



No Hellos, No Goodbyes

by Cat Lady Firebird

October 1982

Their entanglement began, not with a hello, but with a case.

This one took two weeks. Two weeks spent traipsing through crappy hotel rooms, opulent ballrooms, grubby woodland hikes, and pulsing dance clubs. Two weeks playing a husband-and-wife cover that neither one of them particularly wanted in the first place, sharing quarters when one or both of them would rather have been alone, pretending to be parts of different subcultures — environmentalist, druggie, glitterati — all in pursuit of a quarry they had no guarantee of capturing.

They don't always have the luxury of separate rooms or even separate beds, and after two weeks, they also don't have the luxury of too many secrets anymore. She's seen him drag himself out of bed, bleary-eyed with his hair sticking out in all directions. He's smelled her morning breath. But they're both agents. They know how to compartmentalize, how to focus on the goal, how to push themselves to keep going even when everything looked lost and despair threatened to overwhelm them.

Until it didn't. The takedown was ridiculously simple. An arrest while someone's at dinner in a nice, but not swanky, resort restaurant. A chase through the corridors of a mid-range hotel that ends with him pressing the second suspect against the wall while she handcuffs him.

Neat. Normal. Simple. After all that. On a Friday night, with the expenses pre-approved through the rest of the weekend. And while the hotel might have been mid-range, the liquor at the bar was just as intoxicating as anywhere else, the bourbon so smooth, the whiskey so neat. Neither one of them has to drive. Neither one of them has any more responsibilities at the moment. They both drink far too much as they spend the evening trading sarcastic observations and hilarious impressions of the suspects, the people they've encountered, political figures, and anyone else they deem worth skewering.

When they come back to their hotel room, they're leaning on each other, gig-

gling like children at jokes that probably wouldn't have seemed funny any other night.

And then the door closes behind them, and Francine stumbles over one of her heels, and Lee catches her before she hits the floor. Mostly. He's too far gone himself to make it smooth or graceful, and they land on the bed in a heap of clothing and limbs. They both burst into gales of laughter that are too loud, entirely out of proportion, and maybe — just maybe — bordering on hysteria. They're laughing even harder as they try to sort themselves out.

Later, both of them swear the first kiss was an accident.

But not the second, or the third, or the sudden shift from hilarity to need, from shared relief to something more physical, from professional restraint to shattered inhibitions. And neither one of them is prepared for just how much they enjoy it or how right it feels.

Or how much they want to do it again, even after the alcohol has worn off. And even if they don't admit it to each other.

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November 1982

He's hated holidays since he was a kid. She quails at the thought of facing them alone after being left standing at the altar. Their names are the first two on the board for Thanksgiving weekend duty. Both of them have done it before. Both of them know what to expect: a lot of drinking, a lot of arguing, and intrafamilial conflicts that spill over into violence and exposed secrets.

For once, the criminal networks in Washington have other ideas.

It's dead quiet. Even Metro PD is reduced to patrolling the same areas over and over, not out of caution, but out of boredom.

In the bull pen, Lee beats Francine at penny poker three times. She responds by trouncing him twice in backgammon. They discover they're both so good at geography that they can keep it going for hours without either one of them stumping the other. And as they watch the second hand sweeping around the clock face, they find themselves leaning against each other in a silence that's startlingly companionable.

Neither of them moves away. Neither of them wants to. And Lee's hand is warm on Francine's waist when she takes him to her apartment after their shift ends.

They don't discuss it afterward. They both know what this is.

But it's all right. They don't need to pretend. Not between themselves.

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December 1982

By Christmas, they've fallen into a rhythm without ever meaning to. When she has a rough day and is sore after taking down lowlifes, he follows her home and starts with a massage. When he's about ready to crawl out of his skin, she challenges him at the firing range, both of them knowing where it will end up.

As the holiday hits, Francine and Lee spend the night together for the first time, not because of a case, but because they want to. They wake up tangled around each other. She teases him about his own morning breath. He shoves his hands into her snarled hair before he nips her shoulder. She gasps, and it goes from there.

When New Year's Eve comes around and the Agency starts divvying up who's going to which embassy parties, it's perfectly natural for them to pair up. They draw straws with other pairs and end up with Austria.

They both know that eyes are following them as they leave, first from the Agency to go to their respective apartments and change, and then from the party at half past midnight, in one car. With one destination.

They know, but they don't care.

They do their jobs, and do them well. They don't owe anyone any explanations.

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January 1983

It's a particularly nasty month for weather, and they're part of a group that ends up stranded at a ski lodge in west Maryland after a case goes south. It's a group of four agents; two of them are claiming this is the last bachelor weekend before one marries. Lee and Francine are using a boyfriend-girlfriend cover. It's not too far from the truth.

Highway patrol closes the roads and the four of them are left staring at each other for five days straight, with very little to do and very little variety in food, surroundings, or companionship.

Tempers fray. Little digs become sniping, and sniping turns to arguments. All of

them storm away in anger at least once, choosing to hole up in their hotel room rather than stay out in the lobby.

When it's Francine's turn, Lee comes in later and the arguing starts again. It ends with them up against the wall, panting and shuddering, in the shower.

When Lee does it and Francine is the one who comes in later, he rolls over and refuses to acknowledge she's there, even after she scratches at the nape of his neck in the way she knows he likes.

She doesn't understand. He doesn't want to think about it.

After the roads thaw, they drive home in silence. They file their report, including specifying the cover they'd used. They mention the restlessness and stress. Neither of them mentions anything else.

Both of them have other work partners by now, and they spend the rest of the month solving cases.

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February 1983

He knows what she wants. She's not exactly subtle about it as she doodles candy hearts during staff meetings, drops hints about loving roses — completely oblivious to the way their smell sickens him — wonders out loud about others' Valentine's Day plans.

Every time Francine tries something else, Lee laughs it off or makes a sardonic comment to a third party.

The holiday comes and goes.

But that Friday evening, he arrives at her apartment door. Not with roses, but with carnations. He's also holding a magnum of good champagne. And his eyes are just the tiniest bit apologetic.

She lets him in without a word, and later, they both think that maybe they've found an equilibrium.

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March 1983

When she hears the news, the floor seems to drop out from underneath her.

Agent down. Shot through the head. Partner injured and covered in blood, in brains, in other substances nobody wants to categorize.

Francine gets to the hospital as soon as she reasonably can. Lee's in the emergency department, on a gurney behind a curtain, sleeping while hooked to an IV. She sits at his bedside, keeping vigil until he wakes up.

He says her name, but there's absolutely no life in his eyes. Lets her take his hands, but his skin is cold as ice. Closes his eyes and turns away when she strokes the side of his face.

She only finds out he's been discharged when she hears about it in the staff meeting the day after it happens. He's on leave. Standard operating procedure after an incident like this. She goes to his apartment and knocks on the door. There's no answer.

The silence is far worse than their most intense argument. She tells herself it's temporary. Extreme shock, entirely understandable given the circumstances. Nothing more than that.

When he comes back to work, he's a ghost. Or apparently wants to be. He's the first to volunteer for the most dangerous missions. His dry, sarcastic wit becomes biting complaints. He declines any invitation to go out for a drink — from anyone, not just her — and when she suggests dinner one night, gives her a look so fierce that she stammers to a halt, quailing before she even finishes the sentence.

She knows he's participating in mandated counseling. He wouldn't be allowed to stay on the job if he weren't.

She's not so sure it's helping.

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May 1983

The assignment's announced and everyone groans. A month, this time. In Chile. The desert. In days that boil and nights that freeze. With no immediate backup. No safety net. The phrase "suicide mission" is whispered when people think other people can't

hear.

Francine doesn't envy Billy having to decide who's going to take it.

She's also, to her own surprise, not particularly startled when he doesn't have to. Lee requests it.

She tells herself it's pointless, but she goes to his apartment one last time anyway.

This time, at least, he answers the door. Steps back so she can enter. He's never been a good housekeeper, but the disarray she sees this time is well past anything anyone would consider acceptable.

She meets his eyes, and sighs.

"I'm not going to change your mind, am I?"

His answer is quiet. Remote. Final.

"No."

She leaves. Goes to the nearest chocolate shop she can find. Picks out a sweet-and-salty arrangement and takes it home. Insists it's the flavor contrast that leaves tears on her face.

And when he leaves, she doesn't say goodbye.

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