

Timeframe: Fall of 1986. I fiddled with the time a bit between Stemwinder and Night Crawler. Night Crawler has not taken place yet.

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Ready or Not

Amanda King had just replaced the preliminary report on the Kimberlain case back in the security files of the vault when two strong arms came around her, pulling her back into the firm chest and strong embrace of her partner, Lee Stetson. She fought off her first instinctive reaction... a gasp of surprise. She was getting very good at catching herself before she responded to one of Scarecrow's surprise attacks. At first it had been keeping her heart from lodging in her throat when he'd pop up in her kitchen window or behind her suddenly on the street. But these days, since their relationship had gone from professional partners to romantic partners, the encounters had become decidedly more physical.

"Lee," she sighed softly, feeling his lips tickle her neck, his warm breath traveling up to stir the hair near her ear.

"It had better be me," Lee chuckled, whispering in her ear. "Are there any other men in your life that do this?" His lips dropped to nibble on the tender column of her neck.

"Ah, well..." She smiled, enjoying being held in his strong embrace.

"Ah, well what?" Lee turned her in his arms, his look softening as he caught her teasing smile. "The correct answer to that question, Mrs. King, should have been an immediate 'no'. Now I can see that this requires a more... in-depth... investigation."

Lee's hands crept up her back, pulling Amanda into what she knew would be much more than a Class C Interrogation. As his eyes dropped closed and his lips opened for her kiss, she took a step back, pressing a hand against his chest to keep him at arm's length. At his smoldering look, she shot him her best "try it, buster, and lose a finger" look. Brown and hazel eyes dueled with one another for a few more moments before Lee finally took a step back, acknowledging, albeit temporarily, defeat.

"What has gotten into you?" Amanda laughed, straightening the collar of her blouse and fluffing her hair.

"Hey, can you blame me? How can any man be expected to resist you?" Lee said, raising an eyebrow and giving her his best devilish grin.

"Well, you did a pretty fair job of resisting me for three years," Amanda quipped, managing to wipe the grin off his handsome face. She swept past him, giving him a wide berth just in case he wasn't finished with his fun and games.

Lee turned on his heels and followed her out of the vault, watching as she composed herself and sat down at her desk. Pulling a few files from her "in" box, she went about studiously avoiding him. He couldn't suppress a smile as he walked over to sit on the corner of her desk.

"You know," he smirked, "since you became an agent candidate you've started getting awfully cheeky."

"Do you mind?" Amanda asked, fighting back a smile. She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. "You know, some of us actually have work to do."

"Hey, I'm sorry," Lee chuckled. At her skeptical look, he continued, "Really, I am. It's just I find it very hard to keep my hands off you."

"Thank you," Amanda gave him a small smile in return for the compliment. "But, Lee, when we're at the office we should act like we're at the office. Anyone could have walked in and found us in there. What would they have thought?" She'd placed the files down and was now giving her partner a serious look.

"Amanda, it's late. All the normal people have gone home for the night." She glanced up, raising an eyebrow at his meager excuse. "I know, you're right," Lee countered sheepishly. "It's just that this," he gestured between the two of them,

"...us, it's all so new to me. It's hard to explain, because I know we've known each other for over three years now... but when I'm around you I just can't help but want to touch you and hold you."

Amanda smiled at his earnest tone. "I know," she sighed. "I feel the same way, it's just..."

"Just what?" Lee prompted, reaching over to grasp her hand.

She looked up into his eyes. "It's just so new to me, too. I feel like I'm getting to know my best friend all over again. I mean, I know you... but I don't. Does that make any sense?"

He smiled, squeezing her hand. "Of course it does. I guess that's my point, Amanda. I know you as my partner and as my friend. Now I'm just eager to get to know you on another level. You know, you could cut me a little slack here. I'm not used to being in love."

Lee's words melted Amanda's resolve and she squeezed his fingers, telling him without words that she understood and that she felt the same way. The love she saw shining in his eyes never ceased to cause her heart to flip-flop in her chest. Amanda dipped her head shyly as she remembered his voice on T.P.'s briefcase phone the day that the Stemwinder war games had fallen apart. In those chaotic hours they'd come close to losing everything they held dear. Yet somehow they managed to hang on and not only to beat Alexi at his own game but also to walk away with a priceless gift. After over three years of one zigging while the other was zagging, of wasted opportunities and near misses, they'd finally both let their guard down and admitted, to themselves and each other, that they were in love.

Now, more than a month later, they were trying to figure out exactly what that meant.

Looking down into Amanda's eyes, Lee's thoughts raced along a similar path. The words 'I love you' had been shared, but the tangle of feelings and the repercussions those feelings would have on both their lives were still a puzzle to him. It wasn't that he wasn't secure in Amanda's feelings for him. He knew she loved him. He'd known it long before he'd spoken the words aloud and she'd returned them. In fact, the burden of that knowledge was what had kept him from addressing his burgeoning affection for his partner for so long. The thought of

someone loving him, and worse yet, of his loving someone in return, scared the hell out of him. In many ways, it still did. Emotional entanglements on any level were something he'd worked hard to avoid.

Until now. Until he'd opened his life and his heart to Amanda King.

Now what? That was the question that had been keeping Scarecrow awake at night. Now what? How do you live with a feeling you haven't fully defined in your life? He knew in his soul that he needed Amanda as he needed air to breathe, food to eat... but in daily terms what did it mean? He'd had so little experience with this. And if there was one thing Lee Stetson hated and feared, it was being a rookie... at anything. He didn't like not knowing the answers, not being in complete and total control of any situation he faced.

At this point, all he knew for sure was that he loved her and that he wanted her in his life and in his bed. It was, in his mind, the next logical step. When he'd talked with Amanda about it, she'd been very clear... she wanted to take the next step, too, but she wanted to take it slow. Amanda had suggested they take their time - what was the rush? Lee had innocently inquired as to how much time she was talking about. Amanda countered that they'd both know when the time was right. Lee volleyed back with there being no time like the present. The teasing had somehow helped them forge their way through this tender discussion, although it had done nothing to help them resolve when, exactly, would be a good time... the right time... for them to take that next step.

Ultimately, Lee had supported her decision to wait. He didn't mind waiting, and he knew that it meant a lot to Amanda. So, he tried to keep his natural urges, and his hands, to himself. However, it was a battle he didn't often win. He'd spent three years on the edges of her life, never allowing himself to show exactly how he felt about her. Now he wanted to make up for all that lost time. He did his best trying to walk the fine line between showing the woman he loved exactly how much he loved her and pressuring her for more than she was ready to give. The fact that Amanda seemed to bloom and sparkle with every sign of his affection didn't make things any easier. The line seemed to bend and turn at odd moments and he was finding that he was having a hard time navigating this new territory.

Lee placed a tender kiss on Amanda's cheek and went over to his desk. She noticed the tension in his shoulders and the pensive look on his face as he thumbed through his daytimer. A small frown pulled at the corners of her mouth. Something was

troubling him, but she couldn't figure out what it was. At first she'd thought it was her decision to wait a while before being intimate. However, after some playful teasing and cajoling, he'd agreed with her in that decision completely.

Not that she herself hadn't had second thoughts on the matter. Lee Stetson was one of the most romantic, sexy men Amanda had ever met. If she hadn't known that before, the last few weeks had proved it to her. Not a single day had gone by without Lee showering her with attention, presents, surprises, and kisses... lots and lots of kisses. His lips didn't seem to be satisfied unless they were nestled against their favorite spot, the nape of her neck... although it was not unusual for them to wander hither and yon in search of even more sensitive flesh. To Amanda's amazement, however, it was the simple, almost careless caresses that most nearly melted her resolve to wait to make love. His hand seemed always to find hers, whether it was helping her from a car, steering her through the sidewalk traffic of Georgetown, or clandestinely toying with her fingers under the table during staff meetings. These natural, guileless contacts never failed to quicken her heart and deepen her love for this man.

If Lee only knew how many times she'd fantasized about him and how hard it was now for her to hold things between them to a slow simmer. It wasn't too long after they'd met and started working together that she'd begun to envision him in her arms... and in her bed. Of course, it had been so much easier when she'd thought it was just a fantasy; a wonderful, romantic dream that would never come true. Only it did come true. Lee Stetson, her partner, her best friend, and the star of some very steamy erotic fantasies, loved her and wanted to make love to her.

She, too, had found it nearly impossible to keep from being near him, from touching him. The smell of his after-shave made her knees weak and the warmth of his hands on any part of her made a shiver run down her spine and caused her stomach to flip excitedly. He had a way about him... of looking at her with such passion and love and longing... she found her eyes captured by his time and time again. Then he would smile and those incredible dimples would appear. It simply wasn't fair for one man to be so gosh-darned appealing. How was she supposed to resist six foot two inches of well-muscled, sexy charm? Why should she resist? That was a good question... all she knew was that her most heartfelt desire and ultimate fantasy was becoming reality and that she needed time to adjust and feel more secure before sleeping with him. Looking over at him, head bent to the task of jotting a note on his calendar, she couldn't help but think he needed time too.

Her eyes focused back on her own work, but her mind refused to follow and stayed with the man she loved. His ego, of course, would never let him admit it, but she could tell that they both had some issues to work out before taking their relationship to the next step. She just wished he'd open up to her, talk to her about what he was feeling.

"Amanda, would you like to go with me?" Lee's voice cut through her wandering thoughts.

"Hmmm??" She looked back over at him, willing her mind to focus on his words and not just the shape of his mouth or the slight day's growth of beard that shadowed his usually smooth chin and cheeks. She ached to run her hand across the roughness and she briefly thought about how it would feel against... *Don't go there, Amanda!*

"The Crystal Ball? Would you like to go with me?" Lee asked, getting up to once again perch on the edge of her desk.

"Ahh, weren't you assigned to work that function?" Amanda inquired, blinking to clear her thoughts, and then watching as Lee's fingers found hers and slowly stroked the back of her hand.

"Amanda," he chided her, "I just told you, they reassigned Cooper to the security detail. I thought it might be nice if we actually attended one of these affairs for pleasure instead of business. What do you say? I'll pick you up at 7:30 tomorrow night?"

"7:30 would be fine. I'll be ready," she smiled.

Lee leaned down to place a kiss near the corner of her mouth. "I'm counting on it," he murmured, his lips lingering on the sweet spot, a twinkle in his eyes.

She watched as he hopped off the corner of her desk, grabbed his jacket from the back of his chair, and sauntered from the office. She shook her head, wondering if she'd ever be ready for what was headed her way.

Out of breath from the last few twirling steps of the dance, Amanda came to a stop, her hands clasped tightly by Lee's. The air in the ballroom fairly crackled with excitement as the band moved into another 40's swing number. Amanda and Lee looked out over the dance floor, watching dozens of other couples swing and sway in flashes of tuxedo and taffeta, wing tips and satin slippers. Everyone was bedecked and bejeweled in their finest, and the Crystal Ball was, at only ten o'clock, turning out to be THE social event of the season.

Lee turned and looked down into Amanda's eyes, immersed in their sparkling brown depths. She started to pull away, but he held fast to her hands and pulled her just a bit closer to him.

"Hey, those were some fancy dance steps there, Ginger," he smiled down at her.

"Well, you're not so bad yourself, Fred." Amanda smiled back at him in that way she had that never failed to cause a shiver of excitement to run down Lee's spine. This time was no exception. Again Amanda went to pull free from his grasp, but this time Lee pulled her away from the crowd, toward the colonnade that ran along the side of the ballroom, near the doors to the terrace.

"Come here," he beckoned her, drawing her deeper into the shadows.

Confused, Amanda glanced around; then, perplexed, she looked up into Lee's eyes. Her questioning shrug was cut off as Lee smoothly moved up against her, pressing her body back against the pillar, pinning her between the smoothness of the marble and the hardness of his chest. Before she could utter a protest, his mouth captured hers, pushing her slightly off balance. She reached for his shoulders to steady herself and found herself instead pulling him deeper into the sensuous kiss. Lee loomed over her, his fingers twining in her hair, which had begun to fall from its upswept chignon. His mouth ravished the softness of her own as his body molded to hers.

Vaguely, in the deep recesses of her mind, Amanda knew she should push him away. She'd made a promise to herself to take things at a slow pace. Hadn't she? *A promise? Yes, a promise. Now what was that promise again?* Try as she might to

focus her thoughts, the feeling of Lee's body pressed to hers bombarded her senses and she finally surrendered to the undeniable passion between them.

Lee felt Amanda's body relax against him. He smiled even as he kissed her, and like the good soldier he was, he pressed his advantage. Now he was on familiar territory. This was a part of the game Lee Stetson knew best, where he felt at home. In this he was the expert and the rules... well, the rules be damned... he always played his hand best when he made them up as he went along. Why worry about tomorrow when the here and now was so much more enjoyable? He continued his soft assault of Amanda's mouth, moving his hands to the pillar, supporting his weight so as not to crush her. Her hands caressed his shoulders, and it took all his willpower not to sweep her up into his arms and charge from the room with her.

Amanda moaned softly as his tongue swirled about hers in an intimate, timeless dance that needed only the music of their passion for each other. She pulled against his shoulders, clinging to him as if he were her only support in a world that was careening out of control. Slowly Lee moved his body down hers, his mouth traveling along the sweetness of her cheek and nibbling at her jaw, then nipping gently at her earlobe. Amanda sighed and moved her head back, allowing him access to the softness of her neck.

By now her hair had tumbled completely out of its pins and combs and was a mass of chestnut curls flowing about her shoulders. Lee reached to brush the tousled strands back, the heady smell of her perfume pulling him like a honeybee into the folds of a fragrant flower. His hand snaked through the lengths of her hair, then dropped to caress her shoulder. Hooking a finger under the strap of her gown and slowly lowering it so his lips could feast on the creamy flesh of her shoulder. His lips moved lower, pausing on the curve of her breast where the burgundy satin bodice of her gown drew a line of defense against further onslaught.

Amanda's head was resting against the pillar, her eyelids at half-mast. Lee pulled her even closer into his body, making his need for her clear, even through the layers of her taffeta gown. He could feel her breasts pressed to his chest, her breathing ragged and shallow. While one hand held fast to her upper arm, a finger still looped in the strap of her gown, his other hand dipped lower to caress her hip.

"Lee," Amanda's husky voice sent another shiver down his spine, her breath warm on his neck. It wasn't a question.

"Hmmm," Lee growled, his insistent lips gently pushing at the fabric that hid Amanda's breasts from his view. It wasn't an answer.

The terrace behind them was dark and deserted, its usual appeal lost in the late fall chill. Lee stepped back, deftly opening one side of the French doors and pulling Amanda with him into the shadows of the terrace, shutting the door behind them.

Amanda took the moment to adjust her dress and try to smooth her hair. She felt him come up behind her, feeling the warmth of his body even before he touched her. She could see the mist of his breath over her shoulder and it mingled with her own. Ever so slowly, he lifted her hair from where it had fallen and placed a gentle kiss on the nape of her neck. She could not stop the moan that escaped her lips or keep her head from falling back against his chest.

His hands rested lightly against her waist, his thumbs gently caressing her ribs. His long, slender fingers held her fast, and the power in those hands sent what felt like bursts of electric current coursing downward, into her stomach. Her knees went weak and she felt his arms wrap about her waist, his forearms tightening about her, supporting her against his body. He snuggled his hips against her buttocks, his arousal very evident. Amanda again felt a weakness in her limbs at the thought that he might be ready, willing, and able to take her right there in the shadows, against the terrace railing. Her resolve melted in the passion between them. She loved Lee and knew his love for her was real. She could feel it in his hands, see it in his eyes. Questions lingered, but they were not loud enough to rise about the steady beat of his heart against her back.

"Let's go back to the apartment, " Lee whispered into her ear, his hands lingering below her breasts. His voice was husky, the sound seeming to come from deep within his chest.

Amanda shuddered and Lee turned her in his arms. He tilted her chin up with a finger and gazed into her eyes, his lips only inches from hers. Her eyes were still heavy-lidded with passion, and he could feel her trembling against him. A nervous energy coursed through him. He hesitated for a moment, looking down at her. Every instinct in his body was urging him on, and yet something held him back. He loved this woman so dearly. Now, at the moment when he knew she was going to give herself to him, was he hesitating? He shook his head slightly to clear it. "Amanda, I love you so much," he started, his voice shaking with emotion.

Amanda reached up and placed a finger to his lips. "Let's go, Lee."

His apartment was unlit when they entered, the moonlight streaming through the windows and the sheer curtains, casting shadows across the carpet. Lee reached to turn on the lights, but Amanda stopped him, reaching up to pull his hand away from the switch. Before he could form the question, Amanda pressed her body into his, seizing his lips with her own. The feel, scent, and taste of her washed over him, engulfing his senses and sending his mind whirling. Never in his life had he felt like this. So out of control, head over heels in love... in want... in need... and yet? His heart beat in his chest and in his mind. Although it was the last thing his body wanted, he pulled out of her embrace, heaving a ragged breath.

"Lee?" Amanda asked, not sure what was happening.

"Amanda, I'm sorry. I just... it's just..." his words faltered as he looked down into her brown eyes.

"Just tell me," Amanda murmured, concern edging her voice.

"I've never felt this way before... never before," he started, his voice thick with emotion.

Amanda closed her eyes and leaned in, resting her forehead against his chin.

He continued, murmuring into her hair. "It's like I can't get close enough to you, near enough to you. I want to hold you in my arms forever and even that wouldn't be long enough."

Amanda opened her eyes, looking up to meet Lee's intense gaze. Her palms were resting on his chest, under his tuxedo jacket, and she could feel his heart pounding.

"I'm afraid," Lee whispered, so low that Amanda wasn't sure she'd heard him correctly. *Afraid?*

"Afraid of what?" she asked tenderly.

"Of everything..." He sighed. "Of loving you too much, of wanting you too much... of messing this up. Amanda, I have never in my life loved anyone like I love you. I'm beginning to think I didn't even know what love was until I met you. I just don't know what to do, what you need from me."

"Lee, all you have to do is love me... that's all I'll ever want from you, all I'll ever need," she smiled softly up at him.

"How do I do that?" He pulled out of her embrace, walking a few steps from her. His back to her, his voice drifted over his shoulder. "To me, love was a roof over my head and army mess hall food and never knowing from one minute to the next when I was going to have to pack up everything I owned to move away from my friends. It was one-night stands and brief affairs and making sure, no matter what, that there were never any ties; no promises that would be broken along with the hearts attached to them."

His words had come in a rush, and then there was silence. It swirled around him as he tried to calm his pounding heart. He continued, more softly. "I learned never to invest too heavily in any place or anyone... because I never knew when it would be gone." He looked up at the ceiling, shoving his hands deeply into the pockets of his trousers. "Amanda, love comes so easily to you... you grew up surrounded by it. You always had it as a safety net to fall back on."

"Easy for me?" Amanda's soft tone cut through the dim light of the room and caused Lee to turn back to look at her. "Lee, I lost my father when I was 16 years old. I lost my husband when I was 32. The two most important men in my life, up until now, left me. I wouldn't say that was easy." Her bright, tear-filled eyes bore into him, their intensity matching the timbre of her voice. "But then, nobody promised that love would be easy. Sure I've been lucky in a lot of ways... I have a family that loves me, supports me. But you've had people that loved and supported you, too, Lee. You've just never opened your eyes to see them. It's easier for you to think of yourself as this solitary man, to turn away from anyone willing to put out their hand... or their heart. But they're there."

She reached up to wipe a tear from her cheek, her fingers trembling. "Billy, Francine, Emily, Harry, T.P.... they've always tried to be there for you. Even though

you never let them. They've risked their careers, their very lives for you. If that isn't love, I don't know what is."

Amanda took a deep breath and looked down at the carpet at her feet. Her voice, when it came, cracked with emotion "So, opening up now, letting these feeling in, makes you afraid?" Her eyes met his again. "Lee, love isn't this nice, neat little package you get to unwrap like some present on Christmas morning. It comes with a lot of conditions and a lot of responsibilities... it can be messy and hard and inconvenient and time-consuming and, yes, scary. I know that for a fact. You think it's been easy, following in the footsteps of all the women in your life? You think it hasn't scared me to risk offering you my heart and soul, not to mention my body, all the while hearing water-cooler rumors of your romantic escapades and conquests? I walked... no... I ran away with you, away from my family and everything I hold dear so that I could be with you while we tried to catch Alexi. Do you think that was easy? That I wasn't scared?" Another tear traveled down her cheek, unchecked. "No, Lee, easy would be running away from these feelings. And I did that for a long time. We both did. But running is not an option now. Not for me. I love you. It's that plain and it's that simple... and that complicated. The intensity of what you feel for me frightens you? Well, join the club. I'm scared to death."

Lee had bowed his head while she spoke, his chin dropping to his chest, listening to her words while staring, unblinking, at the floor. Her hand on his chest startled him and he looked to see that she had moved to stand close to him.

"I've also never been happier in my entire life," she stated, her eyes capturing his. "It's an enigma, Scarecrow." She smiled up at him. "Like us... a spy and a housewife... a lone wolf and a den mother... life's thrown us an interesting curve ball and we can either stand here and let it go past us or take a chance and swing for the bleachers."

"You've been coaching Little League too long," he sighed, smiling softly, reaching to cup her face in his hands. He leaned down and placed a gentle kiss on her lips.

"Seems we're in the same boat."

"That's what I've been trying to tell you, Scarecrow," Amanda murmured against his mouth.

He pulled back to look at her. "You're gonna have to be patient with me, Mrs. King. I don't have a good track record when it comes to love and my natural instincts are to turn and run."

"I love you," she whispered to him, her mouth moving softly over his. "You think I'd let you get away from me that easily?" She felt his smile against her lips.

The kiss deepened and Lee pulled her into the circle of his arms. He knew then, in his soul, that he would never be alone again. Her physical proximity meant nothing...it wouldn't matter if she were in his arms, sitting at the desk next to him, or across the Atlantic Ocean. Amanda was a part of him now... she made him complete, whole. And all she needed from him was his love.

Amanda felt Lee relax under her hands. His lips, warm on hers, spoke to her as surely as his voice just had. He'd opened up to her in a way he never had before. He'd allowed her to see into the hidden places of his soul... exposing the hurt and loneliness and abandonment that still fought to control him. With everything they'd been through... even recently, with his admission of love for her... she'd still felt there was a part of him that he'd kept locked away... hidden. Tonight, he'd loved her enough, trusted her enough, to show her that raw part of himself. Sharing their fears, they'd helped each other to begin to heal those old wounds.

She pulled back, unwrapping her arms from where they'd taken up residence around his neck.

Lee looked down into her brown eyes and smiled. The terrible urgency he'd felt earlier in the evening, to have her body near him, to possess her, had left him. He knew now the physical act of sex wasn't what was going to keep her with him. It was the feelings they shared for one another. More than the joining of their bodies, it was a joining of their souls... a joining of their hearts... and the knowledge of this filled him with a warmth and satisfaction and contentment he'd never experienced before.

"I should take you home," he sighed, realizing it was getting late.

Amanda looked up into his eyes, her fingers running along the studs on his shirt. "I am home," she smiled up at him.

The End