

# Four

**LEE** opened his eyes and stared at the sky in confusion. *Stars? What the heck?* He blinked slowly but the stars remained, though he could have sworn they moved slightly as his eyes focused.

*Alright, why aren't the set lights on?* Lee frowned. *And when the hell did it get so dark out?*

Lee lay still as he tried to piece together how he had come to be laying flat on his back – when he realized that's where he was – and staring up at a sky full of stars. For some reason he couldn't quite grasp, his mind kept skittering away as if it were an errant puppy free from its leash. It was frustrating and he felt his jaw tensing tighter and tighter the longer he tried to recall how he had ended up on his back.

Giving up on the immediate past, Lee cast back farther until his mind finally gave up a memory. In his mind's eye, he saw the sudden flash as one of the set lights exploded above his head. He remembered curling himself over a child – he hadn't had the chance to identify *which* child – to prevent the hot glass fragments from hitting either of them in the face. He remembered closing his eyes protectively and the pain in his leg when the stand hit him, a pain that was now awake and reminding him of just what a stupid trick he'd pulled. The painful throb in his leg seemed to awaken an even more painful throb in his head, but he could recall nothing that would explain this particular ache.

As he lay probing at the empty spot in his memories, the starry night sky slowly resolved itself into the meshed rain shield that had been erected to deflect most of the water away from the main filming area. At about the same moment that he realized what he was looking at, Lee felt a hand grip his shoulder and give it a light shake.

"Lee?"

Lee rolled his head to the right to look at the person addressing him. However, the explosion that erupted in his skull at the movement halted the motion before it had really gotten started and elicited a sharp hiss instead.

"Shhh, don't try to move," the voice directed. Without seeing the speaker, Lee couldn't even begin to guess who was addressing him; though he wasn't sure whether it was the rush of blood thumping in his ears in time with his heartbeat or the general fuzzy disconnectedness of his mind that prevented him from identifying the speaker.

"Ow," Lee finally moaned when the pain had settled back down to the ache it had been before.

As if that one word had opened a dam, a flood of voices suddenly swept over Lee, some directed at him, but just as many at each other. "Holy shit, Boss!" "Wait'll I tell my wife about this." "What the heck were you thinking?" "Did you see him jump—" "Damn, man." "Is he alright?" "Jesus, Lee, are you nuts?" Lee flinched at the tide of sound, his eyes closing and his arms coming up as if to protect his face. He was unable to keep up with the cacophonous wave of comments directed his way and simply chose to ignore them for the time being.

"All right, quiet down folks!" a different voice commanded from somewhere above and behind Lee. The effect was immediate. Even Lee was stunned to hear that voice deliver a demand with such authoritative volume, though he couldn't say just why. When he realized that the quiet remained unbroken, he slowly lowered his hands.

"Lee?"

The voice was much closer. Lee slowly opened his eyes and stared at the dark face hovering inches above his own. It took several seconds for the rounded features to resolve themselves into his soft-spoken security chief. *Lane. Good.* Lee relaxed, letting his eyes slide shut.

"Lee?" Lane called again. "C'mon, lemme see those baby blues again."

"In a minute," Lee muttered as much to her as to himself.

"Now would be better," she informed him. "C'mon, Lee. You've done enough sleeping and I really need to have a look at those eyes."

Lee sighed. "Only if you promise to do something about this headache," he finally told her. "And, tell me what the hell happened."

"Deal."

Reluctantly, Lee slowly cracked his eyes open. It took a moment for his vision to clear again but when it did, he found Lane hovering over him with a concerned expression on her face. He waited while she studied him, her eyes at first locked with his and then roving over his face and down the length of his body.

"Well?"

"Well, it looks like you're going to have one heck of a headache," she informed him.

"No, really?" Lee growled at his security chief as he reached up to gingerly touch the sore spot at the base of his skull. "Remind me again why I pay you extra for your medical background."

Lane smiled at his grumpy retort. "No one ever said I was a doctor, Lee." She sat back on her heels. "But, I'm pretty sure you're gonna live. Mild concussions aren't generally lethal in this day and age."

Lee gave her a grim smile. "Well, that's a relief."

"Yeah, well, don't get too excited just yet," she warned him, a palm pressing his shoulder firmly to the ground. "They tell me you took a pretty good hit to the neck and back. Until the real medics get here to check you out, I need you to just lie still."

Lee frowned. "You're kidding, right?"

"Fraid not." Lee blew out an exasperated breath at the answer.

At the same time, he heard a loud answering inhalation from beyond Lane as if a large group of people had all gasped at once. He watched Lane frown as she glanced over her shoulder and raised his brows. Curious despite the throb in his head and leg, Lee rolled his eyes until he could just make out a crowd gathered around the director's monitor.

Lee couldn't tell for sure, but it looked to him like everyone on the lot besides himself and Lane was there. Judging by the furtive glances he was receiving, he could guess exactly what they were looking at. Even the children, freed of their mounts, were peering at the monitor then at Lee with looks ranging from awe to outright fear.

Seeing the kids still in the costumes from the shoot peeking out around the adults at him brought on a flash of memory. Green eyes, wide with fear, beneath unruly damp sandy-blonde curls floated through Lee's foggy mind. It took him a long moment to place the memory but, when he did, Lee felt his stomach lurch with worry.

"Lane?"

Lane brought her attention back to him immediately. "Yeah?"

"Where's the kid?"

Lane flashed him a grin then turned toward the crowd and bellowed, "Hey, Dillon!" Lee watched and, when a tawny head appeared between two horse wranglers, Lane shouted, "C'mon over here."

"He's fine," she explained to Lee as the boy trotted towards them. "I had to send him with Jackie while we pulled the equipment off of you. He was pretty upset when you didn't respond to him when everything had stopped falling."

"Ah," Lee grunted, his eyes never leaving the approaching child.

Dillon stopped at Lane's side and looked down at Lee, uncertainty and concern at war on his expressive face. Lee's eyes widened in surprise when the visage before him was overlaid by a memory from earlier in the week. The boy whose mother Lee had protected from attack was the very same one standing before him now, the one Lane said he had pulled free from the maddened horse.

As Lee stared, Dillon turned to Lane. "Is he okay now?"

"Yeah, he's okay. Mostly. We're going to wait until the ambulance gets here, though, just to be sure."

Lee watched Dillon's green eyes, a shade darker than his mother's, get wide at mention of the ambulance and felt a stab of compassion for the boy who had been through quite a lot for someone his age. "Hey, buddy," he called hoarsely. When Dillon turned towards him, Lee lifted his hand out and gestured the boy closer.

Dillon came to Lee's side and squatted near his head. Lee waved the boy closer until he was leaning close to his face. Lee rolled his eyes left then right before speaking. "Don't tell anyone," he whispered, "but I'm fine. This is just an excuse so I can take a break."

Dillon's face lit up, the worry blown away by the words that echoed those he had spoken to the child earlier in the week. He glanced over his shoulder at Lane then whispered back to Lee, "I won't tell anyone."

Lee smiled. However, the smile soon slipped as a pair of emergency response technicians stepped into his line of sight carrying all sorts of gear. Lane tapped the boy on the shoulder. "Okay, Dillon, let's the medical people have a turn at Lee. You can talk to him again later."

Dillon gave Lee a questioning look to which he received a wink and a smile. At the reassurance, the child placed a hand on Lee's shoulder and leaned over until his lips were nearly on Lee's ear. "Watch out for the ferro-mom-met-her," he warned, carefully pronouncing each syllable of the difficult word.

Lee's grin broadened at the warning. "I will," he assured the boy.

"C'mon, kiddo. Let's leave the hero to his attendants." Lane's eyes twinkled in her serious face at that last jibe.

Lee's brows lifted as he watched Lane lead Dillon back to the crowd gathered around the director's monitor. *Hero?* Lee mused. *Oh, boy.*

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A blue wisp of smoke curled purposely upward from the hot pan, carrying with it the tantalizing scent of sizzling pork fat. The thin cloud of flavor briefly joined others of its kind in hovering near the polished pine cabinet doors before drifting onward. The scent, no longer wearing its blued cloak, passed through the doorway and into a much larger room where it paused above a buff leather sofa to wait for its siblings to follow the trail it had left behind. When enough had crowded into the spacious sitting room to fill every nook among the shelves lining the walls, the flavored air pushed upward towards the vaulted ceiling high above where it tumbled over a railing and headed for the slumbering figure centered in the loft.

Lee's nose twitched at the tantalizing smell that tickled his taste buds. For several breaths, each deeper than the last, his nostrils quivered as his sleeping mind tasted the scented air. Even after his brain had identified the source, it took a long minute to prod him close enough to consciousness to acknowledge the intrusion.

Lee inhaled deeply. *Bacon?* he wondered fuzzily as he rolled onto his back.

"Oww!" Lee groaned, quickly rolling back onto his side. "Gods," he hissed hoarsely as his free hand reached up to cup the knot on the back of his head.

Lee waited until the pain in his skull settled to a dull throb then pushed himself up. He scrubbed blearily at his face ending by scratching his chin behind the beard where new stubble left his skin feeling like rough sandpaper. As his hand fell limply to the bed, a huge yawn forced his jaw open until it cracked and a tiny part of him began to wonder if it was possible for his mouth to get stuck that way.

His mouth finally snapped shut with a click of teeth at the same time that a waft of smoke floated past him. Lee's brows furled as he carefully sniffed the air.

"Bacon?" he asked the room. "What the--?" Before he could finish the thought, Lee's memory provided the answer in the form of a shadowed face outlined by the light from below hovering above his own.

He smiled. "Cass."

On the heels of that memory came a jumble of others. He recalled arguing with the rescuers that he was fine. They had eventually bundled him up into their truck and taken him to the hospital regardless of his self-diagnosis. The trip had made him nauseous, he remembered, and they had used that as justification for the delay he experienced when he arrived at the hospital.

When the doctors had finally released him to Cass' care with the caution that he had a mild concussion, he had wanted to find the emergency workers to pass on an "I told you so." However, Cass had managed to drag him out before he'd made a total fool of himself - he hoped. He really couldn't remember now why it had been so important that they know he had diagnosed himself correctly.

*Probably that ego of yours looking to assert itself,* Lee ruefully admitted to himself. He snorted softly in self disgust as he reached for the shirt lying on the floor by the bed. *You can't ever let anyone else be right, can you?*

While he didn't think Cass would mind one way or the other, Lee added a pair of shorts to his ensemble before wandering down out of his loft. There were only thirteen steps between the loft and the living room, but if asked, Lee would've sworn it took him a full ten minutes to descend. It seemed to him almost as if he was walking in molasses or some other thick substance. Of course, he chose to ignore the fact that his head felt a bit spacey as well. He didn't want to deal with the injury and had always found the fastest way to recover from one was to simply pretend it didn't happen. -And Lee was good at pretending.

He paused in the doorway to the kitchen to take a deep breath. The smell of sautéed mushrooms and ham joined the bacon, causing Lee's very empty stomach to grumble a reminder about how long it had been since it had seen food. His grin changed from amused to embarrassed when Cass looked up at the sound.

"Well, good morning, Sleeping Beauty," she laughed. "Hungry, are we?"

"Yeah," Lee sighed as he shuffled toward the central island that served double duty as a breakfast nook. He pulled a stool out from under the overhang and climbed up onto it.

"Lucky for you," Cass informed him once he'd settled himself and returned his attention to her, "I'm almost done here."

"Lucky me," Lee agreed. He propped his chin on his fist and watched as Cass tipped a bowl over a frying pan and began coaxing slices of potato out with a fork.

With the strange disconnectedness that had been with him since he had awoken on the muddier day before, it was easy to daydream as he watched his friend move about his kitchen as if she owned the space. And, for a moment, Lee

indulged himself in one of his favorite fantasies where he and Cass were a couple. As he watched her split her attention between the quickly congealing eggs and the sizzling home fries, though, his mind overlaid her body with another, smaller form.

When she turned, Lee's eyes were drawn slowly up from the plate of scrambled eggs in her hand to the sparkling green eyes framed by waves of copper that regarded him quizzically. She tilted her head, her thin brows drawing together as she continued to peer at him, and then stepped closer and pushed the plate onto the countertop next to him. She reached out a hand and settled it on his shoulder.

"Lee?"

"Hmm?"

She leaned down so their eyes were level. "Are you okay?"

"Uh-huh."

She quirked a brow. Lee was sure he had never seen such a peculiar shade of green before. "That's funny, you don't *look* okay."

"Huh?" Lee frowned. "I don't?"

"No, you don't. Your eyes are completely unfocused."

Lee blinked, then blinked again. The green eyes before him vanished leaving a familiar pair of bloodshot honey-brown ones in their place.

"Uh..."

Lee scrubbed at his face in a vain attempt to shake loose the cobwebs. He had fantasized and daydreamed plenty, but he couldn't recall ever hallucinating outright. He watched Cass' face as her features relaxed with relief.

"That's better." Cass straightened back up, leaving her hand resting on his shoulder. "Do you know what day it is?"

Lee sighed. "It's..." His brows drew together. "Well, unless I slept for more than just the night, it's Saturday."

"Well," Cass replied cheerfully, "It sounds like you're back in the here and now."

"Yeah," Lee muttered, "I think."

Cass gave his shoulder a squeeze as she pushed the plate of food in front of him. "Here, eat up. It'll help."

Lee glanced at the plate as his stomach growled to remind him of the reason he had left his bed in the first place. He smiled up at Cass. "Thanks."

Her eyes twinkled when she grinned and said, "All part of the service, Mr. Hero, sir."

Lee's fork halted halfway to his mouth and he gave her a withering look. Cass chortled at his glare then turned and headed back to the stove.

*If I'm such a superhero, why isn't she a puddle of goo right now? That look shoulda melted her!* he pouted at her back. *Or, scared her at the least.*

"And, you can stop pouting," she told him without turning around. "That kid could've been seriously hurt or died if you hadn't acted before the horse got out to those old pastures."

Lee blew out an exasperated breath, "Yeah, well. It was still a stupid stunt that could've ended just as badly as if I'd done nothing."

"Look here, Mister," Cass began sternly, spinning around and pointing the spatula at him. "None of the 'could haves' happened. That kid came out of that without so much as a scratch because of you."

Lee shoved a forkful of eggs into his mouth and began chewing. She couldn't fault him for his silence if his mouth was full. Truth be told, he had no come back but he really hated to admit defeat. Cass narrowed her eyes at him a moment then nodded and turned back to her cooking.

"Besides," she continued as she tipped a frying pan over a plate. "The whole city considers you a hero now, so you just better get used to it."

"Wh-" Lee tried to ask. The shock of such a revelation, however, sent parts of the partially chewed mouthful of potatoes into his throat where it caused a coughing fit that stole his breath. Cass was at his side in an instant, pounding his back and encouraging him to take deep breaths.

When the coughing died down, Cass retrieved a glass of water and handed it to him. "Here, try a sip of this."

Lee took several small sips before setting the glass down. He drew in a long, deep breath and held it to the count of ten, then slowly released it. He repeated the measure until he was sure he wasn't going to cough anymore and then turned a hard gaze on Cass.



"What do you mean, 'the whole city'?"

"Well, heroic or not, that stunt cost more than just a bump on the head."

Lee took another small sip of water as he waited for her to continue. When she didn't, he asked, "And?"

"And..." Cass ducked her head then turned and retrieved her plate from the counter. She turned and leaned against the counter.

Lee growled.

Cass sighed. "And, Stacey decided to take advantage of the free publicity to help defray the costs of replacing the camera and mounting hardware that horse wrecked."

Lee's eyes narrowed. "What free publicity?"

Cass scooped up some eggs and stuffed them in her mouth, using Lee's own tactic against him. Lee sighed and bit into a piece of bacon, crunching noisily on the well crisped strip while he waited less than patiently for her to finish. He stopped chewing when he saw her draw breath to speak.

"If you remember, the cameras were rolling when everything went south. Stacey was in the suite while Charlie was assembling the dailies. When she saw what had been captured, she directed him to assemble everything he had from the incident and then sent the edited footage to KDKA and Pixie along with a press release. "

"Holy fucking gods!" Lee growled. "What the hell was she thinking?"

Cass gave him a reproving look. "What she was thinking," she informed him, "was that twenty-eight thousand dollars is going to put a good dent into the budget for your movie and you haven't even started shooting yet. Live action children's movies don't bring in the kind of cash that mainstream blockbusters do, so she decided to take this opportunity to get your name out there now before she has to dip into advertising funds to do it."

Lee had closed his eyes when Cass mentioned the money. Now that she had finished speaking, he sighed in defeat and hung his head. *Well, you really shoulda seen that coming.*

After a moment, he lifted his head and looked at his old friend. "You know, this is going to make going out harder than usual," he told her softly.

Cass reached across the counter to where Lee's hand rested and gave it a squeeze. "I know, hun."

The two sat in companionable silence as they worked on clearing their plates. When Cass finished, she sat back and regarded Lee thoughtfully. Lee swallowed his last bite then lifted a questioning brow to her.

"You know," she began slowly, "you could put off the dating-meeting strangers thing for a while."

"Cass," Lee warned.

"Now," Cass held up her hand to halt his tirade before it got started. "I know how important this is to you." She tilted her head and regarded him from beneath suddenly heavy brows. "Even if I think it's about the most ridiculous idea you've ever allowed to become lodged in that twisted mind of yours," she continued drolly.

Lee shrugged and gave her a small, embarrassed smile. Cass chuckled.

"But," she continued, "I don't think it will kill you to hold off on your campaign for a couple of weeks until the news hounds find something else to chase after."

Cass began gathering up the dirty dishes while Lee mulled over her suggestion. *She's got a point*, that voice that sounded vaguely like his mother told him. *If you're meant to meet your soulmate by taking strangers to dinner, then it's unlikely that a short respite will affect the outcome.*

*Yeah.*

Lee sighed, partly in resignation but also in relief. He really didn't like to hide from people. However, he didn't much care for his current method for meeting women, either. He just couldn't shake the idea that he'd miss out if he didn't accept an invitation. This, at least, would give him a valid excuse to decline.

Lee watched Cass scrub dishes for a bit longer then said, "Okay."

She turned from the sink, leaving her wet hands hovering over the suds, and gave him a bright smile. "Good."

Lee returned the smile, but it quickly faded as a sudden thought occurred to him. "I've already got a date tonight."

"So?" Cass shrugged. "Cancel it."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

This time, Lee shrugged. "I just can't."

"Well then, postpone it."

"But, I've already got the reservations and everything set up."

Cass blew out an exasperated breath and turned back to the dishes. "Well, I guess you'll just have to go, then," she said, putting in a little extra effort in cleaning a frying pan. "After all, those aren't the sorts of things that can be rescheduled," she continued sarcastically.

*In other words, you really **are** an idiot.*

"Yeah," Lee softly agreed.