

Kansas Isn't So Bad After All

Doug Hodges strode quickly down the crowded Agency corridor. The agent glanced at his watch, trying to maneuver his way through the throng of people rushing out for lunch. He pushed on, darting in and out, all the while knowing he'd never make his 12:45 appointment in the Agency's Office of Human Resources. He also knew that Zuckerman would never wait for him. *The man had no patience.*



The door to the OHR was propped open and Amanda King glanced up from her paperwork to see an attractive, dark-haired man flash through the doorway.

"Zuckerman here?" the man asked no one in particular.

Amanda didn't get a chance to open her mouth before the agent stalked over to her desk, reaching for the logbook and today's sign-out sheet. "Out to lunch? I'm only five minutes late. Doesn't he know I have to get this tax thing figured out by the end of the week? You know, you don't mess around with the IRS." Slamming the log sheet back on the desk, he looked up and noticed Amanda staring quizzically at him.

"Is there anything I can do for you, Mr. Hodges?" Amanda asked hopefully.

At last the man's eyes seemed to focus on her and he smiled. "Amanda King, isn't it?"

"Yes," Amanda smiled back as they shook hands. "We met last week during the Slevinsky debriefing. Lee Stetson introduced us."

"Ah, yes. Lee always did have great taste in women. And please, call me Doug," the agent said, still holding fast to Amanda's hand.

Amanda blushed and gently pulled her hand free. "Thank you, Mr... ah... Doug."

"Amanda, look, I'm sorry for my outburst just now. It's my fault for being late and Zuckerman's fault for being impatient and I've taken it all out on you."

"No, " Amanda interrupted. "You didn't... "

"Yes, I did and I'm embarrassed by that little temper tantrum." He smiled down into her brown eyes. My goodness, Lee certainly does know how to pick'em... what a beauty. He flashed Amanda his most charming smile. "How can I ever make it up to you?" He stepped in closer to her. "How about lunch? Seeing as I've a spare hour in my schedule now, why don't we go out and grab a bite to eat and get better acquainted?"

"Oh, gosh, I don't..." Amanda stammered.

"Unless of course you and Lee are... well, you know..." The handsome agent raised an eyebrow questioningly.

"No," Amanda blurted out, cutting the agent off. He raised both eyebrows and she smiled nervously, calming and lowering her voice. "No, Lee and I are just...well, we just work together...sometimes...every once in while. When he can't avoid it," she laughed nervously.

Doug smiled. "Then he's a fool," he stated, bringing a blush to Amanda's cheeks. He reached out and took her hand in his. "Well, then there's absolutely no reason we can't get some lunch. Is this your coat?" He reached over and plucked a beige wool coat from the coat stand next to the desk Amanda had been working at.

Amanda glanced at the wall clock. Lee had mentioned earlier that he might drop by for lunch, but it was almost one o'clock now. She hesitated, but then her stomach grumbled and she took the coat from Doug, reaching over to grab her purse from under the desk. "Yes, thank you, lunch sounds wonderful. Let me just sign out so Ms. Fletcher knows where I've gone." She signed out in the logbook and turned to allow Doug to help her on with her coat. "Besides, I have a feeling you won't take no for an answer."

"I never do," the dark-haired agent whispered over her shoulder, stirring the brown curls near Amanda's left ear.

Amanda's eyes grew wide, and she wondered vaguely if she knew what she was getting into.



Lee Stetson strolled casually down the corridor. It was almost empty now. The lunch hour crowd had made its way out, draining out into the restaurants and cafes of Georgetown. The Agency was quiet, almost deserted, as the blond agent glanced at his watch. Quarter past one, and he hadn't even had lunch yet. He pondered his options. He could grab a burger at the commissary, but he felt like getting out. He'd been trapped in the archives vault all morning going through some old files and he needed some fresh air... and some company. With that thought in mind, Scarecrow spun on his heels and headed back down the hallway.



His hands thrust into his pockets, Scarecrow sauntered into the OHR.

"Anyone home?" Lee called out, as the reception desk was empty. "Amanda?" he tried again.

Abigail Fletcher, the chief administrator of the OHR came out of her office to greet the agent. "Oh, Mr. Stetson, it's you." The constantly flustered woman brushed past him, reaching for the logbook on the receptionist's desk. "You're looking for King?"

"Yes," Lee smiled what he knew was his most charming smile. "Amanda King was assigned here today, wasn't she?"

Abigail nodded. "We've been so short-handed of late. She was organizing some files and doing some low-level clearance reviews on some new applicants. Let me see where she is now." She thumbed through the sheets on the log.

Lee's smile disappeared; it was wasted on this woman anyway. Besides he didn't like seeing Amanda stuck down here in 'never-never' land pushing papers around. She was too valuable for this type of work. Unfortunately, as a part-time, civilian worker she was put where she was most needed. Today, that was doing background checks on clerk-typists and janitors.

"Ah, yes. She's signed out for lunch," Ms. Fletcher stated and turned to walk away.

"Out to lunch? But we were supposed to have lunch. Are you sure?" Lee asked, confused. He was sure he'd said something to Amanda this morning about maybe catching lunch together.

"Yes, Mr. Stetson, I'm sure. The log sheet doesn't lie." The frazzled woman called back as she slipped around the corner and out of sight.

That's funny. Usually, no matter how late it was, Amanda was free for lunch. The tall agent ran a hand through his thick blond hair. It looked like lunch would be a burger and fries in the commissary, after all. Alone.



"Francine, was that Amanda?" Lee approached the willowy blond in the hallway outside of the Bullpen.

"Well, good morning to you too, Scarecrow." Francine's sarcastic tone froze the agent in his steps.

"Oh, sorry. Good morning, Francine," he offered with a flourish. "Isn't it a lovely day?" The smile Lee flashed his friend and co-worker was excessively toothy and not at all reflected in his eyes. "Now, was that Amanda you were just talking to?"

Francine dropped the pretense of annoyance and smiled affectionately at her friend. "Yes, it is a lovely morning and yes, that was Amanda. Did you need to talk with her? I know where she's going—"

"No, no," Lee interrupted her. "I was just wondering, that's all. I haven't seen her around lately and I just wanted to say hello."

Francine cocked her head, looking at her friend curiously.

Lee noticed the look. "I've been busy lately and I think she was trying to get in touch with me... or something," he finished weakly.

"Yes," Francine drawled in her 'I know all, I see all, and You Can't Fool Me' tone. "You can relax, Scarecrow, Amanda has only one person on her mind this morning... and it's not you." Francine left the line out as bait and turned to walk away, figuring the fish would follow.

He did. "Hey, wait a minute," Lee caught Francine's shoulder and turned he back to him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

His friend's eyes twinkled mischievously. "Well, I'm sworn to secrecy, but I think I can make an exception for you." She placed a well-manicured hand on Lee's sleeve, pulling him a little closer. "It seems our Amanda is in the throes of a passionate love affair. It also seems she's a little out of her league. She came to me for advice... that's when I knew she was desperate," Francine smirked.

"Come on, Francine, get to the point," Lee urged. He didn't like way the words 'passionate' and 'affair' were being tossed around in this conversation about Amanda and he wanted to get to the bottom of it.

"Okay, okay... Well, Amanda has been seeing Doug Hodges for about two months now."

"Doug Hodges??" Lee blurted out. He glanced around the room, coughing slightly to cover the outburst. "Ahem... Doug Hodges, you say?" he finished, trying to make his tone that of someone mildly interested rather than decidedly apoplectic.

Francine leaned in conspiratorially. "Yes, and on the sly I might. And it's getting hot and heavy, if you know what I mean," she finished, raising her eyebrows. "He's invited her away for the weekend and she doesn't know whether to go or not. She asked for my advice."

"Well," the disgust in Lee's voice was hard to miss. "I hope you told her what to do."

"I certainly did," Francine nodded, smiling smugly.

Lee smiled, his shoulders relaxing a bit. "Good," he murmured.

"I told her go for it."

"You what?" Lee shouted at the female agent, his hazel eyes widening in disbelief.

"Lee, please," Francine whispered under her breath, glancing about at the attention they were both receiving. "This is supposed to be a secret. Anyway, what was I supposed to tell her? The man's drop-dead gorgeous and obviously warm for her form. God only knows why, but he is. This is a chance of a lifetime for a divorced housewife from Arlington."

Lee shook his head in disgust. "I don't believe you, Francine. The woman comes to you as a friend for advice and you toss her to the wolves. Or the wolf to be exact. Hodges is the biggest skirt chaser at the Agency."

"You mean after you?" Francine inserted quickly.

"Yes—NO! How can you compare me to that... that... letch?" Lee asked, trying to look innocent, harmless, and hurt... and failing miserably at all three.

"Come on, Lee. Last year at the Christmas party the steno pool voted you the man most likely to succeed... in the xerox room... with the lights out." She smiled sweetly at her friend.

Lee rolled his eyes. "I'm being serious here, Francine. What does Amanda know from a guy like Hodges? She's looking for a relationship while he's looking for a piece of—"

"Hey, wait a minute," Francine interrupted. "How do you know what Amanda's looking for? Maybe she deserves to have some fun for a change. She's young, mildly attractive, why shouldn't she go sow some wild oats? More power to her, I say," she nodded brusquely.

"Wild oats?" Lee spat back at his friend. "I don't think—"

"That's right, Scarecrow, you don't." Francine smiled sweetly at him. "Look, I've got to go. I'm already late for a meeting with Billy. But Listen, I'm serious, don't mention this to anyone. Amanda did tell me this in confidence, okay?"

Francine's tone was sincere and Lee nodded in understanding. It had taken a long time for Francine and Amanda to find common ground, he didn't want to be the one to pull the rug out from under any type of truce they might be functioning under these days. He wouldn't mention Amanda's secret to anyone. But he wasn't going to stand by and let her make the mistake of her life either. He'd get her to change her mind about this weekend's rendezvous with old "Hot Hodges". After all, that's what friends are for.



Amanda sat chewing the cuticle of her right index finger. The meeting was already twenty minutes past schedule and showed no signs of ending. She fidgeted, unable to get comfortable in the hard conference room chair. But the chair wasn't the only thing making her uncomfortable. Amanda looked and found Lee staring at her. Again. He'd been watching her the whole meeting. The only time Scarecrow had taken his eyes off her was when he'd been asked to address the group. Other than that, those hazel eyes were constantly on her. She tried smiling at him, and although he'd smiled back it wasn't Scarecrow's usual carefree grin. It was softer... gentler... and it definitely made her uncomfortable. Although she wasn't certain exactly why.

"That's all for now, children," Dr. Smyth finished. "I expect the reports on my desk next week, Billy," he directed to the man sitting to his left.

Billy Melrose smiled faintly at his superior and rose from his chair to address the group. "The assignments are posted. Any questions, I'll be in my office until two. Have a good day."

The agents rose from the large conference table, some stifling yawns, others stretching the kinks out. Amanda hurried after Billy, catching him just outside the conference room door.

"Sir, could I speak with you for a moment?" Amanda asked in a small voice.

"Yes, Amanda, certainly," Billy smiled affectionately at the young woman.

"I just wanted to remind you about this weekend. I'll be out of town and just wanted to remind you in case anything came up. Anything you might need me for, I mean." Amanda stumbled over her words until she saw the friendly smile on Billy's face.

"I remember, Amanda. I've taken you off the duty roster for this weekend. It will be hard, but we'll survive without you just this once." He patted her on the shoulder.

"Thank you, sir," she said, nodding her goodbye and turning around just in time to bump headlong into Lee. The file folders he'd been carrying flew every which way. "Oh, my, I'm sorry," she apologized, reaching for the papers that were scattered on the floor.

Scarecrow and Amanda both bent over at the same time and narrowly missed butting heads. They both seemed to reach for the same paper at the same time, making an even bigger mess.

"If you two would just calm down," Billy recommended, watching the two scramble about, apologizing profusely to each other the whole time. He'd always had a soft spot for Amanda King. Even if she was a bit clumsy at times. Billy realized that her initial ineptness was mostly from nerves. Now after more than two years with the Agency, she'd settled down and was really beginning to fit into the organization. Amanda had become a special part of this office and if Billy had his way, her association with the Agency would turn into a permanent agent candidacy at some point. He particularly liked the calming influence she seemed to have on Lee Stetson. Scarecrow had gone through some drastic changes in these last two years... most of them Billy credited to his partnering the high-strung operative with the housewife-turned-spy. Oh, certainly he'd gotten some flack from the "lone wolf" Scarecrow at first. Lee had only one partner his whole career, and had watched that partner mowed down by a bullet which was meant for him. It had taken a lot of convincing to get the Scarecrow to partner with anyone, much less a housewife and den mother. But it had worked out. Just as Billy knew it would. Now their friendship was headed down another road, it would seem. It amused Billy no end to watch his two favorite agents blind-side each other, neither of them willing to admit that theirs was more than a simple friendship. But Billy Melrose had better things to do than to watch two lovesick spies fumble their way to happiness. His desk, and the paperwork piled upon it, was calling him and he left the two, there on the floor, to fight it out for themselves.



The hall closet was dark. The light had burnt out some weeks ago and had never been replaced. That, and the fact that this closet ended up becoming home for every displaced toy, tool, and piece of clothing that didn't have another, made the search for her suitcase an unpleasant experience for Amanda. She finally located the tan canvas bag under the archery set, one bowling shoe and three badminton rackets. Amanda pulled the bag out and quickly shut the door and leaned on it, as if holding off a big, bad monster. The cleaning of this closet, she thought, would be a good chore for the boys and would keep them busy and out of her mother's hair while she was away this weekend.

Carrying the bag upstairs to her room, Amanda went over in her mind what she needed to pack. It would be very cold in the mountains this time of year and she would have to pack accordingly. She'd been told it would be a "back to nature" weekend at the cabin, with lots of hiking, so a couple of pairs of jeans, sweaters, hiking boots and her down jacket already lay out on her bed. These didn't half fill the large suitcase, and she had more than enough room for the several pairs of wool socks, long under-wear, and flannel nightgown she tossed into it. A cosmetic bag, filled with soap, shampoo, a toothbrush and such was the last item packed, then the big bag was zipped tight and brought down stairs to wait by the door.

Her packing complete, Amanda plopped down on the couch to unwind from the hectic Friday she'd been through at the Agency.

The house was quiet and she soaked up the solitude. Her mother and the boys had gone to a movie and pizza afterwards and wouldn't be home till after she left for the mountains. She glanced at the clock. It was only six and she had at least two hours before she was to be picked up. Amanda stretched back on the couch, picking up the paper for a second, only to toss it back on the coffee table. She leaned back and closed her eyes, her mind trailing back to earlier that morning. The staff meeting had been a real bear. Long on talk and short on interest. And it had only been a harbinger of things to come. Lee had been acting so incredibly weird. For the remainder of the day it seemed that she was forever running into Scarecrow... figuratively and literally. Every time she'd turned around, there he was. Several times he'd approached her, starting some inane conversation or asking for some file she'd never heard of, only to drift off as others approached. It seemed as if he had something to say, but never quite got around to it before something or someone else demanded a piece of her attention. Finally at five o'clock he walked up to her as she was putting on her coat to leave. He'd helped her on with the coat, then had tied the wool scarf around her neck, pulling her collar up to protect her from frigid cold. Then he'd said goodbye, squeezing her glove-covered hands, a strange look in his eyes. *Weird. Very weird.*

Amanda jumped up from the couch. Remembering her partner's odd behavior made a chill run down her spine. A chill that had nothing to with the temperature.



Lee Stetson sat back on the couch in his apartment. A fire was crackling in the hearth and a scotch and water was balanced on the arm of the sofa. He propped his

feet up on the coffee table, feeling the tension slowly flow from his body as his second scotch took effect. Today had been a terrible one for Scarecrow. No matter how hard he'd tried to get Amanda out of his mind, his thoughts were always somehow pulled back to her. To be perfectly honest with himself...something Scarecrow rarely was... Amanda King had been the major topic of his brain cells for over two weeks now. Ever since Francine had spilled the beans about Amanda and Hodges, Lee's life hadn't really been the same.

As hard as it was for him to even broach the subject, Scarecrow realized it was time to face facts. Amanda King, a divorced housewife, a mother, and den mother had not only wheedled her way into the Agency and his career, but also into his heart. Lee grimaced at the vision of his precious bachelor freedom slipping away. He closed his eyes and tried for a moment to imagine how might be if he and Amanda... well... moved beyond the easy friendship and partnership they now shared. What he saw was a gold ring encircling the third finger of his left hand and a noose around his neck. Parking his shiny corvette in suburban Arlington and rushing home to meet Amanda and the kids at the door with a pizza. He shook his head, freeing himself from those frightening images. He was used to a much different lifestyle. Turning this corner with Amanda, well, he might as well be the real Scarecrow, stuck in Kansas with Dorothy and her damn dog.

He reached up to massage away the headache that was fast forming. But even as his mind formed images of domestic boredom, his heart was painting a different picture. One he couldn't ignore. The life he had now, with all its freedom, the spacious apartment with the beautiful view, would be empty without someone to share it. He'd never felt that way before... had always preferred his solitude. But now... now it just seemed... lonely. He found himself enjoying the time he spent with Amanda at work and looking forward and trying to find ways to spend even more time with her... away from the agency. He did want someone to share his life with and damn if it didn't look like Amanda King might just be that person.

Lee never liked admitting any weakness, especially one of an emotional nature. But he could no longer deny his feelings for Amanda. He'd fought a long, courageous battle, but the time had come to surrender. But how? And how much need he surrender to keep her from this weekend tryst with Hodges? He needed to stop her from going with this jerk, but he wasn't yet prepared to lay all his cards on the table. Admitting he had feelings for Amanda was one thing...putting his head in the noose willingly was another. No, he needed time to figure this out. Time that "Hot Hodges" was threatening to take away from him. He didn't want to finally work out

his feelings, figure out the right time to make his move, only to find that Amanda had moved on. No. Something needed to be done about... Doug. Lee sneered at the thought of the secret agent Romeo, surprising himself at the level of animosity he felt towards his co-worker. *What right did he have to be putting the moves on Amanda?* The possessiveness he felt towards Amanda also surprised him... and scared him even more.

Lee had spent most of his thirty-odd years corralling his emotions, hiding them away, for fear that they would be used against him. Now, suddenly, he needed to share them with Amanda, to tell her everything in his heart, in his mind. But he didn't know how. "I love you" and "I need you" were phrases seldom used on the army bases where he'd spent his childhood. And later, he'd found out the hard way that these words were weapons that could be used to manipulate and hurt. In the end he'd been an apt pupil and had learned quickly how to use them himself... although he wasn't proud of it... to get what he'd needed at the moment... be it information from an enemy agent or just a little warmth for the night. Now, suddenly, these words were beginning to take on real meaning. Amanda, bit by bit, day by day had begun to make them fresh and new. As scared as he was of opening up his heart to her, the thought of Amanda in another man's arms suddenly made his bachelor freedom less than a treasured commodity.



At seven forty-five the doorbell chimed and Amanda raced for the door, grabbing her coat and bag. She pulled open the door and stopped dead, staring at the figure in her doorway. Standing there in a flannel shirt, cords, and a down vest was Scarecrow.

"Oh, Lee... come in," Amanda said, motioning him in from the blowing snow storm that had recently begun.

"I'm sorry for just showing up like this. Is it okay?" He glanced nervously over Amanda's shoulder up the small stairway that led into the kitchen.

"Yes," Amanda reassured Lee, moving around him to shut the door. "Mother and the boys are at the movies."

"Well, when I didn't see the car... ah... good." He followed Amanda through the foyer and into the kitchen. It was dim; a single lamp in the family room and the small bulb over the oven shedding a soft glow about the room.

That was just fine with Scarecrow. He'd always liked it better in the shadows, and he was already feeling uneasy about what he'd come to say. "Amanda, I have to talk with you."

"Talk? Is it a case? Oh, Lee, I explained to Mr. Melrose that I was going away for the weekend—"

"No, no, Amanda," Lee threw up his hands to stop her from going on. "It's nothing like that. It's just... well, it's... Look, I'm just going to say it out straight. I know where you're going this weekend and I wanted to tell you that I think it's a very bad idea." There, Stetson, that wasn't so hard.

"What do you mean, you know where I'm going?" Amanda asked. "Who told you?"

"Francine -don't get mad, I forced it out of her. But it doesn't matter how I found out about you and Hodges. All that matters is that you're about to make a big mistake, Amanda."

"Hodges? Mistake?—" Amanda started.

"Yes, Amanda. A big mistake. Doug Hodges may seem like a nice guy to you, and generally speaking he probably is. But he's not right for you, Amanda. Going away with him this weekend is all wrong," Lee tried to keep his tone neutral, the large lump forming in his throat making it all the more difficult. He was walking a fine line in this game. He wanted to stop Amanda, but at the same time he wanted keep his cards close to his vest.

Amanda's eyes clouded in confusion, then sudden light dawned. Lee had heard about Hodges inviting her away for the weekend. He didn't want her to go. *He cares!!* A strange warmth spread through her and her leapt wildly in her chest.

Lee saw the look on Amanda's face and reacted like any well-trained, profession, single, male agent would. He panicked.

"Amanda," his mind whirled and searched for a way out. Like a horse who suddenly realizes it's tethered to a post, he pulled and bucked, backing away from Amanda. His words rushed out in a jumble. "I just came over to tell you I don't think you should go. But it's your decision," he generously offered. "I just figured I should tell you what I thought... I mean we are... friends... partners." Still in reverse, he backed up as far as he could, coming up against door leading from the kitchen to

the back yard with a thud. *Flee while the fleeing is good, Stetson. Plant the idea and then back away. No commitment and no entanglement and you win some more time to think this whole thing through. No sense rushing in like a bull, declaring undying love when simple logic and a good lie will work just as well.* He turned quickly, reaching for the door.

"Lee."

Amanda's husky voice stopped him, hand hovering over the doorknob. Knowing better, but unable to stop himself, Scarecrow hesitantly glanced back at her over his shoulder. Everything in his being was telling him to run... but his heart anchored him the spot.

Amanda stood for a moment, still and quiet in the soft light of the kitchen. She saw the panic on Scarecrow's face, and it astounded her. This man had saved her life many times, faced KGB operatives and terrorists too numerous to mention, yet here he was shaking like a leaf and rushing into the night. But the question had to be asked. Amanda had to know.

"Lee, did you come over to tell me what you think... or what you feel?" The words were out. No turning back now.

Lee hesitated a moment, then turned away, back to the door. He opened it a crack and a burst of cold air swept into the kitchen. "Amanda..." he tried to force the words, but only her name would come.

"Lee," Amanda whispered, her voice warm in the cold of the night, "If you don't want me to go, all you have to say is 'No, Amanda, don't go.' You don't have to say anything else."

Scarecrow stood in the open door, his breath coming in ragged puffs of steam in the frigid air. His mind was telling him to run, his heart was holding him fast... and for an eternity of a minute the two waged war over his soul. "No," he finally breathed raggedly, pulling the door fully open and stepping outside.

Amanda's heart lurched as she watched him go. She'd pushed him, and now he was leaving things and would never be the same between them again. She rushed to the door, but he had vanished from sight. Why had she taken that step too far?? Why couldn't she have just left well enough alone?? She fought back the tears that leapt to her eyes.

Then, just as she turned to go back inside, her heart heavy, Lee's voice emerged from the darkness. "No, Amanda, don't go." That was all he said and then Scarecrow was gone.

Amanda slowly turned in the open doorway, peering out into the shadows of the patio. Her heart beat strongly and a veil of tears formed in her eyes. The ground was covered with a dusting of snow and the moon shown on it like crystals. She started slightly at the sound of the corvette's engine coming to life. He wouldn't be back, not tonight. But Monday promised to be the start of a brand new week... a brand new day... a brand new relationship.

Amanda looked back into the warmth of her kitchen, leaning against the door jam with a deep sigh. She thought briefly that she should perhaps call Carla and tell her she wouldn't be attending the sorority reunion this weekend. But it was too late, they'd be here any minute to pick her up. Besides she was already packed. Glancing back, she again surveyed the patio and the darkness and shadows that had only recently swallowed up the Scarecrow... her partner... her friend... her... Lee. She smiled to herself as she again watched the moonlight dance off the crystal snowflakes. She'd turned Doug down flat on this weekend's offer, much preferring the company of her Kappa sisters in the mountain cabin that Carla and her husband John owned. But Lee didn't have to know that. Not yet.

The bitter cold swirled about the patio, but Amanda stood for quite a while in the open doorway, a special warmth enfolding her like a strong pair of arms.

The End... or The Beginning