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Timeline: after the wedding, marriage is still as secret

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Notes: Thanks to a_bit_dotty for her beta efforts, even though she doesn't like mush. Since Suzanne hasn't been able to post her Z story, Beth asked me to go ahead and post one I'd written in preparation for round 2 in order for us to finish round 1.

Z is For Zulu

"Zulu Persimmon, Zulu Purple... Who comes up with these names, anyhow?" Amanda Stetson grumbled to herself.

"Harry V. Thornton himself, that's who." Lee smiled at Amanda as he entered the Q-Bureau.

"Oh, hello," Amanda greeted her husband. "I had no idea Harry knew so many colors. There are more in the Zulu series than Crayola has in its largest assortment box. They go from Zulu Amber to Zulu Yellow." Amanda laughed slightly. "I guess even Harry couldn't think of a color that began with 'Z'."

Lee crossed the room and tossed his keys on his desk before perching on the edge of Amanda's desk. "I guess not." He took the slim book Amanda was studying from her hand. "Ah, the old 'Codes and Ciphers' course. The most boring course the Agency has to offer."

"Beaman has found a way of 'spicing up' the course, as he put it."

"Oh?"

"He's been leaving us codes to make sure we respond properly to them," Amanda grimaced. "Yesterday, Mrs. Marston handed me a slip of paper with 'Zulu Sepia, Nedlindger's, 2pm' on it. I wound up spending the entire afternoon taking pictures

of Fred Fielder while he tried, unsuccessfully, to get a date from that new red-haired waitress at Nedlindger's."

Lee laughed at the thought of Fred trying to pick up the cute new waitress. "At least Beaman knows you understand Zulu Sepia."

"Yeah, but how often will that be used? Have these codes been updated since Harry created them? I mean, really, when was the last time the Agency issued a Zulu Pink?"

"To my knowledge, we've never used the 'Russian Invasion' code." Lee quickly leafed through the book. "In all my years here, I've only heard a handful of the Zulu codes used."

Amanda took the book back from Lee, placed it on the desk in front of her and opened it to the first page of Zulu codes and sighed. "Then why are we learning all ten thousand of them?"

"What's this? Do I hear exasperation about a class assignment from Miss 'Don't-spring-me-from-class-because-I-want-to-go-through-the-process'?"

"I just don't see the point in learning codes that are as outdated as Dr. Smyth's cigarette holder."

Lee chuckled. "Look at the bright side. If you are studying Zulu codes, you'll be done this week, and then maybe," Lee tipped Amanda's face up toward him with his index finger, "just maybe, I will get to spend more than five minutes alone with my wife."

Amanda smiled as Lee leaned toward her, his intentions crystal clear. Just as his lips almost met hers, the phone rang.

Lee put his hand on the receiver. "Don't answer it."

"Lee..."

"I know, I know." Reluctantly, Lee picked up the receiver and handed it to Amanda.

"Q-Bureau, Mrs. King."

'Mrs. Stetson' Lee mouthed at her.

Amanda swatted Lee playfully on the leg and spoke into the phone. "Good Morning, Mr. Melrose." She listened intently for a few moments. "Yes, Sir. I'll be right there, Sir." Hanging up the phone, Amanda sighed and looked up at Lee. "Duty calls."

"I think we need an unlisted number," Lee complained.

Laughing, Amanda rose and gave Lee a light peck on the lips. "I won't be long."

Quickly, Lee wrapped his arms around Amanda's waist to prevent her from rushing out the door. "That's what you said yesterday, but Beaman had other ideas. Besides, I won't be here when you get back. I have meetings at the French Consulate all day."

"How about dinner tonight, at your place?" Her eyes twinkling, Amanda added, "With the phone *off* the hook?"

"Mmm. You read my mind."

"I have to pick up the boys from their baseball game, and get them dinner, but I could be there around eight o'clock." Amanda gave Lee another quick kiss and removed his arms from her waist. "I had better go see what Mr. Melrose wants before he sends Francine up here to see what is keeping me."

"Yeah, and I'd better get to the French Consulate before my late arrival starts an international incident." Lee took Amanda's hand as they both walked to the door. "Let's get this day started so it will end on time."

"Mom! Did you see that slide I made into 3rd base? They thought they were gonna get me out, but I went right under that tag."

Amanda looked down into the excited face of her oldest son. "I sure did, Phillip! It was wonderful, just like the pro's."

Phillip beamed at the praise from his mother. "I bet it was from all that sliding practice you did with us."

"Maybe, but I think you just have natural talent." Amanda ruffled Phillip's hair and looked over her shoulder at the sea of children in baseball uniforms. "Where did Jamie go? I have to be somewhere at eight."

"I'm right here, Momma." Jamie appeared at Amanda's side. "I dropped my hat."

"You're such a dufus!" Phillip stuck out his tongue at his younger brother.

Jamie angrily retorted, "I am not!"

"Phillip, don't call your brother 'dufus'. Just get in the car. I really can't be late for my appointment." Amanda herded her two sons toward the Wagonner and the boys climbed into the back seat. When she opened the front door, Amanda noticed a slip of paper under the driver's side windshield wiper. "Oh, no, not a ticket," she moaned, reaching under the wiper blade to retrieve the paper. Quickly she unfolded the small white rectangle, and her heart dropped to the ground when she read the typed message: Zulu Blue, 7pm, Chez Tair.'

Amanda apologized into the phone. "Lee, I'm sorry, but it's..."

"Work." Lee and Amanda said in unison.

"I know, Amanda, and I understand. It doesn't mean I have to like it."

The frustration in Lee's voiced matched what Amanda was feeling. "I don't like it, either." She glanced at the clock and sighed deeply. "I have to get ready now or I'll be late. Missing dinner with you is no excuse for performing poorly on my assignment."

"If Beaman only knew the sacrifices you - and *I* - make for your good grades, he'd give you an 'A' for effort," Lee muttered, clearly annoyed with the entire situation. "Call me when you get home."

"I'll call as soon as I can. Good night, Lee," Amanda said and replaced the receiver in its cradle. "Darn that Beaman," she grumbled to herself as she headed to her bedroom to dress for an evening at Chez Tair.

Upon entering Chez Tair, Amanda scanned the crowd of diners looking for a familiar face. Seeing none, she approached the maître d'. "Excuse me, my name is Amanda King. I am supposed to meet someone here."

"Ah, yes, madam. Right this way, please." The maître d' escorted Amanda to a secluded candlelit alcove in the back of the restaurant where a table for two was beautifully set. A magnum of champagne was chilling in a silver bucket on a stand near the table. The maître d' held out one of the chairs for Amanda and she gracefully slid into it, nodding her thanks to the gentleman. "Your party will join you shortly, madam," he said, then bowed from the waist and backed away from the table.

A hand holding a single red rose snaked around Amanda's right shoulder and startled her. "I'm glad to see that 'Zulu Blue' is one order you choose to follow," a soft voice whispered in Amanda's left ear, sending a chill down her spine.

Amanda turned to her left to look deeply into Lee's eyes. "I could never refuse a 'respond without question' order from a senior agent."

A smile played around the corners of Lee's mouth as he knelt beside Amanda's chair and took both her hands in his. "Is that so?"

Amanda mirrored Lee's smile with her own. "That's so, Scarecrow."

"Then I have one more Zulu Blue order for you to follow out. Kiss me, Mrs. Stetson."

"Gladly, Mr. Stetson."

As their lips met, Amanda's last coherent thought was, 'I think I could learn to love Zulu Blue orders.'

The End