

Single Father Society 6: Christmas in Cedarwood

With bonus story, Single in Springdale

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Chapter One

Five Days Until Christmas...

"We're done until the fifth of January," Ashley Willis called to his eight-year-old son, Wyatt. Ashley stood in the living room of his home and watched the snow fall. He sighed. He and Wyatt had needed a break from school. Teaching elementary art wasn't the easiest job in the world, and the whole month of December had been especially tough. Winter break fever had set in, and the kids wanted time off. They acted out when they'd normally have been fine, and their concentration diminished. A couple of his fellow teachers noticed the uptick in attitude from the students. During the staff winter party, the consensus was everyone needed a break.

Ashley wouldn't argue. He loved his job, but he wanted a few days where he didn't have to worry about someone spilling entire bottles of paint or losing scissors. Plus, he wanted time with his boyfriend and son. Ever since Ashley and Colt had moved in together, he seemed to see Colt even less than when they lived apart. Then there were the rumblings from his fellow teachers about why they thought he should be getting married.

Good Lord. He had enough to worry about without making things legal. Living together and buying the house in both names should've been enough? Sure, they had needed more room and bought the bigger house, but he hadn't quite adjusted to the change. Anyway, he wasn't the marrying type...right? He'd barely gotten his life in order with the new house and scheduling conflicts. Then Wyatt begged for a puppy. Colt, the man who could seem surly to everyone but the ones he truly loved, brought home two pups he'd rescued from the shelter. Having two puppies wasn't bad, but they created a whole new group of problems like accidents, having to go outside at all hours

of the night, and chewing up the furniture. Colt helped, but he wasn't home that much to make a difference. At least Colt and Wyatt were good at taking the pups for walks.

About the only thing Colt had done was give Wyatt ideas for naming the dogs. Wyatt thought the world of Colt and, of course, agreed to Colt's ideas. The female became Liz and the brown male was named Dick.

Ashley shook his head. He and Colt had been through hell together. After finally getting the nerve to speak to each other, they'd tried dating. Then the Coalition, the group who wanted to rid Cedarwood of gay people, attacked Colt and beat the hell out of him. The moment he found out, Ashley thought he'd lost Colt. Ever since the attack, he realized just how much he loved Colt. He couldn't see his life without him. But that didn't help right now when he seemed to be doing a lot of living alone.

"Hey, Dad?" Wyatt bounded into the living room. Liz and Dick collided with each other and nipped, then flopped at Ashley's feet. Wyatt knelt on the floor and petted both dogs. "Dad wants us to get a real live tree. He called and asked me if I'd tell you." He stared up at Ashley. "Can we? It's our job."

"Wyatt." He settled on the arm of the chair. Bits of stuffing fluttered to the floor from the most recent spot the dogs had gnawed at on the chair. He sighed. "Why would we get two? We've already got an artificial tree." Picking a real tree might be fun, but what did they need with a second one? "Why didn't he tell me?"

"I don't know." Wyatt rolled his eyes and made a disgusted face. "He gave me money and said we needed to."

"He gave you money over the phone?" He massaged his temples. "Wyatt."

His son pulled cash out of his pocket and plunked the wadded-up bills into Ashley's hand. "See? Five twenties. Now can we go?"

Ashley stared at the money. He felt backed into a corner. "Colt asked for this?"

"Yes." Wyatt groaned. "Dad. We don't have school for two and a half weeks. It's time to have Christmas. Please?"

Wyatt did have a point. "Who am I to argue?" Ashley pocketed the cash, then nodded to the kitchen. "Put your coat on and the gates up for the dogs." He grabbed his keys, phone, and wallet, then tucked each into his pockets. He snagged his coat and stuffed his arms through the sleeves. When he withdrew his keys, he pulled his phone out. The light for messages or emails wasn't blinking. "Is Dad meeting us there? Where are we supposed to go?"

"He said he had to work late." Wyatt shrugged. "I stopped by the diner on the way home. That's when he gave me the money."

"So he never called?" He hated when Wyatt lied. "Wyatt?"

"No. I got confused." Wyatt snapped the gate into place, then tossed newspaper on the floor. "Can we go?"

"Can we stop the attitude?" He turned his attention to the dogs. "You two behave. Shouldn't be that long." He went into the garage and closed the door. He slid behind the wheel of the car, but checked his phone again. Still nothing. "I'm going to call Dad." The call went straight to voicemail. Ashley sighed. "Damn."

"Don't swear." Wyatt fiddled with his MP3 player. "I was told to tell you he's working late."

Ashley pinched the bridge of his nose. In the last six weeks, he'd seen Colt only a handful of days. Sometimes Colt came home before Ashley put Wyatt to bed, but most of the time it wasn't until after Ashley turned in for the night. Most often, he left before Ashley got up for work. Ashley missed his boyfriend. Moving in had not brought them closer together. The more they were apart, the more he believed buying the house together had been foolish. They exchanged texts and handwritten notes more than they had actual conversations.

His phone pinged.

Did Wyatt give you money? You need to get two trees. One for the diner and a bigger one for the house. I know we have the artificial tree, but I like Christmas trees. Go to the Sleigh Bell Tree Farm.

No sentiment. No excitement. Just a direction. He sighed again and opened the garage door. "Okay, Dad told me the plan, but now he's up to us having three trees. I don't understand his logic, but I'm not going to argue. Let's go."

"Dad, cheer up. We're getting two Christmas trees. Real ones." Wyatt whooped. "I've never had a real one, just the ugly fake one."

"I haven't had a real tree either." He backed out of the garage and stopped long enough to put the garage door down again before he swiveled into the turnaround. Ashley drove down their street to the main drag. "The house we lived in before was a rental, and we weren't allowed to have a real tree or a dog."

"I know." Wyatt groaned. "It was so boring."

"Depends on how you look at it." He glanced over at Wyatt. His son had his earplugs in and was now wrapped up in his music. He wished he'd never bought Wyatt the MP3 player. Wyatt spent more time plugged in than he did in conversation. Maybe it was Ashley. Was he boring?

A dull ache started behind his eyes as he drove through Cedarwood to the outskirts. He might as well focus on their trip. If he remembered correctly, the Sleigh Bell Tree Farm was just outside of town. As soon as he saw the gigantic lighted bell, he knew he'd found the right place. He'd passed the farm hundreds of times when he drove out to the freeway. He'd wanted to stop, but hadn't seen a reason before now.

He turned onto the gravel drive and parked along the ribbon-covered fence row. Seeing the snow and the bright red ribbon and lights strung over the lot buoyed his spirits. Wyatt was right. This was Christmas and they should have fun. He wished Colt were there, but they'd make it work.

"Dad!" Wyatt left the car and darted around to Ashley's side. He yanked open the car door. "We can ride on the wagons and cut down our own!"

"What?" He shook his head. "We don't have a saw. We'll get a couple from the lot."

"They have them on the wagon." Wyatt grabbed Ashley's hand. "Come on. We'll miss the horses."

"Where did you learn about saws on the wagons? And how do you know about horses?"

"Tyus, Dad. His family owns the farm. Duh." Wyatt rolled his eyes. "Didn't you hear him talk about it during career day?"

"Kid, I'm stuck in the art room. I don't see all of the presentations." He locked the car, then stuffed his keys into his coat pocket. "I don't know if you and I are capable of wrangling two trees. We can try but you need to behave."

Wyatt let go of Ashley and stood tall. "Hey, Tyus." He glanced over his shoulder. "I'll behave, Dad."

Tyus waved. "Hi, Mr. Willis. Can Wy come with me to tour the wreath display? We'll be right here."

"Sure. I'm going to look at what's already cut." And make one more call to Colt. He fiddled with his phone and strode onto the lot.

"Are you calling Dad?" Wyatt shook his head. "I'm supposed to tell you he's working late."

"Well, maybe he can meet us here." Ashley dialed Colt, but got his voicemail again. He stuffed his phone into his coat pocket, then made his way over to Tyus and Wyatt. "Find anything?"

"We did." Wyatt pointed to the wagon. "See? Horses. Come on, Tyus."

Ashley sighed. Riding on the wagon might be fun and festive. He headed over to the wagon. When he climbed up the steps, he noticed a figure already seated near the back of the rig. He stopped in his tracks. He knew that figure. "Colt," he murmured.

"Surprise." Colt laughed and stood. Wyatt darted past Ashley and hugged him. Colton winked. "Ash?"

No freaking way. No wonder he hadn't been able to get a hold of Colton. He bit back a grin. What a way to get ready for Christmas.

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