

He winked at her. "Yeah. Is, uh, Mrs. King in yet? I didn't see her car out there." He spoke in a casual, off-hand manner, gesturing toward the street.

When dealing with matters of national security, Mavis Marston would take a secret to her grave. But when it came to office gossip, she could chew the fat with the best of them. It had been a long time since she'd been able to contribute anything of note to the lunchtime tittle-tattle. "Oh, Mrs. King called in sick today. Said she caught a cold," she informed him, blatant interest written across her normally placid features.

Lee frowned contemplatively. "Oh. Is that right?" Removing the badge he had just finished placing on his jacket lapel, he handed it back to her. "I just remembered an errand I meant to run this morning. No wonder I'm here so early."

He flashed a grin at her and swiftly went out the door of the Georgetown foyer. Therefore, he missed her raised eyebrows and speculative comment. "No wonder, indeed," she murmured under her breath.

"Oh, no, you don't, Amanda King," Lee muttered to himself as he opened the driver's side door of the Corvette and slid behind the wheel once more. "I'm not letting you off the hook that easily."

He drove straight to her house in Arlington, a route that came as naturally to him as the one to his own apartment. The nearer he got, the more nervous he became. He felt his resolve begin to weaken as he again considered the tacit implications behind her seemingly innocuous words.

What was he going to say to her, exactly? He realized that he really hadn't given it much thought. All he knew was that it -- something -- was hanging between them and would continue to do so until one of them acknowledged that . . . that . . .

That what? That they were heading into new territory, he realized. Amanda had apparently seen it coming; why hadn't he? She wouldn't have been so audacious in her reply if she were in doubt. No, she must have realized what he hadn't.

He'd wanted very much to kiss her that night in the swamp. He'd had to suppress a groan of frustration when the intimate moment had been interrupted by Sacker's men. And then later, he'd gone and denied the whole thing . . . two people seeking a little warmth . . .

"Not exactly."

She was right. Those moments they'd clung to one another had been far more than two

people trying to warm themselves. No -- while on the trail of a madman in search of a Utopia society, two people had started to recognize that they had found their own Utopia.

The enormity of the realization descended upon Lee. He drew a deep breath and thought about turning back, but suddenly he was pulling up in front of her house, the white picket fence gleaming against the soft green grass of her lawn. Steeling himself, he turned off the ignition and stepped out of the car.

'A cold,' he thought to himself smugly, finding it easier to take a cynical approach rather than think about what was really happening to him. 'I'd have thought she could be more original than that!' Well, if it were true, which he highly doubted, he would say he was concerned about her and had stopped by to see if she needed anything. If it wasn't true, which he was certain was the case, he would grill her and find out why she really called in 'sick'.

Suddenly feeling more at ease and in control of the situation, he smiled to himself and headed toward to his customary spot at the back door. He was almost certain she'd be alone; her sons would be in school and her mother would be . . . what was Friday? Bridge? Or the beauty parlor?

Pausing to peer through the window, he could see her, stretched out on the couch in her nightgown and robe and sound asleep. The television was on, showing a classic Cary Grant movie, the name of which escaped Lee for the moment.

A closer look revealed to him that the coffee table was crowded with a box of tissues, assorted cough drops, magazines, and what looked like an unfinished cup of tea.

She really did have a cold. Well, after all, she had been in a swamp all night, he reasoned. He stood watching her for a while, reluctant to disturb her. She looked so peaceful resting there. Her face, unadorned by makeup, was pale, and fleetingly he wondered just how ill she really was. What if it was worse than just a cold?

After a moment, she began to awaken, stretching on the sofa. Hastily, he stepped back from the window lest she find him staring at her. Heading back to his car, he decided that he'd drive to the store and pick up a few things for her. Then he'd have a legitimate reason for having come over.

When he returned, half an hour later, with two grocery sacks, she was awake, sitting up on the couch and reading. As she reached for a tissue, he rapped lightly at the window. She didn't seem surprised at all to see him. Smiling, she set her book down and stood up, crossing to the door and opening it.

"Hi there," he said, returning her smile.

"Hi," she replied, her voice barely above a whisper. She cleared her throat. "Come on in." This sounded more like 'cub od id.' It was painfully obvious that she did indeed have a cold, and a nasty one at that.

Feeling guilty for mentally accusing her of lying to avoid explaining herself to him, he lifted the bags in offering. Actually, she didn't seem at all ashamed or embarrassed in his presence. "I come bearing gifts," he told her. "I heard you were sick."

"What? How did you hear?" she asked, again in her adenoidal voice.

Lee grinned and began unloading the contents of the paper sacks. "When I got in to work, I asked Mrs. Marston if you were in yet, and she told me you'd called in sick. So I thought I'd bring you some supplies."

He set the items onto the counter - whiskey, cough drops, tissue, two cans of chicken soup, crackers, and a sack of assorted lollipops.

"Oh my gosh!" she exclaimed as he worked, finally folding the bags and placing them under her sink by her trashcan. "Lee, you didn't have to do all this."

He found her unassuming, surprised manner charming; somehow it made him wish he'd done more. "I wanted to, Amanda," he replied, unaccustomed to the warm sensation filling his heart. "You would have done the same for me. You do do the same for me, whenever I need it."

A shy smile graced her lips, and she bowed her head. "Well, thanks," was her quiet response. As though she needed to busy herself with something, she ignited the burner under the teakettle and removed a mug from the cupboard.

"It's my pleasure," he told her sincerely.

Amanda eyed the groceries sitting on her countertop more closely. "Umm, Lee?"

"Yeah?"

"Whiskey? And . . . lollipops?" she questioned, amusement wrinkling her nose.

Lee picked up the bottle of alcohol. "What?" he asked defensively. "I always drink whiskey when I'm sick."

"Oh," she nodded her comprehension. "And . . . the suckers?"

He shrugged. "I thought they'd help your throat. I brought some cough drops, too," he remarked, picking up the bag of offending lozenges and giving it a look of disgust, "but I personally hate them. I thought suckers would taste better."

"Well, it looks like you thought of everything," she said appreciatively, a slight smile tugging at the corners of her mouth.

Pleased, he placed a hand on her shoulder. "Now come sit back down and rest. Let me bring you some tea."

While she got settled, he waited for the water to boil, then fixed her a cup a tea, adding what he considered to be a dollop of whiskey. Handing her the steaming cup, he sat down beside her. He didn't want to leave just yet, but was unsure of whether to broach the question he'd come to ask.

"Don't you have to get back to work?" Amanda asked with a sniff as she reached for another tissue. "I don't want you to get sick, too."

"I'll take my chances and stay for a few minutes," he told her with a smile. "I'm sorry you got sick. Must've been sleeping in that damp swamp that did it, huh?"

His subtle allusion to the swamp and what had almost taken place there was not lost on her. An enigmatic and somewhat amused expression crossed her face before she answered. "I'd say that's a pretty accurate guess."

"Yeah." He looked at her closely, hesitating a moment. "Amanda."

She met his eye, and though hers were cloudy with illness, he could detect a definite challenge in their depths. Rising to the occasion, he went on, only to sink back down before he got started. "I, uh . . . I was just wondering. I mean, you know . . . ahh . . ."

"Yes, Lee?" she prompted. Again he heard the unspoken dare behind her harmless words. She picked up her mug and took a sip from it. Immediately she coughed, sputtering as she placed one hand to her throat and shakily returning the mug to the coffee table, almost missing the edge.

Lee leaned forward, placing one hand on her knee and steadying the sloshing beverage with the other. "Are you all right?" he asked in concern.

She coughed again and pointed to the tea. "What'd you put in that?" she asked in a raspy

voice. "My throat is on fire!"

He looked at her sheepishly. "A little whiskey," he admitted. "Sorry I didn't warn you."

"A little?" She grimaced, then caught his look of contrition. "It's okay, I'm just not used to it," she said, clearing her throat. "What were you going to say just now?"

"Oh," he paused and lowered his eyelids. Taking the safe way out and chastising himself for it, he finished, "Just that . . . Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Oh." She seemed surprised, as if she'd been expecting him to say something else entirely. "No thanks, really. You've been great," she told him, again giving him her Mona Lisa smile.

He breathed a sigh of relief; she was letting him off the hook. "Okay, then. Well, you know if you need anything, anything at all, just call me."

"Thanks," she replied sincerely. "I appreciate the offer."

"Well, I guess I really should get in to the Agency. Billy'll have my hide if I'm too late." He stood reluctantly. "Can I stop by at lunch time? See how you're doing?"

She nodded. "I'd like that, Lee."

"Okay, I will," he responded, hearing the eagerness in his own voice. A grin crept over his face at the thought of seeing her again in just a few short hours.

"Okay."

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Lee rolled his eyes as he glanced at the clock again; it was after one. Billy had called an unexpected meeting right at the moment Lee had been about to head out to check on Amanda.

"Scarecrow, are we keeping you?" his boss asked sarcastically.

Lee shrugged casually. "Well, I did have something rather important to see to," he replied. "But don't rush the meeting on my account . . ." he trailed off, waving a hand toward the clock.

Billy smirked. "Get out of here," he barked with mock annoyance.

Lee grinned at the other agents in the room who eyed him enviously as he went out the door. Once around the corner, he broke into a sprint, anxious to avoid any further delays.

Twenty minutes later, he turned his Corvette onto Maplewood Drive and felt the familiarly pleasant anticipation increase as it always did. The fact was, he couldn't remember just when he'd begun to have this feeling whenever he was about to see Amanda.

Hurrying around to the back of her house, he was disappointed when there was no sign of her on the couch. Her blanket and pillow were still there, as well as her array of cold accoutrements.

He knocked tentatively, in case she was simply out of his line of vision, but she still didn't appear. Feeling his heart sink, he debated finding a phone and calling, but didn't want to awaken her if she'd gone upstairs to lie down.

Just as he was turning to leave, he caught sight of her walking into the kitchen. She'd obviously just emerged from the shower. Seeing him, she bit her lip but couldn't suppress a smile as she walked across the kitchen and unlocked the door.

"Hi. Sorry, I thought you got tied up at work and weren't coming after all, so I took a shower," she explained, her discomfiture apparent as she pulled her blue robe more tightly around her slender figure. "Have you been waiting here long?"

"No, I just got here a few minutes ago, and yeah, I did get hung up. A meeting," he told her, trying valiantly not to react to the sight of her in nothing but a robe, her feet bare, her dark hair framing her face in wet ringlets.

"Well, you didn't have to come," she said, sounding apologetic. Immediately, her eyes widened as she realized what she'd said. "I don't mean I didn't want you to come; just that you didn't have to. Since you were so busy . . . I mean . . . I'm sure you have better things to do and . . ."

"Amanda," he interrupted her explanation, which showed promise of a ramble. "What do you mean I've got better things to do?" He allowed the incredulity he felt to come through in his voice. "I came because I wanted to, not because I felt that I had to. I . . ." he paused, staring at her. He could smell the scent of her shampoo and soap, and her robe was clinging slightly to her damp frame. ". . . wanted to," he finished with some effort.

She studied him pensively, as if trying to read his thoughts. Her unfathomable brown eyes seemed to bore into his, and after what seemed to Lee like an eternity, she replied, "Okay," in a soft whisper.

Desperate to distract himself from her innocently captivating appearance, he inadvertently focused on it. "Amanda, shouldn't you maybe dry your hair? And why aren't you wearing your slippers?"

"Lee," she cut in with a laugh. "I just now got out of the shower. I threw on a robe to bring my towels downstairs and there you were. I haven't had time to get dressed or dry my hair."

"O-oh," he stammered. He hadn't heard a word past her first comment and was trying to keep his imagination in check.

"Come in and sit down," she invited, heading out of the kitchen.

He followed her into the den, trying to keep his eyes off of her. She folded her blanket and lay it on the arm of a nearby chair, and curled up in the corner. Lee opted to sit next to her, unwilling to be too far away from her.

"So . . . Can I fix you some lunch?" she asked.

Lee sighed. "Amanda, you're sick. I'll fix you some lunch. Chicken soup."

"Oh, I'm not hungry. I . . ." she began.

He shook his head, absently picking up her hand. "You need to eat. How do you expect to get better and come back to me," he caught himself and cleared his throat, rewording his thought. ". . . I mean to work . . . if you don't eat and take care of yourself?"

Her eyes on their joined hands, she swallowed hard. "Well, when you put it that way . . ."

"You sound better. How are you feeling?" he asked, moving them out of the awkward moment.

She nodded. "I'm feeling better than I was this morning, that's for sure."

"Good," he said approvingly, finding that he was playing with her fingers. As nonchalantly as he could, he lay her hand back down, patting it softly before moving his away. "I was worried about you."

"Oh, well . . . thanks," she replied, looking away from his gaze. He took the opportunity to admire her natural beauty. He wasn't used to seeing her like this, and he found that he liked the look very much.

A heavy moment of silence followed. Amanda looked back up and met his eyes. Neither of them spoke, neither of them moved. Just when Lee had begun to wonder how to extricate himself from the uncomfortable situation, Amanda hastily turned away from him, grabbed a tissue and sneezed into it violently. He flinched, then laughed.

"Oh my gosh, I'm sorry!" she exclaimed, embarrassment evident on her face. "I'm such a mess with this darn cold."

He grinned at her self-deprecation and the depth of his own relief. "Maybe you're allergic to me," he suggested, unable to resist teasing her.

She laughed with him. "I don't think so, but after that episode, maybe you'll be allergic to me!"

"No." He shook his head, smiling at the thought. "Let me get that soup for you," he hastily remarked. Anxious to put some distance between them, he stood and left the room.

In the kitchen, Lee busied himself with heating her chicken soup, trying to calm his erratically beating heart. What in the world was wrong with him? He'd never been such a tangled mass of emotions with any other woman. Somehow, where Amanda was concerned, every little step seemed like a giant leap.

Moments later, he returned with a bowl full of steaming soup and a plate of crackers. "Would you like some tea or juice?"

"Umm . . . tea, thanks," she replied, accepting the bowl from him, which he handed to her with a potholder. "Without whiskey," she added anxiously.

He chuckled. "No problem."

When he came back, he set her tea down on the table and sat beside her again. "How's the soup?" he asked.

"It's wonderful," she told him. "I guess I was a little bit hungrier than I thought I was."

Lee grinned in triumph. "I knew it. Eat it all; I want my partner back."

Blushing, she nodded and took another spoonful of the broth. "Yes, sir," she agreed good-naturedly.

"Listen, I guess I should get back," he said reluctantly. "I got in a little late this morning and then skipped out on the meeting. I don't need the wrath of Dr. Smyth upon me."

She laughed. "Okay. Thanks again, for everything."

"You're welcome," he replied, standing and heading toward the back door. "Call me if you need anything. In fact, call me tonight and let me know how you're feeling."

"Okay, I will," she acquiesced with a nod, then added, "Thanks again, Lee. You're . . . Well, you're a really good friend."

He only took a split-second to decide on his reply before stepping through her door. "Not exactly."

The End