

FIRE AND ICE

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Summary: What happened that weekend at Pinetop when the skiing was lousy?

Rating: According to MS Word, this is written on a fifth grade level. I beg to differ. NC-17

Timeline: Post ep, of sorts, for "Billy's Lost Weekend."

Notes: Did they or didn't they? I can make an argument either way. I was certain I knew the answer and then started writing this and wasn't so certain any more. I hope that even if you don't agree w/ me, you believe me.

My research found that Pinetop is in AZ, but given that they talked about driving there, I replaced it w/ a generic resort west of the DC metro.

Written: Started 8/20/00 -- Finished 10/7/01 (yes, this took me more than a year to write)

Feedback: Yes! Please! Detailed and critical is wonderful -- as is just acknowledgement that you liked it.

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*Elysium is as far as to
The very nearest room
If in that room a friend await
Felicity or doom.*

She looked around again, feeling lost amidst racks and rows of flowing satin and lace, skimpy nightgowns on padded hangers, and lacy underwear and camisole sets. It was the lingerie department of Woodward & Lothrop, and, not for the first time, she questioned her presence there. For the past several years, function, rather than form, had dictated her sleepwear choices. Now, however, she was shopping with a different purpose in mind.

She reached out to finger a cream-colored silk and lace garment on the rack in front of her. Imagining the different scenarios in which the nightgown would come to play, she felt a growing warmth slowly spreading through her chest.

"May I help you?" Amanda turned toward the voice and found a saleslady standing next to her.

"Oh, I was just looking at this nightgown." Her dissolute daydream interrupted, she struggled to recover her composure.

"It's lovely, isn't it?" the other woman answered, clearly oblivious to Amanda's discomfort. "And it would look absolutely stunning on you."

Again, Amanda slid the lustrous material between her fingers. "It doesn't look very warm."

The saleslady chuckled slightly, as though surprised by Amanda's assessment, and then responded, "Honey, lemme tell you, if you wear that, you'll be generating enough heat that it won't matter."

Her earlier ruminations revived, Amanda felt her face grow red at the other woman's words, but nevertheless nodded her assent and understanding. "I'll take it."

* * * * *

"Can I help you?" The teen behind the drugstore counter asked the question with an air that seemed to convey that helping Lee was, in fact, the last thing he wanted to do.

"Yeah, where do you keep your Trojans?" Lee answered, surprised at how unfamiliar the words that had once been spoken on a biweekly basis felt again coming from his lips.

"Next aisle over," he answered, "across from the pregnancy tests." He pointed in the general direction.

"Thanks." Lee nodded.

"No, problem," he answered, and then asked, "Big plans this weekend?" The clerk's acne-scarred face contorted into a smirk.

Shifting his weight and jamming a hand into his jeans pocket, he answered, "Yeah, something like that."

Studying the selection, he felt presumptuous -- wondering, not for the first time, whether he was expecting too much of Amanda too soon -- whether he should've reserved a lodge with two bedrooms.

As he paid for his prophylactics, he contemplated the irony of the situation. He wanted Amanda more than he'd wanted any woman in his past. At the same time, however, he was more than willing to wait.

She'd been there when he'd phoned the resort, arching an eyebrow and drawing her lower lip between her teeth in her familiar gently excited smile. Then, before he could discuss the arrangements with her, she'd slipped from the Q-Bureau, blowing him a kiss and saying she had some shopping to do before they left for the weekend.

No, he realized, he was not being presumptuous. He and Amanda both knew what the weekend meant.

* * * * *

Her suitcase lay open on her bed. Empty, she thought, but full of potential. Breathing deeply, she began to fill it. Jeans came first. Turtlenecks, sweaters, ski pants, and toiletries followed.

More than once, she glanced at her shopping bag on the floor. There was still time to pack one of her other nightgowns and leave the negligee behind. Finally she shook her head; she couldn't believe how silly she was being. She and Lee were engaged to be married. They both knew what was going to happen this weekend and they both wanted it, right?

With a deep sigh, she withdrew the negligee and matching peignoir from the shopping bag and placed them carefully on top of the rest of her clothes. She then fastened the clasps on her luggage and took another deep breath in a vain attempt to still the butterflies dancing in her stomach. Then, with one last glance back at her bedroom, she lifted her luggage and proceeded downstairs.

"Okay, I left the number of the lodge on the refrigerator, and Jamie's gonna spend the night with Mick Conlan on Friday. Are you sure you and the boys will be okay?" Amanda hefted her suitcase into the cargo space of her Wagoneer, and rubbed her hands together. Where had she put her

gloves?

"We'll be fine, Darling." Dotty drew her daughter into a swift, firm hug. "You just go; have a good time." She paused, shutting the rear door, but leaving her hand on it. "Where did you say you were going again?"

"A . . . retreat . . . for work -- so we can get to know our coworkers better outside the office." Amanda slipped into the driver's seat, quickly closed her door, and started the engine. Rolling down her window, she added, "I'll see you in a few days, Mother!"

Having out-waited the morning rush-hour traffic, she made it to Lee's apartment five minutes early.

She set the parking brake and let the engine idle as she glanced up at his window. She could see his blinds fall to the side, and knew he'd been watching for her. As she walked up the front steps her mind once again wandered toward the trove in her suitcase and the plans she'd made for it. Shoving her hands deeper into her pockets, she again wondered when she'd misplaced her gloves.

His door was unlocked, and she quietly let herself in. "Hi, there! You ready?"

"Yeah . . ." he set his suitcase down to kiss her. "I'm really looking forward to this."

"So am I," she answered. Her heart raced and she felt goosebumps rise on her arms. She kissed him again, this time letting her lips linger, and twined her fingers with his. "Let's go."

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*The housewife's gentle task
"How pleasanter," said she
Unto the sofa opposite,
"The sleet than May -- no thee!"*

The rain had begun falling shortly after their arrival. Freezing as soon as it hit any surface, it had soon coated the entire resort in a slippery glaze that, while beautiful, made any sort of ambulation next to impossible. Ice-laden limbs had fallen against powerlines, snapping them, and leaving the vacationers not only cabin bound, but without electricity.

"I'm sorry," Lee whispered, drawing Amanda closer, as they huddled in front of the fireplace in their cabin.

"Lee, stop apologizing. You're not responsible for the weather."

"I know, but I know how much you had your heart set on skiing," he drew her closer and planted a gentle kiss in her hair.

"I told you before, it really doesn't matter what we do as long as we can spend time together. We haven't been able to do enough of that lately." She absently traced patterns in the fabric of his jeans, and felt his thigh muscles quiver under her touch. "Besides, there's more to do than just skiing." She looked at him through heavy lidded eyes, her voice grown huskier, and the implication was not lost on him.

"Are you . . . you really mean that?" She saw his eyes widen, but, at the same time, his shoulders squared, almost as though he were preparing to do battle with an invisible foe.

"Lee." She turned to face him, taking both hands in hers and squeezing them gently. "We're finally alone, in a cabin, in the mountains, with only one bed. What did you think would happen this weekend?"

His lips met hers, silencing any further conversation. Gentle at first, the kiss gradually intensified. As he continued to explore her mouth with his, Lee slipped his hands under her sweater, running them along the smooth skin of her back. He moved with a slowness that was in marked contrast to the inner rush she felt, and gently began to trace the shape of her breast through her bra.

As his thumb gently brushed the peak of her nipple, Amanda felt her head begin to spin. So many sensations, so long forgotten, were being reawakened under his tender ministrations. With a

trembling hand she reached for the buttons on his shirt. Finding them too small for her unsteady fingers to manipulate, she settled instead for the larger button on his jeans.

"Amanda?" He drew her hands between his to still her. "You're shaking."

"Am I? I . . ." She focused her attention on the juncture of fabric and skin at the collar of his shirt as she tried to come up with an answer. "I guess I'm just a little chilled."

"No, it's more than that." Lee released her hand to tilt her head toward his. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, sweetheart." She moved to plant a gentle kiss on his palm before, again, reaching for the waistband of his jeans. "It's just . . . well, it's been a long time. I want to do this," she added after a beat, but even to her own ears the assertions sounded somewhat hollow.

"Amanda . . ." She continued to work at his fly, and her name was little more than a gasp. Clearing his throat, he asked, "Just how long has it been?"

"What?" She stopped her hands' wandering, and looked up at him, startled.

"How long has it been since you've . . ." he paused, and she saw his Adam's apple move as he swallowed. "Since you've been with someone?"

She thought for a mere fraction of a second, quickly scrolling through dates in her head, before answering him. "A little more than five years, I guess." He was watching her, his expression unreadable, and she continued. "Joe and I didn't, you know, toward the end."

"And you haven't . . . with anyone else?" He spoke quietly, and she could tell the answer was important to him.

"No." She leaned over and gave him a light kiss. "There hasn't been anyone I wanted -- until now."

She watched a play of emotions dance over his face, stunned surprise settling slowly into pleased acceptance. "Come here," he finally said, reaching out to cup her chin and angling her face toward his for a kiss.

Tracing her lips with his tongue, he requested entrance. She yielded, opening her mouth and allowing him to taste more of her. As the kiss deepened, she climbed into his lap, straddling him, her knees on either side of his hips. Failing again in her attempt to undo the buttons on his shirt, she finally gave up and pulled at it, popping the tiny discs unceremoniously from their thread housing as she slid the chambray from his shoulders.

With a gasp, he pulled back. "Amanda," he groaned as she began to plant light, nibbling kisses along his neck. "What are we doing?"

She broke away long enough to answer his question, "I thought that was pretty obvious, Stetson." Returning her attention to his neck, she trailed a line of kisses from his throat to his collarbone.

"Amanda . . ." His voice was a guttural growl, and he shifted in the couch, his arousal evident through the thick denim of his jeans. His jaw was set, and she could tell his self-control was near the breaking point. "Why are we doing this?"

The question gave her pause, she struggled for a moment before asking, "Don't you want to . . . I mean this is what we're supposed to be doing, isn't it? That's what this weekend is for?"

He clenched and unclenched his hands and then pushed her gently from his lap back to the couch. Rising, he ran a hand through his hair, and then, as though unsure of what to do with himself now that he was standing, sank heavily back into the couch.

With a deep sigh, he opened his mouth to speak, but Amanda cut him off. "Lee." She laid a finger against his lips to quiet him. "I want this; I want *you*."

Not giving him a chance to answer and eager to prove her point both to herself and to him, she turned to recapture his lips. She drew his lower lip into her mouth, sucking and nibbling on it gently. In response, Lee snaked his hand again under her sweater to caress her breast. Tracing its

shape through the thin fabric of her bra, he then worked his way toward its peak. Enjoying the attention, she arched her back, moaning into his open mouth.

Quickly, not allowing any time for hesitation or second thoughts, she moved once more toward the button on his jeans. Working the fly, she reached for him and began to stroke his erection through the fabric of his boxers.

The action seemed to shock him back to the present. "Ungh. Amanda . . . no." He broke away and bit his kiss-swollen lower lip in a desperate attempt to focus. "I can't."

She moved back, regarding him with an expression of undisguised hurt and frustration. He hit at the arm of the couch with the heel of his palm and exhaled deeply. "I'm sorry; that didn't come out right." He opened his arms to her. She eyed him in wary confusion, but moved into them nonetheless.

"Do you have any idea how absolutely, completely, madly in love with you I am?" His voice broke as he asked the question, and she felt compelled to nestle more closely against his chest. "You're the first thing I think about when I wake up in the morning, and the last thing on my mind before I fall asleep, and then my dreams are filled with you.

"I want to make love to you, Amanda King, but not until it's the right time for both of us. Not just because it's convenient, or the thing to do." He paused and tightened his arms around her. "We're going to be spending the rest of our lives together, you know. There's no rush." He placed a feather light kiss on the crown of her head.

"I *do* want this, Lee." She paused and picked up his hand, and then, with the deliberation of a child working a jigsaw puzzle for the first time, fit her fingers between his. "And I don't want to wait too long," she added with a smile.

"Neither do I . . ." He grinned in response, and then turning serious for a moment, added, "You know, I . . . we should've discussed this earlier. I'm sorry."

"What would we have discussed?" She squeezed his hand. "We both thought we knew what was going on. I went . . . that is, I thought I knew what was coming. And I . . . well, even as nervous as I am, I was looking forward to it."

"So was I," he acknowledged in an almost defeated tone, "but not now, not like this. I don't want you to feel any pressure . . ." Lee pulled away from her and refastened his jeans as he stood. "Now, I'm going to take a shower . . . a very *cold* shower," he amended, and turned away before he could change his mind.

She watched him retreat with equal measures of relief and surprise. Somehow, he seemed to know what she needed more than she did. It had been too soon, too rushed, too much.

* * * * *

Amanda found her suitcase in the corner of the dim, candle-lit bedroom. In the adjoining bathroom, she could hear the steady stream of the shower, and, though she could not see him, Lee's nearness filled her with a sense of peace and comfort. He was her constant. Though their relationship could hardly be called 'normal,' she had no doubt that it was right. She'd never been so sure of anything in her life.

Placing her luggage on the foot of the bed, she popped the clasps, and pulled out the garments she'd purchased the day before. Changing into them as quickly as possible in the chilly air, she then pulled the quilt from the bed and cocooned herself in it. The saleslady's words about not needing to worry about keeping warm echoed in her head, and she smiled at the irony.

From her toiletry bag, she withdrew her brush and began to run it rhythmically through her hair. It soon crackled with static electricity in the cold, dry air, and she gave up the endeavor as futile. In the next room, she heard the water stop and smiled. The shower must have been even colder than Lee had anticipated; he couldn't have been in there for more than five minutes.

"Amanda . . ." Lee's voice resounded through the bathroom door.

She cracked the door to poke her head in. "Lee, what's wrong?"

"I think housekeeping forgot to give us towels; could you see if there are any out there?"

"Yeah, of course." She scanned the room and quickly located the spare towels on the top shelf of the closet. Grabbing one, she quickly crossed the short distance to the bathroom door -- one hand keeping the quilt tight to her body, the other clutching the white resort-issue towel.

At the door she paused. "Lee?"

"Come on in." His answer echoed from the tiny confines of the bathroom.

Taking a deep breath, she drew her makeshift housecoat more tightly around her and reached for the door handle.

"Hi!" He stuck his head out from behind the shower curtain.

"Hi, yourself." She fought the urge to sneak a peak, though she could barely see him in the dim light. Suddenly at a loss for words, she held the scrap of terry cloth out and stated the obvious. "I brought you a towel."

"Thank you." He smiled indulgently, and stretched an arm out from behind the thin plastic barrier to take it from her. She could see the goosebumps on his forearm, and knew he must be freezing. "What're you wearing?" He commented on her unorthodox attire for the first time as he fastened the towel around his waist.

"I was cold," Amanda answered, adjusting the quilt self-consciously. Studying her feet, she added, "The pajamas I packed weren't exactly the warmest."

She could see his almost imperceptible double take, and it was clear her meaning was not lost on him. The tiny bathroom suddenly seemed even smaller and a whole lot warmer. "Well." Lee exhaled deeply. "I'm gonna dry off."

"Oh, of course!" She seemed suddenly to remember where she was. Looking over her shoulder reluctantly, she added, "I'll just go wait out by the fire."

* * * * *

*Love is anterior to life
Posterior to death,
Initial of creation, and
The exponent of breath*

"Is there room under there for me?" Lee came out of the bedroom, his towel-dried hair standing on end and making him look as though he'd recently come into contact with a high-voltage wire.

"Sure." She held one side of the quilt out, and he crawled in next to her, grateful for the warmth.

Nestling into his arms, she smiled up at him. "This is nice."

"Yes, it is," he answered and let his hand trail along her waist. "You're soft."

"I wanted to buy something new for the weekend," she explained, the fine hairs on her arms standing on end as his fingers fondled the fabric.

He paused for a moment, unsure of just what to say or how to begin. Finally, he spoke. "Amanda . . ."

At the same time she sighed, "Lee."

Together, they smiled at each other. "We have to talk."

She chuckled. "Why don't you start?"

"I was just wondering," he began, thinking aloud. "Whatever happened to Dean?"

"You want to know what happened to Dean!" She arched an eyebrow, nonplussed. "We drive all the way out here for a romantic weekend, and you ask questions about my ex-boyfriend?"

Lee shrugged sheepishly, but did not retract the question.

"Okay," she exhaled deeply on the word, and patted his knee. "Dean and I called it off . . . right after I got amnesia. He was pushing for marriage, and I realized that while I was very comfortable with him, that was all. There just wasn't any chemistry."

"No chemistry . . ." he repeated, not quite a question, but not a statement either.

"No chemistry," she confirmed. "And that's very important."

"You never cease to amaze me, Amanda King." He brushed a stray hair from her forehead and let his hand linger longer than necessary. When he was with Amanda, even the most innocent of touches seemed electric. Chemistry.

She smiled up at him, and sought his other hand to grasp under the quilt, tracing absent patterns on it with her thumb. "So, Stetson . . ." She narrowed her eyes in an expression that he knew meant trouble. "What happened to Leslie?"

"Leslie," he echoed.

"Yeah," she confirmed. "You never did give me the whole story."

He fidgeted and cleared his throat before answering. "You were right; she was too normal for me. I need a woman who keeps me on my toes."

"Keeps you on your toes . . ." She looked contemplative and he knew she was weighing his words. He wondered just how heavy she found the explanation that he'd thought was benign.

Watching as she got lost in thought and noting the tiny furrow that had appeared between her brows, he finally asked, "Where'd you go?"

"I'm just thinking." She dodged the question as she rolled the fabric of his sweatpants between her fingers.

"About what?" he pressed, never taking his eyes from her.

"Lee," she answered with growing conviction, "I'm a single mother from Arlington -- as normal as you can get. I'm not the sort of exciting woman who's going to 'keep you on your toes'."

"You don't really believe that?" Her insecurity startled him.

She nodded sincerely. "I'm not like any of the women you've dated before. I don't have the money, the glittery lifestyle, and . . ." she paused, looking down toward her chest in a moment of self-deprecation. "I certainly don't have their figures. All I can offer you is two kids, a mortgage, and a live-in mother-in-law."

Lee exhaled deeply in a search for the right words. "Amanda," he began and then paused, still grappling with just what to say. Finally, he decided that the best way to meet her revelation was with a disclosure of his own. "You're right; I have been with more than my share of women. But if you think for a moment that I would rather be with any of them, you couldn't be more wrong." He paused again, drawing his arm more tightly around her.

"Listen to me, Amanda King." He reached up and gently cupped her face to ensure she was paying attention to him. "You could never be 'normal.' Your life excites me. *You* excite me. I don't need the fantasy; I have the real thing."

"I'm the real thing?" She smiled as she asked it, clearly enjoying the sentiment.

"You're as real as they come," he responded. "From your great legs all the way to the tip of your cute nose." He placed a quick peck on it, before moving to her mouth.

She met his lips, softly and gently exploring the contours his of mouth. Slowly she pushed further, teasing him with persistent flicks of her tongue, desire growing stronger as even more was given. "I love you," she whispered, resting her forehead against his.

"I love you, too," he responded, and then repeated it, studying the reflection of his own eyes in hers. "I love you, too."

He pulled back, turning on the couch so that she was resting her back on his chest. Together they sat in silence, his arms circling her. He rested his chin on her head and inhaled the clean, natural scent of her hair.

Placing one last kiss in the sensitive spot behind her ear, he then pulled away. "The fire's dying down."

"Oh? I hadn't noticed," Amanda sighed, turning to trace the line of his jaw with her fingertips.

Reluctantly, he stood. "Wait here; I'll get some more wood."

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Opening the door to the cabin, Lee was met by a wall of cold air. It pushed its way through the warp and weave of his parka, worked past the cotton batting, and finally made short shrift of the lining until he felt as though he was wearing nothing more substantial than a thin cotton T-shirt.

At the same time, however, he was thankful for the frigid assault. It gave him the opportunity to focus on something other than the woman waiting for him inside the cabin.

In many ways, their relationship had moved very quickly. Less than four months from their first kiss to their first "I love you." Then, less than a month and a half after that, he had asked her to marry him. Yet, at the same time, they had moved very slowly. They'd known one another for more than three years, and the path from their initial meeting to the point at which they realized they could not fight their growing attraction to one another had seemed fraught with pitfalls.

Gripping the icy rail, Lee carefully made his way down the cabin's two front steps. He was relieved to see that someone on the resort's staff had spread salt and sand along the walkway. On flat ground, he quickly made his way around the corner to the woodpile.

As he pulled back the tarp, the thin layer of ice shattered, ringing loudly in the cold, thin, night air. He loaded several logs into his arms and began to make his way back to the front door. Amanda was waiting for him inside. That simple fact weighed in his every step, causing him to walk more slowly from the woodpile than he had toward it. He was, he realized, scared.

Amanda scared him. The realization stopped him in his tracks. He was unused to a woman that knew him so well, that challenged him so completely, that loved him so fully. Further complicating matters was his love for her. Having moved past his fear of that to acknowledge it, he now embraced it, and everything it meant.

His love for the woman waiting for him inside was now as fundamental a part of him as breathing, and just like breathing, he was no longer afraid of it, but of its absence. To lose her, as he had all-too-recently discovered, was worse than anything in the world.

Still nervous, and yet at peace with his own emotions, he once again began the slow, careful walk back to their cabin. Amanda was waiting for him.

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*What fortitude the soul contains
That it can so endure
The accent of a coming foot
The opening of a door*

She stood in front of the fireplace, watching the glowing embers without seeing them. She had drawn the quilt more tightly around herself despite the fire's heat. The evening had been more than

she could have imagined. She heard the door open, but did not turn to look. Lee's footfalls, his scent, his breathing patterns were all second nature to her now. She knew his moods too -- could read them as easily as she read the Washington Post every morning.

She knew his anger. He wore it in his eyes -- the way they turned from green to gray, and narrowed at the edges. She knew his pain too -- the hard set of his mouth, and the deep breathing that indicated he was burying his feelings, and later the way his brow furrowed and his voice softened when he let it out, a little at a time, and only in her presence. She knew his joy -- the fine lines that appeared in the corners of his eyes when his smile was genuine.

And she knew his fear -- the deliberation in movement, the controlled evenness of his breathing. Which is why she knew the moment he opened the door that Lee Stetson was scared to death.

"Welcome back." She continued to poke at the fire, deliberately not looking at him.

"Here . . ." He stepped around her to drop the stack of logs next to the fireplace, and then placed one on the glowing embers. Taking the poker from Amanda, he carefully encouraged the log to catch. Satisfied, he handed it back to her. "I'm gonna get another load."

"Okay." She reached out and let her fingertips graze his. "Hurry back."

In the renewed light of the fire, Amanda took the opportunity to survey the cabin. She hadn't really looked at her surroundings before, having directed most of her attention to her companion. Their accommodations were very nice, she realized -- rustic and homey at the same time.

Pulling her mind away from the hypnotic flickering of the fire, she made her way to the kitchen, and rustled through the cabinets until she found a bag of marshmallows. She brought it and two skewers back to the living room. Spearing her own, she held it over the flame and waited for Lee to return.

She turned it carefully, ensuring that each side was roasted to a crispy golden brown. As she turned it, her mind turned over the evening. Things had not turned out as she'd planned, but as she'd been learning, that was not always for the worst. She pulled the marshmallow from the fire, and began to blow on it. She was looking forward to whatever the rest of the weekend brought.

"That's a good idea." She'd been so intent on roasting her marshmallow that she hadn't heard the door open. In her surprise, she spun quickly and the toasted treat flew from the skewer and landed in a gooey glob near his feet.

She waved the empty skewer at him in mock menace. "Ohh, I *hate* it when you do that."

"Sorry . . ." he offered, though it was clear that he was struggling to hold back laughter. Dropping the logs, he returned to scoop up the mess, while she skewered two more marshmallows and began to roast them.

He took a seat next to her on the hearth, and she handed him one of the skewers. Together they sat in companionable silence, looking not at one another but at the reds, yellows, and oranges of the flames that leapt and flickered, nipping at the outside of the sugary white pillow and caramelizing it.

Satisfied that her own was toasted to perfection, Amanda pulled it from the fire blew on it gently before plucking it, like a flower, from its metal stem. "Open up," she instructed Lee with a smile, the firelight reflected in her eyes compounding the playful glint.

Even with his mouth open, dimples played at the corners of his lips. He was clearly enjoying her attention. She pushed the marshmallow into his mouth, and let her fingers linger over his lips as he swirled the warm treat around inside.

As she pulled her hand away, he moved in to kiss her, sharing the sugary sweetness. She responded, one hand playing with the soft hairs at the base of his neck as she moved the other against the hearthstones to steady herself.

She jumped suddenly, as a popping log sent an ember into the air that landed on her hand.

"Oh, God, Amanda! Are you okay?" He watched with obvious concern as she brought her hand to her mouth and began to suck on it in an attempt to soothe the burn.

"Yes," she spoke around her hand. Taking it from her mouth, she made her way quickly to the bathroom, and placed it under a steady stream of cold water.

From the bathroom she called, "Can you look through my suitcase? There's a blue toiletry bag in there. I think I might have some cream and bandages in it."

"Sure!" he answered, his voice growing louder, as he grew closer. Looking in on her, he asked, "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine; I'm just gonna have a little sore." He continued to watch her, as though convinced she was injured more severely than she was, so Amanda added, "Lee, my bag?"

"Right . . ." He turned and retreated to the bedroom.

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"Blue toiletry bag . . . blue toiletry bag," Lee repeated, opening Amanda's suitcase. Somehow, this foray into her belongings was more than he had bargained for. Inhaling deeply, he began to move her clothes aside in search of the bag. Jeans, undershirts, sweaters, and panties -- he tried to remain focused on the task at hand. Pushing aside more clothing, he found several boxes tucked into the corner.

Pulling one out, he studied it. "I don't believe it." Quickly, he set his discovery aside just as Amanda poked her head in the door.

"Lee? Did you find it?"

"Oh, I, yes . . ." He spotted the bag under the divider and quickly reached for it. "Right here."

"Thanks." She entered the room. "What took you so long?"

"I got lost in your suitcase. How could you bring so much for just a weekend?" He grinned at her.

"I've learned to expect the unexpected." She flashed him a smile and plucked the bag from his hands.

"Speaking of the unexpected . . ." he began, and then paused, watching her spread the cream over her wound and then struggle to open the bandage wrapper. "Wait, let me."

He took it from her, swiftly unwrapping and applying it to her hand and then finished the job by bringing it up to his mouth for a gentle kiss. "Good as new," he whispered, crumpling the papers in his free hand.

"What were you going to say before that?" she asked, taking the papers from him to throw in the wastebasket.

"Hmm?" he questioned.

"About the unexpected," she began, and then spied her open suitcase, and the displaced cartons. "Oh!"

"Yeah, about the unexpected . . ." He nodded, his voice suddenly several keys deeper.

He saw Amanda's eyes widen as he deliberately made his way to her suitcase to retrieve the boxes. Reading the names aloud, he fought back a smile. "Ribbed, lubricated, *jumbo* . . ." he stressed the last word with an unabashed grin and tossed the boxes back into her open bag.

"Oh . . ." She drew the large quilt more tightly around herself as she fought past her obvious discomfort for an explanation. Looking back up at him, she met his eyes, and he nodded, silently offering the reassurance she'd been seeking. "It's been a long time," she finally offered. "I wanted to . . ."

"Be prepared?" he asked, finishing the sentence for her.

"Yeah . . ." she agreed, smiling softly.

He laughed gently. "Y'know, Amanda . . . I don't know what you may of heard about me, but even I can't go through three boxes in one weekend." He grinned and added, "Though it might be fun to try."

She smiled, shaking her head at his jest, but agreeing with the sentiment. "I guess I was a little foolish."

"No." Lee shook his head and smiled softly. "You were just being you."

She blushed, and he continued, "My beautiful, vibrant, exciting, and enthusiastic Amanda. C'mere." He held out his arms to her and she stepped easily into them.

"You know . . ." he began, tickling her neck with his lips. "I did some shopping for the weekend too."

"Oh?"

"Latex, ultra-thin, spermicidal lubricant," he whispered just brushing his lips over her ear. "You're right; it's important to be prepared."

She pushed back a bit, to look him in the eye. "Really?"

"Really . . ." he insisted.

"I love you," she whispered.

"I love you, too," he answered in kind, drawing her close and nuzzling her hair gently. She melted against him, and he held her more tightly, enjoying the feel of her heartbeat against his own chest.

He heard her sigh and the expression of breath brushed over the front of his sweater, making him painfully aware of how close they were.

"You know . . ." he whispered, working his lips through her hair down to her ear, just barely brushing it to whisper. "It's getting late."

She stood on tiptoe to fleetingly touch her lips to his. Then, pulling back, she looked him in the eye and said simply, "Let's go to bed."

He grasped her hand, and led her the short distance to the old fashioned, four-poster bed. Turning back the blankets for her, he said, "I'm gonna add another log to the fire, and take care of the candles in the other room." With a wink, he added, "Don't go anywhere."

* * * * *

She heard the crack of another log being added to the fire, and unconsciously reached out to smooth the bedding beside her. A few moments later, Lee, bearing a candle, returned to the room and slipped into bed beside her.

"Oh, you're nice and warm," he commented, inching closer. "It feels nice."

She readjusted herself so that her head was resting on him. Unconsciously she slowed her breathing to match his until their chests were rising and falling in tandem. The result was almost hypnotic, and she found herself growing intoxicated by the lethargy of the moment.

Fighting off the heaviness of sleep, she reached for his hand, tracing the shape of his fingers while he worked his other hand gently through her hair. "Y'know," she began, still struggling against the drowsiness, "we never did finish our talk."

"Hmmm," he agreed, clearly also resisting slumber.

"Lee, I . . ." She shifted in his arms, and began to gently massage the top of his thigh. "I want you to know, that I did think about this before this weekend. That even as nervous as I was, I was still looking forward to it."

"I know," he answered. She was enjoying the feel of his hands running through her hair, and the thrum of her own heart in her ear led her to almost miss his second, softer sentence. "I'm nervous, too."

"But why . . ." She was not surprised, but did not try to hide her confusion.

He rolled over to face her, slowly running a finger along the line of her cheekbone and then tracing the outline of her lips. "You're Amanda," he answered as though the meaning behind the phrase were clear, and much more than what lay on the surface. "I've been in love with you for so long, but what I feel for you is so new to me, that I'm still learning."

"You're doing just fine," she answered, a growing security filling the spaces that had only recently been taken up with self-doubt. "We both are."

"I've still got a lot to learn though," he offered with a false sincerity that she recognized as a challenge.

"Oh?" she asked, accepting the challenge. "Like what?"

"Like," he began nestling closer and nuzzling her neck, and breathing in deeply, "what it is that makes you smell so good."

"Or," he continued, "what you'll do when I . . ." He brushed his lips along the tender skin behind her ear, and then gently drew her earlobe into his mouth. His speech muffled, he finished, "do this . . ."

She sighed, her voice breathy in response, "That feels nice."

"*You* feel nice," he answered continuing to trail kisses along her neck and moving along the line of her collarbone. "You taste nice," he added.

"Mmmm . . ." She squirmed against him, the warm tenderness of his lips on one tiny patch of skin heightening the sensation all over her body. "What else?"

"What it will be like to wake up with you in my arms," he whispered sliding the strap of her nightgown aside to kiss her shoulder blade. "And be able to appreciate it rather than having to run away from yet another band of killers," he added.

She rolled over to face him. "I can answer that one; it will be wonderful."

"Absolutely heavenly." He nodded in agreement and guided her toward him for a slow, intense kiss.

"Absolutely heavenly," she echoed with a smile once the kiss had ended. She nestled closer to him, at the same time, trying, unsuccessfully to stifle a yawn. "Goodnight, Lee." She yawned again and added, "See you in the morning."

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*When night is almost done,
And sunrise grows so near
That we can touch the spaces
It's time to smooth the hair.*

The bright winter sunlight glistened off the icy glaze that covered the land and flitted through the window. Amanda woke, and without opening her eyes, reached for the other side of the bed. Finding it vacant, she was suddenly wide-awake, and blinked her eyes open. He was sitting, already dressed, in a chair across from the bed.

"Good morning!" He smiled brightly, as she stretched trying to rid herself of her residual lethargy.

"Good morning," she returned the salutation. "What are you doing?"

He smiled again, the sunlight making his eyes sparkle almost yellow-green. "Watching you. You're beautiful when you sleep."

She laughed, blushing, and propped herself up on her elbows, self-consciously readjusting the straps of her nightgown and picking at the hem of the bedsheet. "How long have you been watching me?"

"Oh, just for the past few minutes . . ." He smiled again. "The power's back. I made some coffee if you want it."

"That sounds wonderful." She smiled again. "I'll just . . . get dressed."

"If you insist . . ." He grinned impishly, pushed out of the chair, and moved to kiss her briefly. "I'll be right back."

After he left the room, Amanda crawled from the bed, grabbed her robe and tied it loosely around her. She sat at the vanity and studied her reflection in the small mirror, not entirely sure what she was looking for.

She heard him pad into the room and turned to greet him. "Hi."

He leaned in and kissed her lightly on the forehead. "Penny for your thoughts."

She stood, watching him carefully, and said, "I was just thinking . . . there's also a whole lot I still have to learn about you."

"Oh?" He smiled at her. "I thought you had me all figured out."

"No," she shook her head gently, "not even close."

In a reversal of the previous evening's game, he jutted his chin out and asked, "Well, what would you still like to know?"

She watched him, the sun's rays from the window serving as a backlight that seemed to add an almost ethereal cast to his strong features. Reaching out, she ran her hand over the sandpaper roughness of his cheek before answering, "How it will feel to kiss you before you shave."

He turned to kiss her palm gently and smiled. "Let me show you."

She melted against him willingly, the scrape of his cheek against hers an invigorating abrasion. As the kiss deepened, she wrapped her leg around him, pointing her toe to trace a line down the back of his calf. "Whether your legs feel as good as they look," she whispered against his chin and ran one finger teasingly along the line of his hamstring.

His leg quaked gently as she then brought her hand up to caress his buttock. "Amanda," he sighed, his voice deep in his chest, as her hands traveled under his sweater. The skin on his back was smooth, warm, and enticing, as though he were made of the sunlight that had woken her.

"You're so warm," she commented, giving voice to the thought. "I love the way you feel." She pulled his sweater up and off and trailed her fingers over the planes and angles of his chest. "So strong," she added.

His body was not new to her. She'd long grown accustomed to Lee's physique, but she seemed this morning to be viewing it in a new light. His shoulders were broader, his jaw squarer. Everything about him was more striking.

She wrapped her arms around his torso, and then slid them down to cup his rear. "Mmm," she uttered the nonsense syllable and pulled his pelvis against hers. His growing erection was evident, and served to magnify her own arousal.

Her voice thick, she looked into his eyes and whispered, "How it will feel to make love to you." Taking both of his hands in hers, she walked backward, pulling him with her toward the bed.

She sat on the edge of the mattress, still holding his hands, and he stood in front of her. For what

seemed like an eternity to her, they both remained still -- watching one another in silent contemplation.

"Yes," she whispered breaking the silence in response to the unasked question she saw written in his eyes. "Yes . . ." she repeated with happy conviction, drawing the word out until it was little more than sibilance.

Never letting go of her hands, Lee crouched on the floor in front of her, and continued to study her eyes. In them, she knew he would see the confirmation that hadn't been there the night before.

He dropped one of her hands, to cup her cheek. Then, moving so slowly she thought she was imagining it, he brought his hand down and ran his thumb over her lower lip. "Yes, indeed," he whispered.

He leaned in closer and at the same time drawing her down toward him until their lips met. It was tender, soft, and undemanding. Amanda felt boneless and sank slowly until she was sitting on the rag rug on the floor next to him.

She angled closer, melting against him and deepening the kiss, tasting his toothpaste and underneath it, the coffee he'd made for breakfast. With some reluctance, she broke away, at a snail's pace, trailing her lips along his chin and then over his throat, before pulling back entirely.

He reached out and untied the sash of her robe, and she shrugged out of it, the diaphanous material falling slowly, almost dancing in the air, on the way to the ground. She felt his eyes on her, appraising, appreciative, and her skin tingled as though it was his hands, and not his eyes, that were caressing her.

"This is the nightgown you bought for the weekend?" he asked, with a catch in his voice. "It's beautiful." He slid a finger under one of the straps, pulling it away to caress the silky, cream skin that lay beneath the creamy, silk fabric. "You're beautiful."

He slid the other strap away and pushed the bodice of the nightgown to her waist. The room was still cool, yet she felt quite warm. With the lightest of touches, Lee traced the shape of her breast, and she sighed as he brought his palm over her nipple.

She leaned into the caress, wanting more, wanting him. Rising to her knees, she wiggled her gown past her hips, and then stood, pulling him with her, to let it fall to her feet. Her own clothes removed, she reached for Lee, dipping her fingers into the waistband, teasing the sensitive skin along his lower abdomen, and taking pleasure in the gasp she elicited in response.

She pulled him a little closer to unbutton his fly, freeing his erection. She pushed the denim and the soft cotton of his boxers down in together. As she removed his pants, she let her fingers trail where the fabric had been only moments before, appreciating his solid contours.

Her attention then returned to his penis. She grasped it with a gentle firmness, and saw him swallow hard, as she began to stroke his length. She smiled, enjoying the reassurance that she was handling him so well.

"C'mere . . ." It came out almost as a growl, and he drew her closer. As he planted tender fleeting kisses along her jaw and down her neck and shoulders, she released her grasp on his penis, moved to knead his glutes. She felt his fingers run teasingly over her hip and her muscles tightened involuntarily.

Shifting his weight slightly, he eased her down to the bed. He kissed his way through the valley between her breasts and then swirled his tongue around the concavity of her belly button, nipping playfully around it. "Oh, Lee, that . . ." she paused, reconsidering her words in light of the voluptuary onslaught " . . . feels good."

He raised his head and met her eyes, smiling in a mix of self-satisfaction and genuine happiness. He inched his way higher, moving his mouth over the surface of her breast until he eventually he took her nipple between his lips -- suckling her.

She arched her back, willing him to take more, and he understood her cue, moving his hand to the thicket of curls between her legs and then spreading her tender folds and slipping his fingers into

her core. Shallowly at first, he then moved more deeply, and she felt as though she were a bird, soaring far above the earth. She never wanted to come down.

She felt as though he were everywhere at once, his hands and lips all over her, and she sought to reciprocate, running her hands over his hips, his shoulders, his hair -- kissing his chest, his chin, his lips.

As the kiss deepened, she pulled away, pushing gently against his shoulder. "Wait . . ." She saw a flash of confusion cross his face and gently squeezed his hand as she rolled away. "I'll be right back."

She crawled toward the end of the bed, and hung over the edge of the mattress to rifle through her suitcase until she'd found one of the condom boxes. She ripped it open quickly and then retrieved one of the foil wrapped packets.

She rolled back in his direction and he reached for it. "No." She drew her hand back and raised her eyebrows suggestively. "Let me." Amanda tore the packet open and retrieved the latex sheath. Taking it in hand, she slipped it gently over the tip of his penis, and then gently unrolled it stroking his erection as she covered it.

"Oh, Amanda . . ." She saw the muscles in his rear tighten as she approached the base of his shaft. She then danced her fingers carefully back to his tip and smiled as he bucked against her hand.

"Amanda," he repeated, and grasped at her upper arms, drawing her closer and shifting so that he was positioned carefully above her. She moved with him eagerly and pulled him down against her.

She felt his fingers once again slip within her moist folds and welcomed the presence, bucking against his hand. Then, unwilling to wait any longer, she reached for his penis, guiding it deep within her core.

It was an almost instantaneous feeling of completion as he filled her, and she gasped and locked her legs over his hips as she sought to feel him even deeper. It was an exquisite feeling -- no longer soaring, but turning loop-d-loops and barrel rolls, zooming toward earth and then turning back toward the stars at the last minute.

They rocked together, Amanda raising her hips to meet each of his thrusts. She whispered his name in his ear, and the pace picked up. She repeated it, feeling like Icarus flying toward the sun. Unlike him, however, she knew she was safe -- she would see it firsthand, and her wings would not melt.

Suddenly, she was there, seeing the sun up close. It was better than she imagined, different than she remembered -- not just red, or yellow, or white, it was awash with every color in the spectrum, and it was warm -- heating her from the inside out, until she had no choice but to throw her head back in an ecstatic mixture between a yelp and a sigh, and let some of it free.

And then, it was over, and she drifted, like a snowflake, slowly back to earth.

* * * * *

He watched her, her onyx eyes regaining their focus, and her breathing deepening. She reached out and lay a hand on his chest, smiling with the same lazy conceit that the Mona Lisa wore. He marveled at how cool her hand was on his skin -- another one of her secrets.

"What are you thinking?" She rolled over to face him, letting her fingers trail over his abdomen in a way that was enticing without being arousing.

"That you're amazing," he answered, leaning in to give her a brief kiss. "I want to learn all I can about you, but the more I learn, the more I discover I have yet to know." He pouted, "I'm beginning to think that the rest of our lives is not enough time."

"We've got the rest of the weekend to get started," she whispered, and began to caress his foot with hers. "Now, what is it you wanted to know?"

END