

One Hundred and Three

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Timeline: Early third season.

Author's Notes: Many thanks as always to my superb betas. You ladies are the best!

Lee Stetson grumbled as he rang the nurse's station buzzer for the third time in as many minutes. "Incompetent . . ." he muttered. His characteristic hatred of hospitals was magnified when his stay in them was so completely unnecessary.

Every chance Billy had, he stuck Lee in the hospital for his annual physical. Lee could swear that he even marked his calendar every year and then gleefully watched for the perfect opportunity.

A nurse entered the room looking harried and distracted. "You rang?" she quipped, out of breath.

"Yes . . ." he began. He'd been prepared for a rant, but he quickly changed his mind at the sight of her. He even felt slightly guilty for being so impatient; she was the only nurse he liked. Her name was Renee. She was tall, thin, brunette, cheerful . . . she was perfect . . . almost.

His manner suddenly doing an about-face, Lee strained to pull himself up against his pillows. He grimaced at the resulting pain that shot through his left leg from thigh to foot. Having suffered what his doctor was calling a 'moderately severe' pull and a sprained ankle, any movement at all resulted in searing, annoying pain.

"Well?" she prodded, polite but clearly in a hurry to get on with her duties.

"I, uh, I was wondering when I get to eat. I'm starving," he complained lightly.

She gave him a sympathetic look. "I think you're scheduled for dinner at six. Can you hold out for another . . ." She consulted her watch. "Half hour?"

"It's five-thirty?" he asked incredulously, glancing around as if to find a clock to confirm the time. Why hadn't Amanda been in to see him? She'd been off work for at least an hour by now. The fact left him slightly annoyed and more than a little disappointed.

"Sure is. I'll make sure you're on the first meal rotation," she promised with a conspiratorial wink.

He smiled, still perturbed that his partner hadn't shown up. "Thanks. Listen, no one came by to see me, did they? While I was asleep?" he asked hopefully, knowing that if Amanda had come, she would've let him sleep.

Her eyes widened. "Yes! I forgot. A woman came to see you . . ."

"Yeah?" he questioned, grinning. "I knew it! Did she say anything? Is she going to come back later?"

"Um, no," Renee shook her head, moving to the windowsill. "But she did bring you these things."

Lee took the proffered items eagerly, glancing them over. "Amanda brought me Modern Man and The Wall Street Journal, huh?" he mused with a smile.

"Is Amanda your girlfriend?" Renee asked.

He shook his head, wondering why the thought brought a ridiculous grin to his face. "Partner, actually. And friend."

"Hmmm." Renee sounded speculative. "Well, your partner, she's blonde, isn't she? She's very pretty."

"Ah." He shook his head again, feeling a sharp stab of disappointment. Could something have happened to Amanda? "No. That would be Francine. My partner is a brunette."

"So *Francine's* your girlfriend," Renee guessed, tilting her head to one side.

Lee allowed a look of mock horror to cross his features. "No. No. She's a friend and co-worker."

She studied him appreciatively. "You mean to tell you don't have a girlfriend," she said in a disbelieving tone. "I refuse to believe a gorgeous guy like you is unattached, even though you are . . . older."

Not knowing whether to be insulted or amused, he finally smiled. "Well, I am unattached . . . at the moment. But thanks for the, ah, ego booster."

She smiled. "What a waste. Oh, well. I'll be back later." Waving, she left his room.

After she left, Lee flipped through the current issue of Modern Man, skimming titles: How to Wine and Dine Her, Flab Attack, Gourmet Cooking For Two. He could have written half the articles in the magazine.

Toward the back of the publication, however, a title caught his interest. Could You Fall In Love With Your Best Friend? The upper right corner displayed a photo of an attractive couple, locked in an embrace that was apparently meant to be deceptively platonic.

Taking a closer look, he realized that it was actually a quiz – one of those psychological tests that help you come to some kind of epiphany or cathartic self-revelation. Amanda was his best friend – he didn't need to take a test to find out what he already knew. He was, most definitely, not in love with Amanda King.

Where in the world was she, anyway? He frowned as he flipped through the pages, searching for an article of interest. Finding an article on wine, he started to read, only to stop after three paragraphs. Sighing, he turned back to the test, aware that he wouldn't be able to rest until he'd taken it.

With an inexplicable sense of trepidation, he began to read. The introductory paragraphs told the story of a cop who had fallen in love with his . . . partner. She'd become his best friend after they'd worked together for . . . two years. She was completely different from the women he was . . . used to dating.

Lee took a deep, steadying breath, wondering why he was doing this to himself. In too deep to turn back, he moved on to the first statement of the test.

1) I am happier spending time with my best friend than I am when I'm out with other women.

Four possible responses presented themselves: 'I agree completely', 'I agree somewhat,' 'I disagree somewhat,' and 'I disagree completely'. After some thought, Lee reluctantly marked the top one, "I agree completely."

2) I often find myself looking for reasons to spend time with her.

No, he thought. But as soon as he reacted in the negative, he crossed out his answer. Why else would he drive over to her house at every opportunity, just to have a few minutes? This was definitely weird, he decided.

3) I am jealous when she talks about going out with other men.

Frowning, Lee forced himself to be honest, and remembered how he'd felt on occasions when other men had shown an interest in Amanda. Still, that was just plain old protectiveness, wasn't it?

4) I find myself justifying my behavior toward her as protective.

Stunned, all he could do was mark the quiz in the affirmative. Frowning, he asked himself again where the hell she was. Usually, she was there waiting for him when he woke up. Now, when he needed to see her, she hadn't even bothered to call him.

5) I often initiate and enjoy physical contact, such as holding hands.

The pen fell to his lap, its ink making a thin blue line on the sheet. Running a hand through his hair, he wondered if someone had turned the heat on, suddenly. He blinked rapidly, staring at the ceiling, then looked back at the page, fully expecting to have read the last statement wrong.

Rereading the sentence, he sighed. In a rather dramatic fashion, he marked his answer in the affirmative. Closing his eyes, he could feel her hand in his at this very moment.

Oddly enough, handholding had never been something he'd done with the women he dated. But he reached for Amanda's hand on a regular basis. He realized that he loved the feeling of her hand snugly enclosed in his own.

Several similar proclamations followed, and he found that he was unable to truthfully mark anything other than A or B, the most positive responses. There were thirty statements in all, and halfway through, he could feel beads of perspiration beginning to form on his brow. It really was getting much hotter in the room. He impatiently flung the sheet and blanket off his legs.

The twenty-first statement asserted that he found himself admiring women who were, in some way, like his best friend. Thinking of Renee, he realized that she did, in many ways, resemble Amanda. He reluctantly circled A . . . 'I agree completely.'

Number twenty-five was about having frequent fantasies about his best friend. The room became warmer still as he recalled, in vivid detail, the most recent fantasy he'd had about

Amanda. He was beginning to discern dizzying contradictions in his own thoughts and behavior.

By the time he'd finished, he was completely bewildered and a little angry. What a stupid quiz. The article was deliberately phrased to trip a guy up. He was, most definitely, not in love with Amanda King.

He simply couldn't believe she hadn't even phoned to see if he was all right! If it were her in the hospital, he'd be sitting at her bedside, holding her hand until she woke up. Of course, he didn't have a family at home, either. For the first time in his life, this thought left him feeling as though he were missing something in his life.

With studied indifference, he tallied up his score according to the instructions - one hundred and three. Big deal; it didn't mean a thing, right? His eyes scanned down to the score explanations.

He read it, his eyes widening. Shaking his head, he knew that somehow, even though all of his answers had been either 'I agree completely' or 'I agree somewhat,' there was something horribly wrong about the whole thing.

As soon as he got out of here, he'd prove to himself and to that inane quiz that he had never been, wasn't now, and wasn't ever going to fall in love with his best friend. He'd jump start his dating career with a vengeance . . . maybe call that attractive Leslie O'Connor he'd met recently. She was nothing whatsoever like Amanda.

Not bothering to close the magazine, he laid it on the bed tray in front of him. Glancing at his watch, he grimaced. Six o'clock and no Amanda. And no dinner, either. Just as he was about to hit his buzzer, Renee breezed into the room, pushing a dinner cart.

"I told you I'd make sure you got your dinner," she announced, placing the tray in front of him. "What's wrong? You look all flushed."

"Nothing. It's hot in here, that's all," he replied dismissively, glancing down at the plate.

She raised one concerned eyebrow at him as she arranged his silverware and napkin within easy reach. "Maybe I should take your temp; it feels pretty cool in here to me, and I've been running around all afternoon."

"Oh, I don't have a fever," he said, waving a dismissive hand.

She ignored him and stuck a thermometer into his mouth. "It'll just take a second," she replied soothingly to his aggrieved look.

After a moment, she removed the thermometer and held it up to the light. "Well, you're right; you don't have a fever."

"See?" Picking up a fork, he speared a piece of meat. "What is this?"

"Chicken fettuccine and broccoli, and bread pudding for dessert," she told him.

"Dessert of senior citizens," he remarked sardonically, tapping the dried-out confection with the back of his spoon.

Renee laughed. "What would you like to drink?"

"How about a nice white wine?" he jested, taking a bite of noodles and chicken.

"Ha, ha. Very funny. You can have coffee, milk, apple or orange juice, or I can sneak to the vending machine for you and get you a Coke."

Lee smiled. "I'll just have some of this ice water," he answered, indicating the pitcher on his tray.

"Okay," she said with a nod. "I bet you'll be glad to go home tomorrow morning."

"You bet right," he responded fervently.

"I'll let the doctor know you're feeling warm. I still think you might be coming down with something," she said, then hurried out of the room.

"That's not -" he began, but she was already gone.

He ate enthusiastically. Though the food wasn't exactly up to the standards he was accustomed to, he was hungry.

"Hi, Lee." Amanda announced her presence quietly from the doorway.

"Amanda!" he said with a smile, feeling his heart begin to pound behind his ribs. Then, mindful of his earlier resolve, he held the smile in check.

"How's the leg?" she asked, advancing into the room. She sat in the empty chair next to his bed and crossed her legs.

"Legs, yeah," he remarked, staring at her shapely limbs. Her skirt was the perfect length, allowing him a view to just above her knees when she sat down.

"What?" She cocked her head, wrinkling her nose.

"What?" he repeated, forcing himself to focus on her face.

She frowned. "Did you get hit in the head, on top of everything else? You look a little flushed. I asked how your leg is feeling."

"Oh, the leg. Yeah. It's much better. Practically brand new," he asserted. He slapped his upper thigh for emphasis, immediately regretting the action. He suppressed the groan that sprang up into his throat.

"Well, good," she replied. Standing, she indicated his plate. "Are you through with your dinner? Can I set this on the other table?"

She glanced at the magazine, but he rapidly closed it, placing it safely on the other side of the bed. Nervously glancing back at her, he noted her look of surprise.

"Uh, sure," he said, nodding. "Thanks."

Giving him another funny look, she removed the plate and carried it to another small table in the room. He wondered if she'd gotten a good enough look at the page to see the title of the quiz.

She sat back down and sighed. "I'm sorry I wasn't here earlier," she began.

"I . . ."

"Yeah," he cut in. Feeling an attack of peevishness coming on, he went on. "I was beginning to wonder if you'd come at all."

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said again. "Mother and the boys kept me busy from the time I walked in the door until thirty minutes ago when I finally escaped."

"Oh . . . Well, that's okay," he relented, remembering the mental fit he'd been throwing at not having been able to see her earlier. That preposterous test was making him doubt himself. Now, everything he said and did would make it seem as if he was . . . No. Don't think about it, he told himself.

"Well, no, it's not," she countered. "I should have been here. After all, you did save my life. I really wanted to be here sooner."

"Amanda, I really do understand," he replied, more softly this time, touched that she'd wanted to be there sooner and feeling guilty for acting like a petulant child. He patted her hand, then gave it a reassuring squeeze, not bothering to move his. No ludicrous psycho-babble was going to make him stop holding her hand.

Renee entered the room again, a tiny cup in her hand. "Okay, time for your meds," she stated.

"Meds?" Lee questioned suspiciously. "What meds?"

"Something for the pain and to help you sleep," she told him. "The sooner you take them and get a good night's rest, the sooner you'll be able to leave in the morning."

Lee held out a hand. "In that case . . ."

The nurse smiled, then turned to Amanda. "Hi, I'm Renee."

"Hi, I'm Amanda King," Amanda said. "Has he been a terrible patient?"

Renee laughed. "Well, the other nurses warned me about him, but he's not been too bad."

Surprised, Amanda laughed, too. "Turning over a new leaf, Stetson?"

Lee shrugged. "Renee's a good nurse. That can make all the difference."

"Well, it was nice to meet you," Renee said to Amanda, then winked at Lee. Turning, she quickly exited the room.

"Nice to meet you, too," Amanda replied, looking quizzically from Renee to Lee.

Lee finished taking his medication, then lay back on his pillows and smiled at Amanda, covering her hand with his once again. "I can't wait to get out of here tomorrow."

"Would you like me to pick you up?" she volunteered.

Stifling the eager acceptance he wanted to blurt out, he brushed the offer aside. "Nah, that's okay; Billy's sending someone to pick me up."

"Well, I could let him know I'm going to do it," she persisted. "I don't mind at all," she assured him, then smiled softly. "You know I don't."

He nodded, feeling his resolve fade away. "I know you don't, but . . . "

"No 'buts' about it," she insisted, squeezing his hand. "Why shouldn't I do it? I'm your partner."

He made a show of thinking it over and then capitulated. "Okay, thanks," he replied gratefully.

They talked for a few more minutes, and then Lee felt himself becoming groggy. "Sorry," he said, stifling a yawn. "That sleeping pill is working fast."

"That's okay; you should sleep. Listen, I'll be by for you in the morning. Is eight good?" she asked.

"Perfect," he agreed, closing his eyes.

"Well, then."

"Yeah. Amanda, thanks for coming. I really appreciate it." He took a deep breath and tried to open his eyes. He felt a distinct loss as she pulled her hand slowly from his.

She patted his arm. "Well, you're welcome," she replied, smiling.

"I'll see you in the . . . morning." Fighting a losing battle, he heard his voice becoming deeper and felt himself sinking into the bed.

"Okay," she whispered.

He felt her cool fingers smooth the hair away from his eyes, and he opened them again to look at her face.

She leaned down and placed a soft kiss on his forehead, then whispered, "Sweet dreams."

His heart once again began its telltale flutter, and he replied, "Oh, you can count on it."

Could you fall in love with your best friend?

"Yeah, maybe."

"'Maybe' what, Lee?"

His eyes flew open in a panic. She was still here? His hand went automatically to the magazine at his side, reassured to feel the slick pages under his fingers. He breathed a sigh of relief.

"Oh, nothing," he murmured, closing his eyes again. "Sorry."

"Okay, well . . . see you tomorrow."

A smile tugged at one corner of his mouth. "Yeah . . . tomorrow," he whispered, then drifted off to sleep.

Results:

If you scored between 100 – 115:

You're a goner; you might as well face it. You compare every woman you meet to your best friend, and they all come up miserably short. If you don't deal with it now, you'll have to do so sooner or later. You're head over heels in love with your best friend. Admit it to yourself, then to her.

The End