

Sneak Peek: In Jack's Arms
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Sneak Peek #1

Bumping hips with Jack in the kitchen of my childhood home felt so strange and yet in some way oddly familiar. Side by side, we arranged the leftovers from our feast of Asian-influenced tacos while Mattie stacked plates and silverware in the already full sink. Our dishwasher had been on the fritz for weeks, but I hadn't had the time to get it repaired. Seeing the stack of dishes waiting for me was yet another reminder that I really needed to get on that.

My fingers brushed against Jack's when we both reached for a container of the crunchy Mexican shortbread cookies Mattie loved so much. The accidental touch reminded me of the deliberate and gentle way he had stroked my cheek back at the store. After watching him expertly handle the situation with that knife-wielding nut, I understood that there was a darker, dangerous side to Jack Connolly, one that he kept well-hidden.

For me, it seemed, he had been willing to unleash that frighteningly skilled beast. I couldn't quite describe the way that made me feel. No man had ever come to my defense like that. Jack's actions made me feel...special.

"It's 9:15," Mattie announced. "I have to go."

I glanced at the clock on the microwave and noticed the late time. My brother stood next to the sink overflowing with dishes and wrung his hands. Knowing only too well how he needed his routines, I smiled and shooed him off. "Go on to bed, Mattie. I'll get the dishes tonight."

He relaxed instantly and leaned over to kiss my cheek. "Night, Abby."

I gave him a quick hug. "Night, Mattie. Make sure you set your alarm and plug in your cell phone to recharge."

"Okay." He grabbed the small container of *polvorones*.

"Don't eat those in bed. You'll get powdered sugar on everything."

He exhaled with frustration at my nagging. "Okay, Abs."

I held up both hands. "Sorry."

After grabbing a handful of paper towels to guard against crumbs, Mattie stood in front of Jack with such indecision playing upon his face. Making up his mind, he gave Jack a very manly but less than forceful punch to the arm. "Night, bro."

Jack grinned and clapped Mattie on the back. "Night, bud."

Mattie made it all the way to the arched doorway before he turned back. "Jack, you forgot to put five dollars in the swear jar."

"You're right. I sure did." Jack tugged his wallet from the back pocket of his jeans and retrieved a five dollar bill that he promptly deposited into the swear jar sitting on the counter.

Satisfied that Jack had played by the rules, Mattie smiled and left the kitchen. Amused by the way the two men interacted, I shot Jack an appreciative smile. "Thank you."

"For?" He loaded up his arms with the plastic containers of leftovers and carted them to the refrigerator.

"For treating Mattie like any other guy," I explained and opened the icebox for him. "Most people just see his Down Syndrome. Sometimes they treat him in an almost patronizing way. It makes my skin crawl. You don't do that. You treat him like any other younger brother."

"I treat him exactly the way I would want someone to treat Finn or Kelly." Jack closed the refrigerator door. "So 9:15?"

"It's the routine he prefers. He showers, changes into his pajamas and watches two episodes of his favorite television show. After that, it's his prayers and bed."

"Every night?"

I nodded and moved to the sink. "Every night."

Jack tapped the dishwasher. "What's wrong with this?"

"It stopped rinsing a few weeks ago, but I found a tutorial online that helped me fix that one. Now it won't fill with water at all."

"I'll take a look at it tomorrow afternoon. If that's okay?"

I laughed. "Like I'm going to turn down a free handyman?"

Jack chuckled and pushed his hip against mine. "Scoot down. I'll wash if you'll rinse and dry."

Not at all surprised that he was willing to pitch in, I moved to stand in front of the empty sink and grabbed a dishtowel and sponge from the drawer while Jack rearranged the stacks of dishes, cups and silverware. When the sink was brimming with sudsy water, he reached for the sponge and got to work.

I couldn't stop staring at those big, strong hands of his. He wasn't as stocky as his youngest brother Kelly, but he was taller and leaner than Finn. Jack had an incredible physique with muscular forearms and biceps that stretched the sleeves of his T-shirts. This close to him, I relished the incredible heat and that intoxicating, woody scent that followed him everywhere. It had to be his soap. Jack didn't strike me as the type of guy who misted himself with cologne just to hang around his gym.

Our fingers touched every time he handed me a dish to rinse and dry. I tried to ignore the illicit thrill that sparked deep in my core, but it was impossible. My thoughts kept turning back to the way Jack had so tenderly cupped my face and traced my lip. His action left no chance for misinterpretation. Jack wanted *me*. I didn't know why or even when that had happened, but it was clear as day.

I practically vibrated with giddiness at the discovery. *Me. Me. Me. He wants me.*

"Abs?" He waved a plastic tumbler. "You zoned out there for a second."

"Oh. Sorry." Flushed, I reached for the cup and rinsed it quickly. Trying to get a grip, I searched for a safe discussion topic. My gaze landed on the tattoo marking the underside of his left forearm. It was the first time I had been at the right angle to read the Latin inscription inked on his skin. "Fortune favors the bold, huh?"

Jack glanced at me with surprise. "You know Latin?"

"Catholic school," I explained.

"Really?" He seemed even more surprised by that.

"I went to St. Mary's."

"The private school?"

"I was a scholarship kid." The all-girls academy was the best in Houston and had a rigorous curriculum that sent all of its graduates to good colleges. "Actually, I was in the same class as Lena Cruz. Erin Hanson and Cassie Roberts were in the year below

us." Knowing that Jack had recently had trouble with Cassie's boyfriend John Hagen, I didn't mention the connection. Instead, I asked, "Do you know Erin?"

"Ivan Markovic's new wife?"

"Yep."

"I know her by sight. She's really beautiful—and not at all the type of woman I would ever expect a man like Ivan to marry."

"Their wedding was really beautiful. They seem to be madly in love with each other."

"She must love him to take on that history," he muttered. Scrubbing a plate, he asked, "What about Bee Langston and her friends?"

"You mean like Hadley Rivera?"

"The one who draws comics?"

"Graphic novels," I corrected. "She was a year under me and in the same class as Vivian Valero. Er—I guess she's Kalasnikov, now. Bee Langston and her bestie Coby, the DJ, were a year behind those two. Caitlin Weston went to school with us for a while, but she graduated really early, even earlier than Bee. Pips Barlow Bennett, the oil heiress who hangs around with Ty Weston, was in the same year as me too."

"Jesus," Jack breathed with a tinge of awe. "You've just listed the who's who of Houston."

"The program attracts the best. We've all stayed in touch, networked and supported one another."

"I guess Beyoncé was right about girls owning the world," he said with a playful wink.

I rolled my eyes and flicked suds at him. "I never pegged you as the Beyoncé type."

He splashed me back. "What can I say? I'm a well-rounded guy."

I giggled and dabbed at my cheek with the dishtowel. Looking at the bold ink on his arm, I asked, "So why that motto?"

"It's the way I've lived my life."

"Does that mean you like taking risks?"

"Calculated risks? Sure."

"Like?"

"Like this one." With those lightning fast reflexes of his, Jack swooped down toward me and planted his lips against mine. Shocked by his unexpected kiss, I inhaled a sharp breath. My eyelashes fluttered together and excitement rocked me. The chaste touch of his lips against mine, an innocent, sweet kiss like two teenagers on a first date might exchange, ended much too soon.

Still reeling from the surprise of it, I blinked and peered up into the grass green eyes that had enthralled me from day one. "Jack?"

"Tell me to stop, Abby. If you don't want me, you need to tell me right now."

I gulped as his roughened voice sent shivers right through me. "And if I do want you?"

His forehead touched mine. "Kiss me, Abby. Show me how much you want me."

Gripping his shirt, I rose on tiptoes and captured the mouth of the man who had been starring in my fantasies for ever so long. Though I initiated the kiss, Jack quickly took control. Something told me that he would always be the one in control, the

commanding alpha male who protected and supported me—and I wouldn't have it any other way.

He cradled my face in his wet hands and flicked his tongue against the seam of my lips. I clutched at his arms, desperate for something to hold onto, and let him swipe his tongue across mine. Head pounding, I prayed my shaky legs would hold me up as Jack stabbed deeper and kissed me with such passion.

As if reading my mind, Jack crouched down and used those brawny arms of his to lift me right up. He deposited me on the nearest countertop, and I wrapped my legs around his waist, drawing him in and keeping him close. His strong hands gripped the front of my polo shirt, tugging it free from my jeans, and then slid under the fabric to stroke my bare belly. His fingertips were rough and hot, rasping me and setting me on fire.

"Jack." I breathed his name with such need. I couldn't believe this was happening. It was a million times hotter than I had ever imagined. Nearly delirious with desire, I rocked against Jack and encouraged the exploration of his masterful hands.

He plundered my mouth, taking what he wanted and giving me so much pleasure in return. Clasp my nape, he tilted my head back and gazed down into my eyes. We were both breathing hard now and both desperate for more, so very much more. "Abby, I want—"

But he didn't get the rest of that thought finished.

A terrifying crash shattered our beautiful moment. Squealing tires and exploding glass could be heard throughout the house.

Jack snatched me right off the counter, dragged me down to the floor and covered my body with his. As if he had never left the battlefield, he shouted orders to Mattie, commanding him to stay put and lock his bedroom door. Pushing me into a corner where I would be well protected, he pinned me with a stern, no-nonsense look as he fished his cell phone from his jeans. Shoving it into my hand, he said, "Stay here. Call 9-1-1. Do not come after me. Understand?"

"Yes, Jack."

He kissed my forehead and rushed out of the kitchen. Dialing the phone with shaking fingers, I prayed he would come back to me in one piece.