

Two

INVISIBLE fingers poked restlessly through the remains of last year's bounty, indiscriminately tossing the detritus as if searching half-heartedly for some forgotten thing. Small, more substantial fingers poked just as restlessly at a collection of Matchbox cars arranged in some obscure pattern only they could discern. From time to time, those fingers paused in their play to reach up and reset a lock of hair disturbed by the pass of the invisible searcher.

Lee watched the towheaded boy stop his play to again reach up and set his wind ruffled hair back in place. The boy, Lee recalled from his earlier encounter during the shoot, was much younger than his height and maturity would suggest. He was a quiet child who handled his role in the show exceptionally well, but otherwise kept to himself.

Lee was about to go out and ask the child why he was still here when he caught the boy's attention turn to the parking lot. Lee followed the boy's gaze to where two women were standing beside a silver Blazer. There was another, sportier car sitting beyond the Blazer, but Lee couldn't see enough of it from his position to tell what it was. Lee's brows rose.

The taller of the two women topped the shorter by a head and, by the way she stood, it appeared that she enjoyed that height advantage immensely. Her black hair was perfectly coifed and unaffected by the spring wind swirling around her. Her skirt and jacket spoke of sophistication and a high profile job. As Lee watched, the woman tossed her head and he caught a glimpse of dark, flashing eyes and a perfectly made up face. She reminded Lee of nothing so much as one of those women who would try to seduce him for her own purposes, and he could feel his face wrinkling up in disgust as he watched.

The shorter woman contrasted the taller in every aspect. Where the taller woman's hair was so dark it shone nearly blue in the sunlight, the shorter woman's was a bright, coppery red which bounced around her head in unruly curls as she spoke. Where the taller woman's features were dark, almost Mediterranean, the shorter woman's were so pale as to seem nearly transparent. Even her clothes, a thick sweater and pressed Dockers, were simple and practical as opposed to the taller woman's flashy duds. There seemed, to Lee, to be a no-nonsense air about her that spoke of a hidden strength and brought a small smile to his face.

Even at this distance, Lee could tell the two were embroiled in a heated argument. The taller woman was gesticulating wildly while the shorter appeared to be more restrained, her words coming through clenched teeth. Lee watched the altercation a moment longer before cutting his eyes back to the boy whose unhappy gaze was locked on the two women.

"Lovers' tiff."

"Huh?" Lee blinked and turned his attention away from the tableau near the cars. He smiled at the woman who had spoken to his back. "Hey, Lane."

Lane returned the smile. "Hey, Lee." She indicated the women outside with her chin. "I said, 'Lovers' tiff.'"

"Oh?" Lee glanced outside. The shorter woman was approaching the porch with a determined look on her face, the taller on her heels, obviously still shouting.

Lane nodded. "I heard them on my way in."

"Huh."

Lee watched the approaching women with interest. The dark woman had put her longer legs to good use and quickly caught up. She reached out and clamped down on the red-head's shoulder, spinning the shorter woman around. Lee glanced over at the boy to check his reaction in time to see a tear trickle down his cheek. As he watched, the child jumped to his feet and ran towards the two women.

"Excuse me a sec," Lane said as she pushed around Lee.

Lee smiled as he watched her burst through the door. Lane wasn't huge by any stretch – though she couldn't be called small, either – but she definitely carried herself with authority and Lee loved watching her throw that tough butch attitude around.

Lee followed Lane's progress into the yard. The red-head was being shaken violently despite her efforts to free herself, while the boy struck at the dark woman's waist and back. When Lane arrived, she inserted herself between the women as if they were mere bushes tangled in the wind and split them apart.

The moment the red-head was freed from the shaking grip, the young boy left off his attack and cowered against her. "Huh," Lee commented again, this time to the empty room. There was no doubt about the relationship between the boy and the red-head.

Lee's grin, which had been on his face since Lane left the building, slipped as he watched the taller woman lunge at his security chief. In an instant, he was out the door and on his way across the yard to where the two women struggled. He arrived just as the over dressed visitor managed to accidentally land an elbow into Lane's face hard enough to send the butch stumbling backwards.

Lee's hands were already reaching out as he approached the combatants and he managed to place one in the middle of Lane's back, preventing her stumble from turning into a fall. He halted his forward momentum to give her his attention. "Are you alright?"

“Yeah,” she muttered through the hand covering her face once she’d caught her balance.

Lee nodded then turned to the tall woman who he could now discern as being of some sort of Latin descent. She had paused in her attack when Lane started to go down and was now standing with her hands on her hips and her chest heaving.

“You,” Lee snarled, jabbing a finger in the air at the woman. “I want you off this property immediately.”

“And, if I don’t?” the woman growled with a feral gleam in her dark eyes. “Whatcha gonna do about it, *little man?*”

Lee stiffened and his heart rate, already increased in response to the altercation, jumped. He could feel the blood thump angrily in his veins and he fought to maintain control. If there was one thing that could really set him off, it was an attack on his height. Slowly, deliberately, he drew himself up fully. Despite Lane’s hunched posture beside him, the top of his head barely reached the butch’s chin but, it was enough.

Lee’s fists clenched and he forced himself to breath deeply. *She wants a fight, one part of his mind observed with glee. Go ahead and give it to her. She needs taken down a rung or two.*

Not in front of the boy, another, more rational part warned. It defeats your purpose if you tell kids there’s an alternative to fighting and then you go attack someone right in front of them.

Lee felt as if he were suspended over a precipice as his mind fought to give him direction. Somewhere behind him, he was aware of a conversation taking place, but he kept his eyes on the tall, arrogant woman before him. As he watched, she shifted insolently to one hip as if to say, ‘When I get done playing with you I *will* get my way.’ Lee’s eyes narrowed.

“If you don’t,” he finally answered her when he was sure his voice would come out steady, “then you will be forcibly removed.”

“Oh yeah?” the woman scoffed, a smirk twisting her mouth. “By who? You?” She flicked her eyes toward Lane, then back again. “Her? I don’t think so.”

From behind, Lee heard a soft voice plead, “Jesimae, don’t.”

The dark woman’s head snapped up, her eyes focusing over Lee’s shoulder as the smirk changed to a snarl. “You shut up, you little slut!” she screamed. “Is she your new pet? Huh? Or, are you sleeping with *him* now?” Her voice positively dripped with

disgust as she uttered the word, 'him.' Lee's eyes slitted in anger and locked on the taller woman's.

"You leave my mom alone!" a young voice piped up, momentarily breaking the tableau. Lee glanced back at the child standing defiantly in front of his mother and caught the boy's eye, giving him the barest of nods in approval.

Lee heard the tall woman draw breath to respond. He spun his head towards her. "That's enough!" he roared, drawing the woman's focus back to him and drowning out whatever venom she had been about to spew at the boy. "I will not have you abusing my guests," he continued an instant later, his voice closer to normal but still tight with anger. "You will remove yourself from this property immediately, or you will be removed. The choice is yours."

"I don't think so," she snapped at him. "Not without her." Her lip curled and her eyes glinted with vicious intent. "But, you can keep the brat."

A stifled sob reached Lee's ears and he twitched with the desire to soothe the anguish so evident in that sound. At that tiny movement, Jesimae lunged at Lee, her intention to knock him out of the way more than obvious. Lee stood his ground until the very last moment when she was committed to the charge, and then stepped aside. The tall woman stumbled past him, but caught herself before she fell and spun around glaring. Her attention was now completely on Lee and, by the look on her face, he could guess that she wasn't used to being challenged. Certainly, she appeared as if she wasn't used to having her attacks foiled.

Lee felt his breathing settle as the adrenaline and years of training kicked in. His mind crystallized, banishing the distracting mental arguments of earlier and allowing the threat before him to become his sole focus. The woman probably matched him in weight despite the foot of difference in height between them, a fact that Lee adjusted for without conscious thought.

As she charged him again, Lee dropped to one knee. He configured the fingers in his fist so that the middle knuckle extended beyond the others. When her foot landed next to his knee, Lee let the spiked knuckle fly. The instant Lee's fist struck Jesimae's thigh, her leg collapsed under her and she crashed to the ground. He quickly moved back away from her as she curled protectively around the injured limb.

Lee stood with his knees slightly bent, balancing comfortably over his center of gravity and breathing deeply, as he grimly watched the woman writhe on the ground and howl in pain. "They always forget the old adage," he muttered to himself in disgust. "The bigger they are, the harder they fall."

As he warily watched the woman, two sets of pounding footsteps drew near, slowed and then halted. "Is everyone okay?" a voice asked from behind him.

"Yeah," Lane answered. "Mostly."

"We're fine," Lee seconded Lane. He briefly glanced over his shoulder at the two uniformed security guards who had just arrived then returned his gaze to Jesimae. "Can you fellahs escort Ms. Jesimae here to her car and ensure she departs the property immediately?"

"Right away, Mr. Rorrison," the shorter of the two burly men responded with a slight lisp as they stepped around Lee.

"Thanks."

Lee took deep breaths to force his body to relax. He watched the security guards each reach a hand under an arm and haul the dark woman to her feet. As if by instinct, her legs settled under the instant she was vertical. She wrenched her arms free of their supports as soon as she realized both legs would hold her.

The men glanced at Lee for guidance. He lifted his chin towards the parking area. They nodded in reply then each reached out to corral the woman and ensure she went where they wanted her to go.

"Don't touch me," she snarled at them. However, they ignored her order and started ushering her away. Between their shoulders, she glared at the red-head as she walked backwards. "I'll be *seeing* you," she taunted the mother. Then, she turned her eyes on Lee. "And, you haven't heard the last of me, either!" With that, she turned and limped back to the parking area followed closely by the two guards.

Lee let out a breath of relief as the red sports car departed, spraying gravel behind it. A sound drew Lee's attention back to those around him. Lane was standing to one side, her arms hanging loosely at her sides and a slightly glazed look in her eyes. Though it hadn't yet started to discolor, her cheek was already very swollen, causing her right eye to close partially. On the other side, the red-head stood with her arms wrapped around her son and her face buried in the boy's hair. Lee could just make out the child's high voice trying to comfort his mother.

"Why don't you go get some ice on that?" Lee asked Lane. "Laurie should still have the first aid kit handy."

Lane blinked slowly then nodded. "Yeah," she mumbled. "Good idea." With a short nod to Lee, she turned and headed for the porch.

Lee stood uncertainly, watching the intimate mother-son moment. "Umm..." he started, and then trailed off. He took a step toward the two then stopped again as he realized that the woman's shoulders were shaking, that the sound he'd heard earlier was her crying.

Lee blinked in surprise at the sudden pang he felt at that realization. He had the oddest feeling that he ought to be in boy's place offering some small comfort to the distraught woman. As he struggled to identify the feeling and its source, the mother sniffled and lifted her head to look at him.

For the first time, Lee was able to see the woman's eyes. He was amazed by the deep green color, bright right now with tears. When the red-head lifted her brows in a question at his stare, Lee ducked his head and rubbed the back of his neck, hoping the sudden flush he felt wouldn't be noticed.

"She," the woman began in a hoarse voice. She cleared her throat and began again. "She didn't used to be like that."

Lee nodded, accepting the explanation for the apology that it was. He glanced at the porch. "Ma'am, if you'd like, there're benches on the porch. You could take a moment to collect yourself."

The woman followed his gaze then gave him a watery smile. "I'd like that."

Lee gave her a firm nod then turned and headed for the porch. He crossed the porch and paused at the door to look back at his guests. "Uh, can I get you anything? Tissues? Water? Um, some other drink?"

"Water would be great, thanks."

Lee smiled, his eyes drawn once again to the green ones approaching him. "Water it is." He tore his gaze away from the woman with some effort, and focused it on the boy. "And, what can I get for you?"

The boy glanced at his mother for permission. At her nod, he looked skyward in thought. After some deliberation, he looked at Lee and asked, "Y'got any chocolate milk?"

Lee grinned broadly at the boy. He looked left and right, as if checking for eavesdroppers, then spoke in a loud stage whisper, "Don't tell anyone, but that's my favorite drink, too."

The child's laughter followed Lee through the door. Lee's grin faded some once he was safely inside. After a pause to settle himself, and a deep sigh, he headed for the doorway on the other side of the room.

"Looks like," a voice spoke from the gloom near the porch-side windows, "you've found a new interest."

Lee stopped and squinted into the gloom with a frown. "Not funny, Laur. She's a lesbian and about as likely as Cass to ever be interested in me as anything other than a friend."

"Uh-huh. If you say so."

"I do," he answered firmly and then turned and walked out of the room.

Lee watched the blue Blazer leave the parking lot and drive away. When it was no longer in view, he let the curtain fall back in place and turned from the window. *It's just as well*, he thought glumly. *I've got plenty of female friends already.*

For a long time, he stood with his mind skittering from idea to idea as he stared at the painted conceptualization of an ancient Greek goddess interacting with a mortal hero. The goddess, her mask-like helm tipped back on her head and her armor top gleaming across her chest with the long flowing dress beneath, was caught in the act of reaching out to the unknown hero. In one hand, she held a long, thin spear. The other was flat against the hero's chest as if to hold him back. The hero, wearing little save the look of anguished rage on his face, was staring beyond the goddess where an army lay dead among the ruins of a city and its slain inhabitants.

The hero's focus was on that of a dead woman holding two equally dead children and Lee's eyes settled there as well. *Some things*, his mind taunted him as he contemplated a deity who would allow her own champion such grief by not intervening, *are just not meant to be.*

"Sorry about that, boss."

Lee blinked slowly. As if coming out of a deep sleep, he pulled his gaze from the painting and let it settle on Lane. The swelling under her eye had gone down some but not enough to hide the effects of the hit. Luckily, the coloring of her skin would render the resultant bruise into a dark shadow rather than the stark violet marking it might've been on a lighter person.

"Lee?"

"Hmm?" Lee shook his head, returning his mind to the present. "It was a lucky shot, Lane. I only came out as back up. I didn't expect that you'd actually need me."

"Yeah." She studied him a minute. "Good thing you're more than you appear, huh?"

Lee grunted and looked away. His eyes fell on the door and he thought to ask, "Was she okay?"

Lane nodded. "Yeah. Laurie took care of her." She was silent a moment then sniffed and turned for the door.

Lee followed the security chief with his eyes. When she paused and looked back him, he lifted a brow in query. She hesitated a moment longer. Then, "She says the boy's on the list of riders for Friday. You'll see them again."

Lee's eyes narrowed slightly. "Has she been gossiping again, or something?"

"Huh? Who?"

"Laurie!" Lee stopped himself from saying more.

Lane looked confused. "No, I don't think so. She just said the kid would be back." She shrugged. "I thought you looked a little disappointed that you'd missed them, so I figured I'd pass it on."

"Right," he replied, drawing the word out. "She's up to something. I can feel it."

Lane shrugged again. "If you say so." She took a breath. "I gotta go fill out a report on this," she gestured at her cheek. "I'll catch you later."

Lee nodded. "Yeah, sure. Just leave a copy with Laurie and I'll sign it when I'm back up here on Friday."

Lane waved as she turned and left the room. Lee watched her leave, but his mind had already returned to the woman he'd struck and the smaller one that had been her target. He could still see those green eyes looking back at him.

He really didn't want to admit it, but Laurie's earlier comment had been on the mark. The small red-head intrigued him for some reason and Lee was sorely disappointed that he had missed the opportunity to speak with her. But, it seemed as if it were just not meant to be.

Lee had been stopped four times before he made it to the kitchen to retrieve drinks for the mother and her son. As he had reached up for a bottle of water, his pager went off with a priority code. He had been forced to send Laurie out with the drinks while he stayed behind.

As it turned out, the call was two fold, though the priority code was only for half of it. Cass had run into a problem with advertising and needed to discuss alternatives with him so a decision could be made before the end of the business day. When they were

done, she passed on a message that Mrs. Leminski had called to say that their meeting for that evening needed to be postponed due to a family emergency.

By the time he'd made it out to the front room, he could see that she was no longer on the porch. A twitch of the curtains had revealed the woman buckling her son into his car seat. Lee had stood there and watched her move, his mind in turmoil. She seemed to have an aura of strength about her that contradicted her connection to the dark woman who had attacked her. As much as he tried to wrap his mind around the idea, he just couldn't reconcile her to the role of a battered mate. It was almost as if this had been the first time the well dressed woman had ever resorted to physical violence.

Yeah, right, his mind scoffed. *Isn't that what they always say?* Lee shook his head. He just didn't know enough to come to any clear conclusions.

After a while, he let out a long sigh. He glanced at the clock hung prominently over the outer door, which read 5pm. *Well, nothing else to do tonight,* he mused. *I guess I can go get some people watching in.*