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A Dance of Love and Jealousy Copyright © 2011 by Roland Graeme

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Delicias domini

Chapter 1 Guy Time

A NEW joke was making the rounds of the ballet company, and Lawrence Duvernoix made sure he was the first to tell it to Nathaniel Deventer.

"Hey, Nate," Larry said. "Have you heard about Kitri's new pet?"

"No," Nate admitted.

Kitri Vesey was one of the company's principal ballerinas. She and Dane Stockton, the company's shining male star, were living together despite the fact that Stockton was openly bisexual and unashamedly promiscuous. Neither Kitri nor Dane struck Nate as the responsible pet owner type, so he was surprised by Larry's revelation.

"It's a dog," Larry specified.

"Really?" The unsuspecting Nate fell right into the trap: "What kind of a dog?" He envisioned something small, fluffy, and irresistibly cute.

"A Great Dane. Kitri's having a little trouble keeping him on the leash. And he keeps sniffing guys' butts and trying to hump their legs. So Kitri is going to have to take him to the vet to be neutered. The sooner, the better." Larry could barely get the last part out before he started sputtering with laughter.

Nate had to laugh, too. "That's terrible, Larry! That is just plain mean." But Nate knew that he would be telling the joke himself, at his earliest opportunity. Dane Stockton was such an incorrigible joker, always making cracks at other people's expense, that Nate was delighted by the prospect of being able to get his own back at him for once.

Nate always enjoyed what he thought of as his "guy time," one on one, with Larry Duvernoix. The fact that Larry was straight and Nate was gay only made their relationship seem more special, as far as the younger dancer was concerned.

Unlike many of the other dancers, Nate had no previous connections to the dance world in his family. His parents were both college professors who had instilled in their son a love of books. When, seemingly out of the blue, their precocious adolescent son developed an interest in dance, they saw no reason to do anything but encourage it.

Some male dancers could walk down the street in their mufti and pass for obviously athletic young men who might be involved in any number of possible professions. Nate, however, looked like a dancer, even when he was in repose, and moved like a dancer, even off stage, with an innate grace and buoyancy denied to other mortals. He was small, compactly and tautly muscled, with corn silk-blond hair, flawless pale skin, and light blue eyes. He looked like everyone's conception of what Tchaikovsky's Nutcracker Prince should look like, so it was not surprising that he had first danced that role at the age of fourteen, when he'd partnered a Clara who, since she was a few months short of her eighteenth birthday at the time, could almost be considered the proverbial Older Woman by comparison.

Nate's parents had attended that performance, which took place in the auditorium of the building that housed the college's cultural center.

"Try not to embarrass me by sniveling the minute the curtain comes down at the end, the way you did the last time we saw Nate dance," Mr. Deventer told his wife, as they took their seats in the auditorium. "God, you'd have thought we were at a funeral!"

Mrs. Deventer, who, like her husband, was a PhD and thus could call herself Dr. Deventer when she so chose, said nothing but gave her husband a look that was more eloquent than words.

At the performance, Mr. Deventer was in fact the one who succumbed, and he made it only until the end of the Act 1 *pas de deux*. Then, at the climactic moment when the Nutcracker Prince lifted the ecstatic Clara high to the accompaniment of a swelling crescendo in the orchestra topped off by a cymbal clash, he was the one who started blubbering like a baby. His wife opened her purse and handed him a tissue.

"I couldn't help it," he told her during the intermission. "There's just something about the way he looks when he's up there that makes you want to bawl like a baby."

"You old softie, you," his wife told him. "I can't take you anywhere."

But without being altogether conscious of it at the time, Mr. Deventer had sensed one of the qualities that would define his son as a performer: a kind of innocence and openness, vulnerable yet fearless, that instantly put audiences on his side. Those who saw Nate dance wanted him to succeed, and when he surpassed their expectations, they were as excited as though the boy next door or a family member had made good. They felt that they had a personal stake in Nate's excellence. When Nate auditioned for the New York City company and was accepted, joining the company meant a move from a quiet college town to the big, potentially wicked, city. His mother had expressed the same fear for her openly gay son that she might have had for her daughter. "I'm so afraid some older man is going to take advantage of you and break your heart."

But Nate was not so easily taken advantage of. His angelic exterior could be deceptive. The discipline that dance had imposed upon his body was mirrored by a certain toughness and independence in his personality. It was entirely possible that he'd end up as the one doing the heartbreaking rather than the other way around.

When he met people and told them he was a dancer, their invariable reaction was to remark about how exciting and glamorous his profession must be. Nate didn't always disillusion them. The truth, of course, was that being a dancer required self-denial and a willingness to embrace drudgery and routine. The seemingly endless cycle of practice, rehearsal, and performance left very little free time for a social life, especially when one factored in the need to rest up and hoard energy in anticipation of further practice, rehearsal, and performance and the even more pressing need to recuperate and begin amassing fresh reserves of energy all over again after these activities. At times, a dancer could feel like a caged hamster running inside its little plastic exercise wheel.

During his first season with the company, Nate was scarcely in any danger of becoming entangled in an ultimately heartbreaking love affair. He was too busy to have much more than a cursory sex life. Living and working in the city did have one advantage: casual partners were readily available, provided you could fit looking for them into an already crowded schedule. From time to time, Nate did indulge himself with the erotic equivalent of fast food.

Manhattan seemed to be teeming with gay men of all ages and degrees of desirability who were perfectly willing to suggest "Let's go fuck" to a stranger after the briefest and most cursory of acquaintances. Nate was protected, to some extent, by his innate dislike of the more extreme forms of promiscuity. And night life, to him, usually meant work, i.e. a performance. He had no interest in the club scene, with its late hours, its tolerance of drinking and drugs, and its loud, raucous music, which to his taste was banal. Still, as an attractive young man, he had his admirers, and adventures occasionally came his way.

There was also a longstanding, if not entirely respectable, tradition of the members of a dance company, who inevitably spent so much time around one another, turning to their colleagues for sexual or romantic gratification.

Contrary to an equally longstanding popular misconception, not all male dancers were gay. Enough of them were, though, to explain the stereotype, and to make it almost too easy for them to hook up with each other, either in pairs or other configurations.

If anything, though, Nate preferred to trick with guys from outside the hothouse dance world, guys who knew little or nothing about dance, who were far from being obsessed with it, and who could actually talk about other things. Nate heard enough shop talk and company gossip twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week without being subjected to it while on a date or in bed.

The company, like any organization, had its cliques. Some of the dancers were friendlier and more outgoing than others. A few were preoccupied with their careers to the exclusion of everything else, including normal family and social ties. Others formed their own tight little circles not open to outsiders.

For all their apparent friendliness, competition between the dancers could be fierce, even when it remained on a subconscious level. Not everyone could perform all the time, and as a result the younger dancers developed an instinctive sense of urgency about assignments and opportunities along with a hypersensitivity about criticism. Each of them hoped to be among the lucky few who would be "noticed" and singled out for larger parts. No one's ambition was to remain indefinitely in the anonymity of the *corps de ballet*, far back from the magical glow of the footlights.

To the extent that a straight man could act maternal toward other men, Larry Duvernoix mothered the younger and more vulnerable members of the company, especially the corps boys. He had gone out of his way to welcome and mentor Nate when Nate was a naïve newcomer, and Nate had developed an instant and enduring crush on Larry as a result. Larry, to coin a phrase, was eminently crushable, with his good looks, his shock of caramel-colored hair, and the way his trimly muscled torso filled out a T-shirt. He also possessed a most ingratiating, easygoing manner. Since Nate couldn't actually have Larry, sexually, except in his fantasies, Nate had settled for the next best thing: friendship, not only with the older dancer, but with his wife, Cara.

Larry and Cara knew an impecunious, hungry young dancer when they saw one. After all, it had not been so long ago that they had both been impecunious, hungry young dancers themselves. They often invited Nate to their apartment for dinner. When Cara got pregnant and took a leave of absence from the company, Nate did his fumbling best to help out. After Cara gave birth to baby Allegra, Nate found his true calling: babysitter. Cara had now returned to work and was dancing better than ever. Whenever the busy couple needed a break from parenthood in the form of an afternoon or evening out together, and Nate was free, he gladly volunteered his services.

Larry and Nate frequently managed to put in their Guy Time together, one on one. On one of these occasions, their conversation did turn toward the question of sexual orientation.

"But you must have guys hitting on you all the time," Nate speculated. "Sure."

"Aren't you ever tempted?"

"No. I've been tempted to cheat on Cara with another woman once or twice. Not recently, and not with anybody you know, so don't waste your time trying to pry the names out of me, or out of anybody else." (Larry knew only too well that their fellow dancers were incorrigible gossips.) "I must be weird, because I do believe that most people aren't one hundred percent gay or straight. But I can remember, back in high school, sitting there in those sex education classes, you know? Where the textbook goes on and on about how it's perfectly natural to have homosexual feelings and be curious about other guys' bodies and engage in mutual masturbation, and all that shit. I'd just sit there, squirming and thinking, 'Oh, gross! Looking at another guy's dick, let alone *touching* it... yuck!'" Larry laughed. "I'd probably be a better dancer if I did pick up a few guys and ball my brains out with them."

"Really? You really think so?"

"Sure. Just like you'd be a better dancer if you let some experienced older woman have her way with you. I think we need to be well-rounded human beings to be well-rounded performers. Well-rounded sexually, in addition to in all sorts of other ways."

"Larry, you are just ribbing me, aren't you?"

"I'm afraid I am. You should've seen the way your face kind of lit up, went all hopeful for a moment, when I raised the possibility of me ever whoring around like Dane. God, you're cute. I promise you, if I ever do decide to play on the other team, you'll be the first guy I'll call."

"I want that in writing."

"Yeah, like I'd put that kind of incriminating evidence down on paper. Let's stop thinking up ways to wreck my marriage and start concentrating on finding you a boyfriend. And preferably not a dancer. Somebody who's *stable*, mentally and otherwise."

Larry was a dancer, but he was eminently stable. Unfortunately, he was already taken. Had he not been, Nate would not have been above making a play for him.

Chapter 2 More Light on the Naked Guy

NATE, at twenty-two, had recently been promoted from the corps to soloist. This was the first step up in the company's hierarchy. The next, and ultimate, position was that of "principal" dancer. As a newly minted soloist, he was the kind of performer who was invariably labeled "young and promising." The company worked him hard, which Nate really didn't mind. To his way of thinking, there was no such thing as useless experience. In his first season as a soloist, he had already danced Florindo, one of the supporting roles in Stravinsky's *Pulcinella*, and Benno in *Swan Lake*. Benno was a cheerful idiot, at least in this production, and Nate dutifully portrayed him as such. In addition, Nate was given solo assignments in three short modern dance pieces without plot lines as well as the task of covering, or understudying, dancers in other roles.

One of the company's unexpected successes was its revival of Glière's *The Red Poppy* (which the irreverent Dane Stockton, who had a penchant for giving nicknames to everybody and everything, called *The Red Scare*). The production preserved the basic plot line, in which the captain of a Soviet cargo ship visiting a Chinese seaport and a local dancing girl meet and fall in love. Both are passionate Communists, and ultimately the dancer sacrifices herself to foil a capitalist-inspired plot and save the captain's life. The production toned down the propaganda and played up the exoticism; some critics, predictably, dismissed the ballet as badly dated kitsch, but audiences loved it. Nate got to romp about as a young Russian sailor who, with his shipmates, even visited an establishment that, in this production, was a combination of gambling club, whorehouse, and opium den. This was heady stuff for a young man who had grown up in a small college town in the middle of dairy farm country in upstate New York.

His first chance at a major role came when he and Pau Miró, a Spaniard, alternated as Aminta, replacing Larry Duvernoix in the company's revival of its lavish and well-received production of Delibes's *Sylvia*. Nate loved Delibes's score and was thrilled to be performing in the piece, even, during his first season with the company, as just another member of the corps. If nothing else, Nate had the opportunity to see and study Larry's Aminta at close range. Larry was superb in the role: elegant yet authoritative. Every time he performed the part, he handed out free lessons in technique and interpretation all over the place to any of his colleagues who, like Nate, chose to watch and learn.

Kitri Vesey was the ballerina most often cast in the title role, which was why Dane deigned to take on the subordinate role of the oafish and bullying hunter, Orion. It was essentially a character part but one which Dane played with typical flamboyance and relish. On stage with Larry, Kitri, and Dane, even as a member of the corps, Nate felt he was in fast company indeed.

In addition to actually performing in *Sylvia* that first season, Nate was one of several corps boys who were instructed to attend some of the rehearsals involving Vladimir Kuriyashin, the Russian-born dancer playing the supporting role of the god Eros. They were expected to observe him at work and learn the basics of the role in case he became ill or injured and needed to be replaced in a performance at short notice. The dancers' slang term for this procedure was "shadowing," because they basically remained on the perimeter of the rehearsal room and imitated what they saw the first cast dancer doing as best as they could. Nate, a quick learner, caught on readily enough, although it was unlikely that he would ever be called upon to perform Eros, and in fact he never was.

He was, however, tossed a crumb, in the form of "a bit."

The corps boys and girls were always excited to be given what was called "a bit," an individual piece of stage business, no matter how small, that set them apart from their colleagues. It was the sort of thing they could include in their resumes, to pad them out.

"I need a boy to do the bit at the end," the gruff, no-nonsense choreographer said during the rehearsals for *Sylvia*. "You, you, and you," he growled, indicating three of the corps boys. "Stand beside each other, pull up your shirts, and let me see which of you's got a decent six-pack. Okay, you'll do." The one who would "do" was Nate. The "bit at the end" was the Act 3 vision of the goddess Diana's mortal lover Endymion, glimpsed far upstage for all of ninety seconds just before the curtain fell at the conclusion of the ballet. Since this vision inspired Diana to pardon the two mortal lovers, Sylvia and Aminta, for their "crime" of having fallen in love, it was an important element in the staging of the final scene.

In order to impersonate Endymion, Nate had to abandon his fellow corps boys and slip unobtrusively off stage near the end of Act 3. Backstage, he had to strip out of his costume, including his dance belt, and put on a silver lamé posing strap that looked like something a model might have worn for a gay beefcake photographer in the 1950s. With a little cloak made from the same glitzy material draped over one shoulder and the crook of one arm, Nate then had to take up his position at the rear of the stage, where he would try not to feel like an idiot as he struck a suitably languid yet sensual pose to the accompaniment of an ethereal stretch of music, complete with a prominent harp part. The instant the vision ended, Nate would dash back into the wings, shed the cloak, and pull his original costume back on over the posing strap, since he wasn't about to join the other corps boys for their curtain call looking like some tacky Las Vegas casino show version of the Apollo Belvedere.

During the very brief dress—or, more accurately, in his case, *undress*—rehearsal for the bit, Nate dared to make a suggestion.

"According to the mythology, isn't Endymion supposed to be lying there, fast asleep, waiting for Diana to visit him every night, not standing up?"

The choreographer stared incredulously at him. "Who's staging this thing? Me or you? Jesus! The prima donnas they've got in *this* company! We need you to look pretty, baby, not give us a lecture on frigging mythology! Just stand there and flash your pecs and abs. Do you think you can do that? And try not to moon the audience!"

Nate meekly stood there and flashed his pecs and abs.

Matters were not helped when, a moment later, he heard one of the stagehands yell to another, "Tell 'em we need more light on the naked guy!"

At the last performance in that initial run, Nate hurried into the wings after doing his "bit" only to discover that the other corps boys had played a practical joke on him. They'd hidden his other costume. In a panic, Nate had finally wrapped his silver cloak around his waist, like a bath towel, to cover his bare butt. Thus attired, a red-faced Endymion, faking a smile while cursing under his breath, had joined in the curtain call, looking anything but languid or sensual. His smirking and giggling colleagues rehashed the incident among themselves and told anybody who would listen all about it for days afterward.

"I'm never going to do that lousy Endymion bit again," Nate told Larry.

Larry looked thoughtful. "You may not have to," he said, which turned out to be prophetic.

This season, Larry told the company's director, Lloyd Walker, that he really didn't want to do Aminta again so soon, and Larry possessed enough clout that Walker listened to him. *Sylvia*, Larry explained, was "Girls' Night Out," by which he meant that it was a ballet dominated by the female soloists and the corps girls and in which the men were of secondary importance. (The irreverent Dane put it more bluntly: according to him, the title of the ballet

should be not *Sylvia*, but *Dancing with the Dykes*.) Furthermore, Larry declared, the rather passive Aminta was not a role that particularly challenged him. Then Larry made a sly suggestion.

"Why don't you give the new kid a crack at it? You know, Nate?"

"Deventer?" Walker was dubious. "I don't know. He *is* just a kid, after all. And we just promoted him to soloist, what, all of five minutes ago?"

"And the whole point of making him a soloist is to give him solo parts, right? He'd be perfect for the role. He's got that whole wide-eyed innocent thing going for him, and that's what Aminta is all about."

"Yeah, which would be fine, as far as it goes," Walker agreed. "My only concern is, if we pair him up with a really strong, experienced ballerina, it might look like a cougar and her pretty little boy toy out there, not like a couple of equally matched young lovers."

"On the other hand, that kind of oddball chemistry just might work," Larry persisted. "Anyway, it's your call. If you do decide to give Nate the chance, I'd be willing to work with him, help teach him the part."

Which, as Larry had secretly counted on, clinched the matter. No director in his right mind was going to pass up the opportunity to have an experienced dancer like Larry shoulder some of the burden of teaching a novice soloist a new role.

Larry, with his customary generosity, didn't just steer Nate through the potential pitfalls and sticking places of the role as they worked on it together. He encouraged Nate to find his own interpretation instead of merely imitating what Larry had done in the part.

"I don't see Aminta as all *that* passive," Nate declared.

"Okay, if that's your gut feeling, go with it," Larry said. "Butch him up a little. He can use it. Hell, a guy can be elegant and aristocratic and a poetic vision and all that shit and *still* have a penis that gets stiff. Keep that in mind."

This blunt comment of Larry's turned out, in the long run, to be some of the best advice Nate had ever received. It was as though he'd suddenly been given permission to be *male* while he danced. Not male in a single, stereotypically macho way, but masculine in all sorts of subtle ways, which could and should be an integral part of what he was trying to accomplish on stage.

To his initial anxiety, one of the ballerinas he found himself partnering in *Sylvia* was none other than Kitri Vesey, who as a dancer was the epitome of forcefulness and individuality. Kitri, unlike Nate, literally had dance in her genes; both of her parents were dancers, and they had named their daughter after the high-spirited heroine of Minkus's *Don Quixote*. Kitri was a perfectionist and held other dancers to her high standards. It was common for tempers to flare in rehearsal whenever things went wrong and dancers got tired or frustrated. Kitri was quite capable of yelling at a male colleague or putting him in his place. "If you can't do it right, dickhead, don't do it at all!" was among her milder expressions of displeasure. She didn't hesitate to extend this tough treatment to her lover, Dane, who took it without resentment or complaint and who was usually able to charm and cajole Kitri out of her foulest moods.

"Pussy-whipped, that's what Dane is," Larry remarked to Nate after one such display of ballerina temperament. "But for God's sake, don't ever tell Cara you heard me say that. She'd call me a sexist pig and never let me hear the end of it."

Nate was intimidated by Kitri at first but managed to hide the fact behind a display of calm professionalism and passivity, in imitation of Dane. When Kitri told and showed Nate exactly how she wanted to be partnered, he was smart enough to submit without question, and he exerted himself to fulfill her expectations. Kitri was pleased.

"Oh my God, I can't believe it," she said, after a run-through of their Act 3 *pas de deux.* "A man who actually listens to you and does what you want. Where have they been hiding you all this time?"

"In the corps," Nate said, which was no more or less than the truth.

"Well, thank God you're not in the corps anymore. But listen, when I come off the *fouetté*, I need you to get in a little closer to me and hold me really firmly, here. Don't be shy, baby. Put your hands right against my hipbones and press in a little, like this. Okay?"

"Okay."

Their partnership turned out surprisingly well. In their actual performances together, Kitri's Sylvia became softer and more womanly in response to Nate's unusually confident Aminta.

Nate admired Kitri and enjoyed working with her. But he couldn't figure her out. Here was this beautiful, intelligent, vibrant woman nearing the peak of her career as a dancer. Why was she involved with a younger gay man who would never be faithful to her? (Nate knew that, technically, Dane was supposedly not gay but "bisexual." But Kitri was the only woman he seemed to show any real interest in. Nate had come to grips with his own same-sex orientation so recently that he couldn't understand why a guy would want to complicate his sex life any further if he could avoid it.)

He broached the subject with Larry and Cara during one of their

evenings together in the couple's apartment.

"I don't understand what Kitri sees in Dane," Nate admitted, naively.

"I can tell you in two words," Larry replied. "Big dick, multiple orgasms. Okay, that's four words, but you catch my drift."

"You are so crude, Larry," his wife said. "And you men have such an exaggerated notion of how important your precious little penises are to us women."

Larry grinned and said, "Well, I happen to think mine is pretty precious. And I seem to recall you telling me that Kitri told *you* that Dane was the best lover she's ever had."

"He's good in bed, she claims. The trouble is, he's incapable of being good in bed with only one other person."

"Some couples don't insist upon monogamy."

"Don't get any cute ideas, Larry," Cara warned. "But seriously, Nate, some women want the security of being with the man they're comfortable with. Maybe what the two of them have together isn't perfect, but somehow they've made it work for them, in a way it never could for a lot of other couples."

Larry agreed. "Kitri and Dane have always been close. They understand each other. They don't have any illusions about each other. They're friends, and that's the important thing in any relationship. I'm almost tempted to say that the whole sex thing may be of secondary importance to them."

"If I was in love with a guy, I don't know if I could share him with other guys," Nate admitted. "Not without being just a little jealous, anyway." *I'd be willing to make an exception if it was you, though, Larry*, Nate couldn't help thinking as he looked at his handsome straight friend. *I'd be willing to share you with Cara, if only that were possible! Maybe there could be advantages to this bisexual stuff, after all!*

Shortly thereafter, Kitri and Larry had to rehearse Glazunov's *The Seasons* together, and this time, during their break, Nate was the topic of discussion between the two of them.

"Sylvia worked out okay without me, didn't it?" Larry asked.

"It went fine. You're not as indispensable as I thought you were," Kitri teased.

"Who'd you like dancing with better, Pau or Nate?"

"Nate. Don't get me wrong, Pau was great. He always is. But there was that little extra bit of an edge in the performances with Nate. It's the same old story. I was beginning to get kind of complacent about the role, you know? Without realizing it. And then the kid came along and made me start *thinking* about what I was doing, all over again. I couldn't fall back on my old routine, anymore.

"For example, I'd always assumed that Sylvia was a virgin and that she and Aminta were waiting until after the wedding ceremony to get it on," Kitri went on. "Now I'm not so sure. Maybe she and Aminta have been doing it all along. And she feels ambivalent about it, guilty, maybe."

"That's what I like about what Nate's started to do with Aminta," Larry said. "It never occurred to me to play him as anything except a dumb male virgin who probably doesn't even know how to masturbate. For once, Aminta looked as though he wouldn't need to be *shown* how to do it!"

This led to a certain line of speculation on Kitri's part. "I wonder if, in real life, Nate would need to be shown how to do it, with a woman, I mean?"

Larry laughed. "You leave that pretty little boy alone. He's got enough on his hands just trying to fend off the advances of a bunch of horny guys."

"Guys like Dane?"

"I didn't mention any names, Kitri."

"You didn't have to. I live with the asshole, remember?"

Nate had a nice little success as Aminta and got some good reviews. More importantly, the company's administrators began to think of him as a reliable young dancer with great potential. In December, the company mounted The Nutcracker as traditional Christmastime fare. When a flu bug made the rounds and wreaked havoc on the scheduling. Nate found himself pressed into service, dancing the Nutcracker Prince with only two hours' notice. Luckily, he had done the role in no fewer than five different productions, amateur and professional, before he'd joined the company, so nothing could throw him. As illness continued to take its toll among his colleagues, he ended up doing eight Nutcrackers in ten days, including a Christmas Eve marathon during which he danced both the matinee and the evening performance on the same day. By the end of this grueling Yuletide experience, Nate was hearing Tchaikovsky's score in his sleep. One of his performances was also covered by the press. The reviewer described Nate as "cherubic," which turned out to be a mixed blessing; the other guys ribbed Nate mercilessly about it, and he thought he'd never live it down.

Nate didn't want to be a cherub. He wanted to be a fallen angel, like Dane, sexy and dangerous and irresistible to gay men. He went so far, one night at home, as to stand in front of the bathroom sink and practice looking sexy in the mirror. But the facial expressions he came up with suggested the aftermath of a painful visit to the dentist rather than pre- or post-coital bliss, and he gave up the experiment in despair.

He mentioned the problem to Larry.

"Stop worrying about it," Larry advised him. "In this business, you've got to work with what you have. Make the most of *that* instead of trying to be something you're not. There's nothing *wrong* with being so goddamned disgustingly wholesome-looking. It could be an advantage: when you *do* suddenly come across as sexy, it might take people by surprise." Larry laughed as a sudden thought struck him. "After all, it's preferable to the opposite, which would be some tough old male whore of a dancer trying to persuade the audience he's still a sweet young boy. We're all likely to have to deal with that, eventually."

CHAPTER 3 Ballet's Bad Boy

THE blunt truth was that Dane Stockton, although he was only a few years older than Nate, was precisely the kind of predatory "older man" Mrs. Deventer had warned her son about. She would not necessarily have approved of Nate's friendship with the dashing *danseur* had she known about it in its early stages.

It was inevitable that Dane should have become the butt of jokes, not all of them kind. He had risen quickly through the company's ranks, from corps boy to soloist to principal, and was now thought of in some quarters as the company's leading male dancer. He was undeniably one of its most reliable box office draws. Dane Stockton, in short, was a star. This season, he had achieved the ultimate accolade: he was, literally, the company's poster boy. The poster advertising the current season featured a photo of a bare-chested and sleekly muscled Dane caught in mid-flight, in seeming indifference to the law of gravity, with his arms extended upward, his black hair flying, and an expression of smoldering sensuality on his face. (Technically, he was performing the kind of leap called the temps de poisson, the "fish jump," in plain English.) Even people who had no interest in dance were familiar with the image; they could scarcely avoid being exposed to it. The poster was not only displayed outside the theater, it was reproduced in advertisements in newspapers and magazines, plastered all about town, and blown up on a billboard high above one busy intersection downtown. There, drivers and pedestrians had only to glance upward to see Dane Stockton, torso bared, legs and crotch sheathed in the thinnest and most revealing of tights, hovering above them, larger than life, like some virile young deity bestowing his benediction upon the urban dwellers as they went about their business below.

Fans could, of course, purchase copies of the poster from the company's gift shop. (One of the jokes making the rounds was that Dane had the bedroom he and Kitri shared wallpapered with them so he could admire multiple images of himself, even while he and Kitri were making love.) The poster achieved such local notoriety that it was parodied. A gay nightclub, sponsoring an event called *Dance Your Buns Off!*, found a reasonable Dane Stockton look-alike and reproduced the pose on its poster advertising the

evening. The nightclub's model, however, was photographed with his eyes crossed and his tongue sticking out of his mouth. *This* poster immediately became a collectors' item, especially among the company's gay male dancers, not all of whom showed Dane the deference an *étoile* like him might be thought to deserve.

Adding to Dane's fame was his undeniable offstage notoriety, a byproduct of his busy private life. His liaison with Kitri would have resulted in a certain amount of gossip, even if he were monogamous. But Dane was anything but monogamous. He was rumored to have recently had affairs with, among others, at least two celebrities from outside the world of dance: a male pop singer who was the idol of teenaged girls, and a gay porno actor who had his own equally loyal if quite different following of adult men. The jury was still out on the singer, who, if he *was* gay, was still in the closet. (Dane, whenever he was asked, insisted they were "just friends.") There wasn't any doubt about Dane's fling with the porno star, because neither man saw any need to conceal it. The actor's studio had even offered Dane a contract to appear with the actor in one scene of one video.

Dane, of course, turned the offer down. For starters, although the ballet company might, at its discretion, release him to dance with other companies as a guest star or to participate in other projects, the company's director, Lloyd Walker, was hardly going to allow one of his stars to suck cock and fuck another man up the ass in a porno DVD, no matter how widely it was known that the star in question regularly engaged in such activities in private.

Dane passed the sample contract around for his fellow dancers to peruse. It was, of course, a beginner's contract. Still, everyone was surprised—and disappointed—by how little money was involved.

"That's why, to make a living doing porn, you have to do it full time," one of the corps boys, Seth, commented. "That's why most of them have real jobs, and the porn is just a sideline. Or they hustle. That's where the real money is." It was well known that Dane's porno actor friend was also a highly-paid male escort with an international clientele.

"Yes," Dane agreed. "That's why I'd never do it, unless I hurt myself and couldn't dance. Then I might think about trying to make some money lying down, for a change. Oh well, it was nice of them to ask me."

The conversation, inevitably, turned to the porno actor.

"The guy's a sweetheart who just happens to work in the sex industry," Dane finally protested, as the talk grew increasingly raunchy. "When he's not working, he's not even much of a party boy. He's the stay-at-home type. Reads a lot. Works out at the gym, of course. Oh, and he plays the saxophone. Collects and repairs them, too."

Even Nate had been drawn into the discussion. "Saxophones?" he asked. "How interesting. I'd never have guessed."

"Yeah, and not just any saxophones. Most of them have to be this special old kind, made in France. I forget the name."

"Selmer Mark VI, maybe," Nate suggested. "They're sort of the Rolls-Royce of vintage saxophones; a lot of jazz players use them."

"That's right, Selmer Mark VI. Damn, you're smart, Nate. You know everything. Anyway, he can take any of these old saxophones he finds and buys and take it apart and clean and repair it and put it back together again, so it plays as good as new. You should see his collection, they're all on display in his house in San Francisco. He's even got a bass saxophone that's a hundred years old. That's enormous, the biggest thing I've ever seen. I couldn't believe he could actually blow it until he gave me a demonstration."

Dane suddenly realized that, for once, he'd said something sexually suggestive without intending to. He joined in the general laughter.

"Okay, enough about the saxophones. That's not the instrument we're interested in hearing about. Is his cock really as big as it looks in all those DVDs?" Seth demanded.

"They don't make it look like that with camera angles or special lenses," Dane replied.

Another of the corps boys, Timothy, was also well acquainted with the actor's videography. "In his videos he always goes both ways," he said breathlessly. "You know, top *and* bottom. Did he do that with *you*, Dane?"

But there were limits even to Dane's candor. "Like the politicians always say, I can neither affirm nor deny."

"I'll take that as a 'yes'," Timothy said. "Oh, you lucky bastard, you!"

Dane responded only with a disingenuous grin worthy of the Cheshire Cat.

The public couldn't get enough of Dane.

A men's magazine did a fashion shoot with Dane, in which he modeled various outfits, clowning for the camera in one shot, doing a quite convincing imitation of surly, sultry male model runway posturing in the others.

Dane's pop singer friend got him a gig, as one of a half-dozen buffbodied male dancers who backed up the singer in a music video, all six of them gyrating about in nothing but the tightest and most revealing of black underpants. (Afterward, Dane claimed to have had sex with two of his five fellow backup dancers, a respectable batting average. Of the three holdouts, one, he explained, was straight; another was in a monogamous gay relationship; and the third "obviously didn't know a good thing when it was offered him," as Dane so modestly put it.)

A famous gay photographer had Dane pose for him in the nude with his genitalia coyly concealed from the viewer in all of the published shots. (The photographer, who quickly became enamored of his handsome, hard-muscled, and extremely cooperative subject, took some more explicit photos of Dane "for his own private archives" and gave Dane copies, which Dane, of course, proudly showed to all of his friends.)

Dane did all this activity on the side, of course, with the company administration's approval and encouragement.

"Walker just keeps hiring you out, Dane," Larry teased his friend, "like the boss of some escort agency, pimping out his prize stud to the highest bidder."

(Those who did not know Larry might accuse him of being more than a little envious of the media's love affair with his colleague. In fact, Larry regularly received his own offers, many of which he turned down. "A smart dancer," he advised Nate, "does not drop his pants and expose his dick and ass to photographers. That kills the mystery. It's always better to hold something back, in reserve." Then Larry reconsidered, and grinned. "Well, not unless it's a really famous photographer and they offer you one hell of a lot of money. And free prints for you to put in your portfolio. Always hold out for the free prints, like Dane did.")

Dane, to his credit, took all of this hullabaloo with several grains of salt.

"It's just part of the publicity machine," he said dismissively. "It helps sell tickets. Next season, it'll be somebody else's turn. And not a moment too soon, as far as I'm concerned. Sometimes I wish they'd all leave me the hell alone so I could just dance."

And, after all, Dane *did* dance, superlatively well.

As he settled down into the day-by-day routine of the company and gradually got to know both men, Nate had ample opportunity to study and compare Larry and Dane's contrasting personalities and styles.

Larry and Dane were opposites, which didn't prevent them from being close friends. It wasn't just a question of sexual preference, although at first blush the straight, happily married, and monogamous husband and father, Larry, seemed to have little in common with the bisexual playboy, Dane. As dancers, too, the two men embodied opposite extremes.

Larry was an impeccable technician who made everything he did look effortless. On stage, his poise never faltered. He was a superb partner; ballerinas fought to have him partner them. He was also the sort of dancer for whom dance was not just a profession but a vocation. He spent much of his free time in the theater, arriving earlier than he needed to and staying later.

Dane, by contrast, might have been a factory worker who showed up on time, punched in, put in his shift, and punched out. While he was on duty, he never gave less than one hundred percent, but the moment he walked out of the theater, he put it out of his head and resumed his (admittedly rather complicated and demanding) private life.

Nate found it fascinating to observe the two men's differing temperaments. Even if he was rehearsing or performing an abstract ballet, Larry had to get into character, so to speak, and remain in character. If it was a serious piece, he would be sober; if it was lighthearted, he could be a bit silly and giddy. Afterward, he needed time to decompress, to shake off the mood of the piece. (This resulted in some extra stress for him on the rare occasions when he performed in both serious and light works on the same evening.)

Once, early in their acquaintance, the company had been rehearsing Prokofiev's *The Prodigal Son*, and Larry, who was dancing the title role, had seemed so preoccupied and moody during the breaks that Nate had overcome his shyness enough to go up to him and ask him if anything was wrong.

Larry had seemed surprised by the question at first. "Oh, no," he'd replied. Then, with a rueful smile, he'd added, "Thanks for asking, Nate, but listen, if I seem a little standoffish, don't take it personally, okay? It's just that I can't get into the mood for all these heavy emotions and stand around making small talk at the same time."

Dane, of course, could do precisely that. Nate had never seen a dancer who could turn it on and off at will the way Dane could, as easily as flipping a switch. Dane was perfectly capable of chattering away like a magpie during a rehearsal break, interrupting himself to resume work with flat-out intensity for forty or fifty minutes at a stretch, and then picking up the conversation exactly where it had left off the instant the next break was called. It was the same thing in performance. If Dane ever suffered from stage fright, he concealed it behind a show of near-indifference. A bored-looking young man warmed up at the *barre*, put on his costume and makeup, and killed time by loitering around backstage, reading, engaging those in the vicinity in vacuous conversations, or simply staring into space. Then he went on stage, where some demonic force seemed to take instant possession of him. Once the curtain came down and the curtain calls were over, the dancer who had just electrified his colleagues and his audience was once again the personification of sloth.

Dane was a master of energy conservation. Anyone who saw him when he was not actually rehearsing or performing would have wondered how this handsome but indolent creature could drag himself onto the stage, let alone dance. Dane had the gift of being able to relax completely, like a cat, and could often be seen lying limp on the floor during rehearsal breaks.

On at least one occasion, however, this trait got Dane into trouble. Nate was not in the theater on the now-legendary night when Dane was standing in the wings, ready to go on in Gluck's Don Juan. The libertine was one of his signature roles; Dane had almost single-handedly transformed the fairly obscure ballet into a crowd-pleaser. While he waited, Dane was reading a paperback book, a particularly lurid bestselling thriller. At his cue, he went on. He was out there on center stage, halfway through his opening sequence of moves, when he realized he was still holding the book in his hand. Nonchalantly, he mimed reading the book for a moment; then, at his earliest opportunity, he closed it, and with an elegant gesture he tossed it into the wings, where it landed on the floor with a thump. Most members of the audience assumed it was all part of the act. And perhaps it was not altogether inappropriate that Don Juan should be reading a book with a picture of a voluptuous, half-naked woman on its cover. However, Genevieve Montgomery, the company's stage manager, nearly had apoplexy. The next day, Genny (as everyone called her) issued a discreet memo advising the dancers to keep "nonessential personal items to a minimum" while they were waiting in the wings. The dancers dubbed this The Stockton Rule.

It occurred to Nate that these two starring roles rather neatly summed up the two men's personalities. Larry excelled as the wayward but ultimately suffering and penitent Prodigal Son. Dane might have been born to play Don Juan, the unapologetic sensualist who remained defiantly unrepentant even when threatened by the fires of Hell.

It was typical of Larry that he was amused by Dane's stardom rather than envious of it. When a dance magazine featured Dane on its cover and the interview with him inside began with the words "Gay icon Dane Stockton...," a gleeful Larry took immediate action. He had two sweatshirts silk-screened with custom lettering on their chests. The shirt he gave Dane had *GAY ICON* emblazoned on it in large block letters. The one Larry kept to wear himself also said *GAY ICON*, but the words *In Training* were printed underneath in smaller letters. Both men often wore these garments in rehearsals. Dane, of course, didn't hesitate to wear his on the street.

"It's a great conversation piece," he explained.

"Yeah," Larry laughed. "The kind of conversation that ends in a pickup."

Chapter 4 Sparring Partners

BECAUSE Larry and Dane were such good friends, Nate's relationship with Larry inevitably drew him into Dane's orbit. But Nate's friendship with Dane had developed much more slowly, because Nate was wary of Dane at first. To give him credit, there was nothing self-important about Dane, who bore his celebrity lightly and indeed treated it as a nuisance most of the time. Dane seemed indifferent toward his "glamour boy" reputation, and he was undeniably friendly. Maybe *too* friendly.

Nate had only been with the company for a few days when he encountered Dane in a hallway of the building. He'd already observed the notorious Dane Stockton from a distance, on more than one occasion; this time Dane, who seemed to be hurrying somewhere, stopped, turned on his heel as deftly as though he were executing a step in performance, and went up to Nate.

"Oh, hi! You're the new guy, aren't you?" Dane said.

"Yes."

"I'm Dane Stockton."

"I know. Everyone knows who you are."

"Do they?" Dane responded, almost artlessly. "You make it sound like I'm on some Most Wanted list."

"Sorry."

"Oh, don't be. And you are?"

"I'm Nate Deventer."

Nate shook the hand Dane offered him. Dane then proceeded to stand there and look Nate up and down in a way that would have been ideal for the "What Not to Do" portion of an employee training video about sexual harassment.

"Why, you're just as cute as a cuddly little kitten, aren't you?" Dane finally exclaimed. "I'd like to take you home with me and see if I could make you purr."

Nate had always had the tendency to blush readily all over, and he could feel himself blushing now.

"Look at you," Dane went on mercilessly. "You're turning pink. Hot pink."

Nate tried to think of something to say to extricate himself from the situation.

Dane was smiling at him in a way that managed to be both teasing and reassuring at once. "What's the matter, kitten? Can't you talk? Cat got your tongue?"

Nate forced himself to return Dane's smile. He was sure he had now progressed from hot pink to fiery red.

"Meow," he finally said.

Dane burst out laughing.

"You're all right, kid," he decided. "And you'll fit in around here, don't worry about it. Listen, if you need anything, just ask me. Or my buddy, Larry Duvernoix. We won't steer you wrong. Which is more than I can say for some of the other guys in this company. They don't have my...." Dane hesitated, trying to find the right words. "They don't all possess my well-known *integrity of character*," he finally said, facetiously.

He treated Nate to another generous helping of that seductive grin of his, then gave Nate a man-to-man slap on the upper arm. "See you around."

Nate quickly concluded that Dane hadn't singled him out for special treatment. Dane flirted with virtually everyone in the company and didn't discriminate in regards to gender, age, or degree of physical attractiveness. As a result, no one took him too seriously. He was the kind of guy who was usually described as "charming." There *were* those who were immune to his charm; Nate overheard one corps girl casually refer to Dane as "that asshole Stockton" who considered himself "God's gift to gays—and God knows they can have him."

Nate's path soon crossed Dane's again, and crossed it quite literally when they were among those rehearsing an abstract ballet set to Bach's Orchestral Suite No. 3. Nate came to love dancing in the piece because its bouncy, exuberant moves so well mirrored the music, but that first rehearsal was decidedly chaotic. The choreography for the third movement of the Suite, the Gavotte, required the dancers, soloists and corps members alike, to move rapidly back and forth across the stage in intricate intersecting lines, and as they all struggled to learn the steps and coordinate their moves, collisions were inevitable. Dane banged into Nate, muttered, "Sorry, my fault," and kept moving.

A few minutes later, they collided again. "Me again," Dane admitted breathlessly, because by now all the dancers were working up a sweat.

The third time they hit each other, Dane stopped dancing and grabbed Nate by the upper arm. "Okay, that time it was *your* fault, you little fucker," he growled. He grinned at Nate, to show him he wasn't really angry, then added, "If we're going to keep beating each other black and blue, maybe we should just put on the boxing gloves and get it over with."

After the rehearsal, Dane made a point of coming up to Nate.

"How's it going?" he asked.

"Fine," Nate said.

"You just moved here, didn't you? I mean, to take this job?"

"Yes."

"Is this the first time you've lived away from home?"

"More or less."

Dane nodded. "I thought so. Have you met anybody nice yet? I mean, outside the company. Somebody you'd like to date."

"Ah, not yet. I've been so busy, I really haven't had much time for a social life."

"Well, you can't work *all* the time. You have to have some sort of a life outside of here."

"Like you do?" Nate asked, rather boldly.

"Sure, like me. What have you heard about me, anyway?"

"That you're a player."

"A *player*!" Dane exclaimed, punctuating the word with a guffaw of laughter. "Who, me? Innocent little old me? That's a terrible fib, just plain slander. Hey, are you blushing again?"

"Probably. I can't help it."

"It's amazing, the way you turn all pink like that. Can you blush like that on cue? On stage?"

"I don't know. I never tried."

"It might be useful sometime, in a performance."

"I doubt that the audience would notice."

"Are you kidding? They'd notice. Trust me, the audience sees everything. Including what you don't want them to see, namely when you fuck up." "Do you ever fuck up?"

"All the time," Dane admitted. "You will, too. But don't worry. You'll learn to live with it."

Nate got a firsthand look at Dane in action one afternoon when he went into the men's locker room, which was so quiet that he assumed it was unoccupied. Dane and Beauregard Reynolds, one of the other corps boys, were there in their street clothes. Dane had Beau backed up against one of the rows of lockers, and the two men were kissing, lustfully, with open mouths, their arms around each other and their crotches grinding together. Beau had the palms of both hands pressed against Dane's denim-clad buttocks, which were so visibly hard-muscled that they gave new meaning to the expression "the glutes of death." Dane's ass looked quite capable of accidentally butting somebody to death.

Dane, looking over Beau's shoulder, saw Nate looking at them. Far from being embarrassed, Dane seemed delighted to have an audience. He smiled at Nate invitingly.

"Excuse me," Nate had muttered as he went outside again.

A moment later, Beau, looking sheepish and avoiding eye contact with Nate, left the locker room. After another moment, Dane came sauntering out, looking not at all sheepish. It was quite typical of Dane that, in complete contrast to Beau's evasiveness, he walked right up to Nate with an ingratiating smile on his face.

"Sorry about that," Dane said, in a tone of voice that made it clear he wasn't sorry at all. "We didn't mean to embarrass you."

"I'm not that easily embarrassed. Forget it."

"It's not like we were actually making out or anything."

"Oh?" If you weren't making out, Nate wanted to ask, then what were you doing?

"We were just having ourselves a little fun. You know, teasing each other."

"I see."

"I get the impression you don't approve."

"It's none of my business, but, well, I don't think Beau is very experienced. He might take you seriously."

"All right. I'll keep that in mind." Dane was still smiling at Nate. "What about you?"

"What about me?"

"Are you experienced?"

"Moderately," Nate boasted.

"And if you and I ever decided to have a little fun together, would you take me seriously?"

"Not for a minute."

Dane was good-humored enough to laugh in response to this retort. "Good for you."

Nate was prescient: Beau's fling with Dane lasted, on and off, for approximately six weeks, at the end of which Dane apparently gave Beau the standard *Why don't we just be friends?* speech. Beau sulked, but Dane continued to be friendly and solicitous toward him, and eventually Beau came around and, like so many others before him, resigned himself to his loss.

"This is why I'd never get involved with a guy like Dane," Nate told Larry. (He already felt comfortable enough with Larry to confide in him about almost anything.) "If I'm going to put myself through something like that, it's not going to be with a guy I'll still have to see at work every day after it's over."

"Beau could probably use a friend," Larry pointed out. "You know him better than I do. Why don't you ask him if he wants to talk about it?"

So Nate commiserated with Beau, doing his best to befriend and mentor Beau, the way Larry had befriended and mentored him. This had its downside: Beau regaled Nate with nostalgic tales of Dane's amatory prowess.

"He's very oral," Beau reported. "He likes to use his mouth all over your body. And he's a really great kisser. He got me so hot and bothered, so out of breath, just from kissing me that I thought I was going to start hyperventilating."

Nate couldn't decide whether his sudden mental image of Beau swooning away in Dane's arms was amusing or arousing.

"And man, can he ever fuck," Beau went on. "His dick is as thick around as *this*." Beau indicated the empty aluminum soft drink can on the table in front of him. Nate suspected he was exaggerating, although Beau seemed on the verge of hyperventilating right now, just from thinking about Dane's cock. "I screamed like a girl the first time he put that big thing in me. I didn't think I could take it, at first."

"But I bet you did," was Nate's somewhat cynical comment.

"Hell, yes. I let it stretch me wide open. And Dane never seems to get tired or go soft. He just pounds it in and out of you, fast or slow, any way you want, and he never stops. He's more interested in keeping you all hot and turned on and in making you come than he is in coming, himself. Sometimes I thought he was going to kill me with that big cock of his, but I didn't care. I'd just beg for it, I couldn't get enough. I really enjoyed being his bitch."

Nate didn't know quite how to respond to that. *I'm so glad for you!* seemed a bit trite. He doubted, too, that any greeting card company made a card that said *Congratulations on having been another man's bitch!* So he smiled politely but said nothing.

"You really ought to get Dane to do you sometime. I bet you'd really get off on it, Nate."

"No, thanks. I have no intention of becoming just another notch on Dane Stockton's bedpost."

The moment he said that, Nate regretted it. But Beau wasn't at all offended by being relegated to notch status.

"Well, it's your loss," was all that he said. "You don't know what you're missing."

In the course of a subsequent conversation, Beau proceeded to provide Nate with some "inside information," so to speak, on Dane and Kitri's domestic arrangements. Beau and Dane had gotten together for sex sometimes at Beau's apartment, sometimes at the apartment Dane shared with Kitri, where Dane and Kitri slept in the same bedroom and in the same bed. Beau had glimpsed this inner sanctum but hadn't been invited to try out the bed. When Dane brought a trick home with him, they always "did it" in a smaller guest bedroom down the hall. Dane and Kitri both referred to it, matter-offactly, as The Sex Den.

"When they have visitors from out of town and actually use The Sex Den as a guest room, Dane has to hide the sex toys," Beau reported gleefully. "Unless, of course, the visitor is a gay friend of Dane's." (The sex toys, according to what Beau had already told Nate, included dildos, ball harnesses, handcuffs, a dog collar, and a riding crop.)

Nate couldn't decide whether he found these revelations fascinating or repugnant. "Are you telling me that you and Dane have had sex at his place while Kitri was home?"

"Sure, a couple of times. She was right down the hall the whole time we were doing it."

"Weren't you embarrassed, Beau?"

"Why? Why should I be embarrassed, if neither of them was?"

"Yes, but wasn't it kind of awkward?"

"No. Kitri's a very sophisticated lady. And it's not as though Dane and I were running around the place bare-assed naked. We would always put our clothes back on before we left The Sex Den."

"Oh, well, that makes all the difference in the world," Nate said, not without a touch of sarcasm. "They don't cover such things in the etiquette books."

These intimate conversations had far-reaching effects. Beau and Nate became buddies. And when Beau's current roommate, a waiter/model/actor, moved out and Beau needed a new roommate, Nate agreed to take a look at the apartment they'd shared. It was nothing fancy, but it had the decisive advantage of being much closer to the theater than Nate's present cramped living quarters, a tiny studio apartment. Nate gave his notice to that landlord and moved in with Beau.

Many people assumed that two male dancers living together had to be lovers, but in Nate and Beau's case, this was far from the truth. They had separate bedrooms. Beau was rather more promiscuous by nature than Nate. After his fling with Dane, Beau seemed determined to make up for his prior lack of experience by tricking with a steady stream of men. Nate was no prude. He was simply less sexually aggressive and rarely made the first move when he was attracted to another man. As a result, Nate's sex partners tended to be guys who were intrigued enough by him to overlook his apparent diffidence and make the extra effort required to seduce him.

Beau was just that sort of a young gay man. He and Nate thought nothing of being around each other, within the privacy of the apartment, in various degrees of undress, up to and including complete nudity. And Nate was by no means immune to his roommate's considerable charms, which included a hot, toned body, a handsome face, and the kind of ingratiating manner that was hard to resist. Beau hailed from Virginia, and while Nate wasn't prepared to claim that men who had been born and bred below the Mason-Dixon Line were necessarily freer sexually than their northern counterparts, Beau was undeniably the epitome of laidback Southern charm.

One night, they came home together after the evening's performance, both feeling more "wired" than usual. Nate undressed in his bedroom but soon went to the kitchen, wearing nothing but his boxer shorts, in search of a glass of orange juice.

He was standing in front of the kitchen counter, sipping his juice and thinking about nothing in particular, when Beau wandered in from the living room, nude except for a pair of sweatpants, which, since he hadn't bothered to pull taut the drawstring at the waist, were in danger of sliding off his slim hips and exposing his genitalia. "That was a pretty intense performance tonight, wasn't it, roomie?" Beau asked. He and Nate had already gotten into the habit of addressing each other familiarly as "roomie."

"Yes," Nate agreed. "I still haven't come down."

"Me, either. I'll probably jerk off to help myself relax before I try to go to sleep."

"Yeah, that doesn't sound like such a bad idea." Living with Beau had already given Nate a considerably more casual attitude about discussing sex.

Beau stood behind Nate and placed the flat of one hand against Nate's stomach. Giving Nate's abs a gentle hint of a caress, he exerted just enough pressure to pull Nate's backside firmly against his groin. Nate realized, without having to glance down to look, that about the only thing now holding up Beau's sagging sweatpants was his sturdy erection. Nate didn't pull away. Beau's warm palm felt good on his bare skin. His stiffened dick also felt good, pressing so urgently against Nate's buttocks.

"Hey, do you want to play around a little before we go to sleep?" Beau asked, in the same tone of voice and with the same emotion with which he might have asked, *Hey, do you want to split this pint of ice cream with me*?

"Sure," Nate said. Even as he uttered the monosyllable, Nate was taken aback by the fact that he hadn't even had to think about it.

Well, why not? Nate knew perfectly well that a lot of the male dancers fooled around with each other, in pairs, in trios, and indeed in higher numerical combinations. He was horny. Beau was horny. They were buddies. They were both gay. Neither of them was accountable to anyone. What was holding them back?

Nate was pleasantly surprised by how lacking in awkwardness their initial physical encounter turned out to be. They tumbled into bed together in Nate's room, selecting it simply because it happened to be a few steps closer to the kitchen. Beau had stepped out of his sweatpants, Nate quickly shed his boxers, and they rolled about on top of the bed in a clinch, kissing while their hands explored one another's naked bodies.

Beau had learned a few tricks from Dane during their short time together. As though determined to prove that he could be every bit as "very oral" as the legendary Dane Stockton, Beau licked Nate's squirming body from head to toe, as though the beads of salty sweat already dotting Nate's rosy flesh were highly intoxicating on his tongue.

The two boys restlessly grasped and stroked each other's hard cocks. Beau attacked Nate's ass and balls with his tongue before he finally got around to sucking Nate's cock, swooping down on it and plunging his mouth all the way down around it with such reckless abandon that the descent was punctuated by a muffled retching sound from deep down in Beau's throat. Beau ignored the considerable discomfort he must have been experiencing, however, as he proceeded to give his roommate one of the hottest, wettest blow jobs Nate had ever found himself on the receiving end of.

"Fuck, Beau!" Nate gasped. "Oh, fuck! You really know how to suck! But come on, man! Give *me* a chance. I want to suck yours, too!"

Grunting by way of reply but not taking his mouth off Nate's cock for a second, Beau twisted his limber body around until they were in a sixty-nine position, then mutely pushed his prick toward Nate's face. Nate fought to suppress his own gag reflex as he greedily fed the stiff meat into his mouth and came dangerously close to swallowing it down his throat.

They sucked one another for long, breathless minutes on end, until Nate suddenly felt Beau's hand groping blindly for his own hand, which was resting against Beau's buttock at the time. Beau silently urged Nate to slide his hand into the gap between Beau's ass cheeks and finger his asshole. Nate pushed the tip of his middle finger inside the puckered aperture, which instantly tightened up in response to the invasion. Beau grunted louder and more obscenely, encouraging Nate to finger-fuck him.

At last, though, Beau pulled his slavering lips away from Nate's fiercely pulsing cockhead.

"I can't stand it anymore," Beau gasped. "I just gotta get fucked! You're gonna have to fuck me, man!"

Nate loved to get fucked and as a result usually found himself on the bottom, but he was too aroused by now to care *what* he and Beau did as long as it eventually resulted in relief. He reluctantly stopped his own cocksucking and reached out awkwardly to open the top drawer of his nightstand and grope for the tube of water-based lubricant and the box of condoms he kept stashed away there.

A few moments later, Beau was on his hands and knees on the bed and Nate was kneeling behind him on the mattress, driving his latex-sheathed cock deep into Beau's ass. Beau didn't merely wait there passively and accept the penetration. His anus seemed to suck Nate's fuck tool into its depths, and grip it possessively.

"Oh, nail me, roomie!" Beau urged. "Nail me! That's right, right there, oh yeah, that's the spot! You hit it, now fuck it! Fuck it hard!"

But Nate was already past the point of needing any instructions or encouragement. He let Beau have it, hot and hard, his athletic young body pounding away with an energy that might have made his thrusts agonizingly painful, indeed intolerable, for some gay men. But Beau loved it. He really *did* scream like a girl, Nate realized, as he writhed under his fucker's relentless onslaught, his whole upper torso and upper body vibrating from the repeated impact, his hands clawing at the sheets.

"Fuck me," Beau choked, so turned on that he was barely capable of coherent speech. "Oh, *fuck* me with that big, hard cock! *Hurt* me with it, make it hurt! Make me *feel* it, deep in my ass!"

"Feel this, roomie!" Nate taunted as he sped up his strokes.

"Oh God! Ohhh shit! You fucker! You dirty Yankee fucker, you!"

Nate hammered away at Beau until he could feel himself getting close to coming. Then, to buy himself a little more time, Nate yanked his cock roughly out of Beau's ass, making him yelp. He seized Beau, turned him over onto his back, and lifted Beau's legs up over his shoulders. Then he leaned in hard against Beau's upturned butt and shoved the full length of his desperately agitated prick back up his ass.

Beau's powerful calf muscles tightened against either side of Nate's neck, almost strangling him, and his feet flexed wildly in the air as Nate fucked him. Frantically, Beau reached for the tube of lubricant, squeezed a glob into his right palm, and used it to jerk himself off with his fist pumping so rapidly on his cockshaft that the veins and tendons in his forearm stood out in high relief under the sweaty skin.

He stared up at Nate with lust-widened eyes.

"Yeah," he panted. "Yeah, fucker! Oh yeah!"

They came simultaneously, Beau spraying his jism helplessly up into the air between their bodies so that it rained back down onto his chest and belly, a few stray drops hitting Nate. Even as he was splashed by his buddy's come, Nate could feel his own semen unloading from his cock to swell the tip of the condom trapped snugly around his throbbing shaft. Emitting hoarse cries of satisfaction, he slumped on top of Beau, whose arms closed around him. They kissed some more, open-mouthed, tongues probing, saliva mingling.

Nate had rarely felt so totally fucked out before in his life. Lying there on top of Beau, he almost fell asleep; but eventually his roommate stirred under him, and Nate slowly rolled off him.

"That was fun." Beau gave Nate a light kiss on the cheek and a light slap on the ass and went to his own room. "Sleep tight, roomie. See you in the morning." If Nate's performance had paled in any way in comparison to the heroic lovemaking of Dane Stockton, Beau was too much of a Southern gentleman to say so. And he paid Nate the compliment of coming back for more. The two roommates became fuck buddies, getting together for sex once or twice each week. Sometimes they even slept together afterward. And on several occasions, they slept together without first having sex.

The first time this happened, Nate woke up in the middle of the night, realizing that Beau had just slid into bed next to him.

"What's up, roomie?" Nate muttered sleepily, not bothering to lift his head from the pillow.

"I was feeling kind of lonely," Beau confessed. "I guess I'm kind of homesick. You don't mind, do you, Nate?"

"No, I don't mind. Come on. Snuggle up." Nate pulled Beau close to him underneath the covers and put an arm around him in—for once—a chaste embrace. With his other hand, Nate stroked Beau's curly hair lightly. Beau quickly fell asleep.

Lying there in the dark, listening to Beau's slow, steady respiration, Nate felt an odd sense of contentment and pleasure as he, too, drifted off to sleep. Perhaps Larry Duvernoix was not the only member of the company who was a born mentor of other guys.

CHAPTER 5 Preaching to the Choir

NATE was introspective by nature and a bit of an intellectual. This alone was enough to set him apart from most of his fellow dancers. The younger a dancer was when he or she embarked on a professional career, the more likely it was for the dancer's formal education to have been interrupted, or indeed to be put indefinitely on hold. Most of the dancers in the company had not attended college; many of them had not even completed high school or gotten a GED. It was somewhat ironic that these young men and women, thrust into the foreground of their profession at such early ages, were not necessarily worldly or sophisticated when it came to areas outside dance.

Here Nate's background was an advantage. His parents were firm believers in self-education. Nate had always been that apparent contradiction: a bookish athlete. Without being exactly shy, he did not develop friendships easily. He and Beau had become close, which was not surprising. What *was* surprising, perhaps, was how both Larry and Dane, with their different personalities, virtually adopted Nate as a sort of kid brother. A kid brother whose older sibling, in Dane's case, entertained all sorts of libidinous and incestuous fantasies about him, but a kid brother in need of mentoring and protection nonetheless.

Mr. and Mrs. Deventer stayed in close contact with their precocious son by e-mail and by phone.

"Are you being a good boy, Nate?" Mr. Deventer inquired at the start of one such long-distance conversation.

"Of course, Dad. I don't have any free time to be bad."

"Are you making any friends? Besides that guy you're always telling us about, Larry?"

"Sure. I hang out with Dane Stockton sometimes."

"Dane Stockton? Isn't he that one who's always taking off his clothes in front of the camera?"

So Dane's media notoriety had traveled even to a college town in

upstate New York, which was perhaps not surprising.

"Dane is a bit of a character," Nate admitted by way of considerable understatement. "But he's all right. He can be a lot of fun."

"You're not letting him be a bad influence on you, are you?"

"Dad, if you want to know if Dane and I are sleeping together, you can come right out and ask me, you know. But we're not. As a matter of fact, Dane has come up with this nickname for me. He calls me 'Choirboy' because he thinks I'm such a hopeless, complete innocent."

"Okay." Mr. Deventer sounded decidedly embarrassed by the course the conversation was taking.

"Do you want to know who I am sleeping with, Dad?"

"Ah, only if you feel comfortable talking about it, Nate."

"No one, Dad. *No one.*" (Nate conveniently overlooked his occasional intimacies with Beau, which he did not consider really "sleeping together.") "For one thing, I'm usually too tired at the end of the day, especially after a performance, to even want to *think* about it. And for another, most of the gay men here are so superficial, or so sleazy, or both. In that respect, the big, wicked city is turning out to be a considerable disappointment. I'm afraid the name Choirboy suits me perfectly."

"I'll put your mother on," a slightly embarrassed Mr. Deventer said.

When Mrs. Deventer got on the phone, she matter-of-factly said, "Your father tells me you haven't found a boyfriend yet."

"Mom," Nate protested.

"I can't imagine why not. A smart, good-looking, talented boy like you. You have to have some sort of a social life. It's not healthy not to. You know, the next time you come home for a visit, you can bring a friend with you. We'd love to have him."

"Maybe I'll invite Beau sometime. He's a country boy from Virginia, after all. He ought to feel right at home."

"And what about this Dane Stockton we keep hearing about? I saw his picture in the newspaper."

"Oh? What newspaper, Mom?"

"All right, it was one of those tabloids, down at the supermarket in the checkout line. But he certainly is a handsome young man."

"Trust me, Mom, our town is not ready for the likes of Dane. If I brought him up there, even for just a weekend, he'd probably wreak such havoc that we'd all end up being run out of town."

"I'm sure you exaggerate, Nate. I suspect that, down underneath, he's a very nice boy. But is it true that two of the ballerinas actually fought over him, I mean physically, slapping each other's faces and pulling each other's hair out?"

Nate hadn't heard *that* one. He made a mental note to himself to monitor the tabloids.

"Take my word for it, Mom. If two dancers ever came to blows over Dane, they'd probably both be guys. And all three of them would probably end up in bed together afterward."

Another unlikely friendship gradually developed between Nate and one of his fellow soloists, Josh.

Joshua Pearsal was an atypical dancer, to say the least. Dane sometimes called him L'il Abner or The Hillbilly, although in this case the joke was really on Dane. Josh hailed from Arkansas, all right, but his family was wealthy and prominent.

Another of Dane's nicknames for Josh was The Holy Roller, which was closer to the mark. Josh, who was the same age as Nate, was a self-proclaimed virgin saving himself for marriage, and he was also a born-again Christian of the most fundamental sort. He saw it as his duty to proselytize at every opportunity.

Early in their acquaintance, Nate had let fly with an innocent (or so he thought) "Damn!" during a difficult moment in rehearsal, and Josh had picked up on it right away.

"I wish you wouldn't curse so much, Nate," he told Nate when the dancers took a break. "It doesn't sound nice coming from an educated man like you."

"Sorry," Nate responded.

Josh then presented him with a pamphlet titled *Daily Encounters with the Divine*.

"You read this, Nate," Josh said earnestly. "You will find it to be manna for your soul."

Since Nate was in fact among the least sewer-mouthed members of the company (and the girls tended to be worse than the boys), Josh obviously had his missionary work cut out for him.

Nate had never met anyone who thought or talked quite like Josh. When some of the guys were talking about how they'd gone to a certain gay bar the previous night, Josh recognized the establishment's name. "Isn't that place a notorious hotbed of sodomites?" he asked.

"It sure was last night," one of the guys, a corps boy named Seth, retorted.

"And if you ever want to see a hot bed, Josh, you just come on over to my apartment sometime," another barhopper, Timothy, said with a leer.

Josh wasn't flustered. "I know you would never do anything that you'd be ashamed to tell your mama and your papa about."

That shut the other two guys up, Nate noticed, at least for a moment. They soon got bored by the conversation and wandered off.

Josh then turned to Nate.

"Where would you rather be when the Rapture comes, Nate?" he asked. "In a gay bar, lusting after other men, or in a church, praising God?"

"Uh, are those the only two alternatives, Josh?"

"Of course not. God will choose His Own, no matter where they happen to be."

"Josh, are you telling me.... Do you really believe, I mean literally, that we could all be dancing on stage some night, and some of us are going to suddenly levitate up to Heaven, and the rest of us will be left behind?"

"Yes."

Nate risked a joke. "Imagine if that happened right at the end of *Don Juan*. Talk about your surprise endings!"

"I would hate for you to be one of the ones left behind, Nate. I would miss you."

Which, it occurred to Nate in retrospect, was surely one of the nicest things anyone had ever said to him.

Josh's genuine sweetness of disposition prevented most people from being mean to him. An exception was Dane. Nate suspected that Dane, as a schoolboy, must have been the class bully. Nate happened to be present in the locker room when Dane retrieved a copy of *Daily Encounters with the Divine* from the trash (Josh had a seemingly endless supply of the brochures ready at hand to distribute). Dane used a marking pen to amend the title to *Daily Encounters with the Divinely Well Endowed*. He did additional obscene editing to selected portions of the text inside the pamphlet. He wanted to tape the doctored pamphlet to Josh's locker door, but Larry stopped him.

"A joke's a joke, Dane," Larry said firmly, "but sometimes you go too far. You can show that to the other guys and have your little laugh, but I don't want Josh to see it and be offended."

"Aw, Larry," Dane whined. "You never let me have any fun."

"I mean it, Dane. Don't make me get rough with you."

"Oh, I'd like that," the irrepressible Dane replied. "I'd like you to tie me down and give me a good spanking, Larry, and that would be just for starters. Talk about an encounter with the divine!" And Dane, of course, made a point of catching Nate's eye and smirking at him as he said that.

But Dane backed down. Nate found this interesting. Dane might be the alpha male of the company, so to speak, but he demured to Larry. The soft-spoken Larry knew how to handle him.

On another occasion during a rehearsal break, Dane started badmouthing various members of the company, to their faces, at least. For all his faults, Dane was no back-biter. You always knew exactly where you stood with him.

"God, you're dumb," he told one of his colleagues with whom he'd just had a disagreement concerning some political issue of the moment. "But at least you're not as dumb as Josh." Who was on the far side of the room, out of earshot at the moment. "Josh is the dumbest dancer I've ever met, male or female—and that's saying a lot."

"Look who's talking," Larry retorted.

"I don't think it's very nice of you to talk about Josh behind his back like that," Nate dared to say to Dane. "And I'm sure you're exaggerating."

"Oh, you think so?"

Nate immediately regretted defending Josh to Dane. Not that Dane resented him for what he'd said; quite the opposite. Dane's eyes suddenly brightened with mischief. Nate had presented him with a challenge, and Dane liked nothing better.

"I'll prove it," Dane said.

"How?" Larry asked.

"I'll call him over here and ask him a question. A simple question. And we'll see if he can answer it. Only none of you can coach him or give him any hints."

"All right."

"Hey, Josh!" Dane called. "Come on over here for a minute."

Josh joined them with the smile of the guileless on his face.

"Listen, Josh, we were talking about that ballet we did last season," Dane began. "You know, the one set to Beethoven's *The Creatures of Prometheus*?"

Josh evidently didn't remember. "Ah, which one was that, Dane?"

"You know. It was a one-act ballet, about an hour long. Started out with an overture, with the curtain down. Then there was a big thunderstorm, right after the beginning? And then, later on, Pau and Cara played this man and woman whom Larry sort of brought to life, like Adam and Eve? And they had to be taught everything from scratch, how to move and how to dance and so on?"

"Oh, yeah."

"And near the end there was this pretty tune that went like this?" Dane hummed it; it was the melody Beethoven reused in his *Eroica* Symphony.

"Yeah, now I remember."

"I bet you can't tell us who wrote the music, can you, Josh?"

Josh rose to the bait like a sleek brook trout going after a fishing fly. "Sure I can."

"Okay, what was the composer's name?"

"Ah," Josh stalled for time.

"Come on, Josh. He's a very famous composer."

"Wait! I do know! It was some guy named Prometheus!"

Nate had to bite his lip to keep himself from joining in the general laughter at Josh's expense.

"No, Josh," Dane said. "It wasn't Prometheus. I just mentioned the composer's name a minute ago." Josh looked at him blankly. "I'll give you a hint," Dane offered, in violation of his own dictum. "The composer's name begins with the letter B."

Josh continued to look blank.

"I'll give you another hint," Dane said. "He's famous for having written the Fifth Symphony. The one that starts out like this?" And Dane hummed, loudly and emphatically, the orchestral motif in question. "Wrote the Fifth Symphony, Josh," Dane prompted. "He was deaf. His name begins with B?"

Josh thought hard for a moment. "Was it Balanchine?"

As the fresh laughter died down, Larry intervened. "No, Josh. It was Beethoven. Ludwig van Beethoven."

"Oh. Really? I guess that's right." Josh sounded doubtful. "I should've known better. Balanchine wrote *The Firebird* and *Petroushka*, didn't he?"

"Close enough, Josh," Larry quipped.

"I don't know much about music," Josh admitted.

"No kidding," Dane said.

Nate waited until Josh had left their group before he let Dane have it:

A Dance of Love and Jealousy

"Dane, you should be ashamed of yourself."

"It's funny you should say that, Nate. People have been telling me that my whole life, and I keep waiting for the shame to kick in, but somehow it never does."

"You ought to pick on someone your own size."

"Oh yeah? And who might that be? You, maybe?"

"Maybe," Nate dared to suggest.

Dane, somewhat to Nate's surprise, smiled enigmatically at him but said nothing.

Chapter 6 A Non-Date Man Date

NATE and Dane had developed a curious sort of non-intimate intimacy, if that made any sense. But then, all of Nate's feelings toward Dane seemed contradictory to a lesser or greater extent.

Looking back, Nate remembered the first time he and Dane had had any prolonged one-on-one contact outside of work. Nate was still in the corps at the time.

On that evening, Nate found himself getting ready to go on stage in Bartók's *The Wooden Prince*. This production, once again, tinkered with the original scenario of the ballet, in this case downplaying the folksy elements while making the action somewhat more sinister. Nate and his fellow corps boys were attired in dark, body-hugging costumes so that they could impersonate what the company's program notes described as "various denizens of the forest."

A few minutes before their call, Dane came strolling into the corps boys' dressing room in full costume and makeup but otherwise looking as casual as though he were about to walk down to the corner bar for a beer. Dane was dancing the ballet's male lead, the Prince (the human one, not the wooden one of the ballet's title), and Nate had to admit that he looked every inch a balletomane's fantasy of a *danseur noble*. Dane was wearing a pale sage green raw silk shirt, vaguely medieval in style, over midnight blue tights, and over the shirt was a cobalt blue velvet tunic embroidered in bold patterns of emerald green and orange and studded here and there with pale blue zircons that flashed like tiny stars whenever they caught the light. Annoyingly, Dane was one of those guys who looked more masculine, not less, when he was sporting the right kind of stage makeup, and tonight he was especially handsome.

"Hi, guys," Dane said breezily, addressing the room in general. "Where's Deventer hiding himself? Oh, there you are. Hey there, Nate."

"Hey there, yourself."

Dane had no sooner approached Nate than the call came, so the two of them had to continue their conversation as the corps boys, on their way toward the stage, unceremoniously jostled past them. Some glanced curiously at Dane and Nate; most didn't bother. There was nothing unusual about Dane chatting up a corps boy, or indeed putting the make on one.

"What are you doing after the show?" Dane asked.

"Nothing."

"I'm going to go have something to eat. I'm already starving, so I can just imagine what I'm going to feel like when we're done. Come have dinner with me."

"Aren't you having dinner with Kitri?"

"She made other plans. She's going out with some of her girl friends. I hate to eat alone. So how about it?"

By now the stampede had thinned out considerably. Nate followed the stragglers out of the dressing room with Dane in tow. Nate kept his voice down so that only Dane could hear. "I don't date married men."

"I'm not married," Dane pointed out.

"You're in a relationship."

"Well, yeah. But this isn't a date. I'm not asking you out on a *date*. I just want to know if you'd like to come along and watch me stuff my face. It would give us a chance to talk, which might be nice."

"Why me? I mean, why are you asking me instead of one of the other guys?"

"Why not?"

"No offense, but...."

"What?"

"If we leave together, everybody will think we're going off somewhere to have sex."

Dane seemed genuinely shocked. "Am I as bad as all that?"

"I don't know exactly how bad you really are, but your reputation sure is bad."

"Shit. Oh, come on. You must be exaggerating. And anyway, what do you care what other people think? Jesus. All I wanted was somebody to talk to. You're making a much bigger deal out of this than it really is."

"I'm sorry."

By now all of the dancers were assembled in the wings, waiting for their various cues.

Dane seemed to be expecting Nate to say something further. When he

didn't, Dane pressed the issue. "So is that a yes or a no?"

"I'm starting to feel hungry, too, so I guess it's a yes."

"Good." Dane grinned. "I promise to respect your virtue. I'll meet you at the stage door afterward, okay? No, better yet, meet me by the drinking fountain down the hall from you guys' dressing room, you know, the one right next to the men's room? I'll let you in on a secret. I'll show you how I sneak out of here when I don't want to be bothered by fans and autograph hounds."

The performance went well, and Nate once again had a chance to observe close up how Dane could transform himself from a rather ordinaryacting, laidback young man into, in this case, a poetic vision of vulnerability and romantic longing.

With his stint as a Dancing Denizen done, Nate showered and changed quickly, but Dane proved to be even quicker. The poetic vision, now in torn faded jeans topped by a plain gray sweater with at least one hole worn in it and with his hair still tousled from being hastily towel-dried, was loitering by the drinking fountain. Dane, like Nate, had a bag containing his gear slung over one shoulder.

"That was fast," Dane commented.

"I didn't want to keep you waiting."

"I'm glad you're not the kind of fussy queen who takes a lot of time getting himself ready."

"That's a rather backhanded compliment, Dane. It could almost be interpreted as you're saying I'm a slob."

"You're hardly a slob. You're *casual*, that's all. I like to be casual, too, when I'm finally done with the damn performance. You have no idea how that heavy velvet number makes me sweat. Come on. I promised to show you my personal escape route."

Dane led Nate farther down the hall to the stairwell at the end. They descended to the ground floor, where Dane negotiated a miniature labyrinth of corridors and finally took Nate into a storage area dimly lit by ceiling light bulbs.

"Come on," Dane urged when Nate hesitated.

Nate followed Dane through a doorway and into another storage room, smaller, even more poorly lit, and decidedly grungier than the first.

"Where the hell are we?" Nate asked.

"My dungeon. This is where I take pretty blond boys so I can have my way with them and nobody can hear them yell for help. Oh, for Christ's sake, Nate, you should see the look on your face. I *am* kidding, you know. Imagine having sex in this depressing place. Ugh! Anyway, here's the door."

Dane indicated the kind of steel door equipped not only with a crash bar on the inside that unlocked it but with a sign warning *Emergency Exit Only— Alarm Will Sound*.

"Won't the alarm go off?" Nate asked.

"Nope. It's been broken for months, and no one has noticed. Except me." Dane pushed the crash bar and opened the door. Sure enough, no alarm sounded. A moment later, Nate found himself standing beside Dane in the narrow alley on one side of the theater. No one else was around.

"See? No muss, no fuss. Now hurry up, I'm starved."

A short, brisk walk brought them to one of the theater district's innumerable small restaurants. They sat at a table for two with a *Reserved* sign on it.

"You have a reservation, Dane? I'm impressed."

"Oh, they know me here, I come in a lot. I phoned them the minute I got off stage to confirm I was on my way. Now eat up." Dane pushed one of the two menus on the table toward Nate. "I'm going to have a salad, the steak, and a baked potato."

"Good God. How many calories is that?"

"I don't know. Who cares? Don't tell me you count calories?"

"Sure I do."

"Why? I mean, look at you. You're in shape."

"Yeah, and I intend to stay that way."

"Do I look as though I'm out of shape?"

"No." Nate had to admit, grudgingly, that Dane was in fantastic shape.

"I don't eat like this all the time. This is to replace the calories I already burned off tonight. Come on, you look starved. Have whatever you want. I'm paying, you know."

"No, you're not."

"Of course I am. I invited you. And I remember what it's like to be living away from home for the first time on a tight budget. I don't expect you to put out in exchange for a meal, if that's what you're worried about. You can leave the tip, if you want."

"All right, Mr. Big Spender. Then I'll have what you're having."

"Good. Thank God that's settled." Dane looked around for the waitress. "Argumentative little motherfucker, aren't you? Everything with you has to be a battle."

"Sorry."

"Oh, don't apologize. I get a kick out of it."

They ordered. As the waitress walked away from their table, Dane leaned back in his chair, looking very much at his ease, and scrutinized his dinner companion, making no attempt to conceal the fact that he was doing so. Nate couldn't help thinking that this was kind of ironic, because some of their fellow late-night diners seated at nearby tables were not-so-furtively observing the two of them at the same time. Nate wasn't particularly vain, but he and Dane were probably the two best-looking men in the room. It occurred to him that the people who were admiring them no doubt took it for granted that they were lovers. Nate wasn't sure whether he found such an assumption embarrassing or flattering. There was a third alternative. He felt a momentary twinge of depression, because, after all, he and Dane *weren't* lovers. Nate didn't have a lover.

"I understand Larry and Cara have sort of adopted you," Dane finally said.

"I like them. And baby Allegra is adorable."

"I'm not the babysitter type, myself."

"No, you're not. I imagine you're not the domestic type in general."

"It may interest you to know that I've asked Kitri to marry me, more than once. She has a sort of standing invitation, but she's always turned me down."

"Does that surprise you?"

"Ooh, that's cold. Even coming from you."

"Oh, come off it, Dane. You have no reason to be offended. Can you sit there and honestly tell me that you consider yourself to be good husband material?"

"I'm easy to get along with."

"I'm sure you are, as long as nobody makes any real demands on you. What I don't understand—but no, it's none of my business."

"No, go ahead, say what you were going to say."

"I don't understand how you can live with a classy lady like Kitri and screw around behind her back every chance you get, like some horny tomcat prowling in an alley."

"Ouch. But I don't do anything behind her back. I tell her everything. She doesn't mind."

"Now *that* I really don't understand. How a woman could *not* mind something like that? Doesn't she have any pride?"

"What's pride got to do with it? You really do have the most incredibly old-fashioned ideas, Nate. Tell me something. You're not still some kind of a virgin, like Josh, are you?"

"Of course not."

"You're blushing!"

"I blush kind of easily, remember? It's because I'm so fair-skinned, that's all."

"It's very sexy. I love the way that color creeps up and takes over and makes you look as though you're burning hot, all of a sudden."

"Don't change the subject. Getting back to this astonishingly modern and open-minded relationship you and Kitri have, is she faithful to you?"

"There you go again. 'Faithful.' What an outmoded concept. If she ever wanted to have sex with another guy, she'd be perfectly free to do so. Right now, she chooses not to. I keep her pretty satisfied," Dane boasted. "She goes out with other men. I mean she socializes with them, all the time. I'm not jealous. Why should I be? What, because two people are living together, they can't each have other friends?"

"But you don't just have friends, Dane. You have tricks."

"I enjoy sex. I like to be around guys. In bed and out. It's as simple as that. I like sitting here with you, talking to you. I'm even enjoying that smug, morally superior attitude of yours and your obvious disapproval of me. I get a kick out of you. When Kitri asks me what I did tonight, I'll tell her. I'll tell her all about you. I may even ask her for her advice about how I can start breaking down those defenses of yours and start to get you to like me."

"You make it all sound so very cozy."

"You know, that's exactly the right word for it. Cozy. It *is* cozy. Don't knock it."

Their food arrived. They ate greedily. Dane, somewhat to Nate's horror, loaded his salad with creamy bleu cheese dressing and loaded his baked potato with butter and sour cream. Nate, feeling comparatively virtuous, restricted himself to a small amount of oil and vinegar by way of salad dressing and a dollop of the sour cream. There was a lapse in their conversation for a few minutes.

"What about you," Dane finally mumbled around a mouthful of steak.

"What about me?"

"Haven't you ever wanted to be in a relationship?"

"Sure."

"Mr. Right hasn't come along yet, huh?"

"No."

"You'd insist on being 'faithful' to each other, of course."

"Not necessarily. I just can't see us both whoring around indiscriminately."

"Oh, yeah. Like alley cats. A very flattering comparison, that was, by the way."

"Sorry. You think I'm a pompous ass and a prude, and judgmental, don't you?"

"I think you're an idealist. And the idealists of this world tend to get hurt. Disillusioned, you know?"

"Dane Stockton. Did you just say something serious? Something that wasn't a joke, or a wisecrack, or an insult, or flippant?"

"I'm not just a pretty face and a hot body, you know. I have depth, too. It may be a *shallow* depth, easily plumbed, but it's still depth."

"That's more like it. For a moment there, I didn't recognize you."

They'd cleaned their plates. "Let's have dessert," Dane urged.

"Jesus, Dane. What are you trying to do, fatten me up for the kill?"

"There isn't an ounce of fat on you. You're practically anorexic. No, I take that back. That cute little bubble butt of yours looks extremely pinchable. When am I going to get a chance to pinch it?"

"Stop flirting with me, Dane," Nate warned. "I thought we'd agreed this wasn't a date. You'd better go ahead and indulge yourself in dessert, I guess, because it's the *only* treat you're going to get to indulge in this evening, at least while you're in my company."

Dane was a bad influence. He talked Nate into ordering rice pudding after Nate admitted to liking it, although Nate told the waitress *not* to top it with whipped cream. Dane, for his part, ordered chocolate cheesecake, not only topped with whipped cream but with chocolate syrup drizzled over it, and he wolfed it down as though nary a bite of steak had passed his lips.

"Perfect," Dane declared as he leaned back and used his napkin to wipe a smear of chocolate from his mouth. "Now that my energy level has been replenished, I'm ready for anything. I'd even be up to working off some of these calories before I go home and go to bed, if my very attractive dinner companion were so inclined, which I'm afraid he's not." "Your dinner companion is already feeling guilty enough after this little food orgy," Nate retorted. "Which is why he's going home and going straight to bed to sleep it off, *alone*."

"Too bad. Well, consider it an open-ended invitation. You never know when you might get *really* hungry, some night," Dane said with a particularly suggestive smile. He reached for the check and pulled out his wallet, despite Nate's protests. "I told you, this is on me," Dane said mock-sternly. "No arguments from you, for a change! You can leave the tip, like I said before."

"All right. Thank you, Dane."

"My pleasure. I've enjoyed this. You don't have to rush off, do you? Let's sit here and talk some more, just for a minute."

"Okay. What should we talk about?"

"Let's talk about you. How are you and Southern Fried Chicken getting along?"

"If you're referring to me and Beau, that's a *terrible* nickname for him, and we're getting along just fine, thank you."

"Are you two an item?"

"No. Just roomies."

"Beau is quite a little hottie."

"Oh? It's funny you should say that. It didn't seem to keep you from getting tired of him in an awful hurry."

"It wasn't a question of getting tired of him. We had fun. We had the hots for each other, and we got it out of our systems. I wouldn't mind hooking up with him again. And I'm sure Beau wouldn't mind getting it on with me again sometime."

"You're awfully sure of yourself, aren't you?"

"Did I sound arrogant when I said that? I'm sorry. I didn't mean to."

"You have such a casual attitude toward relationships, Dane."

"Is that such a bad thing? It's when people insist on getting all noncasual with each other that things start to get heavy and awkward. Maybe that's your problem. You've got this idea in your head that you have to be in love with a guy to have sex with him. Well, that's bullshit. There's nothing wrong with admitting that sucking a dick and taking it up the ass can just plain feel good."

"Lots of things feel good, which doesn't mean it's necessarily a good idea to indulge in them indiscriminately."

"Most gay men are quite discriminating. They have definite

preferences. Some kinds of guys turn them on more than others, and some kinds of guys don't turn them on at all. Come on, Nate, be honest. Don't I turn you on at all?"

"Okay, you're hot. You're a fucking Adonis. Is that what you want to hear? Now are you happy? I still think it would be better if we decided to just be friends."

"We could be friends-really good friends-and still fuck."

"No, thanks."

Dane was studying him again and had a rather smug smile on his face. "From the way you attacked that steak, I can tell you're not a vegetarian. I've got a big piece of meat, too, you know. You can have it. Any time you want. It'll fill you up good."

"Don't be disgusting, Dane."

"A good fuck might change your attitude about all sorts of things, baby."

"I repeat, thanks, but no thanks. I'll pass."

"Jesus, what are you, some kind of a choirboy?"

"Just because I don't spend every minute of my waking hours thinking about other men's dicks!"

"All right, don't get all bent out of shape. I was just teasing you."

"You spend an awful lot of time teasing people, Dane, and I wonder what would happen if you ever teased the wrong guy."

"Ooh, is that what they call a veiled threat, Deventer? Now I know why I like you so much, Nate. You come across as this sweet little innocent fresh off the farm on the outside, but underneath you're as tough as nails, aren't you? You're just a ballsy little closet butch, aren't you?"

"I don't know about me. I *do* know about you. You're impossible. And for your information, I did not grow up on a farm. In a small college town in the middle of farm country, yes, but not *on* a farm."

"I was speaking, ah, you know, metaphysically?"

"I think you mean *metaphorically*, Mr. Wise Guy. And to think that you make fun of poor Josh!"

"Josh is kind of hot, actually. And some of these religious fanatics make the best fucks, once you get them started. I think the whole guilt thing is an extra turn-on for them. I had an affair with this young priest once, and all he could talk about was how we were going to go to hell. I used to have to shove my dick in his mouth just to shut him up." Nate shook his head. "You are beyond impossible."

"Now that I think of it, that's a good name for you. 'Choirboy.' I think I'll call you Choirboy from now on."

"I'm having trouble coming up with a name for you, Dane, because none of the ones I can think up do full justice to your personality. Quite apart from the fact that they're all obscene."

Dane laughed. "Come on. Let's go."

When they were outside on the sidewalk, walking along shoulder to shoulder, Nate felt an odd pleasure at being in Dane's company. He suddenly felt a reluctance to end their evening together. But it *was* getting late by Nate's standards, especially on a performance night.

"That was a good meal," Dane remarked. When Nate said nothing in response, he added, "All talked out?"

"I'm a little tired, that's all."

Dane nodded. "At least it's only a short walk from here to Beau's place." Dane stopped walking. "I can catch the bus right here. Sometimes I splurge on a cab, but that's usually when I'm with somebody and we're in a hurry. And you've made it clear this isn't going to turn into that sort of a night."

"Dane, I'm sorry, but—"

"Oh, for God's sake, Choirboy! I'm still teasing you. Don't you know by now when I'm kidding and when I'm being serious?"

"You haven't ever been serious long enough, at least not when I've been around you, for me to be able to tell when you're being serious."

"Well, seriously, this has been nice. And seriously, I'd like to do it again, sometime soon. And just as seriously, I wish you and I could go out on a real date together sometime. It wouldn't necessarily have to end up with the two of us in bed, if that's what you're worried about. We could just go out together and have ourselves some innocent little fun. So maybe you'll give that possibility some *serious* thought."

"Maybe I will." Nate adopted a lighthearted tone. "Maybe I'll surprise you sometime."

"Nate, you do like me, just a little, don't you?"

The question took Nate by surprise, as did the sudden hint of genuine anxiety in Dane's voice. He remembered that Dane was, after all, only three or four years older than he was. Being a principal dancer in a ballet company, receiving a lot of media attention, and leading an active and varied sex life; all that didn't necessarily make one an adult. For all his outward self-confidence and sophistication, Dane was in some ways still naïve and immature. He was like the typical high school kid who desperately longed to be "popular," however he chose to define that.

"I like you just fine, Dane. If I didn't, I wouldn't put up with you for a minute."

"You don't think I'm a jerk?"

"I think you're a total jerk, but that's part of your appeal. It's kind of endearing."

"Do I get a goodnight kiss?"

"I thought we agreed this wasn't a date."

"Aw, come on. I've seen you kiss guys. I've even seen you kiss Larry."

"Sure, but those were just guy pecks. You're likely to misinterpret it and want to turn it into a real kiss."

"God, you are a hardass."

"If you're going to stand there and pout—"

"Yeah?"

"Then we may as well get it over with."

Dane leaned over and gave Nate a guy peck on the cheek. His lips were moist.

"Okay, Choirboy. You can go home with your cherry intact. Save it for some other lucky guy."

"Stockton, it's hard to believe that anybody could look and act as butch as you and still be such a total bitch."

"It's a gift, Choirboy," was Dane's parting shot as the two men separated, Nate walking away, Dane remaining behind to wait for his bus. "Good night."

And so "Choirboy" became Dane's nickname for Nate. It could've been worse, Nate realized. Remembering his and Dane's very first encounter, for instance, Nate was grateful it wasn't something like "Kitten." Or "Bubble Butt!"

WHEN Dane got home that night, Kitri was already there, sitting up in the bed they shared. She was leafing through a lingerie catalogue.

Kitri had a weakness for lingerie. She spent so much time during her working days wearing functional rehearsal clothes that she could be forgiven for wanting to change into pretty things at bedtime. Tonight, she was wearing a spaghetti-strap slip in mocha-colored silk with chocolate-colored lace on the bodice and the hem.

She and Dane began a running conversation while Dane undressed and used the bathroom, getting ready for bed.

"How'd it go tonight?" she asked Dane.

"It could have been worse." This was Dane's way of saying that the performance in general and his contribution to it had gone reasonably well, in his opinion. He could be surprisingly modest and self-critical, and he was quite capable of making an assessment along the lines of, "I was so bad they should have got their money back."

Kitri nodded, knowing that she was unlikely to get any further details out of him.

"How was your get-together with the girls?" Dane asked.

"Fun. We had a few drinks and a few laughs. We all complained about the shortcomings of the men in our lives."

"Oh? You must have dominated the conversation, then?"

"On the contrary. The others all said they envied me."

Dane's nighttime bathroom routine was concluded, and he came back into the bedroom, unself-consciously nude. His penis, the subject of so much discussion and the object of so many fantasies, swung between his hardmuscled thighs in a relaxed state of post-urination flaccidity. Without being aware that she was doing so, Kitri glanced over the top edge of the catalogue page, letting her eyes focus for a moment on her lover's endowment. The tip of some men's penises could be quite peculiarly shaped. Dane's plump pink cockhead, however, was nicely symmetrical: it resembled the ready-to-open bloom of certain varieties of tulips.

Dane slid into bed beside Kitri and glanced over to see what she was reading.

"What's so engrossing? Oh, wow!" Dane exclaimed when he got a good look at the catalogue. "Talk about a titty show. I bet every single one of those models has had breast implants."

"Amazing. Even *your* eyes go straight to the boobs. I'm not looking at their breasts. I'm looking at the outfits. I do like these, and I'd love to buy one of them, but I can't decide which of the two I like better: this apricot-colored one or this really intense sort of rose pink."

"Get them both."

"One would be an extravagance, Dane. Two would feel absolutely decadent. I'd feel so guilty."

"Then let me buy them for you. That way you wouldn't have to feel guilty at all. Just sexy."

"But you're always buying things for me," Kitri protested not very convincingly.

"That's why I have a girlfriend. So I can spoil her and make her look pretty. Fold down the corner of the page to mark it for me. Now put the wish book aside, and let's take a look at that little ensemble you happen to be modeling at the moment." Dane ran one fingertip down from the side of Kitri's neck to her shoulder, in the process hooking one strap of her slip and lowering it around her upper arm. His fingertip lingered on her firm flesh.

"Are you wearing panties under that?" he asked.

"Why don't you find out for yourself?"

Dane's other hand disappeared under the bedclothes draped over Kitri's waist. He caressed her bare thigh, then found the bottom hem of her slip and pushed it upward. His searching fingers encountered a pair of lace-trimmed silk panties. His fingers began to explore the texture of the lace.

"Found anything you like?" Kitri asked.

"I always do."

"You seem to be a bit excitable tonight. What did you do after the performance? You must have stopped *somewhere* on your way home."

"I went to have something to eat, and I invited that young kid Deventer along."

"Not the pretty little blond boy?"

"Yes."

"Isn't he a little young for you? I don't really mean young, I mean, you know, inexperienced?"

"He is a sweet kid, but I bet he could be highly fuckable."

"You're home kind of early. Does that mean you didn't get past first base with him?"

"I'm not sure I even got off the bench," Dane admitted with a rueful laugh.

"Turned you down, did he?"

"Flat. Even though I bought him dinner and schmoozed him with my fatal charm and everything. You don't have to look so smug about it, Kitri."

"Sorry. I'm not surprised, though."

"Really? What makes you say that?"

"Oh, I don't know. Some of these young kids, they look at you in a way that's kind of scared but hopeful. Nate—that's his name, isn't it? Nate looks at you in a way that's not exactly scared. In fact I don't know just how to describe it."

"More like 'contemptuous', is that it?"

"Darling, I wouldn't go that far."

"He's no pushover, I'll give him that."

Kitri sighed contentedly as Dane continued to touch her intimately with both hands. "Never mind, darling. I'm enough of a pushover for both of us."

As far as she was concerned, Dane was already off the bench and up to bat. He stopped stroking Kitri's shoulder and arm, but only long enough to reach over, slide his hand under the bodice of the slip, and cup his palm around one small but firm breast, letting his thumb brush in rapid strokes across the taut nipple.

Kitri's entire body quivered in response. She had always been an exceptionally responsive sex partner, and Dane knew how to get the best out of her. She let out her breath in a moan of mingled delight and invitation that had his whole body clenching in betrayal of his own sexual need, his muscles bunching up the way they did during a strenuous dance routine.

He touched her moist lips with one fingertip, which she licked with a wanton suggestiveness.

Dane's other hand was still buried under the covers, but now it was deftly pulling Kitri's panties down over her legs.

A rush of cool air accompanied the loss of her panties, but heat immediately followed when Dane replaced his hard, hot hand at the juncture of her thighs. A deep pulsing rhythm took hold of her, starting where his hand pressed so intimately against her and traveling to every nerve ending her body possessed. She arched into his waiting palm.

"Rub my pussy, Dane," she urged him. "Rub my pussy and make it purr."

"Damn, but you feel good." His lust-hoarsened voice made her heart pound in reaction. "I love touching your clit. It's like a warm little pearl tucked in there between your cunt lips."

She forced her eyes open and looked at him. His own eyelids were shut tight, his jaw clenched; he was concentrating on what he was doing to her, his own need as intense as hers, even though it was momentarily sidelined. He opened his eyes and smiled at her.

She abandoned herself to him. She rested her head back against the pillow and relaxed her thighs, opening herself to him even wider, to show him how much she wanted it. As he settled into a sensual rhythm, waves of pleasure rippled through her, first building, then easing up, but easing up only to rush through her again, more insistent than before. The sounds of animalistic lust emerging from deep in her throat ought to have embarrassed her, but they didn't.

Those lewd moans coming from deep within her excited him, as did the sight and the sensation of her legs relaxing, opening wide, inviting him to continue his explorations. Dane sucked in a ragged breath. He was already damn close to ejaculating, even though neither of them had so much as touched his now stiffened and grossly distended cock. He forced himself to ignore the throbbing in his loins, to concentrate not on satisfying and coming himself but on making Kitri come.

He picked up the pace with one hand on her breast, easing his middle finger inside her smooth, wet vaginal heat with the other. She gasped more loudly. Lowering his head, he drew the tip of her nipple into his mouth and tugged gently on it with his teeth. That was all it took.

The spasm hit her hard, and she arched off the bed. The moist clenching and unclenching around his probing finger hit him even harder. Her strong cunt muscles nipped at his finger as though they wanted to bite it off and draw it deep inside her. His own body was getting close to the breaking point, and she hadn't even touched him. He had closed his eyes again, but now he opened them in time to watch her face contort with the pleasure he was giving her.

"Dane, oh Dane!" His name burst from her lips unexpectedly, and the sound triggered an intense reaction in him, one so strong that he could no longer remain in control.

He reached out blindly, groping for the condom he always kept ready under the pillow on his side of the bed, and his hand touched Kitri's. She was feeling for the foil packet containing the rubber, too.

"Put it on quick," she whispered, still breathless from her orgasm, as her fingers closed around the packet and pushed it into his palm.

He ripped the packet open, extracted the condom, and deftly rolled it down over his aching cock. But when he reached out toward the nightstand for the tube of lubricant they kept in the top drawer, Kitri's hand shot out and closed around his wrist, restraining him. "I'm so wet," she panted. "No lube. Just put it in me. Oh, put it in me quick!"

He straddled her until their bodies aligned, grinding himself hard against her, searching for the ultimate satisfaction he'd deliberately denied them both up until now. Her thighs locked around his waist, and he angled his latex-sheathed cock downward, inserting it into the wet slit between her pulsing vaginal lips.

"Yes, oh yes," she gasped, tossing her head from side to side on the mattress so that her long hair flung itself across the sheets. Her body welcomed him, drawing his manhood deep inside her.

Dane began to stroke. He was loving her hard, the way she liked it. Her vaginal muscles were so well developed that she could bring most men off at will simply by clenching them too forcefully. She fought to maintain some semblance of control over her body in order to prolong this agonizing pleasure.

Dane, like many men, gay or straight, wasn't above indulging in some far-ranging fantasies, even when he was with a partner and both of them were in the throes of mutual passion. Right now, Dane was thinking about a certain young blond boy he'd just had dinner with.

Nate! he thought savagely. Stuck-up little bitch! Goddamn prick teaser! I'm gonna fuck you like this! I'm gonna make you beg for it! Oh yeah, baby, hot tight little ass, squirming around my big dick, grabbing hold of me like this, getting me hot, so fucking hot, making me want to come! Oh hell, I'm getting close! Already so fucking close! I don't know if I can hold out much longer!

And he couldn't. His unexpected climax took him by surprise.

"Don't stop," Kitri pleaded. "Oh God, don't stop!"

Still ejaculating inside the condom that sheathed his dick, Dane continued to thrust back and forth inside her.

Gonna make you come, too, pretty boy, he thought, still picturing Nate's face and body in his mind. Gonna make you shoot your load all over the place, all over both of us. Hot damn! I wonder if Nate's come tastes as sweet as he looks?

Imagining what it would feel and taste like to have Nate's semen flooding the interior of his mouth, Dane shuddered his way through his orgasm. Kitri let out a stifled little squeal as she came again helplessly.

Minutes later, Dane eased himself off her.

"That was—" she gasped.

"Don't say it," he muttered. He'd lost control, which was unusual for him.

"Incredible."

"I came too fast." *Goddamn Choirboy*, Dane decided. It was all Nate's fault for getting him so overexcited!

"I don't recall watching the clock." Kitri turned on her side and gazed up at him with passion-dazed eyes.

Dane took her in his arms and kissed her. A bisexual guy couldn't ask for a more beautiful, sensuous, or understanding mistress. At times like these, Dane was fully aware that he was enjoying the best of both worlds.

WHEN Nate got home that same night, he found Beau lounging in front of the TV in the living room.

"You're coming home kind of late, for you," Beau remarked. "Where'd you disappear to after the show?"

Nate decided in favor of honesty. "I went to have a bite to eat. With Dane, as a matter of fact."

"Oh, my God. You and Dane? Really?"

"Yes. You don't mind, do you?"

"Of course not. But you two didn't actually *do* it, did you? You weren't gone *that* long. Dane usually likes to take his time."

"It wasn't anything like that, Beau. It wasn't a date, let alone a sex date. It was just having something to eat and talking. Getting to know each other a little better."

"Dane is a sweetheart, isn't he?"

"I don't know about that. He's kind of full of himself."

"Yeah, but he's got a lot to be full of himself about."

"Maybe. Maybe not." Nate realized that he was undecided as far as that particular issue was concerned.

"Are you going to see him again?"

"I'm not sure I 'saw' him tonight, not in the way you mean, Beau. It was just what straight guys call a man date. Just two guys getting together to stuff their faces and yap. It didn't mean anything."

"Dane really likes you. I can tell."

"Don't be ridiculous. By the way, your name came up in the course of the conversation. Dane told me he wouldn't mind getting it on with you again sometime. Just for sex, of course," Nate warned. "He didn't say *that*, not in so many words, but reading between the lines... well, you know better than to expect too much from Dane."

But Beau already looked more animated. "Maybe I should give him a call sometime soon. Listen, if I do, and he wants to come over here some night, would you like to join in? It could be a really wild threesome."

Nate grimaced. "Leave me out of it. As far as I'm concerned, you can have your precious Dane Stockton all to yourself."

Chapter 7 His Own Private Icon

BOREDOM was an occupational hazard for the dancers, who welcomed any break in their day-to-day routine of class and rehearsal. Such a diversion was provided when the famous dancer Romuald Ghent was finally due to arrive in town to take up his new position as the company's resident choreographer. Rumors had circulated for some time to the effect that Ghent had been offered this job; he was not, however, the only potential candidate, which had heightened the suspense.

Most of the dancers in the company had seen Ghent on stage when he'd performed in various cities in the United States. Kitri had an advantage in that she'd actually danced with him when she'd made a guest appearance in London. Nate had been so intrigued by this that he'd overcome his usual reticence and pumped Kitri for details.

"But what's he like as a *person*?" he asked after their discussion of Ghent as a dancer, which took place in a favorite refuge for the dancers: a coffee shop just across the street from the theater.

"Well, he's a perfect gentleman, which is more than I can say about some of you guys, including a certain jerk named Stockton." (Dane, who was sitting three feet away reading a newspaper, didn't even look up, let alone respond to Kitri's comment.) "Ghent's got that dry, self-deprecating English sense of humor," she added. "And that *very* dry, understated English way of handing out praise. I remember after we'd done *Coppélia*, he just sort of looked at me in a way that made me think something was wrong, but then he said, 'For such a tiny slip of a girl, you do have a great flaming technique and stage presence, don't you'?"

Nate made the mistake of not trying to conceal his excitement about Ghent's imminent arrival from anyone, including Beau.

"All right, Nate," Beau said to his roommate the next day after class. "How much is it worth to you, for me to keep your secret?"

"Huh? What are you talking about? What secret?"

"That you have that photo of Romuald Ghent hanging on the wall in

your bedroom."

"Oh, shit!"

"And that you probably take it down at night and sleep with it under your pillow. I bet you even *kiss* it before you go to sleep."

"Go stuff yourself."

"Of course, if you ever invite any of the other guys in the company into your bedroom, then everybody will find out. Unless you do it with the lights out."

"You'd better keep your mouth shut, Beau, if you ever want to do it with *me* ever again. With the lights on *or* off."

"Okay," a smirking Beau conceded. "Your dirty little secret is safe with me. Until you do something to really piss me off. By the way, I believe it's your turn to clean the bathroom this weekend. The toilet could use a good scrubbing, and so could the shower stall."

"Blackmailer. All right. I'll do it."

"And while you're at it—"

"Don't push your luck, roomie."

Nate was indeed guilty of admiring Romuald Ghent. Ghent had a website, which contained the usual: his biography, a schedule of recent and upcoming activities, a diary-like blog in which he kept his fans up to date on what he was doing, and a gallery of photos of the dancer, both in performance and off stage. There was also a shop link where items could be purchased, notably limited edition prints of selected photos of Ghent, "individually numbered and personally signed by" him. Other star dancers and choreographers had similar websites. Ghent's was modest and unassuming by contrast to some of the others Nate had seen. And one difference was that a percentage of the profits on the merchandise sold on Ghent's went to The Royal Ballet Benevolent Fund, certainly a worthwhile cause.

Nate liked one of the limited edition prints in particular: it showed Ghent working at the *barre* in a rehearsal room and was a close-up focusing on his upper body. He was wearing navy blue tights and a raspberry-colored T-shirt and was disheveled, with an intent look of concentration on his face. The photo, though a striking image, didn't look posed. Nate liked to think that it was a "happy accident," snapped during a prolonged photo session.

Nate splurged, ordering the print in the largest of the three sizes in which it was offered, sixteen by twenty inches. When it arrived, he splurged again, taking it to a shop to be professionally matted and framed under glass. From the moment he brought the framed print home and hung it on the wall opposite his bed, though, he considered it money well spent. It provided him with inspiration, and you couldn't put a price on that. Ghent had signed his name in a bold scrawl across the lower right-hand corner of the print, with a little flourish on the tail of the final letter T that backtracked and underlined the entire signature with a slash.

Since Beau's idea of interior decoration was to leave his porno DVDs lying on the coffee table in the living room so visitors could admire the cover photos of naked and erect buff-bodied Adonises on the DVD cases, it was no wonder he teased his roommate.

The subject of Ghent became a topic for general discussion in the theater when the company finally got around to announcing formally what had been common knowledge in the rumor mill for some time: that Romuald Ghent had accepted the company's offer to become its new resident choreographer and would be arriving from across the Atlantic soon—in mid-season—to take up his duties.

"There's always some last-minute glitch in the contract negotiations for these things, which no doubt explains the delay," Larry pointed out as he and a group of his fellow dancers perused the press release.

"We're actually going to meet Romuald Ghent, and work with him," Nate said. "Isn't that great? Aren't you guys excited? I can hardly wait."

Dane shrugged. "Whatever."

"Dane believes the dance world would be better off without choreographers," Larry joked.

"As in, they should all be lined up against the nearest wall and shot," Dane specified.

As far as Romuald Ghent was concerned, this was blasphemy to Nate's ears. Ghent was one of his heroes and had been, in fact, ever since Nate had taken his first dancing lessons.

Ghent was an Englishman, now in his late thirties—an age at which the physical demands of the classical ballet repertory inevitably began to take their toll on a dancer's body. A savvy dancer like Ghent could extend his career by easing into other repertory or by exploring other options. Ghent was doing both. He was gradually abandoning his classical roles in favor of less demanding modern dance works, and he was increasingly in demand as a choreographer, an interest he had pursued throughout his career. In his native Britain, he was even doing some acting in musicals and straight plays and on television.

Ghent was openly and unapologetically gay, another factor contributing to Nate's admiration for him. His private life had never been much of an issue

until recently. The British press and public, in particular, could have a peculiar love/hate relationship with celebrities, up to and including members of the royal family. Some critics accused Ghent in his capacity as choreographer of "bringing a homoerotic agenda" to ballet, whatever that meant. ("*That* horse ran out of the unlocked stall about fifty years ago, long before Ghent or any of us was even born," Larry had quipped to Nate once when the topic had come up in conversation.) One critic dismissed Ghent in print as "England's leading purveyor of gay Eurotrash."

Matters were complicated by Ghent's on-again, off-again relationship with Henri Keller, a Swiss-born dancer who was one of Europe's biggest stars. The two men were frequent collaborators, often performing together and usually now in works choreographed by Ghent. It was also well known that they were lovers, although their different professional schedules inevitably made their relationship a sporadic, long-distance one. Keller, who was a couple of years younger than Ghent, was facing the same problem: how to deal with the depredations of age and the reality that his years as a classical ballet *danseur* were numbered. Keller, however, was not handling it as well. He had some well-publicized drug problems—cocaine and painkillers were reportedly his drugs of choice—had been arrested on drug possession charges, and had recently spent some time in rehab as part of a plea bargain deal.

The press, already grazing on this juicy fodder, went into a true feeding frenzy when Keller was involved in a sex-and-drugs scandal along with a macho Brazilian soccer star. The details varied according to which account one read in the tabloids or saw on cable television news programs, but there was no question that Keller, the soccer player, and three other men, one of whom was an admitted male prostitute, were partying in the soccer player's hotel suite the night before his team was to play in the World Cup when the party got out of hand and the police and an ambulance were called. One of the celebrants had OD'd and was taken to the hospital; he recovered. The other four men ended up in jail overnight, although the soccer star got bailed out in time to play—badly. His team lost, and hysterical, disappointed fans blamed not only him but Keller as well. The dancer even received death threats.

The soccer star's career survived this setback, although his romance with a sultry, internationally famous (female) fashion model did not—and that, of course, was good for another round of sensationalized media coverage. The male prostitute, who suddenly revealed a real talent for shameless self-promotion, made the rounds of the talk shows. *His* career was given a boost.

Keller kept on dancing, his every offstage move now monitored by the paparazzi. He once again made headlines when he lost his temper, snatched a camera out of an aggressive photographer's hands, and hurled it to the sidewalk, damaging it. Keller then kicked the guy in the shin. The delighted photographer sued, leading to speculation in the tabloids about whether a dancer's leg, not unlike a boxer's fist, could be considered a potentially lethal weapon in a court of law. (To the media's disappointment, the case was settled out of court.)

Romuald Ghent, who could be quite forthcoming when it came to talking to the press about himself or about dance-related issues in general, consistently refused to comment on any of the controversies swirling about Henri Keller.

"I wonder if Ghent's a cokehead, like his boyfriend Keller," Dane speculated.

Nate made the mistake of coming to his idol's defense. "I'm sure he's not."

Dane was roused from his lethargy by the indignation in Nate's voice. "Oh you are, are you?" he responded. "I suppose you've had a chance to test his urine? I hear that Keller's into just about everything, including water sports. Get him high enough, and he'll do anything. I wonder if Ghent is that kinky, too?"

"There's never been any hint of scandal involving Romuald Ghent," Nate insisted. "Not directly, anyway."

"I did hear that he's the one who made Keller go into rehab the second time around," Larry said.

"And I'm sure you can't keep up the kind of schedule Ghent does, always performing or choreographing, if you're high all the time," Nate said.

Dane looked dubious. "I don't know about that, Choirboy. Keller seems to have done it, up until now. And he's managed to combine that with what is, by all reports, a very active and varied sex life."

"Look who's talking," Larry taunted.

Dane, true to form, far from being offended, joined in the laughter at his expense. "Well, at least I'm no druggie," he protested. "I'm high on life. If Keller is a coke whore, well, then I'm a *cock* whore." He laughed boisterously at his own lewd joke.

"But getting back to Ghent, I'm sure it will be interesting to work with him," Larry said. "He's had his own run-ins with the press lately, although at least they've been about his work. Some of the critics like his choreography and think he's a genius; others can't stand it."

"Sometimes the audience hasn't liked his stuff, either," Dane pointed out. "Take that evening-length ballet he did in London last year. I heard it stank up the place and they couldn't *give* the tickets away. Let's just hope he doesn't do us any favors along those same lines."

Beau was the sort of young gay man who not only thrived on gossip but had an uncanny gift for sniffing it out. His sources of information were usually reliable, and as a result he was invariably the first to break the latest news to his colleagues.

"Okay, here's what I've heard," Beau reported a few days after the official announcement of Ghent's appointment. "There's going to be a big gala fundraiser, like there was last year, only this time in Ghent's honor. They haven't decided what's going to be on the first half of the program, but the second half will be the first performance of a brand new ballet choreographed by Ghent. So we'll no doubt start rehearsing that right away, once he gets here. And after the gala there'll be one of those meet-and-greet publicity parties in the ballroom of the hotel down the street, just like there was last year. With a free buffet and open bar, to keep the big shot subscribers and contributors happy. We'll all be invited, so you know what *that* means."

"Yeah, Find a Husband Night!" Seth crowed. "I can't wait!"

"Me, either," Timothy agreed.

Amid the general laughter, only Josh seemed puzzled.

"What's Find a Husband Night?" he asked. "Is it some kind of a dating service?"

"More or less," Seth said.

Beau explained, "All these rich guys will be there, and they'll have a chance to meet the dancers, get a good look at them up close, and maybe ask them out on dates."

"Oh." Josh looked perturbed.

"Especially rich gay guys, Josh."

"Oh!" Josh seemed genuinely shocked. "But you wouldn't actually go with a man just because he has money, would you, Beau?"

"Just give me a chance, and then stand back and get out of my way, baby."

"It's bad enough that you persist in your sinful behavior." Josh was now firmly in pulpit mode. "You need to choose between God and Mammon—"

Beau interrupted him. "I'll have to find out what corporation your buddy Mammon works for—or better yet, owns—before I choose. And I won't insist on the guy being a potential husband; I'll settle for a sugar daddy." "Satan is lying in wait for you with his invidious wiles. I'll pray for you."

"Y'all do that, Arkansas," Beau drawled. "Y'all just pray real hard that one of those rich men lays eyes on l'il ol' me and decides that he'd like to sin with me like crazy."

Dane, who had listened in on this conversation without—unusually, for him—throwing any of his own witticisms into the mix, waited until Josh had left before interrogating Nate.

"You're the brainy one in this outfit, Choirboy. What does *invidious* mean?"

"Well, actually it means undesirable. I think Josh meant to say *insidious*, which means underhanded, or in this case, diabolically clever."

"The damn Bible thumper can't even quote it correctly, huh?"

"Oh, be quiet. We all know you're going straight to Hell, Dane."

"And enjoying every minute of it."

Nate shook his head. "Shameless. Absolutely shameless."

"Don't hold back, Choirboy, on account of worrying about hurting my feelings. Tell me what you *really* think about me."

"Don't tempt me!"

The conversation then returned to the topic of the newly appointed resident choreographer.

"I wonder if Romuald Ghent is his real name or a stage name," Timothy speculated.

"It's his real name," Nate said. "I happen to know that for a fact. He's got an older brother who's also a dancer named Crispinius."

"Crispinius Ghent? What a moniker!" Timothy exclaimed.

Beau disagreed. "Oh, I don't know. It's got a certain ring to it."

"They're both named after saints," Nate explained.

"My teacher wanted me to change my name," Moishe Berg, one of the corps boys, said with a laugh. "To something less Jewish-sounding, or preferably *non*-Jewish-sounding, of course. I remember one of her suggestions was 'Maurice Montagne', or something pissy like that. I told her, 'Well, as long as you insist on something that sounds sort of French, why don't I just call myself Maurice Vichy and be done with it?' And of course she didn't get it. Because, like a lot of teachers, she wasn't interested in anything outside of dance and didn't know anything about any other subject."

"I do like the name Maurice, though," Nate said. "Maybe I'll change

my name to Maurice Deventer. That sounds more like a name a dancer should have than Nathaniel."

"Deventer almost sounds like a made-up name, Nate," Moishe said.

"Yeah, but it's not. It's Dutch. Hudson River Valley and all that."

"You could use just your last name, Nate," Seth suggested. "But break it up. Call yourself Deven Ter. That's got a certain ring to it, too."

"Yeah," Nate agreed. "It sounds butch. Maybe *too* butch, though. It sounds almost like a porno actor."

"You just stick with 'Choirboy', Choirboy," Dane advised. "And if you ever do decide to do porn, I've got contacts in the industry, remember? I know. Here's a perfect title for your film debut: *Choirboys in Heat.*"

"No, I can top that," Seth declared. "How about Choirboys in Cuffs?"

"I can come up with one, too," Beau said. "*Hell's Cherubs*, starring Deven Ter. In which Nate gets gangbanged by a bunch of horny, tattooed bikers, of course."

"You guys all need to get a life," Nate protested.

CHAPTER 8 EGG CLOGS

A MEMO was distributed to all of the dancers in the company requesting their presence in one of the larger rehearsal rooms on a certain day and time. Lloyd Walker would take advantage of this opportunity to introduce Romuald Ghent, who had just arrived in town to assume his new duties.

Nate, much to Beau's amusement, made no secret of his excitement.

"You're going to be disappointed, roomie," Beau teased him. "That sexy picture of him, the one on your wall, was probably taken *years* ago."

"It was not. And I've seen pictures of him that were taken quite recently, so there." To prove his point, Nate showed his roommate a recent issue of a dance magazine, in which there was an interview with Ghent accompanied by no fewer than five color photographs, in each of which he was wearing the same outfit: beige linen trousers topped by a magenta T-shirt.

"Okay, he *does* look kind of hot," Beau admitted grudgingly. "But wait until he opens his mouth. I bet he's got one of those awful, pissy, upper-class English accents."

"Oh, that's nice and hypocritical coming from you, Mr. Direct Descendant of a Confederate Civil War General," Nate scoffed. "For your information, Ghent comes from the West Midlands in England, and his family owns a string of pubs. They're not upper-class at all."

"Next you'll be telling me you know what shoe size the guy takes. Hey, does he say anything in that interview about coming here?"

"Sure, but it's all kind of vague. The usual publicity BS about it being an exciting opportunity and he has certain things he hopes to accomplish, blah blah. It's kind of a puff piece, really. I imagine he'll have more interesting things to say when we meet him face to face today."

They arrived at the theater to find the rehearsal room already filled. Some folding chairs had been brought in and arranged in rows, but the dancers who showed up too late to claim these had no hesitation about sitting on the floor, which they were used to doing, anyway, during their downtime.

Dane, predictably, was one of the ones on the floor, where he was more

lying than sitting.

"Oh, come here, guys," he called out to Beau and Nate when he saw them looking around for a place. "Sit down beside me. There's room." Dane deigned to sit up, and Nate and Beau joined him, one on either side. Dane put his arm around Beau and gave him a quick hug. "Isn't this nice, having both of my boys next to me."

"I'm not your boy, Dane," Nate reminded him.

"Not yet."

"Yeah, well, until I am, go cop a feel on someone else." Nate wriggled free of the arm Dane had slipped around him. "God, Dane, you are *so* full of yourself."

Dane grinned. "Hardass, isn't he, Beau?"

"I keep working on him, Dane," Beau said.

"I wonder how long we're going to have to wait for the great man to make his appearance," Dane speculated. "And how long we're going to be stuck here listening to some spiel once he does come."

Walker and Ghent, however, were punctual, arriving no more than a minute after the time indicated in the memo. The dancers' first glimpse of their famous colleague created a stir, including a smattering of applause, which Ghent modestly cut short by raising his hand in a traffic cop gesture that he turned into a friendly little wave directed at the group in general.

At least one member of the audience, namely Nate, was already mesmerized.

Lloyd Walker began by saying that Romuald Ghent needed no introduction, and then, of course, proceeded to introduce him at some length while the subject of his soliloquy stood there beside him, smiling and surveying the curious young faces all around him.

Nate didn't pay much attention to Walker's speech of introduction. He was too busy checking out Romuald Ghent. In complete refutation of Beau's teasing, there was nothing disappointing about Ghent at all. Ghent might be in his late thirties, but only a few lines at the corners of his eyes betrayed that fact. He had a boyish face with a soft pink complexion. His longish hair, carelessly mussed at the moment, was a peculiar sandy blondish-brown color. Nate wasn't sure he liked Ghent's neatly trimmed pencil mustache; even though it featured in virtually all of his recent photos, including the famous one in Nate's bedroom, in person it almost resembled a caterpillar perched on his upper lip.

He was intrigued by Ghent's outfit, which looked as though it had been

assembled with no regard whatsoever for color coordination but suited its wearer perfectly. When he'd first come into the room, Ghent had been wearing a windbreaker and a baseball cap, both in the same eye-popping shade of bright acid yellow. He'd shed these. Under them, he wore a polo shirt, lime green with darker green horizontal stripes, khaki slacks, burnt orange socks, and brown moccasins. The slacks were held up with a belt in crocodile-textured leather (whether it was real or fake crocodile, Nate couldn't tell) which was dyed a particularly unlikely bright blue. All of the clothes appeared to be of good quality, though not ostentatiously so. The one obvious touch of real luxury was Ghent's wristwatch, which looked expensive indeed.

When it was his turn to speak, Ghent thanked Walker. Then he pulled a piece of paper from his pocket and unfolded it.

"I have a 'cheat sheet' here," Ghent admitted, "with all of your names on it. And I spent some time looking through all of your personnel files, trying to match up names with faces. I must say that some of you don't resemble your publicity photos. You're all still rather young to require *that* much retouching; wait until you're my age." When the laughter died down, Ghent went on, "Let me go around the room and see how many of your names I can get right."

He proceeded to do so, and faltered only near the end when he got one of the corps boys confused with another one, who did rather resemble him. As Ghent apologized for this single slip, Nate was impressed: the man had obviously done his homework. Ghent had much less of an obvious English accent than Nate, let alone Beau, had anticipated. Some of his vowels and inflections sounded almost American, and he used American slang.

"I'm very excited to meet you all, and I know that I'm going to enjoy working with you. I'm aware that I may come here with a certain reputation," the new resident choreographer continued. "Some critics have said that, as a choreographer, I'm old-fashioned because I'm trying to put the narrative emphasis back into dance. I'd like to enter a plea of 'not guilty'. I admit that I'm interested in telling stories and that a lot of my recent work has been inspired by literature and mythology. But I believe that, as dancers, we inevitably convey emotion when we move, even in an ostensibly abstract ballet. As performers, we are actors, whether we're portraying a specific fictional character with a personal history and motivations unique to him or her, or whether we're up there on stage anonymously, exposing our feelings to the audience through movement, trying to elicit a response.

"But I'm happy to leave these issues for the critics to debate," Ghent went on easily. "I'm sure you're all more interested in how my coming here is going to affect you in the here and now. Well, taking as my motto the Latin expression *festina lente*, which means 'make haste slowly', I don't propose to attempt anything too radical." He paused, then added, "*Yet*," with a droll inflection that earned him some chuckles.

Nate saw that Dane had a small notebook in his lap and was writing in it with a ballpoint pen while Ghent spoke. Nate's curiosity was aroused. He couldn't believe that Dane, of all people, was actually taking notes on what Ghent was saying.

"As you can see by looking at the season's performance schedule, we'll be doing a few of my older, shorter pieces, all of them new to the company's repertory, of course. I hope you'll find them interesting, and I'm looking forward to working on them with you.

"We'll also start rehearsing soon for the fundraising gala, which is two months away—nine weeks, I believe, to be exact. I'm told that this is an event that everyone always looks forward to, mostly because of the party afterward." This resulted in additional ripples of laughter. "Well, you still will be expected to *dance* first, I'm afraid. The program for the first half of the evening hasn't been determined yet, but we anticipate it will be made up either of several short pieces or one long one."

Dane caught Nate leaning forward, trying to sneak a look at what Dane was writing in his notebook. He held the notebook out for Nate to see. In rather childish-looking block lettering, Dane had printed *Ghent: nice ass/nice smile/talks a lot—fuckable? Y!!!* (Nate assumed that the *Y* stood for "Yes.")

Nate could feel himself starting to blush a little as Dane put the notebook back in his lap.

"And speaking of things Latin, the second half of the gala program, after the audience has had a chance to get a few drinks into them during the intermission, will be devoted to a piece inspired by a classic work of Latin literature.

"We're quite excited that we'll be doing a new ballet called *Eclogues*, with a score by Matthias Metzinger, a very talented and innovative young German composer. It's based, of course, on Virgil's *Eclogues*. Are any of you familiar with them?"

Nate immediately raised his hand—and immediately regretted it, when he saw he was the only one with his hand up.

"Yes, Mr. Deventer, Nathaniel. My notes tell me you prefer to be called Nate, am I correct? What can you tell us about Virgil's *Eclogues*?"

"They're, ah, poems about farmers and shepherds, in Latin, of course."

"Right." Ghent's smile was encouraging.

Nate could feel himself blushing again. Some of the corps boys and girls were looking at him as though he'd suddenly grown a second head.

"And they were very influential, because other writers later on imitated them. It helped to create this whole pastoral tradition in which writers contrasted city life to country life. And implied that country life is preferable."

"Very good."

Now the other dancers were staring at Nate as though he had *three* heads.

"I'll let Nate off the hook," Ghent said with a smile. "Although, as I'm sure he could tell us, the *Eclogues* are a set of individual poems that can be read separately. They don't tell a story, not in any conventional sense. So in order to create a ballet scenario out of them, we've taken a few liberties.

"For one thing, there will be quite a lot for you men and women of the corps to do, because you'll be representing the ordinary people, who are going about their day-to-day business in this rural community, farming and tending to your crops and herds and harvesting and so on. The idea is that you're sometimes in the foreground, but then from time to time you recede into the background, leaving the stage free for these various vignettes featuring the soloists.

"In the first of these, there's this older man, Silenus, who gets drunk and tries to sleep it off. But two young boys, Chromis and Mnasyllos, and a young girl, Aegle, come along and find him, and they tie him up—don't worry, it's just what we in the United Kingdom call a little light bondage, nothing terribly kinky." Ghent's audience burst into laughter at this witticism of his. "And in Virgil, they don't let him free until he agrees to sing for them. Since this is a ballet, they make him dance to entertain them instead, and this turns into a little scene in which Aegle teases and flirts with not only Silenus, but with the two boys. By the end it's clear that she prefers Chromis to Mnasyllos; there's obviously some sort of a romance going on there.

"Next we're introduced to two characters named Thyrsis and Corydon, and their friend Meliboeus. In Virgil, Thyrsis and Corydon engage in a singing contest with Meliboeus as the judge, and he decides that Corydon is the winner. Once again, we've turned this into a dancing contest for our purposes. It starts out as a version of 'Anything you can do, I can do better', and it develops into a sort of pissing contest between these two macho men, but it remains essentially playful.

"It's about time we gave the ladies an extended opportunity, so they

have a scene in which a young wife, Thestylis, who's expecting her first child, and her women friends come to consult an older woman, the Sibyl. She performs a mystic rite and makes predictions about the child's future.

"Aegle has participated in this scene, and after the other women leave, she remains behind, and sure enough, Chromis, who has been hanging about and keeping a close watch on her, pops up, and they have a tender little *pas de deux* together.

"As I'm sure you all know, when the ancient Greeks performed their tragedies, they would often perform the kind of comedy called a 'satyr play' on the same bill, to provide comic relief." As Ghent spoke, Nate glanced about at his colleagues; the expressions on their faces suggested that most of them didn't have the faintest idea of what Ghent was talking about. "So once again, we've made a departure from Virgil and borrowed this idea. In a sort of comic interlude or scherzo, three satyrs—their names are Dophios, Terpekelos, and Psolas—run on stage and engage in all sorts of boisterous comic business. Some of which may be just a tad sexually suggestive." More laughter. "They run off, and then we have a much more serious scene, also involving three men.

"Corydon reappears and mopes about, because he is suffering from unrequited love for a beautiful young boy named Alexis." There were a few snickers, to which Ghent matter-of-factly responded by saying, "Oh, you all knew there was going to be a homoerotic element in this ballet sooner or later, didn't you? As they say, that's how the smart money would bet. Anyway, in Virgil, Alexis is only mentioned; he doesn't actually appear. We have him appear on stage, of course, and in another one of our liberties, we've made Thyrsis the older man who is Alexis's lover and protector. So the rivalry between Corydon and Thyrsis that began in their dance contest continues in this romantic triangle. After Corydon has his solo, Alexis runs on stage, followed by Thyrsis. All three of them interact, and Corydon makes it clear that he's mad about the boy, but at the end of the scene it's just as clear that this time he's the loser. This scene is basically a big *pas de deux* for Corydon and Alexis, sort of sandwiched in between two shorter *pas de trois* for all three men.

"We move straight on to the finale, in which everybody is on stage. Chromis and Aegle are going to be married, so everybody congratulates them and celebrates, with Meliboeus acting as master of ceremonies, sort of blessing the young couple's union, and Silenus getting drunk, as usual. Mnasyllos, standing there on the sidelines, is still in love with Aegle, but he's a good loser. Corydon isn't such a good loser. He's still carrying the torch for Alexis. So the audience sees glimpses of these little dramas, still working themselves out, right up until the end. Chromis gets the girl, Corydon doesn't get the boy, and the curtain falls."

Ghent paused.

"Since Silenus is essentially a character role, and he's supposed to be older than most of the other characters, the administration, in its infinite wisdom, has persuaded me to undertake the part." There was a burst of applause. "Performing my own choreography—this must be my punishment for sins committed in a previous life. But in all seriousness, I'm looking forward to actually performing on stage with you, even in a small part. As for the role of Alexis, I'm delighted to be able to tell you that since Henri Keller will be here on the East Coast making some guest appearances, he has agreed to dance Alexis, not only on the night of the gala, but in the subsequent performances." This announcement, although technically no surprise to anyone in the room, was also greeted with enthusiastic applause.

"We'll be casting the other roles very soon," Ghent said by way of conclusion.

Dane moved his notebook so Nate could see it again. Dane had drawn a line across the page under what he'd written previously and had now printed below it *old ballets/brand new ballet—Egg Clogs (?) ancient Roman shit—gay sex!!! guest star Keller the Cokehead.*

"I've been doing all the talking," Ghent said.

("*I'll* say," Dane muttered under his breath so that only Nate could hear him.)

"Now it's your turn. Does anybody have any questions?"

Josh raised his hand.

"Yes, Mr. Pearsal-it's Josh, isn't it?"

"Yes. Mr. Ghent, are there going to be any unnatural acts performed on stage in this here ballet of yours?"

The question resulted in a general outbreak of tittering, but Ghent managed to keep a straight face.

"You mean, as opposed to backstage before, during, and after the performance? I fervently hope so," he joked. "I suppose it depends on how you define *unnatural*. But seriously, it's a ballet about people's interactions and emotions. And that includes sexual feelings, of course."

"Are any of us going to have to be nude up there on stage?" Josh asked.

"No, there will be costumes." Ghent was fighting back a smile. "They may be on the minimal side, because we want the audience to see the line of the bodies, but the essentials will certainly be covered up. Any other questions?"

Josh, of course, had one. He politely raised his hand again.

"Yes, Josh?"

"Mr. Ghent, has anybody ever talked to you about Jesus?"

Josh and Ghent both ignored the renewed titters, which were now accompanied by an outbreak of nudging and eye-rolling.

"As a matter of fact, Josh, yes."

"Are you saved?"

"I don't know about that. I wouldn't presume to speculate. I'm a communicant of the Church of England, if that means anything."

Josh looked nonplussed. "What does that mean?"

"I'd be delighted to discuss these matters with you sometime, Josh, one on one," Ghent said smoothly. "But I don't see any reason to keep the other members of the company any longer. Unless there are any other questions about *Eclogues*?"

Dane, of all people, now raised his hand.

"Mr. Stockton? Dane?"

"How long is this ballet going to be, Mr. Ghent?"

"The approximate running time—it's listed in Mr. Metzinger's score—is fifty-five minutes."

"Oh, thank God," Dane said. "While you were talking about it, you made it sound interminable."

This joke, which was not altogether in the best of taste, elicited some guilty laughter at Ghent's expense.

Romuald Ghent, however, seemed unflustered. "You're lucky it's not going to be an evening-length ballet, Dane," he said coolly. "Which it easily could have been. And speaking of casting issues, which one of the three oversexed satyrs would you like to play, since, according to everything I've read and heard, that shouldn't be too much of a stretch for you?"

This time the laughter was directed at Dane, who had the grace to exclaim "Oh, good one, Mr. Ghent!" and join in the merriment himself.

"As some of you may well learn, to your regret," Ghent said, mockthreateningly, "do something to offend me, and you'll probably end up meeting some horrible fate on stage in a ballet based on classical mythology. Well, I believe that's all for now. Good day."

The assembly began to break up.

Some of the other dancers let Nate have it out in the corridor.

"Teacher's pet," one of the corps girls, Bethany, teased him.

"Yeah, Nate, that was pretty slick, making sure Ghent noticed you like that," Seth taunted.

"At least I didn't insult him the way Dane did," Nate muttered.

Dane had heard. "No, you were too busy sucking up, Choirboy. But you may be wasting your time, Nate," he said. "You're not Ghent's type. *You're* not a cokehead."

"And at least Nate didn't ask Ghent if he was afraid of going to hell," Larry laughed. "For making all those homoerotic ballets. *Really*, Josh!"

"I didn't ask Mr. Ghent any such thing," Josh protested. "But what's Church of England, anyway? What do they believe in?"

"Ask Nate," Dane suggested. "He's our little intellectual, remember?" But Dane smiled at Nate in a way that took any sting out of the remark.

"Now I wish I'd kept my mouth shut," Nate muttered.

"You were lucky you were able to get a word in edgewise," Dane said. "Ghent did enough talking for both of you. God, I wonder if Ghent talks that way in bed, while he's having sex. You know, like a college professor standing up in front of the class, lecturing? I can just hear him now. 'The ancient Romans called it *analingus*. I'd like you to write a ten-thousand-word essay on the subject and hand it in tomorrow. If you get a grade C or higher on it, I may allow you to kiss my lily-white Anglo-Saxon English ass.' God, what a bore!"

"He's a snappy dresser, though," Beau opined.

"Are you kidding?" Dane scoffed. "*That* getup? He must be colorblind. And with what they're paying him, you'd think he could afford to hire a fashion consultant."

"I thought he looked very stylish," Nate said.

Dane had caught the scent, so to speak. "Oh, you liked what you saw, huh, Choirboy? Now we know what kind of a guy turns Nate on. Older limey stuffy intellectual types. I bet Nate gets an A on *his* paper when he hands it in! I bet he'll even shoot for *private tutoring* and *extra credit*?"

"Go fuck yourself, Dane. Go fuck yourself right up the ass!"

"Nice mouth, Choirboy. You better not let the professor hear you talking like that. It might destroy your egghead image."

"But seriously, Dane," Larry wanted to know. "Assuming you *can* be serious for a moment, which I doubt. What do you really think about Ghent? About this new ballet of his for the gala, I mean?"

"The cute little English dude is out of his freaking mind," Dane said. "No audience is going to sit still for this nymphs-and-satyrs crap. And if I get roped into dancing one of the roles in this Virgil shit and they expect me to wear one of those dopey little pleated skirts like we do in *Sylvia*... well, I'm not going to do it. You can be my guests. I'll sit out there in the audience and watch you other guys make fools out of yourselves. As long as I still get to go to the party afterward."

CHAPTER 9 Roll Out the Barrel

IN ADDITION to his other responsibilities, Romuald Ghent taught class, the daily morning ritual shared by every member of the company from the most junior members of the *corps de ballet* to the most experienced principals. Curiosity about what Ghent's teaching style would be like inevitably led to a good turnout at his first scheduled class.

By coincidence, Dane and Larry arrived for class wearing their "Gay Icon" and "Gay Icon in Training" sweatshirts, respectively.

"Looks like great minds do think alike," Larry joked.

"Yeah, this way, Ghent will be able to tell the two of us apart," Dane said.

Nate wasn't amused. "I can't believe you're going to wear those in front of Mr. Ghent."

"Why shouldn't we? We wear them all the time," Larry pointed out.

"What if he's offended?"

"Why would he possibly be offended, Choirboy?" Dane asked.

"I don't know," Nate had to admit.

"Ghent seems to have a pretty good sense of humor," Larry said. "Speaking of shirts, he's no *stuffed* shirt, thank God."

"And we're talking about a man who did that ballet last year, in Paris, you know, the one a critic called *Seven in a Bathhouse*? I forget what the real title was?" Dane asked.

"Seven against Thebes," Nate said. "It was based on the play by Aeschylus."

"Well, I knew it wasn't based on the movie *The Magnificent Seven*. Although, come to think of it, now *there* would be a really cool idea for a story ballet! Judging from the reviews I read, and the photos, this *Seven against Thebes* thing was wall-to-wall guys, all of them practically naked, squirming around on top of each other and working up a sweat. Maybe that's what Ghent calls bringing culture to the masses; I call it a gangbang. I understand that even the *gay* guys in the audience were shocked. Which must be why the thing played to packed houses even though the critics panned it," Dane added cynically.

"Ghent and Henri Keller both danced in it, didn't they?" Larry asked.

"Yes," Nate said. "Keller played the male lead, Eteocles, and Mr. Ghent was Polyphontes, one of the guys who defends the seven gates of the city of Thebes against the enemy."

Larry looked at Nate with just a hint of suspicion on his face. "You're quite the walking encyclopedia of knowledge when it comes to Romuald Ghent, aren't you, Nate?"

"I like to stay on top of what's going on in the world of dance, sure," Nate said, not a little defensively. "Especially when it involves a man we're all going to be working with."

"Speaking of staying on top," the irrepressible Dane went on, "now I know where Ghent got his inspiration from. I bet the choreography for *Seven against Thebes* was inspired by his buddy Keller's hot little after-hours soccer match in that hotel room."

Larry and Nate both emitted groans.

"I hope the company decides to do the piece here next season," Nate said, "and that you have to star in it, Dane."

"If that's your idea of a threat, Choirboy, don't make me laugh. I wouldn't mind getting naked and tussling with Ghent on stage. It could be very interesting. Remind me to suggest it to Mr. Walker."

"I suggest you get your mind out of the gutter and concentrate on class," was Nate's prim parting shot.

This admonition wasn't strictly necessary, because among the contradictions in Dane's character was the fact that he did take class seriously. His flamboyance was like the flame of a gas stove's burner: it could be turned down low at will.

The pianist reported for duty. Ghent also showed up promptly in another unorthodox outfit: olive drab tights that looked like something a dancing soldier might wear topped by a soft, slouchy sweatshirt in a glaring neon burgundy hue that came dangerously close to defying the traditional dancers' superstition about never wearing anything red to class.

Ghent greeted the assembled dancers, who had been busy stretching and warming up, and called them to order for the first part of class, consisting of exercises at the *barre*.

"Play something lively," Ghent suggested to the pianist. "We all look as though we need to wake up."

The pianist obliged. He had a vast repertory of pieces in a wide range of tempos, rhythms, styles, and moods that he could perform from memory to meet the shifting needs of a class.

As a ballet master, Romuald was highly interactive. He moved along the rows of dancers, observing, correcting, offering suggestions. Nate noticed that he wasn't above using flattery to coax what he wanted, at least from the female dancers.

"My dear, you have such a lovely line going for you there," he told one young corps girl who was progressing through a series of *tendus*. "So let me see it, not just some of the time; all of the time. Are you balanced? You should be able to hold that position without even touching the *barre*, if you have to. Let's see that one again. Keep the leg fully turned out the whole time you extend it, one smooth movement, never anything jerky. Now you have to push forward with your heel and stretch your foot through the *demi-pointe*. Pretend you're dancing on sand, not on a hard floor, and that you're drawing a firm straight line in the sand with your toe when you do the extension. Is that any better?"

"Much," the girl admitted.

With the men, interestingly enough, Ghent was more businesslike.

"Wake up, Mr. Pearsal," he told Josh good-humoredly. "I know it's early in the morning, but you're half my age, so there's no excuse for you not to be twice as energetic. Let's keep a straight carriage and a decisive line instead of all that wavering."

"Yes, sir," the sleepy-eyed Josh replied.

After three-quarters of an hour, the dancers abandoned the *barres* and moved into the middle of the room to begin what was called, logically enough, *centre* work. By now everyone was energized—and perspiring.

Ghent shed his sweatshirt. Under it, he was wearing a torso-hugging Tshirt, bright orange with an eye-catching design on the front: a rampant crowned heraldic lion with one paw resting on a foaming tankard of beer or ale. Dark blue block letters underneath the lion proclaimed *The Drunken Lion*, *Kidderminster*. Nate had an advantage over his colleagues: he knew that Kidderminster was Romuald's home town.

The first sight of the shirt aroused some merriment.

"What?" Romuald asked once he'd caught on. "At least I'm not a 'Gay Icon in Training'," he said. "If you have to *train* for it, why bother?"

Larry took this teasing with good grace, and the class went on.

Nate was sustaining an *arabesque fondu* when Romuald paused beside him.

"How's our Virgil scholar doing today?" Romuald asked.

"Fine, Mr. Ghent.'

"Let me see that again. It's good, but keep the leg pliant, no hint of a stabbing motion. Remember, that's what *fondu* means: 'to melt,' or 'to sink down'. No matter how much tension your body may be under, it should *look* easy."

Finally, the class neared its climax, in which leaps, turns in the air, and high beaten steps were practiced. In order to have enough room to practice traveling steps and minimize the risk of collisions, the dancers formed small groups and crossed the room systematically from corner to corner.

It wasn't uncommon for a dancer to ask a teacher to work on a specific step or combination with the class. If this new "vocabulary," as it was termed, was appropriate for the class as a whole, the teacher might accommodate the request on the spot. If not, the teacher might agree to work with the dancer briefly after class, refer him or her to another class, or even ask a more advanced student to demonstrate the step.

"Mr. Ghent?" Larry began. He had left the others in his group and approached the teacher.

"Yes?"

"You're famous for your barrel turns." Larry used the colloquial term for what was technically a *coupé jété en tournant*.

"Everyone, please take note of Larry's diplomatic use of the present tense."

"But you are."

"Are you trying to flatter me, young man?"

"No. Are you that easily flattered?"

"No. It takes a lot more than that to get on my good side. And now that we've gotten that out of the way, I assume you'd like me to...?"

"To show us how you do them. I don't mean I expect you to perform for us, of course; I want you to tell me what I'm doing wrong."

"You're determined to make me earn my American dollars, aren't you? Very well. Ladies and gentlemen, let's clear a space. Get ready for takeoff, as they say. All right, Mr. Duvernoix, give it a whirl."

As the pianist began a new, animated melody, Larry performed a series of curving jumps. Each of them was followed by a quick turn on the floor which incorporated the landing of the previous jump, the takeoff for the next jump, and a quick change of the position of his feet.

"I don't see much of a problem," Romuald diagnosed, after a heavybreathing Larry came to rest again. "Very good elevation. I like the inward leans on the turns; they're nice and controlled. What don't *you* like?"

"I don't think my changes are fast enough."

"They don't need to be too fast, as long as they're sure. The only thing the audience is likely to notice is any hint of hesitation. It should be *this*," Romuald executed the changes of feet, the actual *coupés*, without actually jumping. "As opposed to *this*." He repeated the movement, but this time with an infinitesimal hint of indecisiveness. "Stand beside me, and we'll break it down into its component parts."

Soon several of the men, including Dane and Nate, were lined up, watching and imitating what Romuald and Larry were doing, namely standing shoulder to shoulder and looking down at their own and each other's feet as they did *coupé* after *coupé* in slow motion. Since, at least in conventional, classical choreography, male dancers had a monopoly on barrel turns, the women in the room gradually stopped what they were doing and became, for the time being, amused spectators.

"And you gradually bring it up to speed," Romuald said, suiting the action to the word.

"Now you're doing the changes so fast, I can't see them," Dane halfmarveled, half-complained. "There's got to be some trick to it. Let us in on it."

"Nonsense," Romuald insisted. "There's nothing to it, if you just stay focused and in control and you don't tense up. Look over there, Nate's got it. Do it for real, Nate. Get out of his way, guys."

Nate, fueled by an adrenalin rush, detached himself from the group and went into orbit, doing barrel turn after barrel turn as he circled an invisible spot on the floor.

"Yeah! Go, Nate, go!" Beau cheered.

"Look at Choirboy fly!" Dane exclaimed.

"What a little showoff," Larry said, but without malice.

A panting Nate stopped jumping and circling and looked expectantly at Romuald, awaiting his verdict.

"Bloody hell," the Englishman muttered.

"Was it that bad?" Nate asked.

"It was that good. So fluid, as though you were being spun around on

the end of a piece of string." He flicked his wrist, miming the way a child might do tricks with a yo-yo.

Dane's competitive spirit had been piqued.

"Anything Choirboy can do, I can do, too—and better," he boasted.

"Prove it," Larry taunted him.

Dane launched himself into his own demonstration of the *coupé jété en tournant*. It was impressively athletic and probably would have brought down the house in any theater in the world; but "O proud boast!" Romuald wasn't completely won over by the display.

"You're pushing it too hard," Romuald diagnosed after a gasping Dane stopped leaping and circling and came back to submit himself to the ballet master's post mortem. "It's the usual temptation: if you let yourself get too carried away by the excitement of the moment, you lose that extra bit of control. Which you should always keep in reserve, in case you need to draw on it."

Dane nodded. "What else?' he asked, looking and sounding astonishingly humble, for Dane.

"Well, each of the turns was just a little bit different. Individual, not uniform."

"Is that necessarily bad?"

"Yes," Romuald insisted. "Because you have to be able to do them with absolutely mechanical precision and consistency. Then, *if you choose to*, or the piece you're doing calls for it, *then* you can vary them, however *you* decide to. That's the whole point of technique. It provides that bedrock foundation that gives you a whole range of choices and alternatives." Impulsively, Romuald moved into the area Dane had just occupied. "Clear the flight deck," he quipped, "and stand by, because there may be a crash landing! Maestro," he addressed the pianist. "A little traveling music, please—and make it hot!"

And then what Nate had secretly hoped to see took place: Romuald Ghent was actually dancing. In front of him, at close quarters. It was true that Ghent didn't risk quite the same degree of elevation he might have taken for granted five years previously, let alone ten years previously. But his changes and jumps and turns were lightning-quick, and he was providing an object lesson in what he'd just lectured Dane about. He was utterly in control, and to top it off, he didn't seem to get tired. He simply spun about in circle after circle, faster and faster, with an expression of boyish glee on his perspirationbeaded face. The men and women in the room, every one of whom was much younger than Ghent, began to cheer and clap their hands rhythmically to accompany his demonstration.

Finally Romuald did stop and staggered to a halt so awkwardly that Josh, who was standing the closest to him at the moment, instinctively reached out and grabbed him, to steady him and prevent him from falling. The two men ended up in a clumsy clinch with Romuald giggling breathlessly.

Nate felt an inexplicable, absurd stab of jealousy. Because Josh had actually touched Romuald Ghent. Even hugged him!

"Thanks, Josh," Romuald was saying. "Speaking of control, it *is* important to end gracefully, too, despite what you just saw! But now my legs hurt a bit, which is why I wobbled. Unfortunately, none of this becomes any easier as the years pass!"

His T-shirt was now plastered to his torso by sweat. The lion emblazoned on his chest might not be literally drunk, but it was undeniably sodden at the moment. Through the wet fabric, Nate could see Romuald's nipples, which were large, hard-pointed, and yes, very sexy.

Get your mind off sex, Nate told himself sternly. And to think that you were giving Dane a hard time about it before class began!

When class ended shortly thereafter, Romuald finished it with a *révérence*, a formal bow which the dancers responded to with bows and curtsies of their own. In some quarters, this was considered an old-fashioned and outmoded gesture which could be dispensed with. But Romuald Ghent, Nate was beginning to discover, was an individualist who saw no incongruity in combining thoroughly up-to-date ideas with a healthy respect for tradition.

Now that class was finished and the dancers had a break before they separated and reported to various rehearsals, there was a general stampede toward the nearby cafeteria for refreshments. Romuald was among the last to leave, and Nate lingered behind so he could fall into step beside him as they walked down the hallway. So did Beau.

Nate felt a bit tongue-tied and was grateful when Beau asked, "Mr. Ghent?"

"Yes, Beau?"

"Do you mind if I ask you a personal question?"

"Of course not."

"Where did you get those snazzy green tights?"

Ghent, who had no doubt anticipated a question of a considerably more intimate nature, suppressed a laugh. "They're British military surplus,

actually. They're long underwear, meant to keep you warm outdoors in very cold weather. Very practical."

"But I don't think your shirt is military issue," Nate dared to remark.

"No, that's from the pub my Dad and Mum run, back home in Kidderminster."

"I bet they're very proud of you," Beau said, adding slyly, "I bet they have photos of you on display all over the walls of the pub."

Beau grinned insolently at Nate as he said this, and Nate, far from being grateful, now wanted to kill him.

"Don't remind me," Romuald said. "It's an embarrassment, but then I suppose all parents are like that. It could be worse, though. At least they haven't renamed the place *The Drunken Danseur*, which of course is a standing joke back home."

"I imagine you're the pride of Kidderminster," Nate said.

"Hardly. The town's famous for its carpet manufacturers, and also because it has another big factory where boats are built. Including yachts for the luxury trade. Luckily, the factory workers patronize the pub and help to keep it in business."

In the cafeteria, Romuald ordered tea. "I'll have the Earl Grey," he told the woman behind the counter, "and make it hot and *strong*, my dear. These youngsters have worn me out."

She not only gave Romuald two teabags, but in acknowledgement of his star status, she refused to serve him his hot water in a paper or plastic cup but found a heavy restaurant-quality cup and saucer in white china.

Romuald stood beside Nate, who was treating himself to a quick caffeine boost from black coffee in a lowly paper cup. Beau had wandered over to chat with Josh and some of the other guys. Romuald sipped his tea, then looked at Nate rather curiously. "Nate?"

"Yes, Mr. Ghent?"

"If you don't mind my asking, why does Dane Stockton call you 'Choirboy'?"

Nate could feel himself starting to blush, much to his annoyance. "Oh, that's just a silly little nickname he came up with for me." He had a sudden inspiration. "Dane means it ironically," he lied. "He calls me 'Choirboy' because I'm such a bad boy, like him."

"Oh, really." Romuald's tone of voice suggested that he wasn't buying this, not for a minute.

"Yes, I'm really very mature for my age," Nate blustered on. "You know, there are sex clubs here in New York, where guys hook up with each other for casual sex. And I've been to a lot of gay parties, which can get kind of wild. I've had lots of affairs," he blurted out, piling falsehood upon falsehood. "Usually with older men."

"I see. Older men, eh? Superannuated geezers who have just turned all of thirty, I suppose?" Before Nate could answer, Romuald went on. "So that's why Dane calls you Choirboy. I would imagine, by the same token, your nickname for Dane ought to be something like The Vestal Virgin?"

Nate nearly choked with laughter on *that* one.

"Trust me, the only thing that Dane keeps burning is his libido," he joked.

"And I'm sure a lot of men who have gotten too close to it have been scorched."

"Not me."

"No, not you?" Romuald smiled. "I'm glad to see that your selfproclaimed dissipated lifestyle hasn't gotten in the way of your dancing."

"Mr. Ghent, I haven't fooled you for a moment, have I? You know I'm an awful fibber, don't you?"

"I have to admit, Nate, that I can't exactly see you as a wild party boy."

"No, I'm not. I don't know why I said all that. I guess I didn't want you to think I was, you know, young and dumb, and all unsophisticated and inexperienced and unworldly."

"It's nothing to be ashamed of. Being disciplined and responsible, I mean. Still, a man your age needs to have himself some fun occasionally."

"What do you do for fun, Mr. Ghent?"

"I sit at home and think about the ballets I would choreograph if I had unlimited money and resources at my disposal. Or about the ballets I would still like to dance in if I could turn the clock back and be your age again knowing what I know now, of course; otherwise, there wouldn't be all that much of an advantage in going back. Isn't that terrible? To think about work so much of the time? Especially when I just reminded you about the need to balance work with recreation. I'm afraid the Dane Stocktons of this world would find me very boring."

"Dane is all right. He's not nearly as superficial as he may seem at first glance." Nate didn't know why he was defending Dane all of a sudden.

Romuald nodded. "He's a very good dancer. The kind who's a crowdpleaser. Not quite in Larry's class, of course. Oops. That sort of slipped out. It's not really appropriate for me to say such things about one dancer in front of another. You're going to have to pretend you never heard me say that. Deal?"

"Deal." Nate was happy. He and Romuald Ghent now shared a secret. They both admired Larry and preferred his dancing to Dane's.

"There are exciting dancers like Dane, you see, who have the ability to drive audiences crazy no matter what they do, or *don't* do, and then there are dancers like Larry who just go out there and deliver the goods, consistently, season after season, and keep getting better. And if there's any justice, they develop an audience that's smaller and less demonstrative, maybe, but one that can be knowledgeable and discriminating and fiercely loyal."

"Isn't it possible to be both kinds of dancer?" Nate asked. "Have the best of both worlds, so to speak?"

"In one body? Theoretically, perhaps. Personally, without consciously intending to, I've always seemed to steer my way rather uncertainly between those two extremes. Even back when I first began to have some success and make a name for myself, the critics couldn't seem to make their minds up about me. Some said, 'Oh, he's flashy, all right, but he has no staying power. Not the kind who can keep that up and sustain a long career.' And others said, 'He's always very correct, but doesn't that get rather boring, in the long run? If only he'd cut loose and take a real risk, once in a while'."

"I think I'd like to be a bit of a risk-taker," Nate mused. "*Calculated* risks, of course. Nothing really reckless."

Romuald Ghent laughed. "Perhaps I can find a suitably calculated risk for you to take sooner or later. I shall have to give the matter some thought."

Chapter 10 Matinee Performances

EVERY dancer eventually looks back and, with the benefit of hindsight, identifies certain defining moments in his or her career. The dancer may not have been aware of it at the time, but something happened on each of these occasions that had a long-ranging effect. For Nate Deventer, such a turning point was what started out as "just another matinee performance" of *Sylvia*.

One afternoon, after his usual routine of class and rehearsal, Nate was summoned to Walker's office, where he found Walker and Pau Miró waiting for him.

Pau greeted Nate warmly, as he always did when the two of them met. "Nate. My ankle's still bothering me, and the doctor told me to lay off it for another day or two. Can you do me in the matinee of *Sylvia* tomorrow?"

The phrase "do me," which an outsider might have misinterpreted as implying something sexual, was dancer shorthand for "do my role in the performance I was scheduled for."

"Sure," Nate said at once.

"I know it's short notice, Nate," Walker said.

"Mr. Walker, I've gone on for some of the other guys with almost no notice at all," Nate pointed out.

"I know. We appreciate it. And it's just another matinee performance, after all. Hardly a special occasion. The audience isn't likely to be hypercritical."

"I'll do you sometime, Nate, to pay you back." Pau spoke reasonably fluent English, but he was blissfully unaware of the unintentional double entendre in his words.

Nate fought back a smile. "No problem. I like the role of Aminta, you know."

Some dancers were unenthusiastic about appearing in the matinee performances. They claimed that the typical afternoon audience was made up largely of out-of-towners: tourists, shoppers, business people. There might be a sprinkling of local senior citizens and students. The implication was that it wasn't a particularly sophisticated or knowledgeable audience. Nate wasn't sure this was necessarily true, and even if it was, he didn't care. A performance was a performance.

"Who else is dancing tomorrow?" he asked.

"Kitri, of course," Walker said. "Dane, as Orion. You know how Dane talks. He always claims he only agrees to do Orion to keep Kitri company. That new Russian girl, Svetlana, will be the Diana. And oh yes, Joshua Pearsal will be Eros again."

Nate had to smile at the thought of the virginal Josh portraying Eros, the mischievous god of love; but in fact Josh was superb in the role, bringing an unexpected masculine energy to it. His ideas about Eros, in fact, were not unlike Nate's ideas about Aminta.

The next day after Act 1 of the performance, Dane joined Nate backstage. Dane was looking very sexy indeed, with his bare chest, bare thighs, and "dopey little pleated skirt," as he put it. Nate was similarly attired.

"Guess who's in the audience, watching us from out front," Dane said.

"I can't imagine."

"Ghent."

"Really? I wonder why."

"It's obvious. He wants to see us in action so he can check out our strengths and our weaknesses. He's been taking in quite a few performances, in fact, mostly at night. So now's your chance to strut your stuff and make sure the Professor notices you." (Dane had already settled on "the Professor" as his nickname for Romuald Ghent.)

"Oh. Well, I can't change the way I dance just because Mr. Ghent happens to be watching me."

But Nate wondered if that was strictly true. A moment ago, as far as he was concerned, the matinee audience had consisted of a thousand or so anonymous individuals. Now, one of them had a name: Romuald Ghent. And suddenly, he was the only member of the audience who mattered. Nate felt an odd little extra surge of adrenalin-fueled anticipation as he prepared to go on stage for Act 2. Anticipation and anxiety. He wanted to do well, to be at his best. But he knew that, unfortunately, it wasn't always a question of willpower.

Stop thinking about it, he lectured himself. You're an idiot. Just go out there and dance. Which was what he did.

Kitri and Dane, as established names and audience favorites, received noisy ovations at the end of the performance. Nate, Josh, and Svetlana, however, had all danced well, too, and earned their fair share of the applause. Seth, the corps boy who had succeeded Nate as Endymion, unlike his predecessor had no qualms about appearing for the curtain call with his genitals barely concealed by that absurd little silver lamé pouch. On the contrary, Seth seemed to revel in it. But then, Seth was a bit of an exhibitionist who at least had a lean, nicely sculpted, hot body to show off. The lighting crew had cooperated by making sure they threw plenty of light on "the naked guy." The matinee audience seemed to like what it saw.

Nate showered and changed quickly. On his way out, he saw Romuald Ghent, as usual looking very colorful in a lavender sweatshirt over black trousers, with some sort of a red gemstone pendant suspended from a chain around his neck. He was talking to Kitri and Dane. They excused themselves and left together without seeing Nate, who was about to slip away in the opposite direction when Ghent glanced over and noticed him.

"Nate. Wait up, please." Ghent quickly crossed the distance between them. "I really enjoyed your performance. Tell me, do you always dance like that?"

"Ah, like what, Mr. Ghent?"

"As though it didn't make any difference to you whether the audience was out there or not. As though you'd still give one hundred percent even if the auditorium was empty."

"I don't know about that, Mr. Ghent. I just try to do my best. I know there's plenty of room for improvement. Right now, for example...."

"What?"

"You'll think it's silly."

"No, I won't."

"Well, I wish I could go right out there again and do it all over again while it's still fresh in my mind. Fix the things that now I know weren't quite right, and so on. But of course I can't do that. Aside from anything else, I'm too tired!"

"Do you like dancing Aminta?"

"Very much."

"What do you like about it?"

"Oh, everything. The music, the character, the story."

"No, tell me. Tell me something specific."

Nate realized that Ghent wasn't just making polite small talk but was genuinely interested in his opinion.

Nate told Ghent about how he didn't mind the fact that Aminta took a backseat to the ballerinas in *Sylvia*, so to speak, but how that could in fact be considered an advantage; about how he had worked on the part with Larry;

and how he'd disagreed with Larry about Aminta not being much of a dramatic challenge. As he spoke, he noticed that the pendant dangling between Ghent's pectoral muscles, which the soft, clinging fabric of the lavender sweatshirt did little to hide, was in fact a tiny sculpture carved in red coral of the elephant-headed Hindu god Ganesh. Nate knew enough mythology to know that this was appropriate. Ganesh was, among other things, the patron of literature, music, and the arts, and was often depicted dancing, as he in fact was in Romuald's pendant.

"Yes, that's the mistake I made when I first did Aminta," Romuald said. "I took it for granted he was nothing but a ruddy pushover."

Nate suddenly remembered that of course Romuald had performed Aminta—often, and to critical acclaim. And here was Nate, who was brand new to the role, pompously telling him all about his own lofty conception of the part! He now felt tongue-tied, but luckily Ghent picked up the conversational ball.

"I was trying to decide, the whole time I was watching you from out front, just what's so special about you," Romuald said matter-of-factly. "Now I know. For one thing, you're perfectly proportioned, aren't you?"

"Am I?" Nate repeated, feeling dumbfounded by the comment.

"Yes. Most of us aren't, so we have to compensate for it, whether we're conscious of it or not. You don't know how lucky you are."

"Well, if I am, I can't take any credit for it. It's all genetics, isn't it?"

"Primarily. Are there any more like you at home?"

"I have an older sister and a kid brother. Neither of them has the slightest interest in being a dancer, I'm afraid. Although my brother is good at sports. He's a champion swimmer, among other things."

"Pity. That he doesn't dance, I mean. I have a brother, Crispinius, who's also a dancer. Our Mum always says that he and I must have been cut out of the same piece of dough by the same cookie cutter." Romuald smiled. "When I said you were lucky just now, I didn't mean to imply that you haven't had to work at it, and work hard. I can tell that you have. I was very impressed by your performance. It's hard to believe this is your first production of *Sylvia*. There's a very confident, finished quality to what you're doing with it. My first stab at Aminta was a run-through by comparison."

"Mr. Ghent, you're starting to embarrass me."

"Am I? Surely not. All dancers thrive on praise, don't they? Compliments are meat and drink to us. We'd starve without them. But anyone who knows me will tell you that I'm not in the habit of throwing out idle compliments where they're not deserved. When I say it, I mean it. In any event, good show."

Nate hesitated, then blurted out, "Mr. Ghent?"

"Yes?"

"I don't want you to think I'm pushy."

"You strike me as anything but."

"I know you've just started making the casting choices for *Eclogues*, and I know I haven't been a soloist for very long, but I'd really like to be in it, if you think I'm good enough. Not in the first cast, of course. But maybe in the second or third."

"There are quite a lot of solo male parts in *Eclogues*. I should think it's entirely possible that we may be able to find something for you to do in it. Let me give it some thought."

Romuald gave Nate a very man-to-man slap on the shoulder and, smiling, turned and walked away.

There had been nothing fliratious about the encounter—quite the opposite—and yet Nate felt a tingle of lingering excitement afterward. So Romuald Ghent had noticed him, after all. Better yet, he had liked Nate's performance. All this was on a strictly professional level, and yet—!

The thought that Ghent had been observing him the whole time he was on stage—scrutinizing him, assessing his physique and his technique, analyzing them—gave Nate a curious pleasure. It went beyond justifiable pride at having danced well and having earned the other man's approval. Romuald, after all, was a gay man, and very much in his prime. It was entirely possible that he'd liked what he'd just seen on stage, in more ways than one!

I wonder if he ever tricks with any of the guys in the companies he works with, Nate dared to speculate. Of course he does. He's only human, after all! I doubt that he and Henri Keller have a monogamous relationship. Far from it, as far as that slut Keller's concerned, from everything you hear about him! So why shouldn't Romuald play around a little on the side when he meets some other guy and they like each other? What's holding him back? Nothing, that's what!

Nate calmed down long enough to remember that he'd planned to do a little shopping after the performance. There was a bookstore a few blocks from the theater, which he often patronized. Matinee audiences tended to contain a high percentage of chatty autograph seekers who hung about the stage door in hopes of intercepting the dancers. Nate avoided them, making good use of the "secret escape route" Dane had shown him, and walked to the bookstore.

Even if he didn't end up performing in *Eclogues*, Nate was curious enough to want to brush up on the literary work on which the ballet was

based.

He looked in the Literature section under V and quickly found what he was looking for: a paperback edition of Virgil's *Eclogues*. It was a bilingual edition with the original Latin text on the left-hand pages and the English translation on the right-hand ones.

Nate had just completed his purchase and was about to leave the store when a man approached him. He was Japanese-American, with the blackest glossy straight hair Nate had ever seen on a man and a distinctive sort of triangular goatee adorning his chin. His smooth, unlined face made it difficult to guess his age, but Nate estimated he might be in his mid-thirties. He was casually but expensively dressed in a beige linen suit worn over a collarless tan shirt with no tie. He carried himself with such an air of self-confidence and looked at Nate so frankly with his black eyes that Nate pulled himself up and waited for him to speak.

"Hello," the man said.

"Hello there, yourself."

"I have a confession to make."

"Oh?"

"I've been sort of stalking you."

"Really?"

"I just saw you in *Sylvia*. A minute ago, when I saw you cross the street and come in here, I told myself, 'That can't really be him, can it?' So I followed you in here to see for myself. Because you guys do look different up there on stage."

"Yes, it's amazing what a difference the makeup and lighting can make."

"That's not how I meant it. You look fine right now. Very handsome. And you were wonderful in the ballet."

"Thank you. I'm glad you enjoyed it."

"I'll be honest: the only reason I bought a ticket and squeezed it into my schedule was because I saw that Dane Stockton would be dancing. I wanted to tell all my friends back home that I saw him dance. But the whole thing was great. Especially you. I do mean it, I'm not just being flattering. I hope I'm not being too bold, or pushy?"

"Not at all."

"You see, I'm here in town on business, and I have to leave first thing tomorrow morning. And I have a business dinner this evening. So I couldn't help wondering...."

"What?"

"What you do, after a performance."

"Besides hang out in bookstores? Nothing much. Matinees are kind of strange, because we usually perform later on, in the evenings. It seems odd to be done for the day already. I was thinking about going home and having something to eat."

"I know this is kind of forward of me, but maybe you'd like to go have a drink with me somewhere. Or that something to eat you just mentioned, my treat, if you know a good restaurant near here."

"I know a couple of nice places, and I'd love to."

"Really?"

"Really."

"You see, I don't know too many people here in New York, except for the people I do business with. It would be nice to have a chance to just talk to somebody."

"Well, you know me now, and I like to talk. The truth is, we're usually a little keyed up after a performance. It can take me an hour or two to wind down."

"Aren't you tired? I would think you'd be absolutely worn out after what I just saw you do."

"Um, I'm *physically* tired, sure, but not *mentally* tired, if that makes any sense to you. That's why I'd honestly enjoy having some company. Come on, let's go."

Nate took his new acquaintance to one of the nearby restaurants that the dancers patronized, usually after a performance. They'd sat down, perused the menu, and ordered before he realized that he was sitting across the table from a man whose name he didn't even know.

"You have the advantage over me," he pointed out. "You know my name, but I still don't know yours."

"Um, in fact I don't know your name," the other man admitted. "I mean, I heard the guy come out in front of the curtain and announce the cast change, but I was so relieved that it wasn't Dane Stockton who'd cancelled that your name didn't really register." He pulled his program out of his pocket and opened it to the cast list. "But I do know you're not Pau Miró, the guy who cancelled."

"No, I'm not," Nate said with a laugh. "Pau is dark-haired and Spanish, and I'm obviously not. Here." He took the program, found a pen in his bag, and crossed out Pau's name, replacing it with his own, printing it. "I'm Nathaniel Deventer, but everybody calls me Nate." He signed his name in the margin. "There. You now own the only copy of this program in existence that not only has a corrected cast list but is signed by the Aminta of the performance."

"I'll take it home with me and treasure it. My name is Kenichirou Hiromitsu."

"I'm glad to meet you, Kenichirou."

"My God. It's unusual to meet somebody who actually pronounces my name correctly the very first time. I'm usually forced to abbreviate it to Ken, which I don't like all that much."

"I've been told by our new resident choreographer that I'm a quick study. Where's home, Kenichirou?"

"San Francisco. I want to be upfront with you, Nate. I live there with my partner. We have an open relationship."

"That's cool. But it's funny you should say that. Everyone I know seems to be in an open relationship, except for this one other dancer in the company, who's married. To a woman," Nate specified.

"And what about you? What kind of a relationship are you in?"

"None, at the moment."

"I find that hard to believe. You're incredibly handsome."

"Are you flirting with me, Kenichirou?"

"Hell yes. Can't you tell?"

"I've had such an uneventful social life lately that I'd forgotten what it was like."

Their food arrived, and they continued to talk while they ate. Nate managed to learn that Kenichirou and his partner ran some sort of an import business, but he didn't find out too many details because Kenichirou encouraged him to talk about himself. Kenichirou was also curious about the notorious Dane Stockton, so Nate told him a few amusing but harmless anecdotes about his colleague—concentrating, of course, on Dane's sex life.

"Dane wouldn't mind us talking about him behind his back," Nate assured Kenichirou. "The guy has no sense of shame."

"I can't believe you actually work with him and are friends with him, and the two of you haven't...."

"Fucked?"

"I didn't want to risk offending you."

"I'm not that easily offended."

"If I was around a hunk like Dane Stockton all the time, I wouldn't be able to keep my hands off him. Hell, Nate, if I was around *you* for any length

of time, I wouldn't be able to keep my hands off you."

They'd finished eating and were lingering over a second round of drinks. Even though he was drinking on a now-filled stomach, Nate wasn't a big drinker, and he sipped the alcoholic beverage cautiously.

What would Dane do, right now, if this guy had picked him up? he asked himself. He'd flirt with him, of course, that's what he'd do. He'd be flirting with him the whole time. No, Dane wouldn't waste any more time than he had to just flirting. If he was attracted to this man, he'd come right out and proposition him. He'd ask him if he wanted to fuck!

He met and held Kenichirou's gaze and smiled. "Maybe I wouldn't mind having your hands on me."

Kenichirou returned the smile. "God, you're beautiful. I'm so glad I met you."

"So am I. I'm only sorry you're only in town for the one day. Do you come to New York often?"

"Three or four times a year. Listen, Nate. I have a few hours to kill before my dinner engagement. How'd you like to spend them with me?"

"I'd love to."

Kenichirou signaled for the check. "Would you like to go somewhere else, or would you like to go back to my hotel? We could play around a little, if you want."

Do not blush, Nate told himself sternly. Do. Not. Blush. Don't start acting like, well, like some silly little choirboy who doesn't know anything!

"I'd like to go back to your hotel," he admitted. "And I'd love to play around with you." Nate felt absurdly proud of himself. Surely even Dane Stockton couldn't have said it any more clearly, or more whorishly!

Kenichirou was looking at him with a mixture of relief and excitement. Nate didn't blush. That was encouraging.

He soon found himself alone with Kenichirou in his hotel room, which was comfortable, even luxurious, despite the typical generic quality of its hotel-chain décor. The room was reassuringly cluttered: an open briefcase was on a table, clothes lay scattered about, and an unzipped suitcase was on the floor. The unmade bed was covered with folders, loose papers, and a very expensive-looking notebook PC. The mess was so typically masculine that Nate felt right at home.

"Let me tidy this up," Kenichirou said as he began to clear the bed.

What might soon be taking place in that bed sent Nate's imagination soaring. Pornographic images from sexually explicit DVDs ran riot through his mind: hot, naked bodies, erect cocks, tangled sheets, sweat and saliva and semen.

He could now, belatedly, feel himself blushing, and of course, when Kenichirou glanced at him after stowing away the notebook computer, he noticed and smiled.

"Have you ever done this before, Nate?" he asked.

"Done what?"

"Had sex in the middle of the afternoon in a stranger's hotel room."

"Sure. Lots of times. Well, once or twice, maybe. And usually late at night, when I went to a bar after a performance and let some guy pick me up. Why do you ask?"

Kenichirou let out his breath in a long, loud exhalation, which took Nate by surprise. Was he as anxious as Nate was about this encounter?

"Only because I hope this doesn't seem, you know, kind of cheap and tawdry. I really like you. Of course there's the physical attraction. That's why I was so aggressive back there in the bookstore. I don't usually come on quite that strong the first time I meet a guy. But like I said, I have to go home tomorrow, and I never expected to meet anybody like you."

"So we might as well make the most of what little time we have, is that it? I understand. It's all right."

"I want you so badly I can barely stand up straight."

"Then I guess we'd better get you down on that bed." Nate took the other man in his arms and gave him a full, open-mouthed kiss on his lips. They were about the same height, Nate realized; that was a welcome novelty for him. Most of his non-dancer tricks were taller than he was.

Their bodies shook, and the tremors vibrated through them as Kenichirou grabbed Nate's waist and pulled him roughly against him. "I already have one fuck of a hard-on. Do you have any idea what you're doing to me?"

"I have a pretty good idea, but maybe you'd better show me anyway. Right now."

Nate fell back onto the bed, pulling the other man with him. They rolled until Nate found himself on top.

Leaning over Kenichirou, he brushed a kiss over his lips. He wanted to tune out any thought that wasn't purely sexual. He wanted a harsh, demanding kiss that wouldn't let him think about anything except physical contact. His tongue delved and played about inside the other man's mouth, devouring, arousing, memorizing the sensation and the taste.

They were already pulling indiscriminately at their own clothes and

each other's, tugging, unbuckling, unzipping. Two pairs of shoes landed on the hotel room's floor.

"You have a fantastic body," Kenichirou whispered when they were both naked.

"So do you." It wasn't mere flattery: he had a lean runner's physique and very little body hair, which meant that there was nothing to get in Nate's way when he began, with an aggression unusual for him, to kiss and lick the other man's sleek, tawny flesh. He concentrated on Kenichirou's chest at first, sucking on each of his brown nipples in turn, then ran his tongue down his stomach, pushing its tip into the navel on the way before lowering his head further and applying eager lips to the turgid cock.

As he sucked, Nate could feel Kenichirou's hands caressing him. The warmth of his fingertips penetrated Nate's skin. Heat of an entirely different kind pounded away inside both men's groins, insistent, demanding further stimulation—and release.

They took turns sucking one another, then sixty-nined. Nate quickly found himself too turned on to deny himself his favorite pleasure any longer.

"I want you to fuck me," he gasped. "I want you to fuck me hard!"

"Oh, God," his partner choked.

"Don't you want to?"

"Want to? I'm about to come just from thinking about it. Give me a second to calm down. Then I'll fuck you, baby. I'll fuck you as long and as hard as you want!"

"Do you have everything we need?" Nate asked. "You know, rubbers and lube?"

"Yes," Kenichirou said breathlessly. "This wasn't supposed to be *that* kind of a trip, but hell, you never know, so I packed them in my toilet kit, which is...?" He looked around the room. "Oh yes, in the bathroom." He jumped off the bed, hurried naked into the bathroom, and returned with the elegant little leather toilet kit, which he unzipped. He extracted a condom and a tube of gel lubricant.

He could feel himself shaking with excitement as he put on the rubber and smeared some of the gel over his latexed erection. Putting on the protection seemed more of a nuisance than usual, if only because even the few seconds' delay added to his erotic agony.

Nate had already assumed the position, lying on his back with his legs raised and his hands on the backs of his knees, holding his thighs wide apart and mutely, eagerly, offering his ass. Kenichirou knelt on the bed, squeezed a little more of the gel onto his fingertip, and rubbed it against Nate's asshole. He penetrated the opening, gently at first, then more forcefully, until his finger was buried in the satiny flesh. Nate's ass was everything he'd anticipated it would be: warm, slick, receptive, and, if the moans the blond boy now emitted were any indication, definitely aroused by what was being done to it. He slipped a second finger inside the moist heat of Nate's ass alongside the first and finger-fucked him more roughly.

"Kenichirou?" His name came out in a groan.

"What?" Closing his eyes against the tension threatening to burst inside him, he eased his fingers back out. "Am I hurting you, Nate?"

"No! Not at all. It feels great. But I'd rather you.... I mean, I'm ready for your cock. Jesus, I'm more than ready!"

Kenichirou knew what he meant. But *he* wasn't quite ready. He wanted more from Nate than a fast, frantic tumble. He knew that, once he was back home in Frisco, he was going to remember every detail of this encounter and relive it often in his memories. He slipped his finger back in.

"Patience is a virtue," he reminded Nate through clenched teeth.

"But I'm not feeling particularly virtuous right now!" As though to prove his point, Nate reached out blindly, wrapped his hand around the straining length of Kenichirou's erection, and proceeded to stroke it in a steady, coaxing rhythm that brought him to the brink of a premature, explosive release.

"Neither am I," Kenichirou gasped.

"Put this fucking thing in me!" Nate demanded.

Kenichirou leaned in between Nate's whorishly spread thighs, and used one hand to guide the head of his cock between those enticing buttocks, pressing it against the impossibly small and tight-looking anal aperture. But, to his surprise and delight, the puckered flesh yielded to the pressure and he was able to push his prick deep inside. Then, grabbing Nate's wayward hands, Kenichirou yanked them above his head and held his wrists with one hand. With the other, he eased himself inside him, trying like hell to keep in mind that too hard a thrusting was likely to make him come too fast.

Slow and easy, he told himself. Slow and easy does it!

"Oh, pound my hole!" Nate begged. "Pound it!"

"You're not making this any easier for me," Kenichirou teased.

"I don't want it to be easy. I want it to be rough. Oh, fuck me hard!"

Halfway through the fuck, they changed positions. Kenichirou lay flat on his back on the mattress with a pillow stuffed under his head, and Nate squatted over his cock. Nate lowered himself onto it, then began to ride it, flexing his knees and fucking himself greedily on the thick impalement. "Aren't your knees getting tired?" Kenichirou asked after several minutes of nonstop jack hammering. Both men's bodies were wet with sweat.

"Not at all. I do this for a living, you know." Realizing that what he'd just said might be misinterpreted, Nate quickly added, "Not the sex, the squatting. We call them *pliés*, and we do them all the time."

"I call it fucking, and I've never felt anything quite like this," Kenichirou groaned. "You're incredible. You're making my cock feel so hot and hard, you're squeezing and stroking it so fast. Oh my God, I think I'm going to come soon. I can't hold it back."

"Don't hold it back. Shoot it off right in my ass."

"I want you to come, too, Nate. I want to see that beautiful cock of yours blast off. I want you to blast your come all over me. Will you do that for me, baby? Will you let me have your come?"

"Sure."

"What's it going to take to get you to shoot?"

"Not much. Pinch my tits while I jerk myself," Nate pleaded. "Pinch 'em hard!"

Considering how perfect the tight fit of their bodies was, how intense the pleasure they drew from one another, it was remarkable how long they did hold out before their mutual climax. Kenichirou held on to rational thought long enough to recognize he'd rarely felt like this with a first-time trick before. Seconds before he erupted in Nate's ass, he knew he'd rarely feel like this with *any* trick again. Determined to make the most of the experience, he abandoned those last remnants of rational thought and surrendered himself unreservedly to lust.

They lay together naked on the bed, holding hands. Kenichirou's chest and stomach were dappled with Nate's spurted semen.

"Oh, I needed that," Nate declared happily. "I really needed that! Thank you, thank you so much."

"You couldn't be more welcome. So tell me, you beautiful boy. Do you like Asian men?" Kenichirou asked.

"You're the first one I've ever been intimate with," Nate admitted. "You seem to have all the standard parts, in perfect functioning order. I like *you*. You've very handsome and sexy."

"That's the right answer. I do get a little tired of rice queens. You know, the kind of guys who make a big fetish thing about having sex with an Asian man?"

"I could make a big fetish thing about having sex with you, I guess," Nate admitted. "But not because you're an Asian-American. Because you're

gorgeous, you have such a nice cock, and you really know how to fuck." He moved lazily, pressing his body more tightly against the other man's.

"Don't rush off, if you don't have to," Kenichirou pleaded. "Stay here until I have to leave. Come here. Just let me hold you for a little while."

They rested in a close, sweaty embrace, not talking, for perhaps twenty minutes. Finally, though, Kenichirou stirred.

"I have to start getting ready," he said, sounding decidedly unhappy about the fact. "I wish I could get out of that damn dinner."

They showered together, which was a novel experience for Nate, being naked with another guy in the narrow confines of a shower stall with the water pelting down upon them both. Kenichirou obviously enjoyed lathering him up, and their play underneath the warm, wet spray almost led to further sex acts; but time was running out. They contented themselves with giving one another a thorough rubdown with the hotel's towels.

They got dressed, Kenichirou in a very expensive-looking pinstriped suit. He had trouble with his elegant, subtly patterned silk tie. Nate matter-offactly tied it for him.

"Thank you." Kenichirou took advantage of the fact that they were still standing face to face to give Nate a kiss. "You're a man of many talents, I see. Come back to Frisco with me and be my houseboy," he joked. "I'll pay you well, and I can promise you many, many interesting fringe benefits."

"I'll consider your offer if I ever decide I no longer want to dance."

"You can dance in Frisco. You can do any number of physical activities in Frisco."

"Yes, I just had a demonstration of some of them, didn't I? You're not the only one who enjoyed today's performance, you know."

Kenichirou was really a charming man. He exchanged postal addresses, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses with Nate. He hoped to get together with Nate the next time his business brought him to New York. He gave Nate a standing invitation to stay with him and his partner any time Nate visited San Francisco. Reluctantly, he parted from Nate in the hotel's lobby, but not before giving him a final, strong-armed hug and a lingering goodbye kiss, not caring whether any of the hotel's employees or guests observed them.

When Nate got home, he glanced at his wristwatch and was surprised to see that it was still relatively early in the evening. Beau was performing in that night's ballet, which had just begun, and wouldn't get in until later. Nate had the apartment to himself for the time being.

As far as Nate was concerned, it had been a perfect day. He'd danced well in one of his favorite roles. Romuald Ghent had complimented him. He'd

met a nice man and had enjoyed some really hot sex with him. Looking back at the day's activities, Nate couldn't decide which one had given him the most satisfaction: the performance of *Sylvia*, his brief conversation with Ghent afterward, or the shameless flirtation and the equally unashamed recreational sex he'd enjoyed with Kenichirou. Right now, he was inclined to place the most value on the latter. He was now, as far as he was concerned, officially one of Ballet's Bad Boys, just like Dane. "Choirboy," indeed!

He went to bed early but read for a while, propped up by pillows under the sheet and blanket. He browsed through *Eclogues*, reacquainting himself with the work, and noticed how Ghent and Matthias Metzinger had selected only certain sections of the poems and freely adapted them to create their ballet. He went back and read all of Eclogue II—which was of course the notoriously homoerotic one about Corydon's unrequited love for Alexis from start to finish, at times comparing the Latin to the English.

"Et sol crescentis decedens duplicat umbras," he read out loud, savoring the oddness of the syllables on his tongue. "Me tamen urit amor: quis enim modus adsit amoris?" Silently, he read the English: *The setting sun causes the shadows to double their length, and still I burn with love: what limit does love acknowledge?*

"Me tamen urit amor," he repeated aloud, shaping the words more confidently this time. "And still I burn with love."

He closed the book, put it on his nightstand, and was about to turn out his reading light when he happened to look up and see the photograph of Romuald Ghent on the wall facing his bed. Nate smiled at the image.

"Good night, Romuald," he said. Then, with a self-deprecating little giggle, he turned out the light and wriggled nude under the bedclothes in the sudden darkness, getting comfortable. He fell asleep quickly.

Chapter 11 Nate Accepts a Challenge

A FEW days later, the cast lists for *Eclogues* were posted.

The gala night, which would include the world premiere of the new ballet, was eight weeks away. To an outsider, two months might seem like plenty of time in which to prepare a new ballet. In fact, the eight weeks would pass quickly, and *Eclogues*, for the time being, would be relegated to the back burner. Work on the new production would have to coincide with rehearsals and performances of the other ballets in the current season's repertory. The company's dancers and staff would typically spend twelve to fifteen hours a day on works that had to be presented to audiences right away, not two months in the future.

On the dancers' callboard outside the rehearsal studio and down in one corner below the current rehearsal schedules were posted three pages of provisional cast lists for the new work as well as a synopsis of the ballet—a detailed, erudite synopsis that clearly betrayed Romuald Ghent's authorship. The dancers pretended to be casual when they scrutinized the cast lists, but any time their own name leaped out at them, they knew it meant a chance to be noticed and singled out, to prove themselves.

For a one-act ballet, *Eclogues* contained an unusually high number of solo parts, some admittedly more important than others. Each of these had to be assigned to at least two, and preferably three, dancers so that the members of the second or third casts could step in as replacements in the event of illness or injury.

Some of the casting decisions were no-brainers. It had already been decided that Romuald Ghent would perform Silenus and Henri Keller Alexis in the first cast. No one was particularly surprised now to learn that Kitri would take on the leading female role, that of the Sibyl. Cara was cast as Thestylis. Larry and Dane would be Thyrsis and Corydon, respectively.

"Which one is Corydon, again?" Dane asked as he inspected the list on the bulletin board.

"He's the horny bastard who doesn't get the boy," Larry reminded him.

"That figures. Just my luck."

Somewhat more surprising was Romuald's decision to entrust the roles of Chromis, Aglae, and Mnasyllos to three of the company's younger soloists, namely Josh, Bethany, and Nate.

When Kitri ran into Romuald, she confronted him.

"Why do I get to be the old hag?" she demanded mock-irately. "Are you trying to tell me something?"

"Darling, you are the most prima of this company's prima ballerinas, and that's what the part needs," the Englishman told her. "And the Sibyl doesn't have to be old. She just has to be authoritative."

"Authoritative', huh? Is that a polite word for 'over the hill'?"

"Not in your case, and you know it. You'll do it for me, won't you?" Romuald cajoled. "You'll see, you will be magnificent. And wait until you see the sketches for the costume design. I told the designer I want you to look like a goddess. And you will. You always do."

"Oh, all right," Kitri grumbled. She had never been able to resist Romuald's charm.

Shortly afterward, Romuald summoned Josh, Bethany, and Nate to his office for a brief preliminary meeting. In the short time he'd occupied the small space, Romuald had managed to make it look thoroughly "lived in"—in other words, cluttered and chaotic. He had to clear stacks of files and loose papers off the chairs in front of his desk before the three dancers could sit down on them.

"I believe in giving young dancers a chance to show what they can do," he said. "And this ought to be a good opportunity for the three of you to do just that. Your roles aren't big ones, I admit. But they're the kind of roles in which a good performance can help to carry along the evening, while a bad performance can do some damage. And certainly with all this big bow-wow publicity surrounding the gala night, in particular, you should get some nice exposure out of it.

"I was very impressed by your Rosetta in *Pulcinella* the other night, Bethany," he continued, "and by your Eros, Josh, at the matinee of *Sylvia* the other day. And Nate, by your Aminta, of course, as you already know. Seeing those performances helped to shape my decision.

"I expect you all to work hard during the rehearsals for *Eclogues* and in the performances. But I'm sure you won't disappoint me. And working hard doesn't mean that we can't have ourselves some fun, too. Do any of you have any questions?"

Josh, of course, had one. More than one, as it turned out.

"This ballet is about godless pagans, isn't it, Mr. Ghent?"

"Ah, the characters are pagans, yes. I wouldn't necessarily describe them as 'godless'. They worship the gods of ancient Rome, which, after all, are the only ones they know."

"Oh, so this ballet takes place B.C.?"

"Very much so."

Nate attempted to come to Romuald's rescue. "Josh, you and I just did *Sylvia*, in which *all* of the characters are pagans," Nate said with a hint of impatience, "and you impersonated Eros, who is a pagan *deity*. With no harm done. It's all just make-believe." Nate was about to add "for Christ's sake" but caught himself in time.

"When I dance this new fellow, what's his name?"

"Chromis," Nate interjected.

"Oh yeah, Chromis. When I dance him, am I going to have to do anything on stage that would be inconsistent with Christian values?"

Bethany gave Nate an *Oh, brother!* kind of look; but Romuald, Nate noticed, managed to keep a straight face.

"You'll have to flirt with Bethany. That shouldn't be too onerous, I would think," Romuald said smoothly. "And you and she—your characters, I mean, Chromis and Aegle—they fall in love and are engaged to be married at the end. All perfectly respectable, if you ask me."

"Well, that's a relief, Mr. Ghent," Josh declared. "I don't really feel comfortable doing some of that unnatural stuff that you see in some ballets. You know, men lusting after one another and acting out abominations, that sort of thing?"

"I do indeed know," Romuald said dryly in what, Nate assumed, was a masterpiece of understatement.

Josh seemed relieved. "Well, then I guess it will be all right."

As he and Bethany left, Romuald turned to Nate, who was about to follow them.

"Stay here for a minute, Nate, if you would. I'd like to talk to you alone."

"Sure, Mr. Ghent."

"I think you'd better start calling me Romuald, even though I know it's a bit of a mouthful."

"Don't you have a nickname?"

"No. I don't like nicknames. Although I will admit to calling my brother Crispinius 'Spinny', which isn't an altogether inappropriate nickname for a dancer. But no one ever calls me anything except Romuald."

"Oh, dear. I'm afraid you and Dane Stockton will never get along. He likes to give nicknames to everybody and everything. And just between the two of us, he sometimes has been known to give choreographers a hard time. He doesn't mean any harm by it; it's like a silly little game to him."

Romuald smiled. "I have my ways of whipping dancers like Dane into shape. As you may see for yourself before too long. Now, what I wanted to talk to you about. You're probably wondering why I'm giving Chromis, which is the bigger part, to Josh instead of to you."

"Uh, I actually hadn't even thought about it until you mentioned it just now. I'm still getting over the fact that you want me in the first cast. And frankly, Mr. Ghent—I mean, Romuald, I'm not used to having my bosses explain their casting decisions to me. I just do what I'm told and dance what I'm assigned to dance."

"I know exactly what you mean. Don't forget, I was a young soloist once, myself. But personally, I like to keep everything open and aboveboard so there are no misunderstandings and people know where they stand. Josh should be very well suited to Chromis, and it might do that boy some good to do a little harmless sinning—on stage, I mean. Stretch himself as an interpreter, you know what I mean?"

"Yes. I'm sorry Josh gave you such a hard time just now."

"He's quite the relentless proselytizer, isn't he? It's almost enough to make you wish the ancient Romans had never invented crucifixion. Oh, hell, it was rather mean-spirited of me to say that, wasn't it?" Romuald had a twinkle in his eye, though, which suggested he was thoroughly unrepentant.

"Now, as for you. I know Mnasyllos is only a small part, but it will still give you some exposure. You seem to be a hard worker and a quick study. I'd like to take full and perhaps unfair advantage of that. Ah, I assume you, unlike Josh, have no qualms about being the object of other men's lust, on stage?"

"None whatsoever." Nate prayed that he wouldn't blush. Miraculously, he didn't.

"I didn't think so. I remember our conversation that day in the cafeteria. All about you being such a bad boy, a habitué of sex clubs and a depraved seducer of older men." Romuald was teasing him, and a chagrined Nate had to laugh ruefully at his own expense.

"I have a vivid imagination," Nate said in his own defense.

"Good. As I said, I plan to take full advantage of it, and of your other

talents. Because I'd like you to not just dance Mnasyllos. I'd like you to be the understudy for Alexis, too."

"Alexis? But that's Henri Keller's part."

"It still needs an understudy, like any other part. And you'd be perfect for it. I'd like you to bring some of the same qualities to it that you brought to Aminta. I want Alexis to be a ballsy little rent boy with a heart of gold. Do you think you can do that?"

"I don't know much about, ah, rent boys, as you call them, Romuald. But like I said, I think I have a pretty good imagination. And I do like to act all kinds of different parts."

"Which is what I want you to do here; be an actor, not just a dancer. And don't misunderstand me, I'm not handing you anything on a plate. This will mean a lot of hard work on your part. It's not just a question of learning two different roles, Mnasyllos and Alexis, in the same piece, which will be challenging enough. I'll need you to help me work out all the details of their choreography, for Alexis in particular. I don't want to wait until Henri gets here to start rehearsing the scene with Alexis; I'll need you to stand in, so you, Dane, and Larry can rehearse it together and we can work out any problems well ahead of time. And then, of course, once Henri does arrive, I'll need you to help me show him the steps." Romuald smiled. "See what I mean? I'm asking quite a lot of you. Think you'd be up to the challenge?"

"Oh, yes. I'd like to give it a try."

"One other thing to keep in mind. Ordinarily, in a situation like this, the understudy is guaranteed at least one performance, usually near the end of the run. I'd like to be able to give you that, but I can't. Henri is scheduled to appear in all of the performances of *Eclogues*. The administration wants to make the most of having him come here as a guest star. And being realists, I'm sure they feel that having his name on the program will guarantee full houses for this untried little ballet of mine. I hope that doesn't sound too cynical, but it's one of the realities of our business. Anyway, the point I'm making is that I'm asking you to work with me on a role that, in all probability, you won't have a chance to do in an actual performance—at least not right now. If *Eclogues* is a reasonable success, it may be revived next season, and then, of course, I'll have more say in the casting." Romuald paused. "You still game?"

"I'm still game."

"I had a feeling you would be. I'm glad. So that's settled, then."

Nate could barely contain his excitement. He'd been thrilled just to be

cast as Mnasyllos. Now he wasn't going to dance just Mnasyllos, and with Romuald Ghent as Silenus, no less. He was going to work on the role of Alexis with Romuald, too, and rehearse it with Larry and Dane, under Romuald's supervision. And then he, Nate Deventer, was actually going to rehearse with Henri Keller, too.

Oh my God, Nate suddenly realized. *Henri Keller, a big international star, is actually going to be shadowing me to learn the role of Alexis! Not the other way around!*

He had to share his news with somebody, or he'd explode. Luckily, he found Dane and Larry leaving the locker room together.

"Do you guys want to go across the street for coffee?" Nate asked eagerly. "If you do, it's on me. My treat."

"I'm not going to pass up an offer like that," Dane said.

"You look all charged up, Nate," Larry observed. "What's happened?"

"I heard Ghent called Nate into his office for a little private consultation," Dane said. "Oh, don't look so surprised, Choirboy, you know how fast word gets around here. Exactly what went on behind that closed door? Did Ghent drop his pants and show you what color underwear he has on today?"

"You are so crude, Dane, but for once I don't give a damn how crude you can be. So come on," Nate urged. "I'm not going to tell you guys a thing until we're all sitting down."

"Does this mean I still get my free coffee?" Dane wanted to know.

"Yes, and I hope you burn your tongue on it so for once you won't be able to talk."

Over coffee, Nate blurted out his news. He supposed he sounded a bit giddy, but in his ongoing state of euphoria, he didn't care.

"Congratulations," Larry said. "I'm so glad for you, Nate."

Dane looked dubious. "Why? What's there to be so glad about? You *do* know what this means, don't you, Choirboy?"

"Of course I know what it means," Nate gloated. "It means I get to work with Romuald Ghent and Henri Keller."

Dane snickered. "God, you are a starry-eyed little innocent. You're going to be working with Ghent, all right. He'll work you like a dog. You'll bust your ass helping him put the role of Alexis together, and then you'll bust your ass again helping to teach it to Keller. And then Keller will actually go on and dance it and get all the credit. While you're stuck in that bit part, the guy with the unpronounceable name?"

"Mnasyllos. Josh is going to be Chromis, and I'm going to be Mnasyllos."

"Yeah, whatever. God forbid Ghent should ever do a ballet about guys named Tom, Dick, and Harry. 'Chrome and Nasal', huh? Might as well call 'em Walk-On A and Walk-On B."

"Maybe Keller will get sick and have to cancel a performance later on in the run, and I'll be able to go on for him some night," Nate dared to dream.

"That'll never happen," Dane warned him. "We've all danced when we're hurt, sure, but recently Keller's been making a career out of it. He never cancels. He can't afford to. He needs the money, because every cent he makes goes up his nose. Instead of fans waiting at the stage door for him asking for his autograph, he's got drug dealers lying in wait for him waving IOUs and threatening to break one of his legs with a baseball bat if he doesn't pay up. And remember, his lawyers had to pay off that photographer he kicked, too."

"But maybe, now that he's supposedly gone through rehab, Keller is getting his act together again," Larry pointed out. "So he's not likely to miss one of these performances. Especially in a ballet that his boyfriend is choreographing as a showcase for *him*, don't forget."

"Well, I don't care," Nate insisted. "I'm still looking forward to it. I can't wait for the rehearsals to begin."

Dane groaned. "Oh, you sweet little innocent, you! The day you ever hear me say I can't wait for a rehearsal to begin is the day you can take a gun and shoot me."

Chapter 12 Early Impoverished

EXCEPT for occasional fooling around with Beau, Nate seemed to have placed his social and sexual life on hold.

One bright spot was the fact that Kenichirou Hiromitsu stayed in touch with him. Shortly after their tryst, Nate had received a postcard from San Francisco. It had a photo of the Golden Gate Bridge on the front, and on the back, a discreet message: *Dear Nate, thank you so much for an unforgettable afternoon. You are definitely my favorite New Yorker. Hope to see you again soon and spend <u>much more</u> time with you. ("Much more" was heavily underlined.)*

They e-mailed each other back and forth, which gave them a chance to learn more about one another. Kenichirou told Nate about his lover and their life together in California, which, oddly enough, didn't make Nate feel particularly jealous. Nate in turn described his living arrangement with Beau and kept Kenichirou up to date about Romuald Ghent and *Eclogues*.

I forgot to ask you what sort of décor you guys have in your apartment, Kenichirou typed in the course of one of these electronic exchanges.

I wouldn't exactly dignify it by calling it décor, Nate replied. It's pretty minimal. What you might call Early Impoverished. Why do you ask?

Just curious, Kenichirou e-mailed back.

But the San Franciscan had an ulterior motive, as it turned out. A few days later, Nate came home in the late afternoon to find Beau waiting for him and all but bursting with excitement.

"Look what was delivered while you were out," Beau said, showing Nate a large package. "And guess who it's from? Look at the return address. Your boyfriend in San Francisco."

Nate, of course, had told Beau all about Kenichirou. "He's hardly my boyfriend. We had sex *once*, and he has a lover."

"Open it, open it!" Beau urged. "I can't wait to see what's in it. It's heavy."

"I'm surprised you haven't X-rayed it."

Nate opened the shipping carton, removed quantities of packing material, and finally extracted a vaguely cylindrical object that was practically mummified in layers of bubble wrap. There was a card, which he opened first to prolong the suspense and torment Beau a little longer. *Congratulations on landing a part in the new ballet! I hope you like this*, Kenichirou had written. *It might brighten up your Early Impoverished décor*.

Nate unwound layer after layer of bubble wrap and finally exposed an Oriental cloisonné vase, about eighteen inches tall. Against an elaborately worked background pattern of brown, deep mustard yellow, emerald green, and gold, a fierce-looking Chinese-style dragon with an elongated body and claw-tipped feet encircled the vase. Its scales were a brilliant blue outlined in silver.

"Oh my God," Beau exclaimed. "Look at that! Isn't it beautiful?"

"I hope it's not worth as much as it looks."

"Why not?"

"I'm not sure I could accept it."

"Don't be ridiculous. It would be rude not to. And you told me the guy's an importer, isn't he? He probably gets this kind of stuff wholesale. At a discount," the ever-practical Beau suggested.

"It *is* gorgeous," Nate admitted as he admired the dragon's snarling face. Its eyeballs glared, and a red tongue protruded from its open, toothy mouth. "I love it. I'm going to send him an e-mail right now, thanking him. *And* I'm going to sit down and write him a thank-you note to snail mail to him, too." Nate's parents had instilled in their son a respect for such old-fashioned social graces as the hand-written thank you note.

Instead of putting the vase in his bedroom, Nate found a safe, out-ofthe-way place to display it in the living room where Beau and their visitors could also enjoy the sight of it.

He was eager to see Kenichirou again and, yes, to have sex with him again. He fantasized about what it might be like to have a man like Kenichirou as a lover and live with him. But Nate was honest enough with himself to realize that it *was* just a fantasy. The most he could hope for with Kenichirou was a sporadic, long-distance relationship.

When I am going to get my chance? he asked himself. When am I really going to hook up with somebody for more than a one-night stand or a casual thing?

The rehearsals for *Eclogues* began. Nate was excited by being a part of them, but he also experienced that feeling of fragmentation typical of working

on an unfamiliar piece. Mnasyllos appeared near the beginning of the ballet, then was off stage until the finale. Alexis, on the other hand, didn't appear on stage until the penultimate episode, after which he, too, reappeared—in his case, almost at once—in the short final scene. Working on the isolated sequences in which these two characters participated, Nate had little sense of what the ballet was like as a whole. It was like being handed the pieces of only two small sections of a jigsaw puzzle to work on without knowing what the completed picture was supposed to look like.

It was quite possible, in fact, for a dancer to perform a work often without becoming familiar with it as a totality. Nate remembered Cara telling him that it wasn't until she'd sat down and watched a DVD of *Swan Lake*, at home during her pregnancy, that she'd had any idea of what actually went on during that ballet's Act 1.

"Even then, I was tempted to skip to Odette's first entrance," Cara had confessed. "But then I figured, as long as I was stuck at home anyway and barely able to move, I might as well watch the whole thing from the beginning. I caught myself thinking, 'Oh, so *that's* what Larry does in Act 1 when he plays Siegfried, while I'm in my dressing room getting ready to go on in Act 2.""

As was not uncommon, the order in which the individual episodes of the new ballet were worked on in rehearsal had nothing to do with their actual sequence in the piece. Romuald began the rehearsal schedule with some of the scenes involving only the corps. Next, he worked intensively on the scene with the women—the Sibyl, Thestylis, Aegle, and the female corps—which took up most of one week. Kitri and Cara both had good things to say about the experience.

"Oh, Romuald is just a sweetheart to work with," Kitri reported.

"It's going to be such a beautiful scene," Cara said. "It's all very ethereal and mysterious but somehow strong and earthy at the same time. Like a Martha Graham version of the Kingdom of the Shades scene from *La Bayadère*, if you can imagine that," she specified with a laugh. "And Romuald can be so funny. He told us our scene has to be 'all estrogen', to counterbalance what you guys will be doing, which is going to be 'all testosterone'."

("You guys" were Larry, Dane, and Nate, who were all present during this discussion.)

"The whole thing sounds kind of dykey to me," was Dane's predictable comment.

"I wouldn't talk, Dane," Cara warned. "Romuald told us your character, Corydon, is 'the personification of frustrated gay lust'—"

"Yeah, that sounds like something the Professor would say," Dane interjected.

"—and that you and Larry are going to be practically gangbanging Henri Keller up there on stage. Romuald was worried about whether Larry can really get into it. I told him not to worry, my husband is extremely versatile. As a dancer."

"Thanks, babe," Larry said.

"You'll notice that Romuald doesn't have any concerns about Dane's ability to 'get into it'," Kitri said.

Dane grinned. "Or about Nate's?" he asked.

"Romuald thinks Nate is very talented," Kitri said.

"Look at our pretty little Choirboy blush," Dane urged the others with sadistic satisfaction. "I bet the Professor's really looking forward to seeing me fool around with Nate, once we start the rehearsals for *our* scene, I mean. If it's testosterone he wants, it's testosterone he's going to get. Me pretending to ball Nate, huh? If I may be so immodest, it sounds like every middle-aged Englishman's secret fantasy come to life."

Nate finally broke his silence. "You may *not* be immodest, Romuald is *not* middle-aged, and you *are* a pig."

Kitri laughed. "Nate, I couldn't have put it better myself."

Next, Romuald scheduled some more rehearsals for the corps in order to work on additional sequences of the ballet in which no soloists were involved.

"What's he like to work with?" Nate interrogated Beau after the first such rehearsal in which Beau, as a corps boy, took part.

"Okay," Beau replied with tantalizing reticence.

"Yes, but what's he really like?" Nate persisted.

Beau deliberated. "He *is* kind of hot. I'd go to bed with him, if he offered." Which was not exactly the sort of answer Nate had been looking for, however welcome it was to have independent confirmation of his own opinion about Romuald Ghent's desirability.

Chafing at the bit to begin work on *Eclogues* himself, Nate lay in wait until near the end of the next corps rehearsal for the new ballet. Then, under the pretense of meeting up with Beau, he loitered outside the rehearsal room door and stole a peek.

Romuald, as usual a blaze of color in lemon-yellow sweatpants and his orange and blue *Drunken Lion* T-shirt, was working the corps boys and girls

hard. At the moment, he'd just changed his mind about the sequence they were concentrating on: instead of two diagonal lines flowing in opposite directions, away from the alley between them, the dancers would move in the same direction. Demonstrating what he wanted, Romuald showed the dancers which leg to lunge forward on and which arm to make a sweeping gesture with, passing it first beside the body, then over the head. Everything was repeated until the level of coordination was increased to his satisfaction.

"You only have two counts of eight to regroup and get back into those tight diagonal lines," Beau warned a couple of stragglers. "You'll have to run faster."

Finally, Romuald paused to catch his breath, then happened to turn around and see Nate.

"We have a security breach," he joked. "There is a spy among us."

Nate blushed. "Sorry, Mr. Ghent."

"Oh, that's all right. I think we've done enough for today. That was very good work, ladies and gentlemen," Romuald said as he dismissed the corps.

Beau detached himself from the general stampede toward the door to approach Romuald and Nate. "Hey, roomie," Beau said breezily.

Romuald's eyes flicked just a bit when he heard that, and he looked curiously at Beau.

"I thought you might want to join me for lunch," Nate told Beau.

"Sure, roomie. Just let me jump in the shower."

Romuald brushed his tousled hair back from his forehead. "What's this 'roomie' business?" he asked.

"Oh, Nate and I live together," Beau informed him.

"That's always a good way to cut down on expenses."

Damn, Nate thought. Now Romuald is going to assume that Beau is my boyfriend. Nate wasn't sure why such an assumption on Romuald's part should bother him, but he quickly said, "Yes, it's a very nice two-bedroom apartment, and it's near here, so it's been working out perfectly so far."

After Beau excused himself, Romuald seemed to be in no hurry to go anywhere, himself.

"I hope you don't think I was snooping, Mr. Ghent. I was just curious. After all, it wasn't so long ago that I was still in the corps, myself."

"Curiosity is good. But I thought we'd agreed that you should call me Romuald. Or are you still having trouble getting your tongue around it?" the Englishman teased. "It does sound kind of grand. And I'm always afraid I'm going to say 'Romulus' instead."

"Which might not be inappropriate, considering what we're working on. Are you looking forward to starting work on *Eclogues*?"

"I can't wait."

"That's good to hear. Most dancers secretly enjoy work, as long as it's productive work, not frustrating. But they'd rather die than admit it."

"I must not be like most other dancers, then. I'm used to being tired out when I go to bed at night. And nine times out of ten, I like the feeling."

"Nate, I'm *counting* on you not being like most other dancers," Romuald joked. "God knows I've already worked with enough difficult ones to last me a lifetime. Well, I won't hold you up. You'd better run along. We don't want to keep Beau waiting. He seems like a very nice boy."

"Yes, he is, even though I haven't really known him all that long," Nate replied. He was babbling a bit; he knew it, and he hated himself for it. "We're just roommates. Just friends, you understand."

Oh God, he thought, now why did I have to go ahead and say that?

Romuald's eyes gave that curious flicker again. He really did have a most endearing smile, Nate couldn't help observing; it made the tiny creases around his eyes deepen and flex for a moment.

"It's important for a man your age to have friends," he said. "Especially in our line of work. This can be a rather lonely profession sometimes. Anyway, Nate, I'll see you soon."

Beau looked smug when he joined Nate and they went to the cafeteria together.

"I took an extra long time, showering, roomie," he declared.

"Why? So you could check out the other guys?"

"Well, yeah. Not that there was anything I haven't already seen. But really to give you and Ghent a little more time together. Did you have a chance to flirt with him?"

"We talked. I didn't *flirt* with him, Beau."

"Why not? This was your chance. I sure as hell flirted with him, every chance I got all through the rehearsal. I even made him laugh a couple of times when I talked to him during the break. He does have a good sense of humor, I'll say that about him." Beau gave his roommate a mischievous look. "We even talked about you, in fact."

"Beau, I will absolutely kill you."

Beau had taken a mouthful of his tuna salad sandwich. "He's the one who brought it up," he mumbled. "Not me."

Nate waited, neglecting his own food, but no further details were forthcoming.

"Well?" he demanded. "What did he say about me?"

Beau, who still had his mouth full, made inarticulate noises.

"Swallow the fucking thing before I choke you," Nate threatened.

Beau swallowed. "The last man who said that to me was wearing leather at the time, and he had me tied up," he joked. "Jesus, what's with this whole macho trip you're on all of a sudden? All right, all right, already! Ghent asked me if you were as serious as you seem to be. His exact words, before you ask, were 'Your friend Nate seems like the serious type. Is he?' And of course I said yes. And then he said, 'I'm often accused of being too much of an intellectual, myself, so Nate and I ought to get along okay.' And I agreed. Then I told him, 'I'm hardly the intellectual type, myself. I'm the dumb, superficial type that a lot of guys seem to like, for some reason,' and that made him laugh. That was all, because then the break was over and we all got back to work. So if you play up the bookish angle, you might have a crack at a certain good-looking limey daddy type."

"I don't need a daddy," Nate said primly. But secretly, he was excited. Romuald Ghent had been thinking about him, drawing conclusions about him. Romuald Ghent thought he was "serious" and smart. Nate had every intention of living up to that assessment.

Finally, the day Nate had marked on his calendar arrived: he was to begin work on the scene in *Eclogues* that involved Mnasyllos. Nate was so eager to start working with Romuald Ghent that he arrived at the rehearsal room more than half an hour early. This, at least, gave him time for a thorough stretching and warm-up.

Nate stretched out on the floor and began his preferred series of warmup exercises, slowly warming his muscles, first opening those around the spine and between the shoulder blades, the ones needed to support every gesture of the upper body and the arms. Next, he located the center of gravity deep within his pelvis, the point of balance needed to sustain a body in motion. Finally, he concentrated on breathing from the diaphragm, picturing the oxygen drawn in with each inhalation filling not only his lungs but flowing through his limbs.

This careful preparation paid off: by the time Josh and Bethany joined him and went through their own more concentrated warm-up routines, Nate's residual nervousness had been replaced by a feeling of relaxation and readiness. Soon Romuald showed up and greeted his dancers, and the four of them got to work.

A rehearsal pianist played the piano reduction of Matthias Metzinger's score, which, as far as one could tell from hearing it in this format, was atonal, spikily percussive, and yet oddly lyrical at times.

Romuald began to work with his three young dancers on the second scene of the ballet, blocking out the action and suggesting movements.

"Try to resist the temptation to do conventional *port de bras* and wave your arms about," he advised his trio of young dancers. "Simpler is always better. One deliberate, well-motivated gesture is stronger than all that generic waving."

Nate was impressed by Romuald's concentration but also by his openmindedness. Every move the dancers executed helped the choreographer to realize and refine what was in his mind by showing him an alternative. Without looking exactly wrong to him, a step, pose, or gesture could still look far from ideal. Romuald was ready, indeed eager, to discard his preconceptions whenever something better came up. Every change he suggested guided the dancers closer to what he imagined them doing in the scene.

The action was simple. The drunken Silenus staggered on stage, lay down, and had barely begun sleeping it off when the two mischievous boys, Chromis and Mnasyllos, and the girl, Aegle, happened to come upon him. They tied Silenus up with his own discarded garlands of vines and painted his face with mulberry juice. When Silenus woke up and found himself in this plight, he was amused rather than offended and agreed to dance for the three young people as the price of being set free. Aegle joined him in his dance, flirting with and teasing him. This led to a boisterous competition between Chromis and Mnasyllos, who vied for Aegle's attention. Aegle seemed to prefer Chromis. A somewhat downcast Mnasyllos was consoled by Silenus.

The property department had already created some quite convincinglooking vines made from flexible wire coated with green plastic and then wrapped with florist's tape, also green, and with artificial leaves inserted at irregular intervals. Josh and Nate experimented with them and quickly found realistic ways of holding and manipulating them.

As far as Nate was concerned, this was a young gay male dancer's wet dream: tying up Romuald Ghent and forcing him to do one's bidding.

The bunch of artificial mulberries, which was Aegle's weapon, proved to be a bit more treacherous in use: hidden among the plastic berries was a tiny rubber squeeze bulb loaded with purplish-red "mulberry juice" created by the makeup department. The first time Bethany tried out the device, she squeezed the bulb too forcefully, and the full load of "juice" spurted out in a broad spray.

"Oh, shit!" Bethany squealed as Romuald's face was soaked rather than daubed. "I am so sorry, Mr. Ghent!"

Romuald, however, thought it was hilarious: giggling, he ran to the nearest mirrored wall to inspect himself and only then reached for a towel.

"I got some of it in my mouth," he reported, "and it does taste absolutely disgusting. Maybe we can get them to use raspberry jam instead!"

Nate was startled by how easily Romuald, a refined, disciplined, softspoken gay man, could transform himself into a drunken heterosexual lecher who was obviously turned on by being teased by a pretty young girl.

"When you lean over me," he coached Bethany at one point, "make sure I get a good look at your bosom. Just shove it right in my face."

"I don't really have any boobs," Bethany said. Like most ballerinas, she was definitely on the flat-chested side.

"Nonsense. You are exquisite-looking, my dear," Romuald assured her, sounding less and less like a gay man, Nate couldn't help thinking. "Shove everything you've got into my face. Remember that Silenus is a horny old fart who desperately needs a cheap thrill. And Aegle may be a virgin, but she's completely boy-crazy. She flirts with the old man because she knows it turns the two young guys on."

The four of them experimented with various ways of indicating this.

"It's sexual, sure, but it's *adolescent* sexual," Romuald insisted. "It's playful and innocent, all very wink-wink, nudge-nudge, giggle-giggle. Slap and tickle, as we say where I come from. There's none of all that heavy, depressing baggage that we old geezers insist on dragging into it."

Josh, somewhat to Nate's surprise, immediately understood what Romuald was getting at and got into the spirit of the thing. No doubt relieved that he wasn't expected to mime any unnatural acts onstage, Josh seemed to have no problem pretending to be a horny heterosexual adolescent, albeit one with ultimately honorable intentions.

Romuald worked intensively with Bethany, observing and correcting the way she held her hands, wrists, and fingers, questioning the smallest components of every movement and modifying them as necessary to get the effect he wanted. He showed her how to lengthen her line by stretching her arms fully in every position.

"Keep it graceful, so there's a nice contrast with the clunkier movements of the two boys and the old sot," he urged. "But don't make it too ballerina-ish. She's a country gal who milks the cows and feeds the chickens."

While the others took a break, Romuald drew Nate aside to work on the moment at the end of the scene when Silenus gave the disappointed Mnasyllos a reassuring little hug.

"It's supposed to be man-to-man but paternal and chaste," Romuald explained. "We don't want the audience to think I'm putting the make on you. The homosexual stuff comes later on in the ballet."

Too bad, Nate thought. He wouldn't have been altogether averse to acting out some "homosexual stuff" at this very moment, alone in the rehearsal room with Romuald.

They played around with it, trying the interaction in various ways, until finally they decided upon an embrace that would look suitably platonic to the audience.

"You do catch on fast," Romuald commented, looking and sounding pleased.

Oh, you have no idea! Nate wanted to say. He was sure there was a whole repertory of non-dance moves that Romuald could teach him, one on one like this, only in the privacy of a bedroom. Instead, Nate merely replied, "This is a fun scene to dance. I'm sure the audience will like it."

By the time the rehearsal ended, Nate was hooked, and he was honest enough with himself to admit it. He had a crush on Romuald Ghent. And for once, a young dancer's idol turned out *not* to have feet of clay. Ghent had not only lived up to Nate's expectations, he had surpassed them.

Nate continued to mark his calendar, but it wasn't really necessary: he had committed the schedule of rehearsals for *Eclogues* to memory. As far as Nate was concerned, the other ballets in the season's repertory were just business as usual. *Eclogues* was the work that really mattered.

Chapter 13 *Delicias Domini*

ONE morning two weeks later, Romuald sequestered himself in a rehearsal room with Larry, Dane, and Nate and a rehearsal pianist to begin work on the scene involving Thyrsis, Corydon, and Alexis. Romuald and the pianist each had his own copy of the piano reduction score of the ballet, which had already been issued by a German musical publishing house; the difference was that the pianist's score was still relatively pristine, whereas the dog-eared pages of Romuald's copy were dense with penciled notes.

Romuald consulted this document, then addressed Dane first.

"You're on stage alone at first, Dane, and you're supposed to be taking care of your farm chores, but your heart isn't in it because you're suffering from unrequited love for Alexis."

"Oh Jesus, here comes the lecture," Dane muttered. "Is any of this going to be on the final exam?"

Romuald, far from being offended, looked amused. "All right, I'll cut it short. So you mope about. You *can* mope about, can't you?"

"Sure."

Romuald asked the pianist to play the music for Corydon's solo.

"Well, it's Music to Mope By, that's for sure," Larry said.

Dane was thrown by the subtle rhythmic shifts in the music. "There's no pulse, Romuald," he complained. "There's nothing for me to latch on to. It's undanceable."

"Undanceable, eh? I believe they said the same thing about Adolphe Adam's score for *Giselle*, back in 1841," Romuald joked. "There's a pulse, if you listen for it."

He had the pianist repeat the passage, slowing the tempo and exaggerating the rhythms and the accents for Dane's benefit. The pianist continued to play the music that way, over and over again, while Romuald guided Dane through the movements and gestures he had in mind. Once this foundation had been laid, the two men began to refine the solo with the pianist gradually bringing the music back up to speed. Larry and Nate observed this laborious process from the sidelines. Nate once again marveled at Dane's ability to grasp the dramatic essence of a role almost at once, seemingly instinctively. Even while his movements were still tentative, he projected a combination of languor and restlessness that was just right for his role.

"Mopety mopety mope," Dane chanted, accompanying his steps with an improvised song made up of nonsense words the first time he went through the solo on his own, with Romuald standing back to watch him. "Mopety mopety mope, and one and two and *turn*. Oh, poor little me so horny, mopety mope."

"We should pencil those words into the score," Romuald joked. "It seems to be helping."

"Dane always hums and sings when he really gets going in a rehearsal," Larry explained. "It drives some people crazy, Romuald, but you'll get used to it."

After several more repetitions, Romuald was satisfied for the time being and told Dane to take a break. Dane grabbed a towel, wiped his face with it, then slung it about his neck while he drank some bottled water.

"Now let's give Alexis's entrance a try, shall we? So Corydon is already on stage. Nate, you come running on, and Thyrsis follows you, only slower, because he's older than you and can't run as fast. I know the feeling myself, only too well," Romuald added wryly. "So you see Corydon and you greet him, and then Thyrsis catches up with you and tries to engage you in a conversation, which of course turns into a sexy little dance for the two of you. But you soon get bored and keep looking over at Corydon, because you see *him* looking at *you*. And finally you break free of Thyrsis and go over to Corydon and flirt with him."

"Prick-tease him, you mean?" Dane asked. "Nate ought to be good at that."

"I am not a prick teaser," Nate protested.

"Gentlemen," Romuald said, fighting back a smile. "Can we get our minds off sex for a moment and concentrate on the matter at hand? So, to back up a little. Nate, you come running on. It's a hot summer day, the kind of day when you feel rather lazy, but even though you're already all hot and sweaty it feels good to be outdoors and have the hot sun beating down on you. You've spent the night with your lover, Thyrsis, an older man who's given you a present and made a big fuss over you, and the two of you have made love."

"Ah, this is what you call getting our minds off sex?" Dane asked.

"It's just the general mood we're trying to create. So Nate, you've woken up after a warm summer night of lovemaking, and now you're restless, you're young and thoughtless and bursting with energy, you're ready for anything, even though it's such a hot day. You come running on—"

"Wait a minute, Romuald," Larry said. "This seems like an awful lot to expect Nate to convey just by running onto the stage."

"I don't want you to mime it, Nate. It's just a sort of a back story for the character, as they say. Keep some of it in your head, let it influence what you do with your body, and it'll come out all right. For example." Romuald turned his back on the three men, walked to the far end of the room, then turned to face them again. He caught the pianist's eye and nodded to him. "You could do something like this, Nate." As the pianist began to play Alexis's entrance music, which had all the animation and rhythmic pulse one could wish for, Romuald suddenly dashed across the room back toward the other three dancers.

Nate, Dane, and Larry all gaped at him. Romuald had executed a simple enough movement, but what he did with it artistically was worthy of comparison with that virtuoso demonstration of barrel rolls he'd given on that memorable morning in class. While Romuald was in motion, he looked about sixteen years old. His face was young, his upraised arms were young, and his body was that of an athletic adolescent buoyed up by overflowing nervous energy. It was as though a bolt of lightning had penetrated the ceiling and lit up the entire room in a sudden flash.

"Ah, could you show us that again?" Larry asked after Romuald had come to a halt beside them.

"Sure. It's only one possibility, Nate. Or you could do it more like this." Romuald ran toward the far end of the room, then spun around weightlessly on the ball of one foot and darted back, faun-like, toward their little group.

This time he looked about fourteen—ancient Greek and Roman jailbait, Nate thought, assuming the ancient Greeks and Romans had such a concept as jailbait, which Nate doubted. *I could never do that in a million years*, he told himself with a mixture of admiration and despair.

Romuald, whose breathing had barely accelerated as a result of his exertions, caught the looks on Dane and Larry's faces. He grinned. "What's the matter? Did you think the old man couldn't do it anymore? Thought he was all talk and no action, eh?"

"You're the one who should be dancing Alexis," Nate blurted out.

"You haven't seen what I have in mind for Alexis to do later on," Romuald warned. "It's going to be pretty strenuous. Now come on, Nate, you give it a try."

Nate, feeling hopelessly mature and earthbound, dutifully crisscrossed the room, back and forth, over and over again, under Romuald's supervision while the pianist played Alexis's entrance music over and over again.

"It's getting there," Romuald announced cheerfully at precisely the point at which Nate was ready to give up. "Take a breather, Nate. Now Larry, this is how you might come on, chasing after Alexis."

Romuald evidently didn't need a breather, even though he'd just followed Nate back and forth, step by step. He demonstrated what he had in mind for Larry's benefit, and Larry quickly caught on.

Dane, true to form, had slumped down onto the floor beside Nate as though he had been working as hard as the others instead of merely observing. After putting Larry through his paces, Romuald had Nate get up and join them. Romuald began to show them how he envisioned the interplay between Thyrsis and Alexis, walking Larry and Nate through it.

Before Nate realized it, the three of them had been at it for the better part of an hour. Dane, of course, was now flat on his back on the floor with the back of his head cushioned by the towel slung around his neck; he was looking up at the ceiling, ready to doze off.

"Okay," Romuald said, wiping perspiration from his face. "Now you two take a break, fifteen or twenty minutes, all right? And, you, Dane—wake up, Dane!—Dane, you and I will work on how Corydon reacts to what Thyrsis and Alexis just did."

"Huh?" Dane asked as he slowly roused himself and stood up. "I thought Corydon just stands there watching them?"

"He observes them, Dane, but you can't just stand there. You have to react. And it's still a ballet. That means you do have to move, even while you're supposedly just standing there and watching."

"Lot of fucking pretentious nonsense, if you ask me!" was what Nate and Larry heard Dane grumbling under his breath as they left the rehearsal room. But Dane had moved to Romuald's side, ready to be put to work by this seemingly tireless taskmaster.

Larry and Nate sat down in the cafeteria and drank, bottled water for Larry, orange juice for Nate.

"So, what do you think so far?" Larry asked.

"It's really interesting."

"Ghent knows what he wants, which is more than I can say about some of the choreographers I've worked with," Larry said. "You know, the kind who basically just make it up as they go along and then can't ever seem to make their minds up? But Ghent isn't inflexible about it. He seems to be willing to give us a lot of leeway, and he wants our input."

They returned to the rehearsal room to find Romuald and Dane locked in an embrace—or, more accurately, a male/male variant of the supported arabesque familiar from countless male/female *pas de deux*. The major difference was that Romuald, who was the one executing the arabesque, was balancing himself on the ball of one bare foot, not *en pointe* in a ballerina's toe shoe. Dane, standing behind him, was holding him by the hips. Both men were perspiring profusely.

Larry couldn't resist. "Get a room, you two."

Romuald grinned at him. "You're back just in time. I'm showing Dane how I want him to support Alexis."

"It looks like you've been showing him a lot more than that."

"I have. We've worked out quite a bit together. Come on, Dane, let's do it all over again. From Rehearsal Number 170," Romuald added for the pianist's benefit. "Okay? And you watch this, Nate. Then if Dane's not too tired, you can try it with him."

Dane and Romuald encircled one another with a restless energy, grappling, separating, then grappling again, in a way that Nate had to admit was... well, there was no point in denying it: Nate found it a turn-on. And it developed into even more of a turn-on when a flushed and panting Dane shed his sweat-soaked shirt and continued to dance with Romuald while stripped to the waist.

"Oh, I do like what they're doing now, don't you?" Larry said to Nate in an undertone. "It's very intense, very suggestive."

"It does look kind of hot," Nate admitted.

"But macho hot, not twinkie hot, if you'll pardon the expression," Larry said with a laugh. "Not that I know very much about such things, you understand. All I know about it is what I hear secondhand from Dane."

"Who's probably a reliable enough source," Nate retorted.

"What are you two whispering about?" Romuald asked as he writhed seductively in Dane's strong-armed embrace.

"We like what you two are doing," Nate told him. "It looks good from here."

"That's good, because now it's your turn, Choirboy." Dane broke away from Romuald, and Nate, feeling just a bit shy, went over to take Romuald's place.

Nate did his best to imitate what he had just seen Romuald do, but the elaborate moves tested even his good memory, and Romuald, who hovered

nearby, frequently stepped in closer to make adjustments.

Finally, even Romuald began to get a bit winded and suggested a brief break. Dane, who was positioned behind Nate at the time with his arms around Nate's waist, didn't relinquish him. He held on to Nate, then matterof-factly pushed both of his hands under the loose-dangling hem of Nate's Tshirt and slid them up Nate's stomach to his chest. Dane cupped Nate's pecs in his palms and thumbed Nate's nipples. Nate squirmed free of him.

"Cut it out, Dane," he warned.

Dane grinned. "That doesn't sound like something this horny kid, Alexis, would say to Corydon."

"Save it for when Mr. Keller gets here."

Romuald, who had observed this bit of byplay, spoke up. "Yes, you might try to curb your obvious enthusiasm a little, Dane."

"I'm just trying to stay in character, Professor."

"Don't try so hard," Romuald said dryly. "You seem to be functioning quite well on pure instinct alone."

After the break, they repeated everything they had done up until now and built upon it. Nate ran "on stage" with Larry in pursuit of him. Nate and Larry danced together, but this time it was a *pas de trois*, with Dane doing a slow-motion prowl on his side of the rehearsal room floor, observing them enviously, all three men engaging in intermittent eye contact. They repeated the action, sometimes *in toto*, sometimes breaking it up into its component parts, with Romuald stepping in to act out whichever role—Thyrsis, Alexis, Corydon—he wanted to demonstrate at the moment.

"I don't seem to be doing anything that could be called real dancing," Dane half-observed, half-complained.

"Wait until after lunch," Romuald predicted. "Then you'll have a chance to work up a real sweat."

Larry, Nate, and Dane went to lunch together. They invited Romuald to accompany them, but he pleaded a prior engagement: he had a few things to discuss with Lloyd Walker.

"Give me a rain check?" he asked.

Nate waited until Romuald was out of earshot before he let Dane have it.

"I can't believe you called Romuald 'Professor' to his face."

"So what? He didn't seem to mind. I think he kind of liked it. It *is* a term of respect, after all."

"And groping me in front of him like that. Have you no shame?"

"Very little," Dane boasted. "I thought we'd already established that, long ago. You have nice tits, by the way."

"Well, the next time you pull a stunt like that, I'm going to haul off and let you have it, a swift kick right in the nuts," Nate promised. "We'll see how much 'real dancing' you'll be able to do then."

Larry laughed. "I had a feeling these rehearsals were going to be interesting."

"Like you've never copped a feel with some pretty little ballerina during a rehearsal, Larry," Dane scoffed, "under the pretense of 'steadying' her, as I've heard you put it. Do you want me to start naming names?"

"Not in front of the child, Dane," Larry protested.

"I'm not a child," Nate insisted. "You guys can talk your guy stuff in front of me."

"And have the Professor accuse me of corrupting you? Not me," Dane said. "You'd better cool it, Choirboy, or we'll soon be calling you 'Boy Toy' instead."

After lunch, they resumed work with renewed energy.

They had to deal with the issue of male/male partnering, which, in this context, had nothing to do with domestic partnership or gay marriage.

When a male dancer partnered a ballerina in a conventional ballet, things could already get complicated enough. Without constant practice, the man could hold the woman too tightly or not tightly enough, stand too close to give her the proper support or too far away. She could jump without pushing up from the stage floor enough, in which case he would find himself straining to lift her dead weight, or she could push in the wrong direction—which was any direction other than the precise trajectory he expected her to take—and fly right out of his hands. Ballerinas had been known, in the worse-case scenario, to be dropped onto the floor with a thud, resulting not only in humiliation and bruising but in possible serious injury. It happened occasionally during rehearsal and had been to known to happen, rarely, but indelibly, during actual performance.

This was why any ballerina would be the first to admit that a good partner was worth his weight in gold while a poor one was a ballerina's worst nightmare.

Some dancers obsessed about the costumes they were required to wear, and sometimes with good reason. A poorly designed costume could not only restrict movement, it might even be hazardous.

Ballet skirts, whether tutus or full, loose-hanging skirts, did not always

fit straight into the waist. Most of them, including all tutu skirts, started at the base of a basque, the stretch of bodice between the waist and the top of the hip, proportional in length to each dancer's torso. Although this extra length of bodice flattered the dancer's shape and line, it was more functional than decorative. Without it, there would be no place for a man to put his hands while partnering, nowhere they could rest, no way for him to guide and support the woman at her waist.

Even in a traditional male/female *pas de deux* with traditional ballet costumes, the male partner's attitude had to be "do whatever you have to do." If he had to grab the ballerina between her legs, taking a firm hold on her inner thighs or her crotch to support her and prevent her from wobbling (let alone taking a tumble), then so be it. Gay or straight, he groped her as intimately as any husband or lover might, if he had to, to keep things going. From the audience's perspective, of course, it all had to look graceful and elegant and effortless.

Male dancers, of course, did not wear costumes incorporating basques. (Well, at least not usually. Given some of the bizarre ideas some avant-garde costume designers came up with, anything was possible!)

By its very nature, then, male/male partnering tended to require even more in the way of sheer gripping, especially when the dancers were scantily costumed.

All four men were well aware of the potential problems. Nate remembered hearing Larry tell the story more than once of how he and Pau Miró had been "tussling," as Larry put it, in an abstract ballet when Pau had slipped and, to steady himself, had seized a fistful of Larry's tights. The audience had been regaled by the sound and sight of a ripping seam as the crotch of the tights had split wide open. Unfazed, Larry had finished the piece with his dance belt visible through the gap in his costume. Off stage, Pau had apologized profusely, although Larry just laughed it off.

"At the next performance, he was afraid to touch me," Larry had told Nate. "I mean, afraid to touch me *at all*! We looked like a horny, aggressive gay guy and a terrified homophobe, with me chasing him all over the stage and having my way with him against his will."

Larry turned this anecdote into a learning experience. He demonstrated, for Nate's benefit, what he called "the knee test": stretching each of the seams in a pair of tights across his bent knee in turn to make sure none of the stitches was likely to give way readily.

"If they don't look or feel as though they'll hold up no matter what contortions you get yourself into," Larry warned, "then toss 'em and try another pair. Or have the wardrobe department run 'em through the sewing machine to put in an extra row of stitches."

Nate wondered if Dane, who had also heard this story on numerous occasions, was thinking of it now himself as he scrutinized what he, Larry, and Nate were wearing. Their loose-fitting practice clothes provided a deceptive illusion of security: the T-shirts and sweatshirts at least gave blindly searching fingers *something* to grip in a pinch.

"These costumes we'll be wearing," Dane said to Romuald. "What are they going to look like, again?"

"Skintight stretchy ankle tights with abstract patterns silk-screened onto them," Romuald explained.

"That's all?"

"That's all. Bare torsos, bare feet-oh, and the facial makeup, of course."

"So we'll be wearing more above the neck than below it," Larry quipped. "That's fine with me. I like to be as unencumbered as possible. I'd go out there commando if I could get away with it."

"Yeah, but this means there won't be anything to grab on to," Dane pointed out. "Nothing sewn onto the tights around the waist, huh? And no stiffness at all in the material?"

"I'm afraid not," Romuald confirmed. "Why? Is that going to be a problem?"

"Only to the extent that it means there's going to have to be a lot of skin grabbing hold of skin, and it's going to get hot and sweaty and slippery out there."

Listening to this discussion, Nate had to give Dane credit: Nate wouldn't have thought Dane capable of uttering something like *stiffness* without sniggering or making a dirty joke out of it.

"Yes, you won't be able to fake it," Romuald agreed. "There'll have to be real body contact."

"Well, if we get desperate and start slipping and sliding around on top of each other too much, we can always grab each other by the waistband and give each other wedgies." Dane grinned. "Let's get down to work."

Before long, in the interests of comfort and to prevent themselves from getting overheated, all four men had shed not only their footwear but their shirts. Being around Larry and Dane both stripped to the waist was bad enough. After his first, furtive glimpse of a topless Romuald Ghent, whose sculpted pecs and shoulder muscles and biceps rivaled those of the younger men, Nate had to tell himself to keep his mind *off* sex and *on* the task at hand.

Sure enough, it wasn't long before, in the course of executing a complicated spin, Nate had to clap his hand around Dane's forearm and wrist and squeeze tight in order to maintain his grip on the other man, to say nothing of his own balance.

"Ow! Not so fucking hard, Choirboy!" Dane exclaimed. "Sniff the fruit, don't bruise it!"

"Sorry."

"The last time a guy grabbed me like that, he left fifty bucks on the nightstand afterward," Dane quipped.

"You guys look like a couple of trapeze artists, grabbing onto each other in mid-air," Larry pointed out. "And you *sound* like it, too. You can hear the smacks when you grab each other, over the music."

"The orchestra will be louder than the piano," Dane insisted. "It'll cover it up. And if it doesn't, tough shit. I'd rather have the audience hear *this* than see and hear one of us bouncing off the floor."

They all got so caught up in what they were doing that their next break became a "working break:" the foursome stood around drinking bottled water and discussing the scene.

"In the poem, you see, Corydon keeps vacillating between this sort of blustery self-confidence and pessimism," Romuald remarked. "He keeps listing all the reasons why Alexis should give in to him, but he still thinks it's hopeless. At the end he even tells himself to stop wasting his time and torturing himself: if Alexis doesn't come across, he can always find some other boy who will. But of course, he's 'protesting too much': the reader doesn't believe him—"

"For God's sake, Romuald, spare me the lecture, will you?" Dane pleaded. "Just tell me what kind of a dude this is that you want me to play. I'm a horny farmer who likes to fuck the pretty young farm boys. Is that it, in a nutshell?"

"Ah, yes."

"Okay. Now, what *kind* of a farmer am I? Am I just a dumb, shitkicking hick or something a little more sophisticated, like one of those weekend country gentlemen you see in the gardening shows on TV?"

"Somewhere in the middle, I think."

Nate spoke up. "Corydon brags about how his cows and lambs are as good as the other farmers' livestock, or better. And he finally beats up on himself for neglecting his chores, because he's been moping about Alexis. And don't forget he tells us he can play the panpipes, and he wins the singing contest, I mean the dancing contest. So he must be a hard-working and smart farmer. And not stupid, or physically clumsy."

"He does call himself *rusticus* at one point," Romuald said, "which literally means 'a rustic', which we'd likely translate as 'hick' or 'yokel'—"

"But he's putting himself down when he says that," Nate argued, completing Romuald's sentence for him. "He tells himself, 'Even though I'm not so bad-looking and I have all these things to offer, why would Alexis be interested in *me*?" The guy's got some self-esteem issues he needs to work through."

"Okay, okay," Dane said. "I can see you two intellectuals are determined to gang up on me. But now I've got something I can work with, at least. Now show me some more of the steps."

They resumed work, quickly working up a mutual sweat.

"You're not gay enough, Dane," Romuald diagnosed at one point, which sent the other three men into gales of laughter. "No, seriously, look at how Larry does it. How he looks at Nate and touches him. They've already slept together—I mean, their *characters* have slept together, in the ballet!— and it shows. So when Corydon sees that, he's envious, and he wants to have the same thing."

"Things have come to a pretty pass when the straight dude has to show me how to come on to another guy," Dane complained.

Larry laughed. "I'm just indulging in my secret, depraved innermost fantasies. About Nate."

"Me, too," Nate said. "I'd love to go to bed with Larry."

"I'm glad Josh isn't here to hear all this," Dane said. "We wouldn't get just a lecture, we'd get a sermon. Okay, let me try it again. You want gay? I'll show you gay." And he was as good as his word. By the time Romuald finally called it quits for the day, Nate felt exhausted yet strangely exhilarated, and he also felt as though he'd been manhandled, virtually nonstop, by Dane in a way that was every bit as physically intimate as actual sex.

"Good workout, Choirboy," was Dane's own breezy assessment. "Can't wait to do it again tomorrow!"

Dane, somewhat to Nate's surprise, was beginning to "get into" Corydon, showing more involvement than he had in rehearsals for some of his other roles. He borrowed Nate's copy of the *Eclogues* and read the parts involving Corydon, which Nate pointed out to him. Dane wasn't particularly moved by Corydon's plight.

"The son of a bitch spends an awful lot of time feeling sorry for himself, doesn't he?" he remarked. "What a downer. Guess I can make something out of that, though." He looked at Nate dubiously. "Can you actually read all this stuff on the left side?" he asked, referring to the Latin text.

"Sure," Nate boasted. "My dad teaches this stuff, remember?" He took the book back and read aloud the opening lines of Eclogue II. "Formosum pastor Corydon ardebat Alexin, delicias domini, nec quid speraret habebat."

"Jesus fucking Christ," Dane exclaimed. "I can't believe you can actually spout off that stuff like that."

"Aw, come off it, Dane," Nate retorted. "You're not as uneducated as you pretend to be. You only act dumb sometimes so you don't scare off all those blue-collar types you like to trick with."

Dane laughed. "I can see I've got to be careful around you. You can see right through me, can't you?"

"You're as transparent as glass. But really, Dane, think about it. *Delicias domini*; that means Alexis was 'his master's delight'. Isn't it wonderful how Romuald has managed to create a whole character out of just those few words?"

"You've really got the hots for the Professor, don't you?"

"I respect him," Nate protested, refusing to rise to the bait. "Which doesn't mean I don't find him attractive. He's very handsome and athletic. And that's just on the purely physical level."

"So what's he got that I don't? Besides his brain?"

"I don't know. There's a certain vulnerability about him that I find appealing."

"Vulnerability, huh? I can do vulnerable, if that's what you want."

"You're going to have to when you play Corydon," Nate pointed out. "That's how I see him, in fact. He's this big, butch, self-confident number outwardly who's all soft and gooey on the inside—but only when Alexis is around. Or when he's all by himself, so his guard is down and he can let his real feelings come out."

"Interesting. You've got the makings of a decent drama coach, Choirboy."

Dane was also the one who asked Romuald to show them the sketches for the costume designs. Having confirmed to his satisfaction that "we're all going to be practically naked," as he somewhat inaccurately put it, Dane got into the habit of stripping down to stretchy bike shorts or ankle-length tights during the rehearsals to approximate the same degree of semi-nudity as the costumes. His colleagues followed suit. The rehearsals began to get intensely physical, and Nate had to admit that, at odd moments here and there, he found himself getting turned on. He refused to feel guilty about this and told himself there was no reason why he shouldn't enjoy his work.

During one such rehearsal, Romuald worked with him on Alexis's solo.

Alexis stood between Thyrsis and Corydon, striking poses and doing balances and turns. The idea was that he was showing off for the two men, who stood there admiring him; but in practice, it looked, well, fey. And the harder Nate worked to make what he was doing look natural, and the more desperate Larry and Dane became in their efforts to make their characters react plausibly to Nate's little virtuoso display, the more fey it looked.

Romuald was the first to articulate what all four of them were thinking.

"It's not working, is it? It's not very good. The whole basic idea, I mean, not how you're executing it, Nate."

"Romuald, it looks like a queer version of the Rose Adagio from *Sleeping Beauty*," Dane complained. "You might as well put Nate *en pointe* in toe shoes and a friggin' tutu."

"It is a bit self-conscious-looking," Larry agreed. "Not terribly spontaneous."

Romuald turned to Nate. "What do you think, Nate? After all, you're the one who's doing it." When Nate hesitated, Romuald made a dismissive gesture and went on. "Don't worry about offending me. I want to know what you really think. If you think it sucks, then tell me it sucks."

"Romuald, I'm afraid it sucks. It sucks big time."

Romuald, to Nate's relief, only laughed. "Okay, we're all agreed. It sucks. So I say we scrap it and try to come up with something else."

They experimented and improvised and eventually came up with an alternative, in which Alexis, in an excess of youthful high spirits, engaged each of the other men in turn in some boisterous horseplay. Thyrsis responded to this with a sort of indulgent amusement, but Corydon began to take it more seriously, mistaking Alexis's playfulness for a growing interest in him. This led more logically into the big *pas de deux* for Corydon and Alexis, during which, according to the stage directions in the score, Thyrsis left the stage.

But now Larry, caught up in the action and in his character, was thinking more analytically and logically, too.

"But *why* do I walk off stage and leave the two of them alone to fool around with each other?" he asked Romuald. "And then, after the *pas de deux*, I come wandering back to reclaim Alexis. What is he, a package I left behind and that I suddenly remember to go back and pick up? Aren't I jealous?"

"You should be boiling mad with jealousy, Larry," Dane opined,

"because the little bitch is throwing himself at me, deliberately trying to get me all hot and bothered."

"Alexis does not ever *throw* himself at you, Dane," Nate protested.

"We're rubbing up against each other the whole time. What do you call it, Choirboy?"

"He's sort of... testing his own masculinity, using Corydon as the guinea pig. Taking the aggressive role in a flirtation with another man, maybe for the first time in his life. Because up until now, he's always been the sex object, and the other guys have pursued him. Anyhow, that's how I see it," Nate said.

Dane wasn't quite buying it. "I still call it prick-teasing. What do you think, Romuald? You haven't said anything."

"That's because I think you men are doing a good job of working it out among yourselves."

"We still haven't solved the question of why I go off and then come back," Larry pointed out.

"Maybe you have urgent farm business to attend to," Nate joked. "Or maybe you're deliberately testing Alexis to see how far he'll go behind your back."

"Which is pretty far, judging from the choreography," Dane teased Romuald.

"Or Thyrsis trusts Alexis so he thinks nothing of leaving him alone with Corydon," Nate suggested.

"In which case he's a sucker as well as a sugar daddy," Dane said.

"You are so cynical, Dane. *Or*," Nate brainstormed further, "Thyrsis is so self-confident, so sure of himself, maybe even a little smug and condescending, that he doesn't believe for a minute that Corydon has a chance of taking Alexis away from him."

"Ooh, that's cold," Dane observed.

"But I like it," Larry said. "I could play it that way. And when I come back, and I see how far the two of you have gone with each other after all, it takes me by surprise, and I maybe have my own little moment of insecurity?"

"Well, let's not talk it to death, men," Dane said. "Let's dance it. Let's take it from the top. Play around with the damn thing and make it work."

"Well, it looks as though *my* work here is done," Romuald joked.

"Like hell it is," Larry retorted. "You can go to the deli down the street and bring us all back lunch. Because after we've run through this whole scene again, we're going to be starved."

After lunch, they tackled the *pas de deux* for Corydon and Alexis. The first time the pianist played the music, even Nate was surprised to hear the texture suddenly reduced to trickles of individual notes with no harmony or bass line.

"Okay, that sounds just plain weird," Dane commented.

"It's a solo for the bass clarinet," Romuald said, consulting his score. "That's why it sounds a little strange on the piano. The bass clarinet is associated with Corydon throughout the ballet. It's already been heard during the dance contest between him and Thyrsis, and it comes back near the very end of the ballet, when Corydon realizes that Thyrsis and Alexis are still going to be together, at least for the time being."

"Oh, I get my very own instrument?" Dane asked.

"Yes, and who deserves it better than you?" Romuald teased him.

"Too bad it's not a bass *saxophone*, which would be a lot more appropriate to accompany Dane," Larry said, which made both Dane and Nate snort with laughter.

They had to explain this private joke to a mystified Romuald.

"Dancers' private lives have obviously become a lot more interesting since I was your age," he remarked after hearing all about Dane's porn actor friend and his musical hobby.

They got to work.

"How homoerotic do you want this, Professor?" a panting Dane asked after half an hour of intense physical exertion.

"I don't know. How homoerotic can you make it?"

"Watch me."

Nate found himself engaged in a sort of stylized wrestling match with his very athletic and aggressive partner.

As the *pas de deux* for Corydon and Alexis built to its climax, the rehearsal pianist played a succession of rippling arpeggios which grew increasingly louder and suggested, to Nate's ears, pounding surf and waves crashing on the shore.

"How's *this* orchestrated, Romuald?" Dane asked after they'd gone through the sequence several times, trying out various moves, discarding some, retaining and refining others.

"The other instruments have taken over from the bass clarinet by now. It starts out quietly but builds and builds, gets louder and louder, and there's a big climax—you know, brass, timpani, cymbal crashes, the whole works." "The Big O, huh?" Dane asked.

"More or less. And then the music suddenly becomes quieter as Alexis breaks away from you, and there's that delicate lyrical bit. The bass clarinet comes back for a moment, while you're looking at him longingly. It should be a very poignant effect."

"Right. Well, what we're doing during all that up and down stuff in the music, it isn't very exciting. It needs a little extra splash," Dane diagnosed. "Why don't we do some lifts? Nate can sort of climb all over me in a lift and carry, and every time the music goes up and hits one of those peaks, I can sort of shove him upwards and then he can slide down again."

"Can you lift Nate?" Romuald asked.

"Sure I can, if we set it up right and he can get a good push off the floor. The question is, can I lift your buddy Keller? How much does he weigh?"

"About as much as Nate." Romuald was studying Nate from head to foot. "They're built about the same. If anything, Henri is a little smaller."

"That's interesting. He looks bigger onstage."

Romuald smiled. "Most of us do. It's an illusion. Stage magic. I didn't know you've seen Henri perform."

"Oh, sure, Professor. Three or four times, when he's danced here in New York. But the first time was, what, almost ten years ago? I was just a kid, and Keller was dancing in Boston, where they revived the full-length *Le Corsaire* for him. I took the bus there and back, just to see him in that, and he was incredible. He just burned up the stage. When I got back home, I told my teacher, 'I guess I'll have to start working a hell of a lot harder.' And I did." Dane grinned. "And quite apart from anything else, I can still remember how hot Keller looked in those sheer harem pants with no shirt."

Romuald laughed. "Now you've given me an idea. We should mount *Le Corsaire* here, for you. Your fans would love it."

For some reason, Nate felt ill at ease with the direction the conversation had taken. He couldn't imagine why. Everyone knew Ghent and Keller were lovers. The reason Romuald was so familiar with Keller's body, off stage as well as on, was because they no doubt spent a lot of time naked in bed together. Making love. Nate was startled to find quite vivid pornographic images of the two men flashing through his head, like bits of X-rated film footage being run at high speed. Romuald Ghent and Henri Keller stretched out on a mattress together, nude, sucking each other's cocks, with Romuald's lips, with that fuzzy little mustache of his on the upper one, stretched taut around Keller's bloated shaft, milking it. And then, of course, one of the two men spreading his hard-muscled buttocks wide apart so the other one could drive his erect cock deep between them. The two of them moaning and thrashing as they fucked. As they climaxed together, spurting their semen. It was quite a picture.

"You look a little dubious, Nate," Romuald observed. "About the lifts?"

"Oh, no. I was just... thinking about something else. Let's give it a try."

Nate was surprised by how strong Dane was: provided Nate did his part of the work by pushing himself up from the floor, Dane had little difficulty lifting him. They were both perspiring desperately by the time they'd run through the sequence twice, struggling to match their movements to the ebb and flow of the music, but they knew they were on to something.

"That was bloody brilliant," Romuald exclaimed when his two dancers, not waiting for him to call a halt to the proceedings, took their own break by mutual, mute agreement, slumping down onto the floor in twin sweaty heaps.

Dane was fighting to get back his breath. "What do you think, Larry?" he asked. "Was that any good?"

Larry had also been observing their exertions, fascinated.

"Don't take this the wrong way, guys," he said. "But I think I'm getting a hard-on just from watching the two of you go at it together like that. So you must be doing *something* right!"

On another day, Nate sat in on a rehearsal in which Romuald worked on what he called "the comic relief intermezzo" for the three satyrs. With so many of the company's principals and soloists already cast in male roles in *Eclogues*, Romuald had recruited three of the corps boys—Seth, Moishe, and Timothy—to play the satyrs.

"You start off," Romuald invited Seth. "Just gambol about, in time to the music, and then we'll start narrowing it down into formal steps. Go on. Don't be shy. Gambol."

Seth stared at him blankly. "You want us to play cards?" he asked.

"He means gambol, not gamble, Seth," Moishe explained.

Seth obviously didn't know what "gambol" meant.

"I'll show you," Moishe volunteered, and he proceeded to frisk and leap about in a tolerably satyr-like manner.

"Oh." Recognition dawned on Seth's handsome face. "You want us to do some male stripper moves, huh?"

Romuald bit his lip but then said, "Precisely."

After this false start, the rehearsal went well: encouraged by Romuald,

who wasn't shy about demonstrating what he wanted, all three boys got into the naughty spirit of the thing.

"I want you to be very free with one another's bodies," he said. "As though all three of you have been buggering one another like mad."

"That shouldn't be hard for Seth to do," Moishe observed in a rare, for him, display of typical gay corps boy bitchiness.

After the rehearsal, Romuald told Nate that he needed to "stretch his legs," and he invited Nate to accompany him as he walked along the building's corridors at random.

"Please, Nate, explain to me what kind of an educational system you've got in this country? I tell that poor boy to 'gambol about', and he doesn't have a clue what I'm talking about?"

"He knew what 'bugger' meant, though."

"I'm sure he didn't learn *that* in school. Or did he? Maybe the public school system here in the States isn't all that different from England's in some respects."

"Actually, I believe Seth went to what we call prep school. A very exclusive and expensive one, as a matter of fact."

"Oh. That explains it." Romuald smiled. "But I don't mean to put your colleagues down, Nate. They're good lads, all three of them, and hard workers. Like you. But still! If only I could clone you, Nate. If I could, I'd cast you as Mnasyllos, Alexis, *and* all three satyrs. It would save a lot of time in the rehearsals."

Nate could feel himself start to blush at the compliment.

"Imagine that," he said. "Five dancers, all with the same face and body, in the same ballet. It might be a little confusing for the audience."

"I find the concept intriguing, though. Maybe the scientists can get to work on it, produce a set of test tube dancing quintuplets."

"Or sextuplets," Nate suggested. "One could be the understudy for all of the others."

Romuald laughed. "You are a delight."

Nate could feel himself *really* blushing now.

"It's a little warm in here," he lied. "I'm going to go get some water."

Chapter 14 Very Strange, This Virgil

IT WAS announced that Henri Keller would be late arriving in town, for reasons that were not divulged to the lower echelons of the company. This meant that Keller would have only a week in which to learn Alexis instead of the two weeks originally allotted.

"This means we'll have to work extra hard once he does get here," Romuald warned Larry, Dane, and Nate.

Dane shot Nate a classic *I told you so!* look, but said nothing—not in Romuald's presence, at least.

"I wonder if Keller is high, in rehab again, or partying," Dane remarked to Larry and Nate when the three of them were alone together. "Or maybe he's just not in any big hurry to get here for such an unimportant little gig."

"These sorts of delays happen all the time, Dane," Larry pointed out.

"Well, I don't think it's very fair to Choirboy, who's already been busting his ass all along."

"Oh, I don't mind," Nate insisted.

"You wouldn't," Dane retorted. "I only hope the Professor appreciates what you're doing for him, and for this boyfriend of his."

Romuald took advantage of Keller's unexpected absence to further refine several sequences of the ballet. At the beginning of the scene for Corydon, Thyrsis, and Alexis, for example, he slipped Corydon in among the corps boys impersonating farmers at work, making him briefly a part of their dance instead of a mere observer. Dane, who despite all his grumbling and cynicism had gotten caught up in the excitement of creating a role in a new ballet, easily adapted himself to the change.

Romuald also put in extra hours of work with the second and third casts instead of turning over some of these responsibilities to a *répétiteur*.

Since, as Romuald put it, "even the great Duvernoix and Stockton, immortals though they are, can get sick or injure themselves," they, too, needed backups for their roles. As a result, Vladimir Kuriyashin and Pau Miró began to show up at the rehearsals to shadow Larry and Dane, respectively, and learn their parts should they need to take over in an emergency during the run. Nate found himself being lusted after by the unambiguously heterosexual Pau, who was a good enough actor to get into the spirit of the thing, after some initial uncertainty.

"What is our relationship, Nate?" he inquired. "I mean, what is this man Alexis to this man Corydon?"

"Ah, you're a farmer, and Alexis is this boy who helps out on the farm."

"I see. And what is my motivation?"

"Thwarted love. Sexual frustration."

"What does 'thwarted' mean?"

"Hopeless. Hopeless love."

"I am in love with you?"

"I should be so lucky, but yes, Pau, Corydon is in love with Alexis. But Alexis is sleeping with the other guy, Thyrsis."

"It is a love triangle, in other words."

"Exactly."

"Corydon wants to fuck this boy in the ass?"

"Now you're catching on."

Once he was clear about the concept, Pau was a choreographer's dream. His Corydon was less rough-hewn than Dane's, more elegant, but he was every bit as lustful. Dancing with him, Nate almost felt like a ballerina being "presented" to the audience by her expert but self-effacing partner.

Male dancers were no doubt often tempted to manhandle recalcitrant ballerinas. Nevertheless, Nate was startled when, during one of their clinches, Pau not only gripped him with an enthusiasm unusual for a straight male dancer in such circumstances but nuzzled the back of his neck with his lips and mimed biting his earlobe.

"Ah, what are you doing there, Pau?" Romuald asked as Nate squirmed under the Spaniard's increasingly aggressive dental assault.

"I always do this to my girlfriends," Pau said. "They like it. You know, before we make love? They say it gets them hot and wet. So I can slide it in easier."

"More information than I need to know about the mating habits of the straight male," Romuald muttered.

"Is it wrong? Don't gay men do this to each other?" Pau wanted to know.

"I wouldn't know," Romuald lied. "It's been a while since anybody tried to take a bite out of me. But keep it in. Maybe we can get Dane to do

something like that, too."

"Oh, sure, Professor," Dane agreed, a little too eagerly. "Absolutely, whatever you want!"

"God help me," Nate lamented. The last thing he needed during these rehearsals was a Dane Stockton armed with a License to Bite.

Vladimir had lived in the United States for less than two years, and his English was still somewhat limited as a result. Learning Thyrsis by watching and imitating Larry, he did everything required of him, and did it well. But he, too, seemed rather baffled by the three characters' relationships to one another, at first. He eventually turned to Romuald for clarification.

"Three men," Vladimir said slowly. "None of three likes pussy?"

This question, predictably, sent Dane into hysterics.

"None," Romuald managed to say, without laughing.

"Not even Larry? I mean, man Larry and I play?"

"Not even you and Larry. Thyrsis, the character you and Larry play, he is *already* sleeping with the character Nate plays," Romuald explained.

Vladimir looked at Nate with an uncertain smile.

"I fuck Nate in the ass? Not Dane, not Pau?"

Dane had to grab a handful of the hem of his T-shirt, pull it up to his face, stuff a wad of the sweat-soaked fabric into his mouth, and bite down on it to keep himself from shrieking with laughter. Larry gave him a kick in the shins to try to sober him up; all this accomplished was to force Dane to hop about on one foot while still chewing on his shirt. It was quite a sight.

Then, seeing that Romuald was rendered temporarily speechless, an impatient Larry took charge of the situation.

"Look here, Vladimir," he said. "It's very simple, really. Watch me." Larry went over to Nate, grabbed him by both hips, unceremoniously bent him over from the waist, and energetically mimed humping him from behind. "You and me," Larry explained, still humping away. "We're fucking him. We're *already* doing it to him, you understand?" Vladimir nodded. Then Larry took one hand off Nate's hip and pointed to Dane and Pau. "Dane and Pau, they *want* to do it." Larry repeated the humping motion. "But no, they *can't. No fucking*, not yet. No, no, no—*nyet*, like you say in Russian." Larry shook his head, then let Nate stand up, and backing away from Nate, Larry waved his hands in front of himself, crossing them in the international *no goal* gesture. "Instead," Larry grimaced, and made a masturbatory gesture with his fist, up and down in front of his crotch. He ended the lewd little pantomime with an exaggerated sigh of orgasmic relief. "Got it?"

Comprehension dawned on the Russian's handsome face. "Got it," he

said with satisfaction. "But very strange, this Virgil. Very strange."

Romuald shook his head. "The Lawrence Duvernoix Method of Drama Coaching seems to get quick results," he joked.

By the time they broke for lunch, Nate was feeling truly hungry. He quickly changed from his rehearsal attire to his street clothes and went across the street to the coffee shop. He was standing in line to give his order when Romuald came in. He was carrying a stack of three paperback books under his arm.

"It looks as though great minds really do think alike," Romuald joked. He joined the queue behind Nate and studied the menu displayed in large lettering behind the counter. "What are you having?"

"The smoked ham and cheese foccacia and a yogurt."

"Sounds good. I think I'll have the same."

Nate chose a strawberry yogurt and coffee. Romuald accompanied his sandwich with a peach yogurt and chai tea.

"What are you reading?" Nate asked, indicating the books Romuald had set down on the table.

"Oh, I just picked these up at the bookstore down the street." (The same bookstore where one could pick up more than just reading material, Nate thought.) "It's my homework—plays by Pirandello, plays by Ibsen, and a book about Hindu mythology. I'm thinking about doing a ballet based on either Pirandello's *As You Desire Me* or Ibsen's *John Gabriel Borkman*, which are both extremely interesting plays, with strong female parts. Or perhaps one based upon some subject from Hindu mythology."

"That's some choice," Nate remarked.

He noticed a familiar-looking pamphlet, pressed into service as a bookmark, protruding from between the pages of the Pirandello anthology. It was a copy of *Daily Encounters with the Divine*.

"I see Josh has been at work on you."

Romuald laughed. "We actually had a very interesting theological discussion, he and I, the other day. Even though it seems as though we're surrounded by worldly cynics most of the time—and most of us are no doubt guilty of being cynics, ourselves—there's no reason why a dancer can't have strong religious beliefs. And Josh came up with an intriguing suggestion. He thinks I should do a ballet about Jesus of Nazareth."

"A dancing Jesus? Good Lord-if you'll pardon the expression."

"I know who'd be perfect for the title role."

"So do I. Dane!"

Romuald guffawed. "My thought, exactly. Perfect typecasting. Can you imagine it? I'd be run out of town on a rail." He took a sip of his tea. "But seriously, something like the Temptation in the Wilderness could be the basis for an interesting ballet, if it were done with taste." He smiled. "Something I've been said to lack."

"Imagine Dane as the tempter. Now that *would* be perfect typecasting, all joking aside."

"Has he ever tempted you?" Romuald caught himself. "I'm sorry. That sort of slipped out. It's a rather personal question."

"I don't mind. Yes, he has, as a matter of fact. Dane has come on to me—which isn't anything much to brag about, since he comes on to everybody sooner or later—and I've always turned him down. I don't know exactly why, to anticipate your next question. Of course he's sexy and all that. But I wonder if there can be such a thing as being *too* sexy. Do you know what I mean?"

"I think I do, in theory. It's an affliction that I wouldn't mind suffering from, for a week or two, just to find out if it's true. That having to turn down the advances of other men, left and right, would become a bore."

Inevitably, they began to talk shop. Romuald claimed to be pleased by the way the rehearsals for *Eclogues* had been going so far.

"There's something I don't get, though," Nate admitted.

"Oh? What's that?"

"Alexis. What's going on inside his head, I mean. If he's such a little slut, if he's sleeping with this older man and taking presents from him and so forth...."

"Yes?"

"Well, wouldn't he realize right off the bat that Corydon is interested in him? Instead of acting so clueless about it at first, so it takes him by surprise when Corydon finally starts coming on to him, wouldn't he be kind of sizing Corydon up, checking him out, all along? Sort of thinking to himself, 'Oh, I wonder what *he'd* be like in bed? I wonder if there'd be anything in it for me if I fooled around with *him*, too?' And maybe Alexis is even attracted to Corydon, would like to get it on with him, but he decides he'd better cool it, at least for the time being, because he doesn't want to risk pissing Thyrsis off and possibly losing the good thing he already has going with *him*. It's just a thought."

"It's interesting. Could you play it that way?"

"I don't know. That's an awful lot of subtle subtext to try to convey, just through movement and gesture and facial expression."

Romuald laughed. "You've just defined the whole basic challenge of dancing, in those few words. Give it a try. When we go back and run through it again, play it like that. But we won't let Larry and Dane in on it ahead of time. Let it take them by surprise, throw them off their game. See if they notice and can play along."

Nate was excited by the idea, excited by the thought of being Romuald's co-conspirator, of sharing a secret, however small, with him.

Back in the rehearsal room, Romuald suggested that Larry, Nate, and Dane run through their entire scene from start to finish without any interruptions.

"Don't stop for anything," Romuald urged. "Just do it flat-out, the way you might in performance, and see what it feels like. Run with it."

Nate put this theory about Alexis to the test, and he found his two partners reacting and responding to him noticeably differently.

"What do you think?" Romuald asked mock-innocently as soon as they were done.

"I think it was better this time," Larry said.

"It was more intense." Dane was still breathing hard. "Something was different." He looked at Nate. "*You* were different."

"Oh? How?" Nate imitated Romuald's display of innocence to perfection.

"You were much less passive," Larry diagnosed. "You seemed more sure of yourself with me. And you were a *lot* more aggressive with Dane."

"Really? Was that good or bad?" Nate asked.

"I thought it was great," Dane said. "Much sexier. Much hotter."

Larry nodded. "Much more of a sort of dynamic going on, among all three men. It wasn't stable. It kept shifting. There was more suspense."

Romuald was having trouble suppressing a broad grin as he made eye contact with Nate. "I agree. Keep it in. Do it like that from now on."

They ran through the entire scene one more time.

"All right, it's starting to look good," Romuald declared. "There's no point in beating it to death. We'll give it a rest until Henri gets here. Hit the showers, men."

CHAPTER 15 The Sweet Taste of Trifle

NATE found Romuald waiting for him when he left the locker room.

"Your idea about Alexis worked out perfectly," Romuald said.

"Yes, it was kind of funny to see Dane and Larry taken by surprise like that, wasn't it? But they went right along with it."

"All three of you are very versatile and imaginative dancers. It's such a pleasure to be working with you. I've been looking at the schedule, Nate, and I see that you actually have a day off tomorrow."

"Yes. Do you need me to come in and rehearse, after all?"

"God, no. I've been working you hard enough. You need a breather. I was just wondering...."

Romuald looked and sounded hesitant, which wasn't at all like him.

"Wondering what?" Nate prompted him.

"What you might have planned, to do on your day off."

Nate shrugged. "Nothing in particular. Catch up on some chores around the apartment, that sort of thing."

"Could these chores be done first thing in the morning, or postponed for a day or two?"

"They could be postponed indefinitely, as far as I'm concerned," Nate said with a laugh. "Why?"

"I plan to do some shopping tomorrow, and it's no fun to do it alone. Maybe you'd like to tag along, and we could have lunch."

Nate realized that Romuald was asking him for a date. A man date, perhaps, but still a date.

"It would give us a chance to talk some more. Outside of work." The ordinarily poised Romuald now looked and sounded ever so slightly nervous.

Oh, my God, Nate thought. He's afraid I'm going to say no!

"I'd love to," Nate said quickly.

"Oh, good. Fine." Romuald instantly reverted to his usual confident

self. "Why don't we meet at the coffee shop across the street, then? At eleven?"

"Great."

"We'll go somewhere nice for lunch when we get tired of shopping. My treat, of course. Somewhere nice, but not too fancy. So dress casually. Whatever you're used to wearing on your days off."

"All right." Nate took a leaf out of Dane's book and flashed Romuald what he hoped was a seductive and irresistible grin. "It's a date, then. I'll be looking forward to it."

"As will I," Romuald replied, with a very British-sounding formality. But he returned Nate's broad smile.

At home, Nate took Beau into his confidence.

"He probably just wants to talk to me about *Eclogues*," Nate said, almost thinking out loud as opposed to really directing the remark to his roommate. "Give me some more notes on how he wants me to play Mnasyllos, and so forth."

"Bullshit. He could do that any time he wanted to at work," Beau pointed out. "He's asking you out on a *date*!"

"You're going to have to help me decide what to wear. He said casual, but I have a feeling his idea of 'casual' can be pretty GQ."

"GQ, hell! He's English, isn't he? *His* idea of 'casual' is probably more like *Country Life*. He'll probably wear the kind of clothes he always has on around the theater. You know, all those bright colors? So you should wear bright colors, too. Let's go look through your stuff and pick out the loudest thing you own."

They examined Nate's wardrobe of "non-work" clothes, which was neither extensive nor elaborate.

"How about this?" Beau selected a soft-textured sweatshirt in a particularly intense shade of rose pink.

"It *is* kind of loud, isn't it? I don't know what possessed me to buy it. I've only worn it a couple of times."

"It's perfect. It suits your coloring."

"But I don't want to look too loud."

"So, match it up with something more subdued. A dressy pair of jeans, and maybe this black jacket, since it's supposed to be on the cool side tomorrow. The black and the pink contrasted, it's perfect. Oh, and *one* piece of jewelry. Nothing too flashy, just a little accent to catch the eye."

"It's a shopping expedition and a lunch date, not an audition!"

"It could be an audition, if you play your cards right. An audition for the starring role of Romuald Ghent's new boyfriend!"

"Aw, cut it out, Beau!"

Beau had no intention of cutting it out. "And don't shave tomorrow morning. That little hint of beard shadow always makes you look more butch."

"Maybe Romuald doesn't like them butch. Maybe he likes them young and nelly."

"He likes *you*," Beau retorted. "That much is obvious. But it can never hurt to man it up a notch. Especially when you're stalking the big game!"

Nate arrived at the coffee shop ten minutes early and nursed his brew while he waited. He began to have second thoughts about the "one piece of jewelry" he'd eventually chosen: a silver bracelet studded with large turquoises, worn on his right wrist. Maybe it was too garish. He was thinking about slipping it off and secreting it in his jacket pocket when Romuald walked in precisely at eleven. He was wearing his lemon yellow jacket and cap over dark brown khaki slacks and an orange sweatshirt that was so vibrantly orange, it was practically neon. He looked as though he should be directing traffic at the site of some emergency.

"Don't you look nice," Romuald said. "And what an interesting bracelet."

"I didn't shave," Nate blurted out. "Is that all right?"

"Of course it is. Why wouldn't it be? It makes you look rather sexy, as a matter of fact." Romuald smiled. "Not that you don't already look sexy most of the time."

"Are you flirting with me, Mr. Ghent?"

"I don't know. I haven't had my tea yet. I'm still half asleep. So I can't be held responsible for anything I do or say."

They sat at the table and sipped their drinks.

"What are you shopping for today?" Nate inquired.

"Things for my apartment. Maybe you'd like to come over and see the apartment later." Somewhat to Nate's disappointment, there was no hint of sexual suggestiveness in the way Romuald said that. "It's comfortable, but not terribly stylish. I want it to look nice for Henri. I want everything to be perfect when Henri comes."

"Tell me about Mr. Keller. I don't mean about him as a dancer. I mean as a person."

"Well, he can be a little moody. But then, so can I."

"I can't imagine you being moody."

"No?"

"Introspective, maybe. There's a big difference."

"Henri, as I'm sure you're aware, likes a good time. When he's not working, that is. Sometimes he's been known to have himself too much of a good time. I'm afraid he occasionally finds me... boring. So maybe it's a good thing that we haven't spent all that much time together recently. Still, I'm looking forward to his visit, of course."

Nate was surprised by how matter-of-factly Romuald made these comments. He might be talking about a casual friend, not a lover.

"I didn't mean to pry into your personal life, Romuald."

"Nonsense. You're not prying at all. Quite apart from the fact that I doubt I even *have* such a thing as a personal life," Romuald said with a laugh. "There's always so much gossip in a ballet company. Now, if you've finished your coffee, shall we get started? Most of the shops I'd like to go to are right here in this neighborhood, but one or two are a few blocks farther away. It didn't occur to me to ask if you mind walking a bit."

"I'm a dancer, Romuald. Of course I don't mind walking."

"Oh, you'd be surprised. I've known dancers who wouldn't walk up or down one flight of stairs if they could avoid it. Their attitude seems to be 'I don't move unless I'm being paid for it'."

"Yes, come to think of it, Dane is just such a dancer."

They walked at a leisurely pace, often pausing to window shop. Finally, though, they went into an antique store.

"Do you collect antiques, Romuald?"

"Collect' would be too much of a compliment, in my case. I accumulate things that catch my eye and that I buy on impulse. Traveling a lot, performing all over the place, is terrible for that. You buy things and have them shipped home, where they end up gathering dust because you're never home to enjoy them. Most of my junk is stashed away in my flat in London. I haven't bothered to have it shipped over here. After all, there's no way of knowing how this resident choreographer gig will work out. My contract can always be voided by 'mutual agreement'." Romuald smiled. "The audiences here may decide they don't like my work."

"Do you care if audiences, or critics, like your work? I mean, if you're satisfied with it?"

"Not particularly. But it's all too rare that I'm really satisfied with anything I do, either as a dancer or as a choreographer. And we don't do our work in a vacuum, after all. A ballet company is still a business. I could care less what the critics have to say—most of the time—but if we're not communicating anything to our audiences, then we're deluding ourselves and taking their money under false pretenses."

Romuald was looking for chairs. He didn't see anything he liked in the first store, but in the second one they entered, a pair of side chairs caught his eye. They were sturdy, with carved walnut frames, and had been reupholstered in a mauve-and-cream-striped fabric.

"Can't resist the candy stripes, huh?" Nate teased him.

"They do look nice. But they have to be comfortable to sit on."

Romuald and Nate duly sat down on the chairs, and Nate delivered a positive assessment.

"I'll take them," Romuald told the owner. He paid for the chairs and arranged for them to be delivered to his apartment.

"That was painless," Nate said when they were outside on the sidewalk again. "Are you sure you're gay? Most gay men take forever when they shop. They can never make up their minds."

"I warned you I'm an impulse buyer. And since you bring up the subject, it may interest you to know that I wasn't exclusively homosexual when I was your age. I was undecided. I had my share of affairs with women, mostly ballerinas. Including one or two famous ones."

"Would you care to provide any names?"

"No. I'm saving all that for when I write my tell-all memoirs."

"But at some point you did decide?"

"That I had a definite preference? Oh yes."

"I've always known I was gay," Nate volunteered.

Romuald looked at him. "And how's that been working out for you so far?"

"Okay, I guess."

"Just okay? Not good, or great, which is what being gay ought to be at your age?"

"I enjoy sex," Nate admitted. "I don't think I'm very inhibited. But I'm not all that crazy about, you know, anonymous sex? I have to get to know the other guy, at least a little. And once or twice, I've thought, 'Oh, this could develop into something serious.' When it didn't, I was miserable. But now that I'm older and more mature, I realize that it was just kid stuff. Puppy love."

Romuald smiled. "Listen to you. 'Older and more mature.' If you're old and mature, then I must be a senior citizen."

Nate wanted to say something like, *No, you're a very hot man*, but he thought better of it and checked himself.

"Well, they say age is only a number," he said. "And I was never very good at math."

They had come to another of the shops Romuald wanted to check out. This one specialized in Oriental imports, some of them antiques, others of more recent origin.

"I like these Oriental trunks and chests of drawers and armoires," Romuald said. "You can never have too many closets, or too much storage space. And some of these smaller decorative objects look as though they'd be fun to have around."

While Romuald inspected the various storage pieces more closely, Nate looked at a group of Oriental vases. He saw a cloisonné one, smaller than the one Kenichirou had given him and, to Nate's taste, less striking in its design. He stole a look at the price tag and was shocked to see the numbers 995. Five dollars short of a thousand bucks—plus tax!

"What's your apartment like, by the way?" Romuald asked him.

"Small and bare," Nate admitted.

"If you see something you like, I'll buy it for you."

"At these prices, I'd never be able to pay you back."

"You wouldn't be paying me back. It'd be a gift."

"I couldn't let you do that."

"Why not?"

"We don't have that kind of a relationship. Not yet. And we may never have it."

"Exactly what kind of a relationship is that?"

"The kind in which you give me things."

"Nonsense. I like to give people presents. I give things to my friends, and to the people I work with, all the time. And we work together. And I hope we're friends."

"Well, I can't let you buy me anything. I'd feel like Alexis."

"Are you saying you'd feel obliged to reciprocate?"

"I guess so."

"You're very proud, aren't you? Very independent. Terribly so."

"I'm sorry, Romuald-"

"No, don't apologize. Why should you? It's one of the many things I like about you. The fact that you can be such a stubborn little wanker, if you'll forgive me for saying so."

"I'll make a deal with you, Romuald."

"I'm always open to negotiation."

"If you're satisfied with the way I dance on the opening night of *Eclogues*, and if you're still satisfied at the end of the run—"

"Which I'm sure I will be."

"If you still are after the last performance, then, and only then, can you give me a present. If you insist."

"I will insist. And what would you like me to give you?"

"I don't care, as long as it's something inexpensive and totally frivolous, with no practical use whatsoever. And you can't tell me about it ahead of time. I want to be surprised."

"Frivolous, eh? Why frivolous?"

"Because you're ordinarily such a serious, intellectual kind of a guy."

"I see. Well, I shall have to give the matter some serious but nonintellectual thought."

Romuald caught the eye of the shop owner. This time, he was prepared to haggle.

"If I buy two or three of these storage pieces, will I get a few dollars taken off?"

The owner was more than willing to negotiate.

Romuald bought a trunk, a chest of drawers, and an armoire. He also liked a pair of Kutani shishi lions or "foo dogs," as they were commonly called, in bright blue porcelain with snarling white-toothed open mouths, protruding red tongues, pointed ears, and rolling goggle eyes. The owner not only gave him a substantial price break on the three furniture items but threw in the lions for a fraction of their tag price.

"Now I'm famished," Romuald announced. "Spending money always seems to make me hungry, so we'd better go have lunch while I can still afford it."

He took Nate to a nearby restaurant; it was, as Romuald had promised, a rather upscale place, but not ostentatiously so.

"Have you been here before?" Nate asked as they were seated and

handed menus.

"Yes, Walker brought me here for dinner, and I came back once for lunch and enjoyed it. But just as it's no fun to shop alone, it's no fun to eat out alone. I'm so glad you agreed to come with me today. So eat up. God knows any excess calories we consume will be burned off tomorrow when we get back to work."

Their waiter, who was no doubt flirtatious by nature, was doubly so on this occasion, confronted as he was by two exceptionally handsome male customers. After he'd taken their order and turned to walk away, Romuald was not above turning his head slightly in order to check out the waiter's retreating ass.

"There's a good-looking lad," he commented. "New York seems to be full of them."

"I thought you already have a boyfriend."

"Just because I'm on a diet doesn't mean I can't look at all the items on the menu and wonder what they might taste like," Romuald joked.

"If you don't mind my asking... but it's another personal question."

"Ask away."

"You and Mr. Keller. Are you faithful to one another?"

"No." Romuald had a way of making the monosyllables *yes* and *no* sound most eloquent. This time, *no* conveyed a certain rueful self-awareness and regret. "Henri, by his very nature, is incapable of being faithful to anyone for very long. And I'm a realist. Or a cynic. I long ago accepted the fact that I have physical and emotional needs like anybody else, and I stopped feeling any need to apologize for having them. Maybe you're wondering why I'm talking to you so bluntly about these things. Well, why shouldn't we talk about them? When I was your age, it was really valuable to me, having older and more experienced men I could confide in. So go ahead and ask me anything you want."

"All right, I will. Since you arrived here in town, have you had sex with anybody?"

"Yes. Three times. Each time with the same guy. And even that had to be squeezed into my busy schedule. He's a masseur. A licensed masseur, legitimate, not what you'd call an escort. I've had him come over to my place to work on me after particularly tough rehearsals. The first time, while I was on the table and we were talking, the subject of sex discreetly came up, and since, thanks to him, I was already feeling quite relaxed and mellow...." Romuald shrugged. "It was a business transaction, but he seemed to enjoy his work. He's a nice guy. So I've invited him back, twice. It was convenience sex. The equivalent of fast food. But once Henri gets here, while he's here in town with me, I intend to try to be reasonably monogamous."

"Why? I mean, does it make a difference to him?"

"It makes a difference to me. Things haven't been going well for Henri and me. I imagine we may soon be at the point where we agree to be 'just friends', if we're not there already. But, if there's any chance of salvaging the other part of the relationship, I intend to give it my best shot before giving up on it."

"And what if it doesn't work out between the two of you?"

"Well, there is such a thing as 'rebound sex', which can be rather hot, as far as it goes. I still have my masseur's number. As for anything longerterm..." Romuald paused and smiled at Nate in a conspiratorial way. "I'll just have to wait, and see what may or may not develop. You can't *will* these things into happening, Nate. When they do come your way, they always seem to come on their own, and more often than not, they take you by surprise."

Nate hesitated. "I have a confession to make, Romuald."

"Do tell."

"My roommate Beau and I. Ever since I moved in with him, we've been fooling around together. Oh, we're not in love with each other, nothing like that. We're just fuck buddies. It's like you said: convenience sex. I know it's terrible, and I ought to be ashamed of myself, but—"

"Stop apologizing. I can't imagine what you think you have to apologize for. It sounds like an eminently sensible arrangement to me. I think Beau is a very nice boy." Romuald leaned back in his chair and smiled at Nate in that conspiratorial way he had. "So neither of us is a starry-eyed virgin. How shocking. Now tell me one more thing. Theoretically speaking, do you think you could ever let yourself get involved in a relationship with a man who, how shall I put it? Who hasn't quite extricated himself from his ongoing relationship with another man?"

"I think I could," Nate said slowly. "But only if this theoretical gentleman you're talking about happened to be a native of a town called Kidderminster in the English Midlands. Otherwise, no sale."

Romuald laughed. "Very particular, aren't you? But, seriously, you wouldn't feel cheated? Short-changed, somehow?"

"I don't think so. Theoretically speaking."

"It doesn't seem as though it would be quite fair to you, somehow."

"Life isn't always fair, as they say. And maybe, just maybe, fair is

overrated."

Over their food, they discussed less personal topics: how the rehearsals for *Eclogues* were progressing; what ballets by other choreographers Romuald had seen and been impressed by in England and Europe; which dancers, past and present, he particularly admired.

"Do you have to be anywhere else in particular this afternoon?" Romuald asked as they lingered over refills of their drinks, tea for him, coffee for Nate.

"No."

"How'd you like to go and hang out at my place for a little while?"

Romuald had a way of inflecting the suggestion that eliminated any hint that it might be a sexual proposition.

"I'd love to," Nate replied at once. He was as excited by the prospect as if it *were* a sexual proposition, and he sternly told himself to stop behaving like some love-struck young kid.

Romuald's apartment building was decidedly upscale, by Nate's standards: it was a converted brick factory building. The small lobby retained a certain industrial ambience. They took the elevator to the fourth floor.

The living room, a large rectangular space with windows at one end, was conspicuously bare of furniture. An Oriental rug positioned in the middle of the hardwood floor created a sort of oasis there. The furniture set on top of the rug—a brown leather couch, two matching armchairs, a coffee table, and two end tables, each of which held a small table lamp—formed a symmetrical grouping. Facing the couch was a rack on castors, which held Romuald's flat-screen TV, DVD player, and audio system. A small bookcase against one wall was filled with books, DVDs, and compact discs. At the far end of the room by the windows were a desk and chair. There was no other furniture in the room, and the large areas of unoccupied floor space made it look like a stage set waiting for the actors to come on and say their lines.

"Do you mind if I look around?" Nate asked.

"Not at all."

"I'm curious to see how a dancer who's made it to the big time lives."

"You're going to be bitterly disappointed. As you can see, I don't lead a particularly luxurious lifestyle. I will admit that my flat in London is a little more settled than this place, more finished-looking, simply because I've had so much longer to work on it."

Nate first went over to the windows to check out the view. Romuald's

desk was littered with notebooks and papers, but on one corner, there was enough room for a small photo in an easel frame. The photo was a head shot of Henri Keller looking handsome and relaxed; his signature filled the lower right corner.

"Nate, I'm going to make a pot of tea. Would you like some coffee, or something else to drink?"

"No, I'll have tea, too, please."

"Take a look around the rest of the apartment, if you want to," Romuald said as he went into the kitchen. "The bedroom and the bathroom are that way, down the hall."

Nate, thus encouraged, saw no reason not to satisfy his curiosity. He made his way to Romuald's bedroom.

Once again, an Oriental rug occupied the center of the floor space. The platform bed—simple in style, and with a modestly proportioned double mattress—was set on top of the rug, so that one could walk all the way around it. Two very small matching nightstands, each topped with a small lamp, flanked the bed. Romuald apparently went in for symmetrical arrangements: as an interior decorator, he didn't seem to be particularly imaginative. The bed at least looked comfortable, with its soft peach-colored sheets and pillowcases and a huge square of thick cotton fabric block-printed with bold geometric designs, a combination of blanket and bedspread carelessly thrown over the foot of the mattress, where it trailed down onto the rug.

Romuald had at least turned the wall facing the bed into a photo gallery: there was another, much larger photo of Henri Keller, shown dancing this time, and among the other framed photos, all of which were signed, Nate recognized the faces of several well-known dancers and choreographers. What really caught his eye, though, was a large black-and-white photo of a nude male posing in a relaxed, casual, yet somehow sexually charged manner on some sort of a narrow bench with a tubular chrome frame and legs and a black leather seat cushion. He had a nice face, not male-model handsome, perhaps, but appealing, with tousled dark hair and bedroom eyes. He had a spectacular physique, the well-chiseled muscles bulkier than those of most dancers. It was a full-frontal pose, and even though his exposed penis was flaccid, it had every appearance of exceptional bulk, too. The signature read *To Romuald from Nicholas*.

Romuald joined him just in time to catch him inspecting the signature on the nude photo.

"Now *this* is more what I imagine a gay man's bedroom should look like," Nate joked.

"It's a nice photo, isn't it?"

"Very. Are you going to tell me who Nicholas is?"

"No," Romuald said bluntly but with a big smile on his face. "Maybe once I've gotten to know you better. Let me keep at least some of my secrets."

"Is he a dancer? At least tell me that much."

"No, he isn't."

So at least he's not my competition, not in that particular area, anyway! Nate couldn't help thinking.

"Those three Oriental pieces I bought," Romuald mused. "I can group them here, where there's all this empty floor space. Henri can put his things in them. Yes, that'll work. And the foo dogs can go on top of the chest of drawers, as a sort of accent." He smiled at Nate. "Sorry. I was thinking out loud, which I tend to do at times."

Now Nate realized what seemed odd about the apartment. None of the photos on display was of Romuald himself. Didn't the man possess an ego?

"I was wondering...."

"Yes?"

"Where you keep your photo albums and scrapbooks and things like that. Your memorabilia. Documenting your career."

"Oh, that." Romuald's tone was dismissive. "It's all packed away, I guess. Most of it still back home in England, with all the stuff I've acquired on my travels that I told you about before. I do try to live in the moment, as they say. Which is difficult, because it's usually the upcoming rehearsal or performance that's occupying our thoughts and taking up all our energy, isn't it? I can't get too interested in what I did last month, let alone last year or the year before last."

They had wandered back into the living room.

"Sit down," Romuald urged. "Make yourself comfortable. Lose your shoes. I usually do, the moment I get inside the door. I've only held out this long to make a token gesture toward formality, in your honor. I'll go see if the tea is ready."

He returned shortly in his stocking feet, carrying a heavily loaded tray. In addition to the teapot, which was covered by a knitted cozy, the cups and saucers, and the milk pitcher and sugar bowl, there was a plate of triangularly shaped scones with jam and butter on the side.

"Tea is served. Move that out of the way, will you?"

"Sure." That was the only object on the coffee table: some sort of a

book with unusually large, square-formatted pages, bound between thick, plain cardboard covers. "What is it?" Nate asked as he moved the big volume to a free section of the couch and his host set the tea tray on the table.

Romuald sat down beside him. "It's my most valued possession at the moment. It's an orchestral score. A photocopy of an orchestral score, to be precise. I don't even want to think about how much I paid to have it photocopied."

"I assume it's a ballet score? Or is it an orchestral work that you're going to choreograph for a ballet?"

"It's a ballet score. Can you keep a secret? The only reason I ask is because it's a ballet I've tentatively agreed to choreograph, and maybe dance one of the roles in, for La Scala next year. During what I laughingly call my 'vacation' from this new job of mine, here. We've begun the contract negotiations, but nothing's signed yet, so of course, although I'll probably do it, the whole thing could fall through at the last minute and they'll hire someone else."

"I won't breathe a word."

"Thank you. Once it's a done deal and the announcement is made in the press, then your reward can be that you can tell everyone you knew about it first." Romuald opened the lid of the teapot to check the color of the brew, then, satisfied, poured out tea for them both. "Let it cool for a moment, it's very hot," he warned.

"Tell about this ballet for La Scala."

"The ballet's title is *Muzio Scaevola*, and the composer's name is Attilio Regolo Casapietra."

"I'm afraid I've never heard of him."

"I'd be astonished if you had. He's quite an obscure figure. And, unfortunately, for obvious reasons. You see, he was a young and ambitious composer in Italy when the Fascists came to power. He had a few orchestral works performed that were fairly well received. And then Mussolini, no less, had the government commission this ballet score from him. It's an eveninglength ballet, three acts. It was supposed to be given its premiere in Rome, with no expense spared. Of course, the whole thing was intended from the beginning to be a propaganda piece. Then things started to go wrong for Mussolini, to put it mildly, and the production was cancelled. *Muzio Scaevola* has in fact never been performed, so La Scala will be giving the world premiere. A very long-delayed world premiere, obviously. We'll be using the original conductor's score and the instrumental parts prepared for that cancelled premiere. They've been sitting on a shelf in a vault in the music publisher's basement, all these years. You're sitting next to a photocopy of that conductor's score."

"How fascinating. What happened to Casapietra?"

"After the war, he was tainted by his association with the Fascists, whether fairly or unfairly is still open to question. He kept a low profile, taught composition, continued to write music, mostly chamber works, no more large-scale pieces. He was pretty well forgotten by the time he died, in the 1970s."

They sipped their tea.

"La Scala is taking a bit of a calculated risk by producing this thing," Romuald went on. "They could easily ruffle a lot of feathers. That's why they're tying the production into this exhibition that's going to take place in Milan at the same time. It's all about Fascism in the other visual arts, painting and sculpture, and in architecture. There'll be academic seminars and panel discussions. My own feeling on the subject is that Casapietra wasn't a war criminal, after all. He never held any position in Mussolini's government. He doesn't even seem to have been very politically acute. He was just a guy trying to earn a living and make a name for himself. It's a *ballet*, for God's sake. Still, it'll require some sensitivity in the handling, so as not to offend anyone."

"What's the story about? I mean, I do know who Gaius Mucius Scaevola was—"

"You actually know his full Latin name. My God. You've read Livy, of course."

"Not recently, and only in bits and pieces. Don't give me too much credit, Romuald. My dad's the real Latin scholar, so I'm a product of a typical trickle-down effect, that's all. I know about Mucius Scaevola mostly from this old Italian sword-and-sandal movie called *Hero of Rome*. At least, that's the title in English. It stars Gordon Scott. Whom I've always thought was incredibly hot."

Romuald laughed. "I've never heard of it."

"You can get it on DVD. You ought to see it. It may not give you any ideas you can use for the ballet, but you'd probably get a kick out of it."

"I've got a copy of the original scenario for the ballet, too. It's quite mad. Over the top, as we say in England. As you may recall, the Romans are being besieged by an Etruscan army led by Tarquinius, the exiled former king of Rome, and his ally Lars Porsena, the king of Clusium. They hope to force the Romans to disband their republic and take Tarquinius back as their king. "In one battle, this macho number named Horatius Cocles and two of his buddies defend a bridge over the Tiber from the enemy. Horatius defends the bridge singlehanded against the enemy onslaught while the other two literally break up the bridge underneath them so it's of no use to the enemy. Finally, as the bridge collapses, Horatius dives into the river and swims to safety.

"Later on, another young Roman stud, Gaius Mucius, or Muzio as he's called in Italian, who is an idealistic young hothead, decides to infiltrate the enemy camp and assassinate Porsena. When he sees a well-dressed man inside the royal tent, he assumes he's Porsena, so he stabs him to death. Unfortunately, the dead man turns out to have been Porsena's secretary—which proves that it *is* possible, after all, to be too well dressed," Romuald joked.

"Muzio is taken prisoner but defies his captors, and Porsena, who assumes Muzio must've had accomplices, threatens to put him to death after horrible tortures unless he reveals the details of this supposed conspiracy. Whereupon Muzio holds his right hand in the flames of a brazier until it's burned up, and he tells Porsena that back in Rome there are three hundred other young men who are every bit as resolute as he is and who will not rest until Porsena is dead. Porsena is so impressed by this display of courage that he pardons Muzio and sends envoys to Rome to negotiate peace."

"And Muzio earns the cognomen 'Scaevola', which means 'left-handed'," Nate interjected.

"Nate, you have got to be the only dancer I have ever met who can toss around terms like 'cognomen' in the course of a casual conversation."

"I guess that makes two of us, Professor," Nate dared to say. "Dane insists that you aren't offended by that nickname. Are you?"

"Dane is too much of an innocent at heart for me to be offended by anything he says or does. But getting back to the ballet, right there's another potential problem with reviving this piece: the whole point of the story, as far as the ancient Romans were concerned, is that Muzio isn't an incompetent assassin, he's a hero and a role model. That may be a hard sell for a modern audience.

"Muzio, of course, has a girlfriend, named Clelia, who is taken hostage along with a bevy of other virgins by the Etruscans. After Tarquinius makes unwelcome sexual advances to Clelia, she and her gal pals escape by jumping into the river and swimming away, out of the reach of their guards. There's a lot of swimming in this ballet, it would seem; where's Esther Williams when you need her?

"I forgot to mention that in this version of the story, the god Mars

actually comes down to earth in Act 1 and takes on human form, so he can fight alongside the Romans. He's incognito, of course, and he pretends to be just another Roman soldier. He's one of the guys who help Horatius defend the bridge, and then he and Muzio become buddies. It's not until Act 3, near the end, that he reveals his true identity and resumes his divine shape, so the ballet climaxes with this Busby Berkeley-esque apotheosis in which Mars presents this big floor show, a series of visions of the future greatness of Rome. Ending, of course, in the original scenario with a vision of the Fascists coming to power. We'll have to scrap that bit, needless to say, and come up with something else for the big finish. Maybe we can show the Italian soccer team winning the World Cup."

Nate realized that this was a veiled reference to Henri Keller's recent travails. He hesitated, but then said, "I thought soccer was a sore subject with you."

"It *is*, but if you can't laugh about these things...." Romuald shrugged. "But let's not get into all that. Not tonight. I'm having too good a time to want to spoil it by dredging up old memories." He smiled at Nate.

"What's Casapietra's music like?"

"It's like Respighi on steroids. I always thought that Khachaturian's *Spartacus* was the most macho ballet ever written, but compared to *Muzio Scaevola*, *Spartacus* is testosterone-deficient."

Nate turned toward the score, which was lying next to him. "Can I take a look?"

"Of course. The whole point of photocopying the thing was so I can make notes in it, but of course I haven't been able to bring myself to actually write on any of those pristine pages yet. So you'll see that I'm making my notes on separate sheets of paper inserted between the pages here and there."

Nate opened the score at random and examined the rows of staves, each of which was labeled in the margin of the left-hand page with the Italian name, often abbreviated, of the instrument in question, starting with *flauto picc*. at the top and proceeding down to *contrabassi* at the bottom. The staves were black with notes.

"Well, I can bang out a simple piece on the piano and follow along with a pocket score when I'm listening to a recording," Nate said, "but this is beyond me. Can you read music?"

"Yes. Not like a professional musician can, but well enough to have a rough idea of what this is going to sound like. There are even vocal parts in some of the scenes, for a chorus."

"It all sounds exciting, Romuald. I hope you do it."

"I think it could be a lot of fun. And when the Italians do something like this, they tend to do it in a big way, with no expenses spared. Tell me, Nate, will you stay for dinner? I'll make something simple for the two of us. An early dinner. And then I'll make sure you get home, not too late. I know you need your rest. God knows I do!"

"I'd love to stay, Romuald."

"Good. You see, I'm feeling decidedly selfish at the moment. I want to have you all to myself today for a little while longer." Romuald stood up. "I'll start getting busy in the kitchen."

"Can I help you?"

"Absolutely not. You're my guest. You stay here. Turn on the TV and find something you'd like to watch or play a DVD, or a CD."

Romuald went into the kitchen, and Nate got up and went over to the bookcase. Romuald, not surprisingly, had an extensive collection of ballet performances on DVD but also a selection of movies, and his taste in music ranged from ballet scores, symphonic works, and opera to jazz.

Intrigued by a DVD case that had no labeling on its spine, Nate pulled it out. The exterior of the case was blank except for a sticker that stated *Advance Copy Not For Retail Sale*. Nate opened the case and looked at the actual disc. *Dr. Faustus: A Ballet in Two Acts* was printed on the label, along with the names *Romuald Ghent* and *Henri Keller*.

Excited, Nate found the remote control, turned on the TV and the DVD player, and loaded the disc into the player's drawer. He hit the play button on the remote.

"Have you found something?" Romuald called from the kitchen.

"I certainly have."

Romuald came back into the room carrying an opened wine bottle and two glasses and set them down on the coffee table. He looked at the screen.

"What are you watching?"

"You and Henri Keller, I assume, in that ballet based on Marlowe's *Dr*. *Faustus* that you did for the Edinburgh Festival a couple of years ago."

"Oh my God."

"Do you mind?"

"Of course not, I told you to pick out anything you wanted. But you don't know what you're letting yourself in for. It's ghastly."

"I'm sure you're exaggerating."

"Well, to be perfectly honest, I haven't actually seen the damned thing, at least not all the way through. I haven't had time to. It just came in the mail a few days ago. The DVD won't be available for sale until later this month. This is what they call an advance or review copy, the sort of thing that's sent to reviewers to look at ahead of time. That's why that's not the final packaging, and there's no cover photo or booklet with notes or anything. I'm still sure it's ghastly. The audience was polite, but the critics *hated* it."

The opening credits were still scrolling across the screen.

"Well, sit down," Nate insisted. "It's about to begin, and I intend to judge for myself."

"I wonder what sins I committed in a previous life, that I should be condemned to watch my own work now."

"Shush. The music's about to begin. This is one of Matthias Metzinger's scores, isn't it?"

"Yes, it's the first time he and I collaborated on a full-length piece, in fact. The score is worth hearing, at least. Matthias is brilliant."

Nate watched, entranced. Henri Keller danced the title role, Romuald portrayed Mephostophilis and a beautiful young Scottish ballerina named Elsbeth McKinnon, who looked like a young Moira Shearer, took on all the female roles: an earthy female Innkeeper, the aristocratic Duchess of Parma, and Helen of Troy. The costumes were stylized Elizabethan, the gloomy neo-Gothic sets lavish and atmospheric.

Nate, understandably, concentrated on Henri Keller at first. He'd seen the Swiss star dance in other DVDs, as Albrecht, Siegfried, and Romeo. Those performances had confirmed Keller's talent as a dancer, but none of them had quite prepared Nate for the intensity the man revealed here. With his high cheekbones and elegant profile, Keller rather resembled the great Erik Bruhn. As Faustus, he was wearing a long brown wig and artificial facial hair, which made him look more rugged than usual.

Nate was surprised when, after Faustus conjured up Mephostophilis, Romuald made his first appearance looking like a dashing Elizabethan courtier, elegantly dressed and youthful, with blond hair and beard—and dangling pearl earrings!

"I'm sorry, Romuald, but you don't look very diabolical."

"No, we decided that Mephostophilis shouldn't look like a stereotyped Devil but like a fairly normal human being. Implying that there's the potential for evil in all of us. Maybe that was a mistake, too subtle."

Nate was familiar enough with Marlowe's play to realize that the two

louts, Robin and Rafe, who provided vulgar comic relief in the original, had been given expanded parts in the ballet. They appeared intermittently throughout, making life miserable for Faustus's assistant, Wagner, and trying their own hands at conjuring, with invariably disastrous results.

"Those two guys have all the fun," Romuald commented. "And they didn't have to wear the kind of heavy costumes the rest of us were saddled with."

Romuald excused himself to check on the progress of dinner during the scene in which Lucifer confronted Faustus and showed him a masque of The Seven Deadly Sins—a ballet within the ballet, so to speak.

"Dinner's almost ready," Romuald reported. "Shall we put this on pause, or would you like to be served right here on a tray? Which I don't mind doing, by the way. I'm afraid I often eat in front of the TV, when I'm here alone at night."

"Romuald, this is absolutely mesmerizing. I can't tear myself away."

Romuald laughed. "Flatterer. All right, you sit tight. Elsbeth's big scene as Helen is coming up, and I will admit that she was bloody marvelous. Pour me out another glass of wine."

Romuald's idea of "something simple" for dinner turned out to be tuna steaks served with rice and asparagus, with a lemon slice on the side.

"You can cook!" Nate exclaimed.

"You needn't sound quite so surprised."

"I just wonder when you ever found the time to learn."

"I had to, in pure self-defense, after consuming so much lousy food on the road. I realized there was no reason not to eat decently when I am at home. And this isn't anything fancy."

They ate and drank with trays in their laps.

"I made strawberry trifle for dessert," Romuald said.

"It sounds fattening."

"I guarantee it's one hundred percent fat-free," Romuald lied.

Nate decided not to call Romuald's bluff. The trifle, sponge cake soaked in liqueur and topped with the strawberries, custard, and whipped cream and served in broad, deep-footed glasses, was delicious.

On the screen, Faustus's career was drawing to its gruesome close as his contracted time on earth ran out. Romuald noticed Nate's absorption in what he was looking at.

"You needn't be polite, Nate, or worry about hurting my feelings. Do

you really think it's any good, or is it just a pretentious bore?"

"I'm enjoying every minute of it. Those critics were out of their minds. We ought to do it here."

"Actually, the possibility has been raised, either for next season or the season after next. It all depends on how *Eclogues* goes over here. Well, it doesn't depend *entirely* on that, of course. But if the audiences and critics here don't care for a short ballet of mine, the company will be less likely to risk mounting a full-length work."

"Wouldn't Larry be fantastic as Faustus?"

"Yes, he would, now that you mention it. He'd be very different from Henri, I'm sure. More introverted, more of an intellectual? But just as good, in his own way. And our local bad boy, Dane, could be the Mephostophilis. Perfect typecasting."

"No, you should do it again yourself."

"Oh, I'd rather give somebody else the chance, and if I did dance in this thing again, I'd do one of the smaller parts. The Duke of Parma, perhaps. Or Lucifer. I can see you as Wagner, who's supposed to be a young man, or as either Robin or Rafe, which are fun roles to play. A strong cast might redeem the damned thing and make it halfway bearable."

"I don't want to hear you say another negative word about it, Romuald," Nate said, impulsively. "It's a terrific ballet. And you and Henri Keller are brilliant in it. This is the kind of a ballet I'd like to be in, even if only in a small part,. This is the kind of dancing I want to do. I don't want to just go out there in front of the audience and give them an abstract demonstration of technique. I want to act."

"You're all excited," Romuald observed.

"I guess I am. If it wasn't getting so late, I'd play the whole thing all over again."

"You can borrow the DVD. Take it home with you."

"Can I?"

"Of course. Keep it for as long as you like. I'm familiar with the ballet, remember?"

"Thanks. I really should be getting home."

"Yes, you should, as much as I'm enjoying having you here. I mustn't be selfish."

They were still seated side by side on the coach, and Nate made no effort to get up.

"I really had a good time today," he said, stalling for time.

"Maybe we can do it again sometime soon."

"I want to," Nate admitted. He was too excited to say something more guarded, such as *Yes, that would be nice*.

"I really enjoy your company, Nate. If only...."

"What?"

"If only you were not so very young."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"I'm old enough to be your father, biologically speaking."

"Only if you were careless enough to get my mother pregnant when you were a very precocious and very horny teenager."

"I'm still that much older than you."

"I repeat," Nate said stubbornly, "what's that got to do with anything?"

"Are you attracted to older men?"

"When I'm attracted to another man, I don't ask to see his driver's license. Do you?"

"Not as a general rule. Once, though, in London...."

"Come on, tell me."

"This beautiful young Russian boy—I won't mention his name, because you'd recognize it—who'd just joined the company, sort of threw himself at me. I retained just enough presence of mind to ask him, 'Exactly how old are you, anyway?', and he claimed to be eighteen. I called his bluff, checked the company's personnel records, where there was a photocopy of his passport. The little tart was still several months short of his *seventeenth* birthday. The next time he confronted me with more than dancing on his mind, I ran like hell. 'See you in two or three years,' I wanted to say."

Nate laughed. "Well, I'm not an underage Russian boy."

"No, you're...." Romuald, as though at a loss for words, rested his hand lightly on Nate's shoulder. Nate didn't say anything, either, but waited.

Romuald gave Nate's shoulder a little caress through his pink sweatshirt, then slid his hand higher, to the side of Nate's neck, where his palm rubbed gently against the bare flesh. Nate felt a tingle go through him where the other man was touching him.

"You're exquisite," Romuald whispered, as though reluctantly settling on that one word. "Delightful."

His fingers threaded their way through the fine strands of blond hair on the nape of Nate's neck, exerting the gentlest of pressures, drawing Nate's head closer to him. Nate hastened the process, twisting himself about to face Romuald and reaching blindly out for him in turn with one hand that quickly found and stroked the Englishman's hair. And then they were kissing, their lips touching tentatively, almost shyly at first but immediately gaining confidence. Confidence led to mutual boldness, and they began kissing lustfully, open-mouthed, emitting stifled moans of pleasure as their tongues dueled inside their mouths.

Romuald's lips broke their contact with Nate's, but only long enough to plant further kisses on his cheek, his chin, his throat. His mustache tickled, making Nate squirm a little in his embrace.

"Oh, my little beauty," Romuald moaned. "My little love."

"Don't stop, don't stop," Nate pleaded. "Oh, kiss me again!"

He didn't wait for Romuald to take the initiative; this time, Nate grabbed Romuald's head between both his own hands and attacked his mouth with unashamed hunger. Wildly aroused, Nate prepared to surrender himself to the other man. Whatever Romuald wanted him to do, he would do it, gladly. Right there on the couch, or right there on the living room floor, on the carpet, if that was what the other man wanted.

But then, after a few more moments of this delight, Romuald broke their kiss.

"Maybe I shouldn't have done that," he said, in a voice that was thick with desire.

"Why not?"

"Well, quite aside from the potential sexual harassment issue—we *do* work together, after all—I've always felt there was something sordid, and in fact rather pathetic, about the older men in a ballet company preying on the younger men. Taking for granted that they're a pool of potential sex partners. Not that the girls don't have to put up with much the same thing. So many of you young guys can be inexperienced and vulnerable, and it's almost in the nature of things that you look up to the older men at times, and so, as I said, you can be easy prey."

"I know what you mean, Romuald. But I've never felt preyed upon, myself, and I certainly don't feel that way now."

"That's because you're an exception. You're the exception that proves the rule, as they say. You're exceptional in so many ways."

"Oh? Do tell." Nate felt a need to lighten the mood of their conversation. "Let me count the ways in which you think I'm exceptional."

"Seriously. You're so very... I don't know quite how to put it. Yes, I

do. You're not very malleable, are you? I mean, outside of work. There, you're as malleable as anyone could wish. You're a choreographer's dream. No, don't be embarrassed; it's true, and it's rare to find a dancer with a truly open mind who's willing to try just about anything. But outside of work...."

"What?"

"You're the exact opposite. You seem absolutely indifferent to peer pressure. If you believe something, that's it; you're not about to change your mind, or pretend to think otherwise, just to make other people feel comfortable."

"Is that necessarily bad?"

"I can't decide if it's good or bad, admirable or deplorable. All I do know is that it's unusual, and rather intimidating."

"Are you saying you're afraid of me?"

"Maybe a little. Because I'm so attracted to you, and I don't know if acting on the attraction would be a mistake. Talk about temptation. I guess Faustus isn't the only one who's vulnerable to temptation."

"Remember what we talked about at lunch today? You told me you have physical and emotional needs. So do I."

"Everyone does."

"But not everybody is completely honest about having them. You also admitted to me that you're an impulse buyer. We all have impulses, too."

"But we don't always have to act on every impulse. Not right away. Not without due deliberation."

Nate sighed. "Are you saying what I think you're saying? That you're *not* going to take me into the bedroom and make love to me?"

"I'm saying that it's killing me to say this, but I really think we ought to back off a little and give this some serious thought first. I want more from you than just a one-night stand. I'd want a lot more if we did decide to get together."

"All right."

"Are you disappointed?"

"It's killing me, too. God, you have no idea!" But Nate flashed Romuald a reassuring grin. "But if there's anything that dancing's taught me, it's that you can't always do everything you want, get everything you want, right away. You have to work toward it, and earn it. But I can usually get what I want, if I work at it long and hard enough," he boasted. "So consider yourself warned. That 'preying and preyed upon' thing can work both ways."

"I won't make the mistake of underestimating you." Romuald smiled.

"Something *has* occurred to me," the Englishman said. "A possible complication. Here I am, talking about holding out for more than a one-night stand, when you and I haven't even been to bed together yet. For all you know, I may be a lousy lover."

"I think we will have to arrange an audition, as soon as possible," Nate suggested. "What they call a command performance. You're not a bad little dancer, Mr. Ghent—"

"Oh, thank you for the compliment, kind sir!"

"—which suggests you may have potential in other areas, as well." Nate consulted his wristwatch. "It's getting late. I'd better go home."

"I'll call you a cab."

"Don't bother. I can walk to the subway from here."

"You're going home in a cab, young man, and I'm paying for it. No arguments."

"Yes, sir."

"There's a service I use. They know me. They appreciate the fact that performers are usually on a tight schedule. They'll send one right away."

Romuald found his cell phone and made the call. Nate noticed that he gave the service the destination, Nate's address, without hesitation or any need to ask Nate what it was.

"How do you happen to know my address?" Nate asked after Romuald hung up.

"From your personnel file, of course."

"I'm sure you haven't looked up the addresses of everybody in the company, let alone memorized them."

"I'm not as interested in everybody in the company as I am in a certain individual. Anyway, the cab will be here in ten minutes."

Ten minutes, Nate thought. Maybe he'll get stuck in traffic, or have trouble finding the address. Maybe it'll take longer. I hope so!

"I've sorry the evening has to end," Romuald said, as though he could read Nate's thoughts. "I've really enjoyed myself today."

"So have I." Nate retrieved his shoes and slipped them on.

"Don't forget your DVD." Romuald took the disc out of the player and replaced it in its case.

They were making small talk, but somehow there was a new sense of warmth and intimacy between the two of them.

Nate didn't want to leave.

"I'll see you in class tomorrow, Romuald," he said. "Won't I?"

"Yes. Looking forward to it, my lad."

They left the apartment and went down in the elevator, Nate carrying the DVD, Romuald padding alongside him in his socks.

There was no one in the apartment building's vestibule. They stood there, waiting, not speaking. And then, as though both men were responding to some previously agreed upon, secret cue, one known only to themselves, they turned toward each other and began kissing again, passionately.

Nate had a hard-on, and crushed against Romuald's body as he was, he could feel that Romuald had an erection, too.

"Oh, fuck!" he gasped when he'd finally forced himself to pry his mouth away from Romuald's.

"When the cab comes, I could always tell him I've changed my mind. Tell him he's not needed after all, give him some money for his trouble, and send him away."

"Yes, you could do that. But you shouldn't. As much as I'd like to stay here with you tonight—"

"And as much as I'd like you to-"

"We shouldn't."

"Because—"

"Because of what we talked about earlier. Due deliberation."

"Yes. Due deliberation. Oh, I almost forgot." Romuald pulled money out of his pocket and pushed it into the front pocket of Nate's jeans. "For the cab." His hand remained in Nate's pocket for much longer than necessary, the fingers searching, groping, and stroking.

"If anybody happens to see us while we're making out like this, that gesture, you giving me money, could be misinterpreted," Nate joked.

"Let 'em look. Let 'em interpret, or misinterpret, as they please. Kiss me again. Kiss me goodnight."

They kissed. The taxi chose that moment to pull up out front. The driver, damn him, had made the trip in approximately *eight* minutes.

"Son of a bitch," Romuald muttered. "Any other time, we'd still be waiting."

"My thought exactly."

"Goodnight, Nate."

"Goodnight, Romuald."

Nate rode home in a daze.

Beau was relaxing in the living room when Nate came in.

"I almost thought you weren't coming home tonight," Beau said.

"I almost didn't."

"You've been with him this whole time?"

"Every minute."

"What was it like?"

"Fantastic."

"Oh my God. You two did it, didn't you?"

"We most certainly did not. We decided not to—for now. He did kiss me, though, a couple of times."

"Tell me everything. Don't leave anything out."

Nate, feeling very smug indeed, faked a yawn. "I'm kind of tired, Beau. I really should go to bed and try to get some sleep. I'll tell you all about it in the morning."

"You'll tell me all about it right now. You can't leave me hanging like this."

"I *am* kind of hungry. Which is terrible, because I've been eating all day long. Maybe I'll have a snack before I go to bed."

"How about some popcorn?"

"Yeah, popcorn might hit the spot."

"I'll make it. You start talking. Spill it, roomie."

Nate gave an edited account of the afternoon and evening's activities. When the popcorn was ready, he and Beau sat beside each other on the living room couch and ate the hot unbuttered kernels while Nate got around to what his roommate called "the good part."

"So something may or may not happen, down the road," Nate said by way of conclusion. "It all depends on what happens when Keller gets here."

"It sounds like Keller's going to be handed his walking papers."

"I can't count on that."

"But any way you look at it, Keller's only going to be here for a little while."

"You're right. I'd forgotten about that."

"So, worst-case scenario, he and Ghent are still in this long-distance romance. Which will give you your chance to make your move." "I have no intention of making my move, as you put it."

"Why not?"

"I'm leaving it all up to Romuald."

"Why? I mean, why should he be the one who calls the shots? Why shouldn't you have a say in the matter?"

"I don't know. I just know my gut feeling is it has to be that way."

"You do want to have sex with him, don't you?"

"Of course I do. It's all I can think about."

"And he wants to have sex with you?"

"Oh, yeah. But you don't get it, Beau. There's so much more to it than that. We want to have more than just sex. We're both willing to hold out for that. Maybe we're stupid, but that's how it is."

"Oh my God. Two guys who are crazy about each other but decide *not* to have sex with each other. That is so fucking romantic. That is so fucking hot. It's almost like Corydon and Alexis in *Eclogues*."

"I don't know how hot it is. The more I think about it, the more I realize how fucking *frustrating* it is. I'm not sure I'm going to be able to hold out."

"What's he like, outside of work, I mean? When it's just the two of you, one on one, and nobody else around?"

"He's everything I think I could ever want in a man."

"Oh my God!"

"I know. I've got it pretty bad, don't I?"

"I'm getting hot just hearing about it, thinking about it. What's he like as a kisser?"

"Beau, when he kissed me that first time, I thought I was going to die. I thought I was going to melt away. I bet if I kissed him long enough, I could come in my pants just from kissing him. That's how sexy he is. That's what he does to me."

"Oh my God!" Beau repeated.

"Beau, you have got to swear not to tell anybody about any of this. I will *not* put up with having all the guys tease me about this. Especially that son of a bitch Dane. He'd never let me hear the end of it. And it's not just me I have to think about. I won't do anything that might embarrass Romuald."

"I swear I won't breathe a word, if you promise me you will keep me informed about any and all developments. I want to hear about everything that happens between the two of you from now on. Hell, I want to hear about everything that *doesn't* happen, too, when it comes to that!"

Chapter 16 A Contract Is Negotiated and Signed

DURING the new few days, Nate seemed to go about his usual routine in a daze, like a sleepwalker.

The only times during which his mind truly cleared and he was able to focus his thoughts on the task at hand were when he was rehearsing with Romuald and the others during the day and when he was performing at night. Rehearsals and performances, they were real. Everything else seemed dreamlike by comparison: meals, household chores, getting dressed and undressed, going to bed at night (alone) and waking up in the morning. Even when he took class, Nate felt as though he was on autopilot.

To all outward appearances, nothing in his life had changed. He was still a busy young dancer, living and working in New York. He had a full schedule, and in his few moments of downtime, he sat around and joked and laughed with his friends, especially Dane and Larry. Dane continued to tease him and flirt with him as shamelessly as ever, perhaps even more openly and brazenly than before, since the two of them were, after all, rehearsing *Eclogues* together, and the rehearsals were getting more physical than ever.

Again, to all outward appearances, Romuald behaved toward Nate with perfect decorum, betraying no hint of favoritism. Quite the contrary, in fact: Romuald worked him hard and was tough on him, tougher than he ever was on either Larry or Dane. But Nate responded by exerting himself harder than ever. And one thing, undeniably, had changed. Nate and Romuald saw each other only at the theater, when they were almost invariably in the company of other people. And yet they were closer than ever, connected by some invisible bond.

Romuald would describe a movement or gesture to Nate or, more commonly, would demonstrate it for him. And Nate would either ask for clarification or, more commonly, he would simply nod, because on some basic level he instinctively understood what Romuald was trying to convey to him. Their eyes would meet and lock for an instant, and Romuald's mouth would curve in a slight, secretive smile under that neatly trimmed pencil mustache of his, and his eyes would crinkle at their edges in that characteristic way they had. And Nate, returning the older man's gaze, would pray that he would not betray his emotions to the other dancers by blushing, or that, if he did blush, it would be mistaken for a flush as a result of sheer physical exertion. And at the same time, he could feel, for that fleeting split-second when he and Romuald looked at each other and smiled, that dizzying, melting sensation rush over him again, the way it had the first time Romuald had kissed him.

Nate was almost continually aroused. Now, perhaps for the first time in his young life, he understood what sexual and romantic frustration was like. It was too bad he hadn't been cast as Corydon in *Eclogues*. A month ago, such a possibility would have struck him as absurd. Now he could empathize completely with Corydon; he knew he was capable of doing full justice to the demanding part, giving Dane a run for his money. Me tamen urit amor: quis enim modus adsit amoris? And still I burn with love: what limit does love acknowledge? Now Nate knew the answer to Corydon's rhetorical question: *none*. Love acknowledged no limits, accepted no boundaries, overpowered any barrier that stood in its way, and crushed those foolish enough to resist it. It was torture.

Nate's sex life, for the time being, was confined to fantasy and to masturbation.

He found himself in bed at night, the sheet pushed down around his ankles, while his fingers slipped rapidly up and down his agitated, lightly lubricated cock. He kept the reading lamp beside his bed turned down low so that, in the faint glow it cast across the bedroom, he could still see the photo of Romuald on the wall opposite his bed. If Beau ever so much as suspected that his roommate was jerking off over the picture of Romuald, he would never let Nate hear the end of it; but Nate was now indifferent to any such consideration. Through his mind flashed vivid, infinitely provocative pictures of what he guessed the beautiful Englishman would look like naked. At first he fantasized about Romuald kissing him again while he fucked him, stroking his cock in and out Nate's willingly surrendered ass while Nate clung to the other man and pleaded with him for more. Then, emboldened by lust, Nate dared to think about that butch, rounded ass of Romuald's opening up for *him*, and his come spurted out, splashing onto his thrashing thighs and his tautmuscled belly.

On some subconscious level, Nate already sensed that things couldn't go on like this indefinitely, or even for very much longer. He had to see Romuald again, outside of work. He had to be with the other man, just the two of them, alone. And some instinct told him that Romuald felt exactly the same way, that Romuald was experiencing the same agony of erotic suspense.

I want... *I want to give myself to him*, Nate thought in a fever of desire. *I want to be his. I don't care about anything else. Nothing else matters.*

At their next rehearsal, Romuald concentrated on Dane, helping him to refine his interpretation of Corydon.

"Come on, Dane," Romuald cajoled. "You of all people shouldn't have trouble projecting desire for another man. You're mad about the boy, absolutely mad about him, and everything you do has to show that to the audience. Every time you look at Nate or touch him, it's got to be as though he's the most fascinating, precious thing you've even seen in your life. As though nothing else in the world exists except Nate—I mean, Alexis."

Standing on the sidelines at the moment, observing, Larry curled his lips in a knowing little smile as he pondered Romuald's possible Freudian slip. It was natural enough for a choreographer to refer to a character in a ballet not by his own name, but by the name of the dancer portraying him. Romuald, however, had been doing this rather consistently of late. He kept saying "Nate," not "Alexis."

Dane nodded. "Okay," he said. "But don't *tell* me, Professor. Show me."

"Yeah, why don't you run through the *pas de deux* with Nate, Romuald?" Larry suggested just a tad maliciously. "I don't mean do it fullout; maybe just walk through it and show us how you'd do some of the mime bits. You're a much more experienced actor than the three of us rolled together—and don't look at me like that, I'm not trying to butter you up! But it's true. You've even acted in straight plays, and on television."

"Television doesn't count," Romuald said. "They edit it to cut out your mistakes and make you look good. Too bad they can't do that with us dancers up there on stage."

"Still," Larry persisted. "Don't be so modest. Come on, help us out here. Show us how you'd do it if you were Dane."

Romuald turned to Dane. "Do you think it'd be useful?"

"Of course."

As Romuald glanced at Nate, Nate didn't wait for him to ask; he said quickly, "Me, too. Let's do it."

The pianist played the music, which by now had become familiar to all of them. Romuald, as usual, didn't dictate but made suggestions and presented options. "Okay, here, where for a moment it almost looks as though Nate is going to give in to you, Dane? You might do something like this." Romuald had his left arm around Nate's waist, supporting him, as Nate leaned slightly backward; Romuald echoed Nate's swaying movement with his own body, leaning over him, and at the same time he raised his right arm and mimed running his open hand over Nate's face, then down over his shoulder and bicep. Romuald was looking at Nate with such an expression of desperate longing on his face that Nate felt momentarily disconcerted. Was Romuald just acting?

"Very slowly and deliberately, time it to the music, make it look almost like slow motion. You don't really touch his face, Dane, because you might smear his makeup—which you guys will be wearing in the performance, remember," Romuald went on, reverting to the discussion of purely practical matters. "You *can* touch his hair, if you want to, since you'll all be wearing your own hair, not wigs."

"Thank God," Dane said. Like most male dancers, he hated wigs.

"You can *grab* his hair," Larry suggested from his vantage point. "Pull his head farther back, like you're getting ready to kiss him, whether he wants to be kissed or not."

"Hey!" Nate protested. "That's my scalp you're talking about!"

But Romuald had already seized a handful of Nate's blond mane and was trying out the gesture, none too gently. Nate went along with it, hoping that neither Dane nor Larry realized how exciting he found it to have Romuald touch him.

"And maybe you react by sort of half-resisting, half-yielding for a beat, Nate," he suggested. "You look up at me, kind of pleadingly, and right away I'm sorry that I started to get rough with you, and I let you go."

"Oh, I like that, Professor," Dane exclaimed. "It looks really good. It looks hot."

"You like the idea of doing it to *Nate*," Larry said with a laugh. "Mr. Keller might not be so cooperative, once he gets here."

He'd meant it as a joke, and Romuald did indeed smile, but there was a pensiveness behind Romuald's smile that was not altogether devoid of melancholy. "Well, a lot of things might have to be done differently once Henri gets here. Little things here and there—in the choreography, I mean. Nothing major. Just the usual adjustments that are always necessary when one dancer takes over a role from another." He gave Nate a quick, reasonably chaste-looking hug followed by a smart slap on the back. "As for you, you little scamp, you're a ruddy marvel. Every time you do this scene, it gets better. Now, if you're not too tired, you and Dane run through it again, just one more time, and this time Larry and I will both watch. Pretend you've never seen it before, Larry; give me your honest opinion when they're done."

Larry's verdict was highly positive. After the rehearsal, when he and Dane went to hit the showers, Romuald detained Nate for a moment.

"I've been looking at the schedule again, Nate, and I see you're performing tonight, in *Pulcinella*." Romuald's tone of voice was deceptively casual, but Nate now knew the other man well enough to hear a certain subtext in his words.

"Yes, it's a fun work. I always enjoy it."

"Today's Saturday. What do you usually do on a Sunday morning after you've danced on Saturday night?"

"Oh, nothing in particular. Maybe—just maybe—some distinguished English gentleman will invite me to join him for Sunday brunch."

"Yes, that's a strong possibility. But you might not have to wait for brunch. It just so happens that I had Mr. Walker get me a ticket for tonight's performance, so I can see you dance. I decided that, since I've been working so hard lately, I deserve to give myself that much of a treat. Maybe—just maybe—you'd like to come to my place afterward for a quiet little late supper. Nothing fancy, I'll just put something together."

"I'd love to, Romuald."

"There might be no reason to call the taxi service later on tonight. You could stay at my place overnight. You could bring your toothbrush, and anything else you need."

"I'll bring my toothbrush. I don't think I'll need anything else. I always sleep in the nude, for example."

"So do I. An interesting coincidence. We can sleep in the nude together."

"I can't think of a more pleasant way to spend a Saturday night."

"It just goes to show you, Nate, that there are a lot of things we still don't know about each other. I think it's time we began to start closing that information gap." Romuald flashed Nate an impish grin. "Now go take your shower. You're all sweaty."

I've just been propositioned, Nate decided as he reluctantly left the rehearsal room. He was teasing me the way he has before, sure, but there was more to it than teasing and joking around this time. Something's changed, something's changed inside him that's made him come to some sort of a

decision. He can't stand it anymore, either. He wants me as much as I want him!

And I've come to a decision, too. I'm not going to let him back out, not this time! I'm going to go back to his place with him this evening after the performance, and I'm going to spend the night there, and I'm going to give myself to him. I'm going to make love to him. I'm not going to take "no" for an answer. I can be aggressive, too, if I have to be. I can be every bit as aggressive as Corydon is in the ballet!

Nate confided in Beau, warning him that he wouldn't be coming home that night.

"I think this is going to be it," Nate said, scarcely able to believe it himself.

"What are you going to wear?' Beau asked. "To change into after the performance, I mean?"

"What difference does it make? I don't plan to keep my clothes on any longer than I have to once I get to Romuald's place."

"Now you're talking, roomie! You go for it!"

Nevertheless, Nate went to extra pains to make himself presentable.

He had rarely before felt such excitement in anticipation of a performance. But of course this was no ordinary performance. He had an assignation afterward. He had a date. He was going to spend the night with Romuald Ghent.

Stravinsky's score for *Pulcinella*, based on melodies by Pergolesi and other eighteenth-century composers, incorporated several vocal numbers sung in Italian. That evening, playing Florindo, Nate found himself paying special attention to the sung texts.

"Ma degli uomini il consiglio io per me non seguirò," the mezzosoprano sang at the start of the ballet's final scene. "Non perchè mi piace il giglio gli altri fiori sprezzerò." The suave, melting beauty of the melody disguised the cynicism of the words. "I will not follow the plans of men," the singer said, justifying her fickleness. "Just because the lily pleases me doesn't mean I reject other kinds of flowers."

When Romuald joined him backstage after the performance and congratulated him on his dancing, Nate mentioned his reaction to the song text to him.

"Yes, it's a rather dry-eyed, rational view toward love, isn't it?" Romuald said, smiling. "One I share, to a certain extent, perhaps."

"We'll have to discuss your attitude about love, Romuald."

"Yes, we will. Over dinner."

And so they did. At Romuald's apartment, they ate the light meal he prepared, accompanied by a bottle of wine, while listening to music. Romuald's CD collection included the score of *Pulcinella*, of course, so they listened to that. The other piece on the disc was another Stravinsky score, *Apollo*.

"You're going to have to dance Apollo some day," Romuald said matter-of-factly.

"Me? That's the kind of role I think of Larry doing," Nate protested.

"And some day, some young dancer will say, 'That's the kind of role I think of Nathaniel Deventer as doing.' Mark my words."

"I'm not looking quite that far ahead at the moment," Nate said rather boldly. "I'm only thinking about the rest of tonight, and tomorrow morning."

"And what are you thinking about?"

"How much I've missed being with you, one on one like this, the past few days. How much I'm attracted to you, and how desperately I hope that you're attracted to me in the same way. How much I want to go to bed with you. What about you, Romuald? Have you had time to give the matter 'due deliberation', like we were talking about the other night? Is that why you invited me over here, tonight?"

"I invited you over here because I haven't been able to think coherently about very much else but you."

"And what have you decided?"

"This will have to be a mutual decision, Nate. And before we get too carried away, we would need to establish a few ground rules." Romuald sounded as matter-of-fact as though he were negotiating a contract.

"Okay, such as?"

"Neither of us could demand monogamy. It's not realistic. It only leads to possessiveness and jealousy. For one thing, you're too young and beautiful for me to keep all to myself. That would be incredibly selfish of me. You're going to be attracted to other men, and they will be attracted to you. I would never want to think that you were limiting your options, closing yourself off to other experiences, out of some sort of misplaced concern for how I might feel about it. I'm willing to share you with other men—within reason."

"Romuald, you're making me blush."

"Yes, I can see that I am, and as usual, it's incredibly sexy to watch. Don't distract me; I'm not quite finished. Would be you willing to go along with what I've said so far?"

"Yes."

"Good. And what you'd need to understand, and also accept, is that this can go both ways. I've been known to enjoy the occasional three-way or group sex scene. It's not necessarily a purely physical pleasure, interestingly enough. You can feel quite emotionally involved with another man, even with a complete stranger, during and after a sex act, even a sex act that you've told yourself is just recreational, just guys having themselves a little fun together. Of course, what you feel for the man you're in love with—the one you want to be with outside of bed as well as in bed—that's completely different. It exists on an altogether separate plane. But I've found that these two very different ways of responding to another man are by no means mutually exclusive. In a strange sort of way, one enriches the other. I really do believe that's one possible way in which most gays are fundamentally different from most straight people. We're hard-wired to respond just a bit differently, on that physical and sexual man-to-man level."

"I think I understand what you're saying. I'm not sure I entirely agree with it, but I'm willing to keep an open mind."

"Good. I'm glad you're not the kind of 'yes man' who automatically agrees with everything I say. I wouldn't like that. So monogamy and jealousy are out, and the potential for variety, at least, is in. What we *would* have a right to expect from each other is honesty."

"Agreed."

"Excellent. Is there anything else we need to discuss?"

"Yes. One thing."

"And that is?"

"Just how much longer am I going to have to wait before you kiss me?"

Romuald smiled at him. "This long." He closed the distance between them, took Nate's blond head between his hands, and kissed him on the lips. A hot shiver of response rippled through Nate's entire body. What he'd told Beau had been no exaggeration: when Romuald kissed him, he felt as though he was melting away, as though he was already coming!

"Oh, God!" he moaned. "Oh Romuald, oh God!"

"So beautiful," Romuald gasped. "You are so fucking beautiful, so goddamn perfect. I won't lie to you, Nate. I've been with lots of men. I thought I was in love with some of them, and probably, in one way or another, I truly was in love with them. But I've never felt anything like what I'm feeling now with you!"

"I'm not a virgin, either, Romuald," Nate confessed. "I've had sex with other men. I thought I was in love with a couple of them. But now I know that was all nothing, just sex, just *wanting* to be in love with somebody. It was nothing compared to this!"

"Ah, Christ!" the other man gasped. "If you keep talking like that, you're going to make me come!"

"Let's not talk about it anymore, then. Romuald, I want to make love to you," Nate pleaded. "Right now. Please! Everything else, we can think about it, talk about it later. But right now I need you so bad, and I want you so much."

"I can't wait any longer, either, Nate," Romuald confessed. "I've got to be with you, I've got to have you, I've got to make love to you. I'm afraid I'm going to go crazy if I don't!"

He grabbed Nate and kissed him again. Then, holding him by the hand, he led him into the bedroom. Nate saw the enhancements Romuald had made for Henri Keller's benefit: the Oriental armoire, the chest of drawers, the trunk. The two blue porcelain foo dogs perched on top of the chest of drawers seemed to wink encouragingly at Nate as he entered the room and sat on the edge of the bed, stripping out of his shirt.

"Light on or off?" Romuald asked.

"Off," Nate decided. He was already shedding the rest of his clothes, strewing them across the Oriental rug on the floor.

Romuald was tearing his own clothes off as though they were burning his skin, baring his lean, hard-muscled body.

Already completely nude himself, Romuald grabbed Nate's left ankle and stripped the sock off his foot, then repeated the process with his right foot.

"Naked," Romuald choked. "I need you to be mother naked, so I can see and touch and taste every inch of you before I go stark raving mad!"

He still had Nate's right ankle gripped in his hand, and now he pressed his face against the sole of Nate's foot, kissing and licking it, before he ran his wet tongue up over the ball of the foot and inserted his tongue between two of Nate's toes.

"Oh, you fucker!" Nate moaned as he writhed in response to the tickling. "You horny fucker!"

"Suck you," Romuald was mumbling semi-coherently as he mouthed Nate's wildly flexing toes. "Going to suck your toes, going to lick and suck every part of you before I'm done with you!" Nor was he exaggerating. He finally relinquished Nate's foot only to throw himself on top of Nate at full length and kiss him passionately on the mouth again, pushing his tongue deep inside Nate's open, panting, greedily receptive mouth. Then Romuald grabbed Nate's wrists and held them pinned down on the mattress at his sides while he used his mouth on as much of Nate's upper body as he could reach from this position. Nate squirmed wildly under the other man's relentless oral onslaught, and when Romuald began to suck on his already stiffened nipples, pulling each of them inside his mouth in turn to lick and lightly bite down on them, he arched his back and yelped with lust. His tits felt burning hot within Romuald's mouth, and each nip of the Englishman's teeth on the swollen, hypersensitive flesh sent a hot stab of response through Nate's body, making his hard cock twitch and his asshole clench.

"Fuck me, fuck me!" Nate heard himself pleading. "I can't stand it anymore—you're going to have to fuck me!"

"Not yet! Not until I've had a chance to suck your cock!" Romuald growled. He slid down Nate's torso, replacing his mouth on Nate's tits with both his hands, catching the tormented nipples between his thumbs and forefingers and pinching and tugging on them, hard. At the same time his mouth captured the bloated head of Nate's bobbing cock. Romuald sucked it deep inside his mouth, his groans of pleasure echoing Nate's as he wrapped his lips snugly around the base of Nate's penis and began to suck, stroking the full length of the blond boy's cockshaft from top to bottom, over and over again.

"Yours, too," Nate babbled, twisting his body around until he and Romuald were lying next to each other, head to feet. "I want to suck yours, too. I want to sixty-nine, your cock in my mouth—oh, God!"

They sucked each other passionately for long, breathless minutes on end, both men hotly aroused by the loud slurping and suctioning noises they were making as they fed on each other's dicks. As he pumped his mouth up and down around Nate's shaft with a machinelike regularity, Romuald slid one hand between Nate's tensed buttocks and fingered his asshole, his fingertip first massaging, then penetrating the taut little sphincter ring.

"And your ass," Romuald gasped. "God, how I love the smell and the taste of your ass! I'm going to eat it. I'm going to fuck it with my tongue!" He let Nate's rigid cockshaft slide against his throat as he pushed his face between Nate's buttocks and began to kiss and lick his ass, as though the puckered rim of flesh was the most sensual thing he had ever come into contact with. His stiffened tongue penetrated Nate's asshole like a miniature penis, penetrating it as deeply as it could.

A Dance of Love and Jealousy

"Ah, you cocksucker! You ass-licker!" Nate moaned. "You're getting me too horny, too hot. I can't stand it—you're going to have to fuck me—I can't wait any longer. I'm going to have to have your cock in me! Fuck me! Please, Romuald, *please*! *Please* fuck me!"

"I'll die," Romuald said. "I'll die unless I have you!"

He reached over, yanked open the top drawer of the nightstand on the left side of the bed, and pulled out a box of condoms. He extracted one, tore open its foil packet, and rolled the pre-lubricated, ribbed rubber down over his painfully tumescent and throbbing dick. "I'm going to die," he repeated as he groped for the tube of lubricant he also kept in the drawer. "I'm going to die if I can't have you; I've waited so long, I've thought about this so often, lying here alone at night! Thinking about you! Wanting you! Wanking myself like a silly little schoolboy, jerking off, thinking about you!"

He unscrewed the cap from the tube of lubricant, squeezed a blob of the clear gel, rubbed it over his latex-sheathed cock.

"Fuck me." Nate's voice, suffocated by desire, was barely audible as he lay flat on his back on the bed, raised his legs, and reached down to grasp and part his buttocks. "Fuck me quick, I can't wait any longer. I want you so much, it hurts!"

He clenched his teeth and fought back a shriek of pain as Romuald pressed his cockhead right against his asshole, then pushed it through the taut aperture, forcing it to stretch.

"Shit! Oh, shit—no, don't stop, get it in there, all of it, deep in my ass—oh, Romuald! Yeah! Get in there, all the way in there, fuck me, fuck me hard!"

Their bodies were locked together in the most intimate, obscene way imaginable: hard cock penetrating tight ass. Nate abandoned himself to the other man's thrusts. He couldn't relax his sphincter enough, he couldn't open his asshole wide enough; he couldn't get enough of his fucker's cock!

"Romuald, ah, fuck!" he babbled, staring up into his lover's face, which was a glowing, slack-lipped, heavy-lidded mask of desire. "Yes, yes, harder, deeper, don't stop, don't stop!"

No doubt as a direct result of his rigorous daily physical training routine, Romuald possessed an agility—and a stamina—that would've been the envy of many a man half his age. He and Nate soon found themselves in a position familiar enough from porno DVDs, where it was visually effective, but which most nonprofessionals would not have found all that comfortable. Nate was basically supporting himself on the mattress only by the back of his head and his shoulders; his back was raised virtually perpendicular to the bed, and his legs were high in the air. Romuald was squatting behind and above him, with his feet planted firmly on the mattress and his knees deeply flexed. He was driving his dick straight down into Nate's ass as he seized Nate's ankles and held his legs open in a wide V shape. Nate's own erect cock was cantilevered out from his groin, directly above his face.

"Fuck me, fuck me," Nate chanted breathlessly as he stared up into his lover's eyes. "Oh, fuck me hard, fuck me deep! Take me, Romuald! I'm yours, all yours!"

"Hot," Romuald moaned, his cock continuing to jackhammer down into Nate's ass. "So fucking hot!"

"Come in me," Nate urged. "Come in my ass, just like this, let me feel your cock going off inside me. Oh, I'm so fucking horny, I think I'm going to come!"

He reached up with his right hand, grabbed his hitherto neglected dick, and jerked it feverishly. But the gesture was almost redundant: he was ejaculating, all right, helplessly, his semen flying out of the tip of his penis and spraying down onto his face and chest like a thick white rain.

"How dare you," Romuald taunted him excitedly as he watched the discharge. "How dare you come without my permission. I wanted that come in my mouth. I wanted to taste it, all of it, every drop—oh, God, I'm there! I'm going to come, too! I'm going to shoot!"

"Do it!" Nate demanded. "Come in my ass, lose your fucking load!"

He tightened and flexed his anal muscles around Romuald's prick as the other man gripped his ankles more tightly, threw his head back, and thrust and shuddered his way through his own orgasm, his semen filling the reservoir tip of the condom deep within Nate's ass.

He let go of Nate's legs, which fell back down onto the bed. He pulled his cock out of Nate's ass and peeled off the filled condom, flinging it aside. He stretched out on top of Nate's body, took his face between his hands, and kissed him repeatedly. Their bodies writhed together like one entity, glued together by sweat and semen. At last, Romuald pulled his mouth away from Nate's long enough to cradle Nate's disheveled blond head in the crook of his arm and, nuzzling his lips against the flesh of Nate's throat and shoulder, to speak.

"Oh, my little beauty, my little love, my Nate, my sweet Nate, are you happy? Are you as happy as I am?"

"Much happier," Nate boasted. "Nobody could be as happy as I feel right now. Kiss me. Kiss me, Romuald. Never stop kissing me, never stop loving me. I'm yours. I'm yours."

Chapter 17 The Calm Eye of the Storm

LLOYD WALKER was a man who was not easily agitated. In his line of work, it was often necessary to maintain an outward semblance of calm even when everything around him seemed to be on the verge of chaos. As he sat in his office one afternoon and busied himself with paperwork, he did a quick personal inventory. He supposed he was lucky and ought to be grateful. He was a happily married man and had recently become a grandfather. He was the director of a major ballet and modern dance company, and people whose opinions he respected told him he was good at his job. And just at the moment, on this quiet weekday afternoon, he seemed to be in between crises, for a change, as opposed to dealing with one crisis on top of another. He might as well sit back and try to enjoy this calm in the eye of the storm, because he knew damn well it couldn't possibly last!

The current season was going well so far. The big gamble had been hiring Romuald Ghent as the company's new resident choreographer. As a dancer, Ghent was a big name, one of the biggest. Critics seemed to either love his work as a choreographer or hate it; there was no fence-sitting. Audiences, on the other hand, tended to be favorable, although there had been a few recent exceptions on the other side of the Atlantic. What Walker really hoped to do was talk Ghent into doing more dancing. He was still comparatively young, as dancers went, and surely had quite a few good years ahead of him as a performer, maybe not in the more demanding classic ballet roles, but definitely in the more modern repertory. Luckily, the latter was what Ghent seemed to be focusing on now, including new works.

The first test would be *Eclogues*, Ghent's new ballet based on Virgil, which the company was rehearsing now. They'd scored a coup by talking Henri Keller into coming to town to dance in all ten performances of the new work, starting with the big fundraising gala on opening night. Keller, with his recent history of drug and sex scandals, was undeniably a loose cannon, but he was still a major international star. His name alone had guaranteed that all ten performances of *Eclogues* were sold out well in advance. Since Romuald had assured Walker that the climactic, penultimate scene in *Eclogues* would

be "Homoerotic with a capital H," they'd hedged their bet by casting Dane Stockton, the hottest young male dancer on the company's roster, as Keller's partner in the scene. That pairing alone should guarantee that they'd win the gay vote, so to speak. As additional insurance, since the scene required a third male dancer, they'd assigned that role to Larry Duvernoix, another local audience favorite.

Keller was Ghent's boyfriend—when he wasn't diverting himself elsewhere to the delight of the scandal-hungry world press—which was the only reason they'd been able to sign him up as a guest star in the first place. Romuald, according to reports Walker had received from his contacts in other ballet companies, knew how to handle Henri and keep him from getting too out of control. On a good day, that is.

Personally, Walker liked Romuald. Underneath his ingratiating, deceptively easygoing exterior, there was a core of steely determination. He was capable of driving a hard bargain when he chose to. Walker respected that. You didn't get to where Ghent was in the dance world by being indecisive or a pushover.

Walker hadn't been surprised when Romuald had cast Nathaniel Deventer in one of the small parts in *Eclogues*. Nate, although fairly new to the company, had already proven himself: he was reliable, hard-working, and versatile. He'd quickly been promoted from just another corps boy to the rank of soloist. What *had* thrown Walker for a moment was Romuald's insistence that Nate also serve as Henri Keller's understudy. Covering for a major star in a leading role, especially in a brand-new and untried ballet, was the kind of responsibility usually entrusted to a more experienced dancer. But Romuald had been inflexible on the point, and Walker let him have his way.

By all reports, though, Nate was doing a fine job. Walker had asked Larry, whose opinions he always trusted, about how the rehearsals were going, and specifically how Nate was coping with the considerable challenge that had been thrown at him.

Larry, instead of coming up with a quick, glib answer, had looked thoughtful for a long moment. Then he said, "The kid is absolutely fucking brilliant. No kidding. I mean, I *knew* he was good, I knew he wouldn't let Ghent down, but I wish you could see what he's doing in these rehearsals. Somehow, Ghent has this way of pulling things out of him. It's hard to explain. It's almost like the two of them can communicate by telepathy."

Walker was pleased. The intensely self-critical Larry was not in the habit of handing out unearned praise to others.

"And how's your buddy Dane doing?" he'd asked. "How are he and Ghent getting along?"

"Dane is Dane," Larry replied with a laugh. "And he's playing a horny gay guy—perfect typecasting. Trust me, you won't be disappointed on opening night."

Dane could be a pain in the ass, but Walker had to concede two points: he sold tickets because audiences loved him, and he practically generated his own publicity because the press couldn't get enough of him. He was the one member of the company who was unarguably a household name outside the world of dance enthusiasts. He was as notorious for his private life—which was hardly so private any longer, after all—as he was admired as a performer, if not more.

Somewhere on Walker's desk, buried under a stack of papers, was that issue of a gay magazine that had just come out. He retrieved it. Yes, Walker had given Dane permission to give the interview and had even okayed the inclusion of some tasteful and not *too* revealing nude photos of his star. But he had no control over the magazine's editorial staff, of course. So there a shirtless Dane was on the magazine's cover, admittedly looking quite handsome and alluring. But the cover photo was accompanied by the winceinducing caption, *Dane Stockton in the Raw! Ballet's Bisexual Bad Boy Bares his Butt!*

"Enough with the frigging alliteration, already," Walker muttered. They claimed there was no such thing as bad publicity. Still, he made a mental note to himself to suggest to the company's publicity department, and to Dane himself, that they tone things down a little. Walker didn't want to risk offending any of the company's more conservative sponsors.

Dane was shacking up with Kitri Vesey, one of the company's star ballerinas, who was a few years older than Dane. Walker, like a lot of people, couldn't figure out the precise nature of the couple's relationship. Dane and Kitri could bicker, of course, almost like an old married couple, but it was obvious that, in some sense, they were devoted to each other. Which didn't prevent the notoriously promiscuous Dane from screwing around with other men, every chance he got, apparently with Kitri's full knowledge and approval.

Thank God for a dancer like Larry, who was straight and happily married to Cara, another of the company's ballerinas. The couple had a baby girl, Allegra, and Walker was her godfather. Now, Larry was a guy who had his head screwed on right. You could always count on Larry to come through in a pinch.

Some of the gay male dancers, on the other hand, seemed to make a full-time second career out of driving Walker crazy. The younger ones were

the worst: they tended to be drama queens and were always going through some sexual or romantic crisis, real or imaginary. Walker had long ago stopped trying to keep a mental scorecard, tracking which of these boys was carrying on with which of the others; it varied from day to day. At times he thought he was running not a dance company, but a gay dating service!

"The kid," as Walker somewhat affectionately thought of Nate Deventer, was an exception. Nate was gay, but he was a lot more sensible and goal-oriented than some of the others, and he didn't seem to be particularly promiscuous. He and Larry were friends, and Larry was no doubt a good influence on him and a suitable role model. Somewhat incongruously, Nate and Dane were also buddies—as were Dane and Larry, for that matter. Scuttlebutt had it that Dane had the hots for Nate in the worst way and was always chasing after him, but the two of them had never actually hooked up. Nate was too smart to fall for a trashy number like Dane, apparently. Good for him!

As for Romuald Ghent, he was gay, too, but he was an older guy, and he didn't seem to allow his private life to interfere with his work. Walker wasn't sure that Romuald even *had* much of a private life. Ever since the Englishman had arrived in New York, he'd pretty much devoted himself to the job, putting in long hours and giving of himself unstintingly. Walker was grateful for this, of course. But he had the gut feeling that Romuald, for some reason, didn't allow himself to have much recreation, or fun. Innocent fun or otherwise!

Speak of the devil, none other than Romuald now showed up at the office door. Lloyd invited him in, and the two men sat and talked shop, with Romuald bringing him up to speed on how the rehearsals for *Eclogues* were progressing, among other things.

In the short time he'd been with the company, Romuald had acquired a reputation as a snappy and innovative dresser with a penchant for bright colors and bold patterns, often combined in unorthodox, mismatched ways. Today was no exception. He was giving new meaning to the term "the layered look." His pre-faded pale blue denim jeans were paired with a violet T-shirt; he had a red-and-blue checked flannel shirt, the sort of thing a blue-collar worker or an outdoorsman might wear, tied around his waist; and, worn unbuttoned over the T-shirt, *another* shirt, this one a rather dressy cotton one with hot pink and lime-green vertical stripes. This shirt wasn't tucked into his pants but hung loosely around his torso. And it had French cuffs with massive, eye-catching gold cufflinks in them.

There was a pause in the two men's conversation as they ran out of work-related topics to discuss.

"There was one other thing I wanted to bring to your attention," Romuald said as he sat back comfortably in his chair.

Walker had known the Englishman long enough by now to recognize that sudden shift to prim formality in his voice and manner. It usually meant something was up. Something Walker was going to have to deal with sooner or later.

"Yes?" Walker asked.

Then Romuald dropped his bombshell:

"Nathaniel Deventer and I have developed a personal relationship. Outside of work."

"Ah, are you telling me you two are dating?"

"We're fucking," Romuald said, reverting to his usual bluntness.

"I see. And you're telling me this because...?"

"In the interests of full disclosure. I'd promised myself, after some of this recent unpleasantness in the press about Henri Keller, that I'd try to keep my personal life strictly separate from my work. But unfortunately such vows are usually made to be broken. I think Nate is a dancer with unlimited potential, and I intend to do everything I can to help him and promote his career. I hope I'd want to do that even if he was a straight guy who had absolutely no interest in me outside of work. Mark my words, Lloyd: I promise you that less than five years from now, Nate will be performing on the international circuit, and you'll be proud to be able to say that he got his start here with your company.

"But that's the future. As for the here and now, once word of our relationship gets around, as I'm sure it soon will, some people will start accusing me of favoritism, of giving Nate opportunities and breaks just because of my personal feelings for him. I don't give a damn about what most people think. But I do expect you to be my watchdog, so to speak, and if *you* notice anything like that—if you see me losing my objectivity and crossing that fine line between properly nurturing and showcasing a dancer and giving him preferential treatment—then I want you to call me on it and tell me I'm doing something inappropriate or unfair to the other dancers. That's all I wanted to say."

"Well," Walker said slowly, "thanks for being so upfront with me, Romuald. I'm not exactly naïve, you know. I'm been in this business long enough to know, well, what sorts of things go on. But in this case, I don't envision many problems. You're too levelheaded a guy."

"Thank you for saying so. I'll try to live up to that assessment. Let's

hope you're not being too optimistic!" Romuald rose to leave.

"Oh, one other thing, Romuald."

"Yes?"

"Congratulations."

He'd succeeded in taking Romuald by surprise. "Congratulations?" Romuald repeated blankly.

"Sure." Walker grinned at him. "Listen, I may be an old fogey, and I may not play on you guys' team, but I've been around long enough to know the score, and I'm not blind. Nate is a sweet kid. And I guess he's also what's commonly known as 'a hottie'?"

Romuald returned Walker's grin. "Nate is what is commonly known, here in the States, as 'a *smoking* hottie'," he replied, more than a little smugly.

Walker laughed. "Get out of here, you horny bastard. You ought to be ashamed of yourself. Leave me alone. Some of us still have work to do."

Ghent and Deventer, Walker thought when he was alone. Shit! I sure didn't see that one coming! Talk about being blindsided!

He'd assumed that Romuald, who was only *named* after a saint, after all, would get tired of "all work and no play" and would hook up with somebody here in New York sooner or later, if he hadn't already. And he'd assumed that it could very easily be one or more members of the company, possibly among the younger and sluttier gay male dancers. Walker was actually surprised that Dane Stockton, that oversexed and under-inhibited bastard, hadn't already made a play for Ghent: God knew Dane seemed to sleep with everybody else sooner or later! But somehow Nate hadn't entered into Walker's speculations. The kid had a level head on *his* shoulders, too. He and Romuald were well matched in that respect, at least. This might be the start of something more serious than the usual testosterone-driven fling. And it might work out okay, with luck.

Then Walker remembered Henri Keller. He wondered what Keller was going to have to say about all this! The Swiss dancer supposedly had a volatile temper: he'd had a recent run-in with the law after he'd assaulted a photographer who was trying to get a candid shot of him for a tabloid. The paparazzo had sued, and Keller had settled out of court, no doubt paying through the nose. If Keller and Ghent were still carrying the torch for each other and weren't just casual fuck buddies, Keller might not relish the prospect of their cozy little *pas de deux* turning into a *ménage à trois*.

Better get ready to batten down the hatches, he thought with grim humor. I think I just heard a hurricane warning on the weather report. Well, it was nice while it lasted!

Chapter 18 Intimacies

THERE was no longer any doubt about it in Nate Deventer's mind. He was in love with Romuald Ghent.

Nate was twenty-three, and Romuald was thirty-eight. Nate rarely thought about the fifteen-year difference in their ages. For all practical purposes, it was erased most of the time. One of the things Nate loved about Romuald was the way this rather serious, intellectual older man could revert to an almost boyish insouciance, taking delight in the little things in life. It was a side of Romuald's personality that he only occasionally revealed to other people but that he consistently displayed when he was with Nate.

It hadn't taken Nate long to get past his lingering feelings of awe toward Romuald. Already, he felt comfortable teasing the other man. And Romuald, whom some people mistakenly thought of as the epitome of British reserve, was quite capable of giving as good as he got.

"What first attracted you to me?" Nate asked Romuald one evening, one of the times they'd managed to coordinate their busy schedules to spend a few hours alone together. "My body or my mind?"

"What an egotistical question," Romuald retorted with a laugh. "What makes you think I was particularly attracted to either of them?"

"Seriously, Romuald. Was it my dancing or my personality?"

"It's hard to separate the two. I liked your dancing from the very start. But I liked your personality, too. Let me put it this way. There are at least a half-dozen guys in the company who are *almost* as physically attractive as you and who are in the habit, shall we say, of making themselves much more readily available to all and sundry. You never saw me coming on to any of *them*, did you? So there's your answer." Romuald paused. "On the other hand, you can't fuck the mind, as they say. Too bad. Because if you could, I'd certainly like to fuck yours. I suspect it would be one hell of an orgasm. Mind-blowing, so to speak."

"Romuald Ghent, you are a dirty old man."

"And proud of it. Whereas you, my fine lad, are a brazen corrupter of your elders and your betters."

"You want to see brazen? You want to be corrupted? Okay. Let's take off our clothes and go into your bedroom."

"Nate, that is hardly the way to impress a man with your intellect."

"The intellect is highly overrated—at times. Let's go fuck. Let's have nonintellectual, mindless sex."

Romuald pursed his lips and pretended to think about it for a moment.

"All right," he finally said. "Let's!"

Romuald was a bit of a workaholic. Just how much of a workaholic he was, Nate learned later that very night. As usual, after an energetic bout of lovemaking, Nate didn't bother to go home to the apartment he shared with Beau. Romuald urged him to stay at his place, and they slept together in Romuald's bed.

Nate woke up to find himself alone in the bed in the darkened bedroom. He glanced at the digital display of the alarm clock, which happened to be on the nightstand on the side of the bed he was lying on. It read 3:25 a.m. Nate, missing the warmth of Romuald's body next to his under the covers, assumed he'd gotten up to go to the bathroom or to get a drink of water, perhaps. He waited, but he heard no sounds coming from elsewhere in the apartment. At three-thirty, he slipped out of the bed and went, nude, to investigate.

In the living room, Romuald was seated at his desk by the windows; he'd pulled on the trousers and shirt he'd discarded when they'd gone to bed. The only light in the room was provided by the desk lamp; in the little pool of light it cast onto the desk, Nate could see that Romuald had his score of *Muzio Scaevola*, the ballet he was thinking about choreographing for La Scala, open in front of him. He was making notes in its margins in pencil.

The intense look of concentration on his face softened when he glanced up and saw Nate, standing there in the shadows at the far end of the room.

"Nate. Did I make a noise and wake you up?"

"No. I just happened to wake up, and I missed you. What are you doing?"

"Some ideas about *Muzio Scaevola* popped into my head while I was lying there in bed, half asleep. I often get up in the middle of the night and do a little work, you see. After all, I'm not used to having a bedmate." He smiled at Nate. "Let alone such a stimulating one. You're a source of inspiration for me."

"It's nice of you to say so, Romuald, but I'm sure it's not true. You're

the most imaginative man I know. You hardly need me, or anybody else, to get your creativity going."

"You let me be the judge of what I need and don't need. And don't underestimate yourself. And while you're at it, come here. Aren't you cold, standing there with no clothes on?"

"No. Beau and I run around our apartment in the nude all the time."

"Dear Lord. Your very own nudist colony. The things that go on in this town. I'm shocked."

During this banter, Nate had joined Romuald at the desk. Romuald pulled him down onto his lap and kissed him.

"Am I interrupting you?" Nate asked as he sleepily submitted to his lover's caresses. "Am I bothering you?"

"No, I was about to come back to bed, anyway. As for bothering me, I believe the expression is 'hot and bothered', isn't it? We'd better go back to bed, all right—*to sleep*—before you get me too excited. Another orgasm like the one I had earlier tonight would probably kill me."

"Not on my watch," Nate boasted. "Not with me there to be your very own personal paramedic and monitor your vital signs. Or, in your case, your *virile* signs," he punned.

Romuald hugged him tighter. "It is late. Come on. You need your sleep."

He turned out the desk lamp and led Nate back into the bedroom. Shedding his shirt and pants, Romuald slid into the bed beside Nate, nude, and took him in his arms. They moved into what they both had already begun to think of as a favorite sleeping position: on their sides, with Nate's butt pressed snugly back against Romuald's crotch and Romuald's arm around him. On the pillows, their heads rested together with Nate nestled into Romuald's shoulder.

Neither man spoke. They lay there, listening to each other's breathing.

"Are you still awake?" Romuald finally whispered.

"I don't know if I am or not," Nate murmured. "Whenever I'm with you like this, it's like being in a dream. The kind of dream you want to go on forever and not wake up from."

"What a romantic you are."

"Am I? I think I'm the exact opposite, most of the time. Much too practical. That's why I love being with you so much. *You* make me feel romantic."

"I wonder whether I deserve you."

"I don't know. But *I* deserve *you*," Nate boasted brazenly. "I've been such a good boy all my life, and such a dedicated, hard-working dancer, that you are my reward. You've heard the expression 'trophy wife', haven't you, Romuald? Well, you are my trophy boyfriend. My trophy lover. My prize."

He'd been teasing Romuald when he said that. But—as so often—there was a fundamental truth behind the lighthearted banter. Nate couldn't help being proud that he had won Romuald Ghent as a lover. The fact that Romuald was a celebrity in the dance world, a famous dancer and choreographer, really had very little to do with it. In Nate's eyes, Romuald was an immensely desirable man in his own right: mature, sophisticated, worldly. (To say nothing of handsome, sexy, and good in bed.) Nate had his fleeting moments of insecurity when he felt hopelessly young, inexperienced, and callow by comparison and wondered what Romuald saw in him.

Nate had never felt anything like this for another man. It was the strangest combination of admiration and respect, friendship, tenderness, and lust.

First and foremost, there was the fact that Romuald treated him like an intellectual equal. Like most dancers, Romuald was deeply immersed in all things that had to do with dancing. Unlike most dancers, he had a wide range of interests outside the dance world. He could put the blinders on, so to speak, and concentrate on his work; or he could take them off and engage himself in other pursuits at will.

When they did talk about dance, of course, Romuald proved to be an invaluable ally and resource. He was eager to give Nate the benefit of his experience. But he never dictated to Nate; he encouraged the younger dancer to find his own way.

Very typical was the way Romuald reacted when Nate was cast in the company's revival of a semi-abstract, semi-story ballet set to Berlioz's programmatic orchestral score, *Harold en Italie*. Nate was scheduled to dance the small role of An Abruzzi Mountaineer, who appeared in only one scene of the work. It now seemed odd to Nate to be working with any choreographer other than Romuald, although the man in question was pleasant enough. Larry, however, was first cast for the lead role of Harold, so at least Nate was working with him.

Romuald was not about to second-guess a fellow choreographer's work. He had nothing to do with *Harold en Italie*, after all. Nevertheless, despite his own hectic schedule, he took a lively interest in what Nate was doing. After Nate's first rehearsal for his new part, he and Romuald had dinner together in Romuald's apartment. They ate at the kitchen table, and Romuald wanted to know how the rehearsal had gone. Then he asked Nate what he thought about the character he was playing and how he was thinking of interpreting him.

Nate had to admit that he hadn't given the matter much thought. It was virtually a walk-on part, after all. This movement of Berlioz's score was subtitled "Serenade of an Abruzzi mountaineer to his mistress," and the choreography, while obviously acknowledging that fact, didn't seem to do all that much to flesh it out. In the actual performances, Nate would wear an elaborate and presumably authentically Italian costume, and the makeup department was going to do its best to transform him from a fair-skinned, blond, blue-eyed, and rather ethereal-looking young male beauty into a blackhaired, black-mustached, sun-bronzed Italian stud, which he was rather looking forward to; it ought to be amusing. As for the staging of the scene, it was basically a crowd scene, at night in a village square, with other characters coming and going, Harold among them. Nate came on, mimed playing a guitar to accompany his serenade, and at the end of the scene he went off. Larry, impersonating the brooding, introspective Harold, observed him and reacted to his performance; the scene was mostly about *him*.

"It's a no-brainer, Romuald, isn't it?" Nate asked.

Romuald didn't let him get off that easily. He challenged Nate to dig deeper, presenting him with a series of questions. His character was described as a mountaineer, which implied he spent a lot of his time outdoors. So how would such a man carry himself, and how would he move, and how might that differ from a man who spent most of his time indoors? How old was this guy supposed to be, anyway? Was he younger than Nate, a teenager? The same age as Nate? Or older, "a grizzled mature man, like me," as Romuald put it? Was he naïve and inexperienced when it came to love or more worldly-wise, perhaps even a bit cynical? And what about the woman he was serenading? What was their relationship? Was she his "mistress" in a sexual sense, or was it more of a platonic, courtly love kind of thing? Was she a young girl, probably still a virgin, or was she an older and more experienced woman, herself? How did she feel about this guy who was serenading her? Was she shy? Embarrassed? Excited? Flattered? Indifferent? Receptive? Eager? What happened after the serenade? Did she close her window and go to bed alone and dream about the mountaineer while he went off to his own bed? Or did she run downstairs and open the door and let him in, and the two of them made love?

"Jesus, Romuald," Nate complained as he tried to steer himself through this barrage of alternatives. "It's like taking an exam back in school! The whole scene only lasts six minutes." "All the more reason why your characterization has to be precise," Romuald argued. "The more specific it is inside your own head, the better chance you have of conveying something real to the audience. You have to do this with every part you play, even the smallest ones—consider each and every one of the possibilities. And you don't have to tie yourself down to just one; in fact, you probably shouldn't. You can change your mind from performance to performance, play around with the options. That's the beauty of it: it's fluid, not fixed."

Somehow, Nate was not surprised that Romuald had a CD of *Harold en Italie* in his record collection. They adjourned to the living room for dessert and coffee, and Romuald put the disc on, cueing it directly to the third movement of the work.

"You can usually trust the music," he commented. "It's your best guide to what you want to feel and project." They listened through to the end of the movement to the place where the solo viola played a gentle, wistful reprise of the melody of the serenade.

"That part always sounds, to me, like the woman's response to the serenade. It suggests that she is not altogether indifferent to the music, or to the musician," Romuald said in that dry, understated, and rather formal British way he had of expressing himself at times.

"So you think she opens the door, lets him in, and they make love?"

"I suspect he at least gets to second base, or however they put it in Italy," Romuald laughed. "Remember, Harold is wandering all over the place, alone. He sees the guy serenading the girl, and he's envious of them. Would he be so envious of a mere casual flirtation?"

"I guess not. Not that I know very much about 'mere casual flirtations', as you put it. When I'm attracted to a guy—*really* attracted to him—I don't waste any time playing games. He knows where he stands with me. I hope."

Romuald was looking at Nate in a way that made him blush.

"Do I know where I stand with you?" he asked.

"I should think so, by now."

"God, you are beautiful," Romuald breathed.

"Aw, Romuald, cut it out."

"It's true. I wish I had a door. I'd open it and invite you in."

"You've already done that," Nate pointed out. "More than once. And come to think of it, you've got a bedroom door."

"Which is wide open. Wide open for you."

Nate took a last sip of coffee, then set down his cup. "I think we'd

better adjourn to there, shouldn't we?"

Sexually, they seemed insatiable for each other. They always had sex at Romuald's apartment, where Nate usually spent the night. (As a matter of fact, Romuald had yet to set foot in the apartment Nate shared with Beau. Beau knew about Nate and Romuald, of course. Nate had been spending so little time at the apartment lately, often just making a quick stop there to change his clothes and pick up his mail, that Beau had begun to joke about the possibility of subletting Nate's bedroom.) Nate preferred to make love to Romuald in his bedroom with the lights off, or with only one bedside light on but turned down low. He didn't mention it to Romuald, but he didn't welcome the prospect of making love to Romuald with the framed photo of Henri Keller visible right there on the wall opposite the bed among the other photos of famous dancers and choreographers whom Romuald knew or had worked with. There were times when Nate didn't care to be reminded that he had a rival for Romuald's affections, thank you very much!

Nate's perceptions were no doubt colored by his romantic feelings for Romuald, and he could hardly be objective as a result. But he was sure about another thing: on a purely physical level, Romuald was the most exciting, satisfying sex partner Nate had ever had.

Nate couldn't decide which he liked more: the sheer physicality of their lovemaking, which was often intense to the point of violence, or the impassioned yet gentle kissing and cuddling which invariably preceded and followed the main event. He happily mentioned his dilemma to Romuald one night as they lay in bed together, both of them spent.

"Yes, I *do* like the kind of sex that starts out slow, with lots of foreplay," Romuald admitted, "and then builds gradually and ends up all hot and dirty and orgasmic. But on the other hand, I also like the kind where you and the other guy just attack each other, like animals, thinking about nothing but getting your rocks off as quickly as possible, and then afterward, you both calm down and just enjoy being together, kissing and caressing. Oh hell, the truth is, I just enjoy sex, period." He leaned over to kiss Nate, who snuggled closer against him. "Luckily, we don't have to choose. We can have it all sorts of ways, try them out one at a time, and then decide which ones we especially like."

In bed, in the heat of passion, Romuald tended to cast off the last vestiges of his acquired upper-crust British reserve, and he reverted to his working-class roots. He swore like a sailor and behaved like a satyr.

"Sit on my face, Nate!" he demanded one night, after they'd sixty-nined until they were both dangerously close to ejaculating. "I want to lick your ass. I'm going to fuck you with my tongue until your asshole melts in my mouth, like marzipan!"

Nate had never before heard his asshole, or anybody else's for that matter, compared to marzipan. But Romuald wasn't exaggerating. Romuald rolled over, flat on his face. Nate squatted over his lover's face and reached down and played with his stiff nipples while Romuald's tongue invaded his asshole and maneuvered around inside it with an agility that made Nate shudder and gasp. Romuald was masturbating energetically while he rimmed Nate; but Nate didn't dare to touch his own cock, which was dripping semen from its tip. That teasing, tormenting tongue drove him wild, and it never seemed to tire. Before long, Nate's asshole was flexing in helpless response to the relentless stimulation, silently screaming for relief. Nate knew what his ass, which seemed to have acquired a mind of its own, was begging for: as good as the rimming felt, his bunghole desperately wanted to be stretched and penetrated by something longer and thicker and less flexible than that tongue.

"Fuck me!" Nate heard himself pleading. "Oh God, Romuald, please fuck me! I can't stand it anymore, you're going to have to fuck me, before I go insane!"

He wrenched himself away from Romuald, who sat up quickly and swung his legs over the side of the bed.

"Let's do it a different way this time," Romuald suggested breathlessly. "Shall we?"

"Anything! Any way you want!"

"Get the things out of the drawer. I'll go get—" Romuald had already gotten off the bed and dashed out of the bedroom, like a sprinter starting a race. Nate had no idea what he intended to "get," but he knew from his previous experiences as Romuald's overnight guest what "the things" were. He opened the nightstand drawer and pulled out the condoms and lube.

Romuald returned to the bedroom, carrying in front of him a plain wooden stool from the kitchen.

"What the hell?" Nate asked.

"Let's try it with me sitting down and you sitting on my cock." Romuald set the stool down on the floor near the bed and seated himself on it, tucking his feet behind its lower rung. His erection protruded almost straight up from his groin.

"Give me the rubber," Romuald urged. He put it on himself, then took the tube of lube from Nate's hand and slicked himself up. "Sit facing me, Nate. Put your arms around your neck, wrap your legs around me, and sit down on my cock." Nate followed these instructions with an alacrity that soon had both men sucking in their breath in pleasure as Nate's asshole sank down around Romuald's latex-sheathed shaft. The position seemed to allow an unusually easy and full penetration; and better yet, they were face to face and could kiss while they fucked. Nate rode Romuald's cock, pushing himself up and down on it with increasing abandon.

"Oh, this is wonderful, this is fantastic, don't stop, Romuald, don't stop," Nate babbled.

"Stop?" Romuald gasped. "You're the one who's doing all the work!"

"Don't move," Nate insisted. "Just sit there and let me fuck myself on you. Like a dildo, like you're a human dildo. Let me fuck myself on your big, hard cock!"

"God damn. You're just a little sewer mouth, aren't you?" Romuald taunted him.

"Yes. I'm a bad boy, I'm a whore. I just want to get fucked."

"Get fucked, then. Ride that cock. Up and down, you bad boy. You smutty-mouthed, nasty little tart. Ride it! Keep that hot ass of yours moving, up and down on my cock!"

"You're no better than I am. You're a fucker. A fucker! A dirty fucker who likes to shove his big dick up other guys' holes!"

"I'm worse. Much worse than you. I like to take hot-assed little innocent boys like you and turn them into, into hot-assed, ah, not-so-innocent grown-up men," Romuald sputtered as he began to giggle, breathlessly and helplessly. "Oh shit, I'm so horny I don't know what I'm saying, I'm not making any sense! Kiss me. Kiss me, you bad boy."

Clutching each other tightly, kissing furiously, they continued to hump until they both exploded in orgasm, one after the other in rapid succession. Even after they'd both come, Nate kept his mouth glued to Romuald's, and he continued to ride the other man's cock until it began to go flaccid inside him. Only then, reluctantly, did Nate unwind his arms and legs from around Romuald's body, ease himself free from Romuald's cock, and lower his feet back onto the floor. Nate felt rather shaky as a result of his intense orgasm. As far as he was concerned, that unpretentious, sturdy wooden stool was the greatest sexual invention since the vibrator!

Afterward, when they were lying in his bed together, Romuald seemed to feel the need to apologize. "I hope I wasn't too crude, Nate. You know, while we were fucking? I got a little carried away."

"Romuald, I love it when you're a perfect gentleman, and I love it even

more when you're crude. Don't worry about it. I tend to get a little carried away, too, whenever I'm with you. Let's face it, we're two of a kind."

"I'm glad. I'm glad that we understand each other so well, and I'm glad that we get along so well. When we're together, working; when we're together, *not* working; and, well, when we're together, having sex. If I seem to make a pig of myself sometimes, well, you have to keep in mind that I was coming off a rather long dry spell when I met you."

"Well, now you can start making up for all that lost time. I enjoy being piggish with you. It suits me just fine. You can join me at the trough any time."

Romuald was full of sexual surprises. Just when Nate had begun to assume that he was going to be the bottom in their relationship—which, in Nate's own words, would've "suited him just fine"—his lover turned the tables on him.

Romuald was utterly matter-of-fact when it came to discussing such things as sexual hygiene, so Nate wasn't particularly surprised when he brought up the subject in the middle of a subsequent lovemaking session. They'd begun, as usual, with some prolonged oral play, and were taking a quick break to recover their breath and give their over-stimulated erections a chance to calm down a bit when Romuald spoke.

"This afternoon, Nate, when I took my shower here at home, I made sure I gave myself an especially good cleaning-out with the shower shot." By *the shower shot*, of course, Romuald meant the long, thin, cylindrical nozzle that could be attached to the end of the hand-held, flexible shower hose in place of its regular spray head. It was a useful appliance for gay men who liked to get fucked—or fist-fucked—to have, since they could easily and thoroughly douche themselves.

"Yes, that always feels good, doesn't it?" Nate replied. "I always use mine at home when I think I'm going to get—well, you know, lucky. When I'm kind of looking forward to getting fucked."

Nate always enjoyed playing with Romuald's ass, using his fingers or his tongue to stimulate it, and he assumed that this was Romuald's way of telling him he wouldn't be averse to some of that kind of ass play right now.

"I haven't been fucked in a while," Romuald told him. "The last time was by my masseur, you know, the guy I told you about? I wanted to be nice and clean and relaxed for you. Even so, you're probably going to have to take it a little easy at first. I may be kind of tight."

"Ah, Romuald, are you saying you want me to fuck you?"

Romuald grinned at him. "Bright lad," he said. "I'd say you've earned a

turn. After all, turnabout is fair play. You do want to, don't you?"

"Sure. Of course I do. I've even fantasized about it."

"I like it both ways. I'd assumed you probably do, too."

"Oh, I do, Romuald. I do! It's just that...."

"What?"

"It's just that the mere thought of fucking you is getting me so excited, I'm afraid if I do screw you, I'll probably come too fast."

"Oh, that's all right, Nate. We'll just keep doing it, over and over again, until you learn how to pace yourself. It's not unlike learning how to pace yourself and keep up your stamina during a performance of a ballet. And I'm rather good at that sort of coaching, if I do say so myself."

"Well," Nate said, adopting Romuald's own matter-of-fact tone. "We might as well get started with my first lesson, then."

"Why don't we both have a slug of whiskey first? I've got a bottle in the kitchen, which is just going to waste because I'm not much of a hard liquor drinker. That ought to relax us a little, and maybe slow you down."

"All right."

Romuald went to the kitchen and came back with the bottle and two glasses. He filled both glasses with a generous portion of the amber liquid, then clinked his glass against Nate's. "Cheers," Romuald said as he raised his glass and drank. "Here's to the fine art of anal intercourse."

"Don't let me get too crocked," Nate asked as he, too, drank. He wasn't used to drinking whiskey, let alone to drinking it straight, and the alcohol seemed to sear the inside of his mouth and heat his stomach.

"Oh, one or two good stiff belts can't hurt you. And remember, I'm a trained professional, the son of pub owners. I'll take care of you. I think I will have another one, though, a good tall one, myself. *That* ought to relax my asshole enough for you to ram your dick right into me."

Nate shook his head. "Romuald, if any of the people down at work could hear you talking like this...!"

"Oh, I'm sure they'd be shocked," Romuald scoffed. "Well, no doubt our friend Josh *would* be shocked, and terribly disappointed by our shamelessly hedonistic—to say nothing of our equally shamelessly homosexual—behavior. But he's definitely in the minority. I can't imagine our friend Dane, for example, would be too judgmental."

"If Dane were here with us, he'd not only be knocking back the booze, himself, he'd be pouring it down our throats to get us good and drunk so he could have his way with both of us."

"Hmmm. Not an altogether unpleasant prospect. However, luckily for you, Nate, you're the only man I want to have his way with me tonight." Romuald drained his glass and set it down on the nightstand. "I believe I'm ready," he announced. "Let's get right down to it."

He positioned himself on the mattress facedown and spread his legs. As an afterthought, he took one of the pillows from the head of the bed and stuffed it underneath his head and shoulders to cushion his face, which he turned to one side.

"You know what to do," he told Nate. "I've done it to you often enough. So do it!"

"I'm glad you're not this bossy when we rehearse," Nate grumbled.

"I'm not—usually—this horny when we rehearse," Romuald retorted. "Not that certain thoughts don't enter my mind during these rehearsals! Now, get a rubber on your cock and get your cock up my ass!"

"You asked for it." Nate straddled Romuald's hips and busied himself with a condom packet, tearing it open and unrolling the rubber down over his hard-on. He reached for the tube of lubricant. "I'll use plenty of lube," he promised as he applied it to himself, then gently rubbed a second glob directly onto Romuald's puckered sphincter muscle—which did look impossibly small from Nate's current vantage point.

"You're going to have to," Romuald said, his voice muffled by the pillow. "Maybe I ought to have another whiskey?"

"No. No more booze. I want you relaxed, not comatose."

Nate stretched out comfortably on top of Romuald's broad back, positioned his legs on the outsides of Romuald's legs, reached down between their bodies with one hand, and began to guide his slippery cockhead into the deep cleft between the Englishman's buttocks, searching blindly for his hole. He found it and began to press his cockhead against it. The taut ring of muscle resisted the pressure for a moment, then began to yield.

"Don't move," Nate warned as Romuald tensed up beneath him and began to lift himself off the mattress, pressing against it with both his open palms. "*Do not move*. You just lie there and get ready to get fucked!"

"Jesus, you're thick!"

"And you're tight. Stop resisting. Stop fighting me. Open that hole for me, buster. Open it wide. Spread it!"

"It's obscene, a beautiful young man like you afflicted with such a grossly huge cock. It's the only thing about you that's not in proportion. It's—

oh fuck, it's going in me! It's stretching me wide open! Christ, it's tearing me apart!"

"Maybe I should take it out and put more lube on it."

"Don't you dare! Don't stop now! Get the rest of that motherfucking thing in there, before I lose my nerve!"

"Okay, you want it so bad, take it!"

"Oh, Nate! My sweet Nate. Go ahead and take me. I want you so bad. It's my wanting you that hurts, not you penetrating me. Go ahead and push it all the way in. Yes, oh yes. Oh, God! You're so big. You're filling me up, so much, all the way. That's what I want, to feel you inside me, all of you, filling me up completely. Oh, you're such a man. You're not a boy, you're a man. Fuck me like a man. Just take me. Make me yours. Stroke it, stroke it. In and out of me. Hard and deep. Oh yes! Yes!"

"You are tight," Nate gasped. "Really tight, like a little boy!"

"Since when are you in the habit of fucking little boys?"

"I'm not. I was speaking ... speculatively."

"Well, stop speaking speculatively and fuck me in actuality!"

Nate slid his arms underneath Romuald's squirming body. He groped in search of the hot spikes of the other man's nipples, and when he had found them, he pinched them savagely between his thumbs and forefingers, making Romuald gasp and curse—and, not so incidentally, wriggle his butt even more wantonly up into Nate's groin as his anal muscles constricted repeatedly against the impaling bulk of Nate's prick.

"Yeah, you like that, don't you?" Nate taunted. "You like having your tits worked on while you take a cock up your ass."

"I fucking love it," Romuald retorted. "Do it harder. Hurt me! Make it hurt! God damn, your cock feels bleeding huge inside me, and my tits are on fire! Do it, you little fucker. Do it to me! Make me come!"

"You'll come when I damn well give you permission to, and not a moment before!" Nate thundered. "I'm the boss here, not you. I'm in charge. I'm the one doing the fucking this time!"

"Bitch," Romuald moaned ecstatically. "You nasty little buggering bitch. I bet you weren't this arrogant when you were still in the corps. They never should have promoted you to soloist. It's given you delusions of grandeur, my lad. Now you think you can even fuck a choreographer, and boss him around!"

Which statement, unfortunately, Nate found so hilarious that he started

to laugh, which was not exactly conducive to the mood of unrestrained, pornographic erotic excess he and Romuald had managed to create up to that point.

"Stop laughing." Romuald choked, trying to sound stern, although by now he had begun to laugh, himself. "Stop it, I say! How dare you laugh at me while you have your cock in my ass. It's unforgivable, an unforgivable breach of decorum."

"I can't help it," Nate guffawed. "You are such a —such a silly fuck!"

"Unforgivable," Romuald groaned as Nate continued to thrust into him. "Typically American, no breeding."

"You want breeding?" Nate taunted. "Get some hetero to fuck you!"

"Maybe I will. What's the matter? Aren't you up to the task?"

"I'll show you who's up to what, and up whom and where, and how far," Nate panted, perhaps none too coherently. He seized a handful of Romuald's dark blond hair in his hand and roughly pulled the man's head up from the pillow and around so that they could kiss. And then they stopped talking and devoted their full concentration to the fierce pleasure their bodies were providing one another.

Chapter 19 Trying Things on for Size

ROMUALD and Lloyd Walker had decided that *Eclogues* should be preceded by another one-act ballet, *The Seasons*, not only on the gala night but during the subsequent nine scheduled performances of the new ballet. This was a shrewd choice, for Glazunov's tuneful score made no great intellectual demands upon an audience. Nor did the scenario present anything that was not virtually self-explanatory. The theory was that the audiences, after being thoroughly entertained during the first half of the evening and refreshed by an intermission, would be in the most receptive frame of mind possible for *Eclogues*.

The next round of rehearsals for *Eclogues* took place on the theater's stage, on the actual set, which the stage crew had been working on for some time.

The set, to Nate's initial astonishment and disappointment, made no attempt to evoke the natural world. On the contrary, the action of *Eclogues* seemed to take place inside a vast abandoned factory, filled with rusting industrial artifacts. The teasing interplay among Silenus, Chromis, Mnasyllos, and Aglae, for example, took place in front of what looked like a gigantic steam press. And Corydon, Thyrsis, and Alexis played out their drama on gently sloping ramps underneath an assortment of huge gears suspended from the flies. Equipped with individual battery-operated motors, these gears slowly rotated, some clockwise, some counter-clockwise, and at different speeds, throughout the scene.

Dane, somewhat to Nate's surprise, loved the set from the first moment he set foot on it.

"This is great!" Dane said. "I thought we'd be posing and prancing around in front of, you know, columns and arches and all that crap? This is much better. And I can't wait to see it lit." The company's lighting technicians and crew were justly famous for their ability to transform even an ordinary set into something magically atmospheric; Nate could easily imagine what they might do with this raw material. "Some of these surfaces are raked," the ever-practical Larry pointed out. "It won't feel quite the same underfoot as an absolutely level floor."

Rehearsing on the set for the first time, Nate realized that Larry was right: the deceptively slight inclines could throw one's balance off—not by much, but any amount of uncertainty was too much. He and his colleagues made the necessary adjustments quickly enough, though, and the rehearsal went well.

"Oh, it's starting to look very good indeed," Romuald declared as he dismissed his dancers.

He gave Nate a quick congratulatory hug. No one, seeing it, would have found anything out of the ordinary in it; but Nate's whole body, still tense from the exertions he had just put it through, was suffused with a rush of pleasure.

"Have I told you how pleased I am with all the hard work you've been doing?" Romuald went on.

"Actually, no, you haven't. Not today. Until just now."

"How negligent of me," Romuald said, but now he had dropped his matter-of-fact tone of voice in favor of something softer and infinitely more insinuating, and his eyes and mouth, as he smiled at Nate, were more eloquent still.

"Well, you've been very busy. Especially at night. You're going to have to be careful not to overwork yourself. What you really need, Romuald, is someone to take care of you."

"That sounds ominous. A caretaker, eh? A nurse?"

"A boss," Nate said brazenly. "Someone to boss you around."

"I see. He'd have to have a strong personality. He'd need to be a rather stubborn type. Headstrong, that's the word: young and energetic and headstrong. I wonder where I could possibly find such a person?"

"I can't imagine. No, wait, I have an idea."

"Yes?"

"You could take another look through the company's personnel files, Romuald. Someone suitable might just pop up."

"What an excellent suggestion."

"I might be able to come up with all sorts of helpful suggestions, given half the chance."

They were flirting shamelessly with one another. Most of the others involved in the rehearsal had left, but Larry had stayed behind and was lingering on the set, inspecting it at his leisure "What are you two talking about?" he called out. He was looking up at the assortment of gears suspended high over his head and not paying much attention to Romuald and Nate. From the auditorium, the gears looked massive and heavy; up close, you could see that they were made of cardboard, plywood, and plastic foam painted to look like metal.

"Oh, I was just giving Nate some notes," Romuald fibbed.

"Do you have any for me?"

"Not really, Larry. You've pretty well got it nailed. I may still need to do a little work with Nate, one-on-one, sometime. He's still a little unsure of himself when it comes to some of the more physically demanding moves." Romuald let Nate think about *that* one for a moment. Then he leaned in close to Nate and whispered in his ear, "*Delicias domini*. Alexis was his master's delight, and you are mine. Now run along, you bad boy, and try to behave yourself."

LARRY happened to glance over at the two men as they separated, and he noticed that Nate was blushing in that telltale schoolboyish way he had. And Romuald seemed unusually pleased with himself; in fact, he was on the verge of smirking. Larry said nothing, but he was enough of a mathematician to add one and one and draw his own conclusions from the result.

That night, Larry and Cara were actually able to take time out of their busy schedules to make love. Afterward, Larry went to check on baby Allegra.

"She's fast asleep and looks like a little princess," the doting young husband and father reported as he slipped back into bed. He took Cara in his arms.

"Good," Cara said. "I was afraid all that moaning I did earlier might have woken her up."

"Have I told you lately how much I love you?" he asked.

"As a matter of fact, darling, you have."

"And how grateful I am to have you?"

"Um, the gratitude thing doesn't ring a bell. What brought this on all of a sudden?"

"Oh, I don't know," Larry said with a sigh. "Being around the other guys at work, comparing myself to them, I guess. So many of them, especially

the younger guys who are still unattached... they just seem to be drifting."

"So that's what I am now, huh? An attachment?"

"Yes, Cara. A beautiful, indispensable attachment. I couldn't do without you. I wouldn't want to go on living. I'd rather lose a leg."

Cara had to laugh. "This is an awfully morbid conversation for us to be having right after we've made love."

"Sorry. But it's true. Some of the gay guys in particular, I feel sorry for them. They don't know what they're missing out on."

"From what your buddies like Dane tell you—and I'm sure you don't tell me *everything* they tell you, thank God—you're missing out on certain things, too. Namely, lots and lots of indiscriminate, wild sex."

"Oh, been there, done that," Larry teased his wife. "I don't miss it. But really, all this sleeping around, it's just a way of dealing with loneliness. And it's not even a question of gay as opposed to straight. Some of the straight single guys, and some of the girls, are just as bad. I'm so tired of having these young bimbos hit on me."

"Oh, you are, are you? You're going to have me hitting on you, buster, in a minute. As in punching your lights out. We'll see how irresistible you are to all the young bimbos with a black eye and a pair of bruised nuts."

They both laughed. Larry hugged her harder underneath the covers.

"But seriously," he went on. "That's why I'm so glad that Nate and Romuald seem to have found each other."

"They do make a cute couple. I caught Romuald sort of looking at Nate from across the room the other day, when he didn't realize anybody was watching him. He was sort of admiring Nate, you know? And it was funny, Romuald is so much older than Nate, but he was looking at him almost like one young kid who has a crush on another. It must be so strange to be a mature man and find yourself going through that excited young love thing all over again."

"Yes, I'm glad we're already a respectable, boring old married couple, Cara."

"Yes, we are a role model for the others, aren't we? God help us."

"You know what?"

"What?"

"I almost think I could go again."

"We both have to get up early in the morning, Larry."

"But not that early."

"True. But if I wanted a sex fiend for a husband, I could marry Dane."

"I'm trying to picture what that would be like. Dane married to a woman, I mean, and specifically to you. Dane as a daddy. It kind of boggles my mind."

"I'd turn that boy around in a hurry and keep him on the straight and narrow," Cara boasted. "I'm not like Kitri. I wouldn't put up with Dane's whoring around for a minute."

"Are you saying you'd be able to drive him straight with your womanly wiles?"

Cara giggled. "Come here, you. I don't know about driving Dane straight, but I certainly intend to drive you crazy."

NATE, like his colleagues, was scheduled for a costume fitting—which, given the simplicity of the costumes, especially those for the men, was relatively quick and painless, as far as the dancers were concerned. This didn't mean that the costume department had been idle; they had to produce costumes not only for the first cast, but for the second and third casts as well, because each dancer's body was different.

Daniel Stern, the chief men's costumer, had been a dancer himself, so he knew the dancers' priorities when it came to what they wore on stage: comfort first and foremost, in the sense that a costume must do nothing to impede free movement, with appearance a distinctly secondary consideration. (Although an otherwise levelheaded dancer was perfectly capable of throwing a tantrum if he thought a costume would make him look foolish on stage.)

Daniel, who was in his forties but looked younger, was a dapper, brighteyed man with the trim, elegant build of a former dancer. He wore his sandy hair and beard cropped short.

"This is what you'll wear as Mnasyllos," he told Nate. "It's this new imported miracle fabric that costs a fortune and is a pain in the ass to cut and sew, but it stretches in every direction and breathes, and it looks fantastic under the stage lights. You're going to feel as though you're not wearing anything at all, which I gather is the whole idea."

Nate was dubious as Daniel handed him what looked like nothing more elaborate than a decorated pair of very thin stretch tights, ankle-length, without feet. The extremely lightweight fabric, admittedly, had an odd meshlike texture to it, almost like fish scales; it was a dull bronze-gold color and had large irregular quasi-geometric patterns silk-screened onto it.

He stripped naked and put on a flesh-colored dance belt. He had no qualms about stripping in front of Daniel, who was a macho gay type and a great favorite of the gay male dancers, most of whom permitted Daniel to take slight physical liberties with them. Daniel was savvy enough to make sure that the other guy always made the first move and that he continued to welcome his advances, so the issue of potential sexual harassment never came up. Nate thought nothing of kissing Daniel on the mouth, including slipping him the tongue, or allowing the older man to put his hands on his bare buttocks and give them a friendly little squeeze. It was all just harmless flirtation.

Nate pulled the tights on, and Daniel inspected him critically.

"Have you gained weight?" he accused.

"Of course not. I'm exactly the same size I was the last time you fitted me—which was what, a month ago?"

"Your pelvic girdle looks a little softer to me. I thought you'd finally lost the last of your baby fat," Daniel teased.

"Daniel, I do not have now, nor have I ever had, anything that could be described as *baby fat*."

"Oh, I'm just trying to get a rise out of you, Nate. Still, I could swear your obliques have a little extra layer of padding on top of them. In other words, an extra layer of *fat*, in layman's terms. Have you been eating a lot of Italian food lately? Pasta, veal parmigiana? Cannolis? I remember you telling me once you had a weakness for that sort of thing."

Nate thought about strawberry trifle, his and Romuald's favorite shared dessert, and felt a twinge of guilt.

"What are you, the costume maker or my doctor?" he blustered.

"I'm both. I'm also your conscience, and your Father Confessor. You got no secrets from me, baby. I know that hot little body of yours as well as any of your boyfriends do. Better, probably. But never mind. Lay off the heavy pasta sauce and work out a little harder in class, and you'll be all right."

Daniel stepped back so he could judge the effect of the costume from a distance.

"Raise your arms. Turn around. Bend over," he instructed Nate, sounding like a drill sergeant. "Bend over farther, all the way, touch your toes. Oh *please*," he protested when Nate obeyed but tilted his head upward to direct a suspicious look in Daniel's direction. "Yes, I do enjoy looking at your ass, I admit it, but I also need to see if the waistband's going to ride up and down over your buttocks. We can't have you guys showing your butt cracks

on stage. Good, it doesn't ride up or down at all, it stretches and retracts like crazy, doesn't it? And that fabric does look good on you. How does it *feel*, though?"

Nate straightened up again and twisted his hips from side to side, looking down at himself. "Like I'm naked," he admitted.

"You guys are going to look extremely hot on stage—in the nontemperature sense of the word. Now, here's Henri Keller's costume for Alexis. See how the fabric has a little more of a reddish-copper tinge to it? Very nice. They sent me his measurements, but I'll have to do the final fitting once he arrives, of course. I've heard he can be a real pain in the ass about his costumes—and about everything else, as a matter of fact—although it's hard to imagine what he can find fault with in a pair of tights. And here's yours for Alexis, which is almost identical, since you two happen to be just about the same size. Keller does have thicker thighs and a slightly bigger butt, apparently," Daniel said with a grin. "Slip it on, and let's take a look at it."

"It feels fine," Nate reported once he had pulled off the first pair of tights and shoehorned himself into the second pair. He offered himself for Daniel's inspection.

"Move around in them a little. Do some leg lifts, as though you were at the *barre*. I'm told Ghent's choreography has you guys doing all sorts of extreme moves. Make sure it stretches okay and you're comfortable, but let me see where it puckers. It always *does* pucker, trust me, but I can fix that."

"I think it's perfect. Too bad I'll probably never actually wear it on stage."

Daniel, kneeling in front of Nate, used tailor's chalk to mark the spots—invisible to Nate's eyes—where he presumably saw puckers. "Okay, baby, slip 'em off and let me put a few hand stitches in them."

"Should I give them the knee test first?"

Daniel laughed. He knew exactly what Nate was referring to. "Don't insult me. You could dance up and down Mount Everest in these without a stitch coming loose."

Daniel gossiped while he busied himself with a needle and thread.

"Ghent was in here for his fitting the other day. And of course, he wanted to take a look at all the costumes, not just his."

"Oh? What do you think of him?"

"I like him. He's not at all grand or stuck-up. And, as I'm sure you've noticed, since you've been rehearsing with him so much, he sure doesn't look his age. And not just facially. He's got these really firm abdominal muscles, and an ass like a young boy's. The first time I saw it, I was tempted to take a bite out of it. Plus he's got a nice fat dick, which I also made sure I got a good look at while he was changing. Uncircumcised, by the way."

Been there, done that! Nate thought, just a tad smugly.

"I know Ghent and Keller are still supposed to be a hot item, but do you think Ghent's found himself any action on the side here in town?"

The question caught Nate by surprise. "I don't think Mr. Ghent is the 'action on the side' kind of guy," he said, rather primly.

"Too bad. I could go for him, myself. And I'm surprised Dane hasn't made a play for him yet. Can't you just see Dane and Ghent together? Whew. Imagine those two gorgeous guys in bed together."

Nate felt a need to change the subject:

"Has Dane had his fitting yet?"

Daniel groaned. "Don't remind me. What a drama queen. The costume makes his ass look too big, it makes his thighs look too thick, the waistband pinches, it's too tight in the crotch—that last one was good for a laugh, because I told him his cock isn't *that* big. He went on and on. I wanted to sew his mouth shut, but I made all the adjustments he wanted. Oh, and then he started to get all paranoid, wondering whether the color goes with his skin tone! As though anybody in the audience is going to be able to tell what color your skins are, once you guys step out there under the stage lights."

Daniel and Nate shared a laugh at Dane's expense.

"In all seriousness, Nate, I think Dane's a little anxious about doing justice to the role, and he's taking it out on the costume. It happens. Comes with the territory. I deal with it."

Nate tried on the tights again. This time, predictably, they fit him and moved with him like the proverbial second skin.

"It's perfect. Thanks, Daniel."

"My pleasure. It's my job to make you look good out there."

Nate got dressed and treated the delighted Daniel to a goodbye kiss that was considerably more sensual and prolonged than the situation strictly required.

Nate was bursting to tell somebody about his relationship with Romuald. He'd confided in Beau, of course, from the start. And he suspected that both Larry and Dane suspected the truth: neither man was above teasing Nate, dropping the occasional innuendo into a conversation.

It occurred to Nate that there were two people who were *not* members of the company and who didn't even live in New York City with whom he

could share his secret.

It was typical of Nate that, once he'd decided to confide in his parents about the recent, dramatic developments in his personal life, he lost no time in doing so. During his next phone call home, he'd barely exchanged greetings and pleasantries with his father before he got right to the point.

"Dad, I've met this guy, and we've been seeing each other."

"Ah, seeing each other, as in...?"

"I think I'm in love with him."

"Well, that's wonderful, Nate, as long as you're happy."

Am I happy? Nate asked himself. I guess I am. Maybe not completely happy, the way things are right now. If only it wasn't for Henri Keller!

"Nate?" Mr. Deventer prompted when his son said nothing. "Everything *is* all right, isn't it? You're okay, aren't you? You and this other boy?"

"I'm fine. Everything is absolutely all right. The only thing is, he's not exactly a boy. He *is* a little older than me."

His father had caught the hesitation in his voice. "Just *how* much older, Nate?"

"Fifteen years."

"Oh, thank God. For a moment there, I was afraid you were going to say he was my age, or even older. Not that there'd necessarily be anything wrong with that. Oh hell, what do I know about such things? I'm afraid I'm hardly in a position to give you advice about such relationships. What does he do for a living? I bet he's a dancer, too?"

Nate decided that, having risked this much already in the cause of honesty, he might as well come totally clean. "It's Mr. Ghent."

"Romuald Ghent? The guy you're always telling us about? The Englishman?"

"Yes."

"I should've known."

"He's a really great guy, Dad."

"I'm sure he is, from the way you've always talked about him. It's just that I thought you told us he was married. To, ah, another man?"

"Not married, Dad. Just sort of... entangled. On and off. With that other dancer, Henri Keller, the one who's flying into town soon to dance in *Eclogues*."

"On and off, huh? Would it be safe to assume that at the moment it's off?"

"Definitely. I mean, I hope so. I don't know."

"This is a lot for me to absorb all at once. Your mother is looking at me with the *strangest* expression on her face. She can only hear my end of the conversation, of course. Let me put her on the phone. No, wait, she's rummaging around in the desk drawer for some reason. Hold on, Nate."

Nate waited patiently. He could hear, at the other end of the connection, an urgent *sotto voce* conversation. Finally, his mother was on the phone:

"Nate! I found that magazine you sent us. The one with the pictures of Mr. Ghent in it. I have it right here in my hand. Is he ever cute!"

Nate groaned. This was going to be worse than he'd anticipated!

"He's got a really nice smile. I refuse to believe that this man is, what did your father just tell me, thirty-eight years old? He looks like a college boy. He's very sexy."

"Jesus, Mom! Why can't you and Dad be raging homophobes like other parents and say you don't feel comfortable talking about it? This is so embarrassing."

"There's absolutely nothing to be embarrassed about, Nate. I'm your mother. You can tell me anything. I do hope you're practicing safe sex?"

"Yes, we are practicing safe sex. And that is the extent of the information I care to divulge on *that* topic."

"You're going to have to invite Mr. Ghent to come along with you the next time you get some time off work and come up here for a weekend. We can't wait to meet him. Just let me know a few days ahead of time, so I can stock up on food. What do British people like to eat, anyway? Not all that strange stuff you read about in books, I hope—kidney pie, and kippers, and bangers and mash, and so on?"

"Romuald isn't fussy. He'll eat anything."

"Oh, good. And I'll have to get the guest room tidied up and ready. Not that we expect him to *stay* there, of course. He can just put his things in there. He can sleep with you, in your room, at night."

"Mom! *If* and *when* I bring Romuald up there for a visit, we can start worrying about the sleeping arrangements *then*."

"Nate," Mrs. Deventer said, just a bit smugly, "your father and I are not the kind of old-fashioned, fuddy-duddy parents who have outmoded ideas about the propriety of our adult children having sex while they are under our roof." "Oh, that's good to hear, Mom," Nate replied with thinly veiled sarcasm. "It's good to know you're so liberal and progressive." He was tempted to add, *While I'm at it, why don't I bring Dane Stockton and half a dozen of the other gay guys in the company along and turn the weekend into one long wall-to-wall orgy?*

"Give me Mr. Ghent's address," his mother insisted. "I'll write him a nice little letter and let him know he has a standing invitation."

Nate could only imagine what the contents of such a *nice little letter* might include. He decided to stall for time. "I'll e-mail it to you, Mom."

Chapter 20 New Faces in Town

DURING the last week of rehearsals for *Eclogues*, the company's routine was enlivened by the arrival of two visitors: Matthias Metzinger and Henri Keller.

The first to arrive was the composer, Metzinger, who flew in from Germany. He sat in on the orchestra rehearsals, and when he wasn't so occupied, Romuald took him in hand and showed him around the town. Romuald and Matthias were obviously old friends. The German, like Romuald, was in his late thirties, a wiry, voluble man with a perpetually startled facial expression. He wore his black hair in stiff, gelled spikes which made him look as though he'd given himself the hairstyle by sticking his finger into the nearest electrical outlet.

Romuald introduced Matthias to the dancers.

"Which one is the boy who does porn on the side?" Matthias demanded as he eagerly scrutinized the men in the group.

"Don't look at me," Larry said as Matthias's gaze rested on him for a moment.

"I think you mean Dane," Romuald said. "But-"

"I don't *do* porn," Dane protested as he shook Matthias's hand. "I know a guy who works in the industry, that's all."

"Oh, how interesting. You must tell me all about it. We ought to do a ballet, Romuald, about a man who suffers from an addiction to porn," Matthias rattled on. "Or about a young man who goes to wicked Los Angeles hoping to become an actor but becomes a porn star instead. And then what happens? I know. He becomes disillusioned. He wants to be loved for himself, not just for his body. Oh, you would be magnificent in such a ballet, Dane."

Romuald finally got around to introducing Nate to Matthias.

"Oh, of course this is Nathaniel, whom you've told me so much about," Matthias exclaimed, which inevitably made Nate blush. "Wherever did you find him? What a beauty! Why, he's Alexis to the life. What a pity you won't be dancing Alexis in any of the actual performances, Nate." "Oh, that's all right," Nate said a little awkwardly. "I've really enjoyed the rehearsals so far. And of course I love dancing Mnasyllos."

"Never mind, Nate. Romuald and I will find a bigger role for you in our next ballet."

"There may not *be* another new ballet, Matthias, not for a while, anyway," Romuald warned, "unless this one turns out to be a success."

"Of course it will be a success. With my music and your choreography and all of these beautiful dancers on stage—how do you say it in English, 'it's a sure thing, it can't miss'?"

Nate jumped to the naïve conclusion that since Romuald and Matthias were friends, the composer must be gay. He felt somewhat chastened when Matthias began showing everyone pictures of his wife and children back home in Germany and asking for advice about the best places in downtown Manhattan to shop for gifts for them.

Nate and the other dancers had little further contact with Matthias, at least for the time being, because the composer naturally spent most of his time sitting in on the orchestral rehearsals for *Eclogues*. The ballet would be conducted by Ted Kovalchek, the company's principal conductor, who by all reports quickly established a good working relationship with Matthias. As for the orchestral players, they apparently found the score difficult and challenging to master but "interesting," which was often a euphemism for "dull and academic," but fortunately not in this case.

"Isn't Mr. Metzinger at all interested in what we're going to be doing up there on stage?" Nate asked Romuald during one rehearsal break.

"Of course he is, but his primary concern is helping Ted to get the music right. He does tend to leave the decisions about the choreography to me. Getting him to offer his honest opinion about what I'm doing is like getting blood out of a stone. *Eclogues* is, what, the sixth ballet I've done with him? And I'm still not sure whether or not he thinks any of them are really any good."

Eventually, the orchestral rehearsals were moved from the orchestra's backstage rehearsal space to the auditorium's pit, since Ted could only check sound levels and balances while the orchestra was actually playing in the theater.

Romuald and Nate sat in on one of these rehearsals, taking seats toward the rear of the auditorium, because Romuald was curious to hear what the score sounded like from such a vantage point.

"What do you think?" Romuald whispered at one point.

"It's so sensual," Nate replied.

They were both excited by what they heard. No one was nearby to see them. Romuald took Nate's hand and held it, not relinquishing it until the rehearsal was over and—reluctantly—they had to stand up.

It was impossible to be formal, or even constrained, around the effervescent Matthias. Nate didn't hesitate to show his enthusiasm.

"What a wonderful score, Matthias!" he exclaimed. "I thought it was interesting all this time we've been hearing parts of it played on the piano; but now, with all the instruments!"

"Unheard of," Matthias teased Nate. "A dancer who takes an interest in music."

"Nate is the Renaissance Man of this company," Romuald said.

"That must be why you—" Matthias caught himself. "That must be why you and he get along so well."

Nate was sure he knew what Matthias had intended to say before he thought twice about it: *That must be why you are in love with him*. Exactly what sort of conversations had Matthias and Romuald been having together in private?

"Don't take this the wrong way, Matthias," he said, "but I'm amazed a straight man could write such convincing music for a scene involving three gay guys."

Matthias whooped with laughter in response. "But that's like saying Tchaikovsky shouldn't have been able to write convincing music for dancing swans because he never made love to a swan—not as far as we know, that is! And fucking is fucking," the earthy composer went on, "no matter who is doing it to whom. 'Whom' is correct, isn't it, Romuald?"

"Yes," Romuald said with a smile.

"Romuald always corrects my English. I ask him to. He's very good at it." A thought struck Matthias. "Is that why Dane always calls him 'the Professor'?"

"More or less," Nate said while Romuald narrowed his eyes and pretended to glare at him.

Matthias excused himself and went to confer with Ted, both men burying their noses in Ted's conducting score, which was still on the podium.

"What, exactly, have you told Matthias about me?" Nate asked Romuald when the two of them were alone.

"Quite a lot, actually. Everything, as a matter of fact."

"Everything?"

"Everything," Romuald repeated. "Why shouldn't I? Matthias is my friend. I don't see any need to keep things from him. And it's not as though you and I have done anything we need to be embarrassed about. We're both consenting adults, as the expression goes. Why do you ask?"

"I don't know. I was just curious, I guess."

"And now you've made me curious. What, exactly, have you told your friends about me?"

"Practically nothing. Except for Beau, of course. He and I live together, after all. I don't keep very much from him."

"And this reticence of yours is because...?"

"Because I thought I ought to be discreet, for your sake."

"I appreciate that, but perhaps it's not necessary. If I choose to be friends with a member of the company, it's none of the company's business. If I choose to take the relationship to the next level, then the company may have a legitimate concern. Which I have already addressed with my boss, Mr. Walker, in private."

"The next level. That sounds kind of intriguing, Romuald. In the sense that there could be additional levels beyond the one we're on at the moment."

"Yes, the possibility is intriguing, isn't it? I've been giving the matter a great deal of thought lately."

And that, for the time being, was as much of a declaration of intent as Romuald was prepared to commit himself to making. And for Nate—also for the time being—it was enough.

"Let's go have a cup of tea, Nate," Romuald suggested. "I could use it."

The pieces of the jigsaw puzzle were finally coming together. The dancers had a rehearsal not only on the set but with the orchestra accompanying them in the pit.

Dane and Nate ran into momentary difficulty during the long, unaccompanied bass clarinet solo to which they danced their *pas de deux*. Normally, a dancer tried to anticipate the musical beat by a hair so that he created the illusion of being right on top of the beat rather than running the risk of lagging behind it. The bass clarinet solo, with its asymmetrical phrases occasionally broken up by pauses, was difficult to coordinate one's movements to.

"The phrasing must be very loose, very free," Matthias told Ted and the clarinetist, who was a laidback, stocky, shaggy-haired young man named Clifton. This was one of the rare occasions on which Matthias expressed a

firm preference about how his music should be interpreted; he ordinarily gave Ted a great deal of leeway.

"Nate and I are having trouble following him," Dane admitted, referring to Clifton. "We can't see him down there in the pit from where we are up here on stage, and we can hardly *hear* him, either, when he plays those really soft phrases."

"I have an idea," Clifton said. "Instead of the two guys trying to follow me, why don't they just do their thing, and I'll follow them? I can turn around in my chair toward the stage, like this." He demonstrated. "And watch them, and match up my phrases to what they're doing."

"Yeah, but then you'd have to move your music stand, too, so you can still see your music," Ted pointed out.

"No I wouldn't. I don't need to see the music. I've memorized it."

"You've memorized the entire solo?" Matthias asked.

"I've memorized my whole part," Clifton said, to Matthias's astonishment. "I have to do *something* to keep myself occupied when I'm not actually playing."

"Let's give it a try," Ted suggested.

They did, and it worked perfectly. Dane and Nate concentrated on their movements, and Clifton observed them closely, timing and shaping his phrases so that they seemed to emerge from what the two dancers were doing.

"Brilliant," Romuald declared. "Absolutely bloody brilliant!"

The ever-phlegmatic Clifton shrugged. "All in a day's work. What's this ballet supposed to be about, anyway? Are you guys supposed to be, uh, *doing* each other, or what?"

Chapter 21 The Sex Industry's Loss

DESPITE his Bad Boy reputation, Dane Stockton really had few vices. His profession required him to stay in top physical condition at all times—there was no such thing, for a dancer, as an "off season"—and as a result, Dane worked out religiously and did not keep late nights. He ate a reasonably healthy diet, with occasional lapses. He did not do drugs, he drank only in moderation, and he certainly did not smoke. He even led a frugal lifestyle and did not believe in wasting money. His one great self-indulgence was sex, which admittedly made up for all of the others. Dane liked sex—thinking about it, talking about it, and above all, performing it. Had he not become a highly successful professional dancer, it was entirely possible that his second career choice might have been porno actor/male escort. The dance world's gain was the sex industry's loss.

It was not for nothing that Dane projected a brash self-confidence. Unlike most dancers, he rarely suffered from nerves and never from stage fright. Still, even he had his limits. It was one thing to perform with the other members of the company, most of whom were his friends and some of whom he had been sexually intimate with. Dane had also danced with some famous names and had never been particularly intimidated by the experience. But the imminent arrival of Henri Keller was making Dane feel uncharacteristically on edge, for some reason. After all, Keller wasn't just another famous dancer: he was a big star, one of the biggest. And quite apart from all the unsympathetic media attention he'd been receiving lately, he had a reputation for being "difficult." That term, Dane knew only too well, could cover a multitude of sins, from minor, irritating eccentricities to near-psychotic behavior.

Dane was honest enough to admit to himself that he was feeling a bit insecure. What if he wasn't good enough to dance with Keller without making a fool out of himself? What if, next to Keller, he looked like a rank amateur up there on stage?

Dane shared these fears with no one, not even Larry or Kitri, who were

his usual confidants.

One thing that was encouraging, at least, was that Romuald seemed to find no fault with his dancing and in fact seemed quite satisfied with it. Dane had decided that he liked the Professor (as he always thought of him). He was tough on Dane in the rehearsals, which Dane respected, because there was nothing condescending or belittling about Ghent's toughness. He only wanted to help a dancer to do his best. Dane responded by working harder for Romuald than he had sometimes been known to do in the past for other choreographers.

One unanswered question nagged at Dane. He couldn't figure the Professor and Henri Keller out. He supposed, of course, that he ought to withhold judgment until Keller actually showed up in town and Dane had his chance to meet and evaluate the man. But everything he'd heard about Keller suggested that he and Romuald were an unlikely couple. Oh sure, they were both great dancers; they had that in common. (Although Dane couldn't help wondering whether that could in fact be a disadvantage. He had a healthy competitive nature, himself, and even when he liked a fellow dancer—Larry was the classic example—Dane couldn't avoid wanting to test himself against the other man to at least some extent. He wanted to compete against him, and to win.)

Dane had a sneaking suspicion that Romuald, once you got him going, could be quite the dynamo in the sack. Dane's instincts were rarely wrong about such matters. But Romuald was hardly the sort of filthy sex pig that his lover Henri Keller was reputed to be. As the old expression put it, it took one to know one. Dane had no illusions about his own sex pig status, and indeed took a certain perverse pride in it. If it came down to it, he and Keller probably had more in common than Keller and Ghent did!

As for Romuald and Nate, now *that* was another story. Despite the difference in their ages and the fact that Romuald was a world-famous dancer whereas Nate was still a relative unknown, the two men were suspiciously compatible. They were both intellectuals—"eggheads," as Dane thought of it—and although Dane didn't think of himself as particularly well-educated by comparison, he was smart enough to realize that serious relationships between two men, as opposed to casual flings, had to be based on more than just sex. The Professor and Nate had the hots for each other, there was no doubt about that. Dane suspected that they were seeing each other outside of work—dating, in a word. The lingering question in Dane's mind was whether it was still some sort of a weird platonic friendship—Dane wouldn't have put that past the rather high-minded Professor—or whether sheer animal instinct had taken over yet and the two of them were balling their brains out every chance they got.

He realized, rather belatedly, that he had a reliable source of inside information very near at hand: none other than Nate's roommate, Beau Reynolds. Why hadn't he thought of that before?

Dane didn't have to give the matter much thought: impulsively, he looked up Beau's number and called him.

"Hey there, Southern Fried Chicken," Dane said breezily when Beau answered. "How's it hanging, buddy?"

"Damn you, Dane, you know I don't like that nickname." Beau was trying to sound indignant, but he was failing to do so.

"Oh, I can always come up with a new one for you. How about Rebel? As in Rebel Yell? I seem to recall you doing a lot of yelling the last time we were together."

"Yeah," Beau said salaciously. "I remember."

"I remember, too. It's been a while, hasn't it? Too long. I wanted to call you, but I've been so busy, with these rehearsals and all, you know how it is. Listen. What are you doing this afternoon? For the next couple of hours?"

"Nothing."

"Where are you? At home?"

"Yeah, I just got in."

"Why don't I come over and we can fuck around for an hour or two? I'm sure in the mood. How about you, Beau? Are you in the mood, too?"

"I'm always in the mood for you, Dane. I got in the mood the moment I heard your voice. How soon can you be here?"

"Real soon, Rebel. Real soon. I'll leave right away."

"Do I have time to jump in the shower?"

"Don't bother on my account. You know how I like it, baby. Hot and dirty and sweaty. You're going to be lucky if you have time to turn down the bed. See you soon."

As he hung up, Dane felt a familiar hot surge of excitement sweep through his body. The unconcealed excitement in Beau's voice had stroked his ego; he couldn't deny it. The kid was hot for him, and Dane knew from their previous encounters just how enthusiastic Beau could be in the sack. This was going to be an extremely pleasant way of spending the afternoon. A little sex—or a *lot* of sex, for that matter!—wouldn't do either of them any harm. And he'd get Beau to talk, all right. He'd pump the guy for information, like a fist pumping away on a stiff penis, and with the same inevitable results. He'd get Beau to spill, all right!

As it turned out, Beau did have time to turn down his bed, but just barely, and only because Dane stopped at a liquor store on his way to buy a bottle of wine, a brand he remembered Beau had especially liked. Dane, to do him justice, was rather good at retaining such information about his various tricks.

He greeted Beau with a hug and an open-mouthed kiss that left no doubt in either man's mind about the exact nature of this particular social call.

"I brought you a present," Dane said, indicating the bottle. "Come on, open it."

"Thanks, Dane, but you know I'm not that much of a drinker, except sometimes with dinner, or when I go out to the bars."

"So, pretend this is dinner, or a bar."

"Okay." Beau went into the kitchen, and Dane took a look around the living room.

He noticed immediately the elaborate cloisonné vase with its encircling dragon pattern.

"I see you've made some changes since the last time I was here," he remarked. "The big vase?"

"Oh, that's Nate's. One of his boyfriends gave it to him."

"One of his boyfriends? How many have there been?"

"Oh, not many." Beau returned with a corkscrew and two wine glasses, and Dane opened the bottle. "You know Nate. He's not like you and me. I think he's still a little unsure of himself when it comes to sex. Or he *was* a little unsure of himself until very recently. Now he seems to be making up for lost time."

Dane's plan, to the extent that he'd actually formed one on such short notice, had been to get Beau a little buzzed, have his way with him, and then interrogate him, taking advantage of the usual post-coital relaxation of one's defenses. It now looked as though he wasn't going to have to do much interrogating. Beau was almost as eager to talk to somebody about recent amatory developments in general as he was to get fucked himself!

"This really hot Japanese-American businessman from San Francisco gave Nate the vase," Beau said as Dane poured wine for them both. "I haven't met him yet, myself, but Nate told me *all* about him. They only had a onenight stand, and *that's* what this guy sent Nate afterward, as a souvenir. Can you imagine? They've kept in touch, and the guy wants to see Nate again the next time he's in town. This guy's loaded. I bet that vase cost a lot of money."

So, Dane thought. Choirboy's developed a taste for pricey Asian

cuisine, has he? The sly little bastard. I guess I'm not good enough for him, not rich enough. Mr. Priss won't have anything to do with me, but all the time he's been whoring around with out-of-towners who buy him expensive presents! Fucking little sushi whore!

But even as he began to simmer with jealousy, Dane knew he was being unfair. Nate wasn't like that. Nate might be suspiciously convincing at portraying that boy whore, Alexis, in the rehearsals for *Eclogues*, but he was incapable of being a calculating gold digger, himself. If he went with a man, it was because he really liked him, and he wouldn't care whether the guy was rich or penniless.

Damn it, Dane thought. What do these other guys have that I don't? Why does Choirboy go for them but not for me?

Aloud, he asked, "Ah, where *is* your roommate, by the way?" In his haste to arrange this tryst, Dane hadn't entertained the possibility that Nate might be home when he arrived at Beau's place, or might be expected to arrive there shortly.

"He's probably.... He doesn't spend all that much time here lately, you know." Beau was bursting to tell Dane all about Nate and Romuald, but he confined himself to dropping hints. "Especially at night."

"So he's got a lot of boyfriends now, does he?" Dane prompted. "He's been playing the field, spreading himself around?"

"Oh no. Just one special guy, recently."

"Really? Is it serious?" Dane refilled Beau's glass. *Now* they were getting somewhere!

"Very serious."

"Choirboy's in love? Aw, come on, Beau, you must be kidding me."

"No, honestly, Dane. He's head over heels."

"Anybody I know?" Dane asked, feigning cluelessness.

"Dane, I'm sworn to secrecy. I promised Nate I wouldn't tell anybody."

"You don't have to worry about breaking your promise. Some big frigging secret! Everybody down at work knows that Nate and the Professor have this thing going on between the two of them."

"Really? You think a lot of people suspect?"

"Sure. You can't hide something like that. The way the Professor goes around with that goofy grin on his face, you can tell he's getting laid. And the way he looks at Nate, it's so cute. Anybody can tell he's in love. As for Choirboy, he's trying to play it cool, sure, but he's not that good of an actor. We all know he's in love with Ghent."

"They've been seeing each other just about every night," Beau blurted out. "Sleeping together, over at Romuald's place."

"Oh, really? And what's going to happen once Henri Keller shows up in town? Are they planning on making it a threesome?"

"I don't know, Dane. I do know Nate's really worried about it. He's afraid that Romuald is, you know, still in love with Keller, and that it's going to be really awkward when Keller gets here. To say the least!"

Dane grunted. He was going to need a little time to digest this information and thrash his way through all of the possible implications. And Dane always thought more clearly when he was nice and relaxed, and nothing relaxed him more than a prolonged romp in bed followed by a good, strong ejaculation.

"Finish your wine, Beau," he urged as he raised his own glass to his lips and drained it. "And let's go into the bedroom. All this talk about your hot little roommate and his sex life is making me even more horny!"

When it came to sexual pleasure, Beau and Dane were like-minded young men who saw no reason to be indirect or subtle, let alone coy, with each other. They went into Beau's bedroom and stripped, flinging their clothes carelessly onto the floor. Smiling, Dane took Beau in his arms and gave him a searching, open-mouthed, tongue-lashing kiss as they both sank back slowly onto the bed.

Dane attacked Beau's naked body with his lips and tongue, licking him with the intense concentration a cat might demonstrate while washing itself. He licked Beau's ears, his armpits, his crotch, his ass, even the backs of his knees and the soles of his feet. He interrupted the process several times to grab and restrain the squirming Beau and kiss him on the mouth again. By the time Dane pushed his head between Beau's legs and started serious work on his testicles and anus, taking the balls inside his mouth, relinquishing them only to dip his head lower and give the asshole a thorough rimming, he had Beau quaking and moaning with helpless lust.

"Oh, stop that, Dane you're getting me too excited! Give me your cock, Dane," Beau gasped. "I want to suck you!"

"Come on, let's sixty-nine," Dane demanded. "Shove your cock in my mouth and fuck my face while I fuck yours!"

It became a playful competition to see which of them could take the other's cock farther inside his mouth and deeper into his throat without gagging. As they sucked, Dane buried first one finger, then two fingers inside Beau's ass, probing and teasing. The thought that he would soon be penetrating that tight male hole with more than his fingers sent hot, fierce throbs of anticipation through the core of his turgid penis. As much as he was enjoying their reciprocal cocksucking, he knew that if he treated himself to that particular pleasure for too much longer, he'd prematurely shoot his wad.

He pulled his mouth away from Beau's saliva-slippery tool.

"You ready to get fucked?" Dane asked.

"I was ready the minute you walked in the door."

"Let me go take a quick piss first," Dane said bluntly. "For some reason, I can always fuck longer and harder with an empty bladder. You don't want me to come too fast, do you?"

"God, no. I want you to fuck me for hours."

Dane excused himself to make his quick trip to the bathroom. On his way back after taking his piss, he passed the door of what he knew was the apartment's other bedroom. Dane was shameless enough when he was in other people's company; he wasn't above doing a little snooping when he wasn't being observed by anyone at the moment. He opened the door and took a quick look inside Nate's bedroom. As he'd anticipated, there were stacks of books lying around.

I wonder if Choirboy would go for me if I was more of the intellectual type, Dane speculated.

Then he saw the large framed photograph of an intense-looking Romuald Ghent on the wall opposite the unmade bed. *Autographed*, yet!

"Son of a bitch," Dane exclaimed under his breath.

The photo had now told him all he needed to know, confirming what he'd already gotten out of Beau.

It was amazing how jealousy could sometimes act as an aphrodisiac. As he hurried back to Beau's bedroom, Dane found himself wondering what Romuald Ghent looked like naked. Considering how hot the Englishman always looked in his revealing rehearsal clothes, it didn't require all that much of an exercise of the imagination. And it was only another short, quick leap of the imagination from there to picturing *both* Romuald and Nate naked and erect in bed together, with Romuald on top of Nate and the blond boy lifting his legs and reaching down to spread his ass cheeks and—!

"Where are the goddamn rubbers?" Dane gasped as he literally jumped up onto the mattress beside Beau.

"Right here, in the usual place." Beau opened the top drawer of his nightstand. It was a virtual sexual mini-mart, well stocked. Beau was sexually

active enough that he made sure to keep a variety of condoms and lubricants on hand so that his sex partners could have their choice. They could have prelubed or unlubed condoms, ribbed or unribbed, plain or brightly colored, extra-sensitive or extra-strength. There was even a box of those ghastly fruitflavored rubbers, which Beau really considered to be just a novelty and rarely used. Dane helped himself to the box containing magnum-sized condoms. This wasn't immodesty on his part, but sheer practicality. Some brands of normal-sized condoms were uncomfortably snug when fitted onto his erect prick. They could cut off a guy's circulation and make him feel as though he was going to pass out in mid-fuck!

There was an equally wide selection of lubricants. Beau was grateful when Dane grabbed the bottle of expensive silicone-based gel. It was well worth the extra money, because it was extremely slippery and long-lasting, taking longer than many other lubes to dry out. As much as he loved to get fucked, Beau knew from past experience that he needed Dane's hefty endowment to be as slick as possible if he was going to take it without discomfort. Especially once Dane got himself firmly seated in the saddle and started those long, hard thrusts deep into Beau's ass that they both liked so much!

"How do you want me?" Beau asked. "On my back? On my belly? On my side? Sitting on you?"

"We'll do every position in the book," Dane promised as he tore open the foil packet and extracted the condom. "And don't you worry, Rebel. No matter which position we happen to find ourselves in, I'll do it just the way you like it!"

IT WAS about twenty-five or thirty minutes later when Nate returned to the apartment. He had no sooner put his key in the lock, turned it, and opened the front door a notch than he heard the most extraordinary noises coming from somewhere inside the apartment. Well, in all honesty, perhaps they were not *that* unusual, after all. Nate had heard them often enough before. As he stepped into the living room, Nate recognized the squeak of bedsprings, the repeated slapping impact of flesh against flesh, heavy breathing and grunting, and Beau's loud moans of pleasure, which as usual he was making no effort to keep down. Nate's roommate had obviously brought at least one guy home with him, and they were going at it full-tilt in Beau's bedroom.

He and Beau, by now, were comfortable enough with each other that

neither of them insisted upon excessive respect for the other's privacy in such circumstances. Beau definitely had an exhibitionistic streak, which was contagious.

As a result, Nate thought nothing of going to investigate. He entered the hallway and paused in front of Beau's bedroom door. The door was wide open, of course, and from his vantage point in the hallway Nate was treated to a spectacle worthy of any porno DVD featuring a pair of professional actors.

Bea was lying naked on the bed on his back, his body wet and shiny with the sweat of sex. His ass was elevated by two pillows, one on top of the other, shoved under the small of his back. His legs were spread wide, his feet waving in the air, toes curled. And Dane was kneeling on the bed with his hands pressed into the backs of Beau's thighs to keep his legs in the position he wanted, out of the way, while he leaned over Beau's body and pumped his cock in and out of Beau's ass.

Naked except for his wristwatch and a small medallion on a chain around his neck, Dane, too, was flushed from his exertions and dripping sweat from every pore, his tangled black hair as limp as though he'd just wet it under a shower. He was humping so energetically that the medallion never stayed still but bounced restlessly up and down in the deep groove between his pecs.

Most of Dane's grossly swollen cockshaft was encased in the milkyhued latex of a light-colored condom. That thin ring of rolled-over rubber around the open end of the condom was stretched taut around the base of Dane's shaft, pinching and constricting it in a way that looked rather uncomfortable, almost like a tourniquet.

Nate was familiar enough with Dane's body by now. He'd seen Dane naked in the shower, down at the theater, after rehearsals and performances; and he'd seen Dane practically naked when he was stripped down for the rehearsals of *Eclogues*. And during these rehearsals, he'd done a lot more with Dane than just look at him; they'd been touching each other almost as intimately as lovers while they danced. But now, seeing Dane not only nude but fully erect and in action, was a totally different experience—and a rather unsettling, dizzying one.

Christ, he's hung! Nate found himself thinking with a crudeness that was unusual for him. It's even bigger when it's erect than I thought it would be! How the hell can Beau take all of that? It's got to hurt! And look at those balls! They're huge, too. And that ass, pumping away like that, the cheeks clenching every time he rams it in. Man, has he ever got a nice ass! It's almost as nice as Romuald's!

Almost, but not quite. As far as Nate was concerned, no man on earth possessed an ass that was the equal of Romuald Ghent's hard-muscled, sensuous, and astonishingly boyish-looking butt. But of course, Nate was prejudiced. And he hadn't been anywhere near as intimately acquainted with other men's asses recently as he now was with Romuald Ghent's!

"Don't stop, don't stop," Beau was pleading. "Keep on fucking meoh, fuck me, Dane, please fuck me! Please!"

"That's right," Dane was gasping as he stared down at Beau's desirecontorted face. "Beg for it, you little bitch! Beg for that cock!"

And then, for some reason, both men happened to turn their heads toward the doorway, more or less simultaneously, and they saw Nate standing there gaping at them.

"Oh, shit," Beau choked.

Dane didn't stop fucking. "Choirboy," he said, calmly acknowledging Nate's presence, even as his features took on a new animation born of diabolical glee.

"Sorry," Nate muttered.

"Don't you dare leave, Choirboy," Dane said as Nate made a tentative move away from the doorway. "You stay there and watch. I want you to watch. I want you to see me fucking your hot-assed little roommate. You want Nate to watch you getting fucked, don't you, Beau?"

"Yeah," Beau gasped. "I want him to watch!"

It was as though Dane's eyes and voice exerted some hypnotic influence upon the other two young men. Nate stood there, mesmerized, and watched Beau getting fucked. Dane was looking at Nate now, not down at Beau, as he humped him.

"You can take your clothes off and join us, Choirboy, if you want to," Dane invited, his voice a soft, breathy croon. "Only you're going to have to hurry. I'm think I'm about to come!"

Beau was writhing on the mattress under Dane, oblivious now to Nate's presence. Nate stared, not daring to so much as blink as Dane's hips moved even faster, thrusting and jerking, working their way through the throes of ejaculation. Dane's teeth were bared in a snarl of sexual exultation. He did not take his eyes away from Nate's for so much as an instant.

"Fuck!" he shouted. "Aw, fuck! Fuck, yeah!"

Dane had obviously climaxed, but he maintained his position: he kept his cock buried deep inside Beau's ass, kept his hands pressed against Beau's thighs. Beau was masturbating, so vigorously, so desperately, that it looked to Nate as though he was giving himself more pain than pleasure. His eyes were tightly closed, his face screwed up in a grimace of concentration. He was out of breath, emitting frantic little sobs.

"Come on, Choirboy," Dane urged in a silken, caressing whisper. "Help your buddy out. Help him to come. Be a pal."

Nate stepped into the room and stood beside the bed. He knew what Beau liked. Nate leaned over him, cupped his palms over Beau's sweat-slick, clenching pees and gave them a squeeze, then seized and pinched his nipples. Beau opened his eyes and stared up at Nate as Nate worked on his tits, and Dane continued to plow his ass. Beau whimpered, half-agonized, halfgrateful, as he ejaculated, the thick white globs of come spewing from the head of his over-stimulated cock and splattering down across his belly and chest. One of the wet, slimy wads smacked against the back of Nate's left hand, the fingers of which were still pinching Beau's tit.

"Yeah!" Dane exclaimed. "That's it! Shoot it for me, baby, shoot that come! Yeah, that's a good boy, a real good boy."

Nate released Beau's nipples, and Beau slumped back onto the mattress, his eyes once again closed. Dane had stopped thrusting, but his cock was still hard and was still planted firmly inside Beau's ass. Dane didn't move, but his muscular chest rose and fell as he sucked in deep breaths to replenish his lungs. He'd finally broken his prolonged, intense eye contact with Nate. His head was bowed, his sweat-soaked hair falling down over his face.

Nate retreated into the kitchen, where he washed his hands at the sink. He was trembling—with excitement, he realized, not with revulsion, although revulsion had been what he'd anticipated. He wondered, idly, whether what he'd just done with Beau and Dane could actually be considered a sex act, technically speaking. He and Dane hadn't even touched each other. Nate had touched Beau, of course, and had even gotten some of Beau's come on him. But what now lingered in Nate's memory was the shocking, searing intimacy with which he and Dane had stared at each other, the whole time Dane was fucking Beau and Beau was coming. *That* had been undeniably sexual, in its own unorthodox way.

With predictable nonchalance, Dane now sauntered into the kitchen, still completely nude. He'd gotten rid of the condom and had apparently given himself a quick scrub in the bathroom with a soapy washcloth: his pubic hair was damp, and his penis was still semi-erect. It looked huge.

"Hey, Choirboy," he said, as casually as though they were both fully clothed and encountering one another at work in the theater. "I don't suppose you've got any cold beer in the fridge, do you?"

"I think we do. I'll get you one."

"I could sure use it."

Nate took two beers from the fridge, deciding he could use one, himself. He and Dane stood there, leaning against the kitchen counter, and drank straight from the cans.

"I'll pay you guys back the next time I come over," Dane said. "Bring you a six-pack. No, better yet, a twelve-pack."

"You don't have to do that, Dane. You're welcome to the beer, for God's sake."

"Thanks. I'm assuming, of course, that I'm going to be invited back."

"You're always welcome here, Dane. Don't be silly."

Dane grinned. "I was kind of hoping, the next time, *you* might be the one who invites me over. Not Beau."

Nate listened but didn't hear any sounds of activity elsewhere in the apartment.

"Where *is* Beau, by the way?" he asked.

"Oh, he's 'resting comfortably', as they say in hospitals, after that little anal operation I just performed on him," Dane boasted. "I really reamed him out, didn't I? And you liked what you saw, didn't you, Choirboy? You were staring so hard I though those pretty blue eyes of yours were going to pop right out of your head. I bet you wish you could be on the receiving end of some of that same treatment. Well, all you have to do is name the time and the place. Right now, maybe, if you want to; just give me a chance to catch my breath."

Nate was blushing furiously-of course.

Don't act like such a whore, Dane chastised himself. You know Choirboy doesn't like that. Rein it in a little, before you scare him off.

"I really miss having a regular boyfriend," Dane went on when Nate didn't say anything. "You know, a guy you can hang around with, have fun with, not just in bed. Somebody you can really get to know and feel close to."

This was the right tack to take: instantly, Nate's guard was down.

"Yes, isn't that nice?" he blurted out, thinking about himself and Romuald.

Dane smiled. "You know, you've changed a lot since you and I first met. Especially recently."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, I don't know. You're more mature, somehow. A little more

experienced and sure of yourself. I wonder if it has anything to do with working with the Professor? He's an awfully smart, sophisticated kind of guy, after all. Some of that was bound to rub off on you."

"Yes, isn't Romuald wonderful? Isn't he the most wonderful man you've ever met?"

Oh, Jesus! Dane thought. "Maybe some of it could even rub off on *me*, if I spent enough time around the Professor. I'd like to get to know him a little better. I ought to spend some time with him, one on one."

He'd expected Nate to react to this suggestion with at least a flicker of jealousy, but Nate seemed unperturbed.

"Yes, that might not be such a bad idea," Nate said.

Dane decided to probe a little deeper. "These intellectual types, I don't have much experience with them."

"They're no different from other people, Dane."

"Except that they're smarter. But seriously, I wonder what the Professor is like in bed? I bet it takes a lot to get him going. A slow starter, you know? Inhibited? But once you get him warmed up, I imagine he could be really hot. With the right guy, of course."

Nate wanted to retort that Romuald Ghent, far from being inhibited or a slow starter, was more like a finely-tuned sports car: he could go from zero to sixty within a very few seconds. All you had to do was turn on the ignition, throw him in gear, step on the gas, and sit back and enjoy the ride!

Instead, he said, "Maybe you ought to ask Romuald out on a date some time. He might surprise you, Dane. He might turn out to be every bit as exciting as some of your other tricks. He might even be able to teach *you* a thing or two. You never know."

Dane was amused, though also slightly flabbergasted. Fucking Choirboy has even more balls than I gave him credit for, he thought. He must be awfully sure of himself if he can practically dare me to put the make on his boyfriend. And look at that smirk on his face! He's been getting it, all right, getting it good and regular, and in a way that sure seems to agree with him! God damn! The Professor must be doing something right, to keep the kid this hot and bothered! And get a load of the way he keeps checking out my dick! Before, if I so much as mentioned the word "dick" in front of him, he'd turn tail and run away!

Dane gave his hips a little twitch, which made his heavy penis swing from side to side in front of him.

"You keep looking at it, Choirboy," he purred. "Why don't you touch

it? Come on, Nate, don't be shy. Don't be so stuck-up. Give my dick a little squeeze, just to be friendly. Just for luck. Come on, I dare you to."

Nate was staring at the genital display. "Can I? Really?"

"Sure. Why not? We're buddies, aren't we? Go ahead. Just touch it. Just once."

Nate couldn't help himself. He reached out slowly and grasped Dane's prick in his hand, closing his fingers in a loose fist around the shaft just under the head and stroking it. The response was instantaneous: the thick member tensed and jerked. A thick vein, swollen with blood, pulsed against Nate's palm. He ran his fingers back and forth, stroking more boldly.

"Give it a squeeze," Dane whispered. "Oh yeah, harder," he urged as Nate complied.

Slowly, reluctantly, Nate pulled his hand away.

Dane was smiling at him. "See?" he whispered. "It doesn't bite!"

"That's really quite impressive," Nate declared, for lack of anything better to say. His throat felt dry; he took another sip of his beer.

"Think you could take it? Some guys can't."

"I don't know," Nate admitted. "Maybe I couldn't."

"I'd be gentle with you, Choirboy," Dane murmured. "So gentle. I'd treat you real good. It wouldn't have to be like what you just saw me doing to your roomie. He and I both like it rough sometimes, but I like it just as much the other way. I'd treat you real nice. I'd bend over for you, if that's what you wanted. I'd do anything you want. I'd be your sex slave. You'd like that, wouldn't you? Having a dirty whore like me to be your own private sex slave and take care of you. Think about it, Nate: you giving me orders, telling me what you want me to do to you, and me doing it. No matter how filthy." A thought struck Dane: the obvious potential stumbling block, namely Romuald. "And nobody would ever have to know about it. It would be our dirty little secret. Yours and mine."

He was thrilled by the unexpected response he was getting. Nate was blushing, of course, the way he always did when somebody talked sex around him. But he was also trembling—actually shivering! The poor kid had the shakes, he was so turned on! And better yet, he wasn't telling Dane to *cut it out* or *stop being disgusting*, the way he usually did when Dane really got sewer-mouthed, in general, or teasingly propositioned him, in particular. Dane was beginning to get to him!

Beau chose that moment to come into the kitchen and interrupt them. He'd pulled on his clothes, carelessly, and he had that freshly fucked look about him, a kind of pleasurable, dazed lassitude. He was carrying Dane's trousers.

"Your cell phone went off, Dane," he reported. "I think it's here in your pants."

"Oh, thanks, babe." Dane gave Beau an enthusiastic hug and kiss partly for Nate's benefit, as Dane would've been the first to admit, but mostly because he was genuinely fond of Beau. Beau was hot in bed and made no unreasonable demands outside of bed, and Dane appreciated that in a casual sex partner. He retrieved the phone from his pants pocket.

"Oh, it's Kitri." Dane returned the call. "Hey, sweetheart. I'm at Beau and Nate's place. No, they're *both* here." In response to a question of Kitri's, Dane laughed. "Let's just say I made a trip to Virginia, and the South rose again." He winked at Beau. "What? Oh, I'm still working on *him*. It's a long, laborious process." He smiled at Nate. "As a certain cute little English dude we all work with would say—you know, the one who's a bit of a classical scholar?—'Rome wasn't built in a day'. I'll tell you all about it when I see you. Yes, I'll be home soon. Bye." He hung up and stretched himself languidly. "Well, I guess I'd better get dressed. Much as I'd like to stick around and maybe go another round, with both of you. Maybe next time, huh? Kitri's expecting me for dinner." He finished his beer and set the empty can down on the kitchen countertop.

"I still can't believe you tell Kitri all about your sex life, Dane," Nate said. "What you do with other guys, I mean."

"Why not? She likes to hear about it. All the details. It turns her on. Wait'll I fill her in on *this* little afternoon romp. We'll probably end up boffing each other like crazy later on tonight." Dane grinned at both Beau and Nate. "I thought you were starting to get over that lingering puritanical streak in you, Choirboy," Dane teased. "Don't start backsliding, now."

He caught Beau's eye, and the two of them exchanged knowing looks. "What you need, Choirboy, is a steady boyfriend," Dane declared. "I'll have to think about it and see if I can come up with some suitable candidate. He can't be just any horny bastard, of course. He'll have to be a guy with some real class. Unlike me, I guess."

And with that parting shot, Dane wandered off toward Beau's bedroom in search of the rest of his clothes.

Nate, remembering that he and Romuald had promised to be honest with one another, went through an hour or two of agonized indecision before he came to the conclusion that he had to tell Romuald what had happened. Even if it spoiled what he knew was going to be their last night together before Henri Keller's arrival. He blurted out his confession to Romuald over dinner. He had imagined the worst-case scenario, in which Romuald reacted with indignation and disgust. As a result, Nate wasn't prepared when Romuald simply stared blankly at him for a moment and then burst out laughing.

"It's not funny, Romuald!" Nate protested. Now *he* was the one who almost felt angry!

"I'm sorry, Nate, but in fact I think it's very funny. I think it's hilarious."

"Aren't you the slightest bit jealous?"

"What's there to be jealous about? Let me see if I understood you correctly. You came home and caught Beau and Dane having sex. You watched Dane doing to Beau what, by your own admission, you and Beau have occasionally been known to do unto one another, if you'll permit me to wax biblical for a moment. You touched Beau—only on his nipples, am I correct? And then you and Dane had a pleasant little conversation, post-coital on his part, while he stood there in front of you, stark naked, flaunting himself—deliberately, no doubt. And then you accepted his kind invitation to touch his cock. And being the generous, unselfish young man he is, he offered to become your sex slave, should you be so inclined. Have I left anything of importance out?"

"When you put it like that, you make it all sound so sordid," Nate blustered.

"On the contrary. If you'll forgive me for saying so, it sounds almost innocent to me. Naughty schoolboy misbehavior."

"I can't imagine the kinds of schools *you've* attended. I repeat, you're not even the least bit jealous?"

"My dear Nate, my threshold of jealousy is considerably higher than that. If and when Dane leaves Kitri, and you and he set up housekeeping together, *and* you ask me to give you away at your wedding, *then*, I admit, I may experience a twinge of jealousy as I stand there watching you and Dane exchange rings." Romuald let out a most undignified snicker. "Knowing Dane, they'd probably be matching *cock* rings!"

"I can't believe you can joke about it like that."

"And I can't believe you *can't* joke about it. For God's sake, Nate. So you groped Dane Stockton. Half the gay men in New York have done that, apparently, from what I hear, and the other half are standing in line, waiting their turn."

"And I suppose that other half includes you?"

"I have to admit you've piqued my curiosity. Is the implement in

question as big as hearsay would have it?"

"Romuald, it is absolutely gross. I don't know how he manages to *walk*, let alone fit it inside a dance belt and dance. I'm surprised he isn't constantly losing his balance and tipping over."

"The poor afflicted lad. I wonder if there's a charitable foundation somewhere dedicated to discovering a cure for his condition?"

Their subsequent table talk grew rather bawdy. Nate was immensely relieved. For the first time in their relationship, perhaps, he'd been guilty of underestimating Romuald. Nate knew he'd done the right thing by being upfront with his lover about the incident with Beau and Dane.

After dinner, they sat on the couch in the living room and watched television—or, more accurately, they kept the television turned on while they talked, neither of them paying any real attention to the program. By now, Nate was sensitive to Romuald's moods. The Englishman began to grow pensive, and even somewhat melancholy. He reached out and took Nate's hand in his own, interlacing their fingers and applying a gentle pressure.

"Tomorrow morning I have to go to the airport, to meet Henri."

"Uh-huh." Nate desperately tried to think of something a little more articulate to say. "The apartment looks very nice," was what he finally came up with. "I'm sure Mr. Keller will be comfortable here."

"But not for long, maybe."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that, as soon as he and I have a chance to sit down together, quietly, I should probably come right out with it. Get it over with. Tell him that I've met somebody, that I'm involved with somebody. With you."

"And how do you think Mr. Keller will react to that?"

"Knowing him, not particularly well, in all probability. What I'm almost hoping for from him—which is probably too much to hope for—is a show of indifference. Maybe he won't care, and we can move on. Maybe it *is* possible for two men to become ex-lovers and still remain friends." Romuald's whole demeanor, however, suggested that he was pessimistic. He was still holding Nate's hand, but he no longer had his head turned to look at Nate beside him on the couch; he was looking straight ahead at the television screen, or rather pretending to. Nate didn't think this was an encouraging sign.

"Maybe...." Nate started to say, but then he fell silent.

"Maybe what?"

"Nothing."

"Nate. I thought we agreed that we would always try to be honest with each other. That includes feeling free to say what you're really thinking."

"All right. I was thinking... the thought crossed my mind... maybe you shouldn't tell him. Not everything, and not yet, anyway."

"Oh? Why not?"

"For a couple of reasons. For one thing, I know how I feel about you, and I hope you feel the same way about me, but it may be a little early for us to know how you and I are going to do in the long run."

Romuald let go of Nate's hand.

"I see. You don't want me to burn my bridges. Or bust my bridge up under me, the way Horatius and his buddies do in *Muzio Scaevola*. You think I can have my fling with you, go on with Henri at the same time—string him along—and then if you and I don't work out, I can just go back to him as though nothing had happened. You think I'm capable of that."

"Don't be angry."

"I'm not angry. I wasn't angry before, when you told me how Dane put the make on you—which, let's face it, was what it amounted to—so why should I be angry now? I'm the one who insisted that you say what was on your mind. We're having a discussion, that's all." Romuald paused. "You said a couple of reasons. What else?"

"Maybe, instead of confronting Henri the minute he gets into town, springing all this on him unexpectedly, maybe you should give the two of you a chance to just be with each other and see how you feel. Maybe *he'll* have something he wants to say to *you*. Maybe he's been thinking about your relationship, where it's going, what he'd like to do about it, this whole time you've been apart."

"I hadn't thought of that. I suppose I've been rather selfish, thinking only about myself. As though what I'm feeling, what I want, is all that matters."

"And finally—don't take this the wrong way—"

"I won't. Come on, out with it."

"Maybe we shouldn't see each other, I mean like this, I mean sexually, while Henri is here. Maybe you and I should cool it, until you and he have had a chance to do some serious talking."

"I'm perfectly capable of talking seriously to Henri and being with you at the same time. Well, not *literally* at the same time. You know what I mean."

"I can't help thinking that it might not be fair to Henri for you to be...

preoccupied, when you and he have so much to work out together. And I wonder if a lot of backstage drama would be good for *Eclogues*. Distracting, you know?"

"I hadn't thought of that, either, Nate. You can be quite annoyingly perceptive at times. So you think one love triangle at a time—the one in the ballet, Thyrsis and Corydon and Alexis—is enough. Is that it?"

"I guess so."

"We're talking about, what, a period of almost three weeks? Three weeks of Henri being in town and staying here with me. Three weeks of you and I not seeing each other, except at work. Three weeks of... all right, I'll come right out with it: of not being able to make love to you. I'm not sure I'll be able to stand it. I may go out of my mind."

"It's not going to be easy for me, either, Romuald."

"I should hope not. I'd like to think it will be every bit as awful for you as it'll be for me. Pretending that we're nothing to one another. That none of this has happened. That we don't love each other. What hypocrisy. What a sham."

"Romuald. Are we having our first fight? So soon?"

"This isn't a fight. When I said I was annoyed, I'm a little annoyed at myself, for being so caught up in myself, lost in my own world, that I haven't thought about some of these issues you've brought up. I'm not angry at you. I could never be angry with *you*, Nate, not really. If I wanted to be with a man who was a pushover, a yes man, who concealed his own feelings and only told me what he thought I wanted to hear, I could find one easily enough. I could go to bed with him and have fun with him and maybe even persuade myself that I was in love with him. It might work out just fine for a little while, it might be a very sensible and convenient arrangement. But you and I are not like that. You would never take the easy way out like that, and you would never let me get away with it, either." His face lost some of its tense expression, and he smiled. "I almost wish we *could* have a fight. Shouting, throwing things, the works. I imagine you could be quite a scrapper. Very tough. I bet you could take me. And the making up, afterward, could be extremely exciting, too."

"I hope I didn't say anything that was out of line."

"Don't you dare start apologizing to me, not now. Or I really *may* get angry. You have a stake in this, too, remember. I'm going to have to think about all the things you said." Romuald sighed. "You mentioned being fair to Henri. Well, let me tell you, Nate: there's no 'fair' or 'unfair', in such things. Not when it comes to love. It's only a question of who's going to end up being hurt. Because somebody always is, before these things are over and the dust settles. And I'm determined it's not going to be you."

"Romuald. Are you happy? Do I make you happy? Aside from all of this other worry, do I make you happy, at all?"

"Nate, you'd have to have lived as long as I have and been through some of the things I've been through to know just how happy you make me. To know why I think, sometimes, that I ought to get down on my knees and thank God that you exist, that I found you. Listen. I'm going to promise you one thing. Once all of the performances of *Eclogues* are over, and Henri has fulfilled his other engagements here in the States, and he flies back to Europe, then you and I will be together. I'll take you away somewhere, anywhere, for a weekend, or longer, if we can arrange it. Where we go doesn't really matter, but we'll go, and we won't talk about work, or dancing, or Henri. We won't talk about anything except us. It will just be you and me. Together, and I won't care who knows about us. I promise you that we'll do that. Oh, how I need that, how I'm already looking forward to it. I think it may be the only thing that will keep me going. Promise me that you'll come with me. That we'll be together then, no matter what happens between now and then."

"I promise, Romuald. I swear."

"Then nothing else matters. I can bear all the rest as long as I know I have that ahead of me to look forward to. Now that we've settled that, let's not be so ridiculously solemn and serious. If this is going to be our last night together, for a little while, let's make the most of it. Let's laugh and be silly. Let's be irresponsible. Let's make love. Oh, Nate, my little beauty. My little love."

Chapter 22 Unexpected Developments

HENRI KELLER finally arrived in New York City, and the company's publicity machine kicked into gear and kept whirring noisily, from the moment Keller's plane touched down at the airport to the rise of the curtain on the gala night. Realizing that *Eclogues* wasn't the most exciting title imaginable, the publicity department came up with a caption to accompany the advertising for the new ballet: *A Dance of Love and Jealousy*. On posters and in print ads, the slogan was superimposed over a gauzy, soft-focus photo of three very nude young men, their bodies pressed together, their limbs intertwined, their faces turned away from the camera. The models were not, as one might have expected, Larry, Dane, and Nate (let alone Henri Keller!); instead, the three satyrs in the ballet, Seth, Timothy, and Moishe, had been recruited. All three corps boys had been delighted by the assignment. It was exposure—in every sense of the word.

Romuald groaned when he first saw the posters, and he told Nate that the slogan ought to be *An Advertising Ploy of Hype and Desperation*. But Romuald was a good sport who knew how to play the game, so in public, at least, he projected enthusiasm. Rather more to the point was the deceptively simple phrase also included in the advertisements: *Henri Keller and Dane Stockton*. That said it all, as far as many of the people who had bought tickets were concerned. It was taken for granted that the pairing of two dancers who were almost better known for their recent offstage antics than for their dancing was going to strike sparks.

In addition to the posters and print ads, there were additional photo shoots, articles in the local newspapers, and news commentaries on the local television and radio stations.

What were lacking were interviews with the guest star, which Keller refused to give.

"I'm here to dance, not to talk and be misquoted by the gutter press," Keller declared.

Walker and his fellow administrators cajoled and pleaded, but their

expensive imported star refused to budge. Romuald gamely picked up some of the slack by agreeing to talk to a few journalists. If they were hoping for a chance to rake up old scandals, they were disappointed. Romuald wanted to talk about *Eclogues*, and nothing but *Eclogues*.

As Dane put it after reading one such interview in print, "From the way this reads, the Professor probably lectured them on fucking Virgil until their eyes glazed over, and they started running for the exits before he had a chance to hand out their homework assignments to them."

Romuald did concede in the course of the interview that "There is eroticism, of both the hetero- and the homosexual variety, in this ballet. I do try to be an equal opportunity hedonist." He added, in response to a question from the interviewer, "I don't see why dancers, or audiences for that matter, should deny themselves access to sexual feelings just because it's a ballet. We don't see such austerity in the other media, do we?"

As a result of these pronouncements, rumors began to circulate, especially in the gay community, that *Eclogues* in general and Henri Keller and Dane Stockton's contribution to it in particular, was likely to be pretty hot stuff.

Beau received a phone call from a one-time trick of his who worked for a newspaper as a copy editor.

"He wanted to know if it's true that Dane dances in the nude in this piece," Beau reported to Nate gleefully.

"Don't tell Dane. It might give him ideas." A thought occurred to Nate. "Didn't he want to know if *Keller* dances in the nude?"

"Keller's European. They dance in the nude all the time over there," Beau said dismissively. "I gather his big ol' bare butt is considered yesterday's news."

"So what did you end up telling this guy about *Eclogues*, anyway?"

"I told him Dane does everything to Keller short of actually buttfucking him, which happens to be true, after all. Hell, this whole time you've been filling in for Keller, Dane has gotten more action from you than you've had with all your recent tricks rolled into one. 'More fun than you ever thought you could have with your tights on', to coin a phrase. And I bet Dane's not the only one who's been getting off on it. When I mentioned your recent tricks, I forgot about Romuald. I'm sure he's enjoyed coaching you and Dane, and you and Larry, on how to make love to each other in all of those rehearsals. Too bad Keller had to finally show up and spoil all the fun."

"Bitch."

"Sure, go ahead and insult me, roomie. At least I'm not playing some

ancient Roman farmer's boy toy. Classical literature, my ass. I bet those horny Roman dudes sat there *jerking off* over those scrolls, reading about how hot Corydon was for Alexis."

Even Nate had to admit *that* one was funny. He could never stay mad at Beau for long.

With his colleagues, Keller was aloof, which was not unusual when a star of his magnitude wandered into foreign spheres for a guest appearance.

Most of the dancers got their first look at him when he showed up at the theater the morning after his arrival, without advance notice or fanfare, to take Romuald's class. In total contrast to Romuald, Keller was wearing old, well-worn garments that were all either black, white, or gray without a hint of color. Romuald introduced Keller, the students applauded, Keller nodded brusquely by way of acknowledgement, and then he took his place at the *barre*.

Keller worked hard, with total concentration, and said nothing, not even to Romuald. At the end of class, he exited quickly, maintaining the same low profile.

This first impression was by no means an unfavorable one: Keller certainly didn't seem to give himself any superstar airs.

Dane and Larry got together for sandwiches and coffee after that evening's performance, a double bill of Stravinsky's *Pulcinella*, in which Dane danced the title role, and *The Firebird*, in which Larry was Prince Ivan, to compare notes.

"Keller's sure not much of a talker, is he?" Dane observed. "He *does* speak English, doesn't he?"

"I imagine he must. That hadn't occurred to me."

"Maybe the Professor doesn't stop talking long enough for the poor bastard to get a word in edgewise, in any language," Dane joked. "I still can't picture the two of them in bed together. Well, I *can*, I mean physically; after all, that's quite a nice pair of buns Keller's got on him—"

Larry groaned. "Spare me your lurid fantasies, Dane."

"Sorry. Anyway, there's no reason for Keller to act so standoffish. Everybody knows he takes it up the ass, so who does he think he's kidding with this 'strong and silent macho type' routine of his?"

"I wasn't aware you thought that taking it up the ass was anything to be ashamed about."

"It's not. It's just that this guy breezes into town-late, by the way-to

do ten performances of one role in one ballet, and you'd think it was the Second Coming," Dane complained.

"His name sells tickets," Larry pointed out. "So does yours, for that matter. So don't be such a hypocrite."

"I'm not a hypocrite. I'm just a hard-working, horny bastard."

"No argument here—at least not about the horny part."

"I've busted my ass helping the Professor to put this dude Corydon together."

"Don't pull an arm muscle, Dane, from all that patting yourself on the back," his friend advised.

The next afternoon, a general rehearsal for *Eclogues* was scheduled. The call sheet read "Full Call," which meant that, for once, virtually the entire company would be in the same room at the same time. There would be no other dance rehearsal taking place elsewhere, although Matthias Metzinger was absent, because he was once again working with Ted and the orchestra.

In the largest of the rehearsal spaces, the one that approximated the dimensions of the stage, the company gathered to run through the entire ballet from start to finish for Keller's benefit, in practice clothes, with piano accompaniment, and with Nate at first taking the role of Mnasyllos, then switching to Alexis. In the finale, when Alexis and Mnasyllos were on stage at the same time, Beau would fill in and dance Mnasyllos. Romuald explained this to Keller.

"When Nate comes on the second time, he'll be doing your part, so he's the one you want to watch," Romuald said.

The Swiss looked rather dubious. "*Vraiment*," he muttered, under his breath. "Are you telling me I don't come on right away? Why not?"

Nate was astonished by the fact that Keller had arrived in town and shown up for rehearsals without, apparently, having the slightest notion of what *Eclogues* was about. At this first rehearsal, Keller seemed baffled by where his role fit into the ballet as a whole and by what he was supposed to do.

"Tell me again what the title means," Nate overheard Keller ask Romuald in his lightly accented English.

"Later, Henri," Romuald said.

"And the name of my character is...?"

"Alexis."

"Alexis, oh yes, that's right." Keller sounded distinctly uncertain. "And the *mise-en-scène* is...?"

"Later, Henri. We're about ready to begin."

Keller and Romuald were supposed to be not only colleagues and friends who frequently worked together, but lovers. Hadn't they ever talked about the ballet? Had Keller actually signed his contract without knowing, or caring, what he'd committed himself to performing? Or (as Nate speculated, trying to give Keller the benefit of the doubt) had whatever Romuald *had* told him about the ballet originally simply gone in one side of Keller's head and exited out the other because he was preoccupied with his busy performance schedule?

Romuald took advantage of this opportunity to introduce the dancers who would be doing the solo parts in the first cast of *Eclogues* to Keller. These exchanges progressed without incident, until Romuald came to Nate.

"Ah, so you're the new protégé," Keller said, looking and sounding decidedly sour. "The new discovery. Romuald's latest."

Nate, already nervous at the prospect of being introduced to the man he thought of as his rival, tried to bluff it out. "I don't understand what you mean, Mr. Keller."

"Don't you? I suppose you want me to believe you're as innocent as you look." When a nonplussed Nate said nothing, Keller added, "Let's skip it and get this over with."

During the run-through, Keller and Walker sat on the sidelines along with several of the company's administrators and watched. Keller now had a copy of the ballet's scenario in his hands, which he consulted from time to time. The run-through proceeded without incident, and Nate thought that the ballet looked good. Certainly he, Larry, and Dane held back nothing during their scene together. At the end, Nate was feeling just a bit winded but exhilarated.

Afterward, Romuald, who of course had just danced Silenus in the ballet's final scene, thanked his colleagues. He dismissed the corps boys and girls and told the dancers who had just performed their solo parts to take a break. Some of them drifted out of the rehearsal room in search of refreshments or a bathroom; most of them lingered, curious to observe Keller at greater length.

"What do you think, Mr. Keller?" Walker asked.

He did not get quite the answer he was expecting.

"You expect me to perform in this thing?" Keller demanded. "You must be joking."

Walker was speechless, but Romuald didn't look particularly surprised.

"What's wrong with it *this* time, Henri?" Romuald asked.

"Everything," Keller said.

"You'll have to be a little more specific."

"Words fail me." Unfortunately, this immediately turned out to be an inaccurate statement on Keller's part. Any doubts about his ability to express himself in English were soon laid to rest. "You must be insane if you think I'm going to dance *once* in this farce, let alone in, what, ten performances?"

"That's what your contract says, Henri."

"I should never have let you talk me into signing it."

"I thought we agreed—"

"I agreed to nothing!" Keller shouted. Then, contradicting himself with his very next breath, he said, "You know the only reason I agreed to any of these American engagements was because I was sick and tired of all that—"

"Henri," Romuald interjected quickly. "I'm sure there is no need for us to discuss all this in front of Mr. Walker." Who, as he sat there listening to the other two men, looked as though he fervently wished he could exit via a trapdoor in the floor.

"Don't interrupt me!" Keller yelled. Everyone in the rehearsal room was now staring at him in disbelief. Oblivious, he continued in an only slightly moderated tone of voice. "I'll discuss anything I want to, and in front of anyone I choose to."

Nate didn't know which shocked him more: the way Keller talked to Romuald in front of other people, or the stoic way Romuald stood there and took the verbal abuse.

"This is the stupidest ballet you've done yet, and that's saying a lot," Keller told his lover. "It's incoherent, there's no storyline, there's no progression toward a climax, and the music is third-rate. Why you continue to insist upon working with that incompetent hack Metzinger is beyond me."

Romuald said nothing. Nate was fervently grateful that Matthias wasn't present to hear himself being put down like this; he was presumably attending another of Ted's orchestral rehearsals elsewhere in the building.

One would think that Keller would be grateful that his participation in the "stupid" ballet would be minimal, but logic seemed to have little place in the World According to Keller.

"And why does everybody else have a bigger part than mine?" Keller demanded.

"They don't," Romuald said—curtly, Nate couldn't help noticing.

"They do. Thyrsis and Corydon both appear in two scenes. Alexis only

has one."

Keller's arithmetic was off: Thyrsis and Corydon in fact appeared in three scenes, Alexis in two, if the finale was included in the computation. No one bothered to try to correct Keller on this point.

"Thyrsis and Corydon have their little dance contest scene together, sure—" Romuald began.

"And then Corydon has that big solo," Keller complained.

"It's a short solo. But once Alexis comes on, he's the center of attention. He has that nice *long* solo." Romuald sounded as though he was talking to a sulky child. "And then the big *pas de deux* with Corydon."

"Corydon is the better role. I ought to do Corydon, not Alexis. I want to do Corydon."

"It's a little late for that now, Henri."

"I'm sick of playing young boys. I'm getting too old for that. I'm going to look ridiculous up there. You want to make a fool out of me."

"Now, Henri-"

"You planned this deliberately to make a fool out of me!"

"If I wanted to make a fool out of you, Henri," Romuald said, trying to lower the rising emotional temperature with a joke, "I'm sure I could have found a much less expensive and time-consuming way of doing so. And you have absolutely nothing to worry about. You did Romeo last year, Henri, and you were wonderful," Romuald went on soothingly. "No one thought for a moment that you looked too old."

"Romeo doesn't count. Guys with arthritis can do Romeo and get away with it. Hell, guys with *hip replacements* can still do Romeo and get away with it!" (This may not have been literally true, but Nate had to admit that Keller had a point. In too many productions of Prokofiev's ballet, Romeo seemed to do more miming and acting than dancing.)

Keller turned to Walker. "What's that little blond boy's name? My understudy?"

"Nathaniel Deventer. Nate."

"Ah, yes. Nathaniel." Keller pronounced it the French way, *Na-tan-aye-el.* "He *looks* like a little boy, and he *dances* like a little boy. What is this, a ballet for pedophiles? You expect me to do what he just did? In front of an audience? I'm a man. I want to dance like a man."

Romuald and Walker, aware that Nate was standing nearby and could

hear every word, were both visibly embarrassed.

"Nate is very masculine, and he's a fine dancer," Romuald said.

"Oh, he is, is he? How masculine is he? And how do you know?"

Walker made a quick attempt to change the subject: "I'm sure you'll give the role your own individual interpretation, Mr. Keller, and it will be a big success."

Keller ignored him and continued to harangue Romuald. "And all of that groping and writhing about, it's like a nude wrestling match in a gay bar. It's absurd. It's pornographic. It will all have to be toned down, if you expect me to do it. I'm not about to go out there and carry on like the two of them just did." By *the two of them* he meant, of course, Dane and Nate. "I suppose the degenerates in the audiences here in New York like that sort of thing? Well, I refuse to pander to them. Filthy perverts."

"You're not quite yourself today, Henri," Romuald said. "I wouldn't be surprised if you're still suffering from jet lag. Once you've had a chance to get settled in here and we start in on the real work, you'll see that everything will be all right."

"Everything will be a disaster. An embarrassment. Make a fool out of yourself, if you insist," Keller ranted on. "I refuse to be any part of it."

Romuald was beginning to lose his composure. "We can talk about all this later, at home," he suggested, in an agitated-sounding whisper.

"Oh, we will talk about it, you can be very sure of that," Keller jeered. "We will talk about many things at home, as you say!"

Romuald, looking thoroughly miserable, took Keller by the arm and hustled him out of the room—not a moment too soon, as far as Nate was concerned

In the men's locker room, Keller's performance was inevitably a hot topic of conversation.

"Now we know why Romuald's parents named him after a saint. He's sure as hell got the *patience* of a saint. And he probably needs it to put up with Keller," Seth said.

"Yeah, and did you get a load of Keller? He all but accused Romuald and Nate of fooling around with each other. Wow," Moishe replied.

"Apparently what Dane and Nate do in the *pas de deux* isn't 'masculine' enough to suit him. Well, it's butch enough for me. I'd love to do it."

"I couldn't believe he actually told Ghent his choreography sucks. To

his face. In front of all of us."

"I thought Walker was going to choke. He started turning purple."

"Jet lag', my ass. Keller must have PMS. It must be that time of the month."

Timothy joined the discussion: "By the way, I didn't quite get the bit about nude wrestling in gay bars. *Do* they have gay bars in Europe with nude wrestling?"

While this exchange continued and grew increasingly raunchy, Larry drew Nate aside. "Are you all right?" Larry asked.

"Of course I'm all right. Why wouldn't I be?"

"All that garbage that came out of Keller's mouth—"

"So I'm effeminate. I guess it comes with the territory."

"The guy's a jerk. Ignore him. You saw how Romuald came right out and defended you, didn't you? That's what counts."

"I suppose you're right," Nate said, without much conviction. "I'll tell you one thing: Dane was right when he made fun of me for saying I was looking forward to these rehearsals. Up to now it's been fine, but I'm not looking forward *at all* to tomorrow morning." Which was when their first working rehearsal with Keller was scheduled.

"It ought to be interesting," Larry predicted. And, as usual, he was right.

The unpredictable Henri Keller showed up for his first rehearsal with Romuald, Nate, Dane, and Larry, apparently all business. He had a slightly sullen look on his handsome face, and he greeted the others curtly, but he wasted no time as he began his warm-up, waiting for Romuald's instructions.

"Gentlemen, we need to make up for lost time," Romuald said. "So let's get right down to work. Nate, if you'll do your entrance, through your interaction with Larry up to where you move toward Dane? Henri can shadow you, and then he and Larry can do it by themselves."

"Sure," Nate agreed.

Not content merely to stand there and watch, Keller was soon at Nate's side, matching him move for move. Occasionally, he politely asked Nate to stop and repeat something. Nate soon had to admit that Keller was a hard worker and a fast learner. He was also intensely self-critical.

"No, it isn't quite right, and you know it isn't," Henri said, brushing aside Romuald's attempts to encourage him with praise. "Let me do it again."

Keller and Larry were dancing together when Keller grimaced, as though in pain.

"Is your knee bothering you again, Henri?" Romuald asked. "If it is, we can take a break."

"No, let's go on. I have to learn this."

They finally did take a break. Keller, Nate discovered, was, like Romuald, a dedicated tea drinker. As he gulped down a second cup of the hot brew, he looked at Nate—rather suspiciously, Nate couldn't help thinking.

"You there, Nathaniel," Keller commanded. "Come here. I want to talk to you."

"Yes, Mr. Keller?"

"You're not a bad little dancer. For an American."

After some of the remarks Keller had made yesterday, this might be construed as high praise. "Thank you, Mr. Keller."

"Of course, anyone can tell you have not had the advantage of European training and experience."

"That's true, Mr. Keller. I've never been to Europe."

"It shows. Tell me. Do you enjoy dancing in this ballet?"

"Yes, I do."

"Why?"

"Well, Mnasyllos is only a small part, but it's a lot of fun to do. And I think Alexis is a very challenging role. I enjoyed working on it with Mr. Ghent."

Keller grunted. "You are very young and naïve."

"I'm sure I am." Nate was already afraid he might do or say something that might antagonize Keller, and he decided to take the easy way out by agreeing with the man whenever possible.

"I suppose you'd be willing to do anything to please the great Romuald Ghent." (Who was standing nearby, drinking his own tea; looking at Keller and Nate, Romuald gave a tentative little smile when he heard his name mentioned.)

"He's the choreographer, after all," Nate said cautiously. "It's his ballet."

"Ha!" Keller exclaimed. He drank more tea. The hot beverage was making him sweat profusely. "You are a child," he told Nate dismissively. "Such a child." Shortly after they resumed work, Keller brusquely told Nate to step aside so he could take over as Alexis. At first, he and Dane danced together productively enough, with Romuald, as usual, making corrections and suggestions. Nate had to admit that Dane and Keller looked good together. They were both extraordinarily athletic, beautiful, sexy men. Before long, though, Keller began to betray signs of impatience.

"Must you grip me so hard?" he demanded.

"I'm afraid I have to, Mr. Keller," Dane replied with a meekness that was astonishing to hear, coming from him. "Otherwise, you may slip and fall. Nate and I found that out, during the rehearsals we've done up until now."

"I'm sure that isn't the only thing the two of you found out," Keller said.

It sounded like a not-so-veiled insult to Nate, but Dane once again chose to ignore it. "We found out that this sequence isn't as easy to dance as it looks, that's for sure. So, if there's anything I can do to make it easier for you...?"

"If there is, I'll tell you. Don't condescend to me."

"Sorry," Dane muttered.

Larry and Nate exchanged incredulous glances. Dane Stockton, apologizing? *What next?* Nate wondered. *Maybe he'll tell us he's decided to become celibate!*

After another half-hour of nonstop work, both Dane and Keller began to look fatigued, and Romuald insisted that they take another break.

"We've made a lot of progress already, in a very short time. Let's not push it."

Keller mopped his face and chest with a towel.

"This choreography is too complicated," he declared. "You're going to have to simplify some of it."

"Nonsense, Henri," Romuald said. "It's no more complicated than-"

"Don't argue with me!" Keller spat.

Romuald fell silent.

"We've been working on this scene on and off for the last three weeks," Dane said. "And opening night is only a week away. Isn't it a little late to start making changes?"

"No one is interested in your opinion. You're here to do what Mr.

Ghent and I tell you to do," Keller informed him.

This was too much even for the newly (and as it turned out, only temporarily) saintly Dane. "Oh, I am, am I?"

Nate recognized that glint in Dane's eye and knew only too well what it meant. Henri Keller, although he was not yet aware of it, might as well have had a target silk-screened onto his rehearsal clothes, front and back.

Next, Keller decided that Alexis's solo and the *pas de deux* with Corydon went on for too long. "The audience will get bored," he insisted. "We'll have to make some cuts."

"I can't do that to Matthias, Henri. I couldn't even suggest it to him."

"Why not? He's been paid to write this score, hasn't he? What difference can it make to him if we cut out a few bars here and a few bars there? All he's interested in is the money."

Romuald was clearly at a loss for words.

"Let me see if I've got this straight," Larry dared to interject. "First you complained because your part's too short. Now you're complaining because it's too long?"

Keller glared at him. "I wasn't talking to you."

"Oh, excuse me," Larry said with exaggerated politeness. And with no need for a treaty to be signed, Larry and Dane were now allies in their own private war against Henri Keller.

"I want to go on," Keller insisted.

"Are you sure you're not too tired, Henri?" Romuald asked.

"No, I'm fine. Have the boy show me more of my part."

Romuald dismissed Larry and Dane but asked Nate—"the boy"—to stay behind so that he could work with Keller for a little while longer.

Dane and Larry hit the showers, where, lathering themselves under the hot spray from adjacent nozzles, they didn't mince words with each other.

"Keller's a good-looking guy, but he's getting kind of old to be a boy toy—on stage or off," Larry said.

In *Eclogues*, Larry and Dane were playing mature men who were rivals for the affection of a young boy. The irony was not lost on them that, in the performances, Alexis would be portrayed by Keller, who was more than a decade their senior.

"Oh, I don't know. Now that I've had a chance to see him really close up, and even *feel* him up in all of those clinches, I have to admit Keller

doesn't look his age. If that's what spending all that time in rehab does for you, maybe I should give it a try. I could develop some sort of addiction."

"You already have an addiction, Dane. You're a sex addict. And I hate to rain on your parade, but the first thing a sex addict has to do when he goes into rehab is give up sex. They're not even allowed to masturbate while they're in there."

"Well, so much for that. No way."

"I will admit it's been a hell of a lot easier pretending to lust after Nate than it's going to be pretending to be insane with desire for Keller and his well-worn charms."

"Yeah, tell me about it! With Nate, I don't have to pretend at all. Now, with Keller, I'm *really* going to have to do some acting."

"Are you telling me you wouldn't trick with Keller if you had the chance?"

"I haven't given it any serious thought. I imagine he might be kind of hot, in an arrogant, slutty kind of way. I wonder if he's the type who expects the other guy to do all the work? I've tricked with guys I wasn't all that crazy about outside of bed, you know, because we really didn't have anything else in common? Fucking a guy I absolutely can't stand—that might be an interesting experience."

"There *are* guys who do that sort of thing all the time, Dane. They're called male prostitutes."

"Now you *have* given me an idea. With the fees he's supposedly getting for this gig, Keller could afford to take me out to dinner first. To a really expensive place. At least I'd get to fuck the bastard on a full stomach."

"You're still taking for granted that you're the one who'd be doing the fucking."

"Sure. Keller doesn't fool me. I can tell a stuck-up closet size queen when I see one. He may not be as agile as he used to be, but I bet he doesn't have any trouble throwing his legs up high in the air and spreading his butt cheeks wide open. Ghent's probably been feeding him his English beef sausage every chance he gets to make up for all that lost time while the two of them were separated. Keller's asshole is probably still sore from the reunion bang they had last night. Maybe that's why he's in such a bad mood. I bet Keller'd go crazy if he ever got a taste of the big old Stockton spicy salami." Which, at the moment, Dane was manipulating with one sudsy hand, paying more attention than was perhaps strictly necessary to his genital hygiene. Larry laughed. "Don't let Nate hear you talking about his idol Romuald like that."

"Poor Choirboy. I tell you, Larry, a good hard fuck would do that boy a world of good. Ooh, he's sweet to dance with. Sweet and hot. Just thinking about him...!"

Larry glanced over at his friend. "Dane, are you getting a hard-on?"

"Made you look, huh? I always spring a boner when I think about Nate." Dane took a quick look in the direction of the locker room. "Nobody else seems to be around," he reported. "Maybe this—finally!—could be your chance to change your luck, Larry. You know, find out what it's like to play on the other team? And start out in the All Stars right off the bat!"

"Don't even think about it, fucker. You'd better turn the hot water *off*, buddy, and the cold water *on*," Larry advised. "And stop looking at me like that!"

"Spoilsport."

Chapter 23 Henry Jekyll and Henri Hyde

"KELLER doesn't like me," Nate lamented the next time he had a moment alone with Dane and Larry.

"No kidding? Who does he like?" Larry retorted. "Besides himself?"

"The dude's a total asshole," Dane said, "so why should you care whether he likes you or not? Let him do his gig, and then he can blow out of town. And good riddance."

Nate shrugged. "I just don't see why we can't all get along and be civil to one another."

"With an attitude like that, are *you* ever in the wrong profession," Dane teased him. "We'll be lucky if we're not all at each other's throats before this ordeal is over."

Larry, characteristically, tried to give Keller the benefit of the doubt. "Maybe Keller thinks it's beneath his dignity at this point in his career to be taught a role by another dancer. Especially—no offense, Nate—by a mere soloist, who also happens to be his understudy. Keller probably thinks that even his *understudy* ought to be a principal. He's European, after all, and some of them take the pecking order kind of seriously. It's a status thing for them." Larry grinned reassuringly at Nate. "There's also the not altogether coincidental fact that, judging from what I've seen so far, you could probably outdance Keller even if you had a plaster cast on one leg and were on crutches. He's slipping a bit, which is only natural at his age, but unfortunately he's not big enough to realize how stupid it is to be jealous of a younger dancer who's on his way up."

"Then there's Theory B," Dane suggested.

"What's Theory B?" Nate asked.

"Keller is jealous of you, all right—because you're younger than him, cuter than him, and he knows Ghent has the hots for you."

"Mr. Ghent does not have the hots for me!" Nate flared, lying as instinctively as breathing in his eagerness to shield Romuald from gossip.

"Ooh, look how quick our little Choirboy is to deny it and come to the Professor's defense, Larry," Dane exulted. He found Nate's efforts to maintain the fiction that he and Romuald had never done anything but rehearse together highly amusing. Dane, who loved game-playing and intrigue, was willing to go along with the pretense—for now.

Nate kept up his bluff. "You're disgusting."

"Me? I'm not the little home-wrecker around here. I'm not the one who's driving a wedge between the devoted couple."

"Not *this* time," Larry laughed. "Maybe you're the one who's slipping a bit, Dane."

Nate, feeling like a criminal, came up with no further retorts and was grateful when they changed the subject.

By the next day, the details of Henri Keller's contract had somehow been leaked and were a topic of general conversation.

"He has a limousine on call to take him back and forth between the theater and Ghent's place," Beau reported. "A *stretch* limousine. I know that kind of thing is pretty standard treatment for a big star, but why does one guy need a stretch limo?"

Josh was a member of their little discussion group. "What do you mean, Mr. Ghent's place?"

"Keller's staying at Ghent's apartment, of course."

"Oh. Not in a hotel? That's nice."

Beau rolled his eyes at Nate. "Yeah, Josh, I'm sure it's *really* nice for them, because they happen to be *very close friends*."

"I'm sure they have separate bedrooms," Moishe quipped. "So they can both get plenty of rest at night."

"I'm sure they do," Beau agreed—mockingly, of course.

Nate thought about the one bedroom in Romuald's apartment, with its double bed. He also thought about all the things he and Romuald had done in that bed up until quite recently. He kept his mouth shut.

"Anyway, the point is, the limo is even going to take Keller from here to the hotel ballroom after the gala," Beau went on.

"You're kidding," Moishe said. "It's all of, what, three blocks? We've always just walked it. In the time the driver spends sitting at the traffic signals, we'll already be there."

Beau laughed. "We'll be there. Keller will still be sitting in the back of the limo, like royalty deigning to pay us commoners a visit. But I suppose noblesse oblige."

"Noblesse oblige? What does that mean?" Josh wanted to know.

"It's French for 'if you've got it, flaunt it'. As in conspicuous consumption. And that's not all." Beau seemed exceptionally well informed. "Keller's contract specifies he has to have certain things in his dressing room at every single performance. Six big bottles of this expensive brand of mineral water that comes from some frigging spring high up in the Swiss Alps. A bottle of his favorite brand of shampoo and a bottle of his favorite body wash. An electric towel rack to warm his towels, which have to be a certain brand of towels, mind you. And so on."

Even Nate had to protest at this revelation. "Wait a minute. He goes through six bottles of water during every performance, and a whole bottle of shampoo and a whole bottle of body wash when he takes his shower afterward?"

"Not necessarily. I hear that he takes whatever he doesn't use home with him and stockpiles it. I'm told that, in addition to his other sterling qualities, he's a bit of a tightwad. Never picks up a check if he can avoid it, for example. I wouldn't be surprised if he turns in the empty mineral water bottles to get back the deposits. No, now that I think of it, he probably has the limo driver take them back to the store for him!"

Everyone, including Josh, laughed. Even Nate, despite his preoccupation, had to respond to his roommate's humor.

"Good one, Beau," Nate said. "How do you happen to know all this?"

"Oh, I have my sources."

"Which are?"

Beau indicated Josh. "Not in front of the child."

"I'm not a child!" Josh protested.

"You're a baby," Beau told him. "A complete innocent. Stay that way."

Nate waited until later, when he and Beau were alone, to grill him.

"Okay, roomie. Spill it. Who'd you sleep with?"

"I didn't have to sleep with him. I didn't even have sex with him," Beau boasted. "It's one of the members of the board of directors. Married, of course. Which is why I swore I wouldn't tell anybody his name or that he was the source of my information. I ran into him in a gay bar the other night. He recognized me and came over and introduced himself. We had a few drinks and a few laughs, and he told me all about Keller's contract. I remember one thing he said, his exact words: 'I can't believe we're paying this bastard a small fortune just so he and Stockton can bump pussies up there on stage!' Which I thought was pretty funny, don't you?"

"Hilarious," Nate muttered.

"He thought it was quite fascinating that you and I are roommates and that you're Keller's understudy. He thinks you're cute. I think he's entertaining certain fantasies about you, Nate."

"Oh, just my luck."

"I'll introduce you to him at the party after the gala, if you promise not to say anything in front of his wife, since of course she'll be there with him."

"I'll be the soul of discretion."

As it turned out, Nate needed every ounce of discretion and restraint he had at his command. As the opening night of *Eclogues* loomed nearer, the rehearsals became increasingly strained.

The partnership between Henri Keller and Dane Stockton, upon which Romuald, Walker, and the company's administration had pinned so many hopes, quickly began to betray every sign of turning into a fiasco.

Keller had taken an instant dislike to Dane. Unfortunately, there seemed to be no reason for this, except for the obvious fact that Dane was a younger dancer in his physical prime and Keller felt threatened by his prowess.

Dane now reciprocated by heartily despising Keller and taking advantage of every opportunity not only to belittle Keller but to drive him crazy.

First, of course, Dane began coming up with a seemingly endless series of nicknames for the guest star: "Ham and Swiss," "The Cuckoo Clock," and "Henry Jekyll and Henri Hyde" (everyone agreed that the last one was particularly appropriate). Keller may not have been aware of this, because even Dane hesitated to mock him to his face, but he was the victim of the inevitable fallout. It was difficult for the younger members of the company, in particular, to remain in awe of Keller when they heard him being called, behind his back, such things as "The Admiral" (as in "The Admiral of the Swiss Navy") or "William Tell's Younger and Dumber Brother, who shot himself in the head with the crossbow."

Keller suddenly developed the maddening habit of referring to his colleagues in the third person, even when they were in the same room with him.

"If Mr. Stockton is ready to continue?" Keller would ask during a rehearsal, addressing the question not to Dane but to Romuald.

"Je ne suis pas sourd, M'sieur Keller," Dane sang out cheerfully. "Je vous entends. Je suis prêt."

Keller also began referring to Nate as *le petit Nathaniel* or, whenever he happened to be saying something about Nate while addressing Romuald, as *ton petit Nathaniel*—"your little Nathaniel"—always with a slightly sneering inflection. Nate put up with this without visible reaction or comment, but Dane, predictably, quickly decided he'd had enough of it.

"Romuald," Dane said after one rehearsal break was drawing to its close and they were all getting ready to resume work. "If *votre Henri* is ready to continue?"

Keller glared at Dane murderously, but for once said nothing.

Finally, Dane not only freely indulged himself in his habit of making up little nonsense songs to accompany himself as he rehearsed; on one memorable occasion, he custom-tailored the song to suit the occasion.

"Must he do that?" Keller complained to Romuald during another break as Dane hummed and sang under his breath while practicing a tricky combination of steps all by himself over on one side of the rehearsal room.

"It's harmless," Romuald said. "It seems to help him to concentrate."

"It's moronic," Keller jeered, loudly enough for everyone in the room to hear. "The man is an idiot."

Dane didn't appear to react at first but kept repeating his combination. Then, as he danced, he suddenly broke into full-throated song.

"Oh, he was jest a cowboy from Texas," he twanged in an atrocious imitation of typical country-western singing style, "who crossed the wide blue sea! He climbed up the gosh durn Matterhorn, jest to see what he could see! Yodel yodel lay hee lay hee oh!"

Larry had to bite his lip to prevent himself for laughing. Keller was looking at Dane incredulously, as though he'd suddenly wandered into a madhouse, or some sort of a freak show.

"What do you think you are doing over there?" Keller demanded, actually addressing Dane directly, for a change.

"Singing," Dane said as he continued to dance. "It's a song called 'The Yodeling Fool'. Haven't you ever heard it, Mr. Keller? No? I'm surprised. The second verse goes like this: When he got back to Texas and branded all his steers, he sang this song to calm 'em while he burnt 'em on their rears! Yodel yodel lay hee lay hee oh! 'Cause he was jest a yodeling fool!"

Now Romuald was the one who was having trouble keeping a straight face.

Keller stared at Dane, aghast. "There must be some brain damage

there," he diagnosed.

"You know, I *was* dropped on my head quite a few times back in ballet school," Dane remarked. "What about you, Mr. Keller? Were you ever dropped on your head when you were a child? Or maybe you just fell off an Alp? They can get kind of slippery, can't they, what with all those glaciers?"

"Are you trying to insult me?" Keller demanded.

"Who, me? Not me. I'm just a yodeling fool," Dane protested.

Romuald, as usual, tactfully intervened. "Perhaps we could continue the rehearsal now, gentlemen—*without* turning it into a prolonged song-and-dance routine?"

"Sure," Dane agreed with a look of guileless innocence on his face. "I'm ready if *votre Henri* is."

It didn't take long before Henri dropped the *le petit Nathaniel* and *ton petit Nathaniel* routine, at least for the time being.

At times Nate felt that *Eclogues* had taken over his life, but the new ballet was hardly the only one he was rehearsing, or performing. The following afternoon, he had a rehearsal for *Harold en Italie*. The company had already performed the work several times, but now the choreographer, not completely satisfied with the way the show looked from out front, wanted to change a couple of things in the staging. Nate was on his way from the locker room to the rehearsal room when he saw Henri Keller standing at the water fountain at the end of the hallway.

Keller was in his street clothes, an expensive-looking ensemble, but one in a palette of subdued hues: brown tailored slacks, brown leather slip-on shoes, a russet sports coat worn over an ochre-colored pima cotton T-shirt. It was obvious that, compared to Romuald, he was no peacock.

He had a plastic pill bottle in his hand. He unscrewed the cap, dumped two large white tablets into his hand, and swallowed them with the help of a gulp of water from the fountain. When he straightened up again, he saw Nate, and he did a guilty-looking double-take.

"Come here, boy," Keller commanded.

Nate wasn't sure he liked the curt lone of voice in which Keller called him "boy," but he obeyed. "What can I do for you, Mr. Keller?"

"You can stop spying on me."

"Spying on you?"

"Yes." Keller put the bottle away in the pocket of his sports coat. "I suppose your being here is just a coincidence?"

"Mr. Keller, nobody is spying on you. This is a public hallway. People

walk up and down here all the time. Anybody can come along and see what everybody else is doing."

"I suppose you're going to go running to Romuald and tell him what you just saw."

"I don't go 'running' to Romuald, or to anyone else, for that matter. I mind my own business."

"I have a prescription for these pills."

"Mr. Keller, I repeat, it's none of my business."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-three." Nate had recently celebrated his birthday.

"You're a child."

"If you say so, Mr. Keller."

"What could you possibly have in common with an older man? What can you offer him?" Keller was glaring at him. "Besides the obvious."

"I really have no idea what you're talking about."

"You know exactly what I'm talking about. You and Romuald. He's been fucking you, hasn't he, the whole time he's been here, before I got here. Fucking you, you slut. You devious little bitch. That's the only reason he gave you a part in this stupid ballet of his. That's the only reason he made you my understudy. To humiliate me. To flaunt his pretty little new boyfriend in my face, in everybody's face. *Putain*. Dirty little *putain*. You think you can take my place in his bed, do you? Well, let me tell you—!"

"Mr. Keller." Nate wanted nothing more than to turn and flee, but some instinct, some fierce rush of indignation, made him stand his ground. "Up until recently, I've always admired and respected you as a dancer. But let *me* tell *you*, every time you open your mouth, every time you say something stupid and insulting like that, you piss away more and more of what little respect I have left for you, and it goes right down the drain. Now, here's a suggestion for you. If you don't want anybody to see you taking your pills, take 'em in the men's room."

Nate turned his back on Keller and walked away. To his horror, Keller pursued him for a few steps and screamed at him at the top of his voice as he retreated down the hall.

"Come back here! I'm not done with you yet!"

Nate walked faster, not looking back.

"Bitch!" Keller shrieked. "Dirty little bitch! You're nothing! Nothing, I tell you! Nothing but a cheap little fuck boy for hire! You're *nothing*!"

Several passersby heard him, of course, and within a few hours the story of the confrontation was making the rounds of the entire company, usually in a predictably embellished form.

Dane, just as predictably, soon came up with a new nickname for Keller.

"I heard that you and Psycho Danseur duked it out over Ghent," he told Nate, making no attempt to hide his glee. Dane had intercepted Nate on his way out of the *Harold en Italie* rehearsal.

"The guy's absolutely paranoid," Nate said. He still felt shaken by the encounter. "If this is how crazy he acts when he's clean and sober, imagine what he must be like when he's high."

"Supposedly clean and sober. I've heard he's been going around asking everybody where he can score some painkillers. Apparently, he's got a whole shopping list of drugs he couldn't risk bringing over here on the plane, so he's trying to stock up on them now."

Nate remembered the large white tablets and wondered exactly what sort of "prescription drugs" they were. "Maybe he's hurting, and that's why he's got the rag on."

"Or maybe where there's smoke, there's fire. What's all this talk about you and Ghent getting it on together behind Keller's back?" Dane asked slyly.

"Don't be ridiculous, Dane. There is absolutely nothing going on between Romuald and me. For some reason Mr. Keller is just angry and jealous because Romuald has... taken a certain professional interest in me. Now I almost wish he hadn't."

Dane was staring at him. "You're not a very good liar, Choirboy."

"I'm not lying," Nate lied.

"You're lying right through your pearly white teeth. Who the hell do you think you're kidding? You and Ghent. I know all about it. The only question is, why did it take me so long to catch on, why didn't I see it coming long before now? I must be slipping. Oh, sure, I knew all along you had this cute little schoolboy crush on him, but I never suspected you'd actually hooked him and reeled him in so soon. Jesus Christ. This whole time, I thought it was his old boyfriend Keller he was thinking about, fantasizing about, while he was creating the choreography for Corydon and Alexis. Now I know better. He's been thinking about *you*. When Corydon tries to make love to Alexis, inside the Professor's head, that's *him* making love to *you*. You and I have been doing in the rehearsals what you and Ghent have been doing in the sack. Art imitates life. Wow! No wonder the choreography has turned into such hot stuff." "God damn you, Dane!"

"Oh, you don't have to worry about me, Choirboy. Your secret is safe with me. It's Keller you have to worry about. He's an asshole, sure, but he's not a fool, and he's not blind. And if he keeps shooting his mouth off the way he has been, everybody's going to know you're the *homme fatal*, to coin a phrase. You'd better cool it before there's a full-blown scandal." Dane's whole demeanor and tone of voice betrayed the fact that he would be delighted if there was a scandal, full-blown or otherwise.

"I wish I was dead."

"Don't talk like that, Choirboy. It's not the end of the world. And whether you believe it or not, I'm on your side."

Just when Nate thought things couldn't possibly get worse, they did. When he was ready to head home that day, he had no sooner left the building and taken a few steps on the sidewalk than Romuald burst through the same door Nate had just exited, in pursuit of him.

"Stop, stop, Nate, wait up for me!" Romuald called.

He caught up with Nate and grabbed his arm.

"I understand you and Henri had words. He wouldn't tell me what he said to you, which, knowing him, means he must have said something he ought to be ashamed of." The words came out of Romuald in a rush; he had to stop to catch his breath. "The son of a bitch, the miserable son of a bitch. I'm so sorry—"

"Please, Romuald. It was nothing, just a little misunderstanding. Just rehearsal jittlers, nerves on edge, I'm sure. I'd like to forget all about it."

"No, Henri does not get a free pass. Not this time. The miserable fucker! The bastard! I will not tolerate him speaking to you in a disrespectful way or putting you down. *I will not tolerate it!* Especially when all you've been doing since he got here is working so hard to help him, and me. If this keeps up, I shall dismiss you from the rehearsals. Why should you waste any more of your time working with that ungrateful son of a bitch? I'll teach Henri the bloody role myself, if I have to beat it into him. I'd like to kill him!"

Nate had never seen Romuald angry. And the Englishman wasn't just angry; he was furious. Nate said nothing but gave Romuald a chance to begin to calm down.

"This wretched ballet. It's going to take a year off my life." Romuald seemed to be talking to himself now, not to Nate. "I must have been insane to think Henri could—" He broke off and looked absorbed in gloomy thoughts.

Nate waited. Both men said nothing, for a moment. Romuald sucked in a few deep breaths. Then he offered Nate a somewhat sheepish grin.

"Oh, dear. I worked myself into a bit of a state, didn't I?"

"Kind of, yeah."

"Sorry about that, luv."

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. What about you?"

"I'm fine, too."

"Are you sure?"

"I may not look it, Romuald, but trust me, I'm a big boy, and I can take care of myself."

"Yes, you are that, aren't you? But take my advice, luv. Don't ever get involved with another dancer off stage—I mean seriously involved, to the point that he can hurt you. Don't ever let him have that kind of power over you. It's not worth it, in the long run."

Afterward, Nate pondered their exchange, subjecting every word to analysis. Romuald had called him "luv" twice. Nate had never heard him address anyone else in that way. Maybe in British slang usage, it was no more than a commonplace, the way one American guy might call another "dude" or "bro."

Or maybe not.

But then, literally in his next breath, Romuald had advised him against ever becoming lovers with another dancer. Nate assumed Romuald was being facetious, making a wry little self-deprecating joke.

Or was he? The two of them were already involved with each other, weren't they? Or did Romuald mean that, as far as he was concerned, they weren't "*seriously* involved" with each other?

As soon as he could, which happened to be backstage before the next performance of *Harold en Italie*, Nate sought out Larry and confided in him, making sure the two of them were alone and not likely to be interrupted.

"This'll all blow over," Larry assured him. "You just concentrate on your job. You just go out there and dance. And be grateful that you'll be doing Mnasyllos: you won't have to be on stage with Keller, except for those few minutes during the finale. Which is more than Dane and I can say. God, I am so *not* looking forward to these performances! You and Josh and Bethany, you just go out there and dance with Romuald and try to enjoy yourselves. And at the party after the gala, stay clear of the great Henri Keller, which is what I intend to do. Let him hog all the attention, which is one thing he's probably good at." Larry grinned. "As for you and Romuald, once all the performances of *Eclogues* are over and Keller flies back to Europe, I suggest that you and Romuald get together again and ball each other's brains out. Why the hell shouldn't you?"

"It may not be as easy as all that, Larry."

"It sounds awfully damn easy to me. I can't understand why you gay guys insist on making a big melodrama out of everything. You want the guy, don't you, and he wants you, right? So go for it. Just do it!"

"Larry, I'm afraid Romuald is still in love with Keller."

"I'm sure he is. He has to be. If he wasn't, he wouldn't put up with Keller and his crap for a moment, would he? But I'll tell you something, Nate, in all seriousness. You can kill love, starve it slowly to death, by not nourishing it, and I sure don't think Romuald is getting much in the way of nourishment from Keller. And when love dies, you have to go through all the phases of mourning: denial, anger, guilt, and so forth before you finally get to acceptance. You want my real advice, man to man, all joking aside? You be there for Romuald when he finally gets to the acceptance stage. In the long run, that'll be more important than anything the two of you ever do or don't do in bed."

Larry paused. "One more thing. I don't know if Romuald Ghent is going to be the great love of your life, or just the first real love of your life. But I am sure about one thing. He's a decent guy, and he'll never deliberately do anything to hurt you. Now stop looking at me with those baby blues of yours, as though you're about to bust out crying. Come here and let me give you a hug."

Larry enfolded Nate in his embrace, a sensation which the younger man found intensely pleasurable, and gave him a pat on the back.

"Feel better now?" Larry asked.

Nate nodded against Larry's shoulder. "Much."

Chapter 24 A Late Night Phone Call

WITH less than a week to go before the gala, the lighting crew was working in the dead of night in the otherwise abandoned theater, trial-lighting the set for *Eclogues* one scene at a time.

It didn't bode well when Romuald showed up for a morning rehearsal not only looking asleep on his feet but actually yawning.

"You look tired, Romuald," Larry commented.

"I *am* tired, I'm afraid. I was up late last night, watching what the lighting crew was doing. But it was worth it. The set's going to look beautiful. Even if I don't, as a result of losing out on my usual beauty sleep," the Englishman joked.

Nate found some initial consolation in the fact that Romuald seemed to be holding up well enough despite all the strain. But then, true to form, Henri showed up, not only a few minutes late but in a foul mood.

Henri and Dane had to run through their *pas de deux*, and their interaction whenever they were not actually dancing was anything but seductive.

"That's not the way we rehearsed it, Mr. Keller," Dane pointed out when the *pas de deux* suddenly broke down as an inevitable result of the two dancers going their separate ways.

"Of course it is," Henri insisted.

"I'm sorry, but it's not. You can't keep making these arbitrary changes, not with opening night only a few days away."

"You're the one who needs to follow me," Henri blustered before Romuald had a chance to intervene. "You're the one who is at fault. Are you deliberately trying to throw me off?"

"No. You're doing just fine all on your own."

"Are you trying to make me look bad?"

"I'm trying not to. But believe me, it's an uphill climb."

Henri fell back upon his European hauteur. "I'm not accustomed to

being talked to in this way."

"Oh? That's interesting. Because neither am I. I guess we'll both have to get used to it."

Keller turned to Romuald. "Tell Mr. Stockton that I cannot work under these conditions."

Romuald, however, was unimpressed. "Don't be childish, Henri."

"He's the one who's being childish, not me. Tell him-"

"If you have anything to say to Dane, talk to him yourself. He's standing right there, for God's sake."

"I refuse to engage in idle banter with him."

"Then don't. Try engaging in the *choreography* with him, instead. Try doing the steps the way we agreed to do them last time."

Romuald, Nate noticed, was beginning to lose his temper; and Nate wasn't sure whether he was delighted or frightened by the prospect.

"I insist that you tell Mr. Stockton—" Keller began.

"I'm not telling him shit!" Romuald exploded. "God damn it, Henri! Just get your ass over there and *do the bloody steps*! Dance the fucking thing, will you?"

Henri Keller, to Nate's astonishment, meekly obeyed. During this next run-through of the *pas de deux*, Dane handled Henri as though the Swiss dancer were made of brittle glass, and Henri managed to get through most of the steps and moves correctly but with all the emotion of a sleepwalker. Romuald, observing them, said little. He didn't need to. Everyone involved realized the rehearsal had been a waste of time and energy.

Dane, making little effort to disguise his disgust, didn't want to join Larry and Nate for coffee afterward, which was unusual behavior on Dane's part. "Fuck this shit! I'm going home," Dane said moodily.

Larry, as ever sensitive to other men's moods, could see that Nate was upset and did his best to reassure him, in this case by putting on a display of Dane-like jocularity.

"Romuald has more balls than I gave him credit for. When he read Keller the riot act, Keller sure backed down fast. I always assumed that Keller was the one who did the fucking. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe Keller is Romuald's submissive little bitch, when he's not busy shooting his mouth off."

"Dane and Henri. You don't think they're actually going to start swinging at each other, do you, Larry?"

"That's exactly what I'm afraid is going to happen. We ought to start an office pool on who throws the first punch."

"This is terrible, Larry. I've never been in rehearsals that were so tense."

"Oh, I have. Trust me, it'll all blow over. But wouldn't you love to be a fly on the wall in Romuald's bedroom and see and hear what goes on between him and Keller when they're alone together at night?"

Nate thought about the bedroom in Romuald's apartment and its double bed. He remembered the look on Romuald's face that day they'd gone shopping together, when he had said, *I want it to look nice for Henri. I want everything to be perfect when Henri comes.*

"Maybe they're having really hot, intense make-up sex, or 'still mad at each other but still hot for each other' sex, every night," Larry theorized. "Or else they're just lying there next to each other in bed all night, not talking, totally pissed off at each other."

"Please, Larry."

"I'm sorry, Nate. I forgot you're carrying the torch. Come on, let me buy you a muffin. You'll feel better if you eat something."

After rehearsing for yet another upcoming work in the afternoon and performing *Harold en Italie* in the evening, Nate arrived home feeling pleasantly tired. He was getting ready for bed when his cell phone rang.

"Nate? It's me, Romuald."

Nate said the first thing that came into his mind. "You've never called me before. I never realized that until now. We've never talked on the phone."

"There was never any need to. We see each other at the theater every day."

"True. You took me by surprise. It's nice to hear your voice."

"I wanted to hear yours, too. Did I wake you up? I know you're not a late-night kind of person, Nate, especially on a performance night."

"No, I was just about to climb into bed and read for a little while."

"How'd the performance go this evening?"

"Fine. It's a small part, but I like it. The things you and I talked about, the way you encouraged me to think about the character, have really been helpful. And Larry is terrific."

"I imagine he is. I'll have to catch one of the performances. What are you wearing, Nate?"

The question took Nate by surprise. "Mr. Ghent, is this going to be that

kind of a phone call?"

He was delighted to hear Romuald's laughter. "I wouldn't know how to proceed, even if I wanted to. I'm just trying to picture you in my mind."

"Well, you can picture me sitting on my very messy unmade bed, in my boxers."

"In your knickers, eh? What color are they?"

"White. Plain white cotton."

"White!" Romuald exclaimed. "I am definitely going to have to take you in hand, my lad, and teach you how to start developing a certain personal style and flair. A rising young ballet star does *not* wear plain white knickers."

"Not even when he's at home alone in the privacy of his bedroom and there's no one around to see him?"

"Not even there. You'd be better off nude. Slip them off this instant."

"Yes, sir. All right, I'm now in bed, under the covers, naked. Are you *sure* this isn't going to be *that* kind of a phone call?"

"I am beginning to feel just a bit randy," Romuald admitted.

"What about you?" Nate asked. "I want to picture you, too. Where are you? Are you calling from home?"

"Yes. Henri's asleep, so to make sure I won't wake him up, I'm outside in the hallway by the elevator. I feel rather guilty doing it, sneaking off to make a phone call behind his back, like an adulterer."

Romuald was joking, but the mere mention of Henri dampened Nate's mood. So far, they were both studiously avoiding the topic of Henri's erratic behavior, and Nate had no intention of being the first one to bring it up.

"And you're wearing...?" he asked.

"Sweatpants and a T-shirt. Neither of them white. The pants are navy blue and the shirt is yellow. I'm afraid I look like a bit of a slob. I'm drinking a glass of wine, and I spilled some of the wine all over the front of my shirt earlier, so there are red stains on the yellow, and I'm barefoot."

"Yes, I can picture *you* without any trouble. I'm sure you look nice and casual."

"I'm sure I look like a bum. If any of the other tenants were to come out of the elevator just now and see me standing here like this! But listen. The reason I wanted to call you is because I feel I've been neglecting you ever since Henri got here."

"That's okay, Romuald. We agreed, didn't we? We decided we knew it was going to be like this. And I know how busy you are, with opening night coming up so soon."

"I don't want to be so busy that you feel shut out of my life. I wish we could spend another one of our nights together."

"So do I."

"We will, soon. I promise. It's just that Henri...."

"Mr. Keller is pretty high maintenance, isn't he?"

Romuald let out a most undignified-sounding snort of laughter. "I like that expression. It describes him perfectly."

"Romuald, you don't have to.... I mean, you don't have to say anything, or explain, or apologize. You certainly do not have anything to apologize for. I'm not a stupid, naïve little kid. Believe me, I understand."

"I think you do."

"I know you're more experienced and sophisticated than I am, Romuald, but I think we have a lot in common, and I think we understand each other pretty well. I already feel as though I've known you for years, you see, and—"

"Oh, my little love."

Romuald's voice was like a caress in Nate's ear. It was ironic: when Henri Keller had referred to him as *ton petit Nathaniel*, Nate had resented it fiercely, although he'd tried hard not to show his feelings. But when Romuald called him *my little love*, Nate was thrilled.

"I may be getting a little drunk," Romuald admitted before Nate could say anything. "It's a bottle that was left over, after dinner. I've killed it."

"Go to bed, Romuald," Nate urged. *With Keller*, he thought, feeling a sudden, undeniable stab of jealousy. He fought to clear from his mind the image of Keller and Romuald lying next to each other, in bed, sleeping together. Had they had sex that evening after dinner? Had Romuald allowed himself to get "a little drunk"—either deliberately, or unconsciously—because that would make it easier for him to have sex with Henri? Had Henri fallen asleep after they'd had sex?

"If only you were here with me right now, and it was just the two of us, and I could take you in my arms," Romuald said in a breathless rush. "I wouldn't even mind it if you wore your white knickers. Because I'd tear them right off of you!"

"I'd let you do it."

"I'm getting so excited, just thinking about it. If I wasn't so tired.... It's strange, isn't it, how you can be tired and horny at the same time? If I wasn't so tired, and drunk, I'd call the taxi service and come over there and make

love to you. But I shouldn't. I know I shouldn't. Not in my present horny but impaired condition."

"No, you shouldn't. Go to bed, Romuald," Nate repeated urgently, "and get some rest."

"Yes, I will. And I won't keep you up any longer. You need your rest, too."

"We sound like a couple of worn-out old men," Nate joked.

"I don't feel old when I'm with you, Nate. When I'm talking to you like this, I feel...."

"What?"

"I feel rejuvenated. I feel as though anything is possible, a whole world of possibilities, as though I still have my whole life ahead of me."

I love you, Nate wanted to say. *I love you, love you*! But some shyness inhibited him, and he said instead, "I'm so glad you called me."

"I'm glad I did. Go to sleep, now. And sleep well."

"You, too. Good night, Romuald."

"Good night."

Chapter 25 Talk to the Hand

AT THE next rehearsal for *Eclogues*, Dane showed up with that sly, mischievous look on his face that Nate knew only too well. Dane, he felt sure, was up to no good.

Keller was in rare form, surly and seemingly determined to find fault with everything. As he and Dane ran through the crucial Alexis/Corydon *pas de deux*, Keller kept insisting that certain steps and combinations be simplified—to the great detriment of the number. The climactic lifts, which Dane and Nate had labored so hard to master, had to be replaced with something considerably less athletic and more prosaic.

Nate, observing this from the sidelines, realized with a distinct sense of shock that today Keller was moving with difficulty and was downright insecure at times. He clutched at Dane, lunged for his supporting hands, and gripped them in a way that not only restricted Dane's own movements but looked awkward. As they repeated the sequence and both men began to tire, Keller abandoned what little veneer of civility he had displayed up until now.

"Can't you do anything right?" he jeered at Dane.

"I guess not," Dane retorted.

Romuald attempted to intervene. "I think you both might be pushing yourselves too hard. Why don't you take a break?"

"I don't need a break," Keller said. "I need a partner who can do it the same way twice in a row."

Dane was beginning to lose his temper. "I'm doing it the way I learned it, with Nate, and with the choreographer's supervision and approval. You're the one who's changing everything."

Keller retreated into his third-person mode. "Romuald, tell Mr. Stockton to—"

"Why don't you tell me yourself?" Dane asked. "If you've got something to say to me, spit it out."

Keller gave Dane one of his trademark haughty stares. "Please tell Mr. Stockton that I—"

"Oh, wait!" Dane cried. "If we're going to communicate through our intermediaries, I'd like to introduce you to mine." He went over to his gym bag and pulled out of it what looked like a faded red wool sock. He inserted his hand into the sock, which, Nate realized, was a sock *puppet*, with pieces of brightly colored cloth sewn onto it to represent its eyes, ears, and lips.

Dane held up the sock puppet in front of his face and manipulated it so that its mouth seemed to open and close.

"Tell Mr. Keller that *I cannot work under these circumstances*," Dane haughtily informed the puppet. "Tell him that if he wishes to communicate with me, he can speak to you, and you will relay the message to me in due course. Tell him, if he has any complaints about my dancing, that he can submit them to you in writing, in triplicate, and on sheets of scented toilet paper, and you will forward them to me, so I can use them to wipe my ass. Tell him, while you're at it, that he can baisez mon cul, s'il vous plâit!"

Larry burst out laughing. Nate, with an heroic effort, managed not to laugh. Romuald, unfortunately, couldn't help laughing, too, although he struggled to transform his nervous guffaw into a strangulated fake cough.

"Cochons," Keller gasped. "Filthy cochons!"

Dane held out the sock puppet toward him, still working its mouth open and closed. "Talk to the hand, baby!" he taunted. "Talk to the hand!"

Keller glared at Dane. "You're an idiot."

"Yeah. I'm the idiot who can do the steps. You're the genius who can't. I wonder which one of us is going to look like the idiot on opening night?"

"I don't have to take this from a whore who's slept his way into every leading role he's ever danced."

"Oh, that's a laugh, coming from you."

Keller didn't quite understand the idiom. "A laugh? What do you mean?"

"I'm not the one who's sleeping with the choreographer of this particular piece we just happen to be rehearsing, am I? *I* don't recall fucking anybody before I was cast in *my* part."

Romuald stepped between the two men in an attempt to intervene. "Gentlemen, please—"

"I'm not a gentleman," Dane retorted. "I'm a punk. I'm a punk from the wrong side of the tracks, the kind of punk who's going to bash your boyfriend's face in if I hear one more word come out of his mouth." He pulled the sock puppet off his hand and flung it aside, as though to free up his fist in order to make good on his threat.

Keller made the mistake of uttering not one word, but two: "You cocksucker."

"That's right. I'm a cocksucker. I'm not ashamed of it. Figured that out all by yourself, did you? You're not as dumb as I thought you were."

"What? How dare you!"

"Listen, buster. I'll make you a deal. You leave the cocksucking to me, and I'll leave the pill popping and the coke snorting to you. Okay?"

"You are talentless," Henri sputtered. "A talentless man prostitute." His anger was causing his command of English to falter a bit. "You and Deventer and Duvernoix. All talentless. In Europe, you would all be in the corps, all three of you. The only reason you're here, the three of you, is because Romuald would like you to be his stupid little fuck boys. You are the worst, Stockton. You're not only a whore. You're a stupid whore. That bitch you live with, she's probably never had a real man, so she doesn't know any better, what a real man is like. She certainly doesn't have one when *you* fuck her."

No one said anything for a tense moment.

That's torn it, Nate thought.

Dane had not only turned pale, he had a very strange look on his face, half queasy, half grimly amused. His hands, at his sides, balled into tight fists. He suddenly strode forward until he was quite literally "in Henri's face," with the two men's chests almost touching as they both breathed hard and loudly, eyes locked.

This time he's going to do it, Nate thought. This time he's really going to punch Keller's lights out! And ominously enough, neither Nate nor Larry nor Romuald was making a move to try to stop him.

"Are you finished?" Dane demanded.

"What?" Warily, Henri took a half-step backwards.

"I asked, are you quite finished? Have you said everything you have to say to me?"

"Yes." Henri now looked the tiniest bit frightened.

"Good! Because now you can dance it all by yourself." Dane paused. "*If you can*?" he added in a tone of withering scorn.

Then he turned his back on Henri Keller and walked toward the door.

"You come back here. Don't you dare turn your back on me!" Keller seethed.

"Vous pouvez manger ma merde, vieux con! Foutre-moi mille mois!" Dane spat out by way of an exit line. Then he was gone. The door banged shut again behind him.

"Did you hear what he said to me? I want him fired. I want him fired right now, Romuald," Keller raged. "I want him replaced."

"That isn't possible, Henri. And I really feel that you-"

"Shut up!" Keller shouted at his lover. "You asshole. You dumb fuck. You fire him, or you'll be sorry. You'll be sorry!"

"I'm sorry already," Romuald muttered.

"You're stupid. You're useless."

"Let's all calm down, Henri. Let's all calm down and take a little breather, and then-"

"You and your little fuck boys. That's all you care about. You don't care about me. That little blond bitch Deventer, over there. The only reason he's here is because you like to fuck him. The *putain*. The dirty little *putain*!"

Larry stepped forward. "Okay, Keller. Now you've gone too far."

"Let's all calm down," Romuald repeated. "We're all a little excited."

That had to be the understatement of all time, Nate thought.

"Let's all calm down and take a little breather," Romuald repeated, like a tape recording, "and everything will be all right. We'll give Dane a chance to cool off, and while we're waiting...." Romuald desperately tried to catch the eye of the rehearsal pianist, who was waiting patiently, seated at his instrument on the far side of the room. "I know. Larry, why don't you and Nate run through your entrance again, just one more time, so Henri can watch you?"

"Sure," Larry said. He paused. "As soon as Mr. Keller apologizes to Mr. Stockton."

"What?" Keller asked, as though he couldn't believe what he had just heard.

"After Mr. Keller apologizes to Mr. Stockton, and to me, and to Mr. Deventer, *and* to you, *and* he takes back what he said about Ms. Vesey, then I'll be delighted to do whatever you want, Mr. Ghent. Until that happens, though, I have no intention of doing any more rehearsing with Mr. Keller. Or performing with him, for that matter. There's a limit to the amount of abuse I'm willing to subject myself to."

"You prick. You stupid, arrogant prick," Keller hissed.

"I take it that's a no?" Larry asked. "Well, suit yourself." He turned his back on Keller and walked toward the door.

"You come back here!" Keller bellowed.

"You must have me confused with your dog, Mr. Keller," Larry said, and he punctuated the taunt with a dry little chuckle. "*I* don't come when you call! It's like Mr. Stockton said. You can go ahead and dance it all by yourself, if you can." He exited through the door, letting it bang shut again behind him just as Dane had done. It might have been a routine the two of them had rehearsed beforehand.

Keller was, for the moment, speechless.

Romuald, at a loss, turned and stared blankly at the rehearsal pianist.

"Don't look at *me*," the pianist said. "They pay me to pound this thing. I don't dance!"

"Romuald, I insist-" Henri began.

"Shut the fuck up!" Romuald exploded. "Shut the fuck up, you stinking junkie! You're using again, aren't you? Don't bother to deny it. You stupid bitch. You stupid fuck!"

As Henri stared at him in shock, Romuald went up to him—not unlike the way Dane had confronted Henri only a few minutes before, Nate couldn't help thinking—and lit into him in French. Romuald was evidently fairly fluent in the language. Nate couldn't follow the entire harangue, which sounded as though it was liberally larded with slang expressions and curse words. Every time Henri opened his mouth and tried to say something, Romuald cut him off after only a few words, usually by shouting "Je m'en fiche!" Nate knew *that* one: it might be politely translated as "I don't give a damn!" Gradually, Romuald ran out of steam, and his virtual monologue wound down and was replaced by an abrupt, tense silence. But its effect upon Henri was immediate and dramatic.

Henri continued to stare at Romuald in disbelief. Then, for some reason, he turned and stared long and hard at Nate, also in disbelief. Next, he sat down on the floor at Romuald's feet. Finally, he stretched out on the floor facedown. By now, Romuald had stopped talking and was trying to catch his breath.

And then Henri Keller lost it, in a way that Nate had never seen an adult lose it in his life. Keller began to bang his fists on the floor. And then he began to scream—to scream in a raw, high-pitched, throat-searing way that echoed off the walls of the room.

Romuald, as though nothing too much out of the ordinary was happening, walked over to the pianist.

"Why don't you take a break?" he suggested. The pianist stood up and left. In a hurry.

Romuald, his face impassive, next walked over to Nate. Keller was still

howling away on the floor.

"Nate. If you don't mind doing me a favor? Will you see if you can find Larry and Dane and ask them not to leave. Just ask them to wait for a little while, if they will." Romuald had to raise his voice a little to make himself heard over the screams.

"Sure, Mr. Ghent." Nate fled, eagerly enough.

Keller's screams were loud enough to be audible throughout this entire part of the building, and people were beginning to crowd into the hallway outside the rehearsal room to see if anything was wrong. Nate had to push his way through the growing throng to make his escape.

Seth had managed to stick his head through the rehearsal room door and get a good look at Keller's tantrum. "Wow," he reported to the others who were standing behind him in the hallway. "Too bad we can't sell tickets for *this*!"

The ruckus also brought Lloyd Walker running. Once he saw and heard what was going on, he turned and beat a furtive retreat. There were times when it was advantageous for a man in his position to be hard to locate, and this was definitely one of them.

Nate found Larry and Dane in the cafeteria. They were seated at a table, still in their sweaty rehearsal clothes, drinking bottled water.

"Mr. Ghent asked me to find you guys and, uh, ask you to stick around."

"Nate, you need to stop letting yourself be Ghent's obedient little errand boy," Dane said.

"Come on, Dane," Larry coaxed. "Don't take it out on Nate."

Keller's shrieks could be heard, albeit faintly, even this far away from their source.

"Listen to that, will you?" Larry commented. "You've got to admit it, the guy has some set of lungs."

Dane had a self-satisfied smirk on his face. "Jesus, Nate. What'd you say to him after we left to set him off like that?"

"Me?" Nate exploded. "What did I say to him?"

Larry and Dane both burst out laughing.

"Please, *please* tell me I'm fired," Dane pleaded. "Or at least that I've been replaced in this fucking fiasco of a ballet."

"I think Mr. Ghent is going to make Mr. Keller apologize." (In an instinctive but not entirely successful attempt to distance himself emotionally

from the situation, Nate heard himself saying Mr. Ghent and Mr. Keller instead of Romuald and Henri.)

"Really? You think so? The Professor must have more balls than I thought."

"Incidentally, Dane, I didn't know you spoke French so fluently," Larry remarked. "Where'd you learn it?"

"In bed, naturally. Remember that French-Canadian guy, Jean-Marie Lamartine, who guest-starred here last season?"

"Oh, yeah. Nice guy."

"He taught me a few things."

"I bet he did."

"Mostly curse words, and sex talk. He liked to talk dirty in bed. When he wasn't busy sucking my dick or licking my ass, that is. Man, was that dude ever oral. I practically had to tie him down on the bed before I could fuck him, and even then, his tongue—"

Nate intervened. "I cannot believe you two guys are just sitting here joking while all this is going on."

"Relax, Choirboy."

"What I can't figure out," Larry remarked, "is whether Keller thinks all three of us have been jumping into bed with Romuald at once or if we have some weird serial thing going. You know, if it's Monday night, it must be my turn?"

The distant screaming abruptly stopped.

"Uh-oh," Larry said. "You don't think Romuald went ahead and literally strangled him, do you? I know that's what I'd have been tempted to do if I were him."

"We should be so lucky," Dane scoffed.

A white-faced and preternaturally calm Romuald suddenly entered the room.

"Gentlemen," he said, looking and sounding like an automaton. "If you'd be willing to come back to the rehearsal room, as a personal favor to me, Mr. Keller has something he would like to say to you."

Silently, they stood up and followed Romuald. Dane gave Larry and Nate a furtive *This ought to be good!* look.

The crowd in the hallway had been dispersed, as though by magic. Keller was alone in the rehearsal room, standing there waiting for them, looking icily composed.

"Gentlemen," he said without preamble. "I would like to apologize to

each of you for the intemperate and unforgivable things I may have said to you in the heat of passion. I am not in the habit of insulting my colleagues, and I certainly am not in the habit of insulting women. I beg you to forgive me, if you can. You must understand—although of course it is no excuse that I have been under a great deal of stress lately. This international press on me lately—pursuing me, scrutinizing me, subjecting everything I do or say to analysis and criticism—it's enough to drive a man insane. And people hate me. They hate me. They even say they wish I was dead. Sometimes I think I may be on the verge of a nervous breakdown. But that is my problem, not yours. We're all here to perform in *Eclogues* and make it a success. For Mr. Ghent's sake, if for no other reason, let's put our individual differences aside and try to work together."

"I have to take a great deal of the responsibility for this," Romuald said. "I'm supposed to be in charge of these rehearsals. I should never have let things get out of hand to this extent."

"No, it is entirely my fault," Keller insisted. "I am a terrible person. I am shameful. I am bad."

Dane was the first to step forward.

"Maybe I haven't been very professional," he admitted. "I can be kind of a smartass sometimes."

"I provoked you," Keller said.

"It takes two to tangle," Dane punned. "Okay, let's forget about it and get back to work. That's what you want to do, too, isn't it, Larry?"

"I accept your apology, Mr. Keller," Larry said, rather coolly, Nate thought.

"So do I," Nate agreed with a casualness he was in fact far from feeling. "Let's all try to forget it and just move on."

"You are a sweet boy, Nathaniel," Keller declared.

Well, that's something, I guess, Nate thought. First I'm a dirty little whore, now I'm a sweet boy. I wish the guy would make up his mind!

"Thank you, gentlemen," Romuald said. "We'll get back to work then, shall we? Nate, why don't you and Dane show Henri the first part of the *pas de deux* again? That seems to be the part that's been giving us some trouble. Oh, we seem to be missing our pianist. Let me go see if I can find him."

The rehearsal continued, and indeed concluded, without further incident. Dane and Keller now behaved with impeccable politeness toward each other—which had a deadening effect on their dancing. Both men worked hard to execute the movements correctly. Corydon and Alexis might have

been debating what kind of fertilizer to use on the crops, for all the heat their interaction generated. Romuald must have noticed the fall in temperature and been dismayed by it, but he said nothing and indeed feigned enthusiasm as he suggested that they all call a halt for the day.

After they'd showered and changed, Dane, Larry, and Nate adjourned to the coffee shop across the street to compare notes.

"I missed the weather report this morning, Dane," Nate said as they all sat down around a table.

"Huh?"

"I wasn't aware that hell froze over. Did I actually hear you sort of semi-apologize to somebody, and to Henri, of all people?"

"Well." Dane looked sheepish. "When he started in about all the crap the press has been giving him, I could kind of relate. Some people can handle that better than others, and obviously he hasn't been handling it very well."

"Are you telling us you feel sorry for him?"

"Let's not get carried away, Choirboy. I'm not feeling all warm and tingly toward the dude all of a sudden. Anyway, I do have to admit that Keller is a much better actor that I gave him credit for," Dane said. "It must've just about killed him to have to stand there and apologize to us, didn't it?"

"Maybe he was sincere," Nate theorized.

"Or maybe he was just scared shitless of Romuald. In which case, good for Romuald. He probably bitch-slapped Keller the minute we were all out of the room, which was exactly what Keller needed. God knows he's been asking for it."

"Well, I feel just the tiniest bit sorry for Henri," Larry admitted. "I think there's some lingering feeling there that being gay is something to be ashamed of, which is a damn shame in this day and age."

"Yeah, but it's not as though Psycho Danseur has been in the closet all this time and was just outed against his will," Dane pointed out. "He brought a lot of this media stuff down on himself."

"By the way, Dane," Larry said. "I loved the sock puppet! Where'd you get it at such short notice?"

Dane smirked. "Kitri made it for me last night, out of one of my old socks that had a hole in it, and scraps from her sewing basket. Cute, huh?" He retrieved the puppet from his gym bag and animated it on his hand. "Ooh'," Dane squealed, working the puppet's mouth and giving it a falsetto voice. "Don't beat me, Romuald! I'll be a good little bitch from now on! I'll even apologize to those three mean, nasty fuck boys of yours! Oh, no! Don't fistfuck me! No, wait, you already have your fist shoved up inside me, don't you? Oh, no, please don't stick that big fat English dick of yours up my ass, or make me put that big dirty thing in my mouth—*urghhh!*" Dane emitted a gurgling, choking sound, then giggled helplessly.

"You're disgusting," Nate told Dane, not for the first or, he feared, for the last time. "And Larry, you're just as bad, sitting there laughing your damn fool head off, encouraging him!"

"Ah, Choirboy," Dane sighed. He slipped the sock puppet off his hand. "Maybe you'd like to take Mr. Puppet home with you? You could use him to jerk off with. Thinking about a certain very sexy resident choreographer all the while."

"Do not talk to me, Dane Stockton," Nate fumed. "Do... not... talk to me... ever again!"

"What, not even to recite some poetry for you? You've heard this one, haven't you? 'The handsome shepherd, Corydon'," Dane recited, "'burned with desire for Alexis, his master's delight'—you see, I've been doing my homework, Choirboy. Doing a little research for my role in the ballet so I can act it out more convincingly. I'm burning for you, baby. Saving all my hot, burning love for you." He sat back in his chair and sipped his coffee, making cow eyes at Nate over the rim of the cup.

"Fuck you, Stockton," Nate exclaimed. "Fuck you! And just remember, it goes on: 'nec quid speraret habebat'. Which means 'for whom he longed in vain'. *In vain!* So eat your heart out. Eat your heart out, you horny bastard! God, I wouldn't let you fuck me if you were the last man with a functioning penis on earth. Not even if your dick was twice as big when it gets hard as... as a certain person claims it is!"

"Oh? Who's been telling tales? Oh, I know. Must've been Southern Fried Chicken. Now there's a young man who doesn't believe in playing hard to get. You could take a lesson from your hot-assed little roommate, Choirboy."

"And stop calling me Choirboy!" Nate roared.

"He's even cuter when he's good and pissed off, isn't he, Larry?" Dane asked. "So butch. Our little boy is growing up. I'm so proud. The next time Keller needs a good bitch-slapping, we can let Nate take care of the job."

Larry smiled. "Don't look at me, you guys. I'm staying out of it! From now on, I'm strictly neutral. Like Switzerland."

CHAPTER 26 Dress Rehearsal

THE dress rehearsal for *Eclogues* began well and ended badly.

The actual rehearsal of the ballet was preceded by a photo call: the company's photographer would take pictures of the soloists, posing both alone and in various combinations, and also of the corps, to be used for publicity purposes. As a result, everyone had to be in costume and full makeup well before any actual dancing began.

The company's head makeup artist worked on the soloists while two of his assistants took care of the corps boys and girls, transforming the faces of everyone involved. The makeup, applied with the help of a variety of stencils, consisted of mask-like bands across the eyes and the bridge of the nose and smaller patches of geometrical designs on the forehead, cheeks, and chin.

"We look like freaking *raccoons*," Larry complained as he studied the effect in a mirror. He had the presence of mind, though, to say *freaking* instead of a stronger epithet, as a concession to Josh's presence.

Nate, like Josh, was scrutinizing his own reflection. "Oh, I don't know. They sort of look like tribal tattoos, don't they? It picks up the designs on the tights."

"I think it's cool," Josh declared, and resumed making grimaces at himself in the mirror. "It looks like war paint!"

Dane sauntered into the communal dressing room, looked around at the other men's painted faces, and burst out laughing.

"Oh, my God," he said. "It looks like a bunch of drunks having a tailgate party before the big football game with their faces painted in the team's colors! Do I look as asinine as you do, Larry?"

"You look the same, or worse," Larry assured him.

"Oh, fuck." (Josh cringed when he heard Dane say *that*, but he made no protest.) "Well, let me take a good look at you. So I can start to get used to it. Because if I happen to catch sight of you on stage and it takes me by surprise, I'm not going to be able to keep a straight face. I'll bust out laughing, which won't exactly be conducive to the mood of unrestrained guy-on-guy desire

we're trying to create."

There was a tap on the dressing room door. "Everyone decent?" The voice was Romuald's.

"No, but come in anyway," Dane replied.

Romuald entered, swathed in a voluminous blue-and-white-striped cotton bathrobe, which was faded and frayed from repeated launderings. They all stared at him. Romuald was sporting not only the same kind of facial makeup they were; his elegant little pencil mustache had been padded out with a thicker artificial mustache, and he sported an outline beard, the color perfectly matched to his own hair.

"Oh, my God," Dane exclaimed. "It's Santa Claus!"

"What's with the beard, Romuald?" Larry asked amid the titters.

"What? Silenus is supposed to be the older guy, remember, as opposed to all of you young studs. This is the designer's way of suggesting that."

"I think you look very nice," Josh said.

"And so do all of you. You look great. Are all of you eager to get out there and dance?" Romuald asked. There was a chorus of assent. "Well, we had all better start squeezing ourselves into our costumes, then." He patted his enviably flat stomach through his bathrobe. "In my case, it requires a little extra squeezing. I may have to borrow a shoehorn. I'll see you all out there."

During the photo session, the men and the women got to see one another's costumes for the first time. Everyone had on the facial makeup, regardless of gender. But Bethany, like the other ballerinas who were impersonating younger girls, wore the kind of filmy knee-length shift that a Juliet might wear in her bedroom scene. The fabric was in a color and pattern compatible with the men's tights. She had her hair pulled back, and the headdress and jewelry department had constructed for her an elegant little hair ornament with fake pearls and faceted rhinestones set in a wire and mesh framework.

"Don't you look pretty!" Josh exclaimed at his first sight of her.

"Yes, doesn't she. I wish I looked pretty. I wish I could wear something like that instead of these dumb tights," Dane joked.

"You look pretty enough, Dane," Nate teased him. In fact, Dane looked sensational, like some exotic cross between a comic book superhero and a professional wrestler.

Romuald was standing nearby. "I'll keep your wish in mind, Dane, if I ever choreograph a piece that calls for a guy in drag."

Kitri and Cara were also in the vicinity, talking and laughing together. Romuald had promised Kitri that, as the Sybil, she would look like a goddess on stage, and he hadn't exaggerated. She was swathed in a pale lavender gown with silvery threads running through the fabric, and she too had a headdress—in her case a wreathlike arrangement of silver leaves crowning her head. Cara, in creamy off-white and soft yellow, looked beautiful, too.

Henri Keller now joined them, looking businesslike to the point of solemnity. He was wearing over his bare torso, to keep warm, a long-sleeved hooded jersey with a zip front, so he could take it on or off without having to pull it over his head, which might smear his makeup. He removed the jersey when it was his turn to pose for the photographer. Henri followed the photographer's instructions in a way that suggested he was an old hand at this sort of thing.

Nate, who kept waiting for a display of Psycho Danseur temperament, was almost disappointed when it didn't materialize.

"Okay, clear the stage," Genevieve Montgomery, in her capacity as stage manager, called out. "Places, everyone. All of you who are involved in Scenes One and Two, here with me. The rest of you, farther back until I need you."

Scene One required the corps boys and girls, and Scene Two meant Romuald, Josh, Bethany, and Nate.

Nate, to his surprise, wasn't the least bit nervous. As he waited in the wings for Genny to give him his cue, he felt *ready*, his mind focused on the task at hand, his body calm yet charged by a hint of an incipient adrenaline rush. He'd felt this way pre-performance on sporadic previous occasions. It usually meant that he had nothing to worry about and that he was going to dance well. And so it proved once again.

Romuald, Nate discovered, was the kind of performer who maintained direct eye contact on stage, which was in fact unusual, and a difficult thing to do. Most dancers got into the habit of fixing their gaze just *above* the eyes of the other dancer they were supposed to be looking at, for fear of distracting him or her from what he or she was doing. This might fool an audience, but in Nate's opinion, it inhibited true interaction. The eyes had to have true contact in order for the emotions to be engaged.

Had Romuald done this consistently during the rehearsals? Nate hadn't been consciously aware of it, but now he realized that Romuald must have.

And there was one magical moment near the very end of the scene. Nate was facing forward, and Romuald, crossing in front of him, turned so that his back was toward the auditorium. During that split-second, Romuald not only smiled at Nate with his eyes, but with his mouth. His lips, surrounded by that incongruous artificial facial hair that Nate still hadn't had time to get used to, curved in a secretive, encouraging smile meant for Nate alone. It was over in a flash as Romuald completed his turn and moved on, but Nate was to remember it often in the future.

Nate was astonished to realize that the four of them had exited and were back in the wings.

It can't be over so soon, can it? he thought. It feels as though we were only out there for a minute or two. Now I don't have anything else to do until the final scene. Oh well, at least I can stand here and watch the others.

He lingered in the wings, recovering his breath, and watched the "dance contest" between Thyrsis and Corydon followed by the divination scene for the women and the tender little *pas de deux* for Chromis and Aegle.

He was beginning to get a better sense of what Romuald had in mind: emotionally intense scenes alternating with lighter ones. It was a bit like stretching a rubber band, alternatively increasing and relaxing the tension.

The bawdy interlude with the three young satyrs looked like a lot of fun to perform. Nate felt more than a little envious.

Then the scene with Corydon, Thyrsis, and Alexis began—and went horribly wrong. Not at first; Dane was superb in his opening solo, and the little *pas de deux* between Larry and Henri was on the highest possible level. For those few moments, Henri Keller fully lived up to his reputation, and Larry was right there with him all the way. But then, during his solo, Henri not only consistently lagged behind the beat, he broke down, losing his place, so that he was forced to stop, and Ted, conducting, had to stop the orchestra. After a quick whispered consultation, the musicians turned their pages back to the beginning of the solo, and this time Henri got through it, albeit tentatively.

Visibly ill at ease, Henri began his *pas de deux* with Dane and broke down again, just before the steps that had replaced the lifts. Ted lowered his baton and halted the orchestra again. There was another discussion. The players turned back their pages. They started again at the previous rehearsal number in the score, and Dane and Henri finished the scene.

The finale proceeded without incident, although Henri seemed to be moving like a sleepwalker.

Afterward, in the wings, Henri pulled on the zippered jersey that Romuald handed him. This time, Henri pulled the hood up over his head. Henri's face under its makeup was inscrutable. So was Romuald's.

Larry and Dane, who instinctively stood side by side nearby, waited along with the others for the explosion. It didn't come. Instead, Henri started apologizing, breathlessly, to everyone in the immediate vicinity, including the stagehands.

"That was terrible," Henri said. "I'm sorry."

"Forget it," Romuald told him.

"Terrible, an embarrassment. There isn't any excuse for such a thing."

"That's why we have the rehearsal, Henri. Things go wrong all the time. And we catch them, and we fix them."

"I know the steps. I know the damn steps. I went blank. Sorry, *sorry*," Henri repeated.

Dane spoke up. "It could happen to anybody. It's happened to all of us. It's happened to me. It'll be all right tomorrow night."

Henri looked at him. "So it's come to this," he said in a soft voice without any audible trace of bitterness. "You feel sorry for me."

Dane, for once, couldn't think of anything to say. Henri went to his dressing room. Watching him walk away, Nate noticed how his head seemed bowed and his shoulders slumped ever so slightly, in weariness—and defeat.

There was an awkward silence.

Larry broke it with a comment about purely practical matters.

"While I was upstage, almost underneath those gears, I noticed that the motors do make a hum. Are you sure it can't be heard out in the audience?"

There was a consultation with those who, including Walker, had watched the rehearsal from seats in the auditorium.

"No," Walker reported. "It's covered up by the orchestra."

"Even during the really quiet music?" Larry pressed. "Like the bass clarinet solo?"

"You can't hear it at all, trust me."

Dane wiped his face with his hand, then looked at the greasepaint transferred to his fingers.

"This makeup doesn't hold up very well when you sweat, Romuald," he complained. "And Henri and I were sweating like pigs out there. The lighting's very strong."

"Maybe the makeup guys can adjust the compound between now and tomorrow night," Romuald replied in a monotone. "I'll mention it to them."

Dane and Larry exchanged looks, and Nate, observing them, had no difficulty guessing what they were thinking: *That's not the only thing that needs to be fixed between now and tomorrow night.*

"Could the corps girls and boys come here for a moment?" Romuald

was saying. "Thank you. Ladies and gentlemen, that was excellent. I'm very pleased. One thing, though. Near the very end, when Chromis takes Aegle in his arms, there needs to be a big reaction to that. Your two friends are in love and they're going to get together, and you're all pleased and excited. The music at the end is very grand, so don't rush your arm movements; they need to have a certain weight and deliberation, to go with the pace of the music. Try to make it just a little solemn and ceremonial. That's all. Good work."

Nate went to shed his costume, rub off his makeup, and hit the shower. Part of his mind, as it always did after a rehearsal or performance, continued to dissect and analyze what he'd just done. His scene with Romuald, Josh, and Bethany had gone well, which didn't mean it couldn't be improved.

In front of his locker, getting dressed, he was momentarily oblivious to the chatter of the other dancers all around him.

Maybe, at the very beginning of the scene, Chromis and Mnasyllos are too much alike, he thought. Peas in a pod. Why does Aegle finally decide she prefers Chromis? There must be a reason. Maybe Mnasyllos is too callow or too needy. Is there some way I can hint at why Mnasyllos is the loser?

Or is it just that lightning strikes when Aegle sees Chromis, like when Juliet first sees Romeo at the Capulets' ball, and that's simply it, with no rational explanation? Nothing poor Mnasyllos can do about it.

I'd like to discuss it with Romuald, if only I could get him away from Henri Keller and have him all to myself again!

"I bet Ghent's reading him the riot act right now," Timothy was saying. He was referring to Henri, of course.

"I don't know." Seth was also standing nearby. "I don't think Ghent's the kind to kick a guy when he's down. Unlike *some* choreographers I could name, who practically lie in wait for you, hoping you'll screw up!"

As soon as he had showered and changed, Dane came in search of Larry and Nate.

"Come have coffee with me, guys," Dane said. It was a plea, not a command, and it had more than a little desperation in it. "Both of you."

At the coffee shop, Dane slumped over his cup.

"This is going to be the big fucking disaster of all time," he declared.

Larry was more optimistic. "Oh, I don't know. It won't be the first time that the dress rehearsal sucked and the performance went okay. Better that than the other way around, which has also been known to happen."

Dane wasn't buying it. "Have either of you ever been booed?"

"No," Larry admitted.

"Me, either," Nate said.

"Well, I'm going to be. I'm going to be booed tomorrow night. Booed right off the stage. They'll probably throw things, too."

"Don't be silly, Dane." Nate couldn't imagine any audience not liking a performance of Dane's.

"You think I'm kidding? When that audience sees Keller stumble and lurch all over the stage, they're going to think it's my fault. They're going to think it's because I'm a lousy partner."

"Don't forget, I have to dance with him, too," Larry reminded Dane.

"But not the way I have to. You'll be all right."

"So will you. You're just letting yourself get rehearsal jitters, Dane. It's not like you." Larry had finished his coffee. "Well, I have to be getting home to Cara and Allegra. What are you guys going to do?"

"I don't know. Go home and take it easy, I guess," Nate said.

Dane grunted. "Why the fuck do you need to take it easy? All you've got to do tomorrow night is dance that nice little role of yours. It can't miss. *You're* going to have fun."

Larry excused himself and left. Dane, who had mumbled goodbye to him, sat there brooding. Nate wasn't used to seeing Dane like this.

"You're letting yourself get all bent out of shape over this, Dane. You need to relax."

"I need to get laid."

"Well, don't look at me."

"I'm prepared to beg. Hell, I'm prepared to *pay*. That's how desperate I am."

"Well, that's really flattering. That you turn to me because you're desperate."

"Don't take it personally, Choirboy. I'm so wound up I don't know what I'm saying. That's why I really, *really* need to get laid."

"So hook up with Beau," Nate suggested. "He keeps talking about that little private performance the two of you put on for me the other day. I'm sure he'd be delighted to schedule a replay."

"Thanks for being so willing to pimp out your roomie to me, Choirboy, but in the mood I'm in, I'm going to need something a hell of a lot rougher than he can dish out. I want to be on the bottom, for a change." Dane took out his cell phone and set it on the table, then also took out a small notebook bound in brown leather and began to thumb through it.

"Is that what I think it is?" Nate asked.

"I don't know. What do you think it is?"

"I can't believe it. You actually carry around 'a little black book' with you? Except that it's brown, not black."

"It's an address book. So what?"

"You actually have so many tricks that you don't have room to store all their numbers on your phone?"

"Oh, shut up, Choirboy." But Dane grinned. He seemed a little more at ease. "It isn't just numbers." But it was evidently a number that Dane was looking for at the moment; when he found it, he entered it on his phone.

"Reinaldo? It's me, Dane. That's right. The 'ballet boy', as you call me. Remember what you told me that night we ran into each other in the bar a couple of weeks ago? That you'd like us to get together again so you can fuck me again, only this time you'll do it until I won't be able to sit down for a week? Is that offer still good? Well, then I'm calling your bluff. Tonight. Any time, whenever you're free. Oh, good. That'll work for me. Hey, listen. I've got this pretty blond boy here with me. Want to make it a three-way? Aw, shit, he's not interested," Dane reported in response to Nate's frantic facial expressions and gestures. "He's still too much of a little puritan. I'll have to keep working on him. Oh, you may know somebody? Sounds hot. Go ahead, invite him to join us. A threesome is exactly what I need. Or a foursome, or a quintet, if you know any other guys who might be interested; I know it's short notice. But I'm really, *really* horny, my man. I am 'climbing the walls' horny. I am 'hold me down, take turns fucking me, and come back for seconds' horny. Okay, I'll see you then."

"You're a pig. You're a total pig," Nate accused as Dane hung up.

"Yeah, baby, and tonight I'm going to be a sexually satisfied pig. This dude Reinaldo is a big, butch Puerto Rican stud, and he and his buddies like to fuck guys up the ass. Some of them even suck dick and take it up the ass themselves. I bet by the time I get over to his place, he'll have three or four of them there, lined up, waiting for me. I'm going to go fuck myself silly. I'm going to fuck Romuald Ghent and his ballet, and Henri Keller, right out of my system and not think about any of them again until this time tomorrow. All I'm going to think about is big, hard Puerto Rican dick reaming me out. So sue me!"

They both stood up, collecting their things and getting ready to leave. Outside, on the sidewalk, Dane suddenly turned to Nate. "Don't be mad at me, Nate."

"I'm not mad at you. Don't be silly. Why should I be?"

"I don't know. I guess I act a little crude around you sometimes. I guess I like to get a rise out of you. Don't... I hope you don't take half the stuff I say seriously. Let alone personally."

"Dane, it's going to be all right, tomorrow night. It's going to go fine. Stop worrying about it. Stop *thinking* about it."

"Okay. Thanks."

"Go have yourself some fun. Get laid, if that's what you want to do. Enjoy your little orgy. Do what you have to do."

"Okay. Thanks," Dane repeated.

Nate turned to walk away but then turned back. "Dane. If you want to call me between now and tomorrow night—you know, just to talk?—go ahead. You *do* have *my* name and number in your little brown book, don't you?"

Dane smiled at him. "Oh, yeah."

Left alone, Nate felt at loose ends. For some reason, he was reluctant to head home just yet. Dane's anxiety was contagious, to some extent. It now seemed like a very long time indeed between now and tomorrow evening, a void that Nate was going to have difficulty filling. How he missed being with Romuald! He went back across the street to the theater, drawn by the possibility that one or more of his friends might still be there. Maybe they could go do something together, or at least talk, to pass the time. He reentered the building.

Nate had turned a corner and started down a hallway when he almost stumbled over Henri Keller, of all people, who was sitting on the floor with his back resting against the wall and his legs straight out in front of him. Henri was in his street clothes, and his bag was on the floor beside him. He was staring into space, and he looked, Nate couldn't help thinking, rather like Stravinsky's Petroushka in one of his more dejected moments: a marionette with slackened strings.

"Ah, Nathaniel," Henri said before Nate could react to this unexpected—and unwelcome—encounter. "No, don't rush off. Sit down here next to me," Henri commanded. And then, to Nate's astonishment, he actually added, "Please."

Nate sat down. Henri said nothing for a long moment but once again stared off into space.

Then, "You're not a bad dancer at all. Lots of us have good training, but

not all of us are intelligent enough to benefit from it the way you have."

Nate realized that, coming from Henri, this was high praise. "Thank you."

"Enjoy it while you can."

Nate tried to think of something to say in response.

"All those people out there in the audience," Henri went on. "At first you think they're on your side. Then, gradually, you realize that they're just out there lying in wait for you. Waiting for you to screw up. They want to see a train wreck. They want to be able to go home and say, 'Oh, he's not as good as he's cracked up to be. He's not as good as So-and-So. He's not as good as he was the last time I saw him, a couple of years ago.""

Nate wasn't sure if Henri was talking to him or to himself, thinking out loud.

"I'm so tired. I hurt all over. If only I could just sleep and sleep. Nathaniel. Tell me. You and Romuald *have* had sex with each other, haven't you?" Henri asked bluntly.

"Haven't you asked him that?" Nate asked guardedly, stalling for time.

"Of course I have. I've accused him, to be more accurate. He got angry—he had a right to be angry, I admit it, because I was not very nice to him. And then he said it was none of my business. He told me, 'I haven't interrogated you about what you've been up to back there in Europe this whole time we've been apart.' Which was true. But it didn't use to be like this between Romuald and me. We used to tell each other everything. Now there are things I'm ashamed to tell him, and he has secrets from me. Well, one big secret, really: his feelings for you. Perhaps not such a secret, after all. The fact that he doesn't want to speak to me about you, that he doesn't care to share his feelings for you with me, that tells me all I need to know. You aren't just another man whom Romuald is attracted to. This is different. *You* are different."

"Mr. Keller, Romuald has a great deal of respect for you."

"Ah. 'Respect'. So that's what he feels for me now," Henri said, not without a certain wry, self-deprecating humor in his tone of voice.

"Romuald and I talked about this, and we decided that it wouldn't be right.... We decided not to go on being intimate with each other, while you're here."

"Why not?" Henri seemed genuinely curious. "Out of respect for me, as you put it? How absurd."

"But you—"

"No, don't hold back, speak your mind, Nathaniel."

"You do seem to be awfully jealous. To say the least."

"I am jealous. I don't deny it. But I'm not jealous of the sex, really. I'm jealous of the intimacy. Do you understand that?"

"I think so." Yes, Nate thought, there was physical intimacy, sexual intimacy, on the one hand, but then there were other forms of intimacy, too. There was an intimacy of the intellect and the imagination, perhaps, and in that realm Nate had long ago given himself to Romuald Ghent, fully and unreservedly. There'd been those kisses: those unforgettable kisses, burned onto his lips and into his memory. There'd been those impassioned sex acts of total shared abandon. But there had also been all those times when he and Romuald had just been together, talking, and Nate could swear he knew what the other man was thinking and feeling. There'd been those moments in the rehearsals for *Eclogues* when Romuald hadn't even had to show Nate what he wanted; Nate had simply *known* how to move.

"You would like to have Romuald as a steady lover, wouldn't you?"

Something about the calm way Henri asked the question told Nate he could risk answering it honestly.

"Yes, more than anything. But not for the reasons you might think. Not because he's famous, or because I think it could help my career. But because I like him so much."

Henri nodded. "That's all that really matters. You see, Romuald and I still love each other, and maybe we always will, in a way. But for some reason we don't *like* each other very much anymore. I'm not very nice to him, I haven't been very grateful to him for all the things he's tried to do for me, and he... now he feels sorry for me. Which isn't too solid a ground to build a relationship on."

"I don't know what to say, Mr. Keller."

"Call me Henri, please. And don't feel that you need to say anything. Why should you? Just be grateful that you're still so young, because it means you still have this kind of hurt ahead of you. Or not; you may be able to avoid ever going through it, if you're lucky. Or *peut-être*, if you're sensible enough to be selfish and not allow yourself to fall in love. Which I doubt you'd be capable of—that kind of selfishness, I mean." Henri turned his head toward Nate, looked at him appraisingly, and then, to Nate's surprise, flashed him a warm and ingratiating smile. For that single, fleeting moment, Henri reminded Nate of Dane, of all people.

"How very charming you are," Henri said. "And you are talented. You

care about your work. You might be very good for Romuald, after all. But what you must know about Romuald, what you have to understand about him, is that his work will always come first. Oh, he will love you, he will do whatever he can to make you happy, but if the choice has to be made, he will decide in favor of his work. If you can work with him side by side, or you can be satisfied with your own work when he is busy with his—if you can be content to 'play second violin', as they say—yes, then things may turn out all right for the two of you."

Nate was afraid to say anything. Henri let out his breath in a long sigh.

"Well, it's not so tragic, one lousy dress rehearsal, after all," Henri said dismissively. "And *Eclogues* isn't even a tragic ballet. No one dies in the end." He began to stand up and grimaced. "Ah, my knees hurt. It's such hell to get old and worn out."

Nate rose, too, and was once again surprised when Henri offered him his hand, as formally as though the two of them were being introduced for the first time at some social function.

"I have enjoyed our talk, Nathaniel," Henri said as they shook hands. "I will see you tomorrow, of course. Until then, *au revoir*."

"Au revoir."

They went their separate ways. Nate went down the corridor, turned a corner, and suddenly found himself face to face with Romuald. He, too, was in his street clothes, and he looked remarkably relaxed, under the circumstances.

"Ah, there you are, Nate. I thought you must have gone home, by now."

"If you're looking for Henri, he just went that way."

"I'll catch up with him." But Romuald didn't seem to be in any great hurry to do so. "Did he see you? Did he... say anything to you?"

"We had a rather pleasant little conversation, Romuald, as a matter of fact. Much to my surprise."

"I'm glad. That there wasn't any unpleasantness, I mean. You made a good job of it at the rehearsal today."

"I thought it went well. I'm sure there are all sorts of things I could have done better."

"Nonsense. In all honesty, I don't have a single note to give you. My only concern is, can you keep it that hot between now and tomorrow night. Don't let it cool off. But don't think about that. Go home and relax and go about your business, think of something else. Don't start intellectualizing it, or second-guessing yourself."

"It's funny you should say that, because I think that's exactly what I caught myself starting to do a little while ago."

"It's inevitable. But now, like I said, step away from it, take some time for yourself. I'd better go find Henri." Romuald began to walk past Nate.

"Romuald?"

"Yes, Nate?"

"I'm a little worried about Mr. Keller."

"So am I." The expression that flickered across Romuald's face for a moment suggested that he'd let the words slip out without thinking. He managed a wan smile. "But that's my look-out, not yours. There's nothing you can do about it. You just be ready to dance tomorrow night."

"All right."

"Try not to look so tragic about it, Nate. I know, at your age, you think that every time a rehearsal or a performance goes awry, it's the end of the world. Trust me, it's not. When you get to be the same age as Henri and me, then you'll realize that your reputation isn't going to stand or fall on the basis of one performance."

"Yes, sir."

"Sir! I can't believe you just called me 'sir'. I call my father 'sir', Nate."

"So do I. I'm sorry."

"You're a delight. You make me laugh. And, oh how I need that at times. Goodbye."

"Goodbye, Romuald."

"I'll see you tomorrow night."

"Yes, tomorrow night."

Chapter 27 The Show Goes On

BEAU, on the night before the gala, was predictably excited—not so much because he'd be performing as part of the corps in *Eclogues* but in anticipation of the party that would be held afterwards. He and Nate amused themselves by debating what to wear. Like the other dancers, they'd take their party clothes with them to the theater so they could change into them immediately after the performance and then head directly to the nearby hotel where the party would be held. After they'd consulted some fashion spreads in men's magazines, Nate remembered how smart his admirer Kenichirou Hiromitsu had looked when they'd first met, and decided to imitate him. He and Beau settled on their most stylish suits, but they picked out expensive yet casual-looking shirts to wear under the suit jackets, without ties.

Their discussion of clothes and accessories helped to keep Nate's mind off the upcoming premiere. Nate didn't know why he was so anxious. After all, all he had to do was dance Mnasyllos, and he had the part down pat. If Henri Keller laid an egg as Alexis, that was his problem. Well, it would be Dane's problem, too, and Larry's, and Romuald's. And Matthias Metzinger's, and the company's... but Nate could have no responsibility for any of that.

There's nothing you can do about it. You just be ready to dance, Romuald had told him. That was undoubtedly good advice.

"The important thing is to remember to bring a good supply of your business cards along with you," Beau reminded Nate as they got ready to leave for the theater early the following evening. "So you can hand them out to all of the big shots who'll be there. To say nothing of all the potential tricks! Oh, and make sure you have a little notebook and a pen in your pocket, in case some guy doesn't happen to have his business card with him or he wants to give you his *private*, unlisted number, so you can write it down."

"Honestly, Beau," Nate protested. "It's supposed to be a party. You make it sound like a cross between a gay matchmaking service and a goddamn debutante ball!"

"That's exactly what it is, roomie. They don't call it Find a Husband

Night for nothing!"

Nate scoffed at the notion of finding a husband at the gala. A one-night stand, maybe. And he was no longer on the market. He was in love with Romuald Ghent. Nevertheless, he tucked away a supply of his business cards in the pockets of his suit jacket along with a small notebook and a pen. Nate may never have been a Boy Scout, but he believed in Being Prepared.

Beau left the apartment first, because he had an errand to run on his way, and he liked to arrive well ahead of time for a performance even under ordinary circumstances.

Left alone, Nate found himself replaying in his mind the conversation he'd had with Henri. It was astonishing how much Henri had sounded like Romuald when he was speaking calmly and introspectively like that, for a change. For the first time, Nate had an answer to the question that had been nagging at him for some time: *What did Romuald ever see in Henri in the first place*? Nate scarcely dared to admit the possibility, even to himself; but when Henri wasn't high, or pulling rank on other dancers, coming across as paranoid and insanely jealous, or simply acting out in general, he had the makings of a nice guy.

An hour later, Nate arrived at the theater to find that the backstage chaos so typical of an opening night was already well advanced. The stage door office was crammed with flowers—everything from large bouquets and overflowing baskets to smaller arrangements, some of mere posy dimensions—sent to the dancers by their friends and fans. Congratulatory cards and telegrams were not only thumb-tacked onto the callboard but were taped to the bare surrounding wall.

Genny Montgomery, as usual the calm eye in the midst of the storm, intercepted Nate the moment he signed in.

"Mr. Walker told me to send you up to his office as soon as you got here," she said as she handed Nate a small bundle of his own mail.

"Oh? What's that all about?"

"I don't know. Mr. Ghent and Dane are with him, though, having some sort of a conference. They asked to see Beau, too, for some reason."

"Mr. Ghent probably just wants to give me some last-minute notes," Nate speculated.

Nate didn't take the time to deposit his bags in the locker room but took them with him. He knocked on Lloyd Walker's office door and was told to come in.

Walker was seated behind his desk. Romuald was standing, leaning back against the edge of the desk, and Dane was perched on the arm of an

armchair nearby. They all looked at Nate and smiled, which he found reassuring.

"Hi, Nate," Walker said. "How're you feeling tonight?"

"Just fine, Mr. Walker."

Walker gestured toward Nate's garment bag. "I see you're ready for the party."

"Yes, I'm really looking forward to it."

Romuald let out a dry little chuckle. "I was rather hoping you were looking forward to dancing in *Eclogues*, Nate," he said.

"Oh, of course. That goes without saying. I can't wait to get out there and dance."

"That's good to hear," Walker said. "Because we need you to dance Alexis for us tonight."

Nate was certain he had not heard correctly. "You want... me... to dance Alexis... tonight?" he repeated in a momentary stupor.

"That's right," Walker confirmed.

"What about Mr. Keller?"

"Mr. Keller is indisposed."

Nate looked at Walker, who maintained his poker face. Then Nate looked at Romuald, who had turned his face away and was now staring fixedly at the wall opposite where he stood, as though there was something about the color or the texture of the wall paint that was quite out of the ordinary. Finally, Nate looked at Dane, who did make eye contact with him. But then Dane, under the pretense of lifting his hand to rub his chin, touched his index fingertip to his lips in the classic *shush* gesture.

"You know the part," Walker was saying. "You're the understudy, after all."

"He knows it backwards and forwards," Dane said.

Romuald was still studying the wall. He said nothing.

"But all those people who bought tickets to see Mr. Keller!" Nate blurted out.

"They'll be seeing you instead," Dane interjected quickly. "You and me. We'll do it just the way we did it in the rehearsals, Nate. We're going to forget about all the changes we had to make for Keller, at least for tonight. If Larry and I get mixed up and can't remember what we did originally and what we were supposed to change, well, we'll just have to bluff our way through it for a few steps here and a few steps there, and that'll be our problem, Nate, not yours. You just go out there and dance it exactly the way we rehearsed it originally. It'll be all right. We'll make it work."

"But what about my part? Mnasyllos?" Nate asked.

"Beau Reynolds will do it, since he's *your* understudy," Walker said. "I understand you practically taught it to him single-handedly. No one will notice if the corps is short one boy tonight. We've already told Beau. He's a little nervous, of course, but he'll be all right."

"Oh yes, he'll be just fine," Nate confirmed.

Walker smiled. "And so will you. Mr. Ghent and I have complete confidence in you."

There was a momentary silence. *Why doesn't Romuald say anything?* Nate wanted to know. *Why won't he look at me? What's wrong?*

"Well," Nate said matter-of-factly, fighting to conceal his sudden emotional turmoil. "I guess I'd better start getting ready, then."

Romuald suddenly roused himself from his reverie. "You can have Henri's dressing room," he said. "That way you can have a little privacy. I'll have Henri's things moved out of it. Come on."

Nate found himself following Romuald. They left the office and made their way to where the individual men's dressing rooms were located; they were segregated from the women's, although the latter were nearby. On the way, they encountered Beau.

"Can you believe it, roomie?" Beau asked Nate excitedly.

"No," Nate replied.

"Here you are, Nate." Romuald indicated one of the doors. "I'll be with you in a few minutes. Come with me, Beau, if you don't mind. There are just a few things I'd like to run through with you."

Romuald led Beau away, and Nate entered the room alone.

Ironically, the kind of dressing room reserved for a star wasn't anything special: its primary appeal was that it *was* a private space, however small, and had its own bathroom (which was of economy motel room dimensions). At the moment, the drab little room showed clear signs that Henri Keller was its intended occupant. The zippered jersey he had worn at the dress rehearsal hung from one wall hook; a very expensive-looking white silk bathrobe hung from another; his costume for *Eclogues* was suspended on a hanger from a third. His toilet articles were scattered across the dressing table in front of the mirror, along with a miniature mountain of unopened cards and telegrams. There was the famous electric towel rack plugged into an outlet, with a stack of thick, fluffy white towels next to it. There, too, were the equally notorious

six bottles of imported mineral water, each a hefty glass affair containing two liters. The most eye-catching object in the room, however, was a three-foottall orchid with gorgeous deep purplish-red blooms, staked in a terracotta pot with a saucer and shrouded in transparent cellophane tied with a bright red ribbon, to which a small card envelope was attached.

Nate slowly began to make himself at home, hanging up his garment bag and depositing his other bag, the one containing his usual performance gear, beside the dressing table.

Romuald knocked on the door, then entered the room, accompanied by an assistant, who busied himself collecting Keller's jersey, bathrobe, toilet things, and the mound of cards and telegrams. Everything was neatly deposited in a cardboard box.

"Leave that," Romuald said, a bit sharply, when the assistant made a tentative reach toward the orchid. "It brightens up the place. You might as well have something to look at, Nate, while you're waiting to go on."

Romuald took the card off the orchid, tore it up, and threw it into the wastebasket under the dressing table. Then he removed and discarded the cellophane, as well.

"There," he said, looking at the orchid. "That's better. I'm a little on edge, Nate; forgive me, it will pass," he added matter-of-factly. "How about you? Are you nervous?"

The assistant had left, carrying off the cardboard box. "No more than usual," Nate said.

"Good. Do you need anything?"

"No, thanks. I've got everything I need right here, in my bag." Which Nate had already begun to unpack, taking advantage of the freed-up space on top of the dressing table.

Romuald nodded. "I have a couple of things to attend to. I'll stop in and see you later, shall I?"

"Okay."

Romuald turned to go, but then he stopped. "Oh. I almost forgot something."

"What?"

"This." Romuald kissed him, lightly, on the lips. Then he gave Nate a rather wan, preoccupied-looking smile and turned back toward the door.

Romuald had scarcely left before Daniel popped in, carrying the Alexis costume he'd made for Nate. He took Keller's costume down from the wall

hook and replaced it with the deceptively identical-looking one he'd brought with him.

"And we thought you'd never actually get a chance to wear this," he reminded Nate with a broad grin. "Nervous?"

"Not yet."

"Everybody's talking about it-you going on for Keller, I mean."

"These things happen."

"But they usually don't happen at a gala, or on the opening night of a brand new ballet. Come on, baby, strip, slip it on, and let's see if it needs any last-minute adjustments."

"You just want an excuse to see me naked, Daniel, and to cop a feel."

"Absolutely. This is going to be the high point of the evening for me."

Nate modeled the tights for Daniel, who inspected them from every angle before pronouncing himself satisfied.

"Okay, I've got to go get Beau suited up as Mnasyllos. *Another* second cast costume that isn't going to go to waste, after all. Thank God all that cutting and sewing wasn't for nothing."

Before he left, though, Daniel did indeed give Nate a reassuring, good luck kiss and caress, which wasn't entirely devoid of lustfulness.

Nate removed the costume and hung it up, then pulled on his own utilitarian and well-worn cotton bathrobe. He glanced at his watch. *The Seasons*, the first half of the program, wasn't due to begin for another half an hour. The audience must be assembling in the lobby of the theater, getting ready to take their seats. With the Glazunov ballet and the intermission, it would be almost two hours before the curtain rose on *Eclogues*.

He remembered his mail and killed some time by reading it. There were telegrams from his parents, from his brother and sister, from a few old friends, and, all the way from San Francisco, from Kenichirou, the charming businessman with whom he'd had an unforgettable one-night stand.

There was a knock on the door. "It's me," Larry called.

"Come in."

Larry opened the door just wide enough to stick his head and bare shoulders in. He was standing out there in the corridor, unself-consciously nude except for an extraordinarily loud and baggy pair of boxer shorts in a screaming check pattern of intersecting acid yellow and acid green, with thinner red threads woven into the mix.

"Christ Almighty," Nate exclaimed. "I think I've just gone blind."

"Cara picked these out for me. We thought we'd give Romuald a little competition in the fashion department."

"You ought to wear them onstage. They'd actually go quite well with the set."

"I'm glad you're in a good mood. Aren't you nervous?"

"Okay, Larry, the next time somebody asks me that, I'm going to lie down on the floor and pound my fists and scream, the way Keller did that day in the rehearsal room."

Larry laughed. "All right, I'll leave you alone. But I'm right down the hall, you know, so yell if you need anything. It's my turn to climb into the barrel and fend off Daniel's advances. He claims my tights need one of his famous 'last minute adjustments'. In the crotch and ass area, of course."

Nate's next visitor was Dane, who was also sauntering about in a state of casual undress. In his case, he was bare-chested and wearing sweatpants, with rubber flip-flops on his feet. He had a towel slung around his neck.

"Nervous, Choirboy?" he asked.

"I wasn't, until everybody started asking me 'Are you nervous?', 'Aren't you nervous?', or '*Why* aren't you nervous?'" Nate retorted. "I wish they'd all shut the hell up about it."

Dane nodded. "I know the feeling." He looked around the dressing room. "Nice orchid."

"I think it was from Romuald. Meant for Keller, of course."

"I thought so. Is that the famous mineral water?" Dane picked up one of the large glass bottles, hefted it in his hand, then unscrewed the cap.

"You're not going to drink it, are you?"

"Sure. Why not? It's already been paid for. No point in letting it sit here and go to waste." Dane took a sip. "Not bad," he reported. "It's strong and fizzy. You can really taste the minerals. Although I doubt it can do all that much for you that plain old tap water can't." He set another one of the bottles in front of Nate. "Go ahead, try it."

Nate opened the bottle and drank from it. The water *did* have a distinctive taste and was rather refreshing.

Dane was making himself comfortable and was obviously in no hurry to leave. He sat down in one of the dressing room's extra chairs.

"Aren't you going to ask me how I made out last night?" Dane prompted. "I know you're dying to."

"As a matter of fact, I'd forgotten about that gangbang you volunteered

for. I did have other things on my mind. All right, how'd it go?"

"I think my shitter's swollen shut," Dane boasted. "Permanently. Man, do these dudes ever know how to fuck! It was just what I needed. I'm not feeling tense now at all. Except back there, of course. My sphincter is still pretty tense. I'm kind of dreading the next time I need to take a crap."

"Okay, now I'm sorry I asked. More information than I need to process right now, Dane."

Dane eyed Nate as he drank more water.

"You and me, Choirboy," he said. "We've never really had a serious conversation, have we?"

"Sure we have." Nate was surprised by the statement.

"Have we? We've mostly joked around, it seems to me. Which is okay. And maybe this isn't the best time or place for us to get serious. But I'm going to go ahead anyway."

"Go ahead with what?"

"With telling you the truth, or at least as much of it as I've managed to find out. Because you'll find out eventually, so you might as well know now. And I think you can take it without freaking out."

"Find out what? Take what?"

"Keller isn't 'indisposed'. He's high. Stoned out of his mind. He's in the hospital, checked in under an assumed name because they're trying to keep that part of it out of the papers. Apparently he and Romuald got into a knock-down, drag-out fight this afternoon in Romuald's apartment, and the neighbors called the cops. When they got there, Keller was bouncing off the walls, he was so toked up on whatever it is he's taking now."

"Oh, my God."

"It must've got physical at some point, but Romuald lied about that part of it to the cops, or refused to press charges, I'm not sure which. But I overheard him and Walker talking, you know, when I got here tonight and Genny told me they wanted to see me? I heard them talking before I knocked on the office door. Okay, I was eavesdropping, I admit it. So sue me, already. I heard Romuald saying that he didn't give a fuck, that he was going to dance tonight anyway, even though he has a couple of little bruises from where Keller punched him—on his torso, luckily, not on his face—that can probably be covered up with body makeup, so the audience won't be able to see them."

"I can't believe it, Dane. This is awful."

"Yeah, I feel sorry for the Professor. I hope he got a few punches in, himself, gave Psycho Danseur a taste of his own medicine. Actually, though,

it's not so bad at all—for us, I mean." Dane grinned. "Personally, I'm thrilled that I'll be dancing with you instead of with that prick Keller. And I know for a fact that Larry feels the same way, although unlike me, he's too much of a gentleman to admit it and gloat about it."

"But what about all those people who paid to see Keller?" Nate suddenly had a vision of audience members stampeding to the box office to demand their money back, even though the theater, of course, had a "no refunds" policy. "They're going to be so disappointed."

"They'll get over it. Listen, the worst part of it will be when Walker goes out in front of the curtain and announces the cast changes," Dane predicted. "He's going to do it after the intermission, right before *Eclogues* begins. That way they won't have time to think about it for long. Oh, there'll be some pissing and moaning, and you'll be able to hear it from backstage. I've been there, when I had to jump in for a dancer who had a big following. The one good thing about it is that most audiences have this instinctive tendency to side with the underdog, so you can actually turn that to your advantage."

Dane paused and drank more water. "But forget about the audience. Pretend it's just another performance. It *isn't*, of course, which is what I really wanted to talk to you about. This isn't about you or me. It's about the Professor. For some reason, tonight is really important to him. Well, who am I kidding? You don't have to be a genius to guess the reasons. He's counting on this ballet to be a success, to help turn his reputation around after those flops he had back home. He really cares about *Eclogues*; God knows he's poured himself into it, heart and soul. And the whole thing was supposed to be, you know, like a gift to Keller? To showcase him, and turn *his* reputation around, too, after all that bad publicity. And I bet Romuald was counting on this ballet to be a big success, to help patch things up between him and Keller. Well, that part of it's all shot to hell, at least for tonight. So it's up to you and me and Larry to do as much of a salvage job as we can. Not for our sakes, for Romuald's."

Nate raised his own bottle to his lips. "I thought you didn't like Romuald very much—not at first, anyway," he said after he'd drunk.

"I could take him or leave him," Dane admitted. "What, you don't think I'm capable of changing my mind? Ghent is okay. He's very good at what he does. Even though I don't understand what the hell he's talking about ninety percent of the time. And he's already giving the performance of his life tonight, pretending that everything is perfectly okay, that it's just another dancer having to cancel at short notice and needing to be replaced. That's why we all have to play along with the act. Especially you, Choirboy, because if *you* start to lose it, then the Professor could really fall apart. One thing's for sure. Keller has screwed him over royally tonight, and I'm not going to screw a man when he's already down." Dane grinned again. "So to speak."

"I understand."

"I knew you would. So I'm giving you fair warning. I'm going to go out there and dance my fucking ass off. No holding back, the way I might have had to do with Keller. Think you can keep up with me, Choirboy?"

"Sure."

"Good! You concentrate on that and forget everything else for now, and we'll be just fine. Let's just go out there and have ourselves some fun, okay?"

"Okay."

"Good man. I'd better go and start getting ready." Dane stood up and looked at Nate with a curious expression on his face; it was almost wistful. "How about a kiss, Choirboy, just for luck?"

"Knock it off, Dane. Don't start all that stuff again. Not *now*, for God's sake. Quit kidding around."

"I'm perfectly serious," the other dancer protested. "I thought we just agreed to be serious, for once, tonight?"

"We did, but that doesn't mean-"

"This dude Corydon I'm going to be playing, he's supposed to be all about jealousy and unrequited love, right? So come on, be a sport. Throw me a crumb. Give me a little taste. Help me to psych myself up, get myself in the mood."

Nate couldn't stifle a rueful laugh. "Dane," he said as he shook his head, "that has got to be the most creative come-on I've heard in quite some time. So you're asking me to give in to you, to sacrifice myself, for the sake of art, is that it? You are *beyond* incorrigible."

"And you're beyond hot. You don't even know that, do you, Choirboy? You don't realize just how sexy you are. You don't know what you do to me!"

Dane took a step toward him. Nate was acutely conscious that Dane, with his chest bared, in his sweatpants—under which, he was sure, Dane wasn't wearing any underwear—and flip-flops, was practically naked. And all male.

"I'm jealous," Dane purred, looking at Nate with that smoldering intensity in his dark eyes that had no doubt been the undoing of many men. "Just like Corydon is jealous of Thyrsis, I'm jealous of the Professor, I admit it. That's what I'm going to be thinking about when I'm out there dancing with you. I'm going to be thinking about you and the Professor, and how much I wish I could be in his place. Oh, I'm going to be good tonight, Choirboy. I can feel it in my gut, in my balls. I'm going to be hot, I'm going to be on fire. I'm going to burn up the place. I'm not being arrogant; sometimes you just know, don't you? You're just *on*, you know how it's going to go, you know that nothing can stop you once you get out there and start dancing. That's why you'd better be good, too. One kiss, you little fucker. One kiss, that's all I'm asking for, that's all I need!"

Nate was in Dane's arms, pressed against his chest. Their faces were together, and they were kissing—lustfully, yes, as Nate had anticipated; but also with a strange, languid tenderness. Nate's hands ran restlessly down Dane's hard-muscled bare back. He forced his sliding fingertips to halt their descent just before they reached the elastic waistband of the sweatpants. Dane's cock, very erect indeed, was tenting the crotch of the sweatpants, jabbing against Nate's groin through his bathrobe, which provided no protection at all from the phallic attack.

"Yeah," Dane growled as he pulled away, much to Nate's relief. "Oh, yeah! *That's* what I needed, all right. A man could get used to that! The only problem now, it's going to be tough to dance with this goddamn hard-on." He smiled at Nate, then retrieved his half-emptied bottle of mineral water.

"Some day, Choirboy," Dane promised. "It's going to be you and me, some day—maybe sooner than you think. Until then, well, I'll see you out there. Keep it warm for me!"

Dane slapped Nate on the back and left, but not before he'd tucked under his arm a second, unopened bottle of the water to take with him. His mind a blank for a moment, his lips still tingling from Dane's kiss, Nate simply sat and stared into space.

Somebody else knocked on the door. Nate hoped it would be Romuald, returning; but his new visitor was Josh, looking as relaxed and cheerful as though the performance were already over and the post-performance party at the hotel down the street had already begun.

"Hi, Nate. Aren't you excited?"

"A little, Josh." *Aren't you excited?* was at least an improvement over *Aren't you nervous?*

"This is what you wanted, isn't it?"

The question took Nate completely by surprise. "What do you mean, Josh?"

"To be here for Mr. Ghent if he needed you. In case Mr. Keller couldn't go on some night. That's why you put in all that hard work as Mr. Keller's understudy. I'm sure Mr. Ghent appreciates it. Now he doesn't have anything to worry about."

"No, I guess he doesn't, does he?" Nate replied automatically. *Nothing to worry about!* he thought with a stab of despair.

"I wonder what's wrong with Mr. Keller. I hope he'll be all right."

"He was acting... a little strangely, the past few days. He was probably coming down with something." Nate hesitated. "Listen, Josh. Do me a favor, will you? Keep an eye on Beau out there tonight. If he runs into any trouble during the scene, try to steer him right."

"Of course I will, Nate. That goes without saying." Josh smiled at Nate. "What about you, Nate?"

"What about me?"

"Maybe I could help steer you the right way tonight, too. Would you like us to pray together?"

"Yes, let's," Nate said impulsively. "But let's not just pray that the performance goes okay. Let's pray that Mr. Keller is all right, and that he gets better."

"That's a good idea."

"Ah, I'm not quite sure how you go about this?"

"Oh, it's easy. We just kneel down, and you close your eyes and open your heart to Jesus. You don't even have to say anything out loud. He can see into your heart and hear whatever you may have trouble putting into words."

This silent rite the skeptical but suddenly humbled Nate dutifully performed, there on the carpeted dressing room floor beside his friend. After a minute or so, Josh stood up again and slapped Nate on the shoulder.

"Doesn't that feel great?" he exclaimed. "What a rush!"

"It is kind of... relaxing," Nate admitted.

"I'd better go and start getting ready. You'll see, Nate. Everything will be all right."

Left alone again, Nate had time not only to go through his usual preperformance stretching and warm-up routine, working up a sweat, but to indulge in a leisurely warm shower afterward. As he dried himself off, he consulted his discarded watch again. *The Seasons* must be almost over, a fact Nate was able to confirm when he switched the dressing room's intercom on: it was connected to a feed from a microphone high above the stage, and he could hear the music of the Glazunov ballet's finale. Nate dusted himself liberally with talcum powder and pulled on his dance belt and Alexis's copper-bronze tights.

The head makeup man arrived with his equipment, and mercifully, he didn't ask Nate if he was nervous but confined himself to purely practical matters.

"Okay," he said cheerfully, consulting a list on a clipboard. "You're Deventer, not Keller, right? And it says here to still use the stencil for Alexis instead of the one for the other guy, the one with the unpronounceable name?"

"Mnasyllos."

"Yeah, easy for you to say. *That* one, we use on your buddy, Beau Reynolds, right?"

"Right."

"Just making sure we're all on the same page. Not that there's all that much difference in the way these patterns look, but if one of you guys goes on wearing the wrong war paint, it'll be my ass on the line."

Under the circumstances, Nate found the man's down-to-earthiness refreshing, and indeed relaxing. He sat down and let the guy go to work on his face.

Romuald came in in costume and full makeup, including his beard, with a bathrobe wrapped around him. The robe, unlike Henri's, wasn't pristine white silk. It was the same ragged, faded affair in blue-and-white-striped cotton that Romuald had worn at the dress rehearsal.

"I'm sorry I didn't come to see you before," he apologized, "but I was with Beau, going over a couple more things with him and trying to keep him calm. But it wasn't really necessary. Like you said, he'll be fine. He's very well prepared, thanks to you."

Nate desperately tried to think of something innocuous to say. "I do like the beard," he said. "It looks good on you. It reminds me of the one you wore in *Dr. Faustus*. You ought to think about growing one for real."

Romuald, caught off guard, actually smiled—a genuine, spontaneous smile, not the carefully formed one he'd been displaying up to now.

"Maybe I will. Listen. I wanted to tell you one thing. When you finish your solo and go toward Corydon?"

"Yes?"

"Don't rush it, take all the time you need. Don't worry, the orchestra will follow you. I've already mentioned it to Ted. He'll take his lead from you."

Nate was infinitely grateful to Romuald for talking to him about such practical matters instead of asking him whether he was nervous.

"Anything else?" Nate asked.

"No, that's all. Except... just dance it as though you, Dane, and Larry were in the rehearsal room with me. Do it the way you did it for me there. That's all I ask."

"You've got it."

Romuald studied Nate's makeup. "The line under his left eye is just a little ragged, isn't it? It should be nice and sharp."

The makeup man nodded. "I can fix that." He leaned in close to Nate and began to make the adjustment.

As he worked, he glanced curiously at Romuald. "How's that body makeup holding up?" he asked.

Romuald looked down quickly and guiltily at himself to make sure his bathrobe wasn't hanging open in front. "It's fine," he said.

"I can touch it up for you right before you have to go on stage," the makeup man persisted.

"It'll be all right." There was now an audible hint of curt dismissiveness in Romuald's voice.

The makeup man didn't push it, and Nate sat there, submitting to him as though he'd heard nothing.

"Of course, this isn't the first time you've gone on for another guy on short notice, is it, Nate?" Romuald said in his usual calm tone of voice.

"Hardly," Nate replied. He realized that Romuald was not only changing the subject but was deliberately making small talk, to pass the time and prevent Nate from getting jittery. "I'm used to it."

"Once, when I was your age, I went on with *no* notice. It was *Romeo and Juliet*, and I was dancing one of Romeo and Mercutio's anonymous buddies in the marketplace scene in Act 1, frisking about and generally making a nuisance of myself. Providing the so-called comic relief, except that it wasn't particularly funny, just busy. I was also third cast for Romeo, covering that, but of course I thought I'd never actually have to do it.

"There was a flu bug making the rounds, so the scheduled Romeo called in sick. No problem, except that Romeo Number Two was running a temperature and should've been at home in bed, too, but he agreed to go on. And I must say he was dancing quite strongly, until after the Act 1 ballroom scene, when he made his exit and fainted dead away, right there in the wings. The audience could hear the thud as he hit the floor, but they assumed it was

just another piece of scenery being banged about.

"There wasn't even time to get the costume off him and put it on me. I was backstage, standing around, minding my own business, staring into space, when these two dressers came running up to me with this sort of generic doublet they'd grabbed off a rack. They attacked me, tearing my shirt off, screaming 'Take that off! Put this on! Now get out there and dance!' *Huh? Dance what?* I'm thinking to myself, and the next thing I know, I'm being pushed onstage to do the balcony scene and finish the act. The first time I grabbed the ballerina, she sort of did a double take and stared at me, as in *Where'd this guy come from? What happened to the other one?*

"Then, after the intermission, when the two of us were onstage again during the marriage scene, kneeling there waiting for Friar Laurence to give us his blessing, she took my hand and smiled ecstatically at me, just as a Juliet should. And then she whispered, 'By the way, what's your name?' So I raised her hand to my lips and kissed it, trying my best to look ecstatic, too, and I whispered, 'Romuald.' She hadn't heard me correctly; she thought I said 'Romeo,' so she whispered right back, 'No, you bloody fool, I know you're supposed to be Romeo. What's your *real* name?'

"Oh, but that's not the topper. The poor bloke standing there in front of us with his back to the audience, trying to play Friar Laurence, has finally had enough of all this amorous byplay. He glares down at us and hisses, 'Will you two shut up so we can get the hell on with it?' It all kind of went down the toilet from that point on. By the time the final scene came, I couldn't *wait* to suck down the poison and die."

Nate had to laugh. "I promise you I won't faint tonight, if that's what you're worried about."

"I'm not worried about a thing."

Nate wondered whether that statement was strictly accurate. Both of them were conspicuously avoiding any mention of Henri Keller.

The makeup man was finished. "Okay?" he asked.

"Perfect," Romuald replied.

Nate barely glanced at his reflection. If Romuald was satisfied, that was all that mattered.

"No, wait," Romuald said. "The hair's a little too perfect, maybe."

"It'll be a sweaty mess after the first minute or two, if the rehearsals were anything to go by," Nate reminded him.

"So much the better. I want it to look realistic. Maybe we can give it a head start, though, so to speak," Romuald said with a laugh as he took a comb and used it to make Nate's hair less tidy. Still not entirely satisfied with the effect, Romuald mussed the hair further with his fingers. "There!" he proclaimed. "Don't touch it. Go on looking just like that."

Nate didn't even look in the mirror this time. "I guess I'm ready, then."

The intercom in the dressing room made its characteristic *boing-boing* sound, followed by Genny's disembodied voice, calm as always. "Beginners' call, five minutes, please."

This meant that the intermission was nearing its close and that *Eclogues* was scheduled to start in ten minutes; to provide a margin for error, the calls were always made five minutes ahead of the actual clock time. "Beginners' call" meant that those dancers who had to go on stage at the start of the ballet or shortly afterward had to be in the wings, ready to make their entrances.

"That's me," Romuald said. "Me and Beau, this time, instead of me and you. I only mention it because I wouldn't want you to run out there on stage with us by mistake, and we'd end up with *two* dancers playing Mnasyllos for the price of one!"

"I want to watch from the wings," Nate suddenly decided. "If I stay cooped up in here any longer, waiting, I'll go stir crazy."

"I know the feeling. All right. Let's go."

They joined the clusters of dancers who were already assembled in the wings, ready for Genny to give them their entrance cues. Josh and Beau were engrossed in doing final warm-up exercises, oblivious to each other and to what was taking place all around them. Seeing Beau wearing what Nate thought of as "his" costume gave Nate a bit of a shock. Beau had an unusually intense, almost pained expression on his face underneath his strange-looking makeup; he was obviously screwing up his nerves and concentration.

Romuald waited until Josh and Beau were done warming up and then he joined them and whispered a few words to them. Whatever he said, it made Beau laugh and instantly look less tense.

Those backstage could hear a familiar sound penetrating from the other side of the curtain: the audience, settling back into their seats after the intermission, and the musicians also re-seating themselves in the orchestra pit, tuning their instruments.

Dane, looking typically laidback, walked slowly toward where Nate was standing. Although Dane didn't go on until the third episode of the ballet, he too was evidently not in the mood to sequester himself in his dressing room this evening.

Genny and Lloyd Walker were conferring together. Then Walker, looking like the epitome of poise in his tuxedo, went out in front of the curtain

and was bathed in a spotlight. An expectant hush fell over the audience.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen," Walker said. "As you know, the last item on tonight's program will be the world premiere performance of *Eclogues*, a ballet with music by Matthias Metzinger, who is here in the audience with us tonight, and choreography by Romuald Ghent." He waited for the burst of applause to die down. "If you would like to refer to your programs, there are two cast changes." He paused to give the audience a chance to look at their programs. "Unfortunately, Henri Keller is ill and will be unable to appear tonight." This news was greeted by loud groans, followed by a flurry of whispering throughout the audience.

Dane had been correct. Standing in the wings, hearing this, Nate wanted to die—or, at the very least, find the nearest hole to crawl into and hide.

"The role of Alexis will be danced this evening by Nathaniel Deventer." There was a smattering of polite applause.

"The role of Mnasyllos, which was to have been danced by Mr. Deventer, will be performed by Beauregard Reynolds." There was another ripple of applause.

In the wings, Dane turned to Nate with a big grin on his face. "See, Choirboy? The worst is over. It's going to be uphill all the way from now on."

"I think you mean downhill, Dane."

Dane shrugged. "Same difference, isn't it?"

Walker had left the stage. The spotlight was extinguished, and the lights in the auditorium gradually went down. A few members of the audience inevitably shifted in their seats, getting comfortable, or coughed. In the orchestra pit, Ted raised his baton and gave his players the downbeat. The music began, stealthily at first, then swelling in volume. The curtain rose.

Watching the first scenes of the ballet from his vantage point in the wings, Nate experienced an odd sensation: he almost felt as though he were back in Romuald's apartment, seated comfortably on Romuald's coach, watching the performance on TV.

The opening scene for the corps went well, and the scene for Romuald, Bethany, Josh, and Beau came off perfectly. Watching it, observing Beau in particular, Nate couldn't help feeling a twinge of envy. *This is all wrong*, he thought. *That's supposed to be me out there!*

Dane was also standing there watching, without his usual passivity.

"Look at the Professor," he whispered in Nate's ear. "He's still got it, doesn't he?"

Nate nodded. Larry joined them.

"Ready to go out there and have some fun?" Larry whispered to Dane. But it was Nate's bare upper arm that Larry grasped and squeezed, in a reassuring gesture that was about as close as a straight man was likely to come to a man-to-man caress.

"You bet," Dane said.

Nor was he exaggerating. The "dance contest" between Thyrsis and Corydon elicited ripples of appreciative laughter from the audience.

Then there was the long and mysterious, beautiful scene for the women, followed by the brief love scene between Chromis and Aegle. Kitri, portraying a mature woman, something she rarely had the chance to do in her usual repertory, dominated the divination episode, treating Cara and the other women with motherly solicitude. Cara, as the expectant mother, was tender and introspective. Josh and Bethany also looked very good indeed dancing out there together, Nate had to admit; Romuald had chosen well.

The boisterous scene for the three satyrs provided a slightly startling contrast, as intended, and was also a crowd-pleaser.

Genny turned her head and gave Nate one of her characteristic, mute *Are you ready?* looks, and Nate automatically nodded to her in response. He would be making his entrance soon. Back in the dressing room, he'd thought of *Eclogues* as a rather lengthy ballet in which the wait off stage before Alexis went on seemed interminable; but now, weirdly, the piece seemed to be speeding along, like a DVD being fast-forwarded by an impatient thumb on the remote control.

It was at this moment, of course, that something happened that, fortunately, was a rare occurrence: Nate suffered a sudden and paralyzing attack of stage fright.

I can't do it. I can't go on, he thought as he felt his pulse pounding away in his temples. I can't! I can't remember the steps. No, don't be ridiculous, of course you do. You remember every single one of them. But it doesn't matter if you remember them or not, if you do them correctly or not.

It's just like Henri said. They're all out there lying in wait for you, they want you to fail, they want to see a train wreck—they hate me, I'm going to screw up, I'm going to let everybody down, I'm going to be booed!

I know. I can run away. Just run away. I can make a dash for the dressing room, get my clothes on—I won't even take the time to wipe this stupid makeup off my face—and then I can run out the stage door. If anybody tries to stop me, I'll tell them I'm sick. No, I'll tell them I've decided I don't want to be a dancer anymore, I was crazy to want to be a dancer in the first

place—oh my God, my God!

Dane and Genny were standing beside him.

"How're you doing?" Dane whispered.

Nate offered him a wan smile. "Fine," he lied.

"Good. See you out there."

Genny gave Dane his cue, and Dane went on stage.

Nate stared at him blankly. Dane was interacting with the farmhands, weaving in and out of them. It looked good. Then, as one by one the farmhands departed, going about their duties, Corydon began his solo. And Dane, true to his threat, was dancing his ass off. Watching him distracted Nate for a moment, but then he could feel the sick terror creeping up on him again. He knew for a fact that something horrible was going to happen, the moment he went out on that stage; and, like a condemned man waiting to be led to the execution chamber, he resigned himself to his fate.

I'm going to die, he realized. I'm going to go out there and die, have a heart attack and drop dead, right out there on the stage in front of all those people.

He could see the headlines now: *GALA AUDIENCE STUNNED BY DANCER'S SUDDEN DEATH!* and *STRESS TOO MUCH FOR UNDERSTUDY WHO WAS STUPID ENOUGH TO THINK HE COULD FILL IN FOR THE GREAT HENRI KELLER!* Well, the legitimate newspapers would be unlikely to print something like *that*. But the tabloids would have a field day with this. They'd probably come up with something like *HORROR SHOW AT THE BALLET! DANCE OF DEATH!*

He was still staring at Dane, who was well into his solo. He was mesmerizing to watch. He was doing everything Nate had seen him do in the rehearsals, but refined with additional nuances. In that inimitable way Dane had, he was Corydon to the life, and the audience seemed to be holding its collective breath as he danced.

Nate was suddenly aware that Romuald was standing behind him, once again wearing that absurd, ruinous-looking old blue-and-white-striped cotton bathrobe over his costume. He rested his hands, with the lightest of pressure, on Nate's bare shoulders, and leaned forward until his lips were almost touching Nate's ear.

"Ready?" he whispered.

Nate could feel the bristles of Romuald's false beard ticking his earlobe, could feel Romuald's warm breath on his neck.

"Yes," Nate replied, barely audibly.

Romuald kept his hands on Nate's shoulders while they both watched Dane.

"Deep breaths," Romuald urged in the same whisper. "Nice deep breaths. In, out, in, out."

Nate obeyed.

Think about something else, anything else, he told himself. Think about that day in the rehearsal room when Romuald ran across the room, showing you how Alexis should make his entrance. Remember how he looked, how he moved, how amazing that was.

Larry was standing there in the wings, too, ready to follow Nate on stage. Nate recognized the look of intense self-absorption on Larry's face: Larry was already getting himself inside his character, channeling Thyrsis's thoughts and emotions. He caught Nate looking at him, met Nate's gaze, and smiled—rather seductively, Nate couldn't help thinking. But he knew that, in a very real sense, the smile was not directed at him but at a fictional person named Alexis, who existed only in Larry's imagination.

Genny was hovering nearby, ready to give Nate his cue, but Nate instinctively knew that wouldn't be necessary, because Romuald was going to be the one to give him his cue.

"In, out," Romuald kept murmuring soothingly into his ear as Nate slowly filled and emptied his lungs. Romuald's voice was like that of a hypnotist, and as though he were succumbing to a deep hypnotic trance, Nate could feel a merciful calm descending upon his body and his mind. He forgot everything else and focused on the task at hand, already visualizing himself out there on the stage, seeing himself moving, letting that young boy named Alexis, the one Larry was thinking about, take possession of him.

It's a hot summer day, Nate thought. Hot sun beating down on me, I can smell the grass, I can hear the insects!

"In, out, in... and *go*." Romuald didn't give Nate even the slightest push. As he whispered "*go*," he simply lifted his hands from Nate's shoulders. But it was as though he had suddenly released a tightly-wound spring.

Nate ran onto the stage.

Chapter 28 Triumph Wrested from Adversity

NATE didn't know if he looked sixteen, if he looked carefree and graceful and desirable. For all he knew, he looked like an uncoordinated stumblebum. But he was dancing, he was doing the steps, and that was all that mattered. And then, thank God, Larry, that tower of strength, was out there with him, they were doing it together, and Dane was observing them, reacting to them—Nate wasn't alone, he wasn't going to have to get through it alone, he had Larry and Dane with him.

Alexis submitted to his lover's embrace, returned his caresses, then began to get bored and restless. He broke free of the older man and darted over to Corydon. He roused Corydon from his torpor, teased him, enticed him.

The typical member of an audience might be astonished to know what could go through a performer's mind while he was on stage. This was perhaps especially true of dancers, who relied so much on "muscle memory" to keep them going. Part of Nate's mind, of course, was fully involved in what he was doing from moment to moment, from one step to the next. Like a chess player, too, he was visualizing not only the present but the immediate future: *After Dane moves over there, I have to wait for two counts of eight before I go over to join him. When Dane lifts his right arm, just before that dissonant chord in the orchestra, I already have to be halfway through my turn toward him so he can get his arm around me without any delay!* And so on.

At the same time, however, another level of Nate's consciousness was perfectly free to roam, and the most incongruous thoughts could pop into a performer's mind at such times. The first thing that registered in him on this level was how weird Larry's face, and Dane's, looked with that mask-like makeup on them under the strong stage lighting. Nate had, of course, danced Mnasyllos at the dress rehearsal, and the lighting for that scene, consisting mostly of cool blues, was quite different from the hot yellowish-orange glare in which the lighting designer had chosen to bathe the start of the Thyrsis/Alexis/Corydon scene. The lighting was intended to evoke a bright, cloudless summer day. However, it looked to the audience, from Nate's much closer and infinitely more intimate viewpoint, it transformed Larry and Dane into a pair of buffed and glowering copper-skinned Greek gods, creatures from an alien world, polished bronze statues miraculously brought to life and imbued with warm, sensuously colored flesh. He realized, with a jolt of amusement, that *he* must look just as bizarre to *them*.

Mercifully delivered from his bout of stage fright by now, Nate finally risked taking a quick look out into the darkened auditorium, out of the corner of his eye. There they were, row upon row of faces, with, here and there, a piece of some woman's jewelry catching the light from the stage and flashing like a tiny spark. Nate could not only see the members of the audience, he could hear them breathing over the quieter passages in Matthias's instrumentation. So there were no monsters out there, after all. It was just another audience, although admittedly, tonight, one with a higher *per capita* income than most.

Again, out of the corner of his eye, Nate could see the blue and white stripes of Romuald's bathrobe as he stood there next to Genny in the wings. *Wow*, Nate thought, *wouldn't it be funny if Romuald forgot to take that awful old robe off and came on stage for the finale wearing it?* He had to fight back a giggle. But then, the next time he was in a position to glance toward the wings, he saw—almost to his disappointment—that Romuald had slipped off the bathrobe and was standing there bare-chested.

God, what a hot man, Nate dared to remind himself. He's every bit as hot as Dane or Larry! Why the hell shouldn't I think about that? Alexis has been sleeping with a hot older guy, too! Dane's not the only one who knows how to turn on other men, how to seduce them. When you look at Dane, look at him the way you look at Romuald when he's getting ready to fuck you!

Nate was almost beginning to enjoy himself. He closed off that upper layer of his consciousness for a moment and concentrated on what his body was doing.

Right on cue, Nate spun about and prepared to launch himself toward Dane. Then he realized that Dane wasn't there where he was supposed to be. He was at the other side of the stage, the *wrong* side. On his last diagonal move, Dane had gone to stage left instead of stage right.

Their eyes met across the seemingly vast distance that separated them. Under any other circumstances, the stunned, deer-caught-in-the-headlights look on Dane's face might have been something to relish.

Ted the conductor, mercifully, was watching the action on stage closely and saw at once what had gone wrong. He held back the orchestra, dragging the tempo, and Nate immediately took advantage of the few extra seconds this bought them: he improvised a few fast steps that carried him to stage left and brought him to Dane's side. Dane grabbed him like a drowning man who'd just been thrown a life preserver, and they were back on track. They were dancing together on what was technically the wrong side of the stage, but as they danced, they gradually worked their way back to where they were supposed to be, step by step.

The other instruments dropped out one by one, and the bass clarinet took over.

As they'd done in the rehearsals, the two dancers set the tempo, but for some reason they were both moving more deliberately than they had in any of the rehearsals. It was as though their bodies had agreed on this on the spur of the moment, without any need for conscious input. And Clifton the clarinetist, bless him, had turned his body around in his chair, just as they'd decided he should do during the rehearsals: he was watching them, following them, matching them move by move, phrase by phrase. It was as though he had taken in one huge breath at the beginning of his solo and was now expending it gradually, bit by bit, while the two men on stage intertwined their limbs.

The lighting had intensified by imperceptible degrees to the most intense, retina-searing red, like flames licking at the two dancers' flesh. The evocation of a blazing noon may have been a stage illusion for the audience's benefit, but for the two performers, the heat was real enough. It was being generated from their own near-naked bodies as they exerted themselves.

They were both sweating so hard that when Nate stretched out on the floor and Dane leaned over him, drops of perspiration rolled off Dane and fell onto Nate like a fine rain. Nate accepted them like a baptism of fire.

When he pushed himself off the floor and Dane grabbed him, he was so slippery that he almost slid out of Dane's hands. Dane's fingers reacted by digging into his waist so fiercely that Nate almost let out a yelp of pain. He fought to relax the sudden tension in his facial muscles, praying that what felt like a grimace contorting his features would pass for an open-mouthed expression of pleasure instead.

The bass clarinet solo was drawing to its close with tones of melting beauty that seemed to hang in the air before dying away into inaudibility.

Dane's back was turned away from the audience at the moment. He grinned at Nate through the lather of perspiration on his face and arched his artificially darkened and enhanced eyebrows. Thanks to that strange near-telepathy that could exist between performers at times, Nate knew exactly what Dane was thinking. Dane was asking him, *How are you doing? Really? How are you holding up?*

Fine, Nate replied mutely when it was his turn to face away from the spectators. *Couldn't be better!*

As they changed positions again, Dane's grin broadened. *Want to shoot the works?* it asked. *Give them something to really talk about?*

Sure, Nate's own bared teeth declared. Let's go for it!

Now, when Dane grabbed him and pressed his face against him, he didn't just mime embracing Nate and kissing him on various parts of his body. He crushed their bodies together with rib-bruising force, and his mouth nuzzled Nate's bare torso as he licked Nate's sweaty skin with his tongue and then lightly bit him, in three different places in rapid succession. Nate couldn't imagine what it must taste like, but there couldn't be much question about what it looked like to the audience. From somewhere in the auditorium, somebody—there was no way to tell whether the voice was male or female actually let out a moan, which was immediately followed by nervous laughter and shushing. Nate retaliated for the licking and the biting by seizing Dane's head between both his hands and, with his fingers combing through Dane's limp, sweat-soaked black hair, writhing against him in a provocative near-orgasmic shudder.

As the tidal wave of arpeggios began to surge up in the orchestra, Dane and Nate began their series of lifts. They were grappling like wrestlers. Each time he had to push himself up and entrust himself to Dane's arms, Nate pressed his feet down flat on the stage floor and flexed his knees and leg muscles until they screamed in agony. But it was worth the discomfort; he levitated himself into the fierce clasp of Dane's arms, which held him high in seeming defiance of gravity, before Nate reached down, supported himself on his partner's shoulders, and slid down Dane's body, chest to chest, their mingled sweat eliminating any hint of friction. They repeated these moves again and again, increasing the intensity each time, as the music swelled like a tsumani of sound.

Dane and Nate heard gasps from the auditorium. Either the audience was shocked and horrified by what it saw, or the two of them must be doing something right!

On the final, climactic lift, though, their luck almost ran out. Dane staggered under Nate's weight for a moment, his arm and shoulder muscles bulging and trembling from the strain, his legs almost failing to support them both; Nate, realizing at once what was happening, rolled over facedown across the broad plane of Dane's back, flung his arms around Dane's waist, and turned the lift into an improvised carry as Dane bent over at the waist, lowered his head, and let Nate get one foot back onto the floor so that Dane no longer had to support Nate's entire weight on his back. They'd pushed the envelope and taken a risk—a foolhardy one, no doubt. But it seemed to have paid off. No one in the audience could have known that the improvised moves were not part of the choreography. Slowly, Dane allowed Nate to get both feet safely planted on the floor; then he straightened himself up again, leaned over Nate and caressed him again, and refilled his depleted lungs with a very loud and sexy-sounding deep breath that carried clear over the orchestra. Out of a sense of sheer relief that they both hadn't tumbled down onto the stage floor, Nate allowed himself to melt into his partner's embrace.

Some members of the audience, indifferent to the fact that the orchestra was still playing and the dancers were still dancing, began to applaud; they were shushed.

Panting visibly and audibly for breath, Dane and Nate finished their *pas de deux* as Larry came back on stage.

Dane, Nate, and Larry finished their scene and made their exits, leaving the stage empty for what was supposed to be no more than a few seconds. In this premiere performance, though, the pause before the ballet's finale began was considerably prolonged. *This* time, virtually the entire audience burst into spontaneous applause. A grinning Ted stopped the orchestra. He waited until the tumult behind him began to die away before he raised his baton again, cueing his players to pick up where they had left off at the bars of transitional music leading to the ballet's final scene.

In the wings, Lloyd Walker was standing beside Romuald, who was getting ready to go on.

"Oh, my God. The kid pulled it off," Walker gasped.

"Did you think for a moment that he wouldn't?" Romuald asked.

"Well, you never know how they're going to react to this kind of pressure. But he really came through."

Romuald permitted himself a moment of smugness. "I knew he would. I can pick them. I know a thoroughbred when I see one."

Dane, making his exit, waited until he was in the wings, safely out of sight and earshot of the audience, before he staggered to a clumsy stop. Then he doubled over at the waist and pressed one hand to his side.

"I think I'm going to puke," he hissed. "No," he added in a whisper, using his other hand to wave off the people who moved solicitously toward him. "It's just a little spasm, here in my abdominal muscle. But shit! It hurts. It burns."

"Are you going to be able to finish?" Genny asked him, also in a whisper.

"Hell, yes. I didn't just kill myself out there to back down now."

"That's good," Genny said, "because you've only got about a minute before your cue to go back out." She began to wave to small clusters of the corps boys and girls, getting them out on stage one group at a time.

"Oh, fuck fuck fuck!" Dane chanted under his breath. Grimacing, he forced himself to straighten up. He stared at Nate, who was standing nearby, breathing hard. "Is my makeup as messed up as Nate's is?"

"You both look like hell. Yours is a little worse than his. But it's too late to do anything about it now." Genny was gesturing to Josh, who went onstage. He was followed a few seconds later by Bethany, then by Beau, and then by Romuald. "Dane, you've got to get ready," Genny warned. "I need you out there on a slow count of three. One... two...."

"Fuck!" Dane pasted a bland smile on his face and launched himself on stage.

Larry didn't need Genny's warning but joined Nate, standing shoulder to shoulder beside him.

"Ready?" Larry asked.

"I was born ready," Nate blustered, although in fact he was still desperately short of breath.

Larry suppressed a snort of laughter as Genny gave them their cue, and they joined the rest of the dancers on stage.

The finale seemed to flash by in mere seconds. Chromis and Aegle, to Mnasyllos's chagrin, exulted in their love as the other dancers swirled around them in increasingly complicated figurations. A gleeful Silenus staggered about drunkenly, weaving in and out of the dancing throng, flirting with all the young girls. Alexis, caught up in the excitement, joined in the general dance and urged Thyrsis and Corydon to do so, too. Thyrsis wasn't about to pass up on this chance to dance with abandon with his beautiful young lover, but at first Corydon stood on the sidelines, sulking. Finally, though, both Mnasyllos and Corydon gave in and mingled with the frenziedly dancing mass of bodies. As the music swept to its climax, Chromis raised Aegle high over his head in a spectacular *présage* lift. They held the pose, surrounded by a ring of jubilant, gesticulating dancers, as the music crashed to its close. All the stage lights went out in a sudden blackout, and the curtain fell.

The audience responded with a loud ovation, which, to those backstage, didn't sound like mere politeness. *Eclogues* just might be a success.

Romuald had rejected the idea, during the rehearsals, of raising the curtain to reveal the entire cast on stage so they could take a general bow. Such a general bow was fairly standard procedure in the company's

productions, but for *Eclogues* Romuald had insisted on the more old-fashioned procedure, in which the solo dancers first stepped out in front of the curtain to take their bows, individually and in small groups. The dancers of the supporting roles came out first; the leads followed. This, Romuald felt, built up a little bit of suspense.

Romuald, Josh, Beau, and Bethany went out first, holding hands. They were cheered.

Kitri took her bow, followed by Cara; both women were greeted enthusiastically.

Larry went out, and, as a long-time audience favorite, was greeted by warm applause.

Seth, Moishe, and Timothy, the three satyrs, went out and remained partly in character, leaping about, wagging their butts, and waving their arms at the audience, which responded with laughter as well as applause.

Then it was Dane and Nate's turn to go out together. Neither of them had really had a chance to fully recover his breath.

The roar that greeted them made all the applause given earlier seem half-hearted. As Dane and Nate appeared in front of the heavy red and gold curtain and the spotlight blazed on them, they were assailed and astonished by a hurricane of cheers and bravos and clapping hands.

Even Dane seemed momentarily surprised. In the combined glare of the spotlight and the house lights, he and Nate hardly resembled the mythical figures they had portrayed onstage only minutes ago. Dane looked like an athlete who had just finished a triathlon. Standing next to him, Nate was obviously an exhausted and, at the moment, dazed young man who seemed uncertain how to respond to such an extravagant display of approval. And this shy diffidence, to the audience, was infinitely more touching than any show of polished professionalism could have been. The cheers swelled louder.

Nate risked a slight smile. The applause, incredibly, was growing even louder. He reached for Dane's hand so they could step forward together and take their actual bow. Then he realized that Dane was no longer standing beside him.

Nate turned his head and saw that Dane had stepped back. With a big grin on his sweaty face, Dane was pointing to Nate with one hand, and with the other he was beckoning to the audience, urging them on. Panicking, Nate tried to grab Dane's hand and pull him forward again. Dane shook his head, then stopped pointing and beckoning and used both hands to push Nate forward toward the footlights. The audience went wild. Nate managed a smile, a quick bow, and a wave, then fled back behind the curtain. Dane, who was now laughing, blew the crowd a kiss before he retreated, too.

Walker barred Nate's path before he could take more than two steps. "Get back out there!" he whispered. "Take another bow, you two!"

"No, not both of us, not this time. Take a solo bow, Nate!" Dane said, not bothering to keep his voice down.

"Yes, go ahead, take a solo bow!" Walker hissed.

"I can't!" Nate protested, aghast at the very idea.

Romuald was standing behind Walker. "Do it!" Romuald commanded, in a tone of voice that left no room for dissent.

Dane literally pushed Nate toward the gap in the curtain.

All right, Nate thought with a flash of defiance. You want me to take a solo bow? Well, I'll show you a solo bow!

He pulled himself together as best he could, strode out front and executed a sweeping formal bow, as though he'd just finished performing a role such as the Nutcracker Prince and was elegantly costumed from head to toe, not dripping sweat from every pore, standing there bare-chested and barefoot in a pair of boldly geometrically patterned tights that adhered to his lower body like the proverbial second skin. This time, the applause was deafening. Suppressing a nervous giggle—not altogether successfully—Nate ran off just long enough to seize Dane by the wrist and haul him out front by sheer force. Dane pretended to try to pull free of Nate, who held on to him with steely determination. Their little wrestling match in front of the curtain continued for a few seconds until Nate, still gripping Dane's wrist, put his other arm around Dane's neck in an arm lock and pulled him close to him. Dane reached up with his free hand, grabbed the back of Nate's head, and kissed him. It was a kiss on the cheek, but it felt to Nate—and it looked to the audience—anything but platonic.

Now people in the auditorium were howling and screaming.

Behind the curtain, Genny turned to Romuald and Walker.

"Good God," Genny exclaimed in disbelief. "This isn't just a success. It's turning into a riot."

"Let it!" was Romuald's reckless response.

Nearby backstage, the other dancers, including Larry and Beau, were listening to the tumult and trying to sneak a peek through the gap in the curtain.

"It isn't just the women and the gay guys who are wetting their panties," an exultant Beau reported. "The straight guys are screaming their

heads off, too."

Larry scoffed. "Oh, come on, Beau! How can you possibly tell which of the men in the audience are gay and which are straight?"

"Are you kidding? My gaydar can spot a breeder in the pitch dark from fifty yards away."

Nate and Dane weren't allowed to retreat behind the curtain for more than an instant.

"Get out there again, both of you," Walker barked. "Milk it!"

This was more encouragement than Dane needed, and a temptation that probably should never have been put into his susceptible head. Grinning, he ran out front again, hand in hand with Nate. This time, they didn't rush it but lingered in front of the curtain, turning and bowing graciously to each section of the auditorium in turn.

"Kiss him!" a very deep, masculine-sounding voice suddenly bellowed from somewhere up in one of the balconies.

There were bursts of laughter immediately followed by further, general cries of "Yeah! Kiss him, kiss him!"

Dane had that devil-may-care, let's-shoot-the-works look in his eye again when he turned inquiringly toward Nate. Seeing nothing in Nate's gleeful expression to discourage him, he reached out, grabbed Nate's face in both his hands, and planted a big wet kiss right on Nate's lips. The horny bastard, true to form, even slipped Nate the tongue. The screams of approval from the audience were now deafening and, as they echoed in Nate's ears, almost frightening.

After that, the long-delayed general bow, in which everyone lined up in a row on stage and the curtain was raised to reveal the entire cast, seemed almost anticlimactic. Romuald, in his capacity as choreographer, stepped forward and took a quick solo bow. Then he walked into the wings and returned with a beaming Matthias.

Next, the flowers were brought on stage. Each of the soloists was handed a bouquet: Bethany, Josh, and Beau, for example, were given matching bunches of daffodils; Kitri and Cara received white roses; Larry and Dane had red carnations; and Romuald, in recognition of his dual role as dancer and choreographer, was honored with a somewhat larger mixed bouquet. Nate was once again taken by surprise when an enormous bouquet of dark red roses, the stems swathed in transparent cellophane and tied with dangling red ribbons, was presented to him. Then he realized that the bouquet must have been intended for Henri Keller. He extracted individual roses from the stack and handed them out to his fellow soloists, including Romuald, and to Matthias and Ted. Even after these depredations, the massive bouquet weighed down Nate's arm as he cradled it and looked like something from a gangster's funeral. Joining hands, those on stage stepped forward again to take a final bow before the curtain descended again.

Protected from the view of the departing audience by the curtain, the set was already being dismantled by the stagehands. Ordinarily at this point, immediately after a performance, Nate would have wanted nothing better than to retreat to his dressing room, where he could strip out of his costume, wipe off his makeup, stand under a hot shower, and change back into street clothes—and go home. But this was no ordinary occasion. The entire backstage area was a hubbub of activity, and Nate found himself surrounded by an excited mob of his colleagues.

"You were wonderful!" Walker told Dane, who was nearby, the center of his own congratulatory group.

Dane dismissed the compliment with a wave of his hand. "Yeah, yeah, I know I was wonderful," he said impatiently. "I don't want to hear about how wonderful I was. What I want to know is, was I any damn good?"

Romuald smiled at Dane. "You were pretty damn good."

Larry approached Dane. "Hey, hotshot, here's a little pop quiz for you." He held up his hands, palms outward, for Dane to inspect. "Which is my right hand and which is my left?"

"Aw, fuck you, Larry," Dane exclaimed good-naturedly. "I admit it: Nate saved my butt out there."

"And what about Nate!" Walker exclaimed.

"Now, *he* was wonderful," Dane declared, before anybody else could say anything. "Hot little motherfucker," he added, reaching out to muss Nate's already sweat-soaked hair. "You made me work for every second of it out there, didn't you? God damn! I'll make you pay for that, somehow." He enfolded Nate in his embrace and kissed him on the cheek.

"All right, lover boy. You're beginning to enjoy that just a little too much." It was Kitri who had spoken: still in costume, but now with her upper body swathed in a warm, voluminous paisley wool shawl, she had joined the group. She smiled at the flustered Nate and gave him a hug and kiss, too, to show him she wasn't really jealous. "I watched the whole thing, Nate. You were incredible. You looked like a million bucks out there. And the audience! They loved you."

"Ah, thanks, Kitri." Nate suddenly realized that he and Kitri's lover had just sucked face during their last curtain call together, in front of a thousand people. She was taking it rather well, all things considered!

"How's that spasm of yours?" Genny asked Dane.

"It's killing me," Dane confessed. "But like I always say, there's no medicine like applause. I feel like I could go back out there and do it all over again. How about you, Nate?"

Nate stared at him incredulously. "Are you out of your fucking mind? After that workout, all I want to do is go home and go to bed."

Dane grinned. "Well, you can't. We've still got the party to go to, remember? And baby, you're going to be the belle of the ball. So get ready to twinkle, twinkle, little star!"

"Oh, Jesus," Nate muttered. He'd forgotten all about the postperformance party. The last thing he wanted to do was submit to a meet-andgreet with the public. What he *was* tempted to do was make a dash for the nearest exit so he could go home to bed.

"I wish you wouldn't take the Lord's name in vain, Nate," Josh said. There he was, in his costume and makeup, breathing hard, his torso beaded with perspiration but otherwise undoubtedly the least excited person in the vicinity.

Nate burst out laughing, then grabbed Josh and gave him a sweaty hug. "All right. I'm sorry. And by the way, Josh... you were wonderful out there, too."

Josh, the unflappable, utterly predictable Josh. Josh's head wasn't the least bit turned just because he'd danced a solo role brilliantly in the world premiere of a ballet and had done his by no means insignificant part to make it a success. Nor would it occur to him to be the least bit resentful because he'd done so only to see Dane and Nate receive most of the adulation at the moment. Deep down inside, Josh wouldn't have cared whether *Eclogues* had been a triumph or a fiasco, or whether Nate had won over the audience as Alexis or left them cold. What mattered to Josh, as always, was the state of his friend's soul.

"Don't ever change, Josh," Nate urged. "Promise me you'll never change."

"I am absolutely drained," Dane was saying to nobody in particular. "I feel completely fucked!" (Josh winced at the epithet but said nothing.)

"Look at you two!" Beau exclaimed. "You've got red marks all over you from where you grabbed each other."

Nate looked over at Dane, then down at himself. In the bright wash of the backstage lighting, he could see that it was true: they had imprinted the marks of their fingers on the flesh of each other's shoulders, arms, and waists.

Dane twisted his head and upper torso slightly in opposite directions in a vain effort to examine his own shoulder blade. "Shit, Choirboy, I think you scratched me," he complained. "I think you actually drew blood. Probably when I almost dropped you on the last lift, and you had to grab me. Use a nail file next time, will you?"

"Sorry, Dane."

"Aw, forget about it. It was worth it. These marks will fade."

Josh spoke up. "You've got marks on you, too, Mr. Ghent. Did *we* do that? Beau and me, I mean, when we pretended to rough you up out there?"

Nate stared at Romuald's bare torso, remembering what Dane had told him about Romuald and Henri apparently having come to blows. Across Romuald's taut-muscled ribcage, where the skillful application of flesh-toned body makeup had been smeared and sweated away during the performance, a cluster of three fist-sized dark spots—the beginnings of purplish-red bruises was now clearly visible.

Romuald had instinctively glanced down at himself, and a look of dismay passed across his face. He recovered his composure immediately, though, and when he raised his head again, he met the others' curious gazes impassively.

"Oh, no, Josh," he said. "You and Beau had nothing to do with it. I think I banged into something when I came off stage. I was a little out of breath, you see, and I wasn't looking where I was going. Stupid of me."

As the dancers began to drift back toward the dressing room area, still talking excitedly among themselves, Walker drew Genny aside.

"Tell the bar to have six bottles of champagne sent to Nate's dressing room," he instructed her. "If we can afford to buy six bottles of that damn mineral water for Keller—which the son of a bitch didn't even drink!—then we can afford six bottles of bubbly for the kid, to help him celebrate. Hell, after the way he came through for us tonight, Deventer can *bathe* in it, for all I care!"

Back in his dressing room, Nate was too dazed at first to do anything more than slump down on the chair in front of the dressing table. He saw himself in the mirror. His makeup was smeared, all right; it looked like military camouflage meant to imitate dirt and grime.

He was startled when a husky young man, whom he recognized as one of the bartenders who manned the theater's bar, knocked on the door and then came in, carrying an open wooden crate containing six bottles of champagne.

"Who's this for?" Nate asked. For a moment, he almost thought it must

be another perk stipulated in Keller's contract.

"It's for you."

"For me?"

Genny had accompanied the bartender. "You have the administration's official approval to get smashed, baby," she said with a laugh. "So hurry up, open one of them."

Dane also entered the dressing room. Somewhere on the way, Dane had acquired an ice pack, which he was pressing against his stomach.

"Oh, that's heaven," he reported as he sat down. "It feels better already."

"We shouldn't have pushed it so hard when we did the lifts," Nate told him.

"The hell we shouldn't have. I could tell it looked good, and the audience *loved* it. If you're talking about that little near-slip we had, that could've happened to anyone."

"You could've really hurt yourself, though. I feel bad about that."

"Don't sweat it. The only reason it happened in the first place is that, for a split-second there, I got my wires crossed and I did with you what I was supposed to do with Keller. You know, the fakery we had to come up with at the last minute to accommodate him? I didn't brace myself enough or tense enough, plus I was starting to get tired. It'll be okay tomorrow night, you'll see. I won't have any trouble lifting you then."

Nate stared at Dane. "Tomorrow night?"

"Sure. What's the matter? Oh, I get it. You poor kid. You haven't even had a chance to think that far ahead, have you? Do you really think, even in the best-case scenario, that Keller is going to be up to dancing by tomorrow night? Of course not. They'll either have to change the program—which they'll never do, not now, not after how well it went tonight—or you'll be going on as Alexis again tomorrow night. So you better start getting used to the idea."

Nate, without thinking, once again took the name of the Lord in vain. This time, luckily, Josh was not around to hear him. Dane had matter-of-factly taken a bottle of champagne from the crate, stripped off the foil and unwound the wire from its neck, and popped the cork. The young bartender had thoughtfully provided a stack of plastic tumblers, which Dane now pressed into service.

"Drink up, Choirboy," he urged. "It'll put hair on your chest!" Which

was rather funny, considering that Dane and Nate, like their fellow male dancers, routinely shaved off their body hair when they knew that they'd be performing in a torso-baring work as they had tonight.

Larry stuck his head in the door. "Do either of you guys have your dicks out?" he demanded bluntly.

"Not yet," Dane lamented.

"Good! Because there's a mob of photographers out here who want pictures of you and Nate."

"Can't they wait until we're dressed?" Nate asked.

"No. They want candid photos of you, in costume, and Mr. Walker says to give them whatever they want. They've already cornered me, shot me from head to foot, but I'm afraid that only whetted their appetite. They're out for blood. So brace yourselves."

Larry opened the door all the way, and the photographers surged past him into the dressing room. The "mob" in fact numbered a mere half dozen, but Nate had never been the object of so much media attention. Dane, of course, knew how to work the photographers, whom he soon had taking pictures of him and Nate smiling, standing casually side by side or embracing, and raising their plastic glasses to their lips.

"Oh, my God," Nate muttered. "Wait'll my parents see this. Hugging another guy, both of us half-naked, *and* guzzling champagne."

"Suck it up, Choirboy," Dane chortled as he flashed the photographers grin after grin. "Gotta give the public what it wants!" He tousled Nate's hair, then poured a little champagne straight from the bottle onto Nate's head, making him squeal in protest. The photographers *loved* that!

More people crowded into the room. Everyone, it seemed, wanted to congratulate Nate, and the prospect of free booze was an additional enticement.

Finally, Romuald appeared. He had had time to shower and change into his fresh clothes for the party, the most astonishing outfit that Nate had yet seen him wear. Romuald sported baggy corduroy trousers in pewter gray with fine silver threads running vertically through the weave. The pants were topped by a bizarre sort of loose, slouchy sweater constructed from irregularly shaped pieces of mismatched leather assembled like a mosaic and stitched together with rawhide. Over this, he wore his red coral dancing Ganesh pendant.

"How many small animals did you have to kill to make that sweater, Professor?" the irreverent Dane asked. "Does the SPCA know about this?"

Romuald laughed. "I'll have you know this was made especially for me

by a very talented young English designer."

"It's photogenic, I guess," Dane conceded. "It would make a good stage costume."

Romuald gamely posed with Dane and Nate for still more photos.

At length, though, Romuald was the one who began rather unceremoniously throwing people out.

"Leave Nate alone for a minute," he said. "Give him a chance to unwind. And he's got to change."

Nate found himself alone in the dressing room with Romuald and six empty champagne bottles.

"Hit the shower," Romuald urged. "It'll relax you."

Not that Nate needed any encouragement: as unself-consciously as though he were alone in the room, he was already stripping out of his tights and dance belt.

"Do you mind if I stay, Nate?"

"No, not at all. Please do." For some reason, Nate wasn't surprised by the question. They were being rather formal with one another; Nate hoped it was no more than the inevitable by-product of being in the backstage area, with its relative lack of privacy. He stood nude in front of the mirror and used a palmful of mineral oil to wipe the last vestiges of makeup from his face.

He went into the shower stall and stood under the hot spray for as long as he could take it, until his skin was flushed bright pink and his pores felt emptied. When he stepped out, the main room was filled with steam, which rose toward the ceiling. Romuald handed him a towel—a delightfully warm one. Nate remembered the famous electric towel rack, which was plugged in to a wall outlet nearby.

It suddenly occurred to Nate that Romuald probably would have done this for Henri, managed the traffic in his dressing room, then stayed behind after the others left to help Henri come down after the performance. Oddly enough, Nate still didn't feel at all self-conscious, even though he was naked and toweling himself dry in front of Romuald, who had sat down in a chair and was making no attempt to hide the fact that he was looking at him with admiration and affection. What was there to be self-conscious about, after all? He and Romuald had seen each other naked often enough before.

Not as often, though, lately as I'd have liked! Nate thought.

"When I came off the solo, was it the way you wanted?" Nate asked.

"It was perfect."

Nate started to get dressed. "We took the start of the duet slower, too."

"I noticed that. It worked. I think we ought to keep it like that."

Nate looked at the other man. "Honestly, Romuald. Was it really all right? The whole thing, I mean? Did it go anywhere near the way you wanted it to go?"

Romuald smiled. "Now you're starting to sound like Dane. Trust me. It was really all right." He stood up. "Enough shop talk. Come on. We've got a party to go to. Tired?"

"Exhausted."

"You'll get your second wind. And we'll get some food into you. Then you'll feel better. Think of it as just another part of the performance. Only this time, you won't have to work nearly so hard."

They left the theater and joined the other members of the company, who walked the few blocks to the hotel in an irregular procession. The dancers were experienced quick-change artists; all of them, men and women alike, had managed to make themselves look quite presentable, and, in many cases, really glamorous.

In the hotel ballroom, the dancers descended on the buffet like so many ravenous harpies. The mythological simile, Nate couldn't help thinking, seemed appropriate, since they'd worked up their appetites performing a work based on Virgil.

Many members of the audience had already arrived and were eager to meet the performers they'd just seen on stage. Romuald and Dane were the immediate focus of attention; it took Nate several minutes before he realized that people were crowding around him, as well—and not simply because he happened to be in the other two men's vicinity. He was the object of intense interest in his own right. It was decidedly intimidating.

Nate noticed how deftly Romuald fielded the same set of questions and comments over and over again. Yes, Henri Keller was all right. He was resting comfortably. His injury didn't appear to be serious. (Henri's "indisposition" was now officially an inflammation of a knee tendon: a sudden, unexpected flare-up of an older injury.) Yes, it was a shame that he had been forced to cancel, wasn't it? But how fortunate that Nathaniel Deventer had been ready to go on in his place. Yes, wasn't Deventer a talented young dancer, and didn't he have a bright future ahead of him? Yes, hadn't Deventer and Stockton looked wonderful on stage together? Did you like the ballet? You did? Romuald was so glad to hear that. Yes, he'd enjoyed dancing Silenus; it was a small part, but he'd just wanted to be up there on stage with all of those talented youngsters. Yes, Henri Keller was all right. He

was resting comfortably. His injury didn't appear to be serious. And so on and so forth, over and over again.

Now Nate understood what Dane had meant when he'd said that Romuald was "giving the performance of his life tonight, pretending that everything is perfectly okay." Nate noticed how pale Romuald looked, how tight his reflexive smile had become, as the evening wore on. If Nate were in Romuald's place and had to keep spouting the same nonsense over and over again only to different people, he'd be getting good and drunk by now, or climbing the walls of the ballroom and screaming to be let out.

But speaking of getting drunk, Nate had helped himself to the buffet, but he'd helped himself to more of the freely-flowing champagne being offered by the waiters, as well. He was buzzed, and the combination of physical fatigue, his sheer mental relief that the performance was over, and the alcohol he'd consumed was making him feel delightfully relaxed and a bit lightheaded. He wasn't nearly as smashed as some of the other members of the company, though. Dane and Kitri were actually *dancing*, giggling inanely as they glided across the ballroom floor in a sort of waltz, and attracting a small, appreciative audience. Watching them, Nate was forcefully reminded that they were, after all, a couple, although an unorthodox one.

Several of the corps boys and girls had had a few too many, from the looks of them. Even Josh, to Nate's surprise, was imbibing: evidently, the biblical injunction to the effect that strong drink was a mocker wasn't strictly enforced by his particular sect.

Matthias joined Nate, glass in hand.

"Ah, there you are, Nate." Taking care not to spill the drinks in their hands, he gave Nate a hug. "I wanted to come backstage and see you in your dressing room to congratulate you, but I couldn't get through that crowd of admirers!"

"How'd it look from out front? From the audience, I mean?"

"It looked beautiful."

"I was afraid you might be disappointed because Keller couldn't perform."

Matthias let out a sound resembling a snort. "Disappointed, ha! Let me tell you something. There are dancers and choreographers like Romuald, who are a pleasure to work with. And then there are dancers, and choreographers, and yes, set and costume designers who make me wonder why I was crazy enough to agree to write ballet scores in the first place. Do I have to tell you which category Henri Keller fits in?" "I guess you don't."

"You and Dane, and Larry, looked so intense up there. And what a wonderful tempo you found for the duet! It was all perfect. I was, how do you say in English, I was on the edge of my seat?"

"Yes, on the edge of your seat."

"Perched on the edge of my seat, like a bird in a cage. I wanted to jump up and applaud all the way through, I didn't want to wait for the end. It was so exciting, so stimulating to watch, that it...." Matthias hesitated, as though groping for the right choice of words, and then he paid Dane and Nate what was surely, under the circumstances, the ultimate compliment: "It made me want to turn queer!"

Matthias was soon commandeered by a group of ballet patrons, who drew him aside and engaged him in conversation.

Nate realized that he'd lost sight of Dane, Larry, and Romuald. He looked around for them, then began to move around, as well.

He saw Dane come out of the alcove in one wall that led to the men's room. Dane, rather oddly, just stood there and turned his head first to his left, then to his right, as though he too was on the lookout for someone. Nate went over to join him.

"Hey, Dane."

"Oh, I'm glad you're here, Choirboy. Keep your eyes open, and if any of those reporters or photographers heads for the john, don't let them go in. Head 'em off, engage 'em in a conversation, make with the small talk, drop your pants, do whatever you have to do to distract them."

"Why? What the hell's going on in there that you don't want them to see?"

"Not what you're thinking, you dirty-minded little Choirboy, you. I *wish* a couple of guys were getting it on in there, but no. Listen. Romuald's in there, having himself a little crying jag. I'm surprised he held out this long. Don't worry, Larry's in there with him; he'll be all right."

Nate began to move past Dane toward the men's room, but Dane caught his arm.

"Don't go in there. Do you think he'd want you to see him like that? Give the guy a moment, let him have his space. Let Larry handle it, he's much better at this sort of thing than you and I put together."

Nate couldn't argue with that.

"Get your public face back on, Choirboy," Dane urged. "Play along. Remember, nothing's wrong. Don't let the Professor see how worried you are about him."

A moment later, Romuald and Larry emerged from the alcove. Romuald looked completely composed, as though nothing had happened, and smiled warmly when he saw Nate.

"I see our star is holding up pretty well to all this partying so far," Romuald said. "Are you having a good time, Nate?"

"Yes, it's great," Nate replied automatically, hoping his face and voice betrayed none of the ambivalence and concern he was feeling.

"Good! Come on, let's all have a drink. I'm ready for another drink. And there are some people who asked me to introduce you guys to them," Romuald went on breezily. "Especially you, Nate."

"Everybody wants to meet Nate," Dane said. "Everybody's hoping he'll get good and drunk so they can fight over who gets to take him home tonight. That's why I've elected myself his personal chaperone."

Larry groaned. "With *you* as a chaperone, the evening will probably end in a gangbang. That's why I'm appointing myself your official backup, right here and now. Nobody's going to assail Nate's virtue on my watch. Not unless Nate wants to be assailed, of course."

Nate found himself standing near the bar, holding court with Romuald, Larry, and Dane as a seemingly endless stream of people came up to them, were introduced or introduced themselves, and made small talk. Romuald, Nate noticed, was in fact nursing the fresh glass of champagne he'd taken, and when it was empty he switched to a plastic bottle of water—a common local brand, not Henri Keller's imported mineral water from the Swiss Alps.

Like an actor who no longer needed to consult his script, Romuald fended off the now-familiar barrage of questions and comments.

Yes, Henri Keller was all right. He was resting comfortably. His injury didn't appear to be serious. Yes, it was a shame that he had been forced to cancel, wasn't it? But how fortunate that Nate, here, had been ready to go on in his place. Have you met Nate yet? Let me introduce you to him right now. Yes, isn't Nate a talented young dancer, and doesn't he have a bright future ahead of him? Yes, didn't Dane and Nate look wonderful on stage together? Did you like the ballet? You did? I'm so glad to hear that. And so on, on and on, until Nate, standing there listening to it and occasionally participating in the pleasantries himself, wanted to scream.

God, what torture, Nate thought. What torture this must be for Romuald. These people are freaking robots, freaking battery-operated robots, you switch them on and they stand there and nod their heads and smile and yap away, and they all say the same things, over and over again!

Some relief was provided by the fact that so many people wanted to have their picture taken with Romuald and with the dancers, either one-onone or in various combinations. Nate dutifully posed, again and again, until his facial muscles ached from the constant broad smiling and he was beginning to feel more than a little robotic, himself.

He drank more champagne.

The crowd, mercifully, was beginning to thin out.

"All right, you lushes," Larry said to Nate and Dane. "It's time to break this up. Romuald's going to have Keller's limo take you guys home, as many of you as can fit into it. The driver's starting to get bored from sitting outside all this time, so he's not going to mind making the rounds to drop you all off. So goodnight."

"Aren't you coming with us?" Dane asked.

"No. Romuald has to stick around here until all of the big shots have left. Well, he doesn't *have* to, but he feels an obligation, you know?" Larry lowered his voice. "And then I'm going to take him home. I'll probably spend the night at his place; I've already told Cara. Romuald keeps saying he's perfectly all right, but I'm not going to let him be alone tonight. I doubt if he's going to be able to get to sleep, not right away, certainly. I'll sit up with him; he might want somebody to talk to."

Through the alcohol that had numbed him, Nate absorbed this information. "I want to say goodnight to him."

"Sure," Larry said. "Come on."

"We won't leave without you, Choirboy," a slightly drunk and giggly Dane promised. "Remember, I'm responsible for you!"

"That's a laugh. You're not responsible for yourself," Kitri retorted.

Larry led Nate to where Romuald was standing beside Walker; both men were engaged in conversation with a small group of exceptionally welldressed men and women.

"Goodnight, Mr. Walker," Nate said.

"Oh, are you leaving? I hope you enjoyed yourself, Nate. Goodnight. And thank you," Walker said.

Romuald's eyes were unnaturally bright with fatigue. He was still clutching a water bottle.

"Goodnight, Nate. Are you going home with the others in the limo? Good. I... I will talk to you tomorrow. You take care of yourself, now, Nate, and sleep well."

I don't want to go home, Nate wanted to plead. I don't want to leave you. Let me stay with you, Romuald. Let me be with you. Let me... let me love you!

Instead, he said, "You, too. Goodnight, Romuald."

Larry accompanied Nate part of the way back toward the exit.

"Don't worry about a thing, Nate," Larry promised. "I won't let him out of my sight. Maybe I can get him to talk, instead of keeping it all bottled up inside him. I know it may not seem like it right now, but I promise you, it's all going to be all right. You'll see."

"I know. Thanks, Larry. Goodnight."

Dane, Kitri, Cara, Nate, Beau, Josh, and Bethany all piled into the back of the limousine. Even with all their bags and the various bouquets of flowers, including Nate's massive sheaf of roses, there was still plenty of room; so when they saw Timothy and Moishe standing on the sidewalk outside the hotel, talking, they invited them inside, as well.

Nate fell asleep during the short ride, with his head pillowed on Josh's shoulder. Beau shook him awake. They said goodnight to the others, then went inside the apartment building and upstairs, with Beau carrying the bouquet of red roses.

"I'm too wired to go to bed right away," Beau warned. "I think I'll watch some TV, and maybe do some text messaging. I can't wait to tell everybody about tonight. Don't worry, I'll keep the sound turned down, so it won't bother you."

"Don't you worry. I'm so tired I bet I can sleep through anything."

Like an automaton, Nate undressed, brushed his teeth, and crawled into bed. He had barely assumed his usual position, on his stomach with his face buried in the pillow and both arms tucked under it, hugging it, before he fell asleep.

CHAPTER 29 *Ho Pais Kalos*

NATE woke up in the morning in the cool darkness of his bedroom, and as he lay there in bed, luxuriating in the sensation of not yet being fully alert, he thought he detected the strong scent of roses in the air. He turned over and saw the bouquet that had been presented to him on stage the night before, an explosion of crimson on his nightstand. The flowers were neatly arranged in the cloisonné dragon vase that Kenichirou had sent to Nate, which was filled with water. Even in this dim light, it made a magnificent display. Beau must've done it before he'd gone to bed, while Nate was fast asleep.

Then Nate saw that Beau had retrieved the card envelope from the bouquet and placed it, too, on the nightstand. Nate opened the envelope and pulled out the card.

He was puzzled by what he read, or more accurately, what he read but couldn't understand: the words *HO PAIS KALOS* printed in large block letters. Underneath, Romuald had signed his first name in his characteristic large round hand, with the tail of the final *d* extended in a little flourish that backtracked to underline the entire name.

Beau and Nate rehashed the previous evening's events over breakfast.

"Thanks for putting the flowers beside my bed, Beau."

"I wanted to surprise you. You were out like a light."

"It *was* an exhausting night. But worth it, I guess. The performance went okay. As for the party, I wonder if anyone actually found a husband on Find A Husband Night?" Nate asked.

"It'll be interesting to find out. If any of the guys did score, he won't be shy about talking about it. I may not have gone home with anybody—well, come to think of it, I came home with the star of the show, didn't I? But I still made out okay. Just look."

Beau showed Nate the stack of business cards he had acquired at the party.

"Now I have to start sorting them into four piles," Beau said. "Namely:

Throw Out, Save For Future Reference, Wait For Him To Call, and the allimportant Don't Wait For Him To Call—Call Him First."

Nate had to laugh. "You're incorrigible."

Nate was eager to get to the theater; after breakfast, he and Beau stuffed fresh changes of rehearsal clothes into their bags and left the apartment together.

It was early. The few other dancers they met upon their arrival congratulated them warmly for their performance on the previous evening. They found Larry warming up in one of the rehearsal rooms.

"How's Mr. Ghent doing?" Beau demanded.

"Fine. We sat up and watched all the crap on late night cable TV and talked. Finally, I got him to go to bed and try to get some sleep, and I slept, too—on the couch, Beau, so you can wipe that smirk off your face. Then we had breakfast. He's a good cook. It was nice."

"What'd you talk about?"

"Oh, you know. The performance, of course. Then this and that. Guy stuff."

And that was all that Larry ever told anybody about the night he spent in Romuald's apartment. If Romuald confided in him and cried on his shoulder, which was what everyone who was "in the know" assumed had happened, Larry didn't share the details, not even with Cara.

The three men did some *barre* work. After almost an hour, Romuald appeared in his usual colorful workout attire but looking a bit pale and tired. They greeted him. Romuald seemed to perk up at the sight of Nate, who tried to conceal his anxiety as he returned Romuald's smile.

"Ah, there's my boy. What are you doing here so early?"

"Oh, just working out a little, and getting ready to take class."

"What, as though nothing out of the ordinary happened last night? Do you have any idea how extraordinary you were? All three of you," Romuald added, including Larry and Beau in the conversation.

Nate gave a rueful little laugh. "Thanks for the compliment, but what I do know is how stiff I felt when I woke up this morning. That's why I can't afford to slack off or change my usual routine."

"Maybe you and Dane pushed yourself a little too hard last night."

"I don't think so, I think we were just kind of pumped. Anyway, I feel much better now. I usually do after an early morning workout."

"That's good. We can't afford to have you injure yourself. As for that scamp Dane, I gather he's not here. I imagine he's still in bed, sleeping late?"

Larry spoke up. "I can't say for sure, but that's probably how the smart money would bet." He hesitated. "Ah, Beau? Come with me for a minute, will you? I want to show you something."

"Huh? What?" Beau asked. He was a little slow on the uptake this morning.

"Just something, okay? It's in my locker. In the locker room? Not here?"

"Oh." It dawned on Beau that this was Larry's far-from-subtle way of hinting that Romuald and Nate might want to be alone for a few moments.

Larry dragged Beau off, and Nate, alone with Romuald, felt oddly tongue-tied.

"Speaking of injuries, and avoiding them," he said at last. "How's Henri? Have you heard anything about how he's doing?"

"He's doing as well as can be expected. I just came from the hospital, in fact. He's already complaining about everything and making life miserable for the staff, which is an encouraging sign."

"Do they know if his knee is going to be all right?"

Romuald shot Nate a coolly appraising look. "We both know perfectly well that there's nothing wrong with his knee that wasn't wrong before, don't we?"

"I'm sorry—"

"Don't be. You have nothing to be sorry for. When I took Dane into my confidence last night and shared my sordid little secret with him—because he had every right to know the truth—I did ask him to be discreet, as discreet as someone like Dane can be, but I also left it up to him whether or not to tell you before you went on. I was rather afraid it might throw you off, add to the pressure. It didn't. In any event, I'd have told you today if you didn't already know.

"At least Henri has agreed to fly back to Europe and go back into rehab," Romuald went on. "The doctor and I more or less bullied him into it. Maybe he can salvage his career, and his life. If not, he'll have to crash and burn without me there to pick up the pieces this time. This means, of course, that he's going to have to cancel all of his appearances here. You and Beau will have to step up to the plate and do the rest of the performances of *Eclogues*. Which suits me just fine." "We'll do it," Nate said. "We won't let you down."

"I know that you won't—neither of you. I'll tell Beau the news. It's not official yet, but it will be, very soon. We've managed to keep the press off the scent so far. Mr. Walker is terrified there'll be a scandal, and although of course I'd like to avoid that, for the company's sake, personally I could care less. I'm done being Henri's enabler and covering up for him. I should have stopped doing it long ago." Romuald let out his breath in a long sigh. "Right now Henri is feeling extremely sorry for himself, and extremely angry at me. And I'm feeling drained. What's that expression you Americans have, when there's no petrol in the tank? 'Running on empty'?"

"Yes."

"That's me. Running on empty. And about to grind to a stop. I need a refill badly. In every sense of the word. Have you had your breakfast yet?"

"I had my usual when I got up, cereal and yogurt."

"Come have a second breakfast with me, something a little more substantial."

"All right."

They went across the street to the coffee shop, where Romuald ordered the breakfast sandwich: a scrambled egg and a slice of ham on a toasted English muffin. Nate had the same. As they ate, their conversation flagged, but not in a way that felt awkward. Then Nate remembered something.

"Ah. Mr. Ghent?"

"Yes, Nate? But why so formal all of a sudden?"

"I mean, Romuald. The roses, last night. This was attached to them." Nate pulled the envelope out of his pocket and handed it to Romuald. "I'm sorry, I opened it without thinking—"

"Oh, that's all right. In all the turmoil, no one thought to change the card. We should have done a new one for you." Romuald pulled the card out of the envelope and looked at it. A slight smile creased his lips. "I bet you're wondering what this says?"

"Ah...."

"It's no secret. Back in ancient Greece, as I'm sure you know, the vase painters would often write inscriptions on their vases. There's a whole separate category of such inscriptions that are called 'the *kalos* inscriptions'. Sometimes it's a guy's name, as in 'So-and-so *kalos*', which means 'So-andso is beautiful'. And on other vases it's the phrase '*ho pais kalos*', which means 'the boy is beautiful'. One famous inscription reads 'the boy is beautiful, and he danced in honor of Apollo'." Romuald smiled. "I imagine you must be thinking that Henri is getting a bit long in the tooth to be described as a boy, beautiful or otherwise."

"Not at all. I guess when you—" Nate was about to say, *when you love somebody*, but for some reason he checked himself. "When you're close to somebody, you don't really think about things like age."

"No, you don't. There are a lot of things you don't think clearly or logically or sensibly about."

"The roses were beautiful. I took them home with me last night."

"As well you should have. I'm glad you enjoyed them."

"I have them on display in my bedroom, next to my bed." *Where I have your photo on the wall*, Nate wanted to blurt out, but he managed to restrain himself. "I don't know why I'm telling you that," he admit. "I'm kind of rambling, aren't I? I don't know why."

"Maybe it's because there's something you would like to say to me, or ask me, and you're hesitating, for no good reason. I'd like to think that you and I can talk about anything with each other quite freely. Last night, in front of all those people, we had to keep up appearances, and I wasn't quite myself, for obvious reasons. But now it's just you and me again, isn't it?"

"Yes. Finally. I guess one thing I'd like to know is...."

"Come on, Nate, out with it. For God's sake, stop all this sudden handling me with kid gloves. I assure you, I'm not going to crumble."

"Okay. Was I really all right last night? You're not just saying I was to be polite and make me feel good? Or because you have... certain personal feelings for me?"

"Listen. I'll tell you something I've learned. After dancing for all these years, the strange thing about choreography, the thing I still haven't entirely gotten used to, is that somebody else has to do the actual dancing for you. You're itching to go out there and do it yourself, but you can't. You have this sort of ideal picture inside your head of what it should look like and how it should go. But it can never really be that way, that good, not the whole way through. Not when you do it yourself—that's the irony—and certainly not when other people are trying to do what you've asked them to do. The most you can hope for is that for a few moments here and a few moments there, you watch it and you think to yourself, 'Yes, that's it, that's what I had in mind'. And once in a while, again just for those few moments here and those few moments there, a dancer will do that something extra that takes you

completely by surprise, and you think, 'That was absolutely fucking brilliant, what's wrong with me, why didn't I think of that?' Well, last night everybody gave me those few moments here and those few moments there of satisfaction, but you and Dane gave me those precious moments of surprise. And I thank you for it. Thank you, luv."

"You're welcome. I guess we should be getting back across the street. We don't want to be late for class. And I'd like to be there when you tell Beau the news about the rest of the performances of *Eclogues*. He'll be so excited. This could actually be a big break for him. It's not every corps boy who gets to do a solo part in the entire run of a ballet, let along a new ballet."

"True. But before we go, I have something else I want to say to you first, Nate."

"Okay. What?"

"I've been rehearsing this speech in my mind for some time. Maybe this isn't the time or the place for me to try to give it at last. I don't know. And maybe there's no need for much of a speech, after all. Just a few words." Romuald hesitated. Then he spoke in a rush of emotion.

"I love you. I want to be with you. I want to see if the two of us can work something out that will be good for both of us. No, don't say anything, not yet. Henri and I are finished. I want you to know that. It's over. And maybe I don't have the right to ask anything of you, not right now, when I feel so... so damaged, Nate, and like such a failure when it comes to relationships. Perhaps it's not fair to you. Too much to ask, for you to take a risk on me. But I love you. I can't help it. So there you have it."

Nate had fantasized about this moment, imagining that it might happen in Romuald's apartment some night after they'd made love, or in an elegant restaurant over a candlelit dinner, or during a walk in the park. He hadn't pictured the two of them sitting opposite each other at a little table in the coffee shop, with their dirty plates, cups, and utensils on the table top between them. It didn't matter. The coffee shop, with its strong smell of coffee beans and its hubbub of early morning customers, was suddenly, magically transformed into the most beautiful, romantic place on earth.

"I love you, too. I was afraid to say it before, because I didn't want to put any pressure on you. But now I'm not afraid of anything. So that's settled, then. All the rest of it, everything you're concerned about, Romuald, can be worked out later. Come on. It's time for us to get back to work."

They rose from their chairs as matter-of-factly as though they'd been discussing some prosaic business matter. But then their eyes met, and Nate

found himself once again basking in the radiance of Romuald Ghent's almost boyish smile.

"I feel better," Romuald declared. "I feel as though the worst is behind us, somehow. You always have that effect on me."

"I'm glad," Nate said.

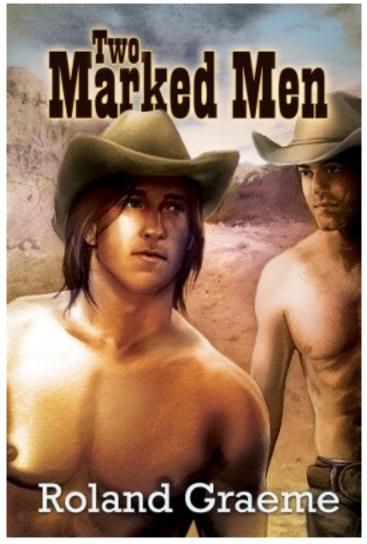
As they left the coffee shop and crossed the street back to the theater, Romuald slipped his arm around Nate's shoulders.

"You affect me in many ways," Romuald teased him. "Some of which are not suitable for public display."

Then, putting his lips close to Nate's ear and lowering his voice to a whisper, he added, "The boy is beautiful, and he will dance in honor of Apollo."

ROLAND GRAEME, a native of Pennsylvania, lives in Buffalo, New York. Although he earned a PhD in English literature, he long ago realized that the Halls of Academe could not contain his overactive imagination. He has written both fiction (most of it erotic) and classical music criticism. An enthusiastic although spectacularly untalented amateur musician and artist, he is also interested in literature, history, and world cultures and religions. Like so many writers, he is a cat fancier and finds it easier to work with a feline in his lap.

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