



Finding Forever in Cedarwood

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Category: Romance, M-m Romance

Description: A celebrity can't hide forever in a small town—not when love enters the picture.

Liam Blackwell's career is in a slump and he needs a boost fast. What's a celebrity to do when he needs experience in a small town? Go to Cedarwood. There are just three requirements—research the town, learn the script and don't get romantically involved, because Liam hasn't come out. No sweat, until a meeting in the center of town throws the plan all out of whack. Stone McCartney lives for his job rescuing animals and finding them forever homes. He's not looking for love, but when he sees Liam, he can't help wanting to make a connection. Can the budding relationship survive the ghosts from Stone's past? Or will Liam and Stone part ways?

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Chapter One

“You want me to do what?” Liam Blackwell rolled his eyes and squeezed his phone. “Pat, I don’t know the first thing about small towns.” Christ. How could his agent think he’d be right for the part of a farmer in Ohio or that he knew a damn thing about farming? He’d never been on a farm. If she were there in the same room, rather than on the phone, he could explain better.

“I knew when you did that audition for the superhero movie that you were a candidate for this film. I sent the producers and talent scout that audition and that’s what got you the job. The director asked for you by name,” Patricia Michaels said. “Just do it. It’s a starring role, great pay and you get a percentage of the residuals. Why turn that down? You can get experience with this director.”

“How?” He tamped down his irritation. He needed the money. He had a lifestyle to maintain. He was still trying to get his last girlfriend to keep quiet about his sexuality. He wasn’t ready to come out. How was he supposed to play convincing leading roles in rom-coms if no one believed he was attracted to the heroine and not the other hero?

“Don’t you have a ballplayer friend? Tanner Fox, right? He lives in Cedarwood, Ohio. The last time I checked, it’s a sweet little town. They have quirks, but you might get the experience you need if you live there for six months. Call Tanner and get info about the town, then accept the damn role.”

Well, fuck. “I’ll call Tanner.” He groaned. “And I’ll take the role.” He massaged his temple. He had few options. The last time he’d worked had been over a year before. “I read the script. It’s not the kind of role I like. It’s simple.”

“Of course it is. He’s a farmer. He’s not a tortured artist or playwright. Jesus. You need a winner and this film is it,” Pat said. “I’ve never steered you wrong before. The studio and the director want you. No one else.”

“I’ll do my best.” He sank onto the bar stool. “You’ll send me the extra details, right? Like anything about Cedarwood?”

“On the way. Call Tanner.” She hung up, leaving him in silence.

Liam tossed his phone onto the bar and grumbled. A freaking small-town movie. God help me to not bomb.

His phone rang. Patricia. He should answer, but she’d hung up on him. He wasn’t in the mood to have his ass chewed again. He hated to be pushed, even if he deserved it. He waited until the ringing stopped before he retrieved the device.

A notification appeared on the screen. One voicemail.

He tapped the screen and retrieved the message from his agent. “Get your butt in gear. I sent the details in an email and I’ve got the contracts on my desk. You’ll report to the set in Washington in November. Now call Tanner and stop dicking around.”

He frowned. She wasn’t about to let up. November. He had until November...that was barely enough time to prepare for the role, let alone understand the small-town situation. He dialed Tanner’s number. There was no guarantee Tanner would answer. He’d seen a press release saying Tanner had married a doctor. There might have been a kid involved, but he wasn’t sure and didn’t remember.

After four rings, the call connected. “Hello, Liam. How are you?”

“Tanner,” Liam said. “I’m good. How’s life treating you?”

“Fantastic. I’ll resume my role with the local team as the assistant coach. Our son is starting the first grade and Dane and I are solid. I’m living the dream. What about you?”

“You have no regrets that you’re not in the major league?” He’d have been crushed to not be a star. He loved the spotlight. Doesn’t Tanner love it, too?

“I thought I would, but I’m good where I am. It’s funny. I never thought I’d like Cedarwood. It’s a small town. It’s quiet—save for the Coalition—but even they’ve slowed down their assaults. Why? Are you thinking of leaving show business?”

“Not really. I love the excitement.”

“Understandable. You love attention.”

“I do.” He chuckled. “I live for the spotlight.”

“I know,” Tanner said. “So what? We haven’t talked in ages. I’d ask you want you want because you never call just to talk. Look, I can’t set you up with anyone because I don’t know who to ask.”

“Huh? No.” His irritation showed up again. Why couldn’t Pat get him in with the right people in Cedarwood? She liked to convince people to fall into line. “I’m interested in visiting Cedarwood.”

“You are? Who is she?”

“No one,” Liam said. “I’m researching a role. I’m playing a guy who has a farm. A girl ends up stranded on the road in front of my farm and walks back to the house to

get help. I take her in since it's a stormy night. I think it involves snow. Anyway, it's sweet and schlocky, but it's a job. It should lead to something meatier the next time around."I hope."I called because I wanted to know if you knew the right place to stay when I come to town. Like a house for rent or something?"

"I do. We have a friend who has a duplex. You could rent half of the house. It's in town, but it'll give you a feel for Cedarwood," Tanner said.

"Fine. When I fly in, I'll find you."

"How about I send you the information? You can set it all up and do what you want, rather than depending on me," Tanner said. "I've got a house, man and child to worry about. You're not on that list."

"I know."

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“Are you jealous?”

“Maybe a little.” Or a lot. He wanted a lover who cared about him, not his movie persona.

“You bastard. You are. Why don’t you just come out? You’ll be happier.”

“No, I won’t.” He couldn’t risk his marketability.

“Why? Because you’ll lose out on roles? You know that’s shit. If you’re half the actor you think you are, then you can play any role, no matter if the character is gay or straight.”

He’d once thought that, but not now. “You don’t know the business.”

“Why not play gay characters? They’re in the movies and part of the culture. We’re not invisible any longer.”

“Visibility is a relative thing.” God, he sounded like an asshole.

“I call bullshit.”

“Call it all day long, but I’m not asked to play gay characters. I’m a pinup.” He rolled his eyes. He hated posing for the cheesecake-type shots, but women wanted to see him in as few clothes as possible. “Do you know my best download is that picture of me stretched out across the hood of that Jeep?”

“Gag.”

“Shut up.”

“I’ve seen you at your worst. You’re not a pinup, but you’re right. You’ve got a body women want. Hell, I bet men want it, too.”

“The fans think I’m hot and I’m not going to argue,” he said.

“Fine. I’ll send you the info and get you hooked up with the rental car place, but I’m not your guide. You need to experience and figure out Cedarwood for yourself—like everyone else.”

Fair enough. “You’re an asshole.” He didn’t have to play the jackass role he’d perfected for the public. He could be nicer.

“No, I’m not letting you walk all over me,” Tanner said. “I remember the last time we chatted and you tried to use me.”

He hadn’t wanted to admit he could be such a jerk, but Tanner was right. “Okay.”

“Good.” Tanner paused. “You’re going to be fine. Be yourself. Most people won’t know who the hell you are and that’s a good thing. Don’t be the movie-star jackass. Be the nice guy that’s buried deep inside you. They’ll like you. It’ll take a little bit, but they’ll come around.”

“Thanks, Mr. Greeting Card-slash-Motivational Poster Man. I’ll be in touch.”

“Just don’t be an asshole.” Tanner hung up.

Liam stared at the bar top and sighed. Tanner had a point. He could be a self-serving,

greedy, needy pain in the ass. He'd let Hollywood and the business run his life. Ruin my life, more like it. He doubted he'd be happy in Cedarwood, but if no one knew him, he could be the guy beneath the veneer, like Tanner suggested. He might not be thrilled, but he'd make his time in Cedarwood work. If nothing else, he'd do his best.

* * * *

Two days later, Liam pulled in to the driveway of a gigantic purple Victorian home. He'd expected a brick house, or maybe a muted gray or putty color for the houses, not...purple. Does the person renting the duplex live in this gaudy-colored building?

A man strode onto the porch and waved. Not Tanner.

Liam drove toward the house and parked. He left the vehicle. "Hi. I'm Liam Blackwell. I'm looking for Arthur Marsh." He held out his hand. "Are you Mr. Marsh?"

"One and the same." Arthur shook hands with Liam and grinned. "What brings you to Cedarwood? A hot new movie? Seeking the perfect girl-next-door for your leading lady? Time off?"

Christ, he asked a lot of questions. "A vacation." So much for not being known. "I'm interested in a rental property. Tanner Fox told me to talk to you and Colin Baker."

"Ah, the duplex. Yes. Mr. Baker and his brother sold it to me last year. Both got married and didn't need the house."

He didn't need an explanation. Instead of being catty, Liam forced a smile. "I see. Is it available?"

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“It is. Half has been rented, but the other half is empty. Would you like to see it?” Arthur asked. “I can take you there now.”

“As long as it’s not the purple monster behind you, I’m very interested,” Liam said. He shouldn’t have mentioned the house being overwhelming...Oh well.

“This is my home.” Arthur frowned. “You don’t like violet?”

“Not for the color of a house.” Shit. He’d been catty. “I’m sure it’s very lovely inside.”

“It is. I had Cary Grant decorate it. He does splendid work.”

Cary Grant? Oh, brother. “I see.”

“But you want to see the duplex.” Arthur wagged his fingers. “It’s down the block. We can take a stroll over there.”

“Walk?” Is this guy serious? “I don’t walk anywhere.” He used his scooter instead.

“You’re in Cedarwood, not Hollywood.” Arthur nodded. “This way.” He strolled down the path to the sidewalk.

They were doing this. Walking. Liam shoved his keys into his pocket. He had no problem getting his steps in. Hell, he ran five miles each morning on the treadmill. But he didn’t want to walk. Tanner’s words came back to him. He needed to be more like Liam and less like the Hollywood Liam. He fell into step beside Arthur.

“I knew you’d change your mind.” Arthur chuckled. “What do you want to know about the house?”

“You’re not the average real estate agent, are you?” Liam asked. “I’m not trying to be a dick. I’ve just never encountered anyone like you.”

“I’m original. Things are slower here and we tend to trust more—unless you’re here to use us.” Arthur stopped short. “We see through bullshit pretty well.”

“And you know I’m bullshitting you?” He wasn’t about to back down. He might be the calmer version of himself, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t going to stand his ground.

“Yeah. You’re trying to hide and learn about the town because you need it for a role. Fine. I’ll help you get the duplex. Just don’t get attached to anyone here. I would really hate to see a friend hurt because you fucked with his heart.” Arthur walked off, leaving Liam alone a few steps behind.

Wait.Hisheart?Arthur knew? Liam frowned, then caught up to Arthur.What a crock of shit...“Wait.” He strode next to Arthur. “I’m sorry.”

“I know.”

“You were hurt by someone, weren’t you?”Probably Cary Grant.

“Don’t psychoanalyze me.”

“I’m not.” He held up his hands. “Here’s the thing. I trust you to help me get the house. I trust you’ll keep my secret, too.”

“It’s my job to get you the house,” Arthur said. “It’s not mine to tell why you’re

here.”

“Right.” He exhaled. “How’d you know about...things?”

“What things?”

“I’m gay.” Jesus. “You could tell.”

Arthur stopped again and stared at him. “Honey, everyone can tell. You wear it on your sleeve without realizing it.”

“I do?”

“Uh-huh.”

Well, shit. So much for my acting ability. “Just...don’t say anything. I’m not ready.”

“Like I said, it’s not mine to tell and I’d never step on your moment.” Arthur waved. “The duplex is right up here. It features three bedrooms and a connected two-car garage. The back yard is communal and the mailbox is attached to the front of the building. All appliances are included. The rent is six seventy-five a month with six seventy-five for the security. I need first, last and the security deposit when you sign the contract. There’s new tile in the bathrooms and laminate throughout the first floor.” Arthur strode up to the front door. “It’s a quiet neighborhood.” He gestured to the home. “I will mention one snag.”

“Snag?”

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“The Coalition. If you weren’t yourself, I wouldn’t mention it, but they’ll figure it out. They aren’t wild about gays in town. Even if you’re not out, they’ll be watching. They have the best gaydar I’ve ever seen.”

“What do they do?” He’d dealt with paparazzi and could handle the Coalition. No sweat.

“They’ll leave threatening letters, write nasty things in the letters to the editor section of the paper, they’ve been known to attack...they’ve tried to run at least four people out of town.” Arthur paused. “If you want company, there’s a support group.”

“Oh? Is it code for something?” Like an underground gay bar?

“It’s for single gay people with and without children. They talk, commiserate and support each other. It might be a good place for you to go if you want to research.”

Huh. He’d sworn Arthur was going to talk about a gay bar. “You’d tell me about that, even though I shouldn’t get attached? Won’t I forge relationships if I’m going to a support group?”

“You know where you stand with me. They’re my friends. Hands off, but be polite. Be a friend. Just don’t think they’ll want to hang around you if you’re an asshole from Hollywood.”

“Well, okay.” He wandered through the ground floor of the home. He’d rather have the whole house, but he’d take what he could get. He nodded at a door in the middle of the hallway. “Does this go to the other side?”

“It did. The former owners had this as one dwelling for a few months, but opted to return it to a duplex. You can go through the door, but I’d ask the neighbors first.”

“I will.” He left the door alone. “I’m going to take a look upstairs.”

“By all means.” Arthur remained in the living room. He fiddled with his phone.

Liam ascended the stairs to the second level of the home. An odd feeling washed over him. He could see himself living there. Not just living, but having a life and future there. What was he thinking? He wasn’t a small-town guy. He needed action and noise. But he did like the house. The smaller bedroom featured blue walls and a white bookshelf built into the corner. Must’ve been a kid’s room, he figured. A mirror was still on the ceiling in the master bedroom. He’d bet that mirror had witnessed more than a few fun times.

“Well?” Arthur stood in the doorway. “What do you think?”

“I’ll take it.” He grinned. “My journey starts here.”

“For the agreed price?”

“Yes.” He didn’t bother to hesitate or haggle. Why? He wanted to live here. He offered his hand. “Do we go to your place to sign or what?”

“We can.” Arthur switched the lights off and followed Liam to the ground floor. “You’ll find Cedarwood is a nice place. We have the swim complex, trails for running, fitness centers in the community center and the Metropark...there are ballfields and a concert series each spring and summer in the park. The schools are fantastic.” He locked up the house. “Since you’re deciding to stay and you’re playing the role of small-town guy, don’t play us.”

Liam nodded. He appreciated Arthur's forthright approach. "I understand." Some movies played small-town folks as simpletons. Cedarwood might run at a slower pace, but that didn't mean they were any less sophisticated. He walked with Arthur to the purple Victorian. Upon second viewing, the house wasn't so gaudy. More like unique. He strolled past his rental car. "Do you get many strangers to town?"

"Seems like we grow a little each day." Arthur waved. "Come in. People like Cedarwood."

Liam gasped as he stepped into the foyer of the home. He hadn't expected such a plush interior. Whoever had decorated the place—Cary Grant, as Arthur had mentioned—had done a good job. Money had been invested and the pieces were cohesive in the space. He stood at the farmhouse table with Arthur. "Don't you need the seller to come by?" He'd like to meet the person he was renting from anyway.

"I do. Colin and Jordan will be here in ten minutes." Arthur pulled papers from the manila folder. "Are you planning on having any pets?"

"I hadn't thought about it." Until an hour ago, he hadn't been sure he wanted to be in Cedarwood, let alone have a pet. "Maybe, why?"

"There's an extra deposit." Arthur met Liam's gaze. "Want it thrown in?"

"Yes." He wasn't sure why he'd said that. He wasn't committed to having a dog or cat. "Throw it in." The character might have a dog and it wouldn't hurt to be prepared. For all he knew, the character would have multiple pets.

"Will do." Arthur paused, then shook his head. "Okay. When they get here, we'll sign the papers. Are you thirsty? Want a water? Brandy? Beer?"

"Water. Thank you." He sat on the bench and folded his hands on his lap. He'd do

this. He'd see this through. Dogs, rental homes, futures...Christ. He didn't belong in Cedarwood. No role was good enough for this. He wasn't cut out for quiet.

Arthur returned to the room with two glasses of water. His phone beeped. "Shoot. Sorry. It's my brother."

"You're fine." He sipped the water. It was odd how something as simple as water could be fancy—he was used to the overpriced purified triple-filtered stuff in a bottle. This wasn't the same and he liked the taste. He smacked his lips. If he stayed, he'd have to get used to the unique water.

"Stone...wait. I'm conducting business. Give me an hour and I'll be over. Yes." Arthur put the phone down and blushed. "My half-brother. He dumps his cash into the shelter and when he gets overwhelmed, he stops over here."

"Shelter?"

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“Animals. He runs a farm, too. If you have a dog, cat, horse, rabbit, bird or whatever that needs a home, he’ll find one or take it in himself. The thing is, he doesn’t just find a home. He finds the right one for the critter. He has the knack. Animals he knows. Checking accounts? No. I straighten it out for him. Anyway, Colin and Jordan should be here anytime now.”

“Good deal,” Liam said. “I’m impressed your brother rescues animals. I’m also impressed there’s another person out there who can’t balance their check book. I thought I was the only one.”

“Don’t flirt with Stone. He has a boyfriend,” Arthur snapped. “Just don’t.”

“Who said I wanted to flirt with him? I’m relating.” He wasn’t ready to come out or have a relationship and Arthur was already warning him against someone. Jesus.

“Right. Relate your way away from my half-brother.”

“I haven’t met him. We might hate each other.” For all he knew, the guy would take one look at him and run. He was too high-strung, and if that was what Stone thought, he’d be right.

“My brother is a good man.” Arthur remained standing and folded his arms. “Hands to yourself.”

“Will do. I’m in town to prep for a part and to learn about Cedarwood. I’m not looking for a date—with anyone.” He rested his elbows on the table. “So you have nothing to worry about.”

“Right.” Arthur snorted. “Colin’s here, so we can get that rolling. Why don’t we move to my office?”

“Whatever you say.” He followed Arthur out of the room to the home office. What an odd guy. He could be so chatty, but protective. Then again, he reminded Liam of the town. They were probably nice enough, but guarded. He’d deal. He hadn’t risen through the ranks of spoiled child star to adult star to serious actor by ignoring the quirks of others. Use what you can to get what you want. He was there for the role, and damn it, he’d absorb everything.

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Chapter Two

Stone parked behind Colin's SUV. He wasn't in the mood to see his half-brother, but he needed the check for the shelter. Only Arthur would write a check to the shelter and not deliver the damn thing. He'd told everyone he'd donated the money, but Arthur had a tendency to forget what he'd said until Stone pushed.

He noticed the extra vehicle in the drive. A rental car packed with junk. Who the hell's there to see my brother? A new boyfriend? He wasn't one to snoop on Arthur, but whoever was there had their life crammed into that car.

Arthur strode out of the house. "I know what you want." He shoved the piece of paper into Stone's hand. "I'm sorry I forgot. Forgive me."

"Is the guy hot?" He looked at the check before tucking it into his pocket. "Huh? So hot you don't want anyone else to see him?"

"What guy?"

"Don't play stupid. The one with the car packed with his life." He nodded to the house. "He's cute, isn't he?"

"I'm getting him a rental property," Arthur snapped. "Jesus. We don't all think with our dick."

"You do." He knew his brother. The man had a flair for finding fixer-upper types. The hotter, the better.

“Not this time.”

“Really? What changed?” Stone asked. “You always want the guys for yourself. I’m looked at as the oddball. You steer them away from me. Do I have some raging horn sticking out of my forehead? Green spots I don’t see? Or am I really that much of an asshole?”

“I never said any of those things.”

“You’re a crap liar.”

“He’s only here on a temporary basis.”

“Ah. A one-month guy? Won’t Laurence care?”

“He’d have to be home long enough to care.” Arthur sighed. “Just... he’s not mine, but I’d suggest you leave him alone. It won’t end well.”

“Because you’re chasing him.”

“Because he’s not staying in town. He’ll be here for six months or so, then he’ll be gone.” Arthur glared at him. “You don’t need to be fucked around by another asshole who will use you.”

“Shit.” He hated when his brother was right and brought up his ex-boyfriend, Jeff. The guy still owed Stone money and an apology. He’d been a great boyfriend when they were together and Jeff had needed a place to crash. But Stone hadn’t been good enough for Jeff to stick around. “Fair enough.”

“No, it’s not fair,” Arthur said. “Jesus. I helped pick up the pieces. He treated you like shit and you wanted him back.”

Arthur had him there. He'd thought he was in love with Jeff.

"I gave you the check and I'll come by the farm later to sort out your checking account. Go before you get a whiff of this guy and do something you'll regret," Arthur said.

"Then he is hot."

"Hell yes, he's hot." Arthur frowned. "Stone. No."

"I'm not." He shrugged. "But if I don't give you shit, you'd think I was sick."

"I would." Arthur gave him a shove. "Go."

"I'm out." He patted his back pocket. "Thank you. I hope Laurence comes home and realizes what he's got." He climbed behind the wheel of his truck. "Thank you. I love you."

"You tolerate me." Arthur waved. "Be good."

He drove off, leaving his brother behind. Arthur knew him too well. He didn't need to get involved with anyone. He'd split with Jeff for the last time not four months ago. He had no business being in a relationship. According to Jeff, he wasn't relationship material. He wanted too much from his partner.

Except he'd thought he was a decent boyfriend. He liked having a warm body in his bed. He missed their conversations over dinner and date night. He missed the noise in the house—noise not made by animals. He drove across Cedarwood to the rescue. He should head to the bank first, but he wanted to make a copy of the check.

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His thoughts turned to the mystery man with Arthur. Who would come to Cedarwood for six months, only to leave? Probably another baseball player or one of Michael Jepsen's bandmates. Ever since Michael had disclosed that he was the guy behind the Bandit stage makeup, come out and married his boyfriend, Niall, everyone wanted to bring their musical talents to Cedarwood. One guy said there was something in the water that made his music sound better in the small town.

What did Stone know? He wasn't a musician, but he doubted there was anything special with Cedarwood other than Michael being there.

He parked in his spot behind the shelter building and headed into the office. He placed the check on the copier and made the copies, then stamped the back of the check.

Wiggles, the shelter mascot, strolled up to him. The sweet basset liked everyone and belonged to no one. He preferred to roam the enclosed shelter grounds and stay with the animals. He knew how to calm the scared critters...like a shelter animal whisperer.

"Hi, guy." He knelt next to Wiggles and scratched the dog behind the ears. "Who'd you visit today?" He admired Wiggles' ability to find the most scared dog and to stay with the animal until he or she felt safe. "Lady? Or George?"

Wiggles sat next to him and his tongue lolled.

He knew better than to expect an answer from the dog. Wiggles had a job and he did it well. He also couldn't talk. Stone stayed on the floor as one of the tabby cats

wandered into the office. Wiggles paid the feline no attention.

“Who let Rebel loose?” Stone called. He petted Wiggles with one hand and snagged Rebel with the other. “You’re not supposed to be loose, young man.”

Amy darted into the room. “Sorry. I had Wrigs with me. I didn’t know where Rebel was. He darted out of the cat room when I replaced the blankets.”

“He’s definitely earned his name. He goes where he wants.” Both animals were safe, but he wasn’t thrilled the cat was unsupervised. He’d had thefts before and didn’t want Rebel being taken by someone who wouldn’t care for him.

“I’ll get Rebel back to the cat room.” Amy scooped the cat into her arms. “Come on, escape artist.”

Of the twenty or so felines at the shelter, Rebel had earned his name. He could be a handful and sought out every opportunity to escape confinement. Stone scratched Wiggles behind the ears again, then stood. “I need to take this check to the bank.”

“From your brother?” Amy called.

“Yeah.”

Amy strode into the room. “I’m glad he came through and now Rebel is contained.”

“Thanks,” Stone said. “I’m going to run to the bank. Want anything while I’m in town?”

“I’d love a gyro.” Amy handed him some money. “Please? I’ve been dying for one all day.”

“Sure.” He tucked the bills into his pocket. “I shouldn’t be long. An hour or so? Be back in a bit.”

Amy knelt next to Wiggles. “We’ll be here.”

He trusted his staff more than most people. They knew the reward of rescuing animals and the pain of the not-so-happy endings. Amy was one of his most trusted rescuers. He wished he could pay her more, but he only had so much money to go around and most of it went to the care and feeding of the animals.

He drove into Cedarwood proper and parked in front of the bank. He spotted the gyro truck down the block. Good. He hadn’t wanted to drive all over to find the food truck. He headed into the building to deposit the check. Thank God the bank catered to businesses and stayed open until nine.

“Stone McCartney.” Ari Winebanks grinned. “Did you get another donation?”

“We survive on donations,” he said. “How are you, Ari?” He wasn’t wild about the guy. Ari owned one of the jewelry stores in Cedarwood and refused to sell to the gay community. But he was a member of the chamber of commerce and he’d made two small donations to the shelter in the past. Stone put up with him in the hopes he might make another donation. “Is business good?”

“Booming. It’s almost May—wedding season. Everyone wants to propose in May.” Ari laughed. “This is my best time of year.”

“I’m sure it is.” He’d never bought any jewelry other than a watch for Arthur three years ago.

“I heard there’s a renter for the Baker duplex.” Ari swept his gaze over Stone. “Do you know him?”

“No.” He hadn’t a clue who the guy was.

“Your brother has the listing.”

“So? I don’t know his business.” Christ. He barely kept up with his own life. How was he supposed to know what his brother did on a daily basis?

“Why not?” Ari asked. “What if the renter is a movie star? We could get Cedarwood put on the map.”

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“I guess.” He’d rather be known for helping animals, instead of Cedarwood being the home of some celebrity.

“I heard the renter is an actor. I don’t know who, but it’ll be nice to have some class in Cedarwood.” Ari nodded. “We need new blood in this town.”

“No, you want them to visit your store and spend money.” Stone sighed. “I need to go. I promised Amy I’d get her a gyro.”

“Ah.” Ari’s eyes lit up. “Are you two an item?”

“No.” He’d been through this a hundred times with Ari. The man knew the truth. “I’m gay and Amy isn’t looking for a boyfriend.” Not that she’d told him anyway.

“She’d be a wonderful partner. You already run the shelter together.”

“I’m gay.”

“Keep your voice down.” Ari sneered. “No one wants to hear about that.”

He groaned. “Fine, but I am. I’m not interested in Amy as a dating partner.” He sighed again. “I should go. Enjoy your afternoon.”

“I will.” Ari nodded and smiled before walking away.

Stone kept the smile on his face, despite his desire to scream. He forced himself to be nice to everyone. He made the hard decisions concerning adoptions, but that didn’t

mean he couldn't act pleasant. He always strived to maintain a positive relationship with the community for the sake of the animal shelter. But people like Ari tried his patience.

He made his way to the gyro truck. At least there was a short line and he wouldn't have to wait long. He queued up. His ex-boyfriend, Jeff, was at the head of the line. Shit. He prayed Jeff couldn't see him. Things were so messy between them and he wasn't in the mood to listen to his ex rant.

"Stone?"

Too late. He met Jeff's gaze. "Hi."

"Hi." Jeff grinned. "Funny seeing you here."

"In town? I do leave the shelter." He had to measure his words to not incite Jeff.

"Not much. I thought maybe you'd marry the place."

There was the jab he expected. "The animals need me."

"I needed you." Jeff stepped aside as Stone ordered. "You're getting two? Got a new stud in the pasture?"

"Amy."

"Oh." Jeff hesitated. "Want to grab a beer? We should reconnect."

"I quit drinking." Drinking only ever got him into trouble.

"Why?"

“I have no real need to do it.” He’d increased his drinking when Jeff stressed him out and he didn’t like himself when he was drunk.

“Are you kidding? A hot summer day is best capped with a cold brew.”

“Or an iced tea.” Time to shut this down. “My order is up. I should go.”

“You’re getting dull in your old age,” Jeff said.

The sizzle wasn’t there. The desire to kiss Jeff had gone a long time ago. Now, when he looked at his ex, he only felt sad. “Old? I’m six months younger than you.” He folded the top of the bag. “I need to go. Amy is probably hungry and she won’t want cold food.”

Jeff shrugged. “My hot bod is waiting when you’re ready.”

“Don’t keep it idling on my account.”

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“Ass.”

“Bye, Jeff.” He’d never really seen the attraction, other than Jeff could’ve been a model. Maybe that was Stone’s problem—he tended to go for handsome men instead of holding out for substance. Jeff had no substance.

He walked to his truck and unlocked the door.

“Excuse me.” A man strode up to him. “I’m new in town. Where did you get those?”

He met the gaze of the man. He’d never seen such brilliant blue eyes in his life. He stared at the man. Expensive haircut, perfect teeth and a tan...he was tall, too. Blood surged below Stone’s belly. He wanted to taste the guy’s kiss and feel his hands on his chest. Shit. He needed to get laid. A perfect stranger shouldn’t have this kind of effect on him. But he did.

The man smiled, sending jolts of electricity thorough Stone. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m too forward.”

“No.” Stone placed the bag on the seat. “I—you look familiar.” He’d seen this guy before.

“Oh?”

“Did you adopt the yellow lab on Thursday?” That had to be it. He’d only read through the adoption agreement, rather than being there. The information supplied by the adopters met the criteria for adoption and Amy had done the interviews. He’d

only seen the couple in passing.

“No, I just got into town.” A smile lit up the man’s face. “I don’t have a dog, either.”

“Oh.” Shit. “I’m sorry. I’m Stone McCartney. I oversee the animal shelter here in Cedarwood.” He stuck out his hand. “If you’re looking for great gyros, then the food truck is right down the block. The prices are reasonable and they’re yum. You can’t lose.” Am I talking too much?

“Thank you. I’m Liam. I’m not in the market for a dog or cat, but if I change my mind, I’ll find you.” Liam grinned. “I’m glad I ran into you. You’re the first person who bothered to speak to me in return.”

“I’m sorry no one else spoke to you, but I’m glad you found me.” He touched Liam’s hand. The sparks intensified. He’d never had this reaction before. He shook hands with Liam. “What brought you to Cedarwood—if you don’t mind me asking? I can be too forward, too.”

“Work.” Liam didn’t release Stone’s hand right away. “Just work.”

“Well, enjoy that work.” He’d asked enough questions for now. He should head back before the gyros were cold. “Enjoy your food.”

“I will.” Liam didn’t walk away. “If I would call you, would you want to go for coffee some time?”

“Sure.” He could use another friend—especially one like Liam. “I’m game to show you around Cedarwood, if you’d like.”

“I would.” Liam winked. “I’m glad I ran into you. I was starting to think no one liked me. That feeling’s gone.”

“I’m glad you’re not lonely.” He slid behind the wheel of his truck. “Don’t be a stranger.” He waved.

As he drove away, he replayed the conversation in his mind. Don’t be a stranger? God. No wonder Arthur said he was dorky. Did anyone say that line anymore? But a coffee date! It wasn’t a real date, but close enough. He drove back to the shelter. He’d made a friend.

He’d never seen Liam around Cedarwood. But hadn’t Liam said he was new to town? His response to Liam, the tingles and desire, confused him. He had no idea if Liam was gay. He could be straight. He could keep things platonic. Well, shit.

He’d worry about Liam later. He had critters to care for and a shelter to run. Plus, he owed Amy her food.

Chapter Three

Liam visited the gyro truck for the next two days, hoping to see Stone. The man intrigued him. Stone seemed sweet, nice and welcoming—nothing like the ladies at the library. He'd never expected two octogenarians to be so catty.

Unfortunately, he hadn't seen Stone and couldn't locate the phone number to the animal shelter.

He'd spent three days in Cedarwood and hadn't ventured beyond the food truck and the library. He should probably make a grocery run.

His phone rang. When he checked the ID, he noticed Patricia's name. He stayed in the rental car and turned off the engine. At least he'd made it to the grocery store. "Hi."

"Hi. How's Cedarwood?"

"It's been three days. It can't let me down yet." He pressed the button to lower the window and let air into the vehicle. "No one except my real estate agent and Tanner knows who I am. Two older ladies at the library recognized me, but I've lied to them about my identity. I figured I'd be found out by more people by now."

"You think too much," she said. "Plus, no one expects you to be there."

"True." He scrubbed his hand over his mouth. "What's up?"

“I’m having the script couriered to you tomorrow. Start prepping. Get into character. No one in Cedarwood would be the wiser,” she said.

“I’ll know.” He didn’t mind stepping into his roles, but he’d already done enough lying. He hated being so fake with the people he was trying to impress. Besides, what would Stone say if he found out Liam was playing fast and loose with the truth?

“So?”

He groaned. “Just send the script.”

“Good boy. Made any friends?”

“Kind of.”

“Tanner and his family?”

“No, this guy runs the animal shelter.”

“He?”

“I can have male friends.”

“Until the paparazzi see you.”

“I’m off the leash. This is a guy and he’s a friend. It’ll be fine.” He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. “Anything else?”

“No, I just wanted to keep an eye on you. I’ve had the rental car paid for the duration of your stay. The money for the duplex has been transferred and you should have plenty of cash in your account. Study these lines and become Ned.”

“Ned?”Gag.He wanted a more exciting name. “Could the character be renamed?”

“No.”

“Not even updated?”

“He lives in the middle of nowhere and he’s a plain kind of guy. Ned fits him.”

Whatever. He’d argue about the name later. Maybe he could lobby the director to change it. “I’ll do it.”

“Good,” she said. “You won’t regret it.”

“I’m sure.” He spotted Stone’s dented black truck. His heartbeat sped up. Excitement flowed through him. “I need to go.”

“Hot date?”

“Not exactly.”

“Remember. Don’t form any ties beyond friendship. You leave in less than six months,” Patricia said.

“I know.” He didn’t care. He had to make a move. He had to know he was alive and wanted to be happy for a change. Liam closed the car window and left his vehicle. He locked the SUV and made his way over to Stone’s truck. “Hi.”

Stone froze, then glanced over his shoulder. Confusion shimmered on his face, then morphed into a smile. “Hi.”

“I thought you were a mirage.” He joined Stone at the truck. “I visited the gyro truck and you weren’t there.”

“It was a special treat for Amy.” Stone loaded dog food into the back of his truck. “How are you?”

“I’m good.” He hesitated. He could be smooth if someone else wrote his words. Being himself wasn’t his strong point. “I never got your number. I wanted to call you.”

“Oh. Sorry.” Stone’s smile broadened. “I should’ve given you my card.” He whipped a business card from his wallet. “Call me anytime.”

“Are you busy right now?” He hoped Stone was free.

“I can be.” He finished loading the dog food into his truck bed. “What do you have in mind?” He pushed the cart to the nearby rack. “I have a meeting at the community center at five.”

“I’m looking at getting a membership there for the weight room. I’d love a tour.” Christ, he was trying so hard to get a date. He’d never had to work like this in California.

“I can do that. They’ve got great equipment, and if you get the platinum membership, it grants you use of the community center plus the Metroparks. That means the trails, the pools and gyms at both places.” Stone fiddled with his keys. “I need to take the dog food home. Cedarwood might be a small town, but there’s still some theft. I’ll help anyone out if they need it, but I’m not wild about stealing. Why don’t I take this home and you can follow?”

“I drove, but I locked the SUV. Why don’t I ride along with you and you can bring me back here? The community center is just across the parking lot, right?”

“Sounds like a plan and yes, that’s the community center,” Stone said. “Hop in. You can meet the dogs.”

“I’d love to.” He rounded the truck and joined Stone on the bench seat. “You’ve got a lot of dog food. How many dogs do you have?”

“Six right now.” Stone joined him in the cab. “I run the shelter. Sometimes we get calls about animals and they can’t be placed. If they can’t, but they’re perfectly good animals, I take them.” He drove across town to the outskirts. “I know. I sound like I’m being overrun by dogs. I’ve got seven cats and a donkey, too. Good thing I live on a farm.”

“It is.” He admired Stone’s dedication. “A donkey?”

“She was abused. The poor girl kicked everyone who came close. We rescued her and brought her to the farm. Once she had space to run and play, she was fine. She’s not mean, but the farmer had her penned up all the time and wasn’t feeding her well.” Stone glanced over at him. “I’m not making excuses, but some people don’t understand how to take care of animals.”

“It’s still terrible.” Not that he had a whole lot of room to talk. He couldn’t handle a houseplant.

“It happens. I hate it, so I do my best to help. We took Daisy and she’s happy. Turned out the farmer was losing money and barely feeding himself, let alone the donkey and his cats. We helped get him a few high school kids to work for free experience and they make sure the cats are fed. Amy, my assistant, makes sure the farmer has food, too. She sort of adopted him.”

He watched Stone, fascinated. He could listen to him talk for hours. He’d never done a damn nice thing in his life and all Stone did was charitable stuff. “Very cool.” He’d have to model Ned after Stone.

“Cool?”

Shit. He’d proved he hadn’t been listening. “Bad because he did what he did, but cool there’s a positive outcome.”

“Yeah.” Stone crinkled his brows. “Anyway, that’s how I got Daisy.”

“You’ve got a big heart.” Bigger than his.

“I love critters.” Stone turned onto a gravel road. “So what brings you to Cedarwood?”

Double shit. He needed to answer, but he had to be vague. “Work.”

“Oh? What do you do?”

What did the character do? He was a farmer. Like he could say he was a damn farmer. Stone would see through that lie right away. He didn’t want to be thrown from the truck. “I write.” It wasn’t exactly a lie. He journaled and tried to journal while in character.

“What do you write?” Stone asked. “I’ve always wanted to write, but I don’t have the time. I’d love to pen a book about my rescues. Maybe turn it into a fundraiser for the shelter.”

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“Good idea.” He needed to buy time to think through the rest of his story. “I write non-fiction.” His life wasn’t total fiction, right?

“Do you write for magazines? Or a newspaper?”

Why does Stone have to ask so many questions? Jesus. “A blog.” Again, it wasn’t a total lie. He contributed to blogs from time to time.

“Well, if you need inspiration, Cedarwood is full of it.” Stone chuckled. “This is my place.”

Liam gasped. The farm reminded him of pictures he’d seen in books. Flowers, pretty landscaping...the house looked like it belonged there and was farmhouse chic. “I’ll bet the upkeep is killer.”

“Not really. I use some of my inheritance to pay the kids from the vocational school to do the landscaping. The animal care is mostly me, but I use kids in the veterinary program with the vo-ed to help. They get experience with the grounds and critters and I get the lawn mowed.” He shrugged. “I like the communal feeling. We all have a stake in it, you know? They get a grade and a little cash and I don’t have to worry about having flowers and the shrubs cut back. You know?”

“I do.” He tended to be selfish. Everything was for him and screw anyone who got in the way. Not a great way to live. He could end up learning a lot from Stone.

Stone parked the truck and switched off the engine. “Want to grab a bag? I can use the help toting the dog food into the shed.”

“Sure.” He scooped one of the bags from the back and followed Stone around to the shed attached to the back of the house. The shed wasn’t a usual structure. The floor had been sealed at the edges and the place was cleaner than his apartment. He placed the bag next to the one Stone rested on the floor.

“I don’t mind the mice, but I don’t want them in the house or the animal feed.” Stone strode out of the structure.

His logic made sense. Liam kept up with Stone. He could see himself living in this house, even if he hadn’t seen inside it yet. He wished he’d found a farm to rent instead of the duplex. He mentally smacked himself in the forehead. Here he was falling for the town like he fell for his leading lady. Christ. He’d only been in town for three days and part of him wanted to stick around. God, he was losing it. He knew jack shit about farming and upkeep, but he wanted to stay at a damn farm.

“Are you in there?” Stone carried two bags. “I’ll do it myself if you’re getting overwhelmed.”

“Shit. Sorry.” He grabbed another bag. It was heavier than he expected. “You’re ripped if you can carry two of these.”

“Practice.” Stone passed him. “And I’m used to the bulk.”

He spotted a woman in the doorway. “Hi.”

“Hi.” She smiled. “I’m Kate. You must be Jeff.”

“No, I’m Liam.” He frowned. “I should help Stone.” Jeff... Must be someone helping Stone.

When he returned with another bag, Kate tipped her head. “I know you.”

“Maybe?” He’d never seen her before, but if she’d watched any of his movies, he was screwed.

“Did you date my mom?” she asked.

“No.” He knew he hadn’t. “I’m new to Cedarwood.”

“Oh. You look like a guy in a picture my mother has.” Kate shrugged. “She’s dated a lot of guys. Says there are lots of fish and she won’t settle.”

“I see.” He wasn’t sure what to think.

Stone joined him in the shed. “Katie, find Elmore. I want everyone fed at the same time.”

“You got it.” She waved and left.

“Elmore?” Liam asked. “Which dog is that?”

“Bloodhound. He has the run of the place, but he thinks he should eat on his schedule.” Stone shook his head. “If I let every dog and cat eat when they wanted to, I’d never get anything accomplished.”

“Makes sense.”

Stone blushed. “I’m sorry about Katie. She’s a senior this year and has been through a lot. Her mother really does date a lot of men. She’s made passes at me and I’m not straight. Katie’s harmless and she loves to talk.”

“She didn’t bother me.” He touched Stone’s arm and sparks shot through his fingertips to his heart. He wanted to pull away, but couldn’t. He liked touching Stone.

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“You’re going to think this is nuts.” Stone rested his free hand on his hip and his blush deepened.

“What?” He froze. He’d been found out. That had to be it. Katie had spurred Stone’s memory, right?

“I’m dying to kiss you.”

“Me?” Holy shit...hallelujah. He wanted to be kissed. He could hear Patricia’s voice in his head. ‘No entanglements.’ Yeah, screw her. “I want to kiss you, too.”

Stone bridged the gap between them. He slid his palm over Liam’s chest. His eyes flashed and, up close, Liam noticed the sprinkling of freckles on Stone’s nose. Stone kissed him and the connection started tentatively. He feathered his lips over Liam’s. His stubble scraped Liam’s cheeks and chin, but the scent of Stone enticed him most. He’d never been this attracted to someone before. He wrapped his arms around Stone. The feel of Stone’s hard body, his muscles, turned him on. Christ, the man was sexy.

Stone deepened the kiss. Chest to chest, he caressed Liam’s ribs. The bulge in his shorts brushed against the one in Liam’s. Electricity shot through Liam’s veins. He sighed.

Stone broke the kiss first. “Wow.”

“Yeah.” He stayed close to Stone. “I’m a little lightheaded.”

“You’re something else.”

“Stone?”

Stone froze and the new voice snapped Liam to attention. He knew that voice.

“I needed to see you...Shit.” Arthur stood in the doorway to the shed.

“Really?” Stone’s eyebrows rose. “I don’t see why.”

“I didn’t know you were here.” Arthur stared at Liam. “We talked.”

Liam folded his arms. “We did.” And he wasn’t listening to Arthur or Patricia. Hell, until now he hadn’t realized Arthur and Stone were related. “I took your suggestions into account.”

“And ignored my warning,” Arthur snapped.

“What?” Stone frowned. “What did you discuss?”

Liam almost said, you, but he thought better of that answer. “House stuff. He hooked me up.”

“Thank you, Arthur. That’s nice.” Stone brightened. “I’m glad.”

Arthur growled. “Yes, house stuff.” He nodded to Stone. “We need to chat.”

“We do?” Stone exhaled. “I need to get Liam back to the community center in a bit. We came here long enough for me to offload the dog food.”

“And kiss?” Arthur snorted and shook his head. “Never mind.” He grabbed Stone’s arm. “Won’t be a minute.”

“Be right back.” Stone rolled his eyes as Arthur dragged him out of the shed.

Liam tensed again. He’d never thought he’d connected with the very man Arthur had told him to avoid. How am I supposed to know Arthur and Stone are related? They didn’t look like each other. Didn’t matter now. He was in big trouble. He wasn’t supposed to have attachments or be kissing anyone from Cedarwood. But he liked Stone. He wanted to maybe go on a date and see where things could lead. He liked Cedarwood, too. It was a nice enough place. Did he want to come back after filming to be with Stone? Among other things, yes. But it was too soon to make such decisions.

Not that he made such big decisions slowly. The only thing he’d ever done methodically was prepare for his film roles. When he fell for someone, he tumbled right over fast. When he tired of the person, it was in an instant. He couldn’t be falling for Stone. If he was, then it was quick—even for him.

Still...he enjoyed Stone’s company.

Stone rejoined him in the shed. “Are you ready?”

“I am.” He followed Stone out of the shed and waited for Stone to close the doors. “Lead the way.”

“My brother...he’s my half-brother. We share a father. You’d think I can’t live my life.” Stone shook his head. He stuffed his hands into his pockets. “I’m not a kid. I’m three years younger than him, but I’m not green. I’ve dated. I’ve been dumped.” He froze. “I’m telling you way too much.”

“You’re fine, but it makes sense why Katie called me Jeff.” He stopped next to Stone in the driveway. “You sound like you need to unwind.”

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“I’m sorry about Katie. I used to date a man named Jeff. It ended roughly and he sometimes tries to come back to the farm.” Stone scrubbed his forehead with the back of his hand. “Then there’s my brother. He knows how to drive me crazy. I got my heart broken once and it’s taken time for me to want to get back out there. I’m slow.” He opened the truck door. “Maybe I’m scared.”

“You can’t rush things.” Who was he to give dating advice? He was the king of rushing.

Stone joined him in the cab of the truck. “I guess.” He stuffed the key into the ignition and started the vehicle. “If you like to lift, the community center has a fantastic weight room. We have a nice running track and trails, too. The pool is nice. I don’t use it enough. My friend Steve used to lifeguard there.”

“Friend?” He tamped down the twinge of jealousy. Swimmers had great physiques and no matter how much he worked on his body, he’d never be that perfect. “I see.”

“He’s married to my friend Farin. They’re cute together.”

“Was he the one who got away?” God. This wasn’t his business, but he couldn’t help himself.

“No. He’s too young. He’s got to be ten years younger than me.” Steve flexed his hands on the steering wheel. “I’m partial to guys closer to my age.”

“How old are you?” Do I really want to know?

“Thirty-seven.”

“Ah.” He wasn’t as old as he’d expected, but he wasn’t sure how old he thought Stone might be.

“You’re not?”

“I’m twenty-eight.” Shit. He should’ve made up a higher number, but if they ended up getting together, he’d hate himself for lying.

“Well, that changes things.” Stone chuckled. “I thought you were older.”

“I’ve lived a lot in my twenty-eight years.” Wasn’t that the understatement of the year?

“You’ll have to tell me about it.”

“Only if you promise I can have another one of those kisses.” Against his better judgment, he reached across the seat and palmed Stone’s thigh.

“Well...” Stone clicked his tongue. “I like forwardness.”

“And I like honesty.” He kept his hand on Stone’s thigh. Touching him felt right. A vision of him riding to the rescue with Stone came to mind. They could be partners. They could rescue together and spend their nights making love. Whoa. He’d gotten ahead of himself. Besides that, he wasn’t good at being honest.

Stone said nothing and pulled into the parking lot at the shopping center. He parked next to Liam’s rental SUV. “I enjoyed the afternoon. If you want to run together some time, let me know.”

“I will.” He hesitated. “Do you mind if I call you?”

Stone placed his hand on Liam’s. “I hope you do.”

“I’m not too young?”

“Nope.” Stone laughed. “You are, but you’re growing on me.”

Liam squeezed Stone’s thigh, then fished his keys from his pocket. He left the truck. Stone turned the truck off and joined him next to the vehicle. “Are you heading inside?” Liam asked.

“You said you wanted a tour.” Stone toyed with his keys. “Or are you tired of me?”

“No.” A little off-kilter explained his situation a bit better. “Let’s go inside.” He checked his SUV, then reached for Stone. “I don’t know where to go.” He stayed next to Stone and entered the building. The smell of sweat filtered to him. The atmosphere on first viewing appeared nice. He spotted kids on the basketball courts and two women walking around the indoor walking track. He could’ve sworn he heard the clink of weights.

Stone shook hands with a gentleman who looked like he could be in the movies, so suave and put together, he made Liam look dowdy. Despite being sweaty, the guy was handsome. Another twinge of jealousy hit Liam. He liked that Stone knew people, but he appreciated the monopoly he’d had on Stone’s time and attention.

He left Stone with the sweaty man and headed to the desk. If he was going to stay in Cedarwood, he needed a place to work out. “Hi. I’d like to get a membership. I’ve got my ID and a piece of mail. It’s my rental agreement. I just moved here three days ago. Here’s the statement from the electric company saying they’ve switched the account to my name.” He pushed the documents across the desk. “Will they work?”

“You’re ahead of the game. Most folks don’t have everything.” The woman handed him a clipboard and form. “We’re still a pen and paper outfit. Fill this out while I get your file started. Make a check out to the Village of Cedarwood. The fees are sixty dollars a month if you pay monthly, two hundred fifty for six months if paid in one lump and five hundred for a year-long membership.”

He wrote out a check for the full year membership. Once he completed the form, he handed everything to her. “There you go.”

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“Thanks.” Her eyes widened. “A year. Very good. Mr....Black?” She tapped the clipboard. “We’re happy to have you, Mr. Black. Since you’ve paid for the full year, you’re entitled to use the Metropark as well as the community center amenities. Just show your card at the readers.” She offered up a nondescript plastic card. “Don’t lose that. There’s a dollar charge to replace it.”

“Will do.” He slid the card into his wallet. “I’m clear to use the equipment today?”

“You are.” She grinned. “I forgot my manners. I’m Anna. If you need anything, let me know. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“The pleasure is mine.” He glanced around, looking for Stone. “Well, shoot. Did you see my friend leave?” He hadn’t been talking that long.

“Stone? He ducked into the aerobics room with Jeff. I swear. You’d think those two could find someone else.” Anna shook her head. “They’re not good together.”

“No? Why?” He leaned on the counter. Jeff’s name had been mentioned before. He’d also heard the notion that being gay wasn’t welcome in town.

“They used to fight all the time. It was awful.” Anna rested her elbows on the counter and flicked her hair over her shoulder. “Stone’s a nice man. He does so much for the shelter.”

“So I’ve heard.” He paused. “He said he and Jeff were a couple.”

“They were. They started out as workout buddies and all that. I didn’t care. They did

their thing and cleaned the machines when they finished. Most patrons don't. So they argued...they're not the first to argue in public. So they'd kiss in the parking lot? Who cared? I mean, I wouldn't turn Stone down if he wanted to kiss me, but he's not interested." She blushed. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have blabbed all that to you."

"It's fine." He chuckled. He seemed to bring out the chattiness in everyone. "I don't care who kisses whom. Love is love, you know?"

"I do." She relaxed. "That Coalition cares, but this is a judgment-free space. Why don't you stroll around? I should've given you a tour, but you bought a membership before I had a chance to realize it." Her blush deepened. "I'm all out of sorts."

"It's fine," he said, repeating himself. "I was rather forward. If Stone comes by here, let him know I'm exploring."

"I will." She nodded. "Are you and Stone close?"

"We're friends." He winked, then stood upright. They were friends. According to Patricia and Tanner, nothing else should happen.

"Good." She rounded the desk. "I hear there's an actor in town. It's getting crazy, the rumors. Everyone wants to know who the actor is. It's out of hand."

Lovely. Soon, his cover would be blown. "I hadn't heard that."

"Yeah. I guess this actor bought the Kingston mansion and is hiding from the media. I guess no one's seen him." She jumped as the phone rang. "Sorry. I need to get that. Happy exploring."

"Thanks." He waited for her to answer the phone then walked away. So his secret was out to a degree? Interesting. Only a few people knew the truth—Patricia, but she

wouldn't tell because she wanted him to lie low, Arthur, whom he'd pissed off by being around Stone, Tanner, because he'd given Liam info on the town. Would Tanner tell his husband? Probably. Would the husband leak the details? Probably not. He had no reason to do it. Then again, neither did Tanner. Would Arthur really let it slip that Liam was in town?

He groaned and strode into the weight room. He didn't want his business blasted all over Cedarwood. He wasn't there to dodge the media. He should be prepping for the role of Ned. He also shouldn't be falling for anyone. Right? I'm here to get ready for a part...

Chapter Four

Stone glared at Jeff. He wasn't sure why he'd allowed Jeff to convince him to chat again. "I need to go." He'd spent too much time arguing with the man for nothing. All he and Jeff would ever be was a dead end. But trust my ex to show up at the right time. As if I know where Stone is at all times...

"No, you don't." Jeff stood in front of the door. "You ignored me."

"We split and I have nothing to say to you."

"You left me."

"Christ." He couldn't handle this for much longer. "We've been through this. We're over. You hate me and I'm tired of the verbal abuse. Let's keep things split and go our separate ways."

"Why? Did you find someone else? That skinny shit out there? He's fake tanned and those highlights are bleach. I bet he's had his teeth fixed and he's tatted. You hate tats."

Where is this coming from? "So?"

"You like him," Jeff snapped. "Oh my God."

"I barely know him." He edged around his ex. "I'm being a good neighbor and I need to go. I owe him a tour."

“We were good together.”

“We were shit,” he said, lowering his voice. “We argued and you called me every name but my own. You threw stuff at me. That’s not love. It’s hell. Besides, everyone in town knew we were not only together, but feuding. It’s not cool.”

“It could be good again.” Jeff held up his hands. “Please?”

“I doubt it.”

“But that guy would make you happy?”

“He’s a friend.”

“With benefits?”

“Jeff, don’t do this.” He scooted around Jeff and grabbed the door handle. “I owe my friend a tour and I hate to let my friends down.”

“Give me another chance.”

“No.” He left the room. He hated how he felt around Jeff. His heart raced, but not in a good way. His palms turned clammy and he wanted to retreat. That wasn’t attraction. It was disgust and fear.

He hurried through the building to find Liam. He finally located his friend in the weight room. “Hi.”

“Hi.” Liam perused the rack of free weights. “I’m fine. You don’t have to entertain me.”

“That’s not what happened.”Damn it.

“I hear the receptionist thinks you’re hot.” Liam crooked his eyebrow. “She does.”

“Jesus.” He’d have to talk to Anna and straighten her out. He wasn’t hot.

“Why are you surprised?”

“Because.” He raked his fingers through his hair. “Look, I’m sorry. My ex-boyfriend is a dick. He wanted to cause trouble and it worked.”

“I noticed.” Liam trailed his hand over the edge of the railing on one of the treadmills. “He’s territorial.”

“Yeah, but I don’t want to talk about him.”

“He hates that you moved on, doesn’t he?”

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“Yeah.” He’d rather not discuss Jeff.

Liam nodded. “Wishes he had you back?”

“He does.” He groaned. Liam confused him. The words he’d used were bland, but he had a serious, yet sexy tone to his voice.

“He should wish with every cell in his body that he’ll lure you back because he knows to his core it won’t happen. You’re not going back.”

The tone of Liam’s voice, combined with the passion in his eyes, got to Stone. “Yeah.” He sounded goofy, but he’d never had anyone talk about him this way. He rather liked it.

“He knows what he lost.” Liam nodded. “You’re smart to move on.”

“Are you interested in taking his place?” He pressed his lips together. He shouldn’t have been so pushy, but he’d never know where he stood with Liam.

“Me?” Liam paled.

Oh, shit. He’d misread the vibes. “I’m sorry.” His brain screamed retreat. He’d gone too far. “I’ll...I’ll be out front if you want a ride home or something. I—bye.” He left the weight room. He had to get out of Liam’s personal space and get away. God. He’d cocked everything up. The way Liam talked, he thought there was attraction. Then there was that kiss...the desire was all in his head.

“Hey, Stone.” Colin Baker strode up to him. “You look stressed. Are you okay?”

“I...”Why lie?“No, I’m not.”

“What’s wrong? Tough rescue?” Colin steered Stone away from the front doors to the garden area. “Talk.”

“It wasn’t a rescue, unless you mean me.” Stone sighed. “I made a tactical error.”

“Honey. With Jeff?”

“No, but he didn’t help matters any.” He sank onto the bench. “I feel ridiculous. I read someone wrong and thought things were one way...they weren’t. If the Coalition found out what I did, they’d be all over it and I’d be run out of town.”

“Why don’t you start coming to the group meetings? It might help. I came up here to post fliers.” Colin sat with him. “But unless it’s getting back with Jeff, I don’t know why any guy would turn you down. Screw the Coalition. They don’t have any power. You can love whoever you want. You’re handsome and sweet. Whoever the guy is, he’s nuts for passing you up.”

“I don’t think he’s gay.”There.He’d said it. “I heard a rumor he’s an actor. I don’t want to question him, because if he is an actor, then he’s trying to be quiet about it.”

“Oh...Arthur mentioned there was a celebrity in town. He said something about the guy wanting to be on the down-low. He used the phrase, ‘we need to protect Stone from getting hurt.’ I wondered what he meant,” Colin said. “I think I know.”

“See? Even my brother doesn’t trust me.”God.Everyone knew about what Liam might be and his brother was the biggest gossip. Who cared if Liam was a celebrity? Not Stone.

“I don’t think your brother doesn’t trust you. He’s protective, yes, but he’s being a brother,” Colin said. “I do the same thing with Farin.”

“Just...it sucks. Why can’t I find someone? Why can’t the Coalition just leave us all alone for good? Do I need to come with a warning label?” Stone asked. “I seem to be okay with animal rescue. I think I can handle a relationship.”

“You’re being too hard on yourself.”

“Maybe it’s me, but I actually thought Liam liked me.”

“What’d he say?” Colin asked, his voice calm.

“I believed him. He gave an impassioned speech about being interested and how any guy would want me. He said Jeff should be begging for me to take him back and realizing I never will because he screwed up. Liam convinced me to buy in,” Stone said. “It was all bullshit. He was practicing for the role, I bet. I thought he liked me.”

“I’m sorry.” Colin toyed with the stack of fliers. “I don’t know what to say. I wish I could fix this, but I’m not sure how.”

“I don’t expect you to.” But talking helped. He wasn’t alone. Maybe he should visit the support group. “Give me a flier. I’ll post it at the shelter.”

“Sure.” He offered up one of the papers. “Maybe Liam is the actor and he’s playing a role. It’s possible. But it’s also possible he isn’t an actor. He might be figuring himself out. He’s attracted to you and the words are there, but his world experience tells him not to go for what he wants. He’s conflicted. If you get combative or push him away, he might stay conflicted or decide he doesn’t need to be true to himself.”

“Don’t put that on me. I’m not a miracle worker and I don’t understand guys. I can’t

make him come out,” Stone snapped.

“No, but you can be his friend. Be there for him. You might help him see being himself isn’t bad. The gay community welcomes.” Colin hugged Stone. “Invite him to a meeting. The more you’re together, the more sparks could fly.”

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“You want me to keep trying? I made a fool of myself.”

“I want you to keep trying, yes, but I doubt you look as foolish as you feel. I bet it wasn’t that bad,” Colin said.

“You’re nuts.”

“Oh, probably. Jordan would agree with you, too.”

He sighed. Although he wasn’t sure about Colin, he trusted his friend. He had no choice but to be the best person he could be. Turning his back on Liam, even if they didn’t end up together, would be irresponsible. His pride wasn’t important. If Liam was an actor, then fine. If not and he was conflicted, then Stone would be there to listen. “Thanks.”

“I’m always here for you.” Colin smiled and stood. “Plus, I think your friend is heading this way.”

“Liam?” His breath turned ragged. He rose to his feet. “Let me introduce you.” He turned to Liam. “Hey. I want you to meet my friend Colin. He owns the bookstore. Colin, this is Liam. He’s living at your old...”Shit. They probably already know each other.“Duplex.”

Liam approached. “Hi. Nice to see you again, Colin.” He stopped beside Stone. “I wondered where you’d gone.”

“We were chatting.” Colin shook hands with Liam. “I was just telling Stone to come

to one of our support group meetings. We welcome everyone.”

“I’ll keep it in mind.” Liam nodded once. “Thank you.”

“Ask Stone for the info—he’s got it.” Colin waved. “Heck, bring him along. See you later.”

Stone massaged the bridge of his nose between his eyes. “That went better than I thought it would,” he said. “Colin’s a great guy, but he wants everyone to visit that group.” Sometimes he pushed too much.

“It might be worth the visit.” Liam elbowed Stone. “It’d give me another chance to meet people.”

“It would.” Stone frowned, then dropped his voice low. “You’re gay, right?” He needed to know. The chemistry with Liam was too strong. If it was all in his head, then he wanted to stop now. “If you’re not, it’s cool.”

Liam averted his gaze. “I don’t talk about it.”

“Oh.” He was confused and not wanting to be chatty. Fine. “Okay. Well, I’m gay—as you could tell by my argument with my ex.” He was too obvious, but whatever. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have pushed you.”

“No, you’re fine.” Liam leaned in close to Stone. “I’m gay. I just don’t advertise.”

“Understood.” He wanted to ask more questions, but didn’t. “Well, we’ll keep things quiet.” He paused. “If I haven’t jacked this all up, will you call me?”

“I will.” Liam grinned. “I need to shop for some extra workout clothes and should probably invest in a bike or something instead of driving everywhere. Know where I

can get a bike?”

“Hunter’s Bike Shop. Tell him Colin or Stone sent you and he’ll give you a deal.” Stone exhaled. “Look, I’m sorry my ex got so pushy. He’s history.”

“Okay.”

Right. Not necessarily interested. “I wanted you to know. I don’t cheat.” Christ. He sounded like he had to sell himself. “Never mind. I’ll see you.” He walked away before he said something else. He’d disclosed too much. If Liam wasn’t telling everyone about his sexuality, then he would only do damage by being forthright.

He drove home and replayed the kiss in his mind. He loved the way Liam had seemed to get into the kiss. The reaction had been wonderful, too. The attraction couldn’t be all in his head. Boy, he was in trouble. He liked a guy who didn’t seem to want him.

Lovely.

* * * *

Stone spend the next two days at the shelter during daylight hours and at the farm at night. He’d hoped Liam would call, but he’d heard nothing. He wished he’d asked for Liam’s number. It would’ve made trying to contact him easier. Then again, he hoped he hadn’t scared Liam away with his ability to talk too much.

He turned his attention to his brother. Numbers weren’t Stone’s forte. He rested his hands on the back of the dining room chair. “Well? How bad is it?”

“Not too bad,” Arthur said. “I think it’s just a missing deposit.” He glanced over his shoulder. “Did you consider what I said?”

“No.” He couldn’t remember what Arthur had given him advice about...this time.
“Remind me?”

“Liam.”

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“Oh. You have nothing to worry about. We’re friends, but nothing more.” He hadn’t heard from Liam, so there was no reason to get upset.

“Stone.”

“You’re patronizing me.”

“How well do you know him?” Arthur asked.

“Well enough to understand he drives you crazy,” Stone said. “So?”

“And he’s getting under your skin.” Arthur rolled his shoulders. “What if you found something out about Liam that’s not cool? Or it doesn’t fit with your values?”

“What? He’s done something illegal? He’s married? Jesus, Arthur, why are you doing this? I kissed him. We haven’t had sex and I don’t see it happening. There haven’t been any declarations of love and we’re not getting married.” He groaned. “It was a kiss. What’s the problem?”

“He’s not doing anything illegal.” Arthur flexed his fingers. “Just...use caution. He’s not the guy you think. He’s...never mind.”

“Married?” Wouldn’t be the first time he’d flirted with a married man unknowingly. He hadn’t gone beyond the first flirt, but still.

“No.”

“A perv?” Arthur’s definition of perv wasn’t the same as his. Anyone who dabbled in BDSM was considered a perv in Arthur’s view. Stone saw nothing wrong with a little slap and tickle.

“No.”

“Abuses animals?” Christ. If that was the case, then his radar was totally off. He hadn’t detected anything in Liam to make him think he’d abuse an animal.

“No.” Arthur faced Stone. “Forget I said anything.”

“Right. You drop little comments and I’m supposed to forget them. Nice.” He left the dining room and poured two glasses of water. “The thing is, I like him.”

“You just ended things with Jeff,” Arthur called.

“I know.” He returned to the dining room and placed one glass next to the laptop. He paced the length of the room. Elmore followed at his heels. “With Jeff, I felt trapped. He screamed, yelled, threw things and cheated on me. Plus, the dogs and cats were afraid of him. That was the biggest sign it wasn’t going to work.”

“Well, if Elmore was afraid, then I have to agree. Elmore likes everyone.” Arthur looked up from the screen. “Did he really cheat on you? You never said anything.”

“I knew you’d kill him.” He and Arthur might only be half-brothers, but they’d become close like blood brothers.

“Damn right. I won’t let you have a relationship like I have with Laurence. It sucks. I never know when he’ll be home and for how long. I never know if he’s leaving again and who he’s leaving to see.”

“I know.” Seeing his brother’s heart broken cut him deep, too. Arthur could be an overprotective jerk, but he didn’t deserve to be cheated on or disrespected. “Why do you stay with him?”

“I haven’t been in contact with him enough to know where I stand.”

“Arthur.”

“I know. It’s rough.” Arthur put both hands up. “I see where you goofed. You didn’t add a deposit. Let me do a little more working, but it might be sorted out.”

“Thanks.” He never wanted to be in a loveless relationship again. He couldn’t be sure Liam would be a better choice. He didn’t know him, and if there were secrets, that was a red flag. The secrets could be something or nothing.

“You should leave Liam alone,” Arthur said.

“You told him to stay away from me, didn’t you? For my own good?” Stone asked. “You don’t give me enough credit.”

“I do, but it seemed better in the planning stage to keep you apart. You really hit it off with him, didn’t you?”

“I did.” He sank onto the other kitchen chair. “But it means little if I’m the only one feeling the pull.”

“True.” Arthur looked up. “Got it. You’re balanced. The checking account is now correct.”

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“Thanks.” He stared at his brother. “Why do you put up with Laurence? He’s not around. He’s probably not faithful this time. Why put yourself through that?” He’d never understand Arthur if he didn’t ask questions.

Arthur pushed away from the table, but didn’t stand. “To be honest, it’s because I’m scared.”

“Of what? You’re the most fearless person I know. Are you worried about rejection?” He wasn’t the only one. “Rejection freaks me out, too.”

“That’s part of it, but mostly it’s being alone. Laurence was supposed to be forever. We had a life together. What if I dump him for good and never get another relationship like that ever in my life? I’m forty-five years old. In the gay community, that’s ancient.”

“You don’t look your age.” Never had.

“Doesn’t matter,” Arthur said. “I’m scared no one will want me.”

“So you cling to someone who isn’t around because even though you’re lonely without him, you’re scared of being lonely?”

“Yeah.” Arthur shook his head. “Sad, isn’t it?”

“Maybe.” But mostly he understood. The fear of the unknown kept Arthur stranded. He’d never be able to move forward until he accepted he might not find someone else, or another chance was possible.

“You have your animals and friends. I invested so much time in Laurence that I pushed a lot of people away. You think I’m a dick.”

“You can be, but you have friends.” He paused. “That’s why you pushed Liam away. You don’t want me to end up like you?”

“I’d call it steered, but yes and no.” Arthur folded his arms. “I did it because...never mind.”

“What is he really? Who is he?”

“Just...he has to tell you. It’s his thing to disclose.”

“Really? I’ve heard you’re sharing his secrets all over town and with everyone but me.”

“I was wrong,” Arthur said. “You’ve seen what I’m going through with Laurence. It’s always a new club or premier. He hasn’t been in a new play in at least a year. No commercial work, either. If he’s not working on film or the stage, then he’s got to have a new guy. I’m sure of it. If I’m not enough to keep Laurence around, then why would you be enough to keep Liam around?”

“Liam isn’t Laurence.” Stone sobered. “I might not be enough for Liam or anyone else.” But he’d never know if he didn’t try. “What if he’s not in show business like Laurence?”

“That’s possible. Not everyone wants that kind of recognition.”

“See?” His phone vibrated. “Hang on. I need to answer this.” He carried the phone to the back porch and stared out at the pond. He didn’t check the number before he answered. “Hello. Cedarwood Furrever Friends. This is Stone. How can I help you?”

“Wow. You’re formal,” Liam said. “I figured I’d get a hi or something. How are you?”

“Good.” He chuckled to hide his nervousness. “I don’t get personal calls often.”

“You’re important.”

“I’m just me. How are you? Settling in? Writing a bunch?” Christ, he asked a lot of questions. “Sorry.”

“You apologize a lot and you don’t have to,” Liam said. “I’m great. I feel more like I belong here in town. I made friends at the gym and made peace with the ladies at the library. I haven’t done as much writing as I’d like, but I’ll get there.”

“You will.”

“Donnie Trask told me to invite Amy Lyons out on a date,” Liam said. “I didn’t have the heart to tell him no and I’m not interested. I got the feeling she’s his friend and he was just orchestrating.”

“When is your date?” Amy would never go out with Liam. She liked bald guys.

“I don’t have one—which is why I’m calling you. Would you like to get coffee? I hear there’s a concert in the park tonight and I’d love company.”

“My brother is here,” Stone said. “And it’s my night to stay late at the shelter. It’s not listed anywhere, but I spend my Thursday nights there. I should get moving so I’m not holding anyone up.” Damn, he’d argued with Arthur for too long and was behind. He strode into the house. He tucked his keys and wallet into his pocket, then placed his hand over the phone speaker. “Hey, Arthur, I need to get to the shelter. Will you lock up for me? Thank you.”

“Who’s on the phone?” Arthur stood. He held on to his jacket.

“Shelter,” Stone said. He’d lied. “They’re short staffed.”

“Oh, I hope everything is okay.” Arthur nodded. “I’ll lock up. No sweat.”

“Thank you. See you later.” Does he believe me? Do I care? He slid behind the wheel of his truck and placed the phone onto the holder. “Sorry. I’m putting you on speaker.” He fiddled with the device. “Liam?”

“I’m here.”

Chapter Five

Stone's heart hammered as he started down the lane. He had Liam on the other end of the line. Liam, the guy he couldn't forget and the one he'd been warned to stay away from, had called him. The longer he kept silent, the more he wanted to kick himself. He should be talking. "Sorry. I had to get out to the truck."

"Don't apologize."

"Force of habit." He sped down the gravel path to the road. "I'm sorry I can't meet you. I haven't been to a concert in the park in a long time. Maybe one of your friends from the gym might be able to go." He hated pushing, but if Liam wasn't interested, then he wasn't. But he'd asked him to go along... God, he was bad at dating and figuring people out.

"I wanted to hang out with you."

"Oh." He almost apologized again. "I wish I could help you." Could he screw this up any more?

"Next time," Liam said.

"Yeah," Stone replied. "Have you visited the stores downtown? The second-hand record store is fun. I get records there every couple weeks. I like the consignment store, too. I've scored some great furniture there." He hadn't gone shopping for fun things in almost a year.

“I’ll check them out.”

He had little else to discuss. If he pestered Liam about writing, he’d be pushy. If he ignored his feelings for Liam, he’d be second-guessing himself. “Who’d you work out with at the gym? Besides Donnie?”

“Isaac someone or another. He played football in high school, but claimed he’d lost his muscle years ago. Norbert Barr was the other one. He kept asking if I was gay.”

He suppressed a groan. “Norbert’s part of the Coalition. Be nice, but keep him at a distance. He can be a dick.”

“Good to know,” Liam said. “I’ll let you go. I’m guessing you’re at the shelter by now.”

“I’m just pulling into the lot.” His heart squeezed. He wanted to talk more, even if he had nothing exciting to say. He enjoyed their conversation. “Since I have your number now, I’ll call you tomorrow or on my break. Maybe on your break from writing tomorrow, we can get together for coffee.”

“Sure. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Bye.” He disconnected the call and blew out a long breath. Christ. He wanted a date, had a chance at one and couldn’t take it. Maybe he did spend too much time at the shelter.

He spotted a box by the front door of the shelter. Odd. He ventured over to the box. If someone had brought up supplies, they should’ve taken them into the building. The box could be an explosive device. The notion was a long shot, but he’d pissed off enough people by having them fined for mistreatment of animals that they’d threatened retribution.

He opened the box flaps. Four kittens were snuggled in a blanket. None were moving. He touched the tiny animals. Three of the four responded. The fourth kitten didn't. Jesus. "Erik." He banged on the door. "Call the vet. We need Aubrey here now. We've got kittens." He carried the box into the lobby. "Someone left them outside. There's a blanket, but I don't see a mother and the box was closed when I walked up."

"Shit." Erik held the landline phone. "Yeah, it's an emergency. Kittens. Dumped."

Stone placed the box and a dog pillow on the counter. He lifted the kittens and blanket out of the box. Three of the tiny animals appeared sleepy, but otherwise okay. One black one and two orange and white babies. The last kitten, a gray tiger, was limp. "Come on, baby. Don't quit." He held the kitten to his chest as Amy cared for the other kittens. "We're getting you help," Stone murmured. He stroked the kitten's head. "I've got you." He warmed the tiny body and retrieved a bottle of formula from the infirmary room. He placed the nipple in front of the kitten's mouth and offered nourishment.

"Come on, Champ. You can do it. Take the milk." He dribbled a little into the kitten's mouth. "You need to drink, baby. You've got to get big and strong." The kitten mewled, then accepted the nipple.

Relief washed over him. They weren't out of trouble yet, but he'd made progress. "Is Aubrey on his way?"

"Yep. Said to do what you're doing. Should be here in about five minutes." Erik held on to one of the tabby kittens. "Amy's got the other two in the exam room. Dolly will love having kittens."

He nodded. Dolly hadn't been able to have kittens and adopted each litter that landed at the shelter. She loved to mother the strays. He stayed with the kitten he'd now

named Champ. The poor little critter's eyes weren't open and he was small, even for a baby. Not good.

Light flashed across the front of the shelter. A moment later, Aubrey strode into the lobby. "What do you have?"

"Champ. He's tiny. Eyes aren't open. He's underweight." He offered up the kitten, despite wanting to keep holding him. "I gave him formula in a bottle. Not a lot, but some."

"I'll handle it, but thank you." Aubrey offered a tight smile. "I have the feeling you're about to adopt another kitty. You named this one."

"He's so small." No doubt he'd bring the little guy home. He could do a special push to get him adopted, but not this time. He wanted to be sure this kitten made it to adulthood.

Another light flashed across the lobby. Stone didn't look over his shoulder when the door creaked. "We're open for adoptions for another half hour." He forced a smile and faced the door. Animals needed homes and the more who were adopted, the better.

Liam strode into the lobby, holding on to two cups of coffee. "Hi."

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“Hi.” Stone exhaled. “I thought you were going to the concert.” He sank onto the closest stool.

“By myself? No. I can’t drink two cups of coffee. I’ll be wired for hours.” Liam offered one of the cups. “This is for you. I asked you to come along with me to a concert and you can’t so I thought I’d come to you. Is everything okay? You’re pale.”

“We got a box of kittens in. They were dumped. Three of them seem fine, but one is tiny. The vet’s giving them all the once-over and I’m worried about the small kitten,” Stone said. “I tried to feed him.”

Liam placed the cups on the counter. “Why do people do that?”

“Feed them?”

“No, dump them.”

Stone sighed. “Lots of reasons. Mostly they don’t bother to get their cat fixed, don’t realize they’ve gone into heat and boom! Kittens. It’s cheaper, especially on the farms, to let the cats run loose.”

“That’s not cheaper. Someone has to house those kittens.”

“I know. Usually it’s me.” He massaged his forehead. “They have methods for taking care of what they don’t want—I won’t tell you because you’ll get depressed and I don’t want to be more depressed than I already am—but at least these four made it here. Aubrey will do his best. Erik and Amy, I think, have the rest.”

Liam placed his hand on Stone's. "I hope it all works out."

"Me, too." He wanted to check on Champ. "When Erik comes back or Eileen comes in, we can go to the cattery."

"Cattery?" Liam's eyebrows rose. "What's that?"

"The room we have set up for some of the cats to roam freely. It's all theirs. No crates. There's a gigantic cat tree and lots of perches for them to look out. Litter boxes line one wall. This way, the cats can stroll and play. People can go in there, play with the kitties and maybe adopt one. Some people come in just to pet and play with the cats. The animals love it."

"I bet so."

"We have two rocking chairs in there. I like to sit in the chair and pet the cats. It centers me," Stone confessed. "I do the same thing at home. Missy loves laps. Dummy doesn't like to cuddle, but he loves to keep an eye on me. Puff will come around when he wants to and Tuffy will if I call him."

Liam grinned. The smile lit up his face. "I'd love to do that, too. Pet the cats. I've never had a pet."

"Why? Allergic?"

"No. My mother said they were too dirty. I had a rabbit but it disappeared. I think it was disposed of," Liam said. He paled. "Shit. I never thought about it. They brought it around for Easter, then in June...it was gone."

"That's terrible, but it happens. We get a rush right after Easter." He loved to suggest that people buy stuffed animals, not real bunnies and ducks for the holiday.

“I never got closure.”

“People don’t think sometimes.”

Liam sipped his coffee, then rested his elbows on the counter. “I can’t change the past,” he said. “I wanted a dog, but my mother refused. I needed to work, not goof around with a dog.”

“Did you have a paper route?” Stone asked.

“A what?”

“Did you deliver newspapers? I did when I was younger. I spent so many hours on my bike.” He laughed. “I still have that old ten-speed.”

“No, I sold whipped topping. Made me so sick to eat it in those commercials. Ten fucking takes and I wanted to puke.” Liam froze and he paled again. “Shit.”

He appreciated not talking about Champ and that he’d finally gotten Liam to open up. “I knew.”

“You did?” Liam asked. “Arthur told you?”

“No.”

“Then how?”

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He wagged his head. “I observe, and no one just appears in Cedarwood without any real reason for coming here. They don’t open gym memberships with no apparent means to support themselves.”

“I thought I hid it well.” Liam sank down in his place.

“That you’re an actor? Yeah, I had no idea who you were, but I could tell you were famous. You have that air about you. Your sunglasses are fancier than anything sold around here, you dress better than the lawyers in town and you’ve got the kind of haircut that screams money.” He shrugged. “I kind of profiled you.”

“Sorry, but you’re right.” Liam flattened his hands on the counter. “I tried to be cool, but I overshot.”

“A little,” Stone said. “But it happens.”

“Honestly, I’m relieved. I wanted to tell someone besides your brother,” Liam said. “I’ll explain everything in the cattery.”

“Okay.” He accepted the coffee cup. “Thanks for this.” He needed the jolt of energy.

“You’re welcome.” The uneasy silence settled between them. “Donnie really chatted me up. He kept saying nice things about Amy. He mentioned you a few times, but mostly her.”

“He hates me,” Stone said. He’d never gotten along with the guy because he kept making passes at Amy and snotty comments about Stone’s relationship with Jeff. “I

don't trust him."

"I wasn't enamored with him. He kept going on about gays going to hell," Liam said.

"That's the Coalition. You don't do anything to them and they still target you."

"That's shit."

"If you're gay, they—him included—will give you hell. It sucks." He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "I'm sorry. You probably don't care that he can be a dick."

"I'd rather know than get drawn into someone who will use me." Liam smiled, then tensed. "I see the vet. Fingers crossed."

"Shit." He hadn't forgotten Champ, but he appreciated having something else to think about for a few moments. "Aubrey."

"Hi." Aubrey joined them at the counter. "It's touch and go with Champ. The other three are underfed, but will be okay. Champ's the runt and they've been chewing on him. I'm not sure if he'll make it. He needs attending, so if you're willing to care for him, he may have a better chance. If you don't have the staffing for it, I'll take him to the clinic."

"I'm adopting him," Stone said. "I'll start caring for him right now."

"Good." Aubrey raked his fingers through his hair. "Call me if you need anything. You know what to do with Champ."

"I do." Regular checks, food, cuddles and keeping him warm. Mostly, he needed to keep an eye on the poor baby. Being away from Champ's siblings would help him

most of all.

Amy brought out a box with a clean blanket inside. “Here’s our Champ.” She handed the box to Stone. “He mewled. He’s a vocal little punk. I think he’s a fighter.”

“I hope so.” He accepted the kitten. “Hi, baby.” He rubbed the kitten’s head beneath his chin. This was the part of the job he hated—caring for abused animals and seeing the damage people could do.

“Jake’s here already, so I’m going to help him with the kittens. Aubrey, thanks for coming by so fast. You’re a lifesaver.” She paused. “Who’s this? I’m Amy. I keep Stone in line.”

“I’m Liam Black. I brought Stone coffee.”

“Nice.” She patted his arm. “Next time tell us and we’ll put in an order. We’ll pay, but we’ll give you an order.”

“I should’ve brought enough for everyone,” Liam said. “Forgive me. Next time, it’s my treat.” He winked. “Thanks for helping Stone. You all do a wonderful job.”

She blushed. “I try.”

“They’re awesome,” Stone said. “I can’t do my job without them.”

Aubrey waved. “I’m the vet.” He grinned. “I love working with Stone. He brings me challenges, but I welcome them.” He turned to Stone. “If you need me, call. I’m out. Nice to meet you, Liam. Stone, later.” Aubrey walked out of the building.

Amy rapped her knuckles on the counter. “I’ll be with the kittens. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.” She laughed as she left the room.

“She’s unique,” Stone said. “A good worker and she keeps me in line.”

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“But she’s trying to push you.” Liam’s eyes glittered.

“No, she’s not trying.” He cuddled Champ closer. “She is full-on doing it.” He closed his eyes. Damn, he’d embarrassed himself. Liam was there for a chat, not to observe. “I wanted to chat with you, not make you watch me care for the animals.”

“You’ve got a special case.” Liam shrugged. “I’m good. We’re chatting. I’ve gotten to see you and know you better.” He nodded once. “When are you done for the night? Or do you stay here?”

“I’ll let Jake handle the desk until nine, but I usually clock out around ten, unless something big happens. Why? It’s late to go out and I have to worry about this guy—who might be a girl. I don’t know yet.” Christ. If Liam wanted to get together, he’d done a lot to push him away.

“Would you mind some company for a while longer?” Liam asked. “You mentioned rocking in the cattery.”

“I’d like it,” Stone said. “If you want, I can give you a tour. You can learn how to care for the animals and volunteer.” Oh, boy. He’d really pushed this time.

“I’d like that.” Liam grinned. He hadn’t paused or hedged.

Stone relaxed a bit. He’d made some progress with Liam and convinced him to consider volunteering. They could spend more time together. They might even have a chance at another kiss. Liam bringing coffee and chatting this long had to mean something. Right? He wasn’t giving up hope, despite what his brother wanted. He

needed to have hope—with Champ and his life.

Liam spent the next hour following Stone around. He learned how to clean the cages, feed the dogs, cats, rabbits and the two ducks, plus add litter to the small litter boxes. He made a mental list of which dogs were available for walks and which were still adjusting to their surroundings. Some of the dogs needed extra patience due to being abused.

He never realized how much time and care went into dealing with animals. He respected Stone's ability to keep his spirits up, despite some of the crazy conditions.

Stone carried Champ to the cattery. "I try to stay here rather than hiding in my office. I'd rather be out and visible. I want visitors to approach me and I can do more when they see me."

"You do." He settled on the other rocking chair and took in the view. For a place to keep cats, the room was rather cheery. An orange tabby climbed into his lap. "Well, hello." Five cats occupied the room. Two black ones, a tuxedo version and a white one with orange spots. The plump orange tabby sniffed Liam before settling on his thighs.

"That's Big Orange. We can't seem to settle on a name for him and he's a little thick, so...Big Orange it is for now." Stone grinned. "He likes you."

"Seems he does." Liam petted the cat. He'd paid the extra deposit for an animal at the duplex. Would it be okay to bring Big Orange home? What would he do with the cat when he had to leave? Bring him along as his mascot? "Has he traveled? I know some cats get into being leashed."

"I don't know. I guess you'd have to work with him." Stone grinned. "Are you considering adopting him?"

“I’m thinking about it.” He nodded to Stone. “How’s Champ?” He’d expected more barking in the shelter. More noise and action. The place was rather sedate. He liked the images of dogs and cats on the walls, plus the little gift shop. If someone couldn’t adopt, they could support the shelter by buying merch. Clever.

“I’ve got a bottle and I’ll try to offer him a little formula in a bit.” Stone jostled the blanket. “He’s in rough shape and might not make it through the night.”

“Stone.” He didn’t want to consider that possibility. Yes, this wasn’t the movies, but the kitten deserved a happy ending. “What if Aubrey came back?”

“He can’t reverse the damage done already—not this fast.” Pain shimmered in Stone’s eyes. “I hate it, but this is what happens sometimes.”

“No.” He barely knew the critter, but he couldn’t bear to see the kitten hurt. “I want to fix it.”

“Me, too.” Stone met Liam’s gaze. “He’s so small and if he wasn’t being fed, then that would be two strikes against him. I want to fix it, but right now, it’s a game of wait and see.”

“Will you take him home?” Not that he could care for the animal. He didn’t know the first thing about special care for cats.

Stone nodded. “Amy’s got Dolly keeping an eye on the kittens and I’ll bring him home to Missy. She’ll care for him there. I’ll be close by, but Missy loves her strays.” He half-smiled. “Did I tell you she brought me a skunk kit? She thought it was her baby. I had to keep them in the barn until I could have Aubrey rehome the kit. Missy was so mad.”

“You never said that.” There were a lot of things they hadn’t said to each other. “I’m

coming with you tonight.” He couldn’t not keep tabs on Champ. In the morning, he’d buy the supplies for Big Orange and adopt him, too. Mostly, he wanted to keep an eye on Stone.

“Liam?” Stone’s lips parted, but he said nothing else.

“I’m attached.” Stone didn’t know it, but he should be cherished. He’d done the impossible, too. He’d forced Liam to climb out of his comfort zone. Stone, Big Orange and a sickly kitten had made him think about more than himself. It was a huge step. “I insist.”

“I won’t argue.” Stone smiled and touched Liam’s arm. “I should argue with you, but you’re determined.”

The gesture warmed Liam to his core. He wanted more of these smiles and touches. “You haven’t seen determined yet.”

Stone shook his head and laughed. The throaty sound filled the room. “Well, okay.”

“I’ll drive—if that’s okay with you?” He hadn’t thought through the details. “Your truck will be okay here overnight, right?”

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“I’ll have Amy pull it into the gated part of the lot, but yeah, it’ll be fine. Usually if it’s here, I’m here.”

“Then let’s go. You need a rest.” He couldn’t relax if he tried, because something had changed between him and Stone. Because Stone knew the truth? Yes, but more than that, he wanted to tell Stone his secrets. He didn’t want to be two different people with this man. He wanted to hear Stone laugh and see his smile. He wanted to taste his kiss and be close to him.

“Stop being so nice or I’ll fall for you,” Stone said. “Champ’s wriggling, so that’s a good sign. I hope it keeps up.”

“Me, too.” He held on to Champ and the box as Stone clocked out. They needed to go because he wanted more time alone with Stone. He scratched Big Orange behind the ears. “I’ll be back for you tomorrow.” Liam carried the box to the lobby and waited.

Stone returned to the front of the building. “I’ll have my phone on,” Stone said. “Call and I’ll come back.”

“Or you can go home and get a proper night’s rest.” Jake snorted. He waved to Liam. “Get this guy out for a while. Hell, get him a date and laid. We love our fearless leader, but he needs a boyfriend that’s not Jeff.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” The tips of his ears burned. He hadn’t been embarrassed in years. He’d shown his ass on film, flashed pubes and done a sex scene that looked more real than anyone wanted to admit, but hearing Jake suggest he date Stone got to him. He wanted to go for a real date with Stone. He had an idea of what they’d do,

too. If Pat or Arthur heard Jake or found out Liam's loose plans, they'd kill him. But wasn't what he wanted more important?

"Okay." Stone held the box and a messenger bag. "Let's go."

"Got the baby?" He frowned. "Is Champ in there?"

"Right here. He's under the blanket." Stone moved the flap. "See? His nose is sticking out. I put warming packs in with him and I've got some formula for him in my bag. We're good."

"Perfect." He stopped at the SUV. "I have one small glitch. I figured out how to get here, but I need a reminder as to how to get to your place."

"No problem." Stone joined him in the SUV. "It's easy."

He settled behind the wheel. Being with Stone felt right—more than his life in California. It was odd he'd feel this way, since he'd never thought he'd leave his home state. He'd assumed he'd find another actor or actress and settle down in Hollywood, where they'd get married. He'd end up playing dad roles and become a distinguished gentleman in the film business. Now, he kind of wanted to give life in Cedarwood a chance.

"Go to Rhodes Road. I know. I didn't name it. Turn left," Stone said.

He did as told. "Now what?"

"Follow this for three miles to Leehan Road. Can't miss it. It's the only one to the right. You'll turn onto Leehan and follow it for a mile."

He switched on the trip function on the dash and checked his miles. Sure enough,

Leehan Road was about three miles away. He turned right, and a mile down the road was Stone's drive. As he headed onto the lane, his heart skipped a beat and his breath caught, like he'd done this drive a hundred times and was on his way home. Shit. Saying this was love was too fast. This could be his ridiculous ability to fall for his costar long enough to get through the film, then falling out of love as soon as the movie wrapped. Would his attraction to Stone die when he left Cedarwood?

He wasn't sure.

He parked in front of the garage. When he stepped out of the SUV, he noticed the quiet and the stars overhead. He'd never seen so many stars before without being in a planetarium. "This is beautiful."

"The sky?" Stone elbowed him. "It's like coming to church or something every time I stand on my porch."

"I can't imagine." He couldn't continue to hold things back from Stone. He needed to tell him everything. They deserved a clean slate between them and a proper start. He followed Stone into the house.

Elmore rumbled up to him. A tortoiseshell cat waited on the third stair step.

"Hi, El. Hi, Miss." Stone carried the box to the living room. "Missy?"

The tortoise shell cat strolled behind him and zeroed in on the box. She swished her tail and sniffed the flaps.

"Will she accept him?" Liam asked. He'd never seen anything like this and had no idea what to expect.

"I need your help, Miss." Stone sat on the floor and leaned against the couch. He

opened the box and blanket. “This is Champ. He needs a momma and we need him. Do you want a baby?”

Missy sniffed the box, then nuzzled the kitten. Within seconds, she climbed into the box and licked Champ’s head.

Liam marveled at the instant connection. “Like she knows he needs her.”

Stone bowed his head. “It’s going about how I’d hoped. She likes babies.” He sighed. “Now we pray and hope.”

Liam sat on the floor with Stone. He rested his back against the sofa and leaned into his friend. The power of the scene plus his desire to fit in were almost more than he could handle. “You keep showing me so much cool stuff.”

“I try.” Stone chuckled and bumped shoulders with Liam. “Missy is a miracle worker. The other cats will be nice, but she’s my caregiver.”

Adorable. “Stone?” He couldn’t hold back. He wanted this scene to play out longer than six months.

“I’ll keep an eye on them, but Missy will let me know if something goes sideways.”

“Good.” He slid his hand over Stone’s thigh and rested it on his knee. He couldn’t not touch Stone. Being with him was like coming home. Maybe he had, but God, he wanted to learn every curve and plane of Stone’s body, taste him and show his appreciation, then do it all again.

Chapter Six

Liam's heart hammered. He'd made a bold move. How would Stone react? Push him away? Encourage him?

"Are you sure you want to do that?" Stone asked. "You won't decide you want to take the gesture back?"

The words cut him deep, but he deserved it. He'd been an asshole back at the community center. "I grew up in the film industry. My mother decided I was the cutest baby ever and I'd be good in commercials. I started at age two."

Stone's eyebrows rose. "I was busy trying to adopt my first cat."

"I wanted a dog, but you know that story," Liam said. Unburdening felt good. He needed to have someone else in on his tale. Besides, Stone made talking easy and relaxing. "I found out years later that my mother put me in the industry because she wanted to be a star and she figured she'd get there on my back."

"Did she?"

"Become a star? You've never heard the names Hillary Grover or DeeAnn Hill, right?"

"Can't say I have."

"See? She's not a star. Never made it past the first audition."

“Is your last name really Grover?”

“Her last name used to be, yes. She married a man named Martin Grover. I kept my dad’s name—Blackwell. That said, everyone around Cedarwood thinks my last name is just Black because it’s the false one I gave,” Liam said. “I’m lousy at undercover.”

“Ah.”

“I did commercials until I was seven. That’s when I landed *The First Family*. I did that show for five years.” He’d loved working on the show. The family was his. He’d rather be with them than going home. At least on set, people cared about him. All his mother wanted was for him to introduce her to an agent or producer. Martin just wanted him to get paid so he could go drinking.

“I watched that show. Weren’t you Billy?”

“I was.” Another wave of embarrassment hit. If he’d been able to do the part now, he would’ve done it differently and been more mature. What did I know about mature at age twelve? “Did you like it?”

“Arthur did.” Stone petted Missy, who continued to bathe Champ. “He had a thing for Shaun.”

“Everyone did. Girls, boys, women who could’ve been his mother...” When he thought back on that time, he couldn’t help but smile. He’d wondered about his sexuality when he’d walked in on Shaun and one of the extras kissing. He hadn’t wanted to kiss the girl. No, he’d been attracted to Shaun. Good thing the show had ended before he’d had a chance to act on his feelings. Then again, if he’d have said something, maybe Shaun would still be around. “The week after we got canceled, Shaun wrecked his car. I never asked anyone, but I swear he did it because he didn’t think he’d get another role. I know I had to go back to commercials. Who wanted to

hire a gangly almost thirteen-year-old? I wasn't mature enough to play an adult, even if I had the body of one, and that body prevented me from playing my age."

"I kept outgrowing Arthur's hand-me-down shoes. Drove our mother crazy."

"I would've killed to have a brother." He rested his head on Stone's shoulder. "I got bit parts on other television shows, usually playing a teen criminal. I shot Brittany Delay, knocked up Tory Johnson and helped Lena Choy hack her best friend to bits—all on film. People thought I was that delinquent."

"So you played the part in public," Stone said. "I bet it sucked."

"Sometimes it did." He petted Elmore, who had trotted over and collapsed next to him. "The thing is, I knew I wasn't a bad kid. I knew I could be a pain in the ass, but I knew I had more determination than Shaun. Brit, Tor and Lena were nice and we're all still friends, but I only got with them because I was pushed."

"You wanted to buck Hollywood?"

"I had a feeling I was gay when I wanted to kiss Shaun and not Teresa. Then on the set of *Rhapsody*, I watched Jack Moore strip naked. I wanted to suck his cock, rather than go to town with my then costar, Michelle. The media wanted me to be girl-crazy and I've had this notion I'd never been taken seriously as an actor if I tried to play straight while being gay."

"You've proven that wrong."

"Not really. Only a handful of people know the truth." Admitting that out loud hurt. He was a fraud. Being himself was great as long as no one else knew about it. How was he supposed to have a relationship that way?

“Living that double life had to be rough. Arthur tried to deny who he was and it didn’t work. Janie, his last girlfriend, knew he liked pole and tried to accommodate. I give her credit for trying and sticking it out as long as she did,” Stone said. “They’re still friends.”

“I hate the double life.”

“Yet you keep living it.”

“I know.”

“Why?”

He sat up and faced Stone. He had to be upfront. “I was afraid. Would I be hired to play the romantic lead if the producers didn’t think I could act attracted to my costar? Would the Hollywood machine spit me out and turn its back on me if I came out? I want to act. I want to hone my craft and be myself.” That’s too much to ask.

“Some women like gay men more than straight—aside from the stereotypical reason that they like our sense of style. Amy explained it to me once,” Stone said. “When she realized I liked guys, she liked me more because we could commiserate over which guys passed us by. She knew I wouldn’t hit on her and I’d be honest. She’s also said she’d love to watch me with my boyfriend—I don’t know how I feel about that, but whatever.”

He understood. Amy didn’t see Stone as competition with men and didn’t have to worry about competing with other women for his attention. They were equals. “Has it ever been hard to be out?”

“In Cedarwood? Hell yes. That crazy Coalition will try anything to run the LGBTQ community out of town. They think straight is the only way to go. I hated having to drive to Cleveland to go out because I didn’t want to risk being seen. Then I realized the Coalition had too much power over me. I’m here to take care of animals and love my family. I’m here for my friends. If that sets the Coalition off, then that’s on them. I’m not going to be someone I’m not to make someone else happy.”

“I understand.” He wasn’t ready to admit those things out loud to anyone else or be that far out of the closet, but he appreciated Stone more. He rested his head on

Stone's shoulder again. Food sounded good, and a few hours' sleep, but he wouldn't trade anything for these moments with Stone. He was in awe of the man. Stone loved his life and was happy without the spotlight. Is that a possibility for me, too?

"What?" Stone asked. "Why are you so quiet?"

He sat up again and stared at Stone. "I want to grow up and be confident like you."

"Like me?" He laughed and startled Elmore. "Sorry, El." He turned his attention back to Liam. "I'm not confident. I kept going back to a dirtbag because I thought I didn't deserve any better."

"That's not true."

"I'm not handsome like Arthur. I talk too much and ask too many questions. I want to meet people's dogs and cats, not necessarily the people. Guys think I'm strange."

"Not me," Liam said. He'd begun to see the rationale for being friends with the pets. Animals didn't talk back.

"You're one of the few," Stone said. "But thank you for the compliment."

"I mean it. Since I've come to Cedarwood, I'm looking at things a lot differently," Liam said. "When Rhapsody wrapped, I did three television movies and a dozen small parts in feature films, but I also did too much blow, drank more than I ever should've and looked for any way to fill the void in my soul. I don't feel so empty."

"That void that screamed you weren't being honest with yourself? Was that it?"

"I had boyfriends, but they had to sign non-disclosure agreements, per my agent, to date me. That's a shit way to start a relationship," Liam said. "So yeah, that's the

void. You don't seem to have one."

"I'm not that special."

"I lied too much and ignored the people I cared about because of my career." Liam trailed his fingers over Stone's cheek. "I don't regret my acting work, but I regret how I treated people."

"You're forgiven." Stone closed his eyes and rubbed his cheek against Liam's hand. "How'd you end up in Cedarwood? Are you filming a show here?" He opened his eyes. "If I don't ask questions, I'll forget why we came back and kiss you."

"I wouldn't mind," Liam said. He rested his forehead against Stone's. "I'm here because of a movie."

"Oh." Stone averted his gaze, but didn't pull away.

"It's prep for a movie role," Liam said. He'd lost a bit of the connection with Stone. Damn it. "You know Tanner Fox, don't you?"

"He and Dr. Dan adopted a dog and cat last year from the shelter. They're nice guys. Their little boy loves to pet the dogs and could spend hours in the cattery."

"I dated Tanner for a hot second," Liam admitted. "We spent like an evening in a club together and fucked afterwards, but that was it. We never would've worked out and I'm glad he found the doctor. He deserves to be happy." He paused. Maybe he liked to talk a little too much, too. "Anyway, I called and asked him for help because I wanted to research small towns."

"Ah."

“I’m contracted to play a farmer in a small town for a television movie. The character’s name is Ned,” Liam said. “I know nothing about towns and even less about farming.”

Stone pulled away and nodded. “I see.”

“I wanted to learn how to be a small-towner. I’ve only ever lived in a city and never in my own house.”

The muscle in Stone’s jaw twitched.

“What?” He’d screwed up again. He thought Stone would be relieved to know the truth. “You’ve heard my secrets. I don’t tell anyone that kind of stuff.”

“Are you using me?”

Oh shit. Now he realized where he'd made his error. “No.”

“You're not lying?” Stone rubbed his forehead. “If you are lying or using me for the role, then say it. I won't be happy, but I'll respect you for telling me the truth.”

“I'm done lying to you. I would never use you for research. Your brother told me to leave you alone and said he'd kill me if I got involved with you. I had no idea who you were when we met at the truck. Truth be told, my agent would kill me, too. She didn't want me to get attached to anyone because I have to leave to make the movie.”

“Yet here you are in my living room, telling me you're invested.”

He had to fix this. He'd come so close to kissing Stone again and allowing nature to take its course...and now he'd messed it all up. “When I met you, I saw a sweet guy who had good taste in food.”

Stone's expression remained blank.

“I know how things appear. I show up and kiss up to you. I'm coming on strong, then sending strange messages while I push you away. It seems like I'm using you and I'm not. I wanted to get to know you. Once I did, I wanted to tell you the truth. I'm not out, yet I want to be with you. I'm not a small-town guy, but I'm at home with you.”

“You're saying things you can't follow through with,” Stone said.

“I know.” He paused. “But I mean every word. If I wanted to learn about Cedarwood, I wouldn’t have had to find you. I could observe. Be aloof or be the weird actor guy who hides in his mansion—but that’s not me. Nothing I’m learning will be the same without you around.”

“Liam.” Stone sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“I’ve never felt more like myself than when I look into your eyes,” Liam said.

Stone didn’t respond. The muscle in his jaw tensed. He rubbed his forehead again. “All I want is to care for the animals and be loved.”

He couldn’t give Stone forever. Hell, he wasn’t sure if he could give him right now. But he wanted to try.

* * * *

Stone stared at the ceiling for what seemed like an eternity. He hadn’t planned on having Liam over, yet he’d allowed him to come to the house. The conversation wasn’t one he’d expected they’d have. He’d found out so much about Liam and liked him more with each discovery. But Liam would leave. He had alternative motives.

Jesus.

He blinked as the room came into focus. He must’ve fallen asleep. When he glanced down at the warmth on his lap, he spotted Missy with Champ tucked against her in the vee of Stone’s legs. Both seemed to be happy together.

He noticed snoring. Couldn’t be the cats and Elmore wasn’t that loud. Was it Barney? He didn’t see the beagle in the living room. Jax? No...the hound was curled up on his dog bed. Ernie? No, he was curled up with Jax. If they were snoring, anyone within a

five-mile radius would know.

He turned his attention to the sofa. Liam had moved to the couch with Elmore tucked into the curve of his legs.

“Traitor,” Stone murmured. He petted Elmore. Since he’d split from Jeff, he hadn’t let anyone spend the night at the house. If he hooked up with someone, it always ended at a hotel. Having Liam there was a strange experience. He couldn’t deny his sadness over learning the truth about Liam, but he wasn’t as upset as he might have been had Liam kept it secret.

He enjoyed Liam’s company. Hell, if Liam could come back to town after the movie, maybe they’d have a shot at being a couple. Maybe.

His phone buzzed. He checked on the cats, then offered the bottle to Champ, who snacked. Once the kitten finished eating, Stone checked the phone. Amy had left a text.

We had a good night. Kittens are A-OK. Hope Champ is okay, too.

He typed a return message.Champ holding on. Missy’s his feline nurse and has adopted him. Will be in later today.

A second message popped onto the screen. He didn’t recognize the number. He rolled his shoulders and shifted his hips to wake up his ass.Damn, I shouldn’t have slept sitting up.He retrieved the message.

No gays in Cedarwood. We know what you did.

Jesus.The text had to be from someone in the Coalition. Who else would send such garbage? He tended to get hate mail when he removed animals from bad situations,

but never hate texts. Besides, he hadn't done anything to anyone this time around.

Katie strolled into the room. "I wondered where you were." Her eyes widened and she grinned. "Tell me you had a good night."

"I did—with the exception of Champ. Poor guy." He scooped the kitten into the box and placed Missy in the blanket with him. "He's wigglier and seems stronger, but I'm still worried."

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“Poor baby,” Katie said. “I’m assuming this is good?” She nodded to Liam. “Looks cozy.”

“He is.”

“Snag this one,” she whispered. “You need good in your life.”

“Thanks, Katie.” He should wake Liam. He needed to get to the shelter and Liam probably had things to do. He had a life. Stone left Missy and Champ with Katie, then hurried up to his bedroom suite to change and run a comb through his hair. When he came back down, Elmore hopped off the sofa. He licked Liam’s face.

Liam sat up and rubbed his eyes. “Shit. You’re good, honey, but you’re not the face I wanted to see this morning.” He petted the dog. “Hi.”

“Hi.” Stone knelt next to the box. “You slept.”

“I did,” Liam said. “How’s our baby?”

Our? “Champ’s hanging in there. He ate and Missy adopted him.” What does Liam mean by our?

“Good.”

“I’ll have Katie peek in on them this afternoon while I’m at the shelter.” He scratched Missy behind the ears. “He’ll be fine.”

“Wonderful.” Liam’s grin spread across his face. “I need to work today, but I’d like to help at the shelter. Do you need hands tonight?”

“Probably. I haven’t checked the schedule.” Stone stood and stretched. “Want coffee?”

“Did you brew some?”

“No, but the Coffee Bean, where you got the coffee from last night, makes a great breakfast blend. We can go there,” Stone said. “Drive through and boom, we’re caffeinated.”

“Sounds good. I didn’t realize they had a drive-through.” Liam ran his fingers through his hair. “I guess I should’ve paid more attention. I went inside when I was there last night.”

“It’s okay. Why don’t we go?” Stone gathered up his keys, wallet and phone. “Katie, I’m heading up to the shelter to check in and get my truck. I’ll be back in an hour.”

“I’ve got Champ.” She waved. “Take your time.”

“Thanks.” Stone followed Liam out to the SUV. “Need me to get you into town?”

“I’d appreciate it,” Liam said. “I’m terrible at directions back home, too. My agent used to chew me out because I’d get lost.”

“GPS can be a good thing.”

“Chauffeurs, too.”

“We’ve got ride sharing around here, but no chauffeurs.” Stone pointed left. “That

way.”

“I don’t mind driving. I rather like it.” Liam pulled out of the driveway and onto the road. “It’s freeing.”

He had to find something to talk about besides driving. “What’s your character like?” He wanted to know about Liam’s project. Why not learn more about him?

“His name is Ned. He’s a farmer and he’s single. He saves the heroine when her car is stranded in front of his farm. It’s an opposites-attract kind of thing,” Liam said.

“Like us?”

“Yeah.” Liam flexed his hands on the wheel. “You’re cuter.”

“Am I?” The heat returned. Or was it just him?

“Oh yeah. Kassidie McFadden is sweet, but she’s high-maintenance—more than me.”

“Is that possible?” he joked.

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“I know, right? She insists on two trailers for every picture, five assistants and requires visits from her husband every day. I don’t mind him, but I have to get the husband’s approval before I can kiss her.”

“That makes portraying attraction rather tough.”

“It does.”

“Is he demanding?”

“He can be. I’ll bet he’d be happier about me kissing her if he knew I was gay.”

“Would you?” Stone asked.

“Be happier?”

“By being you? Yes.”

“I would.” He paused. “I should come out. Just get it over with and do it. Carrying this around is heavy. It’s tiring. Hell, I don’t recognize who I see when I look in the mirror.”

“Do what’s right for you. Don’t let anyone make you do what you’re not ready to do.” He admired Liam’s decision to be bare. Knowing when to come out wasn’t an easy decision to make. “But whatever you do, I’m behind you a hundred percent.” He placed his hand on Liam’s thigh. The sparks returned and he wanted to spend more time with Liam. The connection was real. Had to be.

Liam drove through the line at the coffee shop and ordered two tall coffees. Stone offered money, but Liam insisted he pay. Ten minutes later, Liam pulled to a stop in front of the shelter. “I’ve been thinking about this long and hard. I’m not ready to tell everyone, but I’ve come to terms with me in my own head. I can be two people if I’m playing a role, but not in my personal life. I can only be me.” He turned off the SUV and faced Stone. “I’m gay.”

“Congratulations.” He hugged Liam and breathed in the scent of his friend. “I’m proud of you.”

Liam clung to him. “I wouldn’t have been able to come out without you.” He kissed Stone. “I’m not out to everyone, but you. I’m working up to being fully out.”

“You’ll get there.” He cupped Liam’s jaw. “I know you will.”

Liam’s eyes flashed and he brushed his nose along Stone’s. “I know.” He toyed with the wrinkles in Stone’s shirt, then curled his fingers under Stone’s chin. “Would you want to get together to go over my lines? Help me get into character?”

“I’d love to.” Should he kiss Liam again? Oh, what the hell. He nipped Liam’s bottom lip, then suppressed a whimper. “Promise me one thing.”

“What’s that?” Liam asked. “Your name in the credits as my acting coach? Your name somewhere in the objects on the set?”

“No.” Why would Liam think those things? Because he was an actor and he thought differently than Stone. “I’ll help. I’m honored to do so. All I ask is that you don’t use me. I’m attracted to you—as if you can’t tell. I want to be around you. But if you don’t like me in the way I’m drawn to you and are doing this to get into character, then tell me now.”

“I’m not that kind of guy.”

He wanted to believe Liam, but he had to be sure. “If you’re honest with me, I’ll be honest with you.” He kissed Liam once more. “See you. Thanks for the coffee and last night. I’ll keep you posted on Champ.”

“Thanks,” Liam said. “I’m calling you.”

“I hope you do.” He watched Liam back up, then leave the lot. He enjoyed his time with Liam. He didn’t care if Liam was an actor or famous. He liked the man beneath the façade. Was he setting up for a heartbreak? He’d never know unless he put himself out there.

Chapter Seven

Liam headed home long enough to shower, shave and change his clothes. He'd come to Cedarwood to write and observe. It was high time he did some observing. He'd learned a few things during his time at the gym and watched many of the people at the Metropark, but he wanted a better feel for the folks in town. His thoughts turned to the role and Stone. He wondered if Champ was okay.

He also wanted another of Stone's kisses.

He drove across Cedarwood to the diner and parked. He grabbed his messenger bag. When he went inside the building, he stopped at the hostess stand. A man stood behind the podium.

"Hi," Liam said. "A table for one?"

"Very good," the man said. "Welcome to the Cedarwood diner. I'm Colt, the proprietor. Let me get you a table. This way." He pulled a menu from the holder and directed Liam to a booth by the window. "We're featuring crepes today. Blueberry and strawberry. Would you like a water? Coffee?"

"Coffee and water would be great. Thanks." He accepted the menu. "This is a nice place."

"Thanks." Colt's grin widened. "I'll be right back."

Liam settled on the bench seat and opened his bag. He moved the script aside and

withdrew his notebook. He'd wondered if he'd find local color at the diner and he'd been right. He wanted to incorporate a character like Colt into the movie. A sweet, chatty guy who would be peripheral, but very much there. He snorted. Someone like Colt should be Ned's love interest.

No...Stone should be.

He looked over the menu. Crepes did sound good. Was he still supposed to be on a diet? He hadn't worked out in four days and needed to get back to the gym. He wouldn't gain that much if he indulged in crepes one day and if he ran later, he'd be fine.

A red-haired woman with a snake tattoo peeking out from under her T-shirt sleeve approached the table. "What would you like? Colt let me know you're having coffee." She placed the cup on the table. "I'll bring your water once you place your order." She tapped her pad. "We have the breakfast special—two eggs, taters, toast and meat of your choice."

Meat of his choice?Stone.He bit back a chuckle. He couldn't say that. "I'd like two blueberry crepes, please. Oh, and a cup of fruit. Thank you." He handed her the menu.

"Sure." She jotted notes on the pad. "Regular coffee, right? I wanted to top you off with the right octane."

He laughed. "Regular, yeah." If nothing else, she amused him.

"Sugar and creamers are on the table. I'll be right back with your water." She left him alone again.

He returned to his notebook and added notes about Colt and the diner. He had no

business suggesting changes to the movie or wanting to make it an LGBTQ film. Ned wasn't meant to have a gay relationship. The studio had wanted a sweet heterosexual romance and probably weren't ready for a gay romance. Too bad. The story would be just as sweet if Ned were gay.

The waitress returned with the water. "Your order will be out soon. Do you need anything else?"

"I'm good. Thanks." He sipped his coffee. His thoughts filled with his interactions with Donnie, Amy, Jake...and Stone. He focused on the man who fascinated him. He wanted to get to know Stone. Things were still touchy, but they were going in the right direction.

"Excuse me." A man sat opposite him in the booth. "Hi. I hear you're new in town."

"Do I know you?" He closed his notebook. Unless Arthur had started telling everyone who he was, no one should care if he was new in town. What if he were just passing through and had decided to stop at the diner for breakfast?

"I heard you're new and I wanted to say hi. I'm part of the welcoming committee. My name is Devin. Welcome to Cedarwood," Devin said. He stuck out his hand. "You're writing? Are you a writer?"

He stared at Devin, but shook his hand. Was he being watched, had Arthur spilled more beans or was this guy that pushy?

"Are you published?" Devin asked.

"No." He wasn't sure how to proceed. He'd dealt with the paparazzi, but this guy was a new form of intrusive. "Does it matter if I'm published or not?"

Devin grinned. “I’ve always wanted to write a book,” he said. “Where do you work?”

“I’m sorry. Did someone send you to my table? This is strange,” Liam said. “I’m just here for breakfast.”

“Well, I am here to welcome you and invite you to our group meetings.” Devin slid a piece of paper over to Liam. “Here’s the information.”

“Oh, the LGBTQ support group, thanks.” He looked down at the sheet. The description wasn’t for the LGBTQ group. “Oh.” The Coalition. “Sorry.”

“We’re notthatgroup.” Devin pointed to the paper. “We’re friendly neighbors encouraging interaction in town. We welcome everyone, but ask you keep your affections to yourself.”

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“So don’t act gay with the group?” He fought the urge to roll his eyes.

“Well, yes.” Devin folded his hands. “We’ll gladly help you if you’d like to discuss conversion.”

“As in conversion therapy?” He laughed out loud. “I never thought you’d say that.” He so needed to add this to his notebook.

“We’re helpful.” Devin tensed. “He can’t remove me this time.” He turned back to Liam. “I’m allowed to be here. It’s a public place.”

“Huh?” He noticed Colt striding across the dining room. “Oh.”

“What are you doing?” Colt asked. “You’ll drive away my customers.”

“Those people shouldn’t eat here. Your gayness will rub off and taint them,” Devin said. “I’m welcoming this gentleman to town. No harm intended.”

“By offering conversion therapy? Jesus Christ,” Liam said. “How I conduct my life isn’t your business, but even if it was, I wouldn’t take you up on that kind of activity.”

Colt pointed to the door. “Go.” Once Devin left the table and exited the building, Colt returned to the table. “I’m so sorry.”

The waitress arrived with Liam’s breakfast. “I got this, boss. Take care of him.” She set the plates on the table. “Good gravy. I’m sorry. That guy comes in so often to

recruit people to their group. He tried to get me to join until he found out I'm a lesbian." She shrugged. "Want me to warm up your coffee?"

"In a bit." His mouth watered as he gazed at his food. "This looks delicious."

"It is. I love the crepes, but my hips don't," she said. "I'll leave you to your breakfast. Don't be surprised if Colt comes by again."

He ignored his notebook and devoured the crepes. He'd never had anything so tasty in his life. Was the food really that great or was it the sense of belonging making him feel better about himself? He savored every bite, then dug into his fruit. While he let his breakfast settle, he returned to his notebook. The Coalition was so silly. If someone wanted to consider conversion therapy, that was their decision and not a public one. Besides, conversion therapy wasn't a guarantee.

Devin had to be one of the people Stone had warned him about.

Colt arrived at the table. "Hi. I'm sorry again about the intrusion. He's not supposed to be in the building. I called the police because he's not leaving the property."

"I'm okay. He offered awkward conversation, but I've dealt with worse, so no big deal." He closed his notebook again. "How long have you owned the diner?"

"Me? Ten years." Colt sank onto the bench seat Devin had abandoned. "Why?"

"I'm researching small towns and the people in them." He sipped his lukewarm coffee. "Does Devin interrupt customers often?"

"Unfortunately, yes. I've thrown him out, but he comes back," Colt said. "What did he offer besides therapy?"

“He welcomed me.”

“Ah and wanted you to join their group?”

“Yeah. I thought it was the LGBTQ one. Wrong.”

“Did he freak?”

“Sure did, but it was muted.”

Colt nodded. “I don’t know or care if you’re gay. We welcome everyone to Cedarwood and in my diner. My partner and I want people to come here because they want good food, not a sermon. If you’re interested in meeting people, then visit the inclusive group. We have our meetings every second and fourth Friday in the month.”

“I’ll come to the next one.”

“Very good,” Colt said. He knocked on the table. “When you get your bill, I’m taking twenty percent off.”

“Don’t sweat it.” He didn’t want special treatment.

“Huh? I’ve never met anyone who didn’t want a discount.”

“I pay my share. He interrupted me, but it’s all part of my research. I minded his pushiness and his intrusive questions.” He shook his head. The questions might not be intrusive to other people, but in his situation, he wanted to keep things quiet.

“Like?”

“My job. He told me not to act gay if I went to their meetings. Thought I was a published author because I have a notebook.” Liam sighed. “I’m just writing notes and passing the time.”

“He’s being nosy,” Colt said. “Look, don’t let the Coalition bother you. They like to intrude and I can’t say they’re harmless. I was attacked, but the best I can tell you is to keep your head up. If you cower, they win.”

“Stone mentioned the group did violent things.” Christ. He’d hoped Stone had exaggerated.

“Stone McCarthy?”

“The same.”

“I love him. He convinced Ash and me to adopt Louie. It was the best decision ever. We only had him for a few months, but it was worth every second. We gave him a loving home for his senior months. I wish he’d have been around longer—when we brought him home, he was like a pup again.”

“Aw.” He needed to add this story to his notebook, too. Something Colt said stuck with him. He loved Stone. Doesn’t everyone? But Colt had a partner, so there was that. His jealousy could take a hike.

“Yeah, we’re talking about getting another dog. I guess we should.” Colt grinned.

“You’ve convinced me. How do you know Stone?”

“Arthur helped me get the rental house.” He nodded. “He also said I should stay away from his brother.”

“Which meant you ran right into him.” Colt winked. “I know how that goes. The one you’re supposed to stay away from is the one you end up with.”

“Something like that,” Liam said. “Arthur meant well and if you need a property, he’s the guy.”

“Agreed,” Colt said. “Did you need anything else?”

“I’m good. I wanted to write a bit, then I’ll give up my table.”

“Nope, enjoy.” Colt left him to his writing.

He’d never be able to add characters to the movie, but what if he wrote his own? He’d written plenty of other things. Maybe, with the right guidance, he could pen his own screenplay. It was possible.

Two hours passed as he added his ideas to his notebook. He noticed the lunch crowd filtering in. Shit. He should go. He’d promised Big Orange he’d buy supplies to bring the cat home. He left a twenty on the table for the tip, then packed up his notebook. He checked to be sure his script was still with him, then headed to the register to pay his bill. “Thank you. I’m sorry I used the table for so long.”

“No problem.” Colt handed over his change. “We’re glad to have you. Come back.”

“I will and I’ll bring Stone.” He pocketed the change.

“Do that. Come to one of the group meetings, too. You’ll be glad you did.” Colt waved.

“I will.” He waved, then left. When he strode out to his SUV, he stopped short in the parking lot. Someone had scrawled the words FAG, GAY, FAKE, ACTOR and GET OUT on his windows. What the hell? Why my car? He wasn’t in school any longer, but the whole incident felt very high-schoolish.

“Well, shit.” He headed back into the diner.

Colt was still at the stand. “Back so soon?” He frowned. “What’s wrong?”

“I need to call the police and I wanted to do it from in here. My SUV was vandalized. Do you have security footage?” Liam asked.

“We do and Officer Hargrove will be back for lunch. He should be here any second.” Colt nodded. “Right on time. Hey, Jordan?”

Officer Hargrove approached and waved. Liam recognized him. “Jordan,” Liam said. “I forgot you’re a cop.”

“Mr. Black.” Jordan shook hands with him, then Colt. “What’s wrong?”

“I need the police,” Liam said. “My SUV was defaced.”

Jordan nodded and grabbed his radio. “Let’s look. I don’t doubt you, but I want to gauge the situation.”

“I’ll get the security footage,” Colt said.

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“Thanks.” Jordan followed Liam to the parking lot.

“I don’t know who did it. I came out to this.” He gestured to the SUV. “It’s not permanent, but it’s embarrassing.”

“That’s...okay.” Jordan spoke into his radio. He related the words scrawled on the windows and asked for assistance. “I can’t investigate because I rent to you, so I’m calling in backup. Why don’t you walk me through your last few hours?”

He recounted the interaction with Devin, then how he’d written in his journal before he came out to the vandalism on his windows. “I’ve talked to people at the gym and Metropark, but not today.” He lowered his voice to a whisper. “I’d like to keep it quiet because only a few people know, but the truth is I’m gay and I’m an actor. Whoever wrote on my windows figured out who I am.”

Jordan nodded. “Understood.”

He isn’t shocked? Isn’t going to lecture me? Keeping his identity secret was a terrible weight on his shoulders. He hated it. His phone vibrated in his pocket. He withdrew the device and checked the screen. Patricia. “Shoot. I need to take this.”

“Sure. Stick around, but I’ll have Pete get the photos,” Jordan said. “He’ll want your statement, too.”

“Not a problem.” He answered his phone. “Hello, Pat.”

“What are you doing?” she snapped.

“What? I didn’t do anything.” Now what’s wrong?

“You’re all over social media.”

“That happens every day.” He rolled his eyes and perched on the seat of the bench by the diner entrance. “So?”

“This is worse.”

“How?”

“You came out?” she asked.

“Not yet.” He kept his voice low. “Jesus. Is that all? I’ve been accused of being gay and not out before. Big deal.” It was a big deal, but he wasn’t in the mood to argue it with her.

“Then it wasn’t you that put those words on your car? Are you advertising? Did you think it wouldn’t get out? Or was that the idea—make it look like defacing?” she asked. “If you’re going to do a publicity stunt, you have to tell me.”

A wave of nausea hit. God damn. “What do you mean everyone knows about a publicity stunt?” He’d mishmashed her words, but his mind spun as fast as his stomach.

“There are pictures of your SUV all over social media. The headlines claim Liam Blackwell comes out. I told you if you’re going to do this, let me handle it. Jesus. The media is coming to find you. If you’re not swarmed yet, you will be.”

“I can’t hide.” But he’d been caught. They would find him and want exclusives. They’d find Stone and anyone else they thought he was tangled with for an interview.

He couldn't do this to Stone.

"Go into hiding. You have that house. Hide."

"My car was vandalized. I never posted anything about what happened. Whoever defaced it probably posted the photos. Doesn't matter. I'm here with the police," he said. "I can't leave."

"Shit."

"Yeah." He rubbed his forehead. "Has the studio contacted you?"

"Not yet, but I'll tell them the truth. Someone vandalized your vehicle."

He sighed. "I can't lie any longer. I can't be anyone but myself unless I'm on film. I'm tired of hiding."

"You're ready?"

"I got pushed. How can I not be ready?"

"You were and I'm sorry."

"But I met someone, too, so it's just as well."

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“Jesus. Liam, I told you to keep it in your pants. Guy or girl?”

“It’s not like that. We haven’t...” He wanted to be with Stone. He wanted to learn every inch of Stone, committing it all to memory. “I kissed him. That’s it.” For now. “I like him and he knows the truth. All of the truth.”

“Would he do this? Turn you in to get fame? Would he lie?”

“No.” He trusted Stone. If anyone disclosed his sexuality and vandalized his vehicle, it wouldn’t be Stone.

“God damn it. You should’ve thought this through. This is your career. Guys will come and go,” Patricia said.

“My career won’t last forever.” He’d get older and eventually the parts would dry up for good.

“It will if you play your cards right and let me handle this,” she growled.

“The studio is your deal. I trust you to sort that out. I won’t deny that I’m gay any longer. If that scratches me from the part, then it does. I’ll live with the consequences.” He spotted Jordan waving. “I need to speak to the cops.”

“You do. Maybe we can keep this quiet or you prove you’re a great actor because no one knew your true self,” she said. “Just keep your head down.”

“Thanks.” He disconnected the call and put his phone away. He turned his attention

to Jordan. “Hi.”

“Relay what happened to Officer Jones,” Jordan said.

He did as told and gave his statement to the officer. Speaking to the cops was mandatory, but he was tired of telling the same damn set of events.

“Do you have a way home?” Officer Jones asked. “We want to keep your vehicle to look for prints.”

“Swell.” He groaned. “You can take it. I’ll call a friend.” He held up his hand. “My prints will be on the car and so will Stone McCartney’s. I gave him a ride this morning.”

“Thank you,” Officer Jones said. He jotted notes into his pad.

He hated to bother Stone, especially since he’d said he’d call, but not for a ride. Pat and Arthur would kill him for getting more deeply involved with Stone. Still, he dialed his friend’s number.

After two rings, Stone answered. “Hi.”

“Hi.” He tried to sound upbeat, but his excitement was gone. “How are you? How’s Champ?”

“I’m good. Champ is still sleepy, but Aubrey checked him out. Says there’s progress. Plus, Missy has adopted him. I couldn’t take him back if I wanted to—which I don’t,” Stone said.

“Wonderful.” He needed good news.

“Are you okay? You sound upset.”

“My SUV was vandalized,” he said, his voice flat. He should’ve been better at masking his feelings.

“Were you hurt? Are you okay? Where are you? Have you called the police? Do you need help?”

“Slow down.” God, he needed this man. He wanted someone to be on his side. Pat was, but because he paid her. Stone’s was honest interest. “I’m okay. I wasn’t in the vehicle at the time. The police are here and they’ve impounded my car. I think they’re going under the assumption there’s more here than we realize. Anyway, I’m stuck at the diner and could use a ride.”

“I’ll be right there.”

“Stone.” He loved Stone’s knight-in-shining-armor bit, but he hated to impose. “You don’t have to. If there’s a number for the local ride-share, I can use that.”

“I insist.”

He wasn’t in any shape to argue. “Okay. I’ll be at the diner.”

“I’m on my way now.”

A dull ache formed behind his eyes as he hung up. The media hadn’t found him yet, but if he was all over social media, then they’d be around soon enough. He didn’t want to subject Stone to their scrutiny.

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Shit. What about Big Orange? He'd planned on going to the store, then adopting the ball of fluff.

Stone pulled into the parking lot. He hadn't been kidding about being right there. "Need a lift?"

"Let me make sure I can go, but yes." He tossed his stuff onto the passenger side of the bench seat, then headed over to the police. He approached Jordan. "Am I free to leave? You have my cell number and my address, but if you can't reach me, you can try Stone McCartney's number and address."

"You're free, but we will be in touch," Jordan said.

"Thanks." He hurried back to the truck. "Let's go."

"Are you sure you're okay? You look rattled," Stone said. "I know the shit hit the fan, but I mean, how are you?"

"I'm going to be okay." He fiddled with his bag. "I'm scared because someone touched my stuff, but it's not the first time I've had something like this happen." He paused. "I need to tell you something."

"Will I be pissed?" Stone drove across town in the direction of the farm.

He couldn't be sure, but he assumed so. "You might."

Chapter Eight

Stone deviated from his route to the farm and pulled to a stop in the shaded lot in Cedarwood park. Whatever Liam had to tell him, he wanted to know now. “I’m listening.” He shifted in his seat and faced Liam. “I’m all yours.”

“I hope you are,” Liam said. “I came out to my agent.”

“Congratulations. I’m proud of you.” Is that it? The news wasn’t terrible. He held Liam’s hand. “Feel better, don’t you?”

“About that, I do, but there’s more.” Liam squeezed Stone’s fingers. “I meant to get to the store. I wanted to buy stuff to have at the house so I could adopt Big Orange.”

“I’ll help you. No sweat. The cat will still be there, waiting on you.” Both problems weren’t huge and he’d help. “We’ll get you set up—assuming you still want to adopt the cat.”

“I do.” Liam nodded. “Thank you.”

“I know that look. What else is there to say?” Stone asked.

“You like me, don’t you?”

“I told you I did. Still do.” He scooted over on the bench seat and draped his arm across the back. “I’m intrigued by you. I want to spend lots of time together.”

“Even if I’m being chased by the paparazzi?”

“Are you?” He hadn’t seen anyone following them.

“I will be.”

“Are you sure?” Stupid question. If Liam had been followed in the past, he most likely would be in the future.

“My agent, Pat, says the incident with the SUV has been splashed all over social media. Speculation is rampant about my being gay and hiding it. I am gay and I’ve been hiding it, so the rumors are true.”

“But coming out is your decision.”

“Not now. I’m not upper-tier celebrity, but I’m popular enough that coming out is a big scoop. If the national media doesn’t come looking for me or come calling, the local media will because I’m a celebrity. They all want a scoop.”

He couldn’t imagine how Liam felt or how he handled this kind of trouble.

“I wanted to come here and observe. I wanted to lie low. I had a plan that changed the second I saw you. I realized I wanted to be with you, adopt the cat, help raise Champ and learn my character—not being the media circus to town.”

He needed a second to process what he’d been told. Their quiet existence was about to be imploded. He needed help, but Liam needed more. “Come home with me. The farm is a big property. It’s gated and private. The kids won’t tattle because they’re invested, too. We’re like a big family. We protect each other.”

“What about Big Orange? I don’t want to leave him at the shelter and I can’t impose

on you.”

“One more cat won’t be a problem.” He rather liked the commotion. Having Liam close would be good, too.

“You want me? I’m a mess.”

He gathered Liam in his arms and petted his hair. “You’re a mess in some ways, but you’re not in others. You’re lost, but that’s why you found me. We’ll get you through this. We’ll go to the shelter during my shift and bring Orange home.”

Liam kissed him. “Thank you. I don’t deserve you, but I’m glad I came here.”

“What are friends for?”

“Boyfriends?” Liam asked. “We’re more than just platonic guys. My heart races when I see you and I can’t wait for another kiss.”

“Same here.”

“Then take me home. I want some quiet time with you,” Liam said.

“Then we’re on our way.” He let go of Liam and drove to the farm. He stopped long enough to close the gate behind him, then hurried the rest of the way up the lane. He parked in front of the garage.

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Liam clutched his messenger bag and left the truck. “I hate this.”

“What? Staying with me?” He had to stop thinking in the negative.

“No, the uncertainty. The running.” He waited against the bed of the vehicle. “When I was a kid, I got fan mail. I got death threats and every so often I’d get weird things like underwear. My agent handled most of it so I only saw the good stuff, but I knew the shit came through. Then when I was a teenager, I was a pinup of sorts. I’d get these long lovelorn notes from girls. I’d be chased and attacked. Some of the fan mail had things that would make a porn star blush. Women wanted to fuck me, men wanted to fuck me up, girls wanted to date me...one woman wanted to tie me up in her bedroom and leave me there.”

“Like that movie?” He leaned against the truck door and crossed his ankles. In his young life, Liam had been through a lot. “I bet it got tiring.”

“I was chased and everything I did was documented. I hated it and when I fell out of favor, I thought I’d got my life back,” Liam said. “I worked, but I wasn’t popular. I could work and fly under the radar. Now that everyone wants to know if I’m gay, that uneasiness is back. I’m popular, not for my work, but for my attraction to dick.”

He took the bag from Liam. “You’re safe here. You’re kind of hiding, but not really. You’re like my rescues and I’ll do my best to see you thrive.”

“I’m a shelter pet?” Liam’s eyebrows rose.

“Kind of.” He chuckled, not sure what else to do. “You’re not as fuzzy—as much as I

can tell.”

Liam snorted, catching on to Stone’s attempt at levity. “I shave.” The corner of his mouth kinked in a smile. “I want to be mad, but then you go and say things to make me laugh.” His shoulders slumped. “I don’t want to be a burden.”

“You’re not.” He slid his arms around Liam. “I’m a born rescuer. I’m good at seeing a need and trying to fix it. I’m also drawn to you. I’ve wanted to do more than kiss you since we met. When we kissed, I felt normal. I felt like me. I’m dying to get you alone and not only try those kisses again, but to see where this goes. I don’t care if you’re famous. That doesn’t matter to me. The guy inside is hot and sweet and I need him. He’s scared, but he’s strong and he’s tired. He needs to be free.”

Liam bridged the gap between them and kissed him hard. He balled Stone’s shirt in his hands and rubbed the growing bulge in his jeans against the one in Stone’s shorts. “I need you, too.”

Stone stuffed his hands into Liam’s back pockets. “Honey, we need to be sure we’re alone. Don’t want to be interrupted.”

“I suppose.” He nipped Stone’s chin. “Come on.”

Stone whimpered, then grasped Liam’s hand. He headed into the house and listened for noise in the house. When he heard nothing, he nodded. He spotted Missy and Champ together. Elmore had stretched across the sofa. Stone left the coat hanger on the front door. He hadn’t used the secret code in so long. Not since...Jeff. But why not use it now? He wanted to be with Liam. He left Liam’s bag on the table, then tugged him upstairs to the bedroom.

Once in the privacy of the second story, Liam yanked Stone’s shirt from his pants. He kissed Stone, demanding everything from him in that one kiss. He slid his hands over

Stone's belly.

Stone planted his feet and leaned against the wall. He threaded his fingers into Liam's hair. Every nerve ending in his body screamed for Liam. He needed him more than his next breath.

Liam moved to Stone's abs and belly. He covered Stone's torso with kisses. Once he dropped to his knees, he pinched Stone's nipples. He raked his blunt nails over Stone's belly, and the pain spurred Stone on.

He groaned. So hot. He tingled from head to toe and widened his stance. "Bed," he managed.

Liam directed him to the mattress and collapsed on top of him. Liam whipped his shirt off and his hair stood on end. His eyes sparkled with wildness. His nipples beaded. "Need you." Liam left a trail of fire and love bites on Stone's belly and down to his groin. He opened Stone's shorts and freed his cock. "Damn."

"What?" He fumbled with the button on Liam's jeans. "Like that?"

"I do." Liam bobbed his eyebrows. "I can't wait to have you in me."

He froze. How could he be so foolish in his lack of planning? "I don't have any rubbers."

"Don't mind." Liam stripped and flexed his body. He stood before Stone. "Am I good enough?"

"Hell, yes." He reached for Liam. "Come here."

"Not yet." He helped Stone out of his shorts and boxer briefs. "You're better than I

imagined. You're everything I asked for at Christmas."

He wasn't that exciting. He was just a human. But Liam...he'd aged well. Of course, he was only twenty-eight, but still. The man was all ripped muscle and no hair. Just perfection in human form.

"You have a pride flag." Liam touched the ink on Stone's hip. "I never pegged you as a tat man. No paw prints?"

"Maybe one day." He reached for Liam. "Right now, I want you."

Liam stretched out on top of him, cock on cock. He kissed Stone, sucking on his tongue, then letting go to nibble along Stone's chin. He caressed his lover's throat. Everywhere he touched, he left tongues of fire. He ground against Stone.

"Fuck," Stone bit out. He slid his hand between him and Liam to grasp their cocks. Sizzles engulfed him, and not from Liam being on top of him. The delicious feeling of their dicks together, moving as one, overwhelmed him. He slapped Liam's ass with his free hand.

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“Christ, yes.” Liam ground faster. “Been a long time.” He raked his teeth over Stone’s throat. “Need more.”

“Take it.” He spanked Liam again, no doubt leaving a print. The scent of Liam’s cologne wrapped around him, fogging his brain. Perspiration dotted Liam’s skin, giving him a glittering sheen. Christ, the man was sexy without even trying.

Liam sat up, wrapped his hand around Stone’s and helped stroke their cocks. He tilted his head back and groaned. A blush stretched from his cheeks to his chest. His abs flexed as he fucked Stone’s hand. “I’m close.”

“Already?” He had no room to talk. He could come right now. He arched his back and moved with Liam. The rest of the world seemed to fade away. Only Liam mattered.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” Liam murmured. He tensed and his mouth opened, but no other sound came out. His forehead crinkled. “Stone.” He pushed once more, hard, and came. Cum shot across Stone’s belly. Liam added a few more thrusts and panted.

The warm rush on his skin spurred Stone on. He couldn’t think straight and seeing Liam come apart was his undoing. His restraint shattered. He was closer to Liam than anyone in his life. He wanted to show Liam to everyone. The pressure within him snapped and he jerked. His balls tingled as he came. His cum added to the design on his stomach.

“Shit.” Liam collapsed on Stone, smearing cum between them—almost sealing them together. “Next time, fuck me.” He panted against Stone’s throat. “I need a next

time.”

“So do I.” His heart was in Liam’s hands. That could be tricky, though. He could end up hurt. Could be broken. But he couldn’t stay away from Liam. He’d become too important—too much a part of Stone.

* * * *

Six hours later, Liam sat in the living room with Stone. Freddie, formerly known as Big Orange, strolled around the house like he owned the place. When Liam had pulled his script out, Freddie insisted on lying across it. Once he finished exploring, Freddie hung out with Liam. The other cats joined them in the living room.

Liam couldn’t help but smile. He’d found the perfect cozy situation.

Stone carried Champ into the living room. Missy trailed at his feet. “He’s more active,” Stone said. “His eyes are open and he’s hungry.”

“Great.” Liam closed the script. “I’m glad.”

“Me, too.”

Liam patted the couch. “Join me. It’s kind of nice having our little family.”

“I agree.” Stone kissed him, then settled beside him. “I dreamed of this situation.”

“Did you?” Liam patted Stone’s thigh. “I wish you didn’t have so many kids around.”

“Why?” His eyes lit up.

“Because I want to make love to you, but there are a lot of witnesses,” he murmured.

“Do they ever go home?”

“In an hour.” Stone chuckled and rubbed the kitten under his chin. “It’ll be soon enough.”

“I’m used to more privacy.” He paused. He’d overstepped. “I’m sorry.” He pushed the script aside and scratched Freddie behind the ears. “I’m struggling. I can see into Ned’s persona and, to be honest, other than playing guitar—which I cannot do—he’s boring. He eats, sleeps, farms and keeps to himself.” He wanted to tamp down the irritation, but wasn’t sure how. There was no depth to Ned at all.

“Well, maybe you have to make him more interesting.” Stone continued to cuddle Champ.

He appreciated Stone’s unique take on the situation. “How do you think I should? I’m open to suggestion.”

“Add little bits to him. Like, it might not be on camera but Ned was married before. That’s why he’s so closed off. He’s given his heart away once and something terrible happened that took the person away. Or maybe it was a college love? High school one? The kind of love you think you can’t live without. Maybe he can’t, but he’s been forced to. He loved Ned, but not in the way Ned needed? Or Ned wasn’t enough? He wants that kind of love again, but without restrictions.”

He stared at Stone. The man had great insight. He also got Liam wondering. “Did you have someone like that? Someone you loved and it wasn’t what you thought it would be?”

Stone shrugged.

He did. Liam sat up straight. He wanted to know every sordid detail—not because he

had to be nosy, but because he wanted to channel it for the character. “Tell me.”

“Did you?”

“I’ve been with every one of my costars and realized none of it was real,” he confessed. “Until you came along, I wasn’t sure I could even fall in real love.” He hadn’t expected to say all of that, but he had no desire to take any of it back. He’d fallen in love with Stone. He loved the life they’d created, even if it was only in the space of a few days. This wasn’t costar love, but actual forever love.

“Are you telling me the truth?”

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“You said you’d respect me for being honest. I’m doing that you want.”

“Do you want it?” Stone asked.

“Yes.” No question. He liked the man he’d become when he was with Stone. He was happy.

“His name was John. He went to college with me and ran track. Hurdles. I thought he was gorgeous. I knew I was gay. I’d been out since high school and I asked him out. He wasn’t out yet, but it was a co-ed building we lived in, so no one was the wiser if we were together.” Stone tensed and closed his eyes. He continued to pet Champ. “He was my first.”

Stone’s honesty stunned him. He loved that Stone could be so bare with him. He’d probably never shared this story with anyone else.

“A rumor went around that we weren’t just friends. I was in love—or what I thought was love. He was experimenting.” The sadness in Stone’s voice resonated in his eyes. “We fucked and I thought we were close. Two months, we were tight. Then he stopped talking to me when I told him how I felt. He turned the track team against me and I ended up leaving college at the end of the semester. I finished my degree at the community college over in Springdale. I never saw John again.”

He faced Stone and stroked the back of Stone’s head. “He lost out.”

“I don’t know.” Stone shrugged a third time, but pushed into Liam’s hand. “He wouldn’t have been happy with a man who has too many animals running around and

rescues even more. He'd want to live in the city and go clubbing. I'm not a club kid." He met Liam's gaze. "You say you're falling for me."

"I am."

"Then know what you're getting into. I'm not leaving Cedarwood. This is my home and my life. I'm not hiding and I know who I am. I don't need popularity. I want to be loved and cherished. If you can do that, and accept me, then we'll be fine. If you have any doubts, then tell me now."

He petted Champ and stroked Stone's hair with his other hand. "I can accept that." He scooted closer to Stone. "I'm falling hard for you. I don't care who knows."

The heat of passion and love shimmered in Stone's eyes. "Liam."

"I'm not changing my mind." He kissed Stone. "This is more important than anything."

Stone smiled, then closed his eyes. "Katie," he murmured.

"Hi, boss." She strolled into the room. "Oh my God. I'm sorry."

"You're okay," Stone said.

The tips of Liam's ears burned and he pulled back. "No, really." Although he wanted more time alone with Stone.

"I'm sorry. I should've knocked first." She blushed. "Wow."

"Katie?" Stone scooted forward in his seat and handed Champ to Liam. "What's wrong?"

She stared at him for a second, then blinked. “Oh, yeah.” She waved her hands. “Right. First, I’m done. Everyone’s been fed and Daisy’s in the barn. Kevin finished the lawn.”

“Great,” Stone said. “Anything else?”

“We need our paperwork completed for the vo-ed. I’ve got mine and Kevin says his is in his truck.” She crinkled her forehead and frowned.

“No problem. I’ll sign it right now.” Stone stood and hooked his fingers in his pockets. “Anything else? You’re tense.”

“Well...yeah.” She sighed. “There’s like ten cars and a bunch of people at the gate. We can’t get out. Kevin says they want to see if Liam’s here.”

So the media had found him. Lovely. “Shit.”

“I just want to go home.” Katie stayed in the doorway. “Can we use the access road? We’ll close the gate there, too.”

“Sure. Until further notice, use it.” Stone nodded. “Kevin’s still here, right?”

She nodded.

“Fine. I’ll sign your stuff then talk to him.” He followed her out of the room, leaving Liam with the pets.

Liam held Champ. The little guy had his eyes open and seemed to be taking in the world around him. He purred, too. “Hi, baby. You brought us together. Thank you. You’re a fighter and I love an underdog...er, cat.” He tucked the kitten under his chin. “I love your master. I’m worried I’ll hurt him, though. The crap with the media

will follow me. It's not going to die because I'm here. I'm not sure what to do. Going to the set in Georgia will be rough. I want him around and I don't know if I can live without him." He had to do something. He was a celebrity, but low on the scale of fame. In Cedarwood, he wasn't more than a wanderer.

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Stone returned. “Well, they want you. Katie and Kevin weren’t kidding.”

“Lots of attention, eh?”

“Yep.” Stone rested his hands on his hips. “Arthur left a nastygram voicemail. He said I had this coming. He might be right.”

“No, you don’t have this coming.” He continued to hold Champ. “I’m taking care of it.”

“I know you will.” Stone grinned. “And you’re being honest.”

“So are you.” He threaded his free arm around Stone and cradled the cat between them. “I know what I want and it’s here. I’ll do the movie, but I need a break. Maybe a really long break. I love the spotlight, but love you more.”

“I hope you mean what you say when all is said and done.”

Liam kept his arm around Stone. “We have tonight. We make the most of it and tomorrow, I’ll talk to the media.” Wasn’t Pat being paid to deal with this shit? He tucked his hand into Stone’s back pocket. “I’m serious. I’m happy. I don’t have a ton of money, but I’m very okay with volunteering at the shelter. Maybe I’ll write a book about the shelter. Could make the place some money.”

Stone sighed. “You’re determined to wear me down, aren’t you?”

“I said I’m determined.” He wasn’t letting go. He’d dropped the L-word a few times

and if Stone didn't understand how he felt by now...

"Let me lock up and we'll crash." Stone kissed him. "You said you were determined and I never doubted you."

"See? I don't lie." He let go. "Be careful." Once Stone was out of earshot, he grabbed his phone and called Patricia.

"Hi. How's prepping?" she asked.

"Shitty." He hated to be curt, but damn it, the intrusion sucked and it wasn't even bad yet.

"Liam. What's wrong? Did your guy dump you?"

"No."

"Then what? Do I need to send you a new script? You're so good at wrecking them with food and spilling stuff on them."

"No." He pinched the bridge of his nose. He'd messed up one script and left another too close to the tub one time. "Christ, Pat. The media found me."

"I told you they would. Why are you surprised?"

"I'm angry."

"Oh? Why?"

"I'm paying you to handle this stuff, aren't I? You should be handling it." Christ. He shouldn't have to argue this with her.

“I said I’d handle the studio. They’re irritated you’re deciding to come out. It makes the rom-com seem like a bad idea.”

“Because they think I can’t play straight?” he snapped. “Jesus Christ. I’ve been playing straight all this God damn time. If that’s not a hell of a performance, then I don’t know what is.”

“Liam.”

“You know me. Love is love. I don’t love anyone else.”

“Love is love for you and I’m sure you love someone—you. For the studio, it’s tricky,” Patricia said.

“How? The publicity will be great. It’ll bring attention to the film and could get the movie more eyeballs. People want to root for other people rising up. What if this whole situation encourages someone to come out? Or the studio to start making LGBTQ films? Then it’ll all be worth it.”

“I doubt they’ll do that.”

He couldn’t take any more. If she wasn’t going to work with him and for him, then he wasn’t going to keep her on. “I’m prepping a statement. I’ll figure out a way to arrange it.” He could. Between him and Stone, they’d have a plan. Stone had to know someone who could help. Social media would be a great platform, too. It would all work out.

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“No, I won’t let you. We need a strategy and approval from the studio.”

“Approval? To be myself?” He snorted. “Are you kidding?”

“No.”

“It’s not in my contract.” At least he didn’t think it was. He wasn’t prevented from coming out.

“They could decide they don’t want you in the role and dump your ass. You’ll have to pay the money you’ve spent back to the studio.”

Shit. He hadn’t thought about that. “Fine. Then that’s a possibility. What if they keep me? What if they decide I’m not a liability?”

“Don’t get your hopes up.”

“Aren’t you positive?” He spotted Stone coming up the walkway. “I need to go. I’m tired of lying.”

“Liam. Think this through. Be smart,” Patricia said. “Come on.”

If she said anything else, he didn’t catch it. Instead, he hung up on her. He wasn’t in the mood to keep up the argument. Being himself wasn’t wrong.

Stone strode into the house. “Everything is buttoned up. I forgot to mention, my friend Remy wants to speak to you. I told him maybe later, but he says he wants an

exclusive.”

“He’ll get it.” Liam nodded. “I have a very loose plan.” He paced the length of the room and continued to hold Champ. “I’m going to write up a statement, which I’ll email to the studio. Then once it’s off, I’ll post the same thing to my social media—all of my channels.” He faced Stone. “And the first one who will get an interview is your friend.”

“Are you sure? You’re risking a lot.” Stone grasped Liam by the shoulders. “I’m worried about you.”

“Why?”

“You’re an actor. There aren’t exactly a lot of roles out here in the sticks. Yes, I called Cedarwood the sticks. Compared to what you’re used to, it is. I guess you could do commercials for car dealerships and be the face of the shelter, but it will only last for so long.” He forced a smile and broke Liam’s heart. “I don’t know what to do because I know you’re going to leave. It’s what people in my life do.”

“Stone.” He hadn’t expected Stone to react this way. He thought Stone would be on board.

“It’s a big gamble. I don’t want you to lose out because you’re staying here if you’re not fully into it.”

“You sound like my agent.” He was being careful and Liam couldn’t blame him for doing so.

“She cares about you.”

“She cares about being paid.”

“There is that.” Stone let go and folded his arms. “I’m worried you’ll regret your choice.”

He offered Champ to Stone and when Stone took him, Liam rubbed his hands together. He had to make Stone see he had no regrets. “I care about acting. I love it. I can’t imagine not being on stage or camera.”

“But?”

“But I’m tired. I’ve been lonely. I need a real home base—not an apartment that doesn’t have my personality in it. I need a real set of arms to hold me.” He paused. “If that means staying here, then that’s what I want to do. I’m sure we can create a local theater group, if none exists. There’s always the school. Young actors’ programs. There are things we can do. I can do. What I need the most is love.”

“I can love you.” The pain hadn’t left Stone’s eyes.

“I know.” He slid his hands over Stone’s chest and he stayed far enough away to not squash the cat. “Is the house locked up?”

Stone nodded. “Grab Missy.”

“Hell, yes.” He scooped Missy into his arms and followed Stone to the second floor. He raced up the steps at Stone’s heels. Once in the bedroom, he placed Missy in the box on the dog pillow, then waited for Stone to give Champ to the female cat.

He wasn’t about to let this moment get away. He had Stone and he wanted to prove just how much he loved his man.

Chapter Nine

“I need you,” Stone said. He patted Liam’s ass. “More than I thought possible.”

“You have me.” He scrambled out of his clothes. Despite wanting to go slow, he hurried and tangled himself in his jeans.

Stone stretched out on the bed and crossed his ankles. “You’re not great with disrobing?”

“I’m much better on film when there are multiple takes and me tripping is edited out.” He detangled himself from the denim, then remove the rest of his clothes. He stood before Stone and drank in the image of his man naked. He loved that little pride flag tattoo on Stone’s skin. Maybe he’d get a matching one—someday.

“What are you doing over there?” Stone stroked himself. “You’re far away.”

He crawled onto Stone’s lap and braced himself on his hands on Stone’s shoulders. “I’m looking at you.” He stared into Stone’s eyes. He’d never met anyone like Stone before. Stone embodied sweetness, soulfulness, caring, kindness and had such a big heart. He wanted to be one with the man and to belong to Stone.

He kissed Stone and basked in the heat flowing through his body. He’d found more than a lover. He had a home with his soulmate. Christ, he craved this man. He ground on Stone, loving the feel of his cock against Stone’s. “We need lube.” Liam slid his palms over Stone’s chest. “Like now.”

“It’s in the drawer.” Stone patted the edge of the bed, well short of reaching the nightstand.

Liam scurried off him long enough to retrieve the bottle, then resumed his spot on Stone’s thighs. He dumped lube on his fingers, then slid his hand down his ass, parting his cheeks.

“Christ.” Stone’s eyes lit up. He continued to stroke himself. “You know how to tease.”

“I try.” He caressed his fingers over his hole, then toyed with the puckered skin. Tingles shot through his being. He shivered. With his free hand, he dribbled lube over Stone’s dick. “Gonna stretch me, but I need it.” He pushed one finger into his hole. Not enough, but only having Stone in him would be what he needed. “Can’t wait.”

Stone palmed Liam’s hip and tugged him close for a kiss. He stroked his and Liam’s dicks together.

The combination of fingers on his erection and his own fingers breaching his hole turned his senses inside out. He groaned. “Can’t wait.”

“No?” Mischief laced Stone’s voice. “I should make you.”

“Please? No.” Liam straddled Stone’s hips. He lined Stone’s cock up with his hole and, inch by inch, sank onto him. Holy shit, Stone stretched him. He bore down on his lover, accepting more of Stone into his body.

“Damn, you’re tight.” Stone writhed beneath him. “Feels good.”

“Love it.” Liam undulated on Stone. He needed the slower tempo to catch his breath. The feelings of abandonment and loneliness evaporated. He belonged somewhere and

to someone. He wasn't worthless or seen as another actor any longer. He was Stone's man.

Liam bounced on Stone's cock. With Stone, he felt loved, desired and needed. He'd never had any of those with his previous boyfriends. Stone completed him. The love between them was real.

He sank to the hilt before nearly pulling out. Within seconds, he worked into a steady rhythm and increased the pace. His heart filled with devotion for Stone. When he looked into Stone's eyes, he shattered inside.

He scraped his nails over Stone's chest. "Stone."

Although he was on top, Liam allowed Stone to set the pace. Stone dug his nails into Liam's hips and tugged him up and down on his shaft.

Liam memorized every moment with his lover. Every ripple and nuance of Stone's cock, the sound of his moans and the thrill of being possessed by this man. The tingles in his belly knotted together, then spiraled through his limbs. He panted. His mind went blank and nothing mattered except Stone and being with him.

"Shit." Stone slapped Liam's hip. "On your back."

Liam froze for a split second, then crawled off Stone. He missed the pressure and warmth of his lover despite sprawling on the bed. He tucked his knees to his chest. "Fuck me."

"You bet your ass I will." Stone filled him in one thrust. He added more lube, then held tight to Liam's thighs. The sound of the bedsprings, along with his groans, filled the air. Perspiration shimmered on Stone's chest. His nipples beaded and his abs flexed. He gritted his teeth.

Liam fisted the bedsheets. He couldn't take much more. Stone had him on the ragged edge. Each push nudged him closer to coming apart. He arched his back and matched Stone thrust for thrust.

Stone moved with abandon. The sheer joy of lovemaking showed on his face, and when he moaned, he splintered Liam.

"Fuck. I need to come." Liam tensed and shuddered. He'd never be the same. From this moment on, Stone owned his heart. He wrapped his fingers around his cock and stroked.

Stone's tempo turned frantic. He shivered and pushed hard into Liam. "Fuck. I'm coming."

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Liam couldn't do anything besides hold on. The cadence of Stone's thrusts, the rumble of his voice and the way he stared at Liam in a predatory fashion, were more than he could handle. He shivered and orgasmed. Cum splattered across his belly. He slumped on the bed and panted.

Stone added a few more thrusts. His cock throbbed in Liam's ass and his brow furrowed. "Jesus."

"What?" He draped his arms around Stone's neck and tugged him down. Cum smeared between them. He loved being pretzeled by his man. "What's wrong?"

"That was too fast." Stone panted. His hair slid over his forehead. "I wanted to go slow and make this perfect."

"Don't apologize." He toyed with the hairs at the back of Stone's head. "You were just what I needed and I want more. I'm hooked."

Stone opened his mouth to reply, but blushed and bowed his head rather than speaking. He chuckled. "Okay."

"Stay right here with me." Liam held Stone close and rode the post-climax wave. Stone might not have thought the moment was perfect, but he had everything he wanted. Once he came out, the rest would be okay. He just knew it.

* * * *

Liam spent the next morning working on his statement. The wording had to be

perfect and heartfelt. Not snippy, but businesslike. He had to state the facts. Stone would be at the shelter for another hour, but said he was only a phone call away if he needed a second set of eyes on the statement meant for the studio.

He read the wording for the tenth time.

To Whom It May Concern—

I accepted the role of Ned Davis, knowing full well I wanted to portray the character. I still do. I believe I can bring a dimension to Ned that's nuanced and fresh.

That said, I feel I must be clear. I am gay. I'm enthusiastic to play the role of Ned and don't believe my sexual preference has any bearing on the role. I do feel you need to know for the sake of transparency.

I'm ready to play Ned in the film. I hope we can continue to make this happen.

He rubbed his eyes. Being at the farm was both freeing and shackling. He wasn't a prisoner, but still, he couldn't leave or he'd have to deal with the media. He could go to the rental house, but why be there if he could be with Stone?

He typed the statement for social media.

I've kept this inside for far too long. I'm gay. I've met the man of my dreams and want to be happy, but I also want to be honest. #lovewins #loveislove

There. He'd post that with a photo of him with Stone. His phone rang, but he didn't recognize the number. Instead of answering, he ignored the call. The device vibrated with a voicemail. Champ left his box and wobbled over to the phone. He sat on the screen.

“Are you saying I need to answer?” he asked. “I don’t know who it is.” He swiped the screen to check the notification. “I’ll play it.” He tapped the voicemail icon and switched to the speaker setting.

“Hey, this is Remy. I’m Stone’s friend. I’m trying to catch you for an interview. Are you available to meet sometime soon? Maybe today? I’d love to have Stone present if that’s possible. Let me know. You can call me back on this number. Thanks.”

Huh. He hadn’t expected to hear from Remy this fast. Then again, his coming out was a big scoop.

He called Stone and set the phone to speaker. “Hi.”

“Hi. Is there anything exciting happening?”

“Nope,” Stone said. “It’s quiet for the moment.”

“Wow.” He wanted Stone to read the statement.

“We had four dogs adopted today to good homes, so I’m thrilled,” Stone said. “I’ve only had fourteen calls about you and three women show up to see you. One said she’d wait for you to come by.”

“Oh God.” So much for being incognito.

“She’s devoted. We called Jordan and had her escorted out when she started singing a song from Rhapsody. She made the dogs all howl. Said she’d be back,” Stone said. “I don’t doubt she will be.”

“I’m sorry.” He hated when fans were so bold.

“We knew it would happen.” Stone sighed. “My favorite interruption has to be Donnie.”

“What’d he do?”

“Told me not to corrupt you. He said he and Devin had talked to you and I turned you gay.”

“No, you didn’t.” He growled. “I need to post this statement. Do you mind if I use the photo I took yesterday of us together with Champ? He’s sitting on the phone screen, by the way. Cleaning himself.”

“Post when you’re ready, but I don’t mind,” Stone said. “I’m glad Champ’s getting stronger.” He paused. “You coming out to the public is for you to do when the time’s right for you.”

“I know.” He petted Champ. He had too much to think about, but stroking the kitten helped. “Hey, Remy called. Your friend, the reporter. He’s not some hack, right?”

“He’s good. He’s married to Bobby Gagnon. They have two kids that almost adults. No, Chris is an adult. He’s in college. Anyway, Remy’s a nice guy.”

“He wants to meet up.”

“Today?”

“Uh-huh.”

“I’d say come here, but I don’t have space. We gave up the conference room for more space to house animals,” Stone said. “Why don’t you call him and meet at Bobby’s

office or maybe the coffee shop? Colt might have a space at the diner. Then again, if you go to either place, you risk being tailed.”

“I’ll have him meet at the rental. It’s neutral and shouldn’t be overrun. I need to ask Katie or Kevin to watch the critters and give me a lift.”

“I’m sure they’d help,” Stone said.

“Then okay.” He sat back in his chair and crossed his ankles. “I’ll work something out and send you a text. Would you read my statement?”

“If you’re sure. I’ll read it.”

“Thank you,” he said. “I love you and I’m willing to accept the fallout. I’d rather be happy instead of lonely.” He had to get this done right now.

“I’m behind you, no matter what you do, as long as it’s what you think you need to do.”

“I love you.” He needed Stone to say the words in return. Maybe it was too soon, but fuck it. He knew his heart.

“Liam.”

“Is it possible you love me, too? I’m not Jeff and I’m not John. What we have is real.”

“I’m scared,” Stone murmured.

Now he understood. The words were there, but the fear kept Stone in check. When he saw Stone, though, he’d show him just how much he loved him. “I understand. I’m

not quitting.”

“I knew that.”

“See you tonight?”

“Yes.”

“Bye.” He hung up and his heart filled with passion for Stone. He’d hesitated long enough with who he was—no more holding back. He dialed Remy. “Hi. This is Liam Blackwell. Is this Remy?”

“Welcome to Cedarwood, Liam. It’s great to connect with you,” Remy said. “Like the town so far?”

“I’m not entirely sold, but I’m inclined to stay.”

“Ah, the Coalition made its presence known?”

“It did.”

“Stick to your guns. They’ll back off.”

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“I hope so,” he said. “About the interview, I’d like to get to it as soon as possible. I’d like to meet at Colin Baker’s duplex. I’m supposed to be living there, but after the incident with the graffiti on my car, I decided not to be alone. Would meeting at the duplex work for you?”

“Not a problem. Would you like me to pick you up?”

“If you can, that would be great. The police still have my rental SUV.” Maybe this would all work out for the best.

“Terrible they have the car, but good that you need a ride. I’ll be there in fifteen minutes. Look for the black Jeep with a red grille.”

“Deal. I’ll let the kids know you’re coming and to let you through.” He hung up. Fifteen minutes was just enough time to change clothes and get the animals situated. He scooped Champ into his arms and carried him to the kitchen.

Katie stood at the counter, portioning out dry dog food. “Hi.”

“Hi. I need to ask a favor.”

“Sure.” She stopped portioning. “I’m sorry I asked if you’d dated my mother. There are a lot of guys...” She shrugged. “Anyway, what’s the favor?”

“Let Zak know Remy Bard is coming. He’s got a black Jeep with a red grille. I’m going to do an interview with him. Would you please keep an eye on the animals for me?”

“Sure.” She took Champ. “He seems happy and becoming more social. I’ll place him with Missy. Have fun at the interview.”

He nodded. “I will.” His heart filled to capacity and he knew his place. Everything would work out. He just knew it.

* * * *

Two hours later, Liam finished the interview. “Thanks, Remy. That was great.”

“Do you feel free?” Remy tucked his notebook away. “I bet you do.”

“I am.” He walked out of the rental with Remy and locked the door. “It’s nice to be myself and accepted. Thank you for listening.”

“It’s an interview. I have to listen.” Remy laughed. “But I know what you mean.” He tossed the bag onto the back seat of his Jeep. “I’ll write up the interview and give you the chance to go over it in case I got anything wrong.” He leaned against the fender. “Can I drive you back to the farm?”

“I’m hungry and dying for a gyro. Would you mind giving me a ride to the center of town? If the gyro truck isn’t there, I’m sure I can find something somewhere.”

“There’s the diner. The pizza parlor has a nice personal pizza for five bucks and Bart’s Burgers is reasonable. If I weren’t meeting Bobby and the kids, I’d tag along.” He climbed into the vehicle first and waited for Liam. “Do you ever wish you’d grown up somewhere else? In any other situation? I wish I’d have known Bobby earlier than I did, but that’s because I’m finally whole. You grew up in a crazy situation.”

He’d thought long and hard about this. “I’m convinced I grew up when and where I

did because it made me stronger. I thought I was weak, but I can handle anything. Plus, it made me respect Stone more. I can handle what I've been given. Ten years ago, I'd have turned my nose up at the opportunity to be here."

"Nice. Cedarwood grows on you." Remy stopped at the town square. "You're going to be okay? The paparazzi won't find you? No fans?"

"I'm tired of hiding from the fans. If they've come looking for me, I'm here. As for the paparazzi...they can watch me eat a gyro. If something goes wrong, the police station is right over there and there are people around to hear me scream." He shook hands with Remy. "Thank you for the interview and the ride. I appreciate it."

"Stay in Cedarwood. It's a good place." Remy waved as Liam left the Jeep. "See you." He drove away, leaving Liam to himself.

Liam strode over to the gyro truck and placed his order. Did anyone really want to watch him eat? He doubted it. He wasn't doing anything subversive. His phone buzzed. Not a text, but an email, and not from Stone. Script offers. He might as well read while he ate. No one seemed to mind that he was in the town square.

Once he picked up his sandwich and drink, he headed to one of the picnic tables. As he ate, he read the scripts. Both featured a fine role he could sink his teeth into. Low budget, but who needed a huge production? Indie films were the way to stretch his talents.

His thoughts turned to Stone. He believed he'd made the right decision by being with Stone, but something gnawed at him. He needed to hear the words *I love you* from Stone. Nothing half-assed or forced, but the real words. He didn't doubt Stone's affection for him. The sex was great, too. But was the attraction a result of him being a celebrity? His money? Or just him being himself? Stone struck him as the type to tell him the truth. So why question his feelings? Because so many other people who'd

come through his life wanted him for every other reason besides the man inside.

Then there was the studio. The company would want him to leave Cedarwood for production. Could he leave Stone without knowing exactly how Stone felt?

“Excuse me?” A man approached him. His hair stuck up at odd angles, like he’d run his fingers through it, and his shirt hung on his thin frame. “Are you Liam Blackwell?”

He balled up his sandwich paper, then tucked his phone away. “I am. Would you like an autograph? I don’t have a pen or paper, but if you do, I’ll gladly give you an autograph.”

“No.” The man tipped his head. “Do you know where you are?”

He almost replied ‘the jungle, baby’ but opted to keep that to himself. “In Cedarwood?” The guy looked familiar, but he couldn’t place him. Was that dirt smeared on his cheek? He needed a shave and a bath. His brown eyes blazed. Liam tensed. “Why?”

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“You’re a fag,” the man screamed. “Gay.”

“That’s not a crime.” He swallowed his fear. He’d dealt with oddballs before, but this was new. Maybe he should’ve expected something like this now that he’d come out.

“Liam Blackwell, you’re a fag. You’re gay.”

“We’ve established that.” He held up his hands. “Now can I help you?” Or get the hell out of here?

“You stole Stone from me. He turned you gay so he didn’t have to come back to me,” the man said.

Oh shit. He remembered where he’d seen the man—the community center...Jeff. “I’m gay and have been since long before I met Stone.”

“You took him.” Jeff whipped his hand from his pocket and held something shiny.

Liam recognized the item right away. “Gun!”

“No shit.” Jeff waved the pistol at Liam. “I’m going to get rid of the competition.”

His life flashed before his eyes and fear swarmed in his brain. His hands were clammy and his heart hammered. He couldn’t breathe. His world moved in slow motion. He had no slick comebacks or words at all.

“Hold still.” Jeff aimed the gun.

“Help,” Liam managed. Was it a scream? Whisper? He wasn’t sure. He slumped to the side and pain radiated through his left arm. This time, he did scream, but no sound came out. He slid his gaze to Jeff. A form rushed the man, tackling him. Liam wished he knew what was happening. He blinked. His arm hurt and his fear intensified.

Jordan stood over him. “I need an ambulance.”

Liam heard the rest of what Jordan said, but none of it made sense. He complied as Jordan applied pressure to his arm.

“We need to get you to the ER. Can you walk?” Jordan asked. “We can’t wait.”

He nodded and allowed Jordan to help him to the cruiser. Liam inspected his arm. Blood seemed to be everywhere. His sleeve had ripped. Well, shit. He patted his pocket for his phone. Where is it?

Jordan parked at the hospital and said something, but Liam wasn’t paying attention. He needed his phone to call Stone. How else would he tell his boyfriend he was at the emergency room?

A doctor stood over him. “You’ve been shot?”

The shock wore off a bit and the fuzz in his brain went away. He focused on the doctor. “Yes. I was in the park.”

“You’ll be okay and this won’t require stitches.” The doctor cleaned the wound. “I’m Dr. Aiden Connor. I hear you’re Liam Blackwell. I have to say, Liam, you’re lucky. Most people who come into the ER with gunshot wounds aren’t grazed.”

“He would’ve done more damage if I hadn’t gone limp.” He winced as Dr. Connor applied the antiseptic and gave him a tetanus shot. “Do you know if Jordan, er,

Officer Hargrove is around?"

"He's in the lobby." Dr. Connor bandaged the wound. "The nurse will get your information. Make an appointment with your doctor in a week to check the wound. I can give you a script for pain meds, but I believe in treating with over-the-counter medicine. Stick to ibuprofen. Two eight-hundred-milligram tabs should be fine every four hours."

"Thanks. I can't take prescription pain killers, since I'm a recovering addict. I dabbled in cocaine, but that was years ago." He shook hands with Dr. Connor. "Thank you." He waited for the nurse to fill out his paperwork. Jordan joined him in the curtained-off space.

"I need your statement." Jordan opened his notepad. "I know, I know. I rent to you. I'm a witness, too. Jones is going to take the statement, but I want to know what the hell just happened."

"He shot me." He massaged his forehead. "Do you have my phone?" His arm ached. "I lost the phone when I ducked the shot. I need to call Stone."

"If it's not on you, then it's at the scene. We'll get it to you." Jordan gestured to Jones, who'd joined them in the space. "Talk to him while I find his phone."

Liam recounted the events to the officer. By now, he just wanted to go home. "So that's how I got here. I should call my boyfriend. He doesn't know where I am."

"Jordan will find your phone." Jones put the notebook away. "We got the assailant."

"Great." How could they not? They'd tackled him.

"He's being booked for assault, brandishing a firearm in a public space, carrying an

unregistered firearm and disturbing the peace.”

Liam nodded. “He’s lost,” he murmured.

“What?” Jones stared at him and furrowed his brow. “One more time?”

“Jeff is lost and it sucks. I can’t say I blame him for being upset. I’d be lost without Stone.” He scrubbed the back of his hand across his mouth. “Jeff’s lost because he knows he gave up something good and can’t find a way to come to terms with it.” He sighed. “I want to go home.”

“We’ll get you out of here as soon as we can. Here’s the nurse again.” Jones stepped aside.

Liam relayed his information to the nurse and forked over his insurance card. If he’d known going to the park would get him shot, he would’ve stayed at the rental. This wasn’t how he’d planned on spending his afternoon. All he wanted was to get back to Stone.

He would. Soon.

Chapter Ten

Stone waited at the shelter for any word from Liam. He checked the clock again...almost nine. Where's Liam? Every volunteer, save for Amy, had gone home for the night.

"Why don't you go home?" Amy asked. "You seem to be hesitating."

"So?" He scrubbed his hand across his mouth. "I'm worried."

"About?" She sat next to him at the desk. "I'm your oldest friend. You can talk to me."

He needed to chat, even if it was only to hear himself talk. "You've met Liam."

"He's hot. I saw him in Rhapsody. Kind of had a crush on him, too." She shrugged. "I think everyone did back then."

"He was popular."

"He was in all of the teen magazines." She crossed her legs and faced him. "So?"

"We're living together."

"That's the biggest secret that's not a secret," she said. "I knew the moment I saw you together that you were going to be a couple."

“You were the only one.” He rested his arms on the desk. “He got freaked at the diner and I kind of went overboard about keeping him safe. He stayed overnight and never left.”

“Seems like he likes you.” She narrowed her eyes. “Aren’t you sure about this?”

“He said he loves me.”

“Well, hot damn. That’s great.” She grinned, then the smile faded. “Right?”

“It’s good.”

“Wow. Don’t sell me on the emotion between you.” She crooked her eyebrow. “You think you moved too fast.”

“It’s been a little quick, yes, but it’s...here’s the thing. I’m not leaving Cedarwood. I’m happy here at the shelter. And Liam has to go to Georgia to do his job. He’s an actor. He won’t stay here.”

“But he loves you.”

“He falls for his costars.”

She toyed with the arm of the chair. “I think you have your mind made up, but you’re afraid of the answer.”

“I am?” This was news to him. He hadn’t made any choices yet.

“Yeah. You love him and you’re scared you’ll get your heart broken when he leaves.”

“Yeah,” he confessed. “It’s very possible.”

“You’re also scared this is the love you need. The one you’re waiting for. That’s scary because it could hurt you to your core if it fails.”

She’d nailed it.

“I think you need to tell Liam exactly how you feel. Open your heart way open. Let everything be out there. If he’s not going to screw you over, he’ll appreciate the sentiment. If he leaves and doesn’t come back, then that’s his loss and I’ll probably chase him down to clock him.”

“Thanks, Amy.” He needed to talk to her more often.

“But you’re getting worked up for nothing,” she said.

“I am?”

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“I’ve seen how he looks at you. I would love to have someone look at me that way. He loves you. He’s head over heels—just like you.” She left the chair and patted his shoulder. “Relax. You’re good. It’ll be fine.”

“Thanks.” He mulled over what she’d said. She was right. Still, he couldn’t deny the fear. He hadn’t liked the media showing up at the shelter wanting to get quotes about Liam. The fans weren’t so bad, but could be pesky.

If he loved Liam, he could deal with the irritations now. Liam was worth the wait.

His phone rang. Liam. “Hey, you,” Stone said. “Where are you?”

“I’m leaving the hospital,” Liam said. “I’m sorry I didn’t call earlier.”

“Wait. Why are you leaving the hospital?” His heart hammered. “Liam, what happened? Do you need me to get you? I’m on my way.” He scrambled out of the chair. “Give me ten minutes.”

“Stone, stop.”

“Stop?” He froze. “How can you tell me to stop?”

“Because I’m about to leave.”

“I’ll come get you.”

“I have my SUV.”

“I don’t understand.” The last he knew, the vehicle had been impounded.

“Are you at the shelter?”

“Yes, but I can leave. Amy’s here and I will drop everything for you.”

“I’m almost there.”

He leaned against the counter. “Liam. Are you safe to drive?”

“I don’t know, but I’m here,” Liam said. His headlights brightened the lobby. Within seconds, he strode through the main doors. “Hi.”

“Liam.” He rounded the desk and threw his arms around Liam. “What happened?”

“May I sit? Can we use the cattery?”

“Sure.” He joined Liam in the privacy of the smaller room. The cats roamed about and curled around Stone’s ankles. Adrenaline flowed through Stone’s veins. “Talk to me.”

“Take a breath.” Liam settled on the rocking chair. “I did the interview with Remy. It went so well. He’s fantastic. After that, I posted the statement to my social media and sent the email to the studio.”

“I like Remy,” Stone said. “What about the studio?”

“Well, the statement is all over social media. I made the big search engines and have been inundated with requests from the news media to make a statement to them. Some fans are happy with me coming out. Some aren’t, but some are behind me.” He shrugged and offered a weak smile.

“And the studio?” Christ, he had to settle down.

“Dropped my ass like hot lead.”

“Liam.” He sank onto the counter. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. I liked the character, but I’d rather be true to me.”

“But acting is your passion.”

“It is,” Liam said. “The thing is, that studio did dump me, but another called. Rainbow Films makes projects across the spectrum. It’s a hot place to work.”

“And?”

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“They offered me two scripts for my perusal. They’re good scripts.”

“Liam, that’s great.” He held Liam’s hand. “When one door closes...”

“Both filming locations are in Arizona, though.”

“If it’s work and it makes you happy, then do them.” He’d deal.

“It’s not going to work if I’m away from you.”

“I can’t go to Arizona, but I can visit.”

“I know. A visit isn’t the same.”

“Don’t pass this up because of me.” He’d never be able to live with himself if Liam did. “We’ll still be here.”

“I know.”

He wasn’t sure what to say. He rubbed his forehead. “You seem to have your mind made up. Why don’t you tell me how and where you were hurt?”

“I finished the interview and went to the park to visit the gyro truck. I was on my own and wanted to eat, then read the scripts. They sent me copies to my email. Anyway, I’m minding my own business, reading away when a guy shouts ‘Liam Blackwell, you’re gay.’ He pulled a gun on me.”

“Jesus, Liam.” Nausea washed over him. “A gun? Was it the Coalition? A fan?”

“It was Jeff.” Liam held Stone’s fingers tighter. “It was stupid. I never should’ve gone to the park. I was alone and unarmed, but I wanted to think.”

About? “Wait...Jeff? My ex?”

“Yeah.” Liam sighed. “You said you were behind me. You’ve given me so much while I’ve been here.” He stared at Stone. “Then I said I loved you and pushed a lot. You didn’t back down or cave. I published that statement and brought us so much attention, and yet your first instinct was to protect me. I was worried that you’d never say you loved me, too, but you do. You’re not saying it in words, but your actions. But I kept wondering, what if this was all we could do? What if how I felt was all in my head? What if I pushed you away?”

“Liam.” Shit was realer than he’d ever imagined. “Jeff?”

“I over-thought so much.” Liam shook his head.

“We all do.” Why isn’t he talking about Jeff and if the bastard is in custody?

“But I don’t tend to think this hard about relationships,” Liam said. “That’s where I jump right in with both feet and think later. But that’s not you. Jeff, John and the others made you question.”

“Jeff is an asshole.” He knelt in front of Liam. “You’re being vague and I’m scared. Why did Jeff pull a gun on you?”

“Do you love me?” Liam stared at him. “Not my celebrity status or the money I don’t have. Just me?”

“I do. I’ve been fascinated with you since I first met you. Did I think I’d fall for you? I wasn’t sure right away, but I am in love with you. When you said you were at the hospital, you’re right, I wanted to protect you. I want to string Jeff up for hurting you. I can’t see my life without you.” He settled between Liam’s knees. “I want you to stay, but you need to follow your heart.” Even if it hurts like hell, I’ll be here.

Liam sighed. “Jeff shot me.”

“Holy shit.” He didn’t see any visible wounds and if Liam had been hurt too badly, he wouldn’t have left the hospital. “Where are your clothes? Were they destroyed?”

“I changed at the hospital. Jordan gave me the outfit.” Liam shrugged. “Said he keeps extra clothes in his cruiser for a rainy day.”

“You’ve been through a monsoon.” His heart sank. “How are you so calm?”

“I’m not focusing on what happened,” Liam said.

“Wonderful, but what about Jeff?” Christ, the man knows how to string this out.

“Jeff approached me and said I couldn’t stay in Cedarwood. I’m a fag and I don’t belong. I took you from him and I’m not worthy of you.” Liam massaged his forehead. “I knew how he felt. He lost something great and won’t get it back.”

“So he shot you?”

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“He did. He’s lousy with a gun and grazed my arm, but still.” Liam moved his jacket sleeve, showcasing the bandage on his biceps. “It’s a flesh wound and the police were close by. I guess they liked gyros, too. Jeff’s in custody and will be charged with brandishing a gun in public, possessing an unregistered weapon and assault.”

“Jesus.” His hands shook. “I’m glad he’s shit with a gun.”

“Me, too. It happened so fast. Jordan took me to the ER in his cruiser. But when they checked me in, I realized I didn’t have my phone, so I couldn’t call you. Jordan said he’d contact you but he must’ve forgotten.” A tear slipped down his cheek. “I just wanted to get back to you. I wanted to be here.”

“You are now.” He wiped the drop from Liam’s face.

“Which I why I made my decision.”

“Decision?” Now what have I missed?

“I bet the scripts would work if they were filmed in Ohio. I’m sure they would. If the studio can get the permits to film in Ohio, then I’ll do those films. It’ll give me indie cred and keep me working. Once they’re done and the publicity furor over my coming out dies down, I’m staying here. For good. I’m tired and I need you. I’ll start a youth drama program or something, but I’m not leaving—if you’ll have me.”

“Yes, I will.” He tugged Liam onto his lap. “The house wouldn’t be the same without you. You’ve got my heart in your hands.”

“Do I?” Liam offered him a watery smile. “Stone, that’s the sweetest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“I love you.”

“Love you, too,” Stone said. No regrets, no hesitation. He held his boyfriend and rocked him. They should go, but not yet. “Amy’s still here. We should let her head home.”

“We should, because I want to go home, where I want you to make love to me,” Liam said.

“With pleasure.” Stone followed Liam back to the farm. Once on the safety of his property, he relaxed. Liam was with him and they were out of harm’s way. He wasn’t thrilled Jeff had attacked Liam, but if he was in custody, then good. Stone would continue to protect Liam like he did the animals. He didn’t see anyone around.

When he went inside, he noticed the paper on the counter. He didn’t see Katie or the other kids. “Katie left a note.” He held up the scrap of paper. “‘Everyone’s okay and Champ is doing well. Enjoy yourself.’ So we should have a good night.” He locked the doors and chased Liam up to the second floor. Elmore, Meep, Gracie and Puppy followed. The dogs assumed their spots on the various dog beds. Champ was curled with Missy in the box. “I believe they approve.”

“Looks like.” Liam stripped, then sprawled on the bed. He stroked himself. “What are you waiting for?”

“Nothing.” He stripped then climbed on top of Liam. Despite wanting to go slow, he thundered ahead. He kissed Liam everywhere, needing to taste him. He started at Liam’s lips, then moved to his cheeks, chin and throat. He embraced the passion and desire within him. More than anything, he craved Liam. He sucked on Liam’s tongue.

Liam's eyes sparkled and he met each kiss with the same ferocity.

He pushed ahead, but kept glancing at the bandage on Liam's arm. He had to be careful not to bother the wound. He pushed his concern aside and kept going forward.

The lines deepened around Liam's eyes, giving him a rugged look. Stone slid his palm over Liam's chest, then pinched his nipple.

Liam groaned. "Oh fuck yes." He arched into Stone's touch.

Stone settled between Liam's legs. He alternated between stroking and caressing Liam, wanting him right on the edge of coming. He toyed with Liam's balls, then moved to his shaft.

"Stone." Liam tensed. He threaded his fingers into Stone's hair.

Stone flicked his tongue across the blunt head of Liam's cock. He lapped at Liam's pre-cum. The saltiness soothed him. He and Liam were one.

He elicited another groan from Liam.

Liam tugged on Stone's hair, forcing him to bob his head. Stone obliged. He pushed deep before pulling most of the way out. He flattened his tongue along the underside of Liam's dick. When he swallowed Liam to the back of his throat, he hummed.

"Shit." Liam pulled again. "More."

He sucked on the tip of Liam's erection until Liam cried out.

"Jesus, Stone. I'll come if you don't stop," he muttered.

Let him come. He withdrew long enough to grab the lube. He settled between Liam's knees once again and resumed sucking on his lover's shaft.

Liam trembled and fisted the blankets. "Can't think straight."

He dribbled lube on his fingers, then slid them between Liam's ass cheeks. He had his lover right where he wanted him. He toyed with Liam's hole

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“Fucking Jesus, yes.” Liam tensed, then rocked into Stone.

Stone pushed past the tight ring of muscle and opened Liam. He needed to prep him. The dynamic wasn’t lost on him. Liam controlled so much in his life, but when they stepped into the bedroom, he gave himself over to Stone. He moved his finger in and out of Liam’s ass.

Liam shuddered. “I can’t...hold back.”

“Don’t,” Stone said between licks. He added a second finger and increased his speed. He matched the tempo of his fingers in Liam to the bobbing of his head.

A strangled cry came from Liam. The garbled sound might have been the word ‘fuck’, but Stone wasn’t sure. Liam jerked in Stone’s mouth as he came. He shivered and gasped. He continued to pump his hips, but moved slower with each push.

Liam collapsed limp on the bed. “Holy shit.”

Stone licked him clean. “That was good for me, too.” He withdrew his fingers. “But I’m not done. I want it to be better.”

“Yes.” Liam’s eyes flashed. A fine sheen of perspiration shimmered on his skin. His nipples beaded and he grabbed his knees, baring his ass. “Fuck me.”

“Yes.” He stroked himself, but he didn’t need much help. Seeing Liam come and knowing he had Liam’s love were what he needed. He lined his dick up with Liam’s hole. He added more lube, then pushed. As soon as he sank balls-deep into his lover,

he paused. Holy shit. He'd never felt closer to anyone in his life. They were one body and one all-encompassing love.

Liam reached for him and threaded his arms around Stone's neck. He kissed Stone while Stone pushed in, then pulled out.

Stone built into a steady rhythm. No question, his heart belonged to Liam. He couldn't see life without Liam around. He lost himself in the sinful pleasure of making love to Liam. Skin on skin, body to body, they were one soul. Perfection.

Heat swirled in Stone's belly. His limbs tingled and he bit Liam's bottom lip.

"Come, Stone. Give in," Liam murmured.

He didn't need much to persuade him. He ratcheted up his speed and moved with abandon. He growled, forehead to forehead.

"Liam." The response could've been a whisper or shout. He wasn't sure. The orgasm overwhelmed him and rational thought left. His knees weakened as he slowed. He added five more thrusts before he stilled. His head swam and he wasn't sure how he managed to hold himself up. He braced himself on his forearms. "Damn."

"We're down to one-word sentences." Liam kept his arms around Stone's neck. "I love it—and you."

Stone panted. "I love you, too." Mind blown, body worn down and soul free, he belonged to Liam. He'd never be the same. But did he care? No. Liam had been sent to Cedarwood and they'd come into each other's orbit for a reason. Forget the warnings and arguments. His heart belonged to Liam and he knew to his core that Liam was devoted to him.

Stone embraced the silence between them as he gathered his bearings. He'd never been this wrung out before. Liam required everything from him.

"Stone?"

He withdrew from Liam, then settled beside him on the bed. "Yeah?"

"I want to change my status on social media."

"Then do it." He wasn't sure what Liam was getting at. "It's your social media presence. You can do with it what you want. Why? What did you want to say?"

"I want to change it to listing me being in a relationship," Liam said, his voice strong. "I want to tell everyone that we're together."

"I hope you do. Isn't that what we're already doing?" He rolled onto his side and splayed his hand on Liam's belly. "You're here with me. You're my boyfriend and I love you. I want to tell everyone." He toyed with Liam's indented navel. "You have no idea how guilty I feel about you getting hurt." He couldn't bring himself to look at the bandage again. "It's killing me that the incident with...him happened."

"You didn't hurt me."

"But it happened because of me." If he hadn't dated Jeff, then the bastard wouldn't have threatened and assaulted Liam. He would've left Liam alone.

"He would've done that to the next guy, no matter who happened to be your new boyfriend," Liam said. "He was looking for trouble and found me."

"Still." He couldn't hide his annoyance and irritation. "It never should've happened."

“The incident opened my eyes. I could live without you, but I didn’t want to. I want this life with you and the critters. My career is fine, but it’s not everything,” Liam said. “I’m more than my job and I want everyone to know I’m not just marking time here.”

“You have to do what you feel is important,” Stone said. He caressed the line down the center of Liam’s abs, then pulled the blanket over him and Liam. “Change your status. Tell everyone you’re taken. In a relationship. Whatever. I don’t care. You’re mine.”

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Liam snuggled up to Stone. “I am.”

His world was finally right. He had Liam. Champ was getting better and growing. Stone could deal with the issues from Liam’s career. He couldn’t stop the momentum between them. Love had won.

* * * *

Liam finished cleaning the stall along the back of the blue room. He replaced the blanket and cot, then allowed Tank into the space.

“There you go, guy. All clean.” He petted the bulldog. “I have a feeling you’re going to be adopted today.” He’d spent the last two weeks dodging the media and keeping his head low. He’d read the scripts sent to him, but he preferred being at the shelter with Stone. They had a great working relationship and an even better romantic one. He didn’t miss the rental house or his place in California. Soon enough, he’d return to his home state to retrieve his things. Just not yet.

Why leave when he could spend his days at the shelter, his evenings writing and each night with Stone?

Life couldn’t be better.

“Excuse me?” A woman stood outside Tank’s enclosure. “Are you in charge?”

“I’m not, but my partner, Stone, is.” He loved saying ‘partner’. He wiped his hands on the towel, then left the enclosure. “I’d shake hands, but I’ve been cleaning.”

“No problem.” She knelt in front of the pen. “I’ve been drawn to this guy since I walked in. He’s so lumpy and adorable.”

“Why don’t you walk him in the fence? I’ll get a leash.” Liam grabbed one of the leashes. “I’ll go with you.” He couldn’t let her be alone with the dog because he didn’t know her.

“Thanks.” She walked Tank to the gated area. Once in the grass, she knelt with him. “You’re a handsome boy, aren’t you?”

“He’s great on the leash and house-trained. He knows the words ‘sit’ and ‘come’. He loves to ride in the car, too. Do you have children?” Liam asked. “He can be rambunctious, but he’s good with kids.”

“I want a dog to be my partner and my kid.” She stood and scratched Tank behind the ears. “Do I see Stone about the paperwork?”

“Yes. He’ll handle it.” He grinned because Tank was about to be adopted, but a twinge started in his chest because he hated to see the big guy leave.

“I’d like to talk to you, first. I’m guessing you don’t recognize me or you would’ve said something by now.” She tipped her head and smiled. “I’m Laurie Russell from Rainbow Films. The owner.”

He didn’t know her right off, but he knew the name of the company. “Hello. I’m Liam Blackwell. I’m glad to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you, too,” she said. “I heard you’d left Hollywood and since you didn’t return my emails since you signed the contracts, I thought I’d come to Cedarwood to find you. I’m glad I did. I wouldn’t have fallen in love with this handsome guy or realized the beauty of this state.”

“I needed a break.” The time away from the business wasn’t long, but it was working the way he wanted. “My last project fell through, so I’ve got extra time.” Like the rest of his life if he so chose. “I thought I’d stay here and live for a while.”

“I’m impressed. I never thought you’d have the patience to work in this capacity,” she said. “I’m also impressed you came out. I didn’t think you would.”

“Love was a good motivator.”

“I’m sure.” She held on to Tank’s leash. “I have to confess, you’re probably the only one in Hollywood who didn’t know you were gay before you came out.”

“So I’m told.” The tips of his ears burned. “But I’m fine with the outcome.”

“I heard you dumped your publicist.” She narrowed her eyes. “Mind if I ask why?”

He shrugged. “She wasn’t cool with how I came out and that I wanted to stay here in Ohio. She thought I should’ve kept quiet until the farmer movie wrapped, then come out and use it as publicity. I don’t play that way.”

“Fans tend to feel shafted when artists and actors use their private lives to promote an upcoming work. Like it’s a publicity stunt.” She nodded. “I can assume you wouldn’t do that kind of stuff to get attention.”

“I didn’t come out because it was in vogue.” He kicked at a clump of grass. “If you’d have asked me five years ago, I might have considered it. But this town brought out something in me that’s been there all along...just buried. I like this version of me because it feels more authentic.”

“Authenticity is good.” Laurie smiled and fiddled with the leash. “In the spirit of authenticity and honesty, I also have to confess I hadn’t come here looking for a pet. I

thought I'd play with a dog and fulfill my reasoning for being in Cedarwood, then go."

"Oh." Well, shit. He'd thought he'd found a home for Tank. So much for his instincts with matching pets to people.

"But I'm enchanted with Tank. I can't leave him behind," Laurie said. "Is that nuts? I've known him all of ten minutes and I'm in love."

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“It’s not nuts. That’s how animals work. You think you can live without them, but then you can’t. Why don’t you talk to Stone? He’ll sort out the adoption situation.” Liam stood tall. He wanted the best for Tank, but his nosiness got the better of him. “What was your reasoning for coming to Cedarwood? You never said.”

“You signed the contracts, but you seem hesitant. We’d like to start filming around the Cleveland area in the spring. We’ve procured the permits and have received some great tax incentives to film there, so we’re good to go. We need our star, though, to be fully invested. You’ve seen the scripts. Gay rom-coms. You’re a great leading man and have a knack for comedy.” She held up her free hand. “I know your stipulation. You’ll only film in Ohio. That’s why we’re setting them here. I’m fine with it. What do you say? Are you going to see the contracts through?”

“I’m going to do it, but I wanted to talk to Stone first.” He metered his excitement. The contract would stick and he could still volunteer at the shelter. How could a guy be more lucky?

“I hope you discuss everything with him.” She shook hands with him. “Why don’t we find Stone? I’m ready to take Tank with me. I even love his name. Tank suits him.”

“Will do.” He sent Stone a text to meet him in the walking area.

Stone strode into the fenced space outside. “My phone just pinged and I assumed it was you three. Tank, my man.” He petted the dog, then turned his attention to Laurie. “Hi. Are you interested in adopting Tank?”

“I am, and I should say Liam sold me on him, but Tank did the heavy lifting.” Laurie

laughed. “What do I need to do?”

“We’ll take you into an adoption room and have you fill out the paperwork. It won’t take long and Tank will be in the room with you,” Stone said. “We’ll go over the pertinent information like the adoption fee, agreement and any concerns you might have.”

“Great. Let’s go.” Laurie charged ahead.

“Good job,” Stone murmured. “She’s a keeper.”

He appreciated her forthright approach and love of animals. “She’s a studio head.” Liam held Stone’s hand. “They’re going to film those movies I have the scripts for here in Ohio. They want me and since I signed the contracts...I’m committed.”

“Congrats.” Stone kissed him. “I’m proud of you.”

“Thank you. I said I needed to discuss things with you and she didn’t blink or freak out. She encouraged me to talk to you.” He squeezed Stone’s fingers. “She wasn’t upset by my need to film here or my recent issues with the media. I’m not a liability.” He nodded. “I’m doing this.”

“You are.” He walked into the building and held the door for Liam. “I’m with you on this. You should follow your heart and do the films.”

“Thanks.” He tugged Stone’s arm as he stepped into the building. “Wait.”

“I need to get her paperwork.” Stone smiled, but his brows knotted. “Why?”

“Marry me.” It wasn’t a question, but rather a statement. Blurting the words wasn’t the way he’d planned on popping the question, but he didn’t care. He couldn’t wait. “Will you marry me?”

Stone's eyes widened. "Liam? Are you sure? Or are you just excited and saying whatever's come to mind?"

"I'm persistent and in love. It's time we made this permanent." And he couldn't wait any longer.

"I don't disagree with you. We should do something about us."

"Then you will? Or are you having second thoughts?"

Stone nudged Liam into an alcove and threaded his arms around him. "I will, but I expect something from you."

"Name it." He'd do anything.

"Propose again, but in a sweet, romantic way. I might be easy and will say yes, but I want romance." He kissed Liam. "I love you, so yes, I will marry you."

He rested his forehead on Stone's and sighed. "Love you, too." He needed a ring and to plan the proper proposal, but he'd do those later. He had Stone and their furry family. Who could ask for more? He'd found his heart and direction in Cedarwood.

Everything had worked out just like he'd expected—perfectly.