



Not all that long ago, there had been a time when he would have insisted on leaving as soon as the job was done, anxious to get rid of her lest she think they were on a date. He wondered now how he'd ever considered her a nuisance.

That thought was followed by the somewhat unsettling knowledge that he'd been attracted to and felt a strong connection with Amanda for a very long time. After ignoring and denying his feelings for longer than he could remember, he was finally ready to stop fighting, but he wasn't quite ready to act on them, either. He was willing to take his time and get to know her even better than he already did.

He breathed in her subtle fragrance, suppressing the intense urge to bury his face in the crook of her neck. Her hair, upswept, escaped its clasp in places to fall in soft curls, framing her face.

Her skin, soft and luminous, beckoned to him. He wondered what it would feel like to trail his lips from the spot under her ear to her neck and then down to her shoulder. Feeling his eyelids grow heavy with these tantalizing thoughts, he pulled her closer so that she couldn't see the heady desire he knew was evident in his face.

"Lee? Lee Simms?" A high, sugary voice broke into his pleasant reverie. "Oh, wow - it *is* you! When you never called me after your last mission to outer space - shame on you! - I just assumed the very worst!"

Reluctantly, Lee pulled back from Amanda just enough to greet his past lover. "Uh . . . Hi, Paula," he stammered, embarrassed to be reminded of the ridiculous lies he'd told some of his former dates, but more embarrassed to have it happen in front of Amanda. "It's nice to see you."

Seeing the two women together, he was amazed that he'd ever been attracted to Paula and others like her. Amanda's classic beauty made Paula look like some kind of inexpensive call girl.

"It's 'nice' to see me? Just 'nice'?" Paula blanched, her voice becoming higher and louder, and placed her hands on her shapely hips. She addressed her next comment to Amanda, shaking her head in apparent amazement. "Honey, what's your secret?"

"Excuse me?" Amanda asked, and Lee saw the unmistakable flush that crept into her skin.

"How does a little thing like you hold this man's attentions?" The platinum blonde smirked, creasing her heavily made-up face, and went on. "Frankly, if Lee here says it's just 'nice' to see me, well, that must mean he's firmly hooked by you. Otherwise, *I'd* be in his arms by now and on the way to his apartment, and you'd be toast."

"Oh, well," Amanda replied, clearly discomfited and somewhat angered by the other woman's blunt words. "Actually, we're just . . . friends. I mean . . . we just work together. We're not, um . . . I don't hold his attentions." She blushed, gesturing vaguely between herself and Lee.

Paula's face lit up, and shoving Amanda out of the way, she pushed herself confidently up against Lee. "Oh, really? Fabulous! I should have known. Come on, spaceman, you're mine for the rest of the night!" she gushed.

Lee shot Amanda a look of consternation. "Ah, Paula, wait." He extricated himself from her tenacious grasp, moving toward Amanda and wrapping an arm intimately around her waist. Pulling her snugly to his side, he said, "Actually, Amanda and I *\*are\** together, and she holds my attention very nicely. My dance card is full for this evening." He squeezed Amanda's upper hip to emphasize his point, and felt her shudder.

"Well!" Paula shook her head again as she looked from Lee to Amanda. After scrutinizing Amanda from head to foot, she returned her gaze to Lee and added airily, "Your loss, lover."

After Paula had flounced away, Lee maneuvered Amanda so that she faced him and held her more firmly in place than before, as if at any moment she'd be whisked away. "I can't believe you did that," he chided her, noting that she looked embarrassed and uncomfortable.

She cleared her throat, and he could see her pulse racing in her graceful neck. "Did what?" Her eyes wide, she regarded him questioningly.

He sighed. "Tried to pawn me off on Paula. I have no desire to dance with her. Besides, she was intolerably rude to you."

"Sorry," she mumbled with a slight shrug. "I wasn't trying to pawn you off. Other times . . . I mean, well, let's face it, Lee, you're usually pretty happy to run into an old flame."

How could she really think that he would want to dance with anyone but her? Then again, he hadn't given her any reason to think otherwise, had he?

He regarded her intently, again unable to say just what was on his mind. "Well . . . Not anymore." It was said forcefully, meaningfully, or so he hoped.

Her face was unreadable as she absorbed his meaning. Finally she nodded slowly, as if not quite sure of how to respond. Instead of continuing the conversation, he nodded as well. Taking her hand, he swirled her back onto the dance floor.

*When this world's closing in  
There's no need to pretend  
Set me free - darlin' rescue me  
I don't wanna let you go  
So I'm standing in your way  
I never needed anyone like I'm needin' you today*

"Would you like some champagne?" Lee asked, taking Amanda's hand in his and leading her to their table as the ballad they'd been swaying to ended and a more up-tempo number began. He held his breath, waiting for her answer.

She glanced at her watch and cocked an eyebrow, shrugging elegantly. "Sure, if you want to, why not? The evening's still young."

He grinned in relief. For a moment, he'd been afraid she was going to ask him to take her home, but he wasn't nearly ready to let her go. "I'll be right back," he said.

After obtaining two flutes of champagne, he began to make his way back to the table, eager to spend a few quiet moments talking before he asked her to dance again.

As he neared her, however, he saw that she was not alone. She always had attracted the attention of men, he reminded himself ruefully. Still, the familiar wave of jealousy nearly knocked him over this time, and he hastened to interrupt whatever was happening.

That was another thing that had changed, he realized. Though he'd behaved jealously on previous occasions, he'd never admitted to himself what he knew now. He was jealous - jealous of any and all men who vied for her interest.

The man standing in front of her was asking her to dance. As Lee approached, Amanda's eyes swept to him in obvious relief and she flashed him a smile, causing a surge of happiness to flood through him.

"I'm sorry," she told the handsome stranger. "Here comes my date now, Blake. But it was nice to meet you."

The man moved his gaze to Lee, and Lee felt himself being sized up. "Okay," Blake replied, a glint in his ice-blue eyes. "But it's a crime for a woman as gorgeous as yourself to be left

alone at a party. If I see you by yourself again at any point in the evening, you're fair game."

Lee saw Amanda's smile change from genuine to barely tolerant as Blake strode confidently away. Her eyes narrowed as she watched him, and she looked back to Lee and rolled her eyes.

"Fair game," she muttered under her breath. "Fair game! What does he think I am, a fox?" she asked huffily.

He couldn't hide the grin that sprang to his lips. "Well, you *are* rather attractive," he teased, only half-joking.

The pink in her cheeks heightened as she realized what she'd said. "I didn't mean . . . I . . . Oh, my gosh." She moved a hand up to her mouth.

Lee laughed. "Here, have a drink," he said, handing her the glass.

"Thank you," she said, taking it from him. As her fingers brushed his, he felt his heartbeat tumble over itself and he offered her a small smile. "And thanks . . . for rescuing me from that embarrassing situation with your old girlfriend," she added quietly.

He looked up sharply. "Is that the only reason you think I didn't dance with Paula?" he asked.

She shrugged, looking away. "I don't know, but it was very gallant of you, Lee."

"Hey." He reached out and grasped her hand, and she looked at him. "I wanted to dance with you, and no one else. Really, Amanda, it was you who rescued me."

Nodding, she smiled and whispered, "Oh." He could tell, though, that she was still uncertain.

Was there no way to let her know how he felt without spelling it out? How could he undo all the times he'd informed her, in no uncertain terms, that he would never be interested in her? Not that she'd ever even hinted at wanting a relationship with him. Now, *he* wanted *her*, and he didn't know how to let her know or even if he was ready to do so.

*Do I have to say the words?*

*Do I have to tell the truth?*

*Do I have to shout it out?*

*Do I have to say a prayer?*

*Must I prove to you how good we are together?  
Do I have to say the words?*

They finished their champagne in silence. Lee was unable to resist stealing occasional glances at his companion. After a few minutes, he felt the desire - no - the need, to have her in his arms again.

Standing, he reached for her. "Dance with me."

She smiled, slowly extending her hand. "Again? We just danced."

"Yes, Amanda. Again." He took hold of her offered hand and gently pulled her out of her seat. She stood up, her body dangerously near his, and he wrapped an arm possessively around her waist, trying desperately to say with actions what he couldn't say with words.

"All right," she whispered, her eyes widening and her breath catching. It was obvious that she could sense a difference in him, and he used it to his advantage.

Leading her to the dance floor, he took her into his arms again, his hand resting rather intimately on her lower back. She glanced at him and he saw passion glimmer in her deep brown eyes. He welcomed the answering spark of excitement that shuddered through his body and heart.

He brought a hand up to her slender neck and caressed the soft skin his fingers encountered, never breaking eye contact. After a moment, a slow, gentle smile graced Amanda's lips, and Lee knew that she understood, at least in part, what he was trying to say.

Her gaze dropped and focused on his chest, and he felt her arms tighten around him. Leaning down, he pressed his lips to her forehead in silent gratitude for not needing words. Someday, he'd be able to say them; he just needed a little more time.

*Rescue me from despair  
Tell me you will be there  
Help me, please - darlin' rescue me  
Every dream that we share  
Every cross that we bear  
Can't you see? Darlin' rescue me*

**The End**