

DANCING

for
Jonathan



Anel Viz

A Callback

THE Sunday classifieds listed only two openings for waiters, probably snapped up already, so Vince checked the section called 'Entertainers'. No musicals opening, not that he had ever been called back for a second audition. The escort service he was listed under had an ad in, but he hadn't heard from them since he had refused to let that pervert tie him up. He read down the column and circled one ad.

Now hiring! Male dancers/strippers.
\$25/show + tips. Adonis Revue. Bring
portfolio, proof of age & tape for
audition.

Not what he was looking for, but a shoo-in. He'd passed by the Adonis, a run-down theater wedged in among the pawn shops and porn shops in the seedy section of downtown, seen the photos of their models, and heard about what went on inside. Middle-aged men of all kinds—white collar, blue collar, derelicts—came to watch skin flicks they could have rented at a quarter the price, interrupted every couple of hours when half a dozen or more well-hung studs came on stage one after the other and danced themselves out of their clothes. A friend who'd done it said you could count on at least ten dollars in tips, depending on the size of the audience, as much as fifty on a crowded night, and afterward you could hang out in the lounge, where some men from the audience would join you in hope of arranging a 'private show'. The revues lasted two

weeks; then they hired another batch of boys. It would tide him over until he could find something permanent.

Auditions began at eleven. He had an hour and a half to choose his music, work up a routine, and catch a bus downtown. Dancing wasn't a problem, but peeling off his clothes without breaking step would take practice. And he had to think up a costume. A lot of guys would be showing up to audition, most of them in leather. At the bottom of a drawer he had an old pair of scrubs from his college days, when he worked part-time as an orderly, and that silly cap and a couple of surgical masks. Different, original. Wear clean white sneakers, a thong underneath, and pick up a toy stethoscope at a novelty store on the way. He rummaged through his CDs and found a track with the theme music from a popular doctor show.

The Adonis occupied the second floor of a four-story building on a cross street a couple of blocks north of the theater district. It had its own entrance marked only by a sign in a glass case beside an open doorway—Adonis Theater, All Male Revue—with glossies of that week's dancers below the sign, and inside six steps leading up to a landing. From there a longer flight led to a cashier's booth next to a turnstile in front of a plain black door.

The theater owner, Brenda, an overweight, overly made-up woman with stringy black hair who looked half pious peasant grandmother and half brothel keeper, had stationed herself at the turnstile to hand out application forms. About three dozen young men had showed up for the auditions, more competition than Vince had expected. She turned about a fifth of them away because they weren't pretty enough or she suspected they had fake IDs. The others she waved in, and told them to take a seat close to the stage.

The door opened directly into the theater, less than two yards behind the rear seats. An aisle along each wall, none in the center. Strategically placed signs informed the customers that they would be thrown out if they smoked or behaved inappropriately (i.e., no public sex). The rear aisle extended beyond the wall to the left. A lit sign marked it as the way to the lounge and emergency exit. The narrow lounge, contiguous to the theater, contained a long wooden bench built into the wall, two vending machines for pop and candy, a coffee urn with a stack of Styrofoam cups and a basket of artificial sweetener and non-dairy creamer packets beside it, and two arcade games. Photographs of beefy men in jockstraps decorated the walls beside a large corkboard pinned with the calling cards of local gay-friendly businesses, a rack holding brochures about HIV/AIDS, and the same ‘no sex, no smoking’ signs. The men’s toilets (no facilities for women) were placed at the near end, and a door at the far end marked ‘Staff Only’ gave access to the backstage area.

Those who, like Vince, had brought their costumes in a gym bag changed backstage. While they waited their turn, they sat in the theater filling out the standard application form, altered to include questions about their appearance—height, weight, build, body hair, tattoos/piercings, penis size, cut/uncut, etc. They had crossed out ‘ethnicity’ and replaced it with ‘ethnic type’, but they still had the nerve to call themselves an Equal Opportunity Employer. It also asked for a stage name. He put down Joey, the name he’d used when he worked as an escort. He hesitated whether to mention it under ‘Experience’ along with his short stint in the porn flick industry. In the end he left that part blank.

The dance space—from the looks of it the only part of the theater that merited a regular sweeping—resembled the set-up for a fashion show: a long walkway between facing rows of

dusty red-upholstered seats, several of them broken or sagging from repeated occupancy by obese or overactive customers. The room smelled faintly of stale semen. Beating off in the dark, it seemed, did not constitute inappropriate behavior.

They danced for the theater owner, who had final say, and for each other, then came back to watch the rest of the auditions on the off-chance they'd be told right away who made it. Vince watched carefully, thinking of how he could make full use of the space and making a mental note of shtick he could fit into his number, like moving the mask side to side to show off a variety of lascivious pouts and lip licking. Most wore costumes: a martial arts outfit, a tux, a policeman's uniform, even a turban and pantaloons (Aladdin's genie?). Props were good, too; he could use the stethoscope to listen to his dick. But he'd have to treat the spectators to more backside, even spread his cheeks, something he hadn't thought of. And from the looks of it, it was essential to reveal a rock-hard cock when the last bit of clothing came off. He doubted he could do that. Would the twist he'd planned right before the end make up for it? He had a second surgeon's mask under his thong.

"I'm going to be soft," he whispered to the guy sitting next to him. "Should I just give up and go home?"

"Don't sweat it. It's Viagra, and the old hag knows it. She'll sell you a pill before you go on if you get the gig. Name's Marty, by the way. Nah, it's enough if your equipment looks like it'll be plenty big when you're hard. That's all she's looking for. That and variety, so those scrubs were a great idea. Just watch what I do with these six-shooters." Marty was dressed like a cowboy.

"Fifteen minutes' break. I gotta stretch," the old hag said after Marty's feeble number. Nice Viagra-dosed body, but he couldn't dance worth a damn, and when he put the gun in his mouth it looked more like Russian roulette than fellatio.

Vince used the break to reread the classifieds. Wearing scrubs had given him the idea of looking under ‘Medical’.

wanted: live-in caretaker for disabled
55-yr-old man. should have some
medical background & be able to do
heavy work. references required. room
& board + salary commensurate w/
experience. gay male preferred.

What kind of disability? Blind, retarded, paralyzed? He knew how to move people in and out of wheelchairs from when he’d worked at the hospital. A long shot, but worth a try. He went into the lounge to call for an interview.

A woman answered the phone. “My brother will be interviewing off and on all day. How soon can you get here?”

Vince recognized the address, a posh high-rise about a twenty-minute walk from the theater, but he’d need to wear something else, and the auditions would drag on until three. He suggested five o’clock.

The music had started. Time to get backstage; his audition came next. He hurried back into the theater.

Vince had had the foresight to wear tennies he could step out of and no socks so he could take them off without stopping his dance. Most of the others hadn’t. He came onto the stage doing a kind of rhythmic shuffle, then pretended to stretch and shake out his limbs, which he gradually turned into an in-place dance step, lifting his feet to shin height, putting the weight first on the ball of his foot, then on the heel as he stepped down. He began to walk the length of the ramp, scoping out his audience as he moved. He’d pull the mask to one side, replace it, and pull it the other way, each time revealing a different erotic expression—a suggestive smile, a pout, a leer, a licking of the lips, a blown kiss.

Letting the mask hang around his neck, he danced the same step backward into place. His dancing became more vigorous. He lifted his feet higher, snapped his fingers as he reached one arm forward, then the other, moved from side to side, pivoted 360 degrees on one foot, all the while moving halfway back down the ramp, where he sank to his knees. Writhing his torso to the beat, he bent backward till his head brushed the floor, then shimmied up again so he was sitting on his knees. He put the ends of the stethoscope in his ears and placed the chest piece on his left nipple, then, following the beat, on his sternum, then on the right, jerking his body to imitate his heartbeat. He bent forward, gradually moving it lower and lower while his body mimicked the sounds he pretended to hear, until it came to rest on his dick and he froze in place. His mouth dropped open, and his eyes bulged.

Time to take something off. He leaned all the way back again, and as he shimmied back into a kneeling position he made the shirt of his scrubs ride up nearly to his armpits. He lifted it over his head and flung it to the side as he jumped to his feet, stepped out of his tennies, and resumed the dance. He'd stop, listen to his heart, dance some more and listen again, each time making believe that it beat faster. Again he listened lower and lower, but when he seemed about to move it to his dick, he shook his head no. Instead, he wagged a finger at the audience, tucked the stethoscope into a shoe, and resumed the dance.

He ran his hands sensually across his chest and belly, along his sides, down over his scrub pants as if stroking himself, then into them. He turned his back and pulled them down to give a glimpse of his ass, up and down and up. Then he pushed them to his ankles, stepped out of them, turned, and danced in just a black leather thong and orderly's cap, covering every square foot of dance space, thrusting his hips

forward to simulate humping. Every so often he'd stop at the edge of the ramp and lean back as he bent his knees to let imaginary customers slip a bill under his G-string.

He turned and danced back toward the apron, shaking his booty. Then he tore open the snaps on the side of his thong and dropped it on the floor, his left arm across his back at hip level to hide the surprise. He'd tucked his cock and balls into a second surgical mask beneath the thong. To prolong the tease, he took off the cap and held it in front of his groin before he turned to face the audience.

He danced forward, pulling down the mask behind the cap to play peek-a-boo with his pubic hair. At the center of the ramp he tossed the cap aside. A few gasps, a laugh or two, and even a little clapping. Then he danced backward, turned to face the curtain, ripped the elastic string and whirled the mask over his head, danced backward three-quarters of the way down the ramp, and let the mask fly into the audience as he pivoted to give a full frontal view.

With a soft dick there wasn't much he could do by way of fondling it, but he was well hung and made do kicking high and making it flap up and down and side to side before he danced off to the last of the music amid polite applause.

Old hag Brenda gave a pep talk after the auditions. She'd decide by Tuesday and call if she wanted you. Thank you all very much. You did great.

Although he'd noticed a number of the men who'd come to audition beating off during his performance, Vince didn't think he'd done very well, his only coup tossing the surgical mask to Brenda as he turned around to reveal himself in full flaccid glory. She'd caught it, too, but she had to realize that aiming right had been a stroke of luck. In addition to not having a hard-on, he hadn't done nearly enough teasing, and he'd

completely forgotten to bend over and spread his buttocks. She wouldn't hire him, and he'd never know whether to blame his soft dick or his closed cheeks. Probably both. Maybe next time. He'd come by the theater next week, look at the photos to see who'd made it, and try to remember their routines.

He speculated on which men made the cut. Certainly the guy with the ten-inch schlong. Also the bodybuilder, an Arnold Schwarzenegger clone in the policeman's uniform with the wooly chest and shaved crotch, despite his stubby cock and scrotum the size of a golf ball (steroids?), surprisingly limber, considering his bulk. One of the twinkos too. (Vince guessed she would go for the sultry redhead.) Every revue needs a twink. And, for the sake of variety, probably the guy in the karate uniform (brown belt), apparently tone deaf, who had performed several kata with total disregard for the beat, favoring those with lots of high kicks and skipping the final bows. On the other hand, he had neither spread his cheeks nor sported an erection, had lamely removed an article of his uniform in a casual manner after each sequence, and no longer kicked once he'd taken everything off and his equipment could swing freely. But the *namaste* bow at the end was a nice touch.

Vince felt somewhat reassured. He reflected that, as for looks, he had it over most of the others and was a much better dancer. Next time, definitely. He'd come back in two weeks and knock her socks off.

He saw his bus coming. He dashed across the street to catch it.

Brenda called not half an hour after he got home. One of her boys had been busted for drugs. Could Vince fill in? First show at six.

"Not at six, but I can make the nine o'clock."

"Can you get here any earlier?"

“Not in time for the show. Seven thirty maybe; eight o’ clock for sure.”

“That’ll do. Plenty of time for one of the boys to teach you the final routine.”

“Final routine?”

“Our grand finale, a chorus line with all ten dancers in step together wagging their dicks. How long do you think it’ll take you to learn it?”

“I can have it down in no time if it isn’t too complicated.”

“Okay then, I’ll put up your glossy. Stage name Joey, right?” She laughed. “There’s a real Joey here who goes by Vinnie for dancing. It’ll be like you two switching names. And one other thing. If you don’t have your own Viagra, I charge twenty bucks a pill.”

More Callbacks

“HOW many interviews left?” Jonathan asked his sister.

“Vincent Gregory. Then we’re done for the day.”

“Vince *and* Gregory! I don’t think I can handle two more. That’ll make eight today. I’ve just had it.”

“Only one, Jonathan. Vincent,” Brenda enunciated, spitting out the T. “Gregory is his last name. And it’s your own fault. I told you you should go back to the agency.”

“We’ve bummed out with them three times in a row. That last sneering old bitch was the worst of the lot. I want to choose my own helper this time.”

“Mavis didn’t sneer at you.”

“She did when I hired an escort for the night.”

“You ought to have been more discreet about it. Did you have to rub her face in it?”

“Could I help it if he showed up early?”

“Well, I wish you’d go about it differently. ‘Gay male preferred’—whatever gave you the idea to put that in the ad?”

“Honesty. So they’d know in advance the kind of man they’ll be working for. Besides, I’d feel more comfortable with someone like myself, dressing and undressing me, bathing me...”

“If you ask me, you’re just inviting trouble. How do you know you won’t end up hiring a hustler who’ll walk off with everything you own, maybe even kill you?”

“The résumé, Brenda, the references—”

“Much good that will do! You’ll hire someone for his looks and end up wound around his little finger.”

“Give me some credit, will you? You’re starting to sound like Mavis. I’m not hiring him for sex. I call the other agency for that, and *they’ve* always given me perfect satisfaction. When will he be here?”

Brenda looked at her watch. “Five minutes ago if he were prompt. This one doesn’t look to be very reliable.”

“How late can he be if he’s living here? You’ve been prejudiced against the lot of ’em. Could it be because they’re gay?”

“That’s unfair, Jonathan. It just makes me uncomfortable to think that they may only want the job because *you* are.”

“They weren’t all of them gay, you know.”

“How could you tell? You didn’t ask.”

“I don’t have to, my dear.”

“So I hear, but I don’t believe a word of it. That must be him now. Shall I have Charles send him up or are you too tired?”

Vince walked into a living room that was nothing short of palatial, many times larger than the Adonis lounge, with a floor of white marble streaked with black, windows on two sides, and folding closet doors on the inside wall with floor-to-ceiling mirrors that made it look twice the size. A hallway to the right of the entrance led to the rest of the apartment. To the left the wall continued about fifteen feet to another wall with two doorways, the one closest to the wall shut—a toilet, no doubt—the other opening into an efficiency kitchen. The living area extended past them to form a conversation nook where the interview took place on a horseshoe couch around a glass coffee table. A sliding glass door led onto a wide balcony that

wrapped around the nook and kitchen. At the other end of the room between the hallway and the outside wall, a medium-size space, separated by enormous French doors made up of small panes of glass set in cherry wood and probably intended as a dining room, had been set up as an office.

Vince had expected luxury. He had not expected the man who placed the ad to be half so attractive and athletic-looking, nor his sister, who had sounded so polite on the phone, to be so hostile. In less than no time he realized that if it was up to the man he'd get the job no questions asked, and that he didn't stand a chance if was up to the sister, a good-looking woman with short graying hair and a solid build who eyed him suspiciously. He took her name, Brenda—the same as the theater owner—as a bad omen. On the other hand, that Brenda had hired him. Very protective of her brother, this Brenda, and very proper. He would have to watch his grammar.

He apologized for being late.

“Let's see your résumé,” the harpy snapped, “and the references too.”

“I'm afraid I don't have them. It will take me a day or two get them all together. This wasn't the kind of job I was looking for.”

“And just what kind of employment *were* you looking for?”

“The restaurant business.”

“Oh, you can cook!” the man said. “That's excellent.”

Vince didn't say he'd been looking for a position as a waiter. Why bother, since he did cook?

“But you have worked with invalids before?” the sister asked.

“Yes. I have four years' experience as an orderly in Memorial Hospital, much of it in the rehab wing. And I know CPR.”

“But you prefer to work in the kitchen.”

“It pays better, but I can’t say I like it, at least not cooking twenty different meals for a couple of hundred people. And I miss working one-on-one with patients. But an orderly’s job is ninety percent cleanup.”

“This position also requires some housework.”

“Minor chores,” the man said. “Not like hospital cleanup. I have a cleaning woman to take care of the big jobs. You know—kitchen, bathrooms, floors, laundry. Would you help me into that recliner, please?”

Vince could tell from the look on Brenda’s face that he’d asked nobody else to do that. It was a test, and one he could pass with flying colors. In less than a minute and with no visible effort, he had him out of his wheelchair and comfortably ensconced in the recliner. He seized on his advantage and took charge of the interview.

“You haven’t been this way your whole life,” he said. “I can tell just by holding you. May I ask how long it’s been since you could walk?”

“Sixteen long years. I broke my back in a rock-climbing accident.”

“You seem to have adjusted to the situation very well.”

“It took time.”

“You’ve kept in shape too. How much of you was affected?”

“Only my legs,” the man answered, looking him straight in the eye and grinning broadly. “How soon would you be able to move in if I decide to take you on?”

Brenda’s intake of breath was audible.

“Immediately. I only need to give a month’s notice, and I can afford to lose that as long as I have a place to live.” In fact, Vince would lose less than nothing. He was three months behind on his rent.

“You understand that my brother will decide nothing until we’ve seen your dossier,” Brenda interrupted. “You can mail it to us.”

“Wouldn’t it be quicker to bring them myself?”

“That would work. You can leave them with the doorman.”

VINCE arrived at the Adonis at seven-thirty sharp. The owner introduced him to a blond kid who went by the name of Alec and would teach him the finale. As soon as she was out of earshot he asked, “You got your own Viagra or are you buying from Brenda?”

“Looks like I’ll have to buy.”

“Don’t. Twenty bucks is a ripoff. I’ll sell you some for ten each, as many as you need till you can get a prescription.”

“Thanks.”

“As for the chorus line, don’t worry about it. I can teach you the basic step in no time—you can count to sixteen, right?—and I’ll show you how to do the kicks and turns. If you stand next to me in line, I’ll whisper when to do what. There’s an entrance step too, to get everyone on stage. We come out hands on each other’s shoulders, then hands on butts after the first turn. Got that?”

“Show me the basic step and we’ll see.”

Twice through and he had it down, kicks and pivots included, though not where to put them in. “You’re quick,” Alec said. “Need any tips on cruising the lounge?”

“Just what’s allowed and what isn’t.”

“Nothing’s allowed officially except to make a date to meet up after the show. Just don’t say anything about how much without asking if he’s a cop. If he says no you’re safe.”

“What if he lies?”

“You’re still safe. They have to tell. You can also ask if he wants a private show. That sounds like you’re just going to show him your cock, which he’s paid to see already. He’ll expect more, of course, but don’t come or you might have a problem with the finale.”

Alec went on to explain that private shows took place in the backstage cubicles. Customers weren’t allowed there, but if you gave the security guards a cut you could sneak them in.

“What else goes on backstage?”

“You mean between the dancers? We chew the fat, otherwise nada. Sometimes those who don’t land a date pair up and go home together if they’re feeling horny. You interested?”

Vince shook his head.

“You might be after you’ve popped that Viagra. Ever taken any before?”

“Haven’t needed it. A little foreplay is enough to get me hard. Doesn’t matter with who.”

“Well, you won’t have foreplay on stage. You better take one now. They can take up to an hour to work.”

Vince handed him a ten and took the pill. Then they went over the dance again, each with his hand on the buttock closest to him. Alec worked a finger into his crack. He was obviously interested.

As part of the finale, each dancer had to separate from the line and do a little solo. “It can be anything so long as it’s hot,” Alec said. “A lot of the guys improvise.”

“How will I know when it’s my turn?”

“Same order you danced in. But we line up at random.”

Old hag Brenda had put him third, which gave him about an hour until the grand finale, plenty of time to cruise the

lounge. He was strapped for cash and thought sister Brenda likely to nix the caretaker's position. With luck, some clean-cut businessman might offer him another couple of hundred.

He danced up a storm that evening by pretending he was performing for the man in the wheelchair and collected thirty-five dollars in tips. Not bad, but he could use more. He'd hang out in the lounge and see if anything turned up.

A man was waiting for him, the one who'd caught the surgical mask. Not too old, early forties perhaps, but very short, and round around the middle. "I thought you'd be wanting this back," he said.

"Keep it. I've got plenty."

"Will you autograph it for me? I really liked your number. Original."

"Thanks."

The man handed him a ballpoint, but it wouldn't write on the material. Vince asked if he had a fountain pen.

"No such luck. You give private shows?"

"What did you have in mind?"

"Another look at that gorgeous cock of yours. You won't have to do anything. I'll even pull your pants down for you. Don't worry; the security guard knows me. I'll pay him off."

Before Vince could answer his cell phone rang. Jonathan.

"Mr. Gregory? Could you bring that résumé round this evening? And when you do, come straight up to the apartment, and we'll have another interview, this time without my sister."

"You're alone? She doesn't live with you?"

"Dear God, no. I'm perfectly capable of putting myself to bed. I cook for myself too, after a fashion. The range top and counters are too high for me, but I can use the oven and pop things in the microwave."

“Then you couldn’t have had much of a dinner. I’d come help, but I’m working now.”

“Sorry. I didn’t know. When do you get off?”

In five or ten minutes, he thought, if he took the guy who’d hit on him backstage. But he wouldn’t. The caretaker job looked surer than ever. He did some quick calculations. He could leave after the finale but would need to shower first. Even if he took a cab home and back downtown—he had more than enough in his pocket for that, thanks to the tips—he probably wouldn’t get there till long after midnight. Fortunately, there was a stall backstage. He’d wash off there and walk to Jonathan’s. “I’m afraid I can’t make it before eleven thirty at the earliest,” he answered.

“Not to worry. I’m a night owl, and demonstrations are better than references. See you in a couple of hours. I’ll tell the doorman to expect you and leave the apartment unlocked.”

“And I haven’t had a chance to type up that résumé. What I have is totally irrelevant—restaurant work.”

“Come anyway.”

Now to give that guy the brush off. He didn’t need to. His potential client had wandered off to watch the rest of the show.

ALEC, who hadn’t managed to swing a date, repeated his invitation after the finale. Vince explained he had a second job, graveyard shift. If the caretaker position fell through, he’d say he got fired. The Viagra had left him ready for action, and he wouldn’t have minded having it with a guy as cute as Alec.

“What kind of job?” Alec wanted to know.

“Health care.”

“Why didn’t you say so the first time I asked?”

“I just landed it. Got a call on my cell phone right after my number. I’d better hit the showers.”

It was a warm night, warm enough to walk to Jonathan’s in his scrubs. He’d worked up a sweat dancing, but he hadn’t stayed in them very long, so they looked presentable. There was only one risk: Jonathan would see it behind his scrubs if he got hard, and there was a good chance he would, because of that Viagra he had popped and because something about the man turned him on. The thong would have disguised it better, but it seemed more respectable to wear boxers underneath the scrubs although Jonathan wouldn’t get to see those either, not tonight. Unless he made a good impression, he’d lose the job, which, he suddenly realized, he wanted very much to get. He would have to tread carefully. No sexual advances, just TLC. Sexy TLC, but no more than that, or he might end up as an on-call escort instead of a live-in aide. They’d have more than enough time for that if it turned out the chemistry was real.

“Come in, the door’s unlocked, remember?” Jonathan called when Vince rang the bell. “I’m in the living room.”

Jonathan was in the wheelchair in the middle of the room. “You look surprised,” he said.

“When you told me to let myself in I thought you might still be in the recliner.”

“Seven hours in the recliner? Without going to the toilet?”

“Your sister moved you?”

“No, she brought the walker over so I could hoist myself. Brenda’s strong, but she doesn’t know how to shift my weight so I can position myself. That you did it so easily proves you have experience. I know your references will be authentic. You must have figured out that you’re at the top of my list.”

“How else would one interpret a midnight callback? But I get the impression I’m not at the top of your sister’s list.”

“That’s because you’re too good looking. She’s afraid you’ll take advantage of me.”

“Take advantage?”

“Financially, not sexually. She’ll come ’round. She’s naturally distrustful, but she doesn’t hang on to first impressions.”

“And you?”

“Meaning that any trained aide could have moved me as easily. It wasn’t just that, and it certainly wasn’t because you’re handsome, whatever Brenda thinks. What I’m most looking for is someone I can have complete confidence in, so Brenda won’t feel obligated to stop by every day. I wish she’d make a life for herself, start dating again. She’s not getting any younger.”

“And you think you can have confidence in me.”

“I’m a good judge of people. I pick up on the little things. Most of the men we interviewed asked about my *current* medical condition, but you asked—indirectly, to be sure—about my emotional condition and my past. I also liked what you said about wanting more contact with patients when you were an orderly. Let me show you your room. It’s not very big, but you have a private balcony.”

“*My* room? Am I already hired?”

“Your room for tonight. You’ll be here a couple of hours yet, and this late the buses only run on the hour.”

“What will your sister say when she finds me here in the morning?”

“I’ll make up a convenient lie. One of my many talents. Come. I’ll show you the room then you can make us a little something to eat and we’ll have a chat. Not sandwiches. Your culinary skills are also a factor.”

“A French omelet?”

“Excellent. And a glass of wine to help me sleep. Then you’ll bathe me and put me to bed.”

“The room can wait. I didn’t have a proper supper tonight. What would you like in your omelet?”

“See what you can find in the refrigerator. Be inventive.”

Vince went and peered in the fridge. “Cauliflower?”

“Never had one. Sounds tasty.”

“They are.”

“May I watch you work or are you one of those people who insists on elbow room? From this height I won’t be looking over your shoulder.”

“By all means.”

While Vince assembled the ingredients, Jonathan began punching in numbers on his cell phone.

“You’re calling someone at this time of night?”

“My sister’s pager, to corroborate our lie. She won’t see I called till morning. I’ll tell her I got my pants cuff tangled in the wheelchair and fell out trying to free it. I couldn’t get through to her, so I started calling people on our interview list. You were the first person available.”

Over supper Vince filled himself in on Jonathan’s needs and interests, his likes and dislikes. He hadn’t let his disability hold him back. He played wheelchair basketball twice a week. He drove to the gym in a car outfitted with hand controls. He got in and out of it by himself and stowed the wheelchair in back once he was inside. Parking wasn’t a problem because of the handicapped sticker.

“What I miss most is getting out of the city. It would be a nice change to go away for a weekend without my sister. Also the beach. The wheelchair’s no good on sand.”

“I could carry you.”

“With everyone watching? No thanks. Besides, it’s no fun if you can’t go in the water, and swimming is one of the few things I *can’t* do. My legs are dead weight, and I sink to the bottom of the pool.”

“Swimming and rock climbing.”

“And walking.”

Vince didn’t know how to react to that remark. The man didn’t mince words, did he? Rather like his sister in that respect.

Jonathan asked only one personal question: “Are you gay or gay friendly?”

An alarm immediately went off in Vince’s head. If Jonathan had just called to have sex, there would be no job. “Does it matter?” he answered.

“Of course not. I didn’t advertise for an escort. But there are places you could take me where a straight man might not feel comfortable. The disco, for example. To watch, maybe run into some old friends. Not to dance. I used to go there a lot.” He laughed. “A very upscale and expensive place, but my sister called it slumming. I haven’t been there since my accident.”

“It wouldn’t embarrass me. How hot do you like your bath?”

“I’ll adjust the water. I’ll be right there—sitting in it. It’s less messy to lift me into an empty tub. It’s a whirlpool, by the way. To stimulate my leg muscles. Your room has a full bathroom—balcony too—but if you’d like a soak in the whirlpool before bed, feel free.”

“Thanks. It’s been a long day.”

Vince wheeled Jonathan halfway down the corridor. “Left here,” Jonathan directed. “Your room is straight ahead.” Jonathan’s suite consisted of two bedrooms next to each other, one large, one small, a full bath and a compact utility room

grouped around a triangular stretch of hallway. The smaller bedroom was rigged up as a library with a desk and convertible sofa bed, a large oriental rug on the floor. Jonathan's room was sparsely furnished: king-sized bed, night table with lamp, a recliner, and a television. No rugs, which would have got in the way of his wheelchair, and no dresser. The shelves and closet were hidden behind a set of folding doors running the length of the left wall, with mirrors from floor to ceiling like those in the front room.

"How come I get the balcony?" Vince wanted to know.

"It used to be my room. The layout of the bathroom isn't suited for railings. Will you lay out my clothes for me so I can get dressed in the morning? On the bed. I won't kick them off during the night." He was very up front and casual about his disability. "You can help me undress by the tub. I don't like the feel of the leatherette on my bare bottom."

Jonathan took care of the buttons; Vince did most of the undressing. He removed his clothes in a businesslike fashion, his face expressionless, but he made his touch sensual.

"I like the way you handle me," Jonathan said, "professional, but not indifferent."

"Is there any feeling in your legs?" Vince asked.

"Yes, only the muscles were affected."

"They're less withered than I thought they'd be."

"A therapist comes every weekday to exercise them. He'll show you how so you can take over. You should have seen them before my accident. They were my best feature. Now it's my arms and chest."

"I see that. And it all comes from basketball?"

"More from my rolls in the park, as I call them. I don't miss a day if the weather's halfway decent. I set a pretty brisk

pace. You won't find it easy keeping up with me. You'll get lots of exercise."

He spoke as if he'd already made up his mind to hire him.

Vince slipped down Jonathan's underpants. "You trim your pubic hair. That couldn't be easy."

"It isn't. Another reason I asked for a gay man. Maybe you can do that for me too."

"No problem. It won't embarrass me."

Across from the faucet and shower head, the bathtub had a wood-slat seat that folded down with a railing behind it and a hose with spray nozzle next to it. "As you see, I can shower alone," Jonathan said. "I just need help getting in and out of the tub for a soak. Not tonight, though."

Vince raised the seat and lifted Jonathan into the tub. "Soak if you want to. I don't mind."

"No, I've kept you up long enough already. I'd have done this myself, but I thought we'd have a dry run as part of the interview."

"A wet run is more like it," Vince said, and he took off his shirt. "I'll just fill it four inches or so so I can wash you. You want me to wash all of you?"

"Every inch. I can't get at my butt while I'm sitting on it. I need both hands to raise me."

"Shampoo?"

"Yes, please."

"Anything else?"

"Don't use the hose to rinse me off. Turn on the shower so I feel the water raining down all over me."

"The floor'll get wet."

"And you too."

A hint he wanted Vince to undress completely? Well, he'd have to wait on that. He'd close the shower curtain for the rinse off. Jonathan was hiring him primarily because of his looks, he knew that, but he didn't want to be hired as a gigolo. Soaping the guy's dick for him was as far as he'd go.

Working Overtime

VINCE slept until the sun was high. He hadn't taken that soak in the hot tub before turning in. By the time he'd got Jonathan dried off and put to bed it was after three. Instead, he had cleaned the tub, spent a quarter of an hour scoping out the apartment, and ground the beans and put water in the coffee maker so Jonathan would only have to push a button in the morning.

He slipped into his scrub pants and stepped onto the balcony to check out the view. The cement was already hot; it would be another scorcher. He wished he'd brought his slippers. He quickly jumped back inside onto the carpet.

It was after ten, and he hadn't given notice at the Adonis. First show at three. Or was it at noon? He just had time for a cup of coffee before he'd have to get moving. He opened the door to his section of the apartment, went down the corridor to the living room, and walked in on an argument between Jonathan and his sister. "What about the applicants we scheduled for today?" she was asking. "Am I supposed to call and say the position's been filled?"

So they were arguing about him. Vince cleared his throat. Brenda looked up and glared. "You've certainly made yourself at home," she said.

"My scrubs," he explained. "I'll just pour myself a cup of coffee and leave you to continue your discussion in private."

"No," Jonathan said. "It concerns you."

“My brother has decided to hire you, references or no references.”

“I told you I could have them ready in a day or so.”

“I don’t need references. Vince has shown me what he can do. It’s about time I had an aide I get along with.”

“I think you should run a background check as well. There’s no agency to vouch for him. You’re too trusting; that’s what’s wrong with you.”

“Honestly, Brenda!”

“I only meant you shouldn’t go by first impressions.”

“You said the same thing about Mavis, and who was right?”

“Negative impressions are different.”

Meaning that he should trust her negative impressions about me, Vince thought.

“And what was the upshot?” Jonathan went on. “I had to put up with her for a month.”

“No, your sister’s right to insist on taking precautions,” Vince said. “After all, I’ll be living with you and will be fully responsible for your welfare.”

“You see, Jonathan?”

He ignored her. “I thought I’d pay you what the agency charged,” he said to Vince.

“But the agency takes a cut!” Brenda exclaimed. “He has virtually no experience, he isn’t bonded, you’ve seen no references...”

“Yet,” Jonathan interrupted.

“...and here you go offering him more than a professional would get!”

“And worth every penny, I’m sure.”

“Wait a sec,” Vince said. “I can’t start right today anyway. I have to give my current boss at least a week’s notice, and—”

“And what are you going to do in the meantime?” Brenda objected, turning to her brother. “Really, Jonathan, you owe it to yourself to check out the other applicants.”

“I work a three to eleven shift, so I could be here at night and all morning.”

“That’s more than I’ve had since we fired Mavis,” Jonathan pointed out.

“Well, at least you’ll be able to provide a reference from your current employer when you come back tonight,” Brenda said, evidently resigned to a provisional hiring.

He lied. “I wouldn’t count on it. He’ll be none too happy I’m giving such short notice. It really should be two weeks.” Instantly her guard was up again. “But I’ll have something from my last job and a letter from the hospital before I’d be starting full time,” he added.

“You should move in some of your things,” Jonathan said. “Will you have time to do that before you have to be at work?”

“Probably not, but I can bring a suitcase to work with me. Now if you’ll excuse me, I think I’ll get on that right away and leave you two to talk it out. This is embarrassing for all of us.”

“Not for me,” Jonathan said. “If you’re going to be one of the family, you’ll have to get used to our little spats.”

Once again Vince was struck by the resemblance in personality between brother and sister. They’re two of a kind, he thought. His presence hadn’t seemed to bother Brenda in the least, exactly like Jonathan, who could speak so frankly about his handicap.

He could have quit without notice, but the job with Jonathan obviously wouldn’t be secure until he won Brenda over. That shouldn’t take more than a week. God, if she only

knew what he'd been reduced to to earn a living! No big deal for a guy fresh out of college (not that Brenda would agree—Jonathan too, most likely), but he'd graduated years ago. To still be at it going on thirty! Hard to believe.

Once out of the apartment he called the Adonis to check: noon or three? Noon. He'd have to rush to get that suitcase packed. With all the rent he owed he'd have to move out little by little so his landlord wouldn't notice.

Noon to eleven! And he'd told Jonathan he had to be at work at three! How would he make the time to get those references? And when would he work on Brenda? The caretaker job might fall through yet. He'd better do a couple of private shows between performances.

He called Jonathan after the three o'clock show and told him his boss had said he could make up the two weeks by finishing out the next week, working on the weekend, and starting at twelve instead of three.

"You'll exhaust yourself," Jonathan said. "Why don't you just quit?"

"That's not like me. It wouldn't be responsible."

JONATHAN was right. Vince came close to exhausting himself. He never got to bed before one or two in the morning. Then he'd wake up early to help Jonathan get ready for the day and make breakfast for the two of them, sneak back to his apartment to pack another suitcase, and hurry to the Adonis for the twelve o'clock show, stopping by the bank to deposit yesterday's tips. A seven-minute dance and ten-minute finale every three hours four times a day didn't leave him much time to accomplish anything in between, so he'd hang around the lounge to see if he could pick up an extra twenty for a private show or maybe

rush out and grab a sandwich. He wasn't eating right, and by the time he got back to Jonathan's, he was famished. He'd make them a light meal, give Jonathan his bath and put him to bed, and then lie in the Jacuzzi for half an hour to soak his aching muscles before he turned in.

By the end of the week he still hadn't made it to the hospital for a letter of recommendation. He could have phoned—they must have had a record of his employment on file somewhere—but what kind of reference would they give? “Mr. Vincent Gregory worked for us as an orderly for four summers between such and such years. He performed his duties satisfactorily and made a good impression on the people he worked with.” He'd do better to go in person and try to find someone who remembered him, preferably a doctor. *If* anyone remembered him. It had been almost ten years.

So Friday morning he skipped going to his apartment and stopped by the hospital instead. He read through the list of personnel in Physical Rehab. Most of the doctors were new, and he recognized none of the nurses. Dr. Shenai was head of the department now. Vince had worked with several of his patients his last summer on the job. He'd been quite the taskmaster, but he was critical of everyone. Vince thought that he'd been pleased with him on the whole. But could he just walk into his office and ask for a recommendation? What if he didn't remember him? His best bet would be to go up to the rehab wing and see if anyone recognized him.

As luck would have it, he ran into Dr. Shenai in the hall. “Vince, isn't it?” He shook his hand. “We haven't seen you here in ages. What have you been up to? How have you been doing?”

“Oh, you know. Hanging in there.”

“And what brings you here? Visiting a patient?”

“As a matter of fact, I came hoping to get a reference. I’m applying for a job as an aide for a paraplegic.”

“I’ll be glad to write something. But wouldn’t a letter from your current employer be more to the point?”

“Well, it’s been a while since I’ve done this line of work.”

“Pity. You showed a real knack for it.”

“You see, it had nothing to do with my major.”

“Which was?”

“Theater Arts.”

“That was a mistake, as I’m sure you’ve figured out by now. Well, just how long has it been?”

“To be honest, you *were* my last employer. I only now decided to go back to it.”

Dr. Shenai’s face clouded over. “I see. Your skills must be pretty rusty then. Are you sure you can handle it?”

“Well, there’s no therapy involved, and the man is pretty self-sufficient. I suspect it will be a lot of heavy work mostly: household chores, placing him in his chair, getting him in and out of the tub. I am strong, and I suspect those things come right back to you, like riding a bicycle. And it is a foot in the door, so to speak.”

Dr. Shenai looked doubtful. “We’ve learned a lot since you were here. We don’t do things exactly the same.”

“As I said, I won’t be doing therapy with him.”

Dr. Shenai grunted. “Leave the man’s name and address at the desk, and I’ll write something up and send it out this afternoon. Oh, and remind me of your last name.”

“Gregory. And thank you. I’m sure it will be a tremendous help.”

“Don’t mention it. And good luck to you.”

Dr. Shenai was right; an acting degree was a ticket to starvation. Star-struck idiot that he was, he'd gone straight to Hollywood after graduation, certain he could break into films. Ha! Out there pretty faces were a dime a dozen; he had no connections and only average talent. Within six months he'd run through his money, and the debts had begun to pile up. He wouldn't stoop to hustling—too risky—and he didn't want to get involved in the drug scene. He turned two cheesy skin flicks—that, at least, was professional and offered some protection—and used the six thousand dollars to get to New York and see if he could land a part on Broadway, off-Broadway, off-off-Broadway, or even in the soaps. He was glad the last hadn't panned out; Jonathan might have seen him there. Had he seen the porn flicks? Not a chance. As far as he could tell, Jonathan wasn't into that, and if he had been once upon a time, he'd have long forgotten. Hell, if he saw them now he wouldn't recognize him in Buzz Kutt, who was much skinnier and had bleached his hair blond as a disguise. Not his pubes, but he had taken the precaution of applying two decal tattoos, one on an upper arm, which Jonathan had seen, and the other in a place he hadn't.

He had no luck in the legitimate theater, except for an occasional bit part in summer stock and a spot in the dance corps in a god-awful musical that had closed in two weeks. The rest was flipping burgers, washing dishes, waiting tables, an unbearable month as night desk clerk in a flop house that reeked of piss, then some real money working for the escort service, then back to waiting tables, and now a stripper! Why had it taken him so long to think of getting back into health services? And this job was a peach, one in a million!

He had told Dr. Shenai a letter from him would be a tremendous help. How tremendous, he wasn't sure. Given what he'd said about Vince's rusty skills, he'd probably write

something fairly noncommittal, but it was better than nothing. That he was head of Physical Rehab ought to count for something. Jonathan he'd won over already, but would it do the trick for Brenda? Maybe he ought to turn up his flirting a notch, just in case.

Turning up the heat would be easy. Jonathan clearly enjoyed the flirtation, and till now he'd been playing hard to get. But he feared moving too quickly from a simmer to a boil. It wouldn't take much for his own desires to get the better of him. The more men who approached him for a private show, the more attractive he found Jonathan, with the result that he made less than half of what he would if he'd been more forthcoming. He turned down most and put on a very perfunctory performance on those rare occasions he agreed to take someone backstage. He'd let them fondle him a bit, but no beating off and certainly no sucking, though he did let one man kiss the tip with lips closed.

The combination of Viagra, wanting it, and not getting any would have proved unbearable if it weren't for Alec, who continued to urge Vince to go home with him after the show. Of course he couldn't, not with Jonathan waiting, so a couple of times they went backstage for a short but intense kissing and mutual exploration session and even a bit of sucking. They didn't dare come, though, lest they go limp in the finale, and Vince would go back to Jonathan's and give him his sensual bath, trying to hide the erection that wouldn't subside.

He got back Saturday night exhausted from the two extra performances, a couple of private gropes, and a half-hour in the closet with Alec. With the show ending three hours later, he hadn't taken the time to shower at the theater. He found Jonathan sitting in his wheelchair in a pair of cotton lounge pants. "Long day?" he asked. "I thought you'd be worn out, so I

showered myself tonight. Treat yourself to a soak in the whirlpool. You look like you need it.”

“Shall I get you into bed first?”

“No, I’m not tired. I want to finish my book.”

Vince filled the tub and stretched out in the swirling water. Not surprisingly, Jonathan rolled himself into the bathroom a minute or so later.

“I can’t concentrate,” he said. “I feel like chatting.”

“Chat away. Just don’t expect any scintillating conversation. I’m bushed.”

Even if he brought the wheelchair close enough, Jonathan would have had to raise himself with his arms and crane his neck to see over the edge of the tub, so he stayed by the door, but Vince felt completely exposed just knowing the man knew he was naked and was hoping for a private show. How odd, considering he had spent the day wagging his dick in front of dozens of anonymous men whose goggle-eyed faces he could barely make out in the darkness. When he’d soaked his fill, he reached for the towel and held it in front of him while he dried off.

Jonathan couldn’t resist commenting. “Modest, aren’t we?”

Vince clicked his tongue. “Tsk-tsk. It isn’t modesty; it’s professional standards. How many of your previous aides got naked for you?”

“None, alas. Not that I minded. None of them were as good-looking as you.”

“I hope those aren’t my only qualifications.”

“I don’t count that among your qualifications. I consider it a perk.”

“Stop embarrassing me.”

If getting sexual was in the cards for them—and Vince wasn't at all sure he should let it happen—tonight wasn't the night for it. Wrung out as he was, he'd have to take the passive role in everything, which wouldn't be fair to Jonathan and probably meant getting into awkward positions to accommodate his partner's disability. His dick had gone soft during his soak, but it might not stay that way, and with Jonathan clearly not about to move to allow him his privacy, he couldn't help but show him a little something. He turned to the wall to dry his hair, giving Jonathan a ringside view of his ass, one of his best features.

He wrapped the towel around his waist before turning to step out of the tub. Jonathan had a broad smile on his face, and his eyes were sparkling, but he mercifully refrained from offering a compliment.

“Are you ready for bed now?” Vince asked.

Jonathan nodded. Vince wheeled him into his bedroom, helped him into bed, and removed his lounge pants. Then he went to clean the tub.

THE letter of recommendation arrived Tuesday. Jonathan told him about it when he got home from the Adonis.

“I received an absolutely glowing letter from Dr. Shenai this morning, the head of rehab no less! Brenda is more than satisfied. She's already planning a long overdue vacation. You can consider yourself hired. Permanently.”

“What does he say?”

“For one, that he's delighted you've decided to go back to a profession you were obviously cut out for. I must say I agree with him. There are any number of things—massage, range of motion—you could take over that I pay others to do. It wouldn't

surprise me if you made as much at this one job as you do at two, even with the tips.”

“Tips?” For a second Vince wondered if he’d found out what his other job was.

“You wait tables, don’t you?”

“Oh, those tips.” What else could he have meant? The kind of tips he’d been getting brought in a lot more than anything a waiter could hope for.

“Next week, when you start full time, I’ll have my therapist show you how to range me. I’ve also been thinking that you should go back to school for some professional training. If you’re licensed, the state will pick up your health coverage. I’m right in assuming that you haven’t any, aren’t I?”

Vince acknowledged he was.

“I’ve taken the liberty of looking into it. They have a program at the technical college starting in September. It’s dirt cheap and only a couple of hours a day. In two years you’d have your certificate; less if they give you credit for on-the-job experience.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Well, don’t think long. Classes may fill up quickly.”

Vince gave notice at the Adonis the following day. Old hag Brenda was crestfallen. Whereas the other dancers stuck to their routine time after time, Vince refined his, trying out small but very effective embellishments, and he always improvised a new solo for the finale. She had told him that, if he wanted, she’d put him on the roster for another two weeks; he’d only have to come up with a new costume. She took the disappointment well, though. “If you’re ever free some evening and strapped for cash, just give a ding-a-ling,” she said, eyeing his crotch.

Vince spent the rest of the week emptying his belongings from the apartment he owed three months' rent on and moving them into his room at Jonathan's. Luckily, he didn't run into his landlord. He didn't own much by way of clothing, but he had some and a sizable CD collection, plus a few keepsakes and some heavier items like a television, which he intended to sell. Twice he had to make two trips, rushing off after the show without stopping to shower and making a quick detour on the way to Jonathan's. He let Jonathan know in advance, and on those nights Jonathan set out a light meal for him and got himself ready for bed so Vince could have a soak in the whirlpool. And both times they replayed their little peek-a-boo game of Saturday night.

On Sunday he said goodbye to Alec. "Now that you're only working one job, maybe we'll have time to get together for some serious fooling around," his friend said.

"I don't know; not for a while anyway. I'm switching from part time to full time, which in theory could mean twenty-four seven. But who knows? We might run into each other somewhere."

"I sure hope we do. We have some unfinished business to take care of, don't you think?"

Vince was right not to commit himself. He had a lot to learn about his patient. Not all cases of paraplegia are alike. The bundles of nerves that branch off from the spinal column control different functions in various parts of the body, while other functions in those same parts depend on different nerves. If the spinal cord itself is severed, one loses everything controlled by the nerves below, but Jonathan had crushed only two vertebrae, damaging the nerves that came out at those points, most irreparably, but others less so. If his accident had not taken place in the wilderness where he'd had to wait hours before a helicopter came to evacuate him, some of the functions

he lost might have been saved. He was unable to move from the waist down, but he could feel, he had control over his bladder and bowels, and was capable of an erection and, for all Vince knew, ejaculation. He could do many things for himself in a pinch that others could do for him more efficiently, and, fiercely protective of his independence, he had until Vince came. For example, he had a gadget he could use to retrieve a book from an upper shelf, something Vince could do in a fraction of the time, and he didn't object when Vince got it for him because they enjoyed each other's company and he was secretly happy to have to rely on him.

Little by little, Vince took over more responsibilities and caring for Jonathan became like working two jobs, if not three. Jonathan's therapist stopped by every day for range of motion and stayed an extra half-hour on Mondays to exercise him. Jonathan had him demonstrate how to range him. Vince tried it out under the therapist's direction, who said that he did a more than adequate job. They decided to let him take over that part of the therapy and have the therapist come in on Mondays for more extensive rehab, at which time he'd observe Vince to make sure he was doing it right.

So every morning, Vince came into Jonathan's bedroom wearing his scrub pants, and over his patient's protests—"You're just going to have to take them off again when you get me dressed." "This is how it's done."—struggled him into the cotton pajama bottoms he never wore to bed before he went through the range of motion routine. But Jonathan won out for the massage.

On Thursdays Jonathan had an hour-long session with his masseuse. He owned three or four books on massage, which Vince studied. He watched the masseuse work, asking questions to make sure he knew exactly what she was doing and how. The next day he tried out what he'd learned. He

positioned Jonathan on his stomach near the side of the bed and decorously draped a pillowcase over his loins.

“What’s with the covering?”

“Propriety. All the books begin with instructions on how to drape a client.”

“Good God, Vince! You give me baths. You wash me down there. I was stark naked when you put me here. The masseuse leaves the room until I’m up on the table and have pulled a sheet on top of me. Get rid of that thing.”

“Yeah, it does seem kinda pointless.”

The pillowcase was tossed aside, and Jonathan had his massage in the nude. He said that as far as he could tell Vince did at least as good a job as the masseuse. So she was let go, Vince bought him a massage table, and Jonathan got three massages a week instead of one, undraped, which feels better on the skin in addition to the psychological benefit of greater intimacy. Vince was also able to massage him front and back. Jonathan couldn’t turn himself over on a narrow table, and the masseuse had lacked the skill to flip a person whose legs were dead weight, even if decency had permitted it. Vince could, fairly easily, with a little experimentation. The table came close to tipping over when he moved him from his stomach to his back, but with Jonathan already on his back, Vince could sit him up with his legs dangling over the side, lay him on his side, roll him over while supporting his legs, and then lift them back onto the table, so he massaged his front half first.

The first time Vince pressed on his abdomen above the pubic bone, Jonathan got hard. Vince was embarrassed and tried to ignore it. Jonathan wouldn’t let him.

“You could at least say something.”

“About what?”

“Guess.”

“Oh, that. What am I supposed to say? It’s a perfectly normal reaction.”

“Anything. Acknowledge that it’s there. It’s staring you in the face, and I know it is. It’s like the elephant in the living room everyone pretends isn’t there.”

“Only not quite as large.”

Jonathan laughed, and his erection went down. “Well, that’s something. It’ll do in context, but if you’d said as soon as it happened, ‘Hey, you have a smaller dick than an elephant...’”

“Okay, I’ll say something else: It’s nice.” Then, realizing Jonathan might think he meant he had a nice cock, he added, “It’s nice you can still get aroused.”

After a couple of massages, Jonathan adjusted to Vince kneading him so close to his genitals, and he stayed soft unless his bladder was more than a quarter full.

Vince had also read the last chapter in one of the manuals, the chapter on erotic massage and tantric release. No doubt Jonathan would have loved having his prostate massaged and his balls stroked, and if Vince practiced on himself he could learn to bring him to orgasm without ejaculation. He would have welcomed the ejaculation as well; the man was fully functional and had no sexual outlet. But Vince wouldn’t. He was no longer afraid of losing his job, but it was too much like what he’d had to do when he worked as an escort.

Sunday, Tuesday, and Thursday became massage days, and Wednesday and Friday Vince’s days off. He’d get up, prepare breakfast, spend fifteen minutes on range of motion, then he’d go off and do his own thing until late evening, when he’d return for an order-out supper at home with Jonathan. On top of all that, he took over Brenda’s shopping for groceries, prepared three meals a day, and did a little light housekeeping,

though he now had a dishwasher and no longer had to do his own laundry. The maid took care of it. He also drove Jonathan to the gym twice a week and accompanied him on his daily walk, which was more like a jog. Jonathan could build up quite a respectable speed, especially downhill, just by pushing his hands over the wheels, and Vince had to puff and pant to keep up with him. At least they got to bed earlier than when he'd danced at the Adonis.

Jonathan realized that he was coming to rely on Vince more than was good for him. When Brenda had tried to mother him, he'd put a stop to it; he let Vince do for him more than was necessary. He could have showered himself, for example, but he balked at forgoing the pleasure of having Vince bathe him. His previous aides had only given him a bath once a week. What's more, they were together twenty-four seven. Jonathan understood that he was giving up some of his physical independence, but he didn't see his growing emotional dependence. Brenda didn't see it either. If anything, she appreciated the thought Vince gave to her brother's emotional well-being. She was more than won over; she adored him.

Vince realized it. He was good for Jonathan, and he wore himself out being good for him, but he also lectured him: "Besides your sister, myself and your basketball games, you have no social life."

"There's the gym."

"Do you interact with any of the guys there except to say good morning? Do you ever get together with any of the men you play basketball with?"

"I don't like support groups."

"I mean socially. Where are your friends? Who besides Brenda and your nephew come over for dinner? Who do see besides your doctor and your therapist?"

Jonathan avoided the question. “I’m used to the way I live. Why try to change me?”

Vince suspected that although Jonathan appeared to have come to terms with his disabilities, he still felt uncomfortable with handicapped people, however well-adjusted, and he was too self-conscious around those he called the ‘physically whole’ to entirely relax. He didn’t know how to go about addressing that problem. In time, perhaps. But Vince did get him to socialize somewhat with the denizens of the park. Not the joggers, bird-feeders, and such, but he got him to play an occasional game of chess there and turned him on to horseshoes. In return, Jonathan would not allow Vince to restrict his life to caring for him and talked him into registering at the technical college.

Just how he would manage all he did and take courses beginning September, Vince could not imagine. He had to work hard, but he loved every minute of it, more than any job he’d ever had. It was the only job he could honestly say he loved. He and Jonathan got on splendidly together. Like best friends, they confided in each other, though Vince took care to steer the conversation away from sexual matters. He knew that, given an opening, Jonathan would say something, and he’d go down on him in a heartbeat, and he thought having sex would make their relationship hopelessly complicated, if not ruin everything. So he kept Jonathan guessing about his orientation and let him think that he’d been working at a restaurant when he applied for the job. As for himself, he scarcely noticed his new and for him unprecedented celibate lifestyle. He found fulfillment in the intimate tasks he performed daily for Jonathan, and when he needed more he brought himself off while thinking about him.

Dancing for Jonathan

SEPTEMBER came. They made time for Vince's coursework by arranging to have their groceries delivered, Jonathan taking a cab to the gym and showering more often instead of getting bathed, and making sandwiches the night before for their next day's lunches. After he roused Jonathan in the morning, Vince would leave him to get out his pajama bottoms and dress by himself. They ate take-out up to four times a week and went to a restaurant for Friday dinner. Jonathan thought it would be fun to go the restaurant where Vince used to work, but Vince insisted he wouldn't like that kind of cheap place. "Besides, I want to relax."

In the evening they'd sit together in the living room while Vince studied and prepared his assignments. They could even chat while he worked, since he knew a lot of the material already and Jonathan was a more than willing guinea pig for him to practice the techniques he learned in class. The only real challenge was the required anatomy course, and even there he had a head start because of a life drawing class he'd taken in college. What's more, he'd been given a full semester's credit for his past experience, so he would be able to complete the program and have his certificate in hand by the following Christmas.

Brenda came for dinner on Saturdays. Every other week she'd bring her son with her; on alternate weekends he stayed with his father. Brendan was a shy and very bright fifteen-year-

old who thought the world of his uncle, though he hadn't known him before his accident. He was born a year later. It didn't take him long to warm up to Vince: a good thing, because it gave Jonathan some time alone with his sister. He was doing everything in his power to convince her to take a vacation, to go on a trip. "It'll do you good. Maybe you'll meet somebody. Just think: two weeks in Europe, Mexico, Antarctica... anywhere!"

"And Brendan? Michael won't have him for more than a weekend."

"He can stay with us the rest of the time."

"But you're so far from his school. Over an hour by subway."

"Then go over Christmas."

"I'm not so sure. He'd be in the way."

"Not at all! Just see how well he and Vince get along! And if you make it over Christmas, Vince will be off from school too. We'll have plenty of time."

"I'll think about it."

"That's what you always say."

Vince had commented on how quickly he and Brendan had hit it off. "You told me he was shy. It only took a few minutes for him to come out of his shell."

"That doesn't surprise me. The boy's starved for father figures." Then he added, "Do you think he's gay?"

"I think he's young."

"Of course he's young. Do you think he's gay?"

"I hardly know the kid. What makes you say that? Because he fell for me right away?"

"That's not what I meant. I've thought for a long time he might be. I just wanted to know your opinion."

“As I said, I hardly know the kid. You’ve known him his whole life. What makes me an expert?”

“Oh, I know you prefer to keep your sexual preferences a mystery. My guess is you’re bi. Am I right?”

“Hmmm.”

“Okay, forget about it. This is about Brendan. I was thinking you’re so much closer to him in age, closer than you are to me, and you get around, while I’m pretty much shut up all day in this apartment.”

“Except for basketball, and the gym, and your daily rolls in the park, and...”

“You know what I mean. I have hardly any contact with people. You’re the only real friend I have, the first friend I’ve had in sixteen years. Who else would I ask?”

“His mother?”

“God forbid!”

“What difference does it make, really, whether or not he’s gay?”

“It’s just that if he is and he has issues, I wish he’d turn to me. Or you.”

“Better you.”

“Me, then. His father won’t be of any help, nor will Brenda. Oh, she’ll be supportive, whatever happens, I’ve no doubt about that, but what does she know? Less than either of us.”

“Look, he knows you’re gay, doesn’t he?”

“Yes.”

“Then I’m sure that, when he’s ready, you’ll be the first one he turns to if he has any questions. He may even surprise you and ask about girls.”

“May I send him to you if he does?”

“Very funny. But honestly, why don’t you see more of him, spend some quality time together without his mother there if you’re so concerned, so he’ll feel more comfortable telling you things? Maybe he could accompany you on one of your rolls in the park sometimes, because, frankly, what with my classes and everything else I have to do, I’m pooped.”

“But it keeps you in shape.”

“I won’t argue with *that*.”

BRENDA caved in and signed up for a Caribbean cruise during the Christmas holidays. It was arranged that Brendan would spend Christmas Eve and the next day with his dad and stay with Jonathan and Vince the rest of time so Michael could go skiing in the Adirondacks.

“Doesn’t Brendan ski?” Vince asked.

“Oh, I imagine Michael is taking some floozy with him,” Brenda snapped. “That’s why he’s going. He couldn’t care less about skiing.”

Jonathan asked Vince if planned to go home to his family for Christmas. “I think you said they live somewhere in Ohio.”

“I’m sure they want me to, but Brendan will be with his father, and no one should have to spend Christmas alone. Besides, I’d rather be with you.”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely.”

Brendan had never lived with his uncle before, and everything about his life as an invalid fascinated him. He accompanied to Jonathan to basketball, insisted on trying out the whirlpool, watched Vince do range of motion every morning, and looked on during his massage (draped, for Brendan’s sake,

but Vince did massage both front and back, and the ease with which he repositioned him left Brendan goggle-eyed). On the other hand, he was shooed away at bath time, rolls in the park were impossible because of snow, and they all wore pajamas to bed.

They decorated the tree a day or two early. They'd open their presents after lunch on Christmas Eve, because Brendan had to leave immediately afterward to go to his father's and wouldn't be back till the day after Christmas. Vince still hadn't bought anything for Jonathan. By now he'd saved up a good amount of money, more than he'd had since his brief incursion into porn, and he wanted to give him something special, but for the life of him he couldn't think what.

"I'm afraid I haven't chosen your gift yet," he said.

"I haven't decided on yours either, but I'm sure I'll think of something. But you don't have to buy me anything, Vince. It's the boss who gets gifts for his employees, not the other way around."

"I'll make up my own mind who to buy Christmas presents for, thank you, and you're at the top of my list. My problem is that this is the first time I've had to get something for a man who has everything."

"What makes you think I have everything?"

"Okay, then, for a man who has everything he could possibly want."

"That least of all."

As soon as he'd said it, Vince had realized his mistake. He looked at his friend's legs and stammered, "I'm sorry. Stupid of me."

"That isn't what I was thinking of."

If he didn't mean his legs, then he had to mean... Things were getting dicey. "Look," Vince said, "I'm asking what you

want from Santa Claus.” With Brendan there eating up every word, Jonathan wouldn’t dare say he wanted to have sex with him.

Dead serious, Jonathan looked him in the face and said, dwelling on each word, “I want to go to a club New Year’s Eve. I’ll pay.”

“No, you won’t. This is my present; I don’t care how much it costs. It’s the perfect gift. Thank you for suggesting it. But won’t Brendan be here that night?”

“You two go out and have fun,” Brendan said. “I’ll watch the fireworks from the balcony and go online with my friends. I can take care of myself. I’m fifteen years old, for Christ sake.”

“Will you choose the club?” Jonathan asked.

“Hell no. The only places I know are dives. I want to take you somewhere high class.” The last thing he wanted was to take Jonathan to a club where someone might recognize him. There was a slim chance he’d run into someone he knew working as an escort, but it was understood that escorts pretended not to know each other when with a client.

“There is one club I used to go to... I think it’s still there. But we’ll need reservations.”

“I’ll call. This is my treat.”

“Are you going to get drunk?” Brendan asked eagerly.

“Lord, no. A man in my condition can’t afford to get drunk.”

“And a man with my responsibilities can’t let himself get drunk either,” Vince added.

“Maybe I’ll run into some former friends and catch up on old times. That’s about all I can do. But Vince can dance, and I can watch him. I’ll bet he’s one hell of a dancer.”

So that was settled, and the next day Vince put an envelope under the tree with their confirmed reservations for Vincent Gregory and guest printed off the Internet.

“After all these years I don’t have anything to wear to go clubbing,” Jonathan said, “and I bet you don’t either, at least not to this club. No jeans, no leather. So I know what I’m getting you for Christmas. Let’s go shopping.”

“No sequins either.” Vince smiled.

“Certainly not. Silk, shiny silk, and new shoes. What’s your best color?”

“Black.”

“Sorry, too hard to see. You’ll be swallowed up on the dance floor.”

“Silver, then.”

“*I’ll* be wearing silver. To match my hair.”

“Okay, you choose. Anything but red.”

“I was thinking more of a dusty powder blue.”

“I look better in dark colors.”

“Shiny is different. You’ll see.”

Brendan chimed in, “I never heard two guys talk fashion like this before. I thought you’d wear tuxedos.”

“Are you eavesdropping again? No, not tuxedos, not in this kind of club. We’re going dancing, remember?”

“You mean to a disco?”

“What did I tell you, Vince? The kid’s a genius—and precocious.”

Shopping for clothes was fun. Jonathan took him to shops with mind-boggling prices Vince had walked past before but never dared enter. He’d let his eyes roam over the mannequins in the window a minute or two and then move on. Thirty bucks for a pair of socks and two hundred for their cheapest necktie!

Inside, the salesclerks were inordinately attentive, stopping just short of fawning on their customers. The first clerk who came to help them, conservatively dressed and model-handsome, listened carefully to what they wanted and what for. “I’m not the one to help you there,” he said, and called out, “Colin, could you take care of these gentlemen, please? Colin’s an expert,” he explained, turning back to Vince and Jonathan.

Colin was also gay. Jonathan knew his exact size; Vince only approximately. “Ah, but you want these to mold to your body,” Colin said. He measured their necks and arms—Vince had to measure Jonathan’s waist and inseam—and then he led them under a special light and held different color swatches of cloth next to their skin before he grabbed some half-dozen items off the rack for each of them. For Jonathan he picked out more shades of silver than Vince thought existed, everything from mother-of-pearl to sterile chrome to tarnished pewter. For Vince he must have drawn his inspiration from the rainbow flag. “But your friend is absolutely right about the powder blue,” he said. “Wait and see.”

The fitting rooms posed a problem. They were big enough for two in a pinch but not for a wheelchair, and Jonathan couldn’t try things on without Vince’s help. So Colin took them into the stockroom, brought in a halogen lamp and set up a full-length mirror. He hovered over them awhile, but getting Jonathan in and out of his various nearly skin-tight garments was too lengthy a process, so he excused himself and went to see to other customers, saying, “I’m sure at least one of the outfits I’ve chosen for you will be exactly what you’re looking for.”

When Jonathan had decided on his purchases, he had Vince model everything Colin had pulled off the racks for him. He favored the body suit in powder-blue satin with a faint

cloud-like shimmer of gauzy white. It had a turned-up gold collar and pearl-shaped onyx buttons down to the navel. “Try it on again.”

“I really prefer the...”

“Try it on again. For me.” Vince dutifully squeezed himself into the body suit. At least the satin slid easily over his skin. “You look stunning in that,” Jonathan declared. “A knockout.”

Vince wasn’t convinced. “Where would I wear this except to a disco?”

“That’s what we’re buying it for. We’ll just have to go more often.”

“And pastels aren’t my color. I’ll look washed out and pale unless I spend the rest of the week under a tanning lamp.”

“It’s not a pastel. I’ll get Colin, and we’ll ask what he thinks. You stay here and continue looking at yourself in it.”

Colin gushed. “Splendid! Gorgeous! Ravishing!” He ran his hand up the inside of Vince’s leg and across his chest to check the fit, tugging on the material here and there as if to adjust it, but what he was really after was a chance to press his fingers gently into Vince’s flesh. “It’s perfect!” he exclaimed. “It will require hardly any alterations at all. Just a little taking in here.” He grabbed the material—and a little more than that—at the base of Vince’s butt. “Come see for yourself.”

At his invitation Jonathan rolled his wheelchair closer and brushed his hands over Vince’s body where Colin had touched him. Colin’s touch had annoyed Vince, but Jonathan’s sent a shiver through his body.

“What does he think?” Colin asked.

“He doesn’t care for the color.”

“Nonsense! It’s perfect.”

“I don’t think it goes with my complexion at all. I look like an old woman who’s put too much powder on her face.”

“Not under disco strobe lights.” Colin shook his head from side to side while holding up and wagging the index finger of both hands. Vince wondered how he kept from getting dizzy. “And if you frost your hair, just the tips, on top only.”

Vince looked pleadingly at Jonathan.

“If you don’t shave that morning or the day before,” Jonathan said, “the shadow of a beard—”

Colin got all excited. “Yes! Stubble!”

By now, even if Vince had fallen in love with the outfit at first sight he would have looked for reasons not to buy it for the pure pleasure of ticking off Colin. A big mistake. He ought to have seen that Colin’s enthusiasm had nothing to do with the suit and everything to do with him. “I’m not too sure how the blue and gold go together,” he ventured.

“The colors of French royalty,” Colin admonished. “And I have the perfect belt for it.” As usual, he stressed the adjective instead of the noun. “A heavy chain in gold and black. I’ll get it for you. But first tell me how it feels.”

“Wonderful. Like I don’t have anything on.”

That was all Colin needed to step back and imagine him with nothing on. He reconsidered a second, then approached, undid three more buttons, and opened the shirt wider. “Like that. What do you think for accessories?” he asked Jonathan. “Matching gold chains? And a gold name bracelet maybe?”

Jonathan signaled his approval. “For Vince. Just the chain for me.”

“Now turn around,” Colin went on, addressing Vince. He frowned. “Panty line.” (An excuse to cop another feel.) “What you need is silk underwear to go with it.”

“Jonathan, isn’t that going a bit far?”

“Have you ever worn silk underwear?” Jonathan answered. “You’ll love it.”

“Why wear underwear at all? Why not a silk G-string?”

“You’ll have to go somewhere else for that,” grumbled Colin.

“And how the hell am I supposed to piss in this thing? I’d have to peel it down below my butt, which would mean taking my arms out as well. What if someone comes in and sees me standing at the urinal? Can you imagine?”

Colin obviously could imagine: his eyes lit up; but Jonathan said, “You go into a stall.”

Vince eventually gave in. It took less time to convince him than it had taken to get Brenda to agree to a vacation. An ogling Colin watched him strip off the body suit and then hurried off to have the alterations done that would “only take a few minutes.”

“Let me buy the shoes,” Vince said. “You’ve spent too much on me as is. And for what?”

“For *my* present,” Jonathan answered with a twinkle in his eye.

“We won’t buy the belt, will we? It sounds awful.”

“Worse than awful.”

Colin looked hurt that they weren’t taking the belt. “You don’t care for it? I thought *you* would,” as if his lack of enthusiasm for the body suit proved that Vince wouldn’t like anything.

“My friend isn’t into chains.”

“Oh, that’s funny.” He probably meant it, though his laughed sounded fake.

“And you’ve decided on the dove. It’s lovely, isn’t it? But I thought you would go for the dapple grey.”

“My friend doesn’t ride,” Vince said.

“Huh?”

In all, they spent close to four hours shopping. Brendan insisted on a fashion show when they got home.

“I’ve tried it on already,” Vince said. “Twice. And I’m pooped. Shopping ain’t my thing.”

“But I haven’t seen it.”

Jonathan patted him on the shoulder. “I’m tired too. You know how hard it is for me, dressing and undressing. Can’t it wait until we open the presents?”

NEW Year’s Eve. Jonathan’s excitement had been growing ever since he’d opened the envelope the day before Christmas and found that not only had Vince wangled a reservation—the place had probably been booked for at least a month—but they had a reserved table next to the dance floor.

“I didn’t think they reserved tables.”

“I explained your situation, and they made an exception so you could see.”

Jonathan was so excited, he had agreed to model his outfit for Brendan despite the hassle of changing clothes. Vince stood him up so he could see himself full length in the living room mirrors. Vince had put on the body suit, and Brendan declared they made the most gorgeous couple he had ever seen.

“We aren’t a couple,” Jonathan said, afraid that the comment might offend Vince.

“Of course we are,” Vince said. “We’re going on a date.”

“Do you think the outfit is too young for me, Brendan?” Jonathan asked. “It’s no good asking Vince; he doesn’t know anything about clothes. Would you believe he showed up for his interview with me in scrubs?”

“He’s styling this afternoon. And I love the five o’ clock shadow. And blue suede shoes! How very Elvis! But without the pot belly.”

“Or the sequins.”

Vince hadn’t shaved because he knew he’d be modeling the outfit for Brendan and wanted to look exactly the way he would when they went to the disco. He wore a heavy gold name bracelet on his right wrist and a gold chain around his neck that matched Jonathan’s. He had the shirt unbuttoned to the bottom of his breastbone (Colin had recommended he unbutton two more), exposing his not-too-thick, dark chest hair. He’d balked at buying the shoes. Jonathan had to argue, pretending his only other option was gold dancing slippers, before he would agree to them. They weren’t an exact match, but the suede echoed the gauzy effect that muted the sheen of the satin. As for the belt, finding one had been easier than they thought, though they had to look in three more stores to find it. It was two inches wide, of a darker but matching blue, not the exact fabric, but similar enough, and closed with an oval, gold-tone plaque buckle with a chunk of black cut glass in the center that, unless you looked closely, could pass for onyx. They knew it would work because they’d gone hunting for it the same day and had the suit in a box with them.

“I asked you about what *I’m* wearing,” Jonathan repeated. “Is it too young for me? The cuffs, the deep V-neck?”

“It makes *you* look young.”

“Yes,” Vince said, imitating Colin, “isn’t he ravishing?”

He had chosen a two-piece ensemble in dove grey watered silk. The pants hugged his thighs and flared to the cuffs, hiding his calves, which had atrophied over the years and were skinny in proportion to his thighs, which, while no longer muscular, still had a respectable amount of meat on them. The slightly

darker shirt, worn over the pants, had a wide, sharply plunging V-neck with a broad shawl collar and full sleeves as wide at the wrists as the pants cuffs.

“What about shoes?” Brendan asked.

“I’m going to polish up my dark brown calf loafers to a high shine.”

“Sounds good.”

“They’re loose and comfortable. You’ve probably noticed, if I wear anything, it’s slippers or canvas shoes, and I don’t pull the laces tight.”

“You need more jewelry. A ring or something. You gotta have something on your hand with those sleeves.”

“I have a garnet ring from when I went through my flashy phase, but it’s kind of garish.”

“I don’t know what a garnet is. And what’s garish?”

“Gaudy. Mine’s big too. I’ll show you the ring.”

“It should be gaudy. And big.”

Vince carried Jonathan to his room to help him change into something less nice but equally comfortable, and Brendan followed to see the ring. “You had a flashy phase?” Vince asked. “What were you like? Anything like Colin?”

“A little bit, maybe; not very. Colin’s one of a kind.”

“Who’s this Colin?” Brendan wanted to know.

“The salesman who sold us these duds.”

“Is he...?”

“Do bears shit in the woods?”

“Oh.”

The garnet, a flat, three-quarter-inch, oblong stone with faceted corners, oxblood red, was mounted in a filigree setting crosswise on a thick gold band. “That’s not garish,” Brendan said, “and it’ll look great with the shirt.”

Vince had another surprise waiting for Jonathan. He'd hired a limousine, and there was a split of champagne sitting in an ice bucket on the back seat. He had the chauffeur make a detour around the tip of Manhattan to give them time to drink it. He asked Jonathan to make a toast.

"To a good year ending and a better one about to begin."

"To many good years."

They clinked glasses and took a sip. "And I'm paying for drinks tonight," Vince said.

"You are not. It wouldn't look right. Remember what Colin said? I'm your sugar daddy."

"That's exactly what I don't want people to think: that I'm your gigolo."

"And what will they think I am if you pay? I'll tell them who you really are."

"Tell who? They won't ask."

"If I see anyone I know. I used to go there often. Some of the old crowd could still be there. So I'm paying, and that's that. Let it drop. We're embarrassing the driver."

The chauffeur spoke up. "Not embarrassing. Amusing."

Vince was impressed that the club had a doorman instead of a bouncer. He wasn't even burly enough to act as one. He was expecting them and took their coats to the cloakroom before showing them to their table. Vince gave him a tip before Jonathan could reach for his wallet.

"This isn't for drinks, and they know that *I* made the reservations and paid for them in advance."

Although it wasn't yet ten o'clock, the club was already crowded, and the doorman had to walk ahead of them to clear a path for the wheelchair. About a third of the men there were middle aged, on the whole not too flashily dressed, and obviously well heeled. The younger set was a motley crew. The

cavernous room was decorated with streamers and balloons, the strobe lights were flashing, and the '70s and early '80s music blaring. Their table, a large one, had a two-quart glass bowl of confetti in the center, and there were five extra chairs so they could invite other people to join them if they wanted to.

The doorman asked if he should get them party hats. They'd seen the pile of them on the cloakroom counter, cone-shaped and in every imaginable color so whoever wanted one would be passably coordinated. They turned him down.

"We also have Jacobin caps."

"No thank you."

"Noisemakers? We have blowouts, foil horns, clappers, kazoos, rattles..."

Vince waved his hand to show they weren't interested, but Jonathan said, "Blowouts."

"I'll be right back."

A tall, thin, balding man came up behind Jonathan and put his hands over his eyes. "Guess who?"

"Give me a clue."

"Peach daiquiris."

"That's no help. What does he look like, Vince?"

"Very different from how I looked fifteen years ago. Remember me?" He uncovered Jonathan's eyes and moved in front of him.

"Archie."

"Very good. May I join you?" he asked, sitting down before Jonathan could answer. "I saw you come in. I can't tell you how pleased I am to see you're getting out, especially on New Year's." He looked sincerely delighted. "Who's your gorgeous friend?"

"Vince, my live-in aide."

The two shook hands. “Anyone else here I know?”

“Doug and Charlie. Out there on the dance floor.”

Archie waved, but they didn’t see him. “So they’re still together?” Jonathan asked.

“Back together.” He turned to Vince. “Doug’s the round one with the red beard; the one who’s more jiggling than dancing. The guy in the crew cut is Charlie.”

“Do you have a date?” Jonathan asked.

“Did I ever have a date?”

“Why don’t you bring your drink over to our table? Don’t tell me you don’t have one.”

“Only an empty glass.”

“Then get a refill. And while you’re at it, could you get something for us and set up a tab for me? I don’t trust Vince not to pay out of his own pocket.”

“This is my Christmas present for him. I think I *should* pay.”

“Now aren’t you a love? What a lucky man you are, Jonathan, to have an aide so eager to please you.”

“We’ve been through this already, Vince. Just tell Archie what you want to drink.”

“A perfect Rob Roy.”

“And you’re compatible, too! A serious, hard drink, not one of those frilly soda-fountain cocktails I like. Jonathan will want a whisky sour, I expect.”

“I don’t drink those anymore. Make it a vodka gimlet, easy on the ice.”

Archie left to get their drinks. When he stood up, Vince realized that he was not as tall as he’d thought. He was one of the few older men who were wearing platforms. “He thinks we’re sleeping together,” Vince said.

“Archie thinks everyone is sleeping together. It’ll do no good to tell him any different.”

The doorman returned with the noisemakers and the Jacobin caps they hadn’t asked for, brown for Jonathan and black for Vince. “I can ask a waiter or one of the security guards to keep an eye on you,” he said, “so you won’t have to go to the bar.”

“That won’t be necessary. Some friends will be joining us. They’ll take care of it.”

The music stopped just as Archie got back to the table. He hurried onto the dance floor to drag Doug and Charlie to the table before they were lost in the crowd.

Doug and Charlie seemed no less happy Jonathan had come than Archie was, but they were less expansive about it. “What do you think of his date?” Archie asked. “Isn’t he delicious?”

“My aide. Vince.”

“Lighten up, Jonathan. Can’t you let yourself indulge in a little fantasy?”

“I *am* his date,” Vince said.

“Why don’t you sit with us?” Jonathan asked. “Best table in the house.”

They didn’t have to be asked twice. “Where’ve you been keeping yourself?” Doug asked. “Why don’t we see more of you?”

“Any of you.” Archie chimed in.

“Claude is here...” Charlie began.

Archie piped up again. “He is? I didn’t see him.”

“...with a date. Hired, as usual.”

“He always did that, even when he was in his twenties,” Archie remarked.

“Shall I get them?” Charlie finally finished his sentence.

“Yes, do.”

“It may take some looking.”

Vince hoped the date wasn't someone he knew from his escort days.

He wasn't. Claude, a very in-shape man with dark hair greying at the temples, had come with a guy he called Lance, whom none of the others had met and who might have had to show ID to get into an R-rated movie, though he had to be at least twenty-one. He was dressed the way Colin would have outfitted him if he worked at Filene's Basement. Claude took one look at Vince and you could tell he was green with envy. “You still see Andy occasionally?” he asked.

“How could he?” Doug said. “Andy moved somewhere down south.”

“Arizona,” Charlie told him.

“Out there? I thought...”

“So Andy's in Arizona,” Jonathan said. “What about some of the other guys we used to hang with?”

“Your friend couldn't be much interested in gossip about people he doesn't know,” Charlie said. “You're looking good. He must take good care of you.”

That caught Claude off guard. “You mean this is long term?” he asked.

Lance evidently made the same assumption as Claude and began chatting with Vince as if they were two of a kind. “What do think of this place?” he said under his breath. “Have you ever seen anything like it? Kinda subdued for me, though.”

Vince shrugged.

“And I like that John of yours. He's—”

“*Jonathan*,” Vince corrected.

“Whatever. Pity about the wheelchair. What happened to him? Is it serious?” Without waiting for an answer, he picked up where Vince had interrupted him. “He is handsome, though, very handsome. A real turn on. But so is mine.”

“I work for him.”

“So I gathered.”

“Full time.” Lance’s eyes widened, and he looked as though he were about to whistle. “I’m his aide,” Vince added.

That deflated him, and Vince turned to catch up on the conversation Jonathan was having with his old friends. They were arguing Obama, how slow he was in acting on his promises and if he really did consider gay rights a priority.

Archie raised his empty glass. “Anyone need a refill? Look at you, Vince! You’ve hardly touched yours, and the ice is all melted.”

“I’m on the job.”

Jonathan looked as if he’d been slapped in the face.

“Not that I don’t want to be here,” Vince went on, “And I mean to have fun. But when Jonathan’s around, I’m designated wheelchair pusher.”

“Then get out on the dance floor and enjoy yourself,” Jonathan ordered. “This song’s perfect for you.”

The last tune had segued into *Macho Man*.

Archie agreed. “It suits him to a T.”

So Vince got up to dance for Jonathan as he’d promised. He stayed within sight of the table, his hands clenched in a fist at shoulder level, rocking his shoulders forward and back to the beat as he stepped in place, first one, then the other. From time to time he’d wink at Jonathan, and point a finger at him and smile.

“Don’t hold back,” Jonathan yelled.

“What?”

“Don’t hold back,” he yelled louder.

Shuffling his feet, Vince jerked his hips forward in a sexual thrust in time with the music while jiggling his shoulders as if in a sustained trill, his arms down and swinging freely, and turned to show the table of friends first one profile, then the other. Then he faced them, still thrusting and jiggling, his arms above his head now, and lowered them in turn to shoulder height, straight ahead of him, to point a finger at them. The men applauded.

The music changed. For a second Vince stood in place, a gleam in his eye, deciding how he would dance this one. Then he strode forward in rhythm, grabbed Jonathan’s wheelchair by the armrests, and, shuffling backward, pulled him onto the dance floor.

“I can’t dance with you,” Jonathan protested. “I can’t dance, period.”

“Yes, you can. Aren’t you listening? It’s the Time Warp. And you don’t dance disco *with* people; you dance *at* them.”

There was plenty of room for them on the floor, because most of the men had formed lines and were following the lyrics. Vince did too, the first time through, while Jonathan sang along, or tried to—he was choking with laughter. After that they improvised. Vince went back to his show-off thrusting jiggle step while Jonathan clapped and swayed his upper body. Continuing his “Macho Man” routine, Vince turned, and, looking over his shoulder, bumped his booty at him and winked. Jonathan risked a swat on the behind, and Vince started lifting his legs higher and thrusting less. Then, when the right words came again, he leapt into the air, spun halfway round, and landed flatfooted, his legs straddling Jonathan’s

knees. He placed his hands on Jonathan's shoulders and went back to thrusting.

"I get a lap dance!" Jonathan was laughing so hard the tears ran down his cheeks. "Can I cop a feel?"

Vince backed away.

"Do I get a kiss?"

He danced his way to behind Jonathan's chair, grabbed the handles, and spun him round and round, dancing in a circle and talking all the while.

"Why shouldn't you get a lap dance? I won't take you to any of *those* places, and I have to make it up to you somehow."

"You're flirting with me. How many Rob Roys have you had?"

"Just one, but I'm going to have another. I told you I was going to have fun tonight. How many gimlets have you had?"

"A few."

"You lush. Then it's a good thing I've made myself your designated wheelchair-pushing, lap-dancing, everybody-thinks-I'm-a-hustler date."

Jonathan was still laughing when Vince wheeled him back to the table. He'd never seen him so happy. Jonathan's friends were, too, and couldn't stop talking about how good they looked together and what a great job Jonathan had done. Lance, who was feeling left out, had his eyes glued to one of the giant screen TVs that was broadcasting the Gucci fireworks over the Hudson. The other was tuned to the mob at Times Square, waiting for the ball to drop.

Archie brought another Rob Roy and gimlet. They sat sipping their drinks, still a little out of breath.

"I need to use the restroom," Jonathan announced.

Vince got up. "Excuse us. Which way is it?"

“Do you think the stud will shake the droplets off for him?” Lance asked when they were out of earshot.

Claude glared at him. “Will you do it for me?” he asked.

“Not here. Later. Sure. Anything you want.”

There was a line waiting to use the urinals, and all the stalls were in use. The beer drinkers, no doubt. The attendant, who looked more like a bouncer than the doorman, signaled them to let Vince and Jonathan go ahead of them as soon as the handicapped stall was free. Despite the attendant, it was none too tidy inside. Vince wet a paper towel and wiped off the seat and used another to dry it.

“You piss first if you have to,” Jonathan said. “I can wait. Just lift the seat. I’ll close my eyes.”

“Don’t bother. It won’t keep you from peeking.”

“I promise not to.”

“I don’t care one way or the other, not under the circumstances. We have to adapt to the situation at hand. If I were all sweaty I’d need *your* help to get outta this... this...”

“Sheath?” Jonathan suggested.

“Yeah. Good thing I haven’t danced much.”

As Vince had predicted, he had to get the top half of the body suit off his arms and peel it down to below his butt to take a leak. Jonathan was discreet, turned his head to the side, and only watched from the corner of an eye.

As he helped Jonathan pull down his pants and onto the seat, Vince asked, “Are you having fun?”

“Now?”

“Cut it out.”

“The time of my life—on the dance floor. And it was nice running into old friends, but that’s getting a little stale already. I don’t want to stay long. Do you mind?”

“Why should I mind? It’s your present.”

“And it was a wonderful present. But I didn’t think I’d be this tired. I’m not as young as I used to be.”

“Shall we stay for the ball to fall and go home soon after? It won’t be much longer.”

“That’s what I was thinking.”

Someone banged on the door of the stall. “Hey, hurry up! What d’ya think you’re doing in there?”

Jonathan was back in his pants and Vince was having trouble maneuvering him into his chair because of the cramped space.

“I hope he’s still there when you wheel me out,” Jonathan whispered. “Can you imagine the expression on his face?”

“Yeah. We’ll be coming out of the crapper, and *he’ll* be shitfaced.”

“How many of you are there anyway?”

“Sir...” (The attendant’s voice.)

“Let’s open the door and ask him in to join us.”

Besides the impatient rowdy, only three people were on line to use the facilities. The attendant was on his way, and men at the urinals had turned their heads to see what would happen, some taking the opportunity to peek at their neighbor. When the stall swung open, the man staggered back, more drunk than embarrassed. The attendant laughed out loud. “That was priceless.”

Still giggling, they got back to the table about ten minutes before the ball dropped. Not many people were dancing now; most were watching the TV screens. Archie had picked up a plain-looking man who appeared to be in his forties but might have been older—he had salt-and-pepper hair. Claude and Lance had left. After Jonathan had told the others about their prank, the conversation lagged. Then the speakers went silent,

the countdown started, the next year flashed on and off in blinking lights, confetti and streamers flew through the air, landing on everyone, noisemakers went off, people poured champagne and began singing *Auld Lang Syne*. Archie got all teary and put his hand on Jonathan's knee. "Do you know how well this song fits you?" he asked, and Vince wondered if Jonathan's friends truly cared for him or had forgotten him and would forget again when the party was over.

They took a cab home, Jonathan resting his head on Vince's shoulder. When it pulled up in front of their building, Vince said, "Party's over. The doorman shouldn't see us behaving like this, and Brendan is probably still up waiting for us."

The cab driver got the wheelchair out of the trunk and tried clumsily to help get Jonathan into it until Vince motioned him away. When the elevator doors closed behind them, Jonathan said, "I need a bath."

"A shower. We both need showers."

"And tomorrow?"

"It already is tomorrow. A day like any other, except we'll be getting up later."

HAPPY as Jonathan had been the night they went to the disco, over the next six weeks he grew gradually more depressed and taciturn. When Vince asked what the matter was, he'd answer, "Nothing's the matter," and try to make a stupid joke.

One evening Vince had looked up from his studies and said, "We have to do something to cheer you up. Don't tell me something isn't bothering you. Why don't we invite some of the friends you met at the disco next Saturday?"

“What friends? Oh, they’d come—to eat my caviar and drink my champagne and grope you when I wasn’t looking. You call that a party?”

“Fine. How about I try these new isometrics I’m reading about on you?”

“Go right ahead.”

But Jonathan’s heart wasn’t in it. “Tomorrow’s your day off,” he said. “How are you going to spend it?”

“At the library again. Big test next week.”

“So you’ll be back late?”

“Probably after midnight. Don’t wait up.”

“It’s been awhile since I’ve waited up. Not since you started school.”

Vince got back at ten. Jonathan’s sullenness worried him.

It seemed Jonathan had gone to bed—he never went to bed that early—leaving all the lights on in the apartment and a half-eaten dinner on the coffee table. More than one glass. Vince sniffed them. He’d been drinking.

Vince put the leftover food in plastic containers and moved it to the refrigerator, loaded the dishwasher, wiped off the table, and turned off some of the lights. Then he went to check on Jonathan.

The room was dark, and the light behind him cast a still deeper shadow over the bed, but he could tell Jonathan wasn’t asleep, and he distinctly heard two people breathing.

“Sorry. I didn’t think...”

“It’s okay,” Jonathan said feebly, and then in a loud whisper, he snarled to the person next to him. “I told you he wouldn’t go to bed without looking in on me. Why didn’t you get dressed when I told you?”

“Because we weren’t finished. Would it make a difference if I had my clothes on when he saw us?”

Vince lingered in the doorway, as if his brain was too busy telling him he should leave them alone and listening to what the man said to tell his feet to move.

“When you get right down to it, does it really matter he found out?”

“To me it does.”

“You make it sound like he’s the boss. Well, now that he knows he may as well see us.”

“No.”

“I want to see *him*. I like the silhouette.” And he flicked on the table lamp.

Jonathan was lying naked on his stomach, his legs slightly spread. The lube at base of his buttocks and along his cleft caught the light and made them shine. A blond man a few years younger than Vince sat in bed next to him, covered from the waist down by a sheet that rose above his lap in a familiar tent.

“Alec!”

“Joey? I knew I’d run into you eventually. I forget your real name.”

“Vince,” Jonathan muttered.

Vince hurried to the bed, yanked the back support pillow out from behind Alec, and helped Jonathan sit up, pulling the sheet up over his legs. It lay flat in his lap.

“Thank you. You two know each other?”

“We worked together briefly last summer,” Alec explained.

Jonathan’s jaw dropped. “For the agency?”

“At a strip joint. You should see this guy dance. He’s fabulous!”

“I know. I’ve seen him.”

“At the disco,” Vince cut in, so Alec wouldn’t get the wrong idea.

“Is this the health care job you told me about?” Alec asked. “No wonder you weren’t interested in me. It’s a wonder *he* is,” he added, indicating Jonathan.

Vince turned on Jonathan. “How could you take a risk like this? How did you know he wouldn’t steal from you, or worse?”

“Aw, c’mon, Vince. You know me.”

“Yes, but he doesn’t.”

Jonathan ignored Vince’s questions and cut to the quick. “So you were stripping at a club when I hired you.”

“I’d hardly call it a club,” Alec interrupted.

“Oh, shut up, will you?” Vince snapped.

“You were a stripper.”

“And now you know,” he admitted in a voice at once challenging and resigned, humbled and defensive.

“And you continued at it another two weeks.”

“I wasn’t sure you’d hire me. Brenda was against it. I needed the money.”

“Something tells me I’m not wanted here,” Alec said.

“Something tells you right. Vince, will you get my wallet from the desk and give your friend here two hundred dollars?”

“Jesus! Were you going to let him take it by himself? I know you weren’t waiting for me.”

“That’s all I have in it. I took out my credit cards and the rest. Besides, he’s bonded.”

“Bonded prostitutes!”

“Who are you to talk?” Alec cut in angrily.

“You keep out of this,” Jonathan said; then calmly, to Vince: “The agency is.”

“So there’s only two hundred in your wallet,” Vince sneered. “What about a tip?”

“Throw in another fifty if you want. I’ll pay you back.”

Vince walked out in a huff to get the money. Alec hadn’t yet got out of bed, and his tent was still in evidence when Vince returned with a handful of bills. “Here. This is for you.”

“Hold on to it a minute, will you? I have nowhere to put it.” He was pissed at Vince for calling him a prostitute.

“Try your pocket.”

“What pocket? I have no pants on. Or haven’t you noticed?”

“You’ll have nothing for those pants to cover up if you don’t get the hell out of here.”

“In other words, take the money and run. I’m not being a shit on purpose, you know. I’m stalling. I’m trying to figure out what’s going on.”

“We’re the ones who have to figure out what’s going on, and we can’t do it with you here.”

Alec got out from under the sheet and picked up his clothes from the recliner by the bed. Still naked, but less hard, he ambled up to Vince to get his money, exaggerating a foolish, pseudo-sexy walk that obviously wasn’t meant to turn anybody on. Vince jerked his hand back and held the money behind his right ear. “Get dressed first.”

Alec slowly got into his clothes. When Vince handed him the money he leaned in, as if for a kiss. Vince turned his head away; Alec shrugged. “I’ll see myself out.”

“No, I’ll see you out.”

He more or less pushed Alec out the door. Then he called to Jonathan, “Shall I fix us both a drink?”

“No thank you. You can have one if you like.”

He could have used one, but he thought it would seem like he couldn't face what he knew was coming. No use trying to put it off, but where to begin?

Jonathan began. "So you *are* gay," he said.

"Queer to the core."

"And all these months I've been asking myself: 'Is he or isn't he?' You're very straight acting."

"It isn't acting. I can't act. I've done some, err... theater too, and I stink."

"Why didn't you tell me you were gay?"

"Because it had nothing to do with us."

"It had everything to do with us. You're my best friend—that is, I thought you were my best friend—and you're out to everyone but me. What's more, when you came to work for me you were working as a hustler."

"A stripper. I wasn't hustling. Okay, I did briefly, a couple of years back. For an escort service, not on the streets. And I was in a couple of gay porn films a few months after I got out of college. You may as well know that too. I can give you the titles if you want to see what kind of faggot I was six years ago."

"Not if you can't act. Stripper, escort, porn star... that's quite a dossier. You did work at the hospital, I assume. You didn't make that up?"

"Do you think I gave Dr. Shenai a blowjob so he'd write that letter?"

"Sorry."

"No, I'm sorry. I have no right to be hostile."

"I just want to get a handle on who you really are."

"Who I really am is who you used to think I was. The truth is that I really wasn't who I was, or didn't want to be."

“But you earned a living selling your body. To some degree, that is.”

“It’s pretty much my only asset. It landed me this job.”

Jonathan blanched; the look on his face vacillated, hovering between offended and guilty. Vince guessed here was an issue—the issue—he was terrified to broach, and suddenly realized it was so for both of them. He rephrased his answer. “On and off, yes. I sold my body.”

Like Vince, the sudden realization that the topic at hand was not this single incident, but the conflicting demands of their working and personal relationship, had sobered Jonathan and frightened him. He sounded almost conciliatory. “And you were angry at yourself for it.”

“Liking myself wasn’t easy.”

“Then you don’t need my anger on top of it.”

“You have every right to be angry.”

“Do I? Who am I to judge? I use escort services. It’s men like me who keep them in business.”

“You have an excuse. You’re in a wheelchair. My only excuse was I needed the money.”

“Not all that bad an excuse, when you come to think of it. Let me show you something.”

He reached behind the night table for a lever that released a drawer that Vince had taken for a bit of decorative carving. “My toys. An impressive collection, isn’t it?”

“Why are you showing me this?”

“Why did you tell me about those movies? I’ve given some of them names. Would you like to meet Vince?”

“No.”

“I’m sorry. I’m being hostile. I’m not sure which of us I’m more mad at.”

“You talk as if you’ve done something heinous. The escorts, the sex toys... What do you have to be ashamed about?” Vince asked. “I blame myself for that.”

“Why? They were part of my life before I ever met you.”

“Because I knew you were gay, I knew you had needs, and Lord knows I knew I was gay myself. I’ve read up on tantric massage. I could have gotten you off once in a while. There are licensed therapists who do that. They say that as long as they keep their clothes on and their clients don’t touch them, it’s on the up and up.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“You know: been there, done that. I didn’t want to be your gigolo.”

“Ouch!”

So there it was, out in the open. They fell silent, thinking of what had passed between them, both resentful, both feeling guilty. At last Jonathan said, “Your turn to ask questions. I’m the one who was caught *in flagrante delicto*.”

“Again my fault. I should have knocked. I’d have figured out you were with someone, but we could have avoided a scene.”

“I’m sure there are still things you want to ask me. You have as much right to know about me as I do about you.”

“Was that your first time with Alec?”

“Yes.”

“But there’ve been others.”

“I’ve already told you I pay for sex.”

“Recently? Since I’ve known you?”

“Once or twice, back in September, in the afternoon, when you had class.”

“And before?”

“Regularly. I’m not impotent, you know.” The guilt and anger were still there, in both of them, and the little barbs came out unintentionally.

“You don’t have to remind me. Just what *can* you do sexually?”

“I wish you didn’t have to ask me that. I wish you already knew first hand.”

“But I don’t, so tell me. Alec fucked you. What else did you do?”

“Do I have to tell you all this?”

“I spilled my guts to you. I’ll give you a blow-by-blow description of those movies I made if you’re interested.”

“I sucked him off. He sucked me off. Vanilla.”

“You didn’t fuck him?”

“I can’t do that with escorts anymore.”

“*Can* you top?”

“It’s a question of logistics. Look, you asked what your being gay had to do with us. What does my sexual performance have to do with us?”

“I don’t know the answer to that.”

“Don’t you?”

Neither of them wanted it to, but sooner or later everything they said led back to what they didn’t want to talk about.

Vince sighed. “This is going nowhere. Maybe we should just go to bed.”

“To *bed*. I hope you’re not thinking of packing up and leaving in the middle of the night.” He sounded scared.

“Leave to go where? Jonathan, I’m really, really sorry. I’m sorry this had to happen. I’m sorry it had to be Alec. I’m angry that you put yourself in danger. You’re angry at me, I’m angry

at me, you're angry at yourself, and I just feel like crying. Please. I can't talk about it anymore."

VINCE got hardly any sleep that night. Of all the ways to end eight months of a near perfect friendship! Jonathan couldn't have slept much either. He was already up and in his wheelchair when Vince stumbled into the living room.

"I suppose it's over now," Vince said mournfully.

"Why should it be? Why can't we make it a new beginning?"

"You mean become lovers? I won't service you on the massage table or wherever as part of my duties. It would give me pleasure, too, but I applied for this job because I was sick and tired of servicing other men for money."

"I understand. But lovers? Only if you want to. *Do you want to?*"

"What if it doesn't work out?"

"What if it does? Our only other option is to throw in the towel and go our separate ways. At least give it a chance."

"I just don't know."

"Sit down and hear me out. If things were different, if we were just good friends—and we were good friends, weren't we?—would you want to have sex with me? I mean, it isn't my disability that turns you off, is it?"

Vince shook his head. "To be honest, I've been thinking about it for months. Why do you think I haven't had sex all this time?"

"You haven't?"

"No."

“You had to know I’ve been wanting it... hoping for it... for...”

“Since you first laid eyes on me.”

“I’ll admit it occurred to me when you showed up for that first interview. Why pretend otherwise? But then I thought, ‘No, I can always pay for an escort’. And now you know I do sometimes. But with you I had the feeling that the two of us could have something else. Something more, something better. It was always at the back of my mind, of course, but wishing—seriously wishing—that we could add sex into the mix came later. Do you believe me?”

“Yes. At first I suspected you just wanted to seduce me, and I resisted. Not because I didn’t find you attractive, because I wanted the job. Then you stopped. By the time I sensed you were hitting on me again, I wanted you too.”

“So?”

“I just don’t know.”

“Are you afraid of a relationship?”

“Maybe. Up to now I’ve had mostly one-night stands. Sometimes with someone I’d been with before, but still a one-night stand. But that isn’t it. It just seems wrong.”

“Is it the job? Are you afraid I’ll be taking advantage of you?”

“Not anymore. I’m more afraid of taking advantage of *you*.”

“That’s something Brenda would think. How could you be if I’m the seducer? Doesn’t that skew the employer-employee balance of power cliché?”

“A high school student can come on to his teacher. It’s happened.”

“I’m not a high school kid. I’m fifty-six years old.”

“Please, don’t press me on this. I’ll go on working for you. Give me some time, and we’ll see.”

“Will you at least dance for me?”

“Now?”

“Why not?”

Vince smiled broadly. “You mean a striptease?”

“Yeah. Show your stuff.”

Now Vince was laughing. “What should I put on to take off?”

“What was your costume back when you worked with Alec, wherever that was?”

“My scrubs.”

Jonathan grimaced. “Anything but that.” Then he started to giggle. “So that’s why you were wearing them when you came later that night! I was wondering what they had to do with working in a restaurant.”

“So what should I strip out of?”

“That disco outfit I bought for you.”

“Impatient, aren’t you? It won’t take me long to get naked wearing that.” They both started laughing again. “Brendan said I needed a bass guitar to go with it.”

“I have to agree with him if you’re wearing it for a striptease, but I’m afraid you’ll have to do without. I don’t have one.”

“I’ll go change; you choose the music. But you have to promise to keep your pants closed and not beat off.”

“I promise, if you make it another lap dance.”

“Fine. But no touching.”

“Not even to slip something green into that powder blue body suit?”

“Now *that* color becomes me!”

The awful weight had been lifted from their chests. They had broken the ice; they had acknowledged the depth of their affection and the sexual chemistry between them. It was a new beginning. Neither of them knew where it would lead, but both were ready to let it lead where it would. Starting playfully, with a striptease, seemed like the way to go. What could go wrong?

Brenda. She had her own key. She walked in on them when Vince had peeled the body suit to below his midriff. He'd also kicked off his shoes and draped the belt around Jonathan's neck, and was straddling the wheelchair and thrusting his hips toward him.

"So this is how you entertain each other!" she said. "And in the morning, no less! When the maid's away, the mice will play."

"You could have knocked."

"When do I ever knock, Jonathan? And if Brendan had been with me? What would he have thought?"

"He probably would have wanted to watch."

"I'm sure he would have wanted to watch, and I hope you wouldn't have obliged. As for me, I *don't* want to watch. I'll come back this afternoon." And she left.

The two looked at each other in embarrassed silence. Vince hadn't moved since Brenda came in. At last he said, "She thinks he's gay too."

Jonathan nodded. "So? Are you going to finish?" he asked.

"The dance, no. The other part, yes." And he pulled the body suit down to his ankles. He had no underwear on.

Another long silence.

Jonathan spoke first. "Do I read your thoughts? Now that Brenda thinks we're sleeping together, shall we make love?"

"Brenda has nothing to do with it. Your bed or mine?"

“Yours. My sheets still have Alec’s stains on them.”

Vince shuffled forward, hobbled by his costume. Jonathan reached out and touched his cock, cupping his hand below his balls; then he leaned forward and took it in his mouth, swirling his tongue around it and gently sucking till it grew hard. Stepping on the legs of the body suit, Vince pulled his feet free and lifted Jonathan, carried him to the bedroom, and undressed him. By now he must have undressed him two or three hundred times, but even with his training and experience, just to get him out of a T-shirt and flannel lounge pants was an awkward business compared to falling into bed with a man who had full use of his limbs and fumbling with buttons and buckles while tearing at each other’s clothes.

Clumsy as the process was, however, it seemed to Jonathan that getting naked had never been so erotic—the desire, the anticipation, the kisses with which Vince devoured every new piece of skin he exposed. Even the rough tug Vince had to give to lift his hips in order to slip down the lounge pants didn’t interrupt his moaning and the sticky, copious dripping of his penis. Only his inability to reciprocate beyond stroking Vince’s face, arms, back, whatever was in reach, the impossibility of repositioning himself to take a more active role, frustrated him. He wanted to make love no less than he wanted to be made love to. But he said nothing. What he had was glorious; he reveled in Vince’s eagerness and excitement. And his immobility, his helplessness to resist or control the attention Vince lavished on him if he had wanted to, itself afforded him unbearable pleasure. He would let him improvise and learn how best to unite their bodies.

When he went down on him, Vince rediscovered the familiar sweetness of another man’s arousal, the musky smell of his groin in your nostrils, the thrill of his hardness filling your mouth, the smoothness of skin, the exaltation of swirling

your tongue around it to explore its shape, its thickness, its contours, its tracery of bulging veins, the spongy duct running up the underside of the shaft, its crowning knob with the well-defined ridge around its base and narrow slit at the tip, the pressure of it sliding to the back of your throat. He couldn't remember when he'd last given a blowjob, probably weeks before he'd auditioned to be a stripper and applied to work as an aide on the same day. He relished the experience.

His own enjoyment did not blind him to Jonathan's longings. He sought out where he was most sensitive and intuited his desire to touch and taste. He tried to maneuver into sixty-nine position, but the headboard blocked his legs. Moving Jonathan down and bending his knees, a chore much like dragging a hundred-pound sack of potatoes, did not work. The dead weight of his legs clamped them together, and Vince could not hold them apart and balance himself at the same time. They had to lie diagonally across the bed, Jonathan's upper leg behind the lower, which tilted him slightly, and Vince had to raise his head and lean over him to reach his privates. But it did the trick, and Jonathan was happy.

"How did you manage it with those escorts?" he asked.

"Less well."

It would also be possible for them to lie next to each other with Jonathan on his back and Vince on his side. Jonathan could twist at the shoulders. But limiting their love life to kissing, cuddling, caressing, and a perpetual routine of sixty-nine would not satisfy them in the long run. "Where do you keep the lube?" Vince asked.

"In the toy drawer."

Something else they could do for variety. "Maybe I can meet my namesake tomorrow," Vince said. "Do we need condoms?"

“How long has it been for you?”

“I told you. Close to a year.”

“And you’ve been tested?”

“Twice.”

“The men I paid were tested by the agency, they used condoms, and always pulled out before they came.”

“Bareback, then, as it should be between us.”

He went to get the lube. When he returned, Jonathan had fallen onto his back. Vince parted his legs wide enough to fit one knee between them and went down on him again, rocking back and forth, forcing his mouth down to the base while he ran his hands over his chest and stomach. Then he generously oiled Jonathan’s shaft, dabbed some more between his own buttocks, and slowly lowered himself onto him till he was impaled to the hilt. He was tight; he hadn’t spread his cheeks for another man in ages.

Jonathan had not expected this. Primarily a top before he lost the use of his legs, he had come to accept the inevitability of spending the rest of his life on the bottom. With Vince he could do both. How had he known?

“Next time sit me up in the support pillow so I can kiss you while you fuck yourself on me.”

“*You’re* fucking me, and it feels wonderful.” For him, unlike Jonathan, who had been sexually active before AIDS, the sensation of skin instead of latex rubbing inside him was something he had never experienced. “We can try it in the recliner too,” he added. He’d already begun to plan ahead and think of where and how they could do it differently.

Vince rode him faster and faster, breathing heavily, bumping and grinding, his mouth open, his eyes glazed and staring. “I’m close.” And Vince posted more insistently as the horn of the saddle swelled inside him, till Jonathan gasped, his

upper body grew as rigid as the lower, and Vince felt a spurt of warmth into the center of his being and a sudden throbbing against his prostate.

Vince rose off him and lifted his legs, his expression asking, “Do you want this?”

“Yes.”

He balanced Jonathan’s calves on his shoulders and entered him, but their weight impeded his pumping so he couldn’t set a steady rhythm. They also kept slipping off, and when he tried to hold them in place he had to struggle not to topple onto his side. It could be done, fucking Jonathan on his back, but they would have to find something to support his legs and keep them in the air.

When he tried taking him doggie style, it was Jonathan who fell over – his legs were useless to make himself a tripod. They could do it doggie, Vince realized, if Jonathan knelt with his knees on the floor and his stomach resting on the bed. Or some other place, maybe even standing, Jonathan’s legs dangling from a countertop or with him folded over the back of the heavy upholstered arm chair in the living room, or—why not?—bent over the cement balustrade of the balcony with a towel under him late at night. So many things to try, and so many ways to do it!

For now, though, they were in Vince’s bed, and there was business to take care of. It was no time to tote him around the apartment experimenting. Vince tried lying behind him, but as with their first attempts at sixty-nine, holding his legs apart posed a problem. He could get in, but not as far as either of them wanted. A pillow between them might work. He’d work that out next time. For now he’d just have to lie on top of him, as Alec must have done. This way he could wrap his arms around him and lick his neck and ears. And, his mind freed

from puzzling over how to arrange their bodies, he became aware of how infinitely more pleasurable it is to feel the silky walls of your partner's rectum on your bare skin and being joined to a man you've truly connected with.

With many a *God, yes!* and a *Like that!*, Jonathan talked him through the most gloriously exhilarating fuck of his life. "Take your time," he said, "I'm in heaven."

Vince took his time, but all good things must come to an end, and in the end, he came, and his coming was more intense and overpowering than any orgasm they had ever known. Yet each time would be better, less clumsy and more natural, no more trial and error, as they learned their possibilities and limitations. Even undressing each other would go more smoothly. And, oh yes, he'd dance for him too, often. He savored the irony that he had taken both jobs.

They lay there, sweaty and wrung out from their exertions and from having passed a sleepless night, but contented, replete. And basking in the afterglow of a lovemaking that had been too long in finding expression, they fell asleep.

Brenda did not return that day. Hunger woke them in the late afternoon. They hadn't even had breakfast.

"Let's go out for dinner," Vince said. "We have something to celebrate. Just let me remake your bed and get those Alec-soiled sheets into the laundry."

"Will you sleep in it with me tonight?"

"Every night."

Epilogue

A LITTLE over a year later, in mid-April, Jonathan told his sister, “You’re not going to like this, but Vince and I are talking about getting married. We can in Connecticut. It’s only a short drive away.”

“So you are lovers. I thought so, ever since I barged in and interrupted Vince’s... performance. But I couldn’t be sure if you were lovers or if it was only a game.”

“Yes and no. We weren’t lovers, but it was more than a game.”

“And how long *have* you been lovers?”

“Since five minutes after you walked out. So thank you.”

“For barging in or walking out?”

“For both. Your timing couldn’t have been better.”

“Well, what I’m about to say will surprise you. I’m glad you’re getting married. I wished you could have married Andy, but there wasn’t such a thing as same-sex marriage back then.”

“Andy. I forgot all about him.”

“You mean he forgot all about you. He showed what he was worth. Vince has too.”

“The age difference doesn’t concern you? Vince is a lot younger than me.”

“So much the better. He’ll be strong and healthy and able to take care of you for many years to come.”

“And I’ll be old and feeble as well as crippled. Do you think he’ll stay?”

“I do. I’m sure of it.”

“What do I have to offer except a lot of money and a life of ease?”

“Is that all the credit you give him? You have the same thing to offer that he does. Love.”

“This is all backwards. I’m giving you all the arguments against it, and you answer me by knocking them down one by one.”

“You’ve already answered them for yourself. I’m agreeing with you.”

“You know, we would have done this earlier, but Vince refuses to go on working for me if he’s my husband, and he won’t allow me to support him either. Now he’s licensed and has found a job in sports medicine. Ours can be a union of equal partners.”

“And who’s going to take care of you?”

“Oh, Vince will range me in the morning and bathe me in the evening and give me my massage, which I can tell you is more than therapeutic. And I can reciprocate. Did you know that the whirlpool is big enough for both of us? Well, almost.”

“You don’t have to tell me about the intimate side of your relationship.”

“I was just explaining that his caring for me isn’t a one-way street. The other things, such as keeping house or taking me places, I can do myself or hire someone to do. It also means we’ll have space. We won’t be closeted together and on top of one another all the time. I have a social life now. I’m back in touch with friends I haven’t seen in years.”

“You can thank Vince for that.”

“You mean they come here to ogle him.”

“You’re back to giving me the negative arguments. They come here because they enjoy your company. They can relax with you now that you’re a couple and not a lonely invalid. You have a full life, an enviable life. That makes all the difference.”

“And you, Brenda? What about you?”

“Me? Do I feel the way they do? Well, you’re right. I’m not only glad for you and Vince. I have selfish reasons too. I’m glad because of Brendan. It sets a good example for him, your getting married, and the day isn’t far when he’ll be asking you for advice. You know I’ve stipulated for you to be his guardian if anything should happen to me, and Michael agrees.”

“That’s not what I meant. I was asking: ‘Do you have a life?’”

“Oh, I’m more than happy going on as I was. I have all the freedom I could ask for now that you don’t need me anymore. I didn’t say anything, of course, but I resented being tied down to you. I blamed it in part for the breakup of my marriage. Not you, *it*. But I was wrong. Michael is a *schmuck*. That’s what went wrong. So you see, I have no complaints about my life. And now I can be happy for you, too. Your accident was a blessing in disguise.”

“You mean Vince. I’m a lucky man, aren’t I?”

“I TOLD Brenda,” Jonathan said to Vince when he came home that evening.

“About getting married? How did she take it?”

“If I hadn’t made my mind up already, she’d have talked me into it.”

“So, shall we set a date? I can get a day off, maybe two, but I haven’t built up any vacation time yet. We should make it

a Thursday and use the weekend to make a three-day honeymoon.”

“We never did get around to taking a trip together, did we? I still haven’t left the city in over seventeen years. Where can we go that’s close to Connecticut? The Cape?”

“Too cold unless we put it off till summer.”

“Then we’ll put it off till summer. There’s no rush. We won’t do anything after we’re married that we don’t do now. How will it change our relationship, really, except to make it official? I’ve already written you into my will.”

“I don’t give a fuck about your will. But I think you should have made the trust fund for Brendan bigger. But you make it sound like there’s no reason to bother getting married.”

“Except that I want to, if only to let the whole world know how happy I am. We’re lucky; we don’t need the protections other same-sex couples need. Recognition, yes, but not the legal protections. In my tax bracket and with my disability, it makes no difference whether I file as married or single. You’re a medical professional. If something happens to me, who’s to keep you out of my hospital room?”

“And if something happens to *me*?”

Jonathan waved that objection aside. “We have the support of my family...”

“And mine?”

“Don’t jump to conclusions. I haven’t met them. Do they even know? We’ll find out when we invite them to the wedding.”

“So now there’s going to be a wedding!”

“Why not? Why treat it as an elopement when we have all this time to plan it? As I said, I want the whole world to know.”

“A gala affair?”

“Nothing ostentatious. A ceremony in front of friends and family, an outdoor reception with flowers and a cake...”

“And champagne.”

“Definitely champagne.”

“And disco dancing.”

“Is there any other kind?”

“And formal attire.”

“We’ll go clothes shopping again.”

“Where? Where we got the disco outfits?”

“You need a new disco outfit; you’ve sweated the life out of the powder blue. We’ll find something reasonable this time. Going to the disco is just one other thing we do, not the most wonderful once-in-a-lifetime Christmas present Santa ever gave me.”

That merited a kiss. Jonathan continued: “But yes. That boutique would be a good place to buy our suits for the most wonderful once-in-a-lifetime wedding anyone ever had.”

“But we’d have the other salesclerk serve us.”

“We could still use it as an opportunity to invite Colin. He could be our best man.”

“He’d make a better flower girl. We should invite Alec, too, if we can find him, to thank him for finally getting us together. Maybe he still works for the same escort service.”

“We could watch him disco dance at the reception.”

“Alec? Or Colin?”

“Oh, that’s right. You met Alec when you go-go striptease danced together. We could hire him for the entertainment. But I meant Colin.”

“I’m sure he puts on quite a show. The applause will be deafening.”

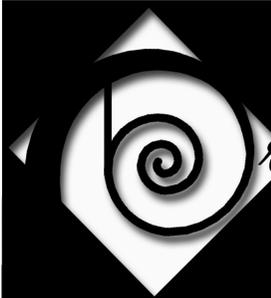
“People won’t be able to take their eyes off him.”

“Everyone else, not me. It’s my wedding, and I’ll be too busy dancing.”

“On my lap.”

“Exactly. So when I dance, the whole world will know I’m dancing for Jonathan.”

ANEL VIZ, born and raised in New York City, currently resides in the Midwest, where he has taught at the same small liberal arts college for over thirty years. He has lived about one-quarter of his life in French-speaking countries. He returned to his childhood passion of writing at age sixty, and ever since he has churned out works in a variety of M/M genres: poetry, short and novel-length fiction, humor, essays, etc. He likes to experiment. Though most of his stories are romances, few of them would be called traditional romance. His work appears regularly in *Wilde Oats* and *GayFlashFiction* online magazines.



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