

Chapter One

Stephen “Scooter” Valenti poked at the food on his plate. His parents, Natalie and Jerry, were busy in a conversation he wasn’t following, though his mom occasionally asked him about what he thought of this or that. Most of his answers were monosyllabic. Or a grunt. Or the shrug of his shoulders.

“How was work today, son?” Natalie was not impressed with the grunts and shrugs. She wasn’t certain what the problem was, but she had high hopes he would confide to his father and her what was bothering him.

“Fine.” Scooter was shoving one pea at a time into his mashed potatoes. Natalie, remembering he did that as a child when he was troubled by something, knew for sure her son was going through a dreadful period.

She glanced over at Jerry, frowned, and rolled her eyes, attempting to get her husband to give it a shot. He only shook his head, then blotted his mouth before he folded up his napkin.

“I was considering getting rid of the front lawn,” he began. Natalie flashed at him like he was off his rocker. Scooter didn’t budge. The peas in the mashed potatoes, however, had taken on a new shape, though he was clueless about what that might be.

“Yep. Thought I’d get a couple of contractors’ bids on asphaltting the entire area. Whaddya think of that, Scoot?”

“Sure. Whatever.” He moved a few more peas, stopped, and then focused on his dad. “What the hell are you talking about? Why would you want to do that?”

He was faced with both of his parents, arms folded, with eyebrows raised.

“You want to talk about it?” his mother inquired.

“NO!” Scooter practically screamed. Then his outburst immediately subsided. His shoulders dropped, and he shook his head. “I’m sorry. It’s nothing.”

“It’s Ty... and that’s not nothing,” Natalie announced.

“It is *not* Ty!” he responded. He quickly got up to take his mostly uneaten dinner to the sink in the kitchen. Tyler “Ty” Cameron and Scooter had been best friends since elementary school. Ty, who he always thought was straight, fell in love over the past year with another man, Eric. Between starting college, having an internship, and Eric, Ty suddenly wasn’t as available as he’d been in the past.

As the plates clattered against the porcelain, Natalie followed him. She found him shaking slightly, and looking down at the sink as if it was going to produce an answer for him. She lightly pressed her palm against his back. As he shook his head more violently, he collapsed into his

mother's arms. He felt his dad behind him, holding him as well. They let him cry it all out, at least until he stopped long enough to speak to them.

"I missed that doofus so fuckin' much! Sorry, mom."

"Scooter," his father, ignoring the swearing, stated, "Ty's not dead."

"He might as well be. He barely texts me, and when he does it's all about Eric this, or Eric that. Then he starts bragging about his college classes, or how close he is to taking his equine-assisted therapy testing. I mean, shit.... they're getting married in a couple of months, and he hasn't even asked me to be his best man!"

"You think he's actually bragging about school, his test, or Eric?" Natalie asked.

Scooter wiped his eyes with one of the dish towels. "No... No," he admitted. "I mean... I'm happy for him. He's on a path to getting what he wants as far as a career. Eric and he are amazing together. I wish I had a girlfriend that was half as good to me as Eric is to Ty. I'm just..."

"You miss him. You missed all the special times you've had together. And you're lonely." A glance at his son's face, Jerry had hit the nail squarely on the head. Scooter nodded slowly.

"And now I'm being a shitty best friend to him."

His mother took his face in her hands and kissed him tenderly. "You're facing the prospect of deciding what *you* want in life, and with whom to spend it. You're growing up, son. The only constant in the world is change. As odd as it sounds, it's the truth. And right now for you... well... it's a bitch."

"Mom!"

She kissed him again and began gathering the rest of the dishes that were still on the table. His dad patted him on the back and reminded him that if he wanted to talk any more, they were there for him.

"By the way. I'm not getting the front lawn paved over, son. But it could use the lawnmower tomorrow if you have time."

Scooter snickered, shook his head, and walked away. As he closed the door to his room, he slid down the door, ending up on the floor. He cried softly, regretting his outburst, and realizing how disappointed he was with the way he acted after all Ty and he had been through the past few years.

At least Luke won't get on my case about it, he thought. He's never judgmental, no matter how much of a mess I am.

Luke Michaelson was the counselor they'd met after they were assigned community service at Rancho Lobos, a dude ranch of sorts in the mountains above Santa Barbara. Luke had been at the ranch nearly twenty years. He'd received his license as an equine-assisted therapist, after earning his master's in social work degree from University of California, Santa Barbara, otherwise known locally as UCSB.

Ty and Scooter ended up at Rancho Lobos thanks to Ty's "Had," as Ty had nicknamed his stepfather. Hayden Olliveti—Hayden plus Dad equaled "Had" in Ty's mind—was the attorney who represented them after they had been arrested for disturbing the peace by getting into a fistfight in a local restaurant. Their fines were alleviated by eight weekends of community service at the ranch—mostly manual labor and shoveling horse manure—but the court order also called for anger management counseling and therapy, which was where Luke fit in. The last thing Scooter wanted to do was talk about his feelings to anyone, particularly Luke. The man towered over him at six foot, six inches, and was built like the proverbial brick shithouse. The first time Scooter laid eyes on Luke, he couldn't get a complete sentence out of his mouth. He felt, at the time, as if he was going to puke any minute. The man put the fear of God in him, which was Luke's intention at the time.

Within just two weekends, Scooter began to open up to his feelings; before long he was talking to Luke about anything and everything. Ty wasn't enthusiastic about the deal either, but he complied with the program almost from the start. Both the men kept seeing Luke professionally over the next two years, a feat that Luke seemed able to pull off without regard for the dual relationships he had with them both. Ty continued to help Luke out at the ranch as he began his own studies to follow in his counselor's footsteps, becoming a part-time, paid intern. Scooter still spent time at the ranch—usually to help when they needed extra manpower—but also because he'd made close friends during their assigned time there.

That time was particularly complicated for both Ty and Scooter. The first week there, Ty met Eric. Their immediate attraction required a complete overhaul in Ty's thinking—and how Scooter felt about the changes his BFF was going through. Ty was faced with trying to reconcile his life as a straight man, while at the same time developing even deeper feelings for Eric. Scooter did his best to support Ty as he discovered another side of his personality, but not without a misstep or two. He became jealous of Eric, with whom Ty worked in the kitchen. It wasn't that Scooter was attracted to Ty sexually; he saw his best friend moving away from him, and it scared him. Somehow, they got through that without much trouble... eventually. Scooter could see how Ty felt about Eric, and the bottom line was that he wanted Ty to be happy. And, with Eric, he was.

At the same time as Ty was trying desperately to figure out his emerging gay side, his father, Cam—straight as can be and in the military—began to cultivate similar feelings for Scooter and Ty's attorney, Hayden. Obviously, the two adult men figured that out, given that they'd gotten married within a year of meeting one another. Ty, his dad, and Had were a family, now. It was the family Cam had been unsuccessful in creating with Ty's mom, and the one Ty had prayed for all the time he was growing up. Now he lived in town during the week and spent most weekends up at Rancho Lobos, where he'd moved in with Eric.

Scooter's parents weren't getting any younger. They'd had him late in life, so retirement wasn't far off for them. They weren't planning on moving out of the area, but he also knew it was getting beyond time for him to get his own place. Ty and Eric were getting married, both having chosen careers that would be a welcome additions to the ranch staff. And Scooter? Still working forty hours a week for minimum wage plus tips at a restaurant, living at home, and with no girlfriend. He hadn't had a girlfriend for over two years, not since before the court case.

He was going to be twenty-one in a few months. He had no place of his own, a job that was going nowhere, and no one special in his life. He felt over to his side and wept. At some point he must have fallen asleep, since he awoke about two in the morning. He shook his head, made his way over to his bed after taking a leak, and fell back to sleep until after nine.