

# Hot Cakes

## *Bonus Scene*

“Oh my God, please make it stop.” Camden McCaffery looked at Aiden Anderson, his best friend and the CEO of their company. “I’m begging you.”

The “it” he was referring to was Dax Marshall, another of their partners and friends. More specifically, it was his whistling of *Let It Snow! Let It Snow! Let It Snow!* as he came into the conference room for their morning meeting.

Aiden understood. Cam was severely hung over, as he always was after they took a trip to their hometown of Appleby, Iowa.

They’d been there for Christmas. Cam’s family was awesome and had considered Aiden one of their own most of his life. He and Cam always spent a week there for the holidays. The meals around the table, the laughter, the cut-throat board games, the traditions were all things that Aiden looked forward to every year. This year had been just like all the others.

Until Christmas Eve.

When Cam’s younger sister, Zoe, had slipped into Aiden’s bedroom just past midnight. In pink lingerie. And had asked him to take her virginity.

“Seriously. Shut him up,” Cam hissed to Aiden, interrupting his thoughts.

Aiden swallowed hard and scrubbed a hand over his face.

He’d been unable to think about anything but Zoe since that night and facing her brother—her surly on a good day but downright asshole-ish when hung over brother—was not making him feel any better.

Cam wasn’t exactly the protective type. Because Zoe wasn’t the type that needed protecting. She was feisty and more than able to take care of herself. And she certainly didn’t need to be *protected* from Aiden. He’d never do anything to hurt her. He was ninety-percent sure he was in love with her.

But he didn't really want to know what Cam would think of him and Zoe together at the moment.

Then again, he and Zoe weren't *together*. At all. In fact, he'd skipped breakfast Christmas morning because Zoe had been helping prepare it and she would have very happily put ghost peppers in his eggs or dog shit in his hash browns.

She was *not* happy with him.

As in, she wasn't speaking to him. Every time he was within two feet of her, she'd found a way to skirt around him or simply head in the other direction.

The *one* time he'd managed to block her into the corner of the dining room, she'd given him a look that could only be described as *murderous* and said, "If you really think I'm above punching you in the balls in my mother's house, you are dead wrong."

He'd let her go.

"I'm going to heave my coffee mug at his head," Cam growled.

Dax was still whistling. He was also sitting at the head of the conference table, with his feet propped on the shiny mahogany surface. He had his hands linked behind his head and Aiden knew Dax realized Cam was hung-over.

"Knock it off," Aiden told him. "You know he's always like this the morning after."

Specifically, the morning after being within a hundred yards of Whitney Lancaster.

Cam's ex. The woman who'd broken his heart. The woman he'd never gotten over. And, inevitably, every fucking time Cam was in Appleby, no matter how hard he tried not to, he ended up running into her.

He really did try like hell not to see her or have to talk to her. But every damned time, something happened—he'd stop for a tank of gas or to pick something up at the hardware store for his father or he'd just be walking down the damned street—and suddenly she was there in front of him.

This time he'd nearly run her over in a crosswalk on Main Street.

Dax stopped whistling. "Did you know that it's a commonly held belief that you can only kiss *one* girl under the mistletoe on any given night?" he asked. "It's not like New Year's Eve where you can go around kissing everyone while the clock strikes."

Cam groaned, propping his elbows on the table and resting his head in his hands. His huge biceps bulged, making the tattoo that ran from shoulder to wrist jump.

“That right?” Aiden asked, amused in spite of himself.

“Guess so,” Dax said. “At least that’s what the four girls at the Christmas party told me.”

“You kissed four different girls under the same mistletoe at the same party?” Aiden asked.

“Yeah. But one at a time. It wasn’t like a mistletoe orgy or anything,” Dax said.

“But they thought mistletoe should be a monogamous thing?” Aiden asked.

Dax shrugged. “Yep. Ridiculous right?”

“I’ve honestly never given mistletoe etiquette a lot of thought,” Aiden told him.

“Well, now you know.”

He hadn’t made a lot of use of mistletoe at all actually, but he wouldn’t mind getting Zoe there. She’d *have* to kiss him again then, right? He didn’t know all the mistletoe rules, but he knew that the basic one was you had to kiss whoever was under there with you.

“But being *under Mistletoe* later ended up being completely worth having to apologize about the other three girls,” Dax said.

Aiden lifted a brow. “One of them was *named* Mistletoe?”

Dax grinned. “That’s what she told me it was. She was in a tiny green dress with little white “berries” dangling from it.”

“Was this a costume party?” Aiden asked.

“Nope.”

Aiden shook his head. That kind of stuff happened to Dax all the time.

The conference room door opened again and Oliver Caprinelli and Grant Lorre, their other two partners, entered followed by their executive assistant Piper.

She set a bottle of water and two ibuprofen tablets next to Cam. She rubbed his shoulder. “I’m ordering burgers and fries for an early lunch,” she told him. “It will soak up some of that shit in your system.”

He nodded but didn’t look up.

She smiled at Aiden. “You want anything?”

“Same,” he told her with a grateful smile. He wasn’t hungover but he was damned tired and feeling like a jerk. He hadn’t slept well since sending Zoe out of his room on

Christmas Eve, v-card intact. He wasn't sure a burger would actually fix how he was feeling, but he was positive a salad wouldn't.

Piper laid papers next to Ollie and Dax, picked up Dax's empty coffee mug—and would likely refill it—and handed over Grant's glasses, which he must have left somewhere.

She was always taking care of all of them. Grant had hired her as Ollie's assistant, because Lord knew Ollie needed the most babysitting. The visionary of the group, Ollie had a hard time with things like schedules and deadlines. He was always thinking five steps ahead of the rest of them. But he wasn't at all detail oriented. He came up with the big ideas and then trusted Dax, Aiden, Cam, and Grant to make them actually happen.

He was brilliant. But he couldn't be counted on to show up for a dinner reservation—or to even remember to eat at all—without Piper.

"I want something for lunch too," Ollie told her.

"I know," she replied, heading back for the doorway.

"Do you want to know what I want?" he asked.

"A teriyaki burger with pineapple and no onions." She did not put a question mark after onions.

Ollie frowned. "Yeah."

She simply nodded and swept out of the room, the air behind her smelling like spicy candy. Aiden had yet to place the scent exactly—and she wouldn't tell him, always giving him a mysterious smile when he asked—but it was delicious.

"She's a know-it-all," Ollie said to no one in particular.

The rest of the guys didn't reply. Because she was. Thank God.

"You gonna live?" Grant asked Cam, eyeing his friend and partner from beside Aiden.

"Unfortunately, I think so," Cam told him, tossing the ibuprofen tablets into his mouth. He swallowed a mouthful of water, then said, "It's going to be a long fucking day though."

"Why do you do that to yourself?" Grant asked.

"He almost killed Whitney this time," Aiden said. He much preferred talking about Cam and Whitney to thinking about Zoe and how badly he'd messed things up with her.

She couldn't go without speaking to him forever. Her family was his family. They *would* see each other again. They'd sit across from one another at her mom's dining room

table. They'd lounge on the sofa in the living room and watch movies with Henry, her little brother. They'd sit around the firepit on the back patio and drink spiked lemonade with Cam and her two best friends, Josie and Jane.

She couldn't avoid him.

And the next time he saw her, he was going to fix everything. Somehow.

"You almost *killed* her?" Dax asked. "What's that mean?"

"I did not." Cam shot Aiden a scowl.

"That's not the story I heard," Aiden said, unable to resist needling Cam.

They'd been best friends since kindergarten. Cam had done a lot of stupid things over the years and Aiden knew about every one of them.

"I was turning the corner onto Main and she stepped out into the crosswalk. It was totally her fault," Cam said with a scowl.

"But you *did* almost hit her," Aiden said.

"Holy shit," Dax said, his eyes wide.

"I. Did. Not." Cam sighed. "I saw her immediately and slammed on the brakes. She was startled and dropped the bag she was carrying which made it look a lot worse than it was."

"What was in the bag?" Ollie asked.

"Uh." Cam clearly didn't want to say.

But Aiden really had heard the whole story. It had happened on Main Street in Appleby, Iowa. It was a tiny town and everyone heard every "whole story". And then some. The stories got embellished, of course, but this one was pretty good even without the extras.

"Panties and frosting and cookies," Aiden said.

Dax thought about that. Then he nodded. "Three of my favorite things."

Aiden grinned at Cam's pained expression.

"Apparently she'd just been shopping at the boutique and had stocked up on panties. She also had a box of frosted cookies. So the crosswalk was strewn with panties in various colors that were covered in frosting and pieces of cookie."

Cam groaned, folded his arms on the table, and put his head down.

Aiden chuckled. He couldn't believe his badass, tattooed and pierced friend, who had plenty of women who wanted to ride his motorcycle—literally and metaphorically—couldn't get over this woman. But if Aiden kept joking about it and kept the Whitney-incidents light, he hoped one day Cam would be able to do the same.

“So, being a gentleman, of course Cam helped her clean everything up,” Aiden said.

“I couldn't just drive off,” Cam muttered into the table.

“Of course not,” Ollie agreed.

“But now you can't stop thinking about how you never thought you'd touch her panties and...cookies...again, right?” Dax asked.

“You're an asshole,” Cam said, also into the tabletop. But his words were clear.

Dax grinned. “And, if you were me, you would have been thinking of how symbolic it all was. How sticky and sweet those panties could get—”

“I hate you,” Cam said.

Dax's grin grew. “But you're not me, so that's good.”

“Okay, enough,” Grant said. He was always the one to pull them back to business.

Of course, 'business' was a loose term around the thirty-ninth floor of the office building in downtown Chicago that housed their offices.

They met every morning around this table. They'd been working together for nine years and it was a rare morning that they missed this ritual. It was less about actual business and more about touching base with one another. And giving each other plenty of shit before they went their different directions to do their individual jobs.

They'd met in college and the five of them had accidentally created the decade's most popular online video game.

They were millionaires. Famous in the video game world. They were stars at gaming cons, even Comic Con in San Diego. They had a huge fan base online. They were wildly successful.

And it had all started in a dorm room at the University of Chicago.

“Oh, hey, gift exchange,” Dax said, dropping his feet to the floor and reaching under the table to pull out a package.

Grant sighed.

He really would like to talk numbers and get everyone back in the work mindset, Aiden knew. But Ollie and Dax were always barely in that mindset anyway, Cam was obviously in bad shape, and Aiden was so distracted that he wasn't sure he was going to get anything done today.

He'd told Zoe no.

She'd come to him in lingerie, slipped into bed with him, kissed him, and asked him to be her first. To take her virginity. To have sex with her.

He'd never wanted any woman the way he wanted Zoe McCaffery.

And he'd said no.

Worse, that was *all* he'd said.

He'd been dead asleep when she'd slid into his bed. He'd had a couple of her mom's reindeer martinis while they'd played cards. It had been the middle of the night. Zoe had shocked him. Completely and totally shocked him. He'd had no idea she wanted him.

He had several excuses. Good excuses.

But the truth was, even in that semi-conscious state, he'd known that being with Zoe could never be a one-night thing.

So, he'd said no.

He could have explained himself better. He could have made her understand—maybe.

But the “no” had been enough to send her back to her own bedroom and he hadn't dared go after her with her brother sleeping just next door.

Besides, he would have wanted to make her promises and he had a lot of shit to figure out before he could promise her anything.

Like his work and where he lived and how he could move his life to Appleby to be with her.

Zoe McCaffery was never leaving their tiny hometown. Which made it clear that *he* was now going home. To stay.

“Aiden?”

He jerked his attention back to the Chicago conference room. Dammit.

“Yeah?”

“Merry Christmas man,” Ollie said, pushing a wrapped gift toward him.

“Aw, you shouldn’t have,” Aiden said. But they always did. They exchanged gag gifts every year after Christmas.

They were millionaires. They all could, and did, buy whatever they wanted, whenever they wanted it. So this was more for fun than anything. But it was nice to be thought of.

Aiden pulled a coffee mug out of the paper gift bag. It was black with two simple words in white block letters. HEAD DICK. He grinned, glad the words weren’t reversed. “Thanks.”

He was the head of these dicks, that was for sure. Grant was the serious, CFO, but Aiden was the CEO of Fluke, Inc.—named for the fact the company and all of their successes truly had been a fluke. His position as head of the company wasn’t because he was smarter or more driven than any of the other men. They all worked their asses off and every one of them was talented and smart and gave their all to the company. But they needed someone to bring them together. That was Aiden. He saw every one of their strengths—and weaknesses—and was a master at putting those puzzle pieces together into one awesome big picture.

Cam was the attorney and had never backed down from a fight. He protected their copyrights and trademarks like a bulldog, he negotiated kickass contracts, and he was always the go-to guy when someone needed yelled at.

Ollie was the visionary. He was the creative juice behind the game and all the products and events that Fluke did to promote their brand.

Dax was their graphic designer and computer geek. Though he was the least geeky geek Aiden had ever met. Dax took Ollie’s ideas and made them tangible things. He made the scribbles on their white boards into the people, places, and things in *Warriors of Easton*, their video game. He also charmed Comic Con crowds and did hilarious YouTube videos.

Dax and Ollie were the faces of the company at Comic Con and online to their fans. They were the ones that could talk story and character arcs and all of the details and nuances that the fans raved about—and bitched about—on social media.

Grant was the money guy, the one who made sure that Dax and Ollie didn’t blow through every penny of their profit with their grandiose schemes. He was also the one

made sure that everything they wanted to do would, actually, get funded while also paying their employees well and making sure all of the partners would retire young with healthy investment portfolios and a chunk of cash in the bank.

Aiden was the people person. Not with the fans, not like Ollie and Dax, but he dealt with their merchant accounts and their employees. And his four partners. He mediated arguments, made sure they were all fully utilizing their talents, and made sure they were happy.

They were a well-oiled machine. They all fit together perfectly and they accomplished amazing things together.

How as he going to leave them? Leave Chicago? Leave the company? Aiden ran a hand through his hair. This was complicated.

He wanted Zoe. But Zoe was in Iowa. His business, his partners, and his life were here.

He had no idea how to work this out.

“This is for you.” Aiden slid a wrapped box toward Ollie.

Ollie tore it open immediately. Inside was a case of Fudgie Fritters, Ollie’s favorite snack cake. It was from the Hot Cakes factory that was located in Appleby, Iowa.

And run by Whitney Lancaster’s family.

Cam just growled.

“Hey, you are absolutely forbidden to eat a single one of these,” Ollie said, holding the box against his chest protectively.

Cam wouldn’t touch Hot Cakes products if someone offered him a billion dollars.

“You can only get them by the case from the factory,” Aiden told him. “And those are the freshest Fudgie Fritters you’ll ever eat.”

“You’re a man among men,” Ollie told him. He held out a bag to Dax. “For you.”

Dax immediately turned the bag upside down, shaking tissue paper and his gift out onto the table. He held it up. It was a necktie. With gummy bears on it.

He grinned. “I fucking love this.” He immediately pulled the tie he’d been wearing—the red one that was covered Christmas lights and actually lit up if he pushed the button—from his collar.

They all wore shirts and ties, and often jackets, to the office. But Dax had been adamantly not a “tie guy”, until he’d discovered all of the dumb and ugly ties he could buy. Like the rubber ducky tie, the emoji tie, the bacon tie—yes, it looked like a slice of bacon hanging down the front of his shirt—and the Clue tie with all of the potential weapons from the board game Clue. He also had a giraffe tie and an otter tie. And now he had a gummy bear tie. Gummy bears were Dax’s favorite thing in life. Even higher on his list than girls who called themselves Mistletoe and got busy with him on Christmas.

“I don’t know if I should give you your gift today,” Grant said to Cam, pushing a box across the table anyway.

Cam reached for it. “Why’s that?”

“You’ll see.”

Cam tore the paper back from the box. And groaned. It was a bottle of whiskey. His favorite kind. The really good expensive stuff. The stuff he’d been tipping back in the passenger seat of Aiden’s car all the way back from Appleby yesterday. Straight from the bottle. Super classy and all.

“Sorry.” Grant didn’t really look sorry. He looked amused.

“Hair of the dog,” Dax said. “Take a swig. You’ll feel a thousand times better.”

“Do not do that!” Piper called from her desk that sat just outside of the conference room.

“Oh yeah, he’s doin’ it!” Dax called back. “And if you could run and get some raw eggs and hot sauce for the hangover cure, that would be great.” He grinned.

“No way!” she called back, in spite of the fact she was talking to her *five* bosses. “We all know who would be cleaning it up when he hurls!”

“Can everyone stop shouting?” Cam asked, looking seriously miserable.

“What did you get for Grant?” Dax asked Cam.

“Oh. Shit. It’s out by Piper’s desk.”

“Hey, Piper!” Dax yelled.

“Jesus,” Cam groaned. “Seriously, man. I will flush your gummy bears down the toilet if you keep doing that.”

Dax just chuckled. Cam could probably flush the ones Dax had on his desk in his office, but Aiden was sure Dax had pounds of them stored elsewhere. He claimed they helped with his creativity. As did the ping pong table he utilized regularly.

“Here. Good lord.” Piper pushed a huge cardboard box into the room, but the ease with which she moved it indicated it was fairly light.

Grant looked at it as if it was full of snakes. “What the hell?” he asked Cam.

But Cam wasn’t in the mood to joke around. He just gestured toward it vaguely with his hand. “Open it.”

Grant stood and rounded the table, still looking like he was walking toward the guillotine.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.” Dax bounded to his feet and crossed to the box. He ripped the top open and peered inside. Then he started laughing. “Awesome,” he told Cam over his shoulder. “Nice job.”

“Oh God,” Grant muttered.

Dax reached into the box and pulled out Grant’s gift. It was a giant bean bag chair. It was a rich, soft brown leather and was far too big to be a child’s chair, but it was definitely a beanbag chair.

Aiden chuckled.

Dax only had bean bag chairs in his office. He claimed, predictably, that they helped with his creative process too. Because his creative process was so important to the company, they let him get away with that shit. But they knew it was at least half made-up. Dax was the class clown, the life of the party. He felt it was his personal duty to make sure everyone enjoyed their work and that Fluke was a fun place to be.

Grant, on the other hand, refused to attend meetings in Dax’s office because of the bean bag chairs. And the gummy bears. And the bright yellow walls. He said the whole room gave him a headache and that grown men shouldn’t sit in chairs that were multicolored. Leather—brown or black—was the only acceptable upholstery for “serious chairs”.

So Cam had gotten him a “serious” beanbag chair.

“I’m not sitting in that,” Grant said.

“You have to,” Dax told him. “It would be rude not to. How would that make Cam feel?”

Grant cast a look at Cam. Who was looking a little green around the edges actually. “You’re an ass,” Grant told him.

Cam nodded. “I’m aware.”

For a moment, Aiden thought about giving Cam more shit about being so hung-up on Whitney.

But, for the first time, he thought maybe he completely understood.

Zoe had gotten to him. He hated knowing she was upset with him. More, the idea that he might not have another chance with her made his stomach twist.

And he hadn’t really *had* her. Not the way Cam had had Whitney. Aiden was certain he’d never get over Zoe. Even now. What if he *had* taken her virginity Christmas Eve? How could he have walked away and come back to Chicago? How could he have gone on as if nothing had changed? Once they were together, there would be no going back to how things had always been.

He’d never thought of her as a romantic interest or even a sexual interest until two summers ago. But since then, he’d been doing his damndest to ignore the fact that the girl he’d always thought of as a little sister was suddenly the only woman he wanted.

Now, there was no avoiding it. He’d seen her in pink lingerie. She’d kissed him. She’d confessed she was still a virgin and had told him that she trusted him completely and wanted him to be her first.

He wasn’t going to get over that.

He was going home to Appleby—somehow—and he was going to convince her—somehow—that he wanted more than one night with her.

He wanted forever.

And, he definitely had some sweet-talking to do.

HEAD STRAIGHT INTO SUGARCOATED NOW! READ CHAPTER ONE RIGHT HERE:

<https://erinnicholas.com/sugarcoated-chapter-one/>

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Aiden's story, **Sugarcoated**, releases on March 24<sup>th</sup>!

Dax's story, **Forking Around**, is coming in May.

You will get to know Grant better in **Making Whoopie** in June.

Sparks fly with Cam and Whitney in **Semi-Sweet on You** in September.

And last, but not least, Ollie and Piper's story, **Gimme S'more**, will release in  
January 2021!

Find them all at Goodreads ~ <http://bit.ly/HotCakes-Goodreads>

**Welcome to Hot Cakes! It's going to be sweet!**