

A photograph of a person's bare torso, showing the chest and abdominal muscles. The person has long, light-colored hair. The word "HAIR!" is overlaid in large, black, sans-serif capital letters across the upper chest area. The lighting is warm and focused on the torso, with the background being dark.

HAIR!

Shara
Bloodstone

HAIR!

...Hips swiveling, Ricky sauntered toward Bobby. When Bobby tilted his head up, his eyes were level with the crotch of Ricky's blue jeans.

Ricky shot Bobby a grin. "Been here long?"

Bobby nodded. "I saw most of the show."

Ricky laughed. He crouched next to Bobby's ear and asked, "Did it turn you on?"

"Human animals get turned on watching other humans fuck, don't ya know? Whether or not we want to. It's kind of a knee-jerk reaction."

Ricky stood. "So you're telling me you would've gotten turned on regardless of who was up there doing it?"

Bobby thought about it. "Maybe."

Ricky's smirked. "Bullshit."

Bobby shrugged. "Okay. You're more fucking gorgeous than most other people here. Who would I rather watch? You, of course. But, then again, I'd also be happier if I actually fucked you myself."

"Hey, you were the one who got all pissy when I came by last week."

"Cause it was, like, two-thirty A.M. and I had a major client early the next morning. And...you were drunk." He paused and looked at him. "It's not like I don't love having sex with you. You know that."

Ricky leaned back into his hip and gave Bobby a seductive look.

"Come on," he said. "Let's get a drink..."

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HAIR!

BY

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HAIR!
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*For Johnny,
In Memory of Nick*

CHAPTER 1

New Age music with an Asian influence wafted along gentle air currents circulating among muted earth tones at the Alfredo Sirvin Salon. The activities enacted by stylists, receptionists, and other staff members all occurred in an unhurried fashion and a relaxed environment to ensure optimum results in exceptional hair design, for which the salon was famous.

A large, oval mirror dominated each workstation, allowing for easy observation of the process by which patrons were transformed into high style by his or her stylist.

The squawk from Bobby Salem's ecstatic client sent a jolt of excitement through the otherwise serene ambiance.

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“You’re a freakin’ genius, Bobby, I swear!”

The woman tossed her auburn curls from side to side and marveled at her image in the looking glass across from her.

“Anyone who can make that mop of mine look this gorgeous has to be a genius. You are the bomb, baby—the bomb.”

Bobby stood behind his client at shoulder height and also looked into the mirror. He placed his palms together in prayer position and made a slight bow forward in thanks. A high-pitched, electronic version of the *Sex In the City* theme song shattered the moment, sending Bobby’s client into a rabid search for her cell phone beneath the plastic cape covering her torso. Once she managed to locate it, she snatched it out from under the plastic protector and snapped it open. She barely had it to her ear before she answered.

“Hello?”

Bobby heard the muffled voice of a frantic woman on the other end and stepped back to tidy his styling accoutrements spread on the small shelf beside him.

“What?”

Bobby noted how his client hung on every word the caller was saying and guessed it was her boss. He went about his business, cleaning his brushes and combs before replacing them in the drawer where they were kept. He noticed the only response his chirpy customer now made was an occasional “Mm-hm.” He left her to her one-sided conversation and strolled over to the reception desk.

“Hey, Leenie,” he said, shooting a smile to the closest

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receptionist. “What time is Mrs. Tierney coming in?”

“Let me see...”

When the young woman consulted the schedule, Bobby watched how the strands of her brunette pageboy cut shimmered in the salon light designed to bring out the best and camouflage the rest.

“Ah, here it is,” she continued. “Twelve-fifteen. You’ve got fifteen minutes.”

“Great. Thanks.”

Back to his station, he found Lizzie Goodman had pulled off her plastic cape and stood wrestling a black jacket over her shoulders while holding her cell phone to her ear. He quickened his steps to aid her, but the intensity of her voice made him think twice about butting in. In those few seconds, he watched her manage to get the jacket on and grab her purse off the hook by the mirror.

“I got it, Paula. I’m on my way back, right now,” she was saying while she pulled herself together. “You want anything on my way?” She shook her shoulder pads into place and checked herself out in the mirror while listening. “Okay, you got it. Be there in ten.”

All in a titter, she clicked the phone shut. Bobby’s mellow presence seemed to calm the sense of urgency that had suddenly grabbed hold of her.

“Well, at least I got my hair done before the shit hit the fan,” she said, exasperated. “Micky Grant’s dickering with Paula—my boss—over a couple of people he wants to attach to his star for *Grease*.”

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Bobby had to make an effort to keep up with how fast she spoke.

“What,” he asked, “the national tour?”

“No, this is for Broadway. We just finished the tour and now Billy Hamilton, the star on Broadway, wants out to do a movie. The producers are hot on Tommy Hastings, so, Mickey Grant, his pain-in-the-ass-agent Paula’s been dealing with for, like, a zillion years, wants to attach a couple of his clients who need Broadway credits to the star.”

“Oh, yeah?” Bobby asked. “What does that mean, ‘Attach them to the star’?”

Lizzie checked her make-up in the mirror while she answered.

“It means they either get a contract for the show, too—chorus, probably—or we don’t get the star. Package deal. If we want the star bad enough, we give his other people a job, too. He cleans up with a bigger percent, that way.”

Bobby nodded.

Lizzie whipped around to face him. “You rock, Mr. Salem! Positively the best. Wait ’til Paula sees my new do—I might finally get her in here.”

“I’d like that.”

She grabbed him into a big hug.

“Before you run, let me ask you something.” When Lizzie stopped and looked at him, he asked, “Did you guys see Nell Wynstrom’s clients at the casting call for the tour?”

“The Wynstrom Agency? Yeah. She always has a couple of slots. Is she a customer of yours?”

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“No, she’s my boyfriend’s agent.”

“What’s your boyfriend’s name?”

“Ricky Hart...actor, singer, dancer.”

Lizzie pursed her lips and shook her head. “Good name. But I don’t remember seeing him. All right, baby,” Lizzie said with a burst of exuberance. “I gotta run before my boss’ head spins off her body. “

She crammed two wadded up twenty-dollar bills into Bobby’s hand and gave him another little squeeze before she turned away. “Thank you!”

Bobby thanked her, but she was already off to the reception desk to pay for the cut.

He listened to the sound of water flowing down the fountain located at the heart of the salon. After a moment, he padded over to the window and gazed down at Madison Avenue. After another moment, he sighed and turned to await Mrs. Tierney’s arrival.

* * *

Times Square’s raucous energy level was a jolt to Bobby’s nervous system after spending the day inside the soothing Sirvin Salon. He loved the rush of liveliness from the outside world, especially when he stepped out onto Madison or Fifth Avenue. But the noise and pace of activity that increased with proximity to the city’s entertainment core were like visceral blows against his sensibilities. He always thought of the change in atmosphere as though he were departing the sane world and heading for dangers unknown. His nervous system

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quivered when he turned off Fifth Avenue and walked westward, along Fiftieth Street. When he turned off Fiftieth onto Seventh Avenue, he headed south until he reached Forty-Sixth Street, the thump of excitement pumping through his blood. As he walked along Forty-Sixth, the amalgam of sound and light from Manhattan's theatre district grew louder. When he turned left onto Broadway, its vibrations exploded through the streets. The crowds grew thicker while activity increased. The closer he drew toward the heart of Times Square, the greater the cacophony of sound and sensory input. He took a deep breath and connected to the quiet part of himself for a sense of serenity while he walked through the techno-jungle.

When he finally hit Broadway at Forty-Second Street, the fervor of noisy activity thundered at a grating level, and nighttime was rendered irrelevant by endless lights along the streets and atop the buildings.

The images fed by huge screens erected overhead were inescapable; they practically overwhelmed almost every square inch of space around the building tops. The Stock Exchange report slinking around the edifice between Forty-Second and Third Streets slithered like a huge, blinking snake-in-the-grass amid too many billboards. The side of the huge Condé-Naste Building offered a moving image so high, Bobby grew dizzy looking up at it and had to turn away. He did crane his neck to look at some of the gigantic, non-moving posters for Broadway shows advertised on top of lower buildings, however. In doing so, he also glanced at gigantic images of booze bottles glorified in color and light, hovering above the

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crowd among the latest celebrities dressed in designer underwear. It occurred to him that these were modern icons demanding worship, the way they dominated the scene.

The sound of hundreds of automobile engines punctuated by the blast of angry horns and the occasional rev of construction machinery infiltrated the air. Bobby shivered, even on this moderate, spring evening, as he erected invisible walls against the intrusive elements of such a loud, rude environment. He took a deep breath to keep the stress at bay while swarms of people out for dinner, hitting the nearest bar for a cocktail, searching the side stores for NYC memorabilia, hailing cabs, eating on the run, crossing against the lights, lining up at TKTS for bargain seats to Broadway shows, snapping photos here and there, laughing and calling out to friends without reverence for strangers passing by, all created a challenge to his peace of mind. But, Bobby managed to stay calm, cool and collected as he navigated the streets.

He looked toward the massive structure of buildings on the east side of Times Square, across from Duffy Square, in search of the lobby that would get him off the street.

Ah, there it is!

Bobby squinted from the light blasting through the open doors at the base of the building he sought. The lighting remained intentionally bright so as to avoid unsavory and even illegal activities from occurring in an area filled with shady characters among the innocent. Bobby stepped without hesitation onto the escalator and embraced the diminishing noise level with its ascension. He was also relieved by a

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decrease in obtrusive lighting.

By the time Bobby reached the second level landing, a dark, cavernous ceiling filled with twinkling stars had appeared overhead. The bowl of heavenly bodies simulated a vast, night sky that seemed far removed from the urban squall just outside its walls. The silver lettering of the sign at the top announced his arrival at the Cosmic Code.

Bobby stepped off the escalator and approached the moving images of meteors and asteroids along the walls. These images conjured the idea of being lost in space and animated large portions of the nightclub ahead. Space-age sounds of rockets whizzing by and twinkling chimes filtered through the sound system.

The hostess by the entrance was oblivious to Bobby's approach. As she stood at her stand flipping through a magazine, Bobby figured the loud club music booming inside precluded her awareness. He nodded to the two doormen and waited for the young lady to notice him. When she did, a friendly spark lit her up.

"Oh, hey, Bobby. How's it going?"

He smiled and shifted the knapsack weighing on his shoulder.

"Going fine, Shula."

"Your boy's in there. Busy as hell with this group of Wall Street guys. Like, thirty of them, guzzling shot after shot."

"Got to swallow the pain somehow, don't you know."

"Yeah, right," she said dryly. "Those guys must have to hit the sauce pretty hard to survive working down there."

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Bobby chuckled.

She turned toward the doorman on her right and motioned toward Bobby.

“He’s cool,” she said. She turned back to Bobby. “Have fun, sweetie.”

Bobby entered the strange domain and ambled along the aisle that ran beside a section of low tables and chairs. The chairs invited one to sink down into them and achieve maximum comfort, but Bobby was in search of the main bar. While he walked along, he silently cursed the DJ for the outlandish decibels at which he spun the dance music. The grating thump of the bass seemed especially loud in this area designed for relaxation. And, as he walked along, Bobby winced at the intermittent firing of guns and explosive blasts from videos games being played along the walls. To him, this conglomeration of fun-filled, noisy activities amid the serene, outer-space theme made the Cosmic Code a dichotomy of ambiance, and he wasn’t sure if he ought to unwind or get jazzed up for fun.

Get me to the bar, quick.

When he made it through what felt like a minor sensory affront (compared to Times Square), he was thrilled to score a stool in a subdued corner at the end of the bar.

As he sat, he scanned the crew at work. A male bartender he didn’t know was flirting with a female customer. The other bartender, Marissa, was banging out a row of Cosmopolitans on the bar top in front of her. At the rear wall behind them, the bar-back named Julio squatted and loaded beer into the short,

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but very long, refrigerator. Bobby watched him feed the bottles in rapid-fire succession, one after another, into perfect rows along the shelves.

That's why Ricky and the rest of the bartenders love him—the guy works like a speed-freak. Course, he probably is a speed-freak.

Bobby caught his breath when the door at the back of the bar swung open and Ricky stepped through. He always caught his breath whenever Ricky stepped unexpectedly into the picture; that much hadn't changed since the first time he laid eyes on him two years ago.

Still as golden-tanned as the first time Bobby had seen him at the Red Room on Spring Street, Ricky's hairstyle was trendier now, thanks to Bobby. He'd cut it shorter and bleached the tips as blond as they could be. Well, okay, maybe he wasn't quite as buff now as the first time they'd met—he'd just come off the National tour of *Forty-Second Street* and was hot to trot, ready to star on Broadway. Unfortunately, a series of rejections after that had started to get him down, and he'd gone back into the bar business to maintain a steady cash flow. Bobby snuffed at the irony of leaving his own waiter job after the two-year apprenticeship program he completed at Sirvin's, while his lover had come off of relative success only to slide back into the business. And, now, even with an occasional television spot here and there, Ricky couldn't seem to shake the bug biting his confidence away.

Bobby sighed and looked at the hunk he'd always believed would make it big as an actor, but who was currently a

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bartender and big time party-boy. Frankly, he was worried. But his worries evaporated for the moment when his gorgeous lover shot him a grin.

He watched Ricky speak to Marissa, who then glanced over at Bobby and waved. She finished the drinks she'd been making and set three Cosmopolitans up on the bar, which delighted the ladies who had ordered them.

"Hey, Bobby, baby," she chirped with excitement. She reached up and hugged him as best she could over the bar. "How you doin'?"

"Great, Marissa. How're you?"

"Great—I'm loving my hair! You did good, boy. I get more looks on the street without that rat's nest than I ever did in my life."

"I told you to go short. Those blue eyes of yours look twice as big as they did when you had long hair. How does Sheena like it?"

"Totally loves it! She jokes she has a new girlfriend now. But she's not cutting hers, no way. I don't want her to either."

"Well, long hair works on her. She has different hair than you."

"I know, it's gorgeous. But, the best thing is, neither of us has hair on our pussies!"

Bobby laughed with her. "Hey, whatever works for ya."

"Oh, that works for us, believe me. So, anyway, cutie, what are you drinking tonight?" She motioned toward Ricky. "Ricky's over there pounding out ten Slippery Nipples. For some Wall Street guys. There were, like, thirty before. I don't

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see how these guys are even standing right now.”

“Those Cozzies I just saw you make looked pretty good.”

“You got it.”

As she returned to her section to make his drink, Bobby watched Ricky shake the metallic mixer he held and pour the liquid from it into the shot glasses lined up along the bar in front of him. Once he shook out the last drop, he grabbed the shots by twos and doled them out.

The last executive to get his shot had his tie askew, with the knot pulled down to his chest, and the buttons around his neck were undone. The guy was wasted. Bobby figured he was stressed to the max from his life as a businessman and drank to relieve the pressure that would probably, in the end, kill him. That is, if he didn't end up getting fired first.

Bobby sniffed in the happiness that came with making a living doing what you love most. He truly loved designing hair-dos to complement a person's features or match their character. He also loved to cut and color hair, or add extensions, even design wigs. Hair got his creative mojo going like nothing else (except for sex with Ricky!). He counted himself a lucky man, indeed, to spend the bulk of his days in the stimulating, creative world of high-end hair design. And he was more than thrilled to be well on his way to earning the big bucks, too.

Sweet Marissa put the big, pink drink on the bar in front of him.

“Hey,” she said, “Sheena's birthday is next weekend. You guys gonna come out with us, down to the meat packing

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district? She wants a spanking at that new place down there, what's it called? The Black Hole of Bondage, or something like that. Supposed to be very hot."

Bobby shrugged. "Sure. If Ricky wants to."

"Oh, he wants to. He already got H.R. to cover his shift on Saturday."

"Sounds good to me." He sipped his Cosmopolitan. "Mm. After dealing with my last, needy customer today, this is what the doctor ordered."

Marissa laughed just as Ricky swept over.

"What's so funny, there, Missy?"

"Just your cute honey making me laugh. I'll let you two catch up while I serve the boys from the hood coming in now. Catch you later, Bobby."

Bobby thanked her and locked his gaze onto the azure pools that belonged to his lover.

"How you doing?"

"Fine. Couldn't be better," Ricky answered, sarcasm etched in his voice. "Got a thousand dollar tab going for the swingin' dicks down there. I'm working it as best I can. Especially for the stiff's afraid to come out of the closet."

Bobby sipped his drink and listened while Ricky filled him in on which was the biggest asshole, which one was fairly cool, and who was definitely gay.

He chuckled. "By the way, did your agent, by any chance, submit you for an audition for *Grease*? To replace Billy Hamilton?"

"No. Why? Is he leaving?"

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“Mm-hm. And they held auditions, like, a couple of weeks ago.”

Ricky frowned. “That sucks for me.”

“No kidding. Didn’t you catch wind of it around town? In your classes, or anything?”

Ricky looked away. “No...” He scratched behind his ear and was just about to jump away to help a customer, when Marissa motioned that she had him.

“Dude,” Bobby continued in a low but fervent voice, “listen. You’ve got to start getting out there more. I mean, if you’d known about that call, I could maybe have gotten Lizzie to call your agent for an audition, requesting you. But if you’re not in the groove, you don’t know what’s going on out there, and you won’t be able to use your connections.”

Ricky stiffened. “You mean your connections.”

“Mine, whatever. What difference does it make, if I’m willing to help?”

Ricky’s cheeks reddened beneath his golden tan. “Could you spare me the lecture, tonight, Mr. Salem? I’m beat and not in the mood.”

“I don’t mean to lecture you, Rick. But you’re beat ’cause you’re in a rut. I mean, this job was supposed to be temporary, just for cash. Right?”

Ricky pouted and looked toward the other end of the bar, refusing to answer.

Bobby continued. “But you’re caught up in this shit. I mean, you’re not making open calls in the morning because you’re out partying ’til God knows what hour every night.”

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Ricky got defensive. “Why should I do open calls when I have an agent?”

“Because, dude, she’s not submitting you. For whatever reason, she hasn’t done much for you lately. Which means you have to get out there. Start booking gigs on your own. At least until she starts to work for you again.”

Ricky leaned his hands against the bar and pressed against straightened arms, his eyes cast down toward his feet. Bobby knew he should quit while he was ahead, but he couldn’t resist just one more dig.

“And what about your classes? You haven’t been to your on-camera class or your dance classes in how long?”

Ricky’s face snapped up. “What are you all of a sudden—my mother?”

Bobby’s cheeks burned. “No, I’m not your mother, Ricky, but I love you. I want to see you on top of the world, making it as an actor.”

“I guess now that you’re on top of the world, you don’t want to be seen with a lowly bartender.”

“That’s not true, man, and you know it.”

Ricky fumed in silence for a moment while Bobby sought out how best to convince his lover of his good intentions.

He finally said, “I want to see you happy, that’s all. And I know you’re not. Plus, you’re too talented. It’s a waste. That’s all I’m saying.”

Ricky took a slow, deep breath and let it out. One of the Wall Street guys waved at him. He nodded back.

“I got to go.”

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“No problem,” Bobby said. “Are we on for Saturday, with the girls?”

Ricky’s blue eyes blazed before he answered. “Yeah, of course.”

Ricky pushed off the bar and sauntered away. Bobby’s gaze dropped to Ricky’s perky ass as he strutted. He sipped his Cozzie and swallowed down how upset he was about their altercation. But he’d had to say something—he’d just had to. If Ricky strayed too far from focusing on his performing career, it’d be next to impossible to get back on track. That business was one tough nut to crack, with lots of talented guys competing for a limited number of jobs.

He hoped Ricky would see that before too long, and get into the groove again.

CHAPTER 2

A group shot at the Black Hole of Bondage Leather Buns Café got Sheena's birthday gathering off to a lively start. Ricky, Bobby, Marissa, Sheena and another lesbian couple all clinked their glasses together and downed their silver Patron.

"Woo—ee, Sheena," Marissa announced with a wince. "Happy twenty-seven, baby!"

"Yeah, girl," Ricky said with a grin. "Now, let's party like a rock star!"

"Thank you, guys, for coming out with me tonight," Sheena said, raising her beer chaser. "Let's do more drugs and get down and dirty!"

"That's why we're here, Mama," Marissa said.

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“Here, here,” added their two lesbian friends.

“I already bought Sheena her first paddling,” Marissa said with a devilish grin. She hugged her lover around the waist and Sheena kissed her on the lips.

“Thank you, my love.”

Bobby sipped his draft beer and admired Sheena’s tresses. He’d layered her dark brown, shoulder-length waves into a sexy look that brought out her inky irises and also matched her brainy but kinky countenance. The spiked pixie cut he’d done on Marissa’s short, brunette made her aqua eyes seem to pop in color, and also accentuated her long, lithe frame. He thought she could’ve played one of the faeries in Shakespeare’s “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” which he’d designed hair and costumes for back in high school.

He took a minute to survey the staff members working at Black Hole of Bondage. Most were dressed in black Gothic attire suggesting dominatrix or S&M themes. The ladies serving drinks wore black leather bustier tops that squished their tits up over the top, with either black leather shorts and tights, or skin-tight black pants. The guys serving food and drinks wore black leather pants and variations of black straps criss-crossing their shirtless torsos. The male staff members who doled out spankings were dressed like seventeenth century executioners, with black hoods over their heads and holes cut out for breathing and seeing. The female paddlers each wore a unique mask with a long, black dress. One of them reminded Bobby of Mortisha on *The Addams Family* TV show.

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He watched as Sheena headed toward the center of the café floor where staff members had just set up the shackle board for spankings. He chuckled and thought he wouldn't be caught dead getting spanked in public, unlike the line of people currently waiting for it. Marissa had followed her lover down, to be as close as she could when Sheena got her bottom paddled. Those who'd come earlier kept their good seats at the tables around the stage, while Bobby and other folks watched from the elevated bar area up in back.

Bobby scanned the shelf of accoutrements from which one could choose the method for spanking: wooden paddles, strips of flayed leather, something that looked like a big, hard, plastic fly-swatter, a rubbery rod. Nothing too hard core, he thought. Ricky followed Bobby's line of vision and seemed to read his thoughts.

"The really kinky stuff is upstairs," he said in a low voice. "Big time sex club."

"Oh, yeah?" Bobby asked. "What's going on up there?"

"You can get your bare ass whupped, then shtupped. Everything from giant dildos to double fist-fucking."

"You want to check it out?"

"Hell, yeah. You know me."

"And you know me."

Ricky gave him a lascivious smile. "You're the meeker one."

They both stopped talking when Sheena stepped up to the podium.

A lady in black led Sheena to the angled black board at the

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far end of the podium and had her bend over. She then placed each of Sheena's wrists into the handcuffs attached to the board and locked them into place. The scary-looking guy with a black hood over his head grabbed the over-sized fly swatter and delivered a good thwack to Sheena's buttocks. Bobby watched him deliver nine more, increasing the intensity of each one. The guy started out mellow, not spanking to induce pain. The more he increased the force of his whacks, the louder the audience cheered. Bobby figured the last two smacks had to hurt.

He noticed Marissa's smiling expression fade to concern.

The masked lady in the Mortisha dress massaged Sheena's tush before releasing her, which drew applause from the crowd. Sheena looked out at her audience not with a look of pain or shame on her face, but one of victory.

Huh, Bobby thought, go figure.

A few minutes later Marissa was beside him, holding Sheena's hand, urging Ricky and him to join them upstairs.

Ricky was raring to go, so Bobby shrugged and followed the four girls and his lover over to a corner where a door had been painted black.

The next dim-lit room held black sofas and mattresses arranged in a haphazard fashion. This chamber consisted of hetero sex, which interested him only slightly more than the lesbian room he'd just left. He glanced at the watchers watching the doers. One lady was leaning over a carpeted horizontal post some three feet long. Dressed in a blue top, she was naked from the waist down while some bald guy with a

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hairy ass boinked her from behind. Little more than candles and dim gas lamps provided illumination in each room. If one really wanted a good look at the sex acts being played out, one had to get within a few feet of the action. He noticed a group gathered around the mattress where a naked couple romped, impairing his view. He decided against getting closer in favor of finding the gay room, where Ricky had disappeared moments ago.

Bobby glanced back into the lesbian room. Sheena sprawled over one of the sofas, making out with Marissa, who knelt on the floor beside her. Sheena's dress was lifted up around her waist, revealing her nakedness. The infatuated Chinese girl who had been following her around earlier was eating out her pussy.

Happy Birthday, Sheena.

Bobby turned and wove his way in the opposite direction, back through the shadowy lounge, into the next chamber of sex.

The scent of exotic incense floated out of the gay boys' room. Bobby followed it in and felt immediately at home. He went over to the small bar on the far wall and ordered a whiskey while scanning the dimly lit bodies in various corners and on sofas. He sipped while he walked to where several guys were entranced in watching the action. He slipped around two guys massaging each others' asses and followed their gazes of rapture to a mattress on the floor.

In the dim light, a rush of adrenalin shot through him when he saw the bronzy physique of none other than his own Ricky,

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down on all fours, glistening with sweat. Ever the exhibitionist, he writhed in ecstasy while a muscled black man on his knees behind him held him by the hips and fucked his ass. Bobby could see the performance was a turn on for the guys watching. One guy had his hand down his pants, working his own willy, while a couple of others groped each other without taking their eyes off the main event. Bobby had to admit that the sight of the big black guy pumping his ample cock in and out of Ricky's perfect ass was hot in the extreme.

His gorgeous lover thoroughly enjoyed an audience. While Bobby wasn't much for getting off while people watched, Ricky loved it. And it had always enhanced their sex at home—the post group sex of parties and clubs. Bobby noticed Ricky had a greater sense of bravura about their private activities after he'd gotten off in front of other guys, as though he'd been hot-wired and wanted to pass it on to his more modest lover. Bobby didn't need to share the way Bobby did, but he understood his lover's need for attention and humored him by playing along. Now, he stood off to one side and watched, a sly smile on his lips.

The black guy slowed his thrusts. Bobby watched Ricky come down to his elbows, lift his ass higher, and spread his legs wider. His black partner leaned back and pulled out just enough to watch his condom-covered cock slide out almost to the tip before he urged it in again. Bobby saw the glisten of KY smeared all around the guy's member just before he slid it back into Ricky's asshole. He did that a few more times, then brought his naked body in closer to Ricky's butt and started

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ramming harder. Bobby watched Ricky's ass indent as the guy fucked him good and deep.

As he neared his climax, the black guy growled, "You white mother-fucker!"

He growled again and stiffened as he released his wad into the smooth rump of the willing white boy.

Bobby watched Ricky's partner cease his movements and slide himself out. Bobby couldn't discern what he said when he patted Ricky's bum and slipped down to lay on the mattress beside him while Ricky stretched. Bobby watched him ease down into the yoga position called "The Cobra" and press his hands against the floor to curl his face up toward the ceiling. While Ricky reached his chest upward, Bobby marveled at how his beautiful buns tightened and his legs extended into pointed feet along the mattress. A moment later Ricky stretched the opposite way, into the posture called "Downward Facing Dog," pressing his heels into the floor with his back extended and his ass up toward the ceiling.

Bobby chuckled at how Ricky milked his audience, even in the sexual arena. Observers expressed their appreciation with favorable comments. Ricky released the pose and laughed, lying back against the mattress. Bobby knew he knew exactly what he was doing when he relaxed his beautiful body into a provocative pose. Bobby noted guys licking their chops, hoping for a chance to do what the black guy had just done. A skinny blond guy who wasn't too bad looking took the initiative and came onto the mattress, kneeling before Ricky. A moment later, he was sucking Ricky's cock. Ricky lay back

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and let him suck him off, gyrating his hips as the guy took him deeper into his throat. Bobby marveled at how beautiful Ricky's face appeared in the throes of his orgasm, his long lashes closed over his eyes, his parted mouth drawing in shallow breaths while the stranger coaxed his milky release.

When it was over, Bobby sat quietly in the shadows while Ricky rose and dressed.

Hips swiveling, Ricky sauntered toward Bobby. When Bobby tilted his head up, his eyes were level with the crotch of Ricky's blue jeans.

Ricky shot Bobby a grin. "Been here long?"

Bobby nodded. "I saw most of the show."

Ricky laughed. He crouched next to Bobby's ear and asked, "Did it turn you on?"

"Human animals get turned on watching other humans fuck, don't ya know? Whether or not we want to. It's kind of a knee-jerk reaction."

Ricky stood. "So you're telling me you would've gotten turned on regardless of who was up there doing it?"

Bobby thought about it. "Maybe."

Ricky's smirked. "Bullshit."

Bobby shrugged. "Okay. You're more fucking gorgeous than most other people here. Who would I rather watch? You, of course. But, then again, I'd also be happier if I actually fucked you myself."

"Hey, you were the one who got all pissy when I came by last week."

"'Cause it was, like, two-thirty A.M. and I had a major

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client early the next morning. And...you were drunk.” He paused and looked at him. “It’s not like I don’t love having sex with you. You know that.”

Ricky leaned back into his hip and gave Bobby a seductive look.

“Come on,” he said. “Let’s get a drink.”

Bobby was aware of numerous eyes on Ricky and him as they walked toward the small bar in the room. He had to admit, he liked people knowing he was with the guy they were all drooling over. And he liked knowing he was more to the pretty boy than just a one-time fuck.

As Ricky ordered drinks, Bobby considered how few of these guys would know how to deal with Ricky on a day-to-day basis, outside this arena. Ricky was an entertainer, with an entertainer’s ego and, therefore, special needs. Most of these guys would bail when Ricky started getting difficult—if Ricky didn’t dump them first. Or else they’d get so hung up on him, they’d become his personal doormats. Bobby understood him in a way most people didn’t. Basically, he was honest. He tended to tell it like it was. Amazingly, Ricky appreciated that more than having people blow smoke up his ass by telling him what they thought he wanted to hear—even if he sometimes got uppity at first.

A handsome Latin guy was leaning against the wall nearby, checking them out while they sipped their drinks. Bobby figured he was fantasizing about a threesome, but, frankly, Bobby wasn’t interested. He had all he wanted in Ricky, which he wanted to share with him later, between the

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1500 hundred-count Egyptian sheets he'd bought on sale at Saks last week.

But Ricky was in one of his devilish moods. He took Bobby by the hand and led him over to the wall where the Latin man stood. In no time, Ricky was chatting him up. Bobby had to smile as the guy opened up to relate the story of his origins in Ecuador, and how he ended up in NYC. At one point, Bobby did space out while watching other guys engaged in make-out sessions and other sexual acts around the room. When he tuned back into the conversation, Ricky started kissing him. He loved how it felt and responded with enthusiasm. A moment later, he felt his cock being rubbed. He didn't mind the feeling of that, either, but he sensed it wasn't Ricky's touch. He glanced down to find the good-looking Latin guy fondling him. He realized that Ricky was intentionally standing off to one side to make room for the guy. He knew Ricky had either suggested the guy do it, or at least made it easy for him. Bobby didn't argue when he felt the guy unlatch his belt and un-zip his fly.

Ricky was still kissing Bobby as he reached a hand up to rub his chest. Bobby felt the other guy yank his underwear and slacks down around his knees.

"Ay, nice *pinga*," the Latin guy said.

Bobby had been with enough Latin men to know that meant prick.

Ricky broke from his kiss to comment, "Isn't it a beauty?"

"*Sí, sí*," the man said as he fondled it.

Bobby recalled how Ricky had told him on numerous

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occasions that it was a good-looking cock, longer than average, with just the right girth. Now, he watched Ricky watch the Latin guy put his mouth over his “good-looking cock.”

Ricky fondled Bobby’s pectorals while the Latino blew him. Bobby sensed Ricky glance at the blissful expression he felt must be showing on his own face. He also felt him resume watching the Latin man pump his head up and down his rod.

Bobby leaned against the wall and gave into the experience. A few minutes later, he felt his cock get rock hard and enlarge when the guy shoved a finger up his ass. As Bobby’s member swelled to its fullest size, the man put a hand around its base and pumped harder. He took his mouth off just as the jism erupted, aiming it away from him.

Bobby reveled in the explosive release of ejaculation that made him think of thousands of stars shooting through his blood stream until the Big Bang erupted from the barrel of his cock.

Ricky kissed him and massaged his chest as he shook off the final shivers of his orgasm. The Latin man swathed down Bobby’s baby batter. After a moment, Bobby reached down and pulled his slacks back up.

The man stood. “*Gracias*,” he said with a seductive smile. He handed Ricky a card with his number. “Gimme a call. I like to do you both sometime.”

Bobby turned to Ricky. “Are you ready to go?”

“Sure.”

“Let’s find the girls.”

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Ricky surprised him with a sweet kiss. “You got it. Let’s go.”

CHAPTER 3

Ricky padded down the old building's linoleum-lined hallway and glanced at the numbers. When a hot-looking guy exited a door twenty or so yards ahead, Ricky knew he was close to suite number 1102. He gave the young guy a subtle once-over as they passed each other.

Damn—that's fine.

He didn't get the gay vibe, though, and besides—this was a business call, not pleasure. He reached for 1102's doorknob.

An outstanding beauty with long, red hair sat on the worn sofa inside the suite's vestibule. She glanced up from the forms she was filling out and Ricky noted the two stacks of headshots on the coffee table before her—one a serious

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expression, one smiling—the standard tools of any serious actor. He'd been through the drill, too, three years ago, when he first signed on with Nell, and provided her with a hundred of both, each with a resumé stapled to the back.

I ought to get new headshots done myself one of these days. Although, why bother, with no impressive theatre credits to add as of late.

He stood up straight to feel more confident and poked his head inside the open door to Nell's office.

There she was, like always, seated behind her big desk, with a phone at her ear. She glanced up.

“Hey, Ricky Hart! Have a seat—I'll be with you in a sec.”

Ricky nodded and turned. Rather than take a seat, however, he stood and stared at the dozens of theatrical posters framed on the wall, all of which he'd perused a dozen times before. As he read the familiar autographs of clients represented by Nell on the posters for their shows, he thought she looked a bit heavier than the last time he'd seen her. Well, she was no little flower, that one—she'd survived as an agent a long time, a solid woman with a strong presence.

Guess she'd have to be, to thrive in this biz.

It always pissed off Ricky to have to wait for Nell, or for the numerous other oh-so-important entertainment people with whom he'd had appointments in the past. His time was precious, too, but he'd never been ushered right in, whether he arrived early or on time. Always made to wait, he felt as though they did it on purpose, as though they were lording over him and his less-than-stellar status as an actor by letting

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him know they were important enough to make him wait. He figured it was part of their little power trip, reminding him that his career hinged on their control.

He sighed.

What you gonna do? They do have the power to open the right doors—doors that would probably slam in my face if I knocked with no representation. No choice but to play nice.

He scratched his head and attempted to subdue the fidgetiness setting in. He glanced at the pretty girl, so ardent in her form-filling. She couldn't be more than eighteen, with a certain professionalism about her already. Probably started when she was ten, a real pro on camera and stage. Ricky recalled Nell telling him how lots of her clients started as kids and made fortunes by the time they were twenty, owning townhouses and condos, with substantial financial holdings. She also mentioned most of them burned out by the time they hit twenty-three and went into other lines of work. And here he was, twenty-six, still looking to get a break.

He sighed again, but caught himself before negative thinking grabbed hold of his mind, which would threaten his self-confidence.

Nell's voice pulled him away from the poster for *Dames At Sea*. From the doorway, she addressed the young redhead.

"How you doing out here, Laura?"

The girl scanned the sheets she'd been writing on. "So far, so good I think. I've got all my stuff here for you, too. Oh—I just need to sign these right here."

"You in a hurry, or have you got time to wait? I need to

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see Ricky. If you've got other appointments—"

"Oh, no, take your time. I can wait."

Ricky fought to keep his toe from tapping with impatience. He felt his mind racing at a million miles an hour while these two were dawdling. He was also pissed off he didn't bring any workout clothes for the gym, since he realized he'd have time in this area of town before his bartending shift at the Cosmic Code.

Maybe I'll catch a movie...

"All right, Ricky, my boy. Let's go on into my office."

Ricky was glad when Nell shut the door for greater privacy. He followed her over to the desk and sat down after she'd gone around to her chair.

Nell sat back and made a cool appraisal of Ricky. He knew she was sizing him up as a product, also known as "talent," and he gave her a sexy smile. She responded with a half smile, but he didn't read a smile in her eyes, which meant: Time to get down to business.

"So, Rick. What's on your mind?"

He leaned an elbow on the arm of his chair and took his time.

"Well, Nell, it's like this. I heard from a very good source that Billy Hamilton is leaving *Grease* to do a movie. And, apparently, the call for his replacement was a couple of weeks ago. Now, I'm perfect for that role, I've even played it in summer stock. So I'm just wondering why I didn't get a shot at it this time."

Nell raised her eyebrows and puckered her mouth to one

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side.

“Ricky, hon, Billy Hamilton is a star. As a mid-size agency, I don’t get too many calls for star replacements.”

“But Equity rules say a certain number of actors have to be seen for every role, right?”

“Right, yes, that’s true.”

“So—couldn’t you have gotten a slot with Paula Zimmerman? I mean, shouldn’t she have seen at least a couple of your clients?”

Nell took a breath and Ricky sensed she was choosing her words carefully before she spoke. Immoveable in her chair, her fingers were linked together, resting over her big belly. He thought she resembled a great bullfrog on a lily pad, just waiting for the right moment to shoot its tongue without moving anything else and catch the nearest fly. While she barely moved, he sensed the wheels were turning...

Here comes the zinger.

“Look, Ricky, it’s not that I don’t love you, but facts are facts. You haven’t done any decent principal work since *Altar Boyz*. Now, who is Paula Zimmerman going to want to see from the list of clients I submit? I only have two slots with her, and she picked those out from the package I sent her.”

Ricky felt a flame of anger sear his throat. He swallowed. “Was my headshot in that package?”

She looked away for a second and Ricky knew she’d screwed him by leaving it out.

“Look,” she explained, “I had to go with the six hottest guys I’ve got right now. You’re not exactly on top of the

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current list, honey. I've got twenty year-olds vying for parts that open up on Broadway. They're hungry, on fire. They're at the top of their games as singers and dancers, out there all the time, looking for an opportunity."

"I'm an actor who sings and dances,. I never said I was a technician."

"And I'm not saying you have to be. The chorus is full of dancers who can out-dance the leads— that's not my point. Believe me, I'd rather have a solid actor in a role than a tootsie who sings and dances like a charm but is cardboard as a character."

"Right!" Ricky said with passion. "That's my point."

"Well, honey, what are you doing? I don't hear from you regularly, you're not calling me about stuff that's coming up. Otherwise, I can't keep track. I've got clients who call me every day. They stay on my radar by keeping in touch. I'm only one person, you know, with lots of clients who all want work."

Ricky bit his lip to keep from making a retort, since, on one hand, she was right.

"Look, when I get limited slots with the biggest casting directors on Broadway, I have to send in the guys I think have the best chance of booking the job. And, frankly, you're losing your edge, kid."

Ricky swallowed down the tears filling his eyes from behind. He felt his cheeks color with the blood rushing to his head. He was shaken and unsure about how to be cool while pressing her to help jump-start his career.

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“Look, Nell, you told me once I could have a big career.”

“That’s right, I did. And I’m not saying you can’t now. But you have to want it bad enough to do any and everything you can to get it. It doesn’t come on a platter.”

Only if you’re born into it, he thought bitterly, like the Sheen boys and the Penns, and other famous successes who were kids of those in the screen industry, or established stage actors. *They fall into it while shmucks like me struggle to get noticed.*

He noticed Nell squint her eyes, as though she sensed his thoughts.

“You have to want it badly enough,” Nell repeated. “Some people are luckier than others in getting a break. Ultimately, everybody has to prove themselves. You’ll get your chance—but you’d damned well better be prepared for it. You lose your edge, you’re sunk.”

Ricky looked down at his hands in his lap. He couldn’t argue with those words. The fact was, she was right. He knew the old saying: Luck equals being ready for right timing.

He swallowed his strong emotion and took a deep breath. “Okay, Nell.” His voice was hoarse. “I don’t want to take up any more of your time right now. I appreciate you seeing me.”

“You’re welcome. Thank you for coming in.”

Nell spoke again, just before Ricky reached the door.

“Ricky, ask yourself something.”

He turned and looked at her.

“Ask yourself,” she continued, “how bad do I want it? How bad do I want the brass ring?”

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Ricky said nothing.

Nell turned the full intensity of her gaze on him. Her tone of voice was without mirth, but not without compassion.

“If you decide you want it bad enough, remember to live up to your own highest standard—period. Don’t let anybody or anything pull you down.”

Ricky absorbed her words, then slowly nodded.

“Okay, Nell. Thanks. See you ’round.”

CHAPTER 4

At midnight, Marissa watched Ricky wipe down his bartending station and re-stock the glassware.

“Well, now, that’s something you don’t see every day,” she teased.

Ricky wiped sticky gook off the Triple Sec bottle and replaced it in the speed rack by his hips. “What?”

“Such avid cleaning at this time of night. Aiming to get out early or something?”

“Yeah, as a matter of fact.”

“Whatsa matter—got a hot date with Bobby?”

“No. He’s home in bed. I just, for once, would like to get the hell out of here at a reasonable hour so I can make my jazz

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class tomorrow at Broadway Dance Center.”

“Hey, good for you.” She nudged her chin. “Here comes Donny.”

Ricky glanced back to see the pudgy manager push through the door and come behind the bar. He was an okay guy, Ricky supposed. A divorced guy who cherished his newfound freedom, Donny embraced the late nightlife. He didn’t mind being the Cosmic Code’s night manager, sleeping away half the day, as long as he didn’t have to kiss any more corporate ass. He loved the irony of getting home at the same time he used to rise for his former job, somewhere around six in the morning, which he mentioned almost every time Ricky got caught up with him in after hour cocktails. Ricky cursed himself for sleeping in, but Bobby was right...he’d gotten into a rut. Now that had to stop.

“Hey, guy,” Ricky said.

“What’s up, Rick?”

“Not too much going on here tonight. Think you can get by with two bartenders, so I can move on out a little early tonight?”

Donny looked surprised. “That’s a switch. You usually like late-night clean-up, when the industry regulars come in.”

“True, true, I’m a money ho, usually. But I got some things to do tomorrow. Got to get up early.”

Donny shrugged. “If Marissa and H.R. don’t mind closing, that’s fine by me.”

Ricky nodded. He felt odd, all of a sudden, that he’d put getting in shape ahead of his making another hundred bucks at

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the end of the night. But sometimes making money had to be put on the back burner in order to get ahead later. Once he closed his bank out, he turned in his paper work to Donny and came out the exit at the service end of the bar. In an effort to remain undetected by the regulars, who expected him to either serve them or drink with them, he stood quietly waiting for Marissa to come over. She was embroiled in telling a tale to a pair of girls who listened, enthralled. She tossed a half-glance his way but was hell-bent on finishing her story before she came over. He waited another couple of minutes and thought he ought to leave, right there and then. But after cocktails every night for the past six month, he couldn't go home cold turkey. He needed a shot of bourbon to soften the after-work edge.

"Psst, Marissa," he called over.

Marissa gave him a semi-annoyed look. She was still yakking to her girlfriends while she walked over to Ricky.

"Hel-looo?" she said to him with exaggerated wide eyes.

"Can't you see I'm busy, dah-ling?"

"Yeah, busy working it."

"Duh, how else will I make money?"

Ricky almost said, "By serving drinks," but refrained.

"Listen, baby, you can go right back. Just pour me a Makers Mark, neat."

"Yes, kimosabe."

She over-poured the shot of bourbon and slammed it up on the bar in front of him.

"Love ya," she said with a flip attitude. She blew him a

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kiss and went back to the two ladies.

“Mean it,” Ricky said drily before he downed his shot.

He tried to avoid passing the main bar on his way to the door, but a regular customer and drinking buddy, Todd Blane, came out of the men’s room and snagged him with a high-five.

“Hey, dude,” he said, “you off early or somethin’?”

“Yeah, kind of. Got some stuff going on I’ve got take care of.”

“Hey, come on over here before you go. Lemme buy you a drink.”

This was precisely what Ricky had hoped to avoid...the temptation and the pressure to conform. Especially from straight guys he didn’t want thinking he was a wuss.

“Hey, guy, I’d love to, but I got to run. Sorry.”

“Aw, come on, brother, just one ain’t gonna kill you.”

Ricky sought a way out that would save him face. “Let me make a phone call,” he said. “I got to see what’s up and then I’ll be over.”

Todd grabbed his hand and shook it. “With the significant other? All right, bro. I gotcha. See you back at the bar.”

Ricky nodded and pulled out his cell phone as though he were stepping toward the atrium to make that call.

He shook his head with annoyance.

I got to keep these guys my buddies or I won’t make as much cash off them when I work. Regulars who think they’re your friends tip way better than the average shmo who comes in only once in awhile.

He craned his neck to see Karl and Judd seated with Todd

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and finally succumbed to peer pressure; he figured he'd better go over for at least one drink, to keep up the appearance of being a bud.

Just as he started to make his way over, Nell's voice echoed in his head.

"How bad do you want the brass ring?" he heard her ask. *"And remember,"* she continued, *"live up to your own highest standard. You can do it, if you really want it."*

Ricky stopped in his tracks. He looked around himself, at the cocktail waitresses and bouncers, heard the annoying boom of loud music that grated on his nerves.

Do I want to end up working here the rest of my life, or would I rather be in Broadway shows?

Passion and need grabbed hold of his senses as the fear of failure bellowed in his head. He turned and rushed toward the escalators before he talked himself back into drinking with the boys.

He leaped down the moving metal stairs and rushed out into the crisp evening where the frenetic activity of Times Square was still at a high. He hailed the first cab he saw and got in so fast the driver wondered if he was being pursued.

"Over to the east side, please," Ricky said. "Twenty-eighth and Lex."

The driver nodded and turned the taxi eastward.

From the cab window, he watched pedestrians bustling along the sidewalk and wondered where his own life was headed.

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* * *

One of the great things about Buddy Adler's jazz class were the live percussionists. They played the entire warm-up for the first hour of class, until Buddy put on hot, soulful music for the combination during the second half. The beat of the conga and other drums vibrated into the core of the dancers' bodies, and Ricky was grooving on it like a man lost in the desert drinking his first glass of water.

Buddy had been a mega-successful Broadway dancer for years. Well into his fifties now, he'd devised a brilliant warm-up routine and exercises for training serious dancers at the optimum level necessary for the expectations of Broadway and National tour performances. During the second part of class, he taught dance combinations from shows he'd been in, or material he'd choreographed himself. His class was one of the most popular and successful in all of New York City.

During his first class back, Ricky recalled most of the warm-up routine, and when he didn't, he looked in the mirror and mimicked the dancers up front. Only a super-confident dancer who'd been coming regularly to class would dare stand up front in a big, high-profile class like this. Thirty-five top-notch dancers trained professionally in this class and most of them knew their stuff. Ricky decided he'd be one of those guys up front, after coming to class on a regular basis. But, for now, he was content to get back inside his body, stretching and working muscles he'd neglected for too many months.

Each movement flowed from one into another during the warm-up series. Ricky reached his arms up one at a time,

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rhythmically stretching the muscles along his sides and back in time with the other dancers. As the routine progressed, he let out a groan of delighted agony when he bent over to a flat back position that worked his back, buttocks and hamstrings. In keeping with the progression of the warm-up, he rounded his back down and pressed his chest first against his right thigh, then over to the center where he hung for eight beats, and over to his left. His hamstrings loosened up as he breathed deep into them, and his body heat rose with the exertion of his movements. The glorious release of acids throughout his muscles and endorphins in his brain made him wonder why he'd stayed away so long.

What was I thinking, man? There's nothing like this for getting into optimum shape. Nothing is this incredible—well, maybe sex. Okay, this is more work. But, at least I know I'm alive, taking it to the max.

While he struggled a bit to get the combination down, he knew it was because he was rusty in picking up steps. The simple fact was...he hadn't been practicing. He vowed to himself he would get his butt in there every day until he was in top form again.

After class had ended and Ricky headed for the door, Buddy tossed him a bone.

"Nice to see you back, Mister Hart."

"Oh, gee, thanks, Buddy. Yeah, it's been a while."

"Will you be here again, say, within the next three months, you think?"

Ricky chuckled. "I'll be back tomorrow."

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* * *

Donny razzed Ricky when he asked to get out early for the third night in a row.

“You turning into an old man, or what?” he teased. “Can’t hang with the big boys after work anymore?”

Ricky smiled sheepishly. “No, nothing like that. It’s just, I finally got my butt back to working out in the morning, and I don’t want to fuck it up by partying ’til all hours again.”

“Can’t manage to get your ass out of bed the next day? I could party ’til six A.M. in the old days, and make an eight o’clock meeting if I had to.”

Ricky shrugged. “Well, I can’t. Not if I want to be on top of my game.”

Donny raised his eyebrows in mockery. “Oh, excuse me. On top of who, what—oh, your game!”

His laughter annoyed Ricky, who gave him a tight smile. He forced himself to count to ten before making a response. “Well, Donny, ol’ boy, I’m passing you the scepter for the moment. You be king until I get back on the circuit.”

Donny wasn’t sure how to take this, but Ricky thought he seemed to like the idea of being king.

“I’ll get out with you guys soon,” Ricky said. “I just had to get back in shape for a while. You know?”

Donny patted his paunch and said, “Yeah, sure I do.”

Ricky laughed and clapped him on the back. “Ah, that’s why I love ya, Don.”

This seemed sufficient to get Don off Ricky’s back. He didn’t want him to take personally his decision to avoid the

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party scene.

Over the next few weeks, Ricky found himself deflecting numerous wisecracks from his former partying buddies for not staying after shifts to drink with them. He also noticed his earnings dipped from leaving sooner than usual and paying for classes. It was tough to fight the urge to unwind by tossing back a couple of drinks every night, especially since he got off work so late. Whenever he started to weaken, however, he heard Nell's voice in his head telling him to live up to his own highest standard. Between that statement and Bobby's lecture on how he'd gotten out of the show circuit loop, he felt his gut harden in response to people who tried to pressure him back into partying. He gained further strength in breaking this habit by admitting to himself how pissed he was for his own laxity over the past year. The anger helped keep him fired up for his focus on discipline.

Each morning before dance class, Ricky practiced vocal exercises by playing one of the many tapes he'd kept from private singing lessons he'd taken over the years. He'd dress himself in his dance clothes and pack his bartending clothes into a big dance bag. After dance class today, however, he changed into comfortable clothes and headed downtown.

He felt mild anxiety when he entered the acting studio he hadn't been to in almost a year. Relief washed over him when Sally Speedak appeared genuinely happy to see him.

"It's so nice to see a talented student back in class," she said.

Ricky thanked her. "I'd like to do a monologue I was

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working on a while ago, Sally. Something I think would be good for auditions.”

Sally nodded. “Great. There’s no reason why you can’t be working all the time.”

Ricky cast his eyes down. “No reasons beyond the roadblocks I put up myself.”

Sally smiled. “Those are always the hardest to get past. But, once you do...”

Ricky looked up at her. “What?”

“There’ll be no stopping you.”

CHAPTER 5

With a final fluff to Paula Zimmerman's soft, blond hair, Bobby put down his teasing brush and stood back to admire.

"Voila!"

An attractive middle-aged lady in her late forties, Paula turned her head from side to side and admired her new cut and color.

"You are an artist," she said with admiration. "I love it. And I loved your spread in Style magazine, last week."

"Thanks. I heard it's great," Bobby said matter-of-factly. "Got to get a copy of it."

Paula gave him a surprised look. "You haven't even seen it yet?"

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“Well, not the final product. I glanced at a copy one of the girls had, but I haven’t looked at it in depth. The photographer gave me my own photos after the shoot. I just didn’t know which ones the magazine would choose to use.”

“Make sure you get a copy of the final version for your portfolio.”

“Oh, for sure. I’m on it. I’m onto building up my book. My video collection, too. I’m shooting a video with VHI in two weeks—Lulu and the Sextets.”

“They’re very hot right now.”

Bobby nodded.

Paula stood and unsnapped the neck of her plastic cape.

“Say, I’d like to take a look at your portfolio. We’re casting for *Hair* at the Delacorte Theatre in the early fall. Lots of hair in the sixties style, only they want it trumped up, you know? Oodles of extensions, with an over-the-top wildness.”

“They’re doing *Hair* in Central Park?”

“Mm-hm. Special fortieth anniversary performance. I bet you’d come up with some great stuff, once you research it. If you’re interested”

“Are you kidding? I love theatre. Love to give that a shot.”

“Here,” she dug quickly into her handbag. “Here’s my card. Have Lizzie set up an appointment in the next couple of weeks. We’ll chat in my office.”

“Sounds swell.”

“Swell!” she repeated. “Now, that’s a cute one. I like that.” She held the cape out to him. “What shall I do with this?”

“I’ve got it. By the way—when’s the casting call for

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Hair?”

Paula scratched her head and pursed her lips. “Let’s see...the show is three days in late September, six weeks of rehearsal. Sometime in late June. We’ll need contracts done by early August. Don’t want to keep the cast on hold for too long beforehand.”

Bobby nodded. His wheels were turning with possibilities. He’d wait and discuss them with Lizzie, however, instead of the head honcho herself.

All he said was, “Cool.”

Paula offered him the urban kiss-kiss on either cheek and squeezed him. “You are just precious—I could eat you up!”

Bobby giggled. “Great to see you, Paula. You look stunning.”

As they walked toward the reception desk, several staff members echoed his compliment.

“Why, thank you,” she said in a lovely voice. “I’m a new Bobby Salem fan, that’s for sure.”

After he bid the casting director adieu, Bobby thought what a perfect show *Hair* would be for Ricky to get in on.

* * *

Bobby arrived before Ricky and sipped white wine at a table for two. This was one of their favorite little spots in the city, a Greek, family-owned restaurant with no more than twelve tables. The exposed brick wall and candles provided a sense of comfort, supported by the authentic, Greek cuisine. And they both loved the Calakos family who ran it with a

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subtle presence.

Through the open façade at the front of the restaurant, Bobby watched Ricky cross Lexington Avenue and head toward the restaurant. His buff body radiated the glow of good health. Bobby was thrilled with Ricky's change of pace over the past six weeks, the way he'd cut back on the partying and gone back to his classes. He'd even gone to a couple of casting calls to get his auditioning chops down. That's why Bobby felt confident in making the suggestion at the back of his mind.

Ricky flashed a smile the minute he spotted Bobby. As he came through the doorway, he greeted the Calakos brother who was running the place that night. "Hey, Nikos."

The slim, dark-haired man nodded in greeting. "Nice to see you."

He motioned Bobby toward the table and followed him, pulling out his chair.

"You rock, man," Ricky said. "Thanks."

Bobby waited while Ricky spread his linen napkin across his lap, took a sip of water, and ordered a glass of merlot from Tina, the youngest Calakos daughter who was serving their table.

Bobby sensed an aura of energy around Ricky and realized he was beaming with excitement.

"Okay," he said, "spill the beans."

"What?" Ricky teased. "Did I say anything?"

"Come on," Bobby said. "Tell daddy what's going on."

Ricky lifted his eyebrows but couldn't suppress a grin.

"It's no big deal," he said, "but I booked a commercial

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today.”

“What do you mean, ‘It’s no big deal’? That’s a big deal. I think it’s great! Awesome! Congratulations.”

Ricky shrugged. “Just an under five kind-of-thing. I may not even have lines, if they shoot it a certain way. I play a kids’ soccer coach.”

“Well, shee-it—a soccer coach. Ain’t that sweet.”

Ricky shot him a playful look that implied, “Give me a break.”

Bobby ignored it. “What’s the product?”

“Cheerios.”

“Cheerios? Oh my God—I see big royalties. What do you mean, ‘it’s no big deal’?”

Ricky shrugged. “It’s great I finally got something, but it’s just a sports shoot kind of thing.”

“Well, I think it rocks. And you might like what I have to tell you, too.”

Ricky perused the menu he already knew by heart. “I’m getting the moussaka.” He closed his menu and placed it to one side.

Bobby closed his, too, and sat back. “Guess who was in my chair, today? Who now looks stylish and fabulous?”

“I don’t know. Who?”

“Paula Zimmerman.”

Ricky’s eyebrows went up in interest. “Oh, really?”

“Mm-hm. She was thrilled with her cut and color—”

“Of course she was.”

“Mm-hm. So thrilled, as a matter of fact, that she thought I

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might be interested in doing a big production at the Delacorte this September.”

“In Central Park?”

“Mm-hm.” Bobby milked his chance to present a potentially great opportunity.

Ricky played along.

“Okay,” he began in mock deliberation, “the powerful Paula Zimmerman wants you to do exactly what at the theatre in Central Park?”

Bobby explained what Paula had said to him about designing hair, wigs and extensions for *Hair*. He could almost see Ricky’s mental wheels turn.

“Who’s directing?”

“I don’t know,” Bobby said. “But, I figure this thing is going to be big. Lots of coverage for the Fortieth Anniversary reunion. Right?”

Ricky looked hard at Bobby. “You’ve got to get me an audition, man. I’ve wanted to play Claude since I first heard the music. When I was eleven. I was at my aunt Jessie’s and Uncle Carry’s house when I found the album. My uncle said he remembered when the show first came out and told me all about it. I played that album over and over and over, the whole weekend I spent with them, until I knew every freaking lyric—especially to all of Claude’s songs.”

Bobby nodded. “Somehow I knew this was right for you.”

As soon as Tina took their dinner orders, Ricky gushed, “I never stopped loving that show. I got the album for Christmas when I turned twelve. I guess it was around the same time I

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realized I was gay, 'cause I had a bad, wicked crush on Sammy Welling, the captain of the varsity football team."

"You aimed high, my man, didn't you?"

"Oh, yeah, always. Anyway, there I was, stuck in the burbs of Dayton, Ohio, a gay boy in a blue-collar neighborhood. They would've hung you by the balls if you dared say a word about preferring boys to girls. So I just kept playing *Hair* over and over again, dreaming I was Claude, pretending I was one of those sixties rebels who wanted to rip down the establishment and murder all the hypocrites giving grief to people who only wanted peace, love and drugs."

Bobby nodded. "When I was young and got freaked out by nasty stuff, I went into my own little world and drew. I designed these little fantasy worlds, complete with heroes and monsters."

"Yeah, well, around the era of the Vietnam War, you didn't have to look too far for either of those."

Bobby sighed. "Actually, you still don't."

Ricky nodded. "But, anyway, do you see how cool it would be for me to do this show? I've got to do it! I've got to get Nell to submit me for it."

After Tina brought their salads, Bobby said, "Why don't you give me a picture and resumé and let me run this by Lizzie first. See what she thinks."

Ricky sipped his wine. The light from the wall sconce danced in his eyes as he watched Bobby over the rim of his glass.

"You just might be my real-life hero, you know?"

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Bobby chuckled. "I'm just a humble artist, in search of creativity. Sharing the opportunity whenever I can."

* * *

Seated in their favorite booth at the Big Boy Diner on Broadway, Ricky and two of his dancer friends ate their post-class meal. They were discussing the combination from "Chicago" they'd just learned when Ricky's cell phone buzzed. He wouldn't have bothered taking the call except Nell Wynstrom's name flashed.

"It's my agent. Gotta take this, guys." He flipped back the lid and popped the phone up to his ear. "Hey, Nell, how are you?"

His friends paid homage to the importance of a call from one's agent by consuming their bagels in silence.

All of a sudden, Ricky was rummaging around his dance bag with urgency until he pulled out a pen. "Okay, Nell, go ahead."

He listened and wrote on a white napkin. "Uh-huh, I got it...right, nothing from the show," he said. When he looked up at his friends, their expressions displayed unabashed curiosity.

"Wow," he continued, "this is most excellent, Nell. I mean, I am psyched about this! Really, really psyched!" He laughed.

His two friends waited in silent expectation as Ricky ended his call, folded up the napkin and tucked it inside his wallet.

The one named Martin finally said, "Okay, what's up?"

Ricky grinned from ear to ear. "I've got a call for the

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anniversary performance of *Hair* in Central Park this fall.”

The two dancers congratulated him. He filled them in with details about where and when.

“Damn,” Martin said, “I ought to get my agent to submit me, too. I’d be perfect.”

Ricky smiled and kept his secret weapon to himself. He was starting to realize the truth in the statement, “It’s who you know.”

And he also realized that while Bobby had helped him get his foot in the door, he was the one who would be running with the ball. He’d have to prepare his audition material to perfection and pump himself up to win this part.

CHAPTER 6

During the next week, Ricky got to bed early each night and rose at a reasonable hour each morning. He started his day in meditation to keep himself clear and focused on remaining relaxed. The wear and tear of working late-nights and into the wee hours of the morning had fallen away over the past two months, as his head cleared and his physical strength returned.

He had a week before the audition for *Hair*. After Buddy's class each day, he ate lunch and walked over to the dumpy Harlequin studios, just off Times Square. Gray and dingy, the place seemed as though it had been around a hundred years. But Ricky was content to rent a small room with good acoustics and practice the songs he'd be singing.

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Each day, he turned on his tape recorder and rehearsed the tunes he'd chosen to best represent himself. For his initial audition, he decided to sing "Greased Lightening" from *Grease*. He knew it showed amazing theatrical energy whenever he sang the hell out of it. For his ballad, he'd sing "Earth Angel" from *Jersey Boys*, a sexy tune that let him be vulnerable. If they wanted more, he'd do the upbeat medley from *Jersey Boys* he'd rehearsed, and if they wanted legitimate Broadway material, he knew stuff from *The Fantasticks* and a tune from Sondheim's *Company*. He made sure he had plenty of material he was comfortable pulling out of his bag of tricks.

He craved making a permanent change in his life and felt that this show could make a huge difference in his career path. He knew the exposure would be incredible. *Hair* had been groundbreaking during its heyday. No one had done anything like it before. He looked up the history online and found that Joseph Papp had been the producer who gave two Bohemian actors—James Rado and Gerome Ragni—the chance to mold their creative vision into the phenomenal success that *Hair* ultimately became. The job of re-creating the audacity of such a rebellious social perspective emblazoned Ricky in such a deep way, he almost felt the part was his already.

And, deep down, he wanted an outlet for ranting and raving against the intolerance he'd experienced as a young, gay man growing up in mainstream America. His gut told him that, if directed with zeal, this show would spit back some of 1968's outrage into an era that seemed to have forgotten how

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to question things so obviously wrong. He wanted to be a part of the fire that could deliver a jolt into social complacency. He longed for the chance to send a kick toward unfair cultural bias. He craved the opportunity to battle some of the fears eating away at individual freedom. In short: he was dying to get onstage and shock the hell out of the audience!

So, Ricky trained his mind, body and emotions to be strong, yet remain flexible. He channeled everything he had into presenting his best side to the casting director and other professionals who would be at the audition. He planned on making their choice easy by making sure every cell in his body vibrated the kind of vim and vigor called for by this show.

* * *

Bobby wanted Ricky to book *Hair* for a variety of reasons.

But first and foremost he wanted his boyfriend to share in the kind of success he was currently experiencing by earning a living doing what he loved.

For years, Bobby had dreamed of becoming not only creatively successful, but also a financial success. He'd kept that goal in mind through all the times he felt humiliated by waiting tables in that ratty, mid-town rib joint, especially when ignorant persons spoke down to him in the rudest manner possible. He'd taken that job to support himself through the apprentice program Alfredo Sirvin insisted all his stylists endure, regardless of previous experience or training. And Alfredo only chose stylists with at least two years of formal

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hair schooling, on top of time in the field. No newbies made it into his training program, yet, all had to endure two years of learning the Sirvin way without pay. Bobby had been a practicing stylist at a trendy salon in San Francisco for eight years before he came to Sirvin's. But he was astute enough to know he was getting a phenomenal education in exchange for stepping down from his established position in Frisco. And he also recognized that, during his training, he was making major connections with rich clients in a city packed full of them.

So, for two years, Bobby had swallowed his pride to put up with long hours of training and waiting tables to survive, and now he was reaping the rewards.

And, even though Bobby missed spending time with Ricky as of late, he looked at their relationship in a similar vein as when he'd paid his dues at Sirvin's. He figured the investment in time apart now, would only give them time together down the line.

Bobby loved Ricky, but he also knew that Ricky would have to reach a similar level of success if they were to remain together. Not that he would've had a problem if Ricky had decided to leave show biz and make nightclubs or restaurants into a career, perhaps going from bartending into management. But Bobby was certain Ricky was the one who would never be happy with such a choice—because he knew how badly Ricky wanted to make it as an actor.

So, for nearly three months, Bobby had gone about his own business and supported Ricky whenever he needed it. Right now, he figured Ricky would probably need some

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loving care the evening after his audition, which would take place tomorrow afternoon.

* * *

Ricky entered the huge rehearsal studio at the rear of the Public Theatre. It reminded him of an immense, open playing field. Gray floors and off-white walls seemed designed to invite an actor to fill it with his presence. Ricky intended to do just that with his monologue and songs.

He approached the long table where three people sat. Three persons, that was all. Ricky knew the importance of these three, however. They, alone, would see the first tier of auditionees and filter out the riff-raff before the callbacks that followed, until only the cream remained. Once they'd narrowed down the casting calls to the final choices, the director and producers would be called in. That's when actors, singers and dancers really felt the pressure of the final cuts.

Sometimes the process for making the final choice would go on and on and on, with callbacks numbering into the double digits, while more and more individuals came on board to discuss who was right, or more right, for a role. Ricky knew how quite an array of folks might be gathered together for the agitating experience of the final callback—anyone from the producer's wife or girlfriend, to extended business partners and sponsors—oh, and why not ask the cleaning lady, too, to get the layman's perspective of the singer onstage?

He chuckled at his own jaded point of view and decided to have a good time at this, the first stage of the game.

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But, since this was only round one, Ricky would have to shine if he was to get a shot at grabbing the brass ring.

He approached the table, flashed a smile to each person seated behind it, and introduced himself.

He recognized Paula Zimmerman from Bobby's description. She looked at him through narrowed eyes.

"Aren't you Bobby Salem's friend?"

Ricky nodded. "I am. And you must be Ms. Zimmerman. Great to meet you."

"Nice to meet you, too." She introduced him to the director, beside her, and the musical director on the other side.

She turned back to Ricky. "So. What have you got for us today?"

Ricky introduced the monologue he'd be doing, from the play *Equus*.

He turned around and faced the back wall to bring himself within. He focused his mind into the point between his eyebrows, called the third eye by those who meditate. He offered a brief prayer to all the mighty actors who had auditioned in this room before him, or rehearsed for their wondrous performances in the Public Theatre. He invoked their spirits, called upon them for strength, and dug into his balls to give it his all, as he knew that they had done. When he turned around to face his tribunal, he was committed to using the fullest part of himself.

* * *

Ricky knew he'd rocked at the audition, but that didn't

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always mean the callback was a shoo-in. Once, he'd had a call for a new show in Vegas. The auditioners applauded when he finished singing. He was certain the job was his—at the very least, a callback. When he didn't hear from Nell for two days, he called to see what was up. She explained that the casting director agreed he'd given a super audition and shown the videotape to the main producer. The producer was impressed by Ricky's performance but appalled because he greatly resembled the guy his wife had used to cheat on him. Ricky knew that, as irrational as that was, it had cost him the role. It didn't matter that he wasn't even interested in women! The guy simply didn't want to see his face up there onstage.

So, a great audition didn't guarantee you'd get the part.

This time, however, Nell called Ricky two days later with the time and date for his callback. A pang of excitement coursed through him when he realized he'd gotten through Door Number One.

For the next week, he juiced himself up by reading his best reviews for shows he'd done, which he'd compiled in a photo album, along with promotional and performance photographs. He recalled some of his favorite moments onstage, when he'd felt one with his character and had mesmerized the audience. His desire to become the wild-child character of Claude, who still feels bound by doing "the right thing," consumed him. He knew that role belonged to him, and when he walked into the callback, he acted and sang as though he already had it.

Apparently, he convinced the auditioners, too, because he made it to the dance call, which he blew through with aplomb.

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Nell was excited when she called him with the news.

“Good work, honey,” she said. “This is wonderful. You’ve broken the barrier and made it into that little circle where they make the final cut. For this next call, they want you to prepare something from the show. Doesn’t have to be perfect, they just want to hear your range and get an idea of what you can do with the material.”

Ricky kept his cool and did his homework. He bought the original cast recording of the show, got the sheet music for a few of the songs, had his musical coach give him some suggestions and record the accompaniment on tape. He learned as much of the music as he could, keeping his interpretive choices loose in case the musical director asked him to incorporate changes at the audition, and practiced daily with his tape.

His confidence soared when, one afternoon, he ran into Martin, his buddy from dance class.

“Hey, bro,” Martin said after they greeted each other. “Did you ever audition for that production of *Hair* they’re doing at the Delacorte?”

“Uh-huh. Did you?”

“Yeah. My agent got me into the dance call.”

“Yeah, I went to that, too.”

“Oh? I didn’t see you there.”

“Well, there might’ve been more than one.”

“I was there Tuesday, ten A.M.”

“Me, on Thursday.”

“Oh. Anyway, I thought the choreography kind of sucked,

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man. No big challenge. I tore it up, though. Don't know if they'll call me back or not. It's been over a week now."

Ricky squirmed. He didn't want to sound like a braggart or make his friend feel bad by telling him he'd gotten called back right away, as a principal player.

He aimed to be conciliatory and said, "Hey, you never know with these people, man. Never know what they want."

He started to say he had to run, but Martin thwarted his escape by asking, "So, how'd you end up doing on Thursday?"

Damn—I was hoping not to say. Oh, well...

"I did okay. Actually, my agent had gotten me in to sing before that. So the dance combination was a callback for me."

"Oh, really? And...?"

"I got called back again."

"Already? So they're doing callbacks now?"

"I guess. I mean, I don't know how they're working, exactly. I just know I went in and sang first, and then I had to dance."

A look of disappointment clouded Martin's face, but he masked it with a cheery countenance.

"Hey," he said, "good for you, man. Good luck with that. I'll see you round. See you in class."

Ricky scratched his neck self-consciously. He felt for his friend. He knew how shitty it felt to be out of the loop and not get a principal audition, let alone a callback. He sighed in empathy, but reconnected to his own inner strength and his own personal need.

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* * *

Cell phone to his ear, Bobby asked Ricky how his fourth callback audition for *Hair* had gone.

“Great, I think,” Ricky said with a chuckle. “That doesn’t mean they necessarily agree.”

Bobby knew this stance was a defense against caring too much and investing in something before it came to pass.

“What did Nell say?”

“Nothing, yet. We can only wait and see what the great gods decide. In the meantime, I need a drink. I’ve been dry since all this began. You want to meet at the W Hotel after work?”

“Sure. I can probably get there by eight. I’ll call if I get held up.”

* * *

Bobby wasn’t surprised to see Ricky chatting with a couple of guys at W’s streamlined, post-deco bar. He knew that as a bartender, Ricky felt at home at any bar and tuned into his ability to keep the good times rolling along even among the crowd. Bobby was glad when his face lit up as he approached; it’d been a while since Ricky appeared happy to see him.

Ricky turned from his new friends and beckoned Bobby to take the seat beside him.

“Go ahead,” he urged, “you’ve been on your feet all day.”

Bobby didn’t argue.

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“You want a Cosmopolitan?” Ricky asked.

Bobby thought that sounded like a good idea, so Ricky ordered one from the bartender. Bobby gave Ricky a look of expectation. Ricky teased him by feigning ignorance.

“What?” he asked.

“Well? What happened at your callback? Are we celebrating or crying in our drinks?”

Ricky chuckled. “We’re celebrating. I’m back in on Monday to see what they want to do with me.”

Bobby sat up straight.

“So—that means you’re hired?”

“Barring some unforeseen change of heart—yeah. Nell said they want to use me, just not exactly sure how. They want to see me interact with the other actors they chose.”

Bobby beamed and clinked his martini glass against Ricky’s.

“Well, there you have it!” He took a sip, then stopped. “You don’t seem overly enthused.”

“Oh, no, I am. I’m excited about the whole thing. It’s just—if they wanted me for a particular role, I think they’d have said so. They’d have said they want to see me for the part of Claude on Monday. But they want to see me for a Member of the Tribe, for sure, and then have me read for the part of Claude.”

Bobby hadn’t yet learned the details of the show, even though Paula was pretty much set on him doing the hair.

“So, what’s the tribe?”

“Like the chorus. Only, it’s a small group, more creative

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and interactive. I'll get to define myself more than I would in a regular chorus. All the members of the tribe have to create a character, and I don't know who they have me in mind for or what solo stuff I'll get to do. Just have to see what happens on Monday."

Bobby bit the inside of his lip.

"What?" Ricky asked. "Okay, what do you know? Spit it out."

Bobby took his time choosing his words. "Lizzie told me not to say anything to you because she's not supposed to discuss things until final decisions are made. But apparently you really blew them away every time you came in."

Ricky perked up. "She told you that?"

"Mm-hm. Apparently you had 'Claude' written all over you."

Ricky grinned and snuffed out a "Hmph."

Bobby shrugged. "It's just...there's some guy who's hot on Broadway now who wants the part. I guess he won the Tony award last spring."

Ricky's face dropped and he spoke with sarcasm. "Oh, I see. So he's already been cast and they've just been yanking my cord."

"Now, now, don't go getting all pissed off about it before we know for sure."

"But you just said—"

"I just said what I heard and that I'm not supposed to say anything because nothing's certain, not at this stage of the game. I just wanted you to know you knocked their socks off."

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Ricky took a deep breath to contain himself. He had walked in there believing this role was his, and he'd be damned if he walked in there like a loser-wuss on Monday.

"Well, I'm glad to hear I knocked their socks off. I'll go in and do it again, thank you very much."

Bobby smiled. "See, that's what I love about you."

"What?"

"You've been so strong lately. Taking the positive approach." From his barstool he leaned in close to him and spoke low so no one else could hear. "Can I suck your cock?"

When Ricky cast his eyes downward, Bobby felt a pit in his stomach and reacted by backing away. "What? You're not interested in me sucking you off anymore?"

"No, no. It's not that. I'm so focused on getting this part, I can't concentrate on anything else. I don't even want sex, I swear."

"That's not the Ricky Hart I know. At least, the one I used to know. You were always up for sex, anytime, practically any place."

Ricky gave him an apologetic look. "I'm sorry. It's not you, I swear. I don't know what's up with me right now."

Bobby forced himself to contain how upset he felt at being rejected, but was certain his cheeks burned scarlet with the hurt. He also contained himself because he didn't want Ricky to blow his audition at this point. He knew most actors had fragile egos and decided to give him the space he seemed to need right now.

"Hey, baby," he said as cheerily as he could. "You know I

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love you. I only want you to do well. So, fine. Whatever you say. You don't want me in your bed, fine"

"Honestly, I have to work tomorrow night, which is gonna kill me. Saturday nights are brutal. I'll be there until, like, three A.M."

"Can't they let you out early?"

"They've let me out early for the past three months. I hardly worked this week. All I did was do actor-singer-dancer stuff, since being in that frigging bar 'til all hours would've thrown me off my game. I begged off and got my way, but Don made me swear I'd work the late shift on Saturday in return."

"Well, at least you have all day Sunday to recover."

"Yeah, I guess." He shrugged. "That's why I'm keeping to myself the rest of the time."

Bobby reminded himself that he had invested in this audition, too, by helping Ricky get noticed in the first place. He had his best interests at heart. He forced himself not to feel insulted by Ricky's decision to go home alone and stepped back from his own needs. Although he was frustrated that their sex life had dwindled over the past couple of months, he decided to be patient and wait to see the outcome of the final callback. Hopefully, all would go well and romance would resurge.

"I understand," he heard himself say. "I want you to do great, baby. I just know you're gonna rock 'n' roll!"

He clinked his glass against Ricky's again. As he sipped the last of its contents, he swallowed the urge to beg Ricky to change his mind and come home with him.

CHAPTER 7

Currents of electricity seemed to permeate the air as Ricky took the seat across from Nell. A half-smile adorned her face as she perused the front page of Ricky's contract for *Hair: The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical*, as it was officially called, and laid it down on the desk, facing him.

"Okay. This is the agreement for your obligation to understudy the part of Claude, agreeing to be prepared to perform the role that weekend, should the signed player be unable to. It includes the release of responsibility to perform as part of the tribe, should that happen."

Ricky cast her a glance.

"I know," she said dryly, "you're praying like hell that'll

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be the case.”

“I wish no ill will toward anyone. However...”

Nell chuckled. “Well, if you have to perform, you’re covered.” She rose and came over beside him, pointing her pen against the contract. “You get this in monetary compensation for learning the part and doing rehearsals, this if you actually have to perform it, one solid rehearsal before, no matter what, blah, blah, blah. Basically, it’s everything we’ve gone over the past week.”

As soon as he signed his understudy agreement, she picked it up and slipped the next in its place.

“Okay,” she said brightly. “This is the agreement for what happens if you don’t have to go on as Claude.”

“So, this is what I’m actually doing onstage.”

“Barring unforeseen circumstances.”

“Like I said...”

Nell stood up straighter and looked down at Ricky. A large woman, she was even more intimidating at her full height, especially when one was seated in a chair looking up at her.

“Let me tell you something, Mr. Hart. The understudy position is not to be taken lightly.”

“I never—”

She cut him off. “I’ve seen understudies sweat bullets cramming the part in their heads because they had to go on at the last minute. They didn’t take their job seriously enough to learn the part inside out, thinking, ‘What could possibly happen?’ Now, I can’t say what the future holds in this situation, but I suggest you learn this role as thoroughly as if

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you're going on for opening night. I negotiated your contract with full faith that you'd do just that."

"Nell, of course I will. I wish I really was the one going on." He paused and smiled. "I'd say, 'I'd kill to do this role,' but I don't want to be accused of anything."

Nell chuckled. "Look, once you know this role, I can find plenty of bookings for you to play it down the line. I hear there's a National Tour going out, and they want to do it in Vegas. Both great venues with great pay. You're way ahead of the game if I sell you to them as a tribe member in the Fortieth Anniversary production at the Delacorte, and also Claude's understudy. Right? Investing yourself fully is a win-win situation."

Ricky smiled and surrendered. "Nell, I'm so glad I don't have to bartend right now, I'll do whatever it takes to stay in this business."

"You know, I can probably get you gigs to stage it, too, at regional theatres. On cruise ships, even over in Europe. You'll know all of Claude's blocking and what the chorus does. This is a great opportunity, Ricky. I'm proud of you for stepping up to the plate."

"Thanks, Nell. I'm just glad I got the chance."

* * *

Ricky Hart was so thrilled to be working in theatre again, he went at it with total discipline and an upbeat attitude. He got his part as a tribe member down while also learning Claude's music. The early rehearsal days had the tribe

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members rehearsing music for the group arrangements before any staging was done, and Ricky made sure he did his homework each night. He came in fully prepared for each rehearsal the next day. He listened to Taylor Duff sing the part of Claude and absorbed it by listening. He had to admit, the guy was good, and his Tony Award winning status was more than Ricky brought to the table. But once Ricky was fully secure with his part as a member of the tribe, he set about perfecting the role of Claude.

Ricky also put his love life on the back burner to immerse himself completely in his task. He was glad Bobby was equally busy, between his clients at the Sirvin Salon, sketching out designs for the show, and meetings with the director, producer and costume designer.

Of course, he longed for the day he'd reached a certain status inside the industry and could relax a little, going out on Saturday nights, for example, even while doing shows. But right now he couldn't relax, couldn't party and enjoy it. He only imbibed an occasional glass of wine with dinner. He'd tell himself the time had not yet come to play, so he'd better keep his energies exerted in the right direction.

He was glad when he got to run through the show as Claude one rehearsal, when Taylor Duff couldn't make it. It also gave the young guy who was understudying all the chorus parts a chance to perform Claude's member of the tribe routine. Fresh out of NYU, the newbie wouldn't be in the actual performance unless something happened to a male member of the tribe.

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When compliments of Ricky's performance abounded after the rehearsal, he felt he'd achieved something after all.

* * *

Going down the cramped back staircase of the dance studio at Broadway, Ricky struggled to listen to an urgent message Nell had left on his cell phone while he'd been in class. As soon as he was in the building lobby, he hit her number and waited until she answered.

"Hey, Nell, it's Ricky Hart returning your call."

"Ricky Hart, hold on a minute. I've got a thousand calls coming in all at once."

He waited while she put him on hold, nodding to dancers he recognized on their way out of the building. After what seemed like an interminable moment, Nell's voice blasted into his ear.

"Okay, Ricky Hart, hang onto your hat. Taylor Duff has contractual obligations to a TV pilot out in L.A. They decided to shoot the same week *Hair* is playing in New York. That means you're going on in his place."

Ricky froze at the thought that he was really getting the chance he'd dreamed of.

"Woah," he said slowly. The realization began to sink in. "Wow, Nell, that's freaking awesome. I mean—am I in all three performances? He can't get out of even one day?"

"Ironclad, apparently, for two weeks. They considered getting him back for the Saturday performance, then decided against it."

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“Well, sure, with the jet lag coming back over from the West Coast.”

“That means you’re on, baby. It’s all yours—and nobody had to die.”

“Well, I’m certainly glad to hear that.” His mind was racing so fast with all the things he needed to go over, he had to force himself to listen to what Nell was saying.

“They want you in for a wardrobe fitting on Monday, then you’ll rehearse through Thursday, with the dress rehearsal scheduled for Friday night and the opening on Saturday. So, get plenty of rest, this weekend. Your life is about to switch into the fast lane.”

“Great, Nell, thanks.”

As soon as he hung up, he jumped up in the air and howled, “Woo-hoo! I’m in! I’m Claude!” Then he sang a little part from one of Claude’s songs: “And I believe that God, believes in Claude—that’s me! That’s me!”

He laughed like a lunatic for a couple more minutes and finally hit Bobby’s number into his phone, eager to share the news.

CHAPTER 8

At the opening night of *Hair*, Bobby remained calm, cool and collected. Backstage, he let nothing frazzle him, even though the energy was palpable with electricity. He kept himself cocooned in his peaceful shell and provided a sense of calm to the performers who were on a completely different wavelength. Their bodies were buzzing with the high-voltage energy they stoked and fought to constrain until they got out on stage, where they'd channel it during performance. And, while Bobby loved being around the excitement backstage, as a hair stylist, he was king at remaining unaffected by it—something he'd learned to do long ago. After all, he couldn't have his hands shaking because a client was having a

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meltdown in his chair. He felt his job was not only keeping them grounded long enough to dress them up, but also to help them remain relaxed and focused on what they had to do. In this way, he believed he truly made a difference in people's lives. And most people who ever worked with him agreed.

So, there he stood in a pair of gray jeans and a faded Old Glory T-shirt, quietly dressing the wigs, making sure they were secured to performers' heads before he touched them up. He made sure extensions were intact, and that real hair was coiffed to perfection. He also offered a soothing moment to the actors he came in touch with. After he'd seen to most of the cast, he stuck his head out into the hall in search of Ricky.

Ricky had grown his hair almost to his shoulders for the show. Bobby had given it high and low lights for depth, and added super-blond to the ends. Earlier in the evening he'd teased it up to make it fuller. Now, he wanted one more look at it before Ricky went out on stage. Once he got out there and started singing, sweating and dancing, it would become a controlled wreck. He'd fix it at intermission, but, for now, he wanted to make sure that Ricky looked stellar for his entrance. He wanted every straight girl and every gay guy to cream when the light hit Ricky and the audience saw Claude for the first time.

Bobby spotted Ricky holding a ballet barre. He faced the wall as he rounded and straightened his back to warm up. Bobby approached just as Ricky came away from the barre and stood back to close his eyes, taking slow, deep breaths for total relaxation.

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Bobby said nothing but knew he'd sensed his presence, because he opened his eyes and turned to look at him.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey," Bobby answered. "Just wanted to look at your hair before you go out."

"Is it stunning, like me?"

"Oh, yeah."

Bobby stood back and openly admired Ricky's developed pectorals and ripped abs, which were apparent in the open shirt he wore like a robe, backstage.

"You look fucking amazing. I mean, you rock like you've never rocked before."

Ricky grinned. "Well, what's say you and I rock like we've never rocked before after the show."

"Opening night party will be the place to rock all right. They're setting up the catering tents out on the lawn as we speak."

"I was thinking more of you and me. Alone." He lowered his voice. "I know I haven't thought of much else beyond *Hair* the past two months."

"Welcome to my world."

Ricky chuckled. "Yeah, but you know what I mean."

Bobby nodded. "I know."

At that moment, the stage manager walked by. "Five minutes 'til curtain, Rick," he said.

"Got it, Mike, thanks."

Bobby clicked into professional mode. He stepped back, made a visual assessment of Ricky's hair, and pulled out his

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comb for a quick, last minute tease.

“Okay, that’ll have to do,” Ricky said. “I’ve got to get my shirt on.”

“Try not to mess it up when you get dressed. Shit—I should’ve done that after you put it on.”

“Baby, the way I throw my head around out there, once I get going—it’s going to be one giant mess!”

Bobby smiled. “But a beautiful mess. Let it rip, man. And break a leg.”

Each pressed the folded knuckles of their right hands against that of the other.

“Thanks,” Ricky said. “You’re the best.”

“At what I do, it’s true,” Bobby said. “And so are you.”

“Thanks.”

Bobby’s heart pounded with excitement as he watched Ricky swagger to his dressing room.

* * *

Bobby slipped over to stage right to get a look at Ricky onstage. He got tingles all over when he heard Ricky sing, “I Got Life,” and knew his performance energies were dead-on center. Further viewing was interrupted, however, when he was called upon to re-coif one member of the tribe and re-wind feathers through another’s hair. He made it over to a backstage corner just in time to watch Ricky launch into “Hair.” Bobby got a major rush as Ricky’s magnetic delivery oozed youth and sex appeal while he described sundry inventive aspects of his “long, beautiful hair.”

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The “Hair” number brought the house down as the audience went wild. Bobby sensed audience members were not only stirred by the mythic proportions the song had come to acquire over the years, but also because Ricky had the power of a rising star. A jolt of worry suddenly panged him as he wondered what might happen if Ricky ascended too high up the ladder of success. What would happen if Ricky lost sight of Bobby behind his entourage and droves of adoring fans? What if, Ricky got famous and was invited to all kinds of trendy parties at hotspots all over town? When Bobby imagined Ricky meeting some gorgeous guy at Moomba Bar and Grill—the new Dolce and Gabbana model, for example—only to dump Bobby like lead weight, a lump formed in his throat.

I can't compete with that—that guy is drop-dead gorgeous!

Or, worse, what if Ricky wanted to make it in Hollywood? Look at how he'd gotten a break tonight—because Taylor Duff left to shoot a television pilot out there for huge bucks and fame beyond the Broadway circuit.

Worries flashed through Bobby's mind as he continued watching Ricky sizzle onstage, hot and wild beneath the lights, in front of some two thousand people. The whole time he'd supported Ricky through his rough patches in life, he knew he had great talent and believed in his abilities. But he'd never actually considered what would become of them after Ricky got the chance to show his gifts and prove himself to the world.

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Now, he knew Ricky's talent would no longer remain a secret, and plenty of industry folks, along with fans, would soon be knocking on his door. Especially after the nude scene, where Ricky had no problem strutting his gorgeous physique up there onstage, stark naked, for all the world to adore—straight and gay alike.

Bobby took a deep breath and opted for a philosophical approach in facing the future with a hot, new performer.

I believe in our love and our connection. I've got to believe that, no matter what, Ricky won't sell his soul in the end.

* * *

In the wig room, Bobby arranged all the wigs and hair accoutrements while the wardrobe mistress organized costumes in the hallway outside. He put them all in order for dressing before tomorrow's show. He changed into a blue T-shirt with a faded yellow flower on the front, locked his knapsack into the locker against the wall, and followed the winding corridor up to where the cast party was rolling in high gear.

He helped himself to a glass of champagne from the tray offered by a server and sipped as he wound through the crowd. Upbeat club music from the DJ's table blared louder the closer he got to the dance floor. A temporary wooden floor had been laid over a clearing beneath a bunch of oak trees by the western side of the theater's entrance. Several people were boogying while others hovered near the bar and buffet tables. When he entered the biggest tent, he spotted Ricky over on the

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other side, radiant in a tuxedo T-shirt and a pair of black jeans. He was flashing his smile, surrounded by a group of well-wishers as flash bulbs went off. The photojournalists were busy gathering candid shots from the opening night party for the Sunday papers and posting on the Internet. Bobby sipped his champagne and made a discreet appearance. He opted to hover just outside the group of people, until Ricky looked up and noticed him.

“Oh, hey, there you are,” he called. To his adoring new fans he said, “Excuse me please. This is Bobby Salem, who designed the hair styles for the show.”

People “oohed” and “aahed” as he approached Bobby and pulled him toward him. The circle parted to make way.

“If it wasn’t for this guy,” he announced, “I doubt I’d be standing here right now.”

Bobby gave the group a shy smile and was pummeled by questions from how he got involved with the production, to how long he’d known Bobby. Ricky stood back to let him answer.

A moment later, Sheena rushed up to Ricky and pecked a quick kiss on either cheek.

Marissa followed and hugged him around the waist, setting off flashes all the over the place.

Group photos were then taken of Ricky, Bobby, Marissa and Sheena. A few other cast members in the area got in on some of the shots, too, and a journalist recorded the correct spelling for everybody’s names.

When that surge of excitement died away, Ricky pulled

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Bobby aside and spoke to him in a quiet voice.

“How you holding up?”

“Me? I’m great. What about you?”

“I’m buzzing, man.”

“How much have you had to drink?”

“Oh, it’s not that. It’s the whole thing. The show, the original creators, the press, the party—man, I’m just buzzing on how great this all is!”

His enthusiasm caught Bobby, who laughed, even though the hint of a doubt remained in his mind regarding their future relationship.

Ricky got very close to Bobby and reached down to clasp his hand.

“Hey,” he said in a low voice tinged with a suggestion. “What do say we go down to my dressing room for a minute. I need to show you something.”

“Oh, really?”

Ricky answered in a playful voice. “Yeah. My headband. It might need some work before tomorrow’s show.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it,” Bobby answered. “I’m coming back early to dress all the wigs and hairpieces and stuff. I’ll take care of it then.”

Ricky’s face grew unmistakably seductive and he lifted an eyebrow.

“No, but I really think we both should go down there now and take a look at it. There are a couple of things I think you ought to have a look at besides the headband.”

He squeezed Bobby’s hand enough to startle him into

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understanding that he needed to join him, *pronto*. A shiver of excitement ran through Bobby when he agreed.

“Lead the way, kimosabe.”

* * *

A handful of people lingered backstage. Bobby and Ricky passed a technician securing a bundle of colored wires outside the mechanical room.

“Good show tonight,” Ricky said.

“Thanks. I was gonna say the same to you,” he answered.

Ricky opened the door to his dressing room and said, “Could you check that suede head band I told you about?”

Bobby chuckled. “What’s with the headband?”

After they both entered, Ricky shut the door behind them and locked it.

“Nothing. Just an excuse to get you in here alone.”

Bobby noticed a bucket of opened champagne in an ice bucket by the dressing table.

“That’s nice. Where’d that come from?”

“Zimmerman Associates. Thanking me for all my hard work.”

“Nice.”

“I would’ve shared it with you, but they came piling in here after the performance, so I had to share it with them to be polite.”

“That’s okay. I understand.”

He watched Ricky pour from the bottle into an empty plastic champagne flute, which he handed to him.

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“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

He poured himself a share and clinked his plastic flute against the one Bobby held.

“To you.”

“Me?” Bobby asked. “We should be drinking to you.”

Ricky shook his head. “Nah-uh. If it wasn’t for you, I seriously doubt I’d have gotten to do this tonight.”

“Hey, it wasn’t my doing that got Taylor Duff a pilot and opened the spot for you.”

“No, but if you hadn’t thought of me in the first place, and gotten me an in with Zimmerman, I’d still be bartending at this very moment.”

Bobby snuffed a little laugh. “Some things are just meant to be, I guess.”

Ricky came close to Bobby. He rubbed his nose in an affectionate gesture over his cheek.

“Like us. We’re meant to be.”

Bobby swallowed hard as an outrageous sense of joy welled up in him.

In a quiet voice, he asked, “You really believe that? I mean, things haven’t been so hot between us lately.”

“It wasn’t you, babe, believe me.” He stopped nuzzling Bobby’s cheek and stood back to look in his eyes. “I had to get this right. I knew it was my one big chance to pull myself up to the next category, to make the statement that I’m strong enough to live my dream. I had to block everything else out for a while and focus everything I had on doing my absolute

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best for this.”

“I know that. That’s why I stayed out of your way. And I respect you for doing it.” He grinned and took a quick sip of champagne. “‘Cause, baby, you sure did it! You really got their attention tonight. I mean, when you sang ‘Hair’ I got chills all up and down my spine. And after the reprise of ‘Good Morning Starshine,’ I thought, ‘That’s it—he’s a star. His career is made. And he’s gonna leave me now and go to Hollywood.’”

Ricky laughed. “What am I gonna do in Hollywood? I’m a Broadway guy.”

“You never know. You might run off with some hot model—”

“Oh, pull-eese!”

“—the Dolce and Gabbana guy, for example.”

“He’s hot, all right. Okay, I promise...if he ever comes on to me, we’ll both do him!”

Bobby laughed. Ricky looked at him.

“Listen, Bobby. Now that I feel I’m almost equal to you—

“Almost equal? That’s ridiculous. You’ve always been my equal.”

“Not when I was slinging drinks and you got your chair at Sirvin’s. There was a split in where we each were at in our lives and careers, and I felt inferior.”

Bobby shook his head, and his face filled with an expression of genuine compassion. “I have never, ever thought of you as anything less than great.”

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"I appreciate that, I really do. But let's get real...if I hadn't pulled myself up a rung with this show, I'd be miserable, always feeling like the little weenie who got left behind."

Bobby raised his eyebrows. "Well, we certainly don't want you to feel like a little weenie, do we?"

They both laughed and Ricky pulled Bobby's hand over to cup his crotch.

"Especially when I have this nice, big hard one for you right here."

Bobby groaned and kneaded his hand up and down the hard penis pushing from inside Ricky's black jeans.

"I've missed this, Rick. I need it. I need you."

Their lips came together in searing passion. After all the creative exertion of the past few weeks, their need for intimacy finally blazed in their touch. Ricky threw his empty champagne flute over on the floor and ran his hands up through Bobby's soft, brown hair, holding his head still while he sent his tongue inside his mouth. They made out in a frenzy, unleashing the feelings they'd held in check for too long. After a moment, Bobby broke the kiss, slugged down what was left of his champagne and threw it aside, too. He brought his mouth back over Ricky's and suckled the lips of the man he adored.

Both sets of hands ran up and down each others' sides, feeling the bare flesh up under each others' T-shirts. Each finally ripped off the other's shirt to run their palms over pectorals and nipples, up to the neck and throat, back down to the abs. When their body heat grew to the point where their

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cocks were hard as rock, they broke away from each other like two prizefighters in the ring. They stood apart, looking into each other's eyes: Bobby's big and cocoa-colored, as erotically charged as Ricky's electrifying blue ones.

A sexy smile curled the edges of Ricky's lips. Bobby matched his smile with a grin.

A moment later he asked, "We gonna stay in here?"

Ricky nodded. "Why not? The door's locked."

Bobby looked around the simple décor of Ricky's dressing room. A bench held the leather dance bag he carried his belongings in, while one chair stood before the lighted mirror on the wall behind the dressing table. A comfy old chair that looked as though a previous actor's grandmother had made it a gift from her sitting room was the only piece of furniture that looked remotely comfortable. Even in this Spartan space, however, Bobby knew they weren't going to make it home without at least jacking off on each other.

As if on cue, they both pulled their belt buckles apart and undid their flies. Ricky slid down his black jeans in a fluid, graceful movement that made Bobby stop to watch him, slowing the rhythm of his own undressing.

The golden, sculpted muscles of Ricky's thighs were exposed when Ricky pulled his jeans down around his knees. They flexed when he sat on the bench to pull off his black motorcycle boots. Bobby shoved the toes of one clog into the heel of the other and kicked it away, staring as Ricky stood to slide his jeans down over his ankles. Bobby pulled the other clog off and watched Ricky strip his black socks away. When

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he pointed his bare foot, Bobby admired his high arch. The tight, black undershorts over Ricky's hips showed off his golden tan very nicely. Ricky waited for Bobby to look into his eyes before he slipped his hands inside his waistline and slid the shorts away from his round ass, down his supple thighs.

Bobby practically salivated at the sight of Ricky's member, deep bronze in color, the perfect girth and length. He unzipped his own fly and hurried to slide his jeans away. After he stepped out of them, he tossed them over the dressing table's chair and pulled his gray briefs away.

"Love the colors," Ricky said.

"Huh?" Bobby looked down at the only piece of clothing he had left on, multi-colored striped socks. He laughed and pulled them off, tossing them in a corner.

Without hesitation, he got down on his knees between Ricky's open legs. Gratitude flashed through his mind, since this particular dressing room had carpeting instead of a tiled floor, as did most of the other dressing rooms. He grabbed the insides of Ricky's thighs and pressed them open to gaze at the only cock in the world he really ever wanted to taste.

"You know how much I've missed this?"

"How much?"

Bobby said nothing when he reached out and grasped it. Ricky closed his eyes and tilted his head back, savoring their connection.

"Yeah, Bobby."

During the hand job Bobby administered, the sole sound in

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the room was their heavy breathing.

Ricky opened his eyes. "I want to touch you, too."

He brought his hand over Bobby's wrist to stop him from manipulating his penis. "Let me have you. I want to taste you."

A moment later, Ricky's hands pressed into Bobby's shoulders. Bobby didn't resist as he guided him down to the rug and kissed his neck. Bobby melted into the kisses Bobby dabbed along his chest and nipples. When Ricky plucked his hard nipples, he arched his back in response, and when he plied them gently between his teeth, Bobby gasped in further pleasure. Ricky suckled his flesh down to his abs and grasped his penis in his hand while tonguing out his navel. Bobby's hips rolled back and forth in response to the turn-on.

A minute later, Ricky was up on his knees over Bobby, a leg on either side of his ribs. He took Bobby's cock in his hand at the same time that Bobby took his. They flicked and licked the ends of each other's pricks, finally circling their tongues around the sensitive hole at the tip. In between tongue flicks they released gasps of pleasure, until they found themselves in the classic sixty-nine position sucking each other off.

Ricky moved his torso back to straddle his thighs on either side of Bobby's head, moving his cock in and out of his mouth. Bobby opened his mouth wide to take in Ricky as far down his throat as he could. Ricky was doing an extraordinary job of matching his hip thrusts to the movement of his mouth up and down Bobby's stiff prick before he slowed. Bobby felt

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him back away from sucking him off and disengage his own cock from his mouth.

He rolled off and said, "I've got to fuck you, baby. Do you want that?"

Bobby looked at him with desire. "Yeah, I want that."

Ricky rubbed his chest against Bobby's and stroked his rod. "You want it good and hard? You want my cock up your ass?"

Bobby spoke in a breathy voice. "In a bad way. That'll make this day perfect."

Ricky kissed Bobby on the mouth. "I want that, too." He wasted no time in retrieving a condom from his make-up bag on the dressing table. He wiggled his eyebrows. "Pre-lubed and ready to go!"

Before he opened the package, however, he had Bobby roll over onto his knees, then bent down behind Bobby's ass to flick his tongue against his asshole.

Bobby groaned with pleasure. "Oh, yeah."

After pushing his tongue in as far as he could, Ricky stopped. He reached his hand around and slipped his middle finger into Bobby's mouth. Bobby sucked and saturated it with warm wetness. After moistening two more fingers, Ricky slid his hand back into Bobby's crack. Massaging his ass with the other hand, Ricky pressed a wet finger, then two in. He had no trouble sliding a third in, but was so turned on he could no longer wait to get his cock up inside his lover. He ripped the condom from its packaging and slid it over his member. He chuckled when his lover teased him by gyrating his hips

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around in circular movements.

Up on his knees, Ricky guided the head of his cock into Bobby's anal opening and pressed. The lubricated condom made a smooth and easy entry, so he pushed his cock halfway in and pulled it back slightly. He continued that motion a few times to immerse himself deeper inside Bobby. They worked in unison as Ricky held Bobby around the waist and rocked him back toward him. This put Bobby into a squatting position and Ricky was able to plunge his cock fully into his ass. Ricky gripped Bobby around the waist and pushed deep inside, the silky condom facilitating his entry.

Ricky watched Bobby's back muscles contract and contort as his cock built up to the explosive release of his orgasm. His wide girth swelled as he rode his boy hard. Hearing Bobby utter intermittent "Yeses" turned him on more and more, until he his thoughts melted away. He swatted Bobby's ass several times, spanking him harder with each thrust.

They both forgot themselves in the heat of their frenzied passion.

Bobby sweat and groaned as Ricky drove closer to his orgasm.

Ricky mumbled, "Love to fuck you, baby, love to fuck you!"

Endless rushes of indescribable bliss flooded Bobby's body as his lover penetrated his ass over and over. Waves of emotional satisfaction made him immune to any discomfort. He was so grateful he and Ricky had finally connected in the most intimate way imaginable. The consummation of their

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emotional closeness fulfilled in a way nothing else could.

He heard Ricky moan with the ultimate release of his fucking. His spanking ceased as Bobby felt Ricky shoot hot cum. Two, then three more plunges and Ricky ceased his ramming. He slid himself out and kneeled for a moment before lying along the carpet. Still on all fours, Bobby stretched his back up like a cat and rolled his shoulders. He rose to grab a towel off the rack in the little bathroom and wiped himself clean.

He stuck his head out the doorway. "Maybe I should shower while I'm in here."

He admired Ricky's golden physique splayed out on the floor. Ricky lifted his head to look up at Bobby's cock.

"I see you need something taken care of."

Bobby wiggled his eyebrows. "A shower might be just the thing."

"I'm there."

Ricky rose in one movement and strutted to the bathroom. Bobby turned the shower on and tested the temperature. He felt Ricky standing behind him, his hands massaging his buns. A moment later, they were in the shower.

Before Bobby could douse himself in the liquid gel soap, Ricky had snatched it away to squeeze it himself on his lover's chest. He rubbed it onto his smooth chest, more with erotic sensation than an intention to clean. He squirted more into his palm and rubbed it along Bobby's belly, down to his curlies. Bobby knew he was taking his time massaging the soap into his pubic hairs, teasing his penis to stand upright before he

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actually took it in his hand.

Bobby put his mouth against Ricky's neck and gasped as he plied his hard cock in the sudsy concoction of liquid gel. As he stroked Bobby's rod, Bobby felt the first twitch of his orgasm vibrate against the palm of Ricky's hand. Ricky obviously sensed it, too, and stroked faster in an effort to draw out his climax. He released his penis only to massage suds up under his balls, sending shivers through Bobby's torso. Bobby opened his legs and reveled in the glorious sensations as Ricky swathed his hand over all of his private parts.

"Oh," he groaned, "that is so good!"

Their mouths fused beneath the spray of warm water and, at the same time, Ricky managed to squeeze out more gel into his hand.

With their mouths parted but very close, Ricky plied Bobby's cock with the perfect amount of pressure. Bobby felt the surge of release rising from within. His climax set in and he moved his hips, guiding his member around while Ricky held it.

"Yeah, right there."

Ricky complied with the rhythm Bobby needed to bring his orgasm forward. Bobby gasped and felt his hot cum mix with the soap gel and the warm spray coming down from the shower nozzle.

The two men stood motionless for a moment before Ricky released Bobby's sated prick.

Bobby opened his eyes and grinned. "Good thing we're in the shower already. We can clean up and get home to bed."

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Ricky squeezed gel into his hands and swathed his body in the foam it produced when he rubbed it all over himself.

“My place or yours?”

“Let’s make it mine,” Bobby answered. He paused and stepped out of the shower to let Ricky under the nozzle to rinse himself off. “You know, my place is big enough for two. When did you say your lease is up?”

“End of January.”

“You ever think about us moving in together?”

Ricky smiled. “All the time.”

Bobby laughed. “Really?”

“Mm-hm.”

Bobby slid an arm around Ricky’s neck and pulled his forehead against his own.

“What do you say we just do it?”

“I’d love to, babe. I’d love to.”

Bobby smiled. “I love you.”

Ricky surprised Bobby with a quick peck before he pulled away.

“Ditto,” he said. “I love you, too.”

As Bobby reached for a towel, he marveled at how he and Ricky had each stepped into new worlds, so to speak. The worlds were different, yet similar, and had brought them closer together as a couple. He handed the towel to Ricky and reached for another.

As the two of them stood toweling themselves off, he felt, for the first time in their relationship, that they’d were operating as a team.

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The sensation was empowering and he chuckled out loud.

“What?” Ricky asked.

Bobby shook his head.

“Come on,” Ricky insisted. “What were you thinking?”

Bobby shrugged. “I was just thinking how much more we can accomplish together than alone.”

Ricky beamed. “You know, I feel like I’m on top of the world right now. And it’s because we each got our shit together on our own. Geeze—I can’t imagine what we could do together.”

“Me neither. But I’d like to.”

“Me, too.”

A genuine hug sealed the deal for moving into the next level of their relationship.

SHARA BLOODSTONE

After earning a Bachelor's Degree in French and Spanish literature, Shara Bloodstone took to the road. She toured the world as a musical theatre performer for several years before making New York City her home base. While she has always been involved in the arts, economic realities introduced her to employment in the restaurant, bar and retail industries. Her extensive travels and professional experience encompass the ridiculous to the sublime, providing her with a glorious reserve of material for use in her writing.

* * *

**Don't miss *Gift With Purchase*, by Shara Bloodstone,
available at AmberAllure.com!**

The fragrance and cosmetics' department at prestigious Bartons On Fifth Avenue boasts some of the finest products in the world, along with the prettiest people to sell them. With movie-star looks and ambitions beyond his day job, Timothy Wilson fits right into the mix. While working as counter-manager for a prestigious fragrance line, Tim is also pursuing a Masters Degree in Dance at NYU. When his line is moved to a new selling bay within the department, Tim is thrilled to find his new counter located next to that of the handsome and

debonair Colin Welling, a man he's admired from afar for years.

Colin isn't quick to jump into romance, however, after illness claimed the life of his longtime lover. But, as the Christmas season unfolds, the striking pair grows closer, both at work and outside of it. Unfortunately, Tim discovers that Steven Oberman has been hired to work at Bartons, too. One of Tim's numerous lovers from the dance world, Steven becomes obsessed with getting Tim back. With this and other past indiscretions brought to light, Tim fears for his evolving relationship with Colin—whom he has come to regard as the man of his dreams.

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