



Cedarwood Manny

Author: *Megan Slayer*

Category: Romance, M-m Romance

Description: Two men collide at a coffee shop...sparks fly along with the java. Dr. Adrien Ellet loves his dental practice in Cedarwood. He prides himself on being one-half of the most inclusive office in town. Where he's an expert in the dental field, he's not so hot as a father. He knows his relationship with his four-year-old son, Kyle, isn't great and his nanny, Kelsi, is moving on. What's a guy to do when he needs a little guidance and could use a hot man in his life? He goes to the coffee shop. Nathan Gordon loves children and his career as a nanny. But he's lonely. Being a nanny means spending his time with children, not going to clubs or partying. Good thing he's happy to be a homebody. When he runs into the coffee shop for a quick latte, he meets the man of his dreams—who also happens to be the head of the family he wants to nanny for. What's a guy to do when he's hired to care for the children, yet he's attracted to the father, the dentist from the coffee shop? Can these two make it to forever or will the passion between them fizzle before they get started?

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Chapter One

“You’re leaving me?” Adrien Ellet stared at his nanny, Kelsi, but doubted what he’d heard. She’d worked for him for the last two years. Because of her, he’d been able to focus on his dental practice and keep busy during his divorce from his ex-husband, Gerry. She’d been the parent to his son, Kyle, when he couldn’t and she’d done a great job. “Why? Do you need a raise?” Why are we discussing this at the dental office? Can’t it wait until we get home?

“I’m getting married and won’t have to work,” she said. “That’s the best raise and you can’t provide it. I’m so happy.” She clapped and her curls bounced. “Would you believe it? I’m marrying a dentist.”

He couldn’t stop his pat answer. “Well, you’ll always have—”

“—free dental care,” she said, finishing his sentence. She laughed. “You’re so predictable.” Her eyes shimmered. “I will have the best care and will be happy, so it’s all good.”

“I can tell.” He folded his arms. At least she’d waited until there weren’t any patients present to have this discussion. He had to piece through what she’d said and the consequences. She couldn’t be his nanny if she was married. Shit. “What about Kyle?” Did he sound angry? Complaining?

“I love Kyle, but I can’t spend my every waking moment with him and you,” she said. “First, it’s not like you’re going to marry me and make me his mother. Second, you’re not over Gerry, although you should be because he was a dick. And third,

you're not my type."

"Because I'm old?" He had to rationalize why she'd decided to leave. Right now, it didn't make sense. Yes, he understood she wanted to move on and marry, but why not tell him before now? "I'm gay, and that's the problem?" He wasn't attracted to her, but he could make things work for Kyle's sake. She was too young for his tastes, and a woman, but the care of his son came first. "Kyle loves you. He'll be destroyed when he finds out you're going."

"He loves you, too."

"I guess." Adrien massaged his forehead. He'd always had a hard time connecting with Kyle. Christ. The kid was four years old. No matter how hard Adrien tried not to, he treated Kyle as if he were older and expected more from him than the child could do. Why? Because Adrien had been raised the same way. He hadn't been given a chance to be a kid. His mother had expected him to behave like an adult. He processed things like a child would—because he was a child. That didn't help Adrien's feelings of cluelessness. Kelsi knew how to reach Kyle and explain things on his level. Kyle had flourished once she'd become his nanny. Now she was leaving.

"You're an arrogant jerk," Kelsi said. "Aren't you going to ask who I'm marrying or congratulate me? No. You're trying to figure out how to fix this and change it to go along with what you want." She snorted. "You're thinking you're in a bind—not how this is good for me."

"I—" She had him pegged. "You're right." He hated being so callous.

"I knew it. This is your problem. You are selfish. How does the situation affect you—not how will this affect Kyle." She rolled her eyes. "I know you want to care, but you don't know how, do you?"

She was right. Again. “I don’t think I’m that bad, but okay.” He wasn’t in the mood to argue with her. “Congratulations. I hope he’s everything you want and you’re truly happy.”

“I am. I can’t wait to be married.” She beamed. “But you’re not off the hook. You must step up with Kyle. He’s a little boy and you can reach him. You’re not a bad guy—you just need rewiring when it comes to parenting. Better yet, you need a man who can work with you to be that better dad, rather than being Gerry.”

She had a point. Gerry had dominated parenting and had kept Adrien out, until Gerry couldn’t handle being a dad. Like Adrien had an idea how to parent? He didn’t. But right now he’d focus on Kelsi rather than his present situation. “Who is the lucky guy?”

“Mike. He says we’re leaving for Vegas tomorrow.” She hopped up from her seat on the edge of his desk. “I’ve never been outside of Ohio, let alone to Vegas.”

Mike? Vegas? “Hold on.” He needed a moment. “Mike? As in Dr. Cline?” His office mate was the only Mike he knew who happened to be a dentist.

She nodded and rubbed her hands on her thighs. “He proposed last night.”

Shit. He’d thought he knew his office partner, but Mike hadn’t said a thing about dating. Hell, he hadn’t mentioned wanting to get married a second time, either. But knowing what Adrien did now explained why Kelsi had seemed to hang around the office so much more. “So...tomorrow you’re flying to Vegas.” Doesn’t Mike have patients tomorrow?

“It’s last minute, yes.” She paced the length of his office. “We’re leaving after his last appointment. When I go to his house tonight, we’re packing so we can grab and go.”

“I see.” At least Mike was being responsible. “Are you going to tell Kyle goodbye? Or just disappear?”

“Disappearing would be cruel,” she said. “I’m going to tell him tonight, but he knew I was seeing Mike.” She paused. “Kyle will be fine. He’s young and I’m not leaving his life altogether. You’ll get a new nanny and step in as more of a hands-on parent...and he’ll be fine.”

“He loves you. He’ll be crushed.” Age had nothing to do with the problem. His son was attached to Kelsi.

“He can love someone else, too.” She tipped her head. “Maybe you could find someone, too. Maybe you’ll see you’re a good father who just needs a nudge in the right direction. If you stop being afraid of parenting and dating and life...you’ll be okay. I know it.”

“I’m not scared.” Not of the things she’d mentioned. Was he?

“You are, too. Ever since Gerry left, you freak.”

“I don’t.”

“You won’t date.”

“I’m busy.”

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“Too busy to be happy? Too busy to get to know your kid? Come on,” she said. “Don’t ignore you’ve been hurt, but don’t glom onto that hurt like it’s a lifeline. It’s not.”

She was only twenty-five, but she approached the situation with the maturity of an older woman. He sighed. “That hurt runs deep.”

“I know,” she said. “I heard the things Gerry said. He is a dick. He never should’ve been so rotten, but he was and you have to move forward.”

She’d seen some of the issues, but not all. She hadn’t been around when Gerry had begged Adrien to help him have a child. His ex had wanted a son and had connected with Kyle’s surrogate, but once Kyle had been born and proved to be more of a challenge than a doll or toy, Gerry had left.

“He was never strong enough to be a dad for the duration,” Kelsi said. “You are.”

“I’m a crusty old dentist,” he said. “Who wants to be with a guy like me? Most people hate the dentist when they aren’t trying to date him.” Kelsi was one of the few individuals he knew who liked dentists.

“You’re old, but you’re not crusty. You’re more defined than a lot of guys my age.” She shrugged. “But you’ve got fifteen years on me. You’ll always seem old.”

“Thanks,” he muttered.

“Luis liked you.”

“He wanted us to move. I like Cedarwood.”

“So that was a minor drawback. What about Eric? He was sweet, too.”

“He lived with his mother because he didn’t want to pay for an apartment. I want someone a bit more responsible and independent,” Adrien said.

“Okay, I agree. He might have been an odd choice after all,” she said. “But you can’t ignore everyone because there might be issues. You deserve better.”

He bit back a growl. Not only was she making sense, she wasn’t going along with his plans. Sure, she didn’t know the plans per se, but that didn’t matter. She was leaving when he wanted her to hang around and be there for Kyle until Adrien sorted out his life. Besides that, Adrien hated change. She’d thrown him a curveball and he didn’t know how to deal. Give him an oral issue, an infected molar or lost crown and he could find a solution. In his life? No chance. He wanted the status quo back.

“Hey, you need to give yourself more credit and try harder with Kyle. Things will work out,” she said. “Why don’t you go to that support group? I’m sure they could give you tips for forging a relationship with Kyle.”

“How do you know?” He’d seen the fliers for the support group but had doubted its effectiveness.

“Because I can’t help you forever. You need to be a dad. Stop being scared, like I said. This could be what you need to get you going in the right direction.” Kelsi patted his shoulder. “The group is there to listen and a new man could be the partner you deserve.”

“You going is not what I need,” he blurted. “I can’t do this on my own.” No support group, parenting tip or change would help.

“You have to force yourself to try with Kyle and to not be like your mother. She isn’t his parent—you are.”

He hated when Kelsi was right. “I’ll still need a nanny. I can’t stay home with Kyle and still keep regular hours here at the office.”

She hugged him. “I know it’s scary. Getting married is exciting and scary as hell to me. I’ll be living with Mike. What if we’re not as compatible as I want? I don’t want to be divorced ever.” She shook her head. “You can handle Kyle for the weekend. You’ll take him to preschool on Monday and if you have to reschedule a few appointments, the world won’t end. Just explain to your patients there are a few quirks you have to fix with your life and they’ll understand.”

“Kelsi.” She made things seem so easy.

“I’m not turning down Mike or a trip to Vegas.”

He had to stop being selfish. He could handle being a dad, even if he was afraid. “I’m sorry. Have a great time and enjoy the vacation. You deserve to have your dreams come true. Congratulations and I’m thrilled that you’re happy. Thanks for working with me and Kyle. You helped us a lot and you’ll be hard to replace.”

“Thank you.” She clapped him on the shoulder again. “Take a breath. You can do this.”

“Sure.” He wished he shared her confidence. “I have no choice.”

“True. But also, I’ve pulled some strings to get you a new nanny, er, manny and you’re going to love him. You should get the info about him later today.” She smiled. “I’m going to pick Kyle up from his play date and I’ll tell him on the way home about my getting married. Why don’t you grab a coffee and head home, too? Anyone who has

an emergency can still call you.”

“I know.” He needed time to fortify his nerves before he faced his son.
“Thanks.” Wait, a new manny? She’d helped... Monday? Christ. This was out of control.

“Welcome.” She bounced out of the office, leaving him to the no longer soothing strains of the instrumental music on the radio.

He scrubbed both hands over his face. Kelsi made sense. He’d never been good with kids, but now that he had Kyle, he had to change. Even at the office, he didn’t handle juvenile patients. Mike did. Gerry’s words came back to him. ‘Have a kid,’ Gerry had sworn. ‘The child will bring us closer together,’ he’d said. But Gerry hadn’t stuck around. Teething and potty training had proved to be too tough for Gerry to teach to Kyle. When things had gotten tough, Gerry had left.

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Now Adrien had a divorce in his past, and he had Kyle and his practice. He should feel blessed. He had what he wanted in life. But he was lonely and scared. He'd hired Kelsi to be the parent he'd struggled to be because she'd gelled with Kyle. What if Adrien couldn't find another nanny like her? He couldn't reduce his hours at the office when he had to pay the bills.

A dull ache formed behind his eyes. He wanted to be happy for Kelsi and Mike. He wanted to keep a positive attitude about his son, but he wasn't sure what to think.

No matter what happened, he wouldn't accomplish anything at the office. His hours were over and even though he was on-call, he wasn't chained to the building. He locked the front doors, then turned off the lights. According to Kyle's daily schedule, Adrien had forty-five minutes before his son came home.

He should grab a coffee and allow the fresh air to clear his mind. He picked up his keys and shoved his phone into his pocket. Within moments, he left the office and strolled down the block to the Brews Brothers Coffee Shop. He loved the play on words and that Lee and Lorn were real brothers running the store.

The bell rang overhead as he entered the building. The strong scent of roasted beans lingered in the air, making his mouth water. The aroma soothed him, too.

He made his way to the counter. "I'd like a tall coffee. Plain, please."

"Tall, dark and handsome coming up," the barista said. "No caramel? Whip? Just plain?"

“Yes, plain.” The caramel and whip were bad for his teeth and he wasn’t wild about the added sugar.

She nodded. Seconds later, she handed him the cup. “Two dollars.”

“Add two more dollars for your tip.” Once she did, he swiped his phone across the reader and paid. “Thank you.”

“Thanks, Doc.” She fiddled with the register. “Refills are free today.”

“Aren’t they free every day?”

“On the regular roast, yes, but we’re offering free refills on the cappuccinos, macchiatos and everything else,” she said. “So, don’t leave before we top off your cup.”

“Will keep that in mind.” He turned on his heel to leave, but instead of walking away, he collided with a solid wall of male muscle. He grunted and heat seared him. From the man’s touch? No, from the coffee staining his shirt. “Fuck,” he muttered. “Are you injured?”

The man winced. “It’s not comfortable, no.”

He left his cup on the counter and retrieved napkins. The tips of his ears burned and embarrassment filled his brain. “Let me...” He dabbed the man’s chest. Was his face on fire? It felt like it.

“It’s not your fault.”

“I dumped coffee on you. It’s a miracle you’re not hurt.” He continued blotting. “I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry.” The guy closed his hand over Adrien’s. “Let me buy you a coffee.”

“I spilled mine on you. I should be buying you one,” Adrien blurted.

“Do that next time.”

He met the man’s gaze. Holy shit. He’d never seen such deep blue eyes. When the guy smiled, Adrien noticed his teeth. Nice, straight and seemingly clean. The man must practice good oral hygiene. “I love your teeth,” he said. Christ. If he was trying to be sexy, he’d failed.

“Thanks. I’ll tell my parents the years and cost of my braces were worth it.” He smiled. “I’m Nathan Gordon. You are?”

“Adrien.”

“Adrien the coffee spiller.” Nathan laughed. He took the cup from Adrien. “I’ll get fresh java and we can talk. Find a table.”

“Sure.” He should be on his way back to the office, not drooling over a younger man who might not even be gay. Why wasn’t he basking in his embarrassment and getting the hell out of there? Instead, he followed Nathan’s directive and selected a narrow booth along the bank of windows. He couldn’t chat long, but he owed Nathan some attention since he’d offered to purchase new coffees.

A moment later, Nathan showed up at the table. “Good choice. I like to watch the traffic.”

“Oh. It was open.” God. He sounded silly. No wonder Kelsi said he’d never get a date—he didn’t know how to make small talk with hot men.

Nathan sat across from him. “What’s wrong? If you’re upset about the coffee incident, don’t be. I’m not.”

“It’s embarrassing.” Among other things. When he met Nathan’s gaze, his blood sizzled. He wanted to say something intelligent and cool, but the words wouldn’t come.

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Nathan pushed one of the cups toward Adrien. “Like I’ve never done anything along those lines? I have.” He sipped his coffee. “I tripped into a glass door and broke it. Screwed up my face, too.”

He wasn’t sure how to respond. “Wow.”

“Oh yeah. See this scar?” He pointed to a thin line bisecting his cheek. “I survived, but I’ll never model.” He shrugged. “I never wanted to be a model, but still. If I can move on, you can, too.”

“True.” Getting upset over coffee wasn’t that important. He hadn’t done permanent damage. “I’m still sorry.”

“I know and appreciate it.” Nathan wound his fingers around his cup. “Do you come here often?”

He stared at Nathan’s hands. Adrien had a thing for men with strong but manicured hands. Nathan flexed his fingers. For a moment, Adrien’s mind wandered. He wondered what it would feel like to have Nathan’s palms on his chest or to lace his fingers with Nathan’s. Heaven? Possible. A tingle shot through him. He hadn’t thought about being with anyone in so long. He didn’t know Nathan, and yet he wanted to touch him. Crazy.

“Adrien?”

He met Nathan’s gaze again. “Sorry.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah. My mind wandered.” He gritted his teeth and tried to smile. So much for being smooth. “I don’t visit here as much as I’d like.” He sighed. Steam swirled from his coffee cup and the dark liquid reflected the ceiling tiles. He stared at the pattern, rather than looking at Nathan. “I’m usually working.” Instead of parenting. Jesus, he needed to re-evaluate his life.

“I’m glad you came in today.” Nathan hummed along with the song on the radio. “Do you like music?”

“Some. I’m more of a jazz instrumental kind of a guy than being into the current stuff. I like songs from the thirties and forties.” He blew across the top of his cup, then sipped his coffee and watched Nathan. “You?”

“I’m partial to the current songs, yeah, but I spent time in musical theater, so I’m a sucker for showtunes of any age.” Nathan swept his gaze over Adrien. “You’re in business attire. Are you an accountant?”

“No.” He laughed and relaxed a bit. He sucked at financials. “My accountant would string me up if I tried to balance my books.”

“Lawyer?”

He shook his head. Did he look like he worked in the legal field? He’d never seen himself as anything besides a dentist.

Nathan crinkled his nose. “You don’t strike me as a stuffy businessman or someone in the stock market. Are you a doctor?”

“Kind of.”

“Really? Huh. I wouldn’t have thought you were.” Nathan tipped his head and his brow furrowed. “I’d have guessed you were a teacher before a doctor.”

“Why?”

“You seem very scheduled.”

“I am.” He needed his timetables.

“Well, then I wasn’t far off.”

The connection forming between him and Nathan dictated that Adrien should tell the truth. He hated to mislead his friends and potential lovers. Was there a chance Adrien might be his lover? Anything was possible. “No, you’re not. I’m a dentist.”

“No kidding.”

He’d been honest. Nathan sagged a bit in his seat. Was that defeat in his eyes? Adrien wasn’t sure, but it felt like defeat. “You’re not into dentists? It’s okay. I’m not the favorite of too many people. Dentists tend to equal pain, drills and bills. I’ve heard all the bad jokes and snide remarks. I’ve gotten death threats because patients didn’t appreciate their bill or the suggestion they might need a root canal. I’ve been struck, bitten and cursed at and there’s little anyone can do to shock me.” He met Nathan’s wide-eyed gaze. Well, shit. He’d disclosed too much and babbled.

“You’re single, aren’t you?” Nathan asked.

“It shows, doesn’t it?” He needed to curtail his nerdy, defensive streak.

“It does.” Nathan smiled and his dimple deepened in his left cheek.

Adrien expected something patronizing from Nathan. When he didn't get a further response, he nodded once. "Well, it's been fun, but I should go. I bet you're the life of a party since you're approachable. Are you?" He paused. He'd made no sense and had been condescending when he wasn't trying to be. "I mean, are you single?"

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“I am unattached,” Nathan said. “My last boyfriend didn’t want a dog and I did. He also wasn’t fond of my job at the time, so I figured if we couldn’t compromise over a dog, then we’d never agree on anything.”

“That makes sense.” He chuckled. Kyle had begged for a dog since he’d played with one at the park. Not being home much had prevented Adrien from looking into adopting a dog. That, and he hadn’t wanted to force Kelsi to take on an animal and Kyle.

“Do you like dogs?”

“I do and my son wants one. I work too much for us to have one right now. I want the animal to lead its best life and that wouldn’t be with us right now.”

“Understandable.”

And probably a mark against him. “You’re still talking to me. Either you’re not turned off by my being a dentist or you’re being nice.”

“Turned off?” Nathan’s smile widened and he toyed with his cup. “Wow. I didn’t know there was a love connection happening.”

“Oh fuck,” Adrien muttered. “I’ve let my worries get the best of me and I’m reading more into this than I should’ve. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.”

“I didn’t mean to assume,” Adrien said. “My ex swore my brain and mouth weren’t in sync. He wasn’t wrong. I’m usually processing my next move before I’ve made the last one.”

“That’s not a bad thing.”

“How?” Adrien blurted.

“You have to multitask, don’t you? Especially at the dental office? You don’t slow down. It’s part of who you are—you’re going in fifteen directions at one time,” Nathan said. “Which would be part of the reason you don’t have a dog. You can’t concentrate on the animal.”

Well, someone finally understood. But was Nathan turned off?

“You have a son, though. Is he high functioning like you?”

“He’s four. He’s smart, but...”Shit.He’d screw things up again with his honesty. “I expect a lot from him and I forget to factor in his age.”

“Did you adopt?”

“Surrogate. My sperm, though. My ex couldn’t on account of his vasectomy.” Why was he telling Nathan so much? He usually kept his personal life quiet. “Anyway... I’m a forty-year-old dentist who has a son, no dog and has gone through a divorce. I’m nerdy and should get going. I need to go home to see Kyle. That said, I feel like I’m losing a modicum of control in my life. My nanny is leaving so she can get married and I feel like I’m at a loss.”

“That’s rough, but you’ll manage. You’re resourceful.”

He'd disclosed too much. "Uh, sure." He frowned. The man had him so confused. Were they connecting? Not? Was Nathan fishing for information? Was he spilling his guts when he should be keeping his mouth shut? "I should go home to my son. I'm babbling and I don't want to be late."

"You're fine." Nathan drank more of his coffee. "I don't mind."

"You should. Sometimes I don't know when to stop talking."

"Do you work a lot?"

"Yes." More than I should.

"You spend time with patients, but not other adults," Nathan said. "It's normal. You crave human contact from someone your age who isn't sitting in a chair with their mouth open and waiting for you to do work."

His jaw slackened and he tried to hide his shock. Nathan seemed to know him well, even after a few minutes. "How do you know how to say the right things? Are you trying to rob me blind? Get into my good graces and swindle me?" Or are you attracted to me?

Nathan shrugged. "It's a gift. That and I don't think you're strange—at least not as strange as you think I should. You're funny and sweet and I've enjoyed our conversation. Oh and no, I'm not going to rob, swindle or cheat you."

He had no words. Even Gerry, who'd sworn to love him forever, hadn't been so nice or understanding.

"I've listened to you and done all this talking, but never shared who I am." Nathan laughed to hide his embarrassment. "I'm a manny. It's my job to listen and pay

attention. I work for the training center in town.”

“Oh.” Adrien sat back in his seat. “Do you know my nanny, Kelsi Ward?”

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“She’s a friend, yes,” Nathan said. “Can I call you?”

“Me?”

“Who else? Yes, you.” Nathan offered a wide smile. He slid his phone across the table. “Add your digits and I’ll put mine in your phone.”

Adrien fumbled, but complied. Getting the number of a hot man wasn’t usual for him. He tended to ask and be declined.

“There.” Nathan left his phone on the table and folded his arms. “Maybe next time we get together, you can bring your son.”

“Yeah.” That wasn’t going to happen, but he could try. He didn’t introduce Kyle to men he wanted to date. He and Nathan might be having a great conversation, but until he could be sure Nathan wasn’t dangerous, he wasn’t going to bring him around Kyle. “I’ll see you. Thanks for the coffee and sorry once more for spilling mine on you.”

“I’m not sorry. I got to meet you. That was worth the trouble.” Nathan stood when Adrien did and offered his hand. “I’ll call you.”

“I won’t hold you to it, but I hope you do.” He shook hands with Nathan. “Bye.” Tingles shot from his fingertips to his heart. He held on to Nathan’s fingers for a moment longer than he should’ve, but couldn’t bring himself to pull away. He wanted that tingle again and to feel alive. Nathan had awakened something he’d thought was dormant within him.

“Bye.” Nathan waved.

Adrien left the coffee shop and walked back to his office, his heart lightened. He'd never thought he'd be giddy about talking with another guy, or feel this hopeful. Nathan made him happy and he'd realized he didn't want to be lonely any longer. He deserved a second chance at love. Was Nathan the one to love him? It was too soon to tell, but he wouldn't balk at the opportunity. He checked his watch. Kyle and Kelsi should be home by now. He needed to head out. He could think about love and Nathan later—after he played Dad for the night.

Chapter Two

The next morning, Nathan pressed the plastic pod into his coffee machine. While his java brewed, he leaned against the counter. Ever since he'd bumped into Adrien, he hadn't been able to think of anything else. The soulfulness in Adrien's eyes, combined with the sadness, bothered Nathan. He didn't know Adrien well, but he sensed the man had a lot on his schedule and needed a break.

Then again, so did he. A steady job would be nice. He'd moved to Cedarwood with high hopes he'd find his future in his adopted hometown. So far, he'd spent lots of time waiting tables and working toward his certification as a manny, but had no employment to show for his effort. Now that he had the proper credentials, no one wanted a manny. He could handle children as well as anyone else. Being a man didn't make him less qualified.

His phone buzzed. A text? From Adrien? He doubted he'd hear from the dentist already, but a man could hope. He hadn't called Adrien first and Adrien didn't strike him as that forthright. Chatty, but not forward.

He checked the screen. Instead of a text, he had an email waiting. He brought up the message. The subject line made him pause. An Offer of Employment. Holy shit. He focused on the sender's name. The Child Academy and Care Services—his employer. He sucked in a ragged breath as he tapped the full message.

Dear Mr. Gordon,

In agreement with your contract with the Child Academy and Care Services, we've

paired you with a family. I know you'll fit in well with this family, but as per our guidelines, you'll meet the family today at one p.m. at the CACS offices. We'll supply your information, but it's strongly suggested you bring your portfolio.

The family information is listed below. Take time to familiarize yourself with each member to ensure your interview goes smoothly.

Meet me in the atrium at twelve-forty-five and I'll introduce you to the family at one.

Best,

Cheryl DeArmond

Director of CACS

Family:

Adrien Ellet

Father

Occupation: Dentist

Age: 40

Marital status: Single

Address: 412 Blanche Drive, Cedarwood

Kyle Ellet

Age: 4

Same address as father

Mr. Ellet has primary custody

Photos are attached and please be prompt.

Nathan stared at the names on the email, then glanced over the photos. Holy crow. He thought Adrien might be the same guy he'd met at the coffee shop. How many other men in Cedarwood were named Adrien and were dentists? Not many, he guessed. His heart beat faster when he saw the photo of Adrien. The man had been handsome in person—much better than the picture.

He put his coffee down. He knew Adrien. Their meeting the day before had been an accident and a bit painful—he hadn't been burned, but hot coffee on skin wasn't pleasant—but he'd gotten to know Adrien. The question remained—would Adrien see the meeting as something organic or contrived? Would he see the situation as Nathan trying to make the right impression ahead of the meeting today? Nathan hadn't been trying to get a job yesterday. He'd simply wanted to speak to the handsome man responsible for colliding with him.

In a few hours, he'd have the chance to not only meet up with Adrien, but maybe even clear the air and nab a job.

Nathan finished his coffee and sent a reply to the training center to agree to the meeting. He hurried through a shower and planned his outfit for the interview. He didn't have much, but maybe if he scored the job, he'd be able to afford more clothes and nicer stuff. Then again, if he had a steady job, he could stop living out of a suitcase in his miniscule apartment.

His phone rang. Nathan stood before the mirror in the bathroom and tied the towel around his waist. He set the phone on the stand, then answered the call. He appraised himself. “Hello?”

“Hi, babe.”

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“Rhett?” he blurted. He stopped staring at himself and his breath lodged in his throat. He should’ve checked the caller ID before accepting the call, but he’d never guessed his ex-boyfriend would want to talk to him.

“Who else calls you babe?” Rhett asked. “How are you?”

He couldn’t believe his ex was on the other end of the line. Rhett hadn’t wanted to be with a manny or consider getting a dog. He’d said he needed a man who could give his full attention to him. Nathan hadn’t been ready to settle down and liked working with children, so he wasn’t all that upset over the break-up.

“Nate?”

“I’m here.” He turned his back on the mirror. “Why are you calling me?”

“Why not? I miss you.”

“You do?” He tried to sound smooth, but his voice came out brittle. “Really?”

“You mean a lot to me,” Rhett said. “We had something strong.”

“We were only together for six months.”

“I care about you.”

Interesting. He hadn’t cared that much when they were together. “I’m certified as a manny and interviewing today for a job.”

“Good for you.”

Really? He pinched the bridge of his nose. “It’s not a big deal that I’m a manny? Are you softening your stance? Or that hard up for a boyfriend? You said you couldn’t love a man who couldn’t be yours alone.”

“I was a kid and confused,” Rhett said. “I’m more mature now. Where’s the interview?”

“Cedarwood.”

“Where? I’ve never heard of Copperfield.”

“Cedarwood.” Rhett never had been good at listening.

“Whatever.”

“Rhett.” He wasn’t in the mood to talk to his ex. “I’m busy.”

“You’re always busy.” Rhett paused. “I still care about you.”

He wasn’t sure if he should trust Rhett. Part of him didn’t want to—he’d been hurt when they’d split and wasn’t ready for another round of heartbreak. But part of him wanted to believe he wasn’t destined to be alone for the rest of his life. “I’m being offered a job and won’t be available much, so if you’re looking to get back together, it’s not a good time.”

“We can work around the obstacles.”

He wanted to give in, but held back. “The family might not want me to date.”

“They might be okay with it.”

He doubted the family would want him to split his time between them and a boyfriend. He’d met Adrien. The man needed stability and structure. Nathan could provide both for him and his son—if he didn’t have a boyfriend in the mix.

“Well?”

He had to answer. “Rhett, I need to focus on this interview. It’s big and I can use the money. Remember the loan you stuck me with?”

“I do and I’m sorry. Once I get another job, I’ll help pay that money back.”

He truly doubted his ex would give him another cent.

“I wish I hadn’t shafted you,” Rhett said. “It wasn’t cool and I have no excuse other than I was immature.”

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He couldn't have heard him right. "Rhett?"

"I was a dumb kid and we both need jobs. You're perfect for the nanny position. You're good with kids and will probably fit right in with the family. As for me, I need to find another server job. It's not the best money, but I know how to work a crowd," Rhett said. "I'll get that money to you. I promise."

"Thanks." He wasn't sure what else to say. Rhett hadn't been responsible when they were together and could be saying the right words just to get back into Nathan's good graces.

"I won't hold you up any longer," Rhett said. "Don't forget about me."

"How can I?" He had a loan, photos, texts and scars on his heart as memorabilia of their relationship.

"Good. I won't forget you, either. I miss you."

"You can always call and text." Not that he'd answer, but more power to Rhett.

"True."

"I should go."

"Don't ignore our good times," Rhett said. "I'm waiting for you. Now knock 'em dead."

“I will. Bye.”

“Bye.”

Nathan sank onto the bed. Jesus. His ex had given him too much to think about. Getting together a second time? Their first time around hadn't been good. He'd given his heart and Rhett had given him hell. He'd ended up with a loan on a car he didn't have. Did Rhett feel bad? Maybe, but Nathan wasn't convinced.

The phone call still rankled him. Either Rhett had mellowed or there was more to the story. Rhett never did anything without a contingency plan. He shook his head. He'd worry about Rhett and his motivations later. He wanted to please Adrien and make a good impression.

His phone rang again and he groaned. Who the hell wants me now? He checked the screen. Kelsi. He sighed and swiped to accept the call. He liked his friend and she'd know how to level him. She'd already nannied for Adrien. She'd help him figure out what to do. “Hi.”

“Hi. Got your interview today, don't you? With Dr. Ellet?” she asked.

“Yeah. I've done these interviews before, but this one...I know Dr. Ellet, kind of.” Admitting that sounded odd.

“You do?”

“We met at the coffee shop last night. It was an accident, but we met,” he said. He'd connected with Adrien. Hell, he could see them having a partnership of sorts. If they worked in tandem, Adrien would be happy with how his son was raised.

“Cool. That'll make the interview easier.”

“How? I like him.” Shit. He shouldn’t’ve had said that. He pinched the bridge of his nose. Maybe she’d missed his last point.

“Good.”

She’d lost him. “You’re not making much sense, Kels. Dr. Ellet will decline me because he’ll think I want to date him or I met him last night just to get in good with him—and might have led him on.”

“Did you?”

“Did I what?”

“Lead him on?”

“No.”

She didn’t reply right away. “Do you like him? You said you did.”

“I like him as in I’m attracted to him, but I don’t know the guy well enough to be sure we’d be a decent match.” But he wouldn’t turn down another coffee meeting. The sizzle he’d felt when Adrien had touched his hand had been real.

“Honey, you’re meant for this job. You’re the kind of manny they need,” Kelsi said. “You’re the balance.”

“For Kyle?”

“Yes,” she said. “You’re going to do so well you’ll take my job and Kyle won’t even miss me—which sucks because I love that kid.”

“You’re the one getting married?” Nathan blurted. He hadn’t known she was the one mentioned in the rumors. “Since when?” He’d thought she told him everything.

“Last night.”

“Your doc proposed?”

“Who else?”

He sounded silly. “I’m sorry, but you shocked me,” he said. “Congratulations.”

“Thank you,” she said. “Now, about Kyle and Adrien... Let me give you some pointers. Adrien, Dr. Ellet, never thought he’d be a dad. He’s a dentist and that’s the only way he sees himself. Until he married Gerry, he never thought he was capable of fathering a child. He was wrong. He’s been through a lot in the last two years—the divorce, being a single father and keeping his practice afloat. He needs stability. Kyle is little—he’s four—but he’s smart and he knows Daddy’s not happy. He understands Daddy Gerry left and isn’t coming back. He and Adrien need glue—which is you.”

“And you’re not keeping the job because you’re marrying his partner?” Nathan asked. He hated when she rhymed, but at least she hadn’t said it in a sing-song manner. He wasn’t one of her charges.

“Right.”

He scrubbed his forehead. He needed time to process the information. Single dad, divorce, stability...Damn it, he was in over his head. “What do I say? How do I prove I’m the one for the job?” He wanted to save Adrien and be the manny Kyle needed.

“Be yourself,” she said. “That’s the biggest thing. Adrien already likes you.”

He does? “How do you know?”

“He gushed about you last night when he arrived home—after your date.”

“It wasn’t a date. We ran into each other and he dumped coffee on me.” He hadn’t tried to get the java stain out of his shirt yet.

“Close enough. If you can get him nervous, then that’s something. He’s normally chatty, but cool. He doesn’t let many people in,” Kelsi said. “So before you get pissed, I called in a favor. I know how Adrien is and if he not only mentioned meeting you, but said he was excited to see you again, then that’s something. I told Cheryl you’d be a good fit for this situation and she agreed. She doesn’t know you met him, but you’re the right one on paper.”

“What if it doesn’t work?” He hated to be negative, but he saw the downsides to being employed by the Ellets.

“Don’t sweat it. You’re thinking too hard and not letting nature work for you.”

She could be too damn positive for her own good. But she had a point. He blew out a long breath and closed his eyes. He could handle anything, especially a four-year-old and his handsome father. “Okay, give me the rest of the lowdown. I’m ready.”

“Good boy,” she said. “I told you the biggest points about Adrien. As for Kyle, he’s sweet and adventurous. He loves to draw and is trying to read. He loves books, so library trips are a must. I’ve taken him to the art museum over in Spirewood and it seemed to go over well.”

“You’ve covered all the important points concerning Adrien?” he asked.

“Dr. Ellet?” she corrected.

“Yes.” Jesus. He’d already resorted to calling his potential employer by his given name.

“He’s nice, but cool and loves structure. He has a schedule. It’s not crazy or impossible, but follow it and be Kyle’s manny—do that and you’re good.”

“Got it.”

“You have to help Adrien. He’s a brilliant dentist, but parenting isn’t his forte. He doesn’t know what to do—which is why you’re there. Show him and he’ll be fine. He might even realize he’s not so bad after all.”

“I see.” Talk about a challenge...

“He loves Kyle, but he needs direction. That’s where you come in. Help him. Show Adrien how to parent and if you hit it off, then great,” Kelsi said.

“You think I’ll fall for him?”

“Don’t have to think. You already did.” She laughed. “You’re in so deep.”

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The tips of his ears burned and he bowed his head. “Thanks.”

“Anyway, when Doc comes home tonight, we’re leaving for the airport. Don’t worry about the interview. I know you’ll be fabulous and will be a family by Christmas.”

“We’ll be a family right away. That’s how being a manny works,” he said.

“Sure,” she said, drawing out the word. “You’ll be more than that.” Before he could argue with her, she continued. “I know you’ll crush this interview. Later.”

“Bye.” He hung up and tossed his phone onto the dresser. Well, shit. She’d set him up. He trusted Kelsi. If she thought he’d be good for the Ellet job, then he’d go along with her judgment, but he’d give her hell later.

He checked the clock beside his bed. He should finish getting ready so he could be at the training center on time. Too many thoughts raced through his mind. The connection with Adrien was real, but he didn’t want the dentist to think he’d pulled a fast one. He wanted to be taken on his own merits. He ran a brush through his hair, then glanced at his reflection in the mirror. When he’d arrived in Cedarwood, he’d sworn he’d found his future. With the Ellets? He sure hoped so.

He stuck out his hand and imagined Adrien being there instead of his reflection. “Hello, Dr. Ellet. I’m Nathan Gordon and I want to be your manny.”

* * * *

Nathan groaned and drove across town for the second time in an hour. “Damn change

of plans,” he grumbled. He pulled into a parking lot and stopped. He tapped his phone to dial Kelsi.

“Hi,” she said. “I take it you got the memo to change the venue?”

“Yeah. What gives?”

She didn’t say anything right away. “There’s a time crunch. Because I’m leaving today and Dr. Ellet can’t find a babysitter for his hours at the office, he wanted to get the next nanny right in. He knows you’re the one being interviewed because he has your info, just like you have his. If possible, he’ll want you to start today.”

“You couldn’t have mentioned this possibility this morning?” She has to know things would move quickly. She was the one pushing the situation ahead!

“I just found out,” she said. “Dr. Ellet has been pacing the length of the room for the last hour. He’s frantic because he thinks he’s letting his patients down. I’ve tried to talk to him, but he won’t listen.”

“So he’s keyed up.” Great. “He knows we’ve met, doesn’t he?” Fuck.

“Hon,” she whispered. “Slow down. This is going faster because of my situation, but also because of yours. He knows you. He feels confident that you’ll be the piece they need to make this all work. If he didn’t feel right about you, he wouldn’t have pushed. Promise.”

He wanted to believe her. What he thought didn’t matter. He had to regroup and adjust his attitude. If he wanted the job, he had to show he could do it. “Then I’m ready.” He put the phone on the console and switched to the speaker setting. He left the parking lot. “I’m on my way.”

“This makes me happy and, trust me, will make your day. You’re going to love it here,” she said. “See you in a few.”

“See you.” He tapped the button to end the call. She’ll be here? Good. He squared his shoulders and headed to the Ellet household. In fifteen minutes’ time, he reached Blanche Drive. His heart hammered. The memory of Adrien’s smile and the glint in his eyes buoyed Nathan’s spirit. He sucked in a ragged breath, then parked in the driveway. If he hadn’t known better, he wouldn’t have thought a doctor lived in this house. He’d expected a mansion—or at least a fancier home, not the quiet Victorian that looked like the rest of the homes on the street.

He forced himself to the front door and fought back the wave of fear. Why be afraid? He didn’t have time to worry about the what-ifs. He spied Kelsi’s car. At least she’d been telling the truth about being there and backing him up. He knocked on the door and held his breath.

Within seconds, the door opened and Kelsi smiled from inside the house. She held on to the handle. “Hello, Mr. Gordon.” She stepped aside. “Dr. Ellet, your company has arrived.” She turned her attention back to Nathan. “Please come in.”

“Thank you.” He almost teased her about the formality, but if that was what the dentist wanted, then he’d go along with it. He followed her into the foyer, then the living room. The home seemed cozy—more than he’d expected. The furniture appeared neat but lived-in and toys were scattered on the floor. Photos of Kyle and Kyle with Adrien adorned the walls. None of the images seem to have the ex-husband in them. Good. If there was a possibility that he and Adrien might have a relationship, he didn’t want visual reminders of Adrien’s ex all over the place.

He spotted Adrien and his heartbeat quickened. He’d have to get used to referring to the dentist as Dr. Ellet, rather than Adrien. Well, shit. Kyle was sitting on the floor and flipping through a picture book. Kelsi nudged Nathan.

“Dr. Ellet, this is Mr. Gordon. Kyle, I’d like you to meet Nathan.” She knelt next to the boy. “Remember how I said you were getting a new nanny? Well, you’re so special, you’re getting a manny.” She nodded. “Yeah, you graduated from a nanny to manny, and Nathan is yours. None of your friends will have a manny. See?”

Kyle’s eyes sparkled as he waved at Nathan. “Hi.”

“Hello, there.” Nathan matched Kyle’s grin. “I can’t wait to meet you.” He paused, waiting for Adrien to speak. Instead, he was met with silence. Seeing Kyle and Adrien in the room together proved Kelsi right—Adrien behaved as if he and Kyle weren’t part of the same family. No interaction. They looked similar, but had no bond, and that broke Nathan’s heart. His own relationship with his father was strained, but he had one. He held on to his messenger bag with one hand and offered the other hand to Adrien. “Dr. Ellet, I’m pleased to meet you.”

“Again?” Adrien stared at him.

“Yes, again.” At least he knew Adrien remembered him.

“Kelsi, will you and Kyle give me a moment?” Adrien asked. “I need to interview Mr. Gordon.”

“Yes, sir.” She ushered Kyle from the room.

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Once Adrien and Nathan were alone together, Adrien finally spoke. “Tell me yesterday was a coincidence. I feel set up.”

“You were.” He’d always believed the truth was best, but the way Adrien glared at him, Nathan wished he could say anything without being honest.

Adrien crooked his eyebrow.

Well, shit. He’d better explain... “I didn’t know when we met that you needed a nanny. I went to the coffee shop to get a drink and sketch in my notebook. I’d heard about you in conversations with Kelsi, but I never begged her to help me get a job. When we chatted yesterday, I enjoyed it. Had I known then what I do now, I would’ve told you up front.”

“Kelsi mentioned she knew who was interviewing with me.” Adrien gestured to the Queen Anne chair. “Please, sit.”

“Thank you.” He hated the tension between them, but what could he do? “Kelsi greased the wheels—probably because she’s so happy to be engaged and wants everyone else to be happy, too—but I would’ve asked for this job. I love Cedarwood and want to stay here. The training center is adamant about showing us who we could be working with and your file would’ve caught my attention. This is an interesting situation, a challenge, and I love those.”

“Where are you from?”

“Spencer.”

Adrien half-smiled. He remained tense, but leaned back in his seat a bit. “I drove through there on the way to a state park. Do you camp?”

“I have.” Memories of slogging through the woods, only to kip down in a tent, filled his mind. The bugs, mud and strange noises weren’t his idea of exciting. “But I can start a fire, pitch a tent and fish. If you’re interested in a camping trip, I know what to do.” But he’d rather not. “Do you enjoy camping?”

“I hate it.”

“Oh.” That made things a bit easier. He doubted Adrien would demand Kyle be taken on a camping trip, then.

“My ex-husband loved it.”

Things made so much more sense. If the ex liked it, then chances were Adrien didn’t. Adrien also struck him as the type who preferred a bed to sleep in, rather than a sleeping bag on the ground. “You don’t like dirt, do you?”

“It’s not my favorite, no.” Adrien narrowed his eyes. “Don’t try to butter me up. If you enjoy camping, then say so.”

“Whoa.” Nathan held up both hands. The tension came back in a wave. He needed to return to where they’d been the day before. “You don’t have to be defensive. I want to work with you. Kyle is a shared concern and I want to see him grow up well adjusted. I understand your position. You have to work and without doing that, everything else isn’t possible. I also get you were hurt by your ex. I don’t know him, but what I know about him isn’t good. The guy wanted the easy way out. You’re not him and neither am I. I’m not Kelsi, either. I’m not looking to get married or jump your bones.” Liar. He’d slide right into Adrien’s bed if given the chance, but he’d keep that quiet for now. “I’m here for the duration. I respect you and want the best for

everyone.”

Adrien folded his arms and crossed his ankles. His dark eyes sparkled and his forehead knotted. His jaw tightened. He swept his gaze over Nathan. “Fair enough. What about a pet? I remember you saying something about wanting a dog. Kyle does, too. Would you be interested in helping us rear a pet?”

“I love dogs, so that’s not a problem.”

“I see.” Adrien nodded. “You’ll have room and board, plus an allowance. Kelsi demanded a gas card, too. If you’d like one, then I’ll have hers transferred into your name.”

“Thank you.” He took his bag off his shoulder. Adrien still hadn’t relaxed, but he’d offered the perks of the job. Nathan forged ahead. “What are your concerns? Lay it all out.” He braced himself for an ass-chewing over the coincidence. “I like transparency.”

“I’m scared I’m screwing up. Kyle is important to me, but I’m crap as a father. I want help, but asking for it seems emasculating.” Adrien sighed and rubbed his palms on his thighs. “I wasn’t a bad kid and didn’t need much parenting by my mother, so I have no real pattern to follow for Kyle.”

“You’ll learn,” Nathan said. “What else?”

“I don’t want Kyle to think I don’t care. I’m trying, but I feel like a failure.”

“Kyle is smarter than you think. He’s caught on to a lot of what’s going on. He might not understand what’s happening, but he gets the main points,” Nathan said. “He knows you’re not going to leave him the way Gerry did. He loves you just as much as you love him. Now what else?”

“I’m concerned I’m wasting my life at the office,” Adrien said. “You do realize it’s scary, how you’re able to get me to open up? Kelsi kept telling me to visit a support group in town. I declined because I have too many patients to deal with.” He frowned. “Jesus, that sounds awful.”

“Kelsi is right. A support group might help—if you can fit it in.” Nathan laced his fingers together in his lap. “I’m told I’m easy to talk to, but if you asked my ex-boyfriend, he’d tell you I’m more engrossed with my job than my relationships. Guess that’s why we’ve been thrown together. We’re good at what we do and not good with interpersonals. But I’m sure you’ll find balance. I’m sure we will.”

“How will we find balance when you’re part of the problem?”

“I am?” Nathan asked. He tamped down his burst of excitement. He’d made an impression on Adrien. Hell yes.

“I liked yesterday. I planned on calling you today,” Adrien said. “Then the interview came up. I don’t know what to think.”

“I enjoyed our chat, too.”

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Adrien opened his mouth, then stopped. He tipped his head before finally speaking. “I—I’m interested in you, but I don’t want things to be strange. I don’t let every man I meet walk right into my life and meet my son. I haven’t had much of a relationship with anyone since Gerry left and only dated a few times since my divorce.”

Now everything made perfect sense. Adrien wanted to mix work and play, but feared that the ugliness if they split would destroy everything. “I work for you as your manny, first and foremost. I’m not here for a date. Yes, I like you, but I won’t push.” Not that he’d put up walls, but he could keep his hands off Adrien.

Adrien nodded, but his half-smile returned. He leaned forward and offered his hand. “I’d like for you to be my son’s manny. Are you interested?”

“I am.” He shook hands with Adrien. The sparks from the day before returned and intensified. The heat in Adrien’s eyes combined with hunger. Nathan bit back a groan. Holy hell. Keeping his hands to himself would be impossible. “If you’re offering the job, then I’m accepting and can start right now.”

Adrien continued to shake Nathan’s hand. “I am. Thank you. I’ll let Kelsi know she’s off the hook for the rest of the afternoon. You’ll have Kelsi’s room up on the second floor. You’ll share the bathroom with Kyle. My room is down here. When will you be able to move your things in?”

“I can bring a bag over today and get the rest of my stuff tomorrow,” Nathan said. “Will that be fast enough?”

“That’s fine. I don’t have any appointments tomorrow, so Kyle and I can give you a

hand.” He stopped shaking Nathan’s hand, but didn’t let go as he stood. “Welcome to the family. We’re lucky to have you.”

“You don’t have any questions about my experience? Education? References?” Nathan asked. He wanted to address all Adrien’s concerns, but also didn’t want to stop the moment between them.

“No need. I learned plenty from your files the center sent over. I read your background check and Kelsi’s told me lots of other bits and pieces.” Adrien shrugged and finally let go of Nathan’s palm. “The meeting yesterday helped. We felt each other out without knowing it and the spontaneity worked. We were ourselves.”

“I’m glad we met. This is going to be a good situation for everyone.” Nathan stuffed one hand into his pants pocket. He couldn’t wait to get the next chapter in his life going and to find out where things might lead with Adrien. Keep his hands to himself? According to the rules, he should, but...rules were meant to be broken.

Chapter Three

The next afternoon, Nathan finished boxing up his clothes. He hadn't expected packing to take long. He didn't have much, but having Adrien and Kyle there made the job of boxing his possessions easier. Kyle stood on the now stripped mattress and watched Nathan.

Nathan offered a gym bag full of towels and a set of sheets. "Want to carry that, or is it too heavy?"

"I can do it." Kyle's eyes lit up. "I'm helpin'." He bobbed his head and climbed off the mattress. He carried the bag across the room to where his father stood.

Adrien hefted the laundry basket of jeans and polos into his arms. "We'll take this out to the car and be right back in."

"Sounds good." He waited for them to leave the apartment before he sat on the bed and exhaled. Jesus. Despite not having much to pack, he hadn't realized he'd be able to fill his car and Adrien's, too. He raked his fingers through his hair. Then there was Adrien. He'd spent too much time, even in the few hours he'd been at the dentist's home and not working with Kyle, watching the sway of Adrien's ass and longing to hold him. He couldn't deny the heat. He made his way into the bathroom to do one more check to ensure he'd packed everything. If he wanted his deposit back, the apartment had to be in the same shape as when he'd first moved in.

"Nathan?" Adrien appeared in the bathroom door. "There you are."

Nathan tripped over his own feet and collided, hip-first, with the sink. Instead of the curse word on his tongue, he bit back a groan. “What’s up?” he asked, through clenched teeth. The jolt of pain shot from his hip to his head, then back to his hip. “I didn’t expect you to come back so fast.”

“I can tell.” Adrien surged across the room. He moved Nathan’s shirt out of the way, exposing Nathan’s flesh. “Are you okay?” He massaged the tender spot. “It’s bruising.”

“I’m sure.” He couldn’t look down at Adrien. The man’s touch comforted him. He wanted to whimper and curl into Adrien’s caress. The pain subsided with each swipe of Adrien’s fingers. “I’ll bet you don’t realize you’re a good nurse,” Nathan managed.

“Huh?” Adrien remained close to him. He stopped caressing and met Nathan’s gaze. “What?”

The heat in Nathan’s body increased. Adrien’s breath warmed his cheeks. If Adrien leaned a bit closer, they could kiss. Nathan fumbled for his words. “You’re a good dad and you don’t know it,” he said, his voice husky. “You made sure I was okay. Step one complete and you passed with high marks.” Jesus, he wanted to kiss Adrien.

“I did?” Adrien’s eyes widened. “I guess so.” He blushed and leaned into Nathan. “Thanks.”

“Daddy?”

Adrien jerked back and his blush faded. “Kyle.”

“I want to go home,” Kyle said. He ducked under his father’s arm and appeared in the doorway. “Are we done yet?”

“Almost.” Adrien massaged his temple.

“Are you coming to our house again?” Kyle grasped Nathan’s hand. “You’re staying with us like Kelsi?”

“I am, but I have to turn in my keys first. I’ll be right behind you.” Nathan both loved and hated Kyle’s interruption. Without it, he’d have kissed Adrien, but he’d have ruined his chances to be Kyle’s manny. Now he had a moment to regroup. “Promise.”

“Yay,” Kyle shouted. He left the room and Nathan exhaled.

“That was close,” Adrien muttered. “Too close.” He brushed the back of his hand across his mouth. “Do you need anything else besides a horny dentist crowding you?”

“I’m good.” Horny dentist? He liked knowing Adrien was off-kilter, too.

“We’ll carry the last box out there to the car and all you should have is the last laundry basket,” Adrien said. “I’ll help unload once you get back to the house so it won’t take a long time.” He reached for Nathan, then pulled back before he connected. He hesitated, then left the bathroom.

Nathan stared at the spot where Adrien had stood and contemplated the last few moments. He listened for Adrien and Kyle to leave before he ventured out of the bathroom. What the hell just happened? He’d almost kissed Adrien. He’d almost crossed a line. Adrien, for all his talk of wanting to stay professional, had sure seemed to want the kiss, too.

Damn.

Nathan shook his head. If he kept thinking about what could’ve happened, he’d never get anything accomplished. He finished clearing out the apartment. Once he’d done a

final walk-through and was satisfied he'd packed everything, he turned the light off and locked up. He carried the basket to his car and headed into the office to turn in his keys. A thought occurred to him. For the first time in a year, he wasn't going to an apartment or a temporary home—he had a house and a permanent situation. Fuck yeah.

When he left the office, he headed straight for his car.

“Nate.” Rhett rushed up to him. “I went to your place, but the door's locked.”

“I know.” He tucked his car keys into his pocket. “I don't live there any longer.”

“You don't?”

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“I got a job.” He leaned against the fender of his vehicle. “I have to live with the family if I’m going to be their manny, so I moved out of my apartment.”

“Your family?” Rhett paused. “That guy and his kid?”

“You saw them?” Panic washed over him, but he kept his calm. “Yes.”

“He’s old. Is that the kid’s grandfather?” Rhett asked. “He looked like a dentist in town. If my research is right, he’s Dr. Ellet.”

“As a matter of fact, that was Dr. Ellet and his son, yes.” He rested his hands on the fender and crossed his ankles. “I thought you wanted me to snag this job. Are you changing your mind?” Or a little jealous?

“No, I’m happy for you.” Rhett nudged the tire with his foot. “I just didn’t think you’d get it so fast.”

“I did.”

“I know.”

He waited in silence for Rhett to finish whatever he’d wanted to say. When Rhett didn’t continue, Nathan bowed his head. “What did you want?” he asked. “We split.”

“I know,” Rhett said. “But we’re still friends.”

“And?” What does he want?

“I missed you. I wanted to come over, have a beer or two, watch a game or movie...” Rhett bumped his foot against Nathan’s. “And see what happens.”

“Sex.” He sighed. “I know how you operate.”

“What?”

He was wasting time. He should be driving back to the house and starting his job, not putting off his ex. “When you show up out of the blue and want to hang out, it always means you want to fuck. You’ve been dumped by your current beau and are lonely. I’ve been that soft place to fall. Correct me if I’m wrong.”

“You’re not.”

“But I can’t be that for you right now. Maybe not for a long time,” Nathan said. “I have to do my job.”

“You don’t want me any longer?” Rhett leaned against the fender and brushed shoulders with Nathan. “We’re just going to be friends from here on out, right?”

“Probably.” He refused to admit he was attracted to his employer. Not only would he be crossing a thousand lines before the job got going, but he didn’t trust Rhett not to blab to anyone within earshot.

“We could’ve been something good.” Rhett placed his hand on Nathan’s. “Could’ve gone the distance.”

“Only if you magically grow up and can handle an actual relationship,” Nathan said. “You think an argument means you walk out. Your idea of responsibility is taking a shower. I need more than another child in my life. Christ, you’re ten months older than I am, but you act like you’re stuck at eighteen. We’re not children. One of these

days you're going to find a guy who wants to be with you and wants maturity. You're going to want to be what he needs, because fitting with him won't be a struggle. Our puzzle pieces don't fit. I'm the boyfriend type who wants a family. You love the single life. Living it up. There's nothing wrong with admitting you have wants, but don't expect me to toe the line any longer."

"Ouch." Rhett massaged Nathan's fingers. "Do you have another guy in mind?"

"For you?" He knew what Rhett meant, but wanted to give him hell.

"Not me. You." Rhett elbowed him. "Who's the lucky guy? I know when you've moved on and you're outta here."

"I'm moving on because I have a job." He stood tall and pulled his keys from his pocket. "Speaking of that job, I'm sorry, but I have to leave. I'm expected at my post within the hour."

"You even sound like a sour grown-up." Rhett shook his head. "But I like that you're mature." He kept his back to Nathan. "Good luck. I'm so going to text you. I want to know you're happy."

"I am."

"But I don't want to lose my friend." He faced Nathan. "Okay?"

"We're friends—just not lovers."

"Okay." Nathan debated what to do next and despite his better judgment, he hugged Rhett. "I'll see you." He hoped his ex would see the gesture as nothing special, but he knew the guy. Rhett would read into the hug. "Bye."

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“Bye, Nate.” Rhett stuffed his hands into his pockets. “Later.”

“Yep.” He climbed behind the wheel of his car. After he waved, he backed out of the parking spot and drove off. Part of his life was over—Rhett couldn’t drop by at a moment’s notice. There was no time for a one-night stand and now Nathan couldn’t loaf around all afternoon. Did he mind that change? No. He had a whole new one starting—being the caregiver he knew he could be with the family he’d grown to appreciate. This life was new, but oh, so sweet.

* * * *

Adrien waited on the couch. Ever since Nathan had come back to the house and moved his things in, Adrien had wanted to crawl out of his skin. He preferred to let Nathan and Kyle sort out their schedule and feel each other out. Once he knew Kyle trusted Nathan, he could relax.

That didn’t help the desire within Adrien to touch Nathan. He’d almost kissed him. Almost. He hadn’t lost his head this much since Gerry. Nathan was his manny, not a potential boyfriend.

He glanced over at Nathan as he and Kyle entered the family room. Nathan was carrying a bowl of popcorn and Kyle was waving a movie case. Adrien fidgeted in his seat. He wasn’t sure what to do or think. He hadn’t watched movies with his son—that was Kelsi’s job.

“Are you ready?” Kyle danced in front of the television. “Nate made popcorn so we can watch cartoons.” He opened the box, but the DVD popped free. It landed on the

floor.

“Kyle.” Adrien leaned forward. “Is that how you handle your things?”

“It’s okay.” Nathan nodded. “Pick it up. Show me how to put the DVD in the player.” He knelt next to Kyle. “Accidents happen.”

Adrien recoiled. Why hadn’t he thought to use a tender touch with his son? Because he could hear his mother’s voice in his head. ‘We don’t drop things. We don’t throw things. Don’t act up. You’re a child, but you can’t act that way.’ Christ. He was imprinting his upbringing on his son...again.

Kyle turned on the television, then the DVD player. “See, Dad? I know how to do this.” He placed the DVD in the open tray. “Now...the machine will work and play the cartoons.”

“Good job.” Adrien sat on the opposite end of the sofa. “Bring the remote here.”

Kyle cuddled between them. He bobbed his feet and wiggled as he tapped the buttons on the remote. “Did I do good, Daddy?”

Adrien fought the urge to scoot away and instead draped his arm around Kyle. “You did.”

Kyle continued to wiggle and impressed Adrien. The entire time the cartoons played, Kyle was in motion. He had no idea how Kyle managed to wriggle that much. Adrien stole a glance at Nathan. He stared at his manny’s lips. He’d come so close to kissing those lips. Would he taste good? Would the dusting of hairs on Nathan’s cheeks abrade his skin? Would Nathan moan? He flexed his hand and brushed Nathan’s shoulder.

Nathan winked.

At me?Adrien froze.Who else would Nathan be winking at?He tensed and forced his attention to the television. A dull ache formed behind his eyes. Spending time with Kyle wasn't difficult, but being this close to Nathan would drive him crazy.

Once the cartoons finished, Kyle turned the television off. "Like that?" He grinned. "I like the cat. He's silly."

"He is." Adrien shifted in his seat. "It's about time for bed."

"Aw...Daddy." Kyle went limp. "I want to stay up."

"It's almost eight," Adrien said. "You know the rules. Seven-thirty on preschool days and eight on the rest of the nights."

"But Nate said I could stay up." Kyle folded his arms. "Till nine."

"Whoa, buddy, I didn't say that." Nathan put the bowl on the coffee table. "You have a schedule and it's eight. Time for bed. Let's go."

Kyle slithered off the couch and landed on the floor. He groaned. "I don't want to go to bed."

Adrien's headache increased. "Kyle."

His son sat up and his eyes widened. "Yes, Daddy." He left the floor. "Come on, Nate."

Nathan picked up the popcorn bowl, then left the couch. "I believe it's time to brush teeth and wash your face, then into your pjs. Yes?"

“Yeah...” Kyle stomped out of the room with Nathan in tow.

Adrien blew out a breath and sagged on the couch. Part of him understood why Gerry had wanted out—being a parent was hard. If he had to listen to Kyle complain and whine all day, he’d lose his patience. How does Nathan keep his? But the rest of him didn’t see why Gerry would want to leave the situation—except Gerry had claimed he wasn’t the bio dad and therefore he had no connection to Kyle. Maybe the biological connection was what kept Adrien from losing his mind. He’d created this child and couldn’t let him down.

“Are you still here?” Nathan returned to the family room. “How long have you been staring at the blank television?”

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“I don’t know.” He met Nathan’s gaze. “How long has it been since you got Kyle to go to bed?”

“Half an hour. He’s out.” Nathan resumed his position on the other end of the sofa. “Teeth brushed, hair combed, face clean and jammies on. He asked for water twice and stalled for five minutes, but I expected nothing less.”

“How do you do it?” Adrien blurted. “You’re still smiling.”

“I like to smile?” Nathan tipped his head. He faced Adrien. “What do you mean?”

“If I had to wrangle that boy upstairs and get him to sleep, I wouldn’t have my hair,” Adrien said. “You make it look easy.”

Nathan shrugged. “I was trained for this.”

“I want your training.”

“You’ll get it.” Nathan tucked his left leg under him and rested his left arm on the back of the sofa. “First, remember I had schooling in this. Second, I’m not his father. If he hates me, it’s not the end of the world. Third, he’s like you—he needs boundaries and schedules.”

“True.” Now that he had to watch the way his son behaved and how Nathan dealt with him, he understood.

“That said, you’re not a bad father. There’s a connection present and you’re trying.

That's huge. Some people never try. You are." Nathan rubbed Adrien's shoulder. "Give yourself credit. There's room to grow, but for a start, you're great."

He paused. This wasn't Gerry insulting him over his inadequacies or Kelsi taking over without including him. He could do this. "Thank you."

"Welcome." Nathan patted Adrien's arm. "Since he's up there alone, I'm going to turn in. I want to do some journaling and answer a couple of texts. Do you need anything?"

He almost replied you, but didn't. "I'm fine. Thanks," Adrien said. "I appreciate the compliments and I'm glad you're part of the family."

"Me, too." Nathan left his seat. "Get your rest. You've got work tomorrow." He winked, then walked out of the room.

Adrien's pocket vibrated. His schedule for the next day popped onto his phone screen. Nathan was right—he had too much to do tomorrow. Between filling out forms for the preschool to allow Nathan to pick up and drop off Kyle, to running to the grocery store and paying bills, he had a full plate. But his world wasn't in chaos. Yes, he had too much to do, but he had a partner.

He stood and stretched, then turned the light off in the family room. Adrien made the rounds of the first floor of the house, locking up and preparing to settle down for the evening. As he passed the kitchen, he spotted the pile of mail. Shit. He should take the bills to his home office for sorting in the morning. He leafed through the envelopes and a yellow one caught his attention.

Coalition Against Gays in Cedarwood

Well, hell. He'd managed to stay out of the crosshairs of the anti-gay group until

now. What did they want? He turned the envelope over. Someone had written on the back.

Don't allow your practice to be shuttered because you cater to the gay community.

What in the name of God did that mean? He catered to the entire community. Whether someone was gay or not didn't matter to him. He saw cavities and teeth, gums and caps, not who loved a man or a woman. He tossed the letter into the garbage. Fuck that. He wasn't about to let the coalition rule his life.

A piece of paper in the stack of mail slid onto the floor. He retrieved the pale blue sheet of paper. The words caught his attention. Support Group for Single Parents in Cedarwood.

Huh. He wondered if this was the group Kelsi and the others had mentioned. He carried the rest of the mail to the office, but kept the paper in his hand. With his phone in his pocket, he turned the rest of the lights off, locked up and headed to his bedroom.

Adrien sat on the edge of his bed and perused the flier. He recognized names of some of the members. Colin Baker, Farin Baker, Steve Moore, Officer Jordan Hargrove. He chuckled. If they were part of it, then it mustn't be too bad. He retrieved his phone and searched for the group on his internet app. The headline under the name caught his attention.

Just because you're a single parent doesn't mean you're in this alone.

The sentence sounded like something Nathan would say. He read through the rest of the information on the group. Why hadn't he given in and checked out the support group before now? They sure seemed like an asset he should've used. He searched for the next meeting time, then added it to his calendar. He'd attend at least one

gathering and see if he wanted to join. Why not?

He sighed and abandoned both his phone and the paper on his side table. The weight of the day crashed down on him and he closed his eyes. His life wasn't perfect, but he had things back on track.

A vision of Nathan formed in his memory. Every time Nathan smiled, Adrien's blood heated. He hadn't kissed the man, but he wanted to. He longed to touch him again and experience those sparks. According to the contract for hiring Nathan, he couldn't get involved with him. Who has to know we're together?

He opened his eyes. Crossing lines and ignoring rules weren't his style. He lived for order, but now he wanted to toss that order to hell. He left the bed and disrobed. Once he'd brushed his teeth and placed his watch and phone on their respective chargers, he climbed into bed with his tablet and glasses.

He tapped the icon for the internet and logged in to his favorite porn site. Christ, he was messed-up. Having a date or one-night stand wasn't a possibility, but he could look at dirty photos and watch porn movies. Why not? He propped the tablet on his knee and eased his free hand between his legs. The man in the selected video reminded him of Nathan. He knew better than to assume Nathan might in some way be the man performing. If so, he'd never be able to manny for them.

That didn't prevent Adrien from imagining Nathan as the man in the video. He imagined himself as the other man. Would Nathan be a top? Bottom? Sweet and tender in bed? Or an animal? He stroked himself in time with the two men fucking on the video. When they groaned, he pressed his lips together to hide his moan. He hadn't masturbated in a few weeks, so the orgasm wasn't far off. He planted his feet and embraced the warmth in his body. He dropped the tablet and focused on the pleasure within him. He panted. Jesus. He needed this release. He stroked faster and cupped his balls. The added sensation tipped him over the edge. He kicked the

blanket out of the way as he came. From head to toe, he shuddered. Christ, he'd finished faster than he wanted. He added a couple extra strokes, then stared at the ceiling as the climax subsided. He'd wanted to fantasize about Nathan being there, but he'd lost his focus.

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If nothing else, he felt better. He'd masturbated the edge off and could relax. Adrien cleaned himself up with the shirt he'd left on the floor, then settled between the sheets. He cleared the history on his tablet before turning the device off for the night. He switched the light off and pulled the blankets to his chin. He needed sleep, so why fight the feeling? He could worry about Nathan and the attraction later.

* * * *

By Tuesday afternoon, Adrien felt better about hiring Nathan. The three of them had settled into a routine and got along. Where Kelsi had taken over Kyle's care completely, Nathan insisted on having Adrien involved. The adjustment, even over a few days, hadn't been easy. He hated being underfoot, but the more time he spent with Kyle and Nathan, the more he learned. He applauded Nathan's determination to make them a family—not just have a working relationship.

Adrien settled behind his desk. He had bills to pay and had to balance his checking account. A dull ache formed above his eyes. He hated paperwork. Sure, money wasn't a big thing for him, but he tended to screw up his math when completing simple tasks like dealing with his checkbook.

A knock at the door dragged him from his thoughts. Nathan stood in the doorway. "Hi."

"Hi." He hadn't started the bills, but appreciated the break. "How goes it?" Did he sound silly? "I mean...is Kyle okay? Is he awake still?"

"You need to chill. Things are fine. Breathe." Nathan laughed and leaned on the

doorframe. "I came in to ask if you'd eaten. You never made it to supper."

His stomach growled. He'd forgotten all about food. "I guess I haven't eaten. I had too much to do." The excuse sounded lame, but he had no other.

"You work too hard." Nathan laughed again. "Why don't you take a break and have some food? I made lasagne."

"You did?" He couldn't cook. His attempts at dinner tended to be burned disasters. He sighed. "I'll never get the bills paid. Give me a toothache with an abscess and I can figure it out. Checkbooks will always be a mystery."

"You eat, then I'll give you a hand." Nathan wagged his fingers. "I'm not taking no for an answer. Come on."

He liked Nathan's forthright approach. Then again, he liked a man who could guide him from time to time. He controlled so much at work and home...would Nathan be a good top to his bottom in the bedroom? "Okay."

"Good." Nathan left the doorway without touching him.

So much for a moment to get closer. He followed Nathan to the kitchen. He hated to abandon his work, but he could use the companionship. He smelled the oregano and sauce. His mouth watered and stomach growled again. "When did you have time to make this?"

"Kyle helped." Nathan unwrapped the pan. The foil crinkled and caught the light. "He's quite the cook."

"He's four," Adrien blurted.

Nathan shrugged. “He liked helping and it’s good for a child to learn about food. I didn’t know how to make my own dinner until I was a teenager,” he said. “Kyle added the cheese and spread out the pasta.”

“He could’ve been burned.” Adrien sat at the bar. “No, I’m sure you were careful.”

“I was and he was never alone with anything that would hurt him.” Nathan served up a piece of lasagne. “I know what I’m doing.”

“I trust you.” He folded his hands. He admired Nathan’s ease in the kitchen. “If I’d made dinner, it would’ve turned into take-out. I burn things.”

Nathan stared at him and said nothing. He tipped his head.

“What?” His cheeks burned and he held still. “What’d I say?” Christ. This was why he sucked at relationships. He didn’t know how to talk to handsome men without tripping over himself.

“You trust me,” Nathan murmured. “I bet that was tough for you to admit and I’m honored.”

The gravity of the moment hit him. Yeah, he might have been a little crazy to admit the truth, but it freed him. He wanted someone he could talk to bluntly. “I’ve seen you with Kyle. You understand him.”

“I’m doing my best.” Nathan pushed the plate across the bar. “Enjoy.”

“Are you having any?” He hated to eat alone.

“I already ate. If I have more, I’ll have to run ten miles to burn it all off.” Nathan grinned. “But I won’t turn down a breadstick.” He took one from the bag. “You?”

“I’ll run with you.” He accepted the stick. “You’re a gem. Bread with lasagne, you’re good with Kyle and you’re keeping me in line. That’s huge.”

“Nah.” This time Nathan blushed.

“You are. I can’t cook. I don’t know the first thing about being a dad... I need my hand held... I’m surprised you hadn’t been picked up by a family before now.” He stuffed a forkful of pasta into his mouth and bit back a moan. Damn. The noodles melted on his tongue.

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“Kelsi kept me in the loop,” Nathan said.

“Smart girl.” He ate another two bites. “This is delicious.”

“Thanks.” Nathan rested his elbows on the bar and leaned forward. “I hoped you’d like it.”

“I do,” he said between bites. “Just promise me you’re not trying to poison me.” And again, he’d said something ridiculous.

“Me?” Nathan laughed. “No poison. I might be trying to worm my way into your heart, though. I do want you to keep me on.”

This time, Adrien chuckled. “I’m not letting you go.” He froze. He kept saying things that sure sounded as though they were a couple—but they weren’t. He liked Nathan, though, and was in over his head. But every time he looked at Nathan, he wondered if the man tasted good.

“You’re thinking too hard. Want to unburden? I’m not only a great cook, but a fine listener, too.” Nathan crooked his eyebrows. “You don’t have to.”

“It’s okay.” He continued eating and formulated what he wanted to say. “Kyle’s asleep?”

Nathan nodded.

He paused. A thousand reasons came to mind as to why he shouldn’t open up to

Nathan, but he couldn't stop. "I wanted to kiss you."

"I know."

What an odd thing to say. Adrien bristled. Maybe he'd made the wrong decision by speaking. "Oh." Nathan's response stung and he lost his train of thought.

"I know because I wanted to kiss you, too." Nathan signed and flexed his fingers. "I know the rules. I'm a professional guy. Kissing my boss isn't in my plans."

"Right." He finished his supper and a wave of nausea swept over him. Not because of the food, but out of emotional distress. "It's against the rules." The same rules he wanted to smash.

"I've never been attracted to my bosses in the past. I knew my boundaries."

"Right." He couldn't contain the embarrassment much longer. "Never mind."

"But those people weren't you," Nathan said.

He put the fork down and processed what Nathan had just said. "Are you attracted to me?" he blurted. He'd been blunt. Great. He wanted to take the words back.

"Yes." Nathan's blush deepened. "Ever since we met at the coffee shop, I wanted to kiss you."

"At least it wasn't one-sided." Adrien sighed. "We have a problem."

"We do."

"I don't know how to handle it. Kelsi's been my only other nanny and I wasn't

attracted to her.” He massaged her forehead. “Every cell in my body screams to kiss you, but common sense dictates I keep space between us.”

“What’s your gut say?” Nathan crept around the bar. “Does it give you the green light? Or throw up a red flag?”

His mouth ran dry. He flattened his palms on his thighs and measured his breaths. The closer Nathan got, the more Adrien wanted him. To hell with caution. He hooked his fingers in Nathan’s front pockets and yanked him close. The warmth of Nathan’s body enticed him. He noticed the flecks of amber in Nathan’s blue eyes and the fullness of his lashes. The scruff he’d liked on Nathan’s cheeks wasn’t there. He’d shaved.

Nathan cupped Adrien’s jaw and brushed his mouth over Adrien’s. “I’ve been dying for a taste of you.” He kissed Adrien again. The simple gesture went from sweet and tender to devouring in a heartbeat. When Adrien opened to him, Nathan sucked on his tongue.

The craving ran bone-deep. Warmth seeped through Adrien to his core. He removed his fingers from Nathan’s pockets, then caressed Nathan’s ribs beneath his shirt. He wondered what it would feel like to have Nathan’s nude body against his. He moaned into the kiss. He needed more and the desire was stronger than he could fight off.

Nathan broke the connection, but remained close. “Yum.”

He nodded. No matter how hard he tried, his words were gone. “I want more,” he managed.

“I’m not pulling away,” Nathan said. “I’m risking being fired, but it’s worth the trouble. You’re worth it.”

Maybe...“I won’t fire you.” He doubted he’d be able to replace him and besides, he liked Nathan. Why get rid of the guy he liked?

“Not yet.”

He brushed his fingers across Nathan’s mouth. “What?”

“I want you and this. I’m happy working for you,” Nathan said. “But when we do this—get together—there’s no guarantee we’ll stay together. If we split, I lose my job.” He paled. “That sounded so asshole-ish. I mean, I don’t want to lose what we’ve started.” He closed his eyes. “I’m going to stop talking.”

Adrien appreciated knowing he wasn’t the only one who fumbled for words. “We could work out.” Still, guilt pushed into his mind. He didn’t want Nathan to feel ensnared.

“No.” He slid his hands down Adrien’s shoulders. “I meant, you and I are starting something special. If we don’t last, you’ll be hard to forget.”

“You’re not forgettable, either,” Adrien said. “We’ll go slow.”

“We will.”

He couldn’t deny the heat, though. The electricity between them each time they touched spurred Adrien on.

“What?” Nathan asked.

He tugged Nathan close again and kissed him. He guided Nathan between his legs. He craved the closeness. When he kissed Nathan, he memorized every nuance of the

man. They bumped noses and he didn't mind. Nathan was too good to miss. Blood rushed below his belt and he longed to rub his dick together with Nathan's.

"Damn." Nathan panted. "You're addicting."

"I try." He cleared his throat. "Thanks for the food. I needed it. The kiss was the icing on the cake."

"I love your sweetness." Nathan didn't budge. "I'm happy to feed you, too."

"I appreciate it." He slid his hands under Nathan's shirt again. The rippling muscle and smooth skin were more than he could handle. He wanted to pull away and get to work, but why stop? "I should go." If he didn't put space between them, he'd invite Nathan to his bed.

"I should head upstairs."

"You should." He needed space and to clear his head. Still, he wanted to drag Nathan down the hallway, but he couldn't—not yet.

"I need to clean up the kitchen," Nathan murmured. He draped his arms around Adrien's shoulders. "Like right now."

"I need to pay bills." He kissed Nathan again.

"Go." Nathan brushed his nose along Adrien's and sighed. "If we don't stop, we'll never quit. Go. I don't want you to be up all night at the computer."

"Yeah." He disengaged from Nathan and left the stool. He wanted to look back, but didn't dare. "Night."

“Night,” Nathan called.

He paused in the doorway, then faced Nathan. “Thank you.” He wanted to hide his raging hard-on. Damn. He’d almost given in to Nathan’s magnetism. “Night.”

“Good night.” Nathan smiled.

Did Nathan have a hard-on, too? Adrien forced himself to return to the office. An odd feeling swept over him. He’d opened his heart and had hope. He could love again. He wasn’t sure he’d fall for Nathan, but the prospects were good. Sure, he had doubts about his future, but with Nathan, everything wasn’t bleak. They could be a team. Nathan needed stability, too. Nathan enticed and intrigued him. They had time to sort things out, but he wasn’t going to turn Nathan in to the training center. He needed Nathan for more than just his manny. He needed him to help heal his heart.

Chapter Four

Nathan stood in the kitchen and gathered his wits. For the last three weeks, he'd strategically avoided Adrien. The attraction was too strong to deny, but they had to be careful. Jesus, they weren't even together. They were attracted to each other, but that didn't mean much. He had a job to do. So he'd masturbated twice since the kisses in the kitchen. He could fantasize over his boss. Every time he played with himself, he wondered what it would be like to fuck Adrien. He massaged his forehead. He'd gotten ahead of himself again and was only three weeks into the job.

Although he wanted to focus on his feelings for Adrien, he didn't have time to worry about him. He had manny-ing to do. Yes, Kyle was at preschool and wouldn't be done for another hour, but Nathan hadn't decided what to make for supper and still had to gas up his car. He should run to the store, too.

The doorbell rang and jarred him from his thoughts. Nathan nodded. He needed to answer the door. He strode through the house to the breezeway. When he opened the door, a man and woman stood there together.

"Hello," Nathan said. He kept the door open a crack and left the screen door locked. "Can I help you?"

"Hi," the man said. "May we speak to Dr. Ellet?"

"He's not available." Nathan swept his gaze over the couple. Bland clothing, she wore no makeup and he held a sheaf of papers. Religious folk going door-to-door?

“Are you the man of the house?” the woman asked. “Do you have a moment?”

“I am and Dr. Ellet is busy. I’ll take a message—if you have one,” Nathan said. He held firm. Something seemed odd about the two people on the porch.

The man slid a brochure into the gap between the screen door and the frame. “We’re from the Coalition. There are some folks in town that aren’t wanted. While we don’t have the power to remove those folks, we are still interested in keeping like-minded neighbors abreast of the situation.”

“I see.” His stomach lurched. “What situation are you worried about?” He had an idea, but why not see what they’d say?

The woman kept smiling, but without warmth. Neither she nor the man answered.

“I’m new to town,” Nathan lied. “So I’m not up on the rumors and goings on.” He accepted the paper and scanned through the information. “The Coalition? Are you a civic group?” Damn, he was lousy at playing dumb.

“We’re like-minded neighbors trying to keep our town family-friendly,” she said. “I’m Martha and this is Claude, my partner. If you’re interested in keeping Cedarwood family-friendly, then join us at a meeting. The information on the next meeting is listed on the pamphlet.”

Partner, eh? Like in the sack or just wandering around and spreading hate? “I see.” He knew their scheme, but loved to ensnare them. “I do want my community to be safe for my family and everyone.” He paused. “I have a question.”

“Sure,” Claude said. He grinned. “We’re happy to help.”

“Are gays allowed?” Nathan asked. “Polyamorous couples? Unmarried couples? I’d

love to know Cedarwood is safe for my family.”

Claude narrowed his eyes. “Are you part of the LGBTQ community? Living in sin?”

“Does that matter?” Nathan folded his arms and braced his foot against the back of the door. “Anyone can have a family. Whether they’re married or straight isn’t important.”

“It’s not right,” Martha snapped. “It’s immoral.”

“Is it?” He nodded. “But you’re partners. You’re on the level, right?”

She sneered. “We’re friends. Nothing more.”

“I see.” Nathan paused. “It’s your group, so your labels and your rules, right?”

“Can we expect to see you at the next meeting, or are you one of the LGBTQ cretins?” Claude asked. “We’ll have a seat for you waiting—if you’re straight. Is your family going to accompany you?”

“My family doesn’t live in Cedarwood.”

“Then why are you in Dr. Ellet’s home? Are you related?” Martha asked. “Cousins?”

“I’m his manny,” Nathan said.

“Manny?” they asked in unison.

“Like a nanny, but male.” He could do this all day. If they’d allow themselves to be baited, he’d keep tossing them into the deep.

“Ah, but you’re not his lover?” Claude asked.

“No.” Not yet.

“Good.” Martha nodded. “Very good. You’re not corrupted.”

“Corrupted?” Nathan laughed and shook his head. “Who Dr. Ellet or I sleep with has nothing to do with how he does his work or my job.”

“I don’t want a gay man touching my mouth,” Martha said. “It might be contagious.”

“What? Being gay?” Nathan replied. “No one asks if being straight is contagious. They don’t call you strange for loving a man, instead of another woman. Why is who I love such a big deal? I’m not chasing either of you and I’m not throwing my affections under your nose. I’m like Dr. Ellet, living my life and minding my own business.”

“So you’re gay?” Claude’s eyes widened.

“Does that make a difference?” Nathan asked.

“Yes,” Martha snapped.

“I’m single.” And willing to dance around the topic as long as they wanted to keep going.

“Are you gay?” Claude asked. “The doctor is. He was married to a man.”

“It’s none of your business, but I am and so is he. No one seems to care that I’m gay,

so you shouldn't either." He tossed the brochure onto the side table. "So no, I don't want to attend any of your meetings. I'd like for you to leave me and the rest of the LGBTQ community alone. Hell, why don't you leave the general public alone? I'm not interested in joining your group, so you're wasting your time trying to persuade me," Nathan said. "I'm busy and need to get back to work. Good afternoon." Before they could say anything, he shut the door and engaged the lock. He'd been strong, but fuck...he wasn't in the mood for this kind of shit right now.

He remained in the living room and waited for Martha and Claude to vacate the porch. He should call Adrien. If someone was going to try to solicit at Adrien's house, then he needed to know. He fumbled with the phone and dialed Adrien's personal cell number. After ten rings, he got Adrien's voicemail. Shit. He called the main desk of the dental practice.

"Hello, Smile Dental. We're here to make you smile. May I schedule your appointment?" the receptionist asked.

"I'm Nathan Gordon, Dr. Ellet's manny. I've tried his cell and can't get an answer. I need to speak to him and will wait until he's free. It's important, but not life-threatening," Nathan said.

"I'm going to put you on hold and transfer you to his office line. He's almost done with a patient, so it shouldn't be long," she said. "What's the problem?"

"Just an intruder at the house," he replied. "I'll wait. Thanks."

She said nothing else and left him in silence. The lack of noise or even computer-generated music unnerved him. He paced the length of the living room. The family wasn't in danger, but he couldn't shake the odd feeling in his belly. The couple concerned him. Were they stopping at every house? Just Dr. Ellet's? Were they trying to feel them out? Possible.

Something buzzed. The line ringing? He wished Adrien would answer. He'd handled plenty of incidents in his career as a nanny, but the Coalition was out of his realm of understanding.

"Hello? Nate?" Adrien puffed. "I ran into my office. Is Kyle okay?"

"He's fine and still at preschool." He needed to gather his wits.

"Oh, good. Are you hurt?"

"No." He sank onto the arm of the sofa. He watched Martha and Claude's car drive away. "Remember how you mentioned you were considering joining the single parent group?"

"I did in passing. Why?"

"Remember how there's the group against the support one?" Nathan asked.

"I do." Adrien paused. "What happened?" He spoke in a soothing tone and seemed unbothered—or hid his worry very well. "Tell me. If you're safe and Kyle is too, then we can work with this."

Nathan appreciated Adrien's cool demeanor. "Two members of the anti-gay group showed up at the house. They tried to invite me to the meetings. I don't know why they came to your place, but they said they wanted to speak to you. They know you're gay and now they know I am, too. They aren't happy, but they left."

"They never are happy," Adrien said. "Did they use the term family-friendly? Or was it cleaning up the neighborhood?"

"Family-friendly was their term of choice." He'd have remembered the cleaning

comment. Probably would've lost his cool over it, too.

“Nice. They think they’ll clean Cedarwood up by getting rid of anyone that doesn’t share their beliefs.”

“Sounds right,” Nathan said. “I got rid of them, but I’m worried I said too much. They talked about making the town better for families and were grossed out by you having a kid as well as me being your manny. I refused to back down, but I’m worried I put you and Kyle in danger. I stopped them, but they aren’t done, I’m sure.”

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“I know. They hate everyone who isn’t like them,” Adrien said. “Which goes against the whole inclusion thing.”

“I need to get Kyle from school, but I’m hesitant to leave. I don’t want anything to happen to the house or to us when we come home,” Nathan said. “It’s silly. They wouldn’t strike in the middle of the day, but still. How do I do this?”

“Very carefully,” Adrien said. He snorted. “But I know. It’s scary. They can be pushy and have gotten violent. There’s nothing wrong with being gay or bi or whatever. We’re living our lives—don’t forget that. We’re not doing anything immoral or illegal.” He sighed. “If they strike, harass, assault or anything else, we have a friend in the sheriff’s department.”

“We do?” He liked the way Adrien spoke. They were in this together. “Good to know.” His heartrate returned to a normal level. “Thanks, Adrien.”

“Anytime,” Adrien said. “Just keep an even keel and an eye on Kyle as well as your surroundings. This will blow over, but there is a chance it’ll get crazy before it settles down. I’ll be home at six and we’ll come up with a plan of attack for next time.”

“You think there will be a next time?” Jesus.

“I’m sure. They’re persistent,” Adrien said. “We’re a team. I’ve got you and they can’t do shit without my getting in the way.”

“Thanks.” He paused. “Adrien?”

“Yeah?”

“You’re more fatherly than you think.” His heart swelled with pride. He’d helped Adrien start to come into his own. Adrien would need help for years still, but he could do this parenting thing.

“I’ve got a great teacher. I’m getting better because you’re guiding me,” Adrien said. “Without you, I’d still be sinking.”

He wasn’t so sure about that.

“I’ll see you in a few hours,” Adrien said. “Thanks for calling me. I’d rather know than not. Just know it’ll be okay.”

“Thanks. I’ll see you.” Nathan waited for Adrien to hang up before he put his phone down. He exhaled. Cedarwood might be a nice place to live, but there were some real characters in town. At least he had Adrien on his side. Excitement raced through his veins. He’d thought the connection was strong, but now he knew it ran deep, too. He was part of the family, not just an employee. He could handle this.

He checked the clock. Kyle would be done in half an hour. He might as well head up to the school. Better to be early than late. He set the house alarm, grabbed his keys and wallet, then tucked his phone into his pocket and left. He did a quick scan of the house before he backed down the driveway. Everything appeared fine, but he’d be on the lookout for anything strange.

He refused to let down his guard. He had a family to protect and he wouldn’t quit for anything.

* * * *

Adrien set the phone in the cradle and sank onto his chair. He'd known this day would come. The Coalition might have gone silent for a while, but not forever. They were still functioning and wouldn't quit until something big happened. He'd received plenty of literature from the group in his mail and at the office, but they'd never shown up in person at his home. They'd grown bolder.

He tapped his fingers on the desktop. He'd protect Kyle and Nathan no matter what. No one fucked with his family. But he needed help from someone who knew what the hell to expect from them.

He'd seen information on the single parent support group and considered calling a dozen times, but he'd chickened out. The last he remembered, his friend Farin was listed as a contact. He swiped through his schedule listing for the next hour. Nothing. "Mary?" He strode out to the billing area of the office. "Hey, Mary?"

She swiveled around in her seat. "Yes? Are you finally taking your lunch? You go home in two hours—if I don't have to force you out."

"How many more appointments do I have? Just the one, right?"

"Yes, at five. Take your lunch or I'll remove you from the office." She wagged her finger at him. "I'm serious. You're going to make yourself sick if you don't eat. Besides, you deserve the break. Michael can handle any emergencies. He owes you." She waved at him. "Go."

"I will." He shrugged out of his lab coat. "I need to run an errand. I'll be back by the time that appointment arrives."

"Jill can handle it since it's just a cleaning and when it's time for the exam, Michael can do it if you're not back in time." She waved again. "Go. I know you'll be back before you should."

“Thanks.” He formed a plan as he gathered his phone, keys and wallet. The bookstore was only three blocks down the street—easily within walking distance. “I’ll be right back.” He left the office before Mary could chew him out again.

He strode down the sidewalk and hurried. He’d never felt unsafe in Cedarwood, but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t be mindful of his surroundings. If anyone knew what to do when handling problems with the Coalition, it was Farin and his brother Colin. They’d dealt with crap from the group plenty of times and they’d fought off even more problems, yet kept their heads held high. A few cars were on the street and birds chirped in the trees. Other than the threat from the Coalition, the day had been pleasant. He made his way into the bookstore and right up to the front desk. He spotted Farin.

“Hi.” Farin grinned. “You’ve been cut loose. What happened? Did Michael finally make you leave or did that sexy manny convince you to come home faster?” He crinkled his nose. “If the manny wanted you to be home, you wouldn’t be here.” He stared at Adrien. “What’s the deal?”

Sexy? Others know Nathan’s attractive? Well, shit. He’d wanted that to be his secret. Oh well. He focused on his friend. Why did Farin care if he’d hooked up with Nathan? Because Farin was married and happy—and wanted everyone else to be, too. “I need to talk to you.”

“Sure. If you need the talk, though, it’s a little late. You’ve been married, so you know what to do with a handsome man.” Farin rounded the counter. “Guys, I’ll be in the office. Don’t bother me unless the store is on fire.”

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He followed Farin through the store to the back. He'd been in the private space exactly twice, but had never noticed the overabundance of family photos tucked in among the books. Seeing Farin with Steve and Genie struck Adrien as odd—his friend had always been so carefree and impossibly single. He'd never struck Adrien as a family man, but the proof was everywhere.

“What’s on your mind?” Farin asked. “If you want relationship advice, I say go for it. I’ve seen your manny. He’s hot. If he’s good with Kyle and polite, then snap that boy up. You’re lucky if he likes you, too. Go for a ride. You deserve it.”

He held up both hands. “I’m not riding anyone.” Not that he hadn’t given the idea some careful thought—but still.

“Why not?”

“Because he works for me.” And he wasn’t ready for the whole world to know they were together.

“So?”

“It’s not proper.” Plus, it went against his desire to move slowly.

“What’s proper?” Farin asked. “If you’re attracted to each other, then do something about it.”

“Farin.”

“Is there attraction? More than just being horny bastards?”

“Are you serious?” Adrien asked. “Maybe.”

“See?”

“I came here to ask about the Coalition—not romance.” He had plenty of problems with both, but he trusted Farin’s judgment with the anti-gay group.

Farin opened his mouth, then shut it. He sagged in his seat. “Shit.”

“Yeah.”

“Tell me you’re being proactive and there’s no threat,” Farin said. “Right?”

“I wish.”

“Well, fuck.” Farin folded his arms. “What happened?”

“They contacted Nathan and wanted him to join the group. They gave him information and seemed to find my house specifically,” Adrien said. “It’s messed up.”

“Agreed.”

“But he told them the truth—we’re both gay.” Great since his connection with Nathan was strong, but bad because the group would use the information against them. “I don’t care that they know I’m gay. Fuck ’em. What I do care about is them possibly going after Kyle. He’s four years old. An innocent.”

“Slow down,” Farin said. “You don’t have proof they’re going to make waves or say

anything to him. But if they do they've overstepped. You have the control here."

"I do? I want to hide them both and protect them behind thick walls. I feel like my life is spiraling out of my control."

"Don't be so dramatic. Your life is good. You have a great kid and what seems like a great manny. Yes, there is danger, but the crap from the Coalition hasn't increased. You need to be the bigger man. You're not alone. Besides Nathan, you've got us. Colin and Jordan, Colt, Ash...all of us—we're stronger together. Ashley will keep an eye on Kyle at school and Jordan keeps his ear to the ground for rumors. Hate won't win."

Adrien nodded. Farin made a lot of sense. The threat was real, but thin. He'd overblown it. He had more friends than he realized. "Okay."

"My best advice is this. Don't quit on yourself and Kyle. You have a good start with Nathan. You need love and laughter in your life, especially with Kyle and Nathan. You being you is more important and enough to aggravate the Coalition. Be you." Farin winked. "We'll all have more fun that way."

"True."

"Go home and spend the evening with the guys. Kyle will love it and you might realize there's more with Nathan than you thought," Farin said. "I bet there's a lot more."

"Thanks." He knew what he needed to do. He had a sexy man in his home and desire sizzling between them. Besides, he and Nathan needed to be a unified front when dealing with Kyle and the Coalition.

"Feel better?" Farin asked. He walked Adrien to the office door. "At least a little

relaxed?”

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“I do.” He strode through the doorway and into the shop. A few people milled about. He didn’t know anyone there other than Farin, but that didn’t matter. He wasn’t scared. “Thanks.”

“Go home and enjoy your family. You have a gift if you have a family.” Farin walked with him to the front of the store. “Embrace it.”

“I will.” He hugged Farin. “I’ll see you. Thanks for the advice.”

“Anytime,” Farin said. “Later.”

Adrien made his way back to the office. His heart was lighter, despite the need to observe his surroundings closer. The Coalition could give him hell. He was ready and they couldn’t do a damn thing.

* * * *

Adrien pulled into the garage at half past five. The last appointment had been quick and he’d finished his paperwork in record time. Now he could relax with the guys—as Farin put it. He grinned. My guys. For the first time since Kyle had been born, he felt like he belonged to a family. Gerry had been ready to go right after Kyle’s birth and had never wanted Adrien to help with raising him—until that raising became too difficult.

A family. Not him paying the bills and providing a home, but he was part of the unit.

He left the car and grabbed his bag from the back seat.

“Daddy.” Kyle rushed into the garage and hugged Adrien’s legs. “You’re home.”

“I should be. I live here.” He slung his bag over his shoulder, then picked up Kyle. He carried his son into the house. “How was school?”

“Good. Maize said she wanted me to be her boyfriend. I told her we’re friends.” Kyle nodded. “Nothing more.”

“You’re in preschool. Aren’t you a little young to have a girlfriend?” Did kids have boyfriends or girlfriends at this age? He wasn’t sure.

“And Nate got me from school. We had ice cream and played at the park. He rode on the slide with me an’ everything.” Kyle tugged at the hairs on the back of Adrien’s head. “Can I have long hair too?”

“If you want.” Adrien met Nathan’s gaze. “Did you have fun at the park?”

“Uh-huh.” Kyle squirmed. “Let’s make mac-n-cheese.”

Adrien set Kyle on his feet. “I don’t know how to, but if you show me, I’ll help you and Nathan.”

“Nate, Dad.” Kyle groaned and huffed away.

“Right.” Adrien chuckled. He deposited his bag on the kitchen table. “Sorry.”

Nathan grinned. He eased over to Adrien. “You’re picking up this dad thing rather fast. I’m impressed.”

“I’m trying.” He elbowed Nathan and lowered his voice. “How are you?” He added water to the stock pot.

“Better.” Nathan sighed. His brow furrowed as he switched off the faucet. “Just...they freaked me out. Thanks for calming me down.”

“You’re welcome. Happy to help,” Adrien said. He added a dash of salt and oil to the water, then placed the pot on the burner. “I talked to my friend Farin. If anyone knows how to deal with the Coalition, it’s him. He suggested we live our life and exist.” As he turned on the burner, he bumped into Nathan, needing to feel the heat from Nathan’s body. “He also suggested we take that kiss to the next level.”

“I thought we were.” Nathan crooked his brow. He opened the box of pasta. “Aren’t we?”

At least he hadn’t pushed too much. “I’m not trying to put you in a position, but I want to be with you.” He left Nathan long enough to retrieve milk and butter from the refrigerator. He placed both items on the counter.

“Good.” Nathan brushed his hand over Adrien’s. “I’m not used to this kind of attention.” He leaned into Adrien. “I feel better doing this, though.” His eyes glittered. “I’ve wanted to kiss you all day.” When Kyle walked back into the room, Nathan put space between him and Adrien, then said, “Mac-n-cheese will be done soon. Why don’t you help Kyle wash up and we’ll eat?”

“Deal.” Adrien directed his son to the first-floor bathroom. He marveled at Nathan’s patience with his son. No matter what Kyle said, Nathan didn’t blink. Kyle stood at the counter and washed his hands. He splashed and sloshed water onto the counter. Adrien cleaned up the mess, then followed Kyle to the dining room. Nathan had the plates set out, a glass of milk for Kyle and water for him and Adrien.

Nathan sat next to Kyle, who talked through the entire meal. Adrien tamped down his frustration. Kids were too chatty. How did Nathan not lose his cool? Kyle ate most of his dinner, but spilled some of the cheese down his front. Despite the new mess,

Nathan kept up with the conversation and helped Kyle clean the yellow cheese from his shirt.

“I’m done,” Kyle announced. He slid out of his chair and carried his plate from the room.

“Okay, then choose a game. Your dad and I will be in the playroom in a little bit,” Nathan said. “Something we can all play.”

Kyle nodded, then left.

Nathan sighed. "It's exciting. I'll bet you never knew a four-year-old could talk so much."

"Not about so many subjects." Adrien finished his macaroni, then left his seat. He carried his plate and silverware to the kitchen. "I forgot how exciting dinosaurs can be."

"They are for now." Nathan dipped a washrag in the hot water in the sink. "Give it time and he'll find something else." He nodded. "Kyle's setting up a game. Why don't you join him while I wipe down the table?"

"Sure." He dried his hands on a towel. "You're playing, too?"

"Of course." Nathan winked. "I wouldn't miss it."

He abandoned Nathan in the dining room and headed for the playroom on the second floor. Kyle sat in the middle of the floor with an array of DVDs around him. "Can we watch this?" He waved a DVD at Adrien. "Please?"

"Which is it?" He didn't recognize Kyle's selection. Was it rated for kid viewing? What in the hell was the movie?

"Dinobots." Kyle slapped the case into Adrien's hands. "Please?"

According to the rating, the movie was suitable for children Kyle's age and seemed

educational. “Sure.” When Nathan entered the room, Adrien held up the DVD case. “This is cool, right?”

“It is.” He sat next to Adrien on the sofa and spoke to Kyle. “Do you remember how to put it in the machine?”

“I do.” Kyle picked up the remote. Within seconds, he had both the television and DVD player on. He placed the disc into the machine, then stepped back as the movie played.

“I didn’t recognize the movie,” Adrien muttered. “I’m guessing it was a holdover from Gerry.”

“I watched it to make sure it was appropriate,” Nathan replied. “The dinos show kids how to count, recognize letters and even some sign language, without being corny or talking down to them.”

Adrien draped his arm across the back of the sofa and brushed Nathan’s shoulder. Despite the movie playing on the screen and Kyle now nestled between him and Nathan, he didn’t pay any attention to the entertainment. He’d seen some cartoons along the same lines as the Dinobots. As long as Kyle was learning something, he was happy. Adrien stole glances at Nathan. The guy worked the straight-out-of-bed hairstyle like a champ. His scruff had returned and the lines at the corners of his eyes seemed a bit deeper, but rugged. The muscle in Nathan’s jaw quirked. The comfort between him and Nathan blew Adrien’s mind. They were together like a family—like they were meant to be right in this moment all along. The tingles when he touched Nathan increased. Nathan didn’t pull away but smiled instead.

Warmth filled Adrien. His heart beat again. He’d always had a heartbeat, but he felt alive. This wasn’t a passing attraction, but a kinship. He wanted to fuck Nathan, sure, but the connection ran deeper. Every time Nathan grinned and encouraged him, he

wanted to do better. Because of Nathan, he had a connection with his son, too.

Nathan cleared his throat. “Movie’s over.” He ruffled Kyle’s hair. “I want you to put on your pjs and brush your teeth. I’ll be right behind you to make sure you do brush those teeth, not just dampen the brush.”

“Okay,” Kyle said, drawing out the word. He wandered from the room.

Nathan left the sofa. “He’s smart as heck. I don’t let him watch much television, but I trust him to use the machine properly.” He put the disc away. “We’re going to work on putting the movies away next. Just not tonight.”

“Makes sense.” Adrien remained on the couch. He needed to hide his erection. Showing off the bulge in his pants wasn’t a good thing—especially in front of his son. He willed his hard-on to go away until Kyle was in bed and asleep. Being attracted to Nathan was fine, but flaunting it wasn’t.

Nathan stood in the doorway. “I’ll be right back.”

“I’ll be here.” Trying to control my horny self. Adrien folded his hands over his lap. He wondered if Kyle would be okay with him having a boyfriend. What happened in his life affected Kyle’s. Nathan was right—if they were going to take the next step and didn’t go the distance, things would be bad for Kyle.

Nathan returned. “He’s in bed. I let him look at picture books for ten minutes, then lights out.”

“Smart.” He left the sofa and strode into Kyle’s room. “Ready for bed?”

“Yep.” Kyle flipped the pages in his book. “Dad?”

“Yes?” He sat on the edge of the mattress. “What’s up?”

“Do you love me?”

“Yes. A whole lot.”

Kyle held up his stuffed dog. “Do you love Puppy?”

“I do.” He hugged the dog, then Kyle. “Why?”

“Do you love Nate?”

Oh, boy. “I—well...yes.” Not marriage love, but he cared about Nathan. “You’re full of questions tonight.”

“Kerri said you didn’t love me.” Kyle frowned. “She said you only love teeth.”

Interesting. A preschooler came up with this line of thought? “Where’d she hear that?”

Kyle shrugged.

“Well, I love you very much. I like teeth and doing my job, but you’re the most important.” He hugged Kyle again and kissed the top of his head. “Cross my heart.”

Kyle didn’t squirm and stopped flipping pages. “Dad? Kerri said you were a freak. What’s a freak?”

Jesus. The child hadn’t come up with that word on her own. “It’s a not nice word some people use to be mean. I don’t want you to use that word.”

“Why would she call you that?”

“Because some people like to be mean,” Adrien said.

“Am I a freak?”

“No, you’re a nice young man.”

“Is it because you’re gay? I want to be gay. Then I can have a boyfriend,” Kyle said.
“Like you and Daddy Gerry.”

“When you’re bigger, you can figure out for yourself who you love. You can be gay or straight. I’ll love you no matter what.” He tapped the cover of the book. “Start settling down.” When Kyle put the book down, Adrien continued. “I want you to be happy.”

Kyle grinned. “Okay.”

“Were you really good for Nate today?” Adrien asked.

“Yes.”

“Good at school?”

“Yes.” Kyle slapped both hands over his mouth and broke into a fit of giggles. “I didn’t fart at snack like Timmy.”

“That’s good. You shouldn’t pass gas in public.” Ah, the joys of having a little man. “Read your book and I’ll see you in the morning. Good night.”

“Night, Daddy.” Kyle opened his book. He talked to himself and told a story only he knew.

Smart kid. Adrien left the room. He might not have been the best parent, but he’d done a decent job with Kyle. “I’ll send Nate in.” He pointed to his manny. “Your turn. He’s full of questions.”

“He’s always that way. Get him to open up and he never stops.” Nathan laughed and breezed into Kyle’s room.

Adrien returned to the playroom and picked up the toys. He preferred order over chaos, but he appreciated the controlled disaster his son had created. At least Kyle was happy.

Nathan appeared a moment later. “You’re doing my job.”

“I’m keeping busy.” He closed the toy box. “Sorry.” If he didn’t busy his hands, he’d be grabbing Nathan.

“You’ll have me out of a job,” Nathan said. “But it’ll be worth it. I told you Kyle would come around.”

“You did.” Adrien hesitated. “Now what?”

“I check in on him, but he tends to fall asleep soon after lights out.” Nathan sank onto the arm of the sofa. “I don’t sleep very heavily so I can listen for issues with him. I’ll work on emails or write in my journal, but I don’t do anything exciting.”

“I see.”

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“It’s warm out. Kyle’s window’s open, but it faces the north. If we go onto the balcony and talk, we won’t disturb him,” Nathan said. “Join me?”

“Sure.” He’d forgotten about the balcony. Then again, he hadn’t been in the room in forever. He followed Nathan down the corridor to the suite he’d once shared with Gerry. He paused in the doorway. He loved this room. The curving wall, the decorative crown molding, the design sculpted into the ceiling...the character of the space had been the reason he’d wanted to purchase the house.

“You okay?” Nathan scooted past him. “You’re pale.”

“I’m fine.” He forced himself forward. “I don’t come up here much.”

“Because of Kelsi?”

“Yeah.” It was a good enough excuse for the time being. He strode onto the balcony. With the clear night, the stars shone in the sky. “Beautiful,” he murmured. He held on to the railing. “I’m in awe.”

“You like the balcony,” Nathan said. “I knew you would.”

He smiled and said nothing. Part of him couldn’t help but be heartbroken. He missed the life he’d had when he bought the house. He should’ve had stability and love by now. Should’ve been happy. Okay, maybe he was happy for the short-term, but he wanted lasting happiness. To be able to come home to someone who cared about him and wanted him to be there. He’d never have those things if he lived in the past. Why not shuck the depression of the last few years and embrace what he had now? Make

pleasant memories to block out the old ones.Sounds good to me.

Moonlight shimmered on Nathan's cheeks and the slight breeze carried a hint of Nathan's cologne.Forget the past.This was the time to make the future he deserved.

Nathan stood beside Adrien. He wanted to make a move, but would rather be sure Kyle was asleep first.

"When did you move here? Are you a life-long Cedarwood-ite?" Nathan snorted. "Cedarwood person?"

"I don't know what it's called, but I've lived here for ten years." Adrien rested his hand next to Nathan's on the railing. "I got a call from Michael saying he wanted a partner at his new dental office and since I needed a job...it worked. I'd bounced around from practice to practice as an assistant, but he was offering a chance to settle down. Why not take it? You know?"

He loved listening to Adrien speak. The man knew how to talk in a manner that wasn't lecturing or fatherly, but intriguing. Nathan inched closer. "Have you dealt with the Coalition before?"

"In passing. They tend to strike when couples go public or when the group thinks they're being overshadowed." Adrien left his place at the railing and threaded his arms around Nathan from behind. He rested his chin on Nathan's shoulder. "They feel threatened and want everyone to hurt because they think they're being slighted."

"By us? How are we slighting them?" Nathan asked. His brain misfired. He loved being held by Adrien, but couldn't process what Adrien had said.

"By everything. We're not slighting them, but they think so. Hell, no one is doing anything wrong other than them harassing us." Adrien shrugged. "It's life."

“I don’t want you to lose your business at the dental office.” He hated the problems the Coalition were causing and his helplessness to change them.

“Those folks don’t visit me. They go to Dr. Rice. Every one of my patients knows I’m gay.” He kissed the side of Nathan’s neck. “If they care, they don’t mention it.” His breath warmed Nathan’s skin. “I forgot how pretty it is out here.”

“You should join me more often.” Like all the time.

“Oh?”

“Yes.” He turned around in Adrien’s embrace and kissed him. “You’re denying yourself so much. I got you to change your mind about parenting and you’re succeeding with Kyle. How can I convince you I want you to stay up here tonight?”

He kissed Nathan. “Just ask.”

“Stay with me tonight, please?”

Adrien nodded. He feathered kisses over Nathan’s cheeks, chin and lips. He squeezed Nathan’s ass. “I’d love to.”

Nathan moaned. He craved this from Adrien. When Adrien bit Nathan’s bottom lip, he caressed Adrien from his lower back around to his chest. He loved the feeling of Adrien’s hard body against his, erection to erection and forehead to forehead. He gasped. They needed to be quiet, but damn, that was hard. He wanted to shout. Excitement spiraled through his veins.

“Come to the bedroom,” Nathan said between kisses. “Want you.”

Adrien nodded again and allowed Nathan to walk him into the adjacent room. He

collapsed on top of Nathan on the bed. The springs squeaked and he grunted. He didn't mind Adrien's weight on him—he was too caught up in the moment—but Jesus, not making noise was hard as hell. He resumed kissing Adrien. He couldn't get enough. Despite the need for silence, he moaned and opened Adrien's dress shirt. The muscles pulled tight across Adrien's abdomen. Desire swept through Nathan. He mashed his mouth on Adrien's chest and bit one of Adrien's nipples. When Adrien moaned, Nathan tweaked the tight bundle of nerves.

“Nathan.” Adrien straddled him. “Want you naked.”

“You read my mind.” Nathan sat up enough to yank his shirt free from his jeans. He craved skin on skin. “Strip.”

Adrien managed to stand long enough to remove his shirt and trousers. He shimmied out of his briefs, then pulled his socks off. A thatch of curls encircled the base of his erection and a thin strip of hair led from his navel down to his groin. He flexed before Nathan. “Do I measure up?”

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“You do.” He left the bed, scurried to the door and engaged the lock. He’d rather not be interrupted.

Adrien closed the bathroom door. “Good thinking.”

“I try.” Nathan shoved his boxers down his legs. When he stretched out on the bed, warm night air kissed his skin. Moonlight streamed across the floor and illuminated the room. He stroked his erection. “Am I good enough?”

“Of course.” Adrien crawled on top of Nathan. His eyes flashed. His cock throbbed against Nathan’s.

“Fuck, that’s hot.” Nathan wrapped his hand around both cocks. “I bet I can make you come, but you can’t be quiet.”

“Probably can’t.” Adrien rocked his hips, pushing his dick within Nathan’s fingers. His abs rolled with each push and he shuddered. “I’m already so close.”

“Gotta be quiet.” He stroked faster. Like he’d be able to hold his orgasm back...he was on the edge, too. He’d waited for this moment forever and was going too fast. The feel of his cock against Adrien’s, the slight murmurs coming from Adrien and the lust in his eyes were his undoing. He welcomed the climax and growled. He pressed his lips together. Would Adrien orgasm first? Watching him trying to contain himself while coming apart was beautiful. Perspiration glittered on Adrien’s chest.

Adrien rested his hand on Nathan’s and squeezed his eyes shut. His eyebrows knotted together. “Nathan,” he whispered.

The sound was so quiet Nathan almost missed it. He held on to Adrien's thigh. "Let go." He couldn't keep the orgasm contained much longer. His movements turned feral and another groan bubbled within him. "Come for me."

A shudder ripped through Adrien. He curled forward and whimpered as he shot cum over Nathan's belly. He trembled.

"So hot." Nathan allowed his orgasm and jerked in his hand. Twin ropes of cum joined the one left by Adrien. The warmth added to his delight. He'd been marked by Adrien. He added a few extra strokes, then stopped. He belonged to Adrien. The man had his heart and soul. Was it love? Sure feels like the real deal.

Adrien nudged Nathan to his back. He braced his hands on the mattress and leaned over his lover. "You wrung me out."

"Me, too." He chuckled. "You won the bet."

"I did?" Adrien opened his eyes, but frowned. "We made one?"

"Kind of." So Adrien forgot...oh well.

"How can you remember that? I can't think straight. I'm mush."

Nathan pulled Adrien to his chest and smeared cum between them. "I'm good at multitasking." He kissed Adrien. "Or I don't want to miss a moment of this."

Adrien stretched on top of him. He said nothing for a long moment. "I should go."

Nathan kept his arms around Adrien. "This bed is huge and lonely. You make it feel...right." He caressed Adrien's lower back. "Why don't you sleep up here?"

“Tonight?”

“No, as your room?” The question was rather forward, but he couldn’t contain his curiosity. “Why do you sleep downstairs? That room is so small and far away.”

Adrien sighed. He slid onto the bed and stayed beside Nathan, but rolled enough to face Nathan. He tucked one hand under the pillow and rested the other on Nathan’s belly. “It all started because Gerry threw me out of my room.”

“This one?” Jesus. He’d had no idea and wanted to hide. Asking had been so silly.

“Yeah.”

“Adrien.” He held his lover. He wished he could remove the hurt from Adrien’s voice. “Why?”

“We grew apart.”

That wasn’t a good enough answer. “You bought this house.” Adrien had earned the right to choose his bedroom.

“I did.”

“Then you should be in charge of the sleeping arrangements.” Gerry should’ve been the one to leave.

“It wasn’t good, but it worked out. Kelsi could be close to Kyle and I was out of the way.”

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“You’re Kyle’s father.” His heart broke for Adrien and Kyle. He wasn’t good with relationships ending and tended to be the one to hold on longer than he should’ve, but he’d never been nasty. Gerry seemed to excel at cruelty.

“I’m clueless when it comes to being a parent.”

“No.” Nathan pinched Adrien’s nipple. He’d break Adrien of that habit one way or another. “I’m not letting you fall into that trap. You have a smart little boy who loves you. You’re here, which is huge, and you’re learning. Everyone makes mistakes and sometimes we need those slip-ups to learn how to fix the problems. You do more than you realize with Kyle. Maybe you just needed the right teacher to come along to help you figure things out.” He’d work hard to prove his point to Adrien.

“True.” Adrien brushed his nose along Nathan’s. “Teach me.” He kissed Nathan.

“I know it would be weird for Kyle if you moved up here tonight, but spend time with me in here. Yes, parenting is hard and messy and we screw up, but it’s...when you see your son asleep and angelic, there’s nothing like it.” Kyle wasn’t even his son, but he was awestruck at the sight.

“Agreed.” Adrien twined his legs with Nathan’s. “I guess we’re kind of partners, aren’t we?” He raked his fingers over Nathan’s chest. “Working together for the common goal of raising Kyle to be a good human being.”

“More than kind of.” He could let Adrien caress him forever. The gesture was hot and sweet. He sighed. “Stay tonight.” I need you.

“What if Kyle finds us together?”

Well, shit. He'd thought of that, but ignored the danger. “What about it? We won't be naked all the time.” Not every time. “Didn't you sleep with Gerry?” They must've at one point.

“Kyle wasn't old enough to catch us in bed together. Gerry left before Kyle turned two and we weren't sleeping in the same room for a year before that.”

Jesus. He hadn't realized just how much of a number Gerry had done on Adrien. The man was an asshole. How could someone be so hurtful and mean? Part of him wondered where things had gone wrong. “It'll be okay. Kyle knows he has two dads.” And me. “This won't be a huge shock if you're honest with him and speak to him on his level. Give him credit.” He should give them credit, too. He and Adrien could control themselves.

“Will do.” Adrien kissed him again and snuggled up to Nathan. “I'm glad you were available and met me at the coffee shop.”

“I'm only sorry you spilled the coffee on me—because it was hot and uncomfortable,” Nathan said. “But I don't regret it.” He paused. “Why did Gerry leave? What happened?”

“Are you sure you want to know?” Adrien's brow crinkled. “It's not that exciting.”

“Yes.” He needed to understand Adrien and the dynamics between him and his ex.

“We got together on a blind date. He was directed to me and I was at Club Gray because the guy who was supposed to show up didn't. We danced, drank and laughed. By two in the morning, we'd gone home together. We were a couple from then on,” Adrien said. “But he had a jealous streak and needed to be number one at

all times. I didn't mind him being on the pedestal because I was getting my footing at the practice. The only reason we got married is because he pushed. He said we needed to be married. If we weren't then we weren't a real couple."

"So you did it to shut him up?" Nathan asked. He couldn't believe what he'd heard. "That's nuts."

"Agreed."

"But you loved him." He hated the streak of jealousy building within him. He wanted Adrien to love him, not Gerry. The ex had never deserved Adrien.

"I did, but it wasn't the knock-you-down, head-over-heels kind. I didn't think I'd do better." Adrien put a bit of space between them. "I'm not exactly hot."

"Who says?"

"Most all of the guys I've ever dated. They've told me I'm plain."

"They lied."

"I've never understood fashion, I only have a nice car because it had the best crash-test rating, the girl who cuts my hair makes me look professional or on-point—whatever that is—and I don't like popular music. I'm more of a jazz kind of guy. That all made me odd and old to other men."

"I'd say it makes you unique."

"Lovely." Adrien closed his eyes. "That tends to be a death-knell."

"That wasn't an insult." He grasped Adrien's hand and kissed his knuckles. "You

deserve love that overwhelms you.”

“One day.”

I’m right here. Maybe he wasn’t good at expressing himself to Adrien and was almost ten years younger than him, but he was crazy for the dentist. “It’ll happen.”

“Well, it didn’t with Gerry. He had a wandering eye. He started cheating on me after we’d been together for two years. I wasn’t exciting enough, he claimed later.” Adrien snorted. “He wanted a younger man. He must’ve cheated on me a dozen times. I only caught on after Kyle was born because the guy showed up at the hospital demanding to see his boyfriend and the boyfriend’s son. Imagine my shock. I’ve got a son, but my husband is cheating on me. Gerry didn’t have the balls to tell me the truth—he let the boyfriend do it.”

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“Adrien.” He tugged Adrien close again. “I’m sorry.”

“I am, but I’m not. I learned. That’s what mattered. I grew and tried to make the best of the situation. I wanted to stay together for Kyle,” Adrien said. “It didn’t work.”

“Tends not to.”

“I know that now.”

“Kids understand stress. They might not realize why you’re upset, but they can feel it.”

“You’re right—even at eighteen months, Kyle pulled away from Gerry. That and the glow of having a baby was gone. No one wanted to hang out with him because they wanted to see the baby instead. He couldn’t claim he was going to be a father and should have attention. Nope. The baby got the spotlight and that drove him nuts. Once he realized Kyle was more work than he could handle, Gerry left,” Adrien said. “He wanted a kid when it was fashionable, but once it was difficult... He had three boyfriends at one time right before he threw me out of my own bedroom. That’s when I started the process of divorcing him. I’m not happy—I wanted to make the marriage last, but I learned the fairy tale doesn’t always come true.”

“If you were still with him, then I wouldn’t have met you.”

“Very true.”

He breathed Adrien in, soothed by his lover. He thanked God Gerry was gone. Let the

jackass have the boyfriends. Nathan had Adrien and Kyle. They were precious gifts and he refused to let go. Being Kyle's caregiver was more than a job, it was a mission. Being Adrien's lover was a mission, too. He'd show Adrien love could be overwhelming and wonderful—no question.

Chapter Five

Nathan rolled onto his back and reached for Adrien. He wasn't sure how long he'd been asleep, but holding Adrien made the night better. They hadn't had sex yet, but they were close. Adrien was his. Instead of touching Adrien, he found a cold, empty sheet. He opened his eyes. No Adrien? Sunlight stretched across the room and the other half of the king-size bed was indeed vacant. Where was Adrien? Shit.

Nathan sat up and noticed the clock. Eight-thirty. Fuck. He should be up and moving by now. He needed to get Kyle out of bed. He scrambled to dress and comb his hair. Christ, he was so behind. He hurried into Kyle's room.

The bed in Kyle's room had been made, but Kyle wasn't around.

His heart seemed to stop and the world moved in slow motion. Kyle was gone. He heard voices downstairs. Kyle and Adrien? He hoped so as he ran down to the first floor.

Adrien stood at the bar while Kyle sat on one of the stools. Kyle swiveled in his seat and grinned. "We're makin' pancakes."

"You are?" He willed his heartrate to return to a normal level. Kyle and Adrien were fine and safe. "May I have some?" Did he appear freaked out? He hoped not.

"Yeah." Kyle wagged his head. "You were sleepin'."

"I was tired." He sat across from Adrien and next to Kyle. "I like pancakes. How did

you know?”

“I told Daddy,” Kyle whispered. He giggled. “With whippy cream.”

“You really shouldn’t tell Kyle any secrets,” Adrien said. He smiled and flipped one of the pancakes. “He told me almost everything.”

“Nice.” He didn’t care. He hadn’t mentioned anything he wouldn’t have told Adrien anyway.

Kyle slid off his chair. “Gotta go.”

“Need help?” Nathan asked.

“Nope.” Kyle darted out of the room. “I have to pee.”

“He’s been more independent this week.” Nathan folded his arms. “He’s coming out of his shell, too.”

“I don’t think he’s ever really been in one, but he’s had his coping mechanisms.” Adrien plated two of the pancakes, then put a lone pancake on another plate. “I can’t cook much, but I make decent flapjacks. There’s butter, syrup and strawberries over here. I don’t have any whippy cream.” He turned off the heat. “Be right back.”

Nathan froze. They’d served him. Adrien was helping Kyle. For a split second, he felt redundant. He didn’t touch his food. He should be taking care of them, not the other way around.

Kyle and Adrien returned a moment later. Water streaked down the front of Kyle’s pajama shirt. “I played in the bubbles,” Kyle said. “Bubbles!”

“You spilled soap and water everywhere, little man.” Adrien wiped his hands on a towel. “Eat your breakfast.”

Kyle returned to his seat and ate his pancake. His hair stood on end and he smeared syrup on his cheek.

“What happened?” Nathan asked. He dribbled syrup on his pancake. “Did you fall in?”

Kyle nodded. “Just playin’.”

“He had soap up to his armpits and water all over the counter.” Adrien turned the heat back on. “I’ve got enough for my pancake, unless either of you want another.”

“You’ve got to eat,” Nathan said.

“I will.” Adrien waved his palm over the pan. “Just wanted to be sure I didn’t eat what you wanted.”

“I’ve got plenty.” Nathan bit into his pancakes. The light fluffiness melted on his tongue. He moaned. “This is delicious.”

Adrien grinned. “I can’t make much, but I’m good with these.”

Nathan ate in silence. The family atmosphere wasn’t lost on him. He loved the scene—sweet and wonderful.

Kyle finished his breakfast and carried his plate to the dishwasher. “May I go play?”

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Adrien nodded. “For half an hour, then you need a bath. I’ll clean up the kitchen and either Nathan—Nate or I will help you.”

Kyle sighed, then turned away from Adrien.

“Stop.” Adrien placed the last pancake on his plate and switched off the burner. He directed Kyle into the hallway.

Nathan couldn’t hear what was said, but guessed by the tone Adrien wasn’t pleased with Kyle’s reaction. Pride swelled in him. He wanted Adrien to be more forthright with his son and was proud Adrien had taken the initiative. But Kyle’s behavior bothered him. The kid had been through a lot, but that didn’t mean he should be belligerent.

Adrien returned without Kyle. “He’ll drive me crazy.”

“He’s a kid.” Nathan put his plate in the dishwasher and rearranged the plate Kyle had used. “He’s reacting to his environment and seeing how he can push the boundaries. You’re setting them, so he’ll learn.”

Adrien rinsed the pan. “I feel like I’m failing.”

“You’re not,” Nathan said. “He knows things are in flux. Gerry isn’t coming back and isn’t interested in him. Dad works a lot and Kelsi left him. He needs the stability—same as you.”

“I should be home more.” Adrien tensed and ran his fingers through his hair. “I’m not

around enough.”

“Adrien, slow down.” Nathan rounded the counter and caged Adrien between his body and the sink. He pressed his groin against Adrien’s ass. “You’re not failing. You’re learning, remember? Things won’t always go the way you want—won’t for him either. But you can’t quit.” He curled around Adrien enough to meet his gaze. “I know what I said last night. I pushed and now you’re overwhelmed.”

Adrien didn’t move and said nothing.

“We need to show unity. Kyle isn’t a bad kid. He’s just testing what he can get away with. He’ll straighten up as long as you give him stability and let him know he’s loved. He’s safe and you want the best for him—even if that means boundaries.”

“Thanks.” Adrien dunked the pan in the water. “I’m—I need to get over myself.” He snagged a towel and dried his hands before he turned around in Nathan’s arms. “I enjoyed last night.”

“I did, too.” Nathan paused. “Why’d you let me sleep for so long? I’m here to work for you and with Kyle.”

“You looked so angelic I didn’t want to wake you and I’m Kyle’s father. If I can’t take over from time to time, then what’s the point of me being here?” Adrien asked. “I’m going in at ten today because my first appointment isn’t until ten-thirty. I figured I had the time, why not spend it with my family?”

His?Nathan’s heart swelled. “Me included?”

“Yeah. You’re both my family.” Adrien kissed him. “Unless you want to not be.”

“I do.” He cared for Adrien more than he’d ever thought possible.

“Good,” Adrien said. “Unless you want to, I need to give Kyle a bath or he’ll be covered in syrup all day.”

“I’ll do it. You get around for work.” He kissed Adrien and basked in the sweet taste of the syrup on Adrien’s lips. “I feel like I belong here. Like fate intervened.”

“Maybe it did,” Adrien murmured. He embraced Nathan. “I like you being here, too.”

“Thank you. By the way, I love pancakes, like Kyle said.” He tweaked Adrien’s nipple through the fabric of his T-shirt. He disengaged from his lover, then left the room. He’d never felt so loved or appreciated in his life. His spirits soared. He could handle anything because now he had a home.

* * * *

Adrien finished his last appointment. His back ached from hunching over the chair all day—four deep cavities and a dozen smaller ones. He never should’ve scheduled them all in one afternoon session.

“Dr. Ellet?” Mary strode into his private office. “You have a visitor.”

“A patient?” If Kyle and Nathan were there, she would’ve alerted him. Who in the hell’s out there?

“No.” She frowned. “Just...it’s someone from the Coalition.”

“Great,” he grumbled. “Thanks.” He followed her out to the records space. A woman waited alone by the coffee table in the outer room. He turned back to Mary. “Stay in the office and keep your ears open,” he whispered. Adrien strode out to the larger space. “Hello. I’m Dr. Ellet. Did you have any questions?”

“I do.” She folded her hands. “Have you considered closing your half of the practice and leaving Cedarwood?”

She was blunt.Okay...“Are you suggesting there’s a bigger practice seeking my skills?” He shook his head. “I’m happy here and my family is in Cedarwood. I think I’ll stay.”

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“I don’t have another job for you, but what if you looked for another practice? I hear Springdale is looking for dentists.” She toyed with her purse. “You’re not welcome here. You’re encouraging others to be like you.”

“How so?” He wanted to hear this answer.

“They think it’s permissible.”

“What? Who are the they you’re referring to?” Adrien asked. “I’d never prohibit anyone from wanting to become a father, a dentist...a husband.”

“To be gay,” she snapped. “Consider closing your half of the practice and leaving town. We want Cedarwood to be family-friendly.”

“I see.” He nodded once. “I’ll take that into consideration, but I’ll let you know I’m declining.”

“You’re not listening.”

“I hear everything you say, but I’m not agreeing. That’s different.”

“Then things won’t be pleasant for you.”

He hooked his fingers in his belt loops. “I don’t know how. My patients know who I am and that I’m gay. If they care, they aren’t saying. If I were doing anything illegal, the police would be on this place in seconds, so that’s not an issue.” He shook his head. “No, I’m not afraid. You can’t throw any hate my way that’s not already been

thrown. You can't speak to my son because you have no right. You're not welcome on my personal property, so that's out of the question. If you're going to scare patients away, then don't bother. I'm transparent in my practices."

"You haven't heard the last of this." She turned on her heel. "We're not done."

"Ma'am? Why don't you expel this energy you've pent up on something to help all of society? Not just your corner, but everyone? Stop trying to get rid of people you don't like and embrace everyone. We all bleed the same. We're all trying to be the best parents and family we can. Hate can't win. If you look into your heart, you'll realize we're not all that different."

"Oh yes we are." She slammed the office door and left.

"Wow," Mary said. "What's eating her?"

"She wants me to leave town. I won't, but that's what she wants."

"I'm proud of you." She stood at the receptionist window. "You held your own. Good job."

"I'm tired of other people trying to tell me how to live my life." Gerry had expected him to accept the cheating. His parents didn't want him to be gay. The men he'd dated had preferred he be more flamboyant. Now this woman wanted him to leave town. What next? "This is my home." He locked the office door, then headed through the office to the back of the building. "I'm ready to go. It's been a long day."

"Agreed." She followed him to the back door. "You know what we need? A pride flag. I know Michael would agree to it."

"Why?" He held up both hands after he locked the rear entrance. "I agree with you,

but what's your rationale? Everyone knows I'm gay."

"Right, but if we have a flag, then it's obvious we're friendly to everyone." She strode into the break-room and retrieved her purse. "Maybe it'd prevent the Coalition from stopping in again. They might see the flag and say, okay this is a lost cause. Then go away?"

"I'll make sure Michael is okay with the decision, but I agree. I doubt it'll deter them, but who knows." He set the alarm. "You're ready to go?"

"I am."

He gathered up his things from his office. Once Mary was out of the building, he checked the back door, then headed to his car. Bone-deep weariness set in. He needed to see Kyle and Nathan. To taste Nathan's kiss. "I'll see you in the morning."

"You bet." Mary waved, then opened her driver's side door. "What are you doing tonight?"

"I'm not sure. Supper with the boys, then a game, probably." He placed his bag on the back seat. "You?"

"The boys?" She grinned. "You're getting close to the manny?"

"Nathan."

"Well?" She cocked her hip. "I hope you're on more than a first-name basis." She wagged her eyebrows. "You're happier than I've seen you in a long time. You're smiling more and there's a spring in your step."

"We're sorting things out." But the more he spent time with Nathan, the more he

wanted to be closer.

“Good.” She waved. “I’m going to put my feet up, listen to Bruce chew out the kids for half an hour, then make supper and help the kids with homework. See you in the morning.”

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“See you.” He waited for her to climb behind the wheel of her car, then he settled on his driver’s seat. He closed the car door as she drove away. Once satisfied she was gone, he backed out of his parking spot, then left the property. His phone rang and he pressed the button on the console. “Hello?”

“Adrien.”

He fought the wave of nausea. “Gerry?” What in the hell does he want?

“How are you, babe?”

“Confused,” Adrien said. “Why are you calling me? You said you never wanted to speak to me.” He sped down the main drag of Cedarwood. “You hate my guts. What do you want to discuss?”

“Our son.”

“Huh.” Odd. Gerry had given up custody of Kyle. He’d requested his parental rights be severed and insisted on his name being removed from the birth certificate. Once he’d left court, Gerry hadn’t looked back. “What about him?” Does Gerry even remember Kyle’s name?

“You’ve got a manny.”

“So? I had a nanny, too.”

“He’s handsome and young.”

“Get to the point,” Adrien said.

“I don’t like the guy,” Gerry said. “I’m not sure he’s the right influence on our son. I’ve checked into him and he’s not good enough.”

“He was cleared by the state.” Adrien trusted the background check done by the state. “Next problem.”

“You’re angry.” Gerry clicked his tongue. “It’s not a good look for you.”

“How do you know what I look like?” He turned onto his street. “I’m on my way home and I’m not sure what you want.”

“You.”

“Liar.” He knew better. “Let me guess. You got a sniff of my new manny and want to see him in person? You want to see if, since he’s younger than we are, he might be interested in you? You might win him over and get back at me? Or am I missing the point?”

“You’re too angry,” Gerry said. “You’re reading too much into this. I want you. I still love you and wish we hadn’t divorced.”

“Right.” He pulled into his driveway. “Daniel or whoever you’re with right now wouldn’t marry you. You’re smarting because you’ve been turned down. Look, I’m home and I need to go inside. If there’s nothing else, I’ll let you go.”

“I want to see Kyle.”

“Gerry.” The man had no play, yet he still insisted on making demands.

“What? He’s my son, too.”

“You gave him up.” He turned the car off after he pulled into the garage.

“I’ve changed my mind.”

“You terminated your rights. Besides, it’s been two years since you’ve seen him.” He wasn’t in the mood to deal with his ex-husband.

“I’m not the same man. I want to see him—and you. Please?” Gerry asked.

He should say no. Kyle had few memories of Gerry and no connection with him.

“Only in public and only if the manny is present...and only for an hour.”

“You’re full of rules.”

“Non-negotiable rules,” Adrien snapped. “Take it or leave it.”

“I’m not evil.”

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“You cheated on me and left us. Call me leery.”

“Adrien.”

“I’m in the garage. Text me the details and if we can get together, then fine, but don’t expect it,” Adrien said.

“You’re bitter.”

“It happens,” Adrien said. “I need to go.” He didn’t give his ex time to plead. He hung up and silenced his phone. He was done with Gerry and hated the angry bitterness involved.

Nathan stood at the kitchen door with Kyle and waved. When Adrien spotted them, his day brightened. He’d come home to his safe, happy place. Time to unwind.

Nathan opened the garage door to Adrien. “Hi.”

“Hi, Daddy.” Kyle waggled free from Nathan’s grasp. “We made jelly sammiches.”

“Did you?” Adrien hugged Kyle, then stood. “Did you eat supper?”

“No.” Nathan frowned. “We were waiting for you.”

“Good. I thought we’d go out.” Adrien left his bag on the counter. “I thought we’d go to the Diner. We’ll have a night off.”

“Yes.” Kyle darted away. “I can see Wyatt.” He ran out of the room singing.

“The Diner?” Nathan asked. He wasn’t upset, but confused. “I can make something.” His stomach soured. If they went out in public, then someone might think they were a couple. If that happened, he’d lose his job. He had feelings for Adrien, but damn it, until he knew they were going to stay together, he needed to know his job was secure. He had himself to blame. He’d encouraged Adrien to allow him to grow closer.

“I know.” Adrien wound his arms around Nathan. “It’s been a rough day and I want someone else to do the work—not me or you. The Diner is a safe environment—Colt’s nice and it’s gay-friendly. Plus, I want to treat you.”

“Adrien, you pay me.” He leaned into Adrien. They could be caught tangled up. Did he mind? Not really. “You don’t have to take me out.”

“I know.” Adrien slipped his hands into Nathan’s back pockets. “I thought you’d appreciate the break and me taking initiative.”

“I do, but I’m conflicted.”

“How?”

“I’m excited to be going out into public with you. You want to be seen with me. That’s huge and I want it to happen. I like being with you,” Nathan said. “But what about my job? What do we do if people think we’re together? I could be outted to the training center and lose my job.”

“You’re my manny and we’re going out. No one says we have to crawl all over each other,” Adrien said. “If they have a problem with us going to dinner, then that’s on them. I’ll explain everything to the training center because there’s nothing wrong with having a meal out. Next.”

“Then there’s you. I don’t want to push you into agreeing to do something if you’re not ready. I don’t want to push Kyle, either. What if the bottom falls out? What if he gets attached to me and you dump me?”

“You’re thinking too hard,” Adrien said. “He’s already attached to you, but you could get another job. I don’t want you to—I prefer you being here. You’re good for Kyle and me. But what if you decide you don’t want an old man? Then I’m out of luck.”

Then Adrien had been thinking about the ramifications more and not just making a snap decision. Good. “You’re not old.”

“I’ve got ten years on you.”

He rested his forehead against Adrien’s. “You can be so difficult.”

“Likewise.” Adrien kissed him. “If you’d rather have something here, I can order dinner to go. I’d rather you feel comfortable than do something you don’t like.” He brushed his mouth over Nathan’s. “I’m ready to admit to everyone, especially myself, that I’m entranced by you. I want everyone to know I like you, but I don’t want you to regret it. I’m sorry. I’m excited, happy and ready to move forward with my life. I want Kyle to have a family—us. If someone has a problem with us being together—like the training center—then we’ll figure something out. I don’t want to lose you.”

Fuck yes. He mattered to Adrien. He wanted to reply, but heard Kyle’s footsteps in the hallway. Adrien didn’t let go right away.

“You’re kissing.” Kyle broke into a fit of laughter. “Daddy, you kissed Nate.”

“Is that bad?” Adrien asked. “What if I want to kiss him again?” He knelt next to Kyle. “Do you mind? I like Nate. Can I like him?”

Holy Jesus. Adrien wasn't kidding. Nathan held his breath. He'd dreamed of this moment, but now that it was happening, fear gripped him. What if Kyle said no?

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“Yeah.” Kyle slumped into his father. “You can like anyone you want.” He threw his arms around Adrien’s shoulders. “Is he your boyfriend?”

“Would it be bad if he was?” Adrien asked. He met Nathan’s gaze. “Nate? What do you think?”

Nathan’s hands shook. He’d never been so nervous in his life. “Kyle?” He knelt next to Kyle and Adrien. “I like your daddy. Would you mind if he and I are boyfriends?”

“I want a boyfriend, too.” Kyle sat on his father’s lap. “Can Nate be my boyfriend, too?”

“You’re too young for a boyfriend,” Adrien said. He hugged his son. “But he’ll still be your manny.”

“I can’t be your boyfriend,” Nathan said. “But I am your dad’s boyfriend. Will that be okay?” He ruffled Kyle’s hair. “I hope you say yes.”

Kyle nodded, but stayed tucked into Adrien.

“Thank you,” Nathan said, relieved. He sat on the floor. The massiveness of the moment hit him. He’d not only acquired a boyfriend, but his boyfriend’s son approved. Hell yes. “Should we go to dinner to celebrate?”

“Yes.” Kyle brightened and let go of Adrien. “Can I have a hot dog, too?”

“Whatever you want—but not dessert first.” Adrien stood. “Get your shoes on.”

Nathan left the floor and grasped Adrien's hand. "I didn't know you were going to do that, but it went better than I expected." He squeezed Adrien's fingers. "Spur of the moment?"

"Yeah." Adrien blushed. "Are you okay with that step?" His brow crinkled. "If we moved too fast...say so."

"We're fine." And getting better with every moment.

"Good," Adrien said. "Then let's go. I'm starving."

"I should've made you a jelly sandwich." Nathan put on his shoes, then tucked his wallet and phone into his pockets. When Kyle returned, Nathan helped him into the back seat of Adrien's car. Nathan sat beside Adrien.

Adrien grinned. Once he'd backed out of the garage and down the driveway, he closed the garage door. He grasped Nathan's hand. "Ready?"

"Yeah," Kyle shouted from the back seat. "We're going to the Diner."

Nathan nodded and settled back on the passenger side of the vehicle. Life was good. He rode in silence, save for Kyle's singing. As they made their way across town, he rubbed the back of Adrien's hand with his thumb. He should've known at the coffee shop he'd encountered the right man. Adrien was stable, sweet and handsome—everything he'd ever wanted in a man. Then there was Kyle. The little boy was good, but feisty and he loved him. He'd wondered if he'd made the right decision by coming to Cedarwood and now he knew—he belonged with the Ellet family.

He said nothing as they parked, then entered the Diner. A man Nathan didn't recognize stood at the hostess podium.

“Adrien, Kyle.” The man strode over to them and grinned. “You must be Nathan.” He stuck his hand out. “Nice to see you and meet you.” He paused. “Nathan, forgive me. I’m Colt Harrison. I’m the proprietor of the Diner.”

“Nice to meet you.” He shook hands with Colt. “I’ve never been here, but I’ve driven past the place a lot. It’s exciting.” Did he sound silly? He wasn’t sure what else to say.

“I’m glad you’re here.” Colt waved his arm. “I’ve got the half-moon booth with your names on it.”

“Thanks.” Adrien led the way after Colt.

Nathan directed Kyle to the booth. Being in this situation was oddly comfortable. No one stared at them or whispered. They appeared to be a family out for dinner. If anyone thought he was out of line for being the manny and acting like the father’s boyfriend, they weren’t talking. He sat beside Kyle and Adrien took his place on Kyle’s other side.

Colt placed menus in front of them. “Enjoy your dinner and let me know if you need anything.” He rapped his knuckles on the table, rattling the silverware, then left.

Adrien flipped the menu over. “You’re getting a hot dog, right, Kyle?”

Kyle nodded. “With carrots.”

“Deal,” Adrien said. “When the waitress arrives, you can give her your order.” He met Nathan’s gaze. “Order whatever you’d like. My treat.”

“Adrien.” The Diner didn’t offer a wide array of dishes, but he’d still be reasonable. Once the server arrived, he placed his order. He draped his arm across the back of the

booth and caressed Adrien's shoulder. He shouldn't have done something so bold in public, but couldn't help himself.

"Nathan?" Adrien frowned.

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He'd been too forward. "Sorry." He recoiled. "I forgot."

"That's not it." Adrien half-smiled before the frown returned. "Do you know a man with black hair and three earrings? Looks twenties-ish or like a perpetual college student."

"Sounds like Rhett. Why?" He couldn't see around the side of the booth, but wished he could. His heart hammered. If Rhett was there, what the hell was he doing? He'd be the one to blurt everything to the training center.

"He's coming over and keeps glaring." Adrien bowed his head. "Why don't we wash our hands? Kyle? You should...wash your hands."

"I'm okay," Kyle said.

"Let's be really sure." Adrien nudged Kyle. "It won't be long and this will give Nate some privacy."

"Adrien." Nathan tensed. He didn't want to give Rhett control or rush them away, but he appreciated Adrien's attempt to keep Kyle out of the situation.

"Don't leave on my account," Rhett said. "I won't bite."

"We've got to wash our hands." Adrien directed Kyle away from the table.

"I'm glad they're gone." Rhett took Adrien's place in the booth. "So...you don't answer calls or texts?"

“It’s been a hectic time.” He increased the space between them. “I’m busy.”

“Too busy to answer a text? The kid keeps you hopping?” Rhett asked. “You’re the manny, not the husband.”

“Rhett.” He hated Rhett’s ability to argue in public. Rhett wanted witnesses. He wanted his ex to leave him alone. “Enough.”

“Why?”

“It’s not professional,” Nathan growled. “I’m trying to be the manny. I’m not here to hang out with my friends. My charge is my concern—not you.”

“Yet the dad is handing the parent duties. You’re sitting with me.” Rhett bobbed his brows. “Looked like Daddy was doing just fine on the parenting angle.” He folded his arms. “You said we could try again.”

“I did, but I’ve changed my mind.”

“Because of the old man?”

“Rhett, stop.” Not only was he not impressed with Rhett’s anger, he hated hearing Adrien being insulted.

“You’ve always been a sucker for older guys. You want to be taken care of. Did you tell him you were a sugar baby? Huh? That you got paid to attend college?”

“I had a scholarship,” Nathan snarled. The only relationship he’d had with anyone older than him was a guy two months older. He’d never been a sugar baby and didn’t want a sugar daddy.

“Tell that to your old man,” Rhett said. “I’ll bet the dentist would love to know you’re only getting close to him so you’ve got security.”

Adrien and Kyle stood twenty feet from the booth. Adrien paled. “Excuse me. We’re eating dinner. If you don’t mind, we’d like some privacy.”

“Sure.” Rhett left his seat as they approached the booth. “Good afternoon.”

“Same to you.” Adrien shuffled Kyle onto the bench seat before he joined him. “I’m proud to say Kyle didn’t leave water all over the place and is getting better with the soap. You made me proud, kid.”

“Good job,” Nathan said. He hugged Kyle. “I’m proud, too.”

Kyle blushed, then buried his face against Adrien’s shoulder.

Adrien grinned. Joy wasn’t visible in his eyes. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah.” He’d have to explain, just not in front of Kyle. “That was my ex-boyfriend, Rhett.”

“Say no more.” Adrien nodded. “It’s been that kind of day.”

“You, too?” Now he wanted to question his boyfriend. A thin streak of jealousy hit. Gerry? Had he inserted himself into the situation?

“Mine called the office.”

“Oh?” They’d have to discuss this later—no doubt.

“What we talked about earlier—you, me and Kyle, still stands.” Adrien relaxed and

winked. “I don’t quit that easily.”

“Thanks, Adrien.” He blew out a ragged breath. If Adrien wasn’t ruffled, then he’d be cool, too. The exes could get involved, but they had no standing. What he and Adrien had was stronger than the past.

Chapter Six

Adrien paid the bill and waited for Kyle and Nathan to return to the table. He gathered the plates before he left his seat. Colt strolled over to the table.

“I’ll get that,” Colt said. “But thanks.”

“It’s a habit.” Adrien left the tip under his water glass. “Colt?” He had to ask someone about the group. He’d held out long enough. “Do you have a moment?”

“Sure.” Colt left the plates on the table. “Was something wrong with your dinner?”

“No,” Adrien said. “I have a question about the support group.”

“Are you considering joining?” Colt grinned. “Do you want information about the meetings?”

“Yes.” Holy shit. He’d not only asked, but he’d agreed to attend. A weight lifted from his shoulders. There would be people there he knew, who understood what he was dealing with and wouldn’t make light of his situation. “I’ve been doing this on my own for so long.” He frowned. “Strike that. I’ve got Nathan, but I feel like I’m the lone gay parent. I know I don’t live in a vacuum and there are others, but I spend so much time at work that I don’t see them.”

“Doesn’t the manny help?” Colt asked.

“No, he does. I meant I want to hang out with other gay parents. I want to know being

attracted to Nathan is okay, even if he works for me, and that I'm raising Kyle right." His hands shook. "Does that make sense?"

"It does and you're fine." Colt clapped Adrien on the shoulder. "We all have doubts, but we're in this together. I'll text you the information for the next meeting. Bring Nathan and Kyle. We've got sitters and maybe if you're there together, you'll feel more comfortable about your choices."

"I'd like that. Thank you." Relief washed over him. He'd done the right thing by taking this step. "I'm excited to be included and be somewhere besides a dental convention or the office."

"We're more fun than a dental convention." Colt's grin widened. "So yes, join us."

"I will." He hugged Colt. "Our dinner was fantastic. Thanks for the great food and the information. I need to find my son and manny."

"They're playing games in the foyer." Colt nodded. "Have a good night and see you again soon."

"We'll be back." Adrien ensured his phone, keys and wallet were accounted for, then headed into the foyer. Nathan and Kyle were on each side of the twin motorcycle game. He stood behind them. "Are we ready?"

"Yep." Kyle slid off his seat. "Can we have ice cream?"

Nathan left his side of the game. "Don't push."

"You can have ice cream later." Adrien ushered Nathan and Kyle to the car. "I'm ready to be home."

“Me, too.” Nathan fell into step beside him. “You wore me out playing that game, Kyle.”

“I won,” Kyle said. “That’s why.”

“You did.” Nathan grasped Kyle’s hand. “If we’d have had quarters, it would’ve been a fair fight.”

A million thoughts rushed into Adrien’s brain. He didn’t owe Nathan any explanations and Nathan didn’t owe him any, but he wanted to discuss the phone call with Gerry. He wasn’t sure he wanted Gerry to see Kyle. Would Nathan see the problem from a different angle? He hoped so.

Nathan said little on the way home and once they arrived back at the house, he took the lead with Kyle. He bathed the child and got him to bed on time. Adrien checked in on Kyle twice and kissed him good night.

Anticipation slithered through his brain. He wanted time alone with Nathan and needed his kiss.

“He’s asleep.” Nathan strode into the master suite. “He was so wound up, but he’s happy.” He flopped beside Adrien on the bed. “He said he’s got three dads—two that care and one that ran away. I corrected him. I’m not his dad. I’m Nate.”

“He’s accepting you. That’s huge.” He rolled onto his side and faced Nathan. “Run with it. You’re doing well with him and he’s rewarding you.”

“You sound like me.” Nathan splayed his hand on Adrien’s chest. “I like it. But then I like how you’re coming into your own.” He tangled his legs with Adrien’s and tugged him closer. “I want you.”

“Do you?” He sucked at coy, but he’d do his best.

“Yes.” Nathan crawled on top of him. “I’ve wanted you all day.”

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“I’m not going anywhere.” Adrien relaxed beneath Nathan. “What did you have in mind?”

Nathan opened Adrien’s shirt and rained kisses over his chest. He alternated between nips and bites, drawing a groan from Adrien’s throat. Adrien spread his legs. With Nathan, he felt wonderful and cherished. He never wanted this to end. Nathan kissed his way down to Adrien’s waistband. He swirled his tongue around Adrien’s navel.

A gasp wrenched from Adrien and he focused on Nathan. His senses were heightened and time seemed to move in slow motion. “Yes.”

Nathan glanced up at Adrien and grinned before opening Adrien’s pants. The purr of the zipper drowned out Nathan’s humming. But Adrien embraced the freedom. He wasn’t only offering up his body, but his heart. He could be himself with Nathan and be loved for it. He could put his guard down without hiding or pretending.

“Hips,” Nathan said between kisses. When Adrien complied, Nathan dragged Adrien’s pants and boxer briefs down his legs. He’d stripped Adrien not only of his clothes, but his fears, too.

“Jesus.” Nathan parted Adrien’s legs again. He settled between Adrien’s knees. “You’re beautiful.”

“I’m me.” He blushed and heat blistered his skin from his hairline to his chest. He wrapped his fingers around his erection and stroked. Nathan had him on the edge...why not do the same to Nathan?

“Love it.” Nathan planted his hands on Adrien’s thighs. He leaned over Adrien and sucked his cock to the back of his throat. When he bobbed his head, Adrien moaned. He moved up and down. His hair tickled Adrien’s abs. Nathan’s humming turned Adrien’s senses inside out. Nathan caressed Adrien’s balls and didn’t relent. Each push and lick nudged Adrien closer to the edge.

Adrien couldn’t breathe. He planted his feet on the bed and grabbed the sheets with one hand while palming the back of Nathan’s head. He needed to be quiet, but that was almost impossible. His legs trembled and the orgasm built low within his belly.

Nathan hummed again as he bobbed his head.

Another groan rumbled within Adrien. He arched his back in a sharper angle. He needed to come. “Fuck,” he whispered.

Nathan withdrew. “Naughty, naughty.” He folded Adrien in half, pressing Adrien’s knees to his chest. “I want to be inside you.”

“Yes.” He hated being left on the edge, but damn. He was all in. Adrien held on to his legs. “I want you in me.” His inhibitions melted. He hadn’t felt this desired in so long. Under Nathan’s gaze, he believed he and Nathan were meant to be.

“Lube? Rubbers?” Nathan’s eyes sparkled. He stood and whipped his shirt off. They’d closed the doors and hit the lock, but left the lights on. As he stripped, Nathan writhed in front of Adrien, giving him a perfect view of his body.

Adrien licked his lips. He wanted to run his mouth over the planes of Nathan’s chest. A dusting of hair slightly darkened Nathan’s torso from his belly button to his groin. His dark nipples tightened. The dimple in his cheek deepened. He pushed his jeans and boxers to his ankles. Stripping down revealed a tattoo of a pride flag on his hip.

The flag had to be a sign. He and Nathan were more than a short-term relationship. They were meant to go the distance.

“You have ink,” Adrien said. He let go of his legs and propped himself up on his elbows. “I never noticed that before.”

“We’ve never been naked together in the light.” Nathan laughed. He rested his hands on his hips and rocked on his feet. “I hope you like what you see.”

“I do,” Adrien said. He hoped he measured up, too. Nathan had mentioned he liked the way Adrien looked, but Nathan was all lean muscle. He ate right and exercised, but wasn’t nearly as taut as Nathan. The man was perfection.

“Rubbers? Lube? You never answered me.” Nathan grinned. “Can’t let you get hurt.”

“Nightstand.” He needed Nathan beside him. He ached for his lover to fuck him. “Hurry.”

“Brat.” Nathan retrieved the bottle from the drawer and tossed a foil wrapper onto the bed. “What’s this?” He held up a toy. “You have a stroker? Whose ass is this supposed to be?” He squeezed the jelly item. “I’m intrigued.”

Adrien bit back his embarrassment, then embraced his boldness. Why should he be afraid to admit he’d masturbated? “Stipe VanWinkle.”

“The porn star?” A wicked grin spread across Nathan’s face. “Do you like him?”

“He’s hot.” He shrugged, then resumed stroking his dick. “You’re better.” But he’d liked the way the toy snugged around him when he wanted to masturbate.

“Maybe I should have one of these made from a casting of my ass.”

“Why, when I can have the real thing?” He stroked faster. “Real thing, get over here before I come apart.”

“Can’t have that, can we?” Nathan settled between Adrien’s knees once again. “Have I told you how much I love your ass?”

“No.” He grabbed a pillow to prop himself up so he could watch Nathan. “Tell me again.” He caressed his asshole while resuming stroking his cock.

“You’ve got a nice ass.” Nathan scraped his nails down Adrien’s inner thigh. “Sexy balls.” He licked his lips. “Great dick.”

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Adrien groaned. “Thanks.” The man knew how to tease. Adrien relinquished his erection and pulled his knees to his chest. He parted his ass cheeks. “Nathan.”

“Yes?” Nathan popped the lid on the bottle, then dribbled lube on his fingers. “Ready?”

“Jesus, yes.” He moaned. “Need it.”

“Do you?” The smile lit Nathan’s eyes. He traced his fingers down Adrien’s ass.

The lube chilled Adrien’s skin, but Nathan’s touch increased the heat in his veins. Adrien shivered. “Please?”

Nathan kissed Adrien’s inner thigh and lowered his lashes. He dragged his tongue along Adrien’s leg until he brushed Adrien’s cock with his cheek. His hair slipped over his forehead.

Adrien clawed at his legs. “Nathan.”

“I want you to beg.” Nathan caressed Adrien’s hole and toyed with the puckered skin. He traced his fingernail over the sensitive tissue. When Adrien shivered again, Nathan pushed past the tight ring of muscle.

Adrien tensed, but welcomed the thrill. He needed this. He opened his eyes and focused on Nathan. He wanted to speak, but the words were gone.

Nathan flattened his hand on Adrien’s belly. “Breathe for me.”

He nodded. The only thing that mattered in that moment was Nathan and the experience. He parted his lips as Nathan eased his finger deeper into his asshole. Nathan kissed Adrien's inner thigh. Once fully within Adrien's hole, Nathan nuzzled Adrien's balls, adding to the sensation.

Adrien couldn't think straight. His legs trembled and he needed to come. "Nate..."

Nathan met his gaze and pumped his finger. "Love that?" He added more lube. "More?"

Adrien nodded again. Christ. He could barely form coherent thoughts and Nathan wanted an answer? He rode the waves of pleasure. The experience would only get better when Nathan fucked him. He panted.

"Damn, you're tight." Nathan licked his balls. "Love it." He increased his speed. "Almost ready. Relax."

Impossible. Adrien shuddered and bucked against Nathan's finger.

"So good." Nathan nipped Adrien's inner knee.

The bit of pain added to Adrien's pleasure and he couldn't hold on for much longer.

Nathan kissed the swollen spot where he'd bitten Adrien, then withdrew his finger. "I want you to use this while I fuck you." He drizzled lube into the stroker, then offered the toy to Adrien. "Do it."

"Yes," Adrien managed. He slickened his erection, then slid the toy over his shaft. He tapped the button to engage the vibration within the stroker. The hum resonated in his brain. His nerve endings fizzled. The pressure around his cock along with the hunger in Nathan's eyes nudged him even closer to the edge. He'd rather have Nathan's ass,

but the toy would be fine for now. He groaned. “Nathan.”

Nathan ripped the foil packet, then sheathed himself. “Beautiful.” He crawled onto the bed and propped Adrien’s ass on his thighs. He lined his dick up with Adrien’s hole. Although he moved slowly, Nathan’s desire shimmered in his face.

Adrien sprawled limp on Nathan. He felt every ripple and nuance of his lover’s dick. The fullness and stretching overwhelmed him. He continued to pant as he stroked himself with the toy. “Oh, Jesus.”

Nathan grasped Adrien’s hips and settled fully within him. “Shit, that’s hot.” The hunger in his eyes increased with his pace. He pushed into Adrien, then pulled most of the way out before diving deep again.

Adrien struggled to catch his breath. He wanted to capture this moment forever. Being with Nathan, being one, pleased him. He dug his heels into the bed and met Nathan thrust for thrust. The move pushed Nathan deeper into him. Nathan pistoned into Adrien’s hole. The springs squeaked and the headboard clunked against the wall. Nathan moaned.

“Oh God.” Nathan tipped his head back.

Between Nathan’s noises, being so full and the toy, Adrien couldn’t hold on. “Need. To. Come.”

“Yes,” Nathan murmured. “Come for me.” He shuddered and curled over Adrien. His cock throbbed in Adrien’s ass. His movements turned feral as he slammed into him. “Now.”

His restraint snapped as he gave in to the orgasm. His body buzzed as cum slipped down his hand. The only thing he saw was Nathan. He sagged beneath his lover and

relaxed. Nathan knew how to wring him out.

Nathan continued to thrust, but moved slower. He kissed Adrien. A lazy smile curled on his lips and he said nothing. Within moments, he stilled and remained inside him. He rested his forehead against Adrien's.

Sizzling started in Adrien's belly, then spread to his limbs. Being with Nathan completed him. He was happy and without doubts. He let go of the toy and slid his arm around Nathan's waist. Neither he nor Nathan spoke for a long moment and, instead, Adrien basked in the bliss of being loved.

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Nathan shifted his hips. "I should move."

"Should, but you don't have to." But he wanted to remove the stroker and clean himself off.

"You're good."

"I am?" At what?

"I knew this would be hot." Nathan kissed him. "Crazy hot. You didn't disappoint."

"Neither did you." He wasn't sure how they were having this conversation, since he could barely form coherent sentences.

"Let me get a towel and ditch the condom." Nathan eased out of Adrien and left the bed. He padded nude into the bathroom.

Adrien blinked. He needed another moment to gather his bearings. He eased his cock from the toy and spilled cum down his belly. Oh well. He sprawled on the bed and stared at the ceiling. Weariness settled into his brain.

Nathan returned. He wiped Adrien's chest and groin. A smile curled on his lips. "What are you thinking? Or are you thinking?"

"I'm worn out." He crawled under the covers. "And I want you to be right here beside me."

“That’s where I want to be, too.” Nathan snuggled up to Adrien. “I meant what I said. You’re good at this. I haven’t been this well-loved in a long time.”

“You’re not too shabby.” Adrien trailed his fingers down Nathan’s cheek. The tension he’d thought was gone came back. He stifled a groan. Why couldn’t he shut off his damn brain? Because the stress wouldn’t go away until he dealt with it. Why couldn’t Gerry get out of his life for good? “My ex called,” he blurted. “He wants to see Kyle.”

“No.”

No hesitation, just a forthright response. “Nathan.” He’d chided him, but was relieved Nathan agreed with his initial thought, too. “I didn’t think you’d say that.”

“Why?”

“I figured you’d be the voice of reason,” Adrien said. “You’d tell me I was crazy.”

“I’m trying to be the advocate for your son. Kyle deserves to be loved. That bastard doesn’t care about him,” Nathan said. “He’s ignored Kyle and treated you like shit. That’s unacceptable. He can want to see Kyle, but I wouldn’t allow it.”

“I thought maybe if we met in a public place and kept it in a situation I can control...it would be better. But I’m second-guessing.” He wasn’t sure of anything right now. “I told him we’d have to discuss it.”

“You’re braver than I would be.” He kissed Adrien. “You saw my ex. He wants to get back together.” His hands trembled as he caressed Adrien’s hip. “It’s nuts.”

“I saw.” He’d bared his soul by sleeping with Nathan and talking about his past. He knew Nathan had one. He’d been confronted by Nathan’s ex. The man was handsome

and he understood why Nathan would be attracted to Rhett.

“I’m not going back to him.”

He almost blurted thank god, but didn’t. “I heard part of the conversation.” He hated to lie. “Everyone did. I wasn’t my business and I’m sorry I listened in.”

“He shouted.” Nathan swept his gaze over Adrien and splayed his hand over Adrien’s heart. “There’s a reason I’m here in bed with you and it’s not by accident. There’s a reason I’m not with him. I’m drawn to you and thrilled to be the man in your life.”

“Your ex is determined.” He had to be sure Nathan would stick around.

“He is, but I’m going to bet Gerry is, too.”

Adrien nodded. “That’s putting it mildly.”

“They know what they’ve lost and what we now have.” Nathan brushed his nose along Adrien’s. “Don’t worry about Rhett. He’s yesterday’s news. I’m not wild about Gerry wanting to see Kyle, but I won’t let him do anything to harm Kyle.”

“I know.” That was one thing he knew to his core. Nathan would follow through with his declaration.

“Don’t worry about either of them. We’re a team.” Nathan kissed him. “Go to sleep. I want to hold you. I want to wake up beside you and know things are okay.”

“They are. You’ve got me.” He snuggled tight to Nathan. “Night, babe.”

“Night.” Nathan held him. He was safe.

The importance of the life he'd created with Nathan and Kyle wasn't lost on Adrien. He'd been given precious gifts. Being with Nathan wasn't an oddity. It was the best thing to happen to him. He found his center. Nothing else except his family mattered. For the first time since Gerry had kicked him out of the bedroom, he was happy, stable and not worried about the next day. He loved Nathan. Sure, it was happening fast, but soon he'd be able to confess that truth to Nathan. Soon.

Chapter Seven

Adrien stepped onto the back porch. No matter how many times he watched Nathan and Kyle together, he'd never tire of it. His heart lightened each time Kyle laughed and Nathan smiled. He hadn't seen Kyle so carefree and like himself. He laughed more too and clowned around again. He hugged Nathan often and had grown closer to Adrien. The changes were great, but felt right. Adrien nodded. He had the life he craved now.

He sipped his coffee and his thoughts turned to his relationship with Nathan. He'd slept with Nathan four times and stayed in Nathan's room every night. He left before Kyle woke, despite not wanting to go. He wondered if he'd gone too fast by wanting Kyle and Nathan to get along and for Kyle to come around concerning him and Nathan being a couple, but his son seemed to take the situation in stride.

His phone buzzed in his pocket. Adrien put his coffee cup on the railing and answered the call. "Hello?"

"Dr. Ellet?"

He didn't recognize the voice on the other end of the line and knew he hadn't given his phone number to patients. The only people who called him doctor were patients...or those who didn't know him. "I am. How may I help you?"

"I'm told you're in search of a manny," the man said. "Are you?"

"No, I'm not." He tensed. His heart pounded and fear gripped him. What an odd

question. “Who are you?”

“A friend.”

“I see.” He wasn’t sure what to think or say. Talking to this man wasn’t making him comfortable. He wiped his free hand on his trouser leg. When had his hands grown so clammy? He had to keep calm. If he showed fear, then this person would use it against him. “Thank you, friend, but I’m not looking for a manny.”

“Do you love Nathan?”

Christ. The guy was determined. He refused to give in and held on to the porch railing. The more the man talked, the more Adrien recognized him. “Rhett?” Maybe it wasn’t Nathan’s ex-boyfriend on the other end of the call, but he sounded like Rhett. Besides, no one else would’ve asked him such a question. “If I’m not mistaken, you sound like the man I met at the Diner. Did we see each other a while back? Like two weeks ago?”

“No.” The man hesitated. “Maybe. How do you remember me?”

He’d been right. Now how did he handle the problem? “Rhett, don’t do this.”

“Do what?”

“You’re not this kind of guy.” He turned away from his son and manny to prevent them from seeing him shaking. Have I got through to Rhett and calmed him down?

“How do you know? I might be an asshole.”

‘Asshole’ seemed like the right word, but he wasn’t about to argue. There had to be something great about Rhett or Nathan wouldn’t have dated him. “You’re upset, but

you're not evil. You want Nathan back and you're trying everything to make that happen."

"I am." Rhett sighed. "How'd you know?"

"Because I've been in your shoes. I've had love I thought was my future and when it ended, I wanted that love back." He continued to tremble, but the more he talked, the more his fear diminished.

Rhett didn't speak.

He had to stay positive and keep Rhett talking. The silence could be a horrible thing. "You'll find someone. I know it. You're handsome, funny and a catch."

Nathan and Kyle passed Adrien and went into the house. Adrien followed them and nodded to Nathan. He placed his hand over the phone. "You might want to talk to him."

Nathan frowned and accepted the phone. "Who?"

"Rhett. He needs talking down from the edge. You're the only one who can. I've tried, but I don't think I'm getting through to him." He gazed past Nathan into the living room and spotted Kyle. "I'll watch Kyle."

Nathan nodded. "I'll take care of this. Sorry." He pressed the phone to his ear, then strode out to the porch.

Adrien guided Kyle into bathroom. "Time to wash up for supper." He helped Kyle with the soap dispenser. "Did you have fun today?" He needed normalcy and something to do with his hands to hide the shaking. "What did you and Nathan do after school?"

“Nate, Dad. We played cars and he read *The Polar Bear* to me.” Kyle splashed in the water, but managed to wash his hands. “Can we keep Nate?”

“Keep? What do you mean?” He finger-combed Kyle’s hair and watched his reflection in the mirror. “He’s not a pet.”

“We didn’t keep Kelsi,” Kyle said. “She left.”

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“She wanted to get married.” Adrien paused. “You liked her, didn’t you?”

“Yes, and she left.” Kyle turned the water off. Without drying his hands, he faced his father. Water dripped onto the rug and his shirt. “I wanted her to stay.”

“I know, kid.” He sat on the closed toilet seat and hugged Kyle. “I don’t think Nathan’s going to get married, so I doubt he’s planning on leaving us.”

“Are you going to marry him?”

He hadn’t expected Kyle to say that. How am I supposed to answer? “Do you want me to marry him?”

Kyle shrugged. “You married Gerry.”

“I did.” He dried Kyle’s hands, then replaced the towel on the railing. “Be honest with me. Do you want me to get married again?”

“I don’t know.”

He’d asked the child a hard question. Jesus. When he’d been four, he wouldn’t have answered, either. Then again, his mother would’ve had a fit until he gave some reason. “Don’t worry about it.” He hugged Kyle again. “If you want me to keep Nathan, then we will.”

Kyle crawled onto Adrien’s lap. He threw his arms around Adrien. “I want you to be happy, Daddy. I like when you smile.”

“Nathan makes me smile.” Made him feel like a human being again, as well.

“Then marry him.” Kyle flopped against Adrien. “I’ll marry him, too.”

“You can’t do that.”

Kyle shrugged. “Okay.” He toyed with the buttons on Adrien’s shirt. “Can we have dinner now?”

“Yes.” He sighed as Kyle skipped out of the room. Adrien had too much to think about. He’d fallen for Nathan and wanted him around, but would he really tie the knot again? His divorce had been too painful and he never wanted to go through that kind of hell again. He headed into the kitchen and tried to clear his mind.

Nathan placed Adrien’s phone on the counter and caught Adrien’s gaze. “Kyle? Do you want to eat in the playroom? I made peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and crackers.”

“Yay.” Kyle bounded over to him and accepted a plate. “Can we watch a cartoon, too?”

“Sure.” Adrien opened the package of crackers. “Pick out a DVD and we’ll watch it.” He doubted Nathan would be there for the viewing, but Kyle didn’t need to know that.

Nathan stood against the counter and waited for Kyle to leave before he spoke. “Damn.”

“Are you okay?” Adrien asked. “You’re pale.”

“He threatened to kill himself.” Pain resonated in Nathan’s eyes. “I thought he was

okay. He's been overly emotional since the first day I met him, but it wasn't this extreme. I'm scared."

"Take tonight off." He embraced Nathan. "Go check on him."

Tears slipped down Nathan's cheeks. "My job is here."

"It is, but Rhett needs you right now." He cupped Nathan's cheeks and wiped away the tears. "Go. We'll be here when you return home."

"Home?" Nathan's age showed in his face. The lines weren't so deep, but the circles under his eyes darkened. He appeared young, but weathered.

"Yes. Our home." He kissed Nathan. "Be a friend."

Nathan nodded, but didn't pull away.

"Don't take forever." Adrien held his boyfriend. "He needs you and so do we."

"Thanks." Nathan lingered another moment as he dried his face. "I'll be back."

"I'm sure." Adrien stayed rooted to the spot until Nathan left the house.

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“Daddy?” Kyle crept into the room. “Nathan left. He’s crying. Did you quit him?”

“No.” He scooped Kyle into his arms. “He’s helping a friend who is sad. He’ll be back.”

“He will? Married?” Kyle asked.

“No, kid.” He carried his son to the playroom. “Not married.”

“Okay.”

Adrien appreciated Kyle’s ability to see things in black and white terms. He might only be four years old, but he was wise beyond his years. Adrien had overestimated him plenty of times, but this was one situation where his view mattered the most. If he trusted Nathan, then so did Adrien. He wasn’t worried Nathan wouldn’t return. He loved Nathan and when his boyfriend returned, Adrien would confess his truths.

* * * *

Nathan parked in front of Rhett’s building, then rushed into the foyer. He pressed the button for Rhett’s unit and waited for an answer. “Come on,” he shouted.

Delaney, one of Rhett’s neighbors, entered the foyer. “Who are you shouting at? Rhett? Isn’t he answering?”

“He’s not.” He stepped out of the way. “Can you help?”

“Sure.” She unlocked the door. “Rhett’s talked about you non-stop. Did you forget your key?”

“He’s talked about me?” He held the door for her, then entered the main portion of the apartment building. “I don’t know why. I don’t have a key to his place.”

“You don’t? He said you were dating again.” She frowned as the elevator stopped. “I wondered why you hadn’t been around in a while, but I chalked it up to my not paying attention.”

The elevator opened and he allowed her to enter first. “He and I aren’t dating.” He pressed the button for the fifth floor. “Is he acting strange?”

“No more than normal.” She shrugged and adjusted her grasp on the grocery bags. “I don’t talk to him much.”

“Seems we should both keep closer tabs on him.” He held the door as the elevator stopped and opened. “I’m here to check that he’s okay.”

“Sure.” She lingered by Rhett’s door. “If you need me, shout.”

“I will.” He knocked, but the lock wasn’t engaged. He pushed the door open. “Rhett? It’s Nathan. I’m here.”

Rhett stood just inside the door. His shirt appeared rumpled and he hadn’t brushed his hair in a while. Dark circles accentuated the tiredness in his eyes. “Hi.”

“Hi.” Nathan’s heart sank. He’d thought Rhett had himself together. “What happened?”

“Come in.” Rhett moved out of the way. “I’m...it’s not a good day.”

“I can tell.” He ventured into the apartment and shuffled his feet. “It’s dark in here. Why don’t you open the curtains?” He faced Rhett. “What’s wrong? Talk to me.”

“You hate me.”

“I don’t.”

“Then why’d you move on with the dentist?” Rhett sank onto the beat-up sofa. The television was on and playing a talk show. The screen lit the room and threw odd shadows. “What’s he got that I don’t?”

“Rhett.” He had to proceed with caution. “You and I weren’t going to work. You like to go out. I’m a homebody. You hate anything that requires attention. I wanted a dog.” He sat opposite Rhett on the armchair. “We were never meant to be anything more than fuck buddies.”

“He has money.”

“So? I don’t care about that.”

“You must. You’re with him.”

He left the chair and opened the curtains. Waning daylight filtered into the room. “I’m with Adrien because I work for him.” That sounded wrong. “I like him and the chemistry is off the charts.”

“Do you love him?”

He did, but what would Rhett do if Nathan told him the truth? “Do you love me? Like, really love me? I don’t think you do.”

“Nathan.” Rhett frowned and curled into himself. “I do.”

“You only love me because you can’t have me. When we were a couple, you cheated on me. Everyone else mattered besides me.”

Rhett half-shrugged. “I learned who I need.”

“Did you?” He doubted Rhett.

“What are you so full of questions?”

“Because I’m worried about you.”

“You are?” Rhett brightened.

“Yes. You and I were horrible as boyfriends, but we’re good as friends. I care about you as my friend.” He returned to the chair. “I want you in my life—just not in my bed.”

“You’ll take me back?” Rhett asked.

“No.”

Rhett groaned.

He needed to be honest with his friend and himself. He couldn't lead Rhett on. "I never set out to date my boss. It's a job. But I met Adrien before I interviewed to work for him. We hit it off, then I landed at his home as the nanny. We fought the pull until it overwhelmed us. That's the kind of love I want. It's what we all deserve."

"But not with me."

"You can live without me. You've done it," Nathan said. "I can't live without him. I'm in love with Adrien and crazy about his son." He tilted his head. "Does that make sense?"

"It does."

"I want you around because you make me laugh and know about things I don't—like fashion and music. You keep up on the celebrity gossip and have great stories. I miss hearing those and I want to be friends, but I don't want to be with you."

"I went over the top, didn't I?" Rhett's demeanor changed. He crinkled his nose, then rubbed beneath his eyes. The circles smudged. "Okay."

Nathan sagged in his seat. "You bullshitted me," he blurted. "You weren't on the edge or contemplating something worse. You just wanted me to come over."

"Duh." Rhett rolled his eyes. "I had to give us one more shot. If you came running and begged me to give you another try, then we'd go 'round again. Well, you came over, but you don't need me."

"I'm not thrilled that you did this." Pissed was more like it. "You fucking lied."

“I did it to prove to myself we were over.” Rhett stood. He opened the rest of the curtains and shut off the television. He finger-combed his hair into place. “I’m sorry.”

Nathan scrubbed his hands over his mouth. “You’re sorry?”

“You have to give me credit for ingenuity.” Rhett smoothed his shirt. “I wanted to start seeing Justin anyway.”

His irritation grew. “You had another man in mind, but you were fucking with me? What’s wrong with you?” He shook his head. “Do it. Date him.”

Rhett scooted forward in his seat. “What’s it like to be in love? Real, actual love?”

“How do I know?” He loved Adrien, but how was he supposed to describe it? Things had happened so fast. Maybe it wasn’t deep love. Just...lust. But he couldn’t live without Adrien. “I don’t know.”

“You’re in love with the dentist. You said. It.” Rhett crooked his eyebrows and the gleam returned to his eyes. “You love him so much you’re afraid to accept it, even if you did say the words.”

“It’s scary.” He couldn’t believe he was having this conversation with Rhett. “I can see my future with him, but I’m worried things won’t last. I feel right when I’m with him and I belong, but I don’t want to lose it.”

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A wry smile curled on Rhett's lips, but he said nothing.

"What?"

"I'm jealous," Rhett said.

"Of what?"

"Adrien."

"Rhett. Don't do this."

"I'm jealous because he has you. He has a love that's once-in-a-lifetime. I'm envious because I want that for myself," Rhett said. "Which means I need to get off my ass."

"You do?" And do what?

"Yeah. I'm head over heels for my friend Adam and I want to be with Justin. I'm so fucked up." Rhett laughed. "It's time I tell them the truth."

"Justin Lewis and Adam Dillon?" If he knew Rhett, the man would have them become a threesome at least once.

"Yeah." Rhett blushed. "Remember them?"

"I do." He didn't know Justin well, but he'd never forget Adam. Rhett had cheated on him with Adam. He wasn't a fan of Adam's, but he was a better fit for Rhett—more

than Nathan had ever been.

“I’m done with screwing with you.” Rhett patted Nathan’s thigh. “I’m ready to grow up.”

“Then chase Adam and Justin.”

“Yes.”

He hugged Rhett. Things were still odd, but better. “You should.”

“Is that your stamp of approval?”

“Sure.” He shoved his hands into his pockets. “I should go. You have men to entice and I need to get back to my job.”

“Agreed.” Rhett threw his arms around Nathan. “I do want you around, too. You’re my sanity.”

“I don’t know about that.” He grinned. “But I’m glad you’re not going to do anything drastic.”

“Me, too, but I never was.” He clapped Nathan on the back and escorted him to the door. “It was a story to get you to come over.” He paused. “Maybe we can double date.”

“We’ll see.” But he doubted it.

“Adrien was super nice when he could’ve told me to fuck off.” Rhett stood at his door. “Love him until you can’t stand, then do it again.”

“Well, okay.” He opened the door. “See you. Go get Adam and Justin.”

Rhett winked. “Will do.”

Nathan left the apartment building. Relief washed over him and he exhaled. Life was finally going his way. He wouldn't have to worry about Rhett any longer and could focus on the home he'd created with Adrien. He sped across town. He needed his boyfriend more than his next breath.

When Nathan arrived at the house, Adrien was standing in the kitchen. He'd tugged his shirttail from his trousers and embodied casual cool, with a hint of frustration.

Nathan walked into the room and said nothing. All he wanted to do was fuck Adrien. He crossed the kitchen and mashed his mouth on Adrien's. Not sweet, but craving. When Adrien opened to him, he sucked on his boyfriend's tongue. He swallowed Adrien's moan and bumped noses twice.

Adrien broke the kiss and panted. “Wow.” He slipped his hands into Nathan's back pockets. “To what do I owe this burst of desire?”

“Is Kyle in bed?” Nathan asked. He peppered Adrien's face with kisses.

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“Yeah,” Adrien said. “Has been for twenty minutes.” He squeezed Nathan’s ass. “Why?”

“I need you.” He tugged Adrien down the corridor to his bedroom. He didn’t stop until they collided with the bed. Desire overwhelmed him. He’d never wanted anyone as much as he did Adrien. He ripped his shirt off and shoved his jeans to his ankles.

Nathan crawled nude onto Adrien’s lap. He’d never get enough of his boyfriend. The chilly air in the room kissed his fevered skin. His nipples beaded and his nerve endings sizzled. He curled forward, pushing Adrien backwards onto the mattress. “Need you.”

“I’m right here.” Adrien slid his hands along Nathan’s bare chest.

Fuck. The synapses in his brain misfired. He kissed along Adrien’s jaw to his throat, then back to his mouth. Adrien was the only man who made him whole. Adrien flowed in his veins. He rubbed his naked cock against the bulge in Adrien’s pants.

Adrien moaned beneath him.

He loved he could draw such primal sounds from his lover. Nathan unbuttoned Adrien’s shirt as he continued to kiss Adrien’s throat. He breathed his lover in. Adrien keyed him up, but also soothed him.

When he tweaked Adrien’s nipples, Adrien whimpered. “No,” Adrien said. “This time it’s my turn.”

Nathan paused. He tended to top and demand his way, but he wanted to give himself over to Adrien tonight. He nodded. “Yes.” Nathan scrambled off Adrien’s legs and smoothed his palms down his chest.

“You’re gorgeous.” Adrien sat up. He placed his hands over Nathan’s and caressed him. “Beautiful.” He dragged his tongue down Nathan’s sternum, then across to each nipple.

Nathan sucked in a raw breath and tilted his head back. Fuck, being with Adrien felt good. He leaned into Adrien. “Touch me.”

“I am.” Adrien’s lips curled in a smile. He stroked Nathan’s shaft while raking his teeth along his abs.

“Fuck, yes.” He shuddered and a thought occurred to him. Being in Adrien’s room, they could make noise and not disturb anyone else in the house. Thank God. He rocked into Adrien’s fingers. He needed more, but loved what he’d been given.

Adrien slid onto his knees and swallowed Nathan’s cock to the root. His cheeks puffed and when he glanced up at Nathan, heat sparkled in his eyes. In seconds, he set a steady rhythm, in and out.

Nathan groaned. His temperature spiked again. The tingles in his limbs centered in his belly. He couldn’t focus because Adrien consumed his thoughts. He threaded his fingers into Adrien’s hair and tugged. “Adrien.”

Instead of answering, Adrien increased his speed. He caressed Nathan’s balls while sucking on him.

“Adrien.” His control splintered. The raking of Adrien’s teeth along his shaft, the combination of sensations over his body and the desire within him overwhelmed

Nathan. He couldn't hold back if he tried. The orgasm washed over him before he could suppress it. Although Nathan tried to pull out, Adrien held firm and swallowed everything Nathan gave him. A shudder wracked his body as he came. Adrien continued to bob his head until Nathan relaxed and swayed on his feet.

Adrien let Nathan's cock slip from between his lips and said nothing as he helped Nathan onto the bed.

Nathan stretched out. He didn't want to move or for the bliss to end. "Loved that," he managed.

"Yeah?" Adrien stood alongside the bed and undressed. His cock bobbed and precum glistened on the tip. He flexed, showcasing the sleekness and strength in his body. He crossed the room and switched off the ceiling light in favor of turning on a bedside lamp. The shadows thrown by the dimmer lighting added to his appeal. The softer lighting accentuated his muscles.

Nathan exhaled and tweaked his own nipple. "Fuck me."

"I will." Adrien plucked a bottle of lube from the dresser. "I can't get enough of you."

"Of me?" He bent his knees and planted his feet on the mattress. If he were going to get what he wanted, he needed to look into Adrien's eyes while they fucked.

"Yes." Adrien tossed a foil wrapper onto the bed, then popped the cap on the lube. He dribbled the clear fluid onto his fingers. "Want me here?" He caressed the seam of Nathan's ass. "Or here?" At the same time, he rubbed his dick over Nathan's.

The dual sensations of being toyed with and cock on cock turned him on. The orgasm had receded only to come roaring back with each touch of Adrien's hand. He writhed

beneath his lover. “Yes. Do it.”

“Soon,” Adrien murmured. He grinned and eased one digit into Nathan’s hole. Adrien’s slow movements gave Nathan time to adjust to him, but still, he stretched Nathan. “Like that?” Adrien asked.

“I will even better when your dick is in me.” He pinched his nipple again. “Need you.”

Fire lit in Adrien’s eyes. He worked his finger in and out of Nathan, prepping him.

“Yes, yes, yes.” He craved Adrien and reached for him. He wrapped his fingers around both cocks. “Christ, I’m going to blow my load all over you.”

Adrien shrugged, but didn’t relent. He kinked one eyebrow and kept his gaze on Nathan while he pumped his finger. He picked up the condom with his free hand and tore the wrapper in his teeth.

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“That’s not good for your dental work,” Nathan said. He tensed, his entire being on the edge. How in the hell had he managed to form a coherent line, much less a snappy one?

“Call it a slip in judgment.” Adrien sheathed himself, then withdrew his finger from Nathan’s ass. “Ready?” He leaned over Nathan and kissed him. “Really ready?”

He draped his arms around Adrien’s neck. The best he could do was hold on for the ride. “Yes.”

Adrien lined his cock up with Nathan’s hole and kissed him once more. The blunt head of his erection teased against Nathan’s puckered skin. “You need more lube.”

He nodded, not able to say anything else, and released his grasp on his boyfriend.

Adrien held Nathan’s gaze as he dribbled more lube down the crack of Nathan’s ass. Once satisfied he’d added enough slickness, he tossed the bottle onto the bed. Nathan held his breath as Adrien pushed into him. Once again, Adrien moved slow and steady until he settled balls-deep in Nathan.

Despite his attempts to relax, everything within him wound tight. Nathan moaned. He hadn’t been fucked in over a year and had forgotten how much he loved to give over control once in a while. Adrien deserved his trust. He bore down on Adrien and forced himself to breathe. Looking into Adrien’s eyes helped calm him. The man knew how to soothe.

“Breathe for me.” Adrien grinded against Nathan, giving him time to adjust again.

The delicious tightness overwhelmed Nathan. He held on to Adrien's shoulders. Passion flowed within him. He focused on Adrien and the way his lover made him feel—cherished.

Adrien rocked his hips in a skilled, but tender fashion. He could've rushed, but the teasing pace Adrien used added to Nathan's pleasure. Adrien sank to the hilt, then pulled most of the way out.

Nathan clawed at Adrien's shoulders. "Can't. Hold. On." Heat engulfed him. Something in his soul shattered. He loved Adrien more than he'd ever believed possible. He embraced the orgasm and groaned.

"Yes," Adrien said. He tipped his head back and pushed with abandon. His Adam's apple bobbed and his blush swept down his chest. His nipples beaded as another groan ripped from him.

Nathan caressed his own dick. He needed the second climax. He stroked in time with Adrien's thrusts. The world around them seemed to blur into nothingness as the orgasm hit. "Fuck," he bit out.

Adrien's mouth opened, but he said nothing. He slammed into Nathan and his cock throbbed. A shudder rocked through him.

Holy Jesus. Nathan sagged on the bed. Adrien had blown his mind. When Adrien slumped over him, Nathan held his lover. This was the bliss he craved. The belonging. This was their perfect moment and he never wanted it to end. He loved Adrien. But could he come clean and admit the truth to his boyfriend? Or would the tinge of fear creep in and destroy everything?

Chapter Eight

Adrien eased his cock from Nathan's ass and removed the condom. Although he wobbled, he managed to straddle Nathan again. This time he folded his hands on Nathan's chest. He rested his chin on his hands. "We need to talk," he said. "I loved what we did."

"Agreed. It's hot."

Adrien nodded. He had to say the words or he'd never get them out. "I love you." There. He'd done it. Now for Nathan's rebuttal.

"You do? So fast?" Nathan asked.

"Yes, without a doubt." He wriggled on top of Nathan. "I'm thrilled we met at the coffee shop."

"Me too." Nathan palmed Adrien's ass.

Things were going well, but he had to drop the other bombshell. "I love you so much and want you in my life. I want you to stay here forever."

"I want that, too."

"But there's a problem," Adrien managed. "A big one."

"What's that?"

Shit. He didn't want to bring this up. "I got a letter from the training center today."

"What?" Nathan tensed. "Why?"

"They're going to be making a home visit. There was a complaint about you and I being more than an employee and employer." Adrien sighed. "We weren't careful enough."

Nathan's eyes widened and his jaw slackened.

"They were tipped off. Us going out wasn't the problem." He'd called the training center to get the truth.

"What problem?"

"Us."

Nathan growled. "Really?"

"Someone told them we were together. Us being in public wasn't bad," Adrien said. "But the Coalition felt otherwise. They decided we shouldn't be out and about and you shouldn't be working for me." He placed his finger over Nathan's lips. "I'm not worried and you shouldn't be either."

"Are you kidding?"

"I love you and I have faith in you. In us. So what if people know? So what if the training center has issues with us? I'm not letting go. Kyle loves you. I love you. That's what's important. We're the ones living with you. I think you feel the same way about me and I don't see the problem. We're here, doing our thing and being happy."

“But my job is at stake.”

“So?” He didn’t understand. “I want you to stay on. So it’s not through the training center? You’ll be here with us.”

“Adrien, it’s my job.”

“And if they say sorry, hit the road, I’m hiring you on my own.” He shrugged. “I can do that.”

Nathan paled. “I knew what we were doing by breaking the rules. I wasn’t worried because I didn’t think they’d find out.” He stared at Adrien. “I didn’t take this job to land in your bed.”

“I know.” He rubbed Nathan’s bottom lip with the pad of his index finger. They’d been so close, but a chasm had formed between him and Nathan. “I’m offering a solution to the problem. My home, Kyle and my heart. Isn’t that enough?”

Nathan opened and closed his mouth, but said nothing.

“What? It’s easy. The only thing that changes is your title. My boyfriend—not the manny.” His heart sank. Nathan wasn’t jumping at the offer. “I thought you’d be happy. Isn’t this what you wanted?”

“Adrien.”

“I’m right here.”

“I need a moment.”

Nathan scooted out of the way, then out of bed. Confusion hit hard. Adrien thought he’d done right by Nathan. Now he wasn’t so sure. “Nathan?”

“Just...” Nathan raked his fingers through his hair. “I don’t know what to think.”

He covered himself with the sheet. Having an argument in the nude wasn’t his idea of fun. “Maybe tell me you love me, too and you want to stay.” Unless it wasn’t the truth. “You came home from Rhett’s and made love to me. Was that just for sex? Did I miss something? Because it felt like more than just fornication.”

Nathan donned his jeans and rested his hands on his hips. “Everything is spiraling.”

“How?” He couldn’t fix what he didn’t understand.

“I care about you and Kyle. I love being his manny and I love being with you. I’m happy,” Nathan said. “But it’s fast.”

“It has been.”

“Then there’s Rhett.”

His stomach churned. He wasn't sure what to think.

"He wanted to pull us apart. The death threat wasn't real—just him being dramatic and getting in the way." Nathan shrugged. "It worked. I rushed to him."

"You did, but I encouraged it. Now you're back here." He reclined against the headboard and crossed his ankles. "I'm not seeing a problem."

"I've never done this. I've never been fired. Never had any dream job handed to me. Never been in love," Nathan whispered. "Ever."

He'd read too much into the relationship. He wanted more than Nathan could give. Because of the connection to Kyle and the way they'd become a family, he'd thought he and Nathan were closer than reality admitted.

"Adrien?"

Nathan deserved a response, but he wasn't sure how to be tactful. "Is this crap?" he asked. "I fell for you. I knew what I was doing. I considered my son's feelings and yours, too. My heart is in your hands. If you don't think you can do this, then fine, but say so. I can't be with someone who isn't sure. I thought I couldn't survive another split, but I can. I love you and I want you here, but I won't stand in your way. I'll fight for you and go to the wall for you with the training center. I started this and I'll make sure you don't pay for what we've done. You'll have a job."

Nathan sank onto the bed and covered his face with his hands.

"I'll go." Adrien left his spot on the mattress. He took the sheet with him and ducked out of the bedroom. Once in the hallway, he paused. Fuck. He'd been tossed out of his own space again. He should've grabbed clothes on the way out. But he had clothes in the dryer. Maybe there'd be enough in the dryer to make an outfit.

He headed across the house to the laundry room. He didn't fault Nathan for being gun shy, but he didn't understand where he'd gone wrong. He donned jeans and a threadbare T-shirt. He wanted to cry, but didn't. He had faith in Nathan and the love they shared. This wasn't like Gerry. Nathan respected him. They were in love and Nathan cared about his son, too. If Nathan would give him a chance, they could make the relationship work. "Give me one more try," Adrien murmured. "Just a chance."

* * * *

Nathan stared at the empty space where Adrien had been. He wasn't reassured by the separation. Adrien understood him when no one else did. He'd given Nathan an out with the write-up. Not just an out, but a life with him—the one Nathan wanted. Hell, he loved Nathan. Not fake love or words uttered during sex, but love. And he was fucking it up by pushing Adrien away. Why?

Because of the kid?

No. He loved Kyle and felt like a father to him.

Because of his ex-boyfriend? Because of Adrien's ex-husband?

No. Nathan still hated Gerry and didn't believe Gerry had ever deserved to have a partner like Adrien. Rhett mattered as a friend, but nothing more.

Then what? The potential firing?

Yes. Call him shallow, but he'd never lost a job on account of being fired. He'd never been viewed as less than competent. Then Adrien had come along.

Was this mess Adrien's fault? No. He'd known what he was doing when he'd decided to pair up with Adrien. He'd fallen for Adrien and loved him. Then why push him

away?

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Fear. He couldn't contain the panic. He didn't want to be hurt. But he loved Adrien and the family unit they'd created. He didn't want to invest time in someone who could leave him. Would Adrien do that?

A knock on the door interrupted his thoughts.

"Nathan?" Adrien asked. "Mind if I come in?"

He couldn't keep Adrien out of his own room. If he did, he'd be no better than Gerry. "Come in."

"Hi." Adrien crept into the space. He wore faded jeans and a body-hugging T-shirt. His bare feet peeked out from under the denim. "I'm sorry I pushed." He stayed in the doorway. "I got excited because of my desire for you and forgot how you might feel. I want to fight for you, but I don't know how."

Nathan scrubbed the back of his neck with his palm. He'd screwed everything up. Adrien would walk away because of his fear. Fuck. Adrien had put himself out there and allowed Nathan into a situation with his son. He trusted Nathan beyond him being their manny.

"What do you want me to do?" Adrien asked.

"Sit." The gravity of the moment weighed on him. He wasn't thinking about himself any longer.

"Sure," Adrien murmured. He perched on the edge of the mattress.

Nathan sighed. "I screwed up," he said. "I'm not good at relationships. I'm the boyfriend type, but I get scared. I look for the ways to blow the twosome up. With the other guys in my past, it wasn't a big deal. No one expected forever and most weren't shocked when we split. Then there's you. I want to be better for you and for Kyle. I know you've been hurt and I don't want to be that guy."

Adrien nodded, but said nothing. Still, Nathan had his rapt attention.

Nathan continued. "I freaked out because I was thinking about me. My life, my job, my reputation. None of that really matters."

"It does to you and that's not bad."

"It is when I'm fucking you over," Nathan said. "I let my concerns about my reputation and how I thought about the Coalition would treat me override my feelings for you."

"How do you feel? Be honest." Adrien rested his hands on his lap. Sadness filled his eyes. "I can handle it."

"I love you." He'd said the words and couldn't take them back—not that he wanted to.

Adrien didn't respond. A small smile curled his lips, but he kept quiet.

"I love you and I want to be with you. I don't want to be the manny. I want to be your partner and help raise Kyle as ours. To be a family." He straddled Adrien's lap and gathered Adrien's hands in his. He needed this closeness. "When I heard you say fired, I flipped out. I didn't want you to be admitting you love me and to keep me around as the manny or to save me embarrassment. I wanted it to be because you truly love me and you can't see your life without me."

“But you denied it because of the imploding thing?”

“Yes.” He swallowed past the lump in his throat. “I’m sorry. You didn’t push or force. You’ve been a gentleman and are more than I deserve.”

Adrien kissed Nathan’s knuckles. “Then what do you want to do?”

“Be loved.” He rested his forehead against Adrien’s. “To be craved and know you need me as your partner.”

“And in return?”

“I love you. I look forward to when you come home, those stolen moments we kiss and Kyle hasn’t caught us, the nights on the couch as a family...holding you when I sleep. I love you. I can’t see my future without you in it. Do you still have room for me?”

“I do.” Adrien kissed him. “All the way.”

His nerve endings misfired and something broke within him. Tears slipped down his cheeks. For the first time in his life he was accepted. He’d come home.

“Why are you crying?” Adrien held him and chuckled. “I love you. Kyle does. There’s nothing to worry about.”

“I’m happy.” He wiped his face. “I’ve got everything I’ve ever wanted because I have you.”

“And it’s only going to get better.”

No doubt.

* * * *

Adrien stood by the picnic table and kept an eye on Nathan and Kyle. In the last month, he and Nathan had gone through so many changes, but they were stronger. But over that time, he'd made the decision to give his ex-husband a chance to see Kyle. He'd agreed to meet with Gerry here at the park, but as he'd expected, Gerry hadn't shown up yet. Adrien checked the clock on his phone again. No texts, emails or missed calls. Damn it. The jerk would have to be late.

Kyle sprinted up to him. "Daddy, will you go down the slide with me?"

"Sure." Like I'd tell my son no? He took Kyle's hand and crossed the playground. Nathan grinned from the foot of the slide.

"The tube's a little narrow up there. You'll have to scrunch down," Nathan said. "I'll be here at the bottom waiting."

Adrien kissed his boyfriend, then climbed up the ladder. He hated heights, but after all he'd been through, he wasn't afraid of much anymore. Kyle settled on his lap, then tapped the tunnel.

"Ready, Daddy?" Kyle asked.

"Sure." He pushed off, sending them both down the slide. When they popped out at the bottom of the tube, he spotted Gerry. A shiver ran the length of his spine. He noticed the woman with Gerry, too. What the hell? He stood between his ex-husband and son. "Nathan, take Kyle to the car."

“No problem.” Nathan scooped Kyle into his arms and carried the child to the opposite end of the playground toward the car.

“May I help you?” Adrien stood tall. He wasn’t about to have his ex bully him like every other time. Gerry’s hair was longer and grayer at the temples than it had been the last time Adrien had seen him. The lines around his eyes were deeper, but the sparkle hadn’t dulled. If Adrien had seen him at a club and not known Gerry, he might have been attractive. Knowing the man the way he did and what he’d been through, though, Adrien wanted to keep separation. The attraction was dead. But who was the woman with Gerry?

“Is that how you greet your former husband?” Gerry snorted. “Come on. We’re closer than that.”

“Are we?” Not that he knew. He swept his gaze over the woman. Her skirt fell below her knees and the billowy blouse did nothing to accentuate her curves. She’d pulled her hair back in a ponytail and wore little makeup—not Gerry’s type. Gerry tended to befriend the flamboyant types and rail-thin glamour girls. Not like this one. Adrien focused his attention on her. “My name is Dr. Ellet. May I help you?”

She smiled. “I spoke to your manny not long ago. My partner and I mentioned to him he should talk to you about leaving Cedarwood. Your husband here said you’re considering leaving. I just wanted to make sure that was the truth. We’re out to keep Cedarwood respectable. You know, a family friendly town.”

Her partner? He had a thousand questions for her, but kept them to himself. What made her so great she could give him hell about his life choices and decide who could live in Cedarwood? “My ex-husband doesn’t know of which he speaks.” Adrien folded his arms. “As for you, I knew you’d come to the house and I also know I’m not leaving town. Cedarwood is my home. Please stop visiting and trying to convince me otherwise. I’m not budging.”

The muscle in her jaw twitched. She inhaled sharply, then nodded. “I see. What about your manny? Word is you’re dating him. That’s against the rules.”

How does she know this stuff?“Are you sure?” He notched his chin in the air. “Seems like you know a lot about my life.”

“It’s not hard to know when you’re parading your relationship around Cedarwood.” She narrowed her eyes. “I have a nanny with the training center and according to the rules, dating isn’t permitted. I know. I’ve read the contract. It’s in plain wording.”

“Then it’s a good thing he’s not with the training center any longer.” Adrien kept his tone even, despite wanting to scream. She had no standing, but she wanted to make his life miserable. “Is there anything else?”

Gerry balled his hands. The vein popped out on his forehead. “Are you dating him?”

“I am.” No harm in admitting the truth, especially if the facts bugged Gerry. “But he doesn’t work for me or the training center, so there’s no issue. We’ve cleared that up with the center. So, I ask once more, anything else?”

“I want to play with my son.” Gerry stepped forward. “Withouthimaround. I don’t want Kyle to think the manny is important.”

Too late.“That wasn’t part of the agreement,” Adrien said. Besides, he didn’t want this argument in public. “You’re welcome to spend time with them, but Nathan stays. He’s Kyle’s manny and I trust him.”

Gerry’s eyes widened and his lip curled in a sneer. “You did this just to piss me off, didn’t you?”

“I did it for the safety of my son.” Adrien held firm. Gerry had given up his rights.

Allowing him to see Kyle went against everything Adrien believed, but he also wanted Gerry to have closure. Now he wished he'd gone with his initial thought and ignored Gerry's request.

"Ourson," Gerry bit out.

"Mine. You quit on us." Adrien forced a smile to keep from unleashing his frustration. The woman was still there with her odd grin. "If you're going to spend time with Kyle, you'd better get moving. I agreed to forty-five minutes—no longer—and you've wasted ten already."

Gerry growled, but walked past Adrien toward the playground.

The woman still stared at Adrien and said nothing. She'd done plenty of damage, but the way she lingered unnerved Adrien.

"Yes?" Adrien split his attention between his son, boyfriend and ex-husband and the woman. "Do you need something else?"

"You knew the rules. Wasn't the reminder enough? The training center spoke to you," she said. "You were busted. You and the manny aren't supposed to be together. Beyond that, you're"—she dropped her voice to a whisper—"gay. That's not welcome."

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“Funny, that information about my dating the manny—which I’m not saying is truth or lie—wasn’t made public. How do you know what you’re talking about?” Adrien asked. “Or were you the one who called the training center?” He inched closer to her. “I know the Coalition isn’t happy with me. I’m gay—so what? If it bothers you so much, then too bad. I’m staying put in Cedarwood with my family and I’m moving on with my life—like I had planned to all along. If that grinds your gears, then I don’t care. I’m not hurting anyone. My son is progressing according to the growth chart, my life is stable and my being gay doesn’t matter to anyone except you.”

“He’ll be an abomination just like you,” she snapped. “Kids don’t turn out well if they’re reared in a gay household.”

“That’s bullshit.” He needed to remember his standing in society, but she’d struck a nerve. “Don’t you have something better to do than argue with me? Than to run the LGBTQ community out of town? Put that energy to good use and take up a hobby. Try painting. Singing? Scrapbooking? Maybe you’re a closet carpenter. Try that.” Adrien tipped his head. “No one is telling you to change who you are or to leave town because you’re straight. You’re accepted. Why can’t I be accepted, too?”

“Because it’s not right.” She shook her head. “It’s against the church and everything I believe in.”

“Aren’t you supposed to love everyone? Open hearts, open minds...”

“Not with gays. You should be reprogrammed.”

Christ. The idea someone could change their sexuality through programming was

ridiculous. “That’s not how this works,” Adrien said. “You were born straight. I wasn’t. That doesn’t mean I’m not wired properly. It means I’m not you. Let’s celebrate our differences.” He’d explained this to many people throughout his lifetime, but this woman was the most persistent. When she frowned and snorted, he abandoned the fight. He wasn’t going to change her way of thinking. “I can’t make you open your mind, but I can ask you to leave me alone. You go your way and I’ll go mine—in town. This is my hometown, too.”

“You won’t be stopped.” She turned on her heel. “One day you’ll understand and you’ll wish you’d changed your actions.”

“I doubt it,” Adrien mumbled. “Are you threatening me?”

“Not yet.”

He watched her climb behind the wheel of her car and drive away. Good—fucking—God. He’d had enough. When he turned to the playground, he spotted Kyle, Nathan and Gerry. Kyle darted away from Gerry and hid behind Nathan. Without thinking, Adrien strode across the park to his son and boyfriend. “What’s going on?” He trusted Nathan had everything under control, but Nathan didn’t know Gerry. “What are you doing?”

“He won’t talk to me.” Gerry shoved his hands into his hair. “It’s like I’m a stranger. I diapered him. I bathed him.”

“You left us.” Adrien stepped toe-to-toe with his ex. “You quit. You wanted someone else. What is he supposed to think? What was I supposed to think? We weren’t important to you.”

“I cheated because you’re boring,” Gerry snapped. “He’ll find out.” He pointed to Nathan. “He’ll get tired of sitting around the house and cleaning up puke.”

Nathan directed Kyle away from the playground in the direction of the car.

“Where’s he going?” Gerry spat. “Come back here. My time isn’t up.”

“Yeah, it is.” Adrien held on to his frustration by a tiny thread. “Don’t insult my son this way. You gave up. You couldn’t handle not being the center of attention and walked. That’s not our problem. We’ve moved on and don’t need you. Kyle’s a smart little boy and he’s got stability. This was your one shot to see him. Don’t try again. You signed away your rights and gave up custody. He’s not a pawn and you’re not the one in charge.”

“You used to love me.” Gerry reached for Adrien. “You used to want me around.”

Not again. “Don’t.”

“I can’t do this without you.” Gerry scrunched up his face and cried out, but no tears streamed down his face. “I can’t.”

“Don’t be so dramatic.” He didn’t have time for the argument. “I don’t know if you brought the woman from the Coalition or if you clued her in to what was going on at my house, but I’m done with you. I’m done with us.”

“You’re really leaving, aren’t you?” Gerry asked.

“I am.” He shook his head. “You showed me what love could be, but you also proved there’s a dark side to everyone. You risked my life and Kyle’s so you could do what you wanted. That’s unforgiveable. I don’t want that for my family or for me. I don’t need a flashy life, but I need to know my partner isn’t going to cheat on me. I need to know Kyle and I are the center of his world. That was never going to be you.”

“And he will be?” Gerry blurted. “He’s a kid.”

“And you’re old enough to know better than to act like this.” Adrien scrubbed his hand across his mouth. “I need to go. You wasted your time and it’s getting late.”

“Adrien.” Gerry jogged up to him. “This is how it ends?”

“Yes.” He kept going and refused to look back. He had his future in the car—why give that up over something that would never work? He pulled his keys from his pocket and joined Kyle and Nathan in the vehicle.

“Daddy?” Kyle left his seat. He held on to the headrest. “Daddy Gerry said I was a bad kid.”

“You don’t have to worry about him. He’s not coming around again,” Adrien said. “And you’re not a bad kid. You’re a good boy. Buckle up.”

Nathan affixed the seatbelt around Nathan’s car seat, then rounded the vehicle. He settled next to Adrien. “Everything okay?”

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“No, but it’s over.” He pulled out of the lot. “I have so much to tell you, but I can’t with small ears close.”

“I’m listening,” Kyle said in his sing-song voice.

“I know you are.” He glanced up at Kyle’s reflection in the rearview mirror. “Did you have fun with Nathan?”

“Nate, Daddy.” Kyle folded his arms and kicked his feet. “I did. Next time we should get ice cream first.”

“Maybe.” He reached across the console and grasped Nathan’s hand. “When is your mother coming over?”

“Seven.” Nathan checked his watch. “She should be there now. I gave her the combination to the garage, so she’ll probably have let herself in.”

“Okay.” He drove home. When Kyle and Nancy, Nathan’s mother, went to check out the playroom for the hundredth time, Adrien would speak to Nathan.

When he pulled into the driveway ten minutes later, Nancy’s car took up the space behind Nathan’s. Adrien parked in the garage, then closed the main door. “Everyone out. We’re here.”

Nancy strode into the garage. “There are my boys.” She waited in the doorway. When Kyle freed himself from his car seat, he left the vehicle and threw himself into her arms. “Hi,” she said. “I missed you.”

Nathan chuckled. “Mom...you were just here three days ago.”

“But now I have a grandbaby.” She grinned, then allowed Kyle to direct her into the house.

Nathan waited beside the car and balled his hand on the roof of the vehicle. “I wish she hadn’t gone to that place already. Grandbaby...”

Adrien shrugged and rounded the hood. “It was going to happen eventually.”

“Aren’t you upset? It’s fast.” Nathan sighed. “But everything with us is fast.”

“It is,” he said. “If I weren’t in love with you and living with you, then it would bother me. But I love you and you’re sharing my bed, so it’s okay.” He kissed Nathan. “I want to marry you one day.”

“You do?” Nathan’s lips parted. “Adrien.”

“Don’t you want to marry me?”

“I want it more than anything—when we’re ready.” Nathan rested his forehead against Adrien’s. “On our timeline.”

“Agreed.” He slid his hands into Nathan’s back pockets. “I’m sorry about Gerry and his friend. She was the one who outed us to the training center. She might have gotten her info through Gerry, but she did the damage.”

“I don’t care.”

“No?” Adrien stared into Nathan’s eyes. “I don’t really, either. We have what we want. That’s what matters.”

“True.” Nathan splayed his palm on Adrien’s chest. “I’ll marry you.” He bumped noses with him. “What about your ex?”

“We had the split we finally needed. I thought I was over him, but this was the slice to cut everything clean away,” Adrien said. “I’m done giving him chances. He doesn’t know Kyle and Kyle doesn’t know him. I don’t need him in my life and I’d rather have you, so why fuck with the past when I’ve got the best future?”

“He’ll show up again. So will the Coalition,” Nathan said. “We’re playing with danger.”

“Only if we let it scare us.” Adrien sighed and breathed Nathan in. “I’m done hiding and worrying. We have a life to live and a son to raise.”

“We do.” Nathan chuckled. “We should also go inside before my mother thinks we’re doing something naughty out here.”

“Or she understands we need a moment of privacy.” He kissed Nathan. “Let’s go.” He’d have to make a trip to the jewelers soon. Nathan was his other half—the man he’d wanted for so long and thought didn’t exist. Sure, there would be intrusions by the Coalition and Gerry would pop up again—the man never did know how to say goodbye for good—but they’d survive. Adrien had the family he wanted, the life he’d worked so hard to achieve and love to last his lifetime. Who could ask for more?