

Chapter One

From my spot in the shade, I count four cats crouched on top of my cinderblock back fence. There's nothing like the July smell of fish frying in hot grease to scare up hungry neighborhood strays. They sit motionless except for the tips of their tails. There's a big striped tom, two gray and whites, and a real small calico. The kids, none of which can reach up there, stand on tiptoe in the dirt, trying to coax the cats down with doughnut holes and Cheese Nips.

Uh-uh. Not happening. The cats are way too smart to fall for that business. They're here for the fish.

When I was little like them it was a bird I wanted. I was six, at a picnic on a hot day. My Uncle Cleve told me if I would put salt on a bird's tail I could catch him. A bird of my own! I was pumped. I would fix him a little box and keep him in my room. Feed him worms. There were lots of birds in Uncle Cleve's yard. They'd land on the grass, peck at bugs and stuff, then swoop back up. I remember running round and round the yard with the salt shaker, trying to do what Uncle Cleve said. I never even got close to a bird, but I got so worn out and hot I threw up, and my Aunt Irene made me come inside and sit under the fan with a wet towel over my head.

“Colton, no,” I yell.

The other kids have lost interest and gone on to play something else, but my son has decided to drag up a little plastic chair so as to get to the cats. He shoots me one of his looks. Do I mind my dad? Or not. He’s considering his options.

“Go get the ball. The red ball,” I yell. The good thing about three-year-olds is that they’re not all that smart. Colton forgets about the cats and goes after the ball.

Sunday afternoons, five of us single dads hang out with our kids at my house. We cook. The kids play. It gets crazy. Usually the kids run around outside while we kick back in lawn chairs, like today. But not always. If the weather’s bad or there’s an important game on TV, we bring it inside. Talk about loud. You haven’t heard noise until you’ve been cooped up inside with our bunch on Super Bowl Sunday.

Between us we’ve got five boys and two little girls. There’s me, Joel, and my son, Colton. He’s got my lanky build, his mother Kari’s blond hair and blue eyes. Kari and I’ve shared joint custody since we got divorced. Colton doesn’t talk as plain as other kids his age, but we’re seeing some improvement. He used to get ear infections a lot. Now he’s got tubes.

My best friend Abe’s daughter is five-year-old Sh’dondra, who Colton has a bad crush on. Colton follows Sh’dondra around like she’s a mother duck. That girl is something else. Sassy? Smart? You have no idea. I tell Abe he better go back to college right now if he plans on being able to keep up with her.

Colton wants to do everything just like Sh'dondra, which I guess explains me catching him trying to pee sitting down last Sunday after everybody left. Me and Colton had to have us a little man-to-man talk about that.

Abe and I met five years ago when I went to work at Lucy's, a hair salon in Eden Plain, Texas, population 33,000, which is where we all live. I know you're wondering. Two guys. Who do hair. The answer is no. Abe and I are neither one gay. The other answer is yes. Abe is black. You probably thought as much from his little girl's name, which used to sound weird to me, a white guy, but doesn't any more. Sh'dondra's mother is Jill. She teaches school. Abe and her still get together from time to time. They used to be married.

Our friend Pete sells insurance, which is why I'm the most well-insured twenty-seven-year-old I know. Life. Health. Disability. I'm good to go. Pete's kids are Brandon and Chase. Twins. They're six. Identical, except Brandon's got a reddish birthmark behind his left ear. Brandon and Chase have ADD. Their mother, Erin, gives them medicine during the week, but on Saturdays and Sundays Pete's on his own. Brandon and Chase are good boys. They just like to tear stuff up.

Sean's a department manager at Sears. Recovering alcoholic. He's the only one of us who has his kid full time. Last fall Sean's wife, Brooke, left with some guy from their church. He's still pretty mad about it. I guess so is his daughter, Allyssa, who's two years old. Allyssa's a cute kid but you have to watch her because she likes to bite. A couple of weeks ago she took a chunk out of Colton's arm. Broke the skin in two places.

One thing. When you get a bunch of kids together, there are going to be fights. Over toys. Food. Who gets to sit where. We dads try to let them work stuff out on their own. Which is easy unless it's your kid who's crying because he got bit.

Casey's thirty-three. He's the oldest one of us. But not the most mature acting. It's because of Casey I had to lay down the law. No booze in my house on Sunday nights. No. Not even after the kids have crashed. I'm not sure Casey has what you'd call a drinking problem but he gets loud when he drinks and you can't have that sort of thing around kids.

His boys are Nathan and Andy. Five and six. Casey's a high school coach. He plays ball with his boys every chance he can. Nathan's probably going to be average, but Andy looks like he may have some real athletic ability. He's already got a pretty good arm. Casey and his wife, Darla, are separated. The boys are with her most of the time. Casey likes to talk about all the high school girls who hang over the desk in his history class. He says they're hot for him. I don't know. Maybe they are.

One thing is for sure. Casey can cook. Today he's brought over his fish cooker. If you've ever fried fish inside your house you understand why we're set up out in the yard. The kids line up and we fill their plates. Catfish. Potatoes. Hushpuppies. Everything fried. None of them want salad, but Abe, who brought it, makes them all take some anyway.

“What kind of dressing?” Andy asks.

“Ranch.”

Abe thinks none of the kids eat enough vegetables. Which unless you count catsup, which Abe says you don't, on the weekends is probably true.

It's after ten before everybody leaves. Sh'dondra and Colton are conked out on the couch. Abe and I have Mondays off, so he's not in any hurry to leave. He helps me clean up. I carry a paper plate of fish scraps out to the fence and put it up there for the cats. Then he and I sit for a while on my back stoop while I have a smoke. It's hot but nice out there. We don't talk much. After the noise of all those kids it's good to sit in the quiet.

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People ask what made me decide to become a hair stylist. I guess it's in my blood. My granddad used to have a barber shop in Eden Plain. It's closed now and he's dead, but when I was in grade school I'd go there sometimes after school to hang out. I'd sweep up for him and listen to the men talk, and when he wasn't watching me too close I'd sneak looks at the *Playboy* magazines he kept under the seat of the red vinyl chair next to the Coke machine that took quarters.

When I was in ninth grade I bought a set of clippers at a yard sale and practiced cutting my own hair. Then I started giving my friends five dollar haircuts in the backyard. I seemed to have a knack for it. Took me a year after graduating high school to get off my butt and do it, but finally I signed up at Texas' Best Barber College, went through the program and got my license.

Nobody told me that barber shops were on their way out, or if they did I didn't pay much attention. All I knew was I planned on cutting hair for a living. So I was pretty surprised when I graduated to find out how hard it was finding a job. Took me a good three months before I talked this guy Mike into giving me a chance at his barber shop, which was on the corner in a rundown part of town. Talk about depressing. Place was shabby. Not even all that clean. Old equipment. Old barbers. Old customers. Most of them worried about their colons.

A lot of days it was boring as heck. But I needed a job and to get some experience under my belt because there's stuff about cutting hair you don't get in school. On-the-job training is how you learn it. Which I did. Because even though they were what I considered old, Mike and the other three guys that worked at the shop were excellent barbers. I watched them close and they watched me close so I could learn.

Which I did.

Until the day I had to quit.

It was a Saturday morning after I'd been at Mike's about six months. This black guy, about thirty-five, from Chicago comes in and asks if there's somebody who can shave his head. He was in town visiting his grandma who was sick in the hospital. The man had tears in his eyes when he told me he needed cleaned up because she wasn't doing so good and it looked like probably he was going to be staying for her funeral if things didn't change. My chair was closest to where he came in and I wasn't busy so I said sure. He sat down and I shaved him. It took me maybe ten minutes. When I was

done, he paid me in cash. I told him I hoped his grandma took a turn for the better and then he left.

Which was when it all hit the fan.

Mike waited 'til the guy was gone but then left his customer and stomped over to my chair where I was sweeping up. His face was as red as one of those crazy zoo gorilla's big old behinds. I thought he might be having a heart attack or something, but no. He asked me what the heck did I think I was doing? We didn't serve blacks. He ran a clean, whites-only shop and didn't I know that?

Well, no, I said, matter of fact I didn't. Wasn't like there was a sign or anything. *Whites only?* This was the year 1998.

I'm six feet, two inches tall. Mike was maybe five-three. I just stood there looking down at him dead in the face but feeling crazy mixed up inside. Stunned. Embarrassed. Mad. Like some little kid who has just gotten a spanking in the aisle of the grocery store for doing something he didn't know he wasn't supposed to do.

I honestly could not believe what the man was saying to me.

After Mike got through yelling at me, the shop went dead quiet except for this one squeaking ceiling fan that needed oil and old Rush Limbaugh ranting on the radio the geezers kept on in the back. Over Mike's head I could see none of the other barbers were looking up but they were sure listening. Hard. All three had customers but they'd stopped cutting. They'd every one laid down their clippers and their scissors and picked up their combs.

I guess I was supposed to apologize. Tell my boss I was sorry and that I'd never do such a terrible thing again.

But I couldn't.

So for the longest time we just stood there looking at each other like a couple of yard dogs ready to fight. Then Mike started in coughing. Then he started sounding like he was choking. Guy couldn't quit harking. I was about to get him a glass of water but then he pulled out his asthma inhaler, which fortunately helped. After he took a drag he sort of slapped me on the back and told me not to worry about what had just happened. No harm had been done. He realized that I didn't know any better, which was probably his fault but that now I did know better. We could rest assured nothing like that would happen again.

After all, blacks had their own places to go. They liked it like that and sure didn't need to be coming to us. Here's what I was to do from now on: Black guy comes in what doesn't know the policy, I just tell him I'm too busy to do anything for him and send him back out the door the way he come in.

Then he told me to finish sweeping up and clean my clippers real good. He went back to working on an old guy's comb-over. And everybody else in the shop started back to what they were doing just like normal.

Normal.

It's a wonder the next three customers I did that afternoon came out of my chair with both of their ears still attached. I nicked all three of their necks. You know how it is

when you're so mad about something you can't even think? Your mind goes ninety miles an hour and your heart feels like it's slamming against the wall of your chest and your hands sweat like a thirteen-year-old kid moving in for his first kiss. You want to say something. You say ten things to yourself but you know you can't say any of those things out loud because it would be really bad if you did and so it builds up and builds up until you feel like maybe you're not going to be able to breathe if something doesn't give.

That is exactly the way I felt the whole rest of that day.

I hated prejudice then and I hate it now. Treating people bad because they're different or because you disagree with something about them is not right. Here's the deal. Growing up, I went through some stuff. Bad stuff that I'm over now but that has a lot to do with how I still am.

When you're a kid, you just want to fit in and be like everybody else. If you or somebody in your close family is different than most everybody else, you get made fun of. Kids tease you. Teachers ask stupid questions about stuff that isn't any of their business. People say things behind your back but where you can hear them. You get your feelings hurt. You get mad. Sometimes you get into fights. I know because it happened to me and to other kids, too.

For my friend Josh it was his mother who caused him grief. She weighed over three hundred pounds and couldn't hardly walk because her butt was so big.

My buddy Mike got teased because his little sister was in a wheelchair. She drooled and she couldn't talk. People acted like she was a monster or something even though she was just a little girl.

Evan's dad was in prison for writing a bunch of hot checks. Other kids' parents didn't want them hanging around Evan because of what his dad did, which wasn't fair because as far as I know, Evan never stole anything in his life.

For me, it was my dad, because after I was born he decided to be gay.

Everybody knew because he didn't try to hide it. Where you live maybe folks buttering their bread on both sides is not such a big deal. But in small-town Texas where if you don't own a hunting rifle people talk behind your back about how you must be queer, being gay is not something people can know about and think you're all right.

Truthfully, I hated my dad being like that. It was embarrassing. People called me gay because of him. I wanted him to be like a normal dad.

But he wasn't.

Ever.

But he was still my dad. And I loved him.

Which put me in a really bad place. A place no kid should ever have to be.

I learned early that there's a lot of hate in this world. Which explains why I could not work for somebody like Mike.

After that day, I never went back.

Quitting put me in a bad place. No job. No money. I could not find work. I tried every barber shop in town, but there weren't all that many. Word about me had gotten around. Two months I went without work and things seemed like they were just going from bad to worse in my life. I was feeling real sorry for myself.

But then my luck changed. Through the grapevine Mrs. Chan who ran Lucy's heard about what had happened to me over at Mike's. She told somebody to tell me to call her up. When I did, she offered me a job. Over the phone. Sight unseen. Even though I was a barber and not a stylist, which meant there was a lot I didn't know how to do.

I believe in being loyal to people who help you out when you're down. Mrs. Chan's not the perfect boss by any means, but let me tell you, I will do anything that woman asks me to do. She's a good person and she was there for me in my hour of need.

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Sometimes I get ribbed for working in a salon with, not counting Abe, all women. When we're having a slow day and the talk turns to PMS I can see their point. But I look at it this way. There are other ways of making a living but I am not a highly educated guy. Without a college degree I could be working out on somebody's ranch. I could be a foreman in a factory. I could work construction.

But why would I want to? I've got an inside job. When it's hot out, I'm cool. When it's cold and wet, I stay warm and dry. I'm surrounded all day by pretty women

who smell good and have nice voices and clean teeth. You tell me: who's the smart one—me or the guy with the sunburn and the grease under his fingernails?

I do both men and women's hair, but probably two-thirds of my clients are female. Naturally cuts are what I'm best at but we're a full-service salon so I've learned to do color and perms, too, even brow and lip waxing, except most women are embarrassed to have that done by a man. I picked up the skills by coming in on my days off and watching some of the more experienced stylists work. I also read stuff and watched training videos. It wasn't as hard as you might think. As a barber, legally I'm allowed to do everything a stylist can do except cut wigs, which is not a problem since there's not a lot of call for that around here.

What I make is not a great living but decent. Counting tips, I cleared \$32,000 last year. Enough to pay the rent on my house, make my truck payment, and keep up on my child support, which I pay to Kari even though I've got Colton nearly half the time.