

Six

THIN, perfectly painted lips pursed beneath thickly lined eyes narrowed in accusation. Delicate shoulders, broadened by the pads in a tan linen blazer by the British designer Boden, twitched back in defiant righteousness thrusting a sparkling golden cross into prominence. Boney fingers with perfectly manicured nails rested primly upon a small Gucci look-alike purse while the toe of a high-heeled shoe tapped lightly in agitation.

"Mrs. Leminski," Lee sighed when he decided the silence had stretched on long enough, "I am *not* going to get into a discussion with you about my hiring practices. I am in compliance with all local and federal guidelines for the employment of childcare workers. That's all I need to say."

Mrs. Leminski opened her mouth to protest but Lee shook his head and spoke again before she could begin. "In Pittsburgh, the people in my employ are protected from harassment and discrimination. The parents who bring their children to act in my show can have any opinion they'd like, but I don't tolerate discriminatory behavior from either them or their children. So, I'm not going to tolerate it from the representative of some organization here to cause trouble."

C'mon, lady, drop it, Lee thought at the woman as he watched her absorb what he'd just said. *I'm really not in the mood to deal with your crap.*

At every turn for the last forty-five minutes, Mrs. Leminski had tried to engage Lee in a debate about the lesbians and gay men that comprised more than two-thirds of his workforce. Cass had dug up some very embarrassing dirt on MAUVE, the religious-based group Mrs. Leminski represented, but, so far, Lee had been reluctant to mention what had been uncovered. All he wanted to do was get the woman to spell out her supposed concerns about violence in his show so he could address them and be done with.

Mrs. Leminski frowned, the mask that was her thickly applied make-up wrinkling unnaturally. "I'm not here to cause trouble, Mr. Rorrison," she contradicted. "But, we know for a fact that children will emulate the adults they see. If children are exposed to deviants such as you employ, they will think that such behavior is acceptable."

Lee really wished he could growl at this woman; maybe even give her a lip curling snarl. Instead, he flicked his eyes toward the tiny clock on his desk. *Ten more minutes,* he sighed to himself.

"Mrs. Leminski, I'm not sure what behavior you could be referring to."

"Why, acts of perversion, of course," the indignant woman replied as if that explained everything.

Lee stared blankly at the MAUVE representative. After a moment, he drew a long breath. "Mrs. Leminski, I produce educational pieces based on historical records for children. I do *not* produce porn.

"I'm not sure what sort of acts of perversion you imagine go on among people who are different from yourself, but I can assure you that my employees are completely professional. The children are as safe from untoward influences here as they are at their schools - perhaps more so."

As he spoke, Lee leaned closer and closer to his desk and the woman sitting beyond it, and his voice rose accordingly. For her part, Mrs. Leminski shrank further into herself as he came closer, her expression a cross between confusion and fear. Lee didn't recognize the second emotion until he paused to take a breath. However, that realization halted his rant before it had really begun.

Instead, he settled back into his chair and regarded her curiously. *Huh. I wonder...* He glanced at the folder Cass had given him. He didn't recall seeing her name on any of the files, but that didn't mean she wasn't in the same boat as much of the membership.

Before he could say anything more, though, the indicator on his intercom lit. Lee looked up at the fidgeting woman then sighed loudly. "Would you excuse me a moment?"

At her nodded assent, Lee pressed the Talk button. "Yes?"

"I'm sorry to bother you, Mr. Rorrison," his admin began, "but Ms. Daich is here and needs to see you immediately."

Lee blinked at the intercom in surprise. "Uh, okay," he replied. "Do you know what she needs?"

"She didn't say. But, she's got several people here with her."

Oh, goodie. Lee sighed again. "Alright, I'll be out shortly."

With that, Lee turned his attention back to his guest. Mrs. Leminski had recovered her composure and some of the haughtily arrogant posture she'd had when she first entered his office. Lee's eyes narrowed briefly in response to the change before he pushed himself to his feet.

"Mrs. Leminski, I'm really sorry, but I need to cut this meeting short. It seems my boss is here with some folks and I need to take care of them."

"Yes, of course." The woman stood slowly, clutching her purse to her chest. As Lee ushered her to the door, she added, "I expect we'll be speaking again soon."

Oh, joy. Lee nodded politely. "Just give my office a call. I'm sure my admin will take care of your needs." *But only if I take away that bonus she just got.*

Mrs. Leminski preceded Lee out of the office. When she had cleared the doorway, Lee saw the crowd Stacey had brought with her and his heart sank. In the reception room stood an entire production crew and Stacy Smith, the highly acclaimed newscaster for KDKA.

Great. Just what I needed today.

"D.J.?"

"Yeh?" a lightly accented male voice broadcast from the speaker grill.

"Hey, it's Lee."

"Lee!" the young Kiwi responded with more enthusiasm. "How's it going, mate? Haven't seen ya around in a while."

"Yeah, I know. I've been running ragged trying to juggle the show and the prep for the movie."

"Yeh? How's that goin'?"

Lee blew out an explosive breath to which D.J. gave a hearty laugh. "Hey, listen. D'you have a class tonight?"

"Naw. Wednesdays are usually the beginners, but we're on a break between classes right now. I was gonna work on the thesis tonight. Why?"

"Oh. Well, it's been a hel of week and I thought a few rounds with you might settle me down some."

"Hey, I can write about the motions of the body anytime. When can ya get down here?"

Lee glanced at the tiny clock on his desk and grimaced. It was already six o'clock. "How about nine?"

"Sure. That sounds great. Mebbe we c'n knock back a coupla beers after."

Lee grinned. He was already looking forward to sparring with his sensei. "Yeah, maybe." *I might need **that** more than the sparring.* "Alright, well, I gotta wrap things up here. I'll see you at nine."

"Right, mate. Catch ya later."

"Later." Lee reached forward and tapped the disconnect on his speaker phone, then leaned back in his chair with sigh and let his mind wander for a moment.

He liked the younger New Zealander who had taken over as his martial arts instructor many years ago. D.J. was like lightening on the tatami and his wit was equally swift off the mat. They had similar martial arts backgrounds which made it easy for them to work together, and D.J.'s studies in physiology and physical therapy filled the gaps in Lee's innate knowledge of the weaknesses of the human body. There was always something for them to learn from each other.

"So," Cass spoke into the silent office.

"Gah!" Lee jumped half out of his skin in surprise.

"Sorry," Cass laughed from her place in the doorway though her grin said that she was anything but. "You're going to work out with D.J. tonight, huh?"

As she waited for him to gather his wits, Cass bustled into the office and settled onto the couch behind Lee's desk, forcing him to swivel his chair to keep her in sight. "Don't worry about it," he said when she'd stopped moving. "And, yeah."

"Good." She swatted his knee. "Maybe it'll get you out of the funk you've been in all week."

Lee frowned. "What do you mean?" He knew he'd been feeling a bit listless since Sunday, disappointed and angry at himself for *being* disappointed, but he thought he'd kept his emotions to himself.

"Now," Cass laughed, "don't go getting all defensive. You can mope all you want around the rest of the folks here without being noticed, but *I* know you." She scooted to the edge of the couch and dropped her voice. "So, what's up with you, hmm?"

Lee shrugged and crossed his arms as he leaned back away from his best friend. "Nothing."

"Uh-huh. I'm not buying it."

Lee shook his head. "Really."

"Right. So, lemme guess..." She tilted her head and regarded him, tapping a forefinger on her pursed lips. A mischievous smile finally appeared and she said, "Your little hearthrob hasn't called you yet."

Lee blew out a breath. *I knew I should never have told her about that.*

Cass chuckled. "That's it, isn't it? You were all excited about giving her your card and she hasn't used it yet."

Lee rolled his eyes then nodded and hung his head with a sigh. "For once," he mumbled to his lap, "I give my card to someone I'd actually *like* to call back and there's not a peep."

Cass leaned farther forward and rubbed his shoulder. "I'm sure there's a good reason why she hasn't called."

"Yeah," Lee sighed. "Because she ain't interested."

Cass snorted. "Right." The room was silent for a long moment. Finally, she settled back onto the couch and leaned an elbow interestedly on the arm. "So, tell me about all the excitement I missed here this afternoon."

"Excitement?" Lee made a sound of disgust. "More like aggravation."

Cass laughed heartily. "That's just the Mope talking. I mean, when's the last time Stacy Smith went into the field to get a story? You should feel privileged."

"Yeah," Lee griped. "I'm so special I get my own private short bus."

"That's not funny!" his friend chortled, swatting his arm. "Brat."

Lee shrugged. "Yup, that's me." But, even he finally cracked a smile.

Cass settled down some when she saw it. "That's better. Now, tell me about Mrs. Leminski. Was the folder useful?"

Lee shook his head. "No, not really." Cass' expression fell and he hurried to explain, "I looked in it and I may yet have to use that information. But, today I thought I'd hear her out... get a feel for where they were coming from and how they're going to be a problem."

"That doesn't sound like you, but okay. So, what did you learn?"

"Well," Lee pushed his desk chair with his toe, giving it a spin as he gathered his thoughts. "First she started in on that Bandura crap from the fifties." At Cass' blank look, he paused. "Umm... that nonsense with the Bobo the clown punching bag... he was the first to try to quantitatively prove a correlation between viewing violence and acting violent."

Cass' expression cleared. "Oh. So that's the foundation of their argument."

Lee nodded. "Mostly, yeah. The whole idea boils down to humans being little more than mimics." He gave her wry grin. "Y'know, 'monkey see, monkey do.'"

Cass chuckled. "And?"

"And, when she was done with her spiel, I proceeded to undermine her basis for argument. I told her how Thorndike proved that there is no such thing as observational learning; that, yes, children may mimic actions they have recently seen on television - or in person, but the effects are temporary. Hours later, a child is no more likely to act violently than they were before they were exposed to violence."

"I see," Cass responded dazedly when Lee paused to take a breath.

Lee shook his head in amusement. "Anyway, once I'd countered her basic premise, she changed directions and began pressing issues about the company rather than the show."

Cass' brows furrowed. "Huh?"

Lee smirked. "She's unhappy that I employ deviants."

"What!" Wide eyes stared at him in disbelief.

"Yeah. That was pretty much my reaction, too. But, every time I tried to get her back on the subject of the show, she'd somehow turn the conversation around and steer headlong into an attempt to engage me in a philosophical debate on morals."

"*Tried?*"

"Yup. I just wasn't in the mood to bite."

"Mr. Pagan-Bible-Scholar didn't jump at the challenge of changing someone's understanding of the 'sacred text,' huh?" Cass snickered. "Grump."

Lee shrugged but couldn't hide the embarrassed grin that tugged the corners of his mouth. After a second, he cleared his throat and continued, "Anyway, Stacey showed up with the news crew and saved me from yet another round of crap." He gave Cass a sidelong look, letting the grin turn into a smirk. "And, judging by the expression on that woman's face, I can bet we'll hear more from her bigoted ass."

For a moment, both of them were silent as they each imagined the snippy MAUVE representative encountering the six and a half foot tall stylishly dressed executive producer with those huge hands and deep voice. In that span of shared imagination, they both sported knowing smirks. Finally, Cass shook her head and sighed, breaking the spell.

"You'd think, in this day and age, that folks would be a little more open minded."

Lee snorted. "You'd think."

"Well, I guess we'll just have to deal with her when the time comes," Cass decided, dismissing the woman and her problems in the same breath. "So, what about Stacy Smith?"

Lee shrugged. "He's about what you'd expect, average size and all that." He paused to think back. "He's a hell of an investigator, though. And I don't just mean his Emmys and other awards."

"What makes you say that?"

"Well, it's been what? Five days since the accident?"

Cass nodded. "About, yeah?"

"Right. So, this guy already has details about my previous career." At her widened eyes, Lee continued, "Exactly. You *know* what he could stumble on if he looks closely enough."

"Oh my god," she breathed and Lee nodded.

"Luckily, he didn't *seem* interested in my background. It was more like he wanted it as filler, to draw a picture of a whole person rather than a single incident."

"Wow," Cass blurted. "Still, that's pretty scary."

Lee sighed. "Yeah. But, he seems like a real professional. I guess I'll just have to trust Providence that he doesn't find and broadcast something we'd rather he didn't."

Cass nodded again, then glanced at her watch and gave a start. "Yikes!" She stood. "And, on that note, I'm going to call it a night."

Lee confirmed the time as well, and grimaced as he pushed himself up out of the desk chair. He was going to seriously have to rush to meet D.J. on time. As he followed her out, he said, "Have a good night, Cass."

She paused at the threshold and glanced back at him. "Have fun and try not to break anything playing tonight."

With that, she was gone.

Lee shook his head hard, sending the sweat that was trickling down from his scalp flying. His every muscle was beginning to protest the extended activity and some part of his mind knew that he'd pay dearly later for all the unexpected strain. He shook that off, too. Despite it all, at that moment, a broad and feral grin stretched his lips.

He and D.J. had already been exchanging attacks at full speed for nearly half an hour, and had been doing some light sparring for three quarters of an hour before that. Thus far, they had been evenly matched with neither able to get a definitive advantage over the other and, even after such a prolonged encounter, it didn't seem like the balance between them would change. Now, thankfully, they were again slowly circling each other with chests heaving as they searched for an opening or weakness.

Lee consciously slowed and deepened his breaths as he carefully shuffled leftward, helping his body to recover from the strain faster. Just as he began to draw another deep breath, D.J. surged forward, his crouch deepening as he crossed the space between them. The sudden attack, launched during the most vulnerable point in a fighter's rhythm, caused Lee to stop for just a moment.

As he tried to complete his breath and adjust to the oncoming attack, Lee watched his opponent explode upwards. By the time Lee's body began to react, D.J. was already airborne with his entire body compressed behind the edge of his swiftly approaching left foot. Because he had paused at that crucial instant, Lee had no choice but to completely relax and let gravity pull him to the floor before he was struck.

That flying kick was the closest D.J. had come all night to breaching Lee's defenses. But, he couldn't just let the attack go without retaliation and, rather than simply wait for D.J. to pass over him, Lee rolled back onto his shoulders coming close to a handstand and whipped his own leg up and around. The ball of his foot struck D.J.'s inner thigh in exactly the same spot Lee's knuckle had struck the belligerent Jesimae the week prior.

Lee continued the roll begun by his kick until he'd regained his feet, never once letting his eyes leave his opponent. It was at D.J.'s landing that the effect of the strike became apparent. Instead of uncurling his legs and bouncing lightly back into position to receive a counter-attack, D.J. crumpled to the mat with a startled squawk - the first sound either of them had uttered since they began that wasn't a grunt, hiss or martial shout.

"Whoa," Lee responded, surprised that his kick had been as accurate and effective as it obviously was on the moving target. "Are you okay?"

D.J. had the leg Lee had struck pulled to his chest and was glaring up at him. "Bollocks," he finally cursed, slowly extending the leg.

Lee stepped closer to his friend, relaxing his stance as he approached. When he reached D.J., he offered his hand saying, "Here, let me help you up. That's a pretty tricky nerve strike."

D.J. grunted and gripped Lee's proffered hand, allowing his torso to be lifted from the floor. As Lee began to step backwards, though, D.J. used his free hand to trap Lee against his wrist and bucked. The sudden motion jerked Lee out of balance and towards his instructor. As Lee stumbled forwards, D.J. planted the foot of his uninjured leg into Lee's stomach and gave a hard backwards yank. Without warning, Lee was tossed unceremoniously over D.J.'s supine form.

Lee crashed into the slightly padded mat in a heap, his left shoulder absorbing almost all of his momentum. D.J.'s maneuver left Lee unprepared and the landing showed it. By the time he had stopped skidding, he was halfway across the mat and completely uninterested in continuing the match.

When he finally looked over at D.J., Lee's sparring partner had his heels on the edge of the tatami and was bowing towards him in the traditional manner for their original style of martial arts. The grin on D.J.'s face said that he knew very well that Lee understood his mistake. Lee dropped back to the mat and groaned.

"Idiot!" he hissed into the floor. *Well, it serves you right*, that other part of his mind chimed in.

"So," D.J. interrupted Lee's moment of self-disgust, "are you alright?"

"Yeah," Lee sighed. He rolled over and sat up with a grimace, his right hand going immediately to his shoulder. "I'll live, at least."

"How bad?" D.J. asked, indicating Lee's clasped hand.

Lee glanced down at the shoulder in question as he began to gingerly test his range of motion. His lips pulled back from his teeth each time his arm moved rearward but he continued to probe the joint for damage in silence. Finally, he looked up and gave his friend a lopsided shrug.

"I've had worse."

D.J. didn't reply to the offhand comment. He just stared at Lee, his brows lifting expectantly.

"Really," Lee insisted as he twisted onto his knees then stood. "It's sprained pretty good, but it's not dislocated or completely torn. I'll be good as new in a week or two."

Which was true. Lee had always been a fast healer; fast enough to notice but not so fast that anyone in the medical profession had ever taken an interest in the difference. Of course, he'd have to actually see a medical professional in order for one to discover his gift of healing and that was something he usually avoided.

Still, as a child, Lee had a knack for getting into the kind of trouble that resulted in injuries and his mother used to joke that he must be made of rubber because the damage never lasted long enough for it to possibly be as bad as it had first seemed. Lee's lips twitched as he remembered the many times he had come into the house careful to appear normal so his mom wouldn't catch a glimpse of some injury or another - and always getting caught.

As an adult, though, Lee didn't seem to get into too much trouble that required him to rely on such a valuable gift. As a matter of fact, if you didn't count the last week, he hadn't been hurt in over three years. And *that* was just a gash he'd gotten when a tree he'd been clearing came down onto an abandoned truck. A shard from a piece of plate glass that had been stored with the vehicle had embedded itself into his thigh. A week later, all that was left was a thin red line.

"A'right," D.J. agreed skeptically. "If you say so."

Lee grinned. "I do."

D.J. snorted and shook his head, then leveled a stern look on Lee. "It's your own fault anyways," he declared.

"Yeah, yeah," Lee agreed cheerfully. He adjusted his voice to mimic his friend's unique timber and New Zealand accent then quoted, "Always ensure the fight is really over before dropping your guard." He returned to his own voice to continue with a sigh, "I know."

It was D.J.'s turn to grin as Lee's antics lightened the mood. "Was a good hit though," he ceded. "I didn't even hardly feel you touch me, but it sure was effective."

Lee smirked at the admission. "Yeah, hitting a plexus sure does the trick." He slowly rolled the stiffening shoulder joint as he continued, "I was just surprised I landed it considering the maneuver I pulled to reach you."

"Right," D.J. grunted. He stretched a hand down and offered it to Lee, "Come on." Once the two of them were on their feet, he hooked his thumbs into the belt tied at his waist. "So," he began, "wanna tell me what's bothering you?"

Lee shrugged his good shoulder. "Nothing much."

"C'mon, mate. I don't hear from you in weeks. You don't show up for classes. Then, out of the blue, you call me up and wanna have an all out sparring session?"

Lee sighed. "Really, it's nothing. Just the usual crap with work." He shifted his stance, brushing away an imaginary annoyance. "We've got yet another social morality group sticking their nose in."

D.J.'s brows rose but he remained expectantly silent to which Lee blew an exasperated breath. "And then Stacie had to go and get some nebbly reporter after me."

"Ah," D.J. commiserated.

"I just really needed to work off some aggravation," Lee finally admitted.

"Didja?"

Lee drew a satisfied breath. "Yeah. Thanks."

D.J. clapped Lee on his uninjured shoulder, "Good." He shook out the leg Lee had struck then turned his attention back to Lee. "C'mon. We need to get out of these uniforms before we cool off any more than we have."

Lee nodded and followed D.J. towards the changing rooms. For once, his mind wasn't on a certain redhead – nor on any of the problems that would be waiting for him when he got to work in the morning.

Lee winced as he lifted his duffel bag off the seat of his truck. The session with his one time martial arts instructor which had quickly escalated from a simple sparring match into an all out fight had left him with a few bruises and aches in addition to the pulled shoulder he'd gotten from that particularly well executed throw. A smirk replaced the wince, though, as he recalled why he'd been vulnerable enough for D.J. to maneuver him into that especially effective throw. To him, it was well worth the strained limb to have so thoroughly gotten the upper hand on his friend.

Lee shook his head as he walked gingerly up the three steps to his porch. "Really, that was a great way to end the evening," he informed the stone gargoyle that guarded his front door. The gargoyle grinned a toothy agreement, keeping his eyes as always on the approach to the large stone and timber A-framed house. The creature, a winged beast half lion and half monkey, had been a housewarming gift from his set builder that somehow made Lee feel just a little bit safer in his large home.

Lee gave the gargoyle a scratch on its stone head before he moved on to the front door. There, he lifted a very tired knee and pressed it against the door frame to support his duffel bag while he juggled his key clip one handed to retrieve the needed key from the assortment he kept there. He

finally found the one he was looking for and was about to give his wrist a flip to clear the others away from it when the opening lines from Tears For Fears' "Shout" suddenly emanated from his hip.

With a start, he reached for his cell to silence the loud song, forgetting for the moment that his shoulder was injured. The pain that shot down his back halted the movement, but also caused him to twitch away from the doorframe which in turn caused the duffel bag to start sliding off his leg. Lee snatched the phone from his hip and flipped it open. However, the motion caused his key clip to tangle in the handles of the sliding duffel bag and, in trying to catch them he dropped the phone.

"Son of a whore!" Lee swore as everything landed on the porch. "Shit, shit, shit," he continued to swear, as he stared at his belongings on the floor. His shoulder and back now ached almost worse than they had when he'd first landed on the mat, and now he had to lean down and pick all his stuff up.

"Holy fucking gods," he hissed as the blood rushed to his aching upper body when he reached down to retrieve the phone that had somehow landed open with the call still connected.

Though the ring tone itself told him the caller was someone he didn't have in his cell's phone book, he still glanced at the number. There were a few folks who called infrequently enough to not be in the address book but regularly enough that he recognized their number when he saw it. This time, though, the number was completely unfamiliar but undoubtedly out of Pittsburgh.

Maybe? Lee's heart rate doubled, this time in hope and, perhaps, a little fear as he lifted the phone to his ear. "Hello?" he squeaked. When there was no response, Lee pulled the phone back and checked the display. The call was still connected.

"Hello?" he asked again, this time sounding more normal. *Ya done scared her away with all that cursing is what*, he silently berated himself.

"Umm," an uncertain, young male voice finally replied. "Mr. Rorrison?" Lee sighed as disappointment and relief washed over him at the sound of the unfamiliar voice. Suddenly, he felt more exhausted than he had from the long sparring session.

"Yeah?"

"Oh. Hey," the young man answered. "I wasn't sure I got the right number." Lee waited. This was certainly not the conversation he was hoping to have tonight. After a pause, the boy continued, "This is Rollin."

Lee tipped his head back to regard the underside of the roof over his porch as he cast back into his memory to place a face with the name. *The intern*, that part of his mind that most reminded him of his mother helpfully supplied in the same instant that the boy inquired, "Hello?"

"Yeah," Lee answered as he carefully crouched down to retrieve his keys. "I'm here." With the phone propped against his good shoulder, Lee snagged the clip and brought it toward his face to jingle the collection. "Sorry," he continued, "I just got home and was trying to find my keys."

"Oh."

"So, what can I do for you, Rollin? Is everything alright?"

"Uh, yeah," the boy answered. "It's all good."

"Well, good." With the phone still tucked against his shoulder, Lee unlocked the front door and, using his toe, pushed his duffel bag inside. He shuffled closely behind the bag and let the door close quietly behind him.

"I was just calling about next week. I wanted to make sure it was still okay."

"Next week..." Lee repeated, bewildered. Leaving the bag by the front door, Lee headed for his den in the back corner of his house.

"Yeah," Rollin replied. Lee remained silent, trying to figure out what he'd forgotten as he settled gingerly onto his desk chair. Rollin finally helpfully offered, "Spring Break."

"Oh! Oh, right." Lee rolled his eyes at himself. *Moron*. "You're going home, right?"

"Not exactly," was Rollin's droll reply.

"Oh. Umm..." Lee frowned. It was like his brain was in molasses worse than it had been after the incident on the set.

"I'm taking my sister out to spend some time with our Dad in California," he supplied. Then, in a quieter voice, he added, "We try to go home as little as possible."

Lee's brow lifted. "Problems?"

"Naw. Mom's just not real stable. Y'know? It's easier to stay away from her if we can."

"Gotcha." The blinking light on Lee's desk phone caught his eye and his frown deepened. "Well," he continued, distracted, "I don't have a problem with you going."

The intern's relief was more than evident as he answered, "Okay, cool. I wanted to make sure it wasn't going to affect my eval or anything. I really need this grade."

"Oh, that." Lee grimaced at himself. *Duh. Is your brain on hiatus tonight?* "No, it's no problem. Pitt already accounts for that when they give me the availability dates for my interns."

"Great." There was a pause, then Rollin continued, "I wanted to check before I left, but you were in meetings all day and today was my last day before Break."

"Right. Well, don't worry about work for a few days and have a safe trip to California."

"Great! Thanks."

"No problem."

"Okay, bye."

"Bye." Lee closed his cell and stared a moment at the blinking message light on his desk phone. He couldn't decide whether to check it tonight or let it sit until morning. "Nah," he finally muttered to the empty room as he pushed up out of the chair. "If it was earth shatteringly important, they woulda called the cell."

With that decided, he left the den. Lee paused long enough to snag his duffel bag from where he had left it by the front door before heading up the stairs to his loft bedroom. Halfway up the steps, the chorus to Madonna's old song, "Lucky Star," began to float up from his hip.

"Cass," he sighed as he picked up his pace. He reached the top of the stairs just as the chorus restarted. Ignoring the twinge of pain, Lee dropped his bag and grabbed his phone in the same motion, flipping it open with his thumb as he brought it to his ear.

Taking a deep breath, he slowly drawled into the phone, "Yes?"

"Hey, hun," Cass' ever buoyant personality bounced into the room with her voice. "Did you get my message?"

"Uh..." Lee glanced guiltily over his shoulder towards the stairs. "No, I just got home."

"Uh-huh," Cass prodded knowingly. "You were going to ignore it, weren't you?"

"Well," Lee squirmed, "only for tonight. I figured it wasn't too important if it was on the home phone. The session with D.J. lasted longer than I expected and then Rollin called just as I was walking in the door."

"Right," Cass agreed with sarcastic cheerfulness. "Who?"

"The intern."

"Oh. Right." Cass paused as if Lee had almost, *almost* derailed her from her original reason for calling. Finally, she continued, "Well, it's not an emergency, but it *is* important. So, let me save you the effort of going back downstairs to check the message."

Lee's eyes widened then darted around the room, settling suspiciously on the large windows across the vaulted ceiling from his loft railing. *How does she do that?* There was nothing – and no *one* – out there. "Okay," he answered, drawing the word out into something of an uncertain question. Cass giggled.

"Just as I was leaving this evening, Stacey called to inform us that the piece Smith interviewed you for will be airing on Friday. It's going to be one of the local features for the Six O'clock News."

"Oh, goodie," Lee could barely disguise the sarcasm. "Lemme go set the DVR."

Cass snickered at his response. As much as she knew he loved telling stories, she also knew he didn't like attention focused on his personal life. "Also," she continued after a moment, "Since you're not going to be in the office for the rest of the week, I'm going to need you to email me a copy of the budget for the movie. Stacey says there's a problem and we need to resubmit it."

Gods, what else? Lee groaned. "Cass, that's on the office machine."

"Of course," Cass sighed. The phone squeaked as if she were adjusting the phone, or moving it to her other ear. "Okay," she began, once the peculiar noises had ceased, "which account did you put it under?"

"Silver line," he told her, trying hard to tamp down on the embarrassment of having to give out the computer account name he had created for this project. "It's all one word."

"Okay..." Lee could hear the scratch of a pencil on paper. When the writing stopped, she continued, "Got it. Password?"

"The usual."

"The usual?" Cass challenged, her voice rising a full octave with her incredulity. "Lee!"

"What?" he replied defensively. "You know I suck at remembering passwords."

"Lee," she admonished him, her voice still almost a squeal. "This is the most important project you've had since I've known you. If someone broke into that account you could lose a lot more than just a couple of production files."

"Yeah, yeah," Lee sighed.

"Lee, I'm serious."

"So am I." He drew a long breath then continued, "Tell me how this is worse than me writing down a new password just for this project." Cass huffed her exasperation, but didn't reply.

"Knowing my luck," he informed her, "I'd lose the damned piece of paper I'd written it on and then be locked out of all my files. Meanwhile, someone else would *find* the paper and *gain* access, thus defeating the point of having a separate password anyhow."

Cass sighed. "Lee, you're an intelligent man. I'm sure you could handle memorizing a new password for something this important."

"Cass, the reason I went into directing instead of acting is because I *suck* at memorization. That's why parts in the show are all ad libbed and not scripted."

"But," Cass countered, her voice dropping back somewhat to its usual timbre, "you can recite any number of tales from just about any culture I could think to name."

"I *retell* stories," Lee insisted. "I know the gist and the important concepts that were meant to be passed on. The rest is off the cuff and changes with each telling. Hell, half the time I don't even have all of the proper character names in my telling."

"If you say so." It was obvious just by the way she said it, that Cass disagreed with Lee's assessment of his abilities.

"I do," he replied with a firm finality.

"Well, I think you could do it if you wanted to. You've been able to do everything I've ever seen you put your mind to." Cass sighed. "But, I can see I'm not going to change your mind tonight."

"Cass," Lee persisted. "I have been using the same password for the last ten years without a problem. It's a nonsense word and a series of numbers that have no direct connection to me. It'd be a disaster if I changed it now."

"You're a stubborn goat, you know that?"

Lee grinned into the phone. "Baa-aa-a."

"Alright, alright," Cass giggled. "I'll get the budget from your machine tomorrow and pass it on to Stacey."

"Okay," Lee agreed. He knew she wasn't done trying to convince him to change the password, but it seemed he had a reprieve for the night. "Thanks."

"Anytime," she replied cheerily. "Now, don't forget to set the DVR."

"So I can see just how bad a mood I was in when Stacey arrived and Leminski left," Lee grumbled under his breath before answering aloud, "I won't."

"Good." There was a pause afterwards and Lee was about to inquire whether the call had been dropped when Cass continued, "So, how bad did you get hurt?"

"What?" Lee asked, startled. His eyes narrowed as he squinted through the distant windows. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, c'mon now," she chided him. "I know you. When you get stressed enough to want to fight, you go all out. And, get hurt." Lee snorted. "Well?"

"Just the usual bumps and bruises," he informed her. "No big deal."

"And?" she insisted.

Lee sighed. "And... a sprained shoulder."

"Just a sprain, huh?" Cass challenged. "It's not a dislocation?"

"Nope. I just jammed it. There were no sickly pops."

"Well, okay," Cass relented, sounding only slightly mollified. "Is it going to give you a problem for tomorrow's shoot?"

Lee frowned. He slowly lifted his left arm, judging the amount of swelling by how much resistance there was in the joint. He pulled his arm across his chest and then extended it fully to his side and tried to press backwards. He was stiff, but it didn't seem too bad. "Nah," he finally replied. "I should be fine."

"Good. In that case, I'm going to let you go soak it for a while."

Lee grinned. "Gee, thanks."

Cass laughed. "You're quite welcome," she informed him. "Have a good night, Lee. And, good luck tomorrow."

"G'night, Cass," Lee managed to reply before the call had disconnected. He glanced at the phone curiously, his left brow crawling up his forehead. "That was weird," he informed the empty room.

During the course of their call, Lee had been able to undress down to the t-shirt he'd come home from D.J.'s in and his boxer briefs. Now, he sat for a moment on the edge of his bed considering Cass' suggestion that he soak the shoulder. He gingerly tested his shoulder again, this time pushing a little harder than he had while on the phone. It was stiff and it hurt to move it, but it didn't seem especially bothersome. "It really isn't that bad," he proclaimed happily.

The soak, he decided, could be safely bypassed. "However," he mumbled as he pulled open the drawer to his night stand, "A little icy hot as insurance never hurts."