

Betwixt and Between

Author: Merel

Timeline: Late third season, just before "Dead Man Leave No Trails."

Author's Notes: This story originally started as a response to the Alphabet Challenge, last year. It just didn't want to be a "D" story! So, a year later, it's moved up in the alphabet and off my hard drive.

I'd like to thank Dix, eman, and Kim for their help in whipping this bad boy into shape. I'm lucky to have such a great group of betas and friends!

Feedback: Do you really even have to ask? OF COURSE!!!!

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"I picked out 'Romancing The Stone'," Lee called from the kitchen where he was pouring soda from a two-liter plastic bottle into a pair of ice-filled tumblers. "You haven't seen that, have you?"

Amanda came in from the family room, walking past him to gather up the large bowl of popcorn they'd made earlier, and some napkins from the holder on the kitchen table. "No, Mother and the boys have, but I haven't. I heard it was good."

"The guy at the video store said it was a romantic, action-adventure film . . . I thought that sounded safe." He grinned at her.

"Hedging your bets, Scarecrow?" She chuckled as she followed him into the family room.

"Well, I've known you long enough to know how you feel about action-adventure movies, and you know how I feel about chick-flicks." He ignored her dirty look and set the two sodas on the coffee table. Then, pulling the videocassette from its case, he popped it into the VCR. "This one sounded like the best of both worlds."

He plopped down onto the end of sofa, stretching his long legs out before him. Amanda placed the large bowl of popcorn on the center cushion of the sofa and took a seat at the other end. The previews and opening credits began to roll and Lee and Amanda simultaneously reached over their respective armrests to turn out the lamps on the side tables, throwing the family room into darkness.

Lee watched Amanda settle in. Toeing out of her sneakers, she curled her slender legs under her. Content that she seemed happy with his choice of movie, he turned his attention to the television screen. Within minutes they were both chuckling at a scene set in a singles bar. The heroine of the movie seemed just as uncomfortable and out of place as Amanda had been on M Street, checking out, as he'd called it, the Lonely Hearts Club.

Amanda's husky chortle drew Lee's attention from the television and he glanced over at her. The murky darkness of the room afforded him the simple luxury of watching his partner. Her tousled hair, pulled up in a loose French twist, tendrils of chestnut silk curling here and there and everywhere, was beautiful in a raw, unaffected way. No chic, sleek, coiffed style – it was free and natural and sexy.

As if she could hear the pounding of his heart and detect the scent of his attraction to her, she glanced over at him, catching him in his secretive perusal of her. He coughed, weakly covering his embarrassment and turned his gaze back to the television screen. He felt her eyes on him for a moment or two. Then, his skin cooled and he knew she was once again focused on the film.

His attention once again shifted to his partner. His eyes trailed down the slender column of her throat and back up to the thick curl of her eyelashes. Once, twice, three times, those eyelids fluttered open and closed. He watched in fascination as they caressed her cheek, hiding away for a brief second the dark gleam of her eyes.

For a moment, he considered the muted shimmer of the small pearl earrings that dotted her earlobes, but quickly his attention swirled about the smoothness of her ear and once again down the length of her throat to land and linger at the scooped neck of her sweater. Freckles and fabric melded and he was transfixed by this combination of nature, firm flesh and soft cotton.

The diffuse glow from the television lit her face, and not for the first time he longed to reach across the distance that separated them and touch the soft curve of her cheek. He watched as during a tense scene she chewed nervously on the nail of her index finger. The tiny, unconscious movements made him ache to touch her, to stroke the smooth skin of her forearms, to pull her finger from her lips and place it to his. Even the toes of her bare left foot, peeking out from under her, beckoned him and it took all his self-control to resist. To hold back.

When had they stopping being just friends and partners and become something more? When had he released the stranglehold on his emotions and allowed this woman into his heart?

Suddenly Amanda laughed, looking over at him, obviously sharing her enjoyment of the movie. Caught like a deer in the headlights of an oncoming tractor-trailer, Lee found himself unable react. After a long moment, she quirked an eyebrow quizzically. Flustered, he reached for the popcorn.

"C-can you take this?" he asked, handing her the bowl. "I, uh . . . if I eat any more, I'm gonna be sick."

Slowly she nodded, her eyes never leaving his. The warmth they evoked startled him.

"Please?" he asked, unable to say more. She reached out and took the bowl from him, then cradled it in her lap.

Lee turned back towards the television, trying desperately to focus on the film, but he could sense Amanda's eyes upon him. When had it all become so different? . . . so difficult? . . . so wonderfully unnerving? He watched from the corner of his eye as she plucked a few kernels of corn from the bowl and popped them into her mouth, her focus once again on the drama on the small screen, rather than the one taking place in her family room.

Lee forced his eyes to focus on the film, trying to concentrate on the plot and not the racing of his heart and the scent of Amanda's perfume. Somehow the action on the screen had gone from a bar in New York to some jungle in South America. When had that happened? He leaned forward slightly, trying to catch up.

But it was futile. Her presence kept drawing him back to reality — back to her. He gave up on the movie's plot and again watched her out of the corner of his eye. She'd been pulled back into the film. He'd been pulled back into her. To a place that was both safe and unsettling at the same time. It was a strange mix, these feelings she stirred in him. The new experience of comfort, familiarity, and affection slowly winning out over his fear of commitment and loss.

How had something so wonderful found its way into his life? Certainly he must have done something good, something wonderful in a previous life. That was it. Karma. She was his reward – someone that was willing to look past all his anger and distrust, to dig through all walls and barriers he put up, and find his long hidden hopes and dream.

When had she broken through his shell? When had they moved from being two strangers on a train platform sharing a secret message and intrigue, to two friends on a sofa, sharing popcorn and a movie? When would it become even more? Because he knew in his heart it would. Someday. It was inevitable. Like the sun rising each morning and setting each night. Like the moon pulling the tides to caress the shoreline, then sending them rushing back into the arms of the sea. It **would** happen. But when?

The answer to that question had been plaguing him for weeks now. Two steps forward, one step back. They were making headway, gaining ground on this voyage to wherever they were headed, but the journey was torturous.

Amanda shifted, and the slight movement pulled him away from his thoughts. The bowl of popcorn they'd fixed earlier was still cradled in her lap and his eyes followed the movements of her hand as it dipped into the container. He couldn't seem to tear his gaze away as her hand moved absently to the bowl and then back as it carried kernels to her lips. He felt a tingling and tightness in his chest as he watched as her tongue darted out, licking the salt from the tips of her fingers.

She leaned forward, grasping the tumbler full of soda while trying to balance the popcorn bowl on her lap. It tilted dangerously to the right and as she placed her glass on the table and moved to steady the bowl, Lee's hand was there, under hers.

The side of his palm brushed against her thigh and she shivered. The softness of her fingers curling over the tougher, tanned skin of his hand set his heart pounding in his chest. In the dim light of the living room, their eyes linked and locked.

For a long moment, the distance between them – between their worlds – stood guard, like some physical entity, separating them. She was his partner, yet still a housewife, a mother. He was her friend, yet still a spy, a dangerous man in a dangerous business. Since they had first met, the labels that decorated and identified their lives had always been like a spring. At once pulling them together and keeping them apart.

But in the soft darkness of the room, the quiet murmur of movie dialog the backdrop to their personal drama, the flicker of fantasy and reality merged, and all those things that separated them seemed to melt away.

Lee leaned towards her, his free hand moving along the back of the sofa. He watched as she reciprocated, her face so near his he could feel her breath on his lips.

They'd both closed the distance, meeting in the middle, sharing the moment that he was sure they'd both been waiting for. Their breath mingling, their lips hovering, relishing the wonderful moment before everything would change. It was as if they were savoring that one second, branding it to memory.

Lee's fingers tightened on the skin of Amanda's upper arm. The mating of their skin and eyes continued, as if they were measuring this moment that seemed to have been destined from the beginning. Three years in the waiting, countless hours spent getting to know one another, becoming partners and friends, and now, finally. . .

"Amanda, why is so dark in here?"

The sound of Dotty's voice split the night and the mood like a hot knife through butter. The popcorn bowl tumbled from Amanda's lap onto the floor as she launched herself from the sofa, tossing Lee his jacket.

"Mother," she hissed at him. "Mother?" she called out to the foyer, her tone falling somewhere between shrill and hysterical.

The jacket had hit Lee full in the face, and he was still trying to extricate himself from it as Amanda began pushing him towards the door and out into the cool spring evening. He turned, the words, "good night," still parked deep in his throat, as the door slammed heavily in his face, a gust of wind ruffling his hair.

He narrowed his eyes as he surveyed the mere centimeters that separated the door from his nose.

"Mother," Amanda's voice carried through the open window to his right. "Why are you home so early? I thought you and Mrs. Rosenswig were going to dinner and then a movie."

"We were, Amanda." Dotty sighed heavily. "But then Doris' hemorrhoids started acting up. I tell you that woman shouldn't go anywhere without her doughnut."

Lee leaned his forehead against the door, letting out a frustrated sigh. Yet another untimely interruption. It seemed that while fate had destined them to be together, the rest of the entire universe was fighting tooth and nails against it.

He turned and looked up at the moon, a small smile forming on his lips. If there was one thing that Amanda had taught him, and she'd taught him plenty, it was that patience was a virtue. Someday they would figure it all out. Someday, some way, they'd be in the right place, at the right time, with no interruptions from work, nosey neighbors, or even Doris Rosenswig's hemorrhoids.

"Someday," he whispered to the moon. Then, leaning over, he cautiously peaked through the window. Dotty was seated next to Amanda on the sofa, her feet propped up on the coffee table. Amanda looked up, catching him peering in and shrugged an apology, mouthing "goodnight" to him as Dotty searched through her purse.

"Someday." He mouthed back to her – but she was already talking to her mother. "But not tonight." He added aloud softly.

He pulled on his jacket and made his way through the backyard, cutting through, as he always did, Dotty's prized flower garden. As usual, he carefully nudged his way

through the shrubs, careful not to leave any sign of his escape. But this time, he stopped and turned back, looking at the splash of yellow, red, and coral flowers.

He smiled back at the house, hearing the faint murmuring of Dotty and Amanda as they discussed Dotty's evening. Digging into his pant pocket he produced a pocketknife. Selecting a red blossom, he cut it off, twirling the long stem between his fingers.

"I think you owe me, Dotty," he chuckled, softly shaking the flower in her direction. Then turning, he headed off into the night.

**The End**