



STICKS
AND
STONES

A NOVEL

Jamie Craig

STICKS AND STONES

...Paul brushed a strand of blond hair from Jack's cheek. "You got this gig because the man who runs MGM knows talent when he sees it. You need to worry about not letting yourself down. This is going to be your big shot if you don't blow it."

"Mean blow it by blowing you?" The unexpected joke startled Paul enough to not resist when Jack pulled him down. Then, Jack's mouth slanted over his, warm and slightly sour and inviting Paul to take everything he wanted.

For a moment, Paul forgot every reason why he should not push his tongue into Jack's mouth. He forgot about how difficult it was to keep Jack at arm's distance. He forgot that Martin could walk in any second and catch them together. His cock hardened, and the more he tasted Jack, the hungrier he became. He imagined himself crawling into bed with Jack, kissing him until the sun finally came up, and then exploring the rest of Jack's body. Especially since Jack's mouth was hot, and he tasted of the whiskey he had been drinking all night.

Jack moved, as if he could read Paul's mind, trying to pull him closer. That snapped Paul out of his fantasy world, but he couldn't quite bring himself to end the kiss. He broke away gradually, clinging to the taste of Jack's lips for as long as he could before lifting his head.

"Yeah, that would be one way to blow it." Paul disengaged himself and straightened. "You got to be careful."

Jack's arm fell to his side. His lazy smile was one of the most genuine Paul had ever seen. "Always, mate."

Paul lingered for a moment, waiting for Jack's eyes to close. When they did, he slipped out of the room to find Martin. He wasn't sure what just happened, but he couldn't shake the feeling that it would happen again. It was just a matter of time...

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STICKS AND STONES

BY

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STICKS AND STONES
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CHAPTER 1

Paul clutched the telegram between tight fingers. The paper was balled up, damp, the ink running. Not that he would need to read the message again. The words were imprinted on his brain permanently. Fifty years from now, when he was an old man, living out his final years in peace on some tropical island, the words would still be haunting him. *New picture. W/ Jack Wells. June release!*

Paul didn't even bother to call his agent. Josh didn't know anything. After all, the guy was dumb enough to think Paul would want to be in a movie with Jack Wells, of all people. But that was fine. He didn't need to ask Josh to do his dirty work. Vance Jesson produced nearly all the musicals at MGM,

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and Paul had no doubt he was responsible for casting Jack fucking Wells. He even knew where to find Jesson, too, and nothing was going to get in his way.

The blast of cold air greeted him as he yanked the sound stage door open. It was the only sound stage with a good, working air-conditioner, and Jesson wasn't above using his connections and power to claim that sound stage for himself. There were dozens of people between Paul and his destination, but he ignored all of them. They didn't exist. As far as Paul was concerned, in that moment, only three people existed in the world. And Paul wasn't going to be happy until at least one of those people was sent back to the Cockney rock he crawled from under.

Jesson had his head bowed over a clipboard, his pen scribbling over a piece of paper. Paul thrust the telegram under Jesson's nose without preamble. "What the hell is this?"

Batting Paul's hand out of his way, Jesson returned to his notes. The scratch of his pen shredded the last of Paul's nerves. "Good morning to you, too."

"Jack Wells? Are you kidding me? Is this supposed to be some kind of joke?"

"Do you see me laughing?"

"I'm not doing a film with that...*punk*." Paul spat the final word.

With a sigh, Jesson capped his pen and leaned back in his chair, resting his ankle on the opposite knee as he gazed up at Paul. The pose was deceptively casual, and if he'd been some neophyte extra on his first film, Paul might have fallen for it.

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But Vance Jesson had grown up in the Hollywood studio system. He was seasoned against every kind of tactic, every brand of behavior. He might be annoyed by Paul's ire, but he would never show it.

"I don't think I've ever seen you this upset about something before," Jesson commented. "I didn't even think you knew Jack."

"I don't need to know him to know that I don't want to work with him. There are about a hundred stories from his last shoot, and every single one of them is about what a jackass he is. Sure, he's had a few minor hits, but let's be realistic here. He's not a great dancer, he has a horrible voice, and he's not a good actor. If you like him because he's pretty, there are plenty of other better looking guys waiting for their big break."

"He can't really sing, no." The concession was unexpected, and for a moment, Paul's hope flared. Jesson's next statement shot it back down to earth. "But that's why you get all the solos. And the acting is subjective. Audiences love him. His *Dreaming of Angels* didn't make as much money as your *Beholden*, but review for review, he's got you."

The mention of the money only darkened Paul's mood. Nobody missed the opportunity to remind him that *Beholden* had done well, but under-performed expectations. A lot. Paul decided to gloss over it. The less said about that, the better. "The reviewers don't know what the hell they want. And acting is *not* subjective. There's good acting, and there's whatever Jack Wells does. It's like he thinks he's on the stage

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instead of in front of cameras. Somebody needs to tell him that he's about thirty years out of date."

"Good. Then you'll have something to teach him when you two report to the set next week."

"Did you miss the part where I said I'm not going to do a film, any film, with that guy?"

Jesson didn't blink. "Did you miss the part in your contract where you don't have a say in the matter?"

Paul sighed. "What about Brett Dawson? He can sing. He's talented." And he wasn't the least bit attractive, but Paul decided to leave that part out.

"In New York until after Christmas. If we want a June release—which we do—we need to start shooting now. You're stuck with Jack, whether you like it or not."

"What about Dore Schary? Did he sign off on this craziness?"

For the first time since Paul's arrival, Jesson smiled. "Who do you think had the idea in the first place to put you two together?"

"When this film bombs with the critics and costs MGM millions of dollars, I'm going to be here to tell you I told you so."

"It won't bomb. The pair of you will be golden." Something steely glinted in his gray gaze. "The studio's counting on you to help us groom the kid, Paul. I know he's a little wet behind the ears, but he's got the chops to do more than a little song and dance. And you're just the one to show him how to do it."

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“The studio thinks it can take any two-bit punk from the streets and turn him into a star. I’ll make your movie, but I’m not going to go help you groom your little pet project.” Paul dropped the telegram on the floor at Jesson’s feet and turned on his heel. Nobody could say that Paul Dunham didn’t know how to make an exit.

Afterward, he would remember noticing the grips wheeling in the potted palms when he stormed onto the soundstage. Not that it would have made a difference in his trajectory. But just maybe, if he hadn’t been quite as incensed at how myopic the studio could be, or infuriated that he was going to have to share any kind of screen time with a no-talent wannabe like Jack Wells, he would have seen the giant fronds passing by out of the corner of his eye.

His shin caught the rim of the bucket of sand in which the palm sat, sending Paul careening sideways. The grip dropped the dolly in alarm, but when the tree teetered from the impact of its base hitting the floor, the burly man chose to save it rather than the unfortunate actor now sprawled along the edge of a beach set.

Slow clapping drew his furious gaze back to Jesson. “Want my advice, Paul? Keep that particular move to yourself.”

Paul pushed himself to a seated position, refusing to rub his shin, even though it throbbed. In an effort to protect his pride, he wrapped himself in another layer of anger. “Are you going to stand there clapping like a monkey or are you going to help me up?”

With a bemused smile, Jesson set aside his notepad and

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stood. “Should I not consider helping you get choreography credit on this new project then?” he asked, holding his hand out.

Paul took his hand and allowed Jesson to pull him to his feet. “Maybe you should consider trying very hard if you want me to help you make Jack Wells look good.”

His chuckle didn’t exactly fill Paul with confidence. “See you Monday.”

The chuckle followed him out of the sound stage. He squinted against the bright sun, wishing he had remembered his shades before storming out of his house. It would be best to go home, put ice on his leg, and find something to distract him from his current plight. He marched over to the parking lot, but swerved at the last second to head toward the small building that housed the assistants and their staff. He still had one ally on the lot. And he wasn’t going to go home until he had exhausted every avenue and bitched to every friendly ear that would listen.

He didn’t bother to knock once he reached Martin’s door. He never did. He flung it open with all the force of his anger. “Have you talked to Jesson at all today?”

As one of Paul’s oldest friends in Hollywood, Martin Pryce didn’t even get flustered at the startling entrance. He marked the page of the script he’d been reading and tossed it onto his desk, then stood and crossed to the pot of tea he always had ready, no matter when Paul showed up. “I’m assuming they told you about Jack Wells.”

“Yeah, *they* told me. How long have you known about it?”

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“Just since yesterday.” His long, slim fingers expertly handled the cups of steaming tea, putting the one lump of sugar in Paul’s that he always took. “They asked if I’d like to be the bearer of the good news.” He was obviously fighting a smile as he held out Paul’s tea. “Considering how I thought you were going to react, I declined.”

“You should have told me as soon as you found out. Look at how my chickenshit agent decided to tell me.” He thrust his palm out, remembering too late that he had dropped the telegram at Jesson’s feet. Martin smiled and pressed the handle of the cup into Paul’s fingers. “Thanks. And Jesson is just a moron. It’s amazing that guy still has a job.”

Martin waved Paul toward the couch, picking up his own tea before joining him. “Lilah and I had plans last night. If I’d told you, you would’ve trapped me for hours doing just this, Lilah would have locked me out of the house for standing her up, and nobody would have had a good night. This way was better.”

“No, it really wasn’t. We’ve got to stop this from happening, Marty. Jesson doesn’t get it, but I know you do.”

Marty ducked his head and sipped his tea. His glasses did little to hide the sudden wariness in his eyes. “Did Jesson not tell you this was Schary’s idea?”

“Yes, but Schary isn’t completely irrational. You could talk to him. He likes you. He’s even invited you to lunch a few times.”

“Yes...except I don’t think he’s necessarily wrong in this case.”

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Paul's mouth literally fell open. "You're kidding me. Please tell me you're kidding."

"I could. I'd be lying, though."

"Come on, Marty. Jack isn't the type of guy you want to act with. You've seen his movies. He's selfish with his costars. He overacts everything. He's young. He's inexperienced. I don't want to work with him."

Setting aside his tea, Martin shifted on the couch to face Paul, bending his knee so it rested between them. "I'm going to say something here, and I already know you're not going to like it, but I'm going to say it this one time and get it out there, because you're my best friend and you need to hear it, understand?" He didn't wait for a response. "You *really* need to get over this Jack Wells problem you have. It's okay to feel threatened by him, but honestly, you have nothing to worry about."

"Threatened? *Threatened?* Why would I be threatened by somebody like Jack? If he's what Hollywood really wants—some shallow, no-talented, pretty boy hack—then maybe that's my sign that I should retire."

"There's more than enough room for both of you. There always has been. And yet, you've harbored these issues with him ever since you dragged me to go see his first movie."

"Because he shouldn't be *in* movies. Christ, why am I the only one who gets this? And now I have to put up with him every day for weeks. Maybe even months. Then there's the publicity. I don't know, Marty, maybe you should just shoot me now."

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"I'm not going to shoot you. Schary would shoot me then."

"How am I supposed to get through this, Marty?"

"One day at a time. Honestly, I don't think it's going to be as bad as you think. I've met Jack. He's a very charming, personable young man." He paused. "When he wants to be."

"Oh, great, that's just what I need to deal with. A no-talent, pretty boy hack who acts like a brat. Lovely. That's lovely." Paul straightened. "You've got to work on this shoot. I won't get through it otherwise."

"Jesson already has—" Martin stopped when Paul opened his mouth to argue again. "I'll see what I can do. I can't make any promises, though."

"Get Lilah involved if you have to. There's isn't a man alive who can deny her anything."

"Yes," Martin said dryly. "Because prostituting my wife's charms always works so well for me." He shook his head. "You know, there isn't a single person involved in this project that believes you and Jack aren't going to be gold together." Paul winced at his casual repeat of Jesson's words, though Martin didn't notice. "He's not nearly as talentless as you seem to think. I think you're going to be quite surprised once you work with him, one on one."

"I think the biggest surprise this experience will hold for me is that Jack is capable of actual speech," Paul muttered.

"Well, lucky for you, then, the first few days will be learning all the songs and the choreography." He patted Paul's shoulder with a smile before rising and returning to his desk. "You'll have plenty of time to see firsthand that Jack's a

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stronger performer than you're giving him credit for. By the time you actually get around to shooting dialogue, you two will be fast friends."

"I don't want to be his friend. Do you even have a clue on what the script is like? Who's playing the female lead?"

If Martin had looked wary before admitting to agreeing with the casting, he seemed ready to bolt now. The desk was between them, his fingers drumming silently on his blotter before he met Paul's gaze and said, "Promise you won't get mad first."

"I'm already mad. Just tell me what's going on."

"At least promise you won't blame me. I told Schary it was a bad idea. More than once. Especially considering your history."

Paul forced himself to smile pleasantly. "I won't be mad at you, Marty. I know you don't make the final decisions around here."

Martin took a deep breath. "Betty Thayer."

"I'm sorry. I didn't quite hear you. I think there might be something *crazy* in my ear."

"I know. But Schary loves her. And you have to admit, she can dance. After all, she learned from the best."

Paul just stared at him. Betty Thayer was a five-foot slip of nothing blonde he'd met on his second film, where she'd been a struggling chorus line dancer and he'd been desperate for stardom. Their affair had lasted until the film's release, only to crumble under the weight of his accelerated career path. Betty had never forgiven him for what she considered "not trying

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hard enough.” He’d never been called a quitter until the night he walked out of her life.

“Martin, I’m going to ask you a question. And I want you to answer me honestly, because we’re friends, and we’ve been through a lot together. Does Schary hate me? Is he trying to force me to break my contract? Because I don’t see any other explanation here.”

“He doesn’t hate you,” Marty said sympathetically. “The Betty thing is dumb luck, and I honestly wish he’d listened to me before getting her to sign. But if it’s any consolation, Jack can’t stand her. He made quite a scene last night when he heard about that.”

“So, I hate Jack, Betty hates me, Jack hates Betty, and I could be really happy if I never saw Betty again. After I finish this shoot, I want a long vacation. I’m going to make sure Josh knows that.”

“If this picture does half as well as everybody thinks it will, you’ll be able to ask for anything you want, Paul.”

Paul didn’t see how it could possibly do well at all. Betty couldn’t sing either. Though she could move that little body of hers like nobody’s business. “I think I need to go get a drink. You come with me. I’ll buy.”

“Why do I have the feeling you’re not going to stop at one?”

“Probably because I’m not.”

“In that case, let’s go back to my house.” Opening a drawer, he tossed the script inside. “I’ll let you finish my twenty-five-year Glenmorangie, and then you can spend the

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rest of the night telling me how much you loathe Jack Wells because he dances like he has rocks in his tap shoes.”

This time, Paul’s smile was genuine. Marty always knew exactly what would make Paul happy. Even when Paul was in one of his most stubborn, belligerent moods, Martin could talk him down. “It’s a deal. And I promise, I won’t spend the whole night talking about Jack Wells. Well, I’ll try not to.”

“If I only had a dime for every time you said that.”

“Ha ha. Come on. I need to get off the lot before I totally lose my mind.” Paul held up his hand. “And don’t you dare say that it’s too late.”

Martin held the door open for him, his eyes bright with amusement. “I’d never dream of it.”

“Yeah, right.” But the smile was still in place. He wasn’t happy about the movie. Chances were, he’d never be happy about the movie. But he hoped that by the end of the night with Marty, he’d no longer be tempted to risk his job. He was a professional. He had been involved in films since he was twelve. He could get through this.

One way or the other.

CHAPTER 2

The edges of Paul's vision began to blur, but he didn't care. He felt warm behind his eyes, and his arms dangled loosely over the side of the chair. Lilah had put on one of her jazz records at some point, and the music flowed over him and through him. He didn't know just how many drinks he had had. He remembered Martin pouring two. And he remembered Lilah pouring one. But there was no way he had stopped at three. Especially since the image of Jack faded more and more with each drop of alcohol.

"I should go home." Paul sighed. "It's late."

Lilah's long legs came into view. She always wore her skirts just a little too short, like she wanted every man in the

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room to check out her smooth thighs and the strong curve of her calves. “So soon?”

“I’ve been here for hours. Haven’t I?”

“Yes,” Martin answered. “But that’s why you should stay. Schary would kill me if I let anything happen to his biggest star.”

Paul smiled. He liked the sound of that. Schary’s biggest star. MGM’s biggest star. Fuck Jack Wells. And fuck Betty Thayer, too. They couldn’t take that fact away. “I don’t want Schary to kill you. I’ll stay tonight.”

Lilah’s warm weight settled across his lap, her arms looped loosely around his neck. The scent of Shalimar filled his nose, and he turned his head away from it to sip instead at the last of his whiskey.

“You worry too much.” Scarlet-tipped nails tickled across his nape. “And you worry about the wrong things.”

From his seat on the couch opposite, Martin said, “You’re not helping, Lilah.”

“What?” The heavy weight of her hair brushed against his cheek as she swiveled to meet her husband’s amused gaze. “All I’m saying is Paul is better off focusing on number one. He’s wasting too much energy thinking about everyone else.”

Paul pushed Lilah’s skirt higher up her thigh, letting his fingers linger on her bare skin. That was more for Martin’s benefit than his own. Marty liked the way his wife looked when another man touched her.

“What are you saying? Forget about Jack and Betty, and focus on what I need to get done?”

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“Exactly.” Her warm breath fanned over his ear, followed by the faint trace of her tongue. “The only person you can truly count on to get what you want is you.” Behind her, Martin cleared his throat. “And maybe Marty.”

What Paul wanted was to send Jack to the streets where he belonged. Jesson wasn't going to help him. Schary wouldn't help him. Marty couldn't help him. He gathered the material of her skirt in his fingers, exposing more of her ass, and tilted his head. From that angle, he could see Martin watching the two of them, his whiskey forgotten. Lilah nipped at his earlobe, then soothed the soft bite with her tongue.

“I think you have an excellent point, Lilah. I love the way your mind works.”

Martin's eyes had steadily darkened, the longer Lilah perched on Paul's lap. When Paul slipped his hand between her thighs, Marty shifted in his seat, exposing the thickening line of his erection. His nostrils flared, and for a moment, his gaze locked with Paul's.

“Well, I love her dearly, but my wife is selfish.” Whenever circumstances progressed to this point, Martin always resorted to referring to Lilah in proprietary terms. Paul knew from experience it added to his arousal. “Take what she says with a grain of salt.”

“It's called self-centered, not selfish.” She cupped the back of Paul's head to keep him still, the tips of her fingernails digging into the flesh. “And I see no reason why he shouldn't take care of himself first.”

Paul cupped her ass with his free hand, grinding his

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thickening cock against her damp panties. He suspected the thought of her husband watching her respond to another man got her juices flowing. Paul didn't care. Especially since he was more focused on her husband anyway.

"Besides, Marty, you should want me to be self-centered. I'll spend a lot less time bitching to you about Jack."

"I haven't secured a position on the production team yet."

"Ha," Lilah said. She turned her mouth down his neck, biting increasingly harder at his tight skin. "He says that like it would stop you from storming into his office anyway. Or over here."

He traced the line of Lilah's underwear before dipping his fingers under the material. Her ass was firm and soft, and he couldn't stop himself from kneading her flesh. Martin shifted on the couch, moving to lean against the arm and stretching his legs over the cushions. He toyed with his zipper, drawing Paul's attention squarely to the bulge in his pants.

"You'll secure a position," Paul said confidently. "Jesson is an idiot, but he isn't a complete fool. He knows that you're the only one who can really handle me on set. And if he drags his heels, I'll just become more difficult until he doesn't have a choice."

"And you question Jack's past behavior on his films?" The slight tease in Martin's voice softened the gibe, not that Paul cared about much more than the fact that watching Lilah attack him was getting Martin harder and harder. "Lilah..." Now his voice had gone husky, further evidence of what the scene was doing to him. "I think Paul would prefer you on

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your knees.”

She pouted as she pulled away, but obeyed Martin’s directive without fail. Paul sipped at his drink while she slid off his lap, and spread his legs to give her room to kneel.

Lilah watched him from beneath her lashes as she worked his belt free. As soon as she unzipped his pants, her attention shifted, her eyes locked on his erection. When she stopped watching him, Paul was free to look back to Martin. He had his cock in one hand, and his shirt pulled up, exposing his flat stomach, and the trail of hair that led from his chest to the dark hair at the base of his cock. His eyes were heavy-lidded, and Paul couldn’t tell what he was looking at. Probably the red shape of Lilah’s mouth as she touched her lips to the tip of Paul’s cock.

“I don’t doubt I’ll be able to find a place on the team,” Martin said, as if he hadn’t just ordered his wife to suck Paul off. He pulled at his length in long, slow motions, dragging his palm over the tip before descending all the way to the base again. “But I just don’t want you to lose sight of the big picture here, Paul.”

Lilah dragged her tongue over Paul’s crown, gathering the salty pre-come with long, slow licks. His groin tightened, but he resisted the urge to thrust his cock deep into her mouth. Paul liked it when Lilah took her time. The longer she took, the longer Paul could focus on Martin’s length. He still remembered how angry he had been when Martin first started dating Lilah. If he had only known Lilah would change things for the better, he would have welcomed her into their lives

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with open arms.

“What’s the big picture?”

Martin’s free hand disappeared into his open pants. The rustle of the material over his knuckles meant he was kneading his balls, a realization that made Paul grip his tumbler even tighter.

“You have all the power here, regardless of what Jesson or Schary might do. You’re a known quantity for the studio. You’ve earned them more money than they can spend in this lifetime, and your career has shown no signs of slowing, even when you made that dreadful war flick two years ago. Lilah, stop playing and suck him.”

Lilah obediently opened her mouth and drew Paul’s head past her lips. She sank lower and lower, slowly swallowing more of his length, until she finally reached the base. Paul moaned at the soft, wet heat enveloping him. It made his head spin and his ears ring. Lilah was very good at what she did. She didn’t even mind if Paul sat back and let her do all the work. In fact, Paul thought she might prefer it that way. Martin wasn’t unaffected by the sight—his hand began to move faster.

“Jack, on the other hand, is probably just a fluke,” Paul said. “A flash in the pan.”

“Jack isn’t a sure thing,” Martin softly corrected. “My point is, it doesn’t matter. When this movie is done, you will still be Schary’s shining star, audiences will still demand your movies, and you will look even better to the press and the brass for putting up with any antics Jack might make during

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filming. You can't lose, Paul."

Paul nodded. Martin was right. Paul did have a secure place in the studio. So he couldn't control who he worked with. He knew that when he signed his first contract with MGM, years and years earlier. But he could still make it to the other side of the shoot smelling like roses. While Jack had nothing to fall back on. In fact...

Lilah's teeth caught on the ridge of his cock, distracting him from thoughts of Jack. He jerked, pushing his cock deeper into Lilah's mouth. Martin jerked, too. Like he could feel Lilah's teeth on his own flesh. Paul's mouth watered. He had to swallow, but his throat was tight. Almost as tight as Lilah's felt.

"Does she feel good?" Martin's voice was almost a whisper. Any pretense at their conversation was now gone. Now it was need, pure and simple. "You're both flushed."

Paul sighed. "She feels amazing." This part was for Martin. "I've never felt anybody like her, Marty. I want to fuck her throat."

"You heard the man." Martin brought his hand up to his mouth and licked the palm, using it to help slick his strokes when he returned to jacking off. "Swallow him down."

Lilah smoothed her slim hands over Paul's thighs, but the touch was too light to be anything close to what he needed. He wanted something stronger, something harder, something he'd feel hours from now. He settled for focusing on the sounds Martin couldn't contain anymore, the soft grunts when the heel of his hand pushed into his balls, the tiny exhalations that

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matched Lilah's quickening breaths. When Lilah slid down Paul's shaft this time, she didn't hesitate when the tip nudged the back of her throat. It slid all the way in with a careful flex of her muscles, squeezing around his length in heady invitation.

Paul cupped the back of her head, his fingers sinking in her perfectly styled, dark hair. He held her lightly, though he itched to tighten his grip and force her down until she moaned with protest. She didn't resist the pressure on the back of her skull, responding instantly to the weight of his hand. He gradually guided her into a faster rhythm, watching as Martin's motions mirrored his wife's. He never went faster or slower than Lilah's mouth. His cock glistened in the overhead light, his fingers smearing pre-come and sweat with each stroke.

The muscles flexed in Martin's stomach, tight and succulent. They had been friends for a long time, but Paul thought he looked better now than he had in their youth, his body harder, more defined. That was Lilah's influence, he knew, and yet another thing to be grateful to her for. He didn't get to see Martin like this nearly often enough, but considering he hadn't gotten much at all before Lilah entered the scene, he would take what he could.

When Martin abruptly sat up, Paul lost his rhythm with Lilah. She protested when his fingers tangled in her hair, but he was too absorbed in the way Marty rose to his feet, his hand still tight around his shaft. Pre-come had gathered in the slit, and every step Marty took closer sharpened the desire to

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know what it tasted like.

Their eyes met. Without a word, Martin folded his hand over the one Paul had cupping Lilah's head and helped him pull her up. Paul's cock fell with a soft slap against his stomach. All three of them groaned—Lilah in protest, Paul at his best friend's proximity, Martin with the last, almost vicious, pull of his length. He angled the tip downward, and in the next moment, shot all over Paul's prick.

Paul shuddered as the hot come rolled down his shaft and tangled in his hair. Lilah immediately leaned forward to catch it with her tongue, but Paul stopped her. He knew he was probably pulling her hair. He didn't care. He just wanted to feel the warmth on his flesh and pretend for a moment—just a moment—that it would be Martin leaning forward to clean it up.

Martin did bend, but he caught Lilah's mouth, distracting her with a hard kiss. Paul immediately closed his free hand around his shaft, stroking once to spread the come. He brought his palm up to his mouth, licking the fluid from his skin, almost moaning at the salty flavor. Almost moaning because this was as close as he would ever come to tasting Martin.

His taste buds still popped at the tang of Martin's come when the other man broke away from the kiss and pushed Lilah back down. She devoured Paul's cock, all niceties stripped away, and together, Paul and Marty forced her head up and down his length. Her chin slammed into his balls, driving them against the zipper of his pants, but not even the slight sting was enough to hold back his impending orgasm.

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Moan after moan rippled through him. Lilah's. Martin's. His own.

Paul brought his hand back to his face, inhaling the faint scent of Martin's skin. He closed his eyes, imagining Martin kneeling between his legs, imagining the firm pressure of Martin's lips. The faster Lilah moved, the easier it was to pretend it was Martin. The other man's fingers curled around Paul's, and he looked up into Martin's dark, blue eyes. They were still heavy-lidded with lust, but now there was something else there. A knowing light. Their gazes locked just as Lilah swallowed around his shaft. Paul caught his breath and a low wave of pleasure rolled through him. His cock jerked, spilling come into Lilah's eager throat. She slurped hungrily, swallowing every drop.

Every muscle went limp and heavy when he spent his release, and Paul sank back into the chair, dropping his head to the back. Martin smoothed his hand over Lilah's hair, easing her away, and she tumbled into his arms, pushing him back to the carpet in her hunger.

"In just a moment, Lilah," Marty said patiently. "Go wait for me in the bedroom."

The look on her face was less than pleased at having been put off, but she went anyway, leaving them alone.

"You mind if I crash in your chair?" Paul asked. He didn't want to crash in the chair, but he never felt comfortable inviting himself literally into their bed.

"Of course not. But you're more than welcome to join us." His mouth tipped. "You're always welcome."

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“You’re too good to me,” Paul murmured, tucking himself back in his pants. “Lilah, too. What can I do for her to return the favor?”

“I’m sure she’ll think of something.” He mirrored Paul’s rise, his gaze steady. “Can we agree to leave talk about the movie out here for the night?”

Paul paused long enough to finish the whiskey in his glass, then set it back on the table. Even with the whiskey against his tongue, he could still taste Martin’s come. He always enjoyed going to bed with Lilah and Marty. Sometimes, he participated. Sometimes, he just watched. But he was surrounded by the spicy, masculine smell of cologne, and if he occasionally touched Martin’s hard body, nobody said a word about it. He supposed, in a way, he might be using his best friends, but he didn’t feel guilty. They had invited him to join them. They had made the first move. And he always let Lilah instigate the contact. Did she know why he played along?

Paul was pretty sure Martin knew.

“No problem. Your house, your rules.”

Martin clapped him on the back as he guided him toward the bedroom. “You have no idea how nice it is to be able to hear you say that in at least one place.”

Paul smiled. He needed this. He needed to blow off a little steam, have some fun, and indulge his needs. By the time he left Martin’s house, he’d have a better view of the world. Even if Jack Wells was still in it.

CHAPTER 3

Staring up at the sprawling mansion, Jack whistled under his breath. The trees hadn't been able to mask its Spanish styling from the road, but as soon as he pushed open the heavy door that opened into the front court, its sheer size had ground him to a halt. Heavy, dark columns lined the bricked walk to the front door, with lush greens dotting the vast yard. The soil in the nearest potted plant was damp. He would bet anything Paul Dunham had at least one gardener who came in to take care of his landscaping. A maid, too. Maybe even a cook. Stars like him always had the full entourage, though as far as Jack could tell, Paul wasn't quite Hollywood's typical celebrity.

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His palms were sweaty. He had begged and argued with Jesson for an hour to get the opportunity to deliver the script and score for *Sticks and Stones* to Paul personally, but now that he was here, his nerves were conspiring against him. *Just what the bloody hell do you think you're doing?* they whispered. *This is Paul fucking Dunham. You aren't fit to shine his tap shoes, let alone be bold enough to costar with him.*

Except this was the opportunity he'd been working his tail off to get. He had camped out in Schary's driveway for weeks until the studio head finally caved and gave him his first screen test. He'd taken on every crap script they'd thrown at him, just to prove they couldn't get rid of him that easily. He'd persevered, and he'd danced until his feet bled, and when Schary refused to move him into starring roles because he couldn't carry a tune, he'd taken voice lessons until he could get through a whole song without driving the teacher to her earplugs.

Nobody in the system worked harder than Jack Wells. The magic of it was, though, nobody knew just how hard that was, because he always made sure to keep it light on the set.

He stopped in front of a window and checked out his reflection before knocking. His blond hair was mussed, the top curled beyond repair. He probably shouldn't have kept the Roadmaster's top down for the drive over. There was a fresh sparkle in his blue eyes, though, and his color was high from the cooler breeze. Or maybe that was just excitement about finally getting to meet one of his idols face to face.

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Paul fucking Dunham. Probably the most gorgeous man to currently grace the silver screen. Dark hair, darker eyes, with that wicked slant to his smile when he was about to break into song. He was the kind of bloke who always looked like he had a secret he wasn't going to share, no matter how hard you begged. Jack wanted to know just how much Paul would take, before giving it up.

As he faced the front door, he switched hands on the script, wiping his palms off on his trousers. He reached for the bell and then hesitated. Did he look like a messenger from the studio? He didn't want Paul to automatically dismiss him. First impressions mattered.

He zipped up his light jacket and stood up straighter. Fuck. That wasn't any good. Now he was a bellboy.

Opening up his coat again, he rolled the sheaf of papers and almost used them to knock on the door. *Idiot. What if he's upstairs or in the back? He'll never hear a knock.*

Jack glanced down at his attire. Maybe he should've worn something more showy, something that made it obvious he was a dancer. His trousers were too baggy, and tucking his shirt made him look like he was fifteen and on his way to the headmaster's. He yanked it out of his waistband, shoved the script into his back pocket, and pressed the bell. From deep within the bowels of the house, the chime resonated through the walls, making his stomach flip. The only way to calm it was to take a deep breath and lean against the jamb in wait.

A short woman opened the door and smiled at him sweetly. Her face didn't betray her age. Her curly, black hair

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was gathered up under a cap. “Yes? Can I help you?”

For a moment, he felt ridiculous for assuming it would be Paul standing there when the door opened. Of course, the man had a housekeeper. He was a huge star.

“Got a delivery for Mr. Dunham, luv.” He laid the English accent on thick, and gave her his brightest smile. There wasn’t a woman in this whole town who could resist them. “Straight from Mr. Schary himself.”

She held out her hand. “I will take it for him. Mr. Dunham is not to be disturbed right now.”

“Ah, but I’ve got instructions to give it over, all personal like.” He tipped his head closer. No housekeeper was going to block him from meeting his idol today. “See, Mr. Schary’s a tad peeved we haven’t started rehearsals yet. I wanted to give Paul the heads up so he didn’t get surprised when he shows up on the lot next week.”

“I will take it for him and give him your message. Mr. Dunham is in his studio, and he is not to be disturbed.” The maid’s smile didn’t falter. “He is very clear about that.”

Yes, Jack was sure he was. Though it was the last thing he wanted to do, he reached into his back pocket and pulled out the script, holding it out for her to take. “Well, far be it for me to disturb a man when he’s working. Though all that noise must drive you around the bend.”

“Oh, no, Mr. Dunham is very quiet. He keeps to himself in the backyard.” She waved her free hand above her head. “I never hear a thing. I don’t even see him most weeks.” One final smile before the door began to close. “Have a good

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morning.”

“You, too, luv,” he murmured, more as an automatic response than anything else. His thoughts were already elsewhere. Backyard. Keeps to himself. Nobody would be back there, which would make it the perfect opportunity to get some one-on-one face time with his upcoming costar

In case the housekeeper was watching through the window, Jack went back through the heavy gate. He waited until it clicked shut behind him before jogging along the front of the building. A stone fence protected the rear of the house. Though it was nearly as tall as he was, the top was smooth enough to grab without wrecking his hands. He swung himself up and over, landing lightly on the other side.

His heart thudded. At least, his hands weren't sweating anymore. Now, his body ran on the same adrenaline that fueled his best work. He was half-hard as he crept along the stone walk to the corner of the house.

He paused and watched the housekeeper come across the rich green grass, away from a low-slung building sitting at the edge of the property. The patio doors opened and shut. He counted to ten, then twenty, before sauntering toward the studio.

Show time.

The faint strains of a saxophone filtered through the walls, growing louder when he pushed the door open. “Gotta say, Paul, I do like your style.”

Paul stood in the center of the large room, the script in one hand, a glass of water in the other. He wore a T-shirt and a

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loose pair of pants. Both clung to him, wet with sweat. His hair was damp, too, and standing on end, pushed out of his eyes. He froze when Jack spoke, then slowly lowered the glass. “What?”

“This.” He swept an arm toward the studio as he prowled around its edge. Mirrors lined the opposite wall, and the hardwood floor was polished to perfection. His cock hardened the rest of the way at the thought of hours spent on its shine. “Makes me wonder if I should’ve blown my last check on my own space instead of my new ragtop. Except then I remember how much my car’s helped me score, and I think...” He dragged his hand along the smooth dance rail. “Maybe not.”

“I meant, what the fuck do you think you’re doing back here?” Paul bit out. “I don’t even allow Melinda in here.”

“Yeah, but Melinda’s not like us, now is she?”

Paul’s brow clouded. “Let me make it clear. You are not invited in here. Get the hell out.”

The man was bigger than Jack had imagined, taller than him by a good four inches. His shoulders were broader, too, but the hips were every bit as delectable as they’d appeared on a screen thirty feet high. Jack leaned back against the rail, resting on his elbows, as he raked his gaze up and down the man he was going to be spending the next few weeks with.

“Now that’s not very friendly,” he commented. “Here I thought, you and me could take a few minutes and look over the script. There’s some good stuff in there.”

“I don’t care what’s in the script. I’m doing this movie because I have to.” Paul crossed the room and tossed his script

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on the table that held his record player. The music came to a sudden stop. “Besides that, it doesn’t really matter what’s in the script.”

The *have to* stung. No denying it. But Jack refused to let his grin fade. Paul wasn’t going to get him that easy. It was probably just some test to see if he had the grit to stick it out.

“Course, it doesn’t,” he agreed. “It’s all about the music.”

Paul snorted. “The music? Well, I’ve got to hand it to you, kid. You have a real killer sense of humor.”

His eyes narrowed. “Not that I’m arguing with you, mate, but I’m not sure I follow.”

“How are your voice lessons going?”

Shit. He’d hoped Schary would keep that private, but apparently not. “Not bad.” And then, because Paul had probably nettled the one spot he was most sensitive about, “How’s the workshops with your acting coach coming?”

“Your information is about as out of date as your acting style, Jack. The last time I had an acting coach, I was thirteen, and preparing for my first speaking role.”

He might be Paul Dunham, but Jack didn’t take that kind of attitude from anyone. “Huh. Well. Guess that explains a lot then.”

Paul folded his arms and leaned against the wall. Every line of his body was straight and perfect. Even when he stood casually, he looked like he was dancing. “Let me offer a suggestion, Jack. You can do with it what you will. Keep your attitude in check until you have something to offer the studio. It’s not really your most attractive asset.”

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“Bloody hell, I know that.” He smirked. “You’d know it, too, if you weren’t so far across the room.”

Paul’s nostrils flared, and if Jack wasn’t mistaken, his brown eyes traveled down Jack’s body to settle on his crotch. “I think maybe you should stop trespassing before I have Melinda call the cops.”

“When it’s just starting to get interesting?” He deliberately shifted his weight, splaying his legs a little bit farther out. It was easy to balance against the rail. His grace was one of his biggest strengths. “Be a shame to waste this time together. Once we hit the studio, we’re going to have Thayer getting in our way.”

Paul stalked over to the door. “Melinda! Please tell Philip I need him in the studio!”

Pushing off the rail, Jack came up beside him before his voice died out. “And tell him to make it quick!” he shouted, hooking his arm around Paul’s shoulders.

Paul shoved Jack away with enough force to send him stumbling back to the wall. “Since you don’t understand when you’re not wanted, Philip will help you find your way off my property.”

He sincerely doubted Philip was a Boy Scout, ready to lead the way with his trusty compass. The wise choice would’ve been to walk out right then with an apology to MGM’s golden boy and a promise to behave himself from then on, but acting smart had never been Jack’s strong suit. He shoved a hand into his trousers pocket, silently relishing the way Paul’s eyes immediately jumped to his crotch again, and cocked his head.

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“You know, Schary warned me about you.” He hadn’t, but Jack wasn’t above concocting a few untruths to throw Paul off his game. “Said you were none too happy about how casting had played out. I have to admit, it’s a little flattering knowing someone like you is nervous ’bout a guy like me, stealing some of your spotlight.”

Paul rolled his eyes. “The only thing I’m worried about is you embarrassing me and dragging this movie down. I don’t need a bomb on my resume because my costar can’t keep up.”

“No worries there, mate. There isn’t anything you can throw at me to knock me off my game.”

“Oh, really? I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Boss?” They both turned toward the door at the rumbling question. Philip, Jack presumed. He was the size of two men, maybe three. He had a round face and hands the size of picnic hams.

“Please escort Mr. Wells back to his car. He’s apparently lost his way.”

Jack ducked beneath the man’s meaty grasp, and skirted both of them to get to the door. “Think I might remember it, after all.” He winked at Paul, mildly pleased that it deepened the man’s scowl. “Offer still stands, Twinkles. You feel like giving it a few turns around the dance floor before next week, just give me a ring.”

Paul waited until Jack was halfway down the walk to call out, “Hey, Jack? Don’t hold your breath.”

He resisted the urge to flip Paul off. Disappointment already burned away the edges of his earlier enthusiasm,

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slowly being replaced by the low roil of anger. Thought he was too good for the likes of Jack Wells, did he? Well, Paul Dunham was about to get the rudest awakening of his professional career. Nothing was going to stand in Jack's way of making *Sticks and Stones* the biggest hit MGM ever had, not even a narcissistic, arrogant, laurels-stuck-up-his-ass celebrity like Paul. And if he could make Paul's life a little more miserable at the same time...

Jack grinned as he flat-handed the gate open to the driveway. A month of shooting and recording with the bastard would still be worth it.

* * *

Paul liked to spend at least four hours a day in his studio when he wasn't in the middle of a shoot, but Jack had interrupted him just after the two hour mark. And Paul lost all interest in dancing. He snagged the script and marched out of the small building, his shoulders bunched up around his ears. Jack was even more obnoxious than Paul had initially given him credit for. Martin had thought he was overreacting. Clearly, he had been *underreacting*. Clearly, he hadn't been angry enough.

"Melinda!" Paul roared, though she was waiting for him at the back door.

"Mr. Dunham, I am sorry."

"How did he get back to my studio?"

"I don't know, Mr. Dunham. I sent him away when I took the script."

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Paul took several deep breaths as he regarded the small woman. She had been working for him for the past decade, and she was his first line of defense. The one who kept nosy reporters and photographers away. The one who politely, yet firmly, turned back overeager fans. The one who always knew when to tell Josh that he wasn't home.

"Yeah, yeah, okay. It's okay." The door bell chimed through the house, putting Paul's teeth on edge. "Go take care of whoever that is."

She bustled off, leaving him in the kitchen with a script he was starting to hate crumpled in his hand. Tossing it onto the counter, Paul reached overhead to get a drinking glass. His whole day was a wreck now. His timing was off, his head was a morass of dark thoughts, and all he wanted was to pick Jack up by the scruff of his neck and pummel him until he wasn't nearly so pretty anymore. The image of Jack black and blue brought a grim smile to his face as he filled the glass from the tap. Schary wouldn't be so excited about his new toy if it was broken. It would be even better if Jack had a broken leg on top of it. Couldn't dance on a pair of crutches.

He was still smiling over what he was sure was going to be his new favorite fantasy when a throat cleared behind him.

"Hi, Paul."

The glass nearly fell out of his suddenly numb fingers. Melinda had obviously forgotten, or maybe she just didn't care, that Betty Thayer was no longer welcome in his home. He turned around with a tight smile. "Betty. To what do I owe this pleasure?"

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Betty had been barely eighteen when they'd first met. Her heart-shaped face had still had traces of baby fat, though her features were fine, her nose adorably imperfect. She laughed all the time, her green eyes dancing, and she'd worn her hair longer than was fashionable at the time, all because she liked the way it swished around her shoulders when she danced. Back then, she'd been dying it blonde, but either she needed it different for a project, or she'd finally learned she didn't need to conform to whatever stereotype she'd always envisioned Hollywood starlets were. Now, it was a warm golden brown, cut to an elegant pageboy that skimmed her narrow shoulders.

She fidgeted with her pocketbook, an oversized patent-leather thing that was wider than her slender form. "You're mad I'm here. I'm sorry. Don't hold it against Melinda, okay? I didn't give her much of a choice about letting me in."

Paul sighed and set his glass aside. "I'm not mad at you. Jack Wells was here earlier. He barged into my studio and...have you ever met Jack?"

Her nose wrinkled. "Yes. Unfortunately. We have the same vocal coach."

"Then you know what an obnoxious prick he is."

"I know he's exactly the kind of guy who drives you craziest."

"Right. An obnoxious prick." Paul tapped the top of the script. "Have you had a chance to look at this thing? Is it any good?"

"It is, actually. It's very funny." She frowned. "You haven't read it yet?"

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“No, Jack brought it over this morning. I guess he doesn’t know that there are messengers for that sort of thing. Did you want to go over it or something?”

“No, I just...” She took a deep breath. “God, this is harder than I thought it would be.”

Paul tensed. Their break-up had not been a pretty one, and Paul didn’t want to go down that road again. In fact, he didn’t want to go down any road with Betty. “What is harder?”

Her fingers were leaving sweaty trails in the leather of her clutch. Whatever was bothering Betty was wreaking havoc on her nerves. “I want to make sure we’re going to be able to keep it professional on this,” she blurted. “I mean, we haven’t worked together since, well, you know when. And trust me, nobody was happier about that than I was. But it would be nice if we could get through the next month and then all the promotions next year without any bloodshed. Or public scenes. Or flying shoes.” The last referenced the one time Paul had tried to talk some sense into Betty after their break-up. He’d ended up at the emergency room with a mild concussion and a slice down the side of his face from where she’s managed to clobber him with one of her heels.

Paul blinked. “I didn’t plan on making any scenes with you. I just want to get through this movie and put it behind me.”

“Yeah, well, we always have a way of working around what we plan, don’t we?”

Paul’s lips twitched. They knew how to get under each other’s skin. But after just ten minutes with Jack Wells, Paul

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thought Betty was a saint in comparison. “True. Okay, you stay out of my way, I’ll stay out of yours, and we can focus on getting through this without killing Jack.”

Mention of Jack made Betty wrinkle her nose again. “I am so glad you have more scenes with him than I do. And more screen time. And that you’re the one I have to kiss. I just know he would try slipping me tongue.”

Paul remembered the way Jack leered at him, not to mention the suggestive comments. He really didn’t think Betty had to worry about Jack slipping her anything. “Yeah, I doubt he’s overly concerned with boundaries.”

“I was surprised to hear you agreed to the casting. I mean, Jack’s a great dancer, so at least he’s not going to make you look bad, but he’s not the type you usually choose to work with.”

“He’s not a great dancer. He’s a clod. And I *didn’t* agree to this. Jesson assured me that if I walked away from this film, I’d be breaking contract.” Just the thought made his head pound, and he turned to fumble through the cupboards, searching for the headache powder. “I didn’t have a say in any of this.”

“Really?” Her shock was evident. “But Schary loves you. Why would he risk making you angry?”

“Because Jack is his new pet. He’s grooming him...” Paul’s eyes narrowed. “Like a little punk like that could carry MGM on his back.”

Betty didn’t seem convinced, but at least she didn’t continue on about Jack’s nonexistent talent like everybody

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else seemed to. The less time he spent thinking about Jack Wells, the happier Paul would be.

“Oh, that won’t happen if this takes off the way everybody thinks it will. My manager said Schary sees you two as the next Hope and Crosby.”

The pain behind his eyes increased. “No, no, no. That is *not* going to happen.” Betty nodded sympathetically, but Paul didn’t think she understood. He would walk away from movies forever before he allowed that to happen. Five minutes in the same room with Jack gave him violent impulses. He was not going to tie his profession, and his life, to Jack Wells. “Besides, for all he knows, we don’t have any chemistry.”

“Maybe not.” She tucked her purse closer into her body, more relaxed now that her mission had been accomplished with minimal violence. “I guess we’ll know soon enough, though.”

“Unfortunately. This is going to be a long six weeks.”

“I don’t know what you’re so worried about. Jack’s the one with everything to lose.” She retreated to the doorway, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “I’ll see you next week then. And thanks for hearing me out.”

“Yeah, well, thanks for coming up to see me. I’ll walk you to the door.”

They passed Melinda in the hallway, and she shot him a fearful glance, but he decided not to chastise her. His head already hurt enough without calling the help to task. Betty was right about one thing. Jack was the one who stood to lose. Did the arrogant little bastard even realize how perilous his current

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situation was? Probably not. The thought cheered Paul. With a little bit of help, Jack could be his own worst enemy on the shoot.

CHAPTER 4

“That is never going to work,” Paul said through tightly gritted teeth. “Have you ever actually seen a movie before?”

Sweet looked at him with all the disdain he could muster. “I’ve been making films since you were in short pants.”

“Then maybe you’re getting senile,” Paul shot back.

“There is nothing wrong with these steps,” Sweet protested.

“Except that Danny Kaye has been doing them for the past ten years! And don’t tell me that nobody will notice. *I* noticed.”

Sweet’s eyes darkened. Paul didn’t care if the choreographer was angry. If he had to dance with Jack, he

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wasn't going to agree to moves that were completely dated. He still had some control over how the film would go. And if Jesson started cussing him out for delaying things, then Paul would tell him the same thing. Sweet may have been talented, but he was losing his touch.

“You don't have a choreographer credit yet. I'm still in charge here.”

Paul folded his arms. “If Jesson sees this shit, you won't be in charge for very long.”

“What shit?” Warm air blasted into the studio as Jack strolled in. His strides were long in spite of his shorter stature, and his blond hair was mussed into carefree curls, like he'd just woken up and not bothered to run a comb through them before heading out to work. When he dropped the bag that likely held his dance shoes at the edge of the polished floor, his biceps flexed beneath the skintight T-shirt he wore. “You started the fun without me?” He pouted in Paul's direction. “Shame on you.”

Paul decided to ignore all the things about Jack that he hated in order to focus on the things about Sweet he hated. “The choreography is shit. And we started with the simple, opening number. I don't even want to think about how bad this could get.”

Jack grabbed a chair and straddled it, resting his folded arms across its back. “So let's see it. Can't be all bad.”

“You want me to...” Paul looked from Jack to Sweet and back again. He didn't want to dance for Jack, like he was providing some sort of free show. But he needed an ally for

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this fight. Even if he found the choice of ally totally distasteful. “Fine.”

Sweet gestured to the pianist, who rested his hands in a ready position. Paul marched over to the center of the floor, counting off in his head even though he hated every second of this. The first number took place in the newsroom where their characters, a pair of political cartoonists, worked. It was supposed to be a short, snappy duet, meant to show off their sketches and workplace, but with Sweet’s choreography, the whole thing felt dull and lifeless.

He took the first step four beats after the music started. The opening was all arm sweeps and leg extensions, nothing taxing, nothing original. Sweet moved around him in what would be Jack’s part, like the little yippy terrier he’d seen in that Warner Brothers cartoon last year. And the last thing Paul wanted to be compared to was a hulking, bruiser of a bulldog.

“I’m going to look like bloody Chester if you make me do that,” Jack complained loudly before the music was even through.

Paul winced at the echoing of his own thoughts—the apt echoing of his own thoughts. He dutifully finished the number, sighing with relief when the music finally stopped. “See? Even Jack gets it.”

“Then we’ll take it up with Jesson,” Sweet started.

“You really want to go running to him instead of working with us on this?” Paul asked.

“Least let us show you what it could be.” Jack hopped up from the chair and slid it out of their way. “Jesson’ll want

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options, if nothing else.”

“What it could be?” Paul and Sweet said at the same time. Paul frowned and moved away from the choreographer to address Jack. “What are you talking about? We don’t have anything to show right now.”

“So we wing it. You must’ve got an idea when you read the script.”

“There’s nothing saying we got the same idea,” Paul protested. But Jack was looking at him with an excited glint in his eye. Like if Paul didn’t show Sweet what he was thinking, Jack would start dancing without him. And if Jack’s idea was even halfway decent, Jesson would love it. And not because Jack was such a great dancer. “Yeah, let’s wing it.”

Whirling on his heel, Jack jogged back to his pack and crouched down, digging around for a moment before straightening. When he came back, he carried two large sketch pads.

Paul stared at him blankly. “You brought props?”

“Never know what might come in handy.” He tossed aside the extra when Paul didn’t take it. “Just try and follow along, yeah?”

The chair came next, and all three men watched Jack lounge gracefully on its seat, the pad propped up on his lap. He nodded to the pianist. Paul still had no idea what he had in mind.

As the song started, Paul began automatically, but his focus was on Jack. Sweet had started dancing almost immediately, but Jack wasn’t budging from the chair. The

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only thing that moved was a pencil Paul hadn't seen him grab, tapping against the edge of the pad in the same tempo as the music. Then came the feet, followed by the bob of his head. Within seconds, Paul realized Jack was turning it into a showcase for the lead. Paul's character. Paul could do exactly what he wanted.

Paul had taken his first dance lessons at the age of four. His mother had always claimed he'd been a natural, but even at that young age, he had been dedicated to practicing. He had worked hard to tone his body to perfection, and incorporated as many wholly athletic moves as he could into any dance routine. Dancing meant freedom. Dancing was the only time he could let go of the careful control he always kept on his emotions and desires. He funneled that energy into the rhythm. Into the music. Even when he was just experimenting with a few steps.

The music was upbeat, and the lyrics were snappy and sharp, with both political and sexual innuendo. Instead of arm sweeps and leg extensions, Paul kept his movements as sharp as the lyrics. He was a man at work in a busy newspaper office. He had deadlines, he thrived on scandal—creating it if he had to. The choreography shouldn't just be entertaining. It should further the story, elaborate on the characterization.

Jack got off the chair halfway through the song. He prowled around Paul, never getting in the way, tapping out complicated patterns that echoed the clack of typewriters in the background. A handstand across the seat took both Paul and Sweet by surprise, but Jack's showboating receded again

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to let Paul take the front.

They ended back in their original spots, back on the job, back to the grind. Sweet frowned at both of them without saying a word.

“Oh, come on,” Jack said. He wasn’t even out of breath. “You can’t say that wasn’t fucking fantastic.”

Jack was right, much to Paul’s chagrin. “Let us work on the choreography, and Jesson doesn’t even need to hear about this.”

Sweet looked between the two of them. “If we collaborate, you won’t try to edge me out?”

“I won’t.” Paul had enough to deal with without pushing Sweet out of a job.

“What about the rest of it?” Jack looked back and forth. “How does the rest of it look?”

Paul glanced over to Sweet. “How about it? Is there anything worth showing us?”

“No. Let me work out a few steps and we’ll meet again after lunch.”

While Sweet went over to the pianist, Jack popped up to block Paul’s path. “But we’re not done. We’ve got the whole morning to work.”

A dozen excuses sprang to mind. He could easily avoid Jack for the rest of the morning, and probably most of the afternoon, but he had done okay. Good, even. “We can work out the rough spots on the opening number.”

The boyish grin surprised him, and for a split second, he almost imagined he saw what the audiences might like about

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Jack. “That kick you did around the chair needs to stay, though. The one you did during the bridge. That popped.”

“Your handstand should stay, too,” Paul said grudgingly. “I don’t think we’re going to need to change much. But it looks like Sweet is going to steal Jeff. You want to do this without the music?”

Jack tapped his temple. “Got it all up here, but if you need the keys, go on and tell ’em.”

“No, I can do it without the music,” Paul said as Jeff stood, abandoning the piano.

He almost called out and asked them not to go. It would be better if he wasn’t trapped in the same room with Jack for the entire morning. But the chords were still thrumming through his body, and despite his impulse to make the film embarrassing for Jack, embarrassing for Vance Jesson, and embarrassing for the entire studio, he also had the impulse to do the best work he could. No matter what.

After Sweet and Jeff disappeared, Paul turned back to Jack. “Let me see that tapping pattern again.”

Jack came up to his side, their hips brushing against each other. Though Jack had made it look effortless, the faint scent of his sweaty skin drifted to Paul’s nose, reminding him of every sinuous movement from earlier. He had to force his focus downward, watching Jack’s feet as he did the routine in half-time.

“Trick is keeping the ankle loose.” Jack lifted his leg and rotated the joint to demonstrate. “It helps maintain your momentum.”

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“Yes,” Paul said dryly, “I know how to tap. Are these steps you made up yourself, or something somebody showed you?”

“All mine. Except for the cramp roll variation. Got that from an old shoe man, back in England.”

Paul spun in a tight circle, surveying the wide room. There was only the one chair, the piano, and the piano bench. Paul liked to work with props. Liked to figure out how each step would look in the middle of the set. He had been in a few movies that featured newspaper rooms, so he knew this set would be cluttered. Unfortunately, it wasn't anything he could reenact in that room. More annoying than that, he could feel Jack practically breathing over his shoulder, full of steps and suggestions.

“All right. It looks good. Do it again at half-speed, while I go through my steps.”

It was easier to follow Jack the second time, and even easier the third. Jack had a tendency to improvise without warning, but Paul kept a close enough eye on him to quickly learn his tells. A slight drop in his shoulder. A glance sideways to see what Paul was doing. A wicked smirk, as if he was trying to catch Paul out. The urge to smack the smirk off his face, even here, was great. Paul funneled that fire straight back into his dancing.

On the fourth pass, Jack hit his handstand off-center of the seat. His grip slid off the edge, sending him twisting at an awkward angle. Paul barely leapt out of his way before he hit the floor, but Jack still managed to catch Paul's leg, forcing him to stumble.

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They fell in a heap of limbs, Jack's shoe catching him in the back. His temper flared with the pain, but he bit back his angry shout. It had been an accident. Just because Jack had him on edge didn't mean he needed to be a complete jerk. He tried to roll away, but Jack still had a hold of him.

"What the hell happened there?" Paul asked.

"Looks like I missed my mark." Jack didn't sound as frustrated as Paul felt. In fact, he sounded a little too pleased. "This mark's more than a mite better, though." With that, his hips pressed forward, the unmistakable line of his cock digging against Paul's body.

Paul reacted without thought, shoving Jack away and crab-walking backward until he was out of Jack's reach. He jumped to his feet and increased the distance between them. His nerves were on fire, and his own cock was starting to thicken. The fact that Jack remained sprawled across the floor didn't help. It didn't help at all.

"Don't touch me."

Grinning, Jack rolled onto his back, folding his hands behind his head as a cushion. It stretched his lean body out to even leaner proportions and pulled his pants taut over his erection. "Was just an accident, mate. One of the fortunate kind, if you ask me."

"Somehow, I'm having a really hard time believing that." Paul settled behind the piano. Partially, so he didn't have to see Jack, and partially so Jack couldn't see him. "A real hard time."

"You should let me do something about it then. We got all

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morning, just the two of us. Be a shame to waste it.”

Paul scowled, his fingers brushing across the keys. “We have all morning to dance. If you want to dance, get up. I don’t have time for anything else.”

Jack’s sharp kick back to his feet hinted at none of his earlier clumsiness. “Maybe that’s your problem.”

“No, *you’re* my problem.” He played a short series of notes, sliding up the scale. “So no more *accidents*.”

Jack’s taps clipped ever closer until his firm weight slid onto the bench next to him. “If that’s the case, why’d you let the piano player go if you didn’t want me all to yourself?”

Paul stared at him. “Are you serious? You really think I was angling to get you alone? We are rehearsing, Jack. This is rehearsal. Not a meat market.”

It was Jack’s turn to run up and down a scale, the higher register grating down Paul’s spine. “I think you’re wound so tight, Twinkles, you don’t know what the difference is anymore.”

“I don’t know the difference between a rehearsal and a meat market? It’s real easy, Jack. Though the fact you don’t know the difference might tell me all I need to know about your current success.”

Jack’s nostrils flared. “I worked my ass off to get here. Don’t you fucking think otherwise.”

“Then get off your ass and prove it. Because so far, I haven’t really seen anything to make me change my mind.”

“Except taking care of Sweet for you.”

Paul snorted. “I took care of Sweet for me. You did what

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you're paid to do, which is follow my lead. Anybody in the chorus line could have done that. So come on. Change my mind."

Jack was too warm, his scent mocking Paul with every inhalation. Paul's control already felt brittle, ready to snap at the slightest provocation. All he wanted was for the bastard to get the hell off the piano bench. Away from him. Back to merry old England would be best, but Paul would take what he could get.

"Well, can't say that following your lead isn't fun." He slid away, shoes clicking as he returned to the chair and set it upright again. "Gives me your best angle, after all."

"What makes you think you can talk to me like that?" As soon as Paul uttered the question, he regretted it. He didn't need Jack's answer. "Most guys would knock you flat on your back for less."

An insolent gleam in Jack's blue eyes made Paul's hands ball into fists. "Because you didn't knock me flat on my back the *first* time I talked to you like that."

"So, you're saying that from now on I shouldn't ignore my impulses to punch you flat?"

"You're welcome to try." He took his place on the chair, seemingly oblivious to how close Paul was to attacking. "Way I see it, you'll either land your punch, in which case you have to deal with Jesson and Schary and why you're bruising their newest hot commodity and wrecking the picture. Or, you'll miss, land flat on your back, and give me a good laugh. Either way, I win."

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Paul smiled sweetly. "Bruising wouldn't wreck the picture. That's what makeup is for. Besides, there are ways to hit you without leaving any marks."

"Voice of experience there, mate?"

"I bet you'd love to know," Paul muttered, turning his attention from Jack to the sheet music in front of him. He hadn't played in awhile, and he generally didn't play in front of people. But it was the only way to get Jack to work without putting Jack in position to grab at him. "Ready when you are."

Their first few run-throughs had been in half-time. Paul didn't bother to keep it slow now. He hit the first few notes at the same, jazzy tempo Jeff had maintained and earned a sharp glance from Jack. Concentrating on the music, Paul hid his smile. Jack might think he was on the ball, but it didn't take much to rattle his cage. He filed that away for future reference, along with the tidbit regarding Jack's insecurity on his work ethic.

A measure later, Jack had resumed the routine. The cramp roll variation he'd introduced in the latter half came earlier this time, with double wings that hadn't been there before. Clean wings, at that. When he did it again, Paul clamped his lips together. Son of a bitch was showing off now.

As Paul watched Jack dance, he felt a curious combination of disappointment, anger, and grudging respect. It would be better if Jack really did dance like he had rocks in his shoes. It would be much easier to justify his hatred for the man if he moved like a drunken elephant with four left feet. As it was, Jack gave Paul plenty of reason to hate him. The endless

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innuendo was more than enough.

Paul knew he'd have to keep his guard up around Jack. Otherwise, the endless innuendo might be enough to wear him down. Jack wasn't a mistake he could afford to make.

CHAPTER 5

Jack was in hell.

There was no doubt about it; this role was a wet dream come to life. He got all the best wisecracks in the script, and the music encouraged some of the best dancing of his life. He didn't have to play romantic lead opposite a woman he couldn't stand, but instead, got to share center stage with the man who had inspired him before he'd ever set foot on American soil. Every sensual glide of Paul's body, every pivot, every extension, lit a fire in Jack's belly that refused to be extinguished by the man's condescending, surly, sometimes downright belligerent, attitude. Jack always got hard watching the man on the big screen. Having to dance at his side did

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nothing to lessen the effect.

If anything, it made it worse.

And Paul hated him. Loathed him. If Jack had been something Paul had stepped in, Paul probably would have been happy to throw away the shoes rather than deal with scraping him off. At first, Jack had explained it away.

Well, I did trespass when he was trying to work.

Well, I did come on to him when he was trying to work.

Well, I did call him a wanker and slap his ass when he was trying to work.

The recurring theme of *when he was trying to work* didn't escape Jack's attention. He would have been happy to test Paul's attitude outside of rehearsals if the man didn't scamper off as soon as Sweet called it a day. But Paul refused him even the courtesy of a polite response when Jack asked him to lunch. Or to dinner. Or suggested breakfast in bed.

That was the one time he was fairly certain Paul was going to break and slug him, once and for all. Jack almost wished he would. At least it would be contact. Because when Paul wasn't showering him in caustic commentary, he was ignoring him. And that just wouldn't do. He hadn't worked this hard to get this job to be relegated to the wings.

On day four of rehearsals, he decided enough was enough.

Jack strolled into the rehearsal hall, his arm around the shoulders of today's prop. Said prop's name was Henry, with the cherubic features of an altar boy and the pouting mouth of a corner whore. The piano stopped, and Jeff joined Paul's and Sweet's stares as they watched him saunter in.

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“Feels like a good day to dance,” he announced loudly, as if they were all the way on the other room and wouldn’t be able to hear him. “Someone aim me at the music.”

“Jack.” Paul sounded less than thrilled to see him. Or maybe he was less than thrilled about Henry. “So nice of you to join us today. You know, if we’re starting too early for you, all you have to do is say the word.”

Jack held his smile, ignoring the well of anger that came at Paul’s not so accurate assessment of time. He wasn’t late. Not technically. “And miss out on your charming company? Not bloody likely.” He guided Henry to the side wall, sliding his hand down the man’s back to give his ass a grope in full view of the others. “You can watch from here, pet. Best seat in the house.”

“No, he absolutely cannot,” Paul said, steel in his voice. “Get him out of here, or I’ll throw him out myself.”

Folding his arms over his chest, Jack blocked Henry from view and glared at Paul. “Since when did you become lord of the manor? He’s my guest, whether you like it or not.”

“We don’t have guests at rehearsal,” Paul growled. “God, what is wrong with you? And newsflash, sweetheart, I *am* lord of this manor.”

“Having a big stick means nothing if you don’t use it.”

“You know what? You’re right.” Paul moved quickly, bending to sweep his leg beneath Jack’s feet. Jack realized what was happening a second too late, and ended up flat on his back. Paul immediately grabbed the back of Henry’s neck and marched him to the door. “It was good to meet you, kid. If you

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ever want to be allowed on the MGM lot again, I'd suggest you don't let Jack pull you into his stupid stunts."

Jack launched himself at Paul's back before he had the chance to shove Henry out the door. As it was, Henry stumbled when the impact jarred Paul's grip, but once Jack was on his back, Paul didn't seem to care anymore about the man he'd been escorting.

He shook Jack with a hard jab into his solar plexus. Sharp pain radiated through Jack's lungs, stealing his breath for a moment, but he landed square, bouncing on the balls of his feet as he waited for the next blow.

"Been dying to do that all week, haven't you?" Jack taunted.

Instead of launching himself forward, Paul took a step back. "No. You know what I've been dying to do all week? Work with a professional. At least when I tell Jesson about you dragging your little toys to rehearsal, I can also add 'I told you so.'"

"Except Jesson already knows about Henry, so you're fuck out of luck there, Twinkles."

"He knows that you're dragging unnecessary guests to our closed rehearsals, even though he also knows that I do not like to have random looky-loos when I'm working? Sorry, I doubt it. Jesson wants to get this film made. Either you're lying, or he's taken leave of his senses."

"Henry's my vocal coach's assistant," Jack said smugly, which was true. The fact that he and Henry had also been casual fuck buddies since Jack had started his lessons was just

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a bonus. “He’s supposed to report back about places in my choreography I’m going to need some extra help on my breathing. Unless, of course, you *want* it to look absolute rubbish when we’re actually shooting and I can’t time my singing with the recording because I’m working too hard trying to make you look good.”

“Oh, I’m pretty sure this is going to look like rubbish no matter how many assistants you have on hand, Jack. And if you want Henry to study your form, you’re going to have to do it on your own time. Not mine.”

“Not your time. *Ours*.” He stepped closer. Paul’s eyes glittered dangerously, his mouth thinning, but he didn’t back away, not even when Jack jabbed him in the chest. “Something you keep forgetting, because you’re too busy trying to catch me out.”

“You have second billing in this picture, Jack. You’re not the star. And if you don’t prove yourself on this shoot, you aren’t going to get another one.” Paul returned the jab, but with more force than Jack used. “So, yes, it is *my* time.”

His prick jumped. Every muscle in Paul’s body was ready to spring, like those seconds before the first note, when he waited to take that first step, make the first move. Jack loved those seconds. The power in Paul’s body was a silent, sensual scream, one he’d couldn’t—and didn’t want to—ignore. He didn’t know if Paul preferred fucking men or not, but Jack did know he wasn’t completely averse to it. He had responded to Jack too strongly that first day. He hadn’t squashed the innuendo when he should have. This was Paul’s own fault if

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he didn't like it.

"There's not one thing you've thrown at me I haven't done. If this picture flops, it won't be my fault."

Paul chuckled. "You think that matters to anybody? If this picture flops, one of us is going to be labeled box office poison, and it ain't gonna be me. It's a bitch, but then, that's Hollywood."

The worst part about it, he was right. Paul Dunham was too big a star to be blamed. But this movie wasn't going to fail, no matter how much Paul might want it to. Jack wouldn't let it.

"Tell me exactly what your problem is with Henry watching. Because if you're doing this just to be a wanker, we're going to have a bigger problem than your ego."

Paul took a deep breath, and his gaze darted away. When he focused on Jack's face again, the hard glint was gone from his eyes. He lowered his voice, as though admitting some dark secret that even Sweet couldn't be aware of. "I don't...I don't like people to watch me rehearse. There are too many mistakes. Rehearsals aren't clean. And then it snowballs, okay? When somebody's watching, it's not just one mistake. It becomes ten mistakes."

Heat crawled up the back of Jack's neck, languid and intense. He couldn't blink, couldn't even look away from Paul. "Go home, Henry."

"Jack..."

"Go. I'll ring you tonight."

Not even the soft taps of Henry's retreating footsteps was

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enough to drag Jack's gaze away from Paul's face.

"Thank you," Paul said, softer still. "I appreciate that."

Jack tried to will his erection away, but the slow rumble of Paul's voice made that impossible. "You know this means I'm going to need you listening to my breathing now, don't you?" he said with a half grin.

"Don't worry." The corner of Paul's mouth lifted. If Jack didn't miss his guess, the small smile was actually genuine. "I'll be sure to point out every spot where you need work."

"I'm sure you will." Jack clapped and then rubbed his hands together. "Right. Let's get to work, yeah?"

* * *

Much to Paul's shock, they did get to work. Sweet actually had good suggestions, and, even more surprising, so did Jack. Paul kept waiting for the other shoe to drop, for Jack to pull another stupid stunt, or embarrass him in front of Sweet and Jeff. But he stayed focused. The hours slipped by, and Paul soaked his clothes through with sweat. Moisture dripped from his brow, his hair, down his neck and back. He could dance for hours, but even he had his limits, and his muscles began to burn. Jack looked almost as wrung out, his pale skin gleaming from perspiration. But he didn't complain. He didn't ask to stop.

Paul's respect for Jack climbed. Just a little bit. Not that he'd ever admit it. Especially since Jack kept shooting him insufferable little smiles.

Sweet and Jeff both scampered out of the room as soon as

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Paul told them they were finished for the night. Jack didn't follow. Paul wasn't surprised. When Jack followed him over to the piano, Paul realized he would have no choice but to speak to him.

"You ready for Betty to join us tomorrow?"

Jack leaned heavily against the side of the piano. "Absolutely not."

"She's promised me she's going to be on her best behavior."

"Yeah, she says that, and then she stabs you in the back."

Paul arched his brow. "She stabbed you in the back? I don't think I've heard that version of events."

"That's because there's nothing to hear."

"So you're just talking shit about your previous costars for no reason? That's a bad habit to get in to."

"It had nothing to do with the picture."

The words snapped between them, prompting a frustrated growl from Jack. Running his hand through his damp curls, he stomped away from the piano to the other side of the room and snatched up his bag. He slung it over his shoulder, but when he turned toward the door, he hesitated. Muscles worked in his jaw. It dawned on Paul that the way the man wore his emotions on his face just might work in their favor on the movie.

"They made us go out." Jack tilted his head to catch Paul's attention out of the corner of his eye. "You know the routine. Dinner. A party here and there. Maybe a premiere. I didn't want to do it, because Betty bored me to tears and I didn't

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think I was a good enough actor to pretend she didn't." He pointed a finger at Paul. "Don't say it."

"Betty knew the studio pressured you to take her out?"

Jack scowled. "Probably. She came and asked me, all sweet like, to go along with it. Said it would be painless. She'd make excuses for the shindig they were pushing on us, and we'd just go to this opening night instead. As long as I walked her up the red carpet and smiled for the cameras, she'd let me duck out after the picture started, and we'd call it square."

"There must be something about Betty that makes her good for that sort of thing. Maybe because she's such a pretty girl. The American public looks at her and thinks, 'Now, who wouldn't want to fuck her?'"

"I still think Schary only signed her on because he wants to get in her pants." Jack sighed and slouched, his bag slipping a little on his shoulder. "But she didn't seem that fussed I wasn't interested, so I went along with it. And everything was good, until..."

Paul waited for it, but when it didn't come, he prompted, "Until?"

"She found out I made a date. For that night. To meet me out back where I was going to slip out." He glanced at the door. "With Henry."

"First, don't underestimate Betty. She can't sing, but she can move. Second, did Betty have a problem with the fact that you were making a date with a guy, or did she have a problem with the potential embarrassment you were going to cause her? Meeting your boy at the backdoor isn't exactly discreet."

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“Yeah, yeah, I didn’t say it was the smartest thing I ever did. My point is, she said she was fine with it. Then at the premiere, she dragged me off to talk to Hedda fucking Hopper herself, and deliberately set it off so we were sitting next to her. No way could I leave after that.”

Paul’s lips twitched at Jack’s annoyed tone. He sounded like he thought this was some great offense he was forced to endure. But then, Henry had a nice little body. Maybe it was a true catastrophe. “Yeah, but I bet you learned your lesson about discretion, didn’t you? And it sounds like you escaped Betty relatively...unscarred. Not all of us can say that.”

“Please tell me you never actually fucked the ice queen. I’m not sure even *my* respect for you could sustain such a blow.”

“You didn’t know?” Paul began to absently play the piano. He found that when he was in Jack’s presence, it was best to keep his hands busy. “The break-up was all over the gossip rags. Especially since I was sporting a very noticeable cut on my face.”

“Oh, I know about the break-up. I’d have to be deaf, dumb, and blind not to know. I’m just hoping you had enough sense to keep your prick in your pants.” A hot gleam replaced some of the ire in Jack’s eye. “She’s not actually your type.”

Paul should have put a kibosh on the conversation. Encouraging Jack was never a good idea. Jack would take an inch, demand a mile, and then run for a hundred more. “What about her isn’t my type? I’m assuming you’ve seen pictures of the women I’ve dated before.”

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“We’ve all got those pictures, mate.” Slowly, he came back to the piano, the predator back in his pace. “I’ve also seen the way you looked at me.”

“Like you’re the pain in my ass that I can’t get rid of?” Paul asked lightly, hoping to disguise his discomfort.

“Funny you should mention your ass.” He leaned against the side of the piano again, trailing his nimble fingers over the keys. “Though for you, I’d bend over in a heartbeat.”

“I wouldn’t bend you over, Jack.” Paul held up his hand. “And don’t suggest or imply anything else, either.”

Jack shrugged, seemingly unfazed by the dismissal. “Wall works just as good for me. But that’s probably just a little too wild for you, I’ll bet.”

“You’re trying to get me to rise to the bait. What do you want me to tell you? That the wall is merely the pre-show activities?”

“All I’ve ever wanted to hear from you was the truth. And not the bullshit you spout because I bug you.”

“There’s an easy solution for that.” Paul smiled. “Stop bugging me.”

The answering grin was hard to look away from. “And dare to blend into the woodwork? Not in a million years, pet.”

“I don’t think you could blend into the woodwork. Even if you tried.”

He held himself utterly still when Jack leaned forward. He was not going to let this little punk back him down, no matter what he tried. Jack’s mouth hovered at Paul’s ear, breath hot and tempting, and it felt like forever before he finally spoke.

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“Least I know you’ve noticed.” Fingers danced along Paul’s thigh, coming to rest on his cock. “Because I bloody well see you.”

Panic shot through him, and Paul reacted without thought. As soon as he felt the pressure of Jack’s finger against his cock, he hit Jack’s hand away, his hand chopping across Jack’s wrist. Just hard enough to make sure Jack understood he meant business. “I thought I told you not to touch me.”

To his credit, Jack backed off, though that grin remained firmly on his face. “Maybe you shouldn’t tempt a bloke by sporting wood like that then.”

“Do you think you have the right to touch anything that catches your attention?” Paul asked, wishing he could adjust himself so his erection wasn’t so obvious. But Jack would track each gesture with a knowing eye. A knowing, obnoxious eye. “Most of us outgrow that.”

“Just don’t see any reason not to let you know it’s not one-sided.” Stooping down to pick up the bag he’d dropped, Jack slung it over his shoulder with a casual grace. “Nothing good comes from pretending. Learned that lesson a long time ago.”

Paul wanted to protest that it was one-sided, and all on Jack’s side. But he would only look ridiculous if he tried, and worse, he would open himself up to more demonstrations. “That’s an interesting philosophy coming from a guy who wants to be in movies.”

With a wink, Jack backed up to the door. “Movies were a bonus, mate. All I ever wanted was to dance.”

Too bad you dance like you have two left feet. Paul bit

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back the cutting remark. Mainly because they both knew it wasn't true. It wasn't any fun to insult the other man if he only grinned and brushed the words off.

"There are easier ways to do that than getting under my feet."

"Maybe," Jack conceded. "But this is infinitely more fun."

"Maybe for you. I haven't been having any fun."

"Not yet." Though he pulled the door open, he shot one last comment over his shoulder. "But you will."

Paul couldn't tell if that was a threat or a promise. Or maybe it was a prediction. Jack spoke with more than a hint of certainty, and the ache in his groin undermined Paul's own denials.

"Fuck this." Paul slammed the lid down on the piano and stood abruptly, knocking the bench down behind him. Jack had gotten under his skin, but that didn't mean he had to stay there. Not if Paul had anything to say about it."

CHAPTER 6

Even Jack's absence didn't give Paul any sense of relief. Long after he left the studio, his groin was still tight, his cock still mostly hard. A parade of people marched through his mind—people he had fucked, people he had tried to fuck, people he intended to fuck some day. Women. Men. Brunettes. Blonds. And every single one of them turned into Jack. Which only fueled his anger. And his arousal.

Paul bypassed showering on the lot and changed his clothes. He considered going straight home, but he had nothing to do there but stew and think of Jack and stew some more. That would make for a long, and possibly, sleepless night. Especially since he probably didn't want Jack at all. He

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enjoyed sex. He always picked up on somebody when he was in the middle of a shoot. Dancing, and even singing, got his blood pumping. He just needed an outlet. A safe outlet.

Martin and Lilah.

He never approached them, but this was a unique situation. Jack was driving him out of his mind. He could handle the younger man if he wasn't so much on edge. Because, of course, Jack would never believe him if he said that he was just a bit high-strung and horny in general. No, an arrogant clod like Jack would immediately take all the credit—or blame—for Paul's arousal. As though he was the only good-looking guy on the set. As though Paul even *needed* a good-looking guy. Beautiful women were just fine with Paul. Especially women as beautiful as Lilah.

And Jack would just love to know that Paul was running from the lot and directly to Martin. Paul could imagine the sly glint in Jack's blue eyes—eyes that were bluer than Martin's—the sardonic twist of his mouth, the *I'll take care of that for you, mate. All you have to do is ask*. Just who did Jack did think he was anyway? Paul knew working with him was a bad idea. Hadn't he told everybody who would listen? And if they knew, if they even had an *inkling*, of what Jack was putting him through, the plug would probably be pulled.

The thought brought Paul up short. All he had to do was drop a hint to Martin. Most people accepted that there were queers all over Hollywood, but nobody could actually acknowledge that fact. And if anybody did...if anybody even implied it...Jack would be sent packing. Right out of

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Hollywood, right out of California, right back to England where he belonged.

Paul dismissed the idea. Jack deserved it. After all the flaunting he did, he deserved it. But Paul would never do that to him. No matter how obnoxious he got. In fact, it would probably be best if he didn't mention Jack to Martin at all. If Lilah wanted to know why Paul was knocking on the door with a raging boner—well, she wouldn't want to know. She wouldn't care. That was the great thing about Lilah, and why Martin was such a lucky guy.

Martin's car was in the driveway. Paul parked behind it and jumped out of the car, forcing Jack to the back of his mind. He could indulge in thoughts of how much he hated Jack later. Much later. Like the next day when Jack was giving him a dozen more reasons to dislike him.

The door opened after the first knock, and a frowning Martin greeted him. He glanced over Paul's shoulder, then down to the fist had used to...well, maybe his knock had been a little heavy. Only when Paul uncurled his fingers did Martin look up again.

"Is something wrong?" He stepped aside to give Paul room to enter. "Should I break out the whiskey?"

"Whiskey can't hurt." Paul marched over to his favorite chair and sat down heavily. "It's just been a...really long day. I just left rehearsals."

"Ah. So this is about Jack." The soft evening sunshine disappeared with the click of the door. Martin crossed to the sideboard where the alcohol was stored. "I have to admit, I'm

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impressed. I thought I would've seen you earlier this week. You've lasted four days."

"He brought a guest to the rehearsal today without even asking first," Paul said. All in all, it had been the least offensive thing Jack had done that day, but he couldn't say *and then he touched my prick*. "He doesn't know his place."

Martin held out a half-full tumbler. "And his place would be...?"

Paul reached for the drink. "Under me." As soon as he said the words, heat flooded his cheeks. He took a sip of whiskey to cover. "You know what I mean. He's not the star of this picture."

"No, but he has a lot riding on it." Marty perched on the arm of the nearby couch. "I'm sure he wouldn't do anything to deliberately sabotage rehearsal."

"It's more of a matter of respect. Jack doesn't have *any*. At all. For anybody." Paul reached out, idly flicking a piece of lint from Martin's thigh. Once he touched the hard muscle, he found another piece of lint to flick away. "He thinks he's running the show."

Martin's lashes lowered to watch Paul's fingers, though he didn't move a muscle to stop his touching. "Would it help if I sat in on the rehearsals? Perhaps having a producer present will curb his behavior."

Paul snorted. "No. Schary being present wouldn't even curb his behavior." Martin's leg was warm, the heat soaking through his pants. "That's the problem with Jack. Though...to be fair...he did send his little guest away."

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“Well, see? There you go. I’m sure he just didn’t understand the situation.”

“Oh, he understands the situation. That’s the problem with Jack. He’s not stupid. He’s not stupid at all.” Emboldened by the fact that Martin wasn’t pushing his hand away, he increased the contact. “Where’s Lilah? She home?”

“No, she had other plans for this evening.” A slightly wary tone crept into Martin’s voice. “Did you want to go out for dinner? My treat. To take your mind off Jack.”

“No. I’m not really hungry. Jack ruined my appetite.” Paul’s gaze drifted to Martin’s crotch. Maybe Lilah being out wasn’t such a bad thing. Maybe Martin would still agree to something—in the interest of taking his mind off Jack. “I’d rather stay in tonight.”

“In that case, you’re going to need more alcohol.” Gently, Martin took his glass and rose, breaking the contact between them.

Paul stood as well. Martin didn’t have quite the same build as Jack. He was taller, and while he was fit, he didn’t have a dancer’s physique. Martin’s ass wasn’t quite as tight, either, but it was still nice. Paul’s cock twitched as his blood rushed south. He stood behind Marty, crowding his personal space without quite touching him.

“You should have a drink, too.”

Martin hesitated for a fraction of a moment before topping off Paul’s glass. “Lilah might be disappointed if we both drink without her.”

“We don’t necessarily have to tell her,” Paul said. The

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words sounded reasonable in his head, but as soon as he uttered them, he realized how ugly they were. He was glad Martin wasn't looking at him.

"Paul..." His name came out as a sigh. Martin bowed his head, his long fingers tracing the etched design on the crystal tumbler. "I'm sure you didn't mean that."

"No, I really fucking don't." Paul spun away and paced over to the door, putting as much space between them as he could. His body burned with shame, and his palms tingled. "I'm sorry. It's Jack. He's...God, I'm sorry."

The heat crawling across his skin was worse than the interminable seconds of silence that followed his apology. When the careful clasp of Martin's hand came down on his shoulder, it took everything he had not to wrench away.

"Did something else happen?" came the quiet question.

"Martin..." Paul wiped his hand over his face, a part of him hoping that he could just wipe away the entire night. "Nothing outside these four walls, right? I guess I probably should have clarified that before I made a complete ass out of myself."

Another warm squeeze on his shoulder, meant to reassure but only made him feel worse. "I'd never betray you, Paul. I hope you know that."

"I know. There's..." Though he trusted Martin without qualification, he still couldn't quite form the words. If he said them out loud, then they would be real. It would be true. But, he supposed he already crossed that bridge with Martin. "Jack made a pass at me and I guess it's...well, more than that. Jack

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isn't exactly subtle about what he wants."

Martin's hand fell away. "He made a pass at you? In rehearsal? Is he crazy?"

"I'm beginning to think he's a complete lunatic. But it wasn't exactly in rehearsal. He waited until Sweet and Jeff were gone."

"Oh." Silence. It lasted long enough to draw Paul's attention back to Marty, to see a small frown pulling his brows together. "Well, if you're not interested in Jack's...interest, I can speak with Schary. I can't guarantee that it'll do any good, though."

"No," Paul said sharply. "The only good that'll do is to have Jack blacklisted. I can't...I couldn't do that to him. Even if he's doing it to himself." Paul balled up his fists with frustration. "I should probably go. Stop wasting your time."

"You're not wasting my time. You're clearly upset by this. Tell me what I can do for you."

Paul laughed. "I know you mean well, Marty, but trust me, you don't want me to tell you what you can do for me."

Color rose in his cheeks. "That can't be the only solution."

Usually, Paul would agree. But his balls ached and his best friend's ass still looked far too appealing. He clearly needed to get laid. It had been far too long since he had given himself permission to touch another man. And Jack had just reminded him of that fact.

"I still think I should go. It feels like I haven't...remember last year when Lilah went to visit her sister in New York? And after the first week, you were climbing the walls?"

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Marty snorted. "That would be an understatement."

"Imagine Lilah moved to New York for four years."

"Four..." He whistled under his breath. "But you still don't have to go. Stay in the spare room. I can...make arrangements for you."

Paul blinked. "Wow. No, Martin, I don't...I'm not quite that desperate yet. Besides...why do you even know how to make arrangements? You haven't done this sort of thing before, have you?"

A wry smile twisted Martin's mouth. "You think you're the only movie star in town with preferences best left behind closed doors? Once, I had to procure the services of a young lady who specialized in putting saddles on her partner and riding him like a pony. Finding someone to suit your needs would be infinitely easier."

Paul laughed despite himself. Once he started, he didn't want to stop. It felt good to laugh, like he was releasing all of the stress making his neck and shoulders tight. Well, *almost* all the stress. "I think I might be able to guess who requested that." Despite the laughter and Martin's offer, he backed toward the door. "I still think I should go and get my head on straight. I need to be focused before tomorrow. Betty's going to join us."

"Ouch." But Martin didn't make any more offers, even walking with him to open the door. "Well, at least you shouldn't have to worry about Jack after tomorrow. He's likely to devote all his time making Betty miserable."

"Here's hoping." But Paul wasn't so sure. Given the

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choice between annoying Betty and tormenting him, Paul had a feeling he knew exactly what Jack would choose. Betty's presence would probably just make Jack shift his tactics. "Thanks. And...sorry again."

"It's already forgotten."

Paul didn't doubt it. Martin didn't have a dishonest bone in his body. If he said it was forgotten, then Paul knew he wouldn't have to spend the next six months avoiding his best friend. The thought made him weak with relief. Dealing with Jack for the duration of the shoot would be difficult enough.

* * *

Three hours later, Paul found himself in Pasadena, just off Colorado Blvd. He had taken a cab, so nobody in the neighborhood would recognize his car. He received a few stares when he entered the house, but most of the men there were more interested in each other than gawking at him. Besides that, Paul was not the most prominent, or recognizable, person in the house. Keeping his head down, he worked his way to the back of the house, searching for the kitchen and something cold to drink. Even though he moved quickly, he surveyed the room thoroughly.

By the time he reached the kitchen, he knew exactly what he wanted.

Paul had never been in this particular house before, but the parties were all the same, regardless of where they were held. When he was younger, he had been stupid. He thought it was all a big party. A lot of fun. But every party needed to come to

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an end, and Paul had avoided these sorts of houses for the past six years. Even so, he knew exactly where to find one when he needed one. Almost as if he always kept that particular option open. And as soon as Paul saw the young man standing in the corner of the living room, he remembered why he kept this option open.

He was slim and lithe, with sun-bleached hair and bronzed skin that could only come from living on the beach. His features were fine enough to get him labeled a pretty boy, but the way his white shirt strained over his chest, the sleeves rolled up to reveal tightly corded muscles drew Paul's gaze downward. Dark pants hugged trim hips and a tight ass. A swimmer. Or a surfer. Definitely athletic.

He was laughing at something an older man Paul didn't recognize had said to him when he glanced casually over the crowd. His eyes widened when he spotted Paul in the kitchen doorway, followed immediately by a hungry sweep downward. When the blond lifted his beer to his mouth for a sip, he shot Paul a wide smile.

At a normal gathering, Paul would cross the room, wait for a break in the conversation, and then politely introduce himself. But this wasn't a normal gathering, and Paul did not need to introduce himself. He caught the younger man's gaze and held it for a long beat before tilting his head to the side, gesturing him over. If the kid was smart, he'd pay attention. If not, Paul would find somebody else who'd suffice.

It took several seconds, and more than one attempt to brush off the older man's wandering hand, for the blond to

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break away from his conversation and weave through the crowd toward Paul. He drained the rest of his beer along the way, discarding the empty as soon as he could, so both hands were free by the time they came face to face.

Up close, he seemed even more delicate, smaller than he'd seemed from across the room. But the eyes were a sharp blue-gray, and his smile genuine, and Paul knew then that the rest of it didn't matter.

"Billy didn't tell me my favorite actor was going to be here tonight." He stuck out his hand. "I'm Don."

"That's because Billy didn't know I was going to be here." He took Don's hand and almost sighed at the contact. His skin was smooth, but his grip was strong. "I'm crashing the party tonight. Did I take you away from anything—or anybody—important?"

"No." The smile deepened. "But you haven't taken me anywhere yet."

"Good point." He tightened his grip on Don's hand and pulled him toward the staircase. Don didn't resist. It shouldn't have mattered that he followed willingly—anybody else in the room would have—but it still made his groin tighter than before. He needed to get balls deep in Don's ass before he exploded.

Once they reached the landing, Paul stopped and surveyed his options. There were several rooms along the hallway, but all of the doors were closed. Paul's frustration grew, and he felt that familiar sense of anger. The anger that had accompanied him since Jack showed up in his life. But the

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bathroom door opened, releasing two drunken, satisfied looking men. Paul shrugged and pulled Don down the hall. It was better than nothing.

Slim arms curled around his waist as soon as they stepped inside. “God, you’re so much bigger in real life than you are on screen.” A warm mouth pressed to his back. “I’ve seen all your movies, you know. That wasn’t me blowing smoke downstairs.”

Paul turned to wrap his arms around Don’s slim figure and pressed him to the wall. He smelled of beer and salty chips, and beneath that was something like cinnamon. Desire climbed up his spine, clawing at him, and he knew as soon as he touched the other man’s mouth, he was going to lose it.

“I’m glad to hear it. You can tell me all about that later,” Paul murmured, his lips hovering over Don’s.

“Later,” Don promised. His hands curled into the front of Paul’s shirt, and he closed the distance between their mouths.

Though Paul wanted to concentrate on the relief at finally getting his hands on a hard, lean body, the hungry jab of Don’s tongue past his lips destroyed his control. Paul sucked on it, grinding against the slighter man’s hips, but quickly needed more, driving back to sweep into Don’s mouth with his own tongue, searching out every warm corner, every sweet recess.

Don groaned and curled a leg around Paul’s. Their erections nudged together, but Paul wasn’t as interested in the man’s cock as he was the tight curve of his ass. He slid one hand down and cupped it. He was rewarded with a hard flex

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against his fingers.

Paul couldn't take his mouth from Don's. He couldn't open his eyes, either. Sometimes he saw Don's face. Sometimes he didn't see any face. And, occasionally, Jack's sharp blue eyes drifted to his mind's eye. He banished that image with the reminder that it was Don's mouth locked to his and Jack was never, ever going to learn about this.

He kneaded Don's ass until they were both moaning. His cock strained against his pants, and he finally reached for Don's hand and dragged it between their bodies to settle over his prick. Don responded immediately—correctly—squeezing Paul's shaft with firm fingers. Paul shuddered and thrust against his palm.

“Want me to suck you?” Don asked, his voice hoarse. He squeezed again, then turned his hand to mold his fingers over Paul's balls. “God, I would love to get my mouth on you.”

“No.”

Don looked up with surprise, as though he was not accustomed to anybody turning down a blow job from him. Judging by the shape of his mouth, that was probably the case. Any other time, Paul probably would have eagerly agreed. But that wasn't what he needed now. Paul pressed his mouth to Don's and added, “I'm going to fuck you.”

The slim cock pressed against him jumped, Don's fingers tightening reflexively on Paul's length. “I can find us a bedroom, if you want.”

“No, I don't need a bedroom.” Paul stopped moving and lifted his head again. “Unless you want a bedroom.”

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Don shook his head. “I just thought it would be more comfortable for you.”

“Oh. No. No, you don’t have to worry about me. But...thanks for offering. Here.” Paul spun Don to face the door and reached in front of him to pull his zipper down. Don pressed back, grinding his ass into Paul’s cock. The light pressure was enough to make Paul’s eyes cross. He wrapped his fingers around Don’s shaft, stroking once to pull a moan from Don’s throat.

Bracing one hand against the door, Don dropped the other to fold over Paul’s on his cock. “Billy keeps Vaseline in the drawer under the sink.” He wriggled his hips, which had the dual effect of sliding his pants down as well as scraping over Paul’s aching erection. “But for you, I’d be willing to go a little rougher. If that’s what you want.”

Paul did want it rough, but he also wanted things to go smoothly. He didn’t want to work his cock into Don’s tight passage slowly and carefully—he wanted to take him with a single thrust. He pulled himself away from Don’s welcoming body, unzipping his pants with one hand while he reached for the sink drawer with the other. Don kept wiggling, working his pants down his legs until they pooled at his feet. His ass looked as perfect as it felt, and Paul paused for a moment, happy to stare at him.

Don looked over his shoulder and smiled. “I can’t wait.”

The words were eager, not bossy, but Paul immediately flashed to Jack. Goading him. Mocking him. Paul kicked his pants off with a near growl. Don wasn’t Jack, and it was

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Don's ass driving him to distraction.

Don spread his legs, his balls hanging visibly between his thighs. Paul slicked up his fingers and traced the crease, skimming over the twitching opening for a second to reach farther and squeeze Don's sac. Don dropped his head, his body vibrating from his soft moans, and pushed back so Paul's forearm and wrist nestled between his cheeks. The heat surged through their skin and sank all the way to Paul's bones.

"You are going to feel so good," Don murmured.

Paul grunted and let go. His hand returned to the tight ring of muscle, and this time, he didn't bother with niceties. He pushed two greased fingers inside, twisting them into the channel to stretch him even more.

Don's pulse hammered, his body throbbing around Paul's fingers. Paul's cock leaked pre-come freely, and he felt the clear fluid gathering at his head and rolling down the underside of his shaft. Paul stroked himself with one hand, spreading the pre-come over his sensitive crown, while he pumped his other hand. His own heart hammered so hard he felt it at the back of his throat.

Don's moans grew louder and louder, until they were nearly shouts. Paul took that as a sign that he was definitely ready for his cock. He pulled his fingers from Don's body and pressed the tip of his cock against Don's clenched, slick hole. He might have taken his time—he still had a thread of his self-control—but Don pushed back against him and Paul had no choice but to slam forward.

A cry wrenched from Don's throat, his head falling back

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against Paul's chest with enough force to border on pain. But that was a mild distraction, infinitesimal compared to the velvety heat now enveloping his length. A shudder wracked through both of them, and Paul coiled his arm around Don's waist to hitch him higher, harder, merging skin to skin as he fought to get accustomed to the constriction. Too long. Far too long. How had he waited so long to feel this again?

Because of his career. But thoughts of his career brought with them images of Jack, and the graceful twists of his hips and arms as he danced around Paul in the practice room. He wouldn't wait so patiently for Paul to move, not like Don was now. He'd be spurring Paul to get his ass in gear, taunting him with unspeakable visions until he had no choice but to punish Jack. He wouldn't stop talking until Paul stuffed his cock down his throat to do it for him. And then when Paul had emptied his balls, Jack would give him that smug smirk and ask how long before they could do it again.

Don tilted his mouth toward Paul, clearly angling for a kiss. Paul gave him what he wanted, claiming his mouth with a hard kiss designed to steal what was left of his breath. He wasn't sure, but he thought Don's feet were no longer touching the ground. Paul didn't think about going fast or slow. He just let his body move, taking what it needed and then demanding more. There was a steady, hard thump. At first, Paul thought that was his own heart beat. But then he realized it was Don's body, hitting the door in a hard tempo.

He shifted his hold to seek out the slim length of Don's cock. Don moaned into his mouth at the first touch, clenching

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around Paul on each drive into his ass. It forced Paul to push even harder, but Don seemed to welcome it, his ragged pants of encouragement spilling from his lips. Paul stifled them with more kisses. He didn't need prompting. He just needed to get this out of his system, so he could keep Jack from getting under his skin.

Don felt good. So good that Paul could imagine dragging him to a more private place and working out all his frustrations on Don's willing body. But not his house. He would never take another guy, especially a guy like Don, to his own home. That made him think of Jack again. Barging into his home. Barging into his *studio*. Pressing himself into the space where he was least welcome.

Paul moved faster, pounding into Don's body, stripping his shaft harder. He needed to stop thinking of Jack. If he wanted to come and find any sort of relief, he needed to stop thinking about Jack.

"*Really?*" Jack's voice filled his head. Paul squeezed his eyes shut to try and block it out. "*Think it's that simple, do you?*"

"Fuck," Paul growled. He yanked out of Don, who immediately shouted in protest. Paul spun him around and lifted him from the floor before Don could even catch his breath. His legs immediately went around Paul's hips, and Paul drove forward, filling Don's ass once again. Don tried to kiss him, but Paul caught his chin with hard fingers and forced his head back, so he was looking into Don's grayish eyes, not Jack's vivid baby-blues.

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This was better. While superficially, the coloring and the build were the same, Don was far too fine-boned to even compare to Jack. The shape of his mouth was different, too. Jack's was wider, more sensual, always pulled into some sort of smile, whether genuine or mocking. When Don reached for his cock and began jerking off, Paul let him, using the separation between their bodies to focus on the sensation of those hot, quivering walls searing him with every thrust.

Paul covered Don's hand, increasing the pressure around his shaft. Two hard strokes were enough to make Don shout, and then erupt over Paul's stomach, his come catching Paul's shirt. He didn't want this to end too soon, even if he needed the release. He didn't want to lose the heat of Don's body, the firm grip of his passage. But his orgasm was too much for Paul to withstand. The way his body clenched and writhed, the way he fluttered and gasped for breath and moved, was all too much to withstand.

Paul slammed his mouth to Don's, their tongues and teeth clashing. Don caught Paul's strangled shout of relief as his cock pulsed and throbbed, filling Don's ass with his come. He jerked his hips again and again, milking the orgasm, desperate to capture every second.

Strong arms wound tighter around him. Don seemed as reluctant as Paul to let it end, chasing his mouth when Paul pulled back for breath. "Don't have to stop with this," he panted. "Here, my place, anyplace you want. Just name it."

Paul needed to go home. Alone. But he didn't want to be alone. That simple fact drove him to have horrible

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relationships with people like Betty. That simple fact was the reason he chose to have a full staff for a house he rarely used. That simple fact drove him to fuck his best friend's wife in front of the man.

“Here. We'll claim a bed. Just a few more hours.”

Don's brilliant smile was almost enough to eclipse the memory of Jack's, the way he'd looked at Paul after touching him at the piano, the knowing in his piercing gaze that Paul couldn't escape no matter how hard he tried.

Almost.

CHAPTER 7

Jack showed up early for rehearsal for a lot of reasons. To prove to Paul that he wasn't the only one who took this movie seriously. To have more time to nettle him before they settled in to work. To beat Betty and have the space to gloat in front of her for the duration of the shoot.

But mostly, because he couldn't sleep. Because he had gone out with Henry the night before, and though there had been much needed drinking and merrymaking, he had stumbled home at one in the morning still thinking about that smoldering look in Paul's eye when Jack had dared to touch him. Henry had volunteered to help Jack take the edge off—quite enthusiastically—but what Henry had to offer and what

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Jack wanted were two totally different things.

He'd jerked off more than once to fantasies of straddling Paul's lap instead of simply touching his cock. Leaning against the piano keys. Banging out a different kind of melody. The little rest he got had been interrupted with more dreams that left him hard and aching.

Better to get to the lot and work. At least he could work through his frustrations with hours upon hours of rehearsals.

Sweet showed up next, his brows shooting up at the sight of Jack stretching out in the corner. "You forget to leave last night?"

Jack snorted. "Just don't feel like being here all day. And since Betty's showing up—"

"Don't blame working all day on me." Her voice from the doorway set his teeth on edge, and though he didn't look back to watch Betty enter, there was no missing her reflection in the long mirror. "If it takes you that long to learn a few steps, Jack, maybe you should consider a new line of work."

"And miss sharing my brilliance with the adoring public? Nice try, sweetheart."

Her lips thinned. With one last glare in his direction, Betty stomped off to kiss and hug Sweet in greeting, a blatant reminder of the years she'd spent in the business, years Jack hadn't accumulated yet. He turned his back on the pair and concentrated on stretching out his stiff calf muscles. If it wasn't for the chance to continue working with Paul, he'd walk and leave Betty to explain it to the others why not even someone as hungry as him was willing to share the screen with

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her. Only his determination to see his name alongside Paul's kept him from leaving.

Jeff was the next to arrive. Jack had no idea if that was the norm or not; all three of them had been there before him since the beginning of the week. But the closer the hand got to the twelve on the clock, the more often Jack glanced at the empty doorway. Where the hell was Paul?

Sweet echoed that question fifteen minutes later, when Paul still hadn't arrived. Betty went to the other end of the room and began stretching, putting her body through an extensive, and obviously well known, set of exercises. Jeff idly plunked out a tune on the piano. A very repetitive one that was like a drill piercing Jack's skull. Another ten minutes passed, and Jack wondered if they were just going to sit around and stare at each other all day, or if they could actually get to work with or without Paul.

The door finally swung open, a full half hour later than they were scheduled to start. They all paused what they were doing to watch Paul's entrance. His hair, always carefully combed, was mussed and sticking up at odd angles, like the most he had done that morning was try to run his fingers through it. The shirt he wore was a trifle too tight, like he had snagged it from somebody else's closet, and his eyes were red.

"Sorry, everybody," Paul greeted. "I overslept."

"Overslept?" Stating his incredulous thought aloud surprised even Jack. "You don't look like you've slept at all, mate."

"I slept," Paul snapped. "I'm just running a bit behind this

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morning. I guess we're even now for all the mornings you came in late."

Jack sauntered closer. "Running behind would imply you have some sort of life to keep you busy. And we all know the only life you have is your work..." His thought trailed off when he caught sight a darker shadow beneath Paul's collar. The man hadn't shaved that morning, either, but it wasn't stubble that attracted Jack's attention. He grinned, unable to contain his burst of glee at recognizing it. "Is that a hickey I spy on our fearless star's neck?"

"Get away from me, Jack." Paul pushed past him, but Jack wouldn't be deterred. He stuck to Paul's side, looking for any other hints of the night before.

"A hickey?" Betty perked up at the words. "So who is it? Another lucky girl from the chorus line?"

"Yes, Paul." Jack planted himself in Paul's favorite spot at the piano, forcing the other man to check his steps at the last minute. "Do tell. Who's the lucky bird who got to lay lips on her favorite movie star?"

"Nobody you know, Jack. So don't worry your head about it." He reached for the stack of papers on top of the piano and made a show of looking through them. "Betty, have you already seen the steps?"

"Is she somebody I would know?" Betty asked.

"No."

"You could fix that. Invite her out to dinner tonight, let us get to know your new squeeze." Jack seriously doubted Paul had spent the night with a girl, but he could play along with

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the best of them. “We’ll double. Me and Thayer, you and your bird.”

Betty’s head snapped around. “I am not going out with you, Jack.”

He affected a patient sigh. “It wouldn’t be a real date, you dozy bint. Just a little bit of pre-publicity for the picture. ‘New Costars Paint The Town Red.’ That kind of thing.”

“Shut up, Jack. We’re not going out on a date. But if you want to paint the town red with Betty, be my guest.”

The more he thought about it, the more Jack loved the idea. “It defeats the purpose if you’re not along,” he pressed. “You’re the big star here. You’re the top billing. Who’s going to give me and Betty a second look without you there to get their attention?” There. Leave it to the man’s vanity to do Jack’s work for him.

“You’re right about one thing. Nobody would give you a second glance without me around. That doesn’t mean I have to spend all night with you. So let it go.”

“I don’t know...” Sweet’s unexpected contribution to the conversation had all three of them looking in his direction. “All three stars, out dancing together. Could be very good PR for the movie, Paul. And if you and Betty start getting seen together in public now, it’ll help counter some of the old press you two had.”

“Right,” Jack said. “Water under the bridge. Let bygones be bygones for the sake of the movie you believe in so much.”

Betty rolled her eyes. “Gee, think you can throw out another cliché there?”

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“Good press for the film?” Paul tossed the papers aside. “The film that’s not even going to be released for another eight months? The film we haven’t even began shooting? You want me to start worrying about promoting a film we don’t even have the choreography for?”

Sweet seemed unfazed. “It’s never too early to get people talking.”

“Unless there’s some reason you don’t want to be seen out in public with your new girl.” Jack kept his gaze steady on Paul, daring him to look up. “You’re not fucking someone’s wife, are you?”

Paul sighed. “Fine, Jack, you win. Since you’re too shy to ask Betty out on a second date yourself, I’ll go along with this stupid plan.”

He let the gibe about being cowardly slide. After all, he’d won. He was going to get to spend time with Paul outside of a studio lot. All right, he was going to have to put up with Betty for the night, but he would also get to watch Paul squirm with whatever date he managed to scrounge up. Because the more Jack watched him, the more convinced he got Paul hadn’t spent the night with a girl.

Which made Jack all that more eager to see just what other buttons he could push. If touching Paul for just those fleeting seconds had driven him to this, what would get him to break completely?

* * *

In spite of all Paul’s attempts to make rehearsals run long,

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the trio were still done by four, packed off with Sweet's blessing and assurances he'd let the marketing department know so that the press could be alerted. Jack had insisted on driving, though nothing made Paul budge on the issue of him and his date. That meant Jack had to pick up Betty and get her to the restaurant on his own. He'd have to take her home afterward, too, but in light of what he hoped to gain from the evening, he figured the trade-off would be worth it.

When she saw his Roadmaster parked on the curb, she let out a low whistle. "I guess I know what you've been spending your money on."

"She's a beaut, isn't she?" Jack ran an appreciative hand over the door before holding it open for Betty. "Got her for a song."

Her eyes narrowed. "You didn't steal it, did you?"

"Yes," he deadpanned. "Just so I can get you arrested for being an accessory tonight."

With an exasperated sigh, she slid into the front seat, tucking her skirt around her legs. "You're such a jerk, Jack."

"Only for you, pet."

He was saved from further conversation by her constant fiddling with the radio, though his nerves were shot by the time he pulled up in front of the restaurant. He tossed the keys to the valet, jogging around the front of the car to slide his arm around Betty's waist. She tensed, and he pulled her closer.

"Smile for the camera," he murmured. A photographer was stationed out of sight, off to the side; the quiet Italian restaurant Paul had insisted on was not one of the usual

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hotspots for the press. As they went inside, Jack made sure Betty was angled to get included in all the shots that might get taken.

He expected to find Paul sitting at a table already, but a quick scan of the room proved that Paul was running late. Again. Or he had no intention of showing up at all. Jack wasn't too worried about the latter possibility. Paul may not have loved the idea, but he recognized a good chance for publicity when he saw it.

"If Paul doesn't show up, I'm not going to spend all night with you," Betty said.

"If Paul doesn't show up, we'd just be wasting our time anyway."

"I don't know what you think you're going to gain by antagonizing him."

"It's not antagonizing to want the man to show some commitment to promoting this picture." He took Betty's hand and pulled her over to the bar, waving off the maitre d'. He didn't want to get stuck at a table until Paul arrived. "And don't tell me you're not curious about who he was with last night. He was late to his own rehearsal because of that date. Paul never does that."

Betty arched her brow. "It is antagonizing when the studio isn't even worried about promoting the picture yet. And how do you know what Paul never does? You've been working with him for less than a week."

"The man's reputation precedes him."

She snorted. "Whatever, Jack. You don't know the first

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thing about Paul.” She leaned forward. “But I know him well enough to know that he’s going to see through whatever game you’re playing.”

Her warnings didn’t faze him. “Because throwing a shoe at the man when he had the good sense to walk out the door gives you all the insight in the world on him, is that it?”

“There was more to our relationship than that one unfortunate incident. And tempers were running high that night. Paul is a very...passionate person. Not that you’ll personally ever know that.”

Jack ignored her attempts to show her superiority by ordering a beer from the hovering bartender. When they were alone again, he changed the subject back and said, “So you’re not the tiniest bit curious who’s got his knickers in such a twist? The man had more hickeys than movies under his belt.”

Betty shrugged. “Not really. Paul’s fucked a lot of people. Having one wild night is hardly news. I wasn’t even that interested in his private life when we were dating.”

“That would explain the break-up, then.”

“Do you ever get tired of pretending you know everything?”

Jack grinned. “No, not really.”

“And why are you so interested in who Paul was with last night? How is it of any concern to you?”

This was more dangerous territory. Betty knew Jack preferred guys, but as far as she was concerned, Paul was straight. Hell, as far as the world was concerned, for that matter. Jack wasn’t interested in ruining the man’s career by

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being too obvious. He just wanted the man to admit it to him.

“Because when it comes to where I can go in this business, Paul is it. The more I know about him, about how he works, what he does, the more I can use to get ahead on my own.”

Betty rolled her eyes. “So, again, I ask what good it does to antagonize him?”

“No good,” Paul said from behind Jack. “He’s just got a shitty sense of humor.”

Slowly, Jack turned. Paul had taken the time between rehearsal and now to eradicate the effects of his sleepless night. His hair was immaculately combed, the five o’clock shadow long gone. Gone were the ill-fitting dance clothes. His perfectly tailored dark suit framed his broad shoulders and lean hips like he’d been born in it, turning his dark eyes into fathomless pools, fixed unsmilingly on Jack.

Every ounce of blood in his veins went barreling south. Jack had to lean his elbows back against the bar and let his jacket fall open in order to let some of the heat overwhelming him escape.

“And here I thought you liked my sparkling wit. Or was it my witty sparkle? I forget.”

“I don’t like either,” Paul said, before pulling his date forward. She was young, probably younger than Betty, and had thick dark hair, eyes so brown they were almost black, and a figure that even Jack could recognize as a killer. “Anna this is Jack Wells and Betty Thayer. Jack, Betty, this is Anna Emery.”

Anna smiled, revealing perfect, white teeth. “It’s so nice to

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meet both of you.”

Jack hated her. It was irrational and completely unfounded. The girl had said a grand total of eight words to him. But in that moment, at that time, bitter dislike surged through his body. Because of the gentle, possessive hand Paul kept in the small of her back. Because of the closeness of their bodies. Because she got to stand there at Paul’s invitation and be the center of his world, if only for a night.

He murmured a greeting, saved from more by Betty’s bright chatter. Turning back to the bar, he picked up his beer and drained the rest of it. He hadn’t actually thought Paul would bring someone, or if he did, that it would be someone completely non-threatening. Jack could rattle off the names of a dozen different girls Paul had escorted over the past few years. Any one of them would’ve been better than the beautiful, young Anna. The fact that she was new lent credence to Paul’s routine being disrupted.

“I’m going to want another of these to take to our table,” Jack told the bartender, sliding his empty glass toward him.

“Sorry we’re late,” Paul added. “We got a little distracted on the ride over. You know how it is.”

Betty flashed a knowing smile. “Yeah, I do.”

Paul caught the attention of the host. “Is our table ready? We’re ready to order.”

Jack hung back as Paul took the lead. This wasn’t turning out how he’d hoped. More than one head turned as they wound their way through the tables, but Paul was the one they watched, Paul and his perfect, perky date.

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Halfway across the room, Betty yanked on his arm. "Smile for the cameras," she hissed in warning.

Great. Now even Betty was making him look like an idiot.

They sat at the small, intimate table, Paul opposite Jack, Betty opposite Anna. Paul was the one the waiter deferred to, and it was only after he'd taken a menu that the others were given one as well.

"So this was your pick, Twinkles." Jack scanned the entrees, wondering if Paul was playing hotshot, if that meant he was footing the bill, too. "What do you recommend?"

Paul caressed his date's arm, absently curling her long hair around his finger. She glanced over and smiled, her eyes full of doting affection. He spoke without looking away from Anna. "The gnocchi is excellent here. It's served in this creamy, rich white sauce. The steak florentina is their specialty. I would recommend that, if you aren't in the mood for pasta."

"Ooo, I remember the gnocchi." Betty closed her menu and set it down. "I'm going to have that."

All Jack wanted was another beer, but he was stuck with his empty glass and its condensation until the waiter came back. Slouching in his seat, he tossed the menu onto the table and started looking around the room for anything more interesting than Paul fawning all over his precious date. He failed miserably.

"So how long have you and Paul been dating?" Betty asked Anna.

Anna glanced over to Paul and then giggled a little. "I

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guess this is our first *real* date.”

Jack perked up at that, until Paul added, “Somehow, we never quite make it out of the house. But we met a few weeks ago. Anna works in wardrobe. But I keep telling her that with a face like that, she’s going to be in front of the camera in no time.”

“Right, because you’re actually looking at her face.” As soon as the words slipped out of Jack’s mouth, he wanted to take them back. He didn’t know this Anna from anyone else. Just because she had the misfortune to be in the place Jack wanted didn’t mean he had to treat her so poorly. Paul was the one he was pissed at.

Betty hit his arm. “Don’t be a boor, Jack.”

“Yeah, Jack,” Paul said, only a trace of smugness in his voice. “Don’t be a boor. Anna also has a really lovely voice.”

Anna’s eyes darted around the table before she giggled again. “It’s okay, but hardly good enough for the movies. But Paul told me that the two of you have a great voice coach.”

“Oh, Richard’s wonderful,” Betty gushed. “He’s even made Jack sound like he doesn’t have marbles in his mouth.”

Jack scowled. “That’s the way the words are supposed to sound.”

“The words, maybe, but not the notes.”

Anna leaned forward. “I don’t think you sound like you have marbles in your mouth, Mr. Wells. I saw the movie you did last year, and I thought you sounded really good. You bring a certain...something to the screen.”

Now he felt like an even bigger bastard for giving the girl

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a hard time. He shot her a smile he almost felt and hoped it would mitigate some of his previous statements. “Call me Jack. And you know, I bet if you asked him nice, Paul could find a spot for you somewhere in *Sticks and Stones*. Better yet...” He leaned closer, lowering his voice. “Ask him not so nice. I hear he loves that.”

“Paul does have an eye for talent,” Betty said quickly, before Anna could respond. “After all, if it wasn’t for him, I might still be dancing in the background.”

Paul lifted Anna’s hand and brushed his lips across her knuckles. “Too bad the script calls for two male leads instead of two women.”

“Now, there’s a thought.” Jack eased back, trying not to focus on all the casual displays of affection Paul kept putting on. It was disarming seeing him like this. Nothing Jack had witnessed to this point would have ever suggested Paul was this free in public. “Paul in a dress. We’d pack ’em in the seats then.”

Paul chuckled. “Maybe I’ll have Josh keep an eye out for a screwball comedy. Something with disguises and wacky misunderstandings.” He smiled at Betty. “Do you want to be my Kate Hepburn?”

The more Jack heard, the more he wished he’d never made this suggestion in the first place. Paul and his harem. He played the women with such easy expertise, getting them to smile and laugh. Even the waiter joined in when he arrived to take their order. Jack was left with the occasional joke, the random comment, all the while his gaze returning to watch

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Paul again and again.

While they ate, Paul's hand disappeared beneath the table. Jack knew he was resting it on Anna's shapely thigh, perhaps caressing her skin. Betty didn't pay attention to Jack at all. She might as well have moved her chair to the other side of the table so Paul could put a possessive hand on her body, too. Not that Jack wanted her to acknowledge him, but maybe then he wouldn't have felt like some sort of third wheel.

"Who wants to go dancing after dinner?" Paul asked.

Anna smiled broadly. "We can go to *Ciro's Nightclub*?"

"We can go wherever you like," Paul promised. "Betty? Jack?"

"Oh, I'm in."

Betty's enthusiasm might have been catchy even if Anna hadn't suggested *Ciro's*. That was A-list all the way. Jack had been once or twice, but not nearly as often as he wanted. Even without any kind of notice, Paul would be able to get them in, no problem.

"You're talking my specialty. Count me in."

"That's Jack. He never misses a chance to show off," Paul said lightly.

"Maybe Jack can show me a few steps at the club," Anna suggested.

"Maybe but..." Paul leaned closer, his voice dropping, though the words were still crystal clear. "Remember that I do get jealous. And Jack also has the reputation for being very hands-on."

Jack smirked. "And considering Paul's the one I've been

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dancing the most with this past week, he's the one to know."

"If you want to dance with Jack, you just have to make sure your boundaries are clear," Paul said.

Anna winked. "What if I don't have any boundaries?"

"Then I guess you better just dance with me," Paul murmured.

Tossing his napkin onto the table, Jack pushed his chair back and rose. "Let's blow this joint then. Can't show off if we never hit the floor."

"Oh. I wanted to try the tiramisu," Anna said.

Paul stood and helped her out of her seat. "Don't worry. There will be plenty of time for dessert later." Paul offered his arm to Anna, then glanced over his shoulder. "Jack, I'm assuming since this was your idea, you're going to get the check?"

His teeth clicked together, his lips pressed into a thin line. There was no way to say no without looking like a complete and utter prat. Paul waited, a smug half-smile curving his sensual mouth. Jack had never wanted to smash his teeth in more than at that moment.

"Of course." He pulled out his wallet. "Ciro's, here we come."

CHAPTER 8

Paul never had a hard time convincing himself he could enjoy a lady's company. When he slept with a woman, he had his own pornographic images to concentrate on while his body did all the work. And when he danced with a woman, he just pretended there were cameras surrounding them, hot lights above them, and dozens of people wandering back and forth on the edges of his vision. It wasn't any different at Ciro's.

"Thank you for tonight," Anna murmured in his ear as he led her around the floor.

"I feel like I should be the one thanking you. You're always on your game."

She responded with a throaty chuckle. "Like pretending to

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be in love with you is difficult.”

“It might be with such short notice.”

“You’re just lucky I didn’t have plans tonight.”

“Trust me,” Paul murmured, scanning the room for Jack’s blond head, “I know how lucky I am.”

Jack was on the other side of the room, his arms wrapped around Betty, trying to pretend his attention wasn’t locked on Paul. It was easy to see that the night hadn’t turned out like Jack had hoped, but Paul didn’t quite understand what Jack thought would happen. Did he think Paul would show up with Don in tow? Did he think Paul would show up dateless, properly embarrassed by Jack’s cunning ploy? Paul’s whole life was built around deceiving people. He had been off his game that morning—Don had been difficult to leave—but a night out on the town was easy. Child’s play.

The song ended and the bandleader announced they were going to take a short break. Paul led Anna back to the table they shared with Jack and Betty. He did feel a little sorry for Betty. She clearly wasn’t enjoying herself. After all, Jack wasn’t the most attentive date.

“I feel like I could dance all night,” Paul announced. “What about you, Anna?”

“Don’t I always manage to keep up with you?” she asked, settling in the seat across from Jack.

“Even more reason for a pretty bird like you to be in pictures.” Jack had been laying the charm on thick, ever since they’d arrived. He’d also been drinking like a fish. Paul counted the drink in his hand as his eighth. “But sooner or

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later, you're going to have to let me give you a spin. We can show Paul a few tricks he hasn't quite mastered yet."

"I sincerely doubt that," Betty said wryly.

"You can have the next dance. If Paul doesn't mind."

"I don't mind," Paul said with an easy smile, like Jack was the least threatening man on the planet. "Maybe it'll be you teaching Jack a thing or two."

"That's far more likely," Betty agreed. "He's been stepping all over my toes all night."

Paul didn't respond visibly to that bit of news, but he didn't doubt Betty's words. Jack's mind clearly wasn't on dancing. "Jack's just not used to leading."

"If someone wasn't always hogging the limelight, I just might actually get a shot." Jack's complaint was just a little too loud, though the din of the club kept him from being noticed. He tossed back the last of his drink, and his lips shone from the few drops of alcohol that clung to them when he put the glass back down. "C'mon, Annie bird, let's do this thing."

Betty grabbed his arm when he stood. "Jack, the band's on a break."

"So?"

"So there's no music."

Jack brushed her off with a grimace and tapped his temple. "It's all up here, luv. Just ask Paul. Showed him good and proper that first day when he let the pianist go." His gaze swiveled to Paul, hot and heavy. "Didn't I, mate?"

"Yes, you do great work without accompaniment," Paul said quickly. "But I think most people here will be more

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shocked than impressed. Besides, Anna won't know what's playing in your head."

"I don't mind waiting until the band comes back," Anna added.

"Well, I do. We're here to dance, aren't we?"

"Is that what you call what you've been doing all night?" Betty said.

Jack swept around the table to crouch at Anna's side. One hand rested on the back of her chair, but the other caressed her calf, his hand oddly gentle in spite of his obvious inebriation. "You wouldn't really make me go out there all by myself, now would you, luv? All you have to do is follow me. I promise to take care of you the way you should be."

Anna didn't look charmed by the display. In fact, her eyes widened with alarm. Paul grabbed Jack's arm and tried to gently pull him to his feet. Jack hit Paul's hand away, but other than that, he didn't budge.

"Come on, Jack. Just wait five minutes. Here, have another drink."

"I don't want another drink!" The hand holding the back of Anna's chair was bone-white from the force with which Jack gripped it. "But that's what you'd like, isn't it? Get me too drunk to do anything but fall flat on my face—"

Betty snorted. "Something tells me you're already there."

Her intervention finally pulled him upright, and he leaned over the table to glare at her, nearly dragging his tie through the candle in the middle. "Think you're so smart, do you? Think you've got it all pegged? You don't know jack, Betty.

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Not about acting, not about Paul. Especially not about Paul. Oh, but he's got you convinced, doesn't he? Because that's what he does, see. He's a master at it. He's so good, he's even managed to convince himself."

"Okay, that's enough," Paul said, grabbing Jack with hard fingers and dragging him away from the table. If they were anywhere else, he might let Jack ramble on and laugh off his ridiculous accusations. But they were in the middle of one of the most popular clubs in the entire city. And at least a few of the people there were gossipmongers.

"Maybe you should take him home," Anna said softly.

"And breach the inner sanctum?" Jack chortled. "Gotta climb over the wall for that, and even then, he'll sic security on you. That's what he does."

Paul snorted. "I'm pretty sure she meant *your* home, Jack. Which is exactly where we're going."

"He didn't sic security on me," Betty said.

"That's because you didn't scale my walls." He slowly pulled Jack away from the table. "You two can get home all right?"

"We'll split a cab," Anna said.

"No, no." Jack fumbled in his pockets, finally pulling out his jangling key ring. He tossed it onto the table, knocking over his empty glass. "Take the Buick. She's all gassed up, and somebody should get a ride tonight." That last set off another round of giggles, and he swayed sideways until Paul caught him again.

Betty snatched up the keys. "Thanks, Jack. We'll try to get

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it back to you in one piece.”

Paul frowned. “I think Anna should drive.”

“I can drive just fine,” Betty protested.

“No, you can’t, and Jack will be impossible to deal with after you hurt his car.”

“Fine,” Betty said, grudgingly handing the keys over to Anna.

“You wouldn’t happen to know where he lives?” Paul asked.

Betty shook her head. “But good luck.”

In the background, the band was starting to come back to their places. Jack jerked away from Paul’s grip and headed toward the dance floor.

“Looks like my luck’s changing all over the place,” he announced.

“It’s not,” Paul said firmly, grabbing Jack before he made it to the edge of the floor. Jack struggled, but Paul ignored him. He rarely had reason to throw his weight around, but when he wasn’t rehearsing every day, he spent hours training and toning his body. Jack may have been a match for him when he was sober, but drunk? He didn’t have a chance.

“Let me go,” Jack said loudly.

Paul pulled him closer, until his back was against Paul’s chest. “No. Now be quiet and come with me.”

Jack did shut up, but he didn’t actually make the process any easier. He dragged his feet, and struggled to break Paul’s grip, and leered at people as they passed by. A few flashbulbs went off. The headlines would write themselves. Jesson would

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be absolutely fucking furious. The image of Paul dragging a drunken Jack out of a very popular club was probably not the image the studio wanted for *Sticks and Stones*.

The cooler air seemed to sharpen Jack's reflexes. Paul still had to keep a firm hold of him while they waited for the car to be brought around, but at least Jack stood a little straighter, his chin held high as he sneered at anyone who dared to get close. Paul shoved him into the back seat as soon as he could; there was no way he was letting Jack up front with him when he was in this condition.

"Looks like you get to be the hero all over again," Jack announced when Paul pulled away. "The perfect Paul Dunham saving face for the studio's latest fuck-up."

"You're the one who called the cameras, Jack. Where do you live?"

"Oh, here, there, everywhere." He suddenly appeared in Paul's rearview mirror, perched on the edge of the seat. "Was it fun for you? Of course, it was. You've been getting your jollies all week, trying to put me in my place."

"And you weren't trying to get one over on me with this silly little idea of yours? You're just sore because I didn't play along with your game."

"All I wanted was a little honesty. Fuck, you're not even honest with Betty, and you've known her for how many years? Why is telling the truth so hard for you?"

"Why do I owe you honesty, Jack? You're not my wife, not my mother, and not the guy who signs my checks. My private life is exactly that. Private."

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“Walls so tight nobody can get in.” The air expelled from the cushion in the back from the force of Jack slumping into the seat again. “Got over that wall once. I’ll do it again. Just see.”

“Why, Jack? I’m genuinely curious. Why does it matter to you? Because it’s a challenge? Do you behave this way with all your costars? I really don’t get it.”

“And I don’t get what I ever did to you to get treated like something you scraped off your shoe before you ever met me. I guess that makes us even.”

“Yeah, I guess it does. Come on, Jack, what’s your address?”

Silence. For a moment, Paul wondered if Jack had finally passed out. When he coasted to a stop at a red light, he glanced back to see Jack’s unwavering gaze locked on his reflection.

“How about we trade for information?” Jack said. “I tell you where I live, you tell me the truth about what happened last night.”

“How do I win in this plan? I could just dump you at a hotel and go home for the night.”

Something closed off in Jack’s face then. He disappeared from the mirror, stretching out on the seat and propping his heels up on the window.

“You’re right, of course,” came Jack’s disembodied voice. “Nobody wins. No game, no foul, nothing but you going your way and me going mine.” He rattled off an address in Pasadena. Paul could only hope it was actually his.

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They drove in silence until Paul reached the Pasadena freeway. He kept glancing up to his rearview mirror, waiting for Jack to sit up again. But he wasn't moving in the back. Paul couldn't even be sure Jack was still awake. Most people would be passed out by this point.

"You're right, you know. I don't want anybody getting in. I don't know what world you're living in, Jack, but where I live, there's too much to lose by trusting the wrong person. You come barreling into my life, acting like I should just...invite you in when I barely know you. You're not really surprised that it hasn't worked out, are you?"

A soft snort. So he wasn't asleep. "Wouldn't have mattered whether I barreled in or did the jitterbug. You had your mind made up before you ever laid eyes on me."

"That's true," Paul admitted. "But it seems like you were more than happy to reinforce my prejudices. I thought you'd be a pain in my ass, and the very first day we met, you managed to do the thing that annoys me the most."

"Apparently, that's breathing."

Paul chuckled. "No, I don't mind you breathing. And usually, I don't mind you dancing. I'm sure you're quite nice when you're sleeping. Oh, and tonight while you were eating? I wasn't annoyed once."

"Gee. And I'm usually told my mouth's my second best feature."

"What's your first?"

"Oh, no, can't tell that. It's all about secrets in this town, isn't it? Pretend to be what you're not in hopes of getting the

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chance to be what you're not in front of even more people." He sighed. He sounded exhausted. "Sometimes I don't know how you people do it."

"I don't know either. You just get to the point that it becomes second nature." It was easier to talk to Jack when it was more like talking to the air. "It's a gradual process. You don't know it's happening until...well, it's too late. But maybe you're different, Jack. Maybe you could do this without losing track of yourself."

"I'm no different. Hell, I did the same thing the rest of this bloody town did. Fell for the great Paul Dunham, didn't I?"

"Jack..." Paul opened and closed his mouth several times, unsure of what he should say. *You don't mean that.* Jack probably did mean it. He did harp on honesty a lot. *You shouldn't do that.* Like Jack would listen to him. *Thanks.* That just seemed insulting. *I broke my vow of chastity because you drive me crazy insane.* Jack would probably take that as encouragement. "You're right about one thing. I wasn't with Anna last night."

"I'm right about a lot of things. Doesn't end up making a lick of difference."

Paul sighed with frustration. He didn't understand why Jack was so...morose. What's more, he didn't understand why he wanted Jack to cheer up. A morose Jack was a terse Jack. He wasn't trying to pry into Paul's personal life. He wasn't indulging in maddening innuendo. He wasn't being lewd. These were all great things. Paul had fantasized about this day, but never thought he would actually see it.

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Except, he hated morose Jack. This wasn't anything like he had imagined.

"It's better than being wrong about a lot of things."

"Don't suppose I could ask one question without you jumping down my throat."

"Sure. I can only promise that for one question, though."

"Only need one." The seat creaked, and his heel slid along the door, but Jack didn't sit up. "Do you think I can dance?"

Paul didn't even need to consider his answer. Jack was still a little rough around the edges, but nothing that couldn't be smoothed over long before filming started. "Yes. I do."

Another sigh, longer, deeper. "Good. Good." He paused. "Course, you just admitted you've been wrong about a lot of things, so maybe I shouldn't take so much stock in what you say..."

Paul snorted. "No, I was wrong to tell Jesson...and Schary...and Martin...and Melinda...that you couldn't dance. I hope you're not so drunk that you'll forget about this conversation, by the way. Because I'll probably never admit to being wrong again."

"Forget Paul Dunham doesn't think I have two left feet? Not a chance."

Paul exited the freeway and navigated down Colorado. Silence settled over the car, though it didn't seem as tense as before. He supposed that was something. He also wondered if he was going to pay for admitting the truth. Jack would probably be a lot more inclined to throw his weight around in rehearsals if he thought he could get away with it. On the other

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hand, Jack did have good ideas on occasion.

He found Jack's small house without incident. It didn't look the sort of home a movie star would live in. And judging by the lack of car in the driveway and the dark windows, Jack lived there alone. Paul parked on the curb and jumped out of the car before Jack could even move to open his door.

His feet fell out when Paul pulled the door open, and he gazed blearily up at Paul, unmoving from where he stretched out. "You're going to make me move, aren't you?"

"Yeah, I don't think you can sleep in my car all night." He bent and offered his hand. "Come on."

Jack's lashes cast dark shadows across his face when he lowered them to glance at Paul's hand. He regarded it so long, Paul was sure he was going to refuse. Then, he unfolded one of his arms from beneath his head and reached out to take it.

He stumbled when one of his feet caught the curb, but though Paul was ready to grab him, Jack righted himself and stepped away on his own. Without looking back, he meandered up the narrow path to the narrow porch, Paul close on his heels. Paul was close enough, in fact, to hear his muttered, "Bugger," when he came face to face with the front door.

"Do you have your keys? Oh...were they on the same ring as your car keys?" When Jack nodded, Paul didn't know who to be more upset with. Jack for being drunk, or himself for not thinking of this sooner. "Do you have a spare around here?"

Jack made a vague gesture behind him, nearly knocking into Paul's arm. "Old man Granger's got a spare for checking

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my post when I'm gone, but he'll pull out his shotgun if I try knocking on his door at this hour." He wagged a stern finger in Paul's face. "You Yanks take your firearms far too seriously."

"I think most people would pull a shotgun on us if we knocked at two in the morning. What about around the back? Do you have a sliding door or a window that might be unlocked?"

Being drunk did nothing to weaken Jack's forehead muscles. A single brow cocked at him in mild disdain. "I spent most of my life living just outside of London. One of the biggest cities in the world. You don't leave your house unlocked. Period."

"Well, okay then." Given Jack's response, Paul didn't think he'd agree to breaking a window. Despite his earlier threat, he wasn't just going to drop Jack at a hotel and wipe his hands of the whole thing. "You have anybody you can stay with?"

"Could drop me off at Betty's so I can pick up my car." He giggled. "With as many times as I stepped on her toes tonight, she shouldn't have any left to kick my ass."

"No, I don't think driving in your condition is a good idea. Come on. I think I know a safe place where you can crash for the night."

Jack came away from the door with a clumsy gait, keeping the distance between them. Paul kept out a close eye, wary of any falls, but for all his intoxication, Jack maintained his footing. He couldn't manage the handle, though, and it

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snapped back on his hand with a vicious metallic click.

“Shit,” Jack swore. Paul caught a glimpse of blood before Jack sucked the heel of his thumb into his mouth. “Your car’s a fucking menace.”

“Not when you’re sober.” Paul caught the handle and pulled the door open, but stopped Jack before he could fall into the backseat. “Let me see your hand.”

Though Jack tried to hold his arm beyond Paul’s reach, it was easy enough to grab his wrist and drag it forward. Jack grimaced and squirmed under the scrutiny. Under other circumstances, Paul might have laughed. All this had likely started because Jack couldn’t keep his hands to himself, and here he was, trying to get away from Paul’s attention.

The cut was jagged, blood still flowing freely. Pushing together the torn edges wasn’t going to help; it would require a bandage, and wouldn’t heal by Monday. Jack was very lucky they didn’t start actual filming for another week. If he showed up their first day with an injury that had to get written into the script, Jesson and Sweet would’ve gone through the roof.

“Just a scratch.” Jack tried to pull his hand back while Paul rummaged through his pockets for a handkerchief. “You don’t go all pansy at the sight of a little blood, do you?”

“I haven’t screamed like a girl and passed out yet,” Paul said, wrapping the handkerchief around Jack’s hand. “But that doesn’t mean I want blood all over my interior. It’s difficult to get out, and there are always questions. Now, hold still while I knot this.” To Paul’s surprise, Jack did remain still, only wincing a little when Paul pulled the cloth too tight. “Martin

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will probably have some actual bandages you can use.”

Jack frowned. “Your producer friend? That’s where you’re taking me?”

“Yes. He never attracts any attention, so nobody will know you’re there. And your reputation will still be mostly intact on Monday.” It helped that seeing Jack and Martin together would probably be enough to fuel his fantasies for the next several days, but Paul didn’t think he should mention that.

Jack pulled his hand back as soon as the knot was secure. “How do you do that?”

“What?”

“Get all these people to trust you. Do anything for you.” Jack leaned against the side of the car, passing out of the streetlight so that his face was in shadows. “You’re going to show up on your friend’s doorstep with your snot of a costar in tow, and I’ll wager he doesn’t even bat an eyelash about taking me in. All because you asked him to.”

“Well, in Martin’s case, we go back a lot of years. He used to be an actor, too, when he was a kid. That’s how we met. And as lonely and frustrating and exhausting as a shoot can be for an adult, it’s about a hundred times worse for a kid. So we got to a point we started to rely on each other.” Paul took Jack’s shoulder and eased him into the car. “Plus, I’m nicer to him than I have been to you.”

Jack’s words filtered out before Paul shut the door. “You’re nicer to everybody than you are to me.”

“Maybe,” Paul said, once he was in the car. “But there are plenty of people I wouldn’t chauffeur around in the middle of

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the night. I just stuffed Betty in a cab a few times.” He turned the key, and the engine roared to life. “Not very gentlemanly, I know.”

“Ah, but you not being gentlemanly is one of the things I like best.” He was stretched out on his back again, as if he knew it was easier for Paul to talk to him this way.

“Unless I’m not being gentlemanly toward you?”

“Nah, sometimes, even then.”

“Why do I get the feeling that you’re a bit of a masochist?”

“And what are you? ’Cause that’s what I haven’t been able to figure out. I start thinking one thing, then you do something that makes me think a whole new possibility. You like girls, you like boys, you’re nice, you’re an asshole. None of it adds up.”

“I guess that just means I’m an enigma,” Paul said lightly, though he knew that wasn’t the answer Jack wanted. Jack wanted an explanation of what Paul wanted, and maybe even why he wanted it, and who gave it to him. Paul couldn’t answer that, because he just didn’t have an answer. He didn’t think Jack would believe him.

A soft snore met his answer, and Paul sighed with relief. Martin lived about ten miles back the way they came, but there was no traffic to contend with. He was going to owe Martin big for this, but despite Jack’s claim, Marty wasn’t just going to help because he loved helping Paul. He was a company man, and protecting Jack was an important part of protecting the studio’s investment. In the end, that was the extent of Martin’s job.

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The windows in Martin's house were dark, but that didn't deter Paul from pulling up in the driveway and reaching over the back of the seat to rouse Jack.

It took several prods for Jack to stir, and even then, he was so lethargic, Paul wasn't sure he wouldn't have to carry the other man up to the front door. Wouldn't Jesson just love that. The bad press from this night was already going to be a pain to spin.

"We there?" Jack mumbled. "How do you always get everywhere so fast?"

"No traffic. That's all."

It was considerably more difficult to get Jack out of the car the second time. But he didn't have to throw Jack over his shoulder and carry him to the house. Jack managed to put one foot in front of the other, but he did lean heavily on Paul. Paul couldn't help but notice how warm his body was, and how well it fit against his.

"Try to stay awake just a little bit longer," Paul said, while he knocked on the door with his free hand.

"Don't s'pose I can get you to join me." Jack's arm hooked tighter around Paul's neck, and he nuzzled his nose along Paul's shoulder. "God, you smell good."

Paul sighed. "No, not tonight. Of course, you're so drunk, nothing would happen even if I did."

The lock turned on the front door, and Paul tried to straighten Jack up before Martin appeared in the opening. He failed, though thankfully, Marty didn't comment before pulling the door wider.

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“What happened?” Martin took Jack’s other arm, nudging the door shut with his hip.

“Just a spot of fun.” Jack abandoned sniffing at Paul to do the same to Martin. Over the top of Jack’s head, Martin arched a brow at Paul. “Shalimar. Your lady friend has good taste.”

“That would be his wife,” Paul said. He looked over Jack’s head to add, “He drank too much at Ciro’s and locked himself out of his house. I’m sorry for coming over here so late, but I didn’t know where else to park him for the night.”

“No, no, it’s all right. We’ll put him in the spare room next to the bathroom, I think.” Martin led the way through the darkened house. “I suppose it would be silly to ask that the photographers at Ciro’s didn’t catch anything.”

“That would be silly. I’m pretty sure we’re going to see several pictures of me dragging a very drunk Jack from the club. Jesson is going to be...unhappy.”

“An understatement.” The stairs were wide enough for them to walk abreast. “I’ll keep him here for the weekend, then. I’m sure I can get Lilah to help me distract him.”

No, don’t do that.

Paul bit back his protest. There was no good reason for Martin not to do everything in his power to keep Jack in the house and away from the cameras. Of course, he didn’t think Jack would be interested in Lilah, but Jack would be interested in Martin.

“You might have a hard time convincing him not to take off.”

The bed was near the door, and Jack fell onto it with a

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muffled grunt.

“I’ll get some water and a bowl for him to use in case he gets sick.” Martin hovered in the doorway, a shadow against the darkened hallway. “Don’t worry, Paul. I’ll make sure you don’t have to worry about him.”

“Thanks. I...I know you will.” Martin disappeared and Paul turned back to Jack’s sprawled figure. With a soft sigh, he began untying his shoes. Jack didn’t even move as Paul removed his shoes, and then his socks. “You still awake?”

“Course not. You only ever touch me like this when I’m dreaming.”

“You dream about me taking off your shoes? Do you have a thing for feet?”

“No, just getting naked with you, you git.” He sighed, his arm flopping out to the side. He missed touching Paul by inches, though with the flex of his fingers back and forth, Paul wasn’t so sure Jack realized he hadn’t made contact. “But you start with my shoes. ’Cause we always dance first.”

A few of Paul’s dreams had started in the same place. The two of them in perfect rhythm as they moved across an endless dance floor. “What happens after I take off your shoes?”

“I get to strip you down.” His hands stroked the air, more graceful than Paul had ever seen. His voice was slowing with every word. He wasn’t going to stay awake for much longer. “No more secrets, no more lies.”

“That sounds like a nice dream,” Paul murmured, shifting his attention to Jack’s shirt. He unbuttoned it quickly, his nimble fingers leaving the shirt hanging open. “But wouldn’t

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that take all the mystery out of things?”

“Is that what you want? Mystery?”

“No, actually, I don’t.” He pulled Jack into a sitting position and quickly pushed the material off his shoulders. Jack cooperated without opening his eyes, and soon his shirt joined his shoes. He wore a white undershirt, but Paul could see Jack’s nipples through the thin material. It was probably best if he didn’t try to remove his pants. “Don’t try to run away in the morning. It’ll be best to stay here and keep low, okay?”

“Stay low and keep here. Got it.” When Paul tried to straighten, Jack’s arm shot up, his hand clamping around the back of Paul’s neck. His eyes opened, their depths unfathomable. “You don’t owe me anything. Know that. Know getting this gig was a spot of luck. Won’t let you down.”

“Jack...” He brushed a strand of blond hair from Jack’s cheek, his voice dropping to match Jack’s tone. “You got this gig because the man who runs MGM knows talent when he sees it. You need to worry about not letting yourself down. This is going to be your big shot if you don’t blow it.”

“Mean blow it by blowing you?” The unexpected joke startled him enough to not resist when Jack pulled him down. Then, Jack’s mouth slanted over his, warm and slightly sour and inviting Paul to take everything he wanted.

For a moment, Paul forgot every reason why he should not push his tongue into Jack’s mouth. He forgot about how difficult it was to keep Jack at arm’s distance. He forgot that

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Martin could walk in any second and catch them together. His cock hardened, and the more he tasted Jack, the hungrier he became. He imagined himself crawling into bed with Jack, kissing him until the sun finally came up, and then exploring the rest of Jack's body. Especially since Jack's mouth was hot, and he tasted of the whiskey he had been drinking all night.

Jack moved, as if he could read Paul's mind, trying to pull him closer. That snapped Paul out of his fantasy world, but he couldn't quite bring himself to end the kiss. He broke away gradually, clinging to the taste of Jack's lips for as long as he could before lifting his head.

"Yeah, that would be one way to blow it." Paul disengaged himself and straightened. "You got to be careful."

Jack's arm fell to his side. His lazy smile was one of the most genuine Paul had ever seen. "Always, mate."

Paul lingered for a moment, waiting for Jack's eyes to close. When they did, he slipped out of the room to find Martin. He wasn't sure what just happened, but he couldn't shake the feeling that it would happen again. It was just a matter of time.

CHAPTER 9

Jesson didn't say a word. He didn't have to. The three newspapers and two gossip magazines said everything for him. They were spread out across his desk, a silent display, a pointed condemnation. Each headline was very kind to Paul. One even called him a hero. Jack was the butt of the joke. It wasn't a surprise. They were all expecting as much. But Paul found himself hoping that Jack had chosen to ignore the morning papers.

"Nobody's going to remember any of this by the time we wrap the film," Paul finally said, more to break the silence than anything.

"You're right. Because he's not going to be associated

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with this film after today.”

“Come on, Vance. He made a mistake. He’s not the first new guy in town to do something he shouldn’t.”

“Jack’s not that new.” Jesson leaned back in his chair, his hands folded over his stomach. He hadn’t smiled once since calling Paul in. “I thought you’d be happy about this.”

“I’m not. If you had called me in to say that I was right and Jack danced like an elephant, that would be one thing. But this is bullshit, and you know it.”

“No, what’s bullshit is Jack sending the studio in last minute circles arranging press coverage for your double date and then fucking it up. Sweet told me he even brought a date to one of your rehearsals. If he’s pulling shit like this now, there’s no telling what he’ll do in a month when we really need him to get in the public’s face.”

“Jack didn’t bring a date. He was a...” Paul paused, searching his memory for Jack’s explanation. “An assistant. His vocal coach’s assistant. He was supposed to take notes. Besides, this could be a big opportunity for the film. If you play it right.”

Jesson snorted. “You sell me on how this can possibly be an opportunity, and I’ll give you final approval on casting on your next flick.”

“Everybody loves the story of the bad boy done good. He’s handsome enough to pull it off. He can be a little dangerous without actually threatening.”

“Those photographers didn’t think so Friday night.”

“Screw those assholes. You’re not at their mercy. You can

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control the narrative. That means you'll have to control Jack, but he doesn't want to lose this picture."

"And you know this because you're all of a sudden Jack's best buddy?" Jesson asked with a disdainful cock of his brow. "How the hell have you gone from doing anything you could to get him off the picture to trying to convince me to keep him on?"

"Because he's got the talent. He can dance. He can sing at least as well as Betty. And if you fire him now over a stupid mistake, you're going to be destroying his career. I can name at least twenty people on the lot right now who are smoking and shooting up everything they can touch. I know another dozen who would be shipped up the river on moral charges if certain producers didn't do everything they could to cover up their behavior. And we won't even get into all the people who got their jobs on their knees. And now you're getting all self-righteous over some public drunkenness?"

Jesson didn't move. Frustration gnawed at Paul's nerves, different from the frustration he'd felt that day he'd discovered Jack's casting. He hadn't liked what Jack had done, either, but he sure as hell understood it now. And considering Jack had spent the entire weekend at Martin's without a single incident of rebellion—something that surprised Paul as much as it had Marty when he'd reported it—he refused to let this tar Jack unnecessarily.

"Any reform story is going to require a girl," Jesson said. "A beautiful, good girl. Someone the public can look at and believe two hundred percent that this is someone worth

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rewriting your life script for.”

“I don’t know if we need to saddle Jack with a fake girlfriend just yet. Let’s just keep Jack out of the public eye for a little bit. Chances are, something much bigger than Jack will come along and distract everybody from his shenanigans. If not, we’ll make sure there’s a girl on his arm before the end of shooting. I know a few who’ll fill the role nicely.”

But Jesson still didn’t look convinced. “Maybe. But if not a girl now, then maybe a mentor instead. Someone he’d look up to. Someone to emulate.” He paused, a calculating gleam appearing in his eye. Paul knew it well. “Like you. The seasoned vet showing the greenhorn the ropes. We schedule a few more double dates—not with Betty, though. We need to direct him as far away as we can from what happened on Friday. And arranging some publicity ops for the two of you would be cake.”

Paul blinked. “Isn’t it enough that I’m starring in the movie with him? Or are you punishing me for sticking my nose into your business?”

“You’re the one who doesn’t want me to fire his ass. You want me to keep him on, that’s the price.”

“Can we wait until after rehearsals are over? We don’t need to deal with a ton of distractions while we’re trying to get all the choreography down.”

Jesson moved aside one of the newspapers to look at the calendar he had on his blotter. “All right. I guess I can give you two weeks. But I’m scheduling a double date for that last Friday. With new girls. And I’m going to have PR start

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leaking out bites to the papers about how the Jack you went out with last week isn't the one you know from rehearsals, how you're going to show him what it means to be a real Hollywood star. That should be enough to get the wheels greased."

Paul inclined his head. "That sounds workable. I'll let Jack know that he's treading on thin ice for now. It'll keep him in line so we don't have any more fires to put out."

"You better. Because if I even catch a whiff of smoke, I'm pulling the plug on his contract. You can tell him that, too."

Paul stood. "I will. Jack'll know exactly where he stands. Speaking of, he's probably already downstairs."

Jesson grunted, his attention already shifting to the stack of messages waiting for him from the weekend. Paul snagged a newspaper and tugged it under his arm. It wasn't a coincidence that it happened to have Jack looking at his worse, while several prominent people looked on with shock. Jack needed to understand the seriousness of the situation.

And Paul thought he could use the reminder, too.

* * *

Not even having the top down on the convertible, with the cool autumn sun beating down on his head, was enough to settle Jack's stomach. He had known it was going to be bad as soon as he saw the papers. He looked like a two-bit hood, ready to tear apart even the most innocent of bystanders. That wasn't how movie stars comported themselves. That wasn't how moviegoers wanted to see their favorite actors. It

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might've been real, but even Jack wouldn't trust the man he saw in the photos. Every raw emotion was etched across his face. The anger. The frustration. Through it all, Paul looked as perfect as ever.

There would have been a time Jack would've turned his fury toward the man who came through the events smelling like roses. He would have said, *It's Paul's fault. If he'd just given me an inch, I wouldn't have tried to take a mile.*

Now wasn't that time. It wouldn't have been that time when he'd strolled into rehearsals, trying to forget what he'd seen on the newsstands, all because of how Paul had finally opened up on Friday night. Jack remembered every single syllable. Most of all, he remembered the kiss. The searing, gut-wrenching admission of Paul's desire. Jack didn't want to turn on that man; he didn't want that perfect moment to be tainted by his bad behavior.

But then Paul had asked him to stick around after rehearsal and told him what Jesson had said. How close Jack had come to getting to the axe. How they had agreed to spin it into the greenhorn/mentor angle. How this would be his last chance. When Paul had hesitantly suggested that maybe they go pick up some dinner and talk details, the hardest thing Jack had done all day was tell him he had previous plans.

It was likely better this way. He needed time to process everything.

His house was dark and quiet, mostly abandoned from the past few days. He dropped his keys on the small stand by the front door, rolling his neck as he navigated through the dark

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for the kitchen. It wasn't much, but it was the first place Jack had ever lived that was solely his. He loved it more than he loved his car. It was the one place he could let everything go, where he could escape when he wanted to tell the rest of the world to fuck off, where his rules prevailed and bugger anybody who dared to tell him what to do. He'd never had a place like that back in Northampton growing up, not when everyone and his brother expected him to go to work at the shoe factories just like all the other men in his family. He'd always wanted something different.

Now he had it within his reach. All he had to do was play by the rules he hated so much. Pretend to be something he wasn't. Paul had been right to comment on the irony of him choosing an acting career, but for Jack, it was an easy distinction. It was one thing to pretend to be somebody else for money if it gave him the chance to dance. It was something else entirely to try and enforce that same mentality over his own identity when in the end, that was all he had.

After putting the kettle on, he picked up the phone and dialed a number from memory. The other end picked up on the second ring, and Wendy Sternon's voice came over the line.

"Hey, luv. It's me." He pulled the curled cord taut to walk over to the refrigerator, cradling it in his shoulder to have his hands free. "What time did you need me to pick you up tonight?"

"We're still going?"

The surprise in her tone made him smile. Wendy had been the first real friend he'd made after moving to Los Angeles.

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They had met at a shabby café in a not-so-nice part of town when Jack had waited tables before getting his big break and she had been trying to make ends meet as a student. Jack had liked how unabashed Wendy was about her intelligence, without mocking his choice for a career. She was sweet, and funny, and said what was on her mind. Three of his favorite qualities in a person. He'd always thought that if he could fall for a girl, it would be Wendy. Then he'd discovered she preferred relationships with women. Their shared secrets only made their friendship seem like kismet.

“Made you a promise, didn't I?”

“Well, yeah, but...”

Her silence made him sigh. “You saw the papers, didn't you?”

“It was kind of hard not to, Jack.” At least she sounded apologetic. “I tried calling you this weekend to find out what happened, but you never answered.”

“I wasn't here. I got locked out of the house on Friday night, so Paul dropped me off with a friend of his.”

“You could've come over here.”

“I wasn't about to call you in the middle of the night. Especially on a Friday night. You might've had company.”

Wendy snorted. “Josie wouldn't spend the night, even if I'd asked her to. You know how paranoid she is.”

“Still, you didn't need me crashing on your doorstep.” He kicked the refrigerator shut and carried the makings of his sandwich over to the counter. “It wasn't pretty.”

“Please tell me you didn't do something stupid. Or, you

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know, more stupid than getting dragged out of *Ciro's* drunk as a skunk."

"Does kissing Paul count?"

"You didn't."

"Don't worry, it didn't get any further. I'd already done all the groping during rehearsal that day."

"Jack!" A chair scraped across a floor. "Okay, that's it. I'm coming over."

"What about your 'do at the university?" He always escorted her, for the same reason she often tagged along as his "date." "If you don't want me to take you, all you have to do is say the word. I know you don't want that kind of attention."

"Oh, please. It's a cocktail party for the English department. The last people on this planet who should give you a hard time about getting a little drunk is a group of wannabe writers." Keys jangled. "I'm on my way. Have you had dinner yet?"

"Making sandwiches, as we speak."

"Cheese and pickle?"

"Of course."

"Save two for me."

He disconnected with a smile. If anyone could make him feel better about this whole mess, Wendy could. She was the only person who knew about his attraction to Paul, as well as being Jack's biggest cheerleader. She was convinced he was going to be a huge star someday, even when his own doubts crept in. She was the one who came up with the ideas for some of his crazier stunts, like the camping out in Schary's

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driveway plot. But what he liked best about Wendy was that she wasn't part of the whole entertainment biz machine. She thought it was fun to peek in over Jack's shoulder, but in the end, it was all just one big lark to her.

Forty-five minutes later, he and Wendy were curled up on his couch, munching on potato chips and finishing off the last of the sandwiches. Though she was not what Hollywood would consider a beauty, he had always been enamored by her vibrant red hair and freckles. She smiled, and the world was a brighter place. If she'd been a man, Jack might not ever have fallen for Paul Dunham.

"I can't believe he kissed you back." It had been her common refrain since hearing it. "Are you sure you're remembering that right? You were pretty drunk."

"I've been telling you for two weeks the man was interested." Jack stretched his legs and propped his heels up on the coffee table. "Not that it's going to make a difference now. There's too much attention on us."

"It sounds like he's trying to make amends, though. He asked you out to dinner."

"To talk about this mentor business. That's just work."

"It's more than what he was offering before."

Jack had already had that thought. It had tormented him all the way home. "Think we might've come to a bit of an understanding on Friday, is all."

"An understanding with kissing."

"Will you let it go, luv? Already told you how tight things are for me at the studio. Paul's not going to do something now

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to bugger that up. His career is too important to him.”

“So is yours to you.”

“Yeah, but he’s got more to lose than I do.”

She shifted sideways to better face him. “Are you going to go along with Jesson’s plan then?”

Jack brushed imaginary lint off his trousers. “Don’t really have much of a choice, the way I see it. I’m lucky I’m still in the picture. Could’ve gone a lot worse.”

“But Paul saved you.”

“He just doesn’t want to waste the rehearsal time we’ve already spent. Though...” A fresh smile spread across his face, borne of sheer joy. “He did tell me he thought I could dance. And he actually told Betty off at one point today when she started ragging on me about Friday.”

“Well, then, there you go.”

“Just means he didn’t want to listen to her bitch.”

“I can’t say that I can blame him.”

The look on her face made him laugh. Resting his arm along the back of the couch, he related the events of the day, how the dancing had gone, what Paul had said. Wendy never interrupted. She just let him go on and on until his throat was dry.

“What do you think was different about today?” she asked when he was done.

Jack frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, it sounds like rehearsal went really well. Paul wasn’t mean to you all day, from the sound of it.”

“Oh. That.” He closed his eyes, but immediately, Paul was

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there, imprinted on his brain like he had been almost from the first time he'd seen the man on the big screen. Unlike other times, though, he didn't shy away from facing it. "All that means is Paul doesn't want me bugging up the picture. We've gotta play nice for the press. He's just getting into the role."

"Except rehearsals are private. Nobody sees those but you guys."

"You have a point?"

"No, not really. I just think maybe things were better today because you were more focused on the big picture. I mean, let's face it, Jack. When you set your mind to something, you can be a little pushy. You broke into the man's studio, for goodness sake."

"I climbed over a wall."

"From what you've told me about Paul, I don't think he sees it that way."

No, Jack was pretty sure he didn't. "There some reason you're playing headshrinker tonight?" he teased.

Her fingertips danced over his forehead, pushing his hair back. "I just don't want to see you get hurt. And sometimes, you're your own worst enemy, Jack."

Though he relaxed under her touch, her words struck a little too close to home. It was nothing she hadn't said to him before, of course. Nobody talked to him as straight as Wendy did. But now, with the shambles he'd turned everything, he wondered if maybe he'd listened to her a little too late this time.

CHAPTER 10

Rehearsals gained momentum throughout the week, improving Paul's moods exponentially. Jack and Betty still snipped at each other, but that was to be expected, and they never let it get in the way of working. Sweet kept everybody in line and smoothly combined his vision with Paul and Jack's various suggestions. And Jack managed to drop all of the habits that drove Paul up the wall. He still had the tendency to leer at Paul when he thought nobody was looking, and that sly, knowing gleam never quite left his eye. But Paul could deal with both of those things. Especially since Jesson had backed off, as agreed, and Jack had buckled down, as agreed, and everything was flowing like clockwork.

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For the most part, Paul did his best to keep his distance from Jack, and Jack seemed to respect that. He hadn't asked, but he was certain Jack remembered the kiss. Paul had thought of little else, both in and out of their rehearsals. At first, Paul tensed every time he was left alone with Jack for more than a few seconds, convinced Jack would try to push for a second kiss. Paul could be the strong one and deny him, but he wasn't made of steel. And he knew, though he hoped Jack didn't, that he would bend if Jack pushed hard enough. But he didn't. Paul thought that meant they might have reached some sort of understanding between the two of them.

That belief, along with his improved mood, spurred Paul to approach Jack while Betty was trying to master a series of increasingly fast steps.

"Do you have plans tonight?"

Jack's damp hair curled in darker blond tendrils at his temples, and he drew his forearm across his brow to wipe away the worst of the sweat. "Even if I did, I'll probably have to cancel them. We're never going to get out of here if she can't figure those steps out."

"No, we don't need to stay with her. That's why Sweet gets the choreographer credit."

Jack finally tore his gaze away from Betty to frown up at Paul. "We?"

Paul smiled dryly. "I didn't ask if you had plans because I'm interested in them."

"So...why ask?"

"Because we still have our own steps to figure out, and it

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might be easier to do that at my dance studio.”

The fact that Jack went utterly still testified to his shock at the offer. The man was a bundle of energy. Even when he was leaning against the wall watching or waiting his turn, some body part was invariably moving. A foot tap. Fingers drumming against his thigh. A nod of his head in time to the music. This lack of motion was both unnerving and completely satisfying.

“Let me get this straight.” The evenness of Jack’s voice reminded Paul of a tuning fork vibrating at frequencies too high to be seen by the naked eye. “You want me to come over to your place when we get out of here? You’re inviting me.”

“Yes. It’s Friday, I’m tired, and I don’t want to be trapped here all night. I planned to practice a bit more at home, and there’s no reason you can’t join me.”

His eyes narrowed. “Is this part of Jesson’s plan?”

“No. First of all, I don’t update Jesson on my after-work activities. Second of all, I don’t tell the press about it, either.”

Jack almost smiled. “Unlike my little fiasco.”

Paul grimaced. “I didn’t actually mean that the way it sounded. I just meant, no, this has nothing to do with Jesson.”

He was poised for more questions, more prods as to his motive, but they never came. The smile Jack had been holding back bloomed, brightening both his eyes and his cheeks.

“Nothing wrong with some extra rehearsal,” he said. “What about dinner? You want me to bring something over?”

Paul shook his head. “No, Melinda will have something ready. Something that’ll keep so she won’t have to interrupt

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us.”

“So dinner and a private show.” A new twinkle appeared in Jack’s eye. “Yeah, I can manage that.”

“Not quite. You’ve got to earn your supper.”

“Cakewalk.” The music stopped, and across the room, Betty bent over to catch her breath. Jack pushed off from his spot on the wall to saunter back to Sweet, leaving Paul with a, “Never had a complaint yet.”

“Yeah, I bet you haven’t,” Paul muttered, hoping he wasn’t getting in over his head, yet knowing, somehow, he was doing exactly that.

* * *

Paul didn’t mind inviting people into his studio. It wasn’t his inner sanctum. He didn’t guard the polished floor jealously. He just had basic rules for the space. The first, Jack had violated on the day they met. When he was in there alone, he wanted to be alone. Without exception. But when he wasn’t seeking solitude, he enjoyed sharing the large room. He was proud of it. He had spent a lot of time and money to make sure it was just right.

“There’s a shower and a dressing room just through there,” Paul said, gesturing at the door on the far end as he led Jack into the studio. “There’s also a fridge in there if you get thirsty. If you want, you can look through the records behind the turntable.”

Though Jack wasn’t a big man, he always had a way of filling a space through sheer force of his personality. Paul had

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felt it that first time, which had only contributed to his annoyance, and he felt it again as Jack strolled around the edge of the room, taking it all in.

“How many flicks did you do before you could get a space like this?” he said, obvious admiration in his voice.

“A lot. I was basically paid peanuts for the first decade of my career. The real key is proper money management and good investments. And it helps that I don’t have to support anybody but myself. Well, and the staff.”

Jack reached the bar, stroking the smooth wood for a moment before dropping his bag to the floor. Lifting his leg, he rested his foot on the bar and stretched forward, watching first his reflection in the mirror, then Paul’s. “So no secret vices that suck away the bank account? *Confidential* must hate you.”

It didn’t matter how many times Paul saw it, the evidence of Jack’s agility always caught him off guard. He used the pretense of selecting the music to finally tear his attention away from Jack’s body. “Trust me, I do everything I can to keep them from sniffing around here.”

Jack’s prolonged silence was unexpected. After nearly thirty seconds of only hearing the whisper of the record cases as he flipped through them, Paul glanced up through his lashes to see Jack bent over his leg, presumably stretching his back along with his hamstrings. The mirror showed his face, though—the missing smile, the tightness in his mouth. When he lifted his head, their gazes caught. It was a fraction of a moment to witness an uncharacteristic shadow passing behind

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Jack's eyes.

Then it was gone, and Jack was unfolding away from the bar, crouching down to rummage around inside his bag.

"We going tap or soft shoe for this?"

Paul shifted his attention back to the records. "Tap, I think. Unless you'd rather do soft shoe."

The sounds of Jack changing his shoes were more comforting than the silence that had crept between them before. When his toes and heels clicked against the floor, Jack said, "Know I'm late saying so, but I am sorry I made a right mess of things last week."

"I appreciate that but..." Paul stepped into a forward lunge, stretching his quads. "Don't worry about it. Jesson will get over it. No harm, no foul."

"I'm not apologizing because of Jesson."

Paul took a deep breath. "Yeah, I know. But I meant it. No harm, no foul. Now you know not to do that again."

"Well, I *know*." The playfulness was back in Jack's tone. "Trick is now to remember."

"I don't think there's anything wrong with your memory." Paul tapped his feet, testing the tightness of his shoes. "Anybody who can remember an entire routine after seeing it once shouldn't have any trouble remembering not to drink too much in public."

"Ah, but I don't drink and dance. There's a difference." A quick ball-change was followed by one of his favored rolls. Then Jack was standing beside Paul, grinning and looking as if his mood had never shifted. "So tell me what to do to earn my

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tea, Twinkles.”

“The final duet of the film. You know, the one where we promise never to let another dame come between us.” Which was a pretty good indication that the studio wanted this to start a series of films. Nobody could be tied down in the end. “I still don’t like the timing. It’s too rough.”

“That’s because you always take it too slow in the beginning.” Jack put some distance between them and faced the mirror. He waited until Paul met his eyes in their reflection. “This is what you do.”

The number itself was one of the longest in the movie. After getting tangled up in the life of the senator’s fickle daughter, the two cartoonists ended up watching her drive off with the millionaire they thought was the villain of the piece. The scene took place outside the National Archives, and though some of the moves took place on the steps, that wasn’t the section Paul was most worried about.

Of course, he hadn’t expected Jack to put the onus of the duet’s problems on him.

Folding his arms over his chest, Paul frowned as Jack started to move. The beginning was slow. That was the whole point. The characters finding their old rhythm together. Jack was full of crap thinking it needed to be sped up. Even if his sharp steps gave the duet a new edge.

Paul waited until Jack finished to speak. “But look, these two guys have been fighting with each other for the last third of the movie. They’ve been completely out of step with each other. I don’t think starting fast really shows where they’re at

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in the relationship.”

Though there was a faint flush to Jack’s face, he wasn’t even breathing hard. “But it looks good. You gotta admit it looks good.”

“It looks great. I never said it didn’t. But this song begins slow. Both of them are feeling a little unsure and stupid. So when we dance...we have to convey that. Like this.”

Paul centered himself, then went through the same series of moves that Jack had demonstrated. Except, even slower than what Sweet had shown them earlier that day. He moved around Jack, beginning in a wide circle and gradually tightening it. He was flirting with Jack’s personal space, trying to imbue each step with a certain shy confidence. Like he knew Jack would accept him, but he didn’t want to push him.

Jack didn’t miss a move. As Paul circled him, Jack made the same revolution. His sheer concentration encouraged Paul, longer than he would have anticipated, and he took the steps farther than he’d originally planned, only stopping when physical contact would have been inevitable.

“What if we did it both ways?” At Paul’s frown, Jack added, “You slow, me faster. Meet up in the middle.”

“If you can tell me one thing... Do you want to do it faster for a reason other than how it looks?”

“Well, yeah. We’ve been at loggerheads, haven’t we? You going one way, me another. Doing it this way would convey that.” He matched Paul’s frown. “Isn’t that what you want?”

Paul smiled and backed up several paces. “Yeah, that’s exactly what I want. Let’s try it.”

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He didn't wait for Jack's response to center himself and start at the top of the routine. He didn't think he'd ever admit as much out loud, but he liked dancing with Jack. Over the past week, they had grown to trust each other as performers. Paul didn't doubt that Jack would turn in a fantastic routine, so instead of worrying about what Jack was doing, he could concentrate on his own work.

It dawned on him a few beats in that they hadn't bothered with the music. Jack's self-avowed ability not to need it had held true, time and time again, but Paul was a little surprised that when it came to a timing thing such as what Jack was suggesting—with both of them maintaining different tempos that still had to somehow match the music—that he hadn't even considered the possibility of needing the accompaniment. He'd trusted Jack's instincts. And as he circled Jack in the ever-tightening curves, he saw he'd been right to.

Jack's part was simpler than Paul's, not through lack of argument from Jack. Sweet had remained firm on this aspect, though. This was a buddy picture, sure, but Paul was still the headliner. He was still the star. With this the final big scene, the one the audiences needed to be humming when they walked out of the theater, Paul was the one who needed all the glory. So Jack's routine consisted of basic footwork, which, while solid, was hardly his forte. Jack liked the jumps. He liked the stunts. He liked changing things up to do the unexpected. He really didn't like having to do school figures any third year student could do.

But his recommendation to speed it up brought a new flash

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to the rudimentary movements. He gave them added grace with each clip of his toe. Where a simple side sweep had always felt awkward to Paul before, now it brought momentum to Jack's sinuous body simply through its swifter tempo. He didn't even have to do anything extra with his arms, like he was wont to do. And through it all, he made sure he watched every step Paul took.

The two of them came to a stop at the same time—the same moment, the same beat. As though they had been practicing that move nonstop for the past three months. They were also just an inch from touching each other. Paul could see the sweat starting to gather just below Jack's hairline, and on his upper lip. He was even close enough to notice that Jack smelled salty-sweet.

“That...” Paul swallowed. “That was good.”

Jack's nostrils flared, like he had just caught the scent of something, too. “Better than good.” His voice was just as croaky as Paul's felt. “I want to do it again.”

Paul dragged his gaze up and down Jack's body. His shirt was so tight, he might as well have been naked. Even though the memory was a week old, he easily recalled exactly how Jack felt against him. He would like to dance with Jack the way he could dance with Betty. A week earlier, Paul would have recoiled at the thought, but now the desire just coiled around him, working its way under his skin.

“Yeah. Once more, from the top.”

Paul was the one who had to tear away, since Jack remained central to the scene. He felt every inch of separation,

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missed every degree of heat. As soon as his feet hit their mark, Jack counted off, not giving him the chance to catch his breath or even think about what was to come.

They just danced. Music unheard bound them together, and what had seemed so magical moments before was now effortless. Steps found like they'd simply been waiting to be discovered, only the thinnest of veneers hiding them below the surface of the routine. Paul swept them away, swept it all away, to come to an end in a mirror reflection of the first time.

Jack took a long shuddering breath. "Jesus," he muttered. "I will never get tired of watching you dance."

Paul didn't know how to respond. He didn't know what happened to his voice. It was gone, like his breath. Even if he could speak, he wouldn't say anything intelligent. He was too caught up in the fact that if he touched Jack, Jack wouldn't pull away from him. If he claimed Jack's mouth in a hard kiss, Jack wouldn't cut him off. Melinda would never interrupt them. Nobody would interrupt them.

Instead of walking away, he tested the limits of his own boundaries. He reached out, his fingers brushing against Jack's arm.

The muscles trembled at the very first contact. Though he didn't tip his head, Jack slid his gaze down to watch the slow path Paul took. Another muscle twitched in his jaw.

"Still think about that kiss, you know." His voice shook, too, even as low as it was, and his eyes leveled again to meet Paul's. The blue irises were a narrow corona around his blown pupils. "Do you?"

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“Yes...all the time.” He shuffled closer. Now they were close enough to dance. Paul slid his fingers down Jack’s arm, then let his hand drift around Jack’s body to rest against his back. His shirt was damp, his flesh radiating heat through the thin cloth. Jack filled his senses. All except one. With a soft sigh, he tilted his head, angling his mouth toward Jack. The only thing louder than Jack’s ragged breathing was his own heartbeat, thrumming in his ears. When his mouth finally touched Jack’s, the sound only amplified, exploding in his skull.

Jack parted his lips immediately, unexpectedly soft and yielding to Paul’s kiss. As their tongues danced, Jack cupped the back of Paul’s head, just as he’d done at Martin’s. A tremor vibrated through his firm grip, though, and small, needy sounds rose in the back of his throat. He answered every one of Paul’s probes, but still let him take the lead, erasing the distance between them to mold his hard body to the front of Paul’s.

There were a million reasons not to kiss Jack, and each one clamored for Paul’s attention, but he ignored all of them. He cupped Jack’s face with his other hand, holding him in place as he sought out even more of his mouth. Paul had started slow, and he kept it that way. He wanted to take his time with the caress and savor every second of it. Every time Jack’s tongue flicked across his, a shock went from his throat to his groin. Even drunk, Jack had been a good kisser. So it was not a surprise that fully sober, Jack had the ability to make the world disappear.

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Even when they had to break away for breath, it lasted mere seconds before their mouths merged again, before each sought the other out to get lost in sensations too intoxicating for their own good. Jack curled his hand, and his blunt nails dug into Paul's neck. Hard. Hungry. As heady as the kisses, but if Jack felt the impulse to push Paul for more, he somehow managed to curb it.

They were both graceful men, but Paul felt more than a little awkward. He backed Jack up without lifting his head, their feet almost tangling more than once, but they both managed to stay upright. As soon as he had Jack against the bar, he pulled at his shirt, exposing a long strip of skin to Paul's touch. His flesh was hot, and he quivered with each caress. All he wanted to do was touch more of Jack.

A gasp escaped him when Jack insinuated his hand between their bodies to seek out the thick line of Paul's erection. The firm hold at the back of his head made it impossible to pull away, not that he wanted to escape the questing fingers. Jack kept his touch light and uneven, twisting his wrist to graze his knuckles down the covered shaft.

"Watching you dance always did that to me," Jack said against his mouth. "Never thought it could get better, but I was wrong."

Paul moaned and murmured some sort of agreement. Something about how much he loved to see Jack move. Paul couldn't pinpoint the first time Jack had made him hard. But if he was going to be completely honest, he'd say it was months before he ever met the other man. When he sat in a dark

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theater in the middle of the day, while some unknown he had never seen before, with blond hair, and a perfect body, danced with amazing passion and intoxicating grace. He had gone to see Jack's film another three times. Maybe one day he'd admit as much. Maybe.

Jack's lips finally slid away, angling downward. His tongue rasped over Paul's jaw, followed by teeth, followed by tongue again, dizzyingly swift as if Jack couldn't decide where or what he wanted. The strokes over Paul's cock grew bolder, squeezes that made his ache, a cupping of his balls that had him spreading his legs farther to give Jack more room.

"Want to taste you," Jack rasped. He nuzzled his nose into Paul's sweat-damp neck, licking away every drop. "All of you."

Paul almost asked if Jack wanted to go to the house. They would be more comfortable in the bedroom. He could just send everybody home for the night. But then Jack's reflection in the mirror caught his eye. The suggestion died on his tongue. He tilted his head back as Jack sought out more of his skin, his tongue darting out in a random, unpredictable pattern.

"Wait a second," Paul murmured, leaning back to pull his shirt over his head. As soon as it was gone, Jack attacked him with his mouth again.

The studio was warm, but goose bumps stippled over Paul's skin at the first rake of Jack's teeth. He threaded one hand through Jack's damp curls for balance, watching both man and reflection bend to latch onto one of Paul's nipples. He saw it coming. Knew through both sight and touch when

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Jack's lips made contact with his skin. Still, when the tongue flicked over the hard tip, Paul groaned and tightened his hold. That was all the encouragement Jack seemed to need. His lips clamped over the dusky flesh as fervently as his fingers dug into Paul's hip.

Jack sucked on the skin until Paul began to squirm, writhing from the dual desire to increase the pressure and break away to give his sensitive flesh a break. If Jack was anybody else, he would have torn his mouth away and forced him to redirect his attention. But Paul didn't want to do that with Jack—especially because he didn't have to. Jack knew what to do without being told. As soon as that thought crossed Paul's mind, Jack shifted his attention, dragging his mouth across Paul's chest, tracing the outline of each defined muscle.

The only drawback to Jack's focus along his bare skin was how it pulled his concentration away from Paul's cock. Jack's hands were everywhere else—scratching across his ribs, massaging his hip. He tweaked the nipple he'd just abandoned, and dragged scalding fingertips along Paul's waist.

Under the constant barrage of touch, he wasn't aware of Jack popping the button on his pants until he felt the cooler blast of air across his lower abdomen.

Jack immediately dropped his head to suck at the wet tip through Paul's underwear.

Paul groaned, his knees buckling. He might have lost his balance entirely, except he reached out to brace himself against the bar, his knuckles turning white from the pressure. Jack looked up, his dark blue eyes shielded by long lashes. He

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only met Paul's eyes briefly before he refocused his attention on Paul's cock. With every passing second, Paul expected Jack to pull his throbbing erection from his underwear, but Jack didn't seem interested in that. He just kept moving his mouth over the material, sucking on and biting Paul's length.

A hot hand pressed against the small of his back, tugging Paul closer. "Think I could stay down here all night," Jack murmured, adding his warm breath to the sparks already electrifying Paul's veins.

"I think I could let you...but Jack..." Paul shuddered as Jack sucked at his balls. "I need to feel your mouth. Need to really feel you."

An impish grin curved Jack's lips. "Don't think I heard a please."

Paul arched his brow, but he didn't feel any annoyance at the teasing words. "Please, Jack, I need your mouth."

"My bloody pleasure."

Grabbing the waistband of both boxers and pants, he yanked them hard enough to catch the tip of Paul's cock in the elastic, and it snapped back against his stomach with a delicious sting. Jack caught the shaft, reaching between Paul's thighs to caress his balls.

"So where exactly did you want my mouth? Here?" He tilted his head. In the next moment, he sucked Paul's sac past his lips.

"Yes, yes, there." Paul clung to the bar with one hand, and the other went to the back of Jack's head. He curled his fingers in Jack's thick curls, flexing his fingers each time Jack sucked

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on his balls. “God, Jack...God...” He rotated his hips, trying to force more of his sac into Jack’s mouth. He wanted to feel Jack’s hot lips, his clever tongue, his warm breath everywhere. The small spot of contact seemed much too small, even as a rush of heat spread up his spine and through his torso.

He knew the moment before Jack was going to move by the added pressure around his shaft. Jack squeezed, hard enough to border on painful, and then his balls were free again, and Jack was dragging the flat of his tongue up the length of his cock. He didn’t stop at the ridged crown, angling the shaft away from Paul’s stomach to better slide his lips over the head. Just his lips. Just the head. All the heat and suction concentrated in another small spot.

Even on his knees, Jack was doing everything in his power to drive Paul insane.

Paul tried, but he couldn’t tolerate the pressure for long. Had he ever felt anything like the texture and shape of Jack’s lips? Even without the earth-shattering pressure, Jack’s lips would be worth it. Completely and utterly worth it. He remained still for as long as he could stand it, staring at Jack’s mouth around his crown, but soon his body was pulsing for more. He tightened his hold on the back of Jack’s skull, gradually adding more pressure until Jack had no choice but to slide his mouth farther on Paul’s length.

Jack’s moan vibrated through Paul’s shaft as he swallowed. Jack slid his fist to the base of Paul’s cock, holding him steady rather than controlling the angle. Paul controlled everything now. He was the one to feed more

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inches into the swelter of Jack's mouth. He was the one who pulled back when it became obvious Jack would swallow him without hesitation if he continued pressing forward. He was the one to caress the sharp cut of Jack's cheek as he stroked against the aching tightness, wondering how in hell he'd managed to hold off on resisting temptation this long.

Paul set a pace that was just right to torment both of them. He wouldn't quite let Jack take his entire length. Each stroke brought Jack's mouth closer to the base, but Paul always pulled back at the last second. He didn't quite know why he wanted to prolong this—only that he would regret it if they rushed it. After spending days, even weeks, thinking about having Jack on his knees, the last thing he wanted to do was rush to the end.

He held strong, but Jack's imploring, silent gaze finally undid him. With a groan, Paul thrust forward, burying himself in Jack's throat.

Jack shuddered, groaning at the same time. His hands smoothed around Paul's hips, reaching behind to cup his ass. Paul tensed. He didn't want to abandon the constriction around his cock, not even to give Jack the chance to breathe, not yet, and if Jack tried to pull him back, Paul would fight him every inch of the way. That determination only increased when Jack swallowed around the length. Nothing had ever felt so blisteringly exquisite, no casual encounter, no professional. Not even the caress of Jack's fingertips down the seam of his buttocks was enough to compel him to move.

Paul slowly removed his hand from Jack's head. Jack

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obediently remained still, while Paul braced himself against the wall. He gradually eased back, teasing Jack, testing him, waiting to see if Jack would try to follow. But he didn't chase Paul's cock, even when he pulled out so nothing except the very tip of his cock brushed against Jack's lips. He moved his hips, dragging his crown across Jack's mouth, smearing the pre-come on his skin, until Jack finally moaned and caught Paul's flesh between his lips.

Without Paul's hold, Jack eagerly sank down the shaft, swallowing him at the first press at the back of his throat. His warm breath fanned across Paul's damp skin, but only for a moment, only for the infinite seconds he held Paul deep inside. He grazed back up, his tongue tracing the thick vein that ran along the underside, and let it slip from his lips, just like Paul had done.

"Your lead, Paul." It wasn't until those lust-filled eyes tilted to his that Paul realized Jack had used his actual name and not one of the annoying nicknames he usually did. "I'm all yours."

The words might have been carefully chosen by Jack for the effect they had on Paul. An electric current went down his spine, the shock making his body stiffen. A part of him wanted to haul Jack to his feet just so he could kiss him senseless. The other part wanted to fuck Jack's throat until both of them were completely and utterly exhausted. Paul eased back and thrust forward again, beginning a slow, thorough rhythm. Jack's final word echoed in repeatedly in Paul's mind—*yours*.

He couldn't look away. He had to watch every stretch of

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Jack's mouth, every hollow of his cheeks, every gleam in his eyes. It was almost laughable to think he'd tried to duplicate this with Don. There was simply no comparison. Even the eagerness Don had displayed was nothing next to Jack's ardent commitment to branding Paul with his desire.

Paul pumped his hips with the same careful control he had when he danced. It felt a little like dancing. The two of them moving together without speaking, as though this was how it had always been, and how it would always be. But if Jack knew anything, it was how to make Paul's control slip and fall away, revealing the mess of desires and insecurities and passions underneath. Usually, he accomplished that with his words. But now, he used his teeth and his tongue, the depth of his throat, and his searching fingers. Paul moved faster and faster, losing himself with each thrust.

When Jack circled his opening with a rough fingertip, Paul grunted and pushed back against his hand. A sound resembling a chuckle echoed through his cock, and he could've sworn Jack was smiling, even if his lips never lost the suction around Paul's shaft. Slowly, carefully—enough for Paul to bet it was a deliberate counterpoint to his snapping hips—Jack eased his finger inside the clenching channel.

Paul whimpered. As soon as Jack had one finger inside him, Paul wanted two. He had the feeling that after that, he wouldn't be satisfied until he had Jack's cock. It had been a very long time since anybody had fucked him, and he wasn't sure he was quite ready to let Jack do so any time soon, but he still couldn't shake the thought of Jack sinking into his body,

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his chest covering Paul's back, his mouth right at Paul's ear, whispering and moaning encouragement. Paul's hips snapped harder, partially in response to that thought, and partially because the blood roaring in his ears made him desperate for release.

A slight sheen of sweat covered Jack's upper lip, and though Paul yearned to taste it, nothing could tear him away from the decadence of Jack's mouth. Jack kept his strokes in and out of his ass deep and lazy, but there was nothing casual about the way he sucked Paul's cock. He devoured Paul with the same fiery passion he poured into his dancing. Mouth wider. Shaft deeper. Constriction tighter. The swallow around the head every time he slapped his balls against Jack's chin only thrust Paul closer to the edge.

He didn't expect Jack to slip his free hand between Paul's thighs and squeeze his sac.

Paul's hands flew to the back of Jack's head, and he drove his cock deep into Jack's mouth one final time. He shuddered from the force of his orgasm, his entire frame shaking with each jerk of his cock. The tension drained from his body, leaving his muscles weak, and the room spun in a hazy circle around him. He pumped his hips a few time, making sure that every drop of come was swallowed. Jack's throat constricted around his sensitive crown until the pleasure blurred into pain. Only then did Paul release Jack's head and begin to ease back.

Jack let him spring free of his lips, but only, it seemed, so he'd be able to tilt his head down and suck Paul's balls into his mouth with the same hunger he'd unleashed on Paul's cock.

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“Jack...Jack...I can’t...” Each attempt to get Jack’s attention only seemed to spur him to suck harder, to use the tips of his teeth, to press his tongue against the soft flesh. Paul’s cock remained semi-erect, though he suspected Jack could make him hard again in no time. He ran his fingers through Jack’s hair, down his neck, over his shoulders, and even caressed his cheeks. Finally, the pressure around his sac was too much, and he forced Jack’s mouth away. Jack looked up with questioning eyes—until Paul sank to his knees and smashed their mouths together.

Jack wrapped his arms around Paul’s back, the hard line of his erection digging into Paul’s stomach. With the lingering taste of come coating Jack’s tongue, Paul sucked at it hungrily, suddenly desperate to have the weight and taste of Jack’s to replace it. Jack shared without hesitation. Each pull elicited another moan, each grind a whimper. He only broke for breath when Paul’s lungs were already burning, but the brilliant desire in his gaze was almost enough to make up for the loss of his kisses.

“Better than I ever imagined,” Jack rasped. Then his lip curled into a playful smirk. “But don’t think I’m going to inflate your ego even more by telling you too often.”

“Maybe I’ll just have to give you a new reason to tell me every day,” Paul murmured, pushing his hand down the front of Jack’s pants. He gripped Jack’s cock and pulled it free of the waistband. Jack’s flesh was hot, and the texture of his skin just below the slit made Paul’s mouth water. Jack’s cock was wet with pre-come, and his hips jerked as Paul rubbed the

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moisture into his sensitive crown.

Jack cupped the back of Paul's head, slanting in for another kiss. It felt like he was trembling, but otherwise, he remained still, letting Paul choose when to move, when to stroke. He tensed when Paul slid his nail across the slit, even his chest going still as he held his breath. Paul nipped at his lower lip until he exhaled, and the shuddering heat across his cheeks made his mouth water all over again.

"What do you want?" Paul said against Jack's mouth, his tongue darting between Jack's lips. "Tell me."

The hands at his back smoothed down to cup his ass and squeeze. "Whatever I can get." He smiled into the kiss. "Don't suppose you'll let me fuck you?"

Paul opened his mouth to say *no*, but somehow that came out as, "Not in here."

Jack's surprise came as a sharp intake of breath, and he peeled away, the delight evident in his eyes, too. Paul waited for the demand to go up to the house, so it was his turn to be surprised when Jack said, "Then whatever you want." He whipped his shirt over his head, revealing the sculptured perfection of his chest. "Cause I don't want to have to wait."

"Then lay down." Paul pushed on Jack's chest, forcing him back to the floor. Even on his back, Jack couldn't keep his hands to himself. Paul straddled him and bent to press his chest to Jack's. Their mouths met in another hard kiss, and the heat from Jack seeped into Paul's body. His skin was unbelievably smooth, like he was made of alabaster, and Paul thought he felt each thump of Jack's heart. Jack's cock pressed

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against Paul's stomach, and he rocked back and forth, dragging the ridges of his abdomen over Jack's slick shaft.

Slithering a hand between them, Jack found Paul's semi-hard cock and delicately caressed its underside, teasing it with the promise of what it had felt like rougher. "Out of curiosity, does the no fucking in the studio rule apply to both of us, or just me?"

Paul lifted his head. "You want me to fuck you on the cold floor with no Vaseline?"

Jack laughed. "Sometimes, I think you're a bigger girl than Betty. But no, I just meant in general."

"In that case, it doesn't apply to both of us."

"Good. Gives me something to look forward to." He ducked his head and licked along Paul's neck. "Though I'm about ready to bust now, so you might want to speed it up if you don't want me breaking that first rule already."

"In that case..." Paul slid down Jack's body, until he was resting between Jack's legs, and his thick erection was right in front of Paul's mouth. For a moment, Paul considered teasing him, but he didn't think Jack had been kidding about being ready to bust. He did indulge in dragging his tongue up the underside of Jack's cock, from his balls to leaking slit.

"Fuck!" Jack's head slammed back against the floor hard enough for Paul to lift his head in concern. The muscles strained in Jack's neck, and his hands balled in fists at his sides. Even his stomach visibly trembled from the force of the tension winding through the man's body. "Jesus, Paul, don't you even bloody think about stopping."

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“I didn’t hear *please*,” Paul teased, but he lowered his head anyway, intent on wrapping his lips around Jack’s shaft and then tasting every inch of him. He gripped Jack’s hips, his thumbs pressing into the hard flesh as he held Jack to the floor and sank down his length. The taste of his pre-come overwhelmed everything, masking the natural flavor and scent of his skin.

The touch of Jack’s hand at the back of his head was surprisingly gentle, considering how tightly his body was sprung. Fingertips caressed his scalp, but he didn’t use his hands to push or pull. That came courtesy of the encouragement streaming past Jack’s lips.

“That’s it, pet, suck me. All the...oh, fuck...Paul, don’t stop, please...God, you feel so bloody good...” And on, and on, until Paul’s ears burned as much from the heat in Jack’s voice as the renewed desire in his veins.

Paul moved faster, wondering if there was a point when Jack’s grasp of the English language would fail him. Wondering if he could push Jack over the edge of coherency into complete, senseless babblings. He wrapped his lips around the base of Jack’s cock, holding him in place and swallowing convulsively, and then slid back up his length, his tongue wrapping around Jack’s shaft with each stroke.

Though Jack’s babbling didn’t stop, it did slow down, interspersed more and more with harsh, ragged breaths. He fought against Paul’s grip, trying to thrust upward, but Paul held him firm, refusing to give an inch. A frustrated Jack curled his hand into the short hair at Paul’s nape and attempted

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to speed him up that way, and again, Paul denied him. Jack had no choice but to lay there and take it, cursing him as much as praising now.

Paul wanted to test to see just how hot Jack's ass was, but he knew that if he released Jack's hip, he would only take that as a sign to buck his hips and try to take control. He also wondered just how Jack's flesh would feel against his tongue, but that would require shifting attention from Jack's cock, and he didn't want to do that. Not yet. Not until he finally tasted Jack's come on the back of his tongue.

“God, Paul...”

Anything else was lost. Jack shouted the same moment his cock pulsed, and Paul quickly slid far enough up his length to catch the first shot across his tongue. Warm, sticky fluid filled his mouth, drawing shivers to Paul's flesh as he swallowed it down. His hands dug even deeper into Jack's muscled hips, hard enough to likely leave bruises, but he wouldn't let go or ease up until Jack had finished, until every last, delicious drop was gone and Jack was limp beneath him.

Paul let Jack's length slip from his mouth, but he couldn't quite bring himself to abandon Jack altogether. He lapped at his cock, and then his balls, and his inner thighs. He gradually eased his hold on Jack, releasing his bruising grip in favor of smoothing his palms up and down Jack's stomach and chest.

“If you think for a bloody minute I'm going to be able to rehearse now...” Jack's ragged voice was slow and sated. “...you're going to have to wait a few more. Let me catch my breath.”

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Paul rested his head on Jack's thigh. "Believe it or not, Jack, I don't really want to rehearse anymore tonight."

"Did I miss a weather report on hell or something?"

Paul snorted. "Can you think of any other reason I'd suck your cock?"

"Other than the fact you've wanted me since I first called you Twinkles?" Jack's hand tenderly caressed the side of Paul's face. "Nah."

"Have I told you recently how much I hate it when you call me that?"

"Do you? I hadn't noticed."

"Maybe I should make it a point to register my displeasure more often."

"Only if doing so means we miss more rehearsals."

"Cutting this rehearsal short wasn't registering my displeasure. It was rewarding your bad behavior." Paul licked a drop of sweat from Jack's skin. "Want to shower?"

"Sure." Jack started to rise, only to stop and rest on his elbows. "Wait. I behave badly, and I get a blow job? How come that worked this time and not before?"

"I guess hell just froze over this afternoon." Paul pushed himself to his knees. He was tempted to lean over and trace Jack's mouth with his tongue, but if he did that, they might not be getting off the floor any time soon. Instead, he stood and put his hand out to Jack. "But from now on, I'm only going to reward good behavior."

Jack's eyes narrowed as he stood. "Where's the fun in that?"

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“Are you saying there’s no fun in being good?”

With a sharp yank at Paul’s hand, Jack brought their bodies together, trapping Paul’s now-hard cock between their stomachs. “Only when we dance, mate.” He nipped at Paul’s neck, licking across his damp skin for a fleeting moment before releasing him again. “Now where’s that shower?”

CHAPTER 11

Though he kept his paces slow and even to match Paul's longer stride toward the private shower off to the side of the studio, everything inside Jack wanted to break out into a silly song and dance like one of his movies. Though the past week had been easier at rehearsals, he'd credited that with his subdued behavior. Jesson's ire had been a wake-up call, and Wendy's words all too truthful. He was his own worst enemy, and if he didn't watch it, he'd lose the best gig of his life. That wasn't acceptable. In this town, you were only as good as your last movie. Losing this would set him back years. He refused to let that happen.

He'd even chosen to believe Paul's invitation had been

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completely innocent. They wouldn't have accomplished much waiting around for Betty. Rehearsing outside the studio made perfect sense, and since they had been working so well together all week, a few more hours in each other's company might not be excruciating for Paul. The thought of it certainly wasn't for Jack. He could live with his attraction and his feelings for Paul as long as he had to, as long as the man didn't treat him like dirt.

But this far exceeded anything he had ever anticipated.

"If you tell me this shower is just your way of ending the night early," he said when they reached the doorway, "I might have to get on my knees again and work on changing your opinion."

Paul gestured at his erection. "Do I look like I want to end the night early?"

Jack quelled the urge to shove Paul into the wall and get on his knees anyway. "You've been walking around with a perpetual hard-on since we met. How am I supposed to know when you mean to use it?"

"Your first clue is whether or not I'm naked," Paul said, flipping on the light.

The shower was larger than Jack expected—he had imagined a small, average-sized stall. But Paul did enjoy his comforts, and it was clear his shower was no exception. The walls were white with the occasional carefully placed black tile, with a completely opaque shower door. It would easily fit both of them with the possibility of a third, and as soon as that thought struck him, he wondered if Paul had ever tried it. And

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if he had, with who? He'd make it a note to ask about it later.

He held back as Paul opened the shower door and stepped inside to get the water going. As good as Paul looked in his dance gear, it didn't hold a candle to how beautiful he was naked. Jack was pretty sure he'd never seen a more perfect ass, carved into the most succulent curve by all his training, and the muscles rippled down his back when he stretched, each flex sending a fresh throb straight to Jack's cock.

Before Paul could turn around, Jack stepped into the shower and wrapped his arms around Paul's waist, molding against his back. He nuzzled his spine for a moment, and then licked at the salty skin.

"In case I'm about to wake up from yet another of these bloody wet dreams, just want to say you are probably the single most stunning guy I've ever seen. You drive me mad, you know. Just by being there."

Paul covered Jack's hand with his larger palm, entwining their fingers. "It's definitely not another wet dream. And just so you know...I've never fucked another male costar."

His heart took a leap into fifth gear, but he did everything he could to remain relaxed. "Technically, you haven't fucked this one yet."

Paul released Jack's hand and turned around. Water streamed down his skin, drops clinging to his lashes and his lips. "That's a small technicality. One easily remedied."

He glanced down and smirked. "Not so small, actually."

Paul mouthed a line down Jack's neck, his teeth scraping across Jack's taut skin. His fingers followed the line of Jack's

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back to his ass, and he cupped his flesh with both hands. “What happened to not inflating my ego?”

His head fell back with a moan when Paul gnawed at his shoulder. “I’ll go back to insulting you after I’ve had your cock in my ass.”

Paul soothed the shallow bite mark with his tongue before finding a new patch of skin to nibble on. “If you go back to insulting me, you might not ever have my cock in your ass again.”

“Point taken.” Though in all honesty, Jack thought maybe Paul liked it, just a little bit.

The water pressure stung where it hit his skin, even with Paul’s broader body taking most of the spray. Jack could only imagine what kind of massage it might give if he was directly under it. The bend of Paul’s head made it possible to press his lips to the wet skin of his neck, sucking at the throb of his pulse point. He couldn’t tell if that erratic beat against his eardrums was his own or Paul’s echoing into him. He wasn’t willing to tear his mouth away in order to test it and find out.

Paul reached for the bar of soap without lifting his head. He worked the soap into a lather before returning his hands to Jack’s ass. He slid his fingers between Jack’s cheeks, tracing his pucker with the slick suds. His other hand went lower, to the sensitive skin behind Jack’s sac. His fingertips were light, teasing. And every caress sent a new shock skittering along Jack’s spine.

Part of it still felt like fantasy. The probe of Paul’s fingers was all too real, adding heat and friction to skin ready to split

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at the slightest contact, but the hunger in his touch was straight out of Jack's best dreams, those imaginings where the world disappeared and all that existed was the two of them and their desire. Paul caressed him like he wanted nothing more than what Jack offered, what Jack would give freely for as long as Paul asked. Maybe, in that moment, that was true. They had gone through a lot of strife to reach this point, where each could trust the other to devote this kind of concentrated attention.

He kissed a path up to Paul's ear, biting at the lobe. "As far as ways to go crazy, gotta say this is my favorite so far."

"I can show you some others," Paul promised, tugging at Jack's balls. He started gently, but soon, his fingers tightened and heat pooled in his lower stomach, spreading down his thighs. He was so caught up in the pressure around his sac, he didn't realize what else Paul was doing until his long finger pushed past his clenched muscle to sink into his passage.

"Oh, yeah..."

Jack dropped his head back, his weight shifting so he leaned more heavily against the wall. It peeled him away from Paul's glistening body, a loss almost excruciating all by itself, but forced Paul's finger deeper inside. Jack gazed up at him, knowing he wasn't nearly good enough an actor to hide just how good this felt. Neither spoke. Paul just stared at him, his mouth wet and swollen, his eyes black, as he eased his finger out.

"When was the last time you were fucked?" Paul asked, another finger joining the first.

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He hissed at the added thickness, clenching when Paul threatened to pull them out too soon. “You’re not really going to make me do the math now, are you?”

Paul smiled and caught Jack’s bottom lip. “No, I’m not. You’re just...you’re just so tight.”

“Because I don’t usually play this way.” Gripping the back of Paul’s neck, Jack braced against him to curl a leg around his thigh, opening himself even wider. “But you’re proving the exception all over the place, seems like.”

“So are you,” Paul murmured, before plunging his tongue into Jack’s mouth. Jack had no choice but to open to the kiss, responding to each sweep of Paul’s tongue, and then making his own demands. Paul slowly worked in a third finger, forcing Jack’s body to give way to the added width. Pain briefly sliced through him, but as Paul’s mouth clung to his, the pain was quickly replaced by pleasure. And then by hunger. Paul moved his hand slowly. Like he had all night.

Jack reached for Paul’s cock, scratching across his wet stomach along the way. A shudder wracked through Paul, a moan echoing from his throat, both deepening when Jack fisted the thick shaft. The pelting water slicked the way to stroke up and down without having to worry about how tight he held Paul, but Jack didn’t hesitate to use the pre-come collected in the slit to make it even slipperier. The memory of what he tasted like made his mouth water. Anyplace else, and he’d drop to his knees for a repeat out on the dance floor, but right here, right now, he wanted that gorgeous cock splitting him open until they both screamed from the pleasure of it.

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Jack completely lost track of time. He had no way of gauging just how much time passed, except for the number of kisses he shared with Paul, and the steady beat of his own pounding heart. The dance studio was Paul's sanctuary, but this was different. It was easier to believe they were in their own world, where the sound of rushing water shielded them from questioning eyes and wagging tongues. It certainly seemed to give Paul a certain amount of freedom that he didn't experience anywhere else. Even in the studio, Paul hadn't kissed him with such ferocity, hadn't been so hungry to reach every part of Jack's body.

When Paul pulled his hand away, Jack automatically moaned at the loss. He felt empty—oddly hollow. He barely had a chance to register that, though, before Paul lifted him from the floor.

He curled his legs around Paul's hips automatically. The cold tile at his back gave him added strength, but he would have called on every ounce of energy he had to be ready for Paul's cock. He used his grip around the base to angle it farther down, sliding back and forth between his cheeks. Every time it passed over his opening, he shivered, but Paul didn't seem to be in any hurry to push inside. He was too busy devouring Jack's mouth, and in those seconds, Jack didn't need anything more.

"Ready?" Paul asked against his mouth. There was no time to even think of a response—though Jack only had one answer to give. *Fuck yes.* Paul's blunt head pressed against Jack's opening, hot and smooth and slick with pre-come and water.

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Paul's mouth moved from Jack's lips to his neck, and his teeth sank into Jack's flesh, muffling his shout as he pushed his crown into Jack's ass.

Fire radiated down the back of his thighs as Paul's girth stretched him more than he could ever have anticipated. He clawed at Paul's back, wincing slightly at the continued press into his opening, but pain simmered into pleasure once Paul was past the tight outer ring. He was pretty sure he started babbling at that point. His mouth always ran away from him when he fought for control. But then his ass was flush with Paul's hips, his balls smashed into the other man's groin, and neither one of them could even think about breathing as the steam rose around them.

Paul gave Jack enough time to adjust to his cock before setting a rhythm with fast, shallow strokes. He only eased out an inch or two before pushing forward again, rocking into Jack's body like he couldn't stand the thought of leaving it. Jack had no choice but to cling to Paul, his muscles clamping down on Paul's length with each forward thrust. The tiles behind him warmed from the friction of his back and the water still streaming down their skin.

Fingers dug into his ass, holding onto him as hard as Jack clung to Paul. The muscles in his legs trembled. Jack thought at first it was a response to being tired, to clamping around Paul's hips with legs that had been dancing all day, but the shaking eased when Paul was fully seated inside him. Then his body stilled, sated in ways that terrified and thrilled him, only to start shaking again as Paul pulled out.

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“Jesus,” Jack muttered. “You’re going to fucking break me.”

“Is that a promise?”

He snickered. “Let’s just try not to let it happen until after we’re done filming, yeah?”

Paul’s smile turned into a smirk as he moved his hips in a small circle, almost as if he was trying to drive his cock even deeper into Jack’s ass. He dug his fingers into Jack’s hips, gripping him as he rotated his hips again. Jack dropped his head forward, moaning and gasping, letting the water splash against his tongue. His body burned for Paul to move again, to increase the friction, to slam into him, but he also wanted this exquisite torture to continue.

What made it worse was the way his cock remained trapped between their stomachs, how hard each rotation pushed against his balls, bordering on the pleasure side of pain until he was ready to beg Paul to move, to do something, anything to relieve the agony of constant contact. It would be easy to take care of it himself. All he had to do was reach down and pull at his prick to free it from the specific angle it was caught. One of the drawbacks to that was relinquishing his hold on Paul’s neck and back, a move Jack was loathe to do.

The other drawback was taking back some of the control he had given to Paul. Tonight was for him. Jack had already sworn to be his for the evening, and more, agreed to the rules Paul had set. He wouldn’t renege on that, even if his own desire became unbearable. He wasn’t wired that way.

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He could, however, try to coax Paul into moving for him.

His mouth shifted, licking away the water, to return to Paul's ear. "Good as this feels, just think about what it would be like pounding into me, pet. Bet anything you're dying to make me scream."

Paul groaned at that, his grip tightening as he pulled Jack up his body. Jack whimpered at each lost inch, until only the tip of Paul's cock remained inside his passage. They were both caught there for a moment, both of them tense, both of them making small, hungry sounds. Paul remained still so long, Jack wondered if he ever intended on moving. Or maybe it just felt like an eternity until Paul slammed his cock home.

The shout tore from his throat. As soon as it escaped, Jack's jaw clamped shut, just as his inner muscles did around Paul's cock. Paul groaned, but he took the clenching as encouragement, repeating the excruciating climb upward with Jack's now sensitized skin protesting against every inch. Jack held his breath. His lungs weren't cooperating. His legs were close to rebelling as well, but he steeled his strength, bracing for the second thrust that would fill him the way he ached to be.

Somehow, Paul had the control to repeat that pattern again and again. Occasionally, he thought Paul would lose patience—but only until he remembered that Paul was all about control. Holding onto his own while forcing Jack to completely let go of his. Each hard thrust reverberated through him, echoing up his spine until his head started to spin. He was glad that Paul kept such a tight hold of him. In fact, it felt

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like Paul wasn't going to be happy until he left his mark permanently on Jack's body.

If it kept his flesh this scorched, his nerve endings this alight, Jack decided Paul could do whatever the hell he wanted with him. He couldn't remember the last time sex had felt this good, or even if it ever had. Under other circumstances, that would have scared the hell out of him, but this was Paul Dunham, this was the man who had shaped so much of Jack's desires and dreams since coming to Hollywood, this was the man who haunted both his days and dreams with erotic images, even when they were as simple as the most delicate of kisses.

There wasn't anything delicate about this. Paul buried his cock inside Jack's ass with every stroke. He left marks that would bloom into bruises by morning. He turned his head to brush his mouth across the most innocuous of places—Jack's temple, the curve of his ear, the edge of his hairline. Jack was left quivering, writhing against the wall as coherency abandoned him and he had no choice but to seek out Paul's lips with his own and fuse them together.

Paul's bruising grip shifted, and suddenly the unforgiving fingers were wrapped around Jack's cock, like bands of steel. He stripped Jack's shaft, his hand moving in tandem with his hips. Jack grunted his approval, his head dropping forward. Paul's mouth was a curious contrast, his lips still seeking out new spots to caress, to lick the drops of water from his skin, even as he drove harder into Jack's ass.

He wanted to tell Paul how amazing this felt, how he had

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never been fucked so well before in his life, how each stroke dissolved more of the world away to leave just the two of them. He wanted to say a lot more, but his tongue wouldn't form the words, his mind couldn't find the sentences. The best he could manage was a series of, "Fuck, fuck, fuck..." that was more a metronome to Paul's thrusts than it was any sort of necessary communication.

When his balls pulled into his body, hot and hard and ready to explode, Jack had been reduced to near sobs and whimpers, sounds beyond his control just like his own body was. Paul's tempo became erratic, like he was fighting the tightness of Jack's hole again, but Jack only knew the pressure around his cock, the pleasure radiating through his ass, and then the white-hot bliss as he finally exploded, shooting all over Paul's curled fingers and onto his chest.

"Oh, Jack...that's it. God, that's it." The words bounced off the hard tiles, each one sending a fresh shiver down Jack's spine. He shuddered until he was completely spent, but even that didn't make Paul relent. Jack cried out, unsure if his body, already stretched to the breaking point, could take one more thrust. Every nerve ending shouted, every inch of his skin burned, and finally Paul tensed, his cock buried in Jack's ass. His length jerked, filling his channel with hot come, and Paul's mouth closed on Jack's shoulder, muffling his shout.

He was shattered. Broken into a million tiny bits, only held together by Paul's tight embrace. He couldn't breathe, couldn't speak, couldn't do anything but desperately cling to him and hope Paul didn't open his arms and let him fall. His

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mouth worked over Paul's damp skin, collecting drops of sweat and water, while the echoes of Paul's cries reverberated through his flesh.

The shower cooled around them, finally giving Jack the fortitude to lift his head and seek out Paul's mouth. He sealed them together before Paul could protest, sweeping past his open lips, hoping Paul could tell just from the kiss what was roiling through him, how overwhelmed he was, how completely and utterly satisfied.

Paul lowered Jack to the shower floor, but he didn't release him. The kiss slowed, growing lazy as exhaustion caught up with both of them. When Paul finally lifted his head, his brown eyes were dark and his lips were swollen. Despite the fact Jack was already deeply satisfied, the sight made him want to climb Paul's body again.

"I think...I think we should get out of here before we turn to prunes."

When his knees trembled, Jack leaned back against the wall, smiling up at Paul. "You did promise me some food if I performed up to par."

"Yes, I did. And I think you've definitely earned your supper." Paul stepped out of the way of the spray and let the water rinse the come and sweat still clinging to Jack's skin. "Your dancing wasn't bad, either."

"My dancing was bloody great, and you know it." He knew this was his opportunity to wash off, but his arms refused to work properly just yet. "We going to give it another go after we eat?"

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“The dancing?”

He decided to take a risk. “Any of it.”

“Sure.” Paul bent to grab the soap he had discarded earlier, using it on his chest, under his arms, and down over his groin. “Unless you think you won’t be up to it, and you want to take it easy.”

He raked his gaze down Paul’s side, settling on the luscious curve of his ass. “I’m up to whatever you are. Always.”

“So you’re saying I’ve met my match?”

It was on the tip of his tongue to quip, “No, you’ve met your better,” but Jack refrained. Instead, he said, “You can call it that.”

Paul smiled and tossed Jack a rag. “Get yourself cleaned up if you can move. I’m starving.”

He swiped the wet cloth over his stomach in lazy circles, all too aware of Paul tracking his every move. There wouldn’t be any more dancing tonight, of that, he was certain. Getting long hours in a bed with Paul, though?

He shivered in gleeful anticipation.

Right then, he thought he’d give up dancing for the rest of his life if it kept that hungry gleam in Paul’s eyes.

CHAPTER 12

The weight on Paul's back could only be one thing, but Paul refused to open his eyes and verify his suspicion. As soon as he did, he'd have to get out of bed, and at that moment, he was just too comfortable. He had huge, south-facing windows, and he didn't feel any heat from the morning sun on his face. That meant it was early. Still early enough to fix this mess? Somehow? Only if he opened his eyes and dealt with the fact that the weight on his back was Jack's sleeping form.

Paul was a little sore from the night before. He had fucked Jack twice after dinner—though the second time, Jack did all the work, riding him until they were both lathered in sweat. They had danced, too. Though it hadn't been for the movie. It

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hadn't been structured. Once again, there hadn't been music. It had just been the two of them, drawing on deep stores of energy, showing off like kids. It had been fun. More than that, it had been intoxicating. To the point that Paul never thought about sending Jack home. He had been too interested in all the things he could do if he kept Jack in his bed.

But the intoxication couldn't last forever. Paul was sober now, and it was too easy to imagine photographers lurking behind bushes and scaling his fences. Or Melinda bringing him breakfast, only to find Paul's mouth was too full of Jack's cock to tell her not to come in.

Worse, it was too easy to imagine Jack demanding a second night, and then another, and another—and Paul giving in to each demand. This was a one-night thing. It had to be. They still had too many weeks of shooting, and Jesson was still watching them far too closely, to let it be anything else. Jack probably wouldn't like it, but Jack would have to understand that Paul just wanted to protect their careers. Protect their futures.

“Jack?” Paul shoved him away, but Jack's eyes didn't even flutter. “Wake up. Come on. Time to get up.”

Another shake brought a low grunt from the man's throat, and his hand came up to bat Paul's away. “Sleep.”

“No, it's time to get up. You can take a nap when you get home.”

Mention of home had Jack cracking an eyelid. “What time is it?”

“It's a little after four.”

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“Are you kidding me?” Closing his eyes again, he burrowed deeper into the pillow, turning away from Paul. “We’re not even rehearsing today. Wake me up later.”

Paul shoved him again, none too gently. “I’m waking you up now. You need to get up, and get dressed, and go home. Before anybody notices that you spent the night here.”

This time when Jack rolled over to face him, his brows were drawn into a thick line, his eyelids heavy but open. “You’re kicking me out?”

“Well, technically, yes. You need to get moving before anybody sees you here.”

“Who’s going to see me? You live like a hermit, and they’d have to get past your watchdog housekeeper to get to you anyway. We’ll be fine until the sun comes up, at least.”

“Is this a risk you want to take, Jack? Do you want to see your picture showing up in some shitty gossip rag again while you’re on Jesson’s shit list?”

Jack finally sat up, propped up on his elbows. Paul winced when he saw the vivid hickey at the base of his neck. Any open-collared shirt he wore for the next few days would put it on proud display for the world to see. He was silent for several seconds, his gaze growing darker with every one.

“Well, at least I see why you don’t get laid very often now.” He kicked off the blankets and rose, standing with his back to Paul and stretching. His back audibly cracked. “That boytoy you saw must’ve been bloody fantastic to keep you in bed late enough to miss our rehearsal call.”

Paul bristled. He wasn’t trying to be a jerk. But he

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supposed he shouldn't be surprised that Jack was throwing his late arrival to rehearsal back in his face. "At least he didn't argue with me when I said it was time to go."

"Course not." He scooped up the pants he'd left crumpled on the floor. "Probably got his money up front. He didn't have any real reason to stay."

Paul almost pointed out that he didn't have to pay anybody for anything. It probably wouldn't take more than a snap of his fingers to get Jack back in bed. But he didn't want this to completely devolve into a shouting match. "You know, Jack, just because you have a self-destructive streak a mile wide doesn't mean I have to get caught in its wake."

"Right. That might mean actually caring about someone other than yourself for two seconds." He yanked his shirt on over his head. "No fuss. Got what I wanted, after all."

"Don't lecture me about caring for someone other than yourself." Paul yanked the bedroom door open with enough force that it slammed into the opposite wall, cracking the plaster. "If you gave a fuck, we wouldn't be having this argument at all."

"Trust me. I won't be making that mistake again." Snatching his jacket from the chair, he stalked out the door, cutting a wide swathe to avoid contact with Paul.

Paul debated following him. He could catch him before he reached the front door and do something. He wasn't sure what. Apologize? Offer to drive Jack? Ask him if he wanted to go out to one of the diners off the highway for breakfast? But he had the feeling that Jack wasn't going to accept that invitation.

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“Well, fuck it. Maybe he’ll leave me alone now,” Paul muttered, without any real feeling. He slammed the door, but even the vibration through the walls didn’t make him feel better. Collapsing on the bed didn’t make him feel better, either. What did Jack want from him? Did Jack want him to pretend they lived in some sort of fantasy land, where they could do whatever they wanted, and nobody would ever try to hurt them?

Paul sighed. Clearly, he was the bad guy in the situation. That was fine. He could be the bad guy. It wouldn’t be the first time in his life.

* * *

His hands shook. If he let go of the Roadmaster’s steering wheel, Jack knew beyond a shadow of a doubt he’d slam his fist through the windshield or his window or into the dash. The streets were deserted, dead before the dawn, and he ran more than one stop sign in his haste to get out of Paul’s neighborhood.

He’d been a fool. And worse, he’d played the fool when faced with the truth. He’d lashed out and said things he didn’t mean, simply because he wanted to hurt Paul. He didn’t know if he’d even managed to do that, though. The man was made of stone. They’d spent a fantastic night together—fucking and dancing and hell, having more fun than he could remember—and the first thing Paul could think of upon waking up was his bloody reputation. No *Last night was great*. No *I wish you didn’t have to go*. Not even a *You’re a terrific fuck*. All he

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wanted was to preserve his precious image. Nothing else mattered. Certainly not Jack.

But it still stung. It still hurt. Because it wasn't just sex to Jack. He was an idiot to ever think the rest of it mattered to anyone but him.

He didn't realize where he was heading until he pulled onto Wendy's street. It wasn't too late to turn around and head back to his house, but with her apartment building looming in the shadows ahead of him, he discovered he didn't want to be alone. He parked beneath a towering palm and practically sprinted to the front door.

His hands still shook. He felt like his entire body was going to fly apart.

Yellow circles of light from the wall sconces dotted the flowered carpet stretching down the length of Wendy's hall. She was on the fourth floor; he'd taken the stairs two at a time rather than wait for the elevator. His knuckles hurt from how hard he knocked. Too late, he remembered just how early it was.

He leaned against the wall next to her door. The chain sliding across the lock on the inside of her apartment grated across his nerves, and he rubbed at his eyes in a desperate bid to calm down.

"Jack?" Her voice was thick with sleep. "What's wrong?"

He took a deep, shuddering breath. "I slept with Paul."

"Oh..." A slim, warm hand wrapped around his arm and gently tugged. "Get in here before Mrs. Carmody comes out to see who's waking everybody up at this hour."

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He let himself be pulled into the dark coziness of her apartment. While she locked the door behind them, he stood obediently, waiting for her lead. Already, he was feeling better. Her soft hand never left his arm, and the cinnamon scent hanging in the air reminded him of all the good times they'd spent together, not the disaster of his morning so far. He'd done the right thing by coming here, even if it hadn't been a conscious choice.

"Why can't you be a guy?" he complained as she led the way to the kitchen. "I wouldn't be going through all this if you were a bloke."

When she flipped the light on, he had to blink rapidly to make the spots in front of his eyes stop dancing. He'd woken her up. There was still a pillow mark on the side of her face. Her faded yellow robe hung open, her bare feet silent on the worn linoleum as she crossed to the stove.

"If I was a guy, you'd still be out of luck since I would probably still like girls," she teased. She picked up the kettle. "Tea or coffee?"

"Is whiskey out of the question?"

She lifted a brow. "At four o'clock in the morning? Yes."

"Tea, then." He sat heavily at the small round table against the wall and buried his head in his hands. "It's such a fucking mess."

"What happened?"

Water ran from the tap. "Told you. We slept together. I even mean that both figuratively and literally this time."

"He spent the night at your house?"

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“No, I was at his.” Briefly, he told her what had happened the night before, leaving out the more salacious details. By the time he finished, she sat opposite him with two steaming cups of milky tea between them.

“I know you don’t want to hear this,” she said warily, “but you do realize you shouldn’t have slept with him at all, right?”

Jack snorted. “You say that like I was the one who started it. He kissed me first.”

“You kissed him the night you were drunk.”

“That was different.”

“Really?”

“Yes. It didn’t go anywhere. And I was drunk.” He cradled his tea. “Extenuating circumstances.”

“But that opened the door, didn’t it?”

Jack frowned. “Weren’t you the one who was trying to make that first kiss into a whole lot of something? You kept nattering on about Paul and how I was the one making things worse.”

“Well, sleeping together is kind of worse.”

“He kissed me first!”

“Why didn’t you just leave after what happened in the shower?”

Jack stared at her with a single cocked brow.

Wendy flushed. “Okay. Dumb question. How about after dinner? Why didn’t you go then?”

“Because I didn’t want to, that’s why. And he didn’t want me to. I’m telling you, Wendy, it wasn’t anything like it was before. Well, it was, in a way. Still that bit of friction, but it

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was different this time, just getting both of us hot instead of annoying the crap out of us.”

“Until you woke up this morning.”

“Until he kicked me out of the bloody bed this morning,” he corrected bitterly. “I don’t know why I’m surprised. His career always has come first. He wanted me off the picture because he was convinced I was going to ruin it. And he made me look ridiculous on that double date just to make himself look good.”

“No, you made yourself look ridiculous by getting drunk.”

“Same thing.”

With a sigh, Wendy picked up her tea and took a sip. “And now you’ve made it so that things are going to be bad when you go back to rehearsals on Monday. I thought you were going to try and make things better, Jack. This isn’t better.”

“Don’t be laying this all at my feet. I know I said some dumb things, but he’s the asshole who couldn’t get me out the door fast enough.”

“What did you expect? You think you were the only who was surprised by what happened last night?”

She said it so quickly, with such genuine surprise, that it took Jack aback. He had spent a good part of the night expecting to be kicked out, for the bubble to burst, for Paul to come to his senses and banish him from his home again. He had been so wrapped up in getting so easily dismissed this morning that he hadn’t even considered what Paul might have been going through. Maybe it took a few hours of distance to see how far things had really gone. After all, Paul had been the

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one who had always been so adamant about keeping things professional. Especially after the kiss.

“He didn’t have to just kick me out this morning.” The petulant tone in his voice annoyed even him, though he managed to keep from wincing at it.

Wendy tilted her head. “Why don’t you go back there later today and talk to him about it?”

The suggestion made him laugh. “Because he doesn’t answer his own bloody door. What am I going to say to his housekeeper? ‘Excuse me, but can you go get Paul? You see, he buggered me senseless last night—’”

“Jack!”

Grimacing, he gulped at his tea. “It won’t work. I won’t get in. Not without an invite.”

“So call ahead and ask him.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t fancy getting my nose rubbed in it twice in the same day, that’s why not.” The tea wasn’t doing anything but making him tired. He yawned widely, not even bothering to cover his mouth. “Fuck, the least he could’ve done was let me get some decent sleep. I’m knackered.”

“Why don’t you sleep on my couch for a few hours before you go home? Maybe things will look better once you’re fully rested.”

“I can’t do that. Your neighbors will talk.”

“Considering how loud you banged on my door, I don’t think you have to worry about any of them believing you spent

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the night.” She paused, her eyes thoughtful. “And how come you’re so worried about my reputation but not Paul’s?”

“Because he lives in Fort Knox.” Leaving his tea, he scraped back in his chair, stood, and took the step he needed to press a kiss to the top of her head. “Thanks, Wendy. I think I will take the couch. For a couple hours, at least.”

But as he wandered back into the dark living room, Wendy’s words haunted his every step. He thought she might have a point, but his exhausted brain refused to work properly and put it all together. He collapsed onto the couch without taking off his shoes. Less than a minute later, he was asleep.

CHAPTER 13

Jack had no idea how long he'd slept. When he finally blinked his eyes open, the curtains were pulled tight, the apartment dead silent. There wasn't even Wendy's humming in the background as she read or worked or did one of the other thousand things she did in her free time. He sat up, his muscles protesting from his cramped position on the short couch. His brain was more alert, but his body felt like rubbish. It was a very good thing he had two days until they resumed rehearsals. Between fucking with Paul and Wendy's couch, his back was practically a pretzel.

He spied the folded sheet of stationery on the coffee table, his name written across the front in Wendy's neat script. *Be*

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back this afternoon. Stick around as long as you want.—W
Scrubbing his hands through his hair, he stood and stretched. It was tempting. There were worse ways to spend a Saturday night than hanging out with Wendy.

Thoughts of his upcoming evening, however, immediately brought back memories of the night before. More specifically, Paul's brusque dismissal in the weak hours of the morning. Wendy had been wrong. It didn't look any better now that he was rested. Then again, neither did his own behavior. He'd tossed out more than one hurtful comment, purposely being as callous as he could manage. He couldn't say he could really blame Paul for going so cold there at the end. Hadn't Jack learned anything about the man in the past two weeks not to know that would be the guaranteed response?

If he wasn't so sure Paul would refuse to see him, he'd take Wendy's suggestion and go over to try and mend some fences. They still had to work together. They still had a front to put on for the public. It would be so much easier to play the devoted student if Paul wasn't glaring at him every second the cameras were aimed in a different direction. But there was no way Paul would bend before he had to. The man had an iron rod instead of a spine.

The idea came to him as he was fumbling around in Wendy's bathroom. Martin. If anyone knew how to handle Paul, it was his best friend. He was also invested in making sure Paul and Jack got along for the good of the movie. Jack was certain he'd have invaluable advice on how best to approach Paul at this point.

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Scribbling out a quick thanks for Wendy, he left it in the same spot on the coffee table and used his spare key to lock up as he left. Jogging out to his car, he wondered about taking the time to run home and change first, but quickly dismissed the idea. He wanted to get this done. Running home ran the risk of talking himself out of this, and frankly, the sooner he resolved this, the happier he was going to be.

He was as jittery heading to Martin's as he'd been fleeing Paul's. It hadn't eased by the time he bounded up the front walk. He shoved his hands into his pockets to try and hide them as he waited for Martin to answer.

Only a few moments passed before Lilah opened the door. She smiled when she saw him, her cat-shaped eyes crinkling at the corner. Jack always had the feeling that Lilah was waiting to pounce on him, and yet, whenever she thought nobody was looking, she watched Martin with a sort of fascinated adoration.

"Jack, this is a pleasant surprise."

He grinned. "And I even showed up sober this time. Step in the right direction, yeah?"

"I think that depends on where your destination is." She held the door open and gestured him inside. "I'm guessing you need to see Martin with a dire emergency?"

"Well, wouldn't call it dire. Just requires his brand of expertise." He waited in the foyer as she shut the door behind him. "I'm not interrupting anything, am I?"

"I'm not sure, honestly." She led him past the flight of stairs to the door at the end of the hall. "He's locked himself

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away in here with Paul. He only does that when they're talking business and they don't want me to distract them."

Jack stopped. Paul was here. That could go either way. It got him the opportunity to see him face to face, in a neutral environment where he'd be less likely to throw a punch in anger. But then, was Martin's really neutral? He was Paul's friend, not Jack's. Jack could just leave and wait for a better time to speak with Martin, but turning tail would make him look even more pathetic. Even if he asked Lilah not to say anything to Marty about his arrival, he didn't think she'd really listen to him.

"He's not going to get pissed if we interrupt him?" Maybe Lilah could solve his dilemma for him.

"Martin? He won't be pissed. Paul on the other hand..." She shook her head. "It doesn't take much to set him off these days."

Fuck. That didn't help him at all. Because Jack knew for a fact that he was the reason Paul was so short-tempered.

"Well, best not to do that then." He nodded toward the door. "Can you tell them I'm here?"

Lilah smiled sympathetically before opening the door a crack. "Hey, guys? You have a visitor."

"Who is it?" Martin asked.

"Jack."

Martin didn't answer immediately. The pause wasn't long. In fact, it was probably only the length of a single, knowing glance. Jack was just about ready to call the whole thing off and leave, regardless of how it looked, but then Paul said,

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“Send him in.”

Jack shot a smile of gratitude at Lilah and pushed the door open. He stepped into a tasteful office, decorated in rich mahogany wood and navy fabrics. Double-wide windows let the brilliant morning sunshine stream inside, but Jack barely noticed. He was too busy devouring the sight of Paul outlined against the glass, his arms folded over his chest.

“Not breaking up a party, am I?” The lightness in his tone even surprised him.

“No,” Paul said, his voice flat.

“We were just discussing the shooting schedule for *Sticks and Stones*,” Martin said smoothly.

“There’s not a problem with it, is there?” Though the look on Paul’s face made it more than clear that production was not what was on his mind.

“No.”

Martin glanced over to Paul with a hint of exasperation, then looked back to Jack. “What can I help you with?”

“Actually...” He took a deep breath. He was here. He might as well get it over with. “I was hoping to talk to you about Paul, but seeing that he’s here, maybe I should just do this with him.”

Martin snagged his jacket from the back of the chair and flung it over his shoulder. “Perhaps you should. I think I’ll go for a walk with my wife.”

Paul snorted. “You’re in quite the hurry.”

“After the morning I’ve had with you? I’ll take any excuse for a breather. Try not to break anything.”

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Jack stood out of the way as Martin hurried out, but once it was just the two of them alone in the room, the silence deafened him. Now that he was here, he had no idea what to say. Paul was still clearly upset. Jack suspected anything he said might only make things worse.

Which meant, in essence, he had nothing to lose.

“Look, I’m just going to say this and get it out there, and if you want to pound me senseless afterward, so be it. But last night was bloody fantastic. Probably one of the best nights I’ve ever had, and I’m not so daft not to know it’s because it was with you. Maybe it wasn’t so much for you, but I knew going in how you felt about keeping things quiet. I shouldn’t have overreacted this morning, even if it did piss me off.”

Paul studied Jack without blinking for several beats, then sighed and relaxed his arms. His defenses weren’t completely down, but even though the same distance separated them, Paul seemed closer. “I didn’t mean to...upset you this morning. I wasn’t trying to dismiss you or act like you weren’t anything more than a temporary diversion.”

Hope flared in a bright blaze, but Jack tamped it down in fear of being premature. “Yeah, well, first thing you’ve gotta learn is I’m not so much a morning person. Trying to communicate anything to me then is putting your life at risk.” He cocked a half-smile at Paul. “I would’ve thought you’d figured that out by now because of rehearsals.”

“I thought your behavior in the morning was just general belligerence.”

“Maybe in the beginning.” Emboldened by the lack of

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animosity in Paul's tone and posture, Jack ventured a few steps farther into the room. "You spend the whole morning bitching at Martin about me?"

"Not specifically. Though the conversation often came back to you." Paul lowered himself to the nearest chair and rubbed the back of his neck. "I spent most of the morning bitching about the fact that no matter what I do, or want, what happened this morning is the rule, not the exception."

He didn't like hearing about Paul's previous attempts at relationships, but the fact that he'd been as upset about it as he was boded well for Jack. Another step closer brought him to the edge of the couch, only a few feet away from Paul. Jack leaned against the back, stretching his legs out in front of him.

"So what is it you do want?" he asked, keeping his tone as neutral as he could. He wasn't entirely sure he succeeded.

"I don't know. I kept waiting for Martin to tell me what I want, tell me what I should do. But even Martin doesn't know how to change the fact that even if I drag you back to my house right now, I'm going to have to make you leave again."

The hope was back again, even stronger than before, too strong to completely dampen. "That's the world we live in, mate. We picked it, so we've got to be ready to deal with what being in it means. And yeah, I know, that sounds a bit ridiculous coming from me."

"It sounds a lot ridiculous coming from you," Paul said wryly.

"But I've never actually been caught, now have I? I might push the boundaries some, but I do what I have to, to make

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sure the rags don't get the dish."

"I don't want to push the boundaries at all. I don't want to give anybody an excuse to rip the rug out from under me. Despite...I know I've made some mistakes. I haven't been perfect. But this morning was an attempt to try to avoid future mistakes. And if you can't deal with that...then we shouldn't have a repeat of last night, either."

Jack frowned. "I never said I couldn't deal with that. In fact, I distinctly recall just saying I know that's the world we live in."

"You'll excuse me if I'm a little bit skeptical after the way you went on this morning."

"And maybe I wouldn't have gone on this morning like that if you'd given me a hint that I might've actually been something more than a convenient fuck."

"You were in my bed, Jack! Do you think I bring convenient fucks to my house? Do you think I bring *any* fucks to my house, convenient or otherwise?"

"How was I supposed to know that? Last night was the first time you and me have managed to spend some decent time together."

"The housekeeper paid not to let anybody in my front door should have been a clue. I spend so much time surrounded by people. There's no privacy at the studio. The gossip rags don't think I'm entitled to my privacy. Whatever I have at home is all I get. But I didn't wake you up because I didn't want you there."

"I know," he confessed softly. "Now, at least. I lashed out.

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I'm sorry I did that.”

“I probably could have been a bit more...thoughtful. You know, instead of shaking you awake and telling you to leave.”

The trembling had returned to Jack's hands, though this time, from excitement rather than nerves. Shoving them into his armpits, he tilted his head and offered what he hoped was an encouraging smile.

“So where does this leave us now? You want to go back to the way things were, or find a way to make this work that doesn't end with each of us pissed at the other?”

Paul arched his brow. “Is the latter option possible? Seems like we're always going to piss each other off.”

“I'd be willing to try if you are.”

“It's not an issue of whether or not you can sleep over, you know. We can't do anything to tip off people at work. You're going to have to behave normally. Or whatever passes as normal for you.”

Jack leveled a stare at him. “You think I'm just going to grab your ass and shove my tongue down your throat every chance I get? You're bloody delicious, mate, but give me a little credit here.”

“Honestly? When you look at me like that, I kind of think you *are* capable of just grabbing my ass and shoving your tongue down my throat.”

“Only because seeing you all fired up like this reminds me of every second from last night.” He took a deep breath. “Look. Fact is, I've worked hard to get to this point in my career. I don't want to bollocks it up. If you're willing to bend

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just a little, maybe see I'm not your enemy here, I can do what it takes to make sure you don't have to worry about me."

"I don't think you're the enemy."

"So work with me on this, Paul. The last thing I want is for last night to be a one-off."

Paul tilted his head, his eyes unreadable. "What do you want? Just a fling during the shoot or something...more?"

His heart pounded in his ears as he said, "Had a thing for you before I ever met you. Getting this time together, even as short as it is, has just convinced me my imagination never did you justice."

Paul smiled. "I never realized you were a fan." He stood, and Jack resisted the urge to close the space between them. But he never looked away as Paul approached, trapping him against the couch. "I can't make any promises, but if my morning bitch-and-moan session made me realize anything, it's that I don't want a fling."

Though Paul's arms didn't touch Jack's sides where he had braced his hands against the couch, Jack felt the heat of them anyway. He smelled the vague scent of coffee on Paul's breath, the musky smell of his aftershave. Both made his mouth water, and he had to fight not to grab Paul's shirtfront and slam their lips together.

"Neither do I. That's why I came here in the first place. I'd hoped Martin could tell me how to talk to you without fucking everything up."

"I think you did a pretty good job without Martin's help. Have you even been home yet today?"

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“No. Crashed at a friend’s and when I woke up, all I wanted to do was fix this.”

“You’re very proactive, I’ve got to give you that much.”

Paul’s mouth hovered over his, and Jack could already taste it. It felt like days since Paul had last kissed him. He tensed, waiting for the pressure of Paul’s mouth, itching to fist Paul’s shirt and drag him into a hungry kiss. Jack held firm, though. Once Paul made the initial contact, he wouldn’t check himself, but Paul needed to make the first move.

When he did, it was with a moan of satisfaction. He wasn’t reserved or hesitant. He claimed Jack’s mouth with a hard caress, his tongue immediately seeking entrance.

Everything went right again at the first touch. With a whimper, Jack opened to the kiss, finally succumbing to the need to touch Paul, to smooth his hands over the familiar chest, to pull him even closer and steal his heat. Part of his brain understood Paul’s fears. For all his talk otherwise, Jack craved Paul in ways he’d never wanted any other man. Not touching him at every opportunity would be torture. Sweet and delicious, but torture, nonetheless. But that was a concern for another time. Because right here, right now, nothing else mattered but Paul’s hot tongue twisting around his and the wild thump of their hearts echoing through their skin.

Paul cupped the side of his head, his palms covering Jack’s ears. Jack shifted, pressing his thigh against the bulge in Paul’s pants, and was rewarded with a moan. Jack pressed harder, and the additional pressure prompted Paul into moving, grinding against Jack’s denim clad leg. Paul had been

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a little distant—even while they were talking, Jack sensed a bit of distance. But the kiss was anything but. Paul seemed to pour himself into the caress, exploring Jack’s mouth, touching Jack’s body, with all the focus and determination he brought to his dancing.

He pulled Paul’s shirt free of his trousers, seeking out the first strip of bared skin with greedy fingers. His nails caught on the hot flesh, making the muscles twitch, and Paul’s grip tightened on Jack’s head. It was hard not to smile. He had the distinct feeling this would always be the best way for them to communicate. Neither one of them would ever be able to deny just what they did to the other. Their bodies would forever give them away.

When he let one hand dip inside the waistband to find the wet tip of Paul’s cock, he curled the other arm around Paul’s back, tugging him even closer. “Doesn’t seem like I just had you a few hours ago,” he murmured between kisses. “Doesn’t seem like I can wait to get you again.”

“I know. But...Martin’s going to be home soon.”

“Martin thinks we’re fighting.” He bit at Paul’s lower lip. “He’s going to steer clear as long as he possibly can.”

“It’s not going to sound like we’re fighting,” Paul pointed out, his lips straying from Jack’s mouth to the line of his jaw. “Unless you plan to shout random obscenities at me.”

“If that’s what it’ll take to get you to bend me over the man’s desk and fuck me senseless.” He mirrored Paul’s mouth to nibble down his neck. “Want you. I don’t really care what it’ll take to get you.”

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Paul groaned, his erection pressing harder into Jack's thigh. Jack was prepared to respond to any of Paul's protests. He expected at least two or three more, but Paul was apparently past the point of arguing. He took Jack by the shoulders and spun him around, walking him backward until the rounded edge of Martin's oak desk dug into his thighs. Jack grinned, and Paul almost immediately covered it with his mouth, cutting off everything except the hungry moan from the back of Jack's throat.

His hands worked feverishly to strip the fastenings on Paul's clothes. He wanted to tear them off, but somewhere in the back of his brain, a little voice reminded him they weren't actually somewhere Paul could get to new clothing easily. Paul was already worried about Martin overhearing. Jack didn't need to add fuel to the fire when they were done and Paul came back to his senses.

As soon as the button and zipper were undone, Jack wrapped his hand around Paul's heated shaft, pumping it slowly from balls to tip. Paul groaned into their kisses and thrust his hips to meet Jack's stroke.

"Could shout other things while you fuck me," Jack murmured. "Like how fantastic you feel buried in my ass."

"You should save that for later..." Paul popped Jack's pants open and shoved them down his narrow hips without ceremony. His underwear followed. Paul caught the fluid on the tip of Jack's cock and smeared it over the head, working his palm against the sensitive skin until Jack's knees buckled and he squirmed, trying to get away and trying to get more at

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the same time. “As much as I love hearing it.”

Jack kicked away the last of his clothes and spread his legs to make it easier for Paul to touch him. “Whenever you want it, pet. I’m all yours.”

Paul slid his hand behind Jack’s balls, the tip of his middle finger seeking out Jack’s entrance. His blunt fingertip traced the ring before gently pressing inside him. Despite the previous night’s activities, the intrusion still stung a bit, and he gasped as Paul began to work his finger in and out, stretching him. “The strange thing is...I believe you actually mean that.”

He did mean it. He’d meant it the night before, too. There wasn’t anything he wouldn’t do for this man, and if he had to turn himself over into Paul’s very capable hands indefinitely, he would. And he’d love every second of it.

He pulled at Paul’s cock at the same, deliberate tempo Paul set with his stretching. They weren’t kissing anymore, as if they’d silently agreed on a ceasefire while their hands were otherwise occupied. Instead, Paul watched Jack with dark, hooded eyes, reading every flicker of emotion Jack couldn’t contain. The scrutiny made him squirm, but that only served to push Paul’s fingers in deeper. When Jack unconsciously clamped down around them, they both gasped.

“We’re going to negotiate more than Friday or Saturday night, aren’t we?” With his free hand, Jack cupped the back of Paul’s head, refusing to let him look away should the desire take him. “Even if it just means a couple hours after your keeper’s gone to roost for the night.”

“Yes. We can try. But...” He touched his forehead to

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Jack's, and his breath warmed Jack's lips. "It won't be easy. And not necessarily at my place."

"My place, your place, the bloody moon." Jack captured Paul's mouth in a slow, sweet kiss that proved next to impossible to end. "Doesn't matter to me where it happens. As long as you're there."

"God..." Paul pushed a third finger into Jack's body. "I hope you're ready."

"Always."

He stroked Paul's cock for as long as the other man let him, only reluctantly letting go when Paul pulled his fingers free and grasped Jack's hips. He twisted in Paul's arms, bending forward as soon as he felt the touch between his shoulder blades. The sun had warmed the wooden desk, but next to his scorched skin, it acted as a cooling balm, coaxing him away from the edge of his release to wait in anticipation of more.

Paul cupped Jack's ass with two large hands, massaging him, pulling apart his flesh to expose his stretched hole. Jack shifted his weight in anticipation, his cock throbbing where it was trapped against the desk. He closed his eyes, already imagining the thick, blunt head, pressing into him, demanding entrance. The image was so vivid, he was certain he would feel it at any second. Instead, he felt the tip of Paul's tongue, drawing a line from Jack's balls to his ass.

He cried out at the hot wetness, at the firm probe of the tip past his entrance. His hands scrambled to hold onto something, anything, in expectation of Paul pressing deeper,

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but by the time he'd gripped the side of the desk, Paul had retreated, tracing around the opening with almost delicate precision.

Before, he might have commented about Paul hurrying it up, or teasing about being unable to keep his mouth off Jack, or something equally provocative just to get a rise from the other man. Now, he could barely find his own voice enough to murmur, "Please," and "God, Paul," and whimper in the back of his throat when Paul pushed inside once again.

Jack spread his legs as wide as he could, and gripped his own ass, pulling his cheeks apart for Paul's mouth. Paul grunted with what sounded like approval, and rewarded Jack by pushing his tongue into Jack's tight channel. Every time Paul moved, Jack moaned. It didn't matter what he was doing. It didn't matter where Paul touched him, or how. All that mattered was the way his nerve endings flared to life, heated by the tip of Paul's amazing tongue.

He pressed his cheek to the cooler wood and squeezed his eyes shut against the pleasure radiating down the back of his legs. His balls tingled, aching for attention, but the last thing he wanted was for Paul to stop. He pushed back against each thrust, and shivered with each withdrawal. No man had ever pushed him so close to the brink of begging before. He was starting to think no man ever would again.

Paul continued to attack him with his mouth until he was aching, the tip of his cock coated in pre-come. He rocked back and forth, increasing the pressure against his cock, and then pushing hard on Paul's mouth. Paul didn't try to hold him

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down, didn't try to keep in place, and somehow, that just spurred Jack into pushing for more, aching for friction. He cupped Jack's sac, squeezing him until he cried out from the sudden stab of pain. Paul released him then and straightened, the tip of his cock sliding between Jack's spread cheeks.

Though he didn't want anything to get in the way of Paul sliding in, Jack released one of his hands to reach for Paul's hip. His fingers dug into the hard muscle, and he glanced back over his shoulder to meet Paul's hungry gaze.

"Do it," he urged. "Don't make me wait any longer."

"I won't," Paul murmured, nudging his crown into Jack's passage. Jack caught his breath, his heart rate tripling, his flesh throbbing around the new intrusion. He forced himself to relax, trying to ease the tension in his muscles, but as Paul pushed in another inch, a new shockwave of pleasure went through him. Each time Paul paused, Jack was convinced nothing could feel better than that moment, and then Paul would claim another inch of Jack's body, and the world would shift around him.

He had to abandon any sense of control over his own body as he clutched both at Paul and the desk beneath him. His cock throbbed, but he couldn't move to increase the friction, he couldn't even breathe while Paul slid inside his clenching channel. He almost wished he was on his back so he could see Paul's face, to watch the pleasure overtake him the way it consumed Jack.

"God, yes..." he hissed. The rest came out as a soft exhalation when Paul's balls finally slapped against his skin.

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“Oh, fuck...fuck yes...” Paul eased out of him as slowly as he had entered him, but it didn’t take long for him to pick up the speed. He gained momentum with each thrust, slamming Jack’s frame against the solid desk. The heavy piece of furniture vibrated beneath him, the pens rattling in the cup on the corner, the lampshade shaking.

His heels kept leaving the floor from the force of Paul’s strokes. Jack slid back, meeting each thrust, but it did more than help him regain his footing. It made his cock slide free of contact with the desk’s surface, and it dangled free, slapping against his thighs with each powerful drive. He reached for it on instinct, only to grunt in annoyance when Paul slapped his hand away.

“Tell me that’s because you’re going to do it for me,” he goaded.

“You want me to?” Paul spoke without breaking his rhythm. “Then you gotta ask for it.”

“Son of a...” He pressed his forehead to the desk, lost in the continual pounding that left him shaking and shattered. Paul’s fingers dug into his hips, the bruising strength sure to leave a ready reminder for days to come. “Fine. Just do it, will you? Touch me.” He let out a shuddering breath when a new angle scraped across his prostate. “Please, Paul. Need to feel you.”

“My pleasure.” The words were accompanied with a hard pull on Jack’s shaft as Paul gave him exactly what he wanted. The firm grip betrayed Paul’s strength, the hours he spent honing his body and building his muscles, and Jack felt each

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stroke all the way down to his toes. Paul alternated his rhythm, his hand moving the opposite of his hips, and Jack's body didn't know if it should push against Paul's cock, or fuck Paul's hand.

The problem was solved for him when Paul curled his free arm around Jack's chest and hauled him upward, molding their torsos together chest to back. Paul ducked his head and sucked at Jack's neck, his hungry groans echoing Jack's. Jack curled an arm back to cup Paul's head, holding him close, then closer.

"So good," he rasped. "Fuck, Paul. Never felt it like this before. Never..."

Paul grunted. Jack hoped it was a sound of agreement. He hoped that he was giving Paul something nobody else ever had. His head fell to the side, and Paul moved his mouth, creating fresh marks with his teeth and lips as he snapped his hips. The tension wound through Jack, and he knew he was close to losing his control. He tried to look for any sign that Paul was as close as he was—they were small hints, but they were there. The way Paul tightened his hold on Jack's cock, the way he bit a little harder and moaned a little louder, the way his precise rhythm became uneven.

And then he couldn't think of anything but hurtling toward oblivion. Everything centered on Paul, on the places where they were joined, on cock and ass and mouth and neck and the heat merging their skin together. Jack murmured encouragement, or what he hoped was encouragement since it felt like he'd lost all control over his thoughts and voice. He

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pressed his head back against Paul's shoulder, but not even the firm wall of muscle was enough to give him strength enough to hold on.

He came with a shout, his cock jerking in Paul's hand, while the rest of him went rigid. Though Paul had to tear past his clenching muscles to drive ever harder into his ass, Jack didn't care. He relished how the burn only added to the fire racing beneath his skin, and clutched at Paul's nape, begging him to give even more.

Paul went rigid, his teeth sinking even deeper into Jack's flesh. He made a high sound, almost a moan, but not quite. His hips moved in short, rapid jerks, pumping his cock even as it twitched with the force of his release. He shuddered, then shuddered again, the tension easing from his muscles, his jaw relaxing, though the arm around Jack's waist didn't loosen. Paul held him close, kissing the fresh bite mark on his skin, soothing the hint of pain there.

"Bloody hell..." Jack rasped. A thin sheen of sweat glued them together, and he licked away the saltiness along his upper lip, wishing it was Paul's mouth he was tasting instead. "Even if I didn't manage to fix this, that was a hell of a send-off."

"It definitely wasn't a send-off," Paul said, before catching Jack's mouth. The kiss was slow, but still hungry—evidence to support Paul's claim. "I guess I better let you go."

He knew Paul was right. And he knew he couldn't argue since that was partially what had caused all their problems in the first place. But he still couldn't uncurl his fingers from

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Paul's nape, or abandon the hot slant of his mouth.

"Suppose it would be pointless to suggest getting some more rehearsal time in this afternoon."

"Why would it be pointless?"

"You're not worried about people seeing us spend so much time together?"

"No." Paul finally peeled himself away, leaving Jack feeling cold. "We're supposed to spend time together. We're rehearsing for a film, and I'm your new mentor, remember? I don't want people seeing us spending all night together."

Jack grinned. "So what you're saying is we just make sure we spend all day fucking instead of all night."

"Half days for fucking. I'm still going to make you work, after all."

"Dancing's not work. But I think that's a deal I can more than live with."

Paul looked over Jack's shoulder. "You better wipe up Martin's desk. He's a patient guy, but even he has his limits."

Bending over to scoop up his pants, Jack dug his handkerchief out of his pocket. "Better the desk than the floor, at least," he commented as he cleaned away the come. "You think this is what he thought would happen by leaving us alone together?"

"Honestly? With Marty, it's impossible to say. He's very...open to possibilities."

"Nothing for me to be jealous about, is there?" Though he kept his tone light, Jack kept his gaze focused on the desk, unwilling to witness the possibility that there just might be

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something for him to worry about.

“Marty is my closest friend. That’s all.”

“Okay.” The relief that flooded through him was more than a little surprising.

“You’re not going to make a habit out of being jealous, are you? It’ll waste a lot of energy.”

“Course not. Just trying to figure out where I stand, is all.”

“Don’t worry about that. I don’t have the energy or the time to conduct two secret relationships.”

Jack grabbed Paul’s wrist and tugged their bodies close again. “Way I see it, if I do my job right, you won’t have any energy left after just the one.”

Paul smiled. “Keep doing what you did just now, and you’ll reach your goal.”

Jack kissed him before the last word had faded away. His only regret at the moment was that they weren’t already at Paul’s so he wouldn’t have to stop.

“We don’t need to wait for Marty to get back before leaving, do we?”

“Nah.” Paul swatted playfully at Jack’s ass before stepping back to zip his fly. “Hurry up and get dressed. I don’t want to get drawn into a conversation with him right now.”

He didn’t waste any time doing as Paul ordered. In fact, he had every intention not wasting any more time with Paul period.

CHAPTER 14

The summons to Jesson's office came without warning, or even a hint of what the producer wanted. At first, Paul thought the meeting would pertain to Jack, but Jack had been on his absolute best behavior. In fact, it was impossible to imagine a more thoughtful, consistent, and pleasant costar. Even when they moved from the dance rehearsals to the recording studio, he attacked each song with single-minded determination to make it the best he could. Except for the fact that he was sleeping with the star of the film, he had been the absolute picture of professionalism.

Jesson probably wasn't calling him in to speak about Betty, either. She never gave the studio any difficulties, and

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she had even responded to the change in Jack's work ethic. Despite the doom and gloom Paul had forecast when he first heard the casting news, things were going really well. Even though it was still a day before they were going to begin shooting, Paul felt comfortable in predicting that they would finish on time. In fact, it might even be the smoothest shoot in Jesson's entire career. Which might have sounded a bit *too* Pollyanna, if he ever voiced said opinion. But he was feeling optimistic about the shoot and about the movie itself.

Martin had even pointed out that Paul looked happy. Marty felt it was worth pointing out because, as he added, he rarely saw his friend genuinely happy. Paul had taken minor offense to that, but he couldn't deny it was true. And he couldn't deny the source of that happiness. It wasn't just that Jack was behaving professionally at work—it was the way he totally let himself lose control when they were alone. Jack had taken all the energy he once used to goad Paul into a reaction and funneled it into better, more worthwhile pursuits. Which really only amounted to goading a different sort of reaction from Paul.

Despite the fact that he didn't know what to expect from Jesson, he was still smiling when he knocked on the office door to announce his arrival. Maybe Jesson had already noticed the change in the atmosphere and wanted to congratulate Paul on it. Maybe he even had a message from Schary. Visions of a choreography credit danced in his head. Jesson called for him to come in. But those visions died when Paul saw the look on Jesson's face. It was not the look of a

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happy man.

“Shut the door,” Jesson barked. The latch had barely clicked when he added, “Since when have you been willing to kill your career for a piece of ass?”

Paul blinked. Jack. Jack had done something. Despite all of Paul’s precautions, despite everything he risked by trusting Jack, Jesson had found out anyway. There was no way both of them would walk away from this intact. If Jesson already knew, then others would, too.

“What are you talking about?”

Jesson pushed a folder closer to Paul, then flipped it open to reveal a headshot. “I’m talking about this guy.”

Paul narrowed his eyes. He didn’t recognize the younger man at first. In fact, he didn’t look too different from any of the other pretty boys who showed up in town with nothing more than a pretty face and a willing ass, without a single iota of talent to set them apart. “I don’t...oh. Oh. How did you get this?”

“His agent has been hounding me for a meeting for two weeks now. Today, he cornered me in the parking lot and said he wanted to make a deal I couldn’t afford to ignore. I brushed him off, but then he turned around and said if I didn’t want to talk to him, he was sure he could find somebody at *Confidential* who’d be interested in how hotshot MGM star, Paul Dunham, prefers pretty boys to cute starlets.”

Paul searched his memory, evaluating every word passed, every smile, every tiny moment of his short night with Don. The younger man had never mentioned being an actor himself,

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but he had mentioned being a fan. And instead of taking that as a warning to get the fuck out of the house, he had just smiled and accepted the praise because his ego needed it, and it felt good.

“I’ve never seen him before,” Paul said hollowly.

“Really?” Jesson’s tone was disbelieving. “Because he’s claiming to have seen a hell of a lot of you. Including the fact that you’ve got a birthmark under your balls.”

“Do you believe every stupid thing you hear? Do you want me to drop trou to prove he’s a lying sack of shit?”

“It doesn’t matter if he’s a lying sack of shit. All *Confidential* will care about is the story. And you know as well as I do that it only takes a hint of a scandal to sink a career. What girl is going to want to swoon over Paul Dunham when she’s been told he prefers his partners to have a prick?”

“What do you want me to do about it? Or is the point of this meeting that there’s nothing I can do?”

“The point of this meeting is for you to see just how your idiotic decisions fuck with not just you, but me, Paul. I can keep this quiet. All I have to do is give the asshole a contract. And you know what? That’s what I’m probably going to do, because the truth of the matter is, you’re too much of a cash cow for me right now to risk losing. But...” He leaned forward and leveled a warning finger at him. “This will be the only time I give one of your fucks a job, because you’re going to keep your dick in your pants from now on, understand? In fact, I think we’re going to have to arrange a little courtship to make sure there’s not even a hint of impropriety for

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Confidential to catch on to.”

Paul stared at him. “A courtship? Are you saying... marriage?”

“That depends on whether or not I get any more surprise visits.”

So he might get a stay of execution for good behavior. That was something, though far from ideal. “Do you already have somebody in mind?”

“A few. Unless you piss me off again, in which case it’ll be Betty.”

Paul couldn’t tell if that was a joke or not. Judging by the tone of Jesson’s voice, it probably wasn’t. “You’re not going to hear from anybody else.”

Jesson stared at him hard for several seconds before sitting back in his chair. “What has gotten into you with this shoot, Paul? First all the problems with Jack, and now this? I’ve never known you to be this reckless before.”

Jack is my problem would be the easy answer. Just two weeks before, Paul would have happily pointed the finger at the other man. But now, he needed to protect Jack. Despite Jesson’s reassurances and warnings, Paul had a feeling that he might not make it to the end of the shoot. No sense in dragging Jack down with him.

“I don’t know. I’ve just been tired. You know, four movies already this year. I guess it can wear anybody down.”

“It might be a good idea to take a little vacation after this is over. Someplace tropical with whatever girl we hook you up with.” Jesson was already nodding in self-approval at his idea.

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“That would be an excellent PR move.”

“Do you ever have an idea that you don’t immediately link back to PR?”

“When it comes to you? No.”

“You say that like I’ve done nothing but cause you trouble since I showed up here. I don’t mind playing the game. I don’t mind doing what you want me to do. But don’t do that. Don’t treat me like that.”

Jesson didn’t blink. “Then don’t fuck up like this again.”

“I won’t.”

Paul didn’t know if Jesson had more to say, and he didn’t care. With those words, he turned back to the door. One time. Hadn’t he always known that it would just take once? If Jesson ever found out about him and Jack... Well, Jesson wouldn’t. Because after that night, there wouldn’t *be* a him and Jack anymore. Paul could see only one solution. If he didn’t want to be forced into a marriage, and he didn’t want to lose the only job he had ever wanted, then he was going to have to return to self-imposed celibacy.

Somehow, he didn’t think Jack was going to take that well.

* * *

Jack was more than a little surprised when Paul slipped him the note over their lunch break, asking to meet up at Martin’s that night rather than their usual spot. He’d learned a lot about Paul over the past few weeks, not the least of which was the fact he was a man who abhorred disruption to his schedule. He liked his life orderly and controlled, and if Jack

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sometimes felt a little constrained by the occasional restriction, the benefits of getting to spend time with Paul more than made up for it.

Besides, he couldn't help but wonder if maybe Paul wanted a repeat of what had happened on Martin's desk. Just the prospect had him humming the rest of the day.

He was more than a little surprised to see Martin's car in the driveway when he pulled up, though, and even more so when Lilah answered the door.

"Paul's waiting for you." She ushered him inside and gestured down the hall. "In Martin's office."

"With Marty?"

"No, we're in the middle of dinner."

That boded well. Jack headed down the hall, a fresh spring in his step.

Paul was standing by the window when Jack opened the door, a dark silhouette against the light curtains. His arms were folded, his shoulders hunched a bit. Jack knew Paul's defensive pose when he saw it, but he refused to let that kill his good mood.

"I thought it would be best to meet here," Paul said in greeting. "Safest place to talk."

"Is that what we're calling it tonight?" He ventured closer, ready for Paul to relax any minute, but when he came up right in front of him and Paul hadn't even unfolded his arms, Jack frowned. "What's wrong?"

"We can't see each other anymore," Paul said flatly. "For the rest of the shoot, we're nothing but a couple of guys who

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work together.”

It was the last thing he'd expected to hear. Jack searched the familiar features for any sign that Paul was joking, then almost laughed out loud at the notion. Of course, Paul wasn't kidding. He never did when it came to work or his relationships.

“Did someone see us?” That had to be the only reason, though he had no idea how. They'd been so careful. Jack had made sure of that because the last thing he wanted was to lose Paul.

“No.” Paul turned so Jack couldn't see his face anymore. “No, it has nothing to do with you. You've been great.”

“So what is it then? What's got you so spooked we have to lay low until after the shoot?”

“No, Jack, we're not laying low. We're not going to be doing *anything* together, period. Before the shoot, after the shoot. It's finished.”

When Paul made to turn his back on him, Jack grabbed his arm and forced him forward again. “What the hell are you talking about? Are you saying you're just done with me?”

“It'd probably be easier if I did say that, wouldn't it? I am done with you, Jack, and I'm sorry. I know you probably don't believe me about that, but it's true. I'm very sorry.”

“You're sorry?” He sounded like an idiot, repeating Paul's words after him, but they didn't make any sense. “I've bent over backward to play by your rules. I did everything I could to show you how serious I was about this, and you're bloody *sorry*? Least have the decency to tell me why.” Fuck. He knew

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he sounded pathetic, begging like this, but the past two weeks had been the happiest of his life. He wasn't about to let it all disappear, just because Paul said so.

"I know you have. I know you've done everything...I fucked up, Jack. There's not really any other way to put it. I went out to a house party a few weeks ago. I found this guy...this boy. He was the one who gave me the hickey. I didn't know it at the time, but he's also an aspiring actor. With some sort of manager who thinks it's a good business move to blackmail a high-powered producer at MGM." Paul shrugged. "I guess it is a good business move, because the kid is going to get his contract."

Jack stared at him, gobsmacked. They had never really talked about that ill-fated night, even though he'd known Paul had hooked up with a man. As conservative as Paul was, though, he would never have expected him to get caught out. He was too careful for that.

Except he had. And now they were both paying the price.

"That doesn't mean we have to stop seeing each other," he tried. "We know how to be careful. We can be extra careful. Hell, even if we only see each other once a week, it's better than not seeing you at all. Don't do this to us, Paul. Don't give up."

Paul shook his head. "That's not how it works. Jesson's effectively put me on notice. This is it. My one warning. Next time? He'll probably feed me to the sharks himself instead of scramble to cover for me. Besides, my *courtship* is probably going to start within the week."

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“Courtship? What courtship?”

“The one Jesson is going to set up. A sort of pre-emptive strike. If I’m a real good boy, he won’t make me marry Betty.”

“Marry...” This got worse with every word out of Paul’s mouth. “What the hell are they thinking? Why would they throw you to the dogs like that? You’ve never been caught at anything like this before, have you?”

“No, I haven’t. And they’re not throwing me to the dogs. This is how they fix it. This is how they prove that I am worth something to them. Because they have somebody willing to tell everybody in Hollywood about the MGM star he fucked, and that’s not a headache they need.”

Sometimes Jack really hated their business. Though he recognized their main priority was to sell fantasies, the fact that they also managed to sell their own souls to the puppetmasters in charge of those fantasies had always rankled. Dating for the sake of perpetuating an image was to be expected, and though he hated it, he went along. For the sake of his career. But forcing a possible marriage? He’d heard of it happening to others, but it had never crossed his mind that it could be a reality for someone as powerful as Paul. Or that Jack would end up as part of the fall-out.

“How do they even know this son of a bitch will be satisfied with a contract? They give in to this, he knows they’ll probably give in to almost anything.”

“Probably not. Once he has a contract with them, he has something to lose, too. And they’ll actually have a bit of control over him. But right now, he has nothing to lose.”

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Unfortunately, Jack knew he had to agree with him. Whoever this kid was, it was a brilliant move. If it hadn't affected Paul, Jack would've almost been impressed at the kid's gumption.

"So that's it? We don't get to have any kind of happiness of our own because we're too busy stroking the studio instead?"

"I knew that was the deal from the very beginning. It's not Jesson's fault, or Schary's fault. It's mine."

"You still shouldn't be punished just because you're human."

"No, I should be punished because I'm fucking stupid." Paul pulled away from him and began to pace. "I was so fucking stupid, Jack. After four years of being careful, of denying every impulse I ever had, and then I just completely ruined everything in one night."

"This kid must've been fucking irresistible for that to happen."

"No, he's not anything special at all. He just...fuck, Jack...he just reminded me of you."

A myriad of reactions swirled inside Jack. On the one hand, delighted shock. Paul had thrown his usual caution to the wind to fuck a guy as a stand-in for Jack. On another, dismay. This was as much his fault as it was Paul's, since he'd done everything he could to get under Paul's skin from the moment they met. On yet another, fury. All Paul had to do was fuck Jack instead, and all of this could have been avoided.

He wanted to grab Paul and drag him to a halt from his

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pacing, but something told him any more contact would be shrugged off. He didn't want that kind of rejection. It was tough enough being told they were over.

"Are you absolutely certain we can't find a way to make this work?" Jack said. "I'm willing to do whatever it takes. Whatever terms you agree to. I don't want to lose this."

Paul shook his head. "I'm happy for the last two weeks. They were...pretty great. It's not a matter of me wanting to lose what we've got. I thought things were pretty safe in that house. I knew he recognized me, but there's just a certain, unspoken understanding. Or there used to be, when I was younger. And at the time, I thought, hey, one quick fuck in the bathroom won't be too dangerous. But I was wrong. If we tried to work something out, even if I think we're safe, chances are good I'll be wrong again."

Jack shook his head. "I can't believe I'm losing the best thing that ever happened to me over a quick fuck in a bathroom."

"It was a little bit more than that, actually. We found a free bed and I stayed there much longer than I should. But that's another reason we've got to stop. My judgment goes right out the window, Jack. It's like I completely lose my mind."

"You haven't lost it with me. Look at how careful we've been. If anything, you're more of a tightass than you were before."

"I have to be more of a tightass, because when we're actually together, the entire studio and staff of *Confidential* could come waltzing through the bedroom, and I wouldn't

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care.”

It would've been flattering if it didn't come with a good-bye. Jack held back his bitter frustration and shoved his hands into his pockets to hide their shaking.

“Can we still have tonight, at least? One last time.”

“Jack...” Paul shifted direction, turning to stand in front of Jack. Paul took his shoulders, his thumbs caressing Jack's collarbone, and pulled him close. Hope surged in Jack's chest as Paul tilted his head to press his mouth to Jack's. The kiss wasn't long. It wasn't deep. His tongue barely traced the seam of Jack's lips, and even when Jack parted them in desperate invitation, Paul didn't do anything to prolong the caress. “I'm really sorry.”

He knew even before Paul let him go that was all he was going to get. He could plead, and he could argue, and he could make himself look even more ridiculous by begging, but Paul had made up his mind. When he got like this, there was no moving him. It was a lesson Jack had learned well.

Too well.

He pulled back reluctantly, his lips still tingling from the tender kiss. “Me, too. More than you will ever know.”

If Paul had more to say, Jack didn't hear it. He whirled on his heel and left before he did something embarrassing and turned their bittersweet parting into something ugly. Shooting was going to be a nightmare now. He had no idea how he was supposed to play the part of Paul's disinterested costar when his heart was pretty much shattered.

He didn't think anyone could ever be that good of an actor.

CHAPTER 15

The worst thing about guilt and stress-induced insomnia was the need to get to the studio by four-thirty so they could do something about the bags under his eyes before shooting started. Paul always loved the first day of a shoot. He didn't just like being an actor, he adored the actual process of filming. Other actors hated it. It was hard. It was hot. It was stressful. It was exhausting. It was chaotic. But Paul didn't care about any of those things once the cameras were rolling and he could lose himself in the role, in the dancing. He could always leave his problems behind and be somebody else.

Except this time. He didn't want to shoot. He didn't want to drag himself into makeup, and then into wardrobe. He

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didn't want to have to face Jack and pretend everything was just great. At least Betty wasn't on the set that day. She would take one look at him and know something was wrong, and she wouldn't leave it at that. She'd nose around and ask questions, and Paul wouldn't budge, but he sure as hell didn't need that in his life right now.

The girls in makeup and wardrobe kept giving him odd looks, but he cut off their protests with curt, "Just get this over with." When he closed his eyes, he saw Jack's face. He knew Jack had real feelings for him. But he never guessed that he had the power to hurt Jack the way he had. He had never had the power to hurt anybody like that. He kept seeing Jack's face crumple, the disappointment and anger shining from his blue eyes. He didn't want to be responsible for hurting Jack like that. He didn't want to be responsible for hurting *anybody* like that ever again. Not if it meant reliving it over and over and over.

He expected to see the call sheet waiting for him in his trailer, but there was nothing. Had it been revised? Was Jesson or the director changing it? That was common on most shoots, but never the films under Jesson's control. He kept his people in line, including headstrong and wayward directors.

Paul picked up the script and looked through it, refreshing his memory. Nothing in his personal life could be so tragic as to make him forget his lines, but it wasn't a bad idea to review them while he had the opportunity. Except, that meant reading Jack's lines, too. Which he heard in Jack's now-familiar accent, colored by his now-familiar smile. Which only

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reminded him of the way that smile disappeared when Paul told him things were over. And why. Which finally reminded him of what a colossal fuck-up he was. He didn't deserve Jack. At least Jack was honest with himself about what he wanted, about who he wanted, about the life he wanted to lead.

His trailer door flung open, pulling Paul from his morose thoughts. He expected a page from the soundstage with his new call sheet, not Martin, with his hair standing on end and the vein popping out from his forehead.

There was only one question to ask. "What the fuck has happened now?"

Martin tossed the folded newspaper he carried onto Paul's lap. "What do you know about this?"

With a frown, Paul picked up the paper and scanned the headline. *MGM Star Breaks Hearts, Gets Caught in Secret Tryst*. Fear clenched his gut as he read on. It wasn't possible. Why would Don have gone to the papers after Jesson capitulated to the blackmail?

By the second sentence, he knew it hadn't been Don.

Heartthrob Jack Wells will leave more than a few girls crying into their pillows when they discover they aren't his type. Wells has been linked to newcomer Don Slater, and not as a possible costar. The two men are being investigated for lewd behavior...

Paul stared at the words for a long time, willing them to rearrange themselves into something that made sense. There was only one explanation. Don hadn't done this. Jesson hadn't

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done this. It had been Jack. He had probably called the editor himself with the tip.

“I don’t know...I can’t believe...”

“Oh, you can believe it.” Martin fell into the other chair, exhaling loudly. “Jesson’s furious. After the fiasco with Jack getting drunk, the last thing Jack needed was a scandal like this. He’s finished onscreen now.”

“Yes, he is.” Forever. Investigated for lewd behavior? Those were four words that sounded the death knell. “I need to go see him.”

The suggestion made Martin bolt upright from his slumped position. “Are you kidding? Now is the very worst time for you to see him. Reporters are going to be everywhere. You can’t be associated with Jack at all.”

“But Jesson was trying to sell the whole mentor angle. I can’t even...I mean, can’t we just spin it that I’m trying to help...” Even as Paul spoke, he knew that angle would never work. Right now, anything and anybody associated with Jack would be tainted. “Martin, I know that it’ll be difficult but I need to speak to him. Please.”

Martin regarded him, his eyes narrow and shrewd. “It won’t change anything. Jesson’s already been on the horn to buy out Brett Dawson’s New York contract so that he can take over Jack’s part.”

The part wouldn’t be the only thing to change. They wouldn’t want any hint of a scandal attached to the release, which meant a new title, and some tweaks to the script, and maybe even a few new songs. Depending on how much of a

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scorched earth policy Jesson felt like implementing, it might even mean dropping Betty in favor of a new starlet.

“I know it won’t change anything. But Marty ...” Paul leaned closer, dropping his voice. “Do you realize what Jack *did*? Do you know what this is? He saved me...my career.”

“I know,” he conceded softly. “I can’t say I understand why, but I do understand the magnitude of the sacrifice he made. Which is exactly why you can’t do anything now to negate that.” When Paul opened his mouth to protest even more, Marty held up his hand to cut him off. “I can’t make any promises. And you can’t use my house as a go-between. But I’ll get in contact with Jack and see what I can arrange where neither one of you will be at risk.”

“Okay. Good. Thank you. I don’t understand why he did this, either. It’s not like he didn’t know what would happen. I’ve been reminding him constantly...I don’t know what the fuck he was thinking.”

Martin rose to his feet. “I would imagine he was thinking of you, actually. Now go home. There’s no shooting today anyway. I’ll call you as soon as I have something sorted out.”

Paul sighed and stood as well. “It’s not like I’ve been Prince Charming to him.”

For the first time since walking into the trailer, Marty smiled. “The same could be said of Jack’s behavior toward you.”

Jack had been obnoxious, but the difference to Paul was obvious. He, at least, always knew where he stood with Jack. And that was far more than Jack could ever say.

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* * *

Martin's phone call came late in the afternoon, just as Paul's impatience and anxiety was reaching a fevered pitch. He barely took the time to scribble down the address Martin had recited before rushing out of the house. He hadn't even asked exactly where he was going. It was an address he could find, and Jack was waiting there. That's all that mattered to him.

It turned out to be an apartment. The surrounding area seemed free of photographers, but Paul couldn't be sure. They were a crafty bunch, and they could be hiding in trees, or perched on the roofs of nearby buildings. A quick scan in the area proved that wasn't actually the case, but Paul still braced himself for one jumping out at him, concocting an elaborate story to explain his presence in the quiet, residential neighborhood.

He wasn't sure what he wanted to say to Jack. He had spent the entire day thinking about it, and the entire drive rehearsing different approaches. Except, none of them worked. He wanted to be reasonable, but how could he be reasonable about Jack throwing away his entire future? Everything. He was throwing away everything. How was Paul supposed to discuss that decision reasonably?

He was still debating that question when he knocked on the door.

It opened almost right away, but the greeting died on his tongue at the sight of the slim, red-haired young woman who answered. She smiled at the sight of him, though, and held the

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door even wider.

“Come on in. I just put some coffee on for you guys.”

“Thanks. Is Jack here?”

“Yep. In the kitchen.” She laughed lightly as she shut the door. “Maybe he’ll calm down a little now that you’re here. I swear, sometimes he has ants in his pants.”

“Among other things,” Paul muttered. “Do you mind if I go speak to him in there?”

“Nope. Just remember I’ll be out here in case you two need a referee.”

She waved him toward the doorway to the lit kitchen, but Paul was already moving, stalking forward even though he still had no idea what he was going to say to Jack. Further rational thought fled his mind when he saw Jack’s familiar back at the counter, his graceful hands pouring out a cup of steaming black coffee.

“Want some?” Jack asked without turning around. “It’s fresh.”

Paul had enough presence of mind to wait until Jack sat down the pot of coffee before grabbing him by the shoulders, spinning him around, and backing him up to the wall. “What the fuck are you thinking about? What goes on in your head?”

Jack surprised him by not struggling. “Right now, I’m thinking I should’ve set the coffee down sooner if it was going to get you standing this close.”

Paul resisted the urge to shake him like a rag doll, but only barely. “I’m serious, Jack. Are you out of your mind?”

Some of the glitter disappeared from his eyes, the blue

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irises growing darker. “There was no way I was going to let that poncy little bastard get the win over you. His career’s in the toilet now, so no, I don’t think I’m completely out of my mind.”

“*Your* career is in the toilet now, Jack. You could have been...you could have really made it. Did you think this was going to fix anything? Fix us?”

“No. I thought it was going to fix things for you so you didn’t have to worry about him ever again.”

“Jack...” He grappled for words, but everything slipped out of his grasp, like flopping, jumping fish. “You didn’t need to do that. Things would have worked out. You didn’t need to take the hit because of this.”

“Was never about need. I did it so you could just go on and not have to worry anymore. Besides, I didn’t fall so far, not nearly as far as you would’ve. And making movies means more to you than it ever did to me. All I want to do is dance. I don’t need to put up with what being a movie star requires, to do that.”

“What are you going to do now? Where are you going to dance?”

“New York. Part of Jesson pulling Brett Dawson out to replace me means there’s a hole in his Broadway show. They’re promoting the understudy, and I’m going to work in the chorus.”

“Oh.” Paul swallowed and swallowed again, but the lump in his throat refused to go away. “The chorus.” Jack didn’t need to work in the chorus. He was better than that. It was a

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huge step backward from where he should be. "I'm not going to see you again."

Jack tilted his head. "We weren't going to be seeing much of each other anyway."

"Well, I know. But you were going to at least be in town. We were going to see each other every day. It wouldn't have been great, but it was better than nothing."

"It would've killed me," Jack said softly. "Eventually. Clean break...hurts, but it's better in the long run, yeah?"

"Yeah. Yeah, sure." Except it felt like his heart was being scooped from his chest. He dropped his arm, releasing Jack, and took a step back. This was for the best, all around. It was a huge step back for Jack, but he could have a future on Broadway. And Paul would have his precious Hollywood career that he had fought so hard for. "Especially since I have a date tomorrow night."

He caught the shadow passing behind Jack's eyes before he managed to hide it again. "Jesson's still pushing that agenda? Figures." He brushed past Paul to go back to the coffee pot. Paul wished he'd turn around and face him while they talked. He did not want to spend these last few minutes looking at the back of Jack's head. "Who's the lucky girl going to be?"

"Her name is Charlotte. I don't know much about her, except she's got a movie coming out next month, and the rags are talking her up as the next big thing. It's a mutually beneficial thing. We'll be dating until next spring, probably." Paul studied Jack's shoulders for a moment. "Whose

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apartment is this?"

"My friend, Wendy's." He poured out two cups, his hands surprisingly steady. "You can trust her. She's been covering for me ever since I moved out here."

"She'll know how to reach you in New York?"

"Yeah." Jack glanced back at him, a curious frown on his face. "Why? Jesson's not going to want you to be taking any risks."

"Sending an occasional postcard isn't a risk." Which completely flew in the face of Jack's desire for a clean break, but what was he supposed to do? "I'll just feel better if I know where you are. That's all."

Jack turned back to the coffee, but with both cups filled, he had nothing left to do but stare at them. Which he did. For long, interminable seconds that stretched between them filled with the echoes of words unsaid.

Then Jack said them.

"Doing this for you was the easiest thing I've ever done, to be honest." His voice was hushed, even, all traces of playfulness cast aside. "You're too good at what you do to take that away from you. But leaving...that's probably the hardest. Always knew there was something special with you, but I have to say I didn't expect to love you as much as I do." He laughed, a dry, hollow sound that rattled through Paul's bones. "Probably should've realized I was doomed the very first time we danced together. You were bloody marvelous."

The pain in Paul's chest spread, reaching every part of him. The space between them became unbearable, and Paul

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pressed himself to Jack's back, hoping he wouldn't be pushed away. He buried his face in Jack's neck, trying to catch his scent, and the texture of his skin. "I'm so sorry. I know...I keep saying that." Paul didn't lift his head. The words sounded better muffled against Jack. "But I don't think I can say it enough. We both would have been a lot better off if I wasn't so stubborn. Because I know it cost me...I won't have this again."

Slowly, Jack released the cups he'd been cradling to bend his arm back and find Paul's. His fingertips were hot from the scalding coffee, but Paul didn't fight him as he pulled and created the embrace Paul had wanted. It forced their bodies even closer together, though Paul was certain there was no such thing as close enough.

"You wouldn't be you if you weren't so mule-headed," Jack said affectionately. "Though I'll give you it might've been better if you hadn't tossed me out on my ear that first day. You deprived us of some prime sex hours, you know."

"Yeah, I know. That thought will haunt me on lonely nights." Paul dragged his mouth from Jack's neck to his jaw, kissing him softly. "Among other things."

"We'll just have to work harder so we don't think about it." Though it was obvious in his tone that the words were merely lip service. "You're not going to let Sweet throw out all my best moves, are you?"

"I suppose that really depends on whether or not Dawson can pull off all your best moves. If he looks like a fool, then you know Sweet will change everything."

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“As long as he makes you look good. That’s all that matters.”

“No, not really.” Paul straightened, but he didn’t step back. “I’ve got to get going. Martin said I shouldn’t stay here too long.”

“Yeah. He told me not to let you.” Bowing his head, Jack folded his hand over Paul’s. “I’m not very good at doing what I’m told to.”

Paul snorted. “No, but I am. It’s probably the only thing I’m good at.”

“Yeah, because your taste in one-night stands is for shit, too,” Jack teased. “I saw that Don. I’m definitely better looking.”

“You’re much better looking.” Paul inhaled deeply. “You smell better, too.” He traced his tongue around Jack’s ear. “You taste better.” He pulled at Jack’s shirt, inching it up his stomach to caress his tight stomach. “I don’t think I’d be going out on a limb to say you’re a better dancer.”

Jack’s grip tightened, and he ground back against Paul’s hips. “This is not you doing what you’re told, mate.”

Paul groaned. Jack was going to do what Jack always did—make him completely forget himself and lose all sense of control. He spun Jack around, and they both paused for a beat. Paul studied Jack’s face, noting every fine detail, committing it all to memory. Was Jack doing the same thing? He probably didn’t need to. Paul had the feeling that Jack already had everything about him committed to memory.

They both moved at the same time, their mouths crashing

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together.

Paul poured every ounce of desperation coursing through him into the kiss, and as their teeth knocked, awkward and frustrated, it felt like Jack did the same. Jack clutched the sides of Paul's head, holding him still until they found their space, found their rhythm, slipped into that sweet tempo of tongue against tongue and fierce hunger that drove Paul craziest. The hard lean of Jack's body into his only added to the fire raging through him. He had no idea how he was going to be able to obey Martin's directive. He had no idea if he even cared.

He clung to Jack for as long as he could, stretching every second into an eternity. But even that wasn't enough. Of course, it wouldn't be. Nothing would be enough short of dragging Jack back to Paul's house, locking him in the bedroom, and making up for all the lost time, all his bone-headed moves, and even Jack's lost film career. But Paul couldn't just ignore reality.

They broke apart, gasping for breath, and Paul found the strength to step back a foot. Then another. "Don't get into too much trouble in New York."

Jack looked like he was going to grab him back, but the hands that twitched forward were suddenly thrust into Jack's pockets. He smiled, that carefree grin Paul was sure he'd never forget. "Well, now that's not any fun. Getting into trouble's one of my specialties."

"Just don't let your specialty get in the way of your career. The next time I make it back to New York, I want to see you headlining the latest Broadway hit."

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“Of course.” He winked. “Who’d want me upstaging them all the time?”

“Nobody with a bit of sense.” Paul swallowed. He didn’t want to say good-bye, and he didn’t think Jack would utter the words first. “Tell your friend thanks for...the coffee.”

He didn’t wait for Jack’s response. He didn’t even pause to acknowledge Wendy. He marched through the apartment and out the front door, afraid that if he stopped, he would lose his nerve. He was okay until he reached his car. When he touched the door handle, his fingers shook. He resisted looking over his shoulder. If Jack was at the window, Paul didn’t want to see him. If Jack wasn’t at the window, Paul didn’t want to know.

CHAPTER 16

Paul shifted in his narrow chair and squinted at the playbill. The small print combined with the dark theater was almost too much of a strain on his eyes, especially since this was the fourth show in two days, and he was getting a bit tired of it all. He liked Broadway musicals. He always had. But Paul found that one a week would suffice. Even two was a good number. But he would go to eight more that weekend, if that was what it took.

The playbill was no help. Not a single Jack Wells. Not a single Wells. Not a single Jack. It occurred to him that maybe Jack decided to just ditch New York altogether and return to London. He could do theater there, though it wouldn't be

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musical theater, and he probably had more friends and family in England. Paul didn't allow himself to dwell on that scenario. It was too depressing to consider. Because if Jack had left the country, then chances were good that Paul would never find him. Completely losing track of Jack was not an option.

He shifted again and checked his watch. A brief survey around the theater revealed dozens more people just like him—famous, wealthy, and impatient. In New York, it was easier to get lost in the crowd. People there still loved to gossip, but they were less impressed with random actors, even if they were Hollywood stars. Nobody took any notice of Paul, unless he imposed himself. He had never thought he would be so happy to be ignored. But he didn't want word to get back to MGM that he was haunting Broadway theater—dateless—looking for a certain actor who had left Hollywood in disgrace, with his tail between his legs.

It had only been three months since Jack left California. The longest and shortest three months of Paul's life. Longest because he hated arriving on set every single day only to be reminded of Jack's absence. He hated going to bed alone. He hated Charlotte—well, he liked Charlotte. She was a sweet girl, and stayed out of his way, but he hated spending every free second with her. And the shortest because he couldn't remember the details. At all. Everything was a blur of shooting, and publicity, and dancing, and missing Jack.

Who, apparently, had disappeared off the face of the Earth. How could it be so fucking difficult to find somebody as loud

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and aggressive as Jack? Even in New York?

The lights overhead dimmed, and Paul tucked the playbill away. If Jack wasn't in this show, he would leave at intermission. The twinge in his temple was already growing. By then, it would no doubt be a throbbing headache.

He had no idea what the show was about. The curtains opened on a city street scene, and even before the first dancer did a pirouette around a vegetable wagon, he was bored. This wouldn't be the one. There was nothing new about this, nothing fresh. More chorus members filled the stage, their voices combining to start overpowering the orchestra in the pit. They crisscrossed back and forth, but not one of them was Jack.

Paul slumped in his seat. This was going to be a long first half.

A man's shout cut through the rising din. Something familiar about it made Paul frown, and his attention snapped to stage left as a slim figure emerged from a restaurant. The new chorus member kept his back to the audience as he placed the chair he carried at a small café table on the sidewalk. Someone across the fake street called out to him, and without missing a beat, the restaurant guy did a handstand across the seat of the chair and vaulted onto the cobbled way.

Everything in Paul tightened. He knew that move. And now that he could see the chorus member's face, he knew it was Jack. The hair was different now, all the boyish curls cut away in favor of a closely cropped sidesweep any banker would be proud of. It wasn't blond anymore, either, now an

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indistinct shade of brown.

But the smile was pure Jack. And so was the laughing glimmer in those blue eyes. Paul tracked every move he made until he disappeared into the restaurant storefront again.

He sat forward in his seat for the entire first half. He didn't know what the show was about. The plot was utterly inconsequential to Paul. The songs were meaningless. Unless Jack was singing. Then he did what he could to weed out Jack's voice. It wasn't difficult. Just like it wasn't difficult to pick him out of a crowd. Watching him, Paul realized that Jack hadn't been exiled, banished from the kingdom. He was where he belonged. He fit on a Broadway stage. The movements that were too big, the voice that was too loud, the acting that was too over the top fit the theater. Paul wondered if anybody else was staring at Jack, eating up every move, fascinated and pleased and even a little proud.

Despite Paul's pleasure at seeing Jack, the hours dragged by. At intermission, he resisted jumping to his feet so he could fight his way backstage, grab Jack by the shoulders, and kiss him until they were both dizzy. But the intermission was too short for that sort of thing. Besides, the last thing Paul wanted was to cost Jack another job. Jack seemed capable of forgiving Paul almost anything, but he didn't want to push it.

At the start of the curtain call, Paul stood and applauded, cheering loudly as soon as he spotted Jack. But he was already moving down the row, ducking and excusing himself, before the stars made their final appearance.

It was easy to get the stage manager to let him backstage,

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though he had to endure the congratulations to the principles before he could maneuver his way closer to the dressing rooms. Chorus members streamed back and forth, laughing and chattering, and though more than one cast a curious glance in his direction, nobody made a show of recognizing him. None of them were Jack. Paul slipped closer to the nearest open door and peered inside.

None of the men inside there were Jack, either.

He didn't even know who to ask for. He'd spent every moment Jack wasn't onstage poring over the playbill, trying to figure out which name was his. He had little choice but to continue down the line of dressing rooms, avoiding the ones for the leads, to finally hear a familiar bray of laughter emanate from an open door at the end.

Jack wasn't the only one in the long, narrow room. He stood with his back to the door, talking to a redhead Paul didn't recognize. Already stripped out of his shirt, Jack used it to wipe away the sweat glistening along his arms, each muscle as sinuous as Paul remembered.

Paul hung back from the door, trying to stay out of sight. Now that he was finally so close, he was seized with indecision. Maybe even a hint of shyness. He should stroll into the room like he owned the entire theater, and greet Jack with all the ease and casualness that he didn't feel. In California, he could do that. But this was Jack's world.

And he wasn't sure Jack even wanted to be interrupted. He laughed at everything the redhead said, standing in front of him half-naked and glistening, the perfect shape of his body

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within touching distance of the stranger's fingers. Did they just work together? Or was there something more there?

Paul's heart sank. Why shouldn't there be more between Jack and the attractive young man? Jack had no reason to believe that he would ever see Paul again. Paul certainly hadn't done anything to give Jack hope, false or otherwise. In fact, all of the gossip columnists were happily reporting planted rumors about his upcoming engagement. Did he go to all this effort so Jack could tell him that he had already moved on with his life?

The redhead noticed him first. Paul didn't have time to duck out of the way before he nodded toward the doorway, and Jack turned around to meet his gaze.

Though Jack's smile softened, his eyes warmed, and for a second, Paul imagined they were back in LA, in that tiny kitchen where they'd had to say good-bye. The redhead might not have even been there. Paul sure as hell wished he wasn't.

Then the spell was broken, and Jack was striding forward, his hand outstretched in greeting.

"Looks like someone's slumming." He grasped Paul's hand and pulled him forward into a one-armed hug, a gesture anybody paying attention could see as completely normal for two old friends. It didn't feel normal to Paul. All he felt was Jack's sweaty body exactly where he wanted it, the heat as intoxicating as it had ever been. "What're you doing here?"

"Oh, mandatory vacation. Seemed like a good time to come out here and catch a few shows. See how the other half lives." He extended his hand to the redhead. "Paul Dunham.

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Pleased to meet you.”

“Adam.” He grinned at Jack. “Does this mean I have to believe that ridiculous story about the Queen and the vodka bottle, just because you actually are on speaking terms with Paul Dunham?”

“I would never tell a lie,” Jack vowed.

Paul smiled good-naturedly. “Only when his lips are moving. I’m not interrupting anything, am I?” He shifted his attention to Jack. “If now isn’t a good time, I understand.”

“No, no, now’s fine. Just great. Perfect, actually.” Tossing his shirt over the clothing rail, he began working at his belt. “Give me two ticks to get changed, and we can go out and get a drink if you want.”

“Yeah, a drink would be great.” He stared as Jack unbuttoned his pants, revealing the ridge of his hip. Paul turned away, forcing himself to focus on Adam, even as he heard Jack’s pants hit the floor. “So, Adam, what...is this is your first show?”

Adam laughed. “Nah. I’ve been working in the chorus for almost a decade.”

“He’s a veteran,” Jack added.

“That’s...interesting,” Paul said lamely.

Adam laughed again. “No, it’s not. I’ll leave you two alone. Give you both a chance to catch up.”

Paul stepped out of the way as Adam brushed past. When the young man shut the door behind him, Paul wasn’t sure if he was grateful for the privacy, or terrified that he finally got it.

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“You can look again. All the danglies are tucked away.”

That didn't actually make it safe to look, but Paul turned around anyway. “Your name isn't on the playbill.”

Jack pulled a thin undershirt over his head. “Yes, it is. Right under Adam's, actually.”

Paul frowned. “Where? I think I would have noticed it.” He brought the page close to his face and skimmed the list again. “Leslie Easley? Seriously?”

“Every day 'til Jesson changed it to Jack Wells.” He cocked a brow. “And don't start. I know there's not a chance in hell your real name is Paul Dunham.”

“Well, Leslie, it just so happens that my name *is* Paul Dunham.” He folded the playbill and tucked it in his jacket pocket. “I liked the show. You weren't too bad.”

Jack snorted. Reaching for a black sweater, he yanked it on, looking somehow more delicious fully clothed than he had mostly naked. “Well, Twinkles, you're lying. On both counts. The show will close by spring, and I was fantastic.”

Paul arched his eyebrow. “Fine. The show will close by spring, and you were okay.”

“So okay, you had to come backstage just to tell me?”

“I thought I'd come backstage and offer some pointers. But the pointers can wait until we have our drinks.”

He thought he caught a smile before Jack bent over to pull on his socks. “Are you in any kind of a rush to get anywhere?”

“I'm really dying for that drink.”

Jack glanced up through his lashes. “How 'bout getting that drink at my place then? We can have some real privacy

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there, and I won't have to worry about anybody calling the cops on me when I flatten you the next time you call me Leslie."

"I'll take you up on that, but not because I think anybody named *Leslie* could flatten me, Leslie."

His smile was brilliant and straight out of Paul's dreams. "Still the same old Paul."

"Mostly," Paul said, watching as Jack slipped on his shoes.

Jack tilted his head questioningly, but Paul waved him off. There would be plenty of time to explain later. They didn't speak again as Jack gathered up his few belongings and led Paul out of the dressing room. They wandered through the theater's maze-like corridors until they finally reached the exit. At the first breath of fresh night air, the threatening twinge behind Paul's eyes disappeared. He pushed his hands in his pockets, hoping that would remove the temptation to touch Jack.

It didn't.

Rather than lead him to the subway station or flag a cab, Jack walked briskly around the corner and ducked into a large parking structure. Paul followed, more than a little bemused, all the way to the convertible Jack had been so proud of back in LA. The top was up now, and frost tinted the windows, but it was still in pristine condition, especially considering the winter starting to take root outside.

"Yeah, yeah." Jack waved off any of Paul's unspoken comments and unlocked his door. "I know it's not the most practical car to have here. And I could probably save money

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taking the train. But she's mine and I'm not ready to give her up just yet, so no wisecracks, okay?"

"I won't say a word," Paul promised, settling in the passenger seat. He wasn't going to criticize Jack for his impractical decisions. Especially since this particular impractical decision meant they had a measure of privacy for the drive home. "You're not spending all your money on car upkeep and living in a dump, are you?"

"No, I got a great deal taking over Dawson's let down in the Village." He turned the key in the ignition, but didn't back out of his spot, instead tracing the lower curve of the steering wheel with his thumbs. When he spoke, the teasing from earlier had settled into a soft solemnity. "Listen, if you can't stay for more than a couple hours because it's not safe, or you have to get somewhere for the studio, or any other reason that's really none of my business, I won't stop you. The fact that you're here at all is more than I ever thought I'd get again. I won't make you regret a second of it."

"No, I can stay." He reached over to touch the back of Jack's hand. It was far from what he wanted to do, but better than no contact at all. "I'm on a real, honest to God vacation. I don't need to rush anywhere for the studio. I don't have any other place to be. Or anywhere else I'd rather be."

Jack watched Paul's hand for a moment before turning his own and entwining their fingers together. "Probably makes me sound like a sap because I know none of it's true, but I'm always scouring the rags to see what shows up on you and that Charlotte girl." He shot a crooked smile sideways. "I'm

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prettier than her, too, by the way.”

“Oh, by far. Have you seen the rumors about our upcoming engagement?”

He nodded. “Just rumors, though, right?”

“Just rumors. There’s no engagement. In a few months, there won’t even be a public relationship anymore. Schary has agreed to give me a few months off, so I can focus on my interest in theater.”

His announcement made Jack’s head snap up. The hope that blazed in his eyes lit a matching fire in Paul’s belly, especially when Jack edged slightly across the seat. “You’re going to do some stage work? When? Where?”

“The Golden Theatre. We start rehearsing in January, show opens in March. Right now it’s scheduled for a ten week run.”

“You’re the lead, right? Of course, you are,” he answered before Paul could. “They’d be bloody fools not to put you in the spotlight. You’re the best there is.”

“Yeah, I’m the lead. I still have to fly back to California to film, but that won’t be until May. So, I might need a place to crash while I’m here, and somebody who’ll show me around New York.”

Though the excitement still glimmered in Jack’s eyes, the tension in his hand betrayed the other thread of his emotions. “You know I’ll always want you, but you’re not worried about how it might look? Or what Schary might say?”

“If I were living with Jack Wells? Yeah, that’d be an issue. But I’m just crashing with my old friend, Leslie Easley. Two

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actors sharing a place isn't really out of the ordinary in New York, is it?"

The smile broadened. "Considering how little we make? Absolutely not."

"So what's life like in New York? I didn't have the luxury of receiving regularly published updates of your life."

Jack gave Paul's hand one last squeeze and then let go, sliding back into place behind the wheel. "Busy as hell, believe it or not," he said as he backed out of his spot. "I've been living in that theater. The show's choreographer is an idiot."

"Really? Since you like working so much, why did it feel like a constant struggle to get you to concentrate?"

"Gee, I dunno, maybe it had something to do with the costar I couldn't stop thinking about."

"So there's nobody distracting you now? Not even that Adam?"

Jack laughed as he pulled out onto the darkened street. "Adam's been hooked up with this painter for the last four years. Even if I was interested, which I'm not, I'd just get the 'we can just be friends' speech." He coasted to a stop behind a cab idling at the red light. "There's nobody else, Paul. There can't be. All I ever think about it is you."

"I'd be lying if I said that didn't make me feel better. I tried, Jack. I really did. I tried to go back to my normal life. I tried to enjoy my time with Charlotte, and I tried to have fun filming with Brett. I pretended nothing had changed, and no matter what I did...everything had changed. I couldn't get

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away from that.”

The streetlights made Jack’s eyes glow when he glanced over at Paul. “I never expected to see you again.”

“I didn’t expect to see you again, either. But just because I can be a bit stubborn doesn’t mean I’m completely stupid. As soon as I realized you were still driving me to distraction, even though you were on the other side of the country, I figured I’d better find a way to get out here.”

“And you think living with me isn’t going to drive you around the bend?” He was still smiling as he eased forward again with the rest of traffic. “You’re a braver man than I ever gave you credit for, mate.”

“I considered the possibility of you driving me around the bend. You know I was really hard up, because I even missed all the times you made me crazy.”

“That’s because I keep you on your toes.”

“That’s one way of putting it, I suppose.” Paul rested his hand on the back of Jack’s seat, dragging his fingertips through Jack’s shorn hair. “I like the new look, by the way. Even though it makes you look like a completely different person.”

He felt rather than saw the heat creep up Jack’s neck. “That was mostly the point. The producers said I was too recognizable the other way. The brown’s okay, but I miss the curls.”

“I miss them a little, too, but you look...more distinguished now. Like somebody who isn’t going to be cooling his heels in the chorus line for very long.”

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“Got at least six more months of chorus work before they’ll even consider me for secondary parts. That was part of the deal I made.”

“Why aren’t you working on Dawson’s show? I had a hell of a time finding you.”

When the muscles twitched in Jack’s neck, Paul realized just how much of the man’s thoughts and emotions were revealed through his body. It was really no wonder he was such an amazing dancer. It was impossible for him to hold anything back.

“Got in a fight with the choreographer, is all. Not a big deal.”

Paul frowned. “A fight over what? And how much of a fight are we talking? Shouting match or did you land a punch?”

Jack sighed. “Second week I was there, I overheard him and the stage manager talking about Dawson going back to LA to work with you again. The bastard called you a no-talent hack who needed stunt doubles for any real footwork, so I decked him.”

“You lost another job in the process of defending my honor? Is it too late to tell you I’m not worth all that?” Paul tried to make a joke of it, but he wasn’t feeling very amused. A part of him wanted to shake Jack and tell him not to do things like that.

Jack didn’t answer right away. They had gone three long blocks before he said quietly, “You are to me.”

Paul couldn’t argue with that. Hadn’t he known as much

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when he boarded a plane to New York? Would he have even bothered with securing a role in a Broadway musical if he didn't completely believe in Jack's feelings? Paul let the words linger between them for the rest of the drive, turning the four simple syllables over in his mind. They weren't a surprise, but they were worth studying.

Possibly because nobody had ever expressed that sort of sentiment to him. And if anybody had in his checkered past, they hadn't meant it.

It was too dark to get any kind of real feel for what the neighborhood was like before Jack pulled into the parking garage and navigated into a spot on the second level. He toyed with the keys for a moment after removing them, then shifted sideways to direct his fathomless eyes at Paul.

"Just so I have this straight...you're staying the night? Because if you're going to walk out the door before dawn for appearances' sake, you need to tell me now. I need to make sure I use what time I get the best I can."

"I'm staying the night," Paul promised. "I'll even make breakfast in the morning if you want me to. Though...I only know how to fry eggs."

The pleased relief in Jack's grin was palpable. "I've even got to help you out with breakfast. Figures."

"There's a reason I employ a staff to run my house," Paul said, pushing the passenger door open.

He had to shove his hands in his pockets again once they were free of the car. He'd take a chance and stay the night. He'd even risk rooming with Jack while he was in New York.

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But he wasn't going to fall into the trap of groping the other man while they were in public. Even if the smile on his face practically begged Paul to grab him and kiss him with every ounce of hunger in his body.

"I don't suppose you'd let me hire a housekeeper?" Paul added.

Jack cocked a brow. "And have a witness to me grabbing your ass every second of the day? I don't think so." He led the way back to the street and jogged across without looking for oncoming traffic. "Besides, we do this the way I think we will, the only room that's ever going to get used is the bedroom anyway."

At that point, the bedroom was the only room Paul needed. Just the sight of Jack jogging across the street made Paul's groin tighten. At least he could be confident that once they reached Jack's apartment, he wouldn't resist Paul. In fact, he would probably make the first move. Had he actually been living like a monk for the past three months? Paul didn't quite expect that level of commitment, but he had to admit, he liked the thought of Jack being wound up as tight as a watch.

Jack lived on the third floor of a three-level walk-up. Paul followed him up the stairs, his feet damned near betraying him and tripping all over themselves. Jack's round ass and strong thighs right in his face didn't help matters.

It felt like Jack was deliberately fumbling with the key in the lock. The seconds ticked away until the tumblers fell into place, and he nearly jumped when Jack reached back and grasped his wrist, tugging him into the darkened room.

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Jack didn't disappoint. He used Paul's bulk to shove the door shut, pinning him by the shoulders and sealing their mouths together.

Paul immediately wrapped his arms around Jack, holding him so tight he wondered if he might snap the man's back in two. He felt Jack's feet dangling just off the floor, but it didn't occur to Paul to set him back down. He just held him tighter, plunging his tongue past Jack's lips again and again, reacquainting himself with the shape and taste of Jack's mouth.

"Bed?" Paul gasped. "Where?"

"End of the hall." He surprised Paul by coiling his legs around Paul's hips, grinding their erections together as he clung to his shoulders as well. "God, I've missed you."

"Missed you, too," Paul muttered as he navigated the hall. He didn't have the energy or the wherewithal to notice any details of the room. His entire world was focused on Jack, the texture of his mouth, and how good it felt to have Jack's strong legs around his hips. He knew he wasn't going to look away from Jack again for the rest of the night. The memories he had held on to so tightly were already fading, and what made him think he could ever live with nothing but time-worn images?

He pushed the bedroom door open with one hand without stopping, and carried Jack directly to the bed. He bent to lower Jack to the mattress, but Jack refused to release him, and they collapsed together, their mouths automatically finding each other again.

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In the three months since he'd last seen Jack, he'd fostered more fantasies than he'd ever thought feasible. Dreams of the pair of them on the dance floor, panting and sweaty as they finished a particularly difficult combination. Images of Jack pinned against the kitchen counter at his friend's apartment, goading Paul into fucking him until he couldn't even breathe. Memories of hot skin and a hotter tongue wreaking havoc with Paul's senses.

None of them compared to the reality of drowning in Jack's kisses.

Though he was the one on top, Paul felt like he was being smothered, crushed by Jack's heat, devoured by his desperate mouth. He braced himself up on one knuckled fist, but Jack refused to relax the circle of his legs, only giving Paul a scant couple of inches between their chests to find the room to breathe. His hands had joined in on the frenzy, never settling in the same spot twice. Through it all, the whimpers from the back of his throat sent vibrations into both of them.

Paul pawed at Jack's shirt, but he couldn't get the material to budge. At least, not fast enough for his needs. He curled his fingers in the shirt and gave it a hard yank, tearing the cloth without a second thought. He pushed his fingers under the ripped material, seeking out Jack's hot skin. The contact fueled his hunger, and he realized he would have no problem with completely tearing Jack's clothes from his body.

A hand slithered between their groins, seeking out the long line of Paul's cock. When Paul scratched over Jack's skin, Jack squeezed. When Paul bent his head to suck hard at Jack's

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neck, Jack pumped up to the covered tip and squeezed again. And when Paul thrust into Jack's unrelenting grip, Jack simply chuckled.

"Didn't think it was possible for anybody to want this more than me," he rasped. "You're proving me wrong left and right tonight."

"You surprised? I've been dreaming about this for the past three months." Paul pulled Jack's zipper down and pulled his length from the pants. He rolled to his back, pulling Jack with him, and used the leverage of the new position to push the jeans down Jack's hips. His cock was just as hard as Paul's, the tip already slick and wet. Jack helped by kicking the pants down his legs and pulling the shirt over his head. As soon as he was mostly naked, Paul cupped his ass, digging his fingers into the firm flesh.

Propping himself up on his knuckles, Jack rocked slowly against Paul, pre-come smearing across Paul's pants. "What else have you been dreaming about?" His voice was a seductive whisper, his body a wicked promise. "What drives you most to distraction?"

Paul moved his hands from Jack's ass to his hips and lifted off the bed, grinding his cock against Jack. His pants were far too tight, and the material seemed to dig into his sensitive skin. Jack's knowing eyes bore into him. The same look that would have set Paul off when they first met now aroused entirely different feelings. From the moment Jack waltzed into Paul's life, he could see right through every façade, every wall, Paul put up. Now he had the feeling he didn't even have

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to say a word, and Jack would know exactly what he had been dreaming of.

“Your ass. I want to feel you wrapped around me. I don’t want to feel anything except you.”

The muscles in his biceps quivered as he slowly lowered himself until their chests were barely touching, their mouths hovering just a breath part. The tip of Jack’s tongue appeared, and as voracious as their first kiss at the door had been, the slide of it outlining Paul’s lips was equally sensual, equally tender. Paul fought to remain still, hypnotized by the careful exploration. It got even harder when Jack balanced on a single fist to smooth his other hand down to Paul’s waistband.

“Whatever you want,” Jack promised. He pulled Paul’s shirt free and ran the back of his fingers across Paul’s oversensitive skin. “I’ll ride you ’til we both explode, luv. And then I’m going to do it again.”

“God, Jack. I need you.” Another skim of Jack’s knuckles across his stomach made him gasp, and a small shock jumped from his abdomen to his throat. He reached between them to unzip his pants. As soon as his cock was free, he pressed it against Jack’s, wrapping his fingers around both shafts. “Please.”

Jack’s chest hitched, his lips suddenly stopping over Paul’s. Paul waited for him to move, but even his hand had ceased its gentle caresses. Pulling their cocks did nothing but provoke a small groan. It was something, though, so he did it again, longer, harder, swiping his palm over the tip of Jack’s.

A shudder rippled through Jack’s smaller frame, and he

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slammed their mouths back together. Teeth caught against teeth, but at least Jack wasn't motionless anymore, his body tilting sideways as he reached for something off the bed. Vaguely, Paul heard a drawer open, and then Jack was sitting up, straddling his hips, with a tub of Vaseline ready in his hands.

“You want the pleasure, or do you want me to do it?”

“You,” Paul whispered, his attention still locked on Jack's face. “I want to see you get ready for me.”

Jack nodded and coated two fingers with the lubricant. He seemed to be moving underwater, though Paul understood everything was progressing at normal speed. His tongue felt dry and heavy, and his stomach fluttered, almost as if he was nervous. Jack reached behind him and arched his back. Paul knew the moment Jack sank his fingers into his hole. His face tightened, and his eyes closed. Paul kept his hold on Jack's cock, fisting his length as Jack's finger sank deeper into his body.

Jack began to rock, thrusting into Paul's hand, then pushing backward onto his own fingers. Paul began to move with him, rocking gently, just barely pushing his hips off the bed. Jack's body was gorgeous in the dim light, each muscle perfectly defined, taut, gorgeous as he flexed. As he watched, a fresh stream of pre-come coated his crown.

He couldn't resist swiping his free hand over the slick head and bringing his now wet palm up to his mouth. Jack opened his eyes in time to see Paul lick it clean, and groaned at the sight, thrusting forward into Paul's fist with a harder stroke

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than before. Not for the first time Paul wondered what it would feel like for Jack to fuck him, but that would have to wait until later, after he'd already lost himself in Jack's ass. Maybe even after the second time.

Jack broke within seconds of Paul tasting him. His hand pulled free of his body, and he slid farther down Paul's length, tugging at his clothes to strip them away. "Skin to skin. I want to feel all of you when you're inside me."

They worked together, fumbling with awkward fingers, and managed to strip Paul of his clothes. Jack was right. Skin to skin was much better. As Jack moved over him, he felt branded, marked with his heat and the smooth, perfect texture of his skin. Every second of contact reminded Paul just how much he adored Jack's body, and how much he loved to feel it against his. Jack claimed his mouth again, and Paul lost himself to the kiss, only vaguely aware of the way Jack was moving on top of him.

Until he felt the tip of his cock nudge against Jack's slick entrance, and the world suddenly narrowed to that one point. He gripped Jack's arms, fingernails creating crescent marks in his otherwise flawless skin, and moaned into Jack's mouth as he slowly sank back. Paul's head spun at the first hint of the heat, every cell in his body clamoring for more.

Jack took his time, belying the hunger driving both of them. Every inch gripped Paul's cock in a silken vise, stretching only enough to accommodate his thick girth. Before he was halfway in, Jack's moans had joined the chorus. The other man practically vibrated, though if it was from the force

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of his restraint or from the overwhelming sensations, Paul had no idea. He suspected it was a combination of both. Jack was not the type to hold back, and the fact that he turned this first stroke into something to be truly savored told Paul far more than any words he might utter.

They were both breathless by the time Paul was fully sheathed. Jack smoothed his hands over Paul's shoulders, panting into his mouth.

"My memories never do you justice," he murmured.

Paul groaned. "Likewise."

He held Jack's cock, but he didn't move his wrist. He throbbed against Paul's fingers, his pulse thrumming, echoing Paul's own rapid heartbeat. He throbbed around Paul's cock, too. All of his blood seemed to be right at the surface of his skin, and Paul felt every pulse, felt every breath against his mouth, felt every twitch, and every moan. His other arm went around Jack's back, pulling him even closer.

When Jack started to move, Paul's first impulse was to snatch him back. *Don't go* lingered on his tongue, and unexpected panic sent a surge through his veins. But Jack had already sought out his mouth again, plunging past nonexistent defenses to make up for the loss of his heat and body elsewhere. Paul tightened his embrace to the point of pain, but Jack never uttered a word of protest. He simply clutched at Paul all the more, sinking back onto his length in the same slow, excruciating rhythm.

He wanted to shift his hold and force Jack to move faster, harder. He wanted to set the rhythm to match all the need

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burning through him. But he held himself back. He didn't need to be in complete control. He didn't need to try to force Jack to bend to his will—because if he did try to quicken the tempo, Jack would probably fight him. There was no need to turn this into a battle of wills. He dampened that desire by focusing on the fresh burn as Jack rocked forward again.

The murmuring began as breath skimming along his skin, hanging there for scant seconds before seeping through the surface, merging with muscle and sinew to become an indelible part of him. He wasn't even sure what Jack was saying. He wasn't sure the individual words mattered. But they echoed each glide of their bodies, every caress of his hands, until Paul finally figured out what Jack was really doing.

As hungry as they both were for the other, as much as the desire raged, Jack was using everything he had to make love to Paul, not fuck him. This was what had been denied them back in California. Paul realized this was probably what Jack had wanted to give him for a very long time.

“Jack...Jack...” He mouthed his way from Jack's lips to his ears. Every time he tried to catch his breath and say something more, Jack would squeeze him, or kiss him, or otherwise steal his breath. His tongue flicked across Jack's earlobe, he nibbled at Jack's neck, and he tried to catch each whisper. “Jack...I just...I love you.”

Jack's chest hitched against his. A hand smoothed down the length of his arm to find his, fingers twisting together in a grip that would have been bruising under any other

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circumstance. He quickened the pace, sliding higher, sliding deeper, squeezing with every stroke.

Paul kept his face pressed against Jack's neck, sometimes kissing him, but mostly he was just breathing Jack in—the familiar musky scent that was salty instead of sweet. Paul bent his knees, bracing his heels against the bed, and rose up to meet Jack, drawing out each stroke, prolonging the contact for as long as he could.

The longer the thrusts, the more aware he became of Jack's cock still throbbing within his grip. When he began to pull, a choked sound came from Jack's throat, and he pushed up enough to meet Paul's eyes.

"Between what you do and what you say, I'm not going to last long, luv." He licked away the sweat along his upper lip, making Paul's mouth water. "Fair warning."

"Don't worry. You keep moving like that, I'm not going to last long, either."

"What, like this?" With a stronger stroke than previously, Jack slammed their hips together, drawing groans from both of them. "Oh, fuck, yeah. Like that."

"Like that," Paul echoed. "Oh, like that." He dropped his head back, his spine arching beneath Jack, and gasped for breath. Each yank on Jack's cock made him tighten around Paul, which sent fresh waves of pleasure through him, starting at his toes and building through his torso. He hadn't been joking when he told Jack he wouldn't last long, but he didn't want to come first. Not until he felt Jack shoot across his stomach.

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Jack was clearly done prolonging anything. He used every finely honed muscle he had to ride Paul's cock, his ass crashing against Paul's hips, his inner walls constricting around his length. Paul knew the moment before he was ready to erupt, the vein running along the underside of his shaft throbbing at the same tangible pace as his ragged breathing. Then, Jack threw his head back and squeezed his eyes shut, the sinew of his neck standing out in long, lickable paths.

Hot come sprayed along Paul's skin, seeping between his fingers, coating his palm. Jack continued to move, though now ploughing into his ass was even tighter than before, and only sank forward after his cock had stopped jerking.

"Love you so much," he muttered before sealing their mouths together.

Paul wrapped both arms around Jack and flipped them over without warning. Jack immediately hooked his legs around Paul, pulling him as deep as possible for the final thrust. His frame shook with the force of his orgasm, every muscle contracting as he erupted. Jack palmed the side of Paul's face, pulling him down for a kiss before Paul even had the chance to take a breath.

Slowly, the world came back into focus around them—the dark shadows of the heavy furniture, the spill of light from the hall. Jack held him within the circle of his body long after Paul had started to soften, but neither was ready to disrupt the shattering rhythm of their kisses for Paul to slip to the side. It was only when his lungs started to burn, and he chased after the salt on Jack's jaw, that Paul even managed to tear his

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mouth away.

“So does it feel like it could be home to you?” Jack asked softly.

“Yes.” Paul chased a drop of sweat rolling down Jack’s brow, catching it with his lips. “I think that’s just what this feels like.”

He felt Jack’s crooked smile against his throat. “Don’t have my own dance studio, though. Can’t quite keep you in the manner to which you’re accustomed.”

“I’ll adjust. I have a feeling we’ll stay active and you won’t let me get fat and lazy.”

“I’ll make it so you never want to go.”

It wouldn’t be difficult. Paul already didn’t want to leave the circle of Jack’s arms. “Rutherford, by the way. That’s my first name.”

Jack pulled back, making it impossible to avoid his amused gaze. “Sounds like we’re both doomed.”

“That stays inside these four walls, or I’ll flatten you.”

“You can try.”

“I’d try and succeed, Leslie.”

Jack shrugged. “That’s okay. I like Twinkles better anyway.”

Paul rolled to his side without releasing Jack. “Why do I have the feeling you’re going to goad me into taking a swing every single day?”

“Because we both know how much you love being goaded. I aim to please.”

“Give me a couple minutes, and you can show me again

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how much you aim to please.”

His smile softening, Jack rested his head on the pillow of Paul’s arm. “And again every day, for as long as you want me.”

Paul liked the sound of that. He didn’t know what would happen once he was obliged to return to Hollywood. He didn’t know how they could manage a relationship when Paul spent most of his time on the West Coast, but Jack could return to Hollywood one day. And Paul could always spend more time doing theater in the future. He wasn’t obligated to make four or five films a year.

He kissed Jack’s temple and pushed those thoughts out of his mind. They were things he could deal with later. Things they would both deal with later. In the meantime, Paul didn’t want to consider anything except the weight and heat of Jack’s body pressed against his. Where he belonged.

JAMIE CRAIG

Jamie Craig is the collaborative efforts of Pepper Espinoza and Vivien Dean. Both successful authors on their own, they began working together in early 2006. Pepper lives with her husband and cats in Utah, where she attends graduate school, and Vivien resides in northern California with her husband and two children.

* * *

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