



# WHAT WE MAY BE

Vivien DEAN

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In spite of his earlier annoyance, Jared smiled with every ounce of warmth that had overtaken his body at Rick's nearness. "Oh, you didn't have to worry about me." Beneath the table, Theresa's foot connected with his ankle, but Jared was proud that he didn't even blink. "I hope everything's okay."

"Well, we'll see about that." He pulled a folded piece of paper from his jeans pocket and set it in front of Jared. "If you want to get together sometime, give me a call. I want that conversation you promised me."

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# WHAT WE MAY BE

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BY

VIVIEN DEAN

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WHAT WE MAY BE  
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# CHAPTER 1

Jared Harvey stared out over the sea of black T-shirts and blue jeans and shook his head. “I am so glad Leo is not here to witness this fashion travesty.”

Next to him, his assistant Theresa elbowed his waist. For a girl who put more than one va in her personal va-va-voom, she had an awfully bony elbow. “You need to be nice tonight. This is for charity.”

“And we couldn’t have saved the twenty bucks for these godforsaken shirts and tossed it into the kitty instead?” Jared sighed, though it was just as much about missing Leo as it was having to walk into a crowded dining hall wearing the same thing as every other person in the room. “I don’t even know

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most of these people.”

“Probably because you hadn’t actually seen Leo since you two were modeling.” Tucking her arm through his, she pulled him away from the doors and toward the open bar. “And didn’t you say everybody liked Leo? He obviously had a lot of friends after he quit the biz.”

“Yes, and now we all look like we should be wearing tool belts and laying gaffer tape. Joy.”

The AIDS dinner was meant to honor Leo’s death, the last of his requests from the very extensive will he had left. News of it hadn’t surprised Jared. He remembered Leo Bloch as generous to a fault, ready to give the designer shirt off his back if someone even hinted at wanting it. It had been nearly eight years since Leo had quit the business cold turkey, seven since Jared had last seen him alive. This particular personality trait hadn’t changed.

Several hundred people filled the dining room. Though Jared only recognized a few of the faces, he knew from the five-hundred-dollar-a-plate price tag that most of them likely had some sort of money. At the organizer’s request, he’d tried to use some of his old connections to get it some press, but the sad thing was, AIDS benefits weren’t exactly the vogue right now. It didn’t matter that he was an ex-model, or an up-and-coming designer, or even that Leo had been a bigger name than him back in the day. His industry was a fickle beast, and if it didn’t scream “It” from the top of the tallest building, nobody wanted to touch it with a five-inch stiletto heel.

At the bar, they stood behind a portly man ordering what



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was clearly not his first sour apple martini. He giggled at his partner, who was also obviously not on his first drink, but when he picked up the glass from the bar, he swung his arm wide, knocking into Jared's waist and spilling the alcohol down his front.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" He grabbed a stack of napkins from the bar and began patting Jared's stomach in a flurry of hands, trying to dry him off. When he strayed below the belt, Jared grabbed his wrist to stop him, ignoring Theresa's titters at his side.

"That's okay," Jared said. "I've got it."

Reluctantly, the man released his hold on the napkins and took a step back. His round cheeks reddened further as his eyes swept up Jared's tall form. They stalled at Jared's chest. If he'd been a woman, Jared would've slapped him for staring at his breasts. "Well, at least now you smell as delicious as you look," the man flirted.

His partner slapped his arm. "Oh, you're bad."

"Great," Jared muttered. "Like I need a couple of drunk queens hitting on me right now." He sincerely hoped that wherever Leo was, he was enjoying this.

"Ben, can you get Mr. Jansen another drink, please? Though maybe we should make this one a virgin martini instead."

The calm baritone behind Jared startled him into turning around to look at its owner. He was even more startled to realize he had to look up at him, too. At six-four, Jared was accustomed to his view of the world, and while he

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occasionally met men who were taller, most of the people he knew were not.

This one was. By a solid two inches. And about fifty pounds of packed muscle.

“Okay, so I guess there’s at least one person these shirts look good on,” Jared said. He looked up to meet warm brown eyes, crinkled at the corners from years of laughter. Dark blond hair fell in waves across his forehead, the rest just a little too long to be completely fashionable, but it was thick and made Jared’s palms itch. At some time in the past, the man had broken his nose. The imperfection managed to make him even more appealing.

And now, the man was smiling, or at least the corners of his full lips were turned up in amusement. “Why don’t you come with me?”

Jared blurted the innuendo before his brain could tell his mouth to shut the hell up. “Just name the time and place.”

Theresa jostled his arm as she leapt forward to step between them. Jared had the distinct urge to shove her out of his way of this man when she said, “Mr. Harvey didn’t do anything wrong. He was just standing there when the other guy knocked his drink into him.”

It took him a moment to process why she was bothering explaining, but then it hit him. A guy who looked like this, taking charge of the situation? Could only be a security guard. And in New York City, that often meant a cop moonlighting on the side. Jared didn’t usually care too much about who he hit on, but flirting with security who thought he was

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responsible for a minor scene was probably not the wisest choice he had ever made.

The guard still looked amused. "I'm well aware of what happened," he said. "I was just offering to exchange—" He paused and glanced at Jared. "—Mr. Harvey's T-shirt for a dry one."

"Oh." Theresa deflated and flushed a bright red. "Sorry."

Jared plucked the shirt away from his stomach, only to stop when it flicked droplets of alcohol at the guard. "A dry shirt would be great, thanks." The guard nodded, but as soon as he turned his back on them, Jared mouthed to Theresa, "*Oh, my God!*"

"*I know!*" she returned silently.

Her features smoothed over, the epitome of innocence, when the guard paused and glanced back. Jared hustled forward to follow. He stayed behind a step or two to allow the other man to lead the way through the throng, not to stare at his well-defined ass cupped almost lovingly in his faded blue jeans. Though staring was a more than enjoyable pastime until that moment when the guard held open a door marked "Private" and gestured for Jared to go through.

"You're a medium, right?" the guard asked, stopping at a row of boxes lining the service corridor. He didn't wait for a response before extracting a carefully folded T-shirt and holding it out.

Jared took it, though the prospect that he was now going to own two of these things didn't fill him with glee. "Thanks. And I'm sorry about that out there. Theresa gets a

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little...protective, sometimes.”

The guard smiled. “Most girlfriends usually do.”

The assumption brought a bubble of laughter to Jared’s lips. “Oh, God, no, she’s not a girlfriend. We work together.” The prospect of dating Theresa made him laugh even harder. “Though she’s going to think it’s hysterical that anybody could ever confuse me as straight.”

The other man chuckled along with him. “Well, then...” He stuck out his hand. “I’m Rick.”

“Jared.” Warm fingers engulfed his. The skin was dry and hot, callused from hard work, and unfortunately, the greeting didn’t last longer than was appropriate. Jared pulled back and looked Rick over with open appreciation this time. “I should probably buy that guy a drink, then, for giving me an opening to meet you.”

“Except it’s an open bar.”

Jared dismissed it with a wave of his hand. “Technicality.”

“And I’m pretty sure I would’ve noticed you before the night was through.”

“Yes, but would you have led me to a darkened hallway to get my clothes off?” With a wink, Jared pulled the wet T-shirt over his head and tossed it aside. He didn’t have nearly the physique Rick did, but he had nothing to be ashamed about. “Credit should be given where it’s due, I think.”

There was no mistaking the distinct glimmer of interest in Rick’s dark eyes as they scanned Jared’s bare chest. “Offering you a dry shirt is just me being courteous.”

“Just. In this city?” His smile was hidden as he pulled the

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new one on. He went to tuck it into his jeans, but as those were still slightly damp from his dousing, Jared let it hang free for the moment. “That kind of behavior usually gets a medal around here.”

“Well, I’d like to think Leo would’ve wanted me to do it.”

His brows shot up. He hadn’t expected the security guard to have known Leo. But the fact that he did—that part of the reason he was being so helpful was because it was a reflection of Leo—boosted him even higher in Jared’s esteem.

“So do you get to eat with us, or just stand on the side looking menacing in case someone uses the wrong fork?” Jared asked.

Confusion flickered behind Rick’s eyes, but he shook his head. “No, I’ll get my own plate, just like everybody else. Why?”

“I’d like to sit together. Continue this conversation. Find out if you look as good on the inside as you do on the out.” He smiled. “Not that that’s ever made a difference to me before, but, well, I’d like to think Leo would want me to.”

Repeating Rick’s earlier words scored the points Jared had been hoping for. “I think that can be arranged. I’ll come find you when they start seating.”

Jared followed him back out to the dining room, offering one last smile when Rick moved gracefully through the crowd. Horrendous fashion statement aside, the T-shirt had done more than he would have ever anticipated. Picking up guys at charity events wasn’t his usual *modus operandi*, but Jared wouldn’t file a complaint about it any time soon. In fact, he

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might pay for another plate, just to say a silent thank you to Leo.

His smile remained while he went off in search of Theresa. Yeah. That was exactly what he'd do.

\* \* \*

The umpteenth time his leg jiggled against Theresa's, her hand shot out and grabbed his knee in a death claw.

"Will you stop it?" she hissed. "You're driving me crazy."

Slowly, Jared reached beneath the table and pried her fingers away. "Talk to the doctor," he said in a low voice, nodding toward the man seated on her other side. "Pretend I'm not here."

"That's a little hard to do when there's an earthquake rubbing against my thigh." She twisted slightly to give a little more privacy to their conversation. "Why don't you eat something? It'll take your mind off it."

It was the fact that he'd been stood up for the first time in years. As the time for seating approached, Jared had combed the room for signs of Mr. Tall, Blond, and Buff, only to come up empty-handed no matter where he looked. He'd waited as long as he could before finally dragging Theresa to an edge table, but his mood had plummeted the longer he had to sit there and listen to the two men across from him flirt outrageously with each other.

"Do you know how much cheese and butter they probably put in this frittata?" he complained instead. "I eat that, and I'll blow up like a Macy's parade float."

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Theresa stared at him. "Gee. From one-sixty to one-sixty-one. Yeah, that's a real tragedy."

Irritated, Jared tossed his napkin onto his unfinished plate and leaned back in his chair. "Let's get out of here."

She grabbed his elbow before he could stand. "Because one guy didn't come over and sit with you? Grow up, Jared. He's working security, remember? He probably got busy." She swept an arm toward the other tables. "Do you see him anywhere else, chatting up another guy? No. Because he's not." Plucking his napkin off his plate, she tossed it at his chest. "So eat and stop being such a drama queen."

The only reason he took the napkin was because the others at the table had stopped eating and started listening to them. And maybe because Theresa had a small point. Heat rose in his cheeks as he picked up his fork and broke off a tiny piece of the frittata, but Jared shot a wicked smile to the others in an attempt to disarm their curiosity.

"Well, she got the queen part of it right, anyway." He held the smile while a ripple of laughter broke their attention, only dropping it when he was no longer the focus of it.

"So what's the deal with this guy?" Theresa asked. She dug into her food as if nothing had been amiss. Steam wafted up from her baked potato when she broke into the skin. "Did I miss something juicy when he gave you a dry shirt?"

"No, nothing like that."

"So what is it?"

"You have eyes. The man is beautiful."

"You deal with male models every day. I don't see you

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going so gaga over any of them.”

Jared rolled his eyes. “Maybe because most of them barely slide out of jail and into bait.”

“Still.”

“No ‘still.’ I wanted to get to know him better, okay? He knew Leo. And he’s taller than me. And he’s hotter than David Beckham sunbathing nude in the Sahara. Do you know what a narrow demographic that really is?”

Theresa slowly chewed her potato, her gaze contemplative. He hated when she did that. She always reminded him of his grandmother at the Sunday dinner table, watching and waiting for him to explain his latest ensemble.

“Fine,” he said. “I hate thinking he might’ve gotten a better offer. Satisfied?”

She grinned. “Just don’t tell him that or you might not get a third chance.”

“A third...” His voice trailed off when he turned to follow her gaze over his shoulder. Rick marched in his direction, his mouth grim, his steps long and sure. He slowed only as he approached, focusing on Jared with a velvet intensity that made him sit up a little straighter.

“There you are.” Rick gripped the back of Jared’s chair and leaned down, either ignoring the curious stares from the rest of the table or completely oblivious to them. Jared wasn’t sure which. “Listen, I got an emergency call and can’t stick around. But I didn’t want to just take off after we made plans.”

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“Way better,” Jared echoed. And then repeated it again in his head.

*Thank you, Leo.*

## CHAPTER 2

Rick tossed the last of his T-shirts into the washing machine and closed the lid. His whole body ached. All he wanted was to crawl into bed and forget about the next week in favor of deep, dreamless sleep. The smell still clinging to his skin made that impossible, though. He needed a shower. Badly. As badly as his clothes needed to be soaked in a bucket of bleach and sanitized.

He stripped out of his jeans and jockeys on the way to the bathroom, tossing them onto the toilet instead of into the hamper. They would be in the next load of laundry. Twisting the hot water tap in the shower as high as it would go, he let it start to fill the room with steam while he grabbed a clean

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towel. Everything was on autopilot. He got like this after a particularly tough client. It was as if all his thought processes went to them, and when they didn't need him anymore, Rick's brain shut down.

Getting nearly scalded worked wonders to wake him up. He scrubbed down with an abrasive loofah, almost taking off the top layer of skin as he worked to get rid of the smells. His skin prickled in protest to the heat, but his muscles shouted their hallelujahs more loudly. Rick was tempted to add his voice to the chorus. Sometimes, there wasn't anything holier than a hot shower.

With his wet towel and jeans dangling in his hand, he abandoned the comfort of the bathroom for the utility closet in the hallway, switching out the loads. His bed beckoned. For the first time since walking through his front door, Rick did what he wanted to do, rather than what needed to be done.

He didn't remember falling asleep. He didn't remember dreaming. When he finally peeled his eyes open to squint at his alarm clock, he vaguely remembered thinking he'd heard a phone, but that could've belonged to anyone. Once, he'd stumbled out of bed to answer what he'd thought was his cell, only to hear Mrs. Krimnik next door start yelling at her grandson in mixed English and German for waking her up so early.

The answering machine blinked at him in cool reprimand when he stumbled out to make a pot of coffee. He hit play and listened as he fought to separate out a single filter from the stack.

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“Hi, Rick. This is Jared Harvey. From Leo’s charity dinner? The one you swapped shirts for when I got my drink spilled on me. Oh, God, except what if that happened more than once? Shit. I didn’t think of that. And considering how many sour apple martinis that guy drank? I would be surprised if I *was* the only one. Well, okay, then I’m the guy you were going to sit next to at dinner. Hopefully, I’m flying solo on that one. Anyway, I owe you a conversation, and I’m hoping we might be able to work out a time to get together.”

A huge grin plastered across Rick’s face as he listened to Jared rattle off his phone number. Of course, he remembered Jared. Tall, lean, dark hair and fair skin, with the most amazing green eyes Rick had ever seen. They glinted like he was best friends with residents from both Heaven and Hell. He had the best mouth, too. Cupid’s bow lips, Rick’s mother would have called them. He’d wondered briefly if it was the product of plastic surgery, but they fit too well with the rest of Jared’s features to be fake. The last name surprised him a little bit, though. With Jared’s high cheekbones and long nose, there was at least one branch in his family tree with Eastern European roots.

He replayed the message in order to scribble down the number. Jared was more flamboyant than most guys Rick dated, but between the infectious gleam in the man’s eyes and the gorgeous exterior, Rick was willing to step outside of his comfort zone and give it a try. Besides, Jared had been friends with Leo in some capacity. That counted.

An hour later, Rick felt more human, with a full breakfast

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in his stomach and the caffeine from several cups of coffee coursing through his veins. He listened to the other end of the line ring and snapped straighter when Jared's familiar voice picked up.

"It's Rick Paulson. From the AIDS dinner. I'm sorry, I had a late night last night so I completely slept through your call this morning."

"Oh, no problems. I crashed here because it got to be so late, I figured I'd just be turning around again right away to get my ass back."

"Where's here? Are you at work?" Rick hadn't considered he'd be interrupting, but that was his own fault. He often forgot other people worked regular nine-to-five jobs rather than his crazy all-you-can-imagine schedule.

"My studio. Inspiration always wallops me when I least expect it."

"I didn't call at a bad time, did I?"

"God, no. I've wanted to hook up since the dinner. It's my fault. I should've called sooner." Someone shouted in the distance. "Hang on." Jared's voice grew fainter as he answered the shouts with his own. It sounded like he was directing people where to put things.

"Listen, if you want to call me back when you're not so busy—"

"No, I don't want that. Let's get something set up. Can you meet for lunch tomorrow?"

"No, I can't unfortunately. Today's my one day off this week. What about tonight?"

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Jared sighed. “That doesn’t work. It’s going to be another late day for me.” More shouts. A woman’s voice cut them off. Theresa, most likely. “But tell you what. I’m stuck here, but it’s all supervising, really. Why don’t you come down and we’ll have a coffee? Theresa brought in some amazing crullers this morning, too. I’ll save one for you.”

Rick actually thought it was a brilliant idea. Coffee and pastries in an informal setting wasn’t really a date, so there would be no added pressures if it turned out they didn’t get along. If the only attraction was physical—and he had little doubt Jared was interested, considering the way he’d been looking at Rick in the service corridor—then they would at least know.

He jotted down the address on the same slip of paper the phone number was on and disconnected with a smile. Strong work ethic. Another plus in Jared’s favor. Rick had a feeling it was just going to be one of many.

\* \* \*

Jared’s studio was over a vintage clothing shop in Morningside Heights. Rick had to stand out of the way when two bulky delivery men came down the narrow stairs. There wasn’t room for anybody to pass, let alone men of their size. He jogged up, expecting the space above to be just as cramped. An open-plan explosion of color awaited him.

Windows lining the street ran three-fourths of the length of the wall, letting the morning sunshine spill across the polished hardwood floor. Stacks of fabric were everywhere, but directly

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in the path of the sunlight, though there was more than one mannequin standing ready and waiting to be dressed. At the far end of the long room sat a series of sewing machines, with a large drafting table standing at command next to them. On the wall nearest Rick, page after page of fashion designs were mounted on the brick. Designer decoupage. Oddly enough, it didn't surprise him.

A head of bright red curls popped out from behind the row of mannequins, the scarlet mouth spreading into a wide grin. Theresa was even more vivacious in her natural space as she'd been at the dinner. "Hey! Jared said you were coming in. He's in the back, looking for some lace, so just go have a seat. He'll only be a second."

Rick wasn't sure where exactly the back was, but the only place Theresa could be talking about was a table in the corner that had been fitted out as a small kitchen. The pink box in the middle of it held half a dozen crullers, and the coffee pot on the narrow counter was nearly empty.

When Jared didn't immediately show up, Rick turned back to Theresa, only to find her knee deep in arguments with the two men he'd seen on the stairs. He hated having to wait. He wasn't very good at doing nothing. He didn't really blame Jared for not being ready for him when he arrived—he *was* at work, after all—but Rick didn't want to just sit there like a lump on a log.

He was rinsing out the coffee pot when a door slammed and a stream of colorful curses filled the air. They stopped in mid-breath, and when Rick glanced over his shoulder to see

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what had happened, he caught Jared staring at him, looking absolutely appalled.

“You’re washing my coffee pot? Why are you washing my coffee pot?”

Rick smiled. “Because you invited me over for coffee.”

“Right. *I* invited. That makes you the guest.” Tossing the bedraggled piece of dark lace he’d been holding onto the table, he strode up to Rick and took the pot out of his hands. “Sit down. I’ve got this.”

It was on the tip of his tongue to say he could help, but the look in Jared’s vivid eyes stopped him. Without a word, he took the chair at the end and watched Jared fuss around. No jeans and T-shirt for the man today. Today, he wore black pants that caught the light every time he moved, and a white shirt with the cuffs rolled back. He wasn’t the most bulked out guy, but Rick had had a good eyeful when he’d stripped out of the wet shirt at the charity dinner. He was lean and hard, built like an Olympic swimmer. Rick had to adjust himself discreetly while Jared had his back turned. He was likely to go through this entire coffee date with a hard-on and his ass clenching.

“So what exactly is it that you do?” Rick asked.

Jared answered without turning around. “I’m a designer. I love clothes. That was most of the reason I modeled.”

“You modeled?”

“Yeah, that’s how I knew Leo.”

It hadn’t even occurred to Rick to ask before now, though it made sense, considering how good-looking Jared was. Leo



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hadn't talked much about his modeling days, and when he did, it had been with a distinct nostalgia that usually brought another bout of depression. Rick had done everything in his power to distract Leo from those kinds of thoughts. Leo had had enough dealing with his failing health there at the end.

"I'm not anywhere near where I want to be yet," Jared was saying. "But it's coming." He waved a long hand toward the mess behind them. "All this is because I got invited to a show at the last minute. I had to get the supplies I needed in order to actually have enough things for the models to wear."

"I guess I never thought of it before. I don't really care too much about clothes."

His announcement brought a double take from Jared, but after a moment, the other man shrugged. "I guess if I was stuck in a uniform all day, I'd probably not think about it too much either."

Rick frowned. "I don't have to wear a uniform. Well, not since I went into home practice anyway."

"Don't bodyguards have to blend into the background?"

"What makes you think I'm a bodyguard?"

Jared froze in mid-reach for a cupboard door. Slowly, he turned and swept an assessing gaze over Rick's seated form, his brows drawing closer and closer together with every inch. "You were working security at the dinner, weren't you?"

"Nooooo," Rick said carefully. "I *organized* the dinner. I'm an RN. I provide home healthcare for people with AIDS and HIV."

Understanding dawned in Jared's eyes. "You took care of

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Leo.”

“For the last year of his life. I lived with him for the last two months when he needed round the clock care.”

The mood had shifted, Jared slightly wary now and definitely less excited about his presence. Rick didn’t know if that had to do with the fact that he’d nursed Leo, or not been the macho cop ideal Jared seemed to have thought he was getting. Either way, he wasn’t entirely pleased with the change.

“I didn’t realize you were so close to Leo,” Jared said quietly. He turned back to the cupboard and resumed his preparations for the coffee. “I’m sorry.”

“No reason to apologize. I thought you knew.”

Jared shook his head. “I haven’t actually seen Leo in years. I knew he’d quit modeling because of the AIDS, but I didn’t know anything else until I found out he’d died.” He seemed intent on not looking at Rick now, focusing on the task at hand with even more diligence than before. “And no offense, but you *really* don’t look like a nurse.”

This brought a small smile to Rick’s lips. “I know. You wouldn’t be the first guy put off by what I do.”

His head snapped around. “I didn’t say I was put off. It just took me by surprise.”

“So you’re not just making the coffee to be polite?” Better to be open about it now. They were both grown men. Busy, too. They didn’t have time to fuck around.

“No. Absolutely not.” Rick caught a wicked glint in his eyes before losing sight of Jared’s face altogether as he

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reached for the pot. “The only time I’m polite is when my parents are watching. And then, only when they’re sober enough to remember.”

Rick laughed at his irreverent words, relaxing back into his chair. “As long as we’re clear.”

“Oh, we’re clear. I’m crystal, you know. What you see is what you get.” He grinned as he set the steaming cups down on the table and lounged in the chair opposite Rick. His long legs slid under the table to nudge against Rick’s calves. “It’s one reason why I’m so obsessed with the way I look all the time.”

He waved off the sugar and milk Jared pushed toward him. “I’ll remember that for next time.”

Jared’s jewel green eyes fixed on him, his lips soft and wet where he’d just licked them. “You think there’s going to be a next time already?” The toe of his shoe rubbed along the back of Rick’s leg, sending shocks straight up to his ass.

He didn’t look away. “Let’s say I think there’s a very good chance of it.” Lifting his cup, he added, “To Leo. For giving us a chance to meet.”

Jared echoed his toast, and though the sound of their mugs meeting was drowned out by Theresa’s shout at one of the delivery men, the reverberations traveled through Rick’s fingers, into his palm, all the way to his gut. Everything about this man seemed to make him vibrate to an entirely new, and definitely not unwelcome, beat.

“So you organized the charity for Leo?” Jared asked without taking a sip from his coffee. “Does that mean you can

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tell me who had the T-shirt idea?"

"That was mine, actually. Well, mine and Leo's. We thought it would represent solidarity if everyone was dressed the same. You know. Everybody united to fight this."

"Do me a favor then, would you?" He leaned forward and lowered his voice. "Next time, call me and let me help pick it all out. The colors, the clothes, that kind of thing. Because honestly, the only one who looked good at that dinner was you. The rest of us looked like we should be hauling gear for a Radiohead concert."

He could get addicted to the way Jared always made him laugh. "I'll remember that. Though hopefully, I won't be doing it again any time soon. Even with all the notes and arrangements Leo made, I still felt like my head was going to explode, all the way until people started arriving."

"But it came off great. I wouldn't have guessed it wasn't a professional running the whole thing." His sly grin returned. "Except for the awful T-shirts, of course."

"It did make a nice change from what I usually do." He hadn't expected it would be this easy to talk to Jared. They'd flirted well enough at the charity dinner, but this was a bona fide conversation. Jared was more than coming through on his promise. "I love my job, but it's ballbusting work a lot of the time."

Jared finally took a drink of his coffee, his bright eyes thoughtful. "A nurse. I still can't believe it. I would have believed a lot of things before believing that. You could model, for instance."

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His bark of laughter was cut short when he realized Jared wasn't kidding. "Not me," he said with a shake of his head. "I've got two left feet."

"Trust me. Nobody's looking at your feet."

"It still means being in front of a lot of people, getting stared at." Rick gave a short shake of his head. "Not my style."

"Maybe not. But that doesn't mean they won't stare anyway."

Like Jared was doing now. Pinning Rick to his chair with only the strength of his attention, the rising desire in his eyes. The tremors that had taken up residence in his gut spread throughout his flesh, returning his arousal to full mast. He couldn't leave now even if he wanted to. One look at him, and Jared would know exactly what Rick was thinking about.

So he sat there, trying not to fidget every time Jared shared a new innuendo, or nudged against his leg in a new spot, or just looked at him through his long lashes while he waited for Rick to respond to something he'd said. He'd hoped for some kind of added camaraderie on top of their attraction, but the way Jared made him laugh—hell, the way he made him totally forget time—was far more than he'd anticipated. Before he knew it, an hour had passed and they had gone through two pots of coffee, only stopping when a red-faced Theresa asked for Jared's intervention.

"I should probably get going anyway," Rick said, rising to his feet. "You've got work to do, and I'm holding you back."

Jared stopped and frowned at him. "I'll only be a second."

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“Yeah, but this is my one day off and I should probably spend some time getting caught up on other things. Like grocery shopping and laundry.”

Waving Theresa off, Jared stepped closer, invading Rick’s space until the musky scent of his mouth-watering cologne filled Rick’s nose. “Does your schedule mean you can’t have dinner with someone dying to spend more time with you?”

The low pitch of his voice cascaded fresh tremors down Rick’s legs. He smiled. “I’d love that. As long as that someone is you.”

“Oh, it is. It most definitely is.” Reaching into his back pocket, he pulled out a business card and slid it into the front pocket of Rick’s jeans. His long fingers grazed along the side of Rick’s erection before pulling out, and Rick had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from moaning out loud. “That’s got my home number on it, too. If I get too swamped down with stuff here today and you don’t hear from me, call me tomorrow so we can work out a date. The sooner the better.”

“The sooner the better.”

He left before he made a complete fool of himself, but on the stairwell, Rick stopped and leaned against the wall. Taking deep breaths, he steadied his racing heart, thinking the unsexiest thoughts he could in a vain attempt to will away his erection. Nothing worked. Every time he managed to conjure an image that would kill his desire, Jared’s long hands and longer body showed up to shove it out of the way. The only way to get rid of his arousal was to do something about it.

Maybe he’d do his grocery shopping online today.

## CHAPTER 3

Jared was nervous. He didn't know why. Well, he did know why, but he didn't understand it. He'd been on a lot of dates in his lifetime. A lot. Enough to make him feel mildly promiscuous when he stopped for a second and actually thought about the numbers. He was an old pro at this. He'd dated models, playboys, athletes. He'd dated old and young. He'd once dated a contortionist who worked with the Cirque du Soleil in Vegas, just because the guy could suck his own dick. There was very little in this life that he thought he hadn't seen or mastered.

But standing in front of Rick Paulson's apartment door, ready to knock for their dinner date, made his palms sweat.

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It was actually a little surprising how much effort it took to coordinate their schedules. Jared was a pretty busy guy, but nothing like his current workload. It figured that the one man he was dying to get his hands on would show up at the worst possible time for his availability. And he didn't understand Rick's schedule at all. The man only got one day off a week. He didn't have an office he had to go into, yet he was gone at the weirdest times of the day.

"I'm on call for my terminals," Rick had explained the third time they'd had to reschedule. "I have to be there. That's my job."

"No, no, that's okay," Jared had said. And it was. Mostly. Except for the fact that the longer it took to actually set a date, the more he feared they'd never be able to hook up. It also left him wondering just what had been different about Leo since Rick had mentioned he'd lived with him the last few months of his life. But those were questions for a third or fourth date, not this one.

If he ever summoned the nerve to actually knock and start this one, that is.

He refrained from wiping his hand on his pants and spoiling the fabric. Instead, he slipped his hand inside the pocket and dried it there where it wouldn't be seen, then knocked before his nerves failed him. Sliding his hand back into his pocket made him appear laidback by the time Rick opened the door, but the first sight of him made his body throb almost immediately.

Not because of what he wore. The black pants were off-



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the-rack and probably a smidge too tight across the thighs, while the light tan shirt was well-pressed but clearly a cotton blend. But it molded over Rick's upper body like it had been made for him, the hint of darker blond hair on the man's chest visible at the open collar. He'd rolled the sleeves up, too, exposing his strong forearms. Normally, Jared would've yelled at his models for doing that to a garment, especially since the wide cuffs were such the rage at the moment, but for Rick, he'd make an exception. The casual look accented one of Rick's best attributes. That kind of fashion sensibility always trumped what might currently be on the runway.

Rick's eyes darkened as they swept over Jared. He didn't think for a second Rick knew he was wearing a Cavalli suit, but there was no mistaking the naked appreciation for how good Jared looked. After all, looking good was the one thing Jared knew how to do right.

"I'm almost afraid to ask where we're going." Rick ran his tongue over his lower lip, leaving it glistening by the time his eyes returned to Jared's face. "Do I need to change?"

"Absolutely not." Jared stepped back and out of the way, giving Rick plenty of room to come out and lock the door. "I've got the cab waiting for us downstairs. Our dinner reservation is in half an hour, but we should have plenty of time to get there."

"Where are we going?"

"Nobu."

"Naboo? Someone named a restaurant after something from a crappy Star Wars movie?"

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Jared chuckled as they waited for the elevator. “No, Nobu. The Japanese restaurant in Tribeca?” When Rick continued to stare at him blankly, his eyes widened. “You’ve never heard of Nobu?”

Rick’s shrug was almost embarrassed. “I’ve never had Japanese food, either.” An easy smile spread over his face. “You still want to go out with such a peon?”

“Oh, you’re not getting rid of me that easy.” The doors whispered open, and they entered the empty car. As soon as they were descending, Jared risked reaching out and smoothing his palm over Rick’s chest. A muscle rippled, detectable even through the fabric, and the nipple visibly tightened until it stood out underneath the shirt. “Do you have any idea how sexy you are?”

Heat radiated from Rick’s body, almost palpable in the small elevator. “You don’t have to try and convince me to try Japanese.” His voice was hoarse. Was that an effect of Jared’s touching? God, he hoped so. “I’m willing to give anything a go at least once.”

“Oh, that’s not sweet talk.” He stepped closer. Rick didn’t retreat. “Haven’t you learned that about me yet? I think it, and it comes right out my mouth.”

Rick’s eyes smoldered where they locked on Jared’s. “I figured that out the first time I met you. It’s half the reason why I gave you my number.”

Another half-step. He wasn’t sure if the lurching of his stomach was because he could feel Rick’s strong thighs brushing against his or because the elevator was twenty years

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old. "What's the other half?"

The unmistakable glance at his mouth made it clear, but Jared was stopped from experiencing it firsthand by the bell announcing the car was stopping. Jared stepped away only enough to make it polite for strangers. He itched to grab Rick's ass and see if it felt as firm as it looked. His daring almost made him laugh. Hard to believe how nervous he'd been only a few minutes earlier.

The doors opened into the lobby. Jared led the way out to the curb, glad the fifty he'd left with the cabbie was enough to keep him waiting. They slid into the back seat, thighs lightly touching, and after they'd pulled into traffic, he let his hand come to rest on Rick's knee.

"I'm glad we finally got our schedules worked out."

Rick's soft smile made his stomach lurch again. Nope. It wasn't an effect of the elevator after all. "Me, too."

The ride to Nobu was quicker than he'd expected. He kept his hand on Rick's knee the entire way, pleased that Rick didn't shift away or do anything to discourage the contact. Rick was clearly out, but Jared got the impression he wasn't big on public displays. He would bet Rick would've been that way even if he'd been straight.

When Rick insisted on paying for the taxi, Jared opened his mouth to argue, only to snap it shut again. Letting him have this leeway now gave Jared more leverage when he wanted to pay for dinner. There were a lot of pricier places to eat in Manhattan, but he doubted Rick was ready to drop a couple hundred dollars for a single meal, not on a nurse's

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salary.

Walking into Nobu always relaxed Jared, no matter what kind of mood he was in. The main dining room was light and airy, the birch tree posts adding to the rustic feel. One wall was dedicated to the sushi bar, while tables were scattered across the wooden floor for more formal dining. As they waited to be seated, he noticed Rick staring at the wall made completely from river stones, another soothing element in the open atmosphere.

“I love this place,” Jared said. “It doesn’t matter how wound up I might be when I get here. By the time I leave, I feel like I can take on the world again.”

Rick grinned. “The food’s that good, huh?”

“Better.”

Their table gave them an excellent view of the wall Rick admired, but as soon as he saw the menu, Rick’s brows drew together into an adorable frown. “Do I look like a pansy if you order for me? I have no idea what’s good.”

“Well, what do you like?”

“I don’t know. I guess I can always just get the steak.”

“You’re not coming to Nobu and ordering steak.” He plucked the menu out of Rick’s hand and replaced it with the drinks menu. “You can pick out the wine.”

There was a pause. “I can’t get a beer?”

Jared bubbled with laughter. “How about I get you sake instead?”

Rick yielded with more grace than he’d expected, remaining quiet as Jared went ahead and took care of their

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drinks and food order. He lounged in his chair, his warm eyes sweeping over the room, always returning to the river wall while he waited to get Jared's attention again.

Except Jared was aware of every little movement. Something about Rick commanded it, even with his less than fashionable attire or his insouciant pose. He wanted to say it was the man's size, and while that probably played a part in it, he wasn't so naïve not to realize it was the man himself. He wouldn't have been so nervous about a simple dinner date if Rick didn't get to him in ways untouched in years.

Though he would never be able to replay the conversation afterward, time slipped away from Jared in a bubble of laughter, smiles, and small, intimate touches. Rick might not travel in the same circles he did, but he was smart and easygoing, willing to concede points when he knew he was in the dark or wrong, yet tenacious with the few topics Jared hit that he believed strongly about. Jared learned more about his work, about what it meant to go to the homes of those suffering from the incurable disease. Rick didn't share specifics—patient confidentiality, he explained early on—but he didn't have to. The pictures he painted gave Jared new appreciation for just what it was he did for a living.

But there was more to the dinner than just the fresh discovery of a first real date. When the food arrived, Jared saw Rick's initial reaction to the delicate presentation, how he stopped for a moment just to look it over before he dove in to sample. He might not care about all of the aesthetics Jared did, but he certainly knew how to savor a thing of beauty when he

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was faced with it. And the look on his face at the first bite...

Rick stopped in mid-chew, his eyes flying to Jared's face. Several seconds passed before he resumed chewing, but the shimmering delight was indisputable. "This is incredible," he said when he swallowed.

Jared fought not to smirk. "I know."

The second bite was drawn out even longer than the first. Jared had never seen such an orgasmic look on Rick's face before—the mouth soft, the small sound of enjoyment in the back of his throat. All of it left him hard and slightly dizzy with want for Rick, desire to see that same look because of what Jared was doing to his body rather than what he was eating.

When the bill came, Jared took it and waved Rick's hand away when he reached for his wallet. "This is on me. I picked the restaurant, it's my responsibility to pay."

"Let me at least pay for my half."

"How about you pay for dessert?" They had foregone anything on the menu because Jared couldn't eat another bite. But if he got Rick to promise a later treat, he was guaranteed to make this date last as long as possible.

Rick's mouth pursed as he thought it over. "How about after dinner drinks instead? You picked your kind of restaurant. Let me take you to my favorite bar."

He liked the sound of that. More alcohol, lower inhibitions...dinner had been bereft of any more of the innuendo from the elevator and cab, but Jared had high hopes that was simply because they were in a public place. The looks

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he kept catching from Rick promised more later. Now with the offer for a drink as well, that promise seemed much more likely to be filled.

“Do I need to change?” he asked with a smile.

Rick chuckled. “Not as long as you don’t mind being the only one in a suit.”

“Stand out in a crowd? Me? Never.”

“Good, because you look too good just as you are.”

It was the first compliment on his appearance to come from Rick’s lips all night. Jared didn’t need it—he knew he looked damned good in the Cavalli—but somehow, knowing Rick had noticed lit a new fire in his belly.

Rick was the one who hailed the cab this time, and they slid into the back seat, sitting even more closely than they had their first trip, as Rick gave the driver the address. His arm stretched across the back of the seat, his fingertips grazing along Jared’s shoulder.

God, he loved how Rick’s bulk just swallowed him up.

“Are you going to tell me where I’m going?”

“You’ll see,” came the cryptic response.

Neon twinkled against the night, peppering the strong lines of Rick’s face in color as they maneuvered through traffic. Though Jared wanted to talk, Rick clearly didn’t find the need to, instead watching the people on the sidewalk as he continued to caress Jared’s shoulder. It gave Jared time to absorb every detail he couldn’t do so blatantly at the restaurant. Like the slight nick under his jaw where he’d obviously cut himself shaving, most likely right before Jared

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had shown up. He'd caught whiffs of Rick's woodsy aftershave all night, but now, seeing the direct evidence of the task, Jared had the sudden desire to lean forward and lick over the small spot and taste it for himself.

As they turned a corner onto a quieter street, Rick unexpectedly abandoned his fascination with the pedestrians to shift his focus back to Jared. A smile was already on his lips.

"I didn't say so back there, but dinner was amazing." His hand stopped moving on Jared's shoulder, as if to hold him still. *Like I'd actually pull away from it.* He tilted his head closer. The soft brush of his mouth across Jared's didn't last nearly long enough. "Thanks."

"My pleasure." He started to chase Rick's lips when the other man pulled back, but the cab coasted to a stop, the driver twisting to say they'd arrived. Jared let him go with a scowl, but blocked Rick's attempt to pay with an arm across his chest. "Fair's fair. This one's mine."

The bar in question wasn't anything Jared would have noticed if he'd been walking by. The neighborhood was quiet, the front unassuming. Only the bar's name lit up the front window in dark red neon. *Paulie's*.

"So what is this place?" he asked, following Rick inside.

Dark wood swallowed any ambient light from the streets, while the brick walls were clearly structural rather than ornamental. The wood floor was pocked and scuffed, but even in the dim illumination, Jared saw that it was spotless. A bar blocked off a large section of a corner, with conventional



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wooden tables lining the wall. It looked like any bar, in any city, all the way down to the blue collar workers dotting the stools.

The burly man behind the bar turned around at their entrance and promptly smiled at them. "Someone's all gussied up tonight." A couple heads turned in their direction, but their glances were brief and detached, an acknowledgement rather than a judgment. The bartender picked up a pint glass and immediately started pulling something from one of the taps. "Good to see you taking a night off for a change."

Rick led Jared to the far side of the bar, settling into the corner stool and gesturing for Jared to sit next to him. "You know what they say about all work and no play."

"Yeah, I actually stand a chance at getting some attention because you're too busy to notice getting checked out." With a grin that looked eerily familiar, the bartender slid the beer in front of Rick. "Not that tits are your style anyway."

Their shared chuckle added another layer to Jared's déjà vu. "This is Jared." Rick rested one hand on Jared's shoulder, gesturing to the bartender with the other. "And this is my cousin Alex."

Now it all made sense. Paulie's, Paulson. A family business of some sort. Alex didn't physically resemble Rick, but the size and smile were enough to draw a line from one to the other.

"It's good to meet you." He offered his hand, holding his smile as they shook. "Nice place."

"It's home," Alex agreed. "What can I get you?"

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He didn't think asking for wine would probably go over well. "Whatever you poured for Rick is fine."

With their beers in hand, Rick led the way to the far corner and the most private place in the room. It gave them an excellent view of the rest of the bar, but shielded them from most of the other patrons, the lighting dim enough to make Jared's fair skin look golden.

"I guess that means your family is all here in New York."

Rick nodded. "Isn't yours?"

"My mom lived here while I was modeling, but as soon as I quit, she moved back to Toledo."

"So it's only you?" With a shake of his head, Rick reached across the table and took Jared's hand, lacing their fingers together and letting them rest next to their beers. It was such a casual motion, Jared didn't think anything of it until he remembered where they were. But a quick glance around the room said nobody was paying them any attention, not even Alex behind the bar. "I couldn't do it. Sounds kind of lonely."

"I'm too busy to be lonely. And having Theresa around is better than a little sis. At least I can threaten to fire Theresa every time she starts mouthing off too much."

Though they had their drinks between them, Rick ignored his, his dark eyes warm and liquid as they regarded Jared. It was hard not to stare, harder not to get lost in imagining whatever it was that was going through Rick's head. And all the while, Rick's thumb kept caressing the side of Jared's hand, as if it had an agenda all its own. Jared's stomach was on permanent lurch mode, just like he'd been in a constant

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state of arousal all night. He didn't foresee that changing any time soon.

"I'd like for you to come back to my place tonight."

Okay, he'd been wrong.

Jared blinked more than once at Rick's soft declaration. He was used to guys being upfront about their desires. Sometimes, all Jared needed was a "Can I blow you?" from a cutie in a club to get what he wanted. But he hadn't anticipated Rick being quite as direct. He didn't know why. Maybe because this was an actual date, and they'd had real conversations about things that were more than sex. It could have something to do with the fact that Rick had chosen to take him someplace where his family—extended or not—could see them together, too. Lots of reasons. None of them negated what Rick had said, though.

"I think that's doable," Jared replied, matching Rick's tone.

"Do you top?"

Another blink. "Why?"

The touches along his hand lengthened. "Do I need a reason other than wanting you to fuck me?"

His hand jerked in Rick's, startled more than anything else. It didn't break the contact, but it was enough to pull Jared forward, his eyes darting around for a moment to see if anybody was listening.

"Why are you so surprised?" Rick's quiet question yanked his focus back, only to see that he had leaned closer, too. Now their noses were only inches apart, and he got another hint of

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the man's sexy scent. "You think because of what I do, I've sworn off sex?"

"No, it's just..." His hand fluttered in Rick's direction. "Look at you."

"Are we back to that again?"

"I don't think it's such a bad assumption to make. You're built like a linebacker. Nobody thinks of linebackers taking it up the ass."

Rick smiled at his blunt language. "Clearly, they don't know what they're missing then. But if you don't top, that's okay. I switch, no problem."

"I didn't say I didn't top."

His nostrils flared, and his pupils noticeably dilated more. Rick's desire was a potent beast between them now, one Jared was having more and more trouble not acting on. "But...?"

"No buts." Jared licked his lip. When had his mouth gotten so dry? "If that's what you want, why are we here?"

"I promised you a drink."

"I think I'd like the other choice more."

"And you'll get it. I promise that, too."

Jared was going to hold him to it.

## CHAPTER 4

The nerves he'd felt approaching Rick's door earlier that night were nothing compared to the excitement bubbling beneath his skin at approaching it the second. Rick was nothing but a bundle of surprises. Down to earth, Jared had expected. Gorgeous and muscled and preferring to bottom than top? Not so much. Wanting Jared to bend him over and fuck him into the bed until neither one of them could walk—as Rick had whispered hot and heavy in his ear during the cab ride back to his apartment—had definitely not been on the radar.

As Jared leaned his shoulder against the wall next to the door, his gaze slid down Rick's body. Six and a half feet of

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solid, lickable muscle. A perfectly molded ass that not even his off-the-rack pants could ruin the shape of. A very distinct bulge at his groin, the one that still had Jared's fingers tingling from groping in the taxi. All his for the next eight hours. Rick wanted to get pounded into the mattress? Jared was more than happy to oblige.

The door swung open into darkness. Casting him a soft smile, Rick tilted his head toward the interior, then vanished inside without uttering a word. Jared followed, bound to him by the invisible threads of their desire. He nearly collided with Rick's back where the man had paused to snap on a small lamp, but after catching himself, closed the rest of the distance to wrap his arm around Rick's waist.

Rick groaned, grinding back against Jared's erection. "You're killing me here."

"I'm killing you?" Jared smoothed his hand downward, finding the thick line of Rick's cock and squeezing. "You're the one who had the dirty mouth in the cab. I think you're getting exactly what you deserve."

"Not yet," came the ragged reply. "But hopefully soon."

He engulfed the hand Jared had on his cock and led him away from the door, his path unerring through the apartment. Jared was too focused on the broad back to waste time looking around. The only room he cared about was the one Rick was intent to reach.

That one mirrored its owner to a T. A large bed was shoved into the corner, proof of a man used to being on his own and not having to worry about a partner having room to

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get out in the middle of the night to take a piss or get a drink. The thick, navy comforter was faded and wash-softened, but there was a mountain of pillows at the head, too many for a single occupant to use. Rick obviously had a weakness for them. The rest of the room was unremarkable, except for a guitar mounted on a stand in the corner and the towering wardrobe he had instead of a closet.

Rick turned around and promptly brought his hands up to Jared's face, holding his head still as he bent forward for a kiss. Jared clutched at his waist at the first contact, already open, already hungry for the slide of Rick's tongue across his own. Broad thumbs stroked his cheeks as Rick devoured him, which did nothing to quell the quivering in his muscles. It was the breathless anticipation of *more* that did it to him. It always had. The burst of succulence on his tongue, where desire and opportunity crashed headlong in an unbridled explosion.

Jared tugged at Rick's shirt, desperate to feel the muscles laid bare against his fingertips. It came free in short, jerky motions, bumping their hips together to send shocks through his cock with each jolting contact. Rick groaned each time they touched. His kisses grew almost savage, all sharp edges. Gone was the easygoing date he'd had most of the night. This one was hopped up and horny as hell. Jared got a little bit harder just thinking about it.

Somehow, the shirt finally came free, giving him room to slide his hand up the smooth expanse of Rick's back. Muscles rippled beneath his palm. A shudder wracked through Rick. When Jared dug his nails in, Rick finally released his face and

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gasped for breath.

“Hang on.”

Rick stepped back only far enough to undo the top few buttons of his shirt before yanking it unceremoniously over his head. It exposed his broad chest, the dark blond hair just thick enough for Jared to curl his fingers into later on when he wanted. For now, Jared yielded to the temptation of bending down to flick his tongue over a flat nipple.

The result was electric. Rick jerked at the simple touch, goose bumps erupting from his skin, visible even beneath the coarse hair. His already ragged breath froze, only to be let out in a single, shuddering exhalation. His hands curled into fists at his side, clenching and unclenching as he struggled with his desire. But when he grappled to try and get Jared’s jacket off him, he hesitated.

Jared frowned. “What’s wrong?”

Rick took a step back. A step in the wrong direction. “As excited as I am, I’ll rip that off you if you let me undress you. Maybe you should do it. I’ll take care of mine then.”

It was on the tip of his tongue to say having his favorite Cavalli suit torn to shreds because Rick wanted him just that much would be worth it, but then Jared realized what he’d been about to say and cut it off at the knees.

He flashed Rick a smile as he began to strip. “Not that I don’t appreciate it, but the fact that you have enough focus to even think about not ruining my suit means you aren’t nearly as worked up as I want you to be.”

Rick toed off his shoes, his hands working furiously at



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opening his worn leather belt. “Oh, I’m worked up. I just know that’s what’s important to you.” He grinned and shoved his pants down, using the weight of his belt to help them crumple to a mass on the floor. “Of course, getting you pissed off so you fuck me harder might’ve been a good idea, too.”

The retort died in his throat at the first sight of Rick’s powerful thighs and the thick erection bobbing between them. The guys Jared usually went out with had standing appointments for wax jobs, which often made even their cocks look effeminate. Rick probably didn’t even realize salons offered those kinds of services. He wouldn’t quite qualify for bear status, but hell if he didn’t ooze masculinity from every pore. A prominent vein ran from the flared crown to the even thicker base, and pre-come glistened at the slit. Even his balls were a mouthful, and Jared sank to his knees before he could stop himself.

His hand folded over Rick’s, holding him steady as he sucked the head past his lips. Rick made a choking sound before settling his other hand on Jared’s shoulder. Not to drag him back to his feet. To hold him down.

Jared smiled and looked up through his lashes. He swirled his tongue around the tip, wetting it further, before seeking out the pre-come that had teased him with the first taste. A moan escaped both of them when he sealed his mouth again and sucked. God, Rick tasted good. The vein throbbed against his lips, echoing his own racing pulse, and he sank a little bit lower in order to get the weight of the shaft against his tongue.

“Love your mouth,” Rick rasped. He skimmed his hand up

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Jared's neck to trace the stretched lips around his shaft. "First time I saw you, all I could think about was what it would be like to feel it."

Jared pulled off, licking around the head. "I probably would've blown you that night if you would've let me."

Another groan. "You're not supposed to make me regret taking so long to hook up, you know."

"Oops. My mistake. Let me just make it up to you."

He swallowed Rick back in, pushing his hand out of the way to be able to grip lower around the base. Jared hummed as he bobbed his head, as much for himself as for Rick. He wasn't convinced he'd be able to take it all into his throat, but damn if he wasn't going to try. The thought of Rick grabbing his head to fuck his face had him fumbling with his fly to free his own cock.

His lips tingled by the time Rick tugged at his hair.

"This'll be over before we get to the good stuff if you keep that up." Rick stepped back, too, as if the added distance would help. "You have no idea how much I've been looking forward to this."

"I might have a little one."

Jared straightened and went back to work on his half-discarded clothing, watching Rick move to the bed through heavy-lidded eyes. The man had a body like a marble statue, flexing with every sinuous movement. His torso twisted as he reached for the nightstand, cutting each muscle in stark relief, and he pulled out a box of condoms and a jar of lube. When he faced Jared again, his gaze narrowed in on Jared's cock, his

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nostrils flaring as he practically growled.

“That’s not a little one.”

Jared smiled. “No, not really.” He draped his pants along with his shirt and jacket over the arm of the nearby chair. He had felt an initial draft when he’d first unbuttoned, but now his skin was hot and tight, ready to split open at the first contact, he feared.

When Jared bent one knee to the edge of the bed, Rick grabbed his hand and yanked him forward. Jared fell onto his chest, chuckling at the haste, but the sound was obliterated by the crush of their mouths again, Rick’s broad fingers clasp Jared’s ass to fully align their bodies.

Every pound of Rick’s heart tattooed onto Jared’s skin. Within the circle of Rick’s arms, there was no way to move or adjust his position, though the last thing Jared wanted was to lose the hard press of that thick cock against his hip. They ground together, creating new sensations, new fires, all the while never giving up on the kisses.

Rick was the one to shift first. He spread his legs, letting Jared slip between them, and braced his heels on the bed. Jared rocked backward, and his cock dragged along Rick’s shaft, leaving a trail of pre-come in its wake. Instinct told him to thrust forward, but he held firm, not yielding to the urge until the wet tip nudged Rick’s balls.

“God, you’re going to feel so good,” Rick murmured. With one last squeeze, he let go of Jared’s ass to scramble to the side for the lube.

Jared caught his wrist. “Not yet.”

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Rick groaned. “You’re not actually going to make me wait, are you?”

Shaking his head, Jared nibbled down to Rick’s chest, licking along the hard muscle until his mouth watered. “I’m just going to use other ways to get you slick first.”

“Oh, God.”

But he didn’t stop Jared, not when he bit at Rick’s nipple, not when he dragged the flat of his tongue over it. The coarse hair scraped over Jared’s already sensitive skin, and he deliberately rubbed harder to make it burn. Rational thought was gone. They acted entirely on base needs, the most carnal desires. Rick’s strong fingers touched everywhere they could reach for as long as he could, finally settling on Jared’s head. Jared licked down the twitching shaft only once. He’d already had a taste of Rick’s cock. Now he wanted a taste of his ass.

Rick lifted his hips to help, spreading his legs even wider. His balls were as heavy as they had promised to be, but Jared lingered on them for only moments. He rolled them around his mouth, first one and then the other, and let his fingers explore the warm crease between the other man’s buttocks. Heat radiated from both of them. What would happen when they finally came together? Would they be able to even last? Jared couldn’t remember the last time he’d been this aroused by a lover. Hell, he couldn’t even remember his own last name right then, either.

The first touch to Rick’s tight pucker made Jared shiver. The muscle was clenching and unclenching, over and over again, in Rick’s anticipation of penetration. If he’d had any

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doubts about Rick's eagerness—which he hadn't—that would have dispelled them, right there. Jared abandoned the heavy sac to move downward, savoring the velvety skin behind the balls for long seconds first. His cock ached. There was a wet patch on the blanket from the pre-come that had already soaked through it. Part of Jared thought he could probably come with just a few pulls of his length and his tongue in Rick's ass.

The only problem with that was they both wanted more.

"Know what I thought that first night?" Grasping the taut flesh and spreading the cheeks even farther apart, Jared looked up Rick's body until the other man met his gaze. "I couldn't stop staring at your ass. You have no idea how glad I was that you were gay."

"I'll bet about as glad as I was that you actually called me."

"How could I not?"

Rick snorted. "You'd be surprised."

Jared blew across the hole, watching it tighten before he leaned in and dragged his tongue over it. Once wasn't enough. Neither was twice. On the third pass, he paused at the opening and sank his tongue past the ring, burying his nose in Rick's balls.

Rick started to thrash at the contact, but Jared held him still—or as still as he could, considering the size of the other man. He thrust in and out of the quivering passage, imagining what it was going to be like when it was his cock sinking into that hole instead. Rick's moans only encouraged him to go on,

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and he lost more time with each additional stroke.

Pain shot through his scalp when Rick grabbed his hair.

"If you don't fuck me now," Rick panted, "I'm going to pin you to this bed and ride you."

Was there anything this man could suggest that wouldn't set him aflame? As Jared sat up, he seriously doubted it.

"What about stretching?"

"What about it?"

Jared chuckled. "I haven't done any."

"I don't care."

Jared had never put a condom on faster in his life. The rubber snapped around the base of his cock, stinging slightly as he grabbed the lube. Rick watched each movement like a hawk. Jared knew that if he hesitated even for a second, Rick would swoop in and do it all himself. While the thought of being smothered by all those muscles was more than tempting, he was just as ready to split that ass as Rick was ready to be split.

He knelt between Rick's legs, aligning his cock up with the hole. Rick grabbed the back of his thighs and held himself up and open, eyes dark and locked on Jared's face as Jared slowly pressed forward. He didn't look away. The desire burning in the depths elicited shivers that nearly made Jared lose control. The tightness around the head of his prick did the very same thing.

"Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck..." Jared muttered. It was even better than he'd imagined. Every inch he pushed inside sucked away more of his breath, until he couldn't inhale at all when

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his balls nudged against Rick's ass.

On the other hand, Rick couldn't seem to stop gulping for air. His cheeks had mottled with splotches of red, and the same heat crept down his neck, disappearing into the hair on his chest. "Gimme a second," he said. "Let me..."

The request was unnecessary. Jared couldn't move anyway. His entire body had locked into a fiery stasis. He couldn't think, or speak, or do much of anything but thank every god ever created for this seemingly perfect moment.

After what was probably only a few seconds but felt like minutes, Rick nudged Jared with his heel. "Do it."

*Do it.*

*Right. Time to move.*

He took a deep breath. Curling his hands around Rick's thighs, Jared slowly withdrew.

He only made it an inch before driving forward again.

"Do you have any idea how fucking good you feel?" Jared said.

"Do you have any idea how much better it'll be if you go faster?" Rick teased.

Jared grinned. "Point taken."

This time, he made it two inches.

Slowly, he sawed his way in and out of Rick's clenching channel, a little bit more with each stroke. His hands shook. He had to dig in even harder to Rick's hips to keep them steady. The heat was killer, the constriction even more so, but eventually, they reached a long, hard rhythm where the only sound louder than that of their skin slapping against each other

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was their harsh breathing.

Pre-come flowed freely from Rick's cock, making his stomach glisten. Neither one of them touched it—Jared, because he feared letting go would be the end of him, and Rick because it was evident from the sounds he made that he was more than satisfied at the moment with the feeling of being stuffed. Jared's mouth watered to taste him again, but that would have to come later. After they had taken the edge off. Before they had another go. Maybe again after that.

Sweat dripped into Jared's eyes. He lost his tempo when he tried to wipe it away, and Rick took advantage of the break to grab his arm and pull him down. They both grunted at the shift in angle. Rick slid his hand up Jared's arm to the back of his neck and lifted to meet his mouth.

Both exhaled as Jared chose a new, more demanding pace to drive into Rick's ass. Rick coiled his legs around Jared's hips, refusing him the room to move very far, so what he lacked in distance he made up for with force, the pair of them hissing from pleasure with each thrust. Jared scratched across Rick's skin in order to get to his cock. The first squeeze around the shaft had Rick clamping down around Jared's dick.

Hot come flooded over his hand. Slamming his head back into the pillow, Rick practically vibrated from his orgasm. The tendons stood out in his neck, his color deepening as he refused to let go of the air in his lungs. Jared fought against the vise of his channel to piston in once, twice, three more times before his own release obliterated every sensibility. He shouted loud enough for his eardrums to ring. Pleasure



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scorched through his veins.

Rick wrapped his arms around Jared's back and caught him when he collapsed. Their mouths sought the other's without fail, but these kisses were slower than their predecessors, too spent to do anything more than show them just what havoc this had wreaked. Jared nipped at Rick's lower lip before soothing it over with his tongue. The musky scent of sex and sweat filled his head. The best smells in the world, as far as he was concerned.

"I am so glad I had the nerve to ask you over here tonight," Rick said.

Jared propped himself up to gaze down into Rick's flushed face. "You were nervous? Are you kidding me? Why?"

"Because look at us." His lazy smile brought a flicker of life back to Jared's cock. "I can't say that I've ever gone out with anyone like you before."

"I'm going to take that as a compliment." As he bent his head for another kiss, though, Jared wondered if there was more to Rick's declaration than the obvious. After all, they didn't exactly have the same social circles. Or the same career paths. Or even many of the same interests. *But the sex is phenomenal.*

For now, that was enough.

## CHAPTER 5

“He took you where?”

Jared grabbed the hem of the blouse Kelly was wearing and yanked, hoping that would help it lay better across the model’s narrow shoulders. He should have asked the agency to send Philippa instead. That girl actually had some curves to her body. His latest designs looked better when they weren’t on stick figures.

“You heard me.” He sat back on his heels and scanned up the middle seam. At least it was straight. Pinching an inch of the scarlet fabric tighter at her waist made it look even better. He reached for a clip to secure it without letting go. “I still haven’t figured out why he’d spring family on me on the first

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date.”

Theresa still stared at him from where she stood at the side of the clothes rack. “Maybe because he likes you.”

“He liked the sex.” Fastening the clip, he stood and walked around to Kelly’s front, surveying every angle of the tighter fit. “What do you think?”

“I think he likes you.”

Jared rolled his eyes. “About the blouse.”

Theresa barely looked at it and waved her hand. “It looks fine. Let’s talk about your date.”

“How about let’s not. Can we focus please? I’m not blowing this show. Not even for someone as amazing as Rick.”

“Ha!” She bolted around the end of the rack to stand in front of him, her hands on her wide hips. “So you admit it!”

“I never denied it. Would I be letting you distract me if I hadn’t had a good time?”

She looked all too impressed with herself, and maybe, if he didn’t have a deadline for this damn show, he might actually be willing to waste time dishing about his date—his all too mind-blowing, amazing date—with Rick Paulson. But right now, he had two hours to get Kelly completely fitted for walking the runway in less than a week. He did not have time for gossip.

“So when are you going to ask him out again?”

The one question he had been hoping she wouldn’t ask. Brushing past her, Jared went to the second mannequin and began stripping off the dress. “I’m not. Kelly, get undressed.

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I'll fix the blouse while Theresa fits this."

Both women moved at the same time, though Theresa's frown said she wasn't nearly done talking yet. He traded the scarlet shirt for the dress and carried it over to the sewing machine, already planning on where to tack in the extra darts.

The quiet lasted a whole thirty seconds.

"If you like him, and he likes you, why on earth wouldn't you ask him out again?"

Jared sighed. The sewing machine whirred as he stitched in the first dart. "Because I made a complete ass of myself, okay? I'm not going to ask him out, just to have him turn me down. End of story."

"What did you do?"

Great. Now Kelly was getting in on it.

"Did you guys not hear me say, 'End of story'?" Jared whipped in the second dart. Rising from his seat, he threw the shirt at Theresa, who caught it from hitting the floor at the last second. "I'm going to get a latte from downstairs. I'll be back in five."

He didn't bother asking if they wanted anything. After the inquisition, he wasn't in the mood to be generous.

The sun blinded him as soon as he emerged from the building. Jared scowled as he turned down the street. Of course, they would make him forget his sunglasses. His head had been everywhere but in the moment all day long. If he'd had his thoughts on his work, he would've had Philippa sent from the agency instead of Kelly, he wouldn't have thought for a second that the burgundy dress would work with Kelly's

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coloring, and he most certainly wouldn't have blabbed about his date to Theresa. Theresa might be his best friend, as well as his assistant, but he should've known she'd be a pit bull about this. He didn't need her to focus on his love life. He needed her to concentrate on making sure they didn't look like fools on the runway.

It was just a shame he couldn't follow his own advice. Because he'd spent the entire day playing the date and night over and over again in his head, getting increasingly annoyed at himself for his behavior.

Rick had never complained. Except for carefully correcting him when Jared jumped to the wrong conclusion, Rick had been a veritable saint about Jared's misconceptions. And Jared knew he'd made mistakes. He'd made a lot of them. He'd assumed a lot of truths, based on superficial data, and each and every time, he'd been wrong. He could use the excuse that his entire livelihood was based on physical impressions, but that didn't justify how badly he'd misjudged Rick. Not once, not twice, but constantly throughout the night.

Frankly, he didn't deserve a second date. He wouldn't tell Theresa that; he felt bad enough about everything that had happened.

As he paid for his coffee, his phone jingled on his belt. Stella behind the counter smiled as he snapped it to his ear; Theresa always called as soon as he stepped away from the sewing machine.

"I said I would be back in five," he sighed in exasperation.

"Actually, I don't think we had a chance to figure out

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when you'd be back here."

Jared stiffened at the amused tone in Rick's voice. His coffee splashed against his wrist, and he hissed in pain. "Sorry, I thought it was Theresa." Jesus, was he always going to be apologizing to this guy?

"I figured as much."

"Let's try this again, shall we?" Jared gave an awkward wave to Stella before juggling his phone and coffee on the way to a quiet corner. "Hi, Rick, how are you?"

"Good. Did I call at a bad time?"

"Actually, you probably managed the one time all day I haven't had my hands all over models."

"Male or female?"

"Female."

"Good. I don't have reason to get jealous then."

They both laughed at the small joke, but a thrill rippled through Jared. Maybe he hadn't botched the date part of the night as badly as he'd thought. Unless Rick was calling for a quickie, which actually wouldn't be a bad thing either.

"Trust me." Jared dabbed away the coffee that still lingered on his wrist. "I would much rather have my hands all over you."

"And speaking of, last night was good. Very good, you think?"

Jared paused. Rick was asking his opinion? How could he be so unsure? Jared was the one who deserved to be so worried about the possible response.

"Very good," he agreed. He decided to take the risk.

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“More than good enough for another.”

Rick’s sigh floated through the line. “Thank God you said that. I was a little worried I was the only one who had fun. You left a little quick this morning. We didn’t get a chance to make more plans to get together.”

He’d left because he’d been more than a little terrified of looking like a schmuck when Rick threw him out. It hadn’t been the easiest thing to peel away from Rick’s gorgeous body, but it would’ve been much worse to face one of those awkward morning afters. He’d had enough of those already in his lifetime.

“I had models coming over for fittings early.” It was only a half-lie. “I’m sorry, I thought I’d mentioned that.”

“I knew you were busy. I should’ve expected it.”

“After one date? You’re not Superman. Even if you’re built like him.”

Rick chuckled. The rich sound went straight to Jared’s cock, even over the line. “So let’s try another one. When is good for you?”

“We’re not going to spend a week going back and forth on the phone, trying to find a date that works for both of us again, are we? We’ve probably logged more talking time already than people do in four dates.”

“Tell me you’re free tomorrow night then. I can even promise you a non-talking date, if you want.”

Jared’s mind raced. Tomorrow night. With his show so close, he should probably work. But did he really want to lose this opportunity while he had it? “Count me in. What did you

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have in mind?”

“There’s a band playing called Drunk Whiskey that I want to go see. Interested?”

He’d never heard of them, but that didn’t stop a resounding, “Sure, sounds like fun. What kind of music do they play?”

“Oh, I think they’re country.”

Jared tried not to groan, though the way Rick phrased it made him smile. “You think? You want to go see a band you’ve never heard?”

“Well, the bass player is one of my patients. This is the first time in months he’s been strong enough to play, so I kind of wanted to poke my nose in and show some support. He promises me they’re good, but if they’re not, I’ll make it up to you, I promise.”

“I think I’ll hold you to that.”

He heard the smile in Rick’s voice. “Great. I’ll pick you up this time?”

“Sure. My studio at seven?”

“Sounds like a date.”

Jared disconnected with a smile. It didn’t leave his face even after he nearly ran into Theresa at the bottom of the stairs.

“Do we need to talk?” she asked. “Because if I pissed you off—”

“We’re good.” He brushed past her to take the stairs two at a time. “I’m feeling inspired. Let’s get back to work.”

Theresa trotted up after him, though thankfully didn’t



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launch into twenty questions until after he'd set down his coffee to give Kelly the once-over in the shirt he'd fitted before taking his break. It looked good, impeccable even. Good enough, he thought, to actually merit some attention now.

"Did you call him?"

"No. He called me." He held up a warning finger. "We're going out again tomorrow night, no I won't give you any more details about what happened *last* night, and I'll apologize about snapping at you before if you promise to drop all this now." He grinned at her smile. "Good. I'm sorry. Now tell me I'm not going to be some walking cliché if I wear jeans and boots tomorrow to see this country band."

\* \* \*

No matter how many times he told himself the hard part had been calling Jared for the second date, Rick couldn't get over his excitement as he approached the studio. Going to a country bar was not his ideal, but Jared hadn't even hesitated to accept, and didn't throw a fuss afterward when he heard what kind of music. Rick had contemplated not sharing the details of why he wanted to go, but in the end, knew that neither one of them were the type to play games, even if Jared's entire life was built on appearances.

He didn't have to go upstairs. Jared waited on the sidewalk, looking like sin in denim, as he leaned against the wall. His long legs were encased in faded jeans, and he wore a dark green shirt left hanging over his waistband. He

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straightened as Rick approached, drawing Rick's gaze to his hips and lower, the memory of their legs twined together as they slept momentarily distracting him.

"I thought a cowboy hat might be overdoing it a little bit," Jared said with a smile.

"No, you look great." Good enough to consider skipping out on Tyson's gig even.

The suggestion was right there on his tongue, except Jared stepped to the curb and immediately hailed a cab. He looked back at Rick with such honest expectation, there was no way not to follow him into the back seat. He'd given the driver the club's address before remembering the possibility of going elsewhere again.

He listened to Jared chatter all the way there. This was one of the things he'd discovered he liked so much during their first date. Jared had an opinion on everything, and he wasn't afraid to share it, even if it wasn't a particularly popular opinion. He had an energy that was the single most contagious thing Rick had ever been around. It was impossible not to react when he was in Jared's presence.

They arrived at the club sooner than he expected. He barely saw the dingy windows, or the lack of a line outside. Jared's fingertips grazed across his for a split second before vanishing again once they entered. Here, they had to be a little more discreet, and Jared's willingness to do so said more about the man than anything he'd uttered in the cab. He flashed Rick a smile before leading the way to a table near the tiny stage. A smile that said, *Follow me if you dare.*

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He dared. He'd dare a lot more, if Jared gave him the chance.

They ordered beers from the top-heavy waitress who kept bending over to give him a good look at her breasts. Rick hid his smile at her obvious attempts to get his attention by focusing on the set-up on the stage. Closest to them was a worn piano, with a stool at center stage, drums practically glued to the back wall, and amps on the other side. If there were speakers, they were well hidden. He hoped they didn't get their ears blasted off from sitting so close.

"You can come back now," Jared said beside him. Rick glanced back to see his sly smile. "The horny waitress is all gone."

Rick grimaced. "Was I that obvious?"

"Only to me. She's probably going to try round two in the Get the Gorgeous Guy in the Corner to Notice Me match when she brings back our drinks."

"And I don't fit under these tiny tables. Great."

Jared laughed. "You don't fit under any table."

"Maybe we'll get lucky and the band will start before she comes back."

"How do you usually handle it?"

"Handle what?"

"Getting hit on."

There was just enough seriousness in Jared's tone to know the question was genuine. "Believe it or not, that doesn't happen that much anymore. I work a lot of hours, and when I don't, I usually hang out with people or at places where they

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know I'm gay." He glanced over at the bar and the backside of the waitress as she leaned over the counter to say something to the bartender. "Coming out was the best thing that ever happened to me. I didn't have to worry anymore about hurting girls' feelings when I turned them down."

"You're probably one of the few guys I've ever met who has positive feelings about coming out. You never had any problems?"

Rick shrugged. "Sure, I had problems. There's assholes all over the place, including some of the people in my family. But that's their problem, not mine. They don't like it? Fuck 'em."

A brilliant smile slowly spread over Jared's face. "Now that is one coming out party I would've loved to see."

When he looked like that, with so much surprised delight in his face, Rick just wanted to get down on his knees and show Jared how much he appreciated it. He'd had the same look when Rick had announced he preferred to bottom, like a kid who'd been told to get in the car to go shopping only to find himself at the toy store instead. Nothing got Rick harder or gave him more satisfaction. It was half the reason he'd gone into a service industry.

The waitress reappeared with their drinks, but Jared preempted her new assault by having money ready for her. Rick bit back his smile when the other man launched into a flattering assessment of her ensemble, finishing with a casual wave at Rick and the comment, "Not that the Neanderthal ever notices. You'd be better off wearing a cowbell and sparklers in your ass before he'd pay any attention."

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She brayed good-naturedly, but only cast one more sideways glance at Rick before heading off to another table. He watched her leave in amazement, then shook his head.

“How did you know she wasn’t going to spill your drink down your front and make a stink about the queers in the corner?” he asked.

Jared took a sip of his beer. “I didn’t. Well, I didn’t think she would, but I knew that was a possibility. She acted like the kind of girl who could take a joke.”

“Good for us.”

“Good for you. You don’t have to worry about her hitting on you anymore.”

A fact for which Rick was grateful. Leaning closer, he said in Jared’s ear, “I’ll make it up to you later. All you have to do is name the place and position.”

Jared’s sharp intake of breath made the hair on the back of his neck stand up. “You couldn’t have said this after the band plays?” His voice was just as low and intimate, though the angle of their heads made it look like they were just buddies sharing a private comment rather than lovers. “Now I’m going to sit here hard as a rock for the rest of the night.”

Rick smiled and sat back in his chair, letting his legs stretch out beneath the small table. It took the strain off his own erection, though thankfully it was well-hidden by his shirt hanging outside his belt. “My diabolical plan has worked then.”

Rolling his eyes, Jared took a long swig of his beer. “You’re the least diabolical person I’ve ever met. That’s why I

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like you.”

The band coming out on the stage stopped Rick from replying, and he shifted his focus as the lights in the bar dimmed slightly to accommodate the musicians. He could think of a dozen reasons why he liked Jared so much, not the least of which was the way he always said what was exactly on his mind, even if it meant jumping to the wrong conclusion. He had these ideas about Rick, mostly because they didn’t know each other well enough yet, but he wasn’t afraid to say them. That took guts. Courage. Rick respected that.

Tyson caught his eye and smiled. He was actually looking good, Rick thought. His new drug protocol was working wonders, giving him strength he hadn’t had in months. He was still far too thin, and his color wasn’t anywhere near normal, but when he’d said he was going to play this gig, Rick wasn’t going to advise him not to. Before he’d been diagnosed, Tyson had lived for his music. Rick wanted him to have it back. At least for a little while.

Beneath the table, Jared’s foot nudged his. Rick glanced over in time for the lights to go completely down, and then it was Jared’s hand covering his, as well. Jared smiled, like a shot of adrenaline to Rick’s heart, and nodded toward the stage. Rick settled back in his chair with a matching grin.

The music was loud, the bass line hard, and the singer not entirely sober, but Rick couldn’t remember the last time he had had so much fun listening to a band. Jared never let his hand go, and the heat rose between them, a reminder of the attraction that had assaulted him since first spying Jared half-

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soaked with Mr. Jansen's fruity drink. Rick started tapping out the beat of the music on the side of Jared's hand, and it throbbed through his veins like hundred proof bourbon. Before the third song was done, he vowed to buy every CD Tyson's band had. This was a night he wanted to remember.

During the set break, Tyson didn't go backstage with the rest of the band. He propped his guitar on its stand and strolled straight for Rick's table. Rick was on his feet before Tyson's boots hit the main floor, and he clapped Tyson on his bony shoulder once the man was close enough.

"You look great up there."

Tyson grimaced in mock exaggeration. "I notice you didn't say I sounded great. That's not good."

"I thought that was a given."

Tyson's chortle rocked his slight frame. "That's because it's the first time you've ever heard me play." His gaze slid to Jared. "And you brought a friend."

Rick stepped back as Jared rose to his feet. "Tyson, this is Jared. Jared, Tyson."

The two men shook hands. An unspoken understanding passed between them, one Rick wondered if anybody else noticed.

"Your keyboardist has some serious skills," Jared commented.

Tyson's brows shot up. "That sounds like you play."

"A little." Jared winked. "Lessons from Grandma Grace. Just enough to make me interesting, not so much to lose my precious social life."

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Their shared laughter filled their little corner of the bar. Tyson waved toward the friendly waitress and pulled up a chair to their table.

"You look familiar." Tyson squinted at Jared. "Do I know you, or do you just have one of those faces?"

"One of those faces. I used to model."

"Really?" A quick glance at Rick. "Really?"

He knew what the subtext was. Not his type. Before Jared, Rick would've agreed with him. After Jared, he wasn't so sure he hadn't held on to his own biases a little too tightly, also.

"We met at the charity dinner I organized for Leo," he explained. "They used to work together."

It took Tyson a second before he put it together. "Oh, that's right. I forgot Leo used to model."

"Were you at the dinner?" Jared asked.

Tyson scoffed. "At five hundred dollars a plate? Not in this lifetime." He flashed the waitress a smile when she set a bottled water in front of him. "How much did that end up raising?"

"Once expenses got deducted? About forty thousand dollars." Rick sighed. "Leo had hoped for more, but it's better than nothing."

"More than a group of my friends could've raised." Tyson jerked his chin toward the stage. "What you see is what you get."

Jared fell oddly silent as Rick and Tyson continued to chat, and though he laughed at the right jokes, or commented when he was directly addressed, Rick could tell his thoughts were



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elsewhere. When the lights dimmed, Tyson scraped his chair back and stuck his hand out to Jared again, smiling as they shook.

"It was good to meet you," Tyson said. "I hope we get a chance to talk again."

"So do I."

Rick waited until the band had filed back onto the stage before leaning over and saying, "You okay?"

Jared smiled. "Yeah. Why?"

"You got quiet."

"You saying I'm a motormouth?"

Though there was a tease in his voice, Rick recognized an evasion when he heard one. But the music was starting, and this wasn't really the time or place for this kind of conversation. He groped for Jared's hand beneath the table and resolved to talk to him about it later. Once they had a little privacy, and it didn't matter if he was hard as a rock just because he liked the way Jared smelled. Of course, then, there might not be actual talking as there would be other, more delightful pastimes, but even if that happened, eventually they would reach a point where their dicks were done and all that was left was getting things out in the open.

That's what he wanted. The more time he spent with Jared, the more he hoped Jared wanted it, too.

## CHAPTER 6

Jared's apartment was both what he expected and completely surprising. Where Rick's was a tidy mess, Jared's was an explosion. Of color, of furniture, of items he'd either collected while he was modeling or raided from Goodwill stores. The couch was a futon buried in overstuffed pillows, each one a different brilliant fabric. Rick wanted nothing more than to sink into it with Jared sprawled atop him. Some of the material looked like it might be prickly, but there were velvets and satins amongst the mix, and one touch said they were stuffed with feathers instead of foam or those annoying beans that were supposed to be so good for the circulation.

Ladder bookcases hid one entire wall, their shelves laden

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with framed photos, miniature statues, and paperbacks. One was dedicated completely to candlesticks. When Rick glanced at Jared in curiosity, the other man just shrugged.

“It’s a thing. I collect them.” He picked up a remote and aimed it at a stereo system in the corner, nearly hidden by a carved wine rack with only a single bottle of wine in it. Talk radio came on, a male DJ talking briefly about the economic crisis around the world, before Jared switched it over to a CD.

Rick smiled as the soft male voice emanated from the speakers. “I don’t remember telling you how I went to see James Taylor last summer.”

“You didn’t. I just like him. And you lucky son of a bitch. Was he great?”

“Fantastic. A lot of covers, but that’s what he’s recording these days, so I can’t fault the guy.” He reached for Jared’s wrist and pulled him closer. “Come here.”

Jared moved willingly into Rick’s larger frame. His arm slid around Rick’s waist, aligning their hips, and the definite bulge of his erection rubbed against Rick’s own. “Do you have any idea how hard it was to sit there all night without really touching you?” he murmured.

“I think I’ve got some clue.”

Their mouths came together in unison, almost sweet in comparison to the hunger boiling through Rick. He loved the shape of Jared’s lips. The tiny dip along the upper always made his mouth water. He traced it with the tip of his tongue, grateful Jared stood still so he could appreciate it. As their breath mingled, he tightened his hold and guided both of them

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back to the couch.

He groaned as soon as the cushions molded around them.

“You do love your comforts, don’t you?” Jared teased.

“If it’s soft and warms me up, hell yeah.”

Jared shifted until he was half lying on top of Rick, the other half propped up in order to gaze down at him. “And you’re sure you want me? I lean toward the bony side, you know.”

“Pillows beneath me...” Rick yanked until Jared was exactly as he’d fantasized earlier, though it succeeded in kicking several of the cushions to the floor. “You on top. That’s about as perfect a world as I can imagine.”

Jared’s eyes warmed. He bent his head to kiss Rick again, still tender, still gentle. Rick parted to his careful probe, allowing their tongues to touch, dance away, then touch again. There was no rush. No need to hurry. They had all the time in the world to savor each other, to make up for the hours they’d spent at the bar unable to do anything more than hold hands beneath the table. They had done greedy hunger the first time they’d come together. Here, in Jared’s plush surroundings, it was only right to glut on what they truly desired.

He slid a hand beneath Jared’s shirt, unerringly finding his waistband and pushing his fingers under the denim. Jared squirmed at the first touch along his crack, and his breath came faster along Rick’s lips. He didn’t abandon their slow kisses, though. If anything, it prompted Jared to coil an arm around the top of Rick’s head and cling to him even closer.

Over and over, Rick stroked the warm valley at the top of

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Jared's ass. The jeans had given him fantasies all night. Both times Jared had gone to the bathroom, Rick had stared at his tight ass until it had disappeared from view. Then when he'd returned, Rick had all but stared at the bulge in his crotch, as well. Jared's body drove him completely around the bend, enough so that he had jerked off in the shower to memories of it twice just since their first date.

Jared reached down with his free hand and squeezed Rick's covered cock. It rested heavily against his hip, the elastic from his underwear digging into the tip, but Jared's touch dragged it across Rick's skin, slicking him along the way.

"We could move this to the bedroom if you want," Jared offered between kisses.

Rick shook his head. "If you don't mind fucking around on your couch, I'd rather stay here."

"Works for me." Another kiss. A bite along his lower lip. "Though I'll have to get up sometime to get the lube and condoms."

"Or you stay here and we suck each other off. Don't need lube for that."

Jared smiled against his mouth. "Is that what you want?"

The only thing Rick knew for sure was that he didn't want to lose the warm weight pinning him down. With a growl, he cupped the back of Jared's head and pulled his mouth back down, pressing a kiss harder than its predecessors to his lips. "I want you not to stop," he muttered.

"My pleasure."

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Now, they deepened the caresses, searching out the other's heat with each delve of their tongues. Rick used his strength to keep Jared from moving any more, but they kept the tempo of their kisses slow. *Make it last. Make him wait.* Even if it drove him insane having to wait for more himself.

He lost time even as he gained heat. His flesh rose in tangible degrees, creeping up the back of his neck, along his arms, all the way to his fingertips. Jared didn't struggle against his lead, which was a little surprising considering how forceful he'd been the first time they'd been together. But one thing he'd learned about their preferences. They both loved to kiss. Spending minutes upon minutes lost in the other's mouth ranked pretty high on their lists of favorite things to do.

It didn't take long for Rick's hand to slide farther into Jared's jeans. He explored over the firm flesh before returning to the valley between the cheeks, stroking up and down along the crease in tempo with their kisses. The first time he brushed over Jared's hole, Jared jerked hard in his arms, their mouths momentarily separating as he gasped for breath.

"How do you feel about fucking me?" Jared said.

Rick drowned in his eyes. "I don't want to move."

"Who said anything about moving?"

The implication canted Rick's mouth, and he caressed the opening yet again. "You want to ride my cock?"

"Oh, fuck, yeah."

He could do that. He might prefer to bottom, but there was no denying the appeal of having Jared rise and fall above him. He wouldn't have to lose Jared's weight or the softness of the

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pillows around him, either. It was a win/win situation for both of them.

Reluctantly, he pulled his hand free and slapped Jared's bottom. "Go get the lube and condoms then. And be quick about it."

With a brilliant smile, Jared bounded up, all energy returned in spite of their languorous kissing. "If you get naked while I'm gone, there won't be a reason to have to get up again," he reminded before making a dash down the hall for what Rick presumed was the bedroom.

Jared had a point. An excellent point. Rick stripped in record time, dropping his clothes onto a beanbag in the corner. He was just tossing his shoes over to join them when Jared returned, wearing only a hard-on and a smile.

He dropped the condoms onto the floor next to the couch and pushed Rick back into the cushions. Straddling his hips, he trapped Rick's cock against his stomach and braced his hands on Rick's chest. His fingers curled into the hair, pulling it hard enough for Rick to feel it like hundreds of needles pricking at his skin. When he grunted, Jared only smiled more broadly.

"As much as I love clothes, if you never put another stitch on, you would be doing me and the world a favor," Jared said. "I swear, you've got the hottest body I've ever seen."

Pleasure radiated through him, though he was pretty sure he was blushing from the compliment. "My clients might have a thing or two to say about that."

Jared circled a flat nipple with the broad of his thumb.

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“Your clients are idiots then.” Unwinding his fingers, he smoothed upward to Rick’s shoulders, then down to his biceps, massaging the hard muscles. “Hell, I’d hire you to walk around naked here every day, if I thought you’d let me do it.”

Rick cupped Jared’s ass. “You wouldn’t have to pay me for that.”

“I’m sure we could work it out in trade.”

“Probably.”

He was content to lie there while Jared continued to explore. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d had a lover who appreciated him as much as Jared did. Not an inch of his upper body was left untouched, and where Jared could reach with his mouth, kisses burned trails as hot as the ones his fingers left behind.

When Jared’s mouth was level with his again, both men paused.

“I’ve mentioned I love your mouth, haven’t I?” Rick said.

“It might have come up once or twice.” Jared licked along the stubble already sprouting on Rick’s jaw. The harsh rasp sent shivers straight down to his cock. “You want me to use it on you now?”

Rick tightened his arms around Jared. “No. No moving from here.”

Jared chuckled. “I think I’m going to have to buy more pillows for my bed if you’re going to react like this.”

“There is no such thing as too many pillows.” Rick paused as Jared’s implication sank in. “So I guess I haven’t blown my



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chances at more dates by dragging you to see a country-western band, huh?"

"Absolutely not. I had fun tonight." His mouth came back to Rick's, his tongue now tracing Rick's lower lip. "But I might make a condition about what our next date is."

"Like what?"

"You be my date for the fashion show I'm getting ready for."

The request surprised him. He must have stiffened or reacted somehow, because Jared stopped his oral quest and pulled back enough to meet his gaze.

"You don't have a problem with that, do you?" he asked carefully.

"No, I'm just...I didn't expect that." He smiled. "You mocked my T-shirts, remember?"

"Ah, but I also told you how fabulous you looked in it, too. Which proves you know how to dress yourself, if not anybody else."

Rick couldn't help but laugh. "You're crazy."

"That doesn't sound like yes."

"Fine, then yes. As long as it works with my schedule."

Jared immediately relaxed, though he didn't return to kissing Rick, an absence he was all too aware of. "I'll make it work. If I have to go out and hire someone else to take over your clients for the day."

The sentiment shot straight through him. "You're definitely crazy," he said gruffly. He tightened his grip and buried his face in Jared's neck. The musky scent of his skin

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only heightened Rick's euphoria. "I've got to get you ready for fucking, you know."

"Did you have something in mind?"

"Yeah." His mind made up, he ran one more stroke over Jared's butt and let him go. "You got to eat my ass last time. Now it's my turn."

The other man's sharp intake of breath was all Rick needed to hear to know he wanted it as bad as Rick did. The heat disappeared, as did the weight, but then Jared had turned around and was straddling his face, one foot on the floor, the other on the pillow next to Rick's head.

The hot skin of Jared's inner thighs was only inches from Rick's cheeks, penning him in. Rick turned his head to skim his lips along the tight muscle, while his hands grasped Jared's ass and parted the flesh. It took every ounce of control he possessed not to yank Jared down to his mouth. He had to hold perfectly still as Jared slowly lowered his hips, stopping only when Rick's nose brushed against him.

"Make sure you get your tongue in there all the way," Jared rasped. "I plan on taking every inch of that cock of yours."

Rick moaned in agreement. He licked along the sweaty skin, the hair tickling his lips, all the way to the clenching ring. His fingers tightened, but as white as the tips got, Jared's pale perfect skin was even more so. Rick fought the urge to find ways to mark it every time they were together. Not to cause Jared pain, but to make the canvas his, to remind Jared of the time they spent together.

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Jared fisted his cock, pulling his balls up tighter to give Rick more room. “Where’s that hot mouth?” he taunted. “Don’t make promises you don’t intend to keep.”

“Oh, I’ll keep it,” Rick muttered. He tugged just enough to pull Jared down a few more inches, his lips sealing over the small opening.

Moans of pleasure came from both their throats. Jared’s balls kept slapping against Rick’s chin as he dove into the man’s ass, alternately pushing his tongue past the ring and licking across it. His nose pressed into Jared’s skin. He couldn’t breathe very deeply, but that didn’t matter. He would rather feast on Jared’s body. It deserved to be worshiped, Jared’s claims about Rick notwithstanding.

“That’s it,” Jared coaxed. “Fuck me with your tongue.”

Each command came with a grind against Rick’s mouth, another flex of muscles as Jared yanked at his cock. His words got coarser, dirtier with each probe into his ass, his breathing audible even where Rick was practically smothered by his body. When Jared suddenly tilted forward, almost pulling away, Rick jerked him back, lifting his head in order to fasten his mouth again over the now slick hole. That impulse stifled his scream when Jared grabbed his erection and started pumping it in rhythm with Rick’s tongue.

Fire raced through him, burning away all coherent thought. Jared knew how to play his body as if they’d been lovers for months, years, always knowing just what to do to elicit the strongest reaction. There was no question about trusting him to do the right thing, or need to prompt him to move faster,

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harder, slower, softer. He anticipated Rick's desire a moment before Rick did, and took him by surprise when new sensations coursed through him. The knowledge was a drug. It wouldn't take long to get addicted to it.

Panting for breath, Rick stuck two fingers into his mouth to get them wet. The absence of his tongue made Jared pause. He looked over his shoulder in time to see Rick slowly press both fingers inside his relaxed opening.

Rick met his eyes. "You about ready to ride me?"

A tremor wracked through Jared when Rick brushed over his prostate. "Isn't that what I'm doing?"

"Maybe." He twisted his wrist. "But we both know my cock'll be better."

Jared's body disappeared as he climbed off. Grabbing the condoms, he ripped one open and tossed aside the wrapper.

"As soon as we get our second wind, I'm going to bend you over this couch and fuck you myself," Jared promised.

His strong hands rolled the latex over Rick's shaft, snapping it in place near the base. Rick groaned at the slight sting, only to groan some more when Jared coated him with lube.

"I'll make sure I get that second wind fast then." He was transfixed by the sight of Jared positioning himself over his hips, holding Rick steady as he lined the tip up with his ass. The air in the apartment was cool compared to the heat beneath his skin, and the places where Jared brushed against him felt ready to combust. "Come on. Do it."

A brilliant smile. A flex of a thigh muscle. Rick lost sight

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of his cock head as it slipped between Jared's ass cheeks. He didn't need to see it, though, to feel it push against the tight muscle, or feel Jared's weight bear down on it, and especially not to feel the constriction around it as it slipped inside.

Jared didn't stop. He sank down onto Rick's length without a break, without a breath. When there wasn't any more room for his hand, he let go and braced against Rick's stomach, a constant stream of groans issuing from his mouth.

Rick grunted when Jared finally stopped. His balls were tight into his body, his nerves already sizzling with anticipation of his impending release. He smoothed a hand up Jared's stomach, smiling when the abs twitched under his palm. The man amazed him. Though his groans had turned into words of encouragement, Rick never doubted the effect they had on each other. He could feel it in the vibrations of their flesh. He'd dream of it, long after he left Jared for the night.

Slowly, Jared rocked along his shaft. The strokes were shallow at first, like he was reluctant to let Rick go, but gradually, they lengthened, slick and tight as he slid up and down the entire length of Rick's cock. All Rick could do was hold on. Jared had control. Rick wanted to thrust, but the first time he did so, Jared tweaked his nipple painfully and warned him not to.

"This'll be over all that much faster if you do that," he said. His body never stopped moving. How he found the breath to speak—or even the control to string more than two words together comprehensively—Rick had no idea.

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So he let Jared take control. He trembled with each slam against his hips, and he moaned with each squeeze around his cock. It wasn't that hard to let go, especially when Jared thrived on the leadership. His entire world narrowed down to their bodies, to the union of his flesh to Jared's, and to the inexorable desire not to have it all end.

There reached a point where he had no other choice but to lift to meet each of Jared's movements. The sheath of the man's ass was hotter than any he'd ever experienced. Only the heat within his own body rivaled it. Sweat dripped down the side of his neck, tickling where it ran over his ear, and his fingers slipped against Jared's damp hips.

"Wanna hold on, do you?" Jared's eyes burned where they met Rick's. For a split second, he thought he saw something other than lust shining there, something deeper, but it was gone with, "Then let it all go."

He wanted to—God, did he want to—but Rick didn't want to come until Jared had. He released one hand to grasp Jared's cock, pulling it in time with their fucking.

Jared hissed. The bounce of his body took on a new direction, a slight roll forward in order to thrust into the circle of Rick's fist. Something primal took him over, a raw edge added to the slap of their skin that spurred Rick to quicken his yanks. Jared fell forward, and immediately cried out in unmitigated pleasure.

"There's the spot," he panted. Though his strokes became erratic, he added more force, until Rick shuddered with each new entry into his ass. Jared clutched at Rick's shoulders. The

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new dig into his muscles was the best invitation to enjoy another human being Rick had ever gotten.

Jared came with a scream. Come shot from his cock, splattering across their chests, and his ass clamped down around Rick's shaft. The pressure was too much to take. So was the smell of their fucking. Rick thrust upward one final time and exploded, deep inside Jared's body.

The weight of Jared's collapse drove Rick to wrap his arms around the thinner man, heedless of the sticky fluid gluing their chests together. He licked along Jared's neck, tasting the salt of his sweat and skin, and buried his nose in the damp hair curling over his ear. Jared's mouth moved against him, too, almost tickling in spots, but the hot rush of breath erased any argument Rick might have put up to get Jared to stop.

"In case it's not obvious," Rick rumbled, "I love this couch."

Jared laughed. Pressing one last kiss to Rick's jaw, he peeled himself away, propping up on one hand to gaze down at him. "It might be my new favorite piece of furniture after tonight."

Rick wanted to reach up and touch Jared's face, but his muscles were liquid, his arms like lead. "Did you get these pillows someplace someone like me might be able to afford to shop at?"

"Some of them, sure. Some of them are leftovers from when I was traveling for work."

"You've been to a lot of places, huh?"

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“Some.” His gaze grew thoughtful. “New York’s home, though.”

Somehow, Rick managed to gather enough strength to slide an arm around Jared. “Lucky for me.”

With a content sigh, Jared lowered himself back down, resting his cheek on Rick’s shoulder. Their heat mingled, and the effects of his orgasm started to take root in Rick’s muscles. His eyes drifted shut. He could get used to this. The weight of Jared on top of him, added to the liquefying of his body, was enough to make him hover just this side of consciousness.

“I’ve been thinking.”

Rick struggled to pull himself back from the brink of sleep. “Hmm? ’Bout what?”

“Meeting Tyson tonight.”

“He liked you. I could tell.”

“Good. I liked him, too. But that’s...not what I meant.”

Jared hadn’t moved from where he laid on top of him, but Rick opened his eyes anyway. “What is it then?”

“I was thinking about the AIDS dinner. About how you didn’t raise as much money as you wanted to.”

Rick snorted. “We still raised a ton. Stop worrying about it. We helped. That’s what matters.”

“We should’ve helped more.”

“How? Sold seats on the street?”

He felt Jared’s shrug. “It bugged me I couldn’t get any of the mags to come and cover it. Especially since Leo and I weren’t exactly small potatoes back when we were modeling.”

Warmth washed through him, and he tightened his arms



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around the other man. “But you came. That’s all anybody can ask. Leo wouldn’t have wanted you to be kicking yourself about this.”

“No, but Leo would’ve been better about getting their attention, that’s for sure.” He lifted his head, his chin sharp where it rested on Rick’s chest. “So I was thinking. I have three models for this upcoming show. What do you think of asking some of your patients to escort them down the runway? I’ll split the proceeds with the charity, and because the mags are going to be there, we should get some national coverage. Maybe even international if my designs are good enough.”

Rick stared at him, dumbfounded. It was clear Jared had been giving this a lot of thought. Was this what had been bugging him at the bar? He’d almost admitted as much. But Rick wasn’t sure what to say in response. He wasn’t a charity organizer. He’d only thrown the dinner because Leo had asked him to. It had been a lot of work just to sell the plates they had, time he could barely spare away from his clients.

Speaking of his clients, they weren’t models. Most of them didn’t like to leave the house at all. It took everything he had sometimes to coax them down to the grocery store to get milk.

“I don’t know,” he finally admitted. “I don’t know if anybody would actually agree to something like that. It’s not like any of them are really that interested in fashion right now.”

Jared remained there, unmoving, unblinking. He finally expelled a long breath and set his head back down. “Maybe you’re right. It was just an idea, is all.”

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His tone hinted otherwise, but Rick didn't know what else to say on the matter. No matter how long he held Jared, though, the feeling that he'd somehow let him down never quite disappeared.

## CHAPTER 7

Nothing was going right. Not the designs, not the alterations, not the fact that he'd fitted Kelly and then the girl had turned around and twisted her ankle on the subway and so now he had wasted a day's worth of work and was scrambling to make it up. Jared had less than twenty-four hours until the show, and at this point, he wasn't even sure he had enough models, let alone a date to go with him.

Rick had said yes, but that had been five days ago. Five days since Jared had opened his big mouth and made the suggestion about raising some more awareness for the charity. Five days since Rick had gently let him down by reminding him that his patients were more interested in figuring out how

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to stay alive than showing off some narcissist's fashion designs. Rick had been diplomatic about it, of course. Rick was always diplomatic. Rick never said anything wrong, which only made Jared feel like even more of a shit for not paying attention to what the others might be feeling and focusing on his own guilt.

It had also been five days since he'd had even a phone call from Rick. That told Jared all he needed to know.

His needle slipped where he was basting in a new dart. It embedded in his thumb, but he didn't make a sound as he pulled it out and sucked away the droplet of blood.

Theresa watched him sympathetically from across the table. "It's going to be fine," she said. "Please stop worrying about the show."

Jared caught the end of the thread and ripped out his last few stitches. "I'm not."

"You are. When was the last time you put something in your mouth besides coffee?"

He clamped his jaw shut at the unexpected memories her question evoked. He'd relived that night in his apartment too many times to count. He'd honestly thought they had the start of something, but of course, he'd managed to find a way to fuck it up. Him and his big mouth. The charity dinner was done and over. Rick didn't even think about it. Why had he ever believed he could do something more, something that should've been done in the first place?

"Do you want to talk about it?" Theresa said carefully. "This isn't about the show anymore, is it?"

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With a sigh, Jared tossed the dress onto the table and leaned back in his chair. His body ached. He hadn't been sleeping for all his work and worrying. He spent all his time at the studio, because every time he walked into his apartment, he saw his damn couch and remembered what it felt like falling asleep on Rick's solid body. Rubbing his hands over his eyes, he rolled his neck, wincing as it cracked more than once.

"I fucked up with Rick," he said simply. "Again. And since it seems that karma really does have a schedule even when she's running late, he hasn't called me since our last date."

Sympathy pulled her mouth down, but at least she didn't get up from her chair to come over and pat him on the back or some mundane shit like that. "Have you called him?"

"I'm not really interested in hearing the 'sorry, Charlie' speech, no."

"So maybe he's busy. You know he's got an insane work schedule."

He'd already considered that. "Except even when it was insane before, he always managed to sneak in a five-minute call here or there."

"Because you two were trying to arrange a date."

"And he hasn't called to try and arrange another one. This math isn't that hard."

"What could you have done that was so bad? I thought you two were really hitting it off."

"We were." He reconsidered. "I thought we were."

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“So what was it?”

“Does it matter? He hasn’t called. Rehashing it isn’t going to make it happen, and it sure as hell isn’t going to make me feel better about it.”

She didn’t follow him as he stood to go pour himself another cup of coffee. No snide comment about his shitty eating habits, either. He knew Theresa just wanted to help, but nothing could fix this. He couldn’t go back in time and change what he’d said. He couldn’t erase all the wrong assumptions he’d made. He couldn’t even get the smell of Rick out of his damn couch, which made it even harder to spend any time in his apartment.

Theresa held her tongue until he’d returned, but she fiddled with her pencil rather than working on the design specs. “You should call him. If you really think you messed up, maybe he’s just waiting for an apology.”

Jared shook his head. “That’s not Rick’s style. He doesn’t play games.”

“And it’s not yours to mope around so much. You like him. I can tell. If you want it to have any chance at all—”

“You think I don’t know that? I figured that out when he left before breakfast the next morning. But it doesn’t make a difference. He hasn’t called, I’m not going to grovel, end of story.”

His tone was sharper than he intended. Theresa didn’t know how to stop fighting for what she considered important, and when it came to his happiness, she wanted only the best for him. Hell, *he* wanted only the best for him, and for a few

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fleeting moments, he'd thought that just might be Rick. There hadn't been a single moment before Jared had opened his big mouth that hadn't been fantastic. The sex, the company, the conversation. Rick was smart and sweet, not to mention hot, and he made Jared feel like he wasn't just a pretty face or a nice body.

But that was done now. He had to let go of the possibilities and move on. It wasn't as if they'd been longtime lovers or something. Two dates. Unless he counted the coffee in the studio. So three dates. Three *amazing* dates. And he'd even met some of Rick's family—

“Hello?”

The masculine voice from the doorway made him turn around, Theresa already rising from her stool. The man was in his twenties, with shaggy dark hair nearly hiding his warm brown eyes. He was tall and this side of thin, and his long hands fidgeted with the end of a scarf he had draped around his neck.

“Can I help you?” Theresa asked.

The stranger glanced from her to Jared, and back again. “I think I'm a little early, actually. Maybe I should wait downstairs.”

They both frowned. “Early for what?” Jared said.

The brown eyes returned to him. “Are you Mr. Harvey?”

“Yes.” Unfolding from his seat, Jared approached the man, though he didn't get any more familiar the closer he got. “I'm sorry, did you have an appointment or something?”

“Rick said to meet him here at two.” He glanced at his

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watch. “I guess he’s running late. I just figured he was up here when I didn’t see him out on the sidewalk.”

Mention of Rick made Jared’s pulse leap. “Rick Paulson? Why were you supposed to meet him here?” And why hadn’t Rick told him about this?

The young man looked around the room, his gaze lingering for a moment on the design wall. “He told me about your show. I’ve never modeled before, but he said we’d just be escorting your other models down the runway, so I figured that can’t be too hard.” He gestured toward the wall. “Are these your designs?”

“Yes.” His mind was awl. Rick was talking to guys about his idea? But he’d shot it down that night. He hadn’t called to warn that he’d be stopping by. “Hang on, I’ll phone Rick and find out what’s going on.”

He left Theresa to talk to the young man and went off to the corner of the studio for privacy, dialing Rick along the way. The first ring hummed through his body, an effect that was only strengthened when Rick’s deep voice came over the line.

“You’re actually taking a break?” Rick teased. “I’m impressed.”

“It’s more like I’ve got someone here looking for you.” He did everything he could to ignore the thumping of his heart. “He says you two were supposed to meet up here at my studio.”

“Damn it. I told everybody to wait downstairs. I missed my train, so I’m running late.”



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“Everybody? What’s going on, Rick?”

“I’ll explain when I get there. Can you do me a favor and go downstairs and round anybody else up who might be waiting? Since someone already spoiled the surprise, they might as well meet you now.”

“Sure, but—”

“Great. I’m about five blocks away. I should be there in just a few minutes.”

The line went dead. Jared stared at it for a second in shock before slipping it back into his pocket.

“I’ll be right back,” he announced. He ignored Theresa’s questioning look and slipped out the door, taking the stairs two at a time in his haste to get to the street. His thoughts wouldn’t stop, and the possibilities that kept cropping up seemed totally unbelievable.

What wasn’t unbelievable were the two men loitering in front of the building, both tall, though older than the guy upstairs. They looked to Jared curiously when he emerged.

“I don’t suppose you’re waiting for Rick Paulson, are you?” Jared asked.

The taller of the pair smiled in friendly greeting. “Is he upstairs?”

“He’s on his way.” Jared held the door open and gestured for them to go inside. “Head on up and help yourself to some coffee.”

He was still staring at the door when an approaching figure caught the corner of his eye. Rick’s cheeks were flushed, his breath slightly quick as he slowed from his jogging pace. He

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smiled upon spying Jared, and the brilliance of it melted the last of Jared's fears.

Jared didn't give him a chance to speak. As soon as he was within touching distance, he grabbed the back of Rick's neck and pulled him in for a long, searching kiss.

Rick opened to him without hesitation. Their tongues twisted, hands grappling for a hold at the other's waist. The thickening line of an erection nudged into Jared's hip, but it was the heat of Rick's firm mouth that Jared savored the most.

"I'm glad to see you, too," Rick said when they parted for breath.

"Why didn't you tell me?" It was all he could manage. He knew he had to get an apology out there at some point, but right now, this was the answer he needed the most.

"About finding the guys for you? I told you. I wanted it to be a surprise." Rick searched his face, his smile slowly fading. "I thought you'd be happy about this."

"I am. I *am*. I just didn't expect it. You said you didn't think it would work."

A faint color appeared in Rick's cheeks. "No, it was a great idea. I should've told you that. But I honestly didn't think anybody would actually agree to get put on parade like you would've needed. Then when I mentioned it to Tyson the next day, he got so excited about it, I felt like a real jerk for not thinking others might be more interested in modeling for you than I would've been. So I've spent the last few days asking around to see who might want a chance in the spotlight. I didn't even have to mention the charity angle to two of the

## WHAT WE MAY BE

guys who said yes.”

Jared stared at him in disbelief. His ears had to be playing tricks on him. He would never associate *Rick* and *jerk* in the same thought, let alone understand why Rick would place such a label upon himself.

“I thought you thought I was being insensitive,” Jared blurted. “When I didn’t hear from you, I figured I’d finally said the one thing that would piss you off.”

Rick frowned. “Because you want to raise more money for the charity? Why would that piss me off?”

“The way I wanted to do it.”

“You were doing it the way you know best. I should’ve respected that. And I shouldn’t have jumped to the wrong conclusions about my clients. I’m sorry. That’s why I wanted to surprise you.”

Every word that came out of Rick’s mouth only left him increasingly flabbergasted. This was an apology Jared should’ve made, though from the sound of it, Rick wouldn’t have let him get very far. What it also meant was they weren’t over. Rick had been trying to make things up to him. They could have a real chance, and all Jared had to do was grab it.

“You did. You really did.”

The lines disappeared, and the smile he loved returned. “It took me a few days to find three guys who wouldn’t look ridiculous with whatever models you got. I never realized how many short guys I know.”

Jared laughed, free and happy. “Everybody’s short next to you.”

## WHAT WE MAY BE

“But we don’t want them short next to the models, now do we?” Rick caught his hand and pulled him toward the doorway. “Come on. We’ve got a lot of work to do.”

Jared followed him inside, but tugged him to a halt before going upstairs. “Thank you for this.” He pressed Rick to the wall, conveying his gratitude in every line of his body. “I can’t believe...I thought we were over.”

Rick rested a hand in the small of Jared’s back, holding him as close as Jared wanted to be. Closer than he thought he’d ever get just a few minutes earlier. “Really? And here I thought we were just beginning.”

At the touch of Rick’s mouth to his, Jared closed his eyes and sank into the caress.

*Just beginning.*

He liked the sound of that.

## VIVIEN DEAN

Vivien Dean has had a lifetime love affair with stories. A multi-published author, her books have been EPPIE finalists, *Romantic Times* Reviewer's Choice Nominees, and reader favorites. After spending her twenties and early thirties traveling, she has finally settled down and currently resides in northern California with her husband and two children.

For more information about Vivien and her books, visit her website at

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\* \* \*

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