

Title: On A Wing and A Prayer

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Rated: PG-13

Timeframe: This story takes place between ATWAS and Stemwinder and changes canon

Disclaimer: Author's Note: I wrote this story quite a while ago, without the benefit of a beta. At that point I didn't think I needed one. I was wrong. Terribly, hideously, incredibly wrong. To put it mildly . . . the story sucked. It was so full of holes I could have used it for a porch screen. Well, a few months back a challenge was issued to take an older story and rewrite it. I didn't think any of my stories needed a renovation as badly as this one did, so I leapt at the chance. Okay, it was a slow leap, but I leapt nonetheless. The following is a story I am now proud to post. . . and I can honestly say that it would never again have seen the light of day if not for a wonderful group of betas whom not only encouraged me to rework this story, but helped me every step of the way.

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The careening taxi tossed Amanda King to and fro across the bench seat like a rag doll. Despite the traffic of downtown Miami, the cabby had miraculously maintained a break-neck pace. Amanda was now seriously regretting having mentioned that she needed him to "step on it" to get her to the airport in time to make her flight back to Washington, DC. Now, in fear for her safety and her pocketbook as she considered the copious amounts of her income she'd need to pay for chiropractic work, she rapped on the scarred Plexiglas window that separated her from the lead-footed driver.

"Excuse me, sir. Could you please slow down?" she questioned through the divider. The car slowed slightly, although Amanda wasn't sure if the driver had actually heard her or was merely preoccupied with lighting yet another Turkish cigarette.

Seeing the futility of further attempts at conversation, she sat back and pondered if perhaps this would be a good time for prayer. She coughed convulsively into her fist as the heavy scent of the cigarette smoke leaked through the cracked Plexiglas, infiltrating her lungs. Her other hand had a death grip on the tattered vinyl strap above the window. She tried to concentrate on the strap . . . hoping to keep her mind off the fact that they now appeared to be traveling the wrong way down a one way street. It served a dual purpose, she thought, scrunching her eyes closed and tightening her grip on the aforementioned torn piece of vinyl . . . it could not only help one to maintain an upright position in a vehicle that occasionally left contact with the pavement, but if things progressed from bad to worse, it could be used to hang oneself should the future hold nothing more appealing than ending up as a crash-test dummy in some taxi cab training film.

After what seemed like a lifetime, the taxi came to a screeching halt in front of the main terminal at Miami International. Amanda's grip gradually relaxed, and she slowly opened one eye and then the other. Without a moment's thought she jumped out of the yellow cab, fighting off the urge to throw herself to the ground and kiss the pavement. The trunk popped open, and when the driver made no move to leave the vehicle to help her with her luggage, she pulled it out herself. Struggling to find

money for the fare while juggling her carry-on and briefcase, she managed to pull a twenty-dollar bill free. She handed it to the driver.

"Sir, I wouldn't dream of telling you how to drive, but really, on the sidewalk? Do you know how dangerous that is? You should really go back and check on that street vendor."

She ignored the disgruntled Turkish obscenities that the driver tossed out the window at her as he drove off. Glancing at her watch, a frown washed over her face. Even at their rapid pace, she was running very late. Scanning the area for her departure gate, she slung her carry-on and purse over her shoulder, tightly gripped the handle of her briefcase, and rushed to make her flight.

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In frustration, Lee jerked his tie, loosening it. *Damn this weather*, he thought, glancing out the window of the third floor of the U.S. Justice Department Building. A fierce storm was kicking up and had pretty much rendered the phones useless. He slammed the handset down in frustration. For the third time, he'd been cut off. He'd just finished up a tough interrogation of Eban Sudahar, an Iranian terrorist that the Agency and CIA nabbed in a joint sting operation, and he was in no mood to play games with the phone company. Sudahar was giving them zilch about the possible bombing of the international trade show scheduled to begin next week at the DC Convention Center. In fact, Sudahar had shared little more than spittle with the agents during the four-hour interview. Lee's thin veneer of patience had just worn through when a message was handed to him by the guard at the door. He left the other agents to see if they could work some magic and 'encourage' the tight-lipped terrorist to talk, while he went to return the call.

Lee looked around for another phone, hoping for a better connection. The message was from Billy and referred to Amanda King. She was in Miami on a courier assignment and scheduled to return today – in fact, he had planned to surprise her and pick her up at the airport later this morning. He hoped that it was a change in her arrival time and not some trouble she'd gotten in to . . . trouble he'd no doubt have to get her out of.

*The perfect ending to a perfect day*, he thought, shaking his head as he walked toward the phone in the waiting area of the next suite of offices.

"Melrose here." Billy's voice cut through his thoughts and the bad weather – and immediately Lee could tell that something was wrong.

"Billy? What's up? What's wrong?" he asked, suddenly afraid to hear the answer.

"You need to get back to the Agency, Scarecrow . . . now."

Lee's grip on the phone tightened. "Billy, what's going on? Your message said something about Amanda."

There was a pause, and Lee could hear Billy take a deep, unsteady breath. "Lee, we heard from a source at the FAA that a passenger plane had to make an emergency landing in Atlanta. They immediately ran it by us because the plane was carrying a federal agent . . ."

"Amanda?" Lee asked, his throat constricting around her name.

"Yes. Seems they were having problems with one of the engines. It came in rough. They're assessing the damage now. There's no news on injuries . . . or fatalities." Billy's voice lowered an octave.

"Oh, my God, are you sure?" Lee pushed the receiver closer to his ear, his chest tightening as Billy's words began to seep through his sleep-deprived and over-worked mind.

"Flight 4239. Miami to Washington, D.C. It was Amanda's plane, Lee," Billy said softly.

The noise of the busy waiting room where Lee was using the phone faded into the background. People were still coming and going, milling about on break and talking, but suddenly, all Lee could hear was the sound of his own breath, coming sharp and rushed into the receiver. His heart stopped its lurching and sank into the pit of his stomach. He closed his eyes tight and tried to slow his breathing.

"I don't have any more information than that." Billy's voice roused him from his shock.

"I'll be right there, Billy," he breathed harshly into the phone, his eyes still closed.

"Okay. I'll try to get some more information." Billy paused. "Lee, just hang on, okay? We don't know anything yet. There's a good chance that everyone on that plane is just fine."

"Yeah," Lee croaked into the phone. "You're right. I'm fine. I'll see you back at the office."

The line clicked, and the silence grabbed Lee by the throat, nearly bringing tears to his eyes.

*Amanda, you had better be okay. You hear me? You can't just come plowing into my life and then just . . . leave. You got that? Not after everything we've been through . . . all the tough scrapes we've gotten out of . . . no way . . . no how . . . please, God.*

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Lee pushed his Corvette to its breaking point, weaving in and out of the mid-day Georgetown traffic. He pulled, squealing tires and laying rubber, into his parking spot and sprinted into the main entrance of IFF.

"Mr. Stetson, Mr. Melrose is waiting for you in the Q-Bureau," Mrs. Marston called out to the agent as he rushed past her, headed for the pseudo-closet-door that hid the Agency's main elevator.

In one fluid motion, Lee turned and sprinted towards his office, his long legs taking the steps two at a time. Rounding the corner into the hallway that led to the Q-Bureau, he ran headlong into Francine.

"Whoa, Lee," Francine muttered, her eyes flashing annoyance as she tried to stay upright on her three-inch heels.

"Francine! Has there been any more news about the plane?" Lee asked, steadying his friend with a hand to the shoulder.

Francine's eyes softened. "No, Lee, I'm sorry, nothing more at this point. The only thing we know is that the plane took off from Miami this morning and had to make an emergency landing in Atlanta."

Lee ran an agitated hand through his hair. "I'm going to check in with Billy. Francine, if you hear anything, please . . ."

"Of course . . . right away." Francine hesitated, then reached out and awkwardly patted Lee's shoulder before taking off down the hall towards the stairwell.

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Billy Melrose turned as Lee entered the Q-Bureau. Their eyes met, and for an unspoken moment, they acknowledged the fear they both shared.

Billy had been the one to officially hire Amanda at the Agency. Standing up to quite a bit of grousing and complaints from Lee, he had championed Amanda in her new career as a civilian liaison working along side Scarecrow. He knew from the beginning that she'd be an excellent agent. No, she didn't have any formal training, but she had something better . . . instincts — and those you can't learn. You either have them or you don't. And Amanda had them. As did Lee. That's what made them such a wonderful team. They worked well off each other, complimented each other . . . one's weakness was the other's strength.

Right now Billy shared the fear of losing Amanda. This accident might have claimed Lee's partner and best friend. However, Billy would also be losing someone special, someone he cared about as more than just an employee. Billy swallowed hard, trying to stomach the sadness he felt himself and for the agent and friend standing in front of him.

"Billy," Lee broke the strained silence, "is there anything new?"

"A bit more. There are some injuries." Billy shook his head. "Lee, I'm sorry. At this point we don't know who or how many people were hurt or how badly. However, the NTSB are on their way to Atlanta to begin the investigation. That should move things along."

Lee walked over to his desk, picking up the Day-Timer that lay open where he had tossed it earlier that morning. Today's date was circled in red, the words "Amanda's Home" written in his barely legible scrawl. *Amanda's home*. He closed his eyes and tossed the calendar back on his desk.

"Lee, look there's nothing we can do until - " Billy began.

"No, there's something I can do. I can get down to the airport and get some information out of the airlines. Billy, I can't just sit here and wait to hear that Amanda . . ." He stopped short, his breath catching in his chest. "That she's hurt . . . or worse." The breath freed itself, making the words little more than a ragged whisper. He stood for a moment, staring at the floor. Finally, he looked up at

Billy. "I have a friend that works security at National. Maybe he can pull some strings, get some more info on what's going on."

Billy nodded, looking away from the fear in Lee's face and hiding the apprehension that had begun to form in his own eyes. "I understand. Go do what you have to."

Lee headed for the door. As he turned the knob and pulled the door open, Billy's voice caused him to pause.

"Lee, you have to have hope. Right now, it's the only thing we've got. Don't give up, okay?" Billy's dark eyes burned into Lee.

"Billy, I will never give up on Amanda . . . never." With that he strode out of the office, heading for National Airport.

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Useless. I am totally useless. I hate this! Lee thought as he headed toward the gates that would have housed Amanda's flight.

Lee Stetson was a man of action. He didn't wait for things to happen, he made them happen. He didn't wait for people to come to him; he went after them. But now . . . now he was helpless. He'd been able to get just a little more information than Billy had.

His friend hadn't been able to give him much information. Seven people were injured, three seriously — one of the flight crew and two passengers. No names, just numbers. His mind raced over the possibilities. Amanda could be one of those hurt. She could be fighting for her life right now and he couldn't do a damn thing. He was just wasting time here. But right now he had nothing but time.

Time to waste. Time to kill. Time to think about all the things that he and Amanda would never share. It had taken him so long to realize his feelings for her. So long to see how her presence in his life made him a different man . . . a better man. But little by little he had come to the startling realization that he cared for this woman. He cared about where she was, what she was doing, how she was feeling. With this realization had come a peace he'd seldom experienced before.

The little, everyday things she'd brought to his life seemed to make the world so much more pleasant. Nothing earth-shattering. Nothing monumental. Just her taking his hand when they walked, fixing his coffee just the way he liked it, straightening his tie, remembering where he'd last left his car keys. Things that, before, would have triggered his 'relationship' alarm were now just a part of being with her. And these small, easy, second-nature gestures had started something growing within his heart. How slowly it had all started, yet how quickly it had grown once it was given the attention it deserved. What had started with a kiss, shared clandestinely in their office, had budded into the beginnings of a romance and blossomed into a very special relationship.

But now what? He had thought, for once in his life, it was all going to work out. This time there were supposed to be no goodbyes, no broken hearts, no tears. This time it was supposed to be different. It was supposed to have been forever. Surely today couldn't be the end of forever. Could it?

Stop it, Stetson, this isn't getting you anywhere . . . not anywhere you want to go. Lee looked around and found himself at the main terminal gates. *This is where she would have arrived,* he thought, unable to keep the morbid thoughts from flashing through his mind. His anger and frustration bubbled to the surface and he violently kicked a row of waiting room chairs, attracting a few stares. But the waiting area was nearly empty. The airline had escorted the people waiting for news on Flight 4239 to someplace more private. Lee turned and slumped down into one of the seats. He leaned forward, elbows on knees, his head cradled in his hands. He gave up the fight with his body and his eyes burned as the full impact of what had happened hit him.

How could I have been so stupid? Such an idiot? To let this happen . . . to let her go without ever having told her what she means to me. Lee ran both hands through his hair, sitting up and wiping the moisture from his eyes. A tap on his back temporarily pulled Lee out of his self-pity and he turned to look over his shoulder.

"Lee?" Amanda asked, looking down at him. Seeing his ragged appearance and blood-shot eyes, she rushed on. "Lee, what's wrong? Are you okay?"

He gazed up into his partner's dark brown eyes.

"Lee, answer me. What's wrong?" Amanda knelt down behind the row of chairs where Lee was sitting, to be on eye level with him. "Lee, talk to me . . . You're scaring me."

Lee knew he should do something, say something, but he couldn't seem to make any part of his body function. Well, except for his heart, which, upon seeing Amanda standing behind him, had dropped to his stomach and then jumped to his throat, where it threatened to take up permanent residence. He tried to make his lips form words, but his brain was not cooperating . . . the synapses were firing, but only enough to keep his heart pumping and his lungs working. Speech was simply beyond him at this point.

"Okay, that's it. I'm going for help." Amanda moved to get up when suddenly Lee shot up out of his chair. Startled, Amanda leapt up as well and backed away only to find Lee hurdling the row of chairs that stood between them and enfolding her in his strong arms.

"Oh, my God . . . Oh, my God, you're okay. You're here and you're okay," Lee murmured in her hair, finally finding his voice. He clutched her to him, running his hands up and down her back, as if to prove that she was real and not some ghost.

"Yes, I'm here and I'm okay. Gosh, I was going to ask if you missed me, but I think I know the answer to that question," she laughed as she felt her ribs compress with the strength of his embrace. "Lee? . . . Lee? . . . Lee, I can't breathe."

Lee pulled back, holding her by the shoulders and staring into her eyes. He shook his head in wonderment, his hazel eyes sparkling with shock and tears. "I can't believe it's you. Where have you been? How did you get here?"

Amanda cocked her head and raised an eyebrow at Lee. "I was in Florida and I got here by airplane. But you know that . . ."

A little of the shock began to wear off and Lee looked Amanda up and down. "Yes . . . I know that. But you're supposed to be dead."

"Dead?" Amanda squeaked.

"Well, maybe not dead," he amended upon Amanda's startled reaction. "But definitely not here." He still couldn't get over the fact that she was standing there, in his grasp, alive and breathing, and looking just as beautiful as he remembered her.

"Lee, this doesn't make a bit of sense. Why would I be dead . . . or not here?" Amanda reached up to caress his cheek.

"Flight 4239 had to make an emergency landing," he motioned frantically with his arms.

Amanda shrugged. "I don't understand. That wasn't the flight I was on . . ." Amanda drew in a sudden breath as understanding suddenly dawned on her. "Oh, my gosh! Lee, that was the flight I was supposed to be on!"

"Supposed to be on?"

"Yes, I missed that flight. I was late leaving the hotel. I had so many things to do last night, I ended up going to bed and not leaving a wake-up call. I can't believe I did that. I never do that. I remember thinking about doing it just before I called mother to check to see if Phillip had finished packing for summer camp. I knew she'd be leaving for her trip to Graves Mountain Lodge first thing this morning and I know Phillip, he'd forget his head if it wasn't attached. Oh, and I needed to remind her to remind Joe that Jamie needs a new pair of sneakers. Can you believe that? I just bought that child a pair of sneakers three months ago. They're already too small for him. He has his father's feet. Besides I wanted to talk with Phillip and Jamie before they headed over to their father's for the weekend. Well, after all that I guess I just totally forgot to ask for a wake up call, and then there was this awful traffic jam, and don't even get me started on the cab ride

Lee's lips interrupted her all-too-familiar rambling as he swept her into an embrace. He didn't care about why she was here. He only cared that she ***was*** here. Safe. Sound. And he wanted her in his arms, just so he could be absolutely certain she wasn't some dream . . . some ghost that would drift away from him.

Amanda gasped against Lee's greedy lips, but then reached up and wrapped her arms around his neck. The kiss deepened as he pulled her up against his chest. She could feel his heart beating and his breath coming in short, shallow bursts against her face. Vaguely she realized he hadn't done a very good job shaving that morning, but that thought was driven from her mind as his tongue announced its presence and demanded entrance.

Oh, my gosh! She'd kissed Lee before. Lately, in fact, they'd spent a good deal of their time together kissing. And as good as those kisses had been, as wonderful as it was getting to know him on a more intimate level, it had never felt this intense. She feared that at any moment her knees would buckle and she would crumble helplessly to the floor.

Lee felt the slight give in Amanda's knees and smiled softly into the kiss. His hands roamed her back, one of them finally nestling in the small of her back, the other just a bit lower, pulling her up against him as close as possible. He loved the feeling of having her in his arms. The powerful feeling of holding this woman and knowing what his kisses did to her. *If only she knew what she does to me.* But now, in the middle of the airport, with everyone waiting and wondering about what had happened to her, was definitely not the time to discuss that topic in any depth.

Lee pulled out of the kiss, staring into Amanda's eyes. He took a deep breath, reining in his emotions. There would be time later for baring his soul and his feelings. "I don't care why you didn't get on that plane, Amanda; I'm just so happy you didn't." Her sweet face, only inches from his, beckoned to him. He was just about ready to dip in for another taste of her lips when he remembered his promise to Billy. He pulled back, putting Amanda at arm's distance, but still holding her hands tightly in his. "Everyone still thinks you're missing. We need to get word back to them."

Amanda, her eyes still dreamy, her lids at half-mast, sighed. "No. I mean, 'yes'. Of course." Her eyes cleared a bit.

"Do we need to worry about your mother or the boys?" he asked, walking over to pick up her suitcase and slinging her briefcase over his shoulder. He slipped his free arm around her waist, pulling her close to his side.

"Ah, no, I don't think so. The boys are safe at Joe's, and Mother is probably already at Graves Mountain. They knew I was planning to take the subway from the airport and I doubt they'd have heard anything about the emergency landing." She paused, a pensive look on her face. "Gosh, Lee, I came very close to dying today."

"Yes, you did," he said softly. "I know that we face danger and possible death every day in this business . . . but when it sneaks up on you in everyday life, you find you're just not prepared for it."

"Yeah," she murmured, glancing back at the waiting area.

Lee placed a finger under her chin, turning her face back to him. "Let's let everyone in on the news that you're safe and then get you home. Okay?"

"That sounds good to me," she smiled up at him.

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"Drat," Amanda muttered, flinging down yet another pair of pantyhose. Her inspection of her lingerie drawer had gained her nothing more than a pile of hose with runs in them and a throbbing headache. And after the scene at the airport with Lee, well, her head was already spinning.

The phone call to the Agency had been greeted with relief and joy that Amanda had arrived home safely. Billy told her not to worry about the trip debriefing until Monday, but had informed Lee that he was needed back at DoJ as soon as possible to help tie up some loose ends on the Sudahar case. Lee and Amanda only had time for a quick kiss at the door and promises to call later.



After watching the silver sports car turn off Maplewood Avenue and out of sight, Amanda had lugged her suitcase upstairs to her room to unpack. Knowing she had the entire weekend to herself caused a rush of guilty pleasure. She could have come very close to losing her life today, and she needed a little private time to process it all. That, and the fact that this afternoon she'd come very close to telling Lee that she loved him. They had both let their guard down at the airport . . . fate having once again intervened, pushing them a bit closer into each other's arms. While the need to let everyone know of Amanda's safe arrival had given them both the chance to briefly scurry back behind the safety of that invisible line, Amanda knew things had changed between them forever.

Amanda had just been about to draw herself a hot bubble bath when the phone rang. It had been Lee, calling from his car on the drive back to DoJ. In the rush, he had forgotten to ask how her courier assignment had gone. Amanda put her bath on hold and had stretched out on her bed to update him up on the details of the trip to Miami. After another few minutes of catching each other up on what else had happened since they'd seen each other two days prior, Lee had finally asked her if she'd like to meet him for a late dinner at Emilio's. Amanda had shrugged off her travel weariness and told him she'd meet him there at eight.

Now, if only the Goddess of Pantyhose would cooperate!

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Lee glanced once again at his watch, then back to the door of the restaurant. He'd arrived about 15 minutes early and garnered an excellent, rather secluded location. A small candle burned on the table, and Lee focused on the flickering light, relaxing and taking a deep breath. *Ridiculous*, he thought. A man his age feeling this way – like he was some stupid kid waiting for his prom date to show up. The candle and a few deep breaths seemed to do the trick, as he felt the tension ease from his shoulders and he leaned back in his chair, content to wait. *Good things come to those who wait . . . isn't that what everyone always says?*

Lee was reading the menu the waitress had brought to him only moments before when a sudden tingle began at the base of his neck – a shiver running down the length of his spine. Turning slowly, he caught sight of Amanda standing in the entrance, nervously scanning the candle-lit room. His first instinct was to flag her over to the table, but he held back. A small smile played on his lips as he watched her slowly walk over to the bar, still glancing over the room trying to locate him. Lee's smile deepened as she found an empty bar stool, leaning over it to place her purse on the bar. He raised an appreciative eyebrow as the hem of her green silk dress moved to reveal the length of a slender calf, the soft angle of a knee, and the whisper of a graceful thigh. Feeling his shirt collar tighten and a sudden flush of heat, he stood, finally, and with a wave, caught her attention. The warm smile she returned quickened his heart and took away his breath. *Good things come to those who wait . . . isn't that how it went? Yes, and patience is a virtue . . . more good words to live by*, he thought, as Amanda glided across the room to him.

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"You finished?" Lee questioned, as Amanda pushed her plate away from her and dropped her napkin on the table.

"Oh, my gosh, yes . . . it was scrumptious, but I couldn't eat one more forkful." Amanda grinned, then sipped at her glass of red wine. Tonight she just wanted to enjoy herself. She didn't want to worry about anything. She was here, having dinner with this man – a man that had become such an important part of her life – and she just wanted to make this moment last. She leaned back in her chair, allowing the warm feeling of euphoria to envelop her.

Lee grinned back at her, finishing off the last of his prime rib and tossing back the remainder of his glass of wine.

"Now that is what I'd call a meal — a good time . . . fine food . . ." he raised an eyebrow and tipped his empty glass at Amanda. ". . . and exquisite company."

Amanda raised her now empty glass as well. "Exquisite company, indeed," she murmured, giving Lee a charming smile.

"You're enjoying yourself, then?" Lee chuckled.

"I'm having a grand time," Amanda laughed.

"A grand time?" Lee questioned, rounding the vowels and doing a very exaggerated English accent.

"Oh, yes, indeed . . . a grand time." Amanda played along, laughing.

"Well, I'm glad I could be of service," Lee continued, plucking at her hand and pulling it to his lips to kiss. Laughter calmed to amusement, and amusement warmed softly to desire as a kind of electrical current coursed between them. Their eyes met and held each other, as the smiles drifted from both their faces. Their eyes locked on more than mere iris and curve of lid and lash. They searched and explored, both of them seeking something, anything . . . their quarry was nameless, but nonetheless potent. A yearning so new, so young, that its boundaries were unknown and unrestrained. The adventure was beginning and at this moment they both acknowledged their expertise and their naiveté, their fear and their daring, their strength and their delicacy.

Lee refused to relinquish her hand as he gazed into her eyes. His thumb traced caressing circles over the back of her trembling hand, the moisture of his kiss still lingering on the soft flesh.

"You know what?" Lee murmured, his gaze never leaving Amanda's.

"No, what?" Amanda responded, her voice trembling along with her heart.

Lee leaned over the table, reaching to gently caress Amanda's cheek. "Amanda King, you are beautiful." His eyes focused seriously on her, drinking in the soft texture of her skin, the curve of her cheek.

The room was spinning for Amanda, and the nearness of Lee — his one hand holding hers and his other gently stroking her cheek — did nothing to steady her. Her breath came short and shallow, and she couldn't take her eyes off of his . . . it was as if they were beckoning her to take the next step. In a

moment without reason she waged the bet and took a chance. She leaned in and placed her lips softly on his and for an instant, a mere second, there was silence and stillness.

Lee's warm breath mingled with hers as he himself threw caution to the wind and pressed deeper into the kiss . . . releasing his hold on her hand to cradle her face. The softness and silence of the kiss changed as they each pressed deeper. Finally, after an eternity measured in seconds, Lee pulled back from Amanda's eager lips.

"I . . . I think I'd better get you home," his breath was ragged and his face flushed.

Amanda smiled into his eyes. "Home, yes, that would be a good idea." She reached up to trace a finger across his lips. Her meaning was very clear.

Lee reached back to take her face in his hands. "Listen, I just want to make sure this is what you want." He smiled to gentle his words. "I wouldn't want you to think I'd wined and dined you only so I could have my way with you."

Amanda's smile faded. "Lee, I know one thing. Today I was one missed flight away from maybe never seeing you again. It's made me realize how fragile and fleeting our lives can be and how in one moment, one day, it might be over. I don't want to face that day with regrets." Her voice was husky and heavy from emotion.

"No, no regrets, not any more," Lee whispered, looking into her sparkling brown eyes. He leaned closer to kiss her. "I want you," he murmured, just as his lips captured hers.

"I want you, too, and I've missed you and . . . right now, I just want to be in your arms." Amanda smiled softly.

Lee reached to trace a finger along the curve of her cheek. "Your wish will always be my command."

Amanda smiled softly. "Then take me home, Lee."

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The room was bathed in deep golden tones as the rising sun's rays fought to penetrate the dark drapery of Lee's bedroom. Although the sun had just begun its daily ascent, Lee was wide awake and had been for nearly an hour. He smiled, content, and continued to trace the line of Amanda's brow, her head heavy in slumber on his chest. The soft rush of her breath caressed his skin through the sheet, causing him to shiver in memory of the previous night . . . a night he had waited so long for, and yet one that had met every cherished dream and then paled them in comparison.

There had been little talk between them on the ride home from the restaurant and they'd walked silently, hands clasped, to his apartment. There'd been a fumbling of keys and then a fumbling of clothes . . . it had been so long since he had offered his heart along with his body that he was worried he'd forgotten the rules of this game, but it came back in a rush with the sweet pressure of Amanda's mouth on his, the tender touch of her hands on his body. They came together at first hesitantly — afraid that the spell that this night had woven might somehow be broken if they said too much, moved

too fast, or felt too strongly. But soon the urgency and passion between them was too powerful an adversary, and the fear that once enslaved them was engulfed and defeated. They came together to claim the night, completing their journey from partners to friends to lovers.

Now the morning was upon them, and Lee simply wanted to freeze this moment in time. In his life there had been so few pure, precious memories of joy. He wanted nothing more than to take this new memory and keep it safe like this forever, embraced in the warmth of Amanda's body next to his . . . no yesterdays to repent for, no tomorrows to worry over. If there were only some way to neatly wrap this memory up safe and sound so that nothing could spoil it or rip it away from him. He tried to keep the dark thoughts of past sorrows from reaching into this day, but like the thieves they were, they stole in — an ever-present reminder of how happiness, for Lee Stetson, was just an invitation to misfortune and heartache. He squeezed his eyes shut, as if to push the door closed to the monster that was demanding entrance.

"No," he whispered, softly shaking his head.

"What?" Amanda stirred, her eyes opening and blinking in a sleepy haze. "What's wrong . . . Lee?"

Amanda pulled out of Lee's arms and rolled over and onto her back. She pulled the sheet across her breasts, running a quick hand through her tousled hair, and looked questioningly at Lee.

"Nothing, Amanda . . . nothing's wrong. I was thinking how perfect it was to lie here and watch you sleep. I didn't want it to end."

Lee scrubbed the sleep from his eyes with both fists and then focused on Amanda, who now was sitting up against the headboard. He sat up and leaned towards her, resting his chin on the tip of her shoulder. "What's up, Sleeping Beauty?" he teased, wiggling his eyebrows at her.

The twinkling of his eyes was contagious and Amanda couldn't help but smile back, any questions of what was troubling Lee rushing out of her mind at the antics of her white knight and his wickedly wielded sense of humor.

"God, you look beautiful in the morning." Lee smiled appreciatively at her. "Me, I pretty much resemble a porcupine first thing in the A.M."

"No," Amanda said, reaching out to brush his hair with her hand.

Lee caught the hand before it reached its destination, pulled it to his lips, and kissed each fingertip, one at a time. Amanda blushed as he searched the tangle of sheets for her other hand and laughed as he repeated the procedure. When he was finished he smiled softly at her and rested his chin on her hands. "Thank you."

"For what?" she asked, her grin softening to a smile, her hands still warmly clasped within his.

"For last night," he answered.

"Oh, that." The grin reappeared. "It was my pleasure."

"No," Lee frowned. "Seriously . . . I mean it. I want you to know that last night was very, very special . . . and I don't just mean this . . ." He gestured to the rumpled bed.

"Oh, Lee," Amanda said softly. "It meant a lot to me, too . . . I mean, it was special . . . I mean, I . . . I . . ." but the words that so desperately needed to be said between them would not form on her lips. While Amanda's heart felt them, her mind knew that once they were spoken they would completely and forever change things between the two of them. And the greatest fear of all — that she would speak them and they would hang out there and never be reciprocated — was just too much of a risk and she stumbled into silence over the road-block of three small words.

Lee leaned over and kissed her softly, his fingers capturing her chin and holding it secure. "I know . . . me too."

"Me too what?" she asked hesitantly.

"I love you, too," he answered simply.

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It was late afternoon by the time Lee had pulled himself out of Amanda's arms and left to meet an informant in Germantown. The drop had been successful; he had the brown envelope containing the surveillance tape Billy had wanted him to pick up. He whistled softly to himself as he pulled the Corvette out of the parking space in front of the small coffee house and merged into traffic.

The trip from the drop site back to his apartment would take about forty-five minutes and it gave Lee some time to think about the events of the past few days. Forty-eight measly little hours . . . and yet so many changes. Lee sighed and pulled down the sun visor to guard his eyes against the late afternoon glare. He pictured Amanda as he had left her, earlier, sleeping tangled in the sheets that they had made love on all day. Even with a shower and a shave, the soft floral scent of her perfume clung to him like wisteria and roses on a trellis. The fragrance meandered and wove sensuously into his mind, and he smiled at the memories it evoked — Amanda's body pressed close to his, the softness of her breasts crushed against his chest, her shoulders and neck open and waiting for the onslaught of his kisses. The blaring of a horn brought his attention back to the road, and he waved a sheepish apology to the driver into whose lane he had just wandered.

"Come on, Stetson, time to wake up," he admonished to himself. Then Amanda's face eased back into his mind once again and he shook the image away, muttering, "Geez, you'd think she'd cast some kind of spell on me."

He flicked on the car stereo, hoping it would keep him focused on the task at hand. He fumbled with the dial until the notes of an old big-band number wafted from the speakers. He began to hum the tune, but stopped suddenly. Then a grin began to spread across his face and soon he was rumbling with laughter. The tune was a familiar old favorite — not to mention perfectly suited to his mood. He turned the volume to the max and began his duet with Mr. Sinatra.

“ . . . and although I know it’s strictly taboo. When you arouse the need in me, my heart says yes indeed in me, proceed with what you’re leading me to . . . It’s such an ancient hitch, but one that I wouldn’t switch . . . because there’s no nicer witch than you.”

Frank continued on by himself, and Lee focused on the road and the future that lay ahead of him.

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Amanda stretched like a cat, then snuggled deeper into the comforts of Lee’s king-size bed. When she first awoke, she’d found the note on her bedside table. His familiar handwriting told her that he’d left to run an errand for work and that he’d back in a few hours. And that he loved her. She still clutched the small scrap of paper in her hand.

She rolled languorously onto her stomach, breathing deeply into the pillow that had so recently cradled Lee’s head next to hers, the scent of his aftershave making her dizzy with desire. She would give anything to have him back in bed with her right now, their legs tangled intimately as they held each other close. A shiver slid down her spine, as she remembered how he had held her and caressed her . . . how it felt to have the weight of him push her back into the mattress, his ever-searching lips pressing kisses along the column of her neck and curve of her collar bone.

Lee had made love with her tenderly, vehemently, gently, boisterously, and with wild abandon . . . they’d laughed and sighed and whispered and screamed. They’d explored what was virgin territory of both body and soul and come out in tender amazement. Then, finally, Amanda had fallen into a deep sleep, her head cradled on Lee’s shoulder, as he told her a fairy tale about a handsome spy and his beautiful apprentice.

She’d fallen asleep before he finished the story, but now, recalling the feel of his arms holding her, his breath warm on his cheek, she was very sure . . .

That the two lived happily ever after.

The End