



Tell Me a Story

by Cat Lady Firebird

The weekend's weather could not have started out better. Six inches of fresh powder had come down the night before they got here, with another three inches the morning of, making the skiing glorious. And then, of course, there was the reason they were there in the first place.

Here at Pine Top, they didn't have to pretend they were anyone other than themselves. Not Scarecrow and Mrs. King, not playing any covers, but just Lee and Amanda, newly engaged, taking a weekend to celebrate. The extra day off that Billy had given them? It was just the icing on top.

Until Saturday morning, when Lee stopped by the lounge to pick up their ski rentals, and saw the weather map. *Oh, no. No no no.*

Winter Storm Warning.

"Can't they predict those a few days out?" he asked the desk attendant. "How did this one catch you by surprise?"

"Up here? No," said the attendant. "You can't always predict them. Although you know we've had intermittent snow bands the past few days, Mr. Stetson. Those don't come from nowhere. It's usually a sign something's brewing."

Lee felt his lips thin. He'd spent time in mountainous areas growing up, but he'd never really learned how the weather patterns could differ.

"How much time do you think we have?" he asked. "If we leave now, can we get back to D.C. before it hits? Is it even going to hit D.C.?" He didn't see that area on the television screen.

"No way of knowing," said the attendant. "But we probably won't have to close the slopes until at least midday. If you left right now, you'd probably be able to get out from under it."

He grumbled under his breath all the way back to their room.

Amanda was already halfway into her ski clothes, but her expression changed when she saw his. "What is it?"

“Snowstorm,” he told her. “Coming in fast. We either leave now, or we might not be able to leave at all.”

“Lee,” she said. “It’s snow. We’ll be fine.”

“We’re due back at the Agency on Tuesday.”

“It storms up here all the time. The roads will probably clear out sometime tomorrow.” She came up and slid her arms around his neck. “And we can spend tonight snuggled in with hot chocolate and a fire.”

It was certainly tempting, but... “How do you know we’ll make it out?”

She laughed. “When I was a little girl, I wouldn’t have wanted to. I’d have wanted to stay right here.” Then she sobered. “This is West Virginia. Deep snow happens here all the time. I’m sure they’re set up for it. It’s not like at home where they have to go into panic mode if it’s more than an inch or two.”

He really wanted to be convinced. He was going to be convinced, he decided. For once, he didn’t want to have to worry about planning or contingencies or what-ifs.

“You’re right,” he told her, pulling her into a long kiss. “We’ll stay and stick with the plan to leave around noon, the day after tomorrow.”

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He should have known better.

The first sign came right as they got to the top of the first lift ride: the sky was an odd kind of gray-blue color, one he didn’t know if he’d ever seen before. The wind was fresher and sharper than he’d ever smelled it, even when he’d spent some time solo hiking in the Alps.

And there was only one lift operator present.

Lee tried to keep his tone light and easy. “Where’s your partner? Taking a break?”

“N-no.” Under the ski mask and scarves, it looked like this attendant was no more than eighteen years old. “He went down to the lodge. Something about the sky not looking right up here.”

He frowned. “Is it safe to ski?”

“Oh, yes! At least, right now.”

At least right now wasn’t the most reassuring of answers, but their best next move was the same thing they’d been planning to do anyway: ski down the slope.

“Is everything all right?” Amanda asked as they took their places.

“Yeah,” he answered. “Come on, it’s our turn. Let’s go.”

Her answer was to push off. He was right behind, and then there was just the bite of the freezing air and the soft hissing of their skis. Lee glanced up only once, noting that the lift chairs were beginning to sway, but that was all the focus he could spare. The trail had apparently been clearly marked at one point, but now, there were small piles of snow around some of the markers, so he was having to pay extra attention just to make sure he didn’t get off-track.

And then it happened. Amanda skied right past a turn without changing course.

“Amanda!” he tried to call down to her. “Stay on the trail!”

She either didn’t hear him or didn’t have time to respond. Lee felt the first edges of panic nibble at his mind. Amanda was competent enough on skis, but she had limits. They both did.

“Amanda!” he called again, barely registering when his skis, too, left the marked trail. “Damn it, stop if you can!”

That must have gotten her attention because she turned slightly toward him. In the next moment, though, she catapulted head-over-heels into the powder.

“*Amanda!*” He barely kept his own balance as he turned his skis sideways to the slope to stop. When he looked up, she wasn’t visible.

Stay calm, Stetson. You have to stay calm. He crab-walked as close as he could to the tracks her skis had left, but still saw no sign of her. “Damn it!”

Yanking one ski off, he began post-holing, starting at the point where her tracks stopped and moving out and down. She couldn’t have gotten that far away, could she? It had only been a minute or two!

“Lee?”

There. It was muffled, but unmistakable, a little further down and to his right. She’d come to rest on her back. Her skis were nowhere to be seen.

Lee waded over and began to offer her a hand up, but then thought twice about it. “Are you hurt anywhere? You think you can get up?”

“I, ah. I think so.”

That wasn’t the most reassuring of answers either. “What do you mean?”

“Not...” she trailed off. “N-not sure. My feet feel funny and...oh, it’s so cold out here.”

He got his hands under her arms and pulled. "Come on, now. If you'll get up we can get out of it."

"I know, but..." she was trembling violently, and her hands screwed themselves into the front of his jacket, pulling it tight across his back. "What happened?"

"You went off the trail, remember? And hit a snow pocket."

"A snow pocket? Are we skiing? Why are we skiing? We were going to drink cocoa and maybe sing a few songs."

Lee felt his worry becoming dread. "Amanda, did you hit your head?"

"N-not sure."

Tugging her mask down, he tried to get a look at her pupils, but she turned away from the wind. "So cold."

"Amanda, honey, look at me. Come on. I need to check and make sure you're all right."

She did, and her pupils *seemed* to be even, but in the shifting light he couldn't be entirely sure. When she blinked, her gaze seemed to drift to the side.

And the sky, he noticed abruptly, was getting darker.

"Okay," he told her. "We're gonna take a couple of steps. Just a few. Stay with me."

"I'll try."

At least she was coherent enough to listen to him, and to respond as he cajoled her into working their way back toward the trail, gradually aiming downhill. They couldn't be very far from it, but when four or five minutes passed and they still hadn't come to a packed area, he looked up in an effort to orient himself.

The top of the mountain had disappeared into a white haze.

Oh, no. He'd thought things had been bad before.

"All right," he told Amanda as he tried to still his shaking hands. "It's just a whiteout. But we're going to be okay. You hear me? We'll be all right." They had to be.

Holding her tightly, he turned around in what certainly felt like a full circle, though without any visual references he couldn't be absolutely sure. Everything was rapidly vanishing into a white-gray haze, and now he wasn't even sure which way he was facing.

All right. All right. He'd been trained for this. He could handle it. *Get down*, he told himself. *Out of the wind. Conserve heat. Do not panic.*

Keep her awake.

“Amanda?” he asked, noticing that he had to raise his voice. “You with me?”

She didn’t say anything, but her hands tightened against his chest. Lee decided to take that as a yes.

“Small,” he told her. “We need to get small. Come on, now, kneel down with me. That’s right.” Getting his back to the wind, he dragged her around in front of him, but he was loath to let go enough to start packing snow. “Amanda. Can you try and hang on to me while I work?”

“T-try.” He had to strain to hear her.

“Good. Good. We’re going to be fine. See if you can help me a little, will you?” The wind was getting louder by the second. “Push the snow toward the wind. That’s right.” He began tamping it down, trying to pack it hard. “As much as you can give me.”

It was heavy, and he could see her straining, but she kept trying. Despite everything, Lee felt a frisson of pride — and hope. She might be hurt and disoriented, but his Amanda was still with him.

Using his arm — he’d long since lost his own skis — he kept tamping down until he could hear the slightest reduction in wind noise. Then he pushed her even deeper. “Down, Amanda. Tuck in.” Their shelter wasn’t much; it was just a low-packed wall. But it was cutting the wind enough.

“Go *in* the s-snow? But it’s-it’s —” her teeth started chattering.

“I know,” he answered.

“So c-c-c-c —”

“Can you just not fight me, then?”

That, she managed. He packed the snow around them as thickly as he could, cheering inwardly as the air began to lose its bite. It’d been a long time since his last winter survival training, but apparently he hadn’t forgotten.

Working them around so that she was sitting between his legs, he pulled the mask back down over her eyes before tucking her face against his shoulder as he tried to stop his own shuddering. “Cover your skin.”

“Feels good,” she managed. “Tired.”

“No, no, no, no. Uh-uh. Do not go to sleep.”

“Can’ stay ’wake.”

“Yes, you can.” The panic was hovering at the edges of his awareness again. How long had building their shelter taken, anyway? “Tell me a story. Tell me about —” his mind went blank for a long moment. “About the kitchen. The blue curtains and the yellow flowers. Why those?”

“Homey,” she drawled.

“There’s lots of ways to be homey. Why’d you pick those two?”

“Sun. Sky.”

“Good,” he told her. “Tell me more. You can imagine a warm sky on a sunny day. What’s on the table?”

Amanda’s brow furrowed. “Mug. Coffee.”

“That’s right. With sugar in it?”

“Uh-uh,” she managed. “You hate sugar.”

“What else is there? Are we having breakfast?”

“Not you. No breakfast.”

“Even though it’s the most important meal of the day?”

No response. Some part of him noticed the wind actually was starting to die down, but the temperature hadn’t changed.

“Come on, Amanda,” he continued. “What are we having? Brioche? Pancakes? Sausage?”

“Mm,” she answered. “Getting warmer.”

“Amanda!” It probably wasn’t the best idea, but he shook her slightly anyway. “What are we having for breakfast?”

“No break...” she didn’t finish the word.

“Amanda King, you listen to me! You’re the one who’s always telling me that breakfast is the most important meal of the day! So what are we having? *What are we eating for breakfast?*” At any other time, this entire line of conversation might have been funny. “Spell out the menu for me!”

“You...” she stopped and took a breath, but started before he could interrupt again. “You like to cook.”

He’d take the non-sequitur. “You’re right. I do. What do you want me to cook?”

She mumbled something, but he couldn’t make it out.

“Eggs?” he asked, blurting out the first thing that came to mind. “Do you want me to make you eggs?”

“Scrambled.”

“Good,” he told her. “Good. With cheese?”

“No. Icky with chocolate. Don’ complain about your food, Jamie.”

“Oh, damn it.” He shook her again, cursing when he realized how numb his fingertips had become. “Come on! Don’t do this to me! Not now! Not this close!”

She rolled slightly in his arms.

“Stay with me, Amanda! Don’t you check out on me now!”

“Shake...” she whispered hoarsely. “St...”

That was when he realized she wasn’t shaking and rolling in his arms. The ground underneath them was vibrating! Avalanche control? A snowcat? He couldn’t be sure, but whatever it was, it meant people. And those people were close.

Lee shoved his arm up, above the packed berm of snow, and began screaming and waving with all his might.

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The ski mask, when it came off, felt like it took half his face with it. Lee couldn’t have cared less. “Amanda!”

“She’s right here.” They were in the lobby of the ski lodge, each with a pair of paramedics bent over them.

Lee pushed hands away and sat up. “Is she all right?”

“That’s what we’re trying to find out,” said one of the paramedics. “If you could keep quiet.”

He clamped his mouth shut hard, his eyes riveted to the scene a few feet away.

“Ma’am? Can you tell us your name?”

She screwed her face up for a moment, thinking. “Mandy.”

“Mandy?” asked the paramedic. “I thought it was Amanda?”

“It’s a nickname,” she said.

“That works. How about your last name?”

She smiled faintly. “West. At least, for a little while longer.”

“Okay. And where are you, Ms. West?”

“Not sure. The kitchen, I think?”

“That’s fine,” said the paramedic. “Now, Mandy, I’m going to shine a light in your eyes. Just follow it for me.”

It looked as though she tried, but Lee couldn't be sure. Her gaze lagged behind the beam. "That's real bright."

"It is, isn't it, sweetie?" Another paramedic was wrapping a blood pressure cuff around her arm. "Do you know what today is?"

"Friday." And then she started to hum. "I'm getting married this weekend."

"You are?" The paramedic flicked his eyes up. "Pack it. We're transporting. Disorientation." Then he turned back to her, and pointed at Lee. "Is this your fiancé?"

She stared at him, her face going owlsh. "N-no. He — he cooks breakfast."

The air was suddenly far too thick and far too hot.

"But that's not right," she continued. "Ricky doesn't know how to cook." She started humming again. "That's why he's gonna marry me."

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"I don't know who Ricky is," Lee admitted to the emergency room attendant who was taking their information. "That's neither me nor her ex-husband."

On the bed, Amanda gasped in surprise. "How do you *not* know who Ricky is? Everyone does!" She hummed a little more. "Although I guess most people don't know he's marrying me this weekend."

The attendant took her hand. "We're a little behind the times."

She giggled. "He's been around *forever*. Grew up with him."

"Did you? Who was he, the boy next door?"

At that, she laughed outright. "He's everyone's boy next door."

Lee shook his head. This still wasn't making any sense.

Amanda suddenly turned and focused her gaze on him again. "You were there back at the — it wasn't a kitchen — it was something else, wasn't it?"

"Yeah," he said quietly, hoping to keep her calm. "It was the lobby of our ski lodge."

"Ski lodge? But it's March. Awful late in the year to be skiing."

"Amanda," he began, but she shook her head. "All right. Mandy. What year is it?"

She gave him one of her fond-but-exasperated looks. "1964. When else would it be?"

He glanced at the attendant. "She would have been thirteen in March 1964. Fourteen that following October."

“Thirteen is old enough!” she declared hotly. “Look at Myra Gale Brown! And besides, everyone says I look like I’m sixteen. Which is exactly how old *that woman* was when she got Ricky’s eye. But she’s older than that now so this time I can get him!”

“All right, Mandy,” said the attendant. “I’m going to go get the doctor now. Can you wait for us for just a few minutes?”

“Doctor? I’m not sick. Oh, wait. Are we here for our blood tests?” She hummed again. “You have to have blood tests to get married.”

“Sure,” the attendant answered. But as she stepped out, she jerked her head slightly. Lee stood and followed.

“Head injuries don’t make things up out of thin air,” the attendant said softly. “They pull from what’s already there. Do you have any idea what she’s talking about?”

Lee shook his head. “We met in 1983. She was already a divorcée by then. As far as I knew, there was never anyone significant before her ex, although she was a cheerleader in high school. She was popular enough to have dates most weekends.”

“All right,” she said. “You can go on back in. For the moment, don’t try to talk her out of her amnesia. I want the doctor to take a look first.”

Swallowing, he nodded and went back behind the curtain, praying this wasn’t going to be a repeat of her amnesia episode from the year they’d met.

“Hi!” she said brightly, and then she held up the chain that was around her neck. “Did you give me this?”

“Not the necklace. But I did give you the ring.”

“It’s beautiful. But you’re not Ricky. Why would I wear your ring?”

Lee’s senses sharpened. So she knew it was an engagement ring!

“I don’t even know you.” She frowned. “Except I do, don’t I? I — something’s not right. I’m not understanding everything.”

“It’s all right, Mandy,” he told her. “Just let it come back at its own pace.”

“Oh, why can’t I keep it all straight? It’s why I always write things down in my journal. Except that’s secret. That’s just for me. And Ricky. Because it’s how I figured out it was me he really wanted. Where is my journal?” She began looking around. “I know I put it in my bag before I left for the train station.”

“Train station?” echoed Lee. “You had gone to a train station?”

“Yeah. Is that the lobby we were in?”

“No, honey.” The endearment slipped out before he could stop it. “That was somewhere else.”

Amanda gave him a skeptical look.

“Did you miss the train?” he asked.

“How could I do that when I’m not there yet, silly? And I’m gonna be early. Mother always says it’s better to be early when things are really important. Or, well, I was going to be early.” She looked at her arm. “Where’s my watch? What time is it?”

“We’ll ask the doctor when he gets here. How far had you gotten?”

She screwed up her face in concentration. “I remember parking my bike there, and putting the lock on it, ’cause I wasn’t even sure if I should since Ricky’s going to bring us back in an airplane and a car. Who wants a tired old bike when you can have a flashy new car? But then I...then I...” she trailed off. “There’s a man in a red hat.”

“A red hat.” It was all Lee could do to keep his voice even. “Really? What kind of red hat?”

“You know.” She made a gesture he couldn’t decipher. “Like all those hats you see in the old movies. Red velvet. A cone except it’s flat on top with no rim, and they’ve got writing on them, and...” she frowned. “I’ve seen them before. There’s a name for that kind of hat.”

His breath caught. “A fez?”

“Yeah. That’s right! A fez! Which wasn’t what I was expecting to see at all, and there were so *many* of them once I got on board...” she trailed off. “Wait a minute. I wasn’t ever out on the platform, so how’d I end up on the train?”

“It’s a long story. There was...” the attendant had told him not to engage, but this seemed like too good an opportunity. “There was a man on the platform. Not Ricky. Do you remember talking to him?”

She thought for a minute, and then went stark white. “Daddy. Oh, no. No, no, no! He wasn’t s’posed to be on his way home from work yet! Get me out of here! I gotta hide!” Her breathing had become ragged, panicked, and she swung her legs as though she were about to get out of the bed.

Lee took a chance and caught her hands. “No, Mandy. You’re safe where you are.”

“Daddy won’t see?”

“No. You’re safe here with me.” He kept his voice gentle. “He can’t see you now.”

“Good. ‘Cause he was so upset when he did —” she broke off. “I thought you said he didn’t see me!”

“I’m sorry. Maybe he did. But you’re still safe with me.”

She stared at him, still breathing fast, but then took a deep breath and let it out. “I am safe, aren’t I? You’re safe. Even if I don’t know who you are. I know that. How do I know you’re so safe? Is it ‘cause of all the red hats?”

“It might be. What would be so awful if your father did see you?”

Her face crumpled. “He’d be so disappointed. He’d tell me, ‘Panda, you’re supposed to be sensible, not foolish over some boy who can sing on television.’”

Boy who can sing on television?

“Mandy,” asked Lee softly, “what’s Ricky’s last name?”

“Nelson. As if you didn’t already know that. Everyone knows about Ricky Nelson.” This time, Lee was able to recognize the song she was humming. “He smiles at the camera like he knows you’re there. And he does know about me. Can’t you hear it in the words to the song?” She started to sing: “It would take one thing more to make me happy, that would be your love, little girl.’ His little girl’s love. That’s me. I’m his little girl. Or I will be, once I get there.”

“Where’s ‘there?’”

“California. I’m gonna take the train all the way across the country!” Then she stopped. “Except...I didn’t, did I? I ended up here instead.”

“Yeah.”

“I almost made it,” she told him, and now she looked sad. “I came really close to getting onto the right train.”

“What stopped you?” Lee asked gently.

She blinked, and a tear fell. “Daddy. He saw me. He just — I thought he was gonna yell or something, or that I was about to get into some big-time trouble. But he just —” her lips began to tremble. “He looked like he’d lost his best friend or something. Like I wasn’t his good, sensible girl anymore.” Her eyes went distant. “We won’t tell your mother. This time. But Panda, you need to think things through, and maybe you need to get into some school activities or something. Like the theater, or sports, or — or cheerleading.” She paused and looked up. “I’m a cheerleader. Or I will be. Right?”

“Yes,” he told her, his heart melting. “The best. And did you do as he told you after that?”

“Uh-huh. Always. Don’t be foolish. Be sensible. It’s all right to have your head in the clouds but you always gotta have your feet on the ground.”

A soft swish of fabric announced the doctor’s arrival. “Amanda King?”

“No,” said Lee quietly. “This is Mandy West. And she’s going to be all right.”

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“Ugh.” Amanda leaned her head back against the pillow, holding an ice pack against it. “Are you sure I can’t have any more of that pain medicine yet?”

Lee checked his watch. “Another hour.”

“It figures, doesn’t it? Just like everything else. We come all the way out here to Pine Top with you and then I bump my head skiing. You’d think just for once we could have a nice, normal trip.”

He laughed gently as he sat down next to her, brushing hair out of her eyes. “We’ve never been normal people. Why start now?”

She began to shake her head, but stopped quickly. “Oh. Bad idea.”

“Yeah. But the doctor says we can go on home tomorrow if you’re still feeling all right in the morning.” He paused. “Nobody’s ever going to know about this one unless we tell them.”

“I sure won’t. It’s embarrassing enough as it is.” Amanda closed her eyes. “I hate that you’re having to see me like this.”

“In sickness and in health, remember?”

She gave him an uncertain smile. “Is that why you won’t tell me what I said at the hospital? The doctor said I was awake all the way up until he gave me the sedative. But I don’t remember anything from the time we got on the lift until I woke up this morning, and you were talking about discharge plans.”

“It’s all right,” he told her. “Really. You were fine.”

Amanda narrowed her eyes at him, but didn’t argue back. Instead, she sighed, long and loud. “I guess there won’t be much celebrating tonight.”

Lee chuckled. “I’ve got some hot cocoa warming now. It’ll be ready in a few minutes. We can share that and cuddle. And maybe talk, if you’re feeling up to it.”

“Talk? What about?”

He reached over to tuck her covers closer.

“I was wondering,” he began, “if you could tell me a story.”

“A story? What about?”

“Tell me...” he paused. “Tell me what you were like when you were thirteen.”

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