



Rainbows Over Cedarwood

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Category: Romance, M-m Romance

Description: The moment Ashley gave up looking for the right man, he showed up in the form of restaurateur Colt Harrison. Sexy has never looked this good. Ashley Willis didn't think he was interested in joining the dating pool...that is, until he catches a glimpse of Colt. The sexy diner owner makes him hot all over and has him thinking all sorts of dirty thoughts. But Ashley has to worry about more than his sex drive—he's a single dad. What goes on in his life affects his son. Will Ashley play it safe or find the love he deserves with Colt? Colt's been happily single for the last few years. He likes his complications to stay at the diner. Then he meets Ashley. The geeky art teacher is everything Colt's dreamed of having in his bed. Will the fact that Ashley's a single father be the deal-breaker or will the naysayers in Cedarwood break up this couple before they get a chance to find love?

Total Pages (Source): 46

Chapter One

“At least I know one person,” Ashley Willis murmured to himself and stood. “Hi. My name is Ashley, but people call me Ash. I’m the art teacher at the elementary school. My road to becoming a dad wasn’t really like yours.” He flattened his hands on his pant legs to hide the shaking. “I’m proud to be a dad. Best thing I’ve ever done, but like I said, it was different. My best friend, Danica, wanted a baby. Her relationships weren’t working out and she figured the only way she’d have a kid was to go with a donor. She asked me. We went the traditional route. I’m gay, but I slept with her because I wanted to give her what she wanted. Shortly after Wyatt was born, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. Turns out the cancer was worse than the doctors realized and she passed pretty quickly.”

Colin Baker, the head of the support group, nodded. He didn’t say anything and no one seemed to be upset or even fazed by his admission that he had a kid. The guys he’d dated had been put off when he mentioned how he’d helped to create his son. They didn’t want to date a guy who’d slept with a woman, even if only to make a baby.

“Like I said, I’m proud to be a dad and I want to be an example to him. Right now that’s not happening the way I wanted. I’m not looking for a boyfriend, but a few friends would be great. That’s why I joined the group.” He blew out a long breath. “And because Steve said this was a good place to talk without judgment.”

Steve Moore, a former fellow teacher in the Cedarwood school district, grinned. He’d been in Ash’s shoes. The school year before, Steve had been encouraged to leave his position with the district because of his sexuality.

Ashley returned to his seat and stuffed his hands between his knees. He shouldn't have been so nervous. The guys at the meeting weren't scary or critical. All of them had been in situations that weren't fun—Colin losing his partner to another man, Steve having to raise his sister and Don dealing with the death of his partner due to AIDS. He appreciated the pressure-free environment. No trying to date one another or get into one another's pants. Little by little, he relaxed and thanked God he'd made the decision to join the group.

Half an hour later, after the rest of the men had shared stories and updates, the meeting adjourned. The dozen or so guys scattered about the room. Steve crossed to Ashley.

"So, you got tenure, didn't you?" Steve plopped onto the chair beside Ash. "I wanted tenure, but not the hassle of the school district."

"You're at Hazelwood, aren't you?" Ashley asked. "I'd heard they had a few teachers leave due to retirement."

"I am. So far, things are looking good." Steve nodded. "They're planning to offer me tenure there if I last another year. I fully intend on doing so. My commute is twenty minutes. Farin can get Genie off the bus or she and Gage can go straight to the store. It's perfect."

"Plus you're head over heels for Farin," Ashley added. He'd watched the romance grow between the two men and couldn't help but feel a little jealous. He wanted a love like Farin and Steve shared.

"There is that. But I asked about you. You're safe with tenure, right?"

"I have a five-year contract. They didn't go the tenure route with the teachers when I was hired. Our track involved longer contracts that aren't exactly called tenure. You

came in after me when the union got the situation returned, but about five other teachers and I fall into that gray area. I'm okay for now."

"Well, if they start giving you trouble, you're in a better position than I was." Steve handed Ashley a business card. "This is my friend Dex. He specializes in discrimination cases. If it comes to needing help, then he's the man you want in your corner."

"Cool." He stared at the card. He hadn't thought about needing legal representation. He hadn't been discriminated against, but then he'd kept his life on the down-low. People knew he was gay, but he didn't advertise.

"We were going to go to the diner for supper. Farin loves the burgers and Genie can't get enough of the fries. Want to come along?" Steve asked. He touched Colin's shoulder, stopping the other man. "Colin, are you and Jordan coming?"

"Sure." Colin stuffed the pamphlets and other papers from the small table into a shoulder bag. "Are you in, Ashley?"

"I need to get Wyatt from the sitter, but sure." He'd been out on the town with friends a few times over the summer, but these were people who understood how to be in public with kids. His friends didn't like when Wyatt tagged along or when Ashley couldn't go out because he didn't have a sitter.

"Meet us there in half an hour?" Steve clapped Ashley on the shoulder. "I know it seems like you're all alone in this, but you're not. I've been there. Colin's been there. You're in good company."

"Thanks." He grinned as he left the building and headed to his car. He'd known Steve from the district staff meetings but hadn't spent much time with him otherwise. Part of him wished he'd made a move with Steve. Maybe he wouldn't be lonely right

now. Then again, Steve and Farin did make a cute couple.

He slid behind the wheel of his car and sighed. He wished he had a bigger car. Then he'd be able to better care for Wyatt. There'd be more room and less inconvenience. Less worry that the grocery bags would tumble over onto Wyatt, and the fear that they'd be crushed to death in the smaller car would go down. In a bigger vehicle, at least they'd have more bulk around them if they did crash.

He turned the key in the ignition. God. What am I doing? Complaining...again. He hadn't said the words out loud, but he was wallowing in his supposed failure to care for his kid. He drove across town to the babysitter's house and thought about his life along the way. Danica. Now, there's a raw deal in life. Cancer fucking sucked. Wyatt wouldn't have his mother because of a goddamn disease without a cure. He pounded the steering wheel with his fist. She shouldn't have died.

Ashley pulled into the driveway at the Learner house and switched off the engine. He dragged a couple of deep breaths into his lungs to compose himself. Wyatt didn't need to see his father upset.

He climbed out of the car and headed up to the front door. Mrs. Learner met him on the porch. "Wyatt's helping pick up the playroom. You look worried. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Just got caught up in my thoughts." He leaned against the banister on the porch. Mrs. Learner knew about Danica but never seemed to push him to talk.

"Danica?" She gathered him in a hug and rubbed his back. "You've got to get the words out of your head sooner or later. I know you're not ready now, but one day you will be. Don't be afraid to talk."

He hugged her back and sighed. "I'm tired of being mopey, if that's what you mean."

“Then don’t be.” She let go of him and folded her arms. “You’ve got a lot to offer a guy. Get out there and try. You don’t have to introduce Wyatt to him right away. Make sure you trust him first, but give romance a shot.”

“You sound like those movies on the cable channel.”

A squeal echoed in the house and a moment later, Wyatt bounded up to the screen door. “Hi, Dad.” He fumbled with the latch then eased open the aluminum door. Unlike most kids his age, Wyatt sounded loud and boisterous, but he also acted very reserved. He wasn’t the type to slam doors or to stomp his feet, but he loved to whoop and holler. He shoved his book bag into Ashley’s hands.

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“Hi, tot.” He tossed the backpack over his shoulder. “Were you good for Mrs. Learner?”

“Yes.” Wyatt grinned and batted his lashes. “I even helped pick up when I didn’t make the mess.”

“That’s true,” Mrs. Learner said. “You helped me put away the dishes, too.”

“I did.” Wyatt grabbed his father’s hand and swung Ashley’s arm. “I’m hungry.”

“Then it’s a good thing we’re going to the diner.” He slid the folded-up money from his pocket and handed the twenty to the babysitter. “Thanks, Mrs. Learner. We’ll see you next week.”

“Bye,” Wyatt called and led his father to the car. “Why are we goin’ to the diner? We never go out on a school night.”

“I thought we’d do something different.” Ashley opened the car door for Wyatt. “Get into your seat and put on your belt.”

Wyatt did as told and kicked his feet. “I’m goin’ to get a cheeseburger.”

“Oh, you are?” He closed the door then rounded the car and plopped behind the wheel. He glanced up at Wyatt’s reflection in the rearview mirror. His son reminded him of Danica in so many ways. He’d inherited her thick, long lashes and her blue eyes. The kid shared her sense of humor and her blonde hair.

Ashley drove the five blocks to the diner and parked. Before he opened his door, he glanced back at Wyatt.

“What?” Wyatt wriggled in his car seat. “I was good. Promise.”

“I know you were.” He watched his son. The kid kept amazing him. He wanted to draw the look of wonder on Wyatt’s face. Because of Wyatt, he saw life with fresh eyes.

“What?” Wyatt asked. He stared at his father. “What’d I do?”

“Nothing. I’m just looking at you.” He pulled his phone from his pocket. “Smile, punk.”

“Dad.” Wyatt rolled his eyes then cooperated. First a cheesy grin then one of his normal smiles—the one that brought out the dimple in his left cheek. “Will there be kids there?” He pointed to the diner. “Huh?”

“Gage from the bookstore will be there. You’re friends with him.” He put the phone away and tugged the keys from the ignition. “Right?”

“Yeah. Can I bring my tablet? I want to show him my new game.”

“No, leave it with my school stuff in the trunk so it doesn’t get taken from the car.” He placed his jacket, bag and the tablet in the trunk. “Come on.”

“Ugh.” Wyatt climbed out of the car and sulked his way into the restaurant.

“Don’t get snippy with me,” Ashley growled. “I can turn right around and take you home.”

“I’m going to get bored.” Wyatt folded his arms. For being six, he could grump like a kid twice his age.

“You’re going to eat and behave. If you do, you’ll get your tablet back. If not, it’s mine for the rest of the week. Got me?”

“Yes, Dad.” Wyatt lowered his shoulders and head but didn’t complain further.

Ashley led the way across the diner to Steve and Farin. They all had at least a couple of friends at the diner. He nudged Wyatt to the end of the table. Nervous jitters filled him. He’d just been with these guys in the meeting and had been fine. Now, on friendlier terms, he wasn’t sure what the hell he felt. Scared? Worried? Why? They weren’t going to bite him.

He knew. He was in a situation with people he respected but wasn’t convinced he could completely trust. The last time he’d made a solid friendship, she’d died. Danica, although she’d been his most valued co-conspirator, hadn’t been able to go the distance. Damn cancer. Then there’d been Lane. The prick. He should’ve known Lane would be a dead end, but he’d listened to Danica. She kept telling him they’d make a great couple. At first, he and Lane had been perfect for each other. Then the shit had hit the fan and he’d seen Lane’s true colors. Lane hadn’t been able to handle sharing Ashley with Danica when the cancer got bad. When she’d died, Lane walked. He’d refused to be a dad. So much for happy endings. Ashley massaged his temples. He needed to focus on the present, not the past, so maybe he could find his future. He smiled at the group at the table.

“There’s the man of the hour.” Steve stood first. “I wondered if you’d gotten lost.” He grinned. He might have been a mild-mannered teacher, but Steve could’ve made a killing in modeling. He worked the nerdy-chic look well, although Ashley preferred his friend in the horn-rimmed glasses versus the contacts, but whatever. He wasn’t the one in bed with Steve Moore.

“Colt?” Steve nodded. “We’re ready when you are.” He waved his hand then settled in his chair. “The service here is fantastic—especially when you know the owner. Farin and I come here way too often.”

Colt? The owner? Ashley sank onto the closest chair and gripped the edge of the table. Colt Harrison. Even thinking the man’s name gave Ashley shivers. When he caught sight of the diner owner, his heart hammered. Unlike most of the guys Ashley knew, Colt wasn’t blatant about his sexuality. He didn’t seem to have tons of female or male friends fawning around him, but he reminded Ashley of a movie star. Where Steve had the boy-next-door good looks, Colt was more like a bona fide sex symbol. From his just-out-of-bed blond hair in the perfect waves, to his blue eyes and that muscled body... Ashley couldn’t expect Colt to be attracted to him, but if there was a chance for miracles, he desired to be with Colt.

Of course, he’d have to gain Colt’s attention if he wanted to get together—like that would happen. Colt probably had a girlfriend or boyfriend and wasn’t looking for a replacement. Ashley tucked those thoughts away for now. He wasn’t going to pine for a guy he was pretty certain wasn’t available. Hell, Ashley wasn’t even sure the guy was gay.

Coming out in Cedarwood had become a bit easier, but just a little bit. The coalition against gay people had gotten stronger, but Colin and his small group of unwanteds had refused to be driven out of town. Ashley still had his job at the school, despite the district knowing he was gay. Would they let him go? He couldn’t be sure. What he did know was as long as he kept his job, he’d be fine. If the district decided to rescind his tenure, then he’d have to find another job. If he was nothing else, he was a survivor.

Ashley sat at the table with his son, his friends from the support group and their children, and pondered his future. He’d been asked at the group what he wanted from his life. When he looked at the people around him, he knew—he wanted a job that he

loved, his son and a partner. Having friends was right up there on the list, but most of all what he wanted was to be happy. Unfortunately, hoping for happiness wouldn't warm the chilly nights.

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Chapter Two

Colton Harrison eyed the customers in the dining room and leaned against the half-wall separating the coffee station from the rest of the room. He'd heard his friend Steve talking to him, but he needed a moment to soak in the view. He loved owning the diner, and a packed room always made his day. He'd taken over the eatery because he loved food—not to get rich. He snorted. He wasn't going to make tons of money serving food to the small town of Cedarwood. Oh, the town wanted to be upscale and could've done with a fine dining establishment, but he hated the uppity types and really disliked wearing neckties.

He nodded to Steve. "I'll be right there." He counted the people at the table...eight. Who were the new ones? He knew Steve, Farin and Genie. Colin, Jordan and Gage had been coming in for the last handful of months, but this new person and child weren't familiar. Maybe they would be once he got closer. He filled five large glasses with iced water and three smaller ones for the kids.

"I'll get those." Cora, one of the servers, took the tray from him.

He didn't say anything as she walked away. At least someone had their head in the game. He didn't. Usually he knew exactly what was going on at the diner. Not tonight. He couldn't get his mind off the people at the main table.

He liked Colin and Farin. They'd served on the chamber of commerce board with him a few times and were nice enough guys. Steve, although generally quiet, was a cool man and Jordan...well, he refused to piss off lawmen. He liked how Jordan and Colin had gotten together after so many years apart and how Steve and Farin had

found they weren't so different after all. Cedarwood, for all its negatives toward the gay community, seemed to be the right place for gays to find happy endings.

Well, everyone except me. His happy ending wasn't going to come with a five-inch dick and a ripped set of abs. No, my future's the diner. He snorted. He could almost hear his ex snapping at him.

'You love the diner more than you could ever love me.'

At the time, he'd hated his ex, Jay, but now he knew his ex had been right all along. Colt had known early on that Jay would never be his forever. Jay hadn't been dedicated to the diner or anything else, really. Jay had wanted to stay at home all day and watch television. He'd preferred the tanning bed to an office and had only cleaned up for a night of clubbing. Once he'd hit twenty-seven, Colt had lost his appetite for the clubs. He'd wanted to settle down.

When Colt had refused to follow Jay's lead, Jay had walked. The insults about the diner had been extra barbs for the hell of being mean. Jay had hated the weather in Ohio, hated the town of Cedarwood—although he might have been on to something there—and had needed the clubs.

He shook his head and tried to forget his ex. He needed to stop living in the past. Yeah, he'd loved the diner more than he'd loved Jay. He'd gotten the job as a host at the diner, moved up to server, then manager, and three years later, he'd moved from host to owner. Getting the keys to the restaurant had been the best day of his life.

Colt crossed the room to the main table. He noticed the booths had been filled by couples and one lady with her computer. He didn't care if people used the free Wi-Fi to do work. Whatever brought in customers worked for him. Conversation caught his attention and he tipped his head.

“You’re gonna put that whole thing in your mouth?”

Colt stopped short. Who had said that? And what thing were they referring to?

“Yes, I am,” a small voice replied.

“You’ll choke on that. Slow down.”

Colt blushed. Dear God. This conversation was happening at the diner? He located the speakers and sighed. A guy and a kid...who were with Colin and Farin’s clan. Whew. “Gentlemen.” He grabbed a chair and turned it around then sat at the end of the table. “Isn’t this one heck of a boys’ night out?” He put up one hand. “Sorry, Genie. Girls, too.”

“We just had the support group meeting and thought we’d stop here to get a bite to eat.” Colin wiped his mouth with his napkin. “You know Jordan and Steve and the kids. This is Ashley Willis and his son, Wyatt.”

Colt nodded. He’d met everyone but the man beside him. “Ashley, I’m Colton, but everyone calls me Colt.” He stuck out his hand. Ashley wasn’t physically what he wanted in a guy—black hair cut short on the sides and a little longer on top, pale greenish-blue eyes and that smile. Even in his simple button-down shirt and dress slacks, the guy looked so well put together, but Colt liked his guys rugged and blond. Then there was his voice. He focused on Ashley. He’d seen the man before, but where? In the diner? Around town? Huh.

“Hi,” Ashley said. He shook hands with Colt. “We’ve been in here a few times but never with this big of a group.” His ears were tinged red and he glanced down.

“No problem.” Colt let go of Ashley’s hand but wished he didn’t have to stop touching him. Maybe he was crazy, but he could’ve sworn there were sparks.

Something deep in his gut tickled and his tongue felt sixteen sizes too big for his mouth.

“Dad, I want to go home.” Wyatt squirmed in his seat. “I’m tired.”

The little boy didn’t look a thing like Ashley. Was he adopted? Why did that matter? Colt wasn’t sure. He’d never considered himself a kid person and tried to steer clear of dating people with children. So much for the attraction.

“Finish your hot dog but eat it in smaller bites.” Ashley blushed darker red. “I’m sure you don’t want anyone to choke here at the diner.”

“No, but we’re trained to help if it happens.” Colt gripped the back of the chair. “Take your time.” Because he certainly wanted to. In his head, he said he wasn’t going to try for someone with a kid, but Ashley made him reconsider his rule against kids.

“Thanks.” Ashley rapped his knuckles on the table and turned his attention to Wyatt. “If you’re going to fall asleep at the table, then get moving.”

“Sorry, sir.” Wyatt munched on the remainder of his fries. He glanced over at Colt then at his father.

“I’ll leave you to your dinner. Enjoy.” He had to walk away from the table. If he lingered much longer, his friends would wonder about him. He knew Colin and Farin well enough, but it wasn’t like they were all best friends. He was supposed to be acting like a businessman, not fawning over a hot guy at the diner. Remember your job here, Colt.

“Hey, Colt,” Farin called. “We were thinking of having a party. Something like one of those fests they have to support different causes. Ours would be a celebration of

diversity and to tell the coalition to stuff it—but not quite in those words. Want to help plan?”

“Where are you thinking of having this fest?” Colt stayed by the table but turned his chair back to the other table. “You’ll need a public gathering permit and will have to get it all approved by the council.”

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“See, this is the stuff we need worked out.” Farin clutched his water glass and nodded to Colin. “What do you say? Want in?”

Colin dropped his fork onto his plate. “Since we’re the six at the table, why don’t we all serve as the board? It would be something for you to get involved in, Ashley, and will get you out in public more.”

Ashley’s eyes widened. “I-I don’t mind, but...” The way the embarrassment washed over Ashley endeared him to Colt. He liked a guy who wasn’t totally sure of his attractiveness and didn’t seem to flaunt it. Ashley fit that bill as well.

“We can meet here after the diner closes,” Colt offered. That would give him time to chat with Ashley, too. Maybe get to know him and decide if there was a chance they could date.

“Or we can meet in the room upstairs at the bookstore, since the kids will have a safe place to be. Here there’s not much for them to do.” Farin rattled the ice in his now empty glass. “Keeps the prying eyes of the public away until we get the plan figured out and it’s a win for all of us.”

“That’s a good idea,” Ashley said. He shook his head. “I’d rather the kids be somewhere we can keep an eye on them.” He paused. “I know, your kids are old enough to be alone, but Wyatt’s not.”

“Then it’s set,” Colin said. “Where’s the bill?”

“Call it my treat.” Colt waved off the server. “Leave a nice tip, but this one’s on me.

When did you want to meet?" He prided himself on not flashing his money, but he seemed to be breaking a lot of his rules all of a sudden.

"I'll get back to you, and thank you. You didn't have to do that." Colin stood and shook hands with Colt. "Thanks a lot."

He didn't have to cover their dinner, but what were friends for? Maybe he was crazy for wanting to impress Ashley, but he did.

While the others stood and pushed chairs in, Ashley and Wyatt lingered behind. Wyatt, for all his complaining about wanting to go and being tired, hadn't finished his dinner.

Colt grabbed a box from the stack and offered it up to Ashley. "You can take the rest home."

"Throwing us out?" Ashley managed a smile, but the light didn't quite meet his eyes. "We'll hurry up." He fumbled with the box. A couple of the fries plopped onto the table.

"We'll see you," Colin said and waved. "And we'll email with those details." He and Jordan, along with the others, left the table.

Colt preferred having a moment alone with Ashley and his son. He gathered up the plates into a stack then did the same with the empty cups. "So, Ashley. That's an interesting name for a boy."

Ashley shrugged. "My mom liked old movies and she had a thing for Leslie Howard." He still wasn't looking at Colt.

"There's nothing wrong with that." Colt carried the plates to a nearby bus tub. "I have

no idea where my folks got my name. I used to think it was a family member's name, but it wasn't. Guess I wasn't that exciting."

"I wouldn't say that." Ashley eased the few fries left on his plate and the ones from Wyatt's into the box then added the remaining part of the hot dog. "I told you there was no way you'd get that whole thing into your mouth."

Wyatt hunkered down in his seat. "Sorry, Dad."

"So that's what you were talking about." Colt removed the cups then used a napkin to wipe down the water rings on the table. He'd let the waitstaff clean the table better once Ashley and Wyatt were finished. "I wondered." He wanted to hear something saucy like that from Ashley. He'd love to show a boyfriend—possibly Ashley—what he'd like to stuff in his mouth.

"Sorry about that." Ashley blushed again. "I forget sometimes that we're in public."

"No sweat. I've heard lots worse." Not really, but he understood where Ashley was coming from. Having a kid couldn't be easy—not that he'd know. Colt had never considered himself a kid kind of person and refused to have one of his own. "If you're ready to go, let me walk you out. I could use the fresh air."

God, that sounds lame. Why didn't I come right out and say I wanted to spend a little more time with Ashley? Jesus. But he preferred to see if the sparks were a one-time occurrence.

"Thanks." Ashley tossed a ten onto the table and directed Wyatt out of the restaurant. "Come on, you." He ushered the kid toward a sensible two-door car. Wyatt climbed into the backseat of the vehicle and accepted the tablet Ashley retrieved from the trunk for him.

“So.” Colt stuffed his hands into his pockets and widened his stance. He wasn’t sure what to say. So many things filled his brain. “I’ve seen you here at the diner, haven’t I?”

“Yeah. I bring Wyatt here every so often. Not much because I’m trying to save money for a house rather than the apartment. It’s nice enough, but there’s no room and Wyatt wants a dog. Can’t have a dog in an apartment.” Ashley shrugged. “Not where we live anyway.”

“That’s smart. Where do you work?” Even though he knew Ashley had to get going, he didn’t want the conversation to end. Electricity sizzled around them. He yearned to touch Ashley again but didn’t dare. They weren’t going to end up together, so he didn’t see a need to push his luck.

“I’m a teacher at the elementary school.” Ashley twirled his keys in his hand. “I’ve got to get Wyatt home so he gets in bed at a normal time.” He hesitated. “I’m looking forward to working with you on the committee.”

Ah... He couldn’t fault Ashley for being cautious. “I am, too.” But he really wanted to get to know Ashley outside the group. “I’ll talk to you when we get together.” Unless you’d like me to call. He pulled his hand from his pocket. Hoping Ashley was attracted to him was so crazy. Ashley probably had a hundred hottie guys wanting his attention. Especially a guy who was so handsome and had a steady job? Sure, he had a kid and that was a turnoff to lots of guys, but did that bother him? Was he ready to jump into a relationship with Ashley? Not yet, but he still wanted to see what would happen if they went on a date. He could get lost in those pale eyes and not get tired of hearing Ashley’s baritone voice.

“Sounds good.” Ashley lingered a moment, not touching Colt, but the sizzle was there. He smiled then averted his gaze and rounded the hood of the car. Colt slid his hands back into his pockets and watched Ashley back out of the spot.

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He'd lost his mind, but damn it, there was a spark between them. His chest tightened a bit and blood coursed faster through his body. For the first time in a long while, he looked forward to spending time outside the diner. He'd thought Jay had been his last chance to have a decent relationship, but seeing Ashley had him thinking otherwise. He wasn't ready to jump right into a long-term relationship, but a few dates, some kissing and hot sex would be perfect. Hell, Ashley could be that one he'd been looking for. A vision of Ashley nude and begging for him came to mind. He shifted his stance to hide the growing erection. Shit. He didn't want to look like a hornball.

Colt waited until Ashley's car had disappeared from the lot before he headed back into the restaurant.

"Well?" Sarah, one of his servers, stopped him by the lunch counter. "What about him?" She rested her hands on her hips. She'd been one of his employees since he'd taken over the business. Unlike most of the waitstaff, she wasn't afraid of him or scared to speak her mind.

"What about him? I barely know him." Colt straightened the menus in the holder and kept his gaze from hers. Only a year older than him, she treated him more like a mother than a contemporary.

"But you're into him, I can tell. You never leave the safety of the diner and only visit the people on the floor when you're in sales mode. You changed." She soft-punched his arm. "He's a nice guy—well, he seems to be. He's a good teacher, too. Janel loves him for art."

Now she'd brought her kid into the equation. She didn't have to be quite so observant

or pushy.

“He’s shy and sweet. When I went to talk to him during conferences last spring, he reminded me of a scared rabbit. Once I told him I wanted to discuss ways to improve Janel’s art skills at home, he loosened up.” She turned Colt around, forcing him to look into her eyes. “If he’s in the single fathers society, then he’s gay and might be on the hunt for a date. Give him a shot. Besides, everyone felt the tension between the two of you. You both looked like you could combust at any moment.”

“Looked like you could combust at any moment.” Jeez. He shoved his hair off his forehead. “Single fathers society? Where’d you get that?”

“The coalition calls them awful names. Other than referring to them as the support group, some of the people around town refer to them as the single fathers society. They’re a special little conglomerate of nice guys who happen to be gay and aren’t out to bring hell to Cedarwood. What the coalition doesn’t realize is that there are more people in town who don’t care about these guys’ sexuality than there are ones who do. I like Colin and his group. It’s a good thing for them.” She poked him in the belly. “Maybe even a good thing for you and Ashley Willis. Don’t walk away from this because of that dick ex-boyfriend of yours. Tear Ashley’s clothes off and fuck him until you both drop.”

“Why?” he asked, half-challenging her. He had no intention of going back to Jay, but he wanted to hear her out—especially the fucking part.

“If you do go back to your ex, I’ll kick your butt. I might be your employee, but I’m not above knocking some sense into your thick head.” She grinned and winked. “Understand me?”

“I do.” He sighed. “I’ll be in the office until closing. I’ve got paperwork to do.”

“Right,” she replied, drawing out the word. “If that’s what you’re calling it.” She strolled away, leaving him alone by the counter.

Damn straight. Paperwork...and getting my mind off Ashley. He headed back to his office and closed the door. He wasn’t about to get into the dating pool. No committee or coalition would change his mind. He wasn’t going to fall for Ashley Willis and he refused to fall in love.

Now if his dick and his brain would agree, he’d be fine.

Chapter Three

Saturday morning, Ashley finalized his lesson plans for the end of the month. He knew where he'd go with the general idea for each grade. After teaching for eight years, he'd been able to streamline how he ensured the kids met the benchmarks for their age and grade.

"Dad, the mail is here." Wyatt thundered into the bedroom and plopped letters onto the desk. "When we get our own house, I want one with the little hole in the door. It's like Christmas when the mail comes." He opened one of the envelopes. A packet of orange smiley-face stickers plopped onto the desk. "Mine!" The boy proceeded to slap the stickers all over his arms and shirt.

"Those aren't for personal decoration." Ashley flipped through the mail. The water bill, the electric bill and the reminder that the garbage bill was due along with an envelope he didn't recognize. The return address was in Cedarwood, but not a place he knew. He drummed his fingers on the envelope. Something wasn't right. They didn't get envelopes from places he didn't recognize. Everyone knew everyone else's business in town.

"What?" Wyatt peered at Ashley. He'd added stickers to his face. The orange dots reminded Ashley of oversize freckles.

"Nothing. Where's my cell?"

"I'll get it." Wyatt groaned and wandered out of the room.

Ashley snorted. “Do you have to be so overly dramatic?”

Wyatt huffed back into the bedroom and offered up the phone. “Maybe. I don’t know what that means.”

“You’re being grumpier than you need to. I just asked for my phone.” He swiped the screen and tapped the Internet app. Where was this address at? He inputted the information and clicked the Search button. Within seconds the results came back.

The Coalition for Order in Cedarwood. Order? He closed the Internet app and dialed Colin’s number. If anyone would know about this new group, it would be Colin. After two rings, someone answered.

“Hi, Colin?”

“This is Jordan. Colin’s indisposed,” Jordan said. “How can I help? Or can I help?”

“Well, maybe you can. Have you ever heard of the Coalition for Order in Cedarwood? This is the group that left shit bags on doorsteps, isn’t it? Or am I wrong? I thought I read about them in the newspaper. They sent out mailers not long ago, punking members of the LGBTQ community—it wasn’t anything bad, but they’ve been getting worse as time goes on. That time might not have had anthrax, but the next time could. I’m a little freaked out.” He turned the envelope over and resisted the urge to tear the end open. He’d been touching the envelope, and if there was anything odd on it, the substance was already all over his hands. Fuck. “It’s kind of funny. The group’s acronym is COC. They sent an envelope. I’m hesitant to open it. I doubt they’ve got something illegal in here, but I can’t shake the uneasy feeling.” He’d mentioned the acronym because it made him chuckle, but he didn’t feel like chuckling at all.

“Huh. When did you get the envelope?”

“Just now in the mail. Wyatt brought it in. Should I be worried?” His heart hammered. Now what? Is there something wrong?

“To be safe rather than sorry, have Wyatt wash his hands and put him in the shower. Hot water and soap. I’ll get the department to send someone over and I’ll be there in ten. Leave the envelope on the desk or wherever you’ve got it and wash your hands. Someone will be there shortly. Okay?”

“Okay.” He felt no better as Jordan clicked off the line. “Hey, Wyatt? Come here.” What else had Wyatt touched? Shit. “Wyatt?” He hurried into the living room where his son sat on the floor, tapping away happily on his tablet.

“I need you to get cleaned up. Like going to the hospital clean.” He scooped the tablet into his hands. “I mean it.”

“Why?” Wyatt shucked his shirt on the floor and strode half-nude into the bathroom. “What’s wrong?”

“I want you to get cleaned up. The cops are coming over.” That sounded so wrong.

“Because I complained yesterday? Dad, I’m sorry.” Wyatt’s eyes widened and his bottom lip trembled. “I won’t be bad.”

“Who said they were coming to take you? They’re coming over because I got a strange letter. Now strip.” He hurried his son into the tub and turned on the water. He kept an eye on Wyatt while he listened for the knock at the door. Christ. If Jordan was worried, then he didn’t feel much better.

Ten minutes later, Jordan and another officer showed up at the apartment. The two officers examined the letter and surrounding area.

“It’s not registering as being covered in anything. We’ve opened it.” Jordan’s shoulders sank. “It’s not dangerous, but it’s not good, either.”

“Why?” He stood beside his friend and read the words on the page.

The Coalition for Order in Cedarwood had graciously invited him to join their group. Their pledge was to restore the sanctity of marriage in the town of Cedarwood and to ensure the town wasn’t overrun by negativity. And they wanted him? Was he negative? No. Was he interested in the sanctity of marriage? Sure, but something wasn’t right.

“Colin and Farin get nasty letters, at least three or four a month. One had powder in it, but it was detergent. Since it looks like the group is trying to reach more people, I’d rather be safe than sorry.” Jordan nodded to his partner. “Thanks.” The other officer left the apartment, but Jordan remained. “I don’t exactly want to have to deal with this. It’s horrible.”

“But it’s not dangerous.” Ashley gave Wyatt his tablet back. “Okay, why don’t you go into my room and watch a movie while I talk to Officer Hargrove?”

“Sure, Dad.” Wyatt strolled into the other room, tablet in hand and happy.

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“This is why you wanted to have the festival? To combat this crap?” He balled up the letter. “This isn’t fair. Why would they do this?”

“Because some people are miserable and others aren’t. Those who are want everyone to be. It’s like when Colin and Farin have free book day down at the store. They get all those free comic books and paperbacks sorted out to give to those who don’t have any. You should see the lines. It’s fantastic because they do get books and so forth into the hands of those who love comics and books, but then there are those who have the notion that because there is something free, they damn well better get it. If they don’t? There’s hell to pay.”

“That’s crazy.” But he knew all too well how people could be. Everyone wants something for free. “So what do we do?”

“Well, Colin and Farin have the idea for the festival started. Farin went to the city about the permits today. Once he finds out what we need to do, we can move forward.” Jordan shrugged. “Would you mind working with Colt on the food and art?”

Would he mind? No. He wanted to do more than work with him. He wanted to run his hands all over Colt’s body, starting at his chest and working his way down. He yearned to taste Colt and hear Colt whisper in his ear. God, he had it bad for Colt. Would Colt want to work with him? Probably not. “Sure.” A guy can hope.

“Perfect. I talked to him yesterday. He’s got plans for food. Would you believe he was an artist?” Jordan widened his stance and folded his arms. “He used to work on displays in the museums at Kent. Got his degree in art, too.”

“He did?” Huh. He never would’ve pegged Colton as an artist. Now he really wanted to talk to the guy. “I’ll give him a call if you have his number.”

“I do.” Jordan whipped out his phone. “I texted it to you. Call him.” He tucked the phone away again then strode to the door. “They’re targeting us and trying to get us to change who we are. I don’t have any plans on switching teams. I finally got my life straightened out and I’m in a good place with Colin. We’re engaged.” He grinned. “Thought I’d be a bachelor for the rest of my life.”

“I’m glad and excited for you.” Kind of. He didn’t doubt Colin and Jordan were happy and completely right for each other, but he wished he had that sort of relationship. He wanted to be loved.

“I’m certain Farin and Steve aren’t going to switch sides either. So it would appear the coalition is trying to sway the wrong people.”

“We don’t want them to sway anyone. If you’re gay, you don’t choose to be gay. It’s what you are.” Ashley thought about Wyatt. Gay or straight, he’d love his son no matter what, but he also hoped the kid never had to worry about his sexuality and people wanting to change him.

“Very true, but some folks won’t change their collective minds.” Jordan shrugged. “Since there was nothing malicious about the letter, I’m keeping the image on file. They didn’t out you or send this because of your sexuality. They could’ve sent these to everyone, but I can’t be sure. Keep me in the loop if you have any other correspondence with them or if they do something beyond a letter.”

“I can do that.” Ashley escorted Jordan out of the apartment and watched as his friend left the parking lot. Well, shit. If the coalition knew about his sexuality enough to send him a letter, then he could run into issues with the school district. He’d never kept his sexuality hidden, butjeez. He’d seen how Steve was nudged out of his job. Sure,

Steve was just a full-time substitute teacher, but still.

“Dad?” Wyatt tucked against Ashley’s side. “I heard you and Officer Hargrove talking. Who hates us?”

Wyatt was too smart for his own good. “Come on.” He led his son back into the apartment and closed the front door. “Sit.”

Wyatt plopped on the couch and kicked his feet. “So who hates us?”

“No one hates us. Hate’s a very strong word.” He debated how to explain the situation. Six-year-olds shouldn’t have to deal with the narrow-minded ideals of others, but Wyatt was in a unique situation. “Some people don’t like others who are gay.”

“Like you.”

“Yes, and those people want to say mean things.”

“That’s mean. Why?”

“Because they can. I don’t have any better explanation.” He wished he did.

Wyatt scrunched up his nose then groaned. “Bullies. So many bullies.”

“That’s about right.” At least he’d found a way for Wyatt to understand. Wyatt’s mother would’ve been proud. Heck, she probably was proud and looking down on them.

“Are you going to call the guy from the diner?” Wyatt scooted to the edge of the couch. “You should. He was nice.”

“And do what? Ask him out?”

“Yes.” Wyatt nodded. “I’ll call Grandma. She’ll drive.”

“I’m not calling Grandma in order to go on a date.” Besides, he had no idea if Colt would even agree. “How about I let you call Grandma once I make a phone call? We haven’t seen her in a week, so she’ll like a visit.”

“Cool.” Wyatt wandered out of the room, probably to find his tablet or to finish the movie.

Ashley stared at his cell phone and debated his options. What would one little call to Colt do? Would it really hurt anything? If he used the festival—whatever it was going to be—as the starting point, then no. If he called simply asking for a date, then yeah, he had a pretty good chance of being shot down. But he wasn’t asking for a date.

He retrieved the message with the cell number and dialed. He held his breath as the line connected and rang. Colt would probably be at the diner and busy. No way he’d actually answer.

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“Hello? This is Colton Harrison of the Cedarwood Diner. How can I help you?”

“Holy shit.” Ashley slapped his hand over his mouth. He hadn’t expected Colt to really be on the other line, to sound so damn sexy when he answered, and he hadn’t planned out what he was going to say in return.

“Hello? Who is this?” Colt asked.

His voice cracked as he answered. “Hi, this is Ashley from the support group.”

“Oh, hey. I was just thinking about you.”

Thinking about me. Yeah, right. “Were you? Jordan gave me your number. He suggested you and I work on the art and food selections for the festival. I think he might be putting the proverbial cart before the horse, but it did give me a reason to call you.” Shit. He hadn’t meant to spout out that much. He’d wanted to stay cool and collected. Not Ashley. The only time he could be cool under pressure was in the classroom.

“I like the way he thinks. Say, I’m done at the diner in half an hour. Are you available to meet somewhere? Oh wait, you’ve got a kid.”

Ashley pinched the bridge of his nose. Colt knew about Wyatt—well, no shit. He’d been at the diner with Wyatt. He rolled his eyes. This was why he shouldn’t have given Colt a second thought—most single guys without kids didn’t want to date a guy with kids. “Yeah, I have a kid and I’m the only parent.”

Colt didn't answer right away and it sounded like he was talking in muffled tones to someone else. The line crackled and something clunked. "Okay. I had to go to my office. The restaurant floor was too noisy. So here's the thing. I know I sounded like a dick when I mentioned the kid. That wasn't my intention. I'm not used to guys with kids, is all."

"No harm taken." Not really. Mistakes happened and he wasn't beyond his fair share of them. But he couldn't deny a twinge of irritation. He'd also run into too many jerks who wanted the kid out of the way.

"Second, meeting at a bar or something with a kid won't work, but what about the ice-cream shop? My treat."

He glanced up at the school picture of Wyatt on the wall. "I owe Wyatt a phone call to Grandma, but sure. We can work in a trip to get ice cream. When?" His foot bounced, and he balled his free hand. Putting himself out there sounded so much easier in his head. Now that he'd actually done it, fear gripped him. No, this wasn't a date, but it could lead to something like maybe a few more longing glances and a couple of brushes of his hand on Colt's.

"How about around two? Then you'll still have time for Grandma and we can get some planning in." Colt chuckled. "I agree, though. I don't see the point in planning art or food without some sort of idea whether or not the festival will even happen."

"Maybe this was Jordan and Colin's way of putting us together." His eyes widened as he realized what he'd said. Fuck. He hadn't meant to utter that out loud, even if the very thought warmed him to the core.

"Remind me to clock the bastards when I see them next." Colt laughed again, the sound warm and rich in Ashley's ear. "No, I can't do that. Neither deserves that."

Ah, so Colt wasn't interested. At least he knew and could act accordingly. He shook his head to clear his mind of the lusty thoughts. "Anyway, I'll get Wyatt around and meet you at the ice-cream shop at two. Deal?" Maybe by then Colt would have forgotten his slip of the tongue and they could both get past the attraction that wasn't there.

"You're on. See you in a while."

Ashley dropped the now silent phone onto his lap. His foot stopped bobbing and he unclenched his fist. He massaged his temples. A dull ache had formed behind his eyes. If he was going to screw up, he had to go big-time, didn't he?

In his mind, he heard Danica urging him on. You're tired of being lonely. You've been doing this on your own for too long. Let someone in. If that someone happens to be Colt, then cool. If not, the right guy will come along. Don't sell yourself short because you're afraid of getting your heart broken. Lane was a pissant who didn't deserve you.

He sighed. She might have just been a voice in his head, but she was right. He did deserve better and Wyatt deserved to be happy. If that meant getting out there, then so be it. Colt might not want to be the guy, but that didn't mean Ashley had to keep himself hidden away.

"Hey, Wyatt? Want some ice cream?" Ashley called. He should call his mother, but that could wait.

Wyatt raced into the room. "Chocolate with sprinkles and gummy worms?"

Although the kid's choice sounded gross, he nodded. "Whatever you want."

"Yeah!" Wyatt pumped his fist and ran to the mat where they kept the shoes. "I'm

getting extra sprinkles.”

Giving the kid so much sugar probably wasn't smart, but he'd get to spend time with Colt. He should forget Colt and his attraction, but the desire was too strong. He warmed all over his body and blood rushed to his dick. Things could be looking up...in more ways than one. He'd only spent a few minutes with Colt and he refused to ignore the way Colt made him feel. If he'd been single and childless, he'd have gone into the alley or office with Colt for a quick blow job or a mutual hand job. Ashley stifled a grunt and adjusted his jeans. Damn, his dick pressed against his zipper. He'd gone too long without sex. Thinking about a guy who might or might not be interested had him hard as steel. Oh well. Once the meeting and the rest of the day were over, he'd tuck Wyatt into bed and head to his own room for a quick jack-off session to get Colt out of his system.

Or to fantasize about the hunky restaurateur. Either worked. He was tired of believing the worst in people and himself.

Ashley stepped into his loafers and grabbed his keys. Better to be positive than to not be anything at all. Thinking positive meant he believed there was a chance for them and a chance was what he needed.

Chapter Four

Colt sat in his car in the parking lot of the strip mall and grocery store. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so giddy over a simple meeting. He checked the clock on the dash. Five minutes until two. He might as well head into the store. He remembered Ashley drove a two-door car, but the rest of the details were a blur.

He opened his car door and climbed out of the vehicle.

"Look what the cat dragged in." Ellis, one of Colt's exes, strolled up to the car. "I never expected to see you here. Then again, I was beginning to think you were part vampire, what with the way you never seem to leave the diner. Allergic to sunlight, are you?"

Colt smiled. He'd forgotten about Ellis, but apparently the guy hadn't forgotten him. "I'm fine with sun. I should probably get more."

"How are things? Business seems good based on the cars always in the lot. Have you found a guy who can handle your other lover?" Ellis leaned on the fender of Colt's car.

Although a tad stocky, Ellis was a handsome man. His dark eyes glittered when he talked, and he smiled often. The longer they stood together, the more Colt remembered the reasons he and Ellis hadn't worked out. The gigantic tattoo of the hand on Ellis' neck grabbed his attention. The thing had unnerved Colt when they were together and hadn't gotten any less bizarre with the passing of time. He didn't care if guys had tats or piercings, but not on the neck, head, face or the tops of the

hands. Maybe he was old-fashioned, but he appreciated men without markings in such obvious places.

“The diner is fine—I assume that’s the lover you’re talking about—and no, I don’t have a boyfriend right now. Wasn’t really looking.” Colt noticed Ashley’s car pull into the lot and park a row over. Ashley left the vehicle first then helped Wyatt out of the backseat. “Sorry I’ve got to run, but I’m here to meet someone for ice cream.”

Ellis glanced over his shoulder in Ashley’s general direction. “Him?”

“Yes. I’ll talk to you later. It was nice to see you.” Not really, but he preferred to be polite. Colt looked both ways before he crossed the aisle then fell into step beside Ashley. “Hi. How are you both today?”

“You didn’t have to leave your boyfriend. We’re good. We could’ve waited.” Ashley allowed Wyatt to go first when they reached the door to the ice-cream shop.

“He’s not my boyfriend.” Colt bristled. Ellis would never be his other half ever again. “He was a learning experience. I’d be lying if I said I missed him, but I was taught some lessons with him, so it was worth the pain.” Will Ashley be worth the hassle, too?

“I see.” Ashley herded Wyatt into the store first then Colt. He lingered behind.

Was Ashley checking out Colt’s ass? He hoped so. Colt turned, but Ashley stood at the door and spoke to a woman. The lady didn’t appear happy. What the hell was she upset about? Colt snagged Wyatt’s hand to be sure he didn’t lose the kid then ventured closer to Ashley and the cranky woman.

“You really need to consider our offer.” She pinched her eyebrows together and glared at him. “It’s your duty as a parent.”

“I know my duty as a parent. I’m not seeing why you feel the need to get involved. We’re fine,” Ashley snapped. “Thank you, though, for your concern.”

“You’re an educator. Do you really think this is best for our children?” she asked.

“What I think is that you’re confusing my ability to do my job with things that have no bearing on that job. This isn’t the 1950s, okay?” Ashley glanced over at Colt and Wyatt and blushed. “I’m late for an ice-cream date with my friend and my son.” He strode away from the woman and joined Wyatt and Colt at the end of the line. “Sorry.”

“About what? You haven’t done anything wrong.” Colt let go of Wyatt and put the kid between them. “What’d she want?”

“To convert me.” Ashley folded his arms and the muscle in his jaw twitched.

“What?” Colt blurted. He’d lived in Cedarwood for eight years and had never been accosted by anyone in order to be converted. He wasn’t ashamed of his sexuality, but he also wasn’t going to advertise.

“Go ahead, Wyatt. Get what you want.” Ashley dropped his voice to a murmur. “I don’t want to discuss it in front of my son.”

The protective streak in Ashley appealed to Colt. “Want to get the ice cream and go to the park? You can talk and he can run off the sugar.” Besides, he wasn’t happy about Ashley’s irritation. This should’ve been a nice getting-to-know-you situation, not a trip to the ice-cream shop ruined by a pushy person.

“Let him eat first.” Ashley ordered his ice cream, a single scoop of chocolate in a dish, and a cone with a single scoop of chocolate for Wyatt then paid. He pointed Wyatt in the direction of one of the open tables. “We’ll be over there.”

“Cool.” Not wanting to be left too far behind, he ordered his single scoop of vanilla dipped in chocolate. “How much do I owe you?” he asked the girl behind the counter.

“Nothing. Your friend paid.” She grinned and offered him napkins. “Have a good day.”

His friend paid? How awesome was that? Colt strolled over to the small table and plopped down opposite Ashley. “Thank you. You didn’t have to get mine.”

“It wasn’t much.” Ashley shrugged and a smile fluttered on his lips for a split second. He kept his gaze low as he ate the chocolate ice cream.

Wyatt zipped through his cone in no time. Chocolate ice cream dribbled down his chin and a sprinkle stuck to his cheek. “I’m done.”

“Looks like.” Ashley wiped Wyatt’s face then retrieved a wet wipe from his bag and removed the sprinkle from Wyatt’s cheek.

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“Dad, stop.” Wyatt scrubbed both hands over his face and groaned. “I’m not a baby.”

“You’re wearing your ice cream,” Ashley said. “Want to go next door to the park? I’m ready to get out of here.”

Not because of him, Colt hoped. “Works for me.” The store wasn’t that busy, but he welcomed the fresh air outside. He gathered up his napkins and keys. He wanted the chance to talk to Ashley without much tension.

“Cool.” Wyatt grabbed Ashley’s hand and yanked him through the small store then out to the sidewalk. He didn’t stop pulling until they reached the park. “I’ll be on the slide and swings.” He raced away, leaving Ashley in the dust.

“Is he always this energetic?” Colt asked. He licked his cone and the latent sexuality of the move wasn’t lost on him. If only Ashley would look to the side and notice. He dragged his tongue over the vanilla cream. I can lick your dick with the same zeal.

“He’s had sugar, so he’ll be extra energetic for a while. I try to regulate how much he gets, but it’s a Saturday.” Ashley finished his ice cream and tossed the empty container into the trash. “As far as he’s concerned, it’s a great day for him. A treat and the park... He’s in heaven.” He smiled but didn’t look at Colt.

“But you’re not having such a wonderful time. I’ll try to be a better ice-cream date when we get together again.” Colt preferred to cut on himself if it meant making his partner or friend happy. “I won’t even lick my cone like a perv.”

“You’re fine.” Ashley nodded to a bench close to the swings and slide. “How about

we sit?” He put his hand in the air and stopped. “Wait. Did you say...?”

“Uh-huh. Go sit.” He followed Ashley to the bench and as they walked, he gawked at Ashley’s ass. Damn. His mouth watered. Yeah, that was the kind of ass he wanted to grab. Once he got Ashley to loosen up, then they could make jokes and get to know each other better.

Ashley settled on the bench and crossed his ankles. “It’s the crap at the ice-cream shop. I usually get beyond it, but this time...she pissed me off. I can’t think when stuff like that happens.”

“What did she say?” Colt sat beside him and draped his arm across the back of the bench. Part of him wanted to touch Ashley and comfort him, but the rest of him held back. They weren’t much more than friends and here he was trying to push things. He couldn’t deny the attraction. Did Ashley feel it, too?

“She was from this coalition. Said she wanted to help the gay community convert to heterosexuals. I’ve never heard anything like it. Then she told me I was screwing up my kid because if he grew up with two dads, he’d never understand that women were good and should be part of the family.” Ashley dropped his hands onto his lap. “Christ, Wyatt has a mom.”

“I’d assumed so. You tend to need a male and a female to make a kid. Parenting them can happen in lots of different ways, though.”

“She’s dead.” Ashley dipped his head. “It’s messed up.”

“But he’s got you. That’s pretty good, or is someone challenging the adoption or something? Your old partner?” This time Colt couldn’t resist. He trailed his fingertips down Ashley’s neck. “Things happen.” He understood part of the reason Ashley seemed so down. He wanted to perk the guy up—in more ways than one.

Ashley didn't say anything right away, but he seemed to relax into Colt's touch. He sighed. "There isn't a partner trying to gain custody." He finally looked over at Colt. "She wanted a baby and I helped her."

Colt frowned. Wait. What had Ashley said? She? "Hold up. I know I heard you say she. Are you trying to tell me you were the sperm donor?" Part of him wanted to be irritated, but honestly, he knew how babies were made. A female was needed in order for the whole process to work.

"Yes and no. I slept with her. The only woman I'd ever fucked and only for the sake of having a kid." Ashley chuckled. "She trusted me. If she was going to have a kid, then she wanted the guy she knew would stand beside her to do it. Me."

His respect for Ashley grew. What a remarkable guy—even if he'd stuck his dick in a pussy. "That's awesome. No, really. I'd love to have a friend who's so dedicated."

"When she died, I took custody of Wyatt. Her folks are dead and my mom didn't want to raise kids. I don't blame her. She's sixty-two. She probably could've raised him, but he's my responsibility." Ashley flattened his palms on his thighs. "I guess that's what irritated me about that lady at the shop. She had no idea what I've been through or what I've done to make sure Wyatt has a good childhood and yet she felt the need to insult me. So I'm gay? Who gives a fuck?"

"I don't care what you are." But knowing Ashley was gay did make a few things a lot easier. He'd known since he'd met Ashley at the diner after the group meeting that his new friend was a homosexual and hadn't cared. What he wanted was for them to try a date or two without the snarky woman interfering. He wanted to keep touching Ashley and explore the sparks between them.

"You're one of the few." Ashley stared in the general direction of the swings, where Wyatt happily kicked his feet. Up and down, higher and higher with each swing.

Although he'd relaxed into Colt's touch, he didn't seem interested otherwise. Colt didn't mind. He'd keep working on Ashley.

"This is why we need the festival. Some folks in this town don't give a rat's ass about who anyone else is tunneling. Some care too much. The support group and anyone else who wants to join in needs to show the rest of Cedarwood that being gay isn't a curse. We're like everyone else." He splayed his hand on Ashley's back. Now he understood why Colin and Jordan wanted him to get together with Ashley. The sizzle wasn't imaginary and he wasn't reeling from the lack of sex. He liked the geeky-looking art teacher. He wanted to curl himself around Ashley and find all the spots on Ashley's body that made him moan.

Ashley glanced over at him then returned his attention to the swings. He cleared his throat. "Your boyfriend is a lucky guy."

"I don't have a boyfriend." Colt stretched his legs and slid down in the seat a bit. "My last relationship ended because he said I loved the diner more than him. He was right." He loved the diner more than he loved a lot of people.

"You're a stickler for work?" Ashley folded his hands but remained bent over. "Or was he that boring?"

"Number two. When you own a business, you can't take days off to goof around. If things sink, then it's your livelihood. Jay didn't get that. When I first took over the restaurant, I had to pour my money into fixing it up. The place was up to code, but I had standards. He wanted to club. We didn't mesh and he walked. I learned a few lessons from him, too, but it wasn't all a waste. I needed that solo time to get the diner sorted out. If I want to now, I can take some time off. I know my workers and I trust them to keep the place from burning down." He'd never talked about Jay to anyone else, but with Ashley he wanted to open up and rip open his scars and get beyond the past.

“Makes sense. I’ve always wanted to work with kids at a school. At first, I thought I’d like to work in a high-school setting. I student taught at an affluent school and that experience opened my eyes. Kids will be kids, but the older they got and the more money they had to play with...the less they respected anyone.” Ashley stood. “I’m going to push Wyatt awhile on the swings. Come along?”

“Stay put? And miss this conversation? Heck no! This is the best conversation I’ve had that doesn’t involve a messed-up order, angry patrons or an incorrect plate of chicken.” I’m pretty sure I’ll follow you anywhere. Colt stretched then adjusted his pants when he stood. He needed to hide the burgeoning erection. Yes, he liked talking to Ashley, but a vital part of him wanted to tunnel the teacher’s ass. He crossed the grassy expanse and watched Ashley’s butt.

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Colt leaned against one of the uprights of the swings frame and crossed his ankles. He stuffed his hands into his pockets. How had he not noticed Ashley before? The man made him laugh, smile, think...horny as hell. God, he hoped the bulge behind his zipper wasn't that obvious—not yet. He'd vowed he'd take things slow the next time he decided to start a relationship. Something about Ashley made him reconsider his vow. Yes, there was a kid involved, but he kind of liked Wyatt, too.

Something Colin had said once came to mind. "Love me, love my kid. If you can't, then we can't do this." Ashley no doubt felt the same and he should. He had to protect his kid.

"Anyway, so I student taught high school kids with endowment issues. They believed they deserved As because they showed up. I challenged them and some of the parents in the district made my life miserable. The parents pretty much wanted to buy good grades for their kids instead of making the kids work. That's when I realized I wasn't cut out to teach older kids. I did a second student teaching stint in an elementary school and found my calling." Ashley pushed Wyatt higher on the swing. "Then Danica mentioned Wyatt and things fell into place."

"I'm sure they did." He couldn't miss the opportunity to joke with Ashley, although thinking of Ashley fucking a woman bothered him. He had nothing against women, but that body, if it was as magnificent as Colt suspected, needed to be worshiped and adored by a man—him.

"You're bad." Ashley grinned and winked. "But that did happen." He blushed from his hairline to his collar. "What did you do before you owned the diner?"

“I worked in a museum.” Colt shifted his weight from his right foot to his left and recrossed his ankles. “I went to college with the intention of becoming an artist. There wasn’t any money in art and my then-boyfriend liked to cook, so I learned to cook. When I ended up being better than he was in the kitchen, he left. I didn’t care. I could do something besides paint, so it worked out. I spent time in the museums in Cleveland and Detroit then came to Cedarwood.”

“I’m glad.” Ashley resumed pushing Wyatt and his smile widened. “It wouldn’t be the same without you.”

Colt bit back a laugh. This was why he liked Ashley. The guy knew how to make him feel like a million dollars. The longer he spent with Ashley, the more he wanted to get to know him better. He’d grown fond of the art teacher. Hell, he wanted to pick up his paints and create again. Between their artistic abilities, their sexuality and the cause, they could be unstoppable. Unstoppable sounded just about perfect to Colt. He couldn’t wait to get started.

Chapter Five

The next night, Ashley hurried through Cedarwood to the grocery store. He'd sworn he'd bought milk the last time he'd gone to the store. But no. The second he poured cereal for Wyatt, he remembered having walked past the cooler and thinking he had plenty of milk. Wrong.

So here he was, pulling into the store parking lot at nine-thirty in the evening to buy milk. Good thing his mother was available to come over and stay with Wyatt while Ashley ran his errand. He didn't want to take his son out so late, in the rain and on a school night. Then again, he'd rather be home, too.

He left his car and tugged his hoodie over his head. He didn't care if he got wet or if his hair looked like shit, but he had the hood, so why not use it? Maybe he could slip in, get the milk, pay for it and leave before anyone saw him.

"Ash?" Bella Norwood hurried up to him as he ventured into the store. "I thought I saw you."

"Yeah." He removed his hood. So much for being incognito.

"This is crazy. I thought you didn't come out after dark," she said. "You're like a reverse vampire or something. You're only out and about in the sunshine." She grabbed a cart, then gestured to him. "Need one?"

"No. I'm here on a milk trip." He'd known Bella for a few years but hadn't spent much time around her outside the parent teacher organization meetings. She was an

acquaintance, nothing more.

“My kids go through milk like you wouldn’t believe.” She stayed beside him as he headed down the first aisle. “I’ve heard good things about your teaching. You’re popular.”

“I do my job.” He wasn’t going to shake her. Drat. “I should get moving. Mom’s with Wyatt.”

“Oh, sure.” She touched his arm. “But...I wanted to ask you if you’re worried.” She tipped her head. “I mean, in this environment...”

“What are you talking about?” He stopped. “You’re making no sense.”

“I’m asking about you being gay, hon. You’re not worried about it? You’re in the school system and out in public,” Bella said. “That’s pretty exposed.”

This time he tipped his head. What the hell? “No, I’m not. I do my job and the students seem to be flourishing.” He nodded to the end of the aisle. “I should go. See you.”

“Ash.”

She wasn’t close enough to him as a friend to use that name and he didn’t appreciate her calling him by that. “It’s Ashley or Mr. Willis.”

She urged him forward. “Honey, you should be careful. I heard the coalition is trying to chase gays out of Cedarwood. The whispers among the parents are rampant. You should be worried about being forced out. How would Wyatt feel?”

His irritation grew the deeper down the aisle he went. Why’d she have to bring Wyatt into the equation? His son wasn’t in danger. He had his grandmother and his father

and his friends. Ashley gritted his teeth. This was supposed to be a quick run. Walk in, buy the milk, pay for it, then go home. Simple. “I’m in a hurry.”

“You don’t care about how this will affect Wyatt?” Bella grasped his arm. “I’m concerned.”

“I am, too.” He stopped in his tracks. “My son is the most important thing in my life. I think of him first. If the coalition doesn’t like me because I’m gay, then that’s on them. I’m comfortable in my own skin and how I’m raising my son. I don’t try to imprint my students with my views on life. I teach. That’s it.”

“You should slow down and lower your voice,” she said. “Really think about what you’re doing and how it might look to others.”

He hadn’t realized he was shouting. Was he? He shook his head. “I conduct myself with decorum.” He spotted Colt. Fuck. Was everyone at the store at this hour? He wanted to hide—after he got the damn milk.

“Hi.” Colt strode up to Ashley. “Hey, Bella, are you here for groceries?”

“Why else would I be at a grocery store?” she asked. She narrowed her eyes. “Huh?”

Good question, but Ashley appreciated the diversion.

“Well, you’re doing a great job of annoying Ashley and making a scene in the salad dressing aisle.” Colt folded his arms. “So, I’ll ask...are you done?”

“We were just talking,” she said. “It’s nothing.”

“You keep bringing up my son,” Ashley said. He sighed. “I need to go.” He wasn’t going to be able to hide his embarrassment and irritation for much longer.

“I see.” Colt nodded to Ashley. “I’ll catch up to you. I wanted to discuss food options for the fest.”

“Sure.” He had nothing better to do. “I’ll be somewhere in here.” Ashley shook his head and ventured to the back of the store. He didn’t understand what was going on, but when he spotted the milk coolers, he focused on his errand. He selected one of the jugs, then closed the cooler. His thoughts turned to the interaction with Bella. She didn’t have his or Wyatt’s best interest at heart. She wanted to be nosy. Someone at the most recent meeting probably mentioned the coalition. Had they mentioned to her that he’d come out? Possible. Knowing Bella, she’d simply targeted him as one of the few gays she knew. Whatever. He hadn’t done anything wrong.

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Ashley made his way back to the front. The faster he paid for the milk, the faster he could go home.

Colt rounded the corner and strolled up to him. “Hi again.”

“Hi.” He clenched his jaw. He wasn’t sure what to say. Did Colt really want to discuss food options? Did it matter? He didn’t need Colt to stand up for him. He could handle himself. He liked having Colt as a friend, but still.

“Hey.” Colt clapped Ashley on the shoulder. “She was out of line. Don’t let her get to you.”

“She’s got the right to be nosy.” He clutched the jug. The milk chilled his skin. “I don’t have to like how she spoke to me, but I can’t tell her to hush.”

“Maybe, but that doesn’t mean she can encourage you to leave town. You and your son are safe. This is supposed to be a place where anyone can raise their family. Not straight families only—everyone.” Colt massaged Ashley’s shoulder. “Keep your head up.”

“I will.” Right now, he wanted to collapse. He hated having to be strong all the time.

“Want to sound more enthusiastic?”

“No.” Ashley sighed. “You know how it feels to work with negativity in the air. It’s crazy. We’re being ourselves and being punished for it. Because we don’t love who they—whoever they happen to be—say we should. That’s garbage and the world we

live in.” His voice cracked. “I don’t want to raise my son in that environment, but I have no choice.”

“We can change it. No, we will change it.” Colt let go. “I’ve got your back and we all look out for one another.”

He massaged his forehead. “I know.” He didn’t doubt he had a good group of people around him. The gay community in Cedarwood wasn’t gigantic, but they were loyal.

“You’ve been insulted and you’ve got the right to feel that way, but try not to let it bother you.” Colt stepped in close. “I care about you. You and Wyatt are important to me.”

He didn’t know Colt well, but the attraction seemed bigger than a passing flirtation. He liked knowing Colt appreciated him. It didn’t hurt Colt was so easy on the eyes, either. “Thanks.”

“You’d better get your milk home.” Colt grinned. “Bella won’t bother you any longer.”

“Appreciated.” He relaxed, despite being tired of the hatred in town.

“You’re my people. You, Colin, Farin, Steve, Jordan...all of us...you’re part of our tribe.” Colt winked. “Don’t forget it.”

He chuckled. “Well, okay. Thanks. I’ll see you and we can actually talk about food options for that festival.”

“I’ll text you.” Colt waved.

Ashley headed up to the counter. He wished the trip had been uneventful, but then he

wouldn't have seen Colt. He liked the diner owner. They could be tight—as friends. As anything else...time would have to tell.

Colt waited for Ashley to leave the store and head to his car. Once happy Ashley was safe, Colt turned his attention to Bella. The nosy priss. Who'd put her in charge and why did she feel the need to center her venom on Ashley? He'd done nothing wrong.

"Don't start with me." Bella held tight to her cart. "You can't bully me."

"Who said anything about me bullying? You did a good job of running Ashley Willis out of here." Colt stood in her path. "Leave him alone. You're the PTO leader. Act like it. Every parent is welcome. He's a parent."

"He's gay," she hissed. "So are you." She paused. "Let me guess. You're with him?"

"Whether I'm with him or not is none of your concern. You're a public figure, just like you told him he is. You should start acting like you're being watched by the public." He stayed in front of her cart. "Understood? People are paying attention."

"Or what? You'll chew me out? You gays stick together," Bella snapped.

"We're humans. We should look out for one another, no matter what," Colt said. "But no, I won't yell at you again."

"Good. It's poor form for a businessman to act the way you are." She notched her chin in the air. "See if we have any further officer meetings at the diner."

"Do what you feel is necessary." Normally he'd argue more for her to reconsider her decision, but why? She had her mind made up. Him trying to correct the situation wasn't going to happen, especially now that he'd stood up for Ashley and made a spectacle. Bella should've known better, though. She'd picked a public space to argue

with Ashley. If Colt had seen them, then others must've, too. No doubt.

He left her in the aisle and made his way to the frozen food section. Buying a few microwave dinners wasn't the healthiest thing he could do, but he needed a break from diner food and didn't want the hassle of preparing something fancy. He snagged a few different plated items, then headed to the registers. His thoughts turned to Ashley. The innocence in Ashley's eyes got to Colt. Yes, the guy was a father and tonight he'd appeared a tad worn down, but he was still young and sweet.

"Colt." Farin joined him in the line. "Fancy meeting you here so late. Don't you eat at the diner?"

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“Most of the time, I do.” He chuckled. “But not every day.” He paid for his dinners. He’d seen Ashley with the others. Maybe Farin would have a different perspective on his situation with Ashley. “Farin.”

“Yes?” Farin put his items on the conveyor belt. “What’s up?”

He held on to his bag and stood at the bagging end of the line. “It’s late, but do you have a couple of minutes?”

“Sure.” Farin paid and grabbed his bags. “Follow me to the car.”

He walked alongside his friend but couldn’t muster the words right away.

“What’s up?” Farin unlocked his vehicle. “Don’t you have time to work on the food for the festival? We’re still planning it out, so if you have to walk away, I understand.”

“Oh, no. I’m still trying to get with Ashley on it, but we’ll come up with something.” He hesitated. “You all paired me with Ashley... What do you think of him?”

“Ashley? Steve knows him better, but I like him.” Farin leaned against the rear fender. “He’s quiet and works hard. Wyatt can be a handful. Ashley’s not got an easy time of it. He does have his mother to help, though. Why? Aren’t you gelling with him?”

“No, we’re good.” They’d be fantastic as friends. Too bad his heart yearned for Ashley.

Farin frowned. "Then what?"

"I came to the store tonight to pick up a couple dinners, but when I rounded the corner, I noticed he was being targeted by a PTO mom. Maybe she was part of the coalition, but I'm not sure. Either way, she was giving him shit and I didn't like it. I know he was uncomfortable."

"I wish they'd stop." Farin snorted. "They don't."

"No, and I had to step in." The bag crinkled in his hands. He glanced around and didn't see Bella. Good. "Ashley looked rattled."

"I bet he was. They know how to cut deep and salt the wound," Farin said. "Ashley's trying hard. He wants to be liked without seeming fake. He's a genuine person."

"I get that." Ashley struck him as the type to speak his mind but need a few moments to wind himself up to the point he could.

"Maybe he needs another set of hands besides his mom." Farin grinned. "Ask him out. I'll bet he'd love that."

"What if he's not interested?" Why in the world had he blurted that? He should've said no thank you, but he appreciated the suggestion.

"Sure appears you are," Farin said.

"How I feel isn't important. He has a kid and I have the diner. I can't drop the diner and Wyatt comes first," Colt said. "You know I'm not a kid person."

"I see." Farin nodded and said nothing right away. "I get the feeling you've thought about this."

“Stop trying to get us together.” He didn’t have to be so belligerent about the situation. Ashley hadn’t done anything wrong and Farin was just being pushy, but innocent.

“Why? You’re already considering asking Ashley out. That’s why you want to know about him. You’re getting the goods so you can make an informed decision.”

He groaned. Farin didn’t have to be right.

“Okay, so my honest opinion—even if you don’t want it—is to spend time with Ashley. See where things go. Don’t try to shut anything down. Let whatever will happen...happen. If things get exciting, then they do. If not, then you know. He might like you, too.”

Everything Farin had said was the opposite of what Colt had wanted to hear. He’d hoped Farin would talk him out of thinking about Ashley. That he’d point out the age difference and mention Ashley was married to his job, the way Colt was stuck with his at the diner. Then there was the kid aspect. Colt wasn’t comfortable around children.

“You don’t like that?” Farin’s smile widened. “I’ve been in your shoes. I thought Steve wasn’t right for me. I came off like an asshole and almost missed out on the best thing to happen to me. I checked myself and now I’m happy. Tell me you’re so happy you don’t need someone. Do it. I don’t think you can.”

“Okay.” There was no point in arguing. “Thanks.”

“You’re going to fight it, but once you take things to the next step, you’ll be relieved.” Farin shook hands with Colt. “Relax. We’ve all been there and you’re going to be fine.”

“I will.” He sighed. “Thanks.”

“Get some rest and send Ashley a naughty message.” Farin slid behind the wheel of his car. “You won’t regret making the effort.”

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He waved. “I will.” He walked over to his own vehicle. He sat in the driver’s seat and locked the doors before whipping his phone out. Despite his better judgment, he typed a text to Ashley.

Hope you made it home okay. Let me know. I’m worried about you.

He hit Send before he could think too hard about what he’d written. Within seconds, his phone pinged with a new message—from Ashley.

I did. Thanks. Will text you tomorrow about the festival. Got some ideas and am excited to work with you. Night.

Well, shit. Ashley didn’t hate him. There was a chance they might have something beyond this one incidence. He wrote another text.

Sounds good. Night.

He tossed his phone onto the passenger seat then sped out of the lot. He hadn’t blown the chance with Ashley. Score one for him. Now that he’d texted his friend, an odd relaxation swept over him. He could go home with a clear conscience and the knowledge he’d done a good thing. Ashley was a nice guy and thinking of him as a friend wasn’t awful. Maybe it was a good thing Farin, Colin and the others had pushed him to add Ashley to his orbit.

Chapter Six

Ashley scrubbed both hands over his face and sighed. In the last few days, he'd exchanged texts with Colt. Nothing exciting, but it was communication. He'd tried to call Colt Wednesday and Thursday nights, but the line had gone straight to voicemail. Either Colt had been busy or hadn't listened to his messages. Now it was Friday night. He'd driven past the diner, but the place had been jumping. No way he'd get a chance to talk to Colt.

Why was he beating himself up with desire for a man who wasn't interested? No, Colt sort of seemed interested, but gave off a strange vibe. Like he wanted to be romanced but couldn't take the next step. Then why did Ashley want to keep trying? Because part of him desired for Colt to change his mind. As much as he believed he could accept Colt as a friend, he still wanted a shot with him.

Instead of stopping by the diner, he'd driven to his mother's home. The voicemail from his mom rang in his head.

'Come over so we can visit and talk.'

Whenever she said that, she wanted more than a visit and the talk was never good.

"Doesn't Wyatt look so happy out in the backyard?" Brenda Willis, Ashley's mother, asked.

"Yes, Ma, he does." Of course the kid was happy. He had a swing set to play on and a tree house. Any kid would love the freedom of a backyard for play, especially a kid

like Wyatt, who spent so much time cooped up in the apartment.

Ashley balled his fists on his lap. He shouldn't be so tense. This was his mother and her house. He should feel comfortable there. But he didn't. She kept plastic slipcovers on the couch and chairs and plastic on the carpet. She refused to allow dust to collect on her knickknacks. He hated bringing Wyatt here because the kid was a regular kid—he made messes.

But she was Ashley's mother and not visiting her seemed harsh.

"You don't have to sound angry." Brenda sat next to him on the couch. The plastic snapped and clicked as she moved. "I'm just across town, but you never want to be here. Wyatt does."

"You have a big yard. He loves that," Ashley said. He hated himself for feeling so unhappy. His phone buzzed in his pocket. Now who wanted him? He eased the device from his back pocket and swiped his thumb across the screen. A text. From Colt? He could only hope.

"You're distracted." His mother swatted his leg. "More phone business?"

Ashley checked the message. From Colt. Yes! He pulled up the screen and read the words.

What about an all-inclusive kind of thing? Like have everyone have a chance to speak there? Booths and such for everyone? Let me know what you think. C

The ideas did sound good. They wanted to make the event inclusive. No matter how people felt about the LGBTQ community, they weren't barred from taking part. The idea was smart, but what if the negatives outweighed the positives? What if there was a problem? He shouldn't think so badly of the people in town. Besides, he should've

been worrying about Colt. He loved spending time with Colt, but their closeness hadn't gotten beyond chatting about the event and their pasts. He needed to call Colt and put himself out there.

"Ashley Rowan Willis."

Shit. He snapped his attention from the screen to his mother. "Sorry." He shoved his phone into his front pocket. "No more twiddling with the device."

"What are you thinking about?" Brenda asked.

He couldn't tell her the truth. Hell, when he'd come out to her, she'd thrown him out. Things were better between them, but every other time he'd mentioned a guy in his life, she'd bristled. "I'm thinking about the support group and why you wanted us to come over."

"The support group?"

Ashley left the couch and strolled through the house to the kitchen. He watched Wyatt giggling on the swing and kicking his legs. "The LGBTQ support group. It helps. I have someone to talk to and can work out some of my problems." That wasn't the half of it, but he wasn't going to go into those details.

"Good. You need someone. I wish Danica was still around. Maybe the two of you could've gotten married. I'm sure Wyatt would've liked to have his mother and father living in the same house." Brenda stood beside him. "Don't you agree?"

"No, Ma, I don't. I'm gay. Marrying Danica would've been cruel to both of us and awful for Wyatt. She wasn't in love with me. She loved Kelley, but Kelley wasn't interested in being a parent. I've told you this. I helped her create Wyatt, but we both knew the score."

“You could’ve gotten along for him.” She pointed to the window. “Wyatt needed you together.”

“He needs a family that loves him and a home. I’m his family and the apartment is our home. I wish you’d understand and accept that.”

“I’m trying.” She sighed. “No, I’ve accepted it. I asked this last time because I wanted to be sure.”

“What do you mean?” He stared at his mother. “You’ve never wanted to accept my life.”

“You’re right. I had a hard time with you...wanting to stick your...in...a guy.” She leaned against the sink and gripped the edge of the countertop. “It’s hard. I expected you to grow up and get married. To start a family and live down the street. I wanted to share pictures of my grandkids and perfect family with my friends.”

“You can’t share pictures of Wyatt?” He understood her having issues with his sexuality. She wasn’t the only person in the world to be upset because they’d raised a gay kid. He didn’t agree with her feelings, but she was still his mother.

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“I can.” She paused then sighed. “You’ve got your support group and I have mine.” She faced Ashley. “I started talking to a few ladies at the nursing home. When I’m not working with the patients, I’ve got friends and we discuss our lives. They know about Wyatt and you. My one friend Colette mentioned her son was gay, and before you ask, no, I didn’t try to put you two together. What I did do was ask her how she dealt with him. She thought I was crazy. It took listening to her chatter about her family for me to realize I was the one losing out. You and Wyatt don’t visit often and I’m not exactly dying to visit you—or I wasn’t.”

He stared at her. She had to be losing her mind. His mother, although he loved her, had never fully accepted him. For her to all of a sudden change her mind blew his.

“I’m sorry I’ve been a shitty mother.” She patted the front of Ashley’s shirt. “I know you never thought you’d hear that, but it’s true. I’ve missed out on Wyatt’s baby years and seeing him get this big because I’ve wanted to keep you at arm’s length. I was wrong.”

“Yeah.” He swallowed past the lump of emotion in his throat. Holy shit. She wasn’t kidding. He didn’t believe his ears.

“To that end, I want to make things better. Wyatt’s still little enough that he doesn’t get what was going on. I can still fix things with him with little damage. I’ve got a lot of work to do with you and I accept that.”

“Ma...wow.”

“Oh, you haven’t heard the wow yet.” She swatted his chest again, smoothing his

shirt. “I wanted you to come over and let Wyatt play in the yard because I want him to live here—with you.”

“Ma, I am not living with you. You kicked me out right after high school. Just because things are tight doesn’t mean I’m going to come back. I made my bed, so to speak, and I’m living with it. We’re happy.”

She frowned. “I’m not expecting you to live here with me. Good Lord.” She shook her head. “I meant, I want you and Wyatt to have the house.”

“Wait, so you’re going to soothe your soul and give us the house? Come on, Ma.” Ashley shrugged away from her. He’d never had the best relationship with either of his parents, but he never would’ve guessed his mother would do something so...odd.

“Ashley, stop. I want you to have the house because I’m not going to use it.”

That stopped Ashley in his tracks. “What? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing is wrong.” She stopped opposite him and cocked her head to the side. “I got your attention, though. That’s what I wanted.”

“You got it all right.” And worried me sick. “What’s going on, then?”

“My friend Millie—you remember her, she was the one with the four dachshunds—has cancer. The dogs are gone and so is her husband. Since I’m a registered nurse, I’m qualified to stay with her and to care for her. It’s bad and I can’t let her go through this alone.” His mother grasped his hand. “That’s the thing here. Going through this with Millie, seeing her losing her battle...it made me understand what you’re going through. You lost your best friend because of cancer.”

He nodded, unsure of what to say. Tears stung behind his eyes. Thinking about the

lady with the four wiggly dogs brought back memories. She'd been his mother's best friend and now she was dying. The emotions—loss, devastation, hurt, anger—all came back in waves. He hugged his mother as she clung to him.

"I've been going to her house all summer. I should've been trying to get in touch with you more, but she needed me. Anyway, we talked about her daughter, who is now her son. Just like you, he was living his life and being himself. It just took him forever to realize who he was inside. That's what helped me put the pieces together. I missed so much. I can't do that any longer."

"Thanks, Ma." He hugged her and sagged in her embrace. God. She'd been through a lot in order to understand her own kid.

"I want you to have the house." She cleared her throat and let go of Ashley. "You're going to need more room for Wyatt. That apartment isn't going to work forever. And what about you? You're going to want to have a boyfriend over and you can't in that apartment. Here, you can. There's room." She wiped tears from her cheeks. "Please?"

"Ma." Her idea was smart—kind of. "What are you going to do when...the inevitable happens? You'll want to come home."

"I've thought about that, too. I'm getting an apartment. Not yours, but one in the retirement community. Like staff quarters, and that way I can work with the other patients who are going through what Millie is dealing with." She picked up a piece of paper. "Look. I've got most of this worked out. All I need is for you to agree so I know the house isn't going to sit empty."

"Ma, I have to work out the lease. I've got another six months on the agreement." But having space for Wyatt would be good. The boyfriend matter was something else entirely, and honestly, he had no plans on getting one. For all he knew, the situation with Colt would be just for the event and done when the event ended.

“Can you sublet?” Brenda asked. She flicked a wisp of silver hair away from her face. “Maybe one of the other teachers or something?”

“I don’t know.” He massaged his temples. “It’s a good idea. It really is. I want Wyatt to have space to play and a room that’s not right next to mine, but I need to think this through. Okay?”

“I understand.”

“You’ve hit me with a lot.” He shook his head. “Last I knew, you were ashamed of me for being gay and against me having a kid. You wanted me to get married to a girl. Now you’re okay with me and my choices. I want to believe you, but it’s hard. This is a total change for you.”

“Which is why I’m not trying to force anything. If it works, then it does. If not, then fine.” She smiled, but the smile wobbled. “I made mistakes and I’m sorry. If I’d known I’d lose out on so much time with you and Wyatt, I’d have done things differently.”

Before Ashley could say anything else, Wyatt bounded into the house. His hair stuck up, plastered there by sweat, and his cheeks burned red. Perspiration glistened on his forehead. “Dad, I’m hungry.”

“We’ll get something.” He didn’t expect his mother to feed them. But there was another option. “Why don’t we all go up to the diner?”

“Yeah!” Wyatt pumped his arms. “We can see Colt, too.”

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Shit.He hadn't meant for Wyatt to blurt that out.

"Colt?" His mother grinned, this time much stronger. "Is this your new guy?"

"He's Daddy's new friend." Wyatt grabbed his grandmother's hand. "Let's go. "

"Yay." His heart had been in the right place when he'd suggested the diner, but his stomach soured. He'd taken a huge leap.Well, no, not really.Maybe Colt wouldn't be there and he wouldn't make a fool of himself. He'd hope for that.

Ashley followed his son out to the car and waited for his mother to lock the house. Moving into the place would be a good idea. The more he thought about a future in an actual home, the more he liked the plan. He slid behind the wheel, drove across town to the diner and parked in the small lot beside the building.

He held his breath as he left the car. This would be the test for his mother. Usually they didn't go out together in public. Even with Wyatt, she preferred to keep things under wraps.

Brenda eased out of the vehicle and held the door for Wyatt. When he jumped onto the pavement, she grasped his hand. "Are you coming, Ash?" She smiled. "I haven't been here in years."

He blew out a long breath. She acted like she wanted to be there.Score one for the Ashley team.He followed his mother and son into the diner. Next step—hoping Colt wasn't there, and if he was, Ashley prayed he wouldn't make a fool of himself. He liked Colt and wanted to look smooth, not like a doofus.

“Welcome. How many...” Colt rounded the half-wall and shook Ashley’s hand. “Hi, you.” He grinned and chuckled. “Nice to see you again, Wyatt. Is this your mother?”

Ashley’s eyes widened. So much for smooth. The man was trying way too hard.

“I’m not Wyatt’s mother.” Brenda giggled. “I’m his grandmother. This is my son, Ashley. I hear you know each other?” She wriggled her brows. “Maybe more than just as friends?”

Colt’s smile strengthened. “We’re good friends, yes. How about I show you to a booth?” He ushered Brenda and Wyatt forward, then stepped between them and Ashley. He offered Ashley another smile, this one softer.

“Sorry,” Ashley muttered. “Ma’s pushy.” She also seemed to be eating up Colt’s attention. At least one of them was getting him to notice.

“She’s fine.” He winked. “You are, too.”

“Colt.” Jeez. What the hell? Where is this coming from? Colt had touched him, but he hadn’t done anything else. Ashley bit back some of his confusion. Was that a compliment? Or a come-on? If it was either, then he liked the comment. He stopped at the appointed booth but didn’t sit. “I need to go to the restroom. Wyatt?”

“I’m good,” Wyatt said and snuggled against his grandmother. “Let’s look at the menu.”

“We’re fine. Go ahead,” Brenda said. “Want water?”

“Yes.” Embarrassment washed over him. He needed to get away from the group for a minute. He wasn’t even sure why he was embarrassed. Because he was attracted to Colt? Or because he knew his attraction was one-sided? He escaped to the bathroom

and stood in the silence of the room. Everything was happening too fast. First his mother had changed her mind about his sexuality, then made the offer of her house, and now he was introducing her to his unrequited crush. He splashed water on his face and sighed. What next? Colt would waltz into the bathroom and ask him out?

The door creaked. When he glanced in the mirror, he noticed Colt behind him. Well, fuck.

Chapter Seven

Colt closed the bathroom door and wiped his hands on his pants pockets. “Hey.” He hadn’t expected to see Ashley that early afternoon and he loved that Ashley was there. “I didn’t want to corner you in here, but I wanted to talk to you.”

“I know. I’ve been bad about getting back to you. Well, no. I tried to call and I texted but got no answer.” Ashley dried his face and shook his head. “Anyway, I brought Ma and Wyatt here because we needed food and it’s a good price. I’m not trying to push or step in or anything. I figured you weren’t interested the other afternoon when we got ice cream. No harm done. I get when I’m not wanted.”

Colt smiled and kept the chuckle at bay. Ashley was babbling. He had no idea and Colt hadn’t been bold enough with his affections. Knowing he’d gotten under Ashley’s skin was cute and endearing. “Stop.”

“Yeah, I’ll shut up now.” Ashley tossed the paper towel. “It’s bad. I can stand in front of a group of six-year-olds and not feel self-conscious. When I talk to you, I feel like I’m the six-year-old. All gawky and goofy.”

“You’re adorable.” Colt crossed the room and curled his fingers under Ashley’s chin. The sizzle returned and grew stronger.

“Oh...really?”

“Uh-huh.” He stared into Ashley’s eyes. God, the man’s handsome. Reluctant, careful and oh so sexy and he wanted Ashley in his bed. He breathed in the scent of Ashley’s

cologne. He could get addicted to the woodsy aroma.

“I should get back to Ma and Wyatt. They’ll think I fell in.” He blushed from his hairline to his collar. “I mean... That sounded dumb.” He shuffled away from Colt, only to have Colt move with him and block his path. He bumped into Colt, brushing his chest against Colt’s. A shiver ran the length of Colt’s spine.

“It sounded fine.” Colt swiped his thumb along Ashley’s chin. “Call me later? Like eightish? I’m off and I’d like to see you.” He stared at Ashley’s lips. What would Ashley taste like? Would he return the kiss if Colt tried?

“I’ve got Wyatt,” Ashley blurted. He also didn’t pull away. “You can come over to discuss festival stuff, but it’ll be the three of us.”

Festival stuff. Shit. That wasn’t what he’d meant at all. “I suppose we can talk about the gathering for a while. How about I bring dinner?” He stepped closer until Ashley’s breath feathered over Colt’s cheeks. “I didn’t get a chance to say this before, but I like you.” Now he’d been blunt. Ashley could accept Colt’s advances or stop things right now.

Ashley’s lips parted as he gasped. “You like me? But...”

“Yeah,” he replied and planted his mouth on Ashley’s. He didn’t want to hear any buts, especially not when he’d prefer to do more than say he liked Ashley. He wasn’t above meeting for a quickie in the bathroom or a blow job in one of the stalls, but not with Ashley and not at the diner with patrons there. He wanted so much more from Ashley. Besides, Ashley’s mother and kid were waiting on him. Far be it for him to keep a man from his loved ones. There’d be time for sex or whatever later. He nipped Ashley’s bottom lip then pulled away and licked his lips.

“Colt.” Ashley wobbled on his feet. “But you weren’t interested.”

“I never said that.” Colt kissed him once more. He’d never tire of tasting Ashley. “I simply took my time in approaching you.”

“I-I need to get back to the table.” Ashley slid his hands along Colt’s chest. The simple touch seared Colt to the core.

“If I don’t hear from you by eight, I’ll call you.” He swatted Ashley’s ass, then directed him out of the bathroom. So what if someone saw them together. He wanted to stake his claim on the sexy art teacher—even if only for a night.

He headed to the kitchen and washed his hands, then jumped in and helped sort out the different orders. When the server brought back the order from Ashley’s table, Colt added a few extra fries to Wyatt’s plate and bulked up the salad. He allowed the server to deliver the food but watched through the window as she placed the plates in front of them. Wyatt squealed, and the mother gushed thanks. Ashley slid his gaze to the window. Was that amusement? Or more embarrassment? Colt wasn’t sure.

He ducked into the kitchen and out of Ashley’s sight, but stayed where he could see his crush. He wasn’t a kid person, but he could see why some would decide to become kid people. Having a kid certainly held perks—ordering from the kid menu, going to fun places like amusement parks... He turned his attention to work in the kitchen. By the time he glanced out of the window, Ashley wasn’t at the table. Neither were Wyatt or Ashley’s mother. Had he scared them off? Probably not, but he would’ve liked to have been told goodbye.

He headed out to the register to check the stock of candy and mints.

“Excuse me.” One of the ladies from the group table approached him. “Are you the owner?”

He braced himself. Either she’d have a compliment for the diner or a complaint about

her food. “I am. How can I help you?”

She stared at him. Her brown eyes glittered and the corner of her mouth kinked. “You’re part of that single father group, aren’t you?”

Single father... Ashley. “No, I’m not. I don’t have any children, unless you consider the diner my child. It does require most of my attention.”

“I see.” She glanced over her shoulder. “I’ve seen you with members of that group. I hear they’re discussing a festival. Something to promote gayness in our town?”

He frowned. Promote gayness in the town? For the love of Pete. “You’re mistaken. The group wanted to create a family gathering situation to celebrate living in Cedarwood. One’s sexuality doesn’t factor into the plans.”

“Are you sure?” She folded her arms. “If you’re hanging out with that bunch, then can we assume you’re gay, too?” She raised her voice. “You are gay, aren’t you?”

He hated a bully—especially one trying to ruin not only his day but his reputation and his diner, too. His sexuality made no difference to his ability to run the diner.

“Not going to answer.” She turned around and held up both hands. “Ladies. This gentleman won’t tell. What do you say? Since he won’t tell, we won’t pay.” She whipped back around to face him. “Well?”

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“That’s dining and dashing. That’s against the law.” He snapped his fingers and pointed to the girl behind the counter. She picked up the phone, ready to press the buttons.

“The Coalition for Order in Cedarwood sees your lack of transparency as a threat to the order in town. How do we know you won’t do something crazy? You’re gay. You might turn our young people gay.” She smiled and narrowed her eyes then dropped her voice to a whisper. “What do you have to say about that?”

“Call the cops,” he said to the girl at the register. He flattened his hands on the glass counter. He had to be careful how he answered the protesting woman. Something told him he’d be eating the cost of ten meals because he doubted any of the women would pay.

“Ma’am, I’m thrilled to be associated with the single fathers group. They are a wonderful group of men concerned with keeping Cedarwood a place for families to be. If that’s something you’ve got a problem with, then I’m sorry.” He spread his fingers out and forced himself to keep calm.

“An associate.” The woman held up both hands. “Then we’re no longer going to be patrons of this filthy establishment. There are rats and vermin here.” She stomped out the door and the other ladies at the table followed. They left half-eaten plates of food and half-full glasses of water, soda and juice. He’d be able to cover the cost of the food. That didn’t bother him. What did was how they’d stiffed the waitress. The girl had nothing to do with his situation other than by being employed by him.

He signaled to two of the other waitresses and stepped up, helping to clear the table.

A couple of other patrons placed money on their tables then left. He bit back a groan. If the coalition had the plan to run gay people out of town by scaring off their customers, then they were temporarily winning the fight. He wasn't going to leave. Cedarwood, save for the few irritating people wanting to get rid of the gays, was his home. He'd been bullied in school and college and refused to submit to another bully. Let them try to close him down by keeping people from the diner. Screw them.

Within an hour, half the diner was empty. The patrons who remained stayed in their seats. Were they afraid to leave? He glanced out of the main window and realized why people weren't going anywhere. The coalition ladies had banded together outside the diner. No signs yet, but now he heard the shouting. Goddamn it.

"Hey, gay, go away," one screamed.

"Clean up our town and get out," another shouted.

He forked his fingers into his hair and gritted his teeth. If they wanted to protest, then fine, but did they have to scare the hell out of his customers?

Colt stood in the middle of the dining room and held up both hands. "May I have your attention? The diner isn't going to close because a few people aren't happy with my friends. If you're a fan of the diner and want to continue eating here, then you're in luck. We're staying open. If you're given trouble when you leave, please let me know. Thank you." He strode over to the counter and picked up the phone.

Colt dialed Jordan's work number. After two rings, Jordan answered.

"Officer Hargrove. How may I help you?" Jordan asked.

"Hi, Jordan, it's Colton. I've got a question," Colt said. "I've just had an issue with the coalition. A bunch of the group just left without paying. We called the cops and

supposedly they're on their way. I'm not seeing anyone. Help?"

"You called the main line? Jesus." Jordan groaned. "They should be there shortly. It's a crime to dine and dash."

"It is," Colt said. "But the thing is, they're outside the diner and picketing. No signs yet, but plenty of shouting. I've got patrons afraid to leave. Can you help?"

"Are they on your property or the sidewalks?" Jordan asked.

He peered out of the window again. "Sidewalks, but some are on the walkway leading to the parking lot."

"According to the info I have, a squad car is on the way. Until they show up, do you have an alternative exit? Like a fire exit? It won't help those wanting to enter but will for those wanting to leave safely."

"I can use the fire exit, yes." Colt motioned to the waitresses. "I'll take care of everything."

"Good deal. Hopefully this ends with little issue. Good luck." Jordan clicked off the line, leaving Colt in silence.

He placed the phone back on the charger. "Okay, folks, this is what we're going to do. We'll use the fire exit. I'll turn off the alarm until the patrons are safely out. I'm going to try to get police presence so this doesn't get out of hand. I'm sorry things went to hell. I didn't expect this to happen. I thought the coalition was harmless. I guess not." He picked up the phone again. "If you're worried about your job or your safety, then speak up. I'll personally escort you to your vehicles. If you feel you need to leave until this blows over, I understand."

A couple of the girls cashed out and one of the cooks left with them. All three promised to come back on the next open day. Colt thanked them, but he knew none would return—not until the shit blew over.

Fifteen minutes later, a squad car pulled up in front of the restaurant. Jordan and another officer climbed out and helped the patrons to their vehicles. Once the building was cleared of patrons, Jordan made his way to Colt. “We can keep watch tonight while on patrol. Other than that, we can’t do much. They’re peacefully demonstrating. That’s not against the law.”

“They’re on my property,” Colt said.

“Actually, they’re on the sidewalks away from the building and aren’t blocking the entry any longer. There’s nothing stating they can’t be there. Where they aren’t permitted is on the diner property. I suggest you clean up and head home. Find a friend you trust and stay with him or her.” Jordan wriggled his brows. “How about with Ashley? He seems hot for you. He also is hot.”

“I know.” Colt surveyed the damage in the dining room. Four servers and two cooks remained. Cleaning up would take an hour, tops. “Girls, I’ll jump in after a bit. The faster we get this mess taken care of, the faster you can go home. I’ll pay you for your full shifts. Yes? Let’s go.”

While the servers scattered and bussed the tables, Colt tugged Jordan aside. “You mentioned Ashley. It’s kind of because of him that this all happened. Kind of.” He couldn’t throw all the blame on Ashley. With his luck, the coalition had been simply waiting on a chance to strike. They’d gotten lucky when Ashley happened into the diner.

“Look, I don’t think it was him. He’s hot and you’re attracted to him. Go for it. Forget these people. Some want to cause trouble no matter where they

are—Cedarwood, Cleveland, you name it.” Jordan shrugged. “The best you can do is show them gay people, those in the LGBTQ community, aren’t any different than they are and we won’t be pushed around.” He chuckled and elbowed Colt. “If you happen to find comfort in the arms of a certain handsome art teacher, then even better.”

“You’re really wanting us to get together.” Colt cleared a table and scraped the food into the refuse bucket. “Why?”

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“Because I’ve seen Ash around town. He’s quiet and sweet. He needs the right guy to open him up—pardon the pun.”

“And I’m that guy?” Colt asked. Not that he’d turn Ashley down. He’d tried to come on to the guy but wasn’t sure how to read him.

“You might be. If I’ve learned anything since I reconnected with Colin, it’s that anything can happen and the last thing you expect is probably what you need.” Jordan removed his radio from his clip. “Excuse me.”

Colt waited until the officer had exited the building before he resumed bussing the tables. When he checked the clock, more than an hour had passed. He groaned and shoved the last batch of plates into the dishwashing machine then closed the cover. At least he could leave those dishes in the machine overnight. He locked the front doors, cashed out the till drawer and retrieved the tape. Once he’d deposited the cash and receipts into one of the money bags then into his briefcase, he switched off the lights in the dining room.

Colt herded the waitstaff out of the back door, switched off the kitchen lights and locked the back door. Once everyone had made it to their respective vehicles, he climbed behind the wheel of his own car. Someone had tucked a piece of paper under his wiper. Instead of getting out to take the paper off his windshield, he drove over to the cop car. He parked beside Jordan and removed the piece of paper before he handed it to the cops.

Jordan nodded and waved as Colt pulled out of the lot. He didn’t feel much better by leaving the police in charge of his diner, but he didn’t have much choice. He pulled

his cell from his pocket and dialed Ashley's number. He'd take the money into wherever Ashley lived, but he wasn't ready to go home.

"Hi," Ashley said. "You're early. I just dropped Wyatt off at Ma's. He wanted to stay there tonight."

"Probably just as well. Her place is secure, right?" Colt asked.

"I thought so. I grew up there, but now you're scaring me. What's wrong?"

"Right after you left, the coalition struck and ran a bunch of my customers off. Wyatt and your mother should be fine but keep an eye out." Colt shuddered. "I thought I'd come over. I know it's forward, but I don't want to be alone right now." This wasn't the reason he wanted to get into Ashley's pants. He'd planned on something smooth, with romance and kind gestures...not with fear and threats involved.

"Understandable. I'll call her and let her know and will keep an eye out for you. I'm at the Westminster apartments, 1B. Right on the end, second drive. There's guest parking right next to my unit."

"Cool. I'll see you in five." Colt clicked off the line in order to allow Ashley time to phone his mother. Otherwise he'd have stayed on the phone with him. He felt safer hearing Ashley's voice. Dating Ashley wasn't dangerous and Colt was scared. After all the shit at the diner, he wanted to be with Ashley, where he felt safe.

He pulled into the small lot and parked under the streetlight. Colt grabbed his briefcase, his wallet, phone and keys then left the vehicle. He clicked the lock and headed for Ashley's apartment. The hairs on the back of his neck prickled. Was someone following him? He wasn't sure, but he'd feel better once he made it into Ashley's place.

He strode up to 1B, but before he could press the doorbell, Ashley answered the door. “Hi. I thought we’d go to Ma’s. It’s more secure and I can keep an eye on Wyatt. Do you mind?”

Colt clutched his things. “Right now, I’ll go wherever you are.” He liked how Ashley thought ahead. They’d be safer if they were all together. Plus, then he’d get a chance to spend quality time with Ashley.

Ashley pulled the door shut, twisted his key in the lock then slipped his arm around Colt. “You’re shaking. It’ll be okay. I don’t know how, but it will. Let’s go.”

The simple gesture both comforted Colt and gave him hope. He could get past this craptastic situation and maybe, just maybe, give a real date with Ashley a shot. He leaned into Ashley’s one-armed embrace. For now, he thanked God he had a good friend in Ashley.

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Chapter Eight

“How about I drive?” Colt squeezed his key fob. “I’m not sure why, but I want to be in control of this situation.” He could accept Ashley being strong for him for so long, but right now he needed to know he had his friend with him.

“Fine by me.” Ashley fell into step beside him. “It’s nice not to have to be in charge for a moment. Which one is yours?”

“The dark-gray SUV. I like having the extra room.” He opened the door for Ashley then tossed the money bag and his wallet into the backseat. He’d worn the wrong pants to shove his wallet into his back pocket. If he did tuck his wallet into his pocket, he’d get a cramp in his back. Not sexy. “Hold this.” He pushed his cell phone into Ashley’s hands.

“No problem.” Ashley settled on the passenger seat.

Colt rounded the hood. He glanced up at the windshield. Ashley looked so right in the car. He had to be nuts. They were friends—acquaintances—at best. They hadn’t gone beyond the quick kiss and embarrassing infatuation. Not embarrassing for him, but awkward because they hadn’t had a chance to decide if they were even compatible. He’d gone from crushing to pushing. He couldn’t deny he wanted to fuck Ashley three ways into next week, but come on. He needed to know the tension between them wasn’t just one-sided.

“This is nice.” Ashley clicked his seatbelt into place. “Better than my little car.”

“But it’s the best you can afford? I’ve been there. All through college, I had this piece-of-crap car that had duct tape holding the fender in place and a bungee cord keeping the trunk shut. She looked like hell, but she was reliable. I only got this when she died and I could afford something better.” He checked the backseat for the money bag and his wallet then shoved his key in the ignition. “Ready?”

“I am.” Ashley sighed. “What happened? Tell me everything.”

Everything? Sure, but not yet. He’d hit the high points first. “The coalition decided they needed to picket. They don’t like having a gay man running the local watering hole.” He backed out of the parking spot and started to exit the lot. “Where are we going?”

“Ma’s on Oleander Lane. Can’t miss the house. It’s the only split-level on the street.” Ashley kept the phone on his lap but reached for Colt’s right hand. He laced their fingers together. “Ma and Wyatt are all I’ve got left, but I’m here for you.”

“Yeah?” He stole a glance over at Ashley in the light of the red traffic signal. He was smitten. Definitely attracted to Ashley. He squeezed Ashley’s fingers. God, being with Ashley felt good. He shifted in his seat and hoped his erection wasn’t visible.

“What about you? Got any family around?”

“No,” Colt replied. He cleared his throat. “My parents are long gone. I was a late-in-life baby. Mom thought she couldn’t have any kids. She hit thirty-nine and gave up the birth control. I showed up nine months later.” He grinned. The longer they talked, the easier the conversation came. “Dad was forty-one. He died a couple years back from a heart attack and she went a year later. Loneliness, I think. They were happy together and it’s just as well.”

“Ma would adopt you. She’s like that—taking in charity cases. Plus she thinks you’re

cute,” Ashley said. “She seems to have turned over a new leaf, too. I don’t know.” He pulled his hand away from Colt’s and folded it in his lap.

Colt missed the comfort of Ashley’s touch. “What do you mean?” He turned onto the side street leading to Oleander Lane. He almost wished the drive would last longer. He didn’t want to leave the privacy of the car and their conversation, but he did want to find out why Ashley had pulled away.

“She’s okay with me being gay. That’s big for her. A month ago, she still wasn’t comfortable with her son wanting to put his cock in ass. Now she says she’s cool with it. She’s more welcoming to Wyatt, too.” Ashley shrugged. “Maybe she did change, like she said.”

“Then I can safely assume she’s not part of the coalition?” Please, God, let her not be.

“No, that’s not her style. She suffered in silence and among her girlfriends. When I brought Wyatt around right after he was born, she was convinced I’d be straight because I had a kid. Then Danica passed and I didn’t do what she wanted. It took her five years, but she’s come around.” Ashley pointed at the windshield. “Turn here. That’s her house.”

Colt parked in front of the garage. “So she thinks I’m cute. What about you?” He turned off the engine and faced Ashley. “I was pretty forward when I kissed you in the bathroom. Am I a charity case or is the crazy way I feel one-sided?”

“It’s not that simple. I’ve got a kid to think about. I can’t jump into something.” Ashley stuffed his hands between his knees.

“You’ve been burned a lot, huh?” He wished he could go back and beat the fuck out of the people who’d hurt Ashley. But then he’d have to kick his own ass. He’d been the kind of guy to pass on a man like Ashley because of a kid. What a jerk!

“I’ve learned not to expect too much.” Ashley scratched his forehead. “Is it warm in here? Or just me?”

Colt glanced over at the window beside Ashley. The glass fogged over. “It’s the both of us.”

“Oh.” Ashley touched the window, trailing his fingers through the condensation. “I haven’t fogged up a window in a long time.”

“We could do so much more than fog the windows.” Colt leaned forward, jabbing the console against his ribs. “Want to try?”

“No.” Ashley touched Colt’s cheek and half-smiled then pulled away again. “Part of my hesitance is Wyatt. I don’t want to dive into something and have it blow up in my face because the stuff in my life affects his. If it’s not a safe situation, then I don’t want in. The other part is my ex. He fucked with my head and it’s because of him I’m scared to go there again.”

“To put yourself out there?” He appreciated Ashley’s honesty, even if he wanted more than Ashley could give.

“Yes.” Ashley met Colt’s gaze. “I’m cautious.”

“I won’t hurt you if at all possible. I’ve been fucked around, too, and I know how that feels. It’s no fun. I refuse to put anyone in that situation.” He let go of Ashley’s hand and slid his palm over Ashley’s cheek. “I’d like to go on a real date—with Wyatt along, too. I want to see what can happen if we give this a go.”

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“How about we go inside? We can sort this out later.” Ashley rubbed his cheek on Colt’s hand. “When Wyatt goes to sleep and Ma gives up for the night...maybe we can explore whatever this is between us.”

“You read my mind.” He let go of Ashley long enough to retrieve his wallet and the briefcase with the take for the night. Safe neighborhood or not, he refused to leave a wad of cash in a locked vehicle. He strolled up behind Ashley and headed into the house. Once the door was locked, he sighed and relief washed over him.

Wyatt ran into the kitchen and threw his arms around his father’s waist. “Hey, Dad. I thought you weren’t coming over.”

“I changed my mind.” Ashley hugged his son. “It’s a long story, but I thought I’d hang out with you and Grandma.”

“I’ve kept Wyatt busy.” The woman entered the kitchen and stopped in the doorway. “Oh, hello. Ash? Who is this?”

“My friend, Colton. He’s in charge of the diner, remember? You met him earlier.” Ashley clutched his son. “Some stuff happened.”

She smiled and nodded once. “Now I do. Call me Brenda.” She reached for Wyatt. “Why don’t you put your pajamas on and we’ll finish watching the movie, okay?”

“You’ll make some popcorn?” Wyatt asked. He disengaged from his father. “Please?”

“Of course. I said I would. Now go.” She patted Wyatt on the back as he left the kitchen. When the kid was out of the general area, she sighed. “Okay, what happened? I know it’s not that you don’t trust me.” She stared at Colt. “What was the thing that took place?”

Ashley gripped the handle on the oven door and leaned against the stove. “Go ahead.”

“Long story short, the coalition for hate—” Colt began.

“It’s not called that, but it’s close,” Ashley interjected.

“Anyway, they don’t want gay people in Cedarwood. I’ve been fine for the last five years, but they decided to make their presence known today. They’re picketing outside my diner. The patrons are all gone and the police are there, but it’s not good.”

“Because of that single dad group?” Brenda folded her arms. “Who cares where you stick your dick?”

“Ma.” Ashley’s eyes widened and his lips parted. “I can’t believe you said that.”

“Ash, I’m old, but I’m not blind. I know what you do.” She shrugged and turned her gaze to Colt. “Now, the dads group? Or something else?”

Colt placed the case and his wallet on the table. He enjoyed the exchange between Ashley and his mother. For a few moments, he felt normal. He bowed his head then forced himself to look her in the eye. He’d been told to always make eye contact with whomever he was speaking to, especially if he had nothing to hide.

“I came out of the bathroom behind Ashley and went in with him. Most people wouldn’t care if two guys went into the restroom at the same general time. People do it all the time. But the group is looking for reasons to cause trouble.” He stole a

glance at Ashley. “I don’t regret what happened. Not a bit. What I do regret is that these folks feel the LGBTQ community in Cedarwood is out to destroy the town.”

“You’re not.” She clasped her hands together. “Well, I’m glad you’re here. I doubt anything bad will happen, but I like having my family close.” She grabbed one of Ashley’s hands and one of Colt’s. “And before your son comes back, the tension between you two is so thick it’s crazy. If you’re not dating, you should be.” She winked then let go and headed into the living room. She stopped in the doorway. “If you would, start a bag of popcorn, and while you’re at it, Wyatt’s in your old room. You’re welcome to stay in the guest room—or the couch. Up to you.”

She left them alone again. Ashley sagged against the stove. “Wow,” he muttered. “I should be thankful, but I’m still reeling.”

“She’s sweet.” Colt exhaled. “She’s also a pistol. She’s trying to push us together.”

“Like she needs to do much pushing.” Ashley grabbed a bag of popcorn from the cupboard and opened the packet. “I think the kiss in the bathroom said a lot.”

“It did.” He tilted his head and listened for Wyatt. He heard the kid tell his grandmother he was ready to finish the movie and her reply to climb onto the couch with her. Good. That meant he had a few moments to cuddle Ashley. He needed the support. He wound his arms around Ashley’s middle and rested his chin on Ashley’s shoulder. Forward, but he’d get the point across to Ashley—he wanted him.

“You’re not worried my son will come in here?” Ashley asked. He pressed the buttons to start the microwave. “He could.” Still, Ashley didn’t pull away.

“If he weren’t wrapped up in the movie.” He nipped Ashley’s neck. God, the man smelled good. He dragged his tongue along Ashley’s jugular vein. He liked guys with a sprinkling of hairs on their chin and neck, but he preferred Ashley’s smooth skin. A

well-kept man was very sexy.

Ashley groaned and leaned into Colt's embrace. "It's been so long since I've felt like this."

"Doesn't have to end." He kissed Ashley's neck again. "I can be quiet if you can."

"Quiet has nothing to do with it." Ashley glanced over at Colt. "I don't have any rubbers." He ducked away from Colt. "I shouldn't give in to this."

"Why?"

"I can want all day long, but I can't do something to put my kid in danger." Ashley turned back to the beeping microwave.

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His common sense said to leave Ashley alone and to give him space. But in his heart, he wanted to be close to Ashley. He eased up behind Ashley again.

“There’s plenty we can do without going all the way. Lots of sexy stuff.” He ground his burgeoning erection into Ashley’s jeans-clad ass. The pressure relieved some of the ache, but not much. He’d have to rein himself in when they went into the living room, but first he wanted another taste of Ashley. He needed to prove they could be great together if Ashley gave them the chance.

Ashley opened the microwave and retrieved the bag of popcorn. When he turned around, Colt caged him between his arms and the counter.

“It’s not the date I had in mind, but I’m not one for doing things conventionally.” He rested his forehead on Ashley’s and kissed him one more time.

“My kid is going to find us,” Ashley murmured. He eased his hand between them and nudged Colt away. “I like you, I do, but we have to slow down.”

Slow down? They’d barely gotten going! Colt bit back his frustration. He’d never worked this hard to impress a guy and wasn’t sure why he was still working on Ashley.

“Dad, is the popcorn done?” Wyatt shouted. His question jarred Colt out of his lust-induced fog.

“Shit. We’ve been caught.” Although he wanted to keep Ashley in the kitchen, he appreciated the interruption. “Until later?”

“Yes.” Ashley patted Colt’s chest then walked away with the popcorn in hand. “Got it, kid.”

Colt gave himself a moment to settle down and adjusted his pants to hide the bulge behind his zipper. When he felt ready, he joined the others in the living room.

Wyatt sprawled out on his father’s lap and rested his head on Ashley’s shoulder. He dragged a blanket over them and munched happily on the popcorn. A cartoon movie played on the television. Brenda sat on the other end of the couch. She pointed to the armchair.

“Have a seat and take a load off.” Brenda tossed him a pillow. “You might want this.”

She’d noticed his erection?Fuck.

“The chair’s comfortable, but you need a pillow for your back. It’s saggy from a couple of broken springs.” Her smile faltered. “That was Ashley’s father’s chair.”

Colt placed the pillow against the back of the chair and eased onto the cushion. He wanted to question Ashley about his father but didn’t. Some things were best left unsaid.

While the movie played, no one spoke. Wyatt barely moved other than to snatch popcorn from the bag. Once the film finished, he climbed off Ashley and yanked the blanket with him out of the room.

“I’ll be right back.” Ashley followed his son out of the room, leaving Colt alone with Brenda.

“How long have you two known each other?” she asked. She switched off the

television. “I’ve gone to the diner for the last two years and never noticed you.”

“I try to stay on the floor and stay visible, but it doesn’t always work. I jump in whenever we need an extra pair of hands.” Colt folded his hands on his lap. “I’m told Ashley came in before the other day, too. Wish I’d have known, but to answer your question, not long.” He had no better excuse. He’d seen Ashley a few times but hadn’t bothered to make a move until a few days before.

“You’re a good businessman, but you’re not observant.” She stared at him and narrowed her eyes a bit. “Makes me wonder. This is new between the two of you. I can see it when you look at each other. He’s cautious and you’re overwhelming.” She crossed her arms. “You know about Wyatt and I’m hoping that’s not going to be a deterrent.”

“It’s not. He’s a cute kid.” The more time he spent around Wyatt, the more he liked the kid.

“He’s a lot like Ashley. Sweet and has his heart in the right place.” She paused. “Speaking of my son, he’s got a kind soul, but he’s been kicked around by life. First his father walking out on us, then Danica and Lane. I hope you know going in that he’s a strong man but tender. If you break his heart, I will make your life miserable. I’m tired of seeing him down. If you can boost him up, then we’ll get along. Otherwise...you’ve been warned.”

“I have and I appreciate it.” So Dear Old Dad had strolled? No wonder Ashley had trust issues. Now throw a kid into the mix... Some people might have run from Ashley, his situation and his hesitance, but knowing the man had survived endeared him to Colt. “I’ll do my best to treat him like a king.”

“That’s all I ask. Now, I’m heading to bed because I’m tired and Wyatt takes a lot out of a body. He’s a good kid, but I forgot how active they are at six.” She stood then

strolled across the room and patted Colt's shoulder. "Good night, but don't you dare wake him or me up."

He sat on the chair a few moments after she'd left him alone. He appreciated her concern. Ashley appeared in the living room next and collapsed on the couch. "The kid asks so many questions," he muttered. "I heard Ma giving you the third degree. That's new for her, too." He shrugged. "Other than Danica, I didn't bring home dates, so she hasn't had anyone to practice on."

"She means well. I'm glad she said something. She seems to really care." Colt scooted to the edge of the chair. "She also wasn't kidding about this seat. The springs are shot."

"Dad wasn't a small man. When he wasn't sitting there, he was passed out in the bedroom." Ashley averted his gaze. "He liked the bottle more than he liked us."

"Because you were gay?" He wanted to understand Ashley better.

"No. As far as I know, he never found out. One day he walked away and we never saw him again. We're better off without him. It was only a matter of time before he went from a lazy alcoholic to a violent one. He punched holes in the walls when he wasn't drinking and threatened my mother. I felt so guilty when I went to college. I don't know whatever happened to him, but I worried he'd come back and do something to Ma."

"Did he?" God. He'd thought his situation was dangerous. He had no idea what Ashley had dealt with.

"Not that I know of." Ashley threaded his fingers into his hair, making the strands stand on end. "If you're ready to go to bed, I'll show you to the guest room. I know Ma said to shack up together, but I'm not sure." He stood and started out of the room.

“I hate thinking about my dad. He was such a—”

“I understand.” Kind of. His parents had been wonderful and so much in love. He grasped the back of Ashley’s pants, hooking his fingers into Ashley’s belt loop.

“Slow down.” Ashley wouldn’t get away from his past by running away from Colt.

When they reached the room, Ashley yanked him inside and closed the door. “Sorry. I didn’t want to turn on the light until you were in the room. It’d wake up Wyatt.”

“Gives us privacy, too.” He let go of Ashley long enough to drape his arms around Ashley’s waist. He rested his forehead on Ashley’s and kissed the tip of Ashley’s nose. “She cares about you and so do I. You’re a good guy, Ashley Willis.” Good, sexy and smart, but haunted.

“I am, eh?” He slid his hands into Colt’s back pockets. The move, the boldest by Ashley so far, turned Colt on. “We can’t do this. We barely know each other.”

“No one said we’re getting together forever,” he whispered and captured Ashley’s mouth in a kiss. Ashley swallowed Colt’s moan as he sucked on Colt’s tongue. This was what Colt wanted, what he needed—to let go and be himself with someone he trusted. The relationship with Ashley was new, but damn, it was intoxicating. He never wanted the night or the kiss to end.

Chapter Nine

Ashley eased away first, needing to think and breathe. Colt overwhelmed him. Besides, his son was just across the hallway. He touched his lips and the tingle shot through his body. Being with Colt was exciting and sexy but scary as fuck. Good God. He was a dad, not a horny young man. He needed to think and move carefully. No matter how much he wanted to lose himself in Colt's kiss, he held himself in check. He'd never felt so alive as when he was in Colt's arms. But he feared the overwhelming desire would destroy the good thing that could be happening between them.

"What's wrong?" Colt ensnared Ashley in his arms and held tight. "Don't like my kiss?"

"I like it," Ashley whispered. Too much. He closed his eyes. Every nerve ending buzzed.

"But?" Colt murmured.

"My heart says go, but my head says take a minute." He couldn't look Colt in the eye. God. Colt probably thought he was a tease. The desire to give in to Colt's nudges battled with his wanting to go slow.

"Then let me help you." Colt maneuvered Ashley to the bed. "You deserve to let go." He disentangled himself from Ashley long enough to ease Ashley's shirt up over his head. When he did, he gasped. "You've held out on me. You're beautiful." Colt pressed his mouth to Ashley's chest, leaving a path of fire in his wake. He licked and

nipped, ratcheting up Ashley's excitement. He sucked on Ashley's nipples then swirled his tongue around Ashley's belly button. Each time he dragged his tongue over Ashley's skin, he sent trembles through Ashley's being.

Ashley gritted his teeth and kept his mouth shut in order to keep quiet. He threaded his fingers into Colt's hair and tugged. He loved a man who took control. Loved when his partner treated him so special. He rocked on his feet. Too much more from Colt and his knees would buckle.

Colton scraped his teeth over Ashley's nipple then bit down hard. Pain radiated through Ashley and centered in his groin. Everything within Ashley wanted to cry out. He chewed the inside of his cheek to keep the noise at bay. Fuck. Colt traced the lines of Ashley's ribs then darted back up to Ashley's nipples before sinking lower toward Ashley's jeans. Wave upon wave of pleasure swarmed Ashley. He tipped his head back and opened his mouth to sigh, but damn, being quiet was getting harder.

"You're on the edge, aren't you?" Colt whispered. "I like it." He rose to his feet and eased away from Ashley. "Ditch the pants and lie down. I want to see everything."

Ashley popped the button on his pants and shoved the denim and his underwear down around his ankles. He sank onto the bed. He needed the break in the action to gather his wits.

Before him, Colt yanked his shirt over his head and discarded the garment somewhere on the floor out of sight. Ashley gawked at Colt. The guy definitely spent time at the gym. There couldn't have been an ounce of fat on him or any hair, either. Chiseled muscle covered his body. He stood tall and rippled his pectoral muscles. The move brought a gasp from deep in Ashley's throat.

"Like what you see?" Colt asked. He flexed his arms and opened the front of his jeans.

Ashley nodded. He couldn't form words, but his brain finally started to cooperate and make rational thoughts. He noticed a tattoo in the middle of Colt's chest. A trinity knot. He wouldn't have expected Colt to have any tats, let alone a trinity knot.

"Body, mind, spirit?" Ashley murmured. He touched the ink on Colt's chest—not over his heart, but directly between his pectoral muscles.

"You know the triquetra? I'm impressed." Colt unzipped and shoved his pants and boxers to the floor. The garments wadded up around his ankles.

"I do." He'd taught a lesson on Celtic art and knots during his student teaching at the high school. "For someone?" Or with someone?

"No." He stepped out of the crumpled-up clothing and crossed the short expanse to Ashley. "I want you." He shoved Ashley onto his back, folded Ashley in half and grasped Ashley's ankles. "So fucking sexy."

Ashley grunted and spread his legs as Colt licked and sucked just above Ashley's groin. His hair tickled Ashley's belly when he dipped his head lower. He kissed and flattened his tongue along Ashley's skin, touching him everywhere except his cock. He nuzzled Ashley's balls and sucked one into his mouth.

Ashley slapped the bed. Holy fuck. From his head to his toes, his skin heated. He noticed every sound and tried like hell not to make any noises above a murmur. But Colt made silence difficult as he sucked Ashley's cock into his mouth. He bobbed his head a couple of times then withdrew.

"I want to fuck you." Colt nibbled along Ashley's inner thigh. "Want to bury myself so deep in you and forget where you end and I begin."

He liked the sound of Colt's words, but he refused to have sex bareback. "I-I told

you, I don't have any rubbers," Ashley mumbled. He hadn't planned on fucking anyone, let alone having a hot moment with Colt at his mother's house.

"There's plenty else we can do," Colt said and licked the inside of Ashley's thigh. He let go of Ashley's legs then stood.

Ashley gasped for breath as Colt stretched out beside him. At least he hadn't scared Colt off—not yet. He wanted the good feelings to last.

"Plenty we can do." Colt wrapped his fingers around Ashley's cock and squeezed. "Touch me."

Ashley did as told. How could he resist? He curled his hand around Colt's erection. Heat flooded his system. He gazed into Colt's eyes and rocked his hips. He trembled. From his head to his toes, everything sizzled. He'd played with himself plenty of times and had his share of boyfriends, but nothing had been quite like this moment with Colt. Being together was hotter, sexier than anything Ashley had experienced before.

"Damn," Colt bit out. He moved his body in time with Ashley's and thrust his cock into Ashley's fingers. He bridged the gap between them and sucked on Ashley's bottom lip.

Ashley trembled and shivered. He couldn't catch his breath. Holy Christ. He couldn't make noise, but damn it, he wasn't going to be able to keep himself in check for much longer.

In perfect rhythm, Colt moved with Ashley. Ashley tipped his head back and panted.

"Don't talk," Colt cautioned and nipped Ashley's throat. "So hot, seeing you on the edge but trying to stay quiet. Next time, we'll take our time."

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Next time? How can he think straight and form clear sentences when every one of my brain cells has turned to mush?

A grunt escaped Ashley's lips. The heat in his body centered in his groin. Colt wasn't kidding—this wasn't going to take long. He pumped his hips and rammed his cock into Colt's hand.

"I'm...I'm right there." Ashley buried his face against Colt's shoulder. He shuddered and the orgasm overwhelmed him. He yanked hard on Colt's cock as he came. He couldn't think or breathe, just felt warm and gooey all over. When he opened his eyes, he noticed the thick rope of cum streaked across Colt's belly.

"My turn," Colt murmured. With his hand around Ashley's, he jerked himself off. "Love the way you touch me. So hot." Colt let go of Ashley and allowed him to stroke him at his own pace. At the same time, Colt massaged his balls.

Watching Colt act so brazen turned Ashley on. He increased his strokes and stared into Colt's eyes. For a moment, he saw straight to Colt's soul.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," Colt whispered. He thrust his hips forward and decorated Ashley's stomach. "Ash." He collapsed on his back and closed his eyes. "I needed that."

"Me too." Ashley rolled away from Colt and swatted the bed for his shirt. He should've brought a change of clothes, but he hadn't been thinking that far ahead.

"Stop." Colt sat up. "I want to take care of you." He leaned over then stood. Colt

wiped the cum from Ashley's belly. Once he'd cleaned up Ashley, he wiped himself off. "Stay with me a while longer."

"I've stayed too long as it is." Ashley scrubbed one hand across his face. He'd been careless. For all he knew, his son or mother had heard what they'd done.

"Please?" Colt grabbed a blanket and stretched out beside Ashley. He covered them. "You're in here with me talking. No one will care."

"If they didn't hear us."

Colt placed his finger over Ashley's lips. "No one heard anything."

He wished he could be so confident. Ashley snuggled up to Colt and sighed.

"You have no idea how this feels to me." Colt eased his arm across Ashley's belly.

"What? A hand job?" Ashley tipped his head and stared at Colt's profile. "Don't tell me this is your first time getting a hand job."

"It's not. I've played with myself before. I meant, being with someone and feeling needed. I'm safe." Colt blew out a long breath and smiled. "It's nice."

"You feel that way with me? I'm no one important." He hated to discount himself, but he knew the score. Colt was model perfect and Ashley wasn't that handsome.

"You're wrong."

"How? I'm boring."

"No." Colt rolled back onto his side and shifted his arm to grasp Ashley's ass.

“You’re a dad and a teacher. Those are both hard jobs and you’re doing them with grace. You’re noble. Compared to me, you’re awesome. I just feed people.” He trailed his fingers over Ashley’s butt cheek then pinched. “I always thought I wanted to be single, free, and fuck every guy I met. I got my heart broken by Jay. I thought I’d grown up and had everything I needed, but I met you. When I see you with Wyatt, I’m awed. I want that kind of love. I want that kind of devotion. I might have grown up because of Jay, but I’m still learning.”

“Remind me to have you over after he’s had three cans of root beer and fruit snacks or when he’s tired and cranky. You’ll change your mind about wanting a kid.” Ashley snorted. Having a child was so much harder than it looked from the outside. “He can be a hellion.”

“Aren’t we all from time to time?” Colt asked. “I saw you and him together, and I realized my desire to be alone was crap. I want to give us a try. Who cares about the coalition or the picketers? Okay, I care, but they aren’t going to change my mind. I like you, Ashley. You’re my safe port when the rest of the world goes to shit.”

“We just met.” Although he agreed with most of what Colt had said, he’d never seen himself as noble, although he liked hearing the words. Still, they were crazy new in their relationship. Things could get out of control quick. How could Colt be so sure so fast?

“I know my heart. I’m not saying I’m in love. You’re right—it’s too soon to know if the feelings are that deep, but I know I’m head over heels for you.” Colt grinned. “When the stuff at the diner went to hell, I ran right to you because I knew I was safe with you. That’s a huge thing for me. I don’t trust easily, but when I’m with you, I know I can trust you with my heart.”

He pressed his lips together and pieced through what he’d been told. Trusting with his heart. Even Lane hadn’t said such things. Lane had simply wanted to fuck all the

time. Ashley didn't doubt that once they had time to fuck, he and Colt would spend plenty of hours tangled up together.

"All I'm asking is for you to give me a chance. I've never been in this deep." Colt kissed Ashley's cheek.

"You don't have anything to worry about. I'm not going to push you away." Ashley kissed him back. "What I am going to do is leave you alone for now. I should be on the couch. Regardless of what Ma said, I want to be able to hear Wyatt if he has a bad dream."

"You're such a hot dad." Colt patted Ashley's ass. "Smart too."

"I try." Ashley sighed and sat up. He didn't feel all that intelligent at the moment. He snatched his pants and underwear from the floor then stepped into them. Instead of buttoning his jeans, he left them open. "If you need to use the restroom, it's the only door to the left. I'm on the couch. Head to the right and down the steps. If you need anything that's not sex, let me know." He winked. "Good night, handsome."

Colt snuggled up in the blankets and winked back. "You know where I'm at if you get lonely."

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The tips of Ashley's ears burned as he shook his head and closed the door. He wandered down the hallway to the stairs. He ended up on the ground floor. The little green light on his phone blinked. He checked the device. One email message. He swiped the screen and retrieved the message.

To Ashley Willis

From Colin Baker

Hope you're holding up okay. I have word on the festival. Farin secured permits for a public gathering. Since the coalition wants to gather, we'll give them a good party. Show them there's no reason we can't all get along. Call me in the morning. I've emailed the others in the group, too, but say something to Colton if you see him. Hope he's doing okay after the incident at the diner. I tried to call him but couldn't get an answer. Let me know.

Colin

At least someone was thinking positive. He had no idea what they were going to do at this festival, but the town needed the reality check—the LGBTQ community wasn't the root of the problem. So what if men wanted to be with other men or women wanted to be with other women? Who cared? Whoever anyone wanted to sleep with was their business. He closed the message and turned off his phone. He left the device on the table then wandered into the living room and yanked a blanket off the quilt rack.

Ashley collapsed on the couch and stretched out. He needed sleep, but couldn't. His

thoughts flooded with memories of the kiss with Colt and Colt's words. He was adored by Colt—well, he seemed to be. He never would've thought that was possible—not by another guy and especially not after his split with Lane.

He closed his eyes and settled under the blanket, but his brain refused to shut down. Why was he thinking about Lane at a time like this? Because Lane had forced him to be cautious. But everything within him wanted to toss that caution to the wind and chase Colt. He'd lost his mind.

Wouldn't Lane agree?

You're putting yourself out there. You're giving him power. How can you be sure he won't dick you over? You've got a kid. He'll find out how hard it is to have a kid. All those perks that aren't perks. He'll change his mind and you'll be alone. Alone with a kid and so much baggage. No one will want you. You'll want me back, but I won't be there either.

He opened his eyes. Fuck Lane. Fuck his stupid close-minded rationales.

“Ash? Are you okay?”

Colt? He opened his eyes and opened his mouth to scream, but thankfully no sound came out.

“Hey.” Colt sat on the edge of the couch. He grasped Ashley's hand. “You were talking to yourself. Everything okay? Bad dream?”

He finally found his voice. “Was it loud?”

“Not very.” Colt had donned his jeans. “What were you talking about? Lane? Kids?”

He'd have to explain his ex sooner or later. Might as well be now. "It's a long story."

"It's okay. You don't have to tell me." Colt brushed his fingers across Ashley's cheek. "It's late. Probably a bad dream. You'll be fine in the morning."

"No—not really." He sat up and reached for Colt. "Sit. I need to get this out."

Colt settled opposite Ashley on the couch and held Ashley's hand.

"Ma had a thing for a guy named Ashley in a movie. He was handsome in an old-fashioned, classy kind of way. And while I was a kid, I wanted to be that classy guy. I had the different crap to deal with in my family and I thought—despite my worries—that getting out would be the best for all of us. I told you about Danica, but I haven't really explained Lane."

Colt rubbed the top of Ashley's hand with his thumb. The small gesture soothed Ashley.

"I know it's early—in the day and our relationship—but I can't not say this." He squeezed Colt's fingers. "I don't expect you to stick around after this. I'm messed up. I've pushed you away and led you on. I'm not a good person to be with."

Colt shook his head. "I've had my share of fucked-up situations. I don't break that easily. I get it. You're guarded and you've got a kid, but I'm in too deep. I like you and I'm fond of him. Don't worry about it."

The words reassured him but not as much as they should have. Ashley exhaled and forced himself to get the words out. "Lane used to tease me about my name. No guy wanted to be called Ashley. He called me Ash or made up names for me. It's funny. Danica thought we'd be so good together. On paper, Lane and I were a match. He was the handsome, loud, outgoing one. Me, the quiet, reserved and not-so-good-

looking one.”

“That’s bullshit. You’re very handsome.”

“If you want a geeky guy who loves art and comic books.”

Colt grinned then kissed Ashley. “I’ve got a thing for geeky guys named Ashley who don’t happen to see just how sexy they are. Comic books are good. Art is awesome. I’m not seeing a downside to you.”

He didn’t want to believe Colt. The words had to be meant to help Colt’s chances with Ashley, but Ashley liked hearing them. Somewhere deep in his soul, he held on to the hope that he could be enough for Colt.

“Lane tore you down. Having a kid was too hard for him, right? The clubbing? I bet he even said there wasn’t a guy out there who would love a man with a son because the kid would hold you back, right?” Colt asked.

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“How’d you guess? From what I said when I talked in my sleep?” He sagged in his seat. “I should’ve known.”

“I can see the hurt in your eyes, too. I won’t push you, but I will absolutely be right here with you. Like I said, you and Wyatt are worth it.” Colt eased over to Ashley and threw his arm around Ashley’s shoulders. “You learned from the experience with Lane and I learned from mine with Jay. We move forward together with Wyatt and say to hell with the coalition. I like you and Wyatt.”

“You’re crazy.” He rested his head on Colt’s shoulder. “But I like your kind of crazy.” He smiled to himself. “Now you know my demons. I’ve never been enough and I’m starting to come around.”

“You’re just fine.”

Something occurred to him. He’d wanted to ask about the tattoo on Colt’s chest. “You mentioned the trinity knot wasn’t for anyone. Not even for Jay?” Like binding them together forever?

“Not even for Jay.” Colt kissed the top of Ashley’s head. “I have a thing about not getting inked for others. I hadn’t planned on getting inked at all, but when I saw the knot at my friend Joe’s tattoo parlor and I knew what the knot meant, I wanted it.”

“Why in the middle of your chest? Why not over your heart or on your back?”

“You can’t really see a tattoo on your back and I wanted to be able to see it.” Colt turned enough to point to the ink. “It’s right here because it’s my center. Body, mind,

spirit...all right here.”

“I like it.” Ashley trailed his fingers over the knot. “It suits you.”

“I did a stint as a curator in my college museum. We did a show based on knots. The artist—Joe, actually—created works of art with different knots on body parts. His tats didn’t look like simple ink, but real art. That’s where I learned about the different ones. This was the knot I wanted. Think you’d ever get ink?”

“Me?” Ashley asked. He’d thought about it, but being a teacher, especially with little kids, he wanted to be an example. “No. I don’t know what I’d get.”

“If you’re meant to have one, you’ll figure it out.” Colt patted Ashley’s shoulder. “Come back to the bedroom with me. I’ll hold you so you can sleep, babe. I’ll sleep better, too.”

Ashley considered fighting the desire to sleep with Colt, but why bother? His mother had encouraged them to be together. Wyatt seemed to like Colt. What would one night hurt anything? He allowed Colt to drag him to his feet and followed Colt upstairs to the bedroom. He left the door open a crack and settled on the bed with his boyfriend. For the moment, life was good—really good.

Chapter Ten

Colt settled on the bed with Ashley tucked up against him. He'd forgotten how nice it could be to have a hot man beside him. He'd missed the warmth and the intimacy. He closed his eyes and breathed in the scent of Ashley's hair, or was it his shampoo? Colt didn't care.

Within seconds, he slipped into a deep sleep.

The next morning, Colt woke before Ashley. He smiled as he surfaced from slumber. Ashley had ground his ass into Colt's crotch and held Colt's arm against his belly. The man was so sexy in his sleep. A bit of scruff showed on his cheeks. With his eyes closed and his lips parted, he snored a bit. Colt noticed the sunkenness of Ashley's cheeks. The man had held the world on his shoulders. No more. Colt refused to let him carry the load alone.

"Dad?" Wyatt strolled into the room and paused. "Dad?"

"He's sleeping." Colt disengaged from Ashley and thanked God he'd kept his pants on while they slept. "What's up?"

"Nothin'." Wyatt wandered out of the bedroom. "Nothin'."

Colt knew better. He eased out of bed and grabbed his shirt from the floor. He followed Wyatt down the stairs to the living room. The kid lay sprawled on the couch where his father had been the night before.

“What’s up?” Colt sat beside Wyatt. “Your dad has a lot on his mind and needed his sleep.”

“With you?” Wyatt narrowed his eyes and frowned. He kicked his foot on the floor. “Dad doesn’t sleep with stuffed animals.”

“He’s a dad.” Colt rested his ankle on his other knee. “You’re upset.”

“He’s my dad, not yours.” Wyatt folded his arms. His blond hair mashed to the side of his face and stuck out on the other side with the slept-in look. “I don’t want to share.”

“Why?”

“‘Cause. It’s me and him.” Wyatt stood then stretched and yanked his sleep shirt down. “You can’t live in our apartment. There isn’t room.”

“You want me to live with you? Or no?” He’d be willing to bet Ashley fed Wyatt plenty, but the kid looked so thin. Maybe it was his desire to take care of them, but he wanted so much more for Ashley and Wyatt. He’d prefer the kid liked him.

“Are you gonna live with us?” Wyatt tilted his head to the side. He rubbed his eyes and yawned. “Huh?”

“I don’t know.” Demanding little man, wasn’t he? Colt bit back a smile. The kid had learned to stand up for himself and his father—good traits to have.

“Am I gonna get food at the diner whenever we go?”

“Probably.” The kid’s sizing me up and bargaining? Fine. “Wyatt, I like your dad. I want to be in your life and his, too.” He fought the urge to tug Wyatt onto his lap and

hug away the fears he saw growing in Wyatt's eyes. The poor guy was scared. He'd lost so much and may not have understood it, but he didn't want to get close to someone who'd leave, too.

"You do?" Wyatt rubbed his chin in a gesture more mature than something a six-year-old would do.

"I do." Colt noticed the footsteps on the carpet. When he saw the feet on the steps, he knew—Ashley. "Here comes your dad."

"Dad!" Wyatt bounded through the room and threw his arms around Ashley's waist. "There you are."

Ashley blushed from his hairline to his pecs. He scooped the six-year-old into his arms. "Sorry, tot. Did you have a bad dream?" He smoothed down Wyatt's hair. "You must've slept okay. Your hair is a disaster."

"When I went looking for you, I found you with him." He nodded over his shoulder and kicked his foot. "Is he your boyfriend?"

Ashley slid his gaze over to Colt then back to his son. "Would you be upset if he is?" He stood Wyatt on his feet and knelt down in front of him. "What do you think? It's your apartment, too."

"He can't live in our apartment. There isn't room." Wyatt plopped down on Ashley's lap. "Why does he have to sleep with you? You're my dad. Dads don't share a bed."

"Wyatt." Ashley sighed and wiped a hand over his face. "That's not always how it works...but you're too young to understand."

Colt cleared his throat and nodded. "I'll be in the other room."

He strode past Ashley and Wyatt and headed to the bedroom. This had to be part of what Ashley was worried about—Wyatt's feelings. Colt wanted Wyatt to like him, but he'd also intruded on a special situation. Wyatt hadn't had anyone else really in his life. Colt sat on the edge of the bed and put on his socks then made the bed. Never let it be said he had no manners.

Colt wandered back down the stairs. He stopped in the doorway to the living room. "Ash? Want me to drive you back to the apartment to get your car?"

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“Let me make sure Ma’s okay with keeping Wyatt that long. I’ll be right back.” Ashley left the room and Wyatt trailed behind him.

Colt should’ve known better. He’d expected to win the kid over just because he was a nice guy and could offer free food at the diner. But he really hadn’t tried to get to know the kid. Did the six-year-old like blocks? Video games? Cats? Dogs? He knew nothing, but he wanted to hook up with Wyatt’s dad.

He scrubbed both hands over his face and checked his briefcase. The money was still there. He’d have to do the numbers when he got back to his house. He shouldn’t have jumped to conclusions. He’d put Ash and Wyatt in an awkward situation.

“Okay, Ma is fine with Wyatt staying here until we get this sorted out.” Ashley yanked his shirt over his head and stepped into his running shoes. “Ready?”

“I am.” He checked his phone. One message from Jordan.

The diner is fine. Probably good if you stay closed on your regular day closed. Will keep you posted.

That was one thing he didn’t have to worry about. He’d drive past the building to check, but he always checked up on the diner. He tucked his wallet into the briefcase. Once Ashley had tied his own shoes, Colt grabbed his briefcase, phone and keys.

“I’m sorry about all this. I shouldn’t have dragged you into my problems.” Colt opened the door for Ashley. “Wyatt doesn’t like me.”

Ashley waited for Colt to slide into the driver's seat and to turn on the engine before he spoke. "Wyatt is cautious like me. He's also six and doesn't understand what's going on. I don't usually involve him in my love life." He bobbed his head. "I'd have to have a love life first, but that's beside the point."

"Ash." He wanted to say something reassuring but had nothing.

"No, that's how it is. He was too small to remember Lane. We were together for five years, but that last year he drifted away. He spent more time at the clubs and stuff and had his own apartment. That's partially why we have the tiny one. I couldn't afford to keep the house we all shared. I'm broke because Lane drained my funds and ran off."

"Ouch." Colt gripped the steering wheel and zipped down the street toward the diner. "I wish I could make that situation better."

"No, it's my own fault. I invested my time in a guy who was totally wrong for me." Ashley crossed his ankles. "That's why this thing with you is kind of freaking me out. I'm feeling the same way as I did with Lane but a whole lot faster. I'm scared."

"I'm not going to take your money." He slowed down as they approached the diner. The picketers were still there. Twenty or twenty-five people if he had to count. No one seemed to be violent, just strolling in a gigantic oval in front of the closed diner.

"Guess that'll make opening tomorrow more difficult—the picketers." Ashley groaned. "The coalition. Don't they ever quit?"

"I doubt it." Colt eased across the intersection and headed the rest of the way to Ashley's apartment. "They want to make a statement. Maybe it's a good thing the single dad group wants to make one, too."

"Farin got the permits." Ashley shifted in his seat. "We need to meet up and plan the

festival out.”

“You’re right.” Colt pulled into the parking lot of Ashley’s apartment complex. He shut off the SUV and turned in his seat. “I won’t take your money. I said I wouldn’t break your heart and I’ll do my best to hold up that promise.”

“I know.” Ashley smiled. He rested his hands in his lap. “I started to say this was like with Lane, but it’s not. With him, I was always looking over my shoulder and checking my wallet. There was attraction, but I couldn’t trust him. I don’t know you that well, but I can already tell the trust is there. Plus, I’m dying to be with you.” He averted his gaze. “After last night and the stuff with Wyatt, I don’t know how you feel and I wouldn’t blame you if you ran the other way.”

“He did a real number on your confidence.” Colt grasped Ashley’s hand and brushed his thumb across Ashley’s knuckles. “Let me walk you in. We’ll see what happens.” Like crazy, against-the-wall sex—if he had anything to say about it. “Let me grab my briefcase. The take from yesterday is in there and I don’t trust leaving it in the vehicle.”

“Deal.” Ashley left the SUV and fished his keys from his pocket. “I wouldn’t—whatever’s in there.”

Colt strolled alongside Ashley to the apartment and draped his arm around Ashley’s shoulders. Just touching him and being a couple in public pleased him. He waited on the small pad while Ashley unlocked the door. “I lived in an apartment like this when I was in college. A studio version.”

“That would be too small.” Ashley laughed. “It’d make keeping an eye on Wyatt easier, though. Nowhere to hide.”

“True.” Colt closed the door behind them and placed the case and his keys on the

couch. “Mind if I hit the lock?” He sounded so cozy and domestic.

“Are you planning on doing something drastic?” Ashley tossed his keys onto the table. “Are you?” He grasped the back of the lone armchair.

“I want to do this.” Colt gathered Ashley in his arms and kissed him. “And this.” He bit Ashley’s bottom lip then licked where he’d bit. He’d never get enough of Ashley. The same sizzles came back and manifested deeper. He felt Ashley to his core. Was it too early to feel so connected? Probably. He slid his palms into Ashley’s back pockets. He needed Ashley closer.

“I like it,” Ashley gasped. He clutched the front of Colt’s shirt. “This is too fast.”

“Good. You need fast and hard.” Colt rubbed his body along Ashley’s, tweaking Ashley’s nipples through his shirt. The bulge growing behind Ashley’s zipper spurred Colt on. He loved the feel of two cocks rubbing on each other, even through fabric. “Got rubbers here?”

“I do.” Ashley threaded his arms around Colt’s shoulders. “In my room.” He kept Colt in his embrace as he guided them out of the main room.

The frantic need suited Colt. He wanted more from Ashley—like everything. Together, they collapsed on the bed in a tangle of arms and legs. Colt didn’t care. He continued to kiss and taste Ashley—his throat, chest, belly and back to Ashley’s neck. The man intoxicated him and made him want the moment to last forever...except he couldn’t wait that long.

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“Fuck,” Ashley gasped. He let go of Colton long enough to slap the bed. “I need the rubbers and lube.”

“Where?” Colt braced himself on his forearms. “Nightstand?”

“Where else?” Ashley grinned. “I’m predictable.” His eyes flashed.

“Nothing wrong with that.” Colt scrambled off the bed and whipped his shirt up over his head. He opened the drawer and located the box of condoms. The bottle of lube had tipped over but hadn’t spilled. Thank God for small miracles. He stood upright with the lube and a condom packet in hand. “Who is doing whom?”

“You had to ask?” Ashley shucked his pants then sat up and removed his shirt. Only his socks remained. “I’m not a natural top.” He wrapped his hands around his cock and stroked.

The shit was teasing him? Colt loved the raw hunger in Ashley’s eyes.

“I couldn’t tell. Thought you were a switch.” Whatever Ashley put his mind to, he could probably do with ease. Colt shoved his jeans and boxers to the floor and stepped out of the wadded-up material. He dropped the rubber onto the floor, then knelt beside the bed. He squirted lube onto his fingers. This wouldn’t take long, but he wanted what they were doing to make an impression.

With one hand he stroked Ashley’s erection. He caressed the length of Ashley’s shaft and occasionally swiped his thumb across the blunt head. When Ashley writhed and moaned, he increased his speed. With the other hand, he massaged Ashley’s asshole.

He pushed in just enough to toy with him, but not enough to breach.

“Oh, God. I haven’t done this in a while.” Ashley grunted. “Feels good.”

“I haven’t done anything yet.” Colt tapped the tip of his finger against Ashley’s asshole. “Relax. I want to make you feel even better.”

“You are.” Ashley balled his fists and rested his feet on the edge of the mattress. “Wow.” His voice cracked and his skin flushed.

Colt eased his middle finger into Ashley’s hole, pushing past the ring of tight muscle. “Breathe out for me.” He moved slow, careful not to hurt Ashley. As Ashley bore down on him, he moved his finger two knuckles deep, then withdrew until the tip of his finger remained within his friend. Fuck, he was tight. Grasping Colt’s finger from within like he couldn’t manage without Colt inside him.

Ashley grunted and balled his fists.

“More?” Colt asked.

“Yeah,” Ashley bit out. His legs trembled and he groaned. “I’m coming unglued so fast. This is...nuts.”

He increased his pumping, moving in and out of Ashley’s ass. Knowing he’d made Ashley feel so good pleased him. He drenched his index finger in lube then eased both digits into Ashley’s butt.

Ashley grunted and said something Colt couldn’t understand. He didn’t need to know the exact word—the meaning came through. Ashley’s cock pointed toward the ceiling and precum slid down the tip. He bucked his hips, thrusting into thin air.

Seeing Ashley so excited turned Colt on. He wasn't going to be able to wait much longer. He needed to be inside Ashley, balls-deep.

"Fuck me," Ashley begged. "Please? I want more than your fingers." The need in Ashley's voice resonated to Colt's core. The pleading in his eyes matched the need in his voice.

"You read my mind." Colt picked up the condom wrapper and ripped the packet open with his teeth. Probably not good for his teeth, but right now he wasn't thinking about dental care. He rolled the rubber over his dick and stroked twice. Damn, his hand on his cock felt nice, but he wanted more than nice.

Colt eased his fingers from Ashley's ass and stood. He coated his dick with lube, then lined himself up with Ashley's hole. Having his own hands on his cock wasn't as good as being inside Ashley—and he hadn't breached Ashley yet. He arranged Ashley's legs over his arms and slid inside his lover. He braced himself on his knees on the edge of the bed and leaned over Ashley. An inch at a time, he filled Ashley.

Ashley's eyes widened and his lips parted. A moan ripped from his mouth.

Fuck, yeah. Colt spread his hands on the mattress on either side of Ashley's head. Slowly he moved in and out of Ashley's ass. Ashley shivered beneath him. Instead of lying there and allowing Colt to fuck him, Ashley threw his arms around Colt's neck and kissed him. He sucked on Colt's tongue, increasing the suction as Colt pushed balls-deep into him.

Christ. This is what I need. Not just sex, but passionate sex. He continued to kiss and fuck his lover. Sweet hell. His brain couldn't process what was going on. His thoughts blurred, but he knew he loved being with Ashley.

Ashley broke the kiss first. "Colt."

“Fuck. Say it again.” Colt reached between their bodies and wrapped his fingers around Ashley’s cock. He stroked Ashley in time with his thrusts. “Fuck my hand.”

“Colt,” Ashley bit out. “Oh fuck.” He did the best he could, but Colt did more moving.

Colt jerked Ashley off in perfect rhythm with his thrusts. Sweat prickled on his back and a trickle of perspiration slipped down his temple. Ashley pinched his beaded nipple.

“Ahh, shit,” Colt growled. He slammed into Ashley. He leaned over his lover. From his head to his toes, everything vibrated. He emptied his load into the condom deep within Ashley.

“Colt,” Ashley begged. “Please?”

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Colt braced himself on one hand and his knees then stroked Ashley. He wouldn't deny his lover the orgasm. He alternated tugs with light caresses and swiped his thumb across the head of Ashley's erection. The orgasm didn't take long. Ashley, with Colt's dick still in his ass, writhed and tensed. He gritted his teeth.

"Fuck," Ashley managed. He bucked against Colt and shot a thick ribbon of cum onto Colt's belly. He shuddered for a moment before he sagged against the mattress. He closed his eyes.

Colt eased out of Ashley's ass and glanced around the small room for a trash bin. He located one and ditched the condom. His legs refused to cooperate, so he stretched out beside Ashley.

"That was... Wow." Ashley slapped his hand onto Colt's hip. "I'm glad we found the rubbers."

"It was gonna happen when it was the right time to happen." Colt kissed Ashley's temple. "And worth the wait. Hopefully, it's not so long until the next time."

Ashley broke into laughter and tipped his head to look Colt in the eyes. "Ma will kill me. I said I'd be right back there in fifteen minutes and I left my phone on her table. If she tried to call, she'd get the call there at the house."

"I think she knows and probably doesn't care." Colt snaked his arm across Ashley's belly. The cum cooled on his own stomach, but whatever. Snuggling was more important. "I have to count the take and do the books, but I don't want to go."

“I have to get Wyatt,” Ashley said. “Call me later? I’ll have my phone.”

“Absolutely, boyfriend.” Saying those words pleased Colt. He hadn’t planned on being a twosome, but now that he’d found Ashley, he couldn’t see his life without the quiet art teacher.

“I like the sound of that.” Ashley kissed him. When he looked at Colt, the passion hadn’t dimmed and neither had the hunger. “It’s early and new, but I do.”

“We’ll sort this out. You, me and Wyatt. It’ll work.” He knew so. He wasn’t sure why he knew, but he did. “How about I call you later? Maybe we can have dinner together. I’ll cook.” Colt and stretched. He felt better than he had in a long time. Hell, he didn’t even mind strutting nude. “Got a towel?”

“In the bathroom.” Ashley sat up then stood and headed to the room across the hallway. He tossed a towel in Colt’s direction. “Here you go.”

The domesticity wasn’t lost on him. Colt wiped the chilly cum off his stomach and grabbed Ashley to clean him off, too. “What do you think? Dinner? The three of us?”

“Wyatt goes to bed at eight, but I think it could work.” Ashley shrugged into a fresh pair of boxer briefs and a white shirt. The soft cotton showcased the muscle in Ashley’s thin body and the gentle curve of his ass.

Colt yanked his boxers up then snagged Ashley in his arms. “You’ve got a hot ass.” He kissed the back of Ashley’s neck. “I want to keep you here and fuck you all over again.”

“But if you do that,” Ashley said and sighed, “we won’t get our stuff done. I can’t leave Wyatt at Ma’s all day.” He snuggled in Colt’s embrace and rested his head on Colt’s shoulder.

“I know.” He swatted Ashley’s butt then let go. He dressed and kept glancing over at Ashley as Ashley finished putting on a pair of board shorts and socks. The casual attire made Ashley look so much younger. “How old are you?”

“Thirty.” Ashley blinked. “I forgot to grab my glasses. I need to take my contacts out.” He headed into the bathroom.

Colt snorted. He’d forgotten about Ashley’s glasses. The guy was sexy with or without the eyewear. He finished dressing and stepped into his shoes. He crinkled his nose. Damn, he needed to shower. Ashley really must’ve liked him or he had no sense of smell.

“I reek of the restaurant,” Colt said. “And you still want me to be around you.”

“Could be worse. It’s been a rough day and night. It’s expected. You’ll go home, shower and get your bookkeeping done. When I come over with Wyatt, you’ll be fresh and clean—except for the scent of whatever you’re cooking.” Ashley turned around and grinned. The dark-rimmed glasses accentuated his blue eyes and the thinness of his face.

“You’re weird, but I like your brand of weird.” Colt strolled into the living room and gathered his things.

“Isn’t that my line?” Ashley eased up beside him. “I’ll follow you out so I can lock the door.”

Colt left the apartment with Ashley right behind him. When they reached the vehicles, Colt tossed his stuff onto the passenger seat. “Come to the house around six. If I’m not there, I’m dropping the take off at the bank. Just wait and I’ll get there.”

“Sounds good.” Ashley kissed him one more time then slid behind the wheel of his

car. He waved as he pulled out of the spot and left Colt alone.

Colt watched Ashley's car disappear around the corner. He slid behind the wheel of his SUV and grinned. This had been the worst and the best weekend of his life. Despite the picketing, the walkout and the loss of income at the diner, he'd found his heart. Life was screwed up, but part was working out and he wouldn't have changed a thing.

Chapter Eleven

Colt pulled into his driveway and the garage about twenty minutes after leaving Ashley's apartment. When the door closed, he blew out a long breath. Thank you, God. He was home and nothing seemed to be out of order. Still, the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. He clutched the case and his keys when he unlocked the main door leading into the house.

He walked through the house and listened for any sounds of a burglar or intrusion. His heart hammered. The incident at the diner had affected him more than he'd expected. People could be narrow-minded and unconcerned with the rights of others, but who could've known Cedarwood, Ohio, would be a place of such discrimination and hate? Satisfied the house was empty, he locked the door and returned to his office. He placed the briefcase on his desk and booted up his laptop. Although he'd just been with Ashley and felt invincible, his head ached. He didn't mind doing the bookkeeping for the diner—the numbers were usually pretty simple—but he wasn't in the mood to look at figures and to count money.

Still, he slogged through the workload and after the usual three hours had not only sorted and counted the take but had also filled out the deposit ticket for the bank. Keeping the money this long wasn't smart and every minute the three grand was in his possession, his stomach ached. But it was Sunday and the bank wasn't open until the next morning.

Colt zipped the bag and clicked the lock. The sooner the money was in the night deposit box, the better. He saved the figures on the laptop and backed up the information then headed to the bathroom for aspirin.

He strolled through the kitchen and appraised the contents of his pantry. What in the hell was he going to feed his guests? What did Wyatt like to eat? Sure, he'd overheard Wyatt and Ashley talking about eating a hot dog and fries, but that couldn't be all the kid would eat. He rested his hands on his hips. He should've called Ashley to ask, but he didn't have much time. In less than two hours, they'd be over. Shit.

Colt pulled a bag of frozen chicken breasts from the freezer and placed three pieces in a freezer bag. He placed the bag on the bottom shelf of the fridge. By the time he returned from the bank drop, the chicken wouldn't be defrosted, but it would be better than trying to speed thaw it. He'd pick up fresh potatoes and green beans on the way home from the bank. Surely Wyatt liked cubed potatoes.

Well, he hoped the kid did.

Colt grabbed his phone and keys then tucked the bank bag under his arm and left the house. He locked the door and rounded the SUV hood. He slid behind the wheel. Once the garage door opened, he backed out and stopped long enough to shut the door. He made the ten-minute drive to the Cedarwood Federal Savings and Loan building and parked beside the night deposit box. He reached for the handle but hadn't pulled up close enough. Fuck. He'd have to get out.

He put the SUV in Park and opened his door. Thankfully the light at five o'clock on that late September evening was still bright enough for him to see his surroundings. He chuckled as he tucked the bag into the night deposit box. This would be a great night to sit outside on the patio and have a glass of wine with Ashley while Wyatt played in the yard.

A man appeared at the front of Colt's SUV. "Put your hands up." He zipped his dark blue jacket and adjusted the dark glasses. Colt couldn't see his hands, but he noticed the color of his skin—white.

“What?” Colt closed the deposit-box door and did as told. “Who are you?”

“Doesn’t matter who I am.” The man inched closer to Colt. He whipped a gun from his pocket. “Where’s the money?”

“In the night deposit box.” Colt debated what to do next. If he reached for his phone or tried to dive into the vehicle, the guy would shoot him. “My wallet is in the car. Take it. Take my car. Just don’t shoot me.”

“Fuck you.” The man slammed Colt’s SUV door shut. “It’s because of shit like you that this town is going to hell.” He aimed the gun at Colt’s head. “Where is the money?”

“In the box.” Colt backed away from the man. Shit. Nowhere to run or hide. He wished he’d grabbed his phone. Maybe then he could’ve called nine-one-one.

Another person, clad in a dark-gray sweatsuit and a black stocking cap, inched up to the side of the vehicle.

Where are these people coming from? Colt nodded to the SUV. “Take my money and my car.”

“You said that,” came a voice from behind him. Something poked into Colt’s back. “We don’t want your car, although it is nice. Expensive.”

He glanced up at the security camera. Dear God, please let the damn thing be working. “It was.” He tried to keep his mouth shut. The more he talked, the better his chances of getting shot.

The man in front of him waved the gun. “Raid the car. Anything. We don’t want this scum to have anything nice. Maybe then he’ll get the hint.”

The person to the side yanked open the passenger-side door. A lock of hair slipped free from the hat. A woman?

“Who are you people? The coalition? I’m not hurting anyone. I run a diner where you probably all eat,” Colt said. His voice cracked. “Take the car and my wallet. Don’t hurt me.”

“Enough.” The man behind him jabbed whatever it was in his hands into Colt’s back. “I’m tired of this piece of shit.”

Something cracked against Colt’s skull. He saw stars and crumpled to his knees. The man in front of him strode up to him and kicked him hard in the stomach. Pain exploded in Colt’s belly and his head. He wanted to fight back. Every cell in his body screamed to lash out at them, but with each kick and hit, he struggled with consciousness. The attackers kicked him in the head and clocked him on the back.

The female attacker held up his phone. “Was this yours?”

“Yes,” he said and spat out blood. “Who else would it belong to?”

“Oh well.” She tossed the device on the ground and stomped on it. The plastic and glass cracked and the screen darkened. “No phone, no help. No one to come save you.”

He tried to look up at her, but they’d hit him in the face and his eyes had begun to swell. He collapsed on the concrete and faked losing consciousness. Fuck these bastards. Let them take his SUV and his money. Once they’d left, he’d get the hell away from the bank to help.

One of the males kicked him again. The other man grunted. “He’s had enough. The idiot won’t stick around town now. He’ll sell the diner to a straight couple and we’ll

get our town back. Leave him.”

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Leave him? Now who was foolish? If he lived—which he was going to do, goddamn it—they'd have a witness. He cracked open one eye and listened for their retreat. Thankfully when they drove off in his SUV, they didn't back up and run him over. He waited for the vehicle to disappear down the road. He groaned. Everything ached, but he needed to get to safety.

Colt managed to drag himself across the yard to the fence separating the bank property and the adjacent private property. Hopefully there was someone home next door. He crawled through the grass, keeping the fence to his side. He smelled the scent of barbecue and heard people talking. Had they heard him getting beaten up? He didn't have time to worry about that. He inched across the small yard to the front porch.

Colt struggled up the three stairs to the wooden porch. Once he reached the door, he pressed the doorbell and slumped onto the mat. He tried to stay awake to explain why he was on the person's porch, but his best attempts had failed him. He curled into the fetal position on the porch and slipped into unconsciousness.

Sorry, Ashley. I'm so sorry.

* * * *

Ashley strolled the length of the apartment again and gripped his cell phone. He should've heard from Colt by now. He chuffed out a breath and checked the clock—five-thirty-five. He had no idea how to get to Colt's house or what his address was. They should've done a little more talking and sharing of information and a spent a lot less time naked, but it was too late to change the past.

He called Colt's number again. Like the first time, the call went straight to voicemail. He'd left a message the first time and adding a second wouldn't do any good. He poked his head into Wyatt's room.

His son sat in front of his computer. "I got to level three on the reading program." He pointed to the screen. "See?"

"You did?" He glanced over his son's shoulder. Sure enough, the six-year-old had reached the next level on the program created to teach children to read. By the time the kid made it to the second grade, he'd be unstoppable. "I'm proud of you, tot. That's awesome. Show me the next question."

He watched Wyatt click through to the next question.

"I have to read it out loud." Wyatt pointed to the words. "The fat cat jumped onto the shelf."

The cat on the screen jumped onto the shelf and reacted to Wyatt's reading. "Congratulations. Next problem."

"Cool, Wyatt. You're doing awesome." He clapped his son on the shoulder. "I'm going to call Colt, okay? Come out to the living room if you need me."

Wyatt nodded and returned to his game.

Ashley wandered into the living room and dialed Colt's phone again. Like the last two times, Colt didn't answer and the call went to voicemail. His gut clenched. Something wasn't right. He'd only known Colt for a few days, but the connection had run deep. After the night before and the scared look in his eyes, Colt had been unnerved.

Ashley dialed Jordan's number. If anyone would know what to do, Jordan would. After two rings, Jordan answered. "Ashley, how are you?"

"I can't find Colt," Ashley blurted. ~~Shit.~~ He'd meant to sound casual and not to let his emotions get away from him.

"Well, I'm not at the station. It's my night off." Jordan paused. "You're worried about Colt. Why? What do you mean, you can't find him? The diner is closed. It's always closed on Sundays. Maybe he's at home? Dropped his phone in the sink? Ran it over with the car? Left it in the car?"

"Maybe," Ashley said. He exhaled and forced himself to settle. "I called his phone three times and can't reach him. I don't know if he's got a home phone and I don't know his address." He pinched the bridge of his nose. "Jordan, you're a cop. After the crap at the diner and the letter from the coalition, you can't tell me nothing seems wrong about this."

"You're right. It doesn't feel right, but that's the scrape. I can't jump to conclusions."

"Should I call the department?" Ashley asked.

"You can call them, but if you tell them he's missing, I can tell you the answer right now. They won't do a missing person report because he's over eighteen and can come and go as he pleases," Jordan said. "I'm sorry."

"I'm not saying he ran away or just up and walked away." Ashley gritted his teeth. He understood Jordan's view on the matter, but still, he needed help. "I'm worried that the coalition escalated."

"Give me five minutes, okay? I'll see what I can find out."

“Thanks,” Ashley said. “I’ll be here.” He swiped his thumb across the screen to end the call, but Jordan had beaten him to the punch. Ashley sighed. He’d never been one to wring his hands, but he felt so helpless. The look in Colt’s eyes when he’d shown up at the apartment haunted Ashley. Colt was a strong man, but the picketers and the threatening tactics of the coalition hadn’t just worried him, they’d gotten under his skin and under Ashley’s skin, too.

He shook his head. There had to be a simple reason he couldn’t reach Colt. Had to. Right? Car trouble? Maybe he’d gone out for some special ingredient and blown a tire? He’d stopped in a bad or low phone signal area?

Ashley held on to hope, but he doubted hope would be enough.

“Dad? What’s wrong?” Wyatt crept up to him and grabbed Ashley’s left hand.

“Something’s wrong with my friend Colt.” He couldn’t lie to his son, but he’d put the words in terms his son could understand.

“The diner guy?” Wyatt asked.

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“Yes, him. I like him, tot.” He stepped over to the couch and tugged his son onto his lap once he’d plopped onto the cushions. “He’s a nice guy, isn’t he?”

“Is he going to be your boyfriend?” Wyatt draped his arm around his father’s neck.

“Yes.”

“Are you going to hold his hand?”

“Something like that.” He stroked the hairs at the back of Wyatt’s head. “He’ll come over here and we’ll go over to his house sometimes. Would you be okay with that?”

Wyatt shrugged. “Then he can live here with us.”

“No one says he’ll live here.” Christ. They’d just started dating. He cared deeply for Colt, but he didn’t know the future. They could last forever or only a few months.

“Okay.” Wyatt slid off Ashley’s lap. “Dad?”

“Yes?”

“He’s nice. I like him. He doesn’t yell at me and lets me have ice cream at the diner.” He strolled into his bedroom, leaving Ashley in silence.

His kid liked his boyfriend? That was a score he hadn’t expected. Then again, the vote of confidence wasn’t forever. There would be bumps along the road, but he had some progress. Now if he’d make progress in finding Colt.

He glared at his phone. “Ring, damn it.”

As if on cue, the device lit up and Jordan’s name showed up on the screen.

“Holy shit,” Ashley blurted. He touched the Connect icon on the phone and pressed the device to his ear. “Hello?”

“I’ve got good news and bad news. Which do you want first?” Jordan asked.

“Bad. Hit me with that first.” He held his breath.

“We found Colt. When he deposited the money from the diner, someone robbed him and beat the hell out of him.”

Ashley sagged in his seat. “Oh my God. Jordan.”

“He’s at Cedarwood General. The good news is he’s bruised and has a couple of cracked ribs, but he’s awake. He doesn’t look fantastic, but like I said, he’s going to make it,” Jordan said. “He crawled across the yard to the house next door. They called the cops and the ambulance. But the bank has video surveillance of the incident, so we’ll get to the bottom of this. The other thing to be thankful for is that he’s going to make it. He’s got stuff to live for.”

“Can I see him?” Ashley asked. “Think they’ll let me go to his room at the hospital?”

“Go and find out. What’s the worst that can happen? They say no? You wait and eventually he’ll be released and you can help him home. If they let you up, then show him you’re in his corner. When you get there, he’s probably being interviewed so give him a moment, okay?”

“I can do that. Thanks, Jordan. I appreciate the help.” Ashley blew out a long breath.

“Thanks.”

“You gave me the tip, but he did the hard work. He crawled his busted ass over to the house next to the bank. That’s pretty heavy stuff,” Jordan said. “Go see him. We’ll be up later.”

“Cool.” He swiped his thumb across the screen and ended the call. He needed help if he was going to go to the hospital. More than likely Wyatt wouldn’t be allowed up to Colt’s room—if Ashley was allowed to visit. He dialed his mother’s number. While he waited for the call to connect, he hollered for his son. “Wyatt? Put your shoes on.”

Four rings later, his mother answered. “Can’t get enough of me, can you?” she asked.

“You’re right. I also need help. Are you busy?” Ashley fumbled into his shoes. “I need to go to the hospital.”

“Is Wyatt okay?”

“He’s fine. It’s Colt. I’ll explain once I pick you up. Can you help?” He tucked the phone between his ear and his shoulder.

“Stop by the house and I’ll be ready. See you in a few.” She hung up on him, leaving him in silence.

Wyatt stood by the door with his shoes on and his bear under his arm. The sight stopped Ashley in his tracks. Wyatt only grabbed his bear when he was worried. He hadn’t even brought the bear with him when he’d spent the night at his grandmother’s.

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Ashley knelt in front of his son. “I need you to be a big boy. You’re doing a great job so far.”

“I’m scared, Dad.” Wyatt clutched the bear tighter. “Am I in trouble? You’re really mad.”

“No, you’re not in trouble. Someone didn’t like something Colt did and they decided to hurt him. It’s not right, but that’s how some people settle problems. That’s the reason I tell you not to hit people at school. It’s not right.” Ashley hugged his son. No one had told him how hard parenting would be or how the singular sight of his son on the verge of tears could bring him to his emotional knees.

“Someone hit him on the playground?”

“Sort of.” He wiped away Wyatt’s tears. “We’ll get through this. Colt’s okay. We’ll cheer him up.”

“Okay.” Wyatt nodded and held tight to Ashley’s hand.

Ashley gathered his wallet, phone and keys as well as his son and headed out to his car. He made sure to lock the door and to remain aware of his surroundings. If someone wanted to hurt Colt, what was the chance they’d want to hurt someone else in the LGBTQ community? He’d been seen with Colt. Would they do something drastic to him? He was paranoid, but Holy Jesus. Nothing makes sense.

Ashley marched Wyatt back to the apartment and called Brenda. Fuck it. They’d wait until the craziness blew over before they used the car. Tonight, he’d enlist the help of

his mother and cling to the hope that the world would right itself again.

Chapter Twelve

Ashley helped his son out of the car and waited for his mother. He appreciated having them along for the visit. He also needed the support. God only knew if someone would show up and try something crazy. She locked the car and Ashley escorted them all into the hospital.

He stopped at the receptionist's desk. "Hi, I'm here to visit Colton Harrison. I'm not sure what room he's in."

She smiled and tapped on her computer. "He's on the fourth floor. Looks like room four-twenty-eight. I'll send you up to the floor. Check in with the receptionist up there in case there are already people in the room."

"He's six." Ashley nodded to Wyatt. "Is that okay for him to visit? Or is it restricted?"

"As long as there is an adult to accompany him, it should be fine." She smiled again then waved to someone behind Ashley.

"Thanks." He held Wyatt's hand as he headed over to the elevators. He blew out a long breath and pressed the Up button.

"It's going to be okay," Brenda said. She squeezed his left hand. "Promise. He'll be fine and when he's all healed up, you'll all work as a group to come up with a way to settle this problem. It'll be great and people will be happy to live in a diverse town."

“Thanks, Ma.” At least she believed in him and them. He wasn’t sure how he felt. Part of him wanted to say thanks but no thanks for the house. He wanted to move the hell out of the area to make sure Wyatt was safe. Wyatt was still small. If they moved to another town, like Hiddleston, maybe Wyatt would grow up and not have to feel the sting of discrimination. But wouldn’t that happen anywhere? It could.

The bell dinged as they reached the fourth floor. Brenda walked out of the car first, followed by Wyatt. Ashley brought up the rear. He sidestepped them and made his way to the reception desk first.

“Hi, my name is Ashley Willis and I’m here to visit Colt Harrison. I was told downstairs that it wouldn’t be a problem to bring my six-year-old along.”

“It’s not an issue.” The woman tapped her computer keyboard. “But you’ll have to wait. He’s already got a visitor.”

“Oh, probably friends of ours.” He sighed and nodded. Colin or Jordan would no doubt be there. “Thanks.”

“I don’t think the man was a friend. He said he was Mr. Harrison’s next of kin.” She frowned. “His husband, I believe.”

“Husband?” Brenda snapped. “Are you sure?”

“That’s what he said. A Jay Damon. Do you know him?” She folded her hands together. “Once he’s out, you’re more than welcome to go back—as long as it’s not after visiting hours conclude. Have a seat over there and I’ll let you know when you can visit him.”

“Sure,” Ashley mumbled. He wandered over to the couches and plopped onto one of them. A husband? Colt would’ve told him about a husband, definitely.

“Dad? What did she mean? You’re Colt’s boyfriend.” Wyatt scooted onto Ashley’s lap. He threw his arms around Ashley’s neck. “He’s staying with us.”

“Wyatt.” Brenda patted the boy’s back. “Sometimes things are more complicated than we realize.”

But why would Colt lie about something so important? They’d had sex. They’d formed a bond. Damn it, he wasn’t sure if it was love, but he cared about Colt more than he did a lot of other people.

“What are you going to do, Ash?” Brenda asked. “You don’t have all the facts. Promise me you’re not jumping to conclusions.”

“I’m not.” He forked his fingers into his hair. Colt had mentioned a Jay before. If Ashley remembered right, Jay had been a bad mistake. Why was he showing up now? Maybe he’d cared more than he’d let on.

A man strolled through the double doors and stopped at the desk. He glanced over at Ashley then knocked on the desk. “Thank you,” he said. He turned his attention to Ashley. “So you’re the other man.”

Ashley straightened his spine but didn’t answer. He wasn’t about to give this jerk the time of day, much less allow the guy to bait him.

“You’ve got a kid.” The man snorted. “Colt hates kids.”

So it was Jay. Ashley held tight to Wyatt.

“You’ll see. He’s not about to fall for a man with baggage. That’s why he married me. I’m everything he wants.” Jay dipped his head. “Go visit. You’ve only got fifteen minutes before they kick you out.”

The woman wagged her fingers at them then pointed to the door.

Jay dipped his head once more. "Have a good evening, breeder."

Ashley's stomach soured. Breeder. Christ. What was with people? He patted Wyatt's butt and once the kid had left his lap, Ashley and Wyatt headed through the double doors. He checked over his shoulder to make sure his mother followed.

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A thought occurred to him. If he left town, he'd be leaving a good job with the tenure he'd earned. He'd leave friends and the places he loved. His mother lived in Cedarwood. They'd finally fixed the relationship a little and he wanted to run away? He didn't want to hide from his troubles or Colt, but he wasn't sure he could handle seeing Colt with someone else.

"Dad, this is the room." Wyatt yanked Ashley's arm. "Here." He led Ashley into the hospital room. "Hiya, Colt."

"Hi," Colt said. He struggled to sit up. "The day just got a whole lot better. How are you?"

"Better than you, it would appear." Brenda draped her arm around Wyatt's shoulders. "Looks like you're going to make it."

"I hope so." Colt blew out a ragged breath. "They got me good."

"But you're going to live?" Wyatt asked.

"Yeah." Colt smiled, albeit weakly. "Give me a couple days and I'll be back at the diner and ready to make you whatever you want." He reached for Ashley. "You look like you've seen a ghost. I'm okay, really. A couple bumps, some bruises and two cracked ribs, but I'll make it."

"Why don't you and I go get a soda from the machine?" Brenda steered Wyatt to the door. "We'll come back to Daddy in a moment. Okay?"

“You’re going to be here when we get back, right?” Wyatt asked.

“We will.” Colt smiled again. “Your daddy and I aren’t going anywhere.”

“Cool.” Wyatt allowed his grandmother to lead him back out of the room.

Ashley waited for the door to close before he said anything. He wanted to measure his words. If he let his heart run free, he’d say something foolish. If he gave himself a moment, he could use his head and be more rational.

“What’s wrong, Ash? Are you okay?” Colt reached for him again. “Come here. I need to touch you.”

Ashley didn’t move. “You’re pretty cool for a guy who just got the hell beat out of him.”

“My favorite guy showed up and sped my healing along.” Colt plunked his hand onto his lap. “But now he doesn’t look so thrilled.”

“He just left, didn’t he?” Ashley collapsed onto the armchair. “Your favorite guy?”

“Huh?” Colt frowned and his forehead wrinkled. “What are you talking about? I meant you.”

“Jay was here. When I asked the woman at the counter to let us back here, she said we had to wait for Jay Damon to leave.” Ashley’s voice cracked. “I know we’re new at this relationship and never actually said we were exclusive, but for me, we were. Are you seeing him? According to the desk worker, he’s your husband.”

The color drained from Colt’s face. “My what?”

“Look, if he is, then fine. I understand.” Not really, but he’d put on a brave face. “I’ve got Wyatt to think about. He adores you.” The muscle in his jaw tensed. “If you’re with Jay, then we’ll just call this a happy fling and stay out of your life other than to be your friend.”

“You’ve got this all wrong.” Colt struggled to sit up again. “I promise you do.”

“There’s been a lot of promising lately.” Ashley stood. He needed to move. “I want you to be honest with me.” His emotions had gotten the better of him. He couldn’t think. Instead, he wanted to scream.

“Ash, wait.” Colt grasped Ashley’s hand as he walked past. “Stop.”

Ashley wanted to fight him, but the fight had left him.

“I’m not married. Never have been.” He caressed the back of Ashley’s hand with his thumb. “Jay came to the room, yes. He showed up long enough to see if I was still around. He asked if I wanted to rekindle the flame. I suspect he thought he’d get in on the fame he saw coming. I’ve been interviewed over the phone by the local paper and the Cleveland news channels. He wanted in on that.”

“Why are they interested?” Ashley inched closer to the bed. “It wasn’t just a robbery?”

“Jordan can explain better, but the people who did this wanted to send me a message. They were part of the coalition—maybe a splinter cell, but they were associated with them. They wanted me to die because I’m gay. If I died, then I’d get the rest of the LGBTQ community out of Cedarwood. It’s stupid, but that’s what they wanted.” Colt grasped his ribcage with his free hand. “I’m not leaving this town. Fuck ’em. If they want to cleanse a town, then they’ll have to find a different town.”

Ashley closed his eyes. Cleanse the town. What was wrong with people? Then again, that made sense. Beat up a member of the LGBTQ community, get the news involved and press for the problem. Once the Cleveland area and the rest of the state took notice, then God only knew what would happen.

“I crawled across that damn lawn because I wanted to see you again.” A tear slipped down Colt’s cheek. “I wanted to see Wyatt again. Jay didn’t factor into the equation. I know it seems messed up. It is. I’m committed to this new thing we’ve started, to not jerking Wyatt around, to keeping my diner and showing the community that we’re all the same on the inside.” He snorted. “Wow, that came out sounding like a fucked-up rally cry.”

“It did a little.” Ashley perched on the edge of the bed.

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“Then it was. I’ve got something to fight for—someone. You and Wyatt. Yeah, it’s new, but I know what I want.” Colt spread his hand across Ashley’s thigh. “Trust me, I’d rather deal with the picketers than cracked ribs.”

“I’m sorry I doubted you,” Ashley said. “That was shitty of me.” He meant every word. The love was new, but it shone in Colt’s eyes. The honesty in Colt’s words wasn’t a façade and the least Ashley could do was believe him.

“You were protecting your heart and your kid. I don’t blame you.” Colt smiled, despite another tear sliding through the stubble on his cheek. “All I can do is beg for you to stick with me.”

“I’m not going anywhere.” He hadn’t needed to think about this answer. His heart belonged to Colt Harrison. “I’m kind of fond of you. Is it love? I don’t know. I’m not sure what love is unless I’m dealing with Wyatt, but...I’m willing to give us a go.”

“Thank you.” Colt kissed the back of Ashley’s hand. “Lane really fucked with your head, didn’t he?”

“Yeah.”

“I won’t.” Colt grinned then winced. “Damn, that hurts. Took a kick to the head and a punch to the jaw.” He flexed his jaw. “Jordan’s supposed to be coming by at some point. I already gave them my statement, but he wanted to be sure I was okay.”

“I’m glad you’re in one piece.” Ashley blinked back tears. The nightmare with the coalition wasn’t over, but he had his man. The rest would have to work out somehow.

“Knock, knock.” Brenda inched into the room and nudged Wyatt forward. “The ladies at the desk and the nurses really took to Wyatt. Candy, drinks...he charmed them into setting him up.”

Go figure. If there was a way to charm someone, Wyatt could do it. Ashley suppressed a chuckle. Danica would be proud—of her son and her friend. She’d been off the mark when she’d pushed him to pursue Lane, but he believed now she’d be proud he’d found Colt. He switched his gaze between Colt, Wyatt and Brenda. The crazy little family was just what he needed.

Wyatt held up a candy bar. “They had cookies and cream.” He crept up to Colt’s bed. “So you’re really okay?”

“I am,” Colt replied. “My ribs are cracked, but if I’ve got a good nursemaid, I might be able to go home tomorrow.”

“I can help.” Brenda patted the end of the bed. “I’m a registered nurse. I’m taking care of my friend, but I can go between the two homes. You shouldn’t need that much help, but some will be good at first. The more you learn to do on your own, the better, but you also don’t want to overdo.”

“I’d like that.” Colt squeezed Ashley’s thigh. “A lot.”

“Visiting hours end in ten minutes,” a voice said over the intercom.

“That’s no fair,” Wyatt moaned. “We need to take Colt home.”

“It’ll be fine.” Although Ashley would feel a lot better once an officer showed up. Hopefully Jordan would be there. He couldn’t be certain Jay wouldn’t try to swindle his way upstairs again or that the coalition wouldn’t try to strike while Colt was down. Besides, what had Colt really ever done to piss them off?

Jordan strolled into the room. "I'm on official duty and have been tasked to remain here tonight. I hear you've got a couple cracked ribs and nowhere to go. How about a roommate for the night? Those craptastic plastic chairs aren't much for sleeping, but Ash will know you're safe."

Ashley stole a glance over at the chair. The piece of furniture wasn't altogether comfortable. He sighed and stood. "Thanks for staying here, Officer. I appreciate it."

"Considering what this guy has been through, and at the hands of the coalition, he deserves a guard." Jordan crossed his arms. "Officers Drake and Gallow watched the video feed from the bank. There's no doubt to your story. We can't ID the people doing the beating, but we're working on statements from the two witnesses. What we do know is that one of the attackers was from the coalition. She had the logo and the name of the group plastered all over the back of her jacket."

"Are you sure you're able to share this info?" Ashley asked. "Usually that kind of stuff is supposed to be for the police only." He'd seen plenty of cop shows and real-crime programs to know some stuff had to be kept quiet in order to figure out the person behind the wrongdoing.

"Normally, yes, but the news got a hold of the tape. We released it in order to help catch the assailants." Jordan rocked on the balls of his feet. "We've also found your SUV. The thing was trashed and stripped, but I knew your vehicle. Got the VIN from the Bureau of Motor Vehicles and matched it. No location on your wallet and thankfully no activity on your cards, but your phone was destroyed."

"I knew the phone was toast." Colt growled. "I need to cancel my cards so they can't use them."

"You can use my phone to call the credit card companies. If you're feeling up to it tonight, you can do it then." Jordan offered over his cell phone. "We'll sort it out."

“I know you will.” Colt nodded. “At least my damn social security card is in the safe at the house. Christ. All this over my fucking sexuality...”

“Language. There’s a small person in the room.” Ashley leaned over the bed and kissed Colt lightly on the lips, careful not to hurt him. “If you’re still interested, I’ll have Ma come up tomorrow—since she volunteered—and once I’m done with school and have Wyatt, we’ll be over.” He paused. “But you’ll have to give us your address.”

Colt curled his fingers under Ashley’s chin. “It’s 774 Hawthorn Drive. The only navy-blue house on the street. We may need to break in tomorrow. My spare keys are at the diner and I can’t get in there without my main set of keys.”

“I’ll call a locksmith,” Jordan said. He nodded to Ashley. “I hate to be the bearer of bad tidings, but you’d better get moving. Claire is a great nurse, but she’s a stickler for the rules. If she thinks you’re trying to stay over, she’ll raise Cain.”

Ashley winked at Colt. “I’ll see you tomorrow.” He clapped Jordan’s shoulder. “Thanks, man.”

“Anytime,” Jordan answered.

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Holding hands with his son, Ashley headed out of the hospital room. Brenda hurried up beside Wyatt. Ashley mulled over the turn of events. So the coalition had been behind the attack. What would they do next? He could just about guarantee Jordan and the rest of the Cedarwood police force were on top of the situation.

He pressed the button for the elevator. When the car opened, he allowed Wyatt and his mother to enter first.

“Ash, why don’t you stay at the house tonight? We’ll stop by the apartment and get a change of clothes and such, but I’d feel better if you were at the house. Please?” his mother asked.

Bone-deep weariness set in. He’d been through so much in such a short period of time. “I’d appreciate it, Ma. Thanks.”

“Whoop!” Wyatt jumped up and down in the elevator car. “We’re going to Grandma’s again.”

The bell dinged, and the car stopped. When the doors opened, two men, one with a news camera, surged up to Ashley.

“We’re with the Cleveland news and we’d like to get a statement from you.” He grasped a microphone. “I’m Remy Nicholas. According to reports, you’re Colt Harrison’s boyfriend. How do you feel about the recent turn of events? Would you be willing to go on camera with your feelings?”

“No, I’d like to keep my name out of this.” Ashley held Wyatt’s hand tighter. “I’ve

got a son and I don't want something to happen to him."

Remy made a slashing gesture across his throat. "I'll meet you by the vending machines. Give me a minute."

If he thought he was going to pressure Ashley into speaking, the reporter had another trick coming. "I'm not interested in talking."

"No." Remy tucked the microphone into a bag at his feet then laced his fingers together. "Off the record?"

"How do I know I can trust you?" Ashley narrowed his eyes. At the moment, he trusted very few people.

"Very simple. I've been following the occurrences here in Cedarwood. For the last year, anyone who is part of the LGBTQ community, mainly the single father support group, has been a target. I'm not a single father or a father at all—unless you count my two boxer dogs—but I do know Colin and Farin Baker. I don't understand how two nice guys like that could bring on this kind of hate."

"It's not them. It's the town. Cedarwood doesn't like change and unfortunately the world is spinning faster than the town can adjust." Ashley tilted his head and gestured to his son. "It's dangerously close to bedtime. I'm sorry I can't help you more."

"I've been thinking about moving here." Remy widened his stance. "I'm not sure Cedarwood is ready for a gay reporter—especially one who's not ready to come out to the vast majority of news watchers."

Ashley patted Remy's shoulder. "When you're ready, you'll come out. If you want to move here, then that's your doing. It's a good town, once we get the discrimination out. I'll see you around."

He strode through the lobby and out to the parking lot. The last rays of sunlight stretched across the blacktop, but the light was enough for them to clearly see around his mother's car. Once Ashley had gotten his son into the car and his mother had pulled out of the lot, he sighed. The hate could end at any time. He wanted his quiet community back. Like Colt had said, he had bigger things to live for than the muck being slung around Cedarwood and he wanted to get going with that life.

Chapter Thirteen

The next afternoon Colt wandered through his house. He'd had the locks changed and new keys made. Thankfully the spare keys to the diner were untouched in the safe. When he'd gone up to his restaurant to survey any damage, he'd had those locks changed as well. With Jordan's help, he'd purchased another cell phone—a fancy one like he preferred. Ashley's mother had done like she'd said and stayed with him. She'd helped him find the best ways to do his daily tasks without taxing his ribs too much. He winced as he exhaled. According to doctor's orders, he was to take a deep breath at least once an hour to ensure he didn't end up with pneumonia or a collapsed lung. When he rested, he'd been instructed to lie on the side of the damage. Doing so hurt like a son of a bitch, but he trusted the doctor.

“Kiddo, have you done your deep-breathing exercises?” Brenda asked. She lifted his shirt and checked the bruising. “Have you?”

“I'd do plenty more if Ashley was here.” He wriggled his eyebrows. “When he gets here, you can have a break. I'd like him to stick around.” He'd probably get the wrong kind of exercise, but who cared? He'd be happier with his boyfriend there.

She rested her hands on her hips. “He's fond of you.”

“But?” He knew there was more to what she was about to say. “Lay it on me.”

“I'm sure he told you about Lane. He's not very good at keeping things inside. Just be warned. He's a strong man, but he's not wild about getting hurt. I meant what I said. Treat him fair and don't push. If this relationship is meant to last, it will.”

“So you’re saying don’t force it and be patient.” Don’t try to fuck the moment you’re well enough to do such things? He grinned and grabbed her in a one-armed hug. “I got the message, loud and clear. Nothing to worry about.” When he let her go, he noticed Ashley’s car in the driveway. T-minus fifteen seconds to heaven.

“Fine. I trust you.” Brenda gathered her purse. “I’ll be back.” She patted his shoulder as she walked past, then left him alone in the living room.

Colt strolled over to the kitchen door. He expected to see Ashley and Wyatt, but instead of only those two, Jordan and another officer were with them. So much for a private hot moment.

“Afternoon,” Colt said. He opened the door. “To what do I owe this visit?”

Ashley herded Wyatt into the house first. “Thanks for having us over.” His eyes glittered and he brushed his hand across Colt’s belly.

“Anytime.” He swatted Ashley’s ass. “You’re always welcome over here.” If he had his way, they’d be living together soon. He wanted his boyfriend in a safe environment and Wyatt out of the dinky apartment.

“Are we?” Jordan blushed. He crooked one eyebrow but didn’t say anything else.

He must’ve seen Colt’s gesture. Colt shrugged. “Of course. What’s up?”

“Besides you finally?” Jordan and the officer headed into the kitchen. “This is Detective Dye.”

“That’s a scary name.” Colt shook hands with Dye. “But I guess if you’re a detective, then it fits.”

Jordan rolled his eyes and Ashley groaned. Colt shrugged again. "I never said I was good under pressure," he muttered. "I'm sorry. You were saying?" He made eye contact with Ashley and winked.

Ashley tried to hide the smile, but Colt noticed. The heat between them damn near set the room on fire.

The detective inched forward, seemingly oblivious to Ashley and Colt's flirting. "The picketers aren't leaving the diner, but we've made some advances with your assault case. One of the witnesses picked out one of the assailants in a line-up. When we brought her in for questioning, she turned on the other two. I don't have many details for you, but I can tell you the investigation is progressing. Now, Hargrove has mentioned you've had other issues. Can you tell me about them?" He pulled out his phone. "I'm going to record this. Is that fine?"

"Sure." Like Colt cared. He hadn't done anything wrong.

"Ready? Go." The detective swiped his thumb across the little microphone icon.

"I got a flyer stuck under my wiper at the diner. There's the group that decided to dine and dash." Colt eased onto the arm of the overstuffed chair. He dragged a deep breath into his lungs, winced then continued. God, his ribs ached. "They weren't regulars, but I remember the name of the group. They reserved the largest table. The Sisters of Cedarwood. Sixteen ladies all wanting dinner at exactly two p.m. I thought nothing of it. We have large groups come in all the time."

Dye shook his head. "So nothing out of the ordinary?"

"Not until Ash came in. Not that that's odd. He's been to the diner before, but this time I decided to make a move. Maybe I brought the problems on myself, but I wanted to tell Ash how I felt. I snuck into the bathroom after he went in. As far as I

knew, no one saw. Now I know they were watching. I have the feeling they were planning on doing something no matter what. I just egged them on.” He grasped Ashley’s hand. He’d inadvertently thrown Ashley under the bus. Damn. He’d have to make up for it when he got back on his feet.

“If we had you look through a book of photos, do you think you’d be able to pick the women from that group out?” Dye asked.

“Even better. I can tell you who most of them are. They’re the ones picketing.” Colt toyed with the seam of his jeans leg. “They literally walked out of the restaurant out to the curb where they started their chants. ‘Gay, gay, go away. Clean up Cedarwood and toss out the trash.’” Colt sighed. He needed his pain meds and time to curl up with Ashley.

“Ah yes. We’ve heard the chants.” Dye turned off the recorder function on the phone. “Thanks for the information.”

Jordan nodded and shook hands with Colt. “Trust me, you did fine.”

“We’ll be in touch. Thank you.” Dye nodded to Jordan. “I’ve got enough.” He strode through the living room to the front door, leaving Jordan behind.

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Colt's head ached and he massaged his temples. They had enough? "What do you mean, he's got enough?"

"I can't get too specific, but the more we've learned, the better we can put together a case." Jordan half smiled. "We've got suspects. That's a good thing. The female suspect is also talking, so that's even better. Once we put the details together, we can proceed. I'll keep you in the loop." He tipped his head. "Are you planning on going outside anytime soon?"

"No." Colt leaned forward to look out of the windows. Three news vans were parked on the street. No...please God, they aren't here for a comment...shit.

"Well, you don't have to talk to the media. There's nothing saying you must. I'd suggest you don't, if only because it'll give you less hassle down the road." Jordan shook hands with Colt then Ashley. "Where's the boy?"

"In the kitchen with Ma," Ashley said. "I figured they were better off in there."

"Smart. I'll be in touch." Jordan left them alone in the living room. The door clicked as he walked out of the house.

"Well..." Ashley smoothed his palm over Colt's good side. "It's not like we're going to be able to screw like rabbits for a while. I read online it'll be a few weeks before you're back in action."

"Not for the next six weeks. I can go back to the diner, but I can't lift anything over ten pounds." Colt gritted his teeth. He hated being infirm and he sure as hell hated

having to rely on people. He also hated that they were so new in their relationship and he had to depend on Ashley so much.

“What’s wrong? Something hurts?” Ashley moved his hand. “I’m sorry. I should’ve known. Ma will have my head.”

“Ash.” He grabbed both of Ashley’s hands. He missed touching Ashley. “Slow down. I need you to trust me.”

Ashley stared at him, wide-eyed.

Colt dragged a deep breath into his lungs and winced as he exhaled. God, meds would make this easier. First, he had to calm down Ashley. “Here’s the thing. I’m on lighter duty for the next six or so weeks. That’s not fun, but it’s not awful. I’m going to make it. Now, here’s the next thing. I’m bad at relying on others unless it’s in the diner setting. When I know I can trust people, I’m willing to delegate. Until then, I’m cautious. Sound like anyone you know?”

“Me,” Ashley murmured. The corner of his mouth kinked.

“We’re two peas in a pod.” Colt cupped Ashley’s cheek. “Now I need you to trust me. I’m not Lane and I’m not about to fuck you over.” He did his best 1930s gangster impression and winked. “Stick with me, kid, and we can do anything.”

Ashley rolled his eyes, but the smile grew. “Works for me.”

“Now, where is your kid and is he eating me out of house and home?” Colt draped his arm around Ashley’s shoulders. “More power to him, if he is.” Together, he and Ashley headed into the kitchen. Wyatt sat at the island on one of the barstools and kicked his feet.

“I gave him some juice and graham crackers,” Brenda said. “Now, I’ve got to get to the bank and run to the store. You’ll be fine now.” She kissed Ashley’s cheek. “I’ll be back or just a phone call away.”

Ashley let go of Colt long enough to wander over to the window. He stood there until his mother left the driveway.

“Dad, can we stay here forever?” Wyatt asked between bites of cracker. “I like it here. There’s room to play and Colt has a backyard.” He turned his attention to Colt. “Do you have toys?”

“I don’t, but I’m sure we can bring some of yours over here.” Colt leaned against the island. Or he could go shopping and do a little spoiling. “Like blocks? Those plastic ones that hurt when you step on them? Or cars? Puzzles?” He paused. “I’ve got the tablet and a computer as well as the gaming system. I don’t have kid games on the console, but I do have access to online movies. Maybe we can find a couple you like.”

Wyatt’s lips parted and he grinned. “Online movies and a tablet? Wow. You’re rich!”

“I don’t know about that.” Although he did like nice things. “If your dad is okay with us finding a movie, I’ll order a pizza and we can hang out in the media room.”

“Media room?” Wyatt frowned. “You actually have a media room?”

“Wyatt.” Ashley placed his hands on Wyatt’s shoulders. “Think before you speak.”

“Well, Dad? Is it okay with you if we get a pizza?” Colt asked. “Eddie’s has great pie.”

“Yeah, Dad? Can we?” Wyatt stuffed the last two crackers into his mouth.

Ashley's gaze switched between Wyatt and Colt. "I'm being double-teamed, aren't I?" He shook his head. "Fine. No onions. Wyatt'll eat anything else, but not onions."

"Yes!" Wyatt slipped off the barstool then raced out of the room. His shoes clunked hard on the floor and the sound echoed through the quiet house.

"He has no idea where the media room is." Ashley scooped up the crumbs and deposited them into a napkin. "But he'll snoop until he finds it."

"That's okay." Colt rounded the counter and snagged Ashley in his embrace. "I found exactly what I needed when you walked into the diner with the single fathers group. You changed my life."

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“You make me sound noble or something. I’m not noble.” Ashley averted his gaze. “I’m not.”

“Look at me.” He tipped Ashley’s chin. “I’ve got someone in my life who knows about art, is willing to talk about it, can tell a Degas from a Picasso, who is sexy as hell when he sleeps and fucks me in all the right ways.”

“You fucked me,” Ashley whispered.

“Same difference. You’re the thing I was missing in my life. If it takes the rest of my life to show you how much I’m in over my head about you, then I’m ready for the job. I’m crazy fond of you and Wyatt. I can’t see my life without either of you.”

“Good thing, since we’re a mismatched set.” Ashley smiled. “All three of us.”

He’d stopped just short of uttering the word love, but he didn’t regret holding that tidbit back. How could someone know they were in love after a weekend together? He suppressed a chuckle then kissed Ashley. They’d been through what seemed like a lifetime in those three days. Could destruction and harm actually bring two people together? He didn’t think so, but he believed the meeting at the diner wasn’t random. There had been a plan and he couldn’t wait to start his life with Ashley and Wyatt.

“Wow. Dad.” Wyatt slapped Ashley on the hip and tapped Colt’s arm. “There’s a guy ringing the doorbell. I didn’t answer it, but he won’t stop.”

“Fuck, I didn’t hear it,” Colt said. He disengaged from Ashley. “I’ll take care of this.”

“Let’s go watch a movie,” Ashley said. “Show me where the media room is?”

“Around the corner. It’s, like, the whole back of the house.” Wyatt clapped his hands, despite having one of Ashley’s in his fists. “There’s everything in there.”

“I’ll catch up to you in a moment.” Colt winked and left his boyfriend and Wyatt in the hallway. He headed through the living room to the foyer. Sure enough, a man stood on the porch. When Colt got closer, he noticed the man’s features. Black hair, goatee and a polo shirt...he’d seen that look before. Where? One of the attackers? No...He grasped the door handle. Who was this guy? Probably a reporter. Goddamn it.

Colt opened the door. A dozen or so newspeople stood on the sidewalk. Flashbulbs popped and cameras rolled. A couple of questions were shouted at him. He focused his attention on the guy.

“Thanks for bringing them here,” he snapped. “I’m not available for comment.”

“My name is Remy Nicholas. I’m a reporter, but I’m not here for a comment.” Remy mopped his brow. “I needed to talk to you—off the record.”

“About?”

“Stuff.”

He glared at Remy. “I don’t know you from Adam. Why in the name of hell would I trust you or allow you to come into my house? You wanted me for an exclusive yesterday. Now what? A talk? Come on.” Shit. Was he now trying to provoke Colt to make the story juicier? He didn’t see a cameraman with Remy, but maybe there was a hidden one or something.

“Okay, yes, I’m trying to do a story, but it’s not what you think.” Remy dropped his voice to a murmur. “I want to highlight the couples in this town who are part of the support group. A feel-good story about the group finding love despite the crap this town is throwing at them, and to shed a little positive light on the LGBTQ community.”

“You’re on the level?” If he was, then Colt was on board. The community needed positivity. Hell, he needed a good vibe.

“Yeah, I’m on the level. No cameraman. No photographer. Just me trying to do a decent story about decent people.”

“Come in. We’ll talk where there is less intrusion.” Colt unlocked then opened the screen door. He stepped out of the way as Remy entered the house. “What exactly was your title for this gem of a story?”

“Rainbow over Cedarwood.” Remy tugged his notepad from his pocket. “The coalition doesn’t want gay people here in town, but even that negativity isn’t drowning out the spirit of the gay community. We’re thriving and finding relationships. We’re making homes and families. We’re not out here to riot or do some of the outlandish things we’re accused of. We want to be happy like everyone else.”

“We?” Colt leaned against the side table and folded his arms. He widened his stance. “Why do you keep saying we? Are you gay and living in Cedarwood?”

“Yes, I’m gay. No, I don’t live in town. I thought I said something the other night.” Remy tapped his pencil on the paper. “No, that was to your partner, Ashley. Nice guy.”

“I think so.” More than nice, but whatever.

“So you met because Ashley came into the diner. The homey atmosphere combined with his charm won you over?” Remy asked.

“I wasn’t looking to get back into the dating pool, but he changed my mind for me.” Colt measured his breaths. Any moment the boom would drop. He just had that feeling. “It’s a new thing between us, but it’s solid.”

“The single-father thing hasn’t wiggled you out?” Remy scrawled on the paper. “Some people aren’t ready to get involved with a single parent.”

“You have to look at the person as a packaged deal—the kid comes along and if you can’t deal with a kid, then don’t date the parent. If you can, then give it a shot.”

“Smart.” Remy jotted more down on the paper. “I’ve already talked to Colin and Jordan as well as Steve and Farin.” He closed the notebook. “The single father support group seems to be a dating service, too. Unintentional, but it is.”

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“Are you a single father, too?” Colt asked. He doubted it, but people surprised him all the time.

“No, and I’m not looking into joining the group. I’m crap with kids. But the chances of people in the group hooking up do look promising.” Remy tucked the notebook and pencil into his messenger bag. “Thanks. The article should come out next Tuesday. Thank you for your time and I hope someday I can find the love you and Ashley share.”

“Sure.” Colt blinked as Remy walked out of the house. He closed the door and engaged the lock. Some positive press would be good. He had to trust Remy would do the right thing.

“What’s taking so long?” Ashley bounded into the foyer. “You’re white as a sheet. What hurts?”

“Nothing.” Colt draped his arm around Ashley’s shoulders for support. “I’m oddly good. Let’s watch a movie with Wyatt.”

“You’re sure?” Ashley paused. “Nothing hurts and no one took photos or anything?”

“My ribs ache, but that comes with getting the shit kicked out of me. No, I had a realization.” Colt nudged them forward. He wanted to get to the media room and to sit down with Ashley beside him. “Something the reporter said. Rainbow over Cedarwood. No matter what life throws at us, we’ve got each other—not just you and me and Wyatt, but the group, too. He’s right. We’ve got our own quirky rainbow going and I’m glad we’re a part of it.”

Ashley grinned. “Are you sure you didn’t get clobbered on the head again?”

“Positive. This is where I’m meant to be and with the people I’m meant to have in my life. Hey, Wyatt? What movie are we watching?” He eased onto the sectional sofa and tugged Ashley down beside him. “Something good?”

“A movie with robots and cars.” Wyatt clicked the remote. “See?” He climbed onto Ashley’s lap and draped his legs across Colt’s. “They’re family like we’re a family.”

Colt eased his arm across the back of the sofa and Ashley’s shoulders. He’d never dreamed he’d be part of a family, but now he couldn’t see things any other way. He loved his life and his partner. Having Wyatt on board was icing on the rainbow cake.

Chapter Fourteen

Ashley scooped Wyatt into his arms and followed Colt into the house. In the last four weeks, so many things had happened. He couldn't keep it all straight, but he wouldn't have changed a thing. He had Colt in his life and arms. Wyatt was safe, happy and thriving in the new environment.

"You're okay with moving in here?" Colt asked. He closed the door. "Your mother isn't upset you didn't want the house?"

"If she is, she hasn't said anything. Getting over market value and being able to transport the swing set over here helped. She's living at the retirement home as a nurse in residence since her friend wasn't allowed to go back home. Ma's important." She was also finally happy. No more dwelling on the failed relationship with Ashley's father or how long she'd waited before accepting Ashley's sexuality. Ashley loved that his mother had been able to move forward. She'd driven him crazy, but he wanted the best for her. If the best meant becoming a full-time on-site employee of the retirement community, then he was all for her decision.

"How about Wyatt?" Colt asked.

"Besides being asleep and weighing a ton, he likes it. Yes, the kid is heavy. Jeez." Ashley chuckled. "But you were talking about him adjusting. He does like it. He's got a yard to play in, friends on this street and an entertainment room." Ashley carried his son up to the second floor. "Did I mention his own room that's not sharing a wall with his father's room? Yeah, that's a plus, too." He appreciated the space in Colt's house and liked the better neighborhood. He wasn't afraid his car would be

vandalized or broken into. Plus he could be with Colt every night. His love for Colt had grown and he couldn't wait to tell Colt how he felt. Was it instant love? No, they'd needed the time to figure out their feelings and now he was sure.

"For everyone." Colt eased up behind Ashley and whispered, "Love having you beside me when I sleep."

The words and the tone of Colt's voice sent shivers down Ashley's spine. He'd never get tired of hearing Colt say those things.

When Ashley placed Wyatt on the bed, Colt helped remove the child's shoes. Ashley unzipped Wyatt's jacket then eased it off his son. Colt draped the blankets over Wyatt. Ashley's heart skipped a beat. He never would've guessed they'd fall into a happy routine so fast. He'd assumed Colt would make a good parent and partner, but their rhythm was so balanced. He'd found the right person to complete his team and to work toward the same goals.

"Come on." Colt nudged Ashley out of the bedroom and into the hallway. "He's out for the count."

"He's never been to the pizza place for one of those birthday parties and game-night things." Ashley strolled into the bedroom he shared with Colt. Yet another new experience. He'd lived with Lane, sure, but there had always been a barrier between them. Lane needed privacy, whereas Colt was an open book. Ashley kicked out of his loafers and unbuttoned his dress shirt. "Come to think of it, that's the first time I've ever been there for a party."

"You kept yourself away from the fun for far too long." Colt shut the door. "I know you're not ashamed of your past, but I wish, babe, I would've been able to be there to help you find yourself faster."

Ashley shrugged out of the shirt. “I know. I also think things had to happen the way they did—I wasn’t in a good headspace back then. I needed to be on my own to see what I really wanted.”

“Me?” Colt stalked toward him. His eyes glittered.

“Yeah, you.” Watching Colt in the dim bedroom light with the T-shirt suctioned to his body turned Ashley on. He admired Colt’s ability to look good in anything—including stripped nude. Colt’s confidence and sensuality overflowed. He couldn’t believe such a handsome man was in his life and he was in that man’s bed.

“Come here, you.” Colt stalked across the room until he caged Ashley in his arms. “I’ve got news.”

“Really?” When Ashley’s legs hit the mattress, he tumbled onto the bed. Colt stared down at him. Ashley spread his legs. Soon they’d be able to fuck. He wasn’t about to push Colt to do something that would irritate his cracked ribs, but he wanted Colt in his ass so much.

“Uh-huh.” The scruff on Colt’s cheeks shimmered in the low light. He stood and flexed his arms. “The doctor says I’m progressing better than he’d expected. I’m still not allowed to hit the weights like I want or to go for the longer jogs, but I can get physical with you.” He eased his shirt up over his head. The bruising from the beating had faded, but the scars on Colt’s torso remained. He touched the tattoo in the middle of his chest. “Remember how you said this was for body, mind and spirit?”

“I do.” Ashley shivered. He loved the low tone Colt used. “It makes you whole.” He’d even considered getting the same tattoo but smaller on his chest.

“Actually, you make me whole.” Colt crawled onto the bed and planted his hands on either side of the mattress next to Ashley’s head. He straddled Ashley’s lap and

rubbed the bulge in his open jeans over the one in Ashley's khaki pants. "I've decided to change the meaning—Colt, Ashley and Wyatt. A big, happy family."

"Really?" His voice cracked. Damn it. "I mean, wow." He wasn't sure what the hell he meant. "Are you sure?" He knew his heart and it belonged to Colt.

"I wasn't me—the real, happy me—until you two came along. The diner didn't complete me. It's a building with workers. This is real." He reached between their bodies and fondled Ashley's erection.

"I love you." Ashley had blurted the words and didn't regret it. "So much."

"I'd hoped you'd say that. I've loved you since pretty much the day I met you." Colt eased away from Ashley and stood long enough to shove his pants to the floor. When the denim fell away from his body, he revealed his lack of underwear. "I wanted to shout it to the world how much I'd fallen for you, but I didn't want to rush you." He stepped out of the wadded-up denim.

"You're so beautiful." Ashley dragged his fingers over Colt's arm as Colt stretched out beside him.

Colt settled on his back, his erection pointed toward the ceiling. He wrapped his fingers around his cock. "Strip, babe. I'm allowed to do this. I can't overexert, but this is within my limits."

He almost questioned Colt, but why bother? Colt had gone to the doctor that afternoon. If the doctor didn't feel Colt was up to a little hand action, then he'd probably have said something. Ashley shimmied out of his pants and boxer briefs. He stroked himself then glanced over at Colt.

"It's been four weeks of not being able to fuck you. I hate it." Colt curled his hand

around Ashley's. "I've dreamed of this."

Ashley rolled onto his side, giving Colt better access. Colt hadn't been kidding. For the last four weeks, they'd been relegated to Colt watching him masturbate, or making out. They still couldn't fuck, but this was pretty good. He moved his hand in time with Colt's strokes. A shudder racked his body. Everything tingled.

"Jesus." Colt squeezed his eyes shut. "Feels so fucking good." He increased the speed of his pulls. A grunt escaped his lips and he tilted his head back. "Fuck."

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Ashley toyed with his own balls while Colt jerked him off. At the same time, Colt cupped his sac. A smile curled Ashley's lips. He loved seeing Colt so happy and hot. Each tug and pull added to Ashley's pleasure. He bucked against Colt and thrust his hips. He shoved his dick into Colt's fingers. His skin prickled and he gasped for air.

"Jesus," Colt muttered. His breathing became labored. "I want to do this forever."

"Me too." Ashley let go of his balls and focused on the sensation of heat in his veins. The orgasm built low in his belly and overwhelmed him within seconds.

"Ash," Colt murmured. He increased pressure on Ashley's cock. "I need to come."

Ashley sped up his strokes then swiped his thumb across the top of Colt's dick. The gentle pressure on the blunt head of his lover's erection was all Colt needed. Colt tensed and jerked his hips. Two thick ribbons of cum splattered onto his belly and pubic hair.

"Oh fuck," he said, drawing out the words. "You know how to make me come apart."

Ashley kissed Colt's shoulder. He needed to come, too, but he wanted to be sure Colt was fine before he gave in.

"That's the best relaxation technique I could want." Colt eased onto his side and winced. He smeared cum from his stomach onto Ashley's hip. "Still doesn't make the ribs hurt less, but I believe I owe you an orgasm." He alternated between increased pressure and soft touches. The different sensations—hard and easy—nudged Ashley closer to climax.

Ashley flopped over to his back and groaned. The heat came back double-time and his legs trembled. He gritted his teeth to keep the noise at bay. Just a little more... He planted his feet on the mattress and met Colt thrust for thrust.

“Come, Ash. Fall apart for me.” Colt nipped Ashley’s earlobe. His breath warmed Ashley’s skin. Ashley’s brain cells misfired as the orgasm swept through him. He shivered. Hot cum splattered on his belly. He closed his eyes and moaned. “Whoa.”

“It’s twenty times better when you haven’t had any for a while.” Colt kissed Ashley’s temple. “Love you, Ash.”

Ashley relaxed and sighed. Colt hadn’t been kidding. The climax was what he needed from the man he craved.

Colt draped his arm across Ashley’s belly. “Much better.”

“Uh-huh.” Ashley opened his eyes and laced his fingers with Colt’s. He could stay in Colt’s arms forever.

“I have other news, but knowing you love me makes everything else blah.” Colt twined their legs together. “Two of the three people who beat the hell out of me were caught. Jordan called. I guess the woman who’d been brought in earlier rolled on the others. She gave up their hiding place. They were arrested this morning and will be arraigned tomorrow. No word on if it’ll go to court for a trial, but when I need to testify, I will.”

“Wow.” Ashley rested his head against Colt’s. “Have they confessed?”

“Not in so many words. If it gets that far and no one makes a deal, the pretrial stuff could happen within a couple of weeks,” Colt said. “I’m not afraid. I just want it over.”

“Me too.” He wanted to be able to spend time with his lover and not have to worry about who might jump out of the shadows. He wanted to forget about being scared and focus on building their life together.

“It’ll be over soon. Colin and Farin set the festival date for mid-June. We’ll have the celebration and Cedarwood will forget the hate. By then the trial should be over—if there is one—and we can move forward.” Colt kissed him again. “Maybe even make this permanent.”

Ashley snuggled up to his boyfriend. He should find a towel or something to clean them off, but he’d do it in a moment. He’d found his rainbow over Cedarwood when he’d found Colt. They’d worry about the rest of the world later. Now he never wanted those bright colors to fade. Being in love was an awesome feeling.