

For Love of Amanda by Timothy Zahn

"Music hath charms..." and, like any powerful tool, it must be handled with care.

The bar was a small local job, a bit shabby but clean enough, tucked away in an out-of-the-way corner of an equally worn working-class neighborhood.

I looked around as I sipped the beer I'd ordered. The clientele was pretty much the same mix I'd seen here every other evening for the past week: burly working-class men from the steel mills gathering for a little hearty Saturday-night conversation, a few lower-level professionals and their wives or girlfriends, plus a scattering of hopeful or hopeless singles, most of them looking a little on the burned-out side. There was also a sprinkling of travelers from the small and undistinguished hotels around the corner on the highway, most of them probably salesmen who spent far too much of their time in places like this.

But then, so had I, at least lately. And I was hardly in the sales business.

I took another sip, wincing at the taste. The place smelled heavily of this particularly bad brand of beer, heavily overlaid with the scent of the harder drinks being downed by those who hadn't come here to socialize. The air was thick with cigarette smoke, the clink of glasses, and a general conversational buzz punctuated at irregular intervals by a call for service or a bark of laughter.

It was just so typically mid-twentieth-century-America that sometimes I felt I had to be on a vid set; that at some unexpected moment a Mohawk-haired director would step into view from among the potted ferns lining the wall by the door and yell, "Cut."

But that wasn't going to happen. This was the real 1953, and the real Pittsburgh. And I was really here.

I sipped my beer again and glanced at the clock above the bar. One minute till nine. The piano across from the far end of the bar was still unoccupied; but if there was one thing I'd learned in the past six weeks, it was that the pianist was one of those time-obsessive people you could set your watch by. I took another sip --

And there he was, stepping out of the door behind the bar and making his unobtrusive way through the tables toward the piano. He was thin to the point of scrawniness, twenty-three years old though he looked younger, with the vacant-edged expression of a man who's collected enough kicks to the head that he's basically given up on life.

The great jazz pianist Weldon Sommers. Or rather, the soon-to-be-great jazz pianist Weldon Sommers.

He sat down at the piano, and for a moment his fingers caressed the keys in silence as if he was waiting for the muse to join him on the bench. Then, very softly, he began to play.

It was nothing special at first, just the typical background filler that a thousand other third-rate barroom pianists were pounding out this evening all across the United States. His eyes lifted from the keys as he gradually brought up the volume on the half-melodies and began looking around the room. Here and there his gaze paused momentarily on this table or that, as if sifting through the essence of the person or persons seated there, before moving on.

And then, after a few false starts, I saw his eyes come to rest

on a hard-faced brunette seated alone at the bar, her lacquered nails rubbing with silent hopelessness at the smooth curve of her glass. As Weldon stared at her, I heard the meaningless filler he was playing start to change as the tone began to mirror the mix of emotions in her face. The melodies became longer and more elaborate, the harmonies sweeping the minor end of the musical spectrum. It was as if he was capturing the essence of the woman in his music, creating her pain and despair and feeding it back again to her.

And the change wasn't only in the music. As I watched Weldon, I could see a hint of shared pain and pity in his face as he created the music of her soul.

I looked back at the woman. She was responding to the music, slumping ever farther onto her bar stool, staring into her drink as if wishing it was a deep pool she could throw herself into. Her fingers dabbed at her eyes, her back twitching with silent sobs. She had connected with the music; and as the music had darkened and deepened, the hopelessness she'd brought in with her had turned to black thoughts of death.

And then, with a subtlety that I doubted a single person in the bar even noticed, the music again began to change.

It began with whispers of hope, bits of brighter melodies unexpectedly appearing among the minor keys like small patches of blue sky peeking out between storm clouds. Slowly, the cheerful melodies began to grow in length and complexity and energy, the blue sky steadily pushing back the clouds.

And again, the brunette was responding. The thoughts of death on her face began to soften, the hopelessly tight grip on her glass began to loosen, and her slumped posture began to straighten. When the music had mirrored her mood she had connected with it, grabbing on like a fish with a piece of bait. And now, with her psyche firmly hooked, Weldon and his music were pulling her upwards toward the light.

The blue sky dominated the music now, the darkness shrinking into mere echoes of distant pain and sorrow. The brunette was looking around the room, actually focusing some attention on the rest of humanity instead of solely on herself. There was no real animation in her face yet, but her eyes seemed brighter and more cheerful. Though maybe that was just the aftereffect of the tears in her eyes.

And then, with a suddenness that caught me by surprise even though I'd been expecting it, from out of the mix of clouds and blue sky came a blaze of musical sunlight.

The effect was striking. The brunette straightened up, her chin lifting as she took a deep breath. This time as she looked around the room, her face was relaxed and at peace, a small smile playing around the corners of her lips. The music came to a crescendo, then faded away into a quiet calmness. The woman took another deep breath, then picked up her drink as if to down the remains in a single, radiantly defiant swallow.

She paused, looked into the glass, and set it down untouched. Pulling a couple of well-worn bills out of her purse, she laid them on the counter beside the glass. Then, with her head held high, she walked straight across the room to the door.

And as she lifted her hand to open it, I saw for the first time the glint of the wedding ring on her left hand.

I looked over at Weldon. His eyes were still on the door through which she had disappeared, and as I peered through the smoke it seemed to me that his face was more alive than it had been when he'd first entered the room.

Small wonder. In a few short minutes, with nothing but his music and his genius, he had lifted another human being from despair to hope to confidence.

And as far as I could tell, not a single person in the bar besides me had even a glimmer of what had happened. Probably the woman herself had no idea how her miraculous transformation had been engineered.

For a minute Weldon seemed to savor his victory. Then the satisfaction faded, the protective mask slipped back into place across his features, and his gaze resumed its probing wanderings around the room. All in a night's work, apparently. His eyes touched my face....

And paused.

I held that gaze, trying to look casual and unconcerned and as oblivious as everyone else in the bar, waiting for his eyes to move along. But they didn't. The barroom filler he had resumed playing turned into a questioning lilt, and his eyebrows lifted toward me in invitation.

I hesitated, all the dire official warnings fast-forwarding through my brain. Even professional time observers shied away from personal contact with the locals, and I was anything but a professional. Add that to Weldon's already demonstrated ability to read the human psyche, and staying where I was definitely seemed like the smart thing to do.

But then, I'd never been very good at doing the smart thing. Besides, I was already playing one major off-edge hunch here. What could it hurt to add another one to the hopper?

And so I picked up my glass and strolled over to an empty table near the back corner of the piano.

"My name's Weldon," he said as I sat down. "What's yours?"

"Call me Sigmund," I said. "I like your piano playing."

"Thank you," he said, his fingers adding a little trill into his current tune that somehow sounded like a musical version of his thanks. "Is that Sigmund as in Sigmund Freud? Or Sigmund as in the tragic hero of the Volsung Saga?"

"Neither," I said, grimacing. The concept of the tragic hero was not one I liked to dwell on. "It means 'victorious protector.' I see you're an educated man."

He shrugged. "I've got a lot of time to read. You seemed to like that last piece."

"Indeed I did," I agreed. "I wasn't the only one, either."

Beneath his thin shirt, I could see his shoulders tense up. "What do you mean?" he asked cautiously.

So he was one of those who didn't like taking credit for his successes. Not that I would have pegged him as anything else. "You play all your own material?" I asked instead.

For a second he looked like he was going to insist that I answer his question. But then he apparently thought better of it. "Mostly," he said, his fingers sliding into a melody that sounded distant and aloof. I wondered if he was echoing someone else in the bar or merely indicating an emotional retreat of his own. "Sometimes I get requests."

"I doubt it," I said, looking around the room. "Tell me: have you ever written down your music and submitted it to a publisher?"

That one earned me an even sharper look. "Why?" he countered suspiciously. "You a scout for someone?"

I shook my head, the dire warnings screaming a little louder for attention. No pushing, no suggesting, no altering, were the strict time-observer rules, and I was currently in peril of shredding all

three of them. "I just wondered."

"Sure," he said, his music taking on a tinge of anger. Clearly, he didn't believe me. "You think I haven't noticed you hanging around?"

Uh-oh. "You must have a good memory for faces," I said, deciding to go with the innocent approach. "I've only been around here the past week or so."

"_And_ you were at Jack's Tap the week I was playing there," he retorted. "_And_ at Otto's the week and a half I was over there. Let me guess: you're scouting greater Pittsburgh for the perfect beer."

I winced. So he _had_ spotted me, at least for part of the month and a half I'd been dogging his heels across Allegheny County. So much for my professional expertise. "Okay, you got me," I conceded, dropping quickly to backup position. "But there's nothing sinister about it. I just happen to like your music, that's all."

"Enough to follow me around?"

"Enough even to put up with this," I said, lifting my glass slightly.

"And what, you haven't got a home to go to?"

I shrugged. "Like you, I've got a lot of time on my hands."

He played for another minute without speaking. I listened to the music, searching it for clues as to what he was thinking or feeling. But all I could hear was more of the neutral barroom filler. "There's no point in trying to sell any of this stuff," he said at last. "So if you were going to ask, don't."

"I wasn't going to," I assured him, choosing my words carefully. "Though I don't see why you're so adamant about it. Music is all about connecting with people's hearts and minds, after all. Yours seems to do that in spades."

"Yes, well, that's the problem, isn't it?" he said bitterly.

"It's a little _too_ personal."

"What's wrong with being personal?" I asked. "How many other composers can say their music fits even a single person like a handmade silk glove?"

He threw me a frown. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Silently, I cursed myself. "Nothing," I said. "Just something a friend once said about your music." She wasn't exactly a friend, of course, but he didn't need to know that. "She's a fan of yours, too."

"Then she doesn't know a thing about music," he declared bluntly, the notes flowing out of his fingers taking on a harsh, discordant flavor. Here and there, I noticed, heads were starting to turn in our direction. "I can only write for one person at a time. Period."

"Okay, fine," I said hastily. "I didn't mean to step on your toes. Sorry."

He glowered at the piano, but I could hear the harshness starting to smooth out. "I tried to sell a few pieces once," he said, the music taking on a wistful tone. "I thought maybe I could help people. Like..."

"Like you helped that brunette?"

He snorted. "Yeah. Only no one wanted it. They all said it was ... none of them wanted it."

I nodded, taking a sip of my beer. That wasn't strictly true, I knew. One of the five publishers he'd sent music to in the past three years had expressed some definite interest.

But then Weldon had suddenly withdrawn it from consideration. None of the biographies I'd read had given any explanation as to why he'd done that. "Maybe they were just feeling too good that day," I

suggested. "Your specialty seems to be encouraging people who are down in the dumps."

The music drifted from wistful into a darker melancholy. "You think I helped her," he said, his voice almost too soft to hear. "You think she went back to her husband all ready to work out their problems and start over again."

He shook his head. "No. She's all fired up now, but it won't last. Chances are she'll be right back here Monday night."

"You're not responsible for solving all the problems of the world," I reminded him quietly. "Besides, who's to say when a temporary fix will grow into something more permanent? You never know about these things."

"Sure," he said, in a tone that said he didn't believe it for a minute. "I know."

I looked down into my glass, tipping it and watching the remnants of the foam slide up and down the sides. So that was it, or at least part of it. Somewhere along the line, one of his musical helping hands had gone awry. Had made matters worse, probably, though I could only guess how that might have happened.

And for whatever reason, he'd taken that failure personally. It hadn't stopped him from playing individual songs for individual people, but it had scared him away from any attempt to market his work to the masses. Probably also why he kept moving from area to area, bar to bar. If and when the brunette came back with even deeper troubles, he didn't want to be there to see it. Or maybe he just didn't want to be there to offer her more false hope.

Weldon Sommers, in other words, was well on his way to turning himself into a modern version of one of the classical Greek tragic figures he undoubtedly read all about in those lonely off-hours of his.

But at the moment, that didn't matter. All that mattered was the timing of the two events. And I could only hope that this mysterious failure had happened just before he'd withdrawn his music from that fifth publisher. Reading his history, Weldon had struck me as the impulsive type who generally let stimulus flow into response with very little delay.

Which was the needle point on which this whole gamble was balanced. Sometime in the next four weeks, he would suddenly change his mind again and send out the composition that would end up changing his life forever. If the woman who would inspire that song had already walked into and out of his life, I was drinking bad beer for nothing.

Lifting my glass, I took another sip. Across the room, the door opened --

And there she was.

I caught my breath, nearly choking on that last swallow of beer. She was a far cry from the holos I'd studied before I'd left: her blond hair falling flat and listless across her shoulders, her once radiant face turned weary and hopeless, her young, athletic body slumped with fatigue inside the confines of a plain and ill-fitting blue dress and brown jacket. She'd been through the mulcher and then some.

But it was her, all right. Amanda Lowell, daughter of Sir Charles Anthony Lowell, ninety-seventh richest man in the world. The woman who I'd gambled would be the inspirational spark that would send Weldon Sommers's career into the musical stratosphere.

The woman I'd come two hundred years into the past to find.

A pair of hard-eyed men crowded in right behind her, catching the door before it could swing completely shut. Once, I suspected, the genteel Miss Lowell would have flinched to have men like that even in

the same room with her. Now, she didn't even seem to notice as they pushed past her in their rush to get to an unoccupied table between the door and the far corner of the bar. One of them said something as they passed; shaking her head, she started across the room.

I watched her as she made her way between the tables toward the bar. Her blank eyes stayed fixed straight ahead, not even acknowledging the presence of the people she was brushing past. I saw a couple of men glance at her, then glance just as casually away again. The brunette hadn't been the only hopeless-looking single woman in tonight, and there was nothing else in Amanda's appearance that anyone here would notice, let alone care about.

No one except Weldon Sommers.

I hoped.

Slowly, I lowered my glass to the table, afraid to move quickly lest I distract his attention. Had he seen her? Surely he had. Had he noticed her face, then, her dully terrified state of mind? Again, how could he have missed it?

But the music hadn't changed from the emotionally vacant barroom drivel. Amanda found an empty stool and slumped down onto it; and still the music didn't change. The bartender stepped up to her, nodded at her inaudible request, and turned to the bottles stacked behind him. Over by the door, one of the hard-eyed men grabbed a passing waitress's arm and jabbed a finger imperiously toward the bar.

And still the music didn't change.

I squeezed my glass hard, afraid to even look at Weldon, a horrible thought crawling like a spiny lizard through my gut. Had my mild attempts at encouragement actually had the opposite effect? Could the revived memory of whatever that dark incident was in his past have temporarily shied him away from his private crusade to lift the downtrodden and comfort the brokenhearted?

Because if I had, I had very possibly just altered history. _No pushing, no suggesting, no altering._...

And then, as the sweat began to collect on my forehead, the music finally changed.

It began slowly, just as it had earlier with the brunette. The major chords he'd been playing softened, flattened, and folded into their minor counterparts. The music modulated once, then twice, as Weldon searched for just the right key to fit the forlorn woman at the bar. The phrasing began to stretch out, the harmonies deepening and stretching and reaching.

And slowly, subtly, it transformed itself into the soft melody I'd been praying to hear ever since I arrived in this time period. A piece simply called, "For Love of Amanda."

I took a deep breath. This was it: the turning point in Weldon's life.

And, if I did my job right, it would be Amanda's redemption as well.

Across the room, the bartender handed Amanda her drink. Lost in her own misery, distracted perhaps by the buzz of conversation around her, she hadn't yet noticed the melody drifting through the smoke toward her.

But she would soon; and when she did, I decided, it might be better if I wasn't here. Leaving my glass where it was, I slid my legs out from under the table and headed toward the restrooms.

I went inside and let myself into one of the stalls, wishing I had a better idea of how long I should stay in here. All the biographies said was that "For Love of Amanda" had been inspired by a

woman who'd come into the bar where Weldon was playing. I didn't know if she was going to go over and talk to him, or for how long; whether she would tell him her name or whether the song's title was just a wild coincidence.

All I knew was that the final, published song was six and a half minutes long. For no particular reason, I decided to give them seven. Pacing as best I could in the confined space, I counted out the minutes, sweating the whole time. The waiting, as always, was the worst part.

I'd wondered earlier if Amanda would go over to talk to him. In fact, she'd done me one better: I emerged from the restroom to find her seated at the table I'd just left. From my angle I couldn't tell whether they were talking or whether she'd just moved closer so she could hear the music better, but I was guessing the former.

Perfect.

And meanwhile, the familiar song continued its inexorable path through the oblivious room. Like a handmade silk glove, Amanda's own phrase echoed through my mind.

I paused just outside the restroom door, pretending to adjust my belt, looking surreptitiously around the room. The two hard-eyed men who'd come in behind Amanda were still seated where I'd last seen them, now with half-full beer bottles in their hands. They were definitely eyeing Amanda as they muttered together, but neither looked interested in making any kind of move on her.

But then, they hardly needed to leave the comfort of their table for that. There was no way for her to leave without walking directly past them.

While at this end of the room we had Weldon, apparently smitten enough with this woman he'd just met to compose a song for her on the spot. A song, moreover, that would be deathless enough to endure for the next two hundred years.

If he was smitten enough to take exception to her leaving with a pair of rowdies, there could be serious trouble.

I finished adjusting my belt and started wandering back toward Weldon and Amanda. Number one on my Things-To-Do list was to make sure Amanda would be ready to move when I was. Number two would be to neutralize the men waiting for her at the door. I doubted they had any idea of Weldon's future place in history, or would care even if they did, and I had to make absolutely sure all of this whispered past without affecting him.

My first clear look at Amanda's face as I approached the table was all I needed to see that Weldon's music had again worked its magic. The tension and hopelessness she'd been carrying when she arrived had been smoothed away, leaving behind something far more like the calm and lovely young woman of those holos. Weldon was still playing her song, working his way through variations and embellishments that I knew he wouldn't include in the final published version. The music's mood was one of hope now, and triumph, and peace, and joy.

And in Weldon's own face, I could see another transformation taking place. Slowly, almost reluctantly, his quiet bitterness and rejection of life were beginning to fade away. Each time he looked at Amanda his eyes seemed to brighten, as if her newly rekindled hope was itself a breath of air on the nearly cold embers of his own life.

It was like a scene from a nineteenth-century romantic novel. It was certainly history in the making. And it was all so beautiful, I almost hated to interrupt.

Almost.

Amanda's head jerked around as I sat down at the table beside her, her eyes startled out of the music's spell and back to reality. "'Sokay, lady," I assured her, letting my words slur together. "'Smy table, but you can sit here. Pretty music, isn't it?"

"Yes," she murmured, looking me up and down uncertainly.

I looked at Weldon. His eyes were on me now, too, the beginnings of a troubled crease forming between his eyebrows. He knew I hadn't been nearly this drunk, and had to be wondering what was going on. The sooner I got this over with, the better.

"Yeah, pretty music," I repeated, adding enthusiasm to my voice as I retrieved my glass and gestured toward Weldon with it. The enthusiasm in my voice leaked out into equal enthusiasm in my arm --

And the last remaining inch of beer splattered across the back of Amanda's coat.

"Gosh dang crikey," I exclaimed as she jerked reflexively. "Sorry, sorry, sorry. Here -- let me get that."

I scooped up the slightly damp napkin that had been under the glass and began daubing at her coat with it. "No -- please -- it's all right," she assured me, trying to move away. "Please."

But I had a solid grip on the back of her coat collar, and I outweighed her by fifty pounds, so she wasn't going anywhere. "Sorry," I said again, ignoring her protests as I brushed industriously at her coat with the napkin. The music was still variations on Amanda's song, but I could hear it taking on a newly ominous tone. Weldon, with his sensitivity to mood and atmosphere, was starting to get genuinely upset. I pulled a bit on the back of Amanda's collar, and caught the glint of silver I'd been expecting to find. I pulled the collar back a little more, waving the napkin for emphasis and distraction --

And as I did so, the first two fingers of my left hand dipped inside her collar and deftly removed the tiny silver disk that had been placed on the back of her neck.

She jerked as it came off, but I was ready and held her down solidly enough that all that showed was a tiny twitch. I made a few more brushing motions with the napkin for show as I threw a surreptitious look at the two men by the door. Engrossed in their bottles, they hadn't noticed a thing.

As for Weldon, he could now be as upset as he wanted, because we were ready to go. Crumpling the napkin, I dropped it on the table and got my feet under me.

And everything went straight to hell.

A sudden and all-too-familiar tingle slapped into my back, right between the shoulder blades, flowing rapidly outward across my torso and down my limbs. In its wake, it left muscles cramped like pine knots, turning my entire body into a living statue.

The two men at the door hadn't lifted a finger. They hadn't had to. There'd been a third man, seated somewhere in the smoke and shadows behind me.

And I'd never even noticed him.

Amanda gave a half-strangled gasp as a big hand closed on her upper arm. "You think we're stupid?" a gruff voice grunted sarcastically in my ear. "I can pluck you crumb-brains out a mile away."

I wanted to say something equally sarcastic back at him, but my jaw was just as locked up as the rest of my body. The gurgle I actually managed to get out didn't seem to impress him. Hauling Amanda to her feet, he glanced once in Weldon's direction, then pried the silver disk from between my frozen fingers. He held it up mockingly for my

inspection, then gave me an affectionate-looking slap on the cheek that sent a fresh wave of agony through the muscles. With a final smirk, he and Amanda headed for the door.

"Sigmund?" Weldon whispered, his music taking on a tense, agitated tone. "What's going on? Who was that?"

I struggled with my uncooperative lips, unable to turn my head to look directly at him. The facial muscles were starting to come back, but I wasn't quite able to make anything coherent come out yet.

"Come on, who was that?" he persisted. "Should we go after them?"

I fought with my mouth again, and this time I made it. "No," I managed. "Too ... dangerous."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him look over at Amanda and her escort threading their way through the tables. "The police, then? Should I tell Al to call the police?"

"No," I said again, managing this time to put some insistence in my tone. It was all over, I knew, and Amanda was probably dead. But bringing the local cops into it at this point would almost certainly bring about the same result _and_ massively change history, too.

His head turned back toward me. "What did he do to you?"

"Drugged," I said. It was close enough to the truth, and more believable to someone in 1953. "No antidote," I added, to forestall the inevitable question. "Just have to work it out of my system."

They were nearly across the room now. The other two men were on their feet, one of them carefully counting money onto the table. Another minute and they would be out the door and gone.

And I would probably never see them again.

I closed my eyes, unwilling to watch them leave, aching in a way that had nothing to do with my paralyzed muscles. This had been my only chance. Perhaps Amanda's only chance. I'd read the whole thing right, played it right; and then, through a single moment's stupid carelessness, had lost anyway.

And then, through all the frustration and reproach and self-pity, I began to be aware of something else. The music. Once again, the music had changed.

It was still Amanda's song, at least as far as the basic melody went. But the rest of it had become something radically different. The glowing hope had been transformed into something ugly, something hard and cold and bitter and accusing. Weldon knew something terrible had just happened, even if he couldn't possibly understand exactly what it was.

And he was throwing the blame straight between my eyes.

I felt a stirring of anger inside me. I'd done my best, damn it, considering the tightrope I had to walk here. Didn't he see that? Or did he simply not care?

He didn't care. That was it. He was just a musician, a barroom pianist who couldn't even hold onto the same job for more than a week at a time. How dare he judge me? How _dare_ he?

I clenched my teeth as the music buffeted me, feeling my heart pounding its own indictment of my incompetence. I knew Weldon was looking at me, and I knew what his expression must be. I wished violently that I could turn my head around so that I could look him squarely in the eye; wished bitterly that I could free my tongue so that I could snarl his pious self-righteousness back at him. My hand twitched, aching to reach over and slap the contempt right off his face

--

I caught my breath. _My hand had twitched?_

I tried again. This time, to my astonishment, the whole arm moved a little.

And not just my arms. My legs were twitching now, the agony of massive cramps changing to the subtler pain of the cramps working themselves out.

I turned my head -- I could do it now -- and looked at Weldon.

He was looking back at me, all right, but not with the contempt I'd imagined would be there. His face was fixed and intent, his eyes blazing with some of the same anger and resolution that was pile-driving its way through my rapidly relaxing muscles.

He didn't speak, maybe afraid of breaking the spell. Neither did I, for the same reason. Just as he'd done with Amanda, he'd found a way to connect his music with my soul and my need, whipping up anger and adrenaline and sheer willpower, forcing my body to burn off the effects of the paralyzer far more quickly than should ever have been possible.

They were out the door by the time I was able to get shakily to my feet. But not very far out; and more to the point, they wouldn't be expecting me. I nodded to Weldon, got an answering nod that somehow also asked if I would need help. I smiled tightly and shook my head; and as I crossed the room I could hear the music once again change mood. No longer angry, it was now glowing with a triumph that said he was trusting me to come through.

I wasn't going to let him down.

They were two doorways away, two of them holding Amanda still while the third was trying to reattach the restrainer I'd taken off her neck. Watching the street for cops, they never even knew anything was wrong until I had dropped the first of them. They had me spotted by the time I dropped the second. The third had just enough time for a curse and a hopeless lunge for his weapon before he joined his pals on the pavement.

Amanda was standing there shaking as I hurried up. "W-who -- ?" she began shakily.

"It's all right, Miss Lowell," I soothed her, crouching down and slipping a dog-collar restrainer around the neck of each of the unconscious men. Only then did I return my stunner to its holster. "It's all over. My name's Sigmund Corcoran; I'm a private investigator. Your father hired me to find you."

Her eyes searched my face as I stood up again. "I can go home?" she asked, as if still not believing it.

"Absolutely," I assured her. "Our portal is in an apartment in Columbus. Let me bundle up these characters where they'll keep for an hour or two, call it in to my coordinator, and I'll drive you there. You'll be home in five hours."

She looked down at the men. "You're not going to just leave them here, are you?"

"Absolutely not," I said grimly, grabbing one under the arms and starting to drag him to a nearby alley. "Aside from anything else, I rather like watching kidnap trials."

* * *

It took some long and fancy persuasion to get Sir Charles and the authorities to allow me to go back. Even then, they made me wait until two months after I'd brought Amanda home.

Which was fine with me. I'd been planning to wait that long anyway.

The biographies said that Weldon had quit his barroom career by this point and was writing full-time out of a downtown Pittsburgh apartment. He seemed cautiously pleased to see me. "Hello, Sigmund," he

greeted me, stepping back to let me into the room. "I was hoping you'd come back."

"It took some doing," I said. "But I managed to convince them it would be safer to give you the whole story than leave you with only half of it."

"I have a full half, do I?" he asked wryly as he waved me to a somewhat threadbare chair.

"Possibly a bit less," I conceded, studying his face as I sat down.

Two months had worked wonders on the man. The emptiness I'd seen in his eyes that last night was gone, replaced by the creative fire the biographies had so often commented on. "You're looking good," I added. "Much better than the last time I saw you."

"I could say the same about you," he reminded me. He hesitated, just noticeably. "How is Amanda?"

"She's fine," I assured him. "She sends her greetings, and her deep thanks."

"So what exactly was that all about?" he asked, sitting down on a mismatched couch across from me. "I watched the papers for days, but there wasn't a thing in there. I was about ready to march into the police station and demand some answers."

"I thought you might," I said. "That's one reason I pushed them to let me come back."

"Back from where?" he asked, some tension creeping into his face as he leaned forward. "Russia? China?"

I shook my head. "I'm from the future, Weldon. To be precise, from November 7, 2153."

He took it better than I'd expected him to. A couple of owlish blinks of the eyes, and he was back on track again. "Two hundred years exactly," he said thoughtfully. "Coincidence?"

"No, that's just how it works," I told him. "You can only do jumps in one-hundred-year multiples. No one knows why."

"I've read stories about that sort of thing," he said. "Science fiction, they call it. I never thought it could really happen. So Amanda was a time-traveler too?"

"A very unwilling one," I said. "She was a kidnap victim."

That one got me no less than three blinks. "She was _kidnapped?_" he asked. "Why?"

"The usual reason," I told him. "Her father has a lot of money. A gang of sewage-eaters wanted some of it."

He mulled at that a moment. "And they decided to hide her in the past while they waited for the ransom to be paid?"

"Basically," I said, rather impressed he'd made the connection so quickly. "It's a little trickier than that -- they wanted some complicated power transfers instead of straight cash. But never mind that. The point is that it was going to take time, and the way everything's interconnected they knew they could never hide her that long."

I waved a hand around me. "So they commandeered a pastportal and brought her here."

"Sounds like a pretty good plan."

"It was a terrific plan," I admitted. "Not only did we not have our usual resources to draw on in 1953, but we also had to make sure we didn't change history while we were looking for her. This was the first time this has ever been tried. I hope the cops can figure out a way to make sure it won't happen again."

He frowned slightly. "You're not a policeman?"

"Private investigator," I told him. "Amanda's father hired about eight hundred of us to assist the police in the search. I just happened to be the lucky one."

"Bull droppings," he said flatly. "Luck had nothing to do with it. You knew something."

"I didn't know, exactly, but I had a strong hunch," I said. "You see, during our interviews, one of Amanda's friends mentioned that she had discovered your music when she was a teenager, and that she had specifically felt drawn to your first published work."

His eyes widened. "You mean 'For Love of Amanda'? It's going to sell?"

I tensed. Uh-oh. "Haven't you sent it in yet?" I asked cautiously.

"Last month," he said. "But I haven't heard anything."

I breathed a quiet sigh of relief. Good; he'd already sent it in. No risk of me pushing or suggesting, then. "You will," I assured him. "Anyway, everyone else just assumed that she liked the song so much because her own name happened to be Amanda. Coincidence, and all that."

"But you didn't buy that."

"I wasn't sure," I said. "But I got to thinking there might be more to it than that, especially after I sat in on a couple of your sessions and saw how intensely personal and individual your barroom music could be."

"Like a handmade silk glove," he murmured.

"Amanda's own words," I agreed. "Which made me wonder if maybe that song really had been written especially for her. If so, it stood to reason that you and she would eventually run into each other. I figured all I had to do was hang around in your shadow and wait for her to show up."

I shrugged. "Turns out I was right."

He shook his head wonderingly. "I knew I'd helped with something important," he said. "Somehow, I just knew it. But I never guessed it was something this big."

"You saved her life," I said. "It doesn't get much bigger than that."

"I guess not," he said thoughtfully. "So what was that shiny thing you took out of her coat?"

"A restrainer," I told him. "A smaller version of a standard police gadget. If you try to run while wearing one, the controller can simply push a button and drop you where you stand."

"Is that what they used on you?"

"No, that was a paralyzer," I said. "It's supposed to immobilize someone for twenty minutes, minimum. Hurts like blazes, too."

He made a face. "I don't think I'd like living in your time," he commented.

I shrugged. "I know people who would agree with you."

He took a deep breath, let it go. "So that's it?"

"That's it," I confirmed, standing up. "I just wanted to come and tell you Amanda was okay. And to ask you not to tell anyone about this, of course."

"Of course," he said, standing up too. "I don't suppose you can...?"

I shook my head. "Sorry. Time travel has already got the philosophers and legislators tied in knots as to how known history and free-will can work together. They're not about to tempt fate by letting people like me give out hints. The only reason this particular event

didn't land us all in trouble was that neither the goons nor Amanda knew who you were."

He snorted. "I'd be lying if I said I understood all this."

"So would I," I said. "But it happened, and Amanda's safe, and I'm not in trouble. The rest is up to the philosophers."

"Sounds good to me." He hesitated again. "Can you at least tell me if I'll ever see Amanda again?"

"I don't know," I said. "I doubt it, though."

"That's kind of what I thought," he said, his face looking wistful. "In that case, could you give her something for me?"

"Depends," I said warily, wondering which of the rules I was about to put my weight on this time. "What is it?"

"This." He crossed the room and selected two old-style reels of audio tape from a small pile on top of the piano. "It's a copy of the tape I just sent in," he said. "The original version of the song."

I searched my memory. None of the biographies had said anything about a second tape of that song being in existence. "I think that should be all right," I said.

"And this," he added, handing me the second tape, "is for you."

I frowned at the title written in block letters on the label. Sigmund's Triumph. "Ah," I said, momentarily at an uncharacteristic loss for words. "I..."

"Keep it as a souvenir," he said, smiling at my confusion. "Or sell it, if you want. Maybe it'll bring you a few bucks, or whatever it is you use back there."

I put both reels into my inside coat pocket, my fingertips tingling. An original, unpublished Weldon Sommers song would bring in considerably more than a few bucks, should I ever choose to sell it.

But of course, I couldn't tell him that. "Thanks," I said instead.

His smile went serious. "And give Amanda my love," he added quietly, stepping to the door and opening it.

"Sure," I said, gazing one last time into his face. The ghosts of his past were still there, I could see, lying in wait for the next time he hit one of the low points of his life.

But never again would they be able to crush him as they once had. On a dark September night two months ago, he had achieved the final victory over them.

For love of Amanda.

I was outside the apartment building, and heading down the steps to the sidewalk, when a final odd thought occurred to me. In two years, the biographies said, Weldon would marry a woman named Jean. A woman he would always declare to be his first and greatest inspiration; a woman of whose background nothing was known; a woman of whom there were no existing photographs.

Amanda, on the other hand, now knew that the song had indeed been written especially for her. A song that carried the title, "For Love of Amanda."

And Amanda Lowell's middle name was Jean.

I thought about it the rest of the way down the steps. But none of that was really my concern, I decided. What was my concern was where I was going to dig up an old reel-to-reel tape player.

Because I had some music to listen to when I got home. Music, I fully expected, that would fit me like a handmade silk glove.

Turning my collar against the November chill, I headed down the street.

Copyright (C) 2002 by Timothy Zahn.