

Three

LEE frowned into the mirror as the towel dropped from his head to his shoulders. "Gods," he muttered, peering at black hair long enough to stand up in wild tufts. "I look like Shaggy. The kids're gonna think I'm a cartoon character!"

He leaned closer to the mirror, staring intently through the glass at his hair. With one hand, he reached up to prod at the damp clumps, knocking them this way and that as he picked through the strands. With each silver strand that he revealed, his frown slipped farther into a scowl.

"An *old* Shaggy."

Well, you're not exactly a kid anymore, that little voice in his mind that too often sounded like his mother reminded him.

Lee sighed and stood up. There was no use, he decided, in dwelling on it. He'd just have to visit his hair dresser first thing in the morning. With that decision made, he took a moment to give the rest of the body in the mirror the once over.

The hair on his chest and stomach, while prolific, was mostly a thin reddish-blond that failed to hide the torso length tattoo or the crisscross of scars it was designed to cover. The bright red flames of the tattoo leapt up from beneath the towel around his hips engulfing his navel and, reaching upwards still, licked the tail feathers of the straining phoenix whose wings were spread wide across his pecs and would move any time Lee flexed, as if the bird were truly flapping away from its birth pyre. Every color of the rainbow could be seen in the recreation of the ancient rebirth myth and Lee found the scowl clearing some as he considered the many layers of meaning he'd integrated into the design. It really was him: changed but the same, a continuity of mind amidst a world of physical alterations.

The tattoo worked especially well to accentuate the muscles he had acquired over the years - his one true vanity. Lee took great pride in the shape of each distinct muscle group and spent a few moments just posing the various groupings in the mirror. He might be short and he might be skinny, but he was strong and healthy, and that was far more important to him.

He shifted his gaze upwards and met the bright, almost clear blue eyes that stared back at him with the beginnings of a smirk. Around the red, neatly trimmed goatee was a lean face with just the beginnings of the lines that would someday deeply crease his face. Beneath the beard and a layer of stubble, a shallow, wide Adam's apple occasionally bobbed into view. *Really*, he thought to himself, *it's just the silver that gives my age away*.

Come on, come on, that other part of his mind chided. *You've got things to do today. Let's get a move on!*

"First things first," he muttered as he reached for the can of shaving cream.

Fifteen minutes later, Lee was standing barefoot in front of a closet full of shirts, a pair of pressed dress pants hanging open over a t-shirt tucked into boxers. The shirts all faced left and were arranged by type: formal dress shirts, business dress shirts, casual shirts and polo shirts. Lee stared hard at the closet, his eyes bouncing from one shirt to another, but always returning to the dress shirts.

"What are you doing?" he suddenly asked the room.

In exasperation at his own preoccupation today, he blindly reached into the closet and pulled down the first shirt his fingers touched. He glanced down as he slid his arms into the sleeves and nodded in satisfaction at the selection Fate had given him. The bright red casual shirt went well with the dark charcoal of his trousers.

Ten minutes more, and Lee was striding down the back walk to his truck. Black socks and dress shoes, and a thin belt, more for looks than out of necessity, completed his ensemble. He looked good and he knew it; sharp, but not too dressy.

As he hoisted himself up into his truck, though, he was careful to avoid thinking about the reasons behind his choice of clothes for the day. Some things were just better left unmentioned.



Lee strode smartly across the gravel-strewn lot. Like the rest of the property, the parking area still bore reminders of its original use as a farm in the crabgrass that fought tenaciously to retain its hold on the old cow pasture. Lee saw no reason to pave the lot, though, since the tough plants seemed capable enough of surviving the wear of vehicle tires and it left the area with the feel of the natural. He liked that feeling.

Lee breathed deeply as he wove his way through the crowd of vehicles parked in the lot. The air was still a crisp 40 degrees and the sky was clouded over and giving the first hints that it might snow again later that afternoon if the temperature dropped just a hair more. Despite the likelihood that he'd be a popsicle covered in muck before the day was out, he was smiling and looking forward to the work ahead.

He'd had a good week, and even the weather wasn't enough to dampen his mood. His second meeting with the production crew the day before had been more productive than he expected. They had worked out all of the preliminary details of the first two weeks of shooting for his movie and were ready to begin reserving locations and blocking in when the talent would be needed for each shoot. If the money was released on time, they would be burning the first rolls of film by the end of April.

Lee glanced curiously at the white PBX vendor's minivan tucked between two overpriced, oversized SUVs near the end of the lot. The blue and gold sunburst logo shone proudly from the rear window which, like the side windows, was tinted nearly black. *Huh*, he thought as he stepped onto the stone path that lead up to the converted farmhouse. *The phone system must be on the fritz again.*

Almost subconsciously, a hand reached back to verify that his cell was attached to his belt. As big a pain in the butt as the thing was to lug around and keep track of, Lee was glad he had it and didn't have to rely on the iffy office phone system. Despite the battery backup and voltage regulators he had on system, the cheap switch still managed to go down about once a month. Only Cass knew just how often he was in the phone closet babying the system back online. But, it had been the best they could afford when they'd originally set the old farm up as a studio and, now that there was money coming in, it all went right back out again to bring more people in for the show. Guest spots by famous people were expensive when they couldn't use you as free advertising.

"It's Friday," Lee cheerfully greeted the parents and children loitering in the lobby as he strolled across the room to the combo locked door that lead deeper into the house.

Most of the kids he passed looked like they were probably older siblings to those who would be in today's shoot. A few, though, appeared to be in the right age group and were likely waiting to be processed in. Regardless, the kids all enthusiastically returned his greeting while the parents stared at him with looks ranging from haughty indifference to outright hostility. Lee shook his head as he pushed through the security door. He suspected they would all be happier people if they stopped trying to live through their children.

As soon as the door closed behind him, thoughts of unhappy parents were lost to the bustle of shoot day hysteria. Lee found his smile broadening as he dodged the hectic people. This was one of the reasons he loved his job: the energy levels made him feel alive in ways that no other job he'd ever held had.

Smile in place, Lee gave a wave to Christa as passed an open doorway. She flashed him a smile in response as she lifted a digital camera to her shoulder. Her attention had returned to her sound tech before the door frame had cut her from Lee's view.

"Whoa!" he yelled when Laurie stepped out of another doorway right in front of him.

"Whoops," Laurie laughed. "Sorry!"

"Oh, hey," Lee said as he stepped back away from Laurie. "Just the person I was looking for." He flashed her a grin. "Uh, I don't suppose Lori's here yet?"

"Of course she is." Laurie's tone dripped with sarcasm as she flicked a hand towards the back of the building and continued, "She's out compensating for the glorious weather we've got to work with today. Why?"

"Ah. Well," Lee combed his fingers through his hair. "I just wanted to see if she could trim this mop before we got started today."

Laurie's brows rose and the corner of her mouth lifted in a smirk as her eyes raked across Lee. "Oh? We got VIPs coming today?"

"What? No. What made you think of that?"

Laurie laughed. "You're kidding, right?"

Lee frowned, his good mood draining away in the face of Laurie's humor. Her laughter quieted as Lee waited. He was sure the scowl that had his face feeling tense had something to do with her sudden loss of mirth. He couldn't stop the reaction, though. He hated being teased.

"Aw, c'mon, Lee," Laurie sighed. "Look at you. You're going to be outside today, doing a shoot that's likely to be in the rain, in the mud and on sweaty horses. And, you're dressed better than you usually do for a meeting with the producers for your movie!"

Lee looked down at himself briefly, his brows furrowed. *I'm not **that** dressed up*, he grumbled silently. *Am I?*

"But, don't worry," she continued, patting him on the shoulder with an ingenious grin. "I'm sure she'll be impressed."

"What!"

Laurie chortled as she ducked around the jamb to the room Christa and her crew were prepping in. Lee was sure that, if he had been a superhero of some kind, the doorway through which she had departed would have been noticeably wider considering the glare he shot after her departing form. That thought was enough to restore at least some of his good mood.

"Humph," Lee sniffed as he shoved his hands deep into his pockets and turned to continue his trek through the house. "Maybe," he confided to the carpet, "she won't even come today." He couldn't decide, though, whether it was relief or disappointment that accompanied that thought.

Lee suppressed a shiver as he scrubbed at his face. Instead of dropping, the temperature had climbed just enough to ensure that the precipitation was an ice cold rain that had soaked completely through his clothes in the first ten minutes after the sky had opened up despite the mesh they had erected to deflect the majority of the water. Another shudder seized him as he stared at the director's monitor where the last take was showing.

"Damn," he muttered, fighting the feeling that his chest and shoulders were trying to collapse in on themselves.

Lee glanced at the waiting children - four boys and two girls - huddled as closely together as the horses on which they sat allowed. They, at least, were completely sheltered from the rain and warmed by the three turbine jet-like heaters aimed at them. Still, their scenes were in the open and they were nearly as drenched as he was. The only thing that really saved them was the period-accurate wool highland costumes they wore.

Lee sighed fighting yet another shiver then directed his voice to where Jackie and her handlers were keeping the horses steady for the children. "Alright. Set them up for one last run. Either we hit it or we don't, but we need to get these kids inside." He continued the thought under his breath, "And before hypothermia makes me totally incoherent."

Jackie nodded then turned and began to lead the horse she held out from under the shelter. Lee squinted through the rain, waiting for each handler to indicate that his or her charge was in position. The script called for the horses to converge as they came toward and past the main camera at a speed that could later be made to appear to be a full gallop. To give the effects wizards enough footage to produce the final effect, the riders had to begin their approach from about seventy yards away.

Lee glanced behind him while he waited to ensure that the entire path the horses would travel was clear. He brought his attention forward again just as the handlers began to signal that they were in position. When he saw Jackie, the last to report, signal that she was ready, Lee keyed the mic on his headset.

Lee hunched his shoulders as much as possible to help him survive the delay of this last run, and then spoke the command that would begin the final shoot of the day, "On the set!" Even those who weren't wearing headsets heard him and, almost instantly, the chatter around him silenced.

"Lights." The entire area before him was instantly lit by several flood lights that would augment the limited daylight. "Balance?" he asked.

"Set," three voices reported back to him almost simultaneously.

Lee nodded absently as he glanced around the area one last time. The air was still, the only sound being the hiss of the rain, as if even nature was holding its breath in anticipation. "Cameras?" he asked into the silence.

"Rolling," the three voices replied, this time slightly staggered.

Lee glanced at Rollin, the young intern who stood fidgeting at his side. "Mark." He spoke into his mic, but directly to the boy as well.

Rollin's head snapped up at the command. He hesitated a moment before dashing out to the center of the area where the action would soon take place. Holding the electronic clap board as far out from his body as possible, he announced in a loud, clear voice, "Scene twenty-four C, take thirteen." He touched a button on the side of the slate and the gate snapped down, making a sharp clack that would allow the different rolls of film to be synchronized later.

Lee nodded his approval as the teen scampered back to his place.

Lee gave the whole set one last look. In addition to the main stationary camera, two more cameras on long booms would catch the action obliquely from above. The three camera configuration was one that Lee preferred because it allowed him to shoot action sequences with minimal risk of the sorts of inconsistencies that tend to crop into multiple takes of the same scene. When additional takes were required, the footage from all three cameras were usually kept and used together.

Satisfied, Lee called out the final command, "Action!"

At the very instant that Lee spoke, the entire area was flooded with a silver light that left afterimages in his eyes. The smell of ozone that accompanied the flash lifted the hairs on Lee's already goose pimpled arms and nape. Despite the surprise, the handlers continued their motions to give their horses swats to set them moving.

Oh, shit, Lee barely had time to think an instant before the entire valley was deafened by the crack and boom of thunder that seemed to originate directly over their heads. He could do nothing but watch in horror as one of the horses

reared, nearly throwing its suddenly pale faced rider from its back, before taking off at a full gallop headed right for the set.

Lee's eyes widened at the disaster unfolding before him. As he hesitated, it seemed as if everything around him slowed until it had stopped moving completely and all sound ceased. Even his heart seemed to have stopped, and his eyes were glued to the horse and rider at the center of the impending catastrophe. Still, he was able to see the entire set with perfect clarity.

Every raindrop between him and the horse hung suspended in its fall. The horse's eyes were rolled back, showing the whites; its front legs raised high, caught mid stride; its mouth was open with lips pulled back and teeth bared, mid scream. On its back, the child - they were still too far away for Lee to tell for sure which child it was - clutched at the saddle horn with eyes and mouth equally open and radiating terror.

Beyond them, he could see Jackie reaching out to grab her charge's reins as well as the back of the horse's saddle. It occurred to Lee that she intended to get behind the child and give chase. For some reason, though he hoped he was wrong, he didn't think she'd be able to catch the horse before something bad happened to its passenger.

Closer, Lee saw the two craned cameras pointed at the approaching pair, their record indicator lights glaring back at him. The platform they used to assist the riders onto their horses stood several feet to Lee's right, on the edge of the shelter under which the children had recently been huddled, just out of view of the cameras. Three fifty-five gallon drums stood at the back of the shelter, their feed lines snaking out to deliver fuel to the jet heaters. A bundle of cables lay at his feet, providing power connections to the main camera sitting slightly behind him, and the boom camera and flood lights to his left.

There was nothing between the horse and the field behind the set that would slow the horse down. It would be to and beyond him in mere seconds. Unfortunately, the terrain on the rear field wasn't as even as it was on the set. Lee's heart contracted as he thought of what would happen if the horse took that child beyond the area designated for the shoot.

That contraction was enough to set the world back in motion. The sound of thunder was the blood rushing through his veins; the whistle of wind was a huge gulp of air entering his lungs. Before he realized what he was doing, Lee was moving. The chances of him accomplishing anything that would succeed in protecting that child were slim and he hadn't the time to give thought to a plan.

Lee covered the distance between his place by the main camera and the horse shelter in about twelve strides and was still picking up speed as he reached the fuel tanks. He planted a foot at the bottom of the nearest tank, using weight of

the tank to give him a solid pivot point. As if he were rounding third base, Lee turned and kept running.

Lee risked a glance to his right. The horse had covered more than half the distance to the cameras. His heart beat painfully in his chest at the thought that he wasn't going to be there in time. He leaned forward and forced his legs to pump harder. There would be no second take on this one.

The thunderous squelch of hooves hitting the soaked ground drowned out the sounds of Lee's foot hitting the first step of the loading platform. He ignored the other three steps as his hands gripped the rails and used them to propel himself forward. He hit the top with the next step and allowed his knee to flex into a deep crouch.

Without looking, without thinking, Lee shot out of the crouch and into the air. He hadn't even the time to send a prayer to his gods. Either the horse would be where he needed it, or it wouldn't.

The sudden jolt of landing on the horse's back knocked the wind from his lungs and was almost enough to send him sliding right back off again. But, Lee refused to accept failure as an option. He allowed his momentum to carry his upper body forward, leaning in to and wrapping around the child. For an instant, as he grabbed the saddle horn just below the smaller hands clenching it, Lee thought he would be able to just ride out the horse's panicked run, using himself as a safety precaution to keep the child in his saddle.

The sudden addition of weight to the already frightened horse's back, however, spooked it even worse and it cut to the right in an attempt to escape this new terror. Unfortunately, the ground was too wet to support the weight of a full-sized, full speed horse. The rear legs, which had been the ones to begin the turn, slid out from under the horse eliciting a scream from the beast and a screech from the child on its back.

Lee grimaced as the situation went from bad to worse. The horse tried to compensate for the loss of footing, but it had too much momentum. Lee wrapped his arms around the child and leaned back, pulling the kid loose from the saddle and stirrups in the same instant that the horse's rear end collided with the main camera's base.

The passengers continued forward when the horse's motion was halted by the collision. Lee kept himself wrapped around the child, protecting the kid as best as he could as the two tumbled free. They missed hitting the camera base and crashed instead into a light stand, which shattered in an explosion of light when it toppled and bounced off the falling camera.

Lee winced at the pain that lanced through his leg where the stand had landed, though he was glad it had stopped their tumble. Amazingly, they had ended up in a sitting position. Before he had a chance to thank which ever agent of providence that had allowed him to get the child safely free from the crazed horse and the disaster of falling equipment, something heavy and sharp struck the back of his head.

For Lee, the world suddenly ceased to exist.