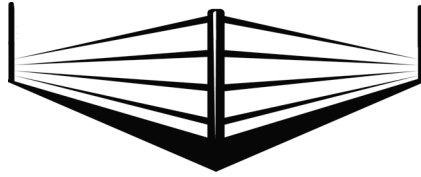


3



Blane wasn't kidding about the parking situation at the stadium. The lot wasn't filled nearly to capacity, but fans littered the sidewalks around the building, all hoping for a chance to see their favorites up close on their way in.

The SUV pulled to an entrance at the back of the building. The hoards were kept to the outer perimeters by security personnel. Trinity nearly shuddered, thinking about how hard it would have been to enter through the front with Jay in tow. *Thank you, Jesus, that I decided to ride with him.*

"There he is!"

"Blane! Blane!"

"Over here!"

Excited shouts for attention met them as soon as the object of the crowd's interest stepped out of the SUV. Blane waved and moved toward the chants. When he was away from the vehicle, Pamela stepped out before ushering Trinity and Jay to follow.

"Their attention is diverted. Let's get inside quickly. The less people notice you, the fewer questions we'll have to field."

Understanding the urgency, Jay jumped to the ground without hesitation. Trinity followed. She could tell he wanted to stay with Blane. Jay watched as the champ signed autographs and posed for selfies, but she nudged her son from behind. Thankfully, he followed Pamela without further hesitation, and they reached the venue without anyone taking notice.

“Blane will be along in a minute.” Pamela stopped just inside the door. “But I have to run. I’ve got a meeting with the head honcho, and you don’t keep him waiting. Will you two be all right hanging out here until Blane comes in?”

Trinity nodded. “We’ll be fine. And thank you for allowing us to ride with you. I got the feeling it wasn’t on your list of things to do today, but we appreciate it.”

Pamela smiled without confirming or denying Trinity’s observation. “I really enjoyed meeting you and Jay. I hope we get a chance to talk again soon. Have a great time this afternoon!”

“Thank you.” Trinity let the omission slide. “We will.”

With that, Pamela strode down the hall as quickly as her patent leather heels would allow. A woman on a mission. But she’d taken time to put a complete stranger at ease just because Blane asked her to. Was she that nice, or was there something more than a working relationship between them? Not that it was any of her business.

“Mom, can I play a game on your phone while we wait?”

Trinity handed the phone over. Sounds of activity throughout the stadium reverberated through various corridors. An occasional passerby gave Trinity and Jay a questioning glance, but no one approached them.

Trinity’s thoughts circled back to Pamela and Blane. They would make a cute enough couple, she supposed. Pamela definitely didn’t sport the same harried momma look that

Trinity had made her signature style. And she was nice, at least as far as Trinity could ascertain from their brief interactions. There was good rapport between Pamela and Blane too.

Trinity considered the man in question. Pamela could do much worse. The man was huge, and she wouldn't want to see him truly angry. His wrestling face was intimidating, and she couldn't imagine it directed at her. Tucker had always been clean shaven and kept his hair short. Trinity liked the look, but she couldn't deny that Blane's look with the ponytail and full but shorter trimmed facial hair worked well for him.

And that didn't even take into account the muscles on top of muscles that no dress shirt could hope to hide. Or the way his eyes lit when he laughed. Those blue eyes ...

She realized those blue eyes were looking at her, and she was off in her own world like she'd taken leave of her senses. She could feel the heat in her cheeks.

"Sorry. I guess I was wool-gathering."

"No problem." He excused her with a one-sided smirk. "I was only apologizing for taking so long. I didn't mean to leave you guys by yourselves. I thought Pamela was still with you."

Trinity shook her head. "She had a meeting, but we're fine. It's not a big deal. You have to give back to the fans, right?"

"More than you know, especially for the champion. Once popularity slips, well, it makes the road a little tougher and a lot more unsure."

"What road is that, Mr. Sterling?"

As Blane's attention shifted to Jay beside her, Trinity felt the last vestiges of embarrassment drain away. She'd never been more thankful that her son seemed to hear everything that went on around him and didn't possess the ability to rein in his insatiable curiosity.

"Every person has goals," Blane explained as his large hand engulfed Jay's thin shoulder. "And the road I mentioned is the

things that happen to get them to their dream. For a wrestler, the goal is the championship belt. And the road he takes to get there is made up of all the matches he must compete in to reach the championship match.”

Jay’s features scrunched into what Trinity called his thinking face as his head dipped in a slow nod. She appreciated Blane offering an explanation instead of pushing Jay’s question to the side, but she wasn’t sure how much of the answer went over his eight-year-old head.

“Sorta like when I wanted to get Mrs. Tate’s All Star Reader Award. I had to practice my sight words every night, even when I wanted to play video games instead.”

“Did you get the award?”

“I sure did.” Jay’s chest pushed out as he stood straighter. “And I was first in class to get it.”

Brows rising high, Blane let out an appreciative whistle. “That must have been one hard road, but I bet your mom was super proud of you.”

Jay looked from Blane to her. She smiled and nodded before Jay returned his attention to the man in front of him.

“She was. She even took me out for pizza to celebrate. And she put my certificate in a frame on my bedroom door. Was your mom proud of you when you won the belt?”

“She called me to tell me how proud she was before anyone else had a chance. And speaking of my belt, I need to head into the dressing room and make sure my clothes are ready for tonight. You want to come with me? You can see my belt, maybe even try it on for size, if you promise not to try to beat me for it.”

Jay rolled his eyes. “I couldn’t beat you yet. You’re bigger than me. I beat my dad a few times, but I think he let me win.”

“And why would he do that?”

His face scrunched as he thought about how to answer.

“I’m not real sure. Maybe cuz he thought everyone should get to win sometimes.”

Blane nodded as if he was seriously contemplating the validity of Jay’s answer. “You know what I think?”

“What?”

“I think you’re right. I think maybe he wanted you to win sometimes because he loved you a lot and knew you’d enjoy winning.”

The expectancy in Jay’s face as he looked at her for confirmation took Trinity’s breath away. Jay knew his daddy loved him, but how hard would it be to remember that when he’d been taken away from him at such an early age? She opened her mouth to speak but decided on a nod instead. Talking was out of the question with the lump lodged in her throat.



Blane fastened the heavy belt around Jay’s waist and watched him preen and pose in the dressing room mirror. Stopping suddenly, Jay frowned into the glass before turning to Trinity.

“I need to take off my shirt,” he announced.

“And why is that?” Trinity looked skeptical.

“Mom,” he said with a roll of his eyes. “You know why. This is wrestling.”

“I don’t know, Jay,” she reasoned. “I may not have watched with you and your dad, but I think I’ve seen wrestlers with their shirts on.”

“They may start the match with a shirt, but they always come off by the end. Especially the champion. He doesn’t ever wear a shirt. You can ask Blane. He’ll tell you. Please, Mom.”

“Don’t drag me into this.” Blane threw up his hands in surrender.

A momentary look of disappointment was aimed at him before Jay's attention returned to Trinity. "Please. Can I? I've got to look like a pro."

Trinity rubbed her lips together, and Blane had the sneaking suspicion it was intended to stifle a laugh. But would Jay's persistence pay off?

"Fine. Hand it here."

With his shirt removed, Jay once more began to strut in front of the mirror. The child's powers of persuasion were impressive. As Blane watched her using her phone to take pictures of Jay looking like a real wrestler, Blane doubted that if Jay asked for the moon, she wouldn't make it happen.

He watched their reflections from the corner of his eye as he checked out the rest of his gear for the night. He'd thought about letting Jay try on the long black leather sleeveless duster that was a key element of his costume each time he entered the ring but decided it might topple the petite boy. Even if it didn't, the ankle length garment would look more like a robe with a train fit for a wedding dress on the boy than the attitude announcing piece it was intended to be.

Blane didn't offer, and it didn't seem to bother Jay. He was perfectly happy to flex his non-existent muscles while his mom took pictures.

"I'm coming for you, Maverick." Jay's little boy voice dropped comically low as he threatened his imaginary opponent.

This time Trinity couldn't suppress her laugh. The contented sound brought out Blane's smile. He loved being able to do something that brought enjoyment to others, especially those he thought needed an extra dose of joy in their lives.

The carefree sound was almost enough to free the image stuck in his head since he'd talked with Jay about his father in

the hallway. He'd sensed her eyes on him and momentarily looked up from Jay. That's all it took to set an invisible weight on his chest. Her wide, clear blue eyes held pain that was unmistakable. He could almost feel her loss as if it were his own.

Maybe he should apologize. It was possible they didn't talk about Jay's dad that much. Grief was a tricky subject, and he honestly didn't even know how long ago their world had been shaken. While he meant it as reassuring and could tell from what little they'd shared that his words were true, they may have been too much too soon for still healing hearts.

A knock on the door drew the attention of everyone in the room. The door opened, and one of the backstage crewmembers stuck his head in. His gaze paused briefly on Trinity and Jay before settling on Blane.

"Ready for a run through of your entrance? Make sure everything is timed right?"

"Yeah. We'll be right there." He turned to Jay. "Ready to go learn how to make an entrance?"