

Cheeseball

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Note: This was written as an addendum to my story, "Crying Uncle." However, you don't need to read that story to understand this one. All you need to know is: (1) the time frame is early 1988; (2) Lee and Amanda's marriage is common knowledge; (3) Lee, Amanda and the boys are living in Rockville; and (4) there has been a small addition to the family.

Additional note: This is just a little bit of fluff. Several friends have read it and told me it was entertaining. It wasn't officially beta'd, though, so any mistakes you find are mine alone. A special thanks goes to Adrea, who gave me the idea!!

Feedback: Yes, please. All comments are sincerely appreciated.

Lee Stetson turned his wrist with practiced ease and smiled as the tumblers fell into place with a faint click. Rotating the brass knob, he pushed the door open and stepped inside, then paused for a moment while his eyes adjusted from the bright winter sunshine to the dimness of the tiled entryway. Carefully closing the door, he glanced down just in time to realize that his damp shoes would leave clearly visible tracks, and he slipped them off and nudged them with one toe to the edge of the woven entry rug. As he took stock of his surroundings, he was momentarily disconcerted by the uncharacteristic silence - it was a rare day when he came home to a quiet and deserted house.

Padding down the hallway in his argyle socks, he reached the kitchen and flicked on the light switch, flooding the cheerful room with a warm glow. Amanda was right, as usual, he mused as he surveyed the bright walls and coordinated window and floor coverings; this was definitely the way to do a kitchen. The kitchens of his many bachelor apartments had been rooms of utility, on good days. This was a room of comfort and contentment.

Lee's stomach gave a low growl, and he turned toward the refrigerator. He opened the door and scanned the contents, searching for something substantial enough to make up for the lunch he had missed, but not so filling as to ruin his appetite for the Beef Wellington Amanda had promised him for dinner. Unfortunately, with two teenage boys in residence, there wasn't much more food available here than in the refrigerators of his bachelor days. His gaze finally came to rest on a cellophane wrapped cheeseball, left over from a gift basket he and Amanda had received for Christmas. "That'll do, he mumbled to himself. If it's moldy, I can cut off the bad parts."

Lee moved the cheeseball to the counter and quickly gathered a box of crackers, a plate, a knife and a glass - which he filled with cold milk. He carried his snack to the family room and settled on the sofa, arranging his culinary treasures on the coffee table. His hand hovered for a moment over the television's remote control before he shook his head and returned his attention to the cheese. "A quiet afternoon in this house is too rare to spoil," he commented to the still room.

Lee had unwrapped the cheeseball and was reaching for the crackers when a slight movement caught his attention, and he turned to see a tiny black and white kitten creep around the corner of the sofa toward his feet. "Great," he muttered, casting a disparaging look at the diminutive animal. "This morning, Jamie spent two hours trying to coax you out of that damn utility closet," he addressed the intruder with a gruff snort, "and you decide to come out now."

"Meowwww," the kitten responded, arching his back as he rubbed himself gently against Lee's stockinged feet.

"You've got the wrong guy, buddy," Lee informed the feline sternly, waving one hand in the general direction of the kitchen. "You'll have to wait for someone else to come home; I'm not a pet person."

The kitten's only reaction was a soft purr. After a final, lingering stroke against Lee's toes, he crouched down and made an uncoordinated leap onto the sofa, almost losing his balance and falling backward to the carpeted floor. Shaking himself with comical dignity, he gingerly navigated the lumpy cushions toward his unwilling host.

"You don't look much like a Wizard," Lee observed sardonically as he watched the cat's unsteady progress. "I don't think Paul would be amused."

Wizard ignored the insult as he ensconced himself comfortably at Lee's side. Then he stared longingly at the food on the coffee table for several moments before

laying one tiny paw on the large man's leg and looking soulfully into his hazel eyes.

Lee met the kitten's look with a stony glare. "Don't even think about it. This is mine," he stated firmly. "Besides," he added in a somewhat milder tone, one corner of his mouth twitching faintly, "Amanda said milk is bad for your digestion. Milk's a dairy product; cheese is a dairy product. This probably wouldn't be good for you."

The kitten, undeterred by the rebuff, rubbed the side of his face against Lee's outer thigh and purred again, louder this time.

"It's not gonna work," Lee grumbled, pointedly moving his gaze to stare straight ahead, away from the kitten's pleading eyes.. "I didn't even want you in the house; if I had my way, you'd be in the barn practicing for a career chasing mice." As he spoke, Lee cut a wedge of cheese, placed it on a cracker, and moved it upward. Pausing with the tidbit mere centimeters from his lips, he cast a brief sidelong glance at the creature at his side before popping the treat decisively into his mouth.

After he chewed and swallowed, Lee stole another quick look at the kitten. "If we were gonna get a house pet, we should've at least gotten one with a pedigree. I don't know why Amanda wanted such an ordinary looking little thing," he said dryly as he returned his attention to his food.

Wizard watched intently as Lee consumed several more cheese-covered crackers, drained his glass, and then leaned back against the sofa cushions with his arms crossed and his eyes partially closed. Finally, the kitten climbed cautiously onto Lee's lap, moved slowly to his knees, and attempted the short jump to the coffee table. Lee had barely uttered the words "good riddance," when Wizard made a wobbly landing on the edge of the plate, sending it as well as the glass, the knife and the kitten tumbling to the floor. A frightened mewl blended with the sound of breaking glass and clanging metal - causing Lee to jerk upright, alarm apparent in his features.

"Hey, are you okay?" Lee asked in concern, scooping the tiny cat up and checking it for lacerations. "You've gotta be more careful," he scolded in relief when he found no bleeding. "You're too small for a stunt like that."

Lee tucked the kitten under one arm while he picked up the broken glass and placed it, along with the remains of his snack, back on the coffee table. Then he set the kitten on his lap and awkwardly rubbed the top of its head. Wizard reclined limply across Lee's legs and whimpered, causing Lee to quirk one eyebrow questioningly. "You're hungry, huh? Well, I guess a little taste wouldn't hurt you," he relented,

reaching forward to slice a small wedge of cheese. He held the offering in front of Wizard, who immediately abandoned his injured pose and sat up to consume the treat. Lee chuckled softly as he resumed stroking the kitten's silky fur. "Just don't think I'm going to make a habit out of this," he warned.

After finishing his cheese, Wizard daintily wiped his mouth and whiskers with one forepaw, then curled up in Lee's lap with a contented purr. "I guess you are kinda cute," Lee conceded as he leaned back and closed his eyes once again, without ceasing the stroking movements. "But if anyone asks, I never said that. It's gonna have to be our little secret."

The End