

One

A DUSKY rose-colored spearhead glowed into existence upon a dark knot of wood, its tip pointing towards the source of a soft scratching noise. Slowly, with patience and stealth, the triangle stretched, elongating into a pointed spear and glowing more intensely as it moved towards its target. Across the seams of boards, over a stack of books, up the dark wooden leg of a chair and its soft chamois-covered back, the spear traveled, its color slowly changing to a blazing white gold.

For an eternal second, the spear paused at the very edge of the chair back as if gathering itself for the attack. Then, in the instant between one scratch and the next, the spear leapt from the chair back and crossed the final distance, lancing its target with a blinding brilliance that finally silenced the scratching.

Lee blinked several times in surprise. He squinted slightly into the morning sunlight streaming under the blinds then sat back from his desk with a sigh. His eyes finally settled on the thick pile of paper stacked on the far side of the work surface. The top page, like those below it and the single sheet centered on the desk before him, was divided into four panels, each of which was filled with a small sketch and several lines of hand written text.

“You’d better not be sleeping on that couch,” a voice called through the office door a moment before it opened.

Lee’s cheek quirked, lifting the right side of his mouth into a half-grin. He cleared his throat and projected a rumbling response towards the door, “I’m awake.”

As the door swung inward, Lee lifted the final sheet of paper from the desk and placed it on the stack with its mates, then looked up to watch the heavysset woman who had been his best friend for more years than he cared to count enter the office. As usual, the stout woman was wide awake and full of energy, seeming to fill the large office with her effervescence. Just seeing her brought a brighter smile to his face, pushing back the fatigue. She moved with a purpose towards the desk, a tall, commercial quality glass filled with a frothy brown drink in one hand.

Her eyes darted about the room, taking in everything in a glance. The untouched blanket still folded neatly over the back of the couch behind Lee, the stack of sketches on the corner of the desk, and the dark circles under his eyes all told the same story. The woman pursed her lips as she came to a halt before the desk. “You were up all night working on those,” her eyes flicked to the stack of drawings then back to Lee, “weren’t you?”

Lee's smile turned sheepish and, after a moment, he ducked his head in acknowledgement. "Can't put anything past you, can I?"

The woman sniffed. "After all these years, I think not!" She plunked the thick glass down before him then dropped a bundle of envelopes bound with a rubber band next to it. Lee's attention went to the stack of mail as he let out a tired sigh.

"C'mon, Cass. You know I've been worried about the preliminary storyboards being right and ready before the crew gets here."

"I know." Cass matched his sigh with one of her own before settling into one of the softly upholstered chairs facing the desk. The moment of melancholy was gone as fast as it came, though, replaced by her normal cheerfulness. "But," she grinned, her eyes twinkling, "If I don't look out for you, who will? You certainly won't."

Lee snorted. He didn't say anything, but he often wondered the same thing.

Cass nodded toward the glass. "C'mon, drink up. I know you haven't eaten since yesterday."

"Yes, mom," Lee laughed, reaching for the drink.

Cass watched Lee for a moment then glanced at the clock on the wall beside the door. "Your meeting is at 4, right? Why don't you go home and get some sleep and a shower." She paused to eye his attire. "And, maybe some fresh clothes. We can't have the 'New Mr. Rogers' looking like 'Old Mr. Sanford', now, can we?"

Lee grunted noncommittally as he took another long gulp of the frothy beverage. He set the still very full glass on his desk with a satisfied exhalation then wiped the remaining liquid from his mustache. "You know," he started, "I still feel pretty good. And, I've got a lot of paperwork to get done for next week's shoot."

"Oh, no," Cass countered immediately. "You are *not* getting out of taking me to see that new Renee Zellweger movie tonight just because you ran out of steam after being awake for 36 hours!"

Lee poked his lower lip out in a pout. "I could always take you tomorrow night," he offered. He loved spending time with Cass, he just didn't quite agree with her on this particular actress' charms.

"Don't even try it, mister." She made shooing motions towards him. "G'wan. Your paperwork will still be here when you get back." Cass slapped the stack of drawings then pushed out of the chair, snagging the pile and heading for the door.

Dark curls bounced around her face as she looked over her shoulder at Lee from the threshold. "I'll see you at 4 with a pile of copies and the originals posted on the conference room wall." As the door swung shut, she called out, "And, drink your milk!"

Lee lifted the glass to his lips, though they were still pulled up in a toothy grin.

Lee was fighting, ducking and twisting to avoid his opponent's attacks while attempting to make his own reach their targets. He was vaguely aware of a buzzing roar as if a crowd surrounded him. Sweat was stinging his eyes and he brushed at it ineffectually with the back of a padded fist. He had carefully moved around the ring, maneuvering his opponent into the perfect position, and was now ready to launch his new combination, one he expected to be enough to win him this very important match.

As he launched his much practiced but never used combination, the warning alarm sounded, distracting him just enough to change his rhythm and ruin the timing of the attack. On the third strike, Lee found a fist where it should never have had a chance to reach. His body spun an instant before the pain exploded in his jaw and his vision clouded. As he crashed to the mat, he could hear the bell sounding the end of the match.

For a long moment, Lee lay on the mat too stunned to rise. His mind marveled at the softness of this particular tatami as the bell for the match sounded again. Fuzzily, he wondered why they were ringing it again, but was too sore to really look up and ask. Overhead, the crowd continued to buzz.

When the bell sounded a fourth – or was that the fifth – time, Lee finally forced an eyelid to peel up. On the third blink, he was able to clear the sweat from his eyes enough to focus them on the two inch tall glowing red numbers of his alarm clock mere inches in front of his nose. As he tried to make sense of the presence of an alarm clock on the sparring mat, the bell rang again. This time, though, he finally recognized it as his phone and, suddenly, his surroundings once again made sense.

With a groan, Lee untangled an arm from the sheet twisted around him and pulled the phone from its cradle. As soon as the handset hit his ear, he muttered in the clearest voice he could manage, "I'm naked. I could show you a really good time."

There wasn't even a pause before the reply was fired back, "That's nice, dear, but you know I don't swing your way."

Lee sighed dramatically as he rolled onto his back, "Ah, the story of my life." He swallowed the disappointment that always swamped him every time he was reminded of his best friend's adamant position on dating him. At times, it was painfully difficult to accept that rejection.

Finally, on the tail end of a jaw splitting yawn, he muttered, "G'mornin', Cass."

"Good afternoon to you, too. You've got two hours to get moving and get in here. Do you think you can manage?"

Lee grinned despite the fuzziness that threatened to drag him back down to sleep. "Oh, I don't know. I may need you to come scrub my back for me. You could give my other parts a good rubbing, too." Sometimes, she just left the door open and he had no choice but to walk into it - even when he knew it was going to be slammed shut again before he got a chance to enter.

"You," Cass chortled, "are incorrigible."

Lee completed the equation softly, "So you keep telling me."

Lee's eyes remained closed as he listened to Cass' laughter slowly dwindle. When she'd finally calmed down, she spoke again. "Whew! Right. So." She took a breath. "Mrs. Leminski called to confirm your meeting with her tomorrow at 5:30. She said to make sure you were aware that she couldn't be 'sweet talked,' as she put it, out of her organization's stance on your show."

Lee growled softly. "Mrs. Leminski can just bite my left—"

"Now, now. Remember, you're the producer of a major children's show," she admonished, but Lee could actually hear the grin on Cass' face.

"Yeah." Lee blew out an exasperated breath. "Just make sure I have my notes for her meeting. And, see if you can find something out on her I can use as leverage. I really hate dealing with these holier-than-thou folks who seem to think they've figured out the secret to the perfect society – especially when that perfection involves censorship."

"I'll see what I can do." Cass paused a moment before continuing, "That girl, Hillary, called again. What do you want me to tell her?" She rushed ahead before he could even begin to form a reply. "And, Laurie called to tell you that there'll be 23 kids for tomorrow's shoot. She wants you to give her a call before the end of the day if you have anything specific you want them wearing."

"Okay, I'll give her a call on the way in."

"Good deal." Except for the steady hum of the desk fan moving the too warm air around his room, there was silence. *Forgot to turn the heat down again*, he mused to himself. Then, Cass asked quietly, "What about Hillary?"

"Just..." Lee laid an elbow over his eyes and let his voice drop to a plaintive whisper. "I don't know. Just tell her..." His voice trailed off as his mind supplied various responses for him: *She's not the one... It's just not going to work... I'm not going to be her trophy...* "Ugh!" he exclaimed as much to give an answer as to silence his mind.

"Tell her 'ugh,' huh?" Cass' voice was light.

"Ha. Ha." Lee gave up. "Tell her whatever you think is best. But, I'm not taking her out again."

Her voice gentled further. "I'll take care of it, hon. Not to worry."

Lee took a deep breath then let it out in a long exhale before speaking again. "Ok, well, if there aren't any emergencies that need my immediate attention, then I'll see you in a bit."

"We'll be here." There was a pause. "Don't forget about Laurie."

"Uh-huh." Lee disconnected the line and let the phone drop to the bed beside him. For several minutes he simply stared at the ceiling, completely forgetting about work and his bad luck with women, and giving his mind a chance to sort through the images from the dream he'd had. "I wonder," he mused to the room after a while, "if I'm trying to warn myself about my lack of concentration or something."

With a snort – whether of disgust or amusement, even he couldn't have said – and a grunt, Lee lifted himself up into a sitting position. He took another moment to arch his back and scratch areas on his stomach and chin where his hair had matted in sleep before swinging his feet out from under the covers and onto the floor. With one last sigh, Lee was standing and ready to face what was left of the day.

"Hey, Laurie."

"Lee! I'm glad you called. Listen, it's going to be pretty chilly out here tomorrow. I know you don't expect those kids to stand around all day in just t-shirts. So, what do you want 'em wearing? Layers? Coats?"

"Whoa!" Lee glanced over his shoulder then changed lanes. "Slow down, kiddo." He reached out and reset the cruise control, then settled deeper into the driver's seat. "Okay, now what's the issue? The weather? I thought it was supposed to clear and warm tomorrow."

"Yeah, the weather. You had to pick the middle of nowhere to film this show, and the weather here sucks. Oh, sure. It's going to be clear and warm... for Eskimos!"

"Aw, c'mon! It's only the edge of nowhere. Trust me on this; I've *been* to the middle of nowhere. Y'gods, you'd think I had you out in Siberia."

Laurie laughed. "I know. But, it's cold and these are kids you're dealing with. So, what do you want me to put 'em in?"

"Umm." Lee drummed his fingers on the top of the steering wheel a moment. Giving a quick glance over his shoulder, he switched back to the outside lane. "Uh, do you think they'll be warm enough if you layer them to *look* like they're in a warmer climate and not out freezing in the arctic tundra? I'd rather the cameras be able to actually see the kids, not just bundles of coats." Lee grimaced. "The last thing I want is a bunch of Kennys running around mumbling into their hoods."

"I could try."

"How about if we have one of the big jet heaters going to keep the area warm, too? – Son of a–!" Lee swerved into the passing lane. "Sorry."

Laurie chuckled. "Lemme guess. You're on the road right now."

"Yeah," Lee growled. "The jackass didn't even look before hitting the highway, much less slow down to merge. He was damned near in my passenger seat and headed for the driver's side!"

"Pennsylvania drivers, gotta love 'em!"

Lee snorted, ignoring the fact that the hands-free mike was unlikely to pick up and transmit his response.

"Anyway," Laurie continued, "Luke's here with me today getting the props ready. Jackie will have the animals here by 9 tomorrow. Charlie and Christa will have their crews here around 8:30 and be ready to shoot by 10. The kids should start arriving around 9, but don't be too surprised if some don't get here until nearly 10. Some of these parents are far less punctual than their children."

Lee sorted through all the times Laurie gave him, fitting them into something of a mental day planner. "Uh, alright, tell Christa her crew will be doing the establishing shots starting at 10:15. I think Luke can have the kids ready by then, don't you?"

"Yeah, sure, provided they aren't scared out of their wits and completely useless by then!"

"Hey! Luke's a really nice guy."

"I know he is. He's just incredibly tall and overbearing - and that has a tendency to scare the hell out of some of the younger kids. They're much more used to being coddled."

Lee sighed. "I'm sure they'll get over it. I did." Laurie laughed.

"Why don't you take Charlie and his crew out and see what sort of footage you can get from Jackie and her animals," he continued. "I'll be on set by quarter to 10 in case there're any last minute details you need to run by me before we start."

"Got it." The speaker crackled. "Uh, are any of the kids going to be riding the horses? I'll need to have safety waivers on hand if so."

"Lemme think a minute." Lee flicked on his turn signal and began to slow down, the cabin of his vehicle quieting some at the lower speed. He nibbled on his bottom lip as he navigated the exit ramp and mentally reviewed his plans for this week's filming. As the truck came to a stop at the bottom of the ramp, he spoke up again. "No, I don't see any reason to have the kids up on the horses tomorrow. But, check around and see which of them have experience riding. We may bring them back for Friday's shoot. If we can't find any, we'll have to see what we can do back at the studio to simulate it."

"O—" A burst of static drowned out the rest of her response.

"Damnit!" Lee swore as he pulled out onto the more rural road, adding several more colorful phrases. "Laurie! Listen. If you can hear me, call the office in about twenty minutes." With an exasperated sigh, Lee disconnected the call.

He spent the next several miles muttering to himself about the inadequacies of the wireless carrier he was contracted with before finally relaxing and enjoying the ride. The remainder of his drive was through a series of farm fields and, as usual, he took part of his attention away from the road to observe the changes in the land around him.

For the most part, the snow was finally melted and gone. Though, in places it could still be seen huddled in the shadows. The land itself was too cold yet to turn for spring planting, and the fields resembled nothing so much as a five o'clock shadow with uneven stubble tracing the contours of the land. Likewise, the trees that bordered the fields in thin strips were still skeletal. Lee smiled as he slowed the truck to watch a

squirrel scuttle across the two lane road, braving the chancy spring weather to retrieve a stashed meal.

Spring, he thought, is nearly sprung.

Lee's hand had just touched the key where it waited for him to pull it from the ignition when his cell chirped from its cradle. He glanced at the number displayed and sighed. He didn't recognize it, but it was local. No doubt, it was someone to whom he'd given his card the last time he was out people-watching. He debated for a moment about just letting the call ring to his voice mail. But, he suspected the person on the other end would be like most of the others and just keep calling until he either returned their messages or picked up the phone.

He paused a moment to prepare himself for what he expected to be a chore then finally pulled the cell from its cradle, hit send and pressed it to his ear. "Hello?"

"Is this Lee Rorrison?"

It was a low female voice with that burr that he found incredibly sexy and, as he had expected, completely unfamiliar. Lee clenched his jaw. *Here we go again*, his mind taunted. But, his voice remained neutral as he answered, "Speaking."

If it was actually possible, the burr became more pronounced, the voice more husky, as the woman on the other end of the line drawled, "Hello."

Lee huffed a long sigh as he waited for her to make her pitch. And, it seemed to him it was always just like that: a woman would call him and begin a line of seduction very similar to the method any other salesperson might use on the phone to sell their product. Only, here, the product seemed to be him and the caller was ready to buy.

He switched the headlights off and pulled the key free from the ignition. By the time he had opened the door to his truck, the woman still hadn't spoken. In exasperation, he spoke a bit more forcefully than usual, "Can I help you with something?"

"Oh, I most certainly hope so," the woman cooed.

Lee rolled his eyes skyward as he slid down out of the truck, slamming the door behind him. "And how might I do that?"

Gods, Lee sent the silent, unformed plea skyward as his patience swiftly headed for the breaking point. He wished, just once, that a woman who held his business card would call him and initiate a regular conversation that didn't involve work or seduction. And, sometimes, he wished he could ignore that little voice in the back of his mind that reminded him time and again that he would never meet *Her* if he didn't put himself out there, that he could just hide away and ignore the games and the disappointment it always seemed to bring.

"Well," she drawled, drawing the word out to nearly three syllables, "There's an orchestra playing Saturday night. I thought dinner, a show, and then a little intimate cocktail..." She trailed off, obviously intending to suggest that the cocktail would turn to something even more intimate.

Lee snorted in incredulity as he pushed through the front door of the small house he and Cass had turned into a studio and offices. "That's what you thought, huh?" he asked as he nodded to the receptionist who waved at him and pointed down the hallway to the converted conference room. *Well*, that talkative part of his mind commented, *she's certainly got her plan laid out*.

"Mmhmmmm."

He paused at the door to Cass' office, waiting for her to come around the desk and join him as he asked, "And what exactly made you think that I would be interested in such a proposition?"

Cass lifted her chin towards his phone, quirking a brow in silent query. Lee rolled his eyes upwards in reply. Cass grinned, her eyes sparkling with mirth, and she shook her head at him. Lee responded with a glare as he waited for the woman on the line to speak up.

"Well, a single guy like you can't want to spend his time all alone," she explained slyly, that sexy burr sending involuntary shivers down his spine. *Now, that's just not fair*, his mind complained. *You might as well just give me a buy-one-get-two-free coupon for the computer store!*

"And," she drew the word out, her voice rising as she did. "You gave me your card. So, you must think so, too."

"I see." Lee kept pace with Cass as the two of them walked the rest of the way down the hall to the conference room. "And, you'd like to be the one to rescue me from my single-ness, huh?"

"Of course."

"What if I say that's not what I want?"

There was a pause. "Can you honestly tell me you'd rather be alone Saturday night?" she challenged in that silky voice.

Go on, his mind taunted him, *tell her. It's at least partly the truth.* Lee sighed in defeat. "Well, no." Lee's eyes scanned across the storyboards Cass had mounted and hung in a long line around the walls of the conference room. He smiled at her and gave a thumbs-up sign.

"Then," she purred, obviously sensing a victory, "why not spend it with me?"

Lee gave a pleading look to Cass, who responded with a lift of her brows. With a slump of his shoulders, he answered the woman, "Okay."

"Excellent," the woman drawled.

Lee dropped into a chair at the head of the conference table, kicking his booted feet up onto the table's surface and staring sightlessly out a window. "Just send me an email with the details so I can get tickets and reservations set up," he told her. "Don't forget to give me directions to where you wanted to be picked up," he directed. He paused, trying to come up with a polite way to give his last request. When no inspiration struck, he just asked, "And, could you include a name? So I know who to ask for." Cass snorted a stifled laugh beside him to which he flicked his eyes in her direction, frowning.

There was a silence as the caller digested Lee's instructions. Then, "Okay. I, uh, guess I'll talk to you later." And, here, finally, Lee caught what he suspected was the real voice behind the seduction.

"Right," Lee agreed. "I'll talk to you later." He waited to the count of thirty to see if she would say anything else, then closed his phone and tossed it on the table. He leaned back in his chair and tilted his head so that he could look at the ceiling.

"I guess you'll be needing a dire production emergency Saturday night, huh?"

Lee rolled his head to the side so he could see Cass. "Yeah, probably. I'll let you know what time would be good as soon as I know what the heck is going on."

"You know," Cass tsked, "You are the biggest wuss I know when it comes to women."

"I know," he sighed, rolling his head back to center so he could see the ceiling again. There was a long silence, where Lee thought of nothing at all.

"Umm, you know it *is* possible to say 'no,' don't you?"

"Yeah."

"So, why don't you?"

“Because.” Lee took a deep breath and clenched his jaw. He slowly released both before continuing. “Because it’s perfectly possible that one of them is the person I’m supposed to be with, and I’ll miss out if I avoid them.”

Cass let out a bark of laughter causing Lee to look over at her again. “That is the most incredibly stupid thing I’ve ever heard!” She shook her head at him, dark curls bouncing around the edges of her face. “Romantic, but incredibly stupid.”

Lee simply shrugged and hunched deeper into his chair.