

ONE

"I saw him in the gym, Jon – where I find all my best material."

Aubrey laughed and picked up another grape. He winked at Jon across the table. "Don't trust him, Jonathan. It will be some poor white trash he's cruising."

Paul turned to him. "I'm telling you seriously, Aubrey, this boy was perfect – built just like him."

"What? A stocky little peasant with over-developed thighs?"

"It's what he was," Jonathan Delmore said reasonably. He picked up the decanter and topped up his glass, tilting his head at the other two in offering. Aubrey put his hand over his glass; Paul shook his head. Aubrey took his hand away and took a sip. "Anyway, Paul, be intelligent. Can the boy even dance?"

"I should very much doubt it – I'd think he'd think it a dirty word. But that's what Jonathan wants, isn't it?" He looked at him.

Jonathan smiled. "Let's not get too literal, Paul. That was said in temper."

Aubrey threw his head back. "And *what* a temper. Exquisite boy," he laughed.

Jonathan Delmore pulled a long-suffering face.

Aubrey sat forward abruptly and clasped his hand. "Marry me, Jon. Life would never be boring."

Jonathan pulled his hand away with a jerk, trying to cover the betraying movement with a smile.

Aubrey slapped a palm on the table. "See? He hates it. I'll never win him, *never*. I'm going to drink myself to death," and he drained his glass.

Paul gave him a withering look. "Always the Prima Donna." He looked at Delmore again. "I'm serious, Jon, the boy's a natural."

"Oh come on, Paul. There's no such thing."

"No, seriously. I think you were right. You do need a completely untrained dancer."

"There are *limits*, Paul. Untrained is one thing, but he still has to be able to make certain movements."

"He could do it."

"Now, how the *hell* would you know that?"

"I *told* you, he was in a karate class..."

Aubrey snorted. Paul ignored him, went on, "He could leap like a monkey. I swear he hovered up there."

"*Oooh*." Aubrey gave a moué of sarcasm. "Word for word."

"Shut up, Aubrey," Paul snapped.

Aubrey lifted his eyebrows. "Sorry, I'm sure."

Paul turned back to Jon. "At least come and see him."

Jon shook his head, a faint smile on his mouth. "I have my sponsors to consider, Paul, can't be done. They'd have a fit if we cast a nobody."

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"Then use somebodies for the nymphs. God knows there are enough somebodies that would be glad to do it. Anyway, think of the publicity. See the big picture, for God's sake, Jon."

"No. Sorry, Paul, I appreciate the effort."

Aubrey reached over for a peppermint and said, "And has he Vaslav's tastes too, as well as his charms?"

Paul looked at him and said dryly, "In what?"

Aubrey gave his famous leer. "Is he ripe pickings for our Svengali here, our Diaghilev?"

"I didn't ask, Aubrey. No, I'd say."

"Won't do then. Must have authenticity."

"Nijinsky wasn't gay, Aubrey, and you know it."

"We *know* nothing, Paul, sweetheart."

Paul made a face. Jonathan, keen to avert yet another argument on Nijinsky's sexual preferences, said quickly, "I'd thought of Christopher Lamprey."

Both of them looked at him. "He's too fragile," Paul said.

"And he jumps like he's afraid for his ankles." Aubrey helped himself to another mint.

"It's not exactly an athletic role, Aubrey," Jon said dryly.

Aubrey pulled another face, said nothing.

Paul said, "André Delacroix?"

Jonathan shook his head. "He's too 'danseur noble.' Anyway, he looks like a faggot."

Aubrey gave a small shriek, pointing at him. "He *said* it, he said it! You heard him. Homophobe."

Paul laughed, watched Jonathan colour up slightly. He said softly, "Tsk, tsk."

Jonathan coloured a little more and lifted a pacifying hand. "I meant it in the nicest way."

Aubrey spluttered disbelief.

"Well, come on, there isn't any point in doing the Faune if he looks like he'd rather chase other fauns, is there?"

"The boy's an *actor*, dear," Aubrey said.

"No, he isn't. That's the problem."

Paul laughed, then said, "Okay, so how about that little Spanish boy? What's his name?"

"Aranjuez?"

"That's him."

Jonathan shook his head. "He's working in Berlin, some new operatic thing. I've already asked him."

Paul clucked. There was a silence, then the large cloisonné clock on the mantel chimed. Aubrey said, "My *God*, is that the time? I've got to rush, darlings, miss my train."

Paul said, "All the money in Egypt and he won't buy a car."

"Can't be doing, sweetheart, just can't." He grinned evilly. "Anyway, I hope some big black boy will rape me one night."

"You should be so lucky." Paul's face was derisory. He got up, saying, "I've

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got to go too, Jon. Been a long night.”

“*Gorgeous* meal, Jonathan, give my compliments to Amy.”

Jonathan smiled and got up to see them out.

Aubrey went first, in a swoop of the large ridiculous coat he wore, his hat pulled down rakishly over one eye. He looked like a 1930's detective novel's idea of an artist.

Paul stood with Jonathan in the silence of the hall. It seemed almost deserted without Aubrey's bulky perpetual motion. He pulled his kid gloves on, easing them into the spaces between his fingers. Jonathan stood with his hands in his pockets, gazing into space. Paul watched him for a while then said in a soft voice, “You really are a *waste*, Jon.”

Jonathan looked at him, startled, then laughed, colouring up again.

Paul smiled and patted the top of his arm. “If you ever change your mind...”

Jon grinned; it was an old joke.

Paul opened the door, said goodnight and was gone.

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