



Shake Me Up

Author: *Andrew Grey*

Category: LGBT+

Description: Ronny Ledbetter inherited a bar, The Gingerbread, from his father, and he's been working his hands to the bone to update the building and keep the business functioning. What he really needs is help... and a life outside of work. What he doesn't expect is a man like Arden to stumble into his life.

Turned out by his parents, Arden Thatcher is living in his aunt and uncle's converted garage, and he needs a job. Getting desperate to find something, he approaches the sex-on-a-stick hot Ronny, who gives him a test behind the bar and then a job. But that only solves one of his problems; his controlling uncle is still attempting to run his life.

With all their issues, neither Ronny nor Arden is looking for a relationship, but one forms more quickly than either could imagine. Arden supports Ronny, helping him build the business. His skill behind the bar draws new customers, and Ronny backs Arden with his family issues that never seem to end. But Arden's uncle poses a threat not only to Arden, but also his aunt and even the bar. It will take both Ronny and Arden's combined strength to see things through to a possible future together.

Total Pages (Source): 10

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:52 am

“Hey, I’ll have another one,” a kid, wearing a Dickinson College sweatshirt and barely old enough to drink, said from his stool at the bar. The only reason Ronny Ledbetter knew he was legal was because he’d checked his ID—twice—just to be sure. Ronny got him another beer, wondering where these kids learned how to behave. Some of them acted like all they watched were spaghetti westerns. “Thanks,” the kid added in a show of manners before turning to the guy next to him.

Ronny nodded and went back to loading the washer with the ton of glasses that were coming back. The place was hopping tonight for some reason. Not that Ronny wasn’t grateful. Business being good meant he wasn’t going to have to worry about making ends meet, and he might be able to take a day or two off. He filled a few more orders, pulled glasses out of the machine, loaded it again, and took payment for outstanding tabs, all within the span of a few minutes.

“You need to get yourself some help, Ronny. You’re making me tired just watching you,” Ashley said from the very end of the bar, where he and his wife, Megan, sat having their usuals—Megan a white wine and Ashley a Moscow Mule. They were an interesting couple. She was an engineer, and Ashley drove big rigs in the area. Both were outgoing, great people, always ready with a quick smile when he needed one.

“It’s been busy all night,” Ronny told him, putting the glasses away during a break in the action. He was finally catching up. The crack of pool balls caught his attention as a group of guys took over one of the tables in the back and started a game. “Not that I’m complaining.” His father had opened this place as a local hangout thirty years ago, and The Gingerbread had gone through a number of ups and downs. The interior woodwork was all very darkly finished, almost black, with a heavily carved bar and decorations and a few stained-glass windows. When he inherited it, the place seemed

run-down everywhere he looked. Parts of the ornate exterior had rotted away, and the inside still carried the scent of cigarettes years after smoking had been banned.

“The place is looking good,” Ashley told him. “Did you paint?”

Ronny nodded. “Yeah. I have just the back area to do.” The Gingerbread was closed on Mondays, so once a week for the last year, he’d spent the day cleaning all the woodwork, getting years of grime and tobacco off of all of it. Then he’d repaired the exterior, and now, finally, he was nearly done painting the inside. Next, he planned to renovate the bathrooms.

“I really like it.”

He leaned over the bar. “So do the others. I haven’t had a Wednesday this busy that I can ever remember.” The bar had been hopping, and the kitchen had been busy too. His menu was pretty basic American food, but he made sure that what came out of his kitchen was quality. People weren’t going to come back if he served food that wasn’t good, no matter how many coats of paint he added to the place. “The college students have always come here to a degree, but they seem to be telling their friends.”

“That’s great.”

“Game nights are even busier,” Ronny added. He’d replaced the old televisions with bigger, brighter ones, and that helped pack the place on game nights. “But it’s hard getting staff.”

“I suppose,” Ashley said.

Ronny held up a finger before going to the other end of the bar, where he refilled drinks and closed out a couple of tabs. He thanked them and watched as a pair of college kids left, only to be replaced by more who were coming in. He took orders

and got them entered in the system before checking on the rest of the folks at the bar, then returned to Ashley and Megan. “I had employees stealing from me. I caught them and got the money back, or else I’d have jailed their asses, but still.” He sighed.

“I wish I knew someone to steer your way,” Megan said, turning to Ashley, the two of them not saying a thing, but Ronny knew they were communicating anyway. It was like they shared a mind.

“Are you really looking for someone?” a voice asked from behind him.

Ronny turned to a seat that had just filled. The kid looked about eighteen, but handed over his ID without hesitation when Ronny asked. Arden Thatcher, he read, then scanned it, and the ID came back authentic.

“I got experience,” the kid—Arden—said, flashing a bright, if crooked-toothed, smile. “My father has a bar back home, and I’ve helped out since I was eighteen.”

Ronny checked the ID once more. The kid was twenty-two, but he barely looked old enough to drive... or maybe Ronny was just feeling like an old man at thirty. “You really interested?” Ronny asked. He was getting too damned tired and desperately needed some help. Maybe if he could get someone he could trust, he could have a few hours away from this place. When the kid nodded, Ronny got an application and handed it over. His friend next to him asked for one as well, and Ronny got one for him too. “Do you have experience in a bar?”

“Lots. I’m a good drinker,” the friend answered, like he was being funny.

Ronny smiled and returned to work, making a note to file that application with the others he had no intention of following up on.

Over the next hour, he was run off his feet. A table tried to skip out without

paying—no way in hell, not in his place. And he had to break up a fight by the pool tables. Ronny was a big guy, and he hauled both men out of the bar after making them settle their tabs and ensuring Mark and Rachel, the servers, got their tips before he let them go sleep it off.

By the time he returned to the bar, Ronny had a ton of glasses to take care of, so he started right in and settled more tabs on top of it. Thankfully, the place began emptying out at about eleven and was almost a tomb just before midnight. On the weekends they closed at two, but during the week, official closing was midnight, and he was pleased he didn't need to hustle anyone out tonight. He settled the last checks and said good night to his final patrons before locking the doors with a deep sigh. Then he got to work once more, doing the last of the cleaning and restocking the coolers before taking the evening's money to the office, where he prepped the night's deposit and locked it in the safe.

"Ronny," Jake, his head cook, said from the doorway. "I think we got an issue."

"What is it?" he asked.

"I'm hearing a lot of noise out by the dumpsters. I sent all the others home and was about to leave...."

Ronny closed up the office. "Let's go take a look." Anyone causing trouble was going to think twice before taking on two guys.

They went through the kitchen and then to the back door, letting it swing open with a bang.

"What are you doing?" Ronny boomed out into the alleyway. He listened and didn't hear a thing. It was quiet—almost too quiet. He stepped out and looked around, checking the dumpsters, which were closed. He lifted the lid and let it bang shut once

again. Whoever had been out here was gone now. “Go on home. I’ll lock up and head out myself.” He waited as Jake hurried across to the parking lot and got into his car. Then Ronny closed the door and locked it tightly from the inside.

Ronny shut off the lights as he went, leaving on a few in the main bar room. Then he went out the main door, double locking it before striding to his car.

A sound from the corner of the building pulled his attention just as a figure hurried away down the alley and into the night, holding something close. He couldn’t see what it was—the figure disappeared quickly—and Ronny was too tired to chase them down. Besides, they were gone, so he got in the car and drove home to the house on the south side of town where he’d grown up.

Pulling into the drive, he got out and closed the car door, listening for the familiar late-night sound of the stream at the end of the property, the water gurgling as it ran over the shallow rocks that covered the bottom. He stood still for a few seconds, letting the sound soothe him, before going inside, where he undressed and showered before falling into bed. He tossed and turned for a while, telling himself he needed to get some help or else he was going to run himself completely out. Finally, he settled into a deep sleep.

His phone woke him a little before six, and he grabbed it before answering. “Yeah?”

“Ronny, this is Yeardley, your tenant above The Gingerbread. There are lights, police cars, and firetrucks all over down here. You might want to come down and see what’s going on.”

“I will. You get out of the building just in case.” His heart raced as he pulled on fresh clothes, dashed out of the house, and jumped into his car. It took him less than five minutes to reach the bar, where he parked along Pomfret and hurried up to the cordon. “I’m Ronny Ledbetter, and I own The Gingerbread. What’s going on?”

The police officer turned around, and Ronny recognized him right away.

“Carter.”

“Hey, Ronny. It seems someone set fire to one of the dumpsters. The call came in about twenty minutes ago. The fire department was able to put it out quickly, and there doesn’t seem to be any real damage to the building. It’s mostly soot, which washed off.”

“That’s good.” He had already spent enough money fixing up the outside, and he didn’t relish having to do it again, though from what he could see, he was going to need to freshen up the paint in that area. But that seemed to be all. “Any idea what caused it?”

One of the firefighters joined them. “Everything is out. It looked like there were papers and cardboard that got set alight. It didn’t get very far because a lot of the other debris was wet, so there was a lot of smoke, but not much else. There doesn’t seem to be an accelerant, but we’re testing just to be sure.”

“So maybe a cigarette from someone passing by?” he offered, and Carter as well as the firefighter shrugged. Great, it seemed no one had any answers.

“We are aware that this area, particularly parts of the parking structure, is used by people as shelter, particularly during inclement weather,” Carter offered.

Ronny shook his head. “I haven’t seen any evidence of that lately. And last spring, when I did see the family who was here for a few days, I made sure they had food.” He’d be damned if he was going to let young kids go hungry if he could help it. “Folks like that don’t want to draw attention to themselves, so I don’t think that’s the answer.”

“No accelerants,” one of the other firemen said. At least someone wasn’t trying to burn him out. Or if they were, they weren’t very smart about it.

“Okay. Let’s get everything cleared up and put away.” The firefighter got the rest of the team back to work.

“Last night when I was closing up, I saw someone. They may have been coming from the dumpsters. I’m not sure. They were carrying something and heading down that way. I didn’t get a good look. That was hours ago, and I don’t think it has anything to do with this, but I thought I’d let you know.”

Carter made a note. “We’ve had a number of restaurants reporting cases of dumpster diving. There are folks without enough to eat, and when you’re hungry, you’ll do what you have to in order to survive.” Ronny understood that. He’d seen that kind of desperation more than once in his life. “I don’t know how much more we’re going to get, but keep an eye out. You might think about putting a camera up on the building. It’s not likely that anyone will be able to mess with them up there, and if something happens again, we’ll have more to go on.”

“I’ll do that.” Ronny shook Carter’s hand. Then he found Yeardley just around the corner, with a robe clutched firmly around her. “It’s okay. It seems it was more smoke than anything. If there is any damage inside, let me know, and I’ll see that it’s taken care of.”

“Everything is fine. I just wanted you to know what’s was going on.” She didn’t seem nervous or upset. “I was wondering.... They cut my hours over at the warehouse. Things are slow right now.”

“Do you want some hours at the bar?” he asked.

Yeardley smiled brightly. “Yes. I have done server work before, so I know the job.

Do you need someone?"

"I do. Come in sometime today if you want. We can get you trained when it isn't too busy, and you can work Friday and Saturday evenings. Does that work?" That would be a big help. After this, he had thought he might lose her as a tenant, but instead he was gaining a server.

"It will be perfect. They cut my Saturday hours, and I'll have Sunday off from both jobs." She seemed pleased. "I'll stop in after I get off shift on Tuesday." And with a smile, she went inside.

Ronny went to unlock the bar. He didn't open until eleven, so he checked his list of projects, figuring he'd knock off another of them while he was here. There was always plenty of cleaning to do, but with this amount of time, he set up the ladder and got the paint and brush to spend a few hours finishing the repainting of the areas in back just below the ceiling, noting a few spots he had missed earlier. There was always more to be done.

Once he had finished that area and another that desperately needed freshening up, he put everything away, pleased with how it looked. He made his rounds, checking out the kitchen and cold storage to make sure everything was as it should be. Then, before the other staff arrived, he made his trip to the bank just around the corner.

With the previous day's take safely deposited, he got the tills ready and opened the door, finding the young man from the night before as his first customer.

"Did you have a chance to look over my application? I wasn't kidding when I said I knew how to work behind a bar."

"All right," Ronny said. "I want you to make me a Sazerac." He sat down and waited while the kid stepped behind the bar. "I want you to take your time. I know you aren't

aware of where things are. Just make sure you get the right ingredients.”

“Okay.” He pulled open the chiller and got a rocks glass. “You start with absinthe.” He located the bottle and put a little in the bottom of the glass, then turned the glass to coat it and set it aside. In a tall glass, he added simple syrup, some bitters, and then paused. “I know that whiskey is the modern version, but cognac was originally used. Which do you prefer?”

Ronny settled back. “Rye is fine.” He smiled to himself as the kid added the rye and some ice and stirred the drink before using a strainer to pour it into the rocks glass.

“I’d add a lemon peel garnish, but I don’t know where those are,” he said, placing the drink in front of him.

Ronny took a sip and smiled. “Okay. That’s perfect.” He excused himself, went in back, got the application he’d set aside, and returned, sitting at one of the nearby tables. “Arden,” he said. “You said your family had a bar.”

“Yes. Up in Sunbury. I’ve worked there since I was eighteen. Mostly we sold beer and stuff. But I convinced my dad to try out specialty cocktails to liven things up. We’d have an old-fashioned night, or a Manhattan night. Cosmo night was always popular. It broke things up and brought in different customers.” He sounded like he might know what he was doing, but Arden looked so damned young, and that worried Ronny.

“Why aren’t you still there? Are you going to school here?” He was cute and had these huge blue eyes. The customers were going to love him. Ronny let his mind wander for a few seconds and then pushed away any thoughts of attraction. That was a nonstarter as far as he was concerned—a surefire way to mess up his personal and work life. Never again.

Arden shook his head. "I'm staying with my aunt and uncle. My dad found out that I had a boyfriend, and he... let's just say that he didn't want me around after that. Dad is one of those people who serves alcohol to anyone who wants it during the week, but on Sunday, he's the first one to decry the wages of sin. And apparently that's me."

Ronny nodded. "I understand." His own father had not judged. That wasn't the kind of person he was. But Ronny was a bartender, and he'd heard plenty of stories across the bar over the years. Very little shocked him any longer. "What about your aunt and uncle? Do they feel any differently?"

"My aunt Louise is really nice. She's my mom's sister and thinks my father is an ass. My uncle is a bit of a dick. I live in the small back-alley apartment that used to be the garage. I have a place to live, but I have to take care of myself otherwise. My uncle insists that he isn't going to go to any expense for me. At least the old skinflint doesn't charge me rent, but I have to pay a portion of the utilities. So I need a job." The yearning in his eyes tinged with desperation had Ronny sighing to himself.

"Okay. I'll give you a chance." He slipped off the stool as the first customers of the day came in. "Wait here until I can get you the forms you need to fill out." He hurried away as people got seated. He returned to the front only to find that Arden had grabbed menus and had passed them out at each table before taking drink orders and bringing them to him at the bar.

Okay, maybe this had a chance of working out after all.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:52 am

Arden Thatcher breathed a huge sigh of relief—he had a job. Now all he needed to do was show Ronny that he could do it. He took orders and helped for about an hour. Then others came in for their shifts, and Arden finished filling out the paperwork and turned it in to Ronny. “Thank you for the chance.”

Ronny nodded, and Arden swallowed hard, the back of his neck warming. Ronny was sexy, that was all there was to it. In his limited experience with allowing himself to acknowledge his feelings toward other guys, there was one thing he knew: Ronny was hot. Really hot. But he was smart enough to know that acting on Ronny’s hotness was a bad idea. He needed this job if he was going to eat, and that was way more important than his boss’ wide shoulders and narrow hips, or his smile, which made his heart race.

“I’ll work up the schedule later today and call you with your hours and stuff. Right now, I need to get to work. The lunch rush is about to pick up any second.”

“Okay. Thanks,” Arden said and left The Gingerbread, walking back toward the small place he called home, at least for now. He hadn’t lied to Ronny exactly. He did have a small space at his aunt and uncle’s. But it was hard for him to tell Ronny that his uncle gave him the creeps. His aunt really was as nice as he had described. But his uncle was a self-righteous asshole most of the time, and at others, when no one else was around, his expression was different, and he would get too close for words. When Arden reached his place, he went inside and locked the door behind him.

He had a small living room with a tiny kitchen and bathroom. The bedroom was a loft upstairs. It was sufficient for one, and he was comfortable enough there, or would have been if it hadn’t been for his uncle. He sat on a sofa that had seen better days.

He'd covered up its hideousness with a blanket he'd gotten at the Salvation Army. The chair he'd found at a secondhand store. That, a lamp, and a coffee table completed his furniture. Still, it was enough for him, and he was grateful to have it, but not enough to play whatever games his uncle seemed to have in mind.

Arden spent the afternoon watching videos on his phone, waiting for a call, which came just after three.

"Arden, it's Ronny. Can you come in tomorrow from eleven till six? That way I can train you on the systems and get you started. After that, I have you on the schedule Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday. I may need you on Sunday, but I'll let you know later in the week."

"That's awesome." He was so excited, his foot bounced on the floor.

"I have you at five dollars an hour to start, but all your tips are yours. And when you work the bar, we have a tip jar that we split among the bartenders that night. Is that fair?"

"It sounds like it." Arden did some quick calculations in his head and actually smiled that he was going to be able to feed himself and pay his share of the utilities. He might even have a little left over for other things. "Thank you again. I'll be there tomorrow at eleven."

"Good. I'll see you then." Ronny ended the call, and Arden jumped up off the sofa and did a little happy dance. Maybe he was going to be okay after all.

A tap on the window into the yard made him jump, and he turned to where his uncle leered inside. Dammit, Arden should have remembered to close the curtains. "What are you so happy about?" his uncle snapped.

Arden stilled and then shrugged. He did his best to ignore him, and eventually his uncle went back toward the main house. Arden took that opportunity to pull the curtains closed, with a slight shiver. His uncle seemed to keep a close eye on him, and more than once, he'd found him peering inside when Arden came out of the bathroom. Still, he had a job, something to celebrate, and his creepy uncle was not going to dampen that.

That evening, Arden pulled the to-go container out of the refrigerator. He looked at the remains of a dinner and shivered. He was ashamed that he had taken to finding things from the trash in order to feed himself, but up until now, he had been existing on his meager savings, and they were almost gone. What was worse was that Ronny had almost seen him the one time, and that only added to his shame. Still, he had to eat, and Arden put the leftover burger in the microwave, hoping that any sort of contamination would be nuked away. Once it was good and hot, he ate the now-dry burger, grateful that he wasn't going to have to do that sort of thing anymore. But Arden had learned that he would do just about anything to survive.

"You're getting the hang of it," Ronny told him as he checked over Arden's order.

"My family had something similar," Arden explained before putting in his latest order and sending it to the kitchen. Then he hurried away, because having Ronny so close made him tingly, and he needed to keep his mind clear. He checked with his tables, refilled drinks, and got more napkins. Then he put in a new drink order and went to the kitchen to pick up food that was ready. By the time lunch was over, he was pleased and hoped Ronny was too.

"Can you watch the bar for an hour or so?" Ronny asked. There were half a dozen people sitting at the stools.

"Sure. Anything unusual?" he asked.

“No. Mostly beer and wine drinkers. You can call if you need anything.” Ronny went into the back, and Arden wiped down the bar, cleaned glasses, and filled drink orders. He used the opportunity to learn how the bar was laid out and where the various spirits were placed. Every bar was different, yet certain things were always the same. Like the most used items were front and center, making them the easiest to get quickly.

“You working here?” his uncle asked from the other side the bar. Arden nearly fumbled the bottle of whiskey he had in his hand. Pushing the creep out of his mind, he finished the old-fashioned and placed it in front of the customer. “What do you think?” he asked.

She sipped it and smiled. “Very good. I haven’t had one of these in a long time.” She took another sip, and Arden turned to his uncle.

“What can I get for you?” He wasn’t going to let the creep get to him, not on his first day at work. Arden had no idea that Uncle Charlie came here. If he had known, he might have tried for a job somewhere else.

“A Miller Lite,” he said, and Arden started a tab before getting him the beer and setting it in front of him. Then he continued checking on the others before peering toward the back room, hoping Ronny would come back out. “Can I get another?” his uncle asked rather loudly.

Arden got him another one and went back to work.

“Everything okay?” Ronny asked a little while later.

Arden shrugged as he put glasses away. “Nothing I can’t handle. Mostly it’s been pretty easy,” he reported. “Do you want me to check the coolers?”

“If you have the chance,” Ronny told him.

“Arden, get me another,” his uncle demanded. The more he drank, the worse he got.

Ronny went over. “I think you’ve had enough already.” He went to the register and pulled up the tab.

“I ain’t paying that. My nephew works here now. He can afford to buy his uncle a few drinks.”

Arden paled, not sure what to do. He hadn’t offered, and yet if he really pissed his uncle off, he might throw him out the way his parents had.

“What kind of uncle are you? Taking advantage of your nephew like that. He just started today, and you want to saddle him with your bar bill?” Ronny never raised his voice, and his uncle pulled out his wallet and handed Ronny a credit card. He ran it through the system and handed his uncle a check to sign. Then he half staggered toward the door. Damn, he felt sorry for his aunt for having to put up with him.

“Sorry,” Arden said softly.

Ronny turned around to where Arden wanted to disappear. “That wasn’t your fault. Your uncle is a well-known ass in this town. If he gives you any grief in here, just let me know, and I’ll handle it.” Ronny patted his shoulder. “Now go get Renae another old-fashioned. She says you make the best she’s ever had.”

As the afternoon wore on, the people at the bar shifted, but the orders seemed to stay the same: a few mixed drinks, but mostly beer and some wine. Still, he made sure he kept up, had everything clean, and kept the bar and coolers stocked.

“Did you get some lunch?” Ronny asked. “Go take a break and put an order into the

kitchen.” He pointed to the table where most of the staff sat, and Arden ordered a burger and fries before sitting down with a glass of ice water.

“How is it working out?” one of the servers asked as she set down his plate and took a seat across from him before setting down her own plate.

“Good, I think. At least I hope so.”

“Ronny is a good boss, and he treats us pretty good. I worked at Grand Illusion before they closed, and they were good people, too, but Ronny is a better boss.”

Arden nodded and watched Ronny, trying not to be too obvious. “He seems nice, and he took care of my uncle when he tried to stick me with his bar tab.”

Lilly took a bite of her salad and set down the fork. “Ronny has a real sense of fairness, and he isn’t going to let someone take advantage of us. He’s been known to take a customer aside when they stiff us on tips, especially someone he sees regularly. A few weeks ago, I had a big party, a family in town for one of the college events. I handled them, and when they paid the bill, they were really cheap with the tip. I saw the check, but at the end of the night, Ronny paid me the full twenty percent. I know he made up the difference himself.”

“But don’t they add the tip for large parties?” Arden had seen it printed on the menus and wondered if it just wasn’t enforced.

“They didn’t then, but they do now. Still, Ronny made sure I was treated fairly. Not many places would do that. But he did.” She continued eating her salad, and Arden found himself watching Ronny, and he blushed when Ronny watched him back. He turned away, hiding behind his burger and trying not to smile like some lovesick kid. “Do you have eyes for Ronny?” she asked.

Arden shook his head and took another bite of his burger. “He’s a nice guy, that’s all.” And he was saving his bacon with this job. Arden made a point of diverting his gaze to the beer sign on the opposite wall.

Lilly was good enough not to say anything, and Arden wondered if she was just keeping her thoughts to herself or if he might have successfully covered his budding attraction. Still, they talked through the rest of lunch, and thankfully, she didn’t bring up Ronny again. Apparently, Lilly was saving up for a trip to Paris, and Arden confessed his own longing to travel and see more of the world than their little part of it. And once they were done, Lilly carried the dishes into the back. Arden thanked her.

“Watch the bar,” Ronny told him, and he hurried into the back. He returned, carrying a few boxes, before leaving.

“What’s he doing?” a man at the bar asked.

Arden shrugged, curious himself, but he wasn’t going to leave his post. He did his job but kept one eye on the door until Ronny come back an hour later without the boxes, his attention glued to his phone.

“Hey, Ronny, you setting up hidden cameras?” one of the other patrons teased.

“Sort of. After the dumpster fire the other day, I put cameras up on the second floor. If someone tries that crap again, we’ll get them on video,” Ronny answered, slipping his phone back into the pocket of his jeans, pulling the material tight around his legs.

“Someone set fire to the dumpsters? When was that?”

“Two, three days ago,” a man answered before signaling for a refill. Arden took care of it and updated the tab. “It wasn’t too bad, but Ronny was lucky it didn’t cause

much damage. Not like a few years ago when someone set a fire, and it burned through the back wall. Took out the main cooler. They had to use a refrigerated truck for months before it was fixed.”

“That sucks,” Arden said, glancing at Ronny, who was walking through the dining area, checking on tables.

“Yeah, it does. It was after then that Ronny began to really fix the place up,” the man said. Arden didn’t know his name. “He’s still working on it, but it’s come a long way.”

“That’s really cool,” Arden said, refusing to look at Ronny. Now that he had some food in him, Arden had more energy and went about cleaning up the bar, getting it ready for a busier evening.

“Thanks,” Ronny said as Arden took the glasses out of the washer a few minutes later. He had all of them cleaned and put back where they belonged.

“We should probably restock a few of the liquors.” He’d made a list and handed it to Ronny. “I’m not sure where you keep the extra stock.”

“Most of these are down there.” He pointed to a cupboard under the liquor display. “But the Grand Marnier is in the back.” Ronny handed him the list back, their fingers touching for just a moment. Arden tried not to react, but a brief tingle zipped through his hand and up his arm. Then the touch was gone, and Arden blinked, pulling his attention back to the task at hand.

“Thanks,” he said, and hurried to get what he needed.

Ronny brought a bottle of Grand Marnier, and Arden placed it on the back of the bar and replaced any of the other liquors that needed it before making sure everything

was closed up and the bar was the way it was supposed to be. Then he made a check to see if anyone needed a drink and finally allowed himself a minute to catch his breath.

“Arden,” Ronny said a few hours later. “Go ahead, punch out, and go home. You did good today. And I’ll see you later. Your hours are posted on the schedule in back in case you haven’t seen the details.”

“Okay.” Arden washed his hands and left the bar, checking in back and noting when he worked next. He had the following day off but was scheduled to work late on Friday and Saturday. He noted them down and got his things, a little reluctant to leave. Here there were other people, but at home, there was nothing but quiet and his creepy uncle, who was not going to be happy with him. Still, he couldn’t hang around here, so he left, walking the couple of blocks home. Arden let himself into the yard and then went into his small place.

No one had been inside, and Arden locked the door behind him. He also made a point of pulling all the curtains closed. Then he showered and finally turned on the television to find something to watch. His belly told him he needed something to eat, so he heated up the last of the food he had in his tiny refrigerator and went through the details of his meager financial situation, working out how he was going to eat for the next week or so until he got paid. It wasn’t a pretty sight and involved skipping a few meals, but he’d make it. He’d had to before, and he would again.

A knock on the door pulled him out of his worries. He jumped up, tensing in case it was his uncle. He went to the door and peered out before opening it to his aunt.

“I brought you some pasta casserole. I didn’t know if you had had anything to eat yet and....” She handed him the warm dish. “You can heat it up another time if you already ate.”

“Thank you.” At least he knew he was going to have something to eat tomorrow.

“I better get back,” his aunt said, looking toward the house. “Your uncle came home stinking of beer this afternoon, and he’s still sleeping it off.” She frowned. “I hate it when he drinks like that.”

Arden didn’t know what to say to her. He knew how much drinking his uncle did at The Gingerbread, but he had no idea if his uncle went somewhere else afterward. He supposed he could be grateful that his uncle was down for the count, but he was disappointed for his aunt. She didn’t deserve to be treated that way. His aunt Louise was a good person, and she deserved better than a husband who drank too much and crept around the backyard, peeking in windows. “I’m sorry he does that.”

She nodded. “Like I said, I’d better get back to the house before he wakes up.” She turned and went back through the yard.

Arden wondered just how harsh his uncle was to her. He could be mean, and his tongue could bite deep. He hadn’t seen any evidence that he hit her, but he wasn’t sure and vowed to keep an eye on things as best he could.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:52 am

Chapter Three

“What are you doing in here again?” Ronny asked the drunk from two days ago. This was Arden’s uncle, and Ronny had to admit that he hated the man on sight. There was something off about him that put Ronny on guard.

“This is a bar, and I want a drink,” he said, his words slurred and his eyes a little unfocused.

“I’m sorry, but you’re already visibly intoxicated, so I can’t serve you.” He crossed his arms over his chest and glared at the man. “You can call someone to come get you and take you home.”

“I can walk,” he said before weaving a little on his feet. Ronny wasn’t sure of that, but he held the door and made sure he got out and down the street. There was no way in hell he was going to serve him anything to drink. Not only was it illegal, a fall-down drunk was the last thing he wanted at his bar.

“Was that my uncle?” Arden asked as he hurried from behind the bar.

“Yes, and he could barely walk,” Ronny told him. “He was heading home.”

“Can I make a phone call?” Arden asked.

Ronny nodded, and Arden went in the kitchen while Ronny took his place back behind the bar. He found himself glancing at the kitchen door every few seconds until Arden returned. Then the two of them manned the bar on what turned out to be a very

busy evening.

“Is everything okay?” Ronny asked a while later.

“I called my aunt to let her know my uncle was on the way home and that he was drunk again.” He bit his lower lip. “I’m worried about her. But there’s nothing I can do. I know she hates that he’s drinking a lot....”

“Is he abusive?” Ronny asked.

“I’m sure he’s verbally hurtful. You saw him the other night. I’m glad he didn’t fight you tonight, but I thought he might. I’m sure he tears her down when he gets the chance, but I don’t know if he hits her. I have wondered, though.”

Ronny nodded. “It wouldn’t surprise me. He’s definitely the type. There’s so much anger and self-entitlement about him. What right does he have to assume that you should pay his bar tab. Really?” Ronny rolled his eyes and then hurried to the far end of the bar. He had plenty to do, and he really didn’t need to be getting involved in Arden’s personal life. He liked talking to him and all. Arden was a pretty interesting guy, but getting dragged into that kind of personal family stuff was something he knew he needed to step away from.

The bar was hopping for the entire night and well after midnight. And at one in the morning, more people came through the door. He had already closed down part of the seating, so what was open was packed, and his servers were being run off their feet. Arden helped him behind the bar and supported the servers, taking out food whenever he had a chance. By last call, the bar finally began to settle down, and he and Arden provided the final drinks of the night. Ronny settled tabs while Arden cleaned and finished stocking the coolers.

The kitchen had closed an hour ago, and the staff had cleaned up already and were on

their way out by the time Ronny locked the door with a sigh. The room was quiet as the last tables were wiped down and the bar made ready for the following day.

“Are you hungry?” Ronny asked Arden. “I noticed that you didn’t get dinner.”

“I was too busy to stop and eat,” Arden said. “So I guess I forgot.”

“I can make him a sandwich,” Ned said. He worked in the kitchen and hadn’t quite left yet. “Give me five minutes.” He went into the back and brought Arden a to-go container. “This should give you something before you crash.” He hurried out, and Ronny finished up his nightly closing, locking all the receipts in the safe before closing up the building and starting toward his car.

“Do you need a ride home?” At some point it had started raining, and it was coming down steadily now. He knew that Arden walked and that he’d be soaked by the time he got home.

“It’s only a few blocks,” Arden said.

Ronny unlocked his car. “Get in before you’re completely soaked,” he said, and once Arden had slipped into the seat, he took off down the rain-slicked alley, heading west.

“I’m over on Chapel,” Arden offered, guiding Ronny to the tiny building on the alley. “That’s me,” he said, and Ronny pulled over to let him out. He watched Arden through the rain as he got out of the car and went through the garden gate. Once the lights came on, he pulled away, slowly. Halfway down the block, he noticed a flashing light in his rearview mirror. He stopped and turned as the light on the outside of Arden’s place flashed on and off and then on again. After a few seconds, it went off and came back on again.

Ronny backed up to Arden’s place and jumped out. He checked for a door outside the

back fence, but there wasn't one. Not sure what to do, he was about to get back in his car when the light flashed on and off once more. Figuring something had to be wrong, he went through the back gate and up to the door.

"I told you no," Arden said, his voice tinged with worry and maybe a touch of panic. "Keep away from me. What are you doing?"

Ronny knocked on the door and heard scrambling from inside. Arden opened the door, his eyes filling with relief. "You saw, then...?" he said, glancing over to where his uncle stood near the sofa.

Ronny nodded. "Is everything okay?"

Arden shook his head. "My uncle was just leaving." He turned back, and Ronny glared at him.

"Do I need to remind you that I own this," his uncle threatened. "I can have you leave whenever I want." What an asshole.

"So does his aunt... correct? And is he paying anything at all to stay here?" Ronny asked.

"I am."

"Then you're a renter, and you have rights. He can't just throw you out, and he can't just come in here whenever he wants," Ronny said to Arden while glaring at his uncle. The whole situation made him wonder about Arden's uncle's intentions. "If he tries to just throw you out, I have lawyers and plenty of resources that you can fight him with."

"And who do you think you are?"

“Someone who can put the word out and make sure you don’t get served at half the bars in town.” Ronny was well aware of the man’s reputation. He was not well thought of. “Now, I suggest you go and sleep off whatever it is you’ve been drinking.” He stepped back to make room.

“This isn’t over,” he slurred as he stepped past.

Ronny rolled his eyes. “Is that a threat? Because if it is, then Arden has a witness. If anything happens to him or you try to do anything to retaliate, I will speak up for him, and believe me, you’ll be the one who pays.” Most of what he said was posturing, but Arden’s uncle was in no position to think very clearly.

He stumbled through the yard and into the back door of the house, closing it much harder than was necessary.

“Are you okay?”

“I am now. I wasn’t sure what to do when I came in and found him waiting for me. The light switch is right inside the door, so I hoped I might be able to get your attention.” He sat down, and Ronny closed the door.

“Did he hurt you?”

Arden shook his head.

“But do you think he would?” Ronny hated the idea of that grubby man getting his hands on Arden.

“I don’t know. You scared him good, that’s for sure. But I don’t know what he thinks. He’s okay usually, but lately he’s been drinking a lot, and when he does that, he gets mean. I’m worried about my aunt, and he’s been making suggestions toward me.” He

shivered, and Ronny wanted to take him in his arms, but he didn't have the right.

"Do you think he's really interested in you, or is it a power thing?" Ronny asked.

"Uncle Charlie is a bigot. My aunt is a kind lady. Why she married him is a mystery. She deserves someone better than him. As for what he wants, I have no idea. But I don't want him in here."

"Has anything been moved or taken?" Ronny asked.

"I don't think so. He was sitting on the sofa and seemed to be waiting for me. I was so surprised." He hurried to the coffee table and began putting the bottles in the recycling. "I didn't have any beer in the house, so he must have brought his own and decided to drink it in my living area." He shook slightly. "I hate the thought of him in here, but there's only so much I can do."

"But your aunt..."

"Is the only reason I'm still here. He would throw me out if he got the chance. He said as much to you. And as much as anyone can say anything to the contrary, I don't really have a right to be here. I'm just a guest, and it would be hard to prove anything else."

"So you have to put up with him coming in here whenever he wants and maybe taking advantage of you?" It was more than Ronny wanted to think about.

Arden shrugged. "I'm glad you were here tonight."

"Okay. I'll be going as long as you're sure he isn't going to cause any more trouble. But if I can make a suggestion. You might want to speak to your aunt and let her know what happened tonight. Let her know that you are in her corner. If she is being

hurt in some way, then maybe an ally will help her. Most people in abusive relationships are trapped because they don't think they have a way out. Let her know that you'll help her."

Arden nodded. "I want to try. She doesn't deserve to be treated the way he does. I don't think he's always been this way. At least I hope not. I never liked Uncle Charlie. He was always a jerk. But I didn't think he'd hurt anyone. Until now...." He shrugged. "Anyway, I appreciate you coming in to help me."

Ronny knew that was his cue to leave. He said good night and heard Arden lock up from the inside. Then he left through the garden and got into his car. As he pulled away, he watched to make sure the lights outside didn't flash, and once they stayed steady, he continued on home.

What he really needed was a dog, Ronny thought, and not for the first time, as he went inside the empty and dark house. The neighborhood had gone to bed a long time ago, and he always came home to absolute quiet. It would be great to arrive home to a little excitement. He wasn't thinking of a big dog, probably a smaller one.

Not that he could actually have one, but it was a nice fantasy. A dog deserved more than someone who was home just to sleep and then went back to work. And it wasn't like he could take a dog into work. The local health department would have a fit and a half. Though he did allow service dogs in The Gingerbread. It was the one exception allowed. But still, Ronny thought it would be nice to come home and not be alone.

Ronny turned on a single light in the stairwell so he could navigate his house and went right upstairs, turning the light off on the other side of the room. He knew the house like the back of his hand, and once he reached the bathroom, he turned on the hot water, stripped out of his work clothes, and stepped under the spray.

He groaned as the hot water hit him, washing away the smell of food, other people's

cologne, which clung to everything, and beer. He closed his eyes, and within seconds, Arden was with him, those eyes filled with pain and fear. Soon, though, they changed, growing darker and half lidded before Arden kissed him hard, pressing Ronny back against the tile. He was insistent and had so much energy.

Ronny hoped the fantasy lasted and did nothing to impede the image in front of him. He gasped as Arden wrapped his fingers around his straining cock, stroking him. The water bathed him in warmth as his fantasy of Arden added to the heat until Ronny couldn't take it any longer. He tumbled over the edge into a release that left him panting. Once he opened his eyes, he reached for the soap to continue his shower, finishing quickly before turning off the water. Ronny dried himself and left the bathroom, going to his bedroom and climbing between the sheets. He could almost feel the ghost of Arden touching his skin as he drifted off to sleep, wishing that it hadn't been only in his mind.

As always, he woke alone, only this time, thankfully, it wasn't to a phone call. Still, he checked the clock and groaned. It was nearly ten, which meant he needed to get to work to get the place opened by eleven. Jumping out of bed, he hurried through his morning routine and bounded out the door. His yard needed tending, and tomorrow—his day off, thank God—he needed to spend part of it mowing his grass and weeding some of the beds. There was always more that needed to get done than he had time for.

When he arrived downtown, the sun was shining, the rain from the previous day a distant memory. He parked and strode to the main entrance, to find Arden huddled against the door. "What happened?"

"My uncle was outside the door this morning, trying to peer inside. I quietly slipped out of my bedroom window and down the trellis on the alley side of the house."

Ronny shook his head. "This is getting ridiculous." He unlocked the door, and Arden

hurried inside, placing his bag on one of the bench seats by the door.

“I wasn’t sure where else to go, and I knew you would be coming soon to open up. I know I’m not scheduled until four, but at least I knew I’d be safe here.” He settled in the booth, pulling a book out of his bag. “I’ll stay out of the way. My uncle has to work today, so he should be gone pretty soon, and I’ll leave.”

This was more than a little frightening. Arden was staying away from where he was supposed to be living, waiting for his psycho uncle to go to work. Still, it wasn’t his place to get involved.

Ronny got the bar ready to open and unlocked the door at eleven, then checked on the kitchen staff of one. Melinda was ready as always, and he set up the bar for the first patrons who took their places. He glanced at Arden huddled in the seat, trying to make himself look small from behind his book. He reminded himself that this was none of his business, even though everything about it pinged that this was a dangerous situation that was only escalating. He just wished he knew what it was moving toward. Still, it couldn’t be good for Arden, no matter what.

Ronny got busy, and when he looked up to check on him, Arden and all his things were gone. He wasn’t sure what to think about that but continued working until it was nearly time for Arden to come in again.

“Everything all right?” he asked as Arden joined him behind the bar.

“Yeah. My uncle had left, so I was able to relax for a while. I left everything locked up from the inside, so he isn’t going to be able to get in, not unless he wants to break down his own door.” He grinned. “My aunt knows I’m working.”

Ronny grabbed two glasses to put them in the washer but paused. “I take it you haven’t talked to her.”

Arden shook his head. "I'm not sure what to say to her. I mean... how do I ask that sort of thing? She knew me when I was a baby, and now I'm supposed to sit down with her and ask if her husband is hurting her? How? And what if he isn't and she doesn't believe how my uncle is acting?"

Ronny could understand. Arden was in a delicate position. He had already been kicked out by the people who should have loved and supported him most. Now he was afraid it was going to happen again. "You do what you think is best." The answer might have sounded like a bit of a cop-out, but Arden needed to be the one to make his own decisions, and Ronny needed to keep out of it.

"What sort of evening can we expect?" Arden asked.

"Make sure everything is full. We aren't going to have the time to restock anything. There's a game tonight, so the place is likely to be packed." He checked the coolers and added more beers, filling all the empty spots. "Check the bar in back as well. You are going to be in charge of that one. We usually only open it on weekends because it gets so busy. It has a limited selection, so any orders that are more complicated will be routed up front. But make sure it's full and ready for the onslaught."

"I will," Arden said, and hurried to the back.

Soon, Ronny was too busy to worry anything other than the orders that flooded in along with the people packing through the door. About eleven, he had a chance to check how business was doing and was shocked to find that the back bar had done a little more business than he had, which was strange, very strange. The front bar always did more because it had a wider selection.

Chapter Four

Arden was having the time of his life. For the moment, he was back behind his parents' bar and the trauma of the last couple of months hadn't happened.

"Four more Cosmos," Lilly said with a smile, and he went into his routine, getting out the shaker, spinning the vodka bottle before tossing it nearly to the ceiling and then catching it, and letting the liquor pour right into the shaker. He added the other ingredients with a flourish before shaking the drink and pouring from high above the bar. He was able to make two at a time, so he put on his little show once more, changing it up before putting all four drinks on Lilly's tray. Then he filled beer orders and set up a line of a dozen shots on the bar, doing a bottle flip between each fill.

"What's all this?" Ronny asked just as he finished.

"Don't be a spoil sport," Lilly said as Arden added the drinks to the tab, and the college guys at the bar each took a shot, downing them with grins before heading off for an impromptu pool tournament.

"What's going on?" Ronny pressed closer.

"A bunch of the girls ordered Cosmos, so I made them and had a little fun doing it," Arden explained. "Now I've sold dozens of them." He was pleased. "Did I do something wrong?"

Ronny smiled. "God, no. But keep in mind that they are going to expect the show every time you work."

Arden shrugged. "Only on Friday and Saturday. That way we keep it special. And we can change the drink we feature. Today, it's Cosmos," he said, and as more orders came in, Arden returned to the bar and went through his routine.

Ronny returned to the front bar, shaking his head as he got back on task.

The bar was hopping well past midnight. Ronny was thrilled that business was doing so well. He had worked hard to get The Gingerbread feeling younger and attracting new customers. His father had let the business grow kind of stodgy, with the patronage getting older. There had been some grumbling when he changed the menu and freshened up the interior, but this kind of business proved that he was on the right track.

"Ronny!" someone called, and he patted Lilly on the shoulder as she passed.

"Man the bar," he told her as he raced toward the back. "What the hell!" he snapped as he turned the corner to the back bar to see Charlie had Arden by the collar, trying to pull him over the bar.

"You little shit. You think you can lock me out of my own property?" he bellowed. Arden tried to pull back, his shirt ripping loudly enough to still the room. Arden's uncle ended up flat on his ass, holding a piece of the shirt as Arden scrambled back behind the bar.

"You okay?" Ronny asked, barely stopping.

"Yeah," Arden said as Ronny stalked to the man on the floor. He was already starting to get up.

"Stay right there," Ronny told him as he pulled out his phone. He dialed 911 and explained that he needed a police officer at the bar as soon as possible. "A patron

assaulted one of my bartenders, and I intend to press charges. So get someone over here right away.” He ended the call.

“You can’t do that,” Arden’s uncle told him, his speech slurring.

“I can, and I did. I will be pressing charges. See, Arden may be your nephew, but he is also my bartender, and I will not let anyone assault them, period. So, you stay where you are, on the floor with the rest of the filth. If you move, I will put you right back down there, and I won’t be fucking gentle about it.” He managed to signal Larry, one of the other men who worked there. “Do whatever you have to in order to see to it that he stays put.” Larry was as nice a man as he had ever met—and he was huge as hell. “I need to get back behind the bar. Call me if the police come in this entrance.” He hurried up front and to his office, where he found an extra shirt from an old promotion. He took it back to Arden, who half huddled behind the bar. Ronny couldn’t help watching as Arden slipped the shirt on over his sleek chest, before relieving Lilly from behind the main bar.

The police arrived five minutes later, coming through the main door. Ronny took them to the back. “He attacked the bartender and was trying to pull him over the bar,” he told Officer Davis.

“He’s my nephew,” Charlie snapped, as though he had some right to act this way.

“Which makes this a case of domestic abuse as well as assault. We have plenty of witnesses,” Ronny looked around, and folks held up their hands. “And I will press charges.” He gave the officers Arden’s torn shirt. “This ripped as he was trying to get away. So you can see how violent the incident was.”

“All right,” Officer Davis said. “We’re going to take him in.” He cuffed Arden’s uncle and led him out of the bar. Then his partner, Red, returned. Ronny had known him for years. He was a great officer and a nice guy, even if he looked intimidating as

hell because of an accident years ago that left him scarred.

Red sat in one of the back booths, taking statements from patrons who lined up to talk to him.

“Wow...,” Arden breathed. “I would have thought most people wouldn’t want to bother.”

“We have good people here,” Ronny said, glancing at Arden, who practically swam in the shirt, which had to be two sizes too big.

“I need to get back to work,” Arden told him before hurrying behind the bar. He got busy and even did his little show when someone ordered a Cosmo, but Ronny could see that much of the joy he’d had earlier was gone. Still, Ronny left him to it and went back up front, putting it into high gear to get himself caught up.

“Please tell Arden to close down the back bar,” he told Yeardley when she came to pick up a bar order.

“I think he already is, but I’ll relay the message.”

“Thanks, and pass the word to come up here to have all orders filled,” Ronny added, and she nodded and took her order.

Despite the ruckus earlier, things had gone well otherwise. Business had continued booming, and he hadn’t had two seconds to breathe for the rest of the night. Ronny checked the clock. It was nearly one, and the front of the bar was still going strong. He watched the clock, and Arden joined him just before last call.

“Everything is cleaned up and restocked in the back,” he said before going about the task of doing the same up front.

Ronny continued filling orders until he declared the bar closed a little before two.

“Hey,” Ronny said once Arden had the beer coolers refilled. “You okay?”

Arden shrugged. “I don’t want to talk about it. Okay?” He hurried away and returned with more supplies, putting them away as customers settled tabs and stepped out into the night. By the time the last one left and he locked the doors, Ronny was exhausted. He knew that feeling. He’d experienced it countless times at the end of the work day. But Arden looked completely drained, with dark circles under his eyes.

“Give me fifteen minutes, and we’ll get out of here,” Ronny said, leaving Arden to finish up. He needed a few seconds away from him or else he wasn’t going to do anything but stare. Just the thought of Arden’s uncle getting his hands on him set his pulse racing, and not in a good way. That man was dangerous; Ronny knew it. Who came onto a public place to try to pull someone over the bar? What the hell was going on in his mind?

He sat down behind his desk with the night’s proceeds and began counting. But he kept losing his place, and after the third time, he shook his head and forced himself to concentrate. He finally managed to get the deposit put together, then locked it in the safe to take to the bank in the morning.

“Is everything all set?” he asked when he returned out front.

“Yes,” Arden told him. “The bar is ready, and the dining room is all set up. I hope it’s okay, but I let the others out a few minutes ago.” He yawned. “Would it be dumb to say that I’m worn out and yet....” He turned toward the door. “I just wish I knew what I was going home to.”

“What your uncle did isn’t like a parking ticket. He has to go before a judge before they will let him out on bail, so I suspect he’s warming a cell somewhere.”

“And what about my aunt?” Arden asked, his eyes filled with concern. “I’m sure my uncle is going to call her, and God knows what kind of trouble he’s going to try to cause.”

“Then we should get you home so you can check on her.” Ronny grabbed his things and waited for Arden to exit before locking the door. Then he led the way to the car and drove Arden the few blocks home. The yard was lit up, and Ronny followed Arden into it.

His aunt hurried out of the house. “What happened? I got a call from your uncle. He said that he’s in jail and that it’s your fault. You got him in trouble, and now he’s going to pay for it.” Her eyes burned, and Arden took a step back.

“That’s not true. He attacked Arden while he was working. The entire bar saw it. Your husband was very drunk. And believe me, if he is in jail, it’s his fault alone, not Arden’s.” There was no way he was going to let Arden take the blame for this. “And I’m the one pressing charges. He assaulted one of my staff, and I can’t have that.”

“Oh...,” she said, the fight draining right out of her. “But... what about bail?”

“That will be up to a judge,” Arden said. “But it’s up to you whether you want to pay it or not.”

She paled, and Arden took her hand. “Come on. Let’s go inside and have some tea.” He led her to his door. “I’ll be right back.” He headed around the house.

“Where is he going?” she asked.

“To get inside,” Ronny answered as they waited. “He’s been coming and going up and down the trellis because your husband has been coming in, and Arden has the door blocked from the inside. He was waiting for him the other day, and I have to

say, that's kind of creepy."

She seemed confused. "Why would he do that?"

"That's what Arden and I have been trying to figure out." He didn't want to express what he thought was going on. It seemed to him that Arden's uncle, despite his protestations, had a long-hidden secret attraction for boys, and Arden living on the property had cracked that door open. "But it isn't right."

Arden opened the door, and they went inside. He busied himself in the kitchen and returned with a pot and three cups. He poured tea for each of them and then sat down in his living area.

"You all must be tired," his aunt said.

"We are, but we need to talk," Arden said. "Uncle Charlie has been behaving weirdly. I don't know what he wants, but he's come in here more than once, unwanted, and he's been peering through the windows." He shivered. "But I'm more concerned about you."

"Me?"

Arden nodded, and Ronny sipped the drink, letting Arden do the talking. He wondered if he should leave them alone, but Arden seemed to shift closer, and Ronny wanted to be there to support him. "How does Uncle Charlie treat you?"

She sipped her tea, and Ronny knew she was very self-conscious. "Let's me use the restroom," he said, excusing himself to give them a chance to speak without him in the room. He knew if she were being mistreated, she wasn't going to want to make a public announcement, and she wasn't going to want to talk in front of a stranger. He found the facilities easily in the small space and washed his hands before returning to

the others.

“No one is going to tell anyone what you said, but you need to get yourself some help. He isn’t going to stop, you know.”

She set her cup on the table. “I know. I just keep wondering what I did to deserve this.”

“Nothing,” Arden told her, and Ronny nodded when she looked at him. “This is his issue. It isn’t your fault. But you need to make a decision about what you want. Uncle Charlie is in jail, and he will be there until Monday. No judge is going to see him until then. That gives you a little time to think.”

She sighed as though the weight of the world was on her shoulders. “How do I...?”

“Well, he’ll need money or a way to post bail. So, if you want to keep him there, then limit his access to any cash or accounts. There are just a few bondsmen in town. One is just down from the bar. We could talk to them. Maybe we could put word out that you will not consent to a lien on your property. You might be able to stop him from using your home as collateral. If that’s what you want?”

Her hand shook. “What I want is out...,” she whispered.

“Then I’ll help you,” Arden told her. “Do you know an attorney? Someone who can help you navigate all this? I don’t know that many people in town.”

“I have a few friends, but Charlie knows them, too, so they may not want to help me.” She bit her lower lip.

Ronny had been keeping quiet. “I know someone. He isn’t practicing actively because he’s working for the college. But I believe he can take private clients on the

side. I'll call him in the morning. I doubt he can help you with a divorce or separation, but he can advise you on how to handle the initial issues."

"Thank you," Arden said softly.

Ronny finished his tea and set the cup on the table. "I think I need to go home. Arden is off, so he can be here with you, and I'll call once I get in touch with Vinny." Ronny said good night to both of them and left, going to his car for the drive home.

Once he got back, he sent a text to Vinny to call him when he got up. Then he sat on the back deck, listening to the water flow over the rocks. For most people, it was the middle of the night, but for him, this was his favorite time of the day. It was quiet and peaceful, with no one asking for anything. As he sat with his eyes closed, his mind wandered to Arden because, damn... the man was adorably sexy. Once that shirt ripped off, Ronny had wanted to take in the sight, but he'd had other things that were more important. Now, in the quiet, he could let his imagination take flight.

Ronny groaned softly, because his imagination was the closest he was ever going to get. He had already gotten more involved with Arden and his family drama than he'd ever intended. What he should do was back away and let Arden and his aunt handle their own issues. But hell, he knew that wasn't likely. He was invested in making sure Arden was safe, and that meant keeping his uncle away from both of them.

"Why is it that I always let myself get drawn in?" It had happened before, and he was letting the same thing happen once again. Would he never learn?

Yawning, Ronny went inside and locked the door behind him. He needed to rest and be ready for the morning.

The damned phone woke him earlier than was necessary. Ronny snatched it off the bedside table. "Yeah...." He blinked himself awake and looked at the display. "Hey,

Vinny.”

“I got your message, and I had a few minutes. Oh crap, you worked late last night.” Vinny was a busy man, so Ronny didn’t get upset, though a few hours’ additional sleep would be great. “What’s up?”

“It’s a situation with one of the guys who works for me. I wouldn’t bother, but there’s family abuse involved, and it’s escalating. Arden works for me as a bartender. His uncle is abusive. The guy attacked Arden in the bar last night. I had him arrested, and he’s in jail at the moment. His wife is scared as hell of him. I think he hits her, too, but I don’t know that for sure. Is there a way that we can make sure he can’t use any of their joint assets for bail? She wants to leave him, and the longer he’s in jail and out of the picture, the easier it’s going to be for her to get things in order.”

“Whoa, that’s one heck of a lot. Now, as far as bail is concerned, she would need to bail him out, and if she doesn’t want to do that, then she doesn’t have to. He can arrange bail on his own but will need collateral.”

“And as far as I know, the assets are joint ones.”

“So he uses the home for bail, skips out, and she’s left holding the bag,” Vinny mused. “I’ll need to do a little research, but there are only a few bail bondsmen in town, so that access could be pretty easy to shut down.”

“Can you help them? I know you don’t do divorces and things like that.”

“No, I don’t. I know people who do, and I can refer her to someone. But I might be able to help in the short term. Give them my number and have them call me right away.”

“Thank you. My bartender is Arden, and his aunt is Louise. The uncle is a real piece

of work and needs to be kept away from both of them if at all possible. If he gets out, they could be in danger. The guy has a real temper, from what I've seen, and it's likely he's going to blame Arden for being in jail. And if Louise stands up to him on the bail..." God, he had no idea how Arden's uncle would react, but it wasn't going to be good. He had to give both of them a lot of credit for standing up to the bully, but him returning to their lives was not going to be pretty.

"I'll see what I can do if they contact me."

"Thanks," Ronny said. "You and Heather stop by the bar soon, and we can have a drink. I appreciate you doing this. I'm lost, and they're even more so."

"It's no problem," Vinny said and ended the call.

Ronny texted Arden with Vinny's information and told him and his aunt to make contact right away. Then he pulled the covers back up and tried to go back to sleep, but other things kept racing through his mind, like a certain bartender and if he was going to be all right.

Chapter Five

“Are you sure we should do this?” Aunt Louise asked as she sat down at the kitchen table.

Arden sipped his coffee and blinked the sleep from his eyes. “I can’t answer that for you. You have to decide what you want.” Her sleeves rode up, and for the first time, Arden saw the black-and-blue marks above her wrist. “Do you want to continue to live in fear?”

She shook her head. “Then I guess I have to make the change. Okay, when does he get here?” Her eyes were clear, and she seemed determined.

“Half an hour,” Arden told her as she pulled the sleeve of her robe down over her arms. “Go get dressed, and remember you have nothing to be ashamed of. You did nothing wrong.” Arden stood when she did and hugged his aunt tightly. “You’re the good person in all this. He was a jerk, but you took me in, even when your sister told you not to.” Arden would do just about anything for his aunt Louise. “You have a good heart, and Uncle Charlie abused that, and it needs to stop. So don’t hide what he did.”

She tensed. “You saw?” Her voice was so soft.

“Yes. It’s not your fault. We all carry wounds and scars. Some are just on the outside. But you’ll heal—inside and out—and the first step is to get rid of him.”

She nodded. “Okay. I need to dress and put my face on. I’ll be right back.” She took

her mug with her and hurried upstairs. Arden finished his coffee and put the mug in the sink. Then he sat in the living room, nervously moving from place to place until his aunt joined him. "I'm so nervous. I never thought I'd be here again." She hung her head."

"Again?" Arden asked.

She nodded. "Charlie is my second marriage. I was very young when I got married the first time, and it was terrible. It only lasted a year, and you weren't even born before it ended. You never met him. The family was angry that I divorced and thought I should have stayed and made it work." She looked almost completely broken, and Arden wished he could fix that. But all he could do was be there.

"They don't get to make the choices for others. Mom and Dad tried to dictate my life and the decisions I was going to make. I know you don't understand, but you still supported me, and I'll support you." The doorbell rang, and Arden got up and opened the door to a black man in his forties, wearing tan pants and a light blue polo shirt.

"Are you Arden?" he asked. "I'm Vinny, a friend of Ronny's."

"Of course. Please come in," Arden told him. "My aunt is very nervous, but I think she's resolved that she needs to get out of the very difficult situation." He closed the door, and Vinny went through to the living room. Then he joined them, and Vinny had them explain what had happened. To his shock, his aunt showed Vinny her arms and even her back.

"How long ago did he do that?" Vinny asked.

"Three days," Aunt Louise answered, close to tears.

Vinny sat back. "Okay." He sat in the chair. "You have some options, but here is

what I think you should do. What we should do. I'd advise you to call the police, make a complaint, and press charges. They will take pictures of your injuries, and those can be used in court. That will help keep your husband in jail and add to the charges. Once you have done that, I will then prepare a petition for a restraining order. And I should be able to get that before a judge tomorrow. But... here is where we do some real good. I will inform the prosecutor that we are getting the restraining order as well as the pending abuse charges. We should then be able to use all of that to ensure that your husband cannot use any joint assets to secure his bail."

Aunt Louise eyes seemed to spin. "Okay."

"I know it seems like a lot, but it really isn't."

"So I just call the police?" she asked.

Vinny nodded. "Here is their nonemergency number. Call this and explain that you wish to report spousal abuse and that you are pressing charges. They will send someone right over."

"I'll be here with you," Arden said softly. "You aren't going to be alone. I promise you that." He sat next to her on the sofa.

"But... your mother and...."

"They don't get a say in this. He's hurting you, and no one gets to do that." Arden wanted his uncle to pay for what he did, though it wasn't likely his aunt would see things that way. "But this is your decision." He unlocked his phone and held it out. Aunt Louise hesitated for a good minute, and Arden wondered if she was going to take the step, but then she took the phone and made the call.

Things happened quickly from there. The police arrived in less than five minutes, and

they were so kind with his aunt. The lead officer was a woman, Vivian Clark, and she was soft-spoken and gentle with her. She took pictures and asked a lot of questions. More than once, Arden found himself swallowing hard and damn near in tears as she related all the things she had put up with over the years.

“Thank you,” Vivian finally told her. “I know how hard this has been for you to tell us, but you did the right thing.”

“I’m not so sure. When Charlie comes home....”

She shook her head. “We’ll do our best to see that doesn’t happen.”

Arden figured that was mostly hope on her part. How could anyone guarantee that?

Once she was done with her questions, she explained what would happen next. “You pressing charges goes a long way to us helping to keep you safe.” Then she said goodbye to his aunt and spoke to Vinny for a few minutes before leaving.

“Okay. You did your part. Now I need to do mine. I will have a police report number in an hour or two. In the meantime, I’ll draft a request for a protection from abuse order, as well as a restraining order. I’m going to ask that he be kept a hundred feet away from your home and work, which means he is going to have to find somewhere else to live. I can also request that he not be allowed to use any of your assets, joint or otherwise, to secure his bail.”

“Thank you. I know it’s Sunday and very little will happen.”

“True, but I have a few contacts I can use. Let me see what I can do.” Vinny gathered his papers. “I’ll call you when I know anything.”

“Thank you,” Aunt Louise told him. “And I’ll thank Ronny as well. I’m so glad he

sent you to us.”

“Don’t thank me yet. There are still a number of unknowns. But as another precaution, call a locksmith as well. Make sure he can’t get in. I’ll also email you the name of a good divorce attorney. Keith knows what he’s doing, and he’s worked with people in your situation before.” He shook Aunt Louise’s hand and then Arden’s before leaving.

Arden saw him to the door, closing and locking it behind him.

“This is so much,” Aunt Louise said.

“I know. But you need to be safe from him. And with him being held on multiple charges now, it weakens his hand a lot.” He pulled out his phone, but he wasn’t sure who to call. “Ronny,” Arden thought out loud and made a call. “I’m sorry to bother you.”

“How is your aunt?” Ronny asked.

“She’s hanging in there. Your friend just left, and he was a big help. But we need a locksmith. Vinny recommended changing the locks.” He heard the sound of the bar in the background.

“Sorry. It’s super busy here, and I can barely hear you.”

“Aren’t you usually off?” Arden asked, but figured when you owned a bar, days off were kind of few and far between.

“It was supposed to be. But John is sick and can’t work today, so I came in to cover for him, but the place is packed because of a game.” He paused. “I’ll find the name of who we use and call you back.” Ronny hung up.

“Is he okay?”

Arden sighed and then made a decision. “Come with me. Let’s lock up the house and go on down to The Gingerbread. Ronny needs help, and I’m thinking you could use a drink and some time away from here.” His aunt didn’t seem convinced. “And I don’t want you to stay here alone. You’ll just worry.”

“Okay. Let me get my purse,” she said, and Arden hurried over to his place to change his shirt and get dressed in more work-appropriate attire. Once he was ready, he met his aunt in the yard, and they left through the back gate, walking the few blocks toward the center of town.

At The Gingerbread, Arden found his aunt a place at the bar before joining Ronny. “I thought you could use some help.”

“I really could. The bar is swamped, and I’ve been taking orders as well, but I’m getting behind.” Ronny began making drinks, and Arden grabbed a pad and checked with each table, taking orders and delivering food when it was ready. It was hopping for a few hours until the game started to wind down. Then people began filtering out, while others came in to replace them.

Yeardley came in after five to relieve him, and thankfully one of the bartenders was able to take a shift to relieve Ronny.

“How are you doing?” he asked his aunt, who had a beer in front of her and had been deep in discussion with the man next to her about which team was likely to go all the way. It was shocking how much his aunt knew and how easily she held her own.

“I’m fine. This is my third beer,” she told him. “And my last. I think if I have one more, I’m going to stumble home, and I don’t want that.”

“Did you get something to eat?”

“I had a sandwich a few hours ago. I’m good.” She pushed the glass away before motioning Ronny over. “I need to handle my tab, please.” She handed him a credit card, and he rang it through and gave her the slip to sign. “Are you done?”

“Yes. I’ve been relieved,” he told her. “So we can go home.” He let her slip off the stool and then led her out in the evening.

“You like him—I can tell,” Aunt Louise said as they walked. “You watch him all the time.”

“He’s my boss, and he was good enough to give me a job when I really needed one. That’s all.”

She snorted. “Don’t try to feed me that line of bull. I just sat at the bar watching both of you watch each other. It was cute. You heard he was busy, and you had to rush in, on your day off, just to see if he needed help.” She stopped as a car pulled down the alley. “If you ask me, I’d say you have it bad.”

“And what does it matter? He’s my boss, and I’m not going to get involved with him. It’s a minefield.”

“That may be true, but that doesn’t change the fact that you like him, and he feels the same way. Every time he thinks you aren’t paying attention, he’s looking at you in that way that makes your heart flutter.” His aunt smiled, and Arden shook his head.

“It doesn’t matter. Not with the way things are right now.” He had so much on his plate with his new job and all the crap with Uncle Charlie. The last thing he needed were additional complications. “And you know it’s a bad idea.”

She shrugged. "I know no such thing. Do you think Ronny is going to use his position as your boss to his advantage?"

"No." He was pretty sure about that.

"And are you going to use any relationship with Ronny to get what you want at work?"

Arden giggled and clapped his hand over his mouth. "You have to be kidding me. It isn't like there's a top to sleep my way to." He shrugged. "I just don't want other people to think that's why I took the job or why he gave me the chance."

"Are they really going to think that?" She continued walking down the back street. "Because I don't. Arden, you don't get to choose who you have feelings for, and if they develop into something deeper, then you definitely don't get to make a choice. The heart wants what the heart wants, and that's about it."

"Was it like that for you and Uncle Charlie?"

His aunt stopped walking. "No, it wasn't. Your grandparents knew his parents, and they pressed us to meet, and then once we did, they kept pushing us together. After the mess I'd made of my first marriage, they determined that they knew best, and I didn't have the backbone to stand up to them, not again. I kept wondering if I was wrong. They had been right before, so I thought they might be right this time, so when Charlie proposed, and they thought we were perfect for each other, I thought they had to be right, even though I wasn't sure. And for a while, things were good between us."

"But then he changed?" Arden asked.

She began walking again. "I think we both did. I realized he wasn't the man of my

dreams and started to pull away. He began to drink more, and then when I stood up to him, he attacked me back. He didn't hit me then, but he went after me verbally, and I grew less and less happy as he got more and more controlling. I don't think I even realized it was happening. I think it happened gradually, and I didn't really see it." She shivered. "Most of the friends I had are gone, and now my world is so small that...."

"It doesn't need to be that way. Call your old friends, tell them what happened and what you're doing. They'll be back." Maybe he was being naive, but it seemed to him that if they were his aunt's friends once, they would be again. "All it takes is one." Arden knew that was true. It only took one person to help change your life.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:52 am

Chapter Six

Ronny was bone-tired. What he really needed was a day off, but it didn't look like he was going to get one this week. Someone had tried to break into the bar Tuesday night, and thanks to Yeardley, they had been caught and were spending some time in jail, waiting for their hearings. One of the cooks had called in sick, and it turned out he had a bad case of the flu and wasn't going to be coming anywhere near food for a while. Thankfully, Ronny knew how to cook and had taken a shift in the kitchen. It was one thing after another, it seemed. He knew owning a place like The Gingerbread was a lot of work, but until this week, he hadn't realized just how much it had taken over his entire life.

"You need to go home and get some sleep," Arden told him about eleven on Thursday. "Is there someone who can close up for you?"

"Yeah, but he's out with the flu," Ronny told him, half asleep behind the bar and grateful it was slow.

"Then go back to your office and crash for a while. I got this," he said gently.

Ronny nodded, went back through the kitchen to his office, and closed the door. He turned off the light and stretched out on the old sofa his father had installed in there years ago. He closed his eyes, and the next thing he knew, the door opened as Arden carried the register drawers inside and set them on the desk.

Ronny blinked. "What time is it?"

“We’re closed, and the bar is all stocked. I sent most everyone else home, and I brought you back the evening’s take.” Arden was too energetic for words. He just kept going. Ronny rubbed his eyes and stretched. “If I can suggest, just slip it into the safe and go home. You can do all the balancing in the morning once you’ve had a chance to rest.”

He nodded, and Arden left. Ronny opened the safe and put everything inside, locked it up, and turned out the last of the lights. He found Arden at the door and let him out before locking up and going to his car. Ronny barely noticed his passenger and pulled off to let Arden out a few minutes later.

“Come on,” Arden said, after getting out and hurrying to the driver’s door. He opened it, and Ronny shut off the engine. “You’re out of any passing traffic and too damned tired.” Arden took his hand and led him into the yard and then inside the small building.

Ronny sat on the sofa, and Arden flipped off the lights. Ronny lay down and barely registered as Arden covered him with a blanket. He curled up and quickly slipped off to sleep, knowing he was safe.

It was dark when he startled awake, wondering where he was and how he got here. He sat up, blinking, trying to make his mind work. “What the hell?” he asked himself.

“Ronny?” It was Arden’s voice from his dream. “You were talking.” Footsteps on stairs pulled his attention, and then Arden sat next to him. Somehow, even though it was dark, he would have known that rich, sweet scent anywhere. “Come on.” A hand slipped into his, and Ronny let Arden tug him to his feet and then up the stairs.

Arden shrugged off his shirt before easing him down onto the mattress. His shoes and jeans followed. For a second, sexy thoughts flitted through his mind, but he was too tired for them to take root. “Just rest. Everything is fine.” Arden lay next to him, a

warm arm sliding around his waist, pressing close to him.

Ronny took a deep breath, sighing softly, and then closed his eyes.

The next thing he knew, it was light. He rolled over, facing Arden, whose eyes were closed, his features relaxed, without the hint of the worry and stress that seemed ever-present since they'd met.

"Morning," Arden told him a few moments later, sliding his blue eyes open. "Did you sleep?"

"Yeah," Ronny said, swallowing hard. He could get lost in those eyes, and Arden's lips were right there, so close, he could finally learn what they tasted like. For a second, he hesitated, but when Arden slid his tongue over his upper lip, Ronny closed the distance between them, their lips touching for the first time.

The kiss was slow, tender, and tentative for about three seconds until Arden pressed him, rocking him slowly onto his back. Ronny closed his arms around Arden as the energy between them built in moments. Arden was one hell of a kisser, and he seemed to throw himself into it.

"Arden," Ronny said, pulling back. "Are you sure?"

Those eyes blazed blue fire. "Sometimes you talk way too fucking much." He kissed him again.

Ronny rolled them on the bed and then slid his hands down Arden's back and over the curve of his ass. He continued the movement, taking the pair of boxers he encountered right along with them. In a matter of minutes, he had Arden naked against him, and it didn't take long for him to return the favor. Ronny held him tightly, their kisses becoming more urgent as they moved against one another. It was

almost more than Ronny could stand.

He watched folks flirt and hit on each other all the damned time. A few people turned their attentions his way, but he never encouraged people, and for years he had gone home alone. So having Arden in his arms was amazing, and damned if he didn't want this moment to last for a very long time. But it seemed that all these months of denying himself only built up the need, and his body was firing on all cylinders.

Arden quivered in his arms, and Ronny closed his eyes, deepening their kiss as his body seemed to develop a mind of its own.

He hadn't had this little control since he was in high school, but Arden seemed to bring out a passion in him he had long forgotten about. Still, Ronny managed to hang on by the tips of his fingers until he felt Arden still in his arms, groaning softly as heat spread between them. Ronny followed him into release, holding Arden tightly, almost afraid to move in case he broke the spell between them.

"You okay?" Arden asked. "You aren't freaking out or anything, are you?"

"No. But...."

"I'm not either, so don't go down that road. Okay?" Arden asked, and Ronny chuckled, enjoying the warmth.

"All right. No road-going," he whispered. "But I think we need to move." He gently shifted and lay next to Arden, who slipped out of bed and returned with a towel. He wiped them both up before climbing back into the bed.

Ronny looked up at the rough wood ceiling just a few feet above his head. "It's a little snug up here."

“Yeah. But it’s comfortable enough for just me.” He sighed. “I understand my aunt had it built for a cousin who was going to stay with her a number of years ago. After that, it was empty for a long time.”

Ronny hummed and closed his eyes. He didn’t want to ask about Arden’s uncle, but he was more than a little curious. Still he pushed his questions aside and gathered Arden to him, and they lay together quietly.

“You know you have all these muscles,” Arden said, running his fingers over Ronny’s chest.

“It’s from years of lifting cases of booze. Who would have thought that lugging tons of alcohol could make you fit? Well, that and working your ass off for years.”

Arden lifted the covers, peered under them, and then put them down again. “Your ass is still there, and it’s quite nice, if I do say so.” He grinned, and Ronny rolled his eyes.

“Thanks,” Ronny snickered softly. “What time is it?”

“It’s nearly ten.” Arden stretched and then settled back down. “I know you need to go soon to get ready to open and everything.” He suddenly seemed a little tentative.

“I do. And you need to be in this afternoon.” Ronny pushed back the covers and climbed out. “This is the part of the day that I hate the most. Sometimes it seems like I leave, sleep, and then go right back.” It was getting a little old.

“Then train someone to do some of the opening work. There’s no need for you to do it all. There are plenty of people who are capable of helping, which may allow you to take a day off.”

Ronny turned around. "I've been thinking of closing the place on Mondays altogether to give everyone a day away. We all need it."

"But you still need to find someone to help open or close," Arden pressed.

"I had someone for a couple years until I found out they were stealing from me. They took enough that they almost sank the entire business." Ronny swallowed hard. "It's difficult to trust anyone that much after that."

Arden paused. "What a self-centered, greedy bastard. That's just...."

"I know. It hurt when I finally figured it out. I felt like such a fool for trusting him for so long. It took me a year to get the business off the brink, and then after that, I was able to try to make improvements. I can't go back there."

He rolled over. "I understand that. But you can't keep this up either. You're working open to close many days, and you're going to wear yourself out. If you do that, then you aren't going to be able to continue."

Ronny sighed. "I know. It's just hard to trust anyone."

"My father had the same kind of problem. He stayed close to the money and the register all the time. He probably still does. The only person he trusted around it was Mom. But she couldn't work as many hours. She had to take care of us. I helped my dad, but...." Arden shrugged. "Look, I guess you have to take a chance and make sure that everything balances. But you have people you can trust, I'm sure. What about Lilly? She's smart, and she thinks you walk on water."

Ronny scoffed. Yeah, Ronny did his best to treat the people who worked for him the way they should be treated. That was something his father had instilled in him pretty deeply.

“Are you kidding? Everyone who works there has been saved by you in one way or another. You make up tips so we don’t get shorted. You saved me, and you helped Yeardley. I’m sure there are others, but I don’t know all of the people who work there that well.”

“Maybe...,” Ronny started. He didn’t really believe it. He had helped Zachary, too, and all it got him was being afraid to leave the bar for fear it would happen again.

“Then train someone to open up and someone else to close. Make the procedures as simple as you can and develop ways to monitor what happens and check that things are done right. That’s all you really need to do.” Ronny knew Arden was right. “I don’t want you to work yourself down to nothing.” He patted Ronny’s chest. “You’re too handsome for that.”

He closed his eyes and tried to think of the last time someone had taken the time to care for him. It was probably before his father passed away. He always thought of himself as the one who had to be strong and who was supposed to look out for the others in his life. His father had always done the same, making sure the people who worked for him were safe and being treated fairly. It wasn’t always easy, but Ronny did his best.

“Can I ask about your uncle?” He really wanted to change the subject, and his curiosity would no longer be denied.

“Vinny has been a godsend for Aunt Louise. He got her in touch with a divorce attorney, and they have filed the initial papers for separation. She’s opened new bank accounts without his name on them and got her money transferred. He apparently has accounts without her name on them, so she couldn’t touch those, but she found statements at the house. He will probably be able to use those for his bail, at least in part, but Vinny was able to make it clear to the court that Uncle Charlie is not able to come home. The restraining order application is being processed, and Vinny told my

aunt he has an appointment with the court today.” Arden seemed more relaxed than he had been in quite a while.

“Okay. But what is keeping your uncle behind bars?” It sounded to him like he should have been able to get himself out, if there was money that he had access to.

“He has to arrange a place for himself to live.”

Ronny stilled. “Let me guess—he tried to get the court to kick you out so he could stay here?”

“Yeah,” Arden said, lifting his gaze. “But this doesn’t fulfill the requirements of the restraining order, which Vinny expects to have after his meeting, and the judge in Uncle Charlie’s case is aware of the application and its likely approval, so he is waiting on that outcome and not letting my uncle live here. With his history, there’s just no way. So, he’s having to find another place, while he’s in jail, and that has to be quite hard.” Arden was definitely pleased. “I hope he can’t find anything and has to stay there for a while.”

Ronny shrugged. “I’m afraid there are enough places in town that Charlie will be able to rent a place, especially if he has the money. You and your aunt need to be prepared for when that happens. We all do.” Ronny was a little concerned that Charlie might try to cause trouble at The Gingerbread, but not nearly as much as he was concerned about Arden. For whatever reason, he had a fixation with Arden, and that worried him a lot. As long as Charlie was behind bars, Arden was safe, but once he was out, who knew how he’d behave. Though if he tried anything with either Arden or his aunt, Charlie would find himself back in jail for violating his bail, and that would cost him both in money and his freedom until trial. Ronny wanted to think that would be enough to keep Arden and his aunt safe, but who knew what was going to happen. “I wish I could help,” Ronny said.

Arden smiled. "You already are." He turned and groaned. "I really need to get up, and it's getting late enough that you're going to need to go into work." He leaned closer. "I wish we could stay here all day."

"Me too," Ronny said softly, drawing Arden closer, his hand sliding around his back, slipping over warm, smooth skin. "I wish I could. But as you said, I need to get in. I have things that I put off from last night." He had plenty that needed to be done. But it was warm and comfortable in this bed. For a few minutes, it felt like the rest of the world didn't exist. "Let me know when you know anything about your uncle."

"Well, we should have the restraining order today," Arden said. "God, this has to be the least romantic conversation ever had while naked in bed."

Ronny grinned. "Well, maybe we can change that... at least for a while." He drew Arden into a kiss, tugging Arden on top of him.

"What has you so damned happy?" Jack asked as he hauled a case of lettuce into the kitchen. The guy was eternally grumpy, and Ronny swore he had never seen him crack a smile for any reason. "Life pretty much sucks and then you die." He got to work, getting the lettuce ready for salads.

"You're just a ray of fucking sunshine. If you're so unhappy...."

Jack stopped. "Who says I'm not happy?" he asked, and Ronny sighed. "Anyway, why do you look like you got to lick the frosting bowl?"

"I had a good night. All right?" Ronny scowled back at Jack. "God, talking to you is about as fun as a root canal."

Jack shrugged. "I know I'm not all sunshine and lollipops. The world is going to hell, and there's nothing I can do about it. But that doesn't mean I'm not happy, in my

own way.” He leaned over the stainless steel work table. “So did you get a little something?”

Ronny met his gaze. “Do you really want to know the details?”

Shaking his head, Jack went back to his work. “God, no. I do not need to know the details of you getting your freak on, but it’s good that you have someone who can make you smile like that. I envy you.”

Jack had a wife and two kids, with a third on the way. “Why? You want to be single again? Dating and shit? It’s hell out there.”

“Oh, God no.” He lowered his gaze, and Ronny figured it was probably best to put Jack and his emotional weirdness out of his mind. If he tried to figure the guy out, his head was likely to explode.

“You gonna be ready for opening?”

“I already am. Go on and do your thing.” He returned to his work, and Ronny turned to go back out front.

“Hey...,” he began. “I need some help.”

Jack paused in his cutting.

“I need someone to open the place a few days a week. Make sure the kitchen is ready, get the tills set up, unlock the doors, that sort of thing.”

“You want me to do that?” Jack asked, nodding. “Sure. I’m here early anyway.” He went back to his prep, and Ronny left the kitchen, smiling to himself. He had someone to open two days a week. Now he just needed someone who could close up.

That was a more difficult, but he had a few ideas. But once he got Jack trained, he could have a couple of days where he could come in later. That was a start.

He got the registers ready to open and made a run to the bank before returning to get the bar set up for the day. By opening time, he was ready to go, but no one came through the door for the first fifteen minutes. When the door finally opened, it was Arden, flushed, his eyes wide.

“He’s out on bail,” he said, shaking as he came to a stop. Ronny hurried out from behind the bar, taking Arden into his arms. “He found a place, and they let him out.”

“What about the restraining order?” Ronny asked.

“I don’t know.” Arden shook in his arms, and Ronny held him, his mind turning to what he could do to help.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:52 am

Chapter Seven

Arden had no idea what he was going to do. All he kept thinking was that his uncle was out again and free to harass both him and his aunt.

“Why don’t you sit down, and I’ll get you something to drink.” Ronny guided Arden to a seat on one of the chairs and returned behind the bar to get him a glass of water. “Let’s call Vinny and see what he has to say.”

Arden was as pale as a sheet, but he took a drink and nodded.

“How did you find out about the bail?”

“Uncle Charlie called Aunt Louise. She’s scared half to death.”

“Where is she now?” Ronny asked.

“At work in a help desk data center in Camp Hill,” Arden answered. “She’s secure there. They have security. I told her to make sure she let them know that she and Uncle Charlie had separated and that they weren’t to let him in if he shows up.” He took another sip of water. “She should be okay. But what about when she goes home?” All he could imagine was Uncle Charlie waiting for her—or him—in the dark.

Ronny made a call, and Arden continued sipping the water, trying to get himself to calm down. It was hard. He thought things were going to be very different only a few hours ago. “Yeah... okay....” Ronny continued to listen. “He’s right here.” Ronny

handed him the phone.

“Vinny?” Arden said.

“Yes. The judge approved the order this morning, and your uncle has been given a copy of it so he can’t try to argue ignorance. That’s the good news.”

“I know he’s out on bail.”

“Yes, he is. But the restraining order only covers your aunt. I tried to get you included as well, but there wasn’t enough evidence for me to do that, at least not at this time. However, he must stay at least one hundred and fifty feet away from where she works and lives, so your residence is covered.”

“Okay.” At least his aunt was safe. That was the most important thing.

“If you see him near the house, get a picture of him. If he violates the order and we can prove it, then he goes back to jail. He’s also being monitored with an ankle bracelet and is only supposed to be at home or at work.”

“I see,” Arden said. “So that means that if he comes by the house, they should know about it.”

“Yes. They can track him through GPS. Now, it isn’t like someone is watching him the entire time, but yeah, they will know.”

“So he could sneak out and come by the house, and as long as he doesn’t get caught....”

“No, see, that’s the good part. It’s GPS, so the coordinates of where he can be as well as where he isn’t supposed to be are loaded into the system. If he goes to the house, it

will set off his ankle monitor and alert the monitoring center. They will check his whereabouts and alert the police. It isn't foolproof, but the system is pretty good. There have been people who have fooled it, but that's pretty hard to do."

"Okay." Arden felt like he could breathe now. "Thank you for everything."

"It wasn't all that much, and I'm glad I could help. I'm mostly an administrator now, but it's good for me to keep my hand in. Let me know if you need anything more. But as of right now, this is all I think I can do."

"I appreciate all your help, and I know my aunt does as well." He hung up and handed Ronny back his phone. "So, I guess that's it."

"Well, yes and no. Your uncle is only out on bail. He still has charges pending, and we'll have to see what the DA does with them."

"Good. Hopefully that will keep him on his best behavior, but I doubt it is going to do all that much. My uncle is going to make his presence known somehow. Uncle Charlie may be many things, but he isn't someone who gives up on much, especially on what he thinks is his." Arden sighed and drank some more water. "And thank you for everything."

Ronny nodded. "We'll just need to do what we can to make sure both of you are safe."

Arden nodded, glad for the first-person plural. "Yeah. But it also means that he could cause trouble here. Especially if he figures out a way to make this part of his route home." Arden was trying to figure out how his uncle could get around his restrictions, because he sure as hell would. That was the kind of person he was. His uncle wasn't someone to break the rules, but he was the kind of person who would try to use them to his benefit if he possibly could. And if he could harass any of those he felt were

responsible for his situation, he definitely would. No question about it.

“I have cameras outside because of a fire in one of the dumpsters not too long ago. If he shows up here, we will have a record, and I doubt a judge is going to let him use the excuse of stopping somewhere for a drink on his way home.”

“Okay.” It felt like they were battening down the hatches and raising the drawbridge in order to protect themselves from his uncle. That wasn’t fucking fair to anyone. Least of all Ronny, who had nothing to do with any of this. His family drama shouldn’t affect everyone in his life. “But maybe...” He didn’t even want to say it. “I don’t want to bring my troubles to you.”

Ronny rolled his eyes. “Please. I’ve seen trouble before. I own a bar. Kids come in here and start fighting on the pool tables. Last month, I had them using pool cues to have a sword fight that escalated to pool stick assault. Like I said, I’ve seen it all. So don’t worry. I have people here who can intervene if he comes around.”

Arden wasn’t so sure.

“Just stop. I can see the doubt in your eyes, and you need to let it go. You aren’t responsible for your uncle. He is. And you can’t stop living your life because of him. Your aunt can’t either. So watch your back, don’t go places alone, and make sure that someone is watching over her. If you see something, call the police. They will understand if it turns out to be nothing.”

“Thanks,” Arden said softly as a few customers came through the door. He finished the water and slid down off the bar stool. “I’ll see you later.”

He left and sighed as he stepped outside. Arden thought of going home but turned and headed downtown instead. He needed a chance to walk and clear his mind. When his phone rang, he checked the screen and considered whether he should answer the call

or not. Part of him wanted to, but still he hesitated. “Mom,” he said coolly. “What is it you want?”

“I understand Louise left her husband. Is that because of you?” she snapped.

Arden refused to rise to the bait. “It’s because he hits her,” he answered. He was beyond trying to soothe her feelings, and it was a fact.

“That can’t be true,” she said. “Louise should stay with him and work things out.” Her old line, reused again and again.

“Is that why you stay with Dad?” he asked. “Because you just figure you need to stay and make things work?”

She sputtered. “If I wanted sass from you....”

“You forget. You and Dad kicked me out. So I will say whatever I want to you. You don’t have the right to tell me how to behave. And I think Aunt Louise is doing the right thing. No one has the right to hit someone else. Would you leave if Dad started smacking you around?” He had asked to make a point, but the silence on the other side of the line spoke volumes. Jesus... did his dad hit his mom? “Mom,” he said more gently, “does Dad do that?”

“You don’t understand.” Her words were so soft.

“I’ll kick his ass,” Arden said firmly. “So help me, I will beat him into next week.” Suddenly, it didn’t matter what his parents had done. If his mother needed help, he was going to be there. “Louise is your sister, and Uncle Charlie has been hurting her. She deserves more than that... better than that... so do you.” Christ on the cross, his family seemed to be coming apart at the seams from everywhere.

He listened and realized his mother was crying.

“Mom, go to Aunt Louise’s. Do it now. She’s at work, but I will be there in a few minutes. Just come over there. You need to be safe. Aunt Louise will be home this afternoon, and the two of you can talk.” There was no need for this shit. What he wanted to do was kick both his uncle and his dad right in the juicy parts.

“I’m not sure. What if your father finds out?”

“You’re just visiting your sister,” he told her.

Well... I’ll think about it.” She seemed to sigh, and he heard her on the line for a few more seconds. Then the call ended, and he realized she was gone.

God, his family was a real mess, and he’d had no idea just how bad it had been. Arden couldn’t help wondering how long his father had been hurting his mom, but one way or another, it had to end. Though if his mom wasn’t willing to do anything about it, there was only so much he could do.

Arden left a message for his aunt to explain about his call with his mother. He got a response almost immediately that she hoped she’d come over. It seemed to her that they really needed to talk.

I hope she shows up, but I don’t know if she will. Louise has been under Charlie’s control for a long time, and she may not feel strong enough to get away from it. He slipped his phone back in his pocket and continued his walk, needing time to digest all the revelations that seemed to happen almost by the minute.

“Are you sure I should be here?” Ronny asked that afternoon. Lilly was watching over things for him. Ronny had gotten busy making arrangements as soon as Arden told him the latest bit of news.

“Yeah. Aunt Louise is nervous and a little shaken up because Uncle Charlie asked to get some of his things. He has a right to do so per the order, but she doesn’t want to be alone with him when he does, and you’re more than a little intimidating, especially when you want to be, so he isn’t likely to cause trouble.” He had no idea if his mother was going to make an appearance or not, but that only added to the complexity of the situation. “But you don’t have to do this if you don’t want to.” He bit his lower lip, worried that he was pulling Ronny more deeply into his family drama.

“Hey. It’s fine. If you need backup, I’ll be there.” He took Arden’s hand as they walked the two blocks from The Gingerbread to his aunt’s house.

Raised voices drifted across the backyard as soon as they stepped through the gate. Arden picked up his pace, going in through the back door to find his mother staring down his uncle while Aunt Louise huddled on the sofa.

“Get out,” Arden told Uncle Charlie, who glared at him and didn’t move.

“You have five minutes to get your shit and leave.” Ronny pulled out his phone. “Otherwise, I’m calling the police, and we’ll request that your bail be rescinded.”

Uncle Charlie grinned like some carton supervillain. “She gave permission for me to be here.” He pointed at Aunt Louise.

“And now it’s being rescinded,” Arden snapped. “All it takes is a phone call that you’re threatening Aunt Louise, and you’ve violated your bail. Now, like Ronny said, you have five minutes. Get what you need, and if you take anything that isn’t yours, the police will be called.” Arden pointed. “Now, march...” He pointed to the stairs.

“I need a suitcase or something.”

Arden hurried away and returned with a couple black garbage bags. “You can use

these for your shit. Now get moving. Four minutes left.” He set a timer on the phone. “You better move your ass.” Arden showed the countdown timer. “Move!”

His uncle went upstairs, and Ronny followed him, presumably to make sure he didn’t take what wasn’t his. Mom sat next to his aunt, the two of them talking quietly.

“Are you both okay?” Arden asked. “He’ll be out of here in a few minutes and then you can call and make sure they know that the house is off-limits once more. And next time he needs to come, make sure you aren’t here. I can handle him.”

“Honey,” Aunt Louise said quietly. “It’s like I’m stuck in a nightmare, and I keep hoping it will come to an end.”

Arden wanted to try to reassure her, but he didn’t know what to say. She was right: both she and his mom were stuck in their own personal nightmares. “It will be over. He’ll be gone, and you don’t have to let him come back. He can send someone else.”

Heavy footsteps on the stairs indicated that they were returning. His uncle carried two of the black bags, one in each hand, muttering as Ronny followed. He went right to the front door, opened it, and ushered his uncle outside. Then Ronny closed it and threw the lock. His aunt called the number she had and explained that he was done and had left the house. Then she finally seemed to relax.

“You could have talked to him,” his mother said.

“Are you back to this?” Arden asked her. “Just stop. She’s leaving him, and it’s a good thing. There isn’t anything to work out. Uncle Charlie is an abuser, and he isn’t going to stop any more than Dad is.”

His mother looked like she had been slapped.

“Adelle,” Louise said softly. “You too?” His aunt took her sister’s hand. “Don’t let him do that. Yes, this may be a nightmare, but it will end, and I’m not going back to Charlie. He’s going to be out of my life, and once this ends, I will build something new and go on. You need to do the same thing.”

“But....” His mom lowered her gaze.

“There are no buts, Adelle. Arden helped show me that I don’t deserve this, and deep down, you know you don’t either. If you need a place to stay, you can come here. I have an extra room upstairs.” And just like that, he watched his aunt find her strength and her voice. It was like magic. “We don’t deserve it.”

“But...,” his mom said again.

“What, Mom? What is it that you think is wrong?” He hated seeing her so beaten down, but he supposed that was what happened. “You have the strength to do this.”

“Your father and I took vows, and....” Her voice drifted off.

“And Dad broke them. He vowed to love, honor, and cherish you, remember? How is hitting you any of those things?” Arden asked her.

She looked at him for a few seconds and then put her hands over her face and began to cry.

“Just let it out,” Louise soothed. “I’ve done plenty of crying over the past few days. You can let it all out.” She wrapped her arms around Louise and held her.

Ronny gently took him by the arm and led him back through the house. “We need to let the two of them talk. They both need to make their decisions for themselves, and I’m thinking that they’ll actually be able to help each other.”

Arden agreed. They stepped out into the backyard with its paver stone path through the yard, and Arden sat in one of the chairs around the table on the patio. His aunt had done the yard in a riot of color. "I hope they'll be okay."

"Your mother seems...."

Arden nodded and was pleased that Ronny didn't continue. "My mom baked me butterscotch cookies when I was a kid. I know that seems like a stupid thing to remember, but I loved them, and my dad hated them. She used to bake them whenever he was out of town. Every... single... time. It was like our secret thing." He thought back on their life while he had been growing up. "I didn't understand it at the time, but Mom always deferred to him. I think she thought it was her wifely duty or something. I don't know. But...." He sniffed. "I think I understand it now." And it hurt to think that his dad had been mistreating his mom for all that time. "Mom is smart. She always helped me with my homework. Even when I had algebra, and it was so hard to figure out, she understood it and was able to explain it to me. Every time. She always read, and she...."

"You saw that?" his mom said, the back door snapping closed after her. Arden sat up straighter. "No one else ever did."

"Sure I did. You read a lot, and you always made sure I had my homework done. You checked it until I was in high school. I never got things wrong because you always pointed out the wrong answers, and you could do the problems in your head."

She nodded but still seemed like she was pulling into herself.

"Did you and Aunt Louise have a good talk?"

"Yes, we did. I understand more about why she's doing what she's doing. And Charlie acted terribly." She seemed to wring her hands, which told Arden how

nervous and uncomfortable she was. “I guess, while I don’t know if she’s doing the right thing, she’s still my sister, and these are her decisions to make.”

Arden stood and moved closer. “You have to let others live their own lives, and if you want to be part of them, then you have to accept and support them.”

“Even if they’re wrong?” she asked.

Arden took a deep breath. “You always have to remember that you could be the one who is wrong.”

Her eyes widened like she had never considered that.

“None of us has a monopoly on being right. Aunt Louise is making the best decisions she can for her. And you can disagree, but remember that you could also be wrong, and Aunt Louise could be the one who was right all along.” He didn’t add that the same thing went for him. His mom was smart enough that she could figure that out.

“I should get going,” she said as she hooked her purse on her arm.

“Of course.” He wished his mother could see how much of Aunt Louise was reflected in herself. “But just one more question. Did she show you the bruises?” he asked very softly. His mom shook her head. “Then maybe you don’t have enough information to form an opinion after all.” He guided her to the gate between the row houses toward the street and locked it after she was gone.

“You okay?” Ronny asked.

“Yes and no. I guess I wish my mom could see what’s going on within herself and in her own life. But she doesn’t.”

Ronny pushed the chair back, and Arden sat down. “People will see what’s easiest for them. Maybe your mom doesn’t want to feel like a victim. Or if she left your father, she would look on that as a failure, and no one wants to think of themselves that way. Keep the dialogue open as best you can, be there for her, and then let her come to her own conclusions. What you and Louise said today isn’t going to just go away. It’s going to sink in, and she’s going to think. The next time your father mistreats her, she’s going to remember it. What happened today is like a seed, and it’s going to need a chance to grow.”

“But what if it doesn’t?” he asked with a soft sigh.

“Then you plant another one.” That seemed too simple. “Your mom is going to need more than your aunt and you before she turns her world upside down. I mean, she’s almost come to accept the way things are. It’s been part of her life for a long time.”

Arden didn’t know what to say. He didn’t like the thought of his mother being hurt, but he couldn’t help her if she didn’t want to be helped.

Aunt Louise came out with a tray, setting it on the table. She poured glasses of iced tea and sat down. “It took me a long time before I was ready. This was just the straw that broke the camel’s back. I’ve been thinking about things between me and Charlie for quite a while. What he did to you was just what finally opened my eyes and help showed me the way out.” She sipped from her glass. “Your mom is going to need time. She has to see the kind of man your father is.”

“I just want to help,”

“I know that. But she isn’t ready for your help. Not yet and knowing my sister and how stubborn she can be, she may never be ready for it.”

Ronny gently patted his hand. “She’s right.”

Arden wished he could do something to make his mom see just what was going on around her. “So, we just wait?”

“Sometimes it’s the hardest thing to do. You can’t help her until she wants it, and right now, she doesn’t.” Aunt Louise handed him a glass of tea. “There is no use in wanting something you just can’t have. I hope that she comes to one of us for help or to say that she’s had enough and needs to know what to do. But until then, all we can do is give her time and be there when she needs us.”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:52 am

Chapter Eight

It had been one hell of a week, and Ronny was exhausted by the time they finally ushered the last person out of the bar in the wee hours of Sunday morning. Everyone had been working insanely hard to keep up with a packed house, with a bachelor party as well as a bachelorette party all on the same night. Bachelor parties he could take, but it was the ladies who really knew how to raise some hell, especially once the two groups found each other. Good God.

Thankfully, the kitchen had closed at midnight, and the staff had already cleaned up and gone home. Ronny stocked the front bar while Arden helped. They'd closed the back bar at the same time as the kitchen, so they were just about done.

"I got this," Arden told him with a mustered smile. "Go finish the office work so we can get out of here." He yawned and was clearly as low on energy as Ronny. The change to closing on Mondays was all set to start this week, with the staff rescheduled and the website updated, along with the signs on the bar doors. And he was looking forward to it.

He had just sat at his desk when Arden barreled in. "Check the cameras. Something is going on outside in the back."

Ronny pulled up his phone. "It looks like a fight of some kind." He showed Arden.

"Jesus, they're fighting over access to the dumpster." Arden groaned and sighed. "That's one of the best places for food if you really need it."

Ronny wondered for a second how Arden knew that and then it clicked. Holy crap... the thought of him dumpster diving to eat just made Ronny angry.

“Call the police. These may be the folks who set the fire, trying to keep the other from getting access.” He left the office as Ronny made a call.

Once he finished, Ronny jumped up and followed Arden to the back door. The scuffle outside grew louder as Arden opened it. “Arden...,” Ronny cautioned.

“The police have been called and are on their way.” Arden closed and locked the door quickly as Ronny checked the cameras again. The men seemed to stop fighting, and after a few seconds, took off down the alley. Well, that worked.

“I better let the police in,” Ronny said, heading to the main entrance to let the officers inside when they arrived. He explained what he saw and the actions they took. Ronny also showed them the camera footage.

“We know these people. They are getting more aggressive lately. The food banks and shelters have cut back, so it’s getting harder for them to find food in the more conventional ways.”

“What do I do?” Ronny asked. “I don’t want them setting more fires or fighting over food scraps behind the bar. Someone might get hurt, and I don’t want more damage to the building. There’s plenty of light back there. I don’t want to add more because it will affect my tenant living on the second floor.” He hoped Yeardeley hadn’t been disturbed too much by all of this. She had worked until after midnight.

“We’ll see if we can locate these two and see what they have to say. But them knowing that you’re watching is a good step forward. Another thing you can do is make sure that all your trash is as compacted if possible. It makes for less food that’s desirable.”

Ronny nodded and thanked the officers before letting them out. “I hate being this way.”

“I know. But you need to ensure that everyone is safe and that the building isn’t in danger. At least they know that someone is watching, and they’ll be more careful. As for the food and compacting the trash....”

“Yeah, well... I can look into it. These people are hungry. That’s the root of the problem. With food getting more expensive, I know these people are suffering, and I wish there was something I could do. But I can’t afford to feed them.”

Arden went right into his arms. “You don’t have to. But maybe we can do a benefit night or something for one of the food banks or shelters. At least then we’d be working toward a solution of some sort. There are groups of folks who take clothing and food out to where the homeless are staying. Maybe we can help them. I don’t know. But it’s something to think about.” Arden yawned. “Right now, I just want to finish up here, lock up, and go to bed. Those ladies wore me out.”

Ronny smiled. “I know. They had you shaking your little backside every five minutes for a while.” They kept ordering Arden’s drink of the day so he would put on his show while making it.

“You watched me?” Arden asked.

Ronny drew him closer. “Of course I saw you. How could I not? Everyone was hooting and hollering back here, so I had to see what was going on.” He leaned down. “It was really sexy.” He was about to kiss him when Arden yawned.

“Oh, God, sorry.”

Ronny chuckled and released him. “Let’s finish up so we can get out of here.” He

returned to his office to secure the cash and the receipts before locking up the safe. Arden had finished and sat slumped in one of the chairs, already half asleep. “Let’s go. Have you talked with your aunt?”

“Yeah. She said everything was quiet and promised to call if there were any issues. I don’t think Uncle Charlie is going to break his bail directly, but I’m sure he’s got something planned to try to get back at Aunt Louise. I just don’t know what it is yet.”

Ronny got them outside and locked the doors before guiding Arden to his car and driving to the house, where they went inside. “Go on up if you want. I’ll be right there.” He went out to the back deck, the stillness of the night surrounding him. He needed this. The quiet and the sound of the water. After hours of overlapping sound, demanding patrons, and problem solving, he just needed a few minutes of nothing.

Arden’s arms slipped around his waist. “I knew I’d find you out here.” The two of them had been coming back here a few days a week, since there was more room here. But they also spent time at Arden’s. He leaned against Ronny’s back. “It’s always so peaceful out here. Everyone else is asleep.”

“Yes, and we should be too.” Still, he couldn’t help inhaling deeply, the scent of the water on the air. “Come on.” He turned and kissed Arden, the heat building quickly. Then he guided Arden inside and closed the door. Taking his hand, he led him upstairs, where they got undressed and fell into bed. As much as he would have adored making love to Arden, they both fell asleep almost immediately.

Ronny cracked his eyes open, wondering what the hell that noise was. He thought it was his phone, and he grabbed for it, but it was dark. “Arden,” he said gently.

“Huh?”

“Your phone,” Ronny told him.

Arden rolled over, and the noise stopped. “Hello...,” he said groggily. “Wait....” He sat up. “What?” Suddenly, he was much more awake. “You need to get to Aunt Louise’s right now. Can you?” More quiet followed. “Okay. You get there. Of course, she’ll welcome you. God, just stop and get there.” He ended the call.

“Who was that?” Ronny asked, rubbing his eyes.

“Mom.”

“Is she all right? Is she hurt?” His mind jumped to the discussion they’d had a few days earlier.

“She’s fine that way. Dad has been going out on Saturdays. Mom thought he was with friends. But last night she followed him... to the Super 8. It seems he’s been...” Arden’s voice broke, and he buried his face against Ronny. “The old bastard has been visiting prostitutes and taking them back to the hotel. Mom apparently saw it and confronted him with it when he got home. She is really angry, hurt, and doesn’t know what to do.”

“It was a good idea to have her see your aunt. At least she can help her.”

Arden shrugged. The reaction seemed strange because he would have expected more intensity and even anger at the situation. “Mom doesn’t know what to do, but I know she’s trying to figure out how she can work things out. At least that’s what she said she needed to talk to Aunt Louise about. Mom was going to call her.”

“Do you want to go over?” Ronny asked.

“No. I think I’ve spent enough of my time and effort on the two of them. Aunt Louise will know how to handle Mom, and she doesn’t need any of my help. Also, Mom is more likely to open up if I’m not there.”

“True. This sort of thing is not something you want to talk about with your son.”

“Yeah, I get that. But at least she’s going to Aunt Louise’s. That will make all the difference in the world for her.”

Ronny was pretty sure Arden wanted to be there and was holding himself back. But it was the right decision. “You want to protect her even after what she did?” Ronny asked.

Arden shrugged and settled back under the covers. “I think she’ll be different once she’s out of my father’s influence. I could be wrong. But in some ways, it doesn’t matter. She’s still my mom, and no matter what, I still love her. She looked after me all those years, so....” He sighed, and Ronny tugged him to him, gently running his hands over his belly.

“Do you think you can let it go for a little while?” He drew closer, nipping lightly at the back of Arden’s neck. “Because I have something that could take your mind off just about everything.”

Arden snorted.

“What?”

“The penis is not a memory wiper.”

Ronny groaned. “No. But it has the power to make things seem less urgent, and it certainly has the power to make guys stupid.”

Arden rolled over. “Okay. Maybe I could use a little stupid right now. I certainly could use a little less immediacy around all this family stuff.”

Ronny tugged him closer. “Then I’ll see what I can do.” He kissed Arden hard, pushing him back on the mattress, and damn, he loved the way Arden gave himself over to him. The trust in his eyes and the urgency in his breath was enough to nearly send Ronny over the edge right then. So very few people had ever treated him that way without expecting something in return. That was love as far as Ronny was concerned: giving without expectations. What more could he ever want?

The words were on the tip of his tongue to tell Arden how he felt, but he held back, not quite ready to go there. It wasn’t Arden, but him. That sort of thing had the power to make things wonderful, but those same three words also had the ability to blow things all to hell, and Ronny wasn’t sure at the moment which of those would happen. Though with each breath and the passion filling Arden’s eyes, the picture of what he wanted was becoming clearer by the second. The way Arden watched him, the way his eyes darkened and his breath hitched, but mostly, it was the way Arden’s body just seemed made for him. They moved together, building the heat between them until Ronny wasn’t sure he could take it any longer. And yet he did... again and again. The closer he got to the edge, the more Arden seemed to anticipate it and help him back so that their love making lasted until the sun lit the room brightly, and Arden practically glistened in the light, like he shone. Then and only then did they both soar together in a release that left Ronny breathless.

“I need to go see my aunt and my mom,” Arden said on Monday morning. It seemed so strange not to have to open The Gingerbread.

“Cool. I want to stop by the bar just to make sure everything is okay.” He thought of doing a project or two on the inside to continue his efforts to freshen up the place, but he decided that could wait until next week. One complete day off wasn’t going to hurt.

“All right.” Arden got out of bed, traipsing around the bed, his little bubble butt bouncing. “I’ll meet you in the kitchen.” He dressed and hurried out.

Ronny wondered where he got all that energy. He closed his eyes, stretching out until the scent of breakfast drew him out of bed. He pulled on some light clothes and went downstairs. Arden was frying bacon and making some eggs while he had bread in the toaster. Once everything was done, he put together breakfast sandwiches and brought them to the table. “These look really good.”

“I’m glad. I love these things. Mom used to make them for me. We never went to McDonalds when I was a kid, so this was as close to an egg McMuffin as I got until I was a teenager.” He poured juice and then sat down next to Ronny. “Eat before it gets cold.”

“You cooked for me,” Ronny said.

“Yeah, but don’t expect it every week. I’m passable in the kitchen and can make basic things, but that’s about all. I can bake a cake using a mix, and I can bake cookies. But if it’s complicated, it’s best to keep me away.”

Ronny shrugged. “I don’t like complicated food anyway. If it’s simple and good, that’s all I need. Like this.” He ate all of his, happily. He didn’t have to cook it, and Arden had done a really good job.

“Do you eat a lot at work?”

Ronny nodded. “There are a few things on the menu because they’re my favorites. They don’t sell a great deal, but I really like them, so I keep them on. They’re not complicated and don’t require extra ingredients, so it’s fine.”

“Like what?”

“Sometimes I just want a salad with a bunch of meat on it. We don’t make them often, but we have all the stuff for other things, so the chef salad stays on. I also love

a good BLT. So I train the chefs to grill the bread instead of toasting it, because I love it that way.”

“Me too. They’re the best.” Arden grinned. “I really like chili. What Mom made is really good. So maybe I’ll try to get her recipe and give it a whirl. The worst thing, we end up having BLTs.”

“I like mine meaty.”

Arden snickered. “You like everything meaty.” That laugh and the smile were amazing. Ronny loved that he could make Arden look that happy.

Once they were ready to go, Ronny drove to The Gingerbread. It was locked up tight and quiet, which he was grateful for. Ronny did a quick walk-through, turning off a few of the ceiling fans that they had forgotten about last night. He locked up again and joined Arden in the car, then headed out to his place.

“That’s Mom’s car,” Arden said, sitting straighter and becoming more agitated by the second. Ronny stopped, and Arden got out, watching the front of the house. Then together they went to the front door, which Adelle opened. She looked tired and more than a little harried. Arden didn’t say anything but just hugged her tightly.

Ronny was becoming more than a little worried about Arden. All this upheaval in his life had to be taking more of a toll on him than he was letting on. Louise greeted them as they moved inside.

“I suppose you want to talk about all this,” Adelle said as they sat down, and Arden bit his lower lip and shrugged. “I don’t know what that means.”

Ronny smiled. “It means that Arden isn’t sure what he wants to talk about or how much he wants to know.” He took Arden’s hand.

“Yeah, what he said.”

“Okay.” Adelle told him. She looked about as pulled-thin as Arden seemed to be.

Louise cleared her throat. “Let’s put all the heartrending and grand confessions on hold for all of us.” She sat down across from Arden. “I know it seems like the family is falling apart... and maybe it is in a way. But your mom, me, and you have to figure out a way forward, and this isn’t a group thing. Each of us has to chart our own path, and that includes you. Your father... well, regardless of the state of the relationship between you, he’s still your father, and nothing is going to change that. We all know what he did to you... and now how he treated Adelle.”

Arden cleared his throat. “But I hate him,” he finally said.

“Don’t...,” his mother told him softly. “It takes too much energy for that.”

Arden’s head snapped around to her. “Huh? After all he did to both of us?”

She nodded. “We need to figure out a way forward. I’m going to take some time to decide what it is that I really want. But you... you’re independent now and building your own life. So keep doing that. Don’t let the mess that I’m in or Louise is in stop you from moving forward. We’ll figure it out one way or another. You figure out your way.”

Arden looked at each of them. “So you’re okay?”

Adelle nodded. “I don’t know what I’m going to do, but that’s my path to blaze. And I’m glad to know I have your support. Up until now, I relied on others to lead the way, and now it’s something I have to do for myself.” She took Arden’s hand. “But don’t worry about me.”

“But....”

“It’s going to take some time, but I’ll figure it out.”

Arden swallowed. “You don’t need my help.” He sounded kind of disappointed.

“No. And you don’t need mine. You are perfectly capable of going your own way. You made that clear when you told us you were gay and then you stood up to your father. I’m sorry I let him throw you out, I really am, and I see things more clearly than I have in a long time. But you went ahead and made a life of your own here. And you need to keep doing that and not let the problems between your father and I weigh you down.”

Arden nodded slowly. “Have you talked to him?”

“He’s up in Sunbury looking after the bar, and I’m going to stay here, for a while at least. I don’t know what’s going to happen between us. I have a lot of forgiving to work my way through before I’d even consider taking him back, and he has a hell of a lot of groveling ahead of him before that could happen.”

“And the rest?” Arden asked.

“I’m working my way through all of it.” She stood, and when Arden did the same, she hugged him. “Go on and leave me here. Louise and I have each other, and we’ll help figure our ways forward.”

Arden stepped back. “Okay. I guess I wasn’t quite expecting this.... But I’m happy for both of you, and I’m here if you need me.” He hugged his aunt as well, and then they left, stepping out in the early-summer sunshine. “That was not what I was expecting.”

“I don’t see why not. You got your strength from somewhere, and I doubt it was from your father. He seems more the bullying type.”

“I guess.” Arden looked both ways before crossing the street. “So what do we do?”

“How about something fun?” Ronny asked, and Arden pulled open the cart door as Ronny approached.

“Definitely.” He licked his lips and waited for exactly what Ronny had in mind.

Chapter Nine

“When you said have some fun, I sort of expected something... I don’t know....” Arden said as Ronny pulled into the parking lot.

“You thought we were going back to bed,” Ronny said with a grin. “Oh, we’ll do that, definitely.”

“But go-carts?” Arden asked as they got out, the engines zooming as the cars rounded the nearby track. He closed his eyes as memories washed over him. Arden sighed as he returned to the present. “Really? This is what you want to do for fun?” He shook his head, even as he smiled. Okay, this looked amazing, and Ronny grinned right back at him.

“Sure.” He took Arden’s arm. “Come on. Let’s go pay and then we can ride. They’re fun, and you and I deserve a little of that right now. Real laughing, smiling fun. No worrying about bars or families, anything like that. Just pure delight like we had when we were kids.”

“If you say so,” Arden told him with fake grouchiness.

Ronny rolled his eyes dramatically before they went inside, and he loaded up a card with their go-cart rides. Then they went outside and chose their cars. Ronny picked a red one, but Arden chose the purple racer. It seemed they were the only two on the track this time, and Arden got out in front as soon as they were allowed to go, inching Ronny out as the on-ramp narrowed.

“I’ll get past you,” Ronny shouted, but Arden put his accelerator to the floor and sped around the track, taking the smallest distance as they passed around the curves. Ronny kept on his back for the first couple of laps and then Arden started to pull ahead, putting a little more distance between him and Ronny with each lap.

“What was it you were saying?” Arden called as they ended the race and returned to the home base. He got out of the go-cart, hurrying to where Ronny waited.

“Yours was just faster,” Ronny grumped. Arden shrugged as Ronny used the card to log them in once more. Since their carts were now in back of the line, they took the ones in front. Both were green, and this time Arden started off behind, but passed Ronny on the second lap and then bade him goodbye.

“You were saying?” Arden said when he won the second race.

“How? I was ahead,” Ronny grouched. “You passed me like nothing.”

“It’s all in the turns,” Arden said. “You’re trying to take them too closely, and the rear wheels spin out a little. You lose speed, and when you did, I passed you. Also, you’re taking the snake curves too wide. Just weave right through and you get the shortest distance,” he explained, and on the third race, they were evenly matched and agreed that it was a tie as they walked back inside. “See.”

“Did you race go-carts before?” Ronny asked.

Arden grinned. “Yeah. It was something....” He paused and turned away, wiping his eyes. “When I was twelve, Dad and I built a go-cart, and we used to race with others in the area. It was so much fun. We used an old lawn mower engine. It was something the two of us did together.” He had forgotten all about it until now. “That is, until Dad got tired of it. I always loved it, but I couldn’t do it without Dad, and he sort of lost interest.” After that, whenever Arden had suggested something they could do

together, his father was too busy.

“Did you win a lot?”

“Yeah. I used to be able to go pretty fast, and I knew how to make the most of the tracks. We figured out how to widen the wheel base so the go-cart was more stable, and I could go faster on the turns. After that, I won a lot, and Dad was super happy. Then others figured out the same thing we did, and they started to win, and Dad didn’t care about it anymore.”

“But you had fun, right?” Ronny asked.

“Sure, I did. But once Dad stopped, it got ripped away. The go-carts sat in the garage for a while until Dad decided he needed the space to work on cars and took them apart. He found a wreck and pulled it into the garage. The thing is still there, and it hasn’t moved or been worked on at all. That’s my father in a nutshell. It was all about him and what he wanted. It didn’t matter that I liked what we were doing together. He got tired, and that was it. It was the same with fishing or anything else we did together.” Arden shrugged. “So I had to find things of my own to do, and he and I grew apart after that.” He swallowed hard. “I always thought I was a disappointment. See, I knew I was different, and I thought he could tell that somehow, but now I know it was all him. He just didn’t care that much.” Arden shrugged.

“Then your dad was a fool,” Ronny told him. “And a selfish ass. That isn’t your fault. I mean, in a way he did the same thing to your mom. He lost interest and decided to go looking for his fun somewhere else. Maybe it’s a pattern and has nothing at all to do with you.”

Arden wiped his eyes. “I think I see that now.” He shook his head as if trying to get rid of these thoughts. “I didn’t mean to have this conversation out here while we’re trying to have fun. So let’s do something else.”

“There a laser tag game in half an hour,” Ronny offered, and Arden grabbed his hand, tugging him toward the desk. He paid for the two of them and requested that they be on the same team.

“But what if we’re not?” Ronny asked.

“Then I’ll kick your butt in there too.” He couldn’t help smiling and loved how Ronny rolled his eyes.

When their group was called, they were on the same team, and between them, they kicked the other team’s butt. Arden had the high score each game, with Ronny coming up right behind. They laughed as they ran through the obstacles, taking out the opposing team’s targets and racking up high scores as they fell. “Shouldn’t we defend?” Ronny asked him after a few minutes.”

Arden shook his head. “This game is all about offense. Let the others defend the goal. We take out the opposing team.”

And that was exactly what they did. After their time was up, they left and got Asian food on the way back. It was the best Monday Arden could remember having in a very long time.

“Thank you for today,” Arden said as they pulled into Ronny’s driveway. He checked his phone and was grateful there were no messages or calls for help. His aunt and mother seemed to have things in hand. He sent each of them messages to make sure they were okay.

We’re talking and having tea , his aunt responded. I might have added a little whiskey... because we needed it. But we’re fine.

Okay. Just don’t tea and drive , he sent back and got a smiley face in response. He put

his phone in his pocket and got out of the car, letting Ronny lead him around the side of the house and down through the yard to the stream.

“I love this spot right here,” Ronny told him. “With the bend, you can see a long way up and down. I love to listen to the water as it passes over the rocks.”

“Did you inherit this place?” Arden asked.

“My grandparents bought it years ago. When they died, Mom and Dad lived here for a while, but the stairs were too much, so they passed it to me and moved into a retirement community before they died. The houses along here are often passed through families because there aren’t that many properties on the LeTort. I love it back here. It’s really quiet, and the neighbors are very nice. They have a summer party each year for the Fourth.” A few of the neighbors were out in their yards. Ronny waved, and they did the same in return.

“It’s lovely.”

“I want to do some more plantings back here, but I haven’t decided on anything yet. Mom and Dad kept the yard very simple, and sometimes I think that’s best, but then I think it would be so pretty to have flowers and shrubs along the side. I guess I’m still deciding.”

“This way is simpler,” Arden told him. “A carpet of green from the house to the stream, with the trees as shade. You know, there’s a garden designer in the eighteenth century who worked with that as his canvas. He used focal points and then did these huge, broad landscape plantings to create these huge vistas. He often built ruins or follies as the focal points, but you have a real one, the stream itself.” He leaned against Ronny. “My advice is to leave things as they are. The trees are full, and the lawn is lush and thick.” He ran his fingers through Ronny’s hair. “Sometimes simple is best.”

“I guess,” Ronny whispered. “But then, sometimes there’s something to be said for complex and interesting.” He drew closer, and Arden felt himself getting lost in Ronny’s eyes. Just before they kissed, the happy shout of children drew his attention. He pulled back with a smile.

“We don’t need to scare the straight people,” Arden teased. “Come on.” He turned away and led Ronny inside. As soon as the door closed, Arden pushed Ronny against the back of it, kissing him hard with all the passion that he’d been holding at bay for hours. When they’d played laser tag, he had thought about pulling Ronny into the corner behind one of the pillars to jump him. But now that they were alone, there was nothing stopping him, and he was damn certain to take advantage.

“Arden...,” Ronny whispered.

“What?” he asked, opening Ronny’s shirt and stripping it down his arms. “Do you want to wait longer?” Arden growled.

“Not exactly. But maybe we should move to the bedroom....”

Arden took his hand, pulling him up the stairs and down to the bedroom. He pushed Ronny onto the bed and straddled him before kissing Ronny until he couldn’t see straight because... damn... the man had magic lips or something. Arden quivered with excitement as Ronny’s arms surrounded him, tugging him closer. Their kisses deepened, and Ronny continued exploring, setting his skin on fire as he slipped his hands under Arden’s shirt and tugged it upward and off.

“Are you going to fuck me?” Arden whispered.

“Is that what you want?” Ronny asked, his voice rough and deep. Arden whimpered as Ronny slipped his hand into his jeans, opening them at the waist before shoving them down past his hips. “I’ve been thinking about you like this, all day.”

“Me too. It was like vroom , vroom foreplay.”

Ronny chuckled. “I’ll give you vroom , vroom , if that’s what you want.” Ronny rolled them on the bed and stripped off the last of Arden’s clothes. He loved the feel of skin to skin, and it wasn’t long until Arden had exactly that. The heat between them rivalled the sun, and as Ronny took care of him, making sure he was ready before joining them together in a rush of white heat that blocked out everything else, all he felt was the way Ronny filled him and how their souls seemed to join in a wave of ecstasy that left him without words. All he could do was whimper as Ronny slowly pushed him to heights of passion he didn’t think possible. The house could have fallen apart around them, and Arden probably wouldn’t have noticed. All that mattered was how Ronny made him feel and the way his gaze bore into him, like Arden was the center of the universe.

Arden came to the realization in a few seconds that things between them might not be perfect all the time, but that he wanted Ronny in his life more than he wanted or needed anything else. Ronny completed him, made him feel safe and whole. This was all that mattered.

“I love you,” Arden said, without really thinking it through. The words just came out, and along with them the realization that if Ronny didn’t say them back, that it was okay. Expressing his feelings was good, no matter what. At least he hoped so.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:52 am

Ronny lay still in the light room, smiling to himself. “Do you have any idea how long it’s been since someone said that to me?” he asked a little while later, their passion spent, and yet Arden’s words still rang in his head.

“Since your parents passed away?” Arden asked, and Ronny nodded. “But didn’t your last boyfriend...?”

“Oh, he told me that, but he didn’t mean it.” There was most definitely a difference. Arden meant what he said; the asshole never did. He just tried to use whatever he thought he could say to get what he wanted. At the time, Ronny had fallen for it, but now he saw the difference. And there was a big one.

Arden’s phone chimed, and he stared at it while Ronny waited. “My mother says that my father is coming down to see her.” He lay back, his head rolling on the pillow.

“Does she need you there?” Ronny asked. Sometimes, it seemed like they couldn’t have a few minutes without some sort of drama poking its way in.

“She isn’t asking, which means it’s likely she doesn’t want to intrude. I’m texting my aunt to see what she says.” His fingers made phone clicks and then a whoosh as the message sent. “Aunt Louise says she isn’t sure what is best. She doesn’t want to get my father angry, but she knows that my father is going to try to pressure Mom and downplay what he did.”

“Tell her we’ll be in the garage apartment. Your father can come and talk to your mom, but we’ll be close enough that if they need us, we can be there in a matter of seconds.” He smiled, and Arden sent the message before hugging him.

“You’re the best. You know that?” Arden rested against him, and Ronny held him.

“Don’t we need to go?”

Arden sighed. “Not right away.” In fact, he held him tighter, and they lay together quietly for a while. Then suddenly Arden jerked and turned to the clock. “Okay, I think we better get ready to go.”

“Fine.” Ronny smiled. “You know, I’m going to start calling you the energizer bunny. You go and go, and then after a quick nap, it’s like you get all this energy back.”

“Yeah. It used to drive my mom crazy. She always said there was never any downtime with me.”

Ronny caressed his cheek. “It’s perfectly okay with me. I like that you have energy.” He kissed him and then slowly slipped away. “We should probably shower before we go. Otherwise, we’re going to go to your aunt’s smelling like sex, and that probably wouldn’t help anyone.” He smiled, and Arden climbed out of bed.

“Fine. But you have to be good.”

Ronny widened his eyes in surprise. “Me? You were the one who dragged me up here so you could have your way with me.” He pulled Arden into a hug. “Come on.”

The quiet, warm glow between them lasted until they reached Arden’s little back-alley apartment. Ronny still thought of it as Arden’s place, but he no longer referred to it as Arden’s home in his mind. It didn’t feel like that to him, not that his opinion mattered all that much, but Arden seemed to tense as soon as they went inside and watched the main house through the window.

“I doubt your father had even arrived yet,” Ronny said as he tugged him away from

the glass. He put on the light outside the door to let Louise and Adelle know they were there if they were needed. Then he turned on the television. “Just try to relax for a little while. Maybe things between your parents will work out.”

“I don’t want them to work out. Not after how he’s treated Mom all these years. She deserves someone better than that. I know he’s my father, but I’m coming to realize that both of us deserve a better person in our lives than him. He wasn’t a good father, and he isn’t a good husband either. Maybe if he took a hike and got out of our lives, we could both move on from it and begin to heal.” He sighed. “After all, he’s the man who kicked me out and the one who’s been controlling my mother. What kind of relationship is that? I understand deciding on things together, but no one gets to try to control what other folks think.” Instead of sitting down, Arden began pacing the small space.

“Hey, it’s okay. Ultimately, this is your mother’s decision. And she will make up her own mind. Your aunt is there, and we’re out here ready to rush in, like the cavalry, if needed. Adelle knows where we are and that she has support. After that, she’ll make the decision she wants.”

“And I’ll respect that. At least I think I can.” His pacing stopped. “I mean.... what kind of person am I that I want my parents to separate? What does that make me?” He sat down for about two seconds and then jumped back up again, using the sofa cushion like a butt trampoline. “Am I a terrible person for wanting something like that?”

“Hey. You’re not a terrible person. And you and your father must have had some pretty simmering, unresolved issues long before he kicked you out.”

“Yeah... well....” Finally, Arden settled back down on the sofa, and Ronny put an arm around him. “I don’t know if Mom and I can develop a more normal kind of relationship, but I do know that we never will as long as my father is in the picture.” He rested his head against Ronny’s side. “This is so fucked up. Maybe I’m just too

messed up to have a healthy relationship.”

“Are you really going to go there?” Ronny asked.

Arden sighed. “No. You’re right. The crap with my parents is what it is, and I need to learn how to let it go. Yes, I want my mother to be happy, and for that matter, my father, too, and maybe that means they go their separate ways. I don’t know.”

“And it’s really none of your business any more than our relationship is theirs.” Ronny held him a little tighter and swallowed the next thing that threatened to come out. He thought it kind of wrong for them to pull Arden into it. Yes, he agreed that they should be here in case things got out of hand and the ladies needed some help, but otherwise, it was up to them. They had to be the ones making the decisions. Ronny wasn’t quite sure Arden was ready to hear that.

Arden checked his phone, but there was no message from anyone. He sent one to his aunt saying where they were and then settled back. “God, I hate this waiting.”

“I know, but we may be waiting for nothing at all.”

A car drew slowly down the alley, traveling near the outside wall of the house. It stopped, the engine idling, and Ronny wondered what was going on. He thought of getting up, but the car continued on. Cars occasionally used the alley, but thankfully it wasn’t heavily traveled. The gate outside with its soft squeak didn’t move, and Ronny eased the tension that had crept into him.

“You’re a good son, you know that?” Ronny whispered.

“I like to think so.” He leaned against him, and Ronny turned his attention to the television because they needed something to do besides waiting. He found a streaming series about a woman whose exes kept dropping dead. He started watching it but thought that maybe this wasn’t the right thing at the moment and switched to

an old romcom. At least it was funny, and the scene where Meg Ryan and Hugh Jackman wandered New York and fell in love always made him warm inside.

Arden seemed engrossed and didn't seem to notice the cars going by. Each of them slowed and seemed to creep by where they were. Ronny thought of getting up to check on it, but that would mean disturbing Arden, and he liked holding him in his arms. He had finally seemed to calm down, and adding to his anxiety wasn't what he wanted. The cars passed on anyway, so maybe his imagination was on overdrive.

The movie was nearly done when Arden's phone dinged. Apparently, his father had arrived and the two of them were talking. "Aunt Louise says that things are civil. I suppose that's the most we can hope for." Arden set the phone aside. By the time the movie was over and they started another one, Arden's phone chimed again. "It's Mom. She says that my father has left for now, but that the two of them are going to talk more later." He shrugged. "So, I guess I was all worked up for nothing."

"You care." Ronny drew closer and kissed him gently. "That alone says a lot about you."

Arden returned the kiss. "You know, since they don't seem to need us, we could just sit here and make out."

Ronny chuckled softly. "I thought we already were." He cupped Arden's cheeks in his hands and moved in for the kiss just as Arden's phone made the shutdown death music.

Arden groaned. "I forgot my charger at your house."

"Don't you have another one?" Ronny had a drawer full at home.

"It's one of those new format ones. They only gave me one, and I didn't have the cash to buy a second one yet. They tried to sell me one with the phone, but they want

like thirty bucks.” He put the phone aside.

“Where is it?” Ronny asked. “I’ll run home and get it for you.” He slipped away from Arden’s embrace. “You lock the doors behind me and stay here unless your aunt or Mom comes out because they need you. I’ll be back in fifteen minutes.” He hurried out to his car and drove the mile or so to the house. Ronny found the charger in the outlet next to the bed and grabbed it and the plug to take them with him back to Arden’s place.

The gate to the yard was locked. Arden was taking the “locking up behind him” thing pretty seriously. Ronny was about to rap on the window, but a crash stopped him in his tracks. He kicked at the gate twice before the inside lock gave way, and the gate flew open. He hurried into the yard and inside Arden’s place.

“You little shit. You really thought you could keep me away from my property?” Arden’s uncle growled as he reached the door.

“What the hell are you doing?” Ronny asked as he skidded to a halt in the doorway. Arden’s crazy uncle had a knife pointed at Arden. The sofa separated them, but Ronny knew that with one lunge, Charlie could erase that distance in a second.

“This little piece of crap cost me my wife and my home. I’m living in some shit apartment over a restaurant that smells like ass because of him. And did you really think some stupid piece of paper was going to stop me? All I had to do was figure a way to make the stupid monitoring people think I was somewhere else.” He grinned and leapt over the sofa.

Arden scrambled away, but lost his footing on a rug and fell, disappearing from sight.

Ronny raced over, leaping at Charlie before he could reach Arden. All he could think of was protecting him, keeping Charlie from hurting him. “You leave Arden alone,” he found himself yelling as he landed on top of Charlie, the two of them rolling on

the floor, ending up in a heap. Ronny thought for a second about the damned knife, seeing it just out of reach under the small dining table against the wall.

“You son of a bitch,” Charlie growled as he scampered for the knife. Ronny went after him, but Arden got to it first, kicking it across the floor and out of the way. Ronny leapt on top of Charlie to hold him down, getting a punch on the side of the head, which sent his mind reeling for a few seconds. But he still managed to keep Charlie on the floor.

“Call 911,” Ronny said as Charlie struggled. Ronny wondered if Charlie was on something because he didn’t stop struggling, not even well after Ronny had him pinned to the floor and had his hands behind his back.

“You asshole. You think you can take everything away. I never wanted you here,” he snarled at Arden. “I wanted you on the fucking streets where you belonged. But no. Louise insisted, the demented bitch.” This guy was filled with anger and self-entitlement. It was a wonder he didn’t explode in a fit of bile and crap.

“Is that why you hit her?” Arden demanded. “You don’t have a right to do that. No one does. How would you like it if I hit you? Or better, if I kicked you in the ribs right now. Would that be fair?” His hand shook. “It’s what you deserve. But I think this is going to last longer.” Arden quivered with fury. “Ronny, I need your phone. Mine’s dead, remember.”

“It’s in my pocket,” he said, not wanting to take his attention away from Charlie.

Arden’s warm hands slid along his hip and into his pocket. Then his cell phone slipped out and Ronny heard Arden making the call. “This is over now. The police will get here, you’ll be in custody, bail revoked, and we are going to add so many charges that you’ll be lucky to get out in a decade.” He loved watching Charlie pale. “Oh, and I hope they give you a huge cellmate named Bubba.”

Charlie struggled harder, but Ronny kept him on the floor. Sirens approached and grew louder until officers hurried through the damaged back gate and inside.

“The man on the ground came at me with a knife, and Ronny saved me,” Arden said quickly, pointing to where the knife rested. “He’s my uncle, and he’s out on bail for hitting my aunt, among other things. Uncle Charlie is also not supposed to leave his house except for work, so you might want to have someone check your monitoring system, because that isn’t working either.” He backed away, and Ronny got up so the officers could take Charlie into custody.

“These two attacked me,” Charlie said. “This is my home. I own it with my wife.”

“Knock it off, Charlie,” Louise said from just outside the door. “He’s not supposed to be here.” She handed one of the officers a paper, most likely a copy of the restraining order. “He’s a lying sack of shit, and you can take him into custody. Be sure to add that he violated the order as part of the charges.” Her eyes blazed with anger as the officers cuffed Charlie and led him out.

Once he was gone, Arden hurried to him, shaking as Ronny hugged him tightly. “Don’t you ever do that again. You jumped a man who had a knife. Scared me half to death.”

“I couldn’t let him get to you,” Ronny whispered. He closed his eyes, tightening his hold, trying to keep himself under control as he realized just how close Arden came to being hurt—or worse.

“Can you tell me what happened?” one of the officers Ronny didn’t know asked.

Arden went first, and damned if he wasn’t brave as he explained how his uncle broke in and threatened him. “Then Ronny got here, and he jumped my uncle, knocking him down, and the knife went flying. I kicked it away, and then Ronny got him under control while I called the police.” With every word, he spoke faster and more

urgently, but he got through it. Ronny added what little he had to say, and the officers spoke to Louise, who was as on edge as Arden.

Finally, the police left, and Arden went inside and locked the door.

“I shouldn’t have left you alone.”

“You had no way of knowing that he was going to show up,” Arden said. “He took me by surprise, and then you came charging in here like a knight on a white horse.” He smiled up at him. “Is there anything you can’t do?”

“There’s plenty.”

“But that’s yet another time that you saved me,” Arden told him, curling on the sofa as Ronny held him. “What did I do to deserve you?”

Ronny closed the gap between them. “I don’t know how to answer that. I don’t think people do anything to deserve each other. Sometimes we get lucky and find someone who makes us forget ourselves and want to put them first. I think that’s kind of rare. My folks had it, and I’m sad that you didn’t have that kind of relationship model, but I did. So, I know what it’s like, and I know when I feel it.”

Arden grinned and kissed him. “As long as you’re sure.”

“I am, and I will be for a long time.” He swallowed, smiling right back at him. “I know we got interrupted earlier, but I want to say that when love happens, like right now with us, we have to be smart enough to hold on to it as hard and for as long as necessary. I intend to do just that, hold the man I love for as long as I can.”

“So do I,” Arden whispered as he pressed Ronny down onto the sofa cushions, looking deeply into his eyes. “I definitely do.”