



Second Chances in Cedarwood

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Category: Romance, M-m Romance

Description: Who knew love could be found at a small-town hot dog shop?

Jack Walters opened his hole-in-the-wall restaurant to serve hot dogs—being a chef is all he’s ever wanted out of life. Love hasn’t worked out for him, so the last thing he expects is to find romance at his shop. But Jack’s been hurt before and he’s leery of the sexy man who keeps visiting his restaurant.

Henry Lord has been all around the world. He’s visited gourmet foodie places and tiny restaurants, but he loves the ambience at Jack’s Hot Dog Shop. He’s also in lust with the sexy owner. Henry’s shy, but he’s determined to get Jack’s attention. There are people who want to use Jack and change him.

Not Henry. It’ll take a herculean effort to prove to Jack that he’s the one for Henry. Good thing Henry believes in love, second chances and finding his home...in Cedarwood.

Reader advisory: This book contains mentions of homophobia, and emotionally abusive exes.

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Chapter One

“Who needs a hot dog?” Jack Walters stood behind the grill at his one-room hot dog shop and surveyed the landscape. Fifteen people had packed into the space—ten waiting on orders and five spread among the three tables. People waited outside. He could almost hear the chatter of the customers over the sizzle of the grill.

Jack lived for the blur of action. He loved his shop and serving food to the people of Cedarwood. Truth be told, he liked being needed in the community and he enjoyed the din of conversation. He’d heard so much gossip over his twenty years at the shop. Couples splitting, people cheating on lovers and spouses, people cheating in business, discussing business, politics...he’d heard it all.

Unlike some of the restaurants in Cedarwood, he kept his business rather plain. Sure, there were metal signs from other hot dog shops and old advertising signs on the wall, but he wasn’t going for upscale ambience. He wanted a quick in-and-out type of establishment. Cash only and most customers took their food to go. He’d considered opening at a bigger location, but why mess with what worked?

He spotted Henry at one of the tables. Most people didn’t bother to stop and sit. They wanted quick and convenient. Henry seemed to linger every day, coming in after one in the afternoon, then staying until closing at three.

Jack filled orders, but his mind wandered to Henry. He didn’t know much about the guy beyond that he was a writer. He’d read a few of Henry’s articles in the local paper and seen his work in magazines displayed in the bookstore.

He'd learned the most about Henry—most of which he doubted was true—through the gossip grapevine in Cedarwood. Everyone talked about everyone. Henry lived alone, wrote stories and articles, traveled and didn't say much. Henry liked order and could be cranky when things didn't go his way.

Most people got irritated when things didn't work out. He knew—he'd seen it at the shop. Hot dogs without the right toppings, with the right ones but cold or too hot, or swearing they'd been overcharged. He shook his head. Every hot dog cost exactly three dollars. Condiments were free, but cheese, jalapenos and chili cost an additional fifty cents each. The sodas were two bucks and fries cost a dollar. Easy.

Jack served up another handful of hot dogs, then read through the new orders. He added a new batch to the grill and glanced over at Henry. He wondered how old he was, since no one seemed to discuss that point. He couldn't be much older than Jack's forty-five years. Sure, he had some gray hairs on his temples and scattered through his short sandy tresses, but lots of people went gray far before middle age. Hell, he'd started showing grays at twenty-eight. He swore the loss of color came from the stress of the shop.

Maybe it did. Maybe he needed to loosen up. He'd been told he'd relieve stress if he visited a BDSM club, but he wasn't sure he wanted someone spanking him.

He served up the hot dogs and only a few people were left in the shop. There tended to be a lull at two in the afternoon. People couldn't seem to remember if his shop was open until two or three, even though he'd kept the same hours since he'd opened the shop twenty years before. The lull always happened at the same time, but the action ticked back up at two-thirty. "I've got to rush to get an order in before you close," they'd say. He didn't care.

Anna, his lone employee, closed the cash register and joined him at the grill. "That's the last one for now—Henry's paid." She elbowed him. "He's only asked for one

refill.”

“He ordered,” Jack murmured. “All I ask is they buy food if they’re going to linger and he eats here every day. Leave him alone.”

She picked up an onion and one of the larger knives. She chopped the vegetable into small bits. “Just makes me wonder why he hangs out here so much. Think he’s bored?”

“No.” He’d kept an eye on Henry. Every day, Henry brought his notebook with him and jotted in the pages while he ate. Jack scraped the grill down, then lowered the heat. “I’m going to stretch.” He left the spatula in the holder, then rounded the grill. He strode right up to Henry. “Can I refresh your soda for you?”

“Oh.” Henry blushed. “Sure.” He closed the notebook. “Sorry. Got lost in my writing. Am I bothering you?”

“Nope.” He ducked behind the counter long enough to refill the cola, then brought the glass back to Henry. “I’m taking a break. Mind if I sit with you a moment?”

“No. Please, do.” Henry moved his notebook out of the way and gestured to the other chair.

Now that he was right across from Henry, he could really look at him. The grays in his hair worked for him and gave him the look of seriousness without seeming severe. His blue eyes sparkled when he smiled, and Jack swore he had a dimple on the left side. Henry folded his hands on his notebook. Jack liked hands and preferred men with clean ones. Blunt working ones were fine, but he preferred pianist ones. Henry didn’t disappoint. Jack wondered what he’d look like holding a fountain pen. Probably sexy. He suppressed a snort. He barely knew Henry, but he’d already fantasized about him. At least the man was handsome—close-up and far away, too.

“You’re staring at me.” Henry’s blush increased. “Am I wearing mustard on my mouth?”

“No.” Jack averted his gaze. This time, his ears burned. “I’m sorry. I spend so much time behind the counter, and I don’t get much of a chance to talk to the customers. You’re always in here, so I wanted to chat, but I got lost in the comfort of sitting.” Jesus. How ridiculous? The comfort of sitting? He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay.” Henry held out his hand. “I’m Henry Lord. I write travel articles for magazines and I’m a libra. I’m forty-seven and single. I like long walks at sunset and the quaintness of this shop.”

He laughed at Henry’s means to break the tension. “Thank you.” He nodded. “I’m Jack Walters. I own the Hot Dog Shop and I’m not sure which astrological sign I am. Never bothered to look. I’m forty-five and single, too. I spend too much time at the shop and not enough at home.”

“Nice to meet you.” Henry smiled. “Looks like we’re both a bit flawed.”

Jack shrugged. “There’s something to be said for flawed.”

“There is.”

The bell dinged and a group of customers entered the shop. Jack sighed. “Duty calls. Maybe next time we’ll get to chat for more than a few moments.” He winked, then left his seat and resumed his position behind the grill. Of all the times he had to work, it had to be this one, when he wanted to get to know more about Henry. A travel writer. Interesting. He’d barely ventured out of Ohio. Henry had probably traveled all over the globe. His partner had to be either very forgiving or the travel had led to their breakup.

A thought occurred to him. Henry hadn't said he was gay, but he'd mentioned he was single. Christ, he had to get his overactive imagination under control. For all he knew, Henry wasn't gay—just single. All the handsome ones in Cedarwood tended to be straight. Most of the gay men had paired up.

Jack focused on making food and tried to ignore the need to look over at Henry. He'd felt a spark when they'd locked gazes, but Henry seemed shy—not attracted. Jack shook his head. Knowing him, he'd overestimated the spark. Again.

He wanted to be in love. Wanted to be needed. There had to be someone out there for him. Someone who understood he had a business and was required to be there if he wanted to make money. Someone who could love him, despite his tendency to close himself off. He needed a partner. An equal.

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Talk about a lot to superimpose on someone. Henry might not be interested in being all those things. Might not want to be any of them.

Jack focused on grilling hot dogs for the two-thirty rush and did his best to ignore Henry.

Why focus on what might not even be possible? Because sometimes the impossible did happen.

Henry opened his notebook, but kept an eye on the crowd. If a few people wanted tables and needed his, he'd leave. He didn't want to prevent Jack from keeping the patrons happy. He liked the atmosphere at the shop. The Hot Dog Shop was a local watering hole. A gathering place for the folks of Cedarwood to grab a quick bite to eat while discussing the news of the day as they waited.

He liked the look of the metal signs and the simple quality to the restaurant. He got the feeling he belonged there when he walked in. Other restaurants gave the feeling of wanting him there to fill a table for a little while. Jack made him want to come back and linger.

He jotted notes on the pages. His schedule dictated he write the short piece on country living by the end of the month. Easy, since it was only the fifteenth. But Cedarwood wasn't exactly country living. The town had a slower sense about it, but it wasn't small like some towns in Ohio. They had a baseball stadium and the theater had been revamped to show movies and for productions. There was now an entire restaurant row area and shops selling everything from knickknacks to books to fabric and home goods. There was even a little grocery store.

He finished adding notes, then stole a glance at Jack. He'd finally gotten the chance to speak to him. Hot damn. He wasn't sure if Jack was attracted to him, but they'd spoken and he'd tried not to make a fool of himself. His ex-boyfriend would be proud. Tate had always said Henry didn't know how to be smooth in public. He could narrate a travel video, but conversation was above Henry's head. Maybe it was.

He wasn't done talking to Jack, but he doubted Jack wanted him hanging around after the shop closed. He wasn't hungry, but he needed a reason to talk to Jack. He'd have to order something to go and leave a note for him.

Henry ripped a page from his notebook and scrawled a few lines. His heart beat faster. He'd dated a little, but tended to keep his personal life very low profile. He didn't want people to question him instead of taking his writing at face value.

Henry ordered a dog and fries combo with a soda to go, then handed Jack the note when he picked up the order.

"Thanks." He smiled and heat filled his veins. Tension settled in his mind. When Jack grinned at him, he wanted to linger.

Henry forced himself to go, then once he'd walked over to the park in the center of town, he stopped moving. Holy shit. He'd made a move. Henry Lord, the man his friends voted most likely to be single forever, had sent a note and asked a guy to call him. He sat on one of the benches and sunshine warmed his face. Would Jack call? Or would he ignore the note? Was he even gay? Fuck. He hadn't thought about that. Just because a guy smiled at him didn't mean the object of his desire was gay...

Damn it.

Henry located another bench and escaped to the shade. He ate his dinner in silence. If he remembered right, there was supposed to be a concert tonight in the park, a quintet

from the high school playing show tunes and movie songs. If he was lucky, Jack had seen his note, read it and might end up joining him. Or he'd made an ass of himself.

He finished his meal, then opened his notebook. Ideas for his novel flooded his mind. He'd visited enough places and written plenty of short pieces, but he'd always wanted to write a novel about a small town—an unremarkable place with remarkable characters. But he didn't want to write just any book. He wanted to pen a mystery with a slice-of-life angle to it.

He'd worked out who some of the characters would be and the chronology of the story—so far he knew he wanted a murder to occur and where. He preferred to feature parts of Cedarwood in the story. He'd never had a hometown and had decided the moment he'd bought his condo that this was where he wanted to call home.

People gathered at the gazebo and conversation filled the air. The twinkle lights strung through the trees came on. Children ran around and someone blew bubbles. A few minutes later, the band assembled on the floor of the gazebo and music filtered over to him.

Henry wrote while he listened to the music. The songs inspired him and he could almost envision the soundtrack to the movie version of his book. Talk about wishful thinking—that his book would be good enough to be made into a movie. A man could dream.

“Hi.” Jack sat beside him. “It’s kind of strange to see you outside of the shop. Mind if I sit here?”

“Don’t mind at all.” He closed the notebook and tucked it into his messenger bag. “I’m glad you showed up. I wasn’t sure if you would.”

“I don’t pass up the chance to spend time with someone outside of work. I haven’t

been invited to anything—not a date, coffee, to sit at the park, nothing—in over a year.” Jack leaned back in his seat and crossed his ankles. “I almost forgot what it’s like to be outside.”

“Fresh air is nice.” He shifted enough to look at Jack. Of all the things he’d learned while on his travels, it was to look the speaker in the eye. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“So am I.” Jack smiled. “You shocked me with that note. Anna thought you were trying to rob us, but you left and that sort of makes robbing us impossible.”

“Oh my. I just wanted to get together to talk.” He massaged his forehead. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be. She’s got an overactive imagination.” Jack rested his arm across the back of the bench. “She’s good people, but she loves to pester me about finding a boyfriend.”

So he is gay? Good. “You’re not with someone? I know you mentioned you hadn’t been on a date in a while, but I thought you were speaking flippantly.”

Jack sighed. “I’m single because my last partner was jealous of the shop. He knew I worked a lot when we met. I came right out at the beginning and said, look, the shop is my livelihood and if I don’t show up—since there are only two employees—the place won’t open.”

“Makes sense.” He respected a man who made his own fortune.

“I thought about getting a dog. I’d like one, but it’s not fair to an animal to be left at home alone so much,” Jack said. “He’d get lonely.”

He nodded. He loved listening to people talk, but Jack had a lyrical quality to his voice. Henry barely heard the music. All he saw and heard was Jack.

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“I thought about redecorating my house, too, but I’d have to be there more than to sleep and sometimes eat and exercise.” Jack shook his head and snorted. “Isn’t that terrible? My ex would’ve said the reason I don’t commit to the dog or the decorating is because I hate handing over control. I won’t lie. I do have a specific way of doing things—I mean, my God, I’m forty-five and single. I live alone. Yeah, I do things my way. No one is there to argue with me.” He blushed. “I sound like an asshole, don’t I?”

“No.” Jack intrigued him. He didn’t talk about the people at the shop or the gossip he’d learned. Instead, he’d opened right up about himself. Henry rather liked the candidness.

“I’m doing all the talking.” Jack’s blush deepened. “What about you? What’s your story—besides what you’re always writing in those notebooks?”

“You want to know about me?” Most people wanted to know about where he’d gone, not about his life.

“I do.”

The tone of Jack’s voice rolled over Henry and sent a shiver down his spine. He wondered what Jack sound like during sex. Probably hot as hell.

“Henry? Are you okay?”

He gritted his teeth a moment. Shit. He’d been caught getting stuck in his thoughts. “Sorry. No one ever wants to know about me.”

“Why? Are you wanted in nine states?” Jack laughed. “Seriously?”

“No. As I said, I’m a travel writer. I write about the places I’ve visited and have a blog about what to eat when you’re in a specific place,” Henry said, “so people want to know about the places—not the visitor.”

“That’s harsh.”

“It’s lonely.” He’d never told anyone that, but Jack seemed genuinely interested. “I travel a lot, so relationships are hard. Most of the time, partners get left behind. It’s exciting to see the new places or to visit places I’ve been to and see how they’ve changed. But I’d also love to get a dog one day.”

“We should get a dog together,” Jack said. “It lives with you while I’m working and with me while you’re traveling.”

“Smart, unless you’re working while I’m traveling.”

“True.”

“I suppose I could take the dog with me. It’d probably be easier traveling with a canine than a human.” Henry smoothed the wrinkle in his shorts. “My last boyfriend left because he didn’t get to go on the trips with me. Said it wasn’t fair I could go all over and he had to stay home and work. But I was the one paying the bills.”

“Aren’t guys too much work?”

“Can be, but I still want to find someone.” He paused. “And, since I’m homosexual, I’m going to have to find a guy one of these days.”

“I hear you.” Jack laughed and, when he grabbed the back of the bench, brushed

Henry's shoulder. "We should do this more often."

Tingles shot from Henry's shoulder to his heart, then brain. "We should." He had to answer with something intelligent. He withdrew his notebook and wrote his phone number on one of the pages, then tore the page out. "Call me."

"Visit the shop." Jack winked. "I need to go. I have to get up early to open in the morning."

"Sure."

Jack folded the page. "See you tomorrow?"

"Sure will." He stood. He wasn't sure what to do—shake hands? Hug him? Wave? He'd follow Jack's lead.

Jack waved, then wandered off.

Henry sank onto the bench and blew out a ragged breath. He hadn't thought he'd manage any one-on-one time with Jack. The man intrigued and excited him. He rather liked Jack's pushiness. He wanted to see him again.

A hot dog, fries and soda sounded pretty darn good—tomorrow.

Chapter Two

Jack woke at five a.m. like he did every morning. He dressed in his jogging attire, did his stretches and hydrated before heading out to the sidewalk for his run. Four miles, rain or shine. He hated running in the rain and refused to run in the snow, but the gentle morning sunshine and coolness worked in his favor. His muscles ached in a good way and he felt refreshed—tired, but ready to handle the morning.

He returned home and showered, then dressed for the day. What did he have to do before he opened? Put in orders for low supplies and prep the workstation. He grabbed his tablet and tucked it into his briefcase bag—as Anna called it. The bag wasn't quite a messenger version but built sort of like a briefcase with a shoulder strap.

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He grabbed his phone, wallet, bag and keys, then headed out to the garage. Fifteen minutes later, he was striding into the back of the restaurant. He settled at his desk in his office, a one-time closet. Once he'd ordered the needed supplies, he washed his hands, then tied on his apron. The next step was prepping the stovetop and chopping the onions. He added chili to the warmer and added extra cheese to the bin. He liked to have as much as possible done before Anna arrived, just in case he needed her to prepare more toppings or get chili from the warmer.

Anna strolled into the restaurant and tossed her jacket onto Jack's desk. "Hi, boss man. Did you end up going to the park or did you wuss out?" She washed her hands, then donned her apron. "Please tell me you met up with him."

"How's Adam?" He finished chopping another onion. "And yes, I did meet up with Henry." He didn't mind her asking questions or pushing him to talk to Henry, but he hated talking about his private life.

"Oh, he's fine. I got him started on that computer program for preschoolers." She stirred the chili. "Best decision ever. He's talking more and trying to read. Really seems like it brought him out of himself." She paused. "Maybe I should get you on that site."

"I talk." He'd chatted quite a bit with Henry. Hell, he'd told Henry more than he'd said to most boyfriends.

"You keep yourself so guarded." She frowned, then opened a package of buns. "One of these days, you're going to find a great guy, but you won't give him a chance to get to know you."

“You don’t know that.” He had to change the subject. “How’s Nick?”

“I stopped seeing him.” She shrugged. “Nick and I realized we weren’t going anywhere. He wanted to move to Smithville and I’m not moving. Not when I have to get Adam into preschool. I don’t know about the preschools there, but I like the one here in town. Miss Julie rocks. She helped Barry when he wouldn’t learn to read.”

She’d switched topics to her children. Good. He’d rather talk about them, even if he knew the stories, than his dating situation.

“But you avoided it,” Anna said. “You need action. You’re not getting any younger and if this guy—who seems decent—is interested, then go for it.”

“I need action like I need a hole in the head.” He finished cleaning up after prepping for the morning. “It’s almost ten-thirty. Ready?”

“As always.” She turned the sign around and, within a minute, the first customers ventured into the shop.

Jack forgot about dating, his love life and everything else. It was time to get to work. Once he started cooking, he had no time to think about Henry or the way he liked talking with him. He wanted to see Henry again, but first, he had to get through the workday. The blur of people in and out of the shop made keeping up with the time of day impossible. The orders racked up and he wished he had someone at the register. Then he and Anna could cook while the third person took the money.

At two in the afternoon, Henry arrived. Jack tamped down his excitement. He thought Henry wouldn’t show up.

Henry ordered, but with the slowdown in people at the shop, Jack had a second to talk.

“I’ll bring this out to you.” Jack finished Henry’s order, then rounded the counter. Anna could handle the two orders pending. He joined Henry at the table. “Hi.”

“Hi.” Henry accepted the food. “Thanks. I thought I’d come at a slow time.” He nodded to the door. “Looks like it’s ramping back up.”

Jack didn’t bother to turn around. The ding of the bell told him everything. “I’ll be back.”

“I’m not going anywhere.” Henry smiled. “I’ll wait for you.”

“Thanks.” Jack resumed his place behind the counter. Jesus. He hadn’t expected so many people to come in at two. The rush tended not to happen until half-past. He shook his head and forced a smile. In the space of forty-five minutes, he made fifty hot dogs and ran out of chili. He hadn’t been this tired in forever.

At three, Jack gestured to Anna to turn the sign around. He made the last three orders, then engaged the lock on the door. Henry still sat at his regular table and scribbled in his journal.

Jack wiped his hands on one of the rags, then tossed the rag onto the cutting board. “I’m taking a break.” He sank onto the chair across from Henry. “Where were we?”

“You were hustling and bustling.” Henry closed his notebook. “Rest.”

“You spend a lot of time here. Are my hot dogs that exciting?” He laughed. “Or are you looking for a job?”

“I like to write here. The atmosphere is conducive to creativity,” Henry said. “But what do you want me to do? I’m game to help out.”

“Want to work the register? Anna writes the amount on the bill and you give them change.” He didn’t tend to use paper order sheets, but if there were three workers and Henry needed to learn the prices, paper would work. “You won’t have to cook. Just handle the money.”

“Why not?” Henry shrugged. “I’m game, like I said.”

He’d just hired a worker...the man he maybe kind of wanted to date. Probably not a good idea. Is it? Jack needed the help. Maybe the time together would show him what kind of man Henry was and how Henry handled stress. Then again, he should probably go out with Henry a few times before he hired him. Oh well. All he’d done was offer a job and could fire Henry if things didn’t work out.

“When should I come in?” Henry asked. “What’s the dress code?”

“Ten-thirty tomorrow. Wear a T-shirt and jeans.” Jack snorted. He’d never had a dress code the entire time he’d owned the shop. “You can say no. It’s not world travel and it’s probably going to be boring.” He had to give Henry an out.

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“I don’t know,” Henry said. “Boring isn’t all that bad. I’m here anyway, so why not work for you? Looked like you needed the help.”

“It might not be fun,” Jack said. As much as he wanted to talk Henry out of the job, he wanted Henry to do it.

“Could be fodder for a book.” Henry grinned and held out his hand. “I’ll do it. I can always use the experience. Why not?”

He shook hands with Henry. “True.” He’d pushed and Henry had pushed back. He liked a man who wasn’t a wuss, as Anna put it.

Henry finished his soda. “See you tomorrow.”

“Yeah.” He stood when Henry did and shook hands with him again. “See you.” He’d just hired someone.

Henry’s eyes glittered and his smile widened. He fumbled as he put his notebook back into his bag, then wandered out of the store.

Jack couldn’t help but smile, too. He hadn’t felt this kind of tingle in so long. He looked forward to Henry being there the next day.

“Well, that’s a funny way to get a date.” Anna locked the door again. “You do realize you basically asked him out.”

“No, I didn’t.” He laughed to hide his confusion. “I wanted him to work for me.”

“Which brings him closer to you, gives you a chance to see him in action and size him up...kind of like a date.” She rolled her eyes. “I can tell you like him. Those sparks could’ve lit up this shop.”

“Anna.” He wasn’t going to argue with her. He did want to go out with Henry for real, not a weird meet-up or seeing him by accident...or working with him.

“I like it.” She patted him on the shoulder and headed around the counter.

He massaged his temples. She knew him too well. He had chosen a strange way to get with Henry, but he’d also gone out of his comfort zone to hire another worker. God, he hoped Henry worked out—and not just as an employee.

* * * *

Henry worked late into the night on the outline for his novel. He couldn’t seem to settle down. He’d been offered a job and would get to spend time with Jack. Okay, so maybe they wouldn’t be side-by-side and he might not get to say much beyond a few words, but he’d be there.

God. He sounded like a damn kid. He wasn’t a young man any longer. He shouldn’t be so excited to be with a man when it wasn’t a date. But he couldn’t contain his excitement.

He abandoned the outline at eleven and fought sleep until eight the next morning. When he looked at his reflection, his stomach churned. He appeared tired. Well, no shit. He’d been up almost all night thinking about Jack.

He dressed, hydrated and spent the next hour in his home gym, alternating among the treadmill, rowing machine and lifting weights. Once he’d finished, he polished off a granola bar and a glass of water, then showered.

He dressed in a decent T-shirt and a pair of older jeans. Should he wear cologne? Stay as neutral as possible? He opted for just wearing antiperspirant, then chastised himself for overthinking the next few hours. He was working, not trying to get a damn date.

Henry checked his look in the mirror again and debated using that shampoo claiming to remove his grays. He'd have to use a lot of shampoo. The grays outnumbered his naturally dark brown hair. He didn't look forty-seven but rather ancient. He couldn't compete with younger men and probably wouldn't be able to cover the imperfections in his hair, either.

He gave up trying to instantaneously change himself and headed up to the hot dog shop. Henry parked in the area behind the shop, then walked in. A few customers were already at the restaurant.

Jack smiled. "Hi. Come around here and I'll get you up to speed." He gestured to Henry and touched his arm. "Won't take long and you'll be an old hat."

"Thanks." He shouldn't have been so excited when Jack brushed his arm. Shouldn't want to fall into his embrace.

Jack stood between Henry and Anna. "So the customer tells you what they want. You write down HD. If they want fries with it, then HDF. If they want a soda, HDFS. When they want toppings, that's when it gets complicated. We only have chili, hot sauce, slaw and cheese. The works is everything. So, HD works. If they want chili, then HD chili. The prices and sides list is right here— upside down for you and right side up so the customer can see it. Make sense?"

"Sure does." Henry nodded. Once the place got rocking, he'd be in trouble, but he'd make it work. He bumped into Jack a few times and the sparks started right back up. Jack smelled good, and not just of food. When he stood close to Jack, he noticed the

flecks of amber in Jack's green eyes. He had kissable lips, too. This wasn't the time to be thinking about kisses, but oh well.

"Ready?" Jack elbowed him. "It's about to ramp up."

"Sure." He craved the action and it only took fifteen minutes for him to understand why Jack needed assistance. Once the crowd started to build, it didn't let up until almost two in the afternoon. He kept up with goings on and learned the menu fast.

At two, the excitement died down a bit. He tucked some of the bills into the money bag beneath the counter. He loved the work. So many stories told and people interacting. He could people watch while aiding the customers.

"You really helped. Thanks." Jack clapped him on the shoulder. "Hungry?"

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“It’s kind of fun and frenetic,” Henry said. “I could go for lunch.”

“Good.” Jack washed his hands in the little sink, then donned fresh gloves. “It occurred to me I hadn’t properly introduced you to Anna. Anna, this is Henry. Henry, Anna.”

“Hi.” Anna applauded. “You impressed me. I don’t know if the take is right, but you seemed to keep up and that’s half the battle.”

“Thanks.” The tips of Henry’s ears burned. Christ. He was pushing fifty. He shouldn’t be getting so embarrassed so easily.

“We’ll get busy again—well, you know.” Jack winked. “Why don’t you go ahead and eat and we’ll handle the last burst?”

“Nah. I’m here. Feed me when we’re done.” Henry stretched his hands and nodded. “I signed on to do the job and I will.”

“Good, but if you keep doing it so well, we won’t let you leave.” Jack scraped the grill. “Here comes the wave.”

The last hour passed in what seemed like seconds. Henry closed the register one last time, then sighed. He’d been tired before, like after a workout, but this was different. “I don’t know how you do this day after day.”

Anna turned the sign around and locked the door. “I’ve asked him that myself.” She removed her gloves. “Can you two handle cleanup? I need to go to the preschool.

Who knew the sign-ups for the fall were in July?”

“No problem,” Jack said. “Good luck.”

Henry left the register and picked up a rag from behind the counter. “What do you use to clean the tables?”

“The spray under the sink.” Jack pointed his elbow in the direction of the item. “Just spray them down and wipe. It’s antibacterial and has bleach, so don’t get it on your shirt or jeans if you like them.”

“Noted.” He cleaned the tables and chairs, then abandoned the spray and rag in favor of the condiment bottles. Without being asked, Henry refilled the bottles and containers.

“We should probably get tax information so you can get paid.” Jack finished scraping the grill. “Why don’t you put the lids on the onions and cheese. They go in the fridge behind me.”

“Sure.” He did as told. “You weren’t kidding about being busy.”

“If you hadn’t helped, I’d be in up to my eyeballs.” Jack wiped his hands, then offered Henry a box. “Made you lunch.”

“Thanks.” He didn’t want to eat on the now clean tables.

“Go to the office. It’s small, but we can eat in there without someone thinking I’m open.” Jack pointed to the little door off the hallway. “When we’re done eating, we’ll count the take. I’ll count, then you do it.”

“Okay.” He ate in silence, not sure what to say to Jack. He’d wanted to be alone with

him, but now that he was, he didn't know what to do with himself.

"Got plans for tonight?" Jack asked. He finished his hot dog. "Something exciting?"

"Sleep?" Henry laughed. "What about you?"

"Sleep, most likely," Jack said. "Ask me tomorrow. I never go out when the shop is open."

"Smart." He hadn't realized he'd asked Jack out. "I just meant are you doing anything tonight." Damn. "Are you going to do something exciting?" No matter how he worded it, he made his questions sound like offers for dates. At least they did to him.

Jack finished his fries. "Are you trying to ask me out?"

He'd gone this far. He might as well just ask now. "Duh."

Jack wiped his hands on the napkin. "Really?"

"Yeah, I am and I'll try again tomorrow. Maybe then you'll say yes," Henry said, finding his gumption. "I'll dazzle you with my register-running skills, and you'll fall madly in love with me." He'd overdone it, but whatever.

"I will," Jack said, his voice low. "You jumped in and didn't complain. That's huge. I've had kids from the high school wanting to work for me. They last a day and quit. It's too hard."

"Not that hard." He shrugged. "Let's get that money counted."

"I'll total the receipts while you count the bills. Then we'll switch," Jack said. He unfurled the register tape and jotted down numbers in a notebook.

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Henry counted the bills and sorted them by denomination. The twenties were the easiest, followed by the tens. The numbers were more complicated with the fives and the ones. He counted the piles three times, then wrote down his totals. "Done."

"Good. Switch." Jack offered up the tape. "I won't tell you what I have until you're done."

Henry totaled the sales, then recounted his math. He waited for Jack to finish. "Done."

"Show me your figures." Jack turned his sheet around. The numbers matched and he sighed. "Good. I hate when they don't work out."

"Does it happen often?" Henry asked.

"When we get busy and Anna just throws money in the register." Jack tucked the bills into the money bag, then plunked it in the safe before closing the door. "Thanks."

"Welcome."

Jack stood. "You're coming back tomorrow, right?"

"I am." Why the hell wouldn't he? He liked the work.

"Good." Jack threw his arms around Henry. "You saved my ass. Thank you."

He hugged Jack back and didn't want the embrace to end, but he also didn't want to

linger too long. He eased away from him and smiled. “See you.” He exited through the back of the restaurant, leaving Jack in the office.

Holy shit. He’d just had his first day of work, not involving writing, in forever. He’d also sort of had a date with Jack. Sure, the speed was slower than he preferred, but maybe the change of pace was what he needed. He looked forward to the next day with Jack and having time to learn about him before jumping into bed with him.

He couldn’t forget the electricity or chemistry between him and Jack. The whole day had been exciting—and not just because he’d been busy. He still wondered if Jack would be a good kisser and how he’d taste. Probably like heaven.

Chapter Three

Jack barely noticed Henry arriving at the restaurant the next day. Saturday was his best day of the week, with everyone being off and wanting to visit the shop. He had plenty of stock, but he’d have to replenish before Tuesday. No matter how hard he worked, the line never died down.

He stole glances over at Henry. Having the extra help was a godsend, but Henry was easy on the eyes. Henry smiled a lot and was personable. He worked hard and no one complained. The shirt clung to Henry’s upper body and accentuated his thin frame as he handed a man change, then smiled at Jack.

The smile warmed Jack to his core. He wanted to say something, but business was too good. Jack resumed making hot dogs, but he couldn’t forget Henry’s question the day before. Henry wanted to get with him. With me! Although the idea seemed strange, he rather liked knowing Henry had asked. But Henry had to know by now that Jack was married to the shop. He might be open for only four and a half hours, five days a week, but the restaurant consumed his life.

But he wanted Henry to follow through and ask him out. It was nice to know someone was interested in him. Henry fit his desires in a man—handsome, clean, he had a job outside of the shop, a source of income...self-sufficient.

Could they have a chance together?

Hell if I know.

At the end of the day, the line finally died down. “Henry? Put up the closed and sold-out signs.” Jack dropped the spatula. “We’ve run out of everything.”

“Will do.” Henry turned the open placard to closed, then propped the sold-out notice in one of the windows. “I’ve never seen that one. I’m assuming you don’t use it much?”

“Only maybe once a month.” Jack removed his gloves. “You must be good luck.”

“Or you’ve got good product.” Henry grinned. “I filled two money bags.”

Anna locked up. “If you two want to count, I’ll clean up out here.”

“Deal.” Jack tossed his gloves in the trash, then collected the bags from Henry. “Bring the register tape and drawer.”

Henry did as told and joined Jack in the office. “There’s still money in the drawer and I pulled the startup out before I filled the second bag. Make sure I counted it right.”

“Will do.” He sat across from Henry. “Count this bag and I’ll count this one, then we switch.”

Henry nodded.

Jack sorted the bills, but didn't have to do much since Henry had already arranged it according to denomination and all going the same way. He counted the cash and wrote his figure down, then counted again. When he came up with the same number, he placed the money in the bag and switched with Henry. He did the exact routine with the second amount of money.

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“Well?” Henry flattened his hands on the table. “Those are my numbers.”

Jack ran through the figures. “They match what I got.”

“Cool,” Henry said. “I already counted the drawer. See if you get the same and I’ll recount the kitty.”

He nodded and tallied the cash in the drawer. Once finished, he checked his math with Henry’s. “We’ve got a match.”

“Yay.” Henry sighed. “Looks like you’ve had a good day.”

“It’s the best one in a long time.” Jack zipped the bags, then tucked them both in the safe. He’d retrieve them before he left. “Why don’t we go out to the dining room? Just sit a while with Anna?”

“Sure.” Henry hesitated. “I meant what I said. I’d like to go out with you. Even if it’s just coffee somewhere. Doesn’t have to be in Cedarwood, but I hear the new Brews is pretty good. Beck makes good coffee.”

“You’ve been seeing another restaurateur in your spare time?” He wanted to sound angry, but he wasn’t. He knew Henry. The attraction was real.

“I like coffee and they make good coffee to go.” Henry blushed from his hairline to his collar. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be.” He winked. “I’m not upset. I’ve never been to Brews, so you’ll have to

take me some time.”

“I will.”

Jack followed Henry out of the office. He liked watching the sway of Henry’s ass when he walked.

Anna rounded the counter and joined them at the largest table. “Boys, I don’t know about you, but I’m tired.”

“You should be,” Jack said. “We had our fourth best day ever.” He poured three sodas, then brought them to the table. “Congrats, everyone.”

“Are you kidding?” Anna’s eyes shimmered. “Damn.”

“It’s great. I’ll be busy tomorrow ordering for Tuesday,” Jack said. He leaned back in his seat. “I don’t mind. I like busy days over the dry ones. Makes the time go faster.”

“It did.” Anna finished her soda. “And since I’m tired, you’re pooped and we all should get out of here, I’m leaving.” She stood, then slapped Jack on the shoulder. “Honey, if you don’t take this boy out for dinner or at least drinks later, you’ll regret it.”

Henry’s eyes widened but he said nothing.

Jack laughed. “Understood.” He loved her like a sister, but Anna could push. “Night.”

“See you,” she called and left Jack alone with Henry.

“Well,” Henry folded his hands on the table. “Are you busy tonight? Doing that ordering, right?”

“I’ll place the orders tomorrow.” Jack sipped the drink. “Do you have a thought on what I might be doing later?”

“I can cook. Why don’t we have dinner together.” Henry’s hands trembled. “I’ll cook for you since you’ve done it for me all these times.”

“I didn’t know you were a culinary wizard.” He’d overdone the compliment, but so what?

“I wouldn’t say wizard, but I’m decent. I can make fish and salad well.” He shrugged. “I took some cooking classes last summer when I got bored.” He paused. “Would you rather get drinks somewhere? I don’t mind.”

“How about a beer somewhere?” They should go somewhere public for an actual first date.

“Sure. What time?”

“Six.”

“Where?” Henry asked.

Good question. Shit. Where could they go that was public but not a skeevy bar? “How about the diner? Colt runs it and he’s good people. We can order a beer.”

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“I’ll be there.” Henry held on to the soda cup. “I’ve been there a couple times. You’re right—Colt is good people. I like his work with the LGBTQ support group.”

“Then there we go.” Jack stood. “Why don’t we leave together? I’ve got to take that money out and I’d rather have another person there just in case.”

He’d forgotten all about the support group. He’d been invited to join and never found the time. “Sure.” Henry collected his phone and wallet from the office, then waited for Jack.

Once he’d locked up the front door and tucked the bags in his briefcase bag, Jack switched off the lights and tapped the pad to engage the security system. He locked the back door, then nodded toward the parking lot. He walked with Henry in silence to the car.

“Good?” Henry asked. “I’ll wait for you to drive off, then I will.”

“Thanks.” Courteous and concerned? He couldn’t wait for their meet-up that night. “See you later?”

“See you.” Henry dipped his head and stood by his car.

Jack settled behind the wheel and locked the doors. He hated carrying out so much money, but he had someone with him this time. He waved, then drove off. Henry’s smile warmed him to his core. He had a date tonight. A real one. And he hadn’t said no.

Crazy.

* * * *

Late that afternoon, Henry arrived at the diner at half-past five. He wanted to be early. Colt, the owner of the diner, met him at the door.

“Henry, nice to see you.” Colt withdrew a menu. “One? Or are you with someone?”

“I’m meeting someone.” He rocked on his heels. He liked being able to say he wasn’t there alone.

“Nice. A date?” Colt gestured to one of the empty booths. “How about here? It’s quiet.” He directed him to the table. “I’m glad you’re seeing someone. You need a partner.”

“I’d like to think so, but that doesn’t mean anyone is interested.” Henry settled on the bench seat. “Are you going to be our waiter tonight?”

“I am, since it’s slow. What’ll you have?” Colt asked.

“How about some waters? We’ll have a beer, but I want to wait until he gets here.” Henry nodded. “Thanks. Were you slow today?”

“A little more than normal, but it’s nice out and people want to eat in the fresh air. Kind of hard when I don’t open the windows.” Colt left long enough to bring back waters. “We were rocking yesterday, so it was kind of nice to have a slower day. Gave everyone the chance to regroup.”

“I’ll bet.” He waited for Jack and his excitement grew. It’d been so long since he’d dated last—five years. God, he was out of the loop. Was he old? He was lonely.

“Hey, I’ll be right back.” Colt left again. When he returned, he ushered Jack to the table. “I’m going to assume this is your guy. I’ve heard you two have been chatting a lot lately. Gossip.” He shrugged. “It’s not my place.”

“Thanks and don’t sweat it.” Jack sat across from Henry. “How about two beers?”

“Very good.” Colt walked away.

Jack folded his hands around the water glass. “You’re early.”

“I like being early.” The tips of his ears burned. He wasn’t sure what to say. He’d been at the restaurant with Jack all day. Shit. He’d screw this up.

“Don’t apologize.” Jack reached across the table and held Henry’s hand. “Don’t be scared.”

“You can tell?” He sighed to settle his nerves. “I haven’t dated in a while.”

“It’s hard, but I haven’t either.” Jack nodded to him. “Where all have you traveled to? Have you seen Europe?”

“Every country.” This he could discuss. He toyed with the condensation on his glass. “Britain was my favorite. I could travel all over eating fish and chips and not get tired of it.” He chuckled. “London was fun. Lots of nightclubs and shopping. But I enjoyed Scotland, too. Ireland was good. Green like everyone says. Portugal was colorful, too. I could’ve eaten my way across Italy and Spain. France...what can you say? It’s a romantic country.” He caught himself. Romantic? What the hell? He’d broken up with Paul right before he’d gone to Paris. “I liked France, but it’s not as much fun to visit Paris when you’ve just been dumped.”

“I bet not.” Jack rubbed the top of Henry’s hand. “Right before?”

“A week before.” He shouldn’t talk about his ex-boyfriends with the man he’d like to be his current.

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Colt arrived. “Would you like something to eat?” He offered a pair of menus. “Jack, I’ll bet you’re tired of hot dogs.”

“Not at all.” Jack took the menus. “But I’m dying for some of that meatloaf with green beans, please?”

“Make that two.” Henry pushed the menu back to Colt. “Thank you.”

“I wish everyone were that easy.” Colt tucked the menus under his arm. “They’ll be right up.”

When Colt left, Jack dipped his head and met Henry’s gaze. “Are you okay?”

“No.” He hated his inability to lie. He wasn’t good at conversation, either. “It’s...”

“I’m boring. I get it.” Jack laughed. “I know. All the guys in town have kids and the clubs are full of younger men. I’m not looking for a cub and I don’t want children.”

“It’s not that.” Henry relaxed a little. “I’m not a kid person.”

“Is it because I don’t have a fancy job? The shop is plenty enough for me—I don’t need the fanciness of a bigger shop.” Jack didn’t pull away from him, but he did tense. “I’m not going to be a famous chef.”

“No. Famous isn’t everything.”

“Because you are?” Jack asked. “I saw your website. You’ve been on television.”

“No...I mean, yes, I was on television, but no, that’s not what I’m talking about.”
He’d made a mess of the conversation. “Wait.”

“You know what? I’ll get the bill at the door.”

“Jack.” He reached for Jack. “Stop.”

“What?” Jack folded his arms. The muscle in his jaw tensed.

“I liked the relaxed feeling at the shop. You’re happier and at ease. That’s the real you. You’re trying to be real now, but you’re tense,” Henry said. “I don’t care if you’re famous or if you make a lot of different stuff. I like the guy who laughs with all the jokes, listens to the stories even when you’ve heard them a thousand times and you come alive when you’re there.”

Jack stared at him. “I haven’t dated in a while, either. I’m not sure how to impress you, but you’re doing a good job impressing me.”

“You don’t need to make me like you. I already do.”

Jack blushed and reached for Henry again. “Sorry. I’m used to guys wanting me to be something I’m not.”

“I know that feeling.” Before he could say anything else, Colt arrived with their food.

“Here you go. If you need anything, hot sauce or a refill, let me know.” Colt backed away, giving them space.

Jack laughed and bowed his head. “I hate tension. I’m terrible with dating and I tend to jump to conclusions. It’s silly because you’re not like the guys I’ve dated—you’re not acting like a foodie or failed restaurateur.”

“I can cook, but I have no desire to open a restaurant.”

“Good.”

Henry and Jack ate in silence, but shared glances. The heat filled Henry’s body again. He barely tasted his food. Jack consumed Henry’s attention.

Jack downed his beer, then finished his meatloaf. “This is good. I liked the gooey cheese.”

“It’s tasty.” He didn’t eat as fast as Jack. “There’s a bit too much seasoning on the beans.”

“It’s a tad heavy-handed.” Jack pushed the empty plate and his beer bottle away. “But the chef might have felt like being generous.”

“Maybe,” Henry said. He drank a great deal of his water. “Want to go for a walk? It’s pretty downtown and we can be ourselves. No one trying to impress anyone. Just talking.”

“I’d like that.” Jack pulled his wallet out. “I’m paying for this.” He took the bill Colt had left on the table and paid at the register.

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Henry had finished eating by the time Jack returned to the table. With his belly full, his heart light and the stress evaporated, he couldn't wait to get out of the diner. He left a tip and walked away from the table.

Jack held his hand out to Henry. "Let's stroll."

"Sure." He fell into step with Jack. "The diner isn't so bad, but the ambience isn't the same as at your shop. I like the frenetic feeling."

"I'm glad you do." Jack chuckled. "I know Cedarwood and my shop aren't that exciting, but they're good places. This is my home... Would you believe I'm afraid to fly? I'm claustrophobic, too."

"I'd never have guessed, but I'm not wild about flying either," Henry said. "Isn't that funny? A traveler who doesn't like to fly?" The cooler early evening air swirled around them. The leaves rustled on the trees and birds sang. Music played on speakers strategically placed in the awnings of the shops.

"Do you love living here?" Henry asked. "You sort of alluded to it."

"I do. It's quiet and now that the Coalition slowed down, it's nicer," Jack said. "For a while, it seemed like the anti-gay group was out to kick anyone they didn't like out of town. Colt was assaulted. Colin had his business defaced. A couple other businesses were messed with. A guy on the baseball team was outted in the media, if I remember. I could be wrong how it happened, but he was outted." He shook his head. "I wish people understood we're all people."

“I know. It’s hard when there’s fear. We fear what we don’t know and instead of learning about stuff, people hold on to that panic.” He walked with Jack. “Was there any reason you decided against kids?” he asked. “I’m not a kid person. I don’t like traveling with kids and I keep such a strange schedule that having a small person isn’t conducive.”

“Having a kid never really appealed to me,” Jack said. “The shop is enough of a spouse, child and angry lover. I don’t need the extra complication.”

Makes sense.

“I see the people with kids and know that works for them. It doesn’t for me and that’s okay,” Jack said. “My sister had kids, but she didn’t like that I came out, so I never got to meet them. I tried, but she wasn’t open to letting me talk to them. They’re older now—sixteen and eighteen—but I’m scared to reach out to them on social media. I doubt my sister refers to me ever.”

“They’re all missing out.” Henry leaned into Jack. “You’re a good man, too. I’m glad I know you.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” He noticed their surroundings. They’d returned to the diner. “I had a good time tonight. I’m glad you met with me...again.”

“I enjoyed myself. I’m glad you asked me.” Jack held Henry’s hand and paused. “Are you available next week? Like Thursday through Saturday again?”

“You need me to work.” He really hoped Jack wasn’t being nice to him because he needed a body at the shop.

“Please?”

“Sure.” He lingered and hoped Jack would say something about liking the night and not coming just to ask for labor. “Text me?”

“Or I’ll see you Tuesday when I open.” Jack stayed with him, but said nothing.

“I might be there.” He couldn’t gauge Jack’s expression. “What? Do I have something on my face?”

“No.” Jack squeezed Henry’s fingers. “I didn’t go out with you tonight just because I wanted you to come to the shop.” He hesitated. “Are you available for another date? I’d like to see you again without the shop involved.”

“Not at the shop?” He hadn’t been dreaming. Jack wanted another date with him.

“In the wild.” Jack’s eyes flashed.

“I would like to go out with you again, yes. I’m willing to work for you, too.” He wanted to kiss Jack, but he wasn’t sure if Jack wanted that, as well. Why was he wondering when he could be taking the lead? He kissed Jack. The moment his lips touched Jack’s, his entire body tingled. The kiss, though short, was everything he’d imagined and more. The slight scruff on Jack’s cheeks abraded his skin and the softness of his lips imprinted on Henry’s memory. There was a tenderness and sweetness to the kiss, but a raw need, too.

Jack broke the kiss first. “Henry.”

“Good?” Was he being too forward?

“Very good.” Jack held tighter to Henry’s hand. “Want to barbecue at my place? Not

hot dogs but real barbecue?”

“Sure.”

“How about tomorrow at seven? I’ll text you the address.” Jack brushed his fingers across Henry’s chest, then lingered on his pecs. “Yes?”

“Yes.” He looked forward to the text.

“See you tomorrow.” Jack let go and wandered to his car.

Henry waited for Jack to safely get out of the lot, then climbed behind the wheel of his car and left, too. Holy shit. He had another chance with Jack. He’d never thought it would happen. Tomorrow couldn’t come fast enough.

Chapter Four

Saturday morning, Jack prepped the ribs and adjusted the temperature in the smoker. He didn’t use the appliance enough for his liking. But barbecue, especially low and slow smoking, was an art. He tucked the temperature gauge in his pocket and set the alarm for the temperature he wanted, then set about cleaning the house. He wanted to impress Henry.

Sure, they’d said they weren’t out to impress each other, but he knew better. He didn’t want Henry to see his house in a mess. His home wasn’t exciting, but why not clean up the papers he’d left around, and dust? He didn’t spend much time at home and didn’t do nearly enough to make it look lived in.

He thought about the date the night before. Things had been too tense, but once Henry got him to open up, he’d had fun. He’d enjoyed himself. But that was Henry—he knew how to make Jack feel at ease. No pretensions, no need to be anything but himself.

He checked the remote temperature gauge to ensure the heat level was correct and resumed cleaning. The house wasn’t too much of a mess, but was so dusty. Damn. But he was never home. Anna claimed he lived at the shop. Maybe he did.

His phone rang and when he checked the number, his heart sank. He'd wanted Henry to call. Not Dexter. He sighed and answered. "Hey."

"Hi, love," Dexter said. "How are you?"

"I'm good, but I'm not your love." He tossed the rag into the hamper, then headed out to the smoker. "You're calling me. What's happening?"

"Well...I'm on my way through Cedarwood and I thought I'd stop by. I'm an hour out and I haven't seen you since we split. Come on. You know you want to see me," Dexter said. "It's been so long and I'm not taking no for an answer. I'm on my way."

"Dexter—" Before he could say anything else, Dexter hung up. No byes, nothing. Just hung up. Jack gritted his teeth and sent Henry a text.

Call me when you're on your way.

Did that sound silly? Probably. He didn't want to come right out and say his ex would be there, hopefully only for a little while, but he'd be at the house. Henry wouldn't come by. He tried calling Henry, but didn't get an answer.

Shit.

He tossed the phone onto the bed, then undressed and climbed in the shower. He had less than an hour before Dexter arrived. If anything, Dexter would be on time. Jack finished the shower faster than he wanted to then dressed. He checked the ribs again and hoped he had enough food for three. Damn Dexter.

The doorbell rang. Jack tensed. Trust Dexter to pick today to be early. He strode up to the front door. Henry stood on the porch. "Hi," Jack said. The tension in his shoulders released. "You made it."

“You thought I wouldn’t?” Henry offered up a bowl of salad. “I need to get the potatoes from the car.”

“Sure.” He took the bowl and waited at the door. When Henry returned with the second bowl, Jack held the screen door for him. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“You can’t wait for my wit and sparkling conversation?” Henry laughed. “There’s a little bowl with dressing in there. I didn’t know how much you’d want.”

“Perfect.” He placed the bowls on the island. “This is my home. It’s not much and rather plain, but it’s home.”

Henry tipped his head. “You’re tense. I can see it in the lines forming between your brows. What’s wrong?”

He had to tell Henry the truth and deal with the consequences. “Okay, so here’s the thing. My ex-boyfriend called. He’s on his way through Cedarwood and wanted to stop by. We didn’t end on bad terms, and I don’t mind that he wants to visit, but not tonight.”

“But you can’t tell him no because he doesn’t listen?” Henry asked.

“Pretty much.”

“We’ll figure it out.”

We’ll?He liked the sound of that. Jack had expected jealousy, but appreciated Henry’s cool response. “You’re not upset?”

“You have a life, and so do I—and they happened before we met.” Henry shrugged. “It’d be awkward to get mad.”

“You’re too good to be true.” But he liked Henry even more.

The doorbell rang again and Jack closed his eyes. Any other day, he’d happily talk to one of his exes, especially one that he’d parted with on good terms. He liked some of his exes as people—just not romantic partners. Dexter was on that list. But Henry was here.

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“Hello?” Dexter swept into the room. “Hello, lovie.” He grinned and batted his lashes. “Where is my man?” He stopped next to Henry. “Who are you?”

“Henry.” He stuck out his hand. “You must be the ex-boyfriend.”

“Ex-partner,” Dexter corrected. “We were pretty tight for a while.” He sidled up to Jack. “People thought we’d get married.”

Jack tamped down his frustration. The only person who’d thought they’d get married had been Dexter. Everyone had seen they were terrible as a romantic couple. “Dexter.”

“So, I see there was going to be a little dinner here.” Dexter turned the bowl of greens around. “Jack, you can cook better than this. You went to school to cook better than this.”

He’d also split from Dexter because he deserved better than this. Jack stepped between Dexter and Henry. What kind of impression was Henry getting now? Jack held up his hand. “Dexter, you said you wanted to stop by. You have.”

“I have.” Dexter nodded. “I wish I could stay longer, but I’m supposed to be seeing a friend over in Shelby. We’re heading to the clubs in Cleveland.” He smoothed the front of Henry’s button-down shirt. “You wouldn’t want to club with us? It’s better than boring salad.”

“He made ribs.” Henry smiled. “So, no. I’m more interested in barbecue, but thanks.”

“Ribs?” Dexter rolled his eyes. “Do you know he used to cook for me? He’d make fine cuisine.”

“Dexter, stop.” Jack met Henry’s confused stare. “It was just food.”

“Right.” Dexter sighed. “Do you know we bought this house together? We were going to get married and have a wonderful life together.” He propped his hand on his hip. “But my life went in a different direction. The distance was too much and he spent way too long at that horrible hot dog shop. You’ll see. You’ll end up lonely. When you do...come to the clubs in Cleveland. We’ll have some fun.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Henry said, his voice level. “Thanks.”

“Well, I need to go.” Dexter kissed Jack full on the lips. “See you later, lover.” He brushed past Henry and left the house.

Jack waited for Dexter to drive off before he faced Henry. The embarrassment would eat him alive. He hadn’t thought Dexter would turn the visit into a damn pissing contest. Once Dexter had completely gone, Jack joined Henry in the kitchen. Henry’s silence bothered him. What a way to spend the beginning of the date! Jesus. He expected Henry to leave, too.

Henry sat on one of the stools and toyed with the plastic on the salad bowl. “It’s funny, exes. They like to come back and show up at the wrong times. They can’t seem to just be your friend.”

“Oh, some can be friendly. I’ve had some.” Dexter was no longer on that list.

“I guess the people I’ve dated are nice enough and I might want to be friends with them, but I don’t really. It’s too painful in some cases and too awkward in others. Maybe I just don’t want to be friends because I don’t want to revisit that time.” Henry

shook his head. “I’ve got a couple exes that lived to inflict pain and start drama. I guess I’m tired of their crap.”

“That makes sense.” He checked the heat on the ribs. “Let me pull these to rest, then we can talk.” He left Henry long enough to open the smoker and plate the ribs on the platter, then covered them in foil. When he returned, Henry remained at the island. Jack tightened the foil around the ribs. “Did it happen to you? An ex who caused trouble?”

“It did.” Henry folded his hands. “Barney. He and I were great together until things weren’t great. When they were, it was fun. When it wasn’t, we shouldn’t have been in the same room together. Barney had stock in making people hurt. If you had a hang-up, say you didn’t like your hair being straight and wanted it curly, he’d make fun of you. I’ve always been thin and can’t seem to put on much muscle. He’d insult me by saying I wasn’t good enough and I needed to pump more iron. Stupid stuff. We lived together when it was good, but then I started seeing through his crap and he moved out. The thing is, when he left, he took all the furniture—even the stuff I had already.” He shook his head. “He brought his new boyfriend around to show off when he realized I was at the same club they attended. He tried to call the magazine where I worked to get me fired. He claimed I’d done work for a rival magazine, but the one he’d named didn’t exist. The only reason he left me alone finally was that he got married.”

“Terrible.” He’d thought he’d known some oddballs in his time, but Barney trumped his exes. “Why don’t we eat? We can sit out at the picnic table on the patio. It’s cool out there.”

“Sure. What are we having for drinks?” Henry left the stool.

“There’s beer in the fridge or water or whatever.” Jack carried the food out to the picnic table, then brought out the plates and silverware when Henry arrived with two

bottles of beer. “Get what you want,” Jack said. “I’m starving, but you’re my guest.”

“Thanks.” Henry added a small section of ribs, then some salad and a dollop of potatoes to his plate. “It’s nice out here. I’ve got a back yard, but it butts up to another back yard and I can see into the other condos around me.”

He wondered where Henry lived, but didn’t bother to question him. “I’m just glad I have someone to share the evening with. Dig in.”

Henry ate in silence and hid his jealousy as best he could. Jack’s ex was handsome, even if he had acted like a dick. Henry felt so old compared to Dexter. Maybe he should’ve tried to dye away his grays before he came over. He should’ve done some extra workouts.

Oh well. He liked the quiet and the ex was gone, so who cared about jealousy anyway? He hated the self-loathing and embarrassment when he let the green-eyed monster get the better of him.

“What are you thinking?” Jack asked. “You’ve got rib juice on your chin.” He offered up a napkin. “I probably do, too.”

“Sorry.” He wiped his face. “I’m thinking it’s a nice night and the ribs are wonderful. Thank you. I’m partial to the dry rub method, so you made my day and made me have to run a few extra miles over the next couple days.”

“Do you run?”

“I do on my treadmill. I’d run around the development, but there are enough judgmental people that I feel less exposed in my little home gym.”

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Jack pushed his plate away and wiped his mouth. “Thanks for bringing over the taters and salad. It was all good.”

“Thanks.” He finished the last of his dinner, then matched Jack’s pose.

“You’re not chatty, but when I get you going, you don’t stop. Are you okay?”

“I’m a quiet person. I like to observe,” Henry said. “I learn a lot by just watching.” He shrugged. “For all the talking you do during the day, it’s all for orders and to say yes or no to the people ordering food. You seem to listen to all those stories.”

“No one wants an opinion when they can have a confessional instead.”

“Is that why you don’t talk about the people who come to the shop? You barely spoke when your ex was here,” Henry said. A touch of the jealousy came back.

“It’s easier with Dexter to let him talk than to argue or speak. If you speak up, he’ll argue louder and get angrier, so instead of escalating, I just let him go.” Jack fiddled with his napkin. “I didn’t think he’d show up. Normally, no one comes to visit me. Today, he showed up. I tried to call you, but you didn’t answer.”

“I was cooking.”

“Did him being here bother you?” Jack tipped his head. “I have friends and exes who sometimes drop by.”

“It doesn’t bother me.” Did his jealousy show? He knew he was fine enough as a

person, but he'd never match the flash or the volume of Dexter.

Jack stared at him. "But?"

"But nothing." He and Jack weren't a couple. He had no reason to be jealous or to get angry. They had pasts.

"But what? I can tell you're upset. You don't like when you're ignored?"

"No." He should speak up. "I want whoever I'm with to be honest. If I'm acting like a dick, then tell me. If I'm making things tough, then say so. I might not enjoy what you have to say, but I respect being told. I respect honesty over silence."

"I see."

"You don't like that." He should've expected this—things were going too well.

"I never said that."

"Then it's my turn. But?" Henry asked. "I'm sure there's more."

"No buts. It's nice to hear someone be so open. It's refreshing."

"You're not upset?"

"Nope." Jack reached across the table and held Henry's hand. "I like it. I like you."

"You do?" He hadn't been sure.

"Yeah. You haven't asked me to spill everyone's secrets. You don't treat me like I'm less than you because I have a shop. It's nice. I'm respected and it's good," Jack said.

“I haven’t had a date respect me in a long time.”

“That’s terrible. You deserve better,” Henry said. “I like you, too. I don’t know what you see in me, though. I have gray hair and I’ve got to have ten years on you.”

“Henry, I’m forty-five.” Jack rubbed the back of Henry’s hand. “Really.”

“No, you’re not.” He couldn’t be.

“Forty-five. You?” Jack narrowed his eyes. “I’d say...forty-six.”

“Forty-seven.”

“Then there we go. I have a thing for older men.” He rounded the table and sat beside Henry. “Stop worrying.” He kissed him. “Dexter and I broke up, and he’s with someone else. He didn’t want to be with a shop owner. Said I should’ve been a restaurateur, not someone who sells hotdogs. When I said get bent, he left.”

“Why would he come by?” He scooted close to Jack and rested his forehead against Jack’s and palmed his thigh. He liked the intimacy.

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“To show off. His boyfriend owns a restaurant, I think.” Jack shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“You own one, too.”

“Mine’s just a small hole-in-the-wall joint. His is fine dining, I believe.”

“Oh well.”

Jack kissed him again. “I need to make sure the coals are out. Why don’t you carry this stuff inside, and we’ll find a movie?”

“Sure.” He disengaged from Jack, not wanting to end their quiet moment. He busied himself with carrying the remnants of dinner into the house, then came back out to retrieve the bottles and the rest of the silverware. He wasn’t sure what to do next. Go home? Stay? Did Jack even want him to stick around after the movie?

Jack strode into the kitchen and closed the sliding door. “Let me put this stuff in the fridge.” He moved the rest of the ribs into a plastic container, then switched things around in the refrigerator before adding the ribs, the salad and the potatoes onto the shelves. He arranged the plates and silverware in the dishwasher. “I’ll turn that on later. It’s nice to have a full load for a change.”

“I bet.” Henry hesitated. This was the point he tended to get confused. Jack said a movie, but for all he knew, it was just a thing to say.

“What?” Jack rounded the island and threaded his arms around Henry. “You’re

pensive again.”

“Nothing.” How was he supposed to say he’d forgotten how to date?

“Look, I’m not good at love and I’m not great at dating, but I want you to stay,” Jack said. “Yeah? Do you have to be somewhere?”

“Right here’s where I have to be.” He couldn’t contain his joy. He had someone who liked him—the fumbling and awkwardness weren’t a turnoff. “I’m not headed anywhere.”

“Good.”

Chapter Five

Henry took the lead. If he was going to get with Jack, he had to do it on his terms. He tugged Jack to his feet.

The moment Henry touched him, Jack seemed to come to life. He pushed Henry against the wall and kissed him. The sheer excitement and force in Jack’s capturing wrenched a grunt from within Henry. He didn’t care. He loved being pushed.

Jack removed Henry’s shirt, shoving the garment out of the way. He slid his palms over Henry’s skin, sending tingles all over his body. “You’re so hot.” He leaned down and licked Henry’s nipples. “Taste good, too.”

Excitement simmered in Henry. He shoved his hands into Jack’s pants. So sexy and perfect.

“God, yes. Need you.” Jack stood upright long enough to remove his shirt. He fumbled down the hallway with Henry, tugging him to the bedroom.

Henry collided with him and landed on the bed. He rolled Jack onto the mattress then pushed his pants the rest of the way down. He needed to taste Jack. He stroked him, learning every inch. He nibbled Jack's inner thigh. Right now, he wanted to make him crazy.

"Need you." Jack reached for him. "Henry."

He had him almost there. He caressed Jack's balls. When Jack moaned, Henry raked his fingers down his leg.

Precum shimmered on the tip of Jack's cock. Jack ground himself on Henry's fingers. So needy.

He was getting closer to where he wanted Jack. He kissed above his groin, making him wait for anything lower and breathed him in. The act teased him.

"God yes." Jack wriggled beneath him. "Do it."

Even closer. Henry flicked his tongue across the head of Jack's dick. Jack's eyes lit up with hunger. Henry engulfed Jack's dick in his mouth. Tasty. He swallowed Jack deep and buried his nose in his lover's curls. He loved the power shift. Jack struck him as a top. Henry could top or bottom. All he wanted to do was make his lover happy.

Jack growled. "Jesus. Love it."

Henry stroked Jack's thighs while he bobbed his head. He needed to learn this man and what made him come apart. He moved faster, taking more of Jack into his mouth.

A shiver rolled through Jack. He shoved his fingers into Henry's hair and pulled.

The bite of pain added to Henry's pleasure. He bobbed faster and eased one finger between Jack's ass cheeks. Did Jack like being touched during a blow job?

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“Yes.” Jack arched his back and bucked in Henry’s mouth. “More.”

Henry parted the globes of Jack’s behind and caressed the puckered skin. At the same time, he licked along Jack’s shaft, then swallowed him to the root.

“God, you’ll fry my brain.” Jack palmed Henry’s head. “Can’t think straight.” He panted. “More.”

Henry pushed his finger over Jack’s hole, not breaching him, but caressing. Jack tensed. “Breathe,” Henry said. “So gorgeous.” He stroked Jack, then resumed blowing him. He wanted to touch himself, but he’d be inside Jack soon enough.

Jack shivered again. “I’m close. Henry.”

Henry alternated between toying with Jack’s hole and massaging his sac while he licked him.

“I can’t...” Jack bucked. He rammed his dick into Henry’s mouth, bumping the back of his throat. “Fuck.”

Henry refused to let up until Jack cried out again.

“Henry.” Jack tensed. “Oh fuck.”

Now he had Jack right where he wanted him. Henry let Jack’s cock slip from his mouth. He stroked his lover fast and kept his finger pressed to Jack’s ass.

Jack panted. He writhed and surged into Henry's hand. He groaned and the sound filled the room. A thick ribbon of cum shot across his belly. Jack moaned. He sank on the bed and sighed. "Yes." He let go of Henry's hair.

Henry stroked a few more times, then backed away from him. "My turn." He stood and removed his pants.

"Yes." Jack reached for him. "Want you"

Henry stepped out of his wadded-up clothing. "Lube? Rubbers?" He stroked himself. Heat shimmered through his body. His nerve endings buzzed. He loved being with a guy the first time. Everything was new. He admired Jack's body, so perfect and strong. So sexy.

"Nightstand." Jack swatted the bed.

Henry chuckled. He'd really messed Jack up. He retrieved the needed items, then returned to Jack. He leaned over and kissed him. The delicious friction of his hard cock against Jack's softer one delighted him.

"Oh God." Jack bit Henry's bottom lip. "Tease."

"You know it." Henry kissed him again, then stood tall. He wanted to be inside Jack. Now. He lubed his fingers.

"Yes, need it." Jack writhed again. "Please?"

"So shameless." Henry folded Jack in half. He dribbled lube down the crack of Jack's ass, having him well prepped. He toyed with Jack's hole again.

"I crave you." Jack held onto his knees. "Henry."

He eased one finger into Jack, stretching him.

“Oh Christ. Been so long.” Jack groaned. “Love it.”

He added a second finger, working Jack open. He nibbled on Jack’s calf.

“Henry, I can’t wait.” Jack shivered again.

Henry squirted more lube onto his fingers. He couldn’t wait much longer, either. He pumped his digits within Jack.

“Henry.” Jack moaned. “Please?”

He increased the speed of his pumping. Jack wasn’t quite ready, so Henry kept stretching him. Jack’s cock bobbed again, rock-hard, and he flexed around Henry’s fingers.

Henry withdrew, then unwrapped the condom and sheathed himself. It’d been a long time since he’d slept with someone. He lubed his cock before he lined himself up with Jack’s hole. “Ready?” He fondled Jack’s balls.

“Been ready.” Jack inched closer. “Do it.”

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Henry pushed. Inch by inch, he filled Jack. So tight. Perfect. He pushed to the hilt and leaned over Jack, smearing cum between them.

“Yes.” A dazed look filled Jack’s eyes. He opened his mouth, but no sound came out.

Henry built into a steady rhythm, in and out. He memorized the feel of Jack around him—every ripple and nuance.

“Yes.” Jack rode him. “Oh God.”

Henry pushed with abandon. He should go slow and savor the moment, but his desire was too raw. He loved the way Jack’s eyes widened with every push, his irises turning a deeper shade of green. His nipples beaded and he blushed from his hairline to his chest.

Jack met him thrust for thrust. “Fuck me.”

Henry groaned. “So fucking good.”

Jack trembled and bucked under Henry. “Need to come again.”

He needed to climax, too. His movements turned feral. The feel of skin on skin and the slap of his body against Jack’s was more than he could handle. He groaned. “Come with me.” The orgasm started low in his belly, but overwhelmed him in seconds. He surged into Jack, his restraint snapping as he came.

Jack shuddered. Another rope of cum decorated his belly. Henry clawed at Jack’s

hips and added a few more thrusts before he stilled. “Holy fuck.” His head swam. Nothing compared to being with Jack. All-consuming was a good way of describing the action.

“I love a man who talks dirty in bed.” Jack held him when Henry collapsed on him. “My ass will be sore, but you’re worth it.”

“Am I?” He stayed a moment longer, then withdrew. Henry removed the used condom and ditched it in the trash basket. “My knees aren’t going to last much longer.” He left the room long enough to retrieve a washcloth, then returned. Henry wiped the cum from his belly and from Jack’s chest.

“Then toss that in the bathroom and come here.” Jack slumped on the bed and panted. “I’m worn out, too.”

“It’s been a great night.” Henry settled next to Jack and palmed Jack’s thigh. “I’m having the best time.” He liked men without ink or piercings. Maybe he was old-fashioned, but he liked a clean slate. He considered the body perfect without the extra art.

“Stay.” Jack rolled onto his side. “Please? I don’t want this night to end.”

Neither did he. Henry tangled his legs with Jack’s and tucked Jack to his side. Part of him kind of wanted to go because wasn’t that what one was supposed to do after sex? But the rest of him wanted to stay. He liked Jack too much to vacate so soon.

“When you’d lose your virginity?” Jack asked.

Damn. He hadn’t thought about that event in so long. He sighed. “I was nineteen. I knew I was gay, but my folks didn’t like it, so I thought I’d try not to be gay. It didn’t work because girls did nothing for me. I liked being friends with them, but that was

it. Lydia, my then girlfriend, didn't stoke my fires, you know? It sounds terrible, looking back, but it's true. We tried to fuck, and I forced myself to do it. She knew I wasn't attracted to her that way and she was extra sweet about the whole debacle, but it was so terrible." He winced just thinking about the fumbling and the episode of limp dick.

"It's never good during our first time," Jack said. "No one gets it perfect from the get-go."

"I'll bet you were pretty good." He brushed some of Jack's hair off his forehead. "You strike me as the type who knew what he was doing early on."

"Not really." Jack grinned. "Her name was Ruthie. She was my high school sweetheart. Nice girl. She wanted babies and forever with me. I knew it'd never work, but I loved her. I still care about her, but I knew, even then, I'd never be the right guy for her."

"Do you still talk to her? I haven't talked to Lydia in ten years."

"I do. Ruthie lives here in Cedarwood."

"Wow." He laced his fingers with Jack's. "Did people give her shit after they found out you were gay or did they treat her like she'd been wronged?"

"If she got flack, she never let it show, but she'd have told me, so I'm assuming not," Jack said. "She seems quiet and like she doesn't know what's going on, but she's a firecracker. She can take care of herself and she'd have given them hell right back."

"Good." He should sleep, but he didn't want to miss a moment with Jack.

"You're thinking."

“I am.”

“About?”

“Among other things, what’s our next step?”

“Ours?”

“Where do we go now?” He might as well be direct.

“What do you mean?”

He’s going to make me work for this, isn’t he? Fine. “It’s pushy to ask, but where do we go from here? I’m not looking for a hook-up. I want a relationship. If that’s not what you want, then I can accept that. Just be honest with me.”

Jack snorted. “You sound like those dating commercials.”

“Probably.” He admired Jack’s ability to avoid a question. “What do you want from this?”

“If I say a good time, you’ll bolt, won’t you?”

“Not exactly.” He’d walk away from the sex part, but they could still be friends. He liked working with Jack. Why stop being platonic?

“What’ll you do?” Jack asked.

“You don’t want to answer, do you?” Henry disengaged from him and sat up. “Look, I’m tired of getting used. It’s happened a lot. People want me because they think I can help them. If you’re not interested in dating, then tell me. I can’t get your restaurant featured on television or in magazines and I can’t make you famous. All I can be is faithful to a fault.”

Jack sat up and stared at him. “I’ve been used, too. People want to gossip and they expect me to tell them what everyone else has said. They want money, too. It’s nuts because I’m a simple guy who runs a hot dog shop. I’m not important. I don’t need fame or lots of money...or to be on television.”

Some of the anger dissipated within him. He and Jack were on the same wavelength, but looking at the situation two different ways. “I disagree about your importance. You’re vital to this town.”

“You’re being generous.” Jack chuckled. “But I appreciate it. I also appreciate your forthright approach. You’re good at blunt, and I’m better at quiet. We’re also pretty damn good at being defensive.” He sighed. “I’m not a good boyfriend. I spend too much time at the shop or working on the books for the shop. I don’t talk much and I seem closed-off. Ask Anna. She’ll tell you I don’t say much.”

“You open up when you want to,” Henry said. “You’re opening to me.”

“You’re easy to talk to,” Jack said. “You’ve asked for the truth and here it is. I want to keep this going with you. I like working with you at the restaurant and getting together with you has been awesome. I feel alive again.”

“But?”

“I’m scared and worried you’ll want things from me I can’t give,” Jack said. “That doesn’t mean I don’t want to try.”

“Then we do that. We try, but we go slow.” Henry stretched back out on the bed and reached for Jack. “We give us a chance and realize we’ve both been hurt. Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“I do have one restriction.” He had to get this out now or he’d regret not speaking up.

“One?”

He shrugged as Jack snuggled up to him. “If we decide to date, then I want it to be just us. If you’re wanting to play the field, then I’m not the right guy.”

Jack nodded, then draped his arm across Henry’s abdomen. “I’m a one-man kind of guy, too.”

“Good.” Relief washed over him. He needed to know he was the only man in Jack’s romantic life. He was too old to play games and he wanted to settle down eventually. No, he wanted to settle down with the right guy.

Jack?

Maybe.

* * * *

The next afternoon, Jack headed up to the shop. He should’ve gone in the morning, but he and Henry had had too much fun lounging in bed. The respite soothed his soul. Henry seemed to know how to rile him up, but also how to calm him back down again.

Unfortunately, their relaxation could only last for so long. He needed to balance the books and order more supplies for the coming weeks. Besides that, he needed to make the chili for the week and ensure he had enough cheese grated for when he opened on Tuesday.

He’d had a wonderful weekend. For the first time in forever, he felt normal. He

wasn't stressed or irritated. His ex showing up hadn't been the best thing that could've happened, but Henry had leveled him and encouraged him to delete Dexter's number from his phone.

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His pocket buzzed. He didn't bother to check the notification right away. Someone must've called. Let it go to voicemail.

Once Jack had ventured into the shop and locked the door behind him, he retrieved the message. His ex-boyfriend Ray had called. He had fond memories of Ray. They'd liked to watch baseball together and he wasn't altogether sure why they'd split. He played the message.

"Hey. If you still have my number in your phone, you know who this is. I'm in Cedarwood and thought I'd drop by. I'm right outside watching you. If you'd have turned around, you'd have seen me before you went into the shop."

Watching? He looked up, and Ray stood on the other side of the door, waving.

Jack unlocked the door. "Hi."

"Hi." Ray stepped into the shop. "This place hasn't changed. Not in the three years since we were together. Do you ever consider redecorating? Switching things up a bit?"

"I like the décor." Jack locked up again and leaned against the counter. Why was it that the moment he had a boyfriend, his exes decided to show up?

"You would." Ray turned one of the chairs around and sat on it backward. "The food scene is really exploding in San Francisco. This place, drab as it is, would be very chic out there. They like weird little joints. Have you ever considered leaving Cedarwood?"

“I like it here.” He crossed his ankles. “It’s a great place to live.” He stared at Ray, really looking at him. He’d been attracted to this man. Ray tipped his head and raked his fingers through his blond hair. Ray had always been a put-together kind of man. His suits were always tailored to his body. He wore the right cologne and walked with grace. But his attitude could be abrasive. His green eyes twinkled, but Jack could never tell if Ray was laughing at or with him.

“You’re not being challenged. There’s no scene,” Ray said. “You need more than this town.”

“I’m perfectly fine.” Now he remembered why he and Ray hadn’t worked out—Ray wanted him to think bigger than Cedarwood. Ray’s attitude sucked. If Ray wasn’t getting what he wanted, he wasn’t happy and let everyone know it.

“Gourmet dogs—not the simple stuff and this atrocious place. It’s so bland.” Ray stared at him and waved his hand. “Tell me you get gossip. Tell me you get something else out of this place than just slinging awful food. There must be something about this place that keeps you here. You’ve got the goods on someone, right?”

“I hear things, but I don’t remember any of it.” He needed to get to work or he’d be behind. “I’m busy and I don’t talk about what I’m told.”

“You’re too busy for a friend?” Ray asked. “You and I are tight.”

“I’m busy now, yes, but us being tight...Ray, you’re overthinking this.” He didn’t know what Ray wanted, but he wasn’t going to get any information out of him.

“I hear you’re seeing someone.”

“Yes.” That must be what Ray wants—dirt on my dating life. Jesus.

“A chef?”

“No.” God, he was nosy. “A man.” He refused to give any names. For all he knew, Ray had heard rumors and would hunt Henry down.

“Is it serious?”

“It’s new.” He didn’t want to tell Ray much, but his relationship with Henry wasn’t any of his business.

“Good. Then it won’t be a big deal if you have dinner with me.” Ray stood and reached for Jack. “You’re going to because you want to, and we’ll have fun.”

“I can’t,” Jack said and backed up. “I’m busy. Remember?”

“With the boyfriend?”

“No, here.” Reason number two why he and Ray split—Ray demanded his time when he didn’t have any to give. “Come on. You know what goes into prep. I’m the only worker I have right now. You know this. What’s wrong with you?”

“It’s just dinner and you can have someone else come in,” Ray said. He rolled his eyes. “I know you have other workers.”

“No, it’s just me. This is my business and my responsibility. I can’t just walk away when there’s no one else here,” Jack said. “I have too much to get done today, but thanks anyway.”

“You used to be fun,” Ray snapped. “You used to be the guy I liked to hang out with, but you changed.”

“You used to not be a dick.” He opened the door for Ray. “Bye Ray.”

“Ouch.” Ray stood in the open doorway. “You’re mean.”

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“It’s true. I’m mean and you’re a dick.” He might not say much, but he wasn’t afraid to be blunt.

“When you’re ready to upgrade, call me.” Ray leaned in and kissed him on the lips before Jack could react. He backed up and grinned, then walked out of the restaurant.

Jack slammed the door and hit the lock, then faced the miniscule dining room. His entire body tensed. He gritted his teeth and the muscles in his back ached. This always happened, but he’d forgotten about his internal reaction to Ray. The stress sucked. Having Ray there reminded him why they weren’t good together—Ray wanted more when he had nothing left to give. Everything was about Ray.

No wonder he’d been drawn to Henry. He liked the laid-back, easy qualities of him. Henry was sweet and worked with him when Ray did nothing but argue. Henry was better suited to him.

He spotted the bins behind the counter and sighed. Although almost everything Ray had said was wrong, he probably needed an assistant. If nothing else, he’d be better off with some company, instead of being alone. But he couldn’t expect Henry to come up now. Henry was a nice guy, but nice guys could be pushed too far. He didn’t want to do that to Henry.

Jack rounded the counter and hefted the box of onions onto the counter. If he was going to open on time tomorrow, he’d need onions and they wouldn’t chop themselves.

Tuesday morning, Henry strolled through Cedarwood on his way to the restaurant. He could've driven, but why waste a perfectly good sunny day? He appreciated the exercise and the quiet around him. Besides, he'd leave a smaller carbon footprint if he walked and he'd surprise Jack. Double win.

He reached the center of town and headed for Jack's. When he passed the gazebo, he spotted Charlie coming toward him. He remembered Charlie from the few times he'd ventured into the newspaper offices.

"Hi." Charlie waved. "Are you busy?"

"I'm on my way to the hot dog shop." Henry slowed his pace. "What's up?"

Charlie looked every inch the cub reporter—young, scruffy and hungry for a story, the juicier the better. He jiggled the notebook in his hand. "You're seeing Jack? Or just working for him?" The piercings in his ear caught the light when he wagged his head, and the tattoo was just visible at the edge of the cuff of his T-shirt. He wasn't like the cub reporters Henry knew, but whatever. Times were changing and things that weren't permissible before were passé now.

"We're seeing each other and I'm helping out at the restaurant. Why?" He narrowed his eyes. If Charlie wanted gossip, he could go somewhere else.

"He was there yesterday," Charlie said. "With someone."

"So? He has to do prep work. Anna probably came in to help." Henry tucked his hands in his pockets. "Where are you going with this?"

"Was it a special party? You're dating him. You should know." Charlie shrugged. "He seemed chummy with the dude."

“If you’re trying to get information, then stop. I don’t know anything about it.” Henry sidestepped Charlie and walked away.

“Wait.” Charlie hurried up to him. “He hugged the guy and they seemed close.”

“So?” The new information bothered him, but it could be a figment of Charlie’s imagination or something to piss Henry off.

“I heard him say he loved him.”

Henry stopped in his tracks. “Look, I don’t know what was going on. Doesn’t matter. It’s not my problem, so if you don’t need me, my problem is getting to the shop.” He needed to be calmer about the situation and Charlie’s presence made that almost impossible.

Charlie shoved the notebook in his back pocket. “Okay, so the real reason I went hunting for you is that the paper wants your services. Remy has been talking about having a travel feature and you’re the best person in town to do this. You’ve gone places and you write about them. Why not work for the paper? The talk is also going around there should be a column about places in Cedarwood. Something like a feature about this restaurant or that shop. You’d be perfect.”

The ideas intrigued him, but if Remy wanted him to write the columns, then Remy could ask. “I’ll get in touch with the powers that be.”

“You will?” Charlie held up both hands and sighed. “Thank you. I’ll let Remy know I talked to you.” He didn’t look back as he walked away.

What a strange kid. Henry shook his head, then strolled the rest of the way to the hot dog shop. The anger from being baited by Charlie hadn’t dissipated, but he couldn’t dwell on what he didn’t know for sure. He was too old for gossip and saw no reason

to waste time arguing. But he couldn't shake the uncertainty. He should go right in and talk to Jack.

Except the shop was jumping. Now wasn't the right time.

Henry hated going somewhere else for lunch, but he wasn't in the right headspace to see Jack. Not now. Still, heading elsewhere felt wrong. Maybe he did have a routine. Wouldn't his father laugh? His father used to say he'd get old, have routines and find true irritation when his routines weren't followed.

Henry ventured over to the food trucks and ordered a tuna salad sandwich and a bottle of water, then settled at one of the picnic tables on the square. He'd never get any writing done at this rate. His mind was too full of Jack.

Christ. This was why he hated relationships. He disliked drama and gossip.

A half an hour to Jack's usual closing time, Henry screwed up his courage and headed to the shop. He'd overblown the situation in his mind and should get to the bottom of the problem—if there was one.

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As he strode up to the door, he noticed the sign. Closed. What the hell? Closed? Already? He didn't see the additional sold-out sign. He knocked on the door. Was Jack even there?

Anna appeared and opened the door. She waved. "Hey, you. He left early so we closed. Come in." She ushered him into the dining room. "How are you?"

"I'm good." He frowned. "He left?"

"He did." She flipped the lock in place. "If I don't do that and someone sees you in here, they'll think we're open and forgot to turn the sign." She pulled the blind down over the window in the door. "There was a guy he knew. He knows everyone and I swear, he never gets through a day without a friend or whatever coming through." She shook her head. "I know. It's not his usual."

"I guess not." Not that he knew what Jack's usual was... They hadn't been together long enough for him to. So much for feeling special.

"His old flame, Josh, came by. They chatted, and Jack said he wanted to go. Who knows why? He doesn't tell me." She shrugged. "He hears all the gossip and keeps quiet. I knew he'd dated Josh a few times, but I didn't think he'd leave with him."

"With him?" Well, shit. "I should go." He wasn't sticking around where he wasn't wanted.

"Whoa. Don't worry about Jack. He's your guy." She held up both hands. "I don't think there's anything to him going. Really."

“Sure.” Still, he should walk away while he still had some dignity and before his emotions got the better of him. “Thanks, Anna.”

“Wait.” She touched his arm, stopping him. “Jack’s not the type to screw around. He might not have told me what was going on, but I’m sure it’s nothing too terrible. When his mother died, he said so. When his father remarried, Jack clued me in. I knew when he broke up with his last three boyfriends and he’s never asked anyone to work for him—not the way he did with you. Trust me and him. Okay?”

“I will.” He forced a smile. “Thanks.”

“Now you can go.” She waved him out of the restaurant and grinned. “I wouldn’t steer you wrong.”

He nodded. She’d reassured him, yet confused and upset him, too. He’d thought he had a good thing with Jack. Thought we have decent communication. He didn’t want to jump to conclusions, but something felt off.

Henry wandered home and his thoughts never ventured far from Jack. He could call, but if there was something important happening, then Jack didn’t need the distraction. When he reached his condo, his shoulders sank and he sighed. Getting upset wasn’t going to help anything.

Screw it. He didn’t know what he didn’t know and couldn’t react to the unknown. When he saw Jack or talked to him next, he’d sort this out.

* * * *

Jack forked his fingers into his hair and growled. He’d thought he was helping Josh, but he’d been hornswoggled. Damn it. Josh had wanted someone to move his furniture—not his father’s and not to help his father move into an assisted living

facility. He gritted his teeth and stared out of the windshield at the parked car in front of his. He'd lost precious time at the shop and he hadn't gotten to see Henry.

He had to see his boyfriend. If anyone could brighten his day, it was his man. He'd acted foolish, although his heart had been in the right place when he'd offered to give Josh a hand. Trust Josh to take advantage.

Jack pulled out of the parking spot and drove over to Henry's housing development. Henry had said he lived in seven-twelve. Where in the hell was seven-twelve? He drove around the blocks, looking for Henry's car. Most of the condos had some sort of decoration out front—a wreath, special outdoor lighting, or rock formations. He finally located Henry's condo, seven-twelve. The one with the plain and orderly front yard. Jack pulled in and parked.

He left the car and headed right up to Henry's front door. Before Jack rang the bell, Henry appeared.

"Hi," Henry said and opened the door. "I never thought you'd be on my stoop."

"I didn't expect to come here just now." He stepped into the condo. He wasn't sure what he'd imagined Henry's place would be like, but the sparseness and dark colors weren't it. "Sorry. Am I interrupting something?"

"No." Henry gestured to the sofa. "Sit?"

"I don't tend to go on raw emotion or act carelessly. I should've called first." He paced the length of the living room. "I'm sorry."

"You're going to wear a hole in my carpet." Henry touched Jack's arm. "What's wrong?"

He stopped moving. The simple gesture, touching him, send a calming vibe through him. Jack sank onto the sofa. “The truth is, I needed to see you. It’s been a day and I needed to center—with you.”

“I’m here.” Henry sat with him. “Are you okay?”

“I can’t say long because I have to get back to the shop. Prep work never ends.” He was rambling. “Sorry.”

“You’ve said that already.” Henry hadn’t yelled. Hadn’t argued. Hadn’t come at him with attitude.

Jack sighed. “I heard you stopped at the restaurant. I missed you.” He held Henry’s hand. “I’m sorry. I know, I’ve said it already, but I am.”

“What happened? Do you want to talk about it?” Henry asked.

“Josh happened.” He glanced down at their interlocked fingers, then met Henry’s gaze. “I’ve known Josh since high school. We sort of dated a while when I came back after college. We’ve been friends because we just are. He’s like that old coat you keep in the closet. It’s not your favorite and it’s a little worn, but you just can’t quite bring yourself to get rid of it.”

“I’ve got a couple like that.” Henry half-smiled. “Go on.”

“He came to the shop today and said his father was moving into an assisted living facility. I’ve known his dad as long as I’ve known Josh and I wanted to help. We were slow, so I went with him to help with the move. Turned out, Josh wanted to relocate a sofa and his father was already in the elder home. It was a big lie to get me to do what he wanted.” He hated the pain in Henry’s eyes, but he’d caused it by not telling him earlier what was going on. “I should’ve made him tell me the truth.”

“But you wanted to help. You’ve got a big heart,” Henry murmured.

“Maybe.”

“Hey, you thought you were doing the right thing. He’s the one who lost out because you won’t believe him a second time.” Henry shrugged and didn’t let go. “Was he the one you were supposedly seen hugging? The one you said you loved?”

“Huh?” He had no idea what Henry meant. “I didn’t hug anyone. If I had, I would tell you.”

This time, Henry sighed. He pinched the bridge of his nose with his free hand. “I should’ve guessed. The little shit.”

“What?”

“I’ve been going crazy thinking you’re stepping out on me,” Henry said. “I ran into Charlie Grover from the paper. He told me he’d seen you hugging someone and telling them you loved them. Said you had a private party at the restaurant yesterday, too. Me, being terrible at dating, let it get under my skin. I knew it was a lie, but I got scared.”

“He saw me with Ray.” Jack scooted closer to Henry. “That’s one man I will never date again. Remember me telling you about the ex that wanted me to go upscale cuisine? That’s Ray. He showed up, informed me the restaurant was a dump, I should go high class and when I refused, he got snippy. No hugging and no I love yous involved.” He slid his palm around Henry’s throat to the back of his neck and tugged him close. “The only man I want to be hugging or kissing right now is you.”

“Same here.” Henry kissed him, then rested his forehead against Jack’s. “I’m sorry I jumped to conclusions. It might not seem like much, but I can’t handle being second best. I know you’re a social person. So am I and I get you’ve got a past. We both do. It’s hard because I’ve been shuffled to the back burner other times and I don’t want that with you. I don’t want you to date me or have sex with me because you think I’m a good worker or you feel sorry for me.”

“Henry?” He hadn’t seen any of that coming. “That’s not how I feel at all.”

“I’m not a jealous guy, but I need to know the truth. I’m pushing fifty and not getting any younger.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t clue you in to what was happening, but you’re not second best

with me.” He was to the shop, but that wasn’t important right now.

“I don’t want to feel like I’m not good enough or that I’m only here to soothe your ego.”

“Things between us are going fast and I don’t blame you for being concerned. I doubt I’d like seeing you with a bunch of your exes or knowing you’d gone with them to do anything. It’d drive me crazy. But this is a small town and some of mine live here. I tend to interact with them because I have a business and I have to keep things positive. I don’t talk politics with the customers because I know half of them would stop visiting the shop if I did. Same thing with exes. It’s better to use honey, you know? My restaurant is the only thing that’s number one uncontested in my life. That said, I want us. I want you. I can’t cut everyone from my past out of my life, but my focus is at the restaurant and with you.” He did have to get the prep work done, but he liked being with Henry too much.

“I can accept that,” Henry said. “My writing is my top priority, too. I’m sorry I’m being so moody. I guess I missed you today more than I thought.” He half-smiled. “I had to eat at one of the food trucks. It’s just not the same.”

“I bet not,” Jack said. “Closing early wasn’t the same, either.” He kissed Henry, needing his calming spirit. “I’m glad I came over, even if it was impulsive. You’re good for me.”

“Want my help at the restaurant? I’m free this evening,” Henry said. “I wanted to write, but I can’t get my head in the game.”

“It’s okay, but I appreciate the offer.” The restaurant was his responsibility. He’d shirked his duties earlier. Time to make up for them now. “But we’re a you and me?”

“You and me,” Henry said, repeating him.

“Work with me, write and be my boyfriend.” He threaded his arms around Henry.
“Yes?”

“Stay here,” Henry said. “I want you to.”

“I can’t tell you no, even if I should be going to the restaurant.” He’d never get caught up.

“I’ll help you in the morning.”

Henry knew how to say the right things. Jack kissed him hard. He cared way too much about Henry. The man made him impulsive and all a mess, but he liked the way Henry churned him around.

Being home with Henry felt right. His life wasn’t so empty and bland. He never considered his life boring, but Jack swore Henry brought a certain electricity to his existence. He followed Henry into the kitchen.

“You don’t bring many people home, do you?” Henry asked.

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“Nope.” Jack left his keys and wallet on the counter. “I don’t spend much time there, either.”

“Because you’re always at the shop?”

“I’m there more than I should be,” Jack confessed. “Do you bring a lot of guys home?”

“No.” Henry crossed the room and held onto Jack’s shirt. “Maybe you should find a reason to be home, and I should find one to bring you over here more.”

Jack didn’t speak right away. His first thought was Henry was trying to change him, to make Jack something he wanted—which wasn’t Jack. But he had to slow down and not react to Henry so fast. Henry wasn’t the other guys. He’d opened up to Henry more. He’d encouraged Henry to put down his guard, too. Jack had to do the same for Henry.

Jack brushed his nose along Henry’s, breathing him in. “Are you giving me a reason to hang out here?”

“A reason to spend some of your spare time you’d waste at the shop and being home,” Henry said. He nibbled Jack’s bottom lip. “There’s nothing wrong with being devoted to the shop, but there’s also nothing wrong with enjoying your away time, too.”

He smoothed his palms over Jack’s chest, sending shivers through Jack. A groan bubbled in him.

“Make your free time count,” Henry said. “Love it.”

“Yeah.” He feasted on Henry’s mouth. The taste of beer lingered on his kiss. He grabbed Henry’s ass, pulling him closer. He groaned again.

Henry broke the kiss. “You’re sexy when you stand behind the counter.”

“Am I?” He’d never been told that. “Is that why you hang out at my shop?”

“I love your meat,” Henry said. His eyes widened as he’d realized what he’d said. “I mean...”

“You like my beefy display?” He loved getting Henry flustered.

“I do.” He ground against him, rubbing on Jack’s hip. “You wear those tight T-shirts to tempt me. Make me come back for more of you.”

“And you do.” He couldn’t get enough of Henry touching him. Henry knew what he could do with the bulge in his pants. He wanted Henry to make him crave him. Henry grasped Jack’s hand, tugging him down to the bedroom.

Henry collapsed on top of him on the bed. “Got you.”

He’d let Henry control things the first time, but this time he wanted to be in charge. Henry pushed Jack’s shirt out of the way and kissed Jack’s belly.

“Yes.” He threaded his fingers into Henry’s hair. “Love it.”

Henry opened Jack’s shirt and moved up to Jack’s nipples. Tingles shot through Jack’s body. So much for control. “Need you in me,” Jack said. “Now.”

“In a bit.” Henry resumed licking Jack’s nipples. He increased his pressure and rubbed Jack’s arms.

“God.” Jack caressed the back of Henry’s neck, then down to his shoulders. The tingles increased and his cock throbbed. “Henry.”

“Yes?” Henry unbuttoned Jack’s jeans, then pushed the denim down his legs. “You wanted me?”

“I do want you.” He shivered when Henry wrapped his fingers around his dick. The synapses in his brain misfired and he couldn’t think straight. He wanted to go slow, but Henry knew how to kick his desire into high gear.

Henry stroked Jack, but also slid his palm around Jack’s hip. He caressed the globes of Jack’s ass.

“Yes, touch me.” Jack groaned. “Henry.”

Instead of answering with words, he tapped Jack’s hole.

His knees weakened. He needed Henry in him. Screw control. “Lube.” He reached behind himself to the nightstand and grabbed the bottle.

Henry took the lube from him. “Let me get a rubber.”

“Yes.” Jack tried to grab the box, but only managed to spill its contents. “Damn it.”

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Henry squeezed Jack's ass. "Get naked." He withdrew his finger and sat back. When Jack complied, Henry stood long enough to remove his shirt, then unzipped. He shoved his jeans and boxers to his ankles. While bent over, he grabbed a condom from the floor. "Turn around."

Jack couldn't contain his giddiness. He turned his back on Henry and wriggled his ass. "Fuck me." Henry made him feel young and desirable again. He stroked his cock. He needed the release.

Henry raked his nails over Jack's ass, then bit one of his ass cheeks.

The jolt of pain kicked his desire up another notch. Jack moaned. "Henry." He gripped the dresser. "More."

Henry sucked hard on the middle of Jack's left ass cheek. He dribbled lube over Jack's hole, then tapped the tender skin.

Jack's thoughts blurred. He backed into Henry. "More."

"Breathe." Henry massaged Jack's hole before pushing. When he finally breached Jack, he moved slowly.

A groan rumbled in Jack. He pulled his ass cheeks apart and writhed.

"Beautiful." Henry pushed his dick fully into him and with his free hand, reached between Jack's legs. He massaged Jack's balls.

“Holy fuck.” He ground on Henry’s finger. He needed Henry fully within him. His skin prickled. He wouldn’t last long at this rate. “Henry.”

Henry pushed his finger in and out of Jack at a steady pace. He added extra lube. “Like that?”

“Yes.” He craved it. He rocked his hips. “Need more.” He pulled away from Henry, climbing off his digit. He faced Henry. Desire and power overwhelmed him. If he wanted Henry in him, he had to make the next move.

Jack opened the condom packet, then sheathed Henry.

“Pushy.” Henry’s eyes glittered. “I like it.”

“You’ll love it.” He stroked Henry twice, then straddled him. He guided Henry’s cock into his ass. He didn’t mind the burn because he’d get what he wanted. The pressure spurred him on. He sank down onto Henry, then grasped his lover’s shoulders. Jack stared into Henry’s eyes. Something changed between them. They weren’t just two guys hot for each other. They were a pair. Meant to be... Forever? Jack wasn’t sure, but right now it didn’t matter. He’d always have a piece of Henry with him.

“Fuck,” Henry said, his voice gravelly. “So good.”

Jack agreed, but he couldn’t answer. His words were gone. All he could do was experience Henry. He bounced on Henry’s lap, loving the fullness. His cock bobbed and he stared into Henry’s eyes again. He was one with Henry and moaned.

Henry held onto Jack’s torso and nibbled on his chest. He bit Jack’s nipple, adding to Jack’s thrill.

“Yes.” Jack cupped the back of Henry’s head and bounced faster. “Make love to me.”

“I am.” Henry raked his teeth over Jack’s tender skin. “You’ve got me.”

Sure did. His restraint held by a thread. Jack trembled. Every cell in his body screamed for Henry.

Henry grasped Jack’s hips, increasing the pace. “Fuck,” he growled. “Come with me.”

Jack gasped. He wasn’t going to be able to hold out much longer. The orgasm was right there. Jack managed to wrap his fingers around his own erection. Just touching himself pushed him closer to the edge. He clawed at Henry’s shoulder with one hand and masturbated with the other. His entire being vibrated. He welcomed the orgasm. “Henry.” He tumbled headlong into climax, coming all over Henry’s abs.

Henry growled as he surged into Jack and came. He shuddered. “Fuck.”

Jack nudged Henry onto his back and stretched out on top of him, smearing cum between them.

“You’ve marked me,” Henry murmured. He panted and embraced Jack. “But I like it.”

“You marked me, too.” Jack pressed his face to Henry’s neck and he shivered.

“Cold?” Henry dragged the blanket over them. “We should probably clean up, as well.”

He’d get up to that eventually. He enjoyed the bliss and perfection of the moment. With Henry, he felt comfortable. He had a home—not just a dwelling or a place he

slept. He had a place with Henry. It didn't matter if they were at his house or Henry's. He knew he belonged and he never wanted to let go.

Chapter Seven

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The next morning, Henry did as he'd said he would and helped at the shop. He'd also brought along his messenger bag and notebook. During the two p.m. slow-down, he took a break at one of the tables and jotted some thoughts in his notebook for the characters. His thoughts turned to the article idea. He'd received an email that morning from Remy Nicholas about writing for the paper writing about the people and places. The offer hadn't been a lark. He'd apologized for Charlie's zest in asking him to do the job. Remy wanted a weekly column featuring happenings around Cedarwood, observations, exciting stuff and pieces about the places in town.

"Henry?" Jack waved. "Help?"

Shit. He closed his notebook and shoved it into his bag, then dropped the bag off behind the counter. After washing his hands, he took his place at the register and jumped right in.

Henry stole glances at Jack. They shared smiles and warmth engulfed him. He felt like he belonged here. At the end of his shift, he headed to the bathroom. When he returned, Anna had left, and Jack stood at the cutting board.

"Wow. Everyone cleared out fast." Henry slowed as he entered the dining room portion of the restaurant. "What'd I miss?"

"I'm trying not to be angry and jealous, but it's hard when I see a call from another guy. Tell me it's not what my mind is racing to believe. Please?" Jack asked. The muscle in his jaw twitched. "Tell me I'm making a mountain out of a molehill."

"What? I get calls from lots of people, but there's no one else but you in my life as

my boyfriend.”

Jack pointed to Henry’s phone. “You got a call, then I got a call, too. What I learned is gnawing at me.”

“I get lots of calls.” So what? “I don’t understand. What did you learn? I don’t have any secrets.”

“Remy called me. He said you’re considering working for the newspaper and writing stories about the town. Is that why you came here? To get stories to print?” Jack’s eyes blazed. “Are you going to do it?”

“I hadn’t planned on writing for the paper.” He shrugged. “It’s an interesting concept, but it’s not something I want to do.”

“You’ve got notes in that book saying you’re spending your time here. There are little stories that are direct things you’ve heard here.”

“So?” He wanted the references, but he wasn’t going to use the actual stories. “I came here because of you.”

“Really?”

“Jesus, Jack. I’ve crushed on you since I came here the first time.” He sounded like a teenager. Oh well. “I wanted to spend time with you.”

“Or to listen to everyone tell their stories so you can use them?”

His stomach churned. The one thing he didn’t want to do was exactly what the paper expected. He hadn’t agreed to do the column. But Jack thought he had. “Jack.”

“I told you. I don’t want to be used. People come here to chatter, not have their dirty laundry aired.” Jack shook his head. “I thought you were different. I thought I could trust you, but I can’t.”

“I’m not using you.” He thanked God they were alone. He didn’t want everyone to see them arguing. He’d fallen for Jack and didn’t like fighting with him. Neither of them trusted each other, but they wanted to be together. God. They were so messed up. “But we’re both doing it.”

“What are you talking about?” Jack’s fury increased and he balled his hand on the cutting board.

“I jumped to conclusions yesterday, and you had to defuse me. Now you’re jumping to conclusions. You snooped in my notebook.” Henry put his hands up. “Hear me out. You got a phone call, then you looked in my notebook. Yes, I was offered a position at the paper and it would be a sweet job. It’d be easy. Just go around town and write about what I see. But I don’t want to. You think I’m going to write about everyone here? I’m not. There is a special relationship between a bartender, or in this case hot dog maker, and the patron. I can’t breach that. I won’t.”

Jack’s shoulders sank and his irritation melted. “Henry, we can’t do this to each other.”

“I know.” He rounded the counter and joined Jack at the cutting board. “We’re testing the boundaries. We’re still getting to know each other and we sort of jumped in faster than we planned.” He chuckled. “I needed to be sure you wanted me and I’ve done a strange job of showing it. I’ve been hurt before and couldn’t bear having it happen again. You’ve been hurt by guys who used you and you needed to test me.”

Jack smoothed the wrinkles in Henry’s shirt. “You got me. Dead to rights.”

“I enjoy writing here because I like the atmosphere. I like listening to you talk. Your interactions are funny, sweet and tender. You’re like a therapist for some of these people. A confessional,” Henry said. “And I’m enamored with you. You’re a dream to me because no one should be this great.”

“Henry.” He inched closer to Henry and loped his arm around Henry’s waist. “I feel ridiculous and stupid. I never should’ve nosed through your notebook.”

“You’re human.” He embraced Jack. “We have baggage and we’re getting through it. We’ll still be unpacking it ages from now, but if we’re patient with each other and ourselves, this will work.”

Jack nodded and rubbed his nose along Henry’s.

“I want to write and some of the people in town will probably find their way into my stories, but it’s for a novel. Jack, I’ve taken bits and pieces of Cedarwood, woven them together and turned them into my story. No one person from this town is a specific character.” He slid his hands into Jack’s back pockets. “There might be a hot shop owner, but that’s all you because I needed to write someone like you into my story.”

“Me?”

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He kissed Jack. “You. I needed you in my life. The story part is just cake.”

“How do we do this? Us?” Jack asked. “I want all of it.”

“With patience and tenderness.” He kissed Jack again. “I don’t want anyone else. Just you.”

“Want you—only you.”

“Then we keep trying together.” He swayed with Jack, loving the feel of Jack’s body against his. “We keep doing our hometown romance thing.”

Jack laughed. “You’re corny.”

“Of course.”

“I like your corny.”

“I like you, too.” He continued to sway. “Let’s go home. You’re tired and are dead on your feet.”

Jack shrugged, but he grinned. “I’m perking up.”

“I can feel it.” The bulge in Jack’s jeans rubbed against the one in his own trousers. “Let’s go home. I’ll take care of you.”

“I can’t say no to you.”

Jack finished cleaning up then locked the shop. He ensured the security system was on and everything else was off before he followed Henry to the office to stuff the take into his bag. He held Henry's hand. "I'm ready."

Henry led the way to the lot. Jack spotted his car, but not Henry's. "Did you drive?"

"I walked." Henry toyed with the strap of his bag. "It's not far and I knew it wouldn't be dark out. Plus, we live in Cedarwood. It's safe and I wanted exercise."

"Then ride with me." He squeezed Henry's fingers. "I'm sorry I freaked out."

"Don't sweat it. We're new at this." Henry let go and rounded the hood. "My ex-boyfriend Nathan would've lost his mind. He hated my writing."

"Why?" He joined Henry in the car.

"He wanted to travel. He wanted to go places on comped tickets and such," Henry said. He settled beside Jack. "Most of the magazines I write for want me to make the trip and pay for only me. Any guests go on my dime."

He engaged the engine. "So? Were the tickets that expensive? Or was he that much of a dick?"

"A dick. Nathan wanted something for nothing every time," Henry said. "He'd have seen that email about the offer to write for the paper and flipped out because he'd hate staying here. He didn't want me to go somewhere and settle down."

"Are you?" He swallowed past the lump forming in his throat. He didn't want Henry to go. "Staying here?"

"I bought a condo, so I probably should." He reached across the console and held

Jack's hand. "Plus, I have this super-hot younger boyfriend."

"I'm only a little younger, but I can offer you all the hot dogs you can eat." He kissed Henry's knuckles.

"See? Perks I wasn't even trying for, but I've got them." Henry held Jack's hand tighter. "We're silly old men."

"We're not old." He didn't consider himself middle-aged—not yet.

"We're silly."

"We're getting our sea legs." He sounded corny, too...like an old man. Jack laughed as he pulled into his garage. "But we're romantic."

"So...romantic legs?" Henry asked.

"Better." He turned the car off then closed the garage with the remote.

“We’ll be fine.”

“We will.” He kissed Henry, then left the car. The relaxation and happiness around him calmed him. He’d been changed by Henry. He never thought he’d find someone like Henry—an equal and a partner. He craved Henry. The man made him crazy and jealous, but also ridiculously happy. He and Henry were finding their direction but doing it together.

Jack abandoned his bag and phone on the counter. “Want to shower?”

“With you?” Henry grinned. “Yes.” He fiddled with his phone and his brows knotted. “Damn it. After I deal with this. Just a moment.” He left the room and ducked out to the patio.

Jack could hear Henry on the phone, but since Henry gave few details on his end of the conversation, Jack opted not to pry. This wasn’t his problem or business.

Jack headed into the bathroom and turned the water on in the shower stall. While the water heated, he stripped. He preferred getting naked with Henry, but this would do. His nipples pebbled and his cock hardened. He slid his hands over his body. Soon, he’d have Henry touching him. With the water running, he couldn’t hear Henry outside. He wondered how long his lover might be before he joined him.

Jack stepped into the stall. The water stung and his muscles ached. Damn, he was tired. He hadn’t realized how worn out he’d become until he stood under the spray. He lathered the washcloth and scrubbed his torso. The hours he’d put in at the shop were catching up to him. He hadn’t been able to get a run in for the last three days.

He needed a good run to stretch and rejuvenate himself.

A few moments later, Henry strode into the bathroom. Jack watched him through the glass door. Henry moved with no finesse. He simply stripped. His muscles tightened as he moved and the tension was evident in his back. When he faced Jack, his eyebrows furrowed.

Henry pushed the door aside and joined Jack. "Sorry."

"No problem." Well, not really. Knowing Henry had put him off rather irked him, but he couldn't say that. He moved aside and scrubbed Henry. He soaped his lover's body and admired the way the suds defined Henry's muscles.

Henry groaned. "Feels good."

"Looks good," Jack said. He nipped Henry's throat. When Henry groaned again, Jack slid his palms over Henry's chest, cleaning him and touching him from behind.

Henry rested his head on Jack's shoulder. "You're dangerous."

"Am I?" He moved his hands down Henry's torso to his groin and stroked Henry's cock.

"Yes." Henry rubbed against Jack, sliding Jack's cock between the globes of Henry's ass.

Jack raked his teeth along Henry's pulse. He loved tasting his boyfriend.

"Damn. Yeah." Henry wriggled free and turned around. He knelt at Jack's feet and pressed his face to Jack's groin.

“Yes.” Jack wanted to say more but the words were gone. He threaded his fingers into Henry’s hair. Henry licked his way along Jack’s shaft to his balls. His touch seared Jack to his soul. Jack closed his eyes. He didn’t feel the slide of the soap over his body or the sting of the hot water on his skin. All he experienced was Henry.

Henry flattened his hands on Jack’s hips. He swallowed Jack deep, burying his nose in Jack’s curls.

A cry built in Jack’s throat. He couldn’t think or breathe. All he saw was Henry and all he experienced was his lover’s treatment. The rhythmic bob of Henry’s head and velvet of his tongue both lulled and excited Jack. The tingles engulfed him. He rocked his hips, pushing more of his dick into Henry’s mouth.

Henry hummed, adding another dimension to the act. Jack tightened his hold on Henry’s hair, guiding him. He pushed deeper and moved faster as his need increased. He wanted Henry too much. “Fuck.”

Henry fondled Jack’s balls, urging him on. When he slid one finger between Jack’s ass cheeks, Jack’s tenuous grasp on his restraint broke. He rammed his dick into Henry’s mouth and came. The tingles in his groin spread through his body and he groaned.

Henry didn’t stop. Instead, he continued to bob his head. He swallowed everything Jack had to offer.

“Fuck.” Jack let go. Henry had wrung him out. He knew how to make Jack come apart in so many ways. Jack sank to the floor.

“Now who is dangerous?” Henry grinned. “Better turn the water off or we’ll both freeze when it turns cold.”

He didn't try to move. Why? He needed to get his head screwed on straight first.

Henry stood. He used the wand to rinse Jack, then himself before he turned the water off. He held his hand out to Jack. "I'll help you."

When Jack stood, Henry dried him.

"Stretch out while I dry off," Henry said. "If I knew I'd blow your mind this well, I might have done it a hundred times before now to ensure you'd think I'm great."

"I do already." Jack wandered into the bedroom and flopped onto the bed. Happy and sated—that was him. He could sleep—once Henry joined him.

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Henry stretched out beside him. “Sleeping? Already?”

“No.” He tangled up with Henry. He wanted more than anything to ask about the call, but tried to forget he wanted to know. God, he was too nosy for his own good. “We sold out of chili today. I’ll have to get the next batch out of the cooler and make more this weekend. I should restock the foil wraps and the wax paper while I’m at it. We had a rush of to-go orders today, and I’ll bet we have a bunch more tomorrow.”

“Jack.” Henry flattened his palm on Jack’s chest.

“I need to refill the condiment bottles, too.” God. He’d say anything right now to keep his mouth engaged.

“Jack, you’re rambling.” Henry pressed his index finger to Jack’s mouth. “What do you really want to ask? About why I stepped out?”

He kept his mouth shut but tensed. Yes, he wanted to know, but he couldn’t be so blunt.

“Remy emailed, and I called him back.”

“Oh.” Shit. He’d given Remy Nicholas an earful about Charlie. “And?”

“He wants to interview me about that column-writing thing Charlie mentioned.” Henry shrugged. “It’ll be a quick meeting. I’ll let him tell me about the column he wants and let him offer it to me, then I’ll turn him down.”

“You will?” He thought for sure Henry would end up taking the job.

“I’m not writing gossip.” Henry dragged the sheet over them. “I write travel pieces. He can have his offer and his lurid tales—if that’s what he really wants. I’m not that kind of guy.”

Jack nodded to hide his relief. He really needed to stop tensing up over things he couldn’t control and stop jumping to conclusions over things he could.

“I’ll handle the situation with Remy and the paper. Don’t worry about it.” Henry snuggled up to him. “I’m not easily bullied.”

“I know.” He closed his eyes. He couldn’t sleep, but he’d bask in his time with Henry. He understood now why some of his other boyfriends had left him. He got too emotional and impulsive. The guys were probably tired of his rollercoaster emotions. But Henry balanced him more than anyone else. He managed to allay his fears while making him worry more. He cared the most about Henry, too. So much it scared him to his core.

He had to get a hold of himself or he’d ruin things with the best guy to ever happen to him. Just breathe. Everything is fine. You’ve got the one and it’s time you proved it to him and yourself.

Chapter Eight

The next afternoon, Henry closed his notebook and checked his watch. He should leave shortly. He wasn’t looking forward to the meeting with Remy, but he wanted to get the situation with the job offer at the paper settled.

“You’re done?” Jack stood at the end of the counter and removed his plastic gloves. “So soon?”

“Well, I have that appointment to talk to Remy Nicholas today. We’re going to clear up the confusion about that offer to write for the paper. Remember?” He draped his bag across his body, then tossed his cup into the recycling bin. “I’ll be back. Promise. Unless you’re closed by the time I’m done, then I’ll see you at your place.”

“I look forward to what you find out.” Jack tugged him close for a kiss. “Good luck.”

“Don’t need luck. I’ve got you.” He grinned, then waved to Anna. Henry left the shop and strode across the center of town toward the newspaper office. He’d only been there once before to place an ad to sell his bicycle. He stepped into the building and snorted. The cavernous space wasn’t what he remembered.

Remy Nicholas strode across the row of short cubicles and thrust out his hand. “Henry Lord. I’m Remy Nicholas. It’s nice to put a face to the name. I’ve seen your name and photo on the articles you’ve written for other publications.”

“You knew my face and name.” He shook hands with Remy. “But thank you.”

“Welcome.” Remy gestured to the back of the room. “A little different than the last time you were here.”

“You opened the space up.” He waited for Remy to direct him where they were to go to have this meeting.

“It was too closed in.” Remy shrugged. “I liked the openness when we had to knock down walls to downsize, so when I took over the paper, I kept it open. It’s easier for the handful of reporters to contact each other across the room, gives us space for the toy drive at Christmas and the food drive in the summer, so I’m happy.”

“Good deal.” He stuffed his hands into his pockets. “About that offer...”

“Yes. Let’s go to the conference room.” Remy directed him to the back of the room to another area. “In here. It’s quiet.”

“Sure.” He joined Remy in the conference space. Remy gestured to one of the seats and Henry sat across from him.

“So, the deal with the column. Let me first apologize for Charlie. His zeal gets him into trouble. Second, what I meant for the column was this. We have a celebrity in town, and it would be a boost for the paper to have you write for us. What would you write? Say there’s a happening in town—a gallery opening or an author is visiting the local writers’ group...or a luncheon or something. That’s what you’d cover. Chatter about Cedarwood with its interesting places and things to do. I want your take on this town.”

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As Remy spoke, Henry started thinking. “Like how it’s just a nice plain small town where I can hear the birds? Like that?”

“Yes, exactly. Charlie must’ve wanted to get out of writing the reviews. I don’t know,” Remy said. “Doesn’t matter. You’ve got a handle on what I’d like you to write.”

“I don’t review. I talk about a place or hit the highpoints, but I don’t want to do that for Cedarwood. I’m happier to do that with places I don’t live in—if that makes sense.” He could review a foreign country or town, but not Cedarwood.

“Then don’t. Write what makes you feel comfortable.” Remy tapped his index finger on the table. “I want you to write something that makes you happy.”

“I can do that.” The more Remy talked, the more Henry considered taking the job. But he wasn’t sold yet.

“I figured you’d be upset and I wanted to smooth your feathers.” Remy shook his head. “Charlie is shit at presentation. He’s a decent enough writer and has the enthusiasm, but he can’t always get his point across if he’s trying to sell someone on something.”

“I noticed.” If it were up to him, he’d fire Charlie.

“Jack’s a pretty good bulldog for you and that restaurant, too.”

“What?” His blood chilled. What had Jack done?

“You sent him to rip my ass a new one, didn’t you?”

“No.” He held up both hands. “Why don’t you tell me what happened?” He wasn’t angry with Jack, but he wished he knew what Jack had done before he’d come to the meeting.

“He called and reminded me you’d chosen Cedarwood as your home base and you weren’t here to critique it,” Remy said.

“It’s true.” He wanted to settle down in his semi-retirement here.

“And I understand that. I’m not asking you to critique anything,” Remy said. “Charlie mis-sold it.”

Henry nodded. “I’m sorry about Jack.”

“No, he had a point. Featuring a place is fine. Like saying the doughnut shop has great bear claws on Wednesdays. That’s a good feature. But to say they don’t make decent ones...that’s not what I’m wanting. Critiques are helpful to a point and not in the way Charlie thought. I’d like to do a meal of the week feature or special dish of the week thing to show off the best dining in Cedarwood. I’m a sucker for Jack’s hot dogs.”

“Ah.” He was, too.

“And I get why Jack was so angry about the perceived gossipy angle Charlie presented. He thought we wanted you to report back on what you hear. No one would trust you and when they saw you coming, they’d run the other way.”

“They would.”

“Which is why I want your thoughts on Cedarwood, you know? What’s great about our town? I don’t expect a weekly column. Could be one every other week,” Remy said. “I’ll work on your schedule.”

“I’ll think about it, but you might want to have a chat with Charlie,” Henry said. “Soon.”

“What’d he do now?” Remy shook his head. “That kid will give me gray hairs worse than I already have.”

“He mentioned something about seeing Jack with someone else. It wasn’t his business to make comments and truthfully, it was bad form for a reporter,” Henry said. “It didn’t look good for the paper to have him butting in.” Getting his concerns voiced did help.

“Agreed. I’ll talk to him.” Remy jotted something on the notepad already on the table. “That’s not the look I want for the paper, plus, it’s just rude.” Remy hesitated. “So that aside, consider my offer.”

“I will.” He did want to write more.

“Please do. I’m trying to revamp the paper and make it more relevant. You’d be good for that,” Remy said. “Can I be frank with you?”

“Sure. I’ve been so far with you.” He wasn’t sure where Remy was going with his line of thinking, but he’d try to keep up.

“You and Jack are a couple, yes?”

“We are.”

“Why don’t you come together to the LGBTQ support group meetings?” Remy asked. “I’ve invited Jack a few times, but he’s always busy. It’s mostly a chance to be around others in the community who understand our struggles. Why not come? We meet tonight at eight.”

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He had plans with Jack, but why not visit the community center? It might do them good. Jack could wear one of his hot dog shop shirts and do a bit of advertising. "I'll let you know," Henry said and stood. "Thanks."

"I appreciate it. You'll enjoy yourself." Remy stood, then walked him out of the room to the front of the newspaper building. "I do hope you consider the column. You'll be great."

"I'll consider it." After he talked to Jack. "Thanks, Remy."

"Welcome. See you tonight." Remy waved.

Henry nodded. "See you." He checked his watch, then headed to the shop. Jack had closed for the day by now, but he should still be there. When he reached Jack's block, he noticed the lights were out and the sign turned around. Still, he marched up to the door.

Jack appeared before he could knock. He opened the door. "Hey you. I didn't think you'd get back here so fast. How'd the meeting go?"

"Hi," Henry said. "It was good." He ducked into the shop. "Need help cleaning up?"

"I'm doing the books. Everything else is done." Jack gestured to the table. "Sit. I want to hear about the meeting."

"Did you call Remy?" He had to know.

Jack sank onto the chair. “I did. I overstepped I’m sure, but I couldn’t stand by while the paper wrote hit pieces.”

“I understand.” At least Jack was being honest—now.

“Did it get you into trouble?” Jack asked. “It wasn’t my intention.”

“It wasn’t the best thing you could do, but we all know what you meant.” Henry sat across from him. “The paper shouldn’t write hit pieces, as you called them.”

“Exactly. Charlie’s presentation was awful.”

“I addressed that with Remy.”

“Good.” Jack closed the ledger. “So?”

“The meeting went well. I’m debating taking the job. It’s good money and as steady as I want,” Henry said. “Not writing about people, but doing more of a feature and something with my thoughts.”

“Oh.” Jack leaned back in his chair.

“It’s not as bad as it seems,” Henry said. He appreciated Jack’s enthusiastic need to protect him. He wanted to do the same for Jack. “Remy invited us to the support group. It’d be good for us.”

“Henry.” Jack crooked his eyebrow. “Really?”

“We either love or argue and we don’t get out beyond the shop. Our friends will be there.” Henry shrugged. “Don’t you want to go? It might be nice to see other couples in the wild.”

“You don’t...” Jack stopped. “Sorry. I’m getting defensive.” He paused. “Because I’m afraid.”

“Of what?” He held Jack’s hand. “It’s just people we know getting together to support one another.”

“I’m afraid you’ll realize there are better choices out there than me.” Jack shook his head. “Sorry.”

“I’m not the other guys you’ve known.”

“I know and that’s why I’m afraid. We’re good together. You respect me and you treat me like a partner. It’s...you’re everything I wanted in a man,” Jack said.

“You’re scared we’ll crash and burn.”

“The others didn’t last.”

“I’m not the others and just because we’re with other couples doesn’t mean I’m on the prowl. I’m not. Trust me. Even if we get split up—I have no idea how they do these things—I’m coming back to you. Always. I know it’s hard to trust me, but please try.”

Jack stared at him a moment, then narrowed his eyes and sighed. “It would be nice to see other people outside of the shop.”

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“You’re probably friends with most of them.”

“Maybe.”

Henry leaned over the table and kissed him. “Plus, it’s darn sexy that you stood up for me. No one’s ever done that, and I want to show everyone you’re my man.”

“I’m sorry to hear you haven’t been treated with respect, but I’m not sorry I did it. I protect my business and my partner,” Jack said. “All the way.”

“I can hold my own but thank you.” He kissed Jack again. “Finish up and we’ll grab supper, then make our next debut as a couple. I’m proud to have you on my arm.”

“I’m falling for you,” Jack said. “Hard.”

“Wonderful, because the feeling is mutual.” Life was going in the right direction for a change and he wasn’t about to argue his good luck.

* * * *

An hour and a half later, Jack still wasn’t sure what to expect when he’d agreed to attend the support group meeting. Would it be something like a twelve-step thing? He’d avoided going at all costs. His ex-boyfriend, Tab, has been part of the group and Jack wasn’t sure he wanted to show his face. God. He had no idea what Tab might have told them, but his ex loved to talk shit. For all he knew, Tab had made him look like a jackass. Would they laugh at him? Turn him away? Christ. And he needed to tell Henry, but he wasn’t sure how.

“Nervous?” Henry asked. “I am.”

“A little.” He ventured away from the car and into the community center. Thank goodness he had Henry beside him. He might have turned back. When he and Henry made their way into the community room, Jack stopped short. He spotted a few kids, some teens, but mostly adults. Some of the faces were familiar—Farin Baker and his husband, Steve, Colt Harrison and his partner Ashley. Colin Baker strode right up to Henry and Jack.

“Hi. Welcome. Good to see you,” Colin said. “It’s very informal because the group got so big.”

“Remy told me to come,” Henry said. “He thought it’d do us good.”

“Sure. Remy’s going to be here. He and Bobby are probably running late—as usual.” Colin grinned. “If you want a nametag, we have them somewhere. Most everyone just mingles.” He turned to Jack. “Question for you. You’re part of the chamber of commerce, yes?”

“I am.” He let go of Henry’s hand. He appreciated Henry’s suggestion to wear one of his shop shirts as a walking advertisement. “We haven’t had many meetings.” He couldn’t recall the last chamber meeting.

“No, because it got swept under the rug.” Colin folded his arms. “Farin and I are trying to get it regrouped. We’re having decals made for placement in each establishment’s window.”

“Good idea.” He glanced over at Henry. He sort of missed Henry, but liked seeing him happy and in the wild. Henry grinned and winked at him, then resumed his conversation with a guy Jack didn’t recognize from the back. Jack couldn’t help but be impressed with himself. He didn’t feel threatened by someone else chatting with

Henry.

“So you and Henry Lord.” Colin stepped between Jack and his view of Henry. “I never thought you’d settle down.”

“Because I’m old?”

“You’re only five years older than me and no.”

“Oh? Then why?” He could have sworn he was older than Colin by a lot more.

“You never leave the safety of your shop,” Colin said. “You keep yourself hidden in plain sight.”

“I like flying under the radar.” But he had to admit he did hide a lot.

“You looked so lonely.”

“I dated a lot.” Sort of.

“I heard and saw. Everyone who visits your shop comes to the bookstore, too. The town isn’t that big.” Colin laughed. “I’m sure we could share war stories about the gossip we’ve heard and not even share names.”

“We probably could.” Jack paused. “People talked about me?” Why? He wasn’t exciting.

“A few asked if you’d settle down.” Colin shrugged. “For a while, people thought this group was a gigantic dating pool. It’s not, but whatever. A guy told me you dated too much. I mentioned it wasn’t any of his business.”

“Charlie?”

“Oh God.” Colin snorted. “He’s a nice kid, but don’t get me started. He loves to gossip.”

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“He does,” Jack said. “Did he pull something?”

“He told a huge lie to cause trouble. Said Jordan had been thrown off the force.” Colin shook his head. “Jordan can be stubborn, but he’s not that bad.”

“We’re all that way.” He had his moments. “Why’d Charlie do it?”

“It never came out. His lies aren’t that elaborate,” Colin said. “But enough to get tongues wagging. He said something about you?”

“Told Henry I’d been involved with someone at the shop. It was an ex and the visit went pear-shaped fast.”

“Ouch.”

Jack shrugged. “Henry and I are working on things. We’re both set in our ways, a little mistrusting and cautious, but in over our heads, too. I really like him.”

“I heard he works with you at the shop now.”

“He’s my cashier,” Jack said. Pride swelled in his chest. “It brought us together.”

“Great. How about that job offer with the paper? I heard Remy’s really into it.”

“That’s all between him and Henry,” Jack said. “But I hope Henry does it. He’s a gifted writer.”

Colin bowed his head. “I’m glad you’re here. You’re a great member of the community and addition to the group—both of you.”

“Thanks. I thought you all didn’t need me down here. You don’t, but it’s nice to have a place to belong.” Why did admitting all that seem so monumental?

“We’re a stronger community when we work together,” Colin said. “And we always need one another.” He dropped his voice to a whisper. “Why would you think we wouldn’t want you in the group?”

“I’m old compared to some here. I don’t have kids and I don’t want them...I’m always busy.” He shrugged to hide his nervousness. “And Tab was part. I figured he did to this group what he’s done to others we ran with—cut me out and talked shit.”

“Tab?” Colin laughed. “I’m sorry, but really? He’s a terrible reason to stay away. You do know he showed up, tried to get in Farin’s pants, came on to Ashley and threw himself at a couple other guys? He also thought it was a dating pool. When he struck out, he left.”

He’d been afraid of nothing. Jesus. He’d kept another secret from Henry, too.

“Don’t sweat it. We’ve all made mistakes and we’re all a little scared.” Colin clapped him on the back. “Besides, Henry must really like you. He keeps looking over at us.”

He tensed. Was it a good look? Why was he worried?

“I haven’t seen such hunger in my life—except when Jordan looks at me.” Colin laughed again. “Go get him.”

“Thanks.” Relief washed over him. He feared too much. Henry was right—they needed to forget the past and move on. He joined Henry in another group of people.

Henry introduced him and he felt like part of a real couple. This thing he'd started with Henry was meant to last.

After an hour, Henry tapped Jack on the shoulder. "Are you ready to go?"

"It's been a long day." He held Henry's hand. "Thanks for suggesting tonight."

"Welcome."

"Why don't you drive?" Once they were in the car, Jack stared straight ahead. He had to tell Henry why he'd been hesitant. "I was afraid to come." He had to lay his soul bare. "My ex-boyfriend was a member, and I was afraid he'd ruined my reputation to all those people."

"And?" Henry backed out of the parking spot. "You blew it all up in your mind, making it more than it was, didn't you?"

"How'd you guess?" He palmed Henry's thigh.

"I know you. When you're extra nervous or scared, you tend to worry yourself into a frenzy." Henry drove across town to Jack's house. "I sort of expected something like this when I suggested the group, and you put up a fight."

"You still pushed." He stayed in his seat although Henry had parked. "You knew—maybe not the truth, but you knew something."

"Because I know you. We're scared but we're good together." Henry reached across the console. "No one told me about anything from your past or what happened, but I had a feeling."

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Henry kept telling him to trust him and he couldn't keep going not quite halfway. Jack nodded.

"I pushed and I shouldn't have," Henry said. "I understand if you're upset."

"I'm not." He'd changed in a good way. "Thanks for helping me grow."

"You helped me find my heart and my purpose." Henry kissed him. "I'm in over my head and I like it."

"I do, too." He kissed Henry. "Come inside with me."

"You need sleep," Henry said. "You've got work in the morning, and I need to write. I'll come over tomorrow."

"You're inspired?"

"Of course, but you're the most." Henry grinned. "I'll be over when you're done with work."

"And we'll finally watch that movie we keep putting off." He had no idea what movie they'd watch, but whatever. "I love it." He slid his palm over the bulge in Henry's pants. "Night."

"Night, handsome." Henry groaned. "I should've parked this in the garage."

"You've still got to drive home. I'll put it away." He left the car and walked with

Henry to his vehicle. “Go or, I’ll con you into staying.”

Henry kissed him once more, then climbed behind the wheel of his car. He backed down the driveway and sped off. Jack pulled his car into the garage and parked, then put the door down. He hurried inside, but Henry was already down the street and nearly out of sight. He sank into his armchair. He’d said he loved something. Sure, it was Henry’s suggestion, but still. Henry was important to him. Did he love Henry? He cared about him more than he had about anyone outside of his family.

He laughed and his stress dissipated. He’d fallen for Henry Lord. Yeah, I love Henry. He wanted to shout it from the roof. He loved Henry.

He couldn’t tell his lover in a text, though. He needed to do it in person. It was too late to rush over to Henry’s tonight. No, he’d tell him tomorrow. He’d plan out a nice evening and make it a date with good food, too. He’d show Henry how he felt.

In love.

Chapter Nine

Over the course of the next month, Jack worked Henry into the schedule more and had him help on Saturdays. When Henry wasn’t at the restaurant, he spent most nights at Jack’s house. He’d invited Jack to come with him to the support group meetings and on one of his assignments for the paper. He enjoyed his time with Henry and loved being less stressed. If he could just manage to tell Henry he loved him, he’d be set.

Jack turned the open sign to closed then locked the front door. “Another successful Saturday in the books. How’d we do?”

“Well enough I had to thin out the register twice,” Henry said. “It’s all in the two

money bags.”

“Well enough that I’m worn out,” Anna said. “You know...we make a good team. Henry, you’re the closer this shop needed. Thanks.” She winked at Jack. “Better keep him.”

“Thanks, Anna. See you.” He waved as she left, then relocked the door behind her. A sigh bubbled in him. He grinned. “She’s a great worker, but she’s pushy.”

“She’s good people.” Henry rounded the counter. “Want me to help clean up?”

“I did most of it already.” He gasped Henry’s hand. “Come over tonight. Again.”

“I’d planned on it. My bag’s in my trunk.” Henry smoothed the wrinkles in Jack’s shirt.

Jack’s hands trembled. He needed to tell Henry so many things, but first he had to ask him something important. Christ. He hated being nervous. “Next Saturday is the Chamber of Commerce Dinner. It’s formal and I have two tickets. You wouldn’t want to come along, would you?” God, he was the east coast distributor of smooth.

“Go black tie with you? Count me in.” Henry kissed him. “I haven’t gone black tie in forever.”

“Not just as my boyfriend, but as my partner.” Jack’s stomach lurched. He needed to be sure Henry wanted to go.

“Jack?” Henry’s eyes sparkled.

“We should’ve defined this all along,” Jack said. “I like you. You like me. No dating anyone else and I love the sex. That sounds like partners to me.”

“Partners.” Henry rested his forehead against Jack’s and brushed his nose along Jack’s. “I’ve got to say it. You do control so well and you keep yourself together, but I love when you’re flustered. You blush, your words get jumbled and it’s adorable.”

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“I love seeing you at the end of the counter. You’re the first guy to see the importance of the shop and to not expect me to put it aside for you.” Shit. He’d said that wrong.

“You want someone who respects your life and livelihood.” Henry kissed him. “I get it.”

“Thank you.” God, he loved Henry. Totally loved him. He’d fallen quick but hard, and he knew his heart. Besides, he didn’t have to say the words out loud to show his feelings.

“I’ll help you, then we go home,” Henry said. “Yours, right?”

“Yours. The bed’s bigger and you drove into work. I biked.” Jack let go. “Plus, I need to take the deposit to the bank tomorrow. I’d rather take it via car than bike.”

Henry helped him clean up and close the shop down for the night. “Want me to bring the car up so you’re not crossing the parking lot with cash?”

“Yes.” He checked the front door and set the alarm system, then gathered his things in his bag and locked the office. He headed to the back door. By the time he reached the rear entrance of the restaurant, Henry had parked next to the door. Jack turned off the lights, checked his bag and closed the door. He locked up and checked the handle, then joined Henry in the car. Once in the vehicle, he relaxed. “I hate bringing out the deposit.”

“I bet.” Henry drove away from the shop. “Need anything at your place?”

“Everything I need is at yours. I have stuff stashed there.” He craved a shower, then sex and food with Henry. Then they’d count the take.

Henry drove, and Jack palmed Henry’s thigh. He said nothing until they were at the condo and parked in the garage. Jack followed him into the kitchen and abandoned his satchel on the counter.

Henry kicked out of his shoes. Instead of letting Henry speak, Jack directed him to the bathroom. He was all for sweaty after-work sex, but not today.

Jack couldn’t wait any longer. He needed Henry more than his next breath. He tugged Henry through the condo to the bathroom.

“Needy?” Henry asked. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Yes, you are.” He shoved Henry’s shirt up. “You’re going to get naked.”

Henry moved his arms above his head, allowing Jack to remove his shirt. His nipples beaded and his eyes widened with hunger. “I’m yours.”

He almost replied, I know it, but hesitated. He craved Henry. Jack pressed kisses to Henry’s chest and focused on his lover’s nipples. He sucked hard on one tight peak.

A moan vibrated in Henry. He palmed the back of Jack’s head. “Feels good.”

Jack switched nipples and hooked his fingers in Henry’s jeans. He opened the denim. Another rumble vibrated in Henry. Jack pushed Henry’s trousers down his legs, revealing his erection.

“Jack.” Henry ground into Jack’s hand.

Jack stroked with one hand and reached into the shower with the other. He turned on the water. Within moments, steam filled the room.

Henry slapped the wall, turning on the exhaust fan. He rocked into Jack's fingers. "You're blowing my mind."

"Good." He nibbled up to Henry's throat. "Get into the shower." He liked the open floorplan of Henry's bathroom. Whoever had designed it must've planned for the occupants to need plenty of room.

Henry kicked out of his clothes, then stepped under the spray. He braced his hand on the wall. Water sluiced down his face. He reminded Jack of a model. Christ. Jack wanted to take photos of Henry this way. His cock hardened. With each breath, he showcased his abs.

"Do you know you're sexy?" Jack undressed in record time, leaving his clothes in a heap.

"I'm just me." Henry grinned, albeit sheepishly and moved away from the shower head. "I'm not that exciting. But you." He reached for Jack. "You're the pretty one."

"Sure." He joined Henry in the stall. "We're pretty hot together." He wasn't about to keep arguing with Henry about who was better looking.

Henry laughed. "I guess."

He'd lessened the tension. He kissed Henry, pressing his body to Henry's. He rubbed the blunt head of his cock against Henry's dick in a delicious friction.

Henry groaned. "Jack."

He lived for the scrape of Henry's day-old whiskers on his cheeks, the taste of Henry and the caress of Henry's hands on his chest. He roved his palms over Henry's body and need overwhelmed him. He wanted to be with Henry in every way and everywhere.

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He wrapped his hand around his own dick and gathered Henry's into the mix. He masturbated them while he kissed his lover. Sizzles shot through his body. His thoughts were a blur. He swept his free hand over Henry's chest.

"Jack." Henry braced his shoulder on the wall. "Feels good."

No kidding. Electricity filled Jack's veins.

Henry panted. "Jack." He pushed himself against Jack's hand. "Oh my God, it's good."

He was about to make this so much better. Jack withdrew his cock and sank to his knees. If he didn't stop stroking himself, he'd come and didn't want to—not yet.

His knees skidded on the hard tiles. He brushed his mouth across the head of Henry's dick. He wanted to make this last. Every time he and Henry got together, the sex ended up happening so fast. They didn't need to rush because they had all night, but once they got going, they couldn't go slow.

Henry widened his stance and caressed the top of Jack's head. He touched him in such a reverential way. The water slid down his face and he parted his lips. Hunger shimmered in Henry's eyes.

Jack fondled Henry's balls and glanced up at him he lived for this moment, too. He swallowed Henry. What a mouthful. He buried his nose in Henry's curls. When Henry groaned, Jack massaged Henry's abs and stroked him while bobbing his head. Within moments, he built into a steady rhythm. He sank deep, then pulled back. Jack

caressed the ripples of Henry's belly. God, the man was so strong.

Henry moaned again. "Suck that dick. Fuck."

The dirty talk spurred him on. Jack moved with gusto. He flattened his tongue, laving all over the thick vein on the underside, then rubbing the blunt head.

Henry ground his hips and pushed his dick into Jack, matching Jack's rhythm. His groans overpowered the sound of the falling water.

The excitement in Henry's voice pleased Jack. He bobbed his head faster and pinched one of Henry's nipples. The sheer power of loving Henry filled him. He wanted to please this man.

"Jack." Henry arched his body, shoving his cock deeper into Jack. "So good."

Jack eased his hands around Henry's body to cup Henry's ass. He allowed Henry to set the pace now and control him. He craved a lover who could push him.

"That's good." Henry murmured. "Love it."

Jack opened wide and took Henry as deep as he could. He hummed around him. Right now, Jack needed Henry to come apart.

"Can't. Last." Henry's movements turned feral. He growled and held tight to Jack's head. "Oh. God." He jammed his dick into Jack's mouth. When he came, he shivered hard.

Jack swallowed everything Henry gave him. Perfection. He hadn't noticed the water on his back and forgot all about the hardness of the tiles under his knees. The only thing he saw was Henry.

Henry groaned again and let go of Jack's hair. "Your poor back is all red." He helped Jack to his feet. "You'll be sore."

"Nah." He kissed Henry. "I don't care." He lathered the washcloth and scrubbed Henry down. He wanted Henry clean. Henry was already hard again and Jack's erection pointed to him like a beacon. Before he took care of himself, Jack had to care for Henry. "Rinse."

Henry ducked under the spray. His hair plastered to his forehead. "Here." He took the washcloth from Jack and scrubbed him. He spent extra time on Jack's dick.

A shiver ran the length of Jack's spine. He wanted to be masturbated, but he'd rather be in Henry. Now. He rinsed and turned off the water.

Henry dried him off and brushed his hand over the head of Jack's cock. "Better do something about that before you hurt someone with it."

"I'll do something." Jack swatted Henry's ass. "Go. I want to be inside you."

Henry's eyes flashed. He scurried out of the bathroom and tumbled onto the bed.

Jack followed at a slower pace. He admired the sway of Henry's ass and the sleekness of his body.

Henry parched on the bed on his hands and knees. He wagged his butt. "Want me?"

"I do." Jack settled behind him and swatted him again. He grasped the globes of Henry's backside. "Such a pretty ass."

"It's all yours." Henry arched his back. "Do it."

Jack caressed along Henry's spine, calming him. He wanted Henry ready, but not too quickly he hurt him.

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“Yes.” Henry whimpered. “Feels good.”

Jack crawled onto the bed and settled between Henry’s spread legs. He parted Henry’s ass. “So pretty.” He flicked his tongue across Henry’s hole.

“Oh my God.” Henry tensed. He reached backwards and petted Jack’s hair. “Yes.”

Jack grabbed the bottle of lube from the dresser and continued to flick Henry’s asshole. He caressed the tight pucker.

“Jack.” Henry let go of him and buried his face in the sheets.

He bit the left globe of Henry’s ass, then resumed licking his hole. He loved the way Henry moaned and writhed. So responsive. Jack stabbed his tongue against Henry’s pink skin. Another groan rippled from Henry.

“Yes.” Henry planted his shoulders on the bed.

Jack pressed his face against Henry’s ass. He almost had him where he wanted him—at the edge. He stroked Henry’s soft dick to full erection. He squirted lube onto his fingers, then pressed his slick digit against Henry’s hole.

“Jack.” Henry backed into him. “Please?”

“Breathe for me.” Jack pushed his finger into him, slowly to allow Henry to adjust around him. Once fully within Henry, Jack worked his finger within his hole, opening and pushing him.

Henry shuddered.

Jack added another digit and more lube. He wanted Henry nice and prepped for him.

“Been a long time,” Henry managed. “Love it.”

He wanted Henry to fall apart. He moved his two fingers in him and licked Henry’s balls. The tingles in his body threatened to overwhelm Jack. He needed to be inside this man.

“Jack.” Henry writhed. “Oh God.” He clawed at the bedding. “Do it.”

Jack swatted Henry’s ass and withdrew his fingers. He couldn’t wait any longer. He grabbed a condom from the box on the dresser. Henry glanced over his shoulder and a dazed grin curled on his lips. The look spurred Jack on. He stood and sheathed himself. “Breathe,” Jack murmured. “Breathe.”

Henry rocked his hips. “Jack,” he whispered. “Need you.”

Jack lined up his dick with Henry’s ass. He held on to his lover’s hips and pushed. The pressure overwhelmed him. So tight and drawing him in. With Henry, he was complete. This had to be what perfection felt like. Had to. Like Henry was made for him. He grasped Henry’s hips harder and in moments, he built into a frantic pace, in and out.

Henry met him thrust for thrust. The sound of their bodies colliding was so loud in the room. They were one soul moving together.

He increased his pace and the orgasm overwhelmed him. Nothing else mattered except Henry and being with him. The world seemed to melt away around him.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” Henry murmured. “Need to...”

He’d stolen the words right out of Jack’s mouth. Jack embraced the climax. He’d never found anyone so perfect for him. Henry was it. He shuddered as the orgasm washed through him. He surged into Henry. His balls sizzled, and he couldn’t think straight.

“Fuck,” Henry said and collapsed. He sighed. “I think you broke something within me.”

Jack settled on him. He added a few more thrusts, then stilled. “Damn, baby.” He dug his teeth into Henry’s shoulder. “You hold me in there so tight. I have to get you to relax more.”

“I’m not good at relaxing.” Henry held on to Jack’s hand. “But you’re doing a good job of trying.”

“Am I?” He brushed his lips across Henry’s shoulder blade. “Did I hurt you?” He hadn’t wanted to, but his zeal had got the better of him. “Henry?”

Henry caressed Jack’s arm. “Physically, I’m fine, but you broke me. I’ll never be the same.” He closed his eyes. “My ass is made for you. Has to be.”

“Mine rather likes the way you fit in me, too.” He held his lover, not wanting the moment to end. Hell, he wasn’t sure how Henry was able to speak so coherently. His thoughts were still a mess and his body languid. He never wanted to move from this spot, but he moved off Henry and ditched the condom, then returned to the bed.

“You make me feel like we’re the only people in the world.” Henry stretched. He draped his arm across Jack’s abs and tangled their legs. “Nothing else matters.”

“We do have our own little world.” He rather liked it that way.

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“I’m glad I visited the hot dog shop and finally talked to you,” Henry said. “My life went from black and white to color with you in it.”

“Mine, too.” He kissed Henry. He’d never been one to fall in love so fast, but he never wanted to give his heart this quickly, either. “Henry?” It was time to tell his lover how he felt.

Henry’s breathing evened and his arm grew heavy on Jack’s belly. Jack nudged him, but Henry didn’t move. He must’ve fallen asleep. Jack suppressed a laugh. He’d been at the precipice of telling Henry he loved him, but his partner was asleep. Of course. Oh well. He’d snuggle with Henry a bit longer, then sneak out long enough to count the take.

Love was grand, but the business was never far away. He’d rather have it handled and be free to relax than have his tasks hanging over his head.

* * * *

Jack woke early the next morning, and Henry followed shortly thereafter. Both hydrated and changed clothes for a morning run. Jack mused at the way they’d fallen into a routine already. Plus, he liked having someone to run with. He loved having Henry in his bed and life.

“What?” Henry tipped his head. “You’re staring at me. Is my hair standing on end?”

“No.” Jack averted his gaze when he tied his shoes. “You’re easy to watch.” He glanced over at his lover.

Henry smiled, then groaned and picked up his phone. “Of course.”

“Huh?” This time he did stare at Henry. Jack set his own phone to play music while he ran. He wanted to bother him but hesitated until his curiosity got the best of him. “Something wrong?”

“Not exactly.” Henry resumed stretching. “I’ve been given a chance to write about a set of galleries that were originally a factory and they’ve kept quite a bit of the factory in original condition. It’s considered a travel destination in Chicago.” He shrugged and tucked his left leg to his chest. “It’s close and the money is good, plus they’re paying me to fly there.”

“Sounds great.” He wasn’t into the art scene and knew little about architectural design. “When do you leave?”

“Tomorrow evening.” Henry switched legs and stretched his right one. “I know, it’s quick.”

“Like when the shop closes?”

“Yeah. I’ll just head up after you’re done and park in the longer-term lot. That way I can get home faster.” Henry stood. “I’ll need to pack, find the chargers I lost when I moved...I’ll need my notebooks and to find my bag for my laptop.”

“Henry.” Jack bit back a chuckle as Henry got lost in his monologue about what he’d need to bring. Once Henry focused, it took a lot to deter him. Jack touched Henry’s arm. “Henry.”

“Sorry.” Henry gestured to the door. “We can go.”

“No.” He stopped Henry. “I’ll take you to the airport. No problem. “Plus, it’ll give us

some time together before you go. I insist.”

Henry grasped Jack’s hand. “You’re sure?”

“Yeah.” He swatted Henry’s ass. “You’ll give me something to miss. I can’t ogle anyone else’s butt while they work.” He nodded to the door. “How long are you going to be gone?”

“Three days.” Henry ventured out to the porch with Jack. “I’ll be home Saturday afternoon.” His eyes widened. “During the last hour you’re open or right after you close, if the plane is late.”

“No big deal. I’ll close early.” Jack locked the house, then tucked his keys into his zippered pocket. “It’s a good reason.”

“You’re sure? I don’t want you to lose business.”

“I need to take more breaks, and this is a good reason.”

Henry crooked his eyebrow. “I’m not that exciting,” he said. “But I’ll take lots of pictures—so many you’ll think you’re there with me.”

“I’d like to be, but this is your job. One of them. It bugs me you’re going because I’m going to miss the hell out of you, but I don’t want you to stay here and miss out. I’m glad you’re doing your job.” He swatted Henry’s ass again. “Really.”

“Okay.” Henry smiled and tucked his earbuds into his ears.

“Ready?” He adjusted his music and nodded.

“Try to keep up,” Henry said and started off, leaving Jack behind.

Jack laughed. He'd gladly follow this man everywhere. He loved him so much. He'd stepped out of his comfort zone and allowed someone to get close to him. Henry made him happy. He made him free.

* * * *

The next afternoon, Jack closed the shop without any delays and headed home. He needed to see Henry one more time. Henry waited at his condo with his bag packed and messenger bag on the sofa. He answered the door in a pullover and jeans.

“Hi.” Jack grabbed the suitcase. “You’re really going to make me miss you. Damn. You look great.”

“That’s the point. I need to look professional.” Henry kissed him. “I’ll miss you just as much.”

Jack carried Henry’s bag to the car while Henry locked up. Letting him go would be so hard. He’d fallen for this man.

“I’ll call when I get to my hotel room,” Henry said. “I’m texting my itinerary, too.”

“You don’t have to, but I appreciate it.” He closed the passenger door for Henry. His heart lodged in his throat. He wasn’t worried about Henry coming back, but that didn’t mean he’d miss him any less. Henry held his heart in both hands. Jack left the condo and drove to the airport. He stayed quiet through most of the forty-five-minute drive. A thought occurred to him when he headed onto the exit leading to the main terminal. “Should I park and take you in? Or just go through the temporary parking?”

“Save the money for Saturday. You won’t be able to wait with me after I go through security, so you might as well save the five bucks.” Henry fiddled with his bag. “I wish you could wait with me.”

“Me, too.” He hated the security measures, even if he understood why they were there. Having them in place made saying goodbye harder.

“Just park here in the five-minute drop-off lane.” Henry withdrew his phone. “I’ve got cash, my wallet, ticket, itinerary, cards, phone... God, I’m always nervous before these things.”

“You’ll be great.” He pulled into the drop-off lane, then parked. “You’ll get that story written and done, then you’ll be home and we’ll go to that dinner.”

“Yes.” Henry kissed him. “It’ll be a great way to celebrate being home.”

“It will.” Jack left the car and tugged the suitcase from the trunk. “Need anything?”

“You?” Henry’s smile wobbled. “Next time, you’re coming with me.”

“This is your job. You do it well and it’ll be done soon enough.” He embraced Henry, not wanting to let go. “I do want to join you, but this will be quick. You’ll be home before we know it.”

“We will.” Henry held Jack tight. “I need to go.”

“You do.”

“Don’t want to.”

“I know.” Jack hugged him a bit longer. He didn’t want to let go, but Henry had to leave. “But go and you’ll be back faster.” He should tell him right now that he loved him. The words were right there. “Come back safe and with lots of pictures.” He cleared his throat. That wasn’t at all what he wanted to say. “I’ll miss you.”

“I’ll miss you, too.” Henry straightened his shoulders. “Bye.” He kissed him one more time, then waved and walked into the building.”

Jack wanted to linger a little more, but worried he’d overstayed the five-minute allotment. He slid behind the wheel of his car and pulled into traffic, then left the airport. A piece of his heart stayed with Henry. His bed would be so lonely. But Henry would be back soon. The three days would fly by. Had to. He could use Henry at the shop, though. He’d come to depend on him. But he’d manage and his heart would grow fonder. He knew it.

He drove home. When he walked into the house, he spotted one of Henry’s notebooks, and one of his spare pairs of glasses had been left on the table. The items were little reminders of his lover.

Henry had only been gone not even two hours, yet he missed him. Jack wandered into the bedroom. He should eat, but why bother? He’d rather sleep. He flopped onto the bed and noticed a piece of paper on the other pillow. He frowned and opened it.

Jack,

I’ve never known anyone like you. You make me feel like me. I miss you and I can’t wait to be home—with you.

Henry

Jack clutched the paper to his chest. He wasn’t good at penning romantic lines, but this was the sweetest thing he’d ever read. Henry hadn’t said the three words he wanted to hear, but Jack felt the love all over the note.

When Henry came home, he’d show him how much he cared. They might not make the dinner on Saturday, but oh well. They had more important things to do and Jack

wanted to show Henry how much he'd missed him.

Chapter Ten

Saturday morning, Jack hurried up to the hot dog shop. He needed to write out a sign explaining why he'd be closing half an hour early. Personal reasons.

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Anna was already there and behind the counter, prepping the toppings. “Hi.”

“Hey.” He unlocked the front door. “You’re early.”

“I got out of my house on time,” She laughed. “My mom came over and offered to babysit. She brought doughnuts. So, right now she’s the favorite.”

“Food is a good motivator.” He’d made the comment flippantly but regretted it. “I mean...”

“I knew what you meant.” Anna stood in the office doorway. “Henry will be back today, right?”

“I’ll head up to the airport and pick him up at five. I should be able to close maybe half an hour early.” He wrote up the sign. “Unless the plane is late, we’ll have enough time to go back to my place, shower, change and get ready for the dinner.”

“Nice.” She left him and went into the dining room.

He stayed in the office and checked his numbers for the day. He’d be fine for wax papers and foil, but he’d need to place orders for onions and paper boxes. Jack filled out his paperwork for the following week, buying extra of a few things just in case.

“Jack?”

“In here.” Where else would he be? He grabbed the sign and tape, then headed out to the dining room. “What?”

Anna plunked the mail on the counter. “You’ve got a huge envelope here.”

“So? I get all kinds of shit in the mail.”

“It looks like a business letter or something, but it’s not.” She turned the envelope over. “I thought it might be from the Chamber of Commerce, but no.”

“You opened it?” His address had been typed on the front and the piece of mail did look important. He opened it. “Who sent this?”

“I don’t know,” Anna said. “There’s no return address or postage, which is why I thought maybe the Chamber dropped it off.” She peeked around his shoulder as he dumped the contents onto the counter. “That looks like Henry.”

The man in the photos sure did look like Henry...in Chicago. Jack didn’t know much about the Windy City, but he knew the big mirrored sculpture. Who was Henry posing with?

“Did he say he’d send photos in the mail?” Anna asked. “We’ve been so busy, I forgot to ask.”

“He’s texted me a bunch of photos.” Jack withdrew his phone and scrolled through the images. None of them looked a thing like the ones printed on the counter. “See?” He offered up the phone. “It’s not right.”

“What’s he holding?” She laughed. “Is that a picture of you? Dorks.”

“He’d said he’d put me in the picture so it was like I was there with him.” He and Henry might be dorks, but he didn’t care.

“It looks like him here, but not really.” Anna left Jack at the register. “Do you think

he sent these?”

“No.” Jack shook his head. He was wasting precious prep time by worrying about photos, but he couldn’t look away. Something was wrong with the images. “His hair is longer here.”

Anna placed the chili in the warmer and turned it on. “It is. He can’t grow hair that long that fast.”

“No and he almost looks pudgy.” Jack scrubbed his hand across his mouth. His Henry wasn’t fat now or then, but he seemed a little more filled out. Henry looked younger in the images, too. Who would be so underhanded as to send these? “Think Charlie would do this?”

“What? Why?” Anna filled the cheese bin. “Charlie seems like a jerk, but why would he do this? There’s no payoff. It’s just mean. He’s not mean.”

“No.” He shoved the photos into the envelope. “I don’t know who sent these, but if I stand here worrying about them, I’ll just give myself an ulcer. I can’t do anything about these, but I can say something when Henry comes back.”

“True.” Anna hugged him. “I’ll bet it’s nothing.”

“Right.” He wished he believed her. Still, he had to get work done. He threw himself into prepping for the day and tamped down his irritation. He needed to focus. The hot dogs wouldn’t cook themselves. Once the first customer arrived, business boomed.

“Gonna be a good day,” Anna said. “Real good.”

“That’s what I want to hear.” Jack filled orders at a furious pace. Whenever he thought he’d get a break, a new group of customers filtered in. At three, he placed the

sign in the window. Good thing he'd planned on closing early. He'd run out of chili again. He was low on buns and slaw, too and now running late. Besides, he couldn't wait until he saw Henry.

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Anna rounded the counter, then stopped short. “Shit.”

“What?” When Jack looked up, Ray strolled into the restaurant. Fuck. “Ray.”

“I’ll be back here.” Anna stayed behind the grill and out of the way.

Ray sashayed up to Jack. “You seem happy.”

“Why not? It’s Saturday, business is good, the sun is shining and I’m closing.” Jack wiped his hands. “You’re here. Why?”

“See? Now the day is the best it can be,” Ray said. “It’s perfect.”

“I wouldn’t say that.” He tossed the rag onto the closest table. “What’s wrong? You only come here when you have a problem. I’m not about to lift your spirits or blow you because you’re feeling poorly about yourself.”

“You wound me.” Ray clutched his chest. “You misunderstand, too.”

“No, I don’t.” Jack folded his arms. “I’m busy, so if you’re here to gloat or whatever, save it for another sucker.”

“Gloat? Me?” Ray squared his shoulders. “Did you get my present?”

He narrowed his eyes and said nothing. Present? The photos? Only Ray would be that big of an ass.

“I sent you a gift.” Ray toyed with his thick gold watch. “Or did she keep it from you?”

“I didn’t do anything,” Anna said. “I’m innocent.”

“Hardly,” Ray snapped.

“Enough.” Jack rested his hands on his hips. “What gift?” He wanted this asshole to admit what he’d done.

“The photos. Your Romeo isn’t faithful.” Ray pulled his phone out. “I looked him up. He posted photos of his trip and he’s not alone.”

Jesus. Jack tamped down his frustration. “I see.”

“You should.” Ray pointed to a photo. “He’s with another guy.”

Jack looked at the image. Sure enough, Henry had posed with someone. The pose was rather platonic. The guy had a wedding ring and didn’t strike Jack as Henry’s type. Henry and mystery man stood in front of a gallery. “It’s for his job.” Probably to go along with the article.

“And this one?” Ray brought up another image. “He calls this guy his boyfriend.”

“He does.” And now that he looked closer at the picture, he recognized the man—Henry’s ex-boyfriend, Carter. “So?”

“You’re not mad? He’s stepping out,” Ray said. “Why are you okay with this?”

“I’m not okay with it, but I don’t have to be,” Jack said. “Want to know why? Because that picture is old. He posted that four years ago. If you paid attention, you’d

see the date.”

“Jack.” Ray recoiled. “Stop.”

“Why don’t you stop?” Jack directed Ray to the door. “I don’t know what your play is here, but it’s not working.”

“I want you to ditch the old guy and come to San Francisco with me. We belong together,” Ray said. “You belong there.”

“I’m good.” Jack steered him closer to the door. “I don’t want to leave my business.”

“Jack. Be reasonable,” Ray said. “You’re not.”

His irritation hit its zenith. He’d never stood up to Ray before and it was high time he did. “Listen up. I’m only saying this once. I like Cedarwood. It’s my home. I like my shop because it’s mine. I built this business up all on my own and I don’t want to give it up. I’m not going to San Francisco or anywhere else. Got it?”

“Jack.” Ray pouted. “That’s not fair.”

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“Probably not, but your little trick was dirty. You lied and thought you’d get your way,” Jack said. “I’m not listening to you any longer. You’re nothing to me.” He stepped into Ray’s personal space. “If you ever set foot in my shop or bring up Henry again, I will call the police. Do not come back. Understand? You’re not welcome here.”

“You used to love me,” Ray said. “You did.”

“And I grew up.” He opened the door. “Ray, get out. You’ve got a boyfriend—I think. He deserves better than you hanging around here.”

“You can’t blame a guy for trying,” Ray said. “We were good once.”

“We were and that moment is gone.” Jack checked his watch. If he goofed off much longer, he’d be late to pick Henry up. He spotted Deputy Jordan Hargrove ambling up the sidewalk. Good. He’d get help in Jordan. “Deputy?”

“Is there a problem here?” Jordan waved. “Jack.”

“There is,” Jack said. “This gentleman is loitering on my property and I’m closed.”

“I see.” Jordan swept his gaze over Ray. “Seems to me you should be moving on.”

Ray struggled and flexed his hand. “It’s really over?”

“Yes.” Jack wished Ray would get the damn hint.

“You love Henry?” Ray asked. “Do you?”

The muscle in Jordan’s jaw twitched. “Sir.”

“Say it and I’ll go. If you can’t, then I won’t leave because I’ll know you still care,” Ray said. “You don’t want to let me go.”

“I love Henry,” Jack said. “With all my heart. Only him.” If he wanted to be with Henry, he had to trust him and he believed Henry loved him, too. Besides, Henry probably had no idea what Ray had done.

“Then I’ll go.” Ray shrugged away from Jack. “Thank you, Deputy.” He adjusted his sport coat. “Goodbye, Jack.” He walked away, leaving Jordan and Jack alone.

“Bye, Ray.” A Chapter in his life seemed to be closing. He didn’t mind, despite the change feeling a bit odd.

Jordan placed himself between Jack and Ray’s retreating form. “Thank you, Sir.” He turned to Jack. “I’ll keep an extra eye on your shop in case he comes back. See you tonight?”

“Should see you. I’m going to pick Henry up at the airport in a bit.” He checked his watch. “Shit. I need to go.”

“Then go.” Jordan followed Ray down the sidewalk.

Jack ducked back into the restaurant. “I need to get moving.”

“We’re good. I got the grill and counter squared while you talked to Ray. Go. We’ll lock up, you can count the take when you get home, then you can have a great night with Henry.” She pulled the shades for the evening and checked the door. “You’d

better tell Henry you love him. He needs to hear it.”

“He does.” He shoved the money bag and receipts into his satchel, then packed up the rest of his things. He had his phone, keys, wallet, tablet... It wouldn’t hurt to come in before Monday to make chili and do more inventory.

“Go.” Anna engaged the security system. “You’ll be late.” She headed to the back door first. “Come on.”

Jack locked the office and walked to the rear exit of the shop. He ensured the alarm had been set. His heart hammered. Soon, he’d connect with Henry. “Thanks.”

“Welcome.” She hugged him again. “Good for you to not let Ray win. He’s a jerk.” She nudged him. “Go get your man.”

“I will.” He settled behind the wheel of his car. He should bring flowers or something, but no time. All he had was himself. He hoped he’d be enough for the man he loved. He’d learned a lesson with Ray. Only a desperate person would stoop so low as to try to divide a couple. But only someone so distressed would try to hold on to a lover so tight. He loved Henry that much and he wanted to hold tight but wanted Henry’s love in return. He’d take no less.

* * * *

Henry disembarked from the plane and checked his phone again. He hadn’t heard from Jack since the day before. He worried if something had happened. He missed their conversations. Jack wasn’t good at radio silence. He talked and texted a lot. There was a chance he could be sick or tired. Maybe he’d had a super busy day at the shop?

He walked through the terminal to the down escalator. Which carousel was his

baggage supposed to be at? He'd have to check his information.

“Hi.” Jack stood at the bottom of the escalator.

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Henry stopped short. He wanted Jack to be there but worried he might not show up. “Jack.”

“Do you want someone else?” He didn’t give Henry the chance to answer. Instead. He threw his arms around him and kissed him. “I missed you.”

“I missed you, too.” Tears pricked at his eyes. “You seem tense.”

“I am, but you’re making me feel right again.”

“I am? What happened?” He grasped Jack’s arm. “Is everything okay?”

Jack slid his hand down Henry’s chest, then laced his fingers with Henry’s. “We’ll talk in the car. Right now, we have to get your bag so we can go home.”

“Sure.” Jack confused him. He detected prickliness from Jack and wasn’t sure how to fix the problem. Then again, he had no idea what the hell the problem might be. “I think mine’s on carousel ten.”

“Over here.” Jack stood with him and squeezed Henry’s fingers. “You should update your social media.”

He frowned. “I guess so.” He paid little attention to his social media pages. He let the magazines do it for him. Now that he’d opted for a more private life, he wanted to keep his life that way. “What brings that on?”

“Did you have a good trip?” Jack asked.

He hated when Jack switched topics. He spotted his bag and pulled away from Jack to pick it up. “I did. I turned in my story, too, so I’m free for the weekend.” He yanked the handle up. “Ready?”

“Yes.” Jack fell into step beside him and grasped Henry’s hand again. He didn’t say anything until he and Henry reached the parking garage.

“Jack.” He stopped at his lover’s car. “What’s going on?”

Jack tucked Henry’s luggage into his trunk. “I’m glad you’re home.”

“And? Something happened.” He sank onto the passenger seat. He wanted answers. Now.

Jack sat with him, but in the driver’s seat. “I didn’t want to say anything in the airport, but Ray visited me today.”

“Ray?” His stomach churned. “Okay.”

“He showed up with photos of you and a couple of guys together. I recognized one of the men, but not the other,” Jack said. “I also recognized the ploy of a desperate man.”

He stared at Jack, trying to comprehend what he’d been told. “I’m lost.”

Jack left the parking spot and sped through the garage. “He tried to make me doubt you.”

“Oh.” Christ. Ray wouldn’t stop, would he?

“I don’t.” Jack held Henry’s hand. “I saw pictures of you with one of your exes and I

realized I wasn't jealous. I felt sorry for Ray because he wanted me to give him another chance. He wanted something we had once but wouldn't have again. He couldn't let go." Jack paid the fee and left the parking garage. "Henry, he wanted to split us up."

"I'm not with anyone else." He probably still had photos with his former boyfriends in his languishing social media feed. He needed to rectify the situation.

"I was upset at first because I thought you might be with someone else, but that lasted a whole second. I trust you. I also could see the pictures were old," Jack said. "I'm tense because I let him get the better of me, but I'm not afraid of how I feel. You're my man. No question."

He'd love to wring Ray's neck, but whatever. "I'll change my photos."

"I wasn't worried about it," Jack said. "I know who you're sleeping with. That's more than enough."

He kissed Jack's knuckles. "You're mine, too." He'd come home to an odd situation, but he didn't care. He had Jack. "I took photos in Chicago—more than just the ones I texted you. It was a good trip, but next time, I want you to come along. It's too lonely without you."

"I saw I was in the ones you texted me." Jack pulled onto the highway. "I felt like I was there."

"Good." He settled in his seat. "I brought you a present."

"Oh?"

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“I found a cookbook all about gourmet hot dogs. You can display it in the restaurant for more decoration,” Henry said. “It’s silly, I suppose.”

“I like it. I’m not gourmet, but fancy isn’t all it’s cracked up to be,” Jack said. “I’m glad you’re home. I missed you.”

“I missed you, too.” He preferred home to traveling now. Home had Jack. “I need to stop by the condo and pick up my tuxedo.”

“I brought it over for you last night.”

“Thanks.” He’d forgotten he’d asked Jack to pick it up. “You’re too good to me.”

“And you’re too goodforme.” Jack exited the freeway. “I know it seemed strange, me being upset. I’m not wild about seeing you with someone else, but I realize how much I care about you.”

“Being gone made me realize I’m not me without you.”

“Then let’s celebrate that tonight,” Jack said. “We’re us and we’re happy.”

“I love it.” He preferred being home. He hadn’t seen the initial problem Jack had mentioned, or been there to fix it, but he didn’t mind. He had Jack and they had a future together.

He had his man, and tonight, they’d be going out on the town—together.

Chapter Eleven

An hour and a half later, Henry adjusted his vest and grimaced at his reflection in the mirror. He hadn't worn his tuxedo in years and the thing fit better. He liked the trimmer version of himself, but he wished he could get his damn vest to lie flat. It looked ridiculous bunched up, but he'd lost weight since he'd worn it last.

"Ready?" Jack strode into the bedroom. "Damn. Everyone will be jealous."

"Why?" He smoothed out the vest again. "Because I've got the best-looking date?" He threaded his arms around Jack. The man filled out his tuxedo well.

"No, I do." Jack laughed. "And we'll be the hottest pair at the dinner."

"We will." He loved how Jack had lightened up. Jack was still stressed from time to time, but he seemed to be managing it better. Maybe it was the runs they went on together or the extra sex they'd had in the shower. He didn't know and didn't care.

"Let's go." Jack escorted him to the garage. "Some of the couples arranged for limos."

"For a dinner?"

Jack shrugged. "I guess. You've got to live with my car."

"Don't need a limo." Henry settled beside him on the front seat. "I'm impressed Colin and Farin got the Chamber of Commerce situation sorted out so quickly. I thought it was a mess."

"It was." Jack backed out of the garage. "But when the new mayor stepped in, things got defrayed rather fast. Then again, the old mayor was too busy screwing his

girlfriend to pay attention to finances. This one seems to care.”

“True.” Henry saw little of the scenery as Jack drove to the event center. He’d only gone past the place and had no idea what the ballroom would look like. “Have you ever been to this banquet hall?”

“I have.” Jack flexed his fingers on the steering wheel. “A friend had their reception there. It’s nice. Plush. The owners dumped a lot of cash into it.”

“I see.” He spotted the building. “It looks like a castle.”

“Inside and out. There’s a huge chandelier inside that dips way down above the dancefloor. Don’t ask me how many crystals are in it,” Jack said and parked. “Too many.”

He’d visited some fantastic places, a few real castles and been in the company of royalty, but none of those times compared to this. His nerves frayed. He wanted to make Jack happy. His stomach lurched. He also wanted to tell him how he felt.

He walked into the banquet hall. Colin, Jordan, Farin, Steve, Colt and Ashley were there, among others. Jordan grinned and nodded.

“What’s Jordan smiling like a fool for?” Henry asked. “He keeps looking at you.”

“He helped me out.” Jack lowered his voice. “He was handy when Ray showed up and helped me get rid of him.”

“We should thank him,” Henry said, but Jack grabbed his arm. “What?”

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“He knows I appreciated the save.” Jack cleared his throat. “It’s cool. Besides, here comes Colt.”

Colt strode right up to them. “There’s the truly small business owner,” he said and clapped Jack on the shoulder. “I keep telling you. That shop is too small. You should have more seating. Maybe a to-go window.”

Jack shrugged. “I’ll go with what works for now.”

“You make a striking couple,” Colt said. “How’s working together and being a couple working out for you?”

“Good,” Henry said. “We see each other, but it’s so busy we don’t get much time to chatter at work. When we’re home, it’s just us.”

“Smart,” Colt said. “Shit. I see the media is here.” He ducked away.

Charlie approached and blushed. His sheepish smile wobbled. “I wanted to apologize for earlier.”

“Apologize?” Henry narrowed his eyes. Now he wanted to say he was sorry? Almost three months later? “For?”

“I overstepped,” Charlie said. “I’m sorry.” He nodded to Jack. “I’m sorry I interfered and poked my nose in where it didn’t belong. It was unethical and just plain mean.”

“Ah.” Henry straightened his jacket. “I see.” He’d forgive, but he wasn’t ready to

forget.

“Don’t screw with people’s lives,” Jack said, his voice even. “It’s not cool and makes people dislike you. They might not want to talk to you—which makes being a reporter sort of impossible.”

“I know.” Charlie’s blush deepened. “I thought I had a hot scoop. I was wrong.”

“You were,” Henry said. “Way off.”

“He said I’d learn something good.” Charlie shook his head. “Ray gave me a hundred bucks to do it.”

“Ray?” Jack rolled his eyes. “Christ.”

The situation made more sense now. Henry shook his head. “If you’re going to be professional and not piss off your boss, don’t take money for stories. Okay?”

“Got you.” Charlie bowed his head and walked away.

Jack gestured to the table. “We’re supposed to sit. I believe we’re eating soon.”

He followed Jack. Small program booklets had been left at each place setting. Henry opened his after he sat down. He scanned the information and spotted the awards section. “Awards?” he whispered. “For what?”

“Commerce.” Jack shrugged. “I’m not even in the running.”

“Why? You have a great business.” Henry rested his palm on Jack’s thigh. “But I’m biased.”

“You are.” Jack draped his arm across the back of Henry’s chair. “My business is too small. I don’t bring in the kind of cash that a place like Colt’s diner does.” He stared at Henry. “Doesn’t matter. I don’t need an award because I got the C&C sticker for the window and the best award ever.”

“You did?” Henry cocked his head.

“I got you.”

Henry leaned into him and kissed Jack’s cheek. “I love you, too,” he whispered. He’d been impulsive, but he didn’t care. He’d spoken the words on his heart.

Jack’s eyes widened. “You do?”

“I do.”

“You love me?” Jack blurted.

“Too soon?” He regretted nothing and refused to take the words back.

“No.” Jack’s smile widened, and he closed his eyes. He caressed Henry’s shoulder, then opened his eyes. “I love you, too. I wanted to tell you tonight when we got home, but you beat me to it.”

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He knew to his core that Jack loved him, but hearing the words out loud pleased him. “When this is over, I want you to take me home and make love to me tonight.”

Jack’s eyes flashed. “We need to stick around long enough to eat, grab swag bags, then say our goodbyes.” He rubbed Henry’s shoulder again. “But I like how you think. I can’t wait to get you into bed.”

Henry bit back a peal of laughter. Jack made him happy. He understood him and didn’t try to change him. A better lover wasn’t out there. He’d found the best. Henry couldn’t wait to get home and make love to his man.

Once dinner concluded, he and Jack couldn’t leave fast enough for Henry. Each time he glanced at Jack, he wanted to strip him naked. Jack loved him. Him!

“Ready?” Jack withdrew his keys from his pocket. “I’m bushed.”

“Let’s go.” He grasped Jack’s hand and walked out of the banquet hall. The chilly night air swirled around him in a welcome change. The hall had become too stuffy with the group of businessmen gathered.

“If I have to discuss one more budget, I’ll scream,” Jack said. He tapped the button to unlock the car. “They don’t know how deadly dull they can be.”

“They know.” Henry sank onto the passenger seat. Once Jack rounded the hood and settled beside him, Henry palmed Jack’s thigh. “They know and wanted someone to listen to them. You were a new audience.”

“I guess so.” Jack pulled out of the parking space, then drove out of the lot. “Still, it’s boring and I have to make budgets. I know they aren’t exciting.”

“Yep.” Henry slid his hand up Jack’s leg to his groin. He wanted to fuck Jack all night long. It wasn’t fair they had to wait until they got to Jack’s place. He wasn’t good at waiting, especially now that he knew Jack loved him.

“Henry?” Jack gripped the steering wheel.

“Yes?” Henry fumbled with Jack’s pants, opening them. He slipped his hand behind Jack’s zipper. His man was rock-hard. He stroked his lover.

“Henry,” Jack growled. “I should pull over.”

“No, you’ll drive home even faster.” Henry caressed Jack, then pressed his thumb onto the head of Jack’s dick. “You want to get home fast so you can get off.”

“I do.” Jack sped to his house and into the driveway faster than he should’ve. The garage door was only partway down when he finally parked and turned off the engine. He leaned across the vehicle. “Need you.” He kissed Henry, pushing past the seam of Henry’s mouth and sucking on his tongue.

Henry bit back a chuckle. He loved making Jack crazy for him. “Take me inside and you can have me.” He squeezed Jack’s shaft.

“Fuck. I don’t know if I’ll make it that far.” Jack palmed the back of Henry’s neck. “Love you.”

“Love you, too.” Henry withdrew his hand. “Go.”

Jack raced out of the vehicle. Henry followed and collided with him in the kitchen.

Jack took control. He pushed Henry against the cabinets and kissed him. The collision forced a moan from him, and Jack swallowed the sound.

“Jack.” Henry pushed Jack’s pants down, then helped him out of his tuxedo jacket. The vest looked so sexy on him.

Jack slapped a bottle of lube onto the counter. “Now. Fuck. Me.”

“Can’t tell you no.” Henry turned Jack around and bent him over the counter. He shoved his lover’s boxers around his ankles. Such a hot ass. He swatted Jack. “Where do you want me?”

“In me,” Jack pleaded. “Now.”

“No condoms.” Henry unzipped. He lived for frantic sex with Jack. He stroked his cock. “Jack?”

“Don’t need one.” Jack held his ass cheeks open. “Don’t want anyone else but you.”

The words were sweet music in Henry’s ears. He dribbled lube over the crack of Jack’s ass, then caressed the pink rosette. He smoothed the slippery fluid over Jack’s hole before he breached him. He eased one finger into Jack.

Jack grunted and bore down on him. “Burns and I crave it. Crave you.”

He added more lube and worked his digit in and out of Jack. He craved Jack, too. “I won’t be able to go slow.” This was his first time going bare with Jack, and he wanted to savor it, but he knew better. Slow was impossible.

“Don’t want slow,” Jack managed. He flexed his fingers. “Do it.”

Henry pumped his finger, then added a second. He dribbled more lube over his lover's hole and worked him until he believed Jack was ready. Although he wanted to keep prepping, Henry withdrew his fingers. "Jack." He lubed his dick and lined himself up with his hole. He pushed. The sweet pressure of being with Jack overwhelmed him. Sex was even better now that they'd admitted they loved each other. He pushed fully within Jack. "That's heaven."

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“Yes.” Jack bucked against him. The sound of his grunts and his skin on Henry’s echoed in the room.

Henry moved with abandon. Each push into Jack heightened his need. His nerve endings sizzled. His balls grew heavy. He threaded his arms around Jack, holding him to his chest.

Jack tipped his head and kissed him. “Fuck,” he managed between kisses. “Right there.”

Henry’s thrusts turned frantic and Jack moved at his cadence. He flexed around Henry, giving Henry the last push over the edge.

“Fuck me,” Henry cried and surged into Jack. A shiver raced through him. His thoughts blurred and his knees weakened. He added three more thrusts, then stilled. He needed a second to get his bearings.

Jack groaned. “God, it’s hot when you come.”

And hot when Jack did, too. Now it was his turn to get Jack off.

Henry withdrew. He didn’t bother to put his dick away, but instead opened the button on his trousers. He knelt at Jack’s feet. “Babe.”

Jack faced him. “Damn, that’s a pretty sight.”

Henry stroked Jack’s shaft and flicked his tongue across the blunt head.

“Yes.” Jack palmed Henry’s head. “I love it.” He pushed into Henry’s mouth. Soon, he pumped his hips, working his cock in and out of Henry. He tensed and a shudder ripped through him. “God.”

Henry fondled Jack’s balls. He wanted to tell Jack to do it, come for him, but his mouth was too full. He alternated his strokes with his bobbing.

Jack dug his nails into Henry’s scalp. He pushed to the hilt in Henry. “Fuck.” He came hard, sending cum down Henry’s throat.

Henry lapped at him, not wanting to miss a drop. He bobbed his head again, licking Jack clean.

“Holy shit.” Jack let go. He eased his dick out of Henry’s mouth and slid to the floor. A dazed look filled his eyes. “Wow.”

Henry wiped his mouth. “You’re pretty wow, too.” He sat back on his heels and settled between Jack’s knees. “Everything is better when you’re in love.”

“It is.” Jack leaned forward and kissed him. “Think you could live with a restaurateur, be my work partner and life partner? You keep me level and happier than I ever thought possible.”

“Yeah.” He kissed Jack. He wanted nothing less. “If you can handle a writer with a mild obsession with a certain hot dog shop owner and traveling.”

“I can.”

“Then we do this,” Henry said. “All the way.”

“Us?”

“Us.” He was convinced he’d found the man of his dreams.

“Forever.”

Henry cuddled against Jack. He had the love he’d always wanted and the happy ending he deserved with Jack.

Cedarwood just might be the best place on earth. It sure was for Henry. He’d found his home