

Loose Id



# ELECTRIC Melty Tingles

K. Z. SNOW



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## *Electric Melty Tingles*

*K. Z. Snow*



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## **Electric Melty Tingles**

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# Chapter One

1970

Louie was, I swear, the hardest-working woman in show business. Not like James Brown was the hardest-working man in show business, although her splits did put his to shame. As I watched her hit the floor again like a drafting compass with a broken hinge, I could almost feel my testicles parting company and landing like finials on either side of my pelvis. The other men at Oliver Duncan's bachelor party must've felt the same; they all winced in unison, even as they cheered.

"Louie Louie," the dancer's none-too-original signature song, grated out of a battered 8-track player. I amused myself by sipping a martini at the wet bar and watching Oliver's reactions to the bumping, grinding, and boob jiggling going on just inches from his face. He seemed to be enjoying himself. Flushed to his hairline, he chortled and squirmed. Then he teasingly stuck out his tongue as Louie began undoing his necktie and unbuttoning his shirt.

That's when I began to squirm. Suddenly, the scene wasn't so amusing anymore. I was watching someone undress and fondle my best friend. I was watching Oliver behave in a sexually suggestive way, which was something I'd never before had to witness. Seeing his interaction with the dancer wasn't the same as accepting the fact he was getting married. The most I'd seen him do with Naomi, his betrothed, was put an arm around her or give her a rather sanitized peck now and then. Louie, however, was coaxing out his inner beast. Coaxing out Oliver's inner beast was something only I was allowed to do. In the privacy of my imagination.

I looked around the enormous, handsome hotel suite for some distraction. None was available. I couldn't even engage in drunkenly senseless conversation, since every pair of eyes in the room was trained on the stripper.

"Excuse me," I said to the bow-tied bartender. He was a little older than I, maybe in his midtwenties, and none too shabby. But he too was distracted. I leaned farther across the bar. "*Excuse me.*"

Yeah, the deaf SOB was straight, like everybody else at this godforsaken bash.

His gaze flickered reluctantly in my direction.

"Could I have another one, please?"

Why the hell not? I didn't have to drive home. A limo was at the ready to shuttle around whichever partygoers weren't staying at the hotel. Oliver's father wasn't only footing the bill for this suite at the Pfister, the drinks, and the dancers, he'd arranged for safe transportation.

Christ, what a night. I glanced through wreathing cigarette smoke in Oliver's direction. Louie was sitting on his lap now, her legs parted on either side of his hips, and doing a slow hump as Smokey Robinson crooned, "Ooh, baby, baby." I looked away. Nope, this wasn't so much fun anymore.

My gaze wandered to the windows. Outside, city lights sparkled in the darkness of the August night. I would've rather been out on the Avenue, cruising for sailors. Not that I'd ever cruised for anybody, much less men in uniform, but I'd heard about such things. The sailors came to Milwaukee regularly from the Great Lakes Naval Training Center and sauntered down the sidewalks in pairs and groups. They were as much a part of the cityscape as the glowing weather flame atop the Wisconsin Gas Building.

To me, anyway.

I often watched them—cute caps set at jaunty angles above their dress-blue jumpers, Vs of white undershirts visible at their necklines, pants hugging their round asses—and thought they looked like fuckable dolls. I had no clue how to interpret each man's swagger, no clue what it was that set the gay ones apart or how exactly to go about approaching them. So I simply watched and dreamed and, back at home, sometimes jerked off while I imagined a bold recruit smiling at me as he took off his hat. The hat removal was, in my fantasies, always an invitation, the prelude to an indescribably thrilling encounter.

"Hiya, cutie."

Startled, I jerked to the right. A dazzling, gap-toothed grin and cloud of perfume hit me. At my side stood a woman in a neon pink negligee, who immediately began smoothing circles onto my back. She had straight bluish black hair only slightly longer than her pasted-on eyelashes.

"Uh...hello." I had to be polite. It was Oliver's bachelor party, and his father had put out beaucoup bread for it.

"I'm Krysti," chirped my unwanted companion. "What's *your* name?"

"Ned. Just...Ned." Well, it wasn't *just* Ned, but she didn't need to know the Surwicki part.

My attention funneled back to the party. Krysti's presence reminded me that Louie wasn't alone. Darryl Duncan, Oliver's older brother and the temporary holder of the family purse strings, had hired a troupe of three dancers. Flame-haired Louie, vivacious as she was, couldn't possibly cater to all nineteen men in attendance.

Krysti tucked some stray strands of hair behind my ear. I tried to inch backward as inconspicuously as possible.

"Wouldja like a little something special, Just Ned? Want me to boogaloo down your Broadway?" Her fingers danced down my shirtfront to the waistband of my trousers.

Uh-oh. A little something special from the Electric Eurydice didn't appeal to me whatsoever. Not unless there was a sailor lurking beneath that lingerie.

"Woooo, go for it, man!"

I tilted past Krysti to look in the direction of the voice, although I already knew whose it was. Oliver, who'd either slid or been pulled from his chair, sat on the floor with his shirt open and zipper down, waving a beer bottle. His hold on the neck was precarious. I worried the bottle might slip from his curled fingers and thump him on the head. He was trying to point at me but couldn't seem to get his forefinger fully straightened.

From all indications, he was rip-roaringly drunk.

I'd never seen him like this. He drank, yeah, but never to excess. Considering the occasion, I supposed overindulgence was understandable. He was only doing what a man was supposed to do.

Being vulnerable to the charms of scantily clad women fell vaguely into the same category. As did getting married.

"Whatcha waiting for, Schnickelfritz?" he called out with a sloppy grin I found disarming as hell. "Get that cherry popped!"

Oh God, why did he have to holler about my "cherry," and when was he going to stop calling me Schnickelfritz? Each one of us was only half-German. Besides, it sounded so fucking *silly*. But I supposed there were worse names.

Krysti fired him a look. "We don't do that sort of thing," she said with snippy indignation. "We're entertainers."

"That's okay," I mumbled. "My cherry's already been popped." Not by a female, granted...

Louie, now sitting in the chair above Oliver and gliding her hands inside his open shirt, leaned over and whispered in his ear.

Oliver lifted his eyebrows and pulled down his mouth. "Pardon, mademoiselle," he said to Krysti in perfect, slurred French. He swung his raised arm to his midsection to affect a bow of apology, but he swung it too hard. Beer shot out of the bottle and splashed onto Louie's inner thigh. She yelped and

fell backward, Oliver topped onto his side, and the room erupted into hoots and guffaws.

"Excuse me," I said to Krysti.

I hustled over to the guest of honor to make sure he was all right. Kneeling beside him, I eased the bottle out of his hand.

"Hope you're planning to replace that," he said as I got him to sit up.

"Don't worry about it." I twisted around and set the bottle on a cluttered coffee table. "Just worry about one of these bozos tripping over your ass."

More music cut a tinny swath through the raised voices in the room. Stevie Wonder, "Signed, Sealed, Delivered." To me, the song was like a bad portent.

All three entertainers were dancing now, slinking and shimmying from man to man, trying to tease some reaction from their alcohol-saturated libidos. The third woman, a blonde named Misty, let Curtis Orton pluck maraschino cherries from her cleavage. Two guys on a love seat pulled Krysti down between them, and Darryl swayed with his hands on Louie's hips. The fact he was married didn't seem to deter him.

"They'll do it for enough money, you know," Oliver said to me. His hand rested on my leg.

"Do what?" I felt a little foggy myself.

"Handjob, blowjob, maybe even fuck. What's-her-name just told me."

"*Handjob, blowjob, fuck.*" Those words alone, coming from Oliver's mouth, made a barbed tingle clutch at my groin. I wanted to lower him back to the floor, carefully crawl on top of him, and kiss him for hours on end as I finished the undressing Louie had begun. Even disheveled, he was a knockout. His sable hair was charmingly mussed, his heavy eyelids gave the rich darkness of his irises a sultry cast, and his lips bore a scrim of moisture.

"I'm not interested," I said, trying hard not to focus on his mouth.

"Don't be uptight about it. Money's not an issue. And I'm pretty sure Darryl brought along a box of rubbers."

"I wouldn't be interested even if they were full-body rubbers." It was the biggest hint I'd ever dropped, but it fell unnoticed.

Shit, I'd wanted to get cozy with Oliver from the time we were fourteen years old. After almost seven years of longing, the most touch I'd ever gotten from him were playful shakes and friendly hugs and an occasional clap on the back or shoulder. Buddy stuff.

Considering I'd had a deep, dark, smoldering crush on him since high school, buddy stuff was more tormenting than satisfying.

"Aw, c'mon, Ned, loosen up," Oliver said, moving his hand aimlessly on my thigh, driving me crazy. "I want you to have a good time."

"I'm having a good time just watching all you preppies get stupid."

"Please don't use that word. Ever since that stinko movie came out, I've been given enough shit just because of my name."

He meant *Love Story*, of course. Ryan O'Neal's character was named Oliver, and Ali MacGraw, as his snotty bitch of a girlfriend, called him "Preppie." The reference made me grin.

"I'll lay off the word," I said, "if you lay off trying to hook me up with some Salome."

"Deal. So, you got a new secret love or what?" Oliver's accompanying wink was so spazzy, I thought for moment he had something in his eye.

"I might."

"Yeah?" Smiling, Oliver lifted his shirttail and dabbed at a corner of my mouth.

Heat shot through me.

"Piece of pimiento from your olive," he murmured.

"Thanks."

He kept looking at me. His besotted, beguiling smile had shrunk and taken on a different quality. It made me feel way more than I wanted or needed to feel, especially on the eve of the eve of his wedding.

A young man I didn't know brought deliverance. He stumbled into us, grabbed Oliver by the shoulders, shook him, and bellowed, "Olé Ol-lie!"

I squinted up at the numbskull. His cheeks puffed out as a belch apparently rumbled up from his stomach—at least I hoped it was a belch—and his head wobbled a little. The guy was one of Oliver's friends from Dartmouth. I was out of their loop. I had a ponytail and went to Milwaukee School of Engineering and had always called Oliver, Oliver.

As Numbskull toddled away, Oliver suddenly clamped my face between his hands and gave me both the worst and best kiss of my life. Impishly, his smile widened for a second. Then he bumbled off the floor like a sack of flour with feet, gave my head an affectionate rub, and wove through the room to receive more olés.

My lips prickled. I touched my fingers to them, trying to relive the feel of his mouth on mine, that startling silky softness and humid heat, the subtle poke of his whiskers. Of course there'd been no tongue. The kiss hadn't been that kind of kiss. But it still had sucked the air right out of my lungs. And the room. And the entire atmosphere. If he did it again, I vowed, I would kiss him back and make it last. Fuck what people thought.

A hand appeared in front of my face, prompting me to look up. Smiling down at me was a clean-cut blond guy whose name I couldn't remember.

"Need some help getting it up?"

I blinked at him. *No, no, you moron. Not getting "it" up, just getting up. From the floor.*

"No, thanks. I can manage."

I bounced unsteadily to my feet. The guy grabbed my shoulders to steady me.

"You look as out of place here as I feel," he said affably. "No offense."

I tried to gather my wits, but the effort wasn't going well. "Yeah, well, I don't go to Dartmouth."

"I'm not a college guy either. My name's Russ. Who're you?"

"Ned. A friend of Oliver. From high school." My attention finally found its way to Russ. He was broad shouldered and very well built, and his neatly combed hair was shiny as a polished helmet.

We shook hands. His grip was so firm it made me reel a little. More and more he reminded me of...of...

*One of those sailors.*

"I don't know anybody here," Russ said. "I just work for Blumenthal's. You know, the caterer." He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "All I did was deliver the hors d'oeuvres. Then Darryl invited me to hang out."

"Won't you get in trouble with your employer?" Damn, my throat felt dry.

"Nah. I called him hours ago. Long as I get the van back in one piece, Felix don't care how I spend the rest of the evening." Russ looked toward the bar and the nearby hors d'oeuvres table. "Can I, uh...get you a drink or some food or something?"

"Thanks, but I'm set." He was such a nice, simple guy and seemed so utterly guileless, I had trouble entertaining the notion he might be hitting on me. So maybe he wasn't. Maybe he just felt obligated to earn his invitation to the party by doubling as a waiter. "I'm leaving soon, anyway."

Russ's smile collapsed. "You are?"

"Yeah. Oliver's father hired a limo..."

"Oh. So you live in the city?"

"I have an apartment near MSOE."

Nodding, Russ licked his lips. "I think I've seen you around."

"Really? Where?" More to the point, why would he even remember me? I didn't exactly look like Robert Redford.

Russ's voice lowered. "Castaways. The Rooster." His sky blue eyes fixed on my face.

My lips parted; shock and germinal excitement had instantly made my breath go shallow. Castaways and the Rooster were queer bars. "What're you saying?" I asked in a strained monotone.

"Just wondering if you'd like some company on that limo ride."

\* \* \*

I hoped my face and voice didn't give me away as I said my good-byes to Oliver and thanked Darryl. I even had a surge of guilt as Oliver gave me another of those buddy hugs. It was an exceptionally warm and prolonged hug this time, and although it didn't come with a kiss, it came with plenty of feeling. I had to keep reminding myself the feeling was platonic, not romantic; I wasn't betraying him.

Russ and I didn't walk out together. I left the suite first, and he met me at the elevator. We rode down to the lobby and waited for our ride mostly in silence, although I did ask Russ how he planned on getting the delivery van back to Blumenthal's. He said once we got to my place, he'd just tell the limo driver he'd changed his mind about going home and instead wanted to ride back to the hotel and keep partying. The limo had to return to the Pfister, anyway.

The vehicle's darkened windows and partition between driver and passenger sections allowed for absolute privacy. That was something the meticulous Darryl must have insisted on, just like he'd insisted on bringing rubbers to the party. He'd likely considered the possibility some bachelors would want to go on a joyride. Or, even more likely, he'd intended to score some action himself. An orgy on wheels would be a lot safer than an orgy in a hotel, where Darryl Duncan was surrounded by people who knew him. And knew about his wife.

I instructed the driver to take the scenic route along the lakefront, which was five or six blocks to the east, and then cut west somewhere around North Avenue and head back south to my apartment building on Juneau. He was courteous enough not to point out there wouldn't be much lakefront to see at night.

Russ and I didn't waste time on small talk. We knew why we were there. And that was about *all* I knew, since the howling wind of lust had by now blown every last shred of thought from my mind. I hadn't been with a man in nearly a month.

As soon as the limo started rolling, we were all over each other. The fingers of my right hand scrabbled at Russ's shirt buttons while the fingers of my left headed south. The crotch of his trousers was packed with rock-solid heat. Once I got enough of his shirt open, I clawed at his undershirt to feel the tough mounds of his chest and mouth the nubs of his nipples. I grabbed the straining ridge of his dick, and he kept squeezing mine. His raw reactions—the thrusts and gyrations of his hips, the animalistic growling—turned me on and spurred me on even more. This guy obviously didn't believe in restraint.

Christ, was I glad. Excitement razored through my muscles, freeing heat and sweat. Urgently, Russ and I shifted and grunted as we struggled to get our pants down, peeling away our underwear with them. As soon as my dick sprang free, precum glistened at its hole. Russ was on my cock like a bunny on a carrot.

Just before his mouth closed over it, he coarsely whispered, "You little whore."

Whimpering, I wilted against the seat, arms flung uselessly to the sides, and closed my eyes. For all I cared, he could've called me Nixon's little whore. My cock was where it needed to be.

Russ pulled hard, with his hand *and* mouth—too hard for comfort, really—but I wasn't about to complain. His free hand worked my balls to the brink of hurt.

"Easy," I gasped.

Russ ignored me. This was probably his sexual shtick, getting rough and treating his tricks like tramps. Fine. It didn't matter. The heralds of orgasm had already begun to blare through whatever discomfort I felt. He finally released my aching nuts, jammed his fingers beneath my ass, and gave it a fierce squeeze. With a series of jerks, I pushed my prick farther into his mouth. I felt a big, nerve-twanging vacuum suck as he simultaneously thrust a finger, or maybe a sapling, up my ass.

I thought I glimpsed the Old North Point Water Tower as I came, but I might've just had phallic symbols on my mind. The contractions of my climax were so lusciously strong I couldn't keep my eyes focused. So I just gave in to the feeling. For a blissful, brief moment, I let the city outside dissolve into the darkness.

Once the throbbing had stopped, or nearly stopped, the cool air of the limo's interior suddenly slid over the lingering moisture on my dick. A new set of shivers compounded my climax shivers. Russ had removed his demanding mouth from my quiescent cock. I clumsily pulled up my underwear and pants.

"Are you a vegetarian?" Russ asked from far away.

*Huh?* "No." All I wanted to do now was fall asleep.

"You taste like a vegetarian."

What was he, a cum connoisseur? "Must be the olives from my martinis." An image of Oliver wiping that bit of pimiento from my mouth flashed through my mind and tugged at my heart. I wanted *him* to be with me, not this stranger.

"Yeah, you did taste a little salty."

I chuckled as my gaze wandered to the window. I didn't know if Russ had shot or not. He'd probably ask me to finish him if he hadn't, but I didn't want to think about that right now. I just wanted a few seconds alone with my fondest fantasies, a few seconds to feel wistful.

"You got a boyfriend?" he asked.

I paused, then shook my head. An unremarkable streetscape silently unwound beyond the tinted window. I wondered vaguely if I'd ever got it on with any of the young men I saw on the sidewalks. Not likely; I hadn't been with that many guys. In fact, I hadn't even gone public with my sexuality. It was still a huge, stressful secret, at least when I wasn't in the bars, and my indulgences were smaller secrets huddled within it.

"Then let's have some more fun," Russ said.

He lifted my hand. I felt it connect with a warm, smooth column of flesh.

Okay, I thought, okay. Let's do what we have to do. Let's have our shameful, secret fun.





## Chapter Two

*The Brady Bunch* provided a yammering accompaniment as the four of us filled our plates from platters and bowls and dug into our dinners. My parents' house was very TV-centric.

I hadn't lived there in a couple of years, which was truly foolish of me. I could've saved a lot of money if I'd kept my ass at home while I went to school. But there were just some things more important than money. Like freedom.

"You're acting weird," said my little sister. Pam was fifteen and had a waning crush on Bobby Sherman. Aside from that, she was generally tolerable.

"Yeah? Well, I was born this way. What's your excuse?" Even when Pam was the perfect little bitch, I couldn't help ribbing her. It was hard to get mad at a teenage girl. They had enough going on in their lives, even if most of it was hormonal and the rest was overdramatized.

Pam made a face at me.

"Don't start," my father mumbled around a wad of pot roast.

"Eat your lima beans," my mother told him.

When he glanced up from his plate, he had the devil in his eye. That's what my mother called it. Unchecked, the devilish look led to the shit-eating grin.

I loved Pop like crazy.

"You know Ned and me don't eat lima beans," he informed my mother for the thousandth time. "They weren't *meant* to be eaten."

"Then what are they meant for?" she asked, which was a first. Her usual comeback was to tell us they were good for us.

"Since they have the same texture as flannel pellets," I said, "maybe pillow filler."

The instigator's shoulders bounced with quiet laughter as he chewed.

"You guys are sick," Pam said. She daintily speared a few lima beans and slipped them into her mouth. It was probably a gesture of female bonding.

"Nervous about standing up for Oliver's wedding tomorrow?" my mother gently asked me.

Just the mention of it made my stomach twist. "Yeah, I guess I am." I laid down my fork and took a drink of water. "I've never done this sort of thing before."

My father, of course, wasn't at a loss for words of wisdom. "Ain't no big deal. The worst of it's the church crap. One hour, tops. Then you pose for a few snapshots, take a nap, go to the reception, and eat and drink until you puke."

Pam's fork hit her plate with a *clink*. "Yuck!"

"Oh, Floyd," my mother said.

Pop glanced at me, and the shit-eating grin erupted. "Unless you're planning on getting lucky. Then you try to keep the puking at a minimum."

"*Dear*, that's enough."

The old man didn't need his wife to tell him. He knew it was more than enough. "So what're you giving them?" Now he was the picture of dinner-table propriety. I swear, the guy could defuse a conflict better than Dag Hammarskjöld.

"A bun warmer," said my mother. She'd picked out the gift and wrapped it. Until now, I hadn't a clue what lurked within the silvery blue box that sat on a closet floor beneath my rented tux.

Pop drew his heavy eyebrows together. "A what?"

"Bun warmer."

"What the hell is that?"

My mother and sister stared at him as if he'd just put the rest of his lima beans up his nose. I burst out laughing. For a few minutes, at least, my ratcheting tension had eased.

The phone rang as Pam said to our father, "Daddy, think about it: *bun...warmer*."

"It'll be perfect for their dinner parties," my mother said defensively as she got up from the table.

The tension crept back. Oliver and Naomi having dinner parties. Damn, why did I have to fall for a guy who was cut out for a life like that?

For marriage, in particular.

I got up too, because I was suddenly too restive to keep sitting at the table. Just as I lifted my plate, my mother called my name. I put the plate down.

She hurried into the dining room, motioning with her hand. "It's Oliver," she kind of said, although she exaggeratedly formed the words more than spoke them. She jabbed a finger toward the living room. "He wants to talk to you."

"Who else would he want to talk to?"

Oliver knew I was staying at my folks' house tonight, so my mother could feed me in the morning and spruce me up just right for the wedding. I figured his call had something to do with checking on my readiness: making sure I had my tux and that it fit; making sure I had tomorrow's timetable down pat.

I went to the living room and picked up the receiver. "Don't worry. I'm as ready as I'll ever be."

"*I'm* not. Ned, would you mind coming to the hotel a little early?" He sounded edgy.

"How early?"

"Like now. I'm already at the Pfister. I told my folks I wanted to spend the night here, that it would help me relax. They think I just want to party more. That isn't it."

I frowned. "What *is* it?"

"Ned, just get your ass down here, okay? I need to talk to someone. You'll have a place to sleep."

"All right. I'll get my stuff together and call a cab." I never could refuse him anything. Except for that time he wanted me to break into the tampon machine in the girls' lavatory when we were sophomores in high school. It had something to do with a revenge plot against the football team.

"Thanks, man." He gave me his room number. "I wouldn't be doing this if I didn't really need you."

That sealed it. Oliver needed me. Besides, he'd stood by me plenty of times.

After asking my mother to call a cab, I hustled into my old room and began filling my nearly empty overnight bag with more stuff I thought I might need. All I'd brought from my apartment were a change of clothes, a few personal-grooming aids, and a couple of muscle-man magazines in case I needed to whack off so I could get to sleep. My mother soon appeared and started tossing questions at me. She was very sympathetic when I told her Oliver had a bad case of the jitters. Pretty soon, Pop and Pam were crowded into the doorway with her. All three of them offered advice for the groom. My

father related some anecdote. I didn't absorb any of it.

Suitcase in hand and tux draped over my arm in a garment bag, I waited at the front door.

It wasn't until the taxi was halfway to the Pfister that I realized I'd left the bun warmer behind.

\* \* \*

Oliver's current room was two floors down from where his bachelor shindig had been held, which was also one of the suites where the wedding party would gather in the morning. The out-of-town guests were staying in the hotel's 1965 tower addition—a hideously dissonant piece of architecture that reminded me of a stack of butter cookies or coffee filters—I couldn't decide which. Oliver made me identify myself before he opened the door, and then he yanked me inside.

"What's going on?" I asked as he locked the door at my back. I went to the closet and hung up my tux, then set down my bag. "How come you're not staying upstairs?" By "upstairs," I meant one of the two suites already reserved by the Duncans.

Oliver stood with his hands on his hips, stared at the floor, and nibbled at the inside of his cheek. He wore a Hang Ten T-shirt and a matching pair of Adidas shorts, and all I wanted to do was tackle him and drop him onto one of the room's two double beds.

When he looked up, I noticed the shadows beneath his eyes. He was on his way to being a mess, both physically and mentally, but he was beautiful to me.

"I'm all fucked-up, Ned."

"Why?"

Oliver's face contorted, and he suddenly bolted into the bathroom. The sounds of retching were unmistakable.

I sprinted to his aid just as the toilet flushed. Kneeling beside him, I laid one hand on his back and curled the other over his forehead.

"Your hand feels good," he mumbled to the swirling water. "Cool. Soothing." After a moment, he sat back on his heels and caught his breath.

Christ, he was a wreck. I got up and wet a washcloth at the sink, then poured a glass of water. When I sat beside Oliver again, he took some water into his mouth, swished it around, and spit it into the toilet. Then he took a drink. I tilted his head toward me and gently swabbed the perspiration from his face. The delicate spears of dark lashes on his lowered eyelids made him look young and vulnerable.

Well, hell, he *was* young. We both were. Oliver was twenty-one. I was still twenty.

"That's like the fourth time I've thrown up today," he said.

"Have you been drinking?" He didn't smell like it.

"No. Maybe I should start."

"What's wrong? Tell me."

He dolefully shook his head. "Tomorrow—I'm not up to it."

"You feel that bad?" Late August was a strange time of year to get the flu, but it was possible. Or maybe he had food poisoning.

"I only feel bad when I think about walking into that church. Just sitting here with you, I feel fine." Oliver briefly put a hand over mine. His felt clammy. "Thank you for coming."

"I had to show up sooner or later. I'm your best man."

"Maybe not."

I laughed nervously. "What, you're firing me?"

Oliver's smile was so wan, it made him look even sicker. He rose from the tiles and shambled out of the bathroom. I followed. When he sat on the edge of one bed, I sat on the edge of the other, facing him.

He kept bending and straightening the fingers of his interlinked hands. "I can't go through with the wedding. I'm not ready for marriage. It's not what I want. I feel like...like I've been given a death sentence. Like I'm scheduled to be executed in the morning."

This obviously wasn't the time to freeze up, so I forced out some words. "Then why did you ask Naomi to marry you? And let the whole thing go this far?"

Oliver dropped his face to his hands. "Jesus, I feel like a schmuck. And an idiot."

"Oliver? Answer me."

He finally met my incredulous stare. "It's expected of me. Just like it was expected of Darryl. So when I started dating Naomi and kept dating her because we got along, she began pushing for it and our families began pushing for it and pretty soon it seemed inevitable, because everybody was counting grandchildren and expecting to gather at our perfect future home for Thanksgiving dinner."

Oliver's face suddenly contracted, as if he was on the verge of tears. Then I realized it was helpless, hopeless despair and self-recrimination I was seeing, and for Oliver, such feelings couldn't be expressed in tears. He was never a crying kind of guy.

"It was like being sucked into that maelstrom in Poe's story," he said, his voice rushed, "or the whirlpool of Charybdis. I didn't know how to say, 'Wait! Let me go! I don't even love her. This isn't what I want.'"

"What *do* you want?" I asked quietly. My head was spinning like a boat in one of those legendary vortices.

"Remember how we used to talk about hopping a freight train? Just riding off into the unknown, without anybody having a clue where we were?"

Color had risen in Oliver's face. Scarlet swatches blazed across his high cheekbones. I began to think he *was* ill, maybe deliriously so, and I was tempted to check his forehead for fever.

"You want to hop a freight?" I asked, trying to figure out where he was going with this before I overreacted.

When he chuckled, he sounded more like his old self again. "No. I'd probably kill myself. But I do want to get away, disappear for a while. No muss, no fuss, no bother. Once I'm recharged, I can deal with all the fallout when I get back."

I gaped at him. "You can't do that! It's too late to do that!"

"I need to, Ned. Right now, I need that more than I can say. I have a lot of things to figure out. And I won't be able to think unless I get away from all this madness."

"But"—flustered, I fell back onto the mattress, clapped a hand over my forehead, and jackknifed back up—"what about Naomi? And the fact two families have dumped thousands of dollars into this affair, and people have put themselves out in dozens of different ways? You can't just walk away from shit like that!"

"So what *should* I do?" he yelled. "Huh? What *should* I do, smart engineer boy? And *how* should I do it? You got a blueprint I can follow?" He bolted from the bed and began pacing around the room.

I scrambled to come up with some logical and considerate course of action, but I couldn't find one. If Oliver stayed, first he would have to tell his parents and Naomi and Naomi's parents that he had no intention of becoming a lawfully wedded husband; those confrontations would undoubtedly lead to

hours of go-nowhere hysteria. Then, if he was still alive and even marginally had his act together, he'd have to inform the wedding party, then make an announcement in church, then make another announcement at the reception. He'd be grilled like a serial killer, shrieked and bellowed at, threatened and vilified until his bones were picked clean. Maybe Naomi's brothers would beat the snot out of him, and he'd end up not only with picked bones, but broken ones.

The more I thought about the scenario, the more I saw only two options for Oliver: either go through with the wedding or get out of Dodge.

He flopped onto the bed again, elbows propped on knees, and shoved his hands into his hair. "I'm sorry I hollered at you."

"That's okay. You're not in a very good place right now."

Smiling sadly, he looked up at me. "You're the best friend I've got. I didn't know who else to turn to." He extended an arm toward me, trying to bridge the span between the two beds, and I did the same. Our fingers touched, then briefly curled together. Immediately my eyes stung, and I lowered my gaze to the floor.

"I love you, Ned."

Everything in me stopped. Time itself stopped. But only for a second or two, only until I realized how he meant it—that he loved me as a valued friend.

It would have to do.

The word *fuck* came out of my mouth on a thin breath as I continued to stare at the floor.

"Did you say something?"

"No." I cleared my throat and lifted my head. "So what are you going to do?"

"Have *you* come up with any ideas?"

"Probably nothing you haven't already thought of."

"Believe me," he said ardently, "I've been racking my brain about this since I woke up today and realized it wasn't just a hangover that was making me feel like shit warmed over. The whole household was buzzing like a goddamned hive, and I just kept getting sicker and sicker until I literally broke out in a cold sweat. I even said to my mother, 'I don't think I can go through with this,' and all she told me was, 'Oh honey, you'll be just fine when Naomi joins you at the altar in her beautiful gown. You'll suddenly think you're in heaven.'"

I couldn't stop snickering. Oliver was a great mimic. "I guess you didn't feel reassured."

"That's an understatement. All I thought was, Wrong-o, Ma. I'm going to feel I've been consigned to the ninth circle of hell."

My laughter dwindled. "I'm really sorry it turned out this way for you."

Oliver nodded. "I just wish I'd had my premonition of misery before I got engaged. The whole wedding-and-marriage thing didn't seem quite real to me until I walked in on my brother banging one of those strippers two nights ago."

I thought my eyes would pop out of my head. "No shit? Darryl ended up balling—"

"Two of them, I think. At least there were two in bed with him. It woke me right the fuck up."

"But...what did that have to do with *you*?"

Oliver fidgeted. "I knew I'd end up like that. Well, not *exactly* like that, but, you know, dissatisfied and restless and always on the prowl, looking for action, constantly trying to cover my tracks. I hate deceit, Ned." He uttered a single, bitter laugh. "Isn't *that* ironic?"

He was really flagellating himself. I hated seeing it. He was a good person, smart and funny and kind. I'd never known Oliver to be insensitive to others, and he wasn't being that way now. He was just desperately unhappy.

"When do you suppose you *will* be ready for marriage?" I asked, thinking of a possible solution to his dilemma. If the wedding was postponed rather than canceled...

"Maybe never." Oliver sighed and scratched at his head after shit canning *that* idea. "But that's another issue entirely."

His bugginess had taken on a new dimension, and I didn't know how to interpret it. "Not all married men are doomed to the kind of life you described."

"I would be." After shooting me a self-conscious glance, Oliver again got up. He walked over to the room's desk and pulled three pieces of hotel stationery from the drawer. "So I'm going to write three letters: one to Naomi, one to her parents, one to my parents. I'll leave them inside the groom's suite, since I don't have a key to the bride's suite. First thing tomorrow morning, long before anybody gets here, I'm taking a cab to the Greyhound station, catching a bus to Chicago, walking to Union Station, and getting on the North Coast Limited. I've already reserved a Vista-Dome sleeper. The trip to Seattle and back will only buy me maybe five days of peace and quiet, but that's all I really need." He turned to face me. I still sat, stunned and immobile, on the edge of the bed. "Do you think that's cowardly?"

I felt a surge of admiration for him. "Yes. But in a way it's courageous too. In either case, I understand."

Oliver seemed to consider this for a moment. "I'll still have to pay the piper when I get back, which I'm definitely obligated to do, but the worst of the flap will be over by then. Naomi and her family should be back in upstate New York. I'm hoping my parents and I can have a civilized discussion."

His reasoning made sense. Nothing got resolved in the heat of the moment. "Do you have any idea what you'll say to them?"

He shrugged. "Maybe that I need to concentrate on getting through my senior year without the distraction of a wife, and that my apartment in Hanover is too small for a couple, and it'll be easier on Naomi too, because she won't have to travel so far to her teaching job in Montpelier or Concord or wherever the hell it is."

"I assume you want me to play dumb." Not that I would've dreamed of betraying his trust. We'd been friends long enough to know when something was said in confidence.

Besides, I felt a thoroughly selfish swell of joy. Now I'd have more time with Oliver before someone claimed him as her own, before he was permanently relocated and reshaped and I had no choice but to relinquish all my dreams.

He hadn't answered my question, so I asked again, "Is that what you want me to do? Just tell everybody I didn't have a clue what you were planning?"

Oliver walked over to the bed and sank down beside me. "What I really want," he said, "is for you to come with me."

## Chapter Three

I couldn't have been more stunned if the bed beneath my ass had melted away and dumped me on the floor. And dumped Oliver on top of me.

All I did was gape at him for five seconds that seemed like five minutes. "Are you serious?" My voice sounded the way it had eight or nine years ago when it changed, but I was too thunderstruck to be embarrassed.

"Absolutely," Oliver said. "I love your company. You know that. And right now I need it too."

There was that word again, the one that always hooked me—*need*.

Once I recovered from my initial shock, I realized I had no good reason to refuse him. I'd quit my summer job at the end of last week since I'd anticipated the wedding taking up most of my time *this* week. Afterward, I'd planned on just kicking back and taking it easy until school started. So I had no plans to do anything. I didn't have to answer to my parents. I didn't have to worry about money, because Oliver insisted on paying for everything; he said he had plenty of cash on him as well as plenty of plastic. The more he cajoled and reasoned with me, the more I was seduced by the notion.

So I gave in. He was wildly grateful, and that made my acquiescence feel completely right.

As Oliver wrote his letters—agonized over them, actually—he occasionally asked my advice. I could tell he was reluctant to do so, but I could also tell he was determined to express his feelings as accurately and sincerely as possible. When he was finished, he let me read what he'd written. His words were achingly humble and contrite, especially when he tried to explain to Naomi how he'd misinterpreted his feelings for her, how she deserved more than the *tepid fondness* and *half-baked commitment* he had to offer. *You'd regret this marriage as much as I would*, he'd written. *In a month or two, you'd be killing yourself with questions. So it's best I answer them now.*

When he got back from depositing his letters as well as my rented tuxedo in the groom's suite, he peeled off his clothing and ambled around the hotel room in a pair of small black briefs with three white stripes.

*Oh, man.*

We'd gone swimming together dozens of times, but seeing him in his underwear in a bedroom was a whole lot different from seeing him on a public beach in bathing trunks. Besides, Lake Michigan's water was always cool, and cool water tended to devalue a man's assets. Tonight, Oliver's assets hadn't been diminished in the least.

"Why don't you get comfortable?" he asked. "We should turn in soon."

"I *am* comfortable."

*Yeah, uh-huh.*

Still fully dressed, I was stretched out on the room's second bed, my back against the headboard, because I knew damned well my modest assets would betray what I was thinking and feeling. In fact, I'd rested the *Milwaukee Journal* on my lap to further conceal what was quickly becoming an embarrassing development. I had no more control over it than I had control of my eyes, which kept bouncing down to Oliver's delectably curved ass and dark trail and mounded crotch.

Although the black fabric of his briefs helped obscure the treasure within, I could still see its angled roll whenever he turned a certain way or came too close to me. Things got even worse when I glimpsed distinct outlines, especially of his cockhead—the softly rounded tip, the gentle slope, the brim. Jesus, it made me dizzy.

I started getting the guilts along with the hots. I'd never come out to Oliver. I'd never come out to anybody I knew. Society didn't have much use for homosexuals, and even less regard. The riots outside the Stonewall Inn last summer had sparked discussion in the bars I sometimes visited, and the consensus of opinion was that we were a long way from finding acceptance. That, and *The Boys in the Band*, a movie I'd seen earlier in the year, only solidified my secrecy. If someone I cared about sneered at me or recoiled from me or called me a filthy faggot, I'd be devastated.

"Ned? Something wrong?"

Oliver's voice jolted me. After making sure all his bags were packed and sitting by the door, he'd dropped onto the bed opposite mine and had apparently been watching me.

"There's something you need to know," I said, "before you take me on this trip with you."

"What?"

"You might change your mind about wanting me with you. And that's cool. I'll understand completely."

Oliver furrowed his brow and uttered a bemused laugh. "Ned, what the fuck are you talking about?"

I felt the blood drain from my face as I looked at him. *You have to tell him. You have to. It's only right.* "I'm gay."

He stared at me a moment longer, his face frozen into that half-amused, half-confused expression. Then he said, "I thought you might still be a virgin, but if you weren't, you swung both ways."

Surprise smacked the anxiety right out of me. "You did?"

"Yeah. I mean, I figured you preferred guys, 'cause there's been a distinct lack of female presence in your conversation and your social life. But since you're not swishy or anything, I assumed you were bi."

"No," I said without inflection. "No, I'm only attracted to men. And I'm not a virgin."

Oliver blushed. "I see."

"And please don't use that word."

"What word?"

"Swishy.' It's derogatory. Besides, gay men aren't produced on some assembly line like Twinkies." I squeezed my eyes shut and groaned inside. Why did I have to use *that* product in my analogy?

"I'm sorry." In addition to looking and sounding chastened, Oliver was getting a little squirrely. "Well, in any case, I'm glad you brought it up. It's something I've been meaning to talk to you about."

"Really?"

"Yeah." Oliver finally crawled under the covers of the other bed.

"So..." I was stymied. I sure as shit hadn't anticipated *this* turn. "Do you want to talk now, or do you want me to leave, or...what?"

"What. Meaning neither." He situated the pillow beneath his head and pulled the covers up to his armpits. "We'll talk about it on the train. Right now we need to sleep."

"Okay." *Wow.* He wasn't shocked or appalled, and I hadn't been banished from his sight.

Once Oliver turned out the light, I got undressed. My dick was safely soft. I was still bewildered, but I allowed myself to start feeling relieved. Maybe a

liberal arts college like Dartmouth fostered a sense of more tolerance than I'd given him credit for.

I began to relax and let the crisp linen and dense darkness enfold me.

"Ned?"

"Hm?"

"Are you attracted to *me*?"

The question gave me instant tingles. At least they were light. "We'll talk about that on the train."

Four or five days alone with him. Even without sex, it would be glorious.

\* \* \*

We were up and hustling by five thirty. Focused on our mission, neither of us raised the subject of my sexuality. But it was the elephant in the room, and we'd be leading it from Milwaukee to Chicago and right onto the damned North Coast Limited.

Freshly showered, jazzed with anticipation, we debated where to have breakfast. I was a lunch-counter kind of guy, so Heinemann's or Woolworth's or George Webb's would've suited me just fine. Then Oliver reminded me he already had a tab going at the hotel, so we ate at the Pfister café. It was easier to call a cab from there, anyway.

A kind of conspiratorial excitement crackled between us. We'd thumbed our noses at the establishment, or Oliver had, and we were stealthily slipping beyond its reach. Outside, it was a glowing summer morning. Hazy sunlight had begun to drift down to the awakening streets. It clung to the creamy ionic columns of Gimbel's eastern facade, as if reluctant to touch the dank river at the building's feet. The air was still fresh, although it held a promise of heat and humidity, and it buoyed smells that were rich and varied and distinctly of this city: the fecund odor of the lake, the thick pungency of bus exhaust, the dusty breath of old brick and the crusty breath of fresh bakery.

I opened the cab's window as soon as we got in, and gazed at the modest buildings as they shuttered by. I somehow knew I'd never see them in the same way again, that my clandestine trip with Oliver Duncan would forever color my perception of these familiar places. They'd have more resonance when I returned.

We didn't talk much, and our escapade lost some of its luster as we sat in the dreary Greyhound station. At least we didn't have to sit there long. Departures for Chicago were fairly frequent.

"How're you feeling?" I asked Oliver once our bus ride was under way.

"Good. A lot better than I felt yesterday."

"Do you regret—"

"No," he said firmly, giving me a look that reinforced his answer.

"You've been awfully quiet since breakfast."

"So have you."

Our gazes locked for a moment before Oliver turned to the window.

"I've just been thinking," he said to his reflection. "That's all."

Arriving in Chicago two hours later seemed to revitalize us. The day was rapidly beginning to warm, which made me glad I'd tied back my hair again, but we decided to walk the six or seven blocks to Union Station rather than park our butts in yet another bus or taxicab. Each of us had only one piece of luggage. Toting it for a short distance wouldn't be too taxing.

Although it was a Saturday and not yet noon, Chicago was already humming like a factory. I felt swallowed up by the city. At least, as we strode up Canal Street, the river alongside us provided some respite from the thick press of buildings.

Oliver checked his watch as we approached the station. We had plenty of time to spare, so we sat for a while outside the entrance on Jackson and watched the world go by.

"What if I can't get a seat on the train?" I asked. The possibility had just occurred to me.

"That won't be a problem," Oliver said.

"How can you be sure?"

"I just am."

I studied his profile as he casually, too casually, scanned our surroundings. "What aren't you telling me?"

Sighing, he looked at his lap and then at me. "I booked for two. I figured it was better to be safe than sorry."

"So...I'll have a coach seat or a sleeping room or what?"

"Jesus, Ned, I wouldn't make you take a days-long train trip in a damned coach seat. You're doing me an enormous favor by coming along. I'm not going to treat you like a second-class citizen."

He was irked. Or maybe he was on edge.

"You can't blame me for wondering," I said. "You only mentioned making reservations for yourself."

Immediately, Oliver's testiness drained away. Resting against the bench, he dropped his head back and closed his eyes. Then he scrubbed his hands over his face and said wearily, "I didn't mean to snap at you. I'm really sorry."

We'd been doing a lot of apologizing to each other. The foundation of our friendship seemed to be shifting, but I couldn't tell if the realignment was temporary or permanent, for better or worse. All I knew was I wanted to hold Oliver. He had to be thinking about what was happening back in Milwaukee—he wasn't a callous bastard—and wondering how all the people he cared about were dealing with his disappearance.

I turned on the bench to face him. "Listen, you don't have to stay glued together for my sake. I know this is stressing the hell out of you. If you're having second thoughts, if you want to go back..."

He shook his head. "No. I need this time. And I need it with *you*."

I kind of floated alongside him after that, trying to concentrate on immediate and practical concerns. Union Station was a flippin' maze, and its lack of signage didn't help any. The building that used to sit atop the station's main passenger concourse had been demolished the previous year, leaving a lone, stately Beaux-Arts structure. I hated the stark and cavernous Great Hall with its vaulted skylight. It made me feel like a very small, pallid fish in a very deep, sterile pond. Rather than dawdle there, we went to retrieve the tickets Oliver had purchased over the phone, had lunch at one of the station's eateries, then struck out in search of our boarding area.

It wasn't easy to find. The crazy, crammed, and crisscrossing grid of tracks and platforms was below street level and not terribly well marked. But thanks to a couple of helpful workers, we found our snazzy train with its duotone green engine and multicolored cars.

Our train. Shit. I was really tumbling headfirst into this adventure now.

After we'd boarded, I continued to follow Oliver's lead. Hell, I was traveling on his dime. An impeccably courteous black porter named Sidney

showed us to the sleeping car where Oliver's room was located. As he described the car's amenities—including a buffet and, above it, a lounge within the Vista-Dome—Oliver had him set up and turn down the bed. I began to wonder exactly where I was going to be; I could've used a nap too. But I didn't have a chance to ask. With brisk geniality, Sidney explained the room's layout, the services it came with, and the train's dining schedule—anything and everything an upper-crust passenger needed to know. After Oliver tipped the porter and Sidney opened the door to leave, I turned to trail after him.

Oliver grabbed the back of my T-shirt. "Where are you going?"

I jerked a thumb at Sidney.

"It's all right. You can go," Oliver told him. "We'll explore after we get settled in." He leaned past me and closed the door.

"How am I gonna find where I'm supposed to be?"

"Maybe by turning around." Oliver stashed our modest pieces of luggage. "Now, let's freshen up and get comfortable and have that talk."

I scanned the cramped space, my heart pattering. "I'm staying in here too?"

"I was lucky to get *this* room, Ned."

"Is there another bed I'm not seeing?"

Oliver stepped into the tiny private bathroom. I heard water running. "There might be some bunklike thing that folds down from the wall above the couch bed. I'm not sure. Why do you ask?"

I was aware of my mouth hanging open. "Why do I ask?" I whispered in disbelief. My wide eyes moved to the neat little bed with its pair of side-by-side, perfectly white pillows. *Why do I ask?*

I licked my lips and swallowed. "Never mind."

## Chapter Four

It was all very innocent. As the train began a slow, rocking crawl out of its subterranean parking place, Oliver and I sat cross-legged on the bed like a couple of kids at a sleepover. I glanced out the window at an ugly jumble of poles and wires, buildings and bridges. The train was moving from Chicago's west side toward the tame wilds of northern Illinois.

I picked up the pint of scotch Oliver had tossed onto the bed, and took a sip. The drop of fire that landed in my belly made me shiver. Oliver chuckled and shook his head as he took the bottle from my hands.

"So when did you know you were gay?" He tilted the bottle to his lips, then lowered it and secured the cap. "*How* did you know?"

"Do we have to talk about this now?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Don't you think it's about time?"

I couldn't argue. We'd been friends since we were freshmen in high school, and now we'd be sharing a rather compact barely-a-double bed, and I still hadn't discussed this central fact of my life.

"I didn't know what homosexuality was until maybe seventh or eighth grade," I said, "but I was probably living it by the time I was six."

Oliver's eyebrows rose. "That young?"

"I think so. I wasn't into sports, but I liked singing and dancing. I knew the soundtrack to *Oklahoma!* by heart when I was seven. And I used to moon over pictures of Gordon MacRae while I played the album on my parents' hi-fi and long for him to be my special friend."

Oliver, who'd just taken a swig of scotch, snorted, then winced, then coughed. "Oh shit," he said, sputtering into laughter. "Don't say things like that when liquid is running down my throat. Little Ned and his special friend—who happens to be a thirtysomething guy in a neckerchief and cowboy hat." He coughed again and put a finger beneath his nose. "Ouch. I just burned my nasal tissues."

I was laughing too. "I would've sat on his lap without a second thought."

Howling, Oliver rocked backward.

It was liberating. For years I'd had nightmares about people finding this stuff out, about Oliver in particular finding out, yet here we were, laughing our asses off over my secret life.

"Oh fuck." Sniffing, Oliver swiped a hand beneath his nose. "So when did you...you know...start acting on your—"

"Impulses?" I said, since he seemed at a loss for the right word.

Oliver nodded, his expression sobering.

"The first time I kissed a boy," I said, unable to ignore the blush that suddenly rouged Oliver's cheeks. "I was eleven or twelve and at summer camp. Eddie Edwards and I were in the bathroom together, and I copped a look at his wiener while we stood at the urinals—"

"Wiener? Ned, you can use grown-up words now. You're almost twenty-one."

"Hey, when I'm talking about adolescent kids, grown-up words don't sound right. Anyway, Eddie and I were pals and got along great, so after he'd stuffed his wiener back in his shorts, I just grabbed him and kissed him."

"How'd he react?" Oliver was a lot quieter now, and paying close attention.

"He was shocked at first, which was understandable. Sort of flinched and tightened up. Then he gave in to it for a second, then suddenly pulled away and said, 'If you do that again, I'll punch your lights out.'"

"How did *you* react?"

The question made me laugh. Or maybe the scotch did. "I stayed away from him."

Oliver wasn't amused. "No, I meant to the kiss."

I looked down and idly picked some lint off my jeans. This wasn't easy to describe to someone who was used to being titillated by females. "A feeling ran through me that I'd never experienced before. I didn't even know if there was a name for it, so I made up a name: the melty tingles. They showered from my chest down to my feet and in between dropped a big, sparkling batch of themselves deep in my belly."

"Your belly?"

"Okay, more like my groin. But I didn't get the melty tingles when I kissed girls. In fact, I didn't even *want* to kiss girls. I wanted to kiss certain guys I saw on TV and in the movies and in magazines and even in school. About two years later, I found out the melty tingles were actually called arousal, and arousal was sexual excitement, and that's what made a guy's dick get so hard, he wanted to shove it into something snug and pump away until he blew his wad."

"But you'd already figured out *that* part, right? Knowing when you needed relief and how to get it."

"Yeah. I knew my right hand was good for something other than writing my name."

We were quiet for a while. I watched Oliver's fingers as they idly ran over the scotch bottle and tried to imagine them moving over my skin. This was going to be one goddamned taxing getaway.

"How did you feel about liking guys?" he asked. "Did you realize it made you different?"

"Of course I did. How could I *not* realize it? I seemed to be the only kid in school—male, I mean—who didn't talk about girls or flirt with girls or generally get stupid around girls. And wasn't interested in typical guy shit like sports. Then there was my father..."

"What about him?"

I sighed. This part was the hardest. "Once in a while he used the word *fruit* when he referred to certain men. Effeminate men, I guess. So I finally asked him what a fruit was. He just kind of snickered and patted me on the back and said, 'If you're ever peeing in a public restroom and the guy next to you is staring at your winkie, he's probably a fruit. So get away from him.'"

"Shit."

"Yeah. I hadn't just eyed up Eddie Edwards' winkie, I'd kissed him afterward. So I guessed that made me a superfruit and people should run screaming in horror from me." I lifted the scotch bottle from Oliver's hand and took another sip. The liquor was starting to loosen my seams. "I even doodled a picture of myself: a banana that kind of looked like Snidely Whiplash."

Oliver laughed, but his laughter had become more subdued. He seemed reflective. "How was your first time?"

"Awkward. Exhilarating." *Please don't ask for details.*

"When did it happen?"

"The summer after we graduated."

"Did I know him?"

"I don't think so. I met him downtown."

I didn't want to tell Oliver I'd met my first trick at Bull Run, a teen dance club on Water Street. Oliver and I had gone there together that night, as we often did on weekends, and I'd sneaked off for maybe ten blissful minutes with some nameless young man. I never did figure out how the guy knew I was gay. He'd been nudging against me every time I danced. When I'd finally turned to look at him, the message that had passed between our eyes was unmistakable. I'll never forget how he'd gripped my ass when we were alone together, and ground my dick against his hard-on; how I'd nearly fainted from excitement.

Oliver seemed fidgety. He got up and went into the tiny bathroom. Noticing the train's gentle sway, I glanced out the window to see where we were as I took another drink of scotch. Nothing much to look at yet. The landscape wouldn't start getting scenic, I figured, until we reached the Mississippi River at Savanna and started heading north to La Crosse. I wondered if Oliver would remember we'd once gone camping in Wyalusing State Park near Prairie du Chien—how our tent had been nearly as small as this bed, and I'd all but inhaled the nylon wall as I'd hugged it to keep some space between us.

"What sealed it for you?" he asked without preface as he resumed his seat. He'd changed into the shorts and T-shirt he'd worn last night. "What made you know for sure and know there'd be no turning back, not even for a minute, not even if Natalie Wood stood naked in front of you and grabbed your crotch?" His face and neck were flushed; his hairline, damp.

"The kiss," I said without hesitation. "The melty tingles I got from that first kiss." As I watched a nervous indecision scud across Oliver's face, my heartbeat picked up speed. Soon it was synchronized with the *clackety-clack* of the train's wheels. "What made you ask?"

When his gaze met mine, I saw the same terror in his eyes I'd once felt myself. Occasionally, it still crept up on me.

"I think...I might be gay too." Oliver snatched up the pint of scotch, spun off its cap, and poured a good half inch of liquor down his throat. I knew his reflexive grimace wasn't triggered just by the alcohol.

"Okay," I said soothingly, although my mind was whirling like a waterspout. "Now don't panic. Let's talk this over before you jump to any conclusions. You could be misinterpreting."

"Misinterpreting *what*?" He had traffic-accident eyes, my-baby-just-fell-out-the-window eyes.

"Jesus, will you try to relax?"

"I can't!"

Fuck. Dueling stridency. Blowing out a breath, I rested my back against the wall that butted up against the bed. "Oliver, what makes you think you're gay? Let's start there."

He dropped his head to his hands for a moment. I cautioned myself not to take his assumption seriously. Oliver's aversion to marriage and narrow escape from the altar might have clouded his thinking. My confession might've muddled it further. In any case, the last thing either of us needed was to take his belief at face value.

"I feel as if I've had to work my ass off to get and keep girlfriends. I mean *work* at it, Ned. It never came naturally. It was always such a goddamned effort."

All I could do was nod, because I no longer trusted my voice. *Just wait. Let him unwind. He's misreading his feelings.*

"I haven't let myself think about this too much," he murmured, more reflective than uptight now. "I just pushed it down and kept doing what was expected of me. Just pushed it down and pushed it down."

I cleared my throat. "What did you think was expected of you?"

"To be like Darryl, I guess." Oliver smiled wryly. "Except for the hound-dogging. Go to a good college, sow some wild oats, be a ladies' man. Then go on to be successful in some lucrative profession, be an upstanding citizen, husband, father."

I nodded. That picture did fit the standard Oliver's family had set. They were nouveau riche and very status conscious. "But that vision doesn't jibe with what *you* want?"

He paused, staring at me, then lowered his eyes. "Not the husband part. I, um... For years I've been having these...fantasies and..." He let out a quavering exhalation. "Wet dreams."

Hearing Oliver talk like that began to make my nuts ache. If he got any more explicit, I'd have to feign a chill and crawl under the covers to hide the bulge in my jeans, just like I'd done last night. "I assume you mean about guys." My mouth felt numb.

"Yeah."

We suddenly couldn't seem to look at each other.

"That happens," I said. "Even to straight guys. It doesn't necessarily mean anything." Boy, I was really winging it now. I didn't have one limp clue what straight guys dreamed about, but I had a feeling there were usually boobs involved.

"Except it's been getting worse," Oliver said, "month after month. It's been getting harder to ignore."

I sneaked a quick glance at him through my lowered lashes. Son of a bitch. That face. That body. I'd forever adored both. At least it seemed like forever. Because my life before Oliver had been nothing more than a babble of voices, a blur of insignificant events. Everything, Eddie Edwards included, paled beside Oliver's beauty and our effortless compatibility. I'd always fancied we were vibrant together, lackluster apart.

"I tried to seduce you in the hotel room last night. In fact, I even packed lubricant, just in case..."

My gaze shot up to meet Oliver's.

He chuckled weakly. "You look shocked."

"I am."

"I guess I didn't do a very good job of it." He reached over and nudged me under the chin. "Close your mouth, Ned." His fingertips were cool, but his touch was tender. "I just wanted to see if I was right about myself. And I wanted to do it with someone I cared about instead of a stranger."

"It worked," I whispered.

"Huh?"

And here it came, the confession that was more monumental than my earlier one, the confession that had the sticky tentacles of all my strongest feelings dragging along behind it—love, fear, hope. I could sense it scrabbling out of its hiding place, climbing up my throat.

"You've been seducing me since we met," I said. "Without even trying. And you've succeeded. You just haven't known it."

A smile touched Oliver's lips. "Would you mind letting your hair down?"

"What?" I didn't know if he meant figuratively or literally. Hell, I didn't even know what had prompted his question.

He pointed toward my head. "Take that rubber band or whatever it is out of your hair. You have such beautiful hair, but you always put it in a ponytail like some goddamned bobby-soxer."



I had longish, dark auburn hair with a slight natural curl. It didn't hang down to my ass or anything—maybe touched the middle of my shoulder blades—but I usually tied it back just to keep it out of my face and off my neck, especially in the summer.

I pulled off the elastic band, gave my head a toss, then finger-combed my hair.

Oliver's smile grew. "You're hot, Ned."

That observation also threw me. It could've meant a couple of things.

"You don't seem to think so," he said.

"I don't know what..."

He kept looking at me as if I'd changed right before his eyes, magically, like a reliable mule into a storybook stallion.

"Would you mind doing me a favor?" he asked in a small, tentative voice.

I licked my lips. "What?"

"Would you mind kissing me?"

## Chapter Five

I knew Oliver could see my chest pumping and hear my breath tattering as we leaned toward each other, but at this point it didn't matter. Feeling as if I were moving through heavy oil, I put a hand on the side of his face.

"Are you sure?" I whispered.

"Yes." Maybe to prove it, he turned his head to the side and clumsily kissed my palm.

All the desire for him that had been wound up inside me unspooled. I wanted to hold his face in both hands, but that might've seemed too aggressive and frightened him. So I simply drifted forward. Very slowly and carefully, I flexed my lips against his.

Silken heat met my mouth. I pressed a little harder, and every time I did, Oliver returned the pressure. Soon we were tilting our heads this way and that, letting our lips crush and glide. His sultry breath gusted across my face, down my throat.

He speared his hands into my hair, gripping it, and his breath quickened further. Then his tongue sought mine. Not tenuously but eagerly. Our lips became slicked with each other's saliva.

This was hunger, the ravenous kind that took nothing for granted—not the faintest scent or lightest touch. It would've been infectious if I didn't already have my own crazed need, and right now it was locking my balls in its fist.

Oliver dropped onto his back, dragging me down on top of him. It was exactly where I wanted to be.

"Did you get them?" I managed to ask. "The melty tingles?"

"I got a lot more than that," he said with a kind of breathless joy. "*Electric* melty tingles. Christ. I'm already stiff."

Not quite believing it, I ran a trembling hand down the taut plane of his belly to his crotch. My cock twitched as soon as I touched the granite-hard ridge in his shorts.

Oliver whimpered and thrust against my hand. My tortured dick pulsed again. He pulled my hair across his open mouth, rubbed it over his face. We kissed more heatedly, writhing on the bed's small field. Soon my lips were on his face, then his ear, then his throat as my fingers scrabbled at the hem of his shirt. He let go of me long enough to raise his arms over his head and let me slip the shirt off his body.

"Yours too," he said.

Shakily, I sat up, my butt resting on Oliver's legs. As I pulled off my shirt, I felt his splayed fingers smoothing over my torso and hooking into the waistband of my jeans.

"Not yet," I said. "Not yet." Because I knew where he was going; I knew he wanted to free my prick. But I'd waited too long for this to let it end so fast.

I curled over him again to lap at the fine dark hair on his chest and pluck at his nipples. When they glistened with my spit, I slid my thumbs over them, again and again, spurred on by the sounds that came from Oliver's throat.

"I'm going to come," he said in a strangled voice.

Redirecting my attention, I hurried to get his shorts and briefs off his hips. Thank God for elastic. When his rigid, rosy cock bobbed into the air, my arousal sharpened so suddenly, I shoved down my jeans and underwear. We soon became a living tangle of bending limbs and urgent moans.

No melty tingles now. My muscles were as tight as harp strings. I was sweating all over and very nearly in pain.

I sprawled between Oliver's parted legs, nuzzled the springy mat of his pubic hair, then burrowed lower to kiss his balls and trace their curvature with my tongue. He'd washed down there, so maybe he'd been expecting us to get intimate. When I felt his hand join mine to brace the base of his cock, I slid my fingers over his; we could support the pillar together. Oliver kept making tight, guttural sounds that sometimes thinned. Hearing them made me want to shoot on his mouth.

As overheated as I was, I wanted this to be right. I wanted to exercise more artistry than I'd ever before bothered with during sex. I wanted to worship every square millimeter of Oliver's precious cock by delivering an agony of pleasure the likes of which he'd never known.

I licked and flicked my way up to the apex, sucked and savored the precum, then drew Oliver's prick into my mouth as if I were bringing it home. Home to my hugging lips and curling tongue and open throat, home to my abiding love. Every dumbass euphemism I'd ever read swam through my mind: this is Oliver's love root, his throbbing manhood, his ramrod of passion. For these blissful moments, the phrases didn't seem quite so lame anymore. Just as I began to play around his cockhead as I slowly pumped the shaft, he uttered a thready cry. Dollops of cum began to hit my tongue. My arousal instantly spiked, and my juice began to jet out undirected as I greedily swallowed Oliver's and kept coaxing more out of him.

It was like holding on to two live wires and not being able to let go.

As Oliver's contractions got weaker, he threw an arm over his face and just lay there on his back, panting. I licked the last dribble of cum from his slit.

He flinched. "Tickles."

Smiling, I stroked the inside of his thigh.

"Sorry it happened so quickly," he murmured, his eyes still shielded by his bent arm.

"I'm not."

"I just wasn't prepared for how..."

"I know. I had a first time too."

I wrestled off my underwear and jeans, which were still bunched around my calves, then peeled off my socks. After scurrying into the bathroom, I cleaned my jizz off my hand and belly.

While I was in the cubbyhole washing up, Oliver had kicked off his two pairs of lowered shorts and sat up. "You're naked," he said when I returned, as if it was a surprise. His gaze caressed my body.

For the first time in my life, I felt exposed inside and out. "Yeah, I needed to clean up."

"Hold me, Ned."

I sat beside him and held him, a simple but heavenly joining. Having Oliver's bare arms around me and his bare chest half pressed against mine was wonderful enough, but the postsex feel and smell of him lifted me right off the earth. His skin was like a satin suit fresh from the steamy heat of an ironing board. His scent was pure, clean, hormone-flooded Oliver.

Trembling against me, he sniffled and coughed out stunned laughter and sniffled again.

"Are you crying?" I asked, hyperaware of his hands fondling the ends of my hair, roaming over my back, creeping down to my ass.

"No, not exactly."

"Well...are you okay with this?"

"I'm obviously more than okay with it. I've never been so turned on in my fucking life." He laughed again, but the sound was tinged with

embarrassment. "Literally, my 'fucking' life."

I shifted position and tenderly kissed him on the lips. His eyelids drifted closed as he gave himself over to the kiss.

When we parted, he simply said, "Guess I was right. I'm queer."

"And I'm thrilled." I would've been even more thrilled if he'd said he was queer just for me, that my pull on him was so strong it was irresistible, but that was pretty damned unrealistic.

"You've really wanted me that much?" he asked.

"More."

"Has it been difficult for you?"

"It ain't been easy."

Nodding, he looked down and gently wrapped his fingers around my dick, his thumb skimming over the crown. My mouth opened as I watched. Goose bumps seemed to erupt beneath my skin and send a torrent of shivers through my body. I'd just come, but the sight and feel of Oliver Duncan's hand on my bare cock was nearly enough to make me pass out.

"I've wanted you too," he said quietly. He suddenly doubled over and smoothly drew my dick between his lips.

I gasped out, "Oh Jesus," slurring the words into an exhalation because I couldn't get my mouth to form them.

Oliver sucked me once, firmly, then released me.

Breathing hard, I gaped at him as he lifted his head.

"That feels so right," he whispered, as if he'd been testing himself.

"Uh-huh."

"I've dreamed about this. But I convinced myself it was just a phase, just some erotic detour I liked taking in my imagination because I enjoyed your company so much."

"What about...what about fucking?" Man, just hearing him talk about his imaginary "erotic detours" would have me rock hard in another ten minutes.

Oliver blushed. "The thought of it makes me hot, but I'm not sure...you know...what the procedure is. And whether it hurts, whether it's..."

I shook my head, respectful of the fact he couldn't bring himself to ask about the details. "No, it feels great. Once you're used to it and have the right partner. Hell of an orgasm, believe me."

Goddamn. I suddenly wanted to stick every part of me I could into his body. I wanted to finger fuck him and toe fuck him, tongue fuck him and dick fuck him. Hell, I would've crawled all the way up his ass like a ferret if I thought I'd fit. And I wanted him to do the same to me.

"I'd love to fuck you," I said. "I'd love *you* to fuck *me*."

"You're turning me on again, Ned."

"Good. Because I'll bust a nut to be the right partner for you."

Oliver's smile seemed constrained, as if it were bound in plastic wrap. He was troubled. "Everything's changed now, hasn't it?"

"Yes. You won't have to pretend anymore. At least not to yourself."

He ran his fingertips over the back of my hand, as if his life were mapped there. "But the way things are, the way my family is and society is..."

I wanted to say to him, *Oh baby, just believe in me. Believe in us*. But that would've been some facile persuasion right out of a movie romance. Oliver was too smart to buy it. He'd say, *Okay, Ned*, then *what*? Enjoying a clandestine rush once in a while was a whole different kettle of fish from securing contentment. I had no idea where or how I'd find my piece of the American dream. I could only foresee finding fragments of it. The connubial bliss part seemed unattainable.

But I couldn't tell Oliver that. He wasn't used to his new self yet, was still anxious about how he'd conduct his life from this point on. Fear of homosexuality had forced all too many men into denying their natures. I'd met guys like that. There was always a certain tightness around their eyes, as if their very lives made them wince—maybe in revulsion, maybe from the ongoing exertion of pretending to be somebody they weren't.

"You've never explored these feelings before now?" I asked. "Never just fooled around with some guy?"

"No, hell no. Subconsciously, I guess, I knew I'd be freeing some animal I'd never be able to get back into its cage. I couldn't risk it."

"Then why are you risking it now?"

Muted conversation and laughter floated down the corridor outside our room. Oliver and I glanced at the door. Mindful of the car's thin interior walls, we were silent until the small group of passengers moved past and out of earshot.

"Isn't the answer obvious?" Oliver said, stroking the hair on my left calf. "A greater terror eclipsed a lesser fear. Teetering on the brink of marriage made me push myself in the opposite direction." When he turned his eyes up to my face, they reflected more feelings than I could identify. "The direction I always wanted to take but was afraid of taking."

"I wish I could promise you that you'll be happy," I said, unable keep the yearning out of my voice. I think I wanted happiness for Oliver more than I wanted it for myself.

His smile was sad but appreciative. "I wish you could too. Because I don't have the first goddamned idea where to go with this."

"Well, we don't have to plot our life journeys right now, do we?" I gently petted his mussed hair. "So how about if we just went exploring?"

That drew a laugh, rueful but more relaxed. "We do have the better part of a week all to ourselves."

"And we can only look at so much scenery."

Oliver flattened a hand on his belly. "Right now, though, I think we need to stoke our furnaces." When I suggestively lifted my eyebrows, he laughed and said, "We need to *eat*, Schnick. I want to keep my strength up."

We both got dressed and went to the dining car, where four-top tables lined a narrow center aisle. The train now followed the sinuous track of the Mississippi River on the Wisconsin side. I stared out the windows with dreamy pleasure as lush green bluffs marched ahead of us on the right and the broad river glimmered on the left.

"Want to go up to the Vista-Dome?" I asked.

"No, not yet. Let's go back to our room."

Realizing why he wanted to was enough to crank up my tingle machine.

We quickly undressed each other and crowded into the tiny shower stall, where there wasn't much room to do anything other than seal our bodies together as we kissed. When the sealing turned to rubbing, as if we were trying to spark a fire, Oliver asked me to face the wall. He murmured something about my ass—it appeared we had our own little mutual-admiration society when it came to each other's butt—and I thought he might fuck me with no preparation whatsoever. But as I jammed the underside of my erection against the slick wall and felt the spangling tension that preceded orgasm, Oliver merely poked at my hole. Then he slid his stiff dick vertically between my cheeks. After two or three upward thrusts, accompanied by bestial growls that

spoke to my own inner tiger, he shot on my lower back and I shot on the wall and we were temporarily sated.

"I wanted to fuck you," he said over my shoulder. His wet lips swept across the span of my shoulders, and his hands flowed with the falling water down to my ass. "But I was afraid I wouldn't do it right."

I turned to face him. "I guarantee you'll be doing it right before tomorrow."

We kissed, snickering past our twining tongues.

Afterward, we sat naked on the bed, toweling the moisture out of our hair, and Oliver insisted on combing mine. The act was sweetly intimate, and it deepened my devotion. I felt soft inside and out, a languorous lump of serenity. Being in love with him had never felt so good.

"So what did you get me for a wedding present?" Oliver asked with a smile in his voice.

I swiveled to face him. "I didn't get you anything. My mother got it. A bun warmer."

He grinned. "Seriously?"

"On my honor. A bun warmer. But I forgot to grab it on my way out of the house."

"I'll bet that was your way of rejecting the wedding and the marriage and all the trappings of domesticity."

"You could be right. When my mother mentioned dinner parties—"

Oliver's grin became a grimace. "Let's not go there."

"Fine with me."

"You can be my bun warmer," Oliver said, "and I'll be yours. No dinner parties attached. No wives either."

"That's even finer."

We lapsed into dopey-smiles and welded-gazes mode again, something we were doing more and more, and Oliver held out his arms to me. He was kneeling on his haunches, so I climbed onto him and sat on his thighs. I curled my legs and arms around his fragrant, water-warmed body and dropped my head to his shoulder. He held my butt, one hand cupping each cheek.

Perfectly interlocked, we said nothing. The train hypnotically chattered and rocked down the tracks. Faintly, at the base of my breastbone, I felt the muffled beating of Oliver's heart. Mine met it, and the train's movement met both, and for a brief eternity, the entire world seemed synchronized with our togetherness.

"Thank you," Oliver said against my neck, then stamped a slow kiss there.

I waited until he withdrew his lips from my skin before asking, "For what?"

"For this. For loving me."

I'd never told him, but it must've been obvious. I closed my eyes. "I've never been able to help it," I said. "It's never been a choice."

His fingers moved over my ass, fondling it, and he kissed my neck again, twice. "I know. It's been the same for me."

My eyes popped open. I stared past the low contours of his back and held my breath.

Oliver slid a hand into my hair. "I love you, Ned. Do you know that? I realize I've said it before, but I've never let the words mean what I felt." He chuckled. "Does that make any sense?"

Dumbfounded, I managed a weak nod without lifting my head.

"Do you believe me? I hope you do, 'cause I've never taken such a high dive into a bigger truth than that. I'm in love with you and I want you and I've never meant anything more in my life."

Where *would* we go with that?

## Chapter Six

Our idyll had begun.

We made love while murmuring declarations of love—always with breathless ardor, over and over again, as we sloppy-kissed and tender-kissed and impressed each other's body, right down to the last tendon and whisker, with our fingerprints and dick tracks, our sweat and saliva.

*"Passion's graffiti,"* Oliver once said after he'd spunked on my belly.

*"But after it's dry,"* I'd answered, *"it's even harder to remove."*

The train meted out our time together in whistle blows, in squealing stops and grinding starts. I didn't want to pay attention to hours and miles, didn't want to realize that arriving in this town, whatever it was, put us that much closer to Seattle. Because soon after our arrival in the Queen City (and how ironic that nickname seemed), we'd start heading back. And "back" meant unavoidable separation. And separation was something I couldn't bear to contemplate.

Occasionally, we'd peek beyond our haven like groundhogs popping out of their burrows to scan the world outside. Only, our world changed with every revolution of the train's wheels. After we'd passed out of northern Illinois, the landscape had become more worthy of notice. But it couldn't pry us out of each other's arms for long.

We couldn't seem to stop smiling. I was sure we looked like total imbeciles to the other passengers—when, that is, we even encountered other passengers. I didn't care. Sidney had likely figured out what was going on between us, but he didn't seem in the least bit put-off. His lack of judgment kind of surprised me, until a minor epiphany struck. A black man in his fifties had seen far too much of the havoc prejudice could wreak, and he likely wanted no part of it. He might've even sustained some psychic wounds himself and borne the resulting scars. In any case, our good-natured porter treated us with great kindness and respect, and we always looked forward to seeing him.

By early evening of the first day, we were exhausted, and we dozed on and off until very near dawn. At some point, in St. Paul, we awoke to feel our train separating from the Empire Builder, which would go its own way to the Pacific Northwest. I hadn't even been aware the two trains were joined—not surprising, since Oliver's presence had been monopolizing my attention. When dawn began almost imperceptibly to pale the room, we were in Mandan, North Dakota, an ugly little stop prettied up by a charming depot. The station struck me as poignant, like a homely girl with an old-fashioned bow in her hair.

I taught Oliver the finer points of anal sex as we rolled through the fog-swathed landscape west of Bismarck and into the desolate, dun green badlands to the southwest. Power poles stuck up amid the sullen hills like discarded toothpicks on a near-empty party tray. We broke for breakfast as the train crossed into Montana and began following the Yellowstone River, then went back to our room and cozied up again, tumbling and touching and laughing on our small, fatigued bed.

Out of an overcautious approach to hygiene, I guess, I rarely barebacked with anybody, but I did with Oliver. Once we started touching each other, we couldn't and wouldn't stop for anything. Besides, the thin membrane of a rubber became a symbol to me. Rejecting it was my way of rejecting any and all barriers that had ever stood between us.

Finally, as other passengers lunched their way past Billings, we took advantage of the viewing dome atop our car. The only other couple we encountered left within minutes, so we held hands as we gazed at the winding waterway. The bluffs were different from the ones lining the eastern bank of the Mississippi. They were the same height but had harder faces, stern and rocky and gray. The river looked much bluer.

Peacefully, Oliver and I continued to sit in our bubble. We talked quietly, about nothing of great importance—the unexpected appearance of other passengers would ruin any weighty conversation—and our hands disengaged whenever someone else entered the Vista-Dome.

After three self-conscious separations, the act began to take on depressing meaning. I knew it was an emblem of what awaited us in our daily lives. People didn't smile at sweethearts like the two of us. They didn't feel the fairy-tale purity of romance we felt in our touches. But I refused to get discouraged, at least not while our trip went on, and silently prayed shame would never get the better of us.

In the diminishing distance, the Crazy Mountains loomed, their line of blue foothills a stark band against the grassy, flower-dotted plain. Above, striated-white peaks seemed to bite into the sky. After a stop in Livingston, we'd climb even higher into the Montana Rockies via the Absaroka Range. The Yellowstone River bluffs were even craggier here, standing back from the water like grumpy old trolls.

Oliver and I finally descended to our refuge. Parting ways with the Yellowstone River, the train rose into Bozeman Pass while Oliver eagerly sucked my cock. I came hard; he swallowed with ease. Nearly six thousand feet above sea level and trembling from a mind-blowing climax, I'd never been so high.

Outside of Butte, we had supper in the dining car, then went to a lounge car for drinks. The train still forged on through the Rockies, near a different river now, and blunt-peaked, smaller mountains muscled up to the water's edge. I yawned, Oliver yawned, and we knew our second round of drinks would be nightcaps.

We hit the sack, early again, somewhere near Missoula. The bed had been made and turned down; the linens were fresh. Sidney must have slipped into our little den of iniquity and worked his magic. I looked forward to waking up with Oliver and being triply embraced—by him, our room, and the mountains. But maybe the mountains would be gone when we awoke.

"I hadn't expected this kind of honeymoon," Oliver said as we lay facing each other, our legs overlapping. Brandy scented his breath. It was the first time in what seemed like forever that he'd brought up his aborted wedding. But before the reference had a chance to jangle my nerves, he added humbly, "I hope you're not disappointed."

Now the word *honeymoon* gave me the melties. "God no," I said. "Oh God no." He'd made it clear this was about us, in our own moment, not about anything or anybody that had come before.

Oliver held my face and kissed me. Soon the tingles fused with the melties, and we were well on our way to messing up the pristine pressed sheets.

I was so deeply in love, my mind had almost stopped functioning.

I slept like a puppy.

Overnight, we missed the northern tab of Idaho and part of Washington State. From Spokane to Seattle, our train was again mated with the Empire Builder.

"How would you like finishing college in New England?" Oliver asked as we bore down on Seattle.

"How would you like finishing college in Milwaukee?" I responded.

Neither option was viable, for all kinds of reasons. We could only smile in resignation and squeeze each other's hand.

And before I knew it, our train was creeping toward King Street Station. It reminded me of Union Station in Chicago. The city rose behind it, a tight cluster of white and gray monoliths.

All I saw was a surface from which we'd rebound with cruel force, a racket that would split the whole of us into halves as it sent us hurtling back to our

starting point.

\* \* \*

Thanks to an honest cabdriver, we found a hotel not far from the train station. The city seemed kind of bleak and dingy, but the dampness and low overcast might've had a lot to do with my impression. After we checked into the Cadillac Hotel, we decided to clean up and then give our temporary destination a look-see.

I didn't know squat about Seattle, except that the Pacific Ocean lay somewhere to the northwest of it beyond Puget Sound, and it still had the Space Needle from the World's Fair eight years ago, and the Doors had held a concert there in June. Frankly, I wasn't much in the mood to play tourist. Twenty-four hours, less the time needed for eating and sleeping, didn't allow for much sightseeing. But I really didn't want to sit around and brood about our return trip.

Oliver and I discussed where to go as we had a bath together, but the discussion didn't get much past the Laundromat stage; we did agree we needed to wash our small stock of clothes. Beyond that, we were still at odds—Space Needle versus waterfront—when Oliver pinned me against the back of the tub and began rocking his soapy body over mine, up and down and up and down, his chest and abdomen and erect cock slip-sliding against me, his hips bucking occasionally. It drove me absolutely wild.

I gripped his water-slick ass the best I could. We dragged our open mouths across each other's face and throat and shoulders before pressing our lips together once more, and we gasped with every slippery, off-center kiss. Blindly, we kept grabbing for our dicks. Then Oliver ran a wet hand over my wet lips, made that strained little mewling sound that preceded his climax, and damned if we weren't both coming. I think it took us by surprise.

"Wow," Oliver said on a breath as he wilted onto my half-recumbent body. "I'm not even sure how that happened."

We quivered against each other as we gulped in air.

"I'm not either," I said. But however the hell we'd made each other come, it struck me as still more evidence that Oliver and I belonged together.

The desk clerk directed us to the nearest Laundromat. After putting our clothes into one washer, we had lunch, then returned to put the clothes in a dryer, then strolled around Pioneer Square. My attention was divided between Oliver, the architecture, and the other people on the streets. Two Black Panthers were handing out leaflets on one corner. I noticed quite a few men and women who could've been homosexuals, although I cautioned myself against stereotyping. Then Oliver leaned toward me and murmured, "Do you see a lot of masculine females and feminine males around here, or am I just imagining things?" So I figured my assumption was correct. If Seattle had a gay neighborhood, as most large cities did, this could be it.

I pulled up short in the middle of a block and grabbed the back of Oliver's shirt. "Look," I said, "a sidewalk bubbler!" A pedestal-style drinking fountain was the sight that had so delighted me, but they were only called bubblers in Milwaukee and a few other places. No wonder passersby looked at me like I wasn't right in the head.

Oliver chuckled. "Come on, Schnickelfritz," he said affectionately. "You're making a scene."

I blushed. "I'm not used to seeing them outside of parks and public buildings."

"You need to travel more."

"Bubbler!"

Oliver and I wheeled around. A very pretty, waifish young man came toward us, his arm and forefinger extended. Blond curls fell over his right eye. It was vivid blue, with a startling sheen.

"You from eastern Mass?" he asked. "Rhode Island?"

Oliver and I exchanged curious glances before we shook our heads.

"Gotta be Milwaukee, then. And not the one in Oregon."

"Warren!"

The young man dismissively flapped a hand behind him. Oliver and I peered past the blond boy and saw the target of his hand-flapping. A scowling man in his thirties who seemed to be built out of railroad ties strode toward us.

"I'm kind of an amateur linguist," Warren hurriedly informed us. "Love guessing where tourists are from just by listening to them. Regional dialects, colloquialisms. All that shit can be a dead giveaway."

"Don't fuckin' blow me off," the iron man said as he stopped in front of us. He wasn't exactly a ray of sunshine, but he was hot. Pockmarked face, bad attitude, and all. I was willing to bet he had different-sized mats of black hair all over his body.

"Oh relax, Pees." Warren smiled brightly at his companion. "You'll scare the tourists. They're from the Midwest."

He kept motormouthing about Oliver and me, and bubblers, and someplace called the Double Header, and more, until I felt winded just listening to him. Pees kept sneaking glances at us. They were head-to-toe evaluative looks, and for the first time, I suspected we were in the company of a gay couple.

Oliver and I just listened. After the quiet and privacy we'd enjoyed on our train ride, I think we both felt a bit overwhelmed.

"War!" a voice called from halfway down the block.

The blond waif kept babbling. The dark, surly hunk looked in the direction of the voice.

"Hey, speed queen!" A man jogged toward our little group.

Pees grabbed the newcomer by the front of his Hawaiian shirt. "Don't call him that in public," he said in a voice like a grater. Then he grabbed Warren by the arm, which finally shut him up. "I told you to lay off the white crosses until evening. How many'd you drop, anyway?"

"I don't know." Warren flashed a naughty-boy grin. "And that's not all I dropped, honey."

Pees rolled his head and eyes. "You little fucker," he said with more dismay than anger, and with more affection than both.

"I work good that way," said Warren.

"Excuse us," I said, then steered a dumbfounded Oliver toward a storefront doorway.

"What the hell was *that* all about?" he said to me in a lowered voice.

I shook my head and shrugged. "Do you realize their names are War and Pees?"

Oliver's forehead dipped farther before he slowly began to smile. "Yeah, they are." He kept watching the trio of men, obviously intrigued by them. He'd probably never seen three comfortably out gay guys in one place before.

The third man, the one in the tropical shirt, was saying something about a drag show. I got the impression Warren performed occasionally. The boy was silky-skinned, wide-eyed pretty, so it didn't seem out of the question. I wondered how old he was.

As the third man walked away, he called over his shoulder, "Don't forget the shit you owe me."

Pees responded with a curt reassurance. Then his gaze immediately homed in on Oliver and me. He waved us back over.

Curious, we rejoined the odd couple.

"So," Pees said, "you interested in renting him or what?"

War pursed his lips, making them plump out, making them impossible to ignore. He definitely had blowjob lips.

I felt my face rumple in confusion. "I beg your pardon?"

War stepped up to us. "Me." He ran his hands down his torso, did a runway turn, and showed us his pert, round ass. "Twenty bucks per person per hour."

I put up my hands and took a few faltering steps backward. An image of Joe Buck from *Midnight Cowboy* had just popped into my head. "Hey, wait a minute. No no no. *You're* the one who got *our* attention. Remember?"

"Was I?" War thought for moment. "I guess I was."

"Oh shit," Pees mumbled. "This is getting embarrassing." He turned to his companion. "See how fuckin' spaced-out you are?"

"Don't you want me?" War asked us. He seemed a bit crestfallen but quickly recovered. "Okay, how's this? Foursome. Just for fun. We're bored, and Pees thinks you're both hot. I do too. I like wholesome guys." He turned to Pees. "When's your birthday again?"

"January." Pees seemed irked, maybe because War had forgotten.

"Close enough," said War, clapping his hands together. "Okay, so you get a birthday present, *you*," he said to Oliver and me, "get a big ol' Seattle welcome, and I get to enjoy spreading some cheer. And a certain part of my anatomy. Whaddaya say?"

I glanced at Oliver and saw him swallow like he had a baseball in his throat. My heart was thumping. Pees had turned a dappled scarlet and suddenly looked demure.

"It's up to you," I said to Oliver.

The get-together could benefit him. Since Oliver didn't have a shit's worth of experience in the gay arena, he needed to get a better fix on what he was about. Specifically, if he was attracted only to me, because of some misguided, circumstantial bonding, or if he was attracted to men in general.

But the proposal left Oliver stymied. I excused us again and steered him back to the doorway. He couldn't seem to look at me.

"Well?" I said quietly. "What do you think?"

"Ned, I really don't feel ready for this."

"Does the thought appeal to you at all?"

"Yes and no." He licked his lips and turned his eyes up to my face. "I don't want to share you."

"You won't be sharing me." I touched his arm. "I'm yours, Oliver. No stranger is going to change that."

His mouth snapped into and out of a smile.

"We trust each other, don't we?" I asked.

He nodded. "But what if I can't...you know..."

"Perform?" I said gently.

"Yeah. Freeze up. Or...foul up somehow."

"So? What would it matter? We'll never see these guys again. It would just be a sexual lark. And it could help you learn more about yourself."

"I don't want to kiss them."

"You don't have to. I don't want to either."

His uneven breathing betrayed his anxiety. "We'll use rubbers? And set limits?"

"Depending on who does what to whom, we might not need rubbers." I wanted to tell him to quit being so uptight about the protection thing, that sex with men was a lot more satisfying without a raincoat. I knew, because hygiene hang-ups aside, I'd topped both ways. But hell, Oliver had only been out for a handful of days and only with me. It would take time for him to ease out of hetero mode and be comfortable in homo mode. "Listen, if it'll make you feel better, I'll ask War if carries them. And as to limits, we'll only do what we feel comfortable doing. Okay?"

Despairingly, Oliver wagged his head. "I don't know. What if they're just setting us up to rob us?"

Fuck, I hadn't thought of that. But I did now. "Okay, we'll show them that we don't have anything for them to steal."

"How?"

"Just leave it up to me. But don't agree to this unless you're sure, unless you're completely willing. I can go either way. Honest."

Oliver nibbled his lip. "Okay. Okay."

Simultaneously, we looked at the other two men. Our expressions must have conveyed our assent, because War beamed and all but danced up to us. Pees, more reserved, followed.

"Good. Now let's introduce ourselves. I'm Warren Jeffers." Dramatically, he gave his head a shake and swept the back of his hand over some fallen curls. "The beautiful runaway from Coos Bay." He gracefully swept an arm toward the more reserved Pees. "This is Parnell Stump, my manager, guardian angel, and boyfriend. Initials P.S. Which translate into Pees. Get it?"

"Ned and Oliver," I said. "How old are you, anyway?"

"He's old enough," muttered Pees. "Trust me."

"That brings up another point," I said. "When we get to the hotel, Oliver and I are turning over all our cash and charge cards to the desk clerk for safekeeping. So don't think you're going to—"

War broke into titters.

"We don't roll people," Pees said, grumpily indignant.

"Of course we don't," said War, running a hand down his boyfriend's arm. "And even if we did, we sure wouldn't do it to a couple on their honeymoon."

Eyebrows raised, I looked at Oliver. Although he was blushing, he smiled. We hadn't said anything about why we were in Seattle. Not a word.

After we retrieved our laundry, we headed toward yet another turning point. And it wouldn't be at the top of the Space Needle.

## Chapter Seven

Getting a boner didn't seem even remotely possible once the four of us were in the hotel room together. As I dug the lube out of our luggage and War produced rubbers to go with it, I saw the apprehension in Oliver's eyes. It fed my own. Although War performed a sprightly striptease as he shed his red hot pants and striped tank top, all I could think of was my impending humiliation. Flaccid was not flattering when it came to sexual encounters.

Beneath his mop of golden curls, War had a sylphlike body: lean, coltish limbs; narrow but firm chest; outstanding, creamy-smooth ass. The last did pique my interest.

"Go ahead, cop a feel," Pees said, gruff and smirking, as he peeled off tattered bell-bottoms and a red muscle shirt that matched War's shorts. He nodded toward his partner.

That's when things turned.

Oliver, sitting a couple feet away from me on the edge of the bed, lifted his butt and began sliding his jeans down his legs. I saw a distinct bulge in his briefs. Oh the irony. He was the one who'd had performance anxiety, yet his little soldier was beginning to stand at attention quite nicely. I felt a small twist of jealousy—then my twenty-year-old hormones kicked in. Watching Oliver get aroused was not something that would leave me soft for long. I gave him a sidelong glance as I fondled War's ass. Oliver's gaze was glued to us. His mouth opened, and that meant he was breathing a lot harder.

War hummed with pleasure, or maybe was carrying a tune, as he swayed his butt against my palms and idly fondled his pretty pink cock. I impulsively leaned forward, my lips parted wide, and nipped at both cheeks. War uttered an "oooh!" of surprise and began giggling. I could *hear* Oliver breathing now.

Smiling, I lifted his hand and put it against War's ass. Ever accommodating, War stepped to the left and let Oliver partake. His cock growing, Oliver swept his hands over War's butt, then squeezed it, then nuzzled it. My dick was twitching at irregular intervals now, and when I slid a hand over Oliver's crotch and felt his semierection, sparks showered through my groin.

"Let's do the Show 'Em," War said.

I looked up. Pees was stroking himself in front of the mirror over the desk. He alternately cast glances at his thickening prick and at Oliver and me feeling up his partner. The man had an impressive physique. Tattooed across the broad expanse of his upper back, a winged, ancient Egyptian sun disk rippled subtly as his languid masturbation went on. Yeah, he had some delectable body hair. The fine stitchery on his buttocks filled in from thighs to calves. Muscular thighs and calves.

My excitement mounted, stringing my muscles ever tighter. As War and Pees situated themselves on the bed—War at the head and Pees at the foot, so they faced each other—I turned to Oliver and kissed him. It was a wet, messy kiss, stimulating as hell, because it was the kind of kiss that told me Oliver was hot and getting hotter, and damn all self-conscious diffidence, he was ready for some action.

"Sit here, Oliver," War chirped. He patted the mattress in front of his parted legs. "Cozy up to my lickin' stick with your back to me, baby. Just lose the skivvies first."

Oliver and I rose from the foot of the bed, where we'd been sitting.

"Want to keep going with this?" I whispered just millimeters from his mouth.

"Yeah." He could barely get the word out. A flush had begun to spread across his chest.

I yanked down his briefs, making sure to scrape the elastic waistband against his cock, then gripped it in my fist and gave it a quick, hard suck.

A knotted sound came from deep in his throat.

"Not too much!" War shrieked. "You'll ruin it!"

After Oliver stepped out of his underwear, he got on the bed and sat where he'd been told. Pees slipped a hand between my legs as I finished undressing. He made a point of nudging my balls before gliding his fingers down my inner thigh. A quiver shot through my legs and sank from skin to bone.

"Tight," he said with obvious approval. "I'd love to suck 'em, but War wants to do some teasing. Now sit in front of me."

Mind hazing, I did so. When I backed up to Pees, I immediately felt his erection push like a smooth, sun-warmed branch against my lower back. We all four now faced off on the bed.

"Just watch, lovebirds," War crooned over Oliver's shoulder. "Just watch each other. Don't touch your dandies, though. Sit on your hands if you have to."

His pale fingers appeared on Oliver's chest and abdomen. A second later, Pees's hands crawled over mine. It was exquisitely arousing, feeling my body being fondled as I watched Oliver's being fondled. He looked drugged. His mouth went slack; his head lolled backward. Still, his dull gaze was trained on me.

War slowly played with Oliver's nipples, inscribing dainty circles around them, flicking them with thumbnails, catching them between his fingers and tugging...then lightly brushing his fingertips over them once they were hard as carmine beads. He nuzzled the slope of Oliver's neck as he played, kissing him, murmuring words I couldn't discern. Oliver groaned without restraint, his neck arching, and his groans joined with mine as Pees pinched my nipples into stiffness. His hard-on bucked against my spine as he nibbled my shoulder.

I almost lost it when the first drop of precum appeared at Oliver's slit. A feeling like soft steel wool buffed the inside of my skin from knees to rib cage. Squirming, I braced my hands on the furred kames of Pees's thighs.

"I'll bet the two of you are freakin' hot together," Pees mumbled against the side of my head. He nosed through my hair to get to my ear, then drew its rim between his teeth. "You should do porn. You got the looks. You got the meat."

It might've been the biggest crock of bullshit anybody had ever fed me, but it made my cock bounce with a surge of blood.

The men's hands moved to our crotches. War still let one hand play over Oliver's chest, because Oliver had a goddamned gorgeous, firm chest that was even more irresistible when his nipples were pebble hard, but Oliver's delta of pubic hair was getting attention too. War buried his fingers in it, letting them skim the base of Oliver's rigid dick. Pees was even bolder, not only poking through my pubes, but running his fingers along the swell of my sac. Tension clutched my groin.

The Show 'Em tease was pushing me to the breaking point. I knew if cum started spurting out of Oliver's cock, I'd shoot too.

"You ready for some slurpin', baby?" War asked, resting his chin on Oliver's shoulder. "Huh? Want the dancing doll to suck your brains out through your dick?"

It wasn't a very romantic image, but it was effective. I could tell from the rising and falling of Oliver's chest and the nearly stuporous look on his face that he was aching to unload.

"War can do it too," said Pees. "He'll drain you dry."

Oliver and I exchanged a glance. I saw uncertainty flicker through his eyes. But I also knew we were both past the point of no return. I got onto my



knees, closed the distance between us, and cupped the back of his head. He smoothed a hand over my stiff cock.

"It's all right," I whispered against his mouth. "You have too many brains the way it is." Nervous chuckles bobbed in our throats as we kissed, as I felt Oliver's heat radiating against my body.

"I love you," he said.

I smiled. "I love you too. Just enjoy it."

"Yeah, baby, lie down," War said. "Close to the end there."

"I'd like that too," Pees said. "He's a looker. I wanna see him stretched out."

Everybody got off the bed except Oliver, who lay on his back, cock pointed at the ceiling. War straddled his legs. I stood at the end of the bed, facing War's back, and Pees stood behind me.

"You want to drill me?" War asked me over his shoulder with a wicked smile.

I was already rolling a rubber onto my erection.

"You mind being fucked?" rumbled Pees at my back. He was still feeling me up.

At this point—blood thrumming and nerves vibrating throughout my body—I would've fucked myself on a goddamned fire hydrant.

"I don't mind as long as I'm done right."

Pees's big hands scorched my skin as I looked down at Oliver's flushed, sweat-glazed body. I thought of my dick up War's sweet, curvy ass while his BJ lips circled Oliver's oh-so-ready prick.

It seemed I was well on my way to being done right.

"You've got the master behind you, hon," said War.

As if to prove it, Pees deftly prepped me with lube. My abdominal muscles fluttered at his touch; my hole puckered with demure, delighted little spasms. If I hadn't been so mired in lust, I would've either laughed or cried.

Laughed, because we were all lined up, prepared to hook together like baby elephants on parade, and it was the most disgustingly freeing thing I'd ever done. I felt like the porn actors I'd seen on cheap film in nasty little viewing booths at adult bookstores. Laughed, too, because this get-together had proved both to me and Oliver that he was gay—absolutely, unquestionably, no-turning-back gay, not just laboring under some sexual delusion prompted by nonsexual circumstances.

Cried, because the love of my life was about to be sucked off by a willowy youth with succulent lips who could wear hideous, spit-shiny hot pants to perfection. I had a secret desire for War to suck me off too, so I was shamefully envious. Cried as well because we were far from home, in an impersonal hotel room with two strangers, spilling our seed wantonly instead of lovingly, and no matter how much I wanted to berate myself for being so fucking earnest about, well, *fucking*, I still wished Oliver and I had our own home and our own bed and our own full life together.

Moist suctioning sounds rose to my ears. I gripped the satin globes poised in front of me and thrust my stiffy between them. Just as War's tightness made me shudder, Pees's thick cock inched up my ass and added a whole new sensation. Pressure built inside my body and pressure built around my cock, and soon I was clenching and being clenched, rocking and being rocked, and the shock waves that ran through my limbs and torso stripped me of all control.

I glimpsed Oliver writhing on the twisted bedspread, thrusting his hips as his fingers clutched a mass of blond ringlets. I heard his coarse moans and saw his beautiful face contort with need. He uttered one syllable—"No" or "Ned," or maybe just "Nuh," a vocalized gasp—and I lost it.

The orgasmic chain reaction created its own miniearthquake. I rammed my pubic bone against War's ass, Pees made some rapid-fire jabs at my prostate, and my cock throbbed with release, the contractions stronger and sharper than any I'd ever experienced. My legs and arms actually shook. Judging by War's muffled whimpers, he was still swallowing Oliver's cream as my dick jerked against his honey spot.

Behind me, Pees grunted. His fingers dug into my pelvis. With one swift backward pull, he let the base of his cockhead lodge within my entrance, and the muscle's spasmodic cinching coaxed *him* into climax.

Breathing heavily, we all went into boiled-noodle mode after that. It was an effort just to get dressed. War suggested we laze around together, naked, and see what else might transpire, but the idea made me uncomfortable. Oliver suddenly seemed ill at ease too. It was easy to get lost in the moment when you were so worked up you felt on the verge of splitting open. But with satiety came second thoughts.

I didn't want anybody eyeing up Oliver's body or languidly stroking him or moving in for a kiss. War and Pees were nice enough guys, but I worried they might start taking the situation for granted if we all settled in together. I could tell by Oliver's wary glances that he felt the same way.

"I'm about ready for a nap," I told our guests.

"I am too," said Oliver.

"Well, we're easy enough to find if you'd like to play again later," said the good-natured War.

They hung around long enough for Pees to fire up a joint and everybody to get a couple of tokes. After that, I really *was* sleepy, so as soon as our guests left, Oliver took a shower and I crawled into the sack. When he joined me, we kissed lightly and cuddled, and I couldn't help noticing that he seemed preoccupied.

"Do you regret what we did?" I asked him.

"Not actually *regret*," he said, lying nearly nose to nose with me. "I just feel weird about it. Like I crossed a line, and now I'm...sullied somehow."

"Why? Did you feel pressured into it?"

Oliver's brow furrowed. "No, not really."

"Did you dislike it?"

He was silent for a moment. "Just the opposite. I'm afraid I liked it way too much."

I smiled sympathetically and touched his lips. "Your appetite's been building too long. That's all. It'll level out."

"You think so?"

"Mm-hm. You've been hooking up with the wrong gender for years. Now that you're hooking up with the right one, you're like a starving man at a banquet."

"Could be." Oliver's gaze angled away from my face. Even though he'd given my theory some credence, he still looked bothered. "Did *you* like it?" he finally asked.

"Of course I did. I got to watch you get turned on while my dick was being stretched. It just about made my brain leak out of my ears."

Oliver laughed even as he blushed. "It *was* pretty freakin' hot. Have you ever had group sex before?"

"Just once. A threesome. But it was kind of smarmy, and it was over real fast."

Oliver grew more somber as he continued to look at me. "I prefer one-on-one. With somebody I care about. The satisfaction runs a lot deeper."

"I agree," I said softly.

We didn't talk any further about War and Pees, or sex, or what it meant to be a young gay man with irrepressible needs. I think we didn't want to admit to ourselves that while we were apart, we'd regularly feel the bite of physical desire—something as natural and inevitable as our missing each other—and, more often than not, would succumb to it.

"Should we just stay together?" Oliver asked. "Should we just say to hell with school and our families and all the other baggage we left behind, and just start fresh, start building a life with each other?"

I closed my eyes against his words. "No," I whispered.

"Why? Because you don't love me enough?"

Moisture began to film the lines of my lashes. I pinched a thumb and forefinger over my eyes and then blinked away the tears' sting. "No, Oliver. Because I love you too much."

## Chapter Eight

The remainder of our brief stay in Seattle was uneventful. And for some reason, our eastbound train ride didn't impress itself on my mind the way our westbound had. Oliver and I were both introspective. Or maybe we were deadening our minds.

We *tried* to stay upbeat—when we talked about War and Pees, we got a laugh out of what characters they were—but our amusement was only a bright, brittle shell over a deeper emotional turmoil. The reality was, each passing mile took us closer to a place we didn't want to be, a place of explanations and responsibilities. And a place of division.

I hoped Oliver didn't resent me for nixing his fresh-start idea. God knows there were moments when I sure as hell questioned my answer.

A gray drizzle enveloped the train for much of its journey. Oliver and I mostly stayed in our room. We looked at and touched each other in a different way now—precisely and tenderly, with a longing that prefigured the more painful longing that was certain to come.

One time, after we made slow love, we simply lay facing each other for over an hour.

"Would you like to go to the dome?" I finally asked.

"I'd rather not. I want to memorize the landscape of *you*." Oliver moved his hand to my face, and his fingertips inscribed a delicate tracery from my brows to my cheekbones. "I want to study 'the distinct country of your eyes, gifted with green twilight.'"

Although the odd statement confounded me, it nearly triggered a rise of tears. "You majoring in creative writing now?" I said, hoping that teasing him would keep me from crying.

Oliver shook his head. "No. I just came across that poem in contemporary lit last year." His smile was more rueful than cheerful. "I was pretty freaked-out when I realized it made me think of you."

I abruptly got off the bed and went to the bathroom. Trying to hold myself together at that moment required more effort than anything I'd ever done.

Until, that is, we were back in Milwaukee, and Oliver spent the night at my apartment, and the next morning after we'd showered together, we realized we could no longer forestall the inevitable.

Storm clouds gathered in the west as we stood outside my building waiting for Oliver's cab. *Donnerwetter*, my maternal grandmother would've called it. Thunder weather. It only added to the grimness of the scene.

"Looks like rain," Oliver said.

"Sure does."

Don't forget me, my heart cried. I couldn't bring myself to say it. I wasn't even sure why I was thinking such a thing since there was no reason we couldn't stay in touch and wouldn't be seeing each other. Sooner or later.

He turned to me. "Ned—"

"Don't forget me," I whispered.

A flare of lightning accompanied the anguished meeting of our eyes.

"Are you crazy?" Oliver said, forcing a lighthearted tone. "Why would I forget you? I couldn't if I tried." He surreptitiously hooked his forefinger around my little finger. "You're the first person to give me the electric melty tingles."

I don't know if I smiled or not. I know I tried to.

"I love you, Ned."

"I love you too."

"That's never going to change."

I shook my head as I looked at the sidewalk. A paper cup tumbled past our feet, propelled by a sluggish gust of wind. My stomach had knotted and my throat had knotted, and I suddenly couldn't imagine getting through this day and every day hereafter without Oliver at my side.

We disengaged our hands and slipped them into our pockets.

Thunder rumbled in the distance as the cab pulled up to the curb.

\* \* \*

The jangling phone jolted me out of my restless doze. I hadn't heard that sound in nearly a week. Yesterday, I'd disconnected the thing as soon as Oliver and I walked into my apartment. Now I dived over the couch arm, grabbing for the receiver and nearly pulling the whole phone off the end table. My heart thudded at the back of my throat.

"Hello," I said breathlessly, certain it was Oliver.

"Oh thank God you're home!" said my mother's voice. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." I eased back onto the couch cushions and raked a hand through my loose hair.

"Where have you *been*? The Duncans have been calling here and making all sorts of crazy accusations..." On and on she went, frothing with relief and annoyance and confusion and Christ-knew-what-else. Then the questions started.

"Mom," I said wearily, "just let it go. Oliver got cold feet and wanted to disappear for a while, so I went with him."

"But...why? Didn't you know how it would affect people?" Now she lathered herself into a full-blown lecture.

When the phrase *broken hearts* hit my ear, I knew I'd heard enough. "Listen. He's my best friend, and he was hurting. *That's* why I went. He needed me, and I love him, and I dare anybody to come up with better reasons than those. I'm sorry, but I don't want to talk about this anymore." I hung up.

Broken hearts. Yeah, I knew about broken hearts.

"Fuck!" I shouted, snatching up the phone book and pitching it against a wall.

I pounded down a beer and then curled up on the couch again, wanting nothing more than to sleep until I could be with Oliver. Problem was, I didn't have the vaguest idea when that would be. Or even if it was possible.

Maybe a half hour later, someone rapping at my door roused me a second time. When I swung the door open, I sagged.

"Don't you ever hang up on your mother."

"Pop, I really need to—"

He muscled past me into my shabby living space and pushed the door closed. "What you need is some respect. That's what *you* need."

I turned. "I apologize for the way I treated Mom. It's been a hell of a week, and I'm wrung out."

Narrowing his eyes, he scrutinized me. "Where'd you go, anyway?"

"We took a train to Seattle and back."

Pop shifted his jaw around as he processed this info. "Well, I suppose you can't get into too much trouble on a train." He shambled over to the couch and plopped down.

"It wasn't our intention to get into trouble," I said. "It was just...an escape. Oliver needed to get away and think."

"Think," my father repeated skeptically. "Then why'd he need *you* around?"

We stared at each other. Something was up. Cold apprehension slid through my stomach like sleet.

"Isn't that what you told your mother?" Pop said. "That Oliver 'needed' you, and you 'love' him, and that's why you went?" He'd given those two words exaggerated emphasis, complete with saucer-eyed expressions and shoulder hitches that made it clear he was ridiculing me.

"What are you getting at?" I said. Without trying, I'd infused the question with sullen defiance.

My steps were deliberate as I walked to the ratty recliner. Woodenly, I sat and rested my arms on the chair's arms.

I was ready. My journey with Oliver had stiffened my spine. If love couldn't validate my worth and give me a reason to be proud, nothing could.

The snideness and swagger melted out of my father. I could tell. No matter what suspicions he might be harboring, the old man loved me. Maybe, just maybe, he'd also come to respect me.

"Is there something we don't know about you?" he asked quietly.

I swallowed. I wanted to tell him, but I didn't know how.

He leaned forward and rested his arms on his knees. "Let's try this. Is there anybody outside your family who means a whole shittin' lot to you?"

"I think you already know the answer."

Nodding, he took a deep breath and blew it out, then scratched at his hairline with both hands. "And that means—"

"Yup."

"You're like Liberace."

I sure as hell hadn't expected *that*, and I coughed out laughter. "No, Pop, I'm not like Liberace."

He relaxed just a tad, which wasn't good either. He'd misinterpreted my meaning and probably thought I'd just denied being queer. In my father's mind, all gay men were the same, like so many shiny scarlet pomegranates hanging from a single tree. I don't think he realized there were as many differences among us as there were in the straight population.

"I'm not like Liberace because I'm still me," I said. "I just happen to be homosexual." I didn't know if he was familiar with the word *gay*.

His face fell. "Don't kid around, Ned."

"I'm not kidding around. It's true. I've known for years. I guess it's time you and Mom knew too."

"Oh Jesus." Shorn of hope, my father dropped his face to his hands. "So you and Oliver..."

My stomach felt funny at the mere mention of his name, especially in this context. "Leave Oliver out of this. He has nothing to do with what we're talking about. This is *my* life."

"And you'd rather be a Nancy than a Ned," said my father's muffled voice.

I couldn't help rolling my eyes. He was a way bigger drama queen than my mom. "No, I don't want to be a Nancy. I'm happy with who I am."

"When your mother's slips disappeared from the clothesline..."

"What?"

Pop slid his hands down just far enough to reveal his eyes. The message they conveyed was familiar: *Cut the innocent crap. You know damned well what I mean.*

"Don't give me that look," I said. I leaned forward, mirroring his position. "Pop, trust me. I don't know what the hell happened to Mom's lingerie, but I didn't filch it. I'm not a cross-dresser. I'm not a drag queen. I like being a guy."

He uttered a pitiful groan and again covered his face. My assertion must've conjured unpleasant images for him. "Where did we go wrong?" he mumbled.

"You didn't 'go wrong.' I'm pretty sure I was born this way." Sighing, I got up from the recliner. "Want a beer?" I figured his favorite panacea would make him feel better.

"Yeah, you better gimme one."

"You wouldn't have even known I was gay if I hadn't told you," I called from the kitchenette. "When did I ever embarrass you?" I opened two bottles and carried them into the living room.

Pop had finally raised his head, but he still slumped forward. He rolled up his hazel eyes to look at me. "When you sang 'The Surrey With the Fringe on Top' in front of the whole relation at Bobo's one Christmas."

"You know Mom made me do that. She thought it was cute. Come on. I was just a little kid."

The old man shot me a disgruntled glance as he took a swig. He finally settled against the back of the couch. "I don't get it. I just don't."

"And I don't expect you to get it," I said. "I only expect you not to treat me any differently."

We both knew I'd just laid down the bottom line. I tried to read Pop's face to see if he'd accepted it. The old man was a former union steward, and he'd yammered plenty about the art of reading people during contract negotiations.

Yes, he'd accepted it. More or less.

Probably less than more.

"Why the hell do you want to be this way? Is it supposed to be some 'in' thing? Part of that free-love bullshit?"

Definitely less than more. "It wasn't a choice," I said. "This is just the way I am. I don't know why. I only know I can't change it. Believe me."

He drank in silence for a while. I didn't say anything further but merely let him mull over my big revelation. That was the only way to deal with Pop when he was upset—just leave him alone with his thoughts.

"Do you want to inform your mother, or do you want me to do it?" he finally asked, managing to sound both weary and resentful.

"I think I'd rather do it myself."

Christ, I could just hear him: *How's this for some goddamned good news? Your son's a fruit, Eleanor. He all but admitted he's been dropping the soap with Oliver Duncan. I'll betcha anything if you dig through his room, you'll find those missing slips of yours.* Of course I'd be only my mom's son. Whenever Pam or I committed some transgression, we mysteriously became the sole possession of one parent.

The phone rang again just as my father drained his beer bottle. Since he'd declined my offer of another drink, I was already on my feet, prepared to see him out. If it was Oliver this time, I could hardly talk to him in front of ol' Floyd.

I turned away from the couch as I answered.

"Ned Surwicki?"

A man's voice. With a surly tone. It sounded vaguely familiar, but I couldn't quite place it. "Speaking."

I glanced at Pop. He was being a little too attentive.

"This is Bill Duncan. I have some questions for you."

Oh fuck. Oliver's father, the self-made man. A bulky, hirsute guy with attitude, he looked and acted like a growth-stunted grizzly bear.

"I'm sorry, but I have company."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Pop jerk into a flurry of movement. Judging by the shaking of his head and jabbing of his finger, he was trying to tell me in his speeding-mime way that he was about to leave.

"When will you be free?" asked Duncan.

"I'm not sure."

"How about in forty-five minutes?"

"I don't know."

"I'll be getting back to you, Ned." It sounded like a threat.

He hung up without another word.

"Well." I put the receiver in its cradle and slid my hands into my pockets. "Looks like this is my lucky day."

"Now what?" asked my father.

"It seems Bill Duncan wants to give me the third degree."

Pop got up from the couch. "You don't have to answer *shit*," he said.

I smiled wanly and clapped him on the arm. I'd been right. He might see me as something of a freak of nature, at least for the time being, but he was still firmly on my side.

That fact brought me some much-needed consolation.

\* \* \*

The phone call I'd been hoping for finally came late that night. I'd been sleeping fitfully, dogged by harrowing dreams I couldn't fully remember.

"I can't talk long," Oliver said in a rushed murmur. "I'm really sorry about my father calling you. He was on the verge of driving over to your place and confronting you, but I blew up and told him that was unacceptable. He backed off."

"You're shitting me. You stood up to him?"

"I had to. What happened was my gig, not yours. The old fart needs to get it through his head that I'm an adult now and I can answer for my own actions."

My heart swelled with admiration for Oliver, which made my yearning even more acute. "So how are things going?"

"Not the grooviest."

"Damn it, I wish I could be there with you."

"That would only make matters worse. You're persona non grata now."

A muted clatter came through the receiver, as if Oliver was repositioning himself. I couldn't remember where all the telephones were in his parents' house. As I recalled, there hadn't been one in his room since he'd left for college, so he probably didn't have much privacy as he spoke to me. My admiration ballooned further. He was taking a risk just by making this call.

"I miss you, Ned. A lot."

The softness in his voice had nothing to do with volume. How I wished I *were* the superfruit I'd once imagined. I'd fucking fly over there and scoop him up and take us to a Pacific island paradise.

"As soon as you can get away," I said, "hop in a car and get your ass over here."

I heard a raised voice in the near background, and the line abruptly went dead.

# Chapter Nine

1970 - 1982

Oliver was in Hanover two days later. His parents had deemed me a bad influence. I found out later they'd reclaimed his car—part of his punishment, I guess—and had him fly back East.

I was devastated.

We wrote to each other a lot at first and made a point of exchanging photos. I signed mine *Schnickelfritz*. Oliver's picture bore a luscious red kiss on the back, so he must've slapped on some lipstick to make the imprint. I often fitted my lips to it. Sometimes I jacked off as I stared at the image and remembered the feel of his mouth on mine.

Our letters were initially full of lewdness and longing. Because of our schedules, connecting by phone was more difficult. Gradually the lewdness and longing became diluted with reportage and practical concerns. I got the distinct impression Oliver was whittling away any indicators of his gayness. He was preparing himself for the wider world that lay beyond two young men's foolish romantic dreams.

We didn't get together over Christmas break; the Duncans went to Switzerland and flew Oliver there to join them. We didn't get together over spring break; Oliver went to Puerto Vallarta. I was tormented by the possibility he was picking up other guys—on the sly, of course—and had maybe fallen for one of them, but there was nothing I could do about it.

We exchanged graduation cards. I'd known for a while Oliver was going on to law school, but he'd neglected to tell me where. Or maybe he *had* told me, but it was in an earlier letter I would've found too painful to reread. In any case, I tried to put it out of my mind. The writing was on the wall. We knew we had to stop clinging; we'd known it for months. Our careers beckoned. Life in the heterosexual world lay ahead of us.

And then, like intertwined tendrils of smoke from the same fire, prevailing conditions forced us to unwind from each other. Drifting apart, rising toward our separate destinies, we moved on with our lives. For at least a year, a corner of my heart was aching hollow. I repeatedly entertained the notion of finding Oliver—and repeatedly convinced myself not to bother trying.

I didn't think he had come out to anybody, except whatever tricks he might've scored. But that didn't qualify as coming out. That was simply showing your true nature, because you had no other choice if you wanted to get laid.

Although my parents and I reached an uneasy peace, we never discussed my orientation. (True to his word, because he considered it his most valuable currency, my father let me choose my own time to tell Mom. All she'd said was, "*Oh my goodness. Are you sure?*") I understood their discomfiture. It saddened me, but I was grateful their love remained unconditional. Mom and Pop belonged to a different generation. If my generation had difficulty understanding and accepting homosexuality, theirs was even more challenged.

Their lack of acknowledgment aside, my queerness was always in the room with us, just like it had trailed behind Oliver and me when we'd gone to Chicago to catch that train. Pam remained in the dark until she was nineteen. Oddly enough, she soon became my best friend and most reliable confidante—understanding and compassionate and always solicitous of my happiness.

Redirecting my focus and energy after Oliver's departure from my life, I got a master's degree and worked hard to build a sterling reputation as a structural engineer. Bridges became my specialty. I didn't just travel the country; I traveled the world. It was exhausting but rewarding. My feeling of personal desolation gave way to a feeling of professional accomplishment.

Atlanta became my home base for seven or eight years. No harsh winter, good international airport, and plenty of bars and bathhouses. It met my fundamental needs. I invested my money well, if not my free time and my body.

Certainly not my free time and my body. I went through a whole parade of domestic and foreign NSA fuck buddies, hittin' it here, hittin' it there, hoping for nothing more than the "little death" that is orgasm.

Until I crossed paths with Geoffrey Ingram.

Urbane and flamboyant and ten years my senior, Geoffrey was a London theatrical producer I'd met after a show one night in 1979. I was flattered he even noticed me, more flattered that he found me worth pursuing. A big bonus, aside from his blue-eyed, black-haired good looks, was that he never asked me to call him Daddy. I loved him before I'd even begun to entertain the notion that it was possible.

More important, I realized offering my heart came with conditions.

Geoffrey could be petulant and self-pitying, especially when he didn't get his way. His sharp wit often turned cutting. He had a low level of resistance to pretty young men. After an intense courtship and two years' worth of transatlantic flights and turbulent visits, distance conspired with disillusionment to erode our fragile affair.

Part of me was ashamed. I felt I'd failed at being a good boyfriend. A bigger part of me was proud. I'd been able to recognize I had standards. They were sound ones, and I'd honored them.

I also realized it was Oliver Duncan who had, however unwittingly, set the bar.

My love for Geoffrey had never replaced my love for Oliver but merely covered it for a while, like modern paneling laid over lovely but outdated wallpaper. In the more obscure corners of my mind, thin strips of that paper still showed. I saw them mostly in my dreams. Once a year or so, I also saw them in the photograph I unearthed. I'd given up kissing the lipstick print, but my disinterment ritual went on, usually prompted by short news bulletins I got from my parents or former classmates.

Oliver was practicing law in Virginia.

He finally got married—not to Naomi, but to a brand-new woman who was also a lawyer.

Fewer than eighteen months later, the marriage foundered.

He gave up law—why, nobody knew.

Finally, word trickled back to me that he had "turned gay."

When Bill Duncan died, my father averred that was what killed him. My response was, "*Then he should've kicked the bucket long before now.*"

By the age of thirty-two, I'd traveled the globe, gone through two significant sweethearts, and had enough one-night stands to keep at least one condom factory operating in the black. The story of my life, with its continually changing settings and cast of characters, began to remind me of St. Louis Cemetery No. 1 in New Orleans. I'd been stacking places and people on top of one another, cramming them into my limited time on earth.

That year, 1982, I moved back to Milwaukee, a comfortable and comforting old nest. I figured it was time to slow down the hectic stratification of my life. My parents were in their sixties, and Pam had a genuinely nice husband and three bright kids. I needed to be around my family.

I didn't need more come-and-go encounters. Not as many, anyway.

I didn't need romance, because I didn't think I could stand it.

But I did wonder, as usual, how Oliver was doing.



# Chapter Ten

1985

I loved Summerfest. A big eleven-day, open-air music festival with multiple stages, it had started in 1968 and grown every year, spreading along the lakeshore just south of downtown and east of the old Third Ward. The Hoan Bridge, which I liked looking at but found structurally questionable, arched over the backside of the grounds like a concrete canopy. Since moving back to Milwaukee after my split with Geoffrey, I'd made a point of going to Summerfest every year, sometimes two or three times.

Nick and Molly Terhune, neighbors of mine and the couple I'd come with, sat beside me at the Main Stage to see Eric Clapton. I occasionally caught distinct veins of scent in the air. Some of them made me hungry, so I excused myself and headed down the aisle between the rows of seats. Food vendors were scattered all over the grounds. I figured it wouldn't take me long to find something to put in my stomach.

It was just outside the Main Stage venue that I heard it, the word from my past that would change my future.

"Schnickelfritz."

I spun around. Then the world spun around me. Oliver Duncan stood maybe twenty feet away, beaming, and I instantly beamed back. We weren't wearing those doofy, moonstruck smiles we'd worn all the way to Seattle, but big, blooming, incandescent grins.

We floated toward each other—at least that's how it seemed—as the crowd streamed around us. Two seconds after we stopped, we fell into a gripping hug. Our fingers dug into each other's back. I closed my eyes and wondered if I was hallucinating.

"You look great," Oliver said, his voice echoing through every bone in my head.

"So do you."

It wasn't empty flattery. He'd grown into his looks. No longer the squeaky-clean Ivy Leaguer he'd been at twenty-one, he was maturely handsome, his face more chiseled than cherubic. He'd always had a nicely defined physique, but now he was solidly hard muscled. I could tell he worked out regularly.

When we eased apart, I asked, "Why're you in town?"

"Vacation." Oliver said, his gaze still moving over my face as if he were admiring a fine painting.

"I live here now." My hunger was gone, and my stomach seemed packed with jumping beans. "Moved back three years ago. I restored a beautiful old Craftsman bungalow in Bay View, right on the lake."

Oliver lifted his eyebrows. "Bay View's been gentrified?"

"Some of it."

"Sounds like you've done well for yourself."

"Professionally, yes."

His expression modulated. "Partner?" he asked more tentatively.

I shook my head. "No. I, uh...was in a long-distance relationship for a while, but things fell apart. I got word my ex died in February from AIDS."

"Oh God. I'm sorry, Ned. I've heard how it's spreading."

"Yeah. That's some scary shit. And what about you?"

"I'm living in Chattanooga."

"Partner?" I asked, echoing the sound of his earlier question.

"No. Just casual dating."

"Have you given up trying to get married?" I asked with a smile. I couldn't help taunting him, just a little.

"Oh Christ." The words came out as half groan, half chuckle. "Yeah, I finally learned my lesson."

"What the hell were you thinking?"

Oliver pondered this a moment. The audience at a nearby stage sent up a cheer. Caught by the cool lake breeze, strains of music from different venues occasionally snaked around us. The wind stirred our hair.

"I guess I was looking for stability," Oliver said. "And social acceptance. I was sick of all the clandestine hookups. And sick of colleagues wondering why I was such a loner. So I thought I could just, I don't know, marry away the gay."

"It doesn't happen that way."

"No," he said, "it sure doesn't."

Our eyes met. The paneling I'd put up over that lovely old wallpaper began to melt away like syrup. I could see the paper's pattern shining through again.

"Want to go somewhere and talk?" I asked.

"I'd like that. But we'll miss Clapton."

*I've never been in love with Clapton. "Layla" might give me goose bumps, but it's never given me the electric melty tingles.* "That's okay," I said. "The fucker'll still be performing twenty-five years from now, probably."

Oliver laughed.

Exhilarated, I jogged back up to the Main Stage seating area to tell Nick and Molly I'd run into an old friend and they should just proceed without me. Then Oliver and I wandered to the north end of the grounds, where the activity was thinnest, and sat on the rocky shoreline. Light from the festival gilded the waves' low crests. Beneath, they looked black with tarnish.

"Damn, I can hardly believe this," I said for the umpteenth time. "Whatever made you pick Milwaukee for your vacation?"

"It's my home. And I've been hearing about Summerfest, so I wanted to check it out." Oliver slipped a little as he shifted on the boulder where he sat, and I immediately grabbed his arm to steady him. He flashed me a quick, self-conscious smile and murmured, "Thanks."

A tight, vibrating string seemed to run through the center of me. Although Oliver's face was largely shadowed, I couldn't stop looking at him. The cut of his hair, the line of his profile, the shape of his hands and the angle of his bent legs—every part of the man who sat beside me was merging with my memories. I wanted to touch him, to see if he was indeed the same Oliver who'd felt so right within my arms and beneath my fingers fifteen years earlier. But I knew he was. I knew it.

As our catch-up session began, I started at the beginning and asked about Naomi. Oliver told me he'd only seen her once, in a parking lot in Concord shortly after his graduation, but he hadn't bothered approaching her. "She apparently hated me with the heat of a thousand suns," he said, "so I assumed a polite greeting would be an exercise in futility."



Laughing, I nearly slid off the boulder where my butt was parked. This time, it was Oliver who made the steadying grab.

He explained what had happened to his law career. "I loved certain things about it but despised the rest. I finally came to the conclusion that the justice system in this country is irredeemably damaged. I sure as hell couldn't repair it, and I was frustrated working within it. So I went back to school and got a master's in guidance and counseling. I've worked with troubled teens and victims of domestic abuse and hospice patients. It's been incredibly rewarding."

My respect for him skyrocketed, especially when I realized how his income must have plunged. Holy hell, I'd been vastly outearning him for years.

What's more, Oliver got next to nothing when his father died. Bill Duncan had revised his will following the "great escape." It stipulated that Oliver would only inherit his original share of the family fortune if he got married and stayed married for at least two years. He'd come into far more if that marriage yielded children.

"My parents never knew about my marrying Joan," he said. "We had a quick and quiet ceremony before a justice of the peace. I suppose, in my heart, I knew the marriage was doomed. Joan was actually pretty decent about it when I told her I was gay and couldn't stand the charade any longer. I felt almost as liberated as when I came out to you on the train."

After their separation, he'd finally come out to his family too. It had sealed his fate as a disowned son. I'd long ago related my experience with my folks, and I didn't want to rub salt in his wounds by bringing it up again.

But Oliver spoke with surprisingly little regret. "I had a feeling my parents and Darryl would turn their backs on me," he said, "but I knew I had to make a choice: either be true to myself or hang on to my family and some cheap veneer of respectability. I'd been avoiding that choice for too long."

"I think you went the right way, even though it's probably been painful for you. People aren't worth hanging on to if they can't love you for who you are. It's not as if you're a violent, cold-blooded criminal."

Anything but, I thought, realizing what an extraordinary man he'd become. It put my own achievements to shame.

And so we talked. And talked. And asked and answered questions. And reminisced. When we got to the subject of our separation, we fell silent for some moments.

Then Oliver cocked his head to look at me. "Ned, why did we let each other go?"

My insides clenched. I'd always told myself it was an organic process, and the paths we'd chosen had made it unavoidable. Now I saw it had been more brutal than that—not a natural death, but a conscious decision to withhold life support.

"I think we knew our relationship had to be all or nothing for us to move forward," I said. "And since we'd convinced ourselves that 'all' was beyond our reach—"

"We opted for nothing."

Reluctantly, I nodded.

"Do you think we made the right decision?"

Pinpricks of light from a distant carrier winked in the backdrop of night. As the boat passed, remnants of the waves it created lapped at the rocks below our feet.

"I don't know," I said, my voice beginning to abandon me.

"But we *are* culpable."

I nodded again. "Yes."

Oliver sighed as he stared at his restless, interlinked fingers. "There's something I never told you, because it humiliated me and would've wounded you."

My attention dialed up several notches as I turned my head to face him.

"When I got home after our train trip," he said haltingly, "my father...went off about more than my disappearance. He said, 'There better not be any faggoty bullshit going on between you and Ned Surwicki, or I swear to Christ I'll have you both arrested.' That's one of the reasons he was going to confront you—to see if you'd somehow corrupted me. I told him you didn't do squat, and there was nothing illegal about having a best friend, and he'd better back off if he wanted to keep me as a son."

"Jesus," I whispered.

Discussing it any further would've been cruel to both of us. We knew we'd buckled under social and familial pressure. Some courage and sacrifice would've bought our togetherness, but we'd found the cost too dear.

"The acknowledgment of our guilt..." Oliver didn't finish the sentence.

"Hurts," I said. "It hurts like hell."

He reached over and cupped my hand. I struggled to swallow away fifteen years' worth of tears.

Soon, the announcement came that the grounds were closing. It made me feel a little frantic. I didn't want to part ways with Oliver—Jesus, not again—but I didn't know how to keep him with me.

We got up from the rocks and strolled toward the main gate.

*Fuck the indecision. You have to say something, even if you think you're making a fool of yourself. Better that than more wondering what might have been.*

"This coincidental meeting," I said, "seems...serendipitous. Don't you think?"

To my surprise, a tiny smirk appeared on Oliver's face. "It wasn't coincidental, Ned."

I stopped short. "It wasn't?"

Oliver shook his head. His smile had broadened, but it had gone from smirking to sheepish. "I've been in touch with your parents on and off for years, just to keep up with how you've been doing."

The confession left me reeling. "So you knew I was living here."

"Yes, I knew. Sorry I didn't let on before, but I wasn't sure how things would go. The fact your parents wouldn't give me your address or phone number made me even more uncertain of the reception I'd get from you."

"I don't think they'd give out my address or phone number to *anybody*. They know it isn't for them to do. You shouldn't have read anything into it."

"I had no way of knowing that," Oliver said, his head lowered. Then he put a hand on my back, urging me forward, and we continued toward the exit.

Actually, I suspected my folks' wariness had to do with how they perceived my lifestyle. They likely viewed most homosexuals as predators and thought they were protecting not only my privacy but my well-being. Hell, maybe they even saw Oliver as the king predator. I didn't know; I never bothered inquiring how they felt about him because, frankly, I never cared.

"Well, what *did* they tell you?" I asked.

Oliver glanced from the ground to me to the ground. "Just the basics. And nothing about your private life. Unfortunately for me, even *they* didn't know

where you were most of the time.”

“That’s true. They usually had a vague idea, but...” I stopped for a beat, then kept walking. “What did you mean, unfortunately for you?”

“Isn’t it self-explanatory? I was hoping we might be able to reconnect.”

A stark realization rammed me. Oliver had tried to revive us. He’d *fuckingly tried*. This man who had once feared being gay, who shrank from coming out to anybody except me, because he loved me, and his anonymous tricks, because he simply needed what they had to offer—this man was the one who’d made the effort. Not out-and-proud me. No, sir. Not nutless me.

At that moment, I could’ve slunk into the lake like a mud puppy.

We passed through the main gate but didn’t proceed toward the vast parking lots. Instead we looked for a place to talk outside the flow of people. We finally found a somewhat isolated nook within a line of large shrubs.

My shame gave way to anger. Why hadn’t I been informed of Oliver’s calls? Were my parents intent on keeping us apart? Were they trying to sabotage my love life because they still saw it as perverse?

“I never knew,” I said. “Nobody ever mentioned your calls. Nobody ever said a goddamned word.”

“Don’t blame your parents.”

“Then who the hell *should* I—”

“I told them not to say anything.”

Thoroughly befuddled, I gaped at him. “*Why?* That doesn’t make sense! You tried to get my address and phone number, so you obviously wanted to get in touch with me, yet you didn’t want me to know? What the fuck, Oliver?”

He laughed quietly and shook his head. “Okay, I admit it doesn’t seem to make sense. But I’d asked for that information before I realized what a full life you had. Your mom said you were constantly on the go, really dedicated to your work and very successful. I didn’t want you thinking I expected you to shove everything else aside to make room in your life for me. I was afraid you’d feel obligated, and I didn’t want to put you in that position.”

I craned my neck toward him. “Are you crazy? There’s *always* been room in my life for you! It’s like I’ve had...this open grave in my soul, but I haven’t been able to bury you, yet I haven’t been able to resurrect you either, and put you back in that special slot in my heart, the one that’s been empty since nineteen-fucking-seventy.” I dropped my head back and closed my eyes. “Oh God. I sound like a bad soap opera.”

“You sound perfectly right to me.”

When I looked at Oliver, he was smiling again. Affectionately. I wanted to disappear into him. “So...what did you mean, this wasn’t a coincidence? My mother and father didn’t know I’d be here tonight.”

“But your sister did. I had some vacation time coming, so a couple of weeks ago, I decided to call your parents again. Pam answered. She just happened to be there.” Oliver chuckled, bemused, as he pushed the windblown hair from his forehead. “She actually seemed excited to hear from me.”

Of course she was excited, I thought. She and I had had many heart-to-heart talks over the years, and Pam had figured out a long time ago that Oliver had been my first love. When I’d found out about his marriage, she’d even asked me, “*Are you still carrying a torch for him?*” And I’d said something about being sick of it burning my fingers.

“Yeah, I told her I was planning on seeing Clapton,” I said.

“I know.” He turned up his hands. “That’s why I’m here.”

“So your vacation...”

“Centered on seeing you.”

His admission cinched it. I wouldn’t be sleeping alone tonight, and I sure as hell wouldn’t be sleeping with yet another near stranger. No hit ‘im and quit ‘im. Uh-uh.

“Where are you staying?” I asked, because it was clear the unrepentant prodigal son wasn’t welcome at his former home. That would continue to be the case, Oliver had said earlier, as long as he was openly gay. Which meant that would be the case forever.

“Where do you think I’m staying?” he asked with a taunting smile.

“No.”

“Yes.”

The crazy bastard was back at the Pfister.

“Only for tonight,” he said. “I couldn’t afford to stay there all week. Tomorrow I’ll be moving to a motel.”

“How can you stand it at the Pfister?” I asked incredulously. “Isn’t it like...a big Romanesque Revival vault full of bad memories?”

Oliver laughed. “Not at all.”

“But why?”

His expression gentled. “Because the last time I was there, I was with you.”

That wallpaper was fully exposed now, its fairy-tale blossoms all vivid color and glimmering gilt. “Would you like some company tonight?” I asked, hoping for much more than that. Believing in much more than that.

“I only want the company of one person,” Oliver said. “And that’s the one whose company I’ve craved for over twenty years.”

\* \* \*

As soon as the door of that hotel room closed at our backs, we drew together as naturally as magnets. Without a hint of restraint, our lips melded and our bodies melded, and the electric melty tingles again flooded through me. In spades. With bells on and whistles blowing and fireworks lighting up the night.

The voltage had never been so strong.

Oliver and I hadn’t killed our love. Its will to survive had been too strong. It had merely lapsed into dormancy while we’d gone about the business of discovering ourselves and shaping our lives. Now that we’d matured into men—good men, with clearly delineated needs and values and priorities, and no shame about who we were—we had something substantive to offer each other. Dear, wise Oliver had somehow known it was time to give our relationship a poke in the ribs. Like a bear sensing spring thaw and green shoots, our passion had suddenly awakened, undamaged and hale and full of renewed determination to fulfill its potential.

“Do you think we can make it work this time?” I asked after we’d made love well into the night.

“I’m sure of it.”

I’d never loved him as much as I loved him at that moment.

We’d finally found our courage and our certainty.



# Chapter Eleven

2010

Anthony De Luca, the seventeen-year-old neighbor who mowed our lawn, shoveled our snow, and had become our friend, watched me with wide, spellbound eyes. “So you didn’t have a problem hooking up for good?”

“Nope,” I said. “We just put our minds to it. We were living together in under a month. And we haven’t been apart for more than five days in a row since then.”

“But, like, how did you handle your job situations?”

“It wasn’t a problem at all. Oliver could find a position just about anywhere in the country. Counselors are kind of like cops and teachers, nurses and doctors. Their services are in demand. And I cut back on the number of projects I took on, so we could be together as much as possible.”

I couldn’t help smiling as I rose from the kitchen table. Oliver and I might not have been able to reclaim our fifteen lost years, but what we’d sacrificed in quantity of time we’d made up for in quality. Going over our history reminded me of my blessings—not a bad exercise for *anybody* to engage in periodically—and I felt renewed pride and pleasure over the life we’d managed to build.

“How’d your folks react?” Anthony asked as I stirred another pitcher of orange juice. I knew he was thinking more of his parents than mine. Joe and Maribel De Luca, who’d moved into the neighborhood less than a year ago, were a lovely couple—but they were staunch Catholics. That explained why their secretly gay son liked hanging around Oliver and me.

“They acted as if they’d expected it,” I said, pouring more juice for Anthony before resuming my seat at the table. “I mean, they weren’t jumping for joy or anything, but I think they knew it would only be a matter of time before Oliver and I got together. Remember, by then I’d been out for fifteen years. So they sure as hell knew I wouldn’t be settling down with a woman.”

Nodding, Anthony seemed reflective as he stared into his glass. “You’re lucky,” he murmured.

“We made our own luck, Anthony. Good *and* bad.” I’d tried to say it as gently as possible, but the statement still came off as harsh. Christ, I didn’t want it to seem I was chiding the kid. He’d been struggling enough. I reached across the table. “The biggest hurdle for most of us is coming out. But once you’ve cleared that hurdle, even if there are people who don’t accept you, you’ll find a whole lot of people who *do* accept you. And support you. More important, though, you’ll feel as if you’ve come home.”

Looking torn, Anthony took a drink. “I’m not sure I know what you mean.”

I believed he did. He just needed more reassurance.

At that moment, Oliver came in through the back door, carrying a sack of groceries. The scent of freshly cut grass wafted in with him. He must’ve heard part of our conversation through the open window.

“What Ned means,” he said in his counselor’s voice, “is that being true to yourself brings an inner joy and peace you can’t get from any other source.” He circled over to me and put an arm over my shoulders. I tilted my face to him, and we lightly kissed. “Hi, sweetie,” he said softly.

I reached up and briefly covered his hand. “I finally told Anthony our story.” We glanced at our young guest. He had a wistful look on his face.

“Abbreviated and sanitized, I hope,” Oliver said with a chuckle. He moved to the counter and began putting away his purchases.

“Of course. With age comes discretion.”

Oliver grinned at me over his shoulder.

Anthony looked back and forth between us. “I’m glad Ned shared it with me.”

Oliver paused to look at him. “Then I am too.”

I hoped my narrative could somehow help Anthony. He’d only just begun dealing with his orientation, and he still hadn’t come out to his family or any of his friends. Obviously deducing we were gay, which didn’t exactly require the mind of Sherlock Holmes, he’d started opening up to us a few months after we’d met him.

I’d found it touchingly amusing at first. Since I’d never had Oliver’s training in how to broach sensitive subjects, I’d just kind of bulldozed right up to the core of Anthony’s nebulous references to his feelings. “*I take it you’ve had crushes on guys*,” I’d said. Oliver had rolled his eyes and groaned quietly. Then he’d taken me aside and whispered, “*For God’s sake, Ned, what’re you going to ask him next? If he likes gladiator movies?*”

But it had worked out in the end. With jittery relief, Anthony had blurted that yes, he was pretty sure he was gay. We’d talked about it, and Oliver eventually directed him to a few gay youth groups in the city.

The kid still had a long row to hoe. Especially now that he had a boyfriend, or a soon-to-be boyfriend. Anthony was developing a relationship with someone he’d met in one of the groups.

“We’ll have to start getting ready soon,” Oliver told me as he sat at the table.

“Like practice our surprised faces?”

“Yeah, for starters.”

Anthony’s gaze shifted between us. “You going somewhere?” The question was strenuously nonchalant, so I suspected he knew what was up.

“Anniversary party,” I said. “Ours.”

“Is it supposed to be our twenty-fifth or fortieth?” Oliver asked. “Or this one?” He lifted his left hand and, with his thumb, touched the gold band that gleamed on his third finger.

“I don’t know, come to think of it.”

Oliver and I considered ourselves married and had worn matching rings for twenty-three years, but we’d never traveled to another state or country to have a legal ceremony performed. It seemed kind of silly to stage a wedding our friends and relatives wouldn’t be able to attend, just to net of piece of paper our state wouldn’t recognize. So, we had no actual wedding anniversary to speak of. That meant tonight’s party would either be celebrating our forty years of declared love or our twenty-five years of togetherness.

“My guess is, our twenty-fifth,” I said. “It’s considered a milestone. Plus, we reunited at Summerfest, and Summerfest is going on right now. That’s how Pam would think, anyway, and she’s the one who dreamed this up.”

“Shit, how’d you guys find out?” Anthony asked in dismay.

“Ned’s nephew spilled the beans,” Oliver told him. “How do *you* know about it?”

“My parents were invited. So was I.”

Oliver and I pulled down our mouths and exchanged surprised looks.

“Think they’ll show up?” I asked.

Hell, Pamela was a lot more naive than I thought if she assumed we were tight with all our neighbors. We certainly didn't get any crap from our neighbors—in fact, we got along with them quite well, in part because we hosted a block party every year—but some of them likely viewed us as benignly aberrant, “the old queers down the street.”

“I'm not sure,” Anthony said. “I did hear my mom say, ‘Oh come on, Joe. They've been together an awfully long time. Everybody seems to like them, and they've been really good to Anthony.’ That doesn't mean my dad'll give in. But I'm betting they'll make an appearance, just to be polite.”

“Hm.” That got me thinking. When I glanced at Oliver, I could tell the answer had got him thinking too.

“Why don't you invite Thomas?” Oliver asked. “We'd love to meet him.”

Anthony's face blanched. “Are you serious?” Thomas was the guy he'd been getting close to.

“I think it's a great idea,” I said with enthusiasm.

“But I...I can't do that.”

“Yes, you can,” Oliver said, gently unequivocal. “Anthony, how do you and Thomas feel about each other?”

The poor kid's gaze slid around the tabletop as if it were lost. When he found the courage to look at Oliver and me, I wanted to applaud. Even the little steps mattered. “I don't know how to describe it,” he said in a small voice.

“Have the two of you been intimate?” I asked, knowing I was bulldozing again. I avoided looking at my spouse.

“We've...” Anthony shrugged. “We've kissed. That's kind of been it. We don't, you know, get much chance to be alone together.”

“Does he give you the melty tingles?”

Anthony blushed a furious red.

Oliver shook his head and rolled his eyes. But he was holding in a smile. He knew from experience that my melty-tingles criterion was valid.

I sort of expected Anthony not to know what I was talking about, but he knew. “Yeah,” he whispered.

“And it makes you a little crazy?”

“It makes us a *lot* crazy,” Anthony said with a nervous laugh. He grew serious again as he took a drink of juice and ran his fingers over the glass. “I think we might be starting to fall in love.”

That was so big a yank on my heartstrings, I momentarily choked up. Suddenly, everything old was new again: the painful longing, the doubt and trepidation, the tentative, straining hope.

Oliver leaned toward Anthony. “Please invite Thomas to our party. There'll be dozens of wonderful people there. People you can learn from, maybe derive strength from. Think of it as the first phase of your coming out. Your parents will be able to see you interacting with gay men and women. They'll see the kindness and respect you're shown, and how relaxed you are. Even more important, once they meet Thomas and come to accept him as your friend, it might be easier for them to ultimately accept him as your lover.”

“Please don't think we're pressuring you,” I said, “but Oliver's right. It could pave the way for your coming out. And you *would* like to come out in the near future, wouldn't you?” I only mentioned it because he'd already told us that. We sure as hell weren't going to push him.

“I really want to,” Anthony said fervently. “I need to. But I just have to figure out when and how to do it.” He glanced at the wall clock, then got up. “Okay, I'll call Thomas. It's kind of short notice, but I think he'll try to make it if he knows it's important to me.”

Yup, I thought, he will. Just like I went on a five-day train trip at the spur of the moment, for no other reason than to spend time with the man I loved.

Oliver and I got up to see Anthony out.

“Thanks for everything,” he said as we each gave him a hug. “Thanks a lot.”

After Anthony left, Oliver and I continued to stand just inside the back door, our hands on each other's waist. We looked into the eyes whose language we'd learned decades ago, the faces we'd come to adore. In a way, we were oblivious of the changes age had wrought. In a more significant way, we treasured those changes.

Not even Elizabeth Barrett Browning could've defined the scope of our love. Those electric melty tingles still hit us, although they'd moderated over the years. We didn't mind too much. The keen thrill of skin pressed to skin had mellowed into the deeper gratification of heart bonded to heart.

“The whole damned summer's going to be crazy,” Oliver said, shaking his head. “Party tonight, Clapton at Summerfest on Monday, Santana on Thursday. Then the Fourth, then the block party. And all the other—”

“We'll have fun,” I said, smiling at the thought of it, smiling into Oliver's sparkling eyes. “We always do.”

He returned my smile. “I love you, Schnick.”

“Olé, Ol-*lie*.”

He laughed and gave me a little shove. “Don't even *try* to turn back the clock. We have an anniversary to celebrate. And whichever one it is, we've sure as hell earned it.”

THE END

## Loose Id Titles by Author K. Z. Snow

*Electric Melty Tingles*  
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**The UTOPIA-X Series**  
*Looking for Some Touch*  
*Seeking Something Wicked*  
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## K. Z. Snow

K. Z. Snow is the daughter of Milwaukee tavernkeepers and learned her first words off a gleaming troll of a Wurlitzer jukebox ("good night, Irene"). Nine years of higher education, resulting in 2-1/2 English degrees and a stint as a teacher, did not dampen her enthusiasm for beer, Green Bay Packers football, classic R&B, and various forms of political incorrectness.

KZ has been many things in her life, including a varsity debater, a Catholic, a hippie, a Girl Scout, a junker, a fag hag, a gardener, an editor, a saxophone /bassoon/tambourine player (not all at once), a damned good dancer, and a companion to most species of domesticated animals, including men.

She now lives in rural Wisconsin, not far from the birthplace of surrealism, a.k.a. The Dells, where her imagination and her hips continue to grow unchecked.