hope - that the reason for her inattentiveness was because she was watching me, like I was watching her. The mere idea sends a pleasant shiver along my spine, causing me to break into an unintentional grin.

"What?" she asks, leaning forward.

"I think we're both more than a little distracted tonight," I tell her softly, hoping my eyes communicate my unspoken meaning.

Her coffee-brown eyes widen and she inhales deeply, nodding slightly in acknowledgement. I can tell that, without a doubt, she knows exactly what I mean.

A moment ago, her foot grazed my leg and my body came alive at the seemingly simple contact. I was grateful that I was sitting at a table. Why is it that when I'm around her lately, all of my senses are heightened? Every little look, every little touch, electrifies me. Am I distracted? Hell, yes.

"I think you're right, Lee," she answers quietly, though I detect a slight change in her voice. She arches one eyebrow at me, and it seems that she's challenging me to voice the silent insinuation.

It seems that our feelings for one another are growing by leaps and bounds. Without even vocally acknowledging the change, though, it's as if, at any moment, those emotions will spring loose like a tightly wound coil.

I'm staring at her again; I can't stop myself. It's as if I'm under a spell. What's that song? 'Love Potion Number Nine.' That's what it's like. She's entrancing, completely distracting.

She's staring back at me, not saying a word, and for a moment, I don't lower my eyes. Instead, I find myself enjoying the tantalizing view of her neck and shoulder as the fabric of her sweater moves against her body. I can imagine my hands lifting it from her slender, supple body.

Her eyelids are lowering, in an effort to hide her thoughts from me, but it's too late. She's thinking about the same things I am.

"Lee . . ." she says, her voice low and throaty. I've never heard her sound quite so . . . sexy, so innocently alluring. The sound of her voice is enough to cause my fantasy to return, and I decide it's time to focus on the task at hand: eating.

"Huh?" I ask as I casually spear some lettuce and tomato on my plate. I chew slowly, focusing my attention on the salad.

"Nothing," she whispers.

With the last forkful poised in the air, I make the mistake of looking up. Amanda has pushed her plate to the side and is resting her arms on the table, watching me carefully. I stare at her hands and imagine all the things they haven't done to me, yet.

Suddenly, she moves one hand up to her mouth and with a slow sensuality runs her thumb and forefinger over the crease of her wine-colored lips. I still haven't put the fork into my mouth, and I can't seem to move. Her eyes haven't broken contact with mine; is she trying to entice me? If so, she's doing a damned good job of it.

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I push my plate to the side; there's just too much pepper. Lee's last forkful stops halfway to his mouth as he stares at my hands. Curious, I slowly bring one up to my mouth, wiping the corners of my lips slowly. He watches every movement, his eyes widening. His fork hasn't moved an inch. I feel, oddly, like a cat, toying with its prey. It's a powerful sensation.

Every nuance, every whisper tonight seems to be filled with tension and innuendo. I've never experienced anything so tantalizing and, at the same time so frustrating, before in my life.

He, too, pushes his plate to the side to await the main course. We resume our small talk, both of us sounding strangely uninterested in the conversation and, therefore, not giving much thought to what we say. We soon resort to talking about work, always a neutral and undemanding topic. Today's case is still fresh in both of our minds.

"I was really impressed with your work today, Amanda," he tells me, his voice warm and sincere.

Shrugging, I try not to let his compliment affect me too much, out of habit. "Oh, well, anyone would have done the same thing. It wasn't anything special."

"No," he replies firmly. "You really do think on your feet. You . . . You're one of a kind, Amanda," he finishes softly.

Reaching across the table, he touches my hand to emphasize his point. As he assures me

that I've got great instincts, all I can focus on is the sensation of his warm skin upon mine, the gentle pressure of his long fingers wrapping around my hand.

He starts stroking the back of my hand; I don't think he even realizes that he's doing it. Does he have any idea what it's doing to me? I start imagining that hand gently moving up my arm to my shoulder, on to my neck and into my hair, the other one sliding under my sweater. Suddenly the table is no longer between us and we're no longer in a crowded restaurant.

In my mind, I can feel his lips hungrily claim mine as he pulls my willing body up against his own. Wrapping my arms around his neck, I return his kiss eagerly and with passionate abandon, and then . . .

. . . Then the waiter announces that our meals have arrived.

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I can't believe I just had such a vivid fantasy. I mean, I fantasize about Amanda quite often - all right, I admit it - all the time. But not when she's sitting right across from me in a busy restaurant.

I look up at her and see that her face looks as flushed as mine feels. I wonder if she was engaging in the same sort of fantasy as me. Is it possible? Is that why it seemed so incredibly real, so poignant? No. No two people have that kind of connection . . . do they?

The waiter gone, I look at Amanda again, and sure enough, she's still blushing. Maybe it's not because of her imagination, though. Maybe it's something I . . . Wait a minute . . . Did I say something; do something to let her know where my thoughts were just now? Oh, no - did I moan? Or sigh?

"Is everything okay?" I ask her, hoping she won't tell me I just made a fool of myself, but she acts like she didn't even hear me, and mutters something that I can't make out at all.

I really must have done something to compromise myself. Choosing to ignore whatever just happened, I cut off a large bite of prime rib and plunge it into the steaming au jus.

Amanda is merely playing with her food. I think she's taken one bite of chicken and eaten a few of the vegetables, but mainly she's pushing the food around on her plate. It's no wonder she's so trim and willowy and . . . Stetson, do not start thinking about her body again, I firmly tell myself.

Despite my own good advice, however, I find myself wondering about her, my curiosity

trying to sate itself within the realms of my imagination. I've seen many women in my time, but the very thought of seeing Amanda unclothed stirs up a nervous excitement in me. Her conservative attire only serves to enhance her loveliness.

"How do you like it, Lee?" she asks.

What did she just say? Did she really just ask me how I 'like it'? Given my current train of thought, it takes me a moment to compose myself.

"Umm." I clear my throat, stalling. "Wh- What did you just ask me?" I give myself strict orders to put her clothes back on and concentrate on what she's saying. If she only knew where my mind was when she asked me that question, and where it went from there!

"I asked you how you like it." She pauses and then adds with emphasis, "The prime rib." Her features express her obvious amusement at my discomfiture.

"Oh!" Thank goodness . . . "It's good. Really good. Yeah. Do you want some?"

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Forcing myself to speak, I ask Lee how he likes his dinner. He looks up at me sharply in apparent alarm and asks me to repeat myself. He's as distracted as I am. I ask him again how he's enjoying his meal, and this time he answers, sounding almost relieved. What did he think I was asking about?

"Oh!" he replies, then adds, "It's good. Really good. Yeah. Do you want some?"

Oh . . . What did he just ask me? Do I want some? I definitely want some. Oh, wait . . . he means the prime rib. C'mon, Amanda, get it together!

"Do you want a bite of this, Amanda?" he asks again, holding a forkful of beef across the table.

I take a deep breath, determined to bring my overactive imagination back under control.

"Oh, no thanks; I've got plenty right here. Thanks for offering, though."

"Sure," he says.

I really wish we'd chosen to split something. There's just no way I can finish all of this roasted chicken. In fact, my appetite, at least for food, is practically nonexistent right now. I force myself to take a few bites, mainly eating the steamed vegetables.



We finish eating, each struggling to keep the waning conversation alive. Finally, the waiter approaches and clears the table, taking away our dishes and promising to return with my wrapped chicken.

"Would you like to sit here for a while and finish the wine?" he asks me, a hopeful expression on his face. How sweet that he doesn't want the evening to end any more than I do.

He refills my wineglass and then his own, proposing a toast. I touch my glass to his, already having forgotten his words.

He watches me expectantly so I take a sip - okay, a gulp - of the Bordeaux. Setting the glass down, I run my tongue over my lips. He's staring again, and I desperately want to end this torturous game we're playing. He looks as though he wants to lean across the table and kiss me. I wish he would.

As Lee takes a sip from his wineglass, I watch closely, and find myself wishing I were the recipient of those amazing lips. I swallow hard and am aware of the ache I feel inside. I've never been so aware of a man before, not even Joe.

We've danced around the issue of our relationship for what seems like forever. Every time he takes my hand in his, I never want him to let go.

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We keep up a semblance of a conversation while we . . . Well, while I finish my meal and Amanda continues to push the food around on her plate. Finally, the waiter comes to take the plates away and wrap Amanda's 'leftover' chicken. Next time, I think, maybe we'll split something.

I don't want the evening to end, yet, so I suggest that we sit a while and finish the bottle of wine. She agrees, and I refill our glasses, coming up with a toast.

I want to see her take a drink, so I stare at her until she does. Instead of a sip, however, she practically gulps half of the contents in one swallow. Now, I know she's really nervous. She licks her lips, which is my undoing, and I almost lean over to taste them; almost, but not quite. This is going to kill me.

As seriously as I want it, I just can't seem to bring myself to initiate a more intimate relationship with her. What if we try and fail, and lose what we have now? Our friendship is strong, but is it strong enough to endure something more? I'm almost certain that it is,

but I guess that's my primary fear - losing the close friendship we share.

To cover my unease, I take a sip of my own wine, afraid, as jumpy as I feel, that I'll spill it down the front of my shirt. No other woman has ever had me so on edge. As I swallow, I look up to find her eyes focused on my lips.

The tension between us tonight is unbelievable. It's as though we both know that we're on a threshold, and we're just waiting to see when we'll walk through to the other side. Despite the strong and increasing physical attraction and desire I feel for her, there's something far deeper.

It occurs to me that we've been playing a kind of game with each other, flirting and hinting, for a long time. Maybe it's time to end the games and turn the flirtation into action. I don't know how much longer I'll be satisfied with just holding her hand. If tonight is any indication, not much longer at all.

The rest of the evening flies, and we pull up in front of her house. Soon I'll have to leave her and go home, alone. I hate this; I don't want to leave her.

I get out of the car and hurry around to the passenger side, opening the door for her. She steps out, straightens, and looks up at me. We're standing there, so close. All I'd have to do is lean down and . . .

"We, uh . . ." she begins, a nervous tremor in her voice. "We should really go around to the back of the house. You know . . . the neighbors."

Deterred from my goal, I blink and step back. "Yeah." I take her hand firmly in mine and we walk slowly toward her house. Stopping at her back door, I attempt a smile.

"So," I say in an effort to stall, trying to work up the courage to kiss her.

"So," she repeats my inane word and nods.

Not knowing how to be suave with Amanda, I simply say, "That was nice, huh?"

She nods again, seeming as reluctant as I am to bring the evening to a close. "Yes . . . It was very nice, Lee," she replies, her voice appealingly breathless.

I stare at her lips, and I know she sees me staring. Still, I can't bring myself to kiss her. Why is this so difficult? Because this is Amanda, I tell myself sagely. My partner, my best friend, my confidante, my . . . hope.

She's looking at me expectantly. For a moment, I think that she's going to kiss me. Oh, please, yes. Let that happen, I beg silently. But, to my immense disappointment, she doesn't move.

"I'll uh, see you tomorrow, Amanda," I tell her. I bring her hand up to my lips, kissing her fingers.

I'd meant to give it just a brief kiss, but I let my lips linger for a long moment as I look deeply into her eyes.

She's trembling, but she replies, adorably, "Yeah."

I can't resist. Her mouth is so close, so inviting, that I instinctively move toward her. A small sigh escapes her lips, and I feel my heart speed up in answer. Leaning down, I see her tilt her face up, indicating her acceptance of my intentions.

Suddenly, when I'm a mere inch away from those tantalizing lips and can feel her breath on my face, the kitchen light comes on like a spotlight. Her mother must have heard something because she's downstairs, chatting about bubble bath and thwarting my plan to share a kiss with her daughter.

With an effort, I quickly release Amanda's hand and take a step away from her, and then I turn and leave her backyard, already anxious to see her again.

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I can't believe this! He was going to kiss me; we were this close, and then Mother waltzed into the kitchen calling out to see if I was home, yet, anxious to report on her new bubble bath. I should have let him kiss me at the car.

Passionate Peach. I missed out on being kissed by Lee Stetson because of Passionate Peach bubble bath. Mother has such impeccable timing.

In a way, though, it's a good thing we were interrupted. The emotions running between us tonight were just too intense. Besides, we do have a lot to talk about.

Steeling myself, I open the back door and step into the kitchen, attempting a smile. "Hello, Mother." I can hear the slight annoyance in my own voice.

Though she was just talking to me, she seems surprised to see me here. "I thought I'd heard you," she tells me, "but then I looked into the den and you weren't there, and then you weren't in here, either. How was your evening, darling?"

"Oh, you know," I reply casually, opening the refrigerator and placing my left-over chicken on a shelf. "Another working dinner."

"Working dinner, huh?" she responds dryly.

I nod emphatically, and say with not a little impatience, "Yes, Mother. Working. Business. At dinner."

"All right," she says with a sigh.

I know she doesn't believe me, and I can't blame her, really. It's just hard, sometimes, answering to my mother when I'm a grown woman with kids of my own.

She says goodnight and heads up the stairs. I stand there in the dark for a few minutes, hoping that Lee will knock on my back door to finish what we started. But after a while, I realize that tonight, at least, he's not coming back, and flip off the kitchen light.

I can't wait to relive the evening's events as I lay in bed, eventually drifting off to sleep. It's a good thing that, in my dreams, at least, there is no such thing as a missed kiss!

**The End**